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THE RELIGION OF FEAR: CONSERVATIVE EVANGELICALS, IDENTITY, AND ANTILIBERAL POP¹

When planes failed to fall from the sky, when global computer networks did not unravel, when hordes did not take to the streets, pitchforks and torches raised, to battle over canned goods, much of the United States breathed sighs of disinterest. With the passing of the "Y2K," a particularly public episode in the history of catastrophism, some wondered if American speculation about the end of the world (or, at the very least, of society as we know it) was but a passing fancy of the late twentieth-century imagination or a crisis of confidence in technology that, once addressed, was safely sublimated. And yet of course there were the planes that did come careening down from the clouds, into buildings and onto a field. To many Americans, such as Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson (those old warhorses of the Christian Right), the two episodes – one imagined and one brutally real – were linked through a conservative evangelical sensibility whereby such events are understood as evidence of an apocalyptic plot unfolding inexorably.

Discourses about geopolitics too often trade in abstractions, even as their realities are refracted in local, specific circumstances. Conservative evangelicals in the United States have responded to the political transitions of recent decades not only in overtly political ways but also through the creation of popular entertainments that, though not always directly, serve the ends of political or cultural pedagogy. Signs of evangelical politics abound in public spaces: they are found on road signs along American highways, in literatures distributed in public places, in warnings and jeremiads of all forms. Some of these pronouncements are funded by major organizations, while others are the work of lone Christians with material resources and a bone to pick with liberalism.

The sensibility underlying these iterations of piety is ripe with references to hellfire and damnation, none of which will surprise even a casual observer of American religion: these festoon many a book cover, church sign ("Church on Fire!" or "Church Aflame!"), and newsletter; they embellish web pages and DVDs; they are both convention and curiosity. Each instantiation of this rhetoric

¹ This essay is taken from a book-length manuscript I am currently writing.

or imagery draws from a common symbolic pool – one which partakes equally of the thunder of prophetic religion and of America’s love affair with spectacular violence – yet there exists no country road which links them all together. Further, there seems to be no overt politics in these flashes of evangelical resistance. Nonetheless, these general impulses and images can be manipulable for political purposes. The fearful and the demonic have surfaced regularly in American evangelicalism, each time in a “fear regime” that has its own politics. A “fear regime” refers to the intersection of these political engagements with emotional registers of interpretation and perception. It is due largely to the sense of urgency conveyed in the emotional registers of these narratives that their political dimensions can be so effectively transmitted and appropriated by audiences and consumers. A “fear regime” thus functions closely to the “episteme” in Michel Foucault’s *The Order of Things*, a culturally- or politically-produced conception of “truth” which ties together and grounds other social discourses. It also resembles William Reddy’s “emotional regime,” which he defines as a “set of normative emotions and the official rituals, practices, and emotives that express and inculcate them; a necessary underpinning of any stable political regime.”²

While the popular creations discussed below do not generate discourses which directly support a particular type of political administration or class of political elites, they do draw upon emotional discourses – those of evangelicalism and those of genre horror or the popular culture of fright – in order to commend a specific range of cultural, behavioral, and affective responses to the socio-political issues it identifies as most pressing. The cultural politics of recent decades have thus given birth to a particularly rich and powerful fear regime, which I call the Religion of Fear, situated at the intersection of popular entertainment, conservative politics, and evangelicalism’s complicated negotiation of its own identity. Below I describe this impulse, paying particular attention to the way evangelicalism’s popular narrations of the fearful and demonic capture its shifting political sensibilities.

Among the most important dimensions of political religions is their role in political pedagogy. Conservative evangelicalism has transformed American politics in recent decades, working not just through conventional channels but through subcultures or alternate modes of will-formation. These processes are often manifested in explicitly conservative popular entertainments that embody the New Christian Right’s (NCR) engagements with domestic and global politics. These creations – *Left Behind* novels, Hell Houses, anti-rock/rap censorship, and evangelical comics – disseminate evangelical political norms (specifically a powerful form of anti-liberalism) through narrative representations of fear and evil. They reveal that conservative American evangelicals negotiate their anxieties about both domestic and global politics through representations of their

² William Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 129. See Michel Foucault’s *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994).

"others" that are couched in discourses of fear and evil.

I focus on "conservative evangelicalism" for a number of reasons. While many of the practitioners discussed herein do embrace theological tenets associated with Protestant fundamentalism, the term "fundamentalism" has been overused to such a degree – both in scholarship and in media – that it now lacks sufficient analytical precision. "Evangelicalism" on its own casts too broad a net, for the narratives I analyze are alien to many who identify themselves in this way. Not all evangelicals are conservative, in other words, and there are also several degrees of conservatism that exist within evangelicalism. Further, what I call the Religion of Fear is also embraced by conservative Pentecostals (some of whom are Latino/a), for whom material evil in general (and Satan in particular) is a very real presence. Pentecostals are distinct – historically, theologically, and ritually – from, for example, Southern Baptists; yet to the degree that they share a common religious lineage which runs through the heyday of American revivalism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and insofar as their socio-political worldview is frequently one that is shared and conservative, I refer to them in common with the term "conservative evangelical."

Evangelicalism and the Culture of Fear

It is darkly appropriate to be writing about fear in this political moment. Amid the unrelenting flow of information to which citizens are now inured, there is an expectation of suddenness, a suspicion that somewhere in the tide of news clippings, updates, special reports, graphs, grids, polls, and extended coverages, an event or breaking news will foretell a new terror, accident, disease, or horrible wrongdoing. We live on guard now, as various color-coding systems inform us of the relative toxicity of our air or the degree to which we are imminently at risk of a terrorist attack. Governmental agencies have been generated to address this fear, this anxiety. It is assiduously documented in various media, and it shapes our consciousness, whether we know it or not.³

Conservative evangelical culture in the United States has thrived under these conditions. The popular entertainments of the Religion of Fear exemplify the

³ Sources that have shaped my thinking on cultures of fear include: Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003); Gregory S. Camp, *Selling Fear: Conspiracy Theories and End-Times Paranoia* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 1997); Mary Douglas & Aaron Wildavsky, *Risk and Culture: An Essay on the Selection of Technical and Environmental Dangers* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1983); Barry Glassner. *The Culture of Fear: Why Americans Are Afraid of the Wrong Things* (New York: Basic Books, 1999); Robert Goldberg, *Enemies Within: The Culture of Conspiracy in Modern America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001); Corey Robin, *Fear: The History of a Political Idea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); and a special issue of Social Research devoted to the subject, Vol. 71: No. 4 (Winter 2004).

links between the political programs of the NCR and the emotional or psychological effects of the growth of evangelical media cultures, a link which is made firmer by the ubiquity of fear in public political cultures. These representations of fear and evil are not only central to conservative evangelicalism's political self-understanding in the contemporary United States, they are also integral to the production of this religious culture's identity, self-understandings, representations, and cultural/political ambitions more broadly.

