

Drag Queens and Farting Preachers: American Televangelism, Participatory Media, and Unfaithful Fandoms

by

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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Abstract

Studies of religion and fandom have generally considered sincere devotion a fundamental point of contact between the two cultural phenomena, an assumption not reflected in fan studies proper. This dissertation aims to expand the scope of research on religion and fandom by offering cultural histories of “unfaithful” fan followings of three controversial American televangelists – Robert Tilton, Tammy Faye Bakker/Messner, and Jim Bakker – dating from the 1980s to 2012, and consisting of individuals amused by, rather than religiously affiliated with, their chosen television preachers. It is argued that through their ironic, parodic, and satirical play with celebrity preachers widely believed to be religious fakes, these unfaithful fans have engaged in religious work related to personal and public negotiations of authentic Christianity. Additionally, it is demonstrated that through their activities, and in particular through their media practices, these fans have impacted the brands and mainstream representations of certain televangelists, and have provoked ministry responses including dismissal, accommodation, and counteraction.

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Dedication

To Erica and Freja.

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

Introduction

It is Memorial Day 1993, and the Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN) is hosting a televised celebration at its vast campus in Irving, Texas. At the foot of the patio of a massive white building, a crowd sways and claps as TBN regular Mike Purkey sings about the fall of Jericho over a canned gospel rock soundtrack. The coverage cuts to the middle of the crowd, where a sunglassesed, dark-haired young woman in a sparkling white dress dances with her infant daughter in her arms. She presents her white-bonneted baby to the camera, smiles brightly, and continues bouncing to the music. A few paces behind is the woman's husband, sporting a short-sleeved, button-up shirt and a camera around his neck. Enthusiastically clapping, dancing, and singing, he turns and smiles as his wife and daughter are captured by the camera.¹ Later in the day, TBN star Betty Jean Robinson is standing on the patio praying for God's presence. As she prays, the special fades to a group gathered around an artificial lake where, in a cordoned-off section near the edge, three people stand waist-deep in the water. TBN's top televangelist Paul Crouch and a male assistant flank a red-haired young woman, whose black ensemble clashes with their gleaming white outfits. As Robinson ends her prayer with an emotional "amen," the men baptize the woman by laying her into the water and quickly raising her back up.²

This broadcast footage of a young family apparently enjoying a day of sanctified revelry and an outsider entering into Christian community vividly reflected TBN's avowed mission of entertaining and encouraging the faithful, while bringing the unsaved to God. However, the ministry's impetus to find camera subjects representing these goals also rendered it vulnerable to exploitation – in this case at the hands of a group of crashers who derived ironic amusement, rather than spiritual fulfillment, from big-money televangelist ministries such as TBN. On that beautiful May day a group including "Brother Randall," the cheekily titled, seemingly devout husband; his wife "Sister Donna"; their daughter; and their good friend "Sister Wendy" donned dressier clothes than usual and drove from their Dallas homes to the outskirts of the TBN

¹ "Happy TBN Family," YouTube video, 0:27, posted by "Randy R," September 30, 2006, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0IGnZou0nmw>.

² "Sister Wendy Gets Baptised – on TV! – by Paul Crouch!!" YouTube video, 1:05, posted by "SnakeOilChannel," September 4, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vC3Xvo34ubY>.

compound. To avoid paying entrance fees they hopped a fence bordering the property and walked down to the festivities, where they took in the performances and ate their fill of free food. While Brother Randall and Sister Donna's parody of an attractive and happy Christian family succeeded in attracting the attention of TBN's cameras, the day would belong to Sister Wendy, whose baptism coup increased her cachet among her co-conspirators. An outspoken atheist, Sister Wendy convincingly played the role of the eager convert, yet a close viewing reveals, and she confirmed during an interview, that she was giggling as she pinched her nose in anticipation of her faux baptism. Both pieces of video footage, originally taped by Brother Randall in 1993 and uploaded to YouTube more than a decade later, served as trophies of the group's successful, tongue-in-cheek infiltration of what they perceived to be a ludicrous media ministry.³

Although the TBN trip was a fun and fruitful excursion for the group, it was also one of the last public activities of the "Robert Tilton Fan Club" (RTFC) – a network of irreverent, yet dedicated, viewers of the titular, Dallas-based, health-and-wealth televangelist founded by Brother Randall, who had been tuning into Tilton's broadcasts since the late-1980s. To Brother Randall, Tilton's heavy focus on financial contributions, his prosperity theology, and his spurious faith healings marked him as an obvious religious charlatan. Rather than changing the channel, however, Brother Randall became increasingly "obsessed" with the high-energy Tilton, amused by his outrageous and often unpredictable behavior, and intrigued by the question of who the real Robert Tilton might be.⁴ Rightly figuring that others also watched Tilton for similar reasons, Brother Randall inaugurated the RTFC in 1991, which would become a hub for a robust, if relatively short-lived, network of Tilton "fans." Buoyed by an entertaining media scandal that targeted the televangelist's fundraising practices, the RTFC would connect hundreds of far-flung Tilton viewers via mail, and also contained a Dallas-based inner circle, members of which gathered to watch and share Tilton compilation tapes, to covertly crash services at the preacher's megachurch, and even to organize a well-attended "tribute" night at a local club – activities grounded in a shared ironic acclamation for Tilton's skills as a religious huckster. By 1993, however, Tilton briefly left the airwaves, depriving the RTFC of its main source of amusement and thereby initiating its gradual demise.

³ "Brother Randall" (pseudonym retained to protect anonymity), Skype interview by author, December 4, 2011; "Sister Wendy" (pseudonym retained to protect anonymity), Skype interview by author, December 17, 2011.

⁴ Brother Randall, Skype interview by author, December 4, 2011

The Robert Tilton Fan Club is but one example of an unexplored cultural phenomenon long associated with American televangelism, and conceptualized in this dissertation as “unfaithful fandom.” In contrast to dedicated, faithful viewers of televangelism, whose relationships with broadcasting ministries involve shared theological assumptions and religious goals, unfaithful fans have become fixated on television preachers they consider ridiculous frauds, laughably extreme, bizarrely behaved, and/or representatives of false Christianities, and have constructed multifaceted fan followings of such preachers with likeminded others. Drawing on interview data and content analyses of a wide range of fan, underground, and mainstream media, this dissertation offers cultural-historical examinations of three forms of unfaithful fandom steeped in irony, parody, and satire – ironic fandom, campy fandom, and antifandom – which have surrounded three scandal-ridden American televangelists: the aforementioned Robert Tilton, Tammy Faye Bakker/Messner, and Jim Bakker. It is argued that through their play with such controversial religious celebrities, these unintended fans have engaged in religious work related to the cultural negotiation of what counts as authentic Christianity in America – work which has had both personal and public resonances. Moreover, it is demonstrated that the activities of such fans have altered, challenged, and contributed to significant changes in the carefully constructed brands of their selected televangelists, provoking a range of ministry responses including dismissal, accommodation, and opposition.

This study of unfaithful fans of American televangelists opens up new analytical avenues within the well-established field of religion, media, and culture. First, it encourages a different understanding of popular culture than the norm in academic work on religion and popular culture, in which the latter concept is generally understood as the collection of a society’s most-consumed cultural artifacts. Indebted in particular to the insights of cultural theorist John Fiske, this dissertation instead frames popular culture as the myriad ways in which individuals make meanings, pleasures, and products from the offerings of the culture industries – activities which often differ from, and even subvert, the intentions of commodity producers. This shift in focus allows for the discovery and analysis of unintended uses of religious mass media by individuals such as unfaithful fans of televangelists, whose activities problematize the common assumption that sincere devotion necessarily links religion and fandom, and complicate existing religious marketplace models. Second, and relatedly, this study challenges the tendency in studies of religion and so-called “new” media to overemphasize the purportedly novel interactive

affordances of online and digital communication. As a corrective, this dissertation examines participatory media practices of unfaithful fans of televangelists extending back to the 1980s, focusing on points of convergence and divergence between analog fan media of the past and contemporary online and mainstream media. Finally, in regards to the “religion” component of the religion, media, and culture triad, this study is less interested in explicitly religious individuals and groups – the foci of most research in the field – than the religious work conducted by unfaithful fans of various backgrounds through their play with television preachers widely considered to be religious fakes.

Sincerity, Religious Authenticity, and Play with Celebrity Revival Fakes

With their celebrity hosts, entertaining programs, and savvy marketing techniques, televangelist ministries have often been understood, and criticized, as prime examples of “the growing worldliness of religion,” and thus as harbingers of secularization. However, as historian R. Laurence Moore rightly points out, “equivalents to televangelism are easy to find and were always widespread and popular” throughout American history, and television ministries are less indicative of secularization than the remarkable malleability of American evangelicalism.⁵ Nevertheless, celebrity revival preachers, more broadly, have long been shadowed by persistent perceptions that they are religious fakes – perceptions related to two issues: the sincerity of the preachers themselves, and the authenticity of their theology. Building on the work of literary critic Lionel Trilling, anthropologist Charles Lindholm writes that sincerity – “doing what one says one will do” and “being as one appears” – rose in importance alongside the rapid urbanization and increased personal mobility of sixteenth-century Europe. This “irreversible plunge into modernity,” which Lindholm defines as “the condition of living among strangers,” put people at greater risk of being deceived, thus resulting in sincerity becoming a “desired trait,” particularly among Protestants, for whom it became a “defining virtue.” Sincerity “evolved into authenticity” as people dug further “beneath the surface of roles and convention,” a mission which Lindholm relates to the Protestant quest for the true God. As it is tied to the hunt for the divine, Lindholm suggests that authenticity “has more spiritual claims to make” than sincerity: “Authentic objects, persons, and collectives are original, real, and pure; they are what they

⁵ R. Laurence Moore, *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 3-4.

purport to be, their roots are known and verified, their essence and appearance are one.”⁶

While deeply interconnected, the concepts of sincerity and authenticity can also be considered separately when it comes to celebrity revival preachers, where authenticity relates to the perceived veracity of these preachers’ professed theological positions, and sincerity to the consistency between their actions and public pronouncements. As per Lindholm, suspicions surrounding the sincerity of celebrity revival preachers, and attempts to assuage these concerns, have been associated with the social anonymity encouraged by geographic mobility and urbanization, commodity exchange as the basis of interpersonal relationships, and the rise of mass communication, all of which have rendered such preachers strangers to the bulk of their audiences. Moreover, the mass approach of celebrity revival preachers has involved a tradeoff in definitional control, and they have long been appropriated by individuals who have used them to craft unintended meanings, performances, and media. These secondary creations, which have often employed humor to query the sincerity of such preachers and the authenticity of their religious messages, have at times had significant cultural impacts, strongly tying together revival preaching and religious fakery in the broader popular consciousness.

To illustrate, we can begin with the case of British-born, Anglican preacher George Whitefield (1714-1770), “Anglo-America’s first modern celebrity” and the best-known personage of the “First Great Awakening,” a European and American revival movement sparked in the 1730s.⁷ Between 1739 and 1740, while still in his early twenties, Whitefield itinerated throughout the American colonies on a well-planned and heavily publicized tour, delivering dramatic open-air sermons to thousands. With booming voice and entertaining style, Whitefield encouraged listeners to open themselves up to direct contact with the divine, an experience often accompanied by intense emotional outpourings.⁸ In addition to his itinerancy, newspapers extensively covered the preacher’s activities, and Whitefield-related publications did brisk

⁶ See Charles Lindholm, *Culture and Authenticity* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 1-10; Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972).

⁷ Harry S. Stout, *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), xiii. For an overview of the “First Great Awakening,” see Thomas S. Kidd, *The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity in Colonial America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

⁸ William G. McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform: An Essay on Religion and Social Change in America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), 60-66.

business.⁹ Thus, Whitefield became the “prototype for future mass evangelists,” a celebrity revival preacher heading a sensational travelling religious show.¹⁰

Scholars have often framed Whitefield as an innovative entrepreneur in the American religious marketplace, a pioneer in evangelical mass media, and an early example of the evangelical impulse to recruit ostensibly secular cultural forms into the service of religion. Although prerevolutionary America had yet to feature the thriving “free market religious economy” posited by sociologists Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, they describe Whitefield as a forefather of the country’s religious commoditization, and an exemplar of the rewards due to inventive religious suppliers. In particular, they emphasize the novel nature of Whitefield’s itinerancy, which threatened established colonial religious “cartels.”¹¹ Historian William McLoughlin has argued that Whitefield’s itinerant preaching was “a new form of mass communication in America” centered on “a new medium – the spoken word of the common man.”¹² To most effectively convey his message, the “divine dramatist” borrowed the style and techniques of the English theatre, the secular form of which he spoke out against as a sinful enterprise.¹³ By incorporating “his acting talents – good elocution, a trained memory, the ability to project intense emotion – into his career as a preacher,” Whitefield “transformed church services into entertainment,” and launched religion into the broader American “marketplace of culture.”¹⁴ As historian Frank Lambert has pointed out, Whitefield’s tactics were well-suited to the burgeoning “consumer revolution” of the mid-eighteenth century, and he was not only an enormously successful “itinerant salesman of his message,” but was also “transformed into a vendible commodity” himself – a religious celebrity circulated via “books, pamphlets, portraits, and wax likenesses.”¹⁵

Whitefield’s commoditized and mass-mediated ministry also became a widely recognized site for “broader discussion of the commercialization of religion.”¹⁶ As Stout notes, Whitefield

⁹ See Frank Lambert, “*Pedlar in Divinity*”: *George Whitefield and the Transatlantic Revivals, 1737-1770* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

¹⁰ Stout, *The Divine Dramatist*, xiv.

¹¹ See Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776-2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy*, 2nd ed. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 49-64.

¹² McLoughlin, *Revivals*, 86.

¹³ For the relationship between Whitefield and the theatre, see Stout, *The Divine Dramatist*, 234-248.

¹⁴ Moore, *Selling God*, 42-43.

¹⁵ Lambert, “*Pedlar in Divinity*,” 6, 77, 122, 128.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 179.

worked in a colonial society in which the “local, face-to-face world premised on trust and personal familiarity” was giving way to physical dislocation and an “impersonal” consumer marketplace, and he was accordingly subjected to criticisms about his sincerity and religious authenticity.¹⁷ Two titles bestowed on Whitefield by his critics – “Pedlar in Divinity” and “Retailer of Trifles” – reflect such concerns.¹⁸ As a travelling salesman of religion, Whitefield was a stranger to most, prompting questions about his sincerity. Was this exciting preacher a true man of God or a religious charlatan, deceiving and exploiting his audiences? Colonial critics charged that funds donated for Whitefield’s orphanage in Bethesda, Georgia were instead going into the preacher’s own pocket.¹⁹ The main driver of Whitefield’s spiritual salesmanship, his energetic stage performances, also encouraged suspicions regarding his sincerity. Whitefield’s “theatricality” rankled his critics in London, who balked at the preacher’s “willingness to impersonate Christ or God the Father judging errant sinners” – a “sacred ruse” by a strange “hypocrite.”²⁰ The fact that Whitefield was “an object of desire, idolized by adoring crowds of females less for the gospel he proclaimed than for the embodied manner of his pulpit delivery,” likewise led to doubts about the preacher’s true motivations, reflected in rumblings that a young orphan with whom he travelled was less spiritual dependent than “concubine.”²¹ Such suspicions spoke to overarching concerns about the strong emotions associated with Whitefield’s preaching and revivalism in general, which threatened the status quo of stoic, reasonable, and therefore purportedly authentic religion.²²

While Whitefield was a master of religious marketing, Lambert makes the crucial point that his audiences were not composed of “passive consumers,” but rather “active producers of meaning,” who reworked the preacher’s message, ministry, and persona in various “unintended,” and often comically critical, ways.²³ Whitefield’s public performances, for example, offered considerable opportunities for derisive humor. In his journals, Whitefield noted when audience members “mocked” him or “scoffers” interrupted his services, often emphasizing the power of

¹⁷ Stout, *The Divine Dramatist*, xvi-xvii.

¹⁸ Lambert, “*Pedlar in Divinity*,” 179.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 176-182.

²⁰ Stout, *The Divine Dramatist*, 83.

²¹ Stout, 168; Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 188.

²² See Lambert, *Inventing the “Great Awakening”* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 211.

²³ Lambert, “*Pedlar in Divinity*,” 134-137.

his gospel to silence such unfaithful spectators.²⁴ During a sermon delivered in Bath, Whitefield recalled that when he “got up on the table to preach, many laughed; but before I had finished my Prayer, all was husht and silent.”²⁵ Whitefield also raised the possibility that impious attendees might mock him via parody, stating in a sermon that he would not be surprised if the “many” in attendance who were “crying what nonsense he is preaching tonight” would “mimic me when they go home.”²⁶ Intriguingly, the preacher’s longtime associate and posthumous biographer John Gillies relayed a third-hand report about a “drinking club” in the colonies, where “a negro boy” who served the patrons “used to mimic people for their diversion.”²⁷ “The gentleman bid him mimic Mr. Whitefield,” Gillies wrote, a request to which the boy obliged, albeit “unwilling.” In line with the hagiographical tone of Gillies’ work, however, the ridiculers receive their comeuppance, and the truth of Whitefield’s ministry shines through the mockery when the boy delivers a powerful Whitefieldian statement on repentance and damnation – an “unexpected speech” that “broke up the club, which has not met since.”²⁸

Although possibly apocryphal, Gillies’ tale at least emphasizes the potential for grassroots humor at Whitefield’s expense, crafted by individuals who had seen the preacher in action, or at least knew of his characteristics and message. In another instance, however, a purported witness to Whitefield constructed a comedy creation with a much broader cultural resonance. According to the preacher’s contemporary James Lockington, the famed British playwright Samuel Foote “by chance” caught a sermon by Whitefield, “the mixture of whose absurdity, whim, consequence, and extravagance pleased his fancy and entertained him highly.”²⁹ Foote subsequently used the preacher as a template for a comedic stage character – “Dr. Squintum” – the name a reference to Whitefield’s famously crossed eyes, which some faithful followers took to be a mark of divine favor.³⁰ In Foote’s play *The Minor* (1760), Dr. Squintum’s foremost supporter is recent convert and brothel manager Mrs. Cole, who becomes

²⁴ See George Whitefield, *The Two First Parts of his Life, with his Journals* (London: W. Strahan, 1756), 118-119, 143, 145, 162, 168, 177, 223-224, 232, 276, 342, 350, 428, 436.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 149.

²⁶ George Whitefield, *Sermons on Important Subjects by the Rev. George Whitefield, A.M.* (London: Henry Fisher, Son, and P. Jackson, 1832), 728.

²⁷ For Gillies’ relationship with Whitefield, see Stout, *The Divine Dramatist*, 140-141.

²⁸ John Gillies, *Memoirs of the Life and Character of the Rev. George Whitefield, A.M.* (Lexington: Thomas P. Skillman, 1823), 56.

²⁹ Cited in Stout, *The Divine Dramatist*, 237.

³⁰ Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, 187-188.

convinced that she can combine her newfound faith with her decidedly sinful career. In this manner, Foote satirized Whitefield and the Methodist movement's emphasis on the power of the new birth to "erase any old sins," and the concomitant "exclusion of all works." *The Minor* proved a great success in Britain and eventually played in the American colonies, its popularity aided by the play's scandalous nature.³¹ In a letter, Whitefield recognized that he was being "mimicked and burlesqued upon the public stage." "All hail such contempt!" the preacher wrote, characteristically viewing such mockery as a sure sign of the truth of his ministry.³² The influence of this comedy creation, which surfaced late in Whitefield's career, would extend well beyond the stage, and, as Stout writes, the preacher "would forever after be burlesqued in prints, cartoons, and satires as the Foote character 'Squintum.'" ³³ In a British satirical cartoon dated from 1760, for example, Whitefield, his eyes crossed to a comically absurd extent, warns a gathered crowd from the pulpit: "You are all Damn'd that go to hear Foote. Verily I say unto you he is a Child of Hell." Whitefield's denunciation of the playwright is humorously counterbalanced by a bag labeled "Cash" that the preacher holds aloft, as well as a humorous carnal confession from a woman in the assembled crowd: "I wish his Spirit was in my Flesh."³⁴ British artist William Hogarth positioned "Dr. Squintum" as the centerpiece of his own satirical print, tellingly titled, "Credulity, Superstition, and Fanaticism" (1762). In Hogarth's treatment, Whitefield stands in the midst of a manic church audience, with a thermometer monitoring the irrational energy of the crowd – from "Madness," to "Lust," to "Raving."³⁵

The example of George Whitefield highlights the vulnerability of celebrity revival preachers to comedic criticisms of their sincerity and religious authenticity, a byproduct of the mass approach of such preachers, and an issue to be dealt with over the following two and a half centuries. The "Second Great Awakening" of the early nineteenth-century saw the rapid development of a bustling American religious marketplace, and a concomitant explosion of entrepreneurial evangelical itinerants – would-be religious leaders whose chances of success rested in their ability to attract audiences, and convince individuals as to their integrity and the

³¹ Stout, *The Divine Dramatist*, 245-246.

³² George Whitefield, *The Works of the Reverend George Whitefield, M.A.: Volume III* (London, 1771), 262.

³³ Stout, *The Divine Dramatist*, 244.

³⁴ A reproduction and brief discussion of this cartoon is found in Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, 188-189.

³⁵ Stout, *The Divine Dramatist*, 247. A reproduction of Hogarth's print can be found in Ronald Paulson, *Hogarth's Harlot: Sacred Parody in Enlightenment England* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 265.

spiritual truth of their messages.³⁶ Cultural historian Jackson Lears has argued that such preachers were part of a broader American “subculture of itinerants,” operating alongside “circus performers, puppeteers, and freak show impresarios,” as well as “peddlers” of all variety of goods, including, notably, patent medicines – the original snake oil salesmen.³⁷ According to Lears, itinerant preachers and patent medicine salesmen were forerunners to modern advertisers in that they combined persuasion and entertainment to sell “the magic of self-transformation” in an ever-expanding consumer marketplace.³⁸ As mysterious hawkers operating on the fringes of society, however, they were also greeted with wariness by those worried about the possible “masque of misrepresentation” involved in their marketing tactics.³⁹ Did they proffer authentic wares or were they sly “charlatans and confidence men,” looking to dupe individuals into buying worthless spiritual and physical panaceas?⁴⁰ The negative association of itinerant preachers with patent medicine pushers extended back to George Whitefield, who was compared to “peddlers of quack medicines” that “relied on artifice to sell their potions.”⁴¹ During the Second Great Awakening, however, these suspicious figures could be one and the same person, as was the case with the famous Methodist itinerant Lorenzo Dow (1777-1834).

Dow patented a formula in 1820 for “Dow’s Family Medicine,” a proprietary mixture of water, Epsom salts, “tincture of bloodroot,” “salts of nitre,” and sulfuric acid originally promoted as a relief for constipation and diarrhea.⁴² Doubts about Dow’s tonic can be inferred through attempts by the preacher and his supporters to allay them. Dow himself promoted the authenticity of such “valuable medicines” by arguing that their discovery was not due to “accidents” on the part of “quacks,” but that they were in fact the product of divine “providence.”⁴³ Likewise, a promotional flyer for Dow’s medicine published after his death

³⁶ See Finke and Stark, *The Churching of America*, 55-116; McLoughlin, *Revivals*, 98-140; Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

³⁷ Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 42. For an overview of the patent medicine trade, see James Harvey Young, *The Toadstool Millionaires: A Social History of Patent Medicines in America before Federal Regulation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961).

³⁸ Lears, *Fables of Abundance*, 42.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁴¹ Lambert, *Inventing the “Great Awakening,”* 200.

⁴² B.W. Murphy, “On Patent Medicines: Their Evil and the Remedy,” in *The Pharmacist: Vol. VII*, ed. Albert E. Ebert (Chicago: Bassett & Mitchell, Printers, 1874), 202.

⁴³ Lorenzo Dow, *Biography and Miscellany* (Norwich: William Faulkner, 1834), 251.

attests “that hardly anything short of inspiration could have led to the discovery of such a remedy.” The same advertisement also trumpeted Dow’s supposed sincerity as a means of encouraging consumer trust. “The Patentee is so well known,” the copy states, “that it needs no comment to inspire public confidence...as a perfect reliance is placed in any thing that would be offered to the public by that celebrated man, for he had nothing but the good of mankind at heart.”⁴⁴ Although little is known about Dow’s personal marketing of his medicine, such activities aligned him with other possible itinerant “hucksters,” who were met with “an ambiguous response of titillation, laughter, and suspicion” – reactions which Dow would actually encourage and capitalize upon in his primary vocation as a preacher.⁴⁵

Lorenzo Dow understood that not only religion, but also “religious controversy” had “become a form of American entertainment,” and he was thus deliberately provocative so as to draw crowds.⁴⁶ Long-haired, sickly, and strangely attired, Dow was a “theatrical performer,” who “might smash a chair to the floor for effect,” recount off-color stories, and encourage audiences to experience the physical “jerks” of the Holy Spirit.⁴⁷ Dow’s style earned him the descriptor “crazy,” which he acknowledged had “brought many out to the different meetings,” and which carried a dual significance, representing contrasting responses to his ministry.⁴⁸ On one hand, historian Jon Butler suggests that “in the minds of many” Dow’s nickname “confirmed rather than denied his religious calling,” referencing his status as a mystic who tapped into “the supernatural revelations contained in dreams,” “could locate lost and stolen objects,” raise the Devil, and perhaps cure disease.”⁴⁹ However, others who came to see Dow considered him “crazy” in a decidedly negative sense. Indeed, in his own memoirs, Dow recalled that the label “crazy” was generally launched against him as an epithet, and was held in the minds of many of those who “laughed” at and “mocked” him as he preached.⁵⁰ Yet come to watch they did, opening up the possibility that Dow might persuade them as to the truth of his spiritual claims, as

⁴⁴ “Dow’s Family Medicine: Invalid’s Manual,” <http://ia601202.us.archive.org/34/items/101182862.nlm.nih.gov/101182862.pdf>, originally published March 26, 1836, accessed January 25, 2015.

⁴⁵ Lears, *Fables of Abundance*, 42.

⁴⁶ Moore, *Selling God*, 144.

⁴⁷ Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 130.

⁴⁸ Lorenzo Dow, *History of Cosmopolite: Or the Writings of Rev. Lorenzo Dow* (Cincinnati: Anderson, Gates & Wright, 1858), 60.

⁴⁹ Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, 241.

⁵⁰ See Dow, *History of Cosmopolite*, 44, 52, 60, 97, 117, 191, 259.

well as, perhaps, the potency of his patent medicine.

While Lorenzo Dow understood, and even embraced, ridicule as a means of attracting attention and potential converts, another prominent revival preacher of the period, the fiery Methodist itinerant Peter Cartwright (1785-1872), thought otherwise. Cartwright frequently preached at camp meetings, outdoor gatherings providing a combination of “revival and recreation,” and which often featured heated emotional and physical displays of the Holy Spirit’s power.⁵¹ As Dickson Bruce points out, camp meetings “offered an unparalleled occasion for all the people in a territory to gather together for several days of social activity,” and “all of the activities of the campground were not of the variety desired by church leaders.”⁵² Sellers of whiskey, patent medicines, and prostitutes frequented such meetings; illicit activities, sexual and otherwise, were reported; and, as Moore notes, “unsympathetic interlopers were common, usually young men who came to make trouble and to have a good time at the expense of religion.”⁵³ Cartwright often took a combative approach to such disruptive elements, as when “two very fine-dressed men...began to laugh and talk” while he preached. Rebuffed after he asked the men to “desist,” Cartwright stepped down for a fight, resulting in a general melee.⁵⁴

Beyond such blunt interruptions, in at least one instance individuals appropriated the style of enthusiastic camp meetings, and the persona of Cartwright himself, to construct a multifaceted and critical performative parody. In 1841, Cartwright helped to organize a meeting in southern Illinois which, he reported, was soon “threatened by the baser sort” of the area’s inhabitants, many of whom “came and pitched their tents a few-hundred yards from the campground.” Fueled by a steady supply of whisky, they raised a raucous commotion and, according to Cartwright, “interrupted our devotions very much.” One Sunday evening, the crashers “ate and drank; and by way of mockery, and in contempt of religion, they held a camp meeting; they preached, prayed, called for mourners, shouted, and kept up a continual annoyance.” At the center of the action was a “self-styled preacher,” a “young champion of the devil” impersonating

⁵¹ Finke and Stark, *The Churching of America*, 92. For an overview of Methodist camp meetings, see Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 49-56.

⁵² Dickson D. Bruce, Jr., *And They All Sang Hallelujah: Plain-Folk Camp-Meeting Religion, 1800-1845* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1974), 54.

⁵³ Moore, *Selling God*, 48. See also Dickson, *And They All Sang Hallelujah*, 56; Finke and Stark, *The Churching of America*, 98-99; Lears, *Fables of Abundance*, 67.

⁵⁴ Peter Cartwright, *The Backwoods Preacher: Being the Autobiography of Peter Cartwright, An American Methodist Travelling Preacher* (London: Charles H. Kelly, 1856), 38-39.

Cartwright. The man “sung and prayed, rose up, took his text, and harangued them for about half an hour,” after which he “invited mourners to come forward and kneel down to be prayed for.” Many of those who were in on the act came forward, and the man “exhorted them almost like a real preacher. Several pretended to get religion, and jumped and shouted at a fearful rate.” Just as the leader “ordered a pause in their exercise” in order to get “something to drink,” Cartwright loudly broke into the mock service, causing the revelers to scatter.⁵⁵

The early twentieth-century witnessed significant shifts in revival preaching, marked by new theological issues, further developments in mass media and religious celebrity, and fresh opportunities for comically critical play with such preachers. Carrying forward the older style of itinerancy was former professional baseball star Billy Sunday (1862-1935), who took up the evangelist’s mantle in the late-nineteenth century, moving up from revival tents to large urban auditoriums. Known for his booming voice and stage acrobatics, the “baseball evangelist” embodied an active masculine Christianity and preached fundamentalist principles, encouraging his auditors to confess their sins, clean up their acts, and return to the moral golden age of America’s rural past.⁵⁶ Canadian-born Pentecostal Aimee Semple McPherson (1890-1944) also started out on the tent-revival circuit, where she preached, spoke in tongues, and healed. Like Sunday, “Sister Aimee” preached a “simple gospel of individual salvation,” and vehemently denounced modernist challenges to the old-time religion.⁵⁷ However, her Hollywood-style ministry would trump Sunday’s stage show, and she would also exploit the considerable evangelical potential of radio broadcasting.

In 1923, McPherson opened the massive Angelus Temple in Los Angeles, which could seat more than five-thousand worshippers, and where she delivered “illustrated sermons,” often based on events from her own life.⁵⁸ By 1924, two radio towers jutting from the church’s roof broadcast sermons, musical selections, children’s programming, messages from community leaders, and the healing powers of the Holy Spirit across the western United States.⁵⁹ Despite

⁵⁵ Cartwright, *The Backwoods Preacher*, 186-190.

⁵⁶ Robert F. Martin, *Hero of the Heartland: Billy Sunday and the Transformation of American Society, 1862-1935* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002).

⁵⁷ Matthew Sutton, *Aimee Semple McPherson and the Resurrection of Christian America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 37.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁵⁹ For McPherson’s broadcasting efforts, see Tona J. Hangen, *Redeeming the Dial: Radio, Religion, & Popular Culture in America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 57-79.

attempts to downplay the healing aspect of her ministry, instead emphasizing her goal of bringing converts to Christ, the “miracle woman” courted considerable controversy for such fantastic claims, as well as suspicions related to the vast amounts of money pouring into her ministry’s coffers.⁶⁰ Was McPherson a sincere woman of God or a greedy and manipulative hypocrite, “pulling a Hollywood” in order to dazzle and dupe the desperate and diseased?⁶¹ For many, these questions were answered by an intense scandal which surrounded McPherson, the prototype for celebrity revival preacher scandals to follow. On May 18, 1926, McPherson disappeared from Los Angeles’ Venice Beach, sending the national press into a frenzy. Just over one month later, she dramatically resurfaced in Mexico, claiming that she had escaped from a band of kidnapers. Although the preacher was welcomed back to Los Angeles by throngs of relieved supporters, her account was heavily scrutinized, and it is most likely that she had run off with a married former Angelus radio engineer.⁶² Comedy was a crucial means of reinforcing and circulating McPherson’s status as an evident religious fake in the wake of the scandal, including editorial cartoons and humorous newspaper columns, a set of paper dolls in *Vanity Fair* magazine, caricatures on stage, and even “a McPherson marionette.”⁶³

It would be Sinclair Lewis’s satirical 1927 novel *Elmer Gantry*, however, in which McPherson was portrayed as the erratic preacher Sharon Falconer, which would come to have the deepest cultural impact, offering America a fictional archetype of the revival preacher as religious fake via its titular character. *Elmer Gantry* emerged during a difficult time for conservative strains of American Christianity, which came under intense public scrutiny as being backwards, intolerant, and ill-equipped for the challenges of the modern world, particularly following the “Scopes Trial” in 1925.⁶⁴ The McPherson scandal followed immediately after, fanning doubts about the sincerity of conservative Christianity’s most visible leaders.⁶⁵ Lewis’ work often probed the disparities between the social masks individuals assumed in the pursuit of success and their true motivations, making it little surprise that the agnostic author was interested

⁶⁰ Edith L. Blumhofer, *Aimee Semple McPherson: Everybody’s Sister* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1993), 174, 222-223. Sutton, *Aimee Semple McPherson*, 17, 107.

⁶¹ Sutton, *Aimee Semple McPherson*, 107.

⁶² For overviews of the scandal, see Blumhofer, *Aimee Semple McPherson*, 281-302; Sutton, *Aimee Semple McPherson*, 90-151.

⁶³ Blumhofer, *Aimee Semple McPherson*, 341-342; Sutton, *Aimee Semple McPherson*, 122-123, 182-183.

⁶⁴ George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 184-188.

⁶⁵ Sutton, *Aimee Semple McPherson*, 37.

in revival preaching. In 1917, Lewis had even attended a Billy Sunday service and walked up for the altar call – not to be saved, but rather to gather insights into the authentic convert’s experience.⁶⁶ Lewis subsequently lampooned Sunday in his novel *Babbitt* (1922) as “Mike Monday,” a boxer turned “the world’s greatest salesman of salvation,” who had made a “fortune” saving “priceless souls...at an average cost of less than ten dollars a head.”⁶⁷ Like Sunday, the character Elmer Gantry also had an athletic background (college football rather than baseball), and an intimidating masculine Christian style. However, while there was no evidence that Sunday’s personal life diverged from his preaching in any scandalous manner, Lewis presented Gantry’s messages and motivations as starkly opposed.

With *Elmer Gantry*, Lewis took great pains to suggest the difficulty of sincerity existing within bureaucratized and commoditized celebrity ministries, as success depended on donning a variety of social disguises. Tall, handsome, and humorously brash, Lewis presented Gantry as a master of manipulation, a charming chameleon who effortlessly alters his appearance and demeanor to ensure his social ascendance. Introduced as a Kansas college student, “Hell-cat” Gantry drinks with the boys, carouses with women, and is generally indifferent to religion until discovering a talent for preaching.⁶⁸ He enters the Baptist ministry for purely “practical” reasons, giving boisterous religious performances to great success, while covertly enjoying the forbidden pleasures of tobacco, alcohol, and sex.⁶⁹ Following a scandal involving a young female parishioner in his charge, Elmer falls out of the ministry and into a job as a salesman, often performing “a burlesque sermon” for the amusement of “the boys.”⁷⁰ While travelling through Nebraska, Gantry attends one of Sharon Falconer’s revivals, and is floored by her beauty, power, and business savvy. He maneuvers his way into Falconer’s ministry, becoming her clandestine lover and preaching partner, and uses salesman tricks to pad the collection plate: priming the pump by hiring a gang of “hoboes” to act as “professional Christians”; laying unused crutches and canes against the altar to “make the exhibit inspiring.”⁷¹ After Falconer’s death by fire at “The Waters of Jordan Tabernacle,” a fictionalized version of McPherson’s Angelus Temple,

⁶⁶ Richard Lingeman, *Sinclair Lewis: Rebel from Main Street* (New York: Random House, 2002), 65, 103.

⁶⁷ Sinclair Lewis, *Babbitt* (Mineola: Dover Publications, Inc., 2003 [1922]), 75.

⁶⁸ Sinclair Lewis, *Elmer Gantry* (New York: Signet Classics, 2007 [1927]), 8.

⁶⁹ Lewis, *Elmer Gantry*, 95.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 165.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 215-216, 230.

Gantry lands a wealthy congregation, looks to enter into radio broadcasting, and continues his pursuit of power, aiming to become “the super-president of the United States, and some day the dictator of the world.”⁷²

Elmer Gantry ends with a victory for hypocritical, commoditized religion in an America that privileged appearance over substance. Sinclair Lewis jocularly, yet urgently, warned his readers about the latest breed of travelling spiritual salesmen, whose success was less due to God’s will than cold calculation, and even sleight of hand. Upon its publication, *Elmer Gantry* quickly climbed to the top of the fiction bestseller list and attracted considerable controversy, with Billy Sunday even publicly imploring God to put an end to Lewis’ life.⁷³ Through his fictional character, Lewis had constructed a potent symbol of religious fakery – a “Dr. Squintum” for twentieth-century America – which would thereafter dog celebrity revival preachers with suspicions of “Gantryism.”⁷⁴ This would especially be the case for revival ministries that would come to harness the communicative power of television, and, in particular, television preachers who conveyed controversial messages of miraculous health and wealth.

According to historian David Harrell, the period between 1947 and 1958 saw a rise in Pentecostal healing ministries, which spread their influence via tent revivals, radio, and the nascent medium of television.⁷⁵ The most influential Pentecostal broadcaster of the era was undoubtedly Oral Roberts (1918-2009), one of a number of “prototelevangelists” who possessed “their own broadcasting empires, regularly scheduled radio and television programs, and a somewhat déclassé image.”⁷⁶ By the late-1950s, Roberts had established a national television presence at the station level, broadcasting services filmed within his own revival tent.⁷⁷ “For the first time,” Harrell writes, “millions of Americans were exposed to the raw drama of the healing line”; however, many were suspicious of what they saw.⁷⁸ In 1958, *United Press* writer Albin Krebs noted that Roberts’ successful television ministry was accompanied by a “virtual

⁷² Lewis, *Elmer Gantry*, 440.

⁷³ Lingeman, *Sinclair Lewis*, 302.

⁷⁴ For “Gantryism,” see Lingeman, *Sinclair Lewis*, xix.

⁷⁵ David Edwin Harrell, Jr., *All Things are Possible: The Healing & Charismatic Revivals in Modern America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975), 25-116.

⁷⁶ Heather Hendershot, *What’s Fair on the Air? Cold War Right-Wing Broadcasting and the Public Interest* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 187.

⁷⁷ Harrell, *Oral Roberts: An American Life* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 125-130.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 171-173.

hurricane of controversy,” and that viewers were torn as to whether the preacher was “a man truly touched of God” or a “faker,” a “charlatan willing to use for his own shameful purpose the human misery he finds in others.”⁷⁹

In 1960, changes in the Federal Communications Commission’s regulatory framework encouraged a boom in American evangelical television broadcasting.⁸⁰ That same year also saw the return of Elmer Gantry via Richard Brooks’ film adaptation of Sinclair Lewis’ novel, which opened with the forthright charge that “the conduct of some revivalists makes a mockery of the traditional beliefs and practices of organized Christianity.”⁸¹ Kurt Edwards has argued that Brooks’ film, which starred Burt Lancaster in the title role, was specifically targeted at Baptist preacher Billy Graham, who had become famous for his revivals and *Hour of Decision* television ministry. Edwards writes that having read Lewis’ novel, “Graham recognized his own visage in the satirical portrait,” and subsequently marketed himself as the “Anti-Elmer Gantry,” “distancing himself and his ministry from the subtlest perception of impropriety.”⁸² In addition to opening up his ministry’s finances to thorough review, Graham also made a point of never being alone in the company of a woman other than his wife.⁸³

While Billy Graham’s strategies helped him to construct a respectable, mainstream appeal, other celebrity revival preachers appeared to embody Elmer Gantry in the flesh, such as the controversial Pentecostal faith healer A.A. Allen, whose ministry was built on his “native shrewdness, unparalleled showmanship, and startling miraculous claims.”⁸⁴ Allen’s tent meetings, broadcast on television throughout the 1960s, were raucous affairs, filled with upbeat black gospel music, energetic performances, and instances of supernatural healing that beggared belief. Critics savaged Allen for his “increasingly sensational” miracles and the overall “carnival atmosphere” of his revival meetings.⁸⁵ Controversy also followed Allen due to his fundraising efforts, and especially his claims, beginning in the early-1950s, that God would rain prosperity

⁷⁹Albin Krebs, “Faith Healing Claim Helps Oral Roberts: Controversial Figure’s Popularity Based on Espousing Theory,” *The Times-News*, February 15, 1958.

⁸⁰ See Jeffrey K. Hadden and Anson Shupe, *Televangelism: Power and Politics on God’s Frontier* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1988), 50-52.

⁸¹ *Elmer Gantry*, directed by Richard Brooks (1960; Los Angeles: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 2001), DVD.

⁸² Kurt A. Edwards, “Billy Graham, Elmer Gantry, and the Performance of a New American Revivalism” (PhD diss., Bowling Green State University, 2008), 1.

⁸³ See *ibid.*, 17-23, 160-165.

⁸⁴ Harrell, *All Things Are Possible*, 68.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 69.

on those with enough faith to financially support his ministry.⁸⁶ In 1954, Oral Roberts introduced a similar “Blessing Pact scheme,” which was repackaged by the late-1960s as “seed faith” theology. This controversial approach combined promises of abundant harvests for financial seeds sown into his ministry with assurances of prayers for participating individuals, and the mail-based distribution of trinkets purportedly charged with miraculous powers.⁸⁷

The “Elmer Gantry image” of A.A. Allen, in particular, was further encouraged by apparent discrepancies between his personal life and public persona.⁸⁸ Allen freely admitted to a checkered past marked by theft, prison, and alcoholism – personal failings he testified had been washed away by his conversion in 1934. The latter vice, however, Allen never seemed to have under control, and he was arrested in 1955 for drunk driving in Tennessee. Allen’s unconvincing explanation of the incident involved him having been kidnapped and knocked out, only to awake with someone feeding him liquor against his will. The scandal led to friction between Allen and his denomination, the Assemblies of God, resulting in the preacher’s resignation and subsequent career as a spiritual maverick.⁸⁹ Despite the controversy, Allen’s ministry continued to grow, and he constructed a vast revival empire based out of Miracle Valley, Arizona, which *Time* magazine described in 1969 as “a teetotaling, nonsmoking oasis of evangelistic fervor and hard-nosed business.”⁹⁰ Allen himself, however, evidently did not adhere to the strictures imposed on his faithful followers, as the next year he was found dead in a San Francisco hotel room, due to liver failure from chronic alcohol abuse.⁹¹

Two years after Allen’s death, a documentary film appeared which claimed to expose the tactics of such alleged revival fakes. Directed by Sarah Kernochan and Howard Smith, *Marjoe* (1972) follows the last tour of Marjoe Gortner, a Pentecostal faith healer and former child preacher who was also an admitted charlatan, having never believed in God or his own accredited abilities.⁹² Throughout the film Gortner humorously outlines his techniques for gaining the trust of, and donations from, his audiences. “You can’t chase any of the little ‘lovies’

⁸⁶ See A.A. Allen, “The Secret to Scriptural Financial Success” (1953), *Miracle Valley Archives Department*, <http://www.miraclevalleyarchives.org/subpage35.html>, accessed January 2, 2014.

⁸⁷ See Harrell, *Oral Roberts*, 141-142, 284-285, 413.

⁸⁸ Harrell, *All Things Are Possible*, 72.

⁸⁹ See *ibid.*, 66-75.

⁹⁰ “Faith Healers: Getting Back Double from God,” *Time*, March 7, 1969.

⁹¹ Harrell, *All Things Are Possible*, 202-204.

⁹² *Marjoe*, directed by Sarah Kernochan and Howard Smith (1972; New York: eOne Films, 2006), DVD.

around the tent,” Marjoe warns the documentary crew before their first covert infiltration of a Pentecostal service, “That’s one rule that I definitely established...I never take out a girl from the church, or in the church, you know, I stick with airline stewardesses.” For Gortner preaching is a job, indeed the only one he has known, and he is upfront about the fact that he is only in it for the money. “This is a business,” he bluntly states, “and, you know, you don’t get meetings, or you don’t get booked back unless you have a gimmick.” As an example, Marjoe discusses a time when he had drawn a cross on his forehead with “a special kind of ink,” which turned red as he sweated throughout the service: “I had one of the biggest meetings that I’ve ever had, because they saw the cross and...and (that) convinced them, you know, that it was really very real, and it made it very easy for me to take offerings and receive money.” Gortner’s story directly echoed A.A. Allen’s testimony that a “cross of blood” had once appeared on his forehead during a revival – an extraordinary indicator of his status as a conduit for God’s messages and miracles.⁹³

Televangelism, Unfaithful Fandoms, and the Way Forward

The legacy of doubt associated with American celebrity revival preachers accompanied the development of the cultural phenomenon which would come to be called “televangelism.” In 1975, *Time* magazine profiled Robert Schuller, a California-based minister of the Reformed Church of America who broadcast his *Hour of Power* program to millions across the country. Following in the footsteps of “positive thinking” theologian Norman Vincent Peale, Schuller preached a gospel of success grounded in optimism and activism.⁹⁴ As *Time* reported, while critics charged that Schuller’s theology was an easy-faith “cultural copout,” the effectiveness of his message was evidenced by the success of his own thriving “religion business.” Central to Schuller’s ministry was an awe-inspiring visual aesthetic. Discussing the television studio/drive-in theatre/worship space that was Schuller’s Garden Grove Community Church, *Time* noted the “collective sigh” released by thousands of visitors as the show opened with a burst from twelve water fountains (“one for each apostle”) – just one of a number of arresting “attractions”

⁹³ See Stephen J. Pullman, *Foul Demons, Come Out!: The Rhetoric of Twentieth-Century American Faith Healing* (Westport: Praeger, 1999), 81; “A A Allen The Miracle of the Outpoured Oil,” YouTube video, 29:18, footage from a 1967 revival, posted by “word3out,” February 14, 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v6tFETfGNoE>.

⁹⁴ For Norman Vincent Peale, see Carol V.R. George, *God’s Salesman: Norman Vincent Peale and the Power of Positive Thinking* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). For a brief overview of Schuller’s ministry, see Jerry D. Caldwell, *Mass Media Christianity: Televangelism and the Great Commission* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1984), 111-115.

including a “crown of thorns plant” and the church’s “glass-walled sanctuary.” Schuller himself was also engineered for maximum visual appeal, his “lithe” body trained by running, and his face covered in “Pan-Cake makeup” for the cameras.” The *Time* profile implicitly invited viewers to speculate as to what lay behind Schuller’s “ever-smiling televangelist image,” and loaded the first print use of the word “televangelist” with tones of amused suspicion.⁹⁵

These suspicions would be amplified in the case of television preachers hailing from a Pentecostal background, such as Oral Roberts, who by the late-1960s was targeting a “broader, more respectable middle-class audience.”⁹⁶ Roberts’ shifting focus coincided with changes in American Pentecostalism, which was growing, moving from the social margins to the middle-class mainstream, interacting with the burgeoning Charismatic movement, and generally becoming more engaged in worldly affairs.⁹⁷ After joining the United Methodist Church in 1968, Roberts ceased his healing crusades the following year, effectively marking the end of “the era of deliverance-tent revivalism.”⁹⁸ Roberts also transformed his television persona, becoming an affable “emcee” who hosted entertaining programs with upbeat music, celebrity guests, and short “sermonettes” featuring vague references to the blessings of God, available to those who subscribed to his controversial seed faith theology.⁹⁹ By 1973, during an appearance on the comedy variety show *Hee Haw*, Roberts even poked fun at his controversial history as a miracle worker. Sitting in the chair of a barber who does not recognize his customer, Roberts chuckles as he hears the latest joke at his expense: “Say, did I tell you the one about Oral Roberts, getting run over by a motorboat?...he was out on the lake, walking his duck.”¹⁰⁰

Following Roberts’ lead, a new wave of televangelists emerged by the mid-1970s who, although tied to the Pentecostal/Charismatic tradition, likewise downplayed controversial gifts of the spirit in favor of therapeutic messages and sanctified entertainment. Pioneers such as Jim and

⁹⁵ “Retailing Optimism,” *Time*, February 24, 1975. For the etymology of “televangelism” and “televangelist,” see Denis J. Bekkering, “From Televangelist to Intervangelist: The Emergence of the Streaming Video Preacher,” *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 23, no. 2 (2011): 101-117.

⁹⁶ Scott Billingsley, *It’s a New Day: Race and Gender in the Modern Charismatic Movement* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2008), 34.

⁹⁷ See Vinson Synan, *The Holiness-Pentecostal Tradition: Charismatic Movements in the Twentieth Century*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1997), 215-278.

⁹⁸ Harrell, *Oral Roberts*, 261.

⁹⁹ Harrell, *All Things Are Possible*, 135; *ibid.*, *Oral Roberts*, 266-272.

¹⁰⁰ Harrell, *Oral Roberts*, 307. “Oral Roberts Visits the Barber Shop,” YouTube video, 1:12, clip from a 1973 episode of *Hee Haw*, posted by “Johnny Lee Clary,” January 9, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YAyp6FSL8sE>.

Tammy Faye Bakker, who were affiliated with the Assemblies of God, built vast television empires centered on religious talk shows and telethons that forged emotional connections with viewers, and which were sustained by mass fundraising efforts powered by complex computer systems. The purportedly deceptive nature of their pseudo-personal techniques and the vast amounts of money that they generated sparked controversy, and encouraged comedic treatments of these latest, alleged Elmer Gantrys.¹⁰¹ Director Rick Friedberg's 1980 film *Pray TV*, for example, lampooned such religious broadcasters via the fictional network KGOD, under the direction of the aptly named, unscrupulous businessman Marvin Fleece (Dabney Coleman).¹⁰² In addition to Fleece's recruiting of the greedy and lecherous revival preacher Buck Sunday (Charles Haid) into the network's fold, *Pray TV* satirized the Bakkers' "Praise the Lord" ministry with the "Pass the Plate" program, and portrayed KGOD's backstage area as filled with data-crunching computers, attractive telephone counsellors, and piles of cash donations dumped onto the floor from wheelbarrows.

In addition to such mainstream comedy constructions, there have also long been viewers who have regularly tuned in to the programs of suspicious televangelists to be directly amused and entertained by preachers widely considered ridiculous religious fakes. In classifying some of these viewers as unfaithful "fans" of televangelists, this dissertation emphasizes factors which set them apart from other unintentionally amused spectators of, and comedic commentators on, celebrity revival preachers. For one, these unfaithful fans, as "media fans," have developed meaningful and often dedicated, if generally irreverent, relationships with their selected televangelists – relationships made possible by the regular presence of these preachers in the media.¹⁰³ Beyond consuming copious amounts of televangelist-related media, such unfaithful fans, much like more sincerely laudatory media fans, have also often produced their own televangelist-themed participatory media and performances. Moreover, the individual unfaithful fans to be discussed can be considered members of broader unfaithful televangelical fandoms,

¹⁰¹ Jeffrey K. Hadden and Charles E. Swann, *Prime Time Preachers: The Rising Power of Televangelism* (Reading: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Inc., 1981), 103-124. For an overview of the Bakker's ministry and its viewers, see Louise M. Bourgault, "An Ethnographic Study of the 'Praise the Lord Club'" (PhD diss., Ohio University, 1980). Steve Bruce, *Pray TV: Televangelism in America* (London: Routledge, 1990), 140-161.

¹⁰² *Pray TV*, directed by Rick Friedberg (1980; Los Angeles: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 2005), DVD.

¹⁰³ See Francesca Coppa, "A Brief History of Media Fandom," in *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet: New Essays*, ed. Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse, 41-60 (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2006).

ranging from relatively loose collections of likeminded individuals to more centralized fan “clubs” sustained through face-to-face, mail-based, and online communication.

The next chapter consists of a literature review and methodological overview. Critiquing common characterizations of televangelical audiences as relatively passive, it aligns this study with the broader “culturalist turn” in the field of religion, media, and culture, emphasizing in particular how individuals *make* culture from American televangelism.¹⁰⁴ Unfaithful fans of televangelists problematize trends in scholarship on religion and popular culture, which has overemphasized what will be referred to as the “mass” experience; work on religion and fandom, which has overwhelmingly focused on sincere devotion; religion and “new” media, which has privileged the study of the explicitly religious and the supposedly novel; religious marketplace models, which do not make room for the activities of such fans; and recent research on so-called “invented” or “hyper-real” religions, which has often downplayed their comically critical natures in favor of rehabilitating their purported religiosity. Methodologically, this dissertation draws on content analyses of participatory and mainstream media, interview data, and the non-participant observation of online interactions to construct cultural histories of these remarkably active, unexpectedly influential, yet academically ignored audience factions.

The following three chapters are centered on the aforementioned Robert Tilton Fan Club (RTFC). Chapter Three – “Robert Tilton, Ironic Fandom, and Recreational Christianity” – focuses on the background to and development of the RTFC (originally titled the “Unofficial Robert Tilton Fan Club” (URTFC)). The concept of ironic fandom is introduced in relation to the controversial health-and-wealth televangelist Tilton, and two ironic fan factions are outlined: scattered viewers who regularly watched and taped Tilton for fun, and ironic fans of Tilton and other televangelists who headed “parody” religions circulating in the American media underground. Challenging recent scholarship which has framed such parody religions as authentic faiths, it is argued that they are better understood as humorous commentaries about religious authenticity. While the leaders of these laughably false faiths satirized politically active televangelists, they were often more amused by Pentecostal-oriented television preachers, some of whom they even praised for their performative skills. Brother Randall’s founding of the

¹⁰⁴ See Stewart M. Hoover, “The Culturalist Turn in Scholarship on Media and Religion,” *Journal of Media and Religion* 1, no. 1 (2002): 25-36.

URTFC was influenced by these parody religions, and he would likewise mix hints of genuine affection for Tilton with a core ironic stance – an approach he called “Recreational Christianity.” While Brother Randall downplayed the evaluative nature of his activities, this chapter redefines his concept in order to emphasize that such religious work/play involves claims regarding what counts as authentic Christianity.

Chapter Four – “‘The (Unofficial) Robert Tilton Fan Club,’ Tabloid Scandal, and a Flatulent Remix” – examines the RTFC’s development in tandem with a national media scandal that surrounded the televangelist, sparked in late-1991 by an investigative report on the ABC newsmagazine *Primetime Live*. Challenging understandings of the Tilton scandal as a relatively dispassionate revelation of wrongdoing, this chapter instead frames the *Primetime Live* report as a piece of tabloid television, which relied heavily on emotional appeals and mocking humor to convict the televangelist as an exploitative and ridiculous religious fake. Moreover, it is demonstrated that the report was produced in cooperation with the Trinity Foundation, a small Dallas-based ministry and self-styled televangelical “watchdog” organization. In addition to investigative aid, Trinity provided *Primetime Live* with short video clips of Tilton in action, sourced from their surveillance operations. Shorn of their original context, these “video proof texts” often portrayed Tilton as a laughably absurd charlatan – a representation which overlapped with the RTFC’s tongue-in-cheek acclamation of the preacher.

The Tilton scandal was initially a great boon for the burgeoning RTFC, which produced a series of independent publications; sustained a network of likeminded individuals living across the country, as well as a core community of ironic fans in Dallas; hosted a popular “tribute” night in faux honor of the troubled televangelist; and functioned as a hub for the trade and sale of a variety of Tilton-related material. Among the latter artifacts was an analog video remix featuring noises of flatulence dubbed underneath clips of Tilton at his most emphatic, energetic, and eccentric – a remix which would prove problematic for the preacher in the distant future. While the RTFC would seek and receive mainstream media attention for its activities, thereby helping to expand its influence, the fan club’s fun depended on Tilton continuing to produce his bizarrely amusing broadcasts, and would therefore not survive the embattled televangelist’s temporary hiatus from the airwaves beginning in 1993.

Chapter Five – “Recreational Christianity Goes Mainstream: *Godstuff* and ‘Pastor Gas’”

– begins by examining the migration of the ironic televangelical taste culture evidenced by the Robert Tilton Fan Club to mainstream American television, largely through the efforts of the Trinity Foundation. Further capitalizing on the power of satirical irony in its ongoing battle against allegedly exploitative televangelists, Robert Tilton included, the Trinity Foundation partnered with the cable news parody program *The Daily Show* to produce *Godstuff* (1996-2000), a segment featuring short clips of television preachers at their most unintentionally hilarious. *Godstuff* not only featured clips of Robert Tilton that the Trinity Foundation had previously shuttled to tabloid investigative programs such as *Primetime Live*, thus demonstrating their original comedic intent, but also footage sourced from Brother Randall of the RTFC, who had developed a friendship with the ministry’s resident media expert. Specifically, *Godstuff* aired clips of combative cable-access preacher Jonathan Bell, one of Brother Randall’s most prized discoveries, who would become an unlikely hit for the segment.

The second part of this chapter tracks the cultural influence of the aforementioned Robert Tilton “fart” remix, which began its life during the mid-1980s as an in-joke among coworkers at a Seattle-based television station. In its analog form, “Pastor Gas” attained legendary status in the American tape-trading underground, and was a source of great amusement, and financial profit, for members of the RTFC. By the mid-2000s, the remix had been relocated online as a streaming video, resulting in its widespread and generally unchecked proliferation, essentially negating the value of physical copies, and spawning countless sequels and imitators. Despite efforts by the latest iteration of Tilton’s media ministry to stem the spread of these unflattering remixes, the result has been the viral rebranding of the preacher as “Pastor Gas,” a vivid example of how participatory media artifacts and practices can threaten the ability of religious organizations to define their brands.

The sixth chapter – “Tammy Faye Bakker, Ludicrous Tragedy, and Campy Fandom” – shifts the focus to a televangelist whose relationship with an unintended fan following would positively impact her career and public image. With her then-husband Jim Bakker, Tammy Faye headed the “Praise the Lord” (PTL) television network, which was rocked by financial and sexual scandal in the late-1980s. Tammy Faye’s extreme makeup, flashy style, and excessive emotionality made her the butt of countless jokes and criticisms; however, these aspects of her persona also attracted a subset of ironic fans – gay men who viewed the televangelist through the

aesthetic lens of camp, and who used her as a cultural resource to construct camp-themed media and performances. This chapter begins by outlining a first wave of Tammy Faye “campy” fandom, focusing on the activities of campy fans associated with *The American Music Show*, a cable-access comedy program based in Atlanta, and drag parodies of the colorful and controversial televangelist. It is argued that while this burgeoning fan following was essentially unfaithful in that it comically critiqued Tammy Faye’s prosperity gospel and her adherence to conservative Christian sex and gender norms, such campy fans also found in the televangelist a relatable, if ridiculous, exemplar of persecutory suffering and steadfast survival.

Following the collapse of her televangelical career, Tammy Faye made some tentative moves to market herself to her camp appeal; however, she would not engage in a full-fledged camp rebranding until after the release of a documentary film produced and directed by two of her campy fans. Chapter Seven – “*The Eyes of Tammy Faye*, Camp Rebranding, and Sexual Politics” – begins by examining Fenton Bailey and Randy Barbato’s *The Eyes of Tammy Faye (TEOTF)*, released in 2000. Carrying forward the first wave of campy fandom’s amusement with Tammy Faye’s laughable eccentricities, Bailey and Barbato’s film departed substantially from the first wave’s critical edge, arguing that the former televangelist represented an authentic Christianity due, in particular, to her alleged longstanding compassion for suffering sexual minorities. Although *TEOTF*’s thesis was built on a selective and even fictive history, it proved remarkably influential, and Tammy Faye would subsequently rebrand herself to appeal to a second, and largely uncritical, wave of campy fandom. While these efforts resulted in her eventual enshrinement as a progressive gay icon, they were also accompanied by the obscuring, intentionally and otherwise, of the fact that she retained staunchly conservative positions on sexuality and gender, and would cooperate with conservative Christian ministries that sought to impede the social progress of sexual minorities in America.

The eighth chapter of this dissertation – “*The Jim Bakker Foodbucket Fanpage: Online Antifandom, Satire, and Collaborative Investigation*” – explores the possibilities for unfaithful televangelical fandom in the online and digital age. Following a prison sentence for his role in PTL’s financial frauds, Jim Bakker relocated to Branson, Missouri, where he established a new television ministry that combined heavy-handed marketing with an eschatological focus. Bakker’s latest broadcasts would attract an unintended following of antifans – viewers obsessed

with, amused by, yet also angry at the televangelist's techniques and theology. One such antifan, "Ron," established *The Jim Bakker Foodbucket Fanpage (TJBFF)* blog, a blend of satirical show synopses and direct attacks which facilitated a bustling, if short-lived, online antifan community. In contrast to ironic fans of Robert Tilton and Bakker's ex-wife Tammy Faye, these antifans wished the televangelist to reform and/or cease his allegedly exploitative and manipulative ministry, and a selection of the blog's core members engaged in a collaborative online investigation of the televangelist's fundraising activities. Although *TJBFF*'s antifan community did not succeed in its avowed goal of having Bakker removed from the airwaves, it evidenced the potential for online participatory media to foster new forms of investigative actions against suspicious televangelists, and Ron's attempt to expand the blog's presence to the video-sharing site YouTube provoked Bakker's ministry into counteraction.

Chapter 2 – Literature Review and Methodology

Introduction

This literature review begins with a look at research on audiences of American televangelism, the bulk of which has understood audience members as relatively passive: filled with anxieties to be soothed, needs to be addressed, or as spiritual shoppers looking for satiation. In contrast, this dissertation follows in a minority stream of culturalist research on televangelism, understanding viewers as critical, selective, and actively engaged with mass-mediated religion. Moreover, by moving beyond the common academic assumption that televangelists and their dedicated viewers are necessarily linked by shared theologies, this dissertation highlights the experiences of individuals who have regularly tuned in to the programs of suspicious and scandal-ridden television preachers not for spiritual enlightenment, but rather for the unintended amusement that they have derived from televangelists widely considered to be religious fakes. This type of entertainment, which has been heightened during media scandals that have surrounded particular television preachers, should not be dismissed as inconsequential, as some scholars have suggested, but rather understood as a potentially influential means of evaluating televangelist sincerity and religious authenticity.

Exploring unfaithful fan followings of televangelists requires a different theoretical grounding than most research on religion and popular culture, which has tended to frame the latter concept as the collection of a society's most-consumed cultural commodities. Drawing on the work of cultural theorist John Fiske, this dissertation instead understands popular culture as the products, performances, and meanings which individuals craft from such cultural commodities. These secondary constructions are often unexpected and unintended by cultural commodity producers, as is the case with unfaithful fans of televangelists, whose existence problematizes an overemphasis on sincere devotion in studies of religion and fandom, and whose products, performances, and meanings have circulated within systems of exchange unaccounted for by existing religious marketplace models. The participatory media created and distributed by these fans, moreover, much of which originated in the analog age, challenges the trend in research on religion and so-called "new" media to exaggerate the purportedly novel interactive

affordances of online and digital communication, as well as the field's forward-facing orientation in general. Such participatory media artifacts led to the initial discovery of the unfaithful fan followings discussed in this dissertation, and methodologically this study combines content analyses of mainstream and participatory media, non-participant observations of online activity, and fan interviews to construct cultural histories of their activities and experiences. Finally, by focusing on unfaithful televangelical fandoms grounded in irony, parody, and satire, this dissertation also intersects with recent research on what have variously been described as "hyper-real" or "invented" religions, arguing that, in many cases, these groups may be better understood as irreverent commentaries about religious authenticity than authentic religions in and of themselves.

Studies of Televangelist Audiences

Communication theorist James Carey offers two models of communication which can help categorize previous academic work on audiences of American televangelism. The first is the "transmission" model, which understands communication as "a process whereby messages are transmitted and distributed in space for the control of distance and people," and which Carey associates with the Christian mandate to spread the gospel.¹ Carey breaks the transmission model down further into a "power model," wherein the initiators of communication "pursue power" over others, and a corresponding "anxiety model," in which recipients of communication "flee anxiety" by flocking to the sure answers provided by communicators.² In contrast to the transmission model, Carey prescribes a "ritual" model of communication, which focuses less on "the extension of messages in space" than "the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs."³ Indebted to the symbolic anthropology of Clifford Geertz, Carey's ritual model understands communication as "a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed."⁴ As its name implies, the ritual model also carries religious associations, but is less concerned with "the sermon, the instruction, and admonition," as is the case with the transmission model, than "the

¹ James Carey, "A Cultural Approach to Communication," in *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society*, rev. ed (New York: Routledge, 2009), 13.

² *Ibid.*, 25.

³ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 19. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

prayer, the chant, and the ceremony,” participatory practices through which individuals express “fellowship and commonality.”⁵

Early academic approaches to audiences of American televangelism generally reflected Carey’s transmission model, often framing social and personal anxiety as the driving force behind the success of television preachers, and attributing televangelists and their programs with considerable powers of persuasion. Sociologist Jeffrey Hadden and Presbyterian pastor Charles Swann’s 1981 work, *Prime Time Preachers: The Rising Power of Televangelism*, the first monograph dedicated to the subject, appeared in the wake of Republican Ronald Reagan’s election to the American Presidency, a victory for which televangelist Jerry Falwell’s “Moral Majority” conservative religious lobby took considerable credit. While Hadden and Swann downplayed Falwell’s influence in Reagan’s election, they argued that televangelism had great political potential, suggesting that many individuals would be “mobilizable in the name of Christian virtue” by televangelists able to speak to their “fears and deepest disappointments.”⁶ More broadly, Hadden and Swann wrote that televangelists traded “in simple solutions to human problems,” a therapeutic emphasis tied to the pervasive American “cult of personhood,” and which fostered “private religion,” focused on the self.⁷ This private religion was purportedly reinforced by the medium of television which, Hadden and Swann starkly argued, “destroys community.” Homes with multiple televisions gave residents reasons to avoid each other, and even if housemates should watch together, “everyone (had to) line up and face the set,” and their “eyes *and* ears (had to) remain focused on the box.”⁸

Hadden and Swann’s alarmist statements regarding the privatized nature of televised religion were intended to explain the experiences of the genre’s most targeted demographic: older, and primarily female, Americans.⁹ As an example, Hadden and Swann briefly discussed the case of Frank and Deirdre Patrick, whom they described as “TV religion fans.” A retired couple with little mobility, the Patricks were dedicated viewers and supporters of televangelism, reportedly spending “30 percent of their income” on television ministries. To explain such

⁵ Carey, “A Cultural Approach to Communication,” 15.

⁶ Jeffrey K. Hadden and Charles E. Swann, *Prime Time Preachers: The Rising Power of Televangelism* (Reading: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Inc., 1981), 15-16.

⁷ Hadden and Swann, *Prime Time Preachers: The Rising Power of Televangelism*, 12-13.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 61-62.

dedication, Hadden and Swann sought to uncover “the psychological makeup of the televangelists’ audience,” turning to the concept of “parasocial interaction” first proposed by David Horton and R. Richard Wohl in 1956.¹⁰ According to Horton and Wohl, personality-driven television programs create an “illusion of intimacy,” with the result being that “the devotee – the ‘fan’ – comes to believe that he ‘knows’ the persona more intimately and profoundly than others do; that he ‘understands’ his character and appreciates his values and motives.”¹¹ Indeed, the Patricks claimed televangelist Jim Bakker as “a member of the family,” not a distant and anonymous religious celebrity, but rather “a real person in (their) lives.”¹²

According to Horton and Wohl, parasocial relationships are not genuine interpersonal interactions, but rather “one-sided, nondialectical, controlled by the performer, and not susceptible of mutual development.”¹³ Moreover, they argued that parasocial relationships could slide into the “pathological” if fans depended on them as “a substitute for autonomous social participation” – a distinct danger for the “socially isolated,” such as the elderly.¹⁴ Hadden and Swann expanded Horton and Wohl’s thesis to argue that televangelists had developed persuasive forms of “parapersonal communication,” enabled by computer technology.¹⁵ Computers tailored ministry materials to make it appear as though televangelists were communicating with each individual viewer, such as by inserting personal names into correspondence, or adding ready-made paragraphs speaking to previously revealed problems.¹⁶ Hadden and Swann suggested that pseudopersonal communication worked best among the “unsophisticated,” as well as individuals, perhaps the most crushingly lonely, who understood such techniques, but nevertheless decided “to incorporate the illusion of personally answered mail” into their everyday lives.¹⁷ While they argued that pseudopersonal communication was “highly deceptive,” and in the service of fundraising “the epitome of a religious hucksterism,” they added that it was not necessarily an “exploitative” arrangement, as “many people (received) responses to problems that trouble(d)

¹⁰ Hadden and Swann, *Prime Time Preachers: The Rising Power of Televangelism*, 65.

¹¹ Donald Horton and R. Richard Wohl, “Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction,” *Psychiatry* 19, no. 3 (1956): 216-217.

¹² Hadden and Swann, *Prime Time Preachers: The Rising Power of Televangelism*, 47.

¹³ Horton and Wohl, “Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction,” 215.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 223.

¹⁵ Hadden and Swann, *Prime Time Preachers: The Rising Power of Televangelism*, 67.

¹⁶ See *ibid.*, 110-111.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 67, 110.

them.”¹⁸ “Alone in the privacy of their living rooms,” Hadden and Swann concluded, “electronic communicants are able to transcend their sense of loneliness and little worth.”¹⁹

Hadden and Swann’s understanding of televangelism’s core audience as anxiety-ridden and socially isolated is reminiscent of early scholarship on new religious movements that emphasized deprivation as the main reason why individuals joined such groups.²⁰ Indeed, Hadden explicitly connected the two religious phenomena in a later article, comparing televangelism to Reverend Sun Myung Moon’s controversial Unification Church. According to Hadden, televangelists, like Moon’s church, “utilize(d) psychology” and “mass communications skills” to transmit a “kaleidoscope of warmth and cheerfulness” to the vulnerable.²¹ Turning again to Horton and Wohl, Hadden argued that televangelists used “their celebrity status to develop parapersonal ties” with such viewers, who then came to “develop a loyalty like unto their children or parents.” Television ministries “extract(ed) rather considerable sums of money” from these individuals by artificially inflating their “sense of worth” through ministry materials and correspondence, thereby making them increasingly susceptible to future pitches.²² Similarly, Richard Quebedeaux argued that televangelists headed powerful “religious ‘personality cult(s),’” and promoted a therapeutic and private faith which gave hope to socially alienated individuals.²³ Harnessing the “‘narcotic’ social function” of mass media, televangelists lulled people into passivity with “entertainment and therapy,” thereby helping “bored and anxiety-ridden individuals” to “escape the real, workaday world.”²⁴ Notably, Quebedeaux also described such audience members as “fans rather than followers,” a wry comment related to his view that televised religion was inherently irreligious.²⁵ Hadden, Swann, and Quebedeaux’s arguments, largely grounded in speculations and assumptions, have been challenged by more recent research on both new religious movements and fandom, which has framed individuals as relatively

¹⁸ Hadden and Swann, *Prime Time Preachers: The Rising Power of Televangelism*, 62, 111, 121.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 67.

²⁰ See, for example, Charles Y. Glock, “The Role of Deprivation in the Origin and Evolution of Religious Groups,” in *Religion and Social Conflict*, eds. Robert Lee and Martin E. Marty (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 24-36.

²¹ Jeffrey K. Hadden, “Indemnity Lost, Indulgences Regained: Theological Convergence in American Televangelism,” in *Restoring the Kingdom*, ed. Deane William Ferm (New York: Paragon House, 1984), 216.

²² *Ibid.*, 218-219.

²³ Richard Quebedeaux, *By What Authority: The Rise of Personality Cults in American Christianity* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982), xii.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 114.

critical and active.²⁶ Nevertheless, the persuasive power of celebrity, parapersonal communication, and the vulnerability of viewers continued to be emphasized by later, often theologically invested, academic investigators of televangelism.²⁷

While other early studies of televangelism did not go so far as to posit cult-like relationships between religious broadcasters and their regular viewers, they often limited the range of possible audience experiences by reducing viewers to quantifiable bundles of needs. The most influential example of this approach was a two-year, survey-based research project conducted jointly by the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School of Communication and the Gallup Organization. The Annenberg/Gallup project, the results of which were published in 1984, centered on a multipart research question: "What are the uses and impact of religious television and its secondary support systems as part of people's religious life; and how do people relate this to their involvement with the local church and community?"²⁸ The term "uses" here reflects the centrality of "uses and gratifications" theory to the project, which understands individuals as active media participants in that they select and consume media products best able to meet their needs.²⁹ Despite the theory's attribution of limited agency to individuals, however, James Carey locates uses and gratifications theory within his transmission model of communication, as it assumes personal lack or anxiety as the primary driver behind media use.³⁰

The term "impact" in the Annenberg/Gallup research question reflects the project's

²⁶ For an overview of research on the relationships between individuals and new religious movements, see Lorne L. Dawson, *Comprehending Cults: The Sociology of New Religious Movements*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 71-124. For a criticism of "pathological" understandings of fandom, see Joli Jenson, "Fandom as Pathology: The Consequences of Characterization," in *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, ed. Lisa A. Lewis (London: Routledge, 1992), 9-29.

²⁷ See Jerry D. Caldwell, *Mass Media Christianity: Televangelism and the Great Commission* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1984), 32, 36, 53-54, 59; Peter Horsfield, *Religious Television: The American Experience* (New York: Longman, 1984), 18, 32, 56, 61, 121; William Fore, *Television and Religion: The Shaping of Faith, Values, and Culture* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1987), 15, 100, 105; Razelle Frankl, *Televangelism: The Marketing of Popular Religion* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), 148; Steve Bruce, *Pray TV: Televangelism in America* (London: Routledge, 1990), 133-134; Quentin J. Schultze, *Televangelism and American Culture: The Business of Popular Religion* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991), 69-95; Janice Peck, *The Gods of Televangelism: The Crisis of Meaning and the Appeal of Religious Television* (Cresskill: Hampton Press, Inc., 1993), 100-103.

²⁸ George Gerbner et al., *Religion and Television: Vol. II Appendix* (Philadelphia: Annenberg School of Communications, University of Pennsylvania, 1984), 1-2.

²⁹ See Elihu Katz, Jay G. Blumler, and Michael Gurevitch, "Utilization of Mass Communication by the Individual," in *The Uses of Mass Communication: Current Perspectives on Gratifications Research*, eds. Jay G. Blumler and Elihu Katz (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1974), 19-32.

³⁰ Carey, "A Cultural Approach to Communication," 25. See Gerbner et al., *Religion and Television: Vol. II Appendix*, 2.

indebtedness to “cultivation” theory, developed by the project’s chief research advisor George Gerbner, and used to explain how religious broadcasting “affected” viewers.³¹ As its name implies, cultivation theory holds that television has the power to cultivate, or implant and nurture, particular understandings of reality in viewers.³² Central to Gerbner’s work are his claims that television had usurped religion’s place as America’s most important source of social narrative, as the medium offered audiences a “total symbolic environment,” and that for “heavy viewers,” “television virtually monopolizes and subsumes other sources of information, ideas and consciousness.”³³ Notably, Gerbner also suggested that the elderly, the bulk of televangelism’s viewers, were “almost totally dependent on television for regular ‘human’ contact and engagement in the larger world,” an assumption of isolation and passivity in line with the work of Hadden, Swann, and Quebedeaux.³⁴ Having framed religion and television as competing forms of mythmaking, one of the goals of the Annenberg/Gallup study was to tease out the prominence of each in religious broadcasting: “Is religion on television more religion than television or more television than religion?”³⁵

The Annenberg/Gallup report concluded that viewers of religious programming received “explicitly religious gratifications,” including having their “spirits lifted,” “feeling close to God,” and the spiritual benefits of preaching, sermons, and music. These religious-specific gratifications were found to be more significant than “general gratifications” such as “general enjoyment,” which the study associated with the role of television.³⁶ The report also found that, despite the fears of nervous observers, religious television was not able to offer all of the gratifications of physical church services. Rather, it suggested that religious broadcasting was more a “complement” than “supplement” for church attendance and donations, and that religious programs, in particular, could not compete with the “personal ‘closeness to members’ of one’s local church.”³⁷ Other contemporary quantitative studies of religious broadcasting audiences would also explore the needs met by such programming, and its relationship with physical

³¹ Gerbner et al., *Religion and Television: Vol. II Appendix*, 3.

³² See Gerbner, “Cultivation Analysis: An Overview,” *Mass Communication and Society* 1, no. 3/4 (1998): 175-194.

³³ Gerbner, “Television: The New State Religion?” *ETC: A Review of General Semantics*, June 1977, 147-148; Gerbner et al., *Religion and Television* (Philadelphia: Annenberg School of Communications, University of Pennsylvania, 1984), 91.

³⁴ Gerbner, “Television: The New State Religion?” 148.

³⁵ Gerbner et al., *Religion and Television*, 2.

³⁶ Gerbner et al., *Religion and Television: Vol. II Appendix*, 120.

³⁷ Gerbner et al., *Religion and Television*, 5.

church attendance.³⁸

Quantitative and transmission-oriented studies of religious broadcasting audiences were not without their critics. The year following the publication of the Annenberg/Gallup report, communication scholar Quentin Schultze questioned the value of the study's broad, survey-based approach, arguing that "in trying to say something about everyone, it says nothing about anyone in particular."³⁹ Further criticism arose in a 1987 issue of *Review of Religious Research* dedicated to the issue of religious broadcasting. Drawing largely on data from the Annenberg/Gallup study, sociologist Robert Wuthnow argued that "the privatization thesis," central to much previous work on the phenomenon, "fail(ed) to be of much assistance in trying to understand the social characteristics of religious television and its audience."⁴⁰ Stewart Hoover, like Wuthnow a participating researcher in the Annenberg/Gallup study, opined that "the measures of viewing most often used to assess the 'audience' of the electronic church (were) totally inadequate to assess the depth and quality of the viewing experience, and (were) thus poorly fitted to the task of explaining the overall 'impact' of religious broadcasting in any detail."⁴¹ In 1988, in a section dedicated to televangelism in *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, Schultze reiterated his previous concerns. Citing the overemphasis on "measurable" sociological factors in previous studies, Schultze lamented that "we still have little idea how the electronic ministries affect American culture and religious life," and he encouraged "careful cultural and historical analysis" in future work.⁴²

The germ of a path-less-taken culturalist approach to American televangelism can be found in Louise Bourgault's 1980 doctoral dissertation on Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker's

³⁸ See Judith M. Buddenbaum, "Characteristics and Media-Related Needs of the Audience for Religious TV," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 58, no. 2 (1981): 266-272; William Stacey and Anson Shupe, "Correlates of Support for the Electronic Church," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 21, no. 4 (1982): 291-303; Gary D. Gaddy and David Pritchard, "When Watching Religious TV is Like Attending Church," *Journal of Communication* 35, no. 1 (1985): 123-131; Michael F. Korpi and Kyong Liong Kim, "The Uses and Effects of Televangelism: A Factorial Model of Support and Contribution," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 25, no. 4 (1986): 410-423.

³⁹ Quentin J. Schultze, "Vindicating the Electronic Church? An Assessment of the Annenberg-Gallup Study," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 2/3 (1985): 283-290.

⁴⁰ Robert Wuthnow, "The Social Significance of Religious Television," *Review of Religious Research* 29, no. 2 (1987): 131.

⁴¹ Stewart M. Hoover, "The Religious Television Audience: A Matter of Significance, or Size?" *Review of Religious Research* 29, no. 2 (1987): 148.

⁴² Quentin J. Schultze, "Researching Televangelism," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 5 (1988): 273-274.

“Praise the Lord (PTL) Club”. Through interviews and ethnographic work, Bourgault probed the place of the PTL Club in the everyday lives of a small number of viewers from Nelsonville, Ohio, an economically depressed coal mining town, and Athens, a nearby small city. Drawing on the work of Geertz and Carey, Bourgault wrote that the PTL Club was “in an ongoing dialectic with its audience; the program help(ed) to shape the audience, and the audience help(ed) to shape the program” as it related to their everyday lives.⁴³ As an example of the potentially unexpected outcomes of the latter process, Bourgault found that members of Nelsonville’s poor and strict United Pentecostal Church, for whom the PTL Club was a rare “permissible form of entertainment,” reacted to what they perceived as the program’s “false doctrines” by “turning off their sets, ceasing to pay attention, or simply disregarding any message inconsistent with their own beliefs.”⁴⁴ Moreover, Bourgault demonstrated that perceived problematic aspects of the PTL Club could be used as fodder for family discussions, in order to help clarify and cement particular religious positions.⁴⁵

Bourgault interviewed Christian viewers from a variety of faith backgrounds: Pentecostals, Wesleyans, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and loosely organized Charismatics. Apart from the Episcopalians, Bourgault found dedicated viewers of the PTL Club in each category, viewers she, like Hadden, Swann, and Quebedeaux after her, described as the program’s “fans.”⁴⁶ She located each fan along a continuum based on whether a particular viewer tuned in to the program to receive religious inspiration *or* entertaining fare. On one pole was the ““entertainment” user,” who “use(d) the PTL as she/he would use any other talk show,” was less interested in explicitly “religious messages,” and generally did not financially support the program or call in for prayers or counseling.⁴⁷ On the other pole was the ““committed” user,” who was in “search of religious messages,” sought “religious growth,” and supported the program more readily.⁴⁸ Among these committed users was a selection of Charismatics whom Bourgault labelled the “real “PTL” fans,” as their “individualistic,” “privatized,” “positive,” and

⁴³ Louise M. Bourgault, “An Ethnographic Study of the ‘Praise the Lord Club’” (PhD diss., Ohio University, 1980), 19.

⁴⁴ Bourgault, “An Ethnographic Study of the ‘Praise the Lord Club’,” 154, 163.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 164-165.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 141.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 244-245.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 244-245, 248.

“upbeat” faith directly overlapped with the program’s message.⁴⁹

In addition to the “entertainment user” and the “committed user,” Bourgault proposed a third category of PTL Club viewer: the “social user.” Like later studies, Bourgault discussed how the PTL Club encouraged feelings of familial intimacy in viewers, which she suggested could be attractive, in particular, for the relatively lonely. As an example she offered Zelda, a sixty-six year-old member of the local Wesleyan church, and the town’s “most enthusiastic ‘PTL’ fan.” A dedicated churchgoer, Zelda nevertheless had “little to occupy her time” during the many hours she spent at home alone, and she “literally watch(ed) (the “PTL Club”) at every opportunity,” occasionally donating “a dollar or two” despite her financial constraints. Bourgault suggested that Zelda received “ample reward” for her “relatively small contributions” in the form of ministry materials and correspondence, which aimed to make her feel like “part of the ‘PTL’ family.”⁵⁰ While Bourgault wrote that Zelda “appear(ed) to use the program to satisfy affective needs of companionship and love,” she was the only social user identified in the course of her research – a stark contrast to the assumptions of much later scholarship on the phenomenon. Nevertheless, she proposed that she might have had better luck locating more such “alienated” individuals in denser urban areas.⁵¹

Bourgault’s culturalist approach, which offered valuable insights into the complexity of televangelical audiences, was an exception to the rule of early scholarship on the phenomenon, and it would be nearly a decade until further in-depth ethnographic work appeared. In 1988, Stewart Hoover published *Mass Media Religion: The Social Sources of the Electronic Church*, a harbinger of a broader cultural turn in the study of media and religion, and a book which sought “to push the debate beyond discussions of quantity to considerations of the qualitative, cultural significance of the electronic church.”⁵² Methodologically, Hoover interviewed a sample of the Annenberg/Gallup study’s subjects – viewers of Pat Robertson’s the *700 Club* – as part of a process he called “elaboration”: “What can we learn about the meaning of those quantitative data by talking with the viewers themselves?” He was particularly interested in the role that religious

⁴⁹ Bourgault, “An Ethnographic Study of the ‘Praise the Lord Club,’” 230-231.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 193-195.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 251-252.

⁵² Stewart M. Hoover, *Mass Media Religion: The Social Sources of the Electronic Church* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1988), 12.

television played in the self-reported “faith history” of each viewer, and “where,” culturally, televangelism “exist(ed) in the interaction between individuals and their sociocultural environments.”⁵³ In this regard, Hoover explicitly drew on Carey’s ritual model of communication, framing media as “cultural systems, consumed in specific places and specific ways, often inconsistent with the intentions of those who craft their content,” and religious television as “a religious activity, produced and viewed by people who share common symbols, values, and a ‘moral culture’ they celebrate.”⁵⁴

Hoover split the audience of the *700 Club* into a number of categories, distinguishing between “needy” and “evangelical” viewers – the former seeking to fulfill their “spiritual or physical needs” through the program, the latter tuning in “because of long-standing involvement with evangelicalism or fundamentalism.”⁵⁵ Hoover found that for most evangelical viewers, the *700 Club* was “valuable to their faith development, but not essential,” and that the true value of the program lay in “what it does for, and represents to, the rest of the world.” For these viewers, the program was important as “a sophisticated and articulate voice of conservative Christianity,” through which “unbelievers” could “be reached and evangelized by the program’s message.”⁵⁶ As for needy viewers, Hoover discovered “a complicated and inconsistent picture” regarding claims that televangelist programs had the “potential for precipitating personal ‘conversion’ experiences,” or the “power...to ‘break in’ on otherwise lonely and isolated lives, bringing solace, meaning, and revelation to people in crisis.”⁵⁷ Moreover, he emphasized that it was “not the case that the *700 Club* (was) the only authentic community of involvement for these people,” a strike against previous alarmist statements about the privatizing power of televised religion.⁵⁸

Hoover’s culturalist approach to televangelism heavily influenced later studies of the phenomenon, such as Janice Peck’s *The Gods of Televangelism: The Crisis of Meaning and the Appeal of Religious Television* (1993), in which she sought “to understand the meanings of evangelical television, its sociohistorical moorings, and its contemporary structure of appeal.”⁵⁹

⁵³ Hoover, *Mass Media Religion*, 14-16.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 21, 26.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 151.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 175.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 210.

⁵⁹ Janice Peck, *The Gods of Televangelism: The Crisis of Meaning and the Appeal of Religious Television*, vii.

Likewise drawing on the work of Carey and Geertz, Peck focused on the television ministries of Jimmy Swaggart and Pat Robertson, exploring how each “create(d) a particular set of meanings or interpretations of the world, and how and why it appeal(ed) to people to take up those meanings as a guide for their beliefs and actions.”⁶⁰ Key to Peck’s work was the notion of an active audience, and she argued that religious broadcasters and their viewers “cooperatively create(d) a universe of sacred meaning.”⁶¹ However, in contrast to Hoover, she neglected to engage with viewers at the individual level, instead assuming that the “structure of appeal” built into the programs offered transparent insights into the experiences of “the intended audience.”⁶² Bobby C. Alexander’s *Televangelism Reconsidered: Ritual in the Search for Human Community* (1994) similarly offered a culturalist analysis of televangelism. Drawing on a small-scale viewer survey, Alexander understood televangelism as a participatory social drama through which evangelicals could “rectify their social marginalization” as well as establish a form of “ritual community” with like-minded viewers.⁶³

While culturalist studies offered a richer understanding of the role of televangelism in the everyday lives of individuals than quantitative, transmission-based studies, both approaches focused on viewers who shared an essential spiritual kinship with their selected broadcasting ministries. However, not all viewers, even heavy viewers, of televangelism tuned in for religious edification, sentiments of spiritually grounded sociality, wholesome Christian entertainment, or to support evangelical efforts. Rather, some such viewers tuned in due to the widespread belief that certain televangelists were religious fakes – insincere hypocrites who preyed on vulnerable viewers, and who preached purportedly inauthentic Christianities – and were fascinated and amused by the spectacle and drama of both evangelical broadcasting itself, and the entertaining scandals that surrounded select television preachers.

Televangelist Scandals and Fun with Religious Fakes

In 1987 and 1988, a series of events brought televangelism back into the academic and popular spotlights. First, Pat Robertson, leader of the Christian Broadcasting Network, made an

⁶⁰ Peck, *The Gods of Televangelism*, 4.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 110.

⁶³ Bobby C. Alexander, *Televangelism Reconsidered: Ritual in the Search for Human Community* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994), 69, 91, 159.

unsuccessful bid for the Republican nomination in the 1988 Presidential election, reigniting interest in the political potential of religious broadcasting.⁶⁴ More pertinent to this dissertation, however, were high-profile scandals involving the televangelists Jim Bakker, Oral Roberts, and Jimmy Swaggart. Beginning in 1987, Bakker was hit with a litany of accusations of both financial and sexual impropriety, including that he had knowingly oversold timeshare condominiums at PTL's "Heritage USA" theme park, had personally profited from the donations of his supporters, and had engaged in a sordid extramarital encounter with a young woman.⁶⁵ That same year, Roberts attracted considerable negative attention after he begged viewers for some "quick money" – four-and-a-half million dollars – prophesying that God would end his life if the fundraising total was not met.⁶⁶ Swaggart, who publicly chastised Bakker for his supposed sins, faced his own disgrace when he was photographed in the company of a prostitute outside of a motel room in 1988.⁶⁷ While these three top television preachers had long been subjected to scrutiny, it was through these scandals that they were most prominently injected into American culture as religious fakes.

David Chidester has argued that "the central problem of religion in American popular culture" is the "question of authenticity." Exploring cultural phenomena "that are not formally or legally recognized as religious institutions but nevertheless look like religion" – baseball, rock music, even Tupperware – Chidester suggests that these "religious fakes" can perform "authentic religious work by negotiating what it means to be a human person in relation to transcendence, the sacred, or ultimate human concerns," and that they can thus be considered "authentic fakes." For Chidester, the phrase "religious fake" highlights the fact that the cultural phenomena he examines are not generally understood as "religious" according to established interpretative frameworks, and within his broader concept he mentions the subcategory of the "'fake' religious leader."⁶⁸ Rather than examine how such perceived religious fakes can facilitate "authentic" religious experiences, however, this dissertation focuses on how "fake" religious celebrities, in

⁶⁴ See Jeffrey K. Hadden and Anson Shupe, *Televangelism: Power and Politics on God's Frontier* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1988).

⁶⁵ The most extensive overview of Bakker's scandals can be found in journalist Charles E. Shepard's *Forgiven: The Rise and Fall of Jim Bakker and the PTL Ministry* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1989).

⁶⁶ See "People in the News," *Associated Press*, January 6, 1987.

⁶⁷ See Susan Wise Bauer, *The Art of the Public Grovel: Sexual Sin and Public Confession in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 143-206.

⁶⁸ David Chidester, *Authentic Fakes: Religion and American Popular Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), vii-ix.

the form of suspicious and scandal-ridden televangelists, have functioned as powerful cultural symbols through which allegedly authentic Christianity has been differentiated from purportedly inauthentic, dangerous, and ridiculous beliefs.⁶⁹

The cultural association of American televangelism with religious fakery has been most strongly established during the seemingly perennial media scandals that have surrounded television preachers. According to communication scholars James Lull and Stephen Hinerman, a “media scandal occurs when private acts that disgrace or offend the idealized, dominant morality of a social community are made public and narrativized by the media, producing a range of effects from ideological and cultural retrenchment to disruption and change.” Rather than mere unveilings of unsavory events and activities, or, in the case of televangelists, straightforward revelations of “clergy deviance,” media scandals are complex cultural processes that “provide symbolic terrain on which the terms and boundaries of public morality are negotiated.”⁷⁰ Robert Wuthnow echoed Lull and Hinerman in writing that televangelists and their scandals were “very much a part of our public religion – for good or for bad,” and that the Swaggart and Bakker sex scandals, in particular, were subjects for “widely publicized discussions of the nature of morality and its relation to public religious figures.”⁷¹ Besides morality, media scandals involving televangelists have also functioned as high-profile venues in which understandings of authentic Christianity have been constructed, defended, and debated. Within these venues mainstream journalistic media outlets have held considerable power in crafting dominant public narratives, and have often made explicit and implicit claims regarding Christian authenticity, as well as the sincerity of select television preachers.

Journalist Mark Silk has argued that in covering religious matters, the American press assumes “a religious rather than a secular point of view,” relying on widely shared “moral

⁶⁹ Chidester, *Authentic Fakes*, 17.

⁷⁰ James Lull and Stephen Hinerman, “The Search for Scandal,” in *Media Scandals: Morality and Desire in the Popular Culture Marketplace*, eds. James Lull and Stephen Hinerman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 3. For scandals as straightforward revelations of “clergy deviance,” see Anson Shupe, *In the Name of All That’s Holy: A Theory of Clergy Malfeasance* (Westport: Praeger, 1995); Anson Shupe, ed., *Wolves Within the Fold: Religious Leadership and Abuses of Power* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998); Anson Shupe, *Spoils of the Kingdom: Clergy Misconduct and Religious Community* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007); Anson Shupe, *Rogue Clerics: The Social Problem of Clergy Deviance* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2008).

⁷¹ Robert Wuthnow, *The Struggle for America’s Soul: Evangelicals, Liberals, and Secularism* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1989), 121.

formulas, or topoi, which shape the way religious stories are conceived and written.”⁷² Discussing the Bakker saga, Silk points out that the preacher was evaluated in the press against a Biblical understanding of hypocrisy, and charged with having put on a “false pretense of piety and virtue.”⁷³ Sean McCloud, discussing print coverage of the Bakker scandals, writes that journalists covering the case “acted as heresiographers by distinguishing acceptable from unacceptable religious styles, activities, and institutions.” What the press framed as most bereft of “religious authenticity,” McCloud notes, was the “combination of wealth and religion” in the messages of not only the Bakkers, but many other prominent televangelists as well.⁷⁴ In addition to relatively sober evaluations, journalists have also used humor to query the sincerity and religious authenticity of televangelists, playing into the public demand for entertaining religious scandals.⁷⁵ McCloud points out that *Time* and *Newsweek* magazines both “mentioned the Bakkers’ air-conditioned dog house more than once, and *Newsweek* also noted that Jimmy Swaggart’s grandson played in an air-conditioned tree house” – amusing indicators of these preachers’ allegedly sinful largesse.⁷⁶

Scholars of televangelism, however, have largely downplayed or dismissed the entertaining and/or humorous nature of televangelist scandals, as well as comedic treatments of these scandals in the mainstream media, journalistic or otherwise. “For sheer entertainment,” Hadden and Shupe wrote of the “soap sleaze” that was the Bakker media scandals, “this was better, juicier, than any episode of ‘Dallas’ or ‘Dynasty’.”⁷⁷ Yet, they also suggested that the scandals were ultimately just a “sideshow,” distracting from the “main event” that was Pat Robertson’s presidential run.⁷⁸ Years earlier, Hadden and Swann noted that the PTL Club’s “finances (had) received so much publicity that a Charlotte radio station had broadcast a parody called ‘The Pass the Loot Club’”; however, they made no effort to further explore such ubiquitous comedy creations.⁷⁹ In discussing Jimmy Swaggart’s (in)famous, televised confession

⁷² Mark Silk, *Unsecular Media: Making News of Religion in America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), xii.

⁷³ Silk, *Unsecular Media*, 86.

⁷⁴ Sean McCloud, *Making the American Religious Fringe: Exotics, Subversives, & Journalists, 1955-1993* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 167-168.

⁷⁵ Judith M. Buddenbaum, *Religious Scandals* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2009).

⁷⁶ McCloud, *Making the American Religious Fringe*, 168.

⁷⁷ Hadden and Shupe, *Televangelism*, 6.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁷⁹ Hadden and Swann, *Prime Time Preachers*, 34.

of sexual misconduct, Robert Wuthnow argued that the mainstream media had presented the event within a variety of cultural “frames,” such as a “theatrical frame,” by which the preacher was portrayed as an insincere actor. Citing a joke by talk show host Johnny Carson, Wuthnow also pointed out the common use of a comedic frame to represent Swaggart’s confession, which he faulted for “failing in any way to make sense of it at all.”⁸⁰ More recently Jonathan Walton, in his 2009 study of black televangelism, acknowledged that televangelists, due in no small part to their legacy of scandal, had become “tried-and-true comedic fodder” in the mainstream media, while at the same time warning against the potentially misleading nature of these “puerile” representations.⁸¹ Such dismissive, cursory, and even hostile approaches reflect longstanding academic biases against cultural artifacts perceived to be “just entertainment.”⁸²

Rare efforts to make sense of comedic treatments of television preachers and their scandals can be found in *The God Pumpers: Religion in the Electronic Age* (1987), a collection of essays exploring the cultural significance of American televangelism.⁸³ In his contribution on televangelist-themed editorial cartoons, Edward H. Sewell Jr. draws on the work of anthropologist Victor Turner to argue that editorial cartoonists are “liminal” figures, possessing a particular “freedom” to play with and critique aspects of society, including controversial religious celebrities.⁸⁴ As an example, Sewell reprints a 1983 cartoon from *The Charlotte Observer* challenging the Bakkers’ prosperity theology, in which Jim Bakker, smiling at the camera with a halo drawn over his head, offers his audience an inverted version of a Beatitude: “Blessed are the T.V. Evangelists – For They Shall Inherit the Gold Coast Condo!”⁸⁵ In another cartoon from a 1981 issue of the *Denver Post*, a stereotypical Uncle Sam character looks up in terror as a member of the Moral Majority stomps a copy of the “King Falwell Version of the Bible” into his mouth, a satire aimed at the televangelist’s impassioned intertwining of religion

⁸⁰ Wuthnow, *The Struggle for America’s Soul*, 134.

⁸¹ Jonathan L. Walton, *Watch This! The Ethics and Aesthetics of Black Televangelism* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 168.

⁸² Jonathan Gray, *Television Entertainment* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 6-7.

⁸³ Marshall Fishwick and Ray B. Browne, eds., *The God Pumpers: Religion in the Electronic Age* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1987).

⁸⁴ Edward H. Sewell, Jr., “Exorcism of Fools: Images of the Televangelist in Editorial Cartoons,” in *The God Pumpers: Religion in the Electronic Age*, eds., Marshall Fishwick and Ray B. Browne (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1987), 46-47. Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Press, 1969).

⁸⁵ See Sewell, Jr., “Exorcism of Fools,” 49.

and politics.⁸⁶ These editorial cartoons, Sewell argues, highlight the cartoonists' considerable "freedom to comment on important topics in ways that would bring cries of libel if they were used in a news report or even a written editorial," in these cases, suspicious intersections between religion, money, and politics.⁸⁷

Sewell's thesis is reinforced by a situation briefly mentioned by Marshall Fishwick in his introduction to the collection: a legal battle between televangelist Jerry Falwell and *Hustler* magazine, published by Larry Flynt.⁸⁸ At issue was a spoof advertisement featured in a 1983 edition of the magazine in which "Falwell" reported that he had lost his virginity to his own mother, in an outhouse, after downing too many "Fire and Brimstones," a concoction of "Campari, ginger ale, and soda." The faux ad further suggested that the televangelist downed the drink prior to preaching: "You don't think I could lay down all that bullshit *sober* do you?"⁸⁹ Despite *Hustler's* disclaimer at the bottom of the page – "Ad Parody – Not to be Taken Seriously" – Falwell's ministry sued the magazine, claiming the "intentional infliction of emotional distress."⁹⁰ While Falwell won an initial judgment, it was subsequently reversed by the U.S. Supreme Court, which maintained that the creators of the *Hustler* mock ad, however distasteful their work was, followed in a long tradition of American "political cartoonists and satirists," who had "played a prominent role in public and political debate."⁹¹ Although not specifically mentioned in the Supreme Court's ruling, the parody was also involved in a public *religious* conversation regarding the authenticity of Falwell's fundamentalist message, which denounced the sexual permissiveness championed by magazines like *Hustler*, and took shots at the preacher's sincerity as well.

Much like Jerry Falwell, this dissertation takes humorous treatments of televangelists seriously. However, in addition to analyzing comedic representations of television preachers in the mainstream media, it pays particular attention to the ways in which everyday individuals

⁸⁶ See Sewell, Jr., "Exorcism of Fools," 52.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 46-47.

