RELIGIOUS TELEVISION AND THE CREATION OF MEANING: A STUDY OF EVANGELICAL PROGRAMMING

by

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ABSTRACT

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Religious Television and the Creation of Meaning: A Study of Evangelical Programming

Professor Martin Laba, Senior Supervisor

The dissertation is an interpretive study of evangelical television programming in the U.S., and of the orthodox Protestant belief system that informs it. It outlines and interprets the "structure of appeal" of that belief system and of its specific manifestation in two programs: "Jimmy Swaggart" (a Sunday revival) and the "700 Club" (a weekday talk show/news magazine). I define appeal as an interdependent relationship between the production of specific meanings and the consumption of those meanings by particular audiences.

The study treats evangelical television as persuasive communication and takes an interpretive approach which treats both the programs and the evangelical belief system as "texts." The theoretical foundation draws on cultural anthropology, rhetorical criticism, and media analysis. It describes the recent history of conservative Evangelicalism, analyzes the contemporary conservative Christian movement as a symbolic struggle over public definitions, and outlines general characteristics of evangelical television (economic structure, programming strategies, variations in format and content, audiences).

The heart of the study is a detailed formal and substantial analysis of "Jimmy Swaggart" and the "700 Club." I employ analytical categories and methodologies from media analysis and rhetorical criticism to contrast these shows as representations of the two poles of conservative Evangelicalism. "Jimmy Swaggart" is the traditional, separatist, ascetic, charismatic pole; the "700 Club" is the contemporary, assimilative, materialist, technical pole. The program analysis fleshes out this theme of "outsiders" and "insiders," comparing the personas of Swaggart and Pat Robertson, the programs' main
themes, the audiences, and formal elements including performance style, use of voice, modes of address, setting, ritual components, rhetorical strategies, and use of televisual framing techniques.

The study concludes that the programs' "structure of appeal" is a synthesis of speaker's motives and listeners' patterns of experience, of form and substance, of production and consumption, and of ethos and world view. I argue that the persuasiveness of these two versions of evangelical belief is related to their different responses to the larger, dominant "narrative" offered by modern, secular consumer society.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to my committee members for their collective support and interest and for their individual contributions. Bill Leiss asked difficult questions in the beginning of this project that helped me think more deeply and critically about the nature of persuasion. He also gave me valuable specific ideas about the relationship between the palatable form of the "700 Club" and the "raw" appeal of Jimmy Swaggart. Roger Simpson has been both a dedicated reader and an equally dedicated friend during this study; his generosity and encouragement have buoyed my spirits throughout my career as a graduate student. My ongoing collaboration with Martin Laba helped get this project off the ground and made its completion a possibility. His enthusiasm for the subject was contagious and helped sustain my belief that it was a meaningful endeavor. I’m also grateful for his early suggestion to pay attention to the "700 Club;" that conversation led me to a key thesis about the contrasts in evangelical TV programs.

Other faculty and fellow students in the Communications Department contributed to this work by creating a stimulating and supportive environment in which to ask questions and seek answers. I thank all of them for that experience; every student should have it so good.

A handful of people have been especially important, not only to the specific work of this study, but to my own process of struggle and growth in which this project took form. I would like to thank: Norbert Ruebsaat, who opened my eyes to the relationship between writing and truth; Hildi Westerkamp, who opened my ears to the world and to myself; Lynda Drury, who taught me the value of struggling to find the connection between heart and mind; Dotty Armstrong, who has helped me recognize my own sources of courage; and Patty Somlo, who has never given up on me or on herself. I also thank Richard Pinet and Alison Hearn for their ideas, encouragement and friendship, Lynne Hissey for her unfailing personal and technical support, Richard Smith for generously rescuing me from technological dilemmas, and Susan Sullivan for sharing her experience of and insights into evangelical Christianity. Finally, I am grateful to Bill Riordan for the many conversations that helped shape this specific project, for his company in my larger "project" in life, and for his recognition and affirmation of my quest to find the connection between
being and meaning.
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FORWARD

During the course of this project, evangelical television has undergone a series of changes and setbacks affecting both its livelihood and its public image. When I began my study of televangelism, Oral Roberts had not yet claimed to be held hostage by a hostile God demanding an $8 million ransom, Jim and Tammy Bakker still held court on PTL, Pat Robertson and Ben Kinchlow were still members of the "700 Club" family, and Jimmy Swaggart's moral character was untarnished. In short, evangelical television was thriving, both financially and "spiritually."

Since that time, the Bakkers, Robertson and Kinchlow have departed from the Christian airwaves, Roberts' credibility has been damaged and his program has slipped in the ratings, and Swaggart's future as a TV preacher is cloudy. Donations to the television ministries have shrunk in the past year and appeals for funds have become increasingly urgent. Jerry Falwell has not only retreated from politics, but has been forced to cut back the number of affiliates of his Liberty television network.

Evangelical television’s future is uncertain, and I suspect the rapid expansion of the 1970s and '80s is over, at least for the short term. Both devoted viewers and the general public have witnessed the often melodramatic exposure of the "sins" of Christian TV's "stars"—an experience that is bound to affect the way televangelists conduct their future business.

While I do not want to minimize the importance of the scandals and cast changes in the past year, I believe they do not change the basic arguments of this study. The two poles of conservative evangelical belief, and their manifestation in the programs of Swaggart and Robertson, exist independently of the personal travails of the TV ministers. In fact, the "sins" of Swaggart et al reinforce the tenets of conservative Evangelicalism, based as it is on a deep and abiding belief in sin, penitence, forgiveness and redemption.
CHAPTER I
TELEVANGELISM AND THE CREATION OF MEANING

I don't have any technique. The only thing I'm trying to do is lead you to Jesus and he'll handle it. (Jimmy Swaggart) ¹

Our concept is to present our program in as simple and as direct a style as appropriate. . . . However, to maintain standards in our industry and to be effective in the marketplace, a degree of entertainment and showmanship is necessary. Communication by mass media is not the same as the direct personal contact between pulpit and pew. (Pat Robertson) ²

Each Sunday, for 60 minutes, some eight million people become a congregation, bound together by electromagnetic waves and flickering images. They congregate across geographical and demographic distances to watch Jimmy Swaggart strut across a fern-covered stage, raise the Bible heavenward and intone: "You need a redeemer." Another four and a half million Americans wake up and start their weekdays with the "700 Club." Amid the bustle of morning routines they tune in to "God's television" to learn from celebrities and experts how to live, love and prosper in a Christian way. ³

The audiences for "Jimmy Swaggart In Crusade" and the "700 Club" are part of the 13 to 15 million Americans who regularly "attend" the "electronic church"—a marriage of television and religion. ⁴ Because religious television is dominated by evangelical Christians, most religious programs reflect the values of that belief system. In taking their message to the airwaves, however, evangelical broadcasters have adopted the modes of representation characteristic of television. The forms of the Electronic Church

range from traditional religious services to standard TV formats wrapped around Christian content. Its perspectives of Christianity range from old-fashioned fire and brimstone denunciations of modern society to upbeat, affirmative homilies and guidelines to a happy Christian lifestyle.

Beneath the formal diversity of televangelism, however, is a common denominator which constitutes the basis of its appeal: the promise of meaning. Conservative Evangelicalism, as a "symbolic system," offers an anchor and rudder to navigate the "meaningless of being" which is the legacy of modernization. In this sense, Evangelicalism is a totalizing symbolic system; it makes sense of individual existence, of disparate experiences, of natural and human history, by integrating them into a cosmic frame of reference. This is no small feat in a world where most of us have come to accept (albeit not without some despair) that morality is relative, events and experiences often random, and life frequently absurd. My study of evangelical television is an attempt to understand how meaning is constructed in the face of meaninglessness. This is not just an academic exercise. I too am unnerved by the erosion of meaning in modern life. And if I cannot accept the values that guide Evangelicalism's grand interpretive schema, I can appreciate the desire that motivates its quest.

A 1979 Gallup poll found that one in five adults in the United States identified themselves as evangelical Christians. The election of Jimmy Carter, a self-proclaimed "born again" Christian, and of Ronald Reagan, who vowed in his campaign to outlaw abortion and put God back in the schools, appeared to signal the birth of a new conservative religious force in American politics and social life. Indeed, George Gallup declared that the results of the survey, commissioned by Christianity Today magazine, made the 1980s "the decade of the evangelicals." The "New Christian Right" gained national attention during Reagan's first campaign. The 1980 "Washington for Jesus" rally drew 500,000 people, most of whom identified Reagan as their candidate. The president-to-be was the keynote speaker at the eastern division of the National Religious Broadcasters convention that year, and Jerry Falwell claimed that his Moral Majority, founded in January, 1979, was a key factor in Reagan's victory. The mass media


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rushed to locate and identify this new "social trend"; newspapers and popular magazines ran numerous articles proclaiming the emergence of a new "Fundamentalist phenomenon" and a "New Christian Right." Given the media's power to make an issue part of the public agenda, such reports and analyses not only informed people about the "rise" of an Evangelical movement, but also helped create that movement in the public imagination. These initial reports and subsequent scholarly articles and books on the Christian Right, the evangelical movement, and the Electronic Church that takes their message to the airwaves, have attempted to explain the resurgence of orthodox Protestantism and the growth of television ministries by referring to statistics on conservative church growth, shifts in public opinion, trends in the television industry or new methods of political organizing. Many of these studies treat the New Christian Right as an "effect" and set about to identify its "causes." What is missing, particularly from secular analyses, is a willingness to enter into the world view of conservative Evangelicalism and to take seriously its interpretations and values. Evangelicalism is more than a political lobby or movement—it is a way of life, of understanding oneself and the world. Followers accept the explanations and rationales of this belief system because they are meaningful; they locate the believer in a system of meaning. This meaning must continually be created, reproduced and disseminated if orthodox Protestantism is to be a living belief system. Such is the role of evangelical television programming. Entering into and understanding this system of meaning, and its representation and reproduction through TV evangelism, is the reason for and heart of my study.

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"The "agenda-setting" theory of the news media, first proposed by Maxwell McCombs, has become widely accepted by U.S. media researchers. For the basic argument, see McCombs, "The Agenda-Setting Function of the Mass Media," Public Opinion Quarterly 36 (1972): 176-187.
In truth, conservative Evangelicalism is not a new phenomenon. It is a well-established, albeit minority, tradition in American religious life. And while the mainstream news media discovered its existence relatively recently, evangelical Christianity is no newcomer to the mass media. This religious perspective constitutes the vast majority of current religious programming on television. Conservative evangelicals have achieved this dominance over religious broadcasting in the last three decades at the expense of mainline denominational programming. Today, three national television networks and one regional network are devoted to the evangelical message (Christian Broadcasting Network, PTL and Trinity Broadcasting Network and the Southern Baptist Convention’s ACTS satellite network). In 1986 there were 200 religious television stations operating in the U.S. and the income of the "electronic church" was estimated at $2 billion.

This domination over religious television also serves to reinforce the public perception that evangelical Christianity is a primary form of worship and belief in the U.S. Mainstream media coverage of the television ministries has contributed to this perception by reporting grossly inflated audience figures based on claims of TV preachers themselves. As Peter Horsfield points out in Religious Television, the combined dominance over religious programming and uncritical media attention has given this minority Christian perspective "an exaggerated influence over the development of American culture and institutions, and possibly over the nature of American and even global religious life." As I will argue, social movements are symbolic constructions. Because television is one of the key sites of symbolic production in our society, its coverage of Evangelicalism and its use by religious broadcasters are principal means of constituting an evangelical movement. While TV preachers may inflate their audience sizes and

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9 Peter Horsfield, Religious Television: The American Experience (New York: Longman, 1984), p. 9. Some 92 percent of religious programs are "paid-time" programming that is purchased from stations; most paid-time programs are evangelical or Fundamentalist in theology.


10 Martin, "Birth of a Media Myth,"

the scope of their influence, conservative Evangelicalism and the Electronic Church have indeed become important religious forces in the U.S.

I first became interested in evangelical television programming through accidental viewing. What intrigued me in my casual encounters with this religious communication was the nature and substance of the beliefs that bound together the preachers and their audiences. I was curious about the meaning of the revivals, talk shows and educational programs—not only their political and social significance as cultural phenomena—but also the meaning that they held for viewers. What interested me initially was how that meaning was constructed, communicated and appropriated. And, more importantly, why was this particular understanding of Christianity attractive to a significant number of people—enough people, in fact, to support a multi-million dollar broadcasting industry. How does this religious perspective conceive of the nature of society and the individual’s place in it? And what makes it appealing: that is, what is the structure of its appeal? These questions guided me as I began exploring the history of Evangelicalism and its forms and means of expression. It is my aim in this study to shed some light on the ways in which evangelical programming creates a particular set of meanings or interpretations of the world, and how and why it appeals to people to take up those meanings as a guide for their beliefs and actions.

Evangelicalism is a general term encompassing a broad spectrum of religious practices (from strict Fundamentalist to charismatic) and denominations (from large formal organizations like the Southern Baptist Convention to small, localized and unaffiliated churches). Evangelicalism was the dominant form of Protestant Christianity in 19th century America. It has, since then, become a minority tendency in U.S. religious life, despite the fact that it is the primary form of worship portrayed on television and radio. Evangelical Christianity can be roughly defined as a pietistic, perfectionist, supernaturalist and millennialist religious tradition. It views Scripture as the literal word of God, asserts the divinity of Christ, believes that a conversion experience is essential to individual salvation, conceives of Christ and Satan as personal beings, and considers testimony or evangelism as an imperative Christian activity. ¹²

¹²George Marsden, a thoughtful and thorough historian of Fundamentalism, offers a definition of that branch of Evangelicalism which also sheds light on the larger movement: 
"'Fundamentalism' refers to a twentieth-century movement closely tied to the revivalist
Chapters 3 and 4 will discuss more fully the history, substance and implications of this belief system.

Although Evangelicalism is an umbrella term that includes Fundamentalists, mainline evangelicals, Pentecostals and other splinter groups of charismatic Christians, for the purpose of simplification I will use the terms evangelical and Evangelicalism to denote the general religious tendency as a constellation of the beliefs and practices cited above, and as the force behind the majority of contemporary religious programming. It should be noted that I am focusing on the conservative wing of Evangelicalism. Grant Wacker points out that the "resurgence" of this religious perspective applies primarily to its conservative elements—what he terms the "Evangelical Right" and what others call the "New Christian Right." The moderate and liberal wings of Evangelicalism have experienced much less spectacular growth in the 20th century.  

Analysts and practitioners of television evangelism have coined a variety of terms for this form of religious communication: the "electric church," "prime time preaching," the "electronic church," "pray TV," and "teleevangelism." I find the last to be the most suitable and vivid term for my study which treats evangelical programming as persuasive communication or rhetoric. Teleevangelism denotes the modern adaptation of a key cultural form of 19th century Evangelicalism: the religious revival designed to win converts and save souls. Teleevangelism combines some of the elements of revivalism with the formats  

(continuation)
and constraints of the television medium; it is thus simultaneously an adaptation of an older cultural form (the revival) to a new means of communication (television), and a transformation of that form imposed by the imperatives of the televisual medium. TV has created a new type of social relationship between speaker and listener that necessarily affects the methods of evangelism and the character of the evangelical belief system.

I have chosen to focus on two distinct forms of religious programming: the weekly revival/religious service typified by "Jimmy Swaggart in Crusade" and the talk show/news magazine program originated by Pat Robertson's "700 Club." Swaggart and Robertson represent opposite poles of the spectrum of evangelical programming. Swaggart's crusades closely adhere to the 19th century revival form, albeit adapted to television's distinct economic and aesthetic demands. Robertson's relaxed, chatty weekday show is constructed within a format that has been wholly determined by the television medium, with religious content inserted. Put simply: Swaggart's program represents television adapted for religion while the "700 Club" constitutes religion adapted to TV. This distinction is evident in the ways Swaggart and Robertson define themselves and their goals: Swaggart is a "country preacher" or evangelist, Robertson is a "religious broadcaster." Chapters 6 through 9 examine in detail the kinds of programming that follows from these divergent identities.

It is important at the outset not to exaggerate the social and political influence of conservative Evangelicalism and its television ministries. As some critics have pointed out, the news media succumbed to this temptation in the late 1970s and early '80s, thereby becoming tools of the movement and of TV preachers. This tendency to overestimate the power of the Christian Right is most pronounced in one study that refers to conservative Evangelicalism and its religious programming as a dangerous and

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14Razelle Frankl, *Teleevangelism: The Marketing of Popular Religion* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), also places Swaggart and Robertson at opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of the degree to which their programs incorporate the various "imperatives" of the television medium and industry. See chapter 9, "The Variety of Messages in the Electric Church."

15See Martin, "Birth of a Media Myth." Martin was the first to systematically examine the media's and religious broadcasters' unrealistic claims about the size of the evangelical audience and the influence of the movement.
effective variant of "total propaganda." At the same time, we cannot dismiss the movement as a harmless or temporary shift in the political wind. One fifth of the adult population is a sizable minority. Further, conservative Christians have become increasingly involved in local and national political issues, including fights to control public school curricula, opposition to statutes guaranteeing equal rights for women, homosexuals and other minorities, campaigns to outlaw abortion that in some cases have led to bombing clinics, the creation of lobbying organizations at state and federal levels, and successful campaigns to replace liberal political representatives with right-wing Christian candidates. The Moral Majority, the Religious Roundtable (a coalition of right-wing political and religious leaders, including Pat Robertson), Christian Voice (a southern California organization founded by Paul Weyrich in 1976 which issues "report cards" rating congress people on their adherence to "biblical" precepts), the growth of Campus Crusade for Christ in U.S. universities, and the "Washington for Jesus" rally (Robertson was one of the organizers) indicate that conservative evangelicals do desire a social and political influence that exceeds their status as a minority religious presence. 

One sign that the Evangelical Right and its religious programming have acquired a heightened social presence is the increase in popular and scholarly analyses of this phenomenon. Such work takes a

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17 The relationship between ultra-conservative political figures and organizations and leaders of the Christian Right was the subject of a study commissioned by the World Student Christian Federation in 1980. The research examined overlaps in membership and sources of funding for such organizations as Christian Voice, Campus Crusade for Christ, Christian Anti-Communism Crusade, various television ministries, etc. Consider, for example, the Religious Roundtable, founded in September, 1979; its 56 original members included representatives from CBN, Moral Majority, National Religious Broadcasters, National Association of Evangelicals, and other conservative Christian groups, as well as Phyllis Schlafly, Richard Viguerie and Paul Weyrich. The researchers argue that the union of Christian and political conservatives "is the result of the conscious recruiting efforts of leaders of the right wing" who "found in the Evangelical movement a potential constituency for their formerly unsellable economic program . . . . Cloaked under the banner of anti-ERA, anti-gay rights, and now pro-morality and pro-God, the Right has found a new platform around which they may mobilize voters." (p. 76) Deborah Huntington and Ruth Kaplan, "Whose Gold is Behind the Altar? Corporate Ties to Evangelicals," Contemporary Marxism 4 (Winter 1981-82): 62-94. See also the special issue on the religious right in Covert Action Information Bulletin 27 (1987).

18 For a comprehensive bibliography of books, articles, dissertations and theses on religious
variety of approaches to the study of televangelism. Horsfield, an Australian Protestant minister, assesses the social impact of the dominance of evangelical programming on television and pulls together a number of empirical studies on religious broadcasting. His book is a comprehensive analysis of the characteristics of religious television (e.g., trends, audience size and composition, people's reasons for watching), and its relationship to the structure of commercial TV. Horsfield's discussion of the relation between religious television and American culture is particularly compelling; he argues that evangelical programming has acquiesced to the "normalizing" tendency of commercial TV by conforming to television's economic and formatting priorities. It has thereby "reinforced the power of television, with its limited views, to act as an adequate determination of the presentation of religious cultural thought." Razelle Frankl's Televangelism: The Marketing of Popular Religion, argues that the "electronic church" is a "hybrid" of "urban revivalism" and television which has become a new social institution distinct from traditional forms of evangelical religious practice. She specifically examines the ways in which "television imperatives" have influenced the fundraising techniques of religious broadcasters.

Jeffrey Hadden's and Charles Swann's Prime Time Preachers approaches the electronic church from a combined sociological and theological perspective. They argue that this programming appeals to certain individuals by playing on their loneliness and inability to cope with the complexity of modern life. Hadden and Swann emphasize the television ministries' ability to attract and build audience support through the use of computerized mailings and telephone banks. The authors conclude that because every modern social movement since the advent of television (I would say since the advent of the printing press) has been developed through the mass media, the Christian Right has the potential to become a powerful social force because it controls its own media and is also heavily represented on commercial television and broadcasting see George H. Hill and Lenwood Davis, Religious Broadcasting 1920–1983, A Selectively Annotated Bibliography (NY: Garland, 1984).

Horsfield, Religious Television, pp. 157–58.

Frankl, Televangelism; pp. 128–142 specifically discuss how the cost of programming and dependence on donations shape the form and substance of religious programs.

radio. Flo Conway and Jim Siegelman, in *Holy Terror*, assert this possibility from a more absolute position. Televangelism, they contend, is the Evangelical movement's "use of religion to legitimize a program of mass manipulation that is unparalleled in American media history."\(^{22}\) These authors draw on cybernetics theory and propaganda studies, treating the evangelical movement as a cult which succeeds by brainwashing victims. While it is important to identify the elements of manipulation in televised evangelism (particularly in its fundraising techniques), Conway and Siegelman overlook the fact that all communication (mediated or direct) attempts to manipulate (as in handle or guide) listeners' attitudes and perceptions. Further, by treating Evangelicalism as a cult, these authors ignore its roots in an important American religious tradition.

Ben Armstrong, current president of the National Religious Broadcasters association, coined the term "electric church."\(^{23}\) His book extols the virtues of televised evangelism as a modern means of spreading the gospel. Armstrong, and most of the TV preachers, view television as an amplified and therefore greatly extended mode of witnessing. As Horsfield notes, evangelical broadcasters tend to hold a simplistic, hypodermic model conception of television's effectiveness.\(^{24}\) If the Bible directs reborn Christians to spread their testimony, television only makes that task more far-reaching and efficient. James Hunter points out that this quantitative approach to soul-saving is related to the general tendency in modern society toward rationalization; the number of viewers reached equals the number of souls brought to God, and viewers are assured their donations are well spent because a given number of people were reached and/or saved by a TV ministry in the past week.\(^{25}\) Not all evangelical broadcasters hold this simple, causal view of the role of televised evangelism. J. Thomas Bisset remarked in *Christianity Today* that 85 percent of those who watch religious broadcasting say they have already been "saved" before tuning in. Bisset challenges the notion that television ministries are bringing new souls to Christ: "We are

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\(^{22}\)Conway and Siegelman, *Holy Terror*, p. 231.


\(^{24}\)Horsfield, *Religious Television*, pp. 29–30. Schultze makes this point as well in "The Mythos of the Electronic Church."

talking largely to ourselves while most of America (and the world) goes unevangelized in the mass media." He also suggests that televangelism has failed in its mission because it has adopted the competitiveness inherent in commercial television, thus fragmenting the "Christian market." A number of essays and articles on religious television and the Evangelical movement have also appeared in religious periodicals, particularly in Christianity Today and Christian Century, published by the National Association of Evangelicals and the mainline National Council of Churches respectively. These works frequently take up the historical debate between conservative and liberal positions within American Protestantism, which I address in Chapter 3.

As Horsfield's work shows, most communication research on religious broadcasting has been quantitative, focusing on the characteristics of the audience and the effects of the programming. For example, in a 1985 issue of the Journal of Communication devoted to "The Mediated Ministry," four of six articles were quantitative analyses of program content, audience uses and gratifications, and the impact of viewing on regular church attendance. One of the most extensive statistical studies of the relationship between religion and television was produced at the request of religious broadcasters themselves. A 1980 seminar (titled "Consultation on the Electronic Church") sponsored by the National Council of Churches, National Religious Broadcasters and the U.S. Catholic Conference, led to the birth of a large research project conducted by the Annenberg School of Communications and the Gallup Organization. The results of that research, titled Religion and Television, were released in 1984. The $175,000 project, directed by


27Bisset's "Religious Broadcasting" is a good example of the NAE position, and Fore's "Religion and Television" is representative of the NCC perspective.


30George Gerbner et al, Religion and Television.
George Gerbner, was paid for by 39 religious organizations (CBN, for example, gave $27,000; Falwell donated $20,000). The study was divided into the following categories: demographic analysis, content analysis, uses and gratifications and audience effects. Put simply, the study asked who watches, what does the programming say, what do people do with these programs, and how are they affected. Despite the time involved (two years), the amount of data gathered (Gallup interviewed more than 2,000 people), and the size of the report (two volumes of analysis and tables), the findings were predictable and undramatic. The report noted, for example, that "viewers of the programs are by and large also the believers, the churchgoers, the contributors," and that the "religious television mainstream tends to run conservative and restrictive rather than permissive."

In a critique of the Annenberg study, Quentin Schultze suggests that the assumptions inherent in the school's theory and method (or, more precisely, in the cultivation theory of Gerbner), predetermined the nature of the findings. In Schultze's words:

in trying to say something about everyone, it says nothing about anyone in particular. Modern statistical analysis is founded to a large extent on an atomistic view of society and assumes that the 'masses' of people should be studied only quantitatively as respondents to surveys and questionnaires, or as participants in experiments.

While the information from the study about audience composition and the programs' general themes is useful, this data alone is insufficient when it comes to understanding the complex relationship between the production and consumption of televangelism as it occurs in a concrete and particular social context. Schultze points out that the Annenberg study "gives no insight into the styles of media evangelism, the theological nuances of popular religion, or the visual appeal of televised services and entertainment." It is precisely such questions that concern me. Obviously, the answers to these and other inquiries about the meaning of televangelism require alternative ways of conceptualizing the relationships among religious


32Ibid., p. 12.


34Ibid., p. 285.
belief, televised religion, and television viewers.

This study approaches televangelism from a communications perspective, but one that seeks to synthesize ideas from a variety of traditions and fields, including cultural studies, theology, anthropology, rhetorical criticism, philosophy and the sociology of religion. The focus of this study is "meaning." That is, it attempts to understand the significance of the evangelical movement and televangelism as cultural phenomena. I am asking not only what televised evangelism means, politically and socially, but also how it comes to have particular meanings. I am concerned with how the evangelical movement, through television ministries, creates a framework of significance that explains and interprets the world. What is the character of those explanations? Through what techniques and strategies are they constructed, and to what end? How do they become effective through their consumption by viewers? And what are the social and cultural implications of this particular set of beliefs, rationales and interpretations of the world?

The study proceeds as follows:

Chapter 2 outlines and develops the theoretical framework which guides my examination of the evangelical belief system, the persuasive character of religious communication, and the creative role of the audience in constructing the meaning of religious media products.

Chapter 3 looks at the history and characteristic beliefs of conservative Evangelicalism, drawing a connection between the schism in American Protestantism, the process of modernization, and the crisis of meaning for orthodox Protestants.

In Chapter 4, I discuss the contemporary evangelical movement, its quest to shape popular meanings in U.S. society, and the importance of "symbol production" in giving the movement internal unity and in creating a public identity.

Chapter 5 analyzes the rise of evangelical programming to a position of dominance in television. I examine the structure of this religious programming, the characteristics of the audience, and the nature of the relationship between TV ministers and their viewers.
Chapters 6 through 9 contain a detailed substantive and formal analysis of Swaggart's Sunday crusade program and CBN’s "700 Club." Chapter 6 deals with the identities, roles and aims of the broadcasters; Chapter 7 discusses the themes of the programs. Chapters 8 and 9 analyze the formal elements of the shows, including performance style, setting, address, ritual components, rhetorical strategies and uses of the television medium. This section is concerned with discovering the "structure of appeal" of these two programs and of the belief systems that inform them.

In the concluding chapter I compare the world views of Swaggart and Robertson in relation to the source of meaning constructed by secular consumer society. Here I also analyze my own "reading" of these three "narratives" and speculate on the nature of their appeal. My focus here is on "signification" as a concrete social activity—a process whereby meaning is completed in the act of consumption. This chapter also assesses the social and political implications of the New Christian Right in light of the conflictual nature of conservative Christian belief and rhetoric. Finally, I speculate on the future of evangelical belief within the larger context of modern consumer society.
Religion as a Symbolic System: The Problem of Meaning

Clifford Geertz has suggested that "the imposition of meaning is the major end and primary condition of human existence . . .". 1 This implies that questions about meaning—whether we are talking about the significance of a cultural form like televangelism, or of a social formation like the evangelical movement—are intimately connected to questions about being, or the significance of existence. Abraham Heschel, in Who Is Man?, makes this connection explicit:

Human being is never sheer being; it is always involved in meaning. . . . The problem of being and the problem of meaning are coextensive. In regard to man, the first problem refers to what he is in terms of his own existence, human being as it is; the second refers to what man means in terms larger than himself, being in terms of meaning. 2

This view of meaning, as central to human existence and to the creation of culture, constitutes the point of departure for my study of Evangelicalism and religious television programming.

To treat culture, as Geertz does, as a "fabric of meaning" within which individuals "interpret their experience and guide their action," is to begin from an understanding of human beings as "symbolizing, conceptualizing, meaning-seeking animals." 3 Cultural forms are structures of signification that are determined by specific social and historical circumstances. These structures, which tell people who they are and what their experiences mean, are communicated through symbols—the place where meanings are "stored." The analysis of culture, then, and of specific cultural forms, begins with the interpretation of symbols. In Geertz' terms, cultural analysis is an "interpretive science" which is concerned with "sorting

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out the structures of signification . . . and determining their ground and import." 4 The cultural analyst
deciphers the content and form of cultural phenomena with the aim of understanding what those
phenomena mean to the human beings who construct and use them. Religion is a particular form of
cultural experience and expression which both derives its meaning and offers that meaning to believers
through a system of sacred symbols.

This study treats religion as an orienting, symbolic framework—constructed in particular ways in
different social and historical settings—which responds to fundamental questions of being and meaning.
This idea derives in part from the tradition of social theory formulated by Weber and Durkheim which
makes religion (or religion-like ideational systems) a central part of social structure. Weber, for example,
identified religion as a human need that arises out of our desire "to understand the world as a meaningful
cosmos and to take up a position toward it." 5 John Wilson draws on this tradition, arguing that religion
"establishes horizons for a culture, orienting the collectivity and the individuals who comprise it through
time and across social space. Religion sets the forms in which thought takes place and condenses the
values which guide behavior." 6 The horizon created by religion constitutes what Peter Berger calls a
"sacred canopy" which legitimates social institutions by "locating them within a sacred and cosmic frame
of reference." 7 Religion, then, directs and shapes experience and gives it substance and significance.

As I have argued, the individual and social need for meaning—to direct everyday life and provide a
frame of reference which supercedes it—is characteristically human. Erich Fromm suggests that this
quest involves finding a "frame of orientation and devotion" that gives our actions a purpose which
transcends their immediate context. Fromm says that while such frameworks are not necessarily overtly

8Erich Fromm, Man For Himself (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett, 1947), p. 56.
religious, they always refer to a set of meanings that lie beyond an individual's personal existence.

Frames of orientation and devotion are thus directed toward transcendence; they aim for a significance that supercedes and directs individual action. As Heschel says: "What we are in search of is not meaning for me, an idea to satisfy my conscience, but rather a meaning transcending me, ultimate relevance of being."

Religion provides this ultimate relevance or frame of orientation and devotion, and does so symbolically; it is a signifying system that offers answers to the questions of being and meaning. In Geertz' words, religion is:

1) a system of symbols which acts to 2) establish powerful, persuasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by 3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and 4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that 5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.

Because sacred symbols "formulate general ideas of order," they impose order on chaos by establishing a general meaning to reality which breathes life and significance into individual existence. It is a symbolic means by which we make sense of the world and simultaneously make sense of our place in it. Religion, as a symbol system, is both a model of and a model for reality and everyday life. Religious symbols express and shape the world: "They shape it by inducing in the worshiper a certain distinctive set of dispositions which lend a chronic character to the flow of his activity and the quality of his experience." For Geertz, religion is meaning-centered in another fundamental way. All religions, he says, appear to address what he calls the "problem of meaning" in human existence: that is, the question of order (significance, direction) versus chaos (meaninglessness, pointlessness). The problem of meaning has to do with human limitations—intellectual, physiological and ethical (analytical capacities, powers of endurance

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11Ibid., p. 83.

12Ibid., pp. 81, 82. For the distinction between the concepts "model of" and "model for" see p. 81.
and moral insight). The apparent inevitability of human bafflement, suffering, and injustice or evil threaten to annihilate order—to make life unfathomable. These limits constitute what Geertz says are "radical challenges with which any religion . . . which hopes to persist must attempt somehow to cope."  

The problem of meaning, or the quest for principles of order, is not confronted exclusively by religion. In our apparently highly secularized society, other symbolic systems are similarly endowed with the capacity to forge meaning out of chaos. Hugh Dalziel Duncan, drawing on the work of Kenneth Burke, refers to order as the enactment of authority which takes some kind of hierarchical form—order establishes a hierarchy of meanings which derive their authority from an "ultimate appeal." Such "ultimates" may be persons (parents, political figures, dieties); rules and codes ("law and order"); environment or nature (processes, structures, natural laws); means (methods, instruments, magic); or perfect ends (utopias, the Kingdom of God).  

We can look at modern science as such an orienting symbolic framework, acting much like religion to establish a sense of order that explains the complex processes of society and existence. Conservative Christians' claim that "secular humanism" has become a contemporary alternative to religion (or a religion itself) is more comprehensible if we consider that humanist philosophy and social science also aim to construct a basis for order (a universal explanatory framework) which appeals to humanity as its ultimate term. Duncan points out that a belief in any type of social legitimation process (e.g., science, philosophy, political ideology) functions in society in much the same way as the supernatural in religion. That is, we legitimize (grant meaning to) hierarchies (conceptions of order) by grounding their "causes" in an ultimate terms (nature, family, science, society, God, etc.). Like religion, then, science, philosophies and political ideologies are strategies that create meaning in the face of potential meaninglessness; they provide a framework to explain, interpret and understand the nature of the world and our place in it. From this perspective, evangelical Christianity can

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13Ibid., pp. 83, 85.

be understood as a particular set of solutions to the "problem of meaning"; it solves this problem by posing a specific framework that makes sense of society and existence, and does so through the construction and invocation of a sacred symbolic system.

Geertz proposes that the interpretive analysis of religion involves "first, an analysis of the system of meanings embodied in the symbols which make up the religion proper, and second, the relating of these systems to social-structural and psychological processes." Applying this method to the evangelical movement and its religious programming means examining the symbolic material which constitutes a particular conception of God, and asking how this notion of divinity relates to the group's perception of social order, history, culture, and humanity's place within these. The evangelical movement's strict adherence to scriptural authority (biblical inerrancy) can be seen as involving a particular devotion to the primacy of the Word which becomes the embodiment of supernatural (and therefore natural) authority. The Bible is thus a model of reality, and a model for individual existence within it. We can then begin to draw out connections between the system of meaning (the Bible as "Truth") and social and psychological processes (how this "Truth" is translated into believers' social actions and values, e.g. witnessing, campaigning for social issues, developing alternative institutions, etc.).

James Carey, who considers religion to be a cultural form like ideology, journalism or everyday speech, suggests that an interpretive approach to culture asks: "what is the relationship between expressive forms... and social order?" He characterizes this approach as a "ritual view" of communication, or communication as a "process through which a shared culture is created, modified, and transformed." Confronted with a particular expressive form, the communication analyst must, like a literary critic, "figure out what it means, what interpretations it presents of life." Like Geertz, Carey believes that manifestations of cultural forms can be approached as "texts" which demand interpretation via

1Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," p. 89.
understanding (verstehen). In this sense, not only are religious programs texts, but so is the evangelical movement itself which creates for its adherents a "shared culture." Carey's view of culture as ritual expression dovetails with Geertz' notion of "cultural performances," seen as rituals that symbolically fuse individual ethos (moods, motivations, attitudes) with the worldview contained in a given symbolic system. It is within such "dramas," or ritualized forms, that the moods and motivations which sacred symbols induce in believers, and general conceptions about existence, meet and reinforce each other. Contemporary non-religious "rituals" provide similar unity and identity to participants. Consider the cohesive function of public ceremonies (e.g. presidential addresses, the renovation of the Statue of Liberty, parades, civic assemblies), popular culture (e.g. Superbowl, Live Aid, Hands Across America, fan clubs), consumption (e.g. shopping and mall cruising), and even television viewing itself.

In the evangelical movement, revivals, church services, Bible conferences and prayer meetings have historically provided a dramatic or ritual context for affirming and propagating belief and for binding believers into a community. Sandra Sizer, in an analysis of gospel hymns in 19th century revivals, argues that the hymns symbolized the basic beliefs and aspirations of revival participants. The hymns' form, enacted within the context of the revival meeting, produced and reinforced a sense of belonging or identity among the faithful. The ritualized form of both the hymns and the revivals, based on a formula of prayer, exhortation and testimony, created an environment which upheld the tenets of Evangelicalism and constructed a sacred space in which believers could enact their faith and create a shared culture. Many religious programs serve this function today with their dramatic format of sacred music, exhortation, prayer and testimony. This form is not used by all religious broadcasters; Robertson's "700 Club" follows quite a different pattern, and, as I argue in Chapter 9, does not qualify as religious ritual.

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18Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," p. 87.


The notion of community, and the ways in which it is created, maintained, threatened and dissolved, has been treated extensively in cultural studies and cultural anthropology. Such work has examined the means by which cultural forms and practices contribute to the creation of a community and to the consciousness of its members; it has examined how symbolic frameworks (or discourses) provide unity and identity to social groups (or subcultures). Sizer, for example, emphasizes the role of gospel hymns in the construction of a "community of intense feeling" that bonded evangelicals to a common faith and therefore to a shared set of social practices. Robley Whitson contends that all religions grapple with the problem of meaning not in terms of the isolated individual, but in terms of a community as it exists in concrete social circumstances. He suggests that "every religion has come into existence at the point of crisis in the meaning of a community, and remains in existence as long as it continues to make possible the positive confrontation of succeeding crises."

Evangelicalism, which was the dominant form of American Protestant Christianity by mid-19th century, faced such a crisis in the late 1800s when Darwinian biology, German theology and "higher criticism" of the Bible began penetrating Protestant theology in the U.S. This constellation of ideas became identified as modernism and constituted the line of division between liberal and conservative factions. For conservative forces, modernism symbolized a threat to the very heart of Christianity, and as Protestant denominations split along ideological lines new conservative tendencies like Fundamentalism and Pentecostalism were born. This "second wing" of Protestantism acquired its substance and identity


22Sizer, Gospel Hymns, p. 52.


by rallying around a well-articulated set of religious symbols characterized by a literalist view of Scripture, a deeply supernaturalist theology, a pre-millenialist conception of history, and an antipathy toward liberal Protestantism and other "false" forms of Christianity (e.g. Catholicism, Mormonism, etc.). The climax of this crisis period, the Scopes trial in 1925, damaged the reputation of the Fundamentalist wing, but did not, as many of its critics predicted, spell conservative Evangelicalism's demise. Fundamentalists, Pentecostals and other conservative evangelicals spent the next three decades building alternative or "parallel" institutions and communication networks upon the foundation of their original sacred symbols and religious rituals. This symbolic system has continued to provide a sense of community for a significant minority of Protestants for whom biblical inerrancy, supernaturalism and pre-millenialism function as a coherent set of values and meanings.

Conservative Evangelicalism did not suddenly appear in the last decade, then. Rather, these groups have once again become an active social movement in response to what they perceived as real threats to their community and world view (e.g., U.S. Supreme Court rulings on abortion and school prayer, the Equal Rights Amendment, demands for civil rights among homosexuals, escalating rates of divorce and teenage pregnancy, pornography, etc.). Robert Cathcart, drawing on the work of Burke, contends that social movements are necessarily symbolic as well as material entities because a movement is "perceived, created, and responded to symbolically." A movement arises as a challenge to the broader system's values and its "consensually-validated symbols," but it is socially recognized as a movement only when it can elicit a "counter-rhetoric." A movement appears as such when it provokes "dialectical enjoinment in the moral arena." Thus, conservative Evangelicalism requires a counter-term or opposing symbol system in order to constitute itself. Today the term which accords unity to conservative Christians is not modernism, but its contemporary equivalent: "secular humanism." By identifying a common symbolic

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27Ibid., p. 267.
enemy, evangelicals create a shared culture constructed upon an alternative set of symbols. Understanding the nature of the conservative evangelical movement therefore requires analysis of its rhetoric in relationship to the symbolic system it challenges.

My analysis of conservative Evangelicalism attempts to outline the symbolic framework which constitutes the movement's beliefs and guides its actions. The programs of Swaggart and Robertson, I propose, represent different symbolic responses to the problem of meaning. This study looks at these programs as divergent models of reality for conservative evangelicals, and as conflicting models for viewers' actions within that reality. In the chapters that follow I examine the substance of the programs' "ultimate terms" and the type of "order" that follows from them; the means by which Swaggart and Robertson, through the selection of certain symbols, constitute sacred versus profane space and create a particular kind of Christian community; and the structure of appeal of a televised revival and a Christian talk show as cultural performances. What I am after is an understanding of the relationship of believer and belief as they meet in a symbolic terrain. I am asking how televangelists together with their audiences "attain their faith as they portray it." The route to this understanding, I believe, lies in being willing to seriously consider evangelicals' interpretations of the world—to enter their universe of meaning. Here I agree with Carey:

We are challenged to grasp hold of the meanings people build into their words and behavior and to make these meanings, these claims about life and experience, explicit and articulate. By grounding this analysis in the concept of symbolicity, I am arguing that through the selection and use of specific symbols, televangelists accord certain terms and social relationships as meaningful; they seek to invoke in their audience an agreement about what is significant and what is not. This study proposes that the inter-relation of belief system, symbolic materials, speaker, and listener produces a particular set of meanings. The aim of that production is the fusion of individual ethos and world view. The language of Robertson and Swaggart is therefore "motivated" in pursuit of identification with their audiences. To speak of motives is to raise the problem of persuasion, or rhetoric, which I consider in the next section.

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28Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," p. 87.
Religious Communication as Rhetorical Form: The Problem of Persuasion

Because religion provides an orienting symbolic framework which explains, interprets and legitimizes a particular conception of the world and existence, religious communication is necessarily persuasive. A religion lives because its interpretations of the world are considered meaningful by a group, a community or a society. It is perpetuated through time and across social space as long as its symbols hold that explanatory power. In looking at conservative Evangelicalism we must examine the methods, structure and substance of its symbolic appeal. This study, accordingly, treats televangelism as a form of persuasive communication. I am arguing that all communication is situated in a particular view of the world (within a specific symbolic system) and is therefore motivated by social and individual intentions. Evangelical persuasion is not static, an already accomplished fact, but a dynamic intention (implicit in all communication) which must be examined in relationship to the set of meanings that Evangelicalism seeks to produce for religious broadcasters and audiences alike.

