REVIEWS

In and Of the World: Christian Rhetorics in Opposition and Assimilation

Bergler, Thomas E. *The Juvenilization of American Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 229 pp. $25.00 (paper).

Gardner, Christine J. *Making Chastity Sexy: The Rhetoric of Evangelical Abstinence Campaigns* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 196 pp. $26.31 (paper).

Maddux, Kristy. *The Faithful Citizen: Popular Christian Media and Gendered Civic Identities* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), xiv + 204 pp. $35.96 (paper).

Sherwood, Timothy H. *The Rhetorical Leadership of Fulton J. Sheen, Norman Vincent Peale, and Billy Graham in the Age of Extremes* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2013), 131 pp. $72.00 (hardcover).

The Christian admonition to "be in the world but not of the world" is open to some interpretation, and myriad sects and schisms testify to the myriad ways it has been interpreted. Christians disagree about what constitutes an appropriate separation from the world, and about which modes of worldly thought, belief, cultural practice, and technology ought to be permissible in a still-Christian context. A great deal of zealous energy is expended on these types of questions. Boundaries are drawn and redrawn. Fractures split the ground between. Positions are taken and defended en route to the maintenance of traditions, identities, and lifestyles. Historically, when Christians have disagreed about who they are and what they are about, they have often chosen to be and be about slightly different things. Even among the Amish, those most separate of separatists, there are gradations.

The ambiguity of separation is further complicated by the centrality of the "Great Commission" to the Christian statement of purpose. Those who strive to remain apart from the world are also tasked with infiltrating it to save as many souls as time and circumstance will allow. There is a certain tension at work between these competing missions. Christians desirous of public influence are always in earshot of siren songs. Culture is calling, and politics, business, art, and with them, *success*, variously conceived. Many devote their talents to reconciling the faith with the times, finding ways to make ancient theologies palatable to modern and postmodern mindsets. Many others embrace worldly means to Christian ends, contributing to entire industries of Christian-ized products and productions. This work has the ancillary benefit of being extremely profitable. Depending on the interpretation, its many successes may reflect either great blessing or great capitulation. Those who

prosper in Christian service must often face questions about whom, exactly, they serve.

This tension between opposition and assimilation contextualizes American Christian discourse. Historian Molly Worthen (2013) has identified it as a defining feature of Christian thought and belief dating back to the turn of the twentieth century. Worthen demonstrates how, for evangelicals in particular, even the most foundational, epistemic doctrines are tangled in combative relationship with the innovations of worldly science, philosophy, and Biblical interpretation. What looks from the outside like an "authoritarian" posture is thus better understood as a "crisis of authority" in which Christians struggle to agree upon the suitability of Enlightenment thinking (p. 2). Those who resist too strongly may be dismissed as anti-intellectual, while the willing may run the risk of seeming merely secular. A sort of engrained defensiveness emerges from this brand of thinking, engendering what Mark Noll (1994) once identified as the great "scandal" of evangelicalism. "The scandal of the Evangelical mind," Noll wrote, "is that there is not much of an Evangelical mind" (p. 3). As the public world has gone the way of secular rationality (Taylor, 2007), the Christian hold-outs have fallen increasingly out of favor. And since the intellectual problem courses through a multiplicity of Christian venues—including politics and public advocacy—the fall has been hard.

The decades-long slide from hegemony to pluralism has prompted a good deal of soul-searching among Christian thinkers. If there is a certain dignity in flouting public opinion, there is also a persistent impulse to remain in the mainstream, to keep the faith while also keeping the faith *attractive* to potential converts. It is this impulse that drives the work of Barna Group president David Kinnaman. His 2007 book *UnChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity and Why it Matters*, co-authored with Gabe Lyons, draws upon extensive survey data to demonstrate that American Christianity is in a public relations crisis. In particular, Kinnaman and Lyons identify a glaring generational problem. Among "outsiders," opposition toward evangelicals is stark:

> Among those aware of the term "evangelical," the views are extraordinarily negative (49 percent to 3 percent). Disdain for evangelicals among the younger set is overwhelming and definitive. Think of it this way: there are roughly twenty-four million outsiders in America who are ages sixteen to twenty-nine. Of these, nearly seven million have a negative impression of evangelicals; another seven million said they have no opinion; and ten million have never heard the term 'evangelical.' That leaves less than a half a million young outsiders—out of the twenty-four million—who see evangelicals in a positive light" (p. 25).

Later, the authors provide a representative quotation from one such outsider. "Most people I meet assume that *Christian* means very conservative, entrenched in their thinking, antigay, antichoice, angry, violent, illogical, empire builders; they want to convert everyone, and they generally cannot live peacefully with anyone who doesn't believe what they believe" (p. 26). Kinnaman's research lends an exigency to Lyons' (2010) book, *The Next Christians: How a New Generation is Restoring the Faith*, in which he calls for a generation of "restorers" who will turn from a divisive posture and instead

seek to "mend the earth's brokenness." Restorers, Lyons suggests, "don't separate from the world *or* blend in; rather, they thoughtfully *engage*" (p. 47). For Lyons, a generation of thoughtful engagers may assist in heralding the type of great, once-in-five-hundred-years shift prophesied by Phyllis Tickle in her *The Great Emergence* (2001).

Dissatisfaction with the conservative, politicized trajectory of American Christianity also helps explain the rise of the "Emergent Church" movement, led by such luminaries as Brian McLaren (2011), Tony Jones (2009), Doug Pagitt (2009), and, somewhere on the outskirts, the formerly-very-popular Rob Bell (2005). Dissatisfaction has likewise prompted Gregory Boyd (2005) to dismiss "the myth of a Christian nation," and David Platt (2010) to advocate a "radical" approach bent on "taking back your faith from the American dream." It is assailed by ascendant women critics like Diana Butler Bass (2010), Rachel Held Evans (2012), Sarah Bessey (2013), and Nadia Bolz-Weber (2013). It has even empowered Youtube-celebrity-turned-author Jefferson Bethke (2013) to argue—somewhat confusingly—that *Jesus>Religion*. For Bethke, the stigma of Christian religiosity can and must be distanced from the unblemished ethos of Christ.