The conservative engagement with popular culture aims to generate an experience of fear in its primarily adolescent audience. This experience emerges through narratives couched in a representational framework and a discourse linked explicitly to a specific range of political concerns. It is through these processes that a distinct understanding of apocalyptic history is articulated, that particular moral and political codes are dramatized, and that a specific form of evangelical identity is maintained and negotiated.

Contemporary conservatism has thrived in part because conservative evangelicals have long recognized the importance of political pedagogy. By focusing on how political norms are taught, how a political worldview is shaped and transmitted, conservatives have helped to ensure their relevance and longevity. Using multiple strategies, of which the popular entertainments of the Religion of Fear is one, conservative evangelicals have linked the deeply felt, experiential religion of American evangelicalism with a specific set of political norms and social issues.

The Religion of Fear is not a particular community of practitioners, nor is it a social movement; I use the term instead to refer to the specific combination of cultural and political conservatism, popular entertainments, and the formation of identity in conservative evangelical culture. As practitioners engage their political circumstances, they constitute themselves through the production and negotiation of experiences of fear and representations of the demonic. These processes reveal much about the labile nature of evangelical identity, about the cultural grounding of conservative evangelical politics, and about the shape of evangelical youth cultures in the new millennium.

But why fear and why now? The marriage of Christianity and fear in the United States is no shocking one. Indeed, the two have coexisted throughout our national history, surfacing during periods of especial anxiety and yielding discourses overflowing with what James Morone has called "a thousand angry thou-shalt-nots."⁴ In Puritan New England, during the Great Awakenings, in the Nativist encounter with the immigrant Other, or in early fundamentalist antimodernism, American Protestants gripped by terrors responded to their fearful Others by producing interpretations – theological and political – of their

⁴ James Morone. *Hellfire Nation: The Politics of Sin in American History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), p. x.

surroundings and circumstances which, at least in their understandings, shored up their identities and preserved some degree of social stability.

Three factors distinguish the contemporary Religion of Fear from previous fear regimes. First, the conservative evangelical culture which produces and engages the politics of fear is committed to (and reliant upon) a declension narrative specific to this moment in American political culture. This narrative makes the perceived radicalism of the 1960s a touchstone, a moment when a previously safe and stable "Christian America" came under siege from the forces of secularism and moral permissiveness. Second, this incarnation of evangelical fear is far more explicitly politicized than its predecessors, dramatizing and indicting not just a range of personal and theological errors (which may have political resonance) but specific conceptions of, for example, the state, citizenship, and public policy. Finally, this fear regime is distinctive in the ubiquity of popular culture therein. In previous fear regimes popular culture has played a role and on occasion served as a vehicle for theologies of fear and redemption. In the Religion of Fear, however, popular creations constitute the substance of identity construction. Indeed, the rise of the NCR in the 1970s overlapped with the expansion of evangelical pop culture. While these entertainments have rarely been explicitly politicized, in recent decades it has become more common to discern the work of religio-political identity construction therein.

Post-Vietnam Evangelicalism

Though some of the Religion of Fear's creations have roots in earlier decades, its narrations of evil and cultural decline were catalyzed in the 1990s by an intensified anti-liberalism (and to some degree anti-statism) in American politics broadly.⁵ This anti-liberalism is a complicated subject. For the most part, conservative political activists – among whom must be included conservative evangelicals – regard "liberalism" not so much as a product of the liberal tradition of political philosophy, but rather as an indigenous American political tradition (affiliated with the Democratic party, union activism, a preference for administrative solutions to political problems, and links with various strains of identity politics) that is often conflated with "the Left." However, the critical discourses directed at this rather broad category often decry "liberalism" for reasons that suggest certain features of liberal political philosophy as well. In these litanies of resentment one can detect disgruntlement with excessively individualist conceptions of citizenship, with restrictions on political speech or activity (which, on quasi-Rawlsian grounds, assert that religions in public yield divisiveness), or with a system of governance which seems to work counter to the principle of subsidiarity, whereby local initiatives are preferable to statist

⁵ 1995 marked the publication of the first Left Behind novel and the first marketing of Hell Houses.

ones. Though this critical discourse – which also contains echoes of populism – has been honed by the NCR since the 1970s, I do not mean to suggest that conservative evangelicals are oriented primarily toward liberal political theory. Yet insofar as American liberal constitutionalism has been shaped by this theory, this resonance is analytically suggestive. Liberalism in the sense evangelicals use it is a social reality, one whose policies and institutions have yielded cultural changes which must be rolled back; this social force also, in its critics' estimation, seeks to depoliticize its detractors through an excessively narrow or coercive conception of political life.

During the 1990s, as this antiliberalism flourished, there was a restructuring of both American evangelicalism (which, in the wake of Pat Robertson's disastrous 1988 bid for the presidency, shifted its focus from national campaigning to local, grassroots organizing) and the broader contours of American politics. Americans entered the 1990s buoyed by an optimism which regarded the major ideological and cultural conflict of the century – between Soviet communism and liberal democracy – as having ended. The book of history had been closed; democracy and civility had triumphed over autocracy and corruption; what conflicts remained could be resolved through increasingly efficient military operations; and politics would consist henceforth of procedural and technical adjustments to a basically sound system.⁶ Yet everywhere this confidence was challenged: in the radical democracy discourses of post-communist Eastern Europe, which seemed to mock American democracy's hollowness; in the disquieting spectacles of the 1992 Rodney King riots in Los Angeles and the ATF raid on the Branch Davidian compound in 1993; in the sudden prominence of survivalist and militia movements during the mid-1990s (many of whom embraced the white supremacist creed Identity Christianity); in protracted ethnic conflicts in the former Yugoslavia and in Rwanda, among other places; and in Timothy McVeigh's bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City (which he regarded as an explicit reprisal against the federal government for its actions at Waco).⁷

⁶ See Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?," *The National Interest* (Summer 1989). This sensibility recalls the spirit of 1950s political theorists who exuded a similar confidence in their era's "polyarchy." See Robert Dahl's *A Preface to Democratic Theory* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1956).

