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THE CHRISTIAN RIGHT IN TRANSLATION:
CHRISTIAN CONSERVATIVE DISCOURSE
IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN
LITERATURE

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THE CHRISTIAN RIGHT IN TRANSLATION:
CHRISTIAN CONSERVATIVE DISCOURSE
IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN
LITERATURE

A Dissertation Presented to the Graduate Faculty of the

Dedman College

Southern Methodist University

in

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

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by

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Advisor: Professor Steven Weisenburger

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Religion in contemporary American politics and religion in contemporary American Literature: are they independent phenomena? Literary scholars have largely assumed so. Scholars have attended to nontraditional, liberal religion in postwar American literature, while overlooking how this literature represents and critiques the rise of the Christian Right. Since white evangelical and fundamentalist Christians allied with the Republican party in the late 1970s, Christian conservatives have transformed American politics. As the GOP's most influential interest group, the Christian Right has set the terms for many of the last four decades' most contentious and consequential debates. Historians, political scientists, and contemporary American writers alike have attempted to understand the Christian Right and its influence through Christian conservative political discourse. In this dissertation, I argue that U.S. Literature since the rise of the Christian Right critiques Christian conservative discourses and reimagines how religious language can work politically. Considering essays, short stories, and novels by Joyce Carol Oates, Richard Powers, George Saunders, Marilynne Robinson, Margaret Atwood, Helena María Viramontes, Octavia Butler, and Louise Erdrich, I demonstrate how this literature engages with the discourses of Christian creationism and climate change skepticism,

Christian apocalypse and U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, Christian conservative neoliberalism, “family values,” religious freedom, and Christian nationalism. These writers depict Christian conservative discourses circulating in isolation from opposing perspectives, that portray Christian conservatives besieged by secular society. Yet they also reinterpret Christian language to explore questions raised by evolutionary theory and complicated by advances in cognitive neuroscience about how we experience consciousness, free will and moral responsibility, and the purpose of human existence. They reimagine the bonds that make a family in Christian language, and they imagine how religious discourse could promote political dialogue and empathy in a postsecular society.

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INTRODUCTION

“Only say the word. My soul shall be healed”

There had been other sharp *turns* in my life. These *turns* that had altered the course of my life, usually without my realizing at the time, but only later. But never a *turn* so clear as the Lord’s mission for me.

For the remainder of the day I worked harder than anyone else in our crew. Harder than the younger men who spend too much time talking and laughing together, uttering profanities, telling dirty jokes. As if your own lips are not polluted, in the telling of dirty jokes. And such laughter, over-loud, like hyenas braying, wears away the soul.

You, Luther Dunphy. You are the chosen one.

You, to bring down the abortion murderer Voorhees that your Christian brethren may rejoice.

There is an agitation in hammering nails but it is a controlled agitation. All carpentry is a controlled action, to a purpose. One nail, and another nail. A sequence of nails, in the construction of a house. How many nails, how many blows of the hammer!—*the Lord God looks upon Luther Dunphy in wonder, in whom he is well pleased.*

“Luther? Hey—”

Voices from below lifting in my direction which I heard (of course I heard) but at a distance, through the distraction of the more urgent voice whispering in my ears.

—Joyce Carol Oates, *A Book of American Martyrs*

Joyce Carol Oates’ *A Book of American Martyrs* opens on Luther Dunphy, a Christian anti-abortionist, as he approaches a women’s clinic in Muskegee Falls, Ohio, a shotgun raised to his shoulder. There Luther murders Gus Vorhees, an abortion provider. He murders Vorhees’ volunteer security guard. He lays his shotgun down on the driveway, kneels, and awaits the police, praying they will kill him too. They arrest him instead.

The novel then turns back to the years preceding Vorhees’ death, to the events that lead Luther to carry his shotgun to the parking lot of the Broome County Women’s Center and shoot a doctor and security guard in cold blood. It moves forward to Luther’s trial, where he is sentenced to death, and to his execution. Chapters follow Luther’s wife and children as they

stumble through the fallout of Luther's crime and punishment. Others follow the Vorhees family as they grieve husband and father and attempt to make sense of his murder.

Luther hears God speak to him directly. He learns from a fellow protester at the women's clinic that Gus often arrives early, before the policemen stationed outside. In the protester's disclosure, Luther believes, "God had sent me a personal message, which it was not possible to ignore or misinterpret—*The murderer is not protected! He is vulnerable.*"¹ Oates sets this message from God in italics to distinguish what Luther believes to be God's voice from Luther's own thoughts. He hears God calling him "*to bring down the abortion murderer Vorhees that your Christian brethren may rejoice.*" He hears God's blessing, "*the Lord God looks upon Luther Dunphy in wonder, in whom he is well pleased.*"² Luther's relationship to God is a relationship to this voice, the voice of God he hears directing him to kill Gus Vorhees.

This voice for Luther merges with the voice of the speaker at an anti-abortion rally he attends sponsored by The American Coalition of Life Activists.³ There Luther hears a Professor Willard Wohlman describe men who have killed abortion providers as committing "acts of defense against murderers not to save their own lives but the lives of unborn children." Luther

1. Joy Carol Oates, *A Book of American Martyrs* (New York: Harper Collins, 2017), 12.

2. Oates, *A Book of American Martyrs*, 17.

3. The American Coalition of Life Activists was an ecumenical pro-life organization active in the 1990s and known for publishing "wanted" posters listing abortion providers' names and addresses. The posters charged the doctors with "crimes against humanity" and offered \$5,000 in reward. Luther attends the rally with fellow members of the "Army of God," a terrorist organization that claimed responsibility for bombings and shootings at abortion clinics in the 1980s and 90s. The speaker, Willard Wohlman, is Oates' invention. See for reference *Planned Parenthood v. Amer. Coal. Of Life*, 290 F.3d 1058 (9th Cir. 2002), par. 12, <https://casetext.com/case/planned-parenthood-v-amer-coalition-of-life>; Jennifer Jefferis, *Armed for Life: The Army of God and Anti-Abortion Terror in the United States* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2011).

believes he hears Wohlman speaking directly to him, imagining that “to me, Luther Dunphy, the Professor seemed now to speak with special earnestness as he concluded his speech.” Wohlman tells Luther that the murderers of abortion providers are martyrs. He calls on the crowded sanctuary to “pray for our brave martyrs, and pray for ourselves, that we have the strength to act as we must, when we must.”⁴ Recalling Wohlman’s lecture, Luther reflects,

Sometimes now I think it is Professor Wohlman’s voice which I hear in my head in the way that the words of the Lord are communicated to me, and the two come together in a single voice like rolling thunder.

A dead baby. A dead conscience.

*What is God telling you?*⁵

Wohlman’s call for violence to defend unborn children becomes God’s call to Luther. Anti-abortion militancy becomes His language.

Oates’ Christian characters are set apart by how they hear God speak to them, and by how they speak. Luther quotes passages of scripture and leans on biblical phrasing (“as if your own lips are not polluted”; “wears away the soul”).⁶ He speaks in Old Testament cadences, with the kind of synonymous parallelism characteristic of the Hebrew poetry of Proverbs or prophecy of Jeremiah (“And such laughter, over loud, like hyenas braying”; “How many nails, how many blows of the hammer!”).⁷ He understands the physical world as a reflection of the spiritual, so that significant moments in his life become God “turning” Luther where God wants him to go,

4. Oates, *A Book of American Martyrs*, 32.

5. Oates, 22.

6. 2 Pet. 2:20 (KJV); 2 Chron. 36:14; Job 14:19.

7. “Parallelism,” in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics: Fourth Edition*, ed. Roland Greene (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 997-999. See for example Prov. 2, Jer. 50.

and so that even the voices of his fellow construction workers calling him parallel the voice of God calling him. For Luther, conservative Christian political discourse becomes the voice of God, and its language becomes his own.

Christian language takes on a fascination for the Vorhees family in the wake of Gus' death, especially for his daughter, Naomi. The Vorheeses are not Christian. Naomi, describes herself as secular yet, reeling from her father's death and desperate to make sense of it, she turns to the Christian language of the man who murdered him. Years after Gus' death, when Luther Dunphy is finally executed, Naomi calls her mother to tell her that she has had a "vision."⁸

Usually it's hidden within us—this *life*. We are so frightened of it, and ashamed of it, and people like us who are "secular"—we don't have the vocabulary to speak of it. But this morning I woke up filled with this happiness and this conviction that it is *life* that courses through us and binds us to one another. It was after the execution I realized this— . . .

It came to me—a conviction. But it's almost impossible to explain. That Daddy is dead—and Luther Dunphy is dead—but you are my *mother*—I am your *daughter*—and we are alive. This is a great revelation to me after years of blindness and self-absorption. It's a revelation like a boulder rolled away from the mouth of a cave.⁹

Naomi describes a "conviction," a "revelation" that life itself is what binds her to others and gives her purpose. Christian language lingers with Naomi after Gus' murder. It is her way of trying to understand her father's death and the man and the movement that killed him. She dwells on the language he spoke, and that spoke to him.

The Rise of the Christian Right

In the last years of the Carter Administration, a group of mostly white conservative evangelicals and fundamentalists united for the first time behind a set of social issues, most

8. Oates, *A Book of American Martyrs*, 500.

9. Oates, 499.

prominently in protest of feminism, gay rights, and abortion.¹⁰ Jimmy Carter may have been the first self-identified evangelical Christian to hold the nation's highest office, but evangelical Christians were unhappy with his socially liberal policies and with the direction the United States had taken since the culture wars of the 1960s and early 1970s. Seizing on this discontent, groups like Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority mushroomed, registering voters in churches and raising support for conservative candidates in advance of the 1980 presidential election.¹¹ Ronald Reagan's victory did not depend on the support of Christian conservatives, but by his election in 1980, the Christian Right had become a key constituency of the GOP, one it could no longer ignore.¹²

In decades prior, Christian conservatives had failed to form lasting cross-denominational alliances. Evangelicals and fundamentalists tend to agree on the essentials of their faith. They believe the Bible is the divinely inspired word of God and the "ultimate authority." They believe in salvation through faith in Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, and they emphasize a "born-again" conversion experience. They also seek to "evangelize," to convert others to their beliefs.¹³

10. Daniel K. Williams, *God's Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 160. As Darren Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt: Plain-Folk Religion, Grassroots Politics, and Evangelical Conservatism* (New York: Norton, 2012), has shown, this coalition also formed around new regional alliances. Southern transplants to California earlier in the twentieth century abandoned New Deal economics and the Democratic party by the late 1950s, setting a precedent for how evangelicals in the South would likewise turn from blue to red in the following decades, and preparing the way for these newly powerful alliances among religious conservatives.

11. Williams, *God's Own Party*, 175-8.

12. Williams, 193.

13. "What is an Evangelical?" National Association of Evangelicals, accessed June 17, 2021, par. 2, <https://www.nae.net/what-is-an-evangelical/>; Thomas Kidd, *Who Is an Evangelical? The History of a Movement in Crisis* (Hartford: Yale University Press, 2019), 4-5, 69-70.

Yet with the formation of the National Association of Evangelicals in 1942, a group of fundamentalists took the name “evangelical” and sought to distance themselves from what George Marsden has described as the “militantly anti-modernist” spirit of fundamentalism.¹⁴ Evangelicals wanted to engage with the wider secular culture, and they sought to partner with other Christian denominations despite their theological differences. Fundamentalists refused to cooperate with mainline Protestants and Pentecostals, and they refused to cooperate with evangelicals who were willing to set aside doctrinal disputes.¹⁵ Fundamentalists also defended segregation, while evangelicals offered measured support to the civil rights movement.

By the late 1960s and early 1970s, however, fundamentalists began to accept they had lost the fight against racial integration, and evangelicals proved receptive to Richard Nixon’s call for “law and order.” Crucially, both groups viewed secularism as an existential threat that made cooperating with other Protestants and even Catholics necessary for the sake of preserving the United States’ Christian character.¹⁶ Falwell’s primarily fundamentalist Moral Majority and

14. Williams, *God’s Own Party*, 3-4; George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism, 1870-1925* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 4. Both fundamentalists and evangelicals today are more likely to call themselves evangelical or simply Christian. Scholars generally continue to distinguish fundamentalists from evangelicals by their more antipathetic posture toward mainstream society and culture and their lessened tolerance for Christians with theological differences. Evangelical also functions as the umbrella term for both groups in many political polls and demographic studies, as in the Pew studies cited below. On defining fundamentalism, see Joel Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 8; Susan Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), xv-xvi.

15. Kidd, *Who Is an Evangelical?*, 75-6; Williams, *God’s Own Party*, 4-5. Pentecostals are distinguished by their emphasis on the gifts of the Spirit, especially speaking in tongues, miraculous healing, and emotional worship. See Williams 5-6; Kidd 6; as well as Vinson Synan, *The Holiness-Pentecostal Tradition: Charismatic Movements in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997).

16. Williams, 4-5.

organizations that followed worked to ally with Catholics against abortion, though they attracted few Catholic members.¹⁷ Still, Catholics shifted rightward in these years. Once a reliable Democratic voting bloc, since the late 1970s about half of Catholics have voted Republican.¹⁸ Those Catholics that aligned with the Christian Right were almost exclusively white, while the majority of Latinx Catholics vote Democratic.¹⁹ Likewise, though Black evangelicals tended to share white evangelicals' beliefs about school prayer, traditional gender roles, abortion, and gay rights, few Black evangelicals aligned with the movement.²⁰ The nascent Christian Right also sought to partner with conservative Jews, and for this reason the group has sometimes been referred to as the "Religious Right."²¹ Though they found common ground in Christian

17. Williams, *God's Own Party*, 177-9, writes that though Falwell's Moral Majority received more attention, his organization remained overwhelmingly fundamentalist Baptist. Pat Robertson, he documents, was in fact more effective at bringing charismatics, Pentecostals, and Southern Baptists into the fold.

18. Mark J. Rozell, "Introduction: The 'Catholic Vote' in the U.S.A.," in *Catholics and U.S. Politics After the 2016 Elections: Understanding the "Swing Vote,"* eds. Marie Gayte, Blandine Chelini-Pont, and Mark J. Rozell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 2-8.

19. Rozell, "Introduction, The 'Catholic Vote,'" 2-8.

20. Allison Calhoun-Brown, "The Politics of Black Evangelicals: What Hinders Diversity in the Christian Right," *American Politics Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (1998): par. 24; Nikhil Aziz, "True Colors: The Christian Right and People of Color," *Colorlines Magazine* 8, no. 1 (Spring 2005). The Christian Coalition, a successor to the Moral Majority with its heyday in the 1990s, made a more concerted effort to reach out to Black evangelicals, with only marginal success. See Carin Robinson, "From Every Tribe and Nation? Blacks and the Christian Right," *Social Science Quarterly* 87, no. 3 (August 2006): 591-601, <https://doi-org.proxy.libraries.smu.edu/10.1111/j.1540-6237.2006.00398.x>. A 2014 Pew study found that Black Protestants make up only 2% of the Republican Party. "Republicans and Republican Leaners," Pew Research Center, 2014, <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/party-affiliation/republican-lean-rep/>.

21. Some scholars prefer "Religious Right" (Kevin Kruse), while others use "Christian Right" (Christopher Douglas) or "evangelical right" (Dochuk), and many use these interchangeably (Williams). I prefer "Christian Right" to designate Christian conservatives, primarily evangelicals with a number of fundamentalists, some other Protestants, and a minority of Catholics, who align with the GOP in new and powerful ways in the late 1970s, culminating

conservatives' staunch support for Israel, still fewer Jews than Catholics supported the Christian or Religious Right.²²

Newly allied and confident of their ability to command a religious majority, white evangelicals and fundamentalists united behind Reagan and brought their influence to bear on the Republican Party platform in 1980. They shared a commitment to what they called "family values."²³ They opposed the feminist movement and the Equal Rights Amendment, a constitutional amendment that would ensure that "equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or any State on account of sex."²⁴ They opposed gay

in Reagan's election in 1980, and with increasing loyalty and influence since. Religious Right was for a time the broader and more ubiquitous term, but it is somewhat misleading. This alliance was newly ecumenical, seeking to find common ground among Protestants, Catholics, and Jews. Yet despite such efforts, and though the movement includes some conservative Jews and religious people of other traditions, it is primarily Christian and evangelical. See Kevin Kruse, *One Nation Under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America* (New York: Basic Books, 2015); Christopher Douglas, *If God Meant to Interfere: American Literature and the Rise of the Christian Right* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016); Williams, *God's Own Party*, 177-9; "Republicans and Republican Leanners."

22. Phil Zuckerman, "Jews and the Christian Right," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service* (Fall 1996): 21-31, documents the small number of Jewish leaders working in Christian Right organizations in the 1980s and 1990s. Today 1% of the GOP identifies as Jewish, and about 30% of American Jews vote Republican. "Republicans and Republican Leanners"; Frank Newport, "American Jews, Politics, and Israel," *Gallup News*, August 27, 2019, <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/polling-matters/265898/american-jews-politics-israel.aspx>.

23. On the fight for "family values," see Seth Dowland, *Family Values and the Rise of the Christian Right* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

24. Williams, *God's Own Party*, 107-110, 189. Christian conservatives understood the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) as an extension of the feminist movement that rejected the God-given differences between men and women. They believed it would remove protections for women and provide cover for the government to fund abortions and legalize gay marriage. The ERA awaited ratification by the states after passing overwhelmingly in Congress. Yet Christian conservative opposition, spearheaded by Phyllis Schlafly, ensured that too few states would ratify the amendment, and it failed to pass. About the Equal Rights Amendment and Phyllis Schlafly's influential campaign to defeat it, see Donald T. Critchlow, *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism: A Woman's Crusade* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

marriage and abortion, and they pushed the party to adopt language promising to appoint judges who would protect “the sanctity of innocent human life.”²⁵ They were angry about what they believed to be the secular government’s intrusion into children’s education. They supported the return of classroom prayer to public schools, and they fought to include creationism in public school science curriculums.²⁶ Christian conservatives also sought to protect private Christian schools from IRS investigations into their failure to desegregate, what leaders described as a government attempt to control religious institutions and an attack on “religious freedom.”²⁷

With each passing decade Christian conservatives have increased their reach in the Republican Party, in electing conservative officials, and in shaping their legislative priorities. Though Falwell’s Moral Majority disintegrated by the end of the 1980s, Pat Robertson’s Christian Coalition quickly took its place, shifting Christian conservatives’ focus to winning

Evangelicals and fundamentalists also found allies among Latter Day Saints in their opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment, as documented by Neil J. Young, “‘The ERA Is a Moral Issue’: The Mormon Church, LDS Women, and the Defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment,” *American Quarterly* 59, no. 3 (September 2007): 623-644.

25. Williams, *God’s Own Party*, 159-60, 189. In the decades to come, religious conservatives would largely fail to turn such “family values” into policy. Ann Taves, “Sexuality in American Religious History,” in *Retelling U.S. Religious History*, ed. Thomas A. Tweed (Oakland: University of California Press, 1997), 53, has demonstrated that particularly in terms of marriage and sexuality, the state has become increasingly secular since contraceptives became legal in 1965.

26. Williams, 191-200; I discuss the history of Christian conservatives’ battle against evolution in public school curriculums in chapter one.

27. Williams, 190; John Fea, *Believe Me: The Evangelical Road to Donald Trump* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018), 34. Though Christian conservative leaders often today cite *Roe v. Wade* as the turning point that propelled Christians into politics in the 1970s and 80s, Randall Balmer, *Thy Kingdom Come: An Evangelical’s Lament* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 13-17, has argued that the IRS’ investigation into Christian private schools was the true impetus for the movement. I discuss the history of Christian private schools and desegregation in chapter four.

local elections. Led by Robertson, the Christian Right continued to hold sway over the GOP, moving George H. W. Bush further right in his re-election campaign in 1992, just as they did in Reagan's second term. The Clinton years, far from dissolving the Christian conservative coalition, only solidified its base and invigorated fundraising.²⁸

Though Robertson's Christian Coalition lost influence at the end of the 1990s, in its place James Dobson's Family Research Council, a political spin-off of Focus on the Family, moved to prominence. Consistently failing to advance significant legislation in these years, the Christian Right under Dobson's leadership shifted its focus from mobilizing voters—electing a socially conservative president, legislators, and local officials—and shaping the GOP platform to influencing legislation. At Dobson's urging, House Majority Leader Tom Delay created the Values Action Team, a committee that brought in religious leaders to meet with Congressmen about legislative priorities. Despite this new influence, and though the Christian Right saw a champion for Christian conservatism in George W. Bush, they continued to lose ground on gay marriage and make little headway on abortion during his presidency. After Congress failed to pass the Federal Marriage Act declaring same-sex marriage unconstitutional in 2006, Christian conservatives moved their focus yet again from influencing legislation to shaping the Supreme Court.²⁹

In the runup to Barack Obama's election in 2008, commentators frequently speculated that Obama's appeal to young religious voters could portend a changing relationship between

28. Williams, *God's Own Party*, 223-241.

29. Williams, 242-263.

Christians and the Republican Party.³⁰ Instead, political polarization continued to increase, and Christian conservatives moved further right.³¹ Conspiracy theories abounded, flourishing in Christian Right media, that questioned Obama's birthplace and whether he was a Christian or a Muslim in disguise. Some even claimed he was the Anti-Christ.³² Obama won a higher percentage of white evangelicals' votes in 2008 than had John Kerry in 2004 (26% to Kerry's 21%). Yet only 20% of white evangelicals voted for Obama in 2012. 79% voted for Mitt Romney, more than had supported George W. Bush in 2004.³³

Obama's first term gave rise to the Tea Party movement, which enjoyed outsized support among white evangelicals.³⁴ The Tea Party gave expression to a bitter distrust of government and brash, combative brand of politics that would later find their champion in Donald Trump, for

30. Williams, *God's Own Party*, 269-76; Matthew Avery Sutton and Darren Dochuk, "Introduction," in *Faith in the New Millennium: The Future of Religion and American Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 1-8; Steven P. Miller, "Between Hope and Despair: Obama and Evangelical Politics," in *Faith in the New Millennium: The Future of Religion and American Politics*, eds. Matthew Avery Sutton and Darren Dochuk (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 199-216.

31. "Political Polarization in the American Public," Pew Research Center, June 12, 2014, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2014/06/12/political-polarization-in-the-american-public/>.

32. Samuel P. Perry, *Rhetorics of Race and Religion on the Christian Right: Barack Obama and the War on Terror* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2019), xi-xiii.

33. "How the Faithful Voted," Pew Research Center, November 10, 2008, <https://www.pewforum.org/2008/11/05/how-the-faithful-voted/>; "Election 2012 Post Mortem: White Evangelicals and Support for Romney," Pew Research Center, December 7, 2012, par. 8, <https://www.pewforum.org/2012/12/07/election-2012-post-mortem-white-evangelicals-and-support-for-romney/>. Like many surveys of religious affiliation and political participation, these studies do not distinguish between evangelicals and fundamentalists. Based on the questions used to determine religious affiliation, fundamentalists would be counted among evangelicals.

34. "The Tea Party and Religion," Pew Research Center, February 23, 2011, par. 2, <https://www.pewforum.org/2011/02/23/tea-party-and-religion/>. In this survey, fundamentalist would be considered a subset of evangelicals.

whom Christian conservatives have demonstrated enduring support.³⁵ A thrice-married reality television star and New York businessman, Donald Trump was in some ways an unlikely hero for the Christian Right. Trump peddled racist rhetoric and reveled in insulting his opponents. He was caught on video boasting about sexually assaulting women. Yet he promised to protect religious freedom, what Christian conservatives had long believed was under attack. After the Supreme Court's ruling in *Obergefell v. Hodges* in 2015 guaranteeing same sex couples a constitutional right to marriage, Christian conservatives feared they were losing the fight for family values, and they redoubled their focus on changing the make-up of the courts.³⁶ Trump promised to realize their long-held goals of installing conservative judges in federal courts and especially the Supreme Court, a promise he has kept.³⁷ 80% of white evangelicals voted for Donald Trump in 2016, and in 2020, as many as 81% voted for Trump.³⁸

35. Jeremy W. Peters, "The Tea Party Didn't Get What It Wanted, but It Did Unleash the Politics of Anger," *The New York Times*, August 28, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/28/us/politics/tea-party-trump.html>. On the history, ideological and religious commitments of the Tea Party, see Christopher S. Parker and Matt A. Barreto, *Change They Can't Believe In: The Tea Party and Reactionary Politics in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013); Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson, *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). I return to evangelicals' support for Donald Trump in my conclusion.

36. *Obergefell et al v. Hodges, Director, Ohio Department of Health, et al.* 576 U.S. 644 (2015). William N. Eskridge and Christopher R. Riano, *Marriage Equality: From Outlaws to In-Laws* (Hartford: Yale University Press, 2020), trace the history of the fight for marriage equality, including a chapter that considers Christian conservatives' responses to *Obergefell v. Hodges* and changing attitudes among religious people about gay marriage.

37. John Gramlich, "How Trump Compares With Other Recent Presidents In Appointing Federal Judges," Pew Research Center, January 13, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/01/13/how-trump-compares-with-other-recent-presidents-in-appointing-federal-judges/>.

38. Sarah Pulliam Bailey, "White evangelicals voted overwhelmingly for Donald Trump, exit polls show," *The Washington Post*, November 9, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2016/11/09/exit-polls-show-white-evangelicals-voted-overwhelmingly->

Since the late 1970s, white Christians, especially evangelicals, have become increasingly more conservative and more loyal to the GOP. The GOP has in turn has become increasingly more conservative and Christian.³⁹ For many of these decades' most contentious political and social disputes, Christian conservatives have set the terms for debate.

You Will Know Them by Their Discourse

In *A Book of American Martyrs*, Oates understands the anti-abortion movement and the Christian conservatives behind it by their language. In its focus on Christian language, Oates' novel echoes scholars of the Christian Right like Susan Harding, who argue that what distinguishes the resurgence in political activity by religious people in the U.S. in the late 1970s is how the Christian Right rhetorically reimagined its role in culture and politics.⁴⁰ In *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics*, Harding documents "the language by which many fundamentalist Protestants and their allies transformed themselves during the 1980s

for-donald-trump/; Frank Newport, "Religious Group Voting and the 2020 Election," *Gallup News*, November 13, 2020, <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/polling-matters/324410/religious-group-voting-2020-election.aspx>. As above, these polls do not distinguish between fundamentalists and evangelicals.

39. Williams, *God's Own Party*, 7-8.

40. On the discourse of the Christian Right, see Cynthia Burack, *Sin, Sex, and Democracy: Antigay Rhetoric and the Christian Right* (New York: SUNY Press, 2008); Nathaniel J. Klemp, *The Morality of Spin and Vice in Political Rhetoric and the Christian Right* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2012); Leslie Dorrough Smith, *Righteous Rhetoric: Sex, Speech, and the Politics of Concerned Women for America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Chiara M. Migliori, "Donald Trump as the Champion of Freedom in the Discourse of the Religious Right and White Conservative Christian America," *International Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society* 10, no. 1 (March 2020): 63-79. Robert J. Wuthnow, "Taking Talk Seriously: Religious Discourse as Social Practice," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 50, no. 1 (March 2011): 1-21, places such studies within the context of a shift in sociology of religion toward studying religious discourse.

from a marginal, antiworldly, separatist people into a visible and vocal public force.”⁴¹ Of Jerry Falwell, whose Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Virginia Harding takes as her primary field site, she writes: “Jerry Falwell was . . . the major cobbler and distributor of the hybrid religious and political rhetorics that enabled hitherto unallied and inactive white conservative Protestants to see themselves as a singular political and moral force.”⁴²

Considering Christian conservative rhetoric about Barack Obama, especially in conspiracy theories claiming he was secretly Muslim or the anti-Christ, Samuel P. Perry finds an extension of the racialized, apocalyptic discourse surrounding the “War on Terror” during the Bush years. “The rhetoric of the Christian Right in the United States might be easier to identify and pin down than the actual group identity of the Christian Right,” Perry observes, and “the efficacy of the Christian Right’s rhetoric is more recognizable than the group itself.”⁴³ Harding and Perry describe the Christian Right as a movement mobilized through and characterized by a powerful religious and political discourse, and whose influence comes from that discourse.

Scholars of late twentieth and twenty-first century American literature have typically wanted little to do with religion, and especially the kind of politically active, conservative Christianity that has made its home in the Republican Party over the last 40 years. The reigning critical paradigm for postwar U.S. literature, postmodernism, identifies this period with the death of the author and the end of the master narrative. Religion, with its appeals to ultimate authority

41. Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell*, ix.

42. Harding, 24.

43. Perry, *Rhetorics of Race and Religion on the Christian Right*, xiii.

and its totalizing explanations, does not fit neatly into our narrative of the postwar years.⁴⁴ What could this literature want to do with religion?

As Michael W. Kaufmann has argued, religion has also been regarded as anathema to our very identities as literary scholars, staked as our profession is in the secularization narrative. With modernity came secularism, so the story goes, the waning of religious belief and its relegation to the private sphere.⁴⁵ We have accepted an oversimplification of Matthew Arnold's prophecy, that "to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us," literature would soon replace "what passes with us now as religion."⁴⁶

In part responding to the power of political Christianity in the U.S., Charles Taylor, Talal Asad, José Casanova, and others in the last decade have begun to reevaluate the secularization thesis and reexamine the relationship between the religious and secular.⁴⁷ These studies of

44. Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," 1967, *Contributions in Philosophy* 83 (2001): 3-8; Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). As Jürgen Habermas, "Religion in the Public Sphere," *European Journal of Philosophy* 14, no.1 (2006), 15, writes of "secular citizens" we might write of secular literary scholars: "As long as [they] are convinced that religious traditions and religious communities are to a certain extent archaic relics of pre-modern societies that continue to exist in the present, they will understand freedom of religion," and I would here include "the study of religion in literature," only "as the cultural version of the conservation of a species in danger of becoming extinct."

45. Michael W. Kaufmann, "The Religious, the Secular, and Literary Studies: Rethinking the Secularization Narrative in Histories of the Profession," *New Literary History* 38, no. 4 (Autumn 2007): 607-627.

46. Matthew Arnold, "The Study of Poetry," in *Culture and Anarchy and Other Selected Prose* (New York: Penguin, 2015), par. 1, Kindle; Tracy Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 2, makes a similar argument about the secularization narrative and the field of literary studies.

47. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007); Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994). See also Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the*

secularism and what some have deemed our “postsecular” era have inspired literary scholars to address how religion and spirituality shape American literature of the later twentieth and twenty-first centuries.⁴⁸ With *Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison*, John McClure traces religion in its pluralist, “postsecular” formations as a way for writers to envision the possibilities of a new individualist, progressive religious landscape.⁴⁹ In *Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion since 1960*, Amy Hungerford examines expressions of belief detached from any religious tradition, what she describes as “belief without content, belief in meaninglessness, belief for its own sake.”⁵⁰ For Hungerford, these expressions of belief allow writers to bolster the authority of their texts where postmodern ideas of language and literature would undercut it. They also allow writers to avoid critiquing the belief systems they draw from. These scholars have tended to find writers eschewing established religion in favor of a novel or nonspecific form of belief.⁵¹ Like Hungerford, they have concluded that contemporary American

Feminist Subject (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Jürgen Habermas, “Secularism’s Crisis of Faith: Notes on Post-Secular Society,” *New Perspectives Quarterly* 25 (2008): 17-29. I return to these studies of religion, secularism and the “postsecular” in the following section considering religious discourse in the public sphere.

48. Habermas, “Secularism’s Crisis of Faith,” 17-20. I define and discuss Habermas’ “postsecular society” in the following section.

49. John McClure, *Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007).

50. Amy Hungerford, *Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion since 1960* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 137.

51. See as well James W. Coleman, *Faithful Vision: Treatments of the Sacred, Spiritual, and Supernatural in Twentieth-Century African American Fiction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006); Bridget Kevane, *Profane & Sacred: Latino/a American Writers Reveal the Interplay of the Secular and the Religious* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008); Teresa Delgadillo, *Spiritual Mestizaje: Religion, Gender, Race, and Nation in Contemporary Chicana Narrative* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); Norman Finkelstein,

literature shirks the responsibility of engaging Christian conservatives with any depth or efficacy.

