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Agonistic Religion in American Religious Pluralism: A Relationship of Contrast and Conflict Between Westboro Baptist Church and Outsiders

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AGONISTIC RELIGION IN AMERICAN RELIGIOUS PLURALISM:
A RELATIONSHIP OF CONTRAST AND CONFLICT BETWEEN WESTBORO
BAPTIST CHURCH AND OUTSIDERS

by

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B.A., University of Iowa, 2008

A thesis submitted to the
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The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we
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Agonistic Religion in American Religious Pluralism: A Relationship of Contrast and
Conflict Between Westboro Baptist Church and Outsiders

Thesis directed by Professor Ira Chernus

ABSTRACT

This M.A. thesis examines the importance of conflict in American religious pluralism utilizing the example of Westboro Baptist Church (WBC) and the group's engagement and relationship with nonmembers, especially considering media. Due to vast religious diversity, religious communities in the United States must engage and interact with each other and the larger public. I provide an overview of various methods of interaction which have been utilized and argued for over time, including ideals of tolerance and cooperative engagement. However, these theories often gloss over or do not explain the conflict among certain religious groups which do not subscribe to cooperative goals or mutual resolutions with outsiders. As such, I argue for the existence of a category of religion I call "agonistic religion" in which religious groups relate and engage with one another, or to nonmembers, through contrast and conflict.

To locate WBC within this agonistic religion, I draw on three aspects of this church: their underlying Primitive Baptist theology which inherently divides members and nonmembers, their style of preaching and biblical interpretations, and their media usage, all of which feed into this relationship which actively contrasts with and pushes against those outside of the church. In response, the larger nonmember community has attempted to counter this group in numerous ways, including media such as news reports, websites, blogs, and social media. I utilize the work of religion and media scholars to examine the portrayal of religion in media according to certain

preconceived notions or narratives which disseminate views on what religion is and what it does, addressing how this affects groups which do not abide by such presuppositions. I also consider the ability of media to develop communities through emotion, such as disgust, anger, love, and humor, seen in WBC coverage. Through media, the larger nonmember group can be seen as contributing to this relationship in which one side challenges the other. By addressing the place of contrast in religious pluralism rather than cooperation, I focus not on long-term goals for the future, but suggest how certain relationships exist, endure, and persist through cyclical emotional engagement and conflict.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The United States has become a home for a large number and wide variety of religious practices and communities. Religiously diverse from early in its history, adjustments and additions have been continually made to the religious environment. As traditions have divided, merged, and formed new boundaries, this diversity has grown, creating new ways of worship, forms of belief, and communities which all reside in this single space. “Pluralism,” according to E. Allen Richardson, “is more than differing patterns of lifestyle or variations of belief. Instead, it is the convergence in a single area of people who are so completely different from one another in cultural orientation, religion, language, and a wide variety of other factors . . . Pluralism is the existence of community within community.”¹ While “pluralism” can refer to all types of diversity existing in one space, religious pluralism specifically can be discussed in relation to the variety of religions which exist in the U.S.

In this landscape, religious communities do not only differ in their content, beliefs, and practices, but also in the ways or methods in which communities interact with others or navigate their differences and similarities. While it is possible to view the religious environment in the U.S. through a lens of “live and let live”² or as utilizing cooperative religious engagement, there must also be consideration of what can be seen as agonistic religion. To situate this term I draw on the work of Chantal Mouffe on “agonistic pluralism” and its effects on democracy and

¹ E. Allen Richardson, *Strangers in This Land: Religion, Pluralism and the American Dream*, rev. ed. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010), 9.

² Robert Wuthnow, *American Mythos: Why Our Best Efforts to Be a Better Nation Fall Short* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2006), 144. Wuthnow is drawing on the work of sociologist Alan Wolfe and how “even if [Americans] think their own religion is uniquely true, they make few efforts to convert others to it” (144).

politics.³ According to Mouffe, “taking pluralism seriously requires we give up the dream of rational consensus,” because of the diversity and conflict which exists inherently and permanently in human life.⁴ Utilizing this term of agonism to build and understand a category of American religion based in interaction and engagement allows for recognition of certain groups which wish less to get along with others than to actively conflict with or offend against the majority larger society. As such, these religions are also viewed from the outside as being difficult, separate, or challenging and are therefore often dealt with cynically, aggressively, or sarcastically. Interaction from both sides acts to confirm this agonistic relationship and this form of religion, allowing such groups to find a space in the U.S. in media, public opinion, and among other religions.

Often it is considered possible or necessary to defend the category of religion from being associated with such groups popularly or academically. In considering the dichotomy of “good/bad religion”⁵ as it has been used in the field of religious studies, Robert Orsi notes that it is “good” religion (logical, courteous and polite, focused on belief rather than practice, and removed from emotion) which has been emphasized historically.⁶ However, Orsi writes, “Religion is often enough cruel and dangerous, and the same impulses that result in a special kind of compassion also lead to destruction, often among the same people at the same time.

³ Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (New York, NY: Verso, 2000), 101.

⁴ Mouffe, 98. William Connolly also makes use of “agonistic” in his term, “agonistic respect.” The meaning behind this, however, is less similar to the way I draw on the word, as he posits the possibility of a mutual, respectful relationship between parties based in the agony of one having his or her beliefs questioned and questioning others. (See William Connolly, *Pluralism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 123 – 124).

⁵ Robert A. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2005), 183.

⁶ Orsi, 188.

Theories of religion have largely served as protection against such truths about religion.”⁷ As Orsi observes, to study groups and individuals which outsiders and academics find problematic, difficult, or which oppose this “good” religion categorization is an important and necessary part of the field of religious studies through which we can understand the many approaches and methods in which humans relate to the “gods” and “the things, terrible and good, violent and peaceful, they have done with the gods to themselves and to others.”⁸

However, a study of such agonistic religions highlights important aspects of not only the academic study of religion, but also a consideration of how religion is portrayed and understood on a larger scale. For example, if, as religion and media scholar Mark Silk suggests, religion is often promoted and viewed as a “good thing,”⁹ cases of agonistic religion are often seen as beyond or separate from the realm of “religion.” As this paper examines below, media can be seen to disseminate and promote a particular understanding of religion, directly affecting perceptions of and interaction with these communities throughout the wider country.

In order to examine the agonistic relationship between such religions and outsiders, I will utilize the case of Westboro Baptist Church (WBC). Founded in 1955, WBC has become a recognized presence in the United States. Though the group includes fewer than one hundred members, the church has performed over 49,254 pickets and protests since 1991.¹⁰ Highly noticeable in nature, WBC pickets include and rely on signs which have become (in)famous, including “GOD HATES FAGS,” “THANK GOD FOR DEAD SOLDIERS,” and “GOD HATES YOU.” Church protests occur in a wide range of spaces, including entertainment events,

⁷ Orsi, 191.

⁸ Orsi, 191 – 192. Quote on page 203.

⁹ Mark Silk, *Unsecular Media: Making News of Religion in America* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1995), 57.

¹⁰ Westboro Baptist Church, “God Hates Fags,” Westboro Baptist Church, www.godhatesfags.com, (accessed November 15, 2012). Number of pickets as reported on November 15, 2012.

worship spaces of many religions, and most notably funeral services. Likely best known for their appearances at military funerals, WBC members display American flags upside-down or trample them, sing songs about the death of the deceased, and hold signs proclaiming the deceased to be in hell. According to WBC press releases regarding the church's appearance at such funerals, the group states: "GOD HATES AMERICA & IS KILLING OUR TROOPS IN HIS WRATH. . . . THANK GOD FOR IEDs."¹¹

The presence of WBC at such events has clearly not gone unnoticed. Having found few, if any, supporters or allies, a relationship has been developed between WBC members and nonmembers based in difference and conflict. Though the church began their ministry of picketing in 1991, media and news sources, especially beginning in the late 1990s, and other internet sites have increased public knowledge of this group beyond those who attend (counter)protests. In coverage by nonmembers, including news stories, personal blogs, websites from organizations and churches, and social media sites, WBC's words have been likened to "terrorism" with an "insane interpretation of biblical doctrine,"¹² seen as "badgering"¹³ or referred to as "bullying."¹⁴ Journalists tell stories of hard-working individuals who have had their lives torn apart by the attention WBC paid to them,¹⁵ or figures who stand up to the group,

¹¹ Westboro Baptist Church, "News Release: GOD HATES AMERICA & IS KILLING OUR TROOPS IN HIS WRATH," Westboro Baptist Church, http://www.godhatesfags.com/fliers/20120910_Dead-Soldier-Albuquerque-NM-Jonathan-P-Schmidt.pdf (accessed September 11, 2012).

¹² Mary Ready, "MARY READY: The Terrorism of Westboro Baptist Church," *TheDestinLog.com*, entry posted July 24, 2011, <http://www.thedestinlog.com/news/terrorism-18611-church-term.html> (accessed April 13, 2012).

¹³ Roy Bragg, "Topeka Has Little Love for Hateful Preacher," The Rick Ross Institute Internet Archives for the Study of Destructive Cults, Controversial Groups and Movements, <http://www.rickross.com/reference/westboro/westboro31.html> (accessed July 24, 2012).

¹⁴ As quoted in A. G. Sulzberger, "In Topeka, the Price of Free Speech." *The New York Times*, October 9, 2010, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/10/us/10kansas.html?_r=4 (accessed September 11, 2012).

¹⁵ Kerry Lauerman, "The Man Who Loves To Hate," *Mother Jones*, March/April 1999, <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/1999/03/man-who-loves-hate> (accessed September 13, 2012).

including children.¹⁶ Seen as “hatemongering”¹⁷ and “extremist,”¹⁸ some sources imply that vigilante acts against WBC, such as having their tires slashed, are appropriate.¹⁹ If direct confrontation is not called for, people often request simply taking no notice of the church.²⁰ The response to WBC, generated and furthered by much of this media attention, is either explicitly negative or silent, preferring to challenge or ignore the group.

During the 20th and 21st centuries means of communication and interaction have been developed which have affected relations within and between religious groups. Media, while always an important factor of religion, has provided opportunities for communication to be more immediate, interaction more widespread, and information more accessible than ever before. No longer do interactions between group insiders and outsiders take place only within physical proximity, but also in digital and media spaces. For example, while personal interaction on the picket lines can be seen as the impetus for this agonistic engagement, interaction in digital and media spaces has also become a site for interaction between the two groups to take place. Media, therefore, becomes important in providing space and knowledge for insiders and outsiders to interact. Without it, a church such as WBC may not be able to negotiate their place into this

¹⁶ Dominique Mosbergen, "Nine-Year-Old Josef Miles Stages Counter-Protest Against Westboro Baptist Church Protesters," *The Huffington Post*, May 15, 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/05/15/westboro-baptist-church_n_1518901.html?utm_hp_ref=westboro-baptist-church (accessed July, 24 2012).

¹⁷ Sean Gregory, "The Price of Free Speech," *Time*, October 4, 2012, 30.

¹⁸ Chelsea Krotzer, "Students Unite in Reaction to Westboro Protest," *The Olympian*, June 7, 2012, <http://www.theolympian.com/2012/06/07/2132349/students-unite-in-reaction-to.html> (accessed September 13, 2012).

¹⁹ Matt Stopera, "Westboro Baptist Church Gets Tires Slashed, Locals Refuse To Perform Repairs," BuzzFeed, <http://www.buzzfeed.com/mjs538/westboro-church-gets-tires-slashed-locals-refuse> (accessed on July, 17 2012).

²⁰ For example, at one church where WBC protestors were scheduled to appear, the website urged community members, "*The protestors want to get an un-Christian response from us. **Just smile, be friendly and don't get caught up in their rhetoric.***" Hales Corner Lutheran Church, "Hales Corners Lutheran Church Home Westboro Baptist Church Protest - July 1," Hales Corners Lutheran Church, <http://www.hcl.org/Home/WestboroBaptistChurchProtestJuly1/tabid/1036/Default.aspx> (accessed July 21, 2012). Italics and bolded text in original.

pluralistic environment, nor could the opposition to this group make possible their action against them through the production of particular representations of religion, mobilizing emotional responses, and creating community.

This paper is a close examination of the relationship between WBC members and nonmembers in order to inspect and analyze the place of agonistic religion within U.S. religious pluralism. I argue that WBC, an example of agonistic religion in the United States, exists in a relationship of active difference and conflict with nonmembers with whom the group identifies and contrasts itself against. As such, a nonmember community, through media sources which affect and feed into particular portrayals of religion, has created a larger community based on feeling and emotion to resist and push back against this church. This interaction acts to form and confirm the very barriers and categories which it requires to continue; difference is not only present here, but it is imperative. It is through this agonistic relationship that WBC is able to create space for itself in this religiously pluralistic environment.

To supplement this argument, I will first review different theories about inter-religious engagement set out by scholars discussing tolerance and engagement. From there I move to discuss WBC, their doctrines, practices, and web-based ministry. WBC has separated itself from all other religions, actively fights against alternative sexualities, and declares America to be “doomed.” Examining the beliefs and preaching practices of WBC members will assist in explaining their stance, as well as what places them in contrast to the majority of Americans whose response I will examine in chapter 4 especially using media-based sources and emotion. I conclude this paper with thoughts on the future of such agonistic religion as well as its relation to the academic study of religion.

CHAPTER 2

INTERACTION IN THE UNITED STATES:
RELIGIOUS PLURALISM, TOLERANCE, AND ENGAGEMENT

According to The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, “Despite predictions that the United States would follow Europe’s path towards widespread secularization, the U.S. population remains highly religious in its beliefs and practices, and religion continues to play a prominent role in American public life.”²¹ As The Pew findings have supported, religion has not become obsolete in influence over the lives of individuals or in the larger country as a whole. While some have suggested the eventual and complete removal of religion from the public sphere through the secularization theory,²² religion continues to enter into the public domain repeatedly through politics, business, and more. Due to this continued presence, interaction and communication among religious individuals and communities inherently takes place every day.

“America,” according to religious historian J. Gordon Melton, has been “an excellent social laboratory” of religion. “In America, real freedom, especially concerning religion, was a present reality. This freedom was reinforced by America’s high degree of separation of church and state, a condition that prevented the government from becoming the arbiter of individual religious choices.”²³ As time has progressed from initial religious disestablishment the U.S. has become a nation of religious pluralism: a single space where multiple religions actively exist in

²¹Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, Religious Affiliation: Dynamic and Diverse* (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, 2008), <http://religions.pewforum.org/reports#> under Full Report, 1 (accessed September 20, 2012). For the full study, see Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, Religious Affiliation: Dynamic and Diverse* (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, 2008), <http://religions.pewforum.org/reports#> under Full Report.

²² See Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967).

²³ J. Gordon Melton, “Religious Pluralism: Problems and Prospects,” *Brigham Young University Law Review* 2001 no. 2 (2001): 621.

both private and public life. As Melton observes regarding the changing religious landscape, “The reality of religious life was disunity, especially at the practical organizational level.”²⁴

Writing about the influx of new religious movements, immigration populations, and the decrease in membership from mainline churches, Melton highlights the presence of difference among and between communities in their religious beliefs and practices. As Richardson is quoted above, the U.S. is a place of communities within a larger community.

Therefore, as a country without any established religion for approximately two hundred years, questions have been continually raised regarding ideal methods of religious interaction in order for the larger society to function. Because of the vast amount of religious diversity, communal areas and public spaces are often filled with competition or interaction where religions must attempt to negotiate or dominate for space. Multiple methods of interaction or existence in the pluralistic environment of the United States have been presented: this chapter acts as an overview of the range of possibilities. But first, I set up a description of the religious environment itself utilizing Marty’s categories of “strangers” and “belongers,” especially considering the location of these two groups present inside one community.²⁵

Marty has a larger viewpoint on religious engagement and hospitality, discussed below. However, he also offers a useful portrayal of the inherent conflict which occurs between those who are viewed as at home in a space (“belongers”) and those who are seen essentially as invaders of it (“strangers”), or “those who are religiously different, who appear to many [group

²⁴ Melton, 620.

²⁵ Martin E. Marty, *When Faiths Collide*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2005). Marty draws these terms from Georg Simmel, a 19th-20th century German sociologist (24). Their use is not specific to only inside the U.S., but rather any place or time when religions “collide” or come together. Such conflicts can occur internally, locally, nationally, or internationally.

outsiders] to be monstrous.”²⁶ Though any religion which is deemed to be “other” or coming from “outsiders” can be viewed with the suspicion for a stranger, Marty’s binary clearly benefits an understanding of agonistic religion, such as the case of WBC, where one group is viewed as entering a space and actively attempting to push against those who reside there.

Those labeled belongers, Marty remarks, view themselves as holding priority within the space, having existed in the place earlier than strangers, and possess a suspicion of those from other areas, communities, or religions which in some way are deemed different than themselves. Such differences could result in conflict and fear about the taking of physical space and resources. Concerns may also be addressed about the influx of ideological differences where the two communities hold “clashing ideas, narratives, and intentions.”²⁷ Due to being viewed as disruptors or opponents, these strangers are therefore inherently seen as problematic by the belonging group.²⁸ However, the boundaries between the two groups are often not absolute but are relative and changeable: those who are strangers and those who belong can shift based on perspective and current opinion.²⁹ For example, Mormonism and Catholicism in the U.S. can both be seen as cases of strangers eventually moving closer to the status of belongers.

With this structure of strangers and belongers Marty presents not only community within community but also the recognition of relationships which run on some sort of impression of difference. To draw on Melton again, in having a lack of unity within a space this contact of strangers and belongers does not happen only occasionally but consistently. Such interaction is

²⁶ Marty, 4.

²⁷ Marty, 7.

²⁸ However, Marty, drawing on Simmel, makes the point that the presence of the other also strengthens group identities and boundaries through their distinctiveness: “conflicting with the other, in our case the religious stranger, is a group-binding element. It is there and then tempting to demonize that “other,” the member of a different caste or religion” (Marty, 29).