But though these figures oppose conservative, "culture war" Christianity, they are not exactly its opposite. Rather, efforts to make Christianity more liberal or more inclusive are simply different variations on the assimilating theme. Like their conservative sibling-rivals, Christian progressives aspire to public influence. Also like conservatives, they emphasize elements of the tradition that are most congruent with their public aims. Like all human beings, they engage their belief system to fashion a satisfying personal identity from which to address the world. In that sense, they operate *beside* conservatives rather than opposite them, their efforts constituting a competing form of what Ross Douthat (2013) calls "accommodation" with modernity. The political problem of contemporary Christianity is thus better understood as an *accommodation* problem appearing in various forms. When Christians become too invested *in* the world, they necessarily become *of* the world as well.

This essay considers the recent work of four scholars at the nexus of Christian opposition and assimilation. These include Timothy Sherwood's (2013) *The Rhetorical Leadership of Fulton J. Sheen, Norman Vincent Peale, and Billy Graham in the Age of Extremes,* Thomas E. Bergler's (2012) *The Juvenilization of American Christianity,* Christine Gardner's (2011) *Making Chastity Sexy: The Rhetoric of Evangelical Abstinence Campaigns,* and Kristy Maddux's (2010) *The Faithful Citizen: Popular Christian Media and Gendered Civic Identities.* In some cases, these scholars deal directly with political issues. In most, however, the analyses are political only in a broader sense, observing American Christians as they seek to participate in and engage the polis through evangelism, education, advocacy, and art. Along the way, these scholars observe their subjects enjoying successes of a worldly sort, often to the detriment of otherworldly ideals.

In and Of the Public Eye

Timothy H. Sherwood analyzes the issue of worldly engagement as it pertains to preaching and political context. His book, *The Rhetorical Leadership of Fulton J. Sheen, Norman Vincent Peale, and Billy Graham in the Age of Extremes,* considers three important Christian figures working at the intersection of 20th century religion and politics. The "Age of Extremes" cited in the book's title covers the period between 1914 and 1991, when much of the world was consumed by a series of hot and, later, cold wars. It was a time of extreme conditions, when people were consumed with geopolitical anxieties. Those hoping to spread the gospel in such conditions—notably including Sheen, Peale, and Graham—developed strategies for engaging the times.

Sherwood's treatment of these figures is consciously situated between a social determinist view and an endorsement of the "Great Man" theory of history. Acknowledging the irony of his position, he adopts a "moderate or less extreme view" aligned with what Jerome Dean Mahaffey has called "limited agency" (p. 5). This is an approach that "looks for and examines the *rhetoric* of an influential individual in order to understand the interactions between that rhetoric and the American [culture]" (p. 5). In answer to the question of whether or not rhetorical agency is real, Sherwood seems to join Mahaffey in answering, "Yes," if tentatively. Sheen, Peale, and Graham were the most influential among a group of mid-twentieth century preachers touted for their influence, and since then their work has enjoyed the benefits of legacy, inspiring ministers and religious-political actors into a new millennium.

Interestingly, though each came to the pulpit with disparate doctrines and dogmas, Sheen, Peale, and Graham shared both an evangelizing mission and an enthusiasm for new media. Each embraced the available means to project the gospel to larger audiences than ever before. And because much of the new technology allowed audiences to *see* them—transforming listeners into *viewers*—their faces became familiar to a public that may only have recognized their voices in years past. In fact, one might argue that, for all the effectiveness of their preaching, these three men may be best understood as *media personalities*—Christian figures who built their careers on the innovations of mainstream media. Sherwood approaches from the media angle, focusing on how each used his extensive public platform to wrestle with symptoms of a national—even *global*—exigency.

Take Sheen, for instance. He became a household name in the early 1950s thanks to his very popular television program, *Life is Worth Living.* Though conspicuously identified with his Catholic faith—he always appeared in his clerical vestments—Sheen's messages were often more ideological than religious. Sherwood situates Sheen within an "age of ideologies" (p. 9), focusing specifically on his work as a spirited defense of capitalism and Americanism against communism and assorted other -isms. Paired with his overt religiosity, Sheen's patriotism worked to strengthen the bond between American identity and Christian faith in the public imagination. Sherwood identifies Sheen as a skilled "Christian sophist" (p. 17) whose rhetorical method drew upon the dichotomous ideological structures already established in the minds of his viewers. In particular, Sherwood writes, Sheen's

"dichotomous paradigm pitted two world orders in an archetypal struggle between the forces of good and evil. The communistic Soviet Union was depicted as being godless and the democratic United States as God-fearing, the Soviets as a 'perversion of morality' and the United States as an 'instrument of virtue in the world'" (p. 25). These two key terms—*United States* and *Soviet Union*—spawned others that persistently reinforced the contrast central to Sheen's rhetorical work. Terms associated with the United States included "*democracy, free, independent, irreplaceable, inalienable, sovereign worth, Divine Justice, created by God,* and *redeemed by Christ*." Soviet associations included "*masses, politicized barbarism, totalitarianism, individuals can be used, devoid of rights, absolute power,* and *The Party*" (p. 33). There are others—too many, in fact, to summarize neatly here. But suffice it to say that Sheen committed much of his speech on *Life is Worth Living* to the proposition that *American* life was worth living, while the Soviet people suffered under brutal ideological constraints. The upbeat, optimistic tone of the show's title is itself indicative of the rhetorical situation Sheen addressed. His broadcast offered confidence and reassurance at a time when both were in high demand.

