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Splitting Sides: On Humor in Twenty-First Century American Evangelical Media

Matas, Caroline

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**SPLITTING SIDES: ON HUMOR IN TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY
AMERICAN EVANGELICAL MEDIA**

Caroline Matas

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Abstract

This dissertation is an exploration of the phenomenon of humor as a tool of religious world-building among American evangelicals in the twenty-first century. As a group defined as much by their independence from strict denominational hierarchies as any other features, American evangelicals nevertheless maintain a strong group identity and commitment to certain boundaries of acceptable behavior and beliefs. I argue that humor—especially humor deployed through media—is essential to this work of boundary maintenance and identity formation among contemporary evangelicals. The dissertation contains five case studies showcasing evangelicals’ use of humor in media ranging from online satirical news to web comics to fish out of water comedy films. In each case study, I demonstrate how humor—as a rhetorical device that highlights the incongruity between humans’ sense of the world as it is and the world as it “should” be—reaffirms boundaries around gender roles, sexual taboos, and race relations. By activating oppositional emotional resonances that reinforce evangelicals’ moral, intellectual, and social separation from nonbelievers on the basis of their beliefs about gender, race, and sexuality, among other theological touchstones, humorous evangelical media constructs a self-policing humor community that wields immense social power.

Engaging with humor studies, media studies, and religious studies, this dissertation offers humor as a salient site of analysis for religious groups. It contributes to studies of how American evangelicals use media to forge religious values, identities, and—importantly—consensus among its diffuse community of believers. Finally, it provides the field of humor studies with a new set of case studies on a religious community that uses humor to a variety of social, emotional, and ideological ends. To ensure that adherents buy in to the party line regarding political beliefs,

gender roles and sexual practices, and general worldview, American evangelical institutions must offer a product worth consuming. Through the cultivation of a variety of overlapping humor communities that provide consumers with ideological reassurance and emotional validation, the case studies in this dissertation provide just such a product.

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Introduction

In his book *The 5 Masculine Instincts*, evangelical pastor Chase Replegle writes about the five main tendencies men display that he believes distort their character and thwart their leadership potential. The first of these is sarcasm. Replegle contends that sarcasm was one of the first recorded sin reactions in the Bible. The “firstborn of humanity,” Cain—having recently slain his brother Abel—wryly dodges God’s question about his brother’s whereabouts with the sarcastic retort, “Am I my brother’s keeper?”¹ Far from dying out with the Genesis flood, Replegle says, sarcasm has remained such a deep human instinct that it has become “the humor of our age.”² While Replegle affirms that he does not oppose the occasional good joke, he warns men to stay on guard, asking them, “How might moments of sarcasm in your life hint at rebelliousness or contempt? How might you be using humor to hide it?”³ What might seem like a harmless tendency toward joking, in other words, might be “holding [men] back from a divine lesson, an opportunity to grow into something better.”⁴

Replegle’s approach to sarcasm—while perhaps more stringent than most—encapsulates the complicated dynamics at play in American evangelicals’ use of humor. As a group that largely espouses that one’s status as a new creation in Jesus Christ should impact every sphere of one’s life, no aspect of one’s speech, behavior, or personality is too small to bring under the lens of scripture. A single joke made in the wrong spirit can have eternal consequences. While Replegle demonstrates the spiritual stakes of joking in bad faith, he also reminds readers that

Er¹ Genesis 4:9, New International Version. See also Chase Replegle, *The 5 Masculine Instincts: A Guide to Becoming a Better Man* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2022), 48.

² Replegle, *The 5 Masculine Instincts*, 43.

³ Chase Replegle, “The 5 Masculine Instincts Study Guide,” *the5masculineinstincts.com*, accessed December 13, 2022, <https://the5masculineinstincts.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Study-Guide-The-5-Masculine-Instincts.pdf>.

⁴ Replegle, *The 5 Masculine Instincts*, 45.

humor has gendered, cultural, and even racial components. His book is written for men, after all, because Replogle fears that men have failed to tune into God's unique calling in light of their "biology, experiences, impulses, and instincts."⁵ In his chapter on sarcasm, Replogle unfavorably compares the "feats of bravery" required for boys to transition to manhood in cultures like those on the South Pacific island of Vanuatu against the Judeo-Christian tradition, whose "transition into manhood is one of accountability and submission to God."⁶ Humor, then, is no neutral feature of humanity—it reflects on maturity, spiritual health, culture, race, and gender. Its use—for good or ill—can change the fate of individuals and cultures the same way it doomed humanity's firstborn to forever wander the earth.

This dissertation is an examination of the phenomenon of humor as a tool of religious world-building among American evangelicals in the twenty-first century. As Replogle's book indicates, many American evangelicals take humor seriously as a mechanism for persuasion, deflection, and even conversion. As such, it behooves those who study American evangelicals to take their use of humor—in its various forms—seriously, too. My dissertation addresses that lacuna in scholarship on American evangelicalism, asking what the study of humor in evangelical media can reveal about evangelical identity maintenance, norm enforcement, and value formation. My interest in studying the role of humor in American evangelical culture grows out of my suspicion that humor is central to the maintenance of order and authority in religious cultures. While the origins of American evangelicalism are multiracial and relatively egalitarian, the tradition has been institutionalized by white men, many of whom are deeply

⁵ Ibid., 37.

⁶ Ibid., 47.

invested in maintaining social and political order through a white hetero-patriarchal hierarchy.⁷ It is these institutions—specifically, their media groups—that comprise the focus of this study.

An entire culture of evangelical humor remains nearly untouched by scholars of American religion. *Splitting Sides* offers a set of case studies of the role of humor in contemporary American evangelical media, from web comics to film to stand-up comedy. These case studies explore the role humorous media plays in American evangelical religious life and demonstrate the cultural and religious *work humor does* where it is invoked. To what extent does humor clarify the aims and values of a religious subgroup, and to what extent does it challenge or blur preexisting boundary lines? How does a religious group's use of humor help elucidate what is sayable and unsayable within a subculture, and how do those boundaries become legible to insiders? As a diffuse religious tradition without a central governing body, American evangelicalism has long employed media to police its adherents' beliefs and behaviors, set agendas, and draw boundaries of belonging and difference.⁸ I argue humor can serve as a mechanism to subvert and to uphold unseen orders, and it behooves scholars of religion to attend to questions of how and when and where humor appears in religious subcultures, especially

⁷ For more on the history of American evangelicalism's relationship to gender and racial hierarchies, see Frances FitzGerald, *The Evangelicals: The Struggle to Shape America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017); Catherine Brekus, *Sarah Osborn's World: The Rise of Evangelical Christianity in Early America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013); Gregory Wills, *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Church Discipline in the Baptist South, 1785-1900* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); and Christine Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

⁸ For texts on American evangelical thought leaders' use of media to shape cultural conversations, see Susan Friend Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Molly Worthen, *Apostles of Reason: The Crisis of Authority in American Evangelicalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Nathaniel J. Klemp, *The Morality of Spin: Virtue and Vice in Political Rhetoric and the Christian Right* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012); and Daniel K. Williams, *God's Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). For studies of how American evangelical laypeople consume, interpret, and selectively uptake that media, see Susan Ridgely, *Practicing What the Doctor Preached: At Home with Focus on the Family* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); James Bielo, *Emerging Evangelicals: Faith, Modernity, and the Desire for Authenticity* (New York: New York University Press, 2011)—especially his conclusion on “dialogic evangelicalism”; and David Harrington Watt, *Bible-Carrying Christians: Conservative Protestants and Social Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

religious subcultures that emphasize hierarchy and order as central to believers' lives. In addition to exploring how humor reinforces and challenges theologies, this dissertation demonstrates how humor helps institutionalize ideas about race, gender, sexuality, and belonging.

In contending that humor is a religious world-building tool, I am joining ongoing conversations in the fields of humor, cultural, and media studies about how content—that is, the affective resonances stirred by the use of humor as a rhetorical device—interacts with form—that is, the platforms and genres through which those devices are transmitted. As I will detail below, David Feltmate, Mary Douglas, and other theorists of religious humor have posited that humor has immense power to cohere social groups and to reinforce believers' understanding of the very scaffolding of reality itself. Cultural studies theorists like Stuart Hall and Judith Williamson have shown that any given media form is also bounded by hegemonic forces that determine what voices and ideas are granted the money, credibility, and access required to create a cultural product.⁹ As Stuart Hall argues, even the presence of “dissenting” voices in mass media is determined and circumscribed by the “mental and structural” limits imposed by dominant groups that seek to bring even oppositional voices within the purview of dominant meaning-making structures.¹⁰ Theorists of media studies—and, particularly, new media studies—have demonstrated how earlier cultural studies theories of dominant and subordinate classes in the realm of media-making have been transformed in light of more democratic platforms like blogs and social media, but have also identified new mechanisms through which

⁹ See Stuart Hall, “Culture, the Media, and the ‘Ideological Effect,’” in *Essential Essays, Volume I: Foundations of Cultural Studies*, ed. David Morley (Durham: Duke University Press). See also Judith Williamson, “Two Kinds of Otherness: Black Film and the Avant-Garde,” in *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader*, eds. Houston A. Baker, Jr. et al. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996); Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer, “De Margin and De Center,” in *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader*, eds. Houston A. Baker, Jr. et al. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996); and Robert Crusz, “Black Cinemas, Film Theory, and Dependent Knowledge,” in *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader*, eds. Houston A. Baker, Jr. et al. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996).

¹⁰ Hall, “Culture, the Media, and the ‘Ideological Effect,’” 318.

dominant classes can constrain the dissent of the marginalized.¹¹ This dissertation engages with these prevailing theories in order to determine how American evangelicals use humor across traditional and new media products to selectively construct “social knowledge...through which we perceive the ‘worlds,’ the ‘lived realities’ of others, and imaginarily reconstruct their lives and ours into some intelligible ‘world-of-the-whole.’”¹²

This introduction offers an overview of the working definitions and frameworks I employ throughout the dissertation when it comes to sweeping and complex terms like “humor” and “evangelicalism.” I benefit immensely from the work of scholars of humor across a variety of disciplines that have highlighted the work humor does in social groups. It is my hope that this dissertation benefits the field of humor studies by offering contemporary American evangelicalism as a group whose priorities and boundaries are deeply shaped by the important social work of humor. So, too, am I grateful for the scholars of American religion who have made it their life’s work to better understand, as historian Timothy Gloege describes it, the “ever-shifting bricolage of beliefs and practices” that constitute American evangelicalism.¹³ I am excited about the possibilities for new insight into the field of American evangelicalism made available by drawing on the theories and tools of humor studies. At the end of this chapter, I offer a roadmap to the chapters ahead. Each chapter presents a case study of a different style of humor being employed in a different form of media. The picture offered by these case studies all together is by no means a complete landscape of every possible way American evangelicals

¹¹ Lora Taub-Pervizpour and Eirinn Disbrow, “Detours through Youth-Driven Media: Backseat Drivers Bear Witness to the Ethical Dilemmas of Youth Media,” in *Media and Social Justice*, eds. Sue Curry Janson et al. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Lina Dencik et al., “Prediction, Pre-emption and Limits to Dissent: Social Media and Big Data Uses for Policing Protests in the United Kingdom,” *New Media & Society* 20, no. 4 (2017): 1433-1450; Mona Kasra, “Vigilantism, Public Shaming, and Social Media Hegemony: The Role of Digital-Networked Images in Humiliation and Sociopolitical Control,” *The Communication Review* 20, no. 3 (2017): 172-188.

¹² Hall, “Culture, the Media, and the ‘Ideological Effect,’” 327.

¹³ Timothy Gloege, *Guaranteed Pure: The Moody Bible Institute, Business, and the Making of Modern Evangelicalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 10.

employ humor to reinforce boundaries of identity and belief; instead, these case studies are glimpses into the “ever-shifting bricolage” of a religious tradition whose past and future are connected by their use of media to determine who they have been and what they will become.

Humor Studies: A Primer

Humor, like the category of religion itself, eludes simple definitions and yet is one of the few near-universal facets of human social life across time and space. Also like religion, humor is as often identified by its fruits—laughter, embarrassment, offense, joy—as by its constitutive elements. While humor is often accompanied by laughter, for example, humor as an intellectual, rather than physical, social phenomenon can still be “funny” without anyone laughing. So how does one decide when humor occurs or what makes something funny—at least to some audiences, if not others?

Ancient and early modern scholars engaging with the subject of humor focused primarily on developing a definition and explaining the origins of humor, laughter, and the comic in human society. The three classical approaches to explaining the pith of *why humor exists* that developed over the millennia remain almost universally accepted today: humor 1) expresses superiority or reinforces hierarchies, 2) highlights pertinent incongruities in cultures and in the natural world, and 3) acts as an escape valve or relief from the tensions inherent to living in a society. Each of these approaches has its ancient and modern champions, but contemporary humor studies scholars typically identify incongruity as the defining feature of humor, recognizing superiority and release as potential but not essential components of the humorous. In other words, incongruity is the logical ground of all humor, but humor can have a variety of functions, including reinforcing or upending hierarchies and relieving social tensions.

Plato, Aristotle, and Thomas Hobbes all contributed to the development of the theory of humor-as-superiority, although Plato and Aristotle critiqued the use of humor toward such ends. Aristotle opined that because “jesting is a kind of mockery,” lawgivers ought to consider forbidding it.¹⁴ Plato took this opinion even farther, expressing in his last dialogue, *Laws*, that “a comic poet, or maker of iambic or satirical lyric verse, shall not be permitted to ridicule any of the citizens, either by word or likeness, either in anger or without anger.”¹⁵ Hobbes, writing in 1650, identified the potential for laughter to make light of one’s own foibles as well as others’: “Laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly.”¹⁶ Contemporary scholars tend to share Hobbes’s view that one application of humor’s potential to mock can involve comparing some kind of human ideal against the perceived failures of oneself or others—a style of joke that can be used in gentle teasing and biting satire alike.

By the nineteenth century, the theory of humor as a human release mechanism began to eclipse the superiority theory in popularity, particularly in light of new biological insights about the human nervous system. Relief theory’s famous champions include John Dewey, Herbert Spencer, and Sigmund Freud, all of whom applied relief theory to their personal understanding of human physiology. Although distinguishing between laughter and humor, Dewey wrote in 1894 that laughter “marks the ending (that is, the attainment of a unity) of a period of suspense, or expectation, all ending which is sharp and sudden.”¹⁷ Freud, moving beyond Dewey’s theory of laughter as resolving a *physical* tension, posited in his 1905 *Jokes and Their Relation to the*

¹⁴ John Morreall, “Philosophy of Humor,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2020), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/entries/humor/>.

¹⁵ Plato, *Laws*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, (Project Gutenberg: 2013), <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1750/1750-h/1750-h.htm>.

¹⁶ Giseline Kuipers, “The Sociology of Humor,” in *The Primer of Humor Research*, ed. Victor Raskin (Berlin: DeGruyter, 2009), 361-398, 363.

¹⁷ John Dewey, “The Theory of Emotion (I) Emotional Attitudes,” *Psychological Review* 1 (1894): 553-569, 558.

Unconscious that laughter and the humorous serve the ultimate function of helping resolve humans' psychic tension. Freud discriminated between "tendentious" (hostile or sexual jokes born from repression) and other types of jokes, but argued that both allow a pleasurable "release" from either a "repressed urge" or an "intellectual tension."¹⁸ More recently, scholars like Mikhail Bakhtin and Giseline Kuipers have identified the social, rather than physiological, ramifications of humor's "escape valve" function. Comic rituals of the Middle Ages, Bakhtin argued, served an important social role of breaking with ordinary time and hierarchies. But, crucially, rather than upending or delegitimizing these systems, Bakhtin argues that comic festivities "sanctioned the existing pattern of things and reinforced it."¹⁹ In the 2008 *The Primer of Humor Research*, humor theorist and sociologist Giseline Kuipers writes that "the discharge of tension is still one of the main functions humor is believed to fulfill," but that no current humor scholars explain *all* humor and laughter as release of tension.²⁰ Instead, release, like the expression of superiority and the maintenance of hierarchy, is just one potential function of humor among many.

While not rejecting outright the potential for humor to spring from a sense of superiority or to function as a "safety valve" for tension release, humor studies scholars have largely reached a consensus on a basic definition of humor as "the perception of something incongruous—something that violates our mental expectations."²¹ John Morreall, a foundational figure in the field of humor studies, argues that aspects of the "incongruity theory" can be seen in philosophical works dating back at least to Cicero. In his 55 BCE *De Oratore*, Cicero wrote, "The most common kind of joke is that in which we expect one thing and another is said; here

¹⁸ Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1990), 99, 121. As Mary Douglas paraphrased, Freud's concept of a joke is that which allows the subconscious filtering system "a holiday." See Mary Douglas, "The Social Control of Cognition: Some Factors in Joke Reception," *Man* 3 no. 3 (1968): 361-376, 364.

¹⁹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 9.

²⁰ Kuipers, "The Sociology of Humor," 362.

²¹ Morreall, "Philosophy of Humor."

our own disappointed expectation makes us laugh.”²² In the late eighteenth century, Scottish moralist James Beattie built on this analysis writing that humans’ laughter “seems to arise from the view of things incongruous united in the same assemblage.”²³ Similarly, Kant wrote in 1790, “In everything that is to excite a lively convulsive laugh there must be something absurd (in which the understanding, therefore, can find no satisfaction).”²⁴ For Søren Kierkegaard, writing in the early- to mid-nineteenth century, the incongruity of humor was inseparable from the Christian faith. Both humor and the Christian tradition, Kierkegaard wrote in his private papers, are predicated on the ability to perceive that things are not as they should be. However, humor and faith both also require something like hope: something to “prevent the individual from leaping aside to despair.”²⁵ Indeed, Kierkegaard suggested that Christianity “is the most humorous view of life in world-history,” because the Christian recognizes the disjuncture between things-as-they-are and things-as-they-should-be, but ultimately reconciles that disjuncture with the hope for a “way out.”²⁶

Perhaps the most significant alteration to the incongruity theory in contemporary humor studies comes from Elliott Oring, a folklorist whose 2003 book *Engaging Humor* made waves in humor scholarship. Oring proposes a fine-tuning of the incongruity theory, positing that humor arises from the perception of “*appropriate* incongruity.” Rejecting other humor studies theories that humor arises when incongruity presented by a joke is *resolved* in its punchline, Oring suggests that resolution of incongruity is not a necessary ingredient to humor. Instead, one laughs because one discovers “points of connection between the incongruous categories” that, instead of

²² Moreall, “Philosophy of Humor.”

²³ Morreal, “Philosophy of Humor.”

²⁴ Immanuel Kant, “Kant’s Critique of Judgement,” trans. J.H. Bernard (London: Macmillan, 1914), https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/1217#Kant_0318_606.

²⁵ C. Stephen Evans, “Kierkegaard’s View of Humor: Must Christians Always be Solemn?” *Faith and Philosophy* 4, no. 2 (April 1987), 183.

²⁶ Ibid.

resolving the incongruity between two frames, makes the incongruity *appropriate* in a “psychologically valid” way.²⁷ To illustrate his point, Oring argues that even “absurdist” humor is, in fact, not simply incongruous but “appropriately” incongruous. “Were incongruities in themselves funny, incongruous pairings like ‘snake/veil’ or ‘tomato/carburetor’ might be expected to excite laughter,” Oring writes. Instead, Oring offers an analysis of an “absurdist” joke:

Q: Why is there only one Eiffel Tower?

A: It eats its young.²⁸

While it seems patently absurd and certainly incongruous to suggest that the Eiffel Tower acts as a living organism and eats its young, as some living organisms are known to do, Oring suggests that the incongruity is nevertheless *appropriate* because “the application of this phrase to the Eiffel Tower would explain why there was only one of them.” Thus, the explanation is *appropriate*, although “completely spurious.”²⁹

I offer this brief survey of key theories of the philosophy and logical underpinnings of humor to provide a basic look into the work that has already been done in the study of humor. While future debates and monographs will doubtlessly fine-tune existing definitions of humor, such a task lies outside of my aims. In this project, I am interested in the ideological grounds of what makes something humorous—or potentially humorous—because of the social ramifications of a joke’s successful uptake. That is, I am interested in the potential for incongruity to create

²⁷ Elliott Oring, *Engaging Humor* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 2.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 13.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 20.

humor because it brings light to what aspects of reality a joker—or audience—sees as being incongruous with one another. As a scholar of religion rather than linguistics or anthropology, my focus is not on *how* or *why* humans make jokes but on what *work* jokes do in social groups. I adhere to the theory of humor as springing from appropriate incongruity inasmuch as I find, in my own work, that American evangelical humor does indeed play on the relationship between things-as-they-are and things-as-they-*ought*-to-be. I remain open to the many and varied consequences of that humor—to reinforce or subvert hierarchies, to relieve the tension that builds in a subculture with stringent gender and sexual roles, or to highlight perceived inequalities or inconsistencies within one’s own worldview.

Humor and the Study of Religion

Although the body of work at the intersection of religion and humor remains sparse, several interrelated key concepts have guided my approach to the study of American evangelical humor. The first is Mary Douglas’s approach to the study of jokes, which, like my own, seeks to move beyond identifying the structure of a joke and toward analysis of its social work. For Douglas, humor—no matter its linguistic parts—is inseparable from the broader system of social relations in which it occurs. Thus, for Douglas, the student of humor must always ask, “*What are the social conditions for a joke to be both perceived and permitted*”?³⁰ With this question, Douglas presages her contemporary Michel Foucault’s theory of discursive practices as *monuments to the sayable*—that is, the theory that any given speech act occurs as part of a landscape of thoughts and utterances that are made possible by a wider world of social relations,

³⁰ Douglas, “The Social Control of Cognition,” 366. Emphasis mine.

concepts, and boundaries.³¹ In each case study, I will approach humor as not just an utterance with internal rules of appropriate incongruity, but whose very existence in broader discourse is determined by social realities that make some humor legible, sayable, and perceptible as funny.

The second theoretical strand that guides my approach to the study of humor and religion is David Feltmate's theory of humor as a key protector of religious plausibility structures.

Drawing on Douglas, Feltmate argues that humor—both its creation and uptake—“requires deep cultural knowledge. People have to share values and plausibility structures—the same social stock of knowledge—in order to play with jokes' meanings.”³² Feltmate theorizes that, among the other social functions jokes serve in everyday life, they are powerful “legitimations”: jokes “reaffirm reality, assuring us that our assumptions about life are stable.”³³ Because his focus is on satirical television programs, Feltmate specifically contends that religious *satire* functions as a religious tool to attack “plausibility structures” that conflict with one's own—an approach that simultaneously reinforces one's own matrix of beliefs and boundaries. In light of my understanding of humor as a deeply and inextricably social phenomenon, in this project I approach *all* religious humor, including but not limited to satire, as a tool for religious world-building and boundary maintenance.³⁴

³¹ Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, eds. Graham Burchell et al. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), 59-60. In this text, one can see Foucault employing remarkably similar framing questions to Douglas's: “The question which I ask is not about codes but about events: the law of *existence* of statements, that which rendered them possible—they and none other in their place: the conditions of their singular emergence; their correlation with other previous or simultaneous events, discursive or otherwise.... I mean the set of rules which at a given period and for a given society define: The limits and forms of the *sayable*. What is it possible to speak of?”

³² David Feltmate, *Drawn to the Gods: Religion and Humor in The Simpsons, South Park, and Family Guy* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 19.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ I share this approach with sociologist of humor, Giseline Kuipers. Kuipers describes humor as “a powerful means of pulling people together and, in doing this, automatically shutting other people out.” In other words, Kuipers writes, “humor is a form of communication, a question of taste, a marking of social boundaries.” Giseline Kuipers, *Good Humor, Bad Taste: A Sociology of the Joke* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2006), 10.

If, as Mary Douglas theorized, humor is always situated within broader social systems that constrict possibilities for meaning and uptake, and, as Feltmate contends, this means humor has great power to reinforce moral and social boundaries, how ought we think about the concrete social realities that make some religious humor “work”? My third guiding construct in my study of religious humor is Amy Carrell’s theory of “humor communities”—a concept that I believe has far-reaching theoretical value to the study of American evangelicalism. Carrell developed the concept of “humor communities” out of Jimmie Killingsworth’s heuristic categories of local and global discourse communities. Killingsworth’s intervention begins with the assertion that discourse is not a “free floating” phenomenon: it happens in communities, and it is perpetuated through both stasis and change by the community’s values, boundaries, and points of contention.³⁵ Rather than understanding all such communities as local entities, bound by strictures of geography or official membership, Killingsworth proposes the category of “global discourse communities”—communities “defined by likemindedness, political and intellectual affiliation, and other such ‘special interests’ [which] are maintained by widely dispersed discourse practices made possible by modern publishing and other communication technologies.”³⁶ Carrell adapts Killingsworth’s concepts of local and global discourse communities to the study of humor in part to provide language for the types of media fandoms made possible by television syndication—fandoms that span generations of viewers, some of whom never saw the original run of a given television show. While a local community of television sitcom fans might be defined as the quantifiable group that has watched a particular episode of the show, how can one account for the broader *language* of a fandom—one based not

³⁵ Jimmie Killingsworth, “Discourse Communities: Local and Global,” *Rhetoric Review* 11, no. 1 (1992): 110-122, 121.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 111.

on the faithful watching of every episode, per se, but on participating in the community of individuals that enjoy, reference, laugh at, and riff on a certain sitcom or franchise? Carrell offers global “humor communities” as a theoretical category that encompasses a broad swath of consumers that engage with a fandom because the values, assumptions, boundaries, and jokes contained therein resonate with them. This is a category with permeable but, crucially, not non-existent borders.³⁷ Participation in such a community is predicated on engagement with a given fandom or body of media work, but the barrier to entry is low. What it means that a given consumer resonates with the work is not a foregone conclusion.

The ambiguity and flexibility of the concept of humor communities strikes me as a useful way to think about the loose coalitions that form around certain types of evangelical media. It encompasses the social realities gestured at by Douglas, Foucault, and others—that humor occurs within broader social systems and its uptake is always socially mediated—by considering the various ways consumers might “opt in” to some humor communities and not others. It allows for ebb and flow within the community, recognizing that different types of consumers might be drawn in at different times and by different aspects of the media, and that different consumers’ fandom might play a larger or smaller role in their personal self-conception. Killingsworth and Carrell’s emphasis on global discourse communities as ideological, rather than geographical, phenomena highlights the importance of exploring the shared values and boundaries that Feltmate argues are central to humor, especially religious humor. While participation in a humor community has a low barrier to entry, humor communities are nevertheless defined by expectations—of what *type* of humor one can come to expect from a certain sitcom or comedian, and of how an audience member should respond to such humor. Carrell deftly highlights the

³⁷ Amy Carrell, “Humor Communities,” *Humor* 10 no. 1 (1997): 11-24, 20.

influential power of humor communities: whether a studio audience; a laugh track; or, more recently, social media likes, comments, and shares, fellow members of a humor community can “influence and/or encourage one another’s evaluations and perceptions of joke texts.”³⁸ This potential for influence and encouragement is an important and, I argue, under-examined aspect of the bricolage that is American evangelicalism.

What is an American Evangelical?

Scholars of American religion have long debated what commitments and practices make a Christian “evangelical.” As Frances FitzGerald details in her sweeping history of American evangelicalism, the term began as an adjective to describe late eighteenth and nineteenth century religious revivals that were not unique to any one Protestant denomination.³⁹ These revivals helped prefigure some of the characteristics of “evangelical” congregations: populist, experiential, and often centered around a charismatic leader. Perhaps even more important than the trappings of evangelical meetings is the set of religious beliefs that undergird them. David Bebbington’s famous “quadrilateral of priorities” posits four core evangelical beliefs: conversionism, or the importance of being “born again” in Christ; activism, or an emphasis on missionary and social outreach; biblicism, or a “particular regard” for the Bible as the inerrant word of God and central to the believer’s life; and crucicentrism, or a strong focus on Jesus’s salvific act of death on a cross.⁴⁰ Many scholars of American evangelicalism—including

³⁸ Ibid., 19.

³⁹ Frances FitzGerald, *The Evangelicals: The Struggle to Shape America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017), 14.

⁴⁰ David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (Milton Park, UK: Taylor and Francis, 2005), 16. Bebbington revisits this topic alongside Mark Noll, George Marsden, and others in Mark Noll et al., eds., *Evangelicals: How They Have Been, Are Now, and Could Be* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019). See also Mark A. Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitefield and the Wesleys* (Westmont, IL: IVP Academic, 2018).

Timothy Gloege, Darren Grem, Molly Worthen, and Lisa McGirr—note that American evangelicalism in particular has been heavily theologically influenced by Lyman and Milton Stewart’s early twentieth century essays on “the fundamentals” of the Christian faith.⁴¹ These fundamentals include crucicentrism (specifically, substitutionary atonement as Christians’ source of hope) and Biblical inerrancy, but specify the importance of Biblical literalism: a literal virgin birth, Jesus’s literal death and resurrection, and literal miracles as accounted in the Bible.

While the beliefs detailed above might serve to help identify a contemporary Christian—including theologically and socially conservative Catholics and Mormons, who might or might not appreciate the label—as adjectivally “evangelical,” scholars of American evangelicalism must also attend to how “evangelical” has been adopted as a noun and made into its own—albeit multi-denominational—religious “category” in the United States. The National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), founded in 1942, has been central to this process, representing and thus giving institutional legitimacy to tens of thousands of conservative Christian churches, schools, and organizations.⁴² The NAE’s initiatives, including the National Religious Broadcasters association and the New International Version translation of the Bible, have both shaped popular understandings of what evangelicals believe and have served to provide a stamp of approval on “evangelical” content. I argue that no study of American evangelicalism can focus solely on evangelicals’ shared set of beliefs without attending to the ways in which self-described evangelical institutions help define, maintain, and guard what it means to be an evangelical in

⁴¹ Timothy Gloege, *Guaranteed Pure: The Moody Bible Institute, Business, and the Making of Modern Evangelicalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015). See also Darren Grem, *The Blessings of Business: How Corporations Shaped Conservative Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Molly Worthen, *Apostles of Reason: The Crisis of Authority in American Evangelicalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); and Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

⁴² Molly Worthen’s *Apostles of Reason: The Crisis of Authority in American Evangelicalism* provides an excellent history of mid-twentieth century American evangelical leaders’ efforts to institutionalize American evangelicalism.

America. Thus, as Sara Moslener, Margaret Bendroth, Kristen Kobes du Mez, Anthea Butler and others have argued, American evangelicalism—as a tradition largely clarified by the institutions and leaders who claimed the term in the twentieth century—is inseparable from the impulses of white supremacy, anti-Communism, and patriarchy that informed those leaders and institutions.⁴³ To this end, Jemar Tisby offers a helpful application of John Frame’s tri-perspectival method of analyzing theology—normative, situational, and existential. Tisby proposes that a normative definition of evangelicalism would include evangelical theological stances such as the quadrilateral and the “fundamentals.” A situational definition would consider the institutions and contexts through which evangelicalism has unfolded in American history. Thirdly, an “existential” definition would include individuals’ self-identification (and their attendant experiences) as evangelicals.⁴⁴ Tisby’s model allows these definitions to exist in tension with one another—a tension also highlighted by other innovative models that consider American evangelicalism as a phenomenon whose central institutions and theologies are *part* but not *all* of the picture of American evangelical life.

Like Tisby’s model, Carrell’s concept of humor communities provides some breathing room in the quest to identify a discrete or static set of American evangelicals. While the

⁴³ It is for this reason that, throughout the text, I will refer to “evangelicals” or “American evangelicals” without always attaching the label “white.” American evangelicalism remains a largely white enterprise in terms of its self-identified adherents—in 2020, the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) found that two-thirds of self-identified American evangelicals were white (“The 2020 Census of American Religion, *PRRI*, July 8, 2021, <https://www.prri.org/research/2020-census-of-american-religion/>). More than the demographic makeup, however, American evangelical institutions and leaders also remain invested in, as Anthea Butler describes it, “maintaining the cultural and racial whiteness that they have transmitted to the public”—a project that can be carried out by white people *and* nonwhite people that anticipate benefiting from white supremacy through “right” belief and practice (Anthea Butler, *White Evangelical Racism* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2021). See also Sara Moslener, *Virgin Nation: Sexual Purity and American Adolescence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Margaret Bendroth, *Fundamentalism and Gender, 1875 to the Present* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996); and Kristen Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2020).

⁴⁴ Jemar Tisby, “Are Black Christians Evangelicals?” In *Evangelicals: Who They Have Been, Are Now, and Could Be*, ed. Mark Noll et al., 262-273 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019), 265.

organizations and individuals *creating* humorous content in each of this project's case studies are explicitly affiliated with American evangelical institutions, I approach their content—and the community it draws—as a humor community. The benefit of this approach is that it allows for a variety of levels of consumer engagement, all of which meaningfully influence the humor community and, thus, trends in American evangelical humor. The audience of an evangelical comedy film, for example, might include those who stream the film on an evangelical streaming service, those who watch the film at a friend or relative's house or a church event, those who pick up the DVD at random and watch, not knowing about its religious content, and even those who watch such films explicitly to mock them. The possibilities of how a consumer might engage with evangelical media, in other words, are broad and diverse. What drives my research, then, is the question of what consumers find when they *do* participate in a given humor community: what values, spoken and unspoken norms, and behavior and identity prohibitions are upheld and negotiated there? In other words, approaching American evangelical media as a landscape of overlapping humor communities allows us to focus on the social and ideological work of that media without getting caught up in defining the limits of evangelicalism as a religious or cultural bloc.⁴⁵

Webs of Influence: The American Evangelical Media Complex

Those familiar with the cultural landscape of contemporary American evangelicalism know that, despite the proliferation of websites, books, companies, charities, colleges, churches,

⁴⁵ Other works on American evangelicalism have helpfully moved toward open-ended definitions of American evangelicalism that dovetail with my own. Benjamin Huskinson, for example, has argued that American evangelicalism might best be characterized as a marketplace with various “products” that gain consumer interest within and outside the bounds of self-identified evangelical Christianity. In chapter 4, I explore how this approach might be paired with Carrell's concept of humor communities for critical analysis. See Benjamin L. Huskinson, *American Creationism, Creation Science, and Intelligent Design in the Evangelical Market* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

think tanks, and other entities that promote evangelical beliefs and practices, there is significant personnel overlap among such entities. Multimedia powerhouse Focus on the Family, for example, has spawned countless subsidiary organizations that have expanded their reach into local, state, and national politics while also allowing for synergistic sharing of talking heads and talking points across their platforms. Susan Ridgely has referred to this phenomenon as a “closed media system.”⁴⁶ These “self-reinforcing networks,” Ridgely writes of Focus on the Family’s empire, can “create the illusion of widespread consensus,” even though the pool of guest writers and commentators brought into the fold is quite limited and carefully shared among platforms.⁴⁷ The same is true outside of Focus—many of the most lucrative and well-known evangelical media groups have a friendly relationship with one another, resulting in a dense web of affiliations that merits exploring.

The subjects of this project’s five case studies present little in the way of confusion or ambiguity in terms of their relationship to American evangelicalism. All unequivocally participate in the dense web of relations between powerhouse evangelical media companies. Internet-based satirical news site *The Babylon Bee*—the focus of chapter one—partners with well-known evangelical advertisers like the Alliance Defending Freedom, Revelation Media, Compassion International, and The Master’s University. The Bee’s employees have been interviewed or featured as guest speakers at evangelical media outlets like the Colson Center’s *BreakPoint*, Kirk Cameron’s *Takeaways*, and Moscow, Idaho’s Cross Church-affiliated Crosspolitic Studios. In a one-hour YouTube special, the Babylon Bee’s editor in chief toured

⁴⁶ Susan Ridgely, “Conservative Christianity and the Creation of Alternative News: An Analysis of Focus on the Family’s Multimedia Empire,” *Religion and American Culture* 30, no. 1 (2020): 1-25, 16.

⁴⁷ Ridgely, “Conservative Christianity and the Creation of Alternative News,” 16-19.

the Creation Museum and Ark Encounter with Answers in Genesis's founder, Ken Ham.⁴⁸ The six stand-up comedians featured in chapters two and three have comedy specials available on evangelical video streaming site Pure Flix and their DVDs and CDs and books are available for purchase at ChristianBook.com and Lifeway Christian Stores. Several of these comedians have been featured writers or interviewees for Focus on the Family products, while another was a featured guest on *The Babylon Bee*'s podcast. Chapter four's subject, Answers in Genesis (AiG), has deep ties to a variety of other evangelical organizations, from its partnership with Pure Flix as the proprietary host of AiG's 500-video catalog of content to its yearly expo for approved "creation colleges," including Bob Jones University and Patrick Henry College.⁴⁹ The final chapter examines two films hosted by Pure Flix—one of which was written by, produced by, and starring Pure Flix's founder. The directors and actors of both films are regulars in the evangelical film industry, and their works are routinely promoted by Christian media review sites like movieguide.org and Focus on the Family's PluggedIn. In short, each of this dissertation's case studies participates in the self-reinforcing network of evangelical media culture.

My subjects' embeddedness in the web of evangelical media culture is significant for several reasons. First, as Ridgely identifies, it means that each of the organizations and individuals I examine here participates in what one might call the evangelical "mainstream." That is, they are key contributors in the legitimating and agenda-setting work of institutional American evangelicalism. To study how they use humor is to study the boundaries of what is sayable in the American evangelical mainstream—especially because humor often illuminates

⁴⁸ The Babylon Bee, "The Babylon Bee Tours the Creation Museum," Youtube Video, 1:02:55, April 22, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ad_foP5csB0.

⁴⁹ Ken Ham, "Why Attend a 'Creation College'?" *Answers in Genesis* October 11, 2022, <https://answersingenesis.org/blogs/ken-ham/2022/10/11/why-attend-a-creation-college/>. In years past, AiG has maintained a list of approved "creation colleges," along with a list of their platinum- and gold-level creation college sponsors (<https://web.archive.org/web/20180528163854/https://answersingenesis.org/colleges/colleges-and-universities/>).

those boundaries by flirting with their outer limits. Second, and relatedly, if comedy plays on an unseen matrix of social values, beliefs, and legitimation structures, studying the humor employed by individuals and organizations decidedly “in the fold” of American evangelicalism can help bring to light how those legitimation structures function in American evangelical culture more broadly. As cultural studies theorist Stuart Hall has written, one of the primary functions of mass media is to provide “the basis on which groups and classes construct an ‘image’ of the lives, meanings, practices, and values” of their own group and of outsiders, leading to a vision of the world-as-it-is that is deeply mediated by hegemonic values.⁵⁰ Because comedy is especially adept at this “selective construction of social knowledge,” studying its use by institutionally-affirmed evangelical performers and media groups can offer new insight to the processes through which certain ideas, values, and boundaries come to be accepted or rejected by the evangelical mainstream, despite its lack of a clear hierarchy or governing body.⁵¹ Humor, as I demonstrate throughout each of this dissertation’s case studies, is not only a world-building tool—it is a religion-building tool, and American evangelicals use it in every sphere of their mediated lives.

Chapter Roadmap

Chapter one explores the role conservative Christian satirical news website *The Babylon Bee* plays in its users’ relationship to “real” and “fake” news. Since their launch in 2016, the Bee has garnered millions of social media followers for its status as a conservative- and Christian-friendly company whose image is edgier and more salient to younger generations than evangelical media stalwarts like Focus on the Family. In this chapter, I detail the Bee’s rise to

⁵⁰ Stuart Hall, “Culture, the Media, and the ‘Ideological Effect,’” in *Essential Essays, Volume I: Foundations of Cultural Studies*, edited by David Morley (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019): 298-335, 327.

⁵¹ Ibid.

prominence and share the recurring themes that I found after coding over 750 articles published by the Bee in 2020. I also analyze the role satire, as an inherently moralizing form of humor, plays in the Bee's efforts to police norms around masculinity, sexuality, and race. Ultimately, I argue that the Bee transforms satire's traditional role as a media watchdog into a scorched-earth rejection of American institutions, a posture I call "apocalyptic cynicism." Drawing clear lines around their own in-group, the Bee contributes to the cultivation of a faithful remnant of conservative Christian Americans that meld anti-feminism, anti-multiculturalism, and pro-conservatism into their conception of what it means to be a follower of God.

Chapters two and three analyze how evangelical stand-up comedians employ humor as an escape valve to navigate hierarchical and binary perceptions of gender roles. In chapter two, I offer the case study of the Date Night Comedy Tour, a touring showcase of five male Christian comics whose sets revolve around the topics of dating and marriage. These sets tend to riff on the men's routine failures to live up to cultural ideals of masculinity and their wives' dissatisfaction with the same. While such jokes might seem like a subversion of a strict gender binary, they ultimately use their lack of "optional" trappings of manliness as an opportunity to point to the immutable differences between men and women, including men's injunction from God to lead the family. Through the ritual and play of stand-up comedy, I argue, each of the *Date Night* comedians reaffirms their commitments to clear gender hierarchy.

Chapter three examines the flip side of evangelical gender comedy through the oeuvre of powerhouse evangelical comedian Chonda Pierce. Pierce has not only made a name for herself as a successful Christian comedian, but was also named the top-selling female comedian of all

time by the Recording Industry Association of America in 2015.⁵² Pierce deals in many of the same kinds of jokes as her male counterparts, constantly turning her attempts and failures at living up to cultural beauty and behavior standards for women into fodder for laughs. Nevertheless, Pierce must do a different sort of performance in order to justify her presence alone on the megachurch stage. By performatively rejecting the presence of the men in her audience and reaffirming her status as wife and mother as her most important roles, Pierce gains access to the pulpit that few women in American evangelicalism are offered. With humor that reminds American evangelicals of their cultural distinctiveness, Pierce helps her “congregation” re-fuse their commitments to God, country, and social boundaries into their everyday lives.

In chapter four, I identify a site where humor is used toward more explicitly educational ends. Answers in Genesis (AiG), the young earth creationist organization behind the Kentucky-based Creation Museum and Ark Encounter, employed a full-time cartoonist from 1997 to 2019, whose mostly single-panel cartoons functioned as pithy introductions to the beliefs of the organization. In this chapter, I argue that the cartoons employ humor primarily to stoke oppositional resonances that more firmly entrench believers into their commitments—and into the humor community created by AiG. By rendering the beliefs of old earth creationists and evolutionists not just incorrect but *laughable*, AiG succinctly draws boundary lines of acceptable forms of Christian belief and invites those laughing along to remain on the right side of history.

In the final chapter of the dissertation, I pair two Christian comedy films for a close reading about the humor of racial encounter in the American evangelical imagination. Both films follow a white protagonist being thrust into “Black culture” for the first time—a fish-out-of-

⁵² “America’s Number One Female Comedian Chonda Pierce Shares Her Inspiring Story in ‘Laughing in the Dark’ for a One-Night Cinema Event,” *Business Wire*, August 27, 2015. <https://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20150827005862/en/America's-Number-One-Female-Comedian-Chonda-Pierce-Shares-Her-Inspiring-Story-in-'Laughing-in-the-Dark'-for-a-One-Night-Cinema-Event>.

water adventure that results in them learning greater cultural sensitivity while they meaningfully improve the lives of their new Black friends. Ultimately, I argue that humor serves the important role of allowing these films to acknowledge the reality of racism in American society, with a key escape hatch: both films defuse or underplay the pervasiveness of systemic racism by identifying racial prejudice as an individual-level sin that can be perpetuated by an individual of any skin color or ethnic background. While such a message might represent an improvement in the sense that it forces its white viewers to acknowledge the reality of racism even on an interpersonal level, it is the perspective, feelings, and desires of white protagonists and imagined white viewers that gets the last laugh.

Chapter 1

Fake News You Can Trust

“Humor can get in under the door while seriousness is still fumbling at the handle.”⁵³

— G.K. Chesterton

“God created humor and we as Christians are gonna use it.”⁵⁴

— Kyle Mann, Editor in Chief of *The Babylon Bee*

Early in the morning of October 16, 2020, President Donald Trump retweeted an article claiming that Twitter shut down its network for hours the day prior in order to slow the spread of negative rumors about Joe Biden and his family. “Wow, this has never been done in history,” the president tweeted. “This includes his really bad interview last night. Why is Twitter doing this.”⁵⁵ The article in question was from *The Babylon Bee*, a conservative Christian satirical news site in the style of *The Onion*. The *Bee* quickly capitalized on the attention, reposting a prophetic 2018 article with the headline, “President Trump Declares the *Babylon Bee* His Most-Trusted News Source.”⁵⁶ The article, which garnered over 350 thousand shares on social media, provoked a flurry of new commentary from the *Bee* fan base. Hundreds of comments poured into

⁵³ Quoted by *Babylon Bee* CEO Seth Dillon, *Twitter*, October 25, 2020, <https://twitter.com/SethDillon/status/1320450190374014980>.

⁵⁴ “The Sweet Sting of Satire: An Interview with Babylon Bee Editor Kyle Mann,” *Breakpoint Podcast*, December 11, 2019. <https://breakpoint.org/the-sweet-sting-of-satire/>.

⁵⁵ Donald Trump, *Twitter* post, October 16, 2020, 6:07am, <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/1317044556328730625?s=21>.

⁵⁶ “President Trump Declares The Babylon Bee His Most-Trusted News Source,” *The Babylon Bee*, January 19, 2018, <https://babylonbee.com/news/president-trump-declares-babylon-bee-trusted-news-source>.

the *Bee* Facebook page, many of which shared the same central theme:

“True fact: I come to the Bee first for news. If the Bee is satirizing a story, only then do I know it's worth looking up and wading through the mainstream media's reporting.”⁵⁷

“It amazes me sometimes how these satirical articles wind up actually becoming a reality. The Babylon Bee has the gift of foresight.”⁵⁸

“The irony is that a satire site IS more credible than mainstream media....”⁵⁹

“I shared a BB article once thinking it was real. If anything, it’s an indictment of the mainstream media when satire sites seem more believable.”⁶⁰

“I’d say the Bee is very high on truth. It’s just not high on facts.”⁶¹

Readers’ shared viewpoint—that the *Bee*’s conservative satire hews closer to “real” truth than do national news outlets—reflects a growing sentiment among white American evangelicals that has been shaped, in part, by sites like *The Babylon Bee*. The Bee’s use of satire

⁵⁷ Livia Carpenter, comment on The Babylon Bee, ““They’re tremendous—nobody else even comes close,”” *Facebook*, October 16, 2020, https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=pfbid02fvKY9Boji2GH6L9CywtLz2DkcL9oge8DdjCosDjYUGKzLdwhf8gg249xNUPtRiFCl&id=1752689034960996&mibextid=vilDUR.