I am approaching the question of persuasion from the perspective of rhetorical criticism. This approach does not treat persuasion as an isolatable effect of communication, as a technique, a function or an individual's aim, but as an intrinsic aspect of all human communication. I am relying here primarily on the work of Kenneth Burke, and on analyses of social movements inspired by his work. Like Geertz, Burke begins from an understanding of human beings as symbol using, symbol making and symbol

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misusing animals. In making "symbolicity" ontologically a priori, Burke proposes that human sociation is rooted in language, or in "symbolic action."31 Language is not a reflection of reality for Burke, but helps to produce reality; it orders experience because it creates the forms which make it possible for us to communicate that experience to others and to ourselves. From this perspective, social or cultural analysis is always simultaneously symbolic analysis because it is through symbols that we act upon and within the world. We speak (via language and other symbol systems like art, music, fashion, etc) to give meaning to existence, to induce cooperation in others in a material field, to create a certain type of order and locate ourselves within it. In Burke's schema, communication is motivated activity—it seeks to affect the actions (real and incipient, or attitudes) of others. In this sense communication is rhetorical or persuasive. Rhetoric, Burke says, is "the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols."32

This conception of language is related to Burke's "dramatistic" view of society. Human relations are analyzed in terms of drama because people develop modes of social appeal as "actors."33 The basic elements of Burke's dramatism are act, scene, agent, agency and purpose. In any given scene (or cultural setting) a particular kind of act is performed by an agent with certain instruments or means, for a specific purpose. In the instance of a religious broadcast, we would examine the setting (revival or talk show), the instruments (mass media) and means (form, substance, style), and the purpose (exhortation, instruction, testimony, conversion). It is within this framework that persuasion is attempted. For it to be successful, however, the listeners or audience must also be incorporated into the dramatic moment; they must unite with the speaker in a mood of "collaborative expectancy" if there is to be communion."34

31Burke, Language as Symbolic Action, pp. 16, 52.
32Burke, Rhetoric of Motives, p. 43.
33Duncan discusses Burke's dramatism in Communication and Social Order, pp. 109-120; see also Burke, Language as Symbolic Action, pp. 44-45.
34Burke, Rhetoric of Motives, pp. 58, 177.
Burke's dramatism is grounded in a particular conception of society. Human sociation is the creation of order—or the enactment of authority that takes some kind of hierarchical form. Hierarchy implies social divisions (e.g., distinctions of class, gender, race, age, status, etc.). Such divisions inevitably produce tensions and potential threats to order which must be mitigated by communication across "difference" if a given order is to be maintained. These social separations are bridged by what Burke calls "courtship" or communication between "different kinds of beings." From Burke's perspective, social order is not a static structure; it is a dynamic, historically variable tension between social cohesion and social division. Cohesion is achieved through communication which aims to create "consubstantiality" within and between different social groups. Consubstantiality, or an acting together facilitated by symbols, occurs when individuals accept the terms which endow the particular hierarchy with the power to uphold order. Individuals may feel themselves to be consubstantial with the society at large, or with particular segments of society, and the latter identification may be opposed to the former. The degree to which people consider a given order to be "reasonable" is historically and socially contingent; in any given period people may take up attitudes of "acceptance," "doubt" or "rejection" toward the established hierarchy or parts thereof. Burke argues that the study of rhetoric begins from the principle of social division because persuasion is concerned with the creation of consubstantiality, and therefore implies an initial separation. Such separations are, in fact, "the invitation to rhetoric." I am approaching televangelism as rhetoric which seeks to create a particular consubstantiality—a sacred community characterized by a specific set of qualities and attitudes—and does so by employing identifiable rhetorical forms and appeals.

Rhetoric's three aspects are identification, persuasion and address. Persuasion is a "motive" in quest of identification between speaker and auditor—an invitation to accept a particular consubstantiality.

35Ibid., pp. 115, 180; see also his discussion of persuasion as courtship, pp. 177 and 208-11.
36Ibid., p. 55, for a discussion of consubstantiality and identification.
37Duncan, Communication and Social Order, p. 111.
38Burke, Rhetoric of Motives, p. 25.
Identification does not mean identical—to seek to make an identification is to imply an original division
or lack of consubstantiality.) Sizer, using Burke, argues that 19th century gospel hymns were "arguments"
for a particular interpretation of Christianity and appealed to listeners to identify with a specific
social/religious community. Rhetoric, she suggests,

involves that aspect of the human condition whereby people express and recognize their
mutual affinities, their belonging to the same group, to this group rather than that. 39

Similarly, when a TV evangelist says to his audience: "since we're going to be spending eternity together
in Heaven, why don't you all turn to your neighbors and love them up a little?" he is creating both an
individual identification for each listener, and a consubstantiality of believers against unsaved others."40

By starting from the principle of social division, rhetorical criticism looks for the ways in which particular
consubstantiations are symbolically constructed. As Sizer says, this approach "seeks to make clear what
the 'identifications' are, and how the 'belonging' is conceived."41 Identifications are born in strife,
according to Duncan; they are signs of tension within a general hierarchical order, potential challenges to
(or doubts about) the reasonableness (legitimacy) of that order.42 Persuasion presupposes difference or
division; rhetoric is unnecessary between identical beings. If everyone were already "saved," TV
preachers would be superfluous.

Address is a key component of rhetoric because persuasion is pointless or impotent without an
audience. The "paradox of all address," Duncan says, is that the hearer "alone can give us success."43 The
listener, then, must be persuaded to enter into collaboration with a speaker's identifications. Both as
speakers and as auditors, we are involved in symbolic activity: we speak to bring others into accord with
our thinking, and as listeners we make others' words effective or active in the world. The TV preacher's

39Sizer, Gospel Hymns, p. 17.
40Statement by Paul Crouch, president of Trinity Broadcasting Network, in a broadcast of his
"Praise the Lord" program, October 16, 1986, KTBW, Channel 20, Tacoma, Washington.
41Sizer, Gospel Hymns, p. 17.
42Duncan, Communication and Social Order, p. 158.
43Ibid., p. 165.
words are impotent unless he can elicit identification with his audience. When Jimmy Swaggart exclaims, "I know I'm plowing now and I'm hitting paydirt," he is both summoning the congregation's collaboration and reacting to audience response to his exhortations. He is assuming a consubstantiality in the making.  

For Burke, form in communication is the "arousing and fulfillment of desires." A form is "correct" to the extent that it corresponds to a listener's "patterns of experience." These patterns vary between historical periods as well as between and within cultures and individuals. Our patterns of experience have to do with our specific place in a social and cultural environment. They are the lenses through which every concrete experience of ourselves, others and the world are refracted. In this sense, Burke says, patterns of experience are "creative;" we use these patterns to give meaning to our actions in the present and to make our acts meaningful in the future. A speaker who wishes to affect our actions—to persuade us in a Burlean sense—must take our patterns of experience into consideration in choosing the form of his or her appeal. The speaker has to work at "saying the right thing" by employing a form that arouses our desires; this implies knowing what we consider desirable and fashioning a rhetoric that speaks to that desire and promises fulfillment. This invocation of desire occurs in the realm of symbols. Burke says a symbol is most powerful or appealing when the speaker's and listener's patterns of experience closely coincide. A symbol can appeal in a variety of ways: as an interpretation of a situation, as a corrective, as an "emancipator," or a vehicle for artistic affect. But the symbol's effectiveness depends on the speaker's ability to convert his or her patterns of experience into a symbolic form that corresponds to those of the audience—it is a merging of identifications, or communion.

The conversion of experiential pattern into symbolic formula operates ideologically—a speaker uses the beliefs and judgements of the audience (its ideology) to get an effect (to persuade). Persuasive

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45 Burke, Counter-Statement, p. 124.
46 Ibid., p. 152.
47 Burke, Permanence and Change, p. 50.
48 Burke, Counter-Statement, p. 153.
communication manipulates (in the sense of handling) listener's ideological assumptions, and does so by employing subject matter and forms that have been "charged" by auditors' previous experience. For example, when Swaggart refers to San Francisco, his audience already brings to those words an ensemble of connotations penetrated with biblical symbolism. The "evilness" of that city, as a modern representation of Sodom and Gomorrah, is "fact" rather than interpretation, a corroboration of the literal truth of scripture. Swaggart draws on the symbolic "charge" invested in the words San Francisco by his audience (e.g., its hostility to homosexuality). The city thus symbolizes the degeneracy of modern society; it is a "sign" of the imminence of the "last days" before the Second Coming. By appealing to this symbolic charge, he invokes the audience's collaboration by endowing events with a pattern of significance constructed from sacred symbols that correspond to his auditors' moods and motivations. To thus guide the listeners' expectations, according to Burke, is to already have some conquest over them.

Burke contends that the rhetoric of identification is also a key element of socialization. Social institutions (school, church, family, media, etc.) are "persuasive" because they "educate" us to accept the given order as reasonable or normal. We participate in this "education" (become "indoctrinated") through the process of internal address. We complete the process of persuasion "from within" by addressing ourselves. Burke holds that without this interior rhetoric, we would remain partially "outside" the dominant consubstantiation; our support for the existing order necessarily depends on the degree to which our internal rhetoric corresponds to external forms of persuasion. Because identification implies social division, the degree of correspondence between internal and external rhetoric is highly variable. Every rhetorical situation poses a specific set of problems to a speaker. To be successful, he or she must, say "the right thing," but the right thing is contingent upon the context and audience. In Burke's view, this contingency inevitably produces a certain kind of "anguish in communication." To attain the

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49Ibid., p. 165.
50Ibid., p. 178.
52Duncan, Communication and Social Order, p. 165.
audience's collaboration, a speaker must consider the listeners' backgrounds, patterns of experience, frames of reference and symbolic terms. Identification or communion occurs when the speaker employs a "voice from without that can speak in the language of the voice within."  

My aim in this study is to identify these two "voices" through a process of careful "listening"—to map out the relationship of belief, speaker and listener in televised evangelical rhetoric. I suggested earlier that Evangelicalism, as a symbolic system, offers a particular solution to the problem of meaning; it simultaneously creates a framework of significance and a set of interpretive strategies (a "sacred canopy") for adherents. Burke says that rhetoric functions as a "strategy for encompassing a situation." Burke uses this notion to understand gospel hymns as "strategies" or "problem-solving tools." The hymns, she suggests, "represent strategies for solving general problems about the relations of human beings to each other and to the spiritual forces or beings of their universe." Televangelism also serves this function. Robertson and Swaggart construct, out of symbolic materials, a particular type of sacred space as well as specific conceptions of the creator and ideal inhabitants of that space; they also fashion the kinds of enemies which threaten it. Televangelists and their audiences must cooperatively create a universe of sacred meaning (a consubstantiality) if evangelical rhetoric is to be successful (to "act" in the world).

I employ rhetorical criticism to examine the symbolic universe of televangelism by focusing on the following: the nature of Evangelicalism's conception of order and the place of the individual believer in that order; the identifications offered by Swaggart and Robertson (what are the ideal qualities of an evangelical Christian, what qualities constitute membership in the sacred community); the divisions that give that community its distinctive character (what qualities are ascribed to outsiders); the style (methods, modes and structures of appeal—in what terms is the "right thing" expressed); and the character of internal forms of persuasion (e.g. the institutions and social formations which support the message of televangelism). In considering televangelism as a cultural "text," I am interested in the choice of language

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53Burke, Rhetoric of Motives, p. 39.
54Burke, Philosophy of Literary Form, p. 1.
55Sizer, Gospel Hymns, pp. 14, 16.
(metaphors, themes), in the strategies and structure of the rhetoric, and in extra-verbal forms of communication (music, visuals, gesture, setting, relations between speaker and auditors). It is on this symbolic edifice that a specific universe of sacred meaning is built. This symbolic system is persuasive to the extent that it provides believers with a "frame of orientation and devotion" that makes sense of the world and of their place in it. I am proposing that television evangelism (within the broader evangelical movement) operates much like the gospel hymns in Sizer's study. The hymns, she contends, "articulate a structure of the world and simultaneously create a community with its own specific identity and a technique of transcendence." In other words, the rhetoric of conservative Evangelicalism, whether found in gospel music or TV programs, provides a particular set of answers to the problems of being and meaning. To make those answers effective, television ministers are dependent on their audience. "Conversion" can take place only when viewers accept the identifications offered by televangelists. As the next section argues, the "anguish of communication" arises in the relationship of production and consumption.

Production and Consumption of Religious Programs: The Problem of Conversion

To ask how cultural products, like TV evangelism, create a particular set of symbolic meanings, is to address what Todd Gitlin calls "the totality of [the] process of production, signification and consumption." This study attempts to construct a model for analyzing that process as it occurs in the relationship between evangelical programs and audiences. In formulating such a model, I am drawing on ideas from communication research, cultural studies, rhetorical criticism and philosophy. I use the term "conversion" to denote the potential for correspondence between a viewer's patterns of experience and the patterns proposed by a specific program. While this correspondence arises within the relationship of production and consumption, it is not a causal flow from the former to the latter. That is, conversion is

\(^{54}\)Ibid., pp. 18-19.

not an "effect" of the programming. Nor am I using the word in the sense that evangelicals would—to indicate a sudden, overwhelming change of heart (to be "born again")—although this experience can, and sometimes does, occur for individual audience members. In this study, conversion refers to the extent to which viewers take up the perspective of the world offered by TV evangelists; it is thus a participatory, cultural activity rather than a textual function or behavioral effect.

Robert Merton studied the process of mass persuasion by examining a radio war bond drive conducted by Kate Smith in 1943. Merton and his assistants concluded that the basis of Smith’s effectiveness did not derive simply from the content of the marathon broadcast. Rather, her persuasiveness was conditioned by the prior image of Smith held by the audience, by the class structure of society, by the cultural standards of different audience strata, and by listeners’ "socially induced expectations, feelings and tensions." The bond drive's formal appeal derived from its marathon structure (as outstanding event, as a dramatic device focusing attention on Smith as the central actor, as a goal-oriented process, as simulated reciprocal communication), and from its carefully orchestrated themes (patriotism, sacrifice, family, etc.). Further, Smith was persuasive because her public image was consonant with the meanings ascribed to the war bonds (Smith as a "lay priestess" who embodied the sacred symbols of traditional American values—sincerity, purity, benevolence, patriotism). Her image was particularly effective given the absence of "counter-persuasion." Because there was no challenge to Smith’s "symbolic fitness," she was able to "monopolize public imagination." The authors stress, however, that the bond drive’s success cannot be attributed solely to the way it was organized and conducted. Persuasion occurs within a social context and flourishes or dies there. Merton argues that the bond drive appealed to a desire for a sense of community which, in a fragmented, competitive and war anxious audience, evoked a craving for assurance. Audience members experienced an acute need to believe

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59Ibid., p. 9.

60Ibid., p. 172.
resulting in a "flight into faith," and Smith became the "object of this faith."61 Audience response to the drive also depended on the degree to which people identified with Smith. The extent of their identification was related to their class positions and their "predispositions." The study identifies three general "patterns of motivation—susceptible, detached and undisposed—with each presenting different problems of persuasion. Smith’s effectiveness was neither guaranteed nor monolithic because of this dependence on the social context and listeners’ dispositions. As Merton notes:

The process of persuasion did not consist of atomistic responses to a limited number of readily detectable stimuli. Listeners responded differently in terms of their constructions of ‘what Kate Smith was really like.’ Other responses clearly involved reference to ‘the kind of world in which we live.’ 62

The study stresses that the bond drive’s effectiveness "cannot be adequately interpreted if it is severed from the cultural context in which it occurred."63 Merton also points out that the nature of the organization of U.S. radio broadcasting facilitated the creation of a national appealing public figure who could be utilized for mass persuasion.

Merton’s findings, I believe, are very relevant for the study of television evangelism. Evangelistic programs similarly construct an image of symbolic fitness for TV preachers. Robertson, Swaggart and their peers regularly refer to themselves as representatives or close associates of God and Christ, and elevate themselves and their families as examples of proper Christian living. They also employ rhetorical devices to enhance the power of their appeals (e.g., repetition, metaphor, analogy, parable). Like Kate Smith, televangelists speak directly to their listeners, simulating the experience of dialogic communication, and this is underscored by the existence of toll-free telephone lines and personalized computer mailings. Evangelical programs also operate in an atmosphere relatively free of counter-persuasion since this religious perspective constitutes the vast majority of all religious programming now on television. 64 Both

61Ibid., p. 143.

62Ibid., p. 10.

63Ibid., p. 18.

64Horsfield, Religious Television, p. 9. In 1977, 92 percent of religious programming on television was paid-time, most of which was purchased by evangelical ministries and
effects and uses and gratifications research are firmly grounded in the theoretical assumptions of
behaviorist psychology and functional sociology and take a quantitative approach to the study of media
texts and audiences.\footnote{For incisive critiques of this tradition of media research see Morley, \textit{Nationwide Audience};
does not adequately address the problem of the meaning of media products. Effects and uses and
gratifications studies assume that the meaning of a particular media message resides rather
unproblematically in the production process, or in the text itself. Effects follow from the meanings
already embedded in the texts, and while individuals may use a media product in a way unintended by its
producer, this is not considered to be an alteration of a text's \textit{meaning} but of its function. Further, uses
and gratifications themselves are treated as static functional categories rather than as part of an active
historical signifying process. Given these conceptual limitations, I have turned to a tradition of media and
cultural analysis which takes a "ritual view" of communication—one that considers cultural forms to be a
site for the creation of meaning based on an active relationship between production and consumption.

Stuart Hall's conception of "encoding" and "decoding" as mutually constitutive practices in the
"encoding/decoding model" begins from the notion that communication media act as powerful ideological
agents in society. Hall argues that media function ideologically to simultaneously produce and reproduce
the apparent rationality and legitimacy of the social order in which they operate. Media are thus key
agents in creating and upholding what Burke refers to as the reasonableness of a given system of
hierarchy. Hall's thesis rests on the concept of hegemony, seen as the process whereby modern social
order is maintained. Raymond Williams describes hegemony as a "complex interlocking of political,
social and cultural forces" which operates through institutions like family, church, schools, the legal
system, cultural industries, etc. Hegemony's effectiveness depends on the priorities of such institutions being interiorized by individuals as "the pressures and limits of simple experience and common sense." (This can be compared to Burke's notion of internal persuasion). The hegemony of the dominant order, however, is not a static structure, but a dynamic, historically-contingent interaction and realization of activities, experiences and social relationships. In Williams' words:

hegemony does not passively exist as a form of dominance. It has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified. It is also continually resisted, limited, altered, challenged by pressures not at all its own.

That is, a given social order can lose its reasonableness for some or most members of society through its inflexibility and inability to respond to pressures generated out of social divisions and conflicts. For this reason, according to Williams, we must also consider forms of "counter-hegemony" and "alternative hegemony" as "real and persistent elements of practice." The evangelical movement in the late 19th and 20th centuries can be seen as a challenge to the reasonableness of certain influential explanatory frameworks—those of modernism and secularism. In this sense Evangelicalism constitutes an alternative hegemony, but one constituted within the parameters of the dominant hegemonic order; it seeks to establish its own symbolic system as the objective definition of reality, but that set of definitions is firmly grounded in traditional capitalist values and priorities. Evangelical discourse is thus one set of meanings contending with others within the social field. The resulting clash of symbolic universes is both part of, and contributes to, the dynamic which is history.

History is a fluid, conflictual field where social groups struggle over definitions of reality and struggle to make their own definitions prevail. At any given historical moment, those definitions which are dominant constitute the hegemonic order. Social institutions like media work to legitimize and reproduce hegemonic definitions as "common sense." The ideological work of media, according to Hall, are dominant constitute the hegemonic order. Social institutions like media work to legitimize and reproduce hegemonic definitions as "common sense." The ideological work of media, according to Hall,

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68Ibid., p. 110.
69Ibid., p. 112.
70Ibid., p. 113.
consists in drawing the line

between preferred and excluded explanations and rationales, between permitted and deviant
behaviours, between the 'meaningless' and the 'meaningful,' between the incorporated
practices, meanings and values and the oppositional ones. 71

Evangelical leaders and TV preachers would likely agree with Hall's statement since they regularly point
to the power of "secular media" and popular culture to corrupt people's values and erode their beliefs.
Commercial media, according to evangelicals, seduce us into non-Christian lifestyles. The values
portrayed on secular media, they argue, are those of a pseudo-religion, secular humanism, and necessarily
exclude the explanations and rationales promoted by Evangelicalism. We can look at the evangelical
movement and TV evangelism as expressions of a challenge to secular hegemony. Conservative Christian
television, like its secular counterpart, is actively engaged in ideological work. Televangelists seek to
distinguish between preferred and excluded definitions of the world, between the meaningless and the
meaningful. They do so by proposing a symbolic system which purports to challenge that of commercial
TV; evangelical broadcasters regularly hold up their programming as an alternative to "non-Christian"
media, and do so in terms connoting a passionate, ongoing battle against an enemy culture. The
evangelical movement challenges one symbolic system (secular humanism) by proposing its own (universal
Christian conversion). Part of this battle is fought in the trenches of "culture" with the weapons of mass
communication.

Televangelists' quests for conversion among their viewers requires far more than simply saturating
the marketplace with "Christian" messages, however. Conversion, or successful persuasion, is a highly
contingent activity—shot through with the "anguish of communication." For this reason, media
consumption is a critical point of analysis. Hall proposes that the meaning of a particular media product
is the result of an active, bilateral relationship between production and consumption. The production
process invests a media product with a "preferred reading"—or the meaning intended by the producer.
John Corner says "preferring" is a textual function that seeks to align "writing" and "reading" so that "the

71Stuart Hall, "Culture, the Media and the 'Ideological Effect',' in J. Curran, M. Gurevitch,
reproductive function of discourse and therefore its ideological effectivity are maximized."12 In Burke's terms, media production is "motivated"—it seeks to persuade the readers to accept a particular formulation of "the right thing." Anguish arises because "perfect transmissions"—where encoded and decoded meaning exactly coincide—are in practice never guaranteed. Rather, Hall says, people's readings of a message "will inevitably reflect their own material and social conditions." Individual readings may therefore be "preferred," "negotiated," or "oppositional" or combinations thereof, depending on "the way the audience situates itself within the hegemonic field of ideologies."13 Using Burke's concept, we could say that rhetoric's effectivity depends on the degree to which external and internal persuasion (the voice without and the voice within) are harmonious. The degree of harmony varies within the audience so that a particular rhetorical situation will summons attitudes of acceptance, doubt or rejection, or, more commonly, a combination of these. Analyzing a media product like TV evangelism therefore requires considering the relationship between text and audience as a concrete setting for the creation of meaning.

David Morley's study of audience interpretations of a British news program analyzed variations in readings related to viewers' social positions and cultural codes.14 He concluded that preferred, negotiated and oppositional readings are related to differences in cultural/interpretive codes, and that these are grounded in social divisions like class, education, gender, etc. Because such codes shape and direct the way we understand cultural practices and products, we bring to the act of decoding specific interpretive tools and frameworks based on our social experience. As Merton noted in the war bond drive, listeners brought to the broadcast "a wealth of wants and expectations which our society had fashioned for them."15 Thus, I will ascribe a meaning to Jimmy Swaggart's Sunday sermon that differs from that of an

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13Hall, "Ideological Effect," p. 344.

14Morley, Nationwide Audience.

15Merton, Mass Persuasion, p. 11.
elderly female member of an Assembly of God church. And her reading will likely be at odds with that of a young man attending Pat Robertson’s CBN University. It is therefore crucial to examine the interpretive framework that viewers bring to religious telecasts if we are to wrestle with the problem of conversion. I am interested in how the "voice within" a particular audience meshes (or fails to) with the televangelist’s voice from without. Asked the other way around, how does the preacher develop an external voice that will conform to the internal symbols of his auditors?

Gitlin argues that the meaning of a media product is ultimately created through the process of consumption:

The act of consuming appropriates and completes the work: it activates from among the work’s range of possible meanings—those that are actually present in the work—those that will embody what the work means, to a given social group and to individuals within it.76

Discerning the meaning of Swaggart’s sermon on the Second Coming of Christ therefore requires not only analyzing the substance and formal qualities of his discourse—the "preferred reading" he invests in the sermon—but also how individual listeners appropriate and interpret his message (the actual readings). Gitlin, like Hall, Morley and Corner, does not propose that a "text" is infinitely open to any interpretation; production inevitably conditions consumption, and as Hall suggests, most readings will fall within a range of negotiations around the preferred reading. But to grasp what a particular media text means, here and now, to a specific reader, always requires an examination of the entire process of production, signification and consumption. Consumption has another social implication as well, according to Gitlin. By consuming certain cultural goods, social groups and individuals "help position themselves in the society, and work toward defining their status, their social identity."77 In other words, through consumption we not only ascribe meaning to media products, we also give meaning to ourselves and our lives. We do so by placing ourselves, through symbolic activity, in a particular social location. In religious terms, we locate ourselves in a cosmic frame of reference. So, for example, when conservative Christians heed Swaggart’s admonitions to "reject the things of this world," including commercial

76Gitlin, "Television’s Screens," p. 204.
77Ibid..
television, they are situating themselves and creating an identification through their non-consumption of certain goods. They simultaneously create an identity by consuming "Christian" symbolic materials.

This act of creating an identity through the process of signification is further illuminated by Sartre in *Search for a Method.* Sartre contends that we invest the world with meaning through our dual roles as agents and objects of signification. We live in a world of signs (a symbolic universe) which have been designated as meaningful by past and present human activity. We participate in, reject or alter those meanings through action: we make things "mean" at the same moment that we give meaning to ourselves through things (both symbolic systems and goods as symbols). In Sartre's words:

> ... significations come from man and from his project, but they are inscribed everywhere in things and in the order of things. Everything at every instant is always signifying, and significations reveal to us men and relations among men across the structures of our society. But these significations appear to us only insofar as we ourselves are signifying.

For Sartre, sense-making and sense-taking are simultaneous and mutually-constituting activities. He cites the example of a man in military dress. The uniform gives the man an identity, which comes to him from outside (from the structure of the military institution within a particular social order and from the recognition of the uniform's significance by others). In this respect, an army colonel is signified. But this is only half the equation. The colonel simultaneously creates for himself an identity (a "self") by donning the uniform and the social characteristics and manners invested in it. As Sartre suggests,

> ... these objective significations, which seem to exist all alone and which are put upon particular men, are also created by men. And the men themselves, who put them on and present them to others, can appear as signified only by making themselves signifying.

What this means for the analysis of televangelism is that we must examine not only how the programs (and TV preachers) seek to establish meanings for the audience, but also how audience members endow the programs and themselves with meaning through the act of consumption. The creation of meaning is always a particular solution to the problems posed by specific "texts" in a concrete

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7*ibid., p. 156.

social context. By choosing to watch "Jimmy Swaggart In Crusade," to listen to religious music, to dress in a particular way, to participate in certain cultural activities, to send her children to "Christian" schools, an individual tells us something about the meaning of the world, and about the meaning of her life in it. This study tries to listen to both of those "stories" at the same time. It attempts to understand how televised evangelism acts as a link between individual ethos and world view by constructing and appealing to a sacred symbolic framework which explains them both. The process of production is completed (made persuasive) in the act of consumption—in the meanings people make of the meanings they are given.
Evangelicalism, says R. Stephen Warner, has been "overlooked, or discounted, stereotyped and patronized" by contemporary social scientists who are blinded by modern biases which prevent their taking this religious perspective seriously. Warner claims: "It is as if evangelicals were denizens of the zoo." The inability to treat Evangelicalism as a legitimate world view is itself a product of the modernization process. The gulf between modern sociological analysis and traditional religious interpretation indicates the extent to which religion has been displaced from the public to private sphere. For the evangelical Christian, this is simply another sign of contemporary society's loss of its essential meaning and direction. In the 19th century, science and God had not yet parted company. Far from being exotic, Evangelicalism was the dominant form of American religious belief and expression. An analysis of the meaning of contemporary Evangelicalism must therefore begin by examining the loss of its cultural hegemony.

Evangelicalism inherited from the Protestant Reformation a belief in the primacy of the Bible as the Word of God and an individuated conception of salvation. By opposing the mediating role of the institutional (Roman) church, clergy and liturgy, Protestantism established a new understanding of the relationship of worshiper and creator. This new religious perspective placed the individual directly before God and made him/her personally responsible for winning entry into the Kingdom of Heaven. The guide to this journey was the Bible which had been wrested from Rome's control and made widely accessible through the new medium of printing. Corporate guilt, corporate penance and corporate redemption—concepts basic to Catholicism—were rejected in the Protestant world view. Christopher Hill proposes that Protestantism "popularized the idea of the individual spiritual balance sheet" and created a

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2This view is held by most historians of Protestantism. See, for example, Martin A. Marty, "Tensions Within Contemporary Evangelicalism: A Critical Appraisal," in D. F. Wells and J. D. Woodbridge, eds., The Evangelicals (Nashville: Abingdon, 1975), pp. 170-188.
universe of "individuals fighting for their own salvation, no longer working out its salvation, as it had
cultivated its fields, in common." As Hill and other writers have noted, the rise of Protestantism is
intimately connected to the development of printing:

Protestantism depended on the new craft of printing. The widespread dissemination of
vernacular translations of the Bible, some in pocket editions, made possible individual study
of the Scriptures.  

Thus, one's ties to eternity were rerouted around elaborate ecclesiastical structures. Bible reading
became a private activity, conducted in the homes of Europe's growing literate middle class. Not only
were the writings of Protestant reformers like Luther disseminated through the medium of printing, but
the explosive increase of Bibles in vernacular permitted and encouraged new interpretations of the
meaning of God's intentions. Protestantism was born and has developed as a religious system highly
oriented to "the Word." Gregor Goethals notes this scriptural emphasis in 16th century reformers John
Calvin and Ulrich Zwingli who rejected all visual and material supports for belief, including icons and
sacred architecture: "The reformers replaced images with the Word, both spoken and written. The Bible
was the principal guide to liturgy and to the communication of faith." This doctrine of sola scriptura
became one of the cardinal tenets of Evangelicalism.

Freidrich Heiler, in an analysis of the history and psychology of prayer, characterizes Evangelicalism
as a "prophetic" religious form. A prophetic religion holds that God reveals His will through His word,
hence the Bible's centrality in discerning divine intention. Revelation is seen as "an objective, historical
fact, a universally binding communication of the divine will" which is made known to believers through

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Scripture. The believer's "experience of salvation rests on the proclamation of divine revelation," so that Christian witness, or testimony, becomes an essential component of the salvific journey.7 Sin in prophetic religion "lies in a breach of the God-ordained order of moral values, in a revolt against God's holy will." Salvation is the act which heals this separation; it is the "restoration of communion with God."8 In Burke's terms, salvation occurs through a communicative act (interpretation and testimony of God's will) which creates a sacred identification; it establishes a consubstantiality of believers. This prophetic quality of Evangelicalism is manifested in its conception of authority, its ethics, its practices and its attitude towards other symbolic systems.

Modern American Evangelicalism grows out of this prophetic, scripturally-grounded tradition. James Hunter notes that the evangelical world view is rooted in the Reformation, European and American Puritanism, and the impulses of the Great Awakenings in the U.S., and "has striven to remain doctrinally faithful to this general conservative tradition."9 Hunter finds in Evangelicalism traces of ascetic Protestantism, including the Calvinist doctrine of divine election, German pietism's emphasis on spiritual perfectibility on earth, Methodism's stress on experiential personal conversion, and the Baptist doctrines of personal salvation and a believers' church.

In the introductory chapter I noted the difficulty of neatly defining Evangelicalism and evangelicals, as have many students of the subject.10 Hunter's definition of the core doctrines and characteristic behavior of evangelicals is useful, I believe, because it is concise, yet broad enough to include the many variants within the movement. Evangelicalism holds that the Bible is the inerrant word of God; that Christ is divine; and that salvation is achieved through the efficacy of Christ's life, death and physical

8Ibid., pp. 155, 157.
9Hunter, American Evangelicalism p. 7
resurrection. The evangelical Christian is characterized by an "individuated and experiential orientation toward spiritual salvation, and religiosity in general and by the conviction of the necessity of actively attempting to proselytize all non-believers to the tenets of the evangelical belief system."11 Evangelical television carries on this tradition of proselytism, although both the form and the goals of this persuasion take on specific characteristics in different religious programs.

Revivalism as Ritual

To understand contemporary Evangelicalism and its use of television as a proselytizing or persuasive tool, we must first consider televangelism’s 19th century progenitor—the religious revival. Hunter says that the revival was central to religious life in the 1800s and that the expression of religiosity in revivalism "largely accounted for the unity of the style and substance of Protestant life in this period."12 William McLoughlin, Jr. argues that mass religious revivals in the U.S. stemmed from a distinct configuration of social conditions: an intense theological reorientation within the churches; inter- and intra-church conflicts involving prominent religious personalities; a widespread sense of social and spiritual upheaval; and a general feeling among the non-churched that Christianity was relevant to individual and social problems.13 That is, revivalism occurs in a period of crisis in the meaning of individual and corporate existence.

The camp meetings which inaugurated the Second Great Awakening at the turn of the 19th century exhibited emotionalism, group fervor and dramatic conversions which have become "part of the inherited lore of American revivalism."14 The camp style revivals also signalled an important shift in Protestant belief; the Puritan concept of predestination was being replaced by Arminian ideas of free will through

12Ibid., p. 24.
14Frankl, Televangelism p. 29.
the spread of Methodism which stressed the role of the individual in achieving his or her salvation. Methodist teachings insisted that individuals could attain spiritual "perfection" through the "crisis experience" of conversion. Perfectionism infiltrated Protestant thought and practice through the waves of revivalism that swept the country in the first half of the century.15 According to Pentecostal historian Vinson Synan, "By 1840, perfectionism was becoming one of the central themes of American social, intellectual and religious life."16

This shift in theology also produced changes in the function of revivals and the role of the preacher. Puritanism had considered revivals to be spontaneous outpourings of religious sentiment directly initiated by God. By mid-19th century, revivals had taken on a new definition; they were consciously orchestrated events intended to instigate the conversion experience. Frankl's work suggests that the revival took on new forms and characteristics under the guidance of Charles Grandison Finney who founded the "modern urban revival." During this period, she argues, revivalism "developed distinctive patterns of organization, complete with specialized roles, routinized traditions, and rituals of conversion as well as distinct beliefs and religious values."17 The preacher acquired a different and more central role in religious life through this new social institution. He was no longer a pastor, tending a flock, but a goad and a beacon on the road to sanctification. (This more active role is characteristic of contemporary television ministers.) Within the context of prayer, exhortation and testimony, the congregation and preacher worked together on the task of individual and social salvation. The revival became both the medium for experiencing conversion or rebirth, and a ritual of transformation. To look at revivalism as a ritual is to consider it as a site for the construction of sacred meaning. The "language" of revivals—prayer, testimony, weeping, moaning, dancing, etc.—symbolically constructed a community and provided a "technique of transcendence."

15Both McLoughlin, Modern Revivalism, and Marsden, Fundamentalism and American Culture, provide good accounts of this period.


17Frankl, Televangelism, p. 23.
Revivalism—both as an institution and a ritual context—was and continues to be a key cultural form of Evangelicalism. During the 19th century, revivalism was "institutionalized," according to McLoughlin. The process of institutionalization, he argues, created "a simple, almost mechanical outlet for Protestantism’s pietistic fervor" which at its most extreme tended toward "empty formalism, bland uniformity, social conformity, and political conservatism." This form has evolved historically with the adoption of new media of communication and has also been forced to adapt to the demands of those media. I examine this development in Chapter 5.

The Transition from Progress to Apocalypse

The world view of mid-19th century Protestantism was rendered meaningful by its ability to account for the shape of social reality and the interior landscape of individual existence. A stress on personal asceticism and a missionary attitude which made the progress of Christianity identical to that of American civilization and values, were supported by and in turn reinforced the values of small town mercantilism which then characterized society. This belief in continuing spiritual and social betterment was part of a post-millenial theology which held that America was leading the rest of the world toward Christian perfection—hence the notion of the "redeemer nation." The evangelical world view was legitimized not only because a majority of Americans held this religious perspective, but also because it offered a sacred explanatory framework for daily life; Protestantism was a "true" representation of reality insofar as social "progress" (the growth of a Christian community through revivals and mission efforts) corresponded to God’s plan (redeeming humanity through Christ). The cultural hegemony of Evangelicalism was supported and extended through the education system and voluntary associations. In Hunter’s words:

18McLoughlin, Modern Revivalism p. 133.

19Ibid., p. 13.

The notion of the quest for a Christian America was... firmly institutionalized. Local, state, and federal governments, dominated in the main by people who shared this conviction, were thus structured to encourage its ascendancy in the culture... the result was the establishment of a uniquely Protestant style of life and work (and therefore, world view) in American society as a whole, even non-Protestant portions of it.

Marsden portrays post-Civil War Protestantism as imbued with confidence about the inevitability of spiritual progress. All social problems were first and foremost shortcomings of the individual, and could be corrected by social reform that would logically flow from individual spiritual rebirth enacted in revivals and mission efforts. The guide for correct living was the Bible, seen as "the highest and all-sufficient source of authority." Evangelicals' confidence in the infallibility of Scripture was bolstered by their Baconian view of science which held that the universe was governed by a rational system of laws created by God. The role of science was to discover these laws which would complement and corroborate biblical teachings. In Marsden's words, "The old order of American Protestantism was based on the interrelationship of faith, science, the Bible, morality, and civilization."

This order was at first shaken and then torn asunder by a series of developments in science, philosophy and theology, which were in turn connected to societal changes related to industrialization. Darwin's theory of natural selection, new methods of biblical criticism, philosophical idealism and increasing social problems generated by industrial modernization presented grave challenges to post-millennial optimism. Marsden argues that these developments called forth a "new theology" (liberal Protestantism) which threatened orthodox Evangelicalism. The last decades of the 19th century, then, constituted a crisis for the Evangelical world view, and the crisis' name was modernism. Hunter argues that both conservative Protestantism and its liberal counterpart are products of modernism; both were shaped by their particular responses—whether of resistance or accommodation—to the forces of modernization. Conservatives tended toward the former route and liberals to the latter, and this

21Hunter, American Evangelicalism, p. 25
22Marsden, Fundamentalism and American Culture, p. 16.
23Ibid., p. 17.
divergence created a major schism in Protestantism in the final decades of the century.

Post–Civil War revivalistic euphoria was short-lived; this is most evident in the growth of pre–millennial ideas. Pre–millennialism began to be widely accepted in the 1870s and was popularized by the successful revivals of Dwight L. Moody. Pre–millennialists believed that the thousand–year reign of peace and progress had not yet occurred and that Christ would return before rather than after the millennium. Thus, the present world was deteriorating materially and spiritually, instead of progressing. Adherents of this perspective based their position on an elaborate historical schema drawn from a passage of the Book of Daniel in the Old Testament. Called dispensationalism, this system divided history into radically differentiated eras, or dispensations, which have been preordained by God. Dispensationalism taught that the earth was rapidly approaching a cataclysmic encounter between God and Satan. All worldly strife, whether human or natural, was merely a sign of the coming apocalypse, and since it was mandated by God, no human effort could alter or delay its inevitability. The only consolation for Christians (that is, Protestants who had been spiritually reborn) was that they would be spared the horror of the seven–year tribulation by being taken up to Heaven beforehand ("raptured"). Following the tribulation and a terrific battle with Satan, Christ was to return and institute the millennium on earth.

This conception of history was persuasive to the extent that it accounted for social and economic problems, made sense of challenges to Christianity associated with modernism (these were the work of the anti–Christ), validated the absolute, prophetic truth of Scripture, and restored to Protestantism a distinctly Christian view of history. Pre–millennialism was generally pessimistic about the state of American


26In a historical study of apocalyptic movements and their rhetoric, Ronald Reid claims that apocalyptic visions are appealing in periods when a substantial number of people are dissatisfied with the present and are uncertain about the future. Apocalypse, says Reid, serves to explain a distressing present and provides reassurance for the future. It does so by identifying a specific hate object or enemy, arousing fears of conspiracy and subversion, legitimizing beliefs by subordinating them to a cosmic plan, and building a strong feeling of commitment among the faithful. Ronald Reid, "Apocalypticism and Typology: Rehtorical Dimensions of a Symbolic Reality," Quarterly Journal of Speech 69 (August 1983): 229–248. These conditions hold for modern evangelicals, a majority of whom hold pre–millennial, dispensationalist views. It also helps explain many evangelicals' fatalist attitude toward nuclear
culture. This view is evident in Moody's remark: "I look upon this world as a wrecked vessel. God has given me a lifeboat and said to me, 'Moody, save all you can.'" Moody said he found pre-millennialism an attractive theological concept because it heightened the persuasiveness of evangelism. This pessimism regarding society's future had important theological implications. The already potent individualistic character of American Protestantism became even more pronounced. The aim of evangelism was simply the saving of individual souls, since society at large was already damned. This soul-saving mission in the evangelical tradition is crucial in making sense of the message of modern televangelists, the majority of whom hold pre-millennial views. Swaggart's crusades, for example, regularly feature upbeat, joyous songs that proclaim the imminence of rapture. His view of politics and society is similarly grounded in the belief that the apocalypse is near:

Armageddon is coming... They can sign all the peace treaties they want. They won't do any good. There are dark days coming... My Lord! I'm happy about it! He's coming again. I don't care who it bothers. I don't care who it troubles. It thrills my soul!

The "Holiness Movement" was another determining factor in the development of modern Evangelicalism. Grounded in Methodist perfectionism, "holiness" refers to the profound transformative experience whereby the individual is filled with spiritual power. This view of sanctification was a feature of Finney's crusades from 1825 to 1835 and quickly spread throughout Evangelicalism. Marsden contends that holiness teachings "revolutionized" the evangelical movement in the years 1840 to 1870, and by the 1870s had penetrated the revivalist Protestant tradition. The experience of total purification came to be called "The Baptism of the Holy Ghost." Sermons and hymns took up holiness themes; metaphors of total surrender, being overwhelmed by Jesus and having one's spirit "cleansed" were common.

Moody was an important figure in the growth of the holiness movement. Holiness teachings were disseminated

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24(cont'd) war. See William Martin, "Waiting for the End," Atlantic Monthly, June 1982, pp. 31-37; and Grace Halsell, Prophecy and Politics: Militant Evangelists on the Road to Nuclear War (Westport, CT: Lawrence Hill, 1986.)

27Marsden, Fundamentalism and American Culture, p. 38.


through his mass revivals and by other evangelists and teachers connected to Moody through Bible conferences. By 1890, "holiness" was a regular feature of evangelical theology. To attain salvation, the individual had to undergo the crisis experience of spiritual rebirth; consecration involved "absolute surrender" which was described by the biblical term "yielding." To "get full of the Holy Spirit," as Moody put it, was a necessary condition for Christian life, Christian service and Christian witness.10

The Fundamental Split in Protestantism

Hunter characterizes the years from 1890 to 1919 as "the disestablishment of American Protestantism."31 The impact of modernism—evolutionary theory, higher criticism of the Bible, and idealist philosophy—infiltrated Protestant denominations. While liberal theologians and clergy responded by incorporating these new ideas and refashioning religious practice around the concepts of the "Social Gospel" and cooperative Christianity, conservative forces responded quite differently. The pervasiveness of pre-millennial views made the Social Gospel (or social reform) irrelevant. Their main preoccupation was saving souls before Christ's return—what Hunter terms a grand "rescue mission."32 Challenges to the Bible, whether scientific or historical, were met with a retrenchment to biblical inerrancy. Darwinianism and higher criticism threatened to rob Christianity of its most basic beliefs and to destroy the supernatural authority of the Word. The way to fight such tendencies was to reassert the divine origins of Scripture; the Bible was not just a metaphor for human history, it was history. Conservatives at first battled to eradicate liberal accommodations to modernism from within the denominations—they established Bible institutes, new centers of higher education and numerous publications to propagate orthodox evangelical views.33 As liberal Protestantism and the Social Gospel gained support among clergy and lay people, some conservatives began arguing for separation from the now corrupted denominations.