If Sheen's ministry situated Americans in opposition to the communists, Norman Vincent Peale's work found them amid the general sense of anxiety that permeated the age. Thanks in large part to the Cold War and the looming threat of atomic destruction, American discourse was enveloped in anxiety, and Americans were seeking relief in psychiatric offices and wonder drugs. A born salesman influenced by the previous anxieties of the Great Depression, Peale committed his ministry to soothing frayed nerves. His upbeat Sunday sermons at New York City's Marble Collegiate Church were wildly popular, and his words were distributed further through a dazzling array of media, including "a nationally syndicated newspaper column, weekly radio and television programs, his ever-growing magazine *Guideposts,* widespread dissemination of his sermons on recordings and in print through his Sermon Publications, and last, his best-selling 1952 book, *The Power of Positive Thinking*," which remained atop the New York Times Bestseller list for "an unprecedented 98 weeks" (p. 53). All told, Peale's communications network was able to reach an estimated 30 million people every week. His success prompted Peale to embrace a ministry-as-business model. "I certainly do not regard myself as a great voice among the world's spiritual leaders," he once declared, "but I do like to believe humbly that I know how to sell my product effectively" (p. 52). He was adept at recognizing the exigencies of the moment and offering popular prescriptions. Consequently, Peale was often criticized for being "too much of a go-getter and not enough of a theologian" (p. 52), a self-help pitchman peddling easy answers to deep and spiritual questions. But despite these criticisms, Peale was undeniably successful at crafting a fitting response to one of the core exigencies of his time. Given his irrepressible optimism, his frequent deployment of inspirational stories, and his business-minded approach to ministry, Peale may be understood as an important pre-cursor to a modern prosperity gospel that continues to enjoy the perks of success – and absorb the criticism.

Finally, Sherwood turns to Billy Graham as an example of rhetorical effectiveness in an "age of heroes." Drawing on the popularity of comic books in the 1950s and 60s to diagnose the national condition, Sherwood suggests that Graham's rise corresponded to a national disorientation, when changing times had called old mythologies into question. In such an environment, the cut-and-dry opposition between God and Satan, heaven and hell played directly into a comfortable narrative format. As the nation's most recognizable proponent of this narrative, Graham became a sort of hero in his own right. Sherwood draws on Marshall McLuhan to argue that Graham became "medium, message, and messenger all wrapped into one," insofar as his powerful ethos outpaced his relatively simple doctrinal statement (p. 91). As Graham crisscrossed the country leading crusades, consulting with presidents, publishing books, and being famous, he acquired an almost superhuman quality that audiences found extremely appealing. Reflecting on an interview with Graham, an Atlanta journalist noted that there was something different about this special man: "That's it…a glow," he said. "It surrounds him and is of him. And maybe that explains why during the conversation between you two, you had the unmistakable feeling that there were three persons in the room" (p. 91). Even more than Sheen and Peale, Graham was famous, in part, for being famous, and for having a uniquely divine sensibility. Noting that the content of Graham's sermons rarely differed from that of other evangelical ministers of his day, Sherwood stresses that Graham's Christian heroism was based in his embodiment of six "verbal dimensions of credibility," including *power, competence, trustworthiness, good will, idealism,* and *similarity* (pp. 96–110). In that respect, he joined Sheen and Peale as the first modern Christian celebrities, men whose very presence could command the attention—and the reverence—of interested others.

In Sherwood's work we see three notable public figures, the sum of whose individual efforts constituted a template for Christian cultural engagement in post-war America. Responding to the exigencies of the time via the latest technologies and savvy marketing strategies, Sheen, Peale, and Graham performed Christian ministry in secular contexts, often toward distinctly secular ends. Much of their work aligned their religious efforts with broader public initiatives. They attempted to bring about a sort of cultural "revitalization" based on associations between Christian faith and American identity (p. 83). In winning individual souls for Christ, they also sought to chart the moral course of the nation. In this, they were often successful. But success of such a worldly sort came with a consequence—it introduced Christian piety to mainstream popularity, an acquaintance easier to forge than dissolve.

In and Of the Cult of Youth

If the mid-twentieth century played host to a simplified and popularized brand of sermonizing, it also facilitated a national shift toward a rising youth culture. In his *The Juvenilization of American Christianity*, Thomas E. Bergler (2012) argues that the former is actually symptomatic of the latter. That is, the move toward simple themes and emotional appeals in American pulpits was part and parcel of a larger shift toward evangelization methods that cater to young people. It is

this process, occurring gradually and often unintentionally over time, that Bergler terms "juvenilization." He defines it as "the process by which the religious beliefs, practices, and developmental characteristics of adolescents become accepted as appropriate for Christians of all ages" (p. 4). Though adapting the faith to young people is admirable, in Bergler's view, it "sometimes ends badly, with both youth and adults embracing immature versions of the faith" (p. 4).

Bergler's book is a *history* book, and it pairs well with Sherwood in that both are primarily concerned with Christian speech practices in the mid-to-late twentieth century. Bergler begins his account in the 1930s and 40s, during the sweeping crises and resultant anxieties that inform so much of Sherwood's work. It was then, Bergler notes, that young people rose to prominence as an important national constituency, representing the future, its possibilities, and the potential solutions to its looming problems. It was also during this period that the term "teenager" came into popular usage, delineating a cohesive group with distinctive characteristics. "Unlike the more diverse 'youth' of previous eras," Bergler writes, "teenagers all went to high school and all participated in a national youth culture increasingly dominated by the same music, TV shows, movies, products and cultural beliefs" (p. 5). Church leaders thus became aware of the teenage target audience around the same time that advertisers did—and for very similar reasons.

From these early days of youth ascendancy, Bergler's narrative arc crosses decades and denominations into our present age of youth fetishism—both in the church and the national culture. Nationally, youth-worship is ubiquitous, playing a definitional role in practically all things popular. Movies, music, television, magazine covers and advertisements all target young audiences, often encouraging older people to reclaim or reminisce on the promise of their younger years. In the church, it has taken a variety of common and recognizable forms. Bergler associates "adolescent Christianity" with "physical activity, touch and other bodily means of expressing faith" (p. 9), desire for "intimate, nurturing groups of friends who will support their faith journey," a tendency to "care more about religious friendships than about truth" (p. 10), a preoccupation with "self-exploration and personal transformation," faith as a means to "identity development," and the emotional experience of "higher highs and lower lows" (p. 11). In many American church services, expressive worship music and love-centric affirmation have replaced theological heft. For Bergler, such services maintain an experiential environment conducive to adolescent worshippers who are "concerned about how their faith relates to their sexuality and their romantic relationships," who "want to experience a 'personal relationship with God' and like the idea of 'falling in love' with Jesus" (p. 9). Ultimately, juvenilization tends to yield a type of shallow, emotive religiosity similar to that which Christian Smith and his colleagues (2009) have termed "Moral, Therapeutic, Deism."

