Precarious Protestants: Economic Agency in Evangelical Self-Help Literature

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PRECARIOUS PROTESTANTS:
ECONOMIC AGENCY IN EVANGELICAL SELF-HELP LITERATURE

by

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Precarious Protestants: Economic Agency in Evangelical Self-Help Literature
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The final copy of this dissertation has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.
ABSTRACT

Netterlund, Eric Luke (Ph.D., Department of Communication)

Precarious Protestants: Economic Agency in Evangelical Self-Help Literature

Dissertation directed by Associate Professor Lisa A. Flores

In the US, the self-help movement and evangelical Christianity have both served as answers to the anxieties around the instabilities of life under contemporary capitalism. The central question that this dissertation is addressing is how the intersection of these two, as evangelical Christian self-help literature, constitute implicit theories of human agency. This dissertation examines the ways that agency is articulated within evangelical self-help literature and considers what kinds of implications these ways of seeing agency have for rhetorical conceptualizations of agency. Self-help literature is a rich site for studying how agency is discussed and conceptualized in popular texts because one of self-help’s primary purposes to address the agency of the reader by finding the reader’s agency lacking and seeking to position the self-help program as addressing this lack. The worldviews that evangelical Christian self-help literature assume situate human agency inextricably in relation to a divine agent, God, and this relationship deeply complicates the vision of agency articulated by the various self-help texts.

To examine these questions about evangelical self-help and agency, I explored the writings of three different contemporary evangelical Christian authors using the analytic procedures of rhetorical criticism. The three authors, Dave Ramsey, Joel Osteen, and Shane Claiborne, provide three distinct evangelical Christian accounts of agency and distinct accounts of the ways that human agency is complicated by relationships, both between people and between people and God. Drawing on the literatures in rhetoric and communication studies on
agency and self-help, I advance using the concept of agentic orientation as a means to analyze how these texts constitute cohesive frameworks that narrate different conceptualizations of agency. Each of these self-help authors articulate specific agentic orientations that are organized around a relational metaphor: a temperate capitalist agentic orientation organized around servitude, a submissive agentic orientation organized around privilege, and a radical agentic orientation organized around intimacy. I argue that these agentic orientations offer an opportunity to reflect on the narratives that people have of their own agency and some of the ways that these narratives defy common assumptions about agency.
DEDICATION

For Larisa, Emilia, and Edwin
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In a project like the dissertation, it is hard to know where to trace the networks of influence and support, but I will try. First and foremost, I would like to thank my parents for their support through the years and for allowing me opportunities from a young age to explore books and curiosities in my own way. I don’t know if I’d be here if it was not for all those hours spent paging through different volumes and cross-referencing encyclopedia articles on unfamiliar topics and language that I came across in my readings as a child.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The self is a topic of preoccupation in both academic and popular literatures, as well as—and most important—a site of effort and exertion, of evaluation and management, of invention and reinvention... Not only is extensive and ongoing labor on the self required of working people under advanced capitalism, but the labor of caring for others and managing the details of domestic life collides head-on with the imperative that everyone—man, woman, and child—focus on inventing an autonomous or self-sufficient self.¹

Whatever else religion may be, in a mediated and consumption-oriented society it becomes a cultural resource broadly available to the masses. Responsibility falls more upon the individual—like that of the bricoleur—to cobble together a religious world from available images, symbols, moral codes, and doctrines, thereby exercising considerable agency in defining and shaping what is considered to be religiously meaningful.²

The scene is a familiar one. People packed into the seats surrounding their gate at a major US airport. Someone is paging through a book their friend recommended because “It changed the way they see everything.” Page after page, the book asks:

Do you feel powerless sometimes?

Most people do.

Maybe you are powerless.

But what if you didn’t have to be?

What if you have more power than you ever imagined?

Good news: you do. And I’m here to help you find that power.

Perhaps it is the increasing complexity of the world, or the exponential increase in information accessible through digital technologies, but underneath everything there is a hum:

You have no idea what you are doing.

You’ve assumed that you just have to fake it.

Let me help you.

Sometimes the book says the power comes from your relationship to money, sometimes your relationship to yourself and others, and sometimes your relationship to a higher power. In the US, when the higher power invoked is also clearly the Christian deity, the discourse of self-help becomes articulated with a larger field of questions that arise from this religious tradition and its history in the US. When considered in the context of the contemporary pressures on individuals to invent themselves within the precarity of neoliberal capitalism, as Micki McGee writes above, more pointed questions of agency and economic agency arise.

When considering the intersection of religion and agency, conversations usually focus on religion’s evaluative role in providing moral codes for judging action, but religions also provide their own conceptualizations of agency. These religious theories of agency are informed by both formal doctrines and the cultural narratives that animate the everyday practices associated with the religious tradition. In the contemporary US, one of the practices of evangelical Christians is the reading and writing of Christian self-help literature. Christian self-help literature is situated between the challenges of everyday life and the assumptions of a Christian worldview. For example, Christian self-help author Dave Ramsey balances responding to problems such as working and consuming in an environment where high levels of consumer debt are the norm and an evangelical Christian conception of God’s role in everyday life. Although evangelical Christians are not a marginalized group, as the term precarity is sometimes used to denote, they too are subject to some of the elements of precarity. Cultural theorists Brett Neilson and Ned Rossiter point to “the disappearance of stable jobs but also the questions of housing, debt, welfare provision and the availability of time for building affective personal relations… [as]
aspects of precarity.” Sociologists Gretchen Purser and Brian Hennigan detail one incarnation of the evangelical Christian response to this precarity in the form of an evangelical faith-based job-readiness program where prayer is prescribed as an essential part of the job hunt. In this sense, evangelicals are engaged with the precarity of the current moment through institutional engagement as well as the personal experiences of hardships such as joblessness and excessive debt. Thus, in gesturing to precarity in this context I am using it in an expansive sense.

Religious worldviews have played a complicated role in the US in both public and private life because religious worldviews are connected to many different spheres of contemporary US life. For example, they can be traced within discourses surrounding electoral politics, sexuality, and national identity among many others. For the sake of this study I am focusing on the role that such worldviews play in accounting for agency. In scholarly conversations, Christian, particularly protestant, worldviews have been connected to certain modes of capitalist economic agency such as consuming, working, and exchanging at least since Weber’s The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism. Weber’s argument focused on how a set of peculiarities among Protestants, specifically in the Calvinist theological tradition, created a symbiotic relationship between capitalism as a developing economic form and Protestant workers and owners. As Weber framed this relationship, these Protestants were called by their theological tradition to work hard and consistently in a vocation and at the same time not indulge in worldly pleasures or luxuries. Thus, an excess of money began to accumulate in the hands of followers of this theological doctrine. Because there was no other acceptable outlet for their profits, these hard

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working Protestants reinvested their profits in their work leading only to higher profits, and the circuit of capital began again. For Weber, this made Protestants ideal capitalists. The idiosyncrasies of the culture of capitalist economies in turn were shaped by the driving Protestant ideology of hard work grounded in ideas of God-given vocations and callings. The other unique aspect of Weber’s vision of the Protestant spirit is that for the Calvinist, the work that the capitalist does is not just economic but also a type of “technology of the self” that works to provide assurance as a supplement to a Calvinist theology of unknowability.

While Weber provides a common starting point for scholarly projects exploring the intersections between Christianity and economic action, the contemporary relationship between protestant values and capitalist forms of economic agency continues to change in relation to the contemporary context. Many of these changes make every day economic actions more complex, although they might make their enactment simpler. For example, internet shopping and banking have made actions like buying clothes or investing in the stock market easy and accessible to people with money to spend and invest. At the same time, the production and maintenance of online shopping and banking applications requires an increasingly complex assemblage of physical and digital infrastructure, workforces and supply chains that span the globe, as well as an ever expanding need for security. Basically, the context for economic action continues to change and in many places become more complex, and religious conceptualizations of agency have to account for the contemporary context somehow.

On the one hand, the relationship between Christianity and capitalism is not unwavering in the face of all this change, but it has also not been completely revolutionized. As Daniel M. Bell Jr. argues, while there are many convergences between contemporary capitalism and

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6. Ibid., 115.
5. Ibid., 21.
Christian beliefs and practices, those same convergences can be points of conflict or disconnection. Bell points to three such sites of conflict: capitalism’s totalizing capacity for “absorbing critique, and even repackaging and marketing it,” the general “disconnect between belief and practice,” and finally the commodification of religious practices that “encourages shallow, decontextualized engagement with religious beliefs.” Bell’s point is basically that while some Christians may be critical of capitalist practices, capitalist practices and ideologies are resilient in the face of criticism because capitalist practices are able to turn those critiques of capitalism into commodities. Beyond that, the relationship is complicated further because many Christians embrace the practices and ideologies associated with consumer capitalism. This relationship is also demonstrated in historical terms in the rise of the Christian Right in the 1980’s.

In the US, the political alliance of Christian and capitalist interests was fostered by a particular set of circumstances. Though dating the origin is tricky, scholars point to the 1980’s when an alliance between the newly minted Christian Right and fiscal conservatives produced a kind of elision between the Christian Right’s support of capitalism generally and the supply-side and neoliberal economics. Many in the Christian Right did not necessarily subscribe to supply-side economics, but there was sympathy among many of them for the ideas of influential neoliberal thinkers such as Milton Friedman. The politics of the conservative Christian culture wars in the 1990’s also included elements of consumptive politics, protesting and boycotting.

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mainstream entertainment for depictions of sex and violence as well as continuing to produce Christian themed entertainment to replace the offending media.\textsuperscript{11}

Such associations have not just been traced by scholars. We can look at recent and contemporary practices and trace similar relationships. For instance, in the realm of self-help literature, personal finance author/speaker Dave Ramsey has spent the last 20 years packaging his financial advice with a message of Christian responsibility. Corporations and politicians both have appealed to discourses of “Christian businesses” in recent controversies over marriage equality and questions of discriminatory business practices, such as the controversy surrounding Chik-Fil-A CEO Dan Cathy in 2012, the US Supreme Court decision Burwell v. Hobby Lobby, and reactionary responses to the US Supreme Court decision Obergefell v. Hodges such as government workers refusing to issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples. In all these examples, Christian rhetoric adapts to the particular forms of economic agency in question, whether consumption, finance management, or public discussions of the place of evangelical Christianity in economic life in the US. In short, discourses such as these permeate the current political landscape in the US and play a significant role in shaping how the relationship between Christianity and economic action are thought and talked of in the US today.

Evangelical Christianity is a complicated term with an extensive role in the religious history of the United States. The first sense in which evangelical Christianity can be used is to talk about the peculiarities of Protestant Christianity in the early years of the US, particularly in terms of form of Protestant Christianity that emerged from and was further buoyed by the First and Second Great Awakenings, US Christian revivalist movements in the mid-18\textsuperscript{th} and early 19\textsuperscript{th} centuries. In this sense, evangelical Christianity is a term that included much of US Protestant

Christianity in the 18\textsuperscript{th} and 19\textsuperscript{th} centuries, describing not a denominational organization but a religious movement emphasizing “that the Bible is the supreme and authoritative foundation for truth and that Christ’s death on the cross was a sacrifice for the sins of the world. As a result of these two beliefs, an evangelical experiences conversion through Christ and is then empowered to engage in an active and holy life of evangelism and service to humankind.”\textsuperscript{12} A second sense one could use the term evangelical for is what George Marsden terms “card-carrying evangelicals,” who are a contemporary “Self-conscious interdenominational movement, with leaders, publications, and institutions with which people from many subgroups identify.”\textsuperscript{13} These card-carrying evangelicals are contemporary Protestant Christians who actively identify with evangelicalism as a movement and set of institutions.

However, when I use the term evangelical, I am neither referring to the historical evangelicalism of the 18\textsuperscript{th} and 19\textsuperscript{th} century nor the card-carrying evangelicals that Marsden describes but a third sense of the term. Marsden describes this third sense:

Roughly speaking, evangelicalism today includes any Christian traditional enough to affirm the basic beliefs of the old nineteenth-century evangelical consensus. The essential evangelical beliefs include: (1) the Reformation doctrine of the final authority of the Bible, (2) the real historical character of God’s saving work recorded in Scripture, (3) salvation to eternal life based on the redemptive work of Christ, (4) the importance of evangelism and missions, and (5) the importance of a spiritually transformed life. By this account evangelicalism includes striking diversities: holiness churches, pentecostals, traditional Methodists, all sorts of Baptists, Presbyterians, black churches in all those traditions, fundamentalists, pietist groups, Reformed and Lutheran confessionalists, Anabaptists such as Mennonites, Churches of Christ, Christians, and some Episcopalians, to name only some of the most prominent types.\textsuperscript{14}

Thus, in the sense that I am using evangelicalism, I mean to emphasize a set of common beliefs that are shared across denominational lines in ways that might make little sense from the

\textsuperscript{12} Barry Hankins, \textit{American Evangelicals} (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008), 2-3.
\textsuperscript{14} Marsden, \textit{Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism}, 4-5.
perspective of thinking of evangelicalism in terms of the formal contemporary movement. By the turn of 21st century, conservative Protestants had created an array of popular Christian cultural texts, from novels to children’s cartoons to self-help books. While some of these texts only circulate in a small subcultural market, others have found a much larger audience. For instance, the Left Behind novel series is a popular case from the last two decades. Left Behind follows a group of newly converted Christians through a literalist interpretation of the book of Revelation, including detailed imaginings of apocalyptic plagues and the UN Secretary-General for an Anti-Christ. The books were extremely popular, selling over 63 million copies with the main twelve novels generating more than $650 million for its Christian publishing company, Tyndale House. However, the Left Behind example only demonstrates a case of extreme success within this much larger market. Christian pop culture is as diverse as the financial self-help literature that Dave Ramsey has been a leading voice in all the way to religiously themed cartoons for children such as Veggie Tales. These texts are not isolated to religious publics, but have instead become mainstream. Dave Ramsey is a widely recognized financial self-help guru, and Veggie Tales is now owned by Dreamworks Animation and had a brief stint on NBC.

What interests me about these pieces of Christian pop culture is how they might be used to constitute understandings of self and agency in the contemporary context, or as Wade Clark Roof says more broadly, how they are used as “a cultural resource broadly available to the masses. Responsibility falls more upon the individual—like that of the bricoleur—to cobble together a religious world from available images, symbols, moral codes, and doctrines, thereby exercising considerable agency in defining and shaping what is considered to be religiously

meaningful.” These Christian cultural resources ask consumers to understand themselves both in terms of contemporary practices of consumption, such as the discourses surrounding fandom, and some element of Christian subjectivity, whether as a tradition religious identification or as something more akin to fandom. For example, in Dave Ramsey’s writings on personal finance, his use of Bible passages is often constructed in terms that allow him to create ambiguity surrounding whether he writing about being a good Christian or being a good capitalist. In his most recent book he makes the claim that anyone living and working in the US today could retire a millionaire. Why do more people not do this? He makes this claim with reference to Proverbs 21:20: “In the house of the wise are stores of choice food and oil, but a foolish man devours all he has.” The wise will become millionaires, whereas the foolish will remain poor because of their appetites. By citing passages from the biblical wisdom literature, Ramsey shifts the appeal of the religious authority that he is using away from questions of morality and religious practice towards questions of wisdom and living well. As another example, Joel Osteen writes about his readers’ engagement in all aspects of life, including economic actions. In one story he tells, illustrating why his readers should wait for God to act on their behalf if they are being treated unjustly, he praises a truck mechanic who stays at his job for seven years without receiving a raise because his direct superior did not like him. The story has a happy ending: the owner of the company retires and gives the mechanic the garage because of divine intervention on his behalf, vindicating him for allowing God to work things out for him. In both of these examples of discourses in Christian cultural commodities, there are implicitly Christian audiences with enough ambiguity for wider consumption, an implicit or explicit evaluation of economic activity from a Christian perspective, and the authors clearly discourage examining the systems of power that their readers live within. These shared themes seem to suggest a question worth examining:

how do popular Christian self-help texts such as these play a role in constituting a certain frame of economic agency for their readers to inhabit?

Other scholars in Communication and other humanities and social science disciplines have analyzed popular Christian texts in a variety of ways. Scholars have explored questions about identity, politics, the place of religion in contemporary society, and many other foci. These studies have generated much insight into the practices and meanings surrounding popular Christian texts in the US. While some scholars have interrogated the connections between these texts and economic, political, and religious discourses, there is very little work directly approaching the question of constructions of economic agency within Christian cultural resources. This particular intersection of economic agency within Christian popular texts, such as the self-help literature this project examines, is crucial because it is in the discourses these texts articulate that we can begin to see how Christian conceptualizations of agency are integrated into the practices of everyday life. By approaching this question through self-help literature, this project is able to look to a genre specifically focused on constructions of the self to examine how these texts manage the tensions between Christian ideas of agency and the problems present in the contemporary social and economic context.

Conservative Protestant Popular Culture

There is currently a significant amount of scholarly interest in conservative Protestant popular culture. The scholarship on conservative Protestant popular culture texts is wide and varied. Within rhetoric, scholarly accounts of conservative Protestant popular culture texts have been mostly focused on: genre and stylistic accounts of conservative Protestant pop culture, how conservative Protestant popular culture serves to constitute Christian identities, and political accounts of conservative Protestant pop culture.

Genre and Style

Rhetoricians and communication scholars have often analyzed conservative Protestant popular culture through the lens of genre and style. In analyzing genre and style, these scholars illustrate how stylistic elements play a crucial role in rhetorical processes such as the circulation of discourses of masculinity within Christian publics. For instance, Luke Winslow’s work on the stylistics and aesthetic norms of evangelical rhetorics provides a good example of this, especially in his writings on masculine style in the evangelical Promise Keepers organization’s rallies and the visual style of popular evangelical preacher and author Joel Osteen.\(^{19}\) Winslow argues that the styles that both Osteen and Promise Keepers invoke function through a logic of othering even as they seem to try to frame their content as invitational. Brian Jackson’s article analyzing the documentary *Hell House* also approaches the text this way, making generic connections between the fundamentalist phenomenon of hell houses as religious themed Halloween-alternatives and the writings and sermons of Jonathan Edwards, an 18\(^{th}\) century “terror revivalist” as Jackson characterizes him.\(^{20}\) Jackson argues that evangelicals’ common use of fear appeals should be

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understood in the context of the long history of Protestants using fear appeals and that this practice should be thoroughly critiqued as politically and perhaps even spiritually counterproductive. Both of these authors account for the particular Christian elements in these texts by treating the stylistic elements connected to elements in the Christian rhetorical tradition. There have also been other approaches that read the stylistic elements of Christian cultural texts in more general stylistic terms, such Joshua Gunn’s analysis of *The Passion of the Christ* through the genre characteristics of pornography as a way to account for bodily affect in media texts.21 His main argument revolves around how visual tropes in *The Passion of the Christ* parallel pornographic tropes, arguing that there is some affinity of desire between the two.

Identity constitution

Accounting for the constitution of Christian identity in pop culture texts is another well represented approach to understanding Christian pop culture. The theoretical approaches that authors in rhetoric use to analyze identity constitution vary from Burkean identification, combinations of Aristotelian rhetoric and ideology critique, to Lacanian theories of subjectivity.22 For example, Brian Snee gives a reading of the film *The Last Temptation of Christ* through a Burkean framework of consubstantial identification, arguing that the identification that the filmmakers attempt to create between the audience and Willem Defoe’s Jesus is so intense that it “exceeds traditional notions of character–viewer identification.”23 Christian Lundberg’s analysis of *The Passion of the Christ* draws on Lacan’s semiotic theories of the subject and Warner’s theories of publics and counterpublics, arguing that publics should not be understood merely in terms of the attention paid to the circulation of discourse, but rather as constituted by

an economy of tropes and affects. For Lundberg, the evangelical reception of *The Passion of the Christ* is a good example to use to think through this theoretical shift, for it is here that we see a public that enthusiastically engages with an economy of tropes that is articulated to strong affective investments in a central trope of victimhood. 

Jon Radwan, on the other hand, analyzes a Christian pop song, “Jesus Freak,” drawing on both Aristotle and discussions in rhetoric on ideology to evaluate the identity elements at play within the song’s lyrics. In studying this song, he is asking how a cultural commodity like this can do ideological work through both lyrical content and the referential use of musical themes and styles. His conclusions, that the figure of the freak in the song’s title working in tandem with the aggressive musicality articulates an emotionally conflicted, intense, but ethically limiting identity, demonstrates the way that musical analysis complements the textual analysis in analyzing identity constitution in pop music.

**Political accounts**

Political accounts of Christian pop culture tend to blend into other ways that rhetoricians approach these texts, because of the tendency in the rhetorical tradition to focus on public discourses rather than commercial or private discourses. For example, while Lundberg is discussing identity commitments, it is through a lens of public constitution and the political implications of narratives of victimhood. Other rhetoricians squarely focus on the political implications of Christian popular culture, such as Christopher Duerrenger and Kristy Maddux. Duerrenger’s focus is on the claims to counterpublicity and victimhood that conservative Christians discourse uses to legitimate their political positions, arguing that conservative groups’ claims to counterpublicity are actually tactical moves that the dominant public makes to constrain legitimate counterpublic politics. Maddux’s book *The Faithful Citizen* gives an extensive overview of the ways that a variety of Christian pop culture texts construct certain

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models of Christian citizenship, and she argues that these models serve as normative frameworks for Christian viewers in the US to understand themselves and their own political actions through.\textsuperscript{25}

This literature has engaged in an array of significant questions about conservative Protestant cultural resources. By examining the elements of style, identity constitution, and political discourses in Christian popular culture texts, this literature gives insight into both how the discourses being examined work and their cultural significance within the current socio-political scene, particularly the scene constituted by the current scholarly concern with neoliberal capitalism.

**Neoliberal Capitalism**

While definitions tend to vary in the extent to which they focus on the economic, political, and cultural features of what neoliberalism is today and how it developed, there is a somewhat standard narrative of its historical-political development. Neoliberalism, as David Harvey explains it in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, arose primarily as an economic theory that became a program for economic policy at the end of 1970's and was intensified during the Reagan years in the US and the Thatcher years in the UK.\textsuperscript{26} As an economic theory it can be articulated to the Chicago and Austrian schools of economic theory that increased the emphasis placed on markets by neoclassical economists and theorized that (to varying degrees) the problems that appeared in markets (instability, crashes, inflation, unemployment) were caused by state intervention. Neoliberal economic theory both lays the blame for economic problems on state intervention while also positing private enterprises as the solution to many of these problems. For example, allowing private companies to take over the management of what were previously government concerns such as maintaining and

\textsuperscript{25} Duerrenger, “The ‘War on Christianity’”; Maddux, *The Faithful Citizen*.

\textsuperscript{26} David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).
managing prisons. Neoliberalism is in this sense a totalizing economic program, in that it seeks to place as much of society under the management of private enterprise as possible.\textsuperscript{27}

Neoliberalism has also become a common term in the literature critiquing contemporary cultural and capitalist practices to such an extent that it is often invoked almost to stand in for contemporary capitalism in general, or what Frederic Jameson and others have called “late capitalism.” Capitalism has been the topic of much social critique for the last century with the expansive influence of Marx’s writings on social scientific and humanistic disciplines, which makes the task of evaluating it as a large contextual element in contemporary society complicated. For rhetoricians wishing to deal with neoliberalism and capitalism there is an abundance of literature and varying schools of thought available to them under the banner of the cultural critique of capitalism.\textsuperscript{28}

To give a full account of capitalism, scholars who are interested in understanding capitalism should consider both economic and cultural elements at play within capitalist systems, although the nature of their scholarship may lead them to focus more on one or the other. In the same way, scholars interested in studying Neoliberalism should consider economic and cultural elements at play when analyzing Neoliberalism, although their academic discipline or disciplinary conversations may prescribe a focus on one or the other. As David Harvey argues, the shift towards cultural capitalism has not made economic mechanisms less relevant to our understandings of what is going on in society but may even deepen our need to account for

\textsuperscript{27} While neoliberalism is totalizing, several scholars have demonstrated that it is not a totality. As Wendy Brown argues in \textit{Undoing the Demos}, while neoliberal rationality is undermining democratic institutions and trying to overwhelm other ways of living in the world, it is so far only partially succeeding and is a site of struggle rather than a fact of contemporary life. Wendy Brown, \textit{Undoing the Demos} (Brooklyn, NY: Zone Books, 2015).

\textsuperscript{28} The largest traditions of this cultural critique would probably be the various authors and offshoots of the Frankfurt School, but the influence of the authors related to the Birmingham Cultural Studies group are equally well represented within the communication discipline through the influence of cultural studies and critical theory in the 1980’s.
economic factors alongside the social.\textsuperscript{29} Harvey illustrates this by discussing how the present economic system in which social events take place is the largest debt economy that humans have ever created and that this could have extensive implications for how scholars understand how the social is organized. The expansion of debt and the finance industry in general are key aspects of the intensive characteristics of capitalist development, as Nigel Thrift would term it in his framing of current capitalist formations as “full-palette capitalism,” where the explosion of finance capital has emerged alongside the extensive commodification of social practices.\textsuperscript{30}

There is a growing literature in which rhetoricians examine neoliberal capitalism primarily in terms of economic discourses. In his book \textit{Selling the Free Market}, Aune details how what was initially an arcane and controversial brand of economic theory became so commonsense by the end of the 1990’s.\textsuperscript{31} He argues that libertarians, the political party closest to representing a coherent neoliberal vision, were able to successfully sell a discourse of "economic correctness" that functions in the way that discourses of political correctness do. In another study of the Neoliberal rhetoric, Hanan and Chaput give a different account of how neoliberal policy is being justified after the 2008 recession caused by the housing market, stating that the appeal to being in a "state of exception" is key to both more Keynesian and Neoliberal justifications for current state intervention into markets.\textsuperscript{32} Both of these works offer a rhetorical perspective of the particular ways that Neoliberal logics are articulated within political discourse, and how rhetorical scholars have insights into how this happens. Many scholars in the Communication discipline and elsewhere have also examined the intersections between capitalism and religion.

\textsuperscript{29} Harvey, \textit{The Limits of Capital}.
Capitalism and Religion

It has been well argued by scholars from a variety of fields that there are intersecting interests between Christianity and capitalist economic formations. Most recently that scholarship has turned to the particularities of neoliberalism, noting that the rise of both appeared seemingly simultaneously in the US with the appearance of the Christian Right and Ronald Reagan in the 1980 presidential election. Theorists such as William Connolly, D. Stephen Long, Philip Goodchild, and Daniel Bell Jr. give an account of these intersections at the level of social theory and the cultural critique of institutional relationships. Connolly’s explanation of the current relationship between conservative Protestantism and capitalism as a “resonance machine” emphasizes both the contingency of this relationship and the functional integration of “cowboy capitalism” with an apocalyptic evangelicalism. Although there is a long history of the integration of Christianity and capitalism in Europe and North America, including Weber’s prominent argument that the drive to reinvest profits is derived from the ascetic attitudes of Calvinist business owners, Connolly is making the point that the particular configurations of these religious-economic assemblages are radically contingent. D. Stephen Long, on the other hand, offers an account of different strategies that have been used to evaluate capitalism in terms of Christian theology, tracing traditions with intellectual roots in Weber, Marx, and a “residual tradition” focused on the good and the beautiful and utilizing MacIntyre’s virtue ethics and John Milbank’s theology of radical orthodoxy. He argues that this residual tradition is the best road forward for a critique of capitalism that offers an alternative way of life. As the title suggests, Philip Goodchild’s book constructs a theology of money, drawing on Christian theology to trace

out an alternative theology of the divine force which money exerts on human relationships.\textsuperscript{36} Bell, as a final example, constructs a theological critique of contemporary capitalism while drawing on the theories of Deleuze and Foucault.\textsuperscript{37} Bell argues that the capitalism’s totalizing tendencies must be critiqued and opposed by understanding the church as an economy of desire and better attuning that economy to opposing the inequality and alienation endemic to the capitalist system. While theoretical critiques of the relationship between capitalism and Christianity in the US provide a starting point for theoretical discussions, they do not offer a close look at the discourses and practices that characterize this relationship, which is why I turn my focus to how rhetoricians as well as scholars in other humanities and social science disciplines analyze the relationship between conservative Protestantism and neoliberal capitalism.

There are three things that these scholars, both within rhetoric and without, studying the relationship between conservative Protestantism and neoliberal economic formation account for very well: particular cases which blend conservative Protestantism and economics in the contemporary US, media structures which commodify and circulate conservative Protestant discourses, and the political convergence of conservative Protestant and neoliberal economic interests.

Rhetorical accounts of the relationship between conservative Protestantism and neoliberal economic formations take all three forms, as studies of particular cases, studies of commodification in media industries, and the convergence of conservative Protestantism with other forms of conservatism in the US. Luke Winslow’s analysis of Joel Osteen’s rhetoric of image and capitalist consumption can serve as an example of the type analysis rhetoricians do

\textsuperscript{36} Goodchild, \textit{Theology of Money}, 14, 25.
\textsuperscript{37} Bell, \textit{Economy of Desire}, 26, 29.
when they work on particular cases. Winslow’s analysis shows how Osteen uses images of health and prosperity grounded in contemporary capitalist consumption to exemplify what a life blessed by God would look like, creating a view of a “Christian life” that is deeply characterized by conspicuous consumption.\textsuperscript{38} Linda Kintz’s book \textit{Between Jesus and the Market} gives a rhetorical look at the cultural production of conservative Protestant culture war ideologies, from the various popular press titles addressing family values rhetoric to the emergence of Christian popular media as a common form of entertainment among conservative Protestant audiences.\textsuperscript{39} She argues that what makes these social and political campaigns successful is their efficient articulation of culture war controversies to what she calls “emotions that matter.”\textsuperscript{40} Sharon Crowley and Marlia Banning both provide insights into the rhetorical analysis of how conservative Protestant ideology has been integrated and balanced into wider conservative processes in the US.\textsuperscript{41} Crowley argues that Christian fundamentalists’ use of apocalyptic narratives leads to ways of seeing the world that are disruptive to civil society and undercut the possibility for civil discourse. Banning’s argument focuses on how post-1970’s conservative politics more broadly have relied on certain structuring mechanisms to shift the political landscape in the US.

In other humanities and social science discussions of conservative Protestantism and neoliberal economic formations, the scholarship tends to focus more on the commodification of conservative Protestant media and the coalitional politics of US conservatism. There are still literatures examining particular cases where conservative Protestantism and neoliberal economic

\textsuperscript{38} Winslow, “The Imaged Other.”
\textsuperscript{39} Linda Kintz, \textit{Between Jesus and the Market: The Emotions that Matter in Right-Wing America} (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997).
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid.
formations intersect, such as Elizabeth Moreton’s book studying the genesis of Wal-Mart and the influence of US conservative Protestantism in its development. One of Moreton’s arguments is that Wal-Mart should be understood as playing a central role in making “Christian culture a true mass culture” through arrangements with the Christian publishing and media production company Thomas Nelson.\(^4\) Sara Diamond’s work relating the development of the Christian Right and its cultural counterparts gives an extensive account of the media and cultural technologies that conservative Protestants used throughout the 20\(^{th}\) century to organize and solidify group education and identification, as well as accounting for some of the coalitions which emerged between the Christian Right and other conservative elements in the Republican Party.\(^4\) Connolly’s recent writings on the subject focus on system level critique and theorization of the coalitions and “resonances” between capitalist and Christian ideologies. He argues that these resonances should be understood in terms of contingent assemblages of apocalyptic Christianity with the recklessness of “cowboy capitalism.”\(^4\) Apocalyptic Christianity for Connolly is linked with a fascination with a final judgement that promotes an “ethos of existential revenge.”\(^4\) Cowboy capitalists, on the other hand, could be exemplified by the financiers who engineered the sub-prime mortgage and derivatives packages that played a large role in the 2008 recession. Connolly argues that the ethos of existential revenge is part of what

\(^4\) Connolly, *Capitalism and Christianity*, 5.
allows this form of Christian ideology to work well with reckless forms of capitalist exploitation because it provides a frame for understanding the exploited as deserving to be exploited.\(^{46}\)

This literature provides deeper insight into the current state of the relationship between Christianity and capitalism in the US. It has looked at the construction of Christianity as an economic identity in the US in addition to being a religious identity, helping us to understand how workers, business owners, and consumers simultaneously participate in capitalist and religious practices in the current economic situation. What has not been studied, either by those interested in economics and religion or by scholars studying Christian popular culture, are questions of how Christian popular culture plays a role in constructing a conceptualization of human agency that manages the relationship between elements of a Christian worldview in relation to the contextual constraints of neoliberal capitalism.

**Guiding Questions and Context**

In light of the discussions in the literature, it seems that the rhetoric of economics has been addressing the rhetorical elements of the neoliberal economic formation, that there is a strong literature in rhetoric on conservative Protestant discourses, and that there is a growing discussion among rhetoricians on how conservative Protestant discourses are articulated in neoliberal economic frames. At the same time, these literatures have not quite developed a frame for understanding the ways that conservative Protestant discourses articulate the relationship between agency and contemporary social problems, save for a few exceptions such as James Darsey’s and Quentin Schultze’s work.\(^{47}\) I argue that part of the reason for this disconnect is that the discussions surrounding this issue often do not take into account how Christian

\(^{46}\) Ibid., 62.

conceptualizations of agency differ from humanist conceptions centered on an autonomous agent.

This dissertation project will be furthering this broader discussion by attending to the rhetorical processes through which these Christian conceptualizations of agency are articulated within Christian self-help books. This project was designed to develop insight into what a evangelical Christian vision of agency can help rhetorical scholars understand about the current relationship between economic and evangelical practices. As I enter this discussion, I also want to pursue the question of how neoliberal logics have become articulated with conservative Protestant discourses. In pursuing answers to these larger questions, I ask these three questions that guide my analysis chapters:

a) When providing explicit economic advice, how does Christian self-help construct of economic agency for its readers?

b) How does conservative Protestant self-help literature locate economic agency within broader constructions of what Christian life should look like?

c) What are some of the other evangelical discourses that challenge conservative Protestant models of economic agency and offer alternative models to conservative Protestant audiences?

To answer these questions, I look to a set of texts made up of popular Christian self-help literature while drawing on the scholarly literatures in Communication and elsewhere on Christian popular culture and the relationship between capitalism and religion.