10Marsden, Fundamentalism and American Culture, pp. 78–79.
31Hunter, American Evangelicalism, p. 27.
32Ibid., p. 30.
33Ibid., p. 31.
The splintering of Protestantism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries had political, as well as ecclesiastical and theological ramifications. While liberals called for increasing involvement in political and social issues, conservatives opted for disengagement. Marsden argues that this "Great Reversal" (1900-1930) in evangelical thought is related to the shift from a Calvinist to pietistic tradition (e.g., politics as a way to further the Kingdom versus political action as a merely temporary restraint on advancing evil), and a shift from post-millennial to pre-millennial eschatology. Holiness teachings also worked against political involvement because the power of the Holy Spirit was essentially an individual, rather than corporate experience. The primary reason for conservatives' detachment from political action was their hostility to the liberal Social Gospel which appeared to refute the basic tenets of evangelical Christianity. Conservative evangelicals viewed social action as secondary to saving individual souls; liberals seemed to make social reform primary and to take a positive stance toward spiritual and social progress which conservatives had already rejected.34 By the turn of the century, the evangelical revivalist movement was seriously fragmented, in addition to being radically separated from liberal Protestantism. The development of Pentecostalism and Fundamentalism were outgrowths of this rupture.

Pentecostalism diverged from other brands of orthodox Protestantism in its view of what constituted sanctification. While adhering to a pre-millennialist view of history and a belief in the necessity of spiritual rebirth, Pentecostals asserted that the conversion act involved receiving the "gifts" of the Holy Spirit, including the power to heal and to speak in tongues.35 Other conservative Protestants rejected this idea, arguing that such gifts were found only in the time of the early apostolic church.

34Marsden, Fundamentalism and American Culture, pp. 85-93.
35Faith healing and glossalalia are two of the gifts acquired when the worshiper is "baptized in the Holy Ghost"; others are wisdom, faith, the ability to work miracles, to prophesy and to interpret tongues. The term charismatic is also used to distinguish Christians who hold that the Holy Spirit bestows gifts of healing and speaking in tongues. Charismatic comes from the Greek charisma meaning favor or gift. Not all charismatics are Pentecostal; there is also a growing number of Catholic charismatics. For a history of Pentecostalism and its central beliefs and practices, see Synan, The Holiness-Pentecostal Movement. For an interesting discussion of the psychological implications of glossolalia see E. Mansell Pattison, "Ideological Support for the Marginal Middle Class: Faith Healing and Glossolalia," in I. I. Zaretsky and M. P. Leone, eds., Religious Movements in Contemporary America, pp. 498-555 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974).
Pentecostal groups were therefore forced out of the conservative mainstream and formed their own churches in the years 1894 to 1905. Both Swaggart and Robertson are part of the Pentecostal tradition, as are many of the prominent television preachers. Synan considers this movement, particularly in its formative years, to be a lower class response to the liberalization of Protestantism. It was a move to "keep alive the 'old-time religion' which seemed to be in danger of dying out in American Protestantism." It was also a largely rural phenomenon, strongest in the South and Midwest. The experience of being displaced first from Protestantism in general, and then from its conservative wing, created for Pentecostals a sense of being dispossessed which was heightened, no doubt, by their already marginalized social position. Holiness and Pentecostal groups, says Synan, exhibited this exclusion in their theological beliefs and practices: they "taught a negative social gospel . . . rather than trying to reform society, they rejected it."

Fundamentalism developed under similarly embattled conditions. As conservatives lost control of Protestant teachings and practices, they developed an increasingly separatist mentality. From 1910 to 1915, a group of Bible teachers and evangelists, backed by Southern California oil millionaire Lyman Stewart, published The Fundamentals—a collection of articles (in twelve paperback volumes) which spelled out the key teachings and positions of orthodox conservative Evangelicalism. One-third of the articles defended scriptural authority and attacked higher criticism; one-third dealt with traditional theological questions like sin and salvation; the rest covered a variety of subjects including attacks on other religious systems. The authors generally avoided ethical and political issues. Although the books were distributed free to pastors, ministers, missionaries, theology teachers and students, YMCA and YWCA secretaries, Sunday School superintendents and religious editors (three million volumes in all), the ideas were largely ignored by the Protestant academy. The primary impact of The Fundamentals, according to Marsden, was to become a "symbolic point of reference for identifying a 'fundamentalist'"

Synan, Holiness-Pentecostal Movement, p. 58.

Ibid.
movement” (Jerry Falwell is the most prominent contemporary religious broadcaster associated with this tradition.)

Hunter sees the publication of The Fundamentals as conservatives’ final assault in the losing battle against modernity’s invasion of Protestantism. By 1919, he argues, the split between "Fundamentalists" and "Modernists" was complete. The Scopes trial in 1925, then, was something of an anti-climax. Conservative Protestants had already lost the war for control of the faith. The highly publicized debate over evolution between Clarence Darrow and William Jennings Bryan did little more than confirm what orthodox Protestants already knew: their historically central place in American religious life had been formally usurped by forces they believed to be profoundly anti-Christian.

The Crisis of Modernism and Development of a Parallel World View

Marsden sees the creation of Fundamentalism as a response to the crisis of modernism. Modernism represented the adaptation of religious belief to the exigencies of modern culture, while evangelicals insisted that culture must conform to the unchanging truths of the Christian belief system. World War I seemed to justify conservatives’ cultural pessimism; pre-millennialist leaders of the movement drew a causal chain from German theology to liberal politics to evolution and then to world war. They argued that modernist impulses not only led to war, but would also bring about the eventual destruction of civilization. Warnings of imminent cultural catastrophe and denunciations of modernity also characterize much contemporary evangelical rhetoric. In the midst of a world which seemed to be turning from God, or at least from the deity familiar to orthodox Protestants, conservative Evangelicalism provided a social and cultural source of identification—a base from which to criticize the faults of modernism. Marsden suggests that early Fundamentalism comprised a "subculture" which created for its

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38 Marsden, Fundamentalism and American Culture, p. 119; see also Hunter, American Evangelicalism, pp. 31–32.

39 Hunter, American Evangelicalism, p. 32.
members "institutions, mores and social connections that would eventually provide acceptable alternatives to the dominant cultural ethos." As Evangelicalism's cultural hegemony waned, its social base also declined. Conservative Protestants looked for a new source of cohesion which they found by laying greater stress on individual commitment and belief, and by asserting the primacy of doctrine:

Certain key beliefs—inerrancy, anti-evolution, often pre-millennialism—gained special importance as touchstones to ascertain whether a person belonged to the movement... Exactly correct belief then became proportionately more important to the movement as its social base for cohesiveness decreased.

After 1925, Fundamentalists (as most conservative Protestants were then called) were publicly discredited and treated in liberal circles as a social anomaly whose time had passed. It was expected that this outmoded form of religious belief would go the way of horse-drawn vehicles. But, as Ernest Sandeen points out, "Fundamentalism, a movement most commonly described as last-ditch reaction and anachronistic, rural anti-intellectualism, has refused to die." Long before the Scopes trial, conservative Evangelicals had been building an institutional foundation of schools, publications, Bible conferences and independent churches outside the liberal domain, for the defense and propagation of orthodoxy. Fundamentalism dropped out of the fight inside mainline Protestantism to take root elsewhere. Leaders of the conservative wing in the 1920s and 1930s emphasized working through local congregations and independent Bible institutes and missionary organizations. An internal network of communication was developed through Bible schools (26 were founded in the 1930s), colleges, Fundamentalist publications, mission agencies, Bible conferences and the new medium of radio. Unlike mainline denominations, which saw a drop in church attendance during the Depression, Fundamentalism quietly flourished.

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40Marsden, Fundamentalism and American Culture. p. 204.

41Ibid., p. 205.


This network of communication and organization provided conservative Evangelicals with a sense of community and identity apart from mainline liberal Protestantism. McLoughlin maintains that by the mid-30s there existed two national Protestant religions: liberal Protestantism and pietistic Fundamentalism. The latter created "an institutional framework and cultural which provided [believers] with a means of perpetuating their ideological separateness." In the 1940s, tensions within Fundamentalism led to a new schism between hard-line separatists and those who sought to create a broader coalition with evangelical-minded members of mainline denominations. These factions spawned, respectively, the American Council of Christian Churches (ACCC, founded in 1941 by Carl McIntyre) and the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE, created in 1942). The ACCC was a vitriolic challenger to the liberal National Council of Churches; at its peak it claimed 1.5 million members. The NAE was more ecumenical and sedate in style, appealing to the middle-class echelons of conservative Protestantism. This organization created the association of National Religious Broadcasters and the magazine Christianity Today. It also led to a new public identity; "Fundamentalist" was dropped in favor of "evangelical" or "neo-Evangelical." By 1952, the NAE claimed 10 million members and represented 30 denominations and churches. The bridge-building activities of the NAE contributed to a new wave of revivalism in the 1950s personified in the rise of Billy Graham to national celebrity status. This new revivalist phase issued from a solid institutional framework of schools, publishing houses, journals, radio stations, Bible conferences, missionary alliances and interchurch evangelizing activities. This institutional support network, according to McLoughlin, meant that "a unified, militant, and prosperous new fundamentalist crusade could be constructed."

Sandeen contends that this phenomenon of "parallel institutionalism" has "dominated and shaped" the conservative evangelical movement. Besides the NAE and ACCC there exists an array of evangelical

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46 Ibid., p. 475.

47 Ibid., p. 476.
professional, academic, business and social associations and societies which parallel similar secular organizations (e.g., Christian Businessmen's Association, Christian Medical Association, Evangelical Press Association, Fellowship of Christian Athletes, etc.). These parallel organizations, as well as evangelical colleges, Bible institutes and "Christian" media, create a unity and structure for conservative evangelicals which is simultaneously "inside" and "outside" the larger culture. As Marsden points out, this insider/outsider "paradox" is a recurring motif in American Fundamentalism whose "ambivalence toward American culture" grows out of conservative Evangelicalism's loss of religious hegemony, its battle with modernism, its belief in its redemptive, custodial role, its pre-millennialist pessimism, and its displacement from mainline denominations. The theological mandate to be of the world but not in it has produced an ongoing dilemma in the history of Evangelicalism—one that surfaces regularly in televangelists' rhetoric. In fact, this paradoxical demand creates a particular kind of tension within evangelical thought. I believe that this tension is a central characteristic of the evangelical world view, which forces it to continually reconstitute a meaningful sacred universe for adherents in a society which "erodes the plausibility of religious belief and weakens the influence of religious symbols in the social structure and culture at large."

As we will see, Robertson and Swaggart have responded to this "insider/outsider" tension in quite different ways.

**Evangelicalism and the Crisis of Meaning**

Evangelicalism came into existence and has persevered through its capacity to create an orienting symbolic framework; it has provided for adherents both a model of and a model for reality. The doctrine of *scriptura sola* served to infuse nature, history, society and individual existence with order and significance. Further, it eliminated doubt and ambiguity; the Bible was a factual representation of "

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*Marsden discusses the nature of this paradox in *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, pp. 6-7. For an assessment of how this insider/outsider paradox figures into political involvement among Christian conservatives, see pp. 206-211.

historical, natural and spiritual phenomena, and as such was a powerful explanatory system. Revivalism, pre-millennialism and the holiness tradition formed important components of Evangelicalism’s "sacred canopy." Pre-millennial eschatology offered an integrated, persuasive interpretation for social conditions in the present, a uniquely Protestant version of the past, and a definitive plan for the future, all based in God’s Word. Pre-millennial theodicy has been compelling in so far as it constructs a timeless, cosmic order that makes sense of contemporary culture on its own terms. It has therefore acted as an anti-dote to modernist ideology which relativized religious belief by making it subservient to cultural and historical contexts. Conservatives’ objection to higher criticism and liberal theology, then, was a defense of the very basis of religious belief, rather than a theological difference of opinion.

Spiritual rebirth and Christian witness followed from scriptural literalism. Mandated by God as essential expressions of faith and keys to salvation, sanctification and testimony were also techniques of transcendence. These rituals reinforced the truth of Evangelicalism by constructing a "community of feeling" which offered an experiential framework for the enactment of belief. Religious revivals and being "baptized in the Holy Ghost" gave communicants a sense of divine mission in the world which was legitimizied by and simultaneously supported covenantal notions of America’s role as a redeemer nation. Personal conversion and proselytism were evidence of belonging to the elect, and at the same time were necessary for the propagation and justification of the evangelical world view. The individuated nature of salvation corresponded to the individualistic basis of capitalism: eternal salvation, like economic survival, was a personal affair, just as sin and financial hardship were individual failings.

This mutually constituting relationship between the shape of religious belief and the fabric of society, which gave significance and legitimacy to both, began to erode at the turn of the century. The scientific and technological rationalism, cultural pluralism and structural separation of public and private life associated with modernism, delegitimized the evangelical world view. Evangelicalism’s capacity to create a model of reality faced serious challenges, even as it continued to provide what believers felt should be the only proper model for reality. Modernism constituted a crisis for orthodox Protestantism by

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See Hunter, American Evangelicalism, chapter 2.
creating a disjuncture between ethos and world view—by disuniting being and meaning. As Whitson argues, a religion comes into existence at times when a crisis of meaning confronts a community.\(^5\) The Reformation was such a crisis point, as was the birth of the second wing of Protestantism. Twentieth century conservative Evangelicalism can be seen as a strategy for transcending, assuaging and healing the crisis of meaning produced by modernism. For evangelicals, this cataclysm involved the potential loss of the symbolic system which infused their world and their lives with significance. To lose meaning is to simultaneously lose "being"—to give up the "frame of orientation and devotion" that tells individuals who they are and what their existence signifies.

In fact, this dislocation of being and meaning is one of the characteristic features of modernity. The loss of traditional and metaphysical explanatory frameworks has been described as scientific "progress" (positivism), as a process of "rationalization" or "bureaucratization" (Weber), as a transition from "Gemeinschaft" to "Gesellschaft" (classical sociology and critical theory), as a result of technological development (Mumford, Innis), and as a side effect of modern capitalism. Philip Wood suggests that the "meaningless of being" is a product of the rise of capitalism and the birth of the individual "bourgeois subject."\(^5\) Pre-capitalist (and "primitive") societies, grounded in distinct kinds of social organization and hence perception, were integrative systems. Wood argues:

> [these] social formations were distinguished by the common possession of world-views which united the immense diversity of the manifest and unmanifest realms of being within one cosmos within which humanity existed as an integral part continuous with the whole, 'at home.'\(^5\)

In such social formations, "all entities were perceived as entering into complex symbolic relations of religious significance with one another . . .".\(^5\) With the development of capitalism, the unity provided by a cosmic or transcendent system of meaning was disrupted and altered. The commodification of things


\(^5\) Philip Wood, "From Existentialism to Poststructuralism, and the Coming of the Postindustrial Society," (unpublished manuscript, Seattle, WA, 1987.)

\(^5\)Ibid., p. 7.

\(^5\)Ibid., p. 8.
(including human labor) offered a new basis for the significance of existence. More importantly, it interrupted or exploded the integrated character of earlier perceptual systems (e.g., it prefigured the "death of God" who had been the unifying force behind reality). Under capitalism, according to Wood, "the socially-recognized values (commercial, moral, or whatever) of things change more often than in previous social formations." The result of this development is "the ceaseless and rapid relativisation of value or meaning." This gives rise to the thoroughly modern perception that existence, or being, is transitory, relative, absurd. Modern philosophies like marxism and existentialism, for example, could develop only after the "meaningless of being" was taken for granted—when perception had become firmly grounded on the premise that

objects should not be perceived as having a stable essence, value or signification... they should not be perceived as pointing to anything beyond themselves (a transcendent reality, for example...)

This "disenchantment of the world," or relativization of meaning, had profound implications for the problem of being: it made the "self" a historically-unprecedented problem. Hunter argues that an increased focus on and concern with the self—which he terms "subjectivization"—is one result of modernization. It is "the structural process of being forced to turn inward to find meaningful life patterns and a stable identity." Modern symbolic systems, including Evangelicalism, have therefore to wrestle with "the complexities of the self" to retain their significance for people's lives. As Hunter points out, the question "Who am I?" is an essentially modern one (dating from the Enlightenment). It arises, he says, in a world where "identity has become deinstitutionalized" so that the "self has become a boundaryless territory to be explored, analyzed, and mapped, an exercise that often requires the assistance of 'experts.'" In other words, we no longer find it easy to feel "at home" in the world. Evangelicalism,

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56Ibid., p. 11.
57Ibid., p. 13, emphasis mine.
58Hunter, American Evangelicalism, p. 92.
59Ibid., p. 93.
60Ibid., p. 94.
then, must increasingly grapple with the shifting ground of personal identity if it is to retain its capacity to provide a meaning to reality and existence. Televangelism deals with this problem of the self in constructing its appeals to viewers. (As I show in Section III, Swaggart's crusade program and the "700 Club" offer different interpretations of the source of the problem and propose divergent solutions.) Further, the evangelical belief system must work against the powerful historical process of capitalist modernization which relativizes values and denies transcendental significance—which relegates God to a personal, and thus socially insignificant position.

I am arguing that conservative Evangelicalism has not withered away precisely because it continues to respond to adherents' desire for transcendence and meaning; it has continued to give believers a sense of their place in history, in society and in the cosmic order of things. It is an answer—and often a highly persuasive one—to questions about the self, or about the relationship of meaning and being. In Geertz' words, the symbolic system of Evangelicalism has proved able to

establish powerful, persuasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in [believers] by . . . formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and . . . clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that . . . the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic. 61

Although Evangelicalism has taken a historically hostile stance toward modernity, it has of necessity had to adapt to modernism's pervasive pressures and structures. Modernity's instrumental rationality, cultural pluralism and private-public dichotomy have had "corrosive consequences for the establishment and maintenance of a religious world view."62 Evangelicalism has responded to this corrosion with a variety of techniques: attempts to eradicate the contaminating system, separatism, building an alternative institutional framework, partial accommodation, and more recently, forwarding claims of superiority. (Such strategies, however, also imply the power of modernity to shape even its opposition.) The resiliency of the evangelical belief system indicates the extent to which it continues to supply a viable alternative to modernist impulses in social, political and cultural life. It continues to render reality and existence meaningful for a significant number of people—to fuse for the worshiper individual ethos and world view

61Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," pp. 80- 81.
in a way that "lend[s] a chronic character to the flow of his activity and the quality of his experience." 43

If this is so, then televangelism should provide an important site for examining the process whereby Evangelicalism legitimates its claims about the nature of reality and existence. It should offer us clues about how the evangelical belief system responds to the problem of meaning: bafflement, suffering and evil. And it should do so with an urgency related to the powerful, dis-integrating impact of modernization. That is, evangelical discourse, as expressed in televangelism, should be marked by a passionate defense of "meaning" against a world which increasingly denies the significance of metaphysical, transcendent symbolic systems. Paul Carter, writing about Fundamentalist resistance to evolution in the 1920s, points out that orthodox Protestants were not simply defending a political ideology or educational perspective, but were also, and primarily, "defending what [they] honestly believed was all that gave meaning to life, 'the faith once delivered to the saints.'" 64 Contemporary conservative Evangelicalism and its televangelists, I am proposing, are also engaged in a passionate defense of the symbolic system which makes the lives of adherents and viewers meaningful.

43Ibid., p. 82.

CHAPTER IV

THE STRUGGLE OVER SYMBOLIC PRODUCTION

The Resurgence of Fundamentalism

The New Christian Right is rooted in the Evangelical past. As Marsden and other writers have pointed out, 19th century Evangelicalism was characterized by racism, a hostility to Native Americans, an imperialist mentality, superpatriotism, a pro-militarist stance, and a deep suspicion of "foreign" ideologies like Catholicism and socialism. Richard Pierard argues that 19th century evangelicals "had become deeply involved in what today would be called 'rightist extremism' long before Fundamentalism emerged in the period after World War I." Orthodox Protestants' withdrawal from politics in the decades between the world wars was a temporary secession. While they refrained from organized political action, they maintained intensely conservative views. The Cold War, McCarthyism and Eisenhower's election provided a ground for the reflowering of evangelical activism; indeed, Leo Ribuffo claims that the New Christian Right is part of a general revival of Evangelicalism that began after WWII. "New Evangelicalism" flourished under the "genteel conservativism" of the Eisenhower years. It took the upheavals of the late 1960s and early '70s, and general confusion within mainline Protestantism to create a climate conducive to the creation of a new conservative Christian movement.

The "resurgence of Fundamentalism" was temporarily eclipsed by a brief revival of liberal Protestantism in the 1960s—a decade which provoked deep reassessments of religious faith and practice for many members of mainline denominations. Liberal clergy and laity became increasingly involved in social and political issues (especially in the Civil Rights and anti-war movements), bringing a temporary


renewal of the Social Gospel. Conservative Protestants, historically at odds with this orientation, kept a critical distance from both movements. For them, the 1960s represented a serious challenge to traditional Christian values. Supreme Courts rulings in 1962 and 1963 against school prayer and Bible reading, in particular, were interpreted as a severing of religion and society, and evangelicals responded accordingly. The loss in Vietnam, Watergate, rising rates of drug use, teenage pregnancy and divorce, the growth of the pornography industry, and increasing portrayals of sex and violence on television, reinforced conservative Christians' view that American society was undergoing a moral and spiritual crisis. The Supreme Court's decision in 1973 to legalize abortion was taken as a particularly devastating renunciation of evangelical values. These developments seemed to constitute a systematic assault on the nuclear family—the social institution held by evangelicals to be central to a proper Christian life. By 1976, the political right, headed by men like Paul Weyrich, Howard Phillips and Richard Viguerie, established contacts with key evangelical leaders. It was this coalition, aided by Viguerie's sophisticated fundraising techniques and interlocking organizational networks, that set the stage for the birth of the New Christian Right. The NCR's most visible organizations—the Moral Majority (now the Liberty Foundation), the Religious Roundtable and Christian Voice—were formed in 1979.

Grant Wacker contends that the world view of the NCR is organized around the notion of "Christian Civilization"—an "explicit set of social and cultural commitments" which were dominant in the 19th century when Evangelicalism was the primary belief system in America. "Christian Civilization," he

4 Falwell, for example, opposed the early Civil Rights movement on the grounds that it was a political, rather than religious concern. His later entry into politics indicates a change in evangelicals' sentiments regarding the relationship between religion and politics. See Frances FitzGerald, Cities on a Hill: A Journey Through Contemporary American Cultures (NY: Simon & Schuster, 1986), p. 129.


6 This view is held by many students of Evangelicalism. See Jeffrey K. Hadden, "Soul-Saving Via Video," and Leonard I. Sweet, "The 1960s: The Crises of Liberal Christianity and the Public Emergence of Evangelicalism," in Wells and Woodbridge, eds., The Evangelicals, pp. 29-45.

7 Grant Wacker, "Popular Evangelicalism," p. 297.
argues, is "not so much a list of discrete ideals as a coherent world view, a way of seeing reality." This 
view of the world is constructed on the belief that there exists a set of "moral absolutes," explicitly and 
 transparently revealed in Scripture, which should underly society's laws, institutions and public policy. 
Social developments in the 1960s and early '70s, perceived as a direct threat to the "Christian Civilization" 
ideal, evoked widespread dissatisfaction among conservative Evangelicals. Wacker argues that it is the 
"Evangelical Right" which identifies most strongly with the values of "Christian Civilization," and that it 
is this faction of Evangelicalism which has experienced the greatest growth in the last twenty years. The 
"Christian Civilization" ideal is central theme of the "700 Club" and informs Robertson's world view. As 
he stated in one program, "I think we should be a biblically-based nation. There has got to be some 
unifying ethic for society." Swaggart, on the other hand, is more likely to focus on individual salvation.

The resurgence of conservative Evangelicalism has been noted in the popular press and in public 
polls. It is evident as well in the growth of the evangelical publishing industry, in the increase in private 
Christian schools and colleges, in the creation of popular organizations and lobbying groups, in the success 
of numerous grass roots political campaigns, and in the growth of the television ministries in the last ten 
years. I believe it is no coincidence that conservative Evangelicalism has once again become a significant 
and vocal religious force in American culture. This perspective was born in a climate of social and 
spiritual crisis. It has been forced to develop its ideological and material resources in opposition to the 
dominant currents and structures of modern society, and has therefore become highly sensitive to threats 
to the maintenance of its world view.

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1Ibid., pp. 298–99.


16For an overview of the growth of evangelicals' use of media, see Richard N. Ostling, 
"Evangelical Publishing and Broadcasting," in G. Marsden, ed., Evangelicalism in Modern 
America, pp. 46–55 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984). See also Huntington and Kaplan, 
Hunter offers a provocative interpretation of why Evangelicalism has successfully survived many of the secularizing pressures of modernism. He suggests that adherents of this religious perspective have been able to maintain their world view, or symbolic system, because as a whole, evangelicals have been located furthest from key structural pressures of modernity: high levels of education, high mobility–inducing income levels, urbanization, and the public sphere of work. The relative isolation of Evangelicals from these factors mitigates the threats of the world–disaffirming qualities of modernity. Orthodox beliefs and more demanding religious practices are much more easily sustained in this situation.11

Conservative evangelicals are heavily represented in the South and Midwest in rural areas or small towns. Since World War II, these peripheries have come into increasing contact with forces of modernization. Economic and industrial development, black civil rights struggles, and the universalization of television have eroded many of the boundaries that separated orthodox Protestants from "the world." Many analysts of the New Christian Right suggest that its social base is greatest in these newly modernizing areas. As James L. Guth argues:

That the current religious militance draws much of its strength from the rapidly modernizing regions of the South and West hints in some way the processes of modernization and secularization may be responsible for the movement.12

Conservative Christians' decision to publicly and vigorously challenge the legitimacy of modernity/secular humanism suggests that the traditional buffer zones surrounding the evangelical world view have lost some of their protective power. The key institutions through which Evangelicalism has been maintained and propagated have, in the last 20 years, increasingly come under pressure from the disaffirming structures of modernization.

Conservative evangelicals' original response to the crisis of modernism was to disenfranchise themselves from the broader society. As Marsden says, the pietistic element of 19th century revivalism

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11 Hunter, American Evangelicalism, p. 130. He also offers a detailed demographic profile of evangelicals on pp. 49–60.

required a separation from "worldliness and apostasy." This ideological separatism provided Evangelicalism with the means to preserve its basic belief system and construct alternative religious practices. At the same time, conservative evangelicals' geographical and social separation from mainstream society permitted the maintenance of a distinct world outlook. By the 1950s, Hunter says, Evangelicalism had crafted a "cognitive defense" against modernity "within which the meaning of conservative Protestantism could be plausibly maintained." This conception of separation has gradually taken on a new meaning for many evangelicals. Before the 1940s, separation was defined negatively: the world is sinful so Christians, as individuals, must avoid and reject it. After World War II, as many evangelicals reaped the benefits of postwar economic growth, separation began to be seen more positively: secularism, the by-product of modernity, is sinful, so conservative Christians, as an organized body, must fight to replace it with evangelical values and institutions. This is the characteristic view of the NCR, although not for Swaggart who continues to insist that separation from the world is still the best defense against modernism. This shift in the meaning of separation has had consequences for the extent to which evangelicals have been willing to engage in social and political activity. The creation of the Religious Roundtable and the Moral Majority are one manifestation of this increased political involvement; the explicitly political content of the "700 Club," Falwell's "Old Time Gospel Hour" and much of TBN's programming is another.

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14Hunter, American Evangelicalism. Ibid., p. 45.


Symbolic Struggle and the Making of the New Christian Right

Because the maintenance and propagation of conservative Evangelicalism depends on perpetuating its symbol system, the battle against modernity (or secularization) is necessarily located in symbolic terrain. Donald Heinz contends that the New Christian Right is engaged in a struggle to create a "countermythology" to combat the "mythologies" of secular humanism and liberal Christianity.17 Conservative evangelicals identify secular humanism as the source of moral decay and godlessness, leading to a wide array of social ills from abortion to homosexuality. Secular humanism is considered particularly pernicious and pervasive because it informs the "cultural assumptions of contemporary intellectuals who significantly control symbol production."18 Hunter's work supports this view. He contends that modernity is "irregularly distributed in society" and is concentrated in urban centers, the academy, the professions and the public sphere of work—the primary sites of symbolic production (e.g. education, media, law, public policy, etc.).19 Modernism—and its embodiment in the ideology and practice of these powerful symbol producers—constitutes a threat to evangelical belief because its "symbols and its structures are deeply contrary to [the] religious, supernaturalistic assumptions" on which Evangelicalism rests.20 Heinz proposes that the various "mythologies" proffered by conservative Evangelicalism, liberal Christianity and humanism can be understood as contending interpretations or "stories" about American society and culture. The National Council of Churches (the organizational arm of liberal Protestantism) has also taken this position. In 1981, an NCC report titled "Christianity and Crisis" viewed the current liberal–conservative schism in Protestantism as "a contest over opposing American stories" which are played out through the use of "rhetorical and political symbols."21


18Ibid., p. 135

19Hunter, American Evangelicalism, p. 130

20Ibid., p. 131

In the current struggle against modernity, conservative Evangelicalism has developed a new strategy. Rather than retreating to safer ground and carving out relatively protected social spaces within which to preserve and practice their beliefs, evangelicals are challenging modernism on its own terms—those of symbolic production. I propose that this new strategy was adopted for several reasons: the forces and structures of modernization have penetrated nearly every available "social space," thus posing a greater threat to the evangelical world view; conservative Protestants have discovered allies among other social groups similarly dismayed by the disintegration of traditional values (e.g. conservative Catholics, Mormons and orthodox Jews); and evangelicals have recognized the potential power inherent in the control of symbolic creation (communication), partly through the successful use of print and broadcast media. As Heinz notes:

If the [New Christian Right] is engaged in a contest over the meaning of America's story, and if public symbols are the key instruments through which overarching systems of meaning are discovered and constructed, then gaining access to symbol production (generation, selection, definition, dissemination and control) is indispensable.  

Direct mail technology, domination of religious broadcasting, and skillful manipulation of the secular media have given Christian Right activists broad access to the production of public symbols or "stories" about the nature of society. But access alone is not enough. For the story told by the NCR to be persuasive, it must speak to and about the experiences of significant numbers of Americans. Robert Wuthnow contends that conservative evangelicals have renewed their interest in politics because the political climate of the 1970s was hospitable to their moral perspective. Evangelicalism has historically been opposed to the separation of public and private morality. This is, in fact, one of the bases of its hostility to modernism. Wuthnow suggests that Vietnam, Watergate, the Supreme Court decision on abortion and the election of Jimmy Carter provoked a national reconsideration of the public/private split whereby "morality came to be viewed as a public issue rather than in strictly private terms." As debates about morality were played out in the public arena (e.g., in the media), evangelicals increasingly felt at home in society: "they found a version of their view being expressed in far quarters, including the nation's

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22Ibid., p. 137.

major news media and the White House itself." Carter's election, in particular, was a symbolic victory for evangelicals. It shifted their perspective from the margins of social life to its center. Their values and beliefs were suddenly treated with respect by the secular media which previously had relegated orthodox Protestantism to cult status. By recognizing the evangelical world view as a legitimate public perspective, the media helped constitute conservative Christianity as a movement.

The national attention that evangelicalism received in the 1970s forged a symbolic link between their own identity and that of the larger society, giving them a sense of political entitlement which made it more conceivable to speak out on moral issues. Evangelicals perceived themselves as having a special message to bring to the American people.

The connection of public and private morality gave conservative evangelicals a platform from which to speak, and it is in terms of morality that the NCR has thrown itself into politics. Indeed, the unity and the social influence of the New Christian Right derives from breaking down the barriers that had separated politics, morality and religion.

Evangelicals' commitment to the preservation of traditional morality, together with the growing politicization of morality more generally, provided the symbolic linkage necessary to legitimate evangelicals' awakening interest in politics.

It is the task of the New Christian Right to maintain this symbolic link. Religious broadcasters like Robertson, who are identified with the NCR, actively reconstitute the connection between politics and Christian morality. Programs like the "700 Club" encourage political activism in terms of moral imperatives which derive from divine mandates. The tenets of Christian Civilization are forwarded as pillars of public morality and the NCR's political agenda is legitimized by linking its moral claims to the public interest.

The success of any modern movement depends on building a coalition around clearly identified issues. A movement must also have a clearly identifiable opposition if it is to create "enjoinment in the moral arena." Movements like the NCR therefore have to minimize differences "inside" while enhancing

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24Ibid., p. 177.
25Ibid., p. 179.
differences with those who are "outside" in order to create consubstantiality. The New Christian Right creates this unity among constituents by stressing general moral issues and downplaying specific internal divisions. As Wuthnow notes, "morality was the one issue on which evangelicals agreed. They remained deeply divided in many other ways—theologically, denominationally, geographically." Tim LeHaye, an outspoken leader of the NCR, publicly acknowledged the importance of minimizing such divisions. In an anti-homosexual campaign in California, he said: "Knowing pastors as we did, we all recognized that the only way to organize them was to make it clear that our basis of cooperation was moral, not theological."

The significant theological differences within Evangelicalism (e.g., Fundamentalists versus Pentecostals, charismatics versus non-charismatics, denominational disputes and demographical distinctions) are rarely addressed by NCR activists. (Such differences have surfaced, however, in the PTL scandal.) Religious broadcasters who are active in the New Christian Right are part of this coalition-building enterprise. According to Horsfield, the Moral Majority was initially successful because it was able to organize previously divergent and disenfranchised groups of conservative Christians around a moral consensus. Falwell's campaign demonstrated "the potential of television and its associated media to bring together elements of society that previously had been scattered" and to unite them "in a potentially dramatic way."

As I will argue in the program analysis, Robertson's message echoes the agenda of the New Christian Right. The "700 Club" seeks to bridge divisions among conservative evangelicals and to create a political coalition around moral issues. Swaggart is not in the business of coalition-building, either religious or political. He is creating a consubstantiality of the "elect" based on an exclusive theology. Swaggart's followers are not out to save the world, but to save their eternal souls. Robertson tries to convince viewers that these goals are identical.

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27 Ibid., p. 178.
28 Ibid.
29 Horsfield, Religious Television, p. 155.
The key sites of moral dispute, and therefore of symbol production, for the New Christian Right are the family, the education system and the mass media. Battles to influence or control public school curricula (e.g. balancing creationism and evolution, controlling availability of reading material, restoring school prayer, prohibiting homosexual teachers) and to promote "pro-family" legislation (e.g. restricting teenage contraception, opposing the Equal Rights Amendment, prohibiting abortion, etc.) are struggles over the "implanting, development and maintenance of symbolic universes." Campaigns against the content of popular culture (e.g., Coalition for Better TV, Accuracy in Media, Parents Music Resource Center) are also aimed at influencing popular symbolic meanings. The development and growth of "Christian" broadcasting, then, is a powerful and important tool in the contest among American mythologies. Developing their own forms of television, in particular, gives conservative evangelicals crucial access to symbolic production, since in their eyes, commercial TV has been the primary means "through which secular humanism was being implanted in the public consciousness." Evangelical broadcasters frequently stress the need for Christian television to counteract the anti-religious messages of secular broadcasting.

If, as Heinz says, secularization is "the process by which more and more sectors of society and culture are withdrawn from the domination or interpretive power of religious symbols," evangelicals seek to reverse this process—to recapture and redefine areas of social and cultural life which have been penetrated by secular ideology. Religious television is an important component of this process; evangelical programming offers an alternative narrative ("story") of the relationship between individual action and social morality. Heinz argues that "relating to symbols by drawing meaning from them and

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31Ibid., p. 138.
32Robertson's view of commercial television is typical of religious broadcasters: "I don't think there's any question that (network) television has brought about a lessening of the moral perception of our nation." Quoted in K. Clark, "The $70 Miracle," p. 3.
33Heinz, "The Struggle to Redefine America," p. 143.
attempting to disseminate such meaning is a significant form of expressive social action. As such, televangelism plays a vital role in the evangelical movement's struggle to define itself publicly, to propagate its belief system, and to perpetuate itself historically. As Heinz notes: "Seizing access to or control of symbol production gives a social movement the opportunity to create an alternative world through the power of symbols."

The Symbolic Character of Commitment

The Bible, or the inerrancy of the word, is the heart of the evangelical symbol system. As an "ultimate" term, the Bible acts as a reference point that explains all natural and social phenomena; it becomes the primary interpretive tool for individual and collective questions about the nature of society, as well as being the chief guide for moral action. As Burke says, an ultimate term functions to explain the relationships among all other terms. The popular evangelical child's prayer, for example, exhibits this function: "Jesus loves me, this I know, because the Bible tells me so." Marsden argues that the notion of scriptura sola, which informs Protestantism and became paramount in orthodox Evangelicalism, serves to eliminate ambiguity and moral doubt. It permanently defines truth and one's relationship to it. Bob Slosser, president of CBN University, expresses this absolute conviction: "If you're going to take a position, then the Scripture gives you a true position." In such a world view, transitions are never gradual, but are radical conversions from one state (sin and error) to another (salvation and truth.) An ultimate term must also function to spell out the terms of authority in a given social order or subculture. Marsden points out that because Evangelicalism is founded on a highly individuated conception of salvation, it lacks a tradition of institutionalized authority. The absence of institutional guides to personal

34Ibid., p. 144.
35Ibid., p. 147.
36Marsden, Fundamentalism and American Culture, pp. 224–225.
action places a greater weight on the inerrancy or infallible authority of Scripture.\textsuperscript{14}

Appealing to the Bible is a necessary, but not sufficient condition for "belonging" to the evangelical community. One must also be born again or "choose Jesus." A correct Christian life, and thus salvation, is impossible without this crucial commitment. Luther Gerlach and Virgina Hine, in a study of Pentecostalism and the Black Power movement, argue that the act of commitment plays a major, formative role in determining belonging in social movements.\textsuperscript{19} Commitment arises from "bridge-burning acts" such as being spiritually reborn. This type of commitment is a psycho-social state... generated by an act or an experience which separates a convert in some significant way from the established order (or his previous place in it), identifies him with a new set of values, and commits him to changed patterns of behavior.\textsuperscript{46}

The act of commitment or rebirth acquires divine significance for evangelicals because it refers back to scriptural mandates.\textsuperscript{41} Being born again thus legitimates individual experience, places the believer within a symbolic system and community, and reasserts the authority of the Bible.

As Gerlach and Hine note, an act of commitment gives the individual "a sense of finality—of having got firm hold on a belief system or conceptual framework that fully satisfies the human need for explanation and meaning."\textsuperscript{42} Jim Whelan, CBN's news director, displays this sense of finality:

We begin with the premise that the center of our universe and the center of meaning is God through Jesus Christ. It's what gives meaning to our existence. We therefore begin with not only a moral framework but also with a philosophical true north so there's a basis for our values.\textsuperscript{43}

Gerlach and Hine contend, and I agree, that the "certitude" surrounding such acts of commitment cannot

\textsuperscript{14}Marsden, Fundamentalism and American Culture, p. 136.

\textsuperscript{19}Luther Gerlach and Virginia Hine, People, Power, Change: Movements of Social Transformation (Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill, 1970).

\textsuperscript{41}A central biblical passage for evangelical Christians is John 3:3: "Jesus said, 'In truth, in very truth, I tell you, unless a man has been born over again he cannot see the Kingdom of God.'" New English Bible, N.T. p. 111.

\textsuperscript{42}Gerlach and Hine, People, Power, Change, p. 161.

\textsuperscript{43}K. Clark, "Christian News."
be understood as effects or character traits associated abstractly with "authoritarian" or "dogmatic" personalities. Rather, the "cognitive closure" that occurs with a profound act of commitment must be examined in its specific social context and related to the particular symbolic universe which calls forth and is upheld by that act.44 In the case of conservative Evangelicalism, being born again is a transformative experience which simultaneously creates for the believer a personal identity, locates her/him within a consubstantiality of other worshipers, and fuses individual ethos with religious world view.

**The Dichotomy of Insiders and Outsiders**

Consubstantiality, Burke points out, implies an original social division: it requires an "us" and a "them." Evangelicalism rests on a profound division of the saved from the damned, radically separated by the act of spiritual rebirth. Hence one is either a Christian or a humanist, but never both. Marsden argues that the revivalist tradition in conservative Protestantism "disposed people to think in terms of fundamental dichotomies—between the saved and the lost, the spiritual and the worldly, absolute truth and error." He notes that this belief system, based on a "fixed antithesis between truth and error, allowed little room for historical and developmental views."45 Gerlach and Hine contend that all modern social movements exhibit this dichotomizing tendency which creates a clear definition of the opposition and the elect and establishes the terms of belonging.46 Wacker also sees a tendency within the Evangelical Right to draw absolute lines between proper and improper belief and conduct. Conservative evangelicals, he says, hold that for every moral question there is only one morally correct answer which "can be discerned with absolute clarity and certainty."47 Wacker locates this absolutism in Evangelicalism's 19th century roots when adherents "were strongly disposed to consider themselves the moral custodians of the culture." He argues that conservative Protestants adopted this custodial position "in direct proportion to the degree that

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45Marsden, "From Fundamentalism to Evangelicalism," p. 137.
46Gerlach and Hine, People, Power, Change, pp. 174–175.
they felt themselves alienated from [the larger culture.]"44 As evangelicals found themselves increasingly at odds with American society, their need to clearly identify the beliefs which set them apart became more urgent. Hence, the "explicit identification of the nature of the dichotomy between worldliness and spirituality" (e.g., strict prohibitions against sensual pleasure and participation in popular culture).

Abstinence from such indulgences, according to Marsden, "became the chief symbols of the spiritual separation of the individual from the world."45 This emphasis on absolute separation is a central theme of Swaggart's theology. Robertson, on the other hand, tries to eliminate this separation by making the world conform to his beliefs.

R. Laurence Moore, in a fascinating study of "religious outsiders," contends that "religious struggles engage people in elaborate strategies that on each side entail affirmation and denial, advancement and repression, of a set of cultural options."50 The experience of being an "outsider" is an important basis for cohesion, for fashioning a sense of community capable of withstanding the pressures of the dominant culture. Orthodox Protestants certainly found themselves at odds with the dominant culture in the 1960s and early '70s. Their call for a return to "Christian values" and for a renegotiation of the relationship between politics and religion, grows out of a historical belief in their role as custodians of social morality. Their appeals were persuasive to many people precisely because they issued from an absolute and coherent set of beliefs. Liberal Christianity, which accommodated social changes in the last 20 years by reinterpreting or compromising doctrinal positions, began to lose much of its explanatory power and distinct message.51 It appeared to many Christians that liberal theology was becoming indistinguishable from New Age philosophies and the human potential movement. Conservative Evangelicalism was strategically positioned to fill the vacuum created by the faltering of liberal Christianity. Conservative Christians moved into politics and justified their actions by referring to their

44Ibid., p. 312.
45Marsden, p. 134.
moral custodial role. The belief that Christians are the guardians of American (and universal) morality is a recurring them in televangelism. Swaggart, for example, admonishes his viewers to be the "lights of the world" in order to lead the rest of humanity to salvation. In a program specially created to raise money for his world–wide evangelization efforts, Swaggart repeatedly told those viewers who were willing to give money that they were helping him "take these countries for Christ." He also warned those who failed to give to the ministry that they were "sending people to hell" because his programs would be taken off the air.\(^2\) Robertson also believes that conservative Christians should become the custodians of social morality:

> "I have always thought that Christians should get involved in public life. . . . The way you lead is from service. If we serve the people with knowledge and compassion and with care, that's the way we ought to take over leadership."\(^3\)

The Problem of the Self

To be persuasive, conservative Evangelicalism must locate the individual believer in a larger framework of meaning; it must therefore confront the "problem of the self." The resurgence of this religious perspective, Wacker says, is one response to people's "deep bewilderment about the reasons for the faltering of the American Dream."\(^4\) Marsden proposes that Fundamentalism has been successful precisely because of its "marked divergence from many prevalent twentieth-century trends in preserving a decisive basis for authority in a culture that has lost most of its other moorings."\(^5\) Evangelicalism has tackled the erosion of individual and social meaning by identifying the causes of this modern malaise and by offering explicit solutions. But in confronting the problem of subjectivization, Evangelicalism has also implicitly accommodated modernity. The growth of Christian self–help literature, counseling centers, encounter–style retreats and lifestyle programming is a contemporary phenomenon—one that would have been utterly foreign to 19th century evangelicals. While the solutions to emotional and psychological


\(^3\) K. Clark, "$70 Miracle," p. 3.


problems are always defined in spiritual terms, the fact that these difficulties are addressed at all indicates an interpenetration of modernity and orthodox Protestantism. Accommodation to modernism is not uniformly distributed among conservative evangelicals by any means. Swaggart, for example, frequently denounces Christian psychology as a sign that people have rejected God's solutions for their problems, and that Christianity has capitulated to the demands of "the World." Robertson's "700 Club," on the other hand, features regular advice segments on how to cope with problems like depression, obesity, smoking, divorce, etc. These differences in content and format will be discussed more fully in the program analysis.