Though now ubiquitous, juvenilization is not inevitable, and much of Bergler's historical work is dedicated to charting its starts and stops. Unsurprisingly, early juvenilization was most successful among evangelicals

who prioritized youth ministry. Billy Graham's Youth for Christ (YFC) offers a prime and representative example. Describing YFC as an upbeat organization whose rally-style events were designed to attract middle-class kids and "inoculate" them against the "insidious moral diseases" of the age, Bergler provides an assessment that is worth quoting at some length:

> Since the fate of the world depended upon winning as many youthful converts as quickly as possible, preachers at YFC rallies didn't worry about ways they might be subtly altering the gospel message. To appeal to teenagers, YFC preachers painted Christianity as the most attractive way of life available, and tried to dispel fears that it was boring or restrictive. Billy Graham claimed that "the young people around the world today who are having the best time are the young people who know Jesus Christ." Jim Rayburn, founder of Young Life, agreed; as he put it, "It's a sin to bore a kid." Evangelical leaders like Graham and Rayburn insisted that accepting Christ as savior did not mean giving up pleasure and wearing a long face. Instead, it meant acquiring a new hero and falling in love with Him. At the same time, they stressed that following Christ included absolute obedience to his commandments and separation from "the world." This seemingly contradictory combination of fun and moral strictness would prove crucial to evangelical youth work and to the juvenilization of the gospel message in the decades to come (p. 51).

Consistent with Sherwood's analysis, Bergler finds Graham preaching a simple but highly adaptable message specifically tailored to a particular audience. Though committed to a few core principles, this iteration was cast in the idiom of the young, walking the fine line between opposition and assimilation by pitching a moral and spiritual vision in fun and pleasurable terms. He notes, further, that YFC leaders "instinctively embraced marketing techniques and business terminology in their evangelistic efforts" allowing them to "compete with some of the best that the entertainment world had to offer." Though effective, these efforts drew criticism on opposing fronts. Fundamentalists criticized the movement for "selling out to worldliness and cheapening the faith by using vaudeville-style gimmicks" (p. 52). For their part, mainline Protestants objected to what they saw as a watered-down, "deficient gospel" (p. 53). Others, including some in the Catholic Action movement, recognized that "the biggest problem with youth culture was not the immorality of its content but rather the sort of persons it tended to create: passive consumers with poor critical-thinking skills" (p. 65). For these critics, YFC and other proponents of juvenilized Christianity had misread the fundamental threat. Young people were "more likely to be lulled to sleep by the trivial world of teenage social life than to be directly defeated by the devil (let alone the communists)" (p. 66).

These types of reactions help explain why juvenilization failed in some denominations even as it thrived in others. Among more liberal, mainline Protestants, juvenilization was often opposed through commitment to social action. The Methodists, for instance, encouraged their young people to work for social justice, heading initiatives to oppose poverty, racial discrimination, and other public ills. Often labeled "communists" by their conservative critics, many young Methodists spent the middle decades of the century championing causes that became almost universally accepted over time. Though widely successful, they failed to spark a mass movement of youth, an outcome that

Bergler attributes to their inability to "overcome the deadening effects of middle-class white youth culture" (p. 68).

In African-American churches, youth ministry was intimately connected to civil rights activism. Faced with glaring injustices that did not confront white congregations, black churches became launch pads for student movements bent on causing social change. The seriousness of this work infused such movements with a profound sense of purpose, a circumstance with opposing consequences. On the one hand, black youth emerged as the drivers of an important national movement, instilling them with adult levels of responsibility. On the other, the movement became intimately associated with the youth, engendering a sort of juvenilization that distanced young people from the mature churches that launched them (p. 118).

Meanwhile, Catholic youth were experiencing their faith as a "claustrophobic subculture in which young people heard that they must win the Cold War by keeping sexually pure, saying the rosary, and participating in Catholic social clubs," a message crafted in part by Fulton J. Sheen (p. 145). Like many in the white Protestant churches, these Catholic youth were coming of age in a faith environment that catered to some of their most inconsequential concerns. As the 1960s arrived, both Catholic and Protestant American youth were caught up in what Bergler terms "a full-fledged juvenilized version of evangelical Christianity," one that centered upon "fun and entertainment while maintaining strict rules about bodily purity." This precursor to the contemporary youth group promised young people the opportunity to "have fun, be popular, and save the world at the same time" (p. 174).

The obvious drawbacks of juvenilization provide a sort of cautionary tale for Christian leaders who believe in the rhetorical value of cultural currency. In Bergler's telling, adolescent Christianity rose to prominence on the back of adolescent secular culture, following certain trends and helping to reinforce them. One important consequence is that, instead of training up mature and confident Christian young people, contemporary churches commonly juvenilize adults. For many reasons, adulthood arrives later in the 21st century than it did even a few decades previous. These days, 20- and 30-somethings who might formerly have been adult-ized by military service, career, or marriage have been able to delay adult responsibilities, replacing them with an extended search for themselves. Rather than working against this trend by providing purpose and guidance, churches have tended to accommodate it, fashioning an emotionally resonant, "seeker friendly" environment that evades judgment.

Whether they are aware of it or not, church leaders routinely endorse the symbiotic relationship between juvenilization and consumerism. The qualities most often associated with the young—impulsiveness, insecurity, and discretionary income, for instance—make them ideal consumers. The juvenilization of American culture is therefore broadly incentivized. Bergler notes that "encouraging people to settle into some of the worst traits of adolescence is good for business. Not all businesses and advertisers operate on this basis, but enough do to encourage the cult of youth and discourage people

from growing up" (pp. 6–7). Operating in a Peale-ian mindset, churches are attentive to the forces of supply and demand. As their services become increasingly juvenilized, their corporate identities skew adolescent. "Adolescent churches," Bergler writes, "are more likely to conform to the supposed needs or desires of young people than they are to shoulder the more difficult task of spiritually forming the young" (p. 16). With that, he indicts much of the most popular methodology at work in American congregations today—a methodology of assimilation, capitulation, and by some more tangible measures, great success.