⁵⁸ Dan Vallar, comment on The Babylon Bee, ““They’re tremendous—nobody else even comes close,”” *Facebook*, October 16, 2020, https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=pfbid02fvKY9Boji2GH6L9CywtLz2DkcL9oge8DdjCosDjYUGKzLdwhf8gg249xNUPtRiFCl&id=1752689034960996&mibextid=vilDUR.

⁵⁹ Julia Evangeline Adeline Cook, comment on The Babylon Bee, ““They’re tremendous—nobody else even comes close,”” *Facebook*, October 16, 2020, https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=pfbid02fvKY9Boji2GH6L9CywtLz2DkcL9oge8DdjCosDjYUGKzLdwhf8gg249xNUPtRiFCl&id=1752689034960996&mibextid=vilDUR.

⁶⁰ Steve Gamburg, comment on The Babylon Bee, ““They’re tremendous—nobody else even comes close,”” *Facebook*, October 16, 2020, https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=pfbid02fvKY9Boji2GH6L9CywtLz2DkcL9oge8DdjCosDjYUGKzLdwhf8gg249xNUPtRiFCl&id=1752689034960996&mibextid=vilDUR.

⁶¹ Michael Gonzales, comment on The Babylon Bee, ““They’re tremendous—nobody else even comes close,”” *Facebook*, October 16, 2020, https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=pfbid02fvKY9Boji2GH6L9CywtLz2DkcL9oge8DdjCosDjYUGKzLdwhf8gg249xNUPtRiFCl&id=1752689034960996&mibextid=vilDUR.

is anything but incidental to their success. First, satire, as a highly affective rhetorical form, serves to pique certain emotional resonances that have concrete social and political consequences. This chapter will examine some of those resonances in light of how they naturalize and even sacralize the oneness of American evangelical identity and conservative partisan identity. Second, I argue that *The Babylon Bee*'s satirization of "real" news manifests a humor community founded on apocalyptic cynicism about American institutions that has a profound impact on American evangelicals' relationship to the political. In short, this analysis of *The Babylon Bee*'s use of satire explores the emotional resonances, socio-political values, and shifting relationship to truth and facts that made most white evangelicals so willing to embrace Donald Trump's vociferous contempt for the mainstream media.

Conservative mistrust of the press is not a new phenomenon. As Seth Perry and others' work on early American print culture demonstrates, the earliest printing technologies in the United States were used to engage in heated debate on theological and political matters, engaging with the Bible as an authority with the power to lend its imprimatur to those claiming to enact "bible-based authority."⁶² Small presses devoted to sharing news tailored to specific demographics and interest groups dominated throughout the nineteenth century.⁶³ In other words, debates about truth and representation are as old as the printed word itself.⁶⁴ Although American "mainstream" print and especially television news achieved what some have called a "golden

⁶² Seth Perry, *Bible Culture and Authority in the Early United States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 67. See also Frank Lambert, *Inventing the "Great Awakening"* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999) and Candy Gunther Brown, *The Word in the World: Evangelical Writing, Publishing, and Reading in America, 1789-1880* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

⁶³ For a history of how anti-Mormon pamphlets, books, and articles helped shape early Mormon history, for example, see J. Spencer Fluhman, *A Peculiar People: Anti-Mormonism and the Making of Religion in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

⁶⁴ See Seth Perry, *Bible Culture and Authority in the Early United States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018). See also Wendy Raphael Roberts, "Early American Evangelical Print Culture," in *A Companion to American Literature*, edited by Susan Belasco et al. (New York: Wiley, 2020).

age” by the mid-twentieth century, the Cronkite-era news monoculture was largely due to a dearth of competitive options, rather than a widespread consensus on the news as a site of rational and objective reports about world events.⁶⁵ Even then, cultural historians identify plenty of Americans discontented by the mainstream news—whether because they were disturbed by its widespread influence, thought it delivered too much “bad news,” or were simply suspicious of journalists’ claims to objectivity.⁶⁶ By the mid-1950s, conservative publications like the *National Review* were positioning themselves as alternatives to the “liberal” mainstream. Both *National Review* founder William F. Buckley, Jr. and his mentor Willmoore Kendall decried prestige news outlets as part of a “liberal propaganda machine” that “try indefatigably to inculcate [the liberal party line] in their readers’ minds.”⁶⁷

Conservative white evangelicals, especially, are no strangers to creating parallel institutions—from universities to news sources to media companies—that reflect their worldview. Indeed, it was a desire to offer a politically and theologically conservative alternative to liberal Protestantism that animated Billy Graham and Nelson Bell in 1956 to launch the evangelical magazine *Christianity Today*—a publication that remains an intellectual pillar of American evangelicalism in the twenty-first century.⁶⁸ James Dobson’s Focus on the Family media empire, too, grew out of Dobson’s early work offering a conservative Christian alternative

⁶⁵ Charles L. Ponce de Leon, *That’s the Way it Is: A History of Television News in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 14, 144. Ponce de Leon’s argument hinges on the idea that television news programming, especially, has always balanced the task of delivering timely news with the obligation to entertain audiences in order to retain their audience. He claims that what might be seen as a golden age of news media might be seen as the primary source of entertainment for American audiences that would soon have more options.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 144. Ponce de Leon argues that if the newscaster-as-voice-of-God ever existed for the majority of American audiences, newscasters’ monopoly on cultural influence had certainly waned by the 1970s.

⁶⁷ Julie B. Lane, “Cultivating Distrust of the Mainstream Media: Propagandists for a Liberal Machine and the American Establishment,” in *News on the Right: Studying Conservative News Cultures*, ed. Anthony Nadler and A.J. Bauer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020): 171-172.

⁶⁸ Molly Worthen, *Apostles of Reason: The Crisis of Authority in American Evangelicalism*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 57.

to the progressive child-rearing advice of Benjamin Spock.⁶⁹ Importantly, both *Christianity Today* and Focus on the Family—arguably two of the most prominent evangelical media companies of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries—were envisioned and continue to run not simply as evangelical oases from secular ideas, but as worthy ideological competitors in a broader media marketplace. In its early days, *Christianity Today*’s editors mailed excerpts from each issue to hundreds of secular newspapers and full magazine copies to “every columnist in Washington, D.C.”⁷⁰ Dobson gained traction for Focus on the Family by running prime-time showings of his 1978 TV special *Where’s Dad?*, which Dobson’s family claims has since been seen by over 100 million people around the world.⁷¹

In many ways, *The Babylon Bee* is a continuation of the legacy built by earlier white America evangelical media moguls. Their business model is predicated on technological innovation—not only participating in new media models, but actively attempting to shape the future of new media. So too do they serve both as a media enclave for conservatives and evangelicals and as a genuine competitor to secular sites like *The Onion*. Their history of creative and effective expansion is one of the many reasons it matters so much to pay attention to American evangelical media ventures: they seek not only to entertain and inform American

⁶⁹ Dan Gilgoff, *The Jesus Machine: How James Dobson, Focus on the Family, and Evangelical America are Winning the Culture War* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2007), 22-23. For more on the history and legacy of Focus on the Family, see Susan Ridgely, *Practicing What the Doctor Preached: At Home With Focus on the Family* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016). See also William Schultz, “Garden of the Gods: Colorado Springs and the Origins of the Culture Wars,” PhD diss. (Princeton University, 2017).

⁷⁰ Worthen, *Apostles of Reason*, 59. For more historical works on American evangelicals’ creation of parallel cultural institutions throughout the twentieth century, see Timothy Gloege’s *Guaranteed Pure: The Moody Bible Institute, Business, and the Making of Modern Evangelicalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015); Adam Laats, *Fundamentalist U: Keeping the Faith in American Higher Education* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); and Matthew Sutton, *American Apocalypse: A History of Modern Evangelicalism* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2014).

⁷¹ Chris Carpenter, “Building a Family Legacy 2.0: Dr. James Dobson Revamps DVD Series,” *Christian Broadcasting Network*. <https://www1.cbn.com/movies/building-family-legacy-20>.

evangelicals, but to expand evangelicals' ideological reach farther into the public sphere—and they do it masterfully.

I argue that *The Babylon Bee* is worth studying for how they use humor to blur the lines between fact and truth in a manner especially suited to a hyper-mediated culture. When Donald Trump made his 2016 presidential bid based on a take-down of the “fake news,” he found a willing audience in many white evangelicals, who did not simply form an unhappy coalition with Trump, but made up one of his most devoted bases and later led the charge in contesting his loss in 2020.⁷² In this chapter, I explore how *The Babylon Bee* uses humor—and specifically satirical humor—to stoke readers' emotional resonances that have profound political consequences. Firstly, I demonstrate how satire's ability to pique strong emotions contributes to the sacralization and naturalization of evangelicalism as necessarily politically conservative. Secondly, I argue that the fomenting of one such emotion—what I call apocalyptic cynicism—about human institutions like the press sets the stage for the breaking down of democratic norms.

The Birth of the *Bee*

The Babylon Bee, founded in 2016, is the brainchild of Christian cartoonist Adam Ford. Ford, an adult convert to Christianity who was already running a faith-based webcomic and newsletter by the time he began conceptualizing the *Babylon Bee*, describes the satire site as “one of those ideas that just wouldn't let go of me.” Ford's vision for the *Babylon Bee* was formed during what he calls “the Obama years and the Obergefell years,” an era of moderate social progressivism that was both praised and critiqued by media sources like news satire site

⁷² Anthea Butler details this phenomenon in Anthea Butler, *White Evangelical Racism: The Politics of Morality in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021). See also Daniel D. Miller, “The Mystery of Evangelical Trump Support?” *Constellations* 26 (2019): 43-58 and *Evangelicals: Who They Have Been, Are Now, and Could Be*, eds. Mark A. Noll et al. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2019).

The Onion.⁷³ Ford saw *The Onion*'s use of humor as the key to its persuasive power. Describing *The Onion*'s influence on the *Bee* three years after the site's successful launch, Ford recalled, "Seeing how effective they were at speaking into the situation, like they would crack these jokes and run these just piercing satirical news pieces and it would make me think, like, man, that's good...that makes me want to believe what they believe.... And I thought, man, we have nothing like that."⁷⁴

The "we" of *The Babylon Bee* is purposely and usefully vague: Is it all Christians? All conservatives? Only conservative Christians? Only conservative evangelicals? While the influence of evangelical Christianity on the *Bee*'s creators and content is hard to deny—from Ford's own conversion through evangelist and radio persona J. Vernon McGee to Editor-in-Chief Kyle Mann's decade as a pastor at an evangelical church in San Diego to former creative director Ethan Nicolle's work on a VeggieTales spinoff series—the *Babylon Bee* team does not explicitly identify the company as evangelical.⁷⁵ Nevertheless, through both their satirical articles and their talk show-style podcast, one can gain a clearer picture of which Christians fall outside the *Bee*'s intended audience. The *Bee* routinely takes aim at prosperity gospel and charismatic traditions, with founder Ford calling the prosperity gospel a "sadistic, false gospel"

⁷³ "Episode 19: The Founder With Adam Ford," *The Babylon Bee Podcast*, October 18, 2019, <https://babylonbee.com/podcasts/the-babylon-bee-podcast/19>. While Ford does not elaborate on the temporal bounds of this era, one might interpret the period as spanning from Barack Obama's inauguration as the forty-fourth president of the United States in January of 2009 to his last day in office in January 2017. During that time, the Supreme Court enshrined same-sex marriage as the law of the land with its 2015 ruling in *Obergefell v. Hodges*. The ruling determined same-sex marriage to be a protected form of marriage in light of the Equal Protection Clause and Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution.

⁷⁴ "Episode 19: The Founder With Adam Ford," *The Babylon Bee Podcast*.

⁷⁵ It is worth noting the broad influence Dallas Theological Seminary has had on the founders of the *Bee*. Ford credits his faith to his process of reading through the Bible while listening to McGee's daily radio program, *Through the Bible*, which has been translated into over 100 languages, according to the program's website. McGee received his doctorate from DTS. Mann's church, Highpoint Church, is also helmed by a DTS graduate. See "About," *Through the Bible with J. Vernon McGee*, accessed December 11, 2022, <https://ttb.org/about>.

and “one of the more evil, damnable worldviews in existence.”⁷⁶ Liberal Christianity, too, attracts the *Bee*’s ire: a November 2020 episode of the *Bee*’s podcast titled “The Dangers of Progressive Christianity” dismissed liberal Christianity as a late twentieth century reaction to evangelicalism and defined progressive Christians as “‘Christians’ [that] don’t really believe the Bible.”⁷⁷ An article following the announced split of the United Methodist Church over the issue of same-sex marriage featured side-by-side pictures of the Methodist flag and the rainbow flag, with the headline, “United Methodist Church to Split Over Whether or Not to Be Christians.”⁷⁸ More explicit references to the core team’s shared religious tradition slip out in less formal conversations, such as Adam Ford’s appearance on an old friend’s podcast in which the two joked about whether Ford was “the evangelical Ben Shapiro”—referencing the right-wing author and television commentator— or whether Shapiro was “the Jewish Adam Ford.”⁷⁹

From the beginning, the *Bee* conflated “conservative” and “Christian” satire as interchangeable underdogs in the fight for cultural dominance against the Left. Ford launched the

⁷⁶ Emily Belz, “Serious Laughter: New and popular satire site The Babylon Bee tries to cut through superficiality to hard truths,” *World Magazine*, October 14, 2016, https://world.wng.org/2016/10/serious_laughter. For more information on the prosperity gospel tradition in American Christianity, see Kate Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Gerardo Marti, *Hollywood Faith: Holiness, Prosperity, and Ambition in a Los Angeles Church* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008); and Simon Coleman, *The Globalisation of Charismatic Christianity: Spreading the Gospel of Prosperity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

⁷⁷ “Alissa Childers: The Dangers of Progressive Christianity,” *The Babylon Bee Podcast*, November 17, 2020, <https://babylonbee.com/podcasts/the-babylon-bee-podcast/120>. When podcast guest Alisa Childers began describing what she believed was the “opposite” of progressive Christianity, the hosts offered, “actual Christianity.” The hosts and their guest agreed that liberal Christianity is a rejection of “almost all the core claims of Christianity” and the hosts noted that they have found that they get along better with non-Christians who share their political and social views than they do with progressive Christians. For more about the history of ideological conflict and overlap between “progressive” Christianity and American evangelicalism in the United States, see Wallace Best, “Battle for the Soul of a City: John Roach Straton, Harry Emerson Fosdick, and the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy in New York, 1922–1935,” in *Church History* 90, no. 2 (2021): 367–397; George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth Century Evangelicalism, 1870–1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); and William R. Hutchison, *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).

⁷⁸ “United Methodist Church to Split Over Whether or Not to Be Christians,” *The Babylon Bee*, January 6, 2020, <https://babylonbee.com/news/methodist-church-to-split-over-whether-or-not-to-be-christians>.

⁷⁹ “Interview with Adam Ford, Creator of the Babylon Bee,” Redeeming Productivity with Reagan Rose, October 27, 2019, <https://redeemingproductivity.com/podcast/rps-12-adam-ford-interview/>.

site on March 1, 2016 with a lead story featuring a tearful Barack Obama. With the headline “Christian News Satire Site Launches,” the story suggested the president was distraught by the idea of conservatives invading liberal territory. The satirical Obama said, ““News satire has a long, storied history as an important and effective tool for articulating a specific brand of worldview: far-left, anti-religion, naturalist, nihilist—in a word, reasonable. The very idea of Christian satire is an outrage and has no place in our society.””⁸⁰ As of its 2016 launch day, the site was populated with a handful of articles that represented the same balance of content the *Bee* has continued to aim for in subsequent years—about half were satirical commentaries on political and social issues (“Hillary Turns to Husband for Advice on Attracting Young, Impressionable Female Voters”), while the other half were in-jokes about evangelical culture (“Counsel On Biblical Gender Roles To Update Manuals With Correct Spelling Of ‘Complementarian’”). In what Ford calls a “God thing,” he found his right-hand man the very day the *Bee* went live.⁸¹ Kyle Mann, who was then working in construction full-time, had written what Ford recalls as the funniest of many article submissions from fans. Mann’s first piece, “Holy Spirit Unable to Move Through Congregation as Fog Machine Breaks,” went up on the site the following day and was the first of the *Bee*’s stories to go “viral” on Facebook—that is, to quickly garner a high volume of article clicks and shares by Facebook users. Ford quickly brought Mann on as his head writer.

Mann and Ford have both noted that their partnership brought important, counter-balancing perspectives to the *Bee*, which in turn shaped its voice and content. Mann grew up attending an evangelical megachurch and was familiar with the quirks of American evangelical

⁸⁰ “Christian News Satire Site Launches,” *The Babylon Bee*, March 1, 2016, <https://babylonbee.com/news/christian-news-satire-site-launches>.

⁸¹ “Episode 19: The Founder with Adam Ford,” *The Babylon Bee Podcast*.

culture. Ford, a former atheist who had a “radical conversion” to Calvinist evangelicalism in his early 20s, brought a helpful outsider perspective on evangelical culture and ensured that the *Bee*’s coverage would include political and social analysis.⁸² An outspoken political conservative, Ford has described political commentary as part and parcel of his Christian commitment to love his neighbor. In an interview with an old friend from his metro-Detroit church, Ford declared that capitalism is “more responsible for human flourishing than anything else ever” and added that “collectivism,” socialism, communism, and “social welfare” were, in turn, “responsible for massive human suffering.... I have a vested interest in trying to promote the system that is responsible for massive human flourishing.” Christian duty and political partisanship intersect in Ford’s summation of the faithful’s mission: “Preach the gospel, fight abortion, fight collectivism. The end.”⁸³

It is in this sense of Christian imperative to speak to pressing political and social issues that *The Babylon Bee* found its voice and made a name for itself in a competitive media marketplace. While the site continued to publish satirical pieces on conservative Christian culture in the years following its founding, the *Bee*’s staff have referred to such pieces as “low-hanging fruit,” while identifying current events as an endless font for conservative commentary.⁸⁴ As Ford predicted at the site’s launch, the *Bee* filled a vacant cultural niche. The site garnered over one million visitors in its first month and has experienced meteoric growth in

⁸² “Episode 1: Origin Story,” *The Babylon Bee Podcast*, June 15, 2019, <https://babylonbee.com/podcasts/the-babylon-bee-podcast/1>. While some see “evangelical” and “Calvinist” as mutually exclusive terms, a growing number of self-described evangelicals are embracing Reformed Protestantism as the theological basis of their evangelical faith. Collin Hansen documents this phenomenon in *Young, Restless, Reformed: A Journalist's Journey with the New Calvinists* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008). For a series of essays by pastors promoting and refining the tenets of evangelical Calvinism, see Myk Habets and Bobby Grow, eds., *Evangelical Calvinism: Essays Resourcing the Continuing Reformation of the Church* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2012).

⁸³ “Interview with Adam Ford,” *Redeeming Productivity with Reagan Rose*.

⁸⁴ “Interview with Adam Ford,” *Redeeming Productivity with Reagan Rose*.

the proceeding years, garnering about 20 million page views per month in 2020.⁸⁵ The data on their readership paints a picture of what kind of role the *Bee* plays in the online lives of its audience. The *Bee*'s top referral sites mirror the right-wing news and opinion sites with which it has the most audience overlap: *The Daily Wire*, *The Federalist*, *The Gateway Pundit*, *PJ Media*, and *The Daily Caller*. If, as editor in chief Kyle Mann says, one of the *Bee*'s goals is to demonstrate to conservatives and Christians that there exists satire that “doesn’t hate them,” conservative Christians are certainly receiving the message. What is less clear from web traffic data is the question of how readers understand the *Bee*'s content in relation to the “real” conservative news and opinion sites they also frequent.

Further muddying the waters between the *Bee*'s “fake” news and “real” conservative-lens news is the existence of the *Bee*'s sibling sites, both founded in the years after the *Bee*'s initial success. In arguably the biggest staffing change in the *Bee*'s short history, founder Adam Ford stepped down to focus on “real” news in 2018, founding a short-lived Christian news aggregate site called *DISRN*, whose tagline described its contents as “brief, smart, faithful.”⁸⁶ Ford called his replacement, Seth Dillon, “a successful businessman who uses his resources for Kingdom purposes.”⁸⁷ As acting CEO of *The Babylon Bee*—whose tagline “Fake News You Can Trust”

⁸⁵ CEO Seth Dillon claims this figure in a Nov 19, 2020 interview with Charlie Kirk. “Exploring the Death of Comedy with Babylon Bee CEO Seth Dillon,” *The Charlie Kirk Show*, November 19, 2020, <https://www.pandora.com/podcast/the-charlie-kirk-show/exploring-the-death-of-comedy-with-babylon-bee-ceo-seth-dillon/PE:4622975>. Web traffic data from sites like SimilarWeb.com suggest that in 2022 the *Bee* has averaged around 7 million page views per month, but page views fail to capture the true reach of the *Bee*, whose articles can be liked and shared on social media sites like Twitter and Facebook without users ever having to click onto the site.

⁸⁶ *DISRN*, Twitter account, <https://twitter.com/disrnnews>. *DISRN*'s founder Adam Ford announced on April 30, 2021 that the company would be “folded” into Not the *Bee*. Ford describes Not the *Bee*'s success as a “rocket ship” whose meteoric rise was taking focus and readers away from *DISRN*, leading him to the conclusion that his energies would best be spent focusing on Not the *Bee* full time. The *DISRN* website has since been deactivated, but Ford's original announcement is accessible via the WayBack Machine: Adam Ford, “Announcement: We are Folding Disrn into Not the Bee. Let Me Explain Why This is a Good Thing,” *DISRN*, April 30, 2021. Accessed via WayBack Machine, December 14, 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20210430170454/https://disrn.com/news/we-are-folding-disrn-into-not-the-bee-let-me-explain-why-this-is-a-good-thing>.

⁸⁷ Adam Ford, “I Sold the Bee and am No Longer Running it,” *Adam4D.com*, accessed November 30, 2022, <https://adam4d.com/i-sold-the-babylon-bee-and-am-no-longer-running-it/>.

highlights its complicated relationship with “the real”—Dillon has spun out the Bee into a web of related networks, all playing with the themes of “real” and “fake” news. A co-founder of Ford’s *DISRN*, Dillon also spearheaded a *Babylon Bee* companion site called *Not the Bee*, a site devoted to rounding up “absurd and hilarious (but real) news that seems like it should definitely be satire” that also serves as a social media platform for subscribers.⁸⁸ On both of these sites, their creators challenge the mainstream media’s claims to truth and offer an alternative Internet landscape for those who wish to see their “worldview” echoed in every post.

By 2020, the *Bee*’s core team had grown to seven—all white men—including a creative director and a web and app developer. By late 2022, the *Babylon Bee* had over two million Twitter followers and one million page likes on Facebook. Their success can be attributed, at least in part, to their prolific content output. While *The Onion* published around 500 articles in 2020 and had an engagement rate of 53 thousand, *The Babylon Bee* published over 7000 articles in 2020 with a total engagement of 8.9 million.⁸⁹ By including features like comment sections, forums, and other opportunities for audience engagement, the *Bee* has forged a dialectical relationship with its readers that has tangible, measurable results.

Why Satire?

The *Bee*’s use of satire is critical to their success as an emotionally and rhetorically persuasive force in American evangelical culture. Satire, as an inherently moralizing form of humor, easily lends itself not only to the project of defining and defending religious worldviews

⁸⁸ Adam Ford, “Welcome to Not the Bee, a brand new site from the creators of The Babylon Bee and Disrn,” *Not the Bee*, August 31, 2020, <https://notthebee.com/article/welcome-to-not-the-bee>.

⁸⁹ Data from Amazon’s web traffic analysis subsidiary *Alexa Internet* as of December 1, 2020. While engagement rates are somewhat nebulous reflections of a website’s popularity—they can include link clicks, comments, shares, and other metrics—the sheer difference between *The Onion* and *The Babylon Bee*’s output and engagement is noteworthy.

but also to the provoking of strong affective ties between individuals, their worldview, and their fellow community of believers. The persuasive power of satire is well-documented. Political scientist Jamie Warner has argued that satire's "indirect, ambivalent, ambiguous mode of communicating" makes it a powerful rhetorical tool because "it can embed 'a threatening idea in a non-threatening form'" and is hard for detractors to take out of context. Any sharp point made through satire can be softened by the claim that it was "only a joke."⁹⁰ Satire is not only difficult for its targets to address, but it also often slips under the radar of critical analysis because it is deployed in the context of entertainment or popular culture. Despite its inherent ambiguity, satire makes an ideal vehicle for persuasive communication. While satire takes many forms, it always plays on the incongruity between things as they are and things as they *ought to be*. The *ought* is the site of the moralizing: the satirist not only claims the authority to define *how things are*, but also to express a normative opinion about how things—society, the world, individuals—could and should be better than they are. This situates the satirist as having "a serene God's-eye view of the fretful stir of puny man," a position that is then extended to the audience: by reducing complex situations and individuals to "caricatures," the satirist offers audiences a "sense of mastery...relief from the burdens of complexity...[and an] imagined control of the world."⁹¹ Satire is a worldview-building exercise, and, as such, a powerful tool for religious world-building.

As I detailed in the introduction of the dissertation, several sociologists of religion have argued for the need to "take humor seriously" in the study of religion. In his book *Drawn to the*

⁹⁰ Jamie Warner, "The Daily Show and the Politics of Truth," in *Homer Simpson Marches on Washington: Dissent Through American Popular Culture*, ed. Timothy M. Dale and Joseph F. Foy (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2010), 50.

⁹¹ Dustin Griffin, *Satire: A Critical Reintroduction* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1994), 168. Other critical works on satire as a discursive tool include Paul Simpson, *On the Discourse of Satire: Towards a Stylistic Model of Satirical Humour* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2003) and Ian Reilly, "Satirical Fake News and/as American Political Discourse," *The Journal of American Culture* 35, no. 3 (2012): 258-275.

Gods, David Feltmate theorizes that humor, like religion, works to “convince people that there is an unseen order” to the world. Satire, in particular, “is based in a common stock of knowledge and affirms the moral boundaries that make the satirist’s plausibility structures seem valid.”⁹² Feltmate’s work focuses on agnostic and atheist humorous critiques of religion, contending that humor about religion actually functions to maintain the boundaries of the “sacred” beliefs of the non-religious—reason, rationality, and the power of scientific inquiry. But, as Feltmate notes, humor is a useful tool for protecting any group’s sacred beliefs because it uses the space of play and entertainment to “reinforce and make explicit moral boundaries.”⁹³ Anthropologist Mary Douglas, too, asserts that humor, as a universal social mechanism, deals with the unseen orders that govern human societies. Humor, Douglas writes, “offers alternative patterns, one apparent, one hidden: the latter, by being brought to the surface impugns the validity of the first.”⁹⁴ Satire in particular has the power to not only offer up alternative patterns but also to deliver strong normative judgments that impugn anyone on the “wrong side” of its unseen order.

Most existing scholarship on contemporary satire examines satire as a tool for liberal meaning-making and moralizing. In her study of conservative comedians, Alison Dagnes notes that most contemporary satirists get their start working in theater and comedy—unpredictable fields with non-family-friendly hours that are more likely to attract left-leaning free spirits. Dagnes posits that some typically conservative values—including “reverence,” stoicism, and moral absolutism—clash with satire’s general unpredictability, irreverence, and relativism.⁹⁵ Stephen Kercher’s work on liberal satire in post-World War II America suggests that satire

⁹² David Feltmate, *Drawn to the Gods: Religion and Humor in The Simpsons, South Park, and Family Guy* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 213

⁹³ Feltmate, *Drawn to the Gods*, 19.

⁹⁴ Mary Douglas, *Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology* (London: Routledge, 1975), 149.

⁹⁵ Alison Dagnes, *A Conservative Walks into a Bar: The Politics of Political Humor* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), 141.

thrives in “oppositional spaces” where individuals are empowered to critique dominant values—often values the satirist finds too conservative or outmoded.⁹⁶ Dannagal Young has made the bold claim that satire might even be an “inherently liberal” aesthetic form due to its use of playful ambiguity and experimentation and its routine use as a tool for social progress.⁹⁷

Despite the dominance of liberal satire in twentieth and early twenty-first century popular culture, however, I contend that satire is not “the tool of the liberal satirist alone.”⁹⁸ As Ronald Paulson contends in his 1967 classic *The Fictions of Satire*, “Depending on the emphasis—whether it is on the nonconformity and deviation of the false society from old norms, or on its rigidifying of the old ways...satire can be conservative or revolutionary.”⁹⁹ In other words, satire might just as easily critique in order to bring society back to an imagined halcyon era as it beckons toward an imagined golden future. My work takes the conservative potential of satire for granted, understanding satire as a rhetorical device that does varied cultural and theological work. Not only can the study of satire bring new insight to scholarship on religion, but highlighting this conservative Christian iteration of satire serves as an important corrective to work arguing that satire is inherently liberal and represents a new case study for the field of conservative media studies.¹⁰⁰ In this case study, I ask how might satire be understood as a conservative ideological tool just as much as a liberal ideological tool. If conservative satire can be understood as a defense of old norms against immoral deviations, what values is *The Babylon*

⁹⁶ Stephen E. Kercher, *Revel With a Cause: Liberal Satire in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 5.

⁹⁷ Dannagal Goldthwaite Young, *Irony and Outrage: The Polarized Landscape of Rage, Fear, and Laughter in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 68.

⁹⁸ Young, *Irony and Outrage*, 214. Young does note in her work that satire is the province of the satirist alone, not of any one political party, but she overstates her claim by arguing that satire is *inherently* liberal.

⁹⁹ Ronald Paulson, *The Fictions of Satire* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1967), 18.

¹⁰⁰ Anthony Nadler and A.J. Bauer have argued that, while the phenomenon of conservative news is not new, there is a great need for scholars of conservative news cultures to cohere into a more self-conscious interdisciplinary field. I offer this case study of *The Babylon Bee* as a contribution to that nascent field. See Anthony Nadler and A.J. Bauer, eds., *News on the Right: Studying Conservative News Cultures* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

Bee trying to protect, and against which interlopers? If, as I will show, satire is uniquely proficient at piquing affective resonances, what emotions does conservative satire like *The Babylon Bee* evoke through its humor community? What are the social, theological, and political ramifications of those resonances?

Satire, Affect, and Evangelical Identity

It is the capacity of satire to pique emotion that interests me in this exploration of the relationship among satire, political conservatism, and American evangelicalism. Scholars of genre have argued that satire, a rhetorical tool that defies simple definitions, is best identified by the emotions it stokes in its audiences. Literary theorist Patricia Meyer Spacks contends that satire always stirs readers' affect, but that only some kinds of satire stir emotions that spur action. Through the presentation of an "Other" with whom the audience is loath to identify, Spacks argues, satire can provoke disgust at the Other (and all the Other represents) that "sometimes generates self-satisfaction and complacency (when we can clearly identify its victims as other than ourselves)." The "best" satire, Spacks posits, complicates the initial disgust response by prompting the audience's radical identification with the other, moving them "to a sense of uneasiness when [they] find [themselves] trapped a moment later, impaled by the scorn [they] have comfortably leveled against the rest of the world."¹⁰¹ For Spacks, it is this kind of satire that evokes "actionable" emotion—emotion that encourages action toward resolution.

The emotional resonances of satire *always* have tangible consequences, whether or not they inspire self-reflection or move audiences toward personal or social change. Indeed, emotional resonances might lie at the heart of American evangelicals' increasing identification

¹⁰¹ Patricia Meyer Spacks, "Some Reflections on Satire," In *Satire: Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. Ronald Paulson, 360–78 (New Jersey: Prentice, 1971).

with political conservatism. Postmortems of the 2016 presidential election have gestured at this possibility as scholars attempted to make sense of the bond between American evangelicals and political conservatism that seemed to have transcended a mere coalition of convenience.¹⁰² Evangelicals' widespread support of Republican Party nominee Donald J. Trump, a man who is self-admittedly not an evangelical and whose personal conduct seems to defy most evangelical moral prescriptions, in both the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections is just one iteration of a broader trend of deep evangelical identification with political conservatism. As various evangelical figureheads failed to toe the party line during Trump's presidency, it was those "traitors"—not Trump or his GOP stalwarts—that evangelical laypeople denounced as failing to live up to the faith. Russell Moore, president of the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention; Wheaton College dean Ed Stetzer; author and speaker Beth Moore; and celebrity pastor John Piper are among the evangelical figures that have publicly denounced Donald Trump and his supporters. As Kristen Kobes Du Mez's details in *Jesus and John Wayne*, all have faced significant blow-back from fellow evangelical leaders and laypeople alike. Russell Moore, as du Mez writes, faced losing his job in 2016 as over one hundred Southern Baptist Convention churches threatened to withhold donations unless Moore stepped down. Moore only held onto his role by going on an "apology tour" and walking back some of his harshest criticisms of Trump.¹⁰³ What are the emotional resonances that led to such a deep emotional investment by evangelicals in rightwing American politics? What led *Babylon Bee*

¹⁰² See, for example, Anthea Butler, *White Evangelical Racism: The Politics of Morality in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021); Daniel D. Miller, "The Mystery of Evangelical Trump Support?" *Constellations* 26 (2019): 43-58; and Mark Noll et al., eds., *Evangelicals: Who They Have Been, Are Now, and Could Be* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2019).

¹⁰³ Kristen Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2020), 268. *The Babylon Bee* has also aimed criticisms at anti-Trump conservatives and evangelicals. In January 2021, the Bee ran a story targeting Mitt Romney's opposition to Trump titled "Follower Of Joseph Smith Urges Nation To Reject Morally Flawed Leaders."

founder Adam Ford to identify opposition to abortion and “collectivism” as two out of the three core duties of the contemporary Christian?

Political scientist William E. Connolly paved the way for Trump-era scholarship on evangelicalism, conservatism, and affect with his 2005 theory of “the evangelical-capitalist resonance machine.” Connolly posited that it is shared *emotional resonances* of persecution and entitlement that so closely bind American evangelicalism to American capitalism and conservatism. Shared affective resonances, Connolly argued, can “trigger the responses of those imbued with them even before they begin to think about this or that event”—an ongoing, precognitive process that leads to the crystallization of shared *identity* between those experiencing similar emotional responses to current events.¹⁰⁴ Thus, alliances that begin as political-religious coalitions can “become fused together...into energized complexities of mutual imbrication and interinvolvement, in which heretofore unconnected or loosely associated elements *fold, bend, blend, emulsify, and dissolve into each other.*”¹⁰⁵ The electronic media, Connolly contends, is key to this process in the twenty-first century, providing “echo chambers” that simultaneously “do much of their work below the level of explicit attention and encourage the intense coding of those experiences as they do so.”¹⁰⁶

In the wake of the 2016 presidential election, scholar of religion Daniel Miller built upon Connolly’s work to make sense of white evangelicals’ broad support of Donald Trump, arguing that political conservatism has become “a constitutive feature of [evangelicals’] *religious* identity as evangelicals.”¹⁰⁷ Miller argues that American evangelicals and the Republican Party have

¹⁰⁴ William E. Connolly, “The Evangelical-Capitalist Resonance Machine,” *Political Theory* 33 no.6 (December 2005): 869-886, 873.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 880.

¹⁰⁷ Daniel D. Miller, “The Mystery of Evangelical Trump Support?” *Constellations* 26 (2019): 43-58, 45-46.

moved past their previous “relation of coalition”—in which still-distinct groups form a strategic alliance—into a “relation of equivalence” wherein a majority of evangelicals have taken on a new social and religious identity that *includes as a constitutive element* loyalty to the Republican Party.¹⁰⁸ For Miller, too, one can account for this historical shift partly by considering “the emotional nature of political identity”—the tendency for individuals to legitimize and/or rationalize a pre-established political identity that has actually been forged through “emotional attachments that transcend thinking.”¹⁰⁹ Through the repetition of shared emotional resonances—facilitated and amplified by electronic media—the Republican Party has come to be part and parcel of the evangelical “homeworld”—“that concrete lifeworld wherein [one is] typically familiar, normal, or ‘at home.’”¹¹⁰ If this is the case, exploring the emotional resonances piqued by evangelical media can reveal the mechanisms behind the increasing inextricability evangelical identity and conservative politics. *The Babylon Bee*’s use of satire, I argue, is one such mechanism.

Satire and The Evangelical-Conservative Resonance Machine

The Babylon Bee is one important site contributing to the melding of American evangelicalism and political conservatism into one shared identity—a reality evidenced by slips of the tongue such as Editor in Chief’s Kyle Mann identifying conservatives as “believers” in “the gospel” and founder Adam Ford’s description of the *Bee* as “criticiz[ing] the left...things

¹⁰⁸ Miller, “The Mystery of Evangelical Trump Support?” 45-46.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 50. See also Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels, “It Feels Like We’re Thinking: The Rationalizing Voter,” in *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016): 267-297.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 51. Quoting Steinbock, 1995, 220.

like atheism.”¹¹¹ In routinely satirizing an imagined liberal, secular cultural hegemony for the benefit of an imagined conservative and evangelical audience, the *Bee* emphasizes a set of conservative evangelical values that contribute to the sacralization and naturalization of political conservatism as a *constituent element* of American evangelicalism—or, as the *Bee*’s team has described it, “actual Christianity.”¹¹² While Mann has touted the *Bee* as “pretty agnostic in terms of politics” and committed to “mak[ing] fun of both sides,” he does not deny that the site’s theological conservatism is ultimately matched by a politically conservative lens. As a guest on the evangelical Colson Center’s Breakpoint podcast, Mann admitted, “A lot of times one side happens to be doing a lot dumber stuff, you know? So in that case we’re going to be making fun of that side a little bit more.”¹¹³

In the year 2020, the *Bee* published 789 stories tagged under “politics.” After coding each one based on its main target, I found that 595, or about 75 percent, of those articles primarily targeted liberal figures or ideas. 101 articles, or about 13 percent, primarily targeted conservative figures or ideas, while 93 articles, or 12 percent, either had no clear target or were aimed equally at liberals and conservatives. In other words, the actual political content of the *Bee* —as delineated by their own tagging system—is overwhelmingly right-leaning.

¹¹¹ “CNN Contributes to President Trump’s Re-Election Campaign and Kyle Mann Joins US for The Babylon Bee,” *Crosspolitic Podcast*, September 8, 2019, <https://crosspolitic.com/podcast/cp-cnn-contributes-to-president-trumps-re-election-campaign-and-kyle-mann-joins-us-for-the-babylon-bee/>. When the hosts asked Mann why he thinks conservatives are “so bad at humor,” he replied, “Because we were so serious for so long, and obviously we’re serious because we believe, like, the gospel, we believe in things that are serious, we believe in things that do have eternal consequences.”

¹¹² “Alisa Childers: The Dangers of Progressive Christianity,” *The Babylon Bee Podcast*. Childers was discussing her desire to define the opposite of progressive Christianity, and the Bee hosts supplied: “actual Christianity.” Adam Ford quote in “1. Episode One: The Bee Origin Story,” *The Babylon Bee Podcast*, June 15, 2019.

¹¹³ “The Sweet Sting of Satire: An Interview with Babylon Bee Editor Kyle Mann,” *Breakpoint Podcast*, December 11, 2019, <https://breakpoint.org/the-sweet-sting-of-satire/>.

Babylon Bee “Politics” Article Targets by Political Affiliation in 2020

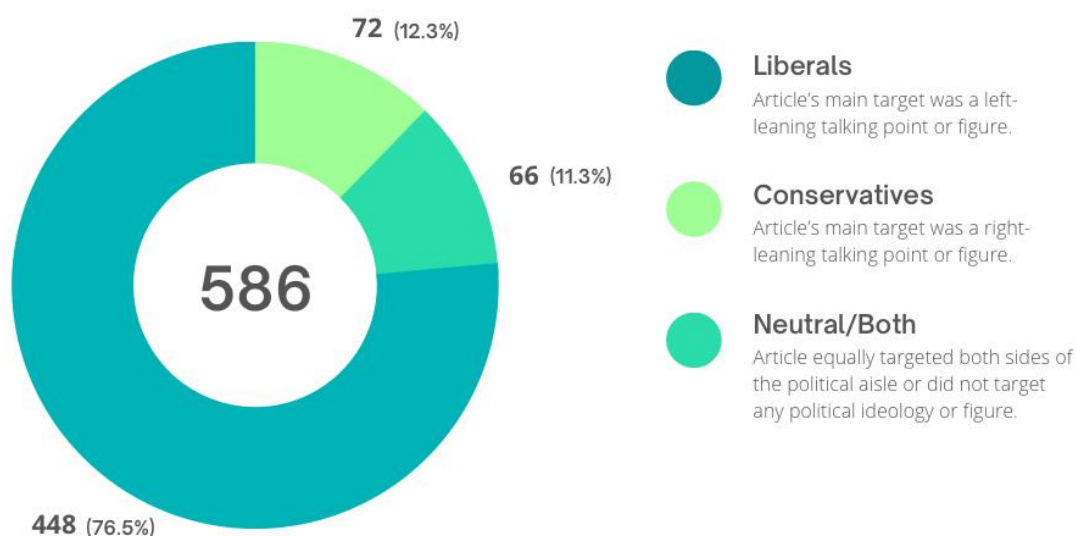


Fig. 1.1 Chart designed by the author

While several of the *Bee*'s articles aimed at conservatives were about Donald Trump, the majority of *those* articles spoofed the president's bombastic personality, rather than his policies. Articles aimed at subjects on the left, on the other hand, touched on recurring themes of liberal hypocrisy, the Godlessness of the Left, the dangers of "identity politics," the uselessness of the federal government, and the liberal bias of the mainstream media. Within these recurring themes are key emotional resonances worth exploring in order to better understand what might be called, in homage to William Connolly, the *Babylon Bee*'s evangelical-conservative resonance machine. In the following section, I will highlight a few of the most salient emotional resonances in the

Bee's oeuvre, paired alongside that resonance's corresponding value. What one can see unfold is a set of fears—of femininity, of multiculturalism, of a decline in white and Christian supremacy—that correspond to a set of values—manliness, bootstraps individualism, the rejection of identity politics—that the Bee vaunts as hallmarks of both true Christianity and true conservatism.

“Mansplaining Down but Woman Confusion Up”: Manliness and the Threat of Emasculation

On May 30, 2019, the *Babylon Bee* published a list article under its “worldviews” tag featuring a bearded white man staring soberly out from under the headline, “12 Obsolete Manly Activities And What You Can Replace Them With.”¹¹⁴ Manliness is dead, the article proclaimed, because no one needs or wants it anymore. The days of “fixing things around the house” (“Obsolete Manly Thing #3”) are numbered—a real man “rents a pastel-yellow townhouse in a suburb with all maintenance included in the rent.” The *Bee* advises men take up “interior decorating.” Is chivalry dead? The article recommends switching it out for “getting a sex change and beating the tar out of women in MMA.” Instead of disciplining their children, the Bee writes, men should instead “dress [their] children in drag and put them on TV.” Men still committed to “earning [their] living” might rethink it in favor of “demand[ing] a living from the government.” In lieu of “opening pickle jars” for women, who can simply “smash the jar against the wall for

¹¹⁴ “12 Obsolete Manly Activities And What You Can Replace Them With,” *The Babylon Bee*, May 30, 2019, <https://babylonbee.com/news/12-obsolete-manly-activities-and-what-you-can-replace-them-with>.

being so oppressive,” men should consider “open[ing] borders,” allowing immigrants to stream into the country unchecked.¹¹⁵

In this article, and many other *Bee* articles like it, manliness serves as a shorthand for a variety of qualities the *Bee*’s writers deem worthy of reverence—physical strength, self-sufficiency, ruggedness, exercise of authority, and maintenance of proper order. These qualities are important at the micro level—opening jars and fixing things around the house—*because* of how they reverberate at the macro level. A society lacking in manliness and its attendant qualities can anticipate a breakdown in family discipline, national border security, and gross domestic product. But what causes a national crisis of manliness? The *Bee* has a few ideas. One key factor in making the United States the “least masculine society in human history” is men themselves, whose sissy interests—for instance, “computer programming,” veganism, and gaming (the *Bee* offers up the satirical example of a Twitch streamer who has “never thrown a punch outside of a video game”)—distance them from the pith of manhood, which the *Bee* defines as “defeating the Nazis, carving society out of untamed wilderness, and landing men on the moon.”¹¹⁶ So too can women’s brash—and irrational—attempts at independence from men stymie men’s efforts to serve as natural-born leaders and protectors. Articles like “Woman Who Won \$758 Million Powerball 2 Days Ago Already Bankrupt,” “Christian Feminist Having Trouble Clicking 'Submit' Button On Website,” and “Report: Mansplaining Down But Woman

¹¹⁵ “12 Obsolete Manly Activities And What You Can Replace Them With,” *The Babylon Bee*, May 30, 2019, <https://babylonbee.com/news/12-obsolete-manly-activities-and-what-you-can-replace-them-with>. As I will explore in chapter two, American Christian men’s failure to live up to cultural values of masculinity are common topics of evangelical humor. In the case of the *Bee*, men’s lack of manliness is a bellwether for the decline of American culture writ large. The male stand-up comedians that make up the case study in chapter two, however, allow more breathing room for men to fail to live up to cultural standards of masculinity as long as they embody the God-ordained masculine roles of husband, father, and leader.

¹¹⁶ “Least Masculine Society In Human History Decides Masculinity Is A Growing Threat,” *The Babylon Bee*, January 17, 2019, <https://babylonbee.com/news/least-masculine-society-in-human-history-decides-masculinity-is-a-growing-threat>.

Confusion Up” suggest that women’s rejection of men’s natural roles can lead to personal problems, but a number of *Bee* articles indicate that women’s liberation poses risks to society and even to national security. In their article “Feminist Interrupts Covert Mission To Lecture Special Ops Team On Gender Balance Of Squad,” the imagined titular feminist only avoided a hostage situation by “annoyingly lectur[ing] the terrorists...on the gender balance of their terror cell” until she was set free.¹¹⁷ Similarly, in the article “Biden All-Female Communications Team Won't Tell Nation What's Wrong, Nation Should Already Know,” the *Bee* satirized that the United States should be proud of its feminist commitment to “move beyond archaic and male-centric methods of communication that use things like clear language and written words.”¹¹⁸ Both men and women’s personal failure to embody their God-given social roles, in other words, causes chaos within the home and far beyond it.

Perhaps more responsible than either weakling men or power-hungry women for the nation’s crisis of masculinity, according to the *Bee*, is secular leftism writ large. The *Bee* blames concepts like “cancel culture,” “intersectionality,” “mansplaining,” and “toxic masculinity” for convincing women to decry everything they disagree with as sexist (“Ocasio-Cortez Accuses Math of Sexism,” “Opinion: If Americans Aren't Sexist, Then How Come They Refuse To Elect The Most Unlikable Women On The Planet?”). The Left, in peddling such concepts, has a hidden goal of obliterating “the cancerous idea that men and women are even the slightest bit different from one another” and convincing every “biological male” to “hate [him]self.”¹¹⁹ So

¹¹⁷ “Feminist Interrupts Covert Mission To Lecture Special Ops Team On Gender Balance Of Squad,” *The Babylon Bee*, April 4, 2019, <https://babylonbee.com/news/feminist-interrupts-covert-mission-to-lecture-spec-ops-team-on-gender-balance-of-squad>.