⁷ On the King riots and their implications for American democracy see, among other sources, Ronald N. Jacobs, Jeffrey C. Alexander, and Steven Seidman, eds. *Race, Media, and the Crisis of Civil Society: From Watts to Rodney King* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000). On the Branch Davidian raid, consult James D. Tabor and Eugene V. Gallagher's important *Why Waco?: Cults and the Battle for Religious Freedom in America* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997). On militia movements, survivalism, and Christian Identity, including their role in the Oklahoma City bombing, see Michael Barkun, *Religion and the Racist Right: The Origins of the Christian Identity Movement* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), James William Gibson, *Warrior Dreams: Violence and Manhood in Post-Vietnam America* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1994), Catherine McNicol Stock, *Rural Radicals: From Bacon's Rebellion to the Oklahoma City Bombings* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997). On the crisis in Rwanda, see Philip Gourevitch's *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed With Our Families:*

This changed political sensibility – both the increase of conservative power during the 1990s and the preoccupation with violent spectacle – is manifest throughout the Religion of Fear. It may appear at first glance counterintuitive that conservatism was able to consolidate itself during a period when the United States was, at least nominally, less conservative than it had been in some time. To conservatives, however, the Clinton administration provided powerful rallying points in the President's peccadilloes, facilitated the creation of new "wedge" issues like gay marriage, and allowed for the reassertion (initially by former House Speaker Newt Gingrich) of a declension narrative blaming social woes on the "permissive liberalism" ushered in during the 1960s. When conservative evangelical "prayer warriors" scan American culture, they see two camps pitched for battle: those who either pursue or adhere to firm standards of religiosity or "godliness," and those who collude, knowingly or not, with evil.⁸ These evangelicals believe that Satan is winning the battle for American culture and American youths. Instead of directly engaging post-Cold War ideologies, these creations reveal that longtime conservative evangelical concerns about race, gender, community, national sovereignty, and economics can be refracted in popular narrations of fear and evil as surely as they can be articulated in policy interventions.

In the evangelical declension narrative, these larger concerns about liberalism, national sovereignty, and religious autonomy are refracted in representations of everyday life usually focused on the politics of the intimate and domestic spheres. Conservative evangelicals believe that, left unchallenged, secular culture diverts teens' attention from godliness with salacious entertainments, allows secular humanists to block the well-meaning efforts of evangelicals to spread the Gospel, and subtly indoctrinates evangelical children into "un-Christian" opinions on the issues facing evangelical communities: homosexuality (a matter of choice rather than natural predisposition), abortion (which is "murder," not a surgical procedure), or multilateral global politics (which compromises America's unique, and God-given, status as an example to other nations).⁹ The gore-filled episodes of Hell Houses or Chick tracts, for example, are packaged as fates which are made possible under liberal regimes and which could befall any

Stories from Rwanda (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1998). On conflict in the former Yugoslavia, see C. Carmichael, *Ethnic Cleansing in the Balkans: Nationalism and the Destruction of Tradition* (New York: Routledge Press, 2002).

⁸ Both of these terms are very commonly used in conservative evangelicalism.

⁹ For good general sources on these sensibilities, consult Linda Kintz and Julia Lesage, eds. *Media, Culture, and the Religious Right* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), Michael Lienesch's *Redeeming America: Piety and Politics in the New Christian Right* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), or William Martin's *With God on Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right in America* (New York: Broadway Books, 1996). These sources, particularly the Lienesch volume, address all the above issues and the general declension narrative. On the larger Christian critique of liberalism, see my *The Fracture of Good Order: Christian Antiliberalism and the Challenge to American Politics* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2003). On the Christian Right and homosexuality, see Chris Bull and John Gallagher, *Perfect Enemies: The Battle Between the Religious Right and the Gay Movement* (New York: Madison Books, 2001).

American family. These “ordinary” evils are frightening enough to participants in the culture of evangelical fear. A confrontational approach to “fallen” culture is desirable, and is seen as a fulfillment of the Gospel of Matthew’s Great Commission. Keenan Roberts, largely responsible for the popularization of Hell Houses, believes his prayer warriors must be “willing to brave the crossfire of criticism and misunderstanding” in the “battle against sin.” According to Roberts, a fighting ethos is legitimately consistent with Christ’s love since opponents are, to Roberts, actively designing schemes which target good families unfairly.¹⁰

Conservative evangelicals and Pentecostals inhabit a world populated by angels, demons, and moral forces that are incarnate in beings both visible and unseen.¹¹ Evil is a reality to these religious practitioners, one as palpable as the divine goodness with which it is locked in combat. Evidence of this conflict is visible everywhere to conservatives, not just in the in-breaking of the supernatural into the world of the everyday – a possibility widely accepted by practitioners – but in evil’s worldly effects. That abortion is not completely criminalized, that pornography is accepted, that school prayer has been ruled unconstitutional – all of these examples that are so central to the Religion of Fear’s declension narrative are also regularly cited as evidence of evil’s growing dominion, and of America’s precipitous slide as it turns away from its purported Christian heritage.

The Sacroscape of Evangelical Fear

Through these strategies of fear-making, cultural and political conflicts or issues are dramatized in ways that contrast “orthodox” behaviors and beliefs with those linked to darkness and demonology. In what ways might such constructions and uses of fear be interpreted? It is fruitful to see the Religion of Fear as constituting what Thomas Tweed would call a “sacroscape,” the cultural constructions which emerge in relief on a symbolic or ontological “map” which evangelicals “write” onto their worlds. This image helps delineate the ways in which the emotional registers of fear, the construction of evangelical identity,

¹⁰ All quotations from Roberts’ 1999 interview with Stacey Capps. <http://www.du.edu/~scapps/documentary/index.html>. In a telling indicator of some of his larger sensibilities, Roberts asked Capps to “[c]onsider the same analogy in light of, say, if our country went to war with Russia. Who truly loves America more? The young men that are willing to go and battle for our freedom? Or the young men that flee to Canada and hide, and don’t want to be drafted? Well, it’s the young men that put their neck on the lines and are willing to risk their own safety for the freedom of others. And that’s what this church does.”

¹¹ There has been abundant work done on the vividness of the supernatural in these traditions. Ann Taves’ *Fits, Trances and Visions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999) is a marvelous historical study of these dimensions of American religion. See also Yvonne Chireau’s essay “Supernaturalism” in Philip Goff and Paul Harvey, eds. *Themes in Religion and American Culture* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

and the specific political sensibilities being narrated are linked together.¹² Yet these links are not just symbolic, but material and institutional. Each of these productions is situated in a context where an engagement with political culture and morality is seen as necessary. The narration and representation of the fearful and the demonic serves a pedagogic purpose, meant both to inculcate audiences into a specific political morality and to situate them in a larger religio-political landscape.

For both creators and practitioners there is a political urgency to these projects. Since the emergence of the NCR beginning in the 1970s, conservative evangelicals in the United States have both responded and contributed to a broad legitimization crisis faced by American liberal democracy. The post-WWII social contract legitimating liberal constitutionalism in the United States depended upon a number of realities (the existence and perpetuity of a growth economy, for example) whose existence can no longer be taken for granted, and upon liberal conceptions of political life (an atomistic conception of citizenship, a sharp boundary between public and private, and suspicion of comprehensive moral or religious worldviews in politics) which have received either serious scrutiny or come under outright attack since the 1960s. American liberalism has, in its efforts to maintain political stability by avoiding contentious moral or religious topics, ironically fueled the very conflicts it sought to contain. Groups seeking to enact particularistic forms of political will, or to sacralize politics, have availed themselves of these larger crises in the attempt to secure cultural or political power for themselves.