²⁹ Marty, 9.

not necessarily violent, though it can be, but at the very least draws attention to ways which groups “define themselves over and against others.”³⁰ U.S. religious communities must inherently find ways to interact with others because no larger government authority will be denying strangers access to the country in physical or ideological space. Because large scale violence is not an option, possibilities for relating to others include tolerance or engagement to cooperate or oppose. An overview of models of religious interaction and engagement assist in situating the case of agonistic religion and WBC within the wider framework of religious pluralism, allowing for a comparison with wider religious interaction to delineate this specific type of religion based in conflicting and contrasting interaction in the U.S.

Tolerance and its Critiques: “Weak” Interaction

Many of the examples to follow have some basis in a critique of an ideal of “mere tolerance,”³¹ an activity which has been publicly and widely espoused in the U.S. However, before addressing these criticisms it is important to situate tolerance’s emergence in the modern West and its use in the United States. Wendy Brown locates tolerance’s beginnings in Europe during the Renaissance and more widely with the Reformation, linking this practice to liberalism, individualism, and the emergence of the private sphere.³² Drawing on Locke’s understanding of tolerance, Brown writes, “Tolerance of diverse beliefs in a community becomes possible to the extent that [personal] beliefs are phrased as having no public importance . . . and

³⁰ Marty, 6.

³¹ Diana Eck, *A New Religious America: How a “Christian Country” Has Become the World’s Most Religiously Diverse Nation* (San Francisco: Harper Collins World, 2002), 70.

³² Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* (Princeton NJ: Princeton UP, 2006) 30 – 32.

as having no reference to a settled common epistemological authority.”³³ It at this point that a sharp divide is intended between the private beliefs and practices of individuals and communities and the public arena of politics, government, and larger social life in which the two must be kept separate from one another.³⁴ Individuals can and should be allowed personal beliefs, but in order to make the larger society function with minimal conflict these individual practices and ideals should not be applied to everyone.

While some rules and laws of tolerance have been in place in the United States since early in American history,³⁵ wider, public attitudes of tolerance, religious and otherwise, became prevalent especially in the latter part of the 20th century up to the present time.³⁶ As Charles Taylor describes this sentiment, “One shouldn’t criticise the others’ values, because they have a right to live their own life as you do. The sin which is not tolerated is intolerance.”³⁷ Often described as a motivation which says “live and let live,”³⁸ tolerance often acts to elide differences publicly, allowing others’ behaviors and beliefs to continue on privately in order to maintain a feeling of wholeness among the larger totality. Brown writes of tolerance today as “an individual virtue, issuing from and respecting the value of moral autonomy, and acting as a sharp rein on the impulse to legislate against morally or religiously repugnant beliefs and

³³ Brown, 32.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Including the short-lived Act of Toleration in Maryland in 1649. See “Maryland Toleration Act; September 21, 1649,” Yale Law School, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/maryland_toleration.asp (accessed November 16, 2012).

³⁶ Brown, 2 – 3.

³⁷ Charles Taylor, “The Age of Authenticity,” in *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap of Harvard UP, 2007), 473.

³⁸ Wuthnow, 144. See footnote number 2 in chapter 1.

behaviors.”³⁹ Brown’s description of tolerance quoted here enables two parts of tolerance: one which is based in the individual and another which focuses on larger society and its inability to legally prohibit certain acts. While laws are put in place which can restrict the practices of certain individuals and groups, tolerance itself, as Brown notes, is not legally mandated; it is not in the law today that one must tolerate another. It is simply something that is done as a virtue which society values.⁴⁰

While there are few who wish to deny the ideal of tolerance at a purely individual level,⁴¹ several critiques have been made which question the use of tolerance as a larger framework for negotiating the presence of multiple religions or groups in one area. Brown herself offers a critique which questions the policy of tolerance being used as a universal good while rooted in Western liberalism, but also addresses the political implications of being deemed “tolerant,” “intolerant,” or among that which is *tolerated*. Brown suggests “almost all objects of tolerance are marked as deviant, marginal, or undesirable by virtue of being tolerated, and the action of tolerance inevitably affords some access to superiority.”⁴² Mouffe also highlights this presence of power behind her emphasis on agonism in democracy and politics.⁴³ Through determining who tolerates and who is tolerated boundaries are marked out between those who are acceptable,

³⁹ Brown, 8-9.

⁴⁰ Such restrictions of legal prohibitions include gay marriage or other issues of sexuality. However, as Brown examines, there are no “laws of tolerance as there are laws, say, of equality, liberty, or the franchise” (Brown, 12).

⁴¹ According to Brown, “A tolerant individual bearing, understood as a willingness to abide the offensive or disturbing predilections and tastes of others, is surely an inarguable good in many settings” (Brown, 13).

⁴² Brown, 14. Marty makes a similar point, commenting that with tolerance, “only the powerful are in a position to be called to be generous . . . acts of toleration will be suppressed by those who exert majority power” (83-84).

⁴³ Mouffe writes, “We have to accept that every consensus exists as a temporary result of provisional hegemony, as a stabilization of power, and that it always entails some form of exclusion” (104). William Connolly has also written of the plight of the tolerated, stating “You may have noticed that people seldom enjoy being tolerated that much, since it carries the onus of being at the mercy of a putative majority that often construes its own position to be beyond question.” (Connolly, 123.)

or belongers, and who are excluded or made strangers. Marty launches a similar critique against tolerance in his own text which leads him to his ethic of hospitality, discussed below. Criticizing tolerance for its “weak character” and “condescension,” Marty aptly explains that tolerance does not come before intolerance: “tolerance is not primitive; it is to action what reflection is to thought.”⁴⁴ Marty views tolerance not as an absolute ability to understand and accept, as it is understood widely above, but in actuality as built on a lack of understanding or engagement.

Outside of these critiques of the motivations behind tolerance, others express concerns about the practical effects of tolerance on group relationships within the U.S. Diana Eck, while recognizing that tolerance is movement away from intolerance, argues that this type of interaction does little to increase knowledge of other communities, effectively making relationships hollow and weak. Tolerance, says Eck, “does not require new neighbors to know anything about one another. Tolerance can create a climate of restraint but not one of understanding. . . . It is far too fragile a foundation for a society that is becoming as religiously complex as ours.”⁴⁵ Robert Wuthnow also expresses fears about tolerance, distressed about its ability to numb public discourse. According to Wuthnow, in espousing an extreme privatization of religious beliefs where attitudes and practices become purely matters of individual tastes and “all religions are true,” it becomes more difficult for religious opinions to influence public debate and discussion. While this may have been the dream of early discourses of tolerance, Wuthnow argues that as this happens it becomes easier for other civic concerns to become solely personal, leaving the public realm to become “a matter of personal charisma and carefully orchestrated

⁴⁴ Marty, 126.

⁴⁵ Eck, 70.

sound bytes or photo ops, rather than an arena for serious debate about values and principles.”⁴⁶
If U.S. citizens begin by eliding religious difference in the public sphere in the name of personal preference then the same could slowly occur for all individual difference.

A brief understanding of tolerance as a mode of religious interaction and its critiques informs a wider discussion about religious pluralism. Tolerance is widely known as the recognition of alternative viewpoints on private and individual lifestyles, worldviews, and choices. While this can, at times, assist in avoiding conflict, it does little to create conversation or impact public policy through its rejection of recognizing and understanding the other. As Wuthnow writes, if such attitudes continue, “We will have expanded our cultural borders but encouraged everything within them to look the same.”⁴⁷

Pluralism, Engagement, and Cooperation

Several scholars have encouraged not a denial of difference in the public sphere through open tolerance but rather support an embrace of distinction when outlining ideal inter-religious relations. Such views provide a closer connection to cases of agonistic religion which actively runs on engagement of difference. However, the views on active interaction set out below also involve some sort of mutual cooperation or goal. Such motivation is absent from the type of engagement which is present in examples such as WBC’s relationship with group nonmembers. Nevertheless, the views regarding pluralism expressed below allow for a movement away from only two options in interaction, acceptance (tolerance) or rejection (intolerance), offering more complex possibilities of interaction.

⁴⁶ Wuthnow, 160.

⁴⁷ Wuthnow, 162.

Beginning with Eck's theory about a "new pluralism," Eck suggests moving past tolerance by recognizing the diversity between groups and engaging each other "in and through our very deepest differences."⁴⁸ According to Eck, "pluralism is the language of not just difference but of engagement, involvement, and participation. It is the language of traffic, exchange, dialogue, and participation."⁴⁹ Using four points to define this pluralism, including requirements for active engagement and surpassing basic tolerance, Eck adds that pluralism should not be mistaken for relativism among religions or even inherent agreement between them. Rather, she encourages building relationships even when groups or members don't always agree.⁵⁰

As the name of her chapter, "From Many, One," makes clear, Eck's view is not only focused on how groups coexist in one area, but also in what ways they could come together to make up a larger whole of the U.S. Eck utilizes metaphors of a symphony orchestra or jazz music to illustrate her version of pluralism, implying a need for collaboration and mutual support in order to succeed: "I find this an appealing image - the symphony of society, each retaining its difference, all sounding together, with an ear to the music of the whole. . . Our challenge today is whether it will be jazz or simply noise, whether it will be a symphony or cacophony, whether we can continue to play together through dissonant moments."⁵¹ Mainly drawing on examples of the larger "world religions," Eck's view focuses on group interaction through respectful engagement to benefit the larger U.S. society.

⁴⁸ Eck, 70.

⁴⁹ Eck, 69.

⁵⁰ Eck, 70 – 72.

⁵¹ Eck, 58, 59. Eck draws the metaphor of the symphony from an article by Horace Kallen from 1915 in which he questions the popular view of the American "melting pot" (57).

Akin to Eck in emphasizing engagement through difference, Marty coins another term for his preferred model of group interaction: “hospitality.” Identifying this ideal as a “risk,” Marty makes theological and practical claims to address the importance of recognizing the stranger as an entity to relate with through acts of welcome (“reception”), exchange (“conversation”), and interacting (“interplay”).⁵² In an analogy of personal hospitality where one person invites another into her home and prepares it to receive guests,⁵³ Marty makes clear that this act is not only in receiving the other, but also requires self-realization and awareness: each group attempts to clarify or adjust certain elements within their own tradition which may be directly offensive or hurtful to the other.⁵⁴ Through this process of hospitality, Marty argues, each party changes: “We greet, eat, gesture, listen, speak differently because of the presence of the other, become sensitive to the changes we must make in our own outlook and community, and emerge as different beings than we were before the possibly tense but often enjoyable experience of *mutual* hospitality.”⁵⁵ Not a one-sided act, but performed by both, or multiple, parties, hospitality results in changing some of the more offensive or off-putting behaviors between specific communities. Both parties can maintain their identities and differences while at the same time engaging mutually with others through hospitality.

The models of engagement put forward by Eck and Marty contain several similarities yet also diverge at some points. Both focus on the appreciation of difference between groups.

⁵² Marty, 1.

⁵³ Utilizing this example of personal hospitality Marty writes, “As I risk hospitality with you, I will not ignore or cancel all observations of the holy seasons, integral to the rhythm of the year and my life as these may be. Of course, I am thoughtful and self-critical, all along I shall be appraising the meanings, values, and interpretations of the various teachings and symbols. . . Housecleaning occurs before the guest is invited and arrives. If I have posted pictures of medieval statuary in which Judaism is identified with swine and the synagogue with blindness, I will have been swinish in my taste and blind in my understanding, anticipated guest or not” (Marty, 129).

⁵⁴ Marty, 128 – 131.

⁵⁵ Marty, 130. Italics my own.

However, Eck puzzles how the many could become one, a symphony rather than a “cacophony,”⁵⁶ or to use another artistic metaphor, a mosaic instead of a finger-painting. Marty’s view of pluralistic engagement focuses more on a two-sided relationship which necessitates adjustments being made on each side. Following along with his framework of belonger and stranger, his idea of hospitality is more relational: each side adapts to the other while still maintaining their own particular features and elements. Similar to encouraging a type of cooperation as seen in Eck’s musical analogy, Marty’s view requires some sort of common agreement by parties on both sides in order for hospitality to take place.

While Marty and Eck provide appealing frameworks for large scale and general interaction among the variety of religions present in the U.S., their theories of engagement which include some level of collaboration or agreement are difficult to apply to agonistic religion and the interaction it requires. Both scholars address the fact that there appear to be some challenges to their methods, for example, in large level violent conflict.⁵⁷ Even though many examples, such as WBC, do not involve massive physical clashes or violence, the inflexibility between both sides to adjust or relate to the other is part of what defines this conflict. To once again rely on Eck’s use of a symphony analogy, it seems that neither side would be willing to play along to the same music; the outcome is much closer to “simply noise.”

Interacting with Conflicting Religions: Bivins and Barrett-Fox

In order to assist in filling in the gaps from Eck and Marty, for this study two other scholars will be useful in examining interaction in the U.S.: religion scholar Jason Bivins, who has written about the “religion of fear,” and Rebecca Barrett-Fox, an American Studies scholar

⁵⁶ Eck, 59.

⁵⁷ Marty, 146.

who performed fieldwork with WBC while in graduate school and published an article on the group in the *Journal for Hate Studies*. Due to the forms of religion studied by these authors, often seen as more difficult to interact with, the views on engagement which I draw from their works on these groups are especially notable for this study. However, while these theories are closer to what will be discussed further below in the case of WBC and their relationship with outsiders through media, some differences remain between the responses given by these authors as ideal forms of interaction and agonistic religion.

Creating a few new categories, Bivins analyzes media and entertainment from “religions of fear” as well as the tactics of “political religion” and “conservative evangelicalism.” Religions of fear, or religions which take part in “a mode of social criticism and a political sensibility [or discourse],” represent American religions which act to counter and influence the larger culture by utilizing similar techniques and forms as popular entertainments.⁵⁸ Drawing on examples like Halloween Hell Houses and the *Left Behind* novels, Bivins states: “These pop expressions do representational and rhetorical work for readers and audience, linking fears of damnation to a carefully identified range of sociopolitical practices and beliefs.”⁵⁹ These groups attempt to challenge commonly held beliefs and practices of the larger population through their focus on fear, demonology, and some amount of media spectacle. While such religion does not often directly support or advocate for particular candidates or even policies, Bivins views this type of religion as made political “when religious narratives conflict with those of the state or public authority . . . and through engagement with concrete issues . . . whereby religions become

⁵⁸ Jason Bivins, *Religion of Fear: The Politics of Horror in Conservative Evangelicalism* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008), 5.

⁵⁹ Bivins, 5.

politicized or are, by virtue of their speech and actions, marked as political.”⁶⁰ As such, a focus on media and entertainment can be relevant to U.S. politics as well a method of engagement.

These religions of fear cause concern for Bivins regarding American democratic culture. Wuthnow’s chapter explains this anxiety clearly in regards the privatization of religion from politics and the public sphere: “The irony is that when all religions are true, those who still believe theirs to be distinctly true are more likely to mobilize and thus gain the upper hand.”⁶¹ Calling these groups “religious bullies,”⁶² Wuthnow’s description can be connected with Bivins’ account of religions of fear as well as their use of public media to disseminate their version of truth. Rather than appealing to “reason”⁶³ and democratic processes, such religions seem to evade this sort of interaction through their speech and images of hellfire, damnation, and the plight of a sinful world preferring the draw to emotion and provocation.⁶⁴ Like the interaction of agonistic religion such as WBC, religions of fear inspire discourse where “Differences over religio-national destiny are issued as challenges, not to conversation partners in the work of democracy, but to the opposing team, whose utter defeat offers the only true consolation, the surest sign of victory.”⁶⁵ Such religious activity, according to Bivins, can be dangerous to political processes and democratic practices of the public sphere.

⁶⁰ Bivins, 8.

⁶¹ Wuthnow, 158.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ “Americans encounter the religion of fear as a discourse that asserts authority, that promises the resolution of conflict and anxiety, that delivers one system of causality in the wake of reason’s demise” (Bivins, 233). Bivins, while noting the caution with which many academics use terms like “reason,” notes that “by invoking these terms, I signal my awareness of these long debates but also my intention to defend these categories as political practices and norms, even as a hermeneutic of suspicion must be maintained” (233).

⁶⁴ Bivins, 230.

⁶⁵ Bivins, 230.

Concluding his text on religions of fear with a call to do more than just study these groups, view them with passivity, or write them off as too fanatical,⁶⁶ Bivins' answer for engaging with such "bullies," directed at scholars and extrapolated for the public, is for engagement and critique when necessary.⁶⁷ Religions of fear, having "constructed a frame through which public life is seen in terms of conflict rather than cooperation and dialogue,"⁶⁸ contrast with the view Bivins holds of the public and political sphere where differences are met with equal ability to be questioned and advanced to impact American society as whole.⁶⁹ These groups, states Bivins, are not exempt from public discourse, especially due to the political aims of their media and entertainment, and they should be recognized as such by both academics and the larger public: "These entertainments," writes Bivins, "so clearly politicized and public, cannot expect to be insulated from the political process and hence from criticism." To shy away from such critical engagement would be to an affront to methods of democracy which stem from "reasonable compromises of principled differences."⁷⁰

Bivins holds a view which is unique from Eck or Marty through specifically examining engagement with this particular type of religion as opposed to religion more generally. WBC could arguably be considered among these "religions of fear," as they also utilize imagery of hell frequently and their style of discourse echoes that of conflict over conversation. However, the

⁶⁶ While Orsi does not call for critique of "bad religion," with which these religions of fear could be identified, the ability to recognize the power and effects of these religious groups have is an important part of studying them instead of solely otherizing them.

⁶⁷ Bivins, 228.

⁶⁸ Bivins, 234.

⁶⁹ Without a system of critique and conversation, we are left with "jeremiads as a surrogate for a politics of common purpose or shared dialogic or institutional principles. . . A politics articulated through visions of destruction, vengeance, punishment, and gore is one that, to put it mildly, signals that American public life is troubled" (Bivins, 234).