¹¹⁸ “Biden All-Female Communications Team Won't Tell Nation What's Wrong, Nation Should Already Know,” *The Babylon Bee*, November 30, 2020, <https://babylonbee.com/news/biden-all-female-communications-team-wont-tell-nation-whats-wrong-nation-should-already-know>.

¹¹⁹ “Are You Suffering From Toxic Masculinity? Know The Warning Signs,” *The Babylon Bee*, January 14, 2019, <https://babylonbee.com/news/are-you-suffering-from-toxic-masculinity-know-the-warning-signs>.

too does the *Bee* implicate Hollywood, “Big Tech,” and the mainstream news media—all of which it claims are in cahoots with Leftism—in the emasculation of American culture. Fictitious computer programmers and left-leaning celebrities recur in *Babylon Bee* stories about the general culture of hypocrisy and feminization among what the *Bee* understands to be the nation’s elites. In a podcast episode titled “Hollywood Hates Christians,” guest host and evangelical filmmaker Brian Godawa told the *Bee*’s listeners that he has seen “very deliberate hate campaigns” against both Christians and conservatives in the film industry, noting his impression that it is even “worse to be a Republican than a Christian” in Hollywood.¹²⁰ Godawa and *Bee* podcast hosts Kyle Mann and Ethan Nicolle lamented the fact that even “good” franchises like the Marvel cinematic universe have “turned woke,” with Mann noting that Marvel “lost” him “when Captain Marvel cut her hair into the...kind of like the feminist combover.”¹²¹ Here one can see how deeply antipathy toward feminism, progressivism, and “wokeness” have melded with the *Bee* staff’s sense of besiegement as conservative Christians—a movie character’s haircut is a sign of Hollywood’s rejection of their own identities.

The *Bee*’s posture toward the threat of emasculation is perhaps best illustrated by the controversy stirred by Matt Carobini, the social media manager of the *Bee*, when he tweeted a screenshot of Kamala Harris’s husband Douglas Emhoff’s Twitter bio in January 2021. In response to Emhoff’s bio—which read, “Future Second Gentleman Douglas Emhoff. Devoted dad. Proud husband to Vice President-elect Harris”—Carobini wrote, “How absolutely emasculating is this.”¹²² When Carobini’s tweet was roundly criticized by some 10 thousand commenters over the following days, he removed his affiliation with *The Babylon Bee* from his

¹²⁰ “Episode 11: Hollywood Hates Christians,” *The Babylon Bee Podcast*, August 23, 2019, <https://babylonbee.com/podcasts/the-babylon-bee-podcast/11>.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Matt Carobini [@carobini], *Twitter*, January 16, 2021. The tweet has since been deleted.

own Twitter bio, but tweeted out several unapologetic responses to the fervor, including a *Babylon Bee* article mocking the concept of toxic masculinity (“Striking Blow Against Toxic Masculinity, Man Graciously Allows Wife to Shovel Driveway”).¹²³ Carobini also made appeals to his faith in response to the backlash, directing the “feminist army” of critics to a Christian apologetics website so that they could “repent and believe in the gospel.”¹²⁴ In another follow-up tweet, Carobini invoked Matthew 10, a passage in the New Testament frequently appealed to by American evangelicals due to its promise that Christians will be hated and persecuted by “the world” due to their faith in Christ. Carobini’s initial response to Emhoff’s self-identification as a devoted dad and proud husband of a powerful wife signals not just a fear of men’s loss of power and dominance, but a specific fear of women’s power as emasculating. Moreover, his response to commenters asking what, exactly, is emasculating about a man supporting his wife’s political career, suggest that he sees feminists as not only militant but also necessarily godless—indeed, persecuting him *because* they are godless and he is not. Beyond highlighting how the Bee writers’ fears of emasculation lead them to explicitly pit Christians and conservatives—vanguards of “traditional” gender roles—against “godless” liberals, this episode gestures at a similarly pervasive emotional resonance in the *Bee*’s oeuvre: a sense of embattlement against the broader forces of “identity politics.”

“Wokeness is the New Sanctification”: White Christian Men Against the World

¹²³ The Bee’s social media team also reposted this article—originally published in 2019—on its social media platforms. It is unclear if Carobini retained control over the Bee’s social media accounts in the days following the controversy.

¹²⁴ Matt Carobini [@carobini], *Twitter*, January 16, 2021, <https://twitter.com/carobini/status/1350586762964430851?s=21>. This tweet has since been deleted.

Perhaps no issue rankles the *Bee*'s authors and readers quite as much as the concept of "identity politics"—a term coined in 1977 by the Black lesbian feminist Combahee River Collective, loosely defined as the effort to pay attention to how various (and intersecting) facets of individuals' lived experiences (including skin color, ethnicity, economic class, gender, sexual orientation, and ability) affect them on not only an interpersonal level but on a systemic level.¹²⁵ At the base many liberals' appeals to forging a politics born out of the lived experienced of the oppressed is a fairly simple belief: that most American institutions—from the government to public schools to social services—were designed to benefit wealthy white Christian people, and often specifically wealthy white Christian men. To attend to the ways oppressed groups have been dealt an unfair hand by lopsided systems, then, is the only way to become a truly free and fair nation for all for the first time. Although sociologist Ben Carrington has persuasively argued that American conservatives use terms like "political correctness" and "identity politics" as "floating signifiers" whose sole political purpose is to "reinforce right wing ideology," it is worth identifying what an explicit opposition to "identity politics" *does* for right wing ideology.¹²⁶ I contend that the *Bee*'s distaste for "identity politics" is rooted in a scaffolding set of sensibilities beginning in their rejection of the premise that American systems unfairly privilege certain groups. It is the following set of scaffolding sensibilities that leads to deep emotional resonance tying white evangelicalism to the Republican Party: 1) Systemic oppression (especially systemic racism) is a myth that can be disproven by anecdotal evidence of so-called marginalized people

¹²⁵ "The Combahee River Collective Statement," *How We Get Free: Black Feminist and the Combahee River Collective*, ed. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017), 19. The concept of intersectionality has been honed by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw. For Crenshaw and others' foundational work on intersectionality, see Kimberlé Crenshaw et al., eds., *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement* (New York: The New Press, 1995).

¹²⁶ Ben Carrington, "'Cancel culture' is a floating signifier from the same conservative lexicon as 'political correctness', 'playing the race card', 'chip on the shoulder' and 'identity politics'. There is no actual referent, other than its political use, which is to reinforce right wing ideology," *Twitter*, January 25, 2021, <https://twitter.com/benhcarrington/status/1353908181370425344?s=21>

achieving power and recognition. 2) Since America's systems are already fair meritocracies, focusing on race, gender, sexuality, and other markers of identity actually a) *creates* division where none should exist and b) gives so-called oppressed groups *more* help than they need. 3) Therefore, efforts toward equity are actually giving some groups a leg-up, creating the first *real* oppressed demographic: white Christian men.

It is an affective resonance of righteous embattlement that the *Bee* stokes across many of its articles and that the *Bee*'s readers reflect back in the comments sections of the *Bee* (on both the paid subscriber portion of their website and on their various social media accounts). Despite explicitly opposing the very concept of identity politics, the *Bee* and its readers deploy their own politics of identity in arguing that they, as white, Christian, conservative men, are uniquely marginalized (and, thus, uniquely positioned to critique existing social and political systems) because of the cultural dominance of feminism, secularism, leftism, and multiculturalism. The *Bee* helps pique this resonance through three main satirical themes that correspond with the scaffolding sensibilities listed above.

First, through stories of real and imagined people of color, women, and LGBT individuals in positions of power, the *Bee* signals that success for these groups is already achievable, thus indicating that their claims to be marginalized are actually disingenuous power grabs that reasonable people ought to resist. Stories like “Powerful: LeBron James Pulls Over To Lecture Homeless Man On His White Privilege” and “‘We Black Women Are Ignored,’ Says Multimillionaire Black Woman To Millions Of Adoring Fans” reject the premise that Black people experience systemic racism on the basis of anecdotes about successful Black people. Other articles—such as “Clever American Disguises Self As Transgender Middle Easterner In Hopes Of Receiving More COVID Aid” and “Huffington Post Criticizes Reality For Not Having

As Many LGBTQ People As Netflix Shows”—suggest that LGBT people actually already have *more* privileges than they need. The *Bee* builds on this concept with stories that depict LGBT people as scammers purposely exploiting their so-called oppression for personal gain. While “Opinion: It’s 2019, And Gay People Are Still Being Forced To Attack Themselves In The Streets” suggests that already-out individuals will vaunt their identity for a power grab, stories like “4D Chess: Trump Announces He Is Gay So He Cannot Be Fired From The Presidency” and “Epstein Released From Hell After Announcing He Is Transgender” simultaneously dismiss the hardships associated with being LGBT and advance a narrative that some individuals claiming to be LGBT are conmen simply looking for special treatment. Satirical treatments of such “scammers”—whether LGBT, Black, or otherwise marginalized—not only empower readers to reject marginalized people’s accounts of their lived experience as spurious and manipulative, but also position readers as superior for being able to see through such false claims of oppression.

Second, the *Bee* illustrates this imagined reality with satirical stories depicting what they envision to be the logical conclusion of “identity politics”—the singling out and punishing of white people, men, and Christians on the basis of their identity as such. In hyperbolic stories like “In ‘It’s A Wonderful Life’ Remake, Angel Tells George Bailey To Kill Himself Because He’s White”; “Progressive Church Bans ‘Jesus Loves The Little Children’ For Suggesting Jesus Loves White Kids”; and “Moderna Vaccine Rejected Since It Also Works On White People,” liberal efforts to uplift the marginalized have curdled into an effort to exterminate white people on the basis of skin color. Not only do such stories communicate to the *Bee*’s largely white and male readership that identity politics pose an obvious threat to their own lives, but the *Bee* also warns that marginalizing white, Christian men will have grievous consequences for the world at large. In one article, the *Bee* imagines CNN denouncing D-Day soldiers “for lack of diversity,” quoting

a fake opinion piece in which the imagined author says, “At some point, you have to ask yourself which is worse: living under Hitler's regime or getting rescued by straight, white males.”¹²⁷ So, too, might identity politics ruin the future of American medicine: in an article joking that Yale Medical School has pledged to stop teaching students about medical discoveries made by white men, one imaginary professor weighs in, “Yes, many people will get sick and die because of this, but it will be worth it for the woke points. We will now only teach medicine discovered by brave, oppressed, trans people of color.”¹²⁸ Another piece suggests that identity politics can even have eternal consequences, imagining angels at the gates of heaven using a skin color swatch to aid in the “purging of souls into the scorching abyss...in accordance with brand new heavenly diversity requirements.”¹²⁹ If, as Carrington has suggested, opposition to “identity politics” works as a floating signifier of right-wing ideology, that ideology guards against white, heterosexual, Christian men’s perceived loss of power and influence by forging a narrative that white, heterosexual Christian men are the only appropriate vanguards of Western society *because* they are the truly marginalized.

While some of the *Bee*’s over-the-top stories about white people, heterosexuals, and men being subjugated or killed can clearly be read as exaggerations for the sake of rhetorical impact, other stories seem to reflect the *Bee* leadership team’s genuine fears for the near future. In an article, “Facebook Unveils New Bigot Recognition Technology,” the *Bee* facetiously quotes Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg as saying, “We're looking for key indicators of bigotry, like

¹²⁷ “CNN Condemns D-Day Soldiers For Lack Of Diversity,” *The Babylon Bee*, February 1, 2020, <https://babylonbee.com/news/cnn-criticizes-d-day-soldiers-for-lack-of-diversity>. This article declines to note that legal segregation is the reason D-Day troops were overwhelmingly white.

¹²⁸ “Yale Med School To Stop Teaching Medicine Discovered By White Males,” *The Babylon Bee*, January 29, 2020, <https://babylonbee.com/news/yale-med-school-will-stop-teaching-medicine-discovered-by-white-males>.

¹²⁹ “Millions Kicked Out Of Heaven Following Enforcement Of New Diversity Quota,” *The Babylon Bee*, January 14, 2021, <https://babylonbee.com/news/countless-sent-to-hell-following-enforcement-of-new-diversity-quota-in-heaven>.

being white, believing in God, and holding any political position to the right of Stalin. Our algorithm has been trained to flag and remove offensive people who aren't welcome on our platform: straight, cisgendered males, conservative people, and of course, Christians.”¹³⁰ Such articles dovetail with beliefs the *Bee*’s leadership team espouses in both official statements from the *Bee* to its readers and their individual public platforms. Managing editor Joel Berry tweeted in the days following Donald Trump’s deplatforming from Twitter that the country was “headed toward corporate-sponsored apartheid” and that “the Left won’t stop at Twitter bans.”¹³¹¹³² CEO Seth Dillon tweeted that Google Business’s suggestion that business owners add attributes like “Women-led, Veteran-led, and LGBTQ-friendly” to their profiles should not be “legal,” musing that announcing the *Bee* as “white-owned, men-led, and conservative-friendly” would likely result in a “STAY AWAY warning notice.”¹³³ The *Bee* echoed these sentiments in an email sent out to their entire subscriber list following Amazon Web Service taking conservative social media site Parler’s servers offline in January 2021. In an uncharacteristically serious open letter, the *Bee* warned readers, “It is not hyperbole when we say this is a big deal. It’s huge. We are heading in a bad direction, and we’re heading there at lightning speed. Parler did nothing but host a site where conservatives congregate and speak freely. If that’s beyond the pale, no conservative sites are safe.”¹³⁴ While the *Bee* employs hyperbolic satire to emphasize the risks of identity

¹³⁰ “Facebook Unveils New Bigot Recognition Technology,” *The Babylon Bee*, November 13, 2018, <https://babylonbee.com/news/facebook-unveils-new-bigot-recognition-technology>.

¹³¹ Joel Berry, “We headed toward corporate-sponsored apartheid. Can’t imagine this ending well,” *Twitter*, January 11, 2021, <https://twitter.com/joelwberry/status/1348622210701930496?s=21>.

¹³² Joel Berry, “Twitter won’t stop at Trump. And the Left won’t stop at Twitter bans. The Left owns communication. They they own the culture. And they are driven by hate, bigotry, and fear. Here we go...” *Twitter*, January 8, 2021, <https://twitter.com/joelwberry/status/1347689138993197057?s=21>.

¹³³ Seth Dillon, “We are white-owned, men-led, and conservative-friendly. How do we apply for the STAY AWAY warning notice?” *Twitter*, 1/19/2021, <https://twitter.com/sethdillon/status/1351588090343804929?s=21>.

¹³⁴ Seth Dillon, “A Message from our CEO,” email, January 13, 2021.

politics, they yoke such stories to genuine calls to action, reminding their readers that the threats they satirize are indeed no joke.

Finally, by satirically featuring men, whites, Christians, and other privileged groups being duped into the oppression marginalized groups claim to experience themselves, the *Bee* creates a foil against which their readers might view themselves. Some such stories highlight white, straight men folding to the demands of the politically correct left. The article “Brave Man Chooses to Self-Identify as Man” features a fictional everyman reaching out to others like him: “I know our culture can be hostile to people like me,” the everyman says, “but I’m prepared to face the consequences. I know there are others out there who feel exactly like I do. They need to know they’re not strange, they’re not some weird freaks. They need to know they’re not alone.”¹³⁵ Other stories—such as “Christian Baker Now Just Sells Cakes Begging Customers Not To Sue Him” and “Christian Just Voting For Whichever Political Party Less Likely To Make His Faith Illegal One Day”—imagine straight, white, Christian men attempting to navigate their marginalization in the wake of hegemonic secular political correctness. These articles read as warnings of an imminent future—one where white, cisgender, straight Christians have already lost the cultural battle and are forced into subservience to their liberal overlords. In addition to providing such foils, though, the *Bee* also offers hyperbolic examples of heroes refusing to accept the liberal status quo. After actor Elliot Page announced that he was transgender, the *Bee* published an article with the headline, “Chuck Norris Comes Out Of Closet As Even More Of A Man,” praising Norris for his masculine boldness. So too can the everyman assert his faith, heterosexuality, masculinity, and proud whiteness even in the face of social stigma. One *Bee* story imagines a 16-year-old “modern-day rebel” named Anthony who fosters “wild plans to

¹³⁵ “Brave Man Chooses To Self-Identify As Man,” The Babylon Bee, March 4, 2016, <https://babylonbee.com/news/brave-man-chooses-self-identify-man>.

grow up, get married, and be a productive member of society.”¹³⁶ The hyperbolic heroism of Chuck Norris and “twenty-first century James Dean” Anthony offer the *Bee*’s readers a potential way forward through the thicket of identity politics and political correctness: Rather than accepting the cultural “lie” that people of color, women, LGBT people, and other minoritized groups are oppressed, strong, white Christian men should assert their own power culturally and politically, lest they become the first truly oppressed group in America.

“We Are Living in the End Times”: Fake News, Real Truth, and Evangelical Apocalyptic Cynicism

One of the most persistent affective resonances in *The Babylon Bee*’s coverage of politics is what I call an “apocalyptic cynicism” about American institutions like the press and the national government. Their stance on such institutions is cynical in the sense that it offers no glimmer of hope for meaningful reform—the *Bee* characterizes the government and especially the press as being broken beyond repair. The *Bee*’s baseline stance about perceived hypocrisy, fraud, or lies by the mainstream media or political officials is that little more can or should be expected of such thoroughly corrupt institutions and their emissaries. Rather than approaching the mainstream media, for example, as an institution that *can* be biased and *can* misinform, the *Bee* presents the press and the federal government as institutions so fully committed to deceit and corruption that there is nothing worth salvaging about them. Instead, as the *Bee* has sought to build, a faithful remnant must create its own enclave of truth and decency and wait for the inevitable downfall of mainstream institutions.

¹³⁶ “Modern-Day Rebel Plans To Grow Up, Get Married, Be Productive Member Of Society,” *The Babylon Bee*, January 25, 2018, <https://babylonbee.com/news/modern-day-rebel-plans-grow-get-married-productive-member-society>.

This orientation is most evident in the *Bee*'s near-constant satire about the liberal mainstream media—a category that, for the *Bee*, includes even the demonstrably right-leaning Fox News. The *Bee*'s recurring satirical themes about the press dovetail with the central resonances of premillennialist dispensationalism—the belief long favored by American evangelicals that an imminent Rapture of true believers will usher in a period of earthly tribulation for nonbelievers, overseen by a reigning Antichrist, before Christ ultimately rules on earth for a millennium.¹³⁷ The inevitability of a period of Great Tribulation—envisioned by many American evangelicals as a time when famine, corruption, war, and godlessness thrive on earth under the central leadership of a secular one-world government—breeds something of a natural cynicism in believers who anticipate the world must hit rock bottom before Christ can reign on earth. I describe this sort of cynicism about American institutions as “apocalyptic” not only because white evangelicals’ relationship to American politics has long been tied to their anticipation of an imminent Rapture, but because the affective consequences of belief in an impending apocalypse help explain how white evangelicals have so fully embraced a partisan political identity.¹³⁸ As William Connolly contends, belief in the inevitable earthly reign of the Antichrist encourages believers to “distrust those who promise social progress by humanist means. For followers of the devil often present themselves as agents of beneficence.”¹³⁹ Right-wing politics not only offer evangelicals the chance to stand against false prophets of human progress, but also provide a set of real-world applications—capitalist accumulation,

¹³⁷ For a dive into American evangelicals’ engagement with popular literature about the end times, see Amy Frykholm’s *Rapture Culture: Left Behind in Evangelical America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). See also Jason Bivins, *Religion of Fear: The Politics of Horror in Conservative Evangelicalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008)—especially his chapter on the *Left Behind* franchise.

¹³⁸ For a survey of American evangelical apocalypticism in its various forms, see Matthew Sutton, *American Apocalypse: A History of Modern Evangelicalism* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2014).

¹³⁹ Connolly, “The Evangelical-Capitalist Resonance Machine,” 875.

environmental degradation, acceptance of war and inequalities—that embrace the imminent end of this earth in favor of a heaven reserved just for them.

One of the primary ways the *Bee*'s visceral apocalyptic cynicism about American institutions furthers the naturalization and sacralization of evangelical identity as inherently politically conservative is through its questioning of “the real” as a set of verifiable facts available to all as the foundation of public discourse.¹⁴⁰ This questioning takes two main forms, both of which dovetail with evangelical eschatology. First, based in a conception of humans as inherently fallen and corrupted beings apart from salvation in Jesus Christ, the *Bee* depicts secular news organizations as bastions of unrepentant sinners who cannot be expected to have the public's best interests at heart. Articles, for example, like “CNN Moves Headquarters Underground After Trump Says The Sun Is Good”; “Media Offers Thoughts And Prayers That Someone Would Start Some Violence At Gun Rights Rally”; and “‘The View’ Audience Applauds Hitler After Revelation He Never Voted For Trump,” suggest that most members of the media would not hesitate to put themselves and others in danger in order to strike a blow at their political enemies. Secondly, echoing the popular evangelical belief that a socialist one-world government will herald the reign of the Antichrist, the *Bee* routinely publishes stories indicating that the mainstream media is in league with socialist and communist nations intent on the destruction of capitalism and American sovereignty. Such stories feature headlines like “Chinese Government Lays Off Entire Propaganda Team As American Media Doing Their Job For Them,” “Iran To Replace State-Run Television With MSNBC Broadcast,” and “Oops: CNN Forgot To Translate Its Latest Coronavirus Update From Mandarin.” Both of these approaches

¹⁴⁰ Daniel D. Miller, “The Mystery of Evangelical Trump Support?” *Constellations* 26 (2019): 43-58, 52.

underscore the institution of the press as not just flawed, but actively working for the downfall of everything white, conservative American Christians hold dear.

Of course, the *Bee*'s satirical critique of news media does not, on its face, separate it from other satire news sites, all of which clash the form and aesthetics of "real" news against their own incongruously false or silly content. In all satire, playing with the line between truth and fiction—perhaps especially as it relates to how "real" news conveys truth to the public—is par for the course. Scholarship on contemporary American satire has argued that satirical news media function as a kind of "Fifth Estate," whose main function is "to hold the Fourth Estate accountable, engaging in boundary work that attempts to relocate journalists back to the central mission of their professional realm."¹⁴¹ By constructing a satirical "hyper-reality" that simultaneously parodies and critiques "real news," "fake news" programs highlight the discrepancy between the authority of real news outlets and the ways those outlets betray their own standards. In this sense, satirical news media can be understood as media watchdogs, identifying—as all satire does—the gap between what is and what should be. Nevertheless, scholars of news satire claim that this "Fifth Estate" largely works in concert with the Fourth Estate—amplifying existing news stories the satirists identify as being especially important, decrying news coverage they see as unbecoming of "serious" news programs, and providing "an added layer of perspective on things when the news cycle can barely keep up with itself."¹⁴²

Such is the complex relationship between news satire and the news itself—at the same time as satirical news critiques the performance and content of "real news" outlets, it reifies the

¹⁴¹ Dan Berkowitz and David Asa Schwartz, "Miley, CNN, and *The Onion*: When Fake News Becomes Realer than Real," *Journalism Practice* 10, no. 1 (2016): 1-17, 1.

¹⁴² Charles Purcell, "The Onion: Inside the Biggest 'Fake News' Outlet in the World," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, August 23, 2017, <https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/the-onion-inside-the-biggest-fake-news-outlet-in-the-world-20170822-gy1chg.html>. The quotation comes from then-managing editor of *The Onion*, Marnie Shure.

legitimacy and authority of the Fourth Estate as purveyors of truth whose basic function must be preserved and refined. In a similar way, as Nicholas Holm argues, American political satire ultimately requires “continued investment in the sanctity of the existing political system.”¹⁴³ In the case, then, of satire parodying and critiquing American institutions, “the failures of the...system are thus funny insofar as they are an incongruous departure from a persistent belief” in the goodness of the existing system, at least in its ideal form.¹⁴⁴

Unlike other satire news sites, however, the *Bee* and its companion sites actively encourage mistrust in the press as an institution, rather than critiquing the institution in order to improve it. The *Bee* and its affiliates have specifically identified mainstream news as a leftist ideology machine committed not to reporting facts but to suppressing conservative voices and values. What sets the *Bee*’s “fake news” satire apart, in other words, is the pervasive resonance of apocalyptic cynicism that rejects the possibility of media reform and instead encourages Christians—and conservatives—to circle the wagons around the few remaining sources of uncorrupted truth. For readers of the *Bee*, this means investing in the *Bee* as a paid subscriber in order to gain full access to its triad of resources—“real news,” “fake news” entertainment, and social media platform—aimed at providing a home for the culturally exiled Christian conservative. In explicitly encouraging readers to eschew mainstream news outlets in favor of their own right-wing sites that lack any journalistic standards, the *Bee* is forging a new kind of relationship with its readership. Such a relationship diverges from what Amy Becker et al. found in their 2010 study of audience perceptions of *The Daily Show* hosted by Jon Stewart: that undergraduate students of all political leanings found it more undesirable for a person to be

¹⁴³ Nicholas Holm, “The Political (Un)Consciousness of Contemporary American Satire,” *Journal of American Studies* 52 no. 3 (2018): 642-651, 650.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

persuaded by satirical news shows than by content from “hard” news programs. From their findings, Becker et al. concluded that, regardless of widespread concerns about media bias, audiences still “draw a measurable and pronounced dividing line between political comedy programs and hard news content.”¹⁴⁵ Other existing studies of satirical news and its audience effects similarly claim that a hallmark of satirical news is its “winky face”—or its clear indications to audiences that they must “enter the performance knowing that no claims are made for the ontological reality of the events unfolding in the text.”¹⁴⁶ The work of news satire is not to supplant the “real” news with “truer” facts, but rather to present a story that the audience knows to be untrue, that “is not so much plausible as it is plausibly plausible, that we are not fooled by it but we can imagine those who would be.”¹⁴⁷

Instead, readers of the *Bee* proudly identify themselves as consumers that could, themselves, easily be duped into believing a *Bee* headline, and as supporters of a president that would do the same. Unlike consumers of other satirical news sites, who are more likely to see others as potential dupes and who see such mis-reads as embarrassing evidence of others’ credulity, the *Bee*’s base sees its matrix of sites as purveyors of deeper truth—and, sometimes, truer facts—than any existing news outlet. To accidentally believe a *Bee* article—or to lift up such articles as “truer” than mainstream media content—is to boast one’s ideological superiority over a nation that has bought into the lies of the “real” news. Such is the necessary corollary of apocalyptic cynicism: if one cannot trust that experts and specialists are acting in good faith to deliver knowledge to the public, one must locate alternative sources of authority to verify what is

¹⁴⁵ Amy Becker et al., “Sizing Up The Daily Show: Audience Perceptions of Political Comedy Programming,” *Atlantic Journal of Communication* 18, no. 3 (2010): 144-157, 155.

¹⁴⁶ Ian Brodie, “Pretend News, False News, Fake News: The Onion as Put-On, Prank, and Legend,” *American Folklore Society* 131 no. 522 (Fall 2018): 451-459, 454-455.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 453.

real and what is fake. The *Bee*, which has grown an audience through its promise of purveying “fake news you can trust,” offers up its satirical cultural criticism—alongside its suite of “real” news sites operating through a conservative Christian lens—as one such moral (and truthful) authority.

Spinning a Web of Isolation: The Fruits of Evangelical Apocalyptic Cynicism

The ramifications of the *Bee*’s powerful emotional resonance with evangelicals and white conservatives can be seen in *Bee*’s own development of alternative sites for evangelicals to get their news and participate in social media. In *Bee* founder Adam Ford’s open letter about his launch of DISRN, he wrote that his motivation was to slice out a corner of the web that “harkens back to a time before the internet was centralized and controlled by a few behemoths (who, by the way, don’t like Christians and don’t like conservatives).”¹⁴⁸ He continues,

I think the centralization of the internet is one of the greatest threats to the spread of the gospel, and the well-being of mankind, that we face today. Maybe the single biggest threat. It is tyranny over information. It’s a handful of people who are hostile to the Christian message and the plight of the individual deciding what’s good and bad, true and false. It’s never been seen before on this scale. I am no conspiracy theorist; never have been. From where I sit, this danger is as clear as day.¹⁴⁹

The *Bee* explained their launch of *Not the Bee*, which also functions as a social media platform, with a similar mindset. In a post promoting *Not the Bee*’s social media platform, *Babylon Bee* lead web developer Dan Dillon wrote, “Not the Bee Social can be a complete replacement for the

¹⁴⁸ Adam Ford, “I Sold the Bee and am No Longer Running it.”

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

mainstream, toxic social networks like Twitter and Facebook.”¹⁵⁰ The *Bee*’s expanding network of websites, then, explicitly seeks to replace “mainstream” sources of news and social media engagement with versions that encourage the lens of an American evangelical worldview.

This attempt by the *Bee* to become a hub for conservative Christian readers looking to isolate themselves from secular media is not novel. Susan Ridgely has identified a similar effort by evangelical media powerhouse Focus on the Family to create a “web” of websites and resources, such that consumers would encounter “overlapping media stories from a variety of contributors and linked organizations, all with the same basic outlook and conclusion, [which] created the illusion of widespread consensus and agreement.”¹⁵¹ A goal of groups like Focus on the Family, as Ridgely identifies it, is to expand their own media group out far enough—Focus on the Family, for example, is the parent organization to countless websites, podcasts, radio shows, books, newsletters, and magazines—that conservative Christian consumers have “worldview-safe” alternatives for every aspect of their mediated lives. The consequence of such an all-encompassing site helmed by a few conservative Christian white men, however, is that audiences undergo a “training...process through which audiences come to [the media group’s] interpretations of reality.”¹⁵² Theory on the function of humor communities furthers this prediction, suggesting that the use of humor both reinforces certain interpretations of reality and causes those interpretations to seem natural and socially optimal.

By identifying the “mainstream” in its many forms—culture, Internet, news media—as hostile to both Christians and political conservatives, creating alternative sites where users are

¹⁵⁰ Dan Dillon, “Join Not the Bee’s social platform to win real money and other awesome prizes (through Oct 31),” *NottheBee.com*, October 5, 2020, <https://notthebee.com/article/get-involved-with-not-the-bees-social-platform-and-win-real-money-and-other-awesome-merch>.

¹⁵¹ Susan Ridgely, “Conservative Christianity and the Creation of Alternative News: An Analysis of Focus on the Family’s Multimedia Empire,” *Religion and American Culture* 30 no. 1 (2020): 1-25, 16.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 8.

assured both their Christian beliefs and their conservative political views are welcomed, and then encouraging users to discontinue use of other social media and news sites, *The Babylon Bee* is building a self-affirming insular community that will further naturalize the fusion of conservative evangelicalism and political conservatism. Their use of humor to do so is a key part of this naturalization process. As Lydia Bean argues in *The Politics of Evangelical Identity*,

Political influence does not work through explicit persuasion or deliberation about political subjects, but by defining evangelical identity in ways that are implicitly linked to partisanship. Ironically, these partisan cues have greater moral power because they are distanced from the dirty business of “politics.” Political conservatism takes on a sacred quality because it is woven into the fabric of everyday religious life.¹⁵³

By creating a sacred space for conservative Christians to build their own, better universe of social media discourse and news coverage, the *Bee* is creating an insular humor community whose dialectic with *Bee* content will subtly cue new members of the community as to what topics are funny, what news is true, and what ideas are anathema. It is through this process that the *Bee* contributes to the sacralization of conservative politics for American evangelicals.

***The Babylon Bee* as Humor Community**

Both qualitative and quantitative data about the *Bee*’s audience provide important insight on the impact the emotional resonances stoked by the *Bee*’s conservative satire can have on American public life. As Jason Bivins identified in *Religion of Fear*, the affect of fear has been central to American evangelicalism in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries as a tool for

¹⁵³ Lydia Bean, *The Politics of Evangelical Identity: Local Churches and Partisan Divides in the United States and Canada* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 3.

engaging and altering the American political landscape. Bivins argues that fear—evoked constantly in evangelical media and practices ranging from fixation on an imminent rapture to the phenomenon of “Hell Houses”—“draws energy from reform” and from the ideals of pluralism and progressivism, instead refocusing energy and power on an unchanging future eternal judgment and the importance of maintaining traditional structures of authority.¹⁵⁴ As I have explored in this chapter, humor is another key mechanism for evoking emotion that clarifies and reifies invisible structures of order in American evangelicalism. Like its flipside genre of horror, evangelical humor—in this case, the satire of *The Babylon Bee*—wields immense cultural power and thus contributes to what Bivins has described as a salient strain of antiliberalism that is hurtling toward a “crisis of legitimation in American political life.”¹⁵⁵ Widespread mistrust of the institution of the press, of the federal government, and even of more moderate members of the Republican Party on the part of many white evangelicals might be the fruit of the tree of antiliberalism, but in surveying the audience of the *Babylon Bee* one can identify the roots.

Macro data on the *Bee*’s readership paints a vivid picture of the section of the media landscape the *Bee* inhabits. Amazon’s web traffic analysis site, *Alexa Internet* reveals that every one of the *Bee*’s top traffic sources and referral sites in 2020 were right-wing and Christian opinion news sites like *The Daily Wire* and *PJ Media*.¹⁵⁶ A more anecdotal survey of the *Bee*’s frequent commenters on both the paid subscriber comments section of the *Bee*’s website and on the *Bee*’s social media posts reveals a core audience of mostly white Americans that are both fluent in jokes about American evangelical culture and primed to embrace the truth claims of the

¹⁵⁴ Jason Bivins, *Religion of Fear: The Politics of Horror in Conservative Evangelicalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 236.

¹⁵⁵ Bivins, *Religion of Fear*, 234.

¹⁵⁶ In fact, during a contentious and highly public period of personnel shift in late 2021, Babylon Bee creative director and podcast host Ethan Nicolle was fired from his role and senior writer Frank Fleming stepped down from his position in solidarity with Nicolle. Both immediately took jobs as scripted content creators for *The Daily Wire*.

Bee over the offerings of the mainstream media. Indeed, the *Bee*'s readership (or, more specifically, commentership) serves a key role in shaping the role the *Bee* occupies in the news media landscape and in bolstering the authority of the *Bee* as a site speaking truth to corrupt power. By continually "speaking back" to the *Bee* through social media platforms and the built-in comments sections and fora on the *Bee*'s own website, the *Bee*'s audience forms a powerful social imaginary with a field of interplay that defines liberals, the mainstream media, and non-conservative Christians as enemies and outsiders against whom the in-group must defend.

Michael Warner's theory of publics and counterpublics proposes that publics—the self-creating and self-organized readership of a given text in circulation—are of "special importance to modernity" for their potential to forge belonging out of the impersonal and give participants a sense of efficacy to articulate and realize the world for themselves.¹⁵⁷ A public creates relation and belonging among strangers by the very fact of those strangers self-selecting into a discourse. As Warner and other theorists of discourse note, however, the opportunities for transformation of the public's shared lifeworld are delimited by the imagined insiders and outsiders signaled by the circulating text itself, the constraints of a given medium, and the policing of formal conventions by others in the public. Amy Carrell's theory on humor communities, for example, suggests that publics, as inherently social formations, train members what to laugh at through explicit or implicit pressure to conform to the broader community's response to a joke.¹⁵⁸ Thus understood, the Babylon Bee's readership constitutes a humor community that provides members with a sense of belonging and influence at the same time as members are influenced by the values, boundaries, and sense of humor of the imagined community at large.

¹⁵⁷ Michael Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics," *Public Culture* 14, no. 1 (2002): 49-90.

¹⁵⁸ Amy Carrell, "Humor Communities," *Humor* 10, no. 1 (1997): 11-24. See also Jimmie Killingsworth, "Discourse Communities: Local and Global," *Rhetoric Review* 11, no. 1 (1992): 110-122.

The *Bee* readership's recurring jokes about *The Babylon Bee*'s trustworthiness relative to the untrustworthy news media provide insight to both the salient values and the imagined boundaries of the *Bee*'s humor community. Excluded from the inner circle of belonging are those who still put stock in the mainstream news as a reputable source of information about the world, those who uphold religious pluralism and multiculturalism as worthy values, and those who do not subscribe to a so-called literal reading of the Bible as the infallible word of God. When the *Bee* published an article claiming that Jesus spent time with prostitutes and tax collectors "just to avoid hanging out with loathsome journalists," for example, readers populated the comments section, voicing their suspicion of the mainstream press and affirming their Christian and conservative bonafides.¹⁵⁹ "True fact," one commenter avowed, "I'd rather associated with murderers, robbers and rapists, then [sic] subhuman piece of garbage journalists."¹⁶⁰ Another wrote, "Journalists, Pharisees, same thing different faux righteous propaganda."¹⁶¹ Other commenters shared in the Biblical insults, calling journalists "Sadducees" and "Teachers of the Law" and joking that CNN really stands for "Canaan News Network."¹⁶² Some commenters questioned whether journalists' souls were worth rescuing, writing, "At least prostitutes can be saved" and "My wife says it's nearly impossible for a journalist to enter the Kingdom of

¹⁵⁹ "Scholars Now Believe Jesus Spent Time With Prostitutes, Tax Collectors Just To Avoid Hanging Out With Loathsome Journalists," *The Babylon Bee*, January 29, 2020, <https://babylonbee.com/news/scholars-now-believe-jesus-spent-time-with-prostitutes-tax-collectors-just-to-avoid-hanging-out-with-journalists>.

¹⁶⁰ Drew Schumann, comment on The Babylon Bee, "Scholars Now Believe Jesus Spent Time with Prostitutes, Tax Collectors Just to Avoid Hanging Out With Loathsome Journalists," *Facebook*, January 25, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/1752689034960996/posts/pfbid032aRtiFr4rdHcZv2KAS1jTMNsBvTkfqpp2u3oFjLEiH R7Wtx3b6Pk7vx5zMkZK8Dl/>.

¹⁶¹ Alex Waterson, comment on The Babylon Bee, "Scholars Now Believe Jesus Spent Time with Prostitutes, Tax Collectors Just to Avoid Hanging Out With Loathsome Journalists," *Facebook*, January 25, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/1752689034960996/posts/pfbid032aRtiFr4rdHcZv2KAS1jTMNsBvTkfqpp2u3oFjLEiH R7Wtx3b6Pk7vx5zMkZK8Dl/>.

¹⁶² Robert Judge, comment on The Babylon Bee, "Scholars Now Believe Jesus Spent Time with Prostitutes, Tax Collectors Just to Avoid Hanging Out With Loathsome Journalists," *Facebook*, January 25, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/1752689034960996/posts/pfbid032aRtiFr4rdHcZv2KAS1jTMNsBvTkfqpp2u3oFjLEiH R7Wtx3b6Pk7vx5zMkZK8Dl/>.

Heaven.”¹⁶³ Others tied Jesus’s alleged hatred of the press to what they understand to be Jesus’s broader opinions on American politics: “He is definitely not crazy about the leftists either ! ! !” one wrote.¹⁶⁴ “Makes divine and perfect sense! But did anyone tell Jesus that reporters are really just whores for the Democrats?” another asked.¹⁶⁵

While the majority of commenters on the *Bee*’s social media posts riff on one another’s jokes (most of which echo or rephrase the joke being made in the article), they act quickly to shut down dissenters in the ranks. When one commenter soberly called others to humility, noting, “the Son of God hung out with sinners...just like you,” another responded, “First time on the internet? My comment was meant to be humorous.”¹⁶⁶ In a comment thread about a *Bee* article claiming that Donald Trump hid the nuclear codes in a Bible so that Nancy Pelosi would never find them, commenters that joked about Trump’s own lack of religiosity were met with swift retribution. When one commenter asked, “Who let [Trump] borrow their Bible?” some responded by affirming Trump’s Christianity (“Cause His is WORN OUT FROM USEAGE [sic] !!” one commenter wrote) and others accused him of being unable to take a joke (“You do

¹⁶³ Shane Coggins and Steven Goad, comments on The Babylon Bee, “Scholars Now Believe Jesus Spent Time with Prostitutes, Tax Collectors Just to Avoid Hanging Out With Loathsome Journalists,” *Facebook*, January 25, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/1752689034960996/posts/pfbid032aRtiFr4rdHcZv2KAS1jTMNsBvTkfqpp2u3oFjLEiHR7Wtx3b6Pk7vx5zMkZK8Dl/>.

¹⁶⁴ Diane Dorton, comment on The Babylon Bee, “Scholars Now Believe Jesus Spent Time with Prostitutes, Tax Collectors Just to Avoid Hanging Out With Loathsome Journalists,” *Facebook*, January 25, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/1752689034960996/posts/pfbid032aRtiFr4rdHcZv2KAS1jTMNsBvTkfqpp2u3oFjLEiHR7Wtx3b6Pk7vx5zMkZK8Dl/>.

¹⁶⁵ Tom Tottleben, comment on The Babylon Bee, “Scholars Now Believe Jesus Spent Time with Prostitutes, Tax Collectors Just to Avoid Hanging Out With Loathsome Journalists,” *Facebook*, January 25, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/1752689034960996/posts/pfbid032aRtiFr4rdHcZv2KAS1jTMNsBvTkfqpp2u3oFjLEiHR7Wtx3b6Pk7vx5zMkZK8Dl/>.

¹⁶⁶ Wayne Shuman and Tom Tottleben, comments on The Babylon Bee, “Scholars Now Believe Jesus Spent Time with Prostitutes, Tax Collectors Just to Avoid Hanging Out With Loathsome Journalists,” *Facebook*, January 25, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/1752689034960996/posts/pfbid032aRtiFr4rdHcZv2KAS1jTMNsBvTkfqpp2u3oFjLEiHR7Wtx3b6Pk7vx5zMkZK8Dl/>.

realize it is a satire site,” another offered).¹⁶⁷ This engagement, as Carrell and Warner have theorized, shapes the values and boundary lines of the *Bee* community by affirming those that “get” the *Bee*’s jokes and reprimanding those that voice opposition to a *Bee* article or the commenters riffing off the original joke. The result is an imagined community of *Bee* loyalists marked by a shared commitment to discrediting the mainstream media and standing firm as a righteous remnant of conservative Christians who know where to find the truth.

Conclusion

The Babylon Bee’s skyrocketing popularity among political and Christian conservatives can tell observers a great deal about the role of humor in coalition building, the importance of new media to individual and group value formation, and the nature of American conservatives’ objections to the press as an institution. If many iterations of news satire operate as reforming watchdogs for the fourth estate, the *Bee*’s approach to the mainstream media has been a scorched earth rejection of the institution and a call for the faithful (a description that might well mean “politically conservative” more than it means “professing Christian”) to commit their time and money to explicitly conservative and Christian outlets. As one such hub for political conservatives and American evangelicals, *The Babylon Bee* is a humor community that offers a sphere of belonging and influence to readers at the same time as readers’ own sense of what is true, what is noteworthy, and what is funny is influenced and transformed by the social pressures of the community. Through *The Babylon Bee*’s recurring article themes and the throng of commenters affirming those themes, one can see the values of this humor community:

¹⁶⁷ Seth Martin, Sue Chiasson, and John Dubus, comments on The Babylon Bee, “‘She’ll never look here,’ he said, smiling, as he held up his Bible,” *Facebook*, January 16, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/1752689034960996/posts/pfbid02AQTgpJma9QxqyPi9RkmjBa5ruMcdufkfPcApodkYvpM4beQ7ffAjfmrNbU2RBSWel/>.

investment in patriarchal authority, opposition to multiculturalism and pluralism, and empowerment as the faithful remnant upholding truth and purity as the nation's inherently corrupt leaders and institutions hurtle toward the end of days. These values will be of no surprise to those who study American evangelicalism, as an investment in whiteness, patriarchy, and structures of authority are part and parcel of the tradition itself. So too is American evangelicals' preoccupation with the apocalypse well-documented. What makes *The Babylon Bee* and its engaged community worthy of further scrutiny, I argue, is the extent to which it represents the end-stage of a melding of American evangelicalism and right-wing ideology that has been in process since the mid-twentieth century.

The inextricability of evangelical Christianity and political conservatism in the Bee community is evident in everything from their podcast guests to their advertisers to their audience's own mediascapes. A Donald Trump-themed face mask company and the creationist Discovery Institute share space as article sponsors, while MyPillow CEO and Donald Trump loyalist Mike Lindell and evangelical apologist James White both appear as guests on the weekly *Babylon Bee* podcast. The fomenting of apocalyptic cynicism about the press puts into question certain norms that were perhaps bound to break down alongside the breakdown of American monoculture. But that breakdown has consequences both evident and unpredictable—from evangelical rejection of the 2020 election results to other, less predictable consequences.

The *Bee* uses satire to challenge dominant media structures even as it mimics the form of those structures, thereby attempting to recreate those structures under the auspices of their own plausibility structures. As I will show in the next chapter, this complex relationship to cultural mores is not unique to the *Bee*, but rather a persistent feature of American evangelical humor. Male evangelical stand-up comedians—the topic of chapter two—display a contentious

relationship to broader cultural values of masculinity, simultaneously joking about their regrettable failure to live up to such values while also supplanting those values with God's immutable designation of men's roles as leaders of the church and home, irrespective of their perceived masculinity.

Chapter 2

The Ritual and Play of Christian Stand-up Comedy, Part I

“Does God have a sense of humor? Come on, He invented marriage.”
-John Branyan

“God wants you to laugh.”
-Ted Cunningham

Evangelical couples looking for a night out could do worse than attending the “Date Night Comedy Tour,” an evening of stand-up comedy routines performed at various churches around the United States, designed to get husbands and wives out of the house and laughing together. The event is relatively inexpensive (anywhere from \$15 to \$20 per couple), takes place in Baptist and nondenominational churches with plenty of seating, and often offers free childcare. For less than the price of two movie tickets, couples can see live comedy performed by comedians they know share their core faith and values. While there, they will be reminded of the importance of humor in maintaining and strengthening marriages. As the Date Night Comedy Tour Facebook page announced in a post about their sold out slate of 2017 shows, “Perhaps churches are waking up to this idea that talking about marriage and relationships with a little bit of humor is a GOOD THING!”¹⁶⁸ Those who missed the tour need not fear—recorded versions of the tour, available on DVD and the evangelical streaming platform Pure Flix, enshrine the

¹⁶⁸ Date Night Comedy Tour, “So far 2017 has proven to be a BIG YEAR for churches wanting to do Date Night events,” *Facebook*, January 24, 2017, <https://m.facebook.com/DateNightComedyTour/photos/a.340601716104160/735151026649225/?type=3>.

special so that couples can watch and rewatch whenever they need a reminder from a brother in the faith about finding the funny in their relationships.