Evangelicals have long been ardently patriotic, staunch supporters of free market capitalism, and committed to America's role as a beacon to nations abroad. Yet the NCR emerged not during American culture's purported Golden Age (the mid-1940s to the early 1960s) but in the 1970s, a hot point of American democracy's legitimization crisis. This crisis grew in the decades following WWII, when – though Americans experienced hitherto unknown levels of both economic affluence and political stability – questions arose as to the moral costs of these socio-political goods; there were questions about, for example, the bureaucratic (and perhaps undemocratic) quality of American politics; about the persistence of racial and gender inequality in a society that trumpeted its freedoms; and about American dependency upon militarism (with specific focus on the ethics of nuclear weapons and of American intervention in Vietnam).¹³

¹² Tweed's term is most fully defined and articulated in *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

¹³ The story of 1960s political discontent is far more complex than this suggests, of course. See John Patrick Diggins, *The Rise and Fall of the American Left* (New York: Norton Books, 1992); Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam Books, 1993); Mark Kurlansky, *1968: The Year That Rocked the World* (New York: Random House, 2005); Meta Mendel-Reyes, *Reclaiming Democracy: The Sixties in Politics and Memory* (New York: Routledge, 1996); James Miller, "Democracy is in the Streets": From Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago (Cambridge, MA:

Not only was this the moment when the postwar liberal social contract began to fray visibly – as both its normative and practical features suffered scathing critiques – it was also the moment when conservative culture began to resurface. The critical voice which emerged here – first articulated in the quasi-populist discontent of the Goldwater and Wallace campaigns, and later successfully pursued by the Nixon administration and its “southern strategy” – suggested that the rise of protests and social discontent, the weakening of America’s image in the eyes of other nations, and the rapid restructuring of social life could all be adduced to the machinations of liberal elites.¹⁴

Anxieties about feminism and gender roles, about multiculturalism, about religious pluralism and “cults,” and about American economic and political autonomy were all at stake in this discourse. With the affluence and political stability of previous decades eroding steadily by the early 1970s, the conservative critique helped split old democratic constituencies and reorient political discourse in ways that facilitated the emergence of the NCR in the late 1970s. As conservative evangelicals became ever more active in the public sphere – initially in response to the Supreme Court’s *Roe v. Wade* decision and to the proposal of an Equal Rights Amendment – there was a sense among many that Jimmy Carter’s election constituted a rare opportunity to exert influence in national politics. These figures believed that the disruptions of the 1960s required not a continuation but a reversal, a restoration of the purported Golden Age. And when it became apparent that the Carter administration was not willing to accommodate them, they began in 1979 to establish their own national political organizations.

The fortunes of organizations like the Moral Majority and Religious Roundtable are well known, as is the NCR’s subsequent period of restructuring.¹⁵ While the Religion of Fear has not found direct expression in these engagements with national politics, nor has its shape been determined by participation in or sponsorship by any major NCR organizations, it partakes of a cultural ethos kept vital by the NCR. In particular, the NCR’s post-60s declension narrative exemplifies what George Lakoff calls a “strict father morality” advocated as a form of disciplinarian correction of perceived socio-political deficiencies.¹⁶ The impulse to restore a lost order both contextualizes the sense of isolation and

Harvard University Press, 1994); Doug Rossinow, *The Politics of Authenticity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); James Tracy, *Direct Action: Radical Pacifism from the Union Eight to the Chicago Seven* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

¹⁴ See Robert W. Whitaker, ed. *The New Right Papers* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1982).

¹⁵ See Michael Cromartie, ed. *Religion and Radical Politics: The Religious New Right in American Politics* (Washington, D.C.: Ethics and Public Policy Center Press, 1993); William Martin, *With God on Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right in America* (New York: Broadway Books, 1996); Matthew C. Moen, *The Transformation of the Christian Right* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1992); and Clyde Wilcox, *Onward Christian Soldiers?: The Religious Right in American Politics* (New York: Westview Press, 1996).

¹⁶ See George Lakoff’s *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

marginalization frequently expressed by evangelicals, while also reinscribing evangelical identity through a vigorous articulation of anti-liberalism.¹⁷

There are ambiguities in these socio-political attitudes, yet conservative evangelicalism's success is due partly to its ability to convey certitude and uniformity. Faced with concerns about the growth and moral valence of a bureaucratic state, conservative evangelicals espouse an ethos of personal responsibility; considering disparities of wealth, these practitioners advocate minimally regulated free market capitalism; angered by what they see as a secular, "activist judiciary," evangelical culture critics seek "the reconstruction of U.S. culture so that it is in tune with the natural law of the Ten Commandments and Judeo-Christian values."¹⁸ There is the further suggestion that the 1960s paved the way for an unwarranted assault on heterosexual privilege, on "traditional" gender roles, and on the status of the "conventional" family as the crucible of morality. America's divinely appointed status as beacon to the nations, critics continue, was compromised by introducing pluralism and ambiguity into the national narrative. Both the conservative evangelical critique of post-1960s politics and the ideal state it postulates once existed (and consequently must be restored) trade heavily in "a symbolic discourse of nationalism . . . [that] circles around a relatively narrow and deceptively simple range of terms: 'life,' 'mother,' 'family,' 'nation,' 'free market,' 'God'."¹⁹ In the face of these "outrages," the Religion of Fear promises restoration.

The popular narrations of the Religion of Fear are linked with these sociopolitical developments. It is due largely to the sense of urgency conveyed in the emotional registers of these narratives that their political dimensions can be so effectively transmitted and appropriated by audiences and consumers. While the Religion of Fear does not generate discourses which directly support a particular type of political administration or class of political elites, it does draw upon emotional discourses – those of evangelicalism and those of genre horror or the popular culture of fright – in order to commend a specific range of cultural, behavioral, and affective responses to the socio-political issues it identifies as most pressing. In general, the politics of evangelical fear are not so much explicitly justified as wrapped in several levels of theology, practice, narrative, and affect, and only referred to indirectly or secondarily. That the politics is not as directly engaged as one finds in, for example, numerous NCR organizations does not make the politics of evangelical fear less substantive.

These religious practitioners share some historic features with political

¹⁷ Christian Smith, *Christian America?: What Evangelicals Really Want* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), p. 4.

¹⁸ Linda Kintz, "Culture and the Religious Right," p. 7 in Kintz and Lesage, eds. *Media, Culture, and the Religious Right* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 8. For a fascinating study of the ways in which social constructions of family life contribute to historical revisionism, see Stephanie Coontz's *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

conservatism, and they are also partly distinct from this diverse tradition. In general, the conservatism at work here is primarily religious: these evangelicals defend what they regard as permanent religious truth from threats emerging from political order or fallen society. For theological reasons foremost, they cherish the freedom and sanctity of the individual (whose experience is at the heart of the evangelical religious dynamic). They believe that the universe contains an unwavering core of moral truths which ought to be enshrined in political order. Tradition and community are seen as guides for nurturing these truths, which – as noted above – are seen as having been compromised in the wake of the 1960s. The religious teachings and creeds which nurture these sensibilities are not mere scrims masking political maneuvering or theocratic ambition; they arise from specific religious convictions as these are shaped by evangelical understandings of social and political change.