In If God Meant to Interfere: American Literature and the Rise of the Christian Right, Christopher Douglas recognizes the growing coalition of Christian conservatives in the late 1970s and the religiously-inflected political debates of the decades following as key contexts for understanding contemporary American literature. Douglas argues that postwar American literature and its primary ideological commitments, postmodernism and multiculturalism, provide the Christian Right with strategies for evading liberal or leftist critique. Christian conservatives make universal claims on morality, he writes for example, and then demand protection for those claims on the basis of a pluralist respect for all cultural groups. Douglas' work argues for addressing how U.S. literature responds to the rise of the Christian Right. Following Douglas, in this dissertation, I consider how that literature critiques and reimagines Christian political discourse.

Few contemporary texts address the Christian Right directly or feature Christian conservatives as main characters, as does Oates in *A Book of American Martyrs*. Yet a number of contemporary novels and stories, represented by Richard Powers' *The Echo Maker*, George Saunders' "Escape from Spiderhead" and *Lincoln in the Bardo*, Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, and Helena María Viramontes' "The Moths," as well as Oates' *A Book of American Martyrs*, critique Christian language. Some engage with an explicitly political discourse, like anti-evolutionism or that of the anti-abortion movement. Others consider a theological discourse, like the language of predestination and its political

On Mount Vision: Forms of the Sacred in Contemporary American Poetry (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2010).

implications, or the language surrounding a Christian practice like baptism or a traditional prayer. In any case, they associate Christian language with the politics of Christian conservatism.

These narratives critique Christian conservatism, its politics and its discourses. They also reimagine how religious language, especially Christian language, can work politically. They answer Christian creationism, climate change denial, and apocalyptic rhetoric about the United States' role in the Middle East. They reinterpret Christian language to consider the relationship between mind and body, the purpose of human existence, as does Oates' Naomi, and how these inform environmental and foreign policy. They condemn Christian defenses of deregulation and weakening the social safety net. Yet they turn to Christian language to explore free will, moral responsibility, and whether humans are selfish by nature. They consider how these questions inform economic policy and drive polarization and the deterioration of political discourse. They challenge the white, Christian nationalist foundations of the heteropatriarchal family, and they reimagine the bonds that make a family in Christian language.

These texts depict Christian discourse as a feedback loop that dismisses outside perspectives and demonizes opponents. Yet they find in Christian conservative discourse a window to understanding the Christian Right's motivations. They imagine how Christian language could promote dialogue and empathy, create community, and speak for those Christian conservatism would marginalize. Christian conservative discourse has powerfully shaped key political debates since the rise of the Christian Right. These texts recognize and engage with that power. They understand, critique, and answer the Christian Right in its own language.

Religious Discourse in the Public Sphere

The rise of politically active religion in the United States in the late 1970s and its impact on political discourse have challenged scholars' understanding of religion's role in a secular

society. We can no longer assume that as societies become more modern, religion will fade from public life. As Talal Asad has observed, “If anything is agreed upon, it is that a straightforward narrative of progress from the religious to the secular is no longer acceptable.”⁵²

Instead, scholars have begun to reexamine what we mean by secular and religious in the West.⁵³ We could understand a secular society as one in which “belief in God, or in the transcendent in any form, is contested; it is an option among many,” as Charles Taylor has described.⁵⁴ Secular may describe a society in which religious belief is in decline, as the secularization thesis assumes. Or it may describe a society that actively marginalizes religion as a harmful influence in society.⁵⁵

In the United States, religion, and so secularism, has been defined according to Protestant terms, that privileged and dominant religion since the nation’s beginnings. Tracy Fessenden has argued that in the United States, “specific forms of Protestant belief and practice” have come to stand in for Christianity, and Christianity for religion, so that both religion and secularism are defined in a way that accommodates and protects Protestantism to the exclusion of other

52. Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 1.

53. Both Taylor and Casanova, cited below, are explicit about these ideas of the secular, secularization, and secularism as specific to Western democracies. Leerom Medovoi and Elizabeth Bentley, eds., *Religion, Secularism, and Political Belonging* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), is a recent consideration of the independent trajectories secularism has taken in non-Western countries and the global influence of Western ideas of secularism.

54. Charles Taylor, “Western Secularity,” *Rethinking Secularism*, eds. Craig Calhoun, Mark Jurgensmeyer, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 49.

55. Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, 60-67. Secularization and secularism follow suit, Casanova writes, so that secularization could describe a neutral separation of church and state and its promotion. It could describe the process, and our certainty of, religion’s inevitable decline. Or it could describe the relegation of religion to the private sphere, its exclusion from public and political life, and support for such interventions.

expressions of Christianity or religion.⁵⁶ This has been true since the New England Puritans sought to define American identity in terms of white Protestant identity, Fessenden demonstrates.⁵⁷ Made in the image of Protestantism, “religion” is belief in God or a higher power and “an acceptable or, in some versions, a ‘rational’ morality,” as Taylor describes it. It is neither fanatical nor superstitious, and it is private. Religion in the West, Taylor writes, develops according to “the pressure to adopt a more personal, committed, and inward form of religion.”⁵⁸ This religion complements the goals of a liberal democracy, instructing citizens in suitable moral values while otherwise removed from public life.

As scholars have troubled our categories of the secular and religious and considered whether they can sufficiently describe the kinds of public, political religious beliefs and practices that have persisted in the West, some have instead described ours as a “postsecular” society. Jürgen Habermas describes a “post-secular society” as one in which citizens live in a secular

56. Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption*, 4.

57. Fessenden, 18-19. The legacy of those efforts has been such that not only do our cultural understanding and legal protections of religion favor Protestantism, but that other religious traditions in the United States have adapted to become more legible in Protestant terms. As Catherine Albanese, *America: Religions and Religion*, 5th ed. (Boston: Wadsworth, 2012), 275-6, writes, Protestantism is in many ways “the one religion of the country” in that it has shaped other religious traditions in the U.S. after its own image. “Although many times unaware of it,” Albanese explains, these traditions participate in an American civil religion derived from Protestant beliefs and have even taken “on some of the characteristics of the Protestant mainstream.” Robert N. Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” *Daedalus* (1967): 1-21, classically defined American civil religion as the “set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals” expressing “certain common elements of religious orientation that the great majority of Americans share” and that “have played a crucial role in the development of American institutions and still provide a religious dimension for the whole fabric of American life, including the political sphere”—and that draw heavily on the Protestant tradition.

58. Taylor, “Western Secularity,” 35-37. Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 47-8, critiques Clifford Geertz’s long-standard definition of religion on the grounds that Geertz privileges Western religions and so interiority over community.

society and yet recognize that religion has not and will not disappear in the foreseeable future. It is a society that no longer believes “cultural and social modernization can advance only at the cost of the public influence and personal relevance of religion.”⁵⁹ Habermas’ postsecular society is prescriptive; he calls both religious and secular people to work to incorporate religion more productively in the public sphere, that realm of public discourse where public opinion and political intentions form.⁶⁰ In literary studies, the postsecular has come to describe an often hybrid, noninstitutional religiosity or spirituality, as in John McClure’s *Partial Faiths*, where “postsecular” designates religion after secularism, religion after the end of religion.⁶¹ In both senses, the postsecular attempts to reconceptualize the relationship between secularism and religious belief and practice in light of religion’s continued influence in public life.

As part of a global resurgence of political religion in the last forty years, the rise of the Christian Right has challenged our understandings of secularism and religion. As with

59. Habermas, “Secularism’s Crisis of Faith,” 20.

60. Habermas, “Secularism’s Crisis of Faith,” 26-8. Habermas, “The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article (1964),” *New German Critique* 3 (Autumn 1974): 49, defines the public sphere as “a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed.” See also Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991).

61. See also Kathryn Ludwig, “Postsecularism and a Prophetic Sensibility,” *Christianity and Literature* 58, no. 2 (Winter 2009): 226-233; Brian Jansen and Hollie Adams, “Good Work and Good Works: Work and the Postsecular in George Saunders’s *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline*,” *European Journal of American Studies* 13, no. 2 (2018); Manav Ratti, *The Postsecular Imagination: Postcolonialism, Religion, and Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2013). Considering the merits and limits of this approach, see Tracy Fessenden, “The Problem of the Postsecular,” *American Literary History* 26, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 154-167; Lori Branch, “Postcritical and Postsecular: The Horizon of Belief,” *Religion and Literature* 48, no. 2 (Summer 2016): 160-167; Ray Horton, “‘Rituals of the Ordinary’: Marilynne Robinson’s Aesthetics of Belief and Finitude,” *PMLA/Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 132, no. 1 (2017): 119-134.

Habermas' "post-secular society," it has also challenged scholars to confront whether and how we should involve religion in politics and the public sphere.⁶² Since the 1980s, scholars have debated whether religious language belongs in political debate, or whether for the purposes of political dialogue religious people should "translate" their religious perspectives into "generally accessible language," as Habermas has suggested.⁶³ Yet they have also debated what may be lost in translation when religious people attempt to put their views in secular language. Religious traditions may have a "special power to articulate moral intuitions, especially with regard to vulnerable forms of communal life," Habermas writes, or a particular "potential" for "transporting possible truth contents" into political dialogue.⁶⁴ Habermas and others have

62. Scholars understand the Christian Right in the context of the growing influence of political religion globally, including the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in the Middle East, the Iranian Revolution in 1979, the September 11th terrorist attacks, and an increase in Muslim immigrants to Europe; the rise of Hindu nationalism in India; and the spread of charismatic evangelicalism in Latin America. See Walters and Kersley, *Religion in the Public Sphere*, 2; Habermas, "Notes on a Post-Secular Society," 18-19.

63. Habermas, "Religion in the Public Sphere," 9-10. Habermas describes this as a language most people (both in and outside a particular religious community) could understand. For John Rawls, "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited," *The University of Chicago Law Review* 64, no. 3 (Summer 1997): 769-771, political debate should be governed by public reason; that is, whatever our individual reasons for supporting a particular political position, we ought publicly to provide support we think others may reasonably accept.

64. Habermas, "Religion in the Public Sphere," 10. Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen, "Introduction," in *Rethinking Secularism*, eds. Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen, (Oxford University Press, 2011), 18, write that we must ask whether our democratic society "loses its capacity to integrate public opinion into its decision-making structure if it can't include religious voices." Are we "deprived of possible creative resources, insights, and ethical orientations if [the democratic public sphere] isn't informed by ideas with roots in religion?"

considered the problems posed by religious political discourse, and they have considered its potential to enrich political dialogue.⁶⁵

The novels and stories I consider in this dissertation are critical of the role Christian language has played in political discourse. As they depict it, Christian conservative discourse assures the faithful they have special access to indisputable truth. It fails to be self-critical and flattens nuance. They portray Christian Right discourse shutting out dissent and stifling consideration for others' perspectives. They describe Christian language as divisive, even violent, painting outsiders as enemies of God, insiders a remnant besieged.

They also turn to Christian language to ask what it means to be human. They find in Christian discourse a vocabulary for the sense of self or even soul at the heart of how we experience consciousness, for exploring free will, and for contemplating the meaning of human existence. They find in Christian and other religious languages the words to imagine relationships and communities that defy and transcend the conditions of oppression meant to divide and dismantle them. They find religious language, including Christian language, speaking

65. Habermas, "Religion in the Public Sphere"; Habermas, "Secularism's Crisis of Faith: Notes on Post-Secular Society"; John Rawls, "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited,"; Rawls, "Political Liberalism: Reply to Habermas," *The Journal of Philosophy* 92, no. 3 (1995): 132-180; Robert Audi, *Religion in the Public Square: The Place of Religious Convictions in Political Debate* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997); Craig Calhoun, "Secularism, Citizenship, and the Public Sphere," *The Hedgehog Review* 10, no. 3 (2008); Judith Butler, Jürgen Habermas, Charles Taylor, and Cornel West, *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); Giorgi Areshidze, "Taking Religion Seriously? Habermas on Religious Translation and Cooperative Learning in Post-secular Society," *American Political Science Review* 111, no. 4 (2017): 724-737. Recent reconsiderations of this debate can be found in James Walters and Esther Kersley, eds., *Religion and the Public Sphere: New Conversations* (New York: Routledge, 2018); and Camil Ungureanu and Paolo Monti, eds., *Contemporary Political Philosophy and Religion: Between Public Reason and Pluralism* (New York: Routledge, 2018). Critical of Rawls and Habermas' approach is Rosi Braidotti, Bolette Blaagaard, Tobijn de Graauw, and Eva Midden, eds., *Transformations of Religion and the Public Sphere: Postsecular Publics* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014).

for people and communities for whom Christianity has been a tool of oppression, and for whom reclaiming the language is central to the critique. They find language for categorical truth and justice where postmodernism offers only skepticism and irony, and they find an ethical mandate for empathy and selflessness.

These writers consider what is irreducible in religious language. They weigh how religious languages can be useful in, not just a hindrance to political dialogue, and they imagine how we might access that potential. The rise of the Christian Right and Christian conservative discourse have tested prevailing categories of the religious and secular and resisted the accepted narrative of religion's gradual decline, its disappearance from public and political life. The Christian Right has forced us to contend with the role religion should play in political debate, and it has prompted writers to confront what religious language could do for politics.

Religious Discourses in Contemporary American Literature

Chapter one examines Christian creationist and apocalyptic discourses in *The Echo Maker*, by Richard Powers. The fight against evolution has animated Christian conservatives since the early twentieth century when fundamentalists' split from mainline Protestantism culminated in the "Scopes Monkey Trial." In Christian creationist discourse, Powers finds deep skepticism of scientific authority and a fundamental faith in human exceptionalism. Both, for Powers, have fed climate change denial and sanctioned environmental degradation. In Christian Right rhetoric following the September 11th terrorist attacks, Powers finds a story of the United States engaged in a cosmic battle between good and evil based on Christian conservative beliefs about the coming apocalypse, one that justified and sacralized the United States' invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq.

Yet *The Echo Maker* also uses Christian language to explore the relationship between mental phenomena, consciousness and the self, and the physical brain, what philosophers call the “mind-body problem.”⁶⁶ As Powers depicts in *The Echo Maker*, the mind-body problem has been illuminated and complicated by advances in cognitive neuroscience, behavioral genetics, and evolutionary psychology as these fields seek the physical correlates and causes of experiences we once believed immaterial. Powers’ novel also turns to Christian language to contemplate the meaning of human existence in light of evolutionary theory. We evolved randomly; what, then, is our purpose?

These are the same kinds of questions Christian creationist and apocalyptic discourses answer for Christian conservatives, the novel suggests. These discourses reassure Christian conservatives that humans are different from other living things. They articulate their desire to believe we have an essential, irreducible essence we call the self or soul. They speak to their need to believe pain has a purpose and good will triumph. They weave a coherent narrative from chaos. Powers’ non-Christian characters use Christian language reluctantly, cynically, when they lack another to describe these experiences. *The Echo Maker* explores why Christian language has such political purchase in the United States by exploring what it does for those who speak it.

In George Saunders’ *Tenth of December*, the subject of chapter two, Saunders turns his characteristically sharp satiric sights on Christian conservative discourse. Christian language keeps reality at bay for Saunders’ characters. It is what they tell themselves to feel good about bad choices and ignore the harm they cause others. Yet in “Escape from Spiderhead,” Saunders

66. Kirk Ludwig, “The Mind-Body Problem: An Overview,” in *The Blackwell Guide to Philosophy of Mind*, eds. Stephen P. Stich and Ted A. Warfield (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 1; “Dualism,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, August 19, 2003, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/dualism/>, par. 2-6.

uses Christian language to ask whether we have free will and whether we can be held responsible for our choices. The story puts the problem of free will in the context of the same scientific advances framing *The Echo Maker*. Since Benjamin Libet's famous experiments in the early 1980s found subjects subconsciously chose when they would flick their wrists before they knew it themselves, cognitive neuroscience has questioned whether our choices are the result of cognitive processes beyond our conscious knowledge or control, a kind of neurological determinism.⁶⁷ "Escape from Spiderhead" also puts the problem of free will in Christian terms of predestination. In a pivotal scene, the story's narrator, Jeff, describes feeling like the course of his life was decided before his birth by forces insurmountable. "Spiderhead" weaves from the discourses of predestination and biological determinism a critique of a capitalist society promising free choice and personal responsibility where for many, choices are few.

These are discourses deeply at odds over human nature and origins. Christian conservatives have decried evolutionary theory for reducing humans to animals driven by the selfish instinct for survival. Christian conservative media have closed ranks against scientific expertise and shut out dissent, creating the kind of Christian conservative echo chamber Saunders parodies in the rest of *Tenth of December*. Yet Saunders places scientific and Christian theological discourses in conversation. The same is true of Saunders' *Lincoln in the Bardo*, wherein a Protestant understanding of death, judgement, and the afterlife joins the Tibetan Buddhist concept of the bardo, a liminal state between life and death. In *Lincoln in the Bardo*, these competing cosmologies bring to life the same questions "Spiderhead" poses about choice, agency, and moral responsibility. In both "Escape from Spiderhead" and *Lincoln in the Bardo*,

67. Walter Glannon, ed., *Free Will and the Brain: Neuroscientific, Philosophical, and Legal Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 3.

Saunders depicts Christian discourses in dialogue with others, to illustrate the absurd contradictions of neoliberalism and the limits of determinism.

Chapter three begins with Robinson's essays about Charles Darwin, evolutionary psychology and sociobiology, and these fields' attempts to explain the human mind and social behavior in terms of evolutionary adaptations. According to this kind of genetic determinism, which Robinson calls "Darwinism," we are fooled by our own minds into believing we choose freely or act selflessly. Altruism is only self-interest by another name. For Robinson, Darwinism undermines and devalues subjective experience. As it asserts we are selfish by nature, built for competition and bettered by it, it feeds conservative small government, free market ambitions of deregulation and dismantling the social safety net.

Robinson indicts the Christian Right for a baseless crusade against evolution that has squandered whatever credibility Christianity once had to engage with science and ethics. All the while, she writes, Christian conservatives have lent moral authority to economic policies that deepen inequality and target the vulnerable. Robinson identifies in Christian conservative discourse the same Darwinist assumptions about human nature that breed competition and contempt rather than cooperation. Yet she finds in the writings of John Calvin and the Puritans a Christian basis for humanism. From Calvin and the Puritans, Robinson argues we are capable of moral reflection and choice and that our models of the brain must account for our experiences of the mind.

I read *Gilead* as Robinson's response to Darwinism and to Christian conservatism. In Congregationalist pastor Ames' relationship with his prodigal godson, Jack, the novel affirms that people can change for the better and asserts the power of how we see one another. The novel answers Christian conservative political discourse made in the image of determinism with Ames'

conversations with Jack about predestination and in Ames' blessing for his godson. *Gilead* imagines Christian discourse that respects and hopes to learn from others' beliefs, religious or otherwise, and that looks for insight in Christianity that could be meaningful to people outside of the Christian tradition.

Margaret Atwood's well-known critique of "family values" in *The Handmaid's Tale* opens chapter four. *The Handmaid's Tale* diagnoses the Christian nationalism woven into the family values movement. For Christian nationalists, a selective narrative of the United States' founding era and especially the Puritans' mission in North America prove America was founded as a Christian nation and that Christian conservative values should be American values. Whereas Marilynne Robinson attempts to reclaim the Puritans from popular stereotypes, Margaret Atwood considers the myth of American Puritanism. *The Handmaid's Tale* depicts the power of that myth to underwrite Christian conservatives' campaign against feminism, abortion, and gay rights in the 1980s. *The Handmaid's Tale* also depicts, and uncritically reproduces, how "family values" have given cover to segregationist and white supremacist ambitions among the Christian Right. The novel's critical engagement with American religious history does not extend to racial history.

The Handmaid's Tale is a secularist warning against political religion. The novel's narrator, Offred, leans on Christian language to imagine she can communicate with someone outside the authoritarian state holding her captive. Yet that language fails to sustain even this brief mental escape. Neither *The Handmaid's Tale* nor its sequel, *The Testaments* finds an answer to white Christian nationalism in Christian language.

Chapter four pairs *The Handmaid's Tale* with Helena María Viramontes' short story "The Moths." In "The Moths," Viramontes confronts conservative Catholic beliefs about gender and

sexuality in the Mexican American community.⁶⁸ The majority white evangelicalism of the Christian Right is not the only expression of Christian conservatism in the United States, though it is the most politically powerful. Latinx Catholics are even less affiliated with the Christian Right than are white Catholics, who have mobilized alongside white conservative Protestants in modest numbers. Yet Latinx and Mexican American Catholics tend to share the Christian Right's socially conservative beliefs about traditional gender roles and the family.

The unnamed narrator of "The Moths" is outcast from her Mexican American family because she fails to live up to their conservative Catholic beliefs about a woman's place in the home. Her father justifies his abuse by his Catholic beliefs, yet she transforms Catholic rituals to help her make sense of and survive it. She reinterprets rosary prayers and baptism in the tradition of *mujerista* theology, a Latina feminist liberation theology. As she incorporates imagery from Aztec religion and *curanderismo*, a popular Latinx spiritual healing practice, into a Catholic baptism, the story confronts the Catholic Church's role in colonizing the Americas and suppressing indigenous religions. In "The Moths," religious discourses have the potential to speak back to one another, and to speak for suffering. Religious language allows the narrator to imagine an alternative basis for Chicanx community, one that transcends the strictures of white family values.

In conclusion, I consider how these texts can help us understand the evolution of the Christian Right since the election of Donald Trump. Bringing Octavia Butler's *Parable* novels, *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*, and Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of the*

68. As I describe in chapter four, some Mexican Americans identify as "Chicano" and "Chicana," terms growing out of the Chicano movement of the 1960s and 70s, to express their political engagement and cultural pride. I use Chicanx/Chicanxs to refer to Mexican Americans of any gender who identify in this way. I use Mexican American to denote people of Mexican descent living in the United States, without this explicit political orientation.

Living God alongside *The Handmaid's Tale*, I find in these novels a prophetic vision, the likeness of today's Christian conservatism. They identify in the Christian Right of the past forty years the Christian nationalism fundamental to Christian Trumpism.

Together with novels, short stories, and essays by Powers, Saunders, Robinson, and Viramontes, these dystopias diagnose the increasing political polarization of these years, in which Christian conservative discourse has becoming increasingly combative and insular. Through Christian language, this literature attempts to understand and speak into this political and religious silo, the seemingly separate world of Christian conservatism, unmoored from the reality of Trump's reelection loss amid a deadly pandemic and a national reckoning with racism in the United States.

Contemporary U.S. Literature confronts the rise of the Christian Right and the power of Christian language in political dialogue. As this literature critiques and reinterprets Christian conservative discourse, it reimagines religion's role in politics.

CREATION AND APOCALYPSE, FAITH IN THE MIND AND FINDING PURPOSE IN
RICHARD POWERS' *THE ECHO MAKER*

When Richard Powers' *The Echo Maker* opens, Mark Schluter is in critical condition after a serious, mysterious car accident. His sister Karin comes home to care for him, only to find that Mark does not believe she is his sister. He has developed Capgras Syndrome, a disorder in which a patient believes a family member or other loved one has been replaced by an imposter. As one of Mark's doctors explains, "The Capgras sufferer almost always misidentifies his loved ones. A Mother or father. A spouse. The part of his brain that recognizes faces is intact. So is his memory. But the part that processes emotional association has somehow disconnected from them."¹ Mark recognizes that Karin looks and acts like his sister, but something does not feel right about her. The only way he can make sense of this disconnect is to believe she is a double.

Mark's brain injury—his experience of living with it, his sister's difficulty coming to terms with it, and his cognitive neurologist Gerald Weber's attempts to study and treat it—sets the stage for *The Echo Maker* to explore the consequences of recent neuroscientific advances in mapping and making sense of the human brain. These advances have allowed the field to broach what Weber calls "the basic riddle of conscious existence: How does the brain erect a mind, and how does the mind erect everything else? Do we have free will? What is the self, and where are

1. Richard Powers, *The Echo Maker* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2006), 61.

the neurological correlates of consciousness?”² At the novel’s outset, Weber contends that what we would call the coherent “self” or even “soul” is a fiction, and what we would call “will” along with it. By its conclusion, however, the novel suggests that our persistent belief in such fictions has a reality and significance of its own.

Critics of Powers’ novels have traced his abiding concerns with cognition and the construction of the self, and particularly how he reflects and explores such ideas in his narrative techniques.³ In their work on *Generosity* and *The Goldbug Variations* respectively, Everett

2. Powers, *The Echo Maker*, 134.

3. Laura Bieger, “Belonging and Transnational American Studies: Reflections on a Critical Approach and a Reading of Richard Powers’s *The Echo Maker*,” in *Re-Framing the Transnational Turn in American Studies*, eds. Winfried Fluck, Donald E. Pease, and John Carlos Rowe (Hanover: Dartmouth College Press, 2011), 219–242, describes how Mark constructs a self through narration. Similarly, Antje Kley, “Narratives of Recognition in Contemporary American Fiction: Edward P. Jones’s *The Known World* and Richard Powers’ *The Echo Maker*,” *Amerikastudien=American Studies* 57, no. 4 (2012): 643–661, considers how Powers’ characters construct themselves narratively in relationship to one another. Conversely, Joseph Tabbi, “Afterthoughts on *The Echo Maker*,” in *Intersections: Essays on Richard Powers*, eds. Stephen Burn and Peter Dempsey (Funks Grove, Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press), 219–229, argues that Powers fails to do enough to show in his narrative mode the disjointedness of the self. Luc Herman and Bart Vervaeck, “Capturing Capgras: *The Echo Maker* by Richard Powers,” *Style* 43, no. 3 (Fall 2009): 407–428, consider how the novel’s several narrators function as a mirror for the mind, as Weber describes it, managing multiple “stories” to present one fictionally coherent narrative. Julie Hawk, “The Observer’s Tale: Dr. Weber’s Narrative (and Metanarrative) Trajectory in Richard Powers’s *The Echo Maker*,” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 54, no. 1 (2013): 18, describes Weber’s struggles to narrate his subjects and contends that his crisis of narration extends to a broader, “species-level” narrative crisis.

Charles B. Harris, “The Story of the Self: *The Echo Maker* and Neurological Realism,” in *Intersections: Essays on Richard Powers*, edited by Stephen Burn and Peter Dempsey (Funks Grove, Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 2008), 230–259, describes the novel as “neurological realism,” a novel about and with a form reflecting how the brain works, in the tradition of the psychological realism about the mind. In response, see Julian Murphet, “A Loose Democracy in the Skull: Characterology and Neuroscience,” in *Mindful Aesthetics: Literature and the Science of Mind*, eds. Chris Danta and Helen Growth (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 189–205, and Sabine Sielki, “The Subject of Literature, or: (Re)Cognition in Richard Powers’ (Science) Fiction,” in *Ideas of Order: Narrative Patterns in the Novels of Richard Powers*, eds. Antje Kley and Jan D. Kucharzewski (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2012), 239–262. Marco Roth, “The Rise of the Neuronovel,” *N+1 Magazine* 8 (Fall 2009) uses “neuronovel” in a similar

Hamner and J.D. Thomas recognize resonances between scientists' belief in their ability to understand human identity and purpose from the genome and (a nonspecific, broadly) religious faith or awe.⁴ Nonetheless, scholars have yet to consider how Powers' novels engage with the political context surrounding the religious languages they invoke—in *The Echo Maker*, distinctively evangelical and fundamentalist Christian discourses inseparable from Christian conservative politics.⁵

way as does Harris, and Christian Knirsch, "Richard Powers's *The Echo Maker*: Reassessing the Neuronovel in American Literature," *Amerikastudien=American Studies* 59, no. 1 (2014): 47-62, dissents on that approach.

4. Everett Hamner, "The Predisposed Agency of Genomic Fiction," *American Literature* 83, no. 2 (June 2011): 413–441, writes about a mystical faith in science's ability to explain the self in *Generosity*, and he briefly addresses this sort of faith in tension with more traditional religious points of view that would discount it. J. D. Thomas, "Science and the Sacred: Intertextuality in Richard Powers's *The Gold Bug Variations*," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 51, no. 1 (2010): 18-3, traces a similar sort of non-specific, mystical faith in science in *The Gold Bug Variations*. Richard Hardack, "'Militant Expectations': Childhood's End and Millenarianism in Richard Powers' *Operation Wandering Soul*," *Studies in American Fiction* 36, no. 2 (2008): 221–238, writes about millenarian and apocalyptic language in *Operation Wandering Soul* as Powers' way to depict society moving toward destruction and a paradox of narrative, that it can attempt to subvert or ameliorate destruction and yet also necessarily must foreclose and conclude itself. Like Hamner and Thomas, Hardack does not broach the religio-political context of this language.

5. As I discuss later in the chapter, creationism comes out of turn-of-the-century fundamentalism, which then encompassed what we now think of as evangelicals and fundamentalists. After their mid-century split from fundamentalists and intentional re-brand, evangelicals are the larger group and wider term (though not without dispute), and I refer to creationism primarily as a modern-day evangelical movement, with modern-day fundamentalists also participating in and contributing to the movement. When possible, I will refer to people subscribing to this doctrine simply as creationists. The sort of apocalyptic beliefs that concern *The Echo Maker*—premillennial dispensationalism—come primarily out of modern-day fundamentalism, with influence from Pentecostalism, but these beliefs also influence evangelicals. Again, when possible, I refer specifically to the doctrine and those who subscribe to it rather than to fundamentalists or evangelicals as a group. When appropriate, I also use "Christian conservatives" as an umbrella term for the fundamentalists, Pentecostals, and evangelicals that tend to subscribe to the creationism and apocalypticism *The Echo Maker* references, and I use "Christian Right," as elsewhere in this dissertation, to describe the mostly

In *The Echo Maker*, Powers uses Christian creationist discourse to represent willful ignorance of science, especially evolution and climate change. He also invokes fundamentalist Christian apocalyptic language surrounding 9/11 and the “War on Terror” that framed these events as the judgment of a Christian God, a fulfillment of end times prophecy. In the ways Powers uses these conservative Christian discourses, he critiques how they have bred suspicion of mainstream science and impeded urgently needed environmental regulation. He critiques, too, how they have sanctioned violence in the years following 9/11 and attempted to lend the U.S. military response a sanctity beyond question.

Yet over the course of the novel, conservative evangelical language of creation and design becomes Powers’ way to express the willful, useful ignorance that allows us to maintain a meaningful sense of self, despite increasingly unsettling neuroscientific conclusions about the human mind and agency. Christian fundamentalist language of prophecy and providence becomes the language Powers uses to express his characters’ fears that agency is an illusion given the tenets of biological determinism, and their persisting belief in the meaningfulness of their choices, determined or not. The novel uses this same language to articulate the anxieties neuroscientific advances have raised, even to argue for the enduring importance of our ideas of the self and will. Conservative Christian political discourse becomes *The Echo Maker*’s language for neurophilosophical inquiry—for asking what we are and why we are here.

(but not solely) white evangelical Christians with increasing political influence in the GOP since the late 1970s.

Religious affiliation in *The Echo Maker* somewhat reflects the varied and complicated dynamics of religious and political influence among these various Christian groups. The Schluter parents and several other minor characters are described loosely as Pentecostal, Bonnie appears to attend a fundamentalist church, still other characters subscribe to conservative Christian beliefs about science and the end times without any connection to a specific denomination, and Weber grew up Catholic and retains an understanding of Christian conservative views of science for that reason.

Christian Language and Science Skepticism

On the night of Mark's accident, a nurse ushers Karin out of the trauma unit and into the waiting room, where she encounters a group of men praying for another patient. There, the novel introduces its critique of Christian conservative beliefs about science and its focus on the problems and possibilities of religious language.

Back in the waiting room, [Karin] witnessed eight middle-aged men in flannel standing in a ring, their slow eyes scanning the floor. A murmur issued from them, wind teasing the lonely screens of a farmhouse. The sound rose and fell in waves. It took her a moment to realize: a prayer circle, for another victim who'd come in just after Mark. A makeshift Pentecostal service, covering anything that scalpels, drugs, and lasers couldn't. The gift of tongues descended on the circle of men, like small talk at a family reunion. Home was the place you could never escape, even in a nightmare.⁶

Karin cannot decipher the language she encounters in the waiting room, but she can gather what it must mean to those who speak it. For the members of the prayer circle, this language is a medium of healing—healing beyond what modern medicine, pharmaceuticals, and technology can accomplish. It communicates these men's hope beyond what medicine can offer, and they believe it will bring physical healing should medicine fail. The religious language Karin encounters in the hospital waiting room steps in where science leaves off, to make sense of or solve what is beyond its reach.