Christianity has consistently been a key focus within US public life. As William McLoughlin has argued, the development of fervent revivalist Christianity in the US has been
deeply entangled with reformist movements in the history of the US. The engagement of revivalist movements was translated into political and social reform through the evolution of a strong tradition of social and political activism within the history of evangelicalism, emerging in the 18\textsuperscript{th} century and including involvement in movements focused on abolition, temperance, and child labor reform. In the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, the story of evangelical activism changed as the Fundamentalist movement challenged shifts toward more progressive and liberal social and theological positions within those evangelical denominations. The tradition of US Protestant activism embodied by 19\textsuperscript{th} century evangelicalism’s engagement in civic issues became split along partisan lines: Protestant activism became more inflexibly characterized as either conservative (fundamentalist and neo-evangelical in the mid-twentieth century) or progressive (social gospel activists and offshoots of the neo-evangelical movement with commitments to social justice).

The recent emergence of the Christian Right during the 1980 presidential election was only an example of that tradition rather than aberration in an otherwise fully secularized political history. In the various forms it has taken over the last few decades, the Christian Right has been a very visible incarnation of conservative Protestant activism in the US. When trying to sum up what the 1980 US presidential election meant for the political scene over the past few decades two themes commonly arise: the debut of the Christian Right as a major national political player and the increased implementation of neoliberal economic policy during the Reagan administration in the form of policies grounded in supply-side economics. As Linda Kintz wrote

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of Reagan, “the rhetoric of the common man to the vague language of everyday religious morality…were perceived as authentic… And this was true even as he constructed a millionaire populism in which corporations, millionaires, and ordinary people could feel themselves equal within the terms of that familiar Transparent American Subject.” My intent in pointing this out is not to suggest that one determined the other, a question that for the moment remains beyond the scope of this study. Rather, the co-emergence of the Christian Right and neoliberal policy in the US provides a starting point for thinking about how conservative Protestantism and contemporary capitalism have interacted and how religious and economic discourses in the US evolved as a result. As James Aune pointed out, Reagan used religious tropes and topoi often, including to attempt to maintain a stable coalition between the different factions of conservatives within the Republican party. Reagan’s use of conservative Christian rhetoric is only one mode of interaction, with a wide variety of consumptive and cultural practices synthesizing religious and capitalist forms and values, from Christian commodities to Christian pro-business, pro-free market activism.

The emergence of the Christian Right and neoliberal economic policy in the early 1980’s has led to many narratives describing their entwinement. Some, such as William Connolly’s theoretical narrative, see the connection between the two as a resonance between ideologies with common orientations towards other people and the environment as well as “affinities of identity.” Sara Diamond tries to dissuade people from understanding the Christian Right “as mere puppets for big business” when so many elements of the movement relied on grassroots

52. Kintz, Between Jesus and the Market, 60.
53. Aune, Selling the Free Market, 122.
organizing and support. These narratives have varied in the primacy they place on either religious or political discourse as the primary explanation for their co-emergence, from evangelical Christianity being a driving force behind neoliberal policy to evangelicalism being a religious ideology marshalled by neoliberal politicians as a means to solidifying a political base. However, the relationship between US conservative Protestantism and capitalism is much more complicated than religion serving as a stooge for capitalism.

Over the last several decades, Christians have not just engaged in discussions of economic policy and citizenship but have also been actively producing artifacts for a Christian audience in the form of education, entertainment, and news. Many Christian organizations produced printed materials in form of circulars and newsletters in the early 20th century. It was in the mid-20th century that something like a market specific to conservative Protestantism began to emerge with the investment in small liberal arts colleges and radio stations by fundamentalists, evangelicals, and other conservative factions within Protestantism. The explosion of radio programming in the mid-20th century evolved as the century progressed into a more diversified set of cultural products, including Christian popular music (often labeled Christian Contemporary Music, or CCM), books and bookstores, magazines such as Christianity Today, and televangelism.

In the past decade or two, texts that might have otherwise just circulated within the already established Christian audience entered mainstream circulation. The Left Behind novels by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins are one of the most common examples of the mainstream

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56. Diamond, Facing the Wrath, 8.
57. Sara Diamond’s work on the religious right offers a vision of how both of these narratives can coexist as terms in a dialectic between religious and public practice.
58. Hankins, American Evangelicals, 139.
circulation of Conservative Protestant cultural products. The *Left Behind* novels were not only widely consumed, but also represented a controversial and provocative version of Christian theology, which is another one of the reasons why they have received the attention of so many scholars interested in contemporary evangelicalism and fundamentalism. While the self-help books that I am focusing on in this project have not all received the same kind or level of attention that the *Left Behind* series has, they do offer a different angle into the circulation of these Christian popular culture texts as cultural resources. In the next section I provide an outline of the chapters that details the specific trajectory of my dissertation.

The following chapters analyze pieces of self-help literature authored by three different authors: Dave Ramsey, Joel Osteen, and Shane Claiborne. In chapter two, I lay the groundwork for my analysis of the self-help book case studies by discussing current scholarly discussions on self-help and the current scholarly conversations in rhetoric on agency. In addition to reviewing scholarship on self-help and agency, I lay out the methodological frameworks that I am working from in my analysis. In approaching my analysis, I follow the methodological procedures of rhetorical criticism. As I articulate a theoretical framework from current conceptualizations of agency (both rhetorical and economic) in chapter two, I argue for a theory of agentic orientation as a theoretical means to better understand the rhetorical significance of how we write and speak about agency, the ways that we narrate human agency.

After having laid the theoretical and methodological groundwork for this project, chapters three through five engage in the work of analyzing the Christian self-help books I have chosen to study. All three chapters are organized around further developing and applying the concept of agentic orientation as a way to examine the ways that these books construct agency in unique ways. Chapter three marks the beginning of my analysis of evangelical self-help with

60. Crowley, *Toward a Civil Discourse.*
personal finance author and speaker Dave Ramsey and a broad-ranging examination of three of his many books on personal finance. Chapter four examines the distinct view of agency that accompanies Joel Osteen’s debut inspirational self-help book *Your Best Life Now*. Chapter five offers a case study that stands in stark contrast with the models of agency discussed in chapters three and four, analyzing activist and evangelical neo-monastic leader Shane Claiborne’s *The Irresistible Revolution*. One of the assumptions that this study is grounded in is that books continue to be a vital medium in contemporary life. As Ted Strifhas writes of books, “They continue to serve—sometimes in new ways, sometimes in traditional ones—as ‘equipment for living’ to quote Kenneth Burke’s memorable phrase. In other words, books remain key artifacts through which social actors articulate and struggle over specific interests, values, practices, and worldviews.”

61 Strifhas later makes a point in his own book that is particularly salient to this project: books have become part of the everyday in contemporary capitalism and are often taken for granted as a medium because of this everydayness. 62 It is unremarkable to walk through a big-box store or by an airport kiosk and see Joel Osteen’s face smiling out at you next to the latest Grisham and King novels.


62. In addition, the concurrent rise of book publishing and Protestant Christianity is not a coincidence, but rather the printing press played an important role in the persistence of Protestant movements including its role in making Martin Luther’s 95 theses a flash point for future reformist action. As historian Elizabeth Eisenstein writes, “Even if Luther, Zwingli, and others had died in their cradles, it seems that some reformers would have turned to the presses to implement long-lived pastoral concerns and evangelical aims. Perhaps civil war in Christendom was not inevitable, but the advent of printing did, at the very least, rule out the possibility of perpetuating the status quo.” In the US, the relationship between publishing and religion, as noted by historian David Nord, continues with the formation of Bible and tract publishing groups such that, “By the late 1820’s, the evangelical publishers became the leading innovators of printing technology and national business organization.” Thus, the productive relationship between Protestantism and publishing continues long after the first fires of reformation were fanned by the affordances that printing provided. Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 183. David Paul Nord, *Faith in Reading* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 6.
CHAPTER 2

SELF-HELP, AGENCY, AND RHETORICAL CRITICISM

“[The] abundance of theories of the self suggests that the self under advanced capitalism is nothing if not belabored. The self is a topic of preoccupation in both academic and popular literatures, as well as—and most important—a site of effort and exertion, of evaluation and management, of invention and reinvention … Paradoxically, the imperative of inventing the self that is found in the literatures of self-improvement is often cast in the form of discovering or uncovering an authentic, unique, and stable self that might function—even thrive—unaffected by the vagaries of the labor market.”

Attempting to understand the role that self-help books play in the work on the self opens up a set of complications grounded in how work on the self is re-framed as finding yourself, re-connecting with a self that was lost or repressed while suppressing the work done to produce that self in the current moment. This challenge is heightened by focusing on Christian self-help, as this dissertation project does, because not only is work on the self framed as the re-discovery of an authentic self, that authentic self is often endowed with cosmic significance. In this literature, the self is situated as inextricably connected to the purposes of a higher power.

Reading a small set of the Christian self-help literature in light of the scholarly discussions of self-help illuminates a set of concerns with the tensions between agency and social control, a relationship that is only further complicated by the religious considerations that accompany my chosen texts. This chapter explores the foundations that this scholarship lays for the study of Christian self-help literature and the ways that a rhetorical approach to these matters addresses this tension around agency. The current literature studying self-help as text, discourse, and movement delineates a vision of the contemporary lifeworld as an ecology of pop-psychology and guided learning in the service of producing selves. However, within the

literature on self-help, religion’s relationship to self-help and agency remains underdeveloped, a
gap that this project will help bridge.

By taking a rhetorical approach to Christian self-help, this project explores the ways that
different narratives of agency are articulated in self-help writings and considers the rhetorical
implications of these narratives of agency. In studying these cases, the Christian self-help texts
examined in this project offer distinct visions of agency organized around metaphors of
servitude, privilege, and intimacy as ways of figuring the relationality of agency. In this chapter I
give an account of the strengths and limitations of the literature on self-help and how the
literature leads me to a theoretical framework grounded in agency. My theoretical approach is
influenced by the tensions between post-humanist and dialectical theories of rhetorical agency.

The chapter begins with an examination of the current scholarly conversations on self-
help literature and programs, identifying key themes that scholars have emphasized as well as the
places where these conversations could be strengthened by examining religious self-help,
including the place that agency has in studies of self-help. The chapter progresses from there by
exploring the ways that rhetorical scholars have theorized agency, complicating common
assumptions about agency while providing a more precise delineation of the elements of agency
that this dissertation examines. After having examined agency in more depth, I give a detailed
account of the texts chosen for this dissertation project and the reasons that they were chosen.
Finally, I close the chapter by examining some of the methodological considerations that
accompany rhetorical criticism generally as well as the particular strengths and challenges that
arise in this project.
Self-Help

Within neoliberal society self-help literature functions as a set of instruction manuals for the individualization and privatization of previously collective functions, such as the movement of collective political complaints to the arenas of the personal and the psychological. This function makes self-help texts significant for understanding how people are organized and directed in neoliberal societies. Self-help reframes issues like finance, parenting, work, and more as do-it-yourself projects, rather than issues that could or should be addressed collectively through collective social or political action. This emphasis on organizing and directing people could be why there is a strong discourse of demystifying self-help in more journalistic accounts of self-help literature. For example, Steve Salerno’s *Sham: How the Self-Help Movement Made America Helpless* discredits the authority of self-help gurus. Barbara Ehrenreich’s *Bright-Sided: How Positive Thinking is Undermining America* debunks the ideology of positivity at the heart of many self-help products. Scholarly accounts of self-help literature in general are in some ways much more cautious in how they treat self-help literature while also providing broader critique. For example, much of the literature on self-help is concerned with examining particular self-help cases and the elements involved in those limited cases. Bridget Cowlishaw argues that the book *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* relies on a subjective epistemology to map the subject-object binary onto male-female relationships. On the other hand, there is a strong thread of scholarship on self-help discourses that focuses on placing self-help in the context of neoliberal capitalism and the phenomenon of therapeutic culture. An overview of the argument

moves through several premises, the first of which is that therapeutic discourse and therapeutic culture are aspects of the current neoliberal situation. Whether the therapeutic is conceptualized as a product of neoliberalism, a pre-condition of neoliberalism, or in a relationship of mutual constitution with neoliberal discourses, therapeutic discourses often complement neoliberal discourses by providing a mechanism for instilling an ideology of individualism, and then creating disciplinary mechanisms that individuals practice on themselves such as forms of surveillance. Self-help literature fits within this framework as an element of therapeutic culture, acting as an “apparatus of governance” used to control citizens through the techniques of self-discipline that self-help discourses encourage. Generally, the concerns and questions addressed by this scholarship focus on how self-help can be both a resource for self-production and a mode of control, often concerned with how it is used as a part of the neoliberal discursive formation, but also concerned with how it can also reproduce discourses of male privilege and regressive gender roles.

Rhetoric scholars have approached the study of self-help literature with many of these same concerns, but the particular questions that they have asked differ in the ways in which they examine the uniquely rhetorical concerns that arise in the study of self-help. These questions generally gravitate toward the two common themes of the rhetoric of therapy and the therapeutic and the tensions surrounding the productive relationship between texts and subjects, examining questions of how self-help texts produce subjects and also how self-help literature is involved in a process of self-production. Dana Cloud’s work on the rhetoric of therapy and the therapeutic

asks wide ranging questions about the ways that the popularization of the rhetoric of therapy depoliticizes social problems framing them as the private problems of individuals. Other scholars such as Naomi Rockler and Thomas West have taken up Cloud’s critique to interrogate how the rhetoric of therapy’s individualizing and depoliticizing force inflects a variety of texts, from popular television and mass media programs to discussions of critical pedagogical practices. The second major focus for rhetorical scholars is questions concerning how self-help interrogates the relationship between self-help texts and discourses and subjects. This approach to studying self-help focuses on the arguments and underlying concerns with the subjects that self-help produces and the political implications of self-production that accompany self-help. For example, Cynthia Smith argues that the discourses produced by Martha Stewart’s company MSLO constituted subjects through discourses of domesticity, self-discipline, and consumerism. Scholars have also argued that self-help produces reading subjects and the practice of reading in unique ways through the particular types of meta-commentary common in self-help books. Across both of these threads there is a general concern that self-help is not as innocuous or vacuous as it may seem.

Across the literature there is a common underlying concern about the ways that, for all of the pretensions of empowerment some self-help projects, self-help is nothing more than another

71. Cloud, *Control and Consolation*.


74. Smith, “Discipline—It’s a ‘Good Thing’,” 337.
form of social control constraining the potentiality for a more complete form of human agency. First and foremost, there is the potential that the discourses and ideologies reproduced in self-help literature is detrimental, such as reinforcing regressive gender norms regarding the maintenance of relationships and the division of labor within relationships.\textsuperscript{75} The concern underlying these studies seems to, at least partially, be that for all the claims made by self-help programs to make readers’ lives better, the programs are merely re-inscribing the dominant power relations. In other words, self-help only helps its readers live under the dominant regime of power. This same concern is transcribed to a larger scale by authors such as Cloud and Rimke, who trace the ways that self-help is more broadly implicated as a feature of the current regime of power rather than incidental to it. As Rimke sums it up, “Self-help techniques are an apparatus of governance through which external ‘psy’ authorities are able to prescribe ever more avenues for individual self-management.”\textsuperscript{76} Taking a step back from these arguments, what seems to be a major concern across them is the relationship between self-help and agency. The concern is that self-help, rather than enhancing agency, limits it.

Studies of self-help literature tend to focus heavily on the aspects of self and help in self-help. The focus on the self in self-help is concerned with the role that self-help plays in the formation of the self and the focus on the helping aspect is concerned with exploring how self-help is helping individuals to respond to the problems of contemporary life, a more topical focus. As sociologist Micki McGee states in her study of self-help culture, these two roles often combine in self-help discourses through the dual movement of framing “its readers as insufficient, as lacking some feature of adequacy…and then offers itself as the solution.”\textsuperscript{77} The

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\textsuperscript{75} Hazelden, “You Have to Learn,” 302; Smith, “Discipline—It’s a ‘Good Thing’,” 353; Cowlishaw, “Subjects are from Mars,” 170. \\
\textsuperscript{76} Rimke, “Governing Citizens,” 73. \\
\textsuperscript{77} McGee, \textit{Self-Help, Inc.}, 18.
\end{flushright}
nature of this lack differs from book to book and program to program, but the assumption of a lack is constitutive of the self-help generally. If you are not lacking, why would you need this book or program to help you to learn a skill, accomplish a goal, or understand something you did not before you read the book. One of the connected points of interest that arise from examining self-help books in relation to questions of agency is that much of the self-help genre is based on the premise that knowledge is a prime source of agency. Whether it is knowledge of the systems one acts in, knowledge of oneself and what one is capable of, or knowledge of others and of relationships, self-help books assume that knowledge of these topoi is the key to their audience’s agency.

Scholarship on self-help literature often attempts to manage the tension between agency and structure in how self-help literature is usually viewed. An example of these two views can be seen in the differences in how one author’s treatment of self-help literature describes readers’ relationship to self-help literature in terms of an ambivalent “thin culture” while another finds within self-help literature a mode of governmentality. On the one hand, the thin culture of self-help is presented as something that readers are not fully engaged in, something that is skimmed, and the advice that self-help literature offers might be noticed and applied or, just as likely, disregarded. This view of self-help literature emphasizes the agency of the reader in relation to self-help literature. On the other hand, theorizing self-help discourses as a mode of governance shifts the agency from the reader and to the structural components of self-help discourse. In this paradigm, self-help literature exercises a form of social control through the individualizing discourses prevalent in self-help literature.

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One of the pieces missing from these accounts is the impact of religion on self-help discourses, particularly concerning how religious worldviews complicate the vision of agency that most scholars assume as they analyze self-help literature. Rebecca Hazleden argues that what the scholarship on self-help has done well is to elaborate arguments concerning what self-help does and is, but the scholarship has not fully attended to how self-help works in detail. This is true in terms of the lack of detailed accounts of the relationship manuals that Hazelden studies as well as the lack of detailed accounts of religious self-help literature which this dissertation studies.

In this project, I am responding to both of these gaps in the literature on self-help by examining how religious self-help, specifically evangelical Christian self-help, complicates both neoliberal concepts of agency and the critiques of neoliberal concepts of agency. As has been noted by others, the very phrase “self-help” implies many things about this genre. Recent discussions of rhetorical agency often gesture toward John Lucaites’ statement that “every rhetorical performance enacts and contains a theory of its own agency—of its own possibilities—as it structures and enacts the relationships between speaker and audience, self and other, action and structure.” Self-help literature as self-help is no different. The phrase self-help itself explicitly portrays a mode of individualistic agency.

As Cloud argues, self-help literature as a rhetoric of therapy becomes political in this sense because “In mass culture, therapeutic narratives neutralize anger and obscure the structures

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80. Hazleden, “You have to learn these lessons,” 291.
of power in which we must come to see our location and our work." This is precisely the reasoning behind Cloud and Gunn’s initial critique of the concept of agentic orientation: it shared too much with the model of human agency that self-help literature presents. Cloud and Gunn use the model found in *The Secret* where thinking and saying the right thing is all that is needed to navigate any structural constraints on agency as an example of the similarities between self-help discourses and the initial theorization of the agentic orientation. Making all the outcomes of our actions dependent on the interpretations that we are operating on (and can change at will) obscures how those outcomes work outside of our individual interpretive processes.

**Agency**

To some extent, the study of rhetoric is marked by a continuing interest in questions of agency. The idea that speech, or other forms of symbol use, have significant practical and political consequences has driven the study and practice of rhetoric since the Ancient Greeks. The Aristotelian definition of rhetoric as “the capacity to see the available means of persuasion” in a sense situates rhetoric as a form of agency, a capacity that enables action and also makes that action effective. As Michael Leff notes, this has meant primarily a focus on the agency of the speaker in traditional rhetorical studies. From Leff thinking about the role of agency in the humanist tradition of rhetoric and Karlyn Kohrs Campbell thinking about how contemporary theory has transformed rhetorical agency into something more multi-faceted, rhetorical scholars continue to interrogate theories of agency as a way to get at this central question: “How ought we to understand the concept of rhetorical agency?” As taken up by contemporary rhetorical

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85. Ibid., 215.
scholarship, agency has been used by scholars such as Carolyn R. Miller to attend to the ways that automation challenges Kenneth Burke’s action—motion distinction and also by Lisa Keränan to explore the ways that institutional practices in hospitals constrain and redistribute the agency of patients who are dying.  

Rhetorical studies’ current discussions on the concept of agency seem to coalesce around the Alliance for Rhetorical Studies meeting in the fall of 2003 and the publications that formed as a result. These discussions often revolve around Cheryl Geisler’s report in RSQ on the varying positions on rhetorical agency currently taken within the field, as well as Karlyn Kohrs Campbell’s article giving a more fully developed conceptualization of rhetorical agency.  

Interestingly, in addition to these two articles, one of the most impactful ideas from the 2003 ARS meeting is a statement by John Lucaites, quoted above, that appears to originally have appeared in print in Geisler’s article, and continues to appear in many other pieces addressing agency: “every rhetorical performance enacts and contains a theory of its own agency—of its own possibilities—as it structures and enacts the relationships between speaker and audience, self and other, action and structure.”

Lucaites’ statement has been used as a rationale by numerous scholars, from Darrel Enck-Wanzer’s studies of Nuyorcian cultural production and the collective agency of the Young Lord’s garbage offensive to Sonja Foss, William Waters, and Bernard Armada’s theorization of agentic orientation as a rhetorical mechanism.  

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rhetoricians have used Lucaites’ statement as a point of departure for a larger contemporary project of finding agency in the performances they study, rather than allowing agency (or its dissolution vis-à-vis the postmodern) to remain a background assumption. By exploring the implicit theories of agency at work within different evangelical Christian self-help books, I am interested in both how evangelical Christian self-help literature theorizes its own agency as well as producing frames through which its readers can understand their own agency. Evangelical self-help literature serves as a unique example for two reasons: first, the religious elements complicate the assumptions that accompany both vernacular and theoretical discussions of agency and structure, and second, self-help literature is a particularly rich ground for exploring the tension between how a text theorizes its own agency while also theorizing the agency of its readers.

In defining agency, there seem to be three approaches to it: defining the what, defining the how, and syntheses of the two. Regarding the first approach, agency’s substance is traditionally characterized in terms of the capacity to act and the effectiveness of actions.91 Both Geisler and Campbell use this definition as a starting point for defining rhetorical agency, Campbell stating that “Whatever else it may be, rhetorical agency refers to the capacity to act.”92 Carolyn R. Miller uses the interaction of students with automated test-evaluation systems to talk through the limitations of this definition because “the pedagogical situation highlights the conjunction of two dimensions of agency: the student's developing competence (agency as capacity) and the goals of social change (agency as effect).”93 Miller argues that the pedagogical situation exposes the limitation of these definitions of agency, particularly in how scholars often

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limit the application of this definition of agency to human actors, a practice that automation challenges. Miller goes on to propose an alternative definition of agency, “the kinetic energy of performance …property of the rhetorical event, not of agents,” a solution to the problem of agency that many rhetorical scholars adopt including Diane Davis, Christian Lundberg, and Joshua Gunn. 94 Diane Davis does this by pinpointing agency in the implicit relationality that precedes every rhetorical act. 95 On the other hand, Christian Lundberg and Joshua Gunn locate, to analytically limit, “rhetorical agency as a rhetorical affect, instead of as a point of origin for rhetorical effect” as a means of counteracting the common assumption that agents have agency by inverting the assumption by suggesting that agency has agents in a case of “possession from without.” 96 Each of these re-definitions addresses particular problems that accompany the assumptions that underpin the more traditional definition of agency in terms of the capacity of rhetors to act effectively.

The second approach, the question of how agency functions, has received more extensive attention from rhetorical scholars because it strikes closer to the stakes of agency in rhetorical theory, turning to questions of determinism and the autonomy of agents (or lack thereof). As Cloud and Gunn summarize it, the streams of thought that approach agency in this manner can generally be narrowed down to three main conceptions of agency: posthumanist agency, dialectical agency, and (naïve) humanist agency. 97 The posthumanist stream focuses on decentering humans when conceptualizing agency, often by conceptualizing agency as dispersed rather than located in stable, singular actors, a theoretical move that can be seen across a variety

95. Davis, Inessential Solidarity, 112.
of theories such as Latour’s Actor-Network Theory and N. Katherine Hayles writings on posthumanism. Cloud and Gunn trace the posthumanist position from Heidegger and rhetoric’s treatment of Heidegger to Foucault and the different discussions that have integrated Foucauldian theory into rhetorical studies.98 The dialectical stream also decenters the human agent to an extent but not as dramatically as posthuman theories as “Dialectics represents an attempt to reckon with the challenges of posthumanism while not abandoning, entirely, various components of the humanist tradition: Agency is to be situated somewhere between subject and structure, a meeting place of interiors and exteriors.” Cloud and Gunn characterize this approach as the most appealing for many rhetoricians because it is not a refutation of posthumanist theoretical contributions but is an attempt to resolve the challenges that post-human theories pose for agency and “Close textual reading practices.”100 Enck-Wanzer’s argument detailing rhetorical agency in relation to tactical forms of cultural production shows how this approach to rhetorical agency emphasizes the promise of dialectical agency by exploring the distribution of agency in cultural tactics while the products of these tactics function “as both (a) evidence of agency and (b) conditions of possibility for others’ agency.”101 The humanist stream of theory focuses on defending a stable human subject, often for pragmatic reasons such as the ease with which it can be understood by students and its political expediency. Geisler and Foss, Waters, and Armada both argue that a humanist conception of agency is needed for effective pedagogy.102

98. Thomas Rickert’s Ambient Rhetoric is a good example of Heidegger’s influence on this conversation within rhetorical studies, as well as indirectly through Diane Davis’s focus on Emmanuel Levinas whose writings were influenced by Heidegger’s phenomenology and that of Heidegger’s mentor Edmund Husserl.
100. Ibid., “56.
The third approach, synthesis, is represented well by Karlyn Kohrs Campbell’s promiscuous and protean framing of agency, which argues for a five-point definition of agency that integrates the complexities of contemporary theory with the concerns of rhetorical studies. Campbell gives an overview of what a rhetorical conception of agency has meant and continues to mean as a way to dialectically bridge the posthumanist critique of the agent and the humanist interest in human agency. Agency is promiscuous in its sociality, Campbell argues. Rather than being the domain of autonomous individuals or totalizing structures that determine all action, agency is “communal…constituted and constrained by material and symbolic elements of context and culture” and that “agency manifests itself in the practices of individuals, practices linked to subject-positions, and hence, agency.”

Agency’s protean dimension is a caveat Campbell places on agency to point to the malleability and instability of agency, particularly to caution that agency can be a force for oppression as easily as it can be a force for justice. As a starting point, Campbell’s more expansive view of agency is the most appropriate to my project as an analytical tool because it has the potential to open questions about how agency’s textuality, artfulness, and invention aspects can be produced through a familiar social process such as the articulation of the self-help discourses that this dissertation studies. Conceptualizing agency as promiscuous and protean means that to examine the self-help books chosen as the products of authors forces me to attend to both how agency emerges in the practices of writing a self-help book (in the invention and formal of aspects of the books) as well as how these practices are articulated into larger discourses of self-help. That being said, one of the key projects of self-help literature is the constitution of perceived agency through textual means, and the general overview of the element of textual agency is not sufficient to fully analyze this element of self-help

literature, much of which typically promises this kind of agency but leaves unmentioned specific mechanisms that may produce textual agency.

To extend this definition of agency to examine the constitution of perceived agency in self-help literature, I turn to the concept of agentic orientation that I would argue has been overlooked as a potential supplement to theories of rhetorical agency. Foss, Waters, and Armada argue that theories of rhetorical agency have neglected theorizing precise ways of accounting for the ways that the interpretive practices effect how agency is employed. They respond to this lack by proposing agentic orientation, which they define as “a pattern of interaction that predisposes an individual to a particular enactment of agency…not unlike Bourdieu’s *habitus.*”\(^\text{104}\) Agentic orientation, as Foss et al. describe it, is “a rhetorical mechanism…that provides various options for the enactment of agency.”\(^\text{105}\) As a rhetorical mechanism, agentic orientation is then composed of three elements:

- “A particular interpretation of structure” under the assumption that “every act is an interpretation of a set of conditions”\(^\text{106}\)
- “A response to structure rooted in processes such as categorization, invention, and symbolization as employed by the agent”\(^\text{107}\)
- “An outcome tied to the choices made concerning structure and act”\(^\text{108}\)

Foss et al. uses the film *Run, Lola, Run* to discuss how different agentic orientations function in the film, demonstrating how the character’s interpretation of structure constrains how they view available responses to structures and by extension the types of outcomes that those actions

\(^{105}\) Ibid., 206.
\(^{106}\) Ibid., 207.
\(^{107}\) Ibid., 207.
\(^{108}\) Ibid., 208.
precede. For Foss et al., this means that the agentic orientation people choose to approach the social world with can have deterministic effects on the outcomes they experience.

This final point is the primary focus of Cloud and Gunn’s critique of this conceptualization of agentic orientation. If changing social outcomes just means changing interpretations of structure, the subsequent concept of agentic orientation becomes a form of magical thinking. They dub this “‘magical voluntarism’: an idealist understanding of human agency in which a subject can achieve her needs and desires by simple wish fulfillment and the manipulation of symbols, regardless of structural constraint or material limitation.”

Their solution is a commitment to a dialectical conception of agency that is an “eminently rhetorical way between happy-go-lucky voluntarism and structural/economic determinism,” but do not elaborate on it in this context.

Interestingly enough, the article by Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische that Foss et al. cite as an initial source of the concept of agentic orientation is attempting to do precisely this. They propose that by conceptualizing agency as a process, in which agentic orientations are an element, they are able to address the disparities between voluntaristic and deterministic conceptions of agency by attending to “a sense of the dynamic interplay among these dimensions.” It is true that Emirbayer and Mische leave the concept of agentic orientation underdeveloped, but their conceptualization of agency and its relationship to agentic orientation make it worthwhile to attend to their conceptualization in more detail than Foss et al. offer.

Emirbayer and Mische’s conceptualization of agency centers around understanding it through a temporal frame:

110. Ibid., 71.
Human agency as a temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), but also oriented toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and toward the present (as a capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment). The agentic dimension of social action can only be captured in its full complexity, we argue, if it is analytically situated within the flow of time. We might therefore speak of the **double constitution of agency and structure**: temporal-relational contexts support particular agentic orientations, which in turn constitute different structuring relationships of actors toward their environments. It is the constitution of such orientations within particular structural contexts that gives form to effort and allows actors to assume greater or lesser degrees of transformative leverage in relation to the structuring contexts of action.

Agentic orientation, therefore, refers to the orientation towards the different temporalities at play in situations as they progress, from seeing past patterns emerging to imagining futures to synthesizing these orientations to address the exigency of the present situation. The key distinction between this concept of agentic orientation and Foss et al.’s conceptualization is the nature of this temporal, situated element. As Foss et al. describe agentic orientation, it is more properly a function of a narrative vision of agency in which an actor first interprets their situation, then acts on that interpretation, and then experiences the consequences of their actions. Agentic orientation consists of this narrative progression in this version. In contrast, Emirbayer and Mische’s description of agentic orientation is always situated in the present. Agentic orientation describes the collection of ways that actors in the present view past, present, and potential future as they interact with the structural conditions they find themselves in, instead of describing a causal flow from interpretation to outcome. In this sense, agentic orientations are related to agency as a means of making agency legible to human actors through interpretive frameworks, not necessarily as a means to increase the capacity to act, although this may occur incidentally. Agency remains grounded in the assemblage of actors engaged in an event, from human to machine to other non-human actors to other situational elements, while the agentic

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112. Ibid., 963.
113. Ibid., 1004.
orientation acts only to make potential agency legible to the human actor engaged in (or imagining) such an event.

Rather than being a mechanism providing options for rhetorical actors to choose from in response to context, as Foss et al. describe agentic orientation, I am proposing to conceptualize agentic orientation as a discursive process that plays a role in constituting individuals’ understanding of their own location in the social field of action. In referring to the agentic orientation as a discursive process, I mean that the agentic orientations are collections of contingently related elements that are rearranged and recomposed through different social practices. An agentic orientation as such consists of hermeneutic elements (an interpretive framing of structural conditions), circulating in a public, organized around a central metaphor. In using metaphor as a primary element of the agentic orientation, I am drawing on Christian Lundberg’s Lacanian definition of metaphor as:

> a function whereby certain metonymic connections become particularly significant points of investment, exerting a regulatory role on a chain of signifiers by retroactively organizing the series of metonymic connections within which the metaphor is nested. Put differently, a metaphor is an affectively saturated connection that rearranges a field of metonymic connections around a central figure with substantial gravity.¹¹⁴

In this sense, the metaphors within agentic orientations function as organizational mechanisms that direct attention, serve as points of affective investment, and help to create narrative coherence and legibility within the agentic orientation.

This definition of agentic orientation is also distinct from Emirbayer and Mische’s definition in two ways. The first is that I have articulated it in a way to be germane to rhetorical concerns rather than sociological ones, for the sake of this project at least. Rather than studying agency in terms of the more expansive scene of the social, this project is interested in studying what these particular rhetorical texts with a more limited scope. The second, which is related to

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the first, is that I want to emphasize the potential distributive concepts of agency more than temporality of agency because I am studying book-length texts. Emirbayer and Mische’s interests in agency and temporality could provide an interesting topos for studies interested in how readers would actually navigate the agentic orientations studied here, but that is beyond the scope of this project. This project remains focused on the more limited subject of the articulation of such agentic orientations within the rhetorical texts.

A final useful interjection that Emirbayer and Mische provide is a definition of agency that offers some elaboration of how agentic orientation is conceptually useful, where agency is “the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments—the temporal-relational contexts of action—which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations.”115 They refer to this interplay of habit, imagination, and judgement (or alternatively the iterative, projective, and practical-evaluative functions of agency) as a “chordal-triad of agency,” a metaphor for conceptualizing how these elements of agency remain analytical distinctions and that “all three dimensions resonate as separate but not always harmonious tones” within social action.116 This re-framing of agency as interactive and processual rather than directional and static de-emphasizes the humanist focus on intentionality and autonomy that continue to haunt discussions of agency. Breaking agency down into constitutive moments of habit, imagination, and judgment that are then placed in the space between actor and structure does two things. First, it provides a hermeneutic for human agency that situates agency as a processual assemblage in which the human actor is an element rather than the agent orchestrating the application of agency. Agency, in this sense, can be understood

116. Ibid., 972.
as a machine, using the Deleuzian idiom. One of the elements that most complicates this agency-
machine is that the stories that we tell about agency are a key element in the function of the 
agency-machine, where humanism is one such narrative and posthumanism another.