"Sin Busters": The Religion of Fear's Narratives of Confrontation

Contemporary apocalyptic literature has proven remarkably popular, even after the causes of specific millennialist anxieties fade from memory. The hugely successful *Left Behind* series is one of the clearest windows onto the political concerns and cultural sensibilities of conservative evangelicals. Co-authored by longtime NCR figure Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, these pulp novels dramatize a specific evangelical interpretation of sacred history (dispensational premillennialism) in which specific beliefs and behaviors (e.g. liberalism or homosexuality) determine whether or not one will be "raptured" and subsequently saved. LaHaye first achieved public notoriety in Southern California during the 1960s, when he articulated what would become a very influential opposition to "secular humanism" in education and government (a concern Beverly LaHaye later brought to her involvement in the Concerned Women of America). His initial educational critiques led him to become one of the first sponsors of separate evangelical schools, a commitment which over time blossomed into a general concern that young people were in danger of seduction and indoctrination by ungodly forces.²⁰ Liberals were taking over, he frequently claimed, ushering in the kind of disgusting promiscuity and moral decline so evident to LaHaye in the culture at large. Indeed, his many books on educational reform are filled with claims positing a causal link between, for example, Deweyan educational philosophy and wife-swapping or bestiality. The schemes of antireligious elites were compromising American autonomy, farming it out to global powers (the Trilateral Commission, the UN, or the ubiquitous international Jewish bankers) that LaHaye saw foreshadowed in the Bible's apocalyptic literature.

²⁰ My *The Fracture of Good Order* explores, among other instances of antiliberalism, LaHaye's role in NCR educational critiques.

The *Left Behind* series emerged during the Clinton years, and over the course of the series the locus of the authors' global concerns changes as the texts respond to current events. The early books, written in the mid-1990s, trained their apocalyptic vision on the Balkan nations destabilized in the wake of the USSR's collapse. One always learns a good deal about the politics of apocalyptic authors by studying their representation of Antichrist. The series' Nicolae Carpathia – whose name suggests both Cold War villains and Dracula – is one indicator of these contextual concerns. In the apocalyptic scenario, a world leader arises and enjoys popularity due to a message of global unity and harmony (which turns out to be recipe for oppression and wickedness). Though Carpathia signaled concerns about instability in Eastern Europe, the series soon devoted the vast majority of its attention to events in the Middle East (Carpathia's global empire is located in New Babylon, for example). Global events are seen as symbiotically related to the aggregate of individual moral decisions in societies: once a society begins to tolerate abortion or homosexuality – each abominable enough in their own right, according to the authors – it slowly, unconsciously creates a climate hospitable to larger, global, even cosmic changes of the sort seen in the End Times.

The authors' engagement with political and religious pluralism, and the way these are linked to a soteriological narrative, vividly embodies the specific features of the Religion of Fear: a stark moral universe, an enduring sense of embattlement, and a highly politicized religiosity. In energetically detailed scenes, earthbound characters – in contrast with the saintly departed – are shown slowly comprehending the consequences of their sinful actions and beliefs. The characters, particularly "the believers" as they are known, are rendered not as shrill separatists but as average folks with whom an average reader might identify: a suburban Dad, a troubled teen, a hustling young professional. We see mirrored in their fates a possibility of our own. These figures signal to readers not only the consequences of religious and political sin, but also the possibility of redemption (we encounter stereotypical "good" and "bad" Jews or Muslims, i.e. those who have and have not converted). If such apparently ordinary lives can meet with dire consequences, a reader might wonder, what of my own?

The leader of the so-called Tribulation Force, airline pilot Rayford Steele, establishes these emotional referents with his internal musings: "If heaven is real, if the Rapture was a fact, what does that say about hell and judgment? . . . We go through this hell of regret and remorse, and then we literally go to hell, too?" Fear of hell a major part of conversion, as illustrated by Steele's resolve "to find the truth and believe ... [since] these consequences are eternal."²¹ When Carpathia is introduced as a popular and charismatic politician from Romania, he is described with telling references: "ecumenical religious convention," "one-world-currency confab," "Jewish Nationalist leaders interested in one world

²¹ Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins. *Left Behind: A Novel of Earth's Last Days* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1995).

government," and "international monetarists."²² These themes resonate with readers accustomed to apocalyptic literature and speculation, but they are also suggestive enough to plant seeds of doubt even in readers not already committed to the authors' worldview. The texts depict a world which, though riven with battle and strife, is morally unambiguous and in which righteous actions are clearly identifiable and achievable. And yet, the books seem to suggest, just as the right-minded devout face persecution during the Tribulation, so too do contemporary Christians in the United States – seeking only to live in a Christlike fashion and to evangelize – face suspicion, bigotry, and even victimization. Indeed, throughout the series, the authors delight in representing Christians as outlaws and targets of oppression. Carpathia refers to them as "the religious zealots in this country hate a person who believes that Jesus is Messiah," the kind of denunciation that echoes claims – long made by LaHaye and other NCR public figures – that the secular public sphere (particularly evident in education and the judiciary) is actually a mask for blatant anti-Christian bigotry.²³

Against those who would argue with the authors' rendering of the Bible's politics, the series also constitutes a sustained polemic against those who see the Biblical texts as "mere symbolism" or as "poetic and metaphoric."²⁴ The Bible contains a strict code of personal morality, according to the authors, one that is unambiguous, clearly articulated in the text, and cautions against a myriad of beliefs and behaviors currently permitted in liberal polities. The goal is clearly to use fear of specific worldly consequences to enjoin readers to a specific reading of Scripture (which also harmonizes with their politics). For example, the series regularly engages feminism and homosexuality. Consider Verna Zee, the feminist editor and most likely a lesbian, who thinks that Christians are "all wacky." Verna is described as "a pretty cynical and miserable person" who gives one member of the Tribulation Force "the willies."²⁵ Verna also appears regularly as a classic feminist bitch, trying to pressure reborn Buck and telling him that "she holds all the cards." Buck and Chloe try in vain to convert Verna (from both atheism and lesbianism, relying on a classic "hate the sin, love the sinner" device).²⁶ The clear politicization of the narrative reveals the way in which the texts not only to promote longtime dispensational concerns about One World governments, the Mark, and secular ideologies, but also suggest that our world is pregnant with signs of the End Times. The relationship between sociopolitical anxiety, the production of fear, and the self-preserved actions intended to follow is fairly clear throughout the series.

The popular entertainments known as "Hell Houses" are less focused on global

²² Ibid., p. 140.