Yet while Karin understands what the men's language must mean to them, both from context and from her familiarity with Pentecostalism, it remains nonetheless inaccessible to her. In fact, Karin describes initially hearing not speech but sounds—murmurs, waves, wind—that only hint at language. She is unable to make sense of the men's conversation even before “the gift of tongues descend[s],” when they could plausibly be speaking to one another in English.

6. Powers, *The Echo Maker*, 8.

Later in the novel, Karin turns to Christian idioms and images as she attempts to understand Mark's brain injury, especially as she runs up against the limits of science to cure him or even explain what has happened to him. That is, she turns to the same religious language for the same reasons as do the men in the prayer circle. Yet in this early scene, though Karin may be able to surmise the significance of their speech generally, she does not understand its specific content, and she certainly cannot communicate in this language herself. She hardly even recognizes it as a medium of communication.

In the same passage, Karin points toward why she would not use Christian expressions in the same way as these men. Karin feels her parents often neglected her and Mark because of what they believed. From what she recounts about her childhood, her parents were most likely conservative Pentecostal or fundamentalist Christians.⁷ She associates Christian language with her parents' faith, and she resents it for that reason. Her description of the men praying reflects these associations. She thinks that the men's language reminds her of "small talk at a family reunion," forced conversations among far-flung relatives, loosely bonded and rarely gathered. In fact, as Karin recounts later, her parents would likely have reacted to Mark's hospitalization as these praying men do. She remembers how when Mark spoke with a lisp as a child, her mother

7. Karin does not name her parents' specific denomination, referring to her mother only as a "zealot." Their apocalyptic beliefs as Karin describes them would place the Schluters as fundamentalists, as would Joan's skepticism of mainstream culture (she "looked on college as a form of witchcraft"). Karin also later calls her mother "a big, big speaker in tongues," which would locate her in a charismatic Protestant faith, most likely Pentecostalism. Though Pentecostalism is distinct from fundamentalism in that Pentecostals believe in emotional worship and expression that fundamentalists reject, these groups are often aligned politically, particularly in terms of apocalyptic beliefs. See Joel Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 8-9; Jonathan R. Baer, "Review: American Dispensationalism's Perpetually Imminent End Times*," *The Journal of Religion* 87, no. 2 (April 2007): 248-264; and Stephen Spector, *Evangelicals and Israel: The Story of American Christian Zionism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

“made him sleep under a wall exorcised with a cross anointed with oil, which shed droplets on his head as he slept,” rather than securing Mark speech therapy or other medical help.⁸ This is the home the prayer circle represents to Karin, the home she has hoped to escape before the “nightmare” of Mark’s accident forces her to return.

Karin’s concluding thought about the prayer circle, that “home was the place you couldn’t escape, even in a nightmare,” is ironic given how her relationship with Christian language will transform over the course of the novel. When Karin describes waiting outside the intensive care unit for Mark as a “nightmare,” she suggests that she has found herself in a situation both terrible and surreal. In the midst of this difficulty, she is confronted with the “home” the praying men represent to her, when the religious belief they remind her of is the last thing she wants to encounter. Yet, as the novel progresses, it becomes clear that it is in just such situations—the nightmarish, the surreal, the experiences that take Karin beyond what she can understand or explain—that religious language becomes most useful to her, becomes even her refuge.

Still, Karin is perplexed and repulsed by Christian language so long as it is entwined with her memories of her parents, and more broadly with Christian conservative beliefs about mainstream science and medicine that her parents’ views evoke. In this scene, when Karin associates Christian language with her parents’ conservative beliefs, she points to the work the novel has yet to do: address the ways Christian conservatives shape debates about science and the self in this period, disentangling their rhetoric from their political views and tapping into its rhetorical power for asking questions about what makes us human.

8. Powers, *The Echo Maker*, 25.

Amy Hungerford's thesis, that literature of this period deals in the signifiers of religious belief divorced from the specific religious institutions or commitments that would typically accompany them, makes sense of this scene—in part. At first, the religious group's speech reads as a clear example of what she calls “belief without content,” absent of specifics yet signifying a religious hope that transcends what science can offer or explain.⁹ Yet, what Hungerford's thesis does not account for in this scene is that Powers gives us a character who recognizes this semantic emptiness and interrogates it. Karin does not adopt the Pentecostal language she observes in the waiting room as her own—not in the form she encounters it there. Instead, through Karin's recollections about her family in this passage, the first of several that explore this rhetoric's connection to Christian conservative politics in the period, Powers' novel digs into the context behind these expressions of belief. With this passage, *The Echo Maker* begins to address the role of Christian conservative language in political debates about science, first as it manifests in controversy surrounding evolution and creationism in public education.

Creationism, A Brief History

Conservative Protestants' struggle against evolution peaked in the years running up to *The Echo Maker*'s publication in 2006. Creation science in its modern form began with Henry Morris' 1961 *The Genesis Flood*, in which he set out to make a scientific argument for a 6-day creation account based on a literal reading of Genesis.¹⁰ When in 1968 the Supreme Court struck

9. Hungerford, *Postmodern Belief*, xiii.

10. Henry Morris, *The Genesis Flood: The Biblical Record and its Scientific Implications* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1961); Edward J. Larson and Mitchell Reddish, *The Creation-Evolution Debate: Historical Perspectives* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 23. As Ronald L Numbers, “Aggressors, Victims, and Peacemakers: Historical Actors in the Drama of Science and Religion,” in *The Religion and Science Debate: Why Does it Continue?* ed. Harold W. Attridge (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 7, documents, creationist beliefs were nothing new by the 1960s, but scientific

down laws barring evolutionary theory from public school curriculum, laws that had been on the books on the state and local level since the early 1920s, conservative evangelicals and fundamentalists began lobbying for schools to teach creation science alongside evolution. Then, in 1987, the Court ruled in *Edwards v. Aguillard* that teaching creation science constituted religious instruction, and so barred it from the classroom.¹¹ In its place, creationists began fighting for equal consideration of “intelligent design,” popularly laid out in *Of Pandas and People*.¹² Intelligent design removed explicit mentions of religion from the creation science position, arguing that the complexities of life suggest an intelligent entity had a hand in designing them.¹³ Finally, in a key case testing the constitutionality of teaching intelligent design in public schools, Pennsylvania district judge John E. Jones III ruled in 2005 that intelligent design was not science, and that a Dover, PA school district could not recommend it as an alternative to evolution.¹⁴

creationism was—that is, the attempt to mount scientific evidence for creationist beliefs. At this point, too, creationism first becomes synonymous with young-earth, literal 6-day creation, “no life on earth before Eden and no death before the fall,” readings of the Genesis account, which “until the last few decades most creationists would have regarded . . . as unnecessarily extreme.”

11. *Edwards v. Aguillard*. 482 U.S. 578 (1987); Larson and Reddish, *The Creation-Evolution Debate*, 21-23. These sorts of laws proliferate after Scopes, Larson and Reddish write, and a 1948 Supreme Court ruling against religious instruction in schools (primarily prayer and bible reading) begins a shift toward addressing them, as a precursor to the 1968 ruling.

12. Percival Davis and Dean H. Kenyon, *Of Pandas and People: The Central Question of Biological Origins* (Richardson, TX: Foundation for Thought and Ethics, 1989).

13. David E. Long, *Evolution and Religion in American Education, An Ethnography* (New York: Springer, Dordrecht, 2011), Kindle.

14. *Kitzmiller v. Dover Area School District*. 400 F. Supp. 2d 707 (M.D. Pa. 2005). On the details of the case, see Larson and Reddish, *The Creation-Evolution Debate*, 34-5.

Conservative evangelicals and fundamentalists have not given up efforts to undermine evolution education since Dover. They have only changed tactics, focusing in the last 15 years on what Nicholas J. Matzke terms “AFAs” and “SEAs,” or Academic Freedom Acts and Science Education Acts. The former allows but does not require teachers to question and discuss alternatives to evolutionary theory, while refraining from mentioning specific alternatives like creation science; the latter includes as its “target[s] for ‘critical analysis’ not only evolution and origin-of-life studies but also global warming and human cloning.” Laws like these are currently on the books in Tennessee and Louisiana, and though they do not override court decisions against teaching evolution, these most recent incarnations of creationist legislation and their applications in science classrooms have yet to be challenged in court.¹⁵ Conservative Protestants’ fight against evolution is far from over, and it is in fact central to understanding the Christian Right’s origins and identity.

The struggle over public schools’ science curriculum is an issue that, while seemingly peripheral, reflects a more fundamental struggle Christian conservatives understand themselves to be engaged in with the U.S. government and secular society. Fundamentalists’ response to evolutionary theory was at the center of conservative Protestants’ split from the mainstream at the turn of the twentieth century, and it laid the foundations for their approach to politics for the century to come.¹⁶ The fight against evolution represents for present-day evangelical and

15. Nicholas J. Matzke, “The Evolution of Antievolution Policies after Kitzmiller Versus Dover,” *Science* 351, no. 6268 (Jan 2016): 28.

16. Historians debate the most appropriate term for this group of Protestants that split from the mainstream at the turn of the century. I follow George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, and Matthew Avery Sutton, *American Apocalypse: A History of Modern Evangelicalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), in calling this group “fundamentalists,” the term they used at the time to signal their commitment to a set of fundamentals of Christianity, especially scripture’s inerrancy and a literal reading of it. These

fundamentalist Christians a fight for the narrative their children, future generations of Americans, will believe about the origins and purposes of the earth and people. It is a fight for a Christian worldview they believe should serve as the foundation for our shared moral values and national identity. It is a fight for religion's place in American society and culture.¹⁷

Debate over evolutionary theory predates Charles Darwin's 1859 *Origin of Species*, but as Mark A. Noll writes, well into the twentieth century Protestants who would make up the core of the fundamentalist movement "were as likely to propose accommodations between biblical revelation and scientific conclusions as they were to set the Bible against science."¹⁸ It was after

fundamentalists are the forebearers of, but not identical to, modern-day fundamentalists. Fundamentalists today, as Susan Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell*, xv, writes are "a particular subset of white Bible-believing Protestants who represent themselves as 'militantly antimodernist,'" (referring to Marsden's famous description), and well-known among them would be Frank Norris, Carl McIntire, Bob Jones, and Jerry Falwell.

In the 1930s, a group seeking to distance themselves from the more anti-modern and militant fundamentalist movement took the name evangelicals, forming the National Association of Evangelicals in 1942. Most agree that what tends to distinguish evangelicals from fundamentalists today is their disposition toward society, in that evangelicals are more interested in engaging with mainstream culture. Evangelical is also the wider term that usually includes fundamentalists. What makes these groups complicated to define and describe is that they overlap, and many fundamentalists would call themselves evangelicals or just Christians.

17. Describing the history of religious people's responses to evolutionary theory, Mark A. Noll, "Evangelicalism and Fundamentalism," in *Science and Religion: A Historical Introduction*, ed. Gary B. Ferngren (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2002), 274-5, writes that it is largely the "grand metaphysical implications" of science and not the "minute particulars" that have concerned them. Noll writes for instance that William Jennings Bryan was concerned with the "broad social implications" of evolution more than "the narrowly research-oriented aspects of science," echoing then Marilynne Robinson's reading of Bryan in *The Death of Adam* (see chapter three of this dissertation). From Bryan's time through today, Noll describes, "from the defenders of modern scientific procedures have come protests about professional expertise, qualifications, and decorum. From the fundamentalists and evangelicals have come protests about the decline of Western morality."

18. Noll, "Evangelicalism and Fundamentalism," 273. Noll in fact here uses "evangelicals," preferring the term for what I have been calling modern-day fundamentalists and evangelicals alike.

World War I that fractures finally began to widen between fundamentalists and the mainline. Whereas most American Protestants eventually accepted and accommodated evolutionary theory into their religious worldviews before the war, in its aftermath, fundamentalists believed they had seen the dangers of modernism on display and began working urgently to counter them—and for fundamentalists, evolutionary theory was a cornerstone of the modernist threat.¹⁹

Distinguished by their “militant opposition to modernism,” in George Marsden’s classic description, fundamentalists rejected the “higher criticism,” or historical criticism of the Bible, coming out of Germany in the mid nineteenth century, and the liberal theology growing up to incorporate it into Protestantism.²⁰ In examining the origins, authors, historical and cultural contexts of biblical texts, higher criticism addressed the Bible as a text rather than the literal, inerrant, divinely-inspired word of God. As such, its conclusions often undermined church tradition and countered fundamental Christian doctrines, especially regarding the gospel accounts of Jesus’ life.²¹ Like higher criticism, evolutionary theory challenged “the veracity of the plain sense of the Bible,” Jon H. Roberts writes. For this reason, he observes, some

19. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 6, locates WWI as the moment where this attitude about evolution begins to change: “Before World War I, the emerging fundamentalist coalition was largely quiescent. Few could have predicted the explosion that followed. The war intensified hopes and fears and totally upset existing balances in American culture. It brought out an aggressive and idealistic theological modernism . . . Moreover, the war raised the question of the survival of civilization and morality.” Additionally, for a history of religious Americans’ changing views on Darwin, from publication of *The Origin of Species* through the Scopes trial, see John H. Roberts, “Religious Reactions to Darwin,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Science and Religion*, eds. Peter Harrison (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 80-102.

20. Marsden, 4. See also Matthew Hedstrom, *The Rise of Liberal Religion: Book Culture and American Spirituality in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) on the trajectory of liberal Protestantism through its split from fundamentalism.

21. Marsden, 17.

fundamentalists “even came to believe that the ‘theory of evolution underlies and is the inspiration of Higher Criticism.’”²² As Marsden puts it, “Darwinism focused the issue on the reliability of the first chapters of Genesis. But the wider issue was whether the Bible could be trusted at all.”²³ Evolutionary theory had fired the first shot at the Bible’s credibility, and fundamentalists prepared to fire back.

In the early 1920s, fundamentalists began lobbying for laws barring evolution from being taught in public schools, and in 1925 Tennessee passed the first such law. Seeking to challenge it, the ACLU began searching for a teacher willing to teach evolution and serve as defendant in a test case. Substitute teacher John T. Scopes volunteered at the request of Dayton school officials eager for the publicity.²⁴ For the prosecution, Democratic Congressman and three-time Presidential nominee William Jennings Bryan volunteered his services. Bryan had campaigned for anti-evolution laws like the one Tennessee passed, having come, as Edward J. Larson and Mitchell Reddish write in their history of the case, “to see Darwinian survival-of-the-fittest thinking, known as Social Darwinism when applied to human society, as being behind World War I militarism and postwar materialism.”²⁵ In this conclusion, Bryan was not alone; fundamentalists began to contend that evolution was at the root of all sorts of social ills.²⁶ In

22. Roberts, “Religious Reactions to Darwin,” 96.

23. George Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991), 12-13.

24. Larson and Reddish, *The Creation-Evolution Debate*, 15-17.

25. Larson and Reddish, 19.

26. Eugenie C. Scott, “The Struggle for the Schools,” *Natural History* 103, no. 7 (July 1994): 10, writes that “turn-of-the-century fundamentalists were convinced, as are their modern descendants, that acceptance of evolution breeds not only theological problems but also moral ones. The most influential creationist of this century, Henry M. Morris, has blamed evolutionary

place of a universe designed by God and people made in his image, the argument went, evolution offered nature ruled by forces ruthless and random, human beings a result of the same. By undermining the Bible, evolutionary theory undermined Christian morality, and teaching children evolution was tantamount to damning them.²⁷ In the “Scopes Monkey Trial,” as it would be known, Bryan sought to pit evolution against Christianity. As he argued the case against John Scopes, he put evolutionary theory on trial against a Christian fundamentalist understanding of the Bible.

Though Scopes was ultimately found guilty, fundamentalists lost in the court of public opinion. The Scopes Trial sealed fundamentalism’s split from mainline Protestantism, and as Marsden recounts, after the trial, the movement “quickly lost its position as a nationally influential coalition.” This pushed fundamentalists underground, where they transformed into a “substantial subculture” in the years to follow. It also fed into a key characteristic of the movement, as Marsden describes it: fundamentalists’ sense of themselves as a “beleaguered minority,” one “with strong sectarian or separatist tendencies.”²⁸

Against the backdrop of the fight over evolution, Christian fundamentalists came into being and went into hiding. The struggle over whether American children would learn evolutionary theory in biology class was seminal for fundamentalists, representative as it was of their fights against historical criticism of the Bible and the moral shifts of modernity. The public ridicule they faced reinforced the movement’s sense of its outsider status. Though evangelicals

theory for ‘communism, fascism, Freudianism, social Darwinism, behaviorism, Kinseyism, materialism, atheism, and, in the religious world, modernism and neo-orthodoxy.’”

27. Scott, “The Struggle for the Schools,” 10.

28. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 6-7.

would seek to distance themselves from fundamentalists' more antagonistic relationship to mainstream society when they split from the original movement mid-century, together the heirs of this early fundamentalist movement, present-day evangelicals and fundamentalists, would form the core of the Christian Right. When Powers brings creationist rhetoric into *The Echo Maker*, he addresses contemporary struggles over the content of biology textbooks, and he also draws in a conflict fundamental to these traditions' history and character.

Christian Creationism, Influence and Appeal

Early in *The Echo Maker*, Powers ties Christian language to anti-evolutionism in a conversation between Karin and Mark's neurologist, Dr. Hayes. Describing the prognosis for Mark coming out of his coma, Hayes tell Karin that "his reptilian brain is showing nice activity."²⁹ When Karin questions him further, he explains that we all have "a reptile brain . . . a record of the long way here." At this Karin thinks: "Clearly he wasn't from around these parts. Most locals hadn't come the long way. Both Schluter parents believe evolution was Communist propaganda. Mark himself had his doubts. *If all the millions of species are constantly evolving, how come we're the only ones who got smart?*" (italics original).³⁰ Hayes continues, explaining to Karin that "the brain is a mind-boggling redesign. But it can't escape its past. It can only add to what's already there." He describes the mammalian brain above the reptilian before finally answering Karin's questions about his "human brain" on top of the mammalian. There, Hayes tells her, Mark is "piecing himself back together. Activity in his prefrontal cortex is struggling to synchronize into consciousness."³¹ Amidst Hayes' explanation of an evolutionary model of the

29. Powers, *The Echo Maker*, 16.

30. Powers, 16-17.

31. Powers, 17.

brain, Karin reflects on two other narratives of how the human brain came to be and what makes it unique: her parents' anti-evolutionism, and her brother's skepticism and wonder at how evolution led to the mind.

Karin seems to accept Hayes' explanation and to dismiss the Schluters' belief, common in her hometown, that evolution could not explain human origins.³² Yet when she considers Mark's doubts, Karin recognizes that though evolutionary theory describes how human beings came to be, it may fail to give voice to our experiences of being. When Karin remembers Mark's question about human evolution, she suggests that their parents' creationism is incorrect and ridiculous to her, but it is also a narrative that expresses what, for some, evolutionary science does not. For Mark, it expresses his belief that we are unique among living things, and unique in a way that a series of mutations and selections could not produce. In this passage, Karin associates Christianity with a creationism, and with the political battles waged in its defense—even as she also frames the creationist narrative as a way of accounting for the complexities of how we experience consciousness.

The novel foregrounds creationism again at its end, when Weber meets Mark after Mark's suicide attempt. Over months, Mark develops on top of Capgras syndrome worsening paranoia and eventually Cotard delusion, in which the affected believes he has already died. It is the only explanation left for Mark that makes sense of why the people and places most important to him feel so strange, and he concludes that taking his own life is the only way to right the

32. The Schluters' equation of evolution with communism aligns with the conservative Christian belief that evolution was more than an incorrect explanation of life's origins, that it threatened to destroy Christianity and a version of American identity and morality built on Christianity—the same threats the Christian Right believed communism posed. See Daniel K. Williams, *God's Own Party*, 11-32.

situation. Desperate to hold on to something he knows for certain, Mark tells Weber he feels like “I’ve made everything up. That I’m some totally invented asshole. But there is one thing I *know* I did not invent,” he insists: the note Karin found on his hospital bedside table the night of his accident.³³ Mark believes this note is from the person who called the paramedics and saved his life, and Mark holds onto it hoping to find a meaning or purpose in his accident. Before he succumbs to sedatives, Mark asks Weber to help him make sense of the note and figure out what he should do next. Yet, as he has been since meeting Mark, Weber is at a loss to help him. He returns to the waiting room, where he overhears a young woman reading to a small child from “an oversized, garish picture book”: “Did you ever wonder how the miracle of you began?” She reads sweetly, reassuringly. “You didn’t come from monkeys. Not from some jellyfish in the sea. No! You began when God decided . . .” (ellipses original).³⁴ The woman then trails off as Weber turns his attention back to Mark’s case.

Though brief, the timing of Weber’s waiting room encounter with Christian creationism is significant. Weber notes the book’s over-the-top size and illustrations to dismiss its story as cartoonish and silly, even as it also seems insidious, the woman reading it in a voice meant to soothe away doubt. Yet despite the critique implicit in Weber’s attitude toward the creationist picture book, he encounters it just as he has become acutely aware that he is out of answers for Mark. Modern medicine has diagnosed Mark with Capgras, but it has not cured it. Weber has failed to help Mark recover his sense of himself and the world as coherent, concrete, and reliable. Moreover, neuroscience cannot allay Mark’s fears. It cannot help Mark shake the feeling that he

33. Powers, *The Echo Maker*, 420.

34. Powers, 421.

is making everything up. It can only confirm that the human brain is always, in ways sometimes visible, more often invisible to us, making everything up. As Weber concludes more than once, what the mind puts together and presents as “single, solid” life is but “a fiction.”³⁵ Finally, Mark has asked Weber to explain to him the point and the purpose of what has happened to his brain—the why of his wiring—and these are questions Weber does not even attempt. Recognizing that neuroscience’s models of the brain cannot help him give Mark what he has asked, Weber leaves Mark, walks into the waiting room, and encounters this creationist children’s book. The narrative of how and why humans came to be that he hears there punctuates just how at a loss Weber has been to pull together a convincing, helpful narrative of his own.

Weber turns his attention away from the young woman reading just as she tells the child that “God decided” to create her, emphasizing that at the center of the conservative Christian story of where people came from and what makes them unique is an explanation of why they are here. Here, creationist discourse affirms that our lives have purpose. It reflects a belief that we are set apart from other living things, not just as mammals with more evolved brains but as people with minds, selves, even souls. If this purposed self is a fiction, it is one many persist in believing, and conservative Christian discourse is where the novel turns when characters are at a loss for language to express it.

These two moments are important for how they position Christian discourse. In both passages, the novel ties Christian language to creationism and its critique, even as it also considers how this language expresses the beliefs that humans are distinct from other living things not in degree but in kind, especially regarding human consciousness, and that our lives

35. Powers, *The Echo Maker*, 164, 433.

have purpose. Yet these are two moments among many tying Christian language to Christian Right politics. Karin recalls how, on her death bed, her mother asked her to put a “bag over my head” if she showed signs of mental decline, then debated with Karin whether assisted suicide would send Karin to hell or was only what Joan Schluter called “Christian charity.”³⁶ Joan’s fundamentalist beliefs merge with bioethical debates about death and dying, what it means to be alive, and whether and when a person’s mental decline or brain death means physical death. These are debates that, for politically conservative Christians, come down to the same contested assumptions as does the struggle between evolutionary science and creation: which authority, science or the Bible, do we trust to tell us how we came into existence and what makes us human?³⁷

Additionally, Mark’s sometimes-girlfriend Bonnie encounters in one of Weber’s books what is likely a reference to a well-publicized 1997 symposium held by the Society for Neuroscience. The symposium explored the “God module,” or the place in the brain where religious belief supposedly originates.³⁸ Bonnie is disturbed by Weber’s suggestions, echoing the symposium’s conclusions: that “religion is just a temporal lobe,” and “belief is just an evolved

36. Powers, *The Echo Maker*, 36.

37. As B. Andrew Lustig, “Ethical Issues at the Beginning and End of Life,” in *Science and Religion: One Planet, Many Possibilities*, eds. Lucas F. Johnston and Whitney A. Bauman (New York: Routledge, 2014), 274, writes, belief in God as creator and in humans created in God’s image are key values shaping conservative Christians’ struggle with the scientific community over end of life issues. Conclusions about assisted suicide, for example, drawn from such beliefs, differ categorically from arguments from the standard bioethical principles of autonomy, beneficence, and justice. See John H. Evans, “Science, Bioethics, and Religion,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Science and Religion*, ed. Peter Harrison (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 207-225, for a history of religion in bioethical debate; and on end of life issues specifically, Lustig.

38. Larson and Reddish, *The Creation-Evolution Debate*, 52.

chemical thing you could gain or lose.”³⁹ Bonnie’s concern echoes that voiced by many religious people over the “God module,” and it is reflective yet again of a larger struggle between scientists and politically conservative Christians in this period.⁴⁰

What disturbs Bonnie is that Weber argues science can explain away religious experiences. This is the cause taken up by the New Atheism, a modern-day form of atheism picking up steam in the early 2000s, usually associated with the writings of key figures like Daniel Dennett and Richard Dawkins. Dennett, Dawkins, and others have made scientific arguments for atheism and against religion, in a manner some critics have described as antagonistic or even evangelical.⁴¹ Methodological naturalism is standard to scientific inquiry; scientists set aside the supernatural and limit scientific study to natural events and causes. The New Atheists espouse philosophical naturalism, contending that science proves the nonexistence of and supplants the supernatural.⁴² The God module controversy, too, centers on the same core

39. Powers, *The Echo Maker*, 417.

40. The symposium in reference, write Larson and Reddish, *The Creation-Evolution Debate*, 52, “made front-page news across the country and excited widespread comment.”

41. Other key figures include Christopher Hitchens and Sam Harris. Observing how a subset of contemporary scientists have become almost evangelical about this assumption, taking science not simply as a method that sets aside supernatural explanation for the purposes of inquiry, but as a “belief system” that precludes any other, religious studies scholar Michael York, “Magic, Astrology, and Alchemy,” in *Science and Religion: One Planet, Many Possibilities*, eds. Lucas F. Johnston and Whitney A. Bauman (New York: Routledge, 2014), 239, writes that scientism is science as “a virtual religion of its own.”

42. Kenneth Miller, “Darwin, God, and Dover: What the Collapse of ‘Intelligent Design’ Means for Science and Faith in America,” in *The Religion and Science Debate: Why Does it Continue?* ed. Harold W. Attridge (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 86. Peter Harrison, “Introduction,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Science and Religion*, ed. Peter Harrison (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 12, similarly writes that New Atheists and others in this camp go beyond the methodological naturalism science requires—the “scientific approach which exclude[s] supernatural explanations”—and insist instead on

conflicts as has evangelical and fundamentalist Christians' long fight against evolutionary theory. Christian creationists have long understood evolution to be synonymous with such a view, arguing that the theory seeks to eliminate the need for, or even precludes, belief in God.

Finally, *The Echo Maker* is set in the middle of an ecological crisis. The Platte River runs through Karin and Mark's hometown, making it a critical stopover point for the sandhill crane migration. Chronic overuse and careless development have left the migration grounds in critical condition and put a species in jeopardy, and wrapped up in the mystery of what happened on the night of Mark's accident is a secret project to build a massive resort and waterpark along the river, sapping yet more resources. Religion does not figure overtly in the conflict over the cranes or how the characters speak about it. Yet, the conflicts between religion and science that the novel does take up—fundamentally, what is the final authority on who we are and where we come from, and what then is our relationship to the rest of the planet—also underlie Christian conservative opposition to the science of conservation and especially climate change. This

metaphysical naturalism—"which [goes] beyond this to deny the existence of any supernatural entities."

What Miller calls "philosophical naturalism" and Harrison "metaphysical naturalism" scientists and philosophers have also described as philosophical materialism; scientific absolutism (Miller, 86); scientific secularism (Alvin Plantinga, "Science and Religion: Why Does the Debate Continue?" in *The Religion and Science Debate: Why Does it Continue?* ed. Harold W. Attridge (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 101); or scientism (Lawrence M. Krauss, "Religion vs. Science?" in *The Religion and Science Debate: Why Does it Continue?* ed. Harold W. Attridge (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 149). These are distinguished from methodological naturalism or scientific rationalism (Miller, 86); "secularism with respect to science" (Plantinga, 101); or simply science (Krauss, 149). The latter set, as Plantinga, 101, explains, claims science "should proceed without reference to the supernatural," and the former instead that "all of life can or should proceed without reference to the supernatural, because objectifying inquiry is enough for practice as well as understanding."

relationship is reflected in the most recent legislation aimed at undermining evolution education that includes climate science in lists of topics science teachers are free to omit or question.⁴³

Creationists have sought not just to discredit evolutionary theory, but to discredit the scientific establishment defending it. Opponents of environmental protection benefit from how creationists have for decades chipped away at science's credibility and purchase, making it easier to frame environmental crises as not factual but debatable. The novel critiques creationism—Karin and Weber dismiss the creationist narratives they observe to be common beliefs in small town Nebraska—and it further critiques the distrust of science that creationism requires. In Karin's interaction with her mother and Bonnie's response to Weber's book, the challenge science makes to a fundamentalist understanding of the Christian Bible comes through yet clearer. Such distrust, fear of, and even villainization of science that have gone hand-in-hand with Christian creationism have consequences for education policy, and they have consequences for how the U.S. responds to ecological disasters, chiefly climate change. This larger critique is the subtext of a conflict between Christian conservatism and science running through a novel centered around imminent ecological disaster.

9/11 and The Christian Apocalypse

In addition to how Christian conservatives have clashed with science in political debates about evolution, bioethics, naturalism, and climate change, *The Echo Maker* also addresses how many have turned to apocalyptic rhetoric to make sense of the September 11, 2001 terrorist

43. On conservative Christians and climate change, see Robin Globus Veldman, *The Gospel of Climate Skepticism: Why Evangelical Christians Oppose Action on Climate Change* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019).

attacks and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq that followed.⁴⁴ In fact, when Karin recounts her mother asking her to help her die, she remembers Joan's obsession with the apocalypse unfolding in current events. Karin thinks she "could form no image of Joan Schluter reading anything but advance accounts of End Time, even then, already breaking out all over," though Joan would finally face "her first real glimpse of End Time at last," when her health began to decline.⁴⁵

Joan's belief that she could see the end time "breaking out all over" reflects the beliefs many Christian conservatives expressed in the years immediately following 9/11, even at the highest levels of government. George W. Bush spoke openly of his mid-life conversion experience to evangelical Christianity on the campaign trail and believed God called him to run for President.⁴⁶ Once in office, he served the Christian Right that overwhelmingly supported him by placing their leaders in key advisory positions and working to advance their agendas on abortion, sex education, gay marriage, religious liberty, and in his signature policy,

44. On the ways *The Echo Maker* depicts the years immediately following 9/11, see also Ann Keniston, "Traumatic Brain Injury in Post-9/11 Fiction," *Post45*, October 24, 2015, <https://post45.org/2015/10/traumatic-brain-injury-in-post-911-fiction/>; Anna Theimann, "Homeland Security and Transmigration in Richard Powers' *The Echo Maker*," in *Radical Planes? 9/11 and Patterns of Continuity* (Boston: Brill, 2017), 117-134; and Birgit Dawes, "Traumorama? The Pathological Landscapes of Richard Powers's *The Echo Maker*," in *Communicating Disease: Cultural Representations of American Medicine*, eds. Carmen Birkle and Johanna Heil (Heidelberg: Winter, 2013), 413-430.

45. Powers, *The Echo Maker*, 35.

46. Linell E. Cady, "Religious Resonances in Bush's 'War on Terrorism.'" *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* 29, no. 2 (May 2008): 188-9; Daniel K. Williams, *God's Own Party*, 247.

“compassionate conservatism.”⁴⁷ Bush’s religious beliefs also informed how he spoke about 9/11 and the American invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq that followed.

In the wake of September 11th, Bush relied on the rhetoric of good versus evil to make sense of the attacks. “Thousands of lives were suddenly ended by evil, despicable acts of terror,” he told the nation in an address that evening. “Today our nation saw evil,” he went on, “the very worst of human nature,” and “the search is underway for those who are behind these evil acts.” In closing, he told listeners he would “pray” that those grieving “will be comforted by a power greater than any of us spoken through the ages in Psalm 23: ‘Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me.’”⁴⁸ In this closing reference, Bush makes the religious connotations of “evil” explicit, tying his repeated use of the term explicitly into a Christian cosmology and moral framework. In the years following, Bush so often invoked good and evil to describe the U.S.’s relationship to terrorism, like when he famously declared Iraq, Iran, and North Korea an “axis of evil,” that by many accounts this language, with its Christian undertones, became a hallmark of his public speech.⁴⁹

47. Williams, *God’s Own Party*, 249.

48. George W. Bush, “Statement by the President in His Address to the Nation,” speech delivered at The White House, Washington, D.C., September 11, 2001.