⁷⁰ Bivins, 235.

group retains some distinctiveness from such religion due to their location outside of several characteristics of evangelicalism, most notably the concept of an individual's control over his or her own salvation, as well as their very small numbers. Due to their size the group's forms of media, while easily accessible, do not reach the level of large scale acceptance as the *Left Behind* series does, for example. Also, while Bivins' description of religions of fear comes close to agonistic religion itself, his final argument supports an ideal of differences and distinctions being able to be compiled through debate, critique, and cooperation for the benefit of the larger democratic society. While this is certainly a nice end, it differs from my description of this type of religion which requires contrast and conflict in order to continue and persist.

To end this brief review of interaction and engagement in U.S. religious pluralism, I would like to include and address the work of Rebecca Barrett-Fox who performed fieldwork with WBC in the mid to late 2000s and early 2010s. Her article examines the difficulties and dilemmas of doing field work with "unloved groups" or "people whose actions or beliefs are hateful or harmful"⁷¹ through the example of her research with WBC. Though Barrett-Fox's piece relates largely to her personal experience, her position sheds some light on yet another way for group insiders and outsiders to relate: compassion or "co-suffering."⁷² Utilizing feminist methodology and reflexivity, Barrett-Fox identifies a place between acceptance and desensitization during her study of this group, maintaining her ability to care for people on both sides of the picket lines she witnessed. Recognizing this, Barrett-Fox writes, "I had not become deadened to the pain of others, insensitive to the words of the church or the harm they caused.

⁷¹ Rebecca Barrett-Fox, "Anger and Compassion on the Picket Line: Ethnography and Emotion in the Study of Westboro Baptist Church," *Journal of Hate Studies*, 9 no. 1 (2010): 11.

⁷² Barrett-Fox, 28.

Indeed, I remained sensitive enough to others that that sensitivity could extend even to church members.”⁷³

Barrett-Fox’s piece, being written largely for an audience of academics and ethnographers, has some limitation on being applied to the larger interaction. For example, though Barrett-Fox shares a story of her own anxiety about WBC picking in her own hometown area, the experience of the researcher may be much more neutral: when he or she walks the picket line between the two groups it is possible that he or she can leave the scene without a personal attachment to one side or the other. However, her recognition of a place between rejection and reception of WBC ideals and practices echoes what theories above have suggested regarding the requirement of engagement to be more than disagreement or agreement: it is interaction, relationship, and as such can be a lengthy and difficult process.

As noted above, by way of their subject matter, these two authors may have more particular insight into religion which actively pushes against outsiders and which is pushed back upon, though the two differ on views of ideal interaction with such groups. Bivins’ description of religions of fear comes close with agonistic religion, though some distinctions can be made in goals, identity, and methods, described in the next chapter. Having worked with WBC in the past, Barrett-Fox provides a firsthand account of the interaction which takes place between church insiders and outsiders. Her recommendation of compassion is quite distinct from Bivins’ call for the researcher to take part in critique and defense against these “unloved” groups; it is unlikely that an ethnographer utilizing Barrett-Fox’s techniques will engage with these groups in the ways Bivins suggests. Both, however, recognize the natural place of conflict and criticism in these communities, recognizing the place of difference which can naturally offend others and produce some sort of backlash.

⁷³ Barrett-Fox, 29.

However, the types of engagement recommended in these and the theories of Eck and Marty in many ways portray this conflict understandably as something which is undesirable, or at least something which should be surpassed. Through utilizing compassion, or “co-suffering,”⁷⁴ Barrett-Fox provides a tool which could alleviate some of the direct confrontation which is seen in picket lines all over the country. At this time, however, there are few people who are willing to stand between the two sides on the picket line with many more taking a stance with one group or the other. As such, her approach is not a perfect fit for examining the conflict as it is today. Bivins fears that the presence of religion of fear “signals that American public life is troubled. This approach to questions of democratic legitimacy, pluralism, public speech, and the role of religion in politics is no substitute for *genuine political conversation and participation*.”⁷⁵ As such, Bivins stresses that there is an alternative to this type of engagement which would be better for the larger country. While it is possible that Bivins is correct in questioning, like Wuthnow, the long term results of such religious interaction on political interaction, his critique glosses over the value of examining these relationships based in conflict in and of themselves. Similarly, Eck writes as her fourth characteristic of her new pluralism, “the process of pluralism is never complete but is the ongoing work of each generation.”⁷⁶ Processes, however, often have goals, even if they are never fully completed. Therefore, questions may be asked in any interaction: how far are we from our goal? How are we proceeding? What I am examining in this example of agonistic religion is the situation as it is now without brushing past it to goals for the future.

⁷⁴ Barrett-Fox, 28.

⁷⁵ Bivins, 234. Italics my own.

⁷⁶ Eck, 72.

Pluralism and Media

My examination of WBC and agonistic religion is based in media usage between two sides. As David Morgan has written, media is “more than radio, newspapers, and televised news broadcasts, media also means Internet fan sites and blogs, circulating videos or cassette tapes, lithographic prints, billboard advertisements, bumper stickers, mass-produced commodities such as plastic statuary or music CDs, or symbols such as crosses, menorahs, and tapestries picturing the Ka’bah.”⁷⁷ In examining the interaction and engagement between WBC members and nonmembers, media is a primary space for this agonistic relationship to take place and it adjusts to fit many forms from news reports to YouTube videos to photos of protest signs to websites.

Usage of such materials can assist both insiders and outsiders in spreading their views and perspectives. According to Joyce Smith, “if [religions] wish to be taken seriously in public debate, they must translate their beliefs into claims that can be understood and argued apart from a specific, theological framework. They can continue to speak their own language but should not expect everyone else to learn the language to engage with them.”⁷⁸ Though WBC utilizes media, video, and engagement with a common culture, the root of their message is based in their theology which has ties to the Primitive Baptist Church, evangelicalism, and fundamentalism, explored in chapter 3. As I will discuss, this has caused some problems for the group in disseminating their message even while making it accessible to the public. Similarly, the nonmember group which is not constructed in any single religion also must engage the public in terms which have a wider appeal. Following Smith’s quote above, due to the wide variety and

⁷⁷ David Morgan, "Introduction: Religion, Media, Culture: The Shape of the Field," in *Keywords in Religion, Media, and Culture*, ed. David Morgan (New York: Routledge, 2008), 12.

⁷⁸ Joyce Smith, “Public,” in *Keywords in Religion, Media, and Culture*, ed. David Morgan (London: Routledge, 2008), 151.

large numbers of people among the WBC outsiders, it would appear that this group has been able to engage the public with more common language and ideals which I address in chapter 4.

Through examining media practices of both sides along with the effects these practices have on engagement, it appears that Eck is correct when she writes, “Clearly, the representation and misrepresentation of religion is public business, for it shapes our civic climate whether or not we are religious.”⁷⁹

While the separation of private and public was once seen as possible, today a much more complex relationship between the two is seen as taking place. Stewart Hoover, discussing the same types of changes to the American religious landscape that Melton addresses above, states: “the new religiosity is not *privatized* in the classic sense of the term. Instead, it takes place in a rather public way, in the sense that the various forms and influences that come to bear on it exist and find legitimacy in the public sphere.”⁸⁰ To examine a particular religious group outside of the larger context in which it operates is to ignore many elements which have affected it; similarly, to close a group off from the larger public it hopes to engage with neglects much. By viewing this type of agonistic religion as existing in relationship with outsiders, it is impossible to overlook the ways in which it engages with influences and attempts to affect the larger public. Hoover adds that media sources aid in this process of connecting with and expanding on “a wide range of cultural and social symbols and ideas.”⁸¹ Media assists in this connection to the larger public, even if, as is the case of WBC, these connections are utilized largely to confront and conflict with that public.

⁷⁹ Eck, 31.

⁸⁰ Stewart M. Hoover, *Religion in the News: Faith and Journalism in American Public Discourse* (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 1998), 35. Italics authors own.

⁸¹ Hoover, *Religion in the News*, 35. In this line Hoover is addressing the work of Wade Clark Roof’s about the baby boom generation accessing new, individualistic forms of spirituality. His comment about media connecting with these larger cultural attitudes, I believe, is applicable in this and other situations as well.

The theories above regarding engagement provide a good starting point to examine religiously based group interaction and pluralism within the U.S. However, to apply these theories wholly to religion like WBC would imply that efforts in engagement are not only unfinished, but are far from being done. Certainly difference is engaged with in these interactions, but as noted above, in a very different way which requires cooperation or often even the wish for a basic consensus. In the case of WBC, each side interacts with the other not through open tolerance, cooperative engagement, hospitality, democracy, or compassion; rather, engagement takes place where each group makes space for themselves as separate, different, and oppositional from the other. Returning to Marty's use of strangers and belongers, we are left with two relational sides where each sees the other as the menace which seeks to cause trouble. As Marty states in an example of engagement involving fundamentalists and outsiders, "they are manifestly both strangers to the other."⁸² Because these groups exist in contrast, it is important to study them in that state without encouraging rough edges to be smoothed or the opposing sides to bend. To do so would be to deny the character of these sides which largely focuses on contrasting the other. In chapter 3 I begin examining this interaction through the position of WBC by utilizing their history, Primitive Baptist theology, practices of preaching, as well as their employment of media.

⁸² Marty, 60.

CHAPTER 3

WESTBORO BAPTIST CHURCH: “GOD HATES”

Located in Topeka, Kansas, Westboro Baptist Church has been traveling, protesting, and preaching all over the U.S. for more than two decades. Beginning their public street ministry in 1991, more than 35 years after Pastor Fred Phelps first began the church, WBC has performed pickets nearly 50,000 times: an impressive feat considering their group numbers at around 70 individuals.⁸³ Through a unique style of proclaiming their message of God’s judgment on a sinful people, WBC has become a well-recognized name. Thus far, it seems that no event is inherently off of the church’s radar for picketing potential, appearing at events as varied as pop music concerts, religious services, and funerals. Their presence has initiated a larger response which includes news coverage, occasional violence, and counteractions against the group in physical and internet space, escalating the relationship of group members and nonmembers to a two-sided interaction in which both sides require preparation and plan for retaliation in different ways. In this chapter I examine the side of WBC, leaving the movements of the opposition until chapter 4.

During their protests WBC members promote the belief that “God H8S,”⁸⁴ a view the church draws from specific biblical interpretation as well as through a particular Protestant tradition which focuses on the sinfulness of humanity and God’s ability to control the salvation of people as only God sees fit. Affiliating as a Primitive Baptist church, WBC draws on connections to Calvinist theology and doctrines, stating these beliefs are “almost universally

⁸³ Barrett-Fox, 15.

⁸⁴ See Westboro Baptist Church, "God Does Not H8," Westboro Baptist Church, under “God H8S” tab, <http://www.signmovies.com/> (accessed November 23, 2012).

hated today.”⁸⁵ Due to the wide nature of the events at which they select to appear, the group has made adversaries and challengers among different ages, religions, interest groups, political parties, and more. As such, the group locates itself in strict counter-distinction to the larger population: not only are WBC beliefs and practices opposed by the majority of the U.S., but these doctrines themselves express disapproval of the life choices of many individuals and groups who may be gay, divorced, single-parents, or members of alternative religions.

As described in the previous chapter, the pluralistic religious environment in the United States consistently requires some amount of interaction between religious groups or between these groups and the public. In this chapter and the next I provide an example of agonistic religion and the type of engagement it requires through the case of WBC. I begin with a brief background of the church’s interaction with the public, situating their actions in real events which became important to WBC’s relationship with outsiders. I then discuss three elements of WBC which affirms their status as an agonistic religion: first, I examine details of the group’s theology which underlie the practices and language of the church, isolating the group from every other within the U.S. I continue by discussing the importance of preaching and spreading their message with harsh words when necessary and also connect the church with larger currents of evangelicalism and fundamentalism. I conclude with an examination of the group’s media usage. Through exploring WBC beliefs and practices in more depth the active contrast and conflict which is inherent in relationships of agonistic religion become clear.

⁸⁵Westboro Baptist Church, “About Westboro Baptist Church,” Westboro Baptist Church, <http://www.godhatesfags.com/wbcinfo/aboutwbc.html> (October 9, 2012). According this webpage of WBC, “These doctrines of grace were well summed up by John Calvin in his 5 points of Calvinism: Total Depravity, Unconditional Election, Limited Atonement, Irresistible Grace, and Perseverance of the Saints.”

Countering the Media Message: “No Fags in Heaven”

An examination of some elements of WBC’s history features several key events which have formed the group’s tense relationship with outsiders today. In comparison to the attention they receive in the present, WBC’s past was relatively quiet until the late 1980s. An early record of interaction with civil government and the larger public sphere occurred in 1989 over an area in Topeka known as Gage Park, located not far from the church’s grounds. In a letter to the Topeka mayor, city council, and police chief, Phelps identifies a section of the park as an area where gay couples meet for “indecent conduct.” Asking, “Do you think Gage Park’s running sore could be permanently fixed?,” Phelps requests attention be paid to cleaning up the park from its “unnatural visitors.”⁸⁶ Though a response was received by the group from Topeka’s Mayor recognizing the situation and that solutions were being considered, this reply apparently was unsatisfying: WBC created and weekly performs “The Great Gage Park Decency Drive,” or “protests against public sodomy in Gage Park.” As of mid-October, 2012, their Decency Drive had continued for 1111 weeks.⁸⁷ Such protests, which have become the popular trademark of the church, began in 1991.⁸⁸

WBC’s style of preaching received new amounts of attention in 1998 through their protest at the funeral of Matthew Shepard and again in 2005 after beginning to appear at funerals of U.S. soldiers. Shepard, an openly gay college student in Laramie, WY, was murdered likely due to his homosexuality in 1998. News of the event quickly spread beyond his small community

⁸⁶ Westboro Baptist Church “Letter to Topeka Mayor Butch Felker regarding Fag Activity in Gage Park, plus the Mayor’s Response (7-18-1989),” Westboro Baptist Church, http://www.godhatesfags.com/letters/19890718_letter-to-mayor-gage-park.pdf (accessed October 11, 2012).

⁸⁷ Westboro Baptist Church, “Week 1111 of The Great Gage Park Decency Drive,” Westboro Baptist Church, http://www.godhatesfags.com/fliers/20121005_Week-1111-Soldier-List-jacm.pdf (October 11, 2012).

⁸⁸ Westboro Baptist Church, “About Westboro Baptist Church.”

and become national news throughout the country.⁸⁹ Appearing at Shepard's funeral a few days later, WBC protestors and Phelps held signs which read, "Matt in Hell," and "No Fags in Heaven."⁹⁰ As part of the media frenzy, images of the group were also broadcast nationally with some incorrectly marking this as the group's beginning of picketing in the public sphere seven years late.⁹¹ However, this event did allow the group a previously unknown amount of exposure. One news piece reports that WBC's appearance at Shepard's funeral "brought them unprecedented public scorn."⁹² In an article titled, "Matthew Shepard funeral put the Westboro Baptist Church on the map," author Tom Morton writes that it was this event that led to their "national notoriety" which previously had been largely confined to their hometown.⁹³

The funeral for Shepard created a media event which began the wider creation and separation of these two groups of insiders and outsiders: it offered a starting place for the recognition of this small Kansas group across the country and its distinction from other members of U.S. society due to its need to spread its message of God's hatred at a an event deemed sensitive by the larger population. According to one report, "The outcry [from the WBC protests at Shepard's funeral] even prompted religious leaders known for their denunciations of homosexuality . . . to take great pains to distance themselves from Phelps."⁹⁴ A division here

⁸⁹Scott W. Hoffman, "'Last Night, I Prayed to Matthew': Matthew Shepard, Homosexuality, and Popular Martyrdom in Contemporary America," *Religion and American Culture* 21, no. 1 (2011): 121.

⁹⁰ Hoffman, 133.

⁹¹ Brian M. Britt, "Curses Left and Right: Hate Speech and Biblical Tradition," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78, no.3 (2010): 650.

⁹² Lauerman, "The Man Who Loves to Hate."

⁹³ Tom Morton, "Matthew Shepard Funeral Put Westboro Baptist Church on the Map," *The Billings Gazette*, March 2, 2011, http://billingsgazette.com/news/state-and-regional/wyoming/article_fa10936e-cb5b-5170-afd8-e7eaa0a43aa8.html (accessed May 8, 2012). Morton mistakenly identifies the group's hometown as Wichita, Kansas rather than Topeka. The misreporting of basic data about the WBC is not uncommon.

⁹⁴ Lauerman "The Man Who Loves to Hate".

was beginning to be drawn between WBC and the larger country even among those who would appear to be allies. Attention to WBC has increased since 1998, and the picketing efforts of the group have spread well beyond Kansas to all 50 states and a few countries outside of the U.S.⁹⁵

Beginning in 2005, WBC added a presence at military funerals into their picketing rotations.⁹⁶ In an open letter to lawmakers working on legislation which would contain or limit WBC's funeral protests released the same year, WBC cites the media attention given to these funerals as an inspiration for their move to "counter" the message that was being sent by these funeral spectacles, including idolatry, that "'it's OK to be gay,'" and the spreading of other ideals which "defy God."⁹⁷ According to the church, the death of soldiers acts as divine punishment, proof of God's wrath against the nation which supports these sins. As such, WBC saw a space where they were needed to preach:

when the death of a soldier is turned into a public platform to lionize America, worship the dead, and defy God, we will be there. . . . When hundreds of necromancers stand outside . . . chanting 'U.S.A.!', we're going to chant back, 'I.E.D.!' When they scream 'God Bless the USA,' we're going to reply with 'God's cursed the USA.' When they falsely claim the soldier is in heaven, we're going to speak words of truth that the soldier is in hell. When the soldier's family members walk hundreds of feet, sometimes hundreds of yards, to stand squarely in front of us and cuss us, we're going to remind them that their loved one is going to cuss them eons [*sic*] in hell for lying to them on the important matters of eternity.⁹⁸

In this letter, WBC draws on and references the conflict which has ensued from these practices.