This chapter examines the work of evangelical standup comedy through the case study of the Pure Flix streaming special *Date Night Comedy*, the only version available to consumers since the live tour ended in 2018. This special reveals the “dance” of ritual and play inherent to standup comedy while also offering specific insight to the lifeworld of American evangelicalism—its ideological scaffolding, opportunities for improvisation, and its agents of maintenance. By focusing on how the comedians in this special joke about gender and marriage, this chapter explores how evangelical standup comedy subverts and reinforces ideas about gender and sexuality. The *Date Night Comedy* special features a line-up of all male comedians thinking (and joking) about their marriages, at times directly identifying the cultural conventions that influence their relationships with their spouse. Analyzing how and when these comedians de-naturalize and re-naturalize the gendered expectations that define their relationships, I argue that evangelical comedians’ subversion of “cultural” gender stereotypes ultimately serves to underscore the immutability of “God-given” gender differences and roles in marriage. By studying what expectations evangelical comedians subvert and uphold in the course of their stand-up routines, one can gain a fuller picture of the landscape of possibilities for evangelical gender and sexual expression.

What Does Standup Comedy Do?

As discussed in chapter one, a recurring inquiry in the study of various genres of humor is whether humor is essentially conservative or subversive—whether it more often serves to

uphold taken-for-granted moral and social boundaries or to destabilize them.¹⁶⁹ Some studies of contemporary satiric television, for example, identify a growing trend in the second half of the twentieth century of “subversive political critique” that “doesn’t just deconstruct, but also offers the potential for alternative politics.”¹⁷⁰ Other scholars, however, contend that many comedians and comedy programs offer the veneer of subversion to project “edginess” but, ultimately, do not threaten the status quo. Avi Santo’s analysis of comic strip and TV show *The Boondocks* engages directly with Jeffrey Jones’s claim that “there is a populist impulse in our society to tell jokes that subvert existing power hierarchies,” arguing instead that *The Boondocks* ultimately upholds institutional norms by encouraging Black uplift through “personal...factors” that overlook systemic sources of marginalization.¹⁷¹ So, too, does Ethan Thompson assert in his work on the long-running TV show *South Park* that the program, “even when engaging the most politically overt of content...can become a carnivalesque pastiche—little more than an offensive echoing of contemporary discourse rather than a subversive alternative.”¹⁷² But do some programs’ failures to achieve the kind of subversion they might be aiming for indicate the inherent inability of comedy to take aim at cultural norms? Is there a way to understand comedy as neither inherently subversive nor inherently conservative?

As Thompson identifies, religious studies tools offer insights into the *work* of comedy that can contribute to a more refined analysis of comedy as participating in what Mikhail Bakhtin

¹⁶⁹ See, for example, Dustin Griffin’s *Satire: A Critical Reintroduction* for an extended analysis of this set of questions. Dustin Griffin, *Satire: A Critical Reintroduction* (Lexington, University of Kentucky Press: 1994).

¹⁷⁰ Jeffrey P. Jones, *Entertaining Politics: Satiric Television and Political Engagement* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), 150. See also Stephen E. Kercher’s *Revel With a Cause: Liberal Satire in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006) for a history of twentieth century subversive comedy.

¹⁷¹ Avi Santo, “Of Niggas and Citizens: *The Boondocks* Fans and Differentiated Black American Politics,” in *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post-Network Era*, ed. by Jonathan Gray et al. (New York: New York University Press, 2009): 252-275, 260, 268.

¹⁷² Ethan Thompson, “Good Demo, Bad Taste: *South Park* as Carnivalesque Satire,” in *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post-Network Era*, ed. by Jonathan Gray et al. (New York: New York University Press, 2009): 213-233, 227.

called the “heteroglossia,” or “the collision between competing discourses that defines human communication and the experience of culture, rather than any singular system of meaning.”¹⁷³ That is to say, one need not settle an overarching debate about whether comedy “inherently” leans toward the preservation or undermining of cultural norms and institutions, but might rather consider how a given piece of comedy “collides” with other discourses and how various audiences might interpret that collision. Many scholars of comedy operate within this framework, identifying how especially stand-up comedy can represent a dialectic between cultural norms and counter-cultural forces that has no obvious or inevitable outcome. Peter G. Stromberg and Peter Robinson, for example, have both argued that entertainment in general (Stromberg) and stand-up comedy in particular (Robinson) represent another iteration of the age-old relationship between ritual and play. Building on Émile Durkheim’s theory of collective effervescence, Stromberg argues that both ritual and play can be understood as “meta-actions,” “activities through which human beings take a step back from and do something to or about their own action.”¹⁷⁴ Stromberg identifies ritual and play as “two of the most important and interesting forms of visible meta-action” because both serve to “valorize” social and cultural ideals—ritual by rendering conventions “not as artifice but as truth, not as contingent but as eternal,” play by offering humans opportunities to improvise the variety of ways one can express and understand that truth.¹⁷⁵ Indeed, foundational theorist of play Brian Sutton-Smith posits that all play depends on balancing ritual and innovation. The two are “handmaidens,” Sutton-Smith writes, with

¹⁷³ Quoted in Thompson, “Good Demo, Bad Taste,” 219. See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 15–16.

¹⁷⁴ Peter G. Stromberg, *Caught in Play: How Entertainment Works on You* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009). See also Peter M. Robinson, *The Dance of the Comedians: The People, the President, and the Performance of Political Standup Comedy in America* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010).

¹⁷⁵ Stromberg, *Caught in Play*, 103–105.

routine and ritual laying groundwork of the unquestionable so that one can innovate without having to recreate the whole world “from scratch.”¹⁷⁶

If all play can be characterized as a balancing act between ritual and innovation, standup comedy is an especially powerful example of this phenomenon. Stromberg lays the groundwork for this claim in his book *Caught in Play*, where he argues that contemporary entertainment culture offers useful insights to the nature of play as salient social force due to contemporary audiences’ potential to get “caught up” in entertainment in a manner similar to what Durkheim described as collective effervescence.¹⁷⁷ If collective effervescence can be described as an “emotional excitement” that “infuses individuals and ideas and endures overtime, producing effects such as stratification, solidarity, and commitment to ideals,” Stromberg contends, then contemporary entertainment culture—by facilitating ongoing “processes of attention, entrainment, and self-transcendence”—can similarly serve to “render certain ideas and practices powerful, even unquestionable.”¹⁷⁸ In other words, the powerful socializing and indoctrinating forces historically engendered by religious ritual and festivals can now be found, perhaps *more than anywhere else*, in contemporary entertainment culture.

In his study of political humor in twentieth and twenty-first century America, Peter Robinson posits that Stromberg’s insights provide a critical lens through which to consider the work of standup comedy specifically. For Robinson, it is the very fact of play’s improvisational nature that makes standup comedy such an important phenomenon through which to understand the work of play in American culture. Stand-up comedy, with its playful qualities of “spontaneity, freedom, fantasy, experimentation, disorder, and even the subversion of

¹⁷⁶ Brian Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 169-170.

¹⁷⁷ Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* trans. Joseph Ward Swain (Project Gutenberg, 2012), 362.

¹⁷⁸ Stromberg, *Caught in Play*, 106-107.

conventional assumptions,” can perform a variety of diverging cultural functions.¹⁷⁹ While standup comedy has the potential to encourage “significant cultural upheaval,” so, too, can it serve as a cathartic steam valve that ultimately works to “make the ritualized status quo tolerable” and thus reinforce existing norms and boundaries.¹⁸⁰ Both Robinson and Stromberg’s work reminds scholars of humor to take seriously entertainment as a sphere of contemporary life whose function—among others—is the “valorization of important cultural ideals.”¹⁸¹ While Robinson’s focus is on the interplay between “playful diversion and serious discussion” in the realm of political standup comedy, I contend that the same “dance” between the serious and the playful, the flexible and the unquestionable, and the subversive and the sacralizing exists in the realm of “religious” comedy, broadly construed.

The Gendered Comic

If standup comedy plays with cultural boundary lines, its most frequent subject matter—across time and culture—is gender. Susan Seizer’s ethnography of “buffoon” performances in the Tamilnadu state of South India provides a salient example of how a lone comic performer can breach gendered social norms while still appearing to respect those norms. Always a male comedian and often reciting the same monologue, the Tamil “buffoon” describes a set of escalating mishaps during which he almost or accidentally says something that could be misinterpreted as sexually explicit to a woman in public. By uttering the bawdy line then rhetorically asking the audience, “Can one say that to a woman?” the buffoon manages to “utter the socially unutterable” while “appropriately distancing” himself from the actual

¹⁷⁹ Peter M. Robinson, *The Dance of the Comedians: The People, the President, and the Performance of Political Standup Comedy in America* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010), 5.

¹⁸⁰ Robinson, *The Dance of the Comedians*, 6.

¹⁸¹ Stromberg, *Caught in Play*, 106.

transgression.¹⁸² This is the rhetorical sleight of hand by which the buffoon manages to earn the audience's laughter—one can laugh at the trampling of gender norms with the comfort that “nothing has been destabilized.”¹⁸³ Indeed, one might consider the performances morality plays that, as anthropologist Keith Basso describes, “‘affirm conceptions of what is ‘right’ and proper by dramatizing conceptions of what is ‘wrong’ and inappropriate.’”¹⁸⁴

More than just upholding cultural norms, the comedian has unique power to reinforce gendered subject/object divides by virtue of their joke's “target” and their joke's real or imagined audience. As Seizer describes, part of the buffoon's ability to make socially transgressive jokes in a mixed-gender setting is in his performative cordoning-off of the women in the room. The buffoon will turn his body toward a male musician on stage and direct the joke to him “alone,” mimicking a private “man to man” conversation.¹⁸⁵ This establishment of two different “footings”—one facing the audience and one making an aside to an onstage musician—“enables the dirty jokes to remain separate from the speaker's frontal, presentational self, and...it enables the ‘real’ audience to *overhear*, rather than *hear*, these jokes.”¹⁸⁶ So, too, does the buffoon's aside to a fellow man throughout his comedy routine about women reinforce what Seizer describes as a “fishbowl effect” for the women in the audience: “the overarching message is that women are not dialogic participants in discourse but rather its objects.”¹⁸⁷ While the comedians of *Date Night Comedy* perform in a different cultural milieu than that of the Tamil buffoon, I will show how they employ many of these same tools—distancing themselves from transgression through rhetorical flourish and through symbolically excluding women from their “guy talk.”

¹⁸² Susan Seizer, *Stigmas of the Tamil Stage: An Ethnography of Special Drama Artists in South India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 190.

¹⁸³ Ibid, 199.

¹⁸⁴ Quoted in Seizer, *Stigmas of the Tamil Stage*, 200.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid, 185.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid, 188.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid, 195.

Date Night Comedy: Strong Wives, Leading Men

Ted Cunningham has built his career on laughter. The founding pastor of Woodlands Family Church in Branson, Missouri, Cunningham is just as often visiting other congregations, where he leads marriage retreats that use humor as a focal point of relationship-building. Since 2015, Cunningham has headlined the traveling Date Night Comedy Tour. Indeed, Cunningham's latest book, *A Love That Laughs*, posits that laughter is essential "medicine" for ailing couples—a tool that "eases tension, defuses anger, lightens the mood, and makes us more attractive and relatable."¹⁸⁸ So, too, can laughter help the "medicine" of other hard truths "go down."¹⁸⁹ Men, especially—as Cunningham writes—might not "show up super excited" for a marriage conference, but the promise of a laugh can get them in the door.¹⁹⁰

In 2018, the subscription Christian video streaming service Pure Flix released a recorded version of Cunningham's Date Night Comedy Tour, with a 5-episode series devoted to showcasing Cunningham and his fellow comedians' 30-minute sets about marriage and family. The five comedians—all men—have fostered careers as "clean" comedians with ties to evangelical media strongholds like Focus on the Family and Trinity Broadcasting Network. Cunningham, an alumnus of Liberty University and Dallas Theological Seminary, is a white Missourian, a pastor, a regular contributor to Focus on the Family, and a father of two. Jason Earls—a Black comedian and the only person of color featured in the special—is a self-proclaimed "Comedy Familiologist," a Texan, president of the Christian Comedy Association,

¹⁸⁸ Ted Cunningham, *A Love That Laughs: Lighten Up, Cut Loose, and Enjoy Life Together* (Carol Stream, Ill: Tyndale House, 2020), 11, 9.

¹⁸⁹ Cunningham, *A Love That Laughs*, 9.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 29.

and a father of six.¹⁹¹ Comedian and podcaster John Branyan is an Indianan, a white right-wing blogger, and a father of four. Paul Harris, a white Arkansan and father, is a comedian and the front-man of the parody bluegrass band The Cleverlys. Comedian and musician Jonnie W. is a white Tennessean that has partnered with Compassion International, Wingman Nation Men's Ministry, and the Creation Festival, and is the only childless performer in the series. While each of the five men differ in their style of humor and delivery, their messages are remarkably similar—perhaps especially in terms of how they assert the naturalness and centrality of the heterosexual nuclear family.

Pure Flix's *Date Night Comedy* special showcases the role comedy can play as an “escape valve” that—rather than subverting cultural boundaries, serves to reinforce them by “safely” transgressing them. As part of a comedy tour created by and for evangelical Christians and explicitly aimed at “strengthening” heterosexual marital units, *Date Night*'s comedians can doubtless be read as enforcers—or at least mascots—of something like an evangelical party line on gender and sexuality. And yet, because successful comedy hinges on the incongruity between frames of reference, these comedians necessarily subvert some audience expectations. In this chapter I will demonstrate when and how *Date Night*'s comedians communicate their own understandings of the boundaries of “acceptable” manhood, womanhood, and marriage through a pattern of transgressing and ultimately affirming community norms. By taking on the comic persona of a man that fails to live up to some cultural standards of masculinity, each *Date Night* comedian relieves the tension of their audience's failure to fully embody a brawny and stoic masculine ideal while nevertheless emphasizing immutable differences—and prescribing different roles—between men and women.

¹⁹¹ “About Jason,” *jasonearls.com*, accessed December 12, 2022, <https://www.jasonearls.com/about/>.

“Catch the Baby”: Masculinities Rejected and Affirmed

The way many of the *Date Night* comedians describe it, the arrival of a new baby is a moment that throws into sharp relief women’s strengths and men’s weaknesses. Paul Harris and Jason Earls both reflect on their sense of emasculation and shock upon attempting to “catch” their babies as their wives deliver them. “I was like, yeah, I’m a strong man, this is my child, my seed,” Earls tells the audience as he mimes squatting to catch the baby.¹⁹² But upon actually catching the “fresh baby,” Earls recalls, he began running around and yelling, “Ahhhh! Get it! Get it! Why does it feel like this?!” Paul Harris, too, recounts to the audience his hesitance at being involved in the labor and delivery process: “The doctor looked at me and goes, ‘You wanna catch the baby?’ Uh-uh. No, I didn’t even make the football team, doc!”¹⁹³ Harris wryly describes his unpreparedness for the gore of new life. “My baby that I had prayed about for years.... She was solid, purple, and slimy.” When his wife asked him who the new baby looked like, Harris replied, “A lizard. You gave birth to a lizard, baby. She looks like your side of the family.”

These comedians’ jokes about their emasculation and ineptitude related to their newborn children reflect a broader trend in evangelical men’s understanding of the roles and requirements of men as fathers and husbands. As Kristen Kobes Du Mez demonstrates in *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation*, evangelical manhood has always been a hotly debated topic within the American evangelical tradition, with

¹⁹² *Date Night Comedy*, season 1, episode 2, “Jason Earls,” directed by Landon Stephen Popadic, Undiscovered Productions Studio, 2018, https://app.pureflix.com/videos/377475622748/date-night-hero-trailer?_ga=2.256791371.1356405263.1598891257-201503769.1598891257.

¹⁹³ *Date Night Comedy*, season 1, episode 4, “Paul Harris,” directed by Landon Stephen Popadic, Undiscovered Productions Studio, 2018, https://app.pureflix.com/videos/377475622748/date-night-hero-trailer?_ga=2.256791371.1356405263.1598891257-201503769.1598891257

male leaders disagreeing on what aspects of “cultural” masculinity reflect a theological understanding of God’s design for men and manhood. In the 1980s and 1990s, new organizations like Promise Keepers and the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood and new books like Gordon Daley’s *Healing the Masculine Soul* proposed an archetype of the “soft patriarch” or “tender warrior”—a man that rejects the unnecessary components of a “macho” culture but nevertheless embraces the perceived call to serve as the headship of his family. While Du Mez is certainly well-founded in describing this archetype as one that “papered over tensions between a harsher, authoritarian masculinity and a more egalitarian posture,” I argue that comedy about gender and marriage is a key tool in the managing and diffusing of these very tensions.¹⁹⁴ Moreover, by offering up moments of emasculation as fodder for laughter in a comedy routine aimed at providing encouragement and support to audiences’ presumed complementarian marriages, the comedians of *Date Night Comedy* help audiences negotiate the ever-shifting boundaries between the cultural expectations and perceived theological imperatives of masculinity.

Each of the *Date Night* comedians uses his comedy to acknowledge the gap between cultural expectations of “macho” masculinity and their own lives and skill sets. Ted Cunningham encourages audiences to use humor to navigate what might otherwise be moments of gendered strife in the marriage. Describing how his wife used to nag him about passing up closer parking spots in a parking lot, Cunningham says he eventually told her, “‘Babe, there’s not a lot of adventure left for men in the world anymore. So would you *please* let me find my own parking

¹⁹⁴ Kristen Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2020), 273

space.”¹⁹⁵ In a self-deprecatingly whiny tone he added, “I want to do it all by myself! I want to provide this for my family!” Cunningham says that his wife now responds to his parking lot idiosyncrasies by rubbing his bicep and crooning, ““You did this all by yourself. I am so proud of you.”” Jason Earls, too, highlights the parking lot as a site of marital disagreement. Describing a stage of his marriage during which “everything turn[ed] into an argument,” Earls mimics some of their recurring tiffs: ““The light is green.’ ‘I *know* the light is green, I’m waiting for the next one.’ ‘There’s a parking space right there.’ ‘*Look*, woman, you ain’t gonna keep telling me what to do. Always trying to control something. I’m parking in the back so we can walk—get you some exercise.”” John Branyan also identifies his wife’s assumption that he knows about “manly” things to be a source of conflict in the marriage: “There’s a lot of things that we men are supposed to know how to do, just automatically, organically...and we don’t know how to do ‘em. You know? We’re supposed to be handy, men are supposed to be handy, know how to fix all the electronics.”¹⁹⁶ Branyan also suggests that much of what men are assumed to know about fixing things does not come naturally, and instead that men’s natural inclination is to resort to violence to solve problems. “I’m certain the first semester of medical school, all they do is teach male doctors not to walk into a room and say, how are you doing, Mr. Smith? You still sick? [mimes hitting someone].”

For the performers of *Date Night Comedy*, there is humor to be found in the disjuncture between presumptions of men as brawny jacks-of-all-trade and their own experiences of ineptitude, fear, and weakness—whether in direct comparison to their wives’ own competence

¹⁹⁵ *Date Night Comedy*, season 1, episode 1, "Ted Cunningham," directed by Landon Stephen Popadic, Undiscovered Productions Studio, 2018, https://app.pureflix.com/videos/377475622748/date-night-hero-trailer?_ga=2.256791371.1356405263.1598891257-201503769.1598891257

¹⁹⁶ *Date Night Comedy*, season 1, episode 3, "John Branyan," directed by Landon Stephen Popadic, Undiscovered Productions Studio, 2018, https://app.pureflix.com/videos/377475622748/date-night-hero-trailer?_ga=2.256791371.1356405263.1598891257-201503769.1598891257

and bravery or to their wives' expectations of what a man should be. Indeed, they encourage their audiences to acknowledge these gaps in order to transform them from moments of marital disappointment or frustration to "callbacks" that the couple can use as part of their own personal lifelong comedy routine.¹⁹⁷ Such a blatant disavowal of "militant masculinity" flies in the face of what scholars of evangelicalism and gender have identified as a pattern of white evangelical patriarchy that "derides gentleness as the province of wusses" and embraces "a rugged, heroic masculinity embodied by cowboys, soldiers, and warriors."¹⁹⁸ And yet, I argue that it is precisely this rejection—or, at least acknowledgement of many men's failure to embody—of some facets of "manliness" that serves a critical function in the maintenance of white evangelical gender boundaries. Not only does the comedian's failure to embody "traditional" masculinity conjure and reinforce the unseen matrix of gender expectations that associate men with handiness, strength, and leadership, but it also decouples "cultural" masculine traits from men's inherent, God-given right to a leadership role in the home. While these comedians continue to uphold rugged masculinity as a cultural standard to which they aspire but of which they routinely and humorously fall short, they emphasize that being born male is the only standard God uses to identify who can serve as a patriarch and leader of the family.

Bad Macho Man, Good Patriarch

Even as they poke fun at their foibles, the lineup of comedians take time in their routines to assert the importance of what they understand to be God's design for the family. "I love leading my family," Earls offers as a segue between jokes. "One thing that I've always done with

¹⁹⁷ Both Branyan and Cunningham specifically include in their sets an exhortation to couples in the audience to cultivate their own two-person comedy "routine," complete with humorous callbacks and opportunities for new observational humor about their own differences and their interactions with others.

¹⁹⁸ Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*, 11, 29.

my wife and leading her is pray for her.” He goes on to joke about praying to God that his wife would realize how smooth he was and how they were destined for one another. Earls ascribes his decision to try and end the argumentative nature of their relationship to his realization that in a marriage relationship, somebody needed to be the “agent of change,” and, since he was the man, “maybe it should start with [him].” Branyan, too, identifies strife in marriage as an inevitable outcropping of inherent gender differences that can only be solved by couples joyfully embodying their God-given roles:

Does God have a sense of humor? Come on, He invented marriage. The whole idea is preposterous. Marriage is a hysterical idea at face value. God said, I’m gonna take two different people, a man and a woman, entirely different creatures with different sensibilities, different emotions, different ways and processes, and I’m gonna make them one. He started with man first, He made man, then He took a rib from that man and made woman. And clearly that was the rib that we used to use to read minds. Right? She can, we can’t. There’s a separation of power. It’s God-ordained. We each have a function, a different function, but we each have a function, that’s what makes it whole.... That’s what makes the marriage work, is the fact that we’re different.¹⁹⁹

Even as Branyan jokes that man was the only creature God said was “not good” during creation (“I can’t leave him down there all by himself, he’ll cover the whole planet in socks and beer cans!”) he identifies woman’s created, God-intended role as “helper.” (“I don’t know why He thought giving her a mind of her own would be helpful, but that’s His wacky sense of humor”).

Thus, the comedians of *Date Night Comedy* use humor to parse out the difference between their conception of inherent gender traits and optional gender traits. Without completely disavowing cultural expectations of masculinity as rugged and fearless, these comedians easily

¹⁹⁹ Popadic, “John Branyan,” *Date Night Comedy*

mine their relatable failure to embody masculine ideals for laughs. To acknowledge their failure to match the bravery, strength, or know-how of their wives is to simultaneously dismiss “manliness” as a requirement for their role as patriarch and to reify the social script of male dominance as the appropriate expectation that men will— understandably and even humorously—sometimes not fulfill. But each comedian is also sure to assert in their routine their understanding of what aspects of masculinity are not optional. Instead of male headship being a role earned through the successful embodiment of masculine ideals, it is inherent, God-given, and irrevocable.

What Men Want, What Women Want

If the men of *Date Night Comedy* can agree on any inherent feature of masculinity, it is men’s uncontrollable sex drive. In a meandering joke during his set, Ted Cunningham teaches the men in the audience how to get sex from their wives. Telling them, “Men are microwaves, women are CrockPots,” Cunningham encourages the married men in the audience to “turn their wife on before they leave the house” by offering her at least twelve “non-sexual touches,” asking her about her feelings, and at least pretending to do housework (Cunningham notes that the sound of the dishwasher running always turns his wife on. “The secret is, you don’t even need dishes in it.”). His advice for women? “Show up naked, that’s it.” Cunningham is far from alone in this assessment. In his routine, Jason Earls describes how his marriage was transformed by the word “sure.” He reenacts telling his wife “sure” with increasing overwhelm as she adds to his “honey-do” list around the house, feigning carrying a cross on his shoulder to demonstrate the burden of her requests. The reward? One night, when his wife was tired but he wanted to have sex, he asked if she could consider indulging him anyway. Her response: a long-suffering “sure.”

Both routines emphasize a transactional relationship wherein husbands undertake (or at least pretend to undertake) the “chores” their wives lay out for them and “earn” sex in return.

The comedians’ characterization of women suggests that what women want, ultimately, is some mixture of human connection and material goods. In Cunningham’s game plan for men to “get” sex from their wives, he encourages them to call their wives once they get to work, “with no purpose other than to ask how she’s doing.” Cunningham adds that, even if it has only been a few minutes since they parted, husbands should ask their wives about “everything [she’s] done and everything [she] *feel[s]* about what [she’s] done.” John Branyan, too, leans heavily on the “women love to talk” line of jokes, commenting that the best marriage he has ever known is between a couple where the husband has learned his wife’s breathing cadence so he could “fit a word in.” So too do many of the Date Night comedians identify their wives’ most frequent requests to be in the realm of housework or home décor. Cunningham tells his audience that HGTV’s Chip Gaines has ruined his life, because his wife is now constantly asking him if they can blow out walls in their house in order to create an open-concept layout. Branyan puts on a high-pitched, whining voice to imitate his wife begging him to fix their faulty electronics. “All this stuff around our house, John, it’s broken,” Branyan says. “So *fix it*.” While Cunningham and Branyan’s complaints about their wives’ dissatisfaction with their handiness undoubtedly contribute to their narrative of their own failure to achieve some cultural expectations of manliness, so, too, do these jokes reify so-called fundamental differences between women and men. Even if the comedian in question is not fit to knock out a wall in the house, he remains the default half of the couple that *might* know how to do such a thing. Nor does his wife’s expectation that he might secretly know about construction suggest that their gender dynamic will unravel if he actually does not. Indeed, as Cunningham notes of his wife’s frequent

questions to him about what is happening in their town's construction zones, "She's not looking for accuracy, she's looking for connection." Whether husbands and wives live up to gendered expectations in their knowledge and interests, their roles are nevertheless static: she the chatty woman seeking intimate companionship, he the simple man awaiting his next opportunity for sex.

Guy Talk

How does a group of male comedians openly committed to a strict sexual ethic forbidding sexual interaction outside the context of a heterosexual, monogamous marriage manage to make so many jokes about sex for this "family-friendly" streaming service? Seizer's ethnographic work gives us a clue: the way these comedians speak "only to" the men in the audience at crucial points allows them to say more sexually explicit jokes in a mixed gender context without breaking the social contract. Revisiting Ted Cunningham's extended joke advising men how to get their wives interested in sex demonstrates this phenomenon—Cunningham directly addresses the men in the audience, even calling out specific men in the audience for their reactions to his jokes.

Ted Cunningham (TC): I wanna give a list to men tonight on how to prepare your wife for a night of romance. Okay? In our home, it's simply known as this: men are microwaves, women are CrockPots.

[Low audience chuckle]

TC: And guys, if you want to enjoy a nice meal when you get home: you turn her on before you leave the house.

[Laughter and scattered applause]

TC: And in our house we actually keep a "CrockPot candle"—when the candle's lit it means tonight's the night.

TC: I love when guys come up to me and go, ‘hey pastor, where do I get me one of those candles?’

[Cunningham stoops to whisper]

TC: It’s *any* candle.

[Big audience laugh]

TC: It’s not a special candle.

[Another laugh]

TC: But guys, start with this idea in mind: it starts early in the morning. Give her an NST: a *non-sexual touch* before you leave the house. Okay? And research tells us that your wife needs twelve non-sexual touches a day. And it’s not one-two-three-four-five-six-seven-eight-nine-ten-eleven-twelve.

[Big audience laughter as Cunningham mimes jabbing at someone repeatedly.]

TC: You know what a non-sexual touch is. A non-sexual touch is the hair over the ear, a hand on the thigh, on the small of the back, hand-holding, a kiss on the cheek, a kiss on the forehead. When you get to work, guys, call her, with no purpose other than to ask her how she’s doing. And say to her, ‘Honey, from the time we left til now, tell me *everything* you’ve done. Spare me no details.’

[Medium audience laughter]

TC: ‘I want to know everything you’ve done and what you’ve *felt* about everything you’ve done.’

[Continued laughter]

TC: And when she’s done simply say ‘tell...me...*more*.’

[Laughter]

TC: And the CrockPot just went from medium to high. Get home, try to beat your wife home, do something domestic. I have found that the sound of the dishwasher running turns my wife on.

[Low audience laughter, a few claps]

TC: *[conspiratorially]* The secret is, you don't even need dishes in it.

[Big audience laugh]

TC: Just turn the dishwasher on, spray some 409 around the house.

[More laughter]

In addressing this extended bit only to the men in the audience, Cunningham creates what Seizer calls a “fishbowl effect,” allowing women to “overhear” men’s “private” conversation while remaining the object, rather than the subject, of the joke.²⁰⁰ Not only does this rhetorical maneuver allow Cunningham to maintain a sense of propriety, as if he were addressing a room of only men, but it also bolsters the American evangelical perception of men as the instigators and subjects of a sexual encounter, while women are the objects. Cunningham’s brief aside to women reinforces this dynamic—all women must do, Cunningham tells them, is “show up naked.”

Another potential function of *Date Night Comedy*’s jokes about sex is its valorization of what American evangelicals might call the “right” kind of sex. As Amy Derogatis writes of the proliferation of evangelical sex manuals since the 1970s, evangelicals talk about sex both to contradict “secular” visions of good sex and to further the idea that marital, monogamous, heterosexual sex is “sexually adventuresome and can fulfill anyone’s desires.”²⁰¹ These manuals also helped enshrine a cultural expectation among American evangelicals that men are more sexually voracious than their wives, and that women must find a way to accommodate this immutable reality about their husbands.²⁰² In this way, the comedians’ encouragement for

²⁰⁰ Seizer, *Stigmas of the Tamil Stage*, 195.

²⁰¹ Amy Derogatis, *Saving Sex: Sexuality and Salvation in American Evangelicalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 70.

²⁰² In their book *The Act of Marriage*, evangelical married couple Tim and Beverly LaHaye write that God designed nature such that “the male in all species of living creatures has the stronger sex drive.” As such, they contend, “God designed the man to be the aggressor, provider, and leader of the family.” See Tim LaHaye and Beverly LaHaye, *The Act of Marriage: The Beauty of Sexual Love* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 28.

married couples to have more sex dovetails with their emphasis on gender difference in marriage. Knowing one's place in society and in marriage is essential to allowing them the freedom to enjoy, experiment, and even laugh about their failures to live up to the ideal. The comedians of *Date Night Comedy* might allow for contradiction and humor within one's enactment of "biblical" manhood or womanhood, but an absolute acceptance of God's complementary design for men and women is the ticket for entry.

Reception

The exact impact of *Date Night Comedy* is difficult to measure. For the unknown number of Pure Flix subscribers that have streamed the filmed version (like their secular counterpart Netflix, Pure Flix does not release their streaming data), thousands more have attended one of the hundreds of events selling out megachurch sanctuaries since the tour began in 2015. Also countless is the number of individuals that might have consumed one of the other iterations of the tour available for streaming and DVD purchase from Focus on the Family (*Date Night Challenge: Comedy Edition*) and reseller sites like eBay (e.g. an earlier edition of *Date Night Comedy* featuring Ted Cunningham, John Branyan, and Ted and Nancy Lowe). Nevertheless, event photos featuring packed audiences throughout the tour's years of existence suggest that the performance has staying power. In other words, the global humor community of those that have engaged with *Date Night Comedy*, either through its live or recorded iterations, is worth exploring and studying alongside the content of the performance itself.

Date Night's social media engagement—which dropped off precipitously in 2018—has been mostly limited to Facebook, suggesting a middle-aged target audience. With 3.8 thousand followers, the tour's page features video clips from the tour's performances and photos of

attendees wearing oversized plastic sunglasses and feather boas against a *Date Night*-branded photo wall. The largely Generation X attendees consist of Black and white—and occasionally interracial—heterosexual couples. Comments on the page’s posts are almost uniformly positive, with the exception of a few would-be attendees lamenting the lack of free childcare at some of the events. Most positive comments noted that the laughter was just an added benefit on top of a positive Christian message:

“Great show! Thanks so much for the laughs and the marriage reminders!”²⁰³

“I was fortunate to be able to attend one in Orlando. A night of laughing is good for the heart.”²⁰⁴

“Enjoyed the laughs and the messages!”²⁰⁵

“I’m am [sic] so interested in getting involved with this kind off [sic] revolution in my area.”²⁰⁶

“Hilariously funny. I got baptized 15 months ago and wondered about intimacy once married. This has confirmed I am on the right path...”²⁰⁷

“This was amazing!!! Thank you! My first date with my husband was at a comedy club in Long Beach, CA. The comedian ended up being a Christian unbeknownst to us. It allowed us to talk about our faith & marriage

²⁰³ Jane Gutierrez, comment on *Date Night Comedy Tour*, “Jonnie W. Live in PHX,” *Facebook*, September 21, 2017, https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=pfbid034gf2tgSezcYJyDdG9CyaoWBY99kCsEBfWfXNW3JsHkia1i wTsYNmcb14HxzJ5yKkl&id=337528339744831&mibextid=vilDUR.

²⁰⁴ Beth Farb, comment on *Date Night Comedy Tour*, “Great Night at Northside Church,” *Facebook*, August 25, 2017, https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=pfbid0M5LF9MD7KB2o41xECzdbA92t7DTdfryq2EnSdwLcwSq2su DzMnPsp2c7qAEQCMtpl&id=337528339744831&mibextid=vilDUR.

²⁰⁵ Lori Donaldson, comment on *Date Night Comedy Tour*, “Great Night in Clearwater Calvary Church,” *Facebook*, May 19, 2017, https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=pfbid02q6pEmsRbaHrwqCjYpaDN8TDACpGwhSJDLXGqYr6a6eE QTfGd2wXfWySRiyJojjr3l&id=337528339744831&mibextid=vilDUR.

²⁰⁶ Dawn Sisley, comment on *Date Night Comedy Tour*, “ONEDAY IS COMING,” *Facebook*, October 3, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/337528339744831/posts/672457032918625/?mibextid=vilDUR>.

²⁰⁷ Articale Don, comment on *Date Night Comedy Tour*, “Ted Cunningham crushing it,” *Facebook*, August 5, 2016, <https://fb.watch/gB4t1IIBOG/?mibextid=vilDUR>.

expectations. That was 5 years ago & we haven't found a Christian comic since! Thank you of [sic] last night! Can't wait see ya'll again!!!"²⁰⁸

Other commenters engaged specifically with portions of the event featured in video clips on the page. By far the posts with the most reach are clips of comedian Jason Earls doing a bit about wanting to reclaim his Saturdays from his kids' sporting events. Clips of Earls's "I Want My Saturdays Back" routine make up an astonishing six of the page's top ten posts in terms of total interactions since its creation in 2015.²⁰⁹ Commenters on these posts tend to be brief affirmations of Earls's experience:

"Lol.." ²¹⁰

"The life of a sports parents .. [sic]" ²¹¹

"I've said that prayer before" ²¹²

"Can I get an amen!" ²¹³

"I watched this five times and laugh harder each time." ²¹⁴

"LOL I feel his pain" ²¹⁵

²⁰⁸ Jessica De Maria, comment on *Date Night Comedy Tour*, "Happening now McLean Bible Church," *Facebook*, February 20, 2015, https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=pfbid0VQogpZRPCmuZv9JRT15Bw2BxXQWBDWtuFxMneMZGndP7MXnyya9tALiPhhzAL3y1l&id=337528339744831&mibextid=vilDUR.

²⁰⁹ Data obtained from CrowdTangle, January 7, 2022.

²¹⁰ Latasha Virtuous Parrish, September 26, 2016, shared post from *Date Night Comedy Tour*, "HELLO PALM BEACH," *Facebook*, September 20, 2016, <https://fb.watch/gB4aSc7Gqv/?mibextid=vilDUR>.

²¹¹ Ryan N Sharlene Brown, September 20, 2021, shared post from *Date Night Comedy Tour*, "HELLO PALM BEACH," *Facebook*, September 20, 2016, <https://fb.watch/gB4aSc7Gqv/?mibextid=vilDUR>.

²¹² Shantil Promise, September 23, 2016, shared post from *Date Night Comedy Tour*, "HELLO PALM BEACH," *Facebook*, September 20, 2016, <https://fb.watch/gB4aSc7Gqv/?mibextid=vilDUR>.

²¹³ Shayne Rainey, September 25, 2016, shared post from *Date Night Comedy Tour*, "HELLO PALM BEACH," *Facebook*, September 20, 2016, <https://fb.watch/gB4aSc7Gqv/?mibextid=vilDUR>.

²¹⁴ John Michael Roth, comment on *Date Night Comedy Tour*, "HELLO PALM BEACH," *Facebook*, September 20, 2016, <https://fb.watch/gB4aSc7Gqv/?mibextid=vilDUR>.

²¹⁵ Ilaine Marrero, comment on *Date Night Comedy Tour*, "HELLO PALM BEACH," *Facebook*, September 20, 2016, <https://fb.watch/gB4aSc7Gqv/?mibextid=vilDUR>.

But despite Earls's overwhelming popularity on *Date Night*'s Facebook page, he trails his fellow comics in terms of Pure Flix reviews. The series's average rating (determined by subscribers) is 3.4 out of a possible 4 stars—a rating brought down by Earls's noticeably lower rating. Cunningham's episode rates a 3.7 average, Branyan's a 3.6, Harris's a 3.8, and Jonnie W.'s a 3.5, while Earls's episode has an average user rating of just 3.1 stars. Whether Earls, as the only Black performer in the group, suffers from the racial bias of Pure Flix's viewership is impossible to discern, especially in light of the fact that no public data exists regarding the racial and ethnic identity of subscribers. What data does exist regarding Pure Flix's faithful, though, indicates that subscribers skew female and politically conservative. Pure Flix's Facebook ad campaigns are aimed almost exclusively at women. In a \$45,000 ad push for the 2016 Kevin Sorbo-led action movie *Caged No More*, for example, Pure Flix reached over a million viewers, 94 percent of whom identified as women in their Facebook profiles.²¹⁶ Web traffic analytics platform Similarweb shows that Pure Flix's visitors also tended to frequent right-leaning websites like Fox News, the Christian Broadcasting Network, and Focus on the Family's media review site Plugged In.²¹⁷

Pure Flix's broad user base—the streaming service has 1.8 million followers on Facebook and garners about 1.9 million website visits per month—suggests that *Date Night Comedy*'s reach far exceeds even its largest sold-out crowds in midwestern and southern megachurches.²¹⁸ *Date Night Comedy* is one of PureFlix's featured comedy offerings and

²¹⁶ Data obtained from CrowdTangle's Ad Library on January 7, 2022.

²¹⁷ "PureFlix.com Audience Interests," *Similarweb*, accessed January 7, 2022, <https://www.similarweb.com/website/pureflix.com/>.

²¹⁸ Data obtained from CrowdTangle and Similarweb on January 7, 2022. <https://www.similarweb.com/website/pureflix.com/#overview>.

routinely appears in PureFlix articles about Christian comedy and date night viewing options.²¹⁹ So too has *Date Night Comedy*'s frontman Ted Cunningham enshrined some of his routine's key points into his marriage advice books *Fun Loving You: Enjoying Your Marriage in the Midst of the Grind* and *A Love That Laughs: Lighten Up, Cut Loose, and Enjoy Life Together*. It is the extensive online reviews of these texts that offer the best view into how Cunningham's fellow conservative Christians respond to his jokes about men and women's differences and the imperative to bring comedy into one's married life.

Cunningham's *Fun Loving You*—a guide for couples on spicing up their marriages through (re)introducing fun and humor into their everyday lives—is by far his most popular book. With an average of 4.6 stars out of 5 on Amazon and 4.08 stars out of 5 on the book review social media site GoodReads, readers' response to *Fun Loving You* is largely positive. In the book's more than 150 written reviews across Amazon and GoodReads, 35 reviewers specifically praise the book for its "practical" advice. Some note that the book might be more useful for younger couples, while others exhort the book's value for "everyone from engaged, newlyweds, busy with kids or empty nesters."²²⁰ Others praise his ability to use humor to delve into a "serious" topic—that of the sanctity of heterosexual monogamous marriage. As one reviewer writes, "[Cunningham's] passion for the institution of marriage bleeds through every page."²²¹ While Cunningham's humor undoubtedly does different work in book form than in his stand-up routines, his readers' praise indicates what makes his self-styled Christian humor both

²¹⁹ "Watch the Best Christian Comedy Movies," *PureFlix*, accessed January 7, 2022, <https://www.pureflix.com/watch-best-christian-comedy-movies-online>.

²²⁰ Eric Reidsma, Review of *Fun Loving You: Enjoying Your Marriage in the Midst of the Grind* by Ted Cunningham. *Amazon*, February 20, 2014, https://www.amazon.com/Fun-Loving-You-Enjoying-Marriage/dp/1434704564/ref=cm_cr_ar_p_d_product_top?ie=UTF8.

²²¹ Serghei Babaraica, Review of *Fun Loving You: Enjoying Your Marriage in the Midst of the Grind* by Ted Cunningham. *Amazon*, November 17, 2014, https://www.amazon.com/Fun-Loving-You-Enjoying-Marriage/dp/1434704564/ref=cm_cr_ar_p_d_product_top?ie=UTF8.

unique and marketable: its ability to make people laugh without pushing the boundaries of what they perceive as biblical truth. Indeed, more often than not, reviewers that mention Cunningham's humor tie it directly to his sound doctrine:

"@tedcunningham is humorous biblical and right on point."²²²

"Funny, biblical, and helpful!"²²³

"Ted Cunningham's [sic] no holds barred, humorous style combined with Biblical truth to not only educate and build you up in marriage, but be entertaining as well."²²⁴

"Light-hearted, practical, solid on the teaching of the Word without feeling like the writer is Bible-thumping."²²⁵

"It does a wonderful job in providing both encouragement and direction, is full of laugh-out-loud moments."²²⁶

"The author uses a lot of humor, yet he is serious as well."²²⁷

Positive reviews of Cunningham's written work suggest that the value of Cunningham's humor is found in the audience's trust that he is using it to deliver biblical truth. In this sense, biblical

²²² MarriageGuy, Review of *Fun Loving You: Enjoying Your Marriage in the Midst of the Grind* by Ted Cunningham. *Amazon*, October 8, 2015, https://www.amazon.com/Fun-Loving-You-Enjoying-Marriage/dp/1434704564/ref=cm_cr_ar_p_d_product_top?ie=UTF8.

²²³ K. Prelock, Review of *Fun Loving You: Enjoying Your Marriage in the Midst of the Grind* by Ted Cunningham. *Amazon*, April 21, 2014, https://www.amazon.com/Fun-Loving-You-Enjoying-Marriage/dp/1434704564/ref=cm_cr_ar_p_d_product_top?ie=UTF8.

²²⁴ Scott Smith, Review of *Fun Loving You: Enjoying Your Marriage in the Midst of the Grind* by Ted Cunningham. *Amazon*, December 9, 2014, https://www.amazon.com/Fun-Loving-You-Enjoying-Marriage/dp/1434704564/ref=cm_cr_ar_p_d_product_top?ie=UTF8.

²²⁵ Messy Garden, Review of *Fun Loving You: Enjoying Your Marriage in the Midst of the Grind* by Ted Cunningham. *Amazon*, March 25, 2018, https://www.amazon.com/Fun-Loving-You-Enjoying-Marriage/dp/1434704564/ref=cm_cr_ar_p_d_product_top?ie=UTF8.

²²⁶ Pjiggy, Review of *Fun Loving You: Enjoying Your Marriage in the Midst of the Grind* by Ted Cunningham. *Amazon*, October 12, 2014, https://www.amazon.com/Fun-Loving-You-Enjoying-Marriage/dp/1434704564/ref=cm_cr_ar_p_d_product_top?ie=UTF8.

²²⁷ Mathem, Review of *Fun Loving You: Enjoying Your Marriage in the Midst of the Grind* by Ted Cunningham. *Amazon*, September 9, 2017, https://www.amazon.com/Fun-Loving-You-Enjoying-Marriage/dp/1434704564/ref=cm_cr_ar_p_d_product_top?ie=UTF8.

truth is both a container and a description of content: a promise that the audience's incitement to laughter will never take them outside of God's prescriptions and that the ideas making them laugh reflect God's intended order.

Cunningham's audiences' desire for truth and practicality is similarly evident in the handful of critical reviews *Fun Loving You* has garnered online. Negative reviews' chief complaint is that, in his effort to be lighthearted, Cunningham ends up offering superficial advice that will only work for others who share his level of social privilege. One reviewer—who ultimately gave the book 4 stars and called it “one of the best and easiest-to-read marriage books I have ever read”—acknowledged that *Fun Loving You*'s advice might not work for everyone:

Having lived in the Ozarks, I know his message definitely resonates with the small-town conservatism found there. It may be harder to apply if both parents are working full-time jobs with a lot of travel demands or lack the resources to create the "fun" time. Dave Ramsey is highly esteemed but there are some families who are already in financial difficulties that need more than the "rah rah" in this book. If your marriage is in deep trouble, or one spouse isn't a Christian, this book may not be what you need-- although he does give some insights into how he counsels couples who are separated that I think solid.²²⁸

Another reviewer echoed this critique, noting that many of Cunningham's date ideas priced out lower-income couples:

My problem with all of this is that it does start to sound financially beyond the reach of most couples and after a while, the endless stories about fancy restaurant and resorts that Ted Cunningham has stayed at start to reinforce that he might come from a well-off middle class that can afford all this stuff. There are people for whom even getting out one night a month could

²²⁸ Justin Tapp, Review of *Fun Loving You: Enjoying Your Marriage in the Midst of the Grind* by Ted Cunningham. *GoodReads*, March 25, 2014, https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/20629584-fun-loving-you?from_search=true&from_srp=true&qid=1kMXQ2qTxn&rank=1.

be expensive and I would hate them to think that was going to hold them back from having a great relationship.”²²⁹

Other reviewers specifically took issue with Cunningham’s humorous tone. “Some of the advice is way too pat and trite for sometimes serious issues,” one reviewer wrote. Others described Cunningham’s humorous approach as “fluff,” “cheesey [sic],” and “slappy [sic] happy American Christian stuff.”²³⁰

Book reviewers’ prevailing critique against Cunningham’s tone, however, was precisely the issue he manages on stage through his use of the “fishbowl effect”—performatively speaking only to the men in the room while allowing women to “listen in.” Reviewers, both positive and negative, spent significant time in their reviews discussing whether Cunningham’s book was most appropriate for men, for couples, or for potentially mixed-gender Bible study groups. Some critical reviews suggested that the book is tailored to a male audience due to its frankness about his sexual relationship with his wife. Reviewers wrote:

“Some of his talk about sex - especially when he talks candidly about sex in his marriage - is done in a juvenile way that I didn't appreciate. Asides like va va voom and talking about what turns on your wife don't seem appropriate or honoring (of sex in general, of his wife in particular).”²³¹

“I can't overly recommend this for *most* female readers.... There was some humor that I felt would be more appropriate for a male reader.”²³²

²²⁹ Matthew Hodge, Review of *Fun Loving You: Enjoying Your Marriage in the Midst of the Grind* by Ted Cunningham. *GoodReads*, July 13, 2016, https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/20629584-fun-loving-you?from_search=true&from_srp=true&qid=lkMXQ2qTxn&rank=1.