²³ LaHaye and Jenkins. *Nicolae: The Rise of Antichrist* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1997), p. 61.

²⁴ LaHaye and Jenkins. *Tribulation Force: The Continuing Drama of Those Left Behind* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1996), p. 65.

²⁵ Nicolae, pp. 279-81.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 341.

political matters but reveal perhaps more about conservative evangelicalism's antiliberal politics. Conservative Christianity's answer to the haunted house, these morality plays are sponsored by local churches to illustrate to young people the dangers – not merely physical, but moral and salvific – posed by drug use, premarital sex, and other such "illicit" activities. Often involving very intense dramatizations of car crashes, abortions, gun violence, and so forth, these productions appropriate the techniques and narrative strategies of genre horror in order to explore a different kind of demonology, that of politicized evangelicalism.

Hell Houses began to appear regularly in conservative evangelical churches in the 1990s, drawing upon older traditions – including Jerry Falwell's "Scaremare" – that sponsored "alternate" haunted houses whose primary purpose was the distribution of conversion literature at the event's conclusion. However, the Hell Houses – explicitly positioned against conventional celebrations of Halloween, rather than just modifications thereof – are altogether more confrontational and controversial. Suburban Denver's Abundant Life Christian Center is widely acknowledged as the site of the first proper Hell House. Associate pastor Keenan Roberts had been working on a seven-scene "morality play" for two years when, in 1995, he first packaged and sold his production entitled *Hell House*. Its primary attribute is the brutal consequentialism displayed.

A typical Hell House experience is structured as a narrative through which attendees are led and in which they are to see themselves as participants. The productions are shaped by an imperative to dramatize the perceived dangers of secular, liberal society; and they are energized by the conviction, shared with many practitioners and participants, that evil, demonology, and Hell are very real.²⁷ Some productions focus on single incidents (such as involuntary manslaughter during drunk driving) which capture the illicit activities of young teens, while others take the audiences on a multi-scene tour of American depravity. The hot-button moral issues long central to the NCR are prominent in all productions, but are far more pronounced in Roberts' version of the narrative.

Most churches which purchase Roberts' kits are already committed to the cosmological idea that the supernatural dwells in American society, frequently manifesting in behaviors such as premarital sex, drug use, school shootings, and so forth. Roberts' productions usually consist of seven or eight scenes which aim to generate an overall impression of the "hell and destruction that Satan and this

²⁷ In my research I have visited Hell Houses and Judgment Houses (drawing primarily on the productions at Bethel Christian Center, Durham, NC, and Victory Fellowship Church, Garner, NC), read scripts for the productions as well as various reports or journals, studied dozens of recorded performances (including the well-known Hell House documentary), toured multiple "virtual" Hell Houses, and interviewed both sponsors and audiences (including many of my students, of whom I would like to single out Emily Linthicum and Lindsey Jones in particular). My accounts here draw on all of these sources to generate a composite picture of Judgment Houses and Hell Houses.

world can bestow on those who choose not to serve Jesus Christ.”²⁸ A personal demon guides attendees through depictions of moral conflicts that, it is implied, an average teen might face. These episodes are charged with a soteriological urgency because, the visitor hears, they are defined by stark ethical choices with eternal consequences (and, though the demon is mum about this, by their political resonances).

The productions allow for considerable flexibility on the part of producers. There is almost always an abortion scene, a teen suicide (often carried out under the influence of rock music of various sorts), a drunk driving accident, and an AIDS death (recently supplanted by a Gay Wedding scene). It is also quite common to see a post-Columbine school shooting and a rave scene (which doubles as a cautionary tale about the dangers of both pop music and drugs). Most Hell Houses, however, leave room for either adaptation of existing scenes or the introduction of new scenes. This serves to keep the productions contemporary, keeping pace with fast-moving youth cultures and appetites, and also to dramatize events or issues that are seen as having immediate political consequence. Roberts, for example, even went so far as to shelve both the abortion and AIDS scenes in 1999 so that he could introduce a Monica Lewinsky and a Marilyn Manson scene.²⁹

Recent productions throughout the United States have focused attention on the eternally recurring concern about religious expression in public schools, made current once more in the post-9/11 era owing largely to the emergence of groups such as the Judeo-Christian Council for Constitutional Restoration (whose slogan is “Confronting the Judicial War on Faith”). In these variations, a young black-clad student – who loudly protests that s/he is tired of hearing about Jesus and school prayer – produces a handgun and opens fire on a fellow student during a classroom debate on the First Amendment.³⁰ Interestingly, such classroom scenes are also used as vehicles for the expression of concern about the overbearing influence of state-mandated curricula, the “crowding out” of religious voices from the schoolhouse, and, occasionally, the possibility that the federal government may eventually (whether through “activist judges” or some other, more nefarious means) target “people of faith.” In these parables of Christian victimology, one occasionally encounters scenes where a well-meaning science teacher – who has discussed creationism in class – has her classroom turned upside down as a secretive para-police group confiscates all religious materials before hauling the teacher herself outside and murdering her. Elsewhere, a small group of girls – femininity is often the focus of Hell Houses’ attention; chastity

²⁸ From the promotional materials for www.hellhouse.ms.

²⁹ It is worth noting that Roberts omitted the school shooting scene in 1999, the year of the Columbine High School shootings in Littleton, Colorado. Though he did address Marilyn Manson, widely associated with perpetrators Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, as a consorter of demons – a charge Manson himself happily embraces, on some levels – Coloradoan Roberts ordered the omission out of respect for Littleton’s citizens.

³⁰ See www.atheists.org/flash.line/Hallow4.htm.

violated or defended is at the center of this moral/sexual universe – has their prayer session and Bible study disrupted as a similar organization bursts through a doorway to seize the girls and lead them to execution. Such scenarios may seem outlandish now, the scene suggests; but with each ACLU defense of gay marriage, with each court decision banning creation science from public schools, America moves closer to the slippery slope which can only end in outright government tyranny over the religious.³¹

These larger concerns with governmentality and political order are generally only implicit. Yet in 2004 at Lynchburg, Virginia's Heritage Baptist Church, a production entitled *Judgment House: Homeland Security* engaged these issues directly. The dominant theme was, not surprisingly, anxiety centering on terrorist attacks and the Judgment House portrayed an imagined America which was constantly besieged by unidentified terrorists. Focusing on a young, virtuous schoolteacher whose steadfast faith sees Jesus as “the ultimate Homeland Security,” the production tracks her schoolhouse ministry (with so much terrorism confronting American society, classroom confessionalism is apparently low on the list of public concerns) and the decisions of her various students (who, much like the teenage women who populate most Hell Houses, make representative decisions with representative consequences).³²

The sins and causes of damnation are quite clearly linked to the hot-button moral and political issues that have for over three decades been at the heart of NCR culture and activism. This is not to downplay the Hell Houses' and their sponsors' intentions to proselytize and save souls they believe are at risk. But it is crucial to understand that the risks envisioned and narrated are those which conservative evangelicals have long attributed to post-WWII American liberalism as well.