49. Nearly every account of Bush’s apocalyptic language around the wars following 9/11 note his language of good-vs-evil, including Cady, “Religious Resonances In Bush’s ‘War on Terrorism’”; Sutton, *American Apocalypse*; Williams, *God’s Own Party*; Allison McQueen, *Political Realism in Apocalyptic Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Alia Brahimi, “Religion in the War on Terror,” in *The Changing Character of War*, eds. Hew Strachan and Sibylle Scheipers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 184-201; Bruce Lincoln, *Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010). See also Peter Singer, *The President of Good & Evil: Questioning the Ethics of George W. Bush* (New York: Open Road Media, 2015).

This fight between good and evil was, as Bush would describe it in later addresses, one for the ages. In an analysis of Bush's public addresses in the years following 9/11, Alison McQueen writes that the president spoke of the 2001 terrorist attacks as an apocalyptic, world-shattering event. McQueen quotes Bush across numerous speeches in the post-9/11 years, describing how in his rendering,

The two decades prior to the attacks . . . had seemed like “years of relative quiet, years of repose, years of sabbatical.” The terrorist attacks brought this familiar world to an end. Suddenly the past looked different. During these “years of relative quiet,” dark forces had been at work. We had now awoken to a new world . . . The 9/11 attacks were a “day of fire.” They heralded a new world in which different rules of state practice applied . . . For Bush, the “untamed fire of freedom” would spread to the “darkest corners of the world.” It would burn “those who fight its progress.”⁵⁰

The apocalyptic rhetoric in Bush's public addresses is, by many accounts, covert. McQueen describes their “apocalyptic undertones,” and Bruce Lincoln their “biblical subtext.”⁵¹ Yet Christians fluent in biblical depictions of the end times easily recognize, for example, the “untamed fire of freedom” that one day “will reach the darkest corners of our world” as an echo of Revelation, wherein God rains down fire on Satan in the final battle for earth.⁵² This

50. McQueen, *Political Realism in Apocalyptic Times*, 3.

51. McQueen, 4; Lincoln, *Holy Terrors*, 31. Ron Suskind, “Faith, Certainty and the Presidency of George W. Bush,” *The New York Times Magazine*, October 17, 2004, <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/17/magazine/faith-certainty-and-the-presidency-of-george-w-bush.html>, also echoes Cady's and Lincoln's descriptions of Bush signaling to conservatives that he was appointed by God to lead the nation while downplaying those references or veiling them to wider audiences, as does McQueen, 4, writing, “To non-Christian audiences, these images might not have carried any special meaning, beyond the familiar promise that American military power would be both effective and decisive. To many Christians, however, Bush's statement might well have evoked Revelation . . . The apocalyptic undertones of Bush's speeches may not be as obvious as those [of popular apocalypse-cult leaders], but they are there for those able and willing to hear them.”

52. Rev. 20: 7-10.

apocalyptic framing was also reflected in the original name for the U.S. operation in Afghanistan, “Operation Ultimate Justice,” before it was later changed to “Operation Enduring Freedom.”⁵³ Bush did not decide to invade Afghanistan because of his evangelical beliefs about the end times, but he sold the invasion to the American public in apocalyptic language.⁵⁴

The same held true for the invasion of Iraq a year and a half later, Alia Brahimi writes: the language of good and evil sold this second front as it did the first. When in time it became clear that Bush’s first two arguments for war with Iraq could no longer hold—there was no evidence that Saddam Hussein was hiding weapons of mass destruction or that he was supporting al Qaeda—the president was eventually left only with his third, that America was liberating the Iraqi people, and Bush “frequently describe[ed] liberty as ‘God’s gift’ in these years, Brahimi notes. If the war in Iraq was not strictly self-defense, it became in Bush’s rendering a war to protect America’s values of freedom and liberty, universal goods sanctified by the Christian faith, from forces of evil.”⁵⁵ Bush also infamously referred to the campaign as a “crusade,” with all its damaging connotations of religious war, clash of civilizations, violent aggression, and aim at taking the Holy Land from Muslims, and which Bin Ladin himself noted played perfectly into al Qaeda’s narrative: “Bush has said in his own words ‘crusade attack.’ The odd thing about this is that he has taken the words right out of our mouth.”⁵⁶ Powers directly references Bush’s

53. McQueen, *Political Realism in Apocalyptic Times*, 3.

54. Cady, “Religious Resonances in Bush’s ‘War on Terrorism,’” 196; Sutton, *American Apocalypse*, 370. Apocalyptic language “served to legitimize and mobilize support” for the operation, Cady writes. Sutton echoes this, writing that while Bush’s foreign policy was not based on premillennialism, “nevertheless, he well understood that the neoconservative ideals that shaped his foreign policy meshed almost perfectly with the ideas of evangelical apocalypticism.”

55. Brahimi, “Religion in the War on Terror,” 188-90.

56. Quoted in Brahimi, 189.

religious framing of the war on Iraq. Toward the end of *The Echo Maker*, Weber watches clips of Bush announcing operation Iraqi freedom “looping over and over: *May God bless our country and all who defend her*” (italics original).⁵⁷

Believing God is on your side can be reason for confidence. Scholars have also noted a remarkable shift in Bush’s Christian language over the course of his presidency from emphasizing personal salvation to focusing on God’s plan for America. Linell E. Cady describes this as “the shift from the language of personal faith and spiritual transformation to a more public theology of the nation,” in which Bush associated “America’s founding principles of freedom and democracy with a divine plan.”⁵⁸ Paralleling this rhetorical shift, Ron Suskind writes, Bush became in later years increasingly intolerant of doubt from advisors. Suskind’s portrait is of a president certain of his positions, rejecting skepticism, who approaches the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq with faith that they will resolve favorably. This certainty, historian of evangelicalism Matthew Avery Sutton argues, is characteristic of evangelical apocalypticism: evangelicals awaiting the end times believe they have privileged information about God’s plan for the future, he writes, and this belief gives “them an unwavering sense of confidence and absolute authority.”⁵⁹

In their apocalyptic undertones, Bush’s wartime addresses wove a narrative familiar and persuasive to Christian conservatives. He spoke their language, and he alluded to what many had long expected: that the world would end soon, disastrously, that evil would be defeated once and

57. Powers, *The Echo Maker*, 432.

58. Cady, “Religious Resonances in Bush’s ‘War on Terrorism,’” 189, 192.

59. Suskind, “Faith, Certainty and the Presidency of George W. Bush,” 4.

for all, and that God would reign over the righteous. In his history of Christian apocalypticism, Sutton locates its beginnings in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In fact, Sutton diverges from the standard narrative of fundamentalism, in which the Scopes trial is the turning point pushing fundamentalists into isolationism for half a century, with lasting effect on the movement's posture toward American society and politics.⁶⁰ Instead, Sutton writes, fundamentalists' belief that Christ would soon return to rule on earth inspired their fight to reclaim the "fundamentals" of Christianity. These beliefs were so formative to fundamentalists and their evangelical heirs, he argues, that they are ultimately "the most distinguishing characteristic of the movement."⁶¹ From them, evangelicals developed a "politics of apocalypse": urgent, uncompromising, confident of correctness and impending, ultimate victory, and framed in apocalyptic rhetoric.⁶²

Many evangelicals and fundamentalists made sense of the September 11th terrorist attacks in terms of these beliefs about God's impending final judgment. On Pat Robertson's *The 700 Club*, Jerry Falwell infamously blamed the attacks on "the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make than an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People for the American Way, all of them who have tried to secularize America"—according to Falwell, they had "helped this happen."⁶³ God had allowed this tragedy

60. Marsden's influential history of fundamentalism also names premillennial dispensationalism as key to the movement, if not its defining characteristic.

61. Sutton, *American Apocalypse*, 3.

62. Sutton, 7.

63. Quoted in Sutton, 370. In his analysis of fundamentalist apocalyptic rhetoric following 9/11 Lincoln, *Holy Terrors*, even compares Falwell's statements on *The 700 Club* to rhetoric of Bin Ladin's followers.

to reprimand America for forsaking its role as God's chosen people, or perhaps to warn the nation against slipping any further down the secular slope. End times prophecy books proliferated in the years after, and Americans seemed to believe what they read: in a startling 2010 Pew poll, "41 percent of all Americans (well over one hundred million people) and 58 percent of white evangelicals" reported that they "believed that Jesus is 'definitely' or 'probably' going to return by 2050."⁶⁴ It was a warning, too, that time was running out.

These groups likewise understand the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in terms of end times prophecies. Most fundamentalist and Pentecostals, and a number of conservative, mostly white evangelicals, interpret prophecies in Revelation and other books of the Bible according to a premillennial dispensationalist view.⁶⁵ In this reading, a millennium is coming during which Christ will reign on earth for a thousand years, and preceding this millennium is first the rapture of true believers to heaven; followed by seven years of suffering from war, famine, plagues, natural disasters, and the like; and finally the battle of Armageddon in which Christ will be victorious.⁶⁶ Many Protestants in this tradition believe that the creation of the modern state of Israel and decades of conflict in the region are fulfilling prophecies that will usher in the rapture, beginning the end of the world.⁶⁷ Some even suspect that when Islamic extremists, or perhaps

64. Sutton, *American Apocalypse*, 371-2. Sutton discusses best-sellers by John Hagee, Jon Walvoord, Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins (writers of the *Left Behind* franchise), and a response by perhaps the most popular author of end-times prophecy books, Hal Lindsey (of *The Late Great Planet Earth*, 1970).

65. Spector, *Evangelicals and Israel*, 15.

66. Baer, "Review: American Dispensationalism's Perpetually Imminent End Times*," 248-9.

67. Spector, 13-15; Phillip Bump, "Half of evangelicals support Israel because they believe it is important for fulfilling end-times prophecy," *The Washington Post*, May 14, 2018,

even all Muslims, oppose Israel, they do so because the Jews are God's people. They likewise believe that when Muslims oppose America, it is not just because of the U.S.'s political support of Israel or other policies in the Middle East, but because Muslims want to destroy Christians.⁶⁸ Muslims, they believe, want to start the war to end all wars, presaging Armageddon by mounting the final offense against God and his people.⁶⁹ When Bush described the evil terrorists, God's gift of liberty and America's role in delivering it, he put the "war on terror" in terms of the end times for the conservative evangelical and fundamentalist Christians, the core of the Christian Right, to which Bush belonged and that put him in office.

When *The Echo Maker* references Christian apocalyptic rhetoric about 9/11 and the war in Iraq, it addresses a second issue—by some accounts central to conservative Christian politics, a worldview influencing even the president of the United States. This apocalyptic language, the rhetoric of black-and-white morality, of coming destruction and justice, of unquestioning certainty of the rightness of the cause and the course ahead—this language sanctified America's military response to 9/11, and this is the novel's critique. Yet the novel also recognizes that Christian rhetoric is adept at expressing certainty about what is coming and of being on the right side, the belief that one has a purpose that is divinely preordained, and it is for this reason that Powers' characters find it paradoxically useful.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/politics/wp/2018/05/14/half-of-evangelicals-support-israel-because-they-believe-it-is-important-for-fulfilling-end-times-prophecy/>.

68. Spector, *Evangelicals and Israel*, 50. These beliefs are part of an overlapping eschatology, Christian Zionism.

69. Spector, 79.

End Times in *The Echo Maker*

Like Joan's Pentecostalism, Bonnie's fundamentalist beliefs also prepare her to understand the U.S. invasion of Iraq in terms of end times prophecy. Mark alludes to Bonnie's apocalyptic beliefs when he accompanies her to church, which he describes as "one of those renegade Protestant splinter cells."⁷⁰ Though he does not name the denomination to which Bonnie's church belongs, in this way he at least locates it squarely within conservative Protestantism, most likely fundamentalism. He asks Bonnie to take him because he wants to look for the author of his mysterious note, but he is also apprehensive about going. "Nobody's going to be comfortable with the whole Left Behind thing," he thinks, "after growing up with a mother on a first-name basis with the Big Smiter Himself."⁷¹ Mark then again references end times beliefs when he describes how Bonnie reacts when he asks to accompany her to church. When he "asks her to take him to the Upper Room," he recounts, "the woman acts like all the seven seals have just started barking."⁷² Mark's first reference is to the best-selling *Left Behind* series, Jerry Jenkins and Tim LaHaye's fictionalized version of a premillennial dispensationalist Christian apocalypse that reached peak popularity in the years Powers sets *The Echo Maker*.⁷³ His second

70. Powers, *The Echo Maker*, 200.

71. Powers, 200.

72. Powers, 200.

73. Twelve books were published as a part of the *Left Behind* series in the decade preceding *The Echo Maker*, as were three movies; book ten, *The Remnant: On the Brink*, topped the *New York Times* bestseller list, among seven others that made the list. See Allisa Wilkinson, "The 'Left Behind' Series was just the latest way America prepared for the Rapture," *The Washington Post*, July 13, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/act-four/wp/2016/07/13/the-left-behind-series-was-just-the-latest-way-america-prepared-for-the-rapture/>.

is to the book of Revelation: seven seals protect the scroll containing the prophecies about the end of the world that fill the rest of the apostle John's account.⁷⁴

With these references, Mark jokingly suggests that Bonnie's church teaches fundamentalist apocalypticism, and his description of the sermon that day confirms it. The pastor took as his subject "the repopulation of Palestine and the fulfillment of prophecy and whatnot," Mark recalls.⁷⁵ Bonnie, too, later describes her pastor's teachings on the Middle East and the end times: "Reverend Billy says this thing with Iraq is actually predicted in the Bible," she tells Mark and friends at their fourth of July cookout, "Something that has to happen, before the end."⁷⁶ Bonnie's reverend espouses the same beliefs many evangelical and fundamentalist Christians held about conflict in the Middle East after 9/11, that unfolding in Arab-Israeli tensions and in the U.S. invasions were signs of the apocalypse laid out in scripture, and that America's actions there were helping bring about Christ's return.

References to 9/11 and the unfolding "war on terror" pepper the background of *The Echo Maker*. They feed the anxious mood of Karin's drive to the hospital on the night of Mark's accident; on the way, she tunes into talk radio about "the best way to protect your pets from waterborne terrorist poisonings," and on the waiting room television she watches "images of a mountain wasteland scattered with guerrillas. Afghanistan, winter, 2002."⁷⁷ In response to 9/11,

74. Rev. 5-7.

75. Powers, *The Echo Maker*, 201.

76. Powers, 216.

77. Powers, 5, 8.

Mark's friend Rupp has joined the Army, and just before Mark's accident he convinces Mark to sign up as well, though his recruiter finds Mark ultimately unfit for duty after the wreck.

Rupp's deployment also occasions a second allusion to how apocalyptic prophecies underwrote the invasion of Iraq. Rupp tells Mark he has just learned he will be deployed to Saudi Arabia, and when Mark asks why, Rupp answers, "The Crusades. Armageddon. George versus Saddam."⁷⁸ In Bonnie, Powers points to how fundamentalist Christians interpreted the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as signs of the coming apocalypse. In Rupp, he depicts how this interpretation was not fundamentalists' alone, but bled into popular understanding of these wars. A war between Christians and Muslims, good and evil, at a world-ending scale—this is Rupp's shorthand for why he will be fighting in Iraq.

In these examples, and in both official and popular narratives about the wars in Iraq they reference, Christian end times discourses express their speakers' beliefs that their lives have transcendent purpose and are unfolding according to a greater plan, even in conflict and chaos. Critiques accompany both references. At the cookout, Karin replies to Bonnie that "every dropped bomb might be creating more terrorists."⁷⁹ Mark does not believe Rupp's explanation for the invasion of Iraq: "You're so full of it. I knew you were full of it. What good is that going to do anyone?"⁸⁰ These religious rationales for war paper over reality, Karin and Mark respond. There is no good reason for the U.S. to invade Iraq. Yet, though Karin and Mark question how Christian rhetoric rationalizes the war, elsewhere in the novel they rely on these same discourses to attribute meaning and purpose to their lives. In fact, Mark's search for such purpose is what

78. Powers, *The Echo Maker*, 385.

79. Powers, 216.

80. Powers, 386.

drives him to attend church with Bonnie. He goes looking for the author of his note because he wants to understand the meaning of the wreck, the coma, and the strange world he has woken up to. Despite the novel's critique of how Christian conservatives made sense of 9/11 and the "war on terror," or perhaps because of how they did so, Powers' characters find their language useful.

Finding Purpose in Christian Language

Mark's accident is mysterious and miraculous. The police cannot figure out how he flipped his truck, how he survived the wreck, or who called it in and saved him. His injuries are likewise mysterious. His is a rare disorder, Capgras syndrome, in an even rarer presentation, accident-induced. His doctors do not know why he misidentifies Karin or how to treat him, and Karin is at a loss to help him. Mark is certainly baffled, and he feels helpless. He does not understand why an imposter has replaced his sister. He repeatedly questions why he is in long-term care and therapy. He imagines wild possibilities to explain the situation, like that he must be the subject of a scientific experiment or a covert government operation. In the face of so many questions they cannot answer and problems they cannot fix, Mark and Karin are desperate for the accident to mean something, and mean something that tells them what to do next.

On top of this, Mark's inexplicable accident brings home to them a reality they might otherwise normally ignore: that our minds, what we think of as our "selves," are themselves accidents of evolution. Mark's Capgras makes plain that we do not exist outside of our brains, that organ only ever-so-slightly removed from the animal forms that preceded it, and we are at the whim of its functions or disfunctions. Mark's brain injury brings Mark, Karin, and even Weber freshly face to face with what John Haught describes as the "cosmic pessimism" many scientifically-educated people have come to: as evolution has progressed randomly and blindly,

without “goal or purpose,” so there is no special purpose in the life it has produced.⁸¹ All three express a desire to find the purpose behind what seem pointless accidents, even if they do not believe such purpose exists, and all three express it in terms with Christian roots.

Weber and wife Sylvie jokingly refer to a “Tour Director,” the force or higher power planning and protecting their travels. When Weber returns from Nebraska, Sylvie tells him she is “glad that Tour Director got you home safely,” and when he leaves again to see Mark after his suicide attempt, he thinks, “No choice but return. Some long loop, back again. Tour Director makes him.”⁸² Though “Tour Director” is Weber and Sylvie’s creation—it is not a phrase Weber would have gleaned from his Catholic education—he acknowledges that the concept he has pulled from his religious background. Weber describes the phrase as “all that was left of their combined religious upbringings.”⁸³ It is a stand-in for “God,” a reference to a higher power minus belief in one. Weber returns to his childhood Catholic faith to find a concept that communicates this desire, remaining after faith is gone, to believe that there are no accidents, but that someone or something is in charge of steering our lives toward some meaningful end. Though Weber and Sylvie refer to “Tour Director” in jest, when Weber leaves a suicidal Mark without answers and encounters the creationist children’s picture book in the waiting room, the scene’s timing implies that even Weber is not immune to feeling his lack of purpose or direction.

81. Haught, “Science, God, and Cosmic Purpose,” 266. Tamler Sommers and Alex Rosenberg, “Darwin’s Nihilistic Idea: Evolution and the Meaninglessness of Life,” *Biology and Philosophy* 18, no. 5 (Nov 2003): 653-668, explores existential nihilism as a consequence of evolution.

82. Powers, *The Echo Maker*, 187, 404.

83. Powers, 104.

Mark certainly turns to Christian language in earnest in his search to find meaning in his accident. Mark believes that the note Karin finds on his hospital bedside table is the key to solving the mystery of the wreck. It reads:

I am No One
but Tonight on North Line Road
GOD led me to you
so You could Live
and bring back someone else.⁸⁴

He becomes devoted to finding its author, and making sense of the cryptic message consumes him. He thinks if he can find who left him the note, he will find out why the wreck happened and what exactly its concluding line—“bring back someone else”—is charging him to do next. The language in this charge invokes resurrection. Divine intervention brought Mark back from the brink of death and now, he believes, he must go and do the same for someone else. He holds onto the note as proof that behind his wreck some bigger story is unfolding. About that, at least, he is correct.

In the end, we learn that the note—the novel’s key mystery—is actually from Mark. He wrote it for Barbara, whom after his coma he knows only as his favorite nurse’s aide. Barbara, it turns out, has only recently become an aid. Until Mark’s wreck she was a reporter investigating the development along the Platt River. She walked out in front of Mark on the road the night of his accident, and Mark rolled his truck to avoid hitting her. Mark penned the message when Barbara came to see him in the emergency room, before his brain suddenly swelled and he lost consciousness, and with it any memory of that night. In a way, Barbara fulfills Mark’s charge to “bring back someone else” when she becomes an aide and cares for him.

84. Powers, *The Echo Maker*, 10.

At the novel's conclusion, we learn that the greater plan Mark thought he was a part of was, all along, his own. The mystery behind the note was that Mark was a mystery to himself. The note's language of God, its suggestions of predestination, resurrection, and divine calling, do not ultimately communicate that there is a higher power directing our paths, but instead that the true greater forces directing our lives are our own brains, stitching together the reality we experience in a way we cannot control or even fully comprehend. The Christian language of Mark's note signifies how desperately we can want to believe we have a greater purpose and how this desire can take on a reality all its own.

Karin too recognizes that though she needs to believe there is meaning in Mark's accident, she will not find it. Mark's accident also throws Karin, as it does Mark, into the Christian language of their childhoods in search for that meaning, despite how uncomfortable that language makes her. Disheartened by how slowly her brother seems to be recovering, Karin ventures carefully to boyfriend Daniel, "do you believe there are purposes out there?" Then, trying again to avoid sounding religious: "It doesn't have to be . . . call it anything. Ever since the accident, I've thought: Maybe we're all on invisible paths? Paths we're supposed to follow, without knowing. Ones that really lead somewhere?" (ellipses original).⁸⁵ Karin hopes Daniel will understand her impulse toward the religious. She thinks he is "faith incarnate," that he "worshiped nature" and "lived like an anchorite and meditated four times a day." "And still," she recognizes, "the word *purpose* made him nervous."⁸⁶ Like Karin, Daniel tenses at the suggestion of a higher power, especially a Christian God, directing their lives, and Karin recognizes the

85. Powers, *The Echo Maker*, 71.

86. Powers, 71.

inescapable religious overtones in what she is asking. “She’d end up like her mother,” she thinks to herself, “using the *Living Scriptures* volume like a Magic 8 Ball.”⁸⁷ Even so, despite her discomfort with her own language, when Daniel does not affirm Karin’s suggestion that there was some purpose behind Mark’s accident, she snaps, “Don’t begrudge me for needing a little faith to survive this.”⁸⁸ Karin feels she needs, if not the Christian’s reassurance of a sovereign, omnipotent God working behind the scenes of Mark’s wreck and recovery, then at least the hope for a positive outcome that a loosely religious (in fact as loosely religious as Karin can make it) “purpose” or “path” could offer her.

Daniel reassures Karin only to a point. He concedes finally, “of course there are forces bigger than us,” but Karin knows he means “forces so big that our paths mean nothing to them.”⁸⁹ If there are forces bigger than them, they are the natural forces generating, constraining and threatening life on earth, and they do not lend special meaning to individual lives. He tells her that we are one of “one million species heading toward extinction. We can’t be too choosy about our private paths.”⁹⁰ There is no special providence for Mark or for anyone, Daniel thinks. Humans are not preeminent on earth, and we should not live as if we are. For Daniel, an environmental activist, these beliefs about purposes and paths are more than inaccurate; behind them are anthropocentric assumptions that rationalize grave harm to the environment.

87. Powers, *The Echo Maker*, 72.

88. Powers, 73.

89. Powers, 73.

90. Powers, 72.

In her back-and-forth with Daniel, Karin reveals why she is so attached to a Christian sense of a divinely ordained path for Mark's life. They agree on the language of "forces bigger than us" as a substitute for the concepts Karin had initially offered—purpose and path—that still held too much religious residue for Daniel. If they could find language that truly shakes any religious connotations, perhaps then these are not concepts proprietary to Christianity or even religion, even if Karin is first reminded of her mother's beliefs when she attempts to express them. Yet Karin is not really satisfied with Daniel's phrasing. She goes on to insist that she still needs to believe that "something right could still come out of this." So, Daniel finally agrees that perhaps Mark meeting Barbara, the first positive influence in his life in Karin's recent memory, has been the purpose of his accident. "If this woman can help Mark, then she's our path," he affirms to Karin, though she knows he does not believe it.⁹¹ Karin pushes the point, then, because she needs to believe the difficulties she and Mark have faced will in the end lead to something worthwhile. She needs hope to help her continue to push through what feels like random and futile suffering, and for that she needs to believe that someone or something else, Daniel's "forces bigger than us," *do* care about Mark and *are* in some way orchestrating the events of his life for good. Karin has tried to do this for Mark herself, but she fears she is failing. And, for a force that cares about Mark, that has a plan for him, she cannot escape a religious discourse she immediately recognizes as her mother's. She wants the kind of reassurance her mother's Pentecostal faith could give her, even if she wants nothing to do with that faith, and even if, as she seems to believe, that reassurance of a purpose in Mark's wreck is ultimately hollow.

91. Powers, *The Echo Maker*, 73.

Faith in the Mind, Faith in Science

The Echo Maker represents how Christian discourse framed the horrific events of 9/11 and the controversial wars to follow as part of a bigger plan in which good ultimately triumphs. This is a language, the novel recognizes, capable of conjuring purpose out of dark circumstances and connecting tragedies into a narrative of triumph, and this is also what Weber, Mark, and Karin fashion from this language—purpose and direction.

In the same way, the novel addresses how, in Christian creationist discourse, human beings are set apart from other life on earth, not merely material but made in God's image: spiritual beings with innate dignity, capable of reason, morality, and connection to the divine, bearing souls. The novel addresses, too, how creationist discourse indicts science for trying to play god, taking the place of scripture in telling people where they came from. The characters use Christian language in parallel ways, to describe what our brains hide from us about their innerworkings—the parts of the mind that remain a mystery to us—and to describe a trust in science to explain human nature and cure human ills that sometimes approaches faith.

When Bonnie comes to Karin with her alarm over the “God module” she reads about in Weber's book, Karin compares Bonnie's faith in God to our faith in the versions of reality and of a coherent self that our brains present to us, even when science tells us they are cobbled-together fictions. Paraphrasing Weber, Bonnie pleads with Karin: “You can turn God on and off with electric . . . ? It's just some built-in structure? Did you already know this? Does everybody? Everybody smart?” (ellipses original).⁹² Karin replies that Weber does not know this for certain, and though she does not tell Bonnie so, she thinks to herself that “what we sum to is still real.

92. Powers, *The Echo Maker*, 417.

The phantom wants our shaping. Even a God module would have been selected for its survival value.”⁹³ She thinks, in other words, that there is more than one way to define “real.” If belief in god is a product of the mind, if it is an evolutionary adaptation to something in our environment, “god” is then a real response to real circumstances, one with real corollaries in a material brain. In this way, Karin thinks, believing in god is not unlike trusting whatever else our minds present to us as reality. The narratives our brains weave together to make sense of external stimuli may be fictions, and yet they are also the closest we get to reality—are our reality.

In prior pages, Weber comes to the same conclusion, and in similar language. “All things come down to belief,” he thinks, “Belief in a gossamer too ephemeral to fool anyone. That will be the holy grail of brain studies: to see how tens of billions of chemical logic gates all sparking and damping each other can somehow create faith in their own phantom loops.”⁹⁴ Our brains have managed to convince us they are more than a collection of “chemical logic gates,” Weber reflects. They hide from us their complicated processes to present an effortless, seamless interface with the world. When something goes wrong, as with Mark’s brain injury, the brain adapts, compensates, convincing us of a new story that can make sense of conflicting or missing information. The unthinking confidence we put in our brains to give us a straightforward, accurate picture of reality, despite what neuroscience tells us about how the brain functions, is a confidence akin to religious faith, in Weber’s description. Like Karin, Weber compares belief in religion to faith in our minds. It is a misplaced faith, he thinks, but also a persistent one, and for this reason, this aspect of how we experience of consciousness must be key to making sense of it.

93. Powers, *The Echo Maker*, 418.

94. Powers, 405.

Karin takes Bonnie's Christian faith, and Weber a more broadly religious faith, as points of comparison for how we experience consciousness. They also describe their trust in science in the language of Christian belief. Karin thinks that in the face of Mark's worsening Capgras, "she was clinging to medical science the same way her mother clung to Revelation. Weber's scientific assurances had seemed so rational. But then, Mark seemed rational to himself. And increasingly clearer-eyed than she."⁹⁵ Karin realizes her belief that medicine would help Mark may be based in faith as much as logic, and her mother's fundamentalism is her point of reference for how she has begun to rely on Weber for a cure. Presaging this, when earlier Karin and Mark watch Weber on television talking about his research, Karin describes him in a similar vein: "When he started to read" from his paper, she notes, "prose poured out of him in Old Testament cadences." Mark sees the same resonances in Weber's presentation: he soon begins "pac[ing] in tight, outraged circles," asking "Who's this guy supposed to be? Billy Graham or someone?"⁹⁶ Weber reminds the Schluter siblings of a televangelist. Their descriptions suggest he postures confidently, that he hopes to win converts, and that neuroscience, the text of his sermon, is a sort of religious message, a gospel in which the lost must place their faith.

Weber frames his own relationship to science in the same way when he recounts trading his devout Catholic faith as a child for devotion to his work. "Then in college," he remembers, "religion had died, overnight, unmarked and unmourned, simply in his meeting Sylvie, whose boundless faith in human sufficiency led him to put away childish things. After that, his whole childhood seemed to have belonged to another person. Nothing to do with him. Nothing

95. Powers, *The Echo Maker*, 244.

96. Powers, 185.

remained of that boy but the adult's trust in the scalpel of science."⁹⁷ Weber tells his deconversion story in Christian terms: he "put away childish things," in the biblical expression;⁹⁸ he adopted Sylvie's "boundless faith" in humanity; and he directed his childhood faith in God, a faith so devout his own parents were concerned by it, instead toward neuroscience.⁹⁹ Though Weber no longer believes in the Catholic faith, he still finds use for what Catholic idioms express so well—a single-minded, sometimes even illogical hope in and dedication to the cause—to describe his relationship to his work.

The language of Christian belief allows Karin and Weber to describe their confidence in scientific models of the brain and in the medical care those models inspire. The mind creates the phenomenon of consciousness, what we experience as the self or even soul; neuroscience explains it. We put our trust in these narratives, Karin and Weber think, like the most committed believers trust in a Christian God and scriptures.

Christian creationists fear science threatens to take the place of the Bible in telling people what it means to be human, and in the creationist account it means to bear the *imago Dei*: to understand good and evil and to act morally, to know or reject God, to be set apart from the rest of creation, to bear a soul.¹⁰⁰ It follows, then, that Karin and Weber invoke Christian belief when they need to express how our minds remain a mystery to us. They describe brains that lead us to

97. Powers, *The Echo Maker*, 309.

98. 1 Cor. 13:11.

99. Powers, 308.

100. For a discussion of the varying interpretations of the doctrine of *imago Dei* (of humans being made in the image of God) and especially how those beliefs underwrite the concept of human dignity, see Thomas Albert Howard, ed., *Imago Dei: Human Dignity in Ecumenical Perspective* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2013).

believe, somehow, that we are more than the sum of our parts. Creationists charge, too, that evolutionary theory replaces dependence on God with, as Weber describes, “boundless faith in human sufficiency” and in the sufficiency of science. It follows too, then, that Karin and Weber describe placing a devout Christian’s sort of faith in neuroscience and neurology, even when face-to-face with the fields’ limitations. Christian discourse becomes useful to the characters in these ways both despite and because of its political connotations.

Why Christian Discourses?

The Echo Maker is not a conservative Christian novel, and it does not promote a Christian creationist critique of science or apocalyptic interpretation of American wars in the Middle East. Weber is a cognitive neurologist and an atheist who left Catholicism, and Karin and Mark detest religion because of their parents’ Pentecostalism. We should not expect this novel or these characters to rely on Christian language to pose the problems concerning them most: How can science explain human consciousness, and how can we explain our experiences of consciousness when they elude scientific explanation? Given what science can tell us about the origins of the universe and human life, does our existence have a purpose? We should not expect *The Echo Maker* to give Christian conservative narratives about human origins, the mind, or our roles in the world credibility.