²³⁰ Reviews of *Fun Loving You: Enjoying Your Marriage in the Midst of the Grind* by Ted Cunningham. *Amazon*, accessed January 9, 2022, https://www.amazon.com/Fun-Loving-You-Enjoying-Marriage/dp/1434704564/ref=cm_cr_ar_p_d_product_top?ie=UTF8.

²³¹ Amanda, Review of *Fun Loving You: Enjoying Your Marriage in the Midst of the Grind* by Ted Cunningham. *GoodReads*, August 10, 2017, https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/20629584-fun-loving-you?from_search=true&from_srp=true&qid=lkMXQ2qTxn&rank=1.

²³² Bluerose’s Heart, Review of *Fun Loving You: Enjoying Your Marriage in the Midst of the Grind* by Ted Cunningham. *GoodReads*, January 27, 2014, https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/20629584-fun-loving-you?from_search=true&from_srp=true&qid=lkMXQ2qTxn&rank=1.

“There is way too much information about the author's sex life.”²³³

“Chapter 8 got a little more personal than we were comfortable discussing in a group setting but is probably a conversation spouses should have with each other.”²³⁴

Even though Cunningham uses the same anecdotes about his sex life with his wife across his book(s) and his comedy routine, his mediating role differs across the platforms. Unlike in his comedy performance, where Cunningham speaks directly to the men in the audience for extended periods, his book is directed to a more general audience, often using terms like “spouse” or “husband/wife” to indicate that his advice is gender neutral. In the context of a message that asserts men and women’s fundamentally different roles within a marriage, Cunningham’s inclusion of sexually explicit information in his book might strike readers as more transgressive than it does in a comedy routine where he acknowledges—and performatively “manages”—the potentially inappropriate nature of his comments in a mixed-sex audience.

Conclusion

In *Date Night Comedy*, one can see the “dance” between ritual and play, transgression and boundary maintenance that is inherent to stand-up comedy. While each of the five comedians in the series toes the line of impropriety with sexually suggestive material and jokes about their own gender nonconformity, their routines ultimately reinforce gender complementarianism. While the comedians’ admissions of their own failure to live up to cultural

²³³ DaisyJo37, Review of *Fun Loving You: Enjoying Your Marriage in the Midst of the Grind* by Ted Cunningham. Amazon, March 31, 2014, https://www.amazon.com/Fun-Loving-You-Enjoying-Marriage/dp/1434704564/ref=cm_cr_ar_p_d_product_top?ie=UTF8.

²³⁴ Toby J., Review of *Fun Loving You: Enjoying Your Marriage in the Midst of the Grind* by Ted Cunningham. Amazon, September 24, 2017, https://www.amazon.com/Fun-Loving-You-Enjoying-Marriage/dp/1434704564/ref=cm_cr_ar_p_d_product_top?ie=UTF8.

ideals of masculinity has the potential to undermine those ideals, each of the *Date Night* comedians turns their “failures” of masculinity into a reminder of the innate and immutable gender differences instilled in them by God. When making especially sexually charged jokes, many of the *Date Night Comedy* comedians direct their jokes only to the men in the audience, a performance choice that allows the women to listen in on—and laugh along with—the joke while acknowledging and thus defusing the transgression of making such comments in mixed company. Audience responses to these performances—whether live on stage, streamed on Pure Flix, or read in Cunningham’s distillation of the jokes in his books on humor in marriage—suggest that comedy is a risky but ultimately rewarding vehicle for these performers’ conservative Christian message. While a few critics bristle at humor as too flippant or raunchy for the serious and holy institution of marriage, the vast majority are delighted by the comedians’ ability to deliver “biblical” truth in a way that feels fun, fresh, and accessible. As Ted Cunningham tells his audience, “God wants you to laugh.”²³⁵ By mixing comedic entertainment with religious instruction, Cunningham ensures audiences walk away doubly edified.

In part two of my analysis of evangelical stand-up comedy, I turn my attention to American Christianity’s best-selling female comedian of all time, Chonda Pierce. Like the comedians of *Date Night Comedy*—with whom Pierce shares personal and professional ties—Pierce’s comedy explores what is funny about gender, sexuality, and gender roles in the context of her marriage and of broader society. Unlike *Date Night*’s all-male line-up, however, Pierce must contend with the added burden of negotiating American evangelicalism’s widespread prohibition on women teaching men while she stands alone at the pulpit.

²³⁵ Cunningham, *Fun Loving You*, 15.

Chapter 3

The Ritual and Play of Christian Stand-up Comedy, Part II

“There is something really sacred to me about a spotlight.”
-Chonda Pierce

At a glance, World Outreach Church of Murfreesboro, Tennessee looked no different Friday, April 27, 2018 than it does on any given Sunday morning. The seats were packed with a mostly white, middle-aged crowd. Giant projection screens on either side of the main stage waited at the ready to deliver song lyrics and front-row views to even those in the very back of the megachurch’s 2800-seat sanctuary. Roving spotlights and upbeat contemporary Christian music signaled the church’s commitment to a low-church, seeker friendly aesthetic. But instead of the church’s celebrity pastor Allen Jackson, it was Chonda Pierce—the Recording Industry Association of America’s top-selling female comedian of all time and one of World Outreach’s earliest members—who took the stage.²³⁶ Pierce was performing a standup special, clips of which would be featured in her newest documentary, *Unashamed*. While the core of the film is composed of interviews (conducted by Pierce herself) of famous evangelical Christians who experienced public backlash for their conservative religious and political beliefs, no Pierce production is complete without some snippets of the frank observational humor that made her famous. “I consider this my home church,” Pierce began her set to riotous applause. “So if there has been something in my career in the past that has really ticked you off, it’s this church’s fault.”

²³⁶ Chuck Dauphin, “Country Comedy Star Chonda Pierce to Star in Documentary,” *Billboard*, July 25, 2013, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/the-615/4615446/country-comedy-star-chonda-pierce-to-star-in-documentary>.

As “clean” and “Christian” comedians go, Pierce is something of an anomaly, simply by virtue of being a woman.²³⁷ Standup specials on platforms like PureFlix and DryBar Comedy feature an almost exclusively white and male lineup of comics. Pierce’s comedy is in some ways a pastiche of tropes about middle-aged womanhood—no set is complete without at least one joke about Spanx (their virtues and their drawbacks), hot flashes, young people’s racy fashion sense, and her disgust over men’s slovenly ways. Like her male Christian comedian counterparts, many of her jokes center around gender and the family: joking about her lack of interest in sex with her husband, her husband’s frustration with her menopausal mood changes, and her excitement to finally be an empty nester.

²³⁷ For an extended consideration of the term “clean” as it relates to evangelical comedy, see Elisha McIntyre, *Religious Humor in Evangelical Christian and Mormon Culture* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018)—especially chapter four.



Figure 2.1 A table of merchandise for sale at a March 26, 2022 Chonda Pierce performance at Stewart Road Church of God in Monroe, Michigan. Photo by the author.

So too might Pierce be considered an anomalous representative of evangelical Christian womanhood. Her comedy specials linger on the darkest aspects of her life—one that has been deeply marred by tragedy. In her childhood, Pierce dealt with ongoing abuse from her father, who was a pastor. In early adulthood, Pierce suddenly lost both of her sisters—one to a car crash,

one to leukemia. While many evangelical women's testimonies include dark pasts, Pierce defies convention by sharing her ongoing personal and family struggles in her comedy, even when no spiritual or life lesson can be easily mined from them. Widowed in 2014, Pierce lost her husband David to complications from alcoholism that consumed the last few years of his life—alcoholism that Pierce says she partially blames on her own absence from the home.²³⁸ Pierce also shares openly about her estrangement from her daughter, who she says broke contact after years of feeling neglected by her mother's commitment to her career in comedy over being present for her family.

Pierce's comic persona is one that layers "expected" American evangelical femininity—white skin, blonde hair, modest dress, charming smile—with unexpected frankness about her lived experiences that do not always comport with evangelical cultural norms. Pierce is outspoken about her longstanding struggle with clinical depression and advocates for the benefits of antidepressant medications to her evangelical audiences. So too does Pierce allow for a level of ambivalence in her consideration of her life choices that seemingly belies many American evangelicals' commitment to a "purpose-driven life." Nevertheless, I argue that Pierce exemplifies what is an essential performance in American evangelicalism: recounting the hero's journey of pursuing one's spiritual calling amidst a variety of trials that ultimately demonstrate God's faithfulness—and the hero's faithfulness to God's call. While it is often evangelical men that embody and claim this hero's journey, the sacrifices Pierce made for her comedy ministry—a whole and healthy family life—are all the keener for the fact that Pierce, as a woman, putatively feels the loss more greatly because of her God-given orientation to the family.

²³⁸ *Chonda Pierce: Laughing in the Dark*, directed by Rick Altizer (2015, Nashville, TN: Fuseic Entertainment). Amazon Prime Video.

This chapter examines the oeuvre of evangelical comedy's most popular female comedian, Chonda Pierce. Evangelical standup comedy might share some of the aesthetic and performative markers of other types of standup comedy, but Pierce's identification of her audiences as a "movement" and "congregation" that share "the same life" signal the special role evangelical standup plays in the creation and maintenance of American evangelical culture.²³⁹ From performing alone on stripped-down church stages in a manner reminiscent of the church pastor to infusing jokes with moral lessons about God's boundaries for human behavior, evangelical standup comedians draw upon a host of symbols and scripts aimed at the re-fusion of audiences' fragmented lives and experiences into one "congregation" united by a shared narrative of God's sovereignty.

Individualism, De-fusion, and Performance

Pierce's home church and regular performing space, World Outreach Church of Murfreesboro, Tennessee, is an exemplar of what sociologist and geographer Justin Wilford has termed "postdenominational evangelicalism" (PDE). PDE churches share a number of characteristics, including a variety of weekend and weekday services "produced in multiple contemporary idioms," "services and programs that have a markedly therapeutic style and message," and a geographic location on "the extreme periphery of large cities."²⁴⁰ These churches' "postsuburban" locations are anything but incidental to their operation style and success, Wilford argues. Not only do such communities express diffuse values, needs, and desires, but the very fabric of life in the metropolitan outskirts is "socially and spatially

²³⁹ Altizer, *Laughing in the Dark*.

²⁴⁰ Justin G. Wilford, *Sacred Subdivisions: The Postsuburban Transformation of American Evangelicalism* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 9.

fragmented,” as individuals’ roles “multiply, separate, and become spatially and socially specialized” to an extent that the “home” simply cannot serve as a site for integrating the whole self.²⁴¹ As such, megachurches and large PDE churches in general offer postsuburbanites a panoply of events, rituals, and social groups that not only offer something for individuals at every stage of life, but also help to “re-fuse” congregants’ fragmented social lives via an overarching narrative of “an intimately personal God who created and cares uniquely about you,” and whose investment in the minutiae of individuals’ lives can help reintegrate the highway, the home, and the workplace as potentially holy sites.

Wilford draws the concept of “re-fusing” from the work of cultural sociologist Jeffrey Alexander, who has argued that, in more complex societies, theatrical performance emerges as a venue of legitimization and rationalization of social organization. Rather than developing a Habermasian public square, Alexander contends, complex societies often retain “ritual-like processes”—a “public stage”—through which actors “create the conditions for projecting cultural meaning from performance to audience.”²⁴² Those conditions, writ large, allow for what Alexander terms “re-fusing,” a process during which the fragmented motivations, meanings, and spheres of modern life coalesce under a compelling narrative that activates and binds together disparate cultural symbols. But what are the conditions that allow for such a re-fusing? The first and perhaps most slippery of these elements is what Alexander calls “authenticity”—the *appearance* of a “self-generating actor who is not pulled like a puppet by the strings of society,” who acts “without artifice, without self-consciousness.”²⁴³ The second is creating “flow,” whose definition Alexander borrows from Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi: “the process of delimiting reality,

²⁴¹ Ibid, 65.

²⁴² Jeffrey C. Alexander, “Cultural Pragmatics: Social Performance between Ritual and Strategy,” *Sociological Theory* 22, no. 4 (2004): 527-573, 51, 55.

²⁴³ Alexander, “Cultural Pragmatics,” 55.

controlling some aspect of it, and responding to the feedback with a concentration that excludes anything else as irrelevant.”²⁴⁴ While this type of performativity need not be associated with the stage (Alexander cites Judith Butler’s theory of gender performance as an example), Alexander identifies theatrical and other explicit performances as important sites for understanding performativity *because* of how entertainers must work all the harder to overcome the audience’s knowledge that they are observing an *imitation* of action.²⁴⁵ They can do so, Alexander suggests, through performative elements like cognitive simplification, time-space compression, and moral agonism.²⁴⁶

Evangelical standup comedy is a potent site of cultural performance because it blends best practices for contemporary audience humor uptake with many of the ideal conditions for ensuring initial audience buy-in. Indeed, evangelical standup comedy resembles Alexander’s description of the earliest iterations of ritual performance enacted by smaller and more monolithic social groups. In such performances, participation in the ritual do not appear “contingent,” but rather are “determined by the established and accepted hierarchies of gender and age.” Secondly, audiences are not strangers, but rather are “linked to performers by direct or indirect family ties.”²⁴⁷ By delivering their comedy from the standpoint of their “universal” roles as men, women, husbands, wives, mothers, and fathers, evangelical standup comedians effectively erase the distinctions between their comic persona and their “authentic” selves. By performing primarily or exclusively at large PDE churches, evangelical comedians are more likely to have an audience that shares key aspects of their worldview and ideological

²⁴⁴ Alexander, “Cultural Pragmatics,” 56. Quoting Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1975), 53-54.

²⁴⁵ See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Oxfordshire, England: Routledge, 2006).

²⁴⁶ Alexander, “Cultural Pragmatics,” 60-61.

²⁴⁷ Alexander, “Cultural Pragmatics,” 39-40.

assumptions and are connected to one another by a variety of interlocking social ties. Moreover, the very setting itself—a PDE church stage with few to no added decorations and the same lighting and staging as the pastor has on a Sunday morning—bolsters the comedian’s claims to power and authority both implicitly (the audience’s association of the location, lighting, and staging with pastoral authority) and explicitly (the audience’s understanding that the pastor, elders, and other church authorities have knowingly “passed the mic” to this comedian). As Alexander concludes, “group-affirming social dramas are much easier to carry off than universalizing ones.”²⁴⁸ So too is audience identification more likely when a given performance compares positively to “an idealized or ‘remembered’ model available from earlier experience.”²⁴⁹ Evangelical comedians, then, benefit from their audience’s collective memory of sermons past as they stand in the place of the pastor, appear to speak “authentically” about their lived experiences, and ultimately tie those experiences back into a broader narrative of God’s salvific power and the evangelical church as God’s elect.

Spanx and God’s Boundaries: Performing Womanhood the Way the Lord Intended

Gender is central to how Chonda Pierce achieves “re-fusion” in her performances. Not only does Pierce’s gender provide her with a set of seemingly non-contingent roles (wife, mother, woman) to embody, but her emphasis on her gender reminds her audience of the non-contingency of their own gendered roles. Pierce’s frequent jokes about gender “benders” and non-heterosexual sexualities construct a simple moral agonism that fortifies and re-naturalizes the community’s commitment to cisgender, heterosexual monogamy. Finally, Pierce’s self-identification as a “broken” woman redeemed by her status as God’s vessel echoes the broader

²⁴⁸ Alexander, “Cultural Pragmatics,” 75.

²⁴⁹ Alexander, “Cultural Pragmatics,” 76.

ethos of evangelical Christianity—a narrative of deeply individual spiritual renewal that spurs re-fusion by charging audiences with the task of infusing the disparate aspects of their lives with holiness.

No Chonda Pierce comedy set is complete without a joke about her status with Spanx. Sometimes she is “on” them: “My beauty secrets are few and far between. I do have on two pairs of Spanx. I don’t know if it’s beauty or just laziness.”²⁵⁰ Sometimes she has forsaken them as another way for the world to “torture us girls that like cheeseburgers”: “Don’t let the cellulite hit you on the way out!”²⁵¹ Pierce jokes about many of the pressures on women to maintain a certain external image, especially as they compare to expectations for men’s appearances. After asserting that her double Spanx took her from a size 22 to a size 8, Pierce looked out into the audience of World Outreach Church and called out a woman in the front row: “I know why she’s laughin’—‘You ain’t no size 8’—oh yeah, you make me be real, but the preacher *walks on water!*”²⁵² And yet, Pierce herself participates in the policing of other women’s bodies. During a question and answer portion of her 2010 special *Did I Say That Out Loud?* a young woman stood up to ask Pierce a question and Pierce responded, “This is a family show, you might want to pull your shirt down.” Pierce finds humor in cultural expectations of manhood and womanhood without going so far as to question (at least publicly) why those expectations are so different from one another. Instead, she emphasizes those differences as outcroppings of God’s intentional differentiation between the sexes. Even as Pierce describes breastfeeding as “sick” and “the wackiest idea,” she notes that breastfeeding allowed her to feed her children for free when she

²⁵⁰ Chonda Pierce: *Did I Say That Out Loud?* Directed by Coke Sams (2010, Murfreesboro, TN: No Whining Productions), DVD.

²⁵¹ Altizer, Chonda Pierce: *Laughing in the Dark*

²⁵² Sams, Chonda Pierce: *Did I Say That Out Loud?*

was young and broke, concluding, “God created us in such an incredible way.”²⁵³ Pierce’s approach to the “wackiness” of gender and sex in human life ultimately takes on an “it is what it is” orientation: one laughs at the foibles of performing womanhood in order to make it easier to perform, not in order to change the performance.

If one’s role as a woman is non-negotiable, so too are women’s various relational options—daughter, wife, mother—limited and predetermined. In almost every single comedy special, Pierce reinforces a moral boundary between those who accept God’s immutable design of humans as monogamous, heterosexual creatures and those who flout God’s order for their own hedonistic gratification. Often, Pierce invokes states like California and Massachusetts as metonyms for a broader, antagonistic liberal culture that is encroaching on conservative Christian values. In *Did I Say That Out Loud?* Pierce describes her brief time living in West Hollywood as a constant encounter with identity and lifestyle difference. “You can’t find anybody that speaks English in California,” Pierce says, adding that those who do speak English are unintelligible due to plastic surgery. What one *can* find in California, Pierce says, is marijuana, psychics, and tattoos. “Isn’t that precious?” Pierce says. “They’re everywhere out there. You can get your rocks colored and your chakras aligned...get your herbs straightened out.” When a man in the audience walks in late during this set, Pierce stops and calls him out off the cuff: “Look at this guy, coming in late... And people wonder why I always direct my videos to women.” After a big laugh from the audience, Pierce adds, “We all married one. Well, except for some folks in California.”

In Pierce’s comedy, the “otherness” of homosexuality is assumed to require no explanation. Her 2010 special also includes an extended story about a trip she and a female

²⁵³ *Chonda Pierce: A Piece of My Mind*, directed by Dennis Glore (2006, Culver City, CA: Columbia Pictures), DVD.

friend took to Cancun. Unbeknownst to Pierce, her friend was able to save them money by ordering them a honeymoon package. Pierce describes telling her friend, “I’m gonna kill you for this.” Pierce adds, to big applause, “The hard thing was telling [the staff] we’re not from Massachusetts.” When Pierce tells the crowd they ended up deciding to invite their husbands out to join them by buying a second honeymoon package, the audience breaks out in peals of laughter. “You could just see, like, the nerves and the blood coming from the bottom of their feet...I thought steam was gonna come outta their nose.” Pierce notes that the unnaturalness of same-sex marriages was not only obvious to the vacationers, but to the staff, as well. She says that every time a staff member put together that the men were sharing a honeymoon package, the staff person would wrinkle up their nose “like my mother when she sees something she doesn’t like: ‘Oh, aren’t you...different.’” Nor does Pierce shy away from sharing her political stances against LGBTQ rights: in her 2019 documentary *Unashamed*, Pierce interviews brothers David and Jason Benham, Liberty University graduates and former Minor League Baseball players who claim their opportunity for an HGTV house-flipping show was taken away from them by the “thought mafia” for their opposition to “homosexuality and its agenda that is attacking the nation.”²⁵⁴²⁵⁵ Although Pierce agrees with the Benhams that the cultural pushback American evangelicals perceive is “pressure, not persecution,” she asks of the next generation of evangelicals, “What’s going to happen to *them*?” As the Benhams assert, “the pressure *wants* to turn into persecution.” What in 2010 was a joke about the outlandishness of a same-sex couple having a honeymoon is no longer a laughing matter: homosexuals have not just earned some

²⁵⁴ Chonda Pierce: *Unashamed*, directed by Rick Altizer (2019, Nashville, TN: Fuseic Entertainment), UP Faith and Family.

²⁵⁵ Lisa Respers France, “Benham Brothers Lose HGTV Show After ‘Anti-Gay’ Remarks,” *CNN*, May 9, 2014, <https://www.cnn.com/2014/05/08/showbiz/tv/benham-brothers-hgtv/>.

civil rights, but, to the Benhams and Pierce, they are also “bullies” with a social and political agenda that directly threatens American Christianity.²⁵⁶

Chonda Goes to Washington

If American evangelicalism is buckling under increasing existential threat from an angry gay lobby, what role does Chonda Pierce play in reinforcing the boundaries of the faith? Donald Trump’s 2016 ascendance to the presidency offered her an opportunity to pair her religious beliefs with political action. A longtime outspoken political conservative, Pierce initially bemoaned the field of candidates in the 2016 presidential race. In early February of 2016, Pierce posted on Facebook,

I am so frustrated by politicians right now. I am frustrated by Washington, period. Lindsay Graham said Ted Cruz should die, Donald Trump calls everyone names like a 5th grade bully. Hillary Clinton lies and gets by with it. The lack of discipline and self-control in this race has bothered me from day one. But, when those who call themselves Christian say demeaning and threatening things - I am doubly concerned.²⁵⁷

Just a few weeks later, Pierce published an open letter to Donald Trump on her Facebook page, imploring him to soften his rhetoric in order to win her support. After telling Trump that she was sorry his campaign event was canceled due to protesters, she concluded,

I implore you to present yourself a statesman. Dignify the office you seek by speaking with calm and assurance. Speak with class and kindness, clarity and compassion. We need leadership who tames rhetoric and exudes respect

²⁵⁶ Altizer, *Chonda Pierce: Unashamed*.

²⁵⁷ Chonda Pierce, 2016, “I am so frustrated by politicians right now.” Facebook, February 27, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/58637741315/posts/10153325894841316>.

for ALL peoples. You have amazing ideas, policies that need to be heard and explored - but we can't hear them because you seem to fuel emotion rather than display an ideology of unity. I want to believe in our country and the power of our constitution. I long for a great change to take place in a positive and safe direction. Our President has not been a unifier - but you have not displayed the unity that we are desperately needing. I appreciate your candor and blunt approach - but it IS possible to choose words carefully. It's something I have to do every single time I open my mouth. Unite us, Mr. Trump. Do that - and you have my vote. #DonaldTrump. Maybe!!!! Chonda Pierce²⁵⁸

For Pierce, Trump's salvation status provided both reason to worry about his leadership skills and leeway to dismiss his rough edges. When a 2005 recording was made public depicting Trump telling Access Hollywood anchor Billy Bush that his fame permits him to kiss and grab women without their consent, Pierce noted that she found Trump's crude words "sickening" but asked her followers to "consider the source. Are they Christ followers? Probably not. We're [sic] they expecting their words to be replayed over and over years from now? I doubt it.... When sin is present there is an absence of any moral compass...."²⁵⁹ In November of 2016, Pierce appeared on a "Trump Tower Live" Facebook stream where she touted Trump as the only reasonable choice for conservative Christians, despite his moral "gray areas." When her interviewer asked her about what got Pierce and her fellow evangelicals "excited" about voting for Trump, Pierce spoke more to evangelicals' antipathy for Democrats than their enthusiasm for Trump:

It blows my mind that the people who call themselves Christ followers are struggling with this decision. I don't understand that.... [T]here are some principles and precepts in God's word—and as a born-again Christian I must adhere to—that are in direct conflict with what's on the Democratic

²⁵⁸ Chonda Pierce, 2016, "An Open Letter to Donald Trump," Facebook, March 12, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/58637741315/posts/10153355610716316>.

²⁵⁹ Chonda Pierce, 2016, "Words are powerful," Facebook, October 9, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/58637741315/posts/10153843994781316>.

ticket right now. And I don't understand why there's a dilemma—I just really don't. Sometimes, life is a lot of gray areas, and there are a lot of gray areas with Donald Trump. Some of his verbiage, the things that he said many, many years ago—honey, if I was held responsible for things that I said through college, I wouldn't have a career right now. So, there are just moments and just times there are gray areas we have to weed through. But then there's just the black and white, the right and wrong, the good and the bad, and you have to focus on that. And you let some of people's personal mistakes or their failures or their fallings, you just let that go aside, as I pray God does that with me every day.²⁶⁰

In her open letters to Trump and her commentary about him, Pierce addressed the man—who is more than a decade her senior—as if he were a wayward but beloved son. She chided him for his impetuosity at the same time as she decried others' unwillingness to give him a fair chance. She even noted that “if” Trump made it to Heaven, she expected that Moses would help him fix the part in his hair.

By the time Pierce was invited to perform for Trump's inauguration in January of 2017, that “if” had turned to “when.” Using most of her set to joke about her time visiting American troops in Iraq alongside Dallas Cowboys cheerleaders, she lamented in a post-performance interview that she had forgotten to exploit her license to “pick on Donald Trump.”²⁶¹ She would soon have a chance to remedy the oversight. Tapped as a member of a faith coalition invited to the White House several times a month to be “debriefed by different Cabinet members,” Pierce was asked to speak at Trump's 2018 dinner for top evangelical leaders.²⁶² After joking that coming out as a Trump supporter (“not gay—I just came out as a follower of Donald Trump”) had gained her more fans than it had cost her, Pierce reframed her old joke: “When you get to

²⁶⁰ Chonda Pierce, 2016, “In case you missed it...” Facebook, November 1, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=10153905899831316>.

²⁶¹ *Chonda Pierce: Enough*, directed by Rick Altizer (Fuseic Entertainment, 2017) 43:17, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PO6tNQ8mvEs>.

²⁶² Altizer, *Chonda Pierce: Unashamed*, 38:43.

Heaven—and you *will* be there with all of us—Moses will part your hair where he wants it to be parted.”²⁶³ Pierce celebrated Trump’s 2020 announcement that he was no longer a Presbyterian, but a non-denominational Christian, posting on Facebook, “This is so good.. he rarely talks detailing his faith. But hey, me and the President “identify” as Non-Denominational’s !! [sic] LOL!!!”²⁶⁴ Throughout Trump’s presidency, Pierce reposted articles praising Trump for his championing of evangelical causes. By the time Trump was campaigning for a second term, Pierce’s initial ambivalence about Trump was all but forgotten. In a 2019 Facebook post advertising her upcoming appearance at a Pennsylvania Women for Trump event, Pierce wrote, “It’s been no secret that I have been ALL IN for President Trump from the beginning. And there’s been no reason to slow down now!! Our conservative agenda is at risk and he has done more for the equality, promotion and support of Women than anyone in office - EVER.”²⁶⁵

How did Pierce become such an ardent supporter of Donald Trump? Postmortems of evangelical support for the man who famously refused to admit that he has ever asked God’s forgiveness have identified a variety of possible explanations for the union, ranging from authoritarian impulse to sexism to racial animus. Anthea Butler’s assessment that evangelicalism is “a nationalistic political movement whose purpose is to support the hegemony of white Christian men over and against the flourishing of others” dovetails with political scientists’ findings that sexism and racial resentment—rather than political party, religious affiliation, race, age, region, education level, or income—were the primary predictors of voters choosing Donald

²⁶³ Altizer, *Chonda Pierce: Unashamed*, 40:48.

²⁶⁴ Chonda Pierce, 2020, “Please take the time to read this...” Facebook, October 26, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/58637741315/posts/10157456675531316>.

²⁶⁵ Chonda Pierce, 2019, “ATTENTION LADIES,” Facebook, July 11, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/58637741315/posts/10156224930676316>.

Trump at the ballot box.²⁶⁶ Indeed, anti-immigrant sentiment is a common refrain in Pierce’s public writing, with Pierce routinely decrying “illegal” immigrants and connecting them with danger and national decline. One viral Facebook post Pierce copied to her own page read, “We cry for illegal immigrants FORCING their way into our country, but NOT ONE mainstream media channel would broadcast the funeral of a slain officer MURDERED IN COLD BLOOD by an ILLEGAL immigrant.”²⁶⁷ Pierce also rejected claims that a Trump-approved ad about a coming “invasion” of 7,000 Mexican migrants was racist, writing on Facebook, “Suddenly standing up for the ‘right way’ is racist!?”²⁶⁸ Pierce has also argued that there is an “agenda” being carried out by Muslims seeking public office.²⁶⁹ For Pierce, Trump was the candidate willing to defend American interests—interests that included the conservation of “traditional” values and the limiting of others’ opportunity to seek asylum in the United States.

Pierce’s relationship to the struggle of Black Americans presents a slightly more complicated story. Her close friendships with fellow Christian comedians Jason Earls and Vernard “Bone” Hampton lead her analysis of race, faith, and nationhood to deviate slightly from the party line. After the 2020 murder of Minneapolis resident George Floyd by a police

²⁶⁶ Anthea Butler, *White Evangelical Racism: The Politics of Morality in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 138. See also Mark Setzler and Alixandra B. Yanus, “Why Did Women Vote for Donald Trump?” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 51, no. 3 (2018): 523-527.

²⁶⁷ Chonda Pierce, 2019, “Got any ideas??” Facebook, January 22, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/58637741315/posts/10155866064301316>.

²⁶⁸ Chonda Pierce, 2018, “There is a right way and wrong way to do things,” Facebook, November 5, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/58637741315/posts/10154568073891316>.

²⁶⁹ Chonda Pierce, 2018, “This is REAL... and there IS an agenda,” Facebook, April 19, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/58637741315/posts/10155299797406316>. Pierce’s post included a link to an article from the website counterjihadreport.com, which has since been made private. The article, available via the Wayback Machine, ends with the following exhortation: “This is why there was only one issue in the 2016 presidential election and there remains only one issue today: immigration. Without a dramatic shift, a halt to Muslim immigration, and a return of tens of thousands of so-called Muslim refugees – the demographics in America will be forever changed. They will never be reversed and it will only be a matter of time until what has happened in dozens of countries in the world will happen here. The long game does not bode well for non-Muslims.” Creeping Sharia, “More than 90 Muslims, nearly all Democrats, running for public office across the U.S.” *The Counter Jihad Report*, April 17, 2018, accessed February 18, 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20180423142456/https://counterjihadreport.com/2018/04/18/more-than-90-muslims-nearly-all-democrats-running-for-public-office-across-the-u-s/>.

officer, Pierce described his killer, Derek Chauvin, as a “despicable picture of evil and hate” and warned her Facebook followers, “I will NOT respond or argue with any of you about the perils of the inner city. The sacred shield of cops. I will not discuss black on black crime. The victims height, weight or demeanor. THIS IS WRONG - pure and simple.”²⁷⁰ Pierce framed her disgust over the crime in the context of her love for her (figuratively) adopted son, fellow comedian Bone Hampton. She wrote,

...you see, I have another son. I didn’t give birth to him. But he is no less MY SON. For over 25 years this young courageous man of God has blessed this white momma tremendously. When my boys are laughing around the house, poking at their mom, eating food faster than I can cook. My heart is full of joy. One is white. One is black. Which one do you think runs the risk of being dragged out of their car? Beaten. Treated like a criminal BEFORE a trial. Which one would you say has a risk of not getting a smile from a stranger walking down a side walk? Which one do you think suffers most simply because of ONE insignificant feature - the color of his skin?²⁷¹

Pierce recognizes the daily indignities faced by Black Americans from both powerful institutions and individuals, but describes the problem was one of individual hate rather than systemic oppression. Her post decried that Chauvin was allowed to remain on the force despite a “history of excessive force” and identified the problem as Chauvin’s inability to be “color blind.” In another post about the scourge of racial animus in the nation, Pierce concluded, “May we continue to teach our children there is no skin color - we are all just children needing a hug.”²⁷²

²⁷⁰ Chonda Pierce, 2020, “WARNING. Picture of HATE,” Facebook, May 28, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/58637741315/posts/10157094925911316>.

²⁷¹ Ibid.

²⁷² Chonda Pierce, 2017, “I’m headed to NYC,” Facebook, August 13, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/58637741315/posts/10154693877596316>.

Despite her individualistic understanding of racism, Pierce's response to Floyd's murder raised the ire of some of her loyal followers—especially when she shared a video from fellow comedian Jason Earls condemning statements made by Candace Owens, a Black conservative commentator. Owens—with whom Pierce shares many personal and professional connections—had called Floyd a criminal and said that Black Americans were the “only community that caters to the bottom denominator of our society.”²⁷³ In the video Pierce shared, Earls said Owens's statement “totally contradicts this gospel that we believe in.”²⁷⁴ Pierce promoted Earls's rebuttal as an exemplar of “biblical perspective and respectfully disagreeing,” describing him as both the Christian Comedy Association's president and their “‘pastor’ of sorts.”²⁷⁵ The blowback was immediate and fierce. Pierce's post—to say nothing of the vitriol in Earls's comment section—accumulated over one thousand comments, most of which expressed anger and betrayal at Pierce's stance:

This is probably the first time I've disagreed with you, Chonda. You are completely off on this one.²⁷⁶

Chandra I'm very disappointed in this post! It's not about peace and taking responsibility! Candace Owens has more truth and honesty than this yahoo your [sic] promoting in her little finger! Certainly more God! This saddens me very much!²⁷⁷

If you have a problem with Candace Owens and what she is saying, you ARE part of the problem²⁷⁸

²⁷³ Candace Owens, 2020, “Confession,” Twitter, June 3, 2020, <https://twitter.com/RealCandaceO/status/1268280610818101248>.

²⁷⁴ Jason Earls, 2020, “My Response to Candace Owens...” Facebook, June 7, 2020, https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch_permalink&v=544723362874394.

²⁷⁵ Chonda Pierce, 2020, “This will be my last post on this subject,” Facebook, June 8, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/58637741315/posts/10157125365211316>.

²⁷⁶ Bee Hawk, comment on Chonda Pierce, 2020, “This will be my last post on this subject,” Facebook, June 8, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/58637741315/posts/10157125365211316>.

²⁷⁷ Jacquelyn Hudson, comment on Chonda Pierce, 2020, “This will be my last post on this subject,” Facebook, June 8, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/58637741315/posts/10157125365211316>.

²⁷⁸ Jo Echement, comment on Chonda Pierce, 2020, “This will be my last post on this subject,” Facebook, June 8, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/58637741315/posts/10157125365211316>.

I love you Chonda but I think all of Candace's video have been spot on.²⁷⁹

I have heard Candace Owens testimony she has been on Thomas Road Church and if by any means you are trying to damage that you are out of order !! I will not have this on my FB page !²⁸⁰

I disagree with Jason. His initial response to Candace is basically the response I had to him. I feel he twisted many of the things she said & presented them his own way. This struck me right away. I listened to his whole narrative. His touching on her being attractive and hinting that that would persuade people bothered me. I am a female & I feel that she often looks "unkempt." So this point to me is irrelevant.²⁸¹

Unfortunately, he misquoted Candace to suit his narrative and when people do that I mistrust them. He said she was using trickery, so was he.²⁸²

I still stand with Candace on this. When she speaks of the least common denominator she isn't suggesting we not love the poor or criminal and help them she is saying they aren't role models to be lifted up. He is purposefully misunderstanding her or he's not bright. Either way he's off base.²⁸³

I love Candace Owens. She tells it like it is.²⁸⁴

Chonda, I'm forever going to be a ride or die with you. On this topic, he used scripture out of context to correct what she said, and she DID NOT say anything wrong. It's a misstep on his part and he needs to own it, and carry on.²⁸⁵

Candice [sic] is a truth teller! Is hard for some to hear the truth because it doesn't fit their narrative.²⁸⁶

²⁷⁹ Michelle Cartagena, comment on Chonda Pierce, 2020, "This will be my last post on this subject," *Facebook*, June 8, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/58637741315/posts/10157125365211316>.

²⁸⁰ Patsy Graves, comment on Chonda Pierce, 2020, "This will be my last post on this subject," *Facebook*, June 8, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/58637741315/posts/10157125365211316>.

²⁸¹ Carol Weill, comment on Chonda Pierce, 2020, "This will be my last post on this subject," *Facebook*, June 8, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/58637741315/posts/10157125365211316>.

²⁸² Debbie Downer Heitke, comment on Chonda Pierce, 2020, "This will be my last post on this subject," *Facebook*, June 8, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/58637741315/posts/10157125365211316>.

²⁸³ Kay Baker Chandler, comment on Chonda Pierce, 2020, "This will be my last post on this subject," *Facebook*, June 8, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/58637741315/posts/10157125365211316>.

²⁸⁴ Karla Ruder Anderson, comment on Chonda Pierce, 2020, "This will be my last post on this subject," *Facebook*, June 8, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/58637741315/posts/10157125365211316>.

²⁸⁵ Nona McCarthy, comment on Chonda Pierce, 2020, "This will be my last post on this subject," *Facebook*, June 8, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/58637741315/posts/10157125365211316>.

²⁸⁶ Melissa Black, comment on Chonda Pierce, 2020, "This will be my last post on this subject," *Facebook*, June 8, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/58637741315/posts/10157125365211316>.

Pierce liked some of these comments—including assertions that “Candace is a great person” and “I love Candace Owens. She tells it like it is.” She also walked back her wholehearted support for Earls’s perspective, noting in the comments section that she had “no problem at all” with Owens and that her desire was simply to “hear ALL sides.”

Also obscuring Pierce’s overall message was her post’s exhortation to readers to “forget that it’s a lot about Candace Owen. Forget that [Earls] has black skin.” While Pierce may have intended this statement to serve as a symbol of her “neutrality” on the subject of racial justice, her desire to “forget” Earls’s Blackness is an example of what Anthea Butler has called the “color-blind gospel” whose “rejection” of color ultimately makes “white...the default color.”²⁸⁷ Indeed, Pierce’s individual friendships with Black men and women might introduce her to perspectives on racial justice that differ from white conservatives’, but they do not mean that Pierce understands racism as a structural *and* individual problem, requiring both structural *and* individual change. In this sense, her own racial politics seem to reflect what political scientists have called “racial resentment”—a form of prejudice “expressed in the language of individualism.”²⁸⁸ This form of racism is especially potent among American evangelicals for the very fact of its insistence on individual solutions to corporate problems. Many white evangelicals that acknowledge the existence of racism identify it as a personal sin of which one must be absolved, rather than a sentiment that poisons individual hearts at the same time as it bakes inequality into broader systems and institutions. Thus, while Pierce would likely agree that racism is bad—and even occasionally step out of party line to decry racism among rightwing

²⁸⁷ Butler, *White Evangelical Racism*, 58.

²⁸⁸ Donald R. Kinder and Lynn M. Sanders, *Divided by Color: Racial Politics and Democratic Ideals* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 105-106. See also Stanley Feldman and Leonie Huddy, “Racial Resentment and White Opposition to Race-Conscious Programs: Principles or Prejudice?” *American Journal of Political Science* 49, no. 1 (2004): 168-183.

pundits—her “color-blind” approach to race does not conflict with the policies and rhetoric of the Trump administration.

Pierce’s attitude about women’s rights and LGBTQ civil rights mirrors her “both sides” approach to the problem of racism. While Pierce recognizes that her Black friends still experience racism “from time to time” and has acknowledged that violence against women does happen, she presents these as discrete events of personal prejudice or animus, rather than systemic issues.²⁸⁹ Those looking to change laws and policies, on the other hand, are painted opportunists not looking for equality but for special privileges. In a post linking a Fox News article by conservative commentator Michael Knowles, Pierce quoted,

In this inverted culture, pride is transformed from the essential vice into the paragon of virtue, the celebrated object of parades.... Racial and sexual bigotry becomes tolerance. Justice, which means to get what one deserves without favor, is replaced with “social justice,” which means to receive through favoritism what one does not deserve.²⁹⁰

So, too, does Pierce suggest that LGBTQ Americans are seeking not equality, but cultural dominance, comparing the “loud, more often obnoxious” LGBTQ community in the US unfavorably against those suffering violence “in many countries (most often Muslim countries)...because of who they love.”²⁹¹ Pierce employs a similar equation against women seeking reproductive rights, writing in a Facebook post, “I’m not fighting your ‘rights’ - I’m

²⁸⁹ Chonda Pierce, 2019, “I remember very well the night Martin Luther King was killed,” Facebook, January 21, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/58637741315/posts/10155864037701316>. See also Chonda Pierce, 2018, “Powerful. I love you, Beth!” Facebook, May 3, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/58637741315/posts/10155328108486316>.

²⁹⁰ Chonda Pierce, 2019, “This is a powerful read and a sad truth,” Facebook, January 22, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/58637741315/posts/10155865638361316>.

²⁹¹ Chonda Pierce, 2019, “I get blasted from many of you,” Facebook, February 20, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/58637741315/posts/10155923211371316>.

simply standing up for those whose rights were crushed in the womb.”²⁹² Besides her assertions that she stands for the rights of the unborn over the supposed “rights” of women to reproductive freedom, Pierce speaks little of how political issues affect women. Instead, she jokes about being one.

Importantly, Pierce’s downplaying of her gender marginalization dovetails with her cultural performance as the “average” American citizen. As Alexander has argued, moral agonism is an essential component of successful social performance. The story of a common enemy helps simplify the narrative of a social performance at the same time as it offers an overarching meaning or purpose through which others can make sense of the disparate elements of their lives. But key to this process—if the performance is to be successful—is the performer’s ability to mask their social power. In her online activism, Pierce performs the role of the American citizen whose identity markers are the presumed default: she is white, American-born, heterosexual, cisgender, able-bodied, Christian, and a native English speaker. Despite the reality that many of these descriptors do not reflect the “average” American’s identity, Pierce benefits from the social power of her own characteristics being endorsed as unquestionably American by systems of power. Moreover, the concept of these identities as being the most truly “American” is so deeply ingrained among many in her audience that her social powers successfully “manifest themselves not as external or hegemonic forces that facilitate or oppose the unfolding performance but merely as...means of representation.”²⁹³ Pierce does not need to comment on the supremacy or correctness of her whiteness, her heterosexuality, her status as an American citizen. Instead, these qualities quietly signify her ability to comment on “deviations” from the

²⁹² Chonda Pierce, 2020, “Historical moment...” Facebook, January 24, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/58637741315/posts/10156705294371316>.

²⁹³ Alexander, “Cultural Pragmatics,” 56.

norm. Those who have no choice but to address the facts of their marginalization become “obnoxious,” unwilling to “forget” that they are Black, or gay, or transgender, and accept their current place in the social order. Having successfully masked the fact of her own social power, Pierce assists others in the re-fusion of the disparate elements of her followers’ lives by focusing on the threat of supposedly fringe groups whose needs and experiences do not reflect the imagined ideal American—an ideal her followers are encouraged to embrace as reflective of their own belonging.

Permission to Speak: The Crisis of a Woman on Stage

The irony of Pierce’s conservative theology is that her very career teeters on the edge of acceptability for women in the American evangelical church. Pierce has been invited to perform comedy at several churches helmed by celebrity pastors—including World Outreach Church’s Allen Jackson and Cornerstone Church’s John Hagee—that do not permit women to serve as pastors or elders in their own ministries. As Beth Allison Barr’s *The Making of Biblical Womanhood* details, many contemporary American evangelical churches struggle with how exactly to determine whether a woman’s “teaching” in various contexts flouts 1 Timothy 2’s injunction that women not “teach or have authority over a man.”²⁹⁴ Pierce—as something of a solitary figure amidst the heavily male-dominated landscape of evangelical comedy—occupies the pulpit as a “performer,” yet offers an hour-long “talk” that she scripted herself. The very possibility of a spontaneous comedic riff indicates the potential “danger” of allowing a woman comedian onto the church stage—when does speaking become teaching or preaching?

²⁹⁴ Beth Allison Barr, *The Making of Biblical Womanhood: How the Subjugation of Women Became Gospel Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2021).

In her exploration of conservative Christian women's roles and limitations in ministry, Kate Bowler notes that female Christian performers, counselors, and comedians exercise "a fickle kind of authority"—one characterized by itinerancy (since such women cannot lead their own megachurches, but rather book speaking tours through them) and earned by "turning her insides out."²⁹⁵ Pierce uses nearly identical words to describe her experience of performing for her target audience. In her 2015 documentary *Laughing in the Dark*, Pierce says, "I stand in front of thousands of women each night and open up my life to them. I share about my pain, my depression, the struggles in my own life—with a few jokes thrown in here and there." Throughout the documentary, viewers see footage of Pierce greeting crying fans, including one who tells her, "You told my story up there."²⁹⁶ Pierce has made a career of turning her pain into humor for others' consumption, but she remains ambivalent about what she gains and loses through that performance. In one standup performance she jokes about how often she is praised for her bravery and authenticity, replying, "I'm not trying to be authentic; I'm lonely! I've got to tell somebody my troubles!" Indeed, Pierce routinely responds to fans that she needed the medicine of their laughter as much as they needed the catharsis of her telling their story. And yet, Pierce also identifies the darker side of using pain as fodder for comedy. In an interview for *Laughing in the Dark*, Pierce jokes about wanting to toilet paper the yard of the manager who told her that her kids would bounce back from her longterm absences from the home, when ultimately her daughter chose to cut off contact with her. When her off-screen interviewer noted that she seemed to be using humor to discuss such a serious issue, Pierce replied, "To deflect my

²⁹⁵ Kate Bowler, *The Preacher's Wife: The Precarious Power of Evangelical Women Celebrities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 115, 187.