Relationality and Agency

One of the dominant stories that is present in current discussions of agency in rhetorical 
studies is that agency is in crisis, and one of the central concerns of much of this story about 
agency is the question of the autonomy of the actor. Can an actor have agency without 
autonomy? This seems to be the concern that accompanies the worries about the postmodern that 
Geisler recounts. The critique of the subject’s autonomy regarding the intentionality of action 
and the significance of intentionality is central to anxieties about the efficacy of rhetoric.

Some scholars have responded to this anxiety by re-focusing questions of agency away 
from the humanist assumptions that drive this anxiety over the autonomy of the agent. In a sense, 
this project’s response to this anxiety around the autonomy of the agent is to focus less on the 
theoretical problem of agency and more on how different evangelical self-help discourses 
construct idiosyncratic articulations of the contours of agency as a way to theorize agency’s 
plasticity when the assumed autonomy of the actor is suspended. Here I partially follow 
Christian Lundberg and Joshua Gunn in their response to this anxiety, suggesting that one of the 
more productive solutions is to shift rhetoricians attention from a liberal conception of the agent 
to a project of developing a “negative theology of the rhetorical agent [that] would allow rhetoric 
to be practiced without the agent as the decisive horizon for rhetorical agency…This project 
would call for a thick theorization of the rhetorical effects of doctrines of agency, and for inquiry 
into the function of persuasion as a systemic effect/affect beyond the individual agent.”

117. Davis, Inessential Solidarity, 112.
However, rather than offering a thick theorization of academic theories of agency, this dissertation focuses on theorizing popular conceptualizations of agency as they appear in self-help literature.

Lundberg and Gunn note that one consequence of this negative theology would be “Casting the problem of rhetorical agency as a rhetorical affect, instead of as a point of origin for rhetorical effect, requires us to think about the agent and its relation to agency as one trope among others that productively and destructively constrains the exercise of our critical imagination.” If agency is an affect rather than an origin or arbiter of effect, it seems like the study of agentic orientations is shifted from a secondary concern regarding the reflexivity of the agent to the very stuff of agency itself. While this certainly seems to cast my project in a very good light, it is also too limiting to a concept of agency that I want to work with in this project. While up until this point I have been laying out a concept of agency that conceptualizes agency as an assemblage rather than a point of origin, I think that agency remains a productive concept for analyzing texts beyond limiting agency to a rhetorical affect. While agency as rhetorical affect is an important element in the larger assemblage of agency that I am building here, I do not think that it would be most productive choice to limit my study of agency to it as a rhetorical affect. To do so would be to foreclose further exploration of the ways that the stories that people tells about their own agency and the ways that these stories may function in ways beyond rhetorical affect. Instead, I choose to shift the value that is placed on autonomy to a value of relationality, in keeping with conceptualizing agency as assemblage. It is the relationships between the elements of the assemblage that, although contingent and shifting, allow the study an analysis of agency without the individualistic concerns associated with autonomy. My choice to focus on the relationality of agency is also in line with certain aspects of Caroline Miller’s

119. Ibid., 98.
account of rhetorical agency’s location within the event itself, but more directly to Karlyn Kohrs
Campbell’s premise that “agency is communal, social, cooperative, and participatory and,
simultaneously, constituted and constrained by the material and symbolic elements of culture.”

Relationality, as such, shifts the focus from the agent to the relationships between actor and
context, whether those relationships are with other people or with practices, structures, artifacts,
beliefs, or knowledges.

**Case Studies and Text Selection**

Contemporary forms of Christian self-help literature can have much in common with and
sometime overlap with the genre of Christian devotional literature that has existed in different
forms since the writings of the Augustine and other writers of the early Christian church.

Depending on how one defined self-help literature in general, the genre could perhaps be traced
further back into the Greek philosophical discourses on how to achieve the good life, although
when self-help literature is discussed today it usually refers to the popular motivational literature
that grew quickly during the second half of the twentieth century, represented by titles such as
*Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* and *Men are From Mars, Women are From Venus*.

Christian self-help literature is a productive focus for exploring my interests in how economic
agency is articulated in evangelical discourses because contemporary society self-help writings
often function as instruction manuals for the individualization and privatization of previously
collective functions, such as the movement of collective political complaints to the arena of the
personal, psychological.

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George T. Kurian and James D. Smith (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 60).
123. Cloud, *Control and Consolation*. 
By looking to self-help literature branded for and marketed to conservative Christians, I intend to explore how economic agency is articulated in productive ways within Christian self-help discourses that assemble unique orientations to agency that challenge as well as complement the contemporary economic order. The first of the cases I study is Christian personal finance guru Dave Ramsey’s major writings. The second case focuses on the best-selling *Your Best Life Now* by pastor and inspirational speaker Joel Osteen. The third case is evangelical activist and author Shane Claiborne’s book *The Irresistible Revolution*. While all three cases offer different views of economic agency, they all seem to share a key contextual element in common. Each of these texts seems to be responding to the economic precarity that characterizes life in contemporary capitalism. For Ramsey, this means acknowledging and planning for the cycles of market fluctuation. For Osteen, this means explaining why his advice to be positive sometimes does not lead to material benefits. For Claiborne, that means offering a Christian critique of the systems that lead to socio-economic issues such as homelessness. I have chosen these three case studies specifically because each case study allows me to study a different aspect of three related aspects of these books: the function of self-help literature like these texts in a neoliberal society, the popularity and relatively wide circulation of the works, and the use of Christian themes and narratives to frame how Christian readers should engage in economic action.

Dave Ramsey and His Personal Finance Self-Help Literature

The set of texts that I focus on in my first analysis chapter is comprised of a selection of the writings of Dave Ramsey, a financial self-help guru whose advice is framed in evangelical Christian terms. Ramsey, while not the only evangelical writing about personal finances, has
been one of the most consistently popular in evangelical circles and beyond.\textsuperscript{124} The particular texts that I will be focusing on are his major books (\textit{Financial Peace}, \textit{The Total Money Makeover}, and \textit{The Legacy Journey}) with a special emphasis placed on his most recent book, \textit{The Legacy Journey}. Again, I am focusing on Dave Ramsey and his books for three reasons: the function of personal finance self-help literature in a neoliberal society, the popularity and wide circulation of his works, and the use of Christian themes and narratives to instruct readers in how they should engage in economic action as well as how to be better Christians. To begin, self-help literature functions within a neoliberal society as a set of instruction manuals for the individualization and privatization of previously collective functions, such as the movement of collective political complaints to the arena of the personal, psychological.\textsuperscript{125} In this case, retirement planning within some personal finance discourses takes the place of pensions and other retirement plans that would otherwise have been the subject of collective bargaining. This function makes personal finance self-help texts significant for understanding how people are organized and directed in neoliberal societies. My second reason for choosing Ramsey’s work, his popularity and the scale of his audience, is in some senses less important than the other two reasons, but is worth discussing nonetheless. The significance of his popularity is in a sense a simple matter of circulation, in that the popularity and widespread circulation of his works means the large-scale circulation of the figures and narratives that frame his financial advice. Whether that leads to distinct effects on his audiences is speculative, but the extensive circulation does mean that the conditions of possibility for the texts’ affectability increases as its points of contact with different publics increase. The final reason for choosing to analyze Ramsey’s works is that

\textsuperscript{124} Authors and personal finance counsellors Jim Sammons and Larry Burkett both represent a similar approach to Christian personal finance advice, although neither had anywhere near as large of an audience as Ramsey has developed; John W. Kennedy, “The Debt Slayers,” \textit{Christianity Today}, last modified May 1, 2006, http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2006/may/23.40.html.

\textsuperscript{125} Cloud, \textit{Control and Consolation}. 
it specifically provides a model of Christian economic action. It therefore meets the requirement for this project more broadly as a Christian discourse. Beyond it generally being a Christian discourse dealing in economic themes, Ramsey also elaborates in his most recent book an argument on the theological grounds for enjoying wealth, something outside of the Weberian framing of the connection between Protestantism and the capitalist form of accumulation. Ramsey is definitely not the dour Calvinist who occupies the religious moment in Weber’s elaboration of the development of capitalism in the 18th and 19th centuries. Instead, Ramsey provides a framework in which Christians should not just accumulate wealth but should also be justified in consuming luxury goods.

Joel Osteen’s *Your Best Life Now*

The second analysis chapter’s text is pastor and inspirational author Joel Osteen’s book *Your Best Life Now*. Osteen is the pastor of one of the largest megachurches in the US and his messages are broadcast on television internationally as well as online. Osteen’s book *Your Best Life Now* is a work of inspirational-spiritual self-help that offers a positive, optimistic framing of the everyday lives of his readers and frames this through a generally Christian spiritual discourse. I am analyzing Osteen’s *Your Best Life Now* for three reasons: the popularity and wide circulation of his writing and voice in the US, the neoliberal elements that characterize his contributions to contemporary Christian self-help literature, and how his message of positive thinking creates a certain model of economic agency for his readers to follow. Regarding Osteen’s popularity, of the three authors I am analyzing he is probably the most widely known. In addition to being at the head of a church of more than 40,000 people, according to Osteen’s website his sermons have a weekly television viewership of 7 million.\footnote{“About Joel,” Joel Osteen Ministries, accessed August 5, 2015, http://www.joelosteen.com/Pages/AboutJoel.aspx.}
study, “his first book, *Your Best Life Now*, was released by Time Warner debuting at the top of the *New York Times* Bestsellers List and quickly rising to #1. It remained on the *New York Times* Bestseller for more than 2 years and has sold more than 4 million copies.” In addition to the enormous scale of his popularity, another reason for analyzing Osteen’s book is that it contains thematic connections to neoliberal discourses of privatization and passive economic agency.

Osteen’s writing is full of anecdotes and hypothetical situations from everyday middle-class life in the contemporary US. Many of the people in his stories are worried about their finances, have just lost their job, or are angry or bitter because they never receive a raise. Osteen’s consistent response to concerns such as these is to blame the negativity of their thoughts/words/actions while praising those who are positive. For example, as I note above, Osteen tells a story of a truck mechanic who worked hard but was disliked by his coworkers and never promoted or given him a raise by his supervisor, with Osteen praising him because “He worked hard and kept his mouth shut, knowing that God was his vindicator. He wasn’t working to please his supervisor; he was working to please God.” The anecdote ends with that very vindication, with the owner of the garage giving the garage to the mechanic when the owner retires. In this narrative, there seems to be a connection between the development of Osteen’s story and Lauren Berlant’s concept of cruel optimism, which Berlant characterizes as a characteristic of life in neoliberalism. This particular example also gives an example of my third reason for studying Osteen’s book: his writing creates a model of economic agency to follow. The specifics of Osteen’s vision of economic agency is distinct from the other authors I propose to study precisely because he seems to be trying to convince his readers to become more passive.

127. Ibid.
economic agents, such as the example of the mechanic continuing to march forward at what seems to be a dead end job.

Shane Claiborne’s *The Irresistible Revolution*

The third and final textual case study that I am analyzing is *The Irresistible Revolution* by evangelical activist and author Shane Claiborne. Claiborne is probably best known as the author of the primary text I am studying, *The Irresistible Revolution*, but he is also known for his activist work and social/religious commentary. His activism is rooted in his participation in a form of what has been called New Monasticism, specifically in his role as one of the founding members of The Simple Way, an evangelical Christian intentional community in Philadelphia. My reasons for choosing to study Claiborne’s book remains similar to the other authors with some qualifications: Claiborne’s book offers a look at a different form of the Christian self-help book, *The Irresistible Revolution* was a popular book among evangelical audiences, and Claiborne very explicitly uses Christian themes and narratives to frame how Christian readers should engage in economic action. First, Claiborne’s book stands in contrast with the other works I am studying in this project for several reasons. One is that it takes a different form than the others; rather than being a straightforward self-help book instructing readers how they should fix some aspect of their lives, it is a piece of Christian living literature, making an argument for how Christians should live through a memoirist style detailing Claiborne’s journey into activism and communal life. The first two authors rely heavily on short anecdotes about themselves and people that their ideas either have helped or would help, but Claiborne’s writing takes a more personal, almost confessional tone. Second, *The Irresistible Revolution* attained some popularity within the evangelical market, but it never achieved the kind of widespread appeal that the

writings of Ramsey and Osteen have. Third, Claiborne spends large portions of his book narrating how The Simple Way community that he is a part of models economic agency for Christians by emphasizing community, care for the poor, and a sort of ascetic simplicity compared to “the American dream.”

In the context of the instability of the contemporary economic situation, questions of how agentic orientations are produced through conservative Protestant discourses become timely, critical reflections on the relationship between religion and agency and the economic imagination in the contemporary US. One of the fascinating parts of this interplay is that Christian discourses have an extensive history of theology and narrative to draw on, which gives some of the narratives an ancient tenor even as they interact with contemporary forms of economic agency. For example, in a recent book by Dave Ramsey, he argued that when Christians critique capitalism drawing on Jesus’s statements about the poor, they actually represent a resurgence of the heresy of Gnosticism, a Neoplatonist conception of the material world as evil.  

131 Ramsey, in a book that combined an argument for Christians to guiltlessly accumulate as much wealth as they can and practical advice on how to do this, frames his detractors as literal heretics, drawing on a theological controversy that occurred almost two millennia prior to his book. This is significant because it both expands the frame of contemporary discussions of economy in Christian discourses and it also serves as a good example of how elements from the Christian tradition can be repurposed to delegitimize contemporary social and political critiques. Because of my theoretical alignments and chosen texts, my analyses of these texts bring certain methodological requirements that must be attended to. Given the importance of the neoliberal

economic context to these texts, I need tools that rhetorical criticism provides for attending to the play between text and context as I approach my analysis.

**Methodological Foundations**

The methodological elements involved in this study primarily focus on questions of rhetorical criticism and textual analysis. The case studies comprising this study will all be approached through a practice of rhetorical criticism. My particular protocol and practices in approaching rhetorical criticism are grounded in the extensive disciplinary literature, but the general elements that I move through in approaching are loosely based on the broad framework which Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Thomas Burkholder have articulated which provides a solid grounding for my project. They lay out the general protocol I will follow in basically three stages of critique that accomplish distinct functions within the process of rhetorical criticism. These three stages will provide the methodological foundation for my project. Alongside this general grounding for my methodological procedure, I also discuss a few of the relevant considerations from the discussions of rhetorical criticism in the field. The special issues which the *Western Journal of Communication* every decade or so which provide this project with particularly relevant insights into the practice of rhetorical criticism.

**Rhetorical Criticism**

Rhetorical criticism, as Campbell and Burkholder describe it, progresses through three basic processes of critique that serve different functions in the creation of the work of critique as a whole. The first task rhetorical criticism aids me in is textual selection, including specifying and limiting the scope of the textual elements which I will examine in each case study. The second task is the descriptive analysis of both the textual elements that I have assembled in the

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133. Ibid.
first task and the relevant social and historical context from which the textual elements come.

The third and final task is the evaluation of the analysis performed in terms of a theoretical perspective and the construction of an argument based on this evaluation and interpretation. With regards to how I approached selecting the texts for this project, I chose these texts based on the questions and themes I was interested in exploring, namely the connection between conservative Protestantism and economic action. I chose the particular cases because of their relevance to these points, as well as providing unique insights into related issues such as the ways that economic subjectivities explicitly become the subject of what Dana Cloud wrote of as the rhetoric of therapy. Both these general procedural elements from Campbell and Burkholder and the more particular concerns that continue to be discussed in the field of rhetoric will play a role in how I approach this project.

Beyond the particulars of how I will approach the textual cases this project will be analyzing, there are also three principles guiding my practice of rhetorical criticism which I have gleaned from the WJC special issues on rhetorical criticism: the first is that the critic exercises agency in constructing and critiquing texts, the second that bodies matter in criticism (including the body of the critic), and the third that in analysis critics should seek to achieve a balance between the importance placed on text and context.

The first, that critics exercise agency in constructing and critiquing agency is a point that extends across many different authors in the field from Edwin Black to Sonja Foss and Michael McGee. In *Rhetorical Criticism*, Edwin Black places rhetorical criticism on continuum of methods from the objective to the subjective, and rhetorical criticism is placed squarely on the side of

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134. Cloud, *Control and Consolation*.
subjective method affected by "personality." In the 2006 *Rhetoric Review* forum on rhetorical criticism, Sonja Foss stated that she understood the process of rhetorical criticism as a synecdoche of human agency in general, with the critic making choices about what to engage in, how to engage in it, and who to talk to about it afterward. At the same time, the rhetorical critic’s agency is not without constraints. McGee points out that while the critic does have agency in constructing the text being analyzed, the critic is actually constrained by two expectations which others have of critics: that the critic will construct the text regardless of the agentic choices of the critic and that “they will function as advocates or adversaries of ‘the text.’” These arguments are important because they contextualize the work that the critic does and ask that I work with a reflexivity about the scope of my own agency as a researcher.

The second principle which I enumerated above, that bodies matter (including the critic’s), is explored by Carole Blair in her reflections on the act of critiquing public memorials. Blair’s conclusion is that in reflecting upon and theorizing how criticism can and should be done, there is a need to be actively interrogating the embodied location of the critic in relation to the text which they are critiquing and considering what role this plays in the process of criticism. This argument is crucial to this study because, as a white, heterosexual, cis-gendered male brought up in the Protestant tradition, I could as easily use the texts I am studying to rationalize and actualize my own privilege as critically analyze them.

The third principle, that critics should seek a balance between importance placed on text and context is a principle that shows in different ways in different authors’ discussions of this issue. One particular perspective that is relevant here is Celeste Condit’s response to Leff and

137. Foss, “Rhetorical Criticism as Synecdoche for Agency.”
McGee’s dueling programs for rhetorical criticism in the 1990 Western Journal of Communication issue on rhetorical criticism. In it, she argues for a sort of middle way between the close textual reading that Leff continues to focus on and the fragmentation thesis which McGee proposes in his article. The significance of this methodological principal for this project lies in approaching fairly traditionally bounded, specific texts in a way that also attends to the complex contexts that these books circulate within.

Rhetorical criticism allows me to approach my texts, Christian self-help literature, in a way that reflexively acknowledges my own positionality as an embodied critic and affirms it as a source of productive tension in the act of criticism. It also creates a space for me to ask the questions I have posed above in close conversation with the texts I am studying, by requiring me to be constantly moving between what the texts I am studying say and the contexts that in which they circulate. It also requires that I move between context and theory when analyzing and interpreting texts.

The next three chapters apply the concepts and methodological elements discussed in this chapter to the texts of each case study to map out and analyze the ways that Christian self-help literature treats economic agency through the agentic orientations articulated within these texts. In chapter 3, I analyze Dave Ramsey’s writings on personal finance, and trace how an agentic orientation organized around the metaphor of servitude is constructed across several books. Chapter 4 analyzes Joel Osteen’s Your Best Life Now argues that an agentic orientation organized around a metaphor of privilege is articulated into Osteen’s treatment of agency. Chapter 5 analyzes Shane Claiborne’s The Irresistible Revolution, arguing that Claiborne writes about

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agency through an agentic orientation organized around a metaphor of intimacy that drives Claiborne’s calls for social justice.
CHAPTER 3

“PERSONAL FINANCE IS WHO YOU ARE”:

THE TEMPERATE CAPITALIST AND SERVITUDE

There are those that believe that finance is merely an exact mathematical science. That is the way it is taught in universities. In fact, finance is an exact mathematical science—until a human touches it. Personal finance is who you are. The personal, philosophical, and emotional problems and strengths that you have will be reflected in your use of money. If you are very disciplined, you can be a good saver of money. If you are very selfish or self-centered, you will surround yourself with expensive toys that you cannot afford. 141

What is required, and cuts across the economy and modern-day society, is not knowledge but the injunction to become an economic “subject” (“human capital,” “entrepreneur of the self”), an injunction that concerns just as much the unemployed as the user of public services, the consumer, the most “modest” of workers, the poorest, or the “migrant.” In the debt economy, to become human capital or an entrepreneur of the self means assuming the costs as well as the risks of a flexible and financialized economy, costs and risks which are not only—far from it—those of innovation, but also and especially those of precariousness, poverty, unemployment, a failing health system, housing shortages. 142

“The rich rule over the poor, and the borrower is slave to the lender.” 143

A family with $375,000 in debt decided to do something about it, and after struggling to get rid of all of their debt (all the while continuing to give money to their church) wrote, “We couldn’t have done it without Dave... We can’t tell you the peace and freedom that this has brought to our entire family.” 144 A family that just read one of Dave Ramsey’s books to get their finances in order wrote, “Our family life has totally changed for the better. We know what our goals are for our money, and our kids are learning to give, save, and spend money wisely. This plan has helped us regain the hope of financial security and the spiritual peace we all look for in

life.”¹⁴⁵ A family with over $100,000 in debt that emerged two and a half years later with no debt wrote, “We were sick and tired of always having more month than money…If you are living in the bondage of debt, you’re not living. Our marriage is so much better, and there is an element of peace that wasn’t there before we had a financial plan.”¹⁴⁶ These are the types of stories that evangelical personal finance guru Dave Ramsey presents as examples of his handiwork; all of these people (and many others) adopted and followed his personal finance program and sent him their stories expressing their new-found peaceful, happy, and even joyful relationship with their personal finances.¹⁴⁷

As these fragments all suggest, another key element that appears across most of the stories that Ramsey’s readers share is the debt that they had before they found Ramsey. Almost all of them recount finding Ramsey’s writings as a part of a realization that they needed to do something about the amount of debt they were accumulating. In their narratives, they recall their accumulation of debt as seeming almost natural, or at the very least unremarkable, until the families realized how much debt they were amassing and how difficult it was to maintain payments for large amounts of debt in addition to paying for the necessities of life, like food and shelter. In these stories, the moment of clarity centered on the accumulation of debt marked a key stage in what we might consider a narrative of transformation. Note the different ways that these narratives of transformation articulate debt as problem and the repayment of debt as a source of emotional recovery. Debt emerges in these narratives both as an agent acting as the antagonist to the family and a consequence of the family’s economic agency, which serves as a source of guilt for the family’s prior financial failings.

¹⁴⁵ Ramsey, *Total Money Makeover*, 77-78.
¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 21.
¹⁴⁷ Ibid.
The inclusion of these stories of transformation and agency in Ramsey’s books serves the common function in self-help literature of initially declaring “its readers as insufficient, as lacking some feature of adequacy,” and it does this by having Ramsey’s readers do this themselves in their own words. This chapter focuses on beginning the exploration of the articulation of economic agency in evangelical Christian self-help discourses. In this chapter, that assessment is primarily accomplished by attempting to answer this question: when providing explicit economic advice, how do Christian self-help discourses construct an orientation to perceived economic agency available to their readers?

Why Ramsey? Two primary reasons for my choice of Ramsey’s work are his popularity and his scale. The scale of Ramsey’s self-help empire is national as the third most listened to radio talk-show host and with millions of books sold in the US. Ramsey’s popularity extends beyond radio and books because of the curriculum that organizations use to run personal finance classes, from churches to high schools and military bases. In many ways, Dave Ramsey is the leading Christian personal finance writer and speaker, and because of his pervasive presence he is the face of personal finance for many people. Dave Ramsey’s career as a speaker, counsellor, author, and general personal finance personality extends from the early 90’s to today. He self-published his first book, Financial Peace, in 1992, the same year he started a radio show on a local Tennessee radio station. By 1997, his radio show “The Money Game” was syndicated nationally, and Financial Peace was picked up by a national publisher. By 2013, Ramsey’s weekly radio audience had reached 7.7 million people, and four of his books were New York

152. Ibid., x.
times bestsellers, with one selling over 4 million copies. Ramsey’s audience is wide-ranging, considering how popular his books, radio show, and seminars have been.

The significance of his popularity is in a sense a simple matter of circulation, in that the popularity and widespread circulation of his works means the large-scale circulation of the figures and narratives that frame his financial advice. The extensive circulation also means that the conditions of possibility for the texts’ affectability increase as its points of contact with different publics increase. That is, the pervasive popularity of Ramsey’s programs means that at the very least more people are aware of his program and perhaps some of the principles that he preaches.

While not every household has $375,000 in debt today in the US, the stories shared above are representative of the economic realities of many in the US. That is, debt is a common practical problem for many living in contemporary capitalism primarily because consumer debt has grown incredibly in the last few decades of the 20th century and continues to grow at an extraordinary pace in the 21st century. In its different forms, consumer debt has risen dramatically in the last two to three decades. US credit card debt expanded quickly during the 1990’s, during which time “credit card debt in America almost tripled, from $238 billion to $692 billion.” Student loan debt has received significant media attention in the last few years because between 2004 and 2014 it had a similar explosion, growing from $364 billion in 2004 to $1.2 trillion in 2014. Total consumer debt in the US has remained in the range of $11-12

trillion from 2007-2015.\textsuperscript{156} In other words, there is a lot of private debt in the US right now, and its composition is shifting as student loan balances continue to increase.

Debt is not just prevalent; it is deeply rhetorical and of particular concern when talking about the relationship between rhetorical and economic agency. Larger public narratives of debt situate it as both an adversary to debtors’ general well-being and a symptom of either contextual problems (such as the loss of a job) and/or more individual problems (such as a misunderstanding of financial options). For instance, debt in self-help literature is often constructed as the enemy that is keeping people from financial stability, as a symptom of poor planning, and as a sign of short-sightedness, a lack of ambition, or financial illiteracy. As an obstacle to stable personal finances, personal finance authors address debt often and thoroughly because it is such a common problem. It is here where the links between debt and agency are most clear. Debt is often framed as a promise or a type of contract that shapes social relationships and demands the performance of responsibility by the debtor.\textsuperscript{157} Debt, as a monetary relationship, also complicates the enactment of economic agency by providing in the present the means to engage in economic action while also potentially placing a greater constraint on the actor’s future ability to act. Debt as a contractual promise and discourses of debt act as peculiar constraints on agency that are also simultaneously a source of agency. In addition, one of the key characteristics of neoliberal economic policy’s privatization has been the increase in private debt. In a sense, neoliberalism is a system that functions by creating private debt as a consequence of privatization.


\textsuperscript{157} David Graeber, Debt: The First Five Thousand Years (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2012); Matthew Tiessen, “Monetary Mediations and the Overcoding of Potential: Nietzsche, Deleuze & Guattari and How the Affective Diagrammatics of Debt have Gone Global,” MediaTropes 4, no. 1 (2013): 47-64.
While personal finance discourses in general, including Dave Ramsey’s writings, certainly do not focus exclusively on debt, its prevalence has made dealing with debt the first major step of many personal finance programs. For example, in Suze Orman’s *The Money Book for the Young, Fabulous, and Broke*, chapter 1 focuses on knowing and understanding your credit score and how to use that knowledge. As another example, the first chapter of Ramit Sethi’s *I Will Teach you to be Rich* focuses on debt and how to optimize your use of it. Both of these examples differ greatly from Ramsey’s total abhorrence of personal debt, so while it is something that most personal finance writers will address, the particulars can look very different from Ramsey’s program. Ramsey’s stance on debt is an outlier within personal finance because he passionately argues that people should not take on any debt if they can help it, and he only begrudgingly makes an exception for home mortgages. What makes Ramsey an outlier is that he rejects the common idea in personal finance that there is bad debt (credit cards, car loans, etcetera) and good debt (student loans, mortgages); for Ramsey, there is no good debt, only bad debt. Part of Ramsey’s caution regarding debt is tied to his sensitivity to some of the ways that economic fluctuations can affect people’s everyday lives. Ramsey writes and speaks in the context of late-twentieth century/early twenty-first century capitalism that in the US has been characterized by instability, sector-specific crashes, and most recently a general recession, all of which he gestures to at certain points in his writings as justification for his more conservative view. Some economic touchstones which are especially relevant for understanding Ramsey’s books are both the general expansion of consumer debt in the last three decades and the booming financial services industry that has produced many different creative new financial products,

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many of which are debt-based, from variations on the standard credit card to the sub-prime mortgages that were at the heart of the 2008 crisis.

The enormity of contemporary levels of debt leaves debt at the level of statistical abstraction, but for the people who hold that debt, it is much less abstract. Instead, debt is an experiential, material, and even embodied aspect of everyday life. For example, cultural studies scholar Matthew Tiessen says that the “emphasis on feelings and promises in contemporary financial discourse objectifies the degree to which the world of finance and economics is an emotional one, held together by interconnected and interdependent feelings of responsibility, commitment, trust, faith, belief, and hope…yielding embodied responses.”160 Echoes of these financial feelings can be seen in the narratives of Ramsey’s testimonials, such as how one family was “Drowning with $56,000 in credit-card debt and a $35,000 income. We met with a financial planner who told us it would take forty years to pay off our debt. We felt hopeless and continued to accumulate debt.”161 In a theoretical frame, the primary force that debt exercises on experience works by calling out a sense of responsibility in debtors that functions through two ways: as a commitment or promise that the person must fulfill and as guilt or liability to those that a person is indebted to.162

To step back, the reasons for considering debt so centrally in a study of Dave Ramsey’s personal finance writings are two: first, writing and speaking about debt is the central topos of most of Ramsey’s work and second, this focus on debt significantly shapes the contours of how agency is articulated within Ramsey’s writings. While debt’s growing influence as an economic product makes it worth considering as a social issue, debt is also more than a financial product composed of a balance of numbers. Debt is a complex discursive phenomenon that creates and

162. Lazzaratto, Indebted Man, 34.
frames peoples’ experiences, and Ramsey’s writings take this into account in how they relate debt to the agency of prospective readers. Maurizio Lazzarato, the Italian Autonomous Marxist social theorist, argues that debt discourses produce subjectivities and are interconnected with a field of discourse that positions creditors and debtors in practical, ethical, and emotional terms. He writes,

> debt mortgages at once their behavior, wages, and future income... Credit produces a specific form of subjectivation. Debtors are alone, individually responsible to the banking system; they can count on no solidarity except, on occasion, on that of their families, which in turn risk going into debt. Debtors interiorize power relations instead of externalizing and combatting them. They feel ashamed and guilty. 163

The expansion of debt under neoliberalism is more than a coincidence in Lazzarato’s estimation: it is a primary technique employed by neoliberal institutions to govern contemporary economic subjects. 164

This conceptualization of the subjectivating force of discourses of debt can be understood to be partially functioning through the production of an agentic orientation, which consists of structural, pragmatic, and imaginative elements. The agentic orientation produced by discourses of debt line up with practical, ethical, and emotional terms of the production of indebted subjectivity. The practical is connected in terms of the framing of the structural constraints that debt places on one’s perception of current possible action. The ethical is connected in terms of the relational imaginary that debt embeds individuals within. The emotional is connected in terms of the ways that individual’s emotional investments in the practical constraints and ethical relationships manage their capacity to process and imagine debt’s impact on their future.

163. Maurizio Lazzarato, *Governing by Debt* (South Pasadena, CA: semiotext(e), 2015), 70.
164. Writing of the function of student loan debt as an example: “Debt is the technique most adequate to the production of neoliberalism’s *homo economicus*. Students not only consider themselves human capital, which they must valorize through their own investments (the university loans they take out), but also feel compelled to act, think, and behave as if they were individual businesses.” Lazzarato, *Governing by Debt*, 70.
In this chapter, I argue that Ramsey’s personal finance discourse produces an agentic orientation to serve as an alternative to the agentic orientation that discourses of debt produce. The passage from Proverbs quoted above appears often in Ramsey’s writings, demonstrating that debt and property are more than objects of consumption and circulation; how debt and property are talked about also plays a role in framing the economic relationships people engage in and the agential capacities available to them within those relationships. Ramsey’s personal finance discourse, which emphasizes a metaphor of servitude at the heart of economic agency, is an intervention into the indebted subjectivity constituted by the complex of discourses surrounding debt in contemporary capitalism. Here, the writings of Dave Ramsey articulate an agentic orientation I have termed the moderate or temperate capitalist that is organized around the central metaphor of servitude. As an agentic orientation, the moderate capitalist is constituted through reconciling a series of tensions surrounding consumption in contemporary capitalism by demonstrating an antagonism between the servitude of debt slavery and the servitude of stewarding divine wealth. In this way, Ramsey’s writings create an agentic orientation to contemporary economic action that is positioned in contrast to the expectations of indebted subjectivity that discourses of debt produce. Analyzing the temperate capitalist as an agentic orientation is the first element in delineating the relationality of agency being examined in this project through the concept of agentic orientation. Servitude is a relational metaphor that implies certain things about agency, positioning human actors’ relationship to agency as being mediated by a third element that is, for Ramsey, the God of Christianity.

In making this argument, this chapter is written in three sections. In the first, I review the discussion in the theoretical literature on debt as a technique for subjectivating and more thoroughly situate my conceptualization of agentic orientation as a rhetorical concept in relation
to this theoretical discussion. In the next section, I lay out how the metaphor of servitude in Ramsey’s writings organizes a certain vision of economic agency informed by evangelical Christian and economic discourses, articulating the agentic orientation of the temperate capitalist. The final section reflects on the tension within the temperate capitalist agentic orientation between the autonomy of the human agent and the sovereignty of God. I conclude that this dynamic is managed by the metaphor of servitude as well as by the implication within the idea that if “personal finance is who you are,” to fix the problems with your finances you must fix yourself. This explication of the temperate capitalist agentic orientation offers an initial exploration in the project of conceptualizing agency as relational, while at the same time integrating the autonomy of the human agent as a central feature. Therefore, the temperate capitalist agentic orientation is a productive place to start thinking about the relationality of agency through agentic orientations because it demonstrates one way that autonomy and an asymmetrical relationality can be reconciled within a theory of agency.

Debt and Agency

Debt is commonly understood to be at its most basic a relationship of one’s obligation to another, whether that obligation is financial or social. Debt is by definition relational. The nature of this relationship can become complicated by the financial apparatuses that organize these relationships, such as when debts are transferred, sold, or bundled with other debts, all currently common practices in the financial services industry, but debt remains relational even as the relationship may become abstracted and impersonal. While the focus of Dave Ramsey’s discussions of debt, and therefore my focus, is on monetary debts, social (and often times figurative) debts are almost as common: debts of gratitude, owing a favor, or lending a hand. Anthropologist David Graeber makes the case that credit rather than barter was the grounds for
exchange in ancient trade interactions, replacing the imaginary history of money where “debt is always something of an afterthought. First comes barter, then money; credit only develops later.” Instead of the “fantasy of barter” that economists have relied on to explain pre-historic and ancient exchange, Graeber details how these forms of exchange were instead managed through debt. Rather than being a secondary aspect of economic life that has only recently begun to expand under the processes of neoliberal capitalism, debt has historically been foundational to processes of exchange around the world. What this means for this project is that the unique thing about the recent expansion of consumer debt in the past couple of decades is not necessarily the characteristics of how debt is experienced, although they continue to change, but rather the particular forms of contemporary debt and the enormous scale it has taken on are what makes the context Ramsey is writing in distinct from past forms of debt.