I believe that much of the persuasive power of the evangelical belief system lies in its answers to the problem of the self and in its ability to make sense of the difficulties of modern life by incorporating them into a complex symbolic system. Evangelicalism offers a cosmic framework which responds to profound questions about the relationship of society and individual existence at a time when such questions appear to have become increasingly urgent for people both inside and outside its boundaries. Heinz argues that a successful social movement is organized around "symbolic dimensions which promise revitalization, new direction, or legitimation for a particular way of life in a time of bewilderment or loss." A religious movement is particularly well-equipped to respond to such crises because "when symbols are interpreted or experienced as religious, they gain a larger resonance." Conservative Evangelicalism has managed to win support and propagate its values because it "has tapped into symbols that turn out to be powerfully resonant in the lives of many people." It is the aim of this study to examine the nature of those symbols as they are manifested in televangelism and to discern how and why they resonate for viewers. Heinz argues that it is crucial to listen to "the public stories that are currently being recommended to give meaning and purpose to the American experience" as well as to ask, "When its symbols have been put together, what is the nature of the symbolic universe toward which the NCR

54Hunter discusses this trend in American Evangelicalism, pp. 94–98.


5Ibid., p. 145.
I propose that within conservative Evangelicalism, there are actually two stories which point to conflicting symbolic universes. My analysis of "Jimmy Swaggart" and the "700 Club" attempts to flesh out and interpret those stories.

39Ibid., pp. 147-48.
CHAPTER V
THE SYMBOLIC UNIVERSE OF EVANGELICAL TELEVISION

The Rise of Evangelical Television

Unlike orthodox Evangelicalism, which has been displaced from the center of American religious life to a peripheral position, televangelism has migrated from the margins of religious television in the 1950s to a position of overwhelming dominance today. This success story is the result of governmental policy decisions, the economic structure of the television industry, and shrewd business practices by evangelical broadcasters.¹

In the early years of television, the networks offered free air time to mainline denominations in fulfillment of the Federal Communication Commission mandate to operate in the "public interest." Besides this "sustaining time," networks provided religious programmers with technical support. Mainline denominations fulfilled their part of the bargain by producing non-controversial, generalized "Christian" programming (usually in a "talking heads" format). This arrangement benefitted both parties; mainliners retained their hegemony over the content of religious communication while fitting into networks' overall strategy of avoiding controversy. Television, after all, was conceived as a commercial medium to attract the broadest possible audience, and was born in the heyday of the Cold War and McCarthyism.

The partnership of networks and mainline denominations effectively eliminated other religious perspectives. Orthodox Protestant groups, who by this time were accustomed to a marginal status, were forced to be more creative in getting their views on the new medium. Some of the larger conservative denominations (including the Southern Baptist Convention, Seventh Day Adventists and the Lutheran Missouri Synod) devised alternative methods of acquiring exposure by buying airtime from local stations and producing programs with members' donations. Smaller orthodox denominations and individual evangelists, who lacked the financial resources of large memberships, looked to the example of earlier

¹This argument owes much to Horsfield's Religious Television.
 According to Horsfield, the pioneers of evangelical TV programming who ultimately survived were aggressive and highly competitive; they developed a program structure built around preachers who had the charisma to elicit audience support. (Rex Humbard went on the air in 1953, Oral Roberts aired for the first time in 1956, Falwell followed in 1957 and Billy Graham's crusades were telecast throughout the decade.) This arrangement of buying airtime from local stations enabled evangelical broadcasters to circumvent the network-mainliner monopoly. By 1959, this type of religious programming constituted a little more than half (53 percent) of all religious time on TV.

Paid-time religious programs—the vast majority of which are Evangelical in perspective—came to dominate in the 1960s and '70s because of changes in FCC regulations and in the structure of the television industry. In 1960, the FCC released guidelines saying that there was no difference, in terms of serving the public interest, between sustaining time and paid time religious programming. Thus, stations were released from the obligation to provide free religious airtime. The Commission also removed restrictions on the amount of solicitation permitted on "non-commercial" programs; this meant that TV stations could pack more advertising into religious shows, making them highly profitable. And finally, the FCC guidelines exempted religious programming from the restraints of the Fairness Doctrine, saying that "religion has not yet reached the level of social controversy." This freed stations from any responsibility for the content of religious programs; religious broadcasters could thereby tackle any political or social issue without forcing stations to "balance" these viewpoints with other programming.

This governmental policy revision made paid-time religious programming extremely profitable and particularly attractive to independent stations seeking to compete with network affiliates. As Horsfield notes, the FCC put religious TV into the domain of the economic marketplace "giving a distinct advantage

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2Evangelical radio's history is treated in Ostling, "Evangelical Publishing and Broadcasting," and in Hunter, American Evangelicalism, pp. 44-45.

3Horsfield, Religious Television, p. 7.

to those expressions of religious faith that are economically competitive." This profit imperative dovetails with the economic goals of commercial television. As competition within the TV industry grew due to the increase of independent stations in the 1960s and the growth in UHF and cable stations in the '70s and '80s, evangelical broadcasters pursued their strategy of purchasing non-network airtime. Robertson went on the air in 1961; Swaggart, Schuller, Bakker and a host of others began broadcasting in the '70s. Today, the great majority of paid-time religious programming is aired on unaffiliated and cable stations. TV ministries also began buying stations and developing their own networks in the 1960s and '70s. By 1977, 92 percent of religious television was paid-time programming and local religious shows had been virtually eliminated. The largest evangelical broadcasters had also achieved a pronounced dominance in religious TV; the ten major programs constituted more than half of all national airings in 1979. Most religious programmers belong to the evangelical association of National Religious Broadcasters, whose membership increased tenfold between 1968 and 1985. According to Horsfield, NRB members now hold a near monopoly over religious airtime due to their "cut-throat purchase of time."

The growth of evangelical television ministries in the 1960s and '70s had implications extending beyond the broadcasting industry. As this type of religious programming came to dominate the airwaves, it gave the evangelical movement a broader base for the production of public symbols. The increased visibility of prominent TV preachers and evangelical leaders helped create the perception that the movement was a viable and growing religious alternative. The television ministries also gave viewers a sense of identification with the wider evangelical community, thus reinforcing audience members' personal commitment to that belief system. Research in the last twenty years indicates that conservative churches

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*Ibid., p. 15.

*Ibid., p. 7.

7Schultze, "Mythos of the Electronic Church," p. 246. In 1968, 104 organizations were affiliated with the NRB; in 1985, that number was 1,050.

8Horsfield, Religious Television, p. 10.
have grown much more than have liberal denominations. Televangelism did not by itself produce this growth, but it has helped unify conservative evangelicals through the creation of national celebrities and charismatic televangelists who command the loyalty of large audiences. Further, as this religious perspective acquired dominance in television broadcasting, it heightened the perception in the TV industry, and in the wider society, that Evangelicalism constituted a "social movement." As I suggested earlier, a movement comes into being only when it is perceived as such by outsiders. For such a perception to develop, a social movement must be constituted in the realm of public symbols. Symbolic production, then, is a key function of evangelical television.

According to Horsfield, this interplay of public perception, the commercial television industry, the evangelical movement and its TV ministries contributed to Evangelicalism's move from a marginalized to more central position in society. In the 1960s evangelicalism as a whole began to shift away from the fringes of American society into the country's religious mainstream, shifting the relative power relation of the television industry away from the mainline broadcasters and their viewpoint to the evangelical broadcasters and their approach to television. Evangelical broadcasters were therefore accorded greater power and influence in the realm of symbol production at the expense of other religious perspectives. Further, because viewers generously supported this programming, televangelists were able to build wealthy media empires and employ the latest computer technology to enhance their fund-raising capabilities. Computerization (the use of sophisticated direct mail techniques and telephone banks) has also made possible the well-organized power bases on which television ministries rely and prosper.

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The 'Intimate' Medium and the Para-social Relationship

Personalized mailings and phone banks are also employed to constitute a quasi-personal relationship between TV preachers and audiences. Pseudo-dialogic qualities incorporated into evangelical programming help establish an identification between televangelists and viewers and solidify the audience’s connection to evangelical beliefs. Merton found that this use of fabricated "dialogue" in the Kate Smith bond drive gave her a degree of interaction and flexibility in shaping appeals that is normally missing from mass mediated communication. Such "reciprocal interplay" reinforced listeners' sense of personalized appeal, binding together the audience and performer.12 One of the striking qualities of television is its ability to produce a feeling of intimacy between viewers and performers, both real (as in the case of "Uncle" Walter Cronkite) and fictional (witness the volume of mail sent to TV characters). Such personal identification with what are actually strangers results in part from television's being an "intimate" medium; programs and personalities invade or are invited into our homes—our most private spaces.13 The serial nature of most television programming also creates a sense of intimacy and familiarity with TV characters; we watch these people daily or weekly and over time come to feel we "know" and "understand" their lives, their weaknesses, their motives, etc.14

Television's ability to create this "intimacy at a distance," according to Donald Horton and R. Richard Wohl, is based on an "illusion of face-to-face relationship with the performer."15 This is


12Raymond Williams discusses the social context of the development of television which prescribed that the medium would be centrally produced, yet received in the privatized sphere of individual homes. The mode of reception or, to use a more active term, consumption, inevitably affects how we perceive and make sense of media messages. See Williams, Television, Technology and Cultural Form (New York: Schocken Books, 1975), pp. 26–31.


particularly true of programs like talk shows which are based on conversation. By employing strategies that mimic real life conversation, the TV host or interviewer (the authors use the term "persona") invites viewers to join in the program's action and message. Such strategies include using "subjective camera" techniques, creating a casual atmosphere on the set, blurring the line between the host and viewers, attributing special character traits to cast members, and addressing the viewing audience directly. (These devices are used more extensively in the "700 Club" format than in Swaggart's crusade program.) Horton and Wohl call this simulated conversation "para-social interaction" which consciously employs the qualities that we usually associate with interactions in our primary social groups. The authors propose that through such strategies, television personalities (e.g., interviewers, talk show hosts, announcers, etc.)—"whose existence is a function of the media themselves"—are able to achieve a singular intimacy with their largely anonymous audience. This intimacy is "extremely influential with, and satisfying for, the great numbers who willingly receive it and share in it."16

The regularity of Sunday programs and weekday shows also permits televangelists (and TV personalities generally) to offer the audience a "continuing relationship" which enhances the feeling of intimacy between viewers and performer. Religious broadcasters promote this relationship by revealing personal information and anecdotes; Swaggart tells and retells the story of his conversion at age nine, Robertson refers to his family, his military and boxing experience and his friendships with important public figures. The programs also encourage regular and repeated contact between performer and viewer. Swaggart's sermons are often presented in two or three part segments aired on successive Sundays and next week's sermon topic is mentioned at the end of each show. The "700 Club" closes with previews of the next day's show and special broadcasts (like Robertson's 1987 trip to Israel) are heavily promoted beforehand. Because regular viewers are the most generous donors, religious broadcasters must devise strategies that encourage repeated contact. The structure of serial programming itself (which originates with serialized accounts in the print media) cultivates familiarity; the performer's "appearance is a regular

16Ibid., pp. 212–213.
and dependable event, to be counted on, planned for, and integrated into the routines of daily life."^{17}

The relationship between viewer and performer therefore acquires a history and through an "accumulation of shared past experiences gives additional meaning to the present performance."^{14} Jim Bakker's resignation from PTL, for example, was interpreted differently by his regular audience than by non-viewers. Loyal audience members were initially far less critical of Bakker, and a majority believed the devil, rather than Bakker, was responsible for his fall into adultery. Longtime viewers had already "participated" in his and Tammy's on-air marital crises, supported Tammy through her breakdown and drug addiction, and exhibited their feelings for the couple by increasing donations after Bakker stepped down. Swaggart drew on such an ongoing relationship with his audience to ask for extra money in honor of his fifty-second birthday last year. Non-celebrity guests and studio audience members on the "700 Club" often express "love" for Robertson and his co-hosts; the basis of this emotional connection is their previous viewing experiences. For example, many viewers sent birthday cards to co-host Danuta Soderman in 1987, as if she were a personal acquaintance. Oral Roberts' ability to raise $8 million dollars by suggesting the money would prevent his being "called home" by God attests to the degree of personal devotion television ministers command from their audiences.

The immediacy and intimacy of television which brings televangelists into people's homes creates an "evocative relationship" between the viewer and broadcaster, according to Horsfield. Evangelical programming utilizes and capitalizes on this capacity by both addressing and appealing to viewers' personal concerns. Because the television medium is ultimately one-way communication, however, religious broadcasters cannot achieve actual intimacy with their audience. Rather, the para-social interaction effected between the TV performer and viewers is a simulation: "the interaction . . . is

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^{17}Ibid., p. 213.

^{14}Ibid., p. 214.


^{20}Horsfield, Religious Television, p. 61.
one-sided, nondialectical, controlled by the performer, and not susceptible to mutual development." The one-sided nature of communication between programmers and audiences is particularly transparent in the use of phone banks and computerized mail systems. Viewers are continually invited by religious broadcasters to call in their prayer requests, testimony and pledges, but their calls are received by trained "prayer counselors," not by Swaggart, Robertson, et al. When Robertson occasionally asks viewers to phone in and express their opinions on specific political issues, they reach a computerized message which merely records that a call has been made. Requests for prayers are systematically categorized according to the type of problem mentioned. A viewer who asks for prayers for her alcoholic husband will then receive a letter discussing her specific troubles. The letter most often asks for funds to help the TV ministry combat that particular social or individual ill. While not all callers respond to these techniques by sending donations, enough do to keep religious broadcasters in business. Further, in a world where most of our daily contacts are impersonal, it must be somewhat heartening to have one's problems recognized and responded to. Many callers probably do not consider the elaborate computer technology that mediates their relationship with their favorite televangelist. The relationship or identification between religious TV personalities and their audiences, then, is a completely mediated one based on an illusion of personal interaction. In Horsfield's view:

> [the] implied intimacy is basically dishonest. The presentation of the broadcaster as a compassionate friend is actually a selective, edited, and cultivated message neatly honed by market research and designed to evoke a particular response . . .

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22I responded to one poll on the SDI defense system and reached a recorded message by AT & T. Over 13,000 calls were placed during the program, according to Robertson; 96 percent favored implementing "Star Wars". "700 Club," February 16, 1987.


24Horsfield, Religious Television, p. 61.
Religious Communication and Mass Media

While one of the responses desired by religious broadcasters is continued financial support, this is not their sole aim. In fact, TV preachers and program hosts generally insist that donations are merely a means to the real end of their broadcasts: the saving of souls for Christ. Horsfield and Schultze contend that the majority of evangelical broadcasters share a utilitarian attitude toward media technology whereby television and radio are simply megaphones for the Gospel message rather than complex social and technological formations which mediate both the Christian message and the nature of the relationship between preachers and faithful. Further, this "hypodermic model" view of television's effects leads televangelists to equate the size of the audience with the number of souls saved. This attitude toward mass communication is part of Evangelicalism's history. The use of mass media to disseminate and amplify religious messages, as we have seen, is as old as Protestantism. The Reformation was tied to the printing press; the Bible was the first book (in 1456) to be mass produced. David Paul Nord argues that the development of a mass press in the U.S. actually originated in the evangelical movement's goal to reach all Americans with the Gospel message. In the two decades before the birth of the Penny Press, the American Bible Society and American Tract Society pioneered in the development of new printing technology and distribution techniques that are usually assumed to have originated with mass circulation newspapers. Designed to reach the widest audience possible, the tracts and Bibles produced by these evangelical publishers instituted formats and styles that would cut across divisions of class and denomination. That is, the gospel message was simplified and standardized. Bibles were printed without comment, tracts were crafted to be "plain," "entertaining," "interesting," "unassuming" and non-controversial. These are the same qualities that came to be linked with popular journalism and

25Ibid., p. 86; Schultze, in "Mythos of the Electronic Church," makes a similar argument in looking at the "technological optimism" which is deeply embedded in American history and perceptions.


27Ibid., pp. 5–6, 21.
literature (and later with television and radio programming.) Further, like the Penny papers, these publications were made affordable to a mass audience. As an American Tract Society noted: "Perhaps in no way can the message of the Gospel be conveyed to more individuals at less expense." Contemporary televangelists thus draw on a lengthy historical tradition of adopting mass media for religious purposes. Religious services began to be regularly broadcast within two months of radio's birth as a mass medium in 1920, and one of the first offerings on television in 1940 was an Easter Sunday service. Contemporary TV preachers employ television for evangelism with the same attitude that compelled their 19th century counterparts to utilize new printing technology. Nord points to an American Bible Society report which spoke of "the Christian obligation to use the 'mighty engine' of print just as God himself had used the written word to reveal himself to man."30

Fashioning a religious message for a mass medium to appeal to a mass audience places important constraints on the nature of that message, however. Religious broadcasters' dependence on continued audience support and their adoption of commercial television's competitive strategies have had profound consequences for the character of evangelical belief. In learning how to locate and target specific Christian "markets," broadcasters have also been forced to shape their communication in ways that appeal to those targeted groups. This has led, in many cases, to a transformation and dilution of the evangelical message. Mainline denominational programmers, who did not have to worry about audience shares or viewer support, could assume that people who watched their shows were interested in the message independently of the format. Producers of paid-time programming cannot make such assumptions; if ratings drop, so does their income and likelihood of staying on the air. Holding viewers' interest is therefore a primary concern for evangelical broadcasters. Because the maintenance of interest (e.g. ratings) is also essential in commercial broadcasting, religious programmers found a logical model for their programs in the techniques and formats of secular television. Successful televangelists, says Horsfield, are

those who can structure an appealing "message package" and build an organization "capable of generating mass support." Dependence on a mass audience, Horsfield notes,

means that the Gospel must not only be proclaimed, but it must be proclaimed in such a way that it meets with the approval of a large share of one's audience . . . [and thereby] triggers the audience's desire to give.\(^1\)

Evangelical broadcasters, in their pursuit of large audiences, have learned to obey the first commandment of television: Thou Shalt Not Bore. One religious broadcaster contends that an emphasis on entertainment "flows from the natural demands of the visual medium." Hence, the obsolescence of the mainline denominational program with its "spiritual talking head." Television has taught viewers to expect visual appeal. Evangelical broadcasters try to fulfill that expectation and to match commercial television's emphasis on entertainment at the expense of information. Televangelism therefore incorporates and highlights the spectacular, celebrity, images of luxury and dramatic transformations. Like commercial television, most "Christian" programming offers immediate gratification and simple solutions to complex problems: lives are transformed, serious illnesses cured, souls redeemed in the span of 30 or 60 minutes. Celebrity guests attribute their fame and riches to their "decisions for Christ." Ordinary people testify to having been saved by watching the "700 Club" or cured by Robertson's "Word of Knowledge."

Like commercial television programming, religious programs also simplify complicated political and social issues to make them palatable for mass consumption. Solutions to all social problems are ultimately personal—society will improve when individuals are reborn and lead Christian lives. There are important differences within this perspective, however. Swaggart is concerned almost exclusively with individual

\(^1\)Horsfield, Religious Television, p. 27.

\(^2\)Ibid., p. 29

\(^3\)Bisset, "Religious Broadcasting," p. 28. Religious broadcasters began discussing and debating the merits of adding dramatic appeal to their programs even before television. A writer in Christian Century, in 1944, said religious radio shows needed "the dramatic, mass appeal which is the genius of radio . . . They must be good radio, using all the successful techniques of professional production." Quoted in Ellens, Models of Religious Broadcasting, p. 33.
salvation and believes "society" is already doomed. Robertson sees Christians as the moral custodians of society, so that personal salvation is the first step toward re-establishing "Christian Civilization." Both orientations are grounded in the insider/outside paradox. Swaggart constructs a community "outside" the world; Robertson forges a community of "insiders" who will reverse society's moral decay. In both cases, however, issues are presented in absolute terms. One is a "Christian" or a godless humanist, good or evil, saved or damned. Solutions to social ills are equally simplistic. In this schema, cultural differences, the international debt structure, class antagonisms and structural inequality disappear. Many media analysts have argued that non-Christian television is similarly reductive. Drama and comedy series are structured on a principle of closure that solves all problems within the space of a program.34 Television news simplifies social reality by reducing it to isolated "events," turning deep social conflicts into disputes between prominent personalities, and dramatizing rather than analyzing issues.35

If the New Christian Right, through televangelism, offers an alternative "story" to counteract the dominant narrative of secular society, the packaging of both tales is strikingly similar. Rather than devise new formats and genres to convey the evangelical message, religious broadcasters have for the most part simply borrowed the conventions of commercial television. The creation of 24-hour Christian television networks has exacerbated this problem because of its enormous appetite for programming. Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN), for example, features Christian-ized game shows, children's programs, morning exercise workouts for women, soap operas, variety programs, and music videos for young people ("Real Videos"). Besides its flagship "700 Club," CBN produces a children's show, a soap opera and a news program and fills out the rest of its broadcast day with reruns of "wholesome" family shows like "Father Knows Best." This variety in programming, according to Bisset, indicates that Christian television is a "creative medium" which understands that mass evangelism must be entertaining if it is to be

34This idea is treated in Gitlin, "Television's Screens."

35See, for example, Lance Bennett, News: The Politics of Illusion (New York & London: Longman, 1983). Bennett argues that mass media simplify issues and social problems through news that has been "personalized, dramatized, fragmented, and normalized." (p. 7.)
It may be, however, that in the process Christian television has become most effective at entertaining. The use of standard televisual formats which are filled with religious content tends to blur the line between "Christian" and secular TV. Horsfield and other critics of televangelism argue that this type of programming necessarily de-emphasizes mystical, sacramental and liturgical elements of Christianity; prevents the formation of genuine Christian community by "privatizing" religious worship; and robs the Christian message of its critical edge by reproducing the culture-affirming qualities of commercial television. I address these criticisms in more detail in the program analysis.

It is important to note divergences from this wholesale adoption of existing televisual formats. Certainly the talk show/news magazine form of the "700 Club" has been largely determined by its secular counterparts. Many televangelists are avid promoters of a "health and wealth Gospel" (e.g. Robertson, Bakker, Roberts, Kenneth Copeland and others) that is compatible with the values of a consumer culture. Robert Schuller extols a mixture of religion, popular psychology and positive thinking which mirrors the affirmative, upbeat tone of much commercial programming. A minority of televangelists, however, preach a version of Evangelicalism that tries to retain the historical tension between spirituality and the world, and also draw on cultural forms and traditions which precede television. Swaggart is the most prominent example of this latter perspective. Not only does he frequently and vehemently denounce the fusion of popular culture and evangelism, his crusade program is less dependent on standard television formats. Swaggart's program originates in the cultural form of the 19th century camp meetings and urban revivals. It is an edited version of live crusade, set not in a TV studio but in civic auditoriums in major cities. These were also the sites of the mass revivals of Finney and Moody. The Swaggart crusade does include entertainment (country music with a gospel message), but the use of music here dates back to the old-style revivals. In fact, Moody established himself as a preacher in partnership with musician Ira

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37 Horsfield, Religious Television, pp. 19, 54-55; see also also Everett Parker, "Old-time Religion on TV—Blessing or Bane?" Television Quarterly (Fall 1980): 71-79.
Sankey who opened their crusades with inspirational gospel hymns. The function of the music in such settings was integrated into the aims of revivalism: it was intended to buoy the emotions and spirituality of the audience and prepare listeners to accept the Holy Spirit. Swaggart's program opens with gospel music which is intended to excite audience emotions, to bring the congregation to its feet and to open listeners to the evangelist's message. The form of the crusade program—gospel music, sermon and altar call—is prefigured by that of the urban revival. Television is employed as a means for conveying that religious ritual to the viewing audience—to re-create for the viewer the emotionalism and interaction between preacher and congregation that characterized 19th century camp meetings and revivals. Grounding his services in this traditional cultural form permits Swaggart to retain some of the historical separation between Evangelicalism and "the world" in a way that is not possible for religious programming that embraces television's standard formats. Shows like the "700 Club," in contrast, are developed wholly within televisual discourse and are "Christian" only insofar as they insert religious content into the forms dictated by that discourse. This type of program, then, more actively integrates the evangelical belief system and the values of modern culture.

The Audience for Evangelical Television

The strategies of evangelical television cannot be examined apart from the people it addresses. Contrary to claims by religious broadcasters, research indicates that the audience for televangelism has stabilized or tapered off after peaking in 1977. The Annenberg study estimates that 13.3 million Americans tune into religious television each week; this figure includes programming by mainline denominations as well as by prominent TV ministries. It does not take into account multiple viewing—an important consideration since many respondents in the study said they watch more than one program per

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week. Nor does it account for those people who watch without agreeing with the viewpoints espoused by a particular program (I certainly am not the only "unpersuaded" viewer in the audience). Horsfield also points out that the total audience for televangelism is relatively small compared to the drawing power of most commercial programming. In 1981, for example, only five religious programs reached over one percent of the viewing population (these were Swaggart, Roberts, Schuller, Humbard, and "Day of Discovery"). The potential social impact of televangelism, therefore, lies not so much in the number of viewers it attracts, but in its ability to transform audience members into social actors—to "coalesce an audience around a social or political issue."

Research also shows a strong correlation between the characteristics of religious television audiences and those of the evangelical population as a whole. Viewers of evangelical programs are disproportionately white, Southern, female, 50 years or older, rural, have modest incomes and a lower than average education. A 1978 Gallup poll found that viewers of this programming are more likely to hold beliefs and engage in practices associated with conservative Evangelicalism (e.g., to have had a conversion experience, to hold that the Bible is the inerrant word of God, to believe in a personal devil, and to read the Bible, attend church and talk about their faith more often). Further, a majority of evangelical Christians do not watch religious television; the audience for televangelism therefore constitutes "a subculture within Evangelicalism." All available studies indicates that for the most part, televangelism reaches those who have previously committed themselves to evangelical beliefs and practices. TV preachers speak to and are supported by the already converted. As Horsfield says, "It is apparent... from the dominant characteristics of the audience that, for the most part, the broadcasters

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41Horsfield, Religious Television, p. 103.

42Ibid., p. 154.

43Ibid., p. 117; and Gerbner, Religion and Television, Vol. I. p. 3


45Horsfield, Religious Television, p. 117.
are not reaching outsiders but insiders.\textsuperscript{44} The fierce competition among TV ministries for viewers and supporters suggests they are aware that their audience is not infinite. Horsfield argued in 1981 that evangelical broadcasting was already approaching its audience saturation point.\textsuperscript{47} Rumors of Swaggart's plan to take over PTL, and speculations about Falwell's reasons for doing do, are one sign of the intense competition within the televangelism industry. These accusations, originally made by Bakker and widely circulated by the commercial news media, were persuasive partly because people outside Evangelicalism found economic competition to be the most plausible explanation for Swaggart's attack on Bakker. I believe most media professionals failed to understand the theological basis of Swaggart's actions because they do not take Evangelicalism seriously as a legitimate belief system.\textsuperscript{48}

Critics of televangelism often cite its failure to fulfill its stated goal of bringing new converts to Christ. TV preachers respond by arguing that the conversion rate is dependent on expanding their audience. This reasoning, I believe, is flawed. The ceiling on the potential audience for televangelism does not depend on technological enhancements or refinements in persuasive appeals, but on the nature of the fit between the evangelical belief system and the reality of people's lives. For televangelism and orthodox Protestantism to be persuasive they must offer adequate interpretations of individual and social existence. Rationalism, cultural pluralism, and the split between public and private life have so thoroughly penetrated the ideological assumptions of most Americans that the route to redemption offered by Evangelicalism is no longer open for the majority of people. Televangelism speaks largely to "insiders" because "outsiders" are, and will continue to be, deaf to its message.

The persuasive strategies of evangelical programming must therefore aim at capturing a greater share of the evangelical "market" and holding those viewers it has already attracted. To attain these ends, religious broadcasters must be highly sensitive to the values, beliefs and desires of their audiences.

\textsuperscript{44}Ibid., p. 119.
\textsuperscript{47}Ibid., p. 108.
Achieving a unity between the "voice within" and the "voice without" requires sophisticated demographic research; evangelical programmers' support for and cooperation in the Annenberg study was no doubt motivated by their need for accurate marketing information. In that study, viewers of religious programs said they received the most "gratification" from the sermons, preaching and music, and from the experience of "having your spirits lifted" and "feeling close to God." Because these "needs" are highly generalized, individual televangelists must devise specific programming strategies that fulfill such desires in ways compatible with the characteristics of their target market. Differences in evangelical programs are not limited to format, but also stem from differences in audience makeup and the perspectives of the preachers. Swaggart, for example, is highly critical of the "health and wealth gospel" promoted by Robertson, Bakker and others. Similarly, a viewer who embraces Schuller's positive thinking theology would be uncomfortable with Swaggart's denunciations of popular psychology. Fundamentalists who are at home with Falwell's sermons would probably reject Swaggart's insistence that being "baptized in the Spirit" requires speaking in tongues. The audience for these programs is thus not homogenous, monolithic or interchangeable. Televangelists must employ formats and construct appeals that take into account the predispositions or patterns of experience of the people who watch them.

Analyzing the structure of appeal in Swaggart's crusade and in the "700 Club" requires a consideration of the intended audience of each program, the ideological and theological perspectives of Robertson and Swaggart, the way in which the evangelical tradition has been wedded to the televisual medium, and the distinct persuasive strategies employed to create an identification between televangelists and viewers. As Robertson says, "Communication by mass media is not the same as direct personal contact between pulpit and pew." The intervention of the television medium affects the substance of the evangelical message, the method of preaching (or techniques of persuasion), and the nature of the

49Schultze suggests that this was the reason for implementing the study in the first place. The report was produced with the funding of religious broadcasters. Those who gave more than $500 received a final copy of the study; organizations that donated $3,000 received access to the computer data tapes. Schultze, "Vindicating the Electronic Church," p. 285.


relationship between speaker and listener. Televised evangelism requires persuasive strategies that are quite distinct from those of the 19th century revivals. If, as research seems to indicate, the audience for televangelism is finite, and if the parameters of that audience are constituted by the conflict between modernity and the evangelical belief system, then televangelists are forced to compete with each other for survival. To stay on the air, TV preachers must elicit support from their viewers in the form of donations. Evoking this kind of devotion requires persuasion, and persuasion is achieved by creating an identification between speaker and listener. Identification is not an abstract "effect," but the union of world views grounded in people's understanding of themselves and of society. It is rooted in the relationship between being and meaning. Persuasion is therefore a social relationship rather than a technique. In the case of televangelism, persuasion is effected through the communion of beliefs of the preacher and his audience. While both Swaggart and Robertson are evangelical Christians, their perspectives are markedly different. So too are their audiences and their persuasive strategies. In the next section I examine the relationship between the substance of each broadcaster's beliefs and the manner in which they structure appeals to achieve identification with their audiences. Swaggart's program and the "700 Club" propose divergent—if not overtly opposing—solutions to the problems of meaning which reflect deep tensions within Evangelicalism itself.
"Jimmy Swaggart" and Pat Robertson's "700 Club" are narratives complete with villains and heroes, plotlines and drama. They are tales about the nature of the universe, about good and evil, and about redemption and damnation. Like the evangelical belief system, these two programs address the problems of being and meaning, and the solutions they pose are different. My analysis of these "stories" attempts to unpack their form and substance. I am interested in how the programs are constructed so as to elicit identification from their viewers—to win agreement about what is meaningful and what is not. I propose that the differences between the programs—thematic, stylistic, strategic—are grounded in the theologies, intentions and self-conceptions of their stars. Swaggart says he is a "country preacher," while Robertson identifies himself as a "Christian broadcaster." These self-imposed identities point toward fundamentally different views of television, evangelism and society. Chapters 6 and 7 examine and contrast the personas, program themes and audiences of a country preacher and a religious broadcaster. The aim of my "reading" of these programs is to discern the structure of appeal (or strategies of persuasion) for each as they arise from the world views that Swaggart and Robertson inhabit and offer to their audiences.

The Programs

The format of "Jimmy Swaggart In Crusade" is a religious revival service supplemented by fundraising and promotions.¹ The hour-long program opens with the theme song "There is a River" while an announcer relates the various components of the ministry and gives the title and location of this week's crusade. The program cuts to a three-minute request for funds (by Swaggart, his son Donnie or his wife Frances), followed by a one-minute promotion for upcoming crusades, Bible conferences and other special

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¹Swaggart's crusade is aired on Sunday on independent and/or cable stations. In larger markets, the program may be broadcast several times during the day. In Seattle, for example, Swaggart's program airs three times in the morning and once in the evening.
events. The next six minutes or so are devoted to music—two or three numbers performed by Swaggart and his band and back-up singers. Swaggart sings and plays piano accompaniment for the other performers. The songs range from slow, sentimental ballads about Christ (his suffering, his sacrificial love and redemptive role) to fast-paced country gospel tunes about the Second Coming, the Rapture, the power of the Holy Spirit and the Pentecostal tradition. The announcer brackets the sermon from the rest of program by restating the sermon title. The musical and promotional segments are sometimes reversed but the sermon always begins approximately 20 minutes into the hour. The televised service is an edited version of Swaggart's live crusades and lasts about 20 minutes concluding with an altar call (12 to 15 minutes long). This section either runs to the end of the hour or is sometimes followed by another short promotional spot.

The "700 Club" is a combined talk-show/news magazine format. It is prepared as a 90-minute program but broadcasters have the option of using only the first hour.\(^1\) The show is divided into a series of brief segments, each of which stands on its own, although they are often tied together thematically. The regular cast—host Robertson and co-hosts Ben Kinchlow and Danuta Soderman—give the show continuity, provide the conversational transitions between segments, produce on-set banter and conduct the live interviews and discussions.\(^1\) Some segments repeat daily—"Word of Knowledge" and news reports; interviews are a staple of the program and most shows include one or more pre-taped features and appearances by celebrities from the sports or entertainment worlds. Commercial-like promotional spots air approximately on the quarter hour. The show is set in a studio before a live audience; it is broadcast live in major cities and is taped for rerun in smaller markets.

J. H. Ellens outlines four "model" formats typically used by religious broadcasters.\(^4\) In the first, television is as an extended pulpit and the preacher is modeled after biblical prophets; in the second, the
\(^1\)Channel 13, KCPQ-TV, in Seattle broadcasts a 60-minute version; my analysis is based on this format.
\(^1\)Robertson stopped hosting the show in spring 1987 to avoid FCC conflicts with his presidential campaign. My study is based primarily on programs he hosted.
program becomes the site of religious spectacle. The third model uses television as a pedagogical tool and the fourth employs TV as a "leaven" for provoking religious thought. Swaggart emphasizes the pulpit model while adding some elements of spectacle. The music, creative editing and the passion that flows between Swaggart and his audience make his performance visually appealing and emotionally contagious, but the focus of the program is on his message and preaching. Swaggart relies far less on spectacle than do preachers like Oral Roberts or Robert Schuller whose shows use elaborate settings and lavish production values to capture and heighten viewer attention. Swaggart has glamorized the setting of his crusades for television by adding greenery and a professional band, but the atmosphere remains very similar to that of an old-fashioned camp meeting. The "700 Club" is a combination of pedagogy and spectacle. Prayers for healing, testimonies of miracles, interviews with and performances by celebrities, and slick, pre-taped features provide the spectacle. Robertson's social and political analyses, interviews with newsmakers, the Bible teaching segments, news reports and advice from Christian experts educate the audience on the agenda of the New Christian Right. Differences in the formats of the two programs do not stem from abstract decisions to use a particular broadcasting model, of course. A country preacher must have a pulpit, just as a Christian broadcaster needs a particular kind of forum for presenting an alternative to secular TV.

The Preachers

The Country Preacher

Viewers who are born again while watching Swaggart are invited to write for his free booklet, "There's a New Name Written Down In Glory." For Swaggart, "glory" is the essence of what it means to be a Christian; it is an overwhelming, transforming, spiritual experience. "The Holy Ghost will change you miraculously," he tells the audience. Indeed, Swaggart never tires of telling viewers about his own conversion at age nine, and of his transformation through the power of the Holy Spirit. The experience

changed Swaggart’s life irrevocably; he knew he had been "called" to a special mission. For men like Swaggart, becoming an evangelist is not an occupational choice, but an ordination by God. Swaggart emphasizes and perpetuates this special status: it is what gives him the power to speak and the right to preach.

Like a majority of television evangelists, Swaggart is a Southerner and a product of a conservative Christian tradition. He is a Pentecostal and an ordained minister in the Assemblies of God church. Swaggart’s career as a religious communicator did not originate on television but in the southern revival circuit. At age 19 he began preaching on street corners and later supplemented his sermons with loudspeakers and mass-produced Bible tracts. Swaggart began broadcasting his services on radio in 1968 and launched his television show in 1972. Swaggart came to broadcasting with a specific purpose—extending his evangelistic reach. This was not his choice, he says, but a directive from God to use the airwaves to carry out the "Great Commission." In 1987, Jimmy Swaggart Ministries included a Bible college, extensive foreign mission efforts, a state of the art TV studio, two programs with 9.3 million American viewers a month (and which Swaggart claims reach 143 countries a week), and an annual income of $142 million. (Besides the Sunday crusade program Swaggart produces a 30-minute panel discussion show called "Teachings in the Word" which is aired on weekdays.) Swaggart is also an accomplished musician and claims that the Holy Ghost taught him to play piano. His more than 50

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*Swaggart's autobiography is filled with references to this calling. See Jimmy Swaggart with Robert Paul Lamb, To Cross a River (n.p.: Logos International, 1977).

The "Great Commission" to save the world for Christ comes from Matthew 28: 18–20: "Go forth therefore and make all nations my disciples; baptize men everywhere in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and teach them to observe all that I have commanded you." Preachers like Swaggart believe television is a tool for saturating the globe with the Christian message and thus a fulfillment of the Great Commission. Swaggart says he initially resisted going into radio and television, and did so only because God directed him to become a media evangelist. See To Cross a River, pp. 184, 210.


*Swaggart, To Cross A River, p. 35.
gospel albums have sold over 15 million copies. Swaggart's music, like his theology, has country roots, and is wedded to his evangelistic efforts.

Born in 1935 and raised in Ferriday, Louisiana, Swaggart remains a country boy. Although he now commands a multi-million dollar media empire he is, in his words, a "simple country preacher." Swaggart describes his televised crusades as "the old sawdust trail, sort of upgraded." To call Swaggart a country preacher is to locate him in a well-established tradition of evangelism with clearly defined techniques and goals. Bruce Rosenberg's remarkable study of the "chanted" sermons produced by a group of predominantly black "folk preachers" provided me with a framework for examining Swaggart's art. For it is no exaggeration to say that preachers like Swaggart and the men in Rosenberg's study have developed a mastery over oratory in much the same way that painters, actors or writers learn to master the materials of their respective arts.

The country or folk preacher's art is his performance. Preachers like Swaggart do not just deliver sermons, they perform them. Rosenberg likens the folk preacher to "an actor strutting on a stage" whose goal is to move the congregation to religious ecstasy. Passion is an essential part of the service because it is through the emotions that a congregation is made ready to "yield" to the Holy Spirit. Members of the congregation also play a vital role in the performance. Their response to the preacher affects his timing, delivery, the direction of the sermon, and the degree of his involvement.

This type of service, which Rosenberg calls "antiphonal," is rooted in the Second Great Awakening. The camp meetings of the early 1800s encouraged people to express their religiosity emotionally and physically. Indeed, ecstasy comes from the Greek ex-histenai which means to cause to stand beside oneself (to be outside of ordinary experience). John Wesley's Methodism taught that spiritual perfection was achieved through the heart rather than the mind; spiritual rebirth was thus not the result of an


intellectual decision but of fervent desire. Conversion was an overwhelming emotional experience, accompanied by weeping, moaning, dancing, convulsions (the "jerks") and babbling (tongues). In such circumstances, the preacher could hardly remain a detached, passive observer. Instead, he was a catalyst for the conversion experience and this demanded his own emotional involvement. The emotionalism of Baptist and Methodist teachings was particularly attractive to poor whites and black slaves in the early 1800s. Because preachers from these denominations were also generally poor and not highly educated, they could more easily identify with oppressed and ignorant social groups. In fact, masters often invited these preachers to minister to slaves because they taught "a religion of consolation." Pentecostalism, with its emphasis on emotion and the display of spiritual gifts, has historically been more attractive to the lower classes. As a belief system, it has been characterized more by religious behavior than by an elaborate theology. Swaggart stresses Pentecostalism’s simple origins and is deeply suspicious of the intellect. A high school dropout himself, Swaggart insists that Pentecostalism’s strength is not its theological sophistication but its spiritual fervor. "The Holy Spirit doesn’t work with our minds," he tells viewers. "It works with our hearts."

Since the days of camp meetings, the South has been the stronghold of conservative Evangelicalism. Many of the major televangelists are southern–born, including Robertson, Roberts, Copeland, Graham, Humbard, Robison and Crouch. The largest audiences for TV ministries are also located in the South. All of the preachers in Rosenberg’s study were born in the South, although many had relocated to southern California after WWII, as had the members of their congregations. The country preacher and the chanted sermon are also largely Southern phenomena; although found predominately in black

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15Postwar migration spread conservative Evangelicalism to other parts of the country. While the "Bible Belt" still exists, its boundaries are less clear than they were in the 1920s and '30s. Social mobility is simultaneously religious mobility. As Evangelicalism has moved to new geographical and social territories, the historical barriers protecting it from the forces of modernization have weakened.
churches, this style of preaching also occurs in white churches in Kentucky, Ohio and Pennsylvania.\textsuperscript{16} While there are important distinctions between Swaggart's style and that of the preachers in Rosenberg's study, there are enough similarities to argue that both stem from the same tradition of folk preaching. Further, it is by looking at Swaggart as a country or folk preacher that we can best analyze how he constructs his appeal and practices his art.

The "manuscript preacher" and the "spiritual preacher" are both part of the Protestant tradition.\textsuperscript{17} The former relies on a text and on the logical development of narrative to illuminate the meaning of God's word. In this sense, the manuscript preacher employs tools of pedagogy; he teaches rather than preaches. Jerry Falwell is one of the best examples of this style. Falwell reads his sermons from cue cards. He establishes a thesis, outlines the points he will cover (usually no more than three or four), and proceeds to explain each point before reaching a summary statement and conclusion. His sermons resemble a classroom lecture. The manuscript preacher is oriented toward the written word and his sermon follows the linear development demanded by written language. (It also makes for rather boring television; I find Falwell's services extremely didactic and tedious.) The spiritual preacher, on the other hand, may begin with a line of text—usually a passage from the Bible—but he is not bound by a manuscript. Rather, his sermon is oriented to the spoken word; his performance is oral and he exhorts or orates rather than teaches. Both spiritual and manuscript preachers draw on the "text–context" form of preaching that is part of the Protestant tradition. The preacher begins with a quotation from Scripture and then explains it by applying the passage to everyday life. Swaggart is a spiritual preacher who uses the text–context format; the titles and themes of his sermons each week originate in the Bible.

Spiritual sermons may be "charted" or "non-chanted." Through chanting, a preacher "attempts to fit his language into metrically consistent patterns" in order to create an effect on the audience.\textsuperscript{18} Swaggart

\textsuperscript{16}Rosenberg, American Folk Preacher, p. 10.