⁸⁸ Marshall Fishwick, "From Sea to Shining Sea," in *The God Pumpers: Religion in the Electronic Age*, eds., Marshall Fishwick and Ray B. Browne (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1987), 9.

⁸⁹ An image of the offending mock advertisement can be found at <http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/falwell/campariL.jpg>, accessed January 22, 2015.

⁹⁰ Rodney A. Smolla, *Jerry Falwell v. Larry Flynt: The First Amendment on Trial* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 162, 315.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 318-319.

have created their own humor-based entertainment, including their own media and performances, from television preachers considered suspicious, scandalous, and/or ridiculously strange. In doing so, this study builds off of stray points made by earlier scholars of televangelism. First was the recognition of viewers who tuned in to the programs of scandal-ridden televangelists for entertainment unintended by their ministries. In a 1988, survey-based study examining the impact of the PTL scandals on viewer donations, Robert Abelman proposed that the incidents had spawned a new, albeit marginal and fleeting, type of PTL viewer – the “curious consumer” – who watched “to satisfy their curiosity about the scandal and its participants,” and a viewing segment associated with the high ratings achieved by journalistic coverage of the scandal.⁹² Two years later, Abelman and Hoover, in the introduction to their co-edited collection on religious television, identified a related category of viewers. In a section discussing the “entertainment value” of televangelism, they noted that the genre’s “placement in ‘fringe’ time-slots (had) generated a substantial cult following among nonreligious viewers.”⁹³ Who these viewers were and what exactly made them “cult” followers of televangelism, however, were questions left unanswered.

In addition to the recognition of such unintended viewers of televangelism, there was the passing observation that many viewers could create their own media. In their contribution to Abelman and Hoover’s co-edited volume, Hadden and Shupe briefly discussed a 1987 *Saturday Night Live* skit lampooning the ministry of Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker, which aired just days after the public revelation that PTL had paid off Jessica Hahn, the young woman at the center of the salacious sex scandal. In the sketch, *Saturday Night Live*’s resident religious broadcaster, “The Church Lady” (Dana Carvey), a judgmental and prudish older woman, grills Jim (Phil Hartman), and Tammy Faye (Jan Hooks) about their ministry’s troubles. Following an overview of Jim and Hahn’s surreptitious sexual encounter, in which the former’s less than stellar stamina is implied, and an absurd story from Tammy Faye about a drug-fueled battle with “demonic raisins” on a hallucinatory Bundt cake (a dig at her well-publicized struggles with prescription pharmaceuticals), Jim pleads to the camera as he gestures toward his gold rings and watch: “I just want our partners to know. We have repented, and we need their emotional, *and* financial

⁹² Robert Abelman, “‘PTL Club’ Viewer Uses and Gratifications,” *Communication Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (1989): 63.

⁹³ Robert Abelman and Stewart M. Hoover, “Introduction,” in *Religious Television: Controversies and Conclusions*, ed. Robert Abelman and Stewart M. Hoover (Norwood: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1990), 4.

support now more than ever.”⁹⁴ In discussing the sketch, Hadden and Shupe made an intriguing suggestion: “Perhaps no piece of videotape has been copied more times than the *Saturday Night Live* interview of the ‘Church Lady’ with comedy troupe actors playing Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker.”⁹⁵ While a brief and speculative aside, Hadden and Shupe’s comment nevertheless pointed to a significant historical shift in the ability of everyday individuals to create and share their own video media beginning in the mid-1980s, due in large part to the increasing affordability and availability of analog Video Cassette Recorders (VCRs).⁹⁶ These two interrelated topics – “cult” viewers of televangelism and participatory media – are the central focus of the present dissertation, and their analysis necessitates a different theoretical framework than those commonly encountered in studies of religion and popular culture.

Popular Culture, Fandom, and Humor

Most research in the area of religion and popular culture has understood popular culture as a collection of heavily consumed cultural commodities. *The Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*, for example, “broadly” defines popular culture as “the products of contemporary mass culture.”⁹⁷ In his introduction to the edited collection *Religion and Popular Culture in America*, Bruce Forbes quotes Jack Nachbar and Kevin Lause in defining popular culture as “that which is (or has been) accepted or approved of by large groups of people” – “that,” according to Forbes, being products such as “television programs, movies, popular music, supermarket magazines, popular fiction...and much more.”⁹⁸ Likewise, in *Religion and Popular Culture: Rescripting the Sacred*, Richard Santana and Gregory Erickson associate popular culture with “film, television,

⁹⁴ See “Church Chat: Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker,” online video, 7:39, posted by “Saturday Night Live,” <https://screen.yahoo.com/church-chat-jim-tammy-faye-000000956.html>, accessed January 22, 2015.

⁹⁵ Jeffrey K. Hadden and Anson Shupe, “Elmer Gantry: Exemplar of American Televangelism,” in *Religious Television: Controversies and Conclusions*, ed. Robert Abelman and Stewart M. Hoover (Norwood: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1990), 17.

⁹⁶ For the early years of VCR technology, see Lucas Hilderbrand, *Inherent Vice: Bootleg Histories of Videotape and Copyright* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 33-72.

⁹⁷ See “Journal of Religion and Popular Culture,” *University of Toronto Press Journals*, <http://www.utpjournals.com/Journal-of-Religion-and-Popular-Culture.html>, accessed January 22, 2015.

⁹⁸ Bruce David Forbes, “Introduction: Finding Religion in Unexpected Places,” in *Religion and Popular Culture*, rev. ed., eds. Bruce David Forbes and Jeffrey H. Mahan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 3-4; Jack Nachbar and Kevin Lause, “An Introduction to the Study of Popular Culture: What is the Stuff that Dreams are Made Of?” in *Popular Culture: An Introductory Text*, eds. Jack Nachbar and Kevin Lause (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1992), 10.

advertising, music, sports, and the news media.”⁹⁹ In *Religion and Popular Culture: A Hyper-Real Testament*, Adam Possamai offers a similar list of cultural artifacts, adding that popular culture “tends to be part of the mass media and is consumed by the masses.”¹⁰⁰ Lynn Schofield Clark, in *Between Sacred and Profane: Researching Religion and Popular Culture*, draws on sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s work on social cleavages tied to taste to define popular culture as “anything that can be successfully packaged for consumers in response to their desire for a means to both identify with some people, ideas, or movements, and to distinguish themselves from others.”¹⁰¹ Other conceptualizations of popular culture have included human activities beyond the acts of consumption, acceptance, or approval. Daniel Stout, in *Religion and Popular Culture: Studies on the Interaction of Worldviews*, offers a two-fold definition of popular culture. He first cites Will Rockett’s description of popular culture as cultural artifacts “which have proved most successful in garnering a significant audience,” followed by sociologist Herbert Gans’ understanding of popular culture as “the beliefs and practices of ‘many people’.”¹⁰² In *Understanding Religion and Popular Culture*, Terry Ray Clark writes that popular culture consists not only of “widespread and well-liked products,” but also “practices, themes, and values that have achieved their popular status as a result of their dissemination through the vehicles of modern technology, including mass marketing strategies.”¹⁰³

Common to all of these conceptual frameworks is an emphasis on what might be called the “mass” experience, which can obscure the fact that each individual experiences cultural commodities in unique ways. In her recent work *Religion and Popular Culture: A Cultural*

⁹⁹ Richard W. Santana and Gregory Erickson, *Religion and Popular Culture: Rescripting the Sacred* (Jefferson: MacFarland & Company, Inc., 2008), 1.

¹⁰⁰ Adam Possamai, *Religion and Popular Culture: A Hyper-Real Testament* (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2005), 18.

¹⁰¹ Lynn Schofield Clark, “Why Study Popular Culture? Or, How to Build a Case for your Thesis in a Religious Studies or Theology Department,” in *Between Sacred and Profane: Researching Religion and Popular Culture*, ed. Gordon Lynch (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 9; Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).

¹⁰² Daniel A. Stout, “Beyond Culture Wars: An Introduction to the Study of Religion and Popular Culture,” in *Religion and Popular Culture: Studies on the Interaction of Worldviews*, eds. Daniel A. Stout and Judith M. Buddenbaum (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 2001), 5; Will Rockett, “Crossing Wire Borders: Concepts of Popular Culture in Film and Television Studies,” in *Continuities in Popular Culture: The Present in the Past and the Past in the Present and Future*, eds. Ray B. Browne and Ronald J. Ambrosetti (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1993), 150; Herbert J. Gans, *Popular Culture and High Culture: An Analysis and Evaluation of Taste* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), vii.

¹⁰³ Terry Ray Clark, “Introduction: What is Religion? What is Popular Culture? How are They Related?” in *Understanding Religion and Popular Culture: Theories, Themes, Products and Practices*, eds. Terry Ray Clark and Dan W. Clanton, Jr. (London: Routledge, 2012), 8.

Studies Approach, Chris Klassen, while defining “popular culture” as “a body of cultural productions (films, music, books, TV) which are consumed and recognizable by a significantly large proportion of... (the) population,” makes the crucial point that it is not the case “that everyone consumes these cultural productions in the same way.”¹⁰⁴ Indeed, drawing on the work of cultural theorist Stuart Hall, Klassen points out that individuals can “articulate an alternative meaning,” even an “oppositional” meaning, from any given product.¹⁰⁵ Eric Michael Mazur and Kate McCarthy, editors of *God in the Details: American Religion in Popular Culture*, similarly highlight the “everyday” “meaning-making” side of popular culture, recognizing that “(j)ust as each piece of popular culture is itself a pastiche of inherited bits and pieces, so each of us works with a wide range of cultural phenomena in making meaning for ourselves.”¹⁰⁶ It is this aspect of popular culture – the productive, and at times unexpected, activities of individuals in relation to cultural commodities – that is the focus of this dissertation. As will be demonstrated, these productive activities often go well beyond the crafting of meanings, particularly among individuals who self-identify as “fans.”

According to cultural theorist John Fiske, the fact that individuals consume certain cultural commodities tells us very little, and he proposes an understanding of popular culture which deemphasizes the act of consumption in favor of examining the productive practices of individuals. “Popular culture,” Fiske writes, “is not consumption, it is culture, the active process of generating and circulating meanings and pleasures within a social system: culture, however industrialized, can never be adequately described in terms of the buying and selling of commodities.”¹⁰⁷ To help differentiate “consumption” and “culture,” Fiske proposes “two parallel, semiautonomous economies”: a “financial economy” and a “cultural economy.”¹⁰⁸ The financial economy involves the manufacture, marketing, and distribution of cultural commodities, and ends when a product is sold to, or otherwise acquired by, a consumer. It is only at this “point of sale” that a product “begins its work” in the cultural economy, having been

¹⁰⁴ Chris Klassen, *Religion and Popular Culture: A Cultural Studies Approach* (Don Mills: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 53-55; Stuart Hall, “Encoding/Decoding,” in *Culture, Media, Language*, eds. Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe, and Paul Willis (London: Hutchinson, 1980), 128-139.

¹⁰⁶ Eric Michael Mazur and Kate McCarthy, “Introduction: Finding Religion in American Popular Culture,” in *God in the Details: American Religion in Popular Culture*, 2nd ed., eds. Eric Michael Mazur and Kate McCarthy (London: Routledge, 2011), 7-8.

¹⁰⁷ John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 23.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 26.

transformed from a “cultural commodity” to a “cultural resource,” and thus available to be used by individuals as they see fit.¹⁰⁹ “Every act of consumption is an act of production,” Fiske affirms, and he outlines three realms of cultural production related specifically to fans, arguably among the most active consumers/producers: “semiotic productivity,” the “making of meanings”; “enunciative productivity,” the sharing of these meanings between individuals; and “textual productivity,” the crafting of their own cultural artifacts.¹¹⁰

Fiske’s work, like Stuart Hall’s, is associated with the British cultural studies tradition, which understands popular culture as “a site where the construction of everyday life may be examined,” and emphasizes “the power relations that constitute this form of everyday life.”¹¹¹ Following in this stream of scholarship, Fiske frames popular culture as a “process of struggle, of struggle over the meanings of social experience, of one’s personhood and its relations to the social order and of the texts and commodities of that order.” Drawing on Hall, Fiske specifies that popular culture is a political struggle, involving relatively disenfranchised “people” continually negotiating with the imposed ideology of the “power-bloc.”¹¹² While the political implications of popular culture are certainly important, and will be discussed within the context of American televangelists and their unfaithful fans, this dissertation places a particular emphasis on popular culture as a site of religious struggle, where issues of religious authenticity are discussed, debated, and negotiated. This focus stands in contrast to the bulk of cultural studies scholarship – Fiske and the wider British cultural studies tradition included – which, due in large part to an overwhelmingly secular bias, has paid little attention to the significance of religion in people’s everyday lives.¹¹³

Beyond the general productivity of individuals, Fiske pays particular attention to popular cultural activities that resist, challenge, and subvert the goals and intentions of relatively powerful producers of cultural commodities. For example, he examines “‘tricky’ users” of

¹⁰⁹ Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture*, 28, 35.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 35; Fiske, “The Cultural Economy of Fandom,” in *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, ed. Lisa A. Lewis (London: Routledge, 1992), 37-39.

¹¹¹ Graeme Turner, *British Cultural Studies: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 2003), 5.

¹¹² Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture*, 28; Stuart Hall, “Notes on Deconstructing ‘The Popular,’” in *People’s History and Socialist Theory*, ed. Raphael Samuel (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 238.

¹¹³ See Michael Bailey and Guy Redden, “Editor’s Introduction: Religion as Living Culture,” in *Mediating Faiths: Religion and Socio-Cultural Change in the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Michael Bailey and Guy Redden (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 4. Notably, Turner’s in-depth overview – *British Cultural Studies: An Introduction* – features no mention of “religion,” or, perhaps more surprisingly, “Christianity.”

shopping malls, such as elderly “mall walkers” and teenage loungers, who had “no intention to buy,” the central activity for which such malls were constructed, but rather appropriated these shopping spaces for their own purposes.¹¹⁴ To describe these sorts of everyday activities, Fiske turns to cultural theorist Michel de Certeau, who uses hunting and military metaphors to explain the practice of reading. According to de Certeau, while authors and social elites treat texts as “private hunting reserves,” attempting to control interpretations and encourage certain readings, readers “poach” from texts, taking elements that they want, leaving the rest, and constructing a variety of meanings that are difficult, if not impossible, to monitor or control.¹¹⁵ Fiske applies de Certeau’s framework to a wide array of cultural products, arguing that in appropriating a cultural commodity as a cultural resource, individuals “pluralize the meanings and pleasures it offers, evade or resist its disciplinary efforts, fracture its homogeneity and coherence, raid or poach upon its terrain.”¹¹⁶

The producers of televangelist broadcasts aim to provoke desired readings and responses: acceptance of the religious authenticity of their ministries and the sincerity of their ministers, the provision of financial and spiritual support, conversion to Christianity. Individual viewers, however, often poach from, craft meanings out of, and modify such programs in ways which differ from – and even diametrically oppose – the producers’ intentions. These activities challenge assumptions in recent studies of televangelism which have overemphasized the “supply side” of the televangelical religious economy, following the lead of “rational choice” theorists of religion such as Rodney Stark and Roger Finke.¹¹⁷ For example, in their work on evangelical “holy mavericks,” including the prominent televangelists Joel Osteen, T.D. Jakes, and Paula White, sociologist Shayne Lee and historian Philip Sinitiere argue that the “key to understanding” their success lies in analyzing their “spiritual goods and services,” which supposedly “match the tastes and desires of religious consumers.”¹¹⁸ Mara Einstein takes a

¹¹⁴ John Fiske, *Reading the Popular* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 17-18.

¹¹⁵ See Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 165-176.

¹¹⁶ Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture*, 28.

¹¹⁷ See Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America: 1776-2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005).

¹¹⁸ Shayne Lee and Phillip Luke Sinitiere, *Holy Mavericks: Evangelical Innovators and the Spiritual Marketplace* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 3. See also Shayne Lee, *T.D. Jakes: America’s New Preacher* (New York: New York University Press, 2005); Phillip Luke Sinitiere, “Preaching the Good News Glad: Joel Osteen’s

similar approach in her recent monograph on “faith brands,” in which she suggests that examining the branding practices of the “new televangelist” Osteen offers straightforward insights into the significance he carries for his viewers, as “making meaning” lies in the hands of such religious marketers, who are in the business of “giving consumers something to think and feel.”¹¹⁹ These approaches artificially limit the agency of individuals to a simple shopping decision – either purchase a satisfactory religious product or leave it on the shelf – and by neglecting to examine the cultural economies that appear only at the moment of acquisition, offer little insight into the varied, and often unexpected, ways in which individuals incorporate these religious commodities, as cultural resources, into their everyday lives.

In her ethnographic work on black, female viewers of televangelism in North Carolina, Marla Frederick recognizes that the “extent to which televangelists’ messages are adopted and acted upon in everyday life is a subject that has yet to be fully examined.”¹²⁰ In contrast to the above assumptions of shared, unambiguous meanings between televangelists and their audience members, Frederick, in line with previous culturalist scholars of the phenomenon, demonstrates that viewers are highly selective, as they “sift through” religious broadcasts and “determine for themselves what they agree with and what they differ with.”¹²¹ For example, while Frederick’s mainline Baptist research subjects often took to heart the core religious teachings of charismatic televangelists, they were also often highly suspicious of “the authenticity of Spirit displays” common to such programs, such as glossolalia and bodily ecstasies.¹²² Similarly, in his recent monograph on black televangelism, Jonathan Walton draws on Stuart Hall’s concept of “negotiated readings” to argue that televangelical viewers “filter the intended messages of televangelists to adjust and apply them personally as they see fit” – they are able to “eat the fish and still spit out the bones.”¹²³ However, for Walton, as for Frederick and most academic observers of televangelism, the “fish” necessarily offers spiritual sustenance, since broadcasters and their viewers “obviously have similar belief systems and moral outlooks.”¹²⁴ It is here that

Tel-e-vangelism,” in *Global and Local Televangelism*, eds. Pradip Ninan Thomas and Philip Lee (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 87-107.

¹¹⁹ Mara Einstein, *Brands of Faith: Marketing Religion in a Commercial Age* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), 70, 122.

¹²⁰ Marla F. Frederick, *Between Sundays: Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 133.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 137.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 138.

¹²³ Walton, *Watch This!*, 172; Hall, “Encoding/Decoding,” 137.

¹²⁴ Walton, *Watch This!*, 168.

Fiske's understanding of popular culture is so important, as it draws attention to the fact that the "fish" of these programs might be something else entirely, depending on the viewer.

By emphasizing the productive capacities of individuals, John Fiske influenced scholarship in two interrelated areas central to the present dissertation: fandom and participatory media. Studies of the intersections between religion and fandom have often focused on the potential religiosity of fandom, such as by highlighting the existence of fan communities and shared frameworks of meaning among fans. Michael Jindra, for example, has argued that the science-fiction television series *Star Trek* (1966-1969) offers its fan communities a "'symbol system' concerned with 'ultimate' questions about the world, human destiny, and 'transcendent meaning'".¹²⁵ More recently, John C. Lyden has suggested that the religiosity of fan devotion to the *Star Wars* (1977-2005) film series is tied to its fostering of "communal identity, a set of shared ideas about ultimate meaning and values, and a set of practices that reinforce or express these."¹²⁶ Other scholars have emphasized the purportedly transcendent experiences of fans. Robin Sylvan, in his analysis of music fans ranging from "Deadheads" to trance aficionados, argues that "the heat of the music" helps individuals touch the beyond: "it provides a powerful religious experience which is both the foundation and the goal of the whole enterprise, an encounter with the numinous that is at the core of all religions."¹²⁷ In his monograph on Bruce Springsteen fans, Daniel Cavicchi compares the process of becoming a fan to religious conversion, as it "entails a radical, enduring change in orientation... a dramatic opening of oneself to another's experience."¹²⁸ Similarly, Matt Hills describes the "'becoming a fan'" moment as a conversion-type experience, patterned by immersive "self-suspension."¹²⁹ He charges that scholars who "expect a rational explanation of the self's devotion and fandom" misunderstand the ineffable, irrational, and thus "neoreligious" nature of the phenomenon.¹³⁰

¹²⁵ Michael Jindra, "'Star Trek to Me is a Way of Life': Fan Expressions of *Star Trek* Philosophy," in *Star Trek and Sacred Ground: Explorations of Star Trek, Religion, and American Culture*, eds. Jennifer E. Porter and Darcee L. McLaren (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 220.

¹²⁶ John C. Lyden, "Whose Film is it Anyway? Canonicity and Authority in *Star Wars* Fandom," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80, no. 3 (2012): 782.

¹²⁷ Robin Sylvan, *Traces of the Spirit: The Religious Dimensions of Popular Music* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 4.

¹²⁸ Daniel Cavicchi, *Tramps Like Us: Music and Meaning Among Springsteen Fans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 59.

¹²⁹ Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures* (London: Routledge, 2002), xxii.

¹³⁰ Hills, *Fan Cultures*, xxii, 96.

Other scholars, however, have challenged associations of fandom with religion. Sean McCloud suggests that studies linking the two are often driven by a “comparative parallelomania,” privileging tantalizing similarities over important differences.¹³¹ While he acknowledges that “the parallels to religion” in fandom can be “striking,” such as claims by some Elvis fans that the deceased star serves as a “guardian angel” and even a supernatural “healer,” McCloud argues that fandoms are better thought of as “late modern projects of the self, elective affiliations that establish self-identity and community during a time when these things are not ascribed, but reflexively made and remade.”¹³² Echoing McCloud, Pete Ward argues that fan devotion to celebrities is essentially “a spirituality of the sacred self,” a pseudo-religious form of identity construction, in which the “the worship of celebrity” reflects “the worship of the self writ large.”¹³³ Taking a different approach, Cornel Sandvoss argues that fandom is not religious as it is not connected to a stable transcendent referent – it “lacks an absolute, other-worldly framework through which social realities are constructed and legitimized.”¹³⁴

To date, the study of religion and fandom has featured a pervasive overemphasis on sincere, and generally unalloyed, devotion as the most crucial point of contact between the two cultural phenomena. For one thing, however, fans do not just uncritically accept their chosen cultural commodities. In his 1992 work *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, cultural theorist Henry Jenkins, like Fiske, turns to de Certeau’s concept of poaching in describing fans as “rogue readers” who “raid mass culture, claiming its materials for their own use, reworking them as the basis for their own cultural creations and social interactions.”¹³⁵ According to Jenkins, the necessity of such reworking points to an inherently “troubled relationship” between fans and the producers of cultural commodities, and he argues that it is “not simply fascination or adoration but also frustration and antagonism” that patterns fan relationships with commodity producers.¹³⁶ Lyden recognized such tensions among many *Star Wars* fans, who engaged in pitched “battles” with series creator George Lucas over the proper

¹³¹ Sean McCloud, “Popular Culture Fandoms, the Boundaries of Religious Studies, and the Project of the Self,” *Culture and Religion: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 4, no. 2 (2003): 198.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 199, 201.

¹³³ Pete Ward, *Gods Behaving Badly: Media, Religion, and Celebrity Culture* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2011), 71, 81.

¹³⁴ Cornel Sandvoss, *Fans: The Mirror of Consumption* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), 63.

¹³⁵ Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 18.

¹³⁶ Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 1, 24.

composition of the *Star Wars* “canon.” Ultimately, however, these struggles were motivated by a “faithfulness to and love for” the fantastic world that Lucas had originally created.¹³⁷ Yet, recent scholarship has suggested that fan relationships need not feature sincere devotion at all, but can be grounded in a wider variety of emotional attachments. Reflecting this view, Cornel Sandvoss has defined “fandom” as “the regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given popular narrative or text,” with “text” understood in a “broader sense,” encompassing “books, television shows, films or music,” as well as “sports teams and popular icons and stars ranging from athletes and musicians to actors.”¹³⁸ Central to Sandvoss’ definition is the ambiguity of the phrase “emotionally involved,” which opens up the concept of fandom to include relationships beyond acclamatory devotion. Drawing on this expanded understanding, the present dissertation focuses on three forms of unintended fandom, identified elsewhere in fan scholarship, which have surrounded select American televangelists: “ironic fans,” “campy fans,” and “antifans”.¹³⁹ While these fans have fixated upon, and have even become self-admittedly obsessed with, certain television preachers, their attraction to these televangelists is associated with widespread sentiments that they are ridiculous religious fakes, and these fans can be considered inherently *unfaithful* in that they have not subscribed to their chosen televangelists’ theologies.

The three forms of unfaithful televangelical fandom to be discussed in this dissertation have been steeped in three interrelated types of humor: irony, parody, and satire.¹⁴⁰ According to literary theorist Linda Hutcheon, irony involves the “rubbing together of... meanings (the said and plural unsaid) with a critical edge created by a difference of context.”¹⁴¹ Closely associated is parody, which she defines as “a form of imitation... characterized by ironic inversion.”¹⁴² Ironic fans of televangelists have often extolled the theologies and preaching styles of their chosen televangelists for the amusement of those who “get” the fact that the ironists are not

¹³⁷ Lyden, *Whose Film is it, Anyway?*, 777-778.

¹³⁸ Sandvoss, *Fans*, 8.

¹³⁹ For ironic fans, see Ien Ang, *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination*, trans. Della Couling (Methuen: London, 1985), 96- 102. For campy fans, see Kevin Kopelson, *Beethoven’s Kiss: Pianism, Perversion, and the Mastery of Desire* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 154. For antifans, see Jonathan Gray, “Antifandom and the Moral Text: Television Without Pity and Textual Dislike,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 48, no. 7 (2005): 840-858.

¹⁴⁰ For the interrelationship between these three forms of humor, see Amber Day, *Satire and Dissent: Interventions in Contemporary Political Debate* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 2.

¹⁴¹ Linda Hutcheon, *Irony’s Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (London: Routledge, 1994), 19.

¹⁴² Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody* (New York: Methuen, 1985), 6.

religiously affiliated with the objects of their faux devotion.¹⁴³ Moreover, in their media, interpersonal interactions, and performances, ironic and campy fans, in particular, have often parodied both faithful fans of these televangelists and the preachers themselves. While irony and parody may carry a “critical edge,” satire, adroitly defined by sociologist Peter Berger as “the deliberate use of the comic for purposes of attack,” is more openly confrontational.¹⁴⁴ As Hutcheon notes, satire is also “ameliorative in intent,” aiming to chastise and correct perceived error.¹⁴⁵ The activities of antifans of televangelists, in particular, have proven heavily satirical, and they have desired their chosen preachers to either reform or refrain from preaching. In contrast, ironic and campy fans have required their chosen televangelist ministries to operate “as is” for the continuation of their play. Yet, the activities of ironic and campy fans, much like televangelist antifans, have often also carried tones of theological evaluation tied to normative conceptions of what Christianity *should* be, and these unintended fans have therefore engaged in religious work related to issues of religious authenticity.¹⁴⁶

The comedic triad of irony, parody, and satire has recently received considerable academic attention for its prominent role in contemporary American politics. The considerable cultural impact of television news parody programs such as *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report* has encouraged scholars to increasingly view such “entertaining political programming as a legitimate location for public discourse.”¹⁴⁷ As Jeffrey Jones writes, although *The Daily Show* is a “fake news program” – a parody patterned after supposedly serious journalistic programs – it has also become an important tool for critiquing the “faux ‘reality’” spectacle constructed by hyper-mediated and heavily funded politicians, thus becoming a “credible source for interpretations, critiques, and ‘truth’ about politics.”¹⁴⁸ Along the same lines, Amber Day, in her work on politically loaded “performative satire,” a category within which she includes phenomena like parody news shows and street activism, emphasizes the cultural significance of what she calls “ironic authenticity,” arguing that for an increasing number of

¹⁴³ Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge*, 2.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 49; Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, 6; Peter L. Berger, *Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1997), 157.

¹⁴⁵ Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge*, 52.

¹⁴⁶ For the potential interpenetration of religious work and religious play, see Chidester, *Authentic Fakes*, 2.

¹⁴⁷ Jeffrey P. Jones, *Entertaining Politics: Satiric Television and Political Engagement*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, Rowan & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2010), xi. See also Jonathan Gray, Jeffrey P. Jones, and Ethan Thompson, eds., *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post-Network Era* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

¹⁴⁸ Jones, *Entertaining Politics*, 74, 79.

Americans, irony has become “a more comfortable way of getting to authenticity,” “a new marker of sincerity,” and a valuable method of engagement in a political sphere populated by suspicious leaders and parties.¹⁴⁹

Scholars of religion have likewise recognized mass-mediated ironic, parodic, and satirical comedy as vehicles for negotiating religious authenticity, specifically. David Feltmate, for one, has explored how the long-running, primetime cartoon *The Simpsons* defines an “acceptable sphere of religious behavior.”¹⁵⁰ As an example, he points to the character of the uber-religious Simpson neighbor Ned Flanders, a parody through which the program “satirizes politically engaged evangelicalism,” a worldview that opposes “the secularism (that) *The Simpsons* generally endorses.”¹⁵¹ Other scholars have examined how explicitly religious individuals and groups have used such cultural commodities as tools to define authentic religion. Douglas Cowan, for example, has discussed how Christian countercult groups embraced the cartoon *South Park*’s mocking treatment of Mormonism as a means of further attacking the allegedly false faith.¹⁵² In his work on Emerging Evangelicals, anthropologist James Bielo has noted the movement’s penchant for “taking irony seriously as a practice of faith.” He discusses how Emergent groups have incorporated “ironic parodies” of conservative Christianity, such as the films *Dogma* (1999) and *Saved!* (2004), into their small group work, in order to help them “think seriously about their religious identity and how popular culture represents Christianity.”¹⁵³ One reason for the popularity of irony among Emerging Evangelicals, Bielo suggests, is the pervasive “religious-spiritual commodification” in North America, which they frame as “an obstacle to authentic faith,” and symbols of which can be appropriated, reworked, and contested through ironic humor.¹⁵⁴ He points, for example, to the popularity of “Buddy Christ” figures – plastic, “ultraironic” miniatures of the Savior featured in *Dogma* – among his study subjects, which have “become something of a calling card among Emerging Evangelicals,” and which winkingly

¹⁴⁹ Day, *Satire and Dissent*, 5, 24, 32, 42.

¹⁵⁰ David S. Feltmate, “Springfield’s Sacred Canopy: Religion and Humour in *The Simpsons*” (PhD diss., University of Waterloo, 2010), 165.

¹⁵¹ Feltmate, “It’s Funny Because It’s True? *The Simpsons*, Satire, and the Significance of Religious Humor in Popular Culture,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 81, no. 1 (2013): 234.

¹⁵² Douglas E. Cowan, “Episode 712: *South Park*, Ridicule, and the Cultural Construction of Religious Rivalry,” *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 10, no. 1 (2005): n.p., <http://utpjournals.metapress.com/content/p5595656n634613v/fulltext.pdf>, accessed January 22, 2015.

¹⁵³ James S. Bielo, *Emerging Evangelicals: Faith, Modernity, and the Desire for Authenticity* (New York: University Press, 2011), 63-64.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 55.

represent the type of gimmicky, feel-good, commercialized faith that they are trying to avoid in their own lives.¹⁵⁵

The unfaithful fans of televangelists to be discussed have similarly engaged in ironic, parodic, and satirical play with amusing, widely recognized cultural symbols of purported religious fakery. However, in addition to the fact that they have found their objects of attention ironically, rather than intentionally, humorous in this regard, these fan followings have been held together by common approaches to select televangelists, rather than shared theologies. This has permitted participants from a wide variety of backgrounds, religious and otherwise, to collaboratively engage in religious work/play which may or may not have personal spiritual significance, but which does make claims regarding authentic Christianity. In ways, such activities overlap with another recent cultural phenomenon that has received considerable academic attention: “Reverend Billy” and the “Church of Stop Shopping.” Born William Talen, Reverend Billy is a New York-based street artist/activist who decries conspicuous consumption in the guise of a stereotypical Pentecostal televangelist. Often accompanied by a faux gospel choir, Talen exorcises chain stores and cash registers, delivers impassioned sermons on the evils of overspending, and baptizes babies into lives of responsible consumerism.¹⁵⁶ A surprising number of academic observers have downplayed the religiously critical nature of such parody performances, with some arguing that they should be considered spiritual behavior. Amber Day, for example, argues that it “is far from the case” that Reverend Billy and his group, most of whom are not Christians, are “simply mocking evangelist preachers and religiosity in general.”¹⁵⁷ Rather, she frames Reverend Billy as a quasi-religious figure, full of “irreverent reverence,” who appropriates “the real power that the preacher figure exerts” to spread his gospel of anti-consumerism.¹⁵⁸ Alisa Solomon, in suggesting that Talen’s troupe evidences what she calls “dialectical spiritualism,” maintains that “Reverend Billy does not make fun of the televangelist role; he makes use of it.”¹⁵⁹ Similarly, Stephen Duncombe argues that while

¹⁵⁵ Bielo, *Emerging Evangelicals*, 64.

¹⁵⁶ For an overview of Reverend Billy’s “ministry,” see *What Would Jesus Buy?*, directed by Rob VanAlkemade (2007; New York: Arts Alliance America, 2008), DVD.

¹⁵⁷ Day, *Satire and Dissent*, 179.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 179, 181.

¹⁵⁹ Alisa Solomon, “Introduction: A Theory of the Leisure Suit,” in Savitri D and Bill Talen, *The Reverend Billy Project: From Rehearsal Hall to Super Mall with the Church of Life After Shopping*, ed. Alisa Solomon (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2011), 10.

Reverend Billy appropriates “the signs and symbols, the tropes and narrative of televised evangelical Christianity,” he “does not do this to criticize the religious expression,” but “to tap into the popular form’s imaginative power,” in order to craft “genuinely moving” “pseudo-religious revivals.”¹⁶⁰

These arguments, however, do not adequately appreciate the fact that Reverend Billy has ironically assumed the persona and style of perhaps America’s most recognizable symbol of religious fakery – the slick televangelist – and has thereby criticized certain variants of Christianity. Tony Perucci does note the complicity of evangelical Christianity in the broader American “religion of consumption” which Reverend Billy’s group targets; yet, he does not explore the significance of Talen’s performance as a televangelist, specifically, which may have both public and personal resonances.¹⁶¹ Discussing Talen’s rejection of a strict Dutch Calvinist upbringing, Bleuwenn Lechaux intriguingly proposes that his lampooning of rigid, conservative forms of Christianity might represent “a kind of cathartic reversal of a biographical scar.” Moreover, she suggests that Talen’s character directly attacks the “contradictions” of scandalous televangelists, who represent “greed and corruption cloaked in morality.”¹⁶² Thus, as Jill Lane writes, while it may be that Talen’s performances encourage “certain spiritual notions of community development and social activism,” his persona is also a powerful and “obvious” way to challenge certain Christianities and some of their suspicious spokespeople.¹⁶³

The flipside of Reverend Billy’s ironic play with the televangelical form is that it has also been used to promote and reinforce particular understandings of authentic Christianity. This aspect of the Church of Stop Shopping can be traced back to the influence of Episcopalian priest Sidney Lanier, a mentor of Talen’s who, in Lechaux’s words, “introduced him to a form of spirituality combined with radical activism which denounced conservative preaching.” Reverend Billy’s act has been welcomed in churches “characterized by their activism and left-wing

¹⁶⁰ Stephen Duncombe, “It Stands on its Head: Commodity Fetishism, Consumer Activism, and the Strategic Use of Fantasy,” *Culture and Organization* 18, no.5 (2012): 367. See also Jennifer A. Sandlin and Jamie L. Callahan, “Deviance, Dissonance, and Détournement: Culture Jammers’ Use of Emotion in Consumer Resistance,” *Journal of Consumer Culture* 9, no.1 (2009): 106.

¹⁶¹ Tony Perucci, “Guilty as Sin: The Trial of Reverend Billy and the Exorcism of the Sacred Cash Register,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 28, no. 3 (2008): 318-319.

¹⁶² Bleuwenn Lechaux, “Non-Preaching Activism in New York: The Theatrical Militancy of Billionaires for Bush and Reverend Billy,” *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 23, no.2 (2010): 177-178, 180.

¹⁶³ Jill Lane, “Reverend Billy: Preaching, Protest, and Postindustrial Flânerie,” *The Drama Review* 46, no. 1 (2002): 78.

positioning,” and which share his group’s concerns about commoditized, conservative American Christianity.¹⁶⁴ Lane suggests that his “relation to these churches is, then, not ironic at all, although he marks his distance from them.”¹⁶⁵ This theologically normative facet of Talen’s work is further evidenced in *What Would Jesus Buy?* (2007), a documentary covering a tour by Reverend Billy and his troupe during the American Christmas season, and the title of which is a tongue-in-cheek play on “What Would Jesus Do?” – the provocative query emblazoned on a constellation of evangelical commodities. A central theme of the film is that the “real” Jesus would be horrified at the hyper-commercialization of his celebrated birthday, often at the hands of conservative Christians.¹⁶⁶

Much like Reverend Billy, unfaithful fans of televangelists have mixed irony, parody, and satire with the aura of scandal and suspicion that has surrounded American televangelism. While for some of these fans the religious issues involved have been relatively unimportant in a personal sense, they have nevertheless become involved in public negotiations regarding authentic Christianity in America. For other fans, these activities have helped them to justify their atheistic, agnostic, or Christian worldviews; have been motivated by a desire to ridicule Christianities which have negatively impacted them personally; and have even been understood as divinely mandated, prophetic attacks. Despite their wide-ranging motivations and backgrounds, such fans have come together to form multifaceted fan followings centered on their chosen television preachers, ranging from loose collectivities to semi-organized fan “clubs.” These fluid social networks have often been facilitated by analog as well as online and digital participatory media practices and artifacts, and cultural-historical analyses of these networks and their media problematize common assumptions and foci in the thriving field of religion, media, and culture studies.

Participatory Media, Methodology, and Religion and the Internet

The unfaithful fans of televangelists discussed in this dissertation were initially discovered through their media products, which were often found on the immensely popular video-sharing site YouTube. While such videos were encountered online, many were originally

¹⁶⁴ Lechaux, “Non-Preaching Activism in New York,” 178-179.

¹⁶⁵ Lane, “Reverend Billy,” 79.

¹⁶⁶ See *What Would Jesus Buy?*, directed by Rob VanAlkemade.

created in the analog age, as far back as the early-1980s. Much has been made of the revolutionary nature of YouTube, which has opened up international video broadcasting to an unprecedented number of people and also functions as a lively social-networking hub, through which individuals share videos, as well as their thoughts, beliefs, and jokes via the site's many opportunities for user comments.¹⁶⁷ As Henry Jenkins points out, however, YouTube is not without historical precedent, as "communities of practice that supported the production of DIY media," and "social networks through which such videos could flow" existed long before the advent of easily uploaded and shared streaming video. "YouTube may represent the epicenter of today's participatory culture," Jenkins writes, "but it doesn't represent its origin point for any of the cultural practices people associate with it."¹⁶⁸ Fans, for example, developed robust participatory media cultures well before the advent of the Internet, creating and sharing their own video, audio, and print material through personal and mail-based fan networks.¹⁶⁹

The 1980s and 1990s witnessed an explosion in fan media, spurred on by developments in consumer electronics. In her 1992 study of female science-fiction fans, Camille Bacon-Smith noted their eager adoption of VCR technology, which allowed them to not only copy and trade hard-to-find material, but also to creatively manipulate their cherished programs. As an example, she discusses the popularity of "songtapes": edited collections of video clips thematically based on songs that were dubbed beneath the on-screen action, and which were traded among fans and screened during fan conventions.¹⁷⁰ By far the most pervasive form of fan media during the 1980s and 1990s, however, was print media such as fanzines. Small-scale and independently produced, fanzines might contain straightforward synopses and reviews of television episodes or films, as well as more intriguing examples of poaching and remixing. Jenkins and Bacon-Smith both discuss the prevalence of "slash" fiction among the science-fiction fan communities they examined – homoerotic stories involving characters depicted as heterosexual within their authorized worlds – and specifically tales featuring Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock from *Star Trek*. While the motivations behind slash fiction are complex, Jenkins suggests that for some gay fans,

¹⁶⁷ See, for example, Michael Strangelove, *Watching YouTube: Extraordinary Videos by Ordinary People* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010).

¹⁶⁸ Henry Jenkins, "What Happened Before YouTube," in Jean Burgess and Joshua Green, *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 110.

¹⁶⁹ See Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*.

¹⁷⁰ Camille Bacon-Smith, *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), 175-184.

the genre allowed them to construct and interact with a variant of the *Star Trek* universe in which homosexuality was open and accepted, which has not been the case in the many iterations of the show. Thus, these subversive activities, through their engagement with a broader politics of sexuality, point to a potentially more serious side of fannish play.¹⁷¹

Unfaithful televangelical fan media in the analog age circulated within what have commonly been referred to as “alternative” media networks, and which have been differentiated from the relatively powerful producers of “mainstream” media. According to Chris Atton, alternative media networks were a more “democratic” form of communication in that they helped “people who (where) normally excluded from media production” to make their voices heard against the din of commoditized mainstream media.¹⁷² In his pioneering study of American zine culture, Stephen Duncombe argues that the “underground” publication movement of the 1980s and 1990s was largely constructed by outsiders to the conservative economic and social programs of the Reagan and Bush presidencies. Zines allowed relatively marginalized members of society to express their opinions to, and network with, likeminded others, thereby cutting through what he, citing a statement by a zine editor, refers to as “TV horseshit reality.” In an era of “spin, promotions, public relations, and pseudo-events,” zines purportedly conveyed the “unfettered, authentic expression(s)” of those who desired “to live without artifice, without hypocrisy.”¹⁷³ As will be discussed to follow, these cultural tensions were reflected in the media produced by unfaithful fans of televangelists throughout the 1980s and 1990s, many of whom considered themselves to be engaged in serious skirmishes against conservative political powers, and who used irony as a weapon “to dominate, if only in laughter, the dominant culture.”¹⁷⁴ While such political issues are important and will be discussed where pertinent, a stronger emphasis will be placed on the many ways in which such individuals evaluated, commented upon, attacked, and played with the alleged “horseshit” Christianities embodied and conveyed by bizarre, ridiculous, and controversial television preachers.

¹⁷¹ See Bacon-Smith, *Enterprising Women*, 203-254; Henry Jenkins, “‘Out of the Closet and Into the Universe’: Queers and *Star Trek*,” in *Science Fiction Audiences: Watching Doctor Who and Star Trek*, eds. John Tulloch and Henry Jenkins (London: Routledge, 1995), 237-265.

¹⁷² Chris Atton, *Alternative Media* (London: SAGE Publications, 2002), 4.

¹⁷³ Stephen Duncombe, *Notes from Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture* (London: Verso, 1997), 32-33.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 145-147.

One of the primary goals of this dissertation is to shine some light on the “shadow cultural economies” of unfaithful fans of televangelists, whose activities have largely remained hidden from academic analysis.¹⁷⁵ At its core, this project is a cultural historical study which, in Roger Chartier’s words, “accentuates plural uses and diverse readings which are not aimed at or inscribed in the text” – “appropriations” not intended or desired, at least initially, by broadcasting ministries.¹⁷⁶ Unfaithful fans of televangelists appropriated television preachers who were widely considered to be religious fakes for their play; therefore, it is necessary to detail the media scandals through which these televangelists were most publicly constructed as religious fakes. Examining primary documents such as mainstream journalistic print and video media, combined with the insights of secondary analyses, will help uncover the issues at hand, theological and otherwise; the assorted stakeholders involved in these media scandals and their motivations; and the broader sociocultural contexts – national, regional, and local – within which these scandals emerged.

The activities and motivations of unfaithful fans of televangelists will be examined in two ways, the first being content analyses of their various media. Much of this media, despite being crafted in an analog age, has since been digitized and uploaded online, highlighting the Internet’s value as a vast and accessible “cultural archive.”¹⁷⁷ Moving beyond common conceptions of media as relatively static “containers of meaning,” Klaus Krippendorff argues that the goal of content analysis is to make “replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful material) to the contexts of their use,” an exercise requiring the construction of analytical “world(s) in which the texts make sense.”¹⁷⁸ To help flesh out these “worlds,” interviews with a number of unfaithful fans were conducted using the audio function of the VoIP (voice over Internet protocol) service Skype, as well as via e-mail. While broad interview questions were worked out in advance, these interviews followed a “responsive interviewing” model, in that they were flexible “extended conversations” guided by the interviewer, yet ultimately crafted by both parties. Herbert and Irene Rubin describe responsive interviewing as an “interpretive

¹⁷⁵ Fiske, “The Cultural Economy of Fandom,” 30.

¹⁷⁶ Roger Chartier, *Cultural History: Between Practices and Representations*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 13.

¹⁷⁷ For YouTube, specifically, as a “cultural archive,” see Jean Burgess and Joshua Green, *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 87-90.

¹⁷⁸ Klaus Krippendorff, *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2013), 24, 26, 30.

constructionist” approach, in which interviewers and interviewees work together to understand the meanings attached to cultural phenomena.¹⁷⁹ Since these interviews often involved recollections and reconstructions of past experiences, they can also be considered examples of oral history, and this study “presupposes that individual actors have valuable knowledge to share based on their life experiences, including their behaviors, rituals, attitudes, values and beliefs.” As Patricia Leavy points out, oral history, like cultural history, often focuses on “individuals or groups that historically have been marginalized, silenced, disenfranchised, or otherwise had their experiences and perspectives left out of the historical record” – a situation which certainly applies to unfaithful fans of televangelists.¹⁸⁰ Taken together with content analyses of their media, interviews with individual unfaithful fans have helped to reconstruct the “collective frameworks of thought” that held their broader fan followings together.¹⁸¹

Another goal of this dissertation is to explore the relationships between the practices and media of unfaithful fans of televangelists in the analog age and subsequent representations of controversial television preachers in both the mainstream media and the contemporary digital and online landscape. Through content analyses of mainstream media, online cultural artifacts, and the non-participant observation of public online interactions, it will be demonstrated that while the approaches and analog media of unfaithful fans originated within the cultural margins, some managed to migrate to the American cultural mainstream, where they have not only influenced broader cultural conversations regarding the religious authenticity and sincerity of select television preachers, but have also threatened the brands of, and even created unexpected marketing opportunities for, certain televangelists.¹⁸² Additionally, the Internet itself has facilitated new unfaithful fan networks which, through interviews and non-participant observations, will be analyzed and compared with their analog predecessors. Thus, another aim of this dissertation is to highlight and examine points of “convergence” between two eras of participatory media: the analog and the online/digital. In contrast to the “digital revolution paradigm,” which “presumed that new media would displace old media,” Jenkins notes that “the

¹⁷⁹ Herbert J. Rubin and Irene S. Rubin, *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2005), 12-15, 27-30.

¹⁸⁰ Patricia Leavy, *Oral History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 11, 18.

¹⁸¹ Anna Green, *Cultural History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 5.

¹⁸² For ethical reasons, non-participant observations of online communication have been limited to sites which are widely considered to be public, such as YouTube commenting areas and publicly accessible Facebook walls; see Robert V. Kozinets, *Netnography: Doing Ethnographic Research Online* (London: SAGE, 2010), 141-142.

emerging convergence paradigm assumes that old and new media will interact in ever more complex ways.”¹⁸³ Indeed, as will be discussed, analog cultural artifacts related to controversial televangelists have even gained new leases on life in the online age.

Scholarship on religion and so-called “new” media has largely subscribed to the digital revolution paradigm, paying inadequate attention to what came before: televangelism and the research associated with the phenomenon, as well as analog participatory media, which, in many ways, foreshadowed online communication. Moreover, there has long been an overemphasis on the online activities of explicitly religious individuals and groups, at the expense of exploring the ways in which religious commodities might be appropriated, modified, and circulated within, often unexpected, cultural economies. In the introduction to their 2005 co-edited collection *Religion and Cyberspace*, Morten T. Højsgaard and Margit Warburg outlined three “waves” of research on religion and the Internet. The first wave emerged in the wake of the World Wide Web’s initial popularity in the mid-1990s, focused heavily “on the fascinating, new, and extraordinary aspects of cyberspace,” and was often marked by “either utopian fascination or dystopian anxieties about the surreal potentials of the new digital communication medium.”¹⁸⁴ Representative of this wave is Brenda Brasher’s *Give Me That Online Religion* (2001) in which she makes the hyperbolic prediction that “online religious activity...could become the dominant form of religion and religious experience in the next century.”¹⁸⁵ Brasher’s work, notably, also contains a rare look at televangelism in the Internet age, through a brief surface analysis of apocalyptic television preacher Jack Van Impe’s website.¹⁸⁶

The second wave of religion and Internet studies aimed for a “more realistic perspective” than the often exaggerated arguments of the first wave.¹⁸⁷ Heidi Campbell adds that this era of research was largely “categorical,” as “scholars attempted to provide categorizations and

¹⁸³ Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 6.

¹⁸⁴ Morten T. Højsgaard and Margit Warburg, “Introduction: Waves of Research,” in *Religion and Cyberspace*, eds. Morten T. Højsgaard and Margit Warburg (New York: Routledge, 2005), 5, 8.

¹⁸⁵ Brenda Brasher, *Give Me That Online Religion* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2001), 19. For other work on the intersections of televangelism and the Internet, see Douglas Swanson, “Digitally Enhanced or Dumbed Down? Evangelists’ Use of the Internet,” *Moebius* 6, no. 1 (2008): 33-43; Phillip Luke Sinitiere, “Preaching the Good News Glad: Joel Osteen’s Tel-e-vangelism,” Denis J. Bekkering, “From Televangelist to Intervangelist: The Emergence of the Streaming Video Preacher,” *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 23, no. 2 (2011): 101-117.

¹⁸⁶ Brasher, *Give Me That Online Religion*, 176-182.

¹⁸⁷ Højsgaard and Warburg, “Introduction,” 9.

typologies to understand common trends within Internet practice.”¹⁸⁸ Three influential edited collections that emerged during this wave helped to establish the agenda for future research. Sociologists Jeffrey Hadden and Douglas Cowan’s 2000 collection *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promises* straddled the line between the first and second waves, highlighting the purportedly novel nature of the Internet while also moving forward in developing new conceptual frameworks, such as Christopher Helland’s oft-employed distinction between “online-religion” and “religion-online.”¹⁸⁹ As Hadden had been one of the preeminent academic analysts of televangelism, it is surprising that he made little mention of the phenomenon apart from framing the Internet as the next step for evangelicals hoping to fulfill Christ’s Great Commission, nor did he suggest that the vast body of research on televangelism could offer insight into the burgeoning field of religion and Internet research.¹⁹⁰ For example, Helland predicted that “religion on the Internet” would not “replace religious structures or decrease the level of organized religious participation occurring in the West,” but would rather serve as a “supplement” to traditional practice – a suggestion that would have been bolstered by citing near-identical findings regarding televangelism.¹⁹¹

In 2004, Cowan and sociologist Lorne Dawson published *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*, which was followed the next year by Højsgaard and Warburg’s aforementioned volume. These two edited collections furthered the second wave’s attempts to establish a stable research agenda for the field. In their introduction, Dawson and Cowan recognized that religious activities online “evoke(d) a comparison with the religious uses of television, most notably televangelism,” and suggested that there were “important continuities between the religious uses of these technologies that have yet to be explored.” Nevertheless, they were more interested in the “important differences” between the technologies, the analysis of which, they hoped, would

¹⁸⁸ Heidi A. Campbell, “Introduction: The Rise of the Study of Digital Religion,” in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, ed. Heidi A. Campbell (London: Routledge, 2013), 8-9.

¹⁸⁹ Christopher Helland, “Online-Religion/Religion-Online and Virtual Communitas,” in *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promises*, eds. Jeffrey K. Hadden and Douglas E. Cowan (New York: Elsevier Science Inc., 2000), 205-223; for Hadden and Cowan’s volume as bridging the first two waves of research, see Campbell, “Introduction,” 8-9.

¹⁹⁰ Jeffrey K. Hadden and Douglas E. Cowan, “The Promised Land or Electronic Chaos? Toward Understanding Religion on the Internet,” in *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promises*, eds. Jeffrey K. Hadden and Douglas E. Cowan (New York: Elsevier Science Inc., 2000), 8.

¹⁹¹ Helland, “Online-Religion/Religion-Online,” 221.

help reveal the particular “signature of the Internet.”¹⁹² Dawson and Cowan also encouraged research on “two very important social consequences of the Internet” which overlap with the concerns of the present dissertation: “a crisis of authority and a crisis of authenticity.”¹⁹³ Citing the heightened interactivity of online communication, Dawson had also previously framed “religious conflict and authority” as important areas for study, and had noted a tendency towards “the relative loss of control over religious materials” online.¹⁹⁴

Regarding their mentioned “crisis of authenticity,” Dawson and Cowan were specifically interested in whether online technology could foster authentic religious activity, a common concern in scholarship on religion and the Internet.¹⁹⁵ In Højsgaard and Warburg’s volume, Dawson contributed an essay exploring the potential for online activity – patterned by “physical absence,” “heightened reflexivity,” and, at the time, a “strictly textual character” – to facilitate real religious experiences, an issue which would be further explored in studies of phenomena such as online rituals, pilgrimages, and religious communities.¹⁹⁶ Heidi Campbell’s 2005 work *Exploring Religious Community Online: We Are One in the Network* cut straight to the point with one of its research questions: “Can online relationships be as authentic as interactions taking place in a local church?”¹⁹⁷ Pointing to worries “that online religion would cause people to abandon their pews in exchange for worship via the keyboard and computer screen,” Campbell found that her informants generally “described their online involvement as a ‘supplement’ rather than a substitute for local church involvement” – again, a conclusion reminiscent of previous, albeit uncited, research on televangelism.¹⁹⁸

In 2005, Højsgaard and Warburg proposed a burgeoning “third wave” of research on religion and the Internet, yet they did not propose what shape this research might take.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹² Lorne L. Dawson and Douglas E. Cowan, “Introduction,” in *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*, eds. Lorne L. Dawson and Douglas E. Cowan (New York: Routledge, 2004), 9-10.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 1-2.

¹⁹⁴ Lorne L. Dawson, “Researching Religion in Cyberspace: Issues and Strategies,” in *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promises*, eds. Jeffrey K. Hadden and Douglas E. Cowan (New York: Elsevier Science Inc., 2000), 43.

¹⁹⁵ Dawson and Cowan, “Introduction,” 2-5.

¹⁹⁶ Lorne L. Dawson, “The Mediation of Religious Experience in Cyberspace,” in *Religion and Cyberspace*, eds. Morten T. Højsgaard and Margit Warburg (New York: Routledge, 2005), 16-17.

¹⁹⁷ Heidi Campbell, *Exploring Religious Community Online: We Are One in the Network* (New York: Peter Lang Publications, 2005), *xiv*.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, *xvi*, 177.

¹⁹⁹ Højsgaard and Warburg, “Introduction,” 9.

Looking back, Paul Teusner viewed the third wave as focused on the relationships between online and offline experience, while Campbell noted “a turn toward theoretical and interpretative research.”²⁰⁰ In regards to the former, Douglas Cowan, in his 2004 book *Cyberhenge: Modern Pagans on the Internet*, pointed out the importance of exploring the intersections between online and offline pagan practice: “There are few authentic examples of religious practice and community that exist entirely online, and even those that claim such an existence...cannot escape the problems of off-line embodiment.”²⁰¹ Similarly, Mia Lövhheim argued that “‘virtual’ interactions on the Internet cannot be neatly separated from many of the conditions of daily life outside the Internet.”²⁰² Campbell continued with her theoretical and conceptual work, developing a “religious social-shaping of technology” theoretical framework to explain how Christian, Muslim, and Jewish groups adapted and appropriated online and digital technologies, as well as more nuanced understandings of religious authority online.²⁰³

Recently, there have been suggestions that a fourth wave of research on religion and the Internet is emerging. Campbell suggests that the fourth wave will witness the “further refinement and development of methodological approaches,” more “typologies for categorization and interpretation,” and an increase in “longitudinal studies” to track developments over time.²⁰⁴ She frames her recent edited collection, *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds* (2013), as a harbinger of this fourth wave, a collection joined by Pauline Cheong, Peter Fischer-Nielsen, Stefan Gelfgren, and Charles Ess’ own co-edited volume: *Digital Religion, Social Media, and Culture*.²⁰⁵ As their titles indicate, “digital religion” is the focus of both volumes, a phrase which, according to Campbell, “describes the technological and cultural space that is evoked when we talk about how online and offline religious spheres have become

²⁰⁰ Paul E. Teusner, “Emerging Church Bloggers in Australia: Prophets, Priests and Rulers in God’s Virtual World” (PhD diss., RMIT University, 2010), 57, 248; Campbell, “Introduction,” 9.

²⁰¹ Douglas E. Cowan, *Cyberhenge: Modern Pagans on the Internet* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 18.

²⁰² Mia Lövhheim, “Virtually Boundless? Youth Negotiating Tradition in Cyberspace,” in *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives*, ed. Nancy T. Ammerman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 96.

²⁰³ Heidi A. Campbell, *When Religion Meets New Media* (New York: Routledge, 2010); Ibid., “Who’s Got the Power? Religious Authority and the Internet,” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 12, no. 3 (2007): 1043-1062; Ibid., “Religious Authority and the Blogosphere,” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 15, no. 2 (2010): 251-276.

²⁰⁴ Campbell, “Introduction,” 10.

²⁰⁵ Heidi A. Campbell, ed., *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Pauline Hope Cheong, Peter Fischer-Nielsen, Stefan Gelfgren, and Charles Ess, eds., *Digital Religion, Social Media and Culture: Perspectives Practices and Futures* (New York: Peter Lang, 2012).

blended or integrated.” She adds that “digital religion is imprinted by both the traits of online culture (such as interactivity, convergence, and audience-generated content) and traditional religion (such as patterns of belief and ritual tied to historically grounded communities).”²⁰⁶

Thus, both volumes, barometers of the field as a whole, continue to explore the explicitly religious, and the essays in each collection cover a number of well-trodden topics, such as religious community, identity, authority, and authenticity. In addition to religious authority, the topic of religious authenticity is central to the present dissertation, yet is understood less as a potentially achievable property than a concept which has been discussed, debated, and played with by individuals and groups of a wide variety of backgrounds, explicitly religious and otherwise.

There have been hints as to the specific foci of the present dissertation in previous research on religion and the Internet. In 1999, Lorne Dawson and Jenna Hennebry analyzed online recruitment by new religious movements, concluding with a look at “communities of belief that exist only, or at least primarily, on the net.” While they suggested that many of the groups that they came across, such as the “First Presleyterian Church of Elvis the Divine,” were “intentional jokes” or “blatant parodies,” they were unsure what to make of “Thee Church Ov Moo,” a self-described “religion based on silliness and confusion” founded by a group of university students in Ottawa, Ontario. Centered on a website filled with transparently “fake” scriptures, teachings, and contradictory statements, Dawson and Hennebry pointed out that Thee Church Ov Moo, on one hand, was “certainly about having ‘fun’ with religion.” On the other hand, they suggested that Thee Church Ov Moo did “seem to...encourage and facilitate the rise of a new conceptual framework and language for religious experience.” Although they admitted that they were uncertain as to whether MOOism was “a ‘religious’ movement or just a most elaborate hoax,” they leaned towards the former position, and offered an expansive description of this purportedly “new religion”: “a self-consciously postmodern, socially constructed, relativist, and self-referential system of religious ideas, purposefully and paradoxically infused with humor, irony, and farce, as well as a serious appreciation of the essentially religious or

²⁰⁶ Campbell, “Introduction,” 3-4.

spiritual condition of humanity.”²⁰⁷

Although Thee Church Ov Moo perhaps helped some individuals to tap into the transcendent, the group’s primary purpose appears to have been to toy with the concept of religion. In this regard, Thee Church Ov Moo resembled the Church of the SubGenius (COSG), a “sophisticated joke religion” mentioned by Dawson and Hennebry as an important influence on the former site.²⁰⁸ Scholars have often framed the COSG, a complex religious parody grounded in homage to a sacred salesman, as a “real” religion, while at the same time noting its comedically critical edge vis-à-vis religion(s). Morten Højsgaard, for example, has described the COSG as a “cyber-religion” – a religion “mediated or located primarily in cyberspace” – while recognizing that the organization is also blatantly “satirical,” and in the business of “selling anti-religious goods via the Internet.”²⁰⁹ Like Dawson and Hennebry, Højsgaard focuses on how “cyber-religious” groups such as the Church of the SubGenius might point to new ways of doing religion online, “characterized by such features as role-playing, identity constructions, cultural adaptability, fascination with technology, and a sarcastic approach to conformist religiosity.”²¹⁰ More forthrightly, Danielle Kirby, in her locating of the COSG within Adam Possamai’s category of “hyper-real religion” – “a simulacrum of a religion created out of, or in symbiosis with, commodified popular culture which provides inspiration at a metaphorical level and/or is a source of beliefs for everyday life” – has argued that the Church of the SubGenius, along with similar groups, “are religions or spiritualities masquerading as a joke rather than the other way around.”²¹¹

This dissertation takes the opposite stance, arguing that the COSG is best viewed as a multifaceted joke masquerading as a religion, which has nevertheless engaged in playful religious work related to the public negotiation of religious authenticity. This latter aspect of the

²⁰⁷ Lorne L. Dawson and Jenna Hennebry, “New Religions and the Internet: Recruiting in a New Public Space,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 14, no. 1 (1999): 31, 35-36. See “Thee Church of Moo Official Website,” <http://www.churchofmoo.com/>, accessed January 22, 2014.

²⁰⁸ Dawson and Hennebry, “New Religions and the Internet,” 36.

²⁰⁹ See Morten T. Højsgaard, “Cyber-religion: On the Cutting Edge between the Virtual and the Real,” in *Religion and Cyberspace*, eds. Morten T. Højsgaard and Margit Warburg (New York: Routledge, 2005), 52-56.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 62.

²¹¹ Adam Possamai, “Yoda Goes to Glastonbury: An Introduction to Hyper-real Religions,” in *Handbook of Hyper-real Religions*, Adam Possamai, ed. (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 20; Danielle Kirby, “Occultural *Bricolage* and Popular Culture: Remix and Art in Discordianism, the Church of the SubGenius, and the Temple of Psychick Youth,” in *Handbook of Hyper-real Religions*, Adam Possamai, ed. (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 43.

COSG has been particularly emphasized by David Chidester, who has classified the Church of the SubGenius as a “virtual religion,” one of a number of “indigenous religions of cyberspace” that problematize culturally entrenched frameworks of religious authenticity by representing themselves as transparently “fake.”²¹² According to Chidester, such “religions” “raise, and defy, all the basic tests that might be applied in adjudicating the authenticity of a religion, such as historical genealogy, structural morphology, personal sincerity, and so on.”²¹³ Moreover, these “religions” may jocularly, yet with a “serious intent,” target the authenticity of specific religious groups, or developments in religion more broadly, like “the commodification of religion.”²¹⁴ It is this type of religious work/play – humorous, yet cogent, evaluations of religious authenticity – that links the Church of the SubGenius to unfaithful fans of televangelists. Indeed, as will be discussed in the following chapter, through its ironic and satirical play with American televangelists widely considered religious fakes, its rich analog participatory media networks (missed by misconceptions that the COSG, which originated in the late-1970s, is an Internet-specific movement), and its status as a vibrant religious parody, the Church of the SubGenius was an important precursor to, and direct influence upon, the first unfaithful televangelical fan following to be examined in this study: “The Robert Tilton Fan Club.”

Conclusion

Following in the line of previous culturalist studies of American televangelism, this dissertation assumes that viewers are selective and active, shaping televangelist broadcasts in ways relevant to their everyday lives. However, rather than examining uses of televangelism by faithful viewers of the genre – understandably the primary focus of televangelical audience research to date – this study offers cultural histories of irreverent, yet dedicated, fans of controversial and scandal-ridden televangelists. Interviews and media content analyses will help bring to light the activities, motivations, and interpersonal networks of some of these unfaithful fans, whose existence problematizes the emphasis on sincere devotion in studies of religion and fandom, and suggests that increased attention should be paid in studies of religion and popular culture to unintended appropriations of religious cultural commodities by everyday individuals. Through their play with preachers widely believed to be religious fakes, these unfaithful fans

²¹² Chidester, *Authentic Fakes*, 192.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 212.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 196-197.

have engaged in broader cultural conversations regarding authentic Christianity in America, thereby engaging in forms of religious work often neglected due to the common academic orientation towards the study of “authentic” religious experiences and explicitly religious groups and individuals. Moreover, the media and approaches of unfaithful fans of televangelists from the 1980s and 1990s, in particular, have migrated from their shadow cultural economies to the American cultural mainstream, impacting the brands of certain televangelists in ways that do not fit into current religious marketplace models, and pointing to areas of convergence missed by studies of religion and “new” media.

Chapter 3 – Robert Tilton, Ironic Fandom, and Recreational Christianity

Introduction

The YouTube video “Robert Tilton Fan Club on Channel 8” opens with a local news story from Dallas television station WFAA, originally broadcast on August 12, 1993.²¹⁵ Picketers circle outside of a courthouse in support of health-and-wealth televangelist Robert Tilton, whose ministry had been battered by allegations of illegal and exploitative fundraising techniques. Carrying signs with messages including “Robert Tilton is Our Pastor” and “Stop Invasion of Privacy,” members of Tilton’s Dallas-based Word of Faith church protest a judge’s ruling that their church must release financial and membership information to the court.²¹⁶ WFAA’s coverage takes a strangely humorous turn, however, with the arrival of an unexpected group of Tilton supporters, as described by reporter-on-the-scene Bill Brown: “It got more interesting when several people showed up saying they’re part of the ‘Bob Tilton Fan Club,’ a Dallas satirical group that holds parties and shows tapes of Tilton preaching.” Clad in a crisp white shirt and tie, “Brother Randall,” the leader of the “fan club,” confesses his concerns about the uncertain future of Tilton’s television ministry: “I sure would hate for him to be taken off the air...they cancelled *Green Acres*, they cancelled *F-Troop*...it’s really one of the most entertaining things you can see... You know, I’ve found a lot of people like to watch Bob just for fun.”

This chapter examines the background to, and genesis of, “The Unofficial Robert Tilton Fan Club” (URTFC), a short-lived network of unfaithful fans of the titular televangelist founded by Brother Randall in 1991. In contrast to faithful fans of Robert Tilton, who considered the preacher a genuine conduit of the divine, the members of the URTFC were ironic fans who praised Tilton as an amusing religious fake, and appropriated the televangelist and his ministry as cultural resources for the construction of their own irreverent media and performances.

²¹⁵ “Robert Tilton Fan Club on Channel 8,” YouTube video, 2:19, posted by “Randy R,” September 30, 2006, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R0hx10eIqvI>. For the date, see *Brother Bob and the Gospel of Greed* (Dallas: The Door Magazine, 2001), VHS.

²¹⁶ Winnie Hu, “Tilton Supporters Protest Order by District Judge to Release Church Records,” *The Dallas Morning News*, August 22, 1993.

Through their activities, Brother Randall and the URTFC tapped into a pre-existing “ironic taste culture” sustained by audiences and independent media producers who were unintentionally amused by Tilton and other controversial televangelists – two components of which will be examined in this chapter.²¹⁷ First were relatively scattered ironic fans, Brother Randall included, who not only regularly tuned in to Tilton’s broadcasts for fun, but who also constructed their own analog, Tilton-themed video compilations and remixes which archived and amplified the amusement they derived from the alleged religious huckster.

The second component of this ironic taste culture was related to Brother Randall’s involvement in the bustling American alternative media scene of the late-1980s and early-1990s, and, specifically, the influence of The Church of the SubGenius (COSG) and *Zontar* zine: thriving alternative media concerns, parody religions, and proponents of unfaithful televangelical fandom. By examining the COSG in tandem with *Zontar*, it is argued that such “parody” religions are less authentic contemporary faiths, as some scholars have recently claimed, than cutting comedic commentaries *about* religious authenticity, which subverted, remixed, and mimicked the religious commodities of a number of targets, American televangelists included. The founders of both the COSG and *Zontar* satirically savaged conservative and politically active television preachers; however, their relationships with less politically oriented, Pentecostal televangelists were more complicated. While they derived considerable ironic entertainment from these preachers’ absurd theologies and outrageous antics, they also lauded certain televangelists for their preaching chops, performative skills, persuasive powers, and even, in some cases, their sincerity. As will be demonstrated, The Unofficial Robert Tilton Fan Club, while retaining an ironic core, likewise featured such flashes of genuine fandom. This chapter concludes by redefining a concept which Brother Randall coined to describe the URTFC’s activities: “Recreational Christianity.” Although Brother Randall downplayed the concept’s theologically evaluative nature, it is argued here that Recreational Christianity – ironic play with

²¹⁷ For the concept of “taste cultures,” see Herbert Gans, *Popular Culture and High Culture: An Analysis and Evaluation of Taste* (New York: Basic Books, 1974). For the idea of an “ironic taste culture,” specifically, see Laurel Westrup, “Thinking Through Sampling, Literally,” in *Sampling Media*, eds. David Laderman and Laurel Westrup (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014), 235.

purported religious fakes – makes claims about Christian authenticity, and is best understood as a form of religious work/play with potential personal and public resonances.²¹⁸

Introducing Robert Tilton

Writing in 1984, sociologist Jerry D. Cardwell proclaimed Robert Tilton to be one of the “rising stars” of American televangelism. The “handsome” Tilton and his “attractive” wife Marte, the “picture of a well-groomed, articulate, and prosperous American couple,” stood at the head of the Word of Faith World Outreach Center Church in the Dallas suburb of Farmers Branch. Sunday services at the megachurch, along with Tilton’s “regular teaching show,” *Success N Life*, were broadcast live across the country, in part through Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker’s PTL satellite network. Throughout his overview of Tilton’s ministry the Episcopalian Cardwell often betrays his status as a bemused mainline outsider.²¹⁹ He expresses astonishment at having witnessed Tilton and his parishioners not only speaking, but singing, in tongues, and recounts an energetic service in which “many, if not most in the congregation were enjoying the service by clapping their hands, jumping, dancing, and raising their hands to the Lord.”

What most struck Cardwell, however, was Tilton’s incessant solicitation of donations, backed by the preacher’s “guarantee” that those who made financial sacrifices to his ministry would “reap the rewards of success.” In contrast to “traditional, mainline churches,” Cardwell reported that the televised services from Word of Faith were filled with “continual, impassioned pleas and direct orders to give to the ministry,” and he noted that during one service many in attendance opened their checkbooks at Tilton’s command. Likewise, Tilton’s *Success N Life* program was packed with appeals for donations: “If he begins with Bible exposition, the talk ends with a statement on giving money. If he begins with the ‘born again’ experience, he still ends with a discussion about giving money.” While Cardwell acknowledged that the “uninitiated” viewer could find Tilton’s focus on finances “a little unsettling, and, perhaps, even

²¹⁸ For the concept of “religious work” and how it can intersect with play, see David Chidester, *Authentic Fakes*, 2.

²¹⁹ For the relationship between Cardwell’s theological background and his academic analysis, see Jeffrey K. Hadden, Review of *Mass Media Christianity: Televangelism and the Great Commission*, Jerry D. Cardwell, and *Religious Television: The American Experience*, Peter G. Horsfield, *Review of Religious Research* 28, no. 2 (December, 1986): 196-198.

abrasive,” he diplomatically suggested that when it came to evaluating Tilton’s practices: “The reader will have to decide this issue for him or her self.”²²⁰

Cardwell’s astonishment stemmed, in part, from his failure to contextualize Tilton’s ministry as part of the broader Word of Faith movement. Sociologist Milmon F. Harrison traces Word of Faith theology back to the American preacher E.W. Kenyon (1867-1948), who blended Holiness and Pentecostal theology with New Thought, or Mind Cure, principles which emphasized that “reality is actually created in the minds and affirmed in the speech of believers.” Texas-born preacher Kenneth E. Hagin (1917-2003), often credited as the “father” of the modern Word of Faith movement, revamped Kenyon’s message in the 1960s, and spearheaded the development of an international “relational network” of “denominationally independent churches” and ministries. Harrison outlines the beliefs that tie together this loose association of ministries. First is an emphasis on “knowing ‘who you are in Christ’.” Believers understand themselves as involved in a “contract” with God, mediated by Christ, which entitles them to spiritual and material rewards. This knowledge paves the way for “positive confession.” Just as God spoke creation into being, believers are encouraged to vocalize, and thus manifest, the positive change they desire in their lives, while keeping negative thoughts and proclamations at bay. Finally, and most controversially, the movement has adopted the “seed faith” strategy of Oral Roberts, teaching that those who sow donations into faithful ministries can expect to reap harvests of blessings at a future date.²²¹

Harrison acknowledges that Word of Faith might be thought of as a “poor people’s movement,” and he describes its theology as a “religious response to class hierarchy.” Thus, according to Harrison, there is little surprise that the American Word of Faith movement particularly flourished during the 1980s and early-1990s, when the “conservative economic policies” of Presidents Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush fostered a “seemingly permanent underclass” in American society. At the same time, “mass entertainment” bombarded the disadvantaged with messages of “extravagant – even opulent – self-indulgence and conspicuous consumption,” as evidenced by popular television programs such as *Lifestyles of the Rich and*

²²⁰ Jerry D. Cardwell, *Mass Media Christianity: Televangelism and the Great Commission* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1984), 122-125.

²²¹ Milmon F. Harrison, *Righteous Riches: The Word of Faith Movement in Contemporary African American Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 5-12.

Famous. Harrison suggests that these cultural artifacts “fanned the flames of desire for prosperity,” and thereby enhanced the attractiveness of the Word of Faith message.²²² It follows that in this cultural milieu, success came to those Word of Faith preachers who were best able to wrap their promises of divinely endowed prosperity in an entertaining televised package. As Harrison argues, “television’s role in spreading and popularizing the Faith Message cannot be overstated,” and the ministries of Word of Faith televangelists such as Kenneth Copeland, Frederick K.C. Price, and Robert Tilton himself boomed between the late-1980s and early-1990s.²²³ Along with a host of others, these televangelists preached and embodied what Kate Bowler calls “hard prosperity,” a theology which “drew a straight line between life circumstances and a believer’s faith,” the latter often expressed through seed faith contributions to their television ministries.²²⁴

While his theology differed little from that of his Word of Faith competitors, Robert Tilton’s vigorous style set him apart from the pack. An unpredictable bundle of energy, Tilton might sling ad-libbed jokes, scat sing in tongues, soft shoe across the stage, and/or perform fantastic faith healings for viewers of his Sunday services. During one service from the early-1990s Tilton, clad in a Western get-up complete with straight-leg jeans, cowboy boots, and a glossy leather vest (evidently for a church theme day), preaches upon the psalmists’ injunction to praise the Lord with “high sounding cymbals.”²²⁵ As he emphatically delivers the Biblical command, Tilton strides across the church’s purple-carpeted stage and points to the drummer in the church’s band pit, who responds with a subdued burst of cymbal crashes. “That is First Baptist. Give me some Pentecostal cymbals,” Tilton replies to laughter and applause from the congregation, prompting the drummer into a more exuberant pattern: “We want some drums that’ll set the captives free!” “Jimmy play that piano!” Tilton screams next, “I want some legs on it! I want some music on it! Fast! Loud!...For Jesus!” The piano player pumps out a boisterous, black gospel-inspired solo while Tilton, perched on the edge of the stage, bounces to the beat. As the preacher walks back to the stage’s podium, the entire band joins in to bring the music to a

²²² Harrison, *Righteous Riches*, 148-152.

²²³ *Ibid.*, 161. For a brief, theologically critical discussion of the growth of the health-and-wealth gospel on television, see Quentin J. Schultze, *Televangelism and American Culture*, 133-137.

²²⁴ Kate Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 97.

²²⁵ Ps. 150:5 (KJV).

conclusion. “Loud voice!” Tilton calls out, stretching out his arms dramatically. “They praised God with a . . .,” he continues, holding his hand to his ear, “Loud voice!” the congregation eagerly responds.²²⁶

Tilton’s television teaching program, *Success N Life*, was no less exciting, with the preacher often running between sets, wildly gesticulating, screaming healings to viewers, and crawling over piles of paper prayer requests. While Tilton downplayed his message of financial prosperity during Sunday services at Word of Faith, it was the centerpiece of *Success N Life*, and he often made bold suggestions as to the contributions expected by God.²²⁷ An undated clip from the late-1980s features Tilton sitting at a wooden desk on a set dressed to resemble a riche personal library. As telephones ring incessantly and counsellors murmur in the background, Tilton, staring directly into the camera, outlines the “key” of his message, building on a passage from Job: “. . . thou shalt then pay thy vows, a vow is a vow of faith to God. Many times a person doesn’t have it – maybe a hundred dollars, five hundred dollars, or a thousand.”²²⁸ According to Tilton the latter amount is the most appropriate, as it demonstrates the greatest amount of sacrificial faith and is therefore the most likely to be divinely covered: “I’m saying God will give you the seed to pay on your vow. If he doesn’t, don’t pay on it. But every time some extra money comes, take a portion of it, and pay on your vow, and eat and pay your bills on the other.” Those who faithfully stick to Tilton’s vowing program are promised miraculous windfalls at a future date, and divine release from the curses which plague unbelievers.²²⁹

The success of Robert Tilton’s ministry, as with all television ministries, depended on convincing individuals of his sincerity and religious authenticity. This task was made difficult, however, by the longstanding cultural association of American revival preaching with religious fakery – an association enmeshed in the very fabric of Tilton’s programming. As John Fiske writes, an “essential characteristic of television is its polysemy, or multiplicity of meanings.”²³⁰ While each television text carries a “preferred reading” desired by its producers, it is also marked

²²⁶ “Western-wear Bob Healing and Testimonial Service,” YouTube video, 12:42, posted by “SufferinSprings,” January 15, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QfhZNMGA6mY>.

²²⁷ For the differing emphases at Word of Faith and on *Success N Life*, see Steve Blow, “Easter Service Appropriately Joyful, But . . .,” *The Dallas Morning News*, April 18, 1990.

²²⁸ Job 22:27 (KJV).

²²⁹ “1 of 2 – Bob Wants A THOUSAND DOLLARS,” YouTube video, 13:45, posted by “SufferinSprings,” February 28, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jiLoUkvSh2s>.

²³⁰ John Fiske, *Television Culture* (London: Routledge, 1987), 15.

by “semiotic excess,” containing within it “traces of competing or resisting discourses available for alternative readings.”²³¹ In the case of Robert Tilton’s programming, great efforts were made to convince audiences that the televangelist was a sincere and genuine conduit of the divine. However, the potential for reading Tilton as a deceptive and bizarre religious fake was also often built into his programs, generally in the form of refutations. The abovementioned clip from *Success N Life* is filled with examples. In discussing his seed faith theology, Tilton reassures viewers that it is “not a gimmick,” but that his theology rests on “a Biblical principle.” “To some it’s crazy,” Tilton acknowledges after pleading with God to aid an audience member, “But to those to whom this arrow was shot to, it’s not crazy, it’s your moment, and hour of deliverance.” Regarding the power of his anointed prayer cloths, to be sent out to those who write in to his ministry, and one of which, he promises, is “going to deliver someone from warts,” Tilton places words of skepticism in a hypothetical viewer’s mouth: “You say ‘Bob this sounds strange.’ It’s all in the Bible: Acts 19.”²³²

Through such inclusions Tilton directly referenced the tensions of religious authenticity involved in his ministry, and acknowledged the propensity of many to dismiss him as an off-beat and exploitative religious fake. However, for some viewers Tilton was ridiculous in the sense that he was a surefire source of amusement, a potential reading which the televangelist also hinted at through his complaints and rebukes on the set of *Success N Life*. “Don’t you laugh at me, I know what I’m talking about!” Tilton challenged the camera during one animated appearance.²³³ In another broadcast, Tilton not only acknowledged his humor value, but also suggested that he had been the target of comedic cultural artifacts: “You see, I know that I’m mocked, ridiculed, written about, laughed about, even bumper stickers made about me.”²³⁴ Such comments overlap with the experiences of a distinct audience segment of Tilton’s broadcasts: dedicated viewers of a televangelist whom they perceived to be a laughably “crazy” and “strange” spiritual charlatan. As will be discussed in the following section, some of these ironic fans of Robert Tilton not only frequently watched his broadcasts for fun, but also constructed

²³¹ Fiske, *Television Culture*, 91-92.

²³² “1 of 2 – Bob Wants A THOUSAND DOLLARS.”

²³³ “BOB’s BEST RANTS 1 – ‘We’ve Seen Midgets Grow!!’,” YouTube video, 13:26, posted by “SufferinSprings,” November 4, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rm-Rf-f5zw4>.

²³⁴ “Robert Tilton in a moment of amazing religious television,” YouTube video, 9:13, posted by “Ken Delusion,” August 14, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=btZadaZmSgg>.

their own Tilton-themed media and shared their pleasures with likeminded others – activities reminiscent of more sincere, devotional fandoms. Moreover, these activities were conducted by “socially situated viewers,” and for some, their creative play with the perceived religious fake intersected with frustrating experiences with evangelical Christianity, and thus resonated with their personal negotiations of religious authenticity.²³⁵

Ironic Fans, Tilton Tapers, and “The Unofficial Robert Tilton Fan Club”

In her 1985 study of primarily female, Dutch viewers of the American soap opera *Dallas* (1978-1991), which focused on the intrigues of a wealthy Texas oil family, Ien Ang identified viewers who, she argued, “don’t enjoy *Dallas* itself at all,” but rather “the irony they bring to bear on it.” Through techniques such as the deployment of “mocking commentary” during group viewing and creative play with character names, these “ironic fans” “transformed” *Dallas* “from a seriously intended melodrama to the reverse: a comedy to be laughed at.” According to Ang, this ironic approach allowed viewers who were opposed to the conservative and commercial discourses built into the program to maintain a critical and elevated “distance...from the reality represented in *Dallas*,” which in turn permitted them to derive pleasure from their dedication to a “bad object” churned out by the culture industries. Unlike the preferred viewer of *Dallas*, who “identifies with the excessive world of the soap opera,” ironic viewers found the “melodramatic enlargement of emotions” in the program to be “completely senseless and laughable,” and thus “easy prey for irony.”²³⁶

Comments appended to many Robert Tilton-themed videos posted to YouTube suggest that the televangelist similarly attracted a considerable number of ironic fans during his heyday – dedicated viewers who understood the televangelist as a laughable religious fake rather than a genuine messenger of God. “I was a ‘fan’ from way, way back,” confessed one YouTube commenter, who further explained, “My level of being a ‘fan’ was rooted entirely in the fact that this dude is crazy!”²³⁷ Beyond merely enjoying Tilton in a tongue-in-cheek fashion, some such ironic fans also used the televangelist as a cultural resource to create their own humor-based,

²³⁵ Fiske, *Television Culture*, 15-16.

²³⁶ See Ang, *Watching Dallas*, 96-102.

²³⁷ See “moreabouttheworld,” comment on “BOB’S BEST 5: “You Are Not Gonna Have Diarrhea Any Longer!” YouTube video, 14:41, posted by “SufferinSprings,” December 9, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d7msyXQq4Vg&list=UU2oWfwRTeW_pS4V-0nfDFww.

Tilton-themed videos. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Video Cassette Recording (VCR) technology was central to the activities of more sincere, television-based fandoms during the 1980s and 1990s, as it allowed fans, for one, to archive and share often scarce video material. Moreover, linking two VCRs together created a rudimentary editing bay, which allowed for the creation of original and often humorous media, such as the aforementioned *Star Trek* “songtapes.”²³⁸ Ironic fans of Robert Tilton likewise capitalized on the creative potential of linked VCRs by editing, compiling, and thereby amplifying elements of the televangelist’s programming which they found to be particularly ridiculous. Some of this material has since been digitized and uploaded to YouTube, and interviews with Tilton tapers offer insights into the significance of these ironic fan activities in the context of their everyday lives at the time.

As of June 5, 2012, YouTube user “Zschim,” a forty-four year-old comic book store employee, had uploaded seven Robert Tilton-themed videos to YouTube, all of which he originally created during the mid-to-late 1980s. A longtime resident of Houston, Texas, Zschim’s interest in televangelism was sparked during a visit in the early-1980s to Tulsa, Oklahoma, where his aunt and uncle were affiliated with Oral Roberts University. Later, “when cable channels became more abundant,” he would regularly tune in to Roberts’ programs, and by “1986 to 1987 or so,” right after he graduated from high school, he and his friends were watching “hours and hours” of Pentecostal-oriented televangelism, including “Robert Tilton, Oral and Richard Roberts, the PTL Club stuff, Jimmy Swaggart, and various others.” Although he was “raised Lutheran,” Zschim stated during our interview that he was “not so religious” when he was a heavy viewer of televangelism. Neither religiously uplifted nor theologically offended by his chosen television preachers, Zschim instead tuned in for ironic amusement: “if you watch enough of these programs... eventually you see some goofy, oddball people and situations, and then there was Robert Tilton.” Zschim recalled that he watched and recorded “a great deal of *Success N Life*,” and he reported that the “basic appeal” of Tilton’s program for him was what he described as “the absurdity of the execution of the situation.”²³⁹

²³⁸ Bacon-Smith, *Enterprising Women*, 175-184. For the process of editing via two linked VCRs, see Ilisa Barbash and Lucien Taylor, *Cross-Cultural Filmmaking: A Handbook for Making Documentary and Ethnographic Films and Videos* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 445-446.

²³⁹ Zschim (pseudonym retained to protect anonymity), email interview with author, February 2 and 7, 2012.

At the time, Zschim frequently convened with a “handful” of his high school friends, and he stated that it was his “role in the group to bring video entertainment.” Among the wide swath of recorded television that he would provide were clips from Robert Tilton’s broadcasts, which he found to be a surefire crowd pleaser: “Robert Tilton was an immediate success with everyone, so I watched more and recorded more... friends would bring other friends to our parties, and Tilton would be a hit with them as well.” Beyond compiling straightforward clips of Tilton in action, Zschim also used a pair of linked VCRs to craft what he referred to as “edits,” featuring looped selections of Tilton at his most emphatic and eccentric. In the description area for one of these videos, titled “Z-TV Bob God Classic 01 Robert Tilton,” Zschim explained that “Two VCRs, friends, and a buzz made this around 1986 or so. There’s a little bit of God in every edit.”²⁴⁰ Sporadically throughout the video examples of the televangelist at his most extreme are stutteringly repeated, often many times over: Tilton rearing his head back and yelling, “I will pay my vows!”; Tilton loudly chastising the demons afflicting an ill woman (“You can’t have her!”); Tilton breaking into impromptu bouts of singing and laughing.

Zschim’s history highlights the potentially social nature of ironic televangelical fandom, as he shared his amusement at Tilton with likeminded friends, for whom he provided video material that amplified the humorous “absurdity” of the televangelist’s hyperkinetic style.²⁴¹ While Zschim certainly understood Tilton to be a ridiculous religious fake, his play with the preacher’s programs does not, however, seem to have carried any significant personal religious relevance. A contrasting case is found in the experiences of Tilton taper, ironic fan, and YouTube user “SufferinSprings,” whose early play with the televangelist overlapped with a period of profound personal religious change, and whose enjoyment of Tilton, at least initially, was relatively private. At the time of our first interview a forty-five year-old corporate recruiter in Dallas, SufferinSprings originally hailed from the small Texan city of Sulphur Springs, having moved to Dallas at the age of six.²⁴² Although his family had attended a Methodist church in his hometown, in Dallas his parents were unable to “find a church they were happy with, and they just kind of blew it off and quit going.” At the age of twenty, however, and following in the

²⁴⁰ “Z-TV Bob God Classic 01 Robert Tilton,” YouTube video, 10:26, posted by “Zschim,” October 22, 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hVLq8SNPT7k>.

²⁴¹ For group ironic viewing of *Dallas*, see Ang, *Watching Dallas*, 97.

²⁴² SufferinSprings (pseudonym retained to protect anonymity), Skype interview by author, December 17, 2011.

footsteps of his older brother, SufferinSprings underwent what he described as a “full-throttle born again” experience, and dove headfirst into Dallas’ strong fundamentalist culture.²⁴³ Over the next “very intense” three years, SufferinSprings “ate, drank, and slept the Bible.” He acknowledged that “for about a year, it was a really healthy thing...it helped me get out of a depression...feel more confident about life and about myself.” However, following what he described as a “honeymoon period,” and after joining a local Southern Baptist church, he recalled that his “beliefs became more angry, strident and extreme.”

During his period of fervent faith SufferinSprings became a self-described “fan” of the zealous televangelist Jimmy Swaggart. The television ministry of local Dallas preacher Robert Tilton, however, provoked a different type of passionate response from the young man:

“I remember being so angry at how blatantly slimy he was that I actually went to the phone and called their prayer line and I said: ‘I’d like to pledge five-hundred-dollars on the condition that he ever actually preaches the gospel on the air...presents the salvation message...the person on the line’s like, ‘Well, I’m sorry you feel that way, but he does present the gospel and I’ll be praying for you,’ or whatever.”

SufferinSprings began to lose his faith when he discovered that his pastor, a close friend, had been having an affair with a married woman from their “small congregation.” This localized scandal was the “catalyst” which led to his “gradually walking from fundamentalism (and) recognizing it as destructive.” Lacking social ties with similarly disillusioned individuals, he found leaving fundamentalist Christianity a “pretty lonely experience,” and framed his deconversion as “strictly a matter of reading books and quietly coming to my own conclusion.”²⁴⁴ He noted that books mail-ordered from Prometheus Press, a publishing house focused on free thought, were central to the process, particularly psychologist Edmund D. Cohen’s *The Mind of the Bible-Believer* (1986), an overview of what Cohen calls the

²⁴³ An oft-cited indicator of fundamentalist strength in Dallas is the influence of Dallas Theological Seminary; for example, see Randall Balmer, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: Journey into the Evangelical Subculture in America*, 4th edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 31-47.

²⁴⁴ John Barbour mentions loneliness as a common component of the “emotional upheaval” that accompanies many deconversions; see *Versions of Deconversion: Autobiography and the Loss of Faith* (Charlottesville, Virginia: The University Press of Virginia, 1994), 2.

“Evangelical mind-control system,” and the work of magician turned debunker James Randi, whose *The Faith Healers* (1987) was a widely read exposé of televangelist stagecraft.²⁴⁵

SufferinSprings’ gradual “secularizing exit” from fundamentalist Christianity, motivated by a combination of “intellectual doubt and moral criticism” of the faith and its leaders, was accompanied by a shift from disgust at Robert Tilton to an “ironic viewing attitude,” the first step towards his development as a dedicated ironic fan of the televangelist.²⁴⁶ The preacher, who he once found so offensive, was now “funny as shit...because he was just such a blatant money grubber, and also he was so eccentric and off the rails.” “I started watching Robert Tilton...for kinda entertainment purposes, around the same time that I was just very gradually coming out of the Christian phase,” SufferinSprings explained during our initial interview. At the time, he was living at his parent’s home while attending college and working part-time, and he recalled that he “would set a timer (on a VCR)...to record (*Success N Life*) every day,” allowing him to catch up with Tilton during breaks in his busy schedule.²⁴⁷ While SufferinSprings’ burgeoning fandom was largely a private affair, his father occasionally joined him to watch:

“At first he didn’t quite get it, and then one day Bob Tilton did something so weird or funny that my Dad was in hysterics, and then...it was kind of like he understood why I was watching this...it’s kind of weird to bond with your Dad like you would watching a comedy movie, except you’re watching a TV preacher.”

SufferinSprings began hunting for the televangelist’s most unintentionally amusing moments in a more efficient manner by reviewing his Tilton tapes using the “high-speed scan” function on his VCR: “whenever he started waving his arms, I would stop it and watch that bit, and if it was

²⁴⁵ Edmund D. Cohen, *The Mind of the Bible-Believer* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1986), 8. James Randi, *The Faith Healers* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1987). Prometheus would also later publish a volume dedicated to the accounts of those who, like SufferinSprings, had left Christian fundamentalism: Edward T. Babinski, ed., *Leaving the Fold: Testimonies of Former Fundamentalists* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1994).

²⁴⁶ For “secularizing exit,” see Heinz Streib, Ralph W. Hood Jr., Barbara Keller, and Rosina-Martha Csöff, eds., *Deconversion: Qualitative and Quantitative Results from Cross-Cultural Research in Germany and the United States of America*. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009), 26. SufferinSprings noted during our interview (via Skype, December 17, 2011) that he held on to a vague belief in “some kind of source we all return to...a source of life or energy or whatever, even if it’s just the natural universe.” Yet, he also stated that “a big part of me thinks that (it) is probably the case” that his own mother “just ceased to exist” after her death. For “intellectual doubt and moral criticism,” see Barbour, *Versions of Deconversion*, 12. For “ironic viewing attitude,” see Ang, *Watching Dallas*, 99.

²⁴⁷ Lucas Hilderbrand notes that “timeshifting,” the ability to record and watch material at a viewer’s convenience, was “the first publicized use of home video”; *Inherent Vice*, 12.

really good I would transfer it to another tape and make like a highlight reel (with) two VCRs patched together.” Fortunately, Tilton’s programs yielded much choice material:

“With Bob, he would sometimes just say something completely insane in the middle of a show, perhaps a twenty or thirty second segment with a crazy ‘aside,’ or non-sequitur, or passage of joyful glossolalia, and I would transfer that to a highlights tape along with other weird moments. At other times, however, he would ‘get on a roll,’ so to speak, and a whole ten or fifteen minute segment would be worth saving.”²⁴⁸

SufferinSprings estimated that it took between one-and-a-half to two years to craft a thirty-minute compilation tape of Tilton highlights, which was originally intended for his private amusement.²⁴⁹

Out of the dozens of Tilton-themed videos that SufferinSprings has since uploaded to YouTube, a handful feature sequences from his early compilations. Like Zschim, SufferinSprings captured amusing examples of Tilton at his most animated and extreme. The YouTube video “Bob Rants for Eight Minutes Straight,” for example, offers just what the title promises.²⁵⁰ However, SufferinSprings also collected clips which featured apparent breakdowns in the preacher’s constructed public persona. “Bob Nearly Trips Over the Plants” opens with Tilton narrowly avoiding a stage light and potted plant as he walks across the *Success N Life* set, then laughing it off with a ministry associate.²⁵¹ Similarly, “Bob Shuts the Gates of Hell” includes a moment when the preacher appears to find his own performance amusing: “And I tell you something, Jesus looked at those storms and he rebuked those storms and told them to ‘be still....stupid storms! (stuttering laughter), be still!’”²⁵² While these two examples evidence Tilton in a rather jovial mood, another of SufferinSprings’ videos reveals a more serious backstage “Bob.” After throwing to a taped healing testimonial which fails to appear, the

²⁴⁸ SufferinSprings, email interview by author, June 6, 2012.

²⁴⁹ SufferinSprings (pseudonym retained to protect anonymity), Skype interview by author, December 17, 2011.

²⁵⁰ “Bob Rants for Eight Minutes Straight,” YouTube video, 7:56, posted by “SufferinSprings,” July 15, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XVjSui1Kuck>.

²⁵¹ “Bob Nearly Trips Over the Plants,” YouTube video, 1:51, posted by “SufferinSprings,” March 1, 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cS_-zrJsGRc.

²⁵² “Bob Shuts the Gates of Hell,” YouTube video, 7:45, posted by “SufferinSprings,” July 28, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RIp8ghZ7BEw>.

preacher's smile slowly fades while the camera remains fixed on his face. As the stage lights dim and the show cuts awkwardly to break, Tilton angrily marches off and chastises a stagehand.²⁵³

While he was a devoted fundamentalist SufferinSprings was angered by what he perceived to be the gross inauthenticity of Tilton's prosperity gospel, as well as his conviction that the "blatantly slimy" televangelist was only in it for the money. His deconversion experience, however, sparked by the fall from grace of his personal pastor and friend, led him to shelve his own theology next to Tilton's as essentially inauthentic and absurd, and opened up an ironic distance from which he could view the televangelist as a source of comedy. Beyond Tilton's extreme style, spurious healings, and ridiculous seed faith message, SufferinSprings also derived entertainment from gaining purported glimpses of the "real" Robert Tilton lying behind his on-camera façade, and therefore came to find the televangelist's seeming insincerity both humorous and intriguing. Sharing SufferinSprings' combination of amusement and curiosity was fellow Dallas resident Randy. A dedicated irreverent Tilton watcher, Randy, under the pseudonym "Brother Randall," would come to found The Unofficial Robert Tilton Fan Club, a tongue-in-cheek fan following which, as will be discussed in the following chapter, would eventually count SufferinSprings as a central member.

During our initial interview Randy reported that he began regularly tuning in to Tilton's programs in the late-1980s, while he was a marginally employed, lapsed Methodist in his late-twenties.²⁵⁴ At the time, as Randy recalled, Tilton's programs were often broadcast during early-morning or midday hours – times when, as Randy put it, "fringy, out of work people" might be watching.²⁵⁵ "I happened to really start watching him during a period of time when I wasn't working full-time," he stated, "so I was kind of his target audience." Much like Zschim and SufferinSprings, Randy was attracted to the comedic "lunacy" of Tilton's high-energy programs – "the faces he pulled, his expressions" – and he grew increasingly "fascinated by his sales pitch." Indeed, he admitted that he quickly became "obsessed" with the televangelist, an indicator of his ironic fan status. Beyond the amusement Randy received from Tilton's on-

²⁵³ "Classic Bob Snippets – "HEE HAMMA HABBA!!!" YouTube video, 5:16, posted by "SufferinSprings," January 21, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9MCHIPvuJOA>.

²⁵⁴ Randy (last name withheld to protect anonymity), Skype interview by author, December 4, 2011.

²⁵⁵ On April 18, 1990, Reporter Steve Blow of *The Dallas Morning News* noted that Tilton's programs were aired daily in Dallas at 5 a.m., 9 a.m., 12:00 p.m., and 12:30 a.m.; see "Easter Service Appropriately Joyful, But..."

camera antics, he also set out to gather reliable information about the preacher's backstage life, at the time no easy task: "back then...there was no Internet, there was no way to find out anything on anybody, unless you just endeavored to really dig." He was even unaware that Tilton pastored a church in Dallas until a friend reported having seen the preacher leave that city's airport, reportedly in "a big, long stretch limo" while sporting a "full-length mink coat" and "a woman on each arm." This piece of gossip, which reinforced the televangelist-as-greedy-lecher stereotype, fueled Randy's interest; however, he remained frustrated by the fact that the preacher had not yet received "a whole lot of media attention."²⁵⁶

One important exception mentioned by Randy was reporter Steve Blow of *The Dallas Morning News*, who beginning in 1990 published a series of articles on the seemingly ubiquitous, yet fascinatingly mysterious, televangelist. Blow's reports anticipated themes of the national media scandal which would soon envelop Tilton's ministry: questions surrounding the televangelist's secrecy and lavish lifestyle; probes into the apparent divergences between his on-camera promises and his ministry's actions; criticisms of his commoditized, mediated, and miraculous style of Christianity. Moreover, Blow's reports often featured tones of amusement, which not only overlapped with the experiences of Tilton's ironic fans, but which would also manifest in later national press attention to the televangelist. Blow's first article on Tilton, "The Great Loan Officer in the Sky," emphasized the secretive nature of the televangelist's ministry.²⁵⁷ Rebuffed in his attempts to speak with Tilton, a ministry spokesperson, or even to solicit "written information" about the ministry, Blow watched *Success N Life* for his data, from which he cobbled together the televangelist's "Miracle Plan": "You give money to God (through Robert Tilton Ministries), and God gives you greater riches in return." Noting that Tilton's "brand of Christianity" differed vastly from the faith of "sacrifice and selflessness" which he "grew up on," Blow added, "I don't know about his theology, but I admire his marketing."

Blow's second article on Tilton revealed that the televangelist filmed *Success N Life* near San Diego, California, where he lived in a many-roomed mansion, and that he periodically flew back to Dallas to host church services.²⁵⁸ Blow questioned how these facts matched up with Tilton encouraging viewers to call in to the "Miracle Prayer Center in Dallas," as well as shots of

²⁵⁶ Randy, Skype interview by author, December 4, 2011.