And yet, Powers’ characters do speak in Christian language, and they do so when they are out of options. Mark clings to the note—his reassurance that “GOD led” someone to save him—as his paranoia intensifies, and he goes from church to church searching for its author, convinced he or she must be religious. As he increasingly suspects that nearly everyone and everything else is wrapped up in a conspiracy, and as Weber fails to offer a cure, Mark feels this religiously professed promise of meaning and purpose is all he has left.

Karin, too, is desperate to find help for Mark, and she tells Daniel as much when she asks him if there could be a purpose or path unfolding in Mark's accident. Karin must face the limits of neuroscience in seeking to return Mark to his former self or even fully explain his condition, and she also confronts her own limitations. In Mark's Capgras, Karin recognizes a mirror of her own delusions. She realizes that her brain is as fragile and as capable of convincing her to believe the illogical or improbable as is Mark's. This perspective allows Karin to see Bonnie's religious faith as a meaningful, not ridiculous, expression of the same impulse, and to admit that she depends on medical science as her mother did on scripture. She comes to understand that she needs a story to believe as much as they do.

Even Weber doubts himself. When reviews of his latest book accuse him of taking advantage of his patients' stories for profit, and when he begins to feel his interactions with Mark have only proven them right, Weber feels his limitations as a scientist, and he thinks about how the faith he once had in Catholicism mirrors his devotion to his research. When Weber recognizes that, though he has long thought himself a model husband, he has nearly been unfaithful to his wife too many times to count, he realizes that Sylvie has no reason to trust him, and he doubts his self-image. Those realizations lead Weber to contemplate how our brains create "faith in their own phantom loops." Weber does not go as far as Mark, willing to believe God sent someone to save him, or even Karin, who uses Christian language with self-conscious reserve. Weber speaks of religious faith only with ironic distance, as a stand in for irrational belief. Still, he turns to Christian discourses of belief in the same circumstances, when he is no longer sure of what he once knew with certainty.

Mark, Karin, and Weber also each lived a childhood permeated by devout Christianity, its language a sort of first tongue for these characters. Growing up steeped in Christian culture is a

common experience in the U.S., but one need not grow up in a church to be surrounded by Christian rhetoric.¹⁰¹ Protestantism has been the privileged and dominant religion in America from the nation's founding, setting the terms for what counts as "religion," and "secular" by comparison, and this long before the Christian Right began to dominate the GOP and conservative politics. As they are for the Schluter siblings and their doctor, these discourses are familiar, even inescapable for many in the U.S., religious or not.

For Powers' characters, their familiarity with Christianity is what makes them so averse to using its rhetoric. All three want to leave behind the faiths that shaped their childhoods, and Karin and Weber particularly take issue with Christian conservative beliefs about science and the war in Iraq. Yet, the way they use Christian discourses parallels how Christian conservatives have employed them in these very political disputes. Across *The Echo Maker*, characters critique Christian conservative politics articulated in creationist and apocalyptic rhetoric. They then use that same language to do the same kind of work, to make sense of the mystery of consciousness and to make meaning out of chaos and suffering. This rhetoric is useful *because* of its problematic associations.

In comparing its main characters' motivations to those of creationists and end times evangelicals, *The Echo Maker* considers what these doctrines offer those who espouse them, and it takes their motivations seriously. In Christian conservative discourses, the novel finds insight into entrenched political battles over evolution and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Bound up in creationism and apocalypticism are Christian conservatives' deep investment in powerful stories that promise their lives have meaning. Powers' characters are uneasy about whether

101. In 2014 Pew poll, "Religious Landscape Study," Pew Research Center, Religion and Public Life, 2014, <https://www.pewforum.org/about-the-religious-landscape-study/>, 70% of Americans still identified as Christian.

speaking in Christian language means implicitly endorsing belief in the supernatural. They are uneasy, too, about admitting they are no longer sure of what they once knew—that is, left to operate on faith. And yet, when new science unsettles old certainties, *The Echo Maker*'s characters turn to Christian language, to narrate their experiences of unmooring.

Christian discourse also lends a sense of certainty to the characters of George Saunders' *Tenth of December*, ironic in Saunders' depiction for the myopia, materialism, and violence it reinforces. In "Escape from Spiderhead," however, Saunders also uses Christian language to explore human agency in light of advances in cognitive neuroscience, or what we have learned about the biology of human cognition and behavior, as a question of ethics and economics.

A REVEREND WALKS INTO A BARDO: AGENCY IN THE AFTERLIFE IN GEORGE SAUNDERS' "ESCAPE FROM SPIDERHEAD" AND *LINCOLN IN THE BARDO*

In *Tenth of December*, Christian language validates what George Saunders' characters already value most. It backs characters' narratives about the world and their places in it, especially when reality impinges on those narratives. In the collection's opening story, "Victory Lap," an attempted rapist admires kings in "Bible days" who could "ride through a field and go: That one," choosing an unwilling bride.¹ "Was she that first night, digging it? Probably not," he concedes. "Was she shaking like a leaf? Didn't matter. What mattered was offspring and the furtherance of lineage. Plus the exaltation of the king, which resulted in righteous kingly power."² Imagining himself as a king in "Bible days" blesses his sexism and plans for assault and writes off his would-be-victim's resistance.

In the second story, "Sticks," a father plants a "kind of crucifix" in his yard and dresses it for the holidays—Santa on Christmas, Uncle Sam on the fourth of July—an exercise his children describe as "Dad's one concession to glee" apart from his otherwise practiced meanness.³ As the years drag on, his children leave home, his wife dies, and the decorations turn stranger. The cross becomes a shrine to loss, mourning his wife's passing and his alienation from his children. At the

1. George Saunders, *Tenth of December* (New York: Random House, 2013), 18.

2. Saunders, *Tenth of December*, 18-19.

3. Saunders, 29.

end of his life, he arranges the cross as a main figure surrounded by six smaller, connected by strings carrying messages of apology.⁴ In its final iteration, his “kind of crucifix” literally props up a vision of reconciliation with his family, one they do not share.

In “Puppy,” Marie thanks God for “struggles and the strength to overcome them; grace, and new chances every day to spread that grace around”—all as her “Lexus flew through the cornfield” on the way to a poorer woman’s home to pick up a puppy.⁵ Her vaguely Christian maxims buttress her internal monologue about overcoming her difficult childhood and, when she arrives at the home, about how she must know what is best for the other woman’s son. The narrator of “The Semplica Girl Diaries” also fixates on how his middle-class home measures up to his neighbors’. “Lord, give us more. Give us enough,” he prays. “Help us not fall behind peers. Help us not, that is, fall further behind peers. For kids’ sake. Do not want them scarred by how far behind we are.”⁶ Religion sanctifies whatever is already holiest to Saunders’ characters. For the “Semplica” narrator, this is keeping up with his peers’ conspicuous spending, even if it means using enslaved women (“semplica girls”) for lawn decorations.

Moment after brief moment in *Tenth of December*, Saunders puts on display the power Christian language has to persuade, most of all to persuade oneself. The collection satirizes Christian discourse for endorsing beliefs, and increasingly since the rise of the Christian Right, political beliefs, at the expense of nuance or empathy for others’ perspectives.

4. Saunders, *Tenth of December*, 30.

5. Saunders, 35.

6. Saunders, 121.

Lauded for his *New Yorker* exploration of Trump supporters and for a Syracuse University commencement address on kindness, Saunders has a reputation for empathy.⁷ Readings of Saunders focus primarily on his relationship to postmodern fiction and what follows, particularly how his stories use irony to affect empathy and what some have called the “New Sincerity.” They also address his depictions and critiques of capitalism and neoliberalism, and on how the former might, for Saunders, offer solutions to the ills of the latter.⁸

7. “Who Are All These Trump Supporters?” *The New Yorker*, July 4, 2016, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/07/11/george-saunders-goes-to-trump-rallies>. Saunders’ commencement address was so popular it has since been published as a book, George Saunders, *Congratulations by the Way: Some Thoughts on Kindness* (Random House, 2014).

8. On post-postmodernism, see Laura Morris, “Beyond Irony: Reconsidering the Post-Postmodernism of Dave Eggers and George Saunders” in *Narratives at the Beginning of the Millennium*, eds. Jessica Homberg-Schramm, Anna Rasokat, and Felicitas Schweiker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 117-130. On the role of irony and empathy in characterizing it, see Layne Neeper, “‘To Soften the Heart’: George Saunders, Postmodern Satire, and Empathy,” *Studies in American Humor* 2, no. 2 (2016): 280-299. Richard Lee, “Narrative Point of View, Irony and Cultural Criticism in Selected Short Fiction by George Saunders,” *Short Story* 18, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 81-94; and Michael Basseler, “Narrative Empathy in George Saunders’s Short Fiction” in *George Saunders: Critical Essays*, eds. Philip Coleman and Steve Gronert Ellerhoff (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 153-172, additionally consider how Saunders puts irony to work for empathy. Jurrit Daalder, “Cruel Inventions: George Saunders’s Literary Darkenfloxx,” in *George Saunders: Critical Essays*, 173-188, offers a critique of Saunders’ methods for affecting empathy in readers. Adam Kelly, “Language Between Lyricism and Corporatism: George Saunders’s New Sincerity,” in *George Saunders: Critical Essays*, 41-58, writes about Saunders’ place in what he has described as the “New Sincerity” in the same collection, and Morris’ piece on post-postmodernism also considers whether Kelly’s description proves useful.

On Saunders’ depictions of life under neoliberalism and particularly its rhetorics, see Alex Millen, “Affective Fictions: George Saunders and the Wonderful-sounding Words of Neoliberalism,” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 59, no. 2 (2018) 127-141; and Sarah Pogell, “‘The Verisimilitude Inspector’: George Saunders as the New Baudrillard?” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 52, no. 4 (2011): 460-478. Juliana Nalerio, “The Patriarch’s Balls: Class Consciousness, Violence, and Dystopia in George Saunders’ Vision of Contemporary America,” *Miscelánea: A Journal of English and American Studies* 52 (2015): 89-102, likewise examines Saunders’ depictions of class and capitalism.

Additionally, Saunders has spoken often of studying Buddhism, his Catholic upbringing, and how these traditions have influenced his life and writing toward kindness and empathy, and some scholarship has also considered religion in his fiction.⁹ Brian Jansen and Hollie Adams identify in Saunders' early work, and particularly in *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline*, the sort of postsecular religious imagination John McClure describes, one that eschews established religion in favor of novel or nonspecific belief.¹⁰ Yet the "postsecular faith" McClure locates in contemporary American fiction confronts Christian conservatism only insofar as it imagines new forms of spirituality with different, progressive politics. As Jansen and Adams note, Saunders' religious imagination often fits McClure's description of postsecular faith, yet his stories also engage with Christian discourses, as in *Tenth of December*—and not just to satirize them.

Through most of *Tenth of December*, Christian language insulates characters against empathizing with others. Yet in a departure from the rest of the collection, "Escape from Spiderhead" puts the persuasive power of Christian language, parodied elsewhere, to use for exploring free will and moral responsibility. In the conclusion of "Spiderhead," narrator Jeff

9. See for example Saunders' discussion of Catholicism and Buddhism in his interview with W. Brett Wiley, "A Conversation with George Saunders." *Image Journal* 88, accessed August 3, 2021, <https://imagejournal.org/article/a-conversation-with-george-saunders/>. In his discussion of "Sea Oak," David P. Rando, "George Saunders and the Postmodern Working Class," *Contemporary Literature* 53, no. 3 (2012): 437-460, similarly reads Bernie's resurrection as, in part, a parody of Christian discourses on patient suffering. In addition to Rando, see Brian Jansen and Hollie Adams, "Good Work and Good Works: Work and the Postsecular in George Saunders's *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline*," *European Journal of American Studies* 13, no. 2 (2018), discussed below; as well as Aiden Cottrell-Boyce, "The Absent Presence of the *Deus Absconditus* in the Work of George Saunders," in *George Saunders: Critical Essays*, eds. Philip Coleman and Steve Gronert Ellerhoff (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 137-152, which explores the theology of "Deus Absconditus" resonating in several Saunders stories.

10. Jansen and Adams, "Good Work and Good Works."

turns to Christian language of predestination and the discourse of biological determinism to ask whether our choices are predetermined by biology, circumstances, culture, or otherwise, or if we choose who we become. He ultimately suggests that free will is limited, ironically, by a neoliberal system that prizes autonomy, and he interweaves Christian and scientific discourses to describe the experience of living within its limits.

Saunders' first novel, *Lincoln in the Bardo* offers yet more conclusive answers to the same questions, insisting on moral agency and exploring how we might live well within constraints. Whereas "Escape from Spiderhead" depicts the absurd contradictions of neoliberalism, *Lincoln in the Bardo* considers how an individual can do good under those conditions, within limits he has little power to affect. *Lincoln* also extends Saunders' exploration in "Spiderhead" of religious language when a Christian Reverend finds himself in a Buddhist afterlife, the bardo of the novel's title. Like Christian and scientific discourses in "Spiderhead," *Lincoln* interweaves Christian and Buddhist beliefs to construct the novel's vision of the afterlife, and so its answer for whether we are ultimately responsible for our choices.

In *Lincoln*, as in "Spiderhead," Christian language does not communicate self-assurance, simplify a complicated situation, or disburden characters from considering the effects their actions have on others. Instead, in both texts, Christian language allows Saunders' characters to reflect on their own moral agency, decide what is right, and act on their convictions. Both Jeff in "Spiderhead" and the Reverend in *Lincoln* feel the courses of their lives have already been decided, and yet both choose to sacrifice themselves for someone else.

When Jeff invokes Christian predestination next to biological determinism in "Escape from Spiderhead," he also invokes Christian conservatives' opposition to evolutionary theory. That is, Saunders takes Christian language seriously in "Spiderhead" when he uses it alongside

the discourse of a field that conflicts deeply with Christian conservatism. In Christian conservatives' conflict with evolutionary psychology and other evolutionary approaches to understanding the human mind and behavior, as in the other stories in *Tenth of December*, Christian conservative discourse has often worked in a closed circuit, wherein opposing views are treated as a threat or do not reach at all. In both "Escape from Spiderhead" and *Lincoln in the Bardo*, Saunders uses Christian language next to the discourses of distinct and conflicting worldviews, and not to defend against or dismiss them. These texts find merit in each, and even common ground. "Escape from Spiderhead" and *Lincoln in the Bardo* consider free will in Christian language together with the languages of evolutionary science and Buddhism, and they consider how Christian language could work cooperatively in political dialogue.

Sex, Drugs, and No Good Choices in "Escape from Spiderhead"

In "Escape from Spiderhead," narrator Jeff is an inmate in a hybrid detention-research center, the "Spiderhead" of the story's title. The name reflects the complex's shape, a center control room surrounded by the "legs" of inmates' "workrooms."¹¹ Jeff was sentenced for killing a friend in a fight when he was a teenager, and he has been spared "real prison" in exchange for participating in drug trials at Spiderhead.¹² From what Jeff recounts, Spiderhead seems to be testing drugs for commercial purposes, military applications, and even corporate interests. (Jeff recounts testing a drug that allows him to "stand still fifteen straight hours at a fake cash register, miraculously suddenly able to do extremely hard long-division problems in my mind.")¹³ When

11. Saunders, *Tenth of December*, 55.

12. Saunders, 68.

13. Saunders, 62.

the story opens, he is participating in a test of a new drug, ED289/290, that makes him fall in and back out of love with multiple women. Imagining possible applications of the love drug, head researcher Abnesti gushes,

We have unlocked a mysterious eternal secret. What a fantastic game changer. Say someone can't love? Now he or she can. We can make him. Say someone loves too much or loves someone deemed unsuitable by his or her caregiver? We can tone that shit right down. Say someone is blue, because of true love? We step in, or his or her caregiver does: blue no more. No longer, in terms of emotional controllability, are we ships adrift. No one is. We see a ship adrift, we climb aboard, install a rudder.¹⁴

The story thus examines our experiences of emotion, questioning whether they are any more than the product of physiochemical reactions. As the experiments progress, Jeff begins to question whether even our personalities and so our choices are the foregone ends of biological processes or genetic predispositions.¹⁵

These questions come to a head in the story's final scene. Forced to take part in a test he knows will lead to a woman's suicide, Jeff instead administers himself the drug "Darkenfloxx," making himself deeply suicidal, and takes his own life. As he dies, Jeff soars over the Spiderhead prison complex in a transcendent state, watching the scene unfold from above. Looking down on his fellow inmates, he asks how they became criminals, by choice or by design? No infant is

14. Saunders, *Tenth of December*, 58.

15. These are questions that probe the boundaries of the human, asking us to consider what exactly is exceptional about us compared to other living things. David Huebert, "Biopolitical Dystopias, Bureaucratic Carnivores, Synthetic Primitive: 'Pastoralia' as Human Zoo" in *George Saunders: Critical Essays*, eds. Philip Coleman and Steve Gronert Ellerhoff (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 105-120, examines adjacent questions in "Pastoralia," arguing that this earlier Saunders story considers what it means to be human by dramatizing the boundaries between human and our genetic ancestors, humans and animals, and the human and the artificial.

born wanting to murder another person, he thinks, and yet somewhere along the way, between nature and nurture, they have become murderers. “At birth,” he supposes,

they’d been charged by God with the responsibility of growing into total fuckups. Had they chosen this? Was it their fault, as they tumbled out of the womb? Had they aspired, covered in placental blood, to grow into harmers, dark forces, life-enders? In that first holy instant of breath/awareness (tiny hands clutching and unclutching) had it been their fondest hope to render (via gun, knife, or brick) some innocent family bereft? No; and yet their crooked destinies had lain dormant within them, seeds awaiting water and light to bring forth the most violent, life-poisoning flowers, said water/light actually being the requisite combination of neurological tendency and environmental activation that would transform them (transform us!) into earth’s offal, murderers, and foul us with the ultimate, unwashable transgression.¹⁶

Jeff’s diction in this passage is a remarkable mix of the religious, scientific, and poetic. He describes a recognizably Christian creation and fall: “charged by God” from a “first holy instant of breath” the inmates go on to be “foul[ed] . . . with the ultimate, unwashable transgression” of taking a life. He describes their births medically, how they emerged “covered in placental blood,” and their falls from grace in likewise scientific language, how “the requisite combination of neurological tendency and environmental activation” led them to murder. He weaves in tender, lyrical details—they “tumbled out of the womb,” their “tiny hands clutching and unclutching.” Their “crooked destinies” awaited them like “seeds awaiting water and light” to become “life-poisoning flowers.” Saunders interweaves these several discourses to ask the same questions: Did his fellow inmates have a choice? If they were born murderers, are they then responsible?¹⁷

16. Saunders, *Tenth of December*, 79.

17. Others have noted how Saunders often interweaves characters’ points of view, as he here interweaves these several discourses, to affect a dialogue among points of view in the Bakhtinian vein. See Michael Basseler, “Narrative Empathy in George Saunders’s Short Fiction,” and Robert Cameron Wilson, “‘Third-person Ventriloquism’: Microdialogues and Polyphony in George Saunders’s ‘Victory Lap,’” in *George Saunders: Critical Essays*, eds. Philip Coleman and Steve Gronert Ellerhoff (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 221-236.

The final aside of Jeff's description, "(transform us!)," suggests that if Jeff is asking how his fellow inmates came to murder, he is also asking a larger question: how do all of "us"—murderers or not—become who we are, and should we be held responsible? In the passage that follows, Jeff leaves behind the inmates to describe a flock of birds flying alongside him. He thinks that each of their beaks, and so each one's "distinctive song" was "an accident of beak shape, throat shape, breast configuration, brain chemistry: some birds blessed in voice, others cursed; some squawking, others rapturous."¹⁸ Jeff has suggested that his fellow inmates did not choose to become murderers, and in his description of the birds, he affirms how they came to be. They—we—are a product of our genetics and environment. "Spiderhead" ends by questioning whether personality is more than chemistry. The story doubts whether we truly have free will, the capacity to choose who we become.

Except that "Spiderhead" ends with a set of choices. Jeff chooses to end his own life rather than be part of an experiment that would have killed someone else. As Jeff flies over the prison complex, he hears a voice asking him if he would like to "go back," to return to life in Spiderhead, and he answers no.¹⁹ Jeff does have a choice at the end of his life, but he does not have much of one. This is the critique the story builds toward throughout. As when the inmates must consent with a "drip on" to each drug before researchers administer it, it is the appearance of choice without real options; the head researcher can always administer yet another drug, "Docilryde," that forces them to comply.²⁰ Jeff must choose between his own life or another's,

18. Saunders, *Tenth of December*, 80.

19. Saunders, 80.

20. Saunders, 75.

and the irony of this freedom to choose is written into his final lines. Jeff thinks he has finally made a better choice, that “I didn’t kill this time,” except that he has killed, killed himself, to avoid it.²¹

What sort of choice did his fellow prisoners have, then, when they committed the crimes that led them to Spiderhead? Jeff asserts that the inmates had no choice in who they became; the story undermines this, but only to a point. The story ends with agency, if an agency severely limited by circumstances. It affirms the reality of choice, if its characters have few choices. When choosing to do the right thing looks like this—means taking your own life—something has gone wrong.

The story’s setting, a prison complex putting its inmates through experimental psychotropic drug trials for profit, points toward some of the ways Jeff’s questions have real-world implications. The complex Jeff calls “Spiderhead” brings to mind the proliferation of private prisons since the 1980s, as well as the practice of profiting from inmate labor, outlawed in the 1930s but steadily “creeping back” in to the U.S. prison system since the same period.²² Jeff does not work in Spiderhead in the traditional sense, but he suggests that the drug testing he submits to profits pharmaceutical companies with interests in selling drugs to the general public

21. Saunders, *Tenth of December*, 78.

22. David Musick and Kristine Gunsaulus-Musick, *American Prisons: Their Past, Present and Future* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 84, 79. “At the turn of the century,” Musick and Gunsaulus-Musick, 95, write, “about 5% of all prison beds in the United States, including about 10% of all federal prison beds, were controlled by corporations. By 2015, private prisons were housing around 7 percent of state inmates and approximately 20 percent of federal prisoners. Imprisonment had become a \$5 billion industry. In 2013, there were approximately 133,00 inmates held in for-profit prisons throughout the United States. By 2024, it has been estimated that private prisons in the United States will hold over 350,000 inmates.”

as well as the military.²³ He has traded himself as test subject, and his mother has spent a considerable amount of money, so that he can serve his sentence in a comparatively better institution.²⁴ Likewise, Spiderhead is not a private prison in the sense that they exist in the U.S. today, but it is a version of one—the private prison, we might imagine, of the near-future: a “better” alternative to the standard, government-run prison, more efficient, making a profit for its owners, promising a better internment and outcome for its prisoners, except that in reality, like private prisons and prison work programs in the U.S. today, it is built on coercion and violence.

As David Musick and Kristine Gunsaulus-Musick document in *American Prisons: Their Past, Present and Future*, in practice, work programs must legally be voluntary and pay inmates for their labor. Yet inmates are often threatened with restricted privileges for refusing work and are paid low wages, from which up to 80% can be deducted for room and board and other charges.²⁵ Additionally, they write, “inmate escapes, inmate-on-inmate violence and violence perpetrated by guards have plagued” facilities run by private prison companies both minor and major.²⁶ Though the logic of privatizing prisons was that “subject to the rigors of market competition” they “could deliver correctional services more efficiently than could the state,” Mary Sigler writes, the cost-savings has “come at the expense of inmate well-being,” saving

23. Saunders, *Tenth of December*, 57-8.

24. Saunders, 68.

25. Musick and Gunsaulus-Musick, *American Prisons*, 81.

26. Musick and Gunsaulus-Musick, 91. They discuss for example Corrections Corporation of America, which runs more than half of U.S. private prisons, as well as Wackenhut Corrections and its successor Geo Group, Capital Correctional Resources running detention centers in Texas, and Management and Training Corporation running correctional facilities in Colorado.

money by cutting funding to staff, education and training programs, and facilities upkeep.²⁷

Spiderhead also profits at the expense of its inmates, despite promising them a preferable sentence, testing drugs by their consent only in the loosest sense of the term, a concerning if also conceivable next step in the logic of a privatized prison system.

The U.S. pharmaceutical industry, another private industry ostensibly serving public health and wellbeing, is also context for Spiderhead. In the U.S., drug companies can market drugs directly to the public, a practice that has driven up prescription drug costs and medical spending since it took off in the 1980s.²⁸ The rationale for allowing direct-to-consumer marketing of pharmaceuticals is that market competition in the drug industry will beget a healthier society, yet as with private prisons, it is a practice that demonstrably profits companies at patients' expense. The logic Jeff questions at the end of the story, the logic of individual choice and responsibility, is the same logic that undergirds the shift toward privatizing prisons and failing to regulate drug companies' marketing practices.

Scholars have long recognized Saunders' abiding interest in satirizing neoliberal capitalism.²⁹ What interests me is why, in "Spiderhead," he turns to religious language, language

27. Mary Sigler, "Private Prisons, Public Functions, and the Meaning of Punishment," *Florida State University Law Review* 38, no. 1 (2010): 150-1.

28. Lisa M. Schwartz, "Medical Marketing in the United States, 1977-2016," *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 321, no 1 (2019): 80-96, outlines this history. See also Lisa Ellis, "Snapshot of the American Pharmaceutical Industry," *Executive and Continuing Professional Education, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health*, accessed May 6, 2019, <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/ecpe/snapshot-of-the-american-pharmaceutical-industry/>.

29. Rando, "George Saunders and the Postmodern Working Class"; Millen, "Affective Fictions"; Pogel, "'The Verisimilitude Inspector': George Saunders as the New Baudrillard?"; and Nalerio, "The Patriarch's Balls" are representative.

I use neoliberalism according to David Harvey's description, "a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by

evocative of Christian creation and damnation, to articulate questions of choice and responsibility that underlie it. In a departure from the other stories in *Tenth of December*, Christian language in “Spiderhead” does not function to prop up a narrator’s suspect values in the face of critique from other characters or the story itself. Instead, it serves the narrator at a point of epiphany. The story may not fully affirm the conclusions Jeff draws in his final moments of reverie, that like the birds we are either “blessed” or “cursed” beyond our own control, but “Spiderhead” also does not undermine its Christian rhetoric outright. Instead, it offers it as a productive way to press into the story’s primary ethical concerns. Christian language works alongside scientific language to express how principles of individual choice and responsibility underwrite an economic system that leaves many feeling they have no control over their lives, that their lots are inalterable.

Christian Predestination and Biological Determinisms, Unlikely Allies

Yet another context for “Escape from Spiderhead” are reductionist and determinist understandings of the human mind and behavior coming out of fields like cognitive neuroscience, behavioral genetics, and evolutionary psychology, and which some conservative Christians have deeply opposed. Psychologist and Religious Studies scholar Fraser Watts describes many religious peoples’ opposition to a reductionist interpretation of evolution, writing that “it is a big jump from” accepting “the idea that human beings have evolved from other forms

strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade.” Rising to prominence in the late 1970s, neoliberalism is characterized by deregulation and the privatization of public services, as with the private prisons “Escape from Spiderhead” references. Neoliberalism holds, as Harvey explains, that “if markets do not exist (in areas such as land, water, education, health care, social security, or environmental pollution), then they must be created, by state action if necessary”; it “seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market.” See David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 2-3.

of life,” and that “evolution provides at least a partial explanation of human moral and religious attributes,” to then “say that evolution explains everything, or that the higher aspects of humans, such as the capacity to be moral, are not what they seem, and are really nothing but a product of evolution.”³⁰ This is Bonnie’s fear in *The Echo Maker* when she encounters Weber’s explanation of the “God module.” Weber argues that neuroscience has explained religious experiences by locating the part of the brain responsible, ruling out the existence of God. As this interpretation plays out in evolutionary psychology and cognitive neuroscience, we are “just survival mechanisms for our genes” or “nothing but a ‘bundle of neurons.’”³¹

From the reductionist interpretation follows the determinist. If we can fully explain human behavior in terms of genes and their drives to replicate, the human mind in terms of neurons firing, we can understand our behavior as products of these processes. According to the kind of neurological determinism inspired by Benjamin Libet’s experiments in the 1980s, we lack conscious control of our choices and actions. Libet monitored subjects using an EEG and asked them to note when they had decided to flick their wrists. He found that their brains registered the decision to move before they were consciously aware of it. The subjects did not consciously choose to act, Libet concluded; their unconscious brains chose, and then made them aware of that choice.³² Genetic determinism asserts a genetic basis for human behavior, that genotype ultimately determines phenotype; and in the adaptationist view, human behavior can be

30. Fraser Watts, “Psychology and Theology,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Science and Religion*, ed. Peter Harrison (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 192.

31. Watts, “Psychology and Theology,” 191-2.

32. About the Libet experiment and its implications, see Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, ed., *Conscious Will and Responsibility: A Tribute to Benjamin Libet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

explained by the drive for self-preservation and reproduction on the genetic level. Motives or actions that may seem otherwise, like love or altruism, are only self-interest by another name.³³

These are the scientific conversations “Spiderhead” invokes when ED289/290 makes Jeff fall in love. When a drug can turn love on and off, love is reduced to a series of neurochemical reactions, and choice becomes irrelevant. This is also what Jeff questions at the story’s conclusion. If the prisoners’ actions can be reduced to “the requisite combination of neurological tendency and environmental activation,” did they ever have a choice?

Determinism is one, certainly not the only, model of human behavior available from scientific data, and it is hotly contested within these fields.³⁴ Many religious people have also

33. Jeremy Sherman, “Scientific Explanations for the Emergence of Love and Altruism,” in *Science and Religion: One Planet, Many Possibilities*, eds. Lucas F. Johnston and Whitney A. Bauman (New York: Routledge, 2014), 192.

34. Watts, “Psychology and Theology,” and Sherman, “Scientific Explanations for the Emergence of Love and Altruism,” both give overviews of alternative interpretations. Additionally, Nancy Murphy, “Divine Action, Emergence and Scientific Explanation,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Science and Religion*, ed. Peter Harrison (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 251-2, offers what she calls “non-reductive physicalism” as an alternative, or “the view that humans are entirely physical and that they nonetheless exhibit all of the higher human capacities once attributed to the mind: rationality, morality, spirituality, and free will.” This is a view, she concludes, that leaves the possibility of free will, depending on how one defines it, or at least room for autonomy.

About this and other controversies in evolutionary psychology as it overlaps with sociobiology, see John Alcock, *The Triumph of Sociobiology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); and Ullica Segerstrale, *Defenders of the Truth: The Battle for Science in the Sociobiology Debate and Beyond* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). In behavioral genetics, see Huib Looren de Jong, “Genetic Determinism: How Not to Interpret Behavioral Genetics,” *Theory and Psychology* 10, no. 5 (2000): 615-637. In neuroscience, see Glannon, *Free Will and the Brain*; and Laurence R. Tancredi, “The Neuroscience of ‘Free Will,’” *Behavioral Sciences and the Law* 25 (2007): 295-308; and Jason Douglas Runyan, *Human Agency and Neural Causes: Philosophy of Action and the Neuroscience of Voluntary Agency* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2013). Bernard Feltz, Marcus Missal, and Andrew Sims, eds., *Free Will, Causality, and Neuroscience* (Boston: Brill, 2020) makes a neuroscientific case for free will. Daniel M. Wegner, *The Illusion of Conscious Will* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002) makes the case against, as does Sam Harris, *Free Will* (New York: Free Press, 2012).

distinguished evolutionary theory from determinist interpretations in these fields, including some conservative Christians (and including Marilynne Robinson in *The Death of Adam*, the subject of the next chapter).³⁵

Even so, such conclusions about the human mind and behavior threaten others' convictions that we are more than our physical bodies, but spiritual beings with souls, with a purpose beyond survival and reproduction. As I discussed in chapter one, Christian creationists have campaigned against evolution in school science curriculums for over a century based on just these concerns. Creationists have long warned that evolution reduces human existence to an accident of nature, random and meaningless. They have feared, like Bonnie in *The Echo Maker*, that evolution seeks to disprove the existence of God. They have warned, too, as William Jennings Bryan argued in the Scopes trial, that it seeks to explain away and undermine morality as a cover for ruthless selfishness. In the fundamentalist account, evolution reduced people to animals ruled by brute instinct, and the Scopes trial became known as the "Scopes Monkey Trial" for this reason.