In and Of the Sexual Revolution

By the closing decades of the twentieth century, Christian advocacy groups were engaging American culture on a variety of separate-but-related fronts, many of which concerned sexuality. Anti-abortion activism was a mainstay, as was opposition to feminism and gay rights, with an increasing interest in so-called gay reparative therapy. But these single-issue, culture war movements were usually the province of very committed, hardcore activists. Anti-abortion activism, in particular, appealed to personalities like Randall Terry and Joseph Scheidler, and was enacted in the streets and in front of women's clinics. Though mainstream evangelical congregations usually supported the mission of these groups, commitment to their *tactics* was somewhat oblique. In the juvenilized evangelical congregations of the 1990s and early 2000s, sexual sin was addressed at the source, through popular and pervasive abstinence campaigns.

Christine J. Gardner (2011) analyzes these efforts in her book, *Making Chastity Sexy: The Rhetoric of Evangelical Abstinence Campaigns*. As Bergler demonstrates, sexual abstinence had been a central theme of Christian youth ministry dating back to the 1950s. In those days, the message was distinctly negative, urging Christian young people to defy their hormones and impulses. More recently, Gardner (2011) observes that this message has undergone significant revision. Or, as she puts it, "Chastity is getting a makeover" (p. 2). Focusing primarily on organizations such as *True Love Waits, Silver Ring Thing,* and *Pure Freedom*, Gardner notes that warnings about the sinfulness of *pre*-marital sex have been replaced by assurances about the wonders of *marital* sex. If young people are willing to wait, that is, they will be rewarded with blissful pleasures later on. Early in the book, Gardner frames her study in terms of assimilation and opposition:

> Following the New Testament injunction to "be in the world, but not of it," evangelicals straddle the line between secular accommodation and religious distinction. Based on my analysis of the evangelical sexual abstinence campaigns, evangelicals are co-opting forms of secular culture to make chastity sexy. The individualistic what's-in-it-for-me approach may resonate with today's teenagers, promising great sex and future marriage as the reward for abstinence, but the persuasiveness of that argument subtly shifts the nature of evangelicalism away from sacrifice and suffering to self-gratification (p. 18).

Consistent with Bergler's work, Gardner identifies a prominent mode of Christian youth outreach that shrinks from being unequivocally Christian. In making the case for a Biblically informed morality, proponents of abstinence

avoid singular reliance on the Bible. Instead, they work to persuade young people that saving sex for marriage will ultimately make their lives more pleasurable and more emotionally fulfilling.

Gardner situates the rise of the contemporary evangelical abstinence campaign in the early 1990s, as "a reaction to what was perceived as a hypersexualized culture in which abstinence is viewed as unrealistic and teenagers are assumed to have no choice but to have sex." Responding to a popular construction that depicted teens as hormonal automatons, abstinence campaigns sought to re-position them as "choice-making agents with the power to control their own bodies" (p. 23). The adoption of "choice" as a key term in this context is somewhat ironic, given its importance to liberal feminist discourses touting "reproductive rights." Those who oversee and/or attend abstinence campaign events are unlikely to support other "pro-choice" initiatives, or to grant individuals absolute sovereignty over their own bodies in other contexts. But the appeal to teenagers insists that young people *can* choose to remain abstinent, that such a choice is not impossible or unrealistic. This assertion takes the traditionally negative valence of abstinence rhetoric and inflects it positively. Here admonitions such as "Stop" or "Do not" become "I will" or "I choose" (p. 27). Instead of passively taking orders, young people are thus empowered with positive agency.

Still, insistence on the availability of choice does not ensure that the *correct* choice will be made. The obvious—and somewhat problematic—subtext of this rhetorical strategy is that young people *should choose to abstain*. A teenager who chooses to have pre-marital sex may do so with the same degree of agency as one who chooses to wait, and so remain within the purview of the appeal. Closing this loophole practically demands a prohibitive argument. But abstinence proponents shore up their positive message by stressing the importance of "purity" in all aspects of life, from romantic relationships to clothing and entertainment choices. A positive, assertive approach to lifestyle decisions, purity has the added benefit of freeing abstinence proponents from taking specific positions on what activities count as sex. "Instead of being forced to make lists of acceptable and unacceptable sexual activity," Gardner writes, "the campaigns can focus on purity, thus subsuming sexual activity under the general category of lifestyle choices that are pleasing to God" (p. 31).

The choice appeal is strengthened further by an emphasis on health benefits. Having positioned young people as choice-making agents with a decided interest in purity, abstinence campaigners argue that saving sex for marriage is smart from both personal health and public policy standpoints. A sort of public health initiative operating in a church auditorium, the campaign notes that being abstinent means avoiding unwanted pregnancy—and with it, abortion—as well as the transmission of sexually-transmitted diseases. Dubbing this "a savvy argumentation structure that begins with a moral and religious commitment and ends with a pragmatic and secular outcome," Gardner notes that it is designed to be effective "regardless of whether one believes in Jesus Christ or not" (p. 35). Further, "although evangelical leaders believe that abstinence is God's design for human sexual behavior, they say

they promote it because it works" (p. 35). One of the primary outcomes it works *toward*, as mentioned above, is healthy, pleasurable sex within marriage. In this way, a distinctly Christian position takes on a largely secular form, offering great, future sex as an alternative to risky sex in the present.