²⁵⁷ Steve Blow, "The Great Loan Officer in the Sky," *The Dallas Morning News*, March 11, 1990.

²⁵⁸ Steve Blow, "Omnipresent? That's Neither Here Nor There," *The Dallas Morning News*, March 18, 1990.

Tilton purportedly praying over paper copies of prayer requests and pledges sent to that city. “You certainly don’t get the idea that the pledges are being handed from Texas to California,” wrote Blow, criticizing the ministry’s sincerity. “That’s the beauty of a thing called fax,” countered Tilton’s attorney J.C. Joyce, who was asked for comment, “It’s an amazing world we live in.” Joyce added that Tilton had clandestinely moved his family to California after receiving “innumerable death threats,” and Blow noted that the lawyer had “specifically cited an incident four years ago in which a human head was discovered in a restroom urinal at Word of Faith Family Church – “It would terrify any sane person,” he said.” Blow challenged Joyce’s reasoning for the move, however, with the help of Farmers Branch Police Department Sergeant Reece Daniel, who reported that the bizarre bathroom situation was not a direct threat, but rather an untargeted prank by a group of “teens... (who) had stolen the head from a mausoleum and apparently chosen the church at random.”

Over the ensuing months Blow continued his hunt for information on Tilton, admitting that the televangelist’s reclusive nature, while frustrating as a journalist, nevertheless made him “more intrigued by this charismatic figure,” a fascination shared by his local reader Randy.²⁵⁹ By August 1991, Randy had decided to take a more active role in his own information gathering by independently publishing a Tilton-themed newsletter, which he looked to promote on a local talk radio station where “people around Dallas that knew Bob growing up” traded “anecdotal things” about the televangelist, yet rarely “any good information.” Randy hoped to piggyback on the station’s broadcasting reach to field fresh sources of information:

“I hit upon the idea that if I put together a little newsletter about Tilton, and sent it to this radio station, that they might mention it as a joke, but also give my PO box. I thought, “Well, maybe I’ll hear some stuff”...like casting my net and maybe I’ll pull something in.”²⁶⁰

Randy’s statement regarding the possibility that the radio station would read his newsletter as a “joke” points to the fact that the publication was not only intended to be a clearing house for Tilton-related information, but was also a humorous expression of his ironic Tilton fandom. A one-sheet, two-sided affair printed on pale green paper and sporting a cutout headshot of a

²⁵⁹ Steve Blow, “Easter Service Appropriately Joyful, But...”

²⁶⁰ Randy, Skype interview by author, December 4, 2011.

smiling Tilton in the header, the inaugural issue of “the unofficial Robert Tilton Fan Club Newsletter” was credited to “Brother Randall,” a *nom de plume* of Randy which took a winking shot at evangelical titles of fictive kinship. “Are YOU a Robert Tilton Fan?” asked the newsletter, “If your answer is an unhesitatingly resounding AMEN, then this is the newsletter for you, brother.” Should readers mistake the fan club to be devotional, Brother Randall made his ironic stance explicit: “Tilton is so completely over the top, unabashed, blatantly (sic) insincere, unrepentant, and downright EVIL that it’s refreshing.” “To some I’m glorifying an evil scumbag, to others I’m mocking a holy man of God,” Brother Randall acknowledged, while clarifying, “I don’t want to get into any moral debates...that’s not what this is about. I’m looking at Robert Tilton on a whole other level: it’s my favorite TV show, just like the Beverly Hillbillies or Green Acres or whatever. Bob is a damn good snake oil salesman. The best.”²⁶¹

Brother Randall’s first newsletter was the opening move in what would become a robust, albeit short-lived, network of ironic fans surrounding Robert Tilton. Moving beyond merely watching Tilton for fun, Brother Randall ironically and publically praised the televangelist *as a religious fake* and parodied his faithful fans, an approach influenced by his deep involvement in the thriving American alternative publishing scene of the 1980s and 1990s.²⁶² A self-described “general geek,” Brother Randall devoured “underground publications and fan publications associated with comic books and music,” as well as offbeat zines such as *Thrift Score*, a guide to second-hand shopping, and *Pills-a-Go-Go*, an irreverent look at America’s pharmaceutical fixations.²⁶³ Indeed, he admitted that televangelism was only one of many cultural phenomena that he “was interested and obsessed with.” However, he recognized that living in Dallas, the “Hollywood for media ministries,” offered him “access to stuff that people in other parts of the country didn’t have,” such as Robert Tilton’s bizarrely entertaining ministry – a rich vein of cultural resources from which he could craft contributions to a pre-existing, underground, and

²⁶¹ Brother Randall, *The Unofficial Robert Tilton Fan Club Newsletter*, 1 (Dallas, 1991), n.p.

²⁶² See Stephen Duncombe, *Notes from Underground*.

²⁶³ Randy, Skype interview by author, December 4, 2011. For a brief mention of *Pills-a-Go-Go*, see Duncombe, *Notes from Underground*, 26. See also Jim Hogshire, *Pills-A-Go-Go: A Fiendish Investigation into Pill Marketing, Art, History and Consumption* (Townsend: Feral House, 1999), and Al Hoff, *Thrift Score* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997).

ironic televangelical taste culture evidenced by two interrelated influences Randy mentioned during our initial interview: The Church of the SubGenius and the zine *Zontar*.²⁶⁴

Both the COSG and *Zontar* featured many of the characteristics that would come to define the URTFC: they were religious parodies entrenched in alternative media networks; they fetishized inept and allegedly inauthentic cultural products, including American televangelism; and they poached the products of televangelist ministries as the raw material for their own, often heavily ironic, cultural contributions. While the leaders of the COSG and *Zontar* satirically attacked politically active televangelists who threatened their visions of American society, their approach towards less politically engaged, Pentecostal television preachers was more complicated. Although they encouraged the derivation of ironic humor from such televangelists, they also expressed genuine admiration for their performance and persuasion skills and even, at times, their seeming sincerity. Similar expressions of genuine admiration would mark the efforts of The Unofficial Robert Tilton Fan Club, the core of which nevertheless involved ironically toying with a televangelist widely considered to be a religious fake.

Parody Religions, Alternative Media, and Recreational Christianity

In 1981 Douglass St. Clair Smith, better known in SubGenius circles as the Reverend Ivan Stang, and one Doctor Philo Drummond (that is, Dr. Ph. D), introduced the Church of the SubGenius to the world with a fifteen-page, one-dollar pamphlet titled, *REPENT! Quit Your JOB! ;SLACK OFF! The World Ends Tomorrow and YOU MAY DIE*. According to the ever-expanding SubGenius mythology, a vast “Conspiracy” deprives humankind of “Slack” – their birthright to do whatever they want, and an attendant state of perpetual luck – through exploitative capitalism and cultural homogenization. While most humans are clouded by the Conspiracy, SubGenii fight back for their Slack under the command of the Church’s “High Epopt,” J.R. “Bob” Dobbs, most often referred to as “Bob” (and always within quotes).²⁶⁵ “Bob,” who developed “strange powers of persuasion” following a “traumatic, close encounter with a UFO at the age of three,” had become the greatest salesman on the planet by the early-1950s.²⁶⁶

²⁶⁴ Randy, Skype interview by author, December 4, 2011.

²⁶⁵ See Reverend Ivan Stang and Dr. Philo Drummond, *REPENT! Quit Your JOB! ;SLACK OFF! The World Ends Tomorrow and YOU MAY DIE* (Dallas: The SubGenius Foundation, Inc., 1981).

²⁶⁶ *Arise!: The SubGenius Video*, directed by Ivan Stang and Cordt Holland (1991; Austin, Texas: The SubGenius Foundation, 2005), DVD.

One night while watching television, “Bob” was drawn into the presence of “Jehovah 1,” who revealed to him the truth of the Conspiracy and the secrets of Slack.²⁶⁷ The savvy “Bob” recognized in Jehovah 1’s message the potential to both evangelize and exploit – “Sure, they’re Pink, but their money is *green*,” the divine salesman advised a young L. Ron Hubbard, who had yet to incorporate Scientology – and he founded the COSG as the world’s “first industrial church,” grounded in a simple motto: “They’ll pay to know what they think.”²⁶⁸ Reverend Stang, the “Sacred Scribe of the Church of the SubGenius,” has faithfully spread his reclusive master’s teachings for the last thirty years through independent publications, films, books, a long-running radio show, occasional gatherings, and an array of items featuring “Bob’s” sacred image: an illustration of a middle-aged, white American male from the 1950s, complete with side-parted hair and a pipe jutting from his smiling mouth.²⁶⁹

Scholars have variously described The Church of the SubGenius as a “sophisticated joke religion,” a “fake religion,” and a “virtual” or “cyber” religion, the latter labels stemming from the organization’s success online.²⁷⁰ Carole Cusack has labeled the COSG an “invented religion,” a subset of new religious movements consisting of groups which unabashedly “announce their invented status.”²⁷¹ Cusack argues that traditional religions compete in a contemporary narrative marketplace in which works of fiction may also “contain all the necessary elements for life choices, morals, and ethics,” a situation which permits “the adoption of explicitly fictional narratives as the foundation for religion.”²⁷² It follows that invented religions, such as Jediism, Matrixism, and the COSG should not be viewed as “trivial or necessarily invalid,” in Cusack’s opinion, but rather “functionally similar, if not identical, to

²⁶⁷ Stang and Drummond, *REPENT!*, 7.

²⁶⁸ J.R. Dobbs, *The Book of the SubGenius: The Sacred Teachings of J.R. “Bob” Dobbs* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009), 18. Stang and Holland, *Arise!*.

²⁶⁹ For an overview of Reverend Ivan Stang’s role in typical SubGenius style, complete with a picture of him wearing a T-shirt with “Bob’s” ubiquitous face, see “Rev. Ivan Stang,” *SubGenius Wikia Clench*, accessed January 22, 2015, http://subgenius.wikia.com/wiki/Rev._Ivan_Stang.

²⁷⁰ For “sophisticated joke religion,” see Lorne L. Dawson and Jenna Hennebry, “New Religions and the Internet,” 36; Stephen Duncombe also labels the Church of the SubGenius a “joke’ religion” in *Zines*, 13. For the Church of the SubGenius as a “fake religion,” see Thomas Alberts, “Virtually Real: Fake Religions and Problems of Authenticity in Religion,” *Culture and Religion* 9, no. 2 (2008): 125-139. For “virtual religion,” see Chidester, *Authentic Fakes*, 197-208. For the Church of the SubGenius as “cyber-religion,” see Morten T. Højsgaard, “Cyber-religion: On the Cutting Edge between the Virtual and the Real,” in *Religion and Cyberspace*, eds. Morten T. Højsgaard and Margit Warburg, 50-63.

²⁷¹ Carole M. Cusack, *Invented Religions: Imagination, Fiction and Faith* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2010), 1.

²⁷² *Ibid.*, 145.

traditional religions” in that they offer world-orienting myths and social cohesion.²⁷³ Thus, Cusack rehabilitates the COSG, which she claims is so often “derided as a ‘parody religion’ and asserted to have no conceivable spiritual merit,” as “a functional equivalent of religion, at the very least, if not ‘authentic’ religion.”²⁷⁴ She argues that the COSG is “a legitimate path to liberation in a world dominated by work and money,” and she compares the idea and attainment of Slack to the ancient concept of the Tao as well as the notion of Buddhist enlightenment.²⁷⁵

In a recent edited collection exploring what Adam Possamai, building on the work of Jean Baudrillard, calls “hyper-real religion” – “a simulacrum of a religion, created out of, or in symbiosis with, popular culture, which provides inspiration for believers/consumers” – Danielle Kirby has also argued that the COSG is a meaningful religion.²⁷⁶ While acknowledging that the Church of the SubGenius “is the classic example of what is generally thought of as a joke or parody religion,” since “humour and an ironic sense of the world is utterly central” to its operation, Kirby worries that reducing the COSG and similar groups to “simply sophisticated jokes has meant that the underlying substance to the various philosophies has often been overlooked or simply ignored.”²⁷⁷ Kirby argues that the irreducible core of the COSG is essentially spiritual, and that the group therefore represents a religion “masquerading as a joke rather than the other way around.”²⁷⁸ By using the tools of remix and *bricolage*, the Church of the SubGenius rearranges elements from popular culture and other religious traditions into its own subversive creations which, Kirby argues, “resonate strongly with the left hand path magical and occultist traditions.”²⁷⁹ Kirby suggests that the COSG, specifically, offers adherents a “unique magical system, termed ‘Slack,’ for which techniques and methods for its accrual and distribution are offered.”²⁸⁰

During my own interview with Reverend Ivan Stang, he agreed that the COSG “has turned into kind of a big social thing that sometimes acts like a real religion.” However, he added that “pretty much everybody involved in it understands the gag,” a crucial point missed by a

²⁷³ Cusack, *Invented Religions*, 3.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 83-84.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 84, 86-87.

²⁷⁶ Possamai, “Yoda Goes to Glastonbury,” 1.

²⁷⁷ Kirby, “Occultural *Bricolage* and Popular Culture,” 43, 48.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 43.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 44.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 49.

small minority of adherents who “take it too seriously” and who he “feels sorry for,” as well as, it would seem, scholars like Cusack and Kirby.²⁸¹ Rather than an authentic religion that uses humor to uncover transcendental truths, the Church of the SubGenius is better understood as an ongoing comedic commentary *about* religious authenticity – more parody than religion. Thomas Alberts, who labels the COSG a “fake religion,” emphasizes its inherently relational nature, and recommends a focus on how such groups “subvert the authentic religion of the privileged elites,” and the “tensions” between fake religions and the more powerful, and therefore more commonly accepted as authentic, faiths which they copy, criticize, and comment upon.²⁸² While Stang and Drummond primarily patterned the Church of the SubGenius after fringe faiths such as Rosicrucianism, Scientology, and UFO religions, the group also has a long history of toying with American evangelicalism.²⁸³ Cusack has noted that the COSG has parodied “megachurch Christianity,” that the group’s “Devival” meetings ape “the style of an evangelical or Pentecostal Christian revival meeting,” and that its “comical emphasis on riches, luck, and sexual attractiveness is a witty ‘culture jam’ on those religions that emphasize material success,” including “Pentecostal Christian megachurches.”²⁸⁴ While accurate in part, Cusack, and other academic investigators of the COSG, have nevertheless failed to examine the group’s development in the context of two interrelated American cultural phenomena of the 1980s and early-1990s: a politicized conservative Christianity, and high-profile television ministries.

Throughout his campaigning and presidencies (1981-1989), Republican Ronald Reagan courted the “Religious Right,” promoting their vision of the United States as a divinely backed democracy. Prominent televangelists including Jerry Falwell, whose “Moral Majority” network aggressively lobbied for Reagan, and Pat Robertson, who made an unsuccessful bid for the Republican presidential nomination in 1988, urged the nation’s citizens to adhere to purportedly traditional, Biblically based values.²⁸⁵ Efforts to have these values reinforced through legislation, however, met with considerable opposition, kindling a heated “culture war” that extended into the presidency of George H.W. Bush. Abortion, homosexuality, education, pornography, drug

²⁸¹ Reverend Ivan Stang, Skype interview by author, May 1, 2012.

²⁸² Alberts, “Virtually Real,” 127-128.

²⁸³ Reverend Ivan Stang, Skype interview by author, May 1, 2012.

²⁸⁴ Cusack, *Invented Religions*, 84, 93, 104.

²⁸⁵ See, for example, David G. Bromley and Anson Shupe, eds., *New Christian Politics* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1984); Hadden and Shupe, *Televangelism*.

use, and the arts became high-profile battlefields between an “orthodox” faction, whose values were tied to “an external, definable, and transcendent authority,” and a “progressive” faction, for whom “moral authority” was tied to “a spirit of rationalism and subjectivism.”²⁸⁶ While televangelists such as Falwell and Robertson used their expensive mass media ministries to promulgate an orthodox stance of censorship, control, and moral absolutism, underground alternative media networks, and specifically zine culture, were sites for the circulation of a progressive politics privileging participation, the free exchange of ideas, and harboring stark challenges to truth claims grounded in spurious theological revelations.²⁸⁷ The Church of the SubGenius was born in the context of these cultural skirmishes, and as a religious parody sustained by alternative media practices can be understood, at least in part, as a culture jam of the collusion of conservative Christianity, commerce, media, and politics embodied by televangelists such as Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson.²⁸⁸

While the Church of the SubGenius evidenced and encouraged the culture jamming of televangelists like Robertson and Falwell, it also promoted the “cult” reception of less politically engaged television preachers. These interrelated approaches can be better understood by examining the COSG’s relationship with American televangelism in tandem with that of *Zontar*, a zine centered on “obscure ‘B’ to ‘Z’-budget” films which Brother Randall of the URTFC cited as a key influence on his own work.²⁸⁹ Cultural critic Jeffrey Sconce has recognized *Zontar* as a path-breaking publication in “the gradual emergence of a growing and increasingly articulate cinematic subculture” beginning in the late-1970s, which lionized “the most critically disreputable films in cinematic history.”²⁹⁰ Film scholars Ernest Mathijs and Jamie Sexton frame this subculture as a “subsection” of a broader “cult cinema” movement, which was focused on

²⁸⁶ James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: BasicBooks, 1991), 44.

²⁸⁷ For a largely pessimistic discussion of the relationship between progressive politics and alternative media, see Duncombe. *Zines*, 174-194.

²⁸⁸ Cultural critic Mark Dery, who popularized the concept of “culture jamming,” described the COSG as one of the movement’s “poster children” (“Culture Jamming: Hacking, Slashing, and Sniping in the Empire of Signs” (revised edition 2010, originally published in 1993), http://markdery.com/?page_id=154, accessed January 6, 2015, and wrote that the group set out to “lampoon religious cults, motivational sales programs, and other forms of groupthink”; *ibid.*, “The Merry Pranksters and the Art of the Hoax,” *The New York Times*, December 23, 1990. Yet, he did not specifically examine the group’s relationships with conservative Christianity and American televangelism.

²⁸⁹ Brian Curran, “Notes on the Great Bad Film Debate,” *Zontar* 9 (1991 [1983]): 41. Randy, Skype interview by author, December 4, 2011.

²⁹⁰ Jeffrey Sconce, “‘Trashing’ the Academy: Taste, Excess, and an Emerging Politics of Cinematic Style,” *Screen* 36, no. 4 (1995): 372.

the “ironic connoisseurship” of films dismissed and derided by the mainstream – a phenomenon which Sconce has labeled “paracinema.”²⁹¹ Sconce argues that paracinema is “less a distinct group of films than a particular reading protocol, a counter-aesthetic turned subcultural sensibility devoted to all manner of cultural detritus.”²⁹² This statement highlights the fact that the “paracinematic sensibility” is often applied to cultural artifacts beyond what *Zontar* referred to as “badfilm,” and Sconce specifically notes the appeal of “TV preachers” to this “highly ironic” aesthetic.²⁹³ However, he does not explore this avenue further, nor claims by *Zontar*’s editors that they actually worshipped the titular “Zontar” – a ridiculous rubber movie monster – and had thereby concocted their own parody religion.

Zontar’s chief editors, Jan Johnson and Brian Curran, began working together during the late-1970s while attending Boston’s Massachusetts College of Art and Design, where they honed a confrontational, collage-based style which Johnson, a fifty-seven year-old social worker at the time of our interview, described as “very hard, very left politics mixed with a combination of Surrealism and pop art.”²⁹⁴ In 1981, the year that Ronald Reagan took office, and during which the Church of the SubGenius issued its first pamphlet, Curran and Johnson unveiled *Zontar*, which would spawn sister publications and an assortment of audio and video tapes over the next eleven years. Named in honor of the space monster featured in *Zontar: The Thing from Venus* (1966), director Larry Buchanan’s low-budget, made-for-TV remake of Roger Corman’s bad-film *It Conquered the World* (1956), *Zontar* implicitly and explicitly conveyed its editors’ political agendas.²⁹⁵ As Sconce argues, the tongue-in-cheek appreciation of bad-film itself is a political act in that it challenges the culturally and economically powerful “purveyors of the status quo, who not only rule the world, but who are responsible for making contemporary cinema, in the paracinematic mind, so completely boring.”²⁹⁶ Curran and Johnson’s elevation of *Zontar* to deific status likewise carried a distinct political edge, and was specifically intended to

²⁹¹ Ernest Mathijs and Jamie Sexton, *Cult Cinema: An Introduction* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 1-4.

²⁹² Sconce, “‘Trashing’ the Academy,” 372.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, 371, 373-374, 377. For “badfilm,” see Curran, “Notes on the Great Bad Film Debate”.

²⁹⁴ Jan Johnson, Skype interview by author, April 18, 2012. Early examples of Johnson and Curran’s artwork can be found at *Punkt/Data*, <http://punktdatagallery.com>, accessed January 6, 2014.

²⁹⁵ Jan Johnson, Skype interview by author, April 18, 2012.

²⁹⁶ Sconce, “‘Trashing’ the Academy,” 374.

challenge what the editors understood as an improper intermixing of conservative Christianity and American politics.

The political edge of Curran and Johnson's religious parody is evidenced in copies of *Zontar* and its sister publications from the early-1990s, which Johnson has since archived online.²⁹⁷ Curran and Johnson relocated contemporary cultural battles into the cosmic realm, where Zontar, "THE MASTER" of the entire universe, called his followers to fight the "evil forces of 'Born Again' Christianity, whose unholy alliance with Greed-oriented power politics has perpetuated a conspiracy to LOOT THE NATION while feeding the IGNORANT SUPERSTITIOUS MASSES a diet of RACIST PABLUM."²⁹⁸ In a sense, Zontar itself was a parody of the Old Testament God: all-powerful, unwavering in will, and demanding of total obedience. However, the crucial difference was that Curran and Johnson's "MASTER" was also utterly and purposefully absurd. Zontar's graphical representation in the zine, derived from Corman's original film, was a ridiculously low-rent, carrot-shaped creature with crab claws and a goofy devilish grin.²⁹⁹ "OUR MASTER," Curran and Johnson acknowledged, "is a poorly constructed, obviously phony RUBBER MONSTER from a cheezy old science-fiction movie that no-one could possibly believe in, let alone take seriously." At the same time, Zontar was preferable to Jesus Christ, as it was "no bleeding corpse hung on a tree-trunk, no namby-pamby turn-the-other cheek hypocrite." Threatened by the actions of conservative politicians and their Christian backers, Curran and Johnson preached "salvation" through "TOTAL SUBMISSION to superior forces FROM OUTER SPACE," a route "far superior to previous inferior plans," such as Christianity's more popular, yet equally bizarre, salvation strategy.³⁰⁰

Zontar's religious satire, however, was generally reserved for what Johnson described during our interview as "right-wing stuff that pretends to be Christian," a statement indicating that Johnson, a longtime atheist, held particular ideas of what Christianity should be.³⁰¹ Notably,

²⁹⁷ See "Zontar: The Magazine of Venus," <http://www.zontar.net/ZmagIndx.html>, accessed September 24, 2014.

²⁹⁸ Brian Curran, "The Hate Break: A Column of Sociopathological Opinion," *Zontar's Ejecto-Pod 4* (1992): n.p.

²⁹⁹ Images of Corman's monster can be found at "Paghat the Ratgirl," reviews of *Zontar: The Thing from Venus*, and *It Conquered the World, The Weird Wired Realm*, <http://www.weirdwildrealm.com/f-zontar.html>, accessed January 22, 2015.

³⁰⁰ Brian Curran and Jan Johnson, "What Happened to the Body Counts?: Editorial," *Zontar 9* (1991): 3-4.

³⁰¹ Jan Johnson, Skype interview by author, April 18, 2012.

he supported these ideas by turning to the “supreme evangelical court of appeal” – the Bible.³⁰² During our interview, for example, Johnson backed his stance that “religion should be private” by paraphrasing Matthew 6:5-7, in which Jesus encourages his disciples to pray behind closed doors, unlike the “hypocrites” (read: politically active conservative Christians), who do so in public.³⁰³ While they might be ludicrous, Johnson maintained that he had no problems with “people’s beliefs” per se; indeed, as he pointed out, *Zontar* encouraged “devotion to a cheesy rubber monster.” What he found problematic, however, were conservative strains of Christianity that were “involved in other people’s business,” and which thereby offended his understanding of authentic Christianity as being a private concern.³⁰⁴ Thus, *Zontar*’s religious parody specifically satirically delegitimized politically engaged variants of conservative Christianity by associating their cherished beliefs with the worship of a schlocky movie monster.

Similar concerns motivated Ivan Stang of the Church of the SubGenius, a group which Jan Johnson of *Zontar* would join in the 1980s, going so far as to organize a Devival – the “Boston Bobalon” – in 1986.³⁰⁵ During our interview, Ivan Stang downplayed the political nature of the COSG. Characterizing himself as “essentially a liberal,” and Dr. Philo Drummond as “essentially a conservative,” he maintained that they “were very cautious never to be political in a serious way,” and pointed out that the group targeted “fundamentalist ‘new agers’” more than conservative Christians.³⁰⁶ However, there were certainly tensions involved with the group’s development in Bible-belt Dallas: “that world of evangelical Christians shoving their self-righteous sci-fi in our faces, when we had sci-fi that we considered more entertaining, like Japanese monster movies.”³⁰⁷ Such tensions are embodied in the COSG’s holy being “Jehovah 1,” who revealed the secrets of slack to “Bob” Dobbs, and who, Stang and Drummond emphasized, is “NOT GOD but a mad alien from some corporate sin galaxy.”³⁰⁸ Kirby has argued that this “reframing” of “the Judaeo-Christian god as an alien” highlights how the COSG “strip(s) references of their original meaning” and reassembles them into a creative religious

³⁰² David W. Bebbington, *The Dominance of Evangelicalism: The Age of Spurgeon and Moody* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Pres, 2005), 23.

³⁰³ Jan Johnson, Skype interview by author, April 18, 2012.

³⁰⁴ Ibid.

³⁰⁵ Ibid.

³⁰⁶ Reverend Ivan Stang, Skype interview by author, May 1, 2012.

³⁰⁷ Ibid.

³⁰⁸ Dobbs, *The Book of the SubGenius*, 14.

remix.³⁰⁹ However, much like Curran and Johnson's Zontar, Stang and Drummond's figure of Jehovah 1 was politically loaded in that it critiqued the conservative Christian divinity by dragging it into the realm of what the COSG calls "bulldada."

A portmanteau combining "bullshit" and the name of the confrontational early twentieth-century Dada art movement, Stang and Drummond defined bulldada in their first COSG pamphlet as "the nearly unexplainable label for that mysterious quality that impregnates ordinary things with meaning for the SubGenius no matter how devoid of value they may appear to The Others."³¹⁰ According to Stang and Drummond, the "most awe-inspiring artifacts of our civilization are not the revered artsy-fartsy pieces of 'culture' displayed in our swankest art museums, universities, and concert halls," but rather those consumer products dismissed by the mainstream, including "low-budget exploitation movies, lurid comic books, all-nite TV, sleazy Paperbacks of the Gods, certain bizarre billboards and pulp magazine ads, and literally any other fossil of raw humanity in all its shit-kickingly flawed glory." The COSG elevates the contemplation of bulldada to mock sacramental status, with SubGenii so-called for their ability to access truth by probing beneath ("sub") the surface of such cultural artifacts: "the SubGenius is fully capable of receiving authentic god-consciousness from soap operas and monster movies, junkyards and 'dives,' freakshows and back alleys."³¹¹ The editors of *Zontar* similarly promoted the viewing of bad-films as a route to "bad-truth," a concept they aligned with bulldada.³¹² Those with an initiated eye could watch as a bad-film "'unravels itself' before the viewer's startled eyes to reveal the poignant, unspeakable 'TRUTH' of the film's 'behind-the-scenes' 'REALITY,'" specifically, "HUMAN TRAGEDY itself, in its raw, unedited purity."³¹³

Besides watching bad-films, Brian Curran suggested that Zontar's followers could glean bad-truth by tuning in to "cult TV" programs, which, he wrote, "frequently reveal unexpected and undeniable TRUTHS about our nation's, our PLANET's, decaying DEATH CULTURE."

³⁰⁹ Kirby, "Occultural *Bricolage* and Popular Culture," 50.

³¹⁰ For the combination of terms see Cusack, *Invented Religions*, 88. In a footnote to their definition, Stang and Drummond acknowledged the concept's debt to the Dadaists, who conveyed with "disgust with all that was conventional and sacrosanct by portraying deliberating inane objects as art of the highest order"; see "REPENT!," 8. For an overview of the Dada art movement, see Mark A. Pegrum, *Challenging Modernity: Dada Between Modern and Postmodern* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2000).

³¹¹ Stang and Drummond, *Repent!*, 8-9. See also Stang and Holland, *Arise!*

³¹² See, for example, "Zontarian Aesthetics," http://www.subgenius.com/ZONTARZONE_/aest.HTML, accessed September 24, 2014.

³¹³ Curran, "Notes on the Great Bad Film Debate," 41.

Curran encouraged the viewing of “Religious Shows,” in particular, which he labeled “the mainstays of CULT TV programming.”³¹⁴ During our interview, Jan Johnson recalled that he and Curran frequently watched televangelism while attending art school, often while smoking marijuana, which allowed their minds “to go into more interesting places.”³¹⁵ In contrast, Ivan Stang recalled that he and Drummond only “occasionally” tuned in to television preachers, instead favoring Dallas radio evangelists, particularly the “really agitated, screaming, classic, in most cases Southern preachers.” Nevertheless, Stang acknowledged that the COSG was “definitely baked in the oven of the televangelists,” and like the editors of *Zontar* he not only appropriated televangelists as prime bulldada for creative media projects, but also encouraged particular ways of understanding select television preachers.³¹⁶ Such activities are reflected in two items cited by Brother Randall as influences on the URTFC: Ivan Stan’s *High Weirdness by Mail: A Directory of the Fringe: Mad Prophets, Crackpots, Kooks & True Visionaries* (1988), a book-length guide for acquiring free or low-cost bulldada through the mail; and *Perverse Preachers, Fascist Fundamentalists, and Kristian Kiddie Kooks* (1991), a VHS compilation of religious programming produced by *Zontar*’s Jan Johnson over the course of three years, and which included a companion zine.³¹⁷

Both Stang’s *High Weirdness by Mail* and Johnson’s *Perverse Preachers* package feature direct attacks against high-profile, politically engaged televangelists – delegitimizing their organizations by associating them with bizarre bulldada, and negatively evaluating their ministries against particular standards of what authentic Christianity ought to be. Despite his claims of political indifference, Stang savaged politically active, conservative Christian ministries in the pages of *High Weirdness by Mail*, most of which he tellingly included in the chapter “Groups You Love to Hate – But They Hate You Even More.” Stang encouraged readers to request information from such ministries via mail as a form of reconnaissance in the ongoing American culture wars: “nobody *ever* won a battle by ignoring the enemy, whereas many battles

³¹⁴ Brian Curran, “Confessions of a Cult-TV Addict,” *Zontar’s Ejecto-Pod 2* (1990), n.p.

³¹⁵ Jan Johnson, Skype interview by author, April 18, 2012.

³¹⁶ Reverend Ivan Stang, Skype interview by author, May 1, 2012.

³¹⁷ Brother Randall, Skype interview by author, December 4, 2011. Reverend Ivan Stang, *High Weirdness by Mail: A Directory of the Fringe: Mad Prophets, Crackpots, Kooks & True Visionaries* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988). *Perverse Preachers, Fascist Fundamentalists, and Kristian Kiddie Kooks*, edited by Jan Johnson (Boston, 1991), VHS; Jan Johnson, Skype interview by author, April 18, 2012.

have been won by knowing how the enemy thinks.”³¹⁸ An included address for Falwell’s Moral Majority lobby group, for example, allowed readers to “learn *just how moral* they are...Worse than you would’ve thought. Much worse.”³¹⁹ Aside from gathering tactical information, Stang suggested that insincere requests for material could deplete the resources of offensive organizations: “if you don’t send these bastards money, but just butter them up while pleading poverty, they’ll send you MOUNTAINS of crap at *their expense*...Imagine if half their yearly budget starts going to supply us mockers.”³²⁰ Such disruptive intent likely lay behind Stang’s cryptic statement in his listing for “Pat Robertson for President”: “You know what to do.”³²¹

Part of Reverend Stang’s offense at ministries like Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell’s stemmed from the fact that they violated his own conception of authentic Christianity – a conception subtly conveyed through scattered excerpts in *High Weirdness by Mail*. While Stang maintained that he had “nothing against Jesus per se,” jokingly adding that the Christian deity was in fact “one of ‘Bob’s’ oldest drinking buddies,” he took issue with some “of His fans – people who gloat when abortion clinics are bombed, who celebrate when AIDS strikes homosexuals (and who) have made him look like an embittered, jealous, bigoted hypocrite. Yeah, I bet JESUS is REAL PROUD of these characters.”³²² Like Jan Johnson of *Zontar*, Stang also appealed to the Bible, such as when he referenced Matthew 5:39 in his entry on controversial tract maker Jack Chick: “Not exactly a ‘turn the other cheek’ philosophy...If the Devil has been looking for something to make Jesus look bad, this is it.”³²³ For Stang, as for Johnson, the authentic Jesus was politically removed and passive, an understanding violated by television preachers such as Falwell and Robertson – troubling “fans” of an aggressive god whose belief system was just as ridiculously bizarre as those propounded by *Zontar*, The Church of the SubGenius, and countless fringe faiths. “How are Jesus contactees any different from UFO contactees?” asked Stang, “You got Me.”³²⁴

³¹⁸ Stang, *High Weirdness by Mail*, 195.

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 199.

³²⁰ Stang, *High Weirdness by Mail*, 195.

³²¹ *Ibid.*, 75.

³²² *Ibid.*, 59.

³²³ *Ibid.*, 197. For the work of Jack Chick, see Jason C. Bivins, *Religion of Fear: The Politics of Horror in Conservative Evangelicalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 41-87.

³²⁴ Stang, *High Weirdness by Mail*, 59.

Jan Johnson's *Perverse Preachers* package treated politically engaged, conservative televangelists in a similar fashion. Johnson wrote in the tape's accompanying zine that his video compilation was intended "to document, inform and warn" viewers about how "the evil forces of the Christian right have harvested a loathsome power in the oppressive government of this once great nation." The zine decried the political aspirations of "perverse Pat Robertson," and blasted "fuckin' Falwell" as the leader of an "evil empire" constructed "on hate and lies." The zine also featured reproductions of mailers sent out by Falwell's ministry, one of which – addressed to the pseudonym "Mr. Edward Zontar" – sought donations to battle the "blasphemous movie" that was Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), a flashpoint in the culture wars for its representation of a human and doubting Jesus.³²⁵ The inclusion of this letter points to concerns held by the editors of *Zontar* that televangelists such as Falwell could impact their cultural arena of choice: film. Indeed, *Zontar* would later publish a picture of Pat Robertson on the set of the *700 Club* shaking hands with Michael Medved, a prominent Orthodox Jewish film critic who had publicly lambasted *The Last Temptation of Christ* as an example of Hollywood's ongoing threat to America's Judeo-Christian heritage.³²⁶ Brian Curran not only derided the critic for his allegedly opportunistic alignment with the controversial Christian leader, but also labeled him a false prophet of bad-film due to his co-authoring of a popular books series on history's "worst" movies, which mocked "the cinematic missteps of people FAR MORE INTERESTING, FAR MORE INTERESTING, and FAR MORE SINCERE than himself."³²⁷

While the *Perverse Preachers* zine opens with a screed against the "foul fundamentalist" Falwell for "railing against sexual freedom of every kind," and for cozying up to Presidents Reagan and Bush, the compilation itself features no footage of the televangelist. *Perverse Preachers* does feature a short interview clip of "Pat the Rat Robertson," relating to his presidential bid. "He was running for the highest office in this land," Johnson wrote, "let history never forget this."³²⁸ The included clip, however, has less to do with Robertson's political

³²⁵ Johnson, "Zontar Video," n.p. For the role of Scorsese's film in the culture wars, see Hunter, *Culture Wars*, 233-234.

³²⁶ For Medved on *The Last Temptation*, see Michael Medved, *Hollywood vs. America: Popular Culture and the War on Tradition* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 37-49.

³²⁷ Curran, "The Hate Break," n.p.; Curran, "Is He Man or Zombie?" *Zontar's Ejecto-Pod 4* (1992): 31-35, 31. For an example of Medved's work on "bad" movies, see Michael Medved and Harry Medved, *The Golden Turkey Awards* (New York: Putnam, 1980).

³²⁸ Johnson, "Zontar Video," n.p.

aspirations than his take on fellow televangelist Jim Bakker, whose high-profile media scandals will be discussed in forthcoming chapters. Robertson faulted Bakker for focusing on celebrity and money – “He had Johnny Carson as his role model” – while reassuring viewers that his own “role models” were “Jesus Christ and the apostle Paul.”³²⁹ Johnson, however, writing about an unrelated clip, charged that Paul, “referenced so often by the frothing fundamentalists of the repressive right,” had altered Jesus’ gospel for the worse, adding teachings which encouraged the subjugation of women and slaves, and encouraging widespread guilt through the theological innovation that Jesus had “died for all people.”³³⁰

At the same time that they found certain televangelical fakes to be distasteful, politically problematic, and worthy of counteraction, Reverend Stang of the COSG and the editors of *Zontar* were also ironic fans of certain Pentecostal-oriented, less politically engaged televangelists. While their approaches towards such television preachers were essentially ironic, in that they laughed at and mocked their absurd theologies and controversial techniques, they could also express genuine admiration for these preachers, even praise. In her aforementioned study of the soap opera *Dallas*, Ien Ang discussed a viewer who exhibited “an uncomfortable mixture of ‘really’ liking *Dallas* and an ironic viewing attitude.” While the respondent admitted that she was often “‘carried along intensely’” by the program, and was emotionally involved with some of its characters, she also demonstrated, in Ang’s words, a “detached irony,” and was prone to laying an “annihilating judgment” on the portrayals of certain characters. Noting that the viewer’s ironic stance was heightened during group viewing with friends who interacted with the show in a decidedly ironic and irreverent manner – “‘we usually can’t keep our mouths shut; we shout disgraceful! and bastard! and bitch!’” – Ang argued that this viewer’s irony operated as a “defense mechanism,” allowing her to playfully deride the soap opera with her friends, while shielding the fact that “secretly she ‘really’ likes *Dallas*.”³³¹

In her more recent studies of listeners to *The Archers*, a long-running British radio soap opera, Lyn Thomas takes Ang to task for rigidly compartmentalizing ironic and genuine fandom. Thomas notes that some of her own research subjects also exhibited both “emotional involvement” in the program as well as a “more ironic stance”; yet, she argues that these stances

³²⁹ Johnson, *Perverse Preachers*.

³³⁰ Johnson, “Zontar Video,” n.p.

³³¹ Ang, *Watching Dallas*, 107-109.

could readily “be switched in and out of,” and that the latter was not necessarily a social mask for the former.³³² Such was the case for Ivan Stang and Jan Johnson in their appreciation of televangelists like the fiery Pentecostal Jimmy Swaggart, who generally downplayed issues of politics in his hunt to save souls for Christ.³³³ For pure preaching ability, Stang and Johnson agreed that nobody could touch Swaggart. “Even if you don’t believe it, it can be very entertaining to see someone who’s that good,” stated Johnson, who also noted Swaggart’s family relation to rock ‘n roll piano player Jerry Lee Lewis: “There’s something about that family, I tell you. They’ve got a gift.”³³⁴ Stang described Swaggart as his “favorite” televangelist – “although what he was saying was ridiculous to me, he said it beautifully” – and revealed that he had even aped the preacher’s style for his early Devival preaching: “I basically imitated Jimmy Swaggart, I would tape his sermons and just twist them around a little bit, but I’d use the same cadence.”³³⁵ In *High Weirdness by Mail*, written just prior to Swaggart’s first prostitute scandal, Stang encouraged readers to tune in to the “Mick Jagger of TV evangelism” for sure-fire entertainment:

“If you’ve never seen Swaggart preach, you’ve missed something...the guy is good...My favorite Swaggart riff is when he whirls around and addresses Camera 2 in close-up: ‘And you there by (the) television, suckin’ on that JOINT!! Oh, you think Jimmy Swaggart’s real FUNNY! But will you be laughing on that Day of Judgment??’ WHAT A MAN! Oh, HELL is a POPULAR JOKE these days...a ‘funny’ ‘joke’!”³³⁶

Stang’s approach to Jimmy Swaggart, in particular, evidences the potential messiness of ironic fandom, as he combined amusement at the preacher’s theology with genuine praise for his preaching style.

Besides his preaching prowess, Stang suggested that Swaggart should be accorded some respect for the fact that he “seemed sincere” – “I think he was never in it for the money, I think

³³² Lyn Thomas, *Fans, Feminisms and ‘Quality’ Media* (Routledge: London, 2002), 139; *ibid.*, “The Archers: An Everyday Story of Old and New Media,” *Radio Journal: International Studies in Broadcast & Audio Media* 7, no. 1 (2009): 60.

³³³ For Swaggart’s downplaying of politics, see Michael Giuliano, *Thrice-Born: The Rhetorical Comeback of Jimmy Swaggart* (Macon: Mercer University Press), 22.

³³⁴ Jan Johnson, Skype interview by author, April 18, 2012.

³³⁵ Reverend Ivan Stang, Skype interview by author, May 1, 2012.

³³⁶ Stang, *High Weirdness by Mail*, 74.

he believed in Hell” – as was the case with most of the laughably bizarre groups and individuals featured in *High Weirdness by Mail*:³³⁷

“They may be wrong, insane, simpleminded, or whatever; but, with only a few exceptions, they mean what they say. They’re sincere. In that respect, these kooks and weirdos possess truer humanity – faults and follies notwithstanding – than many of those who gave them that label.”³³⁸

Similarly, Brian Curran and Jan Johnson of *Zontar* praised the sincerity of one of their all-time favorite television preachers, Howard C. Estep, whose eschatological show *The King is Coming* was represented on *Perverse Preachers* through a brief clip. Although Estep had long since left the airwaves, Curran and Johnson fondly recalled the “quirky style” of the “thin, aging PROPHET O’DOOM’s” program – an updated version of evangelical “chalk talks” featuring Estep writing “strange signs and weird abstractions” on an “abstract glass “black-board” on an “unearthly set.”³³⁹ While he found Estep’s wacky style and absurd theology ironically amusing, Curran commended Estep for conveying his gospel with “certainty and enthusiasm,” as well as for his seeming sincerity: “What was inspiring about Estep was his passionate DESIRE for the END OF THE WORLD. He just couldn’t wait for the cleansing rapture and purifying rain of nuclear fire.” Thus, Curran and Johnson applauded Estep much like they did those great bad-film directors who toiled at crafting terrible, yet honest, cinematic garbage. They elevated Estep as “a true BAD-SAINT of CULT TV,” and immortalized the preacher via a hand-drawn illustration with a thick question mark placed over his head – a wry denotation of the televangelist’s possible mental confusion.³⁴⁰

As for Pentecostal-oriented televangelists who gravitated towards a prosperity message, and whose sincerity was therefore more questionable, Ivan Stang and the editors of *Zontar* were somewhat split. Stang took issue with those Christian preachers who, he believed,

³³⁷ Reverend Ivan Stang, Skype interview by author, May 1, 2012. It should be noted, however, that Stang did take a shot at Swaggart’s merchandising efforts in *High Weirdness by Mail*, such as by listing an address for the “Jimmy Swaggart Gift Catalog,” ostensibly to purchase “goods for people you don’t really like”; *ibid.*, 74.

³³⁸ Stang, 21.

³³⁹ Jan Johnson, Skype interview by author, April 18, 2012; Johnson, *Perverse Preachers*; Johnson, “Shucking the Rubes,” n.p.; Curran, “Confessions of a Cult-TV Addict,” n.p. For chalk talks, see David Morgan, *Protestants and Pictures: Religion, Visual Culture, and the Age of American Mass Production* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 251-256.

³⁴⁰ Curran, “Confessions of a Cult-TV Addict,” n.p.

technologically manipulated sincerity in their pursuit of money. For example, in *High Weirdness by Mail* Stang criticized the marketing gimmicks and pseudo-personal communications of the faith-healing televangelist Peter Popoff, who “sells paper prayer rugs and Anointing Oils to the depressingly gullible – complete with fake handwritten notes to ‘YOU’ PERSONALLY.”³⁴¹ Stang claimed the ethical high road over insincere fakes like Popoff, as the COSG – a parody religion headed by a holy salesman – was straightforward in its desire to make money: “The Church of the SubGenius...is the ONLY religion that is NOT tax exempt. Our prophets want profits, and we don’t expect heathen unbelievers to subsidize us.”³⁴² In registering the COGS as a “novelty manufacturer” rather than a church, moreover, Stang argued that he and Drummond were being “honest” that their organization was not a “legitimate religion.” He framed this during our interview as a noble move, since he had come to realize “how easy it would be to defraud people” in the name of religion, and believed that if they had been “able to keep a straight face, we could have turned the Church of the SubGenius into another Scientology...because I’ve seen people fall for such patently obvious bullshit when we weren’t really even trying to convince them.”³⁴³

In contrast, the editors of *Zontar* generally found seemingly insincere prosperity televangelists amusingly entertaining, with one preacher standing head and shoulders above the rest: Robert Tilton. Unlike “true believers” such as Howard C. Estep, whose program offered irreverent viewers “a peek into strange other worlds,” Jan Johnson ranked Tilton as one of the “outright blatant frauds” of religious programming.³⁴⁴ “I can’t believe that Tilton has any really core beliefs,” Johnson stated during our interview, adding that he nevertheless found the purported huckster’s programs to be “always funny.”³⁴⁵ The bulk of this amusement was ironic in nature, and derived from Tilton’s alleged insincerity, as well as his exuberant style and exploitative theology. In his article on “Cult-TV,” for example, Curran described Tilton’s “incredible *Success N Life*” as a “great seed faith classic,” and as the “best show” among the “truly unbelievable and demented Jeezuz programming available to adventurous cable-watchers.” Turning to the Bible as a means of evaluating Tilton’s religious authenticity, Curran

³⁴¹ Stang, “High Weirdness by Mail,” 64.

³⁴² *Ibid.*, 107.

³⁴³ Reverend Ivan Stang, Skype interview by author, May 1, 2012.

³⁴⁴ Johnson, “Shucking the Rubes,” n.p.

³⁴⁵ Jan Johnson, Skype interview by author, April 18, 2012.

argued that the televangelist's "pitch is based on at most three short and obscure passages of Scripture," the most prominent being a "minor episode" from the seventeenth chapter of 1 Kings, featuring "a little widow woman who baked a cake for Elijah even though she was about to starve to death." As the widow was rewarded with the miraculously replenishment of her provisions, those who vowed money that they "don't even have TO GOD, c/o Rev. Bob (who is God's Prophet, just like Elijah)," would be likewise blessed: "check the mailbox for that unexpected check, etc..."³⁴⁶ While Curran found Tilton's theology ironically amusing, he also noted that the preacher was more playful "than the usual super-conservative televangelists," and often displayed a self-deprecating manner: "He even makes jokes about his increasingly abstract, 'radical' hair-style."³⁴⁷ Thus, some of the humor Curran derived from Tilton was intended by the televangelist himself, however minor compared to his ironic appeal.

Johnson's *Perverse Preachers* compilation contains two segments featuring Tilton taken from a 1990 fundraiser hosted by Morris Cerullo, a diminutive Pentecostal televangelist who briefly assumed control of Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker's Heritage USA theme park in the wake of the PTL scandals, and who Johnson described as "one of the least watchable of the telepreachers."³⁴⁸ During his appearance on the telethon Tilton brazenly tries to steal the show, continually interrupting Cerullo, and essentially attempts to transform the fundraiser into a miniature version of *Success N Life*. "You get him telling you to put your hand on a private part, speaking in tongues, and telling you how much he likes \$1,000 all in one short clip," Johnson wrote in the compilation's accompanying zine.³⁴⁹ Johnson also included in his zine examples of Tilton's mailers, which he had long poached under the pseudonym "Karl Zontar." One mailer featured a photograph of Tilton crouched underneath an illustrated chair with his eyes wide open and hands up – apparently acting out the fear of impending death experienced by the unsaved. The entire back page of the *Perverse Preachers* booklet was filled by an "actual" mailer, dating to 1989, in which Tilton encouraged recipients to write their "biggest prayer requests" on an illustrated outline of a footprint, to stand on the paper and "claim" their "victory," and then to

³⁴⁶ Curran, "Confessions of a Cult-TV Addict," n.p. For the Biblical story, see 1 Kings 17:7-16.

³⁴⁷ Curran, "Confessions of a Cult-TV Addict," n.p.

³⁴⁸ For an overview of Morris Cerullo's ministry, see J. Gordon Melton, Phillip Charles Lucas, and Jon R. Stone, "Morris Cerullo," in *Prime-Time Religion: An Encyclopedia of Religious Broadcasting* (Phoenix: Oryx Press, 1997), 50-51; Johnson, "Zontar Video."

³⁴⁹ Johnson, *Perverse Preachers*; Johnson "Zontar Video."

send the sheet back to Tilton, who promised to take off his own shoes, stand on the same sheet, and pray for their needs.³⁵⁰ While these mailers were included by Johnson as ironically amusing examples of Tilton's exploitative religious fakery, he also admitted that the televangelist was "very creative" with his pitches.³⁵¹

Much like the Church of the SubGenius, the Unofficial Robert Tilton Fan Club grew out of Brother Randall's experiences living in Dallas, the American "capital of evangelicalism," and a hotbed for politically aggressive strains of Protestantism which he found to be "despicable."³⁵² Such antipathy was largely rooted in his being surrounded by "fundamental Baptists" while having attended Baylor University in Waco, an experience which, in Brother Randall's words, left "a little bit of a bad taste in my mouth."³⁵³ Local Pentecostal media ministries, however, despite featuring "kind of crazy and superstitious" beliefs, Brother Randall found to be not only nonthreatening, but also potentially "entertaining to an outsider," and not just for their ironic value. Indeed, Brother Randall genuinely praised Robert Tilton as a "good performer" who crafted exciting television programs and stage shows which not only entertained his faithful fans, but also "interloper(s)" like himself, who wanted to "join in the fun."³⁵⁴ Brother Randall would later coin the phrase "Recreational Christianity," a riff on recreational drug use, to describe his play with such television ministries, ostensibly "just for fun."³⁵⁵ Central to Brother Randall's understanding of Recreational Christianity was a downplaying of its evaluative nature, and he claimed that the URTFC's activities related to Robert Tilton, in particular, were performed in a "positive spirit" – an attempt to, often covertly, participate in the good times that the televangelist and his followers were apparently having.³⁵⁶

Despite such flashes of genuine fandom, however, The Unofficial Robert Tilton Fan Club was essentially ironic, and, Brother Randall's assertions of neutrality notwithstanding, carried a

³⁵⁰ Johnson, "Zontar Video."

³⁵¹ Jan Johnson, Skype interview by author, April 18, 2012.

³⁵² Richard Kyle, *Evangelicalism: An Americanized Christianity* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2006); Randy (last name withheld to protect anonymity), Skype interview by author, December 4, 2011.

³⁵³ Randy (last name withheld to protect anonymity), Skype interview by author, December 4, 2011. Historical insights into Baylor University can be found in William H. Brackney, *Congregation and Campus: Baptists in Higher Education* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2008).

³⁵⁴ Randy (last name withheld to protect anonymity), Skype interview by author, December 4, 2011.

³⁵⁵ For the first reference to "Recreational Christianity," which Brother Randall predicted was "going to be the craze of the 1990's," see Brother Randall, *Snake Oil: Your Guide to Kooky Kontemporary Kristian Kulture*, 2 (Dallas, 1993), n.p.

³⁵⁶ Randy (last name withheld to protect anonymity), Skype interview by author, December 4, 2011.

“critical edge” which queried the televangelist’s sincerity and religious authenticity.³⁵⁷ Indeed, as mentioned above, the URTFC’s first newsletter jokingly praised Tilton for being transparently “insincere” and “downright EVIL.”³⁵⁸ During our initial interview Brother Randall also criticized Tilton’s seed faith theology, which he believed was merely an effective way “to make money,” and he associated the popularity of prosperity theology in Dallas with the broader “money oriented” and “materialistic” culture of the city itself: “prosperity gospel stuff was *huge* in Dallas, and it goes right along with every other aspect of Dallas being kind of shallow and materialistic, I think that was more what I was reacting to than anything about religion per se.”³⁵⁹ At the same time, however, Brother Randall’s ironic play with Tilton was grounded in, reflected, and reinforced particular understandings of authentic Christianity, particularly the “Golden Rule” Christianity associated with his own on-and-off relationship with Methodism.³⁶⁰ For example, during our interview he criticized the prosperity gospel of Tilton and others for the fact that “it wasn’t about helping the poor,” but was rather focused on the self – “what God can do for you.”³⁶¹ Moreover, in the first URTFC newsletter Brother Randall, much like the founders of the COSG and *Zontar*, mocked Tilton’s seed faith theology by highlighting the televangelist’s intentionally myopic use of the Bible, and specifically his repeated deployment of the tale of the starving widow from 1 Kings.³⁶²

The inherently evaluative nature of the URTFC’s activities suggests a more nuanced operational definition of “Recreational Christianity,” building on Brother Randall’s alternate description of the concept as involving “wrong intention(s),” and thereby transforming it into an analytical concept with a broader potential utility: “The ironic play with Christianities considered strange, extreme, and/or false.”³⁶³ Although not a form of religion, Recreational Christianity can be understood, following David Chidester, as a mixture of “religious work” and ironic “religious

³⁵⁷ For “critical edge,” see Hutcheon, *Irony’s Edge*, 19.

³⁵⁸ Brother Randall, *The Unofficial Robert Tilton Fan Club Newsletter*, 1.

³⁵⁹ For a strong economic and business focus as being part of the “Dallas Way,” see Harvey J. Graff, *The Dallas Myth: The Making and Unmaking of an American City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 83, 129. Aside from Tilton’s own ministry, Dallas and the surrounding environs harbored the televangelical empires of other prosperity preachers, such as Kenneth Copeland (Fort Worth), and Jan and Paul Crouch (Irving).

³⁶⁰ See Nancy T. Ammerman, “Golden Rule Christianity: Lived Religion in the American Mainstream,” in *Lived Religion in America*, ed. David Hall (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 196-216.

³⁶¹ Randy (last name withheld to protect anonymity), Skype interview by author, December 4, 2011.

³⁶² Brother Randall, *The Unofficial Robert Tilton Fan Club Newsletter*, 1 (Dallas, 1991), n.p.

³⁶³ Randy (last name withheld to protect anonymity), Skype interview by author, December 4, 2011.

play” that makes claims, albeit often implicitly, about Christian authenticity.³⁶⁴ While Recreational Christianity necessarily levies theological judgments via ironic humor, the desired effects of such comedic criticism varies according to the motivations of those who deploy it. The Recreational Christianity practiced by The Unofficial Robert Tilton Fan Club, for example, depended on the televangelist’s ministry operating as is, and thereby continuing to function as a source of ironic amusement. As will be discussed in the fourth chapter of this dissertation, however, the religiously critical edge of the URTFC’s practices, and in particular the videotaping activities of its members, also appealed to an explicitly religious organization, which added a satirical spin in the hopes of dissuading others from supporting the televangelist’s ministry.

Conclusion

The late-1980s and early-1990s were boom years for health-and-wealth televangelist Robert Tilton, whose exuberant style and seed faith promises attracted a strong following of faithful supporters. The ministry’s broadcasts, however, also brought the preacher into the homes of individuals who became captivated by the brash and bizarre antics of a preacher they believed to be a shameless religious huckster – ironic fans whose viewing, taping, and information gathering activities resembled those of more sincere fandoms. One particular ironic Tilton fan, Brother Randall, gave organized expression to this fan following via the Unofficial Robert Tilton Fan Club newsletter, which would appeal to individuals representing two components of a broader ironic televangelical taste culture. In addition to scattered ironic fans of the titular televangelist whose pleasures were relatively private, Brother Randall also aimed his efforts at the thriving American alternative media scene, where pre-existing examples of ironic televangelical fandom could be found in the publications of the Church of the SubGenius and the editors of *Zontar* zine – religious parodies which heavily influenced Brother Randall’s development of the URTFC.

Challenging previous scholarship which has framed the Church of the SubGenius as an authentic religion, by examining the COSG together with *Zontar* it was argued that such parody religions are better understood as commentaries about religious authenticity, with comedic targets related to their cultural-historical contexts. Among the targets of the COSG and *Zontar*

³⁶⁴ Chidester, *Authentic Fakes*, 2, 210-212.

were politically engaged televangelists such as Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, who were believed to be dangerous and worthy of satirical attack. Pentecostal-oriented television preachers, however, were valued more as sources of ironic humor, and the founders of the COSG and *Zontar* expressed genuine admiration for the style, techniques, and even sincerity of some such television preachers. While the Unofficial Robert Tilton Fan Club would similarly evidence flashes of genuine fandom, the core of the irreverent fan following was nevertheless patently ironic. By ironically praising the exploitative religious fake that was Robert Tilton, it was argued that the URTFC engaged in a form of playful religious work involved in the negotiation of religious authenticity, and described, borrowing a phrase from Brother Randall, as Recreational Christianity.

Chapter 4 – ‘The (Unofficial) Robert Tilton Fan Club,’ Tabloid Scandal, and a Flatulent Remix

Introduction

In the first newsletter of “The Unofficial Robert Tilton Fan Club” (URTFC), released in August 1991, club founder “Brother Randall” put forward the hope that his publication might function as a “meeting place where Tilton news, views, and gossip can be exchanged.” Accordingly, he called on readers to submit their own amusing and/or informative tidbits about the televangelist for the benefit of other ironic fans: “All you Robert Tilton fans please write! Write about your most memorable viewing experience. Write about that time you spotted Bob at the airport... No detail is too trivial.” To set the ball rolling, Brother Randall summarized some of the negative press that his “hero” had garnered over the previous “couple of years,” while at the same time defending the embattled televangelist in a tongue-in-cheek fashion. He decried, for example, the “local media bloodsuckers” who had “failed to come up with anything concrete against the ministry,” and championed Tilton as being “too smart, too insulated” to make himself vulnerable to such attacks. Tilton’s savviness at concealing what were questionable, perhaps even criminal, activities, and his reluctance to “make any guarantees” regarding his gospel of health and wealth ensured, in Brother Randall’s mind, that the televangelist would be a fount of ironic amusement for the foreseeable future – “I’m not worried about my favorite show being taken off the air” – an optimism which would prove to be misplaced.¹

This chapter begins by discussing Brother Randall’s relationship with “Brother Bucks,” a friend, record store proprietor, and fellow Robert Tilton fan. Brother Bucks, who had gained some renown in Dallas for his audiotape series of “bad” gospel music, was an integral early member of the URTFC, whose interests lay largely in financially capitalizing on Tilton’s ironically amusing nature. His greatest opportunity for profit came via an analog video remix which had been circulating in the American media underground for some time – a compilation of vintage clips of Tilton at his most animated and purportedly inspired, underneath which sounds of flatulence had been dubbed. While the creator of the Tilton “fart” tape has long been a

¹ Brother Randall, *The Unofficial Robert Tilton Fan Club Newsletter*, 1 (Dallas, August 1991), n.p.

mystery, this chapter traces its origin to the activities of one “Brother O’Nottigan,” a Seattle-based professional video producer who used his television station’s editing equipment to craft the remix during the mid-1980s. Motivated by office hijinks rather than any specific antipathy towards, or amusement at, Robert Tilton, Brother O’Nottigan initially shared the tape with a few select co-workers and acquaintances, unintentionally setting in motion a flurry of copying which would land the remix, years later, in the hands of Brothers Randall and Bucks. The pair, in turn, would begin marketing the remix in the direct wake of a media scandal that would envelop Tilton, and which would itself feature a considerable amount of amusing video footage of their favorite televangelist.

On November 21, 1991, the national television newsmagazine *Primetime Live* aired an investigative report accusing Tilton’s ministry of engaging in deceptive and exploitative fundraising practices. Rather than a dispassionate unmasking of the televangelist’s alleged insincerity and religious inauthenticity, as some scholars have suggested, the *Primetime Live* report was an example of tabloid television, which traded on Tilton’s ironic humor value to, in part, render him a laughable religious fake. Largely responsible for this representation was the Dallas-based Trinity Foundation, a Christian ministry and televangelist “watchdog” group centered on a radically different understanding of authentic Christianity than Tilton’s own.² The Trinity Foundation provided *Primetime Live* with not only investigative aid for its report on Tilton, but also a number of clips of the televangelist in action, sourced from their longtime surveillance of his broadcasts. Rhetorically edited and selected so as to frame the televangelist as a dangerous and ridiculous religious fake, these theologically motivated and often acontextual clips are conceptualized in this chapter as “video proof texts.” In addition to introducing participatory media artifacts into the mainstream media scandal surrounding Tilton, and attracting national attention to its own ministry, the intended ironic humor of many of the Trinity Foundation’s video proof texts aligned its efforts with the Unofficial Robert Tilton Fan Club, which likewise used the Tilton scandal to publicize its activities and expand its sphere of influence.

² For the Trinity Foundation’s self-description as a “watchdog” of suspicious televangelists, see “About Us,” *Trinity Foundation*, <http://trinityfi.org/about-us/>, accessed January 7, 2015.

On one hand, Tilton's scandal was crucial to the establishment and growth of the URTFC, which continued to create and distribute publications; marketed a range of Tilton-themed products, including Brother O'Nottigan's notorious fart remix; earned mentions in the mainstream media; and even hosted a well-attended Tilton "tribute" night at a local Dallas nightclub. Dallas-based members of URTFC also gathered to watch Tilton on television; trade compilation tapes of the televangelist in action; and to make occasional pilgrimages to the preacher's megachurch, dressed in their Sunday best, to sing and dance along with the true faithful – mixing ironic amusement with genuine admiration for the televangelist's skills as an entertainer and performer, as per their Recreational Christian approach. However, Tilton's continuing troubles were also a Damoclean sword hanging over the irreverent fan following, threatening to cut off its source of fun. Indeed, Robert Tilton was eventually chased, albeit temporarily, from the television airwaves in 1993, spelling the end of the URTFC and, in the opinion of its core members, an exceptional era of ironically entertaining, televised religious hucksterism.

The URTFC, Brother Bucks, and the "Fart" Tape

Brother Randall's second URTFC newsletter, published in October 1991, led off with a lengthy "inspirational letter" from one "Brother Bucks of Dallas," described as "the first PAYING subscriber of the URTFC newsletter," and as the head of the "Mr (sic) Ed Fan Club" – a tongue-in-cheek fan following of the titular "talking" sitcom horse from the 1960s.³ "If there is a money-grubbing God in Heaven," Brother Bucks opened, "He will bless you mightily for starting the Unofficial Robert Tilton Fan Club!" Explaining that he himself "would have started a Tilton Worship Service" if he "weren't already so burdened with my duties of operating the Mr (sic) Ed Fan Club," Brother Bucks proposed a new direction for the URTFC: "I would like to take the opportunity to suggest that we, as fans, not just support Brother Tilton but offer downright adoration and worship." Through such a strategy, he suggested, "Brother Tilton would get to be the God he's always wanted to be." Following a concluding section in which Brother Bucks confessed that his "favorite Tilton Trait is when he shouts at the devil," Brother Randall

³ *Mister Ed*, Syndicated/CBS, 1961-1966.

proposed that “(p)erhaps one day we can compile a list of all the eerie similarities between Mr Ed and Robert Tilton.”⁴

Brother Randall’s closing comment, while facetious, nevertheless points to the overlap between the URTFC and the Mr. Ed Fan Club as examples of ironic fan followings – a connection less happenstance than as suggested by the newsletter. While Brother Randall framed Brother Bucks’ letter as a chance communication from a fellow Robert Tilton fan, the pair were in fact good friends, and Brother Bucks served as an important inspiration for, and integral member of, the URTFC. Indeed, Brother Bucks’ Mr. Ed Fan Club, founded in 1974, anticipated many of the characteristics of the URTFC, as evidenced in a 1984 newspaper profile of the “unusual” fan following, which reportedly had more than one-thousand members at the time.⁵ Most obviously, the fan club maintained an ironic distance from its object of attention. Brother Bucks confessed that he had never even seen an episode of *Mr. Ed* when he first came up with the idea for the fan club, which grew out of his efforts to come up with “the ultimate fake return address”: “So I used the ‘Mr. Ed Fan Club’ because I thought it would be completely absurd for Mr Ed. to have a fan club.”⁶ Second, the Mr. Ed Fan Club parodied the fervor of more genuinely devotional fans. As Scott McCartney reported, Brother Bucks stated, “(w)ith a straight face... (that) the club wants to create a city dedicated to Mr. Ed, and he wants to call it ‘Edtopia’.” Third, the Mr. Ed Fan Club was primarily a mail-based endeavor, centered on Brother Bucks’ newsletter, “The Horses’ Mouth.” Finally, the fan club organized occasional social events, having “held two Mr. Ed parties in Dallas, where ‘Edheads’ gather(ed) to watch videotapes of the black-and-white show.”⁷

Like Brother Randall, Brother Bucks, who at the time of his affiliation with the URTFC was the proprietor of “Fourteen Records” in Dallas, turned an ironic eye on a wide range of cultural artifacts, including a number of examples from American evangelicalism. Raised Baptist in Arkansas, Brother Bucks explained during our interview that although he was no longer an “active Christian,” he was “ambivalent” about, rather than dismissive of or hostile towards, his

⁴ Brother Randall and Brother Bucks, *The Unofficial Robert Tilton Fan Club Newsletter*, 2 (Dallas, 1991), n.p.

⁵ Scott McCartney, “Fan Club Hopes to Revive Television’s Talking Horse,” *Sarasota Herald-Tribune*, June 13, 1984.

⁶ McCartney, “Fan Club Hopes to Revive Television’s Talking Horse.” For the maintenance of an ironic distance from cultural artifacts by their ironic fans, see Ang, *Watching Dallas*, 96-102.

⁷ McCartney, “Fan Club Hopes to Revive Television’s Talking Horse.”

childhood faith: “I like to say, Jesus and I love each other, but we both see other people.” He added, however, that he “will always take pleasure in pointing out and making fun of the people who take it to extremes... And I’m grateful for those people because they’re entertaining as hell.”⁸ The Mr. Ed Fan Club, in fact, had previously offered Brother Bucks an unexpected opportunity to publicly toy with “extreme” evangelicalism. In 1986, Ohio-based evangelist Jim Brown, riding a wave of concern regarding “satanic” influences in mainstream music, charged that the *Mister Ed* theme song – “A Horse is a Horse” – paid homage to the Devil when played backwards, allegedly containing the phrases “someone sung this song for Satan,” and “the source is Satan.”⁹ Press accounts of Brown’s claim often played up its ridiculous nature, making the television horse’s foremost, and ironic, fan an ideal interviewee. In a July 1986 blurb in the prominent monthly music magazine *Spin*, for example, Brother Bucks amplified the humor of the situation by counterclaiming that “Mr. Ed is the last word in sacred,” and stating that he “was even baptized in a Mr. Ed T-shirt.”¹⁰ However, in a profile of his fan club in that year’s November issue of *Spin*, he also betrayed a more serious reaction to the controversy, noting that while it was “hilarious,” Brown was also “promoting a brand of spiritual terrorism that I dislike very much.”¹¹

Akin to the editors of *Zontar* who, as discussed in the previous chapter, decried high-profile conservative Christians encroaching on their field of film, Brother Bucks took issue with Jim Brown’s attempt to exert a censorious influence on his own area of expertise, popular music, and thereby publicly participated in the country’s ongoing culture wars.¹² Also like the editors of *Zontar*, Brother Bucks challenged Brown’s religious authenticity, describing the preacher in a *Chicago Tribune* interview as a “so-called Christian” who chose to “lambaste Mr. Ed” rather than help the country’s “starving and homeless people.”¹³ Brother Bucks’ subsequent ironic play with American evangelicalism would also feature a critical edge, if not, as he maintained during

⁸ Brother Bucks (real name withheld to protect anonymity), Skype interview by author, January 6, 2012.

⁹ See “Mr. Ed Song Satanic: Evangelist,” *The Montreal Gazette*, April 25, 1986. W. Scott Poole highlights the role of Louisiana preacher Jacob Aranza in popularizing fears of “satanic” messages in popular music during the 1980s, see *Satan in America: The Devil We Know* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2009), 175-176.

¹⁰ “Flashes,” *Spin*, July 1986.

¹¹ Sukey Pett, “One Man’s Horse Habit,” *Spin*, November 1986.

¹² Hunter describes popular music as a notable “field of conflict” in the American culture wars; see *Culture Wars*, 232-233.

¹³ Justin Mitchell, “Satan Taking Mr. Ed Along For the Ride?” *Chicago Tribune*, May 8, 1986.

our interview, any harsh “malevolence” or “contempt.”¹⁴ This is evidenced in his audiotape series “God’s Greatest Hits,” inaugurated in 1990.¹⁵ Brother Bucks had been “ironically” collecting what he described as “bad white gospel” albums, and particularly those with “bad album covers,” since 1988, and considered himself a historian and archivist of American evangelicalism’s audio detritus.¹⁶ “God’s Greatest Hits” turned the tables on evangelicals such as Jim Brown by humorously emphasizing the lameness, ineptitude, and theological absurdity of their own “alternative” musical offerings.¹⁷ Although “for legal reasons” Brother Bucks could not “really market” the series, the tapes sold quite well from his record store, with most customers purchasing them “ironically to enjoy them for all the wrong reasons.” However, he also recalled some “pretty rabid” fans of the tapes from Dallas’ “straight-laced Christian” community, who eagerly sought out what they believed to be collections of inspirational “old gospel music.”¹⁸ Indeed, the covers of the first two tapes in the series offered little hint as to their ironic intent, thereby encouraging such confusion. Both covers featured headshots of smiling Caucasian Christians, stated that the “series is designed to showcase obscure gospel recordings,” and encouraged listeners to “(p)lay them often and feel the anointing (sic)!”¹⁹ Such “misfiring” of Brother Bucks’ irony was welcome, however, as he was more than happy to sell back to local evangelicals their own laughably bad recordings.²⁰

The profit motive would likewise underlie Brother Bucks’ play with Robert Tilton and his involvement with the URTFC, the newsletter of which joined a number of other “little marginal periodicals” on Fourteen Records’ counter.²¹ During our interview, Brother Bucks confessed to having watched televangelism for fun since at least the “late-1970s,” and echoed the complexities of Brother Randall’s ironic fandom in describing Tilton as an amusing “crook” who was nevertheless “quite good” at his “act”: “I think...he’s a very successful professional wrestler...nothing can keep him down.”²² While in Brother Bucks’ eyes Tilton was a ridiculous

¹⁴ Brother Bucks, Skype interview by author, January 6, 2012.

¹⁵ Details on the tape series can be found in Brother Bucks, “Caucasians Were Meant For Collecting,” in *The Robert Tilton Fan Club Newsletter*, 7/8, ed. Brother Randall (Dallas, 1992), n.p.

¹⁶ Brother Bucks, Skype interview by author, January 6, 2012.

¹⁷ For the “alternative culture” of American evangelicals, see Heather Hendershot, *Shaking the World for Jesus: Media and Conservative Evangelical Culture* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 28.

¹⁸ Brother Bucks, Skype interview by author, January 6, 2012.

¹⁹ See Brother Bucks, “Caucasians Were Meant For Collecting.”

²⁰ For the potential of irony to “misfire,” see Day, *Satire and Dissent*, 41.

²¹ Brother Randall, Skype interview by author, December 4, 2011.

²² Brother Bucks, Skype interview by author, January 6, 2012.

religious fake, he did not carry any grudge against the televangelist's ministry, theological or otherwise. His impetus to become involved in the URTFC, aside from the fun that it promised, was its potential for financial return – a subversive twist on the prosperity formula preached by Tilton: “we just wanted to make as much money off of Christianity as our heroes were making.”²³ Although he would never come near this facetiously lofty goal, Brother Bucks would earn hundreds of dollars through his marketing, along with Brother Randall, of an infamous Tilton-themed video remix.

Although the concept of video remixes has become synonymous with online streaming video, the history of video remixing extends well back into the analog age. Jonathan McIntosh tracks the history of “subversive video remixes” back to the 1920s, highlighting examples such as the British propaganda film “The Lambeth Walk – Nazi Style” (1941), which mixed footage from Leni Reifenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1935) with the popular title song to create an amusing clip of Adolph Hitler and his officers dancing to the music.²⁴ As mentioned in the first chapter, VCR technology opened up audiovisual manipulations to everyday individuals like science-fiction fans, who crafted “songtapes” featuring their favorite characters and situations with newly dubbed music.²⁵ The previously discussed “edits” created by Robert Tilton's ironic fan “Zschim,” which amplified the televangelist's most animated physical gestures and vocalizations through frenetic repetition, could also be considered rudimentary video remixes, akin (albeit likely unintentionally) to the offerings of the “scratch video” scene of the mid-1980s.²⁶ The most culturally impactful analog video remix of Robert Tilton, however, did not originate with ironic fans of the televangelist, although it would become highly cherished in such circles.

Following promotional mentions of Brother Bucks' God's Greatest Hits series and Jan Johnson of *Zontar's Perverse Preachers* video compilation in the second URTFC newsletter,

²³ Brother Bucks, Skype interview by author, January 6, 2012.

²⁴ See Jonathan McIntosh, “A History of Subversive Remix Video before YouTube: Thirty Political Video Mashups Made between World War II and 2005,” *Transformative Works and Cultures* 9 (2012): n.p., accessed October 1, 2014, <http://journal.transformativeworks.com/index.php/twc/article/view/371/299>.

²⁵ Bacon-Smith, *Enterprising Women*, 175-184.

²⁶ For scratch video practitioners, and their use of repetition, see Sean Cubitt, *Timeshift: On Video Culture* (London: Routledge, 1991), 94-96.

Brother Randall discussed a Tilton tape that was circulating in the America media underground, under the header “It’s a Gas”:

“Seems like everyone we’ve talked to lately has seen or at least heard about a video that’s making the rounds which consists of a series of clips of Bob ranting and raving and squintching (sic) up his face with fart noises dubbed in. I couldn’t possibly do it justice trying to describe it on paper, but it’s a sure-fire way of inducing laugh-till (sic)-you-puke fits of joy.”²⁷

Brother Randall could not recall during our initial interview when he first came across the Tilton “fart” tape, noting that it came from someone that he “traded tapes with” in the “pre-YouTube” days.²⁸ In the second URTFC newsletter, he pointed out that there were “(a)t least two different edits...floating around – a shorter, color one, and a slicker, longer, black & white one” – and he judged the “10 minute video” as having been “(p)rofessionally edited together.” “The mysterious geniuses who put it together are still unknown to us,” Brother Randall wrote in closing, “but we’re on their trail so that we may bow down to their greatness and possibly upgrade our copy of the video. Any info would be appreciated.”²⁹ Despite considerable research over the ensuing years, Brother Randall would never track down who was responsible for creating the Tilton fart tape, although an account that he received was on the right track: “The story I heard was when *Success N Life* was on the air it went out to a lot of...smaller stations all over the US and somebody at one of those stations that had professional video editing equipment made it.”³⁰

The tale of the Robert Tilton fart tape begins with the recollections of one “Brother O’Nottigan,” who had worked as a “post-production editor and a production engineer” at the Seattle-based television station KTZZ during the mid-1980s, and who, at the time of our initial interview was an actor based in Vancouver, Washington. While working at KTZZ sometime “around ’85,” Brother O’Nottigan helped craft what would eventually become a legendary video remix, the origins of which laid in a series of office pranks:

²⁷ Brother Randall, *The Unofficial Robert Tilton Fan Club Newsletter*, 2 (Dallas, October 1991), n.p.

²⁸ Brother Randall, Skype interview by author, December 4, 2011.

²⁹ Brother Randall, *The Unofficial Robert Tilton Fan Club Newsletter*, 2 (Dallas, October 1991), n.p.

³⁰ Brother Randall, Skype interview by author, December 4, 2011.

“The whole premise for this thing started because I was one of a handful of production engineers at Channel 22 in Seattle...One of the favorite things to do was to sneak up behind somebody who was looking at a monitor...and just waiting behind them without them knowing about it until something would happen...on their monitor in front of them that was wanting a farting noise. So you’d make a farting noise behind them and scare them, and it became a very funny thing to do.”

At the time KTZZ carried Robert Tilton’s broadcasts, and a co-worker of Brother O’Nottigan, much like some of the televangelist’s ironic fans, had collected a series of short clips of Tilton at his most unintentionally amusing: “ranting and raving about money,” or “in tongues”; channeling bizarre miracles, such as the healing of a woman with a “tarry stool.” “One of the scenes just had him kind of bearing down in the middle of it and kind of shaking his head and not saying anything,” Brother O’Nottigan noted of the moment when inspiration struck, “there were a bunch of us watching and I said ‘Tom, back that up again, back it up,’ and so he played that again and I made the farting noise just when he beared down and, of course, everybody started laughing.” Encouraged by the jovial response, Brother O’Nottigan and his co-worker crafted a “rough cut videotape” compilation of fart-dubbed Tilton clips, the first of multiple versions which they copied and shared with an assortment of friends, acquaintances, and clients of the television station.³¹

An early version of the Tilton fart tape that has since been posted online, and which Brother O’Nottigan suggested was “probably from late 1987 or early 1988,” reveals the original remix to be a masterpiece of comedic timing and source material selection.³² As noted by Brother Randall in the second URTFC newsletter, the most effective sequences feature noises of flatulence dubbed underneath clips of Tilton “squintching (sic) up his face” – a facial habit intended to convey the preacher’s reception of the Holy Spirit’s inspiration.³³ While Brother O’Nottigan’s remix focuses on Tilton’s melodramatic *intake* of the Holy Spirit, it also occasionally targets the preacher’s penchant for boisterous outbursts, such as by appropriating an energetic, desk-slapping moment from the set of *Success N Life*: “Hallelujah. The first thing that

³¹ Brother O’Nottigan (pseudonym retained to protect anonymity), Skype interview by author, May 9, 2013.

³² Brother O’Nottigan, email interview by author, July 26, 2013. “ORIGINAL Robert Tilton Video (1991),” YouTube video, 4:02, posted by “RotanCam,” January 4, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oa3cPYm5ISU>.

³³ Brother Randall, *The Unofficial Robert Tilton Fan Club Newsletter*, 2.

happens that's it! (fart) Woooooo!" The tape's humor is further amplified through the incorporation of segments in which Tilton's words carry a double-meaning – "I sense the anointing flowing out of me"; "This truth that I'm about to give you has exploded...(fart)...in power" – or in which the preacher appears to react to his faux flatulence: "Results happen"; "Oh, I'm enjoying this."

Brother O’Nottigan’s remix undermines Robert Tilton’s religious authenticity by playing upon his physical and vocal eccentricities, which were taken by the televangelist’s faithful followers to be markers of his animation by the Holy Spirit. In this way, his comedy creation harkens back to humorist Jonathan Swift’s (1667-1745) fictional “Aeolists,” who delivered divine commands via “belching and farting,” and through which Swift “satirized the devotional sounds and uncontrollable bodily eruptions of religious enthusiasm.”³⁴ Although Brother O’Nottigan stated during our interview that he did “not like televangelists,” as they were “crooks,” and expressed an overall distaste for “organized religion,” describing himself as “spiritual” rather than “religious,” his remix of Tilton, who he had never tuned into previously, was more the result of a serendipitous syncretism between the ongoing office pranks at KTZZ and the televangelist’s extreme style than any attempt at religious satire – “just kind of a fluky thing where he fit the context so perfectly, and in so many different ways, that it kind of became this natural thing to put the two together.”³⁵

What started as “just a joke tape,” intended for the amusement of a small group, quickly exploded in popularity as individuals copied and shared the Tilton fart remix.³⁶ After “a year and a half or two years, it started showing back up in places,” Brother O’Nottigan recalled, and he received reports of copies “where you could almost not even make out the picture anymore,” due to the degradation involved in repeatedly copying analog videotape.³⁷ Such noise represented what Lucas Hildebrand calls an “aesthetic of access,” and was a visual indicator of the tape’s much-shared nature, as well as its status as an “illicit object,” unauthorized by Robert Tilton’s

³⁴ Chidester, *Authentic Fakes*, 195. See Jonathan Swift, “A Tale of a Tub,” in *A Tale of a Tub and Other Works*, ed. Marcus Walsh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1704] 2010), 99-104.

³⁵ Brother O’Nottigan, Skype interview by author, May 9, 2013. For a study of American individuals who identify as “spiritual” in opposition to “religious,” see Robert C. Fuller, *Spiritual, But Not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

³⁶ Brother O’Nottigan, Skype interview by author, May 9, 2013.

³⁷ Ibid.

ministry.³⁸ For tape trader and ironic Tilton fan Brother Randall, however, this noise was merely an annoyance, and he spent “a lot of time trying to go back and upgrade my copy, (and) get close to the source of the original one.”³⁹ In addition to travelling back through the tape’s copying history, Brother Randall, in collaboration with Brother Bucks, would become a noteworthy copier and seller of the underground video remix, particularly in the wake of an extended media scandal which would plague Robert Tilton for years. The Tilton scandal was sparked by an investigative report on the ABC television newsmagazine *Primetime Live*, which lambasted the televangelist as a laughable religious fake – a representation built, in part, on pieces of participatory video contributed by staunch theological opponents of the preacher. Such themes and media practices intersected with the activities of Tilton’s ironic fans, and the Dallas-based members of the Unofficial Robert Tilton Fan Club would use the scandal as a springboard to draw attention to their group and expand their operations.

Tabloid Scandal, the Trinity Foundation, and Video Proof Texts

At the turn of the 1990s Robert Tilton’s ministry was soaring. Services at Word of Faith Family Church were packed, the ministry’s broadcasts reached across the United States and beyond, and millions of dollars were pouring into the ministry. By the end of 1991, however, the ministry was mired in scandal, initiated by an investigative report on the ABC newsmagazine *Primetime Live*. Hosted by Diane Sawyer, the report presented Tilton as an insincere religious fake with a shady past, who secretly lived like a king while exploiting his troubled supporters via pseudo-personal mailers and manipulative kitsch. Most damaging was the report’s claim of having discovered hundreds of prayer requests which had evidently been eviscerated of their money and callously tossed, unread, into back-alley dumpsters. Scholars who have examined the Tilton media scandal have framed the *Primetime Live* report as a relatively straightforward unmasking of a hypocritical and greedy televangelist. Sociologist Anson Shupe, for example, describes the report as an “exposé of (Tilton’s) corrupt and cynical direct-mail fund-raising tactics,” and penchant for “manipulative showmanship.”⁴⁰ Similarly, Kate Bowler writes that Tilton “made national news when reporters showed him dumping thousands of prayer requests

³⁸ Hilderbrand, *Inherent Vice*, 163, 176.

³⁹ Brother Randall, Skype interview by author, December 4, 2011.

⁴⁰ Shupe, *Wolves Within the Fold*, 59; *In the Name of All That’s Holy*, 8. See also *ibid.*, *Spoils of the Kingdom*, 88-89.

into the dumpster after removing the money from envelopes.”⁴¹ In addition to, like Shupe, assuming a considerable degree of journalistic objectivity, Bowler paints an inaccurate picture of Tilton personally gutting and disposing of prayer requests, thereby turning him into a caricature of a hypocritical and greedy televangelist.

As emphasized in the first chapter, televangelical fakes do not just exist, but are rather constructed during media scandals which aim not only to inform, but also, and in some cases predominantly, to entertain and amuse. Instead of a dispassionate unveiling of cold hard facts about Robert Tilton, *Primetime Live*'s report is better understood as a piece of what Kevin Glynn calls “investigative tabloidism.”⁴² In contrast to “official journalism,” which privileges “objectivism and a proper distance – critical and emotional – from its subjects,” Glynn argues that tabloid television journalism “sensationalizes the news, short-circuiting reason through excessive emotionality,” and often relies on “the melodramatic,” as well as “campy irony, parody, and broad humor.”⁴³ Tabloid journalism’s provocation of audience responses ranging from “outrage” to “laughter” is most effectively accomplished through the use of televisual images.⁴⁴ In a cultural landscape “distinguished by media saturation, hypervisibilization, and the constant resignification of meanings,” Glynn contends that “images constitute a significant, if not the only, terrain of struggle over the power to produce socially effective truths.”⁴⁵ While tabloid journalism outlets claim to offer audiences access to the truth via particular combinations of televisual images, Glynn suggests that they, in fact, offer “an electronically mediated sense of the real that derives in part from the implosion of any *categorical* distinction between representation and referent” in a postmodern, hyper-real culture – what he describes as “media authenticity.”⁴⁶ In this sense, “it is not so much the ‘reality’ or ‘authenticity’ of the events themselves that matters; rather, it is the *media authenticity* to which the images of these events (give) rise that has generated far-reaching social and political consequences and struggles.”⁴⁷

⁴¹ Bowler, *Blessed*, 137.

⁴² Kevin Glynn, *Tabloid Culture: Trash Taste, Popular Power, and the Transformation of American Television* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 123.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 123-124.

⁴⁵ Glynn, *Tabloid Culture*, 45.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 43.

Primetime Live's construction of Robert Tilton as America's latest televangelical fake was built on the deployment of particular pieces of video material, some of which played directly into tabloid journalism's tendency towards "irony and irreverence" by portraying the preacher as a ridiculous religious fake.⁴⁸ While *Primetime Live* produced much of its own Tilton-related video footage, the program also sourced clips of the televangelist in action from the Trinity Foundation, a Dallas-based Christian ministry. The Trinity Foundation was founded in 1972 by Ole Anthony, a former political lobbyist and government agent who developed a mystical understanding of scripture through a rigorous program of self-directed study. Anthony came to conceive of himself as a Christian rabbi, and by the early-1990s had drawn together a coterie of often destitute and drug-dependent adherents into a neo-Jewish-Christian community inhabiting a row of houses in a troubled section of East Dallas. There members lived, ate, worshipped, and prayed together under the direction of Anthony, who preached an intense theology of radical social change. Ritual celebrations and daily scripture studies followed the Jewish calendar, and day-to-day matters were managed by a group of "Levites," ministry employees bound to a vow of poverty. Trinity's members thought of Dallas' powerful televangelist ministries as modern iterations of the Jerusalem Temple establishment – corrupt and worthy of prophetic rebuke – and Anthony therefore transformed the organization into a televangelist "watchdog" group, which kept tabs on suspicious preachers by archiving ministry mailers, collecting potentially incriminating physical evidence, and videotaping their programs.⁴⁹

Ole Anthony believed Robert Tilton to be particularly egregious, and beginning in 1990 the Trinity Foundation attempted to take down the preacher by partnering with the national tabloid television programs *Entertainment Tonight* and *Inside Edition*, the emotionally based nature and "victimization" emphasis of which overlapped with the ministry's conviction that Tilton was an outrageous religious predator.⁵⁰ In addition to sit-down interviews with Ole Anthony, who negatively evaluated Tilton's ministry against his own standards of authentic

⁴⁸ Glynn, *Tabloid Culture*, 114.

⁴⁹ For two contrasting journalistic overviews of Ole Anthony and the Trinity Foundation, see Burkhard Bilger, "God Doesn't Need Ole Anthony," *The New Yorker*, December 6, 2004, and Glenna Whitley, "The Cult of Ole," *Dallas Observer*, August 3, 2006. For "watchdog," see "About Us," *Trinity Foundation*, accessed October 1, 2014, <http://trinityfi.org/about-us/>.

⁵⁰ Glynn, *Tabloid Culture*, 124. *Entertainment Tonight*, syndicated, December 3, 1990; *Inside Edition*, syndicated, January 31, 1991. Video copies of these investigative reports and their dates can be found on *Brother Bob and the Gospel of Greed*, VHS.

Christianity, the Trinity Foundation provided these tabloid programs with a variety of short video clips of the televangelist sourced from the ministry's vast tape archive, some of which, as will be demonstrated in the following chapter, were intended to elicit disbelieving laughter from the audience.⁵¹ For example, in speaking with *Inside Edition*'s reporter Steve Wilson, Anthony criticized Tilton's equation of miracles with financial contributions from a theologically normative stance. "God does miracles but it doesn't cost you anything," Anthony affirmed with a tone of amusement, "He implies that it costs you a thousand bucks to get a miracle, which is ludicrous." The laughable nature of Tilton's miracles for money formula was emphasized through a clip from *Success N Life* that soon followed in which Tilton, sitting at his desk with his eyes closed, visualizes the strangely specific future blessing due to a needy viewer, if s/he would make a vow to his ministry: "There is faith right now for a new car, if you'll seed today for that new car, the loan will go through, you will get that car."⁵²

Like some of Robert Tilton's ironic fans, and many critics of health-and-wealth televangelists in general, Ole Anthony charged that Tilton's theology was based on the "proof texting" of small portions of Scripture.⁵³ However, the clips of Tilton which Trinity shuttled to tabloid television programs can similarly be understood as "video proof texts" – bite-sized portions taken out of context and intended to support particular rhetorical and religious positions. The power of such video proof texts to perpetuate widespread cultural understandings of American televangelists is best evidenced by the paradigmatic example of Jimmy Swaggart's public confession following the revelation of his first tryst with a prostitute.⁵⁴ An entire televised church service from February 21, 1988 has been distilled down to a clip, or series of clips, the centerpiece of which is Swaggart, eyes turned towards heaven and face bathed in tears, confessing, "I have sinned against you, my Lord."⁵⁵ Besides capturing his explicit admission of hypocrisy, Swaggart's crying in the clip has often been read as insincere – crocodile tears as part

⁵¹ For Anthony and Trinity's collaborations with news outlets, see Whitley, "The Cult of Ole."

⁵² *Inside Edition*, Syndicated, January 31, 1991.

⁵³ For complaints about the "proof texting" of evangelical "popularizers," including televangelists, see Kyle, *Evangelicalism*, 318.

⁵⁴ For an overview of the Swaggart scandal and the televangelist's public defence, see Giuliano, *Thrice-Born*.

⁵⁵ For a clip featuring a short version of such a Swaggart-related video proof text, see "Christian Televangelist Jimmy Swaggart Prostitution Scandal – 1988," YouTube video, 0:51, posted by Al-Hijr المسجد تهزأ بين ك فري ناك ذأ "15:95," August 11, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6MXbR7EHWrQ>.

of the act.⁵⁶ This video proof text has become an oft-used audiovisual shorthand for televangelical fakery for more than two decades, such as during a December 1, 2010 segment on MSNBC's *The Rachel Maddow Show* dealing with top televangelist's Marcus Lamb's admission of an extramarital affair.⁵⁷ Host Maddow, with a mocking tone, walks viewers through the long history of scandalous American television preachers, including Swaggart, "whose scandal came complete with prostitution and a very tearful on-camera confession." Three brief clips of Swaggart's confessional service follow, the last containing his crying admission, which Maddow framed as insincere due to that fact that he would be found in the company of another prostitute in 1991.⁵⁸

While the famous Jimmy Swaggart video proof texts capture an explicit admission of spiritual failure, in other cases it has been charged that such clips have been manipulated in misleading and potentially defamatory ways. For example, on March 23, 2007, ABC's newsmagazine *20/20* probed the ministry of California-based prosperity televangelist Frederick K.C. Price, based on suspicions that the preacher improperly financed his high-flying lifestyle with church donations.⁵⁹ Following a snippet of an interview with a faithful ministry supporter – "When I give to this church, I know that my money's being put to good, excellent use, without one question" – host John Stossel replies, via voiceover, "And yet her pastor, Fred Price, boasts that..." Stossel's segue is immediately matched to a clip of Price apparently describing his financial largesse, accompanied by illustrative stock footage: "...I live in a twenty-five room mansion. I have my own six-million dollar yacht. I have my own private jet, and I have my own helicopter, and I have seven luxury automobiles." Through this combination of testimonial, voiceover, and video proof text, *20/20* presented the televangelist as an evil exploiter.

⁵⁶ See, for example, Hal Erickson, *Religious Radio and Television in the United States, 1921-1991: The Programs and Personalities* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2001), 179-180.

⁵⁷ *The Rachel Maddow Show*, "Touched by a Televangelist," MSNBC, December 1, 2010; a selection from the program is available at "Rachel Maddow: Touched By A Televangelist (With Infidelity Matrix)," YouTube video, 6:04, posted by "incitebytes," December 2, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=inYLkGHPNik>. For the Lamb scandal, see Rachel Zoll, "Televangelist Marcus Lamb of DayStar Says 3 Tried to Extort Him Over Affair with Woman," *The Canadian Press*, November 30, 2010.

⁵⁸ See Giuliano, *Thrice Born*, 20-21, 114-115.

⁵⁹ *20/20*, "Enough!," ABC, March 23, 2007; a selection from the program is available at "Enough – 20/20 with John Stossel – Ministry Videos," GodTube video, 6:54, posted by "videos," accessed January 22, 2015, <http://www.godtube.com/watch/?v=2B1JNNNU>. For a brief overview of Price's ministry, see Harrison, *Righteous Riches*, 144-145.

Price, however, was not speaking about himself in the clip, which stemmed from a 1997 sermon, but was instead offering a parable about a hypothetical individual who had experienced “bad success” – material wealth accompanied by a plague of personal misfortune.⁶⁰ Despite his success, the hypothetical person had a litany of complaints: “my wife’s making out with the gardener... All of my children are on drugs. And I really don’t know who my friends are, because I don’t know if they like me, or like what I can do for them because of my money.” Although ABC issued retractions and public apologies for its use of the clip, Price’s ministry took legal action against a host of defendants including the network, Stossel, and, notably, Ole Anthony and the Trinity Foundation, which had provided *20/20* with the video material.⁶¹ An initial ruling dismissed the complaint, finding that the clip, although taken out of context, was “substantially true” regarding the televangelist’s lifestyle. Price’s lawyers persisted, however, claiming that the way in which the video material was “juxtaposed” unfairly portrayed the preacher as “a hypocrite and deceiver.”⁶² The matter was not settled until 2011 when ABC again apologized, admitting “that it did not conduct sufficient investigation of the clip after receiving it to establish its correct context” – a statement suggesting that the Trinity Foundation had shuttled pre-edited clips to the network.⁶³ By 2007, the Trinity Foundation had been delivering video proof texts of prosperity televangelists to national media outlets for nearly two decades, with one of their first high-profile targets being Frederick K.C. Price’s Word of Faith compatriot, Robert Tilton.

On November 21, 1991, ABC’s *Primetime Live* aired investigative reports of three Texan televangelists: W.V. Grant, Larry Lea, and Robert Tilton.⁶⁴ In introducing the program, host Diane Sawyer assured viewers that questions of religious authenticity would not be the focus of the reports, but rather the sincerity and possible illicit actions of the trio of suspicious televangelists: “we are in no way questioning faith or religious belief of any kind. In fact, many

⁶⁰ For a comparison of ABC’s clip with the original sermon, see “THE TRUTH: About 20/20’s Report on Dr. Price & CCC,” YouTube video, 7:07, posted by “adambaumen,” July 25, 2007, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0LurX47zfk8>.

⁶¹ For Anthony and Trinity’s involvement, see Glenna Whitley, “Ole Oops,” *Dallas Observer*, August 9, 2007.

⁶² Frederick K.C. Price v. John Stossel; Glenn Ruppel; American Broadcasting Companies, Inc.; Ole Anthony and Trinity Foundation, Inc., Case 09-55087 (9th Cir. 2009), available at <http://www.gmsr.com/writing/09-55087-aob.pdf>, accessed January 28, 2015.

⁶³ Melissa Maerz, “ABC News Apologizes to Crenshaw Christian Center Founder for Misleading Video [Updated],” <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/showtracker/2011/04/abc-news-appologizes-to-crenshaw-christian-center-founder-for-misleading-video.html>, accessed January 28, 2015.

⁶⁴ *Primetime Live*, ABC, November 21, 1991. A copy of the report and the date can be found on *Brother Bob and the Gospel of Greed*, VHS.

of the people who helped in this investigation are devoted members of religious organizations, but believe it's important to know the facts." This latter comment hinted at the participation of the Trinity Foundation, which provided *Primetime Live* with investigative aid as well as an assortment of video proof texts. *Primetime Live*'s segment on Robert Tilton, in particular, was peppered with such video clips, which often showcased the televangelist at his most energetic, absurd, and ironically amusing.

"This is Robert Tilton," opens Sawyer as *Primetime Live* cuts to a clip of the televangelist sitting at his desk, wildly pantomiming a physical attack against Satan, "He has the fastest growing ministry on television today." "Viewers are riveted by his melodrama, his quirky style," she explains, the televangelist's humorous eccentricity emphasized through an accompanying clip in which he speaks in tongues, pauses, and then directly addresses viewers – "I love you" – as well as a subsequent clip in which Tilton, kneeling next to a pile of paper prayer requests, offers a hammy religious song. Tilton's purported ridiculousness having been swiftly established, Sawyer charges that his ministry is "shrouded in secrecy," and that, based on deposit receipts "obtained" by *Primetime Live*, "Tilton's followers send his ministry, conservatively, eighty-million dollars a year, tax-free." Despite such wealth and the televangelist's "flashy style," Sawyer claims that "Tilton insists he's still a simple preacher who cares about the sickness and suffering of his followers." Tilton's empathy, however, as well as his efficacy as a conduit for miracles, is challenged through a video clip that follows, in which the televangelist places his hand on the clavicle of a man standing on the Word of Faith stage, shouting "bones go together!" As Tilton moves to the next individual in the healing line, the recipient of the "miracle" grimaces in obvious, excruciating pain as he rotates his shoulder. This clip, as will be demonstrated in the following chapter, would also come to be capitalized upon by the Trinity Foundation for its humor value.

In addition to highlighting Robert Tilton's laughable ludicrousness, *Primetime Live* intriguingly proposed that the televangelist himself had been an ironic fan of revival preaching – a claim backed by an interview with a purported college friend of Tilton, his face covered in shadow to protect his identity. The informant recalled that he and Tilton would, in Sawyer's words, "use drugs, or get drunk, and go off to tent revivals as a kind of sport," parodying the faithful for their own amusement: "You would be drunk, and, uh, go down front, fall to our

knees, uh, speak in tongues.” In a video clip of Tilton preaching from 1983, archived by the Trinity Foundation yet unaired on *Primetime Live*, the televangelist confesses to similar activities.⁶⁵ “Up until that time of the new birth, I laughed about preachers,” Tilton states, standing on a green-carpeted stage in a wine-colored jacket. “I’d sit in a bar, and drink beer, and imitate ‘em,” he continued, shaking his head in mocking disapproval at his past actions as members of the congregation laugh. While Tilton jokingly claimed in the clip that such parodies made him a “good candidate” to spread the gospel once he was filled with the Holy Spirit, instead of “unholy spirit(s),” *Primetime Live*, building on the testimony of its informant, charged that he had, in fact, never stopped his act.

Bereft of any historical footage of Robert Tilton’s early days of revival preaching/exploitative parodying, *Primetime Live*, in an established tabloid television technique, aired “surrogate images” of revival preachers past, including clips of Marjoe Gortner, the previously discussed admitted fake and documentary star, working the healing line and collecting donations during a tent meeting.⁶⁶ Such subtle insertions furthered *Primetime Live*’s thesis that Tilton was America’s latest revival fraud, who had parlayed his skills at parody into a lucrative, yet insincere, preaching career. “Tilton and his friend started developing parodies,” Sawyer states, continuing the theme, “so-called ‘Jesus raps’ of their own.” On cue, the program’s obscured informant offers his best preacher impersonation in a throaty voice: “Oh dear God, come into this young woman’s life, heal tonight! She has a need to find Christ!” For comparison, the report cuts to a clip of Tilton beseeching the divine as he crawls over a pile of prayer requests: “Oh God, in the name of Jesus. We believe in prayer, we believe in miracles!” “I personally thought I was a lot better at it than he was,” *Primetime Live*’s informant complains.