William Jennings Bryan warned against evolutionary theory on the basis of this interpretation, depicting it as the only interpretation, that asserts humans are wholly driven by a selfish instinct for survival. Yet on free will, Christian theology is classically split. The doctrine

35. Essays that comprise *The Religion and Science Debate: Why Does it Continue?*, ed. Harold Attridge (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), and especially Ronald Numbers, "Aggressors, Victims, and Peacemakers: Historical Actors in the Drama of Science and Religion," document how religious people have long held varied, nuanced views of science and its relationship to their respective religious traditions. Additionally, Mark A. Noll, "Evangelicalism and Fundamentalism," details how evangelicals and fundamentalists have been at least as likely historically to support science as to oppose it until the early twentieth century. Jon H. Roberts, "Religious Reactions to Darwin," charts the complicated and changing views religious people have held about evolution since Darwin.

of predestination, in some versions, asserts like scientific versions of determinism that free will is an illusion. These philosophies diverge starkly on the force(s) that truly determine human action, biological or divine.³⁶ Yet even many Christian conservatives believe that our actions are predetermined—by God. A “New Calvinist” or “neo-Reformed” movement has gained influence among evangelicals in the last fifteen years or so, and especially among millennial evangelicals, as Brad Vermurlen documents in *Reformed Resurgence: The New Calvinist Movement and the Battle over American Evangelicalism*.³⁷ Associated with popular evangelical pastors like John Piper and Timothy Keller, this New Calvinism shares with the old a foundational belief in “unconditional election,” or that God has predestined some to be saved and others to be damned.³⁸

In the final pages of “Spiderhead,” Saunders draws in these conversations about agency in evolutionary psychology, behavioral genetics, and cognitive neuroscience. He pairs them with a Calvinist description of the Spiderhead inmates’ fates, that “at birth” the inmates had “been charged by God with the responsibility of growing into total fuckups,” to be “foul[ed] with “the ultimate, unwashable transgression.”³⁹ These discourses reflect deeply conflicted beliefs about

36. About the doctrine of predestination and its history in American Christianity, see Peter J. Thuesen, *Predestination: An American Career of a Contentious Doctrine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

37. Brad Vermurlen, *Reformed Resurgence: The New Calvinist Movement and the Battle Over American Evangelicalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

38. See also Collin Hansen, “Young, restless, reformed: Calvinism is making a comeback—and shaking up the church,” *Christianity Today*, September 2006, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2006/september/42.32.html>. Hansen writes as an insider to the movement, addressing fellow conservative Christians, and his piece first put a spotlight on the growing influence of Calvinist theology in evangelical churches.

39. Saunders, *Tenth of December*, 79.

human nature and free will, a conflict reflected in decades of political struggle over not just evolution, but the status of scientific authority broadly. Yet Saunders uses them in concert, interweaving these discourses in Jeff's questions about his fellow inmates, to convey a determinist view of human behavior. Jeff thinks he and his fellow inmates had no choice.

Ultimately "Spiderhead" does not endorse determinism, biological or divine. Instead, determinism ironically describes the experience of living under social and economic policies that triumph choice and personal responsibility—the limits of free will under free market capitalism. The language of Christian predestination works together with the discourses of biological determinism, and on a topic that has fueled Christian conservatives' ongoing battles against evolutionary theory and distrust of scientific authority, to express the story's leftist critique.⁴⁰

Christian conservatives' suspicion of scientific authority and their broader efforts to undermine scientific consensus on evolution as well as climate change, as I described in chapter one, stand in contrast to how Saunders positions Christian language next to scientific discourses in "Spiderhead." In her work on climate change skepticism in evangelical churches, Robin Globus Veldman documents how such skepticism among evangelicals correlates with a belief that Christians are a persecuted minority, what she calls an "embattled mentality."⁴¹ She describes many of her evangelical interviewees' hostility at even being asked about their views

40. What Saunders does not confront in "Escape from Spiderhead" is Christian conservatives' support for those very policies. In fact, as Marilynne Robinson writes in *The Death of Adam*, biological determinism, and particularly the adaptationist outgrowth of it, has often served as rationale for free market capitalism. Christian conservatives, she argues, have thrown the weight of Christian discourse behind both. I discuss Robinson's critique and the relationship of determinism to conservative economics and Christian conservatism in chapter three.

41. Veldman, *The Gospel of Climate Skepticism*, 97.

on environmentalism or climate change. For these evangelicals, climate change was “a tool wielded by secular elites to undermine the Christian worldview,” much as creationists have warned of evolution.⁴² As Veldman acknowledges, her findings echo George Marsden’s description of the fundamentalist movement in the aftermath of the Scopes trial, that Scopes cemented fundamentalist Christians’ understanding of themselves as a “beleaguered minority.”⁴³

To explain the persistence of the perception among evangelicals that they are under attack, Veldman describes discourse around climate science in evangelical churches as “a vast echo chamber,” borrowing language from Sean Connable’s work on conservative Christian mass media.⁴⁴ In the multiple media arms of Focus on the Family, Connable finds that stories of America’s Christian heritage and of Christians under siege from secularism circulate “without competition from other ideas,” so that “space for nonconformity and dialogue becomes all but impossible.”⁴⁵ Connable’s description of the conservative Christian media environment as an echo chamber, and Veldman’s characterization of the same among evangelical climate change skeptics, also describes how Christian language functions in the other stories that make up *Tenth*

42. Veldman, *The Gospel of Climate Skepticism*, 87-88.

43. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 6.

44. Sean Connable, “The ‘Christian Nation’ Thesis and the Evangelical Echo Chamber,” in *The Electronic Church in the Digital Age: Cultural Impacts of Evangelical Mass Media*, ed. Mark Ward (Santa Barbara: ABC-Clio, 2016), 185.

45. Connable, “The ‘Christian Nation’ Thesis,” 197. Focus on the Family is the influential conservative Christian organization at the vanguard of the Christian Right, formed in 1977 by James Dobson. Focus on the Family’s expressly political arm, the Family Research Council, was formed in 1983. By the late 90s, Daniel K. Williams, 242, writes, Dobson had become “the nation’s most prominent Christian Right leader.” See Williams, *God’s Own Party*, 237-243; as well as Susan B. Ridgely, “Conservative Christianity and the Creation of Alternative News: An Analysis of Focus on the Family’s Multimedia Empire,” *Religion and American Culture*, 30, no. 1 (2020): 1-25.

of *December*. As for Marie in “Puppy” or for the narrator of “The Semplica Girl Diaries,” Christian language insulates Christian conservatives from others’ experiences and perspectives.

In the conclusion of “Spiderhead,” Christian language is neither inimical to scientific discourse nor exclusionary, precluding other points of view. Jeff speaks in both, stitching together the narratives and vocabulary of both, to explain his felt lack of agency. In the way Saunders uses the languages of Christian predestination and biological determinism, “Spiderhead” offers an alternative to the echo chamber Connable documents. He puts these discourses in dialogue.

Damned if You Do, Damned if You Don’t in *Lincoln in the Bardo*

In *Lincoln in the Bardo*, Saunders explores similar questions about free will and moral responsibility. Whereas “Escape from Spiderhead” interweaves Christian and scientific discourses, *Lincoln* uses Christian and Buddhist images and expressions to construct the world of the bardo and the ethics of the novel.⁴⁶ Whereas determinist discourses in “Escape from Spiderhead” critique the social conditions of neoliberalism, in *Lincoln in the Bardo*, Saunders turns his attention to the individual’s experience of living under constraints on agency, and our ethical obligations given those limits.

Lincoln in the Bardo takes place in 1862, just as Abraham Lincoln’s third son, the eleven-year-old Willie Lincoln, has fallen mortally ill. The United States is not a year into the

46. In fact, Jeff’s posthumous musings are not the only instance of religious imagery in “Spiderhead.” As Rando, “George Saunders and the Postmodern Working Class,” notes, “Spiderhead” joins other Saunders short stories like “CommComm” and “Sea Oak” in bringing a character back from the dead with a revelation to share. Jeff’s in-between state at the end of “Spiderhead,” his having left the world below, clearly headed somewhere else but not yet having reached it, is reminiscent of the Tibetan Buddhist understanding of the bardo, a liminal state between death and rebirth and the inspiration for *Lincoln in the Bardo*.

Civil War. The novel moves back and forth between Willie's final days with his family and the world of the cemetery where Willie's body is eventually interred.

The cemetery is inhabited by a chorus of characters whose souls languish in the bardo, a transitional state between death and rebirth in Tibetan Buddhism. These characters in the cemetery compulsively repeat the stories of their lives' unfinished business, each fixated on some loss or desire that keeps them from moving on from the bardo. All insist they are only sick, not dead. Hans Vollman desperately regrets never having consummated his marriage and feels he must wait until he recovers from his "illness" so he may return to his wife. Roger Bevins III deeply regrets having attempted suicide after facing rejection from a lover. He waits to recover so that he may live freely as a gay man, and can again touch, taste, and feel what it means to be fully alive. Only the Reverend Early Thomas does not share his story compulsively, and instead tries to help Willie move on from the bardo. Saunders takes as inspiration for the novel a story about Lincoln returning to the cemetery several times to visit Willie's body in the mausoleum, to lift him from the coffin and to hold him. When Lincoln comes to visit Willie, Willie decides he must also remain in the bardo, and in this way Saunders explores Lincoln's grief and guilt over Willie's death and over the war.

Lincoln picks up questions of agency and responsibility when Willie becomes entrapped in the mausoleum by a mass of demonic spirits, a result of attempting to remain in the bardo, and Saunders lets the spirits talk. The spirits reveal that they too were once human, but have been damned to entangle the souls of children like Willie who linger in the bardo state because of particularly egregious misdeeds like pedophilia, "murdering your loved one with poison," "massacr[ing] an entire regiment of your enemy" or "conspir[ing] with your lover to dispose of a

living baby.”⁴⁷ As the Reverend puts it, the form imprisoning Willie “seemed comprised of *people*. People like us. Like we had been”—people now identifiable as such only by the sounds of their voices.⁴⁸ When Bevins suggests to the damned mass that trapping children seems unfair, the voices respond with “outraged rebukes” and a series of questions reminiscent of those Jeff asks at the end of “Spiderhead”:

Fairness, blah, said the Vermonter.
Did I murder Elmer? the woman said.
You did, said the Brit.

I did, said the woman. Was I born with just those predispositions and desires that would lead me, after my whole preceding life (during which I had killed exactly no one), to do *just that thing*? I was. Was that *my* doing? Was that *fair*? Did I *ask* to be born licentious, greedy, slightly misanthropic, and to find Elmer so irritating? I did not. But there I was.

And here you are, said the Brit.
Here I am, quite right, she said.⁴⁹

The Vermonter speaks up next, asking, “Did I ask to be born with a desire to have sex with children?” and answering himself, “I don’t remember doing so, there in my mother’s womb.”⁵⁰ The language of “my mother’s womb” in particular echoes Jeff’s description of the inmates at the end of “Spiderhead,” as does the woman’s story of the “predispositions and desires” she was born with, culminating inevitably, in her telling, in her husband’s murder. As yet more voices follow in suit, their stories are the same: they are the products of fate, biology, environment, their actions only and completely inevitable.

We were as we were! the bass lisper barked. How could we have been otherwise?
Or, being that way, have *done* otherwise? We *were* that way, *at that time*, and had been

47. George Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo* (New York: Random House, 2017), 267.

48. Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 267.

49. Saunders, 269.

50. Saunders, 269.

led to that place, not by any innate evil in ourselves, but by the state of our cognition and our experience up *until that moment*.

By Fate, by Destiny, said the Vermonter.⁵¹

As Jeff imagines of his fellow prisoners, so the damned surrounding Willie insist that they could not choose who they became.

Yet, when the voice that abandoned a baby follows with his defense, that leaving the child would “free us up; to be more loving, and be more fully in the world, and would relieve him of the suffering entailed in being forevermore not quite right . . .” the same woman’s voice asks in response, “Does it seem that way to you now?” “Less so,” he replies, and in his reply Saunders begins to answer the questions of agency and responsibility that unite these two texts more decisively than does the conclusion of “Spiderhead alone.”⁵² The voices of the damned in *Lincoln* recognize, if reluctantly, that their rationales ring hollow. They *could*, in fact, have been otherwise, *could* have done otherwise. They were not fated beyond their control to harm other human beings so terribly, and they are in fact responsible for their actions. Should they deny it, their fates as globs of child-soul-torture-caging betray them. They have been held responsible, here in the afterlife, for these choices. When the massacring British commander defends his actions by asking, “How was I (how are any of us) to do other than that which we, at that time, actually do?,” the woman asks him, “And did that argument persuade?” He can only answer: “You know very well, you tart, that it did not! . . . For here I am.”⁵³

51. Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 270.

52. Saunders, 270.

53. Saunders, 271. The aside in the Brit’s question—“How was I (how are any of us)” —points us back to the Reverend’s initial observation, that these demon-like creatures who preyed on and murdered the defenseless were “People like us. Like we had been.” The questions they ask about justice, about whether we choose who we are and are responsible for it, are questions

In “Escape from Spiderhead,” Jeff thinks that the inmates did not choose who they became. Though the story concludes with Jeff choosing not to murder, “Spiderhead” ends with a qualified affirmation of free will, at best. As in “Spiderhead,” *Lincoln in the Bardo* also turns to religious language to question free will and moral responsibility. Yet where the story’s answer is qualified, the novel’s is clear: you are responsible for your choices. In *Lincoln*, the judgement these spirits face in the afterlife tells us they are wrong, that they did have choices and are responsible for them. And the novel’s picture of the afterlife is decidedly religious, if the traditions Saunders invokes are mixed and the resulting cosmos unsystematic, rendered with details that do not add up to a comprehensive whole.

Who exactly the British commander’s argument failed to persuade, for example, is unclear. When the spirits encasing Willie first speak, they inform the Reverend and friends that “HE would have no objection” if the group “wished to transport the boy back up to the roof” to be imprisoned there, rather than inside the mausoleum.⁵⁴ The “HE” suggests a higher power, perhaps a god figure, yet we learn little else about him. The precise identity of the higher power calling the shots in this afterlife is the first of many details Saunders suggests without filling out. The Reverend asks the group if they are in “Hell,” to which they reply “not the worst one,” and describe apparently worse eternities they could have faced, like bashing their heads against screw-drivers.⁵⁵ There are states beyond that which the characters in the cemetery occupy, then,

for all of us, not just these with such obvious, horrific transgressions. It also echoes Jeff’s aside about his fellow inmates: “transform them (transform us!)”

54. Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 266.

55. Saunders, 270.

but how many, what they are like, and how one ends up in one or another, the novel does not resolve.

The god figure and hell the characters describe read loosely Christian, and the Reverend understands what he hears from the spirits in these terms. Their defenses of their misdeeds are framed by the Reverend's thoughts about his own sins, what he deserves, and how he can make sense of God's judgment. "Whatever my sin, it must, I felt (I prayed), be small, compared to the sins of *these*," he thinks upon learning that the shell around Willie is full of what once were people. "And yet, I was of their ilk. Was I not? When I went, it seemed, it would be to join them."⁵⁶ The Reverend is the only character who does not share his story of regret or unfulfilled desire that keeps him from moving on from the bardo, and midway through the novel, he explains why. When he died, the Reverend did move on. He found himself before the judgment seat of Christ, and he was found lacking. When he learned he had been damned, the Reverend turned and ran, and he heard a warning to keep silent about what he had seen as he fled back to the graveyard.⁵⁷ The Reverend knows he has died and he knows what awaits him when he again departs the bardo, and yet he cannot make sense of why his fate would follow that of the murderers and molesters before him. He can think only of how he "had many times preached" that the Lord is "fearsome" and "mysterious," that he "judges as He sees fit," "by His whim, according to a standard we are too lowly to discern."⁵⁸ This is the language, loosely as in "Spiderhead," of predestination. We are "as lambs," the Reverend thinks, either to be slaughtered

56. Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 268.

57. Saunders, 192-3.

58. Saunders, 268.

or “released to meadow,” and we cannot make sense of why—that is, the emphasis is not on the action or belief of the person, but on the inscrutable will of God that will determine a person’s fate.⁵⁹ In this way, the Reverend puts the questions the damned voices ask about agency in theological terms of God’s will and our inability to act out of or make sense of it, just as Jeff invokes the language of “being chosen by God” for “unwashable transgression.”

The Reverend takes the questions of free will and moral responsibility the damned spirits pose and puts them in language clearly Christian, and his description of facing judgment after his death is likewise full of biblical resonances. The structure made of diamonds the Reverend approaches, for example, parallels the description in Revelation of the city of New Jerusalem, made of gemstones.⁶⁰ There the Reverend stands before a table where sits “Christ’s direct emissary,” who he later takes to be Christ himself.⁶¹ Before the table he meets “two beings” we might take to be angels, as he describes them as “beautiful in appearance: tall, thin, luminous, borne on feet of sun-yellow light,” echoing passages in the New Testament that describe angels coming down in shining, bright lights.⁶² Beyond the angels he sees a tent where Christ holds a feast, the seat next to him reserved for those the angels find worthy. For those found wanting, a scene of torture awaits, presided over by a “beast,” attended by beings of fire. These two fates match the apostle John’s description in Revelation of the marriage feast Christ will hold upon his return, and of “beasts” who would oppose him.⁶³

59. Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 268.

60. Saunders, 189; Rev. 21: 15-21.

61. Saunders, 189.

62. Saunders, 189; Acts 10: 24-32; 12-5-11.

63. Saunders, 191-2; Rev. 19: 7-9; 13: 1-18.

Yet Reverend Thomas also repeatedly notes aspects of this scene that remind him of home, suggesting that his experience of the afterlife may be idiosyncratic rather than universal within the novel world. The room where Christ sits reminds him of a warehouse he “had known as a boy,” and Christ sits where an authority figure from his youth had sat in the original building.⁶⁴ The two angel-like beings remind him of a schoolteacher who once “flogged” him and of his Uncle Gene, who had once “hurled [him] down the stairs of the granary.”⁶⁵ The parallels to his childhood, and especially to people and moments that frightened Thomas, implies that this afterlife may be particularly his, comprised of what he expected and most feared would await him after death. The Reverend addresses these implications directly, asking,

Is it possible that another person’s experience might differ from mine? That he might proceed to some other place? And have there some entirely divergent experience? Is it possible, that is, that what I saw was only a figment of my mind, my beliefs, my hopes, my secret fears?

“No,” he answers resolutely, “It was real. As real as the trees now swaying above me,” as the gravel below him, and as Willie and the other souls in the bardo.⁶⁶

Before this admission, Thomas’ description leads us to understand Christ’s judgment as a manifestation of Thomas’ fears and expectations alone, whereas the bardo state of the cemetery is shared by all the characters. When Thomas acknowledges this, and insists that Christ’s throne is as real as Willie, Vollman, or Bevins, he undermines the solidity the novel had so far given the world of the cemetery. Rather than the cemetery state as objectively real within the novel world,

64. Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 189.

65. Saunders, 192.

66. Saunders, 194-5.

and the diamond palace only in Thomas' head, we must consider that both these after-death realms, indeed all of them—and the characters do seem to suggest, as with the multiple hells, that there may be yet more realms of life-after-death in the world of the novel—are equally idiosyncratic, or at least subjective. The afterlife, Thomas suggests, may instead *always* be some manifestation of the individual's beliefs, hopes, and fears.

In this and other ways, *Lincoln in the Bardo* also deals in Buddhist thought. As the *Bar Do Thos Grol Chen Mo* (often translated as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*) describes, in the bardo, we experience a reality of the mind's making. The soul's goal in this state is to "recognize all appearances as a projection of the mind," to recognize instead "the profound state of consciousness called the clear light" as reality, and so to achieve liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth.⁶⁷ The Tibetan Buddhist description of the bardo, then, would account for the Reverend experiencing an afterlife uniquely suited to his hopes and fears, yet as real as the experience he shares with the other souls in the cemetery. Additionally, according to the Tibetan tradition, one is visited by both "peaceful" and "wrathful deities" in the bardo, which may inspire the creatures that visit the cemetery and attempt to persuade the Reverend and others to transition on from their existence there.⁶⁸ When they do so, enacting what the characters in the bardo describe as a "matterlightblooming phenomenon," they seem to act out the *Bar Do Thos Grol Chen Mo*'s admonition to leave the liminal state of the bardo and merge with the "clear light of

67. Robert E. Goss and Dennis and Klass, "Tibetan Buddhism and the Resolution of Grief: The *Bardo-Thodol* for the Dying and the Grieving," *Death Studies* 21 (1997): 382; *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism*, eds. Robert E. Buswell Jr. and Donald S. Lopez Jr. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013) 92-8.

68. *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism*, 99; Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 92.

reality.”⁶⁹ When souls do not escape the cycle of rebirth, one of the realms in which they may be reborn is the realm of “hell denizens,” a description perhaps fitting for those spirits damned to entrap children like Willie Lincoln.⁷⁰

Finally, Buddhism’s central teachings, the four noble truths of the dharma, declare the centrality and inevitability of suffering in the human experience.⁷¹ If *Lincoln in the Bardo* has a central teaching, it might be that in President Lincoln’s grief, he identifies with the suffering of others, from soldiers on the battlefield to the enslaved people they are fighting to emancipate. Doing so changes Lincoln, or so Hans Vollman observes. Sharing Lincoln’s thoughts as he leaves his son’s gravesite, Vollman understands that the President’s

mind was freshly inclined toward *sorrow*; toward the fact that the world was full of sorrow; that everyone labored under some burden of sorrow; that all were suffering; that whatever way one took in this world, one must try to remember that all were suffering (none content; all wronged, neglected, overlooked, misunderstood), and therefore one must do what one could to lighten the load of those with whom one came into contact.⁷²

Saunders imagines that in mourning his son, Lincoln grows in empathy, and he depicts this quite literally when the other dead spirits enter Lincoln and work to turn his thoughts toward their own. On the President’s final exit from the graveyard, the spirit of an enslaved man rides with him, and we understand that with Lincoln goes this man’s thoughts, his suffering, into the rest of Lincoln’s presidency.⁷³

69. Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 96; *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism*, 99.

70. *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism*, 99.

71. Albanese, *America: Religions and Religion*, 288.

72. Saunders, 303.

73. Saunders, 343.

More of the novel's afterlife resonates with Buddhist teachings than with Christian, despite the Reverend's interpretation.⁷⁴ Why, then, bring a Christian minister into a Buddhist afterlife? The novel notably spends pages on the Reverend's vision of the diamond palace, and his is the only picture it provides of what may follow the flash of light when souls depart the cemetery. Though we might understand it in terms of Buddhist teachings about projections of the mind in the bardo state, Saunders chooses a Christian mind to experience them, setting up a contrast, or perhaps a conversation, between Christian and Buddhist thought.

"The Smallest Good Intention"

Before the end of the novel, the Reverend Early Thomas trades his fear of returning to the diamond palace for hope. While listening to the demonic spirits describe their past lives, he recoils at how they have "accept[ed] [their] sins so passively, even proudly, with no trace of repentance," and asks if he could really, "even now, be beyond all hope?"⁷⁵ The demonic spirits insist they had no control over their actions, and their damnation belies this claim. Yet, before speaking with them, the Reverend also believes he has no control over what will happen to him when he leaves the cemetery. He follows this question, however, with an aside: "(Perhaps, I thought, *this* is faith: to believe our God ever receptive to the smallest good intention.)"⁷⁶ This parenthetical thought must take hold, because when the Reverend finally does pass out of the cemetery in a matterlightblooming instant, he does so to help Willie escape his demonic

74. If Buddhism provides much of the scaffolding for the world the souls inhabit in the cemetery, this world is not a replica of the Buddhist bardo. This in-between state is typically understood to last 49 days, for example, and yet some of the characters we meet in the novel seem to have been there decades or longer.

75. Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 271.

76. Saunders, 271.

entrapment and reach his father one last time. The explosion he creates makes just enough room for Vollman and Bevins to wrench Willie free, and when they look back at the space the Reverend last occupied, they see for a moment,

inside the ruptured carapace, the imprint of the Reverend's face, which had not, I am happy to say, in those final instants, reverted back to the face we had so long associated with him (badly frightened, eyebrows high, the mouth a perfect O of terror), but, rather, his countenance now conveyed a sense of tentative hopefulness—as if he were going into that unknown place content that he had, at any rate, while in this place, done all that he could.⁷⁷

The Reverend concludes that even if his fate is determined, whatever limits he confronts, he should still do the most good he can. Doing so changes the Reverend from fearful and ashamed to hopeful and content, even if he cannot know whether it will change the verdict when he returns to stand before Christ. This is also the conclusion Jeff reaches at the end of “Spiderhead.” That he must take his own life to save another is ironic and part of the story’s critique, but it is also admirable. Whatever the constraints one faces, both narratives suggest, there is dignity and significance in trying to do good, in “the smallest good intention.”

The way the novel treats its Christian minister’s beliefs within a primarily Buddhist afterlife parallels this principle. As far as we know, Reverend Thomas will return to stand before Christ in judgment, though it also seems only he will experience this particular version of what comes next. Even in a principally Buddhist cosmos, the Reverend’s Christian beliefs about what he will face after death seem to shape what he does face. As there is significance and dignity in doing what good he can within the limits of his circumstances, so in doing good as he can determine it within his moral framework. The novel does not present that framework as universally true or right, but it also does not undercut its validity. Thomas affirms that the

77. Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, 276.

judgment seat of Christ is as real as the bardo world of the cemetery. Behind these two worlds are distinct and in ways contradictory worldviews, yet each offers a way of articulating right and wrong, just and unjust. When the Reverend meets in death a version of justice as he understood it during life, the novel lends his moral framework legitimacy, even as it also underscores its subjectivity.

Importantly, these are specifically religious frameworks. An afterlife drawn up in religious terms gives the novel's last word on questions of free will and moral responsibility. In both "Escape from Spiderhead" and *Lincoln in the Bardo*, religious language expresses these narratives' key insights rather than enabling characters' self-serving myopia. The way religious language works in *Lincoln* is noteworthy, then, given the satire of Christian language Saunders levels elsewhere that alludes to Christian conservative political discourse, as does the way Saunders uses it next to scientific discourse about human nature and agency in "Spiderhead."

When *Lincoln* puts a Reverend in a bardo, it couches one religious vision of the afterlife within another. Christian images work together with Buddhist ones, not so much to create a combined or novel religious vision as to explore the imaginative and ethical possibilities each offers. As in "Spiderhead," Saunders uses Christian language of predestination alongside the discourse of a conflicting worldview, and he does not elide their distinctiveness. Still, as in "Spiderhead," Christian discourse is not hostile toward or working to silence other perspectives. *Lincoln in the Bardo* interweaves Christian and Buddhist discourses about the afterlife, and about moral agency and the consequences of our choices. Saunders imagines these discourses in conversation. *Lincoln in the Bardo* does not directly broach conservative Christian politics, yet read alongside Saunders' earlier work and especially "Escape from Spiderhead," *Lincoln* suggests how Christian language could work differently in politics.

Christian Language, Satire, and Sincerity

The postmodern satire of Saunders' forebearers broke from the model of its predecessors in that it does not point to a normative standard by which it judges or critiques its targets, nor does it present any positive, unequivocal truth or action readers should take instead. As Steve Weisenburger argues, postmodern satire is "degenerative," "function[ing] to subvert hierarchies of value and to reflect suspiciously on all ways of making meaning, including its own."⁷⁸ Yet critics have noted a shift among writers of Saunders' generation, if not back to an earlier satirical model moored by an unequivocal moral standard (of the sort John Gardner called for in his controversial denunciation of his postmodern contemporaries), then at least away from the pervasive, ironic refusal to stand by any standard that was definitive of postmodernism's darkest satires.⁷⁹ David Foster Wallace put the problem his contemporaries have with degenerative satire this way: irony, entertaining as it is, serves an almost exclusively negative function. It's critical and destructive, a ground-clearing. Surely this is the way our postmodern fathers saw it. But irony's singularly unuseful when it comes to constructing anything to replace the hypocrisies it debunks."⁸⁰

Facing irony's dead end, Wallace concludes his well-known essay on television and contemporary fiction by asking what might take its place. His answer, ultimately, is sincerity,

78. Steven Weisenburger, *Fables of Subversion: Satire and the American Novel, 1930-1980* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 3.

79. John Gardner, *On Moral Fiction* (New York: Basic Books, 1977). See Marilyn Edelstein, "Ethics in Contemporary American Literature: Revisiting the Controversy over John Gardner's *On Moral Fiction*," *Pacific Coast Philology* 31, no. 1 (1996): 40-53, on its reception.

80. Wallace, David Foster, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 1997), 67.

and from this essay, Adam Kelly draws the term he applies to Wallace, Saunders, and a number of other writers, including Richard Powers.⁸¹ The “New Sincerity,” as Kelly describes it, attempts to present straightforward and earnest narratives and narrative voices, all the while aware that readers after postmodernism are from the start suspicious of language and the concept of a “self” as stable or coherent, and of any presentation of such as a performance. This kind of writing, then, is marked by a “text’s self-conscious preempting of its own reception,” Kelly explains.⁸² It is “a writing that relentlessly interrogates its own commitments, and a logic that reflects back on itself to the greatest degree possible.”⁸³

If Saunders indeed participates in this attempt at sincerity, new for its self-consciousness and constant self-interrogation, I have argued that in “Escape from Spiderhead” and *Lincoln in the Bardo*, religious language is central to Saunders’ attempt to present something like a moral vision. And it is a moral vision, as Kelly describes, whose validity Saunders time and again second-guesses, or anticipates our second-guessing of it, as with the Reverend asking readers outright if the judgement he experienced in the afterlife was real.

Significantly, Wallace’s first answer to the bind of irony, before he proposes sincerity as the direction contemporary writing might take, is that writers could “become reactionary, fundamentalist” in the line of “Reagan/Bush/Gingrich” and their “nostalgia for a kinder, gentler,

81. Adam Kelly, “David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction,” in *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*, ed. David Hering (Los Angeles: Side Show Media Group, 2010), 131-46. Nepper, “To Soften the Heart,” and Morris, “Beyond Irony,” also consider how Saunders does or does not fit into Kelly’s description of “New Sincerity.”

82. Kelly, “David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity,” 144.

83. Kelly, 138.

more Christian pseudo-past.”⁸⁴ This kind of nostalgia, he writes, “is no less susceptible to manipulation in the interests of corporate commercialism and PR image.” The methods of the “pro-Life,” anti-science (“anti-Flouride”) Christian Right Wallace describes are clearly not those he recommends writers of his generation take up in place of irony. Still, he recognizes that Christian conservatives, too, had a stake in responding to “our televisual culture,” “a cynical, narcissistic, essential empty phenomenon.”⁸⁵ Wallace found conservative Christian beliefs ridiculous (“Americans who’ve opted for this tack seem to have one eyebrow straight across their forehead and knuckles that drag on the ground”).⁸⁶ Yet writers to follow would turn to Christian language to write themselves out of the “nihilis[t]” bind they found themselves in when pop culture co-opted irony.⁸⁷ Saunders is one of them.

Richard Powers may be as well. Kelly includes Powers in his description of the New Sincerity, placing him among writers who “call for a two-way conversation” in their writing and appeal to readers to judge whether it is genuine. On this point Kelly quotes Powers describing reading as “a kind of secular prayer, a conversation you hold with someone whose world is not yours.”⁸⁸ Powers turns to the language of prayer to describe this exchange with his readers, and for Kelly his participation in a trend toward a new kind of self-conscious, self-scrutinizing sincerity in contemporary fiction. In the same way, Powers’ characters lean on Christian

84. Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram,” 69.

85. Wallace, 69-70.

86. Wallace, 69.

87. Wallace, 70.

88. Kelly, “David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity,” 145.

language in *The Echo Maker* to express vulnerability and uncertainty, and their desires to believe their lives have meaning.

Like Christian and scientific discourses in “Escape from Spiderhead,” in *Lincoln in the Bardo* Buddhist and Christian pictures of the afterlife work together to explore free will, both to affirm choice and depict its limitations. In essays spanning five collections and twenty years, Marilynne Robinson likewise considers free will in Christian language. Like Saunders, Robinson compares predestination and determinism in evolutionary psychology as well as sociobiology and neuroscience, for Robinson part of a larger trend toward determinism in contemporary philosophy. Yet for Robinson, predestination is too often misunderstood, as is Calvin. She seeks to disentangle Calvinism and predestination from determinism, and in *Gilead*, Calvinist theology inspires Robinson’s case for our capacity for moral choice and altruism. She finds there, too, a case for respecting our experiences of consciousness, which she argues should have a crucial place in scientific inquiry about the human brain and mind.