The literature situating debt within contemporary capitalist practices and the critique of capitalism suggests debt plays a central role in economic action because of the current trend towards the financialization of the contemporary economic order. There is a stream of thought in the critique of neoliberal capitalism that argues that the crux of the current economic order is the rise of the finance industry as a dominant force in shaping contemporary capitalist practices and policies. For example, Hanan and Chaput give a rhetorical account of the discourses surrounding public debt in the US after the 2008 recession, arguing that the discourses surrounding the Emergency Economic Stabilization Act of 2008 (EESA) create a process of shifting private risk onto the public, where private economic failures become public debt.

166. Ibid., 23.
subsidizing the extremes of neoliberal capitalism.\(^{169}\) Hanan and Chaput’s argument is that this rhetorical mechanism of transfer is often rationalized in terms of a state of exception by policymakers, either as an economic exception in which neoliberal markets need government intervention or moral exception in light of the moral bankruptcy of the Bush administration and Wall Street during that time.\(^{170}\) These rationalizations of EESA through the state of exception discourse legitimize how corporate interests are protected in the name of and at the expense of the public, transforming the losses of a private corporation into sovereign debt. This gives an example of the contractual dynamics of debt reproduce power dynamics, as powerful financial interests are protected by the state.

**Debt as Subjection**

Debt, like so many concepts, is obscured by how commonplace it is in the contemporary US. Credit cards, car loans, mortgages, and student loans have become a part of everyday life for a large portion of the population. As an economic process, lenders extract money from people who need money by giving them money, working on one level “as a mechanism for income redistribution;” it takes from those without capital and gives it to those who have capital, like an inversion of Robin Hood.\(^{171}\) However, this is not how debt is typically discussed. Debt is often framed by banks and financial institutions as an opportunity, money to use that a person otherwise would not have. Taken to its extreme, a society structured by these processes could construct a society where debt is one of the most basic principles organizing social relations.

\(^{169}\) EESA was the law which initially authorized and funded the Troubled Assets Relief Program (TARP), popularly talked about as the bank bailout as the subprime mortgage crisis reached critical levels.

\(^{170}\) Hanan and Chaput, “Stating the Exception.”

where subjectivity revolves around the status of debtor or creditor, a fear that serves as the animating force of much of Maurizio Lazzaratto’s recent writings on debt’s role in society.\footnote{Lazzarato argues that the university system and student debt in the US serve as an exemplary case of what this would look like: “American students represent the ideal of financialized society. The social group is composed of a majority of debtors and a minority of rich creditors’ children. In the production of knowledge, class opposition no longer depends on the opposition between capitalists and wage-earners but on that between debtors and creditors. It is the model capitalist elites want to apply to all of society.” Lazzarato, \textit{Governing by Debt}, 66.}

As a contract, debt, like other types of contracts, is a complex legal mechanism that places people into relationships with other people, institutions, states, economies, and an expansive field of discourse. For the purposes of this study, it is this field of discourse that is of interest. In constructing the debtor and the creditor and the relationship between them, the discourses of debt give a normative charge to the hierarchical relation that the indebted are subject to through their debt. It is in this sense that debt “also functions as a mechanism for the production and ‘government’ of collective and individual subjectivities.”\footnote{Lazzarato, \textit{Indebted Man}, 29.} In this frame, the primary discursive process articulated to debt is an ethic of indebtedness that constitutes indebted subjectivity. The indebted subjectivity works in cooperation with discourses of labor, in that “the couple ‘effort-reward’ of the ideology of work is doubled by the morality of the promise (to honor one’s debt) and the fault (of having entered into it).”\footnote{Ibid., 30.} The discursive function of debt as a contract serves as the mechanism enforcing such a morality by making it a legal obligation, making debtors subject to the state in the same movement that makes them subject to their creditors.

The rhetorical dimensions of debt are primarily to be found in how it is framed and experienced or narratives of that experience. Rhetorical scholars have studied the rhetoric of debt primarily in terms of the rhetoric of policy makers and economic experts.\footnote{Han and Chaput’s essay studying the discourse surrounding EESA is another good example of this focus on policy makers and expert discourses.} For example,
William Herring argues that the rhetoric of debt articulated by James Madison in 1790 continues to play a role in discussions of sovereign debt by US congresspersons and economic commentators, while neglecting the nuances of Madison’s rhetoric of debt.\footnote{176}{William Rodney Herring, “The Rhetoric of Credit, The Rhetoric of Debt: Economic Arguments in Early America and Beyond,” \textit{Rhetoric & Public Affairs} 19, no. 1 (2016): 45-82, 69.} In another study of the rhetorics of debt, G. Thomas Goodnight, David Hingstman, and Sandy Green attend to a more contemporary rhetoric of debt, that of the student debt bubble. They argue that the student debt bubble, functioning as an ideograph, has been marshalled by neoliberal technologists and social commentators as a front in the efforts to privatize and de-centralize higher education.\footnote{177}{G. Thomas Goodnight, David Hingstman, and Sandy Green, “The Student Debt Bubble: Neoliberalism, The University, and Income Inequality,” \textit{Journal of Cultural Economy} 8, no. 1 (2015): 75-100, 92-93.} Both of these essays share a common concern that studies of the rhetoric of economics often have with technical economic rhetoric rather than non-expert discourses of debt.\footnote{178}{Aune, \textit{Selling the Free Market}, xiii.}

While this chapter is focused on an expert of sorts in Dave Ramsey, the variety of rhetoric of economics in Ramsey’s writings is popular rather than technical. Ramsey writes in the register of the common sense of the everyday life management of economic action, and so Ramsey provides a narrative structure articulating how debt can and should be experienced. In this sense, Ramsey’s personal finance discourse is a more direct intervention into the relationship between agency and the discourse of debt than many of the expert discourses on debt because most people need or search for someone to translate technical economic discourses into idioms that are both easier for them to understand and more appealing.

\textbf{Servitude and Relationality}

While not the only evangelical author writing about personal finance, Dave Ramsey has been one of the most thoroughly popular in evangelical circles. The particular texts that I focus
on in this section are three of his major books. I specifically focus my attention on his first book, *Financial Peace*, his most popular book *The Total Money Makeover*, and one of his most recent books, *The Legacy Journey*, which focuses on being wealthy as opposed to becoming wealthy, the focus of his other books. Each of these three books offer a distinct piece of Ramsey’s version of personal finance, from the easy to read total beginner’s guide (*The Total Money Makeover*) to the in depth basic program that the rest of his work is based around (*Financial Peace*) as well as the manual for those who are already wealthy (*The Legacy Journey*). The rhetorical significance of Dave Ramsey’s writings extends beyond their popularity and circulation. Ramsey’s works are also rhetorically significant because they articulate a personal finance discourse, constituted as a practice of self-help that highlights the relationship between an evangelical Christian biblical hermeneutic and contemporary capitalist practices. This practice of personal finance is grounded in a vision of agency as relational in specific ways, a point that I elaborate as I construct the agentic orientation that Ramsey’s writings articulate.

I have defined agentic orientation as a process consisting of hermeneutic elements (an interpretive framing of structural conditions), circulating in a public, and organized around a central metaphor, that in these case studies are articulated within the different self-help books. Ramsey’s discourse of personal finance constructs the frame around economic action in an array of different ways. In this section, I sketch out how the elements of economic agency are articulated by this discourse into an agentic orientation that combines the investment practices of an enthusiastic capitalist with the reserved moderation of a faithful churchgoer. I connect the moving pieces of Ramsey’s articulation of economic agency into an agentic orientation that I have termed the temperate capitalist. I suggest that the temperate capitalist demonstrates the relationality of agency in a way that also illustrates the importance of taking religion into account.
when examining discourses of agency. I primarily explore how Ramsey’s personal finance discourse frames the structural conditions that constitute economic agency and the metaphor of servitude that the orientation of the temperate capitalist is constructed around.

As a metaphor that organizes the agentic orientation in Ramsey’s writings, servitude is a relational metaphor as well as an agential metaphor. The agentic orientation of the temperate capitalist draws on servitude as a particular way that human relationships can be organized. Specifically, these relationships are organized through the formal hierarchy that servitude suggests, articulating agency as being totally determined by a formal hierarchy. In this sense, Ramsey’s writings construct the metaphor of servitude as a universal conception of human agency. All human agency can be reduced to different forms of servitude within this metaphor, with the only differences being who one serves and how one serves. The first of these differences, the question of who one serves, is a common focus for Christian discussions and draw on Bible verses such as Luke 16:3, “No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.” Often, the metaphor of servitude would direct attention to the relationship to a master as the focal point of a discussion of agency. Ramsey’s books, instead, focuses on the second difference I mentioned, the question of how one serves. Rather than using the metaphor of servitude to focus on the servant-master relationship, although that relationship is implicitly always at work in the metaphor, Ramsey uses the metaphor of servitude to illustrate the ways that agency should and should not be used.

Servitude as a relational metaphor of agency, a question of who, is about the source of agency. In the servant-master relationship, the servant has agency as a proxy of the master. This is similar to how James Darsey describes the way that prophetic rhetoric complicates traditional
notions of rhetorical agency, “Prophecy shatters the unity of rhetoric. Inventio and actio are not products of the same agent. Prophecy in a significant respect is performance from a script.” In this sense, asking who one serves is at the same time asking where one derives agency from.

On the other hand, Ramsey use of the metaphor of servitude focuses heavily on the question of how one serves, which primarily focuses on the qualities associated with how one enacts servitude. Assuming that the state of servitude is a universally human condition, the question for Ramsey is not whether you serve (because you do) or even who you serve (because you either do or should serve God) but whether you are a good servant and if you even know how to be a good servant. This is where the focus on wisdom, investment, moderation, etcetera comes into play in relation to agency. Enacting agency as a servant is not a question of how well one can act in one’s own interests and beliefs, but rather how well one can act on behalf of the one you serve. This is one of the reasons why Ramsey’s apology for wealth accumulation is so interesting: it looks like actions of the rationally, self-interested homo economicus but is articulated as the subordination of the servant to the will of their master.

**The Temperate Capitalist: Serving God with Money**

The temperate capitalist agentic orientation is significant in its articulation of agency as relational because it juxtaposes a hierarchy in the form of a discourse of divine sovereignty with the autonomy of the human economic agent. The temperate capitalist also serves as a good starting point for this larger study of the relationality of agency because it offers a simple relational dynamic that is invoked by the metaphor of servitude, at least compared to some of the dynamics in the forthcoming chapters. The rest of this chapter will explicate how servitude works to make the temperate capitalist a viable agentic orientation, interpreting structures, prescribing actions, and anticipating outcomes.

The first element to examine in articulating the agentic orientation of the temperate capitalist through Ramsey’s writings is to map out the interpretive accounts of agents and the structural constraints they face. This section does this by first developing a key tension in Ramsey’s personal finance discourse: between human economic agents and God as an economic agent. The second half of this section breaks down three different forms of economic agency that construct a paradigm for economic action grounded in a relationship of servitude, human’s serving as God’s stewards, that is the central metaphor of the temperate capitalist.

Economic Agents

Noting that both humans and God are economic agents is an important part of the unique field of action that Ramsey’s writings place readers into because it offers a unique perspective on the relationship between the two as mediated by servitude. While Ramsey’s personal finance discourse is constructed for providing human economic actors with advice, it is also setting a cosmic scene in which human economic actors play a role but not the only role. Human agency may be the primary focus of the advice, comfort, and admonishments that make up the field of human economic agency, but Ramsey’s personal finance discourse emphasizes God as both the fundamental source of all human agency and the final arbiter of all outcomes, economic and otherwise. In this sense, God’s role in Ramsey’s framework is as much one of enacting economic agency as it is to act as a universal structural condition constraining and enabling human agency.

The temperate agentic orientation frames human agency in general, and economic agency in particular, in an individualizing frame. Part of this can be attributed to the function of the genre of personal finance self-help; it is not a textbook on macroeconomics, but a do-it-yourself guide to managing your own finances. In Ramsey’s writings, individuals remain his implicit audience as traditional economic agents, capable of rational choice but always under the
influence of irrational forces. His writing is usually directed towards male heads of households and occasionally their spouses. Individual economic agents are described with a certain set of characteristics that seem to set them apart from the other levels of economic agency discussed in Ramsey’s writings. Namely, these characteristics emphasize that individuals are in the final moment the ones actually engaging in direct economic action, are in the end the ones making economic choices, and because of their central importance in the process of economic action are also vulnerable to competing desires and irrational forces.

The individuality of the temperate capitalist is marked by its commitment to conceptualization of the agent as autonomous. Ramsey’s characterization of the individual as the site of economic decision making means that in economic actions, individuals have the agency to make a variety of choices and do a variety of economic actions without being controlled by other actors, situational, or structural constraints. As he says in one place, “Your situation isn’t your spouse’s fault (well, maybe, but we’ll talk later), it isn’t your parents fault, it isn’t your children’s fault, and it isn’t your friend’s fault. IT IS YOUR FAULT! But guess what? That means that if you’re the one who got you into this mess, you’re the one who can get you out.” Ramsey does not deny that these other elements exist and put pressure on individuals as they live and act in contemporary capitalism, but he holds the individual as basically independent and responsible for their actions.

The significance of the temperate capitalist being articulated as autonomous is partially because of the intensity of the autonomy and agency that Ramsey attributes to the temperate capitalist. As an example of how this plays out in Ramsey’s thinking, he writes in several places

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180. Their explicitly heterosexual spouses, that is to say. While Ramsey rarely to never touches explicitly on social issues in his writings, he occasionally telegraphs his affinities to the Christian Right. Occasionally he does refer to women as heads of households, but only on the occasions when he is talking about single mothers, which he does relatively rarely.

181. Ramsey, Total Money Makeover, 7.
that he thinks that anyone who lives in the US and is able to work is able to become comfortably wealthy. He states this unequivocally, making it clear that in current conditions, anyone can and not just should be able to save for a fully privately financed retirement: “Anyone in America can retire a millionaire.”¹⁸² This suggests a wealth of economic agency available, but this also implies that the reason people are not millionaires when they retire is essentially because of their own choices, a perspective that he makes explicit when he explains himself further, writing:

That’s a bold statement, I know…Let me tell you why it sounds so surprising: It’s because we get hit with all kinds of messages from our culture that tell us we can’t do that. I’ve heard them all: “I just can’t find a job.” “The little man can’t get ahead.” “The system is rigged.” I even have a relative who just walks around yelling, “The corporations! It’s the corporations!”…Personally, I think most of these excuses are garbage.

I know that it can be hard finding a job, and I know that the economy has some wild ups and downs. I get that. I didn’t say that it’s easy to become a millionaire; I just said anyone can do it. If you learned God’s ways of handling money and used them throughout your life, if you stayed out of debt, if you saved for emergencies, if you planned and invested for your future, and if you did that consistently over time, where would you end up? You’d be wealthy.¹⁸³

How, then, does Ramsey explain why more people do not do this? He does so with reference to Proverbs 21:20: “In the house of the wise are stores of choice food and oil, but a foolish man devours all he has.” The wise will become millionaires, whereas the foolish will remain poor because of their appetites. Individuals have economic agency, but they are first and foremost limited by their own failings. This narrative positions agents as having so much agency that the largest constraint on their own agency are their own personalities. This is why an ethic of temperance is central to Ramsey’s personal finance discourse. Wealth and status are products of character, and character must be managed and worked on.

The other side of adhering to a view of the individual as an intensely independent, self-determining agent is that he attributes most of the negative elements of contemporary economic

¹⁸² Ramsey, The Legacy Journey, 139.
¹⁸³ Ibid., 139.
life to choices made by individuals rather than structural constraints. Just as good character traits produces wealth, bad ones produce poverty. In some cases, this means blaming people for making poor financial decisions while also blaming individuals for exploitative business practices, such as when he writes about payday loans: “Lower-income people will remain at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder if they fall for these rip-offs. These ‘lenders’ (or as I like to call them, ‘the scum of the scum’) are bottom-feeders and legally make themselves rich on the backs of the poor or those soon to be poor.” Ramsey’s personal finance discourse places both the debtor and the creditor are at fault. What this example also shows is that debt is the one economic practice Ramsey’s writings consistently frame as exploitative, although he expects consumers to not “fall for” the promises of debt. He never allows for the possibility of imagining a benevolent lender. For the most part he does not acknowledge the possibility of there being structural elements at play, save for when discussing certain forms of debt such as payday loans. What should be noted is that this discourse of strong, autonomous agency never falters, even in the face of an exploitative practice like payday lending that Ramsey finds morally odious. The temperate capitalist does not find exceptions to the burden of their own agency when they are exploited by others.

The autonomy of the agent does have its limits, as the potential for exploitation points out, but that does not mean that the temperate capitalist is ever excused for a bad financial choice. Even when being manipulated, cheated, or exploited, the temperate capitalist, in Ramsey’s argument, is always culpable for their economic sins even if they were unintentional or unnoticed. While Ramsey sees individuals as being independent, he still emphasizes the role that psychological and social influences play in individuals’ decision making processes. The independence that Ramsey sees in the individual economic agent means that those individuals

have to take control of the other internal and external influences, such as wanting a new TV or the normalcy of consumer debt in the US, to be able to make that independent action effective. On this count, much of Ramsey’s thinking is derived from behavioral economics, especially his emphasis on the importance of cultivating productive fiscal habits.

An individual’s habits are the place that make or break their attempts to control their own finances, so much of the advice in Ramsey’s personal finance discourse is about breaking bad habits, such as accumulating debt and taking advantage of the potential for good habits, such as monthly budgets. In a sense, this is the one place where the temperate capitalist gets reprieve from the intense agency they are afforded, at least once they instill the right habits into their daily routines. Yet, in another sense, the temperate capitalist’s responsibility for their own habits and unconscious tendencies is just another intensification of the responsibilities of agency that Ramsey connects to the agentic orientation of the temperate capitalist. While Ramsey’s writings mostly address individuals, this does not mean that they hold the primary position in his prescriptive model of how economic agency should be exercised. Instead, families as systems of economic action, sites of collective agency, are emphasized as necessary and better agents because they can (and should in Ramsey’s framework) serve as sites of collective decision making that keeps the excessive tendencies of individual members in check (whether in the form of excessive spending or miserliness). The family then also serves as a form of support for the temperate capitalist, alongside right habits.

While the individual (situated within a family) seems to serve as Ramsey’s ideal human economic unit, God plays an important role in understanding how Ramsey sees the field of economic agency in general, particularly in terms of the divine-human relationship that is articulated in the temperate capitalist agentic orientation through the metaphor of servitude. The
temperate capitalist agentic orientation frames God as the source of all wealth and owner of everything, all of existence, which means that all other forms of personal and collective economic agency are derived from God’s providence. This means that within the temperate capitalist agentic orientation, for all their autonomy and economic agency, humans are “stewards” of wealth that is not their own. While God seems primarily passive in this discussion, God is an agent within this frame in the sense that God intervenes into economic scenes to allocate resources. Ramsey’s writings narrate God as intervening only to give human stewards’ material wealth and to take wealth away from bad stewards. In other words, Ramsey is not suggesting that God is manipulating currency valuations, oil reserves, or your attempts at refinancing your mortgage. As an economic agent, God’s role is to constitute the very conditions of possibility for economic action.

God’s role in the constitution of the economic scene and as an economic actor has some significant implications for how Ramsey characterizes right economic action because by articulating these prescriptions to good stewardship, good work on God’s behalf, they take on a tone of practices of religious devotion. These points have some important implications that play out in Ramsey’s writings that alter how human agency should be understood in relation to God’s economic agency: the need to be actively engaged in the current economic system, that legacy involves more than a transfer of money, and that everyone should always being giving something. “Looking to the future, I’ve instructed my kids that they don’t own it either. When I die, they’ll take over the management, not the ownership—because it’s not mine to leave them. Who’s the true heir of my estate? It’s the current owner: Jesus Christ.”185 While the simple principles that ground Ramsey’s system for building wealth do not require believing this, it is a

central part of how Ramsey’s personal finance discourse makes sense of the field of economic action.

The first prescription, to be actively engaged in the current economic system, is taken directly from the parable of the talents in Matthew 25, lending not just the authority of Ramsey’s articulation of this economic practice as a religious practice but also the authority of scripture. As Ramsey tells it, the parable of the talents is “the story of a rich man who went out of town for an extended trip, and he left three servants in charge of different portions of his wealth while he was gone.” When the rich man returns, two of the servants are rewarded because they invested the money wisely but the third servant is punished because he hid the money given to him and did not do anything productive with it. Drawing on this parable feeds back into the stewardship framework, offering both a scriptural citation and the additional power of narrative to his principle. Ramsey uses this parable to illustrate how a stewardship view of property means more than believing that people are merely looking after what God owns, but that because of that people will be held accountable for how they manage that property. The best way of managing that property, as Ramsey extrapolates from the parable, is to invest it into the current economic system and try to use it to grow wealth.

The second prescription, that a legacy means more than leaving money to your children, places the practice of wealth accumulation into conversation with the question of God’s economic agency. Ramsey emphasizes that it is more important to teach your children to be responsible, effective economic agents first or any financial legacy left to them will be “a curse rather than a blessing.” The point being that if children are not prepared for the same kind of responsibility that Ramsey is teaching adults to have in his writings, then the children will end up falling into the same problems he is advising their parents on. If the children are not taught that

responsibility they risk mismanaging it or even wasting it through unwise forms of consumption. Again, whether the problem is mismanagement or wastefulness, the root question is whether or not the readers’ children will accept their roles as stewards guiding their wealth’s growth.

Basically, while Ramsey’s personal finance discourse seems to value the family unit as an ideal system for economic action because it provides support and accountability, the stewardship relationship complicates the way that this system is reproduced generationally.

The final prescription, that everyone should be giving something, is discussed consistently across Ramsey’s books as a way for people to both acknowledge that they are only stewards of their material possessions and to practice disassociating their personal attachments to “stuff” by giving up a small portion of it on a regular basis. While practicing this kind of disassociation seems to conflict with Ramsey’s emphasis in *The Legacy Journey* that the wealthy should enjoy their wealth, the practice’s main purpose is framed as an act to remind them that they are stewards rather than owners, and because, as Ramsey writes “I believe that God puts us through the mechanical act of giving—even though we don’t fully understand the reasons why—because the act of giving changes us.” Giving in as such is a means of the work on oneself, character development, that is required to become a good steward.

In a sense, all three of these prescriptions are forms of work on the self in addition to their other functions. Engaging in the economy requires individuals learn how to invest and manage money, the very central purpose of Ramsey’s writings. Teaching your children to be effective, responsible economic agents is both a practice of cultivating your own stewards or proxies while also requiring you to grow into the role of a teacher. Making a habitual practice of giving makes the stewardship relationship to material wealth more concrete. What this suggests is that while the temperate capitalist is autonomous, because of God’s central role in this
economic universe, the temperate capitalist is also expected to cultivate themselves in addition to stewarding material wealth.

Forms of Economic Agency

While the temperate capitalist agentic orientation’s articulation of economic agents is centered around the master-servant relationship that stewardship constructs, the forms of economic agency that temperate capitalists are advised to take part in are fairly mundane. They are significant because they circumscribe much of economic actions that private individuals are capable of and are articulated in terms of the metaphor of servitude, which places them in a very different light, particularly when that servitude is placed in tension with the autonomy Ramsey ascribes to the temperate capitalist. The tension between servitude and autonomy is somewhat resolved in these forms of economic agency by articulating them as work on the self, character development. Ramsey talks about this in more established terms, writing that:

Personal finance is who you are. The personal, philosophical, and emotional problems and strengths that you have will be reflected in your use of money. If you are very disciplined, you can be a good saver of money. If you are very selfish or self-centered, you will surround yourself with expensive toys that you cannot afford.  

This seems to suggest that your personality or character has a determinative effect on your economic agency, but what is left unsaid is that the prescriptions that are given to the temperate capitalist agentic orientation are in this sense work that must be done to change who you are.

The themes of economic agency I outline here as central to Ramsey’s articulation of how the temperate capitalist should act to improve themselves can be narrowed down to debt, ownership, and investment. These three forms of agency are more specifically constructed in terms of a description of the economic actions and practices of judgment that ostensibly free economic agents from subjection to debt while reaffirming debt’s power, a discourse on

responsibility and enjoyment of property the replaces ownership with stewardship, and a practical ethic of investment that serves as the one of the foundational practices of wise stewardship. As a site of character development, how the temperate capitalist is instructed to handle debt is central to the development of the temperance of the temperate capitalist because it entails abstaining from consumption when one does not already have the means to do so and enjoying a moderate amount of consumption when one does have the means. As the central figure of the relational metaphor of servitude, stewardship is character development because it requires a consistent practice of resisting the prevailing discourse of ownership. Finally, investment is an extension of stewardship, the most important specific practice that a good steward should be engaged in because, again, it requires restraint and wisdom to invest instead of consume.

Basically, I claim here that what seems initially to be a straightforward series of instructions is actually a program for reconstructing a better self. The temperate capitalist agentic orientation is much more than simply a way of managing one’s money or even interpreting one’s agency in the current context. The temperate capitalist agentic orientation is also a process of self-alteration articulated through mundane financial practices. In the temperate capitalist agentic orientation, the relationship between debt, ownership, and investment is complex, at times in conflict with one another and at other times working in harmony. In the following paragraphs I outline how these forms of agency are presented in Ramsey’s writings as well as attending to the tensions that are at play between the different forms of economic agency.

Debt

While I have talked about debt in relational terms, as a contract or a promise, debt is also a form of agency, albeit one that at the same time is a form of subjection within the temperate
capitalist agentic orientation. Looking at debt in terms of the agency it affords is significant because it clarifies the approach to debt that the temperate capitalist is articulated as critiquing as well as situating this agentic orientation in relation to a more common evaluation of debt’s function. At its most simple level, debt is leveraging and constraining your future economic actions in a certain way to be able to act today.

That being said, the two most fundamental prescriptions that Ramsey gives to the temperate capitalist are to get out of and stay out of debt. The reasons for this emphasis are threefold. First, it would be counter-productive to build wealth and allow debt to build at the same time. Second, it would place the borrower into an exploitative servitude to the lender. The final reason is that being in servitude to another person would make the borrower a worse steward of God’s property. Exploitation in Ramsey’s writings is a fairly open-ended problem and he warns his readers against the predatory tendencies that are exhibited in many different industries, but the primary form of exploitation he addresses is debt. Debt of any kind is a form of exploitation in Ramsey’s writings, because of the asymmetrical power relationship it creates. He consistently cites Proverbs 22:7 as an amplification of this thought, “Just as the rich rule the poor, so the borrower is servant to the lender.” He cites this passage as a reason for not entering into any debtor-creditor relations, from home equity loans to lending money to family members, because doing so is entering into a form of servitude. The problem of exploitation is where Ramsey locates some measure of individual economic agency on the part of bankers, financial planners, salespeople, and others who sell loans to consumers. When he frames the agency of consumers as being constrained by cultural beliefs about debt and finance, he traces these conceptions back to the institutional and individual agents who are selling debt rather than to more abstract notions of collective agency or the potential role that systemic constraints play.
Ramsey takes his recommendation to avoid debt as far as he can. In some places he goes as far as recommending that his readers do not even get mortgages to buy houses if possible, although his baby steps plan assumes that his readers have a mortgage. As he puts it, “Paying cash for a home is possible, very possible. What’s hard to find is people willing to pay the price in sacrificed lifestyle.”¹⁸⁸ This position, avoiding home mortgages and student loans, generally places him as much stricter in his recommendations than most people writing about personal finance today.

That Ramsey’s books focus so centrally on debt is unsurprising, as it is an intensely charged force within so many people’s experiences of everyday life. One way of understanding neoliberalism is as a system that works to keep people in debt. If that is the case, then the temperate capitalist agentic orientation can be understood as offering an alternative to life within the neoliberal debtor subjectivity, resisting debt’s continued expansion. The temperate capitalist is articulated to militantly oppose consumer debt of any kind, as exemplified in Ramsey’s writings by his critiques of credit cards and by his unwillingness to fully endorse home mortgages. This opposition could suggest that in trying to empower his readers, the temperate capitalist is in a sense constructed in opposition to neoliberalism. This personal finance discourse characterizes the subjectivating force of debt as servitude through scriptural references, and it responds by critiquing debt and offering practical solutions. In one sense it seems as if the discourse is attempting to defend the viability of a Christian religious subjectivity in the face of the totalizing expansion of neoliberal capitalism. However, the critique of debt in Ramsey’s writings does not necessarily mean that this personal finance discourse is offering an alternative to neoliberalism.

¹⁸⁸ Ramsey, *Total Money Makeover*, 177.
Neoliberalism, as many theorize it, is not replacing the practices and relationships of capitalism, but rather is intensifying and extending them. As Nigel Thrift writes of this form of capitalist economic development, it “relies on a series of practices of intensification which can just as well be read as practices of extensification, since they involve attempts to produce the commodity and commodification in registers hitherto ignored or downplayed by using the entirety of available faculties in a wholesale redefinition of productive labour.”¹⁸⁹ Thrift argues this in terms of production and commodification, but this process of intensification and extensification also applies to the expansion of debt and credit.

Ramsey gives advice to his readers on both how to no longer be in debt and how to no longer be a debtor, but the question that arises from this framework is: who is the creditor, and beyond that, is Ramsey helping his readers shift from being debtors to being creditors?¹⁹⁰ This seems like a possibility because Ramsey is encouraging readers to do more than get out of debt; he encourages investment in the stock market by purchasing mutual funds. While Ramsey’s writings advise against investing in debt of any kind including government bonds, his advice to invest in mutual funds also invests his readers in the health and stability of financial institutions. Investing in mutual funds translates into investing in and investing with the very institutions that created and profit from the current expansion of consumer debt.

The trajectory that this discourse constructs for Ramsey’s readers is neither the path of the religious ascetic nor the path of the economic technocrat. Ramsey’s writings do not require

¹⁹⁰. Various scholars have written about the debtor-creditor relationship as the foundation of all economic life, with some arguing that it predates exchange as understood today as an economic practice and others point to the rapid expansion of the finance industry and the explosion of the consumer debt market in the late 20th century as indicative of pervasiveness of the debtor-creditor relationship. David Graeber makes the case that primitive debt is the concrete predecessor of abstract notions of social responsibility and unity, rather than utility as narratives of primitive exchange promote, while Maurizio Lazzaratto has written extensively about the rise of finance capitalism and the debtor-creditor relationship replacing previous dynamic of workers and capitalists with that of debtors and creditors. Lazzarato points to other philosophers that his frame is built on, namely Nietzsche, Deleuze, and Guattari. Graeber, *Debt*; Lazzarato, *Governing by Debt*. 
them to avoid the risks and rewards of the market for some other form of reward, but they also do not recommend some of the excesses that the neoliberal economic specialists engage in, such as leveraging debts and betting on financial products designed to fail as some investment bankers did in the events leading up to the 2008 financial crisis. Instead, Ramsey’s path combines the indulgence of consumer culture in the US with an ethic of Christian temperance. The temperate capitalist relies on moderate, long-term investments in the stock market to build their wealth to a place where their ethic of temperance no longer prohibits them from conspicuously consuming. This discourse of fiscal responsibility creates a subjectivity that is constructed able to be both a good Christian and good capitalist.

This call to discard debt and no longer use debt receives a normative charge in this discourse by the articulation of indebtedness to a biblical standard of foolishness and being without debt to wisdom. The opposition between wisdom-foolishness that Ramsey draws on is grounded on his consistent citation of the biblical book of Proverbs. As a piece of religious wisdom literature, much of Proverbs is spent comparing and contrasting the actions of the foolish with the actions of the wise, and Ramsey emulates this practice as he applies his own framework of the wisdom-foolishness of the economic actions of his readers.

Debt is constructed as foolish in Ramsey’s discourse not just in terms of economic exploitation, its ability to capture and extract future value from the indebted, but also through Ramsey’s characterization of the unrepentantly indebted. They are foolish in variety of ways, from the laziness and gluttony of consumers who want to satisfy their appetites immediately or just to “keep up with the Joneses” to the speculative investor leveraging their investment through debt. The wisdom of staying debt-free in Ramsey’s discourse is taken mostly as a given, whether as the implication of the judgment passed on the foolishness of debt or through the affective
symptoms of being debt-free: joy, peace, happiness. These symptoms are shared in contrast to
the affective symptoms of indebtedness: anxiety, guilt, fear. These affective palettes serve as the
sediment that stabilizes the discourse’s vision of a slow-paced, moderate plan for becoming
“fiscally fit.” 191

Stewardship

Stewardship is a second relationship grounded in economic agency that the temperate
capitalist is constructed through. When placed in contrast with ownership, the construction of
stewardship as a form of economic agency places an extra burden of responsibility on the
temperate capitalist because the temperate capitalist is no longer just accountable for their own
appetites. Not only is the temperate capitalist responsible for every aspect of their own fiscal
well-being, they also continue to have a responsibility to God. As God is the final owner of all
property, Ramsey’s image of what his readers should strive for must include this temperance
because in the end they may have their choices evaluated at some later point by an all-powerful
overseer. This means that the temperate capitalist needs to know what God would want them to
do with their capital. In a sense, that is what the overarching focus of the temperate capitalist
agentic orientation is on: how best to manage God’s capital.

Ramsey’s personal finance discourse basically restricts the responsibility and enjoyment
of property to a binary distinction between two distinct modes grounded again in the wisdom-
foolishness binary. People’s relationship with property is again constructed through a notion of
biblical wisdom, this time through a theology of property grounded in the opposition between a
prideful (foolish) understanding of humans as owners of property and the wise view of humans
as stewards of God’s property. Ownership, in this frame, is a fool’s understanding of people’s
relationship to property. Foolishness in Ramsey’s discourse no longer is a function of particular

191. Ramsey, Total Money Makeover, 25.
poor modes of economic action, such as laziness or gluttony as discussed earlier. Instead, it
denotes ignorance of God’s sovereignty over the material wealth you claim ownership of,
ignorance of the rightful hierarchy. In *The Legacy Journey*, Ramsey points to the biblical story of
Job to illustrate this hierarchy, “As I read the scriptures, I don’t see any exclusions to the ‘God
owns it all’ principle. If you every get confused about this, just look at Job. God blessed Job
more than possibly anyone else on the earth at the time, but then God took it all back—even
Job’s children.”192 Thus, the temperate capitalist’s stewardship is grounded in the absolute
hierarchy between human and God.