While *Primetime Live* devoted considerable time to Robert Tilton’s ridiculousness and alleged historical penchant for parody, the crux of the report – an investigation of the televangelist’s mailing operations conducted with the help of the Trinity Foundation – was staunchly serious. First, the program aired the results of a hidden-camera infiltration of Response Media, the Tulsa, Oklahoma-based company behind the ministry’s mailers, and described by Sawyer as the “nerve center of his ministry.” Sawyer reported that a small group including ABC

⁶⁵ A copy of this clip and the date can be found on *Brother Bob and the Gospel of Greed*, VHS.

⁶⁶ For “surrogate images,” see Glynn, *Tabloid Culture*, 20-21. *Marjoe*, DVD.

staffers and the Trinity Foundation's Ole Anthony had duped Response Media's president, Jim Moore, into believing that they "were media consultants" for "Dallas minister" Anthony, and that they were looking to "start a big-money ministry like Tilton's." Captured on hidden camera, Moore emphasizes, among other things, the effectiveness of mailing out "free" trinkets. Some of these trinkets, accompanied by pseudo-personal letters "written by ghost-writers," were intended to be returned to the ministry, ideally with a donation: "Miracle prayer cloths he promises to touch and place upon an altar. Cords he says he'll place on a 'Wall of Deliverance'." *Primetime Live*'s hidden-camera investigation set up the program's coup de grâce, which began with a clip of Robert Tilton affirming that he reached out to "people that are beat up, that are hurting." "But how much," Sawyer asks, "does Tilton really care about the beat up and the hurting?" The answer, according to *Primetime Live*, lay in how the ministry handled received mail, which was, allegedly, "forwarded, unopened to Tilton's bank in Tulsa...the bank opens the followers' mail, not to share the agony, but to get the money." Sawyer further asserts that "those items that people have prayed over and sent in, believing Robert Tilton would touch them and pray over them too. Well if some made it to Tilton, there are thousands that didn't." *Primetime Live* followed with its big reveal: shots of thousands of apparently discarded gimmicks and unread prayer requests, purportedly discovered in dumpsters behind Tilton's Tulsa bank and Response Media. These images were *Primetime Live*'s emotional pay dirt: dozens of paper angels pulled from a garbage bag; a trashed miracle prayer cord; a "tracing where Tilton said he'd place his hand, ripped up by the bank"; "heartbreaking appeals from followers," including a handwritten note pleading with Tilton to "pray for my husband (sic) eyes"; and, finally, a trashed envelope with "a prayerful message," "personal photographs," and a "seven-thousand dollar pledge." "The money probably made it to Tilton," Sawyer concludes, "the prayers went in the trash."

In closing, Diane Sawyer offered "a final word of thanks to that Dallas minister you saw, Ole Anthony of the Trinity Foundation, who helped us gain access to key parts of this investigation." Aside from offering information, consultation, and video proof texts to ABC, members of the Trinity Foundation had conducted the dumpster-diving raids which had netted *Primetime Live* its choicest material.⁶⁷ Sawyer framed the Trinity Foundation as a beacon of authentic Christianity, due to its work with "the homeless and the local community," and Ole

⁶⁷ For information on the Trinity Foundation's collaboration with ABC, see Delia M. Rios, "Cross Fire," *The Dallas Morning News*, December 22, 1991.

Anthony, whom she described as a “fierce critic of big-money TV preachers,” was given the opportunity to outline his own understanding of Christianity, which drastically differed from Robert Tilton’s mass-mediated, pseudo-personal gospel of health and wealth. “The longing of a man’s heart is for community,” Anthony affirmed in a brief one-on-one interview with Sawyer, “for a sense of being able to lay down his life for something important. That can’t happen with a television tube.” Anthony encouraged viewers to “look at the need around you,” rather than donating money to “some far-away evangelist that’s talking you into playing a heavenly lottery,” and asserted that such localized acts of charity were the true path to the “hundred-fold blessing” promised by preachers such as Tilton.

“What is startling,” wrote the *Dallas Observer*’s Glenna Whitley in a 2006 profile of Ole Anthony and the Trinity Foundation, “is that the media have largely given Trinity a pass.”⁶⁸ While *Primetime Live* had propped up Anthony as a foil against which Tilton’s religious fakery could be exemplified, contrasting the televangelist’s self-centered gospel with Anthony’s allegedly Christ-like ethic of self-denial, the program neglected to probe, intentionally or otherwise, potentially controversial aspects of the latter preacher’s own ministry. Drawing on interviews with more than “a dozen” former members of the Trinity Foundation, and supported by ex-member Wendy Duncan’s accusatory tome from the same year – *I Can’t Hear God Anymore: Life in a Dallas Cult* – Whitley argued that Trinity was a chaotic spiritual autocracy helmed by Anthony, who claimed direct knowledge into the divine will, and manipulated those who “were struggling, vulnerable, seeking answers.”⁶⁹ Moreover, Whitley suggested that Anthony was a master of misrepresentation, having knowingly collaborated on a *Primetime Live* report of Robert Tilton that had willfully “distorted facts,” “edited interviews out of context,” and had left out “information favorable to Tilton.” Whitley pointed to evidence in the televangelist’s subsequent, and long-running, legal battles against ABC, for example, which revealed inconsistencies regarding where and when Trinity’s dumpster divers had found the allegedly trashed material from Tilton’s ministry – the lynchpin of *Primetime Live*’s claims.⁷⁰ Whitley also interviewed Powell Holloway, a former Trinity member and participant in the

⁶⁸ Whitley, “The Cult of Ole.”

⁶⁹ Wendy J. Duncan, *I Can’t Hear God Anymore: Life in a Dallas Cult* (Garland, Texas: VM Life Resources, 2006).

⁷⁰ See “Tilton v. Capital Cities/ABC Inc., 827 F. Supp. 674 (1993),” available at <http://law.justia.com/cases/federal/district-courts/FSupp/827/674/1458627/>, accessed January 28, 2015.

dumpster diving missions, who claimed that Anthony and *Primetime Live*'s producers had, in Whitley's words, "mixed the trash from various dumpsters." "It was on videotape," Holloway asserted, referring to raw footage examined for the legal proceedings, "Ole and the producers literally playing with the evidence on B-roll."

What Whitley did not explore, however, was how the Trinity Foundation had manipulated video footage from Tilton's broadcasts, and had succeeded in injecting its own participatory media artifacts – video proof texts of Tilton at his most controversial, bizarre, and ironically amusing – into the heart of the mainstream media scandal surrounding the televangelist. Tilton himself, however, made reference to such tactics during a special episode of *Success N Life*, which aired the day after the *Primetime Live* report.⁷¹ Foregoing his customary expensive suit for a casual blue jacket and jeans, Tilton rebutted *Primetime Live*'s claims with a largely improvised performance that contained some cogent points. Regarding his financial largesse, a key focus of *Primetime Live*'s criticisms, Tilton was little concerned, framing his lifestyle as proof of the effectiveness of his prosperity gospel: "So what? I never preached poverty to you. I said God would provide you with the best...you can have the best but I ain't supposed to have nothing? Get that religious garbage out of your brain!" Tilton also questioned *Primetime Live*'s journalistic ethics, charging that the program had acted deceitfully in its hunt for ratings. "Diane Sawyer admitted that they lied and deceived to go behind the scenes," Tilton stated, "now when did they stop lying? They really never stopped lying." All in all, Tilton framed the program as an "anti-*real* Jesus," Satanic conspiracy, and described Ole Anthony, *Primetime Live*'s theological expert and co-producer, as merely a "so-called minister; he ain't a minister, he's nothing, he's less than nothing...His whole world is around tearing me down."

Tilton's hour-long *Success N Life* special was packed with prime examples of the televangelist's off-the-cuff, and potentially ironically amusing, behavior. During one moment Tilton unexpectedly broke into a bout of singing *glossolalia* as he lifted his eyes and hands towards heaven: "That's singing in tongues for you illiterate folks out there," he explained in a tone of mocking defiance, "That's in the Bible. What happens is most folks just never saw anybody as anointed as I am, as bold as I am, as wild as I am on television, and I don't pull any

⁷¹ *Success N Life*, November 22, 1991. A video of the rebuttal has since been posted online; see "Robert Tilton Defends His Honor," YouTube video, 58:35, posted by "donquixote235," March 17, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZiioE52ic0>.

punches and I certainly ain't lukewarm." It would be Tilton's laughably unbelievable proof of his dedication to submitted prayer requests, however, for which his rebuttal would be best remembered. "I lay my hands, personally, on every prayer request," Tilton affirmed, explaining that he spent "forty-five minutes to two hours" each day in his "prayer closet," attending to the spiritual needs of his faithful followers:

"I begin to pray over stacks of the prayer request forms that you send in. Those prayer request forms have ink on them, and, uh, all kinds of chemicals. I laid on top of those prayer requests so much, that the chemicals actually got into my bloodstream, began to swell my capillaries..."

In sum, Tilton claimed that his physical intimacy with so many prayer requests had resulted in an allergic reaction, which, in turn, necessitated many of the lifestyle choices criticized by *Primetime Live*: plastic surgery to remove ink-induced bags from his eyes – "Frankly folks, it was a serious mess; messed my bottom eyes up" – as well as a vacation home and pleasure boat for doctor-mandated relaxation.⁷²

Tilton acknowledged that this fantastic revelation would be a "newsy thing"; yet, he also warned news outlets against unfairly manipulating his rebuttal footage: "And you media people that are taping this, please don't edit it to pieces and make me look bad again, or your blood is going to be on your own hands."⁷³ Nevertheless, Tilton's strange claim of dedication to his supporters' prayer requests backfired spectacularly, as it would be incorporated into another round of video proof texts that painted him as a ridiculous religious fake. A week after its original investigation aired, *Primetime Live* aired a follow-up report reasserting its claims, and featuring new interviews with former Tilton supporters whose letters had purportedly been discovered in the trash. The follow-up report also contained a selection of clips taken from Tilton's rebuttal, intended to represent the televangelist as a brazen, albeit ludicrously inventive, liar.⁷⁴ Most notable were extended clips of Tilton discussing his alleged ink-related illness, and *Primetime Live* further emphasized his ridiculousness through a clip of the televangelist's

⁷² *Success N Life*, November 22, 1991.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Primetime Live*, ABC, November 28, 1991. A copy of the report and the date can be found on *Brother Bob and the Gospel of Greed*, VHS.

“closing words” from the rebuttal, in which Tilton, arms crossed and smiling widely, appeared comically glib: “So, until we meet again, happy trails – I love that song – Happy trails to you, until we meet again.”

In the weeks following *Primetime Live*'s original report, which earned “king-sized ratings” in the Dallas area, Robert Tilton's troubles crescendoed.⁷⁵ The Internal Revenue Service and the Federal Bureau of Investigation teamed up with the Texas Attorney General's office and other government organizations to determine whether Tilton's ministry had committed mail fraud, or had illegally diverted donations for the televangelist's personal benefit.⁷⁶ At the same time that Robert Tilton was being crucified by the news media, Ole Anthony was beatified, emerging as a prophetic voice against seemingly sinful televangelists who would be called on for on-camera commentary, investigative aid, and video proof texts over the following years.⁷⁷ Although coverage of the Tilton scandal at the national level would be relatively sporadic, Anthony became a fixture in the regular regional and local Dallas features on the televangelist, often appealing to viewers' emotions in his ongoing battle against Tilton. For example, during a December 3, 1991 interview with Scott Gordon of WFAA-TV in Dallas, Anthony railed against Tilton's lack of personal attention to those “in dire need,” which, he argued, could have catastrophic effects.⁷⁸ “Please pray for him,” Anthony read from a selected letter, “if he loses his job he will commit suicide”; ended up in the trash.” On December 9 of that same year, the Trinity Foundation hosted a press conference in which Anthony outlined what he called Tilton's “Wheel of Fortune.” In a room filled with posters, the most prominent of which documented the purported mail and money pathways of Tilton's ministry, Anthony outlined the televangelist's

⁷⁵ Ed Bark, “Televangelist Expose Intrigues Major Audience,” *The Dallas Morning News*, November 23, 1991.

⁷⁶ A number of television news reports relating to these investigations can be found on *Brother Bob and the Gospel of Greed*, VHS. See also, “Agencies Coordinate Tilton Investigations,” *Austin American-Statesman*, November 30, 1991.

⁷⁷ As late as 2007, Ole Anthony appeared as a talking head on the CBS and CNN networks to lambast high-profile prosperity televangelists, in the context of Senator Charles Grassley's launching of an investigation into the tax-exempt status of such preachers: see “Eye to Eye: Ministries Probed (CBSNews),” YouTube video, 3:28, posted by “CBS,” November 6, 2007, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i_3mqrj5Ju4; “Mega Ministries,” YouTube video, 4:09, posted by “Obed James,” November 12, 2007, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TwLLPszpUmY>. For the Grassley investigation, see Jacqueline Salmon, “GOP Senator Investigates Spending at Several TV Ministries,” *The Washington Post*, November 7, 2007.

⁷⁸ WFAA-TV (Dallas), December 3, 1991. Clips of the report and the date can be found on *Brother Bob and the Gospel of Greed*, VHS.

“spiritual sorcery,” which had allegedly victimized thousands: “It’s got to break your heart to think about what this is doing to the people.”⁷⁹

In addition to eliciting the empathy of viewers, Anthony also occasionally deployed biting comedy to delegitimize Tilton, as evidenced during an appearance on *Spectrum*, a Dallas/Fort Worth-based television talk show hosted by local NBC reporter Mike Snyder.⁸⁰ Asked by Snyder whether Tilton’s activities constituted fraud, Anthony framed the televangelist as a liar through a mocking mention of the most infamous moment from his televised rebuttal of *Primetime Live*: “He says, he claims, that he takes every one of these prayer requests, lays over them to the extent that the ink from the prayer request sort of chelates into his body, and his lower eyes get messed up so he has to have plastic surgery.” Heightening the humor by brushing his cheeks with his pinky fingers, and encouraged by the scattered laughter of the studio audience, Anthony continued, fictitiously expanding on Tilton’s original testimony: “And he lays on ‘em so strong, that his hair gets so messed up that he has to have permanents every week. And he lays on this so bad, that he has to have more makeup on than Tammy Faye Bakker.” Through this performance, Anthony made explicit the satirical irony that lay behind many of the video proof texts of Tilton which the Trinity Foundation had shuttled to *Primetime Live*, and which had drawn nationwide attention to the televangelist’s potential as a source of ironic humor. This unprecedented publicizing of Tilton as an accidental comedian would be quickly capitalized upon by the core members of the Unofficial Robert Tilton Fan Club, whose ironic play with the televangelist was not motivated by a desire to see his empire topple, as was the case with the Trinity Foundation, and some of whom carried concerns about the potential effects of the ongoing media scandal on the very existence of their irreverent fan following.

Playing with, and Profiting from, Religious Scandal

In the third issue of the Unofficial Robert Tilton Fan Club newsletter, published in December 1991, Brother Randall outlined two points related to the URTFC’s parasitic

⁷⁹ WFAA-TV (Dallas), December 9, 1991. KXAS-TV (Fort Worth), December 9, 1991. Clips and the date can be found on *Brother Bob and the Gospel of Greed*, VHS.

⁸⁰ *Spectrum*, KXAS-TV (Fort Worth), December 8, 1991. Clips of the program and the date can be found on *Brother Bob and the Gospel of Greed*, VHS.

relationship with the televangelist in the context of his ongoing media scandal.⁸¹ Underneath an illustration of Tilton with the body of a snake and a halo above his head, erupting from the television glass of a solitary male viewer, Brother Randall opened with a question that was likely on the minds of many ironic Tilton fans: “Is This It?” “I imagine that each of you reading this have the same mixed feelings that I do,” he wrote, “part exhilaration (sic) over the attention Bob is getting, and part dread that the plug might really be pulled this time.” Although he admitted that the scandal, prompted by a *Primetime Live* piece which he accurately critiqued as a piece of emotionally manipulative tabloid television, had shifted “the outlook for Robert Tilton and for the fan club itself...from bright to kinda dismal,” the timing was also right to try to expand the URTFC, as more individuals than ever had been exposed to the televangelist’s humor value as an amusing, alleged religious huckster. Furthermore, that same month the URTFC received a crucial piece of unexpected publicity from Steve Blow of *The Dallas Morning News*, whose own above-mentioned articles on Tilton, eagerly followed by Brother Randall, had often betrayed the reporter’s own amusement at the televangelist.

On December 11, 1991, Blow published a profile of the URTFC, featuring excerpts from the club’s newsletters and interviews with Brothers Randall and Bucks.⁸² Decrying the negative press focused on Tilton, Brother Randall argued that the preacher exemplified a long-running “American tradition” of the “snake-oil salesman,” and, indeed, stood “at the very top of his craft.” “There are a lot of closet Tilton fans out there,” Brother Bucks added, perhaps somewhat hopefully, “They like him for his bad art value.” Blow’s report included Brother Randall’s mailing address – ostensibly for “editorial contributions” to the URTFC newsletter – and indicated that Brother Bucks’ Fourteen Records was “the exclusive retail outlet” for the independent publication. Far more people, however, would trek to Brother Bucks’ record store to acquire copies of another Tilton-related cultural artifact mentioned in Blow’s article: “the ‘gassy’ Tilton tape that has been making the rounds in Dallas for more than a year.” “Starting that day,” Brother Bucks recalled regarding Blow’s article, “it was like a barrage of people, five, ten, sometimes twenty (people) a day coming in...looking at me saying, ‘Are you the one with the

⁸¹ Brother Randall, *The Unofficial Robert Tilton Fan Club Newsletter*, 3 (Dallas, 1991), n.p. For irony, and specifically satirical irony, as a “parasite,” see Robert N. Spicer, “Before and After *The Daily Show*: Freedom and Consequences in Political Satire,” in *The Daily Show and Rhetoric: Arguments, Issues, and Strategies*, ed. Trischa Goodnow (Lexington: Lexington Books, 2011), 25.

⁸² Steve Blow, “Next-Greatest Show on Earth: Brother Bob,” *The Dallas Morning News*, December 11, 1991.

fart tape?” To meet the sudden demand Brother Bucks, with the assistance of Brother Randall, began dubbing copies of the remix onto “generic tapes,” some salvaged from the trash, and selling them as a “behind the counter item,” much like Brother Bucks’ illicit God’s Greatest Hits audio compilations.⁸³ Whether they sold for ten-dollars, in Brother Bucks’ recollection, or twenty or twenty-five dollars, according to Brother Randall, the dubbed copies of Brother O’Nottigan’s remix were highly profitable, putting a few-hundred dollars into their pockets.⁸⁴

The swift sales of the “fart” tape at Fourteen Records highlighted the local marketability of Tilton-related humor as the televangelist’s scandal rolled on, encouraging Brothers Bucks and Randall’s next ambitious venture: an ironic Tilton tribute night at the aptly named “Club Dada” in Dallas’ lively entertainment district of Deep Ellum.⁸⁵ The title of the event, “Love That Bob!,” was lifted from a syndicated 1950s American sitcom, and was thus a throwback to Brother Bucks’ Mr. Ed Fan Club.⁸⁶ “We just wanted to mix up some cool local rock n’ roll with some bad gospel action,” explained Brother Bucks, who produced “a short video of like a hundred of the worst album covers” from his bad white gospel collection, which was projected onto a screen throughout the festivities.⁸⁷ The bill included performances by artists whose work intersected with the ironic televangelical taste culture promoted by the URTFC, including hip-hop musician “MC 900 Ft. Jesus,” whose stage name played on a divine vision reported by Oral Roberts in 1980, and Farley Scott, a law office employee/comedian known locally for his “Reverend Bob” televangelist parody, which he had long performed in clubs.⁸⁸ Scott had been refining a ““Cheating Preacher’ character” since attending college in the mid-1970s, around the same time that he began watching “a whole lot” of Pat Robertson’s television programs. “Reverend Bob” was specifically born from Scott’s amusement at a testimony by one of the televangelist’s callers

⁸³ Brother Bucks, Skype interview by author, January 6, 2012.

⁸⁴ Ibid; Brother Randall, Skype interview by author, December 4, 2011.

⁸⁵ For a discussion of the history and cultural significance of Deep Ellum, see Alan Govanar and Jay Brakefield, *Deep Ellum and Central Track: Where the Black and White Worlds of Dallas Converged* (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 1998).

⁸⁶ For information on the sitcom *Love That Bob*, see James W. Roman, *From Daytime to Primetime: The History of American Television Programs* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2005), 82.

⁸⁷ Brother Bucks, Skype interview by author, January 6, 2012.

⁸⁸ For Oral Roberts’ vision, which resulted in a “resounding outburst of public ridicule and criticism,” see Harrell, *Oral Roberts*, 415-417. For the origin of “MC 900 Ft. Jesus” (real name Mark Griffin) stage name, see the online interview at <http://www.earpollution.com/vol3/oct01/profiles/mc900ftjesus/mc900ftjesus.html>, accessed January 28, 2015. Both artists are referenced in a promotional poster for “Love That Bob!”; see <http://www.flickr.com/photos/81188628@N00/6439953955/>, accessed January 28, 2015.

that God had supernaturally repaired her refrigerator, resulting in his own character's habit of "healing" a variety of mundane objects – from "toasters" to a "barbeque sandwich" – with the "miracles" often signaled by on-stage pyrotechnics.⁸⁹

In spite of the character's name, "Reverend Bob" was not a straightforward parody of Robert Tilton; however, Scott acknowledged that Tilton directly influenced his decision to produce and host his own piece of participatory media beginning in 1986 or 1987 – a half-hour long, improvised public-access television show titled "Rev. Bob's Inspirational Moment."⁹⁰ Scott confessed during our interview that he had been angered by the popularity of Tilton, whose gospel, he argued, strayed far from "the example that Jesus set," and therefore used his program to mock the televangelist, including his physical proclivities. For example, in one episode originally aired on June 8, 1992, and selections of which have since been archived to YouTube, Reverend Bob, sporting comically loud clothing on a set resembling that of Tilton's *Success N Life*, led his audience in what he called "squeenching." "Instead of praying we'd 'squeench up,'" Scott explained, "which was something I did get from Bob Tilton...to make him look like he's really concentrating really hard on the camera he'd squinch his face up really tight like he was getting direct downloads from God or something."⁹¹ With his two dogs "Stealth" and "Attack Plan Bea" lying at his feet, Reverend Bob announced that it was time for a "squeench with the dogs." Drawing Stealth onto his lap, Reverend Bob crumpled his face and tented his right hand over the dog's head as he instructed his audience: "Grab your thighs. Grab your TV. Put one hand on your TV. Put one hand on your mammals. Begin to feel the squeench vibes radiating."⁹²

Robert Tilton's habit of "squeenching," central to both the humor of Brother O'Nottigan's fart remix and Reverend Bob's public-access parody, had become a recognized shorthand for the televangelist's amusing absurdity, and was accordingly used by Brothers Bucks and Randall in promoting "Love that Bob!" "Squinch on Up and Come On Down To...Love

⁸⁹ Farley Scott, Skype interview by author, April 26, 2012. In a similar case, Hadden and Swann mention that televangelist Kenneth Copeland reported having laid his hands on a secondhand airplane in order to "heal" it; see *Prime Time Preachers*, 93-94.

⁹⁰ Farley Scott, Skype interview by author, April 26, 2012. For the participatory potential of public-access television, see Laura R. Linder, *Public Access Television: America's Electronic Soapbox* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1999).

⁹¹ Farley Scott, Skype interview by author, April 26, 2012.

⁹² "Squeenching with Mammals," YouTube video, 2:17, posted by "fwscott," May 29, 2006, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wtb2MI1pJk8>.

That Bob!” commanded a pale-pink poster, featuring an illustration of a squinting Tilton affixed to a cross, a nail piercing his right hand, which held a dollar bill.⁹³ In a sidebar, the poster hinted at the possible airing of another renowned piece of “squeench”-related comedy during the event: “Q: Will they play that naughty tape I’ve heard so much about? A: Maybe.” Another advertisement for the tribute night, printed in *The Dallas Observer* magazine, was designed by offbeat syndicated comic artist Buddy Hickerson.⁹⁴ A grotesquely angular Tilton, his suit jacket stuffed with dollar bills and speaking gibberish *glossolalia*, stands in front of Club Dada as a small group raises their arms in adulation. “Catch Robert Tilton Fever!” the notice cried, “He’s thinner than Elvis; He’s richer than Elvis; He’s better than Elvis!” Among those who came across the latter notice was “SufferinSprings,” the Dallas-based, former fundamentalist turned ironic Tilton fan discussed in the previous chapter: “I saw immediately that it was a tongue-in-cheek thing, and I just about fell out of my chair, I was like ‘I have to go to this.’”⁹⁵

Held on January 9, 1992, a Thursday evening, “Love That Bob!” attracted hundreds of attendees, including Michael Precker from *The Dallas Morning News*, who outlined the evening’s festivities for readers.⁹⁶ “It’s ‘Love that Bob’ night,” wrote Precker, “...apparently the first evening of merrymaking at the expense of Dallas’ own controversial televangelist. No hard-charging exposes or rebuttals here; leave your indignation at the door.” “We’re here to praise Bob and have a little fun with him at the same time,” explained Brother Bucks. In addition to musical performances by MC 900 Ft. Jesus and local band “The Potatoes,” the evening featured a “Speaking in Tilton’ contest,” in which participants offered their best outbursts of mock *glossolalia*; a stand-up comedy routine by Hickerson targeting “televangelism”; Reverend Bob’s onstage healing of a malfunctioning toaster; and a “Tilton Trivia contest.” “Love That Bob!” also featured the public airing of Tilton-related remixes, including a “heavy metal speed rap” audio remix crafted by one “Schwa,” a “computer systems analyst” who reassembled sound bites from Tilton’s televised rebuttal of *Primetime Live*, often inverting their intended meanings. “He said, ‘Now please don’t edit this to make me look bad,’” Schwa explained to Precker, “I thought,

⁹³ For an image of the poster, see <http://www.flickr.com/photos/81188628@N00/6439953955/>, accessed January 28, 2015.

⁹⁴ For an image of Hickerson’s poster, see <http://www.flickr.com/photos/81188628@N00/6439952673/>, accessed January 28, 2015. For examples of Hickerson’s work, see Buddy Hickerson, *The Quigmans* (New York: Harmony Books, 1990).

⁹⁵ SufferinSprings, Skype interview by author, December 17, 2011.

⁹⁶ Michael Precker, “Poking Silly Fun at Tilton,” *The Dallas Morning News*, January 14, 1992.

‘Gee what a challenge.’”⁹⁷ The centerpiece remix, however, was Brother O’Nottigan’s fart tape. “The evening begins with a screening of the notorious ‘Joyful Noise’ video,” Precker wrote, “a bootleg tape that apparently has been around for about a year.” Following a brief description of the remix and its “whoopie-cushion soundtrack,” Precker concluded that the “humor is undeniably juvenile, but not ineffective. The audience howls with laughter throughout.”⁹⁸ Farley Scott, who had first seen the remix just prior to “Love That Bob,” recalled that it was screened multiple times throughout the evening: “every time they played it I ran back into the main room so I could watch it on the screen.”⁹⁹

Brother O’Nottigan’s fart tape was central to the financial success of “Love That Bob!,” with Brother Bucks recalling that he and Brother Randall “made a lot of money that night.”¹⁰⁰ Copies of the tape were hawked for twenty dollars at a merchandising table manned by Brother Randall, where attendees could also purchase back issues of the URTFC newsletter, neon photocopies of a high-school yearbook photograph of the televangelist, and t-shirts featuring Tilton squinting and surrounded by either dollar signs or bills.¹⁰¹ The merchandising table also served as the site of SufferinSprings’ initial introduction to Brother Randall and his wife Sister Donna, demonstrating the event’s potential, much like more sincere fan gatherings, for fostering relationships between ironic Tilton fans.¹⁰² SufferinSprings broke the ice by deploying a Tilton-esque burst of *glossolia* – “koolabasanda” – and informed the couple that he was a long-time Tilton taper with his own “highlights reel” of clips, setting in motion SufferinSprings’ entry into the URTFC under the self-selected moniker “Brother Russell,” and the development of long-term friendships.¹⁰³ Brother Russell would quickly become a core, active member of the URTFC, having found a community of Recreational Christians that helped address the loneliness he

⁹⁷ A video version of Schwa’s remix opens *Brother Bob and the Gospel of Greed*, VHS. The remix transforms Tilton’s rebuttal into a confession of his greed; e.g.: “Come on people, give me a little break,” was transformed into “Come on people, give me ten-thousand dollars”.

⁹⁸ Precker, “Poking Silly Fun at Tilton.”

⁹⁹ Farley Scott, Skype interview by author, April 26, 2012.

¹⁰⁰ Brother Bucks, Skype interview by author, January 6, 2012.

¹⁰¹ The merchandise table, and the price of the fart tape, was mentioned by Precker in “Poking Silly Fun at Tilton.” An image of Brother Randall behind the stocked merchandise table can be found at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/81188628@N00/6439933691/>, accessed January 28, 2015.

¹⁰² For more sincere fan gatherings as sites of personal networking, see Camille Bacon-Smith, *Enterprising Women*, 8-16.

¹⁰³ SufferinSprings/Brother Russell, Skype interview by author, December 17, 2011.

experienced after his recent deconversion from fundamentalist Christianity, as discussed in the previous chapter.

With its mixture of raucous revival parody and free flowing alcohol, “Love That Bob!” hearkened back to the mock revival meetings described by American evangelist Peter Cartwright in the nineteenth-century, and if *Primetime Live*’s claims that Robert Tilton parodied preachers and drunkenly attended revival meetings for “sport” were accurate, may have been an event that the televangelist himself would have enjoyed at one point in his life.¹⁰⁴ Furthermore, the music, heavy irony, media play, and merchandising featured during “Love That Bob!” was reminiscent of contemporary “Devivals” hosted by the Church of the SubGenius; indeed, Reverend Bob was affiliated with the COSG and Brother Randall, as mentioned, cited the parody religion as an influence on the development of the URTFC.¹⁰⁵ In line with her argument that the COSG is, at the least, a “functional equivalent of religion,” Carole Cusack has suggested that Devivals might be thought of as a form of “religious celebration,” in which “inspired and charismatic preachers” spread the life-changing gospel of “Slack.”¹⁰⁶ The similarities between Devivals and “Love That Bob!” however, reinforce the previous chapter’s argument that the COSG is better considered a religious parody than a religion in and of itself.¹⁰⁷

“Love That Bob!” was inherently relational in that it involved ironic play with a widely accepted televangelical fake, and while such activities can be considered religious work due to their commentaries on religious authenticity, it would be a stretch to claim that the event was a *religious* celebration. Similarly, overemphasizing the purported potential of COSG Devivals to

¹⁰⁴ For a discussion of Peter Cartwright’s account of revival parody, see the introduction to this dissertation. *Primetime Live*, ABC, November 21, 1991. In a 1995 decision related to Tilton’s ministry’s ongoing legal actions against ABC, legal representatives of the ministry argued that Tilton had played no part in the 1963 “tent revival disgrace” described on *Primetime Live*, which, the plaintiff argued, was “a fad fueled by” the film *Elmer Gantry* (1960). While *Primetime Live*’s informant admitted in raw interview footage that he was not absolutely confident that Tilton had specifically attended and mocked such revival meetings, he “ran with” a “group that did, and that made fun of the preachers,” and he claimed that Tilton performed revival preacher parodies at parties. “It was like a group of comedians standing around and throwing lines back and forth to one another,” the informant recalled, “There was nobody that wasn’t included. We all took part in this.”; see “Tilton v. Capital Cities/ABC Inc., 905 F. Supp. 1514 (1995),” available at <http://law.justia.com/cases/federal/district-courts/FSupp/905/1514/1740773/>, accessed January 28, 2015.

¹⁰⁵ During our interview on April 26, 2012, Farley Scott pointed out that he starred in a Church of the SubGenius commercial which aired on MTV in 1991; see “SubGenius Commercial,” YouTube video, 1:02, posted by “Ivan Stang,” November 3, 2006, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wtb2MI1pJk8>. Brother Randall, Skype interview by author, December 4, 2011.

¹⁰⁶ Cusack, *Invented Religions*, 3, 84, 106.

¹⁰⁷ Pace Kirby, “Occultural Bricolage and Popular Culture,” 43.

foster religious experience obscures their more important function as “sophisticated critiques” of religions, and in the case of Devivals roughly contemporaneous with “Love That Bob!,” of evangelical Christianity, in particular.¹⁰⁸ For example, at a 1992 Devival in Cleveland, following the prosperity gospel-lamprooning country “hymn” “My Wallet Belongs to ‘Bob’,” a joke by Reverend Ivan Stang that the COSG’s holy salesman could sell “hypocrisy to Baptists,” the recognition of his fellow “killed-again SubGeniuses,” and appeals to the crowd to buy twenty-dollar memberships and COSG merchandise, Ivan Stang “ranted” about the evangelical culture in his hometown of Dallas.¹⁰⁹ “They call Dallas...well, it’s part of the ‘Bible Belt,’” Stang explained, “And because Bob Tilton...and so many other preachers come from there...Dallas is called the ‘buckle’ of the Bible Belt.” “What we have been called to do by J.R. ‘Bob’ Dobbs and his lovely wife Connie,” Stang continued, to the cheering encouragement of his nightclub audience “is to unbuckle the Bible Belt so that its stupid looking pants may drop to its knees and it will be forced to gaze, unflinching, upon its own private desires!”

Robert Tilton’s ongoing media scandal had rendered him a potent symbol of evangelical hypocrisy and greed, and the COSG eagerly incorporated comedic treatments of the televangelist into its Devival events. Brother O’Nottigan’s fart tape, for example, which Ivan Stang described during our interview as “one of the funniest things I’ve ever seen,” was screened at a 1992 Devival in Atlanta, Georgia, while clips from a video for the Tilton-sampling song “Don’t Eat Your Seed,” featuring a Tilton-masked actor frolicking with scantily clad models, was included in a video collage that played behind Stang as he ranted during a 1991 New Year’s Devival in Dallas, just over a week prior to “Love That Bob!”¹¹⁰ The tenor of “Love That Bob!,” however, differed from the satirical tone of such Devivals in that it mixed ironically critical humor with

¹⁰⁸ Cusack, *Invented Religions*, 3.

¹⁰⁹ See “1992 Rant ‘N Rave SubGenius Devival in Praise of ‘Bob’ Dobbs,” YouTube video, 2:01:32, posted by “General Public,” April 10, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UXAdY-epBTA>. For SubGenius “ranting” as a form of subversive preaching, see Cusack, *Invented Religions*, 94.

¹¹⁰ Reverend Ivan Stang, Skype interview by author, May 1, 2012. For the screening of the Tilton fart tape at the Atlanta Devival, see the video description of “SubGenius Devival with the Swingin’ Love Corpses 1992 PhenomiCon,” YouTube video, 2:01:44, posted by “Philo Drummond,” August 7, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G354OZtnGEO>. For the Dallas Devival featuring the “Don’t Eat Your Seed” video, see “Club No New Year SubGenius Devival – Dallas, 1991-92,” YouTube video, 1:42:53, posted by “General Public,” April 10, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MTXznMCPnhg>. The video was created by John A. Davis for “Drill Thrall music”; see “Producer Profile: John A. Davis,” http://www.bigmoviezone.com/filmsearch/producers/producer_display.html?uniq=275, accessed January 28, 2015. A copy of the video can be found on *Robert Tilton and the Gospel of Greed: Special Video Festival Edition!* (Dallas: The Door Magazine, n.d.), DVD.

genuine admiration for Tilton as a performer and/or a religious huckster.¹¹¹ During our interview, Brother Bucks judged the COSG, which he had some contact with during the 1980s, as “too negative” for his tastes, and he pointed out to Michael Precker of *The Dallas Morning News* that the “love” aspect of “Love That Bob!” was not entirely tongue-in-cheek: “There’s really a great deal of affection for him here.”¹¹² It would be this form of Recreational Christianity, mixing irony with hints of genuine admiration, which the core members of the URTFC, buoyed by the success of their Tilton “tribute” night, would spread as the televangelist’s scandal raged on.

After “Love That Bob!”: The Brief Rise and Gradual Fall of an Ironic Fan Following

In February 1992, Brother Randall published the fourth issue of his newsletter, in which he dropped the descriptor “unofficial” from the title – perhaps a vote of confidence for the fan club’s future prospects. Much of “The Robert Tilton Fan Club Newsletter” was dedicated to a recap of “Love That Bob!,” with Brother Randall confessing that, for him, “the most enjoyable part of that blessed night of miracles was getting to meet some of the fan club partners like Brother Derek, Sister Rene, Brother Russell, and Brother Scott – to name just a few.”¹¹³ Brother Russell, making his first contribution to the newsletter, also expressed excitement at having come across fellow Tilton fans: “I was thrilled to learn so many others share my obsession with the Tilton phenomenon. Finding out there was a fan club made my spirit leap within me.” To that point unaffiliated with any alternative or underground media networks, Brother Russell made an attempt to connect with other tapers of the televangelist:

“By the way, I’ve been compiling a highlights tape of Success N’ Life for the past year or so, saving some of Bob’s more ‘anointed’ moments for posterity. Has anyone else been crazy enough to do this? If so I’d like to contact them and maybe get some stuff I’ve missed (like the legendary ‘toppling the walls of Jericho’ program where

¹¹¹ As discussed in the previous chapter, Ivan Stang appreciated the performative skills of, in his opinion, seemingly sincere televangelists such as Jimmy Swaggart, but was more openly critical of alleged “seed faith” scammers such as Peter Popoff and Robert Tilton.

¹¹² Brother Bucks, Skype interview by author, January 6, 2012. Precker, “Poking Silly Fun at Tilton.”

¹¹³ Brother Randall, ed. *The Robert Tilton Fan Club Newsletter*, 4 (Dallas, 1992), n.p.

Bob marched around the prayer altar seven times and then shouted the shout of victory).”¹¹⁴

Brother Randall echoed Brother Russell’s desire to network with others who recorded the televangelist – “All you Tilton tapers get in touch” – and also put out calls for a copy of Tilton’s 1988 book, *How to Kick the Devil Out of Your Life*, as well as a “widow’s mite,” a replica coin sent out by Tilton’s ministry, and based on his oft-deployed gospel tale of a poor, yet generous, widow.¹¹⁵ This latter piece of “Christian kitsch,” a sign of hope for the faithful, was ironically prized by Brother Randall for its very kitchiness – as a worthless symbol of Tilton’s ludicrous theology, spiritual greed, and the amusing credulity of his followers.¹¹⁶ “Have lots to trade” he added, hoping to entice others.

After “Love That Bob!” the newly christened Robert Tilton Fan Club (RTFC) followed two interrelated trajectories. The RTFC newsletter functioned as a hub for a burgeoning “virtual community” of ironic fans of the televangelist, while a small group in the Dallas area, the core of the RTFC, engaged in face-to-face activities focused on the increasingly beleaguered televangelist.¹¹⁷ In addition to continued investigation of the ministry’s fundraising practices by the Texas Attorney General’s office, Tulsa-based lawyer Gary Richardson sued Tilton and his ministry for forty million dollars, for the alleged “malicious infliction of emotional distress” on a “woman who said the ministry continued to mail solicitation letters to her husband months after he died.”¹¹⁸ Brothers Bucks and Randall capitalized on the ongoing media scandal by sending out a press release promoting the RTFC as a “third” approach to Robert Tilton – a group of

¹¹⁴ Incidentally, Brother Russell’s request for this particular clip would go unanswered until the 2012 online appearance of “Bob’s Shofar March,” YouTube video, 2:59, posted by “Zilcheal,” March 1, 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G_V9qldGHT0. “OMG I thought this classic was lost forever!” wrote Brother Russell, as “SufferinSprings,” in the video’s commenting area, “(I) saw this when it first aired but didn’t capture it on tape. None of my Bob-loving friends had seen it or caught it on tape. Now at last I have evidence that the whole thing wasn’t just a dream. This is quite possibly the cheesiest thing Bob ever did on the air. THANK YOU for saving this and posting it.”

¹¹⁵ Robert Tilton, *How to Kick the Devil Out of Your Life* (Dallas: Robert Tilton Ministries, 1988). The story of the widow’s mite can be found in Mark 12: 41-44. For Tilton encouraging callers to receive the paradoxically titled “authentic replica of the widow’s mite,” see “Bob God Robert Tilton in Israel 1990 01,” YouTube video, 11:49, posted by “Zschim,” September 27, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tp51EuPXCAM>.

¹¹⁶ For an overview of evangelical “Christian kitsch,” which is often derided by outsiders to the faith, see Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 222-269.

¹¹⁷ For the potential of alternative publications to sustain “virtual communities,” see Duncombe, *Notes from Underground*, 49.

¹¹⁸ “Attorney Hints of Federal Suit against Tilton,” *Daily Oklahoman*, March 5, 1992.

“false followers” ostensibly interested only in the preacher’s “entertainment value,” and who thereby offered an amusing alternative to the mainstream media’s focus on the battle between “angry naysayers” and “faithful viewers.”¹¹⁹ Karen Thomas of the *Chicago Tribune* picked up on the press release, and interviewed both Brothers Randall and Bucks for a March 29, 1992 overview of Tilton’s troubles.¹²⁰ Thomas included Brother Randall’s explanation that the RTFC approached Tilton “from a non-religious point of view, as an entertainer,” and mentioned both the club’s “Love that Bob!” tribute night and its foundational newsletter. Her report also hinted at the threat Tilton’s legal issues posed to the very existence of the irreverent fan following. “We don’t want to see him hauled off to prison for anything he has done,” Brother Bucks stated, adding, “He is the main source of our humor.” In the fifth RTFC newsletter, published the following month, Brother Randall aired his fears “that Bob may be taken from us one day,” or that he would become “more toned down and palatable to mainstream Christians,” and, thus, less ironically amusing.¹²¹

For the time being, however, the RTFC’s leaders reveled in the attention that the fan club was receiving from not only across the country, but from across the pond as well, via the British television program “Made in the USA.” Produced by Fenton Bailey and Randy Barbato, a pair of unfaithful fans who will be discussed further in later chapters, “Made in the USA” featured “reports on American pop culture with clips from local public access television,” and anticipated the American mainstreaming of ironic approaches to televangelism, which will be covered in the following chapter.¹²² Appearing before one of Tilton’s large roadside billboards in Dallas, reporter-on-the-scene Bill Judkins offers a brief overview of the televangelist’s rise to fame, capped off with a sharp dig: “Of course, it goes without saying he’s under investigation for fraud.”¹²³ “Whether you think Robert Tilton is an angel or the devil,” he continues in a later scene, walking towards a suburban bungalow at dusk, “there’s no denying he makes some pretty terrific television. But for many, it’s Reverend Tilton’s eclectic brand of media savvy

¹¹⁹ An image of the undated press release can be found at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/81188628@N00/6439954785/lightbox/>, accessed January 28, 2015.

¹²⁰ Karen M. Thomas, “Suits, Probes Bedevil Popular Pastor Bob,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 29, 1992.

¹²¹ Brother Randall, ed. *Robert Tilton Fan Club Newsletter*, 5 (Dallas, 1992), n.p.

¹²² “Made in the USA,” *The WOW Report*, <http://worldofwonder.net/productions/made-in-the-usa/>, accessed January 28, 2015. See also Elizabeth Kolbert, “Viewers in Britain Catch a Bouquet of America’s Weirdest Shows,” *The New York Times*, March 16, 1994.

¹²³ Clips of this segment can be found on *Brother Bob and the Gospel of Greed*, VHS.

performance that makes him worthy of praise and devotion. Come with me as we meet the unauthorized Robert Tilton Fan Club.” An interior shot reveals Brothers Randall and Bucks standing in front of a floor-to-ceiling painting of Tilton, the televangelist’s face altered in a canine fashion. In words taken nearly verbatim from his first newsletter, Brother Randall explains his attraction to Tilton: “The thing about Robert Tilton to me that’s so good is that he’s so over the top, so unabashed, so blatantly insincere and downright evil that it’s refreshing.” “I’ll drink to that,” Brother Bucks chimes in.

The centerpiece of “Made in the USA’s” Tilton segment was footage of an alleged RTFC fan club meeting, including a boisterous “Speaking in Tongues workshop” led by one “Brother David,” and the sale of various Tilton-themed paraphernalia.¹²⁴ “The bigger trouble Bob gets in, the more demand there is for Bob products,” Brother Randall explains, standing at a table laden with merchandise, including leftovers from “Love That Bob!” “This is the Robert Tilton paddle ball set,” he points out, picking up a paddle emblazoned with a photograph of a characteristically squinting Tilton, “It’s something that’s just going into production, this is kind of the prototype.” While “Made in the USA” presented the RTFC’s meetings as well-attended, small-scale replicas of “Love That Bob!,” Brother Randall admitted during our interview that much of what was aired was “complete b.s.” – a playful fiction for the benefit of the program’s producers. “The reality,” he explained, “would be a bunch of people sitting around on couches watching TV.” “But we’d have fun,” Brother Randall continued, “and Big Bucks would come over and bring one of his Bad White Gospel (cassettes)...and we’d have little sing alongs...after a few drinks, and get into the music and the spirit of things.” As Brother Russell pointed out, these “house gatherings” were also venues to copy and “swap videos” of Tilton, as well as “other weird stuff”: “everybody brings their videotapes and a blank. You get what your friend has taped, and your friend gets what you have taped.”¹²⁵

In addition to irregular, low-key meetings, Dallas-based members of the RTFC occasionally crashed services at Robert Tilton’s church and other ministry events. Successfully

¹²⁴ The “Speaking in Tongues workshop” is mentioned in the fifth issue of the *Robert Tilton Fan Club* newsletter (1992), and was depicted in a YouTube video, “Robert Tilton Fan Club on ‘Made in the USA,’” which has since been removed from the site.

¹²⁵ Brother Russell, Skype interview by author, December 17, 2011. For fan “house gatherings” as sites of VHS copying, see Bacon-Smith, *Enterprising Women*, 164-165.

infiltrating Word of Faith demanded considerable skills in “performative parody,” as Tilton’s church, like those of many other prominent and controversial televangelists, was carefully monitored by security staff on the lookout for unusual behavior.¹²⁶ During our interview Brother Randall described an incident in which he and a group had their cover blown as they tried to participate in the taping of “a new intro to *Success N Life*,” centered on a “crowd scene of people throwing away their crutches and stuff.”¹²⁷ As Brother Randall recalled, they had initially “managed to say the right things” to Tilton’s staffers, and “everything was cool” until an acquaintance showed up who was “obviously there to cause trouble.” As the offending interloper was ejected from the premises, he “called out” to the more convincing crashers, resulting in their removal as well. While he had no intention of disrupting the taping, Brother Randall conceded in retrospect that the ministry’s security “had every right to kick us out.”

Key to pulling off a successful performative parody was the construction of a convincing outward appearance. “At Word of Faith we’d wear a coat and tie just like regular church,” Brother Randall explained, evidenced by a photograph of himself and his wife, Sister Donna, standing in front of Tilton’s church at an unspecified date.¹²⁸ Brother Randall wears a non-descript grey suit, while Sister Donna sports a conservative white top with a prominently placed “Jesus” pin, its gaudy nature a subtle indicator of the couple’s ironic stance. Also important was acting in ways so as to avoid detection. Brother Russell was a particularly effective parodist in this regard, having mastered what he called “Christianese” during his years as a fervent fundamentalist, and he would later share some of his tips with readers of the RTFC newsletter’s successor zine.¹²⁹ He warned, for example, against “the overuse and ill-timing of well-known Pentecostal interjections,” and counselled, “(w)hen in doubt, whisper, don’t shout.” Brother Randall maintained during our interview that he and his fellow crashers “weren’t really ridiculing, or mocking anybody, or causing trouble” during their visits to Word of Faith, where they watched “Bob perform,” enjoyed the church’s first-class band, and sang and danced – much

¹²⁶ For “performative parody,” see Day, *Satire and Dissent*, 69. Brad Bailey, a contributor to the humor-based religious magazine *The Door* (to be discussed further in the following chapter), reported having been asked by security to leave Word of Faith church for allegedly acting suspiciously during an undercover visit; see Brad Bailey, “Bang! Pow! Hallelujah! Rootin’-Tootin’ Robert Tilton!,” *The Door*, September/October 1989.

¹²⁷ Brother Randall, Skype interview by author, December 4, 2011.

¹²⁸ Ibid. The picture can be found at <https://www.flickr.com/photos/81188628@N00/6439934289/>, accessed January 28, 2015.

¹²⁹ Brother Russell, Skype interview by author, December 17, 2011; Ibid., “How You Can Hang With The Holy...*Hassle-Free!*,” in *Snake Oil*, 1, ed. Brother Randall (Dallas, 1993), n.p.

like Tilton's faithful followers.¹³⁰ At the same time, their visits were loaded with irony, and their "pleasurable misuse" of the services, as well as their performative parodies of the "crazy people" in attendance, were comically critical of Tilton's ministry and its supporters.¹³¹

As trophies of their successful infiltrations of Word of Faith, the participating RTFC members videotaped the services that they crashed, and Brother Russell described seeing himself in crowd shots alongside "other people that watch him for entertainment" as "fucking awesome" and "gratifying."¹³² The days of such fun, however, were waning. Faced with mounting obstacles in the early months of 1992, Robert Tilton's ministry initially expanded its efforts. At the end of April the ministry announced plans for "The Power Channel" – a local twenty-four hour cycle of Christian programming that would feature "minimal" appearances from Tilton himself.¹³³ The sixth RTFC newsletter, published in June 1992, suggests that many of the televangelist's ironic fans were less than enthusiastic about the new development. Describing the channel as a "real mixed bag" of shows and formats, Brother Randall's foremost question was "WHY is he doing it? Is it merely a fund raising gimmick...Or is Bob just completely INSANE?"¹³⁴ Contributors "Brother Jason" and "Brother Derek" lamented that Tilton was "rarely in front of the camera (sic)." Instead, "every couple of hours one of two odd little men appear in Bob's familiar library set trying to emulate him and failing miserably."¹³⁵ For his part, "Brother Kenneth" pointed out that the channel broadcast a "very weak signal," and was "incredibly difficult to pick up even in Dallas."¹³⁶ Despite the disappointments of Tilton's latest venture, the new contributors evidenced the ongoing expansion of the RTFC, as did Brother Randall's welcoming of readers "joining us via plugs we've gotten in such august publications as Ghoul Pardi, Obscure, The Brutarian, and Psychotronic" – indicators, along with a mention in *Zontar's Ejecto-Pod*, of the RTFC newsletter's growing profile in the American zine scene.¹³⁷

¹³⁰ Brother Randall, Skype interview by author, December 4, 2011.

¹³¹ Ibid. For "pleasurable misuse," see Fiske, *Television Culture*, 315.

¹³² Brother Russell, Skype interview by author, December 17, 2011.

¹³³ Nancy St. Pierre, "Tilton Plans 24-Hour TV Format," *The Dallas Morning News*, April 28, 1992.

¹³⁴ Brother Randall, "All Tilton All Day: Power 55," in *Robert Tilton Fan Club Newsletter*, 6, ed. Brother Randall (Dallas, June 1992), n.p.

¹³⁵ Brother Jason and Brother Derek, "Confounding the Wise," in *Robert Tilton Fan Club Newsletter*, 6, ed. Brother Randall (Dallas, June 1992), n.p.

¹³⁶ Brother Kenneth, "A Different Perspective," in *Robert Tilton Fan Club Newsletter*, 6, ed. Brother Randall (Dallas, June 1992), n.p.

¹³⁷ Brother Randall, ed. *Robert Tilton Fan Club Newsletter*, 6 (Dallas, June 1992); "Robert Tilton Fan Club," *Zontar's Ejecto-Pod* 4 (1992), n.p.

On July 9, 1992, *Primetime Live* aired another follow-up to its Tilton investigation, which included clips of the televangelist admitting that he sometimes prayed over “computer printout(s)” rather than “original prayer request(s),” which were often “thrown away.”¹³⁸ The program also featured an interview with a former family nanny, who claimed that Tilton’s garage had been filled with boxes of unread prayer requests which the preacher ordered her to throw into the trash. This renewed national criticism set the stage for what would be the final edition of the RTFC newsletter, published the following month. Moving away from the rough, stapled look of his previous newsletters, Brother Randall produced a glossy double issue (#7/8) with nested pages – a foreshadowing of his next publishing venture. “These are trying times for Bob-watchers in the Dallas/Ft Worth metroplex,” he admitted in the opening pages. “The Power Channel,” which had proven to be “a mixed blessing at best,” was finished, and Sunday services from Word of Faith were no longer available on local Dallas television.¹³⁹ With fresh Tilton resources in increasingly short supply, the final RTFC newsletter relied heavily on playful speculation, jokes, and previously published material. A reprinted article from a 1990 issue of *Zontar’s Ejecto-Pod*, for example, featured author Jayne Jain faux praising Tilton as a “truly ZONTARIAN,” “long standing PROPHET OF COMMODITY FETISHISM.”¹⁴⁰ Brother Hal drew up a *Success N Life* drinking game, including the category “WHERE’S THE FART?”: “Whenever Bob squinches, two drinks are taken.”¹⁴¹ Brother Randall contributed two jokingly speculative entries, one of which examined whether Tilton was involved in the occult, and advertised a two-dollar bumper sticker emblazoned with “Robert Tilton Turns Me On!,” as well as a set of “12 Robert Tilton Trading Cards,” featuring humorous images and captions.¹⁴²

¹³⁸ *Primetime Live*, ABC, July 9, 1992. A copy of the report and the date can be found on *Brother Bob and the Gospel of Greed*, VHS.

¹³⁹ Brother Randall, “From Brother Randall’s Desk,” in *Robert Tilton Fan Club Newsletter*, 7/8, ed. Brother Randall (Dallas, August 1992), n.p. “Televangelist Tilton Cancels Sunday Show,” *The Houston Chronicle*, August 14, 1992. In the November 27, 1992 article “Televangelist Appears to be Closing ‘Power Channel,’” the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* reported that the station broadcasting Tilton’s latest venture had “been without power for three months.”

¹⁴⁰ Jayne Jain, “Planting That Seed: Rev. Robert Tilton,” *Robert Tilton Fan Club Newsletter*, 7/8, ed. Brother Randall (Dallas, August 1992), n.p.; originally published in Brian Curran and Jan Johnson eds., *Zontar’s Ejecto-Pod* (1990), n.p.

¹⁴¹ Brother Hal, “‘Tilt’-ing the Focus of Your Parties,” in *Robert Tilton Fan Club Newsletter*, 7/8, ed. Brother Randall (Dallas, August 1992), n.p.

¹⁴² Brother Randall, “What Master Does Bob Serve?,” in *Robert Tilton Fan Club Newsletter*, 7/8, ed. Brother Randall (Dallas, August 1992), n.p.; *Ibid.*, “Fan Club Merchandise!!!,” in *Robert Tilton Fan Club Newsletter*, 7/8, ed. Brother Randall (Dallas, August 1992), n.p.

Although the influence of his fan club and newsletter continued to grow, Brother Randall read the writing on the wall regarding Robert Tilton, and made the decision to expand the scope of his efforts. “For the future,” Brother Randall wrote in the final RTFC newsletter, “I hope that this newsletter will continue to be a forum where one and all will come to gab and gossip not only about Bob, but about the entire televangelist scene.”¹⁴³ This vision was realized with the 1993 publication of the tellingly titled *Snake Oil* zine, which carried the tagline, “Your Guide to Kooky Kontemporary Kristian Kulture.” On the first page of the zine’s inaugural edition, Randall described *Snake Oil* as “America’s premier forum for secular devotees of today’s televangelist scene,” and explained that his target audience was the “growing congregation of ‘false followers’ who are hip to the comedy, pathos, intrigue, and outlandish hairdos that await them inside the doors of the electronic church.”¹⁴⁴ The zine’s purview extended beyond televangelism, however, to include pieces on Christianities which Brother Randall found ironically amusing, bizarrely fascinating, and/or mind-bogglingly distasteful, such as the ministry of the recently deceased Branch Davidian leader David Koresh, snake-handling churches, and the controversial Christian radio preacher and exorcist Bob Larson.¹⁴⁵ Despite *Snake Oil*’s broader focus, Brother Randall reassured readers that the Robert Tilton Fan Club continued to exist, and he expressed confidence that “our towering giant of a friend Bob Tilton will endure.”¹⁴⁶

The first issue of *Snake Oil* featured a considerable amount of Tilton-related material, most notably Brother Randall’s “Amy Tilton Wedding Scrapbook.”¹⁴⁷ Robert and Marte Tilton’s only daughter was married on May 15, 1993, with the ceremony and reception held at the Word of Faith complex.¹⁴⁸ As the festivities were open to the public, Brothers Randall, Russell, and a small group of other RTFC members jumped at the opportunity to attend. Although it was Amy Tilton’s big day, the crashers were more interested in the bride’s father, who was suddenly

¹⁴³ Brother Randall, “From Brother Randall’s Desk,” in *Robert Tilton Fan Club Newsletter*, 7/8.

¹⁴⁴ Brother Randall, “From Brother Randall’s Desk,” in *Snake Oil*, 1, ed. Brother Randall (Dallas, 1993), n.p.

¹⁴⁵ Brother Randall, “Wet David Koresh T-Shirt Contest,” in *Snake Oil*, 1, ed. Brother Randall (Dallas, 1993), n.p.; *ibid.*, “How Can I Find a Nice Church Where They Handle Snakes?,” in *Snake Oil*, 3, ed. Brother Randall (Dallas, 1994), n.p.; *ibid.*, “Boyd Rice on Religious Shock Jock Bob Larson,” in *Snake Oil*, 2, ed. Brother Randall (Dallas, 1993), n.p.

¹⁴⁶ Brother Randall, “From Brother Randall’s Desk,” in *Snake Oil*, 1.

¹⁴⁷ Brother Randall, “Amy Tilton Wedding Scrapbook,” in *Snake Oil*, 1, ed. Brother Randall (Dallas, 1993), n.p.

¹⁴⁸ For an announcement of Amy Tilton’s wedding, see Helen Bryant, “Tilton’s Good News: A Wedding,” *The Dallas Morning News*, March 21, 1993.

tantalizingly close. “It was the first time we had ever really had access to him,” Brother Randall recalled during our interview, “that was the first time we had ever been face to face with Bob.”¹⁴⁹ For Brother Randall, the unparalleled highlight of the wedding, and his ironic fandom in general, was meeting Tilton during a brief moment immortalized in a photograph. Captioned “Bob talks to his No. 1 fan” in *Snake Oil*, the photograph features a besuited Brother Randall and tuxedoed Tilton standing side by side, both smiling brightly as they face to the left of the frame.¹⁵⁰ Documenting Brother Randall’s face-to-face meeting with the unwitting object of his faux devotion, the photograph also captured his genuine excitement at meeting Tilton. As Brother Russell explained, while the core members of the RTFC “laughed at” Tilton, they were also “fascinated with” the televangelist, who, he stated, “was sort of like a rock star to us.”¹⁵¹ Recounting the meeting in *Snake Oil*, Brother Randall confessed that he could barely contain himself: “I wanted to blurt out, ‘I’m the president of your fan club!’ but thought better of it.”¹⁵² “We were just over the moon” Brother Russell added during our interview, “I didn’t get my picture taken with Bob, but just that I knew somebody that got their picture taken with Bob...we were ecstatic.”¹⁵³

At the end of September 1993, it was announced that after nearly two years of negative press attention and ongoing lawsuits, Robert Tilton was leaving the airwaves. According to Arbitron data published in *The Dallas Morning News*, *Success N Life* had lost 84.4% of its viewers between November 1991, the month of *Primetime Live*’s first investigative report, and February 1993, a staggering drop accompanied by plummeting donations.¹⁵⁴ “It is a matter of the media,” Word of Faith’s lawyer J.C. Joyce complained to *The Dallas Morning News*, “When people get up and say Robert Tilton is guilty of fraud, and the media not saying ‘What fraud?’ – you (the media) have never asked the question because there is no fraud.”¹⁵⁵ Joyce’s accusation carried considerable merit, as no charges against the televangelist or his ministry would stick.¹⁵⁶

¹⁴⁹ Brother Randall, Skype interview by author, December 4, 2011.

¹⁵⁰ Brother Randall, “Amy Tilton Wedding Scrapbook.”

¹⁵¹ Brother Russell, Skype interview by author, December 17, 2011.

¹⁵² Brother Randall, “Amy Tilton Wedding Scrapbook.”

¹⁵³ Brother Russell, Skype interview by author, December 17, 2011.

¹⁵⁴ Steve Scott, “Tilton’s TV Ratings Plummet,” *The Dallas Morning News*, April 18, 1993.

¹⁵⁵ Howard Swindle and Allen Pusey, “Tilton to Discontinue his Television Ministry,” *The Dallas Morning News*, September 30, 1993.

¹⁵⁶ As Sean Rowe of the *Dallas Observer* would write in 1997, Tilton had “all but won his holy war” against the media and his legal opponents, having never been convicted of fraud, and having a number of other lawsuits dismissed and overturned on appeal; see *ibid.*, “Second Coming,” *Dallas Observer*, November 6, 1997.

The end of *Success N Life* did, however, provide a satisfying conclusion to the Tilton media scandal as a public religious drama, and the televangelist's retreat offered encouragement to those who considered him a dangerous hypocrite, including Ole Anthony of the Trinity Foundation. Reached by *The Dallas Morning News*, Anthony rebuffed Joyce's claims of media manipulation, and reaffirmed his belief that Tilton was an exploitative conman: "The media didn't cause his demise. His fraud caused his demise."¹⁵⁷

Addressing the cancellation of *Success N Life* in the second issue of *Snake Oil*, Brother Randall wrote that he was "angry" and "confused," and he questioned the outcome of the media's attacks: "Is the world really a safer place now that Robert Tilton is off the air? Or will inferior, substandard seed faith evangelists... simply move in and claim SNL's market share?"¹⁵⁸ "Bob," he lamented, "we're gonna miss ya." Although he admitted that it might seem "trivial" to mention in the face of such devastating news, Brother Randall included a report on the RTFC's humorous intervention during a pro-Tilton courthouse protest in August 1993, an overview of which opened the previous chapter. This action, the centerpiece of which was RTFC member Sister Wendy breaking into a swarm of faithful followers while holding a sign with the "Robert Tilton Turns Me On!" bumper sticker attached, was a departure for the RTFC, representing the fan club's only intentionally disruptive culture jam.¹⁵⁹ "I've always maintained a policy of not harassing Pastor Tilton, his family, or his church members," Brother Randall explained in *Snake Oil*, while admitting during our interview that the fan club did "mess with" Tilton's supporters that one time.¹⁶⁰ Although uncharacteristic, the RTFC's courthouse prank was rewarded with a response from the televangelist himself. "They don't bother me. They seem harmless," Tilton responded to a reporter's questions about his unfaithful fans; yet, he also levied a severe theological judgment: "They are very unaware of the depth of their sacrilege."¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁷ Swindle and Pusey, "Tilton to Discontinue his Television Ministry."

¹⁵⁸ Brother Randall, "From Brother Randall's Desk," in *Snake Oil*, 2, ed. Brother Randall (Dallas, 1993), n.p.

¹⁵⁹ "Robert Tilton Fan Club on Channel 8," YouTube video, 2:19, posted by "Randy R," September 30, 2006, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R0hx10eIqvI>. For the date, see *Brother Bob and the Gospel of Greed*, VHS.

¹⁶⁰ Brother Randall, "From Brother Randall's Desk," in *Snake Oil*, 2; Brother Randall, Skype interview by author, December 4, 2011.

¹⁶¹ Robert V. Camuto, "Love That Bob!: The Rev. Robert Tilton Inspires Irreverent Fan," *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, August 28, 1993. Brother Randall mentioned Tilton's recognition of the RTFC in "From Brother Randall's Desk," in ed. Brother Randall, *Snake Oil*, 2.

Conclusion

In her history of the American prosperity gospel, Kate Bowler describes the 1980s as the “Golden Age” of televangelism, when “prosperity preachers ruled the decade as stars of the small screen.”¹⁶² Razelle Frankl narrows the time frame of the “Golden Age” to the years between 1980 and 1987, emphasizing the emergence of national religious celebrities and sizable audiences.¹⁶³ For the core members of the RTFC, however, the “Golden Age” of televangelism began with the high-profile troubles of preachers like Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart in 1987, and ended with Robert Tilton’s defection from the airwaves in 1993. Never again would media scandals involving suspicious televangelists achieve such cultural prominence, or offer so much amusement. A sense that an exceptionally entertaining era of televangelism was fading pervaded Brother Randall’s latter publications. In the first issue of *Snake Oil*, for example, Brother Bucks waxed nostalgic in the context of “the dimming of Bob’s reign”: “If you’re anything like me, you will shed a small spiritual tear as you realize the difference between the early and mid-90’s.”¹⁶⁴ While the American prosperity gospel and its televangelists would march, during the 1990s the movement increasingly shifted from what Bowler calls a “hard prosperity” stance, which controversially “drew a straight line between life circumstances and a believer’s faith,” towards a “soft prosperity” approach, grounded in “therapeutic and down-to-earth Christian self-improvement,” paving the way for contemporary superstars such as Joel Osteen.¹⁶⁵ For ironic fans of hard-sell religious hucksters like Robert Tilton, however, this kinder, gentler breed of televangelist has proven incredibly boring. “It’s not as much fun anymore because the personalities aren’t as colorful,” Brother Bucks bluntly stated during our interview.¹⁶⁶ While Brother Randall reported that he still checked out the occasional “wacky” television preacher, he even judged the most recent offerings of Robert Tilton (to be discussed in the following chapter) as too “sedate” for his tastes: “if I was going to watch Bob I’d pull out one of my old videotapes and watch some clips from back then.”¹⁶⁷

¹⁶² Bowler, *Blessed*, 104.

¹⁶³ Frankl, “Televangelism,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Society*, ed. William H. Swatos, Jr. (Walnut Creek: Altamira Press, 1998), 512.

¹⁶⁴ Brother Bucks, “A Word from Brother Bucks,” in *Snake Oil*, 1, ed. Brother Randall (Dallas, 1993), n.p.

¹⁶⁵ Bowler, *Blessed*, 78, 97.

¹⁶⁶ Brother Bucks, Skype interview by author, January 6, 2012.

¹⁶⁷ Brother Randall, Skype interview by author, December 4, 2011.

Although short-lived, the URTFC/RTFC evidenced the potential for suspicious and scandal-ridden televangelists to attract dedicated and productive followings of ironic fans, whose play with such perceived religious fakes resonated with likeminded individuals in Dallas and beyond, and conveyed, often implicitly, norms regarding authentic Christianity. These elements of the URTFC/RTFC overlapped with the activities of the Trinity Foundation which, through its comedic video proof texts, helped enshrine Robert Tilton's ironic humor value in the *Primetime Live* investigative report that would spark the scandal which would force his television ministry into a hiatus. While Brother Randall's fan club would not survive its subject's temporary absence from the airwaves, the Trinity Foundation, as the next chapter will demonstrate, would usher Recreational Christianity into the American cultural mainstream, albeit with a satirical edge intended to battle against purportedly exploitative and religiously inauthentic televangelists, including a returned Robert Tilton. Much more damaging to the televangelist's renewed efforts, however, would be Brother O'Nottigan's "fart" tape and its many imitators, the viral spread of which in a digital age would represent a serious stumbling block to Tilton's own attempts to establish an online video ministry.

Chapter 5 – Recreational Christianity Goes Mainstream: *Godstuff* and “Pastor Gas”

Introduction

By 1993, Brother Randall of the Robert Tilton Fan Club (RTFC) was on the hunt for a new televangelist to pay faux devotion towards as Tilton, faced with an ongoing media scandal and dwindling support, was soon to take a hiatus from television. Accordingly, the leadoff article in the inaugural issue of Brother Randall’s *Snake Oil* zine focused on the controversial Florida-based faith healer Benny Hinn.¹ Titled “Benny Hinn Blew Me!,” a sexually loaded joke referring to Hinn’s habit of blowing the Holy Spirit’s healing power upon the afflicted, the article outlined Brother Randall’s attempt to be “healed” of a feigned neck injury during a Dallas visit by the preacher’s crusade.² Brother Randall’s backstory and prominent neck brace were not enough to convince security to allow him near the stage, however, and he was instead relegated to general seating, from where he watched “the slickest begging for money I’ve ever witnessed.” Rather than amusing, Brother Randall reported that Hinn’s persistent fundraising, spurious healings, and the service’s sedate sentimentality had left “a bad taste in my mouth,” and argued that the preacher could not hold a candle to Robert Tilton, who, beyond his ironic appeal, genuinely motivated people: “Bob pumps you up, kicks you in the butt. Benny, on the other hand, lulls you into a submissive, emotional stupor. He’s a wimp. He’s Liberace to Bob Tilton’s Elvis.”

Besides, in Brother Randall’s opinion Benny Hinn could not even do scandal right. On March 2, 1993, *Inside Edition*, with the assistance of the aforementioned Trinity Foundation, aired an investigative report of Hinn, targeting his alleged healings and financial practices.³ As with *Primetime Live*’s Trinity-aided report on Robert Tilton, and in true tabloid television fashion, *Inside Edition* aired video clips which, as will be demonstrated to follow, were intended

¹ For a brief overview of Hinn’s ministry, see Melton, Lucas, and Stone, “Benny Hinn,” in *Prime-Time Religion*, 141-144. Brother Randall, “Benny Hinn Blew Me!” in *Snake Oil*, 1, ed. Brother Randall (Dallas, 1993), n.p.

² Hinn blowing upon the ill, who generally fall down dramatically, features in a popular online remix video which humorously dubs nu-metal band Drowning Pool’s 2001 hit “Bodies” underneath a compilation of such clips; see “Benny Hinn: Let the Bodies Hit the Floor,” YouTube video, 2:06, posted by “Human Notions,” May 9, 2007, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5lvU-Dislkl>.

³ A copy of the report and the date can be found on *The Many Faces of Benny Hinn: Version 3.0* (Dallas: The Door Magazine, n.d.), DVD.

to elicit disbelieving laughter from the audience, most notably clips of Hinn blowing on the suffering. The centerpiece of the report involved an actress, apparently more convincing than Brother Randall, pretending to be cured from polio at the hands of Hinn – a “miracle” his ministry would use as a testimonial without any form of verification. Confronted by *Inside Edition*’s Steve Wilson in an interview, Hinn readily expressed regret for such “mistakes,” penitently promising, “I really want to do better.” For an ironic televangelical fan like Brother Randall, however, this conciliatory move was a major letdown, particularly as compared to Robert Tilton’s entertaining rebuttals and counterclaims. “Benny revealed himself to be a spineless slimeball by totally kissing the butts of his attackers,” he wrote in *Snake Oil*, adding that Hinn’s “cop-out” compared unfavorably with the approach of Robert Tilton, “who did the honorable thing and *fought back* and who will ultimately prevail.”⁴

Despite Brother Randall’s humorous optimism, Robert Tilton’s television ministry temporarily folded at the end of October 1993.⁵ Brother Randall tried to sustain the RTFC by keeping *Snake Oil*’s readers abreast of local and regional Tilton news – “valuable” information before the advent of online communication.⁶ In the second issue of *Snake Oil* Brother Randall attempted to capitalize on his access to such news sources by advertising “The Beast of Robert Tilton Clippings Scrapbook,” filled with “50 pages of news stories and articles including the best of The Robert Tilton Fan Club Newsletter,” and available for the winkingly suggestive, postpaid price of \$6.66.⁷ In the same issue, just before announcing that Tilton and his wife Marte were set to divorce, Brother Randall mentioned a swiftly retracted report that Tilton had raped a woman in 1982.⁸ “What other scandals are the TV stations and newspapers sitting on,” he asked hopefully, noting that “a good scandal is the only way we can keep up with (Tilton).”⁹ The third issue of *Snake Oil*, published in the summer of 1994, opened with news of a married couple who had successfully sued Tilton’s ministry for one-and-a-half million dollars (a judgement later

⁴ Brother Randall, “Benny Hinn Blew Me!”

⁵ See Swindle and Pusey, “Tilton to Discontinue His Television Ministry.”

⁶ Brother Randall, Skype interview by author, December 4, 2011. Camille Bacon-Smith noted that the “*Star Trek* Welcommittee,” a mail-based fan hub, offered “news-clip services” for those who wrote in; see *Enterprising Women*, 83.

⁷ In Brother Randall, ed., *Snake Oil*, 2 (Dallas, 1993), n.p.

⁸ Daniel Cattau, “Tilton Files for Divorce from Wife,” *The Dallas Morning News*, August 17, 1993. For the retraction of the rape report on WFAA-TV, November 5, 1993, see *Brother Bob and the Gospel of Greed*, VHS.

⁹ Brother Randall, “Gospel Grapevine,” in *Snake Oil*, 2, ed. Brother Randall (Dallas, 1993), n.p.

reversed), after they had supported efforts for a “crisis center” that never materialized.¹⁰ Brother Randall revealed that he had spent a day in court during the trial, an experience which had altered his understanding of the televangelist. While the mainstream media had convicted Tilton as an evil exploiter of the desperate, a representation that was key to the RTFC’s play, Brother Randall conceded that “regardless of Robert Tilton’s underlying motivations...his program did, in fact, help those people for whom traditional counseling had failed.”¹¹

The final Tilton-related tidbit in the third issue of *Snake Oil* reported that the televangelist had come to embrace “strong prayer,” which involved screaming evil spirits out of individuals.¹² In the last issue of the zine, Brother Randall wrote that Tilton’s second wife – former beauty queen and evangelist Leigh Valentine – had introduced him to the originators of the controversial practice, preachers Sam and Jane Whaley, and that his adoption of their techniques had resulted in “a major rift in his home church here in Dallas.”¹³ Tilton’s new style was featured in the short-lived television program *Pastor Tilton*, which aired in limited markets in 1994, and which featured segments during which the televangelist laid his hands on prayer requests and yelled at the demons hounding viewers.¹⁴ In spite of such amusing histrionics, Brother Randall wrote that the “toned down” program “paled in comparison to the *Success N Life* of yore”; yet, he admitted that “Bob Tilton Lite was better than no Bob Tilton at all,” a dire potentiality which became a reality upon the cancellation of *Pastor Tilton*.¹⁵ Having lost his prime source of ironic televangelical entertainment for the foreseeable future, and with the increasing time demands of

¹⁰ Hugh Aynesworth, “Couple Prevail in Fraud Suit against Televangelist,” *The Washington Times*, April 22, 1994; Amy Latham, “Court Reverses Tilton Verdict,” *Tulsa World*, August 1, 1996.

¹¹ Brother Randall, “Gospel Grapevine,” in *Snake Oil*, 3, ed. Brother Randall (Dallas, 1994), n.p.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Brother Randall, “Gospel Grapevine,” in *Snake Oil*, 4, ed. Brother Randall (Dallas, 1995), n.p. For Leigh Valentine and Tilton’s adoption of “demon blasting,” see Sean Rowe, “The Resurrection of Robert Tilton.” Sam and Jane Whaley’s ministry would be the subject of a February 28, 1995 investigative report on *Inside Edition*, produced with the help of the Trinity Foundation, and which noted the couple’s influence on Tilton; see “Word of Faith Fellowship/Inside Edition,” YouTube video, 9:54, posted by “TrinityFoundationInv,” October 22, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YwE5fBT9RYE>.

¹⁴ Brother Randall, “Gospel Grapevine,” in *Snake Oil*, 4, n.p. Information on, and examples from, Tilton’s new television venture featured on a February 10, 1995 news report on KXAS-TV; see *Brother Bob and the Gospel of Greed*, VHS.

¹⁵ A WFAA-TV report on Tilton from August 17, 1995 mentioned that the program was no longer on the air; see *Brother Bob and the Gospel of Greed*, VHS.

his accounting job and young family, Brother Randall decided to shutter *Snake Oil*, thereby also ending the Robert Tilton Fan Club.¹⁶

Through the RTFC and its associated publications, Brother Randall tapped into, sustained, and spread an ironic televangelical taste culture that delighted in the antics of high-profile, perceived religious fakes, and which resonated with paracinematic aesthetics and religious parodies that circulated in the American alternative media underground during the early to mid-1990s. Brother Randall's success in this regard was evidenced by glowing notices of *Snake Oil* in a 1993 issue of *Factsheet Five*, an influential zine catalogue and review publication.¹⁷ "(T)his is key bulldata (sic) that you *must* obtain," read one of the two reviews, referencing the Church of the SubGenius' label for bizarrely insightful cultural artifacts.¹⁸ As discussed in the previous chapter, Brother Randall had also sought and received notices for his work in the mainstream media, which further spread the RTFC's influence. In the December 1993 edition of *Texas Monthly* magazine, for example, reporter Dan Michalski both reviewed *Snake Oil* and mentioned the Robert Tilton Fan Club. "If tongue-speak 'Ko da ba sa to' moves you to laughter instead of tears," wrote Michalski, "you can subscribe to Snake Oil," after which he followed with Brother Randall's mailing address.¹⁹

Brother Randall's decision to discontinue his activities coincided with the steady migration of the ironic televangelical taste culture evidenced by the RTFC into the American cultural mainstream. This chapter begins by examining Brother Randall and the RTFC's influence on, and anticipation of, an early example of this cultural mainstreaming process: *Godstuff*, a long-running (1996-2000) segment on the news parody program *The Daily Show* (1996-present), co-produced by the Trinity Foundation. Centered on amusing clips of bizarre and brash television preachers including Robert Tilton and Benny Hinn, *Godstuff* played like a hosted, professional version of the televangelist highlight tapes traded among members of the RTFC. Indeed, the Trinity Foundation sourced some of the segment's most popular material from Brother Randall himself, and encouraged readers of its recently acquired, humor-based

¹⁶ Brother Randall, Skype interview by author, December 4, 2011.

¹⁷ For the prominence of *Factsheet Five* during the period, see Duncombe, *Zines*, 157.

¹⁸ Jerod Pore, "Snake Oil," in *Factsheet Five* 49 (1993), 69; another positive review also appears on the previous page.

¹⁹ Dan Michalski, "Snake Oil: Guide to Kooky Kontemporary Kristian Kulture," *Texas Monthly*, December, 1993.

religious magazine, *The Door*, to become active, ironic fans of strange and suspicious televangelists, taping amusing footage and submitting it for possible airing. Moreover, *Godstuff* drew on material that the Trinity Foundation had previously provided to news outlets such as *Primetime Live* and *Inside Edition*, thereby demonstrating the comedic intent of such material. Through *Godstuff* the Trinity Foundation brought Brother Randall's concept of Recreational Christianity, with a satirical spin, to the American cultural mainstream – a new weapon in the ministry's ongoing battle against allegedly exploitative television preachers.

The most enduring legacy of Brother Randall and the members of the Robert Tilton Fan Club, however, would be as early copiers and distributors of the aforementioned Tilton “fart” tape, which attained legendary status in the American tape-trading underground. The tape's continuing popularity, as well as the pervasiveness of inferior copies, encouraged its co-creator, Brother O’Nottigan, to market a remastered and repackaged version of the remix via the next breakthrough in participatory media: the World Wide Web. While Brother O’Nottigan's venture proved moderately lucrative and furthered the distribution of his remix, it did not infiltrate mainstream American culture until the advent of online streaming video in the mid-2000s. Freed from physical distribution restrictions and quality issues, “Pastor Gas,” along with countless sequels and imitators, exploded in popularity as an online viral video. Although the latest iteration of Robert Tilton's ministry has made efforts to stem the spread of such unflattering remixes, they have largely proven futile, with the result that the televangelist has been virally rebranded as “Pastor Gas” – a vivid indicator of the potential influence of even dated participatory media artifacts, and the precariousness of religious branding, in an online and digital age.

***Godstuff*: Recreational Christianity on Cable Television**

Stephen Duncombe has discussed how the late-1980s and early-1990s saw a spike in corporate efforts to capitalize on American alternative culture, in the hopes of connecting with the especially lucrative “18-to-29-year-old” demographic. Marketers sought to establish meaningful relationships with these consumers by harnessing the anti-capitalist “authenticity” of the alternative cultural underground – offering faux DIY zines published by Time-Warner, unveiling rag-tag “grunge” fashions, and developing “alternative” music as a genre to encompass

blockbuster albums such as Nirvana's *Nevermind* (1991).²⁰ In the same vein, this period also witnessed moves by mainstream media companies, most notably cable television channels, to profit from the paracinematic pleasures provided by badfilms such as those championed by *Zontar* and the Church of the SubGenius. As Megan Mullen has noted, cable shows like *Mystery Science Theater 3000*, which migrated from local Minneapolis television to The Comedy Channel in 1989, and *USA Up All Night*, which premiered on the USA Network that same year, transformed what were previously "subversive viewing practice(s) into a new standard for producing commercial television." At the core of these programs were "parodic movie hosts," who guided viewers in the ironic appreciation of select badfilms, and whose "'wrap-around' segments" effectively "segued into and out of commercial breaks."²¹ One such host mentioned by Mullen is Joe Bob Briggs, a Texan redneck character played by Dallas-based columnist John Bloom, and the star of The Movie Channel's *Drive-In Theater* (later *Joe Bob's Drive-In Theater*) from 1986-1996.²² As Briggs, Bloom had written tongue-in-cheek reviews of schlocky horror films for newspapers and his own newsletter, work championed by the COSG's Ivan Stang, who pointed out in *High Weirdness by Mail* that Briggs' "middle name ain't 'Bob' for nothing" – a reference to the Church's "High Epopt" J.R. "Bob" Dobbs.²³ Bloom, however, was not a SubGenius, but instead a committed member of the Trinity Foundation in Dallas. A longtime friend of Ole Anthony, Bloom joined the ministry in 1984, becoming a leader and teacher within the group, as well as a central figure in its efforts to bring the ironic viewing of televangelism to mainstream American television.²⁴

As argued previously, and as will be reinforced to follow, the Trinity Foundation had provided news outlets with video proof texts of televangelists that were intended to be received

²⁰ See Duncombe, *Zines*, 131-140.

²¹ Megan Mullen, *The Rise of Cable Programming in the United States: Revolution or Evolution?* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2003), 169-171. Sconce also noted the mainstreaming of *Mystery Science Theater 3000* and similar paracinema-oriented programs; see "Trashing the Academy," 373. See also Robert G. Weiner and Shelley E. Barbra, eds., *In the Peanut Gallery with Mystery Science Theater 3000: Essays on Film, Fandom, Technology and the Culture of Riffing* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2011).

²² Robert Bianco, "'Joe Bob Briggs' Jolting Cable Viewers of 'Drive-In Theater,'" *The Telegraph* (Nashua, New Hampshire), August 21, 1987.

²³ Stang, *High Weirdness by Mail*, 262. For Bloom's early movie reviews as Briggs, see David Sanjek, "Fans' Notes: The Horror Film Fanzine," in *The Cult Film Reader*, eds. Ernest Mathijs and Xavier Mendik (New York: Open University Press, 2008), 423-425.

²⁴ For Bloom's involvement with the Trinity Foundation, see Jimmy Fowler, "Joe Bob in Bloom," *Dallas Observer*, December 17, 1998.

humorously by viewers. By the mid-1990s, however, the ministry began *explicitly* using satirical irony to discredit alleged televangelical fakes. In 1995 the Trinity Foundation acquired *The Wittenburg Door* (later *The Door*), a humor-based religion magazine founded in 1971 by California youth pastor Mike Yaconelli.²⁵ *The Door* had a history of skewering televangelists including Robert Tilton, an illustration of whom appeared on the cover of the September/October 1989 edition. Sporting white make-up, green hair, purple garb, and dollar signs on both his tie and cufflinks, Tilton resembled “The Joker,” the clown antagonist from that summer’s blockbuster film *Batman* (1989) – an indicator of the magazine’s ready engagement with ostensibly secular culture. In the issue’s featured article Brad Bailey, *The Door*’s self-styled “Televangelist Beat” correspondent, outed himself as an ironic fan of televangelism. “I like to watch TV preachers the same way I like, say, *Plan Nine From Outer Space*,” Bailey confessed, referencing director Ed Wood’s (1959) famously bad stab at science fiction filmmaking.²⁶ Among the current crop of televangelists, Bailey found Tilton particularly entertaining, not only for his ridiculous seed faith theology and laughably transparent greed, but also for his absurd facial expressions. “And Bob’s eyes slam shut, squeechny-like,” Bailey wrote of the physical idiosyncrasy which had amused and inspired Brother O’Nottigan, Farley Scott, and the members of the RTFC, “presumably because God forgot to turn down his set and so Bob’s getting some feedback.”²⁷ Bailey had also added himself to Tilton’s mailing list to receive material guaranteed to make him “laugh at loud,” and had even made a visit to Word of Faith, acknowledging that the preacher “puts on one heck of a show,” and reporting that church security eventually kicked him out for acting suspiciously.²⁸

As an ironic viewer, collector of mailings, and unfaithful attendee, Brad Bailey would have fit right in with the members of the Robert Tilton Fan Club. However, whereas the RTFC played down its critical edge, Bailey, like *The Door* in general, was intentionally theologically evaluative. For example, Bailey recalled the prayer that he had allegedly offered up just prior to

²⁵ For an overview of *The Wittenburg Door/The Door*, see Michael McClymond, “The Wit and Wisdom of *The Door*,” in *Religions of the United States in Practice: Volume 2*, ed. Colleen McDannell (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 433-448. Also see *Nailin’ It to the Church: Religious Satire and the Gospel According to the Wittenburg Door*, directed by Murray Stiller (Franklin: Crown Entertainment, 2008), DVD.

²⁶ Brad Bailey, “Bang! Pow! Hallelujah! Rootin’-Tootin’ Robert Tilton!” For *Plan 9 from Outer Space* as a “paracinematic classic,” see Sconce, “Trashing the Academy,” 373.

²⁷ Bailey, “Bang! Pow! Hallelujah!”

²⁸ *Ibid.*

visiting Word of Faith: “‘God,’ I said – and I was talking to mine, not Tilton’s – ‘let me see just how weird this stuff really is.’”²⁹ In a 1996 article introducing the Trinity Foundation’s takeover of *The Door*, Ole Anthony framed the magazine’s satirical potential as the primary driver behind its acquisition by his ministry: “the main reason we accepted Mike Yaconelli’s offer to take over the magazine is because we both recognize that satire is the most effective way to smash idols – and that’s just about our only job.”³⁰ Predictably, a key target of the magazine’s satire under Trinity’s tenure would be those television preachers who suggested and/or implied that God’s favor could be bought – a modern version, in Anthony’s opinion, of the “religious con game” that Martin Luther had decried when he protested the sale of indulgences – and specifically Anthony’s old foe Robert Tilton, who was soon to return to television.³¹

In 1996 Robert Tilton became embroiled in an acrimonious divorce with his second wife Leigh Valentine, who publicly accused him of frequent drunkenness, physical abuse, a consuming greed, and of being a “perpetual liar.”³² Valentine also made an unsuccessful bid to claim a portion of Word of Faith’s assets, encouraging Tilton’s first wife, Marte, to also seek a share, to no effect.³³ Beleaguered by bad press and hostility in Dallas, Tilton surreptitiously decamped to Florida where, as Sean Rowe of the *Dallas Observer* reported in November 1997, he set about “preparing his own resurrection” out of “a South Florida television studio.”³⁴ While Word of Faith was attended to by a “caretaker pastor,” Tilton began broadcasting a new version of *Success N Life* in select television markets across the country. Although his prosperity message remained the same, Rowe noted that the program’s style had changed considerably. While the *Success N Life* of old was filmed on sets that resembled “lugubrious dens lined with leather-bound books,” Rowe jokingly described Tilton’s new set as “a Sunday-school vision of ancient Palestine, complete with Styrofoam ‘stone’ walls and a gurgling fountain.” Rowe further wrote that Tilton himself was a “little less frisky” in his new setting, and that the televangelist

²⁹ Bailey, “Bang! Pow! Hallelujah!”

³⁰ Ole Anthony, “Trinity, *The Door* and the Power of Small Things,” *The Door*, March/April 1996.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² “Former Television Evangelist Robert Tilton is Losing Himself,” *San Antonio Express-News*, June 14, 1996.

³³ Mark Wrolstad, “Ruling in Divorce Case Ties Evangelist Robert Tilton, Church Assets,” *The Dallas Morning News*, November 26, 1996; “First Ex-Wife Joins Attempt to Get Tilton’s Church Assets,” *Austin American-Statesman*, December 4, 1996; “Jury Rules Preacher Tilton’s Wife Can’t Move Assets to Her Church,” *Austin American-Statesman*, January 11, 1997.

³⁴ Rowe, “The Resurrection of Robert Tilton.”

had left behind his expensive suits in favor of a more casual “*Miami Vice*” look, complete with “pastel pants” and “tropical sport coats.”

As before, Ole Anthony and the Trinity Foundation collaborated with local, regional, and national news media upon Tilton’s return, to send warnings out that the televangelist was up to his old tricks. In a glowing, two-part Dallas Fox News profile of Trinity that aired in 1997, titled “God’s Detectives,” reporter Richard Ray outlined the “unorthodox weaponry” that the ministry wielded in its fight against Tilton, one of which was the power of “videotape.”³⁵ Trinity was again “constantly monitoring” Robert Tilton’s broadcasts, and the report showed ministry member Ronnie Dunlap taking detailed notes as he watched the new *Success N Life*. “Basically it’s the same stuff that he’s said before,” Dunlap explained, shaking his head in disbelief. Another of the “unusual weapons” employed by Trinity, as Ray pointed out, was *The Door*, which he described as an “outrageously irreverent humor magazine,” and which had already taken a shot at Tilton that year, hailing him as the winner of that year’s “Televangelist Super Bowl,” who was in “a league of his own when it comes to the sheer zaniness of his mailings.”³⁶ Most recently, as Ray further explained, Trinity had added *Godstuff* to its arsenal, a television project hosted by John Bloom that was airing on Comedy Central’s *The Daily Show*, and which brought together Trinity’s long-time taping activities and newfound focus on satirical humor.

In introducing Trinity’s takeover of *The Door* in 1996, Ole Anthony highlighted the importance of John Bloom, and his badfilm reviewing persona Joe Bob Briggs, to the new venture, noting that they had “placed Joe Bob’s name at the top of our masthead, and all of his writings are available for the magazine to publish.” Anthony added that Bloom had brought along his own “mailing list of 44,000 very strange fans,” who, he believed, would “fit right in” with *The Door*’s tongue-in-cheek approach.³⁷ Apart from his value as a skillful writer and editor, Trinity also sought to benefit from Bloom’s experience in front of television cameras, which he had developed during his tenure at The Movie Channel, a role that ended in 1996. Following the taping of the final episode of *Joe Bob’s Drive-In Theater*, Bloom and a group of Trinity associates appropriated the set to produce a half-hour pilot celebrating the best “bullstuff” (read:

³⁵ “God’s Detectives,” WFAA-TV, 1997 (exact date uncertain), for copies of the reports, see *Brother Bob and the Gospel of Greed*, VHS.

³⁶ Doug Peterson, “Tilton Rolls to Victory in ’97 Televangelist Super Bowl,” *The Door*, July/August 1997.

³⁷ Anthony, “Trinity, *The Door* and the Power of Small Things.”

bullshit) of televised religion: *Joe Bob's Godstuff*.³⁸ Wearing a western-style shirt and bolo tie, Briggs hosted the program from a den-style set cluttered with white trash accoutrements, including an empty beer can and a miniature replica of the Statue of Liberty. "Do you love religious TV?" Briggs asks the camera, followed by a short clip of Robert Tilton's assistant pastor Don Clowers furiously imitating the flight of an eagle on stage at Word of Faith, "I love religious TV." "I'm a channel-surfing, religious TV, couch potato fool," Briggs confesses, "I once sat in a motel room in Meridian, Mississippi watching a Pentecostal revival meeting that lasted three-and-a-half hours and they didn't even use snakes!" While *Joe Bob's Godstuff* featured a wide range of bizarre religious broadcasting, from dancing rabbis to a troupe of Christian bodybuilders, the pilot heavily emphasized on the antics of prominent health-and-wealth televangelists – Morris Cerullo; Frederick K.C. Price; Paul and Jan Crouch; Ernest Angley; and, of course, Robert Tilton – with Briggs describing the program as "the show that brings the most entertaining preachers into your living room in *Reader's Digest* form."

As discussed in the previous chapter, the Trinity Foundation had built up a vast library of video clips featuring Robert Tilton via its surveillance activities, and had shared with tabloid-esque news outlets clips intended to represent the televangelist as a ridiculous religious fake. The pilot for *Joe Bob's Godstuff* made the humorous intention of some of these clips explicit. For example, the program aired a clip of a spurious healing featured on *Primetime Live* five years prior, in which Tilton places his hand on the a man's broken collarbone. "In the name of Jesus, bones go together!" Tilton shouts, after which he orders the man to "start moving it around." The man complies, grimacing in excruciating pain as he rotates his shoulder – images suggesting that Tilton's healing was far less than effective. The inclusion of the clip in *Joe Bob's Godstuff* suggests that in addition to countering Tilton's assurances that he cared about his followers, *Primetime Live* included a truncated version of the clip for its potential to provoke a shocked amusement in viewers, much like Briggs' own cringing take: "He didn't look so hot either, did

³⁸ Fowler, "Joe Bob in Bloom." "Bullstuff" is a minced oath commonly deployed by Bloom's Briggs persona, even in the service of theological discussion; see Joe Bob Briggs, "Joe Bob Harmonizes the Gospels," *The Wittenburg Door*, November 7, 2007, <http://www.wittenburgdoor.com/exegete.html>, accessed October 14, 2014, in which Briggs/Bloom asks, "Why would John basically call bullstuff on all the other gospel accounts?" A copy of *Joe Bob's Godstuff* can be found on *Door TV's the Original!: Godstuff* (Dallas: The Door Magazine, n.d.), DVD.

he?”³⁹ Likewise, a clip aired on *Joe Bob’s Godstuff* targeting Tilton’s seed faith message had previously featured in a 1991 *Inside Edition* report on the televangelist, which had also been produced with help from the Trinity Foundation.⁴⁰ “If you’ll seed today for that new car,” Tilton confidently asserts from the set of the old *Success N Life*, “the loan will go through, you will get that car.” Immediately following this promise, in footage unaired by *Inside Edition*, Tilton envisions a “company car” for another viewer.⁴¹ Briggs jestingly points out the disparity between the two automobile-related blessings, noting that Tilton forgot to “pray for a low-interest rate” for the viewer saddled with a loan.

While the Trinity Foundation possessed a wealth of ironically amusing clips of televangelists to use for *Joe Bob’s Godstuff*, the ministry also sought fresh material. One source of such footage was Brother Randall of the Robert Tilton Fan Club, who had developed a friendship with Harry Guetzlaff, the man in charge of Trinity’s taping operations.⁴² During our initial interview Brother Randall recalled that Guetzlaff would “tell me some of the stuff that was going on with some of their investigations, and he’d supply me with lots of videotapes and clippings,” adding that he reciprocated with his own video material. He described his time spent with Guetzlaff as “just like being with another big Bob Tilton fan,” since both men were “obsessed” with the televangelist: “it was more like a couple of music geeks getting together and trading Pink Floyd CDs or something.”⁴³ Brother Randall’s labelling of Harry Guetzlaff as a Tilton “fan” is intriguing, as Guetzlaff had once sowed thousands of dollars into Tilton’s ministry, losing faith after he had not received his promised financial miracles.⁴⁴ Guetzlaff’s deconversion from prosperity theology was an “oppositional exit” in that he subsequently joined the “higher tension” Trinity Foundation, which preached a form of Christianity diametrically opposed to Tilton’s.⁴⁵ Much like Brother Russell of the RTFC, Guetzlaff’s deconversion was also accompanied by the opening up of an ironic distance from Tilton, which allowed him to be

³⁹ The truncated version of the clip can be found on *Primetime Live*, ABC, November 21, 1991; a copy of the report and the date can be found on *Brother Bob and the Gospel of Greed*, VHS. *Joe Bob’s Godstuff* (1996), found on *Door TV’s the Original!: Godstuff*, DVD.

⁴⁰ *Inside Edition*, Syndicated, January 31, 1991. Video copies of this investigative report and the date can be found on *Brother Bob and the Gospel of Greed*, VHS.

⁴¹ For the longer clip and commentary, see *Joe Bob’s Godstuff* (1996), found on *Door TV’s the Original!: Godstuff*, DVD.

⁴² David Osborne, “In the Name of God,” *The Independent* (UK), September 6, 1998.

⁴³ Brother Randall, Skype interview by author, December 4, 2011.

⁴⁴ Burkhard Bilger, “God Doesn’t Need Ole Anthony.”

⁴⁵ Streib et al., *Deconversion*, 26, 33.

amused by the televangelist. “People love Bob,” Guetzlaff explained to Fox News’ Richard Ray, “because he’s, you know, he’s just over the top, he’s funny, he’s good. There’s nobody like Bob.”⁴⁶ Although Guetzlaff’s tongue-in-cheek praise aligned him with the ironic fans of the RTFC, his strict opposition to, and active attacks against, the televangelist’s ministry rendered him more an “antifan” of Tilton, a form of unfaithful televangelical fandom to be discussed in the final chapter.⁴⁷

While Brother Randall and Harry Guetzlaff were both unintended fans of Robert Tilton, it would be another television preacher passed along by Brother Randall to Guetzlaff who would play an unexpectedly central role in the Trinity Foundation’s television ventures. In the last article of the final print issue of *Snake Oil* (1995), Brother Randall outlined the troubling backstory of Jonathan Bell, a Dallas-based, cable-access televangelist.⁴⁸ A former hairdresser from Kingston, Ontario, Bell moved to Dallas in 1992 with “a 71-year-old invalid and her 35-year old retarded son,” financially exploiting the pair in order to set himself up in the city. Bell, who would later face charges in Canada for sexually assaulting children, was charged in Dallas for physically assaulting his roommates, who eventually fled home. “This sordid little tale would not be worth telling,” wrote Brother Randall, “if shortly thereafter Jonathan had not gone on to produce two of the most psychotic, disturbing religious programs ever made,” programs which he witnessed and taped by happenstance. Brother Randall described Bell as a “petulant, porcine pentecostal (sic),” whose specialty was “a hellfire and brimstone sermon at max volume,” thus earning him the nickname of “Screaming Boy.”⁴⁹

Jonathan Bell’s two cable-access programs were unrelentingly aggressive, with the preacher often yelling at the camera from a spare, blue-curtained set.⁵⁰ In one appearance Bell, wearing brown slacks and a striped dress shirt, decried abortion, homosexuality (including his own sexual tendencies – the result, he claimed, of childhood sexual abuse), Satanism, secular

⁴⁶ “God’s Detectives,” WFAA-TV, 1997 (exact date uncertain).

⁴⁷ For antifandom see Jonathan Gray, “Antifandom and the Moral Text: *Television Without Pity* and Textual Dislike,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 48, no. 7 (2005), 840-858.

⁴⁸ Brother Randall, “Screaming Boy,” in *Snake Oil*, 4, ed. Brother Randall (Dallas, 1995), n.p. See also Al Brumley, “Man Charged with Abuse of 2 Assistants,” *The Dallas Morning News*, July 30, 1992; and *ibid.*, “Charges Against Evangelist Dropped: Retarded Mother, Son Declined to Pursue Case, Return to Canada,” *The Dallas Morning News*, August 6, 1992. Brother Randall’s article also draws upon, and incorporates selections from Scott Colby and Sue Yanagisawa, “Bail Hearing Set for Monday,” *The Kingston Whig-Standard*, November 4, 1994.

⁴⁹ Brother Randall, “Screaming Boy.”