The comic art of Jack Chick – the cartoon evangelist from Chino, California – might seem superficially to be less culturally or politically significant than the other creations of the Religion of Fear. Aesthetically, his tracts' production values might seem to invite dismissal, as the small 3x5” booklets are produced on newsprint quality paper and are left lying in streets, subway stations, ATM booths, restaurant tables, and inside bills like so much trash. The tracts bear further inspection though, for not only do they reveal the anxieties and political sensibilities of the Religion of Fear, they are also quite widely known among the evangelical youths who are their target audience.

If all one knew about life in the United States was what one read in Chick tracts, one might reasonably come away with the impression that our culture is cesspool of moral depravity, infectious diseases, and international plots. Every other teen, it seems, is HIV positive; Catholic plots reach out from the nineteenth

³¹ Sean Jamison. “Heaven and Hell.” North Texas Daily. October 30, 2002.

³² See Blue “National Trauma, Church Drama” at <http://bad.eserver.org/issues/2005/72/blue.html>.

century to encompass manifold injustices; children are routinely kidnapped, hoodwinked by teachers into believing in “false gods,” and subject to vast webs of subliminal influence – much of it advancing secular humanism, “the radical homosexual agenda,” or some dark combination thereof – through mass media. Chick’s worldview, in other words, is one in which a once-unassailable American hegemony – wherein the salvific example of the exemplar nation, the “city on a hill” which has the power to redeem a fallen world – has come under assault from insidious “cults,” from secular temptations, and from a broader compromise of the conservative political authority which ought rightly to confer upon the United States its enduring role as global leader.

Central to Chick’s understanding of American religious and political culture is his demonization of non-evangelical religions, the acceptance of which is for Chick the slippery slope down which Christian morality goes tumbling. This polluted religious landscape is, according to Chick, ushered into being and nurtured by a perverted judiciary (one learns in “Sin Busters,” for example, that “the evil world system that controls most schools hates Christ and His message”), a seductive entertainment industry (in “*Bewitched*” and “*The Nervous Witch*,” for example, Chick suggests that shows like *Bewitched* or *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* make “magic” and “witchcraft” “cool”), and the symbolically significant Halloween (which Chick takes on regularly, conferring upon it the status of some kind of sacred time, wherein holy struggle is crystallized).

Chick does not endorse legal or political constraints to be placed on “cults” and “false religions”; he simply attacks their legitimacy and asserts that their adherents will roast in eternity. He asserts, for example, that Buddha and Muhammad (not to mention the manifold deities of Hinduism or Native American practice) “never died for your sins.” Jews, while honored as custodians of the Holy Land, must embrace the true Messiah in order to be saved. And both New Age and Wicca are “traps” which lure the young to Satan via devices like ouija boards and rock music. However, Chick reserves his most stinging bile and alarming proclamations for Roman Catholicism, which is responsible for 68 millions deaths between 1200 and 1808, which spearheaded the Holocaust, and which is partly responsible for the invention of Islam.

Along the way, one also reads familiar denunciations of abortion rights, gay rights, and secular humanism, hot button positions that are commonplace in conservative evangelical culture. In Chick’s worldview, American history since the 1960s has witnessed a progressive weakening of America’s distinctiveness. As America embraces multiculturalism, religious pluralism, and secular cultural narratives, it courts the presence of evil.

Finally, the Religion of Fear manifests itself quite publicly in conservative Christian censorship activities. Though this impulse is quite wide-ranging, it is most suggestive in contemporary denunciations of heavy metal (particularly

artists, such as Marilyn Manson or Slayer, thought to embody evil) and hip-hop music (thought to be the apotheosis of temptation, violence, and carnality). Through public pronouncements about the dangers such music poses, evangelicals construct a narrative of fear intended to promote moral codes that reinscribe evangelical norms regarding race, gender, and sexuality, additionally linking political orthodoxy to the ethical consequences of commodity consumption.

American Protestantism has, over the last century, been keenly aware of a range of popular musics it has judged to be threatening, from jazz to blues to funk and punk. Underlying much of this criticism are certain fundamental assumptions about music. Critics like Bob Larson or Jacob Aranza rarely examine music's aesthetic value or formal properties; they do not contend that popular music is *prima facie* without merit, but rather that it becomes debased when combined with specific lyrical content and references. While there are occasional expressions of anxiety about the purportedly sexual rhythms of popular music, conservative evangelicals focus mostly on lyrics, the communities of identity they might help generate, and the actions they are seen to legitimate.

Though moral and sexual anxieties have long surrounded rock and popular music of all stripes, it was with allegations of occultism that contemporary evangelical panics were announced. During the 1970s, as the NCR emerged, record-burnings and public denunciations of rock again became commonplace, frequently set against the backdrop of an emerging evangelical culture providing alternatives to "secular" rock music, films, and other entertainments.³³ The crucial issue for critics was authority over social, sexual, and religious norms. Two of the most influential and sensational musical subcultures to flourish following this period – heavy metal and rap music – were also those that attracted (and continue to attract) the most intense evangelical scrutiny. One of the most frequently recurring allegations posited that Satanic ritual abuse, directly inspired by demonological metal music, was attacking Christianity and undermining social order. (Metal was also regularly blamed for teen suicides or, later, for school shootings.) An additional source of distress was the experimentation with gender roles and sexuality said to be a consequence of a taste for pop music. Beginning during the same period, and intensifying during the 1990s, a similar (and often explicitly related) moral outrage accompanied the conservative evangelical engagement with rap music. Though the discourse was rarely openly racialized, the denunciation of the genre's purported violence and carnality was often a register of racial panic. In Amy Binder's findings, instead of "focusing on the dangers of one-in-a-million devil-worshipping mass killers . . . [rap critics] emphasized that rap music created legions of misogynistic listeners who posed a danger to women, particularly because rap music depicted rape

³³ See Heather Hendershot's *Shaking the World for Jesus: Media and Conservative Evangelical Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004) for an excellent account of this culture.

and other brutality.”³⁴

Such criticisms draw upon long-standing evangelical concerns regarding the “taint” of fallen cultures and the seductions of popular entertainment. The most prominent evangelical antirock critics – including Larson, Aranza, and Jeff Godwin – devote considerable energy and resources to becoming intimately familiar with the music they find horrific.³⁵ Cataloguing the music’s sins, criminal exhortations, foul beliefs, and tales of sexual conquest is central each critic’s denunciations, often couched in frantic interpretations of song lyrics (including a fascination with backwards masking) and imaginative accusations (ranging from the contention that demons forced the hands of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold at Columbine to blaming David Bowie for homosexuality: Godwin once claimed that all rock singing is derived from the sound of “the homosexual penetration of the male” and that Bowie is “the limp wristed king of the abnormal world of Homo Rock”).³⁶ What underlies these censorship campaigns is the insistence that real demonology is – through explicit or subliminal coding in popular music – encouraging adolescents to contribute to religio-political trends which the Religion of Fear finds unsettling. And yet in their public denunciations of this music, conservative evangelicals frequently reveal an unshakeable fixation on it, a need for the demonic musical other whose presence facilitates the assertion of the orthodox self.