The group knowingly performs rituals and acts which oppose others, often producing anger in

⁹⁵ Westboro Baptist Church, "Locations of Westboro Baptist Church Pickets," Westboro Baptist Church, <http://www.godhatesfags.com/picketlocations.html> (accessed October 11, 2012). Other countries include Canada and Iraq.

⁹⁶ Daniel Brouwer and Aaron Hess, "Making Sense of 'God Hates Fags' and 'Thank God for 9/11': A Thematic Analysis of Milbloggers' Responses to Reverend Fred Phelps and the Westboro Baptist Church," *Western Journal of Communication* 71, no. 1 (2007): 69.

⁹⁷ Westboro Baptist Church, "A Message From Westboro Baptist Church (WBC) to Lawmakers on Legislation Regarding Her Counter-Demonstrations at Funerals of Dead Soldiers," Westboro Baptist Church, under Background, http://www.godhatesfags.com/letters/20051212_legislation-message.pdf (accessed October 11, 2012).

⁹⁸ Westboro Baptist Church, "A Message From Westboro Baptist Church," under Today's Dynamics.

these opponents. Until a time when what are seen as the sins of these funerals cease, “WBC is going to be there with a counter-message.”⁹⁹ Here is a battle for space, both physical and ideological which speaks of the larger relationship between the two sides: outsiders see the groups as entering a private space and disturbing the peace through messages of hatred. WBC, however, sees these nonmembers as utilizing these God-given deaths and events as spreading lies which only do harm. Each actively exists in counteraction. If WBC members were to stop their protests, there would be no need for outsiders to organize or for legislators to make law. If WBC were ever to view America as ceasing to sin against God, the preaching of WBC would be different, if not unnecessary.

Primitive Baptists, Predestination, and Preaching

Protests such as these have made WBC well-known. However, there is a strong theological basis behind these acts which assists in polarizing the two sides. Allowing the group to introduce themselves, the “About Us” section on the main webpage of WBC establishes the group as “an Old School (or, Primitive) Baptist Church. We adhere to the teachings of the Bible, preach against all form of sin (e.g. fornication, adultery [including divorce and remarriage], sodomy), and insist that the sovereignty of God and the doctrines of grace be taught and expounded publically to all men.”¹⁰⁰ In this introduction, the church not only locates itself within a tradition (Old School, Primitive Baptists), provides the text to which they ascribe (the Bible), and references their doctrines, but the group also describes the practices and sins which they are actively *against*, as well as the importance of preaching their doctrines to all people. The

⁹⁹ Westboro Baptist Church, “A Message from Westboro Baptist Church,” under Background.

¹⁰⁰ Westboro Baptist Church, “About Westboro Baptist Church.”

description of their church which WBC produces aligns them as an opposing side to many Americans who have violated the group's readings and interpretations of their holy text.

To delineate WBC's positions and purposes, it is necessary to consider threads of their Primitive Baptist background, which produces their "coldly logical interpretation of hyper-Calvinism,"¹⁰¹ as well as evangelicalism and fundamentalism which I bring in below. I will utilize writings of Primitive Baptists as well as scholars such as Randall Balmer, Susan Harding, Patricia Boone, and Nancy Ammerman to enhance an understanding of this small church, beyond their own sources, including their beliefs on salvation, literal Biblical interpretation, millennialism, and God's sovereignty. I move now to discuss beliefs and motivations of the group, tying their language and stances to wider Primitive Baptist beliefs, in order to more deeply examine the confrontational and agonistic relationship which exists between insiders and outsiders.

While each Primitive Baptist church is autonomous from other congregations and is able to hold different Articles of Faith with variations, including WBC as discussed below, the wider denomination offers several similarities among them. The "Abstract to the Doctrine of Salvation as Advocated by The Primitive Baptists" brings together several widely shared tenets of the denomination based on scriptural interpretations.¹⁰² Primarily, there is a problem of human depravity among all individuals: people in the natural, physical state are sinful and, therefore,

¹⁰¹ Barrett-Fox, 21.

¹⁰² "Abstract to the Doctrine of Salvation as Advocated by The Primitive Baptists," The Primitive Baptist Web Station, <http://www.pb.org/abstract.html> (accessed October 12, 2012). This appears to be a main site of information for the basics of the Primitive Baptist Church, along with www.primitivebaptistonline.org which reprints or links to the information from the first site. As a disclaimer at the beginning of the Abstract states, "This statement is not an approved creed of Primitive Baptists. Though it accurately reflects the beliefs of most Primitive Baptists, some may differ on certain points, and others may offer different explanations or different supporting texts."

spiritually dead.¹⁰³ According to Elder David Montgomery, “Human beings have no spiritual life – sin has killed them.”¹⁰⁴ The result of such sin would be eternal death. However, God has chosen certain individuals, “motivated by the sovereign love of God” rather than the acts of these individuals, to receive spiritual life and eternal salvation. Only these who have been predestined and chosen by God will be saved.¹⁰⁵ As a result of these doctrines, and because all humans are in this state of death, one can do nothing to change this separate from God’s will of election. In other words, a person remains in death until “regeneration” or being “quickened” by the Holy Spirit who “kindles the pilot light in us.” One cannot move oneself from death to life: “Spiritual life MUST precede any spiritual response just as physical life must precede any physical response,”¹⁰⁶ but this event will happen among the elect sometime during their “natural lives.”¹⁰⁷

The goal of Primitive Baptists, therefore, cannot be to convert the sinner: humans have no power to do so even through preaching their gospel. However:

Though the Spirit produces life without the means of the preached word, it is the gospel which brings this light and immortality to life . . . The gospel is power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth . . ., in that it delivers those quickened by the Spirit from the darkness of Satan unto the light of Christ . . ., and leads them to the intelligible discovery of their Savior. . ., and transforms them toward the example of His life . . ., all of which will be brought to perfection in His glorious appearing.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰³ “Abstract to the Doctrine of Salvation.”

¹⁰⁴ David Montgomery, "Doctrine for Dummies - -Part 1," Primitive Baptist Online, http://www.primitivebaptist.org/index.php?option=com_content (accessed on October 13, 2012).

¹⁰⁵ “Abstract to the Doctrine of Salvation.” Contrary to the beliefs of several Christian denominations which support salvation for all through Christ’s death, according to this reading of the scriptures this act was not for every person but only a few people.

¹⁰⁶ David Montgomery, "Doctrine for Dummies - -Part 2," Primitive Baptist Online, http://www.primitivebaptist.org/index.php?option=com_content (accessed October 13, 2012).

¹⁰⁷ “Abstract to the Doctrine of Salvation.”

¹⁰⁸ “Abstract to the Doctrine of Salvation.” I have omitted the Bible references utilized in text to support these interpretations.

As such, “The gospel is inherently evangelical. All who are blessed to have it are commanded to teach it to others also.”¹⁰⁹ Preaching, though a human act, can lead to positive and transformational responses among those who have been “quickenened” or elected by God. Elder Montgomery describes this as a “Gospel Call – Whereunto He called you by our gospel (Uh, yeah, they have to hear the gospel in order to believe. God has to bless it to be preached and bless the listener to hear. . .)”¹¹⁰ Though humans have no power over their own salvation, there are some signs and understandings of who are among the elect. For example, they will be those who believe in Christ and follow Christ’s decrees and directions, as “consequences of election.”¹¹¹ Again according to Elder Montgomery, “Belief is a sign of life...it confirms that you have been born again, it is not the cause of regeneration but the effect of it.”¹¹² Therefore, those who believe and follow Christ’s teachings and commandments are expected to explain and promote the gospel and these doctrines.

This brief discussion and background of basic Primitive Baptist doctrine connects with several parts of WBC’s statements and practices. For example, WBC strongly agrees that a select amount of humans will be chosen for spiritual life: Jesus’ death did not save all humanity but only a few, which by extension for WBC means that God does not, in fact, love the whole world.¹¹³ As noted above, according to Montgomery the presence of belief in God and God’s laws is evidence of life and of being among the elect, a status which the group sees themselves as

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ David Montgomery, "Doctrine for Dummies - -Part 11," Primitive Baptist Online, http://www.primitivbaptist.org/index.php?option=com_content (accessed November 17, 2012).

¹¹¹ “Abstract to the Doctrine of Salvation”

¹¹² Montgomery, “Doctrine for Dummies - -Part 2.”

¹¹³ See Westboro Baptist Church, “‘God Loves Everyone’: The Greatest Lie Ever Told,” Westboro Baptist Church, http://www.godhatesfags.com/reports/20060331_god-loves-everyone-lie.pdf (accessed October 14, 2012).

occupying. Conversely, therefore, those who commit sin actively and willingly, such as homosexuality, adultery, or commit to different religious systems *cannot* be considered among the saved, at least at this point, until God initiates a conversion through grace, and thus removes these sins from their physical lives and practices.¹¹⁴ The purpose of preaching, then, is to share the gospels and message of God which produce life among those who have been chosen, offering transformation to these people. According to WBC their primary goal is preaching.¹¹⁵ Their view of this act echoes Primitive Baptist views above: “Everything begins and ends at the commandment of God and we are altogether content to leave all matters of the heart to Him. This in no wise means [*sic*] that we should leave off preaching, for we are expressly commanded to do so, however it is received.”¹¹⁶ The group finds itself commanded to preach, and so they do.

However, when news outlets report on WBC activities or bloggers write posts about WBC’s latest event it is not wider Primitive Baptists which are criticized or mocked, but WBC specifically. As such, WBC clearly also differs from other Primitive Baptist congregations even while sharing basic doctrine with them which animates their practices. Theologically, a primary difference lies in views about the breadth of predestination. While some Primitive Baptists

¹¹⁴ Westboro Baptist Church, "Westboro Baptist Church FAQ," Westboro Baptist Church, <http://www.godhatesfags.com/faq.html>, 2012 (accessed October 12, 2012). Under “How do you feel about people who confess and realize their sins?” and “Are you a sinner? If so, does this mean you will burn in hell, or are you better than these people?” WBC addresses this issue. At length: “The difference between me and a defiant, practicing homosexual, is grace. When the grace of God operates on the heart of a human, that human desires to obey God and live soberly and righteously. And when that happens, that person is profoundly impressed with his sinful nature, and falls on his knees begging God’s mercy. And God has mercy on that heart. Then, and only then, a true spirit of repentance exists, and forgiveness follows. . . Forgiveness does not come without repentance. Repentance does not come, by definition, without the sin stopping. When the homosexual conduct stops, the person is no longer a homosexual.”

¹¹⁵ Westboro Baptist Church, “Westboro Baptist Church FAQ.”

¹¹⁶ Westboro Baptist Church, “FAQ.”

believe that predestination is only about humanity and eternity,¹¹⁷ for WBC God is not only completely sovereign in matters of human salvation, but God's will also animates all forces and events in the entire world. Similar to the belief which states that sins are manifested signs of death, so too are negative events of the world seen as signs of God's displeasure or judgment for these sins.¹¹⁸ As Barrett-Fox explains, "God is the author of all human action and, because God controls all, everything that happens – death and suffering included – glorifies God. Further, God uses death and suffering to speak to humans, to express his divine anger at individual and collective sin."¹¹⁹ Wars, fires, hurricanes, shootings, murder, car accidents, and death are all examples of God's power put to use for punishment and teaching, as well as evidence of God's hatred of sins and sinners.

This theological distinction is the backdrop for the most visible attribute of WBC compared to other Primitive Baptist groups: a strong emphasis on preaching God's hate for human sinfulness to the larger, present world. While the Primitive Baptist authors above discuss the requirement to preach to all and offer encouragement to those who are believers, WBC write and preach less about the positive aspects of the elect, but more about the downfalls of humanity, the depravity of those who sin. While WBC waives a responsibility for conversion efforts, there is a certain call for repentance and conversion to a sinful world through the emotion of fear, discussed below, which may be left out of other Primitive Baptist efforts of preaching.

¹¹⁷ According to Montgomery, "Predestination is always about *people* not *events*. . . This is a huge point and please do not miss it. God did not predestinate all things that transpire (and the Amen Corner says, 'AMEN!') but He predestinated all whom He foreknew" (David Montgomery, "Doctrine for Dummies - -Part 6," Primitive Baptist Online, http://www.primitivebaptist.org/index.php?option=com_content, 3 Apr. 2009 (accessed October 13, 2012).)

¹¹⁸ Utilizing a blog called, "GodSmacks!" WBC keeps close records of violence, natural disasters, and deaths along with Bible verses which call attention to God's method of response for transgressions. See <http://blogs.sporen.com/godsmacks/>.

¹¹⁹ Barrett-Fox, 19.

God's hatred is utilized as a primary tool during their agonistic preaching style. Connected with the Primitive Baptist idea of sin as a sign of salvation or lack thereof, according to WBC not all acts are accepted or loved by God. Compiling a list of 701 Biblical "Passages Proving God's Hate & Wrath for Most of Mankind,"¹²⁰ the group attempts to provide evidence of the strongest sort, biblical evidence, in order to enunciate their point that God does not love the sinner but hates him or her as much as God hates the sin. According to the group, the statement "God loves everyone" never appears in the Bible. The Bible instead shows many instances in which God punishes or "hates" the acts of individuals and groups.¹²¹ Exhaustively listing cases of God's judgment in the Bible (136 verses) and the earlier mentioned 701 passages which demonstrate God's hatred, WBC identifies the concept of divine universal love with the work of Satan: "In essence 'God loves everyone' means that man can lead a sinful life, violate the commandments of God daily, not fear Him and still go to heaven . . . 'God loves everyone' falsely implies that there is only one attribute to God (love) and that there is no hell and no dichotomy between heaven and hell."¹²² For WBC, this idea essentially contributes to the downfall of the society, America, and the world. By fighting against these perceived sins which God hates, the group is also fighting against Satan and Satan's lies and works.

WBC members themselves have noticed this difference between their group and other churches of the denomination in an open letter to Primitive Baptists released by the church in 2009: "Apparently the Primitive Baptists are quietly writing newsletters to each other while Satan rages everywhere, the sin of this world exceeds that of Sodom and Gomorrah, and the

¹²⁰ See Westboro Baptist Church, "'God Loves Everyone': The Greatest Lie Ever Told," Westboro Baptist Church, http://www.godhatesfags.com/reports/20060331_god-loves-everyone-lie.pdf (accessed October 14, 2012).

¹²¹ Westboro Baptist Church, "'God Loves Everyone'" 2, 5.

¹²² Westboro Baptist Church, "'God Loves Everyone'" 33.

return of the Lord Jesus Christ is imminent. This is no time to be a bench player.”¹²³ No written response has been seen from these churches, though it is said that one is not needed, but a distinction has been made between WBC’s methods and those of other churches who choose not to take part in this type of aggressive ministry, refraining from the battle lines between “insiders” and “outsiders” to God’s commands or “us and “them.”

Preaching with Strong Words and Biblical Views: “You’ll Eat Your Babies”

As discussed in chapter 2, there is always a sort of negotiation or interaction which occurs in public arenas between religious groups which have access to a given space. WBC, while respecting state and national laws, offers little compromise or cooperation. Due to their combination of Primitive Baptist theology which suggests only some are to be saved and the rest are sinful, a biblical requirement to spread a message of God’s vengeance on sin, and an ability to do so widely due to media attention and their own resources, discussed below, WBC actively pushes against a nonmembers group and their practices, who the church views as being among the unsaved or the spiritually dead. In this section, I specifically examine WBC’s methods of spreading their message, or gospel, to nonmembers, and the methods through which this is done, including a focus on God’s hatred and an appeal to current events and issues through the lens of their biblical interpretations which are largely unshared.

If, as noted above, the primary goal of WBC is to preach to the masses, their means of doing this appears to be twofold: one is the actual physical picketing at events and locations across the country; the second is their media presence. However, the two are also clearly intertwined: WBC uses its website to promote their upcoming appearances at events, providing

¹²³ Westboro Baptist Church, "Open Letter to All Primitive Baptists from Westboro Baptist Church," Westboro Baptist Church, http://www.godhatesfags.com/letters/20091210_open-letter-to-primitive-baptist-churches.pdf (accessed Oct 13, 2012).

“press releases” which announce their selected picket sites, why they have been chosen, and locations and times in case anyone should wish to attend for any reason. When performing these protests members of WBC often wear t-shirts and hold signs promoting their websites, spaces which the group uses to clearly delineate their theology and positions. Since the church has no books or physical texts which they themselves produce, their websites are the places where nonmembers are directed to learn more about the church.¹²⁴ Visitors are able to listen to weekly sermons by Phelps, read open letters from the church to various communities, and watch their parody videos. The presence of the group at events then could assist in provoking attention, or marketing, for these sites where their beliefs and doctrine are explicitly laid out; preaching is not only performed in physical space but also in digital space.

In both mediums WBC members firmly stand in their mission to spread their message without concern for public opinion, even citing the number zero as the amount of “nanoseconds of sleep that WBC members lose over your opinions and feeeeeeelllllliiiiings. [*sic*]”¹²⁵ Beginning with their use of strong language, WBC minces no words and makes no attempts to glorify, or even reach a middle point with, many outsiders. Calling soldiers “lazy, incompetent idiots looking for jobs because they’re not qualified for honest work,” abortionists “baby-killers,” and lesbians “female fags,”¹²⁶ WBC and their web sources rely on blunt language to assist in spreading their message.¹²⁷ Photos of WBC protests, especially highlighting the language on their picket signs, are posted and updated regularly on their main page, drawing the viewer’s eye

¹²⁴ According to their site, “If you care about your never-dying soul, you will carefully read every word of this website, along with the entire Bible.” (Westboro Baptist Church, “About Westboro Baptist Church”).

¹²⁵ Westboro Baptist Church, “God Hates Fags.”

¹²⁶ Westboro Baptist Church, “Westboro Baptist Church FAQ.”