\textsuperscript{17}Ibid., pp. 9–10.

\textsuperscript{18}Ibid., p. 10.
resorts to a form of chanting at key points in his sermon and does so precisely to evoke audience response. (I will return to this point in a later chapter). Most of Swaggart’s performance is spiritual, non-chanted preaching. This style of preaching is more like conventional oratory. The syntax is flexible and ideas are developed from sentence to sentence. The language is similar to conversation, which it resembles when put in writing. Rosenberg contends that most spiritual preachers employ a non-chanted style, particularly when the congregation is middle-class and/or white. Because the function of chanting is to bring listeners to religious ecstasy, it creates discomfort for many modern worshipers who are accustomed to staid church services. Swaggart’s audience, while primarily white, is largely working or lower-middle class and predominately rural and southern. Such viewers are more familiar with and hospitable to a style of preaching that would seem alien to many middle and upper-middle class churchgoers. As Rosenberg notes:

Contemporary white middle-class churches do not indulge themselves in emotion and seem embarrassed by the ‘passion’ displayed in other more Fundamentalist churches. . . . American middle-class society, for the most part, is ashamed of public emotion: we do not weep in public, and we do not shout in church.”

Jimmy Swaggart does both, and often. For Swaggart, the degree of passion experienced in a religious service is a gauge of the depth of belief. He regularly denounces the absence of feeling in most churches—an indication, he says, that the Holy Spirit has abandoned the majority of American denominations. He often pokes fun at non-charismatic worship with a joke that has become very familiar to his regular viewers: It seems that a man died during a church service and the paramedics had to pull everybody out before they could locate the actual corpse.

Because it is the function of the preacher to ignite the audience’s religious passion, it is essential that he too be fueled by the Spirit. This is a state that cannot be willed. Rather, the spiritual preacher is "called" to God’s work. Nor does the Holy Ghost approach timidly; it "rolls right over" the believer like

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19 Ibid., pp. 10–11.
20 Ibid., p. 45.
a tidal wave. Like the men in Rosenberg's study, Swaggart considers himself chosen by God to spread the gospel. Rosenberg says that "this feeling that one is divinely summoned is important in understanding sermon techniques." Being "called" is the preliminary step toward becoming a preacher or evangelist. Rosenberg's folk preachers followed a common path to their calling. They began as children interiorizing the materials and techniques of local preachers. They spent a period of apprenticeship developing a repertoire of oratory skills and sermon themes. Like Swaggart, these preachers also shared a background in music, either as professional or amateur singers or as members of a church choir. Chanted sermons are musical in structure, and it is common for a preacher to break into song during the performance. Swaggart often slips portions of gospel hymns into his sermons. Entry into the folk preaching tradition occurs when the preacher has "mastered certain aspects of language and certain rhythms which he knows are sure to elicit a predictable response."

Swaggart has inarguably mastered the art of eliciting audience response. He preaches to a weekly U.S. audience of eight million and draws as many as 80,000 to crusades in Latin America. Swaggart is a powerful and highly-skilled orator who employs the techniques of folk preaching on a scale that would astound the men who led the camp meetings. What is perhaps most remarkable about Swaggart is that he has been able to transfer the kind of intimacy and passion characteristic of non-mediated revivals to a medium that generally replaces dialogue with one-way communication and stresses observation over interaction. He has accomplished this merger of TV and country preaching by skillfully exploiting the technical capacities of television to reconstruct for viewers the experience of participating in the actual revival. (I return to this point in a later chapter.)

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22Ibid.
23Rosenberg, American Folk Preacher, p. 23.
24Ibid., p. 25.
The folk preacher's performance is almost completely dependent on the intensity of audience response. If the audience is "off" (non-responsive or bored) the preacher's performance suffers. When the congregation is "up" it is actively involved throughout the performance; people hum along in certain sections, sing, shout and clap to punctuate phrases. The preacher takes his cues from these responses. His timing, rhythm, degree of emotion and direction of the oratory are all affected by how the congregation receives his words. For this reason, Swaggart's performance must be live. It is difficult to imagine him performing alone in front of a camera, or in the manufactured, orchestrated setting of a TV studio (as Robertson does on the "700 Club"). The television audience must be moved to "participate" by identifying with the crusade attenders because the type of emotional engagement engendered in a live revival cannot be duplicated with absent, physically dispersed listeners.

Spiritual preaching, and chanted sermons in particular, developed because church services can be lengthy and uninspiring affairs. Chanted sermons evolved alongside spirituals and gospel hymns which were incorporated into 19th century revivals to buoy the spirits of participants. Rosenberg calls the chanted sermon "an ideal conflation of the prose sermon and the spiritual," and says that "chanting or singing was first used to liven a potentially dull sermon and to establish a rhythm so as to make the performance as emotionally stimulating as the obviously successful spirituals." Moody was the first preacher to integrate gospel hymns into his mass revivals and the form of Swaggart's crusades is very similar to Moody's.

Music and chanting were intended to stimulate interest among revival attenders and to instigate their involvement in the service. Retaining audience interest is even more critical in televised religious

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26Swaggart's early television program, however, was set in a TV studio. Shot in Nashville in the studio used for "Hee Haw," Swaggart's first program was 30-minutes long. It included 10 to 15 minutes of country gospel music, a 10-minute Bible lesson, and five to 10 minutes of promotion for his crusades and albums. His current teaching program, "Studies in the Word," is also a pre-taped format that does not require interactin with a live audience. Swaggart. To Cross a River. p. 217.


services. TV cannot bore: it is too easy for viewers to switch to another program, turn off the set or become distracted by other activities in the home. Viewers expect to be entertained by television even when they have tuned in to also be informed, uplifted or educated. This is part of the "media logic" outlined by David Altheide and Robert Snow.29 Television and radio, they say, employ an "entertainment perspective" to capture and hold viewers' attention. As viewers, we have come to expect entertainment as an intrinsic part of the medium and we enter into a relationship with television performers on the basis of this expectation. The entertainment perspective works "to establish and make sense of the activities to follow."30 Being entertained necessarily elicits emotional involvement, even if it is vicarious (e.g. mediated): "A significant measure of entertainment is the degree of spontaneous emotional display among the audience or participants. . . . any performer measures the success of a show by the emotional response of the audience."31

Swaggart's program is constructed so as to highlight and make central the degree of emotional exchange between performer and crusade audience, with the aim of extending this emotion to viewers at home. Robertson, in contrast, must elicit audience response indirectly; he ascertains viewers' reactions with the aid of phone banks, letters, rating services and market surveys. The studio audience does not supply immediate emotional feedback other than through cued applause. In fact, it cannot do so within the structure of the program's format. (I address this important difference in Chapter 8.) Direct audience involvement in Swaggart's crusades is not simply one component of the program—it is the raison d'être of the performance. An evangelist requires a congregation, and the quality of his preaching is absolutely dependent on how he is received. The country preacher must therefore be highly attuned to the mood and tenor of his audience. He must understand his listeners' "patterns of experience" and intuit their desires if he is to fulfill those desires and create identification. In Rosenberg's words:

The skillful preacher develops his sermon with a certain care and with the emotions of the audience in mind. This is a test of the preacher's aesthetic sense; his timing—

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30Ibid., p. 22.
31Ibid., p.21.
development of ideas and sentiments—is part of the sermon's structure and it too must please in order to move.\textsuperscript{32}

\textit{The Christian Broadcaster}

In the spectrum of evangelical TV programming, the "700 Club" diverges the most from traditional revivalism.\textsuperscript{33} The show originates in the cultural form of television; it is a standard TV format filled with religious content. The preaching elements of the "700 Club" are subordinated to the demands of the format rather than being the central reason for the broadcast. Nor does Robertson see himself as a TV preacher.

\begin{quote}
We [at CBN] consider ourselves professional broadcasters. . . . I've never been an evangelist as such. It turned out that the Lord wanted me to buy a television station, but I never was an evangelist. \textsuperscript{34}
\end{quote}

The communications director of Robertson's presidential campaign reiterated this fact during the PTL scandal: "Pat has been labeled a TV evangelist, but he's not. He hasn't been a pulpit preacher for 25 years. He's a religious broadcaster, a businessman, a newscaster. There is a subtle difference."\textsuperscript{35} In fact, this difference is significant, as I will argue.

Robertson is a Southerner, but he is no country boy. Born in 1930, he is the son of a former U.S. senator and was educated at prestigious schools. A former Golden Gloves middleweight fighter, ex-marine and graduate of Yale University Law School, Robertson bought his first UHF station in 1960 for $37,000. At the time he had $70 which he calls his "seed money."\textsuperscript{36} The station went on the air three

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{32}Rosenberg, \textit{Religious Television}, p. 42.
\item \textsuperscript{33}Frankl, \textit{Televangelism}, p. 117.
\item \textsuperscript{34}Kenneth R. Clark, "The $70 miracle named CBN," \textit{Chicago Tribune}, July 26, 1985, Sect. 5, p. 3.
\item \textsuperscript{35}Quoted in Lord, "Unholy War in the TV Pulpits," p. 64.
\item \textsuperscript{36}Robertson, like several television preachers including Jim Bakker and Paul Crouch, received initial funding from The Full Gospel Businessmen's Fellowship International. The FGBMFI, a Pentecostal organization of business and military men, began in 1952. For more information on this group, see Larry Kickham, "Holy Spirit or Holy Spook?" \textit{Covert Action Information Bulletin}, 27 (Spring 1987), pp. 15–17.
\end{itemize}

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months later, the first UHF facility in the country to devote more than half its programming to religion. Although he is an ordained Southern Baptist minister, Robertson operates more like a businessman than a preacher. He manages the nation's fourth largest cable television network and heads a communications conglomerate that includes three domestic TV stations and one in Lebanon, a radio station, a satellite transmitter and CBN University. (Founded in 1978, the fully-accredited school offers master's degrees in communications, education, biblical studies, business administration and public policy. Robertson hopes to make CBNU the "Christian" equivalent of Notre Dame University). The "700 Club" has a cumulative monthly audience of 16.3 million, the largest of any religious program. In 1985, CBN raised $233 million. The network's money comes from a hierarchy of donors' clubs and from sympathetic corporations.

The role of a Christian broadcaster is quite different than that of a television preacher. Robertson must concern himself with operating and marketing an entire network rather than selling one or two programs to independent stations. He must pay attention to problems of program flow, market fragmentation and competition from independent and network programming. He has, of necessity, adopted the operating procedures, market research methods and programming strategies of his secular competitors. To compete with commercial television's variety, Robertson bought rights in 1980 to older syndicated shows like "The Rifleman," "Wagon Train" and "Burns and Allen." Today, CBN airs 24 hours daily; the "700 Club" is shown four times a day. Two-thirds of CBN's programming is non-religious and includes reruns of "wholesome" shows like "Gentle Ben," "Father Knows Best," "Green Acres" and the like. CBN competes for airtime by downplaying its religious orientation (one employee works fulltime getting the "religious" tag removed from local TV listings) and by offering its cable service free to cable operators, giving stations subsidies for advertising costs, and providing pre-produced television and radio spots.

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In creating its own programs—a talk show, a soap opera and a news show—CBN has replicated standard commercial formats which have been successful in attracting and maintaining audiences. Robertson says he conceived of "Another Life" to counter the immoral content of network soaps. He added "World Class Wrestling" to attract Christian sports fans. Robertson stresses the importance of adopting the techniques of commercial television. He says the biggest mistake made by religious broadcasters is "to superimpose their 'thing' on the media. They should discover what the media are doing and adapt to the media format." CBN's strategy is to offer 24-hour broadcasting packaged as a Christian alternative to secular TV. This, in fact, is the reasoning behind the formation of the network, according to Dabney:

since the media were controlled by secular humanists . . . it was necessary for Christians, at whatever financial sacrifice, to have their own media, and especially their own television network. 40

In other words, evangelicals must develop their own facilities and means of symbolic production to compete with the secular symbol system of commercial television.

What CBN offers is not televangelism, but an "evangelistic thrust" incorporated into its programming strategy. 41 The reruns portray an America where good and evil are easily distinguished and where family and gender roles are clearly defined. CBN News, launched in January 1986, frames issues around biblical teachings and evangelical values. Bob Slosser, president of CBN University, says that faith in Christ "sets you absolutely free to report the truth" and that the Bible "will lead you to correct conclusions about the issues and complications of the day." 42 "CBN News" now airs a dozen times daily and has bureaus in Washington D.C. and Israel. The "700 Club" parallels the format and content of the "Today Show" and "Good Morning America," but does so from a Christian perspective. The show

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40Dabney, "God's Own Network," p. 36.

41K. Clark, $70 Miracle," p. 3.

42Ibid.
competes with network morning news shows for many of the same guest political figures, movie stars, athletes and authors; but whether they represent secular or religious interests, Christian testimony is threaded through every discussion."

Parallels between the "Today Show" and the "700 Club" have less to do with their choice of guests than with the requirements of the format. The talk show format was established in television's early years with Edward R. Murrow's "See It Now." That program inaugurated one of the mainstays of the talk show—the interview with a famous person. The "Today Show" followed this precedent and extended the interviews to celebrities and best-selling authors in order to appeal to its predominately female, morning audience. When "Today" host Dave Garroway was later joined by R. Fred Muggs, a chimpanzee, ratings soared. This set into place a second component of the talk show—an entertaining foil for the host. Many talk programs have followed this comic-straight man pattern (Johnny Carson and Ed McMahon, Merv Griffin and Arthur Treacher, etc.) as a way of adding humor and generating the on-set patter characteristic of the format. The talk show format relies heavily on the host who acts as the program's emotional and intellectual center. Since Jack Paar's success on the early "Tonight Show," audiences have also learned to appreciate hosts with whom they can identify emotionally. This emotional identification is characteristic of the most successful talk show stars and is part of the intimacy at a distance central to parasocial interaction. The emphasis on celebrity, use of gimmicks or humor, and strong TV personalities are now standard elements of the format: "what passes for information and analysis [in these programs] is almost invariably couched in, or interlaced with, these very elements." The "700 Club" follows this pattern: Robertson's personality dominates and shapes the flow and substance of the show, most episodes include at least one interview with a celebrity from politics or the entertainment and sports worlds, and Kinchlow fills the role of the chimp.

The talk show and magazine formats, whether Christian or secular, share certain characteristics: they deal with social issues in predictable forms (e.g. panel discussion, interview, report, monologue); they

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43Ibid.

present information in brief segments which are held together by the regular cast, common setting and thematic organization; their treatment of topics is generally superficial and assumes a short audience attention span; they tend to personalize issues and dramatize the role of individuals; and they generally express the range of permissible viewpoints on an issue through techniques of framing (both technical and ideological). Early morning programs like the "700 Club" generally contain shorter segments than their nighttime counterparts because viewers are less likely to have twenty minutes of uninterrupted attention in the morning. (Although CBN airs the "700 Club" several times a day, it usually runs in the early morning on independent stations.) News is generally presented first on the assumption that it appeals to men, who cannot watch the entire show. The news and public affairs portions of the "700 Club" is always placed at the beginning of the show; later segments focus more on "women's" concerns like parenting and fashion. Morning magazines characteristically offer a diverse conglomeration of topics packaged in uniform lengths. This format does not require sustained attention and continually cues viewers when one segment is ending and another is about to begin. Segments on the "700 Club" range from about six to 15 minutes; the average piece is nine minutes, making it easy for regular viewers to tune in and out according to their interests and the demands of other morning activities. Transitions between segments are clearly marked by theme music and applause for viewers' convenience.

CBN's broadcast strategy incorporates and caters to the entertainment perspective that viewers have come to expect from television (in particular from the morning talk show). That is, a program must please viewers in order to move them. Robertson openly employs this strategy. In a statement published in Christianity Today, he defended the "700 Club's" use of glamour and diversion:

... to maintain professional standards in our industry and to be effective in the marketplace, a degree of entertainment and showmanship is sometimes necessary.

One religious broadcaster remarked in 1980 that the adoption of diverse formats and the inclusion of drama and entertainment were making Christian television more accessible and would likely lead to larger audiences. He added that such diversity reflected a general trend in evangelical broadcasting— a "drift

away from teaching and preaching toward counseling, interpersonal relationships, holistic living, and physical healing." This change is related to market imperatives, he noted; a 1979 Gallup poll showed "a correspondence between these programming trends and the felt needs of the Christian radio and television audience." In this respect, evangelical broadcasting mirrors secular television. Both rely on mediated audience feedback (whether through ratings or phone banks) to develop programming strategies and program content. The maintenance of audiences is essential to continued financial support (from advertisers or viewers). That is, what is aired is that which sells. Robertson may defend the diversity of the "700 Club's" content in terms of finding new ways to deliver the Christian message, but the content is also carefully produced and packaged to appeal to a target market. As he says, the program must "be effective in the marketplace."

Besides adopting the entertainment perspective characteristic of secular television, Robertson has also appropriated commercial TV's marketing methods. CBN uses conventional rating services like Arbitron and Nielsen and also commissions its own research. The network was the largest contributor to the Annenberg/Gallup study which provided detailed audience data to participants who gave more than $500. The communication department at CBN University has also conducted audience research. The results of market research led to the decision to include news on the "700 Club" and to the switch in the early 1980s from a straight talk show to a magazine format. Besides rating services and market surveys, evangelical broadcasters receive direct feedback through phone banks, mail and donations. These, in turn, affect program strategies. Mail becomes a "built-in polling device" so that "unless broadcasters have ironclad formats, their programs begin to focus on those issues and emphases that bring in the mail—and

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47Ibid., p. 29.

48Ibid., p. 31.


50Frankl, Televangelism, p. 82.
the money. Changes in the "700 Club" since its inception as a straightforward talk show reflect market demands. The program has become more serious and politicized in recent years. In the early days, Robertson chatted with an endless stream of Christian authors hawking their books and handed out biblical precepts, social commentary and miracles in equal measure. He has purposefully downplayed the more supernaturalistic elements of the show in the past few years—a decision based both on his political aspirations and on a change in market strategy. Robertson no longer performs healing or speaks in tongues on the air because "it comes on as cornball or zany, and saps the show of the intellectual seriousness he wants it to have." Robertson's description of the show's format and purpose indicates a keen sense of his market and its growing interest in subjects outside the domain of traditional revivalism:

Our programming covers a broad spectrum in order to reach a wide variety of human interests. These range from the traditional church worship services and music to Bible teaching, news briefs, contemporary Christian music, discussions of current events, economics, international relations, finance, social conditions, good health, biblical prophecy, principles of Christian living, and so on. All have Christian dimensions for the benefit of our audience.

Changes in content reflect the imperatives of operating and expanding an audience-supported network. In the early 1980s, CBN was in the process of becoming the nation's fourth-ranking cable network. The organization expanded its programming and made large capital investments in facilities and equipment. The "700 Club" is produced in a $22 million communications center; the state of the art studio where the program is staged "easily outclasses all, save possibly NBC's famed Studio 8." Such expansion requires generous audience support, both in terms of the number of donors and the size of their donations. Traditionally, viewers of evangelical television have been predominantly lower or working class older women. CBN's programming and marketing strategies indicate a desire to enlarge and possibly reorganize its audience. Adding nonreligious programming to attract a general audience,

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32 Dabney, "God's Own Network," p. 47; this perception is also shared by some CBN employees according to one of my informants.
34 K. Clark, "$70 Miracle," p. 3.
including more public affairs on the "700 Club," and downplaying the more mystical aspects of Evangelicalism seem to be part of a plan to develop a wider audience and a broader base of support.

According to Frankl and the Annenberg study, the traditional audience for religious television is most attracted to programs that emphasize the themes and forms of 19th century revivalism. Shows that stress politics and social issues and which adopt commercial formats run the risk of alienating this audience in their quest for new viewers. Research indicates that men and younger viewers are more likely "to be receptive to religious programs that are "more like secular television." Shows like the "700 Club," then, seem to be redefining what constitutes religious television, a move that raises questions about what constitutes the boundary between secular and religious programming. Is there a point, for example, at which a program ceases to be religious and becomes secular? Is religious television defined by its content or by its form? Frankl contends that whether a show is more "religious" or more "secular" depends on the degree to which it has been influenced by the imperatives of television. The "700 Club," she says, is most like secular TV compared to other evangelical programs because of its near total appropriation of television's format strategies and discursive conventions:

[The show's] preaching component is minimal. It is apparent that Robertson's role as a 'preacher' has been changed for television: he has become a host. Although he may teach a segment, even using chalk and blackboard, the topics are often political or international matters. Robertson's presentations are low-key and informative, more like Walter Cronkite than Billy Sunday.  

Although Robertson encourages conversion on the show, this message is simply one among many, rather than the central reason for the performance as it is with Swaggart. The prayer segment is usually two to five minutes long and is bridged to other segments with the same conversational and musical transitions that hold the entire package together. Other direct religious messages, as Frankl points out, "are usually embedded in commercial-like fundraising appeals" that encourage viewers to become part of the CBN "family." Swaggart, of course, also appeals for funds, but he does so in terms of facilitating the

[Frankl, *Televangelism*, p. 126.]

[Ibid., pp. 91–92.]

[Ibid., p. 12.]
Great Commission rather than creating an alternative to secular TV. The primary message of the "700 Club," as expressed through its format, is as much political as it is religious; it is a forum for the concerns and aims of the New Christian Right. The line between politics and religion seems to be blurred even for the program's producers. The log for each "700 Club" episode identifies segments by the following categories: public affairs, religious, sports, informational and entertainment (it is impossible to imagine Swaggart's program being tagged in this way). The log for one show I watched identified as "religious" an interview with a former U.S. Marine officer. Although the man testified to having been born again while serving in Vietnam, the heart of the interview by Robertson focused on how liberals at home had prevented a clear victory there and concluded with a discussion on the current "Marxist threat" in Central America.

With its blend of explicit politics, entertainment and lifestyle features, the "700 Club" not only erodes the boundary between religious and secular television, it also blurs the line between religion and politics. This is, in fact, the central goal of the New Christian Right. In the worldview espoused by the NCR, and by Robertson as one of its leaders, the traditional evangelical separation between the spiritual and the worldly has been eliminated. This is a key difference between Swaggart and Robertson; it is what makes the former's crusade program a rejection of contemporary culture and the "700 Club" an affirmation of modern society. The "700 Club" is a television show that comments on social and political affairs from an evangelical perspective. It is not televised religion, but religion-ized TV. Robertson is a TV personality, not a preacher. He manages and gives continuity to a stream of professionally-produced political messages and "moral" entertainment, packaged for a specific market. The show is conventional TV with an alternative message. By appropriating the conventions of commercial television, CBN implicitly endorses the medium's central role in representing society's values and beliefs and in defining its terms of social discourse. Robertson constructs his "story" about society using the same language (standard televisual modes of representation) as the "enemy" (the "secular humanists" who control commercial TV). Swaggart, on the other hand, sees television primarily as a tool. He bends to TV's

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imperatives to make his crusade more visually interesting and to solicit the funds that keep him on the air, but the form and content of the program are dictated by the demands of revivalism. All other uses of television, in this view, are manifestations of "the world" and inherently sinful. The Christian broadcaster embraces television; it is his profession and his reason to speak. Television is an end in itself because it permits access to and control over symbolic production. The country preacher's "business" is saving souls and television is merely a means to this end. He uses the medium to carry out his calling which comes from God.

The Audiences

Although the general religious television audience shares certain characteristics—predominantly female, over 50, rural, lower income and education—there are significant differences between audiences for particular programs. These differences are not arbitrary; they have to do with the programs' substance, form and the intentions of their producers. The actual audience of religious programs is quite segmented and those who watch do so for very specific reasons.59

According to the Annenbery/Gallup study, Swaggart counts among his viewers the highest number of men (although women are still the majority), the largest percentage of Southerners (nearly half) and one of the biggest proportions of rural dwellers (46 percent). He also reaches the fewest Catholics of all TV preachers and attracts the highest percentage of Protestants. Some 42 percent of his viewers did not complete high school and only one in ten attended college (three percent graduated). Swaggart's viewers are the most likely to say that religion is very important to them and the most likely to hold evangelical views. The study concludes that Swaggart seems to have the greatest appeal to traditional, conservative Protestants in the southern Bible belt.60

60Gerbner, Religion and Television, pp. 63-64; Horsfield, Religious Television, p. 112.
The "700 Club," in contrast, has the lowest number of viewers from rural areas and the fewest with only a grade school education (29 percent). One quarter of the audience has some college education and ten percent are graduates. The program attracts the largest proportion of viewers between 30 and 50 years old (47 percent), the highest share in the Midwest (40 percent), and the highest percentage of married viewers. It also has the greatest number of viewers who belong to and regularly attend a church. The Annenberg study notes that "Pat Robertson . . . appears more successful at capturing a 'churched' audience from 'Middle America'." The "700 Club" continues to attract a significant share of the traditional religious TV audience, however. Its viewers are predominately female in all age groups and the Gallup study reported that more than 70 percent of its over-50 viewers are women. The morning audience for all talk shows, of course, is predominantly female.

In 1985, CBN commissioned Nielsen to survey the audiences for the top ten religious programs. Two CBN employees assessed those findings in a study that compares audiences by the total number of viewers per week and month, and by age and gender. The "700 Club" attracted the smallest percentage of male viewers of all ten programs (22 percent) and was deemed "best at attracting 'the lady of the house'," presumably because the show airs in the morning when more women are able to watch. Swaggart's crusade, in contrast, attracted the highest number of male viewers (37 percent) among the top ten shows. When the audiences are differentiated by age, however, it appears that the "700 Club" is better than Swaggart at appealing to younger viewers of both sexes. Nearly three-quarters of Swaggart's female viewers are 55 or older, while 45 percent of women who watch Robertson are 25 to 54 years old. These ratios are also true for male viewers; 61 percent of the "700 Club" male audience is 25 to 54, while 60 percent of men who watch Swaggart are over 55. These figures support my earlier argument that

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41Gerbner, Religion and Television, pp. 63–64.
42Hadden and Swann, Prime Time Preachers, p. 62.
43Clark and Virts, "Religious Television Audience."
44Ibid., p. 20.
45Ibid., p. 30, Table 2.
Robertson is hoping to reach a younger audience and that the entertainment and political and current affairs content of the "700 Club" is part of that strategy. As the authors of the study note: "other research done by CBN indicates that the news in the '700 Club' is an attractive feature for younger audience." 66

Neither the Nielsen survey or the Annenberg study give figures on the occupational and economic status of religious TV viewers. The TV ministries undoubtedly contract their own research in these areas but are not anxious to share their findings with outsiders. A study by Sari Thomas examined the relationship between viewers' socio-economic class and religious TV content, but her assessment of class is based on the perceptions of the audience held by program producers and outside sources, not on independent demographic data. It is likely, however, that producers' perceptions of their viewers come from internal market research. Thomas identified the "700 Club" as being aimed at an "upwardly mobile audience" and Swaggart's show as attracting a "working class" viewership; she found significant variations in the programs' content which corresponded to differences in the social class of the intended audience.67 (I discuss these findings more fully in a later chapter.)

My research and observations of the "700 Club" and Swaggart's crusade lead me to suggest a determinate relationship between the programs' content and form and the "patterns of experience" of their audiences. A "country preacher" is more appealing to older, southern, rural dwellers of lower education because his theology and preaching style are rooted in their history and religious experience. Swaggart's patterns of experience fit those of his followers—he speaks their language. Robertson's appeal is less proscribed by the boundaries of traditional Pentecostalism. As the barriers which both isolated and protected conservative Evangelicalism have eroded, its message has increasingly reached people outside its traditional boundaries. Robertson's upbeat, slickly-produced gospel of health and prosperity is attractive to the suburban and urban middle classes. Younger people are also more at home with the "700 Club,"

66Ibid., p. 21.

which demands little and promises much, than with Swaggart's message which refers often to death and counsels people to give up earthly pleasures for eternal joy. Many church-goers are likely to feel uncomfortable with Swaggart's harangues against apostate Christianity and moribund denominations. Robertson's theology is supportive of church membership because churches are one of the New Christian Right's most important organizing tools.

While it is tempting to see the distinctions between these audiences as market fragmentation, to do so is to forget the role of meaning in the production-consumption relationship. The appeal of the "700 Club" and Swaggart's crusade is not just a matter of fitting market imperatives to audience characteristics. The programs appeal to specific viewers in particular historical circumstances because they hold meaning for those viewers. And that meaning is always a complex, interactive creation. The "voice without" can speak to the "voice within" only if it has something to say to people's experiences, beliefs and values. Robertson's and Swaggart's audiences are dissimilar because the "stories" these men tell are different.
CHAPTER VII

PROGRAM ANALYSIS: THEMES AND WORLD-VIEWS

Although Swaggart and Robertson both belong to the charismatic Pentecostal tradition, their conceptions of Christianity differ in important ways. Robertson preaches a health and wealth gospel, encourages political activism among his viewers, and devotes much of his program to lifestyle features and advice on practical and psychological problems. The overtly political slant of the "700 Club" reflects Robertson's heavy involvement in the New Christian Right. Swaggart denounces the gospel of health and prosperity, discourages political and material engagement with "the world," and disdains psychology (both Christian and secular) as a capitulation to modernism. While Swaggart's politics are embedded in his beliefs (e.g. anti-communist, anti-abortion, anti-homosexual), he has kept a distance from the New Christian Right. (He did, however, belatedly endorse Robertson's decision to seek the presidential nomination.)

Key differences in the themes of the two programs are grounded in the belief systems and worldviews that Swaggart and Robertson inhabit. These differences are connected as well to their audiences. I am suggesting that Swaggart and Robertson represent separatist versus assimilative versions of Evangelicalism. Swaggart attempts to maintain the traditional separation between Christianity and "the world"; Robertson tries to blur or erase that boundary by demanding that the world change to fit his theology. Both positions are part of Evangelicalism's history—they constitute the poles of the insider/outsider paradox that Marsden identifies. The growth of the New Christian Right's influence in the past decade indicates that Robertson's position has been gaining strength among many evangelicals. The trend in religious programming toward material and psychological concerns also signals structural changes in the evangelical belief system.

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The themes of Swaggart's crusade parallel the message of 19th century revivalism: individualized piety, the need to be spiritually reborn, the mandate to spread the Good News, and the separation of worldly and spiritual concerns. In addition to these stock themes is Swaggart's constant renunciation of false belief systems. The only path to salvation is to born again into the charismatic tradition—to become a "spirit-filled," "Bible-believing," "tongues-talking" Christian. In this sense Swaggart's theology is highly monopolistic, excluding many professed Christians from the ranks of the chosen. Swaggart's crusades revolve around this limited set of themes which are enhanced and amplified through various rhetorical strategies. The themes of the "700 Club" echo the ideological positions of the New Christian Right: the program stresses public over private religiosity, political engagement rather than separation from the world, and social change more than individual salvation. Robertson's theology is integrative rather than divisive and this stems from the imperatives of creating and sustaining conservative Evangelicalism as a social movement.

As a leading member of the NCR, Robertson is involved in organizing his viewers around the unifying theme of "cultural fundamentalism." He is attempting to unify rather than divide conservative evangelicals, and does so by downplaying theological differences and casting social problems in moral terms. The "700 Club" does not criticize particular denominations or draw lines between charismatic and non-charismatic Evangelicalism. Robertson's discussions of theology are confined to generalizations and stress only those beliefs and practices that are widely agreed upon (e.g. biblical literalism, the need for a personal relationship with Jesus, the imperative of being born again, etc.). According to Gerard Straub, who produced the "700 Club" for almost three years, Robertson and most TV preachers "offer bare fundamentals of faith and ignore complex theological issues that will either bore the audience or provide them with opportunities for disagreement." The major themes of the "700 Club" revolve around broad moral tenets: the sanctity of the family, the threat of secularism and communism, the erosion of traditional values, the faltering of America's redeemer role. These are issues that most conservative

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1Frankl, Televangelism, pp. 114-115.

Christians can agree upon. The program brings viewers together around such issues while avoiding theological or ecclesiastical points of dissension. Stewart Hoover, in a study of the "700 Club," says that CBN sources admit to a careful process of 'watering down' of the most unique and potentially controversial elements of the Pentecostal roots of that program, so as not to offend the large, public and heterogeneous audience they see to be their target.4

Such moderation, he adds, "leads to a religious 'universalism' of a kind, where a wide variety of religions and religious viewpoints are tolerated by the program and by its audience."5

Swaggart's theology is far more divisive and religious doctrine is a central part of his preaching. Although he criticizes secularism, Catholicism, Judaism, Hinduism, and so on, his most strident attacks are actually reserved for "apostate Christians."6 Because Swaggart insists that to be saved one must be a charismatic Christian blessed with the gifts of the Holy Spirit, all other forms of Evangelicalism are apostasy. He regularly chastises churches and preachers who fail to teach this "full gospel" message. Fundamentalists, Southern Baptists, even his own denomination have earned Swaggart's scorn on occasion. His critique of the prosperity gospel and Christian psychology are indirect slaps at a number of prominent televangelists, including Robertson. Swaggart's condemnation of PTL and Oral Roberts are typical of his refusal to minimize theological differences. His preaching and writing also abounds with denunciations of religious TV programming that subordinates God's word to "Hollywood-style entertainment."7 Swaggart can afford to be confrontational because he is not in the business of building a political movement. In fact, he highlights divisions between the "truly saved" and the rest of humanity so as to create a consubstantiability on the basis of this special election.


5Ibid., p. 16.

6In a fund-raising special, for example, Swaggart called apostate Christians one of the biggest threats to world evangelization efforts. "Jimmy Swaggart," June 7, 1987.

The religious universalism of the "700 Club" is related to Robertson's prominent role in the
coalition of the Christian and political right wings. He is a founding member of the Religious
Roundtable, was one of the sponsors of the Washington for Jesus rally, and belongs to several right-wing
organizations devoted to foreign and domestic political issues. CBN provided money to former
Guatemalan president Efrain Rios Montt for counter-insurgency measures and is one of the largest
private donors to the Nicaraguan contras. Robertson formed the Freedom council in 1981 to organize his
presidential campaign at the state level. The council was conceived as an educational organization to
teach evangelicals about the workings of party politics. Operating through local churches, the Freedom
Council trained preachers and organized voter registration drives before being dissolved in 1986 during an
IRS investigation.

The programming of the "700 Club" (and of "CBN News") reflects Robertson's political agenda.
During 1986 and '87, the show promoted mandatory school prayer and the teaching of creationism,
lobbied for the SDI defense system, supported the South African government, defended the Nicaraguan
"freedom fighters," criticized sex education in public schools, backed Reagan in the Iran-contra scandal,
argued that the U.S. lost in Vietnam because of negative press coverage at home, denounced arms
negotiations with the Soviet Union, attacked Planned Parenthood, linked AIDS to the "sin" of
homosexuality, and accused secular humanists of destroying the nation's moral fiber. Frankl says these
positions reflect a "cultural fundamentalism" which is similar to the values and beliefs that Wacker
associates with "Christian Civilization." This is the same political ideology held by orthodox Protestants
in the late 19th century, according to Marsden:

Free enterprise economics, success-oriented competitive individualism, opposition to
expansion of the federal government, extreme fear of socialism, conspiracy theories of

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1See the Covert Action Information Bulletin, "Special Issue on the Religious Right," No. 27,
Spring 1987, for more information on Robertson's political activities.

2This grass roots organizing strategy was a key factor in Robertson's victory in Michigan's
precinct delegate contest in 1986. He acquired more delegates the Rep. Jack Kemp and
stayed even with Vice President George Bush. See "Television Preacher Turns into an
history, flag-waving patriotism, and imperialism all confirm this connection.10 Frankl claims that superpatriotism, ultra-conservative economic policies, and traditional sexual and family values are "the major themes of cultural fundamentalism as an ideology of a social movement."11 This ideology unites the Christian and political right wings. Although Swaggart is certainly conservative, his message centers on individual salvation and personal piety. Robertson, in contrast, focuses on social and political issues. In this respect, Swaggart's world view is constituted outside the boundaries of the New Christian Right. As Frankl argues, the messages of the Electonic Church fall into two dominant categories: "popular religion" and "cultural fundamentalism."12 Swaggart preaches the former, Robertson the latter.

An important part of the "700 Club" world view is its emphasis on material success. Robertson's theology is built on what he calls the "Kingdom Principles." This is the scriptural adage—"you reap what you sow"—updated. Put crudely, every investment in the Lord is returned with dividends. Robertson defines it as "giving and getting in equal measure. . . . We do it. It works. You give to be obedient to God and getting is a natural consequence."13 The Kingdom Principles are mentioned often during the program and constitute the core of its fundraising telethons which assert that giving to the "700 Club" is one of the surest routes to God's blessings. This is what Robertson calls the "principle of reciprocity" whereby God "intended for his people to be on the top, not on the bottom."14 In one show he cited the example of a man whose income increased five-fold after giving to CBN. Soderman added that the principle of reciprocity "is sort of like a spiritual bank account."15 The cast encourages viewers to "give


11 Frankl, Televangelism, p. 115.

12 Ibid., p. 127.


out of your need” in order to reap heavenly returns. In one episode, for example, Kinchlow told Robertson about a woman (on a fixed income and in poor health) who decided to send her entire disability check to the "700 Club." Kinchlow explained that three days later she received an unexpected check for $3,000. "Praise God," Robertson replied. "Let’s give God a hand... You there at home, if you want miracles, just step out in faith on the Kingdom Principles, and see what God is willing to do for you."16

The health and wealth gospel—or giving to get—is a popular theme in much of contemporary televangelism. This message is partly pragmatic, given TV ministries’ dependence on audience support. But it is also more than that. In our society we expect something for our money—even appeals for charitable donations are made more attractive by being tax deductible. This is related to the historical development of capitalism whereby "value" has come to be equated with exchange value. That is, the worth of something is determined by its price. TV preachers incorporate this logic into their appeals for funds. Last week’s donations are worth so many souls brought to Jesus. Swaggart’s fundraising appeals are usually supported with footage of people surging toward the altar or viewers in foreign countries engrossed in his telecast.17 The health and wealth gospel, in contrast, portrays the value of donations not in terms of anonymous souls saved, but in terms of personal rewards for the donor. The "700 Club" depicts people who have reaped material benefits for their support of the show’s mission. The "Word of Knowledge" segment often includes examples of "financial healing." In one show Robertson referred to a man whose need for $100,000 would be met in three days "through the miraculous power of the Holy Spirit."18 In another, Soderman prayed that a viewer would receive the $27,500 he needed to start up a business.19 Promotional spots also proclaim this message. In one spot a CBN "partner" testified that after he sent money to the "700 Club," God had shown him how to be "prosperous, financially and

16Dabney, "God's Own Network," p. 45.

17Swaggart's fundraising specials place great emphasis on the fruits of worldwide evangelistic efforts; see "Partners in the Harvest," March 15, 1987.


Guests also reinforce the message that being a Christian brings material blessings. A middle-aged black woman from Philadelphia, adorned in expensive jewelry and furs, testified that God had told her to save her money and "go into real estate." She had amassed a fortune by obeying God's word, and coincidentally had been a long-time believer in the Kingdom Principles. Celebrities from the sports and entertainment fields reveal how becoming a Christian reinvigorated their careers and brought them greater fame and success. Such Christian "stars" circulate among several religious programs (e.g. Rosie Greer, Dean Jones, Roy Rogers and Pat Boone. Dale Evans and Efrem Zimbalist, Jr. even have their own shows on TBN). The testimony of these celebrities invariably backs up the tenets of the health and wealth gospel. The message—that poverty and failure are the fruits of un-Christian living—is reinforced by the lavish furnishings of the sets and expensive attire of the performers. There is an intriguing irony in this success theology: the overwhelming majority of audience members for these programs are neither wealthy nor glamorous. As Dabney notes:

Most of these people, presumably, are living ordinary lives. But the Christian celebrities tell them that ordinary life is contemptible, and that there is a magical way out.23

The health and wealth appeal, as manifested in Robertson's Kingdom Principles, plays on the ideology of the American Dream. It offers a picture of those who have made the dream come true and promises viewers that they too can enter this charmed circle. But, like everything in modern society, the dream has a price. In fact, if it had no monetary value, the dream would be worthless. The "700 Club" quite openly attaches a price to our desires. Inside CBN headquarters stands a pillar which houses a microfilm containing the "Seven Lifetime Prayer Requests" of hundreds of viewers. Before the pillar was sealed, viewers who sent in $100 or more could get their seven requests added to the microfilm where

20Ibid., February 27, 1987.


22Dion is one of many stars whose turn to Christ prefigured a career comeback. He delivered his testimony and lip-synced his latest hit on the "700 Club," February 24, 1987.

23Dabney, "God's Own Network," p. 45.
they would be "surrounded by prayer" twenty-four hours a day. Implicit in this fundraising scheme is
the notion that the requests would likely be answered. Kinchlow reported in one show, for example, how
a woman with an ingrown toenail who had sent in her money and prayers, had three of her requests
answered within the week and her toenail "miraculously healed." "Praise God," Robertson responded.
"You know you can't outgive God." 24

This financial success philosophy is not unique to Christian television. Rags to riches stories, soap
operas about the ultra—wealthy, and voyeuristic programs like "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous" are
stock fare on commercial TV. Market surveys and ratings indicate that these programs are attractive to a
significant number of viewers. And while it is simplistic to say that television merely gives people what
they want, it is true that the intended audience of a program significantly shapes the show's content.
Thomas' content analysis of 23 top-rated religious programs concluded that the class base of the intended
audience influenced how key themes were treated. Those programs aimed at an "upwardly mobile"
audience, including the "700 Club," addressed economic and material themes quite differently than did
those shows created for a "working—middle" or "working class" audience (the latter includes Swaggart's
show). Thomas found that programs aimed at an upwardly mobile audience tended to encourage the
pursuit of material success at a much higher rate than did shows intended for working class viewers. In
the episodes studied, the upwardly mobile programs never identified money as a source of evil,
ocasionally conceded that money would not buy happiness, and most often suggested that wealth can
bring contentment if it is properly used. (One of the proper uses, of course, is giving to TV ministries.)
Working class programs offered quite a different perspective on money. They emphasized that money
does not bring happiness, or that it is the root of evil or sin, in about equal proportions, and rarely
suggested that wealth is positive, even when put to good use. Upwardly mobile programs also scored
higher on the number of prayers for "tangible" outcomes (e.g. material goods and events), while prayers
in the working class shows were most often "spiritual" petitions (e.g. related to metaphysical events). 25

24 Ibid., p. 46.
The study also found significant differences in the degree to which the two types of programs encouraged worldly accomplishment and involvement in social and political activities outside the church. Upwardly mobile programs rated higher in both categories; the working class shows stressed personal piety over worldly accomplishment and generally counseled listeners to remain aloof from the world. Thomas proposes that the messages of the two types of programs correspond to the social conditions and expectations of their viewers:

"It is socially functional to present the poor with teachings that stress the ultimate worthlessness, indeed baneful or dangerous character, of material wealth and its quest. . . . [and] as the 'social ladder' is 'ascended,' it appears to be more acceptable to begin promoting the merits of worldly achievement and acquisition alongside more traditional Christian teachings."  