MARILYNNE ROBINSON'S CALVINIST RESPONSE TO THE CHRISTIAN RIGHT IN
GILEAD

In *The Death of Adam*, Marilynne Robinson looks back at the infamous “Scopes Monkey Trial,” the 1925 case against substitute teacher John Scopes for teaching evolution in a Tennessee public school, defying the state’s ban on the subject. Robinson recalls Scopes because she hopes to recuperate what she sees as surprisingly valuable insight in William Jennings Bryan’s undelivered, but later published closing statement. Bryan planned to conclude his case against Scopes and the evils of evolutionary theory by asking his audience to consider the social and moral implications of teaching evolution and whether schools and the state should not be held responsible.¹ Robinson argues that Bryan and his fundamentalist backers had the wrong target in the scientific theory of evolution. Yet she writes that Bryan’s question, rephrased and refocused, is just what we should be asking about what she calls the “parascientific” philosophy of “Darwinism.”²

Robinson describes “Darwinism” as “an interpretation” of evolution that presents itself as “objective scientific insight” but in fact “impl[ies] a personal and social ethic.”³ She describes

1. Marilynne Robinson, *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), 66-7.

2. Marilynne Robinson, *Absence of Mind: The Dispelling of Inwardness from the Modern Myth of the Self* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 33.

3. Robinson, *The Death of Adam*, 30-1, 40.

that ethic this way: “Darwinists, like primitive economists, assume that what is humane—I use the word here, unexceptionably, as I believe, to mean whatever arises from the desire to mitigate competition and to put aside self-interest—is unnatural, and therefore wrong.”⁴ Darwinists, she writes, champion survival of the fittest: the best of humanity rises to the top at the expense of the weak, naturally and rightly so. What Bryan asked of evolution, Robinson asks of what she calls Darwinism: what are the social, economic, and ethical consequences of promoting selfishness and unrestrained competition?

The critique of Darwinism that follows is also a critique of Christian conservatives’ war on evolution. Robinson writes that Scopes set the “unfortunate terms” of debate between science and religion for the next century.⁵ In *The Death of Adam*, she sets out to revise them. Christian conservatives’ campaign against evolution has been a distraction and discredit to Christianity, she writes, damaging Christians’ ability to respond meaningfully to the ethic of selfishness she calls Darwinism. In these and later essays, as well as her novels, Robinson confronts how the Christian Right has engaged in debates about evolution and human nature. She reframes the Christian response, and she reimagines the role Christian language could play in politics.

Robinson’s readers have long probed how Protestant theology and practice shape her novels. Some of the best, like Amy Hungerford or more recently Ray Horton, examine how

4. Robinson, *The Death of Adam*, 30.

5. Robinson, 63. The Scopes Trial also proved a turning point in the Christian fundamentalist movement. It led, as George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 6, writes, to the movement’s demise from “a national influential coalition” to a “substantial subculture” in the years to follow; and, as Joel Carpenter, *Revive Us Again*, shows, laid the groundwork for the religious resurgence in the second half of the twentieth century popularly known as the rise of the Christian Right. I describe the Scopes Trial and its effects on both the fundamentalist movement and the Christian Right in chapter one.

religious concerns shape even the aesthetic practices Robinson employs.⁶ Still, this scholarship has yet to consider Robinson's investment in religious language's political functions. In fact, Robinson scholarship scarcely finds her work at home in the contemporary era. Scholars describe her style as idiosyncratic, documenting how she stands apart from other writers and trends of the last half century, and they often characterize her novels by (and sometimes criticize them for) what they describe as their nostalgia, concluding that she withdraws from engaging meaningfully with current events.⁷ In her numerous essay collections, Robinson writes candidly and often fervently about contemporary politics, from issues of education to the environment, the state of political discourse, American national identity, and the welfare state. Yet scholars frequently remark just how different the Robinson of *Absence of Mind* or *When I Was A Child I Read Books* thinks and sounds from the Robinson of *Housekeeping* or *Gilead*.⁸ Recent work by Christopher Douglas and Jeffrey Gonzalez considers how Robinson's novels engage with contemporary

6. Hungerford, *Postmodern Belief*; Ray Horton, "'Rituals of the Ordinary': Marilynne Robinson's Aesthetics of Belief and Finitude," *PMLA* 132, no. 1 (2017): 119-134.

7. Commonplace among Robinson scholarship is the observation that Robinson is "difficult to place among her contemporary American peers," as writes Alex Engebretson, *Understanding Marilynne Robinson* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2017), 5. Hungerford, *Postmodern Belief*, and Anthony Domestico, "Blessings in Disguise: The Unfashionable Genius of Marilynne Robinson," *Commonweal* 141, no. 18, (2014): 12-17, make observations similar to Engebretson. Douglas, *If God Meant to Interfere*, goes further, criticizing the focus she chooses in depicting mid-century civil rights struggles, and Christianity's relationship to slavery before that.

8. Marilynne Robinson, *When I Was A Child I Read Books* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2012); *Housekeeping* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1980); *Gilead* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2004). Engebretson, *Understanding Marilynne Robinson*, 100, writes, for example, that "Robinson's essays are remarkable for their independence from her novels, in content and in style."

politics, and even what she calls Darwinism, and yet does not recognize her critique of Christian conservative discourse.⁹

An abiding concern for Robinson, uniting her body of work across genres and decades, has been reimagining how religious language can depict human nature. This project begins with the essays that comprise *The Death of Adam* and continues into her later nonfiction collections, wherein Robinson takes on Darwinism, the New Atheists, and much of what she calls “modern thought.”¹⁰ She presents in Christian language an alternative to the reductive, determinist accounts of human nature she finds in contemporary philosophy, accounts suggesting we cannot trust our perceptions of our choices or motives, and indeed cannot control them. In these and later essays, she likewise critiques the Christian Right for rendering religious language impotent to counter such accounts. Christian conservative political rhetoric, she argues, has denied modern science while failing to confront, and often even aligning with, the sort of small government, free market capitalism backed by Darwinism and other determinisms—what she describes as an “assault on the poor.”¹¹ Instead, she works to recover in Calvinist and Puritan theology a case for

9. Douglas, *If God Meant to Interfere*; Jeffrey Gonzalez, “Ontologies of Interdependence, the Sacred, and Health Care: Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead* and *Home*, *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 55, no. 4 (2014): 373-388. See also Shannon L. Mariotti and Joseph H. Lane Jr., eds., *A Political Companion to Marilynne Robinson* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2016), and in that volume Matthew Scherer, “The Ministerial Exception,” 167-194, which considers Robinson’s view of religion’s place in public life. Robert Chodat, “That Horeb, That Kansas: Evolution and the Modernity of Marilynne Robinson,” *American Literary History*, 28, no. 2, (2016): 328-361, and Justin Evans, “Subjectivity and the Possibility of Change in the Novels of Marilynne Robinson,” *Renascence* 66, no. 2 (Spring 2014): 131-150, have traced Robinson’s abiding concern with Darwinism. Andrew Brower Latz, “Creation in the Fiction of Marilynne Robinson,” *Literature and Theology* 25, no. 3 (September 2011): 283-296, discusses Robinson’s philosophy of creation and subjectivity in *Gilead*, and likewise notes such concerns running through her body of work.

10. Robinson, *Absence of Mind*, 71.

11. Robinson, *The Death of Adam*, 40.

humanism: for respecting the mind, for insisting we are capable of moral reflection and choice, of generosity and altruism, and thus for activism.

In her second novel, *Gilead*, Robinson fleshes out this response to determinist strains in contemporary science and philosophy in Reverend John Ames' debates with his estranged godson, Jack, about predestination, grace, and free will. Revising how Christian conservatives have wielded Christian language in political debate, the novel turns to Christian language to defend human complexity and dignity. In Ames' conversations with Jack, *Gilead* also models how religious modes of expression can facilitate understanding rather than shore up barriers between people with different faith backgrounds. In this way, the novel models how religious language can become useful, rather than a hindrance or flashpoint, in political dialogue.

Science and Religion in Robinson's Nonfiction

Robinson's critique of contemporary thought begins in *The Death of Adam*, with what she calls "Darwinism." Scientists typically use the term neutrally to describe the theory of evolution developed by Charles Darwin, or sometimes interchangeably with evolutionary theory, and sometimes modifying it to Neo-Darwinism to indicate its integration with Mendelian genetics.¹² Robinson uses the term contrarily, to distinguish evolution from a moral philosophy she locates in Darwin's writings about survival of the fittest. Darwinism, she writes, "impl[ies] that there is wisdom and blessing and meaning in 'selection,' which the phenomenon [of

12. On the history of these terms as well as the limits of using them synonymously with evolutionary theory, see Carl Safina, "Darwinism Must Die So That Evolution May Live," *The New York Times*, February 9, 2009, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/10/science/10essa.html>.

evolution] itself does not by any means imply,” and in this way falsely equates “survival of the fittest” with “survival of the good” or “best.”¹³

Robinson’s “Darwinism” is essentially social Darwinism. Darwinism for Robinson proposes that if a behavior allows one person to get ahead of others, to thrive when others do not, then this is a natural and good behavior, one we should reward. It asserts that humans are driven by selfishness, and that our policies should reflect and even bless this. The equally distressing pair to this idea, for Robinson, is that people are likewise incapable of selfless behaviors like generosity or altruism. Whatever human behaviors would seem to work outside of or counter to self-interest are but effective illusions; we waste time with policies that expect or encourage them. This is also what George Saunders explores in “Escape from Spiderhead,” when Jeff questions whether we act freely or if our choices, including even love, are the product of genetics and environment. Yet Robinson is particularly concerned with the suggestion that all human behavior can ultimately be explained by the selfish drive for survival, a kind of genetic determinism that views human behavior as the product of genes competing to survive and reproduce, what she describes as a key tenet of Darwinism.¹⁴

13. Robinson, *The Death of Adam*, 44. The way Robinson uses evolution and Darwinism does not necessarily follow how scientists typically use them. Yet terminology aside, she joins a number of scientists and religious people in making such a distinction between scientific findings and the ethical conclusions select scientists draw from them, evolution included. Miller, “Darwin, God, and Dover,” Plantinga, “Science and Religion,” Kraus, “Religion vs. Science?” and others write about the distinction between methodological and philosophical naturalism, for example (see chapter one). Jeremy Sherman, “Scientific Explanations for the Emergence of Love and Altruism,” in *Science and Religion: One Planet, Many Possibilities*, eds. Lucas F. Johnston and Whitney A. Bauman (New York: Routledge, 2014), 192-203, also describes the scientific critique of adaptationists, who in some accounts (including Robinson’s) treat natural selection as a kind of god (see chapter two).

14. A view based on the theory of the “selfish gene” famously proposed by Richard Dawkins in *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976).

Robinson flouts common usage to call this moral philosophy Darwinism because she argues that Darwin advocated it, and parts of *The Descent of Man* support such an interpretation. “With savages,” Darwin writes, for instance, “the weak in body or mind are soon eliminated; and those that survive commonly exhibit a vigorous state of health.” This is to the benefit of those races, Darwin implies, whereas

we civilised men, on the other hand, do our utmost to check the process of elimination; we build asylums for the imbecile, the maimed, and the sick; we institute poor-laws; and our medical men exert their utmost skill to save the life of every one to the last moment. There is reason to believe that vaccination has preserved thousands, who from a weak constitution would formerly have succumbed to small-pox. Thus the weak members of civilised societies propagate their kind. No one who has attended to the breeding of domestic animals will doubt that this must be highly injurious to the race of man. It is surprising how soon a want of care, or care wrongly directed, leads to the degeneration of a domestic race; but excepting in the case of man himself, hardly any one is so ignorant as to allow his worst animals to breed.¹⁵

Here, as Robinson suggests, Darwin asserts that society would profit from restraining our impulses to “check the process of elimination,” allowing the fit to survive and leaving the “weak” unaided.

For a century and a half, Darwin’s readers have debated passages like these and the extent to which his writing supports, was inspired by, and has inspired social Darwinists. As Diane B. Paul writes, “Few professional historians believe either that Darwin’s theory leads directly to these doctrines or that they are entirely unrelated. But both the nature and significance of the link are passionately disputed.”¹⁶ Few would argue, as Robinson does, that Darwin was

15. Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex*, vol. 1 (Albemarle Street, London: John Murray, 1871), http://darwin-online.org.uk/EditorialIntroductions/Freeman_TheDescentofMan.html, 168.

16. Diane B. Paul, “Darwin, Social Darwinism, and Eugenics,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Darwin*, eds. Jonathan Hodge and Gregory Radick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 219. Paul dives into the controversy, outlining ways in which Darwin did and did not support social Darwinism and demonstrating how, in years to come, his work would

clearly a social Darwinist because of how such ideas are counterbalanced in his work. Following the above paragraph, for example, Darwin continues:

The aid which we feel impelled to give to the helpless is mainly an incidental result of the instinct of sympathy, which was originally acquired as part of the social instincts, but subsequently rendered, in the manner previously indicated, more tender and more widely diffused. Nor could we check our sympathy, even at the urging of hard reason, without deterioration in the noblest part of our nature. The surgeon may harden himself whilst performing an operation, for he knows that he is acting for the good of his patient; but if we were intentionally to neglect the weak and helpless, it could only be for a contingent benefit, with an overwhelming present evil.¹⁷

Darwin does not retract his claim that British society is degenerating because it cares for the sick and poor. Yet he does add that humankind's drive to care for those in need is admirable, and with its own adaptive benefits.

For Robinson, passages like the former outweigh those like the latter. For Robinson, Darwin argues that society benefits when we allow natural selection to proceed unchecked by human sympathy, his admiration for that sympathy notwithstanding. She warns moreover that scientists citing Darwin still make the same argument today, that the survival of the fittest leads to society's flourishing. She criticizes Daniel Dennett and other New Atheists, for example, for concluding from Darwin's work that religion is irrational and that evolution can provide a basis

provide support for philosophies across the board—eugenics, liberal reform, socialism, capitalism, war, pacifism, and others. Also on the history of Darwin's complicated relationship to social Darwinism, see Naomi Beck, "Social Darwinism," in *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Darwin and Evolutionary Thought*, ed. Michael Ruse (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 201. In conclusion, Beck echoes Paul: "Our survey shows that under the auspices of the theory of evolution the most disparate conceptions of progress and diametrically opposed political positions were heralded."

17. Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, 168.

for human ethics.¹⁸ She warns, too, against a trend among evolutionary psychologists and sociobiologists toward genetic determinism that explains away the human mind and behavior in terms of a selfish drive for survival.¹⁹

These are not novel criticisms of Darwin, of Dennett, or of evolutionary psychology or sociobiology. In fact, Christian conservatives have made all three. As I discussed in chapter one, creationists have long understood Darwin's work as a moral threat, and New Atheist attempts at disproving religion have only confirmed their suspicions. They have likewise warned that evolutionary theory reduces humans to animals ruled by instinct, as I discussed in chapter two. Creationists have argued that such conclusions are the logical consequences of evolutionary theory. Yet Robinson distinguishes evolutionary theory from a moral philosophy based on the survival of the fittest and claiming the authority of science. She also associates this philosophy with a certain politics and with a broader trend toward determinism in contemporary thought. Her criticisms of these become wrapped up, importantly, in the critique of the Christian Right she begins in her essays and fleshes out in *Gilead*.

Robinson derides Darwinism as a philosophy masquerading as scientific findings, yet more pressing for her are the dangerous political implications following from such a view of

18. Robinson, *What Are We Doing Here?* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2015), 76; *The Death of Adam*, 42. On New Atheism, see also chapter one's discussion of the "god module" and philosophical naturalism.

19. Robinson, *Absence of Mind*, 44-5, 56-7. Scientists in these fields attempt to understand the mind and human behavior in terms of human evolution, not to reduce or explain it away. They deny that any politics necessarily follow from their work and insist that reductionist and determinist interpretations of their work are misinterpretations. These are controversial fields, even so, and Robinson's are familiar critiques. For a brief discussion of controversies and criticism surrounding these fields, see chapter two and especially Alcock, *The Triumph of Sociobiology*, and Segerstrale, *Defenders of the Truth: The Battle for Science in the Sociobiology Debate and Beyond*.

human nature. She writes that Darwinism as she defines it, “encouraging faith in the value of self-interest and raw competition,” lines up with and lends its support to classical economics and free market policies that call for “the stripping away of humane constraints” in favor of unregulated flow of capital.²⁰ She deals in more detail with the ethics behind policies than policies themselves, but she gives a sense of the sort of politics she has in mind when she writes that such beliefs lead to “polemics against the poor and against the irksome burden of extending charity to them,” and when she later suggests that the same “ethic of competition and self-seeking” motivates “stealing medical care or schooling from babies.”²¹ She likewise critiques a neoliberal economic system that favors outsourcing with little protection for workers, in particular children, or the environment,

that creates poverty among workers in both settings [the original and the outsourced] and destroys the wealth that is represented in a wholesome environment—toxins in the air or the water are great destroyers of wealth. So economic value is created at the cost of the economic value of workers who are made unable to figure as consumers, and of resources that are made unsuitable for any use.

She concludes that “humane limits to the exploitation of people would solve the problem, but they would also interfere with competition, which is the great law of nature, supposedly, and which therefore functions as a value.”²² She seems to have in mind some of the worst results of unchecked globalization, including outsourcing to countries and companies with poor working conditions and protections. She addresses, too, domestic policies that strip away the social safety net, eliminating protections and provisions for the poor, medical care, and public education.

20. Robinson, *The Death of Adam*, 28.

21. Robinson, 47, 67.

22. Robinson, 73-4.

These share roots in the belief that competition brings the best to the top, or that “human beings are perfected by the struggle for survival,” in her words.²³ They assume that restraining or guiding this “struggle for survival” is pointless and profitless. In “Escape from Spiderhead,” Saunders uses genetic determinism to describe the experience of living under neoliberalism. Robinson describes determinism as its philosophical basis.

According to Robinson’s Darwinism, the selfish drive for survival and reproduction determines all our actions in any meaningful sense. In her later work Robinson broadens her critique to consider other “determinist and reductionist models of human nature and motivation” coming out of the hard and social sciences.²⁴ She extends this critique to contemporary neuroscience, for instance, and what she characterizes as its essentially Darwinist, reductionist conclusions about the human mind.²⁵ In addition, she writes, Darwinism joins a number of contemporary ideologies commonly grouped under the rubric of “modern thought,” like those growing out of the work of Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche. In Robinson’s words, these theories together tell us that “the conviction so generally shared among us, that we think in some ordinary sense of that word, that we reason and learn and choose as individuals in response to our circumstances and capacities, is simply . . . a persisting illusion serving a force or a process that is essentially unknown and indifferent to us.”²⁶ From biological determinisms (neurological—“we are the sum of our neurological processes”—or genetic—“we are the product of our genes”)

23. Robinson, *The Death of Adam*, 34.

24. Robinson, *Absence of Mind*, xii.

25. Marilynne Robinson, *The Givenness of Things* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2015), 11-12.

26. Robinson, *Absence of Mind*, 71.

to social and psychological determinisms in the vein of Marx and Freud, Robinson asserts, these philosophies conclude we are at the whims of forces beyond our control.

As her description of modern thought suggests, Robinson takes issue with two conclusions following from determinist models of human nature: first, that we are not in control of our actions; and second, and more seriously, that we cannot trust our own perceptions. Robinson concedes that our choices are to some extent determined by influences and factors outside our control or knowledge. She is more concerned with how, in insisting that we are utterly fooled by the illusion of choice, such theories dismiss the mind's experience and explanation of itself.²⁷ Determinist models of human nature, she writes, "consistently . . . diminish or dismiss the phenomenon of consciousness called the self, a given of experience if there is such a thing in this world," and so deny its manifest complexity.²⁸ If we are in some ways determined by genetics, culture, or accident, she insists, this does not negate our lived experiences of complex motivations and choices.²⁹ Robinson seeks to reinstate in contemporary debate about human nature "the report we make of ourselves" and the "meaningfulness of [our] own experiences."³⁰

27. Wegner, *The Illusion of Conscious Will*, and Harris, *Free Will*, both make this case.

28. Robinson, *What Are We Doing Here?* 59.

29. Chodat, "That Horeb, That Kansas," 334, explains that Robinson is not unique in making this call: "If by all this she means that the 'data' of first-personal reports is as pertinent to the explanation of action as anything given by a neurologist, geneticist, or any other third-person observer," he explains, "she is making a point made elsewhere by a range of Robinson's philosophical contemporaries, including Hegelians like Pippin as well as phenomenologists and Wittgensteinians and neopragmatists."

30. Robinson, *The Givenness of Things*, 86-8.

The Christian Right and Darwinism in the Political Arena

Robinson's criticism of Darwinism past and present is also a criticism of the Christian Right. "Creationism is the best thing that could have happened to Darwinism," she asserts. By desperately defending "creation in a literal six days," creationists "have made religion seem foolish," "rendering it mute in the face of a prolonged and highly effective assault on the poor."³¹ She laments the response conservative Christians have offered to determinist conclusions about human nature, and especially to the Darwinist triumph of self-interest. More than creationists' century-long campaign against evolution, or even the bitter disputes over how Christianity and science define human life that have followed in its wake, from climate change to bioethics and even abortion, Robinson condemns Christian conservatives' failure to advocate for the poor.³²

Instead, she argues, Christian conservatives have been complicit in the push for smaller government, deregulation, and a weakened social safety net that Darwinism endorses. She writes that the Religious Right has found a strange ally in what she calls the "Irreligious Right," or Darwinists. Their common goal: "to disburden themselves of the weak and to unshackle the great creative forces of competition."³³ In fact, that alliance has been neither incidental nor simply expedient, Kevin Kruse argues. In the 1930s and 40s, Kruse documents, business leaders and lobbies mounted an explicit campaign to recruit Christians to take down the New Deal. They aligned Christianity with individualism and freedom, and these with the principles of free

31. Robinson, *The Death of Adam*, 40.

32. On the Christian Right's long campaign against evolution, and the more recent conflicts over climate change and bioethics, see chapter one. Abortion and its role in the larger "family values" movement are the subject of chapter four.

33. Robinson, 40.

enterprise.³⁴ They later used Cold War anti-communism to their advantage, cementing the relationship between Christian conservatism and capitalism that Robinson critiques.³⁵ In recent years that relationship has been the foundation for the Tea Party movement that arose in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis and bailouts and in protest to the Affordable Care Act. The Christian Right “overwhelmingly support[ed]” the Tea Party, though the House Tea Party Caucus has been inactive since 2012, and Republicans’ commitment to fiscal conservatism faded under Donald Trump.³⁶

Robinson takes issue, too, with how conservative Christians use religious language politically. They have fallen back on a defensive ingroup mentality, she writes, produced by and producing the inflammatory and “slandorous” rhetoric of the “dystopian news outlets,” Fox News chief among them, that she notes rose to prominence alongside the Christian Right. They assert that “Secularism bestrides the land like Gog and Magog, and Christians are treated with contempt and hostility.” “None of this is true,” she counters, “but it is a cherished belief that allows comfortable people to reckon themselves among the martyrs.”³⁷ In this way Robinson

34. Kruse, *How Corporate America Invented Christian America*, 6-8.

35. Kruse, 366. See also Angelia R. Wilson and Cynthia Burack, “‘Where Liberty Reigns and God Is Supreme’: The Christian Right and the Tea Party Movement,” *New Political Science* 34, no. 2, (2012): 172–90; Jason Hackworth, *Faith Based: Religious Neoliberalism and the Politics of Welfare in the United States* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012); and Hackworth, “Faith, Welfare, and the Formation of the Modern American Right,” in *Religion in the Neoliberal Age: Political Economy and Modes of Governance*, eds. François Gauthier and Thomas Martikainen (Farnham, Surrey, England: Routledge, 2013), 91-109.

36. Wilson and Burack, 173; Jeremy W. Peters, “The Tea Party Didn’t Get What It Wanted, but It Did Unleash the Politics of Anger,” *The New York Times*, August 28, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/28/us/politics/tea-party-trump.html>.

37. Robinson, *What Are We Doing Here?* 305.

makes explicit the critique suggested in Saunders' parodies of Christian language in *Tenth of December*. She describes Christian conservatives using Christian language to demonize and dismiss opposing views, creating the kind of echo chamber Sean Connable documents in Christian Right media.³⁸ Writing in 2018 on the same topic that has occupied her for the last twenty years, Robinson concludes that, for these reasons, Christian conservatives have “made religious language toxic.”³⁹ In message and method, they have aligned with the very ethic Robinson contends they should stand against. This kind of discourse encourages embittered, embattled groups to compete for “survival” and to believe such competition is natural or inevitable, necessary or good.

Whereas the Christian Right has mobilized Christianity to criticize evolution, Robinson seeks to mobilize Christian language to expose what she describes as the impoverishment of Darwinism and its contemporaries. She argues that Christians should not target science but instead Darwinism and free market economics, to which conservative Christians have so far been unlikely allies as they together seek to slash the social safety net. She also takes on the broader conclusions about human agency and perception that determinisms like Darwinism make, that, in short, there is no choice and there is no self. Christianity, in Robinson's understanding, leads to a high view of human nature and a deep conviction of our capacities for self-reflection and transformation, moral action and especially altruism.

38. Connable, “The ‘Christian Nation’ Thesis and the Evangelical Echo Chamber.” See chapter two for a discussion of Connable's work on Focus on the Family.

39. Robinson, *What Are We Doing Here?* xiii.

Robinson's Humanist Theology

Robinson's sources for these views are her particular readings of John Calvin and the Puritans, especially Jonathan Edwards. This may seem contradictory. These are thinkers famously associated with fiery tirades on the fallen state of humanity and its looming damnation, synonymous with the doctrines of predestination and election. Yet they inspire Robinson to defend human agency and perception, our capacity to act meaningfully and generously. Across her several essay collections Robinson works tirelessly to reclaim Calvin, Edwards, and Puritanism from their collective reputation as judgmental, sin-, and damnation-obsessed. We think of them this way because we so seldom read them in their own words, she writes, so that "the void Puritanism has merged with the void Calvinism, swallowing Edwards along the way, to constitute a vast ignorance of early American history."⁴⁰ She rehabilitates their image by returning to their texts, insisting that what marked these religious thinkers and the Puritan movement in particular were in fact robust, religiously inspired humanism and activism.

The doctrine of predestination or election is for Robinson a classic example of how we have misunderstood Calvin and his legacy. As she glosses it, that doctrine asserts that "we are lost or saved as God wills and our destiny has always been known to him." In Robinson's reading, predestination expresses a belief in God's limitless sovereignty and power, not the meaningless of human choice or action.⁴¹ She allows that "the difficulty of the issue it raises regarding justice and free will are intractable," yet she insists that to mistake predestination for determinism is to "make [a] cartoon" of the doctrine."⁴² From Jonathan Edwards she adopts a

40. Robinson, *What Are We Doing Here?* 185.

41. Robinson, *The Death of Adam*, 187.

42. Robinson, *The Givenness of Things*, 193, 88.

vision of reality utterly dependent on God's will that, for Robinson, stands in contrast to the determinism she locates in contemporary thought. In *The Great Christian Doctrine of Original Sin Defended*, Edwards imagines a world created by God anew each moment: "God's upholding of created substance," he writes, "or causing of its existence in each successive moment, is altogether equivalent to an *immediate production out of nothing*, at each moment."⁴³ That is, each moment is not determined by the last, but dependent only on God willing it into existence. In this understanding of reality, for Robinson, the only determining force is "the freedom of God, constrained only by His own nature."⁴⁴ Robinson does not disagree with or disregard the doctrine of predestination, but she decisively disavows a determinist interpretation of it.

In Robinson's readings, Calvinism and Puritanism alike prized the life of the mind and called for Christians to defend the vulnerable. Calvin's focus on human fallenness or original sin, she writes, is actually "in service of an extraordinarily exalted vision of the human soul." "It is a form of hyperbole," she explains:

purity is corruption, pleasure is illusion, wisdom is folly, virtue is depravity, by comparison with the holiness that can be imagined, not as the nature of God only but as the nature of humankind also . . . The self-abnegation that is always the condition of a true perception of the self or of God can only be understood as the rigorous imagination of a higher self.⁴⁵

Because of this elevated view of humanity, Calvin and his heirs valued human subjectivity: they demonstrated an "extraordinarily fine-grained and humane attentiveness to perception and

43. Jonathan Edwards, *The Great Christian Doctrine of Original Sin Defended* (Boston: S. Kneeland, 1758), <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/evans/N06399.0001.001?view=toc>.

44. Robinson, *What Are We Doing Here?* 184.

45. Robinson, *The Death of Adam*, 182-3.

experience.”⁴⁶ We associate Calvinism with the “merger of Christian pretensions and bullyboy economics,” she writes. Yet in *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin argues we should defend the poor and live generosity because people reflect the image of God.⁴⁷ Not only is determinism a misreading of the Calvinist doctrine of predestination, Robinson writes; the legacy of Calvin and of Puritanism, as she sees it, is action—is in fact activism—because they believed in human exceptionalism, in the presence of God in people. Calvinism and Puritanism, often thought to disparage human nature and deny human agency, so often associated with judgment and exclusion, are Robinson’s sources for her defense of human dignity, of subjectivity, and for her call for a more expansive social safety net.⁴⁸

Institutes of the Christian Religion bears out Robinson’s argument for Calvin’s high view of humanity—to a point. Calvin begins book one by laying out his argument in this way: “The First Book treats of the knowledge of God the Creator. But as it is in the creation of man that the divine perfections are best displayed, so man also is made the subject of discourse.”⁴⁹ We know

46. Robinson, *What Are We Doing Here?* 193.

47. Robinson, *The Death of Adam*, 102, 130-1.

48. Scholars debate just how faithful Robinson’s readings of Calvin and Puritanism are to the primary texts. My focus here is on how she puts these readings to use—as a foundation for how she imagines Christianity working in the political sphere—rather than on how those readings stack up against the original texts. Still, I find useful Christie Maloyed, “The Death of Jeremiah? Marilynne Robinson and Covenant Theology,” in *A Political Companion to Marilynne Robinson*, eds. Shannon L. Mariotti and Joseph H. Lane Jr. (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2016), 195-222. Maloyed ultimately concludes that Robinson chooses what she likes from the Calvinist and Puritan traditions, emphasizing what are for these thinkers minor points while downplaying essential ones. I would add only that Robinson, *The Death of Adam*, 182, herself in fact concedes as much at the outset of *Margueritte de Navarre, Part I*.

49. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Basel, 1536), <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/institutes.html>, 36.

God exists, Calvin writes, because humans reflect God's divine nature. He later extends this argument: "Hence certain of the philosophers have not improperly called man a microcosm (miniature world), as being a rare specimen of divine power, wisdom, and goodness, and containing within himself wonders sufficient to occupy our minds, if we are willing so to employ them."⁵⁰ Yet in contrast to such a picture, *Institutes* also contain meditations on humans' utter unworthiness, of the sort Robinson attempts to counterbalance. In the course of the same argument, that we find evidence of God within ourselves, Calvin writes that if people can know God from the "divine power, wisdom, and goodness" within us, we most readily find God when we face our utter depravity:

For as there exists in man something like a world of misery, and ever since we were stript of the divine attire our naked shame discloses an immense series of disgraceful properties every man, being stung by the consciousness of his own unhappiness, in this way necessarily obtains at least some knowledge of God. Thus, our feeling of ignorance, vanity, want, weakness, in short, depravity and corruption, reminds us . . . that in the Lord, and none but He, dwell the true light of wisdom, solid virtue, exuberant goodness. We are accordingly urged by our own evil things to consider the good things of God; and, indeed, we cannot aspire to Him in earnest until we have begun to be displeased with ourselves.⁵¹

This is the popular image of Calvin, and Robinson aims to bring passages like the former out from behind its long shadow. Among scholars of Calvin, giving attention to context and nuance in his work is not a novel project. John Davis opens an anthology devoted to considering Calvin's legacy, for example, by addressing how popular stereotypes of this polarizing figure compare to the more complicated portrait that emerges in the academic conversation around his

50. Calvin, *Institutes*, 52.

51. Calvin, 38.

influence.⁵² Robinson's picture of Calvin is not groundbreaking so much as an effort to shift popular imagination, and the same is true for her revisions of Puritanism and Edwards.⁵³ These readings are worth considering as the basis for Robinson's vision of political religion, for the alternative she imagines to the Christian Right and its religious rhetoric.