¹²⁷ Consider even the titles of the pages they host, including their homepage, GodHatesFags.com, a site against Judaism, JewsKilledJesus.com, and another against the Catholic Church, PriestsRapeBoys.com. See a complete listing on WBC’s homepage, www.godhatesfags.com.

to “large, colorful signs containing Bible words and sentiments, including ‘GOD HATES FAGS, FAGS HATE GOD, AID CURE FAGS, THANK GOD FOR AIDS, FAGS BURN IN HELL. . . etc.’”¹²⁸

WBC claims to be confronting spiritual falsehoods, like shining a light in the dark.¹²⁹

When answering the question, “Why do you preach hate?” the group responds: “What you need to hear is that God hates people, and that your chances of going to heaven are nonexistent, unless you repent. What you need to hear is a little fire and brimstone preaching, like Jesus preached. What you **don’t** need to hear is that you’re okay just the way you are and that God accepts everyone without exception.”¹³⁰ This mission of WBC is clear: spread the news to those who do not believe, who are not among the elect, that sinners are not forgiven their transgressions unless they repent, and heaven does not wait for those who go against the laws of God. According to WBC, “the truth is harsh. We use great plainness of speech, and will not beat around the bush when it comes to someone’s eternal soul. . . On some they had compassion. On others, they preached fear.”¹³¹

There is much to be afraid of, according to WBC, for those outside of God’s salvation. For example, a document which protests policies of abortion, stem cell research, accepting homosexuality, and other acts which “enrage God” proclaims of upcoming dangers:

The destruction is coming . . . If there is a single little soul out there who is in the age range of 16-25 . . . with any slight sincere interest in fleeing the wrath to come – of getting out of the jaws and teeth of your parents, “preachers,” teachers and “leaders[”] – WHO HATE YOU – COME OUT FROM AMONG THEM – BE YE SEPARATE – TOUCH NOT THE UNCLEAN

¹²⁸ Westboro Baptist Church, “About Westboro Baptist Church.”

¹²⁹ Using their own words, “When WBC members appear on the scene, with clear, ringing, Bible truth on their lips and in their hands – it is like a light being switched on in a dirty kitchen: all the cockroaches scatter!” (Westboro Baptist Church, “God Hates the Media)

¹³⁰ Westboro Baptist Church, “FAQ.”

¹³¹ Westboro Baptist Church, “About Westboro Baptist Church.”

THING. PUT IN SIMPLE TERMS: OBEY GOD! Otherwise, you will join your parents in the Stem Cell Feast – of Bitch Burgers, Obama Fries and Slut Shakes! YOU WILL EAT YOUR BABIES!¹³²

Similar language is utilized by WBC to speak of past events. For example on their blog *GodSmacks* WBC thanks God for destruction of those who they view as sinful or predict the downfalls which will come upon these people. For instance, in early November 2012, the group declares the potential dangers to come for those who approved the legality of gay marriage. Less obvious is the entry which claims, “PRAISE GOD! A MONTANA MAN WAS MAULED TO DEATH BY A GRIZZLY BEAR!”¹³³ until the group identifies Montana as a state which requires WBC to stay 1500 feet away from a funeral during their protests, effectively barricading sinners from the message and ministry of the group. Any attempt to go against the WBC or against that which they preach is seen as an affront to God and God’s laws.

Acts of spreading the WBC’s message continue a sharp delineation between two sides of this confrontation. WBC members feel called to preach to the sinful, or those who actively defy their biblical interpretations or try to silence their message. As such, their very position in America is a place of a contrast: elect vs. non-elect, saved vs. un-repentant sinner, and member vs. nonmember: if anyone was among the elect, their place would be preaching the same message as WBC. Through utilizing their sharp and strong language and connecting their theological ideas to the misfortune of others in current events, the group takes part in what they

¹³² Westboro Baptist Church, "ALL THE WAYS THE CITIZENS OF DOOMED AMERICA DO AND FURTHER WILL EAT THEIR CHILDREN A/k/a [sic] THIS NATION IS ABOUT TO DINE ON SOME Bitch Burgers Obama Fries Both These Dripping with Your Bloody Catsup And Slut Shakes All Going to Make up Your Stem Cell Supper!" Westboro Baptist Church, http://www.godhatesfags.com/reports/20090329_you-eat-your-children.html (accessed on October 14, 2012).

¹³³ Westboro Baptist Church, “GodSmacks,” Westboro Baptist Church, entry posted on November 6, 2012, <http://blogs.sprenot.com/godsmacks/page/2/> (accessed on November 10, 2012).

see as the “foolishness of preaching.”¹³⁴ Attempts to actively spread their message through the media are examined below, after a brief discussion of evangelical and fundamentalist attributes which appear in the WBC theology and practices.

Evangelicalism and Fundamentalism: Interpretation, Logic, and Emotion

Before pursuing a third aspect of agonistic religion seen in WBC, the media, first I would like to consider WBC’s relationship with larger categories in the study of religion such as evangelicalism and fundamentalism. Several differences distinguish WBC from being located purely within either of these groups. However, these traditions contain insights and tools which are useful in locating and understanding the conflict and disagreements which fuels this relationship between WBC members and nonmembers, including elements of millennialism, biblical interpretation, as well as emotion and rationality.

These two groups mentioned above have no firmly binding definitions, but rather are largely categories constructed from distinctive traits or features. The two often overlap at certain points affirming the permeability of the boundaries of these classifications. Balmer delineates three main characteristics of American evangelicalism: “the centrality of a ‘born again’ experience . . . the quest for an affective piety . . . and a suspicion of wealth, worldliness, and ecclesiastical pretension.”¹³⁵ A concern for personal conversion, an emotional connection to God, and a distinction from larger worldly things are among the emphases in this type of Christianity. Connections to evangelicalism will also become clearer below in reference to media.

¹³⁴ This phrase is drawn from 1 Corinthians 1:21 (Westboro Baptist Church, “FAQ”).

¹³⁵ Randall Herbert Balmer, *Blessed Assurance: a History of Evangelicalism in America* (Boston: Beacon, 1999), 111.

Fundamentalism remains an even slipperier group to distinguish, with variations of this group being seen all over the world. Susan Harding, a scholar of Protestant Fundamentalists, connects evangelicals and fundamentalists by referring to both as “Bible-believing Christians,”¹³⁶ emphasizing an element which is seen as vastly important: biblical interpretation. However, according to Patricia Boone, “Only fundamentalists make a point of characterizing themselves as Bible believers. To believe the Bible is to take it literally, to regard every word of it as inerrant and fully divine, to acknowledge no authority above it or equal to it. Protestant fundamentalism, in short, portrays itself as neither more nor less than the authority of God.”¹³⁷ If some portions of evangelicalism are said to rest on emotion and feeling, especially for conversion purposes, these sections of fundamentalism rest on logical, clear, and rational understanding of the sacred text above all.¹³⁸

WBC’s use of biblical texts requires a specific, literal interpretation and also acts as a main authority of the church. Like many of these “Bible-believers” since the late 20th century, WBC has been performing what Harding refers to as reading history “backwards.” “Future events,” such as the Rapture or the Millennium, states Harding, “which are fixed and known, determine – if only in the sense of enabling Christians to imagine – the shape, the content, and the significance of present events and actions.”¹³⁹ According to Harding, these Christians see signs of God’s coming judgment littering the newspapers and websites: “Current events and the

¹³⁶ Susan Friend Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2000), xv – xvi.

¹³⁷ Kathleen C. Boone, *The Bible Tells Them So: the Discourse of Protestant Fundamentalism* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1989), 6.

¹³⁸ “I would like to address the widespread misconception that fundamentalists are the village idiots of Christendom – intellectually benighted folk to be pitied or ruthless preachers to be pilloried. Fundamentalist discourse is in fact marked by an unrelenting rationalism, not the irrationalism or emotionalism with which fundamentalism has so often been identified” (Boone, 11).

¹³⁹ Harding, 230. Just as Christian scriptures are seen as fulfilling Hebrew Scriptures, so it is believed that the foretelling of the end times of carry out the effects of what is taking place now.

daily news are not neutral, secular phenomena that exist independently and are subjected to religious interpretations by Christians. They are signs of the times. They are inside Bible-based history.”¹⁴⁰ Events in the world are viewed through this lens of Biblical interpretation which does not separate secular from sacred or metaphor from literal truth. This description matches clearly with WBC’s view of events through which they see God’s justice taking place according to their biblical interpretations.

Though this demonstrates a logical progression from scriptural authority and interpretations, there is still a presence of emotion in the efforts of WBC, especially as seen above in their use of “fear.” Utilizing language which claims that some actions merit God’s hatred, WBC draws on Balmer’s “affective piety,” by claiming loudly that others and outsiders do not have it. According to Nancy Ammerman, the clearest characteristic and dividing factor of evangelicalism and fundamentalism is the desire and need for a separation between the group and outsiders whose “beliefs and lives are suspect . . . Simply getting along, not making waves, accepting the ways of the world, is not characteristic of those Evangelicals who deserve (and claim) the label “fundamentalist.””¹⁴¹ Clearly the church certainly finds no problem with “making waves,” as Ammerman suggests, drawing on both logic and emotion to strengthen the line between “us” and “them.”

Media and the Message: “A glorious paradox!”

As shown above, acts of preaching spread far beyond the picket lines for which WBC has become famous. Utilizing their own websites as tools to spread their message through FAQs,

¹⁴⁰ Harding, 233.

¹⁴¹ Nancy T. Ammerman, “North American Protestant Fundamentalism,” in *Media, Culture, and the Religious Right*, ed. Linda Katz and Julia Lesage (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1998), 55-113. 63.

videos, and blogs, WBC also establishes and begins a relationship with outsiders through media. According to WBC, “If you care about your never-dying soul, you will carefully read every word of this web site, along with the entire Bible.”¹⁴² Not only is biblical text important, but arguably equally so are their particular interpretations of it which are provided and easily accessed on the website of the group. According to David Morgan, larger Protestantism shows a history with embracing media forms and some aspects of material life. According to Morgan’s study on Protestant usage of images during the Second Great Awakening, “The historical relations of religion and culture are too subtle to allow such a simple parsing as mass culture deformed religion or instrumentalized it or that religion capitulated its mission by accommodating itself to the marketplace.”¹⁴³ Rather, there is a more complex relationship between religion and larger material culture. This pattern has continued up to today with those evangelicals who “embrace the tools of culture to combat the taints of culture”¹⁴⁴ through their utilization of media and web sources. The church’s usage of multimedia forms is not distant from other types of evangelical media usage. According to Bivins, evangelicals have “been keen to use dramatic or theatrical techniques, popular writings, mass communication, and other strategies to attract and maintain audiences” since the turn of the 19th century.¹⁴⁵

Navigating this space in which communities take advantage of the media of the world while avoiding becoming “worldly” affects the ways in which groups utilize media. Hoover

¹⁴² Westboro Baptist Church, “About Westboro Baptist Church.”

¹⁴³ David Morgan, *Protestants & Pictures: Religion, Visual Culture and the Age of American Mass Production* (New York: Oxford UP, 1999), 39. Morgan explains “mass culture” as “a sociological system of producing and consuming uniformly manufactured commodities in markets that do not require the producer to know or encounter the consumer in a face-to-face manner” (16).

¹⁴⁴ Bivins 38. According to Appleby, fundamentalists also utilize tools of modernity, including the media, for their own efforts. (See Scott R. Appleby, *Religious Fundamentalisms and Global Conflict* (Ithaca, NY: Foreign Policy Association, 1994), 33).

¹⁴⁵ Bivins, 38.

considers the possibility of religious groups to tap into wider cultural norms and references of the “common culture” through utilizing media to appeal to audiences.¹⁴⁶ WBC follows this model not only by using the technological devices and tools of the larger culture, but also by drawing on references and connections to it. Such references to cultural jokes and occurrences are placed throughout their site. For example, in their list of upcoming pickets, the group alludes to and parodies Today show banter, utilizes internet language such as “WTH?,”¹⁴⁷ and echoes the well-known YouTube video of an attempted assault in Alabama by starting a blog post with “HIDE YOUR WIFE, HIDE YOUR KIDS, HIDE YOUR BILLFOLD.”¹⁴⁸ Literal musical parodies are also present on their main webpage where audio files are available of WBC members singing new lyrics to popular melodies, including “God Will Always Hate You,” “Bohemian Tragedy,” and “666,” which parody songs by Whitney Houston, Queen, and Foster the People respectively.

Beyond utilizing these songs and references, the group also has a whole site devoted to their short movies which promote their teachings. On www.signmovies.com, visitors are able to see members of the WBC clarify popular Christian misconceptions (“God does not hate,” etc.) and Biblical views of the group are drawn out or explained in more detail. These videos are typically seemingly high-quality productions with fast paced music, visual effects in the backgrounds, and quick cutting of shots to keep the videos speedy and moving.¹⁴⁹ It is easy to see how these videos, in format and style, could appeal to younger age groups or even older

¹⁴⁶ Stewart M. Hoover, “Audiences,” in *Keywords in Religion, Media, and Culture*, ed. David Morgan (New York: Routledge, 2008), 41.

¹⁴⁷ Westboro Baptist Church, “Pickets Schedule,” Westboro Baptist Church, <http://www.godhatesfags.com/schedule.html> (accessed May 7, 2012).

¹⁴⁸ Westboro Baptist Church, “GodSmacks,” Westboro Baptist Church, entry posted on December 23, 2010, <http://blogs.sporennot.com/godsmacks/2010/12/23/godsmack-corrupt-congress/> (accessed May 7, 2012).

¹⁴⁹ Westboro Baptist Church, “God H8S,” Westboro Baptist Church. <http://www.signmovies.com/> (accessed May 7, 2012).

adults, even though the content stays deeply rooted in the WBC's messages of God's hate and divine justice.

WBC draws on this "common culture" for perhaps two reasons, one of which appears to be in order to make their beliefs more accessible to the wider audience. However, I believe, in line with a more agonistic framework, that the use of these cultural elements by the WBC is not only an attempt to take their message to the wider audience, but also provides a way for the group to take control of these social monikers for their own gain: just as God is seen as controlling the world, so do God's messengers, WBC, take power away from the larger, worldly culture through mockery and their ability to overrule the power of these wider cultural references. For example, the song "I Will Always Hate You" is particularly about Whitney Houston and God's hatred of *her*; clearly, the group seems to state, she is no role model and she deserves no praise because of her sinful acts which went against God. The WBC also calls televangelists "whores"¹⁵⁰ and references Hollywood as "creating a zeitgeist of proud-sinning."¹⁵¹ In these ways, WBC makes clear that they don't mean to become a part of the common culture, but rather to position itself against it, questioning its validity and authority over the public.

Such attempts at overturning the power of the common culture are blatantly clear on the group's "God Hates the Media" website. WBC states: "What a glorious paradox! The worldwide media does its best to vilify, marginalize and demonize the servants of God at Westboro Baptist Church – and the Lord our God has specifically put the worldwide media in place FOR WBC to preach through! What they mean for evil God means for good. How cool is

¹⁵⁰ Westboro Baptist Church, "Preachers" Westboro Baptist Church, <http://www.godhatesthemedia.com/preachers-index.html> (accessed May 7 2012).

¹⁵¹ Westboro Baptist Church, "Film," Westboro Baptist Church, <http://www.godhatesthemedia.com/film-index.html> (accessed May 7, 2012).

that?”¹⁵² Hoover writes that religious groups, when they appear in the news, must be able to give up some control of their representation, a situation which many religious communities dislike.¹⁵³ WBC, while recognizing their negative portrayal by media sources, welcomes this chance to spread their message through one more channel as long as they can use it to promote their message.

One distinct way WBC performs this is through forgoing physical protests at events and funerals in exchange for media interviews. While this has occurred a handful of times, one such example includes the events which took place after the shooting of five Amish girls in Pennsylvania. While WBC declared they would picket at the funerals, the publicity of their projected appearance led to an offer by *The Mike Gallagher Show* to exchange airtime for the scheduled protest,¹⁵⁴ which the church accepted, allowing members airtime on the radio show. This is not a choice which is taken lightly by the church; deliberation is placed into what types of action will get them more listeners and viewers. According to one report, “Margie Phelps, a lawyer for the church, said that such contracts were made based on how much publicity they would get: ‘It’s how many ears we can reach. That is our job; that is our goal.’”¹⁵⁵ This implies a careful consideration of the media itself by the church: what events will the media be more likely to cover that day? How much airtime might their protest receive? What parts of the protest will be more likely to be shown? WBC realizes that they’ve created a sort of bargaining tool, or

¹⁵² Westboro Baptist Church, “God Hates the Media,” Westboro Baptist Church, www.godhatesthemedia.com (accessed November 10, 2012).

¹⁵³ Stewart Hoover, *Religion in the News*, 151.

¹⁵⁴ Barrett-Fox 19-22.

¹⁵⁵ Patricia J. Williams, “License and Liberty,” *The Nation* March 28, 2011, 9.

what Williams calls “plain old bullying shot through with entertainment value,”¹⁵⁶ which allows them to utilize the media to spread their message and ministry to the greatest amount possible. Appearing on such radio shows, news venues, and weighing in on internet journalist pieces, the group does not settle with this disagreeable coverage, but rather hopes to utilize it for their favor, taking their contrasting message into public media.