These findings support my observations of the "700 Club" and Swaggart's crusade. Not only does the former promote a connection between material success and Christian living, it also strongly encourages viewers to engage in the social and political causes of the New Christian Right. After a favorable CBN news report on the SDI system, for example, Robertson advised viewers to call or write their congressional representatives. CBN was also one of the key plaintiffs in the Alabama court case concerning the use of "secular humanist" educational materials, and has set up a special fund (titled "Humanism Cases") for further legal fights over public school curricula. The "700 Club" has aired numerous segments on this subject and has encouraged its viewers to examine reading materials in their local schools. When CBN reported on Human and Health Services employee Joanne Gasper's decision to cut federal funding for Planned Parenthood because it offered abortions, Robertson urged viewers to call the White House in her behalf. The show has also encouraged its audience to oppose sex education in public schools and to review material offered to teenagers regarding contraception and protection from AIDS. When Phyllis

24Ibid., pp. 115–116, 118.
27Ibid., p. 119.
Schlafly appeared on the program to promote her Eagle Forum's efforts on this issue, Robertson applauded her statement that the correct Christian stand on teenage sexuality is abstinence. He also urged viewers to support Schlafly's organization.31

The overtly political content of the "700 Club," and its propensity for counseling viewers to engage in political and social issues, places it firmly within the agenda of the New Christian Right. The program is actively involved in constructing an ultraconservative "story" about the nature of society and about evangelicals' role within it. The "700 Club" has enthusiastically supported the Reagan administration and Reagan himself has twice appeared on the show. In his second appearance, Robertson joked with the president that they should swap jobs.32 According to Frankl, Robertson and other TV ministers who fundraise for moral and political goals, are "reversing 'The Great Reversal'" and carving out a sphere of influence in the political arena. CBN's programs "strongly support and reinforce the moral positions of the New Christian Right—from family issues to aggressive political action in Latin America."33

Swaggart addresses politics much less directly. He condemns homosexuality, abortion, humanism and communism often, but does so in terms of sin. (He is equally harsh toward all belief systems different from charismatic Christianity.) The solution to these problems, moreover, is not political and social but spiritual and individual. Those who are born again and filled with the Spirit will not commit such sins because these activities will no longer be attractive. The ills of society—abortion, teenage pregnancy, drugs, divorce, homosexuality—cannot be blamed on Washington or the education system, which Swaggart says are merely symptoms of the disease. Nor can these problems be solved by laws or force: "they can only be changed by a change of heart." This change of heart, accepting Jesus personally, is the only action "that can be effected for good in your life. He is the answer."34 The thrust of

31Ibid., February 27, 1987. The inclusive nature of the NCR permits Robertson to join forces with Schlafly, a right-wing Catholic. Swaggart's exclusive theology would prohibit his supporting a "non-Christian" like Schlafly.


33Frankl, Televangelism, p. 117.

Swaggart's evangelism is to save souls, not to change the political complexion of society. Swaggart has actually become less openly political in his preaching in the past few years in order not to offend viewers and thus build his audience share.35

Avoiding politics is more than a marketing decision, however—it is related to Swaggart's separatist theology. It is difficult to maintain a separation from "the world" while engaging in political lobbying and organizing around social issues. Moreover, joining political causes runs counter to the individuated conception of religion that informs Swaggart's world view. Swaggart's pre-millennialist roots also work against the idea that Christians should engage in politics. Although Robertson and Swaggart both hold a pre-millennial eschatology, their views of the end of the world are different. Robertson is a "post-tribulationist" who believes that Christians will live through the seven-year tribulation. The Kingdom of God will emerge gradually as Christians take over world leadership and a last great revival sweeps the planet. Swaggart is a "pre-tribulationist," believing that charismatic Christians will be raptured before the agonies of the tribulation and will thus have no earthly role in the creation of the Kingdom.36

From Swaggart's perspective, the outcome of history is pre-determined and the vast majority of the human race is already damned to an eternal hell. The only action that can alter this fate is being born again. Swaggart constantly asserts that "good works" are impotent when it comes to eternal salvation; it follows from this logic that political or social activities are largely futile.37 The key is to accept Jesus and this entails rejecting "the world." Swaggart's Evangelicalism is decidedly otherworldly and largely incompatible with the goals of the Christian Right. He is not trying to change this world, but prepare

35Frankl argues that Swaggart, like Schuller and Humbard, purposefully avoids controversial issues so as not to alienate viewers, Televangelism, p. 98. I would say that Swaggart enjoys controversy, as long as it is theological in nature. He has become more careful about making politically or socially-charged statements because of the threat of losing airtime. Swaggart got into trouble in 1984 over statements about Mother Teresa and the Holocaust; stations in Boston and Atlanta (including WANX, owned by CBN), dropped the show for its persistent attacks on Catholicism. A Miami station also threatened to cancel. Swaggart, typically, blamed the secular media for misrepresenting him. See Steve Chapple, "Whole Lotta Savin' Going On," Mother Jones, July/August 1986, p. 45, and "Swaggart's One-Edged Sword," Newsweek, January 9, 1984, p. 65.


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people for the next one. As Swaggart tells listeners, "You're a citizen not of this world but of another world." In this respect, Swaggart is firmly grounded in an earlier form of Evangelicalism; he carries on the tradition of the Great Reversal and Dwight Moody's grand "rescue mission."

Swaggart's separatist theology extends beyond politics to all areas of popular culture. Forsaking the things of this world means rejecting cultural and leisure activities that distract people from their devotion to God and seduce them to embrace modernity. Swaggart denounces all music that is not religious or, more specifically, that is not the "old-time gospel music" he performs. Many of the songs in the crusade, in fact, take up this theme. Swaggart is also a vehement critic of "Christian rock" which he considers satanic. Activities categorized as questionable, if not openly sinful, include attending movies, sports events and rock concerts, watching television (he has specifically mentioned HBO, the academy awards, sports channels and glamorized religious programs; the exception is his own show), dancing, drinking, listening to secular records and going to "honky tonks." He has also condemned smoking and suggested that "good women" wear skirts rather than pants. A good Christian, according to Swaggart, will simply not desire these diversions: "They simply have no bearing," he says. By counseling people to avoid popular culture, Swaggart is attempting to maintain the historical boundary that has protected Evangelicalism from contamination by modernity. This is true as well of his contention that worshipers should abandon churches that do not preach the gospel of the Holy Spirit. Swaggart's theology demands more of followers than does Robertson's. To forgo the pleasures of modern society—the fruits of consumer culture—is a genuine sacrifice, and one that requires constant effort and vigilance. As Swaggart acknowledges, the amenities of this world are seductive: "There is a certain amount of pleasure in making millions dishonestly, in being the sex goddess of a nation," he says, "but it is short lived. The pleasures

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39"Old Camp Meeting Time" is an example of this genre: "I like the old meeting, preaching, praying, shouting, singing . . . I Like the old-time worship of the Lord." Ibid., June 14, 1987.


41Ibid., April 12, 1987.
come to an end."  

The strict practices demanded by this belief system place its adherents in direct, constant tension with the world around them. Swaggart's followers must eschew the "spirit of the world" which he says "is (regretably) almost everything that is considered 'fun,' 'exciting,' and 'with it'—within the context of the sordid package presented daily to a media hungry world."  

The pleasures and problems of the world, Swaggart tells viewers, "have nothing to do with you."  Christians experience this tension, he explains, "because you're going against the prevailing currents of the world."  In this sense, Swaggart preaches a version of Christianity which is anti-modern and anti-materialist. He insists that Christianity exists outside the boundaries of the institutional church and is also fundamentally at odds with material accumulation. As Swaggart remarked in one program: "We preachers make a mistake when we tell you that if you come to Jesus it will all be honey and roses, or tell you you're going to get rich. We prostitute the word and the promises of God when we say that."  Wealth, in Swaggart's view, is part of "the world" and in no way related to salvation. In fact, riches and material success lead people away from God, as Swaggart's frequent stories about his cousin, Jerry Lee Lewis attest. These anecdotes are parables of the spiritual poverty that accompanies worldly prosperity.  

Swaggart's asceticism is full of contradictions, of course, given his $1.1 million estate, his $5,000 Rolex (donated by a supporter) and his expensive attire. He does not preach the primitive communism of the early Christian communities, nor demand vows of poverty as have Christian mystics.  His critique of

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46 Ibid.
47 Ibid.; see also Swaggart, There is a River, p. 159.
48 Swaggart sees no contradiction in rejecting the world and living in comfort. His house, he says, was build "at cost. It only has two bedrooms. It is nice. It's above the normal house. I don't want to appear to be something I'm not." In Steve Chapple, "Whole Lotta Savin'
materialism is far more individualistic and conservative than contemporary liberation theology’s criticism of economic inequality and exploitation. The kinship between Swaggart’s beliefs and these other theologies has to do with their oppositional stance toward the larger society and with their emphasis on spiritual transcendence. They propose that satisfaction (the coincidence of being and meaning) does not come from things (or institutions) but from communion (with God or with others in a relationship mediated by God.) Swaggart’s communion occurs in relationship with Christ and the Holy Spirit; as he often says, ”Christianity is not a religion. It’s a relationship with Jesus Christ.”

Swaggart proposes a challenge to contemporary society. His theology is a negation of modernism. Progress, enlightenment and accumulation have failed to fill humanity’s deepest desire—the desire for connection and community and for an “ultimate relevance of being.” Swaggart condemns modernity because it has robbed human life of meaning and he offers a ”story” of the world that restores pre-modern significance and transcendence. Robertson, on the other hand, offers a less confrontational story. The message of the ”700 Club” is culture-affirming, built on a world view that assimilates, revises and renames, rather than rejects, modern values. Robertson’s ”transformation” occurs within existing institutions and social relationships:

"Pat Robertson sells a 'salvation' that will transform the viewers’ life, and a flood of benefits will flow from heaven following salvation: Restored health, healed relationships, career success, monetary rewards, and an improved lifestyle can all be yours if you just say ‘yes’ to Jesus.”

This message has striking parallels to the promises of the New Age and human potential movements. There is no place in Robertson’s salvific schema (nor in New Age philosophies or pop psychology) for human suffering. The truly saved Christian is healed, enriched, and satisfied, as is the New Ager and the ”self actualized” individual. It follows, then, that poverty, illness, sorrow and loss are self-inflicted failures—punishments for rejecting the proper path. Swaggart’s theology, in contrast, makes

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51Straub, Salvation for Sale, p. 60.
suffering central. Humanity suffers because it is human. Evil and bafflement are the fruits of the fall. Human existence, in Swaggart's view, is a travail of sorrow which is inescapable in this life. "Man is nothing," he tells his viewers. "You think you're something. Jesus said you're blind and miserable and naked." In fact, Christians must choose suffering if they are to achieve union with God: "You must choose to suffer affliction," he says. "That's not pretty, is it?" Further, salvation occurs not because we are good or deserving, but because we accept our worthlessness. "You've got to shout: 'I'm no good. I can't save myself. I'm rotten. I'm filth,'" he tells followers. The sinner attains heaven only because God is merciful. Evil is a human product: Auschwitz, he says, is not of God, but of the world. The route to salvation lies in perpetually confessing one's fundamental baseness and petitioning God for mercy. The path to heaven, then, is arduous—a continual struggle to transcend worldly evil and human weakness.

Robertson's theology, on the other hand, simplifies evil and minimizes misery; it offers simple solutions and easy-to-follow guidelines to happiness, success and salvation. Being born again and finding God's will for one's life "is so easy," Robertson tells his viewers. Co-host Soderman offers a "Freedom Pack" with simple fixes for "those heavy things that are going down." The "700 Club" offers a painless solution to a painful existence. The difference between Swaggart's and Robertson's theological perspectives is particularly apparent in their approaches to the problem of subjectivization. Lifestyle and self-help segments are a staple part of the "700 Club." Experts tell viewers how to cope with divorce, depression, unplanned pregnancy, obesity and addiction. Guests disclose how they have coped with unfaithful partners, overcome their homosexuality, dealt with the discovery that they are terminally ill, and come to terms with unhappy childhoods. At times an entire program is devoted to a particular crisis or problem (I have seen death, obesity, smoking and broken families treated in this way). In such cases the multi-segment format is maintained by breaking down the problem into news reports, testimonies,


interviews, audience questions, panel discussions, etc. Promotional spots often show a family or individual undergoing some kind of crisis; meanwhile the announcer suggests that viewers call a CBN prayer counselor or send for a free booklet that answers their problem. The theme of the "700 Club" telethon in 1987, titled "Lives in Crisis," showed examples of individuals and families who had been "healed" with help from the CBN ministry.

The solutions to these problems are posed in spiritual terms—you can weather emotional storms with God's help—but implicit in the message is that living a proper Christian lifestyle will prevent many of these crises. The program also encourages viewers to look to Christian experts for advice on navigating the complexities of modern life. Robertson's book, *Answers to 200 of Life's Most Probing Questions*, explains everything from depression and divorce to the mystery of the trinity and whether there will be pets in heaven. The program treats these problems within the logic of the segmented format. Serious issues are juxtaposed with lighthearted ones, and both receive the standard nine-minute treatment demanded by the magazine format. As Straub points out, "the complexities of television production and the nature of the medium do not permit an in-depth analysis of any problem, and the television preachers understand the importance of the thirty-second solution." Promotional spots are slickly-produced, short "commercials" which sell the idea that happiness, health and wealth can be found in the Bible. In the teaching segments, Robertson will step up to a blackboard and "within minutes chalk out a quick plan for salvation." Social problems are individualized and analysis is replaced by simple guidelines. Such simple, formulaic solutions are standard in the talk show format where

Experts tell you how to make any crisis as smooth and painless as possible. Recovering from traumas as diverse as a child's bedwetting or nervous breakdown are handled in two to three minute segments in which experts give us five simple rules or steps.

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55Ibid., July 8, 1985.
57Ibid.
The proliferation of Christian self-help literature and counseling services are a sign of accommodation to the subjectivizing pressures of modernization.\(^9\) By posing "Christian" answers to people's emotional dilemmas, this version of Evangelicalism acknowledges the problem of the self and thus concedes to the process of modernization which has rendered the self a puzzle to be solved in the first place. The response to subjectivization characteristic of the health and prosperity gospel, Hunter says, is a "psychological Christo-centrism."\(^6\) Emotional health derives from establishing a harmonious relationship with Jesus. The large volume of Christian advice and self-help literature published in the last decade, the development of Christian therapy and a Christian approach to sexuality, and the stream of experts who tell viewers how to solve their problems in a godly manner, are bound together by a common theme.\(^6\) Christian psychology offers promises of gladness, joy, victory and satisfaction, all of which flow naturally from correct Christian living. The message—that "if one is spiritual, one is happy and contented"—requires "public and subjective denial of inner suffering, dread, and boredom as essential features of human existence."\(^6\)

By offering advice on a variety of psychological and emotional dilemmas, the "700 Club" poses Christian answers to the problem of the self. Just as the program is a secular format with Christian content inserted, its psychological perspective is an appropriation of the terms and forms of secular psychology and the human potential movement "filled" with Christian solutions.\(^6\) The "700 Club," then, ...

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\(^6\)For a discussion of how some Christian conservatives have incorporated elements of the "sexual revolution" into their belief system, see Barbara Ehrenreich, Elizabeth Hess and Gloria Jacobs, "Unbuckling the Bible Belt," *Mother Jones*, July/August 1986, pp. 46–51, 78. The "700 Club" also takes a more modern attitude toward sex. Although insisting that sex should occur only between married couples, Kinchlow remarked that God can show Christians "how to use His tool for our mutual benefit and pleasure." "700 Club," February 27, 1987.


\(^6\)This approach has created controversy within Evangelicalism. David Hunt's *The Seduction of Christianity* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1985), accuses Robertson and other preachers of advocating the techniques of the "New Age Movement." Hunt's book generated a good deal
accommodates and affirms the process of subjectivization—or the modern preoccupation with the self. It does not ask viewers to question the historical process by which the self has been isolated in society, but merely to find Christian ways to adjust to it. This version of Evangelicalism stands in opposition to Swaggart's insistence on self-denial and self-sacrifice. As Hunter notes: "The spiritual exercises of self-discipline and self-denial are hardly conceivable in a situation where that which is to be denied and disciplined is under near-constant examination."64

Swaggart takes quite a different approach to subjectivization. He identifies the problem of the self as a product of the world and advises followers to solve the problem by rejecting it. As he said in one program, self-consciousness itself is sin—a sign that people have elevated themselves above God. You've got to get rid of self-consciousness, he asserts, and get full of "God-consciousness."65 In fact, concern with the self is the original sin; Adam and Eve were cast out of paradise (or communion) because they shifted their attention from God to themselves: "Man's greatest sin is that his every thought is not on God."66 Preoccupation with one's emotional and practical problems is a manifestation of this sin because it elevates the self over the creator. As Swaggart tells viewers, the problem is not that man has an inferiority complex but that he has a "superiority complex." This sense of superiority—the self's obsession with mastering the world—is also characteristic of Satan, he argues. Swaggart's hostility toward psychology stems from his disdain for the self. "You still have self," he tells listeners. "That's the hardest problem the Holy Spirit has. God hates it [self]."67 Psychology is sinful—a product of

63 (cont'd) of controversy within Evangelicalism; it was the subject of heated debate on an episode of TBN's "Praise the Lord," and Swaggart has quoted Hunt extensively in his televised sermons. Hunt wrote a second book with the same theme, Beyond Seduction: A Return to Biblical Christianity (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1987). His ideas spurred a response from Gary DeMar and Peter Leithart, The Reduction of Theology: Dave Hunt's Theology of Cultural Surrender (Ft. Worth: Dominion Press, 1988). Swaggart has taken positions similar to Hunt's in his ministry magazine. See The Evangelist, September 1986.

64 Hunter, "Subjectivization," p. 46.


secularization—because it attempts to find human reasons for and solutions to people's problems. In Swaggart's world view, there is only one source of suffering and that is sin—the state of separation from God. For Swaggart, obsession with the self is a manifestation of this gulf. One does not join God by thinking about "my hairdo," or "my car," Swaggart insists, but by thinking of nothing but the Lord: "When I go to bed at night, when I get up in the morning, my eyes are on God. I think of him every minute of the day." The struggle between good and evil, joy and sorrow, cannot be decided through the actions of human beings, but through the victory of God over Satan. The way out, then, is to align oneself with God and receive eternal life, or with Satan and suffer eternal hell. It is this all important decision that determines the outcome of an individual life, and it is the only choice that really matters. If you choose God, you also choose joy, which Swaggart differentiates from happiness. Non-Christians are happy, he says, but happiness is a "roller coaster ride," short-lived and man-made. Christians have joy which is eternal and God-given. And while Christians must sacrifice worldly happiness, they are also freed from the pain of temporality—they will live forever. Swaggart's mission is intensely single-minded; he is there to beckon, scold and exhort people to choose God. He is a conductor on the train to eternity.

What this means, I propose, is that Swaggart does address the problem of the self in terms of the fundamental questions of human suffering, bafflement and evil. Swaggart's belief system acknowledges and solves these dilemmas by relegating them to "the world" and seeking to transcend them. Believers are freed from the problem of the self by renouncing this world and turning their sights on the next. This religious perspective also bows, albeit indirectly, to the modern problem of the self. The process of modernization which has produced the individual "subject" has simultaneously dispelled traditional, stable systems of meaning. As we have lost our connection to earlier signifying systems that gave us an identity—and specifically from religious beliefs that explained both our lives and our death—we have come face to face with our mortality. The modern problem of the self demands that we create a meaning not only for our existence, but also for its inevitable end. Swaggart's theology offers answers to both

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64Ibid., April 12, 1987.

existential problems: it tells people why they live and promises them they will not die. By denouncing the problem of the self, Swaggart offers a way out—a line of flight—or in Merton's terms, "a flight into faith."\textsuperscript{70} The irony of this path is that in fleeing from mortality, believers must actually seek their death. There is in Swaggart's theology a profound longing for the end of earthly existence. "I'm so tired of this life," he weeps. "I'm so tired of man's pitiful ways." \textsuperscript{71} Swaggart is not just fearless in the face of Armageddon, he yearns for it, because the apocalypse will justify his beliefs and his life's work. The end will provide the ultimate legitimation of his existence, flooding his being with meaning. In a world that increasingly denies or relativizes all significance, this totalizing answer to the problems of being and meaning is undoubtedly attractive to those people who are still capable of a deep belief in eternal life.

Swaggart's solution to the problem of the self—rejecting the world—is aimed at people for whom the world is already a struggle. Swaggart's message is persuasive to those whose patterns of experience coincide with his assessment that the modern world is sinful and empty. Suffering, confusion and wickedness will cease only in union with God, and most particularly at the point when the believer "wakes up in the arms of Jesus" after death.\textsuperscript{72} Robertson, on the other hand, is not tired of this life; he is merely weary of its being run by godless humanists. The "700 Club" does not counsel viewers to reject the world, but to change it—to restore "Christian Civilization" by making society conform to their beliefs. The program asserts that becoming a Christian will bring happiness, success and influence in this life. Robertson's message, then, is directed at people who do not feel themselves alienated from society; it speaks to insiders rather than outsiders. His listeners are members (actual or aspiring) of the middle and upper-middle classes who have reaped rewards from the existing social structure, and who would like to reap even more. This audience is not interested in forgoing the material and cultural benefits of society; it wants a theology that supports and legitimates its social position and aspirations. The story told by the

\textsuperscript{70}Merton, \textit{Mass Persuasion}, p. 143.


\textsuperscript{72}Ibid., June 14, 1987. Many songs in the crusade treat this theme; for example, "Heaven's Jubilee," which says "some glad morning we shall see/ Jesus in the air coming after you and me." "Jimmy Swaggart," May 24, 1987.
"700 Club" and by the New Christian Right is affirmative. The enemy is not the inherently sinful "self"; it is non-Christians who have undermined the proper functioning of society by separating public and private morality. The goal of the NCR, then, is not to reject the world, but to control its guiding metaphor. As Heinz says, "the contest over the meaning and course of the American story is a contest over whose sacred canopy shall prevail." The sacred canopies erected by Swaggart and Robertson are, ultimately, incompatible. The New Christian Right is engaged in a struggle to control society; its cohesion as a social movement is enhanced by referring to religious symbols which make that struggle sacred. Swaggart does not seek to control society but to transcend it. He wants to shed the mortal skin that binds him to the things of the world. Swaggart cannot envision a "moral majority" because he believes most people are incapable of choosing the arduous path to God. He is the man with a lifeboat who saves as many as he can, but who knows the world is still a sinking ship.

CHAPTER VIII
THE APPEAL OF FORM: PERFORMANCE, ADDRESS AND SETTING

Content and form can be separated for analytical purposes, but in practice they are intimately connected. Swaggart and Robertson must select and employ forms of communication appropriate to both their messages and their audiences. Burke argues that winning listeners' consent to one's form is to achieve a degree of mastery over them—to prepare them to yield to the content. Through formal devices and strategies, a speaker draws on listeners' patterns of experience and appeals to their desires. In this way, the form of a message can be powerfully satisfying. The next two chapters address the characteristic forms used by a country preacher and a religious broadcaster. Chapter 8 analyzes performance styles, modes of address and the settings of the programs. Chapter 9 examines the ritual character of the shows, the use of rhetorical strategies and the effects of televisual framing techniques. I argue that the form of the programs follows from the theological, cultural and political differences between their stars.

Swaggart's form—that of a country preacher—seeks immediate and passionate engagement from the audience. Swaggart exhorts and preaches; his listeners' relationship is that of communicants; the purpose of the communication is worship (or an act expressing reverence to a divine power, exhibited in creed and ritual). Although the crusade is pre-taped and edited, its appeal depends on the spontaneity and immediacy of the live performance. Robertson's form—that of a religious television host—creates a mediated but congenial "friendship" with the audience. He informs, explains and teaches; his listeners' connection is that of "television audience" or "700 Club" partners; the purpose of the communication is instruction and entertainment. While the "700 Club" is aired live, its "spontaneity" is pre-programmed into the format to produce an orderly flow of information, entertainment and promotion.

1In Burke's words: "A yielding to the form prepares for assent to the matter identified with it." Rhetoric of Motives, p. 58.
Swaggart’s style can be compared to that of a stage actor. Because he performs for huge crowds, his mannerisms and gestures are highly exaggerated and dramatic so as to convey his message and emotional state to those at the periphery of the auditorium or arena. He must project himself outward and appear as if he is speaking personally to each member of the audience. One observer pointed out to me that Swaggart’s stage manner (e.g. gestures, stance, use of microphone) resembles that of a rock musician. Indeed, Swaggart often refers to the fact that he plays and sings for God, rather than for the "world" like his cousin Jerry Lee Lewis. If it were not for his "infilling" of the Holy Ghost, he says, he would not be preaching but "in some bar playing 'My Cheatin' Heart'." Swaggart also employs a wide range of roles on stage; he acts out the parts of various characters in his anecdotes and biblical stories. Now he is the risen Lazarus, waddling across the stage in his winding cloth; now he is an alcoholic on his knees praying for God's forgiveness. By adopting these roles—performing his parables—Swaggart breathes life into religious doctrine and proves the timeliness (and timelessness) of Scripture. He also entertains the audience; it is much more engaging to witness a story than to simply be told it. This style of performing is highly visual—an important component of televisual discourse. Swaggart is not depicted as a talking head for extended periods; instead we observe the whole man, waving his arms, strutting, dancing, crawling on his knees, mopping his brow, pacing across the platform, holding the Bible aloft as he exhorts the audience.

Robertson’s style is tailored to, indeed created by, television. The intimate conversational setting of the TV studio and the proximity of the camera (most shots are close-up or mid-range) requires a performance style compatible with such settings. Robertson, the cast and guests are nearly always seated (he does stand at a blackboard during Bible teaching segments), and their gestures are compact. In this

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2I owe this observation to Alison Hearn.

setting, performers must convey thoughts and emotions through facial and hand gestures. The live segments consist primarily of people seated in a half-circle so they can look at each other and at the cameras with an economy of movement. This is standard in the talk show format; the emphasis is on conversation and the camera highlights this interaction by switching from speaker to speaker. We never see the cast stand except during transitions when they move to another portion of the set or when taking audience questions. The goal is to re-create the relaxed atmosphere of a conversation with friends. Robertson's manner is calm, friendly and authoritative. He does not raise his voice even when he obviously strongly agrees or disagrees with a guest. Instead, he relies on the breadth of his knowledge, which viewers have seen demonstrated in the past, to make his points. These are backed up with statistics, examples and biblical references. The philosophy of the "700 Club" mirrors Robertson's style. He says he believes in "vigorous discussion of issues," but does not "try to force [his] views on people." The show is presented in "as simple and as direct a style as appropriate . . . we are ourselves in a relaxed and straightforward relationship with our guests." Robertson acts as the facilitator for the smooth flow of images and ideas on the program; he comes across as congenial, even-tempered, stable and firmly in control—not only of the show but also of the world outside the studio. Robertson's image and style can best be described as paternal. He portrays the kind of fatherly authority associated with TV figures like Walter Cronkite and Robert Young. Viewers feel safe in such hands—a security that develops over time as they come to know and trust his persona.

The Use of Voice

Swaggart's use of voice is an integral part of his performance. Modern amplification has given Swaggart an advantage over 19th century revivalists. He does not have to shout to be heard by the throng

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1K. Clark, "$70 Miracle," p. 3.


3I am indebted to Hildi Westerkamp for bringing this important aspect of performance to my attention.
and this enables him to employ a much greater range of voices. He can, and does, slide from a shout to a whisper to make his points and to portray his cast of characters. Such techniques give Swaggart a great deal of control over the audience. Listeners are hushed when he drops to a stage whisper, are excited and boisterous when he shouts out God's praises or rails against the sins of modern society, are moved to tears when he is overcome by the Spirit, are exalted when he speaks in tongues. This use of voice is theatrical and is associated with live stage performances.

Robertson's voice is a product of television. It is the voice of a TV moderator or news announcer: even, dispassionate, modulated, cordial. The range of voices permitted a TV host is quite narrow compared to Swaggart's wide repertoire. Indeed, Robertson has only one voice—he approves or disagrees within the same restricted range of sound and we must rely on his facial gestures and our past knowledge of the program to determine his feelings on a subject. Because the talk show format uses an intimate camera, the viewer is able to make such fine distinctions which would be impossible for the audience at Swaggart's crusades. The conventions of the format—the proximity of the camera, the small set, the conversational voice—contribute to the creation of a comfortable familiarity which characterizes the parasocial interaction that develops between the TV personality and audience.

Mode of Address

Communication or address, Burke says, can be compared to courtship. A speaker "courts" an audience with specific intentions, using a language and form of address designed to evoke a desired response. The mode of address employed in a particular setting tells us something about those intentions and about the quality of the speaker/listener relationship. We petition superiors, for example, discuss, argue and agree with equals, and exhort, cajole, scold or instruct inferiors. Duncan argues that it is "the relation between speaker and audience that determines motivation because it determines how we address

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7Burke makes this analogy in Rhetoric of Motives, pp. 208–212.
8Duncan, Communication and Social Order, p. 289.
each other and thus how we affect each other." Form and content are therefore intimately connected within the structure of appeal—how an address is staged determines what can be said.

An important element of the rhetorical power which Swaggart and Robertson exhibit resides in their being privileged speakers. As an evangelist, Swaggart has been called by God to exhort sinners and bring them into the fold. This special status permits him to speak with the urgency and authority of biblical prophets. Listeners submit to his threats and exhortations because of that authority; they accept forms of address they would likely reject in other circumstances. Swaggart must continually re-create his right to speak by pointing to his status as a "God-called evangelist." In the crusades he tells congregants that he does not scold them because he enjoys it, but because God has ordered him to convey the harsh truth about humanity's precarious position. Swaggart insists that he is only a messenger—just a "poor country preacher"—while reminding listeners that ordained messengers have special access to God. He refers often to his conversations with the creator and noted in one program that he will be permitted to spend a few minutes with Christ at the Second Coming. Swaggart constructs his status as privileged speaker through self-address. He refers to himself frequently in the third person, a device that removes him from the intimate realm of I-you dialogue. At the altar call he urges people to "come to Brother Swaggart" and during the sermon often asks himself rhetorical questions in third person form (e.g. "What do you mean by that, preacher?"). This device separates the man from his role, thereby creating the sense that Jimmy Swaggart as evangelist inhabits a realm outside the activities of ordinary men and women. When Swaggart stands in the center of an overflowing Chilean national stadium and thunders, "Hear me. Hear me," he is speaking not as a man, but as a vessel of the Word. When he suddenly interrupts a sermon and remarks, "My Lord, that's good preaching," he becomes Swaggart the man

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9Ibid., p. 290.
observing Swaggart the preacher. As Rosenberg notes, a preacher's sense that he is divinely summoned is important to understanding his sermon techniques. Much of Swaggart's power as an orator rests on creating this distinction between himself as evangelist and his listeners as sinners. He cannot get too close to his audience—become too intimate—or this privilege will dissipate. For Swaggart to conduct us toward salvation, we must believe he is more familiar with the route than we. He must also be more intimate with God than with his listeners. Swaggart's charisma derives from his ability to evoke such confidence in his viewers; it is enhanced by connecting his purpose to already powerful religious symbolism. By tapping into a reservoir of sacred symbols, a charismatic leader

evokes a deep response from the public by touching the symbolic dimensions of consciousness in such a way that responding to such a leader makes meaning, recovers identity, and revitalizes roots.

Robertson's charisma is based on the pseudo-intimacy created in parasocial interaction. His privilege as a speaker stems from the authority held by media personalities (e.g. news anchors and talk show hosts). For Robertson to be persuasive, he must balance intimacy and authority by constructing an image of benevolent paternalism. The "700 Club" produces this intimate authority by mixing its modes of address; it speaks to viewers sometimes as inferiors and sometimes as equals. In the Bible lesson segments, Robertson instructs people directly; in his commentaries he analyzes and sums up complex political issues with a paternal finality that assumes viewers are largely ignorant on such topics. He advises listeners to get involved in particular issues and contact political representatives with the same fatherly assurance. The style of instruction on the "700 Club" differs from Swaggart's technique.

Swaggart commands his listeners with an address that is urgent and passionate; Robertson coaches his

15Rosenberg, American Folk Preacher, p. 23.
16Heinz, "The Struggle to Redefine America," p. 144. Burke also notes the rhetorical power inherent in adapting religious symbolism to secular arguments. His analysis of Hitler's Mein Kampf argues that Hitler "provided a non-economic interpretation of economic ills" by applying (and thus corrupting) religious patterns of thought and language to political ideology. Burke claims that "the patterns of Hitler's thought are a bastardization or caricatured version of religious thought." See "The Rhetoric of Hitler's Battle," pp. 191–220, in Burke, Philosophy of Literary Form.
audience to accept certain positions by resorting to reason. After a CBN news report lays out the "facts" of a particular issue, Robertson often urges viewers to call the White House or contact their congressional representatives. He does not tell them what position to take, however, but only suggests they make their views known. He is well aware, of course, that the program has already framed the issue in a way that makes the "Christian" perspective obvious and assumes most viewers will make the right choice. By leaving the final decision to viewers, Robertson appears to treat them as equals; his persuasion is backed up by evidence rather than emotion. The "700 Club" also appeals to reason by bringing on non-evangelical guests. Robertson has been host, for example, to Joan Mondale, the Rev. Jesse Jackson, George Gerbner and a representative of the tobacco industry. By exposing viewers to contending viewpoints, the program employs the strategy of secular news and public affairs shows; it presents "both sides" of an issue so that audience members may decide for themselves. Swaggart is not so ecumenical. Non-Christian viewpoints are used mainly as rhetorical devices—they are indexes of the world's moral dilapidation. The only choice offered to viewers of Swaggart's program is that of redemption or damnation. Further, salvation is not attained by making up one's mind but by listening to one's heart.

The intimacy created by the "700 Club" also appeals to the heart—not the passionate, almost erotic emotionality of Swaggart's performance, however, but the warm congeniality of the "700 Club" "family." As Julia LeSage points out, the "maternal" set of most morning talk shows creates an emotional identification for viewers who are invited to share in the personal experiences of the performers. This air of intimacy is enhanced by the fabricated familial relations of the "700 Club" cast. Soderman comes across like a mother or older sister, she defers to Robertson who plays the wise but kindly father, and teases Kinchlow who portrays the slow, good-natured brother. The cast members, as "family," reveal their own fears and hopes, draw out the inner concerns of their guests, and repeatedly express love and

17 The "700 Club" regularly displays the White House information number so viewers can contact the president on specific issues. The dispute over federal funding of Planned Parenthood was handled this way. "700 Club," February 12, 1987.

18 This is a safe assumption; in a call-in poll regarding the SDI defense system, more than 96 percent of respondents were favorable. Ibid., February 16, 1987.

caring for their audience. They thus invite the viewer to become part of the program's extended family. Indeed, as one of the show's promotional songs says, the "700 Club" is "so much more than a TV show; we're a family that's getting together."20 The success of the show depends on maintaining this delicate balance of authority and intimacy. Viewers must respect the performers and trust them, both emotionally and intellectually. LeSage argues that Christian talk shows are particularly "effective television" because they so skillfully blend paternalistic authority with maternal emotionality.21

Duncan identifies five types of address which speakers use to court listeners: the general public is addressed as "they"; community guardians as "we"; friends and confidants as "you"; the self as "me"; and the ideal or ultimate source of order as "it."22 It is through their terms of address that Swaggart and Robertson construct particular types of community and a vision of who belongs and who does not. Swaggart's "they"—those outside the elect—is broader than Robertson's. Swaggart excludes "apostate Christians" (e.g. non-charismatic evangelicals) while Robertson speaks to all who accept the tenets of "cultural fundamentalism" "They," for Swaggart, includes everyone who has not been born again and filled with the Holy Spirit. For Robertson, "they" refers primarily to secular humanists and non-evangelicals. Both men, however, require a "they" in order to produce "enjoinment in the moral arena." Robertson needs secular humanism as the antagonist to conservative Christianity; Swaggart needs the unsaved to justify his calling. If there is no "them" there can be no "us" and the terms of belonging become meaningless.

"We" refers to the guardians of the community. Swaggart's "we" comprises the small minority of born again, charismatic Christians whose task it is to lead humanity to God and effect salvation at the level of the individual. As Swaggart says, these chosen few are "reflections of His light. He reflects off of us to a darkened world that desperately needs enlightenment."23 Robertson's "we" refers to the

22Duncan, Communication and Social Order, p. 292.
custodians of morality who are called to enforce public morals at a social and political level. Straub relates seeing a "700 Club" guest issue a call for "militant believers" and then join Robertson in praying for a national revival: "What America needs, they believe, is the total eradication of immorality and evil," and this will occur only when conservative Christians have gained control of the public domain.24

Swaggart's chief mode of address is "you"—the term used to speak to friends and confidants. He employs this direct address 30, 40 even 50 times during a program (e.g., "You are a fallen creature"; "I'm going to say something that will bother you"; "You need a redeemer," etc.) He also speaks to the TV audience in this way; at several points in a program Swaggart is shown looking directly into the camera and prefacing a remark with "You there by television ...". Although direct address establishes intimacy, it is not, in Swaggart's oratory, the intimacy of equals. Rather, Swaggart speaks directly to his listeners because his status as divine messenger gives him special access to their souls. As an evangelist, he has the right to exhort, chastise and warn people in the most intimate terms. This direct address has another important effect; it bypasses (or attempts to) the mediating role of television and obscures the fact that the actual crusade is also staged to generate material for the televised version. Further, direct address, with its dialogic qualities, is essential to the art of country preaching. By speaking directly to individual listeners, Swaggart tries to retain the intimacy of a live service where preacher and congregants are interactive and interdependent. Such intimacy is crucial to Swaggart's strategy of appeal. The type of consubstantiality he hopes to create depends on getting listeners to participate in the "dialogue"—to feel that they, as individuals, are the "you" to whom he speaks.

The passion of Swaggart's performance is related to his liberal use of this form of address. Duncan notes that "in address to other individuals we enter into the most profound experience in communication."25 Swaggart's passion is not just a theatrical device—it issues from his relationship to his audience. If, as Duncan says, "The self is born in dialogue with others," then breakdown in dialogue

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threatens to annihilate the self—it puts the speaker at risk.26 Swaggart's rhetorical power and his emotional appeal stem from this risk. Because his success as a preacher is ultimately dependent on his audience's response, Swaggart makes himself highly vulnerable on stage. In Duncan's words, "address to a significant other is a moment of commitment, and thus a moment of anxiety, and, if failure occurs, a moment of anguish."27 There is something extremely compelling about witnessing a performer flirt with this potential anguish; it permits us to experience vicariously the vulnerability that always arises in interpersonal relationships.

Rosenberg observed occasions when a preacher "lost" his audience and experienced a breakdown in dialogue. In such cases, the preacher also lost his timing, flailed about trying to recapture the narrative thread, or resorted to formulas to re-establish connection with the congregation.28 Swaggart occasionally loses his audience by digressing too long and far from the topic or by inadequately stimulating listeners' emotions early in the sermon. At such moments, "dialogue" ceases and Swaggart finds himself "alone" on the stage. From my observations, Swaggart is usually aware when the audience has strayed. He draws people back into the conversation by resorting to stylistic and substantive devices that have proven effective in the past (e.g. themes of sanctification and redemption delivered through predictable rhetorical formulas). To avoid moments of anguish, the country preacher uses stock phrases throughout the sermon as a barometer of the audience's involvement. A "refrain" formula functions as a stall to buy the preacher time to compose his next lines. The "stimulant" piques listeners' interest and elicits their response.29 Swaggart's stimulant reminds congregants of the sacred nature of the occasion: "Glory, Glory," "Hallelujah," "Glory to God." His refrain is designed to maintain contact or dialogue and consists of variations on the question "Do you hear me?" (e.g. "Can you hear me?", "You get me?", "You understand?", "Do you hear what I'm saying?"). Swaggart's refrain also exhibits his vulnerability. If the

26Ibid.
27Ibid., p. 298.
28Rosenberg, American Folk Preacher, pp. 35, 42.
29Ibid., pp. 54–55.
audience does not hear him, the dialogue is ended. He can no longer speak and his being is called into question. As Duncan puts it: "We cannot become selves until we are understood and until we know we are understood."

The "700 Club" does not present occasions for this kind of risk and failure, either on the part of the cast or the audience. Robertson, his co-hosts and guests speak primarily to each other; their communication has been pre-planned to avoid the redundancies, mistakes and long pauses typical of ordinary conversation. Robertson is coached in advance on his guests' background, opinions and expertise to avoid moments of anguish in dialogue. When the performers do address the audience (in the studio or at home) they are not dependent on eliciting a response (except for cued applause). There is no chance for a failure of dialogue between speaker and listener because the latter is not offered an opportunity to speak. Questions from the studio and home audience are selected beforehand and questioners are coached by a co-host in order to regulate the sequence and length of each query. At certain times Robertson and the cast do speak directly to the audience—primarily when asking viewers to contact CBN (to request prayer, give testimony, solicit information and products, or donate money.) During the prayer segment viewers are personally invited to pray with the cast and to call a prayer counselor to bear witness to their conversion or to receive additional prayer. Transitional segments advise viewers of upcoming features and ask them to stay tuned. Promotional spots urge people to support CBN or send for literature. Robertson often speaks directly to viewers following a report on a particular social or political issue, and also addresses the audience during the Bible teaching segment. These appeals to listeners, however, are less passionate and personal than Swaggart's address to his audience. Robertson's addresses are more formal; he speaks to "Ladies and Gentlemen" rather than to an individual "you." Often viewers know they are being spoken to directly only because a performer looks straight into the camera or issues general directives (e.g. "stay tuned," "coming up next," etc.).

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30Duncan, Communication and Social Order, p. 298.

11Straub says Robertson is primed for each guest with fact sheets that include short biographies, quotes from books the guests have written, and possible questions to raise during the interview. Straub, Salvation for Sale, pp. 280-281.
Even when the "700 Club" cast members do address listeners directly, their performance is not dependent on immediate feedback. They are not vulnerable in the way that Swaggart is during a sermon. That is, Robertson and his co-hosts are never in danger of being alone on the stage. The "700 Club" is constructed in such a way that the audience is not an integral, essential part of the performance. The "you" to whom Robertson speaks is abstract and physically dispersed; he speaks to a TV audience rather than a congregation. His address is similar to that of secular news programs and talk shows. Such programs speak to an anonymous audience—one that is constructed in the minds of producers, hosts and news anchors—and which can "respond" only through the impersonal mediation of rating services and market research. Phone banks and mail personalize this feedback somewhat on the "700 Club," but the response is delayed and is quite different from the immediate, spontaneous interaction at Swaggart's crusades. Swaggart's audience is not coached to respond by floor directors or televisual cues, but by the strength of his performance.

The formats of the programs also contribute to differences in their mode of address. Swaggart attempts to hold viewers for 40 to 45 minutes with the power of his oratory. The sermon and altar call are presented without interruption and are meant to be consumed without breaks. Swaggart conducts a religious service to which congregants are expected to devote their total attention. That is, they are expected to worship. There is no time out in the sermon for trips to the kitchen and bathroom. The "700 Club" does not necessarily expect 60 minutes of uninterrupted attention. The show diversifies its messages (in form and content) on the assumption that people will tune in and out during the hour. It strives to capture attention in six to ten minute increments, cueing viewers on pending items of interest. The kind of emotional engagement demanded by Swaggart's sermon would be difficult, if not impossible to produce in ten minutes. The mode of address and the way it is staged on the "700 Club" belong to television. Swaggart's form of address, and the space in which it is enacted, are properties of religious ritual—a point I return to in the next chapter. A religious ritual and a television performance take place in very different settings; the setting of an address, moreover, determines not only what can be said, but how it is communicated.
The Setting of Communication

The setting of an urban revival calls forth a very different type of communication than does that of the television studio. I characterize this difference as ecstatic versus congenial communication. This is not to say that Robertson does not move people, but that the "700 Club" studio audience cannot be brought to religious ecstasy because it would interfere with the smooth flow of the program. The studio audience is certainly an important component of the talk show format—it gives viewers a point of identification and enhances the "live" aspect of the program. For the most part, however, the talk show studio audience functions like a part of the set and for much of the program it is simply absent. The audience disappears during the pre-taped and off-set segments of the "700 Club" and is invisible and silent during many of the on-set portions of the show (e.g. interviews with guests). Audience response is regulated through the conventions and technical requirements of the format. The audience is integrated into the program flow, applauding on cue during transitions between segments and appearing as a part of the set when the camera pans back to frame the cast. During the prayer segment, the audience becomes more visible; the camera shows us people immersed in prayer and occasionally lingers on the faces of particularly fervent petitioners. This participation is silent and passive, however. Audience members do not speak, call out or raise their hands heavenward. To do so would interrupt the performance by Robertson, et al. In this way the cast retains complete control over communication on the set. Speech flows one way—from those with the authority to speak to those who must listen. Audience members are granted the power of speech in only one context—when questions are taken from the floor. These segments are also regulated. A member of the cast (usually a co-host, indicating the privileged position of Robertson) controls the microphone, selects questions and steps away when the allotted time is up.