Two Instabilities

In what ways are these jeremiads denouncing heavy metal or these cartoon denunciations of “popery” linked to antiliberal politics? These instantiations of the Religion of Fear either explicitly or implicitly engage geopolitical matters as part of a broader strategy of reckoning with religio-political identity. Each narration is situated in an embattled America, whose fate was once ensured by its proper political and religious direction but which is now under assault from manifold hostile agents. Each constitutes a response to socio-political concerns which, while identified and narrated by creators, resonates with a broader conservative evangelical audience and also conveys to that audience strategies for engaging or responding to political tensions.

There is, however, more at work in the Religion of Fear than the connections between pop and politics. Underlying these engagements is a persistent fascination with darkness which suggests that the fearful spectacles are written into evangelical identities themselves and are perhaps as central to the

³⁴ See Amy Binder, “Constructing Racial Rhetoric: Media Depictions of Harm in Heavy Metal and Rap Music,” in *American Sociological Review*, Volume 58 (December 1993), pp. 753-68.

³⁵ Larson even accompanied the death metal band Slayer on a European tour.

³⁶ Cited from <http://www.wfmu.org/LCD/18/antirock.html>.

conservative evangelical worldview as is the desire to keep these realities separate. The religious identities at work in the Religion of Fear, then, are considerably complex. Engagement with sociopolitical realities is central to the maintenance of such a religious identity, yet the very desire to achieve certainty and fixity reveals points of instability and flux therein. Each bears the trace of longtime evangelical struggles and conflicts, which surface along with fear regimes to serve as occasions and opportunities for the work of self-representation. The first I call the *erotics of fear*: the desire for or attraction to that which is condemned or consigned to the realm of darkness and demonology. Throughout the Religion of Fear, the greatest energy is found in the representations of what is damned, demonic, illicit, or carnal. The narratives depend upon not only regular portrayals of "lewd" or "foul" acts but extraordinarily detailed ones, ones which promise documentary realism or even, significantly, the possibility of a surrogate experience. One sees the viscera and smells the smoke of hellfire in a Hell House abortion scene; reads in technothriller detail about assassinations, environmental cataclysm, and bloody warfare in *Left Behind* novels, or observes archetypal sinners meet their grisly fate in a Chick tract; and hears anti-rock preachers painstakingly detail the demonic imagery, sexual traps, and drug propaganda they find concealed in heavy metal and hip-hop music. What does this fascination reveal if not an abiding preoccupation with, even attraction to, the darkness?

Second, the boundaries of conservative evangelical identity at work in these creations are porous themselves. In its efforts to maintain the boundaries of its identity, the Religion of Fear of necessity engages intimately with its Others, as the dynamics of proximity and distance work together in the sociological function of alterity as identity fashioning. Conservative evangelicals depend upon precisely what they seek to banish from their homes and communities. Those very things which threaten to undermine the purity of identity, and must consequently be driven away, are continually made central to the cultures and symbol systems they are said to oppose. I call this feature of conservative evangelical identity *the demonology within*.

These iterations of evangelical alterity may be seen partly as linguistic reminders of the forbidden, representations that conjure the image of the Other. Yet aside from this quasi-semiotic dimension of identity maintenance, this type of demonological discourse also reveals its social location and its political motivations. It is precisely amidst the strongest efforts to clarify religious orthodoxy and identity, in those moments when the religious stakes seem highest, that socio-political tensions and conflicts emerge most clearly; the centrality of these imaginings is ironically confirmed in the vigor with which they are denied or projected onto others. In the thick of these projects of identity maintenance, boundaries are blurred in the effort to clarify them.

The demons of the Religion of Fear are acutely real to practitioners. But they may

also be seen as what Ralph Ellison called “projected aspects of an internal symbolic process,” obsessions and haunting figures which are disavowed through confessionalists, testimonies, and populist narratives of good and evil.³⁷ The discourse of demonology and fear reflects a multiplicity within conservative evangelicalism, “a simultaneous drawing up and crossing of . . . boundaries.”³⁸ It participates in a symbolic-social field of contestation whose immediate referents – practices and beliefs linked with hellfire – enable evangelicals to enact and reenact their identities while also identifying with the fearful through desire, through pleasure, through exuberance in and exploitation of those things damnable. The demonology within is thus a register of evangelical power; but as it makes things fearful it also reveals the anxieties and terrors of its speakers. It suggests that, at bottom, the Religion of Fear’s most pressing concern is that the monster may lurk within as well as without. To paraphrase Julia Kristeva, fear is at its strongest when the source of horror is the self’s own alien substance.³⁹

These narrations of the fearful require engagement and understanding, from the academy and elsewhere. Such engagement facilitates understanding not only of the new shapes of political evangelicalism and the persistence of fear regimes in American culture, but also of conservative religion’s enduring fascination with fear. The Religion of Fear’s pop narratives constitute symbolic and narrative frameworks from which practitioners draw in multiple ways. Most evidently, the frameworks promise a kind of power – religious, explanatory, social – for audiences and creators, delineating more sharply the boundaries of their identity while also constituting for them a political will. For all the instability of the boundary work evident in this culture, these discourses are ones which aim to center and orient through the rhetoric of constancy, legitimacy, and righteousness.

Through the dramatization and representation of the horrific, conservative evangelicals construct produce a moral code, a series of prohibitions, and a political ethos. By linking what is dark and fearful with what might be called socio-political fallenness, the conservative evangelical architects of the Religion of Fear hope to promote an ethical-political agenda that counters the apparent permissiveness and sinfulness of liberal political order with a disciplinarian worldview emphasizing, among other things, suspicion of state power, strictly defined sexual morality, America’s global superiority, and contestation of “secular” entertainments. While these evangelical creations are intended to serve as exhortations to cling faithfully to orthodoxy, they are at heart monster stories intended – as the term *monstrare* signifies – to show and to warn. They also frequently manifest extreme violence, which is not condemned but, rather,

³⁷ Quoted in Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 3.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

³⁹ Julia Kristeva. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

energetically described or reenacted in the simultaneous censorship and firsthand experience of what is forbidden. As political culture in the United States continues its preoccupation with the role of religion in public life, the Religion of Fear is an impulse which suggests some of the ways in which conservative evangelicals are enacting political identities. That these identities are unfixed, that they are mediated in popular entertainments, and that they signify an enduring preoccupation with evil and violence is indicative that, as political cultures remain unstable in the United States and elsewhere, the vitality of conservative religions will continue to serve as a sign of liberalism's discontents.

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