In this chapter one side of this example of agonistic religion has been delineated through highlighting the ways in which the group exists through and for confrontation based in their theology, preaching, and in utilizing media. Turning to the nonmember side, similar actions of contrast are found in efforts to push back against the church. In the next chapter I examine this nonmember media coverage in depth, exploring the representations of religion which are disseminated and media’s impact on the larger population. I also draw on the presence of emotion in these portrayals and the ways in which it motivates a counter-movement against the church through disgust, anger, love, and humor.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

CHAPTER 4

EMOTION, DISGUST, AND HUMOR FROM OUTSIDE WBC:
“GOD HATES FAGS” VS. “GOD HATES FIGS”

Through examining WBC’s theology, preaching practices, and utilization of media in order to expand upon both their beliefs and their efforts to spread their message, the church can be seen as aggressively countering the larger public through their strong words based on particular biblical interpretations. After examining one side of this relationship between a religion and its outsiders, it is necessary to turn to the side of the nonmembers who interact back with the group. While several methods are used to confront and contrast with WBC, I examine the use of media in creating shared representations of the group as well as highlighting and encouraging emotional responses which essentially mobilize a larger community. The response and reactions from WBC nonmembers affirms the level of interaction which does not tolerate or cooperate but which engages agonistically with this religious group.

The importance of media to this relationship was affirmed by WBC early in the history of this engagement. As discussed in chapter 3, though WBC was founded in 1955 and began their picketing and protests in the early 1990s, the group did not become widely known until their engagement with media at the national news event of Matthew Shepard’s death and funeral. Similarly, WBC began protesting military funerals in response to the media coverage which these funerals received. Having since become a fixture in media events through their appearance on both the national and local scene, WBC has become a well-known church in the public sphere. Media space, however, also provides one location for nonmembers to offer their own interpretations of WBC, interact with the group, or plan for events such as counter-protests.

To find nonmembers who are sympathetic to WBC beliefs and practices is rare, but the majority of the response to the WBC has been openly hostile. The group has been called “the most reviled family in America,”¹⁵⁷ their protests as ““nonsense”” not to be tolerated,¹⁵⁸ and almost 3,500 people have joined a Facebook group titled, “God Hates the Westboro Baptist Church.”¹⁵⁹ The WBC has pushed a nerve in the larger society which has been viewed as necessitating a response and reaction among those not in the church. In this relationship between WBC and outsiders, nonmembers utilize media in order to push against the WBC in a variety of ways including news articles, blogs, editorials, YouTube videos, and other websites, to name only a few possibilities.

A brief word about the categorization of this group of WBC outsiders: as described above, the general grouping of “nonmembers” or “outsiders” pertains to the larger U.S. population. Because WBC has aligned themselves in contrast, preaching accordingly, to all other religious groups, political systems, and lifestyles which differ from their biblical interpretation, almost all people outside of this group are able to be inherently considered within a counter-group. WBC has found agreement with none and disagreement with many including various political leaders, groups of all types such as the Anti-Defamation League and the KKK, religious communities, pop singers, gay-rights activists, and military personnel. I combine these responses into a larger “nonmember” group while recognizing there are clear differences and

¹⁵⁷ Graeme Wood, "The Family That Protests Together," *TheAtlantic.com*, June 18, 2008, <http://thecurrent.theatlantic.com/archives/2008/06/westboro-baptist-church.php> (accessed April 14, 2012).

¹⁵⁸ As quoted in Emma Riley Sutton, "Oklahoma Reacts to Westboro Baptist Church's Tweets about Woodward Tornado," *Examiner.com*, April 16, 2012, <http://www.examiner.com/article/oklahoma-reacts-to-westboro-baptist-church-s-tweets-about-woodward-tornado> (accessed, May, 05 2012).

¹⁵⁹ "God Hates the Westboro Baptist Church | Facebook," Facebook last entry posted October 18, 2012, <http://www.facebook.com/pages/God-Hates-the-Westboro-Baptist-Church/286140474217> (accessed October 30, 2012).

diversities within this larger outsider community. The similarity which binds them together is in their own distinction from WBC, their practices, and the beliefs which the church espouses.

In these nonmember accounts, reaction to and against WBC highlights emotion, including disgust, anger, love, and humor, in order to inform and motivate other nonmembers as well as to actively engage with the church. In this chapter I primarily examine the place of media in interpreting religion and media's ability to disseminate these interpretations. Utilizing authors such as Mark Silk, Stewart Hoover, and David Morgan, I discuss the way religion is portrayed in media, along with Sean McCloud who focuses on the depiction of "fringe religion" or "cults" in the middle part of the 20th century. Such authors demonstrate that media can provide a means of disseminating theories about what religion should be and what it is not among the public. Following this I examine the nonmember response through the lens of emotion, specifically drawing on Morgan's view of media as enabling the building of community around feeling and William Miller's work on disgust. This chapter shows that media, instilled with emotion, provides fuel and structure to relationships which form agonistic religion.

Depicting and Constructing Religion: Understanding Religion in the Public Sphere

In order to understand how such a diverse group of outsiders can coalesce into a larger group, it is important to consider the role and ability of media to inform and confirm public discourse about religion. As noted in chapter one, David Morgan has written that media is much broader than newscasts and large-scale communication networks. In addition to these institutions we can also consider church websites, videos taken on iPhones and transmitted over the internet, homemade signs, and other artifacts.¹⁶⁰ In an age of blogging, social media, and self-published websites, professional journalists are no longer the only members of society who

¹⁶⁰ Morgan, "Introduction," 12. See note 77 for direct quotation.

are able to engage with and affect larger public opinions. Morgan's view allows for an equal valuing of CNN reports with YouTube videos in understanding media usage among the public sphere. Though the authors discussed in this section largely focus on journalism or news media, due to the wider and more horizontal capabilities of digital media I suggest that news does not necessarily require or entail only professional journalism. Accounts of nonmembers of all different occupations are able to draw on and affect the wider public.

The diversity of these forms of media speaks to a multiplicity of viewpoints which are able to be shared. However, many would argue that at base there are several similarities among the U.S. public which speak to a broad consensus on particular matters. According to Wuthnow, "deep narratives that shape our sense of national purpose and identity are so firmly inscribed in our culture that we usually accept them without thinking much about them."¹⁶¹ For Wuthnow, these include cultural myths and stories which focus on the value of individualism, immigration, and, of course, pluralism as discussed in chapter 2. While not exclusively the property of media to enforce and enhance, these narratives can be seen and spread through news, blogs, and web sites just as easily as through education facilities or in the workplace.

This ability of media to spread such cultural narratives is highlighted in Mark Silk's work which states that larger news media holds a "quasi-religious role as purveyor of values and supplier of contemporary rituals" as media acts to explain events, provide information about the broader world, and tell tales of morality.¹⁶² Similar to Wuthnow's consideration of cultural narratives, Silk posits that the American news media has several underlying "topoi," or "moral

¹⁶¹ Wuthnow, 1.

¹⁶² Mark Silk, *Unsecular Media: Making News of Religion in America* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1995), 10.

formulas,”¹⁶³ which focus on certain values of religious origin which are seen in larger American life and culture.¹⁶⁴ Among the seven categories focused on by Silk are good works, tolerance, hypocrisy, and false prophecy. According to American news, Silk notes, religion is inherently a “good thing,” and the “proper business of religion is to promote good works.”¹⁶⁵ Similarly, the media pay particular attention to leaders who themselves defy this basic premise and perform “an abuse of the faith of their followers and, by extension, of all believers,” (hypocrisy) or act as “an affront to the social order”¹⁶⁶ (false prophecy).

As an example of this, I would like to consider Silk’s topos of “good works” in the context of WBC coverage, as several queries are raised and comments made regarding WBC’s status as a religion which echo a concern about the “goodness” of the practices and speech which they utilize. For example, according to one nonmember quoted in a news article, “I really hate the fact that these people are representing Christians because I consider myself a Christian. All they spew is hate and that’s not what Christianity is about.”¹⁶⁷ Similarly, an author from a piece in a conservative magazine questioning the “constitutional right to stand at least on the outskirts of a military funeral and insult the dead soldier, and the honor and worth of the country for which he died,” refers to the group as “(so called) Baptists,” refusing to give WBC this status as a legitimate religion or church and therefore refers to them as “Westborians.”¹⁶⁸ Both of these

¹⁶³ Silk, xii.

¹⁶⁴ Silk, 11.

¹⁶⁵ Silk, 57, 58.

¹⁶⁶ Silk, 88, 91.

¹⁶⁷ As quoted in Gabrielle Biondo, “Westboro Baptist Church Protests Court’s Manchester Funeral Protest Ruling,” *Ballwin-EllisvillePatch*, October 22, 2012, <http://ballwin-ellisville.patch.com/articles/westboro-baptist-church-protests-court-s-manchester-funeral-protest-ruling-167b406b> (accessed October 26, 2012).

¹⁶⁸ William Murchison, “Freedom of Speech and the American Decline,” *The American Spectator*, May 2011, 38.

follow Silk's topos of viewing the practices of the church as good or bad, reflecting on the decision to give status to this group as a religion.

Beyond these pieces from journalists, one is able to see a continuation of this theme and others of Silk's among additional forms of media more tacitly. For example, in an informational web page of the Anti-Defamation League about WBC nowhere do the terms "religion," "religious group" or "church" appear in reference to the group. Rather, they are categorized as a "homophobic, anti-Semitic hate group," a "not-for-profit organization," or simply "the group."¹⁶⁹ Perhaps where this dichotomy of good and bad is seen most explicitly is on a page of the Huffington Post titled "Good News," where a story is posted about a nine year old boy, Joseph Miles Stages, who held his own counter-protest to WBC by holding a sign which reads, "GOD HATES NO ONE."¹⁷⁰ Individual bloggers and editorials have also denied WBC's religious validity through referring to Phelps' particular use of the Bible as an "insane interpretation of biblical doctrine,"¹⁷¹ effectively dubbing him as a false prophet according to Silk's typology. According to Silk, "topoi will mirror public attitudes, if only because it is in the nature of the media to need to be comprehensible to the undifferentiated audience it seeks – that is, morally comprehensible, for the media trade largely in tales of good and evil."¹⁷² Such stories attempt to tap in to larger public understanding, at least in these cases of moral and immoral actions.

¹⁶⁹ Anti-Defamation League, "Westboro Baptist Church," Anti-Defamation League, http://www.adl.org/learn/ext_us/WBC/default.asp?LEARN_Cat=Extremism&LEARN_SubCat=Extremism_in_America&xpicked=3&item=WBC (accessed October 28, 2012). The term "church" is never used to describe the group, but it is included when stating the entire name of the group (*Westboro Baptist Church*).

¹⁷⁰ Dominique Mosbergen, "Nine-Year-Old Josef Miles Stages Counter-Protest Against Westboro Baptist Church Protesters," *The Huffington Post*, May 15, 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/05/15/westboro-baptist-church_n_1518901.html?utm_hp_ref=westboro-baptist-church (accessed October 28, 2012).

¹⁷¹ Mary Ready, "The Terrorism of Westboro Baptist Church."

¹⁷² Silk, 51-53. Quote on page 53.

In his text, *Religion in the News*, Stewart Hoover also discusses the ability of the media to shape and reflect larger public attitudes. Much like Wuthnow's narratives and Silk's topoi, Hoover states, "the way the media handle religion is deeply embedded in a set of historical, cultural, and political perceptions about religion's natural, proper, or desirable place in democratic public life."¹⁷³ Rather than refer to the media as a single unit as Silk does, Hoover delineates three entities which come together to form the coverage of religion in news: the journalists, "the reality of religious practice," and larger public discourse which holds a particular understanding about both religion and media themselves.¹⁷⁴ Creating a sort of ideological triangle where each of these three parts is dependent on the others in a symbiotic relationship, he writes: "Journalistic practice can be seen as a kind of broad generalism that has as its goal the creation of narratives that speak to heterogeneous audiences. . . . Journalism does not alone create these perceptions and discourses. Instead it speaks *to* and *for* them."¹⁷⁵ Journalists are expected to make stories understandable to the broader public. In order to do this they must be able to adequately tap into attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions of this larger group while also feeding into this discourse. Considering Morgan's wider understanding of media, Hoover's insights about the relationship between journalism and public opinion could arguably be extended to media in general. Those who create and consume media fall into similar patterns of acting according to a wider consensus while also taking part in the process of creating it.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷³ Hoover, *Religion in the News*, 11.

¹⁷⁴ Hoover, *Religion in the News*, 10 – 11. Hoover draws on Ruel Tyson in these three categories working together.

¹⁷⁵ Hoover, *Religion in the News*, 8-10.

¹⁷⁶ Hoover again draws on Ruel Tyson's view of the role of journalism as both "consensus made" and "consensus making" (Hoover, *Religion in the News*, 9).

The authors above emphasize the ability of media to portray a broader form of “religion” to the larger national community by following and contributing to public narratives and prototypes about how this category should be defined and described. For this case of examining the media relationship with the WBC it is also useful to examine one other theory which specifically refers to “fringe religion,” or religion outside of the mainstream. Sean McCloud’s *Making the American Religious Fringe* examines the portrayal of this type of religion from the middle to late twentieth century among magazine journalists. These “fringe” movements, according to McCloud, have gone through stages of representation over a period of about fifty years from “disdained exotics to dangerous deviants.”¹⁷⁷ According to McCloud, “the American religious fringe is a constructed and contested category that is constantly in flux, reflecting certain interests, concerns, and power positions.”¹⁷⁸ Though McCloud distances himself from Silk in positing no universal scheme of media, he does view some agendas at work in defining these groups. These groupings of religion are not stagnant and permanent but come into being through time and through engagement with media itself.

Drawing on Stuart Hall and Pierre Bourdieu, McCloud states that larger media attitudes have affected audiences to hold certain negative connotations about specific groups. According to McCloud, “the media undoubtedly influence audience perceptions...Although I would never claim that representations by the mass media caused these unfavorable public responses, they

¹⁷⁷ Sean McCloud, *Making the American Religious Fringe: Exotics, Subversives, and Journalists, 1955-1993* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2004), 98. Drawing on examples like smaller, short-lived groups in California, widespread fear of the Nation of Islam and belief in brainwashing by groups such as the Hare Krishnas, McCloud charts the variation in understanding and labeling of those groups on the borders of American religion rather than in the center.

¹⁷⁸ McCloud, 5.

certainly contributed by promoting negative, un-nuanced images of the groups in question.”¹⁷⁹ McCloud’s examination of the portrayal of the Nation of Islam by magazines during the Cold War period provides several similarities to the case of WBC. Rarely positive, journalists and authors who covered the groups also asked questions of religious authenticity: could this group be a religion even though it denied the equality of all people? Was it not rather a fraudulent organization out to get people’s money?¹⁸⁰ Through articles and news which elaborated on these types of questions such interpretations were able to gain more credence among audiences and readers.

Using McCloud’s logic, stories which highlight queries about their religious identity, such as those seen above, provide at least the beginning of a framework and lens through which audiences will understand and consider the WBC. Added to these questions about religion, media and outsiders also focus on the WBC’s “intrusion” into funeral and public space as will be discussed below, allowing negative connotations about the group to be spread widely. In the next section I examine nonmember portrayals of WBC using reason and emotion. Through focusing on emotions in the latter part of this chapter, I will examine how this agonistic relationship continues by promoting a cyclical conflict, fueling this style of agonistic religion through the media response.

Rationality and Emotion in WBC Coverage

While media sources, whether blogs, news stories, or social networks, often focus on the exceptional, the scandalous, and the shocking, I also include here a consideration of sources

¹⁷⁹ McCloud, 19. Among the examples McCloud draws are the linking of “cults” and “brainwashing” with these fringe groups

¹⁸⁰ See McCloud, chapter 2.

which attempt to rationally explain WBC. Such examples are often able to at least identify the group's picketing as a religious practice and overview the belief that God is punishing those who transgress God's laws, especially homosexuality. For example, "Westboro Baptist Church, an evangelical group in based in [sic] Topeka, Kan., with about 70 members, maintains that America's acceptance of homosexuals is inviting God's wrath."¹⁸¹ These pieces are often created by larger national sources. While maintaining a less biased account than those which I shall discuss below in the context of emotion, these media accounts also largely refrain from an overtly positive framing or categorization, often also performing a critique of WBC even while explaining it to a larger population.

In order to demonstrate these attempts at education mingled with tacit critique I draw on two examples from sources which claim some amount of familiarity with the church. Primarily, I consider a live question and answer session published by the *Washington Post* in 2011 with photojournalist Anthony Karen who "has gone where not many people have gone before: inside the church, homes, protests, and minds of the Westboro Baptist Church members."¹⁸² Answering questions on the church's motivations, including paraphrasing their beliefs on predestination and innate sinfulness, church finances, and the occasional more random query ("Do these people . . . inter-marry within the family?"), Karen provides an apparently honest view of his experience which sheds some light on the church while maintaining some distance from it.¹⁸³ For example, when asked: "Did being in their *compound* make you want to grab a brillo pad and scrub down

¹⁸¹ Patrik Jonsson, "What Recourse Now to Westboro Baptist Church's Rude Protests," *Christian Science Monitor*, March 3, 2011, <http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Justice/2011/0303/What-recourse-now-to-Westboro-Baptist-Church-s-rude-protests>. The act of portraying and explaining WBC in approximately one or two sentences is common (accessed October 30, 2012).

¹⁸² "A Rare Look Into Westboro Baptist Church," *Washington Post*, March 3, 2011, <http://live.washingtonpost.com/westboro-baptist-church.html> (accessed October 26, 2012).

¹⁸³ "A Rare Look Into Westboro Baptist Church."

with bleach? You got some artistically great shots but they still made me sick,” Karen simply answers, “They kept a tidy home. : -),” neither willing to defend or attack the church.

Another example, “A Peek Inside The Westboro Baptist Church,” provides an attempt at explaining the group while also misinterpreting some data. This NPR piece correctly identifies a number of WBC members as lawyers and notes that their funding comes from their “well-respected” legal practice in Topeka. However, the author also portrays Shirley Phelps-Roper, daughter of Fred Phelps and common spokesperson of the church, as insinuating that the group “want[s] people to reject God and be condemned to hell.”¹⁸⁴ The author concludes with a quiet lament that WBC’s ability to win their legal cases “is likely to continue, now that the Supreme Court has decided that Westboro’s right to free speech trumps the right of families to bury their loved ones undisturbed,”¹⁸⁵ leaving the reader with a feeling that the group is only going to be profiting from their ability to disturb others.