⁵⁰ Both of Jonathan Bell’s appearances can be found on *Saved by the Bell!* (Dallas: The Door Magazine, n.d.), DVD.

culture, family breakdowns, and a paucity of charity. Yet, Bell also maintained, somewhat incongruously, that love was at the center of his ministry: “You know a lot of people think, just because I’m loud when I preach, that I don’t have love. That’s a lie.” In his other appearance Bell was inexplicably dressed in a tuxedo; however, his refined appearance did little to temper his combative preaching: “Do you know if you’ve got sin in your life today, and you haven’t realized that you’re a filthy rotten sinner, that you’re going to hell? You’re going to hell!” For Brother Randall, Jonathan Bell’s ironic entertainment value stemmed not only from the preacher’s unabashed embrace of hostility and fear as evangelistic techniques, but also in the paracinematic ineptitude of his programs. As he pointed out in *Snake Oil*, “for no reason little subtitles would appear on the screen with slogans like ‘Satan Wants Your Mind and Soul,’” and he observed that Bell, “in the finest cable access tradition...spent half the time looking into the wrong camera.”⁵¹

Recognizing that Jonathan Bell was a rare find, Brother Randall expressed regrets to *Snake Oil*’s readers that he was unable to share video footage of the preacher with them: “I wish I could afford to include a video tape with each issue of *Snake Oil* so that Jonathan Bell would become the cult figure he deserves to be.”⁵² Brother Randall’s wish that Bell become better-known would be granted, however, through his sharing of the footage with Harry Guetzlaff of the Trinity Foundation, after which it was included in the pilot for *Joe Bob’s Godstuff*.⁵³ Jokingly introducing Bell as a preacher who “is gonna guide us gently toward a fuller understanding of the gospel,” Briggs states that Bell is “better known around here as ‘Screaming Boy’” – an uncredited lifting of Brother Randall’s nickname for the preacher. *Joe Bob’s Godstuff* aired three quick clips of Bell featuring him berating his audience. “If you wanna turn the channel,” Bell challenges viewers in one clip, “go ahead, fool, turn the channel. If you wanna learn something about God, shut your mouth and listen to me for a minute.” Briggs reappears on the screen after the clips with a look of mock astonishment: “I don’t think I can go on, that was so moving.”

Although *Joe Bob’s Godstuff* would not be picked up in its pilot format, a distilled and redeveloped form of the show, simply titled *Godstuff*, would appear on *The Daily Show*, a news

⁵¹ Brother Randall, “Screaming Boy.”

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Brother Randall, Skype interview by author, December 4, 2011; *Joe Bob’s Godstuff* (1996), found on *Door TV’s the Original!: Godstuff*, DVD.

parody program originally hosted by Craig Kilborn (1996-1998).⁵⁴ As mentioned in the first chapter, under its current host Jon Stewart (1999-present) *The Daily Show* has become an influential political voice in America, using satire, parody, and irony to penetrate the allegedly false veneer of party politics. Amber Day argues that *The Daily Show*'s comedy critiques the "artificiality" of scripted "political discourse" that is passed off as "real," thereby making the "fake" news program a valuable means of determining political "authenticity and truth."⁵⁵ Kilborn's iteration of *The Daily Show*, while also heavy on satire, irony, and parody, carried a broader cultural focus than its more politically oriented successor, thereby opening up space for material such as *Godstuff*, which aired regularly from 1996 to 2000.⁵⁶ In addition to being shortened into segments of between two and four minutes, the revamped *Godstuff* dropped the character of Joe Bob Briggs in favor of John Bloom, who hosted the segments in the guise of a preacher imparting the supposed divine wisdom of the included clips, thereby heightening *Godstuff*'s irony.⁵⁷

Through *Godstuff* the Trinity Foundation not only brought the ironic televangelical taste culture evidenced by groups such as the Robert Tilton Fan Club to the American mainstream, but also encouraged and engaged in a form of Recreational Christianity intended to promote the ministry's understanding of authentic Christianity as community oriented, grounded in love and servitude, and, perhaps most importantly, indifferent to money. The ironic humor of many of the included clips, therefore, derived from how they differed from such standards – deviations often highlighted via Bloom's tongue-in-cheek commentary. Unsurprisingly, Robert Tilton was one of *Godstuff*'s favorite targets; however, although he had since resumed broadcasting, *Godstuff* steadfastly focused on clips of Tilton from the past. In addition to the fact that the Trinity Foundation already had ample amusing footage of the televangelist in its archives, vintage Tilton, as Brother Randall also appreciated, was more brash, boisterous, and thus ironically humorous than his latter efforts.⁵⁸ Again, the Trinity Foundation incorporated Tilton clips into

⁵⁴ For the partnership between Trinity and *The Daily Show*, see Fowler, "Joe Bob in Bloom."

⁵⁵ Amber Day, "And Now...the News? Mimesis and the Real in *The Daily Show*," in *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post-Network Era*, eds. Jonathan Gray, Jeffrey P. Jones, and Ethan Thompson (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 86.

⁵⁶ Jeffrey P. Jones, *Entertaining Politics: Satiric Television and Political Engagement*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), 72.

⁵⁷ For the shift in hosting, see Fowler, "Joe Bob in Bloom."

⁵⁸ As mentioned above, reporter Sean Rowe, in "The Resurrection of Robert Tilton," had described the televangelist as a "little less frisky" by 1997.

Godstuff that it had previously contributed to investigative reports, indicating their original comedic intent. In an undated *Godstuff* segment John Bloom, standing at a pulpit in front of a green-screened, stained-glass window as organ music plays in the background, prepares viewers for faux praise of the televangelist: “Rejoice friends as we cast a glad eye on the ministry of Robert Tilton of Dallas, Texas.”⁵⁹ In one clip Tilton ends a long bout of *glossolalia* by staring directly into the camera and stating, “I Love You,” a clip which had been used in *Primetime Live*’s investigative report as evidence of, in host Diane Sawyer’s words, the televangelist’s “quirky style.”⁶⁰ Another clip of Tilton crying onstage at Word of Faith, while reassuring congregants and viewers that “you don’t make this kind of tear up,” had been included in the aforementioned 1991 *Inside Edition* report as a hypothetical response to a former follower’s unsubstantiated claim that televangelists like Tilton were taught to fake cry at special “schools.” In its new, explicitly comedic context, the clip won a smattering of laughter from *The Daily Show*’s audience, and was followed by Bloom’s winking quotation of John 11:35: “And Jesus wept.”

As Brother Randall noted in an August 1996 review of *Godstuff* in the short-lived, online version of *Snake Oil*, “our very own Screaming Boy Jonathan Bell was featured on the premier installment.”⁶¹ While Brother Randall maintained that “*Snake Oil* was proud to have supplied some of the raw material for this show if for no other reason than to see Jonathan preaching with the Comedy Channel’s logo in the bottom of the screen,” he pointed out that he had been “uncredited and unpaid” for discovering and sharing the Bell footage with Guetzlaff. Not only had the Trinity Foundation and *The Daily Show* hijacked his style of ironic televangelical fandom for mainstream consumption, part of the broader plundering of the American alternative underground, but in Brother Randall’s eyes they had also exploited his “fan labor,” folding his prized public-access discovery into a for-profit cable television program.⁶² Along similar lines,

⁵⁹ The undated segment can be found on *The Best of Godstuff: From the Daily Show* (Dallas: The Door Magazine, n.d.), DVD.

⁶⁰ *Primetime Live*, ABC, November 21, 1991. A copy of the report and the date can be found on *Brother Bob and the Gospel of Greed*, VHS.

⁶¹ Brother Randall, “Gospel Grapevine #5 Aug 96,”

<https://web.archive.org/web/20110717082603/http://www.devilsweb.com/snakeoil/grape.htm>, accessed January 29, 2015.

⁶² For feelings of exploitation as they apply to the labor of online music fans, see Nancy K. Baym and Robert Burnett, “Amateur Experts: International Fan Labor in Swedish Independent Music,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 12, no. 5 (2009): 433-449.

The Door encouraged readers to act like ironic televangelical fans by locating, taping, and submitting new material for possible airing during the segment: “We need you to video tape (VHS, SVHS, or Beta) and send to us as many instance as you can of TV preachers doing weird, fraudulent, or just plain silly stuff.”⁶³ In a later call, Harry Guetzlaff specified that *The Door* was particularly on the lookout for obscure preachers from “local stations and local cable access” – an attempt, in effect, to find the next Jonathan Bell.⁶⁴

Brother Randall would have perhaps been even more annoyed if he could have foreseen the privileged place that Jonathan Bell would earn on *Godstuff*. In addition to his regular appearances via archived clips, Bell, who had been located in Canada where he had since returned to hairdressing, was the subject of a tongue-in-cheek investigative report on *The Daily Show*.⁶⁵ “In just two, rare television appearances,” opened comedian Brian Unger, playing the roving reporter, “evangelist Jonathan Bell became known to tens, even hundreds of followers to his Dallas ministry.” The crux of the report’s humor was the disparity between Bell’s angry evangelical efforts and his then status as an evidently mild-mannered hairstylist, centered on a sit-down interview during which Bell, as is common on *The Daily Show*, was unwittingly “drawn into (his) own satirizing.”⁶⁶ *The Daily Show* juxtaposed short clips of Bell’s extreme preaching with new footage of him calmly styling hair, and informing Unger that his mission in life was to “help people.” After Bell loudly sang the Contemporary Christian standard “The Power of Your Love” for the cameras, while Unger mockingly danced and sang along, the faux reporter, back in the studio, added a shocking twist to the buoyantly bizarre proceedings.⁶⁷

“I should mention that over the past few years, Bell has pled guilty to touching the genitals of a boy under fourteen. He got off on a mistrial. Then he faced charges for assaulting an elderly woman and her retarded son. Those charges were dropped. But he finally faced the music on eleven charges of sexual molestation of five boys, dating back almost two decades. Oh, and today’s his birthday!”

⁶³ “*The Door* is on the Comedy Channel,” *The Door*, September/October 1996.

⁶⁴ Harry Guetzlaff, “DOOR Readers: Subject: Immediate Job Openings DOOR TV Associate Producers,” *The Door*, November/December 1996.

⁶⁵ For an undated copy of *The Daily Show*’s report on Bell, see *Saved by the Bell!*, DVD.

⁶⁶ Day, “And Now...the News?,” 90.

⁶⁷ For the original song, see Geoff Bullock, “The Power of Your Love,” in *The Power of Your Love*, Maranatha, 1996, CD.

Unger's closing commentary, which drew considerable laughter from the studio audience, purportedly exposed the awful truth lying behind Bell's calm façade, and emphasized the sinfulness commonly understood to underlie televangelism as a whole.

Beyond appropriating the style and material of ironic fans of televangelism like Brother Randall, the Trinity Foundation also borrowed a particular participatory media form common to such fans: compilation tapes of televangelists in action. While such compilations, as both shared and sold objects, often had a relational function, establishing and strengthening ironic fan networks, the Trinity Foundation relocated the form to the realm of anonymous market exchange, thereby reducing its interpersonal possibilities.⁶⁸ On the back cover of *The Door*'s July/August 1997 issue, an advertisement appeared for *Door TV's Godstuff Video*, a \$24.95, mail-order VHS tape which contained the segment "Channel Surfing Through Religious TV," described as "30 minutes of non-stop Oral, Benny, Bob and the gang offering free tickets to the Promised Land."⁶⁹ Although sporadically broken up by material such as clips relating to televangelism on the mainstream comedy programs *In Living Color* and *Saturday Night Live*, "Channel Surfing Through Religious TV" was at its core a rapid-fire compilation of ironically amusing televangelism, including footage of Robert Tilton and proven *Godstuff* hit Jonathan Bell.⁷⁰

Through *Godstuff* and its associated videos, the Trinity Foundation brought the sensibilities of ironic televangelical fandom to mainstream American television, encouraging viewers to laugh at bizarre, inept, and theologically spurious television preachers, and, in the case of readers of *The Door*, to search for, tape, and share their own amusing footage. *Godstuff* was not Trinity's first attempt to capitalize on the humor value of select televangelists – as discussed, the ministry had shared video proof texts with tabloid news programs that were intended to be received humorously, thereby delegitimizing the ministries of particular television preachers. However, *Godstuff*, along with the ministry's associated acquisition of *The Door*,

⁶⁸ For a note on the potential "social" significance of trading "bootleg" Bruce Springsteen tapes, for example, see Cavicchi, *Tramps Like Us*, 79.

⁶⁹ Advertisement for *Door TV's Godstuff Video*, *The Door*, July/August 1997, back cover.

⁷⁰ A copy of the segment can be found on *Door TV's the Original!: Godstuff*, DVD.

evidenced the ministry's explicit turn to comedy as a valuable tool in its mission to expose purported religious fakes, and to push its own understanding of authentic Christianity. Thus, through *Godstuff*, the Trinity Foundation engaged in the religious work/play of Recreational Christianity, although with different motivations and desired outcomes than Brother Randall of the Robert Tilton Fan Club, whose activities deeply influenced Trinity's venture, and whose own taping activities resulted in *Godstuff*'s biggest hit. Brother Randall's ironic fandom, while theologically critical, required the continued existence of flamboyantly entertaining religious fakes like Robert Tilton. In contrast, Trinity deployed *Godstuff*'s satirical irony in the hopes of destroying such ministries by dissuading individuals from supporting ridiculous religious hucksters.

By 1998, the Trinity Foundation and the Comedy Channel had taken *Godstuff*'s tongue-in-cheek battle against televangelists to the Internet. On the back cover of *The Door*'s January/February 1998 issue appeared an advertisement for *Door TV's Godstuff Video*, featuring a photograph of Joe Bob Briggs sitting in a leather chair on the set of *Joe Bob's Drive-In Theater*.⁷¹ Pitching the tape for a reduced price of \$19.95, plus shipping, Briggs, via an inserted caption, humorously derided Comedy Central for airing a tamer version of *Godstuff*, devoid of his patented redneck persona: "...they got college boy, John Bloom, who they call the GOD GUY to steal all my goofy TeeVee preacher clips and run 'em on Wednesday nites." The advertisement pointed out that interested readers could visit Comedy Central's "little web-site" – www.comedycentral.com – to "download a weekly load of New York/Media-Elite watered-down bullstuff versions" of *Godstuff*. This blurb points to the relocation of ironically humorous video clips of televangelists to a new digital and online context, a media shift which, as will be demonstrated to follow, would come to have major implications for Robert Tilton's ministry, and in particular, its ability to define and control its religious brand.

Online Ironic Fandom, Streaming Video, and Viral Rebranding

By the early-1990s online newsgroups – topical, text-based, and asynchronous communication forums – had become significant sites for fan activity and networking.⁷² Ironic

⁷¹ Advertisement for *Door TV's Godstuff Video*, *The Door*, July/August 1997, back cover.

⁷² See Nancy K. Baym, *Tune In, Log On: Soaps, Fandom, and Online Community* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 2000).

fans of Robert Tilton accordingly turned to newsgroups to express their views and interact with others who found the televangelist strangely compelling and amusing. Although a newsgroup dedicated to the ironic appreciation of the televangelist – alt.fan.robert-tilton – would not be established until 1997, Tilton’s ironic fans posted and congregated in forums dedicated to related topics.⁷³ For example, Tilton was frequently discussed in alt.slack, a newsgroup connected to the Church of the SubGenius, many members of which were early adopters of online communication.⁷⁴ On June 16, 1990, one “St. Mog the Unholy” revealed that after a tip from a friend, s/he “began watching Tilton every day and putting my hand on the screen along with Robert. I watched every fake tear, praised his weekly ‘miracles.’ But it wasn’t until I received his prayer book in the mail that I learned that Robert is, praise ‘Bob’, a SubGenius.”⁷⁵ Aside from the fact that the televangelist’s shortened first name matched that of the COSG’s High Epop, Tilton recognized “that ripping off Pinks is the ideal way to make a living,” sure-fire evidence of his SubGenius status.

Among the ironic fans of Robert Tilton who turned to online newsgroups was Brother Randall of the Robert Tilton Fan Club. In a 1994 contribution to alt.religion.broadcasting, under the topic thread “I miss Robert Tilton!,” California resident “Lon Huber” lamented that he was no longer able to catch his/her favorite televangelist’s program: “Anyone know if he’s on locally in Dallas?”⁷⁶ Brother Randall replied that Tilton was regrettably not on the air “even in his hometown of Big D, the center of the televangelist universe.”⁷⁷ Brother Randall’s habit of signing off his posts with his pseudonym led to his recognition by the original poster, who asked whether he was the founder of the Robert Tilton Fan Club, and who revealed that he had once received some of the RTFC’s material in the mail.⁷⁸ “Amen, Brother Lon,” Brother Randall

⁷³ For alt.fan.robert-tilton, see <https://groups.google.com/forum/#!forum/alt.fan.robert-tilton>, accessed January 29, 2015.

⁷⁴ Morten T. Højsgaard points out that the Church of the SubGenius was online “at least since” December 3, 1998; see *ibid.*, “Cyber-religion: On the Cutting Edge between the Virtual and the Real,” 53. During our Skype interview on May 1, 2012, Ivan Stang stated that he started using the Internet “around 1994,” and as demonstrated here, COSG members were using online newsgroups some years before that.

⁷⁵ “St. Mog the Unholy,” posting in “Robert Tilton Ministries,” June 16, 1990, alt.slack, <https://groups.google.com/forum/#!topic/alt.slack/SfNI94ScxiQ>, accessed January 29, 2015.

⁷⁶ “Lon Huber,” posting in “I miss Robert Tilton!,” November 11, 1994, alt.religion.broadcast, <https://groups.google.com/forum/#!topic/alt.religion.broadcast/PabfHtwdJbA>, accessed January 29, 2015.

⁷⁷ “John Reeves,” posting in “I miss Robert Tilton!,” November 12, 1994, alt.religion.broadcast, <https://groups.google.com/forum/#!topic/alt.religion.broadcast/PabfHtwdJbA>, accessed January 29, 2015.

⁷⁸ “Lon Huber,” posting in “I miss Robert Tilton!,” November 13, 1994, alt.religion.broadcast, <https://groups.google.com/forum/#!topic/alt.religion.broadcast/PabfHtwdJbA>, accessed January 29, 2015.

responded, “I new (sic) that the Internet would provide excellent witnessing opportunities for Recreational Christianity.”⁷⁹ “I’ve been wondering for years what short phrase could sum up the particular brand of Christianity practiced by myself and a few of my friends” Lon Huber wrote back with evident delight, “‘Recreationalism’ it is. Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!”⁸⁰

By the mid-1990s the World Wide Web and graphical browsers such as Mosaic had opened up new opportunities for fan publishing, encouraging Brother Randall, as touched on above, to relocate his *Snake Oil* zine online in the hopes of fostering a “virtual congregation of Recreational Christians on the net.”⁸¹ In the penultimate issue of *Snake Oil* (1994) he announced, with a tone of joking disapproval, that an online version of the zine had been uploaded with the help of a fellow RTFC member: “Brother Ben can tell you where to find it if you e-mail him. You have to have Mosaic or something equivalent. It’s way over my head and downright demonic to boot.”⁸² By the final print edition of *Snake Oil* (1995), Brother Randall framed online access as a necessity for Recreational Christians: “If you are a student of Kooky Kristian Kulture and are not on the internet, you’ve got a major spiritual void in your life.”⁸³ Although Brother Randall enthusiastically endorsed online efforts which evidenced Recreational Christianity in action, including a newsgroup forum devoted to the outrageous and outspoken televangelist Gene Scott, his own online activities would be relatively limited, due not only to the aforementioned time demands of his career and family, but also, as previously discussed, the increasing scarcity of televangelists worthy of ironic devotion.⁸⁴ The latter factor was emphasized in the “Gospel Grapevine” section of the only extant example of the *Snake Oil* website, dated August 1996, in which Brother Randall mentioned that health-and-wealth

⁷⁹ “John reeves,” posting in “I miss Robert Tilton!,” November 21, 1994, alt.religion.broadcast, <https://groups.google.com/forum/#!topic/alt.religion.broadcast/PabfHtwdJbA>, accessed January 29, 2015.

⁸⁰ “Lon Huber,” posting in “I miss Robert Tilton!,” November 21, 1994, alt.religion.broadcast, <https://groups.google.com/forum/#!topic/alt.religion.broadcast/PabfHtwdJbA>, accessed January 29, 2015.

⁸¹ For the significance of the World Wide Web and graphical web browsers in opening up the Internet to everyday individuals, see John Naughton, *A Brief History of the Future: The Origins of the Internet* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1999), 229-252. In 1997, Stephen Duncombe predicted that “World Wide Web sites” had the potential to “eclipse zines,” (*Zines*, 197) and in 2000, Nancy Baym noted that the “World Wide Web has become filled with fan-authored sites” (*Tune In, Log On*, 216). Brother Randall, “Gospel Grapevine,” in *Snake Oil*, 4, n.p.

⁸² Brother Randall, “Gospel Grapevine,” in *Snake Oil*, 3, n.p.

⁸³ Brother Randall, “Gospel Grapevine,” in *Snake Oil*, 4, n.p.

⁸⁴ For an overview of the ministry of Gene Scott, described as “one of the more unique personalities in religious broadcasting” due to his “rambling sermons, parodies of other preachers...and bizarre fundraising segments,” see Melton, Lucas, and Stone, “Eugene Scott,” in *Prime-Time Religion*, 311-313. In the final print edition of *Snake Oil*, Brother Randall noted that Gene Scott had earned his own tongue-in-cheek fan discussion group at alt.fan.gene-scott; see Brother Randall, “Gospel Grapevine,” in *Snake Oil*, 4, n.p.

televangelist, and former *Primetime Live* target, W.V. Grant had been sentenced to prison for tax fraud.⁸⁵ “W.V. will be missed,” Brother Randall wrote, “He was part of that fading, carnival-like tradition of old time faith healers who owed more to P.T. Barnum than to J.H. Christ.”

Among those amusing television preachers who had disappeared from the airwaves was Brother Randall’s long-time televangelical hero Robert Tilton. Indeed, during Tilton’s absence from television between 1994 and 1997, the only way for individuals to ironically enjoy his programming was to watch previously taped footage. “I hope everyone video taped (sic) Tilton while they had the chance,” Brother Randall posted in his 1994 newsgroup discussion with Lon Huber.⁸⁶ Archived online newsgroup forums offer some evidence that ironic viewers other than members of the RTFC had taped Tilton, and may have even traded footage with each other during the televangelist’s hiatus. “Is there anyone else who here who (sic) realizes that not since Groucho marx (sic) has there been a greater comedian!” posted one “Father Tom” in the newsgroup alt.cult.movies on April 5, 1994, “...If anyone here has video footage of him I would love to trade 4 it.”⁸⁷ A responding poster wrote that s/he had managed to tape Tilton’s infamous *Primetime Live* rebuttal, noting that “it was hilarious.”⁸⁸ However, the most discussed Tilton-related video in online newsgroups, and almost certainly the most heavily traded, was Brother O’Nottigan’s fart remix, particularly from 1996 onwards.⁸⁹

On January 25, 1996, a poster from Tulsa, Oklahoma reported that “I saw the funniest video I’ve ever seen last night; I had to leave the house I was in and go out in the bitter cold because my stomach was hurting so bad from laughing.” Explaining that Tilton had “a strange tendency to freeze up right in the middle of a sentence and purse his mouth and clench his eyelids in an expression of extreme intensity,” the poster suggested that “(s)ome students at a local college had dubbed in juicy flatulent sounds on every occasion where he did his

⁸⁵ Brother Randall, “Gospel Grapevine #5 Aug 96.” For Grant’s legal troubles, see “Dallas-Area Television Evangelist Sentenced to Prison for Tax Fraud,” *Austin American-Statesman*, July 23, 1996.

⁸⁶ “john reeves,” posting in “I miss Robert Tilton!,” November 12, 1994, alt.religion.broadcast, <https://groups.google.com/forum/#!topic/alt.religion.broadcast/PabfHtwdJbA>, accessed January 29, 2015.

⁸⁷ “Father Tom,” posting in “ROBERT TILTON Rules!,” April 5, 1994, alt.cult-movies, https://groups.google.com/forum/#!topic/alt.cult-movies/ZpYl_YYPInQ, accessed January 29, 2015.

⁸⁸ Bob, posting in “ROBERT TILTON Rules!,” April 7, 1994, alt.cult-movies, https://groups.google.com/forum/#!topic/alt.cult-movies/ZpYl_YYPInQ, accessed January 29, 2015.

⁸⁹ Mentions of the Tilton fart remix appeared in online newsgroups as early as 1994; see “Michael R.,” posting in “Amazing Quotes II,” April 13, 1994, rec.video.satellite, <https://groups.google.com/forum/#!topic/rec.video.satellite/S1jh3xbKdIY>, accessed January 29, 2015.

‘expression.’”⁹⁰ Other posters eagerly sought out copies of the tape for trade, sometimes complaining that their existing copies were filled with dubbing-related noise – annoyances which pointed to the remix’s wide distribution.⁹¹ One poster, contributing to the forum alt.video.tape-trading, discussed having recently viewed a friend’s copy, which he was “pretty sure” had “originated” in Tulsa or Oklahoma City. Lamenting that his friend had since “taped over it,” he deduced that there were “many more” copies in existence, as his friend’s was “probably the 20th generation.” He included his email address in the hope that someone would step up with a copy to trade: “Please help, it’s my only hope!”⁹² A respondent, who argued that the tape originally hailed from Dallas, revealed that he had a copy, yet grumbled that it was “at least a 20th generation...the audio levels are HORRIBLE!!”⁹³ Other posters reported having come across superior copies of the tape. One reported that a friend possessed “a 4th generation copy that has a 4 mintue (sic) loop of it,” while another looked to trade a ten-minute copy that s/he rated “A/B-” in quality.⁹⁴ Yet another poster implied that quality copies might be obtained through the Robert Tilton Fan Club: “I think the founder is responsible for the Robert Tilton/Gas tape.”⁹⁵

Demand for the Tilton fart tape, combined with a short supply of quality copies, opened up a market for the remix, tapped into by individuals looking to sell, rather than trade, copies. One such individual was Brother Russell, formerly of the RTFC, who had since parlayed his skills at Christian parody into a popular series of prank call comedy albums, which often targeted conservative Christian radio stations, and which communications scholar John Downing described as a “riotous” culture jam of “the loony Right in the United States.”⁹⁶ Brother Russell’s most famous prank persona was Melba Jackson, an apparently devout, elderly woman who was

⁹⁰ “Rock,” posting in “*I* Ancient Hippies,” January 25, 1996, alt.fan.pratchett, <https://groups.google.com/forum/#!topic/alt.fan.pratchett/LV0y8pEgJ4s>, accessed January 29, 2015.

⁹¹ Hilderbrand, *Inherent Vice*, 163.

⁹² “Andrew Bunch,” posting in “Evangelist with gas problems,” March 26, 1996, alt.video.tape-trading, https://groups.google.com/forum/#!topic/alt.video.tape-trading/2kaiCiNE_hM, accessed January 29, 2015.

⁹³ “Jake,” posting in “Evangelist with gas problems,” March 27, 1996, alt.video.tape-trading, https://groups.google.com/forum/#!topic/alt.video.tape-trading/2kaiCiNE_hM, accessed January 29, 2015.

⁹⁴ Ken,” posting in “Robert Tilton,” July 13, 1995, rec.music.christian, <https://groups.google.com/forum/#!topic/rec.music.christian/jxMQFfD2rZg>, accessed January 29, 2015; “Dave Spark,” posting in “Odd Video and Music to Trade,” July 15, 1995, alt.video.tape-trading, <https://groups.google.com/forum/#!topic/alt.video.tape-trading/SgoqjpB4T3U>, accessed January 29, 2015.

⁹⁵ Steve, posting in “Robert Tilton w/gas,” October 14, 1994, austin.general, <https://groups.google.com/forum/#!topic/austin.general/JFN-lutPZe8>, accessed January 29, 2015.

⁹⁶ John D.H. Downing, *Radical Media: Rebellious Communication and Social Movements*, rev. ed. (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, Inc., 2001), 140.

given considerable leeway by broadcasters.⁹⁷ “The sweet old lady approach is good,” Brother Russell explained during our initial interview, “because if you say stuff that is starting to sound a little off kilter they chalk it up to early senility or something and they kinda let it go...they can’t stop it until it’s too late and you’ve said something on the air that is inappropriate.”⁹⁸ By 1998, Brother Russell had established a web-based catalogue where he advertised a wealth of products for sale. In addition to his own prank-call albums, listed for twelve dollars, and a VHS copy of Brother Randall’s Jonathan Bell footage, available for fifteen, Brother Russell hawked a fifteen-dollar, two-hour tape titled “Mondo Tilton,” an assemblage of the televangelist’s “crazy rants, screwups (sic), and scandals” to which he had appended “the notorious ‘fart videos’,” in the hopes, like Brothers Randall and Bucks before him, of making some extra cash.⁹⁹

Retaining a competitive advantage, however, was Brother O’Nottigan himself, who possessed the best quality copies of the remix. In 1998, with Robert Tilton again on the airwaves promising financial windfalls to the faithful, Brother O’Nottigan and his wife “were flat broke and trying to figure out a way to make money.”¹⁰⁰ After a friend informed him that the hosts of *The Mark and Brian Show*, a nationally syndicated talk radio program, had praised the fart tape on the air, Brother O’Nottigan moved to capitalize on his creation, now more than a decade old.¹⁰¹ He “re-edited (the tape) one more time,” added the title “Pastor Gas,” had a number of copies professionally dubbed, and established a legal corporation and a website: www.pastorgas.com.¹⁰² On the left side of the site’s homepage appeared an image of the tape’s packaging, designed by Brother O’Nottigan’s wife.¹⁰³ “The funniest parody video you’ll EVER see!” the cover promised, underneath an image of a squinting Tilton. The site appealed to both the scarcity of the remix and the degraded nature of many circulating copies as selling points for

⁹⁷ Melba Jackson was featured on Brother Russell, *Brother Russell’s Radio Jihad: Starring: Melba Jackson*, Vinyl Communications, 1996, CD; and *ibid.*, *Melba Comes Alive!*, Vinyl Communications, 1997, CD.

⁹⁸ Brother Russell, Skype interview by author, December 17, 2011.

⁹⁹ A list of Brother Russell’s products for sale and a link to his now-defunct website, dated to July 2, 1998, appears on the Church of the SubGenius website; see “Russell Media Underground Catalog,” http://www.subgenius.com/updates/5-99news/X0018_Russell_Media_Underg.html, accessed January 29, 2015.

¹⁰⁰ Brother O’Nottigan, Skype interview by author, May 9, 2013.

¹⁰¹ For archived clips of “The Mark and Brian Show,” which gained its greatest fame at KLOS-FM in Los Angeles, California, see “The Unofficial Mark and Brian Archive – By The Fans, For the Fans,” <https://archive.org/details/MarkAndBrian>, accessed January 29, 2015.

¹⁰² Brother O’Nottigan, Skype interview by author, May 9, 2013.

¹⁰³ An archived version of Brother O’Nottigan’s “Pastor Gas” website, dated to January 25, 1999, can be found at <http://web.archive.org/web/19990125102013/http://www.pastorgas.com/>, accessed January 29, 2015.

the tape, which was priced at \$14.95: “Until recently, the only way you could see the incredible Pastor Gas was to know someone who knew someone who had a crazy cousin who had a fuzzy, bootlegged copy,” the homepage pointed out, while one “Jeff” praised the new version’s quality on the “Testimonials” page: “I’m so psyched I can finally order a clear copy! Thanks!”¹⁰⁴ To further promote the refurbished remix Brother O’Nottigan sent a “six pack” of tapes to *The Mark and Brian Show*, earning an on-air plug that resulted in the sale of “sixty or seventy tapes that day.” Demand tapered off quickly, however, and from then on they “sold, on average, maybe a couple of tapes a day.” Nevertheless, Brother O’Nottigan pointed out that the influx of cash was welcome, as it covered his “family’s health insurance” during a period of lack – a subversive use of Robert Tilton’s television ministry to address his financial issues.¹⁰⁵

In his search for other ways to promote “Pastor Gas” Brother O’Nottigan contacted Ole Anthony of *The Door*, a flyer for which he had received in the mail one day, to inquire about advertising in the magazine.¹⁰⁶ While *The Door*, as a non-profit enterprise, did not accept paid advertising, the Trinity Foundation included a tongue-in-cheek reference to Brother O’Nottigan’s new venture, as well as clips of the cleaned up “Pastor Gas,” in its own Tilton-themed compilation tapes.¹⁰⁷ *Brother Bob and the Gospel of Greed* was first advertised on the back cover of *The Door*’s November/December 2000 issue, which featured a front-cover illustration of Tilton rendered as Dr. Seuss’ “The Grinch.” The compilation itself was a weighty six-hour, two-tape collection of Tilton-related clips, priced at \$39.95.¹⁰⁸ By the following issue of *The Door*, the compilation had been expanded to four tapes and eight hours of material, available for the same price.¹⁰⁹ Near the end of the latter collection, which was largely composed of amusing clips of Tilton in action and television news reports about the preacher, appeared footage from what an advertisement for the compilation cryptically referred to as the “‘you-know-what’ tape.”¹¹⁰ “During the 80’s and 90’s, a little four-minute video of Pastor Tilton (featuring ‘sound effects’) made it’s (sic) way around the world,” a selection of crawling text stated, adding, “For the last

¹⁰⁴ An archived version of the “Testimonials” page, dated to August 28, 1999, can be found at <http://web.archive.org/web/19990125102013/http://www.pastorgas.com/>, accessed January 29, 2015.

¹⁰⁵ Brother O’Nottigan, Skype interview by author, May 9, 2013.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ McClymond noted that “*The Door* is still an underground publication in the sense that it runs no advertisements and does no marketing”; see *ibid.*, “The Wit and Wisdom of *The Door*,” 435.

¹⁰⁸ See the front and back covers of *The Door*, November/December 2000.

¹⁰⁹ Back cover, *The Door*, January/February 2001.

¹¹⁰ Ibid. For the segment, see *Brother Bob and the Gospel of Greed*, VHS.

time... WE HAD NOTHING TO DO WITH IT! We think it is in terrible taste.” “If you are as offended as we are,” the text continued, offering Brother O’Nottigan a winking non-advertisement, “contact the creators of the new digital-master tape at: www.PastorGas.com.” What followed was an undated clip of combative televangelist, and ironic fan favorite, Gene Scott sitting on the set of his own program. “I wanna tell the world one thing I admire about Tilton,” Scott, chomping on his trademark cigar, admitted to his studio audience, “He looks like he’s breaking wind royally on every word.” “Once I began to see this,” Scott continued, “for entertainment, I’ve watched him.” Throughout Scott’s intriguing confession, *Brother Bob and the Gospel of Greed* interweaved short clips from the latest version of “Pastor Gas,” in which the on-screen spaces previously reserved for the telephone number of Tilton’s ministry had been replaced with the address for Brother O’Nottigan’s website.

In its analog, VHS-based form, Brother O’Nottigan’s “Pastor Gas” remix was a valuable physical artifact, having been traded and sold for well over a decade. Brothers Randall and Bucks of the Robert Tilton Fan Club had been early capitalizers on the remix’s monetary value, incorporating it into their broader project of profiting through ironizing American evangelicalism, and Brothers Russell and O’Nottigan would continue to sell the tapes by combining mail-based distribution with advertising via the World Wide Web. This market, however, would collapse once the footage, in digital form, became readily available and easily sharable on the Internet. As early as 1996, digitized clips from Brother O’Nottigan’s remix appeared online. On March 12, 1996, one “Misteradio” wrote in the *rec.radio.broadcasting* newsgroup forum that “Windows/PC users can...download segments of the Robert Tilton ‘tootin tilton / pootin preacher’ video at my home page,” a site since defunct.¹¹¹ Later that same year, in the forum *alt.cult-movies*, poster “CTG,” asked for help locating a physical copy of the Tilton remix, which s/he called “the funniest thing I’ve ever seen.”¹¹² One “Kev” replied that s/he had discovered downloadable segments of the video at the website for the *Don and Mike Show*, a

¹¹¹ “Misteradio,” posting in “QUEEN BEE BARBECUE!,” March 12, 1996, *rec.radio.broadcasting*, <https://groups.google.com/forum/#!topic/rec.radio.broadcasting/hQsaKRXwoJ0>, accessed January 29, 2015. The site mentioned was located at <http://home.aol.com/misteradio>.

¹¹² “CTG,” posting in “Farting Movie?,” September 29, 1996, *alt.cult-movies*, <https://groups.google.com/forum/#!topic/alt.cult-movies/GuGlpvemCY4>, accessed January 29, 2015.

syndicated radio program broadcast from Washington, D.C.¹¹³ An archived version of this website, dated to February 12, 1998, hosts the clip which “Kev” was likely referring to. Titled “Robert Tilton: Hallelujah Farts,” the clip features three short segments – sixteen seconds worth – of “Pastor Gas.”¹¹⁴ Although severely truncated and rather low resolution, this online clip not only made portions of Brother O’Nottigan’s remix available to anybody with access to an adequate Internet connection, its digital format precluded the quality issues involved with copying and sharing analog video.

The most culturally impactful convergence of Brother O’Nottigan’s analog creation and the expanding online and digital media landscape, however, would involve the distinct affordances of streaming video technology, which allows viewers to watch live or on-demand content without downloading it.¹¹⁵ The juggernaut of streaming video has long been YouTube, founded in 2005 and acquired by Google the following year.¹¹⁶ While YouTube is, at its core, a video-hosting service, it is also a thriving social networking site focused on the free sharing of videos between individuals, including myriad copies of, and clips influenced by, Brother O’Nottigan’s original fart remix.¹¹⁷ This “gift economy” aspect of YouTube, while a boon for the distribution of video material, has often proven a bane for those who previously profited off of such material, including Brother O’Nottigan.¹¹⁸ Despite having introduced a digital video disc (DVD) version of “Pastor Gas” in 2005, sales of the remix progressively slowed until 2008, when Brother O’Nottigan decided to shut down his website.¹¹⁹ “What really ended up making it

¹¹³ “Kev,” posting in “Farting Movie?,” October 1, 1996, alt.cult-movies, <https://groups.google.com/forum/#!topic/alt.cult-movies/GuGlpvemCY4>, accessed January 29, 2015. Archived episodes of “The Don and Mike Show” can be found at <http://donandmikewebsite.com/>, accessed January 29, 2015.

¹¹⁴ An archived version of the website, dated to February 12, 1998, can be found at <https://web.archive.org/web/19980212131958/http://davids.com/david/dnm.html#movies>, accessed January 29, 2015.

¹¹⁵ As Henry Jenkins points out, while “delivery technologies” constantly change, “old media,” and in this case a dated video artifact, do not necessarily disappear, but may gain new and different functions and cultural resonances; see *Convergence Culture*, 13. For streaming video, see Wes Simpson and Howard Greenfield, *IPTV and Internet Video: Expanding the Reach of Television Broadcasting*, 2nd ed. (Burlington: Focal Press, 2009), 154.

¹¹⁶ Hilderbrand, *Inherent Vice*, 226, 238.

¹¹⁷ For YouTube as a social networking site, see Burgess and Green, *YouTube*, 58-59.

¹¹⁸ It has been noted that the gift economy aspects of YouTube have, especially recently, often been integrated with advertising revenue frameworks which can financially benefit the site, video posters, and the owners of copyrighted content. Henry Jenkins (“What Happened Before YouTube,” 120), for example, writes that “YouTube seeks to transform the free exchange of cultural ‘gifts’ into an attention economy monetized through advertising revenue.” See also Strangelove, *Watching YouTube*, 182.

¹¹⁹ See archived versions of Brother O’Nottigan’s “Pastor Gas” website from February 4, 2005 (<http://web.archive.org/web/20050204062520/http://pastorgas.com/index.html>, accessed January 29, 2015), and

so it wasn't going to be viable anymore was the Internet and YouTube," he aptly concluded during our interview, "now everybody can watch it wherever they are, and they don't have to pay for it."¹²⁰ Although Brother O'Nottigan would ultimately earn little recognition for his role in the creation and dissemination of what would become a massively popular online video, he stated during our interview that he relished his status as a mysterious "cult hero," and took pride in the fact that his remix had amused so many people: "Honestly, the legacy of the laughter is amazing. I love hearing the stories people tell."¹²¹

It would be difficult to determine when "Pastor Gas" was first uploaded as a streaming video; however, mentions of Tilton fart remixes uploaded to YouTube appeared by 2007, notably frustrations and questions concerning copyright. While YouTube has long championed itself as a home for amateur video content, much of the material hosted on the site is subject to copyright, a fact that has resulted in friction between YouTube and media corporations. The site itself, however, has largely remained immune from charges due to the Digital Millennium Copyright Act's (DMCA) provision of a "safe harbor" for prominent, online media-sharing services. As part of this exemption, YouTube is obliged to help copyright holders discover and address unauthorized uses of video material on the site, most commonly by having such videos removed following the submission of a "copyright infringement notification."¹²² Although this largely reactive approach means that infringing videos can often enjoy a long, even indefinite, lifespan, once a copyright infringement notification has been filed the targeted video disappears immediately. While the original uploader has the option of filing a "counter notification" and making a case for why the video should be permitted on the site, such videos generally remain removed, and uploader accounts are banned following three copyright violations.¹²³

There is evidence that Robert Tilton's ministry was monitoring YouTube from at least 2007, filing copyright notifications against undesirable material related to the preacher including,

April 10, 2008 (<http://web.archive.org/web/20080410210742/http://www.pastorgas.com/index.html>, accessed January 29, 2015).

¹²⁰ Brother O'Nottigan, Skype interview by author, May 9, 2013.

¹²¹ Brother O'Nottigan, Skype interview by author, May 9, 2013.

¹²² For YouTube copyright issues and the DMCA, see Hilderbrand, *Inherent Vice*, 238-243. For the "copyright infringement notification" process, see "Copyright Infringement Notification Requirements," *YouTube Help*, <https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/6005900?hl=en>, accessed January 29, 2015.

¹²³ See "Counter Notification Basics," *YouTube Help*, <https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/2807684?hl=en>, accessed January 29, 2015; "Copyright Strike Basics," *YouTube Help*, <https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/2814000?hl=en>, accessed January 29, 2015.

notably, fart remixes. On March 14, 2007, a blogger lamented that the site no longer hosted a “genre of videos” from which he derived considerable “childish” amusement. “These were clips,” he explained, “of a popular 80’s televangelist, Robert Tilton, embellished with audible flatulence perfectly synchronized with his contorted facial expressions.” The blogger posted a screen capture of the copyright notice which greeted prospective viewers of one such remix: “This video is no longer available due to a copyright claim by Reverend Robert Tilton.”¹²⁴ A case could be made that such videos, as comedic remixes, ought not to have been subject to copyright restrictions, falling instead under the purview of fair use.¹²⁵ However, YouTube’s regulatory framework was balanced in favor of disputants, with the burden of proof placed on uploaders. On February 25, 2011, another blogger complained that he had been “banned from YouTube” following three copyright notifications. While he understood the infringing nature of two of the uploaded videos, he expressed confusion over the removal of the third clip, which was from “the second edition of the Farting Preacher series.” The blogger argued that the Tilton remix should have been permitted due to common free use provisions for parody; however, he mulled whether it would be “worth filing a DMCA counter claim,” which could have resulted in “going to court.”¹²⁶

Efforts by Tilton’s ministry to remove such unflattering online video material came in advance of, and coincided with, the televangelist’s own expansion into streaming video broadcasting. On May 28, 2009, Scott Parks of *The Dallas Morning News* reported on the preacher’s latest program, *Robert Tilton Live!*, which broadcast his “patented Success N Life gospel” through the online service Streaming Faith.¹²⁷ A well-travelled hub for a number of high-profile televangelists, Streaming Faith allowed subscribing ministries to broadcast both live and on-demand streaming video feeds through the site’s propriety player, which integrated elements such as ministry websites, chat rooms, and donation forms into a single, easily navigated online presence.¹²⁸ By 2011, Tilton had left Streaming Faith for Florida-based Right

¹²⁴ Robert Hashemian, “YouTube Copyright Trouble,” *Hashemian Blog*, March 14, 2007, <http://www.hashemian.com/blog/2007/03/youtube-copyright-trouble.htm>, accessed January 29, 2015.

¹²⁵ For fair use provisions for remixes that “create new meaning for the source material,” see “What is Fair Use?,” *YouTube*, <http://www.youtube.com/yt/copyright/fair-use.html>, accessed January 29, 2015.

¹²⁶ Joel Telling, “Banned from YouTube,” *Joel Telling Dot Com*, February 25, 2011 <http://joeltelling.posterous.com/?tag=dmca>, accessed November 27, 2011 (site since defunct).

¹²⁷ Scott K. Parks, “Disgraced Dallas Televangelist Robert Tilton has New Life, Third Wife in Miami,” *The Dallas Morning News*, May 28, 2009.

¹²⁸ See Bekkering, “From Televangelist to Intervangelist.”

Brain Media.¹²⁹ Right Brain’s video portal resembled that of Streaming Faith, and Tilton’s site featured links to his ministry’s website, spaces for prayer requests and vows, and options to donate via mail or the online service PayPal. Tilton’s videos on the site came in three different forms: online versions of previously broadcast episodes of *Success N Life*; sit-down messages from an office set; and, in a new innovation, live services broadcast on the cheap from hotel conference rooms in Florida and California.¹³⁰

On Thursday, April 5, 2012, Tilton’s ministry sent out an email to those on its mailing list announcing that the preacher would host a service that Saturday, the day before Easter Sunday, at the Hilton Garden Inn in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. “If you can’t make it,” the email encouraged recipients, “watch it online at www.roberttilton.rbm.tv.”¹³¹ Scheduled to begin at 2:30 pm Eastern Standard Time, the live broadcast of the service began abruptly nearly five minutes late.¹³² Slower, grayer, yet still trim, Tilton appeared suddenly on the screen, standing behind a podium and framed by two potted plants. While his “brand message” remained one of faith-driven prosperity, the amateurish feel of the online feed did not evidence such blessings, particularly when compared to the lavish production values of Tilton broadcasts past, thereby weakening the televangelist’s brand.¹³³ For one, the entire service was shot by a single camera fixed firmly on the front podium, perhaps a deliberate move to hide the fact that, judging by the sparse responses to Tilton’s exhortations, there were few people in attendance.¹³⁴ The static camera, however, resulted in some awkward moments, such as during a solo from an unseen piano player, when it could do little more than capture Tilton nodding and smiling as he listened to the music. The service was also hampered by numerous technical glitches, often involving the audio feed. Following a song from one “Brother Todd,” for example, Tilton returned to the podium, speaking but producing no sound, and then grimacing as he reached underneath the back of his suit jacket to flip his portable microphone on. Later, as Tilton’s third wife, Maria, sang a

¹²⁹ See *Right Brain Media*, <http://www.rightbrainmedia.com/>, accessed January 29, 2015.

¹³⁰ Tilton’s video portal, which has changed little over the course of four years (apart from the incorporation of more recent radio broadcasts), can be found at <http://roberttilton.rbm.tv/>, accessed January 29, 2015.

¹³¹ Robert Tilton Ministries, email message to author, April 5, 2012.

¹³² Live service broadcast on www.roberttilton.rbm.tv, April 7, 2012.

¹³³ For the concept of “brand messages” as related to televangelist Joel Osteen, see Einstein, *Faith Brands*, 124-126.

¹³⁴ Randall Balmer, who visited Jimmy Swaggart’s church some years after his scandals, had noted the possibility of such a television technique: “The last time I had seen Swaggart on television, which was several years ago, it had occurred to me that all the camera angles had been rather narrow, suggesting that they were trying to cover up for the fact that the congregation was small”; *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 278.

solo, the canned musical accompaniment was barely audible to online viewers, leaving only her rather shrill voice.¹³⁵ Following a brief period of communion, during which Tilton encouraged online viewers to participate with a “cracker or something” and “grape juice or wine,” a closing prayer, and an appeal for donations, the live feed stopped just as brusquely as it had begun.

Poor production values, however, would be less of a concern for Tilton’s ministry when it came to establishing an online broadcasting presence than the continued proliferation of Tilton-themed fart remixes, which resulted in “Pastor Gas,” or as it is more commonly referred to today, “The Farting Preacher,” becoming a widely recognized online meme and genre of viral videos.¹³⁶ While as an analog artifact Brother O’Nottigan’s “Pastor Gas” remix was heavily copied, traded, sold, and shared, thanks to the widespread availability of VCRs and VHS tapes, it remained largely relegated to a “shadow cultural economy,” and was therefore of little concern to Tilton’s ministry.¹³⁷ Indeed, Brother O’Nottigan reported during our interview that he had pre-emptively consulted a lawyer before marketing his “Pastor Gas” tapes online, should the televangelist’s ministry attempt to shut down his operation; however, he never received any notice or complaint.¹³⁸ In contrast, the relocation of the remix to the easily shared, online streaming video format has resulted in a propagation that has not only prompted, ultimately futile, attempts by Tilton’s ministry to stem its spread, but has effectively resulted in the viral rebranding of Robert Tilton as “Pastor Gas”/“The Farting Preacher.”¹³⁹ A quarter of a century after *Primetime Live* and the Trinity Foundation branded him as a ridiculous religious fake, thereby severely damaging his ministry, Robert Tilton faced a new, and in many ways more potent, challenge to

¹³⁵ For Maria as Tilton’s third wife, see Parks, “Disgraced Dallas Televangelist.”

¹³⁶ Biologist and noted “new atheist” Richard Dawkins first coined the term “meme” to describe a cultural equivalent to the gene – an easily replicable and transmittable piece of cultural material; see *The Selfish Gene: 30th Anniversary Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006 [1976]), 192-201. For viral videos on YouTube, specifically, see Jean Burgess, ““All Your Chocolate Rain are Belong to Us?: Viral Video, YouTube and the Dynamics of Participatory Culture,” in *Video Vortex Reader: Responses to YouTube*, eds. Geert Lovink and Sabine Niederer (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2008), 101-109.

¹³⁷ Fiske, “The Cultural Economy of Fandom,” 30.

¹³⁸ Brother O’Nottigan, Skype interview by author, May 9, 2013.

¹³⁹ For viral branding as a deliberate online marketing strategy, if a precarious one due to the possibility of brands being “hijacked” by individuals, see Tilde Heding, Charlotte F. Knudtzen, and Mogens Bjerre, *Brand Management: Research, Theory and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 17.

his ability to define his own image, and which reflects a real hazard for commodity producers, religious or otherwise, in an age of increasingly accessible, online participatory media.¹⁴⁰

There are a number of reasons why Robert Tilton's ministry has been unable to significantly affect the spread of "Pastor Gas" and related videos online. For one, although the ministry, as mentioned, has had some success removing such videos from YouTube due to the site's copyright framework, there are numerous other online outlets beyond its reach. The website *ReligiousFreaks*, for example, which contains a plethora of ironically amusing religious content, has billed itself as "the permanent home for Robert Tilton aka Pastor Gas," and has hosted a digitized version of Brother O'Nottigan's original remix since 2006.¹⁴¹ Moreover, such videos circulate through online communication channels that are invisible to Tilton's ministry, such as email and social networking sites. A second reason is the ease of not only copying and sharing but also making new Tilton remixes, due to the accessibility of digital video editing tools.¹⁴² Brother O'Nottigan's tape did spawn an anonymously crafted, analog-based sequel that has since gained fame online: "Farting Preacher II: Fart Harder."¹⁴³ The title of the remix, almost certainly a reference to the 1990 action film *Die Hard 2* (which often carried the tagline "Die Harder"), and the relatively noisy source clips suggest an origin sometime during the early-1990s.¹⁴⁴ However, nearly all subsequent "Pastor Gas" sequels appear to have been created from digital source material, as they are largely free of audio and video noise, and generally feature clips of Tilton from his post-hiatus broadcasts. Presently, nearly anyone with access to a personal computer, easily acquired software, and possessing some comedic timing can craft their own farting Tilton videos, resulting in a situation in which any time the televangelist broadcasts, he makes himself vulnerable to further remixing. For example, on January 20, 2012, YouTube user

¹⁴⁰ For the challenges faced by corporations in exerting "definitional control" (137) over their brands online, see Michael Strangelove, *The Empire of Mind: Digital Piracy and the Anti-Capitalist Movement* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005): 124-161.

¹⁴¹ "gasmonso," "Robert Tilton is Pastor Gas," *ReligiousFreaks*, February 26, 2006, <http://religiousfreaks.com/2006/02/26/robert-tilton-is-pastor-gas/>, accessed January 29, 2015.

¹⁴² For the rise of digital video editing tools from the 1980s onwards, and their increasing accessibility to everyday individuals, see Chris Meigh-Andrews, *A History of Video Art*, 2nd ed. (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 310-317.

¹⁴³ See "Fart Preacher 2 Fart Harder," YouTube video, 4:21, posted by "Requiem 20101," October 24, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=82e283rqxrY>.

¹⁴⁴ *Die Hard 2: Die Harder*, directed by John McTiernan (1990; Los Angeles: 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2007), DVD.

“hideadbillymayshere” uploaded seventeen entries of his/her own “Farting Preacher Today” series, built entirely on material from a recent version of *Success N Life*.¹⁴⁵

As “hideadbillymashere’s” videos indicate, YouTube continues to host hundreds of flatulent Tilton remixes, and it appears as though the televangelist’s ministry has given up hope of having them all removed from the site. Even when the ministry was more vigilant, however, uploaders found savvy ways of keeping the videos online, such as by tactically avoiding select keywords in video titles, descriptions, and tags so that they could not be easily detected and removed.¹⁴⁶ YouTube user “drac16,” for example, who uploaded a collection of eighteen fart remixes in 2009, left out obvious words in his/her video’s searchable identifiers, instead using titles derived from statements made by Tilton within the videos themselves, and which were often accompanied by dubbed-in noises of flatulence: “Now we’re cookin’”; “Hearing something real powerful”; “The sound of abundance.”¹⁴⁷ “This was awesome,” wrote a viewer of “Open it up,” who nevertheless suggested that the video poster “change the title so people searching for the ‘farting preacher’ can find it.” In response, drac16 revealed the reason for the omissions: “Actually, I intentionally left out the words ‘farting’ and ‘preacher’ in the title because I don’t want Bob Tilton to find it. He has a history of removing these kinds of videos.”¹⁴⁸

The online ubiquity of “Pastor Gas”/“The Farting Preacher” has even encouraged culture jams of official Tilton ministry websites. In a September 1, 2011 posting on the “Robert Tilton Ministries” Facebook page, for example, a poster recreated, in textual form, the essence of the remixes: “*FART* thank you jesus *poot* hallelujah! Hows (sic) the divine diarrhea flowing today?”¹⁴⁹ On January 25, 2012, Tilton’s ministry unveiled a revamped Facebook page, thereby wiping out such derogatory comments.¹⁵⁰ Despite the fresh start, however, the site continued to be colonized by “Pastor Gas”/“The Farting Preacher.” In a commenting thread related to the

¹⁴⁵ For “hideadbillymayshere’s” YouTube channel, see <http://www.youtube.com/user/hideadbillymayshere>, accessed January 29, 2015.

¹⁴⁶ Following de Certeau, such tactics can be understood as “clever tricks of the ‘weak,’ within the order established by the ‘strong’”; see *ibid.*, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 40.

¹⁴⁷ For “drac16’s” YouTube channel, see http://www.youtube.com/user/drac16/videos?sort=dd&view=0&shelf_index=2, accessed October 26, 2014.

¹⁴⁸ See comments appended to “Open it up,” YouTube video, 3:09, posted by “drac16,” June 14, 2009, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=06huSREHBns&feature=relmfu>.

¹⁴⁹ “Robert Tilton Ministries” Facebook page, <http://www.facebook.com/#!/pages/Robert-Tilton-Ministries/146879232027757>, accessed September 7, 2011 (site since defunct).

¹⁵⁰ “Robert Tilton Ministries” Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/RobertTiltonMinistries>, accessed May 16, 2013.

ministry's aforementioned Easter service, a less-than-pious poster wrote the acronym "WTF" ("What the Fuck"). "You don't feel that Easter spirit moving you," asked a faithful poster, to which the prankster replied, "Just gas."¹⁵¹ On March 10, 2012, Tilton advertised another upcoming service at the Hilton Garden Inn in Dania, Florida, which was set to be broadcast online. An individual responded by embedding a YouTube video within the post's commenting section, explaining, "This is one of Pastor Bob's older sermons, but its message still resonates today." The video was not of Tilton preaching, however, but rather one of the many copies of Brother O'Nottigan's original "Pastor Gas" remix, a sly misdirection by the poster.¹⁵²

In 2009, Brother Randall of the long-defunct Robert Tilton Fan Club briefly resurrected *Snake Oil* with a new blog – "Snake Oil: For Fans of TV Preachers and Related Kooky Khristian Kulture" – and until 2011 kept up a fairly regular posting schedule, covering topics such as "Thrift Store Gospel" music, snake handling, and, occasionally, Robert Tilton.¹⁵³ In a September 9, 2009 posting titled "Robert Tilton: A History in Flatulence," Brother Randall outlined what he knew of the "Pastor Gas" remix. "No matter what else Robert Tilton does in his life," he aptly argued, "he will go down in history as The Farting Preacher."¹⁵⁴ Beyond the fact that such videos have been viewed by millions of individuals, certainly exponentially more viewers than Tilton has attracted with his own online ventures, these remixes have resulted in a wealth of online "reaction" videos, capturing viewers responses. From little girls, to pastors, to teenage boys, people laugh heartily, sometimes uncontrollably, as Tilton gesticulates, squints his eyes, and appears to fart time and time again.¹⁵⁵ One reaction video featuring celebrity "YouTubers" in their teens and twenties had amassed over seven-million views by the time of writing. While some of the YouTubers expressed familiarity with the remixes, none indicated that they knew

¹⁵¹ "Robert Tilton Ministries" Facebook page, https://www.facebook.com/RobertTiltonMinistries_, accessed October 3, 2013 (comment since removed).

¹⁵² Ibid. (comment since removed). The embedded video was "Farting Preacher – Spiritual Gas," YouTube video, 4:11, posted by "Zen thology," September 13, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=rUlefDfYw3k#t=18.

¹⁵³ Brother Randall, *Snake Oil: For Fans of TV Preachers and Related Kooky Khristian Kulture*, <http://snakeoilblog.blogspot.ca/>, accessed January 29, 2015.

¹⁵⁴ Brother Randall, "Robert Tilton: A History in Flatulence," *Snake Oil: For Fans of TV Preachers and Related Kooky Khristian Kulture*, <http://snakeoilblog.blogspot.ca/>, accessed January 29, 2015.

¹⁵⁵ See, for example, "Chloe laughing at farting preacher," YouTube video, 0:38, posted by "Dan Morris," August 23, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-clUF2yIq7M>; "Preachers Reaction To The Farting Preacher," YouTube video, 6:19, posted by "PurpleBuffaloStudios," March 31, 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=69fWz_sg75s; "reaction to the 'farting preacher'," YouTube video, 7:18, posted by "caleb rumpel," July 25, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xkflH3AtCcQ>.

who Robert Tilton was, or the controversial history of his television ministry. For YouTuber Alli Trippy, the fact that the subject of the remix was a televangelist was enough to warrant such mockery: “If you’re really, like, ‘a servant of God,’ or whatever, you’re not gonna, like, spend your life trying to make millions of dollars on TV. So, like, I don’t think that it’s disrespectful to make fun of someone who’s, like, exploiting...something that people, like, live their lives by.” Once informed of the scandals that had surrounded Tilton, fellow YouTuber Philip Wang agreed that the remixes could be viewed as just desserts: “If he was doing those terrible things, then I’m glad, I’m glad that he’s the butt of this joke.”¹⁵⁶

Another indicator of the widespread contemporary cultural resonance of “Pastor Gas”/“The Farting Preacher” is that a Tilton fart remix finally appeared on mainstream American television in 2009, during the pilot for the Comedy Central series *Tosh.0*.¹⁵⁷ Although “Pastor Gas,” and/or its imitators, had covertly influenced a 1997 episode of the sitcom *The Drew Carey Show*, in which a friend of the titular character added flatulent noises to an office safety video which he starred in, *Tosh.0* marked the first time that Robert Tilton as “Pastor Gas”/“The Farting Preacher” appeared on television, at least to this researcher’s knowledge.¹⁵⁸ Hosted by comedian Daniel Tosh, *Tosh.0* aims to recreate the experience of viewing and commenting on online viral videos, with Tosh offering humorous takes on well-known online fare.¹⁵⁹ Tosh segued to a clip of one of the latter fart remixes after discussing an indecipherable tweet by erratic rock star Courtney Love. “Looks like Courtney may need some help, and we’ve all lost our way from time to time, I know I have, and when I do, I turn to the ‘Farting Preacher’.” As the clip played, Tosh mimicked Tilton’s performance, betraying a deep knowledge of the clip. “Oh, you are so full of wisdom,” he joked, “I’ve been to a few of his sermons, they’re really powerful, but you need to get there early, those back pews fill up quick.”¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁶ “YOUTUBERS REACT TO FARTING PREACHER,” YouTube video, 9:53, posted by “TheFineBros,” October 10, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PYsBCa-v50U>.

¹⁵⁷ See “Afro Ninja,” *Tosh.0: Hoodies* (2009; Los Angeles: Paramount, 2012), DVD.

¹⁵⁸ See “Drew Blows His Promotion,” *The Drew Carey Show* (1997; Los Angeles: Warner Home Video, 2006), DVD. The influence of “Pastor Gas” on this episode was pointed out by “John Breeden,” posting in “Drew Carey,” February 6, 1997, rec.arts.tv, <https://groups.google.com/forum/#!search/drew%20carey%20pastor%20gas/rec.arts.tv/Wfyazwpwd7E/pSGTu-Hmff0J>, accessed January 29, 2015.

¹⁵⁹ See Rose Helens-Hart, “Promoting Fan Labor and ‘All Things Web’: A Case Study of *Tosh.0*,” *Transformative Works and Cultures* 15 (2014): n.p. Available at <http://journal.transformativeworks.com/index.php/twc/article/view/491/424>, accessed January 29, 2015.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the migration of activities and media associated with the Robert Tilton Fan Club from the cultural margins to the cultural mainstream. Although Brother Randall's ironic fan following would not survive its chosen televangelist's temporary absence from the airwaves beginning in 1994, the RTFC anticipated and influenced subsequent representations of Tilton, and other strange and suspicious televangelists, on mainstream American television. The Trinity Foundation, which had previously shuttled ironically amusing video proof texts of Tilton to national investigative news programs, and one member of which became friends with Brother Randall of the RTFC, shrewdly capitalized on cultural trends by bringing *Godstuff* to cable television with the help of Comedy Central and *The Daily Show*. With *Godstuff*, the Trinity Foundation invited viewer amusement at clips of purportedly exploitative and bizarre televangelists, some of which were directly appropriated from Brother Randall, and further encouraged readers of *The Door* to act like ironic televangelical fans by watching, taping, and submitting their best finds. Through such activities the Trinity Foundation also brought Brother Randall's concept of Recreational Christianity to the mainstream, yet with a satirical edge associated with the ministry's strident theological stance.

Ironically amusing clips of Tilton, however, would ultimately prove less a concern for the televangelist, who returned to television in 1997, than an underground remix which would come to effectively define his ministry. Once a legendary analog remix traded hand-to-hand or via mail in the American alternative media underground, and cherished by the members of the RTFC, Brother O'Nottigan's "Farting Preacher"/"Pastor Gas" video unexpectedly became a massive hit in the age of streaming online video. Despite attempts by Tilton's ministry to quell the spread of the remix and its imitators, its relatively unmitigated spread has resulted in a viral rebranding of the televangelist, representing a serious stumbling block to Tilton's recent attempt to market his ministry online and beyond, and demonstrating that in an age of online participatory media, the maintenance of definitional control over religious brands is a shaky proposition, at best.

Chapter 6 – Tammy Faye Bakker, Ludicrous Tragedy, and Campy Fandom

Introduction

It is the inaugural episode of the fourth season of *RuPaul's Drag Race* (2012), a quasi-parodic fashion/modelling reality show featuring thirteen competitors hoping to become “America’s next drag superstar.”¹ Produced by World of Wonder, the company which, as mentioned in the third chapter, had brought the Robert Tilton Fan Club to British audiences via *Made in the USA* (1992), *RuPaul's Drag Race* is hosted by the statuesque RuPaul Charles, the world’s most famous drag queen.² Titled “RuPocalypse Now!,” a play on Francis Ford Coppola’s epic war film *Apocalypse Now* (1979), the episode has each contestant create a piece of “post-apocalyptic couture” for a runway competition. Striding through a hot-pink themed sewing room and sporting a grey men’s suit, RuPaul walks up to the table of Aaron Coady, a.k.a. “Sharon Needles,” the season’s eventual winner for his groundbreaking combination of shocking horror and supermodel glamor. RuPaul questions Coady about his dress, a dusty-brown gown with a twisted coil of fabric draped over the shoulders, with Coady explaining that he is aiming for a “Linda Hamilton, *Beauty and the Beast*” look, a nod to the long-cancelled (1987-1990) cult television series and its star.³ Just before moving on to the next contestant, RuPaul draws attention to Coady’s left arm: “I noticed you have a Tammy Faye Bakker tattoo on your arm there.” The camera fixes on Coady’s tattoo – a black ink portrait of the since-deceased televangelist smiling through pooling tears, and underneath which “Tammy Faye” is emblazoned in prominent gothic letters. “I do,” Coady replies, “She was a huge idol to me as a kid. I didn’t even know she was selling Christianity, I thought she was selling me makeup.”

The following two chapters examine the role of an unexpected fan following of Tammy Faye Bakker (later Tammy Faye Messner (1942-2007)) in the televangelist’s cultural migration from a widely derided religious fake to a celebrated gay icon. Along with her then-husband Jim

¹“RuPocalypse Now!,” *RuPaul's Drag Race: Season 4* (2012; New York: Logo, 2012), DVD.

² See “RuPaul’s Drag Race,” *World of Wonder*, <http://worldofwonder.net/productions/rupauls-drag-race>, accessed January 29, 2015.

³ For a discussion of the television drama *Beauty and the Beast* and its fans, see Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 120-151.

Bakker, Tammy Faye (who will generally be referred to by her given names as per her own self-branding) helmed the “Praise the Lord” (PTL) empire, perhaps the quintessential 1980s television ministry. PTL’s sanctified spectacle and gospel of fun and prosperity was a magnet for both faithful supporters and suspicious critics, as was Tammy Faye herself, who demanded attention with her extreme makeup, expensive clothes, and propensity for on-camera emotional displays. Much like Robert Tilton, Tammy Faye also attracted a following of unintended fans who relied heavily on irony to negotiate a middle ground between genuine affection and satirical attack: gay men who filtered the televangelist through the lens of camp. For such “campy” fans, Tammy Faye was a tragicomic symbol of suffering and perseverance – both relatable and ridiculous, and always entertaining.⁴

This chapter begins by examining a first “wave” of campy fandom that followed Tammy Faye during the 1980s, a decade which saw PTL reach colossal heights before collapsing under the weight of financial and sexual scandal. Tammy Faye’s early campy fans were drawn into the melodrama of the Bakker’s public struggles and scandals; were delighted and amused by the excesses of PTL, and, in particular, Tammy Faye; and in the case of the campy fans discussed in this chapter, poached these cultural resources for the construction of their own camp media and performances. These underground cultural artifacts, heavy with irony and parody, evidence unfaithful fandom in that they often carried a satirical religio-political edge, challenging normative frameworks of sex, gender, and family promoted by prominent conservative Christians, Tammy Faye included. Moreover, they resonated with, and often reinforced, broader representations of Tammy Faye as a bizarre religious fake who preached a patently false prosperity gospel. At the same time, and in line with the complicated stances of Robert Tilton’s ironic fans, Tammy Faye’s early campy fans often genuinely identified with her over-the-top public suffering, as well as her messages of steadfast perseverance – themes which resonated with their own social marginalization as gay men. While such points of identification were relatively muted during the first wave of Tammy Faye campy fandom, they would be brought to the forefront beginning in the mid-1990s, as gay-oriented media moved from the American cultural margins to the mainstream. During this period Tammy Faye, in collaboration with a selection of campy fans turned influential television players, began actively marketing herself to

⁴ Kevin Kopelson coined the phrase “campy fans” to describe an audience segment of the flamboyant pianist Liberace; see *Beethoven’s Kiss*, 154.

a kinder camp aesthetic which, while still reveling in her status as a cultural oddity, elevated her as a genuine exemplar of suffering and survival, and, more intriguingly, of an authentic Christianity grounded in tolerance, perseverance, and positivity.

Tammy Faye, Campy Fans, and a Critical Edge

Tamara Faye LaValley was born in 1942 in International Falls, Minnesota, a town hugging the Canadian border, and although not desperately her early years were poor.⁵ At the age of ten she had a visceral experience of God's presence within the walls of her mother's Assemblies of God church, receiving the fiery baptism of the Holy Spirit and an accompanying spate of glossolalia.⁶ At seventeen Tammy Faye underwent another epiphanic experience which, as she would later recall, "changed my thinking for the rest of my life."⁷ Bucking the Assemblies of God's staunch proscriptions against makeup, she experimented first with mascara, and then "the biggest sin of all – lipstick," at the encouragement of her friend Ada DeRaad.⁸ Tammy Faye's brother Johnny Grover would later go so far as to suggest that DeRaad had been his sister's "savior" for bringing a dose of color into her drab teenage years.⁹

In 1960, while attending an Assemblies of God college in Minneapolis, Minnesota, Tammy Faye met Jim Bakker, a dynamic young man from Muskegon, Michigan.¹⁰ The pair quickly fell in love, married, and left college for the exciting yet uncertain world of itinerant revival preaching. In 1965 the Bakkers landed their first television time on a Portsmouth, Virginia-based Christian station run by future televangelical superstar Pat Robertson. *Come On Over* (later titled *The Jim and Tammy Show*), the Bakkers' inaugural television effort, was largely an adlibbed children's program featuring a troupe of homemade puppets, most notably "Susie Moppet," a sharp-tongued, yellow-haired girl crafted from a pig-shaped shampoo bottle

⁵ An autobiographical account of Tammy Faye's early years can be found in Tammy Faye Messner, *Tammy: Telling it My Way* (New York: Villard Books, 1996), 3-29.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 19-23.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 25-26. These experiences would have occurred in 1959-1960, at the same time that the Assemblies of God denomination was loosening restrictions against make-up; see Margaret M. Poloma, *The Assemblies of God at the Crossroads: Charisma and Institutional Dilemmas*, 1st ed. (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1989), 15.

⁹ *The Eyes of Tammy Faye*, directed by Fenton Bailey and Randy Barbato (1999; Universal City, CA: Universal Studios Home Video, 2000), DVD.

¹⁰ For the Bakker's early preaching and television work, see Charles E. Shepard, *Forgiven: The Rise and Fall of Jim Bakker and the PTL Ministry* (New York: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1989), 1-64.

and performed by Tammy Faye.¹¹ In 1966 Jim, with musical support from Tammy Faye, moved into adult-oriented Christian programming by hosting *The 700 Club*, a talk/variety show which was the template for the couple's later television efforts. The couple's rising success was not without its costs, however, and Tammy Faye, who gave birth to daughter Tammy Sue in 1970, would later lament the impact of her former husband's intense dedication on their young family. "I began to feel left out of Jim's life," she wrote, "His whole life became television."¹²

By 1972 the Bakkers had fallen out with Robertson, a situation which journalist Charles Shepard attributes, in part, to Jim's growing ego and ambition, as well as his and Tammy Faye's questionable personal expenses.¹³ The following year the Bakkers established the Trinity Broadcasting Network in California with Jan and Paul Crouch, who, as Tammy Faye would later claim, quickly assumed control of the nascent network through a hostile takeover.¹⁴ Once again on their own, Jim and Tammy Faye eventually ended up in Charlotte, North Carolina, where they established the "Praise the Lord" television network. By the late-1970s the Bakkers had doggedly built PTL into a televangelical empire, complete with satellite broadcasting capabilities and "Heritage USA," a studio/theme park/vacation getaway in Fort Mill, South Carolina. The network's flagship program, *The PTL Club*, was a Christian talk/variety show which featured celebrity guests, musical numbers, continual donation appeals, and which conveyed the Bakkers' gospel of positivity, fun, and prosperity.¹⁵

As the celebrity figureheads of PTL the Bakkers embodied the promised rewards of their gospel, and in the case of Tammy Faye this involved eye-catching, sexually suggestive clothing (at least by conservative Christian standards), layers of makeup, and baubles from head to toe.¹⁶ Stewart Hoover has argued that Tammy Faye's melding of "flashiness, materialism, and provocativeness" with Christianity rendered her a "dissonant symbol" to many of her essentially faithful viewers, who were obliged to work through her seemingly clashing combination of materialistic artifice and religious authenticity. While Hoover's interviewees often expressed

¹¹ For Tammy Faye discussing the origins of the couple's puppets, see *The Eyes of Tammy Faye*, DVD.

¹² Tammy Faye Messner, *I Will Survive...and You Will, Too* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher, 2003), 20.

¹³ Shepard, *Forgiven*, 44-47.

¹⁴ See Shepard, *Forgiven*, 48-59; Messner, *I Will Survive*, 22-25; *The Eyes of Tammy Faye*, DVD.

¹⁵ Bourgault, "An Ethnographic Study of the "Praise the Lord Club," 43-143; Shepard, *Forgiven*, 60-117.

¹⁶ Bourgault (44) wrote that Tammy Faye's on-screen persona carried "just a hint of Dolly Parton style – little country girl sexuality, and noted that she often had "tears and mascara streaming down her face."

concern over certain elements of Tammy Faye's image – her seemingly spendthrift manner; her stylistic excesses – many maintained that she was nevertheless “authentic at the core”: a sincere, yet possibly naive, Christian who became caught up in the “trappings of the secular world.” Hoover further suggested that such issues may have actually enhanced Tammy Faye's popularity among faithful viewers, as her engagement with worldly concerns evidenced conservative Christianity's steady deployment into ostensibly secular cultural spheres: “the more outlandish and dissonant she appears on the ‘outside,’ the more compelling becomes the knowledge that she is authentic on the ‘inside’.”¹⁷

One way in which Tammy Faye attempted to demonstrate her inherent authenticity was through frequent displays of tearful emotional vulnerability, associated with the struggles she and her husband faced in both their ministerial work and their personal lives. “Weeping inevitably boosted contributions from listeners, who saw this expression of humility as a levelling confession,” writes Susan Bauer, “a bridge-building emotion that connected glittering TV leader and living-room bound watcher.”¹⁸ While Tammy Faye's tears certainly carried the potential to forge potentially lucrative emotional links with audience members, Quentin Schultze has suggested that the Bakkers' emotional displays were also a source of entertainment for faithful viewers. “Like a real-life soap opera, the ‘PTL Club’ offered entertaining glimpses into the personal lives of other people,” Schultze states, adding that in the face of controversy, the “Bakkers became the main characters in a drama about the grace of God and the actions of Satan in the lives of ordinary people.”¹⁹ For many other viewers and observers, however, the entertainment value of the Bakkers' oft-beleaguered ministry lay in its status as a ridiculous example of televised religious melodrama, with Tammy Faye's mascara-soaked tears evidencing emotional instability and/or calculated insincerity, rather than genuine suffering.

Such themes are evidenced in an early satirical parody of Tammy Faye Bakker from a 1981 episode of *SCTV Network*, a popular Canadian sketch comedy program.²⁰ In 1979 the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) initiated what would become an extended standoff

¹⁷ Hoover, *Mass Media Religion*, 222-223.

¹⁸ Bauer, *The Art of the Public Grovel*, 123.

¹⁹ Schultze, *Televangelism and American Culture*, 114-115.

²⁰ “CCCP 1,” *SCTV Network*, aired October 16, 1981 (Toronto: eOne Films, 2007), DVD. Also see Jeff Robbins, *Second City Television: A History and Episode Guide* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2008), 128-131.

with PTL over how the ministry used donated funds in relation to promises that were made over the airwaves. In what would become a characteristic move, the Bakkers framed themselves as victims of unwarranted governmental interference and attempts to suppress American religious freedom.²¹ *SCTV Network* capitalized on these high-profile hints of religious fakery, and the Bakkers' own animated defenses, with a parody performance of Tammy Faye that struck at the televangelist's emotional and cosmetic excesses, as well as her rationality, sincerity, and the authenticity of her gospel. A faux commercial for "Mayberline, super-thick, industrial mascara" – "It works like a miracle" – the skit opens with the tiny Tammy Faye (comedian Catherine O' Hara) backstage at PTL, pouring out mascara-filled tears as she argues with four frustrated stagehands. At issue was a broken promise that she could introduce Hollywood actor, and PTL stalwart, Efrem Zimbalist Jr. – a comic situation rendering Tammy Faye a petulant, spoiled brat.²² The scene which follows features Tammy Faye sitting at a desk on a flower-filled, PTL-esque stage, tearfully proclaiming her ministry's innocence to viewers: "They can audit us as much as they want. But they ain't gonna find nothin', cause we're clean, praise Him, we are clean!" "You may not like me, or the way I wear my makeup. And you might not even believe a thing I say," Tammy Faye concludes her pitch, "But that shouldn't stop you from having eternally beautiful lashes."

While widespread, such satire has not been the only, or even the most influential, method of comically negotiating the tensions, dissonances, and seeming contradictions that Tammy Faye has embodied as a religious celebrity. There has also been the approach of camp, an irony-inflected aesthetic lens associated with the social experiences of gay men. In her classic essay "Notes on Camp," Susan Sontag describes camp as a "sensibility," the "essence" of which is the "love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration."²³ Much like Jeffrey Sconce's paracinematic protocol, Sontag points out that the camp sensibility is often applied to "bad art" or "kitsch," in which a "seriousness that fails" mixes with "the exaggerated, the fantastic, the passionate, and the naive."²⁴ On one hand, the playful camp appropriation of "mass culture" commodities by gay

²¹ See Shepard, *Forgiven*, 118-149.

²² As Gary Tidwell notes, Zimbalist was elected to the board of PTL in 1979; see *ibid.*, *Anatomy of a Fraud: Inside the Finances of the PTL Ministries* (New York: Wiley, 1993), 169.

²³ Susan Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp'," in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader*, ed. Fabio Cleto (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1999), 53. Originally published in *Partisan Review* 31, no. 4 (1964): 515-530.

²⁴ Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp,'" 55, 59. For paracinema, see Sconce, "Trashing the Academy."

male “aristocrats of taste” is grounded in “detachment” and a “playful” irony.²⁵ On the other hand, in Sontag’s view, camp also represents “a kind of love, love for human nature. It relishes, rather than judges, the little triumphs and awkward intensities of ‘character’...Camp taste identifies with what it is enjoying.”²⁶ Corey Creekmur and Alexander Doty have distilled this dichotomy in describing camp as an “attitude at once...affectionate and ironic.”²⁷ Tammy Faye Bakker/Messner’s excesses and scandals rendered her, for more than two decades, an object of fascination for a campy fandom composed of gay men, some of whom used her as a cultural resource to construct their own media and performances. Much like ironic fans of Robert Tilton, Tammy Faye’s campy fans approached their chosen televangelist with a combination of distanced irony and genuine engagement, and, indeed, Tammy Faye campy fandom can be considered a subset of ironic televangelical fandom with particular cultural resonances for gay men.

A better understanding of Tammy Faye’s meaning for her campy fans begins with a brief look at a celebrity often synonymized with camp affection: film actress and singer Judy Garland. Cultural critic Richard Dyer has examined the relationship between Judy Garland and camp, which he defines as “a characteristically gay way of handling the values, images, and products of the dominant culture through irony, exaggeration, trivialization, theatricalisation and an ambivalent making fun of and out of the serious and respectable.”²⁸ Dyer suggests that Garland’s camp appeal stemmed from ironic takes on the “ordinariness” of early roles that enshrined her as “the image of heterosexual family normality,” such as farm girl Dorothy Gale in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), as well as delight in her later, “wonderfully over-the-top” performances, such as her role as singer Jenny Bowman in *I Could Go On Singing* (1963).²⁹ Aside from her on-screen personae, Dyer argues that Garland’s troubled private life, reflected in some of her later performances, also resonated with many of her gay fans. Although plagued by debilitating addictions and relationship turmoil, Garland was also remarkably resilient, embodying the classic dictum “the show must go on,” and therefore represented, both onstage and off, a

²⁵ Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp’,” 62-64.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 65.

²⁷ Corey K. Creekmur and Alexander Doty, “Introduction,” in *Out in Culture: Gay, Lesbian, and Queer Essays on Popular Culture*, eds. Corey K. Creekmur and Alexander Doty (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 2.

²⁸ Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (London: Macmillan Education Ltd., 1986), 178.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 159, 178. For a camp reading of *The Wizard of Oz*, see Corey K. Creekmur and Alexander Doty, “Introduction,” 2-3.

“combination of strength and suffering, and precisely the one in the face of the other.”³⁰ Thus, Garland’s challenges mirrored the social stigmatization of her gay fans, reflecting “the situation and experience of being gay in a homophobic society,” and her perseverance served as a source of inspiration for the marginalized to strive on.³¹ In sum, Dyer understands Garland as a celebrity symbol whose appeal to gay men is best expressed through a bundle of dichotomies: “suffering and survival, vulnerability and strength, theatricality and authenticity, passion and irony.”³²

Much like Judy Garland, the prominent themes of suffering and survival associated with Tammy Faye lie at the core of her appeal for her campy fans, who have often found in her a genuinely relatable symbol of victimization, vulnerability, and perseverance. At the same time, her campy fans have also maintained varying degrees of amused, ironic distance from Tammy Faye’s larger-than-life trials and emotional excesses. This tension is captured in a definition of camp proffered by legendary camp director John Waters’ character, “John,” in a 1997 episode of the animated sitcom *The Simpsons*.³³ In the episode, dimwitted family patriarch Homer comes to terms with the arrival of an openly gay man in his hometown of Springfield. Upon visiting John’s local collectibles store, Homer openly questions why anybody would want to buy the kitschy merchandise on display. “It’s camp!” John enthusiastically explains to a bewildered Homer, “The tragically ludicrous? The ludicrously tragic?” This latter concept of “ludicrous tragedy” offers a succinct, operative definition of camp which captures the core of Tammy Faye’s camp appeal, encompassing both her relatable personal challenges (which were also opportunities for acts of inspiring perseverance), as well as ironic approaches towards the spectacular absurdity of her trials and overall persona.³⁴ While these twinned themes have intermingled in all camp appropriations of the televangelist, the two historical waves of Tammy Faye campy fandom have tended to emphasize one theme or the other, with fans in the first wave privileging an evaluative irony with a religio-political edge, and thus generally evidencing a more unfaithful stance.

³⁰ Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies*, 149, 151.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 152-153.

³² *Ibid.*, 155.

³³ For Waters as a camp auteur, see Mathijs and Sexton, *Cult Cinema*, 73; “Homer’s Phobia,” *The Simpsons*, season 8, episode 15, directed by Mike B. Anderson, aired February 16, 1997 (Los Angeles: 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2006), DVD.

³⁴ For the use of “tragically ludicrous”/“ludicrously tragic” as operative definitions of camp, see Brock Thompson, *The Un-Natural State: Arkansas and the Queer South* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2010), 201, n. 10.

Dyer's description of camp as a "gay way" of working with resources from the "dominant culture" points to the political potential of camp.³⁵ Building on the work of Linda Hutcheon, Moe Meyer has conceptualized camp as "strategies and tactics of queer parody" which have allowed the "marginalized and disenfranchised" to apply "alternative signifying codes" to particular cultural commodities.³⁶ Creekmur and Doty echo Meyer in describing camp as "a strategy for rewriting and questioning the meanings and values of mainstream representations."³⁷ Through such processes of cultural querying and resignification, camp, in Meyer's view, has the potential to function as an "oppositional critique" and even as a "transgressive vehicle."³⁸ Media and performances associated with the first wave of Tammy Faye campy fandom, which circulated within the American cultural underground, often carried a religio-political edge that challenged normative conceptions of sex, gender, and family supported by high-profile and influential conservative Christians including, notably, Tammy Faye herself. Moreover, such camp treatments also often mocked her preaching and embodiment of a controversial prosperity gospel, thereby playfully critiquing her religious authenticity.

Examples of such early, critical camp appropriations of Tammy Faye are found in the activities of Dick Richards and his cast mates at *The American Music Show (TAMS)*, an Atlanta-based, cable-access comedy program which aired weekly from the early-1980s to 2004.³⁹ A gay man and lifelong Presbyterian, Richards revealed during our interview that he shared with Tammy Faye a history of working with Pat Robertson's media ministry, having operated a television camera "for a few months" during the late-1970s at WHAE, a Robertson-run station based in Atlanta.⁴⁰ As Richards recalled, Robertson's conservative sexual politics were not necessarily reflected in the day-to-day operations of WHAE, as, he claimed, "there were lots of gays that worked there."⁴¹ On the reception side, Richards was a frequent viewer of the Bakkers'

³⁵ Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies*, 178.

³⁶ Moe Meyer, "Introduction: Reclaiming the Discourse of Camp," in *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, ed. Moe Meyer (London: Routledge, 1994), 9, 11.

³⁷ Creekmur and Doty, "Introduction," 2.

³⁸ Meyer, "Introduction," 1, 11.

³⁹ These dates, necessarily approximate due to a lack of corroborating evidence, come from the author's Skype interview with Dick Richards on February 16, 2012.

⁴⁰ For Pat Robertson's association with WHAE, see Les Brown, "Christian Broadcasting Network," in *The New York Times Encyclopedia of Television* (New York: Times Books, 1977), 85.

⁴¹ Dick Richards, Skype interview by author, February 16, 2012. For Pat Robertson's negative stance on homosexuality, see David Edwin Harrell Jr., *Pat Robertson: A Life and Legacy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 81-82, 136, 299-300.

PTL network throughout the 1980s, albeit sporadically and in bite-sized chunks: “maybe fifteen or twenty minutes, here or there.” Like Jan Johnson and the *Zontar* crew, Richards frequently enjoyed these slices of televangelism while “stoned,” and was amused by the unpredictable nature of PTL’s, often live, programming, the Bakkers’ “continuing drama,” and the incessant cycle of “traumatic” situations and donation appeals: “you just could tell they were heading somewhere crazy with all of their money needs.” While his attention was primarily ironic, Richards confessed that he also genuinely admired certain elements of PTL’s programming, such as the Bakkers’ “nice outfits,” and the network’s talented featured singers.

When asked about Tammy Faye specifically, Richards reported that he found her to be both amusingly strange and genuinely endearing. For example, he described *Tammy’s House Party* – a lighthearted and often ad-libbed program featuring cooking, crafts, and music – as both “really good” and “so wacky,” and while he often found Tammy Faye to be ridiculous, he also respected her willingness to be “up for anything,” as well as her seemingly ceaseless “energy.”⁴² Her projected positivity, however, was counterbalanced by the fact that she was also “so vulnerable all the time,” an emotional openness which Richards cited as a possible reason for her popularity among gay men. Although Richards did not address whether Tammy Faye’s vulnerability held any genuine personal resonance for himself, he did draw on her ludicrous tragedy as a cultural resource for campy play on *The American Music Show*, for which he served as both a producer and an actor. Richards described *TAMS* during our interview as a “variety show, soap opera kind of thing,” put on by a troupe of what cultural scholar Tara McPherson has called “a wacky assortment of misfit southerners.”⁴³ Spoofing celebrities and tackling contemporary issues with a blend of camp, parody, irony, and satire, *TAMS*, according to Richards, was indebted to the dramatic work of the “French Absurdist,” and engaged in, often improvisational, play with cultural “oddities” – symbols of incongruity, paradox, and tension – including American televangelism.⁴⁴

⁴² Dick Richards, Skype interview by author, February 16, 2012. For “Tammy’s House Party,” see Messner, *Tammy*, 91-92. For a full, country-themed, episode of the hour-long program, see “Tammy’s House Party with Lillian.mpg,” YouTube video, 55:17, posted by “tbonej,” November 29, 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IBhgkcNGPeU>.

⁴³ Tara McPherson, *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 194.

⁴⁴ Dick Richards, Skype interview by author, February 16, 2012. Critic Martin Esslin discusses a “Theatre of the Absurd” that emerged in the 1950s, centered in Paris, and which radically twisted plot, character, and staging

Richards' essentially ironic approach towards the Bakkers' television ministry in general is evidenced in a YouTube-archived clip from *The American Music Show*, in which he offers an amateur video travelogue of a daytrip he made with his elderly parents to PTL's Heritage USA theme park during the 1985 Christmas season.⁴⁵ At the time, Heritage USA was on its way to becoming the third most-attended theme park in the United States, behind its models Walt Disney World and Disneyland, and like the Disney parks it offered visitors a safe and clean entertainment experience, yet one steeped in a cheerful evangelical Christianity. To unsympathetic outsiders, however, the park was a tasteless bastion of "religious kitsch."⁴⁶ According to Thomas O'Guinn and Russell Belk, while objects offered for sale at the park, "such as a plastic crown of thorns complete with red 'blood,' a crèche that includes a praying Santa, and other Christian kitsch might seem tacky or unauthentic to some," these same items were cherished by faithful PTL fans, and could even acquire the status of "sacred relics."⁴⁷ In a third approach, however, such merchandise, much like Heritage USA's overall aesthetic and PTL's programming, was appealing to ironic fans for its very kitschiness, and Richards's ironic poaching of the park reinforces Darren Grem's point that "(n)ot all of Heritage USA's visitors consumed the park's amenities in an orderly and predictable fashion."⁴⁸

While discussing his visit to Heritage USA during our interview, Richards at times praised the park in a rather straightforward manner. "They kept it very well, it was nice and clean," he recalled, adding that it "met," and "maybe exceeded," his "expectations."⁴⁹ Yet, his expectations also involved ironic amusement, as evidenced in his on-air *TAMS* travelogue.⁵⁰ Sitting on each side of a small television and VCR rig on a set cluttered with ephemera, Richards and his cast mate Patsy Duncan offer commentary on the former's footage of Heritage USA, which Richards describes as a "fabulous place." As the camera focuses tightly on the television

conventions to highlight the inherent "absurdity and uncertainty of the human condition"; see *The Theatre of the Absurd*, rev. ed. (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books Ltd., 1968 [1961]), 25.

⁴⁵ "Tour of Jim & Tammy's Heritage USA during Christmas 1985," YouTube video, 9:00, posted by "misterrichardson," November 25, 2009, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qOOIESTnL9Y>.

⁴⁶ Darren E. Grem, "Selling a 'Disneyland for the Devout': Religious Marketing at Jim Bakker's Heritage USA," in *Shopping for Jesus: Faith in Marketing in the USA*, ed. Dominic Janes (Washington, DC: New Academic Publishing, 2008), 140 and *passim*.

⁴⁷ Thomas C. O'Guinn and Russell W. Belk, "Heaven on Earth: Consumption at Heritage Village, USA," *Journal of Consumer Research* 16, no. 2 (1989): 233-234.

⁴⁸ Grem, "Selling a 'Disneyland for the Devout,'" 138.

⁴⁹ Dick Richards, Skype interview by author, February 16, 2012.

⁵⁰ "Tour of Jim & Tammy's Heritage USA during Christmas 1985," YouTube video.

screen Richards, playing the straight man, enthusiastically outlines the park's kitschiest highlights as they appear: "the famous Heritage USA plastic animals," the red and green archways of "Candy Cane Lane," "Hark! The Herald Angels' Boulevard," an animatronic display featuring the puppet Susie Moppet. The ironic context of Richards' praise for such examples of sentimental religious kitsch is explicated through Duncan's humorous asides, such as her take on an oversized roadside Christmas card from the Bakkers with a simple message for departing visitors: "We love you very much." "That's so true too," Duncan affirms, taking a tongue-in-cheek jab at the Bakkers' pseudo-personal techniques: "Every time I see them I feel that, that they just love me so very much."

After Richards has shown all of his footage, the pair move into campy play with the Bakker's ludicrous tragedies, and praise for their determination. Following Duncan's mention of local opposition to PTL's expansion plans, Richards segues into his closing performance with a reference to Tammy Faye's recently released musical call to perseverance – "Don't Give Up (On the Brink of a Miracle)" – before riffing on the Bakkers' well-publicized marital issues.⁵¹ "One time," Richards states as he begins mock blubbering, bringing his hand up to his eye to wipe away an imaginary tear, "Jim and Tammy almost got a, a divorce." "Don't get so upset Dick, I know," replies a faux sympathetic Duncan, who struggles to keep from laughing. Through further false tears, Richards points out that the celebrity couple had managed to weather the storm, thereby offering a valuable example to those facing similar struggles: "they got counseling, and they put their marriage back together. And we, we hope that'll happen to some other groups that we might know that might be in trouble, and thinking of breaking up."

Richards' play with the Bakkers' marital issues points to an undercurrent of criticism that ran through both the *TAMS* segment and his visit to Heritage USA, and which targeted evangelical ideals of the heterosexual nuclear family. As George Marsden writes, "issues of family and sexuality proved the key that unlocked evangelical potential for overt political involvement" from the 1970s onwards, and the New Christian Right, in particular, staunchly battled progressive social movements, such as the push for gay rights, which threatened its understanding of an America built on pious and patriotic families.⁵² Although the Bakkers were

⁵¹ Tammy Faye Bakker, *Don't Give Up!*, PTL Club Records & Tapes PTL-LP-1850, 1985, 33 rpm. For the Bakkers' marital troubles, see Shepard, *Forgiven*, 154-169.

⁵² Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 242, 239-243.

less explicitly political than many of their televangelical contemporaries, their ministry nevertheless implicitly conveyed a conservative politics of the family.⁵³ Heritage USA, for example, sold a nostalgic experience of an America centered on the stable Christian family which offered respite from the social uncertainties outside of the park gates.⁵⁴ Aspects of the Bakkers' ministry which did not conform to this vision, such as facilities for "unwed mothers who chose birth instead of abortion," were relegated to the property's margins, so as not to distract visitors with "the disquieting realities of life."⁵⁵ Therefore, Richards' very presence at Heritage USA as an openly gay man, the ironic significance of which was certainly shared by the bulk of *TAMS*' viewers, problematized the ministry's normative family vision, as did his play with the instability of the Bakkers' own marriage.

Beyond its implicit, ironic challenges to conservative Christian family values, *TAMS*' Heritage USA segment also took subtle shots at examples of materialism at the park, and thus, by association, the religious authenticity of the Bakker's prosperity gospel and fundraising activities. Early in the segment, for example, Richards expresses confusion over a large outdoor diorama centered on the slogan "Can I Give Candy?": "Would you interpret that as an artist, Potsy?" "Um," Duncan wryly responds, "I think it has something to do with raising money."⁵⁶ Elsewhere, Richards and Duncan express tongue-in-cheek awe at the many examples of affluence and commercialism at Heritage USA: the "lovely condominium homes," "customized vans," and "very nice cars" of the park's residents; the many shops and eateries featured in the park's indoor mall, Main Street USA; a "fleet of three stretch limousines" parked outside of the Heritage Grand Hotel; and ongoing construction projects, including, notably, the development of more hotel space for visitors. Within two years this latter construction work, and its questionable fundraising structure, would be the catalyst for high-profile financial and sexual scandals which would eventually destroy the Bakkers' televangelical empire, and which would provide Tammy Faye's campy fans with fresh cultural resources for their play.

⁵³ For the Bakkers' less explicitly political stance, see Frankl, "Televangelism," 516.

⁵⁴ O'Guinn and Belk, "Heaven on Earth," 230-232. For the "politics of nostalgia" of the New Christian Right, in particular, see Martin E. Marty, "Morality, Ethics, and the New Christian Right," in *Border Regions of Faith: An Anthology of Religion and Social Change*, ed. Kenneth Aman (Maryknoll, : Orbis Books, 1987), 269.

⁵⁵ Grem, "Selling a 'Disneyland for the Devout'," 152-153.

⁵⁶ Tour of Jim & Tammy's Heritage USA during Christmas 1985," YouTube video.

Scandals, Suffering, and Drag Queens

In 1987 *The Charlotte Observer* newspaper, which had long probed PTL's finances, charged that the ministry had knowingly oversold memberships allowing each one-thousand dollar contributor an annual three-night stay, for life, at Heritage USA. Beyond the fact that there were not enough planned hotel spaces to meet this promise, it was claimed that some of the money publicly earmarked for hotel construction costs had been surreptitiously diverted to other expenses, including generous bonuses for Jim Bakker. One expense which Bakker took great lengths to avoid being uncovered, but which *The Charlotte Observer* eventually brought to light, were payments to Jessica Hahn, a woman who claimed that Bakker had raped her in a Florida hotel room in 1980. While admitting to inappropriate conduct with Hahn, Bakker would unwaveringly claim that their sexual encounter was a brief, and consensual, lapse of judgment brought on by marital difficulties and the stress of running PTL. The extended media scandal born from these two incidents was a landmark religious (melo)drama which revolved around the question of whether Jim and Tammy Faye were greedy and morally corrupt villains, or, as the Bakkers themselves maintained, naive, if flawed, victims of the press, a biased judicial system, and even other television preachers.⁵⁷

In an attempt to ward off a rumored takeover of PTL by fellow Assemblies of God televangelist Jimmy Swaggart in the wake of the unsavory allegations, the Bakkers partnered with Baptist Jerry Falwell, who agreed to assume control over PTL in what the Bakkers would later frame as a promise of temporary custodianship obscuring a devilish coup, and which eventually left them barred from the ministry which they had founded.⁵⁸ On May 26, 1987, Jim Bakker appeared on ABC's *Nightline*, hosted by Ted Koppel, where, in Susan Bauer's words, he "tried to cast *Falwell* as the villain," complaining that the televangelist had set out to "steal" PTL.⁵⁹ Falwell's swift retort came via a press conference held at Heritage USA the following morning, in which he blasted Bakker for his "greed" and lack of "repentance," cited PTL's rash of "fiscal irregularities," and read, from a sheet of Tammy Faye's own stationary, a litany of requests allegedly made by the couple in connection with their departure, including a "lifetime" of three-hundred thousand dollar annual payments for Jim, and one-hundred thousand for

⁵⁷ For a detailed overview of the scandal, its origins, and its fallout, see Shepard, *Forgiven*.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 497-498, 504-505.

⁵⁹ See Bauer, *The Art of the Public Grovel*, 138, 136-139.

Tammy Faye. “Jim,” Falwell dramatically stated, looking out towards the sea of cameras, “I must tell you that I would be doing a disservice to God, as much as I love you, and care for you, and will pray for you...to allow you to come back here now, or ever.”⁶⁰

In addition to lambasting the Bakkers’ supposedly sinful greed, Falwell also used his prominent media podium to vilify Jim Bakker as not only a rapacious sexual predator, due to his mysterious encounter with Jessica Hahn, but also as a sexual deviant who suffered from “homosexual problems,” and who had allegedly made “homosexual advances” to male associates.⁶¹ These charges originated with another televangelist, John Ankerberg, who claimed to hold evidence that PTL was a den of sexual iniquity, including homosexual dalliances on the part of Bakker himself.⁶² Although Bakker himself always denied such charges, others would later corroborate such allegations of homosexual activity, and publicly revealing the rumors allowed Falwell to enhance his own status as a powerful “foe of unjust homosexual authority.”⁶³ Moreover, he certainly understood the gravity of such allegations for a minister of the Assemblies of God, which framed homosexual behavior as stark evidence of an individual’s failure to truly reorient his life to Christ – a particularly troubling situation when associated with one of the denomination’s leaders.⁶⁴ Indeed, Bakker’s alleged “bisexual activity” was the primary driver for the denomination’s eventual decision to defrock him. “The evangelical world feels like wrongdoing and sin have consequences,” explained Assemblies of God secretary Juleen Turnage, who added that the denomination considered homosexuality particularly troublesome as it was believed to be the sin that was “the most difficult to overcome.”⁶⁵

⁶⁰ “Falwell Says Bakker Shows No Repentance,” *Associated Press*, May 27, 1987. Clips of the press conference are featured in *The Eyes of Tammy Faye*.

⁶¹ See clips of the press conference from *The Eyes of Tammy Faye*, DVD.

⁶² See Art Harris and Michael Isikoff, “The Good Life at PTL: A Litany of Excess,” *The Washington Post*, May 22, 1987.