The role of the audience, then, is carefully controlled according to the constraints and conventions of the format. The program must fit into a 60-minute slot with each segment having a standard length. The format does not allow for spontaneity or unsolicited audience responses. Swaggart, on the other hand, is not bound by such strict time constraints because his performances are not broadcast live. While
the crusades have a definite structure (music, pitches for money and acknowledgements of local
congregations run about 60 to 75 minutes; sermon and altar call last an hour) he may shorten or lenthen
any part of the service to fit the specific context and the mood of the audience. The finished product, of
course, has to fit into a 60-minute format, but this is a problem to be solved by the program editors, not
by Swaggart. This flexibility is essential to the structure of Swaggart’s appeal. The success of a spiritual
sermon is totally dependent on evoking responses from the congregation. The preacher must have the
flexibility to gauge the temperament of the audience, to play upon listeners’ feelings, and to vary his
delivery according to the strength of their responses. Swaggart is no doubt confident in his ability to
move an audience, but he probably cannot guarantee they will be sufficiently open to the Spirit in the 20
to 30 minutes that a televised sermon runs.

A live broadcast would place enormous pressure on Swaggart to produce the appropriate response
in a very short time. It would also dramatically shorten the time devoted to music and congregational
singing. In the live crusade, group singing and musical performances take up nearly half of the revival
and are extremely important devices for warming up the audience. This use of sacred music, which
originates in Moody’s revivals, is a standard part of evangelical services. One of my informants said
hymns are used in church services and revivals as part of the devotional process; they are an integral
element of worship. Music is particularly important in Swaggart’s crusades. An accomplished performer
whose income is greatly bolstered by record sales, Swaggart also appreciates the emotional power of
music. The crusade I attended included seven musical numbers (fast-paced country gospel songs,
traditional hymns, sentimental ballads and sing alongs). In several instances Swaggart called for one or
more encores when the audience seemed particularly involved in a song. The power of group singing is
quite overwhelming for participants and Swaggart encourages crusade attenders to immerse themselves in
the performance in this manner. At the Vancouver, B.C. crusade I attended, he called for the audience to
repeat one refrain of "Amazing Grace" four times, explaining, "I’ve never heard it sung quite like this."

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Conversations with Susan Sullivan.

singing is a good gauge of the congregation’s emotional state: "If the people are 'high,' the
A live broadcast like the "700 Club" does not permit this kind of spontaneous interaction between performer and audience because the program must move along according to schedule.

The point of the crusade is to move participants to religious ecstasy. To achieve this response, Swaggart needs a setting that permits him the greatest amount of flexibility and spontaneity. The conventions of television, as an industry and an institutionalized discourse, are relatively inflexible and programmatic. Content must conform to the demand of format, program flow and time restrictions. In most live TV programming, spontaneity is incorporated into the format as one more element of the show. The on-set patter between "700 Club" cast members is a planned part of the program flow. An allotted amount of time is devoted to banter and jokes, and this too must contribute to the overall flow of the show. Each segment is set up to lead to the next and no extraneous material enters the discourse. Kinchlow may relate a personal anecdote to Soderman but the tale is designed to set up an introduction to the next segment. In this way, dialogue among the cast is a functional part of the format, serving as a bridge between program components. Even that section of the show that appears to be the most spontaneous—the prayer segment—is subordinated to format requirements. If Robertson or Kinchlow run over the time allotted to the prayer, the "700 Club" theme music comes up in the background as a cue to wrap up and move on. In the "700 Club," then, format dominates the content, as opposed to Swaggart's program where content precedes and determines the format.

This is not to say that Swaggart makes no concessions to the demands of television. At certain points during a live crusade he addresses the TV audience even though the event is not being televised at that moment. He is already anticipating the point when the crusade will be transformed into television. For the most part, however, Swaggart conducts the revival for those in attendance because without their engagement, the event cannot become TV. This also permits him more room for failure; unsuccessful crusades or dull or redundant moments during a sermon wind up on the floor of the cutting room. Robertson has less leeway for failure, especially in the live portions of the show. A boring guest or one

33(cont’d) songs will be sung energetically and many of the verses will be repeated . . .". (American Folk Preacher, p. 43). The preacher, of course, may help stimulate the audience's involvement in the singing, as Swaggart did.
who resists the host's direction jeopardizes both the flow of the program and the maintenance of audience attention. This is one reason why the "700 Club" relies heavily on pre-taped material which can be edited beforehand for maximum effect and integrated into the show's ideological perspective. The possibility of failure is also minimized through program planning. At any given time, three weeks of the "700 Club" are in some stage of development. The producer holds a formatting conference each week to establish future themes, select guests, plan features and testimonies and write formats. The disjuncture between the seamless, regulated flow of images and ideas usually presented on the "700 Club," and the unplanned flow of spontaneous speech, was apparent when Swaggart appeared live (via satellite) on the program. He had been invited to respond to Bakker's allegations that Swaggart wanted to take over PTL. The "700 Club" had initially tried to downplay Bakker's resignation and act as a mediator among the various antagonists in the PTL drama. Swaggart, typically, rejected these conciliatory efforts and during the interview said Bakker had sinned, that PTL's Heritage USA was a circus and that Oral Roberts was a laughing stock. Kinchlow, who conducted the interview, grew noticeably silent and uncomfortable and finally managed to cut Swaggart off. Although Kinchlow promised that Bakker would appear the next day to answer Swaggart's charges, the ex-head of PTL never materialized and the show's hosts mentioned neither Bakker or the scandal. At this point, apparently, Robertson decided to minimize CBN's connection with the "holy wars" and return to the safety of the show's normal format and content.

The "living room" setting of the "700 Club" is patterned after commercial talk shows. This type of setting is intended to create an informal atmosphere—to give viewers the sense they are observing friends interact "at home." Thus, the cast not only comes into our homes via television, but we, as viewers, are transported into theirs. By mimicking the landscapes of our own private conversations, talk show sets

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34During his tenure as producer, Straub kept an ongoing file of program themes and potential guests. A sampling of the themes he proposed reflect the cultural fundamentalism, Christian self-help and NCR politics characteristic of the "700 Club": e.g., "The Working Woman," "Will the Russians Stop at Afghanistan?", "Israel on Center Stage." [this topic was treated in March, 1987], "Don't Worry. Teaching and ministry on why Christians can live free from anxiety," and "One Nation Under God. Looks at the moral drift in America." Straub, Salvation for Sale, pp. 273-275.

help create a context for the para-social interaction between performers and audience. Other Christian talk shows follow this pattern: the PTL Show and TBN's "Praise the Lord" also take place in living room sets—lavish, over-decorated spaces where the hosts and their guests chat, exhort, pray and ask for money. The "700 Club" set, however, is more tastefully appointed and its cast's attire is less ostentatious; it connotes "old rich" compared to the nouveau riche excesses of PTL and TBN. The living room set creates an atmosphere of familiarity while maintaining authority for its discourse. LeSage points out that the price of the furnishings these "rooms" are out of reach for most viewers. The women who make up the majority of Robertson's audience generally can acquire the lifestyle associated with these surroundings only through the success of their fathers and husbands. In this sense, LeSage says, "the set is patriarchal." But because the living room does represent "home," it encourages a type of discourse associated with women's sphere—stories that emphasize the personal and emotional. The role of the female co-host is to draw out these experiences for the benefit of the audience. Soderman usually takes over in segments about the family, asking very intimate questions that would seem inappropriate coming from a man. At such moments, Lesage says, the set "becomes the site for a deeply personal 'sharing'." The living room set in Christian television, she argues, combines a "patriarchal cultural legitimacy" and a "motherly' emotional appeal" that "facilitates the New Right's ability to interpret the public sphere for its viewers." The "700 Club" also signals changes in its discourse by shifting the action among several sets. The show always opens in the living room, the set used for most of the live interviews. Robertson delivers his commentary from a news room setting; this smaller set also houses a TV screen for satellite interviews. The "sunroom" is a more informal set, frequently the site of banter between Soderman and Kinchlow. The prayer segment often takes place in this space. Bible lessons are staged in a classroom set. The regular audience comes to expect different kinds of language or discourse to emanate from these different environments.

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16 LeSage, "Christian Television," p. 16.

17 Ibid.
The setting associated with talk shows is highly conducive to the creation of a para-social interaction between performers and audiences. Programs like the "700 Club" promote this relationship by establishing a sense of intimacy that extends to the viewing audience. TV personalities like Robertson become familiar figures through our repeated visits to their comfortable surroundings (where both performer and viewer are at home), and through the performers' predictable behavior. A central feature of the talk show is "the attempt . . . to duplicate the gestures, conversational style, and milieu of an informal face-to-face gathering." The setting is homey, transitions are facilitated with jokes and anecdotes, the cast acts like a family and guests are treated like close friends. The program also attempts to "blur the line which divides [the performers] and the show, as a formal performance, from the audience both in the studio and at home." Robertson and his co-hosts address one another by first names, reveal personal information about themselves, and adopt stereotypical identities which make them familiar to viewers over time. The regular viewer develops a sense of who these people are and how they can be expected to behave in a given situation. Devoted audience members eventually come to feel themselves part of "the family;" the language of the show comes to hold a special meaning for them—one that is lost on the casual viewer.

The talk show format also blurs the line between performer and audience by incorporating controlled feedback (e.g. questions from the floor and by telephone). Telephone banks heighten the feeling of direct interaction with the cast members who tell viewers repeatedly: "We're here because we care about you;" "We want to hear from you;" "Call and tell us what you think." Such programming techniques cultivate a sense of intimacy which can be effectively exploited to raise money. These devices, of course, are not restricted to the "700 Club," but are characteristic of the whole genre of personality programs that originate in commercial broadcasting. The values stressed in these programs—"sociability, easy affability, friendship, and close contact"—are techniques by which the shows build and maintain

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39Ibid., p. 215.
audience loyalty, and are an important part of the "700 Club's" structure of appeal.40

40Ibid., p. 215.
Televised Ritual and Television as Ritual

Swaggart's crusades are ritual performances; they provide a sacred space for the enactment of belief. The "700 Club" format, I propose, tends to undermine the creation and maintenance of religious ritual. Gregor Goethals defines ritual as the active participation of individuals within the context of extraordinary space and time. Ritual space is "specifically ordered for communion and interaction," just as ritual time is an ordered structure with a clear beginning, middle and end.1 Active participation is crucial within a ritual if it is to "provide an immediate, direct sense of involvement with the sacred, confirming the world view, indeed the very being, of the participant."2 More importantly, ritual must be understood as a technique of transcendence; it has to do with the realm of the sacred. Monica Wilson says ritual is "the symbolic enactment of relationships between man [and woman] and what is conceived of as transcendental reality." Through ritual, human beings "express . . . what moves them most" in conventionalized forms that reveal participants' deepest values and beliefs.3 Anthony Blasis suggests that a ritual’s persuasive power has to do with its ability "to call to mind, recapitulate, or bring into a background presence a collective epic, a salvation history, or some other contextual significance."4

Swaggart's crusades fulfill all of these conditions. His performances draw on the history and salvific schema of charismatic Evangelicalism, are conducted within the conventions of a religious revival,

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2Ibid., p. 6.


4Ibid., p. 67.
require active participation by the congregants, are set within sacred space (the auditorium transformed into church), and take place inside sacred time (beginning: gospel music; middle: sermon; end: altar call). The predictability of the form is essential to the enactment of the ritual. Congregants and viewers enter into this form knowing what to expect from Swaggart and of what to expect of themselves. Roles and purposes are clearly defined. Swaggart will exhort them to change their lives and accept Jesus, and if they are sufficiently "open," their hearts will "yield" and their souls will be filled with the Spirit. The music, particularly group singing, encourages congregants to participate physically; it provides an occasion to become one "body." In our culture, opportunities to express ourselves in communion with others in this way are very rare. The crusade exists to create a place for activities that are out of context in most public settings—weeping, moaning, singing aloud, speaking a divine language. It validates and sacralizes these experiences, creating an identification between preacher and worshipers. As Goethals says, "For those who genuinely participate, rituals offer occasions for identity and renewal."

The "700 Club" does not create sustained sacred time and space, nor does it permit full participation by its audience. The program has a clear beginning, middle and end, but its content is internally fragmented and the overtly religious elements are dispersed throughout the show. The "Word of Knowledge" segment is the only one that fulfills the requirements of ritual, but it is extremely brief and its placement in the program unpredictable. Audience involvement is highly regulated and mediated. The audience is not part of the performance; the cast and guests enact their belief in front of viewers, not with them. Further, because the "700 Club" is largely a secular format with religious content inserted, its ability to construct a relationship between viewers and "transcendental reality" is limited. The experience of watching the "700 Club" has more in common with viewing other TV programs than with attending a religious service. The program can be called a ritual only in the restricted sense that television viewing itself has become a ritualized activity in modern society (e.g. to say one watches a program "religiously" means that it is a significant, habitual activity). To define the term ritual in this way, however, is to strip it of its sacred dimensions. It also indicates the erosion of religious significance in modern life generally.

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Thus, any activity might qualify as ritual—shopping, attending a rock concert, mall cruising, watching the Superbowl. Goethals suggests that as television has become the central medium of communication in our society, it has taken over the church's traditional function of producing common myths and integrating the individual into the social whole—it has become the "new religion." One of the dangers of TV—as—religion is that it tends to "trivialize myths and ritual, reducing them to a kind of ornate emptiness." I propose that the "700 Club" has trivialized the sacred by subordinating it to the talk show format. Participation is regulated and minimized, prayer is de—sacralized by making it conform to imperatives of program flow, and sacred time and space are fragmented.

The Rhetoric of Christian TV

Religious rhetoric persuades through authoritative proclamation rather than rational argument. Listeners are moved by religious rhetoric when they feel the terms of their belief system have been faithfully represented by speakers who hold the necessary authority to deliver divine messages. I am concerned here with the rhetorical strategies that Swaggart's crusade and the "700 Club" use to appeal to viewers, and to convince those viewers that Swaggart and Robertson are legitimate vessels of the Word.

The Bible, preaching and television are oral forms of communication and their intersection, via televangelism, is highly compatible. Oral discourse is necessarily redundant; it must employ simple themes and uncomplicated language to insure maximum listener comprehension. Because of constraints on listener comprehension, oral communication relies heavily on methods of amplification. Basic themes are amplified through elaboration, paraphrase and simple repetition. Television has adopted some of the amplifying techniques of oratory and informal speech, as well as devising methods specific to the medium.

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4Ibid., p. 2.

5The Bible, of course, originated in oral narratives.

6For an extensive discussion of the differences between oral and written communication, see Walter J. Ong, Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word (London: Methuen, 1982.)
TV mixes sound and image to convey and reinforce its messages. Because television was originally conceived as radio with pictures, visual elements are generally subordinated to aural information. Silence, even momentary, is extremely rare on television, and viewers count on spoken narrative, music and sound effects to explain the stream of images that fill the screen. TV news programs, talk shows and televised sermons are particularly dependent on speech because the visual environment of these programs is redundant. Graphics, film clips and written overlays add visual interest and enhance or repeat the narrative, but are usually not crucial to comprehension because the speaker provides the essential information. The combination of sight and sound, then, reduces ambiguity which is a chief concern in a "disposable" medium like television.

The redundancy of the image is one form of televisual amplification. Serial programming, standardized formats and conventional techniques of framing also contribute to the predictability and comprehensibility of television. Live oratory has its own methods of amplification: rhythm, formulaic speech patterns, repetition and use of culturally-embedded myths and fables. The "700 Club" uses techniques of amplification drawn from TV; Swaggart employs those of oratory. In oral communication, both mediated and direct, speakers develop their subjects by repeating basic ideas in different words and contexts to illustrate what they mean and also to relate that meaning to the experience of the audience. Because the experience of the audience of a talk show differs from that of a revival audience, so must the methods used to appeal to them.

Repetition in the "700 Club" is both substantial and formal. The show repeats and elaborates the basic themes of cultural fundamentalism in its news reports, interviews, commentary and teaching segments. The regularity of the program—its correspondence to the patterns of the work week—promote habitual exposure so that the show becomes a normal part of the viewer's morning activities. Predictability is also built into the format. The opening credits, theme music and unchanging set

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Kennedy, New Testament Interpretation, pp. 37, 21. Kennedy argues that "an orally received text is characterized by a greater degree of repetition than is a text intended to be read privately." Repetition, or amplification, in rhetorical communication "is necessitated by the oral nature of the situation and by the constraints of the audience."
constitute a secure, familiar environment. The cast, which viewers have come to know over time, greets the audience like old family friends. Certain segments are standard components of every show ("Word of Knowledge," news report, interview). The length of the segments are also predictable; viewers come to expect a "commercial" break on the quarter hour and can time their morning activities by the show’s rhythm. The program also builds repetition internally. Shows are planned around themes with each segment approaching a subject from a different angle or manner of treatment. For example, the day after the "Amerika" mini-series began, the theme of the "700 Club" was the Soviet threat. The program opened with a news report on the SDI system, led into Robertson interviewing a "sovietologist" from Johns Hopkins University’s Foreign Policy Institute on the plan’s chances for passage in Congress, was followed by Soderman and Robertson discussing the first "Amerika" installment (with clips from the film), and wrapped up with an interview with a Soviet emigre to the U.S.\textsuperscript{10} Sometimes a theme will be repeated over several episodes, as was the case in the week-long series broadcast live from Israel in March, 1987.

Regular viewers become familiar with Robertson’s theological views and with the "700 Club" format. They know certain themes and segments will recur and this is true even when they miss several episodes. Repetition is important in the process of building audience loyalty and establishing a para-social relationship between viewers and performers. The show’s producers, aware of the importance of this cumulative familiarity, introduce changes gradually to minimize viewer alienation (e.g. the change to a magazine format was a calculated risk designed to attract a more upscale audience). Robertson’s departure as host also occurred in stages. In September, 1986, he announced his candidacy for the presidential nomination and his decision to take a sabbatical from the show. Robertson continued to appear regularly in the fall as he groomed Kinchlow for the role of host. His absences increased in early 1987 and he now appears only occasionally as a "commentator" and for special productions like the Israel series. In vacating the role of "700 Club" host, Robertson lost an important point of contact with voters. The program also risked losing viewers, not only because Kinchlow’s TV persona lacks the authority of

\textsuperscript{10}"700 Club," February 16, 1987.
Robertson's, but because no black has ever hosted a major religious program. Producers appeared to be aware of this threat to the show's ratings and quickly recruited Robertson's oldest son Tim to co-anchor.¹¹

Repetition in Swaggart's program is integrated into his preaching style and in the recurrence of key themes. His amplification techniques originate in traditional oratory and are intended to evoke an immediate, visible response from the audience. Style, one of an orator's persuasive tools, is determined by the speaker's intentions. "Plain style" is used to teach, "middle style" to please, and "grand style" to move an audience.¹² Robertson rarely uses "grand" rhetoric because this style of speech, for the most part, is incompatible with the conventions of normal television formats. Robertson employs plain style to inform and instruct and middle style to entertain his viewers; even when he exhorts the audience he does so in a way that does not conflict with the relaxed, informal atmosphere of the show. Swaggart, on the other hand, transgresses the conventions of commercial television, and does so by resorting to grand style oratory.

A speaker's style includes the choice of words (lexicon) and how those words are put together (syntax) to create varying effects on listeners. Metaphors are particularly compelling rhetorical devices because they employ familiar words in new ways, thus making "strange" that which is familiar (or sacralizing the mundane). Sacred language is characteristically metaphorical or imagistic.¹³ The New

¹¹Kinchlow departed the show in February, 1988 for "personal reasons," and the "700 Club" underwent a thorough facelift. Soderman also left the cast and Tim Robertson was joined by younger co–hosts. The more youthful cast was given a more contemporary environment. The new set is brighter and more modern and the show's pace is quicker and more upbeast. These changes suggest that CBN executives are trying to offset the audience losses following Pat's departure and the Bakker and Swaggart scandals. The "new, improved" version of the "700 Club" spurred one journalist to call it the "Good Morning, Christian America" show. Laura Sesssions Stepp, "TV Evangelists Have a Devil of a Year," Washington Post, November 29, 1987, p. A14.


¹³Religious rhetoric is expressed in sacred language which has the following characteristics: 1) a revelatory or evangelical character; 2) immediate and spontaneous claims about reality; 3) an imagistic and metaphorical quality that gives new meaning to ordinary experience; 4) an absolute, urgent cast to its assertions so the "whatever does not fit into them is outrageous;" and 5) the appearance of existing outside time and arising from a cosmic, universal reality.
Testament and traditional gospel hymns are rich in metaphors. Over time, these metaphors have part of a special language that helps constitute membership in the evangelical community—they are devices for establishing terms of belonging.¹⁴ Spiritual preachers exploit this rich metaphorical tradition in their sermons, and Swaggart is no exception. As Swaggart’s followers come to recognize his stock of metaphors, they also become "consubstantial" with him through the sharing of a sacred vocabulary. Swaggart constantly recycles his repertoire of metaphors, building on the basic themes of the Pentecostal belief system. The deadness of non-charismatic churches, the cleansing power of Christ’s resurrection, the nourishing effect of the Holy Ghost are repeated and amplified in new contexts with slightly different wording.

"Hot" is an appropriate metaphor for Swaggart’s style: it connotes passion and interaction, is abrasive rather than soothing. Swaggart uses the metaphor of heat to distinguish spiritual fervor from passive acceptance of doctrine. This metaphor originates in Scripture: at the Pentecost, the Holy Spirit descended on the apostles as tongues of flame. Swaggart describes non-charismatic churches as "cold," "dry," "empty" and "dead." These adjectives also describe his own emotional state when he needs an infusion of the Holy Ghost, which he describes as if it were a drug and he an addict: "I’m so hooked on it I’ve got to have it about every other day."¹⁵ Swaggart’s metaphors, like his theology, are based on dichotomies: hot/cold, dead/reborn, empty/full, dry/wet.¹⁶ To be "full" of the Spirit is to be alive, passionate, warm, washed, sanctified. To be "empty" is to be dead, dried up, cold and removed from God. The Pentecostal–Holiness tradition describes sanctification as an "infilling of the Spirit." Swaggart speaks of the saved as "spirit–filled Christians," and in one program referred to himself as "nine-tenths

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¹⁴Sizer makes this point as well in *Gospel Hymns*.


soul" to indicate an experience of spiritual saturation. One of my informants suggested that Swaggart appeals to viewers who want to be "fed the Word of God"—a phrase that echoes Swaggart's references to "hungry hearts" and "spiritual thirst." God's grace is "wet"—it is the "water of life" that cleanses and refreshes the soul. Swaggart frequently uses a river metaphor to refer to both the holy Spirit and to Christ's blood; the river "gets in your life and starts to flow," it "flows out of your innermost being." He also speaks of "being bathed in the blood of Jesus." The hymn most closely associated with the modern charismatic movement, "There Is A River," is also the theme song of Swaggart's program. The show opens with a long shot of a waterfall as the song plays in the background. This hymn, top-selling record for Swaggart in 1972, is used often during the altar call. Water and rivers, of course, are traditional Christian metaphors for the salvific experience of baptism.

Swaggart also amplifies his message by manipulating the arrangement of sounds and words to produce an effect on listeners. A common figure of speech, one that Swaggart uses liberally, is anaphora. Anaphora is a form of repetition in which one or more words are used to begin a series of sentences or clauses. The Beatitudes are an example of anaphoric construction in the Bible. Kennedy likens the effect of anaphora to "a series of hammer blows in which the repetition of the word both connects and reinforces the successive thoughts." Rosenberg found this type of repetition to be abundant in the sermons of folk preachers; such formulaic construction, he says, is typical in oral composition because it serves as an aid to memory. Because spiritual preachers like Swaggart do not work from a text, but compose their sermons spontaneously, they depend on mnemonic linguistic devices, formulaic syntactical structures and rhythmic delivery. The following excerpt from a revival in Alabama illustrates Swaggart's

18Ibid., January 18, 1987; April 26, 1987; and interview, January 19, 1988, with Gail Yargus, assistant director of "I Believe," an evangelical program produced and aired weekly in Seattle.
10Kennedy, New Testament Interpretation, p. 27.
11Rosenberg, American Folk Preacher, Chapter 5.
use of repetition, formula and rhythm (I have underlined those words which received vocal stress):

God’s given me everything he’s ever promised me, and more besides.
and he’s heaped it up
and pressed it down
and shaken it together
and it runs over
and my cup overflows.
(short pause)
and the Lord is my shepherd
and I shall not want
He leadeth me beside the still waters
He restoreth my soul
He prepareth a table before me in the presence of my enemies
My cup runneth over.
(slightly longer pause)
Hallelujah.
I’m not talkin’ about dried beans.
I’m talkin’ about eternal life
I’m talkin’ about joy unspeakable and full of glory
I’m talkin’ about power from on high
I’m talkin’ about eternal life.
(long pause)
Hallelujah.22

The entire utterance is unified by the theme of fullness or abundance, which is also a metaphor for being filled with the spirit of God. Swaggart begins by referring to his own blessings and draws on biblical language and images to flesh out the theme of abundant grace. The first stanza is based on Luke 6:38 evoking its image of a vessel for measuring grain filled to the brim and overflowing.23 The overflowing vessel then reminds Swaggart of the 23rd Psalm which also contains an image of a cup running over. He joins both texts, adapting them to his theme of abundant grace and eternal life. Swaggart amplifies his message both thematically and structurally, and it is his skill at both that makes his preaching powerful. In the first "stanza," the word "and" introduces every line and also acts as a predictable oral bridge to the next phrase. The basic construction is also repeated as Swaggart creates rhythmic continuity by stressing the verb in each phrase. He punctuates the stanza by artificially drawing out the last syllable (e.g. "over-flo-o-—ws"). After a brief pause for breath, he launches into the second

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23Luke 6:38: "give, and gifts will be given you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over, will be poured into your lap;". The opening reference to "dried beans" in the final stanza also originates in this passage.
stanza, connecting it to the first by starting the next two lines with "and." This set comes from on the 23rd Psalm which Swaggart and his audience know by heart, and which has its own poetic meter. The next three lines begin with "He" and are parallel both in their use of the archaic verb form and in the fact that the verbs receive spoken stress. In fact, Swaggart changes one line drawn from the psalm ("he prepareth a table . . .") from second to third person so that it does parallel the preceding lines. The final line of the stanza repeats the idea in the last line of the preceding set. Like "overflows," "o-ver" is also dramatically lengthened to conform to the meter. This stanza repeats the image of an overflowing cup, just as the final stanza reiterates the theme of fullness and eternal life. Swaggart pauses again for breath before the last stanza and inserts a stimulant ("Hallelujah") to further prod listeners to respond. The last set exhibits the most dramatic use of anaphora. It begins with a negative statement, "I'm not talkin' about . . ." and switches to a series of parallel positive assertions, "I'm talkin' about . . .", that draw on central sacred symbols (e.g. eternal life, unspeakable joy, God's power). Swaggart further emphasizes these symbols through the placement of stress. The second and fifth lines are identical, hammering home the central message of Swaggart's charismatic theology—the victory over death. After the third set Swaggart pauses again, waiting for the applause and shouts to die down. In a different, much more subdued voice, he punctuates the entire passage with "Hallelujah."

James Weldon Johnson says that skilled preachers often use this device—"breaking off suddenly at the highest point of intensity and dropping into the monotone of ordinary speech"—to create an effect on the audience.²⁴ Passages like these illustrate Swaggart's art—his mastery over both substance and form, and thus over his audience. Throughout the entire passage, which lasts little more than a minute, the crusade audience has been on its feet, shouting and applauding and urging him on. Swaggart speaks his lines with his whole body, pacing back and forth with the microphone in one hand and a Bible in the other. By the second stanza, he is prancing across the stage, feeding off the energy of the crowd and of his own preaching. The "hammer blows" of this type of oratory create an aural effect that is very difficult to experience or fully appreciate on paper. It must be heard, and heard in the context of

religious ritual. As Johnson says, the old-time preacher who had mastered the art of intoning a sermon, who had properly developed his gestures, tempo and voice, "had the power to sweep his hearers before him; and so himself was often swept away."\(^{25}\)

Because linguistic devices like anaphora are used to evoke a response from listeners, their placement in the sermon is a gauge of a preacher's control over timing. Swaggart uses anaphora when he wants to elicit maximum emotional response from the audience. A Swaggart sermon follows a fairly regular pattern which might be imagined as a sine wave that increases in frequency and proportion as the sermon progresses. He builds momentum and anticipation by pacing the use of repetition. The rhythm created through this rhetorical strategy is not accidental. In fact, rhythm is "the architecture of the sermon," according to Rosenberg:

In an effective sermon it is always necessary to gradually increase the rhythm so as to inspire the congregation and to build toward an emotional and spiritual peak through the rhythm, whether that peak be at the end of the sermon, or near its middle.\(^{26}\)

Swaggart's sermons peak near the end, but he takes care to work his listeners toward that pinnacle throughout the service. He stimulates the audience with anaphoric moments, each calculated to move listeners closer to the point of "yielding." The placement of these peaks is a matter of timing, or the ability to pace and sustain rhythm. Swaggart's mastery over rhythm and timing is most apparent at moments of anaphora, which have their own rhythm. Indeed, I have never seen this linguistic device fail to arouse an audience, and even found myself waiting for these peaks. I assume that his regular viewers (and crusade attenders) wait for these moments as well because it gives them the opportunity to engage emotionally and physically in the dialogue. Listeners respond to this rhetorical technique by clapping, shouting, standing, raising their arms and weeping. It is at such points that Swaggart becomes most physically involved in his preaching: he struts across the stage in a high-stepping gait, shakes the Bible in the air, casts his eyes heavenward. This is when Swaggart comes closest to a chanted form of preaching. Each anaphoric phrase is punctuated by a groan (e.g. "heaped it up-uh," "pressed it down-uh," etc.) and

\(^{25}\)Ibid., p. 5.

\(^{26}\)Rosenberg, American Folk Preacher, pp. 42, 48.
words are often extended to maintain metrical unity. These utterances have a musical quality; Swaggart will often slip into song during chanted portions of the sermon. The hammer blows have a cadence and beat that speak to the emotions of the listeners who "speak" back with their bodies. These are the points of communion in Swaggart's oratory—when his courtship of the audience has been successful. They are also moments of communion with God, or with transcendental reality. Swaggart often breaks into tongues—enters into dialogue with the miraculous—following a chanted section of a sermon. One of the preachers in Rosenberg's study explained that during the chanted verses of a sermon, he feels that the Spirit has taken him over completely—that he is "being fed by God."27 Compare this experience to Swaggart's metaphor of "getting full" of the Holy Ghost.

Metaphorical language is associative, poetic and imagistic. It is more emotional and physical than rational, lending itself naturally to rhythmic delivery. Metaphors give mundane experience new meaning—they make the ordinary mysterious. In contrast, the discourse associated with news analysis, public affairs reports and interviews strives for a minimum of ambiguity; it de-mystifies the unknown. Statements are supported with evidence and develop toward logical conclusions. If Dan Rather or Tom Brokaw were to lace their reports with allusions and metaphors, listeners would question their authority (if not their sanity). The language of the "700 Club" alternates between this formal, rational discourse of public affairs shows and the familiar, conversational speech of talk programs. Robertson avoids the passionate, poetic terrain of the country preacher because it would jeopardize his legitimacy as a host and professional broadcaster. The "700 Club" audience does not expect to be swept away or brought to its feet (to experience ecstasy) but to be informed, entertained and reassured. Robertson may serve up old-time religion, but he does so in a language and style befitting a politician or newscaster. He urges viewers to choose conservative Christianity over secularism and to subscribe to his health and wealth theology by appealing to their reason and their self interest, not to their subterranean passions.28

27 Ibid., p. 38.

28 Indeed, this level-headed approach is what Dabney initially found attractive about the "700 Club" host: "Robertson did not come on like a preacher at all; he was no thundering sermoneer nor twittering bird smirker, but a reasonable and educated man, with a unified point of view that was especially intriguing to intellectuals." Dabney, "God's Own Network,"
Robertson's style is anecdotal and congenial, rather than metaphorical and ecstatic. His speech, appropriate to a talk show or a press conference, would be out of place in a religious service, just as Swaggart's oratory would be ludicrous in a talk show setting.

Sacred language is distinctive by virtue of being extraordinary. It is immediate, spontaneous, metaphorical, urgent. It makes the familiar mysterious and points to a reality outside ordinary time and space. Swaggart's language is sacred. Robertson's is not. The rhetoric of the "700 Club" is firmly entrenched in "the world;" it speaks the language of television news and entertainment, which is why the prayer segments of the show seem so unsettling, almost profane.29

The Program Frame

Media production is a process of framing—selecting and organizing substantial and formal elements to create a particular set of meanings for an audience. Framing is both an ideological and technical process which invests a product with a "preferred reading."30 The television frame fuses textual, visual and aural elements to produce a rendering of "what is." When we watch these programs, we understand Swaggart to be an evangelist and Robertson to be a Christian TV host because their identities have been constructed for us through an elaborate set of professional, aesthetic and technical conventions.

29"Piety," Burke says, is "the sense of what properly goes with what"—a knowledge that reveals the sources of one's own being." Burke, Permanence and Change, p. 74. In this sense, the prayers on the "700 Club" are impious; appeals to the sacred do not "go with" the rational discourse and slick entertainment of a TV talk show. Nor do petitions for "financial healing" fit well with Christ's teachings. To talk of a "spiritual bank account" is to marry terms that do not properly fit together.

Producers of Swaggart's crusade must portray him as an evangelist and assemble the program in a way that reproduces the spontaneous emotionality of a preacher exhorting his flock. Camera perspectives are used to create a sense of dialogue or interaction between Swaggart and the audience. Two stationary cameras sit about ten rows back near the center of the main floor. They are trained on the stage to capture shots of Swaggart, the band and assorted dignitaries seated at each end of the platform. Another camera, atop a mobile stand, circulates through the aisles in the front section of the auditorium for close-ups of people listening and responding to the performance. This camera also pans in on worshipers during the altar call. A portable mini-camera operator travels up and down the aisles, kneels on the floor below the platform, follows penitents to the altar, and sometimes stands unobtrusively on stage behind the performers. Another stationary camera perches high above the audience at the rear or side of the arena and produces the wide shots of the auditorium that convey the immensity of the crowd; these images are often used for program transitions and as background for written material on the screen.

Editors assemble the final product by splicing together images from these five perspectives. The goal is to create for viewers a sense of the emotional exchange between Swaggart and his musical entourage and the revival audience. This is accomplished by skillful editing. Audience shots are carefully interwoven with images of Swaggart and the other performers. Individuals are shown nodding in agreement to his assertions, laughing at his jokes, listening in dismay as he recounts the sins of society, weeping when moved by the music or preaching. Camera operators are especially alert to signs of strong emotion. Shots of people sobbing or rapt in prayer are staples of the program. Wide angle shots are used at moments when Swaggart elicits a particularly strong response—when he brings listeners to their feet and gets them to "give God a clap offering." The end product is a back and forth motion between speaker and listeners that resembles dialogue. It is realistic—appears to convey the revival as it happened—but is not real. The shot of the young couple holding hands and murmuring assent to Swaggart's defense of marital fidelity is a technical device. It is part of the frame and not necessarily a representation of simultaneous events. This is one of the illusions created by television—that what we see is exactly what

31The placement and use of cameras is based on my observation of and participation in the Vancouver crusade, and on my observations of the program.
took place. Swaggart’s remarks to the TV audience during a crusade are part of this illusion. It seems to
home viewers that they are watching the crusade in progress rather than a manipulated reconstruction of
an event that took place weeks or months earlier.

Just as timing is a key element in the preacher’s art, the pacing of images is central to the televised
spiritual sermon. As the sermon proceeds and Swaggart warms to his subject, the number of audience
shots increases. At peak moments, when he resorts to anaphora, tongues and chanting, shots of the
congregation are more frequent. This technique encourages viewers to vicariously participate in the
interaction between Swaggart and the crusade audience. We are moved not only by Swaggart’s
performance but also by his ability to move others like us. Shots that frame Swaggart and the audience
together contribute to this perception. These images portray him as evangelist—the anointed prophet
delivering God’s message to the world. In Swaggart’s words, he represents "a voice in the wilderness."

Images of the audience are important in another respect: by witnessing others who have abandoned
themselves to ecstasy, viewers are encouraged to plunge into the same river of passion, to yield to the
Spirit and throw off the reserve that characterizes their daily activities. In our society, there are few
occasions for expressing this type of enthusiasm, in the original sense of the word which meant to be
possessed by God. Lewis Hyde suggests that enthusiasm—the "in-dwelling of the spirit" in Pentecostal
terms—is experienced in the flesh. These physical expressions of feeling and belief are at odds with the
disembodied intellect exalted by rationalism. Modernism, grounded in the superiority of reason, expects
religion to also be rational; it thus ostracizes or ridicules belief systems that refuse to bow to the intellect.
Charismatics have been treated as "denizens of the zoo" partly because they exhibit their belief
corporeally, sensuously (e.g. healing, shaking, babbling, etc.). To the charismatic Christian, however,
knowledge is not deduced with the mind, it is revealed through the emotions or body. As Hyde says, the
"enthusiast waits for a sensation of truth." Swaggart’s performances are framed so as to emphasize the


sensual aspect of the enactment of belief. The camera lingers on his hands as he plays the piano, pans in on him as he sweats, shouts, dances and weeps, and seeks out believers who have been swept away by the performance. Swaggart exhorts his listeners to give themselves over to this enthusiasm, while recognizing that modern society looks askance at such overt religious emotion. In fact, he relishes this outsider identification: "You there by television say 'You're too emotional, Jimmy Swaggart; you're a fanatic.' And I say you're right. I'm a hundred percent, bonafide fanatic for Jesus Christ."34 It is Swaggart's goal as a preacher, and the producers' goal for the program, to effect in viewers a "fanatical", physical expression of belief. Swaggart knows he has achieved this effect when he has moved listeners' bodies. The edited program tries to capture this physical passion and to generate similar enthusiasm among viewers. Camera and editing techniques are employed with this effect in mind. They are, in other words, "motivated" techniques.

Because Swaggart conceives of television as a tool to amplify his message, technique is subordinated to substance. The tool must remain as inconspicuous as possible. While the crusade audience is aware of the elaborate technology recording their experience, the TV audience knows it only indirectly.15 Home viewers rarely see the cameras or the bank of monitors that flank Swaggart. It is important that we at home feel the revival to be as spontaneous and unmediated as possible because we are already removed from the event itself. Swaggart draws us into the crusade by looking straight into the camera and addressing us directly and aggressively: "Listen to me by television. Leave the knob alone. Listen to me by television."36 Swaggart's sermon, then, is framed so as to render the technology nearly invisible; viewers are asked to temporarily suspend their knowledge that their relationship with Swaggart is mediated. We are invited to forget we are viewers and pretend we are congregants.


35 Although the cameras and monitors were certainly visible at the revival I attended, they remained peripheral to the focus of the crusade—the music, singing, preaching and praying. I probably paid more attention to the technology than most participants and still found myself oblivious to it much of the time.

36 "Jimmy Swaggart," March 1, 1987. During the promotional and fund-raising segments, however, he speaks to viewers separately from revival participants; the fund-raising portion of the live crusade is not televised.
Robertson’s program, in contrast, highlights and makes central the medium of television. Rather than being a means of transmission, TV is the occasion and site of the gathering. We understand Robertson to be a television host because he is framed in a setting appropriate to that persona. His authority derives, in large part, from this setting. As television viewers, we have come to accept the authority of the TV host or commentator. We may disagree with their message, but we rarely challenge their right to speak. On the "700 Club," camera and editing techniques enhance rather than conceal the fact that the program is mediated. The studio audience is well aware that the performance takes place in order to be broadcast. Most of the time Robertson, the cast and guests do not look at the studio audience but at each other or at the cameras. The performance is not staged for those in the studio, but for viewers at home.37 The home audience is also continually reminded that it is watching a televised performance. Transition shots generally frame the set and one of the floor cameras. The studio audience is often shown as the foreground to this frame, a standard technique of the talk show format. Commercial breaks and regulated applause, cued to transitions, are further reminders that we are watching a talk show, not participating in a religious service. Camera techniques also contribute to the experience of the "700 Club" as television. The program's three mobile cameras produce mainly mid-range shots and close-ups. Viewers understand these images to be part of the informal, conversational setting of the talk show. The cast and guests participate in these conventions; they are attuned to the camera which links them to the viewing audience. The split second lag between a camera change and a speaker's focus reminds viewers of the technology that mediates their relationship to the performers.

In the talk show format, then, the technology of television controls the relationship between speaker and listener. The "700 Club" exists to be televised and its very form would be impossible without TV's historically-developed techniques and conventions. The crusade form exists prior to television, even though it has been adapted in important ways to the demands of the medium. There is no way to hide

37Studio audience members can never forget they are participating in television—the technology will not let them forget. I was unable to attend the "700 Club" in person, but I did participate in the studio audience for KOMO-TV's "Northwest Afternoon" in Seattle, May, 1987. We were coached before and throughout the show by floor directors and told where to look and when to clap. Often the cameras obstructed our view of the performers, who only occasionally looked in our direction and most often focused on the cameras.
the technology in the framing of the "700 Club" because the format demands that it be made central. Indeed, the fact that the "700 Club" is "television" is part of its glamor and appeal. In this respect, Robertson’s relationship to the medium is very different from Swaggart’s. Robertson accepts that television has become a central cultural form and social institution in modern society. He does not question TV’s aesthetic conventions or its production techniques. The problem is not that television has become a "new religion," but that the content of that new belief system is flawed. His goal, therefore, is to give people what they want (e.g. give them television), but to fill it with different content.

Swaggart, on the other hand, rejects television precisely because it is so central to modern life and as such is the epitome of the "spirit of the world." Swaggart endorses television only as an amplification device, medium of communication which is "good" only so far as it is subordinated to evangelism. In this respect Swaggart follows his predecessor, Charles Finney, who believed a preacher should use any "appropriate means" to save souls. From this perspective, the end justifies, indeed, sanctifies the means. Swaggart justifies his use of television by treating it as a means—a medium for transmitting the Good News. As he says, it is "the greatest tool of world evangelization that has ever been known." This is why Swaggart never refers to his crusade as a television program. Rather, it is a "telecast," a term that stresses that the medium is merely a means of transmission, not an independent cultural form.

Robertson, in contrast, treats television as a site of symbolic production in its own right. To create an alternative network is to already accept the logic of television. Robertson competes with secular TV on its own terms (e.g. adopting its strategies of program flow, copying its formats, buying its old products, etc.). CBN is not a tool or a megaphone, but a parallel institution. In Robertson’s words, it is "God’s television." The appeal of the "700 Club" derives from its similarity to secular broadcasting. Viewers

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40 Quoted in E. Diamond, "God’s Television," p. 80.
are not required to reject television, but only to avoid unwholesome, "secular humanist" programming. In this respect, Robertson's viewers are not asked to cut themselves off from society; they retain their status as TV consumers by becoming a specialized market. CBN presents itself as one among several television alternatives, comparable to ESPN, movie channels, or the Playboy channel. Swaggart's message, on the other hand, implies that television cannot exist as an end in itself (as a source of entertainment), but must be used only to convey the salvation message. Swaggart's repeated attacks on glamorized Christian television are grounded in this belief. The emphasis on celebrity and Hollywood production values, he says, is part of the "worldly system of 'entertainment'—which is almost totally opposed to the things of God."41 Those viewers who take his message seriously are not free to participate in television as an institution of entertainment. Unlike other Americans, they must not see themselves as a market.