Hoover writes about the problems which can occur for journalists portraying religion to the larger community: is it enough to simply cover the discussion and differences between communities, or should journalists actively question these groups? According to Hoover, “there *is* a middle ground . . . The very nature of conventional journalism at its best *serves* public discourse because it neither advocates nor inflames, it *clarifies*. . . it attempts to make clear to an idealized general audience the essence of religious issues, trends, and conflicts in a general

¹⁸⁴ Barbara Bradley Hagerty, “A Peek Inside The Westboro Baptist Church,” *NPR*, March 2, 2011, <http://www.npr.org/2011/03/02/134198937/a-peek-inside-the-westboro-baptist-church> (accessed October 26, 2012). This seems to be a misunderstanding of the actual quote from Phelps-Roper in the next sentence which states, “‘Our job is laid out,’ she says, in comments sprinkled with biblical references. ‘We are supposed to bind their eyes, stop up their ears and harden their hearts so that they cannot see, hear or understand, and be converted and receive salvation.’” While the use of this verse is admittedly confusing without including the theology behind it, it seems that the last section of the quotation directly contradicts the above categorization of the group wanting people to go to hell.

¹⁸⁵ Hagerty, “A Peek Inside The Westboro Baptist Church”

language that is accessible to them.”¹⁸⁶ Note the titles of the two articles above, in which they promise a “rare look” and a “peek inside” WBC, seemingly offering the chance for an insider perspective to a group which is seen as outside of public knowledge. Arguably, some of the journalists and writers are attempting to bridge this gap by doing more than simply covering the group, but actively trying to explain them to other outsiders by discussing their occupations and home life. However, there seems to remain a small amount of hostility in even this reporting as seen in the NPR article above or when Karen writes: “I tried to have a rational give and take discussion with one of the girls in the group – she didn’t know how to have a conversation without preaching at me. When I tried to talk, she didn’t have time to hear my opinion, so she walked away.”¹⁸⁷ These accounts seem to state that even when dealt with rationally and calmly some groups just prefer to shout rather than converse.

Even in articles such as these one can see a tacit focus on emotion, hinting at its priority over reason through media coverage of WBC. As noted above, WBC’s use of biblical interpretation and Calvinist theology in actuality speaks just as much to their use of a particular rationality as their use of strong language appeals to emotion. In his study of fringe religion depictions, McCloud highlights the place of emotion as being constant through time; fringe religion itself was identified with “high levels of religious zeal, dogma, and emotion.” By marking groups as outside of traditional or mainstream religion, media sources were able to make use of a dichotomy which ran on an understanding of emotion: “Labeling certain religious practices and beliefs marginal, writers and editors in the largest news and general-interest magazines broached long-stranding debates in American religious history about emotional versus rational religion, exotic versus familiar spirituality, and normal versus abnormal levels of

¹⁸⁶ Hoover, *Religion in the News*, 217. Italics author’s own.

¹⁸⁷ “A Rare Look Into The Westboro Baptist Church”

piety.”¹⁸⁸ Those religious groups located outside of larger and more well-known traditions are therefore seen inherently as more emotional, strange, and as holding strong levels of religious attachment. As such, these groups can then be viewed with distrust in the American religious landscape as dangerous, a contamination, or possibly humorous.

Depicting an Emotional Nonmember Response: “To me, what they did was just as bad, if not worse, than if they had taken a gun and shot me”

These dichotomies and portrayals which McCloud draws on from coverage since the mid-20th century seem to remain true, and I would posit they can be seen not only in how a religion itself is portrayed, but also the response to that religion. If a group itself is emotional, it seems to make sense that an equally emotional response is acceptable: because of these appeals to feelings – through language of hate, insults to soldiers and religious groups, and commenting negatively on issues considered widely to be personal as going against God – a common response to the group is also based in emotion. To once again draw on David Morgan, media assist in “drawing and reinforcing definitive boundaries such as inside and outside, us and them, center and periphery...These structures confer fundamental aspects of social identity by mapping out temporal, spatial, and imagined terrains.”¹⁸⁹ Media assist in drawing the borders between one group and another, and, as Morgan goes on to explain, allow individuals to connect to “collective imaginaries, the shared cultural resources of symbols, images, sounds, songs, ideas, and personae whose knowledge and symbolic use invest individuals in *broad patterns of feeling that constitute their participation in communities of different kinds.*”¹⁹⁰ Above I utilized Silk,

¹⁸⁸ McCloud, 4.

¹⁸⁹ Morgan, “Introduction,” 9-10.

¹⁹⁰ Morgan, “Introduction,” 10. Italics my own.

Hoover, and McCloud to demonstrate how media can make perceptions and portrayals of religion permeate the larger culture. Here I wish to examine the ways media can inform and create communities based on these “patterns of feeling” which Morgan identifies, especially by examining disgust, anger, love, and humor.

Several outsiders of WBC have criticized the media for their extensive coverage of the church. According to a study from The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, “Religion in the News: Islam and Politics Dominate Religion Coverage in 2011,” WBC protest coverage made up 4.4% of “mainstream religion coverage,” giving them status as the 4th largest religious topic covered that year.¹⁹¹ This was largely due to their appearance in the U.S. Supreme Court: WBC had been sued for emotional distress by Al Snyder, the father of a deceased U.S. serviceman whose funeral they had picketed. While lower courts initially found in favor of Snyder, the decision was overturned and eventually made its way to the Supreme Court which ruled 8-1 in favor of WBC. The study continues, “During the week of the Supreme Court ruling, the church accounted for 78.5% of all religion coverage. The ruling was closely followed by the public with 24% of Americans saying they were following it closely.”¹⁹² Media sources are not broadcasting to empty audiences; rather, information on WBC is being consumed by significant percentages of the population even though many of these articles, videos, and websites critically portray the group.

While media creators and consumers intertwine to focus on the scandalous and the contemptible, William Miller claims that this is a natural tendency regarding all things which

¹⁹¹ PEJ/Pew Forum, *Religion in the News: Islam and Politics Dominate Religion Coverage in 2011* (Washington D.C.: Pew Forum for Religion & Public Life, 2012), <http://www.pewforum.org/uploadedFiles/Topics/Issues/Government/Religionandthenews2011.pdf> (accessed October 28, 2012), 4.

¹⁹² PEJ/Pew Forum, 8.

incite the emotion of disgust. A complicated emotion, “even as the disgusting repels, it rarely does so without also capturing our attention. It imposes itself upon us. We find it hard not to sneak a second look or, less voluntarily, we find our eyes doing ‘double-takes’ at the very things that disgust us.”¹⁹³ Linking disgust and contempt, Williams states that these emotions can expand beyond senses like smell, taste, touch and sight into areas of moral and social revulsion.¹⁹⁴ It is not difficult to see a level of disgust which permeates this discourse by nonmembers whether because of issues about religion, legal activities, or especially WBC protests and pickets, discussed below.

I would like to draw on a specific part of disgust which, according to Miller, creates a reaction based on a fear of contamination. That which disgusts is often seen as below or inferior, and when these substances, or people, come near it is cause for concern for the purity of the other: “when something disgusts us . . . we feel tainted, burdened by the belief that anything that comes into contact with the disgusting thing also acquires the capacity to disgust as a consequence of that contact. We thus hasten to purify ourselves.”¹⁹⁵ I will consider this theory of disgust and contamination in reference to media sources which describe WBC and nonmembers, especially those which discuss the group’s protests and call for a counter-protest in order to defeat the group, protecting funeral space and freedom of speech from such contamination.

Even before addressing these counter-protests, it is possible to understand media’s place in addressing WBC contamination to larger society through questioning the group’s validity and morality. For example, critiques are brought up regularly about WBC legal practices: in an article about WBC protesting the funeral of Andy Griffith, the author writes WBC “has made

¹⁹³ William Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, 1997), x.

¹⁹⁴ Miller, 2.

¹⁹⁵ Miller, 12.

their living picketing funerals and suing for the right to do so. The family protests funerals of both the famous and unknown. . . The Westboro Baptist Church will picket almost anywhere for any reason.”¹⁹⁶ In an article in *Time*, discussed below, the author links group practices to “psychological terrorism.”¹⁹⁷ Such representations act to criticize the groups as illogical, irreverent, greedy, and dangerous, tacitly arguing for a need for suppressing and controlling the group’s presence from the larger society.

Calls to counter-protest are more explicit in expressing disgust and the need to contain the church from contaminating certain spaces. WBC’s choice to picket military funerals receives a considerable amount of space in news and blogs. For many nonmembers these spaces are seen as almost national places of mourning where counterinterviews have no place. Authors Brouwer and Hess have put together an analysis of responses from “milblogs,” or blogs written by individuals sympathetic to military personnel and objectives, to WBC.¹⁹⁸ According to this overview, largely any manipulation or damage of national myths and icons held by these groups produces offense. The authors write, “In describing the scene of a funeral, bloggers use language that highlights the sacredness of the ritual and its national symbolic power. . . The unthinkable act of protesting during a ceremony for the dead becomes even more pronounced at military funerals where sentiments of nationalistic pride and sacrifice resound.”¹⁹⁹ Bloggers lament the disrespect for soldiers and their families, often claiming it is they who provided this freedom of speech which

¹⁹⁶ Emma R. Sutton, “Westboro Baptist Church Threatening to Picket Funeral of Andy Griffith,” *Examiner.com*, July 3, 2012, <http://www.examiner.com/article/westboro-baptist-church-threatening-to-picket-funeral-of-andy-griffith> (accessed November 13, 2012).

¹⁹⁷ Gregory, 30 – 34.

¹⁹⁸ Brouwer and Hess have identified multiple themes present in these works, including critiquing their claims to be Christian, hypothesizing about WBC politics, and planning for potential action at counter-protests. These themes seem to be consistent with views of the larger population, though they are perhaps voiced slightly differently at times reflecting bloggers’ connection to the military.

¹⁹⁹ Brouwer and Hess, 79-80.

WBC now exploit to derogate the dead.²⁰⁰ The use of blogs allows for calls for counter-protests which include mockery and even threats of violence rather than appeals for discussion, furthering discourse which locates these groups in opposition to WBC as well as emotional responses.²⁰¹

Attempts to contain WBC in order to protect families and funeral space are also common among the larger public and regarding events removed from military issues. Another blog, “Wall of Peace Against Westboro Baptist Church,” includes a tagline of “Where bigotry and hate can be met respectfully with dignity and peace,” insinuating a containment or obstruction of WBC preaching. After utilizing the Southern Poverty Law Center’s description of WBC as “obnoxious,” a “rabid hate group,” and “a family-based cult,” the author applauds the efforts of a group of truckers and bikers who “pinned down the hate cult until the memorial was over. . . . In my mind anyone who challenges the hate of WBC qualifies as a patriot.”²⁰² According to a statement released by counter-protestors at an event in June of 2012 and recorded in a news article about the funeral of a shooting victim in Seattle, “I and others plan to gather with peaceful loving intent in a manner that will *shield those attending services from the hateful and inflammatory message of WBC*. This is a somber, peaceful event that seeks to create *safe and respectful space for those attending the funeral*.”²⁰³ During these times and in these spaces, WBC presence is seen as a breach in acceptable conduct. It must be the role of others to contain

²⁰⁰ Brouwer and Hess, 81. Italics my own.

²⁰¹ Brouwer and Hess, 81- 82. “Because the justice system cannot always deliver justice, some bloggers express fantasies of *extra-legal justice*. Expressions of imagined violence, even murder, committed against Phelps are frequent and varied” (Brouwer and Hess, 82).

²⁰² “WBC Met By 300 Patriotic Bikers in Joplin,” Wall of Peace Against Westboro Baptist Church, entry posted May 31, 2011, <http://wallofpeace.blogspot.com/2011/05/wbc-met-by300-patriotic-bikers-in.html> (accessed November 13, 2012).

²⁰³ As quoted in Venice Buhain, “Westboro Baptist Church to Target Bellevue Victim’s Funeral, *Kirkland Patch*, June 6, 2012, <http://kirkland.patch.com/articles/westboro-baptist-church-to-target-bellevue-victim-s-funeral-50de46bc> (accessed October 26, 2012). Italics my own.

the group or challenge them, mirroring Miller's theory of attempts to "purify" after coming into contact with that which disgusts. I return to this idea below regarding emotions of love and hate.

Accounts of funerals by friends and families of the deceased also speak to the emotion of disgust. In an interview with Al Snyder, whose son Matthew's funeral spurred the lawsuit which eventually was decided by the Supreme Court, blatant disdain for WBC and their actions is seen. The quote at the beginning of this section is from Al Snyder himself in an interview with *Time* magazine. According to Snyder, "'To me, what they did was just as bad, if not worse, than if they had taken a gun and shot me.'"²⁰⁴ Snyder, having missed WBC's protest at Matthew's funeral but later viewed the group's activities on news reports, expands on his family's reaction to WBC's presence: "'I have to think of the shock that was on my daughter's face when she saw [WBC's] signs. I have to see the hurt in my dad's eyes when his grandson gets killed and then he has to go through this.'"²⁰⁵ Snyder's use of bodily imagery coincides with Williams about the use of disgust to make words ring with more truth: "disgust . . . has the look of veracity about it. It is low and without pretense. We thus feel it is trustworthy even though we know it draws things into its domain that should give us pause. The disgust idiom *puts our body behind our words*, pledges it as security to make our words something more than *mere words*."²⁰⁶ It is possible that the audience can relate better to Snyder, or at least identify that his plea is "heartfelt" because of his identification of the embodied reaction his family exhibited to the presence of WBC at his son's funeral.

However, some scholars have suggested a possibility of media enabling physical responses in audiences, including Birgit Meyer and Jojada Verrips in their examination of

²⁰⁴ As quoted in Gregory, 30-34.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ Miller, 181. First emphasis my own, second emphasis author's own.

aesthetics. The authors are quick to note that it is not only the beautiful which one engages through media, but also the offensive and that which produces disgust. Discussing this distinctly in religious imagery, Meyer and Verrips state, “people may be hurt – literally – by exactly those images that violate their embodied religious sensibilities and accepted modes of representation.”²⁰⁷ This can be applied to Snyder’s language about his feelings and those around him from seeing the WBC at his son’s funeral, even through news reports. This type of study on sensory engagement with media can also be applied to the embodied and emotional reaction from nonmembers about the harsh terminology used by the group as well as their appearance at events which are deemed sensitive, especially funeral spaces.

Returning to Morgan’s remark about communities being delineated by feeling and combining this with Miller’s views on responses to disgust, I’d like to briefly examine depictions of emotions like anger and love among nonmembers in the media. Most counter-protests remain free from physical violence, though it is not uncommon.²⁰⁸ In October of 2012 a counter-protestor tackled a WBC member during a picket of a military servicewoman’s funeral. Several videos were posted online by nonmembers, cheering for the man who attacked a churchperson. Chants of “U.S.A.! U.S.A.!” can be heard in the background while the fight was broken up by law enforcement. In the background of one of the videos, a voice is heard from the nonmember

²⁰⁷ Meyer, Birgit, and Jojada Verrips, "Aesthetics," in *Key Words in Religion, Media and Culture*, ed. David Morgan (New York: Routledge, 2008), 29.

²⁰⁸ Physical violence, however, is certainly not unheard of. While WBC claims that their protests have always been non-violent, many nonmembers have performed acts including “pouring coffee on them and spitting at them” (Jonsson “What Recourse Now?”) on a tamer side. More extremely, Barrett-Fox relates a story in her article of a WBC member opening an anonymous letter filled with white powder which was later found to be not harmful to the member (Barrett-Fox 28-29). One article credits the lack of appearance of WBC at a scheduled event to a WBC getting beaten at a local gas station: “This is a template for how to handle the Westboro people. If lawsuits don’t work, other means will. Whatever it takes to keep them from harassing bereaved military on the day their fallen loved ones are laid to rest” (MacAoidh, "Westboro Baptist Church Goes To Mississippi – And Loses," *The Hayride: News and Commentary on Louisiana and National Politics*, April 19, 2011, <http://thehayride.com/2011/04/westboro-baptist-church-goes-to-mississippi-and-loses/>(accessed October 29, 2012).)

side asking about the identity of the attacker, “Who was that? Was that one of us?” designating two specific sides in opposition to each other through this display of anger.²⁰⁹

Also reported on are groups which speak of contrasting themselves to WBC through communities which focus on love and affinity. In one example a local news site tells of a group who “decided to spread the message of love and acceptance of diversity” after hearing about a scheduled protest at a high school. According to the school’s principal “I felt really well about our community keeping most of the focus forward on what unites us instead of on people’s hate.”²¹⁰ Likewise in another counter-protest during a military funeral, an article author writes inspirationally of the coming together of a community to counter WBC: “attendees said the threat of the church’s protest may have infused the town with a stronger sense of unity. ‘If the Westboro Baptist Church is what it is that brings us together, then that’s what it is.’”²¹¹ These articles, as opposed to the videos of the fight, disseminate examples of a reaction which may be seen as more “positive,” spreading a message that confronting WBC does not necessarily mean fighting back with as much vehemence as the group itself delivers.

In these examples that attempt to stop the message of WBC through violence or love there is a line being drawn sharply between the two sides which acts to join the nonmembers together against WBC and its message. As Morgan noted in the beginning of this section, media has an ability to form community through emotion, and through the dissemination of these accounts to wider audiences these communities can expand, either through love or hate,

²⁰⁹ Andy Towle, “Westboro Baptist Church Member Tackled at Military Funeral For Gay Staff Sergeant Donna Johnson: Video,” Towleroad, <http://www.towleroad.com/2012/10/wbcjohnson.html> (accessed October 26, 2012). This voice can be heard in the first video on the page, “IMG 3674.”

²¹⁰ As quoted in Krotzer, “Students Unite in Reaction to Westboro Protest.”