⁶³ Susan Friend Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 93. In his memoir, PTL associate Austin Miles claimed to have witnessed “Jim Bakker and three of his male staff members frolicking about in the nude” in a “health club” at Heritage USA, and engaging in mutual nude massages; see *Don’t Call Me Brother: A Ringmaster’s Escape from the Pentecostal Church* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1989), 12-13. That same year, John Wesley Fletcher, a frequent guest on PTL who was involved in Jim Bakker’s sexual encounter with Jessica Hahn, would claim that Bakker had homosexual affairs with himself and PTL employee David Taggart; see Shepard, *Forgiven*, 176.

⁶⁴ Blumhofer, *Restoring the Faith: The Assemblies of God, Pentecostalism, and American Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 252-253.

⁶⁵ Laura Sessions Stepp, “The Bakker Witness: Church Links Unfrocking to Claims of Homosexual Involvement,” *The Washington Post*, May 8, 1987.

Although Jim Bakker preached love and compassion for homosexuals, he shared with his denomination, and his more oppositional televangelical brethren, the belief that homosexual behavior was serious sin, and he and Tammy Faye would steadfastly deny that he engaged in such behavior.⁶⁶ On the evening of Falwell's damning press conference from Heritage USA, Ted Koppel and ABC's *Nightline* again scored a blockbuster interview with the Bakkers, live via satellite from their Palm Springs vacation home.⁶⁷ Sitting on a sofa, Jim, dressed casually in a white and beige checked shirt and khakis, and Tammy Faye, heavily made up and wearing bright red (which, as she would later explain, was her "power color"), addressed the many accusations levied against them.⁶⁸ "I admitted that I've had a fifteen to twenty minute relationship with Jessica Hahn," acknowledged Jim, who denied that the incident involved rape. As for allegations of homosexual behavior, Jim challenged his accusers "to come forward publicly with this proof." "I've been married to this man for twenty-six years," added a smiling Tammy Faye, "and I can tell you one thing. He's not homosexual, or is he bisexual, he's a wonderful, loving husband."

While topics of purported sexual sin were dealt with in a rather solemn manner, the Bakkers' *Nightline* interview also contained moments of entertaining levity, such as when Koppel probed the spending habits of Tammy Faye, who, he suggested, was a "shopping machine." Although this label was intended to elicit shame and supplication, it instead prompted broad smiles and giggles on the part of both Bakkers. "I do like to shop, I'm probably well-known for my shopping," responded a beaming Tammy Faye. "But, I am a bargain hunter," she continued, pointing a finger playfully towards the camera. Sloughing off Koppel's suggestion that she shopped "extravagantly," Tammy Faye revealed that she actually frequented budget-friendly stores, like "T.J. Maxx and, and the outlet stores." "I enjoy shopping," she explained further, "it's kind of a hobby to calm my nerves" – "Better than a psychiatrist!" "Well it may not be cheaper, the way you've been going at it," Koppel played along, to the background laughter of Jim. Such buoyant, seemingly naive confessions from Tammy Faye added another layer of entertainment to the scandals surrounding her and her husband, and helped the pair earn praise,

⁶⁶ See Shepard, *Forgiven*, 175.

⁶⁷ "Jim and Tammy Bakker Give 'Nightline' Record Ratings with PM-PTL," *Associated Press*, May 29, 1987. For clips of the interview, see "The Best of Nightline with Ted Koppel Part 3," YouTube video, 6:22, posted by "traderfiles," December 11, 2008, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mFXJcd21r64>; "Charismatic Televangelists Mired in Scandal," online video, 5:28, ABC News, March 6, 2010, <http://abcnews.go.com/Nightline/video/charismatic-televangelists-mired-scandal-10028834>.

⁶⁸ For red as Tammy Faye's "power color," see Messner, *I Will Survive*, 183.

however tongue-in-cheek, from television critics for their *Nightline* performance *qua* performance. Howard Rosenberg, a critic for the *Los Angeles Times*, reported that “the Bakkers were brilliant” during their appearance, offering top-notch television “shaped and polished from years of teary preaching to millions of their Christian followers.” “TV just does not get any better than this,” he continued, adding that the Bakkers were even “downright adorable.”⁶⁹

“As entertainment, it is a great show,” the *Chicago Tribune*’s Joan Beck agreed regarding the Bakkers’ “made-for-TV sex and money scandal,” while at the same time expressing concern that the spectacle distracted from serious issues such as televangelical insincerity, greed, and exploitation. Nevertheless, she could not resist relaying a joke at Tammy Faye’s expense: “Scrape all the makeup off Tammy’s face and you’ll find Jimmy Hoffa.”⁷⁰ Similarly, Jack McKinney of the *Philadelphia Daily News*, in his own article on the Bakkers’ *Nightline* appearance, described Tammy Faye as Jim’s “Avon lady.”⁷¹ Jesting jabs at Tammy Faye’s physical appearance were common in mainstream and tabloid media associated with the Bakkers’ troubles, and much like jokes about her emotional excesses and penchant for shopping, they highlighted her ridiculous religious inauthenticity by emphasizing her ties to the material, rather than spiritual, world.⁷² These same facets of her public persona, however, were also cultural resources appropriated for underground, camp-themed performances which further intermingled Tammy Faye’s potentially relatable themes of suffering and survival with implicit and explicit criticisms of her and her husband’s religious authenticity, as well as their conservative stances on sex, gender, and family. Such performances were hinted at, however unintentionally, by reporter Peter Harriman of the *Moscow-Pullman Daily News*, who faulted Ted Koppel of *Nightline* for failing “to substantiate the perfectly plain observation that Tammy Faye Bakker is a short, squat man in drag.”⁷³

⁶⁹ Howard Rosenberg, “Jim and Tammy: Totally in Command: ‘Nightline’ Ratings Set Record as Koppel Interviews Dethroned but Still Charismatic Couple,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 29, 1987.

⁷⁰ Joan Beck, “Made-For-TV Fight of Televangelists is Not a Holy War,” *Chicago Tribune*, June 1, 1987.

⁷¹ Jack McKinney, “A ‘Pullet’ for Ted Koppel: ‘Nightline’ Host Finds PTL a Key to Ratings,” *Philadelphia Daily News*, May 29, 1987;

⁷² See Patricia Mellencamp, *High Anxiety: Catastrophe, Scandal, Age, & Comedy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 221-229; Kathleen Rowe, *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 32-33; Sean McCloud, *Making the Religious Fringe*, 166-172.

⁷³ Peter Harriman, “Ted Koppel Dropped the Ball on Tammy Faye’s Biggest Secret,” *Moscow-Pullman Daily News*, June 19, 1987.

Steven Schacht and Lisa Underwood define “drag queens...as individuals who publicly perform being women in front of an audience that knows they are ‘men,’ regardless of how compellingly female – ‘real’ – they might otherwise appear.”⁷⁴ Anthropologist Esther Newton has situated drag alongside camp as “the most representative and widely used symbols of homosexuality in the English speaking world.”⁷⁵ Drag parodies of Tammy Faye fall within Newton’s category of “comic drag,” and further, her subcategory of “slapstick” drag, which relies on “gross comic effects” and “ridiculous” appearances, situations, and actions.⁷⁶ Such parodies have also proven highly campy, playing upon the themes of ludicrous tragedy central to Tammy Faye’s celebrity, and which were amplified in the wake of the PTL scandals. For example, a taped performance from a Tampa, Florida gay bar in 1987 features drag queen Heather Fontaine, as Tammy Faye, doing a series of interpretive lip-syncs, a mainstay of slapstick drag.⁷⁷ Dressed in a gleaming white, high-collared dress, curly blond wig, and layers of shining makeup, Fontaine unfolds a narrative of Tammy Faye’s romantic troubles to an enthusiastic audience. She begins by recounting the Bakkers’ seemingly idyllic, pre-scandal relationship via a demure rendition of Dusty Springfield’s blue-eyed soul hit “Son of a Preacher Man” (1968). At the end of the second chorus, however, the song abruptly segues into country star Loretta Lynn’s “Fist City” (1968), a musical threat of violence against the “other woman.” As the song kicks in, Fontaine pulls out a copy of the November 1987 issue of *Playboy* magazine, featuring Jessica Hahn on the cover, from a plastic shopping bag. While the crowd claps to the beat, Fontaine shakes her fist at, and lip-syncs the song’s warnings to, the cover image of a sun-glassed and sultry Hahn. Following a brief selection from Peggy Lee’s wistful look at lost love, “Is That All There Is?” (1969), Fontaine ends with Melissa Manchester’s “Don’t Cry Out Loud” (1978), a musical call to emotional stoicism which she playfully inverts

⁷⁴ Steven P. Schacht and Lisa Underwood, “The Absolutely Fabulous but Flawlessly Customary World of Female Impersonators,” in *The Drag Queen Anthology: The Absolutely Fabulous but Flawlessly Customary World of Female Impersonators*, eds. Steven P. Schacht and Lisa Underwood (New York: Harrington Park Press, 2004), 4.

⁷⁵ Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1972), 100.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁷⁷ “Heather Fontaine as Tammy Faye Bakker Tribute,” YouTube video, 3:26, posted by “Heather Fontaine,” December 15, 2010, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s8NF_uboqQs. For lip syncing and “slapstick” drag, see Newton, *Mother Camp*, 52-54.

by spraying mists of water onto her face from a secret bottle, causing her eye makeup to pool into two inky ponds, much like her televangelical template.⁷⁸

Fontaine's status as a Tammy Faye fan is suggested by the fact that she described the above footage, uploaded to YouTube nearly a quarter century after the original performance, as a "tribute" to the recently deceased televangelist, and she added the message "R.I.P Tammy Faye" to the clip's conclusion. Whatever feelings of genuine identification with Tammy Faye that Fontaine may have held at the time, however, were also intermingled with criticisms of her subject's conservative worldview.⁷⁹ Most obviously, much like Dick Richards' Heritage USA travelogue on *The American Music Show*, Fontaine toyed with the larger-than-life spectacle of the Bakkers' marital problems, thereby humorously highlighting the precariousness of the ideal Christian, heterosexual nuclear family. More implicitly, however, Fontaine's drag parody of Tammy Faye also interrogated conservative Christian frameworks of sex and gender. According to Judith Butler, by drawing attention to gender as a performative construct rather than an essential trait, drag challenges the dominant "law of heterosexual coherence," which conflates sex and gender into a "fabricated unity."⁸⁰ For Tammy Faye, as for other conservative Christians, this law was divinely ordained; however, her own "exaggerated gender display," rather than embodying sacred sex and gender divisions, reinforced the concept of gender as performance, thereby unintentionally intersecting with the crux of drag.⁸¹ Drag performers like Fontaine, then, in poaching Tammy Faye away from conservative Christianity as one of their own, comically critiqued understandings of divinely endorsed heteronormativity by humorously amplifying her hyper-feminine cosmetic, sartorial, and emotional excesses to even more absurd proportions.

Although largely absent from Heather Fontaine's performance, early drag parodies of Tammy Faye also often playfully targeted the authenticity of her prosperity gospel and PTL's fundraising focus, as evidenced by online-archived video footage of parties in Cherry Grove,

⁷⁸ As Newton writes in *Mother Camp* (54), one common drag lip-sync technique "is to pick an ostensible serious record and lampoon it."

⁷⁹ "Heather Fontaine as Tammy Faye Bakker Tribute," YouTube video.

⁸⁰ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2006 [1990]), 187-188.

⁸¹ Judith Lorber, "Preface," in *The Drag Queen Anthology: The Absolutely Fabulous but Flawlessly Customary World of Female Impersonators*, eds. Steven P. Schacht and Lisa Underwood (New York: Harrington Park Press, 2004), xvi.

New York, described by Newton as “America’s first gay and lesbian town.”⁸² One collection of pre-scandal clips, dating from 1986, documents a boisterous house party, where a mustachioed “Tammy Faye,” sporting a short blond wig, green gown, and large cross necklace, markets the gospel to partygoers on the patio.⁸³ “Would you like to be saved?,” she asks the cameraperson, “We are selling, to save Jim’s soul, we have a special here today, it’s for \$25.95, you get the ‘PTL All-American Hymnal,’ songs all about Cherry Grove.” As she makes her pitch, “Tammy Faye” holds up her hymnal, a book covered in brown Kraft paper and titled with glitter paint. Other products she offers for sale include the similarly customized “Bakker Bible,” which doubles as a purse, and a cassette tape – “Tammy Faye Bakker Sings ‘For the Love of God’” – a winking shot at the televangelist’s questionable music talents. A second collection of post-scandal clips from 1988 features another “Tammy Faye” crowned as the winner of a drag competition at the “Ice Palace,” a popular Cherry Grove gay bar.⁸⁴ “Where did you spend all of your money?” a judge jokingly demands from the tearful “Tammy Faye,” resplendent in a white, off-the-shoulder dress. Following her victory, shouts of “Praise the Lord!” fill the club as a judge stuffs a dollar bill down the front of “Tammy Faye’s” gown, an unsubtle suggestion that the real televangelist was also only in it for the money.

While early drag parodies of Tammy Faye were generally performed in venues such as nightclubs, parties, and parades, Dick Richards and *The American Music Show* also brought campy Tammy Faye drag to Atlanta public-access television, part of the program’s pioneering efforts to bring drag to a wider viewership, such as by airing the earliest televised performances of RuPaul Charles, who would later credit *TAMS* as the place where his “star was born.”⁸⁵ Tara

⁸² Esther Newton, *Cherry Grove, Fire Island: Sixty Years in America’s First Gay and Lesbian Town* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993).

⁸³ “Rose Levine, Tammy Faye, and Friends – 1986 – Cherry Grove,” YouTube video, 2:11, posted by “Cherry Grove Historical Archives,” September 17, 2013, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UTqupFi_cJI.

⁸⁴ “Tammy Faye is Crowned – Johnny Pool’s Drag Attack at Ice Palace – 1988,” YouTube video, 2:36, posted by “Cherry Grove Historical Archives,” September 28, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WMZotk8MSzs>. For the origins of the “Ice Palace,” see Newton, *Cherry Grove, Fire Island*, 244.

⁸⁵ According to the June 1987 edition of *Texas Monthly*, “no fewer than three Houston drag shows were spotlighting Tammy Faye Bakker sets” by “Easter Weekend”; see “Trendmonger’s Tip Sheet,” *Texas Monthly*, June 1987. For the appearance of a Tammy Faye drag queen, complete “with gobs of makeup, huge eyelashes, and holding a bible the pages of which are from *Gay American History*,” during an undated running of the Greenwich Village Halloween Parade in New York City, see Jack Kugelmass, *Masked Culture: The Greenwich Village Halloween Parade* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 23. For RuPaul’s relationship with *The American Music Show*, Dick Richards, and the underground scene in Atlanta, see RuPaul Charles, *Lettin’ it All Hang Out: An Autobiography* (New York: Hyperion, 1995), 56-68. For a 1986 appearance on *TAMS* by RuPaul, see “RuPaul and

McPherson has suggested that while “drag is not an exclusively southern development, it does resonate within the region,” where it “can be seen as a response to the excessively performative nature of southern femininity.” In addition to drawing on the “southern belle” archetype, drag performances featured on *TAMS* also often played with a “white trash” aesthetic, resulting in recurring, low-class drag queens such as “DeAundra Peek” and “Ruby Boxcar,” who were “Mary Kay gone bad, trumping even Tammy Faye Bakker in their cosmetological finesse,” and through whom *TAMS* set about “retooling the image of both the redneck and dominant white femininity.” By “deploying a white trash veneer,” and “celebrating the misfit” via such drag queens, *TAMS*, according to McPherson, was involved in a “class-based politics of performance,” which set out to “mock the etiquette-driven, rule-bound fixations of southern culture and ‘hospitality,’” and critiqued a southern society in which “homosexuality has been criminalized and pathologized.”⁸⁶

Drag performances of Tammy Faye Bakker on *TAMS* fell into McPherson’s category of southern “Christian drag,” which, she suggests, is “intent on mocking the self-righteous and moralizing tone of right-wing fundamentalism and the televangelist.”⁸⁷ Such performances, however, could also harbor specifically religious criticisms, and *TAMS*’ drag representations of Tammy Faye comically critiqued the religious authenticity of her seed faith gospel and focus on finances, along with her religiously grounded positions on gender, sexuality, and family. At the same time, these performances were also motivated by a sense of identification with the televangelist as a much-maligned, suffering “misfit,” and thus featured a campy “mixture of insincerity and sincerity,” functioning as both “homage” and satire.⁸⁸ A similar combination of irony and genuine identification was evidenced in an earlier attempt by Richards and his crew to capitalize on the Bakkers’ scandals: a 45 rpm single released in 1987 by Funtone USA, a *TAMS*-affiliated, independent record label helmed by Richards.⁸⁹ Titled “Tickets to Heaven” and

Larry Tee Present Nelson Sullivan’s New York,” YouTube video, 24:42, posted by “5ninthavenueproject,” March 23, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ff1tnLI6hA0>.

⁸⁶ McPherson, *Reconstructing Dixie*, 194-196.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 195.

⁸⁸ For “misfit,” see *ibid.*, 194. Dick Richards, Skype interview by author, February 16, 2012. While Richards was referring here to other conservative Christian cultural artifacts, the statements also apply to his approach to Tammy Faye.

⁸⁹ Laughing Matters, *Tickets to Heaven*, Funtone USA PTL-23, 1987, 45 rpm. Following our interview, Dick Richards uploaded a video for the song; see “Laughing Matters ‘Tickets to Heaven (Those TV Preachers),” YouTube video, 2:28, posted by “misterrichardson,” March 6, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tdgGoYWaoj8>.

credited to the “Laughing Matters,” the cover of the single features an illustration of Jim and a bejeweled Tammy Faye, with slogans lampooning the televangelists’ broken promises, Tammy Faye’s cosmetic excesses, and Jim’s sexual indiscretions: “Free Hotel Rooms,” “Free Make Up,” “Free Trips to Mars,” “Free Back Rubs.” The jaunty, piano-driven sing-along is narrated by a supposed follower who is “embarrassed” after having “given all my money to Jim Bakker and Tammy Faye,” and the chorus targets the televangelists’ mass-mediated and commoditized gospel: “Those TV preachers, they’ll give you what you wish/They’re sellin’ tickets to heaven on their big ol’ satellite dish”. While the song pokes fun at Tammy Faye’s penchant for over-the-top, on-camera suffering – “Tammy, she started crying, she tried not to make a scene/And my heart skipped a beat as I watched her face a’ drippin’ Maybelline” – it saves its most savage satire for the Bakkers’ antagonist in the mediated religious drama: “Now good ol’ Jerry Falwell, is head of the PTL/ But if he’s selling tickets to heaven, I’d rather go to hell.” This final verse associates, however implicitly, Funtone’s singers, a band of cultural outsiders, with Tammy Faye as both enemies of Falwell, and as victims of the latter televangelist’s aggressive actions.

During our interview, Richards revealed that drag parodies of Tammy Faye were fairly frequent on *TAMS* since, as a character, she could “fit into any weird, bizarre situation.”⁹⁰ Following our interview, he obligingly uploaded two YouTube videos featuring footage of one of these performances. On September 14, 1989, *TAMS* aired a special episode of the recurring segment “Bubba Gold’s Hour of Gold,” hosted by the titular “Bubba Gold,” a “country” televangelist character performed by Richards, whose name lampooned both the “redneck” South and the prosperity gospel.⁹¹ The segment opens with Gold, wearing a camel-colored suit, loud tie, and garish blonde wig, singing the show’s hymn-style theme song along with a host of *TAMS* associates on a set littered with ephemera, including, most prominently, posters for the low-budget, sex-thriller film *Voyeur* (1987), starring RuPaul.⁹² In introducing the program, Gold explains that his broadcasting reach is usually relegated to the “gulf coast” region, and that he

⁹⁰ Dick Richards, Skype interview by author, February 16, 2012.

⁹¹ “Bubba Gold” was labelled as “country” by Dick Richards; Skype interview by author, February 16, 2012. “Rev. Bubba Gold’s TAMMY-THON on The American Music Show,” YouTube video, 10:34, posted by “misterrichardson,” March 10, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AfK6IKus78o>; “Rev. Bubba Gold’s TAMMY-THON” (Part 2) featuring Tammy Faye,” YouTube video, 9:46, posted by “misterrichardson,” March 12, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dgC_Ee-i0to.

⁹² For a clip of *Voyeur* (1987), directed by Wayne Hollowell but currently unavailable on any home media format, see “RuPaul’s suspense thriller movie ‘Voyeur’ – an exerpt (sic),” YouTube video, 5:56, posted by “misterrichardson,” March 28, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w28ghbgzH7I>.

only manages to reach Atlanta “on special occasions” – a play on bizarre and obscure television preachers who, as discussed previously, delighted many ironic fans.

After a King James gospel reading from “Sister Viola,” a man in characteristic *TAMS* redneck drag, which concludes with Matthew 5:41 – “And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain” – Bubba Gold reports that he had recently received a letter from his “fellow mistress” Tammy Faye Bakker. The Bakkers had since moved their ministry to Orlando, Florida, where they had established the New Covenant Church in a shopping mall; returned to television broadcasting, albeit in a limited capacity, with a revamped “Jim and Tammy Show”; and were awaiting Jim’s sentencing for his role in PTL’s fundraising fiasco.⁹³ The camera zooms in on the letter held by Gold, an appeal by the Bakkers for supporters to not only send in donations to their new ministry, but also to set aside at least one hour each day to pray on Jim’s behalf. As per that day’s scripture reading, and in a mockery of seed-faith theology, both Sister Viola and Bubba Gold claim that they have been praying at least two-hours each day: “‘Cause we know, as you give so shall you receive, and as we give, we is givin’ double, so we is gonna be receivin’ double for that.” To further aid in the Bakkers’ plight, Gold announces that “we’s havin’ a Tammy-thon tonight. And we gonna give everybody a chance to call in an’ make their donations to Tammy Faye, and her husband Jim Bakker’s, cause.” To prime the pump, Bubba Gold leads viewers in a consideration of all “the good stuff Jim has done, so we can open up our pockets and give twice as much as Jim has asked us.” What follows is a video remix featuring images of Jim and Tammy Faye in happier times. While the visuals of the montage had been poached from an official PTL anniversary video, the gay disco song “Together” by “The Fabulous Pop Tarts” – a group which, as will be discussed, had connections with Dick Richards and *TAMS* – was dubbed underneath, thereby creating an ironically amusing, yet strangely touching, look at the joy of romance and the sadness of lost love.⁹⁴

⁹³ See James A. Albert, *Jim Bakker: Miscarriage of Justice?* (Chicago: Open Court, 1998), 319-322; Adelle M. Banks, “Bakkers Find a Home – Orlando Televangelists Broadcast First Show from Shoppers World,” *Orlando Sentinel*, May 9, 1989; Montgomery Brower, “Unholy Roller Coaster,” *People*, September 18, 1989.

⁹⁴ The provenance of the video footage is revealed by a graphic that appears within it. The title and artist of the song is revealed in the video description from another video posted by Dick Richards; see “Keith Haring, Among His Art,” YouTube video, 4:24, posted by “5ninthavenueproject,” April 28, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Apm9jFnAWB0>.

Later in the program, as a coterie of *TAMS* actors man a bank of ceaselessly ringing telephones, “Tammy Faye,” played by Richards’ partner David, arrives on the set. Wearing a curly blonde wig, the requisite layers of makeup, a green dress, and a leopard-print shawl, David performs Tammy Faye with a deep Minnesota accent, an amusingly unrealistic take on the televangelist’s actual voice. “We need at least one million dollars for that legal bill, that giant legal bill,” “Tammy Faye” tells viewers, after which she and Bubba Gold discuss Jim’s recent stint in a correctional facility, and parody the real Tammy Faye’s tearful lament of her husband’s prison conditions on talk show host Phil Donahue’s program three days prior.⁹⁵ “Oh Tammy Faye,” Bubba Gold mournfully states, “it just brings tears to my eyes when I have to think of Jim sittin’ in that cell block, with no covering at all while he’s tryin’ to go to potty. How does he do that?” “It was just so painful,” “Tammy Faye” affirms “...for him to have to be in there with all those convicts. And they put him on a parade; they were showin’ him to all the men; they were lookin’ at his body; it was just terrible, Bubba Gold, just terrible!” Following a brief mention of Jerry Falwell’s alleged theft of PTL, Tammy Faye ends with a warning for those viewers who fail to adhere to her promoted seed-faith principles: “You got to give to get, you know, Bubba Gold, you can’t get if you don’t give. So you people that are not giving out there, well you can forget about getting anything, I guess!”

As evidenced by the above examples, the first wave of campy fandom surrounding Tammy Faye Bakker, and associated media and performances, tended to emphasize the ludicrous nature of her televised tragedy. These activities and artifacts also often carried a sharp religio-political edge, criticizing normative frameworks of sex, gender, and family which conservative Christians, including Tammy Faye, understood to be divinely endorsed, and lambasting the Bakkers’ gospel of prosperity as religiously inauthentic, thereby underlining the essentially unfaithful nature of this first wave of campy fandom. At the same time, there were hints of genuine affection for, and identification with, Tammy Faye as a symbol of suffering and perseverance, who thereby resonated with the social marginalization of gay men. The relative emphasis on these themes, however, would be effectively reversed in a second historical wave of camp attention to Tammy Faye that began in the mid-1990s, which was largely initiated by campy fans of the televangelist, and which was associated with the cultural mainstreaming of

⁹⁵ For Tammy Faye’s appearance on Donahue’s show, see Albert, *Jim Bakker*, 193.

gay-oriented media, camp, and drag in America. While camp treatments of Tammy Faye would continue to frame the televangelist as an ironically amusing and bizarre cultural oddity, they would increasingly emphasize the relatability of her suffering and perseverance. Moreover, and in a drastic shift from the first wave of camp attention, these treatments would often elevate her as an exemplar of an authentic Christianity focused on tolerance, compassion, and understanding. Perhaps unsurprisingly Tammy Faye herself, whose career entered a downturn during this period, would actively market herself to such lightly mocking, yet largely uncritical and apolitical representations.

The Mainstream and the Marketability of Survival

In 1989 Jim Bakker was convicted of multiple counts of mail fraud, wire fraud, and conspiracy for his part in the Heritage USA fundraising scheme, and was sentenced to forty-five years in prison.⁹⁶ Days after Jim entered a federal prison in Alabama, the owner of the Orlando shopping mall where the Bakkers had attempted their comeback kicked their ministry out, thereby halting their burgeoning broadcasting efforts.⁹⁷ Tammy Faye soldiered on without her husband, reestablishing the New Covenant Church first at a “piano store,” then at “an old Tupperware training center” in an Orlando industrial park, where plans were laid to construct a new television studio.⁹⁸ In March 1990, however, after just a few Sunday services at the location, the Orange County Zoning Board, which had previously granted permission for the space to be used for television production, decided to disallow in-person church gatherings, citing safety concerns.⁹⁹ With help from the American Civil Liberties Union, Tammy Faye succeeded in having the ruling reversed in August 1990, and while television facilities would never be installed at the site, she would host church services there for many months to follow.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁶ For an in-depth discussion of the trial, as well as cogent questions regarding the fairness of Bakker’s original sentence, see Albert, *Jim Bakker*.

⁹⁷ “Bakker Ministry Forced to Leave Shopping Mall,” *The Register-Guard* (Eugene, Oregon), October 27, 1989; “Tammy Bakker to Continue Ministry,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 30, 1989.

⁹⁸ “Tammy Faye Moves Church,” *The Daily Record* (Ellensburg, Washington), March 10, 1990.

⁹⁹ See Adelle M. Banks, “Orange Gives Tammy Good News on Studio: County Says Ministry Can Produce TV, Radio Shows in Warehouse,” *Orlando Sentinel*, May 3, 1990; *ibid.*, “Tammy Protests Orange TV Rules,” *Orlando Sentinel*, May 4, 1990; Ike Flores, “Tammy Faye’s Plans Shot Down,” *Ocala Star-Banner*, July 6, 1990; Michael Griffin, “Bakker Hope to Change Orange’s Mind About Church,” *Orlando Sentinel*, August 13, 1990.

¹⁰⁰ “Orange County Votes to Allow Church Services,” *St. Petersburg Times*, August 14, 1990.

On February 18, 1991, just days after a federal appeals court, while upholding Jim Bakker's conviction, overturned his exorbitant forty-five year sentence due to the "personal religious bias" of the original judge, journalist Mary Schmich of the *Chicago Tribune* reported on a recent service at Tammy Faye's New Covenant Church.¹⁰¹ Clad in a pair of "gold lame high heels," and in command of a "big windowless room" filled with "metal folding chairs," Tammy Faye led a group of "200 or so of the unshakeable faithful" in worship and support for her imprisoned husband. "Now, here was Bakker's wife," Schmich wrote, "standing on a red-carpeted stage in a makeshift pink-walled church next to a podium that held a box of Kleenex for her trademark tears, predicting in her earnest, girlish voice that Jim would be home by next Sunday." "I just believe that my husband will soon be standing right here," Schmich quoted Tammy Faye as saying. Despite her apparent optimism and loyalty, however, Jim would not be released until 1994, furthering the couple's estrangement, and contributing to their divorce in 1992.¹⁰² Rumors abounded that another contributing factor to the collapse of the Bakker's marriage was an affair between Tammy Faye and Roe Messner, a close friend of Jim's, contractor for Heritage USA, and, at the time, a married man. Although the pair denied any sexual impropriety, Messner divorced his wife and in 1993 wed Tammy Faye, who moved with him to California.¹⁰³

While Tammy Faye had been frustrated in her attempts to reenter Christian television during the early-1990s, as she claimed in her 1996 memoir, *Tammy: Telling It My Way*, God soon revealed to her a new way of returning to the small screen: "secular television."¹⁰⁴ Specifically, her opportunity for career resurrection was tied to mainstream television programs that played upon her longstanding camp appeal, a development associated with broader cultural shifts in America. For one, the 1990s saw the emergence of a now-thriving "'Gay TV' industry," sustained by openly gay television professionals, and featuring a marked increase in gay

¹⁰¹ David G. Savage, "Appeals Court Overturns Bakker Sentence," *Austin American-Statesman*, February 13, 1991. Mary T. Schmich, "Jim Bakker's Followers Celebrate a 'Miracle'," *Chicago Tribune*, February 18, 1991.

¹⁰² "Jim and Tammy Bakker Finalize Divorce," *The Associated Press*, March 13, 1992. "Bakker Leaving Prison for N.C. Halfway House," *St. Petersburg Times*, July 1, 1994.

¹⁰³ For the rumors of an affair between Roe Messner and Tammy Faye, see Karen S. Schneider, "Tammy's Troubled Waters," *People*, April 6, 1992; for their marriage, see "Tammy Faye Bakker Weds Old Family Friend Today," *Orlando Sentinel*, October 2, 1993.

¹⁰⁴ Messner, *Tammy*, 328; also see *ibid.*, 324-328.

personalities, characters, situations, and viewpoints on mainstream American television.¹⁰⁵ Relatedly, the decade also saw the continued mainstreaming of camp (a process with roots extending at least as far back as the 1960s), as well as the entry of gay drag into the American cultural mainstream. Writing in 2001 on what she described as the “new gay visibility” in America, feminist cultural critic Suzanna Walters voiced the “concern” of “many critics” regarding the possible effects of such cultural mainstreaming on camp’s critical edge. “If camp was, at least in part,” she asks, “the outsider’s way of sending up mainstream culture, while at the same time signaling a certain insider’s hipness, then what happens to this outrageous sensibility when camp is brought inside, repackaged, and sold to gay and straight consumers alike?”¹⁰⁶ Turning to the mainstreaming of gay drag, Walters examines the case of trendsetter RuPaul Charles, whose rise to superstardom began in the early-1990s. Although RuPaul’s early performances, such as those on *The American Music Show*, often featured a “gender fuck” style that was sexually ambiguous and intentionally provocative, he found fame with a glamorous supermodel style more palatable to wider audiences, yet, as Walters proposes, potentially less valuable as a political critique: “Is he the radical gender-bender, forcing straight culture to reckon with the love that dare not speak its name? Or is he rather the harmless side dish for an omnivorous cultural appetite (?)”¹⁰⁷

An appreciable diminution of criticism would mark mainstream camp representations of Tammy Faye, the most influential of which would involve the participation of her campy fans. Although Tammy Faye would still function as a source of ironic humor for her excesses, as well as for her place in the American cultural canon as an absurd religious fake, there would be little querying of her conservative beliefs regarding sex, gender, and family, or her prosperity-oriented gospel, as had been the case in the first wave of camp treatments. In contrast, during the second wave of camp attention Tammy Faye would often be lauded as an inspirational symbol of suffering and survival and, as will be discussed further in the following chapter, as an authentic

¹⁰⁵ See Kathleen P. Farrell, “Backstage Politics: Social Change and the ‘Gay TV’ Industry” (PhD diss., Syracuse University, 2008); Ron Becker, *Gay TV and Straight America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006).

¹⁰⁶ Suzanna Danuta Walters, *All the Rage: The Story of Gay Visibility in America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), 293.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 17. For RuPaul on his “gender fuck” style, see *ibid.*, *Lettin’ it All Hang Out*, 91. For an early televised example of RuPaul performing in this style, see “RuPaul’s Daring Dance on The American Music Show,” YouTube video, 3:00, posted by “misterrichardson,” July 12, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3VNr6Cnm4As>.

Christian and gay ally for her compassion for, and apparent tolerance towards, homosexual men, in particular. The kinder and gentler camp representations of the second wave generally painted Tammy Faye in a positive light, which encouraged her to actively market herself to her camp appeal, despite not quite understanding the aesthetic herself. Indeed, when asked whether she considered herself “campy” in an interview some years later, Tammy Faye expressed confusion at the descriptor – “I guess I don’t know exactly what campy is” – naively suggesting that it could refer to her “down to earth” nature.¹⁰⁸ Nevertheless, she did play into the aesthetics’, at times, mocking humor at her expense, and would come to negotiate a middle ground between “unintentional” and “intentional” camp.¹⁰⁹

Tammy Faye’s first move to market herself to her camp appeal came via her participation in the short-lived, daytime talk program *The Jim J. and Tammy Faye Show* (1996).¹¹⁰ According to her own recollection, the genesis of the show laid in meetings with producer Dan Weaver, who, she explained, “had been a fan of my daily show, *Tammy Faye’s House Party*,” and Brian Graden, a Fox network executive who would later serve as the president of Logo, America’s first successful gay-themed, cable television channel.¹¹¹ Both Graden and Weaver were openly gay, and judging by Weaver’s decision to name his Dalmatian dog “Tammy Faye Barker,” his fan approach to Tammy Faye carried at least a hint of camp.¹¹² Teamed up with Tammy Faye for hosting duties was Jim J. Bullock, an openly gay comedic actor who his co-host described as “funny and crazy and full of boundless energy.”¹¹³ Much like Tammy Faye, Bullock, who had once been a regular on the 1980s sitcoms *Too Close for Comfort* and *ALF*, had suffered at the hands of the entertainment industry, and early press mentions of the program noted the themes of

¹⁰⁸ Randy Shulman, “The Words of Tammy Faye: Interview with Tammy Faye Bakker-Messner,” *Metro Weekly*, June 6, 2002, <http://www.metroweekly.com/feature/?ak=11>, accessed January 29, 2015.

¹⁰⁹ For “intentional” versus “unintentional” camp, see Newton, *Mother Camp*, 106-107, 111. Sontag also discusses a difference “between naïve and deliberate Camp”; see *ibid.*, “Notes on ‘Camp,’” 58.

¹¹⁰ For Tammy Faye’s own account of the show’s origins, see Messner, *Tammy*, 324-328.

¹¹¹ For Brian Graden and the development of Logo, see Ben Aslinger, “Creating a Network for Queer Audiences at Logo TV,” *Popular Communication* 7, no. 2 (2009): 107-121. Tammy Faye describes Weaver as a “fan” in *Telling it My Way*, 328.

¹¹² In 2007, Graden was included by *Out* magazine in its list of the fifty most powerful gay individuals in America, coming in at number ten; see “The Power 50,” *Out*, April 3, 2007, <http://www.out.com/out-exclusives/power-50/2007/04/03/power-50?page=full>, accessed January 29, 2015. For Weaver’s sexual orientation, see Herbie J. Pilato, *Twitch Upon a Star: The Bewitched Life and Career of Elizabeth Montgomery* (Plymouth, UK: Taylor Trade Publishing, 2012), 316. For Weaver’s dog’s name, see “Dan Weaver,” *The Donna Reed Foundation for the Performing Arts*, http://www.donnareed.org/html/templates/dr_profile.php?drf_person=weaver, accessed January 29, 2015.

¹¹³ Messner, *Telling it My Way*, 329.

struggle and perseverance which both hosts embodied.¹¹⁴ ““We both have been down and out, and we know what it’s like to have had...” Jim J. explained in an article for the *Los Angeles Daily News* – a confession finished by his new on-screen partner: ““...And not to have,” Tammy Faye said.”¹¹⁵ Michael Lambert, president of one of the media companies behind the program, further suggested that “having lived through personal crisis” made Tammy Faye, in particular, “more empathetic as a host for this kind of show.”¹¹⁶

As Tammy Faye would later recall, from its earliest development *The Jim J. and Tammy Faye Show* featured a tension between her own vision of “a clean, all-American show,” much like the offerings of PTL, and Jim J.’s desire for the program be full “of comedy and energy, and a bit risqué.”¹¹⁷ This juxtaposition was intended and fostered by the show’s producers, and, in line with the characteristics of camp, encouraged both ironic amusement and genuine engagement. The pairing of Tammy Faye, a conservative Christian, with the openly gay Bullock was in itself amusingly, and perhaps for some inspiringly, incongruous. More than one early press report referred to Bullock and Tammy Faye as an “odd couple,” while producer Brian Graden described his new program as “*Regis and Kathie Lee* on acid.”¹¹⁸ In an interview with reporter Ed Bark, Tammy Faye downplayed the significance of these themes, arguing that the program was “not about religion” and “not about being gay,” and adding that she refused to “judge” Bullock for his sexual orientation. For one, as she explained, she herself had famously experienced the sting of judgment – “I’ve been judged too harshly myself, and I don’t ever want to be accused of judging anyone else” – a statement promoting a sense of shared suffering with gay men like Bullock. Moreover, as she succinctly framed the situation, “We’re not the judge. God is the judge.”¹¹⁹ This aphorism, which on the surface suggested tolerance, nevertheless also contained within it Tammy Faye’s personal belief that homosexual activity was indeed sinful.

¹¹⁴ For Bullock’s background, and his status as a suffering actor, see Eric Shepard, “Having the Last Laugh: After a Rough Stretch, Jim J. Bullock is Back at Work and has Managed not to Lose his Sense of Humor,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 19, 1995.

¹¹⁵ Phil Rosenthal, “New Odd Couple: Tammy, Jim J.,” *Los Angeles Daily News*, January 24, 1996.

¹¹⁶ See Wayne Walley, “Tammy Faye to Make TV Comeback with New Jim,” *Electronic Media*, November 13, 1995.

¹¹⁷ Messner, *Telling it My Way*, 330.

¹¹⁸ Rosenthal, “New Odd Couple”; Ed Bark, “The Odd Couple: The Former Tammy Faye Bakker and Gay Co-Host Launch Talk Show,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, January 1, 1996. Graden’s description of the show can be found in Cynthia Sanz, “She’s Still Afloat: Another Mate is Jail-Bound, But Tammy Faye Sails On,” *People*, March 11, 1996.

¹¹⁹ Bark, “The Odd Couple.”

Frank and serious discussions about homosexuality, religion, or other controversial topics were not on the agenda for *The Jim J. and Tammy Faye Show*, however. Rather, the program proffered playful entertainment and light camp which was, at times, just slightly suggestive – a conscious effort by the program’s producers to compete with what they framed as the “sleazy” nature of much contemporary talk show fare.¹²⁰ The limits of taste were partially patrolled by Tammy Faye herself, who later wrote that she “would not do anything to compromise my Christian testimony. I was first a Christian and only second a talk-show host.”¹²¹ Glimpses into the content and style of the program, which premiered on December 26, 1995, are made possible by press reports and archived YouTube videos.¹²² The show’s musical introduction, a peppy number sung by Bullock and Tammy Faye, highlighted their unlikely pairing, and took a good-natured shot at Tammy Faye’s appearance: “We’re a recipe you couldn’t bake up/Three times the laughs, and ten times the makeup.”¹²³ Set on a busy, brightly colored stage featuring large Warhol-esque portraits of the show’s hosts, *The Jim J. and Tammy Faye Show* was fast-paced, often ad-libbed, and played Bullock’s worldly knowledge against Tammy Faye’s wacky naivety. A clip from an automobile-themed episode, for example, opened with the pair discussing Tammy Faye’s recent trip to a drug store, during which her jumpsuit top had sprung open.¹²⁴ “So, here I am,” she lamented, “my boobs out to the whole world, and nobody would tell me, it was awful.” “The new Tammy!” quipped Bullock, “You’re gonna give Madonna a run for her money.” While the program toyed with Tammy Faye’s absurdity, the tone was less acerbic than lightly tongue-in-cheek. For example, during an interview from the same episode with a representative of the Petersen Automotive Museum, Bullock, standing behind Tammy Faye’s back, animatedly parodied her fondness for a kitschy, gas-pump nightlight/alarm clock available at the museum’s gift shop, rousing the audience to laughter.

Overall, Jim J. and Tammy Faye shared an easygoing, on-screen camaraderie, and the personal attributes which made their pairing so “odd” were relatively muted. Bullock’s

¹²⁰ Michael Lambert described other programs as “sleazy” in Walley, “Tammy Faye to Make TV Comeback with New Jim.”

¹²¹ Messner, *Telling it My Way*, 330.

¹²² For the premiere date, see Steven Cole Smith, “Starting Over: Tammy Faye’s Back with New Show, New Jim and Newfound Confidence,” *Dayton Daily News*, January 6, 1996.

¹²³ “Jim J Tammy Faye Intro,” YouTube video, 2:52, posted by “Zamora King,” July 24, 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iV7MFIB4ZbE>.

¹²⁴ “Jim J and Tammy Faye Show,” YouTube video, 32:11, posted by “myvideostoday1,” April 30, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bU16ego5kJ4>.

homosexuality appears to have been rarely discussed, save for brief asides in the name of comedy. ““Is this what it’s like to be straight?”” Bullock asked as Tammy Faye applied a pedicure treatment to his feet during the program’s inaugural episode: ““I like it!””¹²⁵ Similarly, *The Jim J. and Tammy Faye Show* downplayed Tammy Faye’s controversial past and conservative Christian beliefs; however, she did find opportunities to inject snippets of Christian piety into the program’s flow, as evidenced in the above-mentioned, automobile-themed episode: ““Those of you who believe in prayer, pray for me!”” she exhorted viewers before a go-kart drag race with Bullock; ““Thank God!”” she commented on the prospect of raised speed limits; ““Forever and ever, Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Amen!”” she playfully pronounced elsewhere.¹²⁶ Tammy Faye also used the program to convey her long-preached messages of positivity and perseverance. For example, she praised guest Cleo Chandler, an elderly female drag racer, as an ““inspiration,”” and expressed optimism regarding her wish to keep racing until she hit one-hundred: ““You’ll make it. I believe that.”” Through such devices, Tammy Faye subtly sanctified her first foray into ““secular”” media, and, in a sense, extended her career as a televangelist.¹²⁷

Although the short-term future of *The Jim J. and Tammy Faye Show* was secure, with twenty-five episodes recorded by the program’s debut and over one-hundred more contractually guaranteed, Tammy Faye abruptly pulled out at the end of February 1996, citing personal reasons.¹²⁸ For one, her second husband Roe Messner, echoing the well-publicized transgressions of her first, had been convicted of bankruptcy fraud, and would be sentenced to twenty-seven months in prison. Second, she was diagnosed with colon cancer, necessitating surgery, radiation, and chemotherapy treatments.¹²⁹ While Tammy Faye’s health issues were certainly a deadly serious personal struggle, they also added another marketable facet to her suffering survivor persona, central to her camp appeal. She was quick to capitalize on such themes with her aforementioned autobiography, *Tammy: Telling It My Way*, which was published in October 1996. In addition to her cancer battle, Tammy Faye dedicated considerable space in the book to

¹²⁵ These lines are taken from Bark, “The Odd Couple.”

¹²⁶ “Jim J and Tammy Faye Show,” YouTube video.

¹²⁷ This challenges Shupe’s argument that Tammy Faye had been secularized into “an eccentric day-time television talk-show hostess”; see *ibid.*, *Wolves within the Fold*, 59.

¹²⁸ For these figures, see Ed Bark, “The Odd Couple.”

¹²⁹ See Lori Brown, “Tammy Faye Quitting Her New TV Talk Show,” *Austin American-Statesman*, February 29, 1996; Cynthia Littleton, “Tammy Faye Exits Talker,” *Broadcasting & Cable*, March 4, 1996; Norma Cavazos, “Cancer Surgery for Tammy Faye; Her Husband is Serving a 27-Month Jail Sentence,” *Buffalo News*, May 12, 1996. For Tammy Faye’s own recollection of her cancer trial, see Messner, *Telling it My Way*, 331-335.

the PTL scandals, which she largely blamed on the machinations of persecutory agents. She described Jessica Hahn as a savvy seductress, who knowingly preyed upon her powerful husband: “She knew what she was doing. She knew what to wear, what to say, and all the right moves.”¹³⁰ Jerry Falwell was portrayed as a wily usurper, who understood the likely outcome of his public allegations regarding Jim’s alleged sexual habits: “...Falwell knew that many people would never forgive Jim if he were homosexual.”¹³¹

Tammy: Telling it My Way also featured considerable scorn for the mainstream media, with Tammy Faye accusing *The Charlotte Observer* of having “sustained a vicious vendetta against us for being televangelists and charismatic Christians,” and the major television networks of acting like “sharks at a feeding frenzy,” avidly devouring the Bakkers’ personal and public tragedies in the name of ratings.¹³² Tammy Faye also lamented the fact that she had become a widespread object of mockery in the wake of the scandals, which, she claimed, had taken a heavy emotional toll. “Everything about me was being ridiculed,” she recalled, “I could not watch television without my eyelashes, my makeup, and even my tears being made fun of. I was the butt of comedians’ crude jokes and snide remarks. My heart ached constantly.”¹³³ As *The Jim J. and Tammy Faye Show* had made clear, however, any chance of career rehabilitation would require Tammy Faye to open herself up to, and even engage with, humor at her expense – a fact she would come to accept, if somewhat begrudgingly. In a 1996 interview with reporter Steven Cole Smith, part of her promotional work for *The Jim J. and Tammy Faye Show*, she revealed that she had, in Smith’s words, “learned to live with being a human parody,” a prerequisite for her return to the spotlight. Yet, as she also noted, constantly being the butt of the joke could still sting: “Let ‘em say what they want, as long as they’re talking about me. But it always hurts just a little bit. But I laugh and smile through it, and nobody knows.”¹³⁴

Tammy Faye’s increasing willingness to capitalize on the cultural resonance of her perceived ridiculousness landed her two cameos on the American sitcoms *The Drew Carey Show* and *Roseanne*, both of which aired in 1996, after she had left *The Jim J. and Tammy Faye Show*.

¹³⁰ Messner, *Telling it My Way*, 108.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 213.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 180, 210.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 287.

¹³⁴ Steven Cole Smith, “Starting Over.”

On *The Drew Carey Show*, Tammy Faye played the mother of the titular character's heavily made-up co-worker Mimi – a jab at her own cosmetic excesses – and she even made light of her notorious emotionality during a teary, on-screen moment: “You’ll have to excuse me. I don’t normally cry.”¹³⁵ On *Roseanne*, Tammy Faye made a tongue-in-cheek appearance as a makeup expert at a spa, who counsels the title character and her sister that “natural is best. You know, let your face tell its own story.”¹³⁶ Following the remission of her cancer, Tammy Faye would again team up with comedian Roseanne Barr, *Roseanne*'s namesake star, in 1998, guesting on the latter's daytime television talk program: *The Roseanne Show*.¹³⁷ Like Tammy Faye, Roseanne had long been ridiculed as an example of the female grotesque for her weight and brash behavior, and had even shared tabloid space with the televangelist during the late-1980s.¹³⁸ It is unsurprising, then, that Roseanne quickly steered the conversation towards her guest's controversial cosmetics. “People criticize you about your makeup all the time,” Roseanne points out, “how mad does that make you?” Tammy Faye replies that she had learned to “laugh” at such criticisms, adding, “It’s just a face...I think everyone needs to be able to wear the face they’re comfortable with. You know, if you look good, then you feel good about yourself.” To the laughter of the studio audience, Tammy Faye admits that she had even undergone cancer surgery in full makeup: “At the worst time of your life...at least if you know you look halfway (sic) decent, then you feel better about yourself!”

Tammy Faye's attempt at good-natured engagement with the audience's amusement at her appearance backfired, however, as an unsatisfied Roseanne attempted to psychologize her guest's “extreme” makeup. “What in the heck is the makeup a metaphor for?” Roseanne asks bluntly, “What does it really mean?” After some hesitation, and unsuccessful efforts to re-inject a

¹³⁵ Information on this episode of *The Drew Carey Show*, which originally aired on November 27, 1996, and which is not currently available on home video formats, can be found at “Mimi’s Day Parade,” *Internet Movie Database*, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0566460>, accessed January 29, 2015.

¹³⁶ “Pampered to a Pulp,” *Roseanne: The Complete Ninth Season* (1996; Toronto, eOne Films, 2013), DVD. More information on this episode, which originally aired on October 22, 1996, can be found at “Pampered to a Pulp,” *Internet Movie Database*, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0688854>, accessed January 29, 2015.

¹³⁷ Information on this episode, which originally aired on November 4, 1998, and which is not currently available on home video formats, can be found at “Episode 1.37,” *Internet Movie Database*, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0688703/?ref_=ttep_ep31, accessed January 29, 2015. A video of Tammy Faye's appearance has since been uploaded to YouTube; see “Roseanne interviews Tammy Faye Bakker (1998),” YouTube video, 16:55, posted by “Vinnie Rattolle,” June 14, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VwH4MwfDTjs>.

¹³⁸ Mellencamp, *High Anxiety*, 203, 279. The September 19, 1989 edition of the *National Enquirer*, for example, featured a story of a possible “suicide pact” between Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker, despairing over the former's imprisonment, as well as a short blurb on the staggering amount of fan mail received by Roseanne Barr.

sense of levity into the proceedings, Tammy Faye suggests that, “deep down,” her makeup indicated insecurities about her physical appearance: “I think I feel ugly without it...I don’t like to look at my own self in the mirror without it...And I feel prettier with it, and I think that if we feel pretty, then we’ll act pretty.” Roseanne, whose own celebrity had largely been built on challenging norms of female beauty, fires back that Tammy Faye’s stance is “a wrong way to feel,” and suggests that her cosmetics were a means of “protecting herself” and “hiding.”¹³⁹ While Tammy Faye gamely considers, and even assents to aspects of Roseanne’s amateur diagnosis, she becomes visibly uncomfortable with the psychological probing, encouraging the host to move on to a more positive aspect of her guest’s persona – her remarkable resiliency.

“Tammy Faye,” Roseanne quickly segues, much to her guest’s evident relief, “you are a woman who kicked cancer in the butt.” “I kicked it right in the butt,” Tammy Faye agrees, flashing a triumphant smile and raising a fist to the cheers of the studio audience. After an overview of her medical trials, featuring moments of humorous candidness from Tammy Faye, Roseanne enhances her guest’s status as a symbol of suffering by highlighting the purported persecution she had faced at the hands of the media during the PTL scandals: “Which one was harder, Tammy Faye, being crucified in the press, or beating cancer?” In choosing the former, Tammy Faye explains that the media scandals had “destroyed my reputation,” and had hampered her current career opportunities. What was not discussed, however, were the suspicions, allegations, and theological controversies that had sealed her in the minds of many as a bizarre religious fake. Indeed, if anything, Tammy Faye’s representation during the segment was as an authentic Christian, who conveyed cogent religious messages to the audience – “God made our bodies, and I trust God with me” – and, in an unexpected finale to the segment, sat behind an organ and led the audience and Roseanne in a sing-along of the gospel chestnut, “(Give Me That) Old Time Religion.”

With many in the crowd guilelessly clapping and singing along, the conclusion of Tammy Faye’s appearance on *The Roseanne Show* could have almost been mistaken for a PTL broadcast, and it allowed her to convey her gospel even more explicitly than on *The Jim J. and Tammy Faye Show*. However, this closing performance also pointed to the undercurrent of irony in the segment as a whole, and which was associated with Tammy Faye’s status, much like

¹³⁹ Mellencamp, *High Anxiety*, 338-350.

Roseanne herself, as an amusingly controversial, “unruly woman.”¹⁴⁰ For example, many viewers of Roseanne’s rather tuneless participation in the closing hymn would have been reminded of her notorious, screeching rendition of the American national anthem at a San Diego Padres game in 1990, a performance she had provocatively capped off by tugging at her crotch and spitting on the ground.¹⁴¹ The ironic absurdity of the situation was enhanced by the equally questionable singing of Tammy Faye, who, despite the opportunities to witness, and the program’s praise for her as a persevering survivor, carried with her not only her longtime stigmatization as a suspected religious fake, but also the ridicule she received for her extreme physical appearance. Although Roseanne, for her part, had attempted to downplay the comic aspect of her guest’s cosmetic habits, her interrogation of Tammy Faye elicited chuckles from members of the audience who shared the widespread opinion that her makeup did not make her look “pretty,” as she herself maintained, but instead laughably ludicrous.¹⁴²

The Roseanne Show’s interview with Tammy Faye, featuring a mixture of irony, affection, and a focus on its subject’s relatable suffering and inspirational survival, overlapped with camp treatments of the televangelist, albeit without an explicit connection to gay male culture. Earlier that same year, however, Tammy Faye had also been interviewed on VH1’s *The RuPaul Show*, a program which not only embodied the mainstreaming of drag and camp, but which would also pave the way for her subsequent rebranding as a gay icon, and the concomitant emergence of a second wave of Tammy Faye campy fandom.¹⁴³ Having left Atlanta for New York City in the mid-1980s, RuPaul shot to fame in 1992 with the surprise hit dance single “Supermodel (You Better Work).”¹⁴⁴ RuPaul’s first foray into mainstream cable television was produced by the aforementioned company World of Wonder (WOW), founded in 1991 by his managers Fenton Bailey and Randy Barbato, formerly of the aforementioned gay disco group “The Fabulous Pop Tarts,” associates of *The American Music Show*’s Dick Richards, and

¹⁴⁰ Rowe, *The Unruly Woman*, 33.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 51.

¹⁴² “Roseanne interviews Tammy Faye Bakker (1998),” YouTube video.

¹⁴³ For some information and the airdate, see Scott Williams, “TV: Dis & Dots...,” *New York Daily News*, March 21, 1998.

¹⁴⁴ For RuPaul discussing his move to New York, see “RuPaul Explains His Decision to Move to New York in 1984,” YouTube video, 3:06, posted by “misterrichardson,” August 1, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G2RHMYRB4YE>. RuPaul, “Supermodel (You Better Work),” Tommy Boy Records, 1992, CD.

pioneers in the development of America's "'Gay TV' industry."¹⁴⁵ World of Wonder's contemporary motto – "today's marginal is tomorrow's mainstream" – highlights the company's tendency to ferret out underground cultural material which might prove entertaining to wider audiences, including ironic takes on controversial televangelists.¹⁴⁶ As discussed previously, the WOW-produced program *Made in the USA* (1992) had brought Robert Tilton's ironic fans to the attention of British television viewers, and the program also featured a piece on the crew behind *The American Music Show* in an episode centered on Atlanta.¹⁴⁷

Much like Dick Richards at *The American Music Show*, as well as RuPaul, who had been a self-professed "fan" of Tammy Faye since he was sixteen – "She was the Judy Garland of the evangelist set" – Fenton Bailey and Randy Barbato, partners both professionally and personally, had long been campy fans of Tammy Faye.¹⁴⁸ "Both Fenton and I have been obsessed with her forever," explained Barbato in a later interview, "especially with the iconicity of her look. Maybe it's because we're just a bunch of queens, but we just thought she was fabulous!"¹⁴⁹ The producers first worked with Tammy Faye in 1997, when she appeared on their short-lived British program *TV Pizza*, in an episode that also featured the Portland-based, transgendered televangelist Sister Paula.¹⁵⁰ Tammy Faye's appearance on the *The RuPaul Show*, however, would mark her first American collaboration with the producers, who, as the next chapter will demonstrate, would prove central players in her latter career, campy rebranding. As an instrumental version of Joan Osborne's 1995 rock hit "One of Us," a hypothetical meditation on

¹⁴⁵ For the relationship between Bailey, Barbato, and RuPaul see Fenton Bailey and Randy Barbato, *The World According To Wonder: Volume 1 1991-2012* (New York: World of Wonder Books), 43-51; RuPaul, *Lettin' it All Hang Out*, 177. Albums by "The Fabulous Pop Tarts," released on Dick Richards' Funtone USA record label, are still available for order at <http://www.bettyjack.com/funtone/poppytarts>, accessed January 29, 2015. Richards mentioned his association with Bailey and Barbato during his Skype interview with the author on February 16, 2012. For Bailey and Barbato's role in the development of the "'Gay TV' industry," see Farrell, "Backstage Politics," 54, 55, 61.

¹⁴⁶ Farrell, "Backstage Politics," 61.

¹⁴⁷ For the segment on *The American Music Show* and the "Funtone family" on *Made in the USA*, see "Laurie Pike's Report about The Funtone USA Family," YouTube video, 3:56, posted by "misterrichardson," February 6, 2008, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EZgXMIZoyeM>.

¹⁴⁸ See RuPaul's confession in Rene Johnston, "Get in Touch With Your Inner Drag Queen," *Toronto Star*, July 1, 2000. For Bailey and Barbato's personal and professional relationship, see Matthew Hays, *The View from Here: Conversations with Gay and Lesbian Filmmakers* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2007), 43.

¹⁴⁹ "The Tracks of My Tears," *Filmmaker*, http://filmmakermagazine.com/archives/issues/winter2000/my_tears.php, accessed January 29, 2015.

¹⁵⁰ See Leslie Camhi, "The Fabulousness of Tammy Faye," *The New York Times*, July 23, 2000. Sister Paula describes meeting Tammy Faye during the taping of *TV Pizza* in "Sister Paula talks about Tammy Faye & Wants to Meet Her Son Jay," YouTube video, 3:07, posted by "Kathy Baldock," December 8, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l_s0YAr7_Tl.

the appearance of God on earth, plays in the background, Tammy Faye walks down the show's catwalk stage to the audience's applause, modelling a zebra-print jacket before letting it fall to the floor.¹⁵¹ "Oh, gorgeous!" praises the statuesque RuPaul who, wearing a pink and orange evening gown and platinum-blond wig, stands up to embrace the diminutive Tammy Faye. After the pair take their seats, RuPaul opens with questions about his guest's clothing: "Now first, tell me who did the coat, who did the suit?" With a laugh Tammy Faye explains that she had been shopping "on the street" in New York City's Chinatown, scoring her jacket for sixty-dollars, and a pair of used zebra-print pumps for thirty, eliciting cheers from the studio audience, as well as the astonished approval of RuPaul: "Oh my God! That's amazing!" As Tammy Faye readjusts her position on the guest's sofa, explains why she decided not to wear a wig, and outlines her assorted baubles, RuPaul lavishes further compliments on her style: "I think you look fabulous!"; "You are just gorgeous!" "Well, you are looking great the way you are!"

RuPaul's acclaim for Tammy Faye's appearance was, in part, praise for the outrageousness of her excessive gender performance, and was thus loaded with irony. Whereas RuPaul performed a knowing, tongue-in-cheek parody of a glamorous model, Tammy Faye had been drawn into a realm of, somewhat unwitting, self-parody.¹⁵² "Now, you do dress very flamboyantly," RuPaul points out, stumbling somewhat after Tammy Faye responds with an assured, and unexpected, "Thank you." "People have called you a queen, a drag queen before," RuPaul continues, "What do you say to those people who say, 'Oh yeah, she dresses up too much'?" Tammy Faye's naivety regarding drag, much like camp, is indicated by the fact that she pulls a comically quizzical face at RuPaul's statement. However, she uses RuPaul's hypothetical criticism as a springboard for a piece of advice that would not have been out of place on PTL: "I say everybody must be who they are. Young people, don't ever let anyone make you something that you're not. You have a right to be who you are." Tammy Faye further emphasizes the error of fixating on appearances, and reinforces her own resiliency, when asked by RuPaul about her strategies to "survive" the "public scrutiny" that she had faced: "You know in your heart who you are, you know what you have done and what you haven't done. And you can look the public

¹⁵¹ Joan Osbourne, "One of Us," Mercury Records, 1995, CD. For the interview, see "Tammy on the RuPaul Show," YouTube video, 4:37, posted by "franceschino rossi," August 8, 2007, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_XVy88x63yg.

¹⁵² For the related idea of interviewees of *The Daily Show* being "drawn into their own satirizing," see Amber Day, *Satire and Dissent*, 66.

straight in the eye, and that's what I did. "That's right, Hallelujah, amen," RuPaul responds in the style of the Black Church, encouraging Tammy Faye to venture into more explicitly theological terrain: "I believe in that. I believe God knows, and you know, and that's all that need to know."¹⁵³ "That's right," RuPaul adds, "...these are just clothes, this is just stuff, it's nothing." "They're just clothes," Tammy Faye agrees, "underneath we're all the same."

Conclusion

This chapter introduced another variant of ironic televangelical fandom and Recreational Christianity by examining early campy fans of Tammy Faye Bakker/Messner. Like the members of the Robert Tilton Fan Club, these campy fans often evidenced the potential messiness of irony-rooted fandom by combining tongue-in-cheek play with genuine affection for, and identification with, the tearful televangelist. In Tammy Faye's melodramatic and high-profile trials, campy fans could find relatable, if ridiculous, reflections of their own social struggles, and inspiration to persevere through life's challenges. At the same time, the activities, performances, and media of such fans often mocked Tammy Faye's adherence to, and attempted embodiment of, conservative Christian sex and gender norms; reveled in the breakdown of her allegedly divinely mandated nuclear family; and poked fun at the absurdity of her prosperity gospel and financial focus. Thus, despite sentiments of sympathy and identification, the first wave of Tammy Faye campy fandom was at its core unfaithful, as it was largely comically critical of her religious brand.

The 1990s, however, witnessed the emergence of a less caustic camp approach to Tammy Faye, associated with the mainstreaming of camp, drag, and gay media. While she remained a ludicrously laughable symbol of televangelical melodrama and scandal, the emphasis was increasingly placed on her relatability as a suffering survivor – a shift which Tammy Faye actively marketed herself towards. As will be discussed in the following chapter, the aforementioned trio of campy fans Fenton Bailey, Randy Barbato, and RuPaul Charles, in collaboration with Tammy Faye, would initiate a remarkable rebranding effort that would not

¹⁵³ For performative intersections between "Black drag" and the "Black church," see Jeffrey Q. McCune, Jr., "Transformance: Reading the Gospel in Drag," in *The Drag Queen Anthology: The Absolutely Fabulous but Flawlessly Customary World of Female Impersonators*, eds. Steven P. Schacht and Lisa Underwood (New York: Harrington Park Press, 2004), 151-167.

only encourage a new wave of laudatory campy fandom, but which would also somewhat rehabilitate her broader cultural significance. Once widely recognized, reviled, and ridiculed as a greedy and suspicious religious fake, Tammy Faye became increasingly lionized as a gay ally and a symbol of an authentic Christianity focused of tolerance, love, and acceptance – representations which, as will be argued, were rhetorically constructed and politically problematic.

Chapter 7 – *The Eyes of Tammy Faye*, Camp Rebranding, and Sexual Politics

Introduction

By the end of the 1990s, Tammy Faye Messner had made tentative moves to market herself to her camp appeal through her involvement in two programs produced with her campy fans: *The Jim J. and Tammy Faye Show* and *The RuPaul Show*. In appearing on these programs, Tammy Faye interacted with a mainstreamed camp aesthetic which, despite lightly ironizing her as a somewhat passé cultural oddity, was also largely devoid of the sharp critical edge featured in earlier treatments by her campy fans, who had often satirized her as a proponent of a religiously inauthentic prosperity gospel, and as a ridiculous representative of restrictive conservative Christian norms of gender, sexuality, and family. At the same time, the criticisms of the first wave of campy fandom had often been counterbalanced by feelings of genuine identification with the controversial televangelist, who, like a Christian Judy Garland, resonated with many gay men as a symbol, however amusingly strange, of suffering and survival. As campy play with Tammy Faye moved further into the American mainstream, however, the ludicrous side of her tragic persona was increasingly downplayed in favor of amplifying the inspirational aspects of her perseverance.

This chapter focuses on a second period of camp attention to Tammy Faye, beginning with the 2000 documentary film *The Eyes of Tammy Faye (TEOTF)*, produced and directed by her aforementioned campy fans Fenton Bailey and Randy Barbato. While toying with its subject's ludicrous tragedy and her (in)famous emotional and cosmetic excesses, *TEOTF* also framed Tammy Faye as not only an inspirational survivor, but as an authentic Christian due to her alleged tolerance for, and compassion towards, gay men, particularly those who were suffering medically. Tammy Faye would subsequently rebrand herself towards the wide-release, critically acclaimed film's glowing representation through appearances at gay clubs and pride parades, the publication of a new autobiography, and her participation in two reality television programs. This rebranding effort succeeded in attracting a second wave of campy fans who were amused by Tammy Faye's eccentricities, yet who also often lauded her as a progressive gay icon and as a symbol of an authentic Christianity seemingly compatible with gay lifestyles. Thus, this

second wave of campy fandom shed much of the religio-political edge of the first wave, and contributed to a shift in Tammy Faye's broader cultural resonance from a ridiculous religious fake to an example of an accepting and tolerant Christianity. However, as will be demonstrated, this rebranding process also involved the diminution and obscuring, intentionally and otherwise, of Tammy Faye's continuing conservative beliefs regarding sexuality, gender, and family, as well as her latter-career involvement and alignment with ministries and movements that sought to exclude sexual minorities from equal participation in American society.

The Eyes of Tammy Faye and the Foundations for a Rebranding

In 1998, Fenton Bailey and Randy Barbato's World of Wonder production company, hitherto known for offbeat television fare, entered the arena of feature filmmaking with the documentary *Party Monster: The Shockumentary*. *Party Monster* told the story of Michael Alig, a leader in New York City's libertine "Club Kids" movement of the late-1980s and early-1990s, who was convicted of a grisly, drug-fueled killing in 1996.¹ For their follow-up film, Bailey and Barbato turned to a better-known controversial figure, Tammy Faye Messner, who, as mentioned in the previous chapter, they had previously worked with on the television programs *TV Pizza* and *The RuPaul Show*. Despite their working history, Barbato would later recall that Tammy Faye was initially "very reluctant" to participate in their film, as "her trust of the media" was "at an all-time low."² Eventually, however, producers/directors Bailey and Barbato secured not only her participation, but also an agreement that she would have no say in the final product – *The Eyes of Tammy Faye* – a documentary drenched in camp.³ While Bailey and Barbato's film would toy with Tammy Faye's "kooky" characteristics, benefiting from her "great sense of fun about herself," the pair also made a serious attempt to tell the story of a much-mocked religious celebrity who, while "very overexposed" in the media, still "felt completely under-revealed, or unrevealed."⁴ The "real" Tammy Faye that *TEOTF* would construct was a laughably strange, yet sincere woman who had persevered through considerable suffering and misunderstanding –

¹ *Party Monster: The Shockumentary*, directed by Fenton Bailey and Randy Barbato (1998; Los Angeles: Paramount Home Video, 2003), DVD. For an insider account of the "Club Kids" scene, Alig, and the murder, see James St. James, *Disco Bloodbath: A Fabulous but True Tale of Murder in Clubland* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999).

² Hays, *The View from Here*, 50.

³ See Bruce C. Steele, "Tammy Faye Loves You," *The Advocate*, July 18, 2000.

⁴ "Doc U: A Conversation with Fenton Bailey & Randy Barbato – On Tammy Faye," YouTube video, 2:23, posted by "International Documentary Association," December 4, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=86k5Vks6PAU>; Hays, *The View from Here*, 49.

circumstances which Barbato linked to the historical marginalization of gay men, and their propensity to “identify with a lot of outsiders...whether they’re gay or straight.”⁵ While Tammy Faye’s campy fans had long been drawn to the televangelist as an ironically amusing, yet strangely relatable, religious fake, Bailey and Barbato’s film would argue that this was a two-way relationship, and that its subject had a long history of compassionate interactions with gay men – a cornerstone of the film’s thesis that Tammy Faye was an authentic Christian.

Appropriately narrated by fellow campy fan RuPaul Charles, *The Eyes of Tammy Faye* sets its premise with a simple question: “Whatever happened to Tammy Faye?”⁶ As somber music plays in the background, sepia-toned images show the disgraced former televangelist going about her daily rounds in Palm Desert, California, where, as RuPaul suggests, she lives in “virtual exile.” Her alleged abandonment is emphasized by a bleak poem which she reads aloud: “Mundane household chores I do, vacuum floors and pick up poo. I try not to think of days gone by, to do so only makes me cry. ‘Why me God?’ I say, ‘why?’” The gravitas of the scene, however, is comically undercut by a sudden shot of Tammy Faye sitting in her backyard, where she had been reading her verse, and where she pokes fun at her own propensity for over-the-top emotion. “It’s a little dramatic I guess,” she concedes, “. . .I’ve often thought I should probably be on Broadway y’know (laughter), all my drama.”

Such campy tones of ludicrous tragedy pervade the film, and *TEOTF* presents its subject’s backstory as a tale of alternating struggle and success, delivered with a steady supply of tongue-in-cheek humor. As the clichéd sound of an ascending harp plays, two amateurish canine puppets appear, a winking nod to the Bakkers’ early evangelical puppetry efforts, and goofily announce the title of the next segment – “A Star is Born” – a reference to fellow camp icon Judy Garland’s 1954 musical film.⁷ Following the aforementioned legend of Ada DeRaad’s introduction of mascara to the young Tammy Faye, a cosmetic antidote to her dreary upbringing, appears footage of the former televangelist backstage during her 1998 appearance on *The RuPaul Show*. She unpacks her considerable makeup bag, reveals that her eyebrow makeup is tattooed

⁵ “Doc U: A Conversation with Fenton Bailey & Randy Barbato - On Tammy Faye,” YouTube video.

⁶ *The Eyes of Tammy Faye*, DVD.

⁷ Although the puppets and the titles they introduced were designed to enhance the film’s camp appeal, Fenton Bailey pointed out that the idea to use puppets was Tammy Faye’s; see Hays, *The View from Here*, 49. For *A Star is Born* and Garland’s gay appeal, see Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies*, 148, 150, 175-176, 180, 188, 190-191.

on, and, over an extreme close-up of her eyes, claims her false eyelashes as a central component of her identity: “Without my eyelashes, I wouldn’t be Tammy Faye. I don’t know who I’d be, but I wouldn’t be me.” Tammy Faye’s laughably tacky taste in makeup foreshadows the film’s overview of PTL, which highlights the “gospel of fun” that entertained not only the faithful, but also the ministry’s campy fans for its unpredictable kitschiness. In this vein, a musical montage highlights some of PTL’s zaniest moments: Jim riding a bicycle across the stage; singers performing in outlandish, Egyptian-style headdresses; a well-manicured poodle dancing on its hind legs.

What *TEOTF* barely touched on, however, was the Bakkers’ controversial prosperity gospel, the purported religious inauthenticity of which was often satirized by earlier campy fans. In discussing the emergence of the broader “electric church,” RuPaul does point out that evangelical television had become an incredibly lucrative enterprise, “generating millions of dollars in revenue.” A joking take on the collusion of commerce and Christianity comes via a mini-montage of clips from the “Christian Shopping Network,” featuring a collection of kitschy “Praying Bears” (\$24.95 each), and including a voiceover promoting the network as a way for viewers to “sow into the kingdom of God while you purchase your favorite products at lower than retail price.” However, apart from a brief shot of a twenty-dollar bill changing hands over copies of Tammy Faye’s 1987 book *Run to the Roar*, an ironically amusing sales pitch for one of her many music albums, and Jim’s politically incorrect hawking of a “beautiful little rice paddy baby” doll for a fundraiser, *The Eyes of Tammy Faye* offers little criticism of, or commentary on, the Bakkers’ commoditized Christianity. This selective approach was intended to counter or forestall viewer associations of Tammy Faye with duplicitous greed, and the film argues that rather than being the beneficiary of ill-gotten gains, Tammy Faye instead paid “the price of PTL’s success” in the form of increased personal insecurity, and the slow collapse of her marriage.

Beyond evidencing the blunted critical edge of mainstream camp, *TEOTF*’s downplaying of the Bakkers’ focus on finances was intended to strengthen its thesis that Tammy Faye was an authentic Christian – an argument buttressed by the film’s praising depiction of her interactions with gay men. “PTL embraced those that other Christian fundamentalists, and televangelists, rejected,” RuPaul states, after which Tammy Faye appears in a grainy, undated clip, seated on a

lavish television set. “Steve is a patient of AIDS,” Tammy Faye informs her viewers, “and he so generously allowed us to talk to him today.” A quick edit reveals that Tammy Faye is sitting next to a television atop a doily-covered table, on which appears a man with side-swept blonde hair, a moustache, glasses, and a pale-blue suit. “Was it just a word to you?” Tammy Faye asks her guest, “Is it something that just happens to other people, and not to Steve?” “I knew that it was a growing problem in the gay community,” her interviewee recalls, “But I, as many other people did back in 1981 and ’82, denied that it could touch me... Why would it hurt me? I was a good Christian pastor.” Following these short clips, a man identified as Reverend Mel White emphasizes their historical significance: “Do you know how early that was, for anybody in the Christian world to be reaching out and to be embracing a gay person, let alone a person with AIDS? Tammy Bakker did it, when no one else would do it.” White’s praise is followed by a return to the interview, where Tammy Faye tearfully laments the failure of Christian compassion in the face of Steve’s condition. “How sad,” she cries, “that we as Christians, who are to be the salt of the earth... who are supposed to be able to love everyone, are afraid, so badly, of an AIDS patient that we will not go up and put our arm around them and tell them that we care.”

Through this short sequence *TEOTF* framed its subject as an ally of gay men, and emphasized her allegedly authentic Christian compassion for that community’s most marginalized members. As Jennifer Brier has discussed, debates over the appropriate Christian response to the burgeoning HIV/AIDS epidemic in the mid-1980s carried a heavy political weight, and resulted in a rift among senior advisors to President Ronald Reagan. On one side were Reagan’s conservative Christian “education and religion advisers,” who “steered the administration toward a morality-based AIDS initiative that shunned homosexuality and hailed abstinence and heterosexual marriage as the only forms of effective AIDS prevention.”⁸ Sharing such views were prominent televangelists such as Pat Robertson, Jimmy Swaggart, and Jerry Falwell, who engaged in what Tanya Erzen has labelled a “politics of condemnation,” centered on a “constructionist” understanding of human sexuality.⁹ Challenging arguments that

⁸ Jennifer Brier, *Infectious Ideas: U.S. Political Responses to the AIDS Crisis* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 81.

⁹ Tanya Erzen, *Straight to Jesus: Sexual and Christian Conversions in the Ex-Gay Movement* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2006), 185. For an overview of “constructionist” and “essentialist” understandings of human sexuality, see R. Stephen Warner, “The Metropolitan Community Churches and the Gay Agenda: The Power of Pentecostalism and Essentialism,” in *Sex, Lies, and Sanctity: Religion and Deviance in Contemporary North*

homosexuality was a natural state, these televangelists framed homosexual behavior as sinful activity, an elected and/or socially influenced deviation from the heterosexual norm instituted at Creation, and one which, like any other sin, might be battled and corrected.¹⁰ These televangelists also preached that gay men suffering from HIV/AIDS, however regrettable the suffering they endured, bore the medical consequences of their sexual sin, and they often referenced the epidemic in their clarion calls for homosexuals to repent and reform.¹¹

Televangelists like Robertson, Swaggart, and Falwell were the implied “other Christian broadcasters” who, *TEOTF* argues, “rejected” and “feared” gay men, and in particular, those suffering from HIV/AIDS. Only Jerry Falwell, the film’s effective antagonist for his role in what is presented as a tragicomic takeover of PTL, is called out by name for having “singled out the pro-abortion and gay movements for attack,” thereby linking gay men and Tammy Faye as mutual victims of Falwell’s aggression. This idea of shared suffering was reflected in the film’s take on Tammy Faye’s tear-filled interview with “Steve,” which suggested her alliance with countervailing political forces during the mid-1980s that encouraged “Christian compassion,” rather than condemnation, for those afflicted with HIV/AIDS, and endorsed awareness and education as ways of combating the epidemic.¹² However, *TEOTF*’s representation of Tammy Faye as an early gay ally is built on a selection of video proof texts that, aside from artificially inflating the extent of her interactions with gay men, intentionally obscure the conservative core of her stance on sexuality. While Tammy Faye and her Jim Bakker did preach love and compassion for homosexuals, they also shared with their more oppositional televangelical brethren the beliefs that homosexual behavior was serious sin, that it was the result of erroneous

America, Religion and the Social Order 5, eds. Mary Jo Neitz and Marion S. Goldman, Religion and the Social Order 5 (Greenwich: JAI Press Inc., 1995), 96-97.

¹⁰ For Falwell’s stance on homosexuality, see Michael Sean Winters, *God’s Right Hand: How Jerry Falwell Made God a Republican and Baptized the American Right* (New York: HarperOne, 2012), 102-104, 280-281. For Pat Robertson’s views on homosexuality, see Harrell, *Pat Robertson: A Life and Legacy*, 81-82, 136, 299-300; Hubert Morken, *Pat Robertson: Where He Stands* (Old Tappan: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1988), 114-115. For Swaggart, see Jimmy Swaggart, *Homosexuality: Its Cause and its Cure* (Baton Rouge: Jimmy Swaggart Ministries, 1983).

¹¹ For Falwell’s position on HIV/AIDS, see Winters, *God’s Right Hand*, 279-281. For Swaggart’s understanding of HIV/AIDS, see Susan Palmer, *AIDS as an Apocalyptic Metaphor in North America* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 29-30. For Robertson’s approach to HIV/AIDS, see Morken, *Pat Robertson*, 79-80.

¹² Brier, *Infectious Ideas*, 89-90.

choices and/or social conditioning, and that those involved in such sexual sin could seek divine deliverance from their habits.¹³

Insights into Tammy Faye's conservatism on matters of sexuality can be gleaned from her full 1985 interview with Steve Pieters, which was, for a time, archived to YouTube.¹⁴ Like *TEOTF*'s informant Mel White, who was formerly a conservative evangelical preacher and ghostwriter for Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, Pieters was an openly gay, California-based clergyman in the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) denomination.¹⁵ Founded in the late-1960s by Troy Perry, a Baptist and then Pentecostal preacher who came to accept his own homosexuality, the MCC conveys an "essentialist" understanding of sexuality, teaching that homosexuality is natural and divinely ordained.¹⁶ Although this position has placed the MCC in tension with American evangelicalism more broadly, as R. Stephen Warner has pointed out the denomination has also demonstrated particular evangelical characteristics. For example, by reinterpreting Biblical proscriptions against homosexual behavior and emphasizing "the silence of the Gospels themselves on the subject of homosexuality," the MCC has upheld the idea of Biblical authority.¹⁷ Moreover, Warner suggests that the MCC functioned as "a repository of traditionalism available to gays gravitating toward moral conservatism in sexual relationships as knowledge of AIDS spread in the late 1980s and romance, dating, coupling, and family values came in style in the gay community."¹⁸ Thus, the MCC mirrored the pro-family agenda of the combative Christian Right, albeit with a radically different understanding of what relationships might constitute this sacred social unit.

The conservative moral and theological undertones of the MCC, as suggested by Warner, may have rendered Pieters, who was piped into the PTL studio for *Tammy Faye's House Party*

¹³ See Shepard, *Forgiven*, 175.

¹⁴ The addresses and information for the videos (since removed) were: "Tammy Faye Bakker Interview Steve Pieters 1985 Part 1," YouTube video, 7:57, posted by "helenofirvine," September 16, 2007, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eC2BD6JnuIc>; "Tammy Faye Bakker Interview Steve Pieters Part 2," YouTube video, 9:09, posted by "helenofirvine," September 16, 2007, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AuR65eSqYno>; "Tammy Faye Bakker Interview Steve Pieters Part 3," YouTube video, 10:01, posted by "helenofirvine," September 16, 2007, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tJVUj-MFB-0>.

¹⁵ Mel White, *Stranger at the Gate: To be Gay and Christian in America* (New York: Plume, 1994). For an online biography of Pieters, see "The Rev. A. Stephen Pieters," *The Body: The Complete HIV/AIDS Resource*, <http://www.thebody.com/content/art39714.html>, accessed January 29, 2015.

¹⁶ Warner, "The Metropolitan Community Churches and the Gay Agenda."

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 87.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 100.

via satellite due to his rigorous chemotherapy schedule for AIDS-related cancer, a somewhat safe interviewee for Tammy Faye, relatively speaking. Still, as the full video of the interview demonstrates, Tammy Faye struggled with Pieters' steadfast claims that his sexual orientation was innate and God-given, and she probed for insights into how he had *become* involved in what she and many, if not most, of her audience members, considered sexual sin. For example, following Pieters' mention of his futile attempts to "program myself to be straight," Tammy Faye asks a series of questions aimed at uncovering whether his homosexuality stemmed from a lack of success with women: "Did girls make you nervous, Steve?"; "Have you ever had a sexual experience with a woman?"; "Do you think, maybe, you just haven't given women a fair try?" Pieters calmly responds to such queries by emphasizing the essential nature of his sexuality – "No, my orientation is towards men" – and endorsing homosexuality as divinely legitimated: "Jesus loves the way I love." Pieters' latter assertion, standing in stark contrast to his interviewer's beliefs, visibly breaks Tammy Faye's stride, who appears quite uncomfortable as she collects her thoughts. Such tension is latent throughout the interview, bubbling nearest to the surface following a question from Tammy Faye – "What made you feel that there was no hope for you to be straight?" – that elicits a deep sigh from Pieters, who nevertheless manages to control his evidently mounting frustration.

The fundamental differences between Tammy Faye and Pieters' understandings of homosexuality were also revealed in their discussion of the social and religious lives of homosexuals. "Now, what if you should want... children, Steve?" Tammy Faye asks, "...Would you ever marry for the sake of having children?" Replying in the negative, Pieters points out that heterosexual marriage is not the only way to become a parent: "A lot of gay couples, now, are in the process of adopting. It is happening more and more frequently. And yes, I would love to parent...But...that hasn't been the path that God has led me on at this point."¹⁹ Tammy Faye quickly counters Pieters' provocative proposal of divinely endorsed gay adoption, a social development vehemently battled by the Christian Right, by raising the issue of homosexual contagion, echoing fears voiced by antigay televangelists such as Jerry Falwell: "Would that

¹⁹ As Wendell Ricketts and Roberta Achtenberg point out, *The Advocate* reported in 1979 on the supposed "first adoption by an openly gay couple" in Los Angeles, notably by "a Metropolitan Community Church pastor and his lover, a physician": see Ricketts and Achtenberg, "The Adoptive and Foster Gay and Lesbian Parent," in *Gay and Lesbian Parents*, ed. Frederick W. Bozett (New York: Greenwood Press, Inc., 1987), 92; "Gay Couple Granted Adoption of Child," *The Advocate*, March 8, 1979.

automatically, do you think, cause the children to lead the same kind of lifestyle?”²⁰ “Absolutely not,” Pieters firmly responds, “My parents were straight. All my teachers were straight. Why didn’t I turn out straight?” Elsewhere, Pieters praises the MCC for bringing homosexual individuals to Christ, and for supporting positive gay lifestyles and healthy same-sex relationships. “I finally found God when I met my gay brothers and lesbian sisters at MCC” Pieters affirms, “And it was through meeting other gay people who were happy with themselves, who were leading productive, active lives, who were in sacred, loving relationships with each other, that I realized that that was a possibility for me too.” Tammy Faye, however, strips Pieters’ confession of its sacredness, reframing his emotional experience as the joy derived from new, yet mundane, interpersonal connections: “So what you were feeling was that strong bond of love between a group of people, right?” “Absolutely,” Pieters replies.

In sum, while Tammy Faye Bakker lamented a pervasive lack of Christian love and compassion towards homosexuals, and, in particular, those who were suffering medically, her own understanding of homosexual behavior as sinful precluded her acceptance of same-sex relationships, gay adoption, and religious communities centered on such social units. It is unsurprising, then, that *The Eyes of Tammy Faye*, in its attempt to present Tammy Faye as an authentic Christian vis-à-vis her approach to homosexuality, excluded material from her interview with Steve Pieters that betrayed the limits of her progressiveness. Indeed, the film’s only explicit suggestion of Tammy Faye’s stance comes from the mouth of her former co-star Jim J. Bullock, who counterbalances her disapproval of homosexual behavior by emphasizing her purported tolerance and status as a fellow cultural outsider. “She has been judged by other people, and she knows what that’s like,” Bullock states in a sit-down interview, “So, although Tammy’s beliefs are not in favor, I don’t think, of homosexuality, she allowed me the freedom to be who I am, and didn’t let that get in the way of our friendship.” For her part, Tammy Faye admits that she ignored Bullock’s sexuality, revealing that she “never even thought of him (Bullock) as gay. I just thought of him as another human being that I loved. It was as simple as that.” A staged reunion between Tammy Faye and Bullock in his apartment allowed her an

²⁰ For Falwell and Robertson’s understanding of homosexuality as contagious, see See Thomas L. Long, *AIDS and American Apocalypticism: The Cultural Semiotics of an Epidemic* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 2. For the Christian Right’s historical opposition to gay adoption, see Ellen Herman, *Kinship by Design: A History of Adoption in the Modern United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 291-293.

opportunity to again exhibit the allegedly Christ-like compassion she had previously demonstrated to Pieters. “Tammy hasn’t seen Jim J.,” RuPaul explains in a voiceover, “since he lost his lover to AIDS, and was himself diagnosed with HIV.” Sitting closely on Bullock’s living room sofa, Tammy Faye inquires into his well-being as she gently strokes his hand: “How are you doing without John?” “It’s been a long, hard road,” Bullock confesses, adding, “I’m coming around...I’m a survivor like you.”

The Eyes of Tammy Faye’s selective representation of Tammy Faye as an authentic Christian was grounded in her alleged tolerance and, above all, compassion for socially marginalized sexual minorities – themes which overlapped with the documentary’s overarching fixation on her as a relatable symbol of suffering and survival. While the film’s tone in this regard could be staunchly serious, such as when dealing with the weighty topic of HIV/AIDS, it also often amplified the laughably ludicrous side of Tammy Faye’s personal struggles, thereby heightening its campiness. *TEOTF*’s take on Jim’s dalliance with Jessica Hahn, for example, incorporates cheesy dramatizations of their encounter from the TV movie *Fall from Grace* (1990), as well as risqué selections from Hahn’s over-the-top, religiously themed *Playboy* video (1992).²¹ Similarly, Tammy Faye’s recollection of her brief dependency on the sedative Ativan is accompanied by footage intended to comically evoke a sense of hallucination, including clips of vintage cartoons backed by disorienting calliope music.²²

Moreover, *TEOTF* set its subject up for mockery in her attempts to resurrect her career. In prepping Tammy Faye for a new set of promotional photos, a makeup artist expresses astonishment, intended to be interpreted humorously, that much of her makeup is tattooed on. Flamboyant celebrity stylist Phillip Block snarkily dismisses a selection of tacky hats she brings along for the shoot. A meeting with a network executive, certainly engineered by the film’s producers, is also played for up ironic laughter, as Tammy Faye’s dated program pitches, such as for a puppet-based children’s show, are met with patient amusement and ultimate rejection. Despite such fun with Tammy Faye’s failures, by the end of the film she emerges triumphant,

²¹ *Fall from Grace*, which starred Kevin Spacey as Jim Bakker and Bernadette Peters as Tammy Faye, originally aired on NBC on April 29, 1990; see Phil Rosenthal, “Reality Goes Soft in Bakker Story,” *Los Angeles Daily News*, April 27, 1990. *Playboy’s Celebrity Centerfold: Jessica Hahn Bares it All* (Los Angeles, CA: Playboy Entertainment Group, 1992), VHS.

²² For Tammy Faye’s addiction to Ativan and treatment, see Shepard, *Forgiven*, 452-453, 460-462.

returning to active church membership after a long period of absence, as well as public preaching and singing. Confidently facing the “Christian community” which, she lamented, “had been so unkind to her in the past,” Tammy Faye dramatically reaps the fruits of her perseverance in the form of a standing ovation after a musical performance at Oral Roberts University, and the playing of her former song, “Don’t Give Up on the Brink of a Miracle,” over the film’s closing credits reinforces her status as a quirky survivor.²³

Conceived of and crafted by two campy fans, *The Eyes of Tammy Faye* constructed its subject as an unlikely, and somewhat ridiculous, gay ally – a beleaguered woman who had long shared their suffering, encouraged their perseverance, and treated them with Christ-like tolerance and compassion. Although there is little evidence that Tammy Faye’s 1985 interview with Steve Pieters was anything more than a one-off, the filmmakers presented video proof texts of the footage, recovered from deep within the PTL archives, as evidence of, it was implied, a long history of positive outreach to homosexuals.²⁴ Left on the cutting room floor, however, were segments of the interview which betrayed the limits of Tammy Faye’s progressiveness, and, indeed, the film as a whole deliberately downplayed her long-held conservative stance on homosexuality. As will be discussed to follow, *TEOTF*’s largely laudatory take on its subject would not only set the tone for a new wave of campy fandom surrounding, and camp-inflected treatments of, Tammy Faye, but would also drive her latter-career rebranding towards such flattering representations, all of which helped shift her broader public image from a bizarre and suspicious religious fake, to a respected gay icon and purported symbol of authentic Christianity. As with *TEOTF*, however, this cultural transformation was selective and generally neglectful of her persistent religious conservatism regarding issues of gender and sexuality.

After The Eyes of Tammy Faye: A Complicated Camp Rebranding

Few would have guessed at Tammy Faye’s initial hesitance to participate in *The Eyes of Tammy Faye* when she arrived in Park City, Utah in January 2000 to help promote the film at the Sundance Film Festival. To build up buzz for the documentary, Tammy Faye teamed up with the film’s narrator RuPaul for public appearances, resulting in an attention-demanding “odd couple” who handed out “emergency makeup kits,” hosted “an ice cream social,” and “dispensed drinks

²³ This song can be found on Tammy Faye Bakker, *Don’t Give Up!*

²⁴ For the interview with Pieters being sourced from the PTL archives, see Steele, “Tammy Faye Loves You.”

at a local coffee shop.”²⁵ Having received a standing ovation following its first screening, *TEOTF* became the breakout hit of the festival.²⁶ Esteemed film critic Roger Ebert, who gave the documentary a positive review, mentioned Bailey and Barbato’s attraction to Tammy Faye as a “camp icon,” and admitted that he too used to tune into PTL: “not because I was saved, but because I was fascinated. They were like two little puppets themselves – Howdy Doody and Betty Boop made flesh.”²⁷ At the same time that he was amused by the Bakkers, Ebert also confessed to moments of genuine engagement: “when (Tammy Faye would) do her famous version of ‘We’re Blest,’ yes, dear reader, I would sing along with her.” While Ebert reiterated the film’s argument that Tammy Faye “has always been friendly with gays” – the cornerstone of its thesis that she was an authentic Christian – he wondered about her role in PTL’s financial fiascos, a subject little discussed in the film for fear of associating its subject with religious fakery. “Was she in on the scams?” Ebert asked, noting that while she was “never brought to trial,” she “lived in comfort, and still does.”

Peter Howell of the *Toronto Star*, who interviewed Tammy Faye during the Sundance Film Festival, likewise reminded readers that her ex-husband Jim “came to symbolize the ultimate in hypocrisy, preaching humility while living lavishly.”²⁸ He also stoked suspicions about Tammy Faye herself by noting the jewelry that she wore during their interview, which, he argued, showed she was “obviously not hurting materially,” and the fact that her attendant publicist intervened to “halt any questions about her financial affairs.” For Tammy Faye, however, living well was not necessarily a sign of avarice and irreligiousness, as observers like Ebert and Howell suggested, but could instead be a sign of blessings bestowed by God, often mediated through faithful followers. In *Telling it My Way*, Tammy Faye blasted reports that she and her husband had ripped off “‘little old ladies’ so that we could live in extravagant luxury,” asserting instead that their lifestyles had been transparent to their supporters who, if offended,

²⁵ For “odd couple,” see Jeff Vice, “Tammy Faye Caught Most Eyes at ’00 Sundance,” *Deseret News*, January 28, 2000. For their distribution of “emergency makeup kits,” see Jami Bernard, “Rocky Mountain High: Even Tammy Faye Eyes Sundance Fest as a Springboard to Movie Greatness,” *New York Daily News*, January 16, 2000. For the pair’s hosting of an “ice cream social,” see Linda Lee, “Parties. Films. Free Food. That’s Entertainment!,” *The New York Times*, January 30, 2000. For their coffee shop appearance, see Jeff Vice, “Gotta Love the ‘Color’ at Sundance,” *Deseret News*, January 30, 2000.

²⁶ The standing ovation is mentioned by Roger Ebert, “The Eyes Have It: Tammy Faye’s Story Captured in Documentary,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, January 24, 2000.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Peter Howell, “Tammy Faye Bakker – A Legend Enjoys a Revival: Notorious Former TV Evangelist Star of a Hit New Film Documentary,” *Toronto Star*, January 24, 2000.

would have voiced dissent “at the grassroots level.”²⁹ As for her extreme style, Tammy Faye argued that it was her obligation to look her best for PTL’s faithful fans: “I never ventured out without my makeup on, without my hair looking good, without great clothes. That was the least I could do for all the partners who watched me and supported me and cared about me.”³⁰

In a promotional interview for *The Eyes of Tammy Faye*, producer/director Randy Barbato suggested that Tammy Faye embodied the cultural tensions between “Christianity and materialism, spirituality and fabulousness,” and that “somehow she manages to wrap them up in one package.”³¹ Rather than citing prosperity theology as her method of sublimating materialism into Christianity, however, Barbato argued that Tammy Faye symbolized a universal Manichean struggle: “We all spend a lot of time feeling bad about ourselves, because sometimes we feel spiritual and sometimes we want to go shopping. Well, that’s what she is, a fabulous mess.” Barbato’s comments reflect the paradoxes of the second wave of camp attention to Tammy Faye regarding issues of religious authenticity. On one hand, she remained somewhat ironically amusing for her excesses and attachment to the material world – attributes generally considered inimical to authentic religion, and which had often been the subject of sharp satire during the first wave of camp attention to the televangelist. Indeed, Tammy Faye’s career resurgence would be supported by some of her earlier campy fans, such as thirty-eight year old Scott Durkin, who was interviewed by reporter Ken Garfield at an early New York City screening of *TEOTF*. According to Garfield, Durkin “said he and his buddies used to get stoned on marijuana and crack up watching Jim and Tammy on TV,” much like Dick Richards from *The American Music Show* and the editors of *Zontar*.³² Such campy fans, as Garfield wrote, were generally amused by the “goofiness” of Tammy Faye’s persona, style, and theology; yet, he added that she could also serve as a relatable symbol of suffering and survival for gay men, “who also know how it feels to be scorned,” and that her campy fans were attracted to “her chutzpah if not her Christianity.”

In contrast to the first wave of camp attention to Tammy Faye, however, which often toyed with her perceived religious inauthenticity, the second wave of camp attention, following

²⁹ Messner, *Telling it My Way*, 144.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 148.

³¹ Leslie Camhi, “The Fabulousness of Tammy Faye.”

³² Ken Garfield, “She Clawed Her Way from Adversity to Admiration,” *The Orange County Register*, April 25, 2000.

in the footsteps of *The Eyes of Tammy Faye*, often praised her as an *authentic* Christian for her approach towards gay men – a representation which clashed with her continuing conservative beliefs regarding gender and sexuality. As with *TEOTF*, media producers and Tammy Faye herself would often downplay and/or intentionally obscure these beliefs so as to enhance her camp appeal and marketability as a gay icon. Yet, her core beliefs could still shine through, such as during a July 2000 interview conducted by Fenton Bailey and Randy Barbato for the gay-oriented magazine *The Advocate*, and associated with the wide release of *TEOTF*.³³ In outlining her own “very nonjudgmental” Christianity vis-à-vis homosexuality, Tammy Faye explained that “The Bible says that he loves every one of us just the same and that he doesn’t classify sin, saying this sin is greater than that sin.” As will be discussed, this idea that homosexual behavior was spiritually aberrant behavior carried broader political implications. Moreover, in response to a jocular question about whether she would be “a drag queen” if she was, hypothetically, “a man,” Tammy Faye encouraged the maintenance of divinely mandated gender divisions. Suggesting that drag might be “cute” as a form of “play,” Tammy Faye nevertheless added, “I think everybody ought to accept the body that God put them in.”

Such tensions between Tammy Faye’s conservative beliefs and her growing status as a gay icon would underlie her rebranding efforts in the wake of *The Eyes of Tammy Faye*. Having acquired a new manager – longtime fan and gay man Joe Spotts – Tammy Faye, in a move reminiscent of her early years on the gospel trail, itinerated once again, beginning with a tour of American flea markets.³⁴ An archived YouTube clip from “The Darrel Show,” an Arizona-based, public-access comedy program, documents Tammy Faye’s appearance at the Goodyear Market Place Swap Meet in January 2002.³⁵ Sporting bright-red hair, her customary thick makeup, and a

³³ Steele, “Tammy Faye Loves You.”

³⁴ For Tammy Faye’s introduction to Joe Spotts, who, she wrote, had “watched me on TV for years” (84), see Messner, *I Will Survive*, 82-85. Although Tammy Faye did not make any reference to Spott’s sexuality, he is identified as a “homosexual fan” of hers in Jeremy Reynolds, “Tammy Faye Messner Finds New Role in Ministering to Gay Fans,” *Charisma*, November 30, 2002, <http://www.charismamag.com/site-archives/154-peopleevents/people-and-events/787-tammy-faye-messner-finds-new-role-in-ministering-to-gay-fans>, accessed January 29, 2015. For Tammy Faye’s stop at the Richwood Flea Market in Kentucky, see Susan Vela, “Eyes Have It: Tammy Faye a Draw,” *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, April 30, 2000.

³⁵ “Tammy Faye at Swap Meet,” YouTube video, 8:27, posted by “The Brown Channel,” August 30, 2006, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KKEnmGQA20A>. For information on “The Darrel Show,” see the review of *The Darrel Show: 5th Anniversary Spectacular* DVD set at *Movies Made Me*, <http://www.moviesmademe.com/movie/review/880>, accessed January 29, 2015. For the dates of Tammy Faye’s appearance at this swap meet, see “Dry Heat,” *The Arizona Daily Star*, January 23, 2002.

leopard-print blazer, Tammy Faye, perched on an outdoor stage underneath a corrugated metal roof, sings “Amazing Grace” to a small group of mostly elderly onlookers. Elsewhere in the segment, a similarly composed group of individuals lines up in front of a merchandising table where Tammy Faye, accompanied by her husband Roe, shares cookies, signs autographs, poses for five-dollar pictures, and hawks VHS copies of *TEOTF*, her autobiography, and items from her new line of “healing” bath products.³⁶ Tammy Faye’s most enthusiastic fan featured in the segment is a middle-aged woman wearing a large, homemade button on her shirt identifying her as a “Proud Member of the Tammy Faye Fan Club.” She explains that membership requirements are simple: “You just have to be a loyal fan and love Tammy Faye.” Whether the woman was a member of Tammy Faye’s official fan club, inaugurated in 2001, and which offered members “two newsletters per year” and an “8x10 autographed photograph” for fifteen dollars, however, is uncertain.³⁷

While Tammy Faye’s flea market appearances afforded her opportunities to reconnect with her faithful fans, she also undertook a drastically different form of itinerancy aimed at cementing relationships with her swelling following of campy fans. These appearances evidenced her increasing willingness to rebrand herself towards her camp appeal by playing up her laughable physical and emotional excesses and the ludicrous side of her personal struggles.³⁸ In September 2001, Tammy Faye served as the celebrity host of the final “Red Party,” a gay-oriented, annual dance event in Columbus, Ohio.³⁹ As per the event’s dress code, Tammy Faye sported a bright-red pantsuit, which complemented her brassy hair, cherry lipstick, and the, often highly sexualized, costumes of other guests, with whom she posed for a plethora of pictures.⁴⁰

³⁶ For the cost of the pictures, see Vela, “Eyes Have It.” For an archived reference to Tammy Faye’s bath products (dated November 9, 2000), which she started marketing in 2000, see “The Tammy Faye Bath Products Story,” <https://web.archive.org/web/20001109190100/http://store.yahoo.com/tammyfaye/>, accessed January 29, 2015.