The temperate capitalist agentic orientation therefore treats the concept of human
ownership as a problem of perception, a common mistake that leads to an array of problems. As
it is constructed here, it is this very notion of humans independently owning property that creates
the conditions that debt arises from. Debt is form of servitude that people accept because they
see it as their own choice to dispose of what they have as they see fit, rather than as managing
someone else’s money. For example, placing several thousand dollars onto a credit card is
something that many people have done at some point, but it might seem different if you were to
find out that you were paying back that debt with someone else’s money. This is particularly true
if that other person expected you to invest that money productively rather than using it to make
interest payments.

Stewardship is the way that divine ownership is integrated into the temperate capitalist
agentic orientation: at some point in the process, someone must evaluate what the divine will for
material wealth is before anything can be done with that wealth. This means that a particular
scriptural hermeneutic is embedded in Ramsey’s personal finance discourse and is presented
under the guise of a common sense reading of the scripture. Stewardship, like debt, is a mode of

economic agency that is characterized as a form of servitude. Unlike debt, this discourse characterizes stewardship as the wisely chosen act of submitting to God, who in this frame is the owner of all things (as well as the creator, an interesting juxtaposition of divine economic agency). The hierarchy of servitude is not the only thing that Ramsey’s personal finance discourse needs to enlighten people on in order to create good stewards, free of ignorance. Not knowing how to operate in current economic systems is actually the main problem Ramsey addresses in his writings. He argues that because his principles should be common sense, people already know what they should do. The ignorance that people struggle with is a practical ignorance of how to do things like get out of debt and save money rather than not knowing that they should be doing those things.

One of the aspects of the temperate capitalist agentic orientation that is more fully articulated in Ramsey’s book, The Legacy Journey, is the idea that wealthy people should enjoy their wealth. This suggests that not only can and should those who want to serve God as economic stewards, they should enjoy that wealth. The view that money is evil or inherently corrupting is dismissed as misguided, or even potentially heretical. Ramsey’s writings say that people should enjoy their wealth by enjoying “a reasonable lifestyle based on your level of wealth. It’s perfectly biblical (therefore right) to not only take care of your family, but also to actively enjoy a portion of what God’s given you to manage.” In most aspects of personal finance, save for that of debt repayment, Ramsey seems to advocate for a very moderate stance and moderate set of practices. This represents itself in his focus on keeping spending within a

193. Ramsey primarily only uses the heresy label to talk about critiques of capitalism and critiques of capitalist economic practices. There are other critiques he makes that might be described as latent accusations of heresy, but anti-capitalism is the only thing he explicitly condemns as heresy. Ramsey argues that Christians who critique capitalism drawing on Jesus’s statements about the poor are actually reviving the heresy of Gnosticism, a Neoplatonist conception of the material world as evil. Labelling positions within Christianity that are critical of capitalism as heretical is much more than simply disagreeing with an interpretation of scriptural text because it focuses on delegitimizing the view in its entirety.

certain ratio of need to want, only indulging if you leave all your other financial processes of saving, investment, and giving unharmed.

Investment

The final mode of economic agency that completes the picture of the temperate capitalist is the act of investment. This includes the specific economic practice of investment in corporations through the stock market as well as a more figurative form of investment that occurs through giving. Both investment in the market and investment in church and/or charity are key elements in Ramsey’s personal finance discourse. Although temperate capitalists are told to see themselves as stewards instead of owners, their responsibility as stewards is an intensified commitment to growth rather than a commitment merely to protection. This commitment to growth is drawn from Ramsey’s reading of the parable of the talents, the same place the figure of stewardship as the appropriate mode of the temperate capitalist’s agential relationship with property was drawn from. In the parable, the stewards that use the money trusted to them to produce wealth are rewarded while the one that merely hid the money is chastised. From this, Ramsey’s personal finance discourse grounds the justification for recommending that people’s primary form of wealth creation (beyond wage labor) should be through investment, a very literal reading of the parable. Specifically and practically, they should invest in the stock market because it offers the highest return on investment generally available.

Ramsey treats these prescriptions as steps, and for him building wealth only comes after a person has completely paid off all their consumer debt except for their home mortgage. Wealth building in Ramsey’s plans is almost completely focused on people using their current incomes to invest in the stock market via mutual funds. Ramsey primarily focuses on investing for retirement as the primary form of wealth building he recommends people do. Ramsey does not
allow any investment beyond retirement investing until his readers have reached the very last baby step. This strategy is in line with his other statements about how any worker in the US can become a millionaire: they can become a millionaire by investing over decades in mutual funds. Ramsey’s plan is not promising easy money or wealth, but instead he offers this mantra: do everything you can to save more.

Investment, then, is a way to become better stewards by cultivating and compounding what has been entrusted to them. It is interesting that in this sense, Ramsey has created a frame in which becoming rich is a means to serve God. Ramsey seems to be articulating a normative continuum between indebted and rich, in that the indebted are poor stewards and the rich are good stewards. While Ramsey frames this in terms of his overall model of temperate capitalism, this particular element could easily be seen to be making more general normative statements about the spiritual and financial worthiness of people with varying degrees of wealth. This is possible because it is not clear that one needs to recognize the divine ownership of all things to perform the duties of a good steward, and that is part of what allows Ramsey’s model of the temperate capitalist to be taken up outside of evangelical Christianity.

The second form of investment, giving, is promoted less consistently than general investment, partially because Ramsey is keen to place responsibility for fiscal choices on individuals rather than allowing charitable organizations or the state to manage the outcome of altruistic giving. Ramsey’s charge to his readers to give is limited by his prescription for how his readers’ should understand wise stewardship. Wise stewardship means not “giving away the Golden Goose,” or in other words not giving away so much at one time that you impede your ability to continue to build or at least maintain your wealth: “God is the Owner. I am the manager. He’s given me a portion of His resources, and he’s given me and my family the
responsibility of managing it for Him in the way He directs me. If I bow to cultural pressure and give away all of my wealth, what am I really doing? I’m just surrendering my role as manager.” 195 In this case, even the imperative to give is moderated by the servant/steward relationship at the center of the temperate capitalist agentic orientation.

One of the reasons why stewardship is a moderating force on giving within the temperate capitalist agentic orientation is that the main purpose of the practice of giving is not to help other people, but to work on the character of the temperate capitalist. Ramsey prescribes giving as a practice of becoming less attached to possessions for everyone, writing of it as a means to have a healthy attitude towards wealth: “The wealthy person who is ruled by his stuff is no freer than the debt-ridden consumer we have picked on throughout the book.” 196 This also ties into developing contentment as a form of personal growth, which Ramsey says might be “the most powerful financial principle there is.” 197 He writes that “Contentment is not the lack of ambition or intensity. It’s the condition of our hearts while we’re pursuing those things.” 198 As a part of reaching contentment, he writes that “There are a few things that we should always be doing with our money, regardless of levels of wealth. One of those things, of course, is giving.” 199 Part of this is because “generous giving the antidote to selfishness.” 200 Again and again, the focus of many of the prescriptions articulated to the temperate capitalist is on developing character. Here giving is an “antidote to selfishness,” a practice that counteracts a flaw and cultivates a virtue.

The other side of giving as a practice of character development is giving as a spiritual discipline. He writes that “When we understand that God is the Owner, we remember that he’s

198. Ibid., 60.
199. Ibid., 76.
200. Ibid., 169.
called us to be generous, joyful givers. If we’re managing things well for the Owner, then we are
definitely setting aside a portion of our income for giving…If you’re a Christian, giving a tithe
should be a part of your budget no matter what Baby Step you’re on.” Ramsey’s writings on
giving as a spiritual discipline is one of the few places (outside of the stewardship versus
ownership model) where Ramsey makes direct prescriptions for a standard of Christian living,
rather than practical prescriptions for becoming wealthy. Again, even when it is framed as a
spiritual discipline, the purpose of giving in the temperate capitalist agentic orientation is not to
actually help others but to acknowledge the steward’s place in a relational hierarchy.

Conclusion

For the indebted, debt is often framed through the connection of consumption and the
relational logic of guilt. In consumption, debt typically becomes a mediating term in the
relationship that individuals have with their everyday acts of consumption. Photographer
Brittany Powell decided to attempt to represent the way that debt permeates people’s lives in a
photo-essay, “The Debt Project” as a way “to re-contextualize an abstract, often shamed
experience.” Powell writes that she wanted to explore this subject matter because “Debt is
publicly enforced and highly stigmatized, but is almost always privately experienced.” In the
photos, the subjects are presented sitting in their homes, displaying what Kathleen Stewart refers
to as ordinary affects. The photographs serve as informal portraits, attempting to capture both

201. Ibid., 76.
the individuals and their lived environments. The framing of the photo-essay attempts to make visible what is missing from the scene that these people may experience in their everyday lives. While the different subjects of each photograph may present different levels (displaying more expensive furniture, technology, and so on), debt remains a burden and perhaps even a threat to their ability to maintain their current living arrangement, while also highlighting the everyday context that these burdens and threats play out within. Yet the threat, the burden, of debt is absent in every photo in the sense that debt is not legible in what the photos capture. Debt is not inscribed on a chair or bookshelf or even the subjects’ faces, save for by the hermeneutic offered by the artist in framing the photos as “portraits of debt” and the handwritten stories that each person tells about themselves, which are often simple accounts of how that person became indebted. What these photos demonstrate is not that debt is not something that is inscribed in a person’s appearance or what their house or apartment looks like, but in their relationships with consumption and the stories that they tell about themselves to explain those relationships.

Just as debt in these portraits flows as mediating term between people and their lived environments, in a portrait of the temperate capitalist their status as stewards of God’s wealth would be the mediating term. In Ramsey’s writings, these examples have this in common: both are mediated by forms of servitude. The hierarchical vision of agency contained in the agentic orientation of the temperate capitalist offers a productive place to start considering the relationality of agency. Just as Karlyn Kohrs Campbell feels it is important to remind rhetoricians that “Agency can be malign, divisive, destructive,” so it is fitting that in looking at

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205. The location of the photographs differ from subject to subject; although most appear to be located in a living room, some are placed in bedrooms (or perhaps efficiency/studio apartments, which is unclear in some of the bedroom portraits). All the photographs are clearly meant to document the everyday composition of the subject’s life, in that many of the scenes are chaotic, but also full of objects that personalize the subjects: a man sitting on a couch framed by a cat gym, a woman sitting at a table with a guitar and several sketches and prints/paintings on the wall, a man sitting on a couch covered in documents and a closed laptop. Without knowing that the project was debt-focused, one would think that these were meant to be semi-candid portraits of individuals and their homes rather than portraits of indebtedness.
the relationality of agency to be reminded that relationships are often hierarchical and asymmetrical. Because of the Christian spiritual element in all of these chapters, the hierarchy and asymmetry between human and God is never quite escaped, but the other writers attempt to soften the hierarchy by framing it in terms of blessing and love. Ramsey’s articulation of the temperate capitalist, on the other hand, embraces the ethos of hierarchy and the duty that accompanies it.

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CHAPTER 4

“I’VE COME TO EXPECT TO BE TREATED DIFFERENTLY”: JOEL OSTEEN’S RHETORIC OF PROVIDENTIAL PRIVILEGE

Some guy stopped me on the streets in New York City and said, ‘Hey, aren’t you that smiling preacher?’ I laughed and said, ‘I guess so. That’s Me. I’m the smiling preacher.’ Yes, I’m guilty of being happy! I’m guilty of being excited about the future. I’m guilty of living each day with enthusiasm.207

I’ve come to expect to be treated differently. I’ve learned to expect people to want to help me. My attitude is: I’m a child of the Most High God. My Father created the whole universe. He has crowned me with favor, therefore, I can expect preferential treatment. I can expect people to go out of their way to want to help me.208

When facing the problems common to many of the people you live and work with, how do you respond? When you make a mistake at work, do you spend the rest of the day berating yourself for being so stupid? If someone close to you finds out that they have late-stage cancer, do you become depressed and despondent? If you see a beautiful house in a beautiful neighborhood, do you recount all the reasons that you would never be able to afford a house like that? If you answered yes to any of those questions, inspirational author and pastor Joel Osteen would have something to say to you: if you do not think, feel, and speak positively about your situation, your life will never be as good as it could be.

Osteen’s career as a pastor and inspirational author began in 1999, and his first book Your Best Life Now was released in 2004, placing the focus of this chapter squarely on the start of his career as a pastor and writer within the context of early 2000’s United States. Considering his message of positivity and optimism, there were some events during this time period that made it a socially and economically unstable period in the US. Although the early 2000s were not as

207. Osteen, Your Best Life Now, 302.
208. Ibid., 38.
unstable economically as the late 2000’s, the 9/11 attacks, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the dot-com bubble made this time unstable in different ways. The economic situation is especially relevant because Osteen consistently tends to write about quality of life in economic terms, specifically in relation to employment. He treats his readers’ lives as primarily concerned with the commonplace elements of everyday, middle-class life in the US.

Inspirational literature is a different kind of self-help literature, in contrast to the more instructional writing style of works like Dave Ramsey’s personal finance books. Rather than instructing the reader how to accomplish a task, finish a project, or navigate a process, inspirational literature deals specifically in a kind of emotional work. Inspirational literature still retains the same ethos as other self-help literature. The impetus to find readers lacking in some way that is a common characteristic of self-help literature is still there, but there are some unique characteristics as well.²⁰⁹ Rather than having readers open a Roth IRA or learn to be more assertive in the workplace, inspirational literature asks readers to change how they think and how they feel.

As a popular inspirational author, Joel Osteen provides a blend of inspirational literature’s emotional work with Christian themes and biblical narratives. Part of the reason for the harmony of this convergence is Osteen’s affiliation and commitment to the Word of Faith movement, a variation of what is often call the prosperity gospel or prosperity theology. Prosperity theology in general is a Christian doctrine that basically posits a cause-effect relationship between Christian piety and material wealth, i.e. the better (more spiritual, more faithful, more loving, more generous) a Christian is, the more wealth they will receive in turn through divine machinations. These premises of wealth often accompany parallel doctrines concerning Christians’ health and are often associated with faith healing movements. For

instance, Osteen promises similar benefits in his preaching and writing, but rather than focusing on specific spiritual disciplines or donating money to the church as prosperity theology often asks people to do, Osteen promises his readers blessings if they will think, act, and speak more positively and optimistically. One particularly impactful example of this is how he recounts his mother discovering she had cancer in the 1980’s, cancer that went into remission after she practiced faithfully optimistic prayer and speaking positively, confident that she would be healed.210

Osteen’s brand of inspiration seems to be very popular, in that his books have sold 10 million copies and broadcasts of his sermons are seen by as many as 7 million viewers every week, but it is also a common target for critique from evangelicals and others.211 Osteen does have critics, both within Christianity and without. As an article on Osteen in Time magazine summarized, “Osteen is an irresistible target for experts from right to left on the Christian spectrum who--beyond worrying that he is living too high or inflating the hopes of people with real money problems--think he is dragging people down with a heavy interlocked chain of theological and ethical errors that could amount to heresy.”212 Osteen’s tendencies to invoke the power of positive thinking alongside celebrations of God’s blessing and favor irritates theologically conservative Christians, who deem his message a misrepresentation of Christianity that misleads listeners. More theologically mainline critiques of Osteen’s message focus on it as an attempt to de-politicize the ethical elements within Christian doctrine by making Christianity about self-actualization. For example, Greg Garrett, Professor of English at Baylor University,

210. Osteen, Your Best Life Now, 126.
calls Osteen “the poster child for our critical inability to distinguish between our American aspirations and Christian teachings.”

When some accuse Osteen of exploiting his audience and even of heresy, Osteen replies that “It seems like I’m naive, but everybody I talk to, they’re saying, ‘You helped me, I like listening to you.’ And the stadiums full of people? They’re not coming because they’re critics. They’re coming because you touched their life.” While Osteen may not want to acknowledge his critics, they are plentiful and add a layer of complexity to understanding where Osteen’s model lies within contemporary Christianity in the US. In some ways, Osteen’s popularity as an inspirational personality brings him a certain level of celebrity. A *New York Times* article focusing on him related this celebrity treatment after a church service, “He signed autographs on church programs, copies of his book — even family Bibles. ‘I don't know if I should be signing these,’ Mr. Osteen confessed, but he did anyway.” While he may have his critics, it seems that Osteen certainly has his fans as well. Osteen’s popularity exceeds his theological tradition, although his church still maintains denominational connections. That being said, the themes and resources that appear in Osteen’s speaking and writing are very much connected to neo-Pentecostal beliefs and practices, drawing on common metaphors such as seed faith and including some elements of a strong charismatic vision of spiritual healing.

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216. As a subset of Pentecostal Christianity that according to the Pew Research Center with which approximately 3.6 percent of the US population identifies, members of the Word of Faith movement simply cannot make up a significant portion of Osteen’s extensive audience, from the millions of books sold to the millions who watch him on television every week. “Religious Landscape Study,” *Pew Research Center*, last updated 2014, http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/.

Compared to the instructional tone of more do-it-yourself oriented self-help books, Osteen’s inspirational writing is focused on encouraging readers to feel better about their prospects, offering a way to see life optimistically rather than as a set of instructions for how to change particular aspects of their life. Like other writers who expound on the theme of the power of positive thinking, such as Norman Vincent Peale and more directly Joyce Meyer, Osteen tells his audiences that how they think, feel, and talk about themselves will determine what they experience in life. Do you have problems with a friend or family member? Perhaps if you frame your relationship with that person more positively, forgiving them for any wrongs or perceived wrongs they have committed, the problem will resolve itself through your improved attitude. Are you having a hard time trying to find the perfect house for your family? Tell yourself and your family that you will find that perfect house, and you will. Is the promotion you have been pursuing at work always just out of reach? Maybe if you find peace in accepting your supervisor’s authority over you, your efforts will be blessed with a raise. In all three of these hypothetical examples, I am paraphrasing Osteen’s advice to his readers facing these problems.

These examples frame agency in a way that suggests that part of the rhetorical significance of Osteen’s writings is to be found in how he situates a person’s agency in relation to their situation, particularly how he limits it. What stands out the most is the way that one’s actions are articulated as most effective when they are limited to work on yourself and how you see your situation. Rather than acting directly by confronting the family member, finding new ways to approach the house search, or trying to negotiate your salary, readers are asked to step back, accept their circumstances and enact positivity and are promised that everything will fall

218. Sinitiere, *Salvation with a Smile*, 64.
into place in their favor. What this suggests is that in Osteen’s teachings, the relationship between individuals and agency is mediated by structural constraints that are favorable to these individuals, or in other words, by a privileged position. This privileged position that shapes how individuals exercise agency is explained in Your Best Life Now as a consequence of the relationship between individuals and God. Throughout this chapter I name to this relationship providential privilege, meaning unearned advantages and resources that are articulated in terms of an individual’s relationship with God. It is providential privilege that distinguishes Osteen’s variation of the power of positive thinking discourse, in that positive thinking’s effectiveness in Osteen’s writings is a consequence of providential privilege rather than the positive quality of one’s thoughts.

Positivity and the power of positive thinking are pervasive themes in contemporary self-help literature and play a key role in understanding Osteen’s rhetoric of providential privilege. Historian Philip Sinitiere outlines a direct lineage from Norman Vincent Peale’s The Power of Positive Thinking to Osteen’s Your Best Life Now via charismatic Christian author and evangelist Joyce Meyer’s writings.220 This positive orientation to everyday life means letting go of criticisms and the practice of critique; no longer evaluating oneself or others through a critical lens, but rather framing life in positive terms. What is happening in Osteen’s writing is a call to this kind of positivity that is framed in terms of thoughts, attitudes, and expression. To fully understand the rhetorical significance of the positivity that this book discusses, the treatment of agency in Your Best Life Now as both heightened and submissive must be thoroughly investigated. The assemblage of privilege, positivity, and submissive agency that is articulated in the agentic orientation in this book places the burden on the individual to save themselves from

220. Sinitiere, Salvation with a Smile, 68.
the precarity of the contemporary economic situation with nothing more than what they think, say, and feel.

To explore this agentic orientation of providential privilege, this chapter analyzes Osteen’s first and most popular inspirational book, *Your Best Life Now: 7 Steps to Living at Your Full Potential.* In this chapter, I argue that Joel Osteen presents a gospel of entitlement that works through a logic of privilege that can also be explained as functioning analogously to privilege discourse; it is both a discourse of privilege and it has similarities to the privilege discourses that critique and make visible privilege. On the one hand, this blessings discourse functions as a discourse of privilege, legitimizing the very real privilege that Christians often enjoy in the United States as the dominant religious group. On the other hand, the way that Osteen crafts this discourse is analogous to how privilege discourse seeks to make visible the workings of privilege with one key difference: rather than seeking to critique and make an intervention to counteract privilege, Osteen’s book instructs readers to see their privilege and exercise it so that they can have their “best life now.”

Where the agentic orientation in Ramsey’s work centers a metaphor of servitude, I argue that the agentic orientation articulated in *Your Best Life Now* is organized by a metaphor of privilege that highlights the tensions between the high degree of agency Osteen attributes to individuals in the form of positive thinking/expression and the superordinate agency that Osteen attributes to God. There is a sense in which Osteen’s articulation of God is as a super-agent, intervening in all aspects of everyday life and holding the capacity to enable people to live their best lives. This suggests that in the worldview Osteen articulates, it is God that acts as the structural constraints that limit the dynamics of human agency rather than social institutions and discourses. Privilege then emphasizes the relational dynamic that occurs within Osteen’s
attributions of agency. The relational focus of privilege also helps to answer the tension in Osteen’s writings between the high degree of agency he seems to attribute to individuals and the severe structural constraints that he places on the individual’s ability to actualize that agency. The metaphor of privilege answers this question by suggesting that part of the reason this tension can exist is that the structural constraints may actually amplify agency rather than dampen it.

The chapter makes this argument through a rhetorical critique of *Your Best Life Now*. The critique moves through several different aspects of this text. The first section focuses primarily on contextualizing Osteen’s first book within broader US discourses of evangelical Christianity and self-help, as well as the particularities of inspirational literature and discourses of privilege. In the second section, I lay out the ways that *Your Best Life Now* develops a vision of human economic agency actualized by divine intervention. After that, in the third section I connect this vision of human economic agency with privilege discourse, and develop the argument that the discourse of agency in *Your Best Life Now* works analogously to privilege discourse. I argue that the juxtaposition of privilege and submission at play within the submissive agentic orientation places a heavy responsibility on the submissive agent for everything that may happen to them in life. The submissive agentic orientation does this by simultaneously restricting their agency, while also suggesting that their words, thoughts, and feelings have enormous determining power in their lives. This makes the submissive agent subject to the precarity of life in the economic instability of neoliberal capitalism while also making the submissive responsible to actualize their best life in that context with only the power of their thoughts, words, and feelings.

**Privilege**

Joel Osteen’s story as a religious professional provides some interesting insights into how he has chosen to present himself, particularly in regards to the ways that he has inhabited a
position of privilege grounded not just in his race, sex, or gender identity, but also in his
inheritance of a church and televangelism ministry. While he is best known for being the pastor
of Lakewood Church and for his inspirational writing, before becoming the pastor of Lakewood
Church, his job was producing the church’s television sermon broadcasts. At the time, his father
was the pastor of Lakewood Church. In Your Best Life Now, Osteen tells a story about how glad
he was that he put in so much work for his father improving the church’s television broadcast
technical elements, writing “Little did I realize that one day I would be standing on that same
platform, behind that same podium. I didn’t realize it then, but I was building my own house.”

While Osteen’s writing and messages are often labelled “prosperity theology” or
“prosperity gospel,” Osteen denies that this is an accurate characterization of his ideas. In an
interview, Osteen commented, “I get grouped into the prosperity gospel and I never think it's
fair, but it's just what it is. I think prosperity, and I've said it 1,000 times, it's being healthy, it's
having great children, it's having peace of mind. Money is part of it; and yes, I believe God
wants us to excel.” Osteen dismisses the prosperity label later in the interview because he
associates it with televangelists coaxing audiences into giving them money. Regardless, as
Sinitiere details in his history of Osteen and Lakewood Church, both Joel and his father John
write, speak, and affiliate with key prosperity gospel figures. John Osteen, trained as a
Southern Baptist minister who shifted to nondenominational neo-Pentecostalism in the 1950’s,
was a significant influence on the style and substance of Joel Osteen’s preaching and writing,
along with the influences of Joyce Meyer’s variation on Norman Vincent Peale’s power of

222. Melissa Barnhart, “Interview: Joel Osteen on Life, Tragedy and Why He Shuns 'Prosperity Gospel'
on-life-tragedy-and-why-he-shuns-prosperity-gospel-label-94355/.
223. Sinitiere, Salvation with a Smile, 61.
positive thinking and John Maxwell’s brand of spiritual/motivational literature. Osteen’s promise is to help his readers to live better lives, which mostly seems to mean becoming happier, healthier, and better Christians. The implied audience of the book is consistently articulated as Christian. He rarely even gestures towards the possibility that his reader is not a Christian. The closest he seems to come is to talk about those who aren’t “following God’s will for their lives.” It is quite clear that being a Christian is foundational to his framework for how his readers can “live their best life now,” and the concept of privilege provides a way to understand how the relationship between agency and this Christian religious element in Your Best Life Now functions.

Privilege discourse is focused on illuminating the ways that race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, and other social identities give some people advantages that remain invisible to them because these advantages have been naturalized through their socialization into these identities. Stephanie Wildman writes that “We do not perceive privilege as something bestowed on us specially; rather, it appears as the fabric of life, as the way things are.” As such, privilege can play a role in maintaining the image of the autonomy of the agent by obscuring structural elements that constrain some people’s agency while advantaging others. As a structural constraint, types of privilege also constrain some groups of people in different ways than others, such as the ways Aída Hurtado delineates between how white women and women of color are constrained by male privilege. Privilege can reinforce the discourse of the autonomy of the agent because unmasking privilege would undermine the independence and self-sufficiency of the agent. While the providential privilege that I extract from Osteen complicates the relationship

between privilege and the autonomy of the agent, providential privilege does reinforce the autonomy of the agent in one sense: the agent has a great degree of autonomy from human structural constraints, bypassing the possibility that structural inequality plays a role in how people experience everyday life.

The concept of privilege is primarily utilized as a tool for social justice oriented activism and pedagogy because it provides an accessible way to discuss structural inequality by locating those inequalities in the everyday life experiences of individuals. Because of its applied focus, most of the most popular elaborations of privilege rely heavily on narratives and metaphors as means of explaining privilege. For example, the most famous of these is probably the image that Peggy McIntosh popularized of privilege as an “invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, assurances, tools, maps, guides, codebooks, passports, visas, clothes, compass, emergency gear, and blank checks.” Michael Kimmel offers another metaphor for privilege as “running with the wind at your back. It feels just like plain running, and we rarely, if ever, get a chance to see how we are sustained, supported, and even propelled by that wind.” The key element of these conceptualizations of privilege often comes down to its invisibility. It is a hidden system of dominance that those who benefit from it do not even have to be aware exists because its effectiveness is primarily determined by structural elements and group membership, rather than the tactics that powerful people use, although performances of privilege is another facet of privilege that is critiqued.

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227. Peggy McIntosh, “White Privilege and Male Privilege,” in Privilege: A Reader, eds. Michael Kimmel and Abby Ferber (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2003), 148. McIntosh goes on to specify that privilege by itself needs to be differentiated between its positive form as an “unearned advantage” (an advantage that everyone should want) and “conferred dominance” (that no one should desire, at least ethically), 156.


Although the theoretical focus of privilege discourse is to critique structural inequality, it is not always clear whether the focus on the individual is a theoretically important move or if it is a tactical frame that, again, makes the concept more accessible and thereby more politically viable. The specific practices that privilege discourse uses to engage this personal reflection can be summarized mostly in terms of reflective questions and questionnaires, as well as some forms of instructive personal narrative. These questionnaires are a more formalized variation of the common charge in privilege discourse to “check your privilege,” or in other words, to take a moment to reflect on the ways that you may have privilege that is affecting how you engage with the issue at hand. Checking your privilege is a means to hold others accountable for the advantages they may have. McIntosh’s essay, which in addition to popularizing the knapsack metaphor, is looked to as a founding piece in writings on privilege and includes in it two sets questionnaires. The first explores the different privileges that whiteness confers on individuals and the second the privileges that heterosexuality provides. Most of McIntosh’s questions are framed in terms of reflecting explicitly on some boost in agency that accompanies being part of a privileged class, such as “I can arrange my activities so that I never have to experience rejection owing to my race.”

Some of McIntosh’s questions are more passive such as “I can turn on the television or open the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely represented” or “When I am told about our national heritage or about ‘civilization,’ I am shown that people of my color made it what it is,” asking people to their context more deeply.

On the other hand, M. Rochlin’s “The Heterosexual Questionnaire” provides a different approach to the questionnaire technique. “The Heterosexual Questionnaire” asks the reader to work through a series of questions that create perspective through incongruity, starting with “What do you think

231. Ibid., 150.
caused your heterosexuality?” and expanding the line of questioning from there, thereby
inverting denaturalizing assumptions about homosexuality to denaturalize the normalcy of
heterosexuality.²³²

This questionnaire approach makes the common form of critique that privilege discourse
levels to “check your privilege” make even more sense, as it shows up in the privilege literature
as a tool that individuals should be able use to self-diagnose their own privilege. In privilege
discourse, this means recognizing when your class, sex, gender, race, religion, or other social
identities (and the representations thereof) give you access to particular resources in given
situations that others may not have access to. For example, it would be rare for a man who
wanted to assume leadership roles to be challenged on the grounds that he is a man, while this
happens often to women seeking leadership positions. Recognizing this privilege then creates an
ethical burden to act with that privilege in mind, either by explicitly acknowledging it in an
attempt to make it explicit and subject to critique or potentially by leveraging those resources for
more equitable social ends.

Undermining the invisibility of privilege, making privilege visible, is one of the focuses
of the political project underneath privilege discourse as well as being the key intersection with
the treatment of agency in Osteen’s writings. As Kimmel describes the invisibility of privilege,
“Invisibility is a privilege in a double sense—describing both the power relations that are kept in
place by the very dynamics of invisibility, and in the sense of privilege as luxury.”²³³ That is why
the purpose of privilege discourse is to make privilege in its various forms visible, to undermine
the power that invisibility confers. Because of this focus, privilege discourse often asks

²³² M. Rochlin, “The Heterosexual Questionnaire,” in Privilege: A Reader, eds. Michael Kimmel and
individuals to reflect on their own social locations and identities to see where they may have unearned advantages.

In Sonja Foss and Kimberly Elliot’s analysis of scholarly conversations on privilege, they argue that there are two distinct approaches to the study of privilege: privilege as structural and privilege as performative. Neither of these discussions quite addresses the particularities of applying the concept of privilege to *Your Best Life Now*. In this section I have primarily been focused on privilege as structural, which Foss and Elliot trace directly back to McIntosh’s original definition of privilege around group membership and in structural terms. Performative privilege, on the other hand, focuses on the ways that an individual performs privilege through communicative acts that subordinate or dominate others. Foss and Elliot see these two views of privilege as describing a productive tension within privilege, meaning that both are accurate theories of privilege that are simply focused on different frames of reference. While there is a sense in which both of these types are relevant to the role privilege plays in the submissive agentic orientation, privilege in *Your Best Life Now* functions in ways that contradict both. Because of this, it seems like it makes sense to treat it as a form of privilege that is distinct from either structural privilege or performative privilege. For the sake of this study, I will call Osteen’s variation of privilege discourse providential privilege.

Providential privilege is distinct from both structural privilege and performative privilege discourses because it focuses on recognizing the array of hidden resources that you have available to you because of divine intervention into daily life, divine providence. Once they perceive these benefits, readers, Osteen suggests, should take advantage of these privileges to improve their lives such as by feeling happier, getting better jobs or houses, and strengthening

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235. Ibid., 16.
236. Ibid., 16.
personal relationships. Providential, structural, and performative privilege discourses in this sense share these two primary characteristics: the initial impetus of recognition and action being focused at the level of the individual.

The reason that I am drawing a connection between Osteen and privilege discourse is that they share a counterintuitively similar social hermeneutic. For both, the first task for individuals attempting to understand and influence social events and their contexts is to understand what kind of hidden advantages they might have. In the next section I go deeper into the insights of providential privilege and the role that it plays within the submissive agentic orientation.

Providential Privilege and the Submissive Agentic Orientation

The articulation of providential privilege and an agentic orientation characterized by submission may seem counter-intuitive, as privilege seems to suggest that the agent’s capacity for self-determination has been amplified while submission is in a sense the opposite of self-determination. However paradoxical this may seem, the submissive agentic orientation functions by requiring actors to give up the autonomy as a prerequisite for attaining providential privilege, which in turn endows their positive thoughts, feelings, and speech with a much higher degree of agency than before. The submissive agentic orientation is therefore deeply inflected by both the act of submitting, allowing God to act on one’s behalf, and the increased agency that this submissive act activates, through providential privilege. This tension between the sacrifice of autonomy and enormous agency permeates how *Your Best Life Now* treats agency and serves as the central problematic for this chapter because of how central it is to the submissive agentic orientation.

Osteen’s promise that his readers will live their best life now is, in a sense, offering a sort of guidebook to providential privilege. It is an account of supernatural providence which begins
with a set of expectations. Osteen writes of this in terms of his own expectations near the beginning of his first book, *Your Best Life Now*:

> I’ve come to expect to be treated differently. I’ve learned to expect people to want to help me. My attitude is: I’m a child of the Most High God. My Father created the whole universe. He has crowned me with favor, therefore, I can expect preferential treatment. I can expect people to go out of their way to want to help me. We can expect preferential treatment, not because of who we are, but because of whose we are. We can expect people to want to help us because of who our Father is.\(^{237}\)

In this sense, what he is offering is not exactly a “prosperity gospel,” but could be thought of more like an “entitlement gospel.” Providential privilege is a function of the divine-human relationship, but in the submissive agentic orientation it must be acknowledged as such. The submissive agentic orientation’s connection to providential privilege is therefore not only mediated by both the divine-human relationship figured as the parent-child relationship, but also by the authority structure of the parent-child relationship. The necessity of submission in this agentic orientation is not a matter of allowing providential privilege to act in one’s favor, but is a matter of submitting to authority as a means of entering into a particular relational structure.

The implications of the submissive agentic orientation for theorizing agency are complicated by the connotations that are attached to privilege. On the one hand, these optimistic expectations of blessing could very easily be used to rationalize various forms of privilege from racial to class privileges in the terms of God’s favor, giving readers permission to reframe any advantages they find they have in terms of providence. At the same time, the way that this optimism is constructed as a practice by this chapter’s agentic orientation forecloses on certain forms of action, constraining agency by construing attempts to advocate for yourself or actively pursue your desires as acting outside of providential privilege and by extension the will of God.