Determinism and the Christian Right in *Gilead*

Robinson's readings of Calvin and Edwards lend her a religiously inspired and inflected vision of human agency and subjectivity. She contrasts these with the determinism she describes as a signature of Darwinism and much of modern thought, and to an ethics and politics of self-interest. It is also a vision in answer to Christian conservative support for those politics, and to the increasingly inflammatory role she observes religious discourse playing in American politics since the rise of the Christian Right. This vision runs through *Gilead*.

Gilead is set mid-century, in a small Iowa town that gives the novel its name. It takes the form of letters from a Congregationalist pastor, John Ames, to his young son, Robby. Ames is dying of a heart condition, and he writes to share with his son stories from his childhood, about his father and grandfather, about meeting his wife and Robby's mother, and his reflections about faith and his work as a pastor. *Gilead* is renowned for Ames' voice, for his careful, lyrical

52. John Davis, ed., *John Calvin's American Legacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). Davis in fact nods to Robinson's project of giving context to Calvin in popular conversation.

53. Much like Calvin, Puritanism remains associated popularly with negative stereotypes despite nuance in academic treatments. Francis J. Bremer, *Puritanism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 102, writes that the latter half of the twentieth century brought a revaluation of Puritanism and its legacies; "yet," he concludes, "despite the sophistication of such studies, academic insights have failed to shift the popular image of puritans as intolerant, bigoted, and censorious."

observations about the end of his life.⁵⁴ His letters become a kind of journal in which he records his reflections on dying, mourns leaving his wife and son, and wrestles with the return of his godson, Jack, to Gilead.

Jack has come home to see his own father and Ames' best friend, Boughton, whose health is also declining. As a child Jack often found trouble, from fights to theft and drinking, an atheist son to a minister father and godfather alike. He has been gone from Gilead and lost to his family for years, since as a young man he had a child with an even younger girl and abandoned both, leaving his family to witness her early death. Ames resents Jack for how he has hurt Boughton and the rest of his family, and he distrusts Jack's friendliness toward his own wife and son. Ames' relationship and reconciliation with Jack is the heart of *Gilead*.

In her essays, Robinson reclaims Calvin's and Edwards' writings on predestination and original sin, which she argues we have long forgotten or misinterpreted. In *Gilead*, Robinson pairs the language of predestination and election with that of blessing and transfiguration, the novel's language for communicating that high view of human nature she describes as foundational to Calvinism. This response to determinism unfolds most pointedly in Jack's conversations with Ames about predestination. When Jack first seeks Ames' counsel on the doctrine, Ames answers that people cannot change and have no real free will. Yet by the end of the novel Ames comes to believe that Jack can change and insists on affirming that he has changed, despite even evidence to the contrary. Ames revises his understanding of predestination, and he demonstrates the limitations of determinist thinking about human nature.

54. See Hungerford, *Postmodern Belief*; Horton, "Rituals of the Ordinary"; as well as Laura Tanner, "'Looking Back from the Grave': Sensory Perception and the Anticipation of Absence in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*," *Contemporary Literature* 48, no. 2 (2007): 227–252.

In the end, he leaves Jack with his blessing, and *Gilead* closes by defending human agency and the power of human perception.

As Robert Chodat observes, “Given how conspicuous” are her concerns with Darwinism, New Atheism, and reductionist accounts of the human mind “in Robinson’s essays, it is striking how seldom readers of *Gilead* have reckoned with them.”⁵⁵ Justin Evans echoes Chodat, describing the *Gilead* triad as “a defense of subjectivity” in response to “New Atheists’ demand for a radically reductionist, naturalistic understanding of human beings.”⁵⁶ Yet more striking is that Robinson’s defense of subjectivity across her essays and *Gilead* is also a response to the Christian Right. She critiques and proposes alternatives not just to Darwinist conclusions about human nature, but to conservative Christian political discourse. This defense of subjectivity is in Christian discourse, theology refuting determinism. Robinson demonstrates in *Gilead* what role Christian language should take in debates about our abilities to reflect on and make meaningful moral choices, to act generously and selflessly, and about policies growing out of such values.

Additionally, as Ames comes to see Jack differently, and to see predestination differently, their theological exchanges evolve past an initial stalemate, and the novel depicts how Christian language could become ethically meaningful and useful to non-Christians. Robinson describes Christian conservative political discourse as defensive and divisive, encouraging competition and zero-sum thinking. *Gilead*’s characters come to use Christian language in a way that reflects respect for others and encourages empathy and cooperation.

55. Chodat, “That Horeb, That Kansas,” 331.

56. Evans, “Subjectivity and the Possibility of Change,” 132, 144.

Gilead's Critique of Determinism in Christian Language

In the second half of the novel, Jack returns to Gilead as the prodigal son. His father has longed to see him despite the hurt between them, and Jack returns changed. He has a wife, Della, and a child, and because Jack is white and Della is Black, Jack hopes to find out if his family could make a life in Gilead. Yet Jack does not tell his godfather about his family. Instead, he asks Ames about predestination.

When Jack first broaches the doctrine with Ames, Ames affirms a determinist view of human nature, if warily. When Jack puts the question to Ames pointedly—"But are there people who are simply born evil, live evil lives, and then go to hell?"—Ames insists that mystery surrounds the things of God and that scripture emphasizes salvation. Yet ultimately he concedes his belief that "generally, a person's behavior is consistent with his nature," one outside his control.⁵⁷ In fact, Ames demonstrates this belief before even answering Jack's question. When Jack asks for his views on the doctrine, Ames becomes defensive and assumes the worst of Jack—that he is looking for an argument or wants to humiliate Ames.⁵⁸ Ames cannot imagine that the Jack sitting in front of him has changed significantly from the Jack he knew as a young man.

Yet Ames misjudges Jack's motives. Jack has in fact returned to Gilead looking urgently for an answer as to whether people can meaningfully change. When he and Ames renew their conversation, Jack quickly leaves theological questions behind and instead asks Ames about abolition in Iowa and Ames' grandfather, about a fire at the African American church when Jack

57. Robinson, *Gilead*, 151.

58. Robinson, 149.

was a child, and whether there were any Black families left in Gilead.⁵⁹ Behind Jack's questions about predestination are his hopes for his family. This is not, for Jack, an intellectual exercise. If Ames is right, if people cannot meaningfully change, how could Jack expect his hometown, one that watched a Black church burn and its Black residents flee, to welcome his Black wife and biracial child? How could he expect his Protestant father to see civil rights as Ames' preacher and abolitionist grandfather did, a legacy Gilead's later generations seem to have forgotten? How could Jack become the sort of man his wife's father accepts or the father he failed to be to his first child? When Jack asks about predestination, he wants to know if people have agency in matters like these. In drawing these connections out from a conversation on predestination, Robinson imagines the social and moral implications of determinist models of human nature.

As Ames changes his view of Jack in the novel's second half, he too fleshes out the limitations of determinist thinking. In his embittered view of Jack, Ames demonstrates that such an ethic is self-defeating. He cannot imagine Jack could be different from the boy he knew, and so Ames is paralyzed by resentment and unable to counsel Jack when he needs it most. Because he believes Jack cannot change, he cannot help him do so. Yet soon after their conversation Ames recognizes he has unfairly judged Jack's motives and admits that he still has not forgiven his godson for how he treated his first child and hurt his family, injuries all the more stinging for Ames when he remembers losing his own firstborn and wife in childbirth. Ames wants to forgive Jack, he writes, and wishes he could see his godson differently. He remembers that even when he blessed Jack as a child, he went about it "coldly," and he wishes he "could christen him again," if only for his own sake.⁶⁰

59. Robinson, *Gilead*, 171.

60. Robinson, 189.

When Ames does again bless Jack in the novel's conclusion, he provides *Gilead*'s final repudiation of a determinist view of human nature. With this act Ames leaves behind predestination as a paradigm for understanding Jack and instead picks up the language and lens of blessing, or of choosing to "acknowledge" the "sacredness" in Jack, as Ames describes the sacrament.⁶¹ Before Jack leaves town, Ames blesses Jack a second time, affirming that God would be with Jack and that he was a "beloved son and brother and husband and father."⁶² After the blessing, Ames fears "that to [Jack] it might have seemed I had named everything I thought he no longer was, when that was absolutely the furthest thing from my meaning, the exact opposite of my meaning."⁶³ Though Jack may doubt it, Ames affirms fully and sincerely that he believes Jack is a treasured family member and recipient of God's grace. This is neither perfunctory nor insignificant given their repeated discussions of predestination. Jack has asked if he could be incapable of belief, incapable of change, incapable of good. In this blessing, Ames answers that Jack has changed, despite ample evidence to the contrary: Jack is leaving town and his dying father; he has not converted to Christianity and so lost his only hope of winning his wife's family's approval; and he will not return to Gilead with his wife and child, having found no home for them there.

Even so, the novel seems to affirm, Ames' view of Jack matters deeply. Pondering their parting, Ames thinks that "it seems to me that when something really ought to be true then it has

61. Robinson, *Gilead*, 23.

62. Robinson, 241.

63. Robinson, 241-2.

a very powerful truth.”⁶⁴ Then, concluding his letter to his son, he observes that “Wherever you turn your eyes the world can shine like transfiguration. You don’t have to bring a thing to it except a little willingness to see.”⁶⁵ This “very powerful truth” of what should be, the power of a “willingness to see” that brings forth transfiguration, this is the power Robinson suggests Ames enacts when his perspective on Jack changes. In these ruminations, some of Ames’ last before the book’s and his life’s end, Robinson suggests that how Ames sees Jack has the power to change things—to change Jack.

In Ames and Jack’s initial discussions of predestination and grace, Robinson responds to Darwinist determinism, demonstrating the self-defeating paralysis that comes from believing we cannot transcend our basest natures. Then, in *Gilead*’s conclusion, Ames speaks the novel’s final word on whether people act apart from narrowly defined self-interest. Ames does not repudiate predestination, but he no longer understands the doctrine to mean that Jack or any person is incapable of meaningful change, of transforming from dishonorable and selfish to loving and self-sacrificial. He adopts the language and lens of blessing as the way he understands his godson, looking for what is good in Jack, affirming it, and in this way multiplying it. Finally, in depicting Ames’ blessing in this way—by suggesting that how Ames sees Jack has changed Jack—Robinson adds to her defense of agency an affirmation of human subjectivity.

Robinson concludes *The Givenness of Things* by describing her philosophy of realism, one that makes further sense of Ames’ final thoughts. “We know how profoundly we can impoverish ourselves by failing to find value in one another,” she writes. “We know that respect

64. Robinson, *Gilead*, 244.

65. Robinson, 245.

is a profound alleviation, which we can offer and too often withhold . . . A theology of grace *is a higher realism, an ethics of truth*" (emphasis added).⁶⁶ She insists that we see human beings as worthy of dignity and respect and that this is in fact a higher, truer version of reality than one fixed on our manifest shortcomings. This is also, for Robinson, an ethical stance. She argues that we have a moral imperative to see each other this way and that by doing so we help each other live up to that vision. In Robinson's words, Ames' sees Jack with a "higher realism": he envisions a truer version of Jack and may even, the novel submits, bring it into being.

This "higher realism" also informs Robinson's aesthetic. Scholars have long noted that Robinson treats her characters' "rich and complicated interior lives" as her utmost subject, and in this choice Robinson responds to those strains of modern thought that would dismiss the self as illusion and insignificant.⁶⁷ In *Gilead*'s conclusion, she takes this further. This is not just human perception dignified or reintroduced into the conversation, but human perception as an active, powerful agent in transforming reality. At their parting, Ames blesses Jack, and the forgiveness he extends his godson works in Robinson's figuring as a sort of supernatural grace, imputed to Jack when he could not receive it for himself. Ames finds seeing Jack differently tantamount to saying goodbye to a different Jack, and in this way *Gilead* argues for human perception as an indispensable source of insight into human nature and being.

66. Robinson, *The Givenness of Things*, 286.

67. Hungerford, *Postmodern Belief*, 114. Additionally, Tanner, "Looking Back from the Grave," 278, writes that *Gilead*'s power stems not only from "its lyrical rendering of quotidian experience" but also the novel's "powerful unveiling of how dying shapes the sensory and psychological dynamics of human perception."

Gilead's Model for Christian Discourse

Robinson's response to the Darwinist ethic in *Gilead* is, importantly, a response in Christian language recuperated from the Christian Right's misuse. Robinson describes Christian conservative discourse as divisive, misguided in regarding scientific discovery as a threat to theology, and gravely mistaken in embracing a Darwinist vision of survival of the fittest as ethical good. In *Gilead*, Robinson brings Christian ideas of predestination and blessing to bear on contemporary theories of human nature. She proposes an alternative to the determinist philosophy of human nature she argues Christian conservatives have endorsed, instead defending human complexity and dignity in Christian language. She also presents Christian language working differently than what she describes in Christian conservative circles, where religious discourse incites conflict, draws lines, and widens gulfs rather than communicating respect and facilitating understanding.

This second aim, considering how Christian language could facilitate understanding, comes through in a question Jack puts to Ames when they meet in Ames' office to resume their discussion of predestination. Jack becomes exasperated with how difficult it is for he and Ames to speak to one another directly. "Does it seem right to you," he asks, "that there should be no common language between us? That there should be no way to bring a drop of water to those of us who languish in the flames, or who will?"⁶⁸ When Jack asks why he and Ames struggle to speak the same language, he points to a preoccupation of *Gilead* as well as companion novels *Home*, *Lila*, and *Jack*: namely, the difficulty of communicating, both across ideological lines,

68. Robinson, *Gilead*, 170.

like religious beliefs, and in relationships that should be the most intimate, like family.⁶⁹ Jack and Ames struggle to speak plainly and honestly about Jack's unbelief and whether he can change. The conversation is weighed down by the baggage of their past resentments and guilt, and in this scene Ames persists in speaking in theological abstractions, unable or unwilling to be pinned down about how divine mysteries apply to Jack's real life.

This need, to bring the theological into terms he can understand and use, is one the novel recognizes and works at answering. In *Gilead*, Robinson considers what religious language is primed, in her estimation, to conjure, like a defense of human dignity, agency, and subjectivity. She also considers where religious discourses fall short and why, and what must happen for this language to become meaningful to people unfamiliar with the contexts of history and belief from which it derives meaning. The novel works both to draw out the humanist vision Christian language can offer, and to render it meaningful to those outside of and even hostile to that religious community.

In her essays Robinson describes conservative religious discourse as too often divisive. In *Gilead* Ames is continually in conversation with nonbelieving family members like his brother Edward or Jack, and with secular or explicitly atheist writers like Ludwig Feuerbach. Ames often uses theological terms or Christian expression, but he just as often follows them with an explanation someone unfamiliar with his religious tradition could understand. Ames seeks to find corollaries in other vocabularies, enriching conversation as a result.

Ames puts the Christian sacrament of baptism, and its pair blessing, into accessible language early in the novel when he writes to his son, Robby, about trying to baptize a litter of

69. Marilynne Robinson, *Home* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2008); *Lila* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2014); *Jack* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2020).

kittens as a child, for Ames an act of compassion and, ultimately, a gesture of connection. After attempting with varied success to coax the kittens into compliance, Ames had later asked his father “in the most offhand way imaginable what exactly would happen to a cat if one were to, say, baptize it.” His father had responded “that the Sacraments must always be treated and regarded with the greatest respect”⁷⁰ In answer to Ames’ sincere question about the kittens’ souls, his father suggested that baptism had no meaning and should have no place outside of an earnest confession of faith. Ames writes that he felt dissatisfied with his father’s response, that it “wasn’t really an answer to my question,” and that he “did respect the Sacraments, but we thought the whole world of those cats.” In fact, though Ames says he understood what his father meant and thus “did no more baptizing until I was ordained,” he also expresses in this reaction his sense, even as a child, that baptizing those cats might have mattered.⁷¹ He expresses his feeling that when he touched these creatures in his desire to save their souls, his touch was meaningful, regardless of whether they shared his faith or even his humanity. He suggests that this religious ritual might be meaningful even if one is not of this religious community or familiar with its traditions.

As Ames continues his story of baptizing the kittens, he expresses this same sentiment. Baptism, he writes to his son, is an act of connecting intimately and in reverence to another being.

I still remember how those warm little brows felt under the palm of my hand. Everyone has petted a cat, but to touch one like that, with the pure intention of blessing it, is a very different thing. It stays in the mind. For years we would wonder what, from a cosmic viewpoint, we had done to them. It still seems to me to be a real question. There is a reality in blessing, which I take baptism to be, primarily. It doesn’t enhance sacredness,

70. Robinson, *Gilead*, 22.

71. Robinson, 22.

but it acknowledges it, and there is a power in that. I have felt it pass through me, so to speak. The sensation is of really knowing a creature, I mean really feeling its mysterious life and your own mysterious life at the same time. I don't wish to be urging the ministry on you, but there are some advantages to it you might not know to take account of if I did not point them out. Not that you have to be a minister to confer blessing. You are simply much more likely to find yourself in that position.⁷²

Ames explains baptism, or blessing, as an act of recognizing in awe the life in someone else and the same life in oneself. Baptism has deep significance for a Congregationalist pastor like Ames, as an expression of salvation and incorporation into the church, of Christ's death and resurrection, and of the death of the old and birth of the new life in the baptized. Yet as he explains this memory to his son, Ames describes this ritual in terms that anyone, Congregationalist or not, might understand. He does not empty the blessing of its religious significance or give it a new secular meaning. Instead, he suggests what a blessing means to Christian believers in a way that includes those who do not speak their language.

In fact, Ames continues this translation work in the next paragraph, as he next looks to Ludwig Feuerbach to illuminate baptism. In Ames words, Feuerbach is "a famous atheist" but "about as good on the joyful aspects of religion as anybody, and he loves the world."⁷³ Feuerbach, Ames writes, can speak to some elements of Ames' faith as well as anyone who shares it, and Ames uses his description of the sacrament to describe again to Robby the religious meaning and value of baptism in non-religious terms.

In these passages, the novel takes baptism and blessing to be the act of recognizing the sacred in another living thing. Ames interprets the ritual in a way important to the book's humanist vision, making the concept available for its conclusion, in which Ames blesses Jack

72. Robinson, *Gilead*, 23.

73. Robinson, 24.

and affirms the fundamental significance of human agency and perception. Yet Robinson does not abandon baptism or blessing as terms. They carry meaning worth bringing into a secular context.

Predestination goes through the same sort of refiguring in *Gilead*. Jack first broaches the idea in an abstracted theological discussion on his father's porch. When Jack renews the conversation in Ames' office, though, he moves from debating theology to discussing his family. Ames believes, at first, that they are discussing a tenet of his faith, a contested and oft-caricatured one, in Ames' description. He does not consider what the concept might mean to Jack outside of the sanctuary, or that questioning the doctrine is Jack's way of asking about whether he can become the husband and father he hopes to be, and whether he can find a home that will accept his interracial family. Yet for Jack, the doctrine of predestination comes to stand for his powerlessness to change himself or his family's circumstances. When Jack tells Ames about his wife and son, the doctrine takes on flesh, and its meaning in the novel changes as a result. Predestination becomes their way of discussing whether people are capable of meaningfully changing, especially from being driven by selfishness to seeking others' good. This religious concept, put in terms of Jack's life, works to pose the problem Jack faces in a way both men, and readers regardless of faith background, can understand.

Once Ames does understand, he leaves predestination behind. In its stead, he picks up blessing, recognizing the sacred in others and helping them thus realize it more fully, as his guide for helping Jack. Blessing becomes instead the religious expression Robinson chooses to communicate how we should relate to one another. In *Gilead*, Robinson uses these theological terms to defend human agency and subjectivity, and she works to make them meaningful to people who would not know or subscribe to the theology they come from. When Ames discusses

predestination and blessing with nonbelievers, the novel brings them out of the sanctuary, modeling in contrast to Christian Right discourse a way Christian language can work in public dialogue that is inclusive and productive.

Robinson's Alternative Christian Politics

Is it enough to propose another version of how Christianity can engage rhetorically and politically with science, with depictions of human agency and the mind, and with their political ramifications, all without directly addressing the Christian Right? Christopher Douglas takes issue with *Gilead*'s response to politically conservative Christianity, describing it as unsatisfying and ineffective for its failure to confront the Christian Right's strong doctrinal stances on issues like sexuality and for offering in its place what he describes as cultural Christianity. In Douglas' words, "*Gilead* nostalgically mourns the road not taken: there might have been a wiser, less arrogant and contentious, more spiritually humble and compelling national religious experience instead of the flavor that ultimately became prominent."⁷⁴ More than the novel's nostalgia, however, Douglas takes issue with what he describes as *Gilead*'s alternate history of Christianity's role in slavery and segregation. "Robinson's opposition to the conservative cultural politics of the postwar Christian resurgence," he writes, "crucially entails a will not to learn its genealogy in the actual Christian support for slavery in America."⁷⁵ Robinson sets the novel mid-century, reaching back into the Civil War years, in order to imagine an alternative to the Christian Right, he concludes, one with an inaccurately one-sided (abolitionist), and for Douglas white-washed, history.

74. Douglas, *If God Meant to Interfere*, 102.

75. Douglas, 91.

Setting *Gilead* before the heyday of the Christian Right allows Robinson to envision, as Douglas observes, a parentage and model for a different kind of Christian political engagement. *Gilead* indeed revives Christian abolitionism as the forefather of a less self-righteous and defensive, more social justice-minded faith and practice. It is also worth considering, as Douglas does, whether the novel falls short when it omits a pro-slavery foil to Ames' grandfather's abolitionism, or when it fails to go beyond Jack's critique of Ames' and Boughton's silence on civil rights to depict the historical reality of Christian pro-segregation.

Yet the novel does offer another response to politically conservative Christianity, in Ames' relationship with Jack. Through Ames' exchanges with Jack about predestination, *Gilead* critiques the determinist conclusions about human agency and subjectivity Christian conservatives have endorsed. In Christian language in answer to the Christian Right's, Ames' final blessing insists on the good in Jack, and the novel affirms that how we see ourselves and others has an important place in our accounts of human nature. *Gilead* also makes Christian theological insights available in accessible language. In contrast to the divisive, inflammatory Christian conservative discourse Robinson describes in her essays, *Gilead* models how religious language can serve as resource and catalyst, not flashpoint, in contemporary political dialogue.

Ames' relationship with his godson likewise provides the occasion for the novel to put the doctrine of predestination in non-doctrinal terms. In *Gilead*, Christian language becomes resource rather than roadblock through difficult family relationships, and the same is true for baptism and blessing. Ames explains his experiences with blessing the kittens as part of the letter he writes for Robby after learning that his heart is failing. Ames hopes to leave a record of love and advice, his life and work, and his family's history for his young son so he may one day know Ames, even in Ames' absence. The intimacy of their relationship and exchange inspires Ames to

translate this religious ritual, important to Ames' work and the way he sees the world, so that Robby may understand both the ritual and his father.

In fact, Ames translates blessing in this way not only to build his relationship with his son but also to explain the difficulties of his relationships with his father and brother. Ames tells the story about the kittens in part to tell Robby about how he and his father struggled to understand one another and how he wants to communicate with Robby in a way he could not with his father. Similarly, Ames first read Feuerbach, we learn on just the next page, because his brother Edward gave him *The Essence of Christianity* as an adolescent.⁷⁶ He tells Robby about Feuerbach in part to tell him about Edward and his falling out with their father after Edward became an atheist. Feuerbach represents for Ames the rift between his father and brother and his regret that they failed to respect and communicate with one another in the face of their differences. Familial exchange, then, is both the occasion and mechanism for translation. Ames describes blessing in an accessible language to his son, through stories about his father and brother, and with an aim of building the kind of relationship with his son that he, his father, and his brother did not have.

In these strained family relationships and difficult conversations, *Gilead* imagines how Christian discourse can play a productive role in political dialogue. Ames manages to find broad language to accompany his Christian vocabulary by keeping others, like his brother or his son, in mind, imaging how they would understand his thoughts about theology. He reads widely and looks for insights in others' language, as in Feuerbach's, that he finds meaningful. Ames must also be willing to listen to Jack's understanding of Ames' belief system, and to consider how Jack understands the language Ames claims as his own, even when—to Ames' mind—Jack gets

76. Robinson, *Gilead*, 24.

it wrong or misconstrues Ames' meaning. He must take Jack's views of his religion into account, and not to correct Jack, but to understand him better. Communication across religious lines succeeds in the novel not when characters already share a common set of assumptions or even a foundation of trust and understanding, but when no matter their differences in background or belief, midst mistrust and misunderstandings, they nonetheless persist in earnest effort to understand one another.

What we stand to gain, Robinson submits, is a long tradition of thinking about what it means to be human, one with something to say about agency and subjectivity that is missing from contemporary conversation, made available to that conversation once again. In *Absence of Mind*, Robinson writes that religious language, and Christian language especially, could enrich modern conversation about human nature—a conversation that, in her estimation, has become “truncated,” lacking language for articulating its value.⁷⁷ With the advent of modern thought as Robinson describes it, we have moved from a robust metaphysics of the self, soul, and conscience “into a void” of determinist making, wherein “the mind, or subjectivity, or whatever we call it now, is assumed always to be erring, misguided, and corrupted” and “truth itself cannot be said to exist.”⁷⁸ We lack a defense of the self, one that can reliably pursue questions of morality and truth, in modern terms. For this reason, she writes, were we to restore this self as a subject worth investigation, it might “look like theology” because we would find ourselves “driven back on an old vocabulary” to renew a discussion that has been allowed to atrophy.⁷⁹

77. Robinson, *Absence of Mind*, xv.

78. Robinson, *What Are We Doing Here?* 203.

79. Robison, *Absence of Mind*, xv.

Robinson's response to Darwinism and other determinisms has Calvinist foundations, and it is formulated in its theological terms, because she is a Congregationalist. Yet she is adamant that it need not be—that one need not be Christian, or indeed follow any sort of religion, to be a humanist in the vein she describes. She assumes that “concepts with religious history such as soul and conscience can be sufficiently redescribed in other language.” Still, she asks,

If they might be redescribed and are not, then we should wonder why they are not, how their exclusion from the vocabulary of self-declared humanism is rationalized, and what the effects of the exclusion might be. If they cannot be redescribed in a nonreligious language, then we need to consider what is threatened or lost when religious language is lost.⁸⁰

Robinson's question, in other words, is whether religious language can do something another means cannot when it comes to thinking and talking about human nature. It may be that another set of terms and philosophy to substantiate them have yet to step in. It may also be, she offers, that other languages not only have not, but cannot articulate a robust defense of human nature as Robinson imagines it, of our capacities for meaningful self-reflection and moral choice. That *The Echo Maker*'s characters use Christian discourse as a sort of linguistic last resort may raise the same question Robinson asks—whether there are many other languages that can readily describe how our experiences of consciousness depart from scientific models of our brains, especially in terms of agency and altruism.

Marilynne Robinson answers the Christian Right in *Gilead* with a Calvinist defense of the mind and moral agency, and with a picture of Christian discourse that extends trust and respect to Christians and non-Christians alike, that is open to and incorporates outside perspectives. In *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*, Margaret Atwood depicts the power

80. Robinson, *What Are We Doing Here?* 204.

of Christian language to consolidate and sanctify political power. She considers like Robinson the legacy of American Puritanism, yet for Atwood that legacy is violence, oppression of women, and these in service of what the Christian Right has called “family values.” Helena María Viramontes likewise confronts conservative Christian gender politics in “The Moths.” Yet Viramontes also answers those politics with her own vision in Christian language—like Robinson, the language of baptism—of the bonds that make a family.

CHRISTIAN RIGHT (WHITE) FAMILY VALUES, CHICANA BONDS AND CHICANX
FAMILY IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S *THE HANDMAID'S TALE* AND *THE TESTAMENTS*
AND HELENA MARÍA VIRAMONTES' "THE MOTHS"

Almost twenty years before Marilynne Robinson created John Ames' fictional hometown of Gilead, Iowa, Margaret Atwood was conjuring up a vastly different Gilead in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and its recent sequel, *The Testaments*, depict a Gilead built, like Robinson's, on the legacy of American Puritanism.¹ Yet their interpretations of that legacy perhaps could not be more different, nor could their visions of Christianity's place in American politics.

Atwood's Republic of Gilead is a repressive theocracy carved out of New England by a totalitarian regime. Its leaders, the "Sons of Jacob," have overthrown the U.S. government and installed a new social order based on select readings of the Christian Bible, primarily the Old Testament. The nation is under tight surveillance, and dissenters are tortured and hanged from the wall around what was once Harvard. Tolerant, cooperative, humanist, it is not.

Men rule this Gilead. Women are wives, domestic servants, or forced surrogates—"handmaids"—with few freedoms and fewer rights. The narrator of *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred, is a handmaid to one of the Gilead regime's top commanders. She is forced to have sex with the Commander in a highly ritualized monthly ceremony that includes his wife. Should she

1. Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1985; New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006); *The Testaments* (New York: Doubleday, 2019).

become pregnant, her child would be taken from her and raised as the Commander's. In the future Atwood imagines, infertility has risen sharply along with radiation and pollution levels. As a solution to declining birthrates, Gilead turns to the Genesis account of Rachel using her servant Bilhah to have children with her husband Jacob.²

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, American Puritanism offers a model for restrictive state control of gender and sexuality and for religious intolerance and violence. A Canadian looking from the outside in at American religion and politics, Atwood draws a line from Puritanism to the Christian Right and the fight for "family values"—for traditional marriage and gender roles, against feminism, gay rights, and abortion—gaining steam in the early 80s, and from the Christian Right to the future she imagines in Gilead. Hers is perhaps the most well-recognized and vivid portrait of the Christian Right in this era, and it is a warning. In response to readers over the years who have asked if *The Handmaid's Tale* is a prediction of America's future, Atwood has answered, "Let's say it's an antiprediction: If this future can be described in detail, maybe it won't happen."³

I begin this chapter with Atwood's dystopic vision of conservative Christian family values taken to frightening ends. I then turn to "The Moths," a short story by Helena María Viramontes that confronts conservative Catholic beliefs about gender and the family. Atwood warns against the power of Christian language in the U.S. to shore up political authority and sanctify authoritarianism. Viramontes sees that power, and she also sees possibility.

2. Gen. 29:29.

3. Margaret Atwood, "Margaret Atwood on What 'The Handmaid's Tale' Means in the Age of Trump," *The New York Times*, March 10, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/10/books/review/margaret-atwood-handmaids-tale-age-of-trump.html?r=1>.

Helena María Viramontes is a Chicana writer, literary critic, activist, and professor of creative writing at Cornell University.⁴ Viramontes grew up in East LA in the 1960s and 70s, and her writing draws heavily on her experiences there.⁵ Working conditions for migrant workers in California's grape fields is the subject of her first novel, *Under the Feet of Jesus*, and the Chicano student walkouts serves as backdrop of her second, *Their Dogs Came With Them*.⁶ Viramontes' first book, a collection of short stories entitled *The Moths and Other Stories*, follows Chicanas of varied backgrounds and across generations struggling against the restrictive roles assigned to them by a patriarchal culture, often in conflicts with husbands and fathers.⁷

In "The Moths," the collection's title story, an unnamed narrator recalls caring for her grandmother, Mama Luna, after she fell ill with cancer when the narrator was fourteen. At home, the narrator faced rejection and abuse from her family when she failed to live up to their standard of a good Catholic daughter. She found refuge at Mama Luna's house, helping her plant herbs and cooking menudo together. Mama Luna cared for the narrator through fevers and fallings-out

4. "Chicano" and "Chicana" grew out of the Chicano movement of the 1960s and 70s when they were embraced by Mexican Americans as identities that expressed their political engagement and cultural pride. I use Chicano/Chicanos to refer to Mexican Americans of any gender who identify in this way. I also sometimes use Chicano/Chicanos when writing about scholarship that prefers these terms to Chicano/Chicanos. I use Mexican American to describe people of Mexican descent living in the United States, without this explicit political orientation.

I use Latinx/Latinxs when writing about the shared history of people of Latin American descent, including Chicano/Chicanos. I also sometimes use