³⁷ For an archived version of “Tammy Faye’s Online Store” (dated March 3, 2001), which allowed individuals to subscribe to her official fan club, see <https://web.archive.org/web/20010303074715/http://www.tammyfaye.com/tfstore/funstuff.htm>, accessed January 29, 2015.

³⁸ For “intentional” versus “unintentional” camp, see Newton, *Mother Camp*, 106-107, 111. For the difference “between naïve and deliberate Camp,” see Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp,’” 58. For Spotts’ role in such appearances, see Silke Tudor, “The Tammy Faye Show,” *SF Weekly*, November 14, 2001, <http://www.sfweekly.com/sanfrancisco/the-tammy-faye-show/Content?oid=2143391>, accessed January 29, 2015.

³⁹ Mickey Weems, *The Fierce Tribe: Masculine Identity and Performance in the Circuit* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2008), 119.

⁴⁰ For pictures of Tammy Faye at the “Red Party,” see “Red Party,” *Qualia Folk*, <http://www.qualiafolk.com/2011/12/08/red-party/>, accessed January 29, 2015; “Zazoo & Tammy Faye,” *flickr*, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/theclubcreatures/29683230/>, accessed January 29, 2015. For the sexually suggestive

Two months after the “Red Party,” Tammy Faye debuted a travelling, one-woman show – “Doing It My Way” – at the Castro Theatre in San Francisco’s famous gay neighborhood.⁴¹ As Silke Tudor of the *SF Weekly* reported, Tammy Faye was part of a “delightfully surreal” double bill alongside the aforementioned camp auteur John Waters.⁴² Entering the theatre in “a long, white fur,” Tammy Faye performed on a stage dressed like a “mock bedroom...complete with makeup mirror and cans of diet Coke.”⁴³ She used the prop bed to illustrate how, as a child, she fearfully hid underneath her bed as her parents argued – a demonstration of her “guileless vulnerability” which was also laughably bizarre. Adding to the campy fun was a portion of the evening during which Tammy Faye conversed with an audience member using the voices of her PTL puppets, and she even incorporated a semi-risqué joke into her act: “When you die, they say you wet your pants and all that...a little Super Glue will do the trick.”

Tammy Faye’s newfound propensity for self-parody and tongue-in-cheek play was targeted at campy fans such as Michael Zanzoni, a forty-five-year-old former viewer of PTL who confessed to Tudor that he used to tune in “every day” for a dose of unintentional “comedy.”⁴⁴ Zanzoni, who was “clutching a highly treasured Tammy Faye record that his brother gave him in 1973,” characteristically mixed irony and affection in his take on Tammy Faye: “She was very glamorous in a white trash sort of way. ‘High white trash,’ I would call it. But I would never say that to her face. She’s wonderful.” At the same time that Tammy Faye knowingly played into her status a cultural oddity, she also used such appearances to subtly convey her gospel, which she intertwined with her camp appeal by focusing on themes of suffering, perseverance, and tolerance. In an interview ahead of her stop in Miami Beach, Florida, Tammy Faye explained that although she wanted to “(let) people know about God’s love and compassion,” her core message was a broader “you-can-make-it type thing” aimed at gay audience members who, she

nature of the event, with an illustrative photo of two attendees, see Kaizaad Kotwal, “Thousands Join Tammy Faye Seeing Red, All Night Long,” *Gay People’s Chronicle*, October 5, 2001, <http://www.gaypeopleschronicle.com/stories/01oct5.htm>, accessed January 29, 2015.

⁴¹ According to Elizabeth A. Armstrong, during the 1970s “the Castro neighborhood...was rapidly being transformed from a newly vacated working-class neighborhood into the first true gay neighborhood in the United States”; see *ibid.*, *Forging Gay Identities: Organizing Sexuality in San Francisco, 1950-1994* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), 116.

⁴² Tudor, “The Tammy Faye Show.”

⁴³ Pictures of Tammy Faye in her fur coat, and sitting on the prop bed on the theatre’s stage can be found at <http://www.tammyfaye.com/images/Castro/TFCastro07.jpg>, and <http://www.tammyfaye.com/images/Castro/TFCastro10.jpg> (both accessed January 29, 2015).

⁴⁴ Tudor, “The Tammy Faye Show.”

argued, were familiar with suffering, like her: “they’ve been made fun of and put down and misunderstood and have really had a rough row to hoe in life.”⁴⁵ Tudor pointed out that Tammy Faye’s San Francisco show combined “pleas for tolerance, respect, and love for all people” with explicitly Christian music, including her own ode to positivity “If Life Hands You a Lemon (Start Makin’ Lemonade),” and the gospel sing-along “Onward Christian Soldiers,” for which she provided accompaniment on the theatre’s organ.⁴⁶ Whether audience members read such musical performances as ironically amusing, spiritually uplifting, or, some combination of the two, they allowed Tammy Faye to continue her career as a revivalist and fulfill God’s mandate that she spread the gospel.

Tammy Faye’s many appearances at gay pride events during the early-2000s were also marked by the collision of camp and Christian witnessing. Darren Phillips, manager of a Washington DC nightclub which hosted a pride-related “Tammy Faye look-alike contest,” judged by Tammy Faye herself, in June 2002, highlighted her relatable suffering and ridiculous cosmetic excess as the key to her resonance with gay men and the drag community: “She has dealt with so much hardship in her life, so she can relate to the hardships and craziness of being gay... On the other side, she wears so much makeup that in many respects she is really one of the first drag queens... even though she is a woman.”⁴⁷ Contest participant Jason Saffer, who was delighted at having met his fashion template during the event, emphasized her importance to gay men by relating a favorably distorted version of the already slanted history offered by *The Eyes of Tammy Faye*: “She was one of the first people to say you can be both gay and Christian... In the ‘80s, when all the other televangelists were preaching that homosexuality was wrong, Tammy Faye had a gay person with AIDS on her show and she hugged and kissed him. I just love her.” The year prior, Tammy Faye served as the Grand Marshall of Tampa Bay, Florida’s PrideFest, where she injected Christian piety into the proceedings, leading “the crowd in a chorus of ‘Jesus Loves Me’,” preaching a message of perseverance, and offering “a rousing speech

⁴⁵ Nina Korman, “The Tammy Show, PTL,” *Miami New Times*, January 24, 2002, <http://www.miaminewtimes.com/2002-01-24/calendar/the-tammy-show-ptl/>, accessed January 29, 2015.

⁴⁶ Tudor, “The Tammy Faye Show.” A picture of Tammy Faye at the theatre’s organ can be found at <http://www.tammyfaye.com/images/Castro/TFCastro13.jpg>, accessed January 29, 2015. “If Life Hands You a Lemon (Start Makin’ Lemonade)” can be found on Tammy Faye Bakker, *Love Never Gives Up*, Pax Musical Reproductions R-2400, 1978, 33 rpm.

⁴⁷ Stephen A. Crockett Jr., “Tammy Faye’s New Club: Not PTL,” *The Washington Post*, June 10, 2002.

based on her faith that ‘God loves you just the way you are.’⁴⁸ Likewise building on *TEOTF*’s thesis, the *Associated Press* historically situated Tammy Faye’s appearance at PrideFest by reporting that she and her ex-husband, Jim, had “supported homosexuals at a time when the rest of America was fearful of AIDS.”⁴⁹

Such revisionist histories concerning Tammy Faye’s relationships with gay men, sparked by *The Eyes of Tammy Faye* and carried forward and revised by others, obscured the tensions between her long-held conservative Christian principles and her camp rebranding – tensions picked up on by some observers. The *Associated Press*, for example, reported that Tammy Faye’s appearance at Tampa Bay’s PrideFest was preceded by a gathering of individuals who “handed out leaflets proclaiming ‘Tammy Faye, shame on you!’”⁵⁰ Forty-nine year-old Linda McGlade chided Tammy for appearing at an event that celebrated sins ““up there with murder and greed.”” For her part, Tammy Faye retorted that the protesters best “read what the Bible really says.” The apparent incongruities involved in her camp rebranding also piqued the interest of a handful of journalists, who sought further clarification from Tammy Faye herself. On June 5, 2002, *MetroWeekly*, a Washington DC-based, gay-oriented newspaper, published an interview with Tammy Faye by editor Randy Shulman, relating to her involvement in that city’s pride festivities.⁵¹ “Given your fundamentalist roots,” Shulman asked, “are you ever surprised at the acceptance you get from gays?” While Tammy Faye admitted that she was “stunned” by such support, she maintained that she had a long history of outreach to homosexuals, although she was conspicuously short on details: “PTL was one of the very first [Christian television shows] to help the gays...They knew that we accepted them...We accepted the gay community when most religious elements did not.” As for Shulman’s suggestion that there were “many Christians who say gay is evil, that it’s an abomination,” Tammy Faye conveyed a more relativistic and tolerant stance: “I think being gay is just being a person who has a different thought on life.”

Limits to Tammy Faye’s proclaimed progressiveness, however, were revealed when Shulman asked for advice for “the young gay or lesbian who has still not found the way to say to

⁴⁸ “Tammy Faye Speaks at Gay Pride Fest,” *Associated Press*, July 9, 2001. For her role as Grand Marshall of the parade, see Amy Abbott, “PrideFest Combines Business and Pleasure,” *St. Petersburg Times*, July 5, 2001.

⁴⁹ “Tammy Faye Speaks at Gay Pride Fest,” *Associated Press*.

⁵⁰ “Tammy Faye Messner, Once Bakker, Keynotes Tampa Gay PrideFest,” *Associated Press*, July 8, 2001.

⁵¹ Randy Shulman, “The Words of Tammy Faye: Interview with Tammy Faye Bakker-Messner.”

their friends and family, ‘I’m gay’.”⁵² Although Tammy Faye encouraged such individuals to “just live your life,” she also counselled restraint when it came to expressing their sexuality – “don’t throw your gayness in anyone’s face” – advice which contradicted her participation in events featuring unfettered expressions of gay sexuality, including the pride events that set the context for her interview with Shulman. Two weeks later, Tammy Faye was the subject of a more critical piece on National Public Radio (NPR).⁵³ Acknowledging that Tammy Faye “always had some gay and lesbian fans,” host Neda Ulaby noted that this fan base had grown considerably since the release of *The Eyes of Tammy Faye*, which she, quite accurately, described as a “largely uncritical documentary.” Contending that “the gay community hasn’t expressed much skepticism” about Tammy Faye’s rebranding, Ulaby suggested that “she walks a fine line in terms of condoning homosexuality,” and pointed out that she “won’t comment on any political issue important to gays and lesbians, such as gay marriage or military service.”⁵⁴ Moreover, Ulaby continued, “(Tammy Faye) doesn’t like being where gay people flaunt their sexuality. Aside, of course,” she mockingly added, “from drag queen contests and sweaty dance parties.”

Asked for comment, Tammy Faye surprisingly revealed to NPR that she would no longer appear at events which celebrated gay sexuality. “I won’t be in the gay pride parades, so that tells you something,” she laughingly stated, “I don’t think they need them. See, I believe in class, and I think that people should always have a bit of class about them.”⁵⁵ This remarkable about-face can be read as an attempt to resolve some of the prominent tensions involved in her camp rebranding. While she found her campy fans teasingly fun, warmly affectionate, and generously supportive, Tammy Faye was also uncomfortable with frank expressions of what she considered sexual sin, instead preferring and encouraging restrained expressions of homosexuality. This lobbying for restraint, however, highlighted the politically problematic nature of her camp

⁵² Randy Shulman, “The Words of Tammy Faye: Interview with Tammy Faye Bakker-Messner.”

⁵³ For archived audio of this piece, see “The Re-Invention of Tammy Faye,” *National Public Radio*, June 20, 2002, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1145322>, accessed January 29, 2015.

⁵⁴ At the time, openly gay individuals were forbidden from American military service under the auspices of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” legislation; see Gary Mucciaroni, *Same Sex, Different Politics: Success & Failure in the Struggles Over Gay Rights* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 174-189. For a history of political debates over same-sex marriage in America, and the roles of religious organizations in these debates, see Michael J. Klarman, *From the Closet to the Altar: Courts, Backlash, and the Struggle for Same-Sex Marriage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁵⁵ “The Re-Invention of Tammy Faye,” *National Public Radio*.

rebranding, as touched on by Ulaby. As Bernadette Barton has argued in her study of “Bible belt gays,” proscriptions against “flaunting” homosexuality operate as a “discursive tool of oppression that silences gay people,” and contributes to their ongoing social marginalization.⁵⁶ In the case of Tammy Faye, her preference for muted homosexuality was motivated by her belief that homosexual behavior was a serious affront to God, a stance which she strategically shielded from her campy fans lest it distract from her marketability.

The intentionality of Tammy Faye’s downplaying of homosexual behavior as sin became evident during an interview and probing of her relationship with her “gay fans” in the November 2002 issue of the Pentecostal/Charismatic-oriented magazine *Charisma*.⁵⁷ In the words of writer Jeremy Reynolds, Tammy Faye “admitted she does not specifically address the issue of homosexuality being a sin when she talks to groups of gays.” Indeed, in her interview with Randy Shulman of *MetroWeekly* five months prior, Tammy Faye had described homosexuality as representing merely a “different thought on life.”⁵⁸ Such relativistic statements, however, combined with her many appearances at gay-oriented events, rested uneasily with conservative Christians like Reynolds, who succeeded in having his interviewee betray, however opaquely, her actual stance on homosexuality: “Messner said if someone comes up to her and asks her if homosexuality is a sin, then she tells them that ‘it’s best not to take a chance with your soul.’”⁵⁹ Overall, Tammy Faye defended her work with homosexuals to Reynolds as a valuable “avenue of ministry,” and maintained that it was not her job to convict gay individuals of their sexual sins: “I leave that up to the Holy Spirit because unless He speaks to them, they won’t change anyway’.”

Tammy Faye’s passing mention of the possibility that homosexuals might “change” aligned her with another of Reynolds’ interviewees in the article: Alan Chambers, Executive Director of Exodus International, one of a number of controversial American “ex-gay” ministries which taught that homosexuality might be cured through reparative therapy and the redemptive power of the Holy Spirit.⁶⁰ While ministries like Exodus framed homosexuality as serious sin –

⁵⁶ See Bernadette C. Barton, *Pray the Gay Away: The Extraordinary Lives of Bible Belt Gays* (New York University Press, 2012), 107-109.

⁵⁷ Reynolds, “Tammy Faye Messner Finds New Role in Ministering to Gay Fans.”

⁵⁸ Shulman, “The Words of Tammy Faye: Interview with Tammy Faye Bakker-Messner.”

⁵⁹ Reynolds, “Tammy Faye Messner Finds New Role in Ministering to Gay Fans.”

⁶⁰ Erzen, *Straight to Jesus*, 42-51.

“If when asked point-blank (Tammy Faye) never says homosexuality is a sin, then there is a danger in that,” Chambers stated – such organizations also reflected a shift in broader conservative Christian attitudes towards homosexuality.⁶¹ According to ethnographer Tanya Erzen, from “the early 1990s” individuals and groups associated with the Christian Right began moving from a “politics of condemnation of homosexuality to one of compassion.” Instead of denouncing individuals for their alleged sexual sins, a greater emphasis was placed on helping the afflicted understand and work through their spiritual disorders. As Erzen argues, however, this softer approach was often no less politically loaded than earlier combative stances, and has resulted in “anti-gay activism cloaked in the rhetoric of choice, change, and compassion.” Chambers, for example, used his own testimony as a purportedly reformed homosexual to publicly oppose the prospect of gay marriage, which could dissuade individuals ‘from realizing the ‘root issues’ of their homosexual behavior and that they are truly heterosexual.”⁶²

As discussed, Tammy Faye’s apparent compassion for suffering sexual minorities was central to *The Eyes of Tammy Faye*’s thesis that she was an authentic Christian, and helped drive the laudatory, second wave of campy fandom that she rebranded herself towards. However, she also used her compassionate stance as a means of simultaneously marketing herself to conservative Christians who not only shared her belief that homosexual activity was sinful, but who also understood such behavior to be a grave, if potentially correctable, threat to God’s plan for society. An intriguing example of Tammy Faye’s efforts to appeal to both markets was her 2003 autobiography and therapeutic manual: *I Will Survive...And You Will Too!*⁶³ The book’s title, an obvious reference to Gloria Gaynor’s 1978 disco hit, and longtime gay anthem; its jacket, awash in pale pink and featuring a black-and-white glamour shot of the author from the photography session featured in *The Eyes of Tammy Faye*; and its overarching themes of struggle and perseverance left little doubt as to one of its intended target markets.⁶⁴ At the same time, the bulk of the book was a rather standard collection of lite-Christian inspirational reading – recipes, dieting tips, poems, quotes, and anecdotes – largely indistinguishable from similar fare aimed at

⁶¹ Reynolds, “Tammy Faye Messner Finds New Role in Ministering to Gay Fans.”

⁶² Erzen, *Straight to Jesus*, 184-185.

⁶³ Messner, *I Will Survive*.

⁶⁴ Gloria Gaynor, “I Will Survive,” Polydor, 1978, 45 rpm; Nadine Hubbs, “‘I Will Survive’: Musical Mappings of Queer Social Space in a Disco Anthem,” *Popular Music* 26, no. 2 (2007): 231-244.

middle-aged, conservative Christian women, save for the forty-seventh chapter: “The Gay Community.”

Tammy Faye explained in this chapter that her gay fans had supported her during her personal low points: “They helped pay my bills while Roe was in prison”; “One gay man sent me \$10,000 tax free!”; “They sent me beautiful things – clothes, jewelry, flowers. They overwhelmed me with the love I no longer felt from the Christian community.”⁶⁵ While such fans may have acted like earthly angels, they were nevertheless, in Tammy Faye’s opinion, full of sexual sin. “My gay friends still know my stand on homosexuality,” she affirmed in a rather debatable statement, adding, “They can quote more scriptures on the subject that (sic) any of *you* can, I think” – a challenge targeted at potentially incredulous, Christian readers.⁶⁶ “Most of the gays I meet say they were born that way,” she continued, before vaguely reinforcing her own belief that homosexual behavior was, in fact, a sinful choice.⁶⁷ Despite attempts by “people of different sexual persuasions” to “interpret the Bible their way” (read: individuals such as Steve Pieters and other members of the MCC denomination) Tammy Faye maintained that the Bible was “a relatively simple book,” with clear rules on “how to live,” including, the implication was, sexually. While active homosexuals were sexual sinners, Tammy Faye reminded readers, much like during her interview with Fenton Bailey and Randy Barbato in *The Advocate*, that their sins were nevertheless no worse than anyone else’s transgressions: “God does not categorize sin.”⁶⁸

Tammy Faye also used “The Gay Community” to perpetuate *The Eyes of Tammy Faye*’s questionable thesis that she had a long, commendable, and controversial history of “loving ‘the gays.’” “It all started twenty-something years ago,” she wrote, “when HIV-AIDS had just been discovered” and was predominantly considered “a gay disease.” Emphasizing the social stigmatization faced by afflicted gay men, who “were treated as if they had leprosy,” she situated her PTL interview with Steve Pieters as a significant historical example of Christian “understanding” and “compassion.”⁶⁹ In the course of presenting herself as a Christ-like first responder to the HIV/AIDS crisis among gay men in the 1980s, however, Tammy Faye also

⁶⁵ Messner, *I Will Survive*, 268.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 269.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 269.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 271.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 265-266.

betrayed a strikingly naive understanding of the medical conditions and their communication. She related an anecdote about a time when she, along with Jim and a host of PTL employees, had contracted food poisoning by eating spoiled hamburgers, after which they received a payment from the unnamed “restaurant chain” to forestall legal action. Not only a financial miracle that saved what was to be a lean family Christmas, Tammy Faye presented the situation as proof of the divine promise of protection found in Mark 16:18 – “If you eat any deadly thing it shall not hurt you” – a Biblical maxim she also cited as the reason she “felt comfortable working with people with AIDS. I felt that God would protect me, and I still feel that way. I have probably hugged and kissed more people with AIDS than anyone. I have cried with them, laughed with them, eaten with them, and I have ministered to them.”⁷⁰ Although intended to highlight Tammy Faye’s courageous compassion towards individuals who, as she herself wrote, had been unfairly characterized as modern lepers, her anecdote actually reinforced this perception, framing those with HIV/AIDS as fearsome, polluted individuals who might spread their deadly conditions through “casual contact,” save for divine protection.⁷¹ This stance aligned Tammy Faye with conservative religious and political rhetoric that had not only socially stigmatized patients of HIV/AIDS, but also gay men in general.⁷²

Tammy Faye engaged more explicitly with political issues involving homosexuality when she appeared on CNN’s *Larry King Live* on September 16, 2003, to promote *I Will Survive*.⁷³ While she agreed with host Larry King that her “views” on homosexuality differed from many on the “far religious right,” including Pat Robertson, her professed beliefs aligned her with the politics of compassion associated with much contemporary Christian anti-gay discourse. Overall, Tammy Faye proclaimed that she followed Jesus’ example by reaching out to the “hurting” “gay community,” which had been socially marginalized by the “misunderstanding of people.” However, she also confessed that regardless of her “love” and compassion for such individuals, “(t)here’s no way I’ll ever understand the gay community” – an othering move that allowed her to distance herself from her most fervent fans. Claiming that she and the “gay

⁷⁰ Messner, *I Will Survive*, 266-267.

⁷¹ Luke Demaitre, “AIDS and Medieval Leprosy: A ‘Distant Mirror?’” *Historically Speaking* 9, no. 5 (2008): 34.

⁷² See Palmer, “AIDS as Metaphor,” *Society* 26, no. 2 (1989): 44-50; Gregory M. Herek and Eric K. Glunt, “An Epidemic of Stigma: Public Reactions to AIDS,” *American Psychologist* 43, no. 11 (1988): 886-891.

⁷³ For a transcript of Tammy Faye’s appearance on *Larry King Live*, see “Interview with Tammy Faye Messner: Aired September 16, 2003: 21:00 ET,” *CNN*, <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0309/16/lkl.00.html>, accessed January 29, 2015.

community” had “decided to...agree to disagree,” Tammy Faye again vaguely implied that homosexual activity was sinful, and suggested, in contradiction to her admission in *Charisma* magazine that she downplayed the topic, that this stance was transparent to her gay fans. While admitting that she herself “didn’t choose to be heterosexual,” she dodged King’s challenges to constructionist understandings of sexuality, central to arguments for the sinfulness of homosexual behavior, by appealing to her own ignorance: “I don’t know the thinking of the gay mind. I really do not, Larry.” Tammy Faye was forthright, however, when King asked for her opinion about gay marriage: “I think marriage is for husband and wife. I agree with old Pat Robertson on that, and a lot of the population.”

The tensions involved in Tammy Faye’s two-pronged marketing effort, and her attempts to negotiate them, were further evidenced during her appearance the following month on controversial faith healer Benny Hinn’s talk show *This is Your Day!*, her first appearance on Christian television in many years.⁷⁴ On an ornate, living-room style stage in front of a live studio audience, Hinn and his wife Suzanne sit with Tammy Faye, her husband Roe, and her daughter Tammy Sue. Sporting his signature Nehru jacket, Hinn mentions that he had decided after watching *Larry King Live* that “it’s time that God’s people talked to Tammy Faye,” prompting a tearful “thank you” from his guest. Following a short overview of Tammy Faye’s many “ups and downs,” Hinn, a believer in divine deliverance from the oppressive “spirit of homosexuality,” who had once prophesied that God would “destroy the homosexual community of America...with fire,” steers the conversation towards her relationship with her gay fans.⁷⁵ “Your stand...on gays, is, you know, something people have questioned,” Hinn states, “Why are you like that? What happened here?” “Well,” Tammy Faye smilingly responds, “I believe that Jesus loves everyone. And I believe the way you win people to Jesus is through love...and not through judging them. And we have agreed, the gays and I, we have agreed to disagree, they

⁷⁴ “Benny Hinn in Studio with Tammy Faye,” YouTube video, 28:34, posted by “Elijah Mendoza,” November 18, 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nnElafXEUKA>. For the date (October 29, 2003), see “2003 Heritage Updates,” *Legasee Publishing, LLC*, http://legaseepublishing.com/wordpress/?page_id=962, accessed January 29, 2015.

⁷⁵ For Hinn’s concern regarding the “spirit of homosexuality,” see Joe Dallas, “Theories of Origin, Part 2: Developmental, Spiritual, and Interactive Theories,” in *The Complete Christian Guide to Understanding Homosexuality: A Biblical and Compassionate Response to Same-Sex Attraction*, eds. Joe Dallas and Nancy Heche (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2010) 209. For undated audio of Hinn prophesying that God would “destroy” homosexuals by “fire,” see “Benny Hinn False Prophecies – Homosexuals, Castro, Appearance of Jesus,” YouTube video, 4:23, posted by “slaves4christ,” December 19, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HcZlyEHP_M.

know my stand.” She further positioned her work with homosexuals as an important evangelical outreach – “I give them the gospel. I have one-woman shows all over the country, and I preach the gospel of Jesus Christ everywhere I go” – which had met with considerable success: “‘Thank you for allowing God to be part of our life,’ that is their exact words.” Conspicuously left out of her explanation, however, was any mention of the ironic humor, self-parody, and celebration of gay sexuality involved in such events.

Tensions were also revealed during Tammy Faye’s interview with Benny Hinn when the issue of divinely aided deliverance from homosexual activity was broached. As during her *Charisma* interview, Tammy Faye emphasized that it was merely her duty to spread the gospel, and that it was ultimately up to God to lead individuals out of sexual sin: “No one can be delivered by the power of God unless God is a part of their life.” Prompted by the loaded word “delivered,” Hinn quickly asks whether she had “seen any deliverance” during her work, to which she swiftly replies, “I have not.” Following a pregnant pause, Hinn expresses his hope for the future: “Well, I pray you will.” “I pr...” Tammy Faye begins, before abruptly changing course, “well, you know, I leave that up to God...Only the Holy Ghost can reach out to hearts and minds, there’s nothing we can do. If we’re not anointed by the Holy Ghost, we are nothing!” Deferring responsibility for bringing individuals out of sexual sin not only allowed Tammy Faye to defend her relationships with her gay fans to conservative Christians, but also legitimated her general refusal to frame homosexual behavior *as* sin in her activities with such fans, instead spreading a gospel of suffering and survival which gelled with her camp appeal.

As has been demonstrated, the second wave of campy fandom which surrounded Tammy Faye Messner was markedly less religiously and politically critical than the first wave, and paid little attention to the incongruities involved in her camp rebranding. Despite her conservative beliefs regarding gender and sexuality, her self-marketing to likeminded others who sought to limit the influence and participation of homosexuals in American society, her questionable claimed history of outreach to medically suffering sexual minorities, and her stigmatizing naivety regarding HIV/AIDS, Tammy Faye’s campy fans, building on the thesis of *The Eyes of Tammy Faye*, elevated her as a longtime gay ally, an appropriate gay icon, and, often, as an authentic Christian. This selective representation would be further perpetuated via Tammy Faye’s participation in two reality television projects steeped in ironic and campy humor. As will

be discussed, beyond neglecting to deeply examine her beliefs regarding homosexuality and the political issues involved therein, one of these programs – not coincidentally produced by Fenton Bailey and Randy Barbato’s World of Wonder production company – deliberately obscured her involvement with a controversial ex-gay ministry so as not to encourage questions about her suitability as a gay icon.

Reality TV, Sexual Politics, and the Continued Construction of an Authentic Christian

Tammy Faye Messner’s return to mainstream American television came through her participation in two reality television projects which played upon her ironic humor value: *The Surreal Life* (2004) and *Tammy Faye: Death Defying* (2005). Leigh Edwards has recently outlined the meteoric success of American reality TV, which she defines as “factual programming with key recurring generic and marketing characteristics, such as unscripted, low-cost, edited formats featuring a documentary and fiction genre mix, often to great ratings success.”⁷⁶ One factor which made Tammy Faye an ideal candidate for reality TV was her history with PTL, where her often adlibbed performances added elements of uncertainty and spontaneity that delighted, among others, the network’s ironic fans. “We were the first reality show,” she would go so far as to claim, “Because whatever happened on PTL, we did it live, and whatever happened, happened.”⁷⁷ A second factor was her (in)famous emotional excesses, which served double duty on both the *Surreal Life* and *Death Defying*. On one hand, this attribute, which had been a key component of her broader cultural resonance as a bizarre religious fake, was toyed with in a tongue-in-cheek fashion. On the other hand, Tammy Faye’s emotional vulnerability, much as during her PTL days, allowed her to genuinely connect with viewers who sought out “moments of ‘authenticity’” from such “reality” programs, however scripted they might actually be.⁷⁸ Besides her seeming sincerity, both programs also argued for Tammy Faye’s religious authenticity, in part by highlighting her evidently positive relationships with homosexuals. As will be demonstrated, however, both programs ignored and/or obscured beliefs,

⁷⁶ Leigh H. Edwards, *The Triumph of Reality TV: The Revolution in American Television* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2013), 4.

⁷⁷ *Tammy Faye: Death Defying*, directed by Chris McKim, aired July 25, 2005. For information on *Death Defying*, which was co-produced by World of Wonder’s Fenton Bailey and Randy Barbato, and the cable channel WE (Women’s Entertainment) tv, on which it aired, see Dennis Harvey, “*Tammy Faye: Death Defying*,” *Variety*, July 4, 2005; “Tammy Faye Messner Announces Her Cancer Has Returned...,” *PR Newswire*, July 21, 2005.

⁷⁸ Edwards, *The Triumph of Reality TV*, 9. Edwards points here to the viewer studies of Annette Hill; see *ibid.*, *Reality TV: Audiences and Popular Factual Television* (London: Routledge, 2005).

activities, and issues which could potentially contradict their attempts to present Tammy Faye as a progressive Christian voice vis-à-vis homosexuality.

Beginning in January 2004, Tammy Faye appeared in the second season of *The Surreal Life*, a reality program on the WB television network in which a group of has-been celebrities cohabited in a gaudy Hollywood mansion.⁷⁹ Leigh Edwards categorizes *The Surreal Life* as an example of the “celebrity TV subgenre,” which scrutinizes and ironizes fame itself, and she describes the program as a blend of “reflexive documentary,” melodramatic “soap opera,” and humorous “sitcom conventions.”⁸⁰ *The Surreal Life* also featured a marked tabloid aesthetic; indeed, the program’s participants were provided information through the daily delivery of a *National Enquirer*-esque magazine on the mansion’s doorstep. As touched on in the previous chapter, Tammy Faye had been a fixture of tabloid magazines during the 1980s, which had often placed her in amusingly hypothetical scenarios. “What if Tammy Faye didn’t wear makeup?” asked *The Weekly World News*, which included a shocking, doctored image of the televangelist bereft of her customary layers of cosmetics.⁸¹ Similarly, the *National Enquirer* invited readers to imagine Tammy Faye entering a convent at Jim’s request “while he’s rotting away in the Big House,” and, in a more prescient move, to picture a world in which the Bakkers were divorced, and in which Jim, less realistically, had subsequently taken “a vow of celibacy for the rest of his life.”⁸² Although she had long decried her poor treatment by the “rag magazines,” Tammy Faye willingly played into *The Surreal Life*’s realization of such hypotheticals by putting her into situations intended to amusingly antagonize her conservative Christian values – a psychic séance; a visit to a nude resort; a clothing-optional pool party – and which often succeeded in provoking outpourings of her trademark tears.⁸³

Edwards argues that while *The Surreal Life* “ridicules” Tammy Faye through such scenes, it “also tries to elicit viewer sympathy for her moral views and what it presents as the

⁷⁹ For Tammy Faye’s appearance on the program, see Terry Morrow, “Tammy Faye Sets up House on WB’s ‘Life,’” *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, December 12, 2003. While the second season of *The Surreal Life* is not currently available on home media formats, five of the season’s six episodes can be streamed by American residents at “The Surreal Life,” *Hulu*, <http://www.hulu.com/the-surreal-life>, accessed November 18, 2014.

⁸⁰ Edwards, *The Triumph of Reality TV*, 69-70.

⁸¹ For a discussion and reproduction of this image, which appeared in the August 18, 1987 edition of the *Weekly World News*, see Mellencamp, *High Anxiety*, 223-224.

⁸² Mike Walker, “Tearful Jim Bakker Begs Tammy to Enter Convent,” *National Enquirer*, December 19, 1989; “10 Leading Psychics Reveal Their...Predictions for 1988,” *National Enquirer*, January 5, 1988.

⁸³ For Tammy Faye’s dismissal of “rag magazines,” see “Tammy on the RuPaul Show,” YouTube video.

purportedly true-to-life Tammy Faye.” Thus, although her tears could be ironically amusing, her apparently “authentic suffering” also rendered Tammy Faye not only the emotional anchor of the program, but also an unlikely marker of authenticity for viewers – a “real,” if laughably strange, celebrity.⁸⁴ Besides an authentic person in general, *The Surreal Life* also constructed Tammy Faye as an authentic Christian specifically, due to the tolerance, understanding, and compassion she displayed towards, among others, her cast mates, who comprised a hilariously bizarre, sitcom-esque family. Tammy Faye herself served as the caring mother figure; young reality-show star Trishelle Canatella was the wayward daughter, and sister to former *Baywatch* actress Traci Bingham; former television heartthrob Erik Estrada functioned as the father and older-brother figure to angry white rap pioneer Rob “Vanilla Ice” Van Winkle; and legendary pornographic actor Ron Jeremy was the lovable, if somewhat creepy, uncle.⁸⁵ Bringing Tammy Faye and Jeremy together under the same roof – the producers’ most obvious attempt to stir up entertaining conflict – backfired spectacularly, as the pair became “fast friends” and managed to “establish a lingua franca of tolerance.”⁸⁶ During the season’s finale, talk show host Sally Jesse Raphael, hosting the show-within-a-show “Dirty Laundry,” took Tammy Faye to task for their unlikely friendship: “He represents everything that you should be against.”⁸⁷ “God is love,” Tammy Faye shot back, “God cares about everybody.”

The Surreal Life’s representation of Tammy Faye as an authentic Christian for her demonstrated tolerance intersected with the program’s overarching thesis, which related to issues involving the American family. As Edwards argues, “reality TV is a key cultural site at which contemporary politics of the family are being negotiated,” and in an era of increasing “family diversity,” including “postdivorce, single parent, blended, and gay and lesbian families,” reality television programs construct “their own arguments about family life, sometimes implicitly and sometimes explicitly.”⁸⁸ In this sense, the second season of *The Surreal Life* argued that

⁸⁴ See Edwards, *The Triumph of Reality TV*, 73-76.

⁸⁵ For some of these “sitcom” family roles, see Edwards, *The Triumph of Reality TV*, 69-70. Notably, Bourgault also suggested that implied family roles were central to PTL’s programming, in which God functioned as “the father,” Jim and Tammy Faye were the “elder brother and sister,” and the viewers were “young siblings”; see “An Ethnographic Study of the ‘Praise the Lord Club,’” 43.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁸⁷ “A Talk Show, Supper and a Goodbye,” *The Surreal Life*, Hulu video, 43:32, <http://www.hulu.com/watch/196528#i0,p0,s2,d0>, accessed January 29, 2015. For the original airdate (February 22, 2004), see “Dirty Laundry,” *Internet Movie Database*, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0713810/?ref_=ttep_ep6, accessed January 29, 2015.

⁸⁸ Edwards, *The Triumph of Reality TV*, 5-6.

functional family units might be composed of the most seemingly diverse participants, and enshrined Tammy Faye as the emotional, moral, and religious glue for a fictive family composed of ironically amusing, has-been celebrities. This theme was extended in the fourth episode of the season, when Tammy Faye and a selection of her cast mates headed to a Long Beach, California coffee shop for a book signing of her aforementioned autobiography, *I Will Survive...And You Will, Too!*⁸⁹ As her cast mates stood in astonished approval at the bevy of gay fans and drag queens in attendance, Tammy Faye began, in her own words, “preaching”: promoting perseverance in the face of suffering, emphasizing the power of forgiveness, and encouraging parents of gay children to “love them anyway... You’ll miss so much if you don’t love your child unconditionally.”

Despite her message of love and acceptance for gay children, however, and her implicit welcoming of homosexuals into *The Surreal Life*’s fictive family, Tammy Faye continued to hold a conservative position on the proper composition of the American family. On March 18, 2004, nearly a month after the last episode of *The Surreal Life* aired, Tammy Faye again appeared on CNN’s *Larry King Live* for a sit-down interview. Host Larry King proposed that *The Surreal Life* had rendered her a “cult hero” to a fresh, “young audience,” which included many homosexuals. “You’re friends with a lot of gays,” King asserted, “What do you feel about gay marriage?”⁹⁰ “Well,” Tammy Faye replied, reiterating her position from her last appearance on the program, “I believe marriage is between a man and a woman.” Although *The Surreal Life* had framed Tammy Faye, however implicitly, as a progressive Christian voice in the shifting politics of the American family – a representation which she actively encouraged – her personal beliefs reflected the restrictive, and often religiously rooted, understandings of family that such movements sought to challenge. Similar incongruities related to Tammy Faye’s rebranding project would be reflected in her next reality television venture.

⁸⁹ “Book Signing and Pool Party,” *The Surreal Life*, Hulu video, 43:34, <http://www.hulu.com/watch/196530#i0,p0,s2,d0>, accessed January 29, 2015. For the original airdate (February 8, 2004), see “The Good, the Bad, & the Porn Stars,” http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0713812/?ref_=ttep_ep4, accessed January 29, 2015.

⁹⁰ For a transcript of Tammy Faye’s appearance on *Larry King Live*, see “Interview with Tammy Faye Messner: Aired March 18, 2004: 21:00 ET,” *CNN*, <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0403/18/lkl.00.html>, accessed January 29, 2015

During her above appearance on *Larry King Live*, Tammy Faye announced that her cancer had returned, and that she was about to embark on a rigorous course of chemotherapy.⁹¹ Her illness and attempts at recovery set the stage for the one-time television special *Tammy Faye: Death Defying* (2005), which aired on the cable network WE (Women's Entertainment) tv, and which, like *The Eyes of Tammy Faye* and *The RuPaul Show*, was produced by World of Wonder.⁹² The core theme of *Death Defying* is Tammy Faye's resilience in the face of overwhelming medical tragedy, which robs her of, among other things, her singing voice, which falters as she attempts to perform, in one of the program's most poignant moments, one of her classic songs of perseverance: "The Sun Will Shine Again."⁹³ As per World of Wonder's campy mandate, however, the special also mines considerable ironic comedy from its subject's deadly serious challenges. Tammy Faye's torturous try at singing, for example, is punctuated with shots of her two small dogs barking loudly, apparently at the awfulness of the music. Elsewhere, in explaining that she wants her funeral to be "a celebration of life" filled with balloons and fireworks, Tammy Faye makes an unusual wish regarding her cremated ashes: "I'd like to have 'em put me in maracas... And then when they're up at church, and they're playing the maraca (sic), and they're having a good time singing... that'd be you in there, with your bones shaking (laughter)." *Death Defying* plays up this amusingly absurd request by inserting footage of sunlit, shaking maracas backed by buoyant music.

Much like *The Eyes of Tammy Faye*, World of Wonder's most famous camp treatment of the former televangelist, *Death Defying* offered its subject opportunities to preach her gospel. For example, over shots of swiftly moving clouds and the harsh California desert – visual metaphors for the ceaseless passage of time and death – Tammy Faye explains the source of her strength by paraphrasing Psalm 23:4: "I feel that presence of, of Jesus as I'm going through this time. The Bible says that when we go through the valley of the shadow of death, we should fear no evil, for he is with us." Also like *TEOTF*, *Death Defying* presented its subject as an authentic Christian due to her compassion for medically suffering gay men, and featured her visiting a small group of, it is implied, gay men at House of Mercy, a Catholic HIV/AIDS hospice in North

⁹¹ "Interview with Tammy Faye Messner," *CNN*.

⁹² *Tammy Faye: Death Defying*, aired July 25, 2005.

⁹³ "The Sun Will Shine Again" appeared on the album Tammy Faye Bakker, *Enough is Enough*, PTL Club Records & Tapes PTL-LP-1855, 1986, 33 rpm.

Carolina.⁹⁴ The general tone of the scene is one of commiseration, with Tammy Faye herself emphasizing their shared medical suffering. “I think cancer’s sorta like AIDS,” she suggests, “in the fact that you have to take all this junk to get better, and you feel gross some days.” *Death Defying* punctuates the scene with evidence of Tammy Faye’s compassion as she hugs a younger patient to the accompaniment of a sentimental piano score, asking God to “touch his body” and to “give him peace...and joy in spite of circumstances.” Through this brief scene, *Death Defying* conveyed a sense of continuity with Tammy Faye’s 1985 interview with Steve Pieters, the foundation of both *TEOTF* and its subject’s arguments, and associated cultural assumptions, that she had a long history of outreach to gay men afflicted with HIV/AIDS. In reality, however, her public work with this demographic was very limited and strictly post-*TEOTF*, such as her hosting of a “drag bingo” fundraiser for the AIDS Alliance in Durham, North Carolina in January 2004. Press mentions of this event also functioned as promotional copy for her forthcoming appearance on *The Surreal Life*, as well as her recently released autobiography, *I Will Survive*, in which, as mentioned above, she betrayed a naive and potentially stigmatizing belief in the transmission of HIV/AIDS via casual contact, such as through the hug highlighted by *Death Defying*.⁹⁵

Death Defying also deliberately obscured information that might provoke serious concerns about Tammy Faye’s suitability as a gay icon. After deciding to temporarily halt her chemotherapy treatments, Tammy Faye flies to Los Angeles for a preaching invitation, where she is enthusiastically greeted at the airport by a “pastor and his wife,” both of whom remain unidentified throughout the scene. Travelling in an ostentatious, sport-utility limousine, the pastor, a young Caucasian man with peroxided bangs and a heavy lisp, reassures Tammy Faye that her “eyelashes look beautiful,” regardless of the fact that tears brought on by a chemotherapy-related ocular ulcer had started to wash one away from her face. An exterior shot reveals their ultimate destination – “Gateway City Center Church” – followed by an interior shot of a mid-sized sanctuary with exposed red ceiling beams, two projection screens flanking the stage, and a few dozen congregants seated in white folding chairs. Excitedly introducing his

⁹⁴ For information on the House of Mercy, which was founded in 1991 by the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, see <http://www.thehouseofmercy.org/History.asp>, accessed January 29, 2015.

⁹⁵ See “Drag Bingo, Television, New Book: Tammy Faye Messner’s New Life,” *Associated Press Newswires*, December 29, 2003; “Evening with Tammy Faye’ Messner Draws 700 to Durham,” *Associated Press Newswires*, January 3, 2004.

guest as “the unstoppably (sic), undescrivable (sic), the unbelievable Tammy Faye Messner,” the pastor prompts a standing ovation from the congregation. Taking the stage in a long black dress, Tammy Faye confesses to feelings of hopelessness upon her initial cancer diagnosis, yet she reiterates her trust in the Lord, and claims that her public health battles had been a boon for evangelism, since she had allegedly received “over ten-thousand emails...of people who are praying, people that have never prayed before in their lives.” The scene’s finale features Tammy Faye’s longtime friend, gospel music legend Dottie Rambo, crediting her with “thirteen souls” saved during the service’s altar call, and prays for divine healing on her behalf.⁹⁶ “I knew I was going to go home from here healed,” Tammy Faye proclaims, after which the pastor, standing astride the pair, shouts out triumphantly.

Death Defying presented Tammy Faye’s visit to the Los Angeles church as an extension of her ministry of faith and perseverance, and as a much-needed opportunity for divine restoration. What the special intentionally left out, however, was the church’s controversial position on homosexuality, as well as disturbing allegations levied against the featured pastor, James Stalnaker, following Tammy Faye’s appearance on August 1, 2004, but before the airing of *Death Defying* in July 2005.⁹⁷ Gateway City Center Church was a West Hollywood church plant of the Pentecostal/Charismatic network Harvest International Ministry, and carried a mission to help “homosexual men” discover “their true identity in Christ, as the head and not the tail.”⁹⁸ Stalnaker himself embodied the supposed success of such ex-gay efforts, as discussed in an account of the service from gay comedic actor Leslie Jordan, in his 2008 memoir *My Trip Down the Pink Carpet*. A friend of Tammy Faye’s manager Joe Spotts, Jordan revealed that he had previously opened, “in full drag,” for her during a California stop of her one-woman show, and that he had attended the service featured in *Death Defying* with a group of his “sinful friends

⁹⁶ On Dottie Rambo, see Douglas Harrison, “Grace to Catch a Falling Soul: Country, Gospel, and Evangelical Populism in the Music of Dottie Rambo,” in *Walking the Line: Country Music Lyricists and American Culture*, eds. Thomas Alan Holmes and Roxanne Harde (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2013), 77-96.

⁹⁷ For an archived online posting from the church dated July 28, 2004, advertising Tammy Faye’s upcoming appearance on August 1, 2004, see “Tammy Faye and Dottie Rambo come to Hollywood,” *Gateway City Center*, <https://web.archive.org/web/20040803070144/http://gatewaycitycenter.com/news.php?id=20040728223738&cal=0>, accessed January 29, 2015. For the airdate of *Death Defying*, see n.90 in this chapter.

⁹⁸ Joseph Helms, “We Need Your Help!!,” *Gateway City Center*, <https://web.archive.org/web/20030815121840/http://www.gatewaycitycenter.com/news.php?id=20030709203655&cal=0>, accessed January 29, 2015, originally posted July 9, 2003. For ministry information about Harvest International Ministry, see *Harvest International Ministry*, <http://harvestim.org>, accessed January 29, 2015.

– all gay, all men, all recovering Southern Baptists.”⁹⁹ He recalled that Stalnaker, “by far the most effeminate man I had ever beheld,” testified “that he used to be gay but now, through the miraculous power of Jesus Christ, he wasn’t.” Jordan, however, was less than convinced with his testimony, and was little surprised by reports in February 2005 that the “sissy preacher” was sued for allegedly, in the words of the *Pasadena Star-News*, “coercing men in his congregation into sexual relationships” through the use of “mind-control and brain-washing” techniques.¹⁰⁰

The producers of *Death Defying* certainly knew of the sordid charges laid against James Stalnaker, which predated similar gay sex scandals that would come to embroil the more prominent evangelical pastors, and also outspoken opponents of homosexual activity, Ted Haggard and Eddie Long, and they therefore scrubbed the special of Stalnaker’s name and any mention of his ministry’s ex-gay stance – all of which would have detracted from its thesis that Tammy Faye was a gay ally.¹⁰¹ Yet, the question remains: What was her motivation for accepting this invitation to preach? As discussed, Tammy Faye believed that active homosexuals, much like any other sinners, might turn towards a more righteous path, thereby aligning her with the mission of Gateway City Center Church. Leslie Jordan, however, recalled that her message during the service differed drastically from Stalnaker’s, and was focused on “love,” “tolerance,” and Jesus’ own silence on homosexuality. “She won us over,” Jordan confessed, “You would have thought we were at a tent revival meeting in the Deep South the way we whooped and hollered. Several of my friends even went forward during the altar call to be saved.” In Jordan’s opinion, Tammy Faye, who evidenced “how a Christian woman should really act,” had likely been “duped” into appearing at a church with such a strident stance against homosexual activity.¹⁰²

Unfortunately, *Death Defying* aired only a small portion of Tammy Faye’s message, so it is difficult to verify the accuracy of Jordan’s recollection. Gateway City Center’s official account

⁹⁹ See Leslie Jordan, *My Trip Down the Pink Carpet* (New York: Simon Spotlight Entertainment, 2008), 237-241. For Jordan’s relationship with Joe Spotts, see Les Spindle, “Leslie Jordan. (Catching Up With...)” *Back Stage West*, October 14, 2004.

¹⁰⁰ Marshall Allen, “Church, Leader Named in Lawsuit,” *Pasadena Star-News*, February 14, 2005.

¹⁰¹ For the Eddie Long scandal, see Todne Thomas Chipumuro, “Pastor, Mentor, or Father?: The Contested Intimacies of the Eddie Long Sex Abuse Scandal,” *Journal of Africana Religions*, 2, no. 1 (2014): 1-30. For the Haggard scandal, see David Crary, “Haggard Case Fuels Debate over Hypocrisy,” *Associated Press Newswires*, November 3, 2006.

¹⁰² Jordan, *My Trip Down the Pink Carpet*, 239-240.

of the service made no mention of Tammy Faye broaching the subject of homosexuality – understandable if she did, in fact, challenge Stalnaker’s views – only that “she spoke of the power of forgiveness and of God’s ability to hold us up when it seems we can’t go on.”¹⁰³ In any event, rather than a “dupe,” Tammy Faye is better understood as a savvy self-marketer who knowingly and simultaneously pitched herself to her ever-growing gay fan base as well as Christian ministries with conservative stances on homosexuality. Her message at Gateway City Center Church had evidently resonated with certain skeptical and curious gay men in attendance, including Leslie Jordan, and what little was aired on *Death Defying* intersected with the special’s campy representation of her as a quirky survivor. At the same time, her very presence at the church lent some legitimacy to the efforts of Stalnaker, with whom she held similar, if not identical, beliefs regarding homosexuality.

Tammy Faye’s final appearances on American reality television came via the six-part documentary television series *One Punk Under God: The Prodigal Son of Jim and Tammy Faye* – a World of Wonder project which aired on the Sundance Channel, and which chronicled her son, Jay Bakker’s, efforts to grow his own Atlanta-based church: Revolution.¹⁰⁴ Like his parents, Jay put secular culture into the service of his ministry; however, Revolution was PTL turned upside-down. Covered in tattoos, piercings, and, as the series’ title suggests, punk-style clothing, Jay presided over services held in smoky bars, often while holding his own smoldering cigarette. In line with the broader Emerging Church movement, Revolution harnessed ironic humor, central to his mother’s camp appeal, as an important theological tool in the ministry’s pursuit of spiritual authenticity.¹⁰⁵ In the first episode of *One Punk Under God*, Bakker even went so far as to parody the stereotype of the greedy televangelist, for which his father was arguably the best-known model. “All you TV landers out there,” Bakker states in an affected raspy voice, sitting in his car and reaching a clawed hand out to the camera, “I just wanna say, if you donate

¹⁰³ Benjamin Hart, “Tammy Faye and Dottie Rambo come to Gateway,” *Gateway City Center*, <https://web.archive.org/web/20041009231256/http://gatewaycitycenter.com/news.php?id=20040822032245&cal=0>, accessed January 29, 2015, originally posted August 22, 2004.

¹⁰⁴ David Kronke, “Tales of a Young ‘Punk’,” *Los Angeles Daily News*, July 12, 2006. For an archived mission statement of Bakker’s church, dating from April 23, 2006, see “The Idea of Revolution,” <https://web.archive.org/web/20060423025243/http://www.vivalarevolution.org/idea.htm>, accessed January 29, 2015.

¹⁰⁵ For the use of ironic humor by Emerging Evangelicals as a means of accessing spiritual authenticity, see Bielo, *Emerging Evangelicals*, 49-51.

\$19.95...¹⁰⁶ Bakker further distanced himself from his televangelical heritage by generally eschewing the medium that had brought his parents both success and scandal, instead focusing on audio podcasting and Revolution's online presence.¹⁰⁷ Besides the tainted association of Bakkers with television, Jay Bakker lacked his parent's easy on-screen charisma, and often appeared nervous and uncomfortable in front of *One Punk Under God's* cameras.

The central storyline of *One Punk Under God* concerns Jay Bakker's struggle over whether to move Revolution towards a gay-affirming stance – denying that homosexuality is a sin and accepting congregants unconditionally, regardless of their sexual orientation.¹⁰⁸ This choice is presented as a deep spiritual struggle for Bakker, who explains during the second episode that he had “been so trained in my life to be like, ‘this is wrong and this is bad.’”¹⁰⁹ A turning point comes in the same episode, when Bakker preaches at the Open Door Community Church in Sherwood, Arkansas, described in an intertitle as “an evangelical gay affirming church.”¹¹⁰ Bakker ends his sermon on a note of love and perseverance strikingly reminiscent of his mother's messages: “We've got to learn to love people, it's not easy. So I encourage you not to give up. Allow your security to be in God, not what others think of you, but in what God thinks of you, and God loves you.” Soon after follows a scene of Bakker's smiling attendance at a “commitment ceremony” between two women at Open Door (gay marriage being illegal in Arkansas), which features a touching declaration of unconditional love from one of the participants.¹¹¹ Eventually, after considerable scripture study and reflection, Bakker declares Revolution a gay-affirming church, provoking division among his ministry co-workers, and the withdrawal of crucial funding from a shadowy “conservative foundation.”¹¹² For Bakker, however, the right move is clear: “I hope that this church has gotten to the point where we can

¹⁰⁶ See “Episode One,” *One Punk Under God: The Prodigal Son of Jim and Tammy Faye* (2006; New York: docuramafilms, 2007), DVD.

¹⁰⁷ For an extensive list of audio podcasts available on the Revolution site as of April 23, 2006, see “Service Audio,” <https://web.archive.org/web/20060423025334/http://www.vivalarevolution.org/media.htm>, accessed January 29, 2015.

¹⁰⁸ For Bakker's efforts in this regard in relation to the broader “Emerging Church Movement,” see Gerardo Marti and Gladys Ganiel, *The Deconstructed Church: Understanding Emerging Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 147-148.

¹⁰⁹ “Episode Two,” *One Punk Under God*.

¹¹⁰ For information on the Open Door Community Church, see the church's website at <http://www.sherwoodopendoor.org/>, accessed January 29, 2015.

¹¹¹ Arkansas “approved a state constitutional ban on gay marriage” in 2004; see Klarman, *From the Closet to the Altar*, 109.

¹¹² “Episode Two,” *One Punk Under God*.

start accepting that others are accepted by God, completely, just the way they are, not the way they should be, or not even the way we think they should be. So let's stop closing the door on people."¹¹³

Intertwined with such weighty religio-political issues was Bakker's struggle with the rapidly deteriorating health of his mother. In the second episode of *One Punk Under God*, Jay flies to North Carolina to visit Tammy Faye, who is stiff, gaunt, and more excessively made-up than usual – likely a futile attempt to mask her shocking physical decline.¹¹⁴ Sitting in her backyard, Jay reveals his hesitance to discuss the “gay thing” with his estranged father Jim, foreshadowing another of the series' plotlines, to be discussed in the following chapter. While the pair joke about Jay and his father's reticent relationship, Tammy Faye makes no comment, on camera at least, about her son's conundrum. During the fourth episode, Jay is faced with the prospect of relocating from Atlanta to New York City so that his wife, Amanda, can pursue her dream of attending medical school. He meets with his mother in a North Carolina fast-food restaurant, where she encourages him to spread the gospel to those “in the bars and the tattoo parlors, and hug those people, and let them know that God loves them.”¹¹⁵ Thus, Tammy Faye encouraged her son, a fellow stylistically excessive family member, to follow in her footsteps by spreading the gospel to society's outsiders. Yet again, however, those outsiders who had been so central to Tammy Faye's latter career resurgence – homosexual individuals – were not explicitly discussed.

On July 19, 2007, Tammy Faye Messner made her final televised appearance on *Larry King Live*, mere hours before she passed away from cancer.¹¹⁶ In a taped satellite interview from the day prior, Tammy Faye sat in her own home alongside her husband Roe, startlingly thin and speaking with a belabored, raspy voice. Despite her obvious suffering, Tammy Faye managed to infuse the interview with some humor, joking that she would like to be most remembered for her “eyelashes.” The front end of the interview was filled with viewer questions sent in via email.

¹¹³ “Episode Two,” *One Punk Under God*.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid*.

¹¹⁵ “Episode Four,” *One Punk Under God*.

¹¹⁶ For a transcript of Tammy Faye's final appearance on *Larry King Live*, see “Tammy Faye Battles Cancer: Aired July 19, 2007 - 21:00 ET,” *CNN*, <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0707/19/lkl.01.html>, accessed January 29, 2015. For video clips from the interview specifically relating to the issue of homosexuality, see “Tammy Faye Messner & Jay Baker,” YouTube video, 2:09, posted by “Gay Rights Watch,” July 20, 2007, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ySVCvOmQMC0>.

“Unlike many of your Christian contemporaries,” wrote one man, “you have been a very positive influence in the gay community. Why do you think you found it in your heart to love and accept us?” Tammy Faye positioned her stance as one of due reciprocity, replying that “it was the gay people that came to my rescue” after the PTL scandals, “and I will always love them for that.” Speaking alone with King after his mother’s interview, Jay Bakker framed Tammy Faye’s 1985 interview with AIDS-afflicted pastor Steve Pieters as a thumb in the face of conservative politicians: “I mean, Reagan didn’t even mention the word ‘AIDS’ during the ‘80s, and here my mom was talking about it on Christian television.” While he admitted that she “might not have agreed on everything with them (the Metropolitan Community Church),” Bakker praised his ailing mother for building a “bridge between Christianity and homosexuality.”

Conclusion

On July 21, 2007, a funeral service was held for Tammy Faye Messner, presided over by Randy McCain, friend of Jay Bakker and pastor of the aforementioned, gay-affirming Open Door Community Church in Sherwood, Arkansas. In recalling the service, McCain, who admitted that he “had never met Tammy Faye in person,” asserted that she had nevertheless proven a great comfort to him as he struggled to reconcile his Pentecostal faith with his homosexuality:

“During these dark nights of the soul there was a shining light piercing my darkness. It was the light emanating from the eyes of Tammy Faye. I would channel surf until I came across the PTL Club hosted by Tammy and her ex-husband, Jim Bakker. There was Tammy Faye, smiling even through her tears, looking it seemed, into my very soul. She would say in her cheery, upbeat, little girl voice, ‘God loves you! Just the way you are! He really does!’”¹¹⁷

Slyly referencing campy fans Fenton Bailey and Randy Barbato’s influential documentary, McCain perpetuated the film’s thesis that Tammy Faye was a proponent of an all-accepting Christianity. Writing in his 2011 book *Fall to Grace*, Jay Bakker painted a more nuanced, yet still laudatory, picture. “Mom was from a different generation, so she never came out and said

¹¹⁷ Randy McCain, “The Eyes of Tammy Faye,” *Open Door Community Church*, <http://www.sherwoodopendoor.org/the-eyes-of-tammy-faye/>, accessed January 29, 2015.

that homosexuality wasn't a sin or anything," he wrote, "But she was a gay ally, no doubt about it."¹¹⁸

As this chapter has argued, such flattering representations were largely outgrowths of the relationship between Tammy Faye and her second wave of campy fans, and instigated by Bailey and Barbato's film *The Eyes of Tammy Faye*. Through *TEOTF*, campy fans Bailey and Barbato transformed the former televangelist, who was widely understood as a symbol of greedy religious fakery and oppressive Christian conservatism, even among her first wave of campy fans, into an authentic, if endearingly wacky, Christian who preached tolerance and compassion towards sexual minorities. Thus, *TEOTF* evidenced a type of Recreational Christianity that carried a transformational power, and which set the stage for an unexpected career rehabilitation supported by campy fans who often identified with and praised her allegedly authentic Christianity, in contrast to the more explicitly unfaithful campy fans of the first wave. *TEOTF*'s glowing take on Tammy Faye was further perpetuated by reality television programs, and reinforced through her rebranding towards her campy fans, for whom she not only toyed with her established status as an amusingly excessive exemplar of ludicrous tragedy, but to whom she also ministered with resonant messages of struggle, perseverance, and divine love. Writing in a "thoughts and well wishes" forum on Tammy Faye's official webpage, which became a de facto memorial following her death, "Randy" from San Francisco expressed sentiments certainly shared by many of her other "gay fans": "You are the only evangelist that I've ever heard say that we're all God's children and God loves all of his children. You were nothing if not 'all inclusive' in your faith and love for ALL people."¹¹⁹

While Tammy Faye preached a message of divine love for all individuals, regardless of their sexual orientation, her rebranding as a progressive gay ally was paradoxical and politically problematic for a number of reasons. For one, she always considered homosexuality to be a potentially correctable sin, and marketed herself to Christian ministries supportive of, and involved in, controversial ex-gay efforts. She was also critical of public expressions of what she understood as sinful gay sexuality, preferring a neutered and domesticated, homosexuality, and

¹¹⁸ Jay Bakker and Martin Edlund, *Fall to Grace: A Revolution of God, Self and Society* (New York: FaithWords, 2011), 163.

¹¹⁹ See the forum entry at *TammyFaye.com*, <http://www.tammyfaye.com/wellwishes.asp?p=63>, accessed January 29, 2015.

opposed the prospect of gay marriage. Finally, her gay iconicity was built on a largely fictive history of interactions with a subgroup of gay men who resonated with her own brand – the medically suffering – and who she stigmatized as highly contagious and requiring divine protection in the case of casual physical contact. For the most part, the second wave of camp attention to Tammy Faye downplayed, neglected, and/or deliberately obscured such potential threats to her gay iconicity, highlighting the diminution of camp’s critical edge as it moved into mainstream American culture. Yet, not all of Tammy Faye’s latter campy fans viewed her through completely rose-colored glasses.

As discussed in the introduction to the previous chapter, drag queen Sharon Needles (born Aaron Coady) was the winner of the fourth season of *RuPaul’s Drag Race* (2012), which aired nearly five years after Tammy Faye’s death. Aside from his aforementioned arm tattoo of a tearful Tammy Faye, Coady signaled his campy fandom for the deceased televangelist during the program’s run by sporting a faux vintage “I Ran into Tammy Faye at the Mall” t-shirt, complete with a colorfully comedic smudge of cosmetics.¹²⁰ In interviews, Coady explained his devotion to Tammy Faye, emphasizing her entertaining spectacle and status as a survivor: “Growing up I had a huge infatuation with her. The makeup, the tears, the preaching, the scandal, the shoulder pads! My kinda lady. The ultimate survivor of adversity.”¹²¹ Elsewhere, he praised “her unconventional beauty, her ability to overcome adversity and overall insanity”; cited the attraction of “her naïve sense of humanity”; and emphasized her vulnerability: “I love Tammy Faye not for her strength, but most definitely for her flaws because I find beauty to be strongest in flawed areas.”¹²² What Coady did not identify with at all, however, was Tammy Faye’s Christian faith – “I don’t believe in God and I don’t believe in Satan or hell” – and his fandom was thus resolutely unfaithful.¹²³

¹²⁰ See “Glamazons vs. Champions,” *RuPaul’s Drag Race: Season 4* (2012; New York: Logo, 2012), DVD. “I Ran into Tammy Faye at the Mall” shirts were perhaps the most popular wearable comedic commentary on Tammy Faye during the late-1980s, and briefly appeared in *The Eyes of Tammy Faye*, DVD.

¹²¹ Christine Michele, “‘RuPaul’s Drag Race’: Meet the Queens – Sharon Needles,” *Socialite Life*, April 16, 2012, <http://socialitelife.com/rupauls-drag-race-meet-the-queens-sharon-needles-04-2012>, accessed January 29, 2015.

¹²² Brian Peterson, “Untucked With Brian: Exclusive Interview with Sharon Needles from RuPaul’s Drag Race, Season Four!,” *Seattle Gay Scene*, January 30, 2012, <http://www.seattlegayscene.com/2012/01/untucked-with-brian-exclusive-interview-with-sharon-needles-from-rupauls-drag-race-season-four.html>, accessed January 29, 2015; Christine Fitzgerald, “Socialite Life’s Interview With Sharon Needles – RuPaul’s Drag Race Season 4 Winner!,” May 2, 2012, <http://socialitelife.com/socialite-lifes-interview-with-sharon-needles-rupauls-drag-race-season-4-winner-05-2012>, accessed January 29, 2015.

¹²³ Fitzgerald, “Socialite Life’s Interview with Sharon Needles.”

For Coady, Tammy Faye was less inspiring as an allegedly authentic Christian than a relatable symbol of suffering of perseverance who was also a source of ironic, and even critical, humor. In contrast to most mainstream camp representations of Tammy Faye, therefore, Coady carried forward the evaluative edge of the first wave of campy fandom, as evidenced in a World of Wonder-sponsored online video produced for Halloween 2013, in which he expertly makes up WOW associate James St. James as his “favorite eighties monster.”¹²⁴ Professing his love for *The Eyes of Tammy Faye*, Needles riffs paraphrased lines from the movie – “I had enough Ativan in me to kill a large truck driver” – before taking a parodic shot at Tammy Faye’s compassionate, yet, it is implied, naively shallow approach to the American gay community’s most momentous historical challenge: “When life hands you AIDS, make lemonade!”

¹²⁴ “James St. James and Sharon Needles: Transformations – Halloween Edition,” YouTube video, 6:44, posted by “WOWPresents,” October 1, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_4FaV_4MhDc. For an interview with James St. James, his history as a New York “Club Kid” and associate of Michael Alig, and his work with World of Wonder, see James Nichols, “After Dark: Meet James St. James, Original Club Kid and Nightlife Icon,” *The Huffington Post*, September 15, 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/09/14/james-st-james-after-dark_n_5814144.html, accessed January 29, 2015.

Chapter 8 – *The Jim Bakker Foodbucket Fanpage: Online Antifandom, Satire, and Collaborative Investigation*

Introduction

“Those of us who do have a religion are sick of being saps for money-grubbing preachers and priests.” Thus spoke U.S. District Judge Robert Potter in sentencing televangelist Jim Bakker to forty-five years in prison for financial fraud in 1989.¹ Potter’s harsh statement, unbefitting an ideally impartial public official, was central to the subsequent reduction of Bakker’s sentence, on appeal, to eighteen years.² Yet, it also captured Bakker’s cultural resonance as a greedy and exploitative religious fake, whose “Praise the Lord” (PTL) ministry was a dazzling, high-tech means of fleecing the Lord’s sheep. By September 1992, a few months after his divorce from Tammy Faye, Bakker dramatically renounced the prosperity gospel, explaining in a public letter that intense Bible study while in prison had convinced him of its theological error: “There is no way if you take the whole counsel of God’s Word, that you can equate riches or material things as a sign of God’s blessing.”³ In December of that same year Bakker’s sentence was reduced again to eight years, and he was released on parole two years later.⁴

Bakker further attempted to rehabilitate his image with the 1996 autobiography *I Was Wrong*, the cover of which featured the disgraced preacher staring contritely into potential readers’ eyes. While he did not confess to the crimes for which he had been convicted, Bakker admitted that he had made many “mistakes,” reflecting failings endemic in society: “The temptation to have more, do more, earn more, build bigger, emphasize material things rather than spiritual.”⁵ Not everyone, however, was willing to forgive and forget. The *Associated Press*, for example, reported that during a signing of *I Was Wrong* at a Charlotte bookstore Bakker was

¹ Peter Applebome, “Bakker Sentenced to 45 Years for Fraud in his TV Ministry,” *The New York Times*, October 25, 1989.

² Art Harris, “Jim Bakker’s Sentence Overturned: Appeals Court Finds Judge’s Remarks Biased against Evangelist,” *The Washington Post*, February 13, 1991. For the role of Potter’s comment in the reduction of Bakker’s sentence, see Albert, *Jim Bakker: Miscarriage of Justice?*, 329-330.

³ “Jim and Tammy Bakker Finalize Divorce,” *Associated Press*; Ken Garfield, “Bakker Regrets Preaching That God Blesses the Rich,” *Buffalo News*, September 12, 1992.

⁴ “Court Lowers Sentence for Televangelist Jim Bakker,” *Associated Press*, December 22, 1992; Ken Garfield, “Free and Repented, Jim Bakker Hits Resurrection Road,” *The Charleston Gazette*, December 1, 1994.

⁵ Jim Bakker and Ken Abraham, *I Was Wrong* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1996), x.

sharply accosted: “‘The public has a right to know!’ shouted Marilyn Barnhardt. ‘What about all those people who gave you money? What do you have to say to them?’”⁶ By 1997, Bakker was mulling a possible return to television, albeit in a much different manner than the money-intensive PTL days. “I would love to minister on television again because I enjoy doing it,” Bakker said of his future aspirations, adding, “I do not want to do something that would cause me to have to just be a fund-raiser. I don’t want to do that.”⁷ Bakker’s anti-materialist worldview was further reinforced through his work with the Dream Center, an inner-city ministry in Los Angeles, where, as Charlise Lyles of the *Dayton Daily News* reported, he was “trying his best to live like Jesus,” devoting his time to helping the homeless and drug addicts while living “in a small dormitory room with only a bed, a bureau, a toilet and a face bowl.”⁸

It was while working at the Dream Center that Jim Bakker met Lori Graham, a youth counsellor from Arizona who would become his second wife. Blonde, petite, and bubbly, Lori was a ringer for Bakker’s first wife, Tammy Faye, and would likewise become an active partner in her husband’s ministry, which would undergo a significant transformation by the end of the 1990s.⁹ In line with broader evangelical attention to the end times in the lead up to the millennium, Bakker augmented his teachings against the prosperity gospel with eschatological and apocalyptic themes.¹⁰ Departing from his Assemblies of God heritage and its emphasis on the pre-tribulation rapture of the faithful, Bakker argued that Christians would face the terrible trials foretold in the Book of Revelations, and encouraged his readers to prepare themselves accordingly.¹¹ Bakker’s thinking on the subject was heavily influenced by prophetic preacher Rick Joyner of Morningstar Ministries, who contributed the foreword to Bakker’s 1998 book,

⁶ “Former Televangelist’s Book Signing Gets Off to a Rocky Start,” *Associated Press*, October 6, 1996.

⁷ Duncan Mansfield, “Fallen Evangelist Wants Back on TV, but no Fund-Raising,” *Associated Press*, August 13, 1997.

⁸ Charlise Lyles, “Bakker Tries Living Gospel,” *Dayton Daily News*, May 30, 1998.

⁹ See “Jim Bakker to Wed in September,” *Associated Press*, August 18, 1998; Hanna Rosin, “Jim Bakker’s Revival,” *The Washington Post*, August 11, 1999. For Lori Graham Bakker’s story, see *ibid.* and Connie Reece, *More Than I Could Ever Ask: The Story of a Woman, Broken and Defeated, Who Found That Dreams Really Do Come True* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000).

¹⁰ See, for example, Lisa McMinn, “Y2K, The Apocalypse and Evangelical Christianity: The Role of Eschatological Belief in Church Responses,” *Sociology of Religion* 62, no. 2 (2001): 205-220; Douglas E. Cowan, “Confronting the Failed Failure: Y2K and Evangelical Eschatology in Light of the Passed Millennium,” *Nova Religio* 7, no. 2 (2003): 71-85.

¹¹ For the Assemblies of God theological position on rapture, see Blumhofer, *Restoring the Faith*, 15-19. For Bakker’s change of thinking on the subject, see Jim Bakker and Ken Abraham, *Prosperity and the Coming Apocalypse* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), 7.

Prosperity and the Coming Apocalypse.¹² Criticizing PTL as a misrepresentation of “real Christianity,” Joyner lauded Bakker’s newfound attacks against what the latter labelled “materialistic Christianity,” and praised his focus on the spiritual side of life, and the imminent end of days.¹³ Bakker himself decried the “Disneyland gospel” of PTL and his own “materialistic theology,” asserting that he had become one of those “prophecy teachers” who had occasionally appeared on PTL, some of whom, he confessed, he had listened to “with amusement” as they warned of impending famine, technology meltdowns, and meteor crashes.¹⁴

Despite Jim Bakker’s professed shedding of his old materialistic self, he would come to fold his new theology into a lucrative media ministry featuring hard-sell disaster preparedness and flashy Christian entertainment. In 2002 Jim and Lori Bakker, along with a set of five siblings whom they had gained custody of, moved to Branson, Missouri, a Mecca of evangelical religious tourism.¹⁵ Amidst reports that the Internal Revenue Service was seeking millions in unpaid taxes from Jim and Tammy Faye, Jim and Lori partnered with former PTL supporter Jerry Crawford to open a restaurant/television studio from which they broadcast “The New Jim Bakker Show” via satellite, cable, and online streaming video.¹⁶ A relatively low-budget affair, “The New Jim Bakker Show” hearkened back to the flashier days of PTL with inspirational messages, wholesome Christian entertainment, and the heavy-handed hawking of “love gifts” in exchange for donations. Jim Bakker’s apparent return to religious profiteering was met with skepticism, amusement, and laments from various observers. David Osborne of the UK newspaper *The Independent* suggested that Bakker had “made a swift journey from shamed to shameless,” and mocked those faithful fans, some of whom remained loyal even after having lost money in the

¹² For information on Rick Joyner and Morningstar Ministries, see the ministry’s website: <http://www.morningstarministries.org/>, accessed January 29, 2015.

¹³ Rick Joyner, “Forward,” in Bakker and Abraham, *ix*. For “materialistic Christianity,” see Bakker and Abraham, *Prosperity and the Coming Apocalypse*, 38.

¹⁴ Bakker and Abraham, *Prosperity and the Coming Apocalypse* 5, 12, 117.

¹⁵ For Branson as a site of evangelical tourism and the Bakkers’ relocation there, see Aaron K. Ketchell, *Holy Hills of the Ozarks: Religion and Tourism in Branson, Missouri* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), *xii-xiii, xxiii, xxxiii, 72-73, 214*. The children are mentioned in Susan Harrison Wolfiss, “Catching Up With Jim Bakker, 20 Years Later,” in Bruce Tomaso, “Whatever Happened to Jim Bakker?,” *The Texas Faith Blog – The Dallas Morning News*, May 7, 2007, <http://religionblog.dallasnews.com/2007/05/whatever-happened-to-jim-bakke.html/>, accessed January 29, 2015.

¹⁶ “IRS Says Jim Bakker and Tammy Faye Messner Still Owe \$3 Million,” *Associated Press*, October 4, 2002; David Osborne, “Bakker’s Back (Who Says There Are No Second Acts in American Lives?),” *The Independent* (UK), June 15, 2003; Bill Smith, “Bakker Returns to TV Pulpit in Branson, Mo.,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, November 19, 2003.

Heritage USA debacle, who came to Branson to see their spiritual hero while “shoveling down barbecued ribs and eight-inch-high chocolate gateaux.”¹⁷ Writing in 2004, televangelism scholar Stephen Winzenburg complained that Bakker had “returned to his old bad habits,” citing specifically his fundraising “gimmicks,” such as “selling little crystal crosses for \$25,” and noted that the televangelist’s new ministry had not furnished him with a requested financial statement.¹⁸

“The New Jim Bakker Show” quickly met with considerable success, and the ministry was buzzing when Jay Bakker arrived with *One Punk Under God’s* (2006) cameras for an awkward family reunion, marked by friction with his father over his move into a gay-affirming stance.¹⁹ During the visit, Jay agreed to appear as a guest on his father’s program, resulting in a clash of old-school televangelism and wary, punk-influenced faith, with Jay appearing distinctly uncomfortable sitting at a table covered with cheap emergency flashlight/radios, offered in exchange for love gifts. In 2008 Jim and Lori, again in partnership with Jerry Crawford, relocated their ministry to Blue Eye, Missouri, on the outskirts of Branson, where they set about building “Morningside,” a multi-acre Christian retreat that was essentially Heritage USA writ-small. Indeed, as Todd Frankel of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* noted during a visit, the ministry’s greeter even mistakenly referred to Morningside as “Heritage” when welcoming visitors.²⁰ In the opinion of journalist Phil Latham, Bakker’s new ministry was laughably ludicrous, featuring a new spin on the religious hucksterism which had landed him in jail in the first place. Simultaneously amusing and egregious, according to Latham, was the cavalcade of “survivalist products” marketed as “love gifts,” ranging from buckets of dehydrated foodstuffs to a “‘Walk in the Light’ kinetic flashlight,” which, as Latham wrote, was “imprinted with Scripture references,” and which, he pointed out, was available cheaper elsewhere, without the Bible message. “I’d suggest you buy a marker for a couple of bucks and write your own Scriptures on the side,” he jested, “You could save about \$30 doing that.”²¹

¹⁷ Osborne, “Bakker’s Back.”

¹⁸ Stephen Winzenburg, “TV Ministries Use of Air Time, Fall 2004,” http://faculty.gvc.edu/swinzenburg/tv_ministries_study.pdf, accessed December 14, 2014, 12.

¹⁹ See “Televangelist Flattered by Positive Response in Branson,” *Associated Press*, April 14, 2003. For Jay Bakker’s visit with his father, see “Episode Three,” *One Punk Under God*. For Jay Bakker’s eventual decision to move his own church, Revolution, towards a gay-affirming stance, see the previous chapter.

²⁰ See Todd C. Frankel, “Jim Bakker Makes Triumphant Return,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, February 22, 2008.

²¹ Phil Latham, “He’s Back: Bakker Moves to Branson to Peddle his Wares,” *Cox News Service*, July 29, 2009.

Sharing Latham's amused incredulity was a group of dedicated viewers representing a final form of unfaithful televangelical fandom to be examined in this dissertation: Jim Bakker antifans. In contrast to ironic fans of Robert Tilton and campy fans of Bakker's first wife, Tammy Faye, these antifans did not approach Bakker with complex mixtures of genuine appreciation and distanced irony. Instead, Bakker's antifans understood the televangelist as a dangerous, exploitative, and even evil religious fake, and they desired nothing less than the end of his ministry, despite their own fixations on his programming. Although the desired outcome of these antifans was staunchly serious, their tactics were often decidedly less so, and they deployed satire, parody, and irony as powerful comedic weapons with which to attack Bakker's perceived charlatanism, capitalizing on the heightened social-networking, information-sharing, and collaborative affordances of online communication.

This chapter focuses on a short-lived, yet vibrant and impactful, online network of Jim Bakker antifans centered on *The Jim Bakker Foodbucket Fanpage (TJBFF)*, a blog founded by one "Ron Johnson" in 2011.²² An avowed atheist, Johnson became simultaneously obsessed and angry with what he viewed as Bakker's televised hucksterism, and originally founded his blog as a means of humorously venting his frustrations. A blend of satirical show synopses, cogent questions, and direct attacks, Ron's blog succeeded in attracting a core coterie of readers/contributors who would become a thriving online antifan community. While *TJBFF*, which only had a year-long run, did not achieve its expressed goal of having Jim Bakker removed from the airwaves, the blog functioned as a well-travelled clearinghouse for information and jokes concerning Bakker's shaky sincerity and dubious religious authenticity, suggested new possibilities for collaborative investigations of suspicious televangelists in the age of the Internet, and succeeded in provoking reactions from Bakker's ministry, which fought to prevent the blog's satire from gaining a foothold on the video-sharing site YouTube.

Antifandom, Blogs, and *The Jim Bakker Foodbucket Fanpage*

In a 2008 posting to the mystery author blog "Murderous Musings," writer Ben Small attempted to explain his attraction to Jim Bakker's latest television venture. "Have you ever been

²² This interviewee-selected pseudonym will be retained to help protect his identity.

addicted to a program you hate?” Small asked, “I know, that makes no sense.”²³ Small admitted that he had previously been “addicted to the PTL Club” during its heyday, and confessed that he not only watched Bakker’s new show, but even recorded it for later viewing. “Bakker is so outrageous, I just cannot turn him off,” he wrote, adding that the televangelist’s programming elicited strong negative emotions: “So I watch, angry, cussing, seething inside at all the old people – the group Jim’s always victimized – who fall for his blather.” In Small’s opinion, Bakker had constructed a “façade of ministry” to cover a “sleazy sales pitch” – a deceptive, pseudo-religious spectacle intended to hawk condominiums, “cheap Bibles, tiny swords, Jesus pictures, ‘partnerships’ and CDs at inflated ‘Love Gift’ prices.” At the same time that the sordid actions of the supposed spiritual crook enraged him, however, Small still managed to derive considerable ironic entertainment from Bakker’s programming: “This is great soap opera.”

Ben Small’s reported experience with Jim Bakker’s broadcasts, combining obsession, amusement, and anger, is indicative of a cultural phenomenon which media and cultural scholar Jonathan Gray has labelled “antifandom”: the “active or vocal dislike or hate of a given text, personality, or genre.”²⁴ As faithful “fans’ Other,” antifans find meaning in, are emotionally involved with, and often construct interpersonal networks and secondary products related to cultural commodities which they despise but do not dismiss.²⁵ Online communication has opened up increased opportunities for antifan activity, and, according to Gray, one of the key motivators of such activity is moral outrage. For example, Gray has examined online antifan postings related to Omarosa Manigault-Stallworth, a contestant on the business-themed reality program *The Apprentice*, and a celebrity who became “an odious moral text to many” for her seemingly unethical behavior. Concerns among “Omarosa’s antifan gathering” about her alleged lack of “integrity or decency” reached such a height that a selection of these posters organized a “letter-writing campaign” in an attempt to prevent the cosmetics company Clairol from hiring her as a spokeswoman. “I am so tired,” one poster complained, “of people like that getting money for

²³ Ben Small, “Addicted to Jim,” *Murderous Musings*, November 16, 2008, <http://murderousmusings.blogspot.ca/2008/11/addicted-to-jim.html>, accessed January 29, 2015.

²⁴ Jonathan Gray, “Antifandom and the Moral Text,” 847.

²⁵ Jonathan Gray, “New Audiences, New Textualities: Anti-fans and Non-fans,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 6, no. 1 (2003): 70-74.

doing something bad.”” Another poster went even further: ““I found her actions so out of keeping with even the minimum standard of behavior I expect from a human.””²⁶

Self-admittedly addicted to the program of a religious celebrity whom he despised, Ben Small was a Jim Bakker antifan, and his concerns about the preacher’s allegedly exploitative profiteering underscored the moral dimensions of his antifandom. Yet, Small’s televangelical antifandom also carried a distinct religious element, extending beyond Gray’s straightforward linking of religion with morality.²⁷ According to Small, Bakker was not only a “fraudulent” huckster in general, he was a *religious* fake in particular, whose actions contradicted how a man of God, in his opinion, should act. “If there’s any mention of the Bible or Jesus at all,” Small wrote disapprovingly, “it’s usually connected to a pitch for money.”²⁸ Thus, televangelical antifandoms, much like ironic and campy fandoms which have surrounded suspicious televangelists, can become involved in negotiations regarding religious authenticity, albeit generally in a much more satirical and combative manner. While Brian Small provides an intriguing example of an individual Jim Bakker antifan, a commenter who posted below his blog entry leads the way to the examination of a bustling Bakker antifan network. “Much like you,” the commenter wrote, “I can’t take my eyes off Jim Bakker and all his sleazy pals. In fact, I just started my own weekly coverage of the shenanigans occurring on The Jim Bakker Show in case anyone here is interested: The Jim Bakker Foodbucket Fanpage.”²⁹

At the time of our initial interview in January 2012, Ron Johnson was a thirty-four year old aerospace technician living in southern California.³⁰ Ron recalled that he “grew up in a Pentecostal family,” and that his maternal grandmother’s husband had “founded a Pentecostal church in Long Beach, California,” where, at some point during the 1950s, “he had a brain aneurysm at the pulpit and died,” a dramatic event which “seemed obviously to affect my aunts and uncles.” One of Ron’s uncles, also a Pentecostal pastor, took over the church, which Ron attended with his family during his youth. Even as “a kid,” however, Ron had many questions which were not met with satisfactory answers: “Things like, ‘Why aren’t there dinosaurs in the

²⁶ Gray, “Antifandom and the Moral Text,” 849-850.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 849.

²⁸ Small, “Addicted to Jim.”

²⁹ “Daniel,” June 3, 2011 (11:50 am), comment on Brian Small, “Addicted to Jim.”

³⁰ Ron Johnson, Skype interview by author, January 20, 2012.

Bible’?” Ron framed such queries as early signposts on his gradual journey away from religion, and by the age of “twenty or twenty-one,” he had largely come to the conclusion that “religion in general” was “bullshit.” While he retained a vague “agnosticism” for some years, at the age of “twenty-three or twenty-four” Ron underwent what he described as an “epiphany,” determining that religion represented “wishful thinking” with “no evidence for it.”³¹ This event capped off Ron’s “secular exit” from religion, and sparked his affiliation with atheism.³² “I can waste my time trying to please some unknown person, unknown entity,” Ron remembered thinking at the time, “or I can just look at my life, be a good guy, and what the hell.”³³ Ron’s self-professed ideal of being a “good guy” points to his sharp sense of personal ethics – “I’m fairly principled” – a personal attribute which would prove central to his development as an antifan of Jim Bakker.³⁴

From his early years, Ron’s family was an influential “interpretive community” in which big-name televangelists were read as ridiculously amusing religious fakes.³⁵ “I grew up with my dad and one of my uncles, watching these guys,” Ron explained, “Jan and Paul Crouch...Tilton...they’re calling it the ‘Comedy Channel’ and kind of laughing at stuff.” As Ron explained, the comedic value of such televangelists did not lie in the absurdity of religion per se, as the viewers themselves “were Christian,” but stemmed from their purportedly spurious theologies and outrageous antics, such as outbursts of glossolalia. In sum, the viewing of televangelism as unintentional comedy was reportedly a “pretty normal” experience for Ron growing up, and a tradition which he would rekindle as an adult. At the time of our interview, Ron was sharing a “big house” with his Thai Buddhist wife and his parents, who, although divorced, cohabited amicably. His return to ironic Christian television viewing began with “Pastor Greg,” an evangelical sitcom which he described as “funny because it was so bad,” yet also “fucking awful” – even borderline “unwatchable.”³⁶ While he shared his paracinematic

³¹ Ron Johnson, Skype interview by author, January 20, 2012.

³² For “secular exit” as a type of deconversion, see Streib et al., *Deconversion*, 128, 136.

³³ Ron Johnson, Skype interview by author, January 20, 2012.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ For the concept of “interpretive communities,” see Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980).

³⁶ An interview with Greg Robbins, the creator and star of “Pastor Greg,” can be found at “What’s So Funny about a Christian Sitcom?,” *ABC News*, October 12, 2005, <http://abcnews.go.com/GMA/story?id=1201119>, accessed January 29, 2015. For a clip of the program, see “TV Series – ‘Pastor Greg’,” YouTube video, 7:01, posted by “FreedomGRP’s channel,” January 17, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b9a0JSHTK-E>.

pleasures from “Pastor Greg” with a fellow atheist cousin, his wife was less than engaged with the program, her Buddhist background rendering it “nonsense,” and for whom the show was less ironically amusing than mind-numbingly “boring.”³⁷

Ron serendipitously found his family a more entertaining Christian television option when setting up his digital video recorder to capture an episode of “Pastor Greg”: “I must have stumbled on ‘The Jim Bakker Show’ . . . and I recorded it . . . I think I was probably saying to myself, ‘Let’s see what Jim Bakker’s up to.’” The potential comedy value of the program was revealed early on, when Ron witnessed Kevin Shorey, the show’s overweight, perpetually peppy, and Caucasian musical director, trying his hand at “rapping.”³⁸ “I just . . . I couldn’t believe what I was seeing,” Ron laughingly recalled during our interview. After introducing his family to the show, they collectively embarked on a viewing ritual which lasted for “months.” “It’d be like a Sunday evening (laughter) block of time where we’d sit there,” Ron explained, “I’d tell my mom or dad, ‘Hey, you want to watch Bakker?’ And they’d say ‘Yeah,’ and we’d get cups of coffee and sit and watch the guy (laughter).” Ron’s wife would also often join in, and the family would both laugh at Bakker’s absurdity, as well as bemoan the “shenanigans going on” at Morningside: “It would be laughing and groaning, while at the same time pointing out how awful, how obvious some of the things he’s saying that were all about manipulation and faking.”³⁹

Ron’s status as a producer of his own Bakker-related media can be traced back to an, ultimately unrealized, plan to “collaborate” on a Bakker-themed blog with his mother and uncle, both of whom had recently retired. Finding that he was the only one willing to contribute to the project, Ron set out on his own, his second stab at online publishing after a sporadically updated, and largely untraveled, *Diary of an Atheist* blog, which he himself critiqued as thematically scattered and “sort of dry.”⁴⁰ Throughout its run *Diary of an Atheist* hinted at Ron’s subsequent, and markedly more successful, online venture. For example, in a comment to his own 2008 blog post in which he humorously challenged Christians who believed that Jesus would return in their lifetime to sign over their earthly assets to himself as a sign of faith, Ron proposed Jim Bakker as

³⁷ Ron Johnson, Skype interview by author, January 20, 2012.

³⁸ Information on Kevin Shorey can be found at his own ministry’s website; see *Kevin Shorey Ministries*, <http://www.kevinshorey.com/>, accessed January 29, 2015.

³⁹ Ron Johnson, Skype interview by author, January 20, 2012.

⁴⁰ Ron Johnson, Skype interview by author, January 20, 2012; *Diary of an Atheist*, <http://diaryofanatheist.blogspot.ca>, accessed January 29, 2015.

a potential candidate: “Jim Bakker preaches every morning that Jesus will be here soon. Surely ol’ Jim would be more than willing to put his [congregation’s] money where his mouth is, and show up this wicked, misguided atheist?”⁴¹ In a November 28, 2009 posting, Ron publicly admitted to viewing Bakker ironically: “I sometimes watch Bakker for laughs on the weekend; I can’t figure out if the guy looks more like Master Yoda or the Grinch.” On June 18, 2011, Ron made his final posting to “Diary of an Atheist,” tellingly titled “I’ve been consumed by The Jim Bakker Show,” in which he encouraged readers to visit his new blog.⁴²

The Jim Bakker Foodbucket Fanpage debuted on May 9, 2011, and featured a URL address highlighting its critical nature: www.jimbakker666.blogspot.com. “Jim Bakker, convicted felon and purported man of Christ, continues fleecing the faithful each weekday at 7am through The Jim Bakker Show at Morningside church,” Ron wrote in the page’s description area, “I blog about it here.” Ron added that the blog offered “commentary, opinion and satire on The Jim Bakker show.”⁴³ As Gray has pointed out, irreverence and mockery are common hallmarks of antifan discourse, and Ron’s satire was intended to encourage Bakker’s abdication or amelioration, as well as to warn others away from the alleged charlatan.⁴⁴ Ron went so far as to claim during our initial interview that if Bakker had confessed to his wrongdoings and ceased his shady activities, he would have immediately discontinued his blog: “If Bakker renounced what he does tomorrow, and said, ‘You know what, I’ve done wrong, I’m never doing it again,’ I would never have another blog post.” Ron framed the issue as purely one of ethics, and revealed that his initial motivation “was to just flat out expose the guy, it was the frustration coming through at how this guy can make a living bullshitting people.” While his blog contained heavy doses of humor from its initial posting, he reported that he progressively amplified the site’s

⁴¹ “JesusLOL,” January 7, 2009 (12:09 pm), comment on Ron Johnson, “Is Jesus Coming Back?,” *Diary of an Atheist*, October 1, 2008, <http://diaryofanatheist.blogspot.ca/2008/10/is-jesus-coming-back-in-your-lifetime.html>, accessed January 29, 2015.

⁴² Ron Johnson, “I’ve Been Consumed by The Jim Bakker Show,” *Diary of an Atheist*, June 18, 2011, http://diaryofanatheist.blogspot.ca/2011_06_01_archive.html, accessed January 29, 2015.

⁴³ See the header for *The Jim Bakker Foodbucket Fanpage*, <http://www.jimbakker666.blogspot.ca/>, accessed January 29, 2015.

⁴⁴ For satire’s potential as a comedic “weapon,” see Berger, *Redeeming Laughter*, 157-173. For humor as a constituent element of much antifan activity, see Gray, “Antifandom and the Moral Text,” 846. For the impetus of antifans to warn others about examples of immorality, see *ibid.*, 848.

comedy when it became clear that it was attracting a readership: “I wouldn’t say it’s equal, I still number one want to expose the guy, but I like making people laugh.”⁴⁵

What Ron denied during our interview was that his blog was concerned with questions of religion: “when I talk about Bakker, religion has nothing to do with it.” “I’m not ripping Bakker because he’s a Christian,” he explained further, “I’m doing it because he’s a fraud.”⁴⁶ Yet, through his online attacks against Bakker, a purported *religious* fake, Ron also conveyed and encouraged normative understandings of authentic Christianity, and therefore engaged in what might be thought of as religiously “prophetic” satire.⁴⁷ As with many of the unfaithful fans of televangelists discussed to this point, it was Bakker’s commercialized gospel, combined with his associated, and alleged, duplicity which Ron understood as the key indicators of his status as a false Christian. While Ron speculated that Bakker may have been sincere in his early preaching days, and was thus “really a Christian, so to speak,” he suggested that Bakker had since “got that taste of money in his mouth, and that’s all he’s going for.”⁴⁸ The title of Ron’s blog targeted the televangelist’s hawking of large plastic “food buckets” filled with dehydrated victuals, which Ron saw as vivid symbols of not only Bakker’s religiously inauthentic combination of Christianity and commerce, but also his deceptive marketing techniques.⁴⁹ In regards to the latter, Ron mocked claims by Bakker that such foodstuffs, once reconstituted, were indistinguishable from fine fare, and he directed readers to online outlets where equivalent food buckets, as well as other products advertised on Bakker’s programs, could be purchased more cheaply, thereby putting the lie to Bakker’s constant reassurances of value.⁵⁰

As a form of independent self-publishing, online blogs have often been compared to analog zines, and the construction of *The Jim Bakker Foodbucket Fanpage* might therefore be profitably discussed in comparison with that of Brother Randall’s “Robert Tilton Fan Club

⁴⁵ Ron Johnson, Skype interview by author, January 20, 2012.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ There has been considerable work on religiously “prophetic” satire evidenced in the prophetic writings of the Hebrew Bible, in particular; see, for example, Thomas Jemielity, *Satire and the Hebrew Prophets* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992).

⁴⁸ Ron Johnson, Skype interview by author, January 20, 2012.

⁴⁹ For the “food buckets” marketed by the ministry as love gifts, see “Food,” *The Jim Bakker Show*, <http://jimbakkershow.com/lovegifts/food.html>, accessed January 29, 2015.

⁵⁰ Ron’s mockery of Bakker’s marketing tactics related to the dehydrated foodstuffs can be found in his post “Bakker spoon-feeds inbreds, wows them with fire – Part 2,” *The Jim Bakker Foodbucket Fanpage*, November 7, 2011, <http://jimbakker666.blogspot.ca/2011/11/bakker-spoon-feeds-inbreds-wows-them.html>, accessed January 29, 2015. Links to cheaper, equivalent products can be found on the right hand side of the posting.

(RTFC) Newsletter” and *Snake Oil* zine.⁵¹ Economically, Brother Randall’s publications required initial outlays of cash for printing costs – financial risks accompanied by hopes of establishing a paying audience. In contrast, Ron incurred no direct financial costs establishing his blog, which he posted to the free site *Blogger*, and he accordingly expected no financial returns, or even much of a readership. Indeed, he reported during our interview that he was “shocked” that his blog had garnered any attention at all.⁵² *TJBFF* was quite time-consuming, however, with each individual posting – forty-five across the blog’s run – requiring hours of work “across multiple days.”⁵³ For Ron, who was dissatisfied with his “boring” career as an electronics technician, the blog became a satisfying creative outlet, and he went so far as to describe his extensive work on *TJBFF* as his “first job.”⁵⁴ The lack of economic constraints also contributed to Ron’s ability to publish more frequently than Brother Randall, who, at most, offered the RTFC newsletter on a bi-monthly basis, resulting in a considerable time lag between Tilton-related news and broadcasts and their discussion in his publications. At his own height, Ron published nine posts in a single month, not quite achieving “just-in-time fandom,” but meaning that the gap between Bakker’s broadcasts and his own contributions was often measured in days, rather than weeks or months.⁵⁵ Moreover, readers of Ron’s blog, unlike Brother Randall’s publications, could easily catch up on missed episodes by visiting Bakker’s official ministry website, where previous programs were digitally archived and publicly accessible, ostensibly for the ministry’s faithful fans.⁵⁶

Another significant difference between Ron and Brother Randall’s publishing efforts involves the use of broadcast images. According to Brother Randall, incorporating video stills into his publications was a laborious process, requiring the aid of a friend with a linked Macintosh computer and VCR, as well as the image editing software Photoshop. After being captured, images were imported into the publishing software Quark, laid out with the text, and

⁵¹ For points of comparison between blogs and zines, see Alison Piepmeier, *Girl Zines: Making Media, Doing Feminism* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 13.

⁵² Ron Johnson, Skype interview by author, January 20, 2012.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Ron published nine posts in the first month of the blog’s history, in May 2011; see *The Jim Bakker Foodbucket Fanpage*, http://jimbakker666.blogspot.ca/2011_05_01_archive.html, accessed January 29, 2015. For “just-in-time fandom” as an online fan phenomenon, see Hills, *Fan Cultures*, 140-141.

⁵⁶ “Video Archives,” *The Jim Bakker Show*, <http://jimbakkershow.com/video/>, accessed January 29, 2015.

then finally printed and photocopied.⁵⁷ Accordingly, Brother Randall's publications relied much more on textual information to convey their ironic fan stance. For Ron, inserting such images into his blog was a much simpler affair. After pausing his digital video recorder at an appropriate spot, he would take a picture of his television screen with a handheld digital camera and then upload the image to his computer. After cropping the image using a free software program, Ron added an explanatory and/or satirical caption and inserted it into his blog, wrapping each post's text around the included images. The ease of appropriating video stills from Bakker's program resulted in numerous captioned images being included in every blog post, with Ron going so far as to describe these images as the "primary engine of my blog."⁵⁸

Insights into the content and style of *The Jim Bakker Foodbucket Fanpage* can be gleaned through the examination of two interrelated postings dating to February 10 and 12, 2012, covering "The Jim Bakker Show's" 2000th episode, which was broadcast the week prior.⁵⁹ Following an opening montage of clips from across the program's history, the episode features Jim and Lori Bakker, flanked by Kevin Shorey and an assortment of students from "Master's Media," Morningside's youth ministry and media training program, cheerfully greeting viewers from a balloon-filled "Grace Street" – Morningside's relatively diminutive answer to Heritage USA's "Main Street" indoor streetscape/shopping center.⁶⁰ "And they said we couldn't come back" announces a victorious Jim, clad in a striped dress shirt, hooded grey overcoat, and blue baseball cap, "But God said, 'You're coming back!'" "Amen," assents his wife Lori, dressed in red. "So this is an amazing, amazing, amazing, amazing, amazing, amazing day," a chipper Jim continues, "the 2000th show. But also, this is the day (chuckling)...that we have finally brought Jesus into this ministry." As his associates smile and laugh at his joke, Jim explains that he is

⁵⁷ Email from Brother Randall, February 28, 2014.

⁵⁸ Ron Johnson, Skype interview by author, January 20, 2012.

⁵⁹ The archived episode, which originally aired on February 3, 2012, can be found at, "2000th Show Celebration," Streaming video, 58:32, *The Jim Bakker Show*, <http://jimbakkershow.com/video/show-2008/>, accessed January 29, 2015. Ron's posts related to the episode can be found at "Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th show with Idol Worship – part one," *The Jim Bakker Foodbucket Fanpage*, February 10, 2012, <http://jimbakker666.blogspot.ca/2012/02/jim-bakker-celebrates-2000th-show-with.html>, accessed January 29, 2015; and "Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th episode with Idol Worship, part two," *The Jim Bakker Foodbucket Fanpage*, February 12, 2012, <http://jimbakker666.blogspot.ca/2012/02/jim-bakker-celebrates-2000th-episode.html>, accessed January 29, 2015. For information on the "Master's Media" program, see *Morningside Master's Media*, <http://morningsidemastersmedia.com/>, accessed January 29, 2015.