In lieu of a straightforward, Biblical argument for chastity, abstinence campaigns bombard attendees with rhetorical techniques directly appropriated from popular culture. Gardner notes that evangelicals have a history of both decrying popular culture as sinful and rechristening it for their own uses, a practice that pulls them into close contact with worldly influence. The tension between is neatly captured by an anecdote about *Silver Ring Thing* founder Denny Pattyn. Gardner recounts that, while addressing a rally in Boston, Pattyn managed to both attack and endorse pop media in the course of one *breath*. "In the same sentence in which he excoriated the influence of MTV (a popular target among all the abstinence organizations examined in this study), Pattyn encouraged the audience to watch MTV for the upcoming show on abstinence hosted by Christina Aguilera." His message, Gardner writes, "seemed to be that secular forms of popular media are to be avoided unless they are sanctified with an evangelical message" (p. 46). Noting that MTV is appealing to evangelicals because of its deep reach into unchurched demographics, Gardner also acknowledges the basic problem inherent to seizing the secular ethos. The message morphs to match the form, such that, in this case, "abstinence is now all about sex" (p. 47).

The sexualized and secularized nature of the abstinence campaign is further problematized by one of its core assumptions. The founding premise of initiatives like *True Love Waits* is that the wait *will eventually end*. Such efforts adhere to a fairy-tale narrative structure that promises love and romance to the young and the chaste, a promise that trades in traditional gender roles and that may never be fulfilled (p. 64). When the promise is broken by the stress of relationship, guilt arises in various forms. When it is broken by the passage of time—as in the case of prolonged singleness or homosexuality—the appeal simply has nothing to offer (p. 139). For the many young attendees who end up happily married, the abstinence message may be remembered as a helpful guide through the maze of adolescence. For those who fall short of their commitments or remain unhappily single, the pithy slogans and techniques likely provide colder comfort.

In later chapters, Gardner's analysis takes her to Africa, where abstinence campaigns are hard at work addressing the continent's HIV/AIDS epidemic. Unsurprisingly, similar techniques and outcomes apply (p. 167). In the end, Gardner concludes, the message of the contemporary abstinence campaign "succeeds only in making abstinence all about sex" (p. 185). She continues:

> The evangelical abstinence campaigns are unwittingly raising a generation of young people with false expectations about the role of sex in marriage and about the sacrifice and commitment of marriage in general. By tying the abstinence commitment to one's religious commitment, the argument for abstinence threatens to weaken the religious faith of young people if the reward for choosing abstinence is never realized, whether because of singleness or the failure of marital sex to live up to expectations of greatness. (p. 185)

Gardner thus identifies the central problem with assimiliationist rhetorical strategies in Christian speech. The adoption of secularized premises upstages the religious motivation, secularizing it, and leaving the intended audience to engage worldly problems en route to merely worldly solutions.

In and Of the Popular Culture

As the preceding cases demonstrate, Christian ministry and popular culture maintain a dysfunctional relationship. Pop culture is often indifferent to Christian faith, at times shifting into outright hostility that Christians return in kind. For years "Hollywood" has served as a devil term for countless Christian activists and organizations, and the entertainment industry is reviled as a den of ever-changing iniquities. The sex, violence, and profanity of film, television, and music mark these media as Christianity's natural enemies. Many a production has warranted boycott (Land, 1998), and the starlet's sultry face has launched a thousand fundraising pamphlets. But it remains the case that popular culture *is* popular, and so wields the type of influence that Christian evangelists crave. As Gardner demonstrates, the appropriation of secular media by Christian missions is bound for complication.

In her book, *The Faithful Citizen: Popular Christian Media and Gendered Civic Identities,* Kristy Maddux (2010) considers five case studies in pop Christian media, with particular attention to how each images civic participation. Specifically, she is interested in how such participation is *gendered* in films such as *Amazing Grace* and *The Passion of the Christ*, books-turned-films such as *Left Behind* and *The Da Vinci Code*, and the television series *7th Heaven*. For Maddux, analysis of these works is instructive on several levels. On the most basic, it demonstrates how various models of civic engagement are depicted in Christian media. Further, it discloses how those models are gendered, and how they differ from one another in this respect. In some cases, Christian behavior is cast according to feminine norms. In others, it is distinctly masculine. In each, the femininity or masculinity of the protagonists is definitive of the version of Christian engagement being promoted. As she considers these works, Maddux situates their depictions within the context of their release and promotion, noting how their various historical settings interact with present, real-world exigencies. As they face the twin temptations of secularity and entertainment value, these media are thus further complicated by current events and cultural assumptions.

Maddux identifies *Amazing Grace* and *Left Behind,* for instance, as proponents of *masculine* Christian engagement. Both feature protagonists who embody masculine qualities including assertiveness, achievement, control, and dominance. But as Maddux notes, the masculinity being depicted is inflected differently in each. *Amazing Grace* features a protagonist representative of "genteel" masculinity, while *Left Behind*'s model is of a more "brutish" sort. Both feature male protagonists who realize their goals by imposing themselves upon their circumstances, albeit with different degrees of aggression. In doing so, they offer competing models for Christian engagement in the present.

Amazing Grace tells the story of William Wilberforce, the eighteenth century English Parliamentarian credited with ending the empire's slave trade. Released in 2007, at a time when Christian participation in politics was widely

and heatedly discussed, *Amazing Grace* offers Wilberforce as an exemplar of "faith-based political activism" (p. 33), a model that was quickly embraced by Christian advocacy groups across the political spectrum. Figures from the Christian Right *and* Left touted the film's applicability, citing it as a model for Christian public figures wary of religious argumentation in the public sphere. Maddux identifies the film's portrayal of Wilberforce as an instance of "retrospective framing," a technique that "makes a distant subject accessible and intelligible to contemporary audiences" (p. 41). It does this, first, "by depicting a historical figure in William Wilberforce, who carries significant cachet among American evangelicals; second, by portraying his faith according to characteristics familiar to evangelicalism; and, third, by posing as its central dilemma the reconciliation of God's work and legislative work" (p. 41). Operating as a stand-in for the evangelicals who comprised the film's core audience, Wilberforce thus provides a compelling counterpoint to critics of Christian politics. That his political victory was secured over an institution as universally despised as the slave trade ensures his broad public appeal. His example of uncompromising and prophetic but also skillful political machination lends itself as a template for current controversial topics.