²⁹⁶ Altizer, *Laughing in the Dark*.

pain. That’s what comedians do. And you buy a ticket to watch it. Is this is a sick world or what?”²⁹⁷

While Pierce is aware of the drawbacks of using comedy as a bandaid for her pain, the impact of her career on her audience has been her ability to share her pain—fully and unapologetically—without losing sight of the optimism humor provides. Even in her darkest moments, Pierce helps others find a reason to laugh. In many ways, this performance mirrors that of evangelical pastors, who often use anecdotes from their own lives as illustrations of broader themes in scripture. Evangelical apologist Douglas Groothuis has called this “good emptiness”—the ability of pastors to lean on God’s strength in order to pour their energy into the congregation.²⁹⁸ Some evangelical pastors even explicitly recommend the use of humor—“especially self deprecating humor”—as a way of making creative connections between subjects and keeping the congregation’s attention.²⁹⁹ Between Pierce’s tendency to perform at Baptist megachurches and her typical ending of a standup routine by saying a prayer or singing a gospel song, one would be hard-pressed to describe exactly how Pierce’s performance at the pulpit differs from that of a guest pastor’s.

For Bowler, the difference between female performers and “teachers” in the church and male “preachers” comes from the former’s symbolic submission to the headship of men. Even as female performers stand at the pulpit and bare their souls, theologize about the character of God, and “usher in the unmediated presence of the divine,” Bowler argues, these conservative Christian women are subject to the authority of male headship in the form of managers, event

²⁹⁷ Altizer, *Laughing in the Dark*.

²⁹⁸ Douglas Groothuis, “Fatigue in Ministry: Good and Bad Emptiness,” *Focus on the Family*, April 26, 2021, <https://www.focusonthefamily.com/church/fatigue-in-ministry/>.

²⁹⁹ L. Roy Taylor, “Using Humor in Preaching,” *National Association of Evangelicals*, Accessed March 2, 2022, <https://www.nae.org/using-humor-in-preaching/>. See also Ted Cunningham, “Adding Humor to Your Sermons,” *Focus on the Family*, August 1, 2018, <https://www.focusonthefamily.com/church/adding-humor-to-your-sermons/>.

coordinators, and even bookstore owners who act as gatekeepers of acceptable female performances.³⁰⁰ Bowler theorizes that women are able to achieve power in evangelical spheres by bringing into their performances a moment of acknowledgment “that the woman herself was subject to an invisible spiritual hierarchy of men,” often by emphasizing their role as shepherds of the congregation’s emotional experience and highlighting the pastor’s continued domain over issues of rationality and doctrine.³⁰¹ Even after his death, Pierce never fails to mention her husband during a comedy set, and even if she pokes fun at him, she ends with sincere remarks about his love, care, and value. In one of her earliest recorded comedy sets, her 1998 *Chonda Pierce: Having a Girls’ Nite Out*, Pierce jokes that she is lucky to have a husband that supports her work, stays at home, and packs her suitcase. But after her audience’s riotous laughter at their relationship’s topsy-turvy gender roles, Pierce says, “He is the important one in my life. He’s the spiritual leader of my home, and he is so important.”³⁰²

And yet, the question remains to what extent the audience—or, indeed, the performer—“feels” the invisible hand of male authority in the moment of performance, while the woman commands the megachurch stage by herself. While Pierce does routinely invoke her husband—or, later, her status as a widow—she blends humorous commentary with original music and prayer without making any reference to the authorities permitting her presence. If Pierce’s ability to perform at certain churches is dependent on the approval of presiding pastors or church event managers, that oversight is no different—and likely no more palpable—than it is when male performers are invited to take the stage. Instead of the specter of male authority hovering over

³⁰⁰ Ibid, 152.

³⁰¹ Bowler, *The Preacher’s Wife*, 152.

³⁰² *Chonda Pierce: Having a Girls’ Nite Out*, directed by Stan Moore (1998: Burlington, KY, Moore Productions), DVD.

Pierce's words, I argue that Pierce manages evangelical gender anxieties by cutting out the men altogether.

In nearly every single comedy set, Pierce performatively rejects the presence of men in her audience. From her earliest comedy videos, Pierce has positioned herself as a woman's comedian, telling men to "go on home" and inviting her female audience to "let our children stay at home with our Promise Keepers."³⁰³ She routinely calls out the few men she can see in the audience, both chiding them for showing up unwanted ("I never invite men to my shows. I don't know why you're here.") and teasing them for their interest in a women-centric event ("Did you know this was a concert that said *Girl Talk*"?).³⁰⁴ Even Pierce's written work preemptively brackets men out of her potential audience: the cover page of her workbook companion to her 2019 documentary *Unashamed* delineates that it is meant to be used "for women's small group or personal study." Yet, Pierce's later documentaries make a point of showcasing men praising her comedy for its cross-gender appeal. In a montage of Pierce greeting fans in her 2015 movie *Laughing in the Dark*, a middle aged man looks into the camera and mentions he has seen her perform before, adding, "Guys think she's funny!" By explicitly aiming her content at women, Pierce is able to welcome men's praise as an unintended byproduct of her real work—ministering to women.

In this way, Pierce employs the same fishbowl effect used by the men of *Date Night Comedy* to cordon off women. Routinely speaking directly to the women in the audience, Pierce not only creates the sense that men are looking in on a private conversation, but she openly tells them that they are not welcome. An effect of this choice is that Pierce cannot be accused of

³⁰³ Moore, *Chonda Pierce: Having a Girls' Nite Out*.

³⁰⁴ Altizer, *Unashamed*. See also *Chonda Pierce: Girl Talk*, directed by Tom Forrest and Rick Altizer (2013, Nashville, TN: Taillight TV), 1:16:00, Amazon Prime Video. <https://www.amazon.com/Chonda-Pierce-Girl-Talk/dp/B00H8CRWU4>.

attempting to preach to—or even entertain—adult men. Instead, men’s attendance at her shows and entertainment therein is incidental to her main purpose.

So too does Pierce capitalize on what Stephanie Martin has called evangelicals’ “rhetoric of active-passivism,” a narrative form that highlights individuals’ limited sphere of action and thus allows evangelicals to “divest themselves of...agency.”³⁰⁵ This strategy is part of what allows Pierce to speak from the pulpit at megachurches that forbid women preachers—she can claim that men attend the event out of their own agency and despite her own protestations that the event is for women only. Pierce relies on stereotypes of femininity as weak and ineffectual in a variety of ways. By belittling herself with labels like “crazy,” “menopausal,” and “wacky,” Pierce transcends evangelical limitations on women’s teaching by performatively embracing that limited sphere. Even when sharing the story of telling off a fellow church lady for saying something rude about homeless people, Pierce couches her insight in self-deprecation. “It’s not me trying to preach at somebody; I don’t care. But sometimes when I’m tired, I just say what I think,” Pierce tells her audience. “That’s why I have to stay close to the Lord, because sometimes I say things that only the carnal nature of man would say.”³⁰⁶

Pierce’s insights and spiritual journey evinced by painful life events are perhaps all the more impactful on her audiences *because* she continually reinforces her status as a flawed and undeserving woman. She routinely highlights her personal limitations as evidence of God’s goodness and forgiveness. And yet, in the rhetorical style of active-passivism, Pierce employs her humor toward embracing things-as-they-are. Even as Pierce reflects on the role she might have played in her estrangement from her daughter, for example, she rhetorically distances

³⁰⁵ Stephanie A. Martin, “Resisting a Rhetoric of Active-Passivism: How Evangelical Women Have Enacted New Modes and Meanings of Citizenship in Response to the Election of Donald Trump,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 104, v. 3 (2020): 316-324, 318.

³⁰⁶ Sams, *Chonda Pierce: Did I Say That Out Loud?*

herself from the blame: “she walked out and chose not to have us active in her life.” Just as Martin identifies active-passivism as a rhetorical strategy for American evangelicals’ engagement in politics—allowing them to “substitute theological trust in place of democratic responsibility”—so too does Pierce defer ultimate responsibility for mending that relationship to God by declaring, “She moved forward and left me behind. And that’s okay. And God’ll figure it all out, in his time, in his way.”³⁰⁷ ³⁰⁸ If Pierce’s gender allows her to highlight God’s favor and provision by raising her up despite her perceived failures as a mother and wife, her status as a comedian is what gets her in the door to speak to mixed-gender audiences from the church’s main stage, making meaning of her life experiences in a manner almost indistinguishable from preaching.

Conclusion

At the beginning of her 2015 comedy special *Laughing in the Dark*, Chonda Pierce recites a quote from Lucille Ball, one of her favorite comedians: “I’m not funny. What I am is brave.” In a voiceover depicting Pierce taking the stage at various churches packed with women and men eager to hear her perform, Pierce says, “We laugh together, we cry together. We’re telling each other stories. We’re sharing the same life. I don’t know if that makes me brave, but I do know it makes me blessed. Blessed to be part of a sisterhood, a movement, a congregation.”³⁰⁹ If Chonda Pierce’s stand up comedy illustrates the tendency for evangelical comedians to reinforce their subculture’s status quo, it also suggests that that “status quo” is contradictory, contested, and always in flux. Such is the tangled knot of identifying the

³⁰⁷ Martin, “Resisting a Rhetoric of Active-Passivism.”

³⁰⁸ Altizer, *Chonda Pierce: Laughing in the Dark*.

³⁰⁹ Ibid.

relationship between ritual and play: “play” can become ritualized and sacralized just as easily as ritual can “fail” to transmit performers’ intended messages. It is for this reason that Wilford has argued that contemporary evangelical performances of re-fusion must be undertaken over and over again. If there is a consistent narrative tying together the disparate threads of both the evangelical stand-up comedian’s life and the fragmented lives of their evangelical audience, it is a narrative of God’s sovereignty that allows them to simultaneously claim and divest themselves of responsibility as autonomous moral agents. If Spanx and home renovation savvy are optional features of womanhood and manhood, they are nevertheless markers of the limited range of options available to beings indelibly and immutably marked by their God-given gender—a range of options evangelical comedians do not seek to widen. But Pierce’s preoccupation with the cultural influence of the LGBTQ community, for example, highlights evangelical comedians’ implicit understanding that their audiences’ re-fusion must be continually reestablished and maintained. The evangelical comedian packages reminders of audience members’ fixed roles and moral boundaries within a performance designed to appear authentic and off-the-cuff.

In his vision statement as president of the Christian Comedy Association, where both Chonda Pierce and Jonnie W. also serve as board members, Jason Earls cites Daniel 1:20 as a guide for encouraging others working in the “business of funny.”³¹⁰ The verse describes God’s favor over Daniel as he was chosen to enter the king of Babylon’s service as a dream interpreter whose “wisdom and understanding” King Nebuchadnezzar found “ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom.”³¹¹ “There is something really sacred to me about a spotlight,” Pierce says in her 2015 documentary *Laughing in the Dark*. “If I talk, I have to tell the truth. And if I tell the truth, not everybody likes it.” If success as a standup comic in

³¹⁰ Christian Comedy Association, “Home Page,” accessed June 14, 2021, <https://cca10.wildapricot.org>.

³¹¹ From Daniel 1:20, New International Version.

general requires an alchemy of hard work, connections, talent, and luck, success as an evangelical standup comic also requires the comedian to bear the mantle of God's favor and take up the sacred work of being God's mouthpiece. The outcome—an audience transforming into a congregation united under shared purpose—is not inevitable, but to evangelical stand-up comedians, the goal is clear: use the sacred spotlight to point the audience to God.

In chapter four, I demonstrate how a different form of humor—web comics—can also point audiences to God, albeit a God narrowly defined by the exacting theology of its creator. In studying how the young earth creationist organization Answers in Genesis (AiG) employs web comics to reject the truth claims of evolutionists and secularists, I show how central oppositional humor is to AiG's cultivation of its consumer base. Through the stoking of oppositional resonances that amplify in-group identification on social, political, and theological grounds, AiG comics quickly and pithily mark their position and invite the faithful in.

Chapter 4

“Stop Mything the Boat”: Creationist Comics and Oppositional Identity in the Evangelical Marketplace

“[T]he Church is always only one generation away from extinction.”
-Ken Ham

“Today in science class I learned the Big Bang is real.... I just questioned the ‘facts’ of evolution and BLAM! You should’ve seen the explosion!”
-Dan Lietha

Ken Ham is coming for your children. Then again, so is Bill Nye the Science Guy. The two science communicators—one a former public school teacher in Australia-turned creation science evangelist, the other a mechanical engineer-turned children’s television personality—both recognize that the ideological battle for the legitimacy of evolution versus creation science will be won or lost through America’s next generation. “I say to the grownups, if you want to deny evolution and live in your world that’s completely inconsistent with everything we observe in the universe, that’s fine, but don’t make your kids do it, because we need them,” Nye exhorts in a YouTube video denouncing Creationism. “We need scientifically literate voters and taxpayers for the future.”³¹² For Ham, the CEO of evangelical creation science organization Answers in Genesis, who challenged Nye to a public debate following the release of Nye’s anti-Creationism video, the consequences of the ideological battle between creationists and evolutionists are even more dire than the future of America. In an article for an *Answers*

³¹² Big Think, “Bill Nye: Creationism is Not Appropriate for Children,” *YouTube* video, 2:32, August 23, 2012, <https://youtu.be/gHbYJfwFgOU>. For more on the Ham-Nye debate, see James Bielo, *Ark Encounter: The Making of a Creationist Theme Park* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 110-115. See also Benjamin L. Huskinson, *American Creationism, Creation Science, and Intelligent Design in the Evangelical Market* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020) and Denise Dávila, “When Discourses Collide: Creationism and Evolution in the Public Sphere,” *Cultural Studies of Science Education* 9 (2014): 877-884.

magazine series “Battle for Kids’ Minds,” Ham writes,

Christians must be ever vigilant. Every newborn must be taught the truth from scratch or else that soul could be completely lost. While statistics indicate that churches and Christian homes are failing to reach kids, God has given us all the resources we need to turn the tide! How long does it take to lose a culture, from a Christian perspective? Actually, it takes only one generation. The devil knows this, and of course God warns us about it. Adolf Hitler understood this when he said, “He alone, who owns the youth, gains the future!”³¹³

In their book *Already Compromised*, Ham and co-author Greg Hall expand on the wide-reaching consequences of failing to raise children with strong creationist beliefs.

We are at war. We are at war with weapons far greater than any bomb, missile, or gun. And these weapons are aimed at targets far more strategic than any building, land mass, or army, because “our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world” (Eph. 6:12; NIV). We are at war against thoughts, thoughts raised up against the knowledge of God. And these thoughts are aimed at the minds of our children.... It is spiritual warfare. There is a great deal at stake: our culture, our well-being, our way of life...but most importantly, the hearts and minds of our youth. It has been said that (from a human perspective) the Church is always only one generation away from extinction.³¹⁴

So, how do you win the hearts and minds of youth? For Ham’s Answers in Genesis (AiG)—the premier creation science organization in an increasingly consolidated market—the key is *resources*. Specifically, multimedia, innovative apologetics resources designed to give parents and teachers a variety of options for reaching—and persuading—the youth in their lives

³¹³ Ken Ham, “Gone in Only One Generation,” *Answers in Genesis*, January 1, 2013, <https://answersingenesis.org/culture/gone-in-only-one-generation/>.

³¹⁴ Ken Ham and Greg Hall, *Already Compromised: Christian Colleges Took a Test on the State of their Faith and the Final Exam is in* (Green Forest, AR: Master Books, 2011), 37.

of the truth of young earth creationism. One of the most versatile of these resources is a vast database of comics and cartoons designed to humorously and efficiently dismiss the claims of evolutionists and bolster the beliefs of creationists. These comics, included in everything from presentation slides to AiG's newly-minted homeschooling curriculum, not only deftly communicate a set of beliefs that resonate with evangelical markets, but specifically attract what are arguably that market's most important base: evangelical children. Most importantly, they succinctly and compellingly communicate the criteria for both orthodoxy and belonging to American evangelicalism's next generation.

This chapter analyzes AiG's body of comics with a focus on how the texts and images use humor to construct and communicate a fundamental opposition between young earth creationism, logic, and "true" Christianity, on the one hand, and evolution, delusion, debauchery, and separation from God on the other. In doing so, I join and expand on existing work identifying American creation science ministries as participants in an evangelical marketplace of ideas and products and as sites for antagonistic community formation. By exploring how Answers in Genesis uses humor to forge the affective, cognitive, and oppositional resonances necessary to cultivate identified consumers, I highlight humor as a key component of evangelical cultural products, especially those aimed at youth.

Creationism in the United States, Then and Now

As direct ideological descendants of Henry Morris and John Whitcomb's "fundamentalist orthodoxy" as laid out in their 1961 book *The Genesis Flood*, AiG posits that a literal reading of Genesis requires believers to base their scientific inquiry on historical evidence of what happened in the past, rather than on present-day scientific insight (e.g. radiometric dating) that

one uses to gain information about the past.³¹⁵ This “historical science” identifies the Christian God as the only being present to observe, test, and provide a “perfect eyewitness testimony” of the creation of the universe and thus argues that the Christian Bible—and especially God’s inerrant account of creation—is the only appropriate foundation on which to build scientific knowledge.³¹⁶ Thus, AiG claims that “true” scientific creationism necessitates belief in a young earth whose age is determined by calculations of dates offered in the book of Genesis, the literal and historical persons of Adam and Eve, a literal historical worldwide flood, and the co-existence of all creatures with Adam and Eve, including dinosaurs. Because AiG is by far the largest and most visible creationist organization in the United States, its definition of creationism has clouded the reality that creationism as a theological stance has a wide array of potential meanings.

This chapter draws on the impressive body of work on creationism in the United States, including Ronald Numbers’s thorough history of the rise of various creationist and intelligent design movements since the time of Darwin and James Bielo’s insightful ethnography of the AiG Ark Encounter attraction as a materialization of American religion. Benjamin Huskinson’s work on American creationism as a competing set of goods in a broader evangelical marketplace, too, serves as a potent reminder to be as specific as possible when delineating between the many varieties of creationist belief held by American Christians today. The label of “creationist” could equally refer to someone who believes in a billions of years old universe characterized by evolutionary processes that were set in motion by a creator god as it does an AiG-style

³¹⁵ Ronald L. Numbers, *The Creationists: The Evolution of Scientific Creationism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 299. Numbers’s book details how “flood geology” as popularized by Whitcomb and Morris influenced a variety of creationist groups in the United States and abroad.

³¹⁶ Jennifer Hall Rivera, “Is Historical Science Useful?” *Answers in Genesis*, July 16, 2021, accessed August 19, 2021, <https://answersingenesis.org/what-is-science/historical-science-useful/>.

creationist that believes the earth cannot be older than 6,000 years and that God created all earthly creatures within the span of one week, more or less in their current form. As Bielo notes, the sheer variability in poll results measuring Americans' beliefs about earth's origins demonstrates the spectrum of ways a believer might describe their own stance on the matter.

A 2019 Gallup poll found that 40 percent of Americans “believe in Creationism”—that is, 40 percent of Americans surveyed responded that they believe “God created human beings pretty much in their present form at one time within the last 10,000 years or so.”³¹⁷ The phrasing of this survey, however, provides no insight to the specifics of self-identified creationists' beliefs. A 2014 survey, the National Study of Religion & Human Origins (NSRHO), sought to obtain a more nuanced understanding of the spectrum of Americans' creationist beliefs by asking respondents about specific elements of young earth creationist beliefs, including whether they believe the biblical Adam and Eve were real, historical persons (25 percent of respondents affirmed this) and the biblical six days of creation were literal, 24-hour days (only 8 percent agreed).³¹⁸ As Bielo summarizes, the NSRHO indicates that about 8 percent of Americans “might visit the Creation Museum and Ark Encounter as committed adherents looking to be educated and edified,” while an additional 14 percent “might visit to earnestly examine their commitments.”³¹⁹ While the NSRHO offered important insight into Americans' varying levels of certainty about the timeline and specifics of creationism, the fact nevertheless remains that a significant portion of the American population (taking both the NSRHO and Gallup into account, somewhere between 25 percent and 40 percent of Americans) leans toward a young earth

³¹⁷ Megan Brenan, “40% of Americans Believe in Creationism,” *Gallup*, July 26, 2019, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/261680/americans-believe-creationism.aspx>.

³¹⁸ Jonathan Hill, “National Study of Religion & Human Origins,” *BioLogos*, 2014, accessed August 17, 2021, https://gallery.mailchimp.com/f65102f84ebd4b661e06bae96/files/dbb742d8-5074-4e54-8830-aaed366ceedd/nsrho_report.pdf.

³¹⁹ Bielo. *Ark Encounter*, 7.

creationist account of the earth's origins that diverges from scientific consensus around an earth whose development was guided by natural evolutionary processes over billions of years. As the NSRHO demonstrates, not all of that 25 to 40 percent of Americans would align perfectly with AiG orthodoxy, but that is precisely why AiG exists.

In this chapter, I use “creationism” as an umbrella term under which AiG undeniably falls, but, where necessary, I specify that AiG holds to a “young earth creationist” ethos that dismisses old earth creationism and intelligent design theories as false and dangerous compromises with secularism. Following Huskinson's lead, I employ the term “creation science” wherever possible in order to denote AiG's commitment to not just the theology of a creator god, but also to scientific inquiry grounded in and guided by their reading of the biblical account of earth's creation, including a belief in a historical worldwide flood.³²⁰ While this consideration of the varieties of American creationism might seem redundant in light of my focus on the avowedly young earth creationist organization Answers in Genesis, it is important to identify that the potential consumers of AiG materials and services, whose financial and ideological loyalty AiG courts, do not necessarily share AiG's exact vision of creation science orthodoxy. More than simply existing as a set of beliefs to affirm or deny, Bielo argues, “creationism must be lived.”³²¹ My interest is in how AiG uses humor to help its consumers embody creationism as an identity that exists in meaningful opposition to other, less rational and less savory belief systems.

Answers in Genesis, a History

Answers in Genesis (AiG) is the brainchild of Ken and Marilyn “Mally” Ham, a married couple with a passion for spreading the message of young earth creationism—the belief that the

³²⁰ Huskinson, *American Creationism*, 103.

³²¹ Bielo, *Ark Encounter*, 6.

earth was created by God in something close to its present form in six literal days approximately 6,000 years ago—to laypeople.³²² The pair began a public outreach ministry—including magazines, talks, and films—about creation science as a subsidiary of their local Baptist church, but were largely supporting the effort through family loans and their own savings. In 1987, the Hams felt “a calling from the Lord” to leave Australia for the United States in order to work with an established creationist ministry, the Institute for Creation Research (ICR).³²³ While their work with the ICR provided them with a wider platform, the Hams soon found that the ICR’s emphasis on research limited their scope. In 1993, the Hams and two ICR colleagues broke off from the ICR in order to found their own, outreach-focused ministry, initially called Creation Science Ministries. Within the year, they changed their name to Answers in Genesis—the title of their already-popular lecture series—in order to better reflect their emphasis on “the authority of all of Scripture—as well as about evangelism and equipping believers to build a biblical worldview.”³²⁴ Within the first few years of AiG’s operation, the team began looking for land—and funds—to establish a high-quality museum that could also serve as the organization’s headquarters.³²⁵

Savvy use of media was essential to AiG’s success from the beginning. Ken Ham’s radio program, *Answers*, was syndicated to hundreds of radio stations by the mid-2000s, and the organization’s website offered a sophisticated repository of articles, magazine archives, and

³²² I say “close to” its present form because AiG accepts what it calls the “strong geological and biblical support for the idea of Pangea, an original supercontinent.” The organization posits that the continents broke up into their present form during the course of 150 days of the Biblical flood in a process they call “catastrophic plate tectonics.” See Andrew Snelling and Bodie Hodge, “Did the Continents Split Apart in the Days of Peleg?” *Answers in Genesis*, July 4, 2014, <https://answersingenesis.org/geology/plate-tectonics/did-the-continents-split-apart-in-the-days-of-peleg/>.

³²³ “History,” *Answers in Genesis*, accessed August 12, 2021, <https://answersingenesis.org/about/history/>.

³²⁴ Ibid.

³²⁵ For more on the history of AiG’s founding and early years, see Benjamin Huskinson, “The Continuation of Creation Science and the Emergence of Intelligent Design,” in *American Creationism, Creation Science, and Intelligent Design in the Evangelical Market*, 69-103 (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

radio program streaming as early as 1999.³²⁶ Another key driver of traffic to the site was a growing collection of webcomics made by AiG’s staff cartoonist, Dan Lietha. Lietha was introduced to Ken Ham’s work when a woman at his church acquired the 12-cassette Answers in Genesis video series produced by Ken Ham and his AiG colleague Gary Parker. The series lit a fire in Lietha, who converted the VHS set to audio tapes and listened to them on repeat.³²⁷ It was while working as an artist for scratch-and-smell sticker and educational poster company Mello Smello that Lietha began drafting a young earth creation comic strip, CreationWise. For Lietha, the Mello Smello job was a fun opportunity that nevertheless represented his “cotton candy phase,” where he was producing “stuff that tastes good” but lacked the freedom to editorialize. CreationWise was a way to devote his skills to a project that had “nutritional value.”³²⁸ When Lietha had the chance to show his fledgling series to Ken Ham at a 1994 conference in Minnesota, Ham, too, saw the project’s value. Ham tapped Lietha to illustrate a children’s book called *A is for Adam*, depicting the events of Genesis for a young audience. By 1997, Lietha was hired as a full-time staff member at AiG, developing his comic series as a way to increase web traffic while also serving as an illustrator for AiG speaker slides and publications.

As the AiG staff grew, so did their vision. With the help of private donations and, later, city subsidies, county grants, and state tax incentives, AiG broke ground first on a 75,000 square foot Creation Museum and, later, a 43,000 square foot to-scale replica of Noah’s Ark.³²⁹ Both attractions are situated in northern Kentucky, a location AiG chose for its centrality—Ham and

³²⁶ “Home page.” *Answers in Genesis*, October 13, 1999. Accessed through *WayBack Machine* August 12, 2021, <http://web.archive.org/web/19991013034846/http://answersingenesis.org/>.

³²⁷ Dan Lietha, personal interview with author, August 6, 2021.

³²⁸ *Ibid.*

³²⁹ For an extended analysis of the controversies surrounding AiG’s funding, see James Bielo’s *Ark Encounter: The Making of a Creationist Theme Park* and Benjamin Huskinson’s *American Creationism, Creation Science, and Intelligent Design in the Evangelical Market*. See also Tom Loftus, “Ark Park Tax Incentives Worth Up to \$18M Approved,” *Louisville Courier Journal*, April 26, 2016, <https://www.courier-journal.com/story/news/politics/ky-governor/2016/04/26/ark-park-tax-incentives-worth-up-18m-approved/83540204/>.

the AiG website routinely note that about two-thirds of America's population reside within 650 miles of their headquarters.³³⁰ As Benjamin Huskinson has shown, the sheer scale of AiG's operation has not only helped to "squeeze out" smaller competitors, but has led to the consolidation of the creation science sector in favor of the biggest names in the creationist game—the biggest of which, by far, is AiG.³³¹ A young earth creationist juggernaut, in 2019 AiG pulled in a staggering 21.5 million dollars worth of donations and grants.³³² While the organization keeps an eye on increasing its offerings of in-person attractions, announcing in 2021 its plans to begin a 3-year fundraiser for a Tower of Babel replica, so, too, has AiG worked to adapt its multimedia offerings to a changing landscape of media consumption styles.³³³ From partnering with evangelical streaming service Pure Flix to serve as a host for about 80 of its videos to uploading their daily radio show to podcast streaming platforms, the AiG team has stretched to fill as many of the perceived needs of its young earth creationist market as possible.

Creationism and the American Marketplace

If AiG is selling cultural and ideological products, who makes up their potential market demographic? As a number of works on the Creation Museum and Ark Encounter attractions note, the physical venues themselves attract visitors with a variety of ideological orientations and agendas, from already-committed young earth creationists interested in growing their faith and/or educating their children via a hands-on experience to avowed skeptics interested in mocking the

³³⁰ "History," *Answers in Genesis*, accessed August 16, 2021, <https://answersingenesis.org/about/history/>. See also Ken Ham, "282 and Counting!" *Answers in Genesis*, August 9, 2011, <https://answersingenesis.org/blogs/ken-ham/2011/08/09/282-and-counting/>.

³³¹ Huskinson, *American Creationism*, 167.

³³² U.S. Department of the Treasury, Internal Revenue Service, "Form 990," (Washington, D.C., 2019), https://apps.irs.gov/pub/epostcard/cor/330596423_202006_990_2021052018154593.pdf.

³³³ Bryan Marshall, "Ark Encounter Celebrates 5 Year Anniversary," *Grant County News*, June 30, 2021, <https://www.grantky.com/content/ark-encounter-celebrates-5th-anniversary>.

beliefs materialized therein.³³⁴ Indeed, in his ethnography of the Ark Encounter’s creative team, James Bielo notes that the attraction was designed with committed creationists in mind “least of all”; it was skeptics and potential converts the team sought to cater to in their design decisions.³³⁵ But is the same true of the multimedia materials available on the AiG website and social media platforms? AiG’s focus on homeschooling tools, Sunday school lessons, and adult education materials suggests otherwise. I argue that, while AiG’s attractions might be geared toward convincing non-believers of the possibility and legitimacy of young earth creationism, their online materials—and their comics and illustrations specifically—do the important work of retaining the loyalty and shaping the beliefs of those who have already bought in to AiG’s orthodoxy. This chapter takes seriously Benjamin Huskinson’s argument that American creation science might best be considered through the lens of an evangelical market—that is, “a competitive environment in which ideas jostle for acceptance” among a broad swath of American Christians, some of whom self-identify as evangelical and others of whom participate in some kind of American civic faith that elevates Christianity as the desirable belief system in the United States.³³⁶ A market model not only precludes the necessity of pinpointing an exact definition of American evangelicalism (recognizing instead that the self-identified evangelical product might resonate in a marketplace including but beyond other self-identified evangelicals), but also centers the question of *how* an organization like AiG distinguishes itself as a desirable good in an oversaturated arena.

³³⁴ Bielo, *Ark Encounter*, 167. For works that survey online reviews from AiG attractions’ visitors, see Paul Thomas’s *Storytelling the Bible at the Creation Museum, Ark Encounter, and Museum of the Bible* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020) and Daniel J. Davis et al.’s “Consumer Identification and Oppositional Organizational Identities: A Study of the Creation Museum,” *International Journal of Organizational Theory & Behavior* 22, no. 3 (2019): 278-295.

³³⁵ Bielo, *Ark Encounter*, 88.

³³⁶ Huskinson, *American Creationism*, 17.

This chapter is not a reception study of AiG’s multimedia materials, although such would be an important addition to the matrix of scholarship around American creationism. Instead, I focus on how AiG’s image and text-based materials—specifically, their compendium of illustrations and comics—communicate messages designed to cultivate an oppositional consumer identity that has the power to both draw in and reinforce belonging among potential markets, especially self-identified evangelicals and committed young earth creationists. In doing so, I draw on the claim Daniel J. Davis et al. that organizations’ use of divisive language that “convey[s] collective grievances and hostility” against a constructed other is a key element in facilitating consumer “identification and cohesion.”³³⁷ Existing research, including Christian Smith’s foundational *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving*, argues that evangelicals’ self-understanding as a persecuted but faithful remnant against a distinctly *other* secular culture is central to the subculture’s identity and success.³³⁸ However, few works have considered how evangelical organizations marshal specific media toward communicating that message. I contend that comics, as self-contained and highly-legible missives that appeal to children and adults alike, are an important mechanism for communicating AiG’s oppositional identity to its humor community, and that the humor they employ in that media is anything but incidental to their message.

³³⁷ Davis et al., “Consumer Identification,” 278.

³³⁸ Christian Smith, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998). For more on the affective ramifications of American evangelicals’ cultivation of a sense of persecution, see Jason Bivins, *Religion of Fear: The Politics of Horror in Conservative Evangelicalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). For a history of Southern evangelicals’ sense of persecution and its political ramifications in the twentieth century, see Joe Creech, *Righteous Indignation: Religion and the Populist Revolution* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2006).

Opposition and Identity: The Importance of Humor

If American creationism can be seen as competing for buy-in in a broad and heterogeneous evangelical market, how do they attract and maintain their market share? In their reception study of visitors to the Creation Museum, Daniel J. Davis et al. identify three main resonance frames consumers identified in their descriptions of their visit: transformational experiences, interpretive bricolage, and oppositional scripts.³³⁹ While the deployment of adversarial resonances is certainly not unique to evangelical organizations—Davis et al. draw on significant existing research on how niche markets like beer-brewing and organic food use this frame—they nevertheless note the lack of theoretical work on both how organizations *communicate* an oppositional identity and how consumers *co-construct* that identity.³⁴⁰ Davis et al. make important headway in terms of establishing how some consumers of Answers in Genesis products profess their loyalty to the organization by framing it in opposition to “the evolutionistic [sic] ‘scientific’ community,” “public school science,” and the “secular” world.³⁴¹ While a full survey of AiG’s multimedia materials falls outside the scope of this chapter, I home in on their suite of comics and illustrations as a key site for constructing the adversarial frames that prime consumers’ oppositional resonances. The concept of oppositional scripts dovetails with David Feltmate’s theory that religious humor “forges group solidarity and allows humor to be used to exclude others.”³⁴² In this chapter I will demonstrate how such oppositional scripts help expand the landscape of possibilities regarding where and around what content humor communities can form.

³³⁹ Ibid, 286.

³⁴⁰ Ibid, 279.

³⁴¹ Ibid, 287-289.

³⁴² David Feltmate, *Drawn to the Gods: Religion and Humor in The Simpsons, South Park, and Family Guy* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 19.

While efforts to theorize the linguistic “rules” and cultural meanings of humor lead to a vast array of claims about what elements of humor are properly basic to the phenomenon, there is widespread agreement among theorists of humor that opposition is an integral component of humor across time and place. Both Victor Raskin’s Semantic Script Theory of Humor (SSTH) and Raskin and Salvatore Attardo’s General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) identify “script opposition” as a foundational element of any humorous text.³⁴³ For Raskin and Attardo, a script is any idea that can be said to be “typical”—that is, to evoke “well-established routines and common ways to do things and to go about activities.”³⁴⁴ Scripts can range in complexity from macro concepts like “library” to a library’s more granular elements, like “looking up a book” and “getting a library card.” Script *overlap* is a common component of human speech, one that is not necessarily bound to be humorous. The script of “library” and its component parts might lead into the story of a young person’s first week at university or a fictional story of a dystopian universe in which all basic goods must be acquired through libraries—an interesting concept, but not one that is necessarily funny. Script *opposition*, Attardo and Raskin argue, occurs when two scripts exist in a relationship of opposition that evokes universal binaries: real/unreal, good/bad, obscene/non-obscene, and high stature/low stature, among others. For example, one might conceive of a joke wherein the script of “library” (a public good that promotes literacy) overlaps with the script of a public ill—a heist library for would-be robbers that provides ski masks, lock picks, and weapons.

³⁴³ Salvatore Attardo, *Linguistic Theories of Humor* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1994), 226. Attardo and Victor Raskin developed the General Theory of Verbal Humor together as a direct descendant of Raskin’s Semantic Script Theory of Humor. See also Victor Raskin et al., “How to Understand and Assess a Theory: The Evolution of the SSTH into the GTVH and Now into the OTH,” *Journal of Literary Theory* 3, no. 2 (2009): 285-312.

³⁴⁴ Attardo, *Linguistic Theories of Humor*, 200.

Theorist of folklore and humor Elliott Oring refines Attardo and Raskin's concept of script opposition—one they admit is highly abstract—with his concept of humor as resulting from “appropriate incongruities” between scripts. Oring claims that script opposition is found in all kinds of non-humorous texts, and argues that humor occurs when the hearer/reader is able to identify an “appropriateness” to the opposition in a joke.³⁴⁵ Especially if the reader/hearer of a text is primed to see the target of the joke as an undesirable other, they are led to identify “points of connection between the incongruous categories” that, instead of resolving the incongruity between two frames, makes the incongruity *appropriate* in a “psychologically valid” way.³⁴⁶ For example, consider the following joke:

Q: How long does it take an evolutionist to change a lightbulb?

A: A few billion years.

The joke is incongruous on multiple registers. On the one hand, the script of “changing a lightbulb” or, more abstractly, of “simple task” is at odds with “billions of years.” But likely very few people would encounter this joke having zero background knowledge about the tradition of “change a lightbulb” jokes as signaling a group or individual's stupidity. Moreover, a young earth creationist encountering this joke in, say, a young earth creationist comic would see the term “evolutionist” and immediately expect that evolution and its proponents would be the target of the joke. While it is incongruous to claim that a simple task like changing a lightbulb could take billions of years, the incongruity is made “appropriate” on several registers—for example, it

³⁴⁵ Elliott Oring, “Parsing the Joke: The General Theory of Verbal Humor and Appropriate Incongruity,” *Humor* 24 no. 2 (2011): 203-222.

³⁴⁶ Elliott Oring, *Engaging Humor* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 2.

is equally absurd to imagine that *anything*, including the creation of the universe, could take billions of years, and evolutionists are the group who are foolish enough to believe that. On another level, people who are foolish enough to believe in evolution are probably foolish about other things, from the insignificant—like changing a lightbulb—to issues of ultimate significance like religion and philosophy.

Oring, Attardo, and Raskin have spent years debating whether what one might call the fundamental opposing script(s) in a joke are part and parcel of what the joke can be said to be “about.” I sympathize with Oring’s claim that no abstract formula can replace cultural analysis of not just the opposing scripts at play in a joke but also of “the role these concepts [play] in the culture and how the jokes frame and comment on these categories.”³⁴⁷ Thus, my interest in AiG’s comics is in both the opposing scripts mobilized in the texts and images *and* a consideration of how those scripts might be understood as “appropriately” incongruous by AiG’s consumers. These oppositions and their varied messages to AiG’s readers are not the genesis of consumers’ antagonistic relationship to evolutionists, secularists, and so-called “fake” Christians. Instead, they are an important part of an ongoing feedback loop in which consumers’ preexisting allegiances are fortified and legitimized by AiG media.

A Note on Comics

Given the panoply of humorous materials AiG offers to consumers—including snarky debates and presentations by AiG staff and goofy children’s videos made by AiG’s resident “paleo-artist” Buddy Davis, one might ask: why the focus on comics? For one, comics have been a perhaps surprisingly large component of AiG’s media output; they employed a cartoonist full-

³⁴⁷ Oring, “Parsing the Joke,” 219.

time for 22 years.³⁴⁸ Secondly, comics as a media form are particularly ripe for rhetorical analysis, but rarely receive the amount of attention by scholars that other forms of media do. The ability of comics to serve as stand-alone, fully “encapsulated” narratives lend them especially well to communicate crucial messages in a small package.³⁴⁹ By virtue of the constraints of the comic form to a single panel or strip of panels, comics are “reductive in creation and additive in reading”—that is, cartoonists use a few key visuals and words to transmit a message that the reader then “expands...into a story by a process called *closure*.”³⁵⁰ Thus, cartoonists often rely heavily on stereotypes and symbols that the reader can easily pick up on in their process of comprehending the overall message of a comic. This is especially true for an organization like AiG, where a single-panel comic might be the only piece of media and messaging that an outsider ever encounters. Using comics to transmit a clear and concise message is all the more important in such a context. In the next section, I explore the recurring messages embedded in AiG’s library of comics—messages that often employ antagonistic humor to send a clear message of orthodoxy and heterodoxy to every potential reader.

Oppositional Resonances in AiG Comics

While AiG’s stock of comics was primarily intended to direct viewers to the website through their individual circulation on email and through social media, the panels have an extended life in a database on the AiG website. Split into three series—*Let There Be Truth*,

³⁴⁸ According to AiG’s cartoonist-in-residence for two decades, Dan Lietha, he was let go from AiG in October of 2019 due to “restructuring,” in part because the organization had expressed concern over the years that employing a cartoonist would lead them to not be “taken seriously” by outsiders.

³⁴⁹ While a survey of comics studies terms is outside the scope of this chapter, see Randy Duncan, Matthew J. Smith, and Paul Levitz’s *The Power of Comics: History, Form, and Culture* for extended commentary on the concept of encapsulation in comics. Randy Duncan et al., *The Power of Comics: History, Form, and Culture* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 131-139.

³⁵⁰ Duncan et al, *The Power of Comics*, 134.

CreationWise, and *After Eden*—the 595 unique comics nevertheless share common themes and a common goal: guiding the reader to AiG’s orthodoxy through the power of entertainment. Not all of the comics are funny, or even intended to be; Dan Lietha, the cartoonist behind the three series, is a believer in comics’ power to “offend,” shock, and awe, in addition to or instead of making people laugh.³⁵¹ The majority of the comics, though, deal in humor of a decidedly antagonistic register, clearly drawing lines between the orthodox and unorthodox, the right-thinking and the wrong-headed. In my systematic review of AiG’s body of comics, three themes emerged which hinged on oppositional resonances that pit true believers against everyone else: 1) the scientific or rational impossibility of so-called “old-earth” beliefs (possible/impossible, rational/irrational), 2) the *ignorance* of unbelievers that keeps them from seeing the truths of the Bible (wise/foolish, saved/unsaved), and 3) the *malicious intent* motivating some unbelievers to keep others from the truth (good/evil, saved/unsaved). In all of these themes, true believers are painted as not only wise and rational, but also under siege by the ignorant and the malicious, who wield their significant cultural power to marginalize Christians.

Oppositional Resonance #1: Rational Creationism vs. Irrational Darwinism

Contrary to popular narratives about creationists, AiG does not fully reject the scientific method or the value of rational thought. Rather, they argue that it is evolutionists who fail to use proper scientific reasoning, leading to a set of beliefs about the universe and its origins that defies logic. Through the oppositional resonances of rational/irrational and possible/impossible, AiG’s comics present creationism as the scientifically superior theory of earth’s origins and, indeed, the only *possible* explanation.

³⁵¹ Dan Lietha, personal interview with author, August 6, 2021.

While secular scientists might describe lingering questions and openness to new evidence as a hallmark of good science, AiG presents it as evidence of irrational thinking. In one comic, a teacher presents her students with the age-old question, “Which came first, the chicken or the egg?” A student replies, “Without a Creator God, both are impossible.”³⁵² Another comic shows a man in a Darwin fish t-shirt telling a man in a cross t-shirt, “I don’t need God. I have science!” The Christian man replies, “Science is a great tool, but it’s not the solution for everything...[like] **death**, for starters....”³⁵³ These comics demonstrate the limits of science to explain some of the deepest questions that plague humanity, and they also hint at secular scientists’ apparent willingness to accept illogical or incomplete ideas instead of letting God fill in the gaps of human knowledge.

So, too, do AiG comics indicate that scientists’ openness to changing their theories along with new evidence suggests their irrational and mercurial nature. One comic features a sweating news anchor presenting a “Science Update”: “...and this new discovery completely changes everything you were ever taught about the origin of life. Oh, wait! An even newer discovery totally changes what I just reported....”³⁵⁴ Another comic shows two men in suits derisively telling a polo-clad Biblical literalist that science is more reliable than the Bible, when one of the men suddenly switches out his edition of a book titled *Science Facts*: “You’re using last year’s science book! This one has all the *new* facts!”³⁵⁵ In addition to the evidently unstable basis of nonbelievers’ scientific theories, AiG cartoons depict the failure of scientists to predict

³⁵² Dan Lietha, “Which Came First,” *Answers in Genesis*, June 22, 2012, <https://answersingenesis.org/media/cartoons/let-there-be-truth/which-came-first/>.

³⁵³ Dan Lietha, “The Death Problem,” *Answers in Genesis*, March 16, 2018, <https://answersingenesis.org/media/cartoons/after-eden/death-problem/>. Emphasis original.

³⁵⁴ Dan Lietha, “Science Update,” *Answers in Genesis*, June 2001; Dan Lietha, “Science Update,” *Answers in Genesis*, October 1, 2001, <https://answersingenesis.org/media/cartoons/after-eden/science-update/>.

³⁵⁵ Dan Lietha, “Reliable Facts,” *Answers in Genesis*, March 28, 2008, <https://answersingenesis.org/media/cartoons/creation-wise/reliable-facts/>.

phenomena like weather as humorous examples of nonbelievers' irrationality. One such comic depicts two men standing in the pouring rain as one man's phone blares, "Today's weather forecast is **100% sunshine.**" In the caption, one man says to the other, "Tell me again why I should trust scientists' ability to be accurate about life on Earth **millions of years ago....**"³⁵⁶ Another comic, using the same caption, shows two children attempting to sled on a grassy hill, disappointed by scientists' faulty prediction of the impending "largest snowstorm of the winter."³⁵⁷ In each of these comics, AiG flips a common script on its head, showing children and non-scientists as more rational than scientists, whose occasionally faulty predictions and inability to answer pressing existential questions are offered as evidence of their irrational belief system.

Image redacted due to copyright concerns

Figure 4.1: Comic by Dan Lietha. Copyright Answers in Genesis, 2017.

Working hand-in-hand with the oppositional resonance of rational/irrational is the script of possible/impossible. Young earth creationists, so often derided as believing in the impossible,

³⁵⁶ Dan Lietha, "Accurate Science?" *Answers in Genesis*, June 26, 2000, <https://answersingenesis.org/media/cartoons/after-eden/accurate-science/>. Emphasis original.

³⁵⁷ Dan Lietha, "Examine Your Trust," *Answers in Genesis*, March 17, 2017, <https://answersingenesis.org/media/cartoons/after-eden/examine-your-trust/>.

are shown in AiG comics to actually possess the *only* possible explanation for earth's history. In some AiG comics, creationists humorously debunk outsiders' claims that their beliefs are impossible. Most often, these comics center around misconceptions about Noah's Ark, from its size to Noah's methods for corralling two of each animal inside. In response to an improbably tall man (indicated by the top half of his head extending outside the cartoon frame) asking a shorter man, "How could Noah have possibly fit dinosaurs on the Ark?" a believer quips, "How was it possible for your mother to give birth to you?"³⁵⁸ Beyond simply defending creationist beliefs as possible, AiG cartoons routinely depict evolutionist beliefs as impossible. A recurring theme in AiG's comics database is comparing human-made art with God's creative powers. In one comic, a man standing in front of a rudimentary drawing of a chimpanzee and a picture of a real chimpanzee tells his female companion, "You know the difference between these two chimps? In public school, I can only say ONE of them was made by an intelligent creator."³⁵⁹ A similar comic shows a man and woman walking out of an "evolution history museum," with the man saying, "I told the curator that I saw evidence of intelligent design in his museum and he got really mad at me."³⁶⁰ Another comic shows a glasses-wearing atheist appraising three different "creations": Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, Rodin's *The Thinker*, and a picture of a fetus. To the first two, the atheist exclaims, "From the hands of a genius! Such creative mastery! Such plan and purpose!" To the rendering of a fetus, the atheist scoffs, "Just a product of natural processes. There's no creator."³⁶¹ AiG's comics use humor to set up a binary between creationism and

³⁵⁸ Dan Lietha, "Dinosaurs—Too Big?" *Answers in Genesis*, July 23, 2001, <https://answersingenesis.org/media/cartoons/after-eden/dinosaurs-too-big/>.