⁶⁰ On Heritage USA's "Main Street," and its debt to Disneyland's "Main Street USA," see Peter S. Hawkins, "American Heritage," in *One Nation Under God?: Religion and American Culture*, eds. Marjorie Garber and Rebecca L. Walkowitz (New York: Routledge, 1999), 268-269.

actually referring to a “statue of Jesus,” which Morningside had acquired to mark the ministry’s milestone and to adorn Grace Street. The statue was a fifteen-foot high, marble copy of Danish sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen’s (1770-1844) “Christus,” a representation of the resurrected Christ best known for its contemporary association with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints.⁶¹ Indeed, while Jim claimed during the program that he had been entranced by another copy of the statue which he saw in an unspecified “cathedral,” an aired photograph of him and Lori standing in front of the copy reveals that it was actually located at a visitor’s center at the LDS church’s “Temple Square” in Salt Lake City, Utah – a fact likely intentionally obscured due to the potential antipathy of viewers towards the Mormon faith.⁶²

Enrobed, eyes downcast, and with arms outstretched, the gleaming white statue stands on a prominent pedestal, looking down on the backs of the audience members seated at their tables. An extended sentimental montage follows, documenting the statue’s conception, construction, delivery, installation, and dedication. During the montage, Jim explains via voiceover that all members of the “I Care Club” – those supporters who contribute one-thousand dollars to support the construction of “Lori’s House,” a proposed home at Morningside for unwed mothers, and “Stella’s House,” a residence for female refugees of human-trafficking in Moldova – will have their names engraved on a plaque located on the statue’s pedestal. Both the establishment of an exclusive club and the linking of donations with exciting construction projects were classic, and proven, methods of televangelical fundraising.⁶³ How much donated money actually went to the advertised housing projects, however, is unclear, as the online fine print for the “I Care” program indicated that donations could also be put to general broadcasting and youth training costs.⁶⁴ Jim also pitches a ten-inch high replica of the statue for a one-hundred dollar love gift, or three

⁶¹ See Matthew O. Richardson, “Bertel Thorvaldsen’s “Christus”: A Mormon Icon,” *Journal of Mormon History*, 29 no.2 (2003): 67-100.

⁶² The picture of Jim and Lori standing in front of the statue appears around the 19:56 mark of “2000th Show Celebration.” The setting of the statue appears identical to pictures of the “Christus” copy in “Temple Square”; see “Temple Square North Visitors’ Center,” *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints*, <https://www.lds.org/locations/temple-square-north-visitors-center#d>, accessed January 29, 2015. For the complicated relationship between evangelical Christianity and Mormonism in 2012, a year which saw Republican Mormon Mitt Romney run for the American Presidency, earning both criticism and support from evangelicals, see J.B. Haws, *The Mormon Image in the American Mind: Fifty Years of Public Perception* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 265-268.

⁶³ See Bruce, *Pray TV*, 140-149.

⁶⁴ “I Care Telethon,” *The Jim Bakker Show*, June 5, 2011, <http://jimbakkershow.com/news/i-care-telethon/>, accessed January 29, 2015.

statues for two-hundred dollars – all part of the ministry’s “Crazy about Jesus Offer.” “It’s Easter coming up,” Jim explains, “And what better Easter gift than the resurrected Christ?” Finally, as an added incentive for those looking to join the one-thousand dollar “I Care Club,” Jim promises to include a larger, eighteen-inch high replica. “Isn’t it beautiful?” Jim asks, as his wife Lori and Kevin Shorey hold up one of the weighty statues for the cameras. After Shorey offers a song, and Bakker signs off with his signature closing line – “God loves you, he really does” – the program ends with a three-minute infomercial for food buckets and emergency fuel.⁶⁵

Ron’s posts on the episode – “Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th show with Idol Worship” (parts one and two) – combined satirical synopsis, absurd comedy constructions, and theological and ethical criticisms. As the titles of the posts suggest, Ron’s central argument was that the installation of the Jesus statue at Morningside was an affront to authentic Christianity, and, much like other previously discussed unfaithful fans of televangelists, he evaluated the situation against the Bible: “always the supreme evangelical court of appeal.”⁶⁶ “I might cite scripture,” Ron explained, “but I don’t do it in the sense that I’m preaching...I’ll point out the fallacies of Bakker’s actions when compared to the Bible.”⁶⁷ At the time of our initial interview, Ron was in the process of writing his posts on Bakker’s 2000th show, and he referenced Biblical narrative as evidence for the religious inauthenticity of the statue spectacle. “I don’t know if it was Deuteronomy or what book it is,” he began, before paraphrasing an account from the book of Exodus:

“There were people who were worshipping the Golden Calf, and they were cursed by God. The Golden Calf was this giant gold statue that the priests, I believe, were saying, ‘This represents God,’ and it obviously didn’t. So, Bakker’s got the (laughter)...he’s got the Golden Calf, and these followers can’t see it...They don’t wanna see it...who knows.”⁶⁸

According to Ron, Bakker’s fundraising gimmick was a spiritually brazen act, particularly in the context of the televangelist’s own professed religious framework. “You’ve gotta have a lot of

⁶⁵ For Bakker’s signature sign-off line, see Hawkins, *American Heritage*, 266.

⁶⁶ David W. Bebbington, *The Dominance of Evangelicalism: The Age of Spurgeon and Moody* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 23.

⁶⁷ Ron Johnson, Skype interview by author, January 20, 2012.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* For the origin story of the “Golden Calf,” see Exodus 32.

balls,” he suggested, “If you believe in Christianity and salvation and these things, you gotta have a lot of balls to make a gigantic statue of Jesus and bring it into your village.”⁶⁹ In addition to labelling the statue “Jim Bakker’s Golden Calf,” and referencing the Decalogue – “Does Jim not know the Commandment prohibiting him from making a false idol?” – Ron mockingly beseeched “Pastor Bakker” in his first post to consider “what happens next” in the Biblical tale “of a dead...idol being lifted up for worship.” In sum, Ron vehemently argued that the statue was “not Jesus,” but rather “an idol you purchased to use as an attraction for inbreds worldwide, so that they may arrive at your strange village to adore it and possibly buy a condo.”⁷⁰

In addition to such direct, biblically grounded satire, Ron also repackaged “The Jim Bakker Show” as though it was a bizarre situation comedy, or film, of his own design, a type of irreverent antifan fiction that, in its subversive intent, was akin to much slash fan fiction, and which also hearkened to *The American Music Show*’s performative play with Jim’s ex-wife, Tammy Faye.⁷¹ Although he was not sure whether he had “planned” to adopt this style, Ron acknowledged that it “helps me out when I’m writing ‘cause I can always go back to the well and make a joke that is in line with their character.” At the center of Ron’s sitcom was, of course, Jim Bakker, an “easy mark” for comedy due not only to the fact that he was “obviously a fake,” but also because he “looks like a doofus.”⁷² Ron particularly delighted in toying with Bakker’s purportedly fraudulent, on-camera emotionality. For example, when writing about what “The Jim Bakker Show” framed as a tender moment between the televangelist and Morningside’s newly arrived statue, during which Bakker reached through the slats of the packing crate to touch the nail holes in its hands, Ron spun the situation into a sexually suggestive, sitcom-esque scene. “What the hell is this guy doing?” Ron wrote, “If Jim was caught doing this in public he’d be arrested for lewdness, among other things.

[**Museum Guard**] ‘We need extra security to the Pagan sculpture exhibit.’

[**Museum Dispatch**] ‘Why, what’s up?’

[**Museum Guard**] ‘Some weirdo is in here making love to a statue.’”

⁶⁹ Ron Johnson, Skype interview by author, January 20, 2012.

⁷⁰ Ron Johnson, “Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th show with Idol Worship – part one.”

⁷¹ See, for example, Jenkins, “‘Out of the Closet and Into the Universe’: Queers and *Star Trek*.”

⁷² Ron Johnson, Skype interview by author, January 20, 2012.

“Jim seems to really get off on inspecting this statue,” Ron continued, adding a picture of Bakker touching its hand, captioned, “Jim Bakker looking for the statue’s sweet spot.”⁷³ In his second post related to the episode, Ron likened Bakker and his ministry associates to “villains in a movie,” included a group shot of “Jim Bakker and his cast of villains,” and attributed each with their own fantastic powers. Ron endowed Jim, “the evil boss at the center,” with “the dangerous power of mind control,” and his wife Lori with “the power to abort her own babies at any time or place” – a dark dig at her troubled past.⁷⁴ Similarly, Ron granted hefty musical sidekick Kevin Shorey, whom he consistently “painted” as the ubiquitous sitcom “fat guy” character, the “superpower” of “binge eating.”⁷⁵

Other central characters in Ron’s antifan comedy were Jim Bakker’s faithful fans, whom he tended to represent, en masse, as Morningside’s “zombies” – a horde of irrational, uneducated, and credulous simpletons who were easily swayed by the televangelist’s spurious fundraising pitches and theological messages. Ron readily deployed the label “cult” to describe the relationship between Bakker and his faithful fans, and in his first 2000th show post implicitly aligned Morningside with two famous examples of purportedly irrational and dangerous faith: Jim Jones’ Peoples Temple and Marshall Applewhite’s Heaven’s Gate group.⁷⁶ “Today may very well be the day that all the Bakker zombies drink Jim Bakker’s special Kool-Aid,” Ron wrote, “and ride off to space in a rocketship (sic).”⁷⁷ Various describing Bakker’s supporters as “inbreds,” “mesmerized,” “old bags,” and “filthy, disgusting zombies,” Ron attributed these individuals with a herd mentality, an argument visually reinforced by an image of members of the studio audience, hands raised, praying a blessing upon the newly installed statue.⁷⁸ One audience member in particular, known as “Grandma Maxine,” an elderly and prominent supporter of Morningside who Ron also called “Grandma Moneybags,” featured regularly in Ron’s blog, and he suggested that she was “probably the biggest donor for this statue effort.”⁷⁹

⁷³ Ron Johnson, “Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th show with Idol Worship – part one.”

⁷⁴ See Graham and Reece, *More Than I Could Ever Ask*.

⁷⁵ Ron Johnson, “Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th episode with Idol Worship, part two.”; *ibid.*, Skype interview by author, January 20, 2012.

⁷⁶ On the People’s Temple and Heaven’s Gate, see John R. Hall, *Apocalypse Observed: Religious Movements and Violence in North America, Europe, and Japan* (London: Routledge, 2000), 15-43, 149-182.

⁷⁷ In “Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th show with Idol Worship – part one,” Ron puts the charge of “cult” in the mouth of a hypothetical “Old Town Mayor.”

⁷⁸ Ron Johnson, “Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th show with Idol Worship – part one”; “Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th episode with Idol Worship, part two.”

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, “Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th episode with Idol Worship, part two.”

For Ron, Grandma Maxine served as a symbol of the “little old ladies” that Bakker, and televangelists more generally, were believed to prey upon. “Is Grandma Maxine being exploited by Jim Bakker?” Ron provocatively asked in a caption underneath a picture of the smiling supporter, sitting contentedly in the studio audience.⁸⁰

Intertwined with Ron’s comedy were relatively straightforward criticisms of Bakker’s ministry, focused, for example, on purported contradictions in his on-camera statements. As discussed previously, catching contradictions, and other misleading information, was key to the Trinity Foundation’s televangelical watchdog efforts, the results of which served as the bedrock for legal challenges and governmental interventions. Indeed, the Trinity Foundation stood at the head of a list of sidebar links, assembled by Ron, which offered his blog’s visitors opportunities to “report” Bakker, alongside links to the Federal Trade Commission, the Internal Revenue Service, the United States House of Representatives, the Missouri State Attorney General, and the media outlet MSNBC.⁸¹ In his second post on the 2000th episode, Ron openly questioned Bakker’s financial claims regarding the Jesus statue, pointing out that while the televangelist revealed that he had purchased the statue for thirty-five thousand dollars, he also stated that it was worth a “quarter million dollars’.”⁸² Ron also highlighted alleged contradictions in the program’s theological messages. For example, he matched Bakker’s on-camera assurance, paraphrasing a prophecy from Rick Joyner, that “(t)his could be your best years,” with the preacher’s subsequent warning that “I believe things are going to happen that’s literally going to bring America to her knees.”⁸³ “You’re saying two completely contradictory things here Jim,” wrote Ron, “and you can’t have it both ways, at least not on my blog.”⁸⁴

As mentioned above, Ron originally intended *The Jim Bakker Foodbucket Fanpage* to be a collaborative venture among a small network of family members, a plan which was ultimately unrealized. What he did not expect was that his blog would become a well-traveled online hub for unfaithful fans of Jim Bakker, many of whom found the televangelist ironically amusing, and

⁸⁰ “Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th episode with Idol Worship, part two.”

⁸¹ *The Jim Bakker Foodbucket Fanpage*, <http://jimbakker666.blogspot.ca/>, accessed January 29, 2015.

⁸² Ron Johnson, “Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th episode with Idol Worship, part two.”

⁸³ Ibid. Bakker was paraphrasing from Rick Joyner, “A Year Like No Other,” *Morningstar Ministries*, 2012, <http://www.morningstarministries.org/resources/special-bulletins/2012/year-no-other#.VJB5gSvF-Sp>, accessed January 29, 2015.

⁸⁴ Ron Johnson, “Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th episode with Idol Worship, part two.”

some of whom, like Ron himself, were also angered by Bakker, and wished that he would be removed from the airwaves. Through their participation in the commenting areas appended to the blog's posts, some of these Bakker antifans would become key collaborators on *TJBFF*, and would help establish a short-lived, yet thriving, community of unfaithful Bakker fans centered on the circulation of satire, vitriol, gossip, and, most notably, information. Indeed, through their uncovering and sharing of knowledge aimed at discrediting, or at least raising doubts about, Jim Bakker and his Morningside ministry, a selection of these antifans evidenced the potential for online participatory media to foster a new form of collaborative investigation of suspicious televangelists.

Online Antifandom, Knowledge Communities, and Collaborative Investigation

As discussed in the fifth chapter, Brother Randall, the de facto leader of “The Robert Tilton Fan Club,” envisioned his publications as sites for the sharing of gossip and information which, he hoped, could offer readers glimpses of the “real” Robert Tilton, lying behind his constructed, and purportedly deceptive, on-camera façade. The club's core, Dallas-based fans made their own small-scale investigations into Tilton's ministry – attending services at Word of Faith church, crashing Amy Tilton's wedding, and even speaking with waiters at the televangelist's “favorite Mexican food place” – in the hopes of gathering information on the preacher's habits, culinary and otherwise.⁸⁵ In this vein, Brother Randall attempted to solicit “good information” about Tilton from members of the broader unfaithful fan network; however, his appeals went largely unanswered.⁸⁶

In contrast, *The Jim Bakker Foodbucket Fanpage* became a bustling clearinghouse for Bakker-related information, reflecting the collaborative opportunities inherent to what communications scholar Paul Booth calls “digital fandom,” and, specifically, fan blogs. In contrast to discussion-based fan forums such as those on Usenet, in which posts and comments are separated by hyperlinks, fan blogs bring posts and comments together into the “same document,” with important implications, according to Booth, regarding authorship. “The blog is not just a post,” Booth writes, “but is rather the combination of the post plus the comments (plus the multitudinous blog entries written over time). The ‘writer’ of the blog is ultimately a group,

⁸⁵ Brother Randall, Skype interview by author, December 4, 2011.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

not an individual.”⁸⁷ In the case of *TJBFF*, publicly visible comments were featured underneath each of Ron’s posts, and he made an explicit decision not to moderate these comments.⁸⁸

Following Booth, then, each blog post on *TJBFF* can be considered a co-authored collaboration between Ron and a selection of unsolicited and uncensored commenters, whose contributions, as pointed out by the praise of one commenter, enhanced the blog’s overall value: “I love coming here and I get excited when I see a new (blog entry) posted. But, if not the comments alone keep me coming back for more. Great Job!”⁸⁹

The Jim Bakker Foodbucket Fanpage attracted comments from a wide variety of unfaithful Bakker watchers, not all of whom shared Ron’s antifan approach of combining satire with more serious efforts to stop the televangelist’s alleged chicanery. Ironic fans, much like those of Robert Tilton, were less interested in questions of ethics than the amusement they derived from Bakker’s broadcasts. “I love getting stoned and watching bakker (sic),” wrote one anonymous commenter, “I’m not out to save old rednecks.” “Why must you try to be a hero?” s/he added, “If people (are) dumb enough to give, let it be dude.”⁹⁰ For others, the comedic aspects of the antifandom encouraged by Ron distracted from destroying Bakker’s ministry. “What has happened to this blog?????” lamented another anonymous commenter, referring to a plethora of humorous insults lobbed by others, “I feel we are straying from some important discussion...Let us get together and bring down the fraud.”⁹¹ Citing the same commenter’s entry, another anonymous commenter wrote that if the blog did not take on “a more adult and serious focus,” s/he “may be forced to remove Food Bucket from my bookmarks.”⁹² Yet another commenter encouraged viewers to monitor Bakker’s broadcasts, make note of potential legal issues, and submit their findings, as suggested by Ron, to organizations like the Trinity

⁸⁷ See Paul Booth, *Digital Fandom* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), 43-47.

⁸⁸ Ron Johnson, Skype interview by author, January 20, 2012.

⁸⁹ “Lori’s Pharmacist (I mean Nail Tech),” February 25, 2012 (7:36 am), comment on Ron Johnson, “Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th episode with Idol Worship, part two.”

⁹⁰ “Anonymous,” April 9, 2012 (9:45 pm), comment on Ron Johnson, “Jim Bakker scribbles on Zach, talks junk with Bill Whaley part 3,” *The Jim Bakker Foodbucket Fanpage*, March 24, 2012, http://jimbakker666.blogspot.ca/2012/03/jim-bakker-scribbles-on-zach-talks-junk_24.html, accessed January 29, 2015.

⁹¹ “Anonymous,” April 2, 2012 (5:17 pm), comment on Ron Johnson, “Jim Bakker scribbles on Zach, talks junk with Bill Whaley part 3.”

⁹² “Anonymous,” April 3, 2012 (7:07 pm), comment on Ron Johnson, “Jim Bakker scribbles on Zach, talks junk with Bill Whaley part 3.”

Foundation. “Until then,” the commenter wrote, “it’s difficult to see the point in this, beyond entertainment.”⁹³

Within the blog’s commenting areas, however, existed a core community of Bakker antifans, the most active members of which helped construct a dominant commenting culture grounded in a shared “purpose of the group’s interaction,” and which aligned with Ron’s own approach.⁹⁴ The following discussion focuses on the activities of four commenting antifans: “Brother Dortch,” “Joe C,” “Tanya,” and “Kool-Aid Kid.” Like Ron, each of these antifans had their own viewing histories and motivations for tuning in to Bakker’s broadcasts. Kool-Aid Kid, for example, whose screen name jokingly referenced the means of mass suicide/murder of the followers of Jim Jones, revealed that s/he used to watch Bakker during the heyday of PTL.⁹⁵ “I caught up with Jimbo’s PTL flying circus back in the days with Tammy just before the collapse,” s/he wrote, adding that s/he “treated it like a soap opera.” “Jimbo’s current version is still a soap opera to me,” Kool-Aid Kid continued, however, his/her approach to Bakker had since taken on a more antifannish air: “but he’s getting under my skin now. Enough is enough.”⁹⁶ In contrast to Kool-Aid Kid, Tanya was a relatively new viewer, and only “remembered a fraction” of the scandals that had plagued PTL. “I had nothing against Jim Bakker when I thought he was off TV and no longer scamming money,” she explained, noting that she had come across his most recent program while “channel-surfing” one day. Her anger was stoked by the fact that, in her opinion, Bakker was not only “making money off the fear of others,” but that he was also apparently repeating his past crimes: “it bothers me that a convicted felon is out there taking advantage of people again.” After witnessing “The Jim Bakker Show,” Tanya searched out more information on Bakker online, leading her to Ron’s blog and a community of likeminded individuals.⁹⁷

In her ethnographic study of an online, soap opera fan community, Nancy Baym outlined two, often interrelated, means by which participants both maintained “group values” and gained

⁹³ “Anonymous,” April 10, 2012 (8:00 am), comment on Ron Johnson, “Jim Bakker scribbles on Zach, talks junk with Bill Whaley part 3.”

⁹⁴ Nancy K. Baym, *Tune In, Log On*, 138.

⁹⁵ As Hall notes, the cause of death of most of Jones’ followers was actually drug-laced “Fla-Vor Aid”; *Apocalypse Observed*, 37.

⁹⁶ “Kool-Aid Kid,” February 27, 2012 (10:40 am), comment on Ron Johnson, “Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th episode with Idol Worship, part two.”

⁹⁷ “Tanya,” February 23, 2012 (9:27 pm), comment on Ron Johnson, “Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th episode with Idol Worship, part two.”

esteem: through offering information about the program, and through developing a “recognizable performative style,” often humorous.⁹⁸ All four of the abovementioned commenting antifans deployed, and recognized the value of, both Bakker-related information and comedy. Kool-Aid Kid, who, as will be emphasized in the section to follow, was one of the blog’s masters of humorous antagonism, viewed Ron’s blog as a way to help “bring down” Bakker, and wielded the “double edge (sic) sword” that was “comedy,” which could simultaneously entertain and attack.⁹⁹ While Kool-Aid Kid preferred aggressive satire, s/he also praised the informational value of blogs such as Ron’s, which were not available “(d)uring the PTL days,” and which “help(ed) to bring the spotlight on this cockroach,” who, in his/her opinion, would come to “face justice.”¹⁰⁰ Brother Dortch, whose foremost offensive technique, as will be discussed, was the serious broaching of “substantive issues,” understood Kool-Aid Kid’s satire as a complementary tool in their shared mission of stopping Bakker, and occasionally made his/her own humorous contributions.¹⁰¹ Should they succeed in their goal, Brother Dortch admitted that s/he would “miss the fun, the laughs, and the good times a blog like this provides,” yet emphasized that the loss of entertainment was “far outweighed by the removal of this vermin from the rest of society.”¹⁰²

In his book *Convergence Culture*, Henry Jenkins outlines the potential power of online, fan-based “knowledge communities” through a discussion of particularly inquisitive fans of the reality television program *Survivor* (2000-Present).¹⁰³ The premise of *Survivor* is that a group of individuals are left in an exotic locale where they must cooperate and compete to accomplish a number of tasks, and are progressively “voted off the island” until a single winner remains.¹⁰⁴ *Survivor*’s impact and popularity depends on the successful cultivation of viewer suspense, and, accordingly, the outcome of each broadcast is heavily guarded by the program’s producers. As

⁹⁸ Baym, *Tune In, Log On*, 165, 171.

⁹⁹ “Kool-Aid Kid,” April 1, 2012 (7:27 pm), and April 10, 2012 (8:41 am), comments on Ron Johnson, “Jim Bakker scribbles on Zach, talks junk with Bill Whaley part 3.”

¹⁰⁰ “Kool-Aid Kid,” February 14, 2012 (6:18 pm), comment on Ron Johnson, “Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th episode with Idol Worship, part two.”

¹⁰¹ “Brother Dortch,” April 4, 2012 (9:35 pm), comment on Ron Johnson, “Jim Bakker scribbles on Zach, talks junk with Bill Whaley part 3.”

¹⁰² “Brother Dortch,” February 22, 2012 (11:30 pm), comment on Ron Johnson, “Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th episode with Idol Worship, part two.”

¹⁰³ See Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 25-58. Jenkins takes the concept of “knowledge communities” from Pierre Lévy, *Collective Intelligence: Mankind’s Emerging World in Cyberspace* (Cambridge: Perseus Books, 1997).

¹⁰⁴ Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 46.

Jenkins points out, however, the safeguarding of the show's secrets, essential for the typical fan's enjoyment of the game, presented an intriguing challenge to certain online networks of "hard-core fans," who dubbed themselves the "spoilers."¹⁰⁵ By sharing speculation and information gleaned from sources such as insider leaks, rumors, producer slip-ups, investigative actions, news reports, and even satellite imagery, these fans sought to spoil *Survivor* by collaboratively unravelling the show's secrets before its official airdates. The success of these dynamic, and often playful, online knowledge communities was a distinct challenge to the ability of *Survivor*'s producers to retain control over the program, and even provoked countermeasures to mislead the spoilers, and thereby protect the integral suspense of the show.

While televangelist programs are not open to being spoiled in the same sense, exactly, the impetus to spoil alleged facades of sanctity has lain behind the perennial investigative reports which have surrounded suspicious televangelists in the mainstream media. Antifan activity in the commenting areas of *The Jim Bakker Foodbucket Fanpage*, however, points to an intriguing, albeit nascent, possibility for collaborative investigations of controversial televangelists, co-constructed by "voluntary, temporary, and tactical" networks of likeminded everyday individuals; facilitated and publicized via online communication; and aided by the Internet's status as a vast and accessible repository of information.¹⁰⁶ The following section focuses, in particular, on the role of two Bakker antifans – Joe C and Brother Dortch – in undertaking such a collaborative investigation, with the tactical aim of discrediting Bakker's ministry, and, specifically, Morningside's Lori's House fundraising effort.

Joe C might best be thought of as an accidental Jim Bakker antifan. A former marine who moved onto eight-acres of rural Missouri land, he found that his property bordered Morningside, where the noise associated with the preliminary construction of Lori's House disrupted his placid country existence.¹⁰⁷ Angry and spurred to action, he "stumbled" onto *TJBFF* while he was searching online for information about Bakker's ministry, and confessed that soon thereafter he became "fixated" by Bakker's bizarre broadcasts.¹⁰⁸ "I must admit I hit the rewind numerous

¹⁰⁵ Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 25.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁰⁷ "Joe C Blue eye, Missouri," February 14, 2012 (8:29 pm), February 18, 2012, (7:56 pm), February 20, 2012 (3:04 pm), comments on Ron Johnson, "Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th episode with Idol Worship, part two."

¹⁰⁸ "Joe C Blue eye, Missouri," February 16, 2012 (4:56 pm), comment on Ron Johnson, "Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th episode with Idol Worship, part two"; "Anonymous" (identified as Joe C within the text), January 10, 2012

times,” he wrote of one episode which he apparently recorded, “I could not believe what I was seeing.”¹⁰⁹ On February 14, 2012, Joe C posted that Bakker had discussed “buying the land next to the School” on a recent program, referring, he believed, to an “84 acre plot that abuts my property on the west flank. He will then have me surrounded on three sides.”¹¹⁰ His suspicions were confirmed by an article in *The Branson Tri-Lakes News* reporting that Morningside had indeed purchased the property, the text of which Joe C pasted into a commenting area.¹¹¹

In Joe C, *TJBFF* had an antifan who was not only upset and motivated, but who also had physical access to Morningside, thereby opening up opportunities for surveillance. Angered by Bakker’s failure to return any of his telephone calls regarding the noise from the Lori’s House construction site, Joe C announced that should the project ever be finished, he would keep a sharp eye out for any evidence of fraud: “if Lori’s House is indeed constructed and is used for anything other than (sic) what they are portraying to people, the word will get out.” “To any Zombies that read my post,” he added, “that is not a threat, it is a promise.”¹¹² In the meantime, he conducted a cursory investigation of the Morningside property. On February 16, 2012, Joe C wrote that he had taken “a ride to the ‘compound’ today after work and took some pics,” which, to his regret, he had been unable to post within the blog’s commenting areas. “I took a picture of the food pantry to show the long lines of people Jimbo was helping with all that food they couldn’t ship,” Joe C explained, adding sarcastically, “Oh wait there were no lines, hell, it wasn’t even open.”¹¹³ Joe C referred here to the “Morningside Food Pantry,” a small stone structure which ostensibly offered food and household supplies to the needy. By emphasizing that the pantry was closed, Joe C heaped suspicion on Bakker’s charitable projects, including, by

(12:04 pm), comment on Ron Johnson, “Rabbi Cahn, plus win/win for Jim Bakker and Philip Cameron,” January 7, 2012, <http://jimbakker666.blogspot.ca/2012/01/rabbi-cahn-plus-winwin-for-jim-bakker.html>, accessed January 29, 2015.

¹⁰⁹ “Joe C Blue eye, Missouri,” February 16, 2012 (4:56 pm), comment on Ron Johnson, “Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th episode with Idol Worship, part two.”

¹¹⁰ “Joe C Blue eye, Missouri,” February 14, 2012 (8:29 pm), comment on Ron Johnson, “Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th episode with Idol Worship, part two.”

¹¹¹ “Joe C Blue eye, Missouri,” February 17, 2012 (3:52 pm), comment on Ron Johnson, “Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th episode with Idol Worship, part two.” Mindy Honey, “Morningside Plans Home for Unwed Mothers,” *Branson Tri-Lakes News*, February 17, 2012, http://www.bransontrilakesnews.com/community/faith/article_eb9cc8ac-59b1-11e1-8f9d-0019bb2963f4.html, accessed January 29, 2015.

¹¹² “Joe C Blue eye, Missouri,” February 14, 2012 (8:29 pm), comment on Ron Johnson, “Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th episode with Idol Worship, part two.”

¹¹³ “Joe C Blue eye, Missouri,” February 16, 2012 (4:56 pm), comment on Ron Johnson, “Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th episode with Idol Worship, part two.”

association, Lori's House. However, he likely did not know that the pantry was only open for short periods each week, and that its closure at the time of his visit was therefore not necessarily evidence of underhandedness.¹¹⁴

Joe C's access to Morningside excited Ron, who offered advice on how to link any media resulting from his visits to the blog: "if you can get stuff posted on YouTube, Flickr, etc., I'll link to it on my main page down in the bottom right corner." "YouTube is especially valuable," Ron clarified, "as it's heavily trafficked by people who may be interested in finding out about Jim Bakker...as I've said all along, the more eyes on Jim the more chance he meets bubba again."¹¹⁵ The bulk of Joe C's investigative work, however, dealt less with exciting incursions onto Morningside's property than relatively mundane probes into regulations relating to Lori's House. On February 7, 2012, he reported that "a truckload or two of wood was delivered" to the construction site, in spite of the fact that, "as far as I have been informed, no building permits have been awarded and there are no scheduled hearings at the present time."¹¹⁶ Joe C subsequently made some preliminary inquiries into which regulatory bodies held jurisdiction over Morningside's newly acquired parcel of land; however, he would not engage in any sustained investigation until after another prolific Bakker antifer – Brother Dortch – shared pertinent historical information regarding Bakker's construction projects past.¹¹⁷

Brother Dortch's pseudonym referenced Richard Dortch (1931-2011), an Assemblies of God minister and top executive at PTL, who, like Jim Bakker, had served prison time in connection with the ministry's financial scandals. Unlike Bakker, however, Dortch admitted to his crimes, repented, and was restored by his denomination – actions which earned him the "respect" of his antifer namesake, who wished that Bakker would do the same.¹¹⁸ As such an

¹¹⁴ Pictures of the pantry and information on its restricted hours can be found at, "Morningside Food Pantry is Expanding!," *The Jim Bakker Show*, August 9, 2011, <https://jimbakkershow.com/news/morningside-food-pantry-is-expanding/>, accessed January 29, 2015.

¹¹⁵ "Ron," February 16, 2012 (5:27 pm), comment on Ron Johnson, "Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th episode with Idol Worship, part two."

¹¹⁶ "Anonymous" (identified as Joe C in the text), February 7, 2012 (11:27 pm), comment on Ron Johnson, "Jim Bakker showcases Godzilla, awful preaching chops," *The Jim Bakker Foodbucket Fanpage*, January 26, 2012, <http://jimbakker666.blogspot.ca/2012/01/jim-bakker-showcases-godzilla-awful.html>, accessed January 29, 2015.

¹¹⁷ "Joe C Blue Eye, Missouri," February 11, 2012 (7:38 pm), comment on Ron Johnson, "Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th show with Idol Worship – part one."

¹¹⁸ For an overview of Richard Dortch, and his post-prison efforts to market his story of redemption, see Wes Platt, "God has an Incredible Way of Bringing Us Down," *St. Petersburg Times*, October 2, 1992. For "Brother Dortch's" "respect" for his namesake, see "Brother Dortch," January 4, 2012 (10:41 pm), comment on Ron Johnson, "Jim

outcome was unlikely, however, Brother Dortch sought to dissuade people from supporting Bakker's ministry. "If this blog," s/he asserted, "is read by one family member and keeps one elderly person out of Morningside per year that is well worth it to me."¹¹⁹ Like the site's other core antifans, Brother Dortch was a dedicated viewer who found Jim Bakker's broadcasts ironically amusing, and s/he delighted in unintentionally humorous elements of the televangelist's program, such as his frequently age-inappropriate wardrobe.¹²⁰ Moreover, echoing Ron, s/he occasionally offered original comedy creations, including sitcom-esque scripts featuring the hypothetically humorous antics of key characters at Morningside.¹²¹ It was Brother Dortch's reliability as a fount of Bakker-related information, however, that most enhanced his/her status within *TJBFF*'s commenting areas. Much of Brother Dortch's shared information was of an apparently insider nature – stories relating to the personal lives of the ministry's Master's Media students; reports on visits to Morningside by the Internal Revenue Service – leading others to praise him/her as a "fly on the wall" and "a wealth of reliable and good information."¹²² While Brother Dortch refused to divulge his/her identity or relationship, if any, to Morningside, citing privacy concerns, s/he claimed membership in a "good honest church," unlike Bakker's own.¹²³

Bakker Show 2011 Wrap-up: The Scammys," *The Jim Bakker Foodbucket Fanpage*, December 26, 2011, <http://jimbakker666.blogspot.ca/2011/12/jim-bakker-show-2011-wrap-up-scammys.html>, accessed January 29, 2015.

¹¹⁹ "Brother Dortch," April 3, 2012 (1:34 pm), comment on Ron Johnson, "Jim Bakker scribbles on Zach, talks junk with Bill Whaley part 3."

¹²⁰ For a dig at Bakker's wardrobe, see "Brother Dortch," December 21, 2011 (3:42 pm), comment on Ron Johnson, "Jim Bakker welcomes Kellie Copeland-[Insert Name Here] part 2," *The Jim Bakker Foodbucket Fanpage*, Monday, December 12, 2011, <http://jimbakker666.blogspot.ca/2011/12/jim-bakker-welcomes-kellie-copeland.html>, accessed January 29, 2015.

¹²¹ See "Brother Dortch," October 1, 2011 (1:44 am), comment on Ron Johnson, "Lori Bakker Birthday Show Part 1," *The Jim Bakker Foodbucket Fanpage*, September 30, 2011, <http://jimbakker666.blogspot.ca/2011/09/lori-bakker-birthday-show-part-1.html>, accessed January 29, 2015.

¹²² For Brother Dortch's detailed information on the life of Jim Bakker's grandson James, one of the Master's Media students, see "Brother Dortch," December 27, 2011 (9:46 pm), comment on Ron Johnson, "Jim Bakker Show 2011 Wrap-up: The Scammys." For his/her claims of IRS visits to Morningside, see "Brother Dortch," February 18, 2012 (10:43 am), comment on Ron Johnson, "Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th episode with Idol Worship, part two." For praise of Brother Dortch as a "fly on the wall," see "Buddy's Buddy," March 24, 2012 (9:50 pm), comment on Ron Johnson, "Jim Bakker scribbles on Zach, talks junk with Bill Whaley part 3." For praise for Brother Dortch as "a wealth of reliable and good information," see "Anonymous," February 22, 2012 (10:48 pm), comment on Ron Johnson, "Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th episode with Idol Worship, part two."

¹²³ For Brother Dortch's privacy concerns, see "Brother Dortch," January 4, 2012 (10:41 pm), comment on Ron Johnson, "Jim Bakker Show 2011 Wrap-up: The Scammys." For Brother Dortch's church affiliation, see "Brother Dortch," January 8, 2012 (7:38 pm), comment on Ron Johnson, "Rabbi Cahn, plus win/win for Jim Bakker and Philip Cameron."

Brother Dortch contributed to Joe C's burgeoning investigation of Lori's House by sharing the history of a similar, and controversial, construction project from Bakker's past – a project which problematized Morningside's legitimation of Lori's House by appealing to historical evidence. Every established televangelist ministry creates an official backstory which “‘testifies’ to its history of satisfying the evangelical Christian community,” and through which it “‘represents itself to its contributing viewers to earn their trust.’”¹²⁴ “The Jim Bakker Show” attempted to build trust in the Lori's House project by reassuring viewers that the televangelist had a venerable history of completing similar ventures. During a break in the program's 2000th episode, for example, appeared a fundraising commercial for Stella's House and Lori's House, filled with lite-rock instrumental music, tear-filled testimonials, and confident promises.¹²⁵ A computer-generated image of the proposed exterior of Lori's House – a gleaming white, three-story residence – was matched to vintage promotional photographs of “Heritage House,” a home for unwed mothers constructed at Heritage USA in 1984, and which appears to have been a legitimate charitable concern.¹²⁶ By airing utopian photographs associated with Heritage House – pregnant women contentedly lounging in a courtyard, children happily walking down a sidewalk, a pair of “Actual Babies Saved by ‘Heritage House’” – “The Jim Bakker Show” appealed to the past as a means to encourage trust in, and donations for, its contemporary projects.

Within *The Jim Bakker Foodbucket Fanpage's* commenting areas, however, Brother Dortch stitched together a multimedia history of a more controversial construction project from Bakker's past, in a move to encourage skepticism. “Kevin's House” was named for Kevin Whittum, a severely physically handicapped, wheelchair-bound teenager who was the face of a prolonged, and incredibly lucrative, PTL fundraising appeal to construct a group home for similarly handicapped young people. Although completed in 1986, Kevin's House would only ever house Whittum, his two sisters, one of whom was also handicapped, and his adoptive parents, including his father, who was, somewhat suspiciously, Jim Bakker's cousin.¹²⁷ Press postmortems of the PTL disaster paid considerable attention to the saga of Kevin's House, which

¹²⁴ Victoria Meng, “Everyday a Miracle: History According to Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN),” *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 21, no. 3 (2009): ¶ 2.

¹²⁵ See “2000th Show Celebration,” streaming video.

¹²⁶ For Heritage House as a legitimate charitable concern, see Albert, *Jim Bakker*, 35-36.

¹²⁷ Michael Isikoff and Art Harris, “PTL Fund Raising: A Tangled Saga Series,” *The Washington Post*, May 23, 1987; *ibid.*, “Probe of PTL Home for Youths; Diversion of Funds from Facility Suspected,” *The Washington Post*, July 23, 1987.

was framed as a prime example of the ministry's poor planning, propensity for exploiting the infirm, and questionable financial dealings.¹²⁸ "The project was plagued by trouble from the start," wrote Michael Isikoff and Art Harris of *The Washington Post*, "including design flaws, delays in acquiring a license from the South Carolina Department of Social Services and an inability to find applicants that met PTL qualifications." Isikoff and Harris pointed out that although Whittum was wheelchair-bound, the home named in his honor, while lavishly decorated with "life-sized rocking horses and a white baby grand piano," was bereft of an elevator, leaving his father to carry him up and down the stairs. Moreover, they reported that "Justice Department officials requested all ministry records relating to fund-raising appeals and receipts for the home," including footage of Bakker's on-camera promises, to determine whether Bakker had contravened "federal laws against mail and wire fraud that prohibit raising money under one pretext, then spending it for something else."¹²⁹ While Bakker evidently never faced legal charges relating to Kevin's House, the project came to a particularly ignoble end when PTL's management ordered Whittum and his family to leave following the Bakkers' own ouster.¹³⁰

In Brother Dortch's opinion, the troubled history of Kevin's House – "nothing more than a fraud to build Jim Bakker's cousin a one-million dollar plus home" – rather than the advertised success of Heritage House, was the best predictor of the motivations behind, and likely outcome of, Lori's House, and s/he drew together a variety of online media to assemble a counter-history.¹³¹ To prove Bakker's efficacy at "selling 'Kevin's House' to the masses," a scheme which, s/he alleged, netted "three million dollars of what turned out to be unaccounted for money," Brother Dortch posted links to vintage personal photographs uploaded by a faithful PTL fan, depicting long lines of people standing outside of Kevin's House during a 1988 open

¹²⁸ Albert, who tends to defend the charitable work at PTL, concedes the many issues with Kevin's House: "...Bakker insisted on a frenetic pace to have the home constructed within just two months. Corners had to be cut and there was no time to build in the design components necessary to obtain state approval as a group home – fire resistant bedroom walls, a system of fire extinguishers and sprinklers, and flooring which met commercial standards. As a result, Kevin's House never received government approval to operate as a group home and only Kevin and his family, including a handicapped sister, ever lived there." "The problem, of course, was that there were clear indications here of loose, effervescent fundraising representations that overstated the matter, diminishing what otherwise would have been a noble undertaking"; see *Jim Bakker*, 37.

¹²⁹ Isikoff and Harris, "Probe of PTL Home for Youths."

¹³⁰ "Bakker's Parents to Cut Salaries by Half; Family Ordered to Leave House," *The Associated Press*, August 11, 1987.

¹³¹ "Brother Dortch," February 14, 2012 (7:32 pm), comment on Ron Johnson, "Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th episode with Idol Worship, part two."

house.¹³² While the images symbolized evangelical strength and support to the original uploader, Brother Dortch framed the long lines as evidence of Bakker’s mastery of manipulation and his follower’s gullibility. Another link provided by Brother Dortch led to a short YouTube clip of Kevin Whittum giving a tour of the opulent house, taken from the critical 1988 television documentary *Thy Kingdom Come, Thy Will Be Done*.¹³³ In it, Whittum explains that the home’s other planned inhabitants were not “quite here yet, because...my mom and dad do not have the license yet. They’re working on that right now.” “To this day,” a sober narrator clarifies, “Kevin Whittum is the only disabled child ever to have lived at ‘Kevin’s Home’.” Comments attributed to the “Orlando Sentinel” and the “Houston Chronicle,” most likely Brother Dortch assuming the names of the newspapers to convey an enhanced objectivity, contained full articles discussing a lawsuit filed against PTL by Whittum after his eviction, and detailing suspicions surrounding the use of donations to the cause.¹³⁴ Intriguingly, Brother Dortch also included a link to the online version of “Salvation Sideshow,” Brother Randall of The Robert Tilton Fan Club’s article from the third issue of *Snake Oil* zine (1994), which examined the role of “freaks” in many evangelical ministries.¹³⁵ While Brother Dortch included the link merely to provide readers with an image of Whittum, in doing so s/he included Brother Randall, however belatedly, in the type of knowledge community the latter had desired with his own participatory media efforts.

Easily cobbled together by fielding and posting information and links to relevant online material, Brother Dortch’s history of Kevin’s House framed Bakker as a master of hype and duplicity, and served as a warning to readers regarding his contemporary activities: “Ladies and

¹³² Brother Dortch, “February 15, 2012, (3:10 am), comment on Ron Johnson, “Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th episode with Idol Worship, part two.” Brother Dortch linked to photos included in the set “PTL – Kevin’s House,” uploaded by user “bjmoore” to the photo-sharing site Flickr; see <https://www.flickr.com/photos/bjmoore/sets/72157594474327593/>, accessed January 29, 2015.

¹³³ “Heritage USA – Inside Kevin’s House,” YouTube video, 2:02, posted by “Ben Martin,” June 15, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-QOF8pyyyk>. For a review of the full film, which was directed by Antony Thomas, see Steve Vineburg, “Thy Kingdom Come, Thy Will Be Done,” *Film Quarterly* 42, no. 3 (1989): 31-33.

¹³⁴ “Orlando Sentinel,” February 14, 2012 (10:52 am), comment on Ron Johnson, “Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th episode with Idol Worship, part two” – contains the text of “Disabled Teen Sues PTL Over Eviction,” *Orlando Sentinel*, August 23, 1987. “Houston Chronicle 7-23-87,” February 20, 2012 (11:01 am), comment on Ron Johnson, “Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th episode with Idol Worship, part two” – contains the text of “PTL Probe Looks at Use of Funds Raised for Home for Handicapped,” *Houston Chronicle*, July 23, 1987.

¹³⁵ “Brother Dortch,” February 14, 2012 (7:32 pm), comment on Ron Johnson, “Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th episode with Idol Worship, part two.” Brother Dortch linked to Brother Randall, “Salvation Side Show,” *Snake Oil*, <http://www.devilsweb.com/snakeoil/sideshow.html>, since defunct, but an archived version of which is available at <https://web.archive.org/web/20110717082129/http://www.devilsweb.com/snakeoil/sideshow.html>, accessed January 29, 2015. For the original article, see Brother Randall, “Salvation Sideshow,” in Brother Randall, ed., *Snake Oil*, 3.

gentlemen, if (Bakker) would steal from Kevin Whittum and be able to sleep well at night... then he would steal from anybody!”¹³⁶ Brother Dortch’s efforts garnered praise from others in the Bakker antifan community, many members of which were apparently unfamiliar with the saga of Kevin’s House. “Wow Bro D., just when I thought I’d heard it all,” posted an astonished Ron.¹³⁷ “Absolutely amazing,” agreed another commenter, “Brother D is certainly on a roll! History does have a way of repeating itself, doesn’t it?”¹³⁸ Brother Dortch associated his information with Joe C’s own inquiries into Lori’s House, offering it as historical precedent, and expressed the tongue-in-cheek hope that the latter might “help” Bakker through his investigation: “As you can see from the construction of ‘Kevin’s House’... Bakker builds first and worries about the permits later. Joe C, I sure hope you can help him change his ways and bring that old snake up to code on the CORRECT way to do things!”¹³⁹

On Saturday, February 18, 2012, Joe C made a surprising revelation – “Against my wives (sic) wishes, I will make a visit to Jim Monday” – and he asked *TJBFF*’s commenters for advice on how to “bring things to the proper authorities (sic) attention” should he make any pertinent discoveries.¹⁴⁰ Some antifans voiced serious concerns about Joe C’s safety, due to the perceived, and potentially dangerous, irrationality of the televangelist’s followers. “Go Joe – while staying safe!” advised Tanya, “Jim needs to go down, but not at a personal cost to you.”¹⁴¹ An anonymous poster, who jokingly wrote that Joe C should “take some garlic” to fend off the Morningside “vampires,” also suggested that he contact the “news media” in the event of any information, since “(g)overnmental agencies usually don’t do much unless they are afraid of public attention through the news media.”¹⁴² Ultimately, Joe C did not visit Morningside that

¹³⁶ “Brother Dortch,” February 15, 2012 (3:10 am), comment on Ron Johnson, “Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th episode with Idol Worship, part two.”

¹³⁷ “Ron,” February 14, 2012 (7:11 pm), comment on Ron Johnson, “Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th episode with Idol Worship, part two.”

¹³⁸ “Awaiting the Sex Scandal,” February 14, 2012 (8:18 pm), comment on Ron Johnson, “Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th episode with Idol Worship, part two.”

¹³⁹ “Brother Dortch” February 15, 2012 (7:28 pm), comment on Ron Johnson, “Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th episode with Idol Worship, part two.”

¹⁴⁰ “Joe C Blue eye, Missouri,” February 18, 2012 (7:37 pm), comment on Ron Johnson, “Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th episode with Idol Worship, part two”; *ibid.*, February 18, 2012 (8:36 pm), comment on Ron Johnson, “Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th episode with Idol Worship, part two.”

¹⁴¹ “Tanya,” February 19, 2012 (12:01 am), comment on Ron Johnson, “Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th episode with Idol Worship, part two.”

¹⁴² “Anonymous,” February 19, 2012 (5:37 pm), comment on Ron Johnson, “Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th episode with Idol Worship, part two.”

Monday, as “the sounds of heavy machinery” coming from the Lori’s House site had put him in a bad “frame of mind.” He reported, however, that he had contacted a local television station and various national television networks, in the hopes of encouraging mainstream media investigations of the construction project, and that he had called “the Mayor (of Blue Eye, Missouri) to find out whom I need to speak to about permits.”¹⁴³ Following some inquiries, Joe C learned that Morningside planned to annex the parcel of land on which Lori’s House was being built – a plan under the jurisdiction of the village of Blue Eye, Missouri which residents of the village, thereby excluding Joe C, could “contest” over a two-week period.¹⁴⁴ On February 23, Joe C reported that he had finally received a return call from Morningside’s General Manager, and that he had scheduled a meeting with Bakker for the following week.¹⁴⁵ “Amazingly coincidental that after publicly posting here about Bakker’s repeated brush-offs, his goonie has now returned your call after seeing your plan of action listed here,” wrote Ron, thus suggesting his blog’s power to prompt Bakker’s ministry to action through “(f)ear of public exposure.”¹⁴⁶

Another avenue of investigation opened up after Joe C reported on February 27 that he had “spent the afternoon at the Stone County Courthouse,” where he discovered public records relating to two, in his opinion, suspicious acquisitions by Morningside: a “23 foot” boat purchased on May 2011, and a property in Lampe, Missouri, for which he provided the street address.¹⁴⁷ The following day, Brother Dortch proposed the boat and “‘parsonage’” as prime examples of Bakker’s financial shadiness. In regards to the latter, Brother Dortch charged that Bakker had misleadingly downplayed the property as “simply a ‘cabin’ that he goes to for recreational purposes only.” However, “anyone who cares to look” at a picture of the property using the address posted by Joe C and Google Earth’s free satellite imaging service – an updated take on the *Survivor* spoilers’ more difficult acquisition of satellite imagery – could see, in Brother Dortch’s opinion, that “cabin” was an inappropriate descriptor for the structure, which,

¹⁴³ “Joe C Blue eye, Missouri,” February 20, 2012 (3:04 pm), comment on Ron Johnson, “Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th episode with Idol Worship, part two.”

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., February 20, 2012 (8:25 pm), comment on Ron Johnson, “Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th episode with Idol Worship, part two.”

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., February 20, 2012 (11:00 am), comment on Ron Johnson, “Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th episode with Idol Worship, part two.”

¹⁴⁶ “Ron,” February 20, 2012 (11:00 am), comment on Ron Johnson, “Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th episode with Idol Worship, part two.”

¹⁴⁷ “Joe C Blue eye, Missouri,” February 27, 2012 (4:20 pm), comment on Ron Johnson, “Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th episode with Idol Worship, part two”; *ibid.*, February 27, 2012 (4:28 pm), comment on Ron Johnson, “Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th episode with Idol Worship, part two.”

according to an image taken in 2011, was a large, three-winged, building next to a lake.¹⁴⁸ As for the boat, Brother Dortch thanked Joe C for his “public record check,” which confirmed his/her previous suspicions that Morningside had purchased the vehicle, allegedly as a “pleasure craft” for Bakker, much like, s/he pointed out, a controversial houseboat used by the Bakkers during the PTL days.¹⁴⁹ “Have you EVER, even once, heard Bakker get on TV and ask for funds for a \$300,000+ ‘cabin’ on the lake or a 23 foot boat?” asked Brother Dortch, implying that money had been inappropriately diverted from other advertised causes, such as the Stella’s House project.¹⁵⁰ Brother Dortch complained that despite Bakker’s purported promises of “total transparency” regarding fundraising for Stella’s House, it appeared to be “another fraud waiting to be disclosed. Can any one person...point me in the direction of exactly where I can go to see the full amount of money taken in for Bakker’s ‘Stella’s House’ campaign and show me exactly how the funds were spent?”¹⁵¹

The collaborative antifan investigation of Morningside’s construction efforts effectively fell apart, however, due to Joe C’s reluctance to post after his eventual meeting with Bakker, which, he reported, “went very well.”¹⁵² Joe C subsequently revealed that he would be putting his own property up for sale, and that he had “two neighbors that (sic) are potential buyers.”¹⁵³ “I hope the offers you got for your land aren’t from Bakker, Joe C.,” warned one poster, “If they are, you know where that money came from.”¹⁵⁴ Despite his exit from participation in *The Jim Bakker Foodbucket Fanpage*, Joe C, in conjunction with Brother Dortch, in particular, had demonstrated the potential for everyday individuals to collaborate on their own online

¹⁴⁸ “Brother Dortch,” February 28, 2012 (8:21 am), comment on Ron Johnson, “Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th episode with Idol Worship, part two.” The free Google Earth application can be downloaded at <https://www.google.com/earth/> (accessed January 29, 2015), into which historical satellite views of the property – located at 2144 Pokeberry Lane, Lampe, Missouri – can be viewed. Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 33-34, 51.

¹⁴⁹ “Brother Dortch,” February 28, 2012 (8:21 am), comment on Ron Johnson, “Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th episode with Idol Worship, part two.” For suspicions regarding Bakker’s acquisition of a houseboat in the late-1970s, see Shepard, *Forgiven*, 110-112.

¹⁵⁰ “Brother Dortch,” February 28, 2012 (11:23 am), comment on Ron Johnson, “Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th episode with Idol Worship, part two.”

¹⁵¹ Ibid., February 28, 2012 (8:21 am), comment on Ron Johnson, “Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th episode with Idol Worship, part two.”

¹⁵² “Joe C Blue eye, Missouri,” March 1, 2012 (2:32 pm), comment on Ron Johnson, “Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th episode with Idol Worship, part two.”

¹⁵³ “Ibid.,” March 1, 2012 (3:24 pm), comment on Ron Johnson, “Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th episode with Idol Worship, part two.”

¹⁵⁴ “Buddy’s Buddy” March 3, 2012 (9:14 am), comment on Ron Johnson, “Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th episode with Idol Worship, part two.”

participatory investigations of suspicious televangelists by sharing their knowledge – stitching together fresh, on-the-ground research; pertinent historical information; and easily accessible online resources into a case for Bakker’s continued status as a religious fake. Some of *TJBFF*’s unfaithful fans were optimistic about the potential for such online collaborative work to expose Bakker; Kool-Aid Kid, for example, pointed out that “(d)uring the PTL days internet (sic) was not available but times have changed and Bakker hasn’t.”¹⁵⁵ Yet, there was also a common understanding that bringing widespread attention to Bakker’s suspicious behavior would require the participation of traditional, mainstream media. Joe C, as mentioned, had contacted various news outlets, seemingly to no effect, while Brother Dortch expressed confidence that, much like *The Charlotte Observer* during the PTL scandals, “another media outlet is going to eventually get sick and tired of hearing these lies on TV.”¹⁵⁶ Although Bakker’s antifans were unable to attract journalistic attention, *TJBFF* would provoke a counteroffensive from fervent, faithful fans of the televangelist, as well as Morningside ministry itself, both of which heavily influenced Ron’s decision to discontinue his blog.

Counter-Investigation, Copyright, and the End of *The Jim Bakker Foodbucket Fanpage*

The Jim Bakker Foodbucket Fanpage’s confrontational nature, combined with Ron’s decision not to moderate comments, encouraged defenders of the televangelist to air their opinions on the blog. During our interview, Ron described himself as “the kind of person who’s open to changing their views,” and he accordingly hoped that *TJBFF* could function as a forum where debate and discussion between Jim Bakker’s faithful and antifans would convince the former to reevaluate their support of the televangelist. “I don’t want to talk just to talk,” he stated, “Let’s talk and let’s see if we can reach a conclusion.” Ron’s hopes, however, stood in contrast to his previous experience with Christian commenters on his atheist blog, who, he recalled, were often more interested in getting into a “fight” than working towards mutually accepted truths.¹⁵⁷ Some of *TJBFF*’s other most vocal antifans also welcomed the participation of Bakker’s faithful fans in the blog’s commenting areas. “I am glad to see the Bakker supporters

¹⁵⁵ “Kool-Aid Kid,” February 14, 2012 (6:18 pm), comment on Ron Johnson, “Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th episode with Idol Worship, part two.”

¹⁵⁶ “Brother Dortch,” February 28, 2012 (11:23 am), comment on Ron Johnson, “Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th episode with Idol Worship, part two.”

¹⁵⁷ Ron Johnson, Skype interview by author, January 20, 2012.

here also and I want them to know that, as (sic) least as far as I'm concerned, they are welcome here," wrote Brother Dortch, who nevertheless also urged pro-Bakker participants to "place their comments here using some bit of reason and logic that makes sense."¹⁵⁸

Brother Dortch's emphases on "reason" and "logic" reflect broader antifan concerns that the allegedly irrational religiosity of the Morningside "zombies" could infect meaningful discussion and debate. Thus, much like Ron's vision for *TJBFF* as a whole, select influential antifans encouraged a commenting culture in which religious beliefs were bracketed, in order to focus on the actions of Jim Bakker. Prominent antifan Tanya, for example, argued that the blog's purpose was not to address "questions about God and/or religion," but to evaluate "Jim Bakker's behavior."¹⁵⁹ One of Tanya's primary tactics in this regard was to catch purported contradictions and incongruities in Bakker's televised messages, thereby critiquing his sincerity. For example, referencing a "recent show" in which "Jim was raving about the dangers of salt," Tanya publicly questioned how much salt was in his own "highly processed garbage-food". "Hypocritical, but very Jim Bakker," she argued, "to preach the dangers of processed food, then make money off it."¹⁶⁰ Tanya also gained recognition and praise in *TJBFF*'s commenting areas for applying her self-described "rational" approach to interactions with the televangelist's supporters, as in the case of a pro-Bakker commenter who decried the site's "craven Bakker Haters," who allegedly "never bolster their innuendos and rumour with any substantial facts and reasoning. Just a lot of weasel words and weak accusations."¹⁶¹ "Have you actually read all the comments?" asked Tanya, who catalogued the myriad forms of evidence collected on the site: "links to information"; "newspaper articles copied/pasted into the comments"; "what Jim Bakker says

¹⁵⁸ "Brother Dortch," February 21, 2012 (3:55 pm), comment on Ron Johnson, "Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th episode with Idol Worship, part two."

¹⁵⁹ "Tanya," April 1, 2012 (10:28 pm), comment on Ron Johnson, "Jim Bakker scribbles on Zach, talks junk with Bill Whaley part 3."

¹⁶⁰ "Tanya," February 22, 2012 (12:08 pm), comment on Ron Johnson, "Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th episode with Idol Worship, part two."

¹⁶¹ For the criticisms of the "craven Bakker haters," see "Just saying..." February 23, 2012 (9:32 am), comment on Ron Johnson, "Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th episode with Idol Worship, part two." According to Tanya, "Ron provided a place where Bakker-supporters could come and present rational, compelling information about Jim Bakker"; see "Tanya," April 21, 2012 (12:12 am), comment on Ron Johnson, "Jim Bakker scribbles on Zach, talks junk with Bill Whaley part 3."

during his shows”; “the history of Jim Bakker.” “Of course, if reading comprehension and critical thinking are a challenge,” she snarkily added, “disregard the above.”¹⁶²

“As others have said,” Tanya wrote, “I also welcome the Bakker-supporters (sic), and their comments – it would, however, be fantastic if they read all the comments before posting. Then they could at least be accurate in their attacks.”¹⁶³ Such expectations of well-planned, researched, and rational debate on the part of Bakker’s faithful fans were not, however, reflected in the activities of many commenting antifans, who, in line with the style of *TJBFF* as established by Ron, often deployed satirical jabs rather than strict reason. Perhaps the commenting areas’ most renowned comedian was the aforementioned Kool-Aid Kid, who earned a coterie of fans for his/her combative humor.¹⁶⁴ For example, in response to a calm and straightforward defense of Bakker’s products by an anonymous commenter – “I think those foods are simply delicious... We were snowed in, no big deal, but the food buckets really came in handy. I suggest the Raspberries and the Potatoes.” – Kool-Aid Kid delivered a mocking retort, labelling the original commenter a “hillbilly”: “Glad to hear you are enjoying the zombie food. I suggest you get a brain in your head.”¹⁶⁵ Moreover, despite calls for religiously dispassionate contributions from Bakker’s supporters, many commenting antifans also perpetuated Ron’s understanding of authentic Christianity as anti-materialistic and uncommodified, and similarly weighed the televangelist’s actions against a Biblical standard. “Praying to the statue,” one anonymous commenter wrote of Bakker’s evident devotion to Morningside’s “Christus,” “did Jim forget thou shall have no graven images?...wonder (sic) what God thinks of all this (?)”¹⁶⁶

Overall, the commenting areas of *The Jim Bakker Foodbucket Fanpage* were hostile to support for, and defenses of, the titular televangelist, and pro-Bakker sentiments were, in general, swiftly pounced on, unraveled, and belittled. This antagonistic tenor encouraged a

¹⁶² “Tanya,” February 23, 2012 (12:54 pm), comment on Ron Johnson, “Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th episode with Idol Worship, part two.”

¹⁶³ “Tanya,” February 25, 2012 (1:45 am), comment on Ron Johnson, “Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th episode with Idol Worship, part two.”

¹⁶⁴ For praise of Kool-Aid Kid from an individual with the pseudonym “KaK Fan,” see “KaK Fan,” March 31, 2012 (11:38 am), comment on Ron Johnson, “Jim Bakker scribbles on Zach, talks junk with Bill Whaley part 3.”

¹⁶⁵ “Anonymous,” February 15, 2012 (11:44 am), comment on Ron Johnson, “Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th episode with Idol Worship, part two”; “Kool-Aid Kid,” February 15, 2012 (12:25 pm), comment on Ron Johnson, “Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th episode with Idol Worship, part two.”

¹⁶⁶ “Anonymous,” February 13, 2012 (6:23 am), comment on Ron Johnson, “Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th episode with Idol Worship, part two.” The Biblical reference here is from the Decalogue; see Exodus 20:4-6.

counteroffensive which, as will be demonstrated, contributed to Ron's eventual decision to discontinue the blog, and which started with charges that Ron and his fellow antifans were "trolling" Bakker and his followers. Conducted by so-called "trolls," trolling is a widespread online phenomenon involving inflammatory behavior from individuals cloaked in anonymity. Trolls revel in causing confusion, delight in steering conversations off-course by attracting attention to themselves, and can prove challenging to the intended operation of online forums.¹⁶⁷ "Read fast," opened an anonymous contributor to one of *TJBFF*'s commenting areas, "and copy if you want to see it before it gets deleted":

"What we're seeing here, Morningside friends and family, is an abject group of internet trolls (all 10 or 15 of them – whoopee!) who are creating a sad little fantasy hate group...Don't be the least bit upset by them – these kind of evil wordsmiths will only get worse in the last days...Keep this in mind, no one with even a modicum of self-respect or dignity would brag about being a part of a community as debased as this one – one where they celebrate someone who ridicules bodily functions, a person's size, the shape of their fingers, their age, their IQ, and any other thing he chooses while using an anonymous persona."

The commenter encouraged Bakker's supporters not to enter into debates and thereby "feed the trolls" – common online parlance for playing into the games of such troublemakers – for fear of being afflicted with their "hate."¹⁶⁸ These accusations provoked swift reactions from some of *TJBFF*'s most prominent antifans. Ron, labelled the "head troll" by the above commenter, took issue with the suggestion that his/her comment was in danger of being removed.¹⁶⁹ "(W)hat indication have I ever given that I would delete a Bakker supporters (sic) post?" Ron wrote, "This is not the Jim Bakker show, where Jim controls the message and stamps out dissent with a pink slip or crafty edit. Your post will stand with all the rest."¹⁷⁰ Ron also highlighted the irony of an anonymous poster criticizing antifans who likewise chose to conceal their identities: "How

¹⁶⁷ See, for example, Susan Herring, Kirk Job-Sluder, Rebecca Scheckler, and Sasha Barab, "Searching for Safety Online: Managing 'Trolling' in a Feminist Forum," *The Information Society* 18, no. 5 (2002): 371-384.

¹⁶⁸ "Anonymous," February 26, 2012 (1:59 pm), comment on Ron Johnson, "Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th episode with Idol Worship, part two."

¹⁶⁹ "Anonymous," February 26, 2012 (2:42 pm), comment on Ron Johnson, "Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th episode with Idol Worship, part two."

¹⁷⁰ "Ron," February 26, 2012 (2:39 pm), comment on Ron Johnson, "Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th episode with Idol Worship, part two."

does a person posting as ‘anonymous’ refer to another as a troll without implicating themselves?”¹⁷¹ Tanya, who relished her bestowed title of “head trollette,” similarly reversed the charges, framing the accuser, somewhat more accurately, as the disruptive force.¹⁷² “If you get your kicks by coming to a blog, NOT reading the comments, and calling them trolls,” Tanya wrote, “well continue to amuse yourself – just acknowledge that you are practicing the behavior that you are condemning.”¹⁷³

In his/her opening comment on trolling, the abovementioned, anonymous Bakker defender included a link to an online article on what author Jane McEntegart referred to as “troll hunting,” focused on an embedded YouTube clip from a 2012 episode of the British Broadcasting Corporation investigative report program *Panorama*, and which, according to the commenter, allowed readers to “see a real life troll when confronted.”¹⁷⁴ In the clip, *Panorama*’s host tracks down and confronts an “RIP troll”: an individual who left intentionally offensive messages on online memorial pages.¹⁷⁵ The program’s goal was not only to expose the troll’s offline identity – middle-aged Cardiff man Darren Burton – but also to gain some insight into his motivations for such unsavory online behavior. Ambushed as he walked to catch a city bus, Burton offered little in the way of explanation, however, besides claiming that “Facebook is an open forum,” and lobbing a combative “fuck ‘em” regarding those whom he had offended.¹⁷⁶ *The Jim Bakker Foodbucket Fanpage* would subsequently feature moves by Bakker supporters to

¹⁷¹ “Ron,” February 26, 2012 (6:23 pm), comment on Ron Johnson, “Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th episode with Idol Worship, part two.”

¹⁷² For “head trollette,” see “Anonymous,” February 26, 2012 (2:46 pm), comment on Ron Johnson, “Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th episode with Idol Worship, part two.” For Tanya’s response to the label, see “Tanya,” February 26, 2012 (2:48 pm), comment on Ron Johnson, “Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th episode with Idol Worship, part two.”

¹⁷³ “Tanya,” February 28, 2012 (12:44 am), comment on Ron Johnson, “Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th episode with Idol Worship, part two.”

¹⁷⁴ “Anonymous,” February 26, 2012 (1:59 pm), comment on Ron Johnson, “Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th episode with Idol Worship, part two.” Jane McEntegart, “Internet Troll Gets Tracked Down, Confronted in Real Life,” *Tom’s Hardware*, February 14, 2012, <http://www.tomshardware.com/news/Troll-cyberbully-real-life-troll-hunting-BBC,14690.html>, accessed January 29, 2015. For the YouTube video embedded in the article, see “Tracking the Internet Trolls | The Next Web,” YouTube video, 3:08, posted by “The Next Web,” February 7, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1kFNYuteAjA>. For the date of the *Panorama* episode (February 6, 2012), and an overview, see Lucy Mangan, “*Panorama*’s Study of Cyber-Bullying was a Portrait of Human Nature at its Worst,” *The Guardian* (UK), February 7, 2012.

¹⁷⁵ For “RIP trolls,” see Whitney Phillips, “LOLing at Tragedy: Facebook Trolls, Memorial Pages and Resistance to Grief Online,” *First Monday* 16, no. 12 (2011): n.p.

¹⁷⁶ “Tracking the Internet Trolls | The Next Web,” YouTube video.

expose the identities, biases, and underlying motivations of two prominent antifans who took great strides to remain anonymous: Brother Dortch and Ron himself.

On March 14, 2012, an anonymous commenter attacked Brother Dortch, intending to raise questions about his/her credibility. “Ok, Dortch,” opened the commenter, “you’ve been on this campaign for a long time...AND, you seem to have a lot of inside information (correction, you THINK you have insider information).” “But,” the commenter continued, “I suspect you are the embittered, fired employee that has a huge bone to pick with all things Morningside. I’m not sure what finally got you canned, but I am sure you had not an ounce of maturity or integrity...cause (sic) you still don’t. You redefine weasle (sic).”¹⁷⁷ Presumably the same commenter followed with cryptic tidbits about Brother Dortch’s alleged personal background. “Dortsch (sic),” challenged the commenter, “how much money have you taken from those who thought you were in a bad way? How much? How loud did you sing your pitiful little song about moving all the way across the country...just to get fired unfairly?”¹⁷⁸ Such allegations overlapped with the reported experiences of a disgruntled former Morningside employee, which were posted to his personal blog on November 30, 2010.

Titled “I Was Wrong,” a play on Bakker’s 1996 book, the blog post featured the testimony of a man who claimed to have first worked with Bakker at the Dream Center in Los Angeles, and who, with his wife, followed Bakker to Morningside, where he worked in the ministry’s “media department.” In Missouri, however, he found that Bakker was “no longer the kind, humble, serving, fallen-now-redeemed preacher I had met in L.A.,” but had become “focused on a mission to regain his former glory” – spending the bulk of the ministry’s airtime “hawking his goods,” crafting programs “almost completely devoid of the Gospel,” and subjecting his staff to intolerable working conditions. After a demotion, without cause, to “junior member” in the media department, the blogger reported that he was eventually fired for refusing to work long hours for low pay.¹⁷⁹ There are some hints, although not conclusive, that this

¹⁷⁷ “Anonymous,” March 14, 2012 (5:53 pm), comment on Ron Johnson “Tired of Jim Bakker’s deception game? Write your Senator, Representative, or IRS office!” *The Jim Bakker Foodbucket Fanpage*, February 28, 2011, <http://jimbakker666.blogspot.ca/2012/02/tired-of-jim-bakkers-deception-game.html>, accessed January 29, 2015.

¹⁷⁸ “Anonymous,” March 14, 2012 (6:47 pm), comment on Ron Johnson “Tired of Jim Bakker’s deception game? Write your Senator, Representative, or IRS office!”

¹⁷⁹ “GMVFX,” “I Was Wrong,” *GMVFX Photography*, November 30, 2012, <http://gmvfx.wordpress.com/2010/11/30/I-was-wrong/>, accessed January 29, 2015.

blogger and *TJBFF*'s Brother Dortch were indeed the same person. For one, working in Morningside's media department would have likely put the blogger in close contact with the ministry's Master's Media students, the personal lives of whom Brother Dortch claimed considerable knowledge. Second, Brother Dortch betrayed a deep understanding of television production practices, including references to "a computer-based non-linear editing system," editing "magnetic tape," and the need to "white balance a camera."¹⁸⁰ Finally, Brother Dortch conspicuously refused repeated requests to deny that s/he had been fired from Morningside. "Just come out and say 'I never worked for Jim Bakker and he did not fire me,'" an anonymous commenter challenged Brother Dortch, "If you do that, you could disqualify the long-winded trolls (sic) comments once and for all."¹⁸¹

"I think the character of the people posting on this blog and their motivations matter," the above pro-Bakker commenter wrote – opinions which underlined probes into the offline identity of *The Jim Bakker Foodbucket Fanpage*'s founder.¹⁸² On May 16, 2012, an anonymous commenter encouraged readers to publicly reveal what they knew of other commenters: "If you know a person's real name, address, or any other personal information, let's post that too. Let's start with Ron. I know quite a bit about him."¹⁸³ The next day, seemingly the same commenter complained that one of the blog's "bucket jerks" had threatened to post "MY ip (Internet Protocol address) and (telephone) area code," reflecting the harassment of "Jim and his family" by antifans such as Ron, "who troll every little piece of information (they) can possibly find about them and use it, if possible, to harm them." Although the commenter assured Ron that s/he was "not interested in posting your real name or anything about you though I do know who you are," s/he conveyed a veiled threat that there would be "a cost to be paid" should he continue with "this mission of 'bringing down Bakker'." "Scarey (sic) thought, isn't it," concluded the commenter, who addressed Ron by his real initials.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸⁰ "Brother Dortch," December 14, 2011 (12:16 pm), comment on Ron Johnson, "Jim Bakker welcomes Kellie Copeland-[Insert Name Here] part 2."

¹⁸¹ "Anonymous," April 4, 2012 (9:42 am), comment on Ron Johnson, "Jim Bakker scribbles on Zach, talks junk with Bill Whaley part 3."

¹⁸² *Ibid.*

¹⁸³ "Anonymous," May 16, 2012 (6:19 pm), comment on Ron Johnson, "Jim Bakker exploits 9/11 attacks to sell product, censors YouTube videos of his own show," *The Jim Bakker Foodbucket Fanpage*, May 12, 2012, <http://jimbakker666.blogspot.ca/2012/05/jim-bakker-exploits-911-attacks-to-sell.html>, accessed January 29, 2015.

¹⁸⁴ "Anonymous," May 17, 2012 (8:12 am), comment on Ron Johnson, "Jim Bakker exploits 9/11 attacks to sell product, censors YouTube videos of his own show," *The Jim Bakker Foodbucket Fanpage*.

During our initial interview, Ron plausibly proposed that such information was uncovered by following links that he himself had posted to his blog, most notably links to a blog run by Phil Naessens, a Christian blogger and fellow Jim Bakker critic.¹⁸⁵ Ron was an active commenter on Naessens' Bakker-related posts, and also debated Bakker supporters on the site. On January 23, 2012, a poster with the telling pseudonym "embarrassed (sic) to be here" responded to Naessens' lament that many Bakker supporters commenting on his blog tended to "hide behind screen names and fake email addresses."¹⁸⁶ "Like who, Phil? Ron?" replied "embarrassed..." who posted information about "the Atheist" from Ron's since-defunct *Diary of an Atheist* blog, including his actual first name.¹⁸⁷ Besides his shady anonymity, "embarrassed..." argued that Ron's status as an atheist disqualified him from debates about authentic Christianity: "I will never argue with a non-Christian. To me, they automatically do the work of Satan."¹⁸⁸ Likewise, on April 3, 2012, an anonymous commenter revealed Ron's atheism on *The Jim Bakker Foodbucket Fanpage* by providing a link to *Diary of an Atheist*, ostensibly to share "insight into the psyche of this blog's owner," and discredit his diatribes against Bakker.¹⁸⁹ While Ron downplayed this revelation during our initial interview, it did counter his efforts to enhance his blog's perceived objectivity by never mentioning his atheistic stance.¹⁹⁰

In our initial interview, Ron cited such online counter-investigative measures as one of his main reasons for discontinuing *The Jim Bakker Foodbucket Fanpage*, and he expressed concern about the possibility of violent reprisals from the televangelist's most fervent followers. "It's a cult," Ron asserted, and while he affirmed that he was "not scared," and even made light of the situation, he added, "I certainly don't want them to know who I am, because if they're

¹⁸⁵ Ron Johnson, Skype interview by author, January 20, 2012. For Naessen's blog, see *What Color is the Sky in Their World?*, <http://phillyflash.wordpress.com/>, accessed January 29, 2015.

¹⁸⁶ "Phil Naessens," January 23, 2012 (12:01 pm), comment on Phil Naessens, "A Former Employee Speaks Out In Regards to Morningside and Jim Bakker," *What Color is the Sky in Their World?*, September 19, 2010, <http://phillyflash.wordpress.com/2010/09/19/a-former-employee-speaks-out-in-regards-to-morningside-and-jim-bakker/>, accessed January 29, 2015.

¹⁸⁷ "embarrassed (sic) to be here," January 23, 2012 (8:39 pm), comment on Phil Naessens, "A Former Employee Speaks Out In Regards to Morningside and Jim Bakker."

¹⁸⁸ "embarrassed (sic) to be here," January 23, 2012 (8:39 pm), comment on Phil Naessens, "A Former Employee Speaks Out In Regards to Morningside and Jim Bakker." "embarrassed" posted information from Ron's blog entry, "Masturbation Guilt hits home," *Diary of an Atheist*, October 6, 2007, <http://diaryofanatheist.blogspot.ca/2007/10/masturbation-guilt-hits-home.html>, accessed January 29, 2015.

¹⁸⁹ "Anonymous," April 3, 2012 (8:17 pm), comment on Ron Johnson, "Jim Bakker scribbles on Zach, talks junk with Bill Whaley part 3."

¹⁹⁰ Ron Johnson, Skype interview by author, January 20, 2012.

crazy enough to move to Jim Bakker land, they're crazy enough to come and kill me.”¹⁹¹ Aside from his pseudonym, Ron posted a faux-interview with himself as his last entry to *TJBFF*, in which he wrote that he resided in Boulder, Colorado rather than California – a piece of intentional misinformation intended to throw angered Bakker supporters off of his trail.¹⁹² Aside from the “threats” of Bakker’s faithful fans, Ron found that the blog had “become more work than pleasure,” and that the time demands of taking care of an “ill parent,” along with an increased work schedule, left little time for blogging.¹⁹³ The waning days of *TJBFF*, however, witnessed the first counteraction against Ron’s activities by Bakker’s Morningside ministry proper.

As briefly touched on above, Bakker’s antifans had long speculated that *TJBFF* was monitored by Morningside, and evidence of such surveillance was found in ministry actions understood to be reactions to blog discussions: Bakker’s willingness to meet with Joe C following the latter’s public complaints, as discussed above; the removal of Master’s Media YouTube videos derided by antifans for their sloppy production values and questionable content.¹⁹⁴ Moreover, apparent insider Brother Dortch straightforwardly stated that the “site is seen and viewed daily by Bakker’s close inner management as well as his regular, ordinary employees also – not including present and past students.”¹⁹⁵ While the extent of Morningside’s surveillance of *TJBFF* cannot be determined precisely, the ministry did take notice, and action, when Ron expanded his blog’s presence to YouTube. As discussed previously, Ron had championed YouTube to Joe C as a potentially valuable antifan tool, and he framed his “Foodbucket Fanpage” YouTube channel as a way “to expose all those other things Jim Bakker does” that could not be covered in his blog, such as Bakker’s numerous “phony prophecies and/or appeals for money.”¹⁹⁶ As with his blog’s still images, Ron used his mobile phone to

¹⁹¹ Ron Johnson, Skype interview by author, January 20, 2012.

¹⁹² See Ron Johnson, “An Interview with Foodbucket Fanpage blogger Ron Johnson,” *The Jim Bakker Foodbucket Fanpage*, May 20, 2012, <http://jimbakker666.blogspot.ca/2012/05/interview-with-foodbucket-fanpage.html>, accessed January 29, 2015.

¹⁹³ Emails from Ron Johnson, April 29, 2012; April 5, 2013; May 4, 2013; November 2, 2014.

¹⁹⁴ For Brother Dortch’s complaints about a Masters Media-associated “gangster rap video,” and another “God awful (sic) video,” see “Brother Dortch,” December 21, 2011 (3:42 pm), comment on Ron Johnson, “Jim Bakker welcomes Kellie Copeland-[Insert Name Here] part 2.”

¹⁹⁵ “Brother Dortch,” December 27, 2011 (1:32 pm), comment on Ron Johnson, “Jim Bakker Show 2011 Wrap-up: The Scammys.”

¹⁹⁶ For, “to expose all those...,” see “Ron,” February 28, 2012 (1:43 pm), comment on Ron Johnson “Tired of Jim Bakker’s deception game? Write your Senator, Representative, or IRS office!” For “phony prophecies,” see “Ron,”

record digital video off of his television screen, which he then uploaded to YouTube, and occasionally embedded in his blog.¹⁹⁷ The clips consisted of footage from Bakker’s programs, provided with illustrative titles by Ron. For example, a clip taken from the 2000th episode has Bakker discussing prophetic portents of the end times – “So many calendars end this year. So many prophetic things” – while also confidently asserting, “It’s not the end of the world,” just before a sharp closing edit. Ron’s intended meaning for this video proof text, which he embedded in his coverage of the episode was revealed in his title for the clip: “Jim Bakker double-talking us.mp4.”¹⁹⁸

Ron’s YouTube activities were short lived, however, as he was quickly faced with a bevy of copyright claims from Morningside, rendering his uploaded videos inaccessible to viewers. Angered, Ron lashed out at Bakker and his ministry in a May 12, 2012 posting, his penultimate contribution to *The Jim Bakker Foodbucket Fanpage*. Ron argued that the uploaded videos “were no different than those Jim puts out every weekday morning, they were only shorter in duration. Small clips, unedited and unchanged” – a statement downplaying the inherently rhetorical nature of his video proof-texting. “The only thing added to them,” Ron continued, “was my critique, which was apparently *spot on* since Jim couldn’t bear having them available for the world to read.” “Real preachers don’t sacrifice Christ’s message in order to save themselves from scorn,” he added, “In taking down videos of your very own show, you did just that.” Arguing, with some validity, that fair use laws were in his corner, Ron suggested that he “could petition YouTube to reinstate the Foodbucket Fanpage videos”; however, he admitted that he did not have the “time,” nor the “desire to fight.”¹⁹⁹ Despite further combative statements by Ron – “you will not silence me here, Jim”; “you will not censor my own thoughts and words without a fight” – his next post

February 25, 2012 (5:58 pm), comment on Ron Johnson, “Jim Bakker celebrates 2,000th episode with Idol Worship, part two.” Ron’s “Foodbucket Fanpage” YouTube channel is since defunct.

¹⁹⁷ Email from Ron Johnson, May 4, 2013.

¹⁹⁸ Although Ron’s “Foodbucket Fanpage” YouTube channel is defunct, he has since re-uploaded this video as “Jim Bakker double-talking us.mp4,” YouTube video, 0:19, posted by “dan614614’s channel,” February 12, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OWBKmu1s9uc>.

¹⁹⁹ See Ron Johnson, “Jim Bakker exploits 9/11 attacks to sell product, censors YouTube videos of his own show.” This posting also contains a screen capture of the copyright notices from Ron’s YouTube account.

would prove to be his last, and he signed off his blog with a quote from the famed satirist Mark Twain: “Against the assault of laughter, nothing can stand.”²⁰⁰

Conclusion

For Ron, the end of his Bakker blogging also marked the end of his antifandom, and he reported that he has since been “unable to watch (Bakker) without feeling a compulsion to write and/or vomit.”²⁰¹ In the commenting area of his final post, Ron’s resignation was met with a wide variety of responses: celebration from Bakker’s supporters, who often claimed victory; regrets from those who believed that he had given up the fight too soon; and statements of thanks and understanding from many in *The Jim Bakker Foodbucket Fanpage* antifan community, who, if not for Ron’s blog, would have been unlikely to interact with such a broad swath of likeminded others. While the blog’s final commenting area would continue to facilitate the exchange of Bakker-related information, attacks, and humor for some time, *TJBFF*’s antifan community slowly dissolved.²⁰² Over the course of its brief existence, however, this antifan community evidenced a more confrontational and combative form of Recreational Christianity than the others discussed thus far, combining satirical humor and information sharing as a means of attacking a perceived religious fake, and, it was hoped, contributing to the downfall of his ministry. Although they were not able to achieve this rather lofty goal, *TJBFF* highlighted new possibilities for antifan antagonists, and new challenges for televangelist ministries, in an online and digital age.

The core of *TJBFF*’s potential to do real damage to Jim Bakker’s ministry was its status as a thriving knowledge community, in which information challenging the televangelist’s sincerity and propriety was shared. Most intriguing was the online collaborative investigation of Morningside’s Lori’s House construction project, and, in particular, the combined contributions of the individual antifans Joe C and Brother Dortch, who offered on-the-ground surveillance and research; a counter-history to Bakker’s official, broadcasted history of past charitable successes;

²⁰⁰ Ron Johnson, “An Interview with Foodbucket Fanpage blogger Ron Johnson.” For the original quote, see Mark Twain, *The Mysterious Stranger Manuscripts*, ed. William M. Gibson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 166.

²⁰¹ Email from Ron Johnson, May 4, 2013.

²⁰² See the comment page appended to Ron Johnson, “An Interview with Foodbucket Fanpage blogger Ron Johnson.”

and links to satellite images and other online information intended to heighten suspicions about the televangelist, and, perhaps, to discover legal misdeeds. Although the effects of such efforts were rather limited, and largely restricted to *TJBF*, they demonstrate that the ability to conduct fairly sophisticated, public investigations of televangelists is no longer restricted to mainstream journalistic media, but can be engaged in by everyday individuals collaborating online – a distinct new challenge for broadcasting ministries.

Chapter 9 – Conclusion

The figure of the televangelist has long been one of America's foremost symbols of religious fakery, a representation that has been sustained and circulated via humor. The mass approach of such preachers, both central to their success and a key contributor to suspicions regarding their intentions, has rendered them vulnerable to unintended appropriations, including by dedicated viewers who have generally derived tongue-in-cheek titillation, rather than spiritual enlightenment, from their programs. This dissertation's cultural-historical analyses of unfaithful fan followings of three controversial televangelists has made fresh contributions to the field of religion, media, and culture. Most obviously, it has broadened the study of religion and fandom by examining active and productive fan followings of religious celebrities not patterned by sincere devotion, but rather by ironic, parodic, and satirical play with high-profile preachers widely considered to be religious fakes. The existence of these unexpected fans, some of whose activities contributed to shifts in the brands and mainstream representations of their chosen televangelists, suggests that studies of religion and popular culture and the American religious marketplace ought to pay increased attention to how everyday individuals make their own culture out of religious commodities and celebrities, and the cultural economies within which these creations circulate. Examining the participatory media practices of these fans, moreover, has revealed intriguing areas of convergence between analog alternative media and both mainstream and online media that have remained largely unexplored in the study of religion and media.

While the example of *The Jim Bakker Foodbucket Fanpage* evidenced the potential for unfaithful televangelical fan followings to thrive on the Internet, this researcher has thus far been unable to locate similar groups online. It may well be, as lamented by some former members of the Robert Tilton Fan Club, that mainstream American televangelism, dominated as it is by comparatively dull preachers like Joel Osteen, is less suited to the development of unfaithful fandoms than the "Golden Age" of boisterous and scandal-ridden televangelists during the late-1980s and early-1990s. At the same time, however, the increasing use of online streaming video by evangelical broadcasters, including by Golden Age relics such as Jim Bakker and Robert Tilton, has resulted in a situation in which preachers perceived as amusingly extreme, insincere, inept, and/or false have become increasingly available to irreverent viewers. Indeed, as discussed

above, Bakker's ministry archives all of its episodes as on-demand streaming videos, a practice that allowed the televangelist's antifans to keep up to date on his broadcasts and therefore helped, however inadvertently, to sustain his antifan following. The Internet, moreover, has made it easier for unfaithful fans to find and follow fringier, unintentionally amusing online preachers. Brother Russell of the RTFC, for example, revealed in an email exchange that he had used YouTube to find and watch especially bizarre "intervangelists," some of whom were reminiscent of laughably strange cable-access preachers like Jonathan Bell.¹ Yet, the likelihood that such online broadcasters might serve as the basis for dedicated, unfaithful fan relationships, much less unfaithful fan followings, is low, due in no small part to their often sporadic output, limited lifespans, and overall obscurity.

Despite the seeming paucity of current unfaithful televangelical fandoms, the fans discussed in this dissertation anticipated and reflected contemporary appropriations of, and play with, not only televangelists, but conservative Christian commodities more broadly. An ideal example comes in the form of a well-travelled blog frequented by both Brothers Russell and Randall of the RTFC: *Christian Nightmares*.² Founded in 2009 by an anonymous and angry former Baptist, *Christian Nightmares* highlights the potential analytical utility of Brother Randall's concept of Recreational Christianity when defined as "the ironic play with Christianities considered strange, extreme, and/or false."³ Filled with images, videos, links, and short synopses related to a constellation of conservative, and often kitschy, Christian cultural artifacts from across a wide swath of time (including, unsurprisingly, many televangelists and online video preachers) *Christian Nightmares* aims to provoke ironic amusement in visitors while simultaneously making serious claims about the material presented, including about its religious authenticity. As the blog's founder explained in an interview, working on the website had proven personally "therapeutic" and "cathartic," helping him/her to deal with disorienting childhood experiences with those who had purportedly "twisted Jesus' teachings" for their own

¹ Brother Russell, email interview by author, August 3, 2013. Brother Russell described such online preachers as "intervangelists" following Bekkering, "From Televangelist to Intervangelist."

² Brother Russell mentioned his frequent visits to the site in an email to the author on December 7, 2011. Brother Randall's relationship with the site is evidenced by links on his own blog *Snake Oil: For Fans of TV Preachers and Related Kooky Khristian Kulture*, <http://snakeoilblog.blogspot.ca/>, accessed January 29, 2015. For the site itself, see *Christian Nightmares*, <http://christiannightmares.tumblr.com/>, accessed May 18, 2015.

³ Matthew Paul Turner, "Christian Nightmare Speaks: My Exclusive Interview with the Blogger Behind the Popular Site," *Beliefnet*, <http://www.beliefnet.com/columnists/jesusneedsnewpr/2011/03/christian-nightmare-speaks-my-exclusive-interview-with-the-blogger-behind-the-popular-site.html>, accessed May 18, 2015.

agendas.⁴ This testimonial intersects with that provided by Brother Russell of the RTFC, in particular, regarding the positive influence of this ironic fan following during his troubling and lonely deconversion from fundamentalist Christianity. Moreover, while *Christian Nightmares* is unable to foster much public interpersonal networking among visitors due to its limiting commenting abilities, its founder stated that s/he had received many supportive “emails from people – Christians, non-Christians, and former Christians alike – who say that they really appreciate the blog, and that it’s helped them exorcise their own evangelical/fundamentalist demons.”⁵

In addition to the blog’s personal significance for its creator and many of its visitors, *Christian Nightmares* has also become involved in broader discussions about conservative Christianity’s continued, and purportedly problematic, public influence in America. This has included humor-laden criticisms of conservative Christian positions on sexuality and gender, thereby resembling the first wave of Tammy Faye campy fandom, in particular. In some instances, such criticism has taken the form of posted material intended to be read as both ridiculous and seriously threatening, such as a short clip of 2016 Republican presidential hopeful Ted Cruz suggesting that supporters of gay marriage were engaged in a “jihad” against the rights of America’s “people of faith.”⁶ Elsewhere, however, the tone is relatively tongue-and-cheek and the material more kitschy, such as a clip from a Christian instructional video, sourced from YouTube, featuring a “creepy” father giving dating advice to his teenaged daughter.⁷ Judging from its analog noise and the clothing of its participants, the original version of this video was likely produced sometime during the 1990s, thus revealing another intriguing convergence of analog and online media. While the video was posted to *Christian Nightmares* as an ironically amusing, outdated cultural oddity, it can also be considered a critical commentary on the allegedly archaic and ridiculous sex and gender frameworks promoted by more contemporary

⁴ Turner, “Christian Nightmare Speaks.”

⁵ Randall Stephens, “Christian Nightmares: An Interview with the Creator of the Popular Blog,” *Religion in American History*, <http://usreligion.blogspot.ca/2013/02/christian-nightmares-interview-with.html>, accessed May 18, 2015.

⁶ *Christian Nightmares*, <http://christiannightmares.tumblr.com/post/116034840926/ted-cruz-says-gays-are-waging-jihad-against>, accessed May 18, 2015.

⁷ *Christian Nightmares*, <http://christiannightmares.tumblr.com/post/111965040166/sex-can-kill-a-creepy-christian-dad-offers-7>, accessed May 18, 2015. For the video on YouTube, see “7 Simple Rules for Dating My Christian Daughter,” YouTube video, 4:36, posted by “Honeydew Wilkins,” February 23, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ThD-tZc2ykk>.

conservative Christian individuals and groups. In this vein, the clip was reposted from *Christian Nightmares* to the feminist blog *Jezebel*, which has long attacked patriarchal, conservative Christianities, and which mocked the video's focus on helping girls to avoid "the taunt of slut" by not irresponsibly tempting their dates.⁸

The avowedly satirical Recreational Christianity featured on *Christian Nightmares* intersects with the antifandom of *The Jim Bakker Foodbucket Fanpage*, as well as the approaches of the founders of the Church of the SubGenius and *Zontar* zine towards politically engaged televangelists like Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson. As argued in the second chapter of this dissertation, the Church of the SubGenius (COSG), which has been identified as an early example and forerunner of groups and movements variously labeled as "invented," "virtual," and/or "hyper-real" religions, should be considered less an authentic religion than an, often caustic, comedic commentary about religion and religious authenticity. Arguments that some form of genuine religiosity undergirds the COSG's activities clash with founder Reverend Ivan Stang's own understanding of the group (as well as, most likely, the understandings of the vast majority of its members); unduly downplay its inherently relational nature; and seem motivated by an impulse to "manufacture" new categories of religion for analysis, at the expense of examining the activities of these groups in their cultural-historical contexts.⁹ Academic investigators of such humor-based, religious-like groups should instead dedicate more effort to examining the historical targets of their humor and the motivations behind their play, rather than serving as "caretakers" of their purported religious status – an approach which may permit the discovery and analysis of previously unexamined forms of religious work, such as Recreational Christianity.¹⁰ While the Recreational Christianity practiced by the founders of the COSG and *Zontar* could be explicitly satirical, as seen in their lambasting of Falwell and Robertson, they also engaged in messier fan relationships with less politically involved Pentecostal televangelists that blended ironic and genuine acclaim, thereby foreshadowing both the Robert Tilton Fan Club and campy fans of Tammy Faye Bakker/Messner.

⁸ Kelly Faircloth, "Just Some Cool Christian Dating Rules from a Chill Christian Dad," *Jezebel*, February 24, 2015, <http://jezebel.com/just-some-cool-christian-dating-rules-from-a-chill-chri-1687777363>, accessed May 18, 2015.

⁹ See Russell T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, *Critics Not Caretakers: Redescribing the Public Study of Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001).

Common to all of the unfaithful televangelical fandoms examined in this dissertation was a theologically evaluative edge, first and foremost criticizing the commodification of Christianity embodied by their chosen television ministries. As discussed in the contexts of the Robert Tilton Fan Club and the first wave of Tammy Faye campy fandom, these fans' playful engagement with such theological issues could overlap with mainstream media scandals, through which their selected televangelists were publicly convicted as insincere and greedy religious fakes. Celebrity revival preacher scandals have long been a popular form of American entertainment and a source of critical comedy. As revealed in the fourth chapter's discussion of the damaging scandal that surrounded Robert Tilton in 1991, tabloid-esque television news outlets used ironic humor, in the form of video proof texts highlighting the preacher's purported absurdity, to delegitimize his ministry. It was further demonstrated that the Trinity Foundation, a Christian organization theologically opposed to Tilton, and which had surveilled and taped his broadcasts for many years, was largely responsible for these flashes of Recreational Christianity at the heart of the national media scandal, having contributed to news outlets short video clips of the televangelist at his most unintentionally ridiculous. While the Trinity Foundation succeeded in injecting its own participatory media artifacts into the scandal by partnering with mainstream media companies, the media and practices of unfaithful fans of Robert Tilton, much like those of the first wave of Tammy Faye campy fans, were largely relegated to the cultural margins, despite some limited mainstream recognition.

As indicated by the viral rebranding of Robert Tilton as "Pastor Gas," however, televangelist-themed participatory media produced and distributed by everyday individuals, unfaithful fans or otherwise, can have a much more significant cultural impact in the online and digital age. In addition to "farting preacher" treatments of other superstar televangelists ranging from Joyce Meyer to T.D. Jakes, which have attracted tens of thousands of views, YouTube harbors an immense and ever-shifting collection of humorous remixes of television preachers.¹¹ Indeed, at the time of writing entering the term "televangelist" into YouTube's search form and organizing the results by view count revealed that the third most popular video, at more than three-hundred thousand views, was a compilation mixing footage of a trio of faith healing

¹¹ See "Farting Granny Preacher," YouTube video, 6:12, posted by "frog97man," August 29, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JRT0liJY87I>; "Farting Preacher T.D. Jakes," YouTube video, 1:50, posted by "iames85," November 5, 2008, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gvmijPkFBJQ>.

televangelists, including the aforementioned Benny Hinn, with sound effects and graphics taken from the video game *Street Fighter II* (1991).¹² Such remixes, in the words of the introductory narration to the latter video, have helped to reinforce the widely held cultural perception that “televangelists are full of shit,” and have negatively impacted the brands of specific television preachers.¹³ Besides remixes, individuals have also shared their own televangelist-themed parody videos on YouTube, such as “THE EDDIE LONG STROKE VIDEO.” Uploaded in the wake of public claims in 2010 that the titular television preacher had groomed a number of young men in his congregation for sex, the video features actors sporting muscles suits, in mimicry of Long’s hyper-masculine appearance, and engaging in lewd dancing to an original song.¹⁴ The creators of this video thereby playfully, yet critically, participated in the media scandal that surrounded Long, much like the members of the Robert Tilton Fan Club had with their own chosen television preacher nearly two decades prior. However, the Eddie Long parody, which had been viewed more than one hundred thousand times by the time of writing, arguably had a considerably greater cultural impact than the RTFC’s activities, due largely to its relative accessibility as a YouTube video.

The example of Tammy Faye Bakker/Messner’s accommodation of, and self-marketing towards, her campy fans suggests that unintended appropriations and uses of televangelists need not *necessarily* be entirely negative situations for religious broadcasters. In the case of Tammy Faye, her once somewhat critical campy fans paved the way for a subsequent, career-rejuvenating rebranding venture, as discussed in the seventh chapter of this dissertation. More recently, Joel Osteen’s ministry used a widely reported online hoax as an opportunity to clarify and promote the preacher’s existing brand. In April 2013, it was announced through a fake ministry website, Facebook page, Twitter account, and YouTube channel that Osteen had not only decided to resign as pastor of Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas, but had chosen to leave the Christian faith entirely. The man who claimed responsibility for the hoax, Justin Tribble, explained to *ABC News* that although he was a “big fan” of the televangelist – if sincere, another

¹² “Televangelists Are Ridiculous – This is Why,” YouTube video, 2:20, posted by “Distractify,” July 29, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NXiuox2F_qg.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ “THE EDDIE LONG STROKE VIDEO,” YouTube video, 4:57, posted by “ASSBAKWARDS PRESENTS EDDIE LON,” October 18, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y46B1u9F5xs>. For the Long scandal, see Chipumuro, “Pastor, Mentor, or Father?”

intriguing indicator of the potential complexity of televangelical fandom – he wanted to draw attention to what he saw as the artificiality of Osteen’s public persona: “I want a message to get through to this guy: ‘Tone down the clichés and get real.’”¹⁵ Tribble’s fake Osteen website also took shots at the religious authenticity of the televangelist’s “feel good Christianity,” as well as his amassing of a personal “fortune” through “books and television deals.”¹⁶ Asked for comment by *ABC News*, Osteen, flashing his trademark smile throughout the interview, used the hoax as a public platform to reiterate his message of positivity, optimism, and perseverance: “I’m really not angry. I don’t feel like a victim. I think a lot of it is my personality; I feel too blessed (and) life is too short to let things like this get you down.”¹⁷

Notwithstanding Osteen’s tolerant, amused, and somewhat dismissive reaction, this online hoax, which had apparently convinced numerous individuals and media outlets that the preacher had indeed lost his faith, represented a real threat to the televangelist’s brand, and therefore demanded the attention of his ministry. While in this case there appears to have been little lasting damage done, the example of “Pastor Gas” and Robert Tilton has demonstrated how the viral online spread of televangelist-themed participatory media can make it extremely difficult, if not effectively impossible, for broadcasting ministries to reassert definitional control over their own brands. In addition to such concerns, there is also the potential, as discussed in the eighth chapter’s overview of *The Jim Bakker Foodbucket Fanpage*, for online aggregates of everyday individuals to initiate and conduct their own collaborative investigations of suspicious televangelists. Although Jim Bakker’s online antifans did not succeed in their goal of having the preacher removed from the airwaves, and despite the fact that many participants believed toppling the televangelist would require the power and reach of mainstream journalistic media, their information-sharing activities were provocative, and Bakker’s ministry moved to quash the extension of the *TJBFF*’s influence to YouTube. This suggests that televangelist ministries, and mass-mediated, commoditized, and celebrity-oriented forms of religion in general, will have to

¹⁵ “Joel Osteen ‘Too Shallow’ for Man Behind Internet Hoax,” *ABC News*, April 10, 2013, <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/headlines/2013/04/joel-osteen-too-shallow-for-man-behind-internet-hoax/>.

¹⁶ For an archived version of this website, originally dating from April 5, 2013, see <http://web.archive.org/web/20130405012832/http://www.joelostenministries.com/>, accessed May 18, 2015.

¹⁷ “Joel Osteen Internet Hoax Claimed Pastor Quit Faith,” YouTube video, 5:59, posted by “ABC News,” April 9, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DyMdOr7dH-8>. For an overview of Osteen’s brand, see Einstein, *Brands of Faith*, 122-137.

increasingly contend with such amateur investigative activities, which are likely to become more complicated and effective in the future.

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