The "brutish" masculinity of the *Left Behind* series operates without the polish of gentility. Giving voice to apocalyptic, turn-of-the-millennium hysteria, these books and movies depict strong, male characters fighting for Christ in an end-of-the-world context. Protagonists with names like Rayford Steele and Buck Williams lead an underground movement known as the "Tribulation Force" to subvert the rise of Nicolae Carpathia, the Anti-Christ, who takes power after the global Christian population has vanished in the Rapture. This narrative draws upon the premillennialist theology frequently touted by Christian Right figures toward the end of the twentieth century. Previously popularized by writers such as John Nelson Darby and Hal Lindsay, premillennialism envisions a world rushing irreversibly toward apocalypse, a descent that human beings can do nothing to stop. Maddux notes that premillennialism may easily lend itself to separatism, insofar as it discourages Christians from taking public action. However, she argues, the *Left Behind* accounts work to dispel such pessimism while remaining faithful to theological dictates. "*Left Behind*," she writes, "puts an immanent, cyclical, and analogical cast on the tragic premillennialist narrative, and in doing so, carves out a space for human agency unparalleled in traditional literal, telic, imminent, tragic premillennialist narratives" (p. 99). The books situate their hyper-masculine characters within a high-octane environment governed by stark and obvious dichotomies – between good and evil, reality and appearance, and truth and persuasion, the last of which imbues the series with a distinct anti-intellectualism. Throughout *Left Behind*, the rational characters are those who find reason to doubt, while the faithful characters never founder. Persuasion is the tool of the Enemy, while truth is evident to those who believe. Ultimately, God is on the side of *action* rather than thought.

The embodiment of masculine gender norms in *Amazing Grace* and *Left Behind* is anything but subtle, but it becomes even more overt when examined beside *The Passion of the Christ* and *7th Heaven*, which privilege

femininity. In these works, protagonists engage the civic space through nurturing, supportive, submissive behaviors, achieving their force by *yielding* to others—a perfect contrast to those who consolidate power through imposition and domination.

Famously—and graphically—depicting the betrayal, torture, and death of Jesus at the hands of the Romans—with the blessing of the Jews—Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* images a feminine model of civic engagement based on the submissive sacrifice of Christ himself. Maddux routes her analysis through a pair of interpretations sitting somewhat at odds with one another. The first, liberation theology, sees "relating to Jesus' suffering as a way for the poor and marginalized to escape their own oppression." The second, feminist theology, worries that "such empathy only leads Christians to accept the suffering in their own lives" (p. 58). Though not directly opposed—and not alone—these views illuminate an important conceptual problem: how to understand the passion? As an empowering force, as an apology for suffering, as something else entirely? In *The Passion*'s model of civic engagement, Maddux sees a message tailored specifically to the middle class, evangelical Christian audiences that made the film a box office success. Noting that, "The Passion allows white, middle-class, North American audiences to see themselves as victims," Maddux continues:

> As followers of Christ, even economically secure, well-educated audience members become victims of the persecution of Christians so evident in the film. The Passion demonstrates, then, that oppression is a fundamentally discursive category. Even if liberation theologians often want to consider economic discrepancies when they talk about "the poor" and "the oppressed," the experience of victimhood provided by *The Passion* ignores such discrepancies, portraying oppression instead based on religious discrimination. By allowing contemporary Christians to understand themselves as victims, *The Passion* feeds the persecution complex common to American Christian discourses, which set themselves at odds to the hostile world inhospitable to Christian value systems. (p. 82)

Gibson's feminine model emphasizes the suffering of Christ in a way that allows audience members to feel and claim it as their own. Instead of encouraging Christians to fight—whether in politics or the streets—*The Passion* directs their focus inward, toward themselves and their shared tribulations. Since the majority of these viewers will have suffered few or no *actual* injuries at the hands of anti-Christian persecutors, they may soon begin searching for slights and inconveniences to play that role in their own narratives. Maddux argues that Gibson's film invites Christian audiences to "play the victim," even if they have not been actually victimized (p. 62).

On the television series *7th Heaven*, feminine civic engagement is enacted through a nurturing domesticity rather than submission. Set in the warm and inviting town of Glen Oak, California, the program focuses on Rev. Eric Camden, his wife Annie, and their seven children. Noting that the show came on the air in 1996—the same year that Congress enacted President Clinton's welfare reform initiatives—Maddux argues that *7th Heaven* addresses a pressing exigency of its moment. Specifically, it bridges the public and private spheres, endorsing private charity as a suitable replacement for public welfare. As politicians and pundits debated the role of government in maintaining the

social safety net, Rev. Camden and his family weekly demonstrated the potential of private citizens to support and nurture their neighbors. Some episodes assertively critique government action, but most simply situate social problems within specific, individualized contexts. In Glen Oak, general problems are localized and addressed locally. The causes are traceable to individual decisions, and may be solved on a case-by-case basis. Notably, though the *7th Heaven* model of civic engagement is enacted by a Christian family drawing presumably on Christian values, the shows tenor remains distinctly secular. "Because human problems result from bad decision making," Maddux writes, "rather than an inherently sinful nature, appeals to individual reform are rare, and suggestions of religious-oriented reform, such as Christian salvation, are non-existent" (139). A model of Christian charity and compassion for a secular world, the Camden family ultimately remains non-threatening to secular audiences.

Ultimately, Maddux's analysis explores what she terms "the limits and possibilities of faith-based civic participation" (p. 181). Her neat identification of masculine and feminine thematics in the above case studies is complicated somewhat by her treatment of *The Da Vinci Code*, which violates and reinscribes certain gendered expectations in interesting ways. The book/film's handling of women's sexuality, heterosexuality, and its preference for the private over the public sphere all disclose a tense relationship with American feminism—contrary to some critical reviews linking the two explicitly (p. 178). Like the others, this example demonstrates how competing visions of Christian civic engagement are depicted in pop Christian media, often to strong reception, but just as often with problematic elements. Maddux provides a laundry list of these, each born out in the artifacts she presents. To this list one might add the demands and temptations of Christian life-as-entertainment. In this respect, pop Christian media exists at the nexus of opposition and assimilation – it infiltrates the world, draws a following, advances claims, and, in some cases, makes a lot of money. Through it all, evangelism remains a goal. But it quickly ceases to be *the* goal, instead becoming one among many.