³⁵⁹ Dan Lietha, "Intelligent Creator," February 4, 2002, <https://answersingenesis.org/media/cartoons/after-eden/intelligent-creator/>.

³⁶⁰ Dan Lietha, "I.D.," *Answers in Genesis*, October 24, 2005, <https://answersingenesis.org/media/cartoons/after-eden/id/>.

³⁶¹ Dan Lietha, "Beautiful Purpose," *Answers in Genesis*, July 1, 2008, <https://answersingenesis.org/media/cartoons/let-there-be-truth/beautiful-purpose/>.

evolution by highlighting nonbelievers' stupidity for not realizing that the creation story is possible while themselves believing in what AiG sees as impossible. But if creationism is so clearly the rational belief system and evolutionists' account of earth's origins are impossible, why are so many nonbelievers convinced otherwise?

Image redacted due to copyright concerns

Figure 4.2: Comic by Dan Lietha. Copyright Answers in Genesis, 2002.

Oppositional Resonance #2: The Wisdom of the Saved vs. the Folly of the Unsav

One of the main ways AiG comics portray the motivations of evolutionists is by demonstrating their ignorance to the glory of God—a result of their lack of a relationship with the Creator that leads to their inability to appreciate creation. The comics often create humor out of unbelievers' ignorance by showing them appreciating Earth's beauty while failing to notice God's creative hand in the process. One four-panel comic shows a grumpy man staring at a beautiful landscape during the day, evening, night, and morning, while shouting, "God, if you're real, show me a sign! ...I'm waiting!"³⁶² Another takes aim at the celebration of Earth Day, with

³⁶² Dan Lietha, "Show Me a Sign," *Answers in Genesis*, April 28, 2003, <https://answersingenesis.org/media/cartoons/after-eden/show-me-a-sign/>.

a baby hugging his crib with a sign reading, “Happy Crib Day!” while his parents look on, bemused. Conversely, some comics signal the folly of unbelievers’ lack of appreciation for God’s creation by extending that attitude to human creations, as well. One such comic depicts Charles Darwin sitting before his birthday cake and marveling, “How amazing that this is the result of some random natural process that took place over long periods of time...”³⁶³ Often, these comics include characters in the background reacting to the atheist-coded character’s ignorance with a frown or grimace—a reminder to readers of the fundamental disjuncture between those who see the earth as evidence of God’s handiwork and those who fail to recognize it.

While many AiG comics portray evolutionists and nonbelievers as pitiable dupes who are unable to see the obvious hand of God in the natural world, they also make it clear that such ignorance can have grave and widespread costs. A recurring theme in the collection is comics that show scientists and science communicators translating the products of their imagination into scientific “evidence.” In one of these comics, an artist sits in front of a humanoid skull that he is rendering into a mockup of a hominid. Pinned to his drawing pad are pictures of the Darwin fish, a crossed-out Bible, and a March of Progress illustration of human evolution. The reader can see that the cord of his airbrush originates in his head, suggesting that such renderings of potential evolutionary links between humans and apes are the product of ignorant or biased artists’ imaginations. The only textual commentary on the comic is a reference to Proverbs 23:7—“For as he thinks in his heart, so is he.” Another comic shows an illustrator drawing renderings based off of a single bone, with his supervisor critiquing his work based on what he wants the art to communicate—“No! No! This fossil indicates a creature evolving the ability to climb a tree to

³⁶³ Dan Lietha, “Darwin’s Birthday,” *Answers in Genesis*, February 6, 2009, <https://answersingenesis.org/media/cartoons/after-eden/darwins-birthday/>.

catch another animal that's evolving...."³⁶⁴ The clashing scripts of objectivity (evidence, fact) and subjectivity (art, opinion) lead to a humorous disavowal of evolutionists' claims: in order to make the evidence fit their theories, they have to resort to imagination and trickery.

Image has been redacted due to copyright concerns

Figure 4.3: Comic by Dan Lietha. Copyright Answers in Genesis, 2009.

If the unsaved are ignorant of God's creative power, the saved—as narrowly defined by AiG's orthodoxy—are in a position of both cognitive and moral superiority for their ability to grasp the reality of the created order. AiG comics often portray this contrast through a humorous clashing of worldviews, in which creationists are baffled over evolutionists' apparent blindness to obvious truths. In a comic featuring two overturned cars—one with a Jesus fish bumper sticker and the other with a Darwin fish bumper sticker—the Christian-coded character thinks to himself, "Thank God I'm still alive!" The evolutionist character, on the other hand, thinks, "Whew! Thanks to the impersonal forces of blind chance that brought the universe and all life in

³⁶⁴ Dan Lietha, "Tale Bone," *Answers in Genesis*, January 15, 2010, <https://answersingenesis.org/media/cartoons/after-eden/tale-bone/>.

it into existence, I'm still alive!"³⁶⁵ Another comic takes place at the front counter of "Genesis Delivery Service," where a customer points to a "Next-day delivery guaranteed" sign while asking a confused employee, "Just to be clear, when you say 'day,' you don't mean some undefined, long period of time, do you?" By suggesting that old earth creationists do not have a firm grasp on "the meaning of the word 'day'" in the Bible, AiG cartoons paint unbelievers as foolish for questioning the putative literal meaning of the Genesis creation story and believers as their wise and patient foils.³⁶⁶ In both of these comics, the believer is shown to not only possess a more accurate assessment of the situation at hand, but also the more culturally salient standpoint. Despite AiG's repeated messaging that "true" Christians stand alone in a wicked and secular culture, humorous comics depicting atheists' inability to appreciate "miracles" or understand the true meaning of a "day" suggest that believers are in possession of superior logic and wisdom.

Image has been redacted due to copyright concerns

Figure 4.4: Comic by Dan Lietha. Copyright Answers in Genesis, 2005.

³⁶⁵ Dan Lietha, "Thank God," *Answers in Genesis*, April 18, 2005, <https://answersingenesis.org/media/cartoons/after-eden/thank-god/>.

³⁶⁶ Dan Lietha, "The Meaning of Day," *Answers in Genesis*, September 9November 7, 2008, <https://answersingenesis.org/media/cartoons/after-eden/meaning-of-day/>.

Oppositional Resonance #3: Malicious Atheists vs. Innocent Christians

While many AiG comics depict nonbelievers and evolutionists as woefully misinformed, others suggest that at least some evolutionists hold anti-creationist beliefs specifically because they are anti-God and seeking to trick others into rejecting the Bible. These clashing scripts of good/evil and guilty/innocent are most often present in comics showing a nefarious teacher, school system, or other “trusted” knowledge source corrupting the beliefs of a Christian child. While these oppositional scripts might not strike some as funny, AiG’s comics about children’s indoctrination often take a humorous turn by suggesting that trusted places for children’s “learning” are actually teaching lies. In one such comic, a little girl is climbing onto a bus whose back end is plastered with “worldly”-coded bumper stickers espousing support for Planned Parenthood, Darwinism, gay rights, and environmentalism. The child’s mother calls to her from off-panel, “Learn lots!” In the caption, a foreboding quotation from “Atheist Lawrence Krauss” reads, “Change is always one generation away. So if we can plant the seeds of doubt in our children, religion will go away in a generation....”³⁶⁷ Another AiG comic depicts the problem with public schools even more explicitly: in a single panel piece, the reader sees a student hunched over as he presumably walks to school. His backpack, labeled “public school education,” is weighed down by its contents—three devious-looking monkeys that are covering the child’s ears, eyes and mouth. The monkeys are telling him, “Hear no creation! See no creation! Speak ‘no creator’!” If belief in God and a young earth creation are the natural and

³⁶⁷ Dan Lietha, “One Generation Away,” *Answers in Genesis*, August 28, 2015, <https://answersingenesis.org/media/cartoons/after-eden/one-generation-away/>. The Krauss quotation in the comic’s caption comes from a 2014 *Salon* article: Sarah Gray, “Cosmologist Lawrence Krauss: Religion could be largely gone in a generation,” *Salon*, November 4, 2014, https://www.salon.com/2014/11/04/cosmologist_lawrence_krauss_religion_could_be_largely_gone_in_a_generation/.

logical human conclusions to the problem of earth's origins, then public schools must be specifically intervening to teach children the wrong ideas and to "blind" them to the truth.

Image has been redacted due to copyright concerns

Figure 4.5: Comic by Dan Lietha. Copyright Answers in Genesis, 2015.

Not only do public school curricula pose a risk to children's natural belief in God and creationism, but AiG argues that public schools are also early sites of discrimination for Christian children. By activating the opposition of real/fake alongside good/evil, AiG comics highlight the "humorous" way public school flips the script: students' interests in fairytales and make-believe are encouraged, while Christian students' interests in biblical "truths" are scorned and suppressed. One comic shows a young boy giving a presentation to his classmates about the Ark Encounter, only to be laughed at by a group of peers. Although the Christian boy's peers are all dressed in Mickey Mouse, Harry Potter, and Marvel Comics costumes, they chant at the child, "Hahaha! Noah's Ark! That's not real!"³⁶⁸ This flipped script can even put children in the position of having to question their teachers. In one comic, a boy tells his school friend, "Today

³⁶⁸ Dan Lietha, "Summer Vacation," *Answers in Genesis*, September 9, 2016, <https://answersingenesis.org/media/cartoons/after-eden/summer-vacation/>.

in science class I learned the Big Bang is real.... I just questioned the ‘facts’ of evolution and BLAM! You should’ve seen the explosion!”³⁶⁹

While public school is the target of many AiG comics, AiG portrays the entire world as a place that is malicious and inhospitable to “true” Christians.³⁷⁰ The “Jesus fish” and the “Darwin fish” often serve as shorthand for “good” and “bad” characters in AiG comics. In one comic, as two men stand next to each other in dueling fish symbol shirts, the Darwin fish sticks out its tongue at the Jesus fish while the Christian man wearing it trembles in fear. Another comic shows a man in a Jesus fish shirt being interviewed for a television station. When he announces, “Yes, I am a Bible-believing Christian!” a big red target appears on his chest, centered on his Jesus fish. The caption quotes a warning from John 15:19: “If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.”³⁷¹ Thus, Christians are not simply tasked with resisting the ignorance and falsehoods that can manipulate weaker believers away from God’s truth. Rather, as AiG reminds them, they must resist active and ever-present attacks—whether social, political, ideological, or scientific—by a world that hates their beliefs and even hates them.

³⁶⁹ Dan Lietha, “The Big Bang,” *Answers in Genesis*, March 15, 2004, <https://answersingenesis.org/media/cartoons/after-eden/the-big-bang/>.

³⁷⁰ Dan Lietha, “Changing Schools,” *Answers in Genesis*, April 5, 2013, <https://answersingenesis.org/media/cartoons/after-eden/changing-schools/>.

³⁷¹ Dan Lietha, “Targeted,” *Answers in Genesis*, October 30, 2015, <https://answersingenesis.org/media/cartoons/after-eden/targeted/>.

Image has been redacted due to copyright concerns

Figure 4.6: Comic by Dan Lietha. Copyright Answers in Genesis, 2015.

Committed Consumers

If the world is inhospitable, irrational, foolish, and malicious to young earth creationist Christians, where can such Christian families turn for help and guidance? The synergistic logic of AiG's message is the extent to which they tether "true" belief to their exact version of creationist orthodoxy. AiG comics depict young earth creationism as not only foundational to "real" Christianity, but also a key source of the worldly oppression and opposition that are the hallmark of being one of God's "chosen." In a world where only a faithful remnant possesses the truth, organizations committed to protecting orthodoxy are of the utmost importance. AiG comics use an oppositional humor style that cultivates believers' sense of belonging in the fold at the same time as it hardens their resistance to outsiders of all kinds.

An important aspect of AiG's role in the evangelical market is the fact that it positions itself as an indispensable gatekeeper of true Christian orthodoxy. AiG sells books specifically warning against "counterfeit" Christian colleges and universities whose witness is destroyed by

theological compromise with old earth creationism.³⁷² Even homeschooling families are not safe—one foreboding AiG comic shows schools of fish labeled “homeschoolers,” with some portrayed as golden Jesus fish and other portrayed as black Darwin fish moving in the opposite direction. The caption reads, “Sadly, some are evolving.”³⁷³ If even the already-faithful remain at risk for ideological corruption, AiG’s mission is more important than ever, and its consumers more dependent on its offerings with each day that Jesus does not return to rapture his flock.

Image has been redacted due to copyright concerns

Figure 4.7: Comic by Dan Lietha. Copyright Answers in Genesis, 2017.

One might think of AiG’s comics, then, as a form of advertisement for their brand. A single-panel comic is an easily-shareable bit of content that can nevertheless deliver a clear message. Not only do the comics communicate AiG’s theological lines in the sand, but they activate oppositional resonances through humor that flatter the sensibilities of those that already

³⁷² Ken Ham, “Counterfeit Christian College,” *Answers in Genesis*, July 1, 2011, <https://answersingenesis.org/college/counterfeit-christian-college/>. See also Ken Ham and Greg Hall, *Already Compromised*.

³⁷³ Dan Lietha, “Changing Schools,” *Answers in Genesis*, April 5, 2013, <https://answersingenesis.org/media/cartoons/after-eden/changing-schools/>.

find themselves on the “right” side of the young earth creationism debate. While AiG’s other resources spell out their beliefs regarding particulars like carbon dating, microevolution, and the fate of the dinosaurs, the comics stick to general concepts that can draw in a broader swath of the 25 to 40 percent of Americans the NSRHO and Gallup have identified as believing in some iteration of young earth creationism. The potential chain reaction of AiG’s messages pairs initial emotional resonance with the binaries highlighted in its comics with ever-deeper brand loyalty and exclusivity: 1) consumer resonates with AiG comics or other media suggesting they are on the right side of humanity with their young earth creationist beliefs; 2) these beliefs are tied (in the comics and elsewhere) to right-wing talking points, to fear of public schools, and to reminders that even Christian schools and colleges can be corrupting forces; 3) AiG offers consumer a deal on homeschooling materials that will ensure the consumer’s children are inculcated with the correct beliefs—beliefs whose consequences include salvation itself.

Conclusion

What is so funny about the existential threat of social, moral, and ideological collapse? Ultimately, not much. As the creator of AiG’s database of comics says himself, “I don’t want to throw a pie in someone’s face.... I want to make a point, full of content.”³⁷⁴ Nevertheless, humor is an essential vehicle for making that point—sending messages that draw a clear line between God’s faithful and the rest of the world, from “counterfeit” and misled Christians to evolutionists to atheists. In their database of comics, AiG activates key binaries—saved/unsaved, malicious/innocent, foolish/wise—to demonstrate how foundational believing in young earth creationism is to one’s identity as a “true” Christian. This gatekeeping function has the

³⁷⁴ Dan Lietha, personal interview with author, August 6, 2021.

significant consequence of positioning AiG as the arbiter of orthodoxy, which in turn has the potential to boost sales of their educational materials to parents worried for their children's faith formation. But just as such binaries can provoke anxiety, they can also create a sense of belonging and importance through script opposition that emphasizes believers' superiority over nonbelievers or "false" believers. Humor not only incentivizes being on the "right" side of the creationism debate, but it also helps cultivate consumers' sense of antagonism against the anti-creationist "other"—a strong tool for developing a loyal consumer base in any marketplace. Such humor may steer clear of pies to the face, but, nonetheless, it ultimately frames its opponents as clowns.

Chapter five demonstrates the power of humor to unite and divide across lines of race—a topic that has been particularly contentious in American evangelical circles due to its history of upholding white supremacy.³⁷⁵ Through a close reading of two films that feature a white protagonist's "fish out of water" journey into a majority-Black cultural milieu, I show how both films approach the subversion and reification of racial stereotypes. Although both films depict the reality of Black Americans' experiences of racism, their use of humor tends to rely on tropes of racialized excess and white cultural mastery, resulting in a humor community that will likely not appeal to many evangelicals of color.

³⁷⁵ See Anthea Butler, *White Evangelical Racism: The Politics of Morality in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021); Melani McAlister, *The Kingdom of God Has No Borders: A Global History of American Evangelicalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); Sara Moslener, *Virgin Nation: Sexual Purity and American Adolescence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Frances FitzGerald, *The Evangelicals: The Struggle to Shape America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017); Gregory Wills, *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Church Discipline in the Baptist South, 1785-1900* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); and Christine Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

Chapter 5: What's Black and White and Racist All Over? Evangelical Film and the Trope of the Racial Encounter

“Comedy is the safeguard of being able to address race.”
-Anthony Hackett

“When that guy laughed, I felt like, man, they got me.”
-Dave Chappelle

On any given night, a person with a Pure Flix streaming service subscription (“God-honoring and inspiring media on any device at any time”) might sit down and decide to watch a comedy.³⁷⁶ Perhaps they might even consult the Pure Flix website and find the featured list, “Our Favorite Christian Comedies.”³⁷⁷ There, they would find a list of eight movies, nearly half of which star white Pure Flix co-founder and CEO David A.R. White. They might also notice a recurring theme: a lot of these films are about white protagonists finding themselves thrust into Black communities. In other words, a lot of these films are cultivate humor communities around jokes about race. This chapter focuses on two of the films included in Pure Flix’s favorite comedies list: 2012’s *Brother White* and 2016’s *Love Different*.³⁷⁸ At first glance, *Brother White* and *Love Different* seem an odd pairing—*Brother White* had a budget large enough to pull big-name actors and was produced by the very film studio that owns Pure Flix. It was written, directed, and produced by an all-white team. *Love Different*, on the other hand, was a crowdfunded venture by a one-man independent film company, written by and starring Black

³⁷⁶ “About,” *PureFlix.com*, accessed September 8, 2022, <https://www.pureflix.com/about>.

³⁷⁷ “Our Favorite Christian Comedies,” *PureFlix Insider*, December 18, 2016, <https://insider.pureflix.com/movies/our-favorite-christian-comedies>.

³⁷⁸ Brian Herzingler, dir., *Brother White* (Pinnacle Peak Productions, 2012) 1hr, 30 min, <https://app.pureflix.com/videos/253278758804/brother-white>; Anthony Hackett, dir., *Love Different* (Sonset Friday, 2016) 1hr, 35 min, <https://app.pureflix.com/videos/253284390865/love-different>.

filmmaker Anthony Hackett and produced by a racially diverse team. Nevertheless, the two share key themes that, I argue, demonstrate the fraught relationship American evangelicals have to the question of how to locate God in the midst of racial difference. Both are fish-out-of-water comedies whose white main characters' journey centers around their efforts to thrive in a majority-Black environment for the first time. *Love Different* tells the story of a white woman who takes a new job at a Black consulting firm and is assigned a Black mentor to help her "learn the Black culture in 48 hours!"³⁷⁹ *Brother White* follows a white pastor, James White, and his family as they are reassigned to helm a small Black church in Atlanta. What follows in this chapter is an investigation into the features and implications of a genre that combines humor, racial commentary, and faith-based messaging.

My approach to studying the "humor" of racial encounter in Christian film is informed by cultural studies, humor studies, and religious studies works on race, religion, and media. This chapter takes seriously several related scholarly interventions: that race and religion are co-constitutive, that humor and race share several formal meaning-making qualities, and that the representations of religion and race in media do not just *reflect* realities, but forge them. My interest in examining two Christian fish-out-of-water comedy films about a white protagonist entering "Black culture" is in finding the resonances between these related theories about humor, race, and religion. How does humor signify on both race and religion? What boundary-marking concepts are accomplished through humor in these films, and which are accomplished through drama and/or emotional appeals to religious values? When, if ever, do comedy and religious values overlap in these films? In exploring these questions, I identify two broad shared features of the films: 1) classic features of humor on race across media types (mechanicity born of

³⁷⁹ "Love Different," *PureFlix.com*, accessed September 8, 2022, <https://pureflix.com/videos/253284390865/watch>.

repetition and excess) and 2) the recurring film and television trope of supraethnic whiteness (a concept that, I argue, combines Christian supremacy and Western supremacy). Finally, I examine how these tropes interact with the American evangelical conception of racism as a personal sin that is resolved through God's preemptive forgiveness and Christians' recommitment to their shared identity in Christ. Ultimately, I argue that, although the presence of racial stereotype and white mastery over Black cultures is not unique to the genre of Christian comedy, the evangelical films examined here pair the naturalization of racial difference and the overriding access of white people to Black communities and cultures with God's own stamp of approval.

Film, Race, and Comedy: A Primer

The fish-out-of-water conceit—in which a protagonist is thrust into unfamiliar circumstances to comedic effect—is a classic trope of American cinema. Since its earliest iterations, the fish-out-of-water comedy has provided filmmakers and moviegoers alike the opportunity to play with boundaries around class, race, gender, and sexuality. Classic 1934 film *It Happened One Night*, for example, depicts a wealthy, sheltered heiress (Claudette Colbert) suddenly on the run with the aid of a no-nonsense reporter (Clark Gable), reduced to hitchhiking and fighting off thieves—all the while, learning about herself and falling in love with her new companion. Later films like 1959's *Some Like it Hot*, 1982's *Tootsie*, and 1993's *Mrs. Doubtfire* play primarily with gender and sex boundaries, with cross-dressing male protagonists taking a “comedic” foray into womanhood. *White Chicks*, the 2004 cult classic about two Black, male FBI agents that go undercover as white women, explores the permeability (or lack thereof) of both racial and gender prescriptions.

A protagonist in an unfamiliar location, community, circumstance, or body (either through elaborate prosthetics or by magic, as in the 1975, 1995, and 2003 adaptations of *Freaky Friday*) will inevitably experience incongruity between life as they knew it and life as they are experiencing it in their new circumstances. This kind of incongruity, theorists of humor have argued, serves as the basis of what people find humorous across languages, cultures, and time. Moreover, as folklorist Elliott Oring has posited, it is *appropriate* incongruity that makes a situation comical rather than, say, tragic.³⁸⁰ Appropriateness and incongruity are “parallel constructions” in humor, Oring says, with incongruity (for example, a man dressed as and behaving as a woman) not requiring *resolution* (wherein, perhaps, the protagonist comes to identify as a woman and transitions to living fully as such) in order to register as comical. Indeed, resolution of the tension between *things as they are* and *things as they “should” be*—that is, the resolution of incongruity—often signals the end of the laughs. Instead of the *resolution* of incongruity, comedy calls for the recognition of the *appropriate* nature of the incongruity. That is, one recognizes “man” and “woman” as related but unique categories with the potential for overlap, for the interplay of clashing roles and expectations. As such, many fish-out-of-water comedies lean on classic dichotomies—rich/poor, Black/white, man/woman, straight/gay—to create easily recognizable moments of incongruity. Crucially, the humor in exploring these dichotomies comes from the assumption of their irreducibility. In this way, humor about gender, race, sex, and class is always involved in the ongoing project of marking the boundaries around those categories.

In film comedies about racial encounter—my primary category of analysis in this chapter—incongruity often arises from a character’s failure to embody racial stereotypes or from

³⁸⁰ Elliott Oring, *Engaging Humor* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 1-12.

their fulfillment of racial stereotypes in unexpected ways. It is in this sense, argues ethnic and cultural studies theorist Albert Sergio Laguna, that comedy is “of race.”³⁸¹ Laguna proposes that comedy and race share key formal qualities—excess, ambiguity, and repetition—for making meaning in the world. Historically, these qualities have been used to reproduce racial stereotypes of people of color’s mechanicity, simplicity, and “excess” (that is, to the master signifier of whiteness), all with the plausible deniability afforded by comic ambiguity.³⁸² More recently, free and accessible social media platforms have allowed for more—and more creative—riffs on racial stereotypes, with memes of angry, two-dimensional white busybodies like “BBQ Becky” flipping the script on the mechanicity of race. Nevertheless, as cultural theorists of race and film have identified, films, in particular, require the buy-in of a variety of investors, from producers to distributors, and thus tend to contribute to the “plurality of dominant discourses” rather than offering counter-narratives with the power to question mainstream social constructions.³⁸³ That is, even when films include representations of minority genders, races, and sexualities, these representations tend to work within, rather than against, hegemonic ideologies about gender, race, and sexuality.

Earliest film and stage representations of Black Americans worked to uphold hegemonic values through the use of white actors performing “Blackness” through the tradition of

³⁸¹ Albert Sergio Laguna, “On the Comedy of Race,” *Cultural Critique* no. 111 (2021): 104-132, 105.

³⁸² See Judith Weisenfeld’s *Hollywood Be Thy Name: African American Religion in American Film 1929-1949* for a groundbreaking analysis of how American filmmakers used new sound and film technologies to characterize—and sometimes caricature—Black religious practices in ways that shaped popular understandings of race, religion, and American identity. See also Jane Iwamura’s *Virtual Orientalism: Asian Religions and American Popular Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010) for a sweeping history of the representation of Asians—and especially Asian Religion—in American media through stereotypes like the passive, effeminate monk and the Kung Fu guru whose wisdom comes from an ahistorical—and, crucially, non-threatening—font of Eastern wisdom.

³⁸³ Stuart Hall, “Culture, the Media, and the ‘Ideological Effect,’” in *Essential Essays, Volume I: Foundations of Cultural Studies*, edited by David Morley (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019): 298-335, 330. See also Stuart Hall, “Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse,” in *Writings on Media: History of the Present* edited by Charlotte Brunsdon (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021): 247-266.

minstrelsy—in which a white performer donned blackface and performed augmented racial stereotypes about Black Americans’ physical features, behaviors, and mindsets. Nineteenth century Black performers’ possibilities for work were largely limited to their willingness to “cork up,” taking on minstrel roles that—despite their more nuanced portrayals and winks to Black audience members—nevertheless perpetuated limited (and limiting) tropes of Black manhood.³⁸⁴ As Judith Weisenfeld documents in her history of representations of African American religion in films in the early to mid twentieth century, even as American films moved away (although not too far away) from the minstrel tradition, “the exclusion of African American actors, writers, and directors from positions of power within the Hollywood studio system ensured that, when Hollywood did present black religion on film, African Americans could do little to help shape those representations.”³⁸⁵ Twentieth century American films’ representations of Black Americans reflected and shaped stereotypes about Black Americans’ inherent—and fanatical—religiosity, their “inextricable” connection to the natural world, and their attunement to the body to the exclusion of the life of the mind.³⁸⁶ In the twenty-first century, even as Black filmmakers, producers, writers, and actors have achieved greater access and influence in Hollywood, the industry remains largely dominated by white directors and investors. So too have limiting stereotypes of Black Americans continued to populate the silver screen, from the

³⁸⁴ See Yuval Taylor and Jake Austen’s *Darkest America* for an extended treatment of the history of Black minstrelsy as an American comic tradition. Yuval Taylor and Jake Austen, *Darkest America: Black Minstrelsy from Slavery to Hip-Hop* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2012). See also Daphne A. Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850–1910* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York: Viking Press, 1973); Henry T. Sampson, *Blacks in Blackface: A Sourcebook on Early Black Musical Shows* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2013); Karen Sotiropoulos, *Staging Race: Black Performers in Turn of the Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

³⁸⁵ Judith Weisenfeld, *Hollywood Be Thy Name: African American Religion in American Film, 1929–1949* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 9. See also Miriam Petty, *Stealing the Show: African American Performers and Audiences in 1930s Hollywood* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2016)

³⁸⁶ Weisenfeld, *Hollywood be Thy Name*, 31, 143–144. See also Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 1986), 126–127.

religiously-inflected tropes of the magical Black man or the Black woman oracle to hyper-sexualized tropes of Black men as players and Black women as manipulative Jezebels.³⁸⁷ While some of these tropes have the sheen of positive representation, many of them rely on the diminished agency of Black characters and affirm the centrality of white characters' experiences and personal growth. Matthew Hughey refers to this "new racism" in American film as "cinethetic racism," arguing that "while the explicit readings of these visual texts may be progressive and emancipatory, they may implicitly function to reify dominant racial discourses and narratives concerning white identity."³⁸⁸

What Hughey calls "new" racism is, however, not so new. As histories of Black performers—including Black minstrel performers—have long argued, popular cultural artifacts related to race have always contained "the dialectical flickering of racial insult and racial envy, moments of domination and moments of liberation, counterfeit and currency, a pattern at times amounting to no more than the two faces of racism, at others gesturing toward a specific kind of political or sexual danger, and all constituting a peculiarly American structure of racial feeling."³⁸⁹ My interest in examining race in Christian film is not born out of the assumption that any given film's representations of race will be so simplistic as to be wholly denigrating or wholly liberating. Instead, I am interested in the very dialectic offered by humor about race: its

³⁸⁷ See Karin Gabbard, *Black Magic: White Hollywood and African American Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004). See also Matthew W. Hughey, "Cinethetic Racism: White Redemption and Black Stereotypes in 'Magical Negro' Films," *Social Problems* 56, no. 3 (2009): 543-577. Alongside these tropes, even blackface makes semi-regular appearances in film and television performances by both Black and white actors. See Aisha Harris, "A Brief Guide to twenty-first Century Blackface," *The New York Times*, September 25, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/09/25/opinion/blackface-tv-movies-race.html> (Accessed September 9, 2022). See also Taylor and Austen's chapter in *Darkest America*, "New Millennium Minstrel Show: How Spike Lee and Tyler Perry Brought the Black Minstrelsy Debate to the Twenty-First Century."

³⁸⁸ Hughey, "Cinethetic Racism," 545. Robin R. Means Coleman has referred to the phenomenon of putatively positive but semiotically negative Black representation in post-1980s television and film as "Neo-Minstrelsy." See Robin R. Means Coleman, *African American Viewers and the Black Situation Comedy: Situating Racial Humor* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998).

³⁸⁹ Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 18.

potential to be read on multiple registers, to signify in a variety of ways to different audiences, and to reify and upset stereotypes—sometimes all at the same time.

Studying representations of race in comedy films is critical not only because comedy mass media has widespread appeal, but also because comedy deals in (often unspoken) assumptions about the way the world is and could be. Cultural theorists have long argued for the importance of examining how media *creates*, rather than simply *represents*, social realities. Stuart Hall identifies three interlocking ideological functions of mass media: 1) to (re)present images of different kinds of social groups and ways of living; 2) to inventory, organize, and assign merit to the plurality of these proffered social worlds 3) to produce consensus and construct the legitimacy of this consensus and the structures that support it.³⁹⁰ In other words, media constructs social knowledge about others and ourselves, assigns values and creates hierarchies about the different ways it imagines people live, and then—through repetition, box office earnings, critical appraisal, and mass appeal—underscores the naturalness and legitimacy of those representations as our shared reality. Comedy is a powerful rhetorical tool in the filmmaker’s arsenal for enacting each of these functions. But comedy is not a simplistic tool used for simplistic ends. As Hall has theorized, media—especially, I posit, comedic media—is an inherently dialectical phenomenon requiring both encoding and decoding. Even when a symbol in a film—a punchline, a prop, a lighting or makeup or sound choice—is imbued with a “preferred meaning” by the person(s) creating the symbol, it remains a polysemic phenomenon: the viewer may or may not interpret the symbol with the grain of its dominant resonance.³⁹¹ It is within this framework that I will approach my analysis of *Love Different* and *Brother White*: as

³⁹⁰ Paraphrased from Hall, “Culture, the Media, and the ‘Ideological Effect,’” 327-329.

³⁹¹ Stuart Hall, “Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse,” in *Writings on Media: History of the Present*, ed. Charlotte Brunsdon (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 255.

open circuits of meaning-making whose comedic choices contribute to a *dominant* narrative that is nevertheless not the *determined* or *only* narrative. In comedy as in all of human communication, “getting the joke” is rarely as simple as one would imagine.

Race: An American Comedy?

Race is so inextricable from American comedy that, as Albert Laguna has said, “race is a kind of ‘American style’ of comedy at its core.”³⁹² To pay attention to how jokes about race *work*—that is, how they come to be both intelligible and humorous to an audience—is to explore how “comedy stages the mechanics of racialization.”³⁹³ Henri Bergson’s foundational work on laughter suggests that “mechanics” are, indeed, central to the making of both comedy and race. Describing the comic as “something mechanical encrusted on the living,” Bergson argues that repetition (of a phrase or a behavior) creates humor because it gives the impression that a person is a thing, controlled by a machine instead of possessing agency.³⁹⁴ All of formal human society—including styles of dress, formal ceremonies, and racial and class boundaries—is poised for humor to break through, because at any given moment something might occur that calls attention to the mechanization of social expectations. It is for this reason that everyday clothing typically does not provoke laughter, but seeing a person wearing outmoded fashion or putting on a disguise is humorous: the break with convention highlights the artificiality of convention itself. Using this logic, Bergson contends that racial difference can provoke laughter because of white people’s assumptions of their own normativity. Drawing on the popularity of blackface performances, Bergson argues that one might “laugh at a negro” because one imagines that the

³⁹² Laguna, “On the Comedy of Race,” 104.

³⁹³ *Ibid.*, 105.

³⁹⁴ Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (Project Gutenberg, 2009), accessed September 28, 2022, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/4352/4352-h/4352-h.htm>.

Black person they see has put soot over their whole body. “‘A negro is a white man in disguise’ [is] also absurd to the reason which rationalizes; but [it is] gospel truth to pure imagination,” Bergson writes.³⁹⁵ Of course, Bergson’s claim that such an “imagination” is humorous can be read on multiple registers. Does the racist assumption that Black people are white people in disguise serve to objectify Black people such that Black people’s behaviors, beliefs, and experiences can be dismissed as mechanical overlays of the depth and “suppleness of [white] life”?³⁹⁶ Or might comedy about race spring from the realization that racial hierarchies are the mechanics underneath which the suppleness and depth of all life can be recovered?

Just as classic jokes like “orange you glad I didn’t say banana” rely on the humor that builds as one repeats the nonsensical punchline “banana” ad nauseum, so too do racial representations take on the sheen of comedy through the endless repetition of certain tropes. Exaggerated and repetitive representations of racial stereotypes in American comedy films have historically served to mechanize and objectify Black Americans. Thomas Edison’s 1908 Kinetograph picture “Ten Pickaninnies” depicts African American children—whom the contemporaneous *Moving Picture World* catalog described as “inky kids” and “coonlets”—being thwarted one by one as they seek to make mischief.³⁹⁷ This short film, characterized by white critics as “funny all the way,” contained many of the gendered and sexualized stereotypes that have continued to serve as fodder for racist humor even as audio and visual technological advancements have enabled more nuanced storytelling. In his seminal 1973 history of Black representation in American films, Donald Bogle argues that the primary tropes of Black film characters since the earliest days of celluloid film have endured into the twentieth century and

³⁹⁵ Ibid.

³⁹⁶ Ibid.

³⁹⁷ J.P. Chalmers (ed), *The Moving Picture World* 3, no. 1 (July-October 1908), 263.
<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.hb0sep&view=1up&seq=272> (accessed October 1, 2022).

beyond: Black men as submissive, grateful, sexless “toms,” buffoonish and lazy “coons,” or hyper-sexual and dangerous “bucks” and of Black women as sexless, maternal “mammies” or—occasionally—as “mulatto” women whose white beauty and innocence are spoiled by her mixed-race heritage.³⁹⁸ Each of these stereotypes relies on repetition to the point of mechanization: reducing Black characters to a set of prescribed roles and possibilities that they must repeat endlessly, both within a given film and within the broader genre of comedy itself. One sees evidence of this phenomenon in the preponderance of stereotypical supporting roles for Black men and women in American cinema: for example, the ubiquity of the “Mammy” role from Hattie McDaniel’s 1939 portrayal of the loyal house servant at Tara Plantation in *Gone With the Wind* to Viola Davis and Octavia Spencer’s roles as maternal, self-abnegating maids in 2011’s *The Help*. The trope of the depthless Black male sidekick in American buddy comedies is so common in twentieth and twenty-first century American cinema that 2001 parody film *Not Another Teen Movie* features Deon Richmond as “Malik Token,” who introduces himself as the “token Black guy” whose role is to occasionally pop into the scene and drop a catch phrase like “damn, shit, and that is wack!”³⁹⁹

If repeated frequently enough, racialized comedy tropes like the Indian convenience store owner, the Arab cab driver, the quiet and submissive Asian, the sassy Black woman, and the two-dimensional Black sidekick become so naturalized that one might come to see people of color as shallow bit players in the unfolding drama of white people’s lives. Not only do these tropes suggest that people of color have a limited sphere of possibilities compared to the endless landscape of identities and adventures open to white (and especially male) film subjects, but they

³⁹⁸ Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York: Viking Press, 1973). See also Taylor and Austen, *Darkest America*, Weisenfeld, *Hollywood Be Thy Name*.

³⁹⁹ *Not Another Teen Movie*, DVD, directed by Joel Gallen (Culver City, CA: Sony Pictures, 2001).

also position nonwhite characters' physical and behavioral traits as being comedic *because* they are deemed to be excessive compared to normative whiteness. If a Black woman character is sassy, she is sassy *compared to* a present or imagined normative white woman foil. Just as Bergson suggests the very existence of a Black person can provoke laughter if one imagines they are a white person "in disguise," the hegemonic normativity of whiteness serves as the basis of many jokes about race. As Laguna theorizes, repetition and the concept of "excess" work together to dehumanize nonwhite subjects "by imagining them as machines incongruous with the normativity encoded in whiteness by virtue of their endless repetition of the excessive traits used to characterize them."⁴⁰⁰ Indeed, "whiteness" as neutral and normative is such a thoroughly hegemonic concept in the United States that no explicit foil to a racialized, excessive other is even necessary to provoke laughter among white audiences.

The phenomenon of exploiting stereotypes about Black Americans is not limited to white filmmakers and comedians. As scholars of Black comedy and film history have demonstrated, many Black comedians and actors have gained popularity through their repetition of stereotypes of Black Americans and their affirmations of white superiority. At times, such comedy was the calculated outcome of a Black actor's attempt to break into the white-dominated film industry; Hattie McDaniel, the first African American to win an Oscar, famously remarked, "I can be a maid for \$7 a week, or I can play a maid for \$700 a week."⁴⁰¹ Through the rise of Blaxploitation films in the 1970s up to the contemporary moment, Black film creators and actors have explored the gray space between reclaiming or redefining racial stereotypes and reaffirming them for racist audiences. The popularity of filmmaker and comic actor Tyler Perry's *Madea* franchise—in which Perry himself dresses in drag to play *Madea*, an elderly Black woman with an

⁴⁰⁰ Laguna, "On the Comedy of Race," 109.

⁴⁰¹ Jill Watts, *Hattie McDaniel: Black Ambition, White Hollywood* (New York, Amistad: 2005), 139.

ambiguous sense of morality—plays on stereotypes of Black womanhood that film historian Donald Bogle has argued “has connections to the old mammy type.... If a white director put out this product, the black audience would be appalled.”⁴⁰² Such is the promise and the pitfall of comedy about race: whatever intended meanings are encoded in a film, different audiences with different standpoints might decode diverging messages about racial difference and racial hierarchy, especially as they intersect with gender and class. Black comedian Dave Chappelle, whose work has never shied away from plumbing the depths of American racism, described in an interview a moment during a filming session that he felt “the difference of people laughing with me and people laughing at me.” Chappelle had donned blackface and was performing as a pixie—a sort of “devil on the shoulder” of famous Black men that encouraged them to fulfill stereotypes of Black manhood. During the sketch, Chappelle recounts, a white crew member laughed too long and too loud. “When that guy laughed, I felt like, man, they got me,” Chappelle told *Time* in 2005.⁴⁰³ The risk of engaging with racial stereotypes is one Black comedians, especially, cannot escape: for an audience accustomed to white supremacy, a performance that a comedian might intend as the subversion of racial stereotypes might read to the masses as racial essentialism’s apotheosis.

White Supremacy and Christian Supremacy: Co-constitutive Tropes

While nonwhite characters in American film have often served a comic function through “supporting” roles whose repetitive and stereotypical behaviors reduce them to automatons in excess of whiteness, whiteness as a hegemonic value is also maintained through film by tropes

⁴⁰² Benjamin Svetkey et al., “‘Madea’: Bad for Black America?” *Entertainment Weekly*, March 20, 2009, <https://ew.com/article/2009/03/17/madea-bad-black-america/>.

⁴⁰³ Quoted in Bambi Haggins, *Laughing Mad: The Black Comic Persona in Post-Soul America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 229.

emphasizing white superiority. There are many such tropes, but one that often appears at the nexus of religion and race is what Sean Tierney has called the “supraethnic viability of whiteness.”⁴⁰⁴ This phrase—used by Tierney to describe “the speed, efficacy, and unorthodox yet highly efficient means by which Whites learn martial arts...in Western film”—helps identify how themes of white mastery contribute to what Edward Said has called white Westerners’ “flexible positional superiority” vis-à-vis the Orient and Eastern religion.⁴⁰⁵ If flexible positional superiority describes whites’ ability to claim the “relative upper hand” in any given cultural situation, the supraethnic viability of whiteness describes the specific trope wherein whites easily gain access to other cultures, religions, and traditions, only to learn or embody those traditions *even better* than the native, nonwhite practitioner.⁴⁰⁶

For Said, religion is inseparable from the Western project to “contain and represent” the Orient within its own hegemonic framework.⁴⁰⁷ The very fact that a white American could, for example, quickly learn and master Asian cultural and religious practices is evidence of how the Eastern “other” is “accommodated to the moral exigencies of Western Christianity.” The white Christian is free to engage with and appropriate “other” cultural and religious practices without fear of losing the upper hand—their freedom to explore and engage with the other is protected by Western power shored up by “a universal and eternal system of Christian values.”⁴⁰⁸ Judith Weisenfeld has demonstrated how white supremacy over Black Americans has similarly been upheld and negotiated in American cinema through representations of Black religiosity as childlike, fanatical, and non-cerebral.

⁴⁰⁴ Sean M. Tierney, “Themes of Whiteness in *Bulletproof Monk*, *Kill Bill*, and *The Last Samurai*,” *Journal of Communication* 56 (2006): 607-624, 610.

⁴⁰⁵ Tierney, “Themes of Whiteness,” 611, 613.

⁴⁰⁶ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 7.

⁴⁰⁷ Said, *Orientalism*, 40.

⁴⁰⁸ Said, *Orientalism*, 68.

If the trope of the supraethnic viability of whiteness illustrates the ongoing effects of Orientalism in American cinema, it can also highlight how white supremacy over Black Americans is upheld and negotiated in American cinema through religious themes. Both of the films I examine in this chapter feature a white protagonist gaining access to—and ultimately mastery over—“Black culture.” The assumption that the white main character has the right and authority to enter into Black communities is rarely, if ever, questioned. So too, I will argue, is the protagonist’s Christian faith essential to their justification for entering, learning, and mastering Black culture. By invoking God’s plan as the impetus for their engagement with Black communities, both films’ protagonists are empowered by their belief that their access to Black culture is granted by God. Thus, my assessment of the supraethnic viability of whiteness in this chapter will combine Tierney’s definition with Said’s theory of Western Christian supremacy: white people can always enter and “master” Black culture if their intentions are good and—crucially—if God is on their side. In this sense, by sending them into the “unknown,” God grants whites access to Black culture. By featuring the white person’s journey into the “unknown” as a mission from God, these fish-out-of-water comedies reaffirm the hegemonic privilege of whiteness with the added sheen of God’s own approval.

Diving In: The Christian racial comedy of *Love Different* and *Brother White*

Love Different

Love Different is a 2016 comedy written and directed by Black Seventh-Day Adventist actor and filmmaker Anthony Hackett. Hackett is also the CEO and founder of the film’s production company, SONset Friday Entertainment, whose name is a nod to his Adventist faith. SONset Friday is a small outfit whose website’s only other listed employee is God; Hackett

credits God as his Executive Producer on every film he creates because “God literally provides all our needs for each production.”⁴⁰⁹ *Love Different*, SONset’s second feature film, premiered at a red carpet event hosted by Columbia, Maryland nondenominational megachurch Bridgeway Community Church on Friday, March 18, 2016. Nearly one thousand people attended the free screening, which preempted the film’s direct-to-streaming release on April 29, 2016. The film also garnered several awards at small, independent film festivals: the Audience Choice Award at the 2016 International Christian Film Festival and Best Picture at the 2016 Charlotte Black Film Festival. While streaming services like PureFlix do not release their user data, *Love Different*’s DVD sales ranked in ChristianCinema.com’s top ten best seller list in the month of April 2016, ahead of Christian film juggernauts like *War Room* and *God’s Not Dead*. At its peak in September of 2016, *Love Different* nearly cracked the top 20,000 on the Internet Movie Database’s proprietary MOVIEmeter.⁴¹⁰

The film follows a 30-something white woman, Lindsay, through her first week working for a consulting firm that primarily serves Black-owned businesses. Lindsay is played by actress Jenn Gotzon, a regular in the Christian film industry whose breakout role was that of Richard Nixon’s daughter Tricia in 2008’s *Frost/Nixon*. The rest of the staff, all Black, must teach Lindsay the ropes of “Black culture” before she meets with her first client—a church elder whose new non-profit aims to draw Black youth back into the church. No stranger to starring in his own productions, Hackett plays Lindsay’s counterpart, the firm’s star consultant, Neque, who is tasked by his boss with taking Lindsay under his wing. Lindsay, who grew up in Iowa, took on this new job explicitly in order to gain familiarity with Black people and “Black culture.” Neque,

⁴⁰⁹ “About: Executive Producer,” *SONSetFriday.com*, accessed September 21, 2022, <http://www.sonsetfriday.com/executive-producer.html>.

⁴¹⁰ “Love Different,” *IMDbPro*, accessed September 20, 2022, <https://pro.imdb.com/title/tt4879412/details>.

on the other hand, grew up in all-Black circles in Maryland and is shocked by Lindsay's naïveté regarding both their personal cultural differences and racism writ large.