In this sense, while providential privilege plays a major role in the construction of agency in

Osteen’s inspirational discourse, it is a privilege that must simultaneously include a submission to divine agency.

As a relational metaphor, privilege emphasizes two relationships: the relationship of the privileged agent to the source of privilege (structural conditions that are favorable for them) and the relationship of the privileged agent to non-privileged agents. The privilege metaphor, as it appears in *Your Best Life Now*, tends to emphasize the first relationship more than the second. The source of privilege is quite emphatically God and not any human-constituted structural conditions. The privileged aspect of this human-divine relationship is often characterized by the providential characteristics of a parent-child relationship, where you are privileged as a function of who your parents are. A key distinction between how Osteen’s inspirational discourse mobilizes this privilege metaphor and other forms of privilege discourse is that, while the privilege described in Osteen’s writings functions similarly to other forms of privilege, it is a privilege chosen by individuals because the providence offered can be accepted or rejected. What this means is that for Osteen the challenge is convincing non-privileged agents to choose privilege, which is then enacted through the performance of positivity. However, Osteen’s inspirational discourse also requires the person to submit to God’s providence by not attempting to act on their own behalf. In a reversal of how the agentic orientation of servitude constructs the human-divine relationship around agency, in the submissive agentic orientation the divine acts in your place rather than you acting as a proxy for divine agency.

In analyzing the submissive agentic orientation, I examine three interrelated elements of this orientation’s treatment of agency: providential privilege, positivity, and submissive agency. These three elements constitute the core of agency in the submissive agentic orientation, working together to at once suggest that people have an extraordinary amount of agency while also
severely restricting how that agency can be enacted. Just as in the agentic orientation of servitude, the relationship between God and human remains a primary part of the dynamic of agency. This relationship differs in Osteen’s writings primarily in terms of the extent of divine intervention. While Ramsey constructed God’s agency as primarily a precondition for human action, in Osteen the possibility of near constant divine intervention drives the submissive focus of the agentic orientation articulated in *Your Best Life Now.*

Providential Privilege

Within the submissive agentic orientation, providential privilege plays the key role of constructing the terrain of agency that people have to navigate. This is particularly significant because by foregrounding the divine-human relationship as central to understanding the limits of human agency and how one can move past those limits, providential privilege suggests that divine intervention into daily life is a common feature of human agency generally and has to be accounted for, which is what providential privilege attempts to do. The submissive agentic orientation is then the product of one such attempt to account for the potential for divine intervention into human affairs and the implications that this has for how human agency is conceptualized.

The practices that privilege discourse describes generally function analogously to Osteen’s discourse of privilege. First and foremost, Osteen writes in terms of individual reflection that mirrors the reflective impulse of privilege discourse. The first goal of providential privilege, like other forms of privilege, is making that privilege visible to the person that has it. This act of reflection is focused on seeing how that individual’s context and relationships offer hidden advantages that others may not have access to, just as privilege discourse asks the individual to recognize hidden advantages available to them. Second, there is an expectation to
act upon seeing the privilege that had been hidden from the individual up until that point. In structural and performative privilege discourses, this means allowing this altered perspective to change how one approaches what they say or do next, attempting to counteract that privilege or at least its political impact.

While the process of checking your privilege has much in common with how Osteen speaks of recognizing providential privilege, there are two key distinctions between these two practices. The first is that the privilege that other privilege discourses describes functions best when it is allowed to be invisible, as it naturalizes the privilege. The privilege that providential privilege describes, on the other hand, functions best when recognized, partially because this privilege is somewhat dependent on the individual acting on that privilege after recognizing it. According to Osteen’s writings, for this privilege to function best they must be optimized by thinking, feeling, and speaking them into being. They are dependent on attitudes, thoughts, and expressions of individuals, as detailed in Osteen’s characterization of human agency generally that I discuss in the following section on positivity.

The other difference here is that Osteen is trying to get his audience to recognize their privilege to take advantage of that privilege, not to counteract it. Providential privilege in this case can function through a recognition and actualization of hierarchy through communicative means. In the examples that Osteen gives of what should be expected, everything from healings to promotions to better housing to getting out of parking tickets are available to those who are just willing to “expect to be treated differently.” This is one of the reasons that, although there are some affinities between privilege discourse and Osteen’s providential privilege, it may be more accurate to call it something like entitlement than privilege. Osteen is bringing the good
news of your entitlement to an array of privileges, and the only thing standing in your way is your own pessimism.

One of the primary focuses of Osteen’s inspirational messages is the blessings that come when people obtain God’s favor. Because Osteen assumes a generally Christian audience from the start, there is never any question in his writing that divine blessing is something that should be desired. Blessing and favor are the major modes of action through which Osteen talks about the intervention of divine agency into people’s everyday lives. For Osteen, God’s favor is the natural precursor of receiving blessings in life, and Osteen’s advice is meant to guide his readers into God’s favor. There is a tension between power and action in Osteen’s portrait of divine interventions into his readers’ lives. On the one hand, Osteen characterizes God as all-powerful, capable of doing anything, but he also writes of God’s actions as working in response to what people do, “God is not limited by environment, family background, or present circumstances. God is limited only by our lack of faith.” God’s divine intervention then is not limited by normal structural constraints that limit human agency, but at the same time it is constrained by faith. Faith, as we shall see in the next section, is enacted through positive thinking, feeling, and speaking.

Positivity

While providential privilege functions to lay out the terrain of agency in a world where divine intervention is a part of daily life, it remains a general concept that needs to be actualized through specific practices. In the submissive agentic orientation, these practices fall under the category of positivity, more precisely thinking, speaking, and feeling positively. While the central, constitutive act of the submissive agentic orientation is abandoning large amounts of one’s agency in submission to God’s action on your behalf, this does not mean that the

submissive agentic orientation leaves individuals without any agency. Osteen acknowledges that there are many challenges that people face today, such as the precarity associated with economic instability, and the submissive agentic orientation does not leave actors helpless to respond to them. In fact, it seems to restore large amounts of agency to them through practices of positive thought, speech, and feeling. This is because it is through these acts of positivity that providential privilege is activated in the submissive agentic orientation. However, the power of these acts of positivity is so great that it is conceivable to interpret this aspect of the submissive agentic orientation as placing blame on anyone who is unable to solve their problems through these positive acts as simply not trying hard enough, not being positive enough.

The second element of the submissive agentic orientation, positivity, is primarily a performance of positivity in how one thinks, feels, and speaks. Effective human agency in this orientation is focused on these three elements of human action: attitude, thought, and expression. Your Best Life Now consistently emphasizes that a person’s attitudes, thoughts, and expressions are the primary aspects of their lives that they actually have the agency to control. The performance of positivity is linked directly to providential privilege that the submissive agentic orientation describes. As Osteen says, “Expect circumstances to change in your favor. Expect people to go out of their way to help you. Expect to be at the right place at the right time.”239 The emphasis on privilege in the form of blessing in a sense reduces effective human agency to this type of work on the self.

Osteen says regularly throughout his book that while people cannot control their circumstances, they can control whether they will react to them positively or negatively. One of the consequences of this idea is that he also quite clearly places the burden of controlling and managing emotional and psychological processes on the individual:

If you are depressed, you must understand, nobody is *making* you depressed. If you’re not happy, nobody is forcing you to be unhappy. If you’re negative and you have a bad attitude, nobody’s coercing you to be bored, uncooperative, sarcastic or sullen. You are choosing to remain in that condition, and the first step out of that mess is to recognize that the only person who can improve that situation is you.\(^{240}\)

An individual’s internal life is their own responsibility in Osteen’s framework, while the context they live in and the actions of other people and organizations remain the province of divine intervention.

While Osteen’s writings treat what is thought and said as equally as important as one’s attitude, attitude is treated both first and foremost as the location of much of the work that needs to be done to live life fully. Several of the seven steps that the sub-title of the book mentions are directly about the shape and tenor that readers’ attitudes need to take to live at their highest potential, such as attitudes of positive self-image, attitudes of open-mindedness in the sense of being open to seeing divine agency at work in their lives, and attitudes of forgiveness and generosity with regards to interacting with other people.\(^{241}\)

These three primary modes of human action as Osteen discusses human agency are also quite clearly presented as interrelated and co-determining. Attitude, thought, and expression co-exist and cooperate in Osteen’s construction of human agency, with thought providing the initial grounding of the other two: “Indeed, thoughts determine actions, attitude, and self-image. Really, thoughts determine your destiny…Your life will always follow your thoughts…Our thoughts affect our emotions. We will feel exactly the way we think.”\(^{242}\) In this sense, these thoughts, feelings, and what is said are accounted for more as an internal ecology that must be maintained and cultured to behave correctly. The correct behavior then consists of enacting positivity through thinking, feeling, and speaking as a way to submit as God acts for you.

\(^{240}\) Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*, 102-103.

\(^{241}\) Ibid., 101, 3, 143.

\(^{242}\) Ibid., 101.
Submissive Agency

The third element in the assemblage of the submissive agentic orientation is submissive agency itself. Whereas providential privilege is the terrain of agency and positive thought, feeling, and speech are the means to act within the submissive agentic orientation, submissive agency is the capacity to act within the framework that this agentic orientation has constructed. Submissive agency is a relational form of agency where the problem autonomy of the agent that many agency theorists are concerned with is discarded in favor of the total dependence of the agent on divine providence for them to achieve their desires. In the submissive agentic orientation, the submissive agent continues to have agency through the means of positivity discussed above, but they avoid other forms of agency that they have at their disposal, a point that this section will unpack. The submissive agentic orientation does not claim that people have no real agency outside of that which they from providential privilege, but rather suggests that the agency that they normally have at their disposal is ineffectual.

*Your Best Life Now* claims that whenever people attempt to accomplish their personal goals through their own willpower and determination, they are setting themselves up to either fail or reach mediocrity. Because the only way to reach your “best” is through cooperating with and deferring to divine agency, any attempt a person makes to reach their life goals will simply not be good enough. This submissive element of human agency ties into the actions of thinking, feeling, and speaking discussed above. It is not that Osteen suggests that people are incapable of acting without the assistance of divine agency, but rather that any action they take will be imperfect and flawed in comparison to one that takes his advice into account, particularly regarding accepting divine assistance. In one example, Osteen tells a story of a man named Todd who turns down his dream job because he needed the security that his current job provided. He
frames this opportunity as an example of where human and divine agency could have worked in harmony, but did not:

Like Todd, many people miss pivotal opportunities in their lives every day because they’ve grown accustomed to the status quo. They expect nothing better. God is opening a new door for them; all they have to do is step through it, yet regrettably they back away from God’s blessing. Why? They refuse to make room in their own thinking for the things God wants to do in their lives.²⁴³

The problem, as Osteen sees it, is with how people exercise their agency through dysfunctional forms of thought, specifically in this case being inflexible in their thinking. This suggests that not only must people submit in their outward actions, accepting the things that are offered while not actively advocating for oneself, but also must submit in their internal actions by being optimistic.

Submissive agency is characterized by a sort of active passivity. This is because the submissive agentic orientation is constructed to focus on seemingly passive forms of agency (internal attitudes and thoughts). The choice offered by the submissive agentic orientation is between independent agency leading to a mediocre life versus deferring to divine agency for a great life. This seems to envision agency as grounded in inaction, albeit an active inaction. It is important to emphasize that while there are times that Osteen seems to negate human agency in relation to divine agency, people still have some agency in his framework. This theme can be seen echoing in the examples of providential privilege and positivity. The submissive agentic orientation limits human agency both in terms of how it characterizes human agency generally and how it characterizes effective agency in the form internal self-work and external submission to divine action.

These limitations placed on human agency are not denials of the agency that humans can exercise without the help of providential privilege and the power of positivity. Yet, Osteen’s inspirational discourse suggests again and again that human are not capable of achieving a

²⁴³ Osteen, Your Best Life Now, 21.
happy, successful, well-balanced life without the help of divine agency. Osteen also limits
human agency by how he characterizes human agency as primarily working through attitude,
thought, and expression. Osteen traces all outcomes in the lives of the people in his narratives
back to these modes of action without actually ever accounting for the choices, interactions, and
other actions that go into the practices of everyday life. In these prescriptions for human agency,
the submissive agentic orientation limits human agency by telling his readers that they need to
relinquish their agency by taking a step back and allowing God to step in and change their lives.
Osteen’s discourse of providential privilege presents this as a reasonable prescription to give
based on how the abilities and capacities available to human agents are constructed within the
discourse, as well as what divine agency is articulated capable of accomplishing in this
discourse. Within the submissive agentic orientation these incongruities between divine and
human agency return the discussion to the metaphor of privilege which attempts to reconcile
them.

**Providential Privilege: Coded Language and Inconsistent Agency**

One central problem has stood out within the articulation of the submissive agentic
orientation, the tensions within the cooperation of privilege and submission. The way in which
this tension is managed in the submissive agentic orientation through privilege, positivity, and
passivity has some significant implications with regards to the economic and social context in
which this agentic orientation has been constructed. In particular, the submissive agentic
orientation calls for a level of submission that could be called ascetic, while also continuing to
place responsibility for the outcome on the human agent because of the function of positivity
within the agentic orientation. This conflict seems to complement the problematic created by
how neoliberal discourses privatize or individualize collective problems, as Dana Cloud writes
about with regards to the rhetoric of therapy. Just as the rhetoric of therapy places the responsibility for social problems on individuals’ need to perform self-work in the form of therapeutic practices, the submissive agentic orientation prohibits agents from advocating for themselves while also making them responsible for the outcome by making positive thought, feeling, and expression the determining factor of their situations.

The inclusion of the neoliberal frame of privatization creates an additional set of tensions around economic agency within the assemblage of privilege, positivity, and submissive agency articulated in Your Best Life Now. These tensions continue to be grounded in the burdens of agency that Your Best Life Now places on individuals while also severely constraining their agency through providential privilege. In contrast with providential privilege, exercising privilege within structural or performative privilege would not incorporate the act of submission as central to having and enacting privilege, save for perhaps submitting to the current structures of power. Submission, however, is central to the function of providential privilege because privilege is a function of the person’s relationship to God rather than to human structures of power (as in structural privilege) or acts of domination (as in performative privilege). In structural and performative privilege, privilege enhances the privileged person’s agency either in terms of how the situation is encountered or what actions are specially permitted to those with privilege. In providential privilege, privilege potentially enhances a person’s ability to achieve the ends they desire, but to do so they must suppress the agency directly available to them and submit to God acting for them. The tension between the enhanced ability to do what one wants and the submission needed to receive that ability place those with providential privilege in a vulnerable place between limitless agency and little agency at all. In this section, I examine a

244. Cloud, Control and Consolation.
different way that this vulnerability has the potential to be exploited through how Osteen’s inspirational discourse uses the language of seed faith.

Seed Faith, Giving, and Agency

One of the conflicts that arises from the submissive agentic orientation’s restriction of effective action to positive thought, feeling, and expression is that this discourse of positivity is pliable enough to include forms of positivity that might take advantage of a submissive agent’s commitment to positivity. One key example of this in the case of Osteen’s writings and ministry is in terms of the way that donating money to organizations such as Osteen’s church can be articulated as an act of positivity, and this exactly what the discourse of seed faith does. Osteen’s common exhortation to his readers and audiences to “plant a seed” draws on a discourse that encourages monetary donations while reframing them as both acts of devotion and acts of positive intentions that will set the wheels of providential privilege in motion.

The first of the burdens that Your Best Life Now places on its readers’ agency is the use of the metaphor of “seed faith” to talk about the positive thinking and expression that the book describes. Seed faith was popularized by Oral Roberts and has been used by many others in the contemporary prosperity gospel tradition. As Roberts describes it, seed-faith can be reduced to three principles: “God is your source…give that it may be given unto you…[and] expect a miracle harvest.” The idea is basically that if you give something (usually money) to God (in the care of a preacher) you should expect to be rewarded by God. This language of seed-faith has been used extensively by a variety of different prosperity gospel authors and preachers to drive donations to their organizations. For example, in 2016 pastor and televangelist Paula White used the metaphor of seed-faith to encourage her listeners to plant a seed of $1,144 on Easter Sunday.

in connection to John 11:44, a passage that describes Jesus resurrecting Lazarus, urging “When you sow that $1,144 based on John 11:44 I believe for resurrection life… You say, Paula, I just don't have that, then sow $144. I don't have that. Sow $44 but stand on John Chapter 11:44.”

This usage of seed faith connects money and faith through the image of future potential at the heart of the language of seed faith.

While not appealing to his audience directly asking for money, Osteen utilizes the language of seed faith that is articulated to this discourse of donating money to “plant a seed.” Osteen reframes seed faith as about planting seeds of positive expression (through thought, feeling, and speech), he benefits monetarily from his audience’s familiarity with the concept of seed faith as a monetary practice. For example, in 2015 Osteen wrote a blog post titled “Sowing a Radical Seed” that talks about sowing a “radical seed of faith” and that “when God asks you to do something and you don't argue or make excuses, you just do it, that's when miracles happen.”

Throughout the entire blog post (and Osteen’s references to seed faith in his book), Osteen never suggests that this blog post is about giving money, but the readers knew and responded under that assumption. In the comments, this conversation takes place:

Commenter 1: “I am an ex felon and a truck driver over the past several years I have been forced out of 4 churches. I thank God for this church. I want to start my tithing but don't know how to send it to this church. How do you send tithe and seeds if you live cross country?”

Commenter 2: “[Commenter 1]- I give my tithe to this ministry regularly. On the website are donation options by using a bank card or bank account. God's favor will shower you.”

Even though Osteen is careful to not frame his use of the seed faith vocabulary in monetary terms, he benefits from the monetary connotations that both he and his audience know are


connected to the concept of seed faith. This is important to note because Osteen is very proud to characterize his work as not being focused on asking for money, as the archetype of the televangelist is expected to do. In a recent interview on The Late Show with Stephen Colbert, Osteen even acknowledges this tension at Colbert’s goading:

Colbert: “Do you ask people to send you cash?”
Osteen: “No, no we don’t. Never have.”
Colbert: “Oh, that’s refreshing. [shakes Osteen’s hand] Let me ask you this: regardless of whether you ask, do they send you cash anyway?”
Osteen: “People send cash anyway, though.” [Colbert shakes off his hands, makes a handwashing gesture]

In these statements, it seems very important to Osteen to avoid living up to the slick image of the donation-seeking televangelist.

While Osteen claims again and again that he is not after people’s money, his use of the language of seed faith functions as a call for donations, regardless of what he claims to intend, because it the larger seed faith discourse is articulated in monetary terms. While the seed faith imagery emerged from the writings of Oral Roberts in the mid-twentieth century and was taken up by an array of leaders within what is now referred to as prosperity gospel Christianity, Osteen’s inspirational discourse uses it slightly differently because of Osteen’s focus on a more holistic notion of a good life. Osteen talks of seed faith in terms of the positive thoughts, attitudes, and expressions that activate providential privilege, which is distinct from the common usage of the phrase in the prosperity gospel tradition connecting the seed in seed faith to money given to the ministries of preachers and televangelist. This is what the comments from Osteen’s blog and the admission to Colbert that people send him money anyway suggest. Osteen,

249. Barnhart, “Interview: Joel Osteen.”
intentionally or not, is leveraging a metaphor that calls his audience to give money to him even as he denies asking for money. This works hand in hand with the way that Osteen’s providential privilege to suggest that all his audience really needs to have their physical, spiritual, and emotional needs met is positivity in their attitudes, thoughts, and speech.

**Christianity and the Power of Positive Thinking**

In this chapter, I have explored how Joel Osteen’s first book, *Your Best Life Now*, articulates a discourse of privilege in the form of divine blessing with the practices of positive thinking and the problems of middle class life in the contemporary US. Much like the orientation of the temperate capitalist discussed in chapter 3, the assemblage of privilege, positivity, and submissive agency that is articulated in this book places the burden on the individual to save themselves from the precarity of the contemporary economic situation while offering nothing more than the power of their words. The agency, tactics, and relationships change, but this implication remains the same, amplifying the individualizing and privatizing themes of neoliberal discourses while advocating for more traditionalist orientations to economic agency. The agentic orientations that emerge from Ramsey’s and Osteen’s writings are not explicitly neoliberal and often contradict the assumptions of neoliberalism. On the one hand, Ramsey’s discourse of personal finance explicitly repudiates the debt-driven expansionism that has been symptomatic of neoliberal capitalism, and on the other Osteen’s focus on the necessity of divine action to effective economic agency could be seen as undercutting neoliberalism’s tendency to reduce social causality to market forces.

As an agentic orientation, Osteen’s privilege discourse presents the interpretation of structure, responses to structure, and outcome in distinct ways because of the extent to which God is the one acting. Much like the metaphor of servitude, the metaphor of privilege
foregrounds the externality of agency to the agent. One of the distinctions between servitude and privilege is that the metaphor of servitude in Ramsey’s writings makes the externality of agency universal and necessary, while the metaphor of privilege as Osteen uses it makes the externality of agency particular and contingent to each agent’s choice of how to respond to providence. In the agentic orientation of servitude to be an agent is to be a servant, but in the submissive agentic orientation one’s agency is independent from prior relationships which is what allows it to be sacrificed in submission to a higher power.

This tension between the implicit advantages of privilege and submission that has been the central concern of agency’s construction in this chapter challenges the image of autonomous human agency while articulating the relationality of agency in a unique way. While a modicum of autonomous human agency continues to exist in the submissive agentic orientation, it is limited relative to the potential agency attainable through providential privilege. The relative autonomy and dependence of human actors do not describe stable relationships to agency but rather shifting relationships that must be maintained moment to moment through self-work on how one feels, thinks, and speaks. In the submissive agentic orientation, the limits of agency are rhetorical, as the only limits to your agency is what you are able to convince yourself is possible.

The burden of responsibility placed on the submissive agent can be exploited in certain ways particularly in relationship to current economic actions, as the use of the discourse of seed faith demonstrates. This prospect arises from the discourse of providential privilege when submissive agency is analyzed in light of its connections to privilege discourse and seed faith. While Osteen’s inspirational discourse creates a high level of expectation for his readers, it also limits their agency in a way that promotes a kind of cruel optimism, which Lauren Berlant defines as “exist[ing] when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing…..
Optimistic relations are not inherently cruel. They become cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially.” Osteen’s promises of providential privilege become cruel precisely where they explain away social inequality and structural privilege through a language of supernatural blessing and favor which requires individuals to sacrifice their own agency to receive this blessing.

There are many examples of this dynamic in Osteen’s writings, but a particular anecdote he tells about a mechanic having problems at his job gives insight into the potential cruelty of Osteen’s optimism. The story, as Osteen recounts it, centers around a mechanic who worked hard but was disliked by his coworkers and his supervisor never promoted or gave him a raise, all “because he wouldn’t go out and party with them after work.” This went on for seven years, and Osteen holds up the mechanic’s actions as exemplary of waiting for God’s providence: “He worked hard and kept his mouth shut, knowing that God was his vindicator. He wasn’t working to please his supervisor; he was working to please God.” The anecdote ends with that very vindication, with the owner of the garage giving the garage to the mechanic when he retires. Osteen caps off this story with this statement: “Friend, that is a good example of God bringing justice into that man’s life. That’s God paying him back for all of those wrongs. God settled his case. God made his wrongs right. And God wants to do the same for you.”

While he acknowledges that the mechanic could have quit and found work elsewhere, in other places in the chapter it is implied that this would have been somehow the wrong thing to do because it would be a sign of “bitterness” or a lack of respect for authority, when “the truth is, whether that person is behaving correctly or not, God expects us to honor his or her position of authority…If

252. Berlant, Cruel Optimism, 1.
253. Osteen, Your Best Life Now, 166.
254. Ibid., 167.
255. Ibid., 167.
you refuse to live under authority, God will never promote you to a position of greater authority.”

Why is this anecdote an example of cruel optimism today? Attachment is the answer. This narrative elevates a certain kind of attachment to employment that includes a sort of unquestioning obedience to authority legitimated through a notion of divine agency at work within the mechanic’s life. The promise of providential privilege not only diverts attention from the productive actions one can take to a focus on being optimistic, it actively discourages people from acting on their own behalves. The optimism of the mechanic is an optimism in the effectiveness of his own optimism. Much like Gunn and Cloud’s critique of the magical voluntarism of *The Secret*, the agency that this orientation attributes to agents at once gives them a high-degree of agency over their own situation in life, but only in the form of having control over one’s own orientation to the situation they find themselves in (attitudes, thoughts, and expressions) rather than admitting them effective agency in other forms.

When thinking about the submissive agentic orientation through the story of this mechanic, the ways that this agentic orientation intersects with neoliberalism gains some nuance. I do think that the prospect of divine intervention into everyday life that the submissive agentic orientation proposes disrupts some of the dogmas of neoliberalism about the primacy of the market. However, the submissive orientation also serves as a good example of “the hyper-responsible of the individual” cultural studies scholar Heidi Rimke names as central to the incorporation of neoliberal forms of governmentality into self-help literature. Not only are those who would be submissive agents are responsible for thinking, feeling, and expressing themselves positively, but they also must be responsible for restricting their own actions in other

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arenas, just as the mechanic refrained from advocating for himself in his workplace. This example of the submissive agentic orientation offers a look at how such a model hyper-responsible individuality delineates the constraints on human agency, primarily that the individual agent is the primary constraint on their own agency. This works in two senses. The first way individuals act as a constraint on their own agency is through the discipline of self-restraint that the mechanic demonstrates. The second is by attempting to act on their own behalves, since they will never be able to marshal as much agency on their own as they would through God’s intervention in the form of providential privilege. No matter what course someone takes under the submissive agentic orientation, they will find themselves to be the primary constraint on their own agency, offering a view of agency that is hyper-individualistic. Thus, while the promise of the submissive agentic orientation is that of total providence through providential privilege, located within it is also a neoliberal logic through which “individuals are rendered entirely responsible for their failures as well as their successes, their despair as well as their happiness.”

CHAPTER 5

THE RADICAL AGENTIC ORIENTATION OF *THE IRRESISTIBLE REVOLUTION*:

FEELING SOLIDARITY AND DE-TERRITORIALIZING CLASS

When people begin moving beyond charity and toward justice and solidarity with the poor and the oppressed, as Jesus did, they get in trouble. Once we are actually friends with folks in struggle, we start to ask why people are poor, which is never as popular as giving to charity…Charity wins awards and applause, but joining the poor gets you killed. People do not get crucified for charity. People are crucified for living out a love that disrupts the social order, that calls forth a new world. People are not crucified for helping poor people. People are crucified for joining them.\(^{260}\)

It’s important to understand that redistribution comes from community, not before community. Redistribution is not a prescription for community. Redistribution is a description of what happens when people fall in love with each other across class lines.\(^{261}\)

A group of homeless families takes shelter in an abandoned cathedral in north Philadelphia and is threatened with eviction. A city starts passing anti-homeless ordinances, including one making it illegal to distribute food in a particular park that is a hub of the local homeless community. Another city’s police force starts to aggressively arrest homeless people for sleeping in public and charges them with disorderly conduct. In Christian activist and author Shane Claiborne’s writings, he asks: how should Christians respond to stories like this? More importantly, how should Christians respond to events like this happening in their own local communities? In his first book, *The Irresistible Revolution*, Claiborne responds to these questions as a part of sharing a loose autobiographical narrative of his experiences with issues such as these, specifically including the scenarios posed above. In Claiborne’s narratives, the response to each of these scenarios is simple: join the homeless, whether by co-occupying the

\(^{260}\) Claiborne, *The Irresistible Revolution*, 129.
\(^{261}\) Ibid., 163.
cathedral, sharing communion and a meal in the park, or sleeping on the streets until they are arrested.

Shane Claiborne is a writer, speaker, and activist engaged in issues surrounding poverty and homelessness in the US as well as international peacemaking.\textsuperscript{262} \textit{The Irresistible Revolution} details how Claiborne’s critique of evangelical Christianity developed as a result of his experiences with institutionalized forms of evangelical Christianity and how that conflicted with what he experienced as an activist. Claiborne advances this critique through a few central stories about the life experiences and the projects he has been involved with: undergoing a transition from mainline to evangelical Christianity as a high school student, working with the Kensington Welfare Rights Union as a college student, working with Mother Theresa in Calcutta, working in a megachurch while finishing college, co-founding and living in the Simple Way intentional community, and working in Iraq with an Iraq Peace Team. While Claiborne is critical of evangelical Christianity in the US, the project of \textit{The Irresistible Revolution} is reformist, in the sense that it is attempting to re-habilitate evangelical Christianity along what Claiborne names as more just and equitable lines. In trying to rehabilitate evangelical Christianity in this way, \textit{The Irresistible Revolution} offers an interesting alternative to the orientations to economic agency that Ramsey and Osteen construct by articulating evangelical Christianity with a focus on contemporary social justice issues.

According to Claiborne, in the author’s note to the 10 year anniversary edition of \textit{The Irresistible Revolution}, the book has sold 300,000 copies since it was originally published in 2006.\textsuperscript{263} While not as impressive as the book sales of either of the other case studies being examined here, Claiborne’s focus in the book and his status both play a role in his more low key

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\textsuperscript{263} Claiborne, \textit{The Irresistible Revolution}, 33.
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Claiborne’s book is more explicitly focused on a Christian audience than either Ramsey or Osteen’s books, in part because Claiborne’s book falls into a subgenre of Christian self-help that is explicitly religious: Christian living literature. While Claiborne’s lack of a megachurch (as Osteen has) or a syndicated radio show (as Ramsey has) limits his audience significantly, his message is clearly tailored for a Christian audience, primarily because of the role that Christianity plays in Claiborne’s own autobiographical narratives. With that in mind it should be noted that of the three cases, *The Irresistible Revolution* is also the one that is the most explicitly about Christian agency in contemporary US context. The religious element grounds participation in the book’s vision of agency, rather than being a primary element of the context as Ramsey and Osteen describe it, but not a prerequisite for basic participation in their schemes of agency.

Much like how Osteen characterizes the economic context he was writing from, Claiborne’s narrative does not refer to itself as emerging from any particular economic unrest, other than the more general problems of poverty and homelessness in the United States that permeate Claiborne’s personal narrative. That being said, homelessness and poverty rates in the US are very much linked to economic instability and social and economic policy changes of different kinds, such as the deinstitutionalization of state mental hospitals in the 1960’s. In this sense, *The Irresistible Revolution* is tracing some of the conditions of the same economic instability that Ramsey and Osteen refer to in their own ways, focusing on the ways that the economic trends of the last few decades have affected the poor rather than the middle class, as

264. In Markofski’s book on New Monasticism, he makes a point of mentioning the presence of *The Irresistible* being on several of the bookshelves of the new monastic community that he was studying. He characterized *The Irresistible Revolution* as being one of the core texts of the New Monastic movement, both because of its popularity and its accessibility. Wes Markofski *New Monasticism and the Transformation of American Evangelicalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 67.

Ramsey and Osteen do in their writings. As the first of the “12 Marks of New Monasticism” that Claiborne republishes at the end of the book suggests, “Relocation to the ‘abandoned places of Empire’” is a primary goal of the new monastic movement that Claiborne describes in his own personal narrative, particularly in terms of the post-industrial neighborhoods of Philadelphia.\(^{266}\) The focus on economic precarity shifts from the foolish consumerism that Ramsey derides and the pessimism of unstable employment that Osteen dismisses to the post-industrial neighborhood as a territory constituted by a complex of classed practices and discourses.

Another aspect that distinguishes how Claiborne characterizes the context of *The Irresistible Revolution* from how Ramsey and Osteen do is that Claiborne clearly situates his vision in a cultural antagonism within evangelical Christianity. The conflict centers on what Claiborne sees as an Americanized Christianity (characterized by megachurches, consumption, and “seeker-friendly” outreach) and a communitarian model of Christianity (comprised of a mixture of narratives of the early church, localized altruism via narratives about Mother Theresa and the homeless, and an assortment of sources within more contemporary writings about Christianity such as John Yoder and Dorothy Day). This model of Christianity emphasizes simplicity in organizational structure and practices as well as engagement with local social and economic issues.

The revolution that *The Irresistible Revolution* describes is a call to revolution within evangelical Christianity in the US. Claiborne’s redefinition of the evangelical serves as a persistent theme across the book, primarily using narratives to model modes of agency that are contrasted with other models of what evangelical agency should look like. Rather than focusing on elaborating a propositional definition of evangelical and then arguing for that definition, Claiborne grounds his definition in the narrative of his own relationship with popular

\(^{266}\) Claiborne, *The Irresistible Revolution*, 363.
evangelicalism. Claiborne also provides an alternative perspective on economic agency compared to Ramsey and Osteen’s models of economic agency grounded in a more pro-capitalist frame. The pro-capitalist frame is explicit in Ramsey’s writings and implicit in Osteen’s, with both offering different variations on the theme. Ramsey explicitly advocates for capitalism in some of his writings as the economic system most morally compatible with Christianity, as well as his consistent advice that people should be investing heavily into the current capitalist formation in the form of stocks and mutual funds. Osteen on the other hand only implicitly offers a pro-capitalist frame, inasmuch as he frames every element of his writings in personal terms, system level considerations such as capitalism never even enter the conversation.

In this chapter, I develop a model I name radical agentic orientation and trace its articulation in Claiborne’s *Irresistible Revolution*. I argue that this radical agentic orientation is organized around a metaphor of intimacy that appears as the ethical dilemma at the center of the economic agentic orientation of consumerism that Claiborne is critiquing. This radical agentic orientation turns on intimacy and authenticity. Because Claiborne defines authenticity in terms of being emotionally connected with other people and often focuses on the variations of economic action in terms of authenticity, the importance of authenticity as Claiborne constructs it hinges on a logic of intimate connection that has significant implications for how people engage in economic action. The pursuit of authenticity in the agentic orientation that Claiborne articulates is not a pursuit of authenticity for the sake of itself or of oneself, but rather a pursuit of authenticity for the sake of the intimacy created in tandem with it because it entails experiencing solidarity, friendship, familial identification, and love across the class lines that create (inauthentic) barriers between people. For Claiborne, this emphasis on intimacy and authenticity is radical. Claiborne explains his attachment to the radical moniker as stemming from how, “as
my urban-farming friends remind me, the word radical itself means ‘root’… So I am a radical in the truest sense of the word: an ordinary radical who wants to get at the root of what it means to love, and to get at the root of what has made such a mess of our world.”