Despite Swaggart's rejection of television, his program, like the "700 Club," is shaped by what Frankl calls TV "imperatives," both technical and economic. One of television's technical imperatives stems from its visual form. Early religious broadcasters, who did not worry about ratings, employed a talking heads format because it was technically simple and cheaply produced. Indeed, talking heads was a staple of many early commercial programs. The development of television into a competitive, multi-million dollar industry brought technical innovations designed to attract larger and larger audiences. Increasingly sophisticated equipment permitted programmers to experiment with new ways to add visual appeal. As competition grew within the industry, so did pressure to create entertaining, visually—stimulating programs. The stationary camera, talking heads format was nearing obsolescence. Given "pray TV's" dependence on audience support, religious programmers were forced to develop strategies that made their products competitive with secular shows.42

One way that television attracts viewers is by creating visual stimulation with "technical events." Special effects like zooms, cuts, voiceovers, words printed on the screen, shifts in action, changes in sound,


42 Eilens, Models of Religious Broadcasting, Chapter 2, refers to religious broadcasters' early debates about how to compete with commercial television.
visual juxtapositions and so on, "create the fiction that something unusual is going on, thereby fixing attention," according to Jerry Mander.\textsuperscript{43} Most commercial programs use eight to ten technical events per minute and advertisements nearly double this technical action. Religious programming has adopted the use of technical events to build action and liven the pace of a program. Talk and interview segments of the "700 Club," for example, use approximately eight events each minute, and sometimes as few as five or six (mainly changes in camera angle and speaker). Filmed inserts and promotions employ more of these effects—about 12 to 13 per minute, speeding up the pace and balancing the slower on-set segments.\textsuperscript{44} In Swaggart's program, technical events are paced to correspond to the exchange between him and the congregation. The number of events increases as Swaggart approaches a peak in the sermon and this heightens viewers' perception of an ascent toward dramatic climax. The rate of technical events ranges from about eight, as he begins a sermon, to 12 to 14 when he has reached a dramatic peak. The ministry's special fund-raising programs rely more heavily on technical events to sustain audience interest because producers cannot count on Swaggart's performance to supply its own dramatic appeal.\textsuperscript{45} Through technical events, television creates an artificial "bias" toward "the more vivid, more powerful, more cathartic, more definite, 'clean' peaks of content."\textsuperscript{46}

Effective video story-telling depends on skillful editing. A narrative is given internal unity by weaving together visual, verbal and musical threads. Swaggart's program is structured around two "stories": a short promotion that conveys the urgency and import of the ministry's world mission, and the service itself. The most difficult job for Swaggart's editors is to retain audience interest for 30 or 40 uninterrupted minutes. They accomplish this task by inter-cutting and pacing shots of Swaggart and the audience and by exploiting technical events (both those created with the original camerawork and those


\textsuperscript{44}These figures do not result from methodical tests or content analyses, but from random counts as I watched the programs.

\textsuperscript{45}Again, the number of technical events is based on random counts I made while watching the show.

\textsuperscript{46}Mander, \textit{Four Arguments}, p. 314.
produced in the editing process). The "700 Club" builds and maintains audience interest in increments. An important part of the show's appeal is its upbeat tone and rapid pace. According to Straub: "Keep it simple, keep it moving, and keep it entertaining was the threefold key to success that I used while producing the '700 Club'." The live portions of the show are given dramatic interest by spontaneous "editing" (e.g. mixing camera perspectives); the pre-taped segments are enriched through production techniques. As Straub says, the "creatively enhanced" tape version of a salvation testimony has "far more dramatic impact than the lived reality."

How a program is framed has much to do with how we understand its "story." The frame is part of the message. Viewers accept Swaggart's passionate exhortations and warnings not just because he is an evangelist, but because televisual techniques effectively portray him as such. Similarly, the "700 Club" audience accords Robertson the authority of a professional broadcaster because it recognizes the technical conventions that legitimize this television persona.

Conclusion

The structure of appeal of these two programs—indeed of any media product—is a synthesis of substance and form, thematic and stylistic elements, performer and audience, production and consumption. I propose that Swaggart's crusade and Robertson's talk show represent separatist versus assimilative perspectives of conservative Evangelicalism. The crusade fashions a "sacred canopy" that denigrates and attempts to transcend ordinary existence. The talk show's canopy is firmly attached to the everyday world; it legitimizes preoccupation with the self and encourages political activism and material accumulation.

Swaggart's revivalism is anti-modernist and stresses traditional themes of personal piety, individual redemption and asceticism. His theology rejects this world and longs for the next. He speaks to (and is

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"Straub, Salvation For Sale, p. 293.

"Ibid., p. 170."
appealing to) listeners who share his belief that earthly life is a struggle and that society is doomed. Swaggart's followers share both his disdain for the problem of the self and his desire to transcend and lose the self by uniting with God. Essential to this rejection of the world is the flight away from rationality and the mind toward passion and the "sanctified" body. The "infilling of the Holy Spirit" is a technique of transcendence; it transports the vessel/believer to a state beyond ordinary reality. Swaggart is a catalyst—a means to and a model of this desired state. His style, mode of address and the setting of his speech must facilitate the journey if he is to create communion. He must construct himself as a prophet and employ grand style rhetoric to fuel the passions and elicit the responses of his listeners. By staging his communication as an old-fashioned camp meeting, he helps build a site for religious ritual—a setting for the enactment of belief. Swaggart's appeal resides in his risk—both as a performer and as an immortal soul who risks death to gain everlasting life. There are few occasions in modern life where the stakes are so high—where people's actions take on such absolute significance.

Because Swaggart's theology asks people to risk earthly happiness, it tends to appeal to those who have relatively little to lose. Robertson's belief system, in contrast, is not about loss, but gain. His theology teaches that life is a blessing and that true believers may reside in the world and prosper. His cultural fundamentalist themes harken back to a world where orthodox Protestants dominated society and encourages Christians to reclaim their historical hegemony. At the same time, Robertson's world view has accommodated modernism by embracing material accumulation and incorporating subjectivism—the modern preoccupation with the self. Robertson encourages listeners to take control of their lives and the world rather than abandon them to an enemy culture and does so in terms that are thoroughly modern. He employs the plain style rhetoric used by teachers, politicians, experts and television commentators. Further, his message is constituted wholly within the conventions of television. Robertson is a congenial host, a TV father figure. The "700 Club" makes minimal demands on viewers and its health and wealth gospel parallels the values of consumer culture. Robertson appeals to people who are "at home" in the world; his theology does not ask viewers to give up their security or material comfort, but justifies both as their divine right. In this sense, the message of the "700 Club" is very safe. It does not ask people to
question either the world or their existence at a structural level. Rather, the program promises to make their social position even more secure and grounds this guarantee in religious symbolism. Christians will come to rule the world, Robertson insists, because the Bible tells them so.

While the structure of appeal of these programs is embedded in their production, the success of that appeal is completed or thwarted in the process of consumption. The next chapter examines my own reading of these shows and speculates on why these two versions of Evangelicalism are appealing in the context of modern consumer society.
Swaggart and Robertson may be heard primarily by the already converted, but what they say speaks to all of us about the kind of world we inhabit and the world(s) we might imagine or hope for. Relegating religious programs and Evangelicalism to the realm of the exotic is, on one level, myopic and elitist. A belief system that claims 20 percent of the adult population in the U.S. and programming that reaches some 15 million regular viewers a week cannot be written off as the death rattle of an outdated religious tradition. On the contrary, orthodox Protestantism has proven itself remarkably durable—adapting to social changes and historical circumstances and extending its appeal to people outside its traditional boundaries. The fact the Evangelicalism has managed to dominate religious television and plant itself firmly in the political landscape also raises deeper social questions. Why has this belief system failed to wither away, as its critics predicted? What is the prospect that conservative Evangelicalism may recapture the social and political hegemony it enjoyed in the 19th century? What social and individual needs does it meet that cannot be satisfied by modern secular society?

In this chapter I offer some speculative answer to these questions. Like the preceding reading of the programs, these responses are my own, a synthesis of the meaning I bring to them and the meaning I make in that meeting. It is probably apparent in my analysis that I am somewhat more sympathetic to Swaggart's world view than to Robertson's. That is, I am partially persuaded by Swaggart's message and rhetorical strategies. But this identification is full of what Burke calls doubt—my "voice within" and Swaggart's "voice without" form a very imperfect union. The stories told by "Jimmy Swaggart" and the "700 Club" operate under the shadow of the larger dominant narrative provided by secular consumer culture. To understand my responses to (or consumption of) these three interpretations of the world, it is necessary to examine both the "texts" and the "reader."
Disenchantment of the World

I have argued that the transition from traditional, pre-capitalist society to a capitalist, market-industrial society had profound social and personal consequences. This historical process transformed values, beliefs and meanings; it altered the ways that people understood and lived their relationships to each other, to nature and to themselves. In traditional or pre-modern society, human beings derived their sense of self from an integrated network of divine explanations and sacred symbols. The self was not autonomous or individuated, but collectively defined through one's position in the social fabric. The question "Who am I?" was superfluous since explicit social hierarchies based on immutable sacred foundations told people who they were and who they could be. The "problem of meaning"—human bafflement, suffering and evil—was solved through an elaborate metaphysical framework, thus minimizing the need for personal, idiosyncratic solutions. This unified and relatively stable universe, where all meaning was interconnected and grounded in the sacred, was gradually replaced by a world where meaning was transitory, relative and based in the secular realm of exchange. The interconnected development of Protestantism, modern science and capitalism created new rationales that explained people's place in society and introduced the modern individual who stood alone before God, before nature, and before the marketplace.

Protestantism rerouted belief around the institutional church and made salvation an individual rather than collective endeavor. It also made doctrine, or the Word, central to religious identity and presupposed a body of rational believers who could interpret and uphold the Word. The ascendance of scientific rationalism further unraveled humanity's already loosened ties to the sacred. The Enlightenment opened people's eyes and told them that the invisible (or metaphysical) was illusion. This was a process of dis-integration: culture was split from nature, subject from object, mind from body, thought from feeling. Enlightenment insisted that everything could be known through reason. This new type of knowing demanded distance from the object of knowledge, however, and distance implies

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1 This argument is developed in Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Belief and History (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1977).
disconnectedness. The human subject, who initially stood apart from the "objective" world, eventually sought to master it: hence the development of the notion that nature was a "thing" to be dominated and controlled rather than an animated field of being to which one was divinely connected. Humanity thus found itself "outside" nature—no longer "at home." As the natural world lost its divinity and mystery, so too did human existence. Like nature, human beings themselves became objects of knowledge. Scientific rationalism turned its microscope on human relationships (sociology), cultural practices and expression (anthropology), thought and language (analytical philosophy, linguistics, psychology) and finally on the soul (psychoanalysis). Not even the sacred escaped the cool eye of reason; witness the development of a sociology of religion and more recently, the "scientific study of religion." Wilfred Cantwell Smith terms this process the "disparagement of the personal" which has been achieved through an almost inescapable glorification of natural science, whose knowledge was of the impersonal world of things (so that knowledge of human matters was considered not knowledge unless it were scientific, 'objective,' amoral, perceiving persons in the matter of things).

The development of capitalism, culminating in its modern manifestation in market-industrial society, also undermined traditional values and social relationships. It was a similarly disintegrative process, splitting production from consumption. In this new system, money came to be the measure of all value, both the value of things as commodities and the value of individuals as producers of labor. Through this process, say Leiss, Kline and Jhally, more and more elements of both the natural environment and human qualities are drawn into the orbit of exchanged things, into the realm of commodities [so that] fewer and fewer aspects of the environment and ourselves remain 'outside' the domain of buying and

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2This critique is elaborated in Max Horkheimer and T. W. Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment, translated by John Cumming (London: Continuum, 1886, c. 1972).


4This is a key theme in William Leiss, Stephen Kline and Sut Jhally, Social Communication in Advertising: Persons, Products and Images of Well-being (Toronto: Metheun, 186), especially pp. 270–277.
In other words, in modern society, money or the marketplace has taken over the function of the "ultimate" term which incorporates and interprets all social and natural phenomena and binds society together into a meaningful whole.

This historical process, which we can call Enlightenment or progress or modernization or the death of God, has produced a world that de-legitimizes metaphysical symbolic systems, replacing them with the logic of commodity exchange. It also poses a distinctly modern "problem of meaning." If the natural world has been usurped from supernatural dominion and brought under human control, if the soul is nothing more than the ego which is open to inspection, analysis and modification, then the meaning of one's life calls for human rather than divine solutions. Such are the roots of the modern self which now has to be constructed within the fluid field of market-industrial society. Cut off from traditional, institutionalized systems of meaning, we are forced to turn elsewhere for answers to the questions "Who am I?" and "What is the meaning of my existence?" Modern society is characterized by subjectivism, a preoccupation with the self, because identity is no longer fully determined by social roles or divine ordination. As the marketplace has evolved into the "privileged institution for the reworking and transmission of the cultural symbols that shape our lives," we increasingly turn to the realm of consumption to fashion a sense of who we are and what our lives signify. That is, we look to the marketplace for answers to questions about being and meaning.

It is possible to look at this as a liberating process; traditional society offered little or no social and economic mobility and religion was often used to legitimize political domination and personal oppression. But this freedom has a price. Leiss et al note that

the consumer society arises from the ashes of traditional cultures, which are characterized by relatively fixed forms for the satisfaction of needs, and unleashes a grand experimentation with the individual's experience of both needs and the ways to satisfy them.\footnote{Ibid., p. 273.}

\footnote{Ibid., p. 263.}

\footnote{Ibid., p. 239.}
As needs and the means of meeting them proliferate, we face an overwhelming array of choices about what constitutes satisfaction, happiness and social connectedness. Consumer society, then, "has eroded the guidelines for the sense of satisfaction and well-being laid out in traditional cultures" while offering (particularly through advertising) "an endless series of suggestions about the possible routes to happiness and success."\(^9\)

Another way to say this is that the world of goods has replaced the world of the gods as the modern source of meaning and being, and advertising produces the "icons" of this new "religion." I am arguing that advertising, the modern "discourse through and about objects," has usurped religious belief as the dominant modern symbolic system.\(^10\) Like religion in traditional society, the marketplace and its language of advertising is a totalizing system; it provides the metaphorical foundation on which rests the meaning of individual and social existence. Consumer culture has become the source of being: I know who I am and what my existence signifies by attending to the icons of the marketplace, by partaking in the right "sacraments" in the proper context, and by faithfully matching my consumption patterns to shifts in the production and marketing of goods and lifestyles. I am a full-fledged member of my culture, a fully modernized person, though my "recognition of consumption as a legitimate sphere for individual self-realization."\(^11\)

If, as Leiss et al suggest, the "modern" individual's sense of satisfaction and well-being is based on ... subjective, shifting estimates of where one stands in relation to others and what values are most important," then the contemporary self must be perpetually reconstituted from the complex symbolic materials of the world of consumption.\(^12\) The self is thus as transitory, relative and temporal as the latest market trends. In such a society, metaphysical transcendence is reduced to a lifestyle choice or a matter of personal taste. Frames of orientation and devotion are translated into worship of the consumption ideals

\(^9\)Ibid., pp. 340, 239.

\(^10\)Leiss et al use this phrase to describe advertising. Ibid., p. 3.

\(^11\)Ibid., p. 238.

\(^12\)Ibid., p. 238.
of celebrity and material success. Happiness is now transformed into a commodity, tied to goods and evoked by advertising. Satisfaction perpetually recedes from our grasp because consumer society is predicated on an infinite increase of wants and the means to fill them. In consumer society,

meaning . . . focuses on questions like, Who is the person I become in the process of consumption? Who are the other consumers like me? What does the product mean in terms of the type of person I am and how I relate to others?13

The self created in the world of consumption experiences a continual process of constitution/dissolution—an unending series of deaths and rebirths without redemption or salvation. As long as the self remains "in motion" in this way, the process itself becomes the means and end of existence. The meaning of life resides in ever renewed consuming. But this movement is also a flight because it postpones and avoids the actual "end" of our existence—the fact of our death. Consumer society has no solution to this existential dilemma other than the logic of further consumption: having more equals being more.14 At the heart of this response to the problem of meaning is a paradox: the marketplace offers a self based on the infinite proliferation and satisfaction of needs to beings who are themselves finite. The tension generated by this contradiction does not disappear, but erupts in other social locations—in critiques of consumer culture, in environmental politics, in an array of social movements, in individual psychotherapy, and in religion.

The Texts: Two Evangelical Stories

It is against this backdrop that the "dramas" of Swaggart's eschatological separatism and Robertson's theological triumphalism must be considered. Their narratives about being and meaning are responses—and quite different ones—to the "story" produced by modern consumer culture.

13Ibid., p. 234.

Swaggart's world view rejects the rationale of the dominant culture and reaches back to traditional religion for its source of meaning. Swaggart eschews reason in favor of emotion, experienced in religious ecstasy. His theology denies human consciousness the power to master either nature or itself. Conscious reflection, in fact, produces a chasm between the individual and the sacred. Self-consciousness is sin because it separates people from God. Swaggart preaches a form of traditional Christian asceticism based on self-denial and self-discipline. "Without God," Swaggart says, "you are eaten up with yourself."

Salvation occurs through the denial of self: "You need to be melted. You need to lose your identity." Modern society, in contrast, is obsessed with individual identity—with creating a self through the process of consumption. Swaggart's cosmology sees consumerism as an activity that anchors people to "the world" and to temporal happiness; the route to eternal joy, on the other hand, is through self-denial, which thwarts consumption. As Swaggart says, the things of the world "do not satisfy"—they do not quench people's spiritual "thirst." By stressing the temporal nature of earthly existence, this belief system constantly reminds followers of their own earthly finitude. It makes central the existential problem of suffering and death. As Swaggart warns listeners, "You might be young, but you're already dying."

Earthly life, then, is merely a preparation period—a state to be endured and transcended in anticipation of immortality in the next world.

Swaggart's world view is grounded in what Ken Wilber calls "mythical religion": it stresses intense conformity needs, sees God as a "cosmic parent," relies on charismatic authority figures (e.g. preachers and evangelists who represent the "parent"), employs mythic ritual, has an in-group/out-group mentality, and lacks rational justification. It is as well a belief system predicated on individuated and passive followers. The source of good—or the sacred—resides outside the believer. Salvation demands that

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16What other kind of culture produces a consumer magazine titled Self?


followers rid themselves of "the world" or earthly desire in order to receive the sacred or the Holy Spirit. Only the preacher remains an active agent in this system. It is his role to produce a receptivity in believers and prepare them to "yield" to the infilling of the Spirit. The self must be denied, emptied, to make room for the sacred to enter. This belief system, I suggest, robs followers of their own potential for praxis—instead they are objects of the external praxis of God, the Holy Spirit and the preacher. According to Dick Anthony, this version of Evangelicalism is a "charismatic religion" because it relies on a "personal relationship with a spiritually realized person as the essential means of spiritual attainment."¹ Because this belief system makes charismatic leaders into agents and followers into objects, it creates a radical separation between believers: they are not responsible to each other as members of a community, but only to themselves and to God. They are expected to contribute to the Great Commission, but only in terms of supporting evangelism as an abstract value. Other people become abstract souls to be saved, rather than reciprocal agents of Christian charity. Non-believers, in particular, are objectified as alien others. In fact, this separation between the saved and the damned is necessary to legitimate the belief that one is chosen.

Robertson's theology conserves some elements of mythical belief while accommodating and assimilating the rationalism of modernity. One "decides" to be a Christian in the same way that one chooses a career or lifestyle. This belief system appeals to people's reason and self-interest. One opts for Christ in order to be happy and successful. It is a "technical religion," in Anthony's terms, because it offers specific techniques for achieving belonging and spiritual attainment.² Practicing the Kingdom Principles, following the guidelines of expert advice, and joining the "700 Club" family are techniques which guarantee emotional and spiritual satisfaction. Robertson's belief system accepts many conditions of modern consumer society and incorporates these values into religious doctrine. He accepts that

¹Dick Anthony and Bruce Ecker, "The Anthony Typology: A Framework for Assessing Spiritual and Consciousness Groups," in D. Anthony, B. Ecker and K. Wilber, Spiritual Choices, p. 92; see also pp. 80-81. The ultimate "spiritually-realized person," of course, is Christ, but the preacher also achieves this status vicariously through his privileged role which places him in proximity to Jesus.

²Ibid.
happiness and self-identity are to be found in consumption as long as this activity is undertaken in the right Christian spirit. Earthly satisfaction is not evil or sinful, but desirable and attainable. Developing a proper relationship with God, in fact, leads to material success and personal well-being. This cosmology encourages preoccupation with the self and offers a wealth of expert advice on how to construct a contented Christian identity. The structure of this belief system has been similarly rationalized. Less reliant on charismatic preachers, it operates through a bureaucratic hierarchy where roles are assigned by expertise and rational authority. Effective leaders and ministers are more like managers, chief executive officers or counselors, than like prophets. Mythic rituals are modernized by turning them into easy-to-follow guidelines, techniques and steps to success. Leaders counsel, advise and encourage rather than exhort and castigate their followers.

Robertson's theology, then, bows to the rationale of market-industrial society whereby all aspects of existence are subsumed into the domain of buying and selling. In this way, being born again acquires exchange value: it purchases financial success, improved family relationships and eternal happiness. Indeed, "700 Club" fans can buy miracles. This perspective also handles mortality quite differently than does Swaggart's cosmology. Like illness, depression, anxiety and financial difficulties, death is easy to conquer with the right attitude and techniques. The believer has only to follow the advice and example of Christian experts and leaders and the problem of mortality evaporates. Robertson holds up his life as evidence of the tranquility to be found in opting for Christ. He suggests viewers should follow his example and "get right" with God "before it's too late" so they too will be able to say: "It's all taken care of. I don't have to worry about death and I don't have to worry about the future. That's so exciting."21

By accommodating to the values of modern consumer society, Robertson constructs a belief system that is easy to swallow. He legitimizes the consumerism and preoccupation with the self of the larger society. This version of Evangelicalism has striking parallels with consumer culture. Both "sell" perfect satisfaction: one by attaching identity and happiness to goods, the other by connecting success and emotional well-being to religious beliefs and practices. The effect of this accommodation is to

de-sacralize the traditional sacred elements of evangelical belief. The "profane" character of the "700 Club"—its mimicry of secular TV and its emphasis on celebrity and wealth—suggests that orthodox Protestantism is undergoing a transformation. It is becoming an alternative modern lifestyle which gains in persuasive power through its use of religious symbolism. Indeed, I am tempted to say that this belief system is ideally suited to modern consumer society because it sanctifies the values which are already dominant in our culture. This is the basis of its appeal. The assimilative form of Evangelicalism tells believers they can have the best of both worlds—they can be "in" the world and "of" it—and still receive God's blessing.

The Reader

The meaning I make of these programs, like my "reading" of consumer culture, is based on my patterns of experience. My Catholic upbringing predisposes me to embrace a metaphysical explanation of the world—to seek an "ultimate relevance of being" beyond my own existence. From this belief system I acquired an understanding of sin and redemption which is more corporate than individual. Salvation, I was taught, resided in one's actions—in works which derived their "goodness" from their social character. Believing in God was a necessary, but not sufficient condition for redemption. One had to implement that belief through action toward and in concert with others.

Catholicism is also a highly ritualized religious tradition. An important part of the sacred nature of the mass, confession and standardized prayer is the ritual nature of their expression. Belief is enacted through these rituals in community with other worshipers. The mass and other sacraments both create and are conducted within ritual time and space. Participation in these rituals marks out the boundaries of belonging and provides a site and technique for transcendence. My early experience of sacred rituals makes me susceptible to religious persuasion which is enacted in ritualized form.

Having grown up in Utah, I also recognize what it means to be outside the dominant belief system. As a child I learned to defend my faith with the fervor that only an outsider can muster, and that zeal
helped reinforce and sustain my faith. I am thus able to identify with the passion that fuels an embattled belief system; I understand the insider/outsider paradox because I have lived it.

My socio-economic background also influenced my interpretation of the programs. Raised in a lower middle-class environment by parents who hailed from the working class, I grew up suspicious of the wealthy, of bosses, professionals and experts. That is, I was mistrustful of society’s dominant symbol producers. Both my parents and my religion taught me that money purchased neither happiness nor the key to heaven. One chose a path in life because of its value to society and others, rather than because it led to financial reward. I am thus disinclined to accept the prosperity gospel and the quick fixes offered by Christian experts.

I am susceptible to Swaggart’s persuasion, then, because he plays on some of the desires that arise from my early patterns of experience. His condemnation of consumer society, the ritual nature of his expression, his appeal to the emotions, his class background, his outsider position, his emphasis on the suffering inherent in human existence, coincide in specific ways with my ethos and world view. Robertson’s belief system and program, on the other hand, are much more alien to my experience. The worship of material success and trivialization of religion, the emphasis on glamor and celebrity, and the political/economic agenda of the Christian Right do not evoke my identification. For me, Robertson comes across like a network executive or political demagogue—neither of which elicit my collaboration.

This is not to say, however, that I accept Swaggart’s offer of consubstantiality. The highly individuated and ultimately passive character of his belief system does not coincide with my experience of religion nor with my perceptions of the world. I read Swaggart’s theology as anti-social and intolerant and lacking a genuine sense of charity. While his belief system is critical of the dominant values of modern consumer society, its solution is highly reactionary: the answer to the failings of modernity is to reject the present and return to the past. In my view, this is no solution at all. Finally, as an ex-Catholic and a member of that highly-secularized group of symbol producers—an urbanized academic—I ultimately reject Swaggart’s appeal to consubstantiality, even though I can identify with his dismay over
the modern loss of transcendent meaning.

**Conservative Evangelicalism as a Field of Struggle**

At the beginning of the decade, Pat Robertson commented that Christian conservatives had "enough votes to run the country." While right-wing Christianity has certainly become a prominent feature of the U.S. political scene in the last ten years, it is important to place this development in a larger historical and social context. One of the most thoughtful essays on the New Christian Right provides that context and argues that the NCR is not a mass political movement at all, but the vehicle of an elite group of preachers and politicians tied to the right-wing of the Republican Party. Michael Leinesch's economic analysis of Christian conservatism contends that the NCR consists of two distinct groups: a small elite of well-educated, well-to-do, mostly professional middle-class activists, and a large, changeable mass membership of marginally educated, lower- and working-class followers. The elite leadership, which includes the likes of Robertson, Falwell and James Robison with connections to politicians like Weyrich, Viguerie and Senator Jesse Helms, are in the business of building a political base from which to effect their policies and platforms and to achieve power within the Republican Party. They are not interested in mobilizing a mass movement, Leinesch argues, because movements are characterized by spontaneous protest and are difficult to bring under centralized control. NCR leaders "are anxious to extend their organizational influence" but "reluctant ... to oversee the transfer of power downward." Hence the need for some means of unifying the Christian Right internally and maintaining a hierarchy of authority and power. The leaders of the Christian Right provide this unity and control by organizing around broad moral issues and side-stepping points of dissension—be they theological, geographical, denominational or

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24Ibid., p. 413.

25Ibid., p. 415.
economic. In particular, the NCR elite has avoided addressing the economic interests of its followers (both actual and potential) because the economic priorities of most orthodox Protestants are in direct conflict with those of the elite activists. Conservative Christian activists have therefore organized around symbolic issues, "not to meet economic ends, but to override them." The NCR leadership uses "moral symbolism" to consolidate its power in local issues and campaigns and to turn potential followers away from liberal candidates and economic policies.26

This strategy has both internal and external weaknesses. It leaves the conservative Christian "movement" open to internal divisions and provides a point of attack from those outside who wish to counter the NCR at local or national levels. First, there is in the history of orthodox Protestantism a strong aversion to and mistrust of political activism, because it erodes the boundaries between spirituality and "the world," and because it threatens to transform religion into political ideology and destroy its metaphysical claims to authority. Second, conservative Evangelicalism is not monolithic. The diversity of religious beliefs and practices among evangelicals makes it difficult to create absolute consensus around specific issues. The NCR's "interest group strategy" must operate by building coalitions across differences; conservative Christian organizations (like the Moral Majority, Religious Roundtable, Liberty Foundation, Freedom Council, Eagle Forum, etc.) must form "uneasy alliances" by employing "widely accepted but vaguely defined issues" in order to "reconcile the constant potential for conflict."27

As we have seen, however, conflict is at the very heart of orthodox Protestantism (and perhaps of all Christianity): the battles between orthodoxy and liberalism, between Fundamentalists and charismatics, between left and right evangelicals, have provided the fuel for the proliferation and perpetuation of belief. Those divisions continue today in the contest for control over the powerful Southern Baptist Convention and debates over the meaning of the gospel epitomized in the theologies of Swaggart and Robertson.28

26Ibid., p. 414.

27Ibid., p. 419.

28Bill Moyers examined the battle within the Southern Baptist Convention in his three-part televised series on religion, "God and Politics." The SBC in the last ten years has increasingly come under control of the right-wing fundamentalist elements and some Baptists
The insider/outsider tension has been a necessary condition for the maintenance of a distinctly evangelical world view; without clear markers of difference, terms of belonging lose their persuasive power. The coalition character of the NCR—while attempting to minimize internal divisions—actually dilutes the potency and effectiveness of the movement. As it seeks to broaden its base, the Christian Right tends to incorporate an increasing number of issues into its agenda. As issues proliferate, so do possible points of dissension. For example, a national school prayer amendment is objectionable to many Baptists who believe prayer is an essentially private matter; many charismatics strenuously object to voting for non-Christian politicians even if those candidates take the proper political position; and a significant percentage of evangelicals see any involvement in politics as capitulation to "the world."29

Christianity is an exceedingly complex religious tradition and its history is rich with contending interpretations. Disagreements about what constitutes proper Christian belief and practice have informed social and political struggles from Christianity's inception. There is no historical evidence to suggest that these internal disputes will dissolve because of efforts by a group of right-wing activists. Christian conservatives are not necessarily political conservatives—a fact that could become particularly evident if issues were framed in economic terms. Philanthropism and pacifism are as much a part of the Christian tradition as "Christian soldiers" and "custodians of social morality." As Leinesch aptly puts it:

... whether their right-wing leaders like it or not, conservative Christians worship a populist prophet, the son of a carpenter who preached to the poor, who drove the money changers from the temple, and who blessed the peacemakers.30

29(cont'd) are now predicting that the Convention will splinter into two factions. KCTS-TV, Channel 9, "The Battle for the Bible," December 16, 1987, Seattle.

29Leinesch, "Right-wing Religion," pp. 420–421. This is apparent in Robertson's presidential campaign. Many political analysts doubt that his candidacy will significantly affect the Republican Party unless he were to actually win the nomination because a large number of Robertson's supporters would not vote for a non-Christian, Republican or not.

30Ibid., p. 425.
Desire and Fulfillment: Two Routes to Satisfaction

This brings me full circle to the question of why the contending theologies and programs of Swaggart and Robertson appeal to millions of people. What desires do they summon and promise to satisfy?

Robertson appeals to the "wealth of wants and expectations which our society has fashioned" for all of us. He endorses material consumption and subjectivism and thus validates the hedonistic or narcissistic qualities of modern society. The "700 Club," with its Kingdom Principles and prosperity gospel, rejects the traditional asceticism of orthodox Christianity. It acknowledges the emotional and psychological strains of contemporary society and offers Christian solutions which promise happiness, well-being, "emotional balance," and, not coincidentally, material success. In this way, Robertson's religious system is well adapted to the modern social situation. Through an accommodation to modernity, this version of Evangelicalism has achieved "a contemporaneity of cultural expression, more or less attendant to the sensitivities and needs of modern people." The format of the "700 Club" reflects this contemporary flavor; it is formally indistinguishable from commercial television. This type of religious programming, like the belief system it expresses, is no longer "outside" the larger society. It has become instead one among many lifestyle and programming choices. In Horsfield's words,

Rather than providing a religious alternative to other television programs, [evangelical] programs appear to have become submerged in the television environment to the extent that they have become an indistinguishable part of it.

Robertson's world view appeals to people by eliminating the outsider tension and showing them how to be "at home" in the modern world as active participants. Followers feel themselves to be both "inside" and superior to the dominant culture with the aid of a theology that promises to restore orthodox Protestantism's cultural hegemony.

31Merton, Mass Persuasion, p. 11.
33Horsfield, Religious Television, p. 35.
Swaggart, on the other hand, retains the position of embattled outsider and appeals to people on this basis. His refusal to accommodate to modernity and his demand for self-denial place his theology in tension with with broader culture. This tension is what fuels the belief system and perpetually recreates the terms of belonging. Swaggart's followers feel themselves to be at odds with the dominant social values and find explanations and justifications for this exclusion in his rhetoric. They feel themselves to be both "outside" and superior to "the world." Believers are invited to enact these feelings in the ritual form of the revivals and to thus construct a community which protects them from the pressures of the dominant culture. Further, the tension implicit in trying to exist outside of the world is made less painful by the promise of achieving insider status in the next world. This is particularly comforting for older people who make up the majority of Swaggart's following. Forfeiting earthly happiness for eternal joy thus becomes an acceptable exchange, especially for people who find worldly satisfaction hard to come by.

These two poles of Evangelicalism co-exist uneasily in contemporary society, as the PTL dispute and Swaggart's attacks on apostasy indicate. Whether this awkward co-habitation can continue indefinitely is open to question. Robertson's version of orthodox Christianity is gaining in popularity, as is the religious programming associated with it. Swaggart's separatism, in contrast, is a less common voice in evangelical broadcasting, and this reflects a trend in Evangelicalism generally. I am suggesting that the waning of traditional, separatist Evangelicalism has to do with built-in limits to the social basis of its appeal. Its distinctly anti-modern character makes this world view much harder to maintain in the face of modernization. This belief system is most appealing to pockets of the population who are furthest removed from modernizing forces—older people of lower education in rural areas of the Southern Bible Belt and midwest. The largest portion of its adherents are middle-aged and older. As these believers age and die, and as the rural south and midwest come increasingly into the orbit of modernization, it will be much harder to maintain the separation demanded by this theology. Further, Swaggart's brand of religion is heavily dependent on charismatic preachers and evangelists to effect salvation among followers, and these beacons on the road to redemption are themselves the product of specific historical circumstances.

\[14\text{Ibid., p. 46; See also Bisset, "Religious Broadcasting," p. 31.}\]
The country preacher is a historical phenomenon and social and cultural changes may make him (or her) an endangered species. That is, Swaggart and preachers like him may no longer find the proper social context in which to reproduce their roles and themselves. This is already apparent in Swaggart's son, Donnie, who lacks his father's charisma and rhetorical talents.

**The Evocation of Desire**

Conservative Evangelicalism may have so far survived the secularizing pressures of modernization precisely because it has preserved the "raw" revivalist separatism of Swaggart while developing a more contemporary expression in the "smooth" accommodation of Robertson. If the abrasive separatist pole has a built-in obsolescence, will the more palatable assimilative pole be able to carry on the core beliefs of traditional Protestant orthodoxy? Or might Evangelicalism eventually be forced to adopt sweeping doctrinal changes to complement the deep cultural accommodations it has already internalized? Is it plausible that this contemporary form of Evangelicalism will ultimately lose its spiritual basis and evolve into a straightforward political/social movement or alternative lifestyle choice?

These questions can only be resolved in history. But the current appeal of these two forms of religious belief does raise important questions about the character of our society. The fact that these two stories about the nature of the world—about the relationship between being and meaning—continue to resonate for a substantial number of Americans suggests that there are limits to secular consumer society's ability to make people's lives meaningful.

To talk about meaning in this existential and transcendental sense in the secularized world of the academy is to risk being dismissed as nostalgic or essentialist. As William Garrett puts it, modern social science finds it difficult indeed to deal with "troublesome transcendence." I am going to take that risk,
however, and side with Geertz in arguing that the quest for a meaning which transcends individual existence is fundamentally human—whether we call that quest religious or not. In Geertz' words, "The drive to make sense out of experience, to give it form and order, is evidently as real and as pressing as the more familiar biological needs." While traditional societies (and many people today) looked to religious symbolic systems to provide solutions to the problem of meaning, modern society has fashioned its own response through the "privileged institution" of the marketplace and advertising. I do not claim this is the only function of modern advertising, but simply that it is one way to look at the symbolic character of the contemporary "discourse through and about objects." In this sense, advertising operates as a metaphysical symbol system, or, in Raymond Williams' words, as a "magic system."

Magic has to do with transformations that occur outside of conscious human action; it points to divine or supernatural intervention. Advertising operates as magic by investing things with the power to transform their consumers—it thereby implies the possibility of rebirth. Advertising's magical character is exhibited in its capacity to animate consumer objects: it makes goods "come alive," as Leiss et al say. The wish for magical transformation, however, implies an original desire to be other than what one is, to be born anew. Magic speaks to human desire and suggests an initial lack. What desires, then, do advertising and the marketplace appeal to, and what transformations of self do they promise?

Magic also connotes sleight of hand or deception, and Williams uses the term this way to argue that advertising both appeals to genuine human needs and "tricks" us into believing that all of these needs can be fulfilled through consumption, thereby precluding other possible sources and sites of satisfaction. The needs Williams refers to include the desire for social relatedness, for basic respect, for avenues of expression and action that affect our social and natural environments. Studies of "quality of life" and

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39 Leiss et al, Communication in Advertising, pp. 259–263.

40 Ibid., pp. 185–190.
analyses of indexes of satisfaction report that people's sense of well-being is most strongly grounded in interpersonal relations, or in "non-material" goods, rather than in the acquisition of things. Consumer society, however, "encourages individuals to express all their wants as wants for goods and services, that is, commodities" despite the fact that commodities are "only weakly related to the things that make people happy: autonomy, self-esteem, family felicity, tension-free leisure, friendships. This is a major defect in a want-satisfying mechanism."41

Consumer society deals with this defect by pulling more and more social and natural elements into the sphere of commodity exchange. The marketplace fails to make good its promise of ultimate satisfaction, however, because consumer culture operates on the constant reproduction of desire. If we were truly satisfied, we would fail to be good consumers. But desire does not originate in the modern marketplace; it only takes on specific social and historical characteristics there. As Stuart Ewen argues, "there are wishes and needs which are generated in spite of the marketplace, yet the marketplace purports to address them."42 The wish for well-being, satisfaction and connection to others is characteristic of human existence—it is part of the quest for being and meaning. The discourse of the marketplace beckons to this desire for meaning from behind the latest product or lifestyle. It appeals, Ewen says, by promising to deliver the "real thing." But at the same time, by appealing to deep human desires, advertising also implicitly conveys the message that the product "isn't the real thing after all; and what is more, people do feel the need for the actual real thing."43

The gospel of prosperity heightens the promise of the "real thing" by sacralizing the language and values of consumption. Swaggart's theology tries to strip the magic from the marketplace by exposing its inability to supply the true object of desire—divine communion and eternal life. Each of these symbolic


43Ibid..
universes—Robertson’s, Swaggart’s and that of the marketplace—derive their persuasive power from the fact that human beings desire the "real thing" in the first place. The endurance and adaptability of these two versions of religious belief suggest that the modern, secular symbol system is an inadequate source for meaning for a significant number of people. Indeed, Williams says, the magical system of advertising exists to reconcile us to the fact that "the meanings and values generally operative in society give no answers to, no means of negotiating, the problems of death, loneliness, frustration and the need for identity . . .". Evangelicalism is not alone in proposing alternatives to the dominant values and structure of consumer society. An array of contemporary social, political and religious groups are also in the process of fashioning interpretations about the nature of existing society and possible alternatives to it. All of these "stories" meet in the conflictual terrain of history where they constitute a field of contending definitions about what is meaningful and what is not.

The Flight of Faith

To take seriously the world view of conservative Evangelicalism and "grasp hold of the meanings people build into their words and behavior and make these meanings, these claims about life and experience, explicit and articulate," is to also raise questions about the nature of modern religiosity. What kind of society makes the theologies of Swaggart and Robertson a viable cultural option? Does a society produce the forms of religion it deserves? If human beings do need frames of orientation and devotion in order to conduct their lives meaningfully, are there "sacred canopies" preferable to conservative Christianity? Are there forms of faith, or metaphysical symbolic systems, which are not reactionary flights into the past or uncritical celebrations of the present, but which create the possibility of authentic, liberatory social relationships in the future? How should the secular academy approach the study of religion if its present methods and conceptual frameworks are ill-equipped to deal with these questions, and with the troublesome problem of transcendence? Or, has history already rendered

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transcendence an obsolete concern?

Wilfred Smith suggests that the historical rationalization of culture in the West has replaced faith—an orientation of being toward reality—with belief—an attitude toward propositions about reality. In the modern context, to be a believer means one has accepted the truth value of a set of propositions; failure to accept those truth claims constitutes disbelief. Doctrine therefore becomes determinate in establishing the conditions for belonging. This, in turn, creates a radical separation between insiders and outsiders, believers and non-believers, and makes the defense of doctrine a primary goal of religion. Smith argues that to understand belief in this way is to already concede to the rationalization and privatization of religiosity. To counter this view of religion, Smith contrasts belief, which is a property of doctrine, to faith, which is a quality of the person. Rather than dividing people along doctrinal lines, faith offers the potential for unity because it is not exclusionary. Faith, Smith says,

is an orientation of the personality, to oneself, to one's neighbour, to the universe; ... a capacity to live at a more than mundane level, to see, to feel, to act in terms of, a transcendent dimension ... Faith is a quality of human living. At its best it has taken the form of serenity and courage and loyalty and service: a quiet confidence and joy which enable one to feel at home in the universe, and to find meaning in the world and in one's own life, a meaning that is profound and ultimate, and is stable no matter what may happen to oneself at the level of the immediate event.46

The failure of modern market-industrial society to provide meaningful answers to the problems of being and meaning, I believe, lies in its incompatibility with such faith. As Smith says, "The West has devised, as one of its major specialities, the notion that faith does not really matter." Modern society is predicated on the view that religious belief is a private, socially inconsequential concern, and "that what human beings have in common is the non-religious, the non-transcendent—this is the contemporary orthodoxy."47 The absence of faith produces a world without meaning in this deeper sense, a society characterized by an attitude of nihilism, or "a bleak inability to find either the world around one, or one's own life, significant."48 Because human beings, as symbol using animals, cannot for long endure

46Smith, Faith and Belief, p. 12.
47Ibid., p. 139.
48Ibid., p. 13.
meaninglessness, they create meaning from the available cultural options. In modern society, those options are primarily secular. Contemporary religious responses to the secularization of meaning have tended toward accommodation to or reactionary rejection of the surrounding dominant culture. Neither route, it seems to me, has been particularly successful at dealing with the flight of faith.

The theologies of Swaggart and Robertson, while premised on the defense and maintenance of belief, must operate in a social environment that has, for the most part, abolished faith. In this respect, evangelical Christianity is already a victim of Enlightenment. Martin Heidegger once characterized post-Enlightenment society as suffering from a "double lack": "the No-more of the gods that have fled and the Not-yet of the god that is coming."49 Swaggart's ethos and world view are attached to the shadow of an already departed deity; Robertson's god is indistinguishable from a successful businessman; and modern consumer society fashions its own gods in the form of goods that have "come alive." Whether there are other gods on the horizon will be determined by the resiliency of human faith, by the kinds of strategies we select to set forth new cultural options, and by the meanings we make of the meanings we are given.

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