From its opening shots, the movie finds humor in the comparison of Neque and Lindsay's lives. A split screen shows both characters brushing their teeth in the morning, dancing alone and pulling faces in the mirror to the embarrassment of their family members—Neque's scoffing wife and Lindsay's terminally embarrassed teenage son. It is clear right away what our protagonists have in common: goofy personalities and strained family relationships. Neque cannot pull his attention away from his phone long enough to notice his wife's desperation to connect with him, and Lindsay's tepid attempts at bonding with her contemptuous son fall equally flat. Outside the home, however, Lindsay and Neque's experiences diverge. Both chatting on the phone with a friend while driving (Lindsay's white, female friend is already at work—their old consulting firm—while Neque's Black, male friend is lounging in bed in an undershirt and scratching lottery tickets), they both pause their conversations when passing a police officer. Lindsay rolls down her window and greets the officer by name. "Have you heard this one?" she asks him as she cranks up the volume on a Christian radio station. Neque, on the other hand, turns his Christian rap music down, switches the dial to public radio, and assumes a comically rigid and focused posture as he passes the officer. When it seems he has made it past the officer unscathed, he tells his friend, "Alright, we good, dawg."

When Lindsay and Neque's paths first cross in the elevator of their workplace, the possibilities of a friendship seem scant. Neque expresses disbelief when his boss charges him with mentoring his new coworker, who naively assured her boss that she has "zero issues whatsoever relating to or understanding African Americans," yet failed to pass his preliminary "so you think you know really know Black people test." Unlike Neque and his coworkers,

Lindsay's response to her boss's prompts—would you record a fist fight or call the police? Can you finish the lyrics to the classic Gospel song “Perfect Praise (How Excellent)”? If you heard a call for help, would you investigate the source or run away?—demonstrate both a naïve trust in others' goodness (including that of law enforcement) and a deficit of basic cultural competence. Neque takes on the seemingly impossible task of introducing Lindsay to Black culture through frank conversations about his own experiences. Lindsay also benefits from others' teaching, including that of Neque's friend Professor Black—who teaches one-day “Blackness” courses for white people on how to combat racist assumptions, perform intricate handshakes, and dance with looser hips—and Neque's sister, Candace, who puts Lindsay's hair into cornrows and teaches her how to fry plantains. More than any planned lesson, though, Lindsay learns and grows through experiencing the racist microaggressions thrown in her direction due to her newfound association with Black people. From white strangers' constant assumptions that she and Neque are in a romantic relationship to a white classmate's racist diatribe, Lindsay sees for the first time the pervasiveness of racial bias in everyday life. Nevertheless, when Lindsay tells Neque she feels like she is finally beginning to understand racism from his perspective, he reminds her firmly that she will never know what it is like to move through life as a Black person. Their differences are—on some level—immutable, at least in a world so deeply marred by the sin of racism.

Lindsay and Neque's blossoming friendship is the heart of the film, as well as the source of most of its humor. Over the course of 48 hours of training, the two share meals, run errands together, spend time with one another's families, and open up about their religious beliefs. While the goal of their time together is increasing Lindsay's cultural competence, the two ultimately both affect one another's closest relationships and mindsets. Neque helps Lindsay find the

strength to discipline her insolent son through corporal punishment. Lindsay helps Neque understand and meet his wife's desire for connection and quality time. Perhaps most importantly, Lindsay's influence leads Neque to realize that he misses his former personal relationship with God. While the film's plot builds toward Lindsay's ability to successfully advise their first shared client, the climactic final scene depicts Neque nearly derailing the meeting by angrily revealing that he used to attend their client's church, only to be pushed out by the elder's rejection of his desire to praise God through rap. In an emotional speech, Neque proclaims that his newfound friendship with Lindsay has renewed his belief in a God who recognizes and values individual differences—and whose love is so all-encompassing that no differences can preclude the potential for meaningful connection.

For Hackett, the film's auteur, *Love Different* was a personal project in more ways than one. Not only did it serve as a way for him to communicate, through humor, how his experiences as a Black man in America differ from white people's experiences, but it also allowed him to tell a story about his personal experience of judgment in the church. In a podcast interview, Hackett revealed that Neque's story of being ostracized by a church for trying to use rap as a form of worship is "lightly autobiographical"; Hackett says he once performed in a church and got "kicked out" because a congregant did not like the genre. Whether highlighting discrimination in the church or racism in the broader culture, Hackett told a *Christian Cinema* interviewer that he hoped the film would bridge divides among Christians. Humor is essential to the project because, as Hackett argues, "Comedy is the safeguard of being able to address race."⁴¹¹ As this remark

⁴¹¹ Jacob Sahms , "Catastasis Thriller Director Delivers Love Different Comedy," *Christian Cinema*, February 23, 2016, Accessed via Wayback Machine July 18, 2022, http://www.christiancinema.com/catalog/newsdesk_info.php?newsdesk_id=3474&src=rss.

suggests, Hackett made his film with the sensibilities—and sensitivities—of white people in mind:

This is my lifelong experience, so each situation in the film is real to my friends or me. It was my opportunity to let white people into the black culture, to see a black world from a white person's perspective. Lindsay, Jenn Gotzon's character, allowed me to discuss situations I'd experienced of racism or discrimination. If you have a different gift or talent, the church doesn't always accept it. The film is about understanding that the church is made up of different kinds of people.⁴¹²

In this interview, one can see the twin forces at work in Hackett's approach to race and racism.

On the one hand, he embraces his right to tell his own story—including, as all stories do, his experiences with systemic oppression *and* his experiences with interpersonal slights that might or might not have anything to do with his identity as a Black Christian man. In doing so, Hackett affirms his own story, and his own experiences of racism, as a valid iteration of what Robert Bellah called “Sheilaism”—a private and personal journey toward salvation and communion with God that is not just different than others’, but totally unique to oneself.⁴¹³ If American evangelicalism is a collection of individuals’ personal experiences of God, Hackett’s telling his story adds a needed voice to express how racism affects his daily walk with God. On the other hand, leaning into the individualizing bent of American evangelicalism, Hackett tempers his critique of systemic racism by drawing a parallel between racism and all the other ways one might be “different,” from preferring certain styles of worship over others to having a different love language or talent.

⁴¹² Ibid.

⁴¹³ Robert Bellah, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 221.

Brother White

Like *Love Different*, 2012's *Brother White* is the product of a faith-based film company owned by a person who writes, produces, and stars in his own films. Unlike *Love Different*, *Brother White* was one of over 30 feature films produced by evangelical film production and distribution juggernaut Pure Flix Entertainment (rebranded in 2021 as Pinnacle Peak Pictures) when it premiered on the Gospel Music Channel (GMC) on March 11, 2012.⁴¹⁴ With a reported budget of over \$1 million, the film boasted several actors with crossover appeal to a non-faith-based audience, including Jackée Harry (*227*, *Sister, Sister*), Reginald VelJohnson (*Family Matters*, *Die Hard*), Ray Wise (*Twin Peaks*, *Robocop*), and gospel artist BeBe Winans. Pure Flix founder David A.R. White plays the film's eponymous character, (Brother) James White, and his then-wife Andrea Logan plays his character's wife, Lily White. While the film had a direct-to-television release, it reached an impressive ranking of 841 on the Internet Movie Database's MOVIEmeter in May and June of 2012, just months after its premiere.⁴¹⁵

Brother White tells the story of a low-level megachurch pastor uprooting his family for the chance to be the head pastor of a small, financially-strapped Black church in Atlanta, Georgia. With the help of a local ne'er-do-well, Eze 8, the Whites organize a gospel concert that raises sufficient money for the church—and proves their fidelity to their new community. David A.R. White plays James White, a white, self-absorbed assistant pastor at a Los Angeles megachurch. The church's head pastor—heavy-handedly named Johnny Kingman, played by an unctuous Ray Wise—brags to his congregation about his many blessings from God, including his

⁴¹⁴ Richard L. Eldredge, "Emmy Winner Jackee Dishes on Brother White, Shooting in Atlanta," *Atlanta*, March 9, 2012, <https://www.atlantamagazine.com/article/emmy-winner-jackee-dishes-on-brother-white-sh/>.

⁴¹⁵ "Brother White," *IMDbPro*, accessed September 20, 2022, <https://pro.imdb.com/title/tt2171809/>.

“brand new Ferrari” and the “millions” of followers he has amassed through his televised sermons. Despite his wife’s insistence that she loves her shared life with him, James is not content. “I just wish that God would see fit to give me a piece of that,” he tells her, looking up at the stars.

James’s chance for upward mobility comes sooner than he could have anticipated. After several embarrassing gaffes at his current church job—accidentally knocking over church stage props and putting a hole in a cardboard cutout of Jesus is the final straw—Kingman hands him his relocation assignment: head (and only) pastor of a small church in Atlanta, Georgia. The Whites’ encounter with race and class difference begins as soon as they exit the airport to find church member waiting to drive them to the parsonage. A Black man wearing a visor and driving a pick-up truck introduces himself as “Deacon Hill from Divine Tabernacle Apostolic Church.” Lily and daughter Emma exchange uneasy looks as they realize there is not sufficient seating in the cab of the truck. Failing to pick up on the family’s discomfort, Deacon Hill (VelJohnson) buoyantly assures them that the trip in the truck’s open bed will be “like a hay ride!” Their new church-provided home is similarly unfit for them, with dripping ceilings, old wallpaper, and no refrigerator.

If the Whites are uneasy about how they will fit into their new surroundings, they are not alone: church organist and worship director Veena Sharpe (Jackée Harry) does not hide her skepticism that a white man from California could offer anything useful to the inner-city church in its hour of need. Veena’s worries are borne out during White’s disastrous first sermon, during which he attempts to mimic the prosperity preaching stylings of his former boss to the disgust of his sparsely-populated congregation. Even if White has potential as a preacher, though, he might not have time to realize it. In a scene depicting a cunning local banker, Jacob Martin (Rif

Hutton), conducting business on the same Sunday morning as White's failed sermon, the audience learns that the church also has external forces threatening its future. Martin stands to receive a kickback from developers that will raze the church and install public housing if White is unable to pay the bank \$10,000 in back-owed rent by the following Monday morning.

The church's small staff gathers to brainstorm possibilities for a church fundraiser, deciding together to throw a benefit concert with the most famous performer they can find on short notice. Once again, Veena questions James's ability to use his connections to find a singer that would appeal to their mostly Black, low-income community, but James is undaunted. Despite Veena's accurate read that James's belief in his own connections is overly optimistic, it is James whose connections come through. James had already made the acquaintance of local man-about-town Ezee 8 (Grifon Aldren), who introduced himself to James as a record producer (an exchange that heavily implied Ezee's job title was a front for less savory dealings). After exhausting his other leads, James enters a local bar to strike a deal with Ezee. Ezee, surrounded by scantily-clad women and drinking alcohol mid-day, agrees to play a game of pool with high stakes: if Ezee wins, James must return home to California. If James wins, Ezee must help him secure an act for the church's benefit concert. Ezee and his friends—judging James on the basis of both his whiteness and general squareness—are shocked to find that James is an excellent pool player. He wins the match and invites Ezee to join his family for dinner. The Whites' innocent optimism seemingly wins over Ezee as the family serves him macaroni and cheese with brie and shows genuine interest in him. Ezee comes through with his end of the bargain, securing gospel singer BeBe Winans as a headliner for the concert.

While the church appears to be close to succeeding in its mission to raise sufficient funds to prevent the bank's foreclosure, several obstacles remain in its way. Martin, the banker—

fearing the concert will prevent him from cashing in on a new public housing project—bribes Ezeel into serving as a security guard for the concert in order to steal the church's ticket money at the end of the night. White also faces challenges closer to home: his teenage daughter, Emma, is so unhappy in Atlanta that she asks Veena's teenage son, Willy, to drive her to the train station so that she can return to Los Angeles by herself. On the night of the concert, James must personally intervene to stop Emma from running away and stop Ezeel from stealing the church's influx of cash. Both encounters are central to James's personal transformation. His daughter finally breaks through his relentless quest for upward mobility, reminding him that his family—the life goal he most wanted to achieve—is already here, waiting to be cherished by him. Buoyed by this insight, James turns his attention to Ezeel, who sits in the church basement, conflicted about whether to follow through on Martin's request. James correctly guesses that Ezeel is Veena's long-lost oldest son, who left the family in favor of a life of petty crime after his father's death. After James suggests to him that God wants him to stop taking the “Ezeel” route in life, Ezeel hands over the concert proceeds to James and joins in with the church choir for an upbeat rendition of “His Eye is on the Sparrow.”

As James basks in the event's success, he is faced with one last challenge: proving that he has, indeed, learned from his time in Atlanta. When one of Jonnie Kingman's minions approaches him after the concert, telling James that his accomplishments in keeping this small church afloat have earned him an assistant pastor spot back in the Los Angeles megachurch, he initially accepts the offer. It is Delsey—James's meek secretary who has struggled to speak her mind throughout the film—that finally finds her voice in order to convince James to stay. Telling James that she and the other congregants are “more alive because of you,” she implores him to continue serving their church as head pastor. In a climactic final scene, locals line up around the

block to enter the church the following Sunday morning, each one stopping to tell James White how much of a difference he has already made in their lives. After a successful sermon that proves how much James has changed since his first attempt at preaching, Veena begrudgingly thanks James for both saving the church and bringing her eldest son back into the fold. The film cuts to black as James, Veena, and Lily sit in a pew together and share a laugh.

Just as Hackett's film worked out many of his own lived experiences, David A.R. White's *Brother White* deals with themes White has wrestled with in his own life. Raised Mennonite in Kansas, White writes in his memoir that his pastor father required him to spend his first year after high school training to become a pastor at Moody Bible Institute before he would offer his blessing for White to pursue his own passions. After his requisite year at Moody, White moved to Los Angeles, intent on becoming a movie star despite having only seen a handful of films in his first 18 years of life. After years of striving to break into the industry, White realized he had become "blinded by my own ambitions and self-serving interpretations of my God-given dream."⁴¹⁶ White only achieved success in his founding of Pure Flix because, he writes, he was finally "ready to ask God what he wanted for my life." Just as his character James White lost sight of his family responsibilities in his obsession with achieving greater status at work, much of White's memoir deals with the question of how to discern whether one's dream is God-given and how to ensure one does not turn their professional aspirations into an idol that distracts from their faith or their family. As with most of David A.R. White's films, White takes on the role of a pastor—his father's dream for his future, and character James White's dream in *Brother White*. The film's protagonist achieves his dream—but in a much different context than he had imagined. So too does White contend that he did, ultimately, become an evangelist in his father's

⁴¹⁶ David A.R. White, *Between Heaven and Hollywood: Chasing Your God-Given Dream* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 120.

image—by pursuing faith-based filmmaking that “influence[s] the global culture for Christ through media.”⁴¹⁷

Racialized Excess and the Comic Potential of Repetition

Both *Love Different* and *Brother White* create moments of humor out of white and Black characters’ diverging expectations of personal space and personal comportment in public. At times in each film, it is the Black character whose behavior is in “excess” of staid white propriety. At other times, the white character behaves in a way seemingly intended to mimic “Black” behaviors—only to be poorly received by Black people. The repetition of these encounters in which white people fail to “get” or embody the liveliness of their Black counterparts builds and repeats over the course of both films, ultimately resulting in the destabilization of that dynamic—typically in the direction of affirming the white protagonist’s ability to keep up with their new cultural milieu. In both films, the white protagonist has a triumphant moment where they receive the nod of acceptance from a Black person or group, signaling their status as more than a racist automaton. In two films about white protagonists encountering Black cultures and realizing their own limitations, their personal growth and ultimate acceptance in Black communities remains the central emotional journey.

In *Love Different*, Lindsay and Neque’s very first interaction demonstrates the difference in their approach to strangers. A split screen follows the two parking in their workplace’s parking lot and walking toward the building’s entrance. Suddenly, the white bar dividing the two screens disappears: they have entered the same frame. After smiling politely at each other, Lindsay enters the building as Neque hods open the door. Inside the elevator, their shared sense of

⁴¹⁷ Ibid, 139.

decorum evaporates. Neque pulls out his cell phone, plugs in his headphones, and begins rapping loudly in a kind of performance for Lindsay. Lindsay jumps in surprise and presses her back against the corner of the elevator as Neque dances and sings increasingly close to her. The audience is made to share Lindsay's perspective, at least aurally—we cannot hear the music Neque is playing, but rather his loud singing reverberating in the silence of the elevator, as Lindsay hears it. One also gets the sense that Neque understands this behavior is not work appropriate: when the elevator doors open on their floor, Neque straightens his suit and walks out, switching deftly into a work call. Lindsay stands on the threshold of the room looking shellshocked.

Brother White also features Black characters that have different—coded excessive—personal boundaries than its white protagonists. The film's clearest source of comic relief comes in the form of the church handyman, Clayton Hamilton (Ken Sagoes). Clayton introduces himself through a jump scare from both the audience's and the Whites' perspective, popping his head through their home's open window and shouting, "Good mornin'! Y'all must be the Whites!" As Clayton hangs on the open windowsill, he promises to "scare up" a "freezerator" for the Whites, who arrived to find their new home missing key appliances. After Clayton takes his leave, the camera lingers with mother Lily and daughter Emma White, who are processing this new development. Emma tells her mother, voice dripping with disdain, "A man named Clayton who just crawled through the second story window is going to 'scare us up' a 'freezerator.' And you wonder why my generation gets tattoos." Lily does not need clarification on this nebulous parallel. As hard as it is for Emma's parents to fathom young people's culture, this new culture—encapsulated in Clayton's lack of boundaries and strange turns of phrase—is much more foreign to all of them.

If both movies have moments characterizing Black characters by their behaviors coded to be in excess of whiteness, both also flip the script to parody white characters as having a relative lack of charisma in comparison to the norms of Black culture. Repeatedly, both films make a joke out of their white characters' stiffness, discomfort, and general uncool factor when faced with everyday aspects of their new Black friends' lives. In *Brother White*, James White's most significant culture clashes occur with choir director Veena, who assumes that his taste in music will not fit the needs of the church. When James claims that he can drum up a famous act for the church's benefit concert, Veena mockingly replies, "Oooh yes, I just *love* the Sheboygan Merry Rainbow Singers!" A crucial difference between *Brother White* and *Love Different*, however, is that James White always proves wrong the assumptions Black characters make about him. Not only does James manage to secure Gospel singer BeBe Winans for the event, but he also wins a series of pool games against Ezee 8 at a local bar after Ezee assumes he will easily trounce the pastor. If his new community assumes he is a stiff, mechanical caricature of a bland white person, James is both aware of this stereotype and able to use it to his advantage, undercutting any potential that stereotypes about his whiteness could truly other or objectify him.

Love Different, on the other hand, depicts white characters as being largely unaware of any potential negative assessments Black people might have about them. Lindsay, especially, remains naively optimistic about her own ability to understand and assimilate into Black culture despite obvious deficits—from her ignorance about common phrases (when a friend tells Neque he'll holler at him later, Lindsay asks what Neque did to offend him) to her penchant for lingering on the edges of any dancing, singing, or handshakes that take place throughout the film. Moreover, the film suggests that she is not alone: during a one-day "Blackness for White People" class Neque signs Lindsay up for, Lindsay's fellow middle-aged classmates bumble through

efforts to dance to a beat, refrain from clutching their purses when a Black person passes by, and master a multi-step handshake. The very fact that this class exists within the logic of the film suggests a kind of mechanicity on the part of white people: so many of them fail at basic interracial interactions that this one-day course exists and continues to attract new enrollees. Nor do Lindsay's fellow students have the sense to be ashamed of their cultural gaps; when the group attempts to identify the Black man in a photograph (it is, in fact, a generic stock photo), only Lindsay has the sense to look bashful when she suggests he might be Tyler Perry. Indeed, the repetition in Lindsay's journey toward greater understanding of her Black coworkers' lives demonstrates the way the comedy of mechanical repetition—of, say, a white person's cultural ignorance—can ultimately destabilize that repeated position. Even so, Lindsay never successfully displays an ability to get out from under certain stereotypes about her whiteness. Toward the end of the film, Lindsay hosts her new coworkers for dinner and a movie at her home, but all of her training has failed to teach her how to season the casserole she offers them. As the film's title and thesis statement both suggest, Black and white people's cultural differences do not need to be paved over, but understood and appreciated.

Just as repetition can reinforce or destabilize assumptions about a comic subject, the slipperiness of signifiers regarding racialized "excess" is part and parcel of comedy. In her analysis of Bergson's theory of comic mechanicity, Alenka Zupančič argues that the comic formula does not depend on the clear separation between automatism and vitality; instead, these qualities have a flexible relationship to any given signifier. The signifier of the body, for example, can evoke life, flow, and vitality in relation to the inert nature of clothes, but can also be coded as rigid and stultifying in relation to the vitality of the soul. As Zupančič writes, "Comedy is a constant reversing of the two series: now we laugh at a (physical) slip that

undermines dignity, now we laugh at a dignity that strives to control such slips at all costs. We could even say that what is comical is this reversibility as such.”⁴¹⁸

Perhaps the most significant moment of comic-coded slippage between expectations of “white” behavior and “Black” behavior comes in the form of Lindsay attempting to “act Black” toward a rude store employee. In this scene, Lindsay faces racial prejudice solo for the first time—and fails to live up to the moment. She enters a Christian book store to buy a co-worker’s sister a baby shower gift, armed with what she assumes is Neque’s credit card, but which is actually his relative’s EBT card. From the moment she enters the store, she is subjected to microaggressions from a store employee, a young white woman who introduces herself as BoneQuisha and presumptuously telling Lindsay that she loves “mixed babies.” BoneQuisha, we learn, saw Lindsay and Neque in the parking lot and assumed they were a married couple. Unlike Neque, who takes racial microaggressions in stride and calmly moves on, Lindsay seems to be at her breaking point when BoneQuisha tells her the EBT card has been declined. After BoneQuisha runs the card a second time and the card is once again declined, Lindsay flies into a larger-than-life tantrum, inflected with attempted African American Vernacular English (AAVE), hand-clapping, and flailing. “You’ve been getting on my last nerves ever since I came into this place with your stupid broke machine,” Lindsay says, snapping her fingers. “Run my EBT card *right now*! Do you want me to get a manag-ah? I’d be happy to get a manag-ah! You want me to get a manag-ah—JUST RUN MY CARD RIGHT NOW, MA’AM! Hello, Ma’am! Bona-bona-Quisha, I NEED YOU TO RUN MY CARD RIGHT NOW.”

The yelling and flailing has somehow managed to summon Neque and his wife, Lisa, who jump in to save Lindsay from herself. Lindsay tries to shake off Neque’s gentle suggestion

⁴¹⁸ Alenka Zupančič, *The Odd One In: On Comedy* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007), 113.

that they walk away, instead yelling at BoneQuisha once again, “I am not gonna stand for your discrimination anymore. Just because his credit card’s not your average major credit card does not mean that you can embarrass him!” Neque grabs Lindsay by the torso and removes her from the checkout counter, limbs still flailing. “Do you not understand what America means? It means FREEDOM! FREEDOM!” she calls over her shoulder. Black and white patrons and store employees in the background look around, aghast. In a moment of absurd physical comedy, Lindsay flails so hard that she and Neque crash into the checkout counter. Neque replies, “Will you stop? We were free for 100 years now!” He calmly pays off BoneQuisha, who then criticizes him for offering her a tip of only three dollars. Through this interaction, Neque decides that BoneQuisha is indeed as “ignorant” as Lindsay suspected.

Lest the viewer fail to recognize that Lindsay’s fit was an attempt to “act Black,” when Neque asks a slightly calmer Lindsay what is wrong with her, her response is to yell “Thug LIFE!” while gesticulating wildly. Neque and Lisa do not question that Lindsay’s anger came from the right place—Lisa consolingly assures Lindsay that she put BoneQuisha “in her place.” But the couple nevertheless take the opportunity to explain to Lindsay that her behavior—rather than emulating Black culture—was supremely white in the sense that a Black person could not have gotten away with such a display. Rehashing the point from Mr. Chamberlain’s initial “Black people test,” Lisa and Neque agree that they would have walked away from, not engaged in, a potential confrontation with the white store clerk.

Lisa: Girl, let that be Neque up in there talking to that woman like that.

Neque: [acting it out] Whaaat? Whole police force woulda been out there waiting on me. Outside, guns drawn, bazookas, tanks, everything.

Lisa: Protests!

Neque: ‘It’s the brotha!’ Protests!

Lindsay: But you had every right to be angry at her!

Neque: Listen, white people, y'all can just get away with certain things that Black people can't. It is what it is, man. It is what it is.

In this scene, one sees the very slippage that leads Zupančič to argue that Bergson's binary of mechanicity and liveliness is too simplistic. Here, we see a woman whose name is BoneQuisha but whose skin is white and whose interaction with a white woman she presumes to be in an interracial relationship is suffused with her own racism. Lindsay, a white woman feeling the secondhand sting of racial prejudice for the first time, responds with an outsized and racist understanding of how a Black person would react in the same situation—to the disgust of the Black patrons in the background of the scene. It is Neque and his wife who impose order upon Lindsay's excess—but who also affirm that her reaction was justified. One might interpret this scene in a variety of ways. Is it funny because it reveals how far Lindsay's assessment of what it means to be Black is from the reality of how careful Black people must be in public to avoid racist violence? Is it a naturalization of racial boundaries—wherein Lindsay looks ridiculous attempting to use the speech patterns and gestures that would be more “appropriate” coming from a Black person? Whose behavior in this scene might be read to be that of an automaton, and whose springs from vitality and flow? Ultimately, the message a viewer takes home about the boundaries of racialized behavior might be most dependent on their preconceived notions about racial difference.

If these films' messages about the differences between Black and white people's speech and behavior remain open to interpretation, both films make a point of depicting the white protagonist's explicit acceptance into their new Black community. In each film, this acceptance is demonstrated through the white and Black characters' ability to share a joke with one another without fear of alienation. In *Brother White*, Veena settles into a pew with James and Lily after

the congregation has filtered out, congratulating him on a successful sermon. She thanks James for what he has done for the church but warns him that the void left by Ezee's return to church will inevitably be filled by a new local powerbroker. When James demonstrates his trademark winning naïveté and responds, "I guess...I'll invite him to dinner, too," Veena responds, "You so stupid!" She slaps him playfully on the arm and the three characters laugh—suggesting that this is a loving taunt—as the screen cuts to black and the credits roll. The final scene of *Love Different* features the launch of Neque and Lindsay's client's nonprofit, but Lindsay is running late. As her new coworkers stand around and joke that she has learned Black culture so thoroughly that she now runs later than they do, Lindsay rushes in. Hesitantly, she makes this same joke: "I was just...trying to fit in?" Her coworker Greg laughs and says, "Ohh, now she got 'Black people always coming in late' jokes. I see you, Lindsay." As the group shares a toast to "loving different," Lindsay starts a chant of "Heyyy, heyyy"—a gathering call for Black people that Neque had demonstrated for her earlier in the film but warned she was not ready to try—and her coworkers finally join in. The screen fades to white on Lindsay's triumphant face.

The Supraethnic Viability of Whiteness as God's Will

The theme of white protagonists' acceptance into and mastery of nonwhite cultures is not limited to these films' closing scenes; the plot of each film is predicated on the assumption that white people can enter Black spaces at will and, indeed, have important lessons to teach their Black counterparts. In both films, the question of how or whether the white protagonist will gain access to a Black community hinges seemingly wholly on the question of whether the white protagonist wishes to do so. Lindsay has presumably been hired by her new company's CEO, but her new coworkers' surprise at her appearance suggests that they were not involved in the hiring process. Later, Lindsay tells Neque that she sought out this job specifically for "the opportunity

to engage and learn about different people” from her “normal friends.” Similarly, James White’s decision to take the head pastor position at his new church is born solely out of his desire to lead his own congregation. While the machinations behind how James’s California megachurch would be in charge of appointing a pastor for an apostolic church in Georgia are never elucidated, the Whites’ tepid reception by their new congregants suggests the church’s members were not kept in the loop about the pastor search process. This unquestioned, unidirectional cultural encounter mirrors Said’s description of Orientalism, wherein “a certain freedom of intercourse was always the Westerner’s privilege; because his was the stronger culture, he could penetrate, he could wrestle with, he could give shape and meaning to the great Asiatic mystery.”⁴¹⁹ Because neither film questions the white protagonist’s prerogative to enter and engage a Black community, both reify a power dynamic that privileges white mastery and white personal growth over the opinions, desires, and competencies of the film’s Black characters.

The narratives of both *Brother White* and *Love Different* make clear that whether the protagonist stays in their new community long-term or returns to their old, racially segregated life is a decision that rests fully on their own shoulders. Throughout *Love Different*, Lindsay maintains a connection with her friend and former coworker Sarah, who implores her to come back to their old workplace. Even when Lindsay demonstrates cultural incompetence so significant that her boss has to task a coworker with “teaching” her “the Black culture,” the stakes of her training are not keeping or losing her job, but rather learning and growing personally. In *Brother White*, the Whites’ tenure at their new church is in greater jeopardy, but those stakes are determined by external financial factors rather than the congregation’s capacity to accept or reject their new pastor. Indeed, after James White delivers his first sermon to

⁴¹⁹ Said, *Orientalism*, 44.

disastrous effect—with several of the dozen congregants in attendance walking out—Deacon Hill reaffirms his leadership and preaching potential. “We believe in your faith and in your heart, we do. We know that it's gonna work itself out in time,” the deacon assures James, despite having no evidence of James’s skills to back up the assertion. In both films, the white protagonist’s potential for mastery of the necessary skills to succeed at their new position are never in question, despite the protagonist’s incompetency being so blatant that it serves as a continual source of humor.

If, as Said argued, the framework of Christian values as “universal and eternal” is a tool of Orientalism, so too can the supremacy of the Christian God’s master plan underscore hegemonic race hierarchies. Both Lindsay and James are coded as true believers in the Christian God throughout the narrative arcs of *Love Different* and *Brother White*. Moreover, both are portrayed as being guided by God toward their new circumstances. In *Brother White*, when James first receives his new church assignment, his wife is unconvinced. “Did you even read this?” she asks him, rifling through a folder of information about their new church. James sits down with her at their kitchen table, framed family photos in the background indicating how much they will be uprooting. “Yes. But...it’s a church. That needs a pastor.” This is all it takes to convince Lily: “Then Atlanta it is,” she replies, knowing that they must accept God’s call. James’s chosenness is underscored throughout the film, including when James first steps into his new chapel. Walking alone toward the building on a cloudless day, only the patch of sidewalk directly in front of the church doors are sunlit. James steps into the glow and enters the building, quiet music playing as golden light suffuses the room. Once again, James stops in a patch of light and the camera zooms in on James’s golden hand resting on a pew. Later, as his secretary Delsey begs him to stay on as the church’s head pastor, the side of his face is once again bathed in

golden light from the church window. As Richard Dyer has argued, movie lighting has historically “assume[d], privilege[d], and construct[ed] whiteness,” not only because televisual and photographic technologies were developed to capture white skin, but because lighting choices that bathe white faces in glowing light have often served to code white actors as innocent, virtuous, and even angelic.⁴²⁰ *Brother White* depicts James as being lit up from glowing light penetrating the church building at pivotal moments in the film that emphasize his divine chosenness: when he first steps into the chapel, when he receives counsel to remain in Atlanta, and when he takes his place at the pulpit to announce that he has heard the voice of God in this church and knows God would like him to stay on as head pastor. Delsey underscores James’s heavenly power when she tells him, “I feel beautiful! and I’m not the only one around here! We are more *alive* because of you.” God, in other words, was the hand guiding James toward the helm of this church—a hand made visible by the rays of light turning James’s face goldenrod as the Black congregation looks on, smiling and applauding.

Lindsay’s Christian calling in *Love Different* is subtler, but no less influential on the plot of the film than James’s calling in *Brother White*. Small details throughout the film signal Lindsay’s Christian beliefs, from the Christian radio station she plays in her car to her choice to shop at a Christian bookstore. But it is not Lindsay’s personal faith that serves as the emotional pith of the film. Instead, it is Neque’s journey back to God’s embrace—a journey inspired by Lindsay—that ultimately provides emotional catharsis during the film’s climactic “big meeting” scene. Neque’s troubled relationship to his Christian faith is the subject of many of his interactions with his wife, who implores him on multiple occasions to attend church with her. When he and Lindsay run into one of his former church friends, he politely—but hollowly—

⁴²⁰ Richard Dyer, *White: Essays on Race and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 89.

agrees with her that he should stop back in some Sunday morning. It is only when Lindsay gently confronts him—face bathed in white light—about why he no longer goes to church and asks him whether he might miss his personal relationship with God that Neque stops to think about whether this might be true. The next day as he confronts his former church elder—and their firm’s big new client—he proclaims that it was his and Lindsay’s ability to form a friendship through their differences that reminded him of how God’s love is supposed to look. Tears streaming down his face, Neque tells the elder,

I have a wife, and, uh, this woman here helped me understand some things that, sometimes you have to look at the person and figure out what kind of love they need. And my wife, she’s the type of person that she just needs more time spent with her. That’s it, just some more time. Some people, uh, they need to be loved with more discipline. The fact is, you need to take time to just love people the way that they need to be loved. Mr. Harrington, if you want to love these young people, when you get out there and you start your business, if you want to love these young people, you need to love...them...different.

Turning then to Lindsay, Neque says in a half-sob, “I think you were right.... I think...I do miss God. I miss God. I miss him so much.” It is church elder Mr. Harrington that stands up to wrap Neque in an embrace as the screen fades to white. Lindsay, as the virtuous white woman, might have inspired Neque’s return to the Christian fold, but it is he and Mr. Harrington who will use that inspiration to do God’s work into the world.

If God’s divine mission is carried out through both films by an innocent—bordering on naïve—white protagonist, that mission is nevertheless one with gendered limitations. Both Lindsay and James fulfill the stereotype of the angelic white savior bathed in glowing light, whose arrival in their new community makes its members more beautiful, more alive, and more

attuned to God. But Lindsay's success at her new job—putatively the narrative center of *Love Different*—is ultimately irrelevant in light of Neque's more important journey back into God's arms. Thus, both movies successfully underpin white mastery of Black cultures with God's divine authority, but God's plans for the protagonists diverge based on gendered spheres of influence. Lindsay might be white, but her positive influence is ultimately in service of Neque's own flourishing as a newfound man of God.

Conclusion: Possibilities and Limitations of Evangelical Individualism and the “Post-Racial” Imaginary

As scholars of race, religion, and media have demonstrated, concepts of white superiority are often expressed through depictions of the “excessive,” “fanatical,” or “exotic” religious and racial/ethnic Other. This concept is foundational to the supraethnic viability of whiteness—in which white protagonists are invited to experiment with and borrow from “Other” religious traditions and expressions without, as Said writes, losing the upper hand. But another message about race and religion is also being expressed in these films, one identified by scholars of race and American evangelicalism as building on the tradition of personal salvation central to the evangelical tradition. If race-based behavioral differences are the source of humor in these films, the emotional heart of the films is in its characters “overcoming” or demoting these differences in light of their greater, shared membership in what Anthea Butler has called the “Christian race”—a construct by American evangelicals that conflates Christianity with whiteness at the same time as it emphasizes all races' shared mission to accept personal salvation.⁴²¹ While this individualizing bent can have the very real consequence of undermining the role systemic racism

⁴²¹ Anthea Butler, *White Evangelical Racism: The Politics of Morality in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 9.

plays in Americans' lives, it also has the potential to empower Black evangelicals to share their experiences of racism as part of their own individual experience of a sin-filled world. Such individual testimonies do not tell the whole story of how racism works in the United States, but I argue it nevertheless moves the needle on white evangelical racism by contributing to the landscape of stories evangelicals might tell about sin and deliverance.

In both of the films examined here, humor both raises the specter of systemic racism and defuses it. Black people's pervasive fear of the police is a recurring joke in *Love Different*, from Neque pretending to listen to talk radio while he passes a cop to a variety of Black characters teasing Lindsay for believing the police will solve, rather than exacerbate, any given dangerous predicament. Nevertheless, such jokes are always resolved by being dismissed as a personal or cultural quirk—a basic reality that Black people must live with and that nobody, white or Black, has a responsibility to resist. Even when Neque and Lisa tell Lindsay that her outburst in the Christian bookstore is an example of her white privilege, they immediately absolve Lindsay from any follow-up on the matter, with Neque saying, “Listen, white people, y’all can just get away with certain things that Black people can’t. It is what it is, man. It is what it is.” Here, as in other moments throughout the film, Neque diverts an opportunity to address the systemic aspects of racism back to the level of individual responsibility. While acknowledging that white people—as a group, not on individual merit—are afforded the privilege to make a scene in public without risking police violence, Neque skirts conversation of a need for social change by marking his acceptance of things as they are: “it is what it is, man.”

Brother White, too, treats both inner city crime and Black people's fear of the police as fodder for comedy. When James first meets his secretary, Delsey, in the church office building, she assumes he is a traveler that has been carjacked. In another case of misidentification, the

Black waitress at a diner in his new neighborhood greets him with, “Take you order, Officer?” When James insists he is not a policeman, she replies, “Whatever you say, Officer.” Unlike in *Love Different*, none of these jokes is ever unpacked, even if only to dismiss fear of police violence as the cross Black people must bear in this lifetime. Instead, *Brother White* makes its rejection of systemic solutions to problems like poverty and racism explicit by making public housing (and its developers) the villainous would-be usurper of the church’s rightful role in community uplift. In a dramatic exchange with Martin—the banker who will foreclose on the church if they do not make up their missed payments—James gets the last word on the transcendent value of local churches:

Deacon Hill: It’s about the land, isn’t it, Jacob? You’ve got another buyer. Probably wants to put up another pawn shop or liquor store. You’re selling out your community.

Martin: Public housing gives people a roof over their heads.

Deacon Hill: Ah, so it is about another new project. More crime, more despair. And what’s in it for you, Jacob? Another kickback?”

Martin: It will create jobs and inject much-needed capital into the community. Times are changing, Deacon. Besides, what can your tiny little church do?

James: Wait a minute, just hold on. I may not have a mind for big business or, ah, how did you put it—injecting capital into the community? And yes, you’re right, Mr. Martin—times are changing, but the people haven’t. Churches give us a reason to look up and to consider that there’s something out there more meaningful than just ourselves. Who wants to live in a world where everybody just thinks of themselves? That’s what a church can do, Mr. Martin.

Brother White explicitly pits secular, government-funded solutions to problems like poverty against the role of the Christian church. If racial differences can serve as a source of humor,

Brother White is clear in its rejection of the systemic factors that have led to the rampant poverty in this mostly-Black community. In other words, the film echoes the longstanding American evangelical dismissal of racism as a problem whose solution was prayer, not politics. As Pinnacle Peak Pictures will continue to emphasize more clearly in the coming decade through its *God's Not Dead* franchise, *Brother White* presents the evangelical church as the locus for personal transformation whose power is only ever curtailed by government intervention.

Although *Love Different* tells a story that ultimately atomizes the experience of racial prejudice to the level of individual experience that can be reckoned with and healed through God's universal love, the film highlights a way forward in American evangelicals' understanding of race and racism. Hackett's film does contribute to the individualizing narrative that has led so many American evangelicals to reject the reality of systemic racism, but it also claims a space for the perspective of a Black Christian as a valid iteration of the individual journey of a fallen world—specifically, one marred by white racism, even if one sees that racism at the level of the individual. So too does *Love Different* show that a well-meaning, Christian white person can nevertheless harbor racist stereotypes and harm others with her ignorance. In fact, God guides Lindsay to break out of her comfort zone and only uses her to spread the faith once she has reckoned with her own racism.

Much of the humor in *Love Different* shares the pitfalls of the humor in *Brother White*: turning cultural differences, even ones with a systemic provenance, into the butt of a joke. The ability to laugh at cultural differences is the apotheosis of the defanged “post-racial” imaginary—one in which society is not “colorblind,” but rather sees racial differences as ahistorical, traversable, and surface-level. *Brother White* doubles down on this message, explicitly positioning secular and systemic solutions to poverty as the enemy of the Christian

church. Surveying the existing landscape, one might conclude that Christian comedy films simply might not be effective vehicles for changing the opinions of white evangelicals on the problem of racism in America. But for those wondering if there is something worth championing in the existing Pure Flix lineup, I offer that the individualizing, low-budget *Love Different* brings one thing to the table: a story told by a Black evangelical himself—one which does not look away from the reality that Black and white Americans experience daily life differently, and that many of the differences in how Black people move through society are born of racism, whether interpersonal or systemic. It is not much, but it is a story that brings the reality of racism to white evangelicals' TV screens while speaking their language. Perhaps, while they laugh, they will also learn something. Perhaps it might even lead them to love different.

Conclusion

Pastor and author Chase Replogle found himself fighting his own masculine instinct toward sarcasm when he added a joke at pop star Miley Cyrus's expense into an early chapter draft of *The 5 Masculine Instincts*. It sparked a realization. "Sure, the line I had was funny," Replogle recounted on his podcast, *Pastor Writer with Chase Replogle*. "I knew my predominantly 30-something male reader would get a laugh out of it. But what struck me was that it was at her expense—she bore the cost of the joke. I was getting the reward, she paid the price."⁴²² Replogle redoubled his commitment to avoiding "poking fun or taking a comedic swipe at someone" out of his God-given conviction that most popular humor demonstrates humanity's sinful instinct toward "jealousy, mob rule, and insecurity."⁴²³ Replogle issued a clarion call to his listeners:

Go scroll through your Twitter and see just how much we, as Christians, use one another to push ourselves up. We mock another's views, using it to find our place. We poke fun to keep from being made fun of. We hide behind our sarcasm. We turn people into opponents, and positions, and—maybe worst of all—doctrines we disagree with. The rest of us go on mindlessly clicking those little hearts in agreement. We do it all to our own shame, but we do it because it works. Our culture gorges itself on the mocking of others.⁴²⁴

Replogle finds himself between a rock and a hard place. He is part of a subculture that could not agree less with him regarding the role of humor in asserting one's place, turning others into opponents, and doing it all on social media where the clicks and shares from likeminded

⁴²² Chase Replogle, "Not Funny & Not at Another's Expense," *Pastor Writer with Chase Replogle* podcast, March 15, 2019, <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/pastor-writer-conversations-on-reading-writing-and/id1338963839?i=1000431860333>.

⁴²³ Ibid.

⁴²⁴ Ibid.

believers can pile up. Indeed, Replogle’s own friends and colleagues enthusiastically join in the mockery. Conservative evangelical author and radio host Eric Metaxas, for example, has been a featured guest on Replogle’s podcast and has interviewed Replogle on his own *The Eric Metaxas Show*. Metaxas, who served as the editor in chief of humor magazine *The Yale Record* during his undergraduate years, has described *The Babylon Bee*’s cutting satire as “genius” and agreed with its CEO Seth Dillon that conservative Christians are not “punching down” with satire, but “punching back.”⁴²⁵ Metaxas’s series of picture books lionizing Donald Trump, too, describe his political opponents as “awful Swamp Creatures” that “put together a whole caravan of troublemakers to...take over the country.”⁴²⁶ Replogle’s other podcast guests include Reformed evangelical pastor Douglas Wilson, who has argued that satire and ridicule are “inescapable” components of the zero-sum game between “the seed of woman and the seed of the serpent.”⁴²⁷ “It is not *whether* we will ridicule a group,” Wilson writes in *A Serrated Edge: A Brief Defense of Biblical Satire and Trinitarian Skylarking*, “but *which* group we will ridicule.”⁴²⁸ Wise Christians, Wilson contends, will take up the sword of satire to fight the secular “reigning orthodoxy” because they know that only one orthodoxy can reign in any given society, and that theirs is the only correct one.⁴²⁹ If, as Replogle fears, even American evangelical culture is going the way of Cain, it is his own friends who are paving the way.

⁴²⁵ “July 26, 2021,” *The Eric Metaxas Radio Show*, accessed December 14, 2022, <https://metaxastalk.com/podcast/monday-july-26-2021/>. Metaxas also literally punched an anti-Donald Trump protester in 2020. In an email to *Religion Unplugged*, Metaxas offered by way of explanation, “It just happened.” See Paul Glader, “Exclusive: Author Eric Metaxas Admits Punching D.C. Protester And Offers Context,” *Religion Unplugged*, September 3, 2020, <https://religionunplugged.com/news/2020/9/3/exclusive-author-eric-metaxas-admits-punching-protestor-in-dc-and-offers-more-context>.

⁴²⁶ Eric Metaxas, *Donald Builds the Wall* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 2019).

⁴²⁷ Douglas Wilson, *A Serrated Edge: A Brief Defense of Biblical Satire and Trinitarian Skylarking* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2003), 20.

⁴²⁸ Ibid.

⁴²⁹ Ibid., 21.

As this dissertation has shown, humor finds its way into many different forms of American evangelical media. The aims, styles, and targets of that humor vary across media group and genre. Some organizations, like *The Babylon Bee* and Answers in Genesis, employ an antagonistic humor style that clearly lambasts their ideological and political opponents, emotionally incentivizing consumers' continued identification with the "right" side of history. Others, like many of the stand-up comedians featured in this study, look inward to their own foibles as fodder for comedy that nevertheless upholds the goodness of God's design and proper social order. Some types of American evangelical humor cut to the quick. Other types, including the racial encounter comedies of Pure Flix, attempt to push the cultural needle so gently that their jokes may have little to no effect on the ills they seek to redress. In each of the case studies examined in this dissertation, however, humor does the important work of reminding consumers of the boundaries of belief, behavior, and identity that keep their plausibility structures in place. Those consumers that resonate with the reality being presented and maintained through such humor are thus invited into the humor community—a loose coalition of individuals that fall on the same side of the zero-sum game that pits their own values against an imagined other.

Humor works as a religion-building tool because it subtly and powerfully shores up both the ideological boundaries of individuals' sense of the real and reinforces the emotional bonds of being one of the few to truly see life the right way. This tool has been especially powerful for American evangelicals as a relatively non-hierarchical (in terms of denomination, though not individual church or family) and diffuse religious tradition. To ensure that adherents' buy-in to the party line regarding political beliefs, gender roles and sexual practices, and general worldview, American evangelical institutions must offer a product worth consuming. Through the cultivation of a variety of overlapping humor communities that provide consumers with

ideological reassurance and emotional validation, the case studies in this dissertation provide just such a product.

This dissertation only scratches the surface of possibilities raised by a serious consideration of how American evangelicals have used humor in their media sources to cohere around certain political and social issues and to incentivize deep investment among believers. Future works might explore the longer history of this phenomenon or analyze the role of humor in evangelicals' adoption of certain political and social priorities over time. Perhaps another work would consider the dialectic between believers like Replogle who stress prudence and restraint in their approach to cultural battles and those, like his more outspoken podcast guests, that understand their role as believers to involve the quick-witted and proactive take-down of opposing viewpoints. In any case, it is my hope that *Splitting Sides* offers an early look at the work humor does in contemporary American evangelical coalition-building and priority-setting. Whether one primarily understands American evangelicalism as an alliance of church and parachurch institutions; as a web of media, discourse, or humor communities; or even as a marketplace of ideas, there is no denying that their religion-building is, indeed, a funny business.

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