Claiborne’s critique of consumerism focuses on locating the radical on a continuum of economic agency that stretches from inauthentic consumerist actions to authentic, local, and engaged actions. One of the many examples of authentic, local action that Claiborne gives from his activism includes the co-occupation of the vacant St. Edwards cathedral by himself and a group of college students in solidarity with the Kensington Welfare Rights Union. The Kensington Welfare Rights Union was a group of homeless families that had temporarily occupied the cathedral while working with the city to try to find more permanent housing for the families. The reasons why co-occupation can be considered local and engaged are fairly clear, but the reason why it is authentic is because it placed Claiborne and his classmates in communion with these families, building relationships. I further argue that Claiborne’s radical agentic orientation offers a productive an alternative vision of the relationality of agency, particularly when placed in conversation with Diane Davis’s relational conceptualization of agency.

The dissonances and harmonies between Davis’s relational agency and the relational agency at the core of the radical agentic orientation provide suggest that religious discourses complicate both common assumptions about agency and theoretical interventions into agency.

In exploring the agentic orientation articulated in The Irresistible Revolution, I first situate Claiborne’s book within the larger historical and social context that it is circulating within, as well as with relation to the particular communities and issues that the book addresses. After having laid this contextual frame, the section that follows is a brief examination of how the

268. Davis, Inessential Solidarity.
radical focus of this book is relational and how this relationality organizes how the radical agentic orientation frames human action. What follows this section is an analysis of The Irresistible Revolution and the ways that economic agency, and agency in general, are constructed through a radical agentic orientation to the structural constraints on agency that, like the other cases, are complicated by the juxtaposition of human and divine agency. After having constructed the radical agentic orientation at work in The Irresistible Revolution, I discuss Diane Davis’s work integrating a Levinasian ethics of the face into rhetorical theory. Davis’s discussion of the face provides a particularly useful frame for understanding the metaphor of intimacy that organizes the radical agentic orientation articulated in Claiborne’s book. I argue that Claiborne offers an alternative, more empathic vision of what Christian economic agency should look like by articulating a Christian ideal of economic agency through the metaphor of intimacy. This more empathic vision of agency suggests that it is inter-dependence rather than autonomy that should be the goal of political projects, from anti-poverty to anti-war efforts. The intimate focus of the radical agentic orientation replaces self-determination with a relationally grounded co-determination focused on creating political and social solidarity by way of the invocation of familial love.

The Revolution: Economic, Social, and Religious

To better understand the ways that The Irresistible Revolution differs from the first two case studies, I must contextualize it within both its social and historical fields of emergence. This section explores several different specific contextual elements that Claiborne and The Irresistible Revolution emerged from, primarily: theological/religious conflict within evangelical Christianity and poverty and homelessness in the US. This move will require expanding the discussion of evangelicalism into parts of evangelicalism that this project has not discussed yet,
as Claiborne occupies a place within the field of evangelical Christianity that is constructed in opposition to the sections of evangelical Christianity that Ramsey and Osteen inhabit. Alongside these two social/historical themes, I also briefly discuss the audience that *The Irresistible Revolution* constructs and its distribution and significance within the field of evangelical Christian publishing in the US.

**Theological/Religious Conflict in Evangelical Christianity**

Claiborne’s writings emerge out of the context of a larger political movement in evangelical Christianity, the evangelical left, as well as a more extensive disaffection among evangelicals with the contemporary form of the institutional church, particularly the megachurch model. The evangelical left is primarily characterized as a political position within evangelical Christianity in the US that gained prominence in the 1970’s. Often, the evangelical left’s commitment to social justice issues continues to be accompanied by the same or similar conservative theological doctrines that politically conservative evangelicals hold. Much like the way that conservative politics seem to hold sway over much of evangelical Christianity since the 1980’s, the megachurch (a church with more than 2,000 people attending every week) has been similarly prominent. Markofski writes that “Megachurch evangelicalism occupies a dominant position in the evangelical field by virtue of its possession of enormous economic and specific (people) capital. It has the largest and fastest-growing churches, the biggest budgets, the largest church associations, the top-selling books, the most affluent members, and the widest

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270. “I have a confession I’m sure many of you will find refreshing and familiar: I don’t really fit into the old liberal-conservative boxes, so it’s a good thing we are moving on to something new. My activist friends call me conservative, and my religious friends call me liberal. What I often get branded is ‘radical.’ I’ve never really minded that, for as my urban-farming friends remind me, the word radical itself means ‘root’… So I am a radical in the truest sense of the word: an ordinary radical who wants to get at the root of what it means to love, and to get at the root of what has made such a mess of our world.” Claiborne, *The Irresistible Revolution*, 20.
influence of any position in the evangelical field.”271 In *The Irresistible Revolution*, Claiborne often comments that it is not the size and influence of the megachurch that he finds problematic, but rather what is lost when that becomes the focus: a connection to the larger community that includes the poor and the complexities that accompany a 2,000 year old religion that get glossed over for the sake of accessibility.

The disaffection with the institutional form of the evangelical church in the US, on the other hand, has had some theological implications. Claiborne represents a form of this disaffection that has been called new monasticism because communal living and a form of holistic religious expression have been central to the movement’s development. New monastic communities take their inspiration from a passage in the biblical book of Acts that describes the very early church as living in community and sharing all that they had.272 As Wes Markofski describes a new monastic community, one thing that characterizes them is “a holistic communitarianism that stands in stark contrast to the theological individualism, political conservativism, and traditional religious practices of dominant expressions of American Evangelicalism.”273 Markofski locates new monasticism as a “particular case of how American Evangelicalism is reproduced and transformed” in relation to what he characterizes as four streams of evangelical Christian practice currently existing in tension in the US, “the Christian Right/conservative evangelicalism, megachurch evangelicalism, the evangelical left, and the

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272. “We dreamed ancient visions of a church like the one in Acts, in which ‘there were no needy persons among them’ because everyone shared their possessions, not claiming anything as their own but ‘sharing everything they had.’ We knew we could end poverty. The early church did, and the homeless families were doing it. We thirsted for the kingdom of God, and we knew that it could come ‘on earth as it is in heaven,’ as Jesus said. We were not interested in a Christianity that offered these families only mansions and streets of gold in heaven when all they wanted was a bed for their kids for now. And many Christians had an extra one.” Claiborne, *The Irresistible Revolution*, 64.

emerging church.” 274 This is a way to both better situate new monasticism within evangelical Christianity while complicating simple, monolithic accounts of evangelicalism in the US.

What is clear to Markofski, as well as from reading Claiborne, is that new monasticism positions itself in opposition to the Christian Right and megachurch evangelicalism and has strong affinities with the evangelical left and the emerging church. Markofski partially explains new monasticism’s position as a repercussion of the state of contemporary evangelical Christianity: “There is today no ‘evangelical point of view’ concerning theological, social, or political matters. Rather, there are multiple, distinctive, often contradictory evangelical points of view in competition with one another to offer the legitimate representation of biblical Christianity in the United States.” 275 It is something of a cliché at this point in studies of evangelical Christianity to point out evangelical Christianity’s current disunity, but it remains important because evangelicals are often treated as a homogenous block in popular discourses. 276

Growing tangentially to the new monastic movement, the emerging church is a complementary movement that covers a much broader array of positions than new monasticism and has no clear center. What they both share is a disillusionment with the Christian Right and the institutional church, as well as an affinity for narrative approaches to biblical hermeneutics rather than a propositional, systematic theology and a more open and cooperative approach to denominationalism within Protestantism as well as with Protestants and Catholic and Orthodox Christians. The primary distinction is that new monasticism seems to be more social justice oriented while the emerging church is often explicitly a response to an understanding of what postmodernity/postmodernism writ large means for evangelical theology.

274. Markofski, New Monasticism, 30.
275. Ibid., 109.
276. One of the most egregious examples of this is the way that the Christian Right is often treated as synonymous with evangelical Christianity in political commentary and polling categorization.
Poverty and Homelessness in the US

In addition to the positioning of new monastic writings within contemporary evangelical Christianity, the burgeoning level of economic inequality in the US also plays a significant role in constituting the social/cultural context that is relevant to understanding Claiborne’s writings. The distribution of wealth and income in the US has grown increasingly lopsided in favor of the wealthiest since the 1980’s. A characteristic of this inequality is the expansion of the homeless population in the US in the last few decades. While homelessness has existed in the US in different forms for centuries, in the 1980’s and 1990’s it became “much more acute and increasingly visible.”\textsuperscript{277} While homelessness is a complex phenomenon that is certainly not reducible to wealth and income distribution, economic inequality is one factor. Other factors include the general restructuring of the workforce with the transition into the dominance of the service sector, welfare reform, and stigma surrounding AIDS and the drug war.\textsuperscript{278} Claiborne’s narratives connecting homelessness and the image of post-industrial cityscapes serve to illustrate how the precarity that characterizes the economic context that Claiborne writes of, where the line between poor and homeless can be tenuous, constrains agency. In addition, Claiborne is also trying to address the ways that homelessness and poverty are stigmatized, stigmatizations that can have consequences for agency.\textsuperscript{279}

In spite of his focus on the poor and poverty, the audience that Claiborne seems to be implicitly speaking to is one that is middle class and evangelical. In part, this seems to be because he is invoking the emergent church and new monasticism to criticize what Claiborne


\textsuperscript{278} Takahashi, \textit{Homelessness}, 8-9.

\textsuperscript{279} Ibid., 51.
characterizes as conservative evangelicalism’s isolationist retreat to suburban megachurches. There seems to be a conflict at the heart of this voicing, as he both idealizes the poor, suggesting that they hold the key for the church to finding true community while at the same time seeming to speak to a middle class audience as co-conspirators, as if they are the potential change-makers (like himself) who if they learn to deny themselves of a comfortable, consumerist existence, they too can change the world.

**Radical as Relational**

Throughout these case studies, understanding agency as relational stands in contrast to the tendency that agency theorists have traditionally had to privilege an agent-centered view of agency at the expense of other elements that play a role. In discussing radical agency here, I am discussing radical agency as a deeply relational iteration of agency. Conceptualizing agency relationally has been a way for this project to respond to the problem of agential autonomy, refocusing the central concern of agency from the integrity of an individual actor to a shifting assemblage of relationships. A key element in the relationality of radical agency in this chapter is the metaphor of intimacy which serves as a boundary between the radical and the mundane. Radical, as taken up in this chapter, is grounded in the act of criticism, as Claiborne’s self-description as radical is treated as synonymous with authenticity and a return to some deeper, more fundamental human inter-relationality. To be radical in this sense is to critique and reject the practices and ideologies that divide people according to class, nationality, race, or religion, particularly the practices and ideologies that have played a role in your own life. Intimacy is a potentially radicalizing element in this account of agency because it undermines structural barriers between groups, most often class in Claiborne’s writings.
The metaphor of intimacy, unlike the metaphors of servitude and privilege, locates agency internally rather than externally. The intimacy at play in Claiborne’s *Irresistible Revolution* mediates a complicated relationship between God, a Christian, and other people. While the metaphor of intimacy as mobilized by Claiborne does not suggest that God is the source of agency, as the other two do in different ways, God does continue to play an important role in how agency is conceptualized as intimate. The intimacy Claiborne describes is the intimacy of universal family that is mediated by God. Everyone is a member of God’s family, and so action and agency are always scaled to the level of the immediate and personal by the metaphor of intimacy.

This familial way that intimacy is articulated does create a tension within radical agency, particularly in how it is placed in relationship with Claiborne’s local, community oriented ethos because it is a universalized relationship frame. If everyone truly is to be recognized and treated as a family member to which you have an ethical and emotional responsibility, why focus on the local community specifically? While the reasons for this focus certainly have strong pragmatic support, such as the effectiveness of focusing on becoming active in your current daily life rather than suspending action, this tension does show up in Claiborne’s narratives of his journey, particularly in his choices to travel and work in Iraq and India. In the sense that it is addressed by international engagement and bringing the same ethos of attending to the local, the immediate, the tension between the localized focus and the image of universal family within intimacy is productive. In the next section, I look to the text of *The Irresistible Revolution* to fully develop the radical agentic orientation, after which I examine some of the implications that this agentic orientation has for how agency is theorized.
The Radical Agentic Orientation

The radical agentic orientation develops throughout *The Irresistible Revolution* from a productive tension between what Claiborne sees as a consumerist approach to action and agency and an authentic approach to action and agency. Just as Claiborne draws out radical’s connection to the root when he defines himself as “an ordinary radical who wants to get at the root of what it means to love, and to get at the root of what has made such a mess of our world,” James Darsey defines radicalism in terms of the “concern with the political roots of a society, its fundamental laws, its foundational principles, its most sacred covenants. It is common for radicals to claim to be the true keepers of the faith; they oppose their society using its own most noble expressions and aspirations.”280 Karma Chávez develops the connection further, articulating the radical as further attempting to find and critique root causes, where the root is the focus of critique rather than the position the radical critiques from.281 The authentic approach to action that Claiborne describes forms a major part of the radical agentic orientation primarily because the authentic is in a sense rootedness, a connection with a simple, shared human experience. Part of intimacy’s role as the central organizing metaphor of the radical agentic orientation is teased out in the conflict between consumerism and authenticity. Intimacy is at the center of much of the analysis of the radical agentic orientation, and the conflict between consumerism and authenticity provides a familiar terrain for Claiborne’s writings to engage his readers on: everyday, middle class life in the US.

Consumerism versus Authenticity

Consumerism and authenticity present general approaches toward social relations, where consumerism describes a life organized around the economic needs, constraints, desires, and

strains of middle class life in the US. Authenticity, on the other hand, describes a life organized around cultivating relationships across class, social, racial, and geographic boundaries. The opposition of consumerism and authenticity is a significant starting point in understanding the radical agentic orientation because it offers a further explication of the radical as authenticity. The radical agentic orientation emphasizes striving towards authenticity, recognizing authenticity as a project to be accomplished rather than a lost innocence. The grounding assumption is that consumerism is the default position that individuals living in US have been socialized into, and in this sense the authenticity that the radical agentic orientation strives for is a radical critique of the prevailing consumerist norms. What the opposition between consumerism and authenticity suggests then is that the radical agentic orientation is articulated around a practice of critique that aims to create human community across boundaries.

As Claiborne describes it, consumerist agency is the inauthentic agency tied to many practices that are packaged as the normal, middleclass lifestyle in the US. It could mean taking out a mortgage on a house in a nice neighborhood, filling the garage with the appropriately safe/stylish automobiles, keeping pace with the latest electronics, and working the extra hours to hold everything together. The now clichéd image of US suburbs as miles and miles of development with malls, cul-de-sacs, and the occasional megachurch is key to Claiborne’s description of consumerist agency because it illustrates how these practices also work to create distance between socio-economic classes, both literally and figuratively. In a sense, consumerist agency is the problem that The Irresistible Revolution is trying to remedy more than anything else because Claiborne names it as the central impediment to a more authentic, just way of life in the US. As Claiborne describes it, consumerist agency is such an impediment because it is socially divisive. The practices entailed by consumerist agency not only play a role in creating a
normal, middleclass life in the US, but also create boundaries between this norm and people in other socio-economic positions.

The Irresistible Revolution describes authentic agency as not just as an alternative to consumerist agency, but also as a more just and natural state of affairs because it disregards the boundaries that consumerist agency reinforces. The authenticity that this mode of agency draws upon is fueled by the promise of bringing humanity into a universal family, in that the critique of consumerist agency is focused on how it unnecessarily creates arbitrary, unethical divisions between socio-economic classes that keep people from recognizing the natural relational bonds between people. Thus, Claiborne describes an authentic approach to agency in terms of critiquing and breaking down these divisions by finding ways to act outside of them and finding ways to build relationships in spite of them.

The distinctions between consumerist and authentic agency can be traced in terms of the ways that these different approaches position relationships through a pair of emotional spectrums, numb to raw and comfort to discomfort. These spectrums offer a multiplicity of emotional positions that people may experience as they navigate the structural complexities of their social world. While Claiborne often formulates the range of these positions as binaries, included in this construction is an understanding that these binaries do not necessarily function through a logic of either-or, but include a logic of both-and, opening the possibility that someone’s experiences can intersect with different sections of the spectrums described simultaneously. Just because an individual’s habits of life lead them to pursue happiness through

282. I was tempted to claim here that Claiborne wishes to return humanity to a state of nature because Claiborne seems to be say that the impulse to feel ethically responsible for the people one interacts with authentically is the natural reaction. I did not because that would be a very counter-intuitive vision of the state of nature, particularly since the phrase is most often associated with Thomas Hobbes’ vision of the state of nature as constant, universal war of individual against individual. Reimagining the state of nature as universal family as opposed to universal war could certainly be framed as a radical move.
the conspicuous consumption of something like an expensive automobile, say a Jaguar, which may lead to a numb comfort, does not mean that they cannot also experience some kind of joyful immediacy in a sunrise or the laughter of a child. This is an integral part of Claiborne’s presentation of the radical agentic orientation as desirable, that the relational productivity of these emotional spectrums is both accessible and desirable to everyone. Again, this is a part of the irresistibility that the title of the book refers to: the pull of the intensities of the raw and uncomfortable emotional elements on anyone that experiences them.

The contrast between numb and raw suggests alternative affective dispositions towards others. Claiborne primarily sets up the contrast between numb and raw in his narrative about the transition from working with Mother Theresa in Calcutta as a college student for several weeks to working at a megachurch in Illinois the month after he returned. There is an attempt to gesture towards an affective element in the numb-raw contrast through its focus on embodiment, although it may still be a sort of emotional state.

The numb disposition is the consumerist, retreated disposition of a suburban middle class iteration of Christianity, as Claiborne tells it. The raw disposition is positioned as both an aspect of inequitable social situations (homelessness, imperialism) and what happens when someone who had been numb faces the others that experience this inequitable treatment/environment. Claiborne uses leprosy as a metaphor to develop these contrasting dispositions:

Mother Theresa always said, ‘Calcuttas are everywhere if only we have eyes to see. Find your Calcutta.’ I was ready to come home. I knew my Calcutta was the United States, for I knew that we could not end poverty until we took a careful look at wealth. I was to battle the beast from within the belly. I learned from the lepers that leprosy is a disease of numbness. The contagion numbs the skin, and the nerves can no longer feel as the body wastes away. In fact, the way it was detected was by rubbing a feather across the skin, and if the person could not feel it, they were diagnosed with the illness. To treat it, we would dig out or dissect the scarred tissue until the person could feel again. As I left Calcutta, it occurred to me that I was returning to a land of lepers, a land of people who
had forgotten how to feel, to laugh, to cry, a land haunted by numbness. Could we learn to feel again? Complacency and ignorance of the problems that poverty creates is framed as numbness, and even emotional impoverishment. The raw end of the spectrum is very vividly figured here as an open wound, excised of unfeeling scar tissue.

Rawness is in a sense an emotional impetus to authentic action, and by extension to the radical. The raw calls out the radical; it is a condition of vulnerability that allows the radical relationality between people to take root. It seems like this description of rawness suggests an affective intensity that accompanies reaching a sort of authentic form of action and experience in Claiborne’s estimation. However, even within this visceral metaphor, the authentic rawness is emotional rather than affective. Claiborne sets up this dichotomy as one between an artificial numbness created by a lack of community, a lack of some kind of authentic interaction, and the natural rawness of witnessing and sharing with others. Yet, although the appeal to authenticity invoked by the rawness suggests a direct, unmediated connection, at the same time Claiborne seems to also be describing a shift towards valuing others differently rather than experiencing them differently. The shift along this binary is a shifting emotional investment, from an autonomous but alienated consumer towards authenticity and a relationally vulnerable radical.

The comfort—discomfort alternative provides a more reserved frame compared to numb—raw, while still playing on the same themes. The comfort—discomfort contrast appears as a continuum in Claiborne’s writings that plays a more extensive role than the numb—raw

284. I feel like it must be asked: what does it mean to say that the US is “a land of people who [have] forgotten how to feel, to laugh, to cry?” This seems to evoke a theme that remains unstated throughout Claiborne’s writings although it is constantly alluded to: an authenticity of experience that is disrupted by modern social structures and processes. It evokes the distinction between nature and society that was prevalent as an anthropological frame for understanding the relationship between the civilized anthropologist and the native other. Is Claiborne’s sentimentalism reviving a narrative of an authentic natural state that some social groups have access to, as this might suggest?
contrast. The comfort end of the spectrum does again represent the complacency of a middle class Christianity that Claiborne typifies through his experiences working at a megachurch in an Illinois suburb, as well as through his own consumption of Christian media as a teenager such as Contemporary Christian Music. Particularly instructive is the way he writes about the church’s use of “seeker-friendly” language and design. However, comfort is also used to characterize the evolution of Claiborne’s personal relationships with the marginalized groups of people that he befriends, primarily the poor and homeless of the Kensington neighborhood in Philadelphia where the Simple Way community is located. He describes becoming more comfortable as part of the process of facing others and exploring the authentic mode of agency he describes throughout the book. The discomfort side of the spectrum is mostly characterized by anecdotes of productive discomfort. Basically: “when the rich meet the poor, poverty will come to an end.” Discomfort is what happens when people are willing to try to live in the authentic mode of action because, as Claiborne portrays it, the norm is to avoid discomfort, but the norm is also grounded in the consumerist mode of action rather than the authentic.

In this sense, the binary between comfort and discomfort is much more open-ended and situational than that between numbness and rawness, making the relationship of the comfort-discomfort binary and the radical slightly more complicated. Rawness is both desirable and ethical in comparison to numbness. Comfort, on the other hand, can be sign of either stagnation or growth and discomfort a sign of a weakness that should be addressed or an act of growth as well. This means that to understand these emotional dispositions relationship to the radical agentic orientation they must be evaluated by a criterion, other than simply identifying the emotion, and that criterion is intimacy. Intimacy must articulate the emotional positions rather than authenticity because intimacy is criterion for authenticity. Numbness is characterized by a

lack of intimacy, and comfort can be the comfort of distance, although comfort can also be the comfort with intimacy. On the other hand, rawness is attainable only through the immediacy of intimacy, and discomfort can be the discomfort with intimacy or the need for intimacy.

The authentic aspect of the radical agentic orientation is therefore a focus on emotional authenticity as an element of human interaction. Emotional authenticity is taken as both a consequence of intimacy becoming the primary mode of relating to other people and a factor that motivates people to cultivate intimacy. The emotional is much more important to the radical agentic orientation than the other agentic orientations this project studies because of how deeply it is tied into its conception of the relationality of agency. While intimacy is constructed through a familial frame, a significant part of how it functions is through emotional investment rather than the relational structure that the relational metaphor implies, as the metaphors of servitude and submission function. Rather than instituting a hierarchy, the metaphor of intimacy is meant to break down both formal (such as the master-servant hierarchy) and informal hierarchies (such as contemporary class structures in the US). The limiting element of intimacy seems to be presence, which means that to be fully radical one must act rooted in the local.

Focusing Agency: Radical as Localizing

To further understand the scope of the radical in the radical agentic orientation the aspect of the local needs to be addressed, particularly because of the importance of intimacy as the focus of authenticity’s critique of consumerism. In a sense, the local is the general scene for the actions prescribed by the radical agentic orientation. The local, like authenticity, is a project for radical re-articulation within the radical agentic orientation because once the boundaries between people are challenged, the spatial relations that reinforced those boundaries must be challenged as well. Although proximity plays a role, the radical articulation of the local is not as simple as
proximity, but is rather a matter of an ethical and political terrain that must be cultivated. Thus, the local serves as the focus for the radical agentic orientation’s work to frame the context in which the agent acts.

Whether referring to actions in the US or internationally, Claiborne names actions that narrate a transformation that is always personal and concrete (going to Calcutta, going to Iraq, interning at a megachurch, starting an intentional community in Philadelphia). The actions are also always framed as localized within community, again whether the community in question is in Philadelphia or Calcutta. Community and the local play a large role both as a ground for where effective action takes places (and therefore where agency can be actualized) and as a ground for more radical forms social change: “So it’s important to understand that redistribution comes from community, not before community. Redistribution is not a prescription for community. Redistribution is a description of what happens when people fall in love with each other across class lines.”

Claiborne takes much of his vision for redistribution and community from a reading of the Bible, specifically the book of Acts’ description of the initial attempts to organize Christian community. In describing the goal of the Simple Way intentional community that Claiborne played a role in founding, he wrote that the Simple Way was attempting to become “a church like the one in Acts, in which ‘there were no needy persons among them’ because everyone shared their possessions, not claiming anything as their own but ‘sharing everything they had.’ We knew we could end poverty. The early church did.”

This passage suggests an optimistic view of the effect their responses to poverty would have, and Claiborne writes elsewhere that when they started the Simple Way community they were naïve, both

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287. Ibid., 64.
practically regarding what they were capable of and historically regarding their awareness of
other’s past attempts to recreate this vision of equality from the early church.

Whether operating in the US or internationally, *The Irresistible Revolution* attempts to offer a scheme of agency that is in some senses both egalitarian and acknowledges inequitable distributions of power, for example stating:

> We are not a voice for the voiceless. The truth is that there is a lot of noise out there drowning out quiet voices, and many people have stopped listening to the cries of their neighbors. Lots of folks have put their hands over their ears to drown out the suffering. Institutions have distanced themselves from the disturbing cries….It is a beautiful thing when folks in poverty are no longer just a missions project but become genuine friends and family with whom we laugh, cry, dream, and struggle.\(^{288}\)

This suggests that the problem for Claiborne is not that inequality has left people powerless, but that too many avoid facing that inequality by discounting or ignoring people subject to systemic disadvantages, recalling here the numbness discussed in the previous section. While there is inequality, Claiborne is careful not to suggest that inequality equals powerlessness. This is one of the key points of a story he tells near the beginning of the book of how a group of homeless families, under the name of the Kensington Welfare Rights Union, occupied the abandoned St. Edwards cathedral and Claiborne’s experiences as a part of a group of college students that worked with the group to try to keep them from being evicted by the archdiocese.\(^{289}\) The Kensington Welfare Rights Union was occupying the cathedral as an inventional stopgap solution, as they advocated for themselves and assisted one another in finding long-term housing. It is true that as the narrative progresses, it is the presence of the group of college students that Claiborne and his friends organized among the families that magnifies the publicity that the occupation received, drawing support from an array of sources, but this does not negate the agency that the Kensington Welfare Rights Union was exercising throughout its occupation.

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\(^{288}\) Claiborne, *The Irresistible Revolution*, 128.

\(^{289}\) Ibid., 55-56.
In contrast to the cases of Ramsey and Osteen, divine agency takes a different role in the structural context that *The Irresistible Revolution* projects. While Ramsey presents divine agency in terms of universal ownership and Osteen presents divine agency as the providential hand orchestrating individual lives, divine agency in Claiborne is presented in the figure of Jesus as the object of Christian imitation and as a desire for a more equitable world in the form of “another way of life—the kingdom of God.” Although divine agency clearly still plays a role in the structural context that the agentic orientation Claiborne articulates must account for, this is a dramatically different conceptualization of the function of divine agency in everyday life. For Ramsey and Osteen, divine agency permeates their conceptions of context to the extent that it is almost deterministic, but divine agency is almost passive as Claiborne presents it. The figure of Jesus and the narratives of Jesus’s actions to reach across social and economic lines (and flouting political and religious authorities) are the most active element of divine agency that Claiborne discusses, but he emphasizes these narratives as forms of action that readers should emulate rather than the particular actions the narratives describes. Thus, divine agency is less a constitutive element of the context, but is rather the object of Christian imitation in the form of imitating Jesus’s ministry to the poor, which included “moving beyond charity and toward justice and solidarity with the poor and the oppressed…joining them.”

Injustice and the Ethical Impetus

The previous two sections explored the radical agentic orientation through authenticity and the local, and this section adds to that elaboration of the radical by looking at the politics of the encounter that play a central role in the function of the radical agentic orientation. The ethical and emotional charge of the encounter, having to face other people who may be experiencing

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290. Claiborne, *The Irresistible Revolution*, 124
291. Ibid., 129.
injustice or oppression, is the energizing logic behind the role that intimacy plays in the radical agentic orientation. Within the radical agentic orientation, authenticity is the end that the radical works towards and the local is a scenic frame for that project, but the encounter is the exigency for the radical because it is where intimacy is activated. While *The Irresistible Revolution* often revolves around Christian themes of love and sacrifice in the lives of figures like Jesus and Mother Theresa, it is the intimacy that these narratives model that has the potential to radicalize agency and that makes authentic agency radical. In this section, I examine how the metaphor of intimacy radicalizes by highlighting an ethical responsibility that individuals have to respond to injustices that they encounter.

Systemic injustice is one of the major structural obstacles in Claiborne’s narratives. In the narratives Claiborne relates, the powerful exploit the weak (through politics, economy, war), and it is the duty of Christians to fight this exploitation. However, this systemic injustice is framed as basically reducible to individuals’ choices. Near the end of *The Irresistible Revolution*, Claiborne summarizes an interaction between Michael Moore and Philip Knight, the then current CEO of Nike, in which Moore invites Knight to visit the factories in Southeast Asia that Nike products are manufactured in and Knight replies “No, not a chance.” From this interaction comes this conclusion: “These are the layers of separation that allow injustice to happen. It’s not that people are malicious. I do not think that we are naturally able to hurt each other. Even Philip Knight seems like too nice of a guy for that. But we keep ourselves at a safe distance.” This again shows how important immediacy is to overcoming the social problems that Claiborne’s stories center on. The problem is not necessarily that capitalist trade practices lead to the

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292. “We are about ending poverty, not simply managing it. We give people fish. We teach them to fish. We tear down the walls that have been built up around the fish pond. And we figure out who polluted it.” Claiborne, *The Irresistible Revolution*, 123.
293. Ibid., 301-302.
294. Ibid., 302.
exploitation of workers in other countries, but that the distance that transnational trade places between workers and company managers or owners allows them to continue to avoid facing the reality of this exploitation.

Within this model, international trade is one among many processes that allows people to maintain a “safe distance” from injustice that they might otherwise have to actively engage. Another institution Claiborne writes of that plays a role in creating this distance is large scale charity. In describing some of the work that the Simple Way community does, Claiborne describes their relationship with charity as attempting “to free ourselves from macrocharity and distant acts of charity that serve to legitimize apathetic lifestyles of good intentions but rob us of the gift of community.”295 Part of what creates this distance, as Claiborne frames it, is the bureaucratization of charity work as they become intertwined with government social work programs and initiatives:

With new government funds and faith-based initiatives, the social-work model can easily entangle the church in the efficiency of brokering services and resources in a web of ‘clients’ and ‘providers’ and struggling to retain God’s vision of rebirth, in which we are all family. Faith-based nonprofits can too easily be the mirror image of secular organizations, maintaining the same hierarchies of power and separation between rich and poor.296

Not only is the complexity of the macro-charity organization a form of distance, because of their form, Claiborne argues that they tend to maintain the hierarchical power structures that in and of themselves are problematic, particularly when the relationship that Claiborne thinks should be modelled is one of familial love.

Another element Claiborne writes of that creates distance is the ways that economic classes are separated geographically in the US, where those in the middle and upper classes of US society would never have to interact with anyone in a lower class in everyday life. Because

295. Ibid., 123.
296. Ibid., 158-159.
of this, Claiborne’s describes his response to enquiries for what his community needs with an invitation to visit and be present to the people living in impoverished neighborhoods.

Often wealthy folks ask me what they can do for the Simple Way. I could ask them for a few thousand dollars, but that would be too easy for both of us. Instead, I ask them to come visit. Writing a check makes us feel good and can fool us into thinking that we have loved the poor. But seeing the squat houses and tent cities and hungry children will transform our lives. Then we will be stirred to imagine the economics of rebirth and to hunger for the end of poverty.²⁹⁷

Not only does geography create distance, the charitable act of giving itself threatens to create distance. With all of these examples, the distance created is both emotional and ethical, in the sense that the distance is a feeling of distance and that feeling plays a role in how the action is perceived ethically. Charitable giving creates distance by seemingly absolving the giver of further ethical responsibility as Claiborne describes it in the quote above.

A unifying element within this discussion is the familial metaphor that appears again and again in the discussions of the responsibility that Christians have to the poor and homeless. As articulated here, the familial metaphor forces evangelical Christians to consider the bonds that they have with people outside their social and economic classes:

As we consider what it means to be ‘born again,’ as the evangelical jargon goes, we must ask what it means to be born again into a family in which our sisters and brothers are starving to death. Then we begin to see why rebirth and redistribution are inextricably bound up in one another, as a growing number of evangelicals have come to proclaim. It also becomes scandalous for the church to spend money on windows and buildings when some family members don’t even have water.²⁹⁸

The familial metaphor here seems to suggest that the unifying impetus for the emotional and ethical concern for the poor and homeless comes down to the intimacy that this familial metaphor creates. This intimacy is incremental, as articulated in *The Irresistible Revolution*, in that it does not start at this familial level of intimacy, but starts in its most basic form with bodily

²⁹⁷. Ibid., 159-160.
²⁹⁸. Ibid., 163.
co-presence, progresses to friendship, and finally can become the recognition of the familial intimacy that this passage describes.

**Radical Authenticity and Intimacy: An Agentic Orientation of Facing and Feeling**

Having examined the construction of the radical agentic orientation through intimacy’s role in critiquing consumerism and injustice and shaping the local, in this section I explore the implications that the radical agentic orientation has for a relational conceptualization of agency. The radical agentic orientation that this work produces revolves consistently around questions of relational authenticity and intimacy. The focus on authenticity is primarily connected to questions of emotional investment and identity, while intimacy provides the primary interpretive frame for evaluating action. I chose to name the agentic orientation in Claiborne radical rather than authentic because it is a name that Claiborne is not just given but chooses for himself. Again, Claiborne’s connection of radical’s associations with the root is different from many other formulations of radical critique because Claiborne looks to be rooted as well as focusing on root causes, further emphasizing some of the conservative tendencies that can accompany the position the radical takes as a defended of central social values.\(^{299}\) The radical is the one that is able to produce and maintain an authentic openness to other people, being willing to face them and be vulnerable to them. The radical is one who is able to be fundamentally authentic, rooted in communion with other people.

**Ethical and Emotional: Facing and Feeling**

Within the general organizing themes of authenticity and intimacy, the most apparent aspect of Claiborne’s model of economic agency is how it blends emotional and normative elements. This normative element is focused on justice and responding to inequitable social and economic conditions, but the driving force in responding to this inequity is framed in emotive

\(^{299}\) Chávez, *Queer Migration Politics*, 56.
terms. I argue that the interconnected normative and emotional aspects can best be understood through the themes of facing and feeling that appear throughout *The Irresistible Revolution*, and in fact are precisely what makes the revolution that the title speaks of irresistible. Facing and feeling can be understood as a practice that drives the search for authenticity in self-understanding and the rubric of intimacy in evaluating actions.