Conclusion

This essay began with a brief discussion of the soul-searching currently underway within American—especially *evangelical*—Christianity, prompted by polling data that indicates a marked, generational shift away from faith. In each of the texts under review, communication scholars have examined elements of Christian cultural engagement that may help contextualize that discussion. In each case, the tension that arises near the intersection of *in* and *of* is on prominent display. As Christian intellectuals take inventory of their gains and losses, they should perhaps situate their analyses at the center of this scale.

The "outsider" quoted in Kinnaman and Lyons' (2007) book provides anecdotal evidence that the estrangement between young people and Christian faith is largely political. When s/he identifies believers as being "antigay, antichoice, angry, violent, illogical, empire builders" (p. 26), it is difficult not to think of the culture war vitriol that has defined Christian political action during his/her young life. The comment reflects upon four decades of spittle-flecked

Christianity, draped in reaction and standing always in warring posture. Having cast itself *of* a particular political ideology, this Christianity found itself *out* of the audiences it most hoped to address. The judgment is vindicating for those on the so-called Christian Left, who have long emphasized the more nurturing, compassionate elements of the tradition. It reflects poorly on the predecessors of the so-called Christian Right, who effectively melded Christian belief with American patriotism and capitalism, and who adopted a moralizing approach to public policy. In Timothy H. Sherwood's mostly laudatory treatment of Sheen, Peale, and Graham, we may yet experience premonitions of Falwell, Robertson, and Reed. One might also think of the modern alignment of ministry and business, of the televangelist scandals of the 1980s, or of the self-help evangelism of the new millennium. The media successes of these men foreshadow the rise of Christian broadcasting empires, which in turn built platforms for politics and business. If it is unfair to blame the fathers for the sins of the sons, we may still cast a critical eye on the conditions in which the sons were raised.

But if the generational disillusionment is largely an indictment of political preaching, it is not entirely so. Perceptions should be examined with attention to the perceivers as well as the perceived, and it is worth noting that contemporary young people perceive faith differently than their parents did in decades past. Thomas E. Bergler's work locates these perceptions within a "juvenilized" mindset, itself a product of well-meaning cultural assimilation. Since the 1950s American churches have devoted considerable time and energy to youth appeals, drawing upon pop culture trends to fashion relatable youth ministry. These efforts cater to a constituency already accustomed to accommodation, whose commitments tend more toward individualism than ideology. Having been raised on the assurance that they can do anything they put their minds to, the "Millennial" generation lives according to that expectation—regardless of what institutions and doctrines may have to say. That a largely irreligious generation should follow so closely on the heels of juvenilized faith traditions is both surprising and not. On the one hand, evangelical congregations have had incredible success in their youth ministries, infiltrating youth culture and making Christian participation *fun.* This success is at least partly responsible for the impressive growth of evangelical congregations over a period when mainline attendance has dwindled. But the breadth of evangelical attendance has corresponded to a distinct lack of depth. The centrality of entertaining, emotionally resonant youth ministry to the evangelical mission has generated an adolescent Christianity predicated on the assumption that faith is simply another feel-good lifestyle enhancement. "If you're getting something out of it," Bergler (2012) summarizes, "by all means, go. If not, find what makes you happy and get involved in that" (p. 220).

The *sexiness* of evangelical abstinence campaigns offers another case study in assimilated, juvenilized thinking. As Christine J. Gardner observes, campaigns such as *True Love Waits*, *Silver Ring Thing,* and *Pure Freedom* reach out to young people by appealing directly to their personal interest, rather than by stressing scriptural precepts. This approach both appeals to and reinforces a "what's-in-it-for-me" consumerist mindset, ironically guiding audiences *away*

from values such as commitment and sacrifice. When campaign promises go unfulfilled—as they very often do—the jilted believers of those promises may lose faith in Christianity as well as themselves. Having deemphasized the theological core of Christian belief, abstinence campaigns prepare their young participants for an adulthood spent waiting—and waiting—perhaps without the assurance of doctrinal fidelity. Further, since evangelicalism tends to thrive when it images itself as a counterpublic, mainstream assimilation tends to dilute the cultural resonance of evangelical messages. "In public sphere theory," Gardner writes, "when a counterpublic such as evangelicalism becomes the public, it may lose its distinctiveness. Evangelicals' reappropriation of an individualistic rhetoric of choice may be persuasive, but it also reproduces an autonomous self within a religious tradition that purports to value community" (p. 194). Having fashioned an argument that appeals to the world, evangelicals find themselves *aspiring* to the world as well.

The close relationship between Christianity and media is a thread that runs throughout the texts considered above. From Sheen, Peele, and Graham to trendy youth ministry to sexualized abstinence rallies, the draw of pop exposure is unequivocal and strong. Kristy Maddux's work reveals the many cultural assumptions that inform Christian pop media, and how these interact with their discursive environments. Depictions of Christian civic engagement necessarily endorse some worldly ideologies and constructs while critiquing others, often aligning themselves with political positions and doctrinal views that separate them from one another. These media thus identify and emphasize the inability of Christians to form strong coalitions, as well as the difficulties facing popular ideals of Christian citizenship. In doing so, they advance narrow, fractured agendas and measure their success in box office receipts rather than unification. The temporal incentives that drive pop media impose themselves on the religious and secular alike, meaning that entertainment value and viewership necessarily take priority over more lasting concerns.

Ultimately, the integration of Christian belief with secular attraction presents both benefits and liabilities. Obviously, it allows Christian rhetors to expand their audiences. But the expanded audiences require expanded appeals, and expanded appeals tend to draw upon secular incentives. These may include political influence, financial success, emotional fulfillment, passionate sex, secure identity, or just good times. But no matter what form it takes, the secular incentive invariably displaces Christ from the argumentative structure. The *end term* in Christian discourse, Christ is upstaged and obscured by secular appeals. This is true even in arguments that purport to advance Christian interests more broadly. It helps explain how so many Christians can be actively and successfully involved in culture production even as the church slips into generational decline. Having become too comfortable in the world, Christians necessarily become of the world as well.

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