²¹¹ As quoted in Caroline Tan, “Hundreds Gather in Yucaipa to Support Fallen Soldier, Protest Extremist Church,” *NBC Southern California*, June 28, 2012, <http://www.nbclosangeles.com/news/local/nathan-davis-yucaipa-picket-westboro-baptist-church-160064985.html> (accessed October 29, 2012).

increasing the nonmember group. To draw on Miller one more time, “Disgust and indignation unite the world of impartial spectators into a moral community, as cosharers of the same sentiments, as guardians of prosperity and purity.”²¹² In order to protect space, whether it is funerals or educational facilities, individuals outside the church become part of larger groups which attempts to counter the presence of this group. Media accounts assist in the creation of these communities, whether through numerous videos being uploaded to demonstrate one man stopping a protest through violence or through stories of unity. Relatively few people in the entire outsider group may have been able to attend these events or hear the “U.S.A.!” chants, but these media sources assist in spreading these accounts of emotion to all nonmembers in order to promote the potential purity of particular events or the larger country.

Finally, I conclude this section with a brief examination of the use of humor. WBC members themselves have used parody in their web and media work, discussed in chapter 3. Yet one other part of the response to the church has been to mock and parody WBC practices and speech or to make light of the issues and events which surround the group. Several motivations can be considered for these acts: first of all, like love and violence, humor also serves to bring together the group of nonmembers in a community in opposition to that which is being mocked as finding humor at the expense of that group is something in common. It also acts to damage the opposing group through belittling their position, actively pushing against WBC and their practices which are ridiculed and viewed with derision, not unlike the parody work that WBC performs.

Blatant mockery is often picked up by media accounts during counter-protests. For example, “‘They’re ridiculous. I thought I’d be ridiculous too,’ explains a man dressed as Darth

²¹² Miller 195.

Vader who stood with those in opposition of the church's message."²¹³ Vader's appearance is only one example of nonmembers engaging with protestors through humor and mocking the group's practices. An author on the BuzzFeed site has compiled "The 30 Best Anti-Westboro Baptist Church Protest Signs," stating: "Here's a trend we can all get behind: people making counter-protest signs at Westboro Baptist Church rally." The site contains 30 photos of signs which question the sexuality of WBC members, mock WBC's trademark line like "GOD HATES FUZZY TINY KITTENS," and directly oppose the message of the group such as "LOVE KNOWS NO GENDER," and "SOLDIERS ROCK."²¹⁴ Another blog post "The Ten Commandments of Flirting With The Westboro Baptist Church" provides a video from Australian television personalities in which one man attempts to "flirt" with a member of the WBC for comedic purposes during a protest. According to Barclay, the author, "These guys did something few Americans have done: they REALLY showed us how stupid the Westboro Baptist Church is."²¹⁵ As Barclay insinuates, an addition of humor to this debate allows for a critique of the group which portrays them as not even worth fighting, deserving to be laughed off the national stage.

The publicity the group maintains has also resulted in several parodies on the internet. Some of these include a deliberate mockery of the WBC, such as www.godhatesshrimp.com, based on Bible verses which condemn the eating of food such as shrimp: "shrimp, crab, lobster, clams, mussels, all these are an abomination before the Lord, just as gays are an abomination. Why stop at protesting gay marriage? Bring *all* of God's law unto the heathens and

²¹³ As quoted in Biondo, "Westboro Baptist Church Protests Court's Manchester Funeral Protest Ruling."

²¹⁴ Matt Stopera, "The 30 Best Anti-Westboro Baptist Church Protest Signs," BuzzFeed, <http://www.buzzfeed.com/mjs538/the-30-best-anti-westboro-baptist-church-protest-s> (accessed October 29, 2012).

²¹⁵ Kate D. Barclay, "The Ten Commandments of Flirting With The Westboro Baptist Church," *Technorati*, July 5, 2012, <http://technorati.com/videos/article/the-ten-commandments-of-flirting-with/> (accessed October 30, 2012).

sodomites.”²¹⁶ Making clear that this site is not meant to be taken seriously, the authors comment that its function is to “poke fun at Fred Phelps” and others who protest homosexuality.²¹⁷ Many simply draw on the phrase which begins, “God hates...” for a comedic effect, including www.godhatesastronauts.com, and two different sites with the simple name, “Stuff God Hates.”²¹⁸ This well-known catchphrase of the WBC which demarcates what God hates has also become a common joke among protestors of all types,²¹⁹ but has especially gained attention from those who counter-protest at the same events as the WBC, as seen above. Several of these signs have had gained widespread attention through the internet, including “God Hates Figs.”²²⁰

Media: Advancing the Agonism

While the pushback to WBC occurs in physical space, it also has a large place in digital and media spaces. Morgan, Hoover, Silk, and McCloud all examine ways in which the media relates to public opinion by both affecting and being affected by this larger discourse. This becomes especially clear when discussing certain religious groups which are removed from what is seen as “mainstream,” problematize the importance of “good works,” and defy traditional understandings of religion through utilizing and drawing on emotion. By focusing less on rationally explaining the church and more upon emotion and the experience of those who are

²¹⁶ Joe Decker and Ryland Sanders, “God Hates Shrimp,” Joe Decker and Ryland Sanders, <http://www.godhatesshrimp.com> (accessed October 29, 2012).

²¹⁷ Joe Decker and Ryan Sanders, “About This Site,” Joe Decker and Ryland Sanders, <http://www.godhatesshrimp.com/about.php> (accessed October 29, 2012).

²¹⁸ See www.stuffgodhates.com, and stuffgodhates.wordpress.com.

²¹⁹ For example, at the 4/20 protests at CU Boulder, a sign was photographed which said, “God Hates Cops.” (Morgan Meyer, “CU Cracks Down on 4/20,” *The Blue Line*, May 7, 2012, <http://www.boulderblueline.org/2012/04/20/cu-cracks-down-on-420/> (accessed May 7, 2012).)

²²⁰ For an example of this, see Allen Patterson, “God Hates Figs,” *The White Sepulcher*, posted entry October 31, 2010, <http://thewhitedsepulchre.blogspot.com/2010/10/god-hates-figs.html> (accessed May 7, 2012).

affected by their practices and speech, diverse forms of media have brought together a wide variety of people who act to contrast and fight against the group.

In discussing the emotional response of nonmembers as portrayed in media representation and response to the group, I utilized Miller's theories on disgust. According to Miller, disgust is a powerful emotion which not only concerns physical senses, but also understandings of proper morality and society. As an emotion and a feeling it contributes to what Morgan has considered the media's ability to create communities and mark off boundaries between in and out and us and them often through feeling.²²¹ As seen in these media descriptions which highlight emotion and feeling group outsiders are building a larger community which supports the containment of WBC from particular spaces and the larger public sphere. Such efforts come from calls through media to counter-protest and protect spaces out of respect for the deceased, relatives, or the country, as well as efforts at making WBC a joke not to be taken seriously. Media's ability to make and promote public discourse, as well as emotion, increases the agonistic relationship between these two sides, creating and affirming a large counter-group which conflicts and contrasts with WBC.

²²¹ Morgan, "Introduction," 9 - 10.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION:
THE CYCLE CONTINUES: “BUILDING WORLDS TOGETHER”

After examining this relationship of two sides based in conflict and contention, this type of interaction and religion draws distinct attention among the pluralistic religious landscape of the United States; it is largely different than the pluralist interpretations present in the first chapter which focus on interacting with disagreement and disparity in ways which aim to work towards some sort of greater America, larger societal good, or more democratic engagement. While these goals are not unadvisable or lamentable, they tacitly or explicitly act to gloss over or pass by the acceptability of traditions which dwell in conflict. Studying these groups in context of the confrontation which is utilized and continued by both members and nonmembers offers an additional space in American religion to consider certain traditions which exist through pushing against larger society and which are actively pushed back upon. This relationship is created and confirmed through the constant interaction by which each side recognizes and engages the other.

To draw on Mouffe’s agonistic pluralism and democracy from which I draw the term of agonistic religion, “tension, though ineradicable, can be negotiated in different ways. Indeed a great part of democratic politics is precisely about the negotiation of that tension and the articulation of precarious solutions. What is misguided is the search for final rational resolution.”²²² While the two sides may be able to find temporary solutions, such as ones which keep WBC from protesting funerals in exchange for media access, to apply a theory which looks to mutual and cooperative resolutions does not work in this example which requires conflict and aggressive action. What I am rather highlighting are the ways in which these differences are

²²² Mouffe, 93.

discussed, enacted, and negotiated, to use Mouffe's word, in relation to each other and the larger public space outside of any solution.

I argue the case of WBC as an example of this type of agonistic religion: throughout their own doctrines and beliefs there is an understanding of a group of people who are chosen, an elect who are specifically called by God to be saved and proclaim their truth, aggressively if necessary, to all others. A binary develops here between two sides inherently. However, while this theology is not entirely unique to WBC, being rooted in Calvinism and followed by a number of other churches, WBC's particular methods of enacting this theology assist in creating the blatant and fierce interaction which ensues between group insiders and outsiders. By utilizing strong language featuring God's hatred in their preaching and attempting to contrast and control their depiction in media, WBC continually struggles against nonmember populations.

This greater nonmember group has not only actively recognized WBC as an outside force but also attempts to deal with the church as such in a variety of ways including acts to combat the group through media sources. In these media spaces the church's categorization as a religion is questioned, expressed through concerns which are similar to Silk's topoi of media representations of religion. Through positing binaries of reason and emotion and dwelling on the embodied feelings of the nonmembers, media sources provide a space for this conflict to take place and continue: by focusing on and promoting disgust, anger, love, and humor, such sources enable nonmembers to actively combat the church and influence the larger opposing group.

Even though this paper addresses a seemingly small group, this study of WBC and its place within agonistic religion holds several implications for the academic study of religion. As noted above, it first demonstrates the possibility, and also the importance, of inherent conflict and contrast in relationships between particular religions, as well as religions and the public

sphere, with no aim for cooperation. The formation of WBC is closely connected to the ways in which the church views itself as existing against nonmembers as well as the practices the community uses which conflict with these other groups. Conflict itself leads to group identification, characterization, and structure; without this factor the church would exist differently. Recognition of the importance of this relationship between members and nonmembers then also problematizes the possibility of religion remaining entirely private. As Hoover notes above, religion currently takes place publicly through what it influences and what influences it.²²³ The interaction and engagement required by agonistic religion questions the possibility of religion's ability to remain outside the public sphere. Certainly a consideration of the ability of media to disseminate a particular understanding of religion itself, as well as representations of these smaller, non-mainline groups, also throws this distinction between public and private into question.

Such cases are not only important for isolated, "fringe," movements, but rather demonstrate complexity and depth to traditional categories of religion. Here I must again draw on Robert Orsi's distinction between "good" and "bad" religion. While, as noted in the introduction, the discipline has often focused and promoted the appearance of religion which can remain unemotional, polite and focus on reason,²²⁴ this case demonstrates the possibility of religion to be studied as something outside of these characteristics, widening long-held views and definitions of this category. McCloud's work on emotion in the portrayal of certain smaller and less-understood communities also emphasizes and addresses a prioritizing among groups

²²³ Hoover, *Religion in the News*, 35. See page 24.

²²⁴ Orsi, 188.

which are viewed less logical than emotional.²²⁵ By only staying on one side of this spectrum, scholars add to this precedence of “good” religion over that which challenges these presuppositions, tacitly relegating such groups to one side of the discipline.

In concluding this paper, I draw on the inherent troubles of communication which occur in this relationship and assist in keeping this relationship continual and aggressive. WBC has claimed their actions do not defy the requisite act of love commanded of Christians. Drawing on Leviticus 19:17, WBC states, “loving your neighbor is defined as rebuking him, and not allowing sin to come upon him. . . We’re not saying ‘We hate fags’ – we’re saying ‘God hates fags.’ The purest, most exalted form of love is to tell people the truth, especially about weighty matters such as life and death, sin, righteousness, judgment to come, Heaven and Hell.”²²⁶ Their picketing and promotion are meant to be positive things; like breaking a bone to reset it, though their preaching is harsh and often hurtful, it is hoped it will result in more individuals coming into the knowledge of God saving them from *more* harm for eternity.

However, this message is not “heard” by nonmembers in ways close to what is described above. Rather, one hears these activities described as “hatemongering,”²²⁷ and the larger community of nonmembers rejoices when the group is stopped from shouting their message either through having their tires slashed²²⁸ or by creating a flash mob to counter the church.²²⁹

What could be seen as a positive intent by WBC, carried out in an aggressive and off-putting

²²⁵ McCloud, 4.

²²⁶ Westboro Baptist Church, “Westboro Baptist Church FAQ.” The group does continue, however, to state that the biblical King David “hated God’s enemies with a perfect, spiritual hatred (as opposed to the fickle human emotion of hatred), just as all of God’s elect do.”

²²⁷ Gregory, 30 – 34.

²²⁸ Stopera, “Westboro Baptist Church Gets Tires Slashed.”

²²⁹ “Flash Mob Response to Westboro Baptist Church in West Virginia,” YouTube, video clip posted April 27, 2010, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DogjbopNBVg> (accessed November 6, 2012). Posted on YouTube on since spring of 2010, this video has had close to 400,000 views.

manner, finds no sympathizers among those who do not follow along with this particular theology. Instead, WBC is viewed as treading on values and emotions of this larger culture with no care for the norms which they violate. Because of the active attempts to derogate WBC's message by nonmembers the church then only attempts to speak louder, endeavoring to push back against the media which "attempts to choke out or suppress the truth of God, when preached, and replace it with false doctrine."²³⁰ And the cycle continues.

John Durham Peters' work *Speaking into the Air* acts to question the problems which are often called "failures to communicate." According to Peters, any effort to communicate with another acts inherently as both bridge and chasm since we are never able to fully see into the minds of others.²³¹ As such, "'Communication,' whatever it might mean, is not a matter of improved writing or freer self-disclosure but involves *a permanent kink in the human condition*...Communication failure . . . means we have new ways to relate and to make *worlds* together."²³² Peters suggests that communication is less a matter of technology or new media, but rather an engagement which is a risk and a matter of trust which can depend on "dumb luck, personality, place, and time."²³³ A challenge, certainly, but one in which we engage every day through interaction between outsiders and ourselves. Though Peters certainly longs for a working resolution of the inherent problems of communication in which one party serves the

²³⁰ Westboro Baptist Church, "GodHatestheMedia."

²³¹ John Durham Peters, *Speaking into the Air: a History of the Idea of Communication* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1999), 5.

²³² Peters, 29. Italics my own.

²³³ Peters, 30.

other,²³⁴ it is not his solution which suits this analysis, but rather his definition of the problem: “To put it a bit archly, dialogue may simply be two people taking turns broadcasting at each other.”²³⁵ This description, in comparison to the “symphony” of Eck, for example, aptly describes the situation experienced by WBC members and nonmembers. Though we may be “building *worlds* together,” noting the plural form of “worlds,” it does not necessarily mean through cooperation or to a similar end. It could also be done in contrast and conflict which occurs through these gaps and difficulties.

To only suggest how these difficulties can be resolved in understanding religious pluralism is to ignore a key feature of human existence that is conflict. In a country with a deep divide in political parties we see aggressive campaigning and mockery utilized at many different levels to make light of or attack another side. Conflict and competition are a key part of this process, especially in an election year. Sports teams actively compete while attempting to move closer to a championship. And, as this analysis has showed, media sources are filled with spaces to interact and conflict, whether they are news sites or social media competitions. While these things can be complained about in some aspects or celebrated for their ability to entertain, they are a part of life right now, every day. They are among the ways in which we make space for ourselves, form identities in contrast to others, and form communities with one another. We certainly create worlds together, but it is not always the same one.

Columnist Ben Patrick Johnson has written an article about his experience with his “oddest of bedfellows,” WBC. Explaining this relationship, he writes, “I found myself in a symbiotic relationship with Westboro. Their goals were served by my drawing attention to them.

²³⁴ “The problem of communication is not language’s slipperiness, it is the unfixable difference between the self and the other. The challenge of communication is not to be true to our own interiority but to have mercy on others for never seeing ourselves as we do” (Peters, 266-267).

²³⁵ Peters, 264.

And I had found an ideal ‘villain’ whose positions are utterly unpalatable not just to the LGBT community, but to America in general.”²³⁶ Nodding to Peters, such engagement and communication, even through conflict and struggle, can lead to the building of worlds through separate aims and different goals. However, echoing Mouffe, there is no resolution or consensus.

With no end in sight for this particular debate, it is also possible to consider the future of media in fueling this type of religious interaction. It has already allowed for a large mobilization of a broad and varied group of nonmembers, for personal opinions to be shared widely and quickly, and for interaction between nonmembers and members to be performed with more ease. I would also like to consider that media could add longevity to these agonistic religions and the relationships which they require to continue. As these groups continue to control their own media, take space in the public eye, and perform acts which push against the larger population, they create more space for themselves in this religious environment of the United States.

To draw on Peters again, “Most of the time we understand each other quite well; we just don’t agree.”²³⁷ In this conflict the positions understand each other basically well enough, but they don’t like what they see in the other. While I have argued that there are nuances in both sides of this argument which often are not highlighted or discussed, there are certain utterances which would be redundant to translate: when WBC states that “God hates fags,” this is what the group means. These words essentially motivate both sides to act, either to affirm them or deny them. Because of disagreement of this type, based in firmly held beliefs, practices, and motivations in which one side sharply contrasts and conflicts with the other, moving past this

²³⁶ Ben Patrick Johnson, “The Oddest of Bedfellows: My Relationship with the Westboro Baptist Church,” *Huffington Post*, October 3, 2011, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ben-patrick-johnson/westboro-baptist-church_b_981688.html (accessed November 6, 2012).

²³⁷ Peters, 269.

interaction to a “new pluralism” or cooperative engagement is unlikely. The inherent distance between these two communities is not due to a deficit of understanding the other’s position; it is the ever-present lack of agreement. As such, agonistic religion persists.

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