Many of the themes that have been discussed in this chapter intersect with rhetorician Diane Davis’s writings on the implications that foreigner relations have for rhetoric in her book *Inessential Solidarity*, which expands the scope and primary focus of the rhetorical to an affectability that precedes the symbolic in human interaction. Davis challenges the focus on identification and the symbolic as the grounds for the expansion of rhetorical study and theory, particularly in the way that Burke’s concept of identification naturalizes the individual as a distinct biological entity. According to Davis, Burke’s purpose in delineating identification is to construct a method for critiquing destructive forms of identification, but Davis wants to shift rhetoric’s focus from critiquing identifications to exploring how disidentification and alienation are part of the process of identification. This focus on disidentification and alienation is important because Davis argues that rhetoric’s ground is a preoriginary affectability rather than identification as Burke argues. Rather than looking to the biological individual as evidence of the natural division between people that rhetoric must bridge through symbolic identification, Davis argues that grounding rhetoric in an originary biological division neglects the ethical dimension of the encounter between people who may not share any symbolic resources in common, drawing on the Levinasian ethics entailed in the encounter with the face of the other because “it’s only in the failure of identification, each time, that ‘I’ am opened to the other *as* other and get the

300. Davis, *Inessential Solidarity*, 25
301. Ibid., 20, 35.
chance to experience something like responsibility for the other that exceeds (and conflicts with) ‘my’ narcissistic passions.” Identification in this frame transforms from a function of symbolic meaning-making processes to a condition for said processes: the affectability of the encounter precedes the particular symbolic interventions made to negate/normalize the encounter through social identities.

This Levinasian re-articulation of identification is a productive framework for understanding the radical agentic orientation precisely because it would be so easy to interpret the metaphor of intimacy as constructing a symbolic identification and going no further. On the other hand, if The Irresistible Revolution is articulating a latent theory of rhetorical agency that is grounded in something analogous to the preoriginary affectability where Davis locates the rhetorical, this case could illustrate how different theories of rhetorical agency may work in relation to Davis’s discussion of inessential solidarity. By noting where the radical agentic orientation does and does not line up with Davis’s discussion of facing the other, I argue that this provides a way to account for the ways that the inclusion of a divine agency in religious accounts of social justice shifts how we would understand the distinction between the political and apolitical in frameworks such as Davis’s. Where Davis sees the preoriginary affectability as an apolitical, ethical ground, Claiborne may see a religious ground for political action.

Intimacy: Facing, Feeling, and Family

The key disjuncture between Davis’s focus on the rhetoricicality of the preoriginary affectability of the encounter and the radical agentic orientation that I have traced in this chapter is that Davis wants to explore what rhetoric would look like if “identification is no longer presumed to be compensatory to division” while the radical agentic orientation seems to be engaged in a political project that precisely presumes that identification must be created to

compensate for current divisions. The problem that Claiborne seems to be constantly writing against is a form of alienation that occurs when people are removed from one another by economic inequality and political factionalism. The Revolution that the book writes of is grounded in one primary act: facing and being present to people regardless of their social, religious, sexual, economic, gender, national identities and being accountable to some form of egalitarian vision of an equitable social order. For Claiborne, this equitable social order must be grounded in the local (in the book, at the level of the neighborhood mostly) because of the importance of the immediate, face to face encounter to resolving the alienation.

Yet, part of what underpins the radical agentic orientation’s vision of an equitable social order is that accomplishing it is actually not a political project, although it sometimes is articulated through the language of activist politics. Instead, it is a religious project, and perhaps a humanist project, at least as it is constructed within The Irresistible Revolution. While it is Claiborne’s evangelical conversion (and later disaffection with the evangelical movement) that drives Claiborne’s commitment to facing others and taking on the ethical responsibility that accompanies this encounter, much of the time this book assumes that this process of facing and feeling is a characteristic of being human rather than of being a Christian. There is an assumption that the transformative power of the encounter in Claiborne’s vision of community, evidenced by statements like “Redistribution is a description of what happens when people fall in love with each other across class lines,” that the hope of this radical vision is not limited to religious communities but is universal. The key term for Claiborne’s view of economic agency in this statement is not redistribution or class. It is love.

303. Davis, Inessential Solidarity, 36.
304. Claiborne, The Irresistible Revolution, 163.
The radical agentic orientation that permeates *The Irresistible Revolution* is produced by the intersection of the elements elaborated through my discussion of the details of this book’s treatment of agency: a particular set of emotional positions combined with localized, community based action that responds to systemic inequality. In terms of the elements that constitute an agentic orientation, the interpretation of structure, responses to structure, and outcome, the radical agentic orientation is characterized by an interpretation of structural constraints as presenting obstacles to agents but not determining outcomes, hence the radical focus. The radical agentic orientation’s response to this view of structure is part of what makes this agentic orientation radical, the critique and decomposition of boundaries, rather than its view of the structure that creates those boundaries. The radical actions at the heart of *The Irresistible Revolution* are grounded in attempts to cultivate intimacy: practices of spending time with others that are then focused through identifications grounded in metaphors of family and familial love that by extension attempts to ignore and undermine the boundaries in place between people.

In this section I argue that *The Irresistible Revolution* is offering a unique model of agency in comparison to the others this project has studied because the radical agentic orientation suggests that the models of agency at work in agentic orientations include territorializing functions. This territorializing machinery (to continue in the Deleuzean idiom) has ethical implications. As Claiborne articulates the situation, the primary implication is that this territorializing function creates figurative distance between systemically asymmetrical classes, and that this naturalizes the physical distance created by housing policy and other forms of boundary work that maintain class boundaries. This territorialization creates an obstacle that inhibits people in different social strata from interacting with one another, and this means that they have no chance to find themselves facing someone too far outside of their own social strata,
with all the implications this has for what Diane Davis has to say about foreigner relations. The poor and the homeless remain distant strangers to the middle class, suburban Christian. The radical agentic orientation approaches this problem of territorialization as the central challenge. The consumerism described earlier in the chapter is one regime of territorialization that the radical agentic orientation critiques, but it is not the only regime of territorialization that the radical agentic orientation would stand in opposition against.

Thus, the agentic orientation that Claiborne articulates at first appears uniquely political in comparison to the cases of Ramsey and Osteen because it is basically a project focused on articulating an agentic orientation capable of de-territorializing the class boundaries that appear over and over again in Claiborne’s narratives. Grossberg describes territory basically in terms of the notion of place in contrast to space or location:

The territory or what we can call a place is the context of lived reality. It describes an affective reality, or better, a complex set of affective articulations and registers that constitute different ways of living in already socially determined locations, different possibilities of the forms and configurations of investment, emplacement and orientation, change and security, attention and mattering, pleasure, desire, and emotions. It sets up complicated relations between belonging and alienation, identity and identification, subjectivation and subjectification. A place is an expressive organization of socio-spatio-temporal investments, transforming extensive space-time (the location), through intensive relations, into a livable space-time. A place defines an orchestration of the affective tonalities that give resonance and timbre to our lives.\(^{305}\)

De-territorialization is thereby a form of resistance to contextual constraints such as the emotional articulations that surround homelessness in the US that play a role in constituting interactions between Claiborne’s middle class audience and homeless people. The radical agentic orientation seems to primarily focus on de-territorialization through the authenticity of the acts that the orientation gestures towards.

It should be noted that a de-territorializing project that maintains intelligibility is also at once a project that is engaged in re-territorializing as well, and so the question becomes not just how class boundaries are de-territorialized through this agentic orientation but also how these relations may be re-territorialized. In this case, the familial metaphor that has an extensive history within the Christian tradition is often how these relations are re-territorialized, although the re-territorialization of this relationship is most often figured as action rather than identity such as when Claiborne talks of people falling “in love with each other across class lines.”

Conclusion

This is a case where we can see specific examples of how reconfiguring the relationship between self and other has the potential to de-territorialize the horizons between social and economic classes. In addition, this case has the potential to add to the discussion surrounding Diane Davis’s call to revise our assumptions about rhetoric, particularly relating to rhetoric’s place as a pre-symbolic affectability. Claiborne draws attention to the importance of the encounter, much like Davis does in centering pre-symbolic affectability, but the difference is that Claiborne locates the possibility for ethical action in translating the encounter into a religiously inflected symbolic register through the intimate familial metaphor. For rhetoricians grappling with questions of agency and ethics, this study has implications for thinking through the alternative vocabularies that popular and religious discourses have for academic discourses of agency and how these alternative vocabularies may challenge certain views of agency.

Of the cases this project has examined, Claiborne represents the orientation with the most expansive articulation of traditional conceptualizations of the structural constraints facing economic agents. It also offers a much more straightforward vision of agency to his readers than Osteen’s writings. This is primarily because divine agency and divine intervention are never

306. Claiborne, The Irresistible Revolution, 163
presented as a constraint on human agency, unlike in Osteen’s privileged agentic orientation, and instead the major constraints on human agency are structural problems such as inequality, indifference to those outside of one’s class or country, and the mechanisms that normalize these problems. Yet, even though *The Irresistible Revolution* presents daunting obstacles to human agency, it does so while also presenting a very optimistic vision of potential human agency. Claiborne seems to be convinced that these are not insurmountable problems; that if everyone could recognize their common kinship, a localized, communal way of life could be maintained equitably.

Even when structural constraints are given more weight, as they are in the radical agentic orientation, this agentic orientation still complicates many of the common assumptions about agency as well as the theoretical interventions into agency because of its articulation to evangelical Christian discourses. In particular, the human-divine relationship as articulated in this chapter still challenges assumptions about human autonomy such as whether autonomy would even be a desirable state. The project of the radical that has been discussed here is grounded in giving up autonomy by making oneself vulnerable to critique, accountable to the local, and moved by injustice. To be radical in this sense is to be subject to the relational intimacy that comes with a universal familial identification. To be anything else would be to be alienated from others. The call of the radical is to sacrifice any autonomy that you may have for the sake of others, although, as articulated in Claiborne, the encounter with the other makes the call of the radical irresistible, which suggests that any autonomy the agent had was already tenuous. One question that the radical agentic orientation could raise for other accounts of the ethical dimension of human agency is where there are parallels between the identification with God’s family and other forms of universalizing relationships. The study of how evangelical
Christian discourses of community inflect how religious discourses implicitly theorize human agency could provide insight into the variety of roles that religious discourses can play in the constitution of everyday life.
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION: RELATIONAL AGENCY AND RELIGIOUS AGENTIC ORIENTATIONS

In studying a small set of the ways that evangelical Christian self-help literature narrates a particular view of the social world and human agents’ place and potentiality within it, this project has attempted to account for one particular element of the process through which that view of agency is articulated, the agentic orientation, as well as how the religious aspects complicate accounts of agency. I chose to approach the interpretations of agency within these self-help case studies through the frame of the agentic orientation because it offered a way to account for how assumptions about agency are articulated within popular Christian writings. Agency is the locus of many practical, political, and theoretical concerns because of its central role in many contemporary discourses, from the constitution of democratically governed state to the constitution of the self within self-help literature. Through my analyses of these self-help books, I have explored the ways that certain concerns tied to views of relationality have played a significant role in constructing agentic orientations that position the hypothetical readers in different ways to their understandings of their own agency as well as the ways that agency is constrained. In this final chapter, I reflect on what this project has argued and some of the implications of these arguments.

If we were to return to our reader from the introduction stretched out next to their flight’s gate, nearing the end of their book after a series of extensive flight delays, we might peek over their shoulder and notice the last few lines:

After our journey together, you now know what you need to do.
You have the tools you need to accomplish this goal.
You have learned how to use them.

My role is done.

Now, the question is, what are you going to do with it?

After spending the last several chapters thinking about the ways that interpretations of agency are constituted, what might jump out about this passage is the progressive focus on building up the reader’s sense of agency and then finally fully transferring the responsibility for what the book contains from author to reader. While this question might easily be found at the end of any number of self-help books, a version of this question is also necessary to visit at the end of this dissertation project. After considering the ways that agency is framed through the agentic orientations in self-help books and the implications of how these orientations are organized relationally, what significance does this have? Is it of consequence?

To answer that question, I step back and consider the larger implications of this project, particularly in relation to the literatures that I delved into in chapters 1 and 2. Before I do so, I revisit briefly each of the arguments I have made about agency across this dissertation. As such, the central themes that I discuss in this chapter are relational agency and the agentic orientation, the dynamics of evangelical Christianity and neoliberalism, and connecting religion to accounts of agency. The articulation of agency in relational terms is in many ways the central theoretical discussion that this project engages, where the dynamics of evangelical Christianity and neoliberalism serve as a central contextual element of this study and the implications of religious discourses for accounts of agency is a central analytic frame. In this sense, this project mostly intervenes into the discussions surrounding agency within rhetoric, but does also have some secondary implications for accounting for the role of religion in neoliberal capitalism. The ways that narratives of agency are woven into a religious worldview through texts such as self-help
books as well as formal religious instruction are particularly relevant to this dynamic between evangelical Christianity and neoliberal capitalism.

Throughout the exploration of these studies I have been thinking through the ways that the concept of the agentic orientation is productive in conceptualizing agency as relational. Although the agentic orientation was initially dismissed by Cloud and Gunn because of its articulation to a naïve humanist conception of agency that preserves the autonomy of the agent as central, I believe this project demonstrates that the agentic orientation has value independent of that conceptualization of agency. The agentic orientation functions just as well in what Cloud and Gunn term a dialectical conceptualization of agency or in the terms of the relationality of agency that this project has focused on in exploring these three cases. In chapter 2, I referenced a perceived anxiety within parts of the literature on agency surrounding the autonomy of the agent and suggested that refocusing on the relationality of agency was a productive response to this anxiety. This anxiety centers around the ways that recent theoretical impulses that decenter and destabilize the self also undermine the autonomy of human agents. Relationality is a productive response to this anxiety because it refocuses the question of agency from the level of the individual to the contingencies of the situation, allowing a robust conceptualization of agency that continues to function even as the self is decentered. Before I proceed with this discussion, I return to the arguments I made about the agentic orientations in the case studies in chapters 3, 4, and 5.

Chapter 3 explores the personal finance writings of Dave Ramsey, analyzing his books *Financial Peace*, *The Total Money Makeover*, and *The Legacy Journey*. As a popular evangelical Christian writer, radio host, and speaker, Ramsey is known for his gruff, heckling approach to advising people on their finances and his extreme anti-debt stance. Ramsey’s anti-debt stance
served as an initial insight into his characterization of human agency because he characterizes debt again and again as a state of servitude or slavery, which he contrasts with a different form of servitude: acting as God’s steward. In analyzing the distinctions Ramsey makes across these books, I pieced together what I named the temperate capitalist agentic orientation. The temperate capitalist agentic orientation’s treatment of agency is organized around this metaphor of servitude that appears over and over in Ramsey’s writings.

Primarily, I argue that the figure of the steward, acting as God’s servant, in the temperate capitalist agentic orientation functions to alleviate tensions between the high degree of autonomy and relatively limited structural constraints placed on the temperate capitalist and the centrality of servitude to how Ramsey conceptualizes all human agency. Within the world of the temperate capitalist, agency is external to the extent that whenever one acts, there is a sense that one is acting for someone, whether as a servant to one’s creditors or as a servant of God. I conclude that the theory of agency articulated within Ramsey’s writings is marked by this inescapable hierarchy, that everyone has to serve; everyone is a servant.

In Chapter 4, I look at pastor and inspirational speaker and author Joel Osteen’s debut book, *Your Best Life Now*. This book of inspirational self-help focuses on a message of positivity, as Osteen tells his readers that the only thing standing between them and their best possible lives is a lack of positive thoughts, feelings, and speech on their part. The focus within *Your Best Life Now* on positive thinking, feeling, and speaking and the wide variance in agency that was attributed to people served as the starting point for my analysis of how agency is discussed within the book. In tracing these dynamics, I constructed what I named the submissive agentic orientation and claimed that it is organized by a logic of providential privilege which manages the variances in agency. Providential privilege, as I describe it in chapter 4, is the
concept that God works on your behalf to provide for your wants and needs on the condition that you demonstrate your faith through your acts of positivity (in thought, feeling, and speech). The submissive agentic orientation is marked by the way that it both attributes exceptional agency to people through acts of positivity while simultaneously seeming to limit their agency in other ways, such as by requiring people to not actively advocate for themselves. On the one hand, God must act on your behalf for you to achieve your best possible life, but on the other, providential privilege is basically activated by your positivity and encumbered by your attempts to solve your own problems. In the world of the submissive agentic orientation, human agency is always inferior to human agency augmented by divine intervention via providential privilege. The submissive aspect of the submissive agentic orientation is a suspension of action on one’s own behalf so that God can act on your behalf.

I argue that the submissive agentic orientation, while being organized around the attribution of a privileged position to the submissive agent, places a heavy burden on agents by implicitly making them directly responsible for both what enables and constrains their own agency. This intense responsibility that the submissive agent takes on echoes the individualizing forces within neoliberal discourses within self-help literature, as the submissive agentic orientation insists that agents must navigate and manipulate their current circumstances with nothing more than the power of their thoughts, feelings, and words.308

Chapter 5 examines how evangelical Christian activist and author Shane Claiborne’s first book, *The Irresistible Revolution*, characterized human agency. As I explored Claiborne’s book, the emphasis placed on relationships and the power of being present to others across social and class boundaries emerged as a central theme that guided how *The Irresistible Revolution* discussed human agency. In this sense, *The Irresistible Revolution*’s treatment of agency had an

ethical character that was distinct from the other case studies because it is so other-focused. In tracing this ethical and relational focus in how Claiborne writes about agency, I named the agentic orientation articulated here the radical agentic orientation that is organized by a metaphor of intimacy. This intimacy is construed as a central ethical concern for the radical agent because it is through the cultivation of intimacy that the radical agent is able to live ethically.

I argue that the radical agentic orientation complicates common assumptions about agency, particularly the assumption that a large degree of autonomy is desirable. The radical agentic orientation undercuts the value of autonomy by suggesting that intimacy requires the sacrifice of autonomy, making oneself subject to others critique, grounded in the local, and invested in justice for others. The way that this is fleshed out is through a project centered around de-territorializing structural boundaries, with a primary focus on class boundaries in *The Irresistible Revolution*, and a complementary project of re-territorializing through a universal familial identification which is characterized as the highest goal of the radical agentic orientation.

These authors’ works have circulated in distinct ways, and the potential acceptance of these agentic orientations is tied into this circulation. Dave Ramsey’s books have sold millions of copies and may be read in isolation as an individualized practice of self-help, but when auditoriums full of people gather for his short courses, they become textbooks to be referred to as Ramsey lectures the participants. Similarly, while Osteen’s books have enjoyed significant success, they circulate in concert with a slew of multi-media ventures by Osteen Ministries such as the traditional church and televangelist ministry, as well as a digital radio station. Although Claiborne’s *Irresistible Revolution* did not enjoy the same degree of commercial success as Ramsey’s and Osteen’s, as Wes Markofski details it has been particularly important to the new
monastic movement as a foundational text. The Irresistible Revolution has also been frequently taken up by younger reading groups in evangelical churches and colleges, something that I experienced attending one such college shortly after the book was published.

These agentic orientations also intersect with the current moment by providing people with frameworks that offer narratives that suggest stable ways of acting within an unstable world. People could use the agentic orientations analyzed in this study to navigate and simplify life in the contemporary US, whether in light of anxiety surrounding the post-9/11 state security apparatus, the economic downturns at the turn of the millennium and in 2008, to the resurgence of far-right politics. All of the agentic orientations I have discussed both frame the nature of readers’ agential potential and what those readers’ should want to do with that agency. The agentic orientations tell readers that not only do they have agency to change their finances, their life, and the world they live in, but also that they should. The point being that while an agentic orientation is not a comprehensive worldview, it does offer the tools to narrate what people should be concerned about and what they should not be concerned about. An agentic orientation thereby offers a simplified view of the world that is also easier to act within. For example, in articulating the temperate capitalist agentic orientation, Dave Ramsey narrates a future in which the US stock market makes continues to make regular gains over time comparable to the economic growth seen in the 20th century. This makes the recommendations of saving and investment work with the metaphor of stewardship that organizes the agentic orientation, although future stock trends are unpredictable given the contingencies of global markets and the potential impacts of climate change and a number of other factors. In this way, agentic orientations such as these can serve to frame a world that can be controlled, rather than a world that is a mess of unstable contingencies that are brewing under the veneer of the status quo.

Relational Agency and Agentic Orientations

While I chose to address the anxiety around the autonomy of the agent by reframing agency in terms of relationality, one thing that I have not addressed is the point that autonomy is actually a relational term. The autonomy of the agent is not excluded from a relational conceptualization of agency, but rather is articulated as one form of relationality that agency can be conceptualized through. In this sense, autonomy is an individualistic relationality that emphasizes self-sufficiency and self-determination. We can see this in its centrality to the agentic orientation of the temperate capitalist in Chapter 3. The temperate capitalist agentic orientation is constructed around an autonomous vision of human agency that attributes the capacity to act unhindered by structural constraints, even as it places that autonomous agent into a relationality of servitude. The autonomy of the temperate capitalist is a qualified autonomy, in that it is an autonomy subject to the hierarchy that servitude places it within, but autonomy is not discounted by this hierarchy because the hierarchy is one between God and human, while human to human relationships are characterized by autonomy.

The three agentic orientations and relational metaphors focused on in this project, the servitude of the temperate capitalist, the providential privilege of the submissive, and the intimacy of the radical, offer a complex look at the ways that agency can be articulated as relational. The construction of the temperate capitalist through a metaphor of servitude offers a good example of this complexity, precisely because it incorporates the autonomous agent into a relational orientation to the world that articulates the autonomous agent as inescapably in servitude without negating that autonomy. Recall that Ramsey emphasized this autonomy through his articulation of economic action through stewardship which balanced the tension between autonomy and servitude by situating the autonomous agent as acting on as God’s proxy.
In most conceptualizations of agency and autonomy, this would be a contradiction because autonomy and servitude seem to be by definition mutually exclusive because of the normative aspects of the theme of autonomy within the agency discourses. As Lisa Keränan points out, the value of “autonomy is predicated on the assumption of an autonomous individual agent who desires to make informed (read rational) decisions” who in turn is engaged in navigating certain ethical problems, and autonomy is thereby often articulated as an important element of ethical agency.  

Servitude, in this sense, could be an obstacle to not just autonomy but also the informed, rational decision making Keränan references in the common articulation of autonomy. However, autonomy and servitude do not contradict one another within the temperate capitalist agentic orientation because these different relationalities are attributed to different relationships, autonomy to a person’s relationships to other people and servitude to a person’s relationship with God. When autonomy becomes a descriptive element within an implicit theorization of agency such as in Lucaites’ description: “every rhetorical performance enacts and contains a theory of its own agency,” autonomy is opened to a multiplicity of definitions limited only by the texts that address autonomy.

In proposing to conceptualize relationality as a central concern to theories of agency instead of autonomy, this project aligns with recent rhetorical theorizations of agency that shift the locus of agency from an internal element of the agent to an external element of the scene, as Karlyn Kohrs Campbell describes agents as “best described as ‘points of articulation’ rather than originators.” When conceptualizing agency as external to agents, whether as an external force possessing the actor, as Christian Lundberg and Joshua Gunn suggest, or as an element of the

310. Keränan, “’Cause Someday We All Die,” 189.
rhetorical event itself, as Caroline Miller argues, reframing the crux of agency in relational terms makes perfect sense. It also means that the work of analyzing rhetorical agency is tied to tracing relational articulations within the rhetorical event rather than looking to solely to the actor to locate agency. The focus of this project has been on agentic orientations, which are not the stuff of agency but rather the frames that people develop to articulate and narrate these relational networks of agency and guide people through them.

Cloud and Gunn point to Foss, Waters, and Armada’s conceptualization of agentic orientation as succumbing to magical thinking because of the particular way that it articulates the agentic orientation in terms of the interpretation of how agency is constituted and constrained. However, one of the strengths of using the agentic orientation is the way it can account for versions of agency that fit within Cloud and Gunn’s framing of magical thinking. As a reminder, Cloud and Gunn argue that Foss, Waters, and Armada’s characterization of the agentic orientation functions in a manner similar to the way that the self-help book *The Secret* characterizes human agency. In Chapter 4, it would be easy to look over the claims that Osteen’s writings make about the power of one’s thoughts, feelings, and speech and categorize it as magical thinking. After all, when Osteen says that all one needs to do to get a promotion or one’s dream house is to feel, speak, and think positive things, we could easily classify it as a form of magical thinking. But by examining Osteen’s book through the interpretive framework of the agentic orientation the chapter pursued a further argument into how its narrative reframed the world around readers, articulating agency in terms of providential privilege and the submissive agentic orientation. Rather than being a view of agency where the agent has total control, the submissive agentic orientation illustrates a tension between a high degree of agency activated by

313. Gunn and Lundberg “Ouija”; Miller, “Automation.”
providential privilege and a very limited degree of agency outside of the functions of providential privilege. The frame of the agentic orientation better accounts for how this text treats agency because it offers a detailed glimpse into the particular story that this book tells about agency.

One of the primary points that Cloud and Gunn critique in Foss, Waters, and Armada’s discussion of agentic orientation is their use of the language of choice. As Cloud and Gunn put it,

The idea that one can choose an ‘agentic orientation’ regardless of context and despite material limitation not only ignores two decades of research within the field of communication studies on agency and its limitations (and is thus ‘regressive’ in more than one sense), but tacitly promotes a belief in wish-fulfillment through visualization and the imagination, as well as a commitment to radical individualism and autonomy.\(^{315}\)

For Foss, Waters, and Armada, a particular agentic orientation is something that can be chosen from many others, with particular sets of outcomes following directly from this choice of agentic orientation.\(^{316}\) I have reframed the agentic orientation in a more limited frame of constituting how people perceive agency and their own capacities and limitations and would not even go so far as to make the claim that people are simply choosing between agentic orientations much less that choosing an agentic orientation will have a direct causal effect on what happens in their life. Instead, I have suggested that agentic orientations, as discursive processes, are modular and are articulated through a multiplicity of different potential configurations of perceived agency and people in everyday life traverse multiple agentic orientations in a day. However, this pliability does not mean that people can choose to jump between agentic orientations as a means to changing the outcomes of one’s actions. For example, while viewing your life through the radical agentic orientation may have some consequences for how you might act when offered a chance to work with and support people who are living below the poverty line in your city, this is not the

\(^{315}\) Cloud and Gunn, “Agentic Orientation as Magical Voluntarism,” 52.

same as claiming that it will determine the outcomes of your actions. Faced with this exact same scenario viewed through the temperate capitalist agentic orientation, action you might take could be drastically different from those of the radical agent, but the outcomes might be indistinguishable. The point of this discussion being that while I think that agentic orientations play a significant role in constituting how we understand our own agency, they are only one element among many at play in the field of social action and do not play a singularly determining role. Attributing such a determining role to them ignores the many factors in play outside of the ways that one actor in such a scene interprets the field of action and their capacity to act within that scene.

Across my case study chapters a theme that is similar to but distinct from the motif of choice emerges within the different agentic orientations. While I would not claim that agentic orientations can be simply chosen, these three case studies suggest that an agentic orientation can be cultivated by people with the resources to do the work of cultivation. I use cultivation to suggest that agentic orientations are developed by everyday practices that people engage in, including reading, handling your finances, managing your attitudes, and working on your relationships with others. The resources needed are basically knowledge (both reflexively of one’s current agentic orientation and some more advantageous way of relating to one’s own agency) and the time, energy, and privilege to be able to do what would be necessary. This is one of the advantages of looking at agentic orientations through the lens of self-help, precisely because the focus of so much of the self-help genre is on the cultivation of different agentic orientations by the introduction of new habits of thought and practice. The cultivation of a new agentic orientation may not lead to completely different outcomes, as Foss, Waters, and Armada suggest, but it does have the impact of altering the relational terrain that people encounter the
world through. For example, if you were to read Osteen’s book and started to cultivate the submissive agentic orientation, how you related to others would change and you might see different outcomes from the changes in how you interpret the world and act in it, but this change or variation is distinct from controlling what happens to you through this change in your agentic orientation.\footnote{Religious Accounts of Agency}

One final implication that this project brings to light is the need to take religious narratives and the divine into accounts of agency. There are many reasons for taking religion into account when theorizing agency. Perhaps the most relevant one to this project is the call Lucaites makes to account for the implicit theories at play in different rhetorical performances that I mentioned above. Reflecting on what happens when accounting for agency in these case studies, across all of them it becomes quite clear that the dynamic between human and divine significantly complicates the conceptualization of agency in different ways. While in many cases the relationality at the center of a relational conceptualization of agency would be a human relationality or an ecological relationality, the primary relationality that organizes these cases is the human-divine relationship. The case study chapters enumerated the different ways that this relationality worked, whether through the formal hierarchy of servitude in the temperate capitalist, the informal hierarchy of privilege in the submissive agentic orientation, or the more egalitarian intimacy at play in the radical agentic orientation, but across all of them it played a central role in narrating how agents should understand the world around them and how they

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317. Again, this is not to say that cultivating a different agentic orientation is ineffectual or of no consequence. If you read Dave Ramsey’s books, followed his advice and cultivated a devotion to saving and investing what you can (whether as an act of stewardship or not), you would probably start to accumulate some amount of wealth even if it is not as much as Ramsey may promise. Did you gain that wealth because you looked at your world through the eyes of a steward or because you were more intentional about contributing to your retirement fund?
could and should act. The different ways that this relationality is articulated across the case studies offers some good examples of the potentially counterintuitive implications that religious discourses have for conceptualizing agency and understanding how people understand their own agency.

Another reason for taking religion into account when theorizing agency that this dissertation project has not addressed is the continued prominence of religion to understanding the contemporary world and interacting with others in, what has been termed by Jurgen Habermas and others as the “Post-secular.”\(^{318}\) This is a potentially productive direction that a further exploration of the themes of this dissertation project could take on, although it is beyond the scope of this current project. As McLennan notes, “postsecularism perhaps best understood not as any kind of clear position, but as a spectrum of concerns and possibilities” surrounding a nonreductive account of the role of religious traditions, beliefs, and practices in theoretical terms, and the focus of this current dissertation project on agency could contribute one small part to such a broad discussion.

In addition, the relationship between religion and other economic and social practices in this study has been mostly in terms of contextualizing the case studies in light of the “extensive and ongoing labor on the self required of working people under advanced capitalism.”\(^{319}\) In all three case studies, the precarity of neoliberalism plays a different role in constituting the conditions for the different agentic orientations constructed in each book. In chapter 3, the caprices of the market are framed as an extension of other forms of uncertainty, against which the appropriate orientation is one of temperance and moderation in an attempt to avoid unnecessary risks. In chapter 4, the neoliberal context remains in the background as the reason


why the reader’s access to shelter, healthcare, and a job might be jeopardized, requiring the activation of divine intervention through positivity to respond to these challenges. In Chapter 5, the social implications of late capitalism are confronted through the poverty and homelessness in a post-industrial Philadelphia, wherein the imperative that this context creates is to a radical intimacy that traverses and rearticulates class boundaries. Across these cases, different articulations of evangelical Christianity offer different articulations of the relationship between religion and contemporary capitalism.

Generally, while this dissertation project is modest in its scope, it has accomplished one of the primary goals that I had established going into this project: to better understand the particularities of contemporary evangelical Christian accounts of agency in relation to economic agency in neoliberal capitalism. However, because of the limited scope of this project, there is much more of this relationship that remains undertheorized. Future projects examining this relationship could shift the focus from popular texts to professional and institutional texts, such as theological writings and the internal documents organizing evangelical churches. Beyond the religious focus, a more extensive elaboration of the agentic orientation outside of both religious and self-help texts could provide a more robust conceptualization that may expand beyond some of the more magical qualities of the concept.

When agency is located outside of agents, in relationships and events and possessing externalities, the stories and frames that people use to account for their own agency take on a different kind of significance. That has been the driving reason why this dissertation project used the concept of agentic orientation, but it is also the reason for looking to these self-help books. They provide agentic orientations that narrate and frame, orientations that may resonate or repulse, get taken up or be forgotten. This project cannot account for whether these orientations
are effective and what effects they have, but it has accounted for how they are articulated within these particular texts and the implications that they have for how rhetoricians talk about agency.

Evangelical self-help discourses, on the other hand, play a large role in the way evangelical Christianity is currently practiced in the US. Religious studies scholar Wade Clark Roof writes that,

> Whatever else religion may be, in a mediated and consumption-oriented society it becomes a *cultural resource* broadly available to the masses. Responsibility falls more upon the individual—like that of the *bricoleur*—to cobble together a religious world from available images, symbols, moral codes, and doctrines, thereby exercising considerable agency in defining and shaping what is considered to be religiously meaningful.\(^{320}\)

This dissertation has attempted to demonstrate how agentic orientations should be added to that list of elements that are available to those who are doing the work of constructing a religious world. The writings of religious self-help authors, such as the ones this dissertation has studied, serve in this sense as cultural resources, both in general as a source of cultural resources but also more specifically as a source of agentic orientations. Ramsey, Osteen, and Claiborne have served as interesting examples of this because where the agentic orientations they present support or disrupt common assumptions about agency, they shape not just the religious worlds that people live in but also people’s understanding of the very conditions of acting in such a world.

The breadth of the audience of evangelical self-help discourses, as Ramsey and Osteen reach millions of listeners and readers every week and others reach millions more, serves as a reminder that while these writings play a role in the construction of contemporary religious lifeworlds, they are also taken up for other applications. Dave Ramsey’s works are being read by people simply trying to gain control of the role that money plays in their lives. Joel Osteen’s writings could easily be read for their encouragement as much as for the religious themes that Osteen draws on. Shane Claiborne’s writings could be read for the alternative communitarian

\(^{320}\) Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace*, 75.
political project that Claiborne advances. There is an ecumenical aspect to self-help discourses that suggests that these authors and agentic orientations are not limited to a strictly evangelical Christian audience. Indeed, the intersection of religious discourses with self-help discourses offers a rich site to study the particular cultural resources that are available to the religious and irreligious alike. The intersection of the religious and the practical offers a vision of everyday life in late capitalism that is complex, where the religious has implications for the practical problems faced and these practical problems have religious implications. The overarching claim of this project has been that these religious self-help discourses call people to not just act differently, but for them to also understand their actions and the conditions under which they act in specific ways. While the role of religious discourses in the public sphere has continued to be important and controversial, religious discourses in everyday life play a key, constitutive role in understanding the different ways that people understand the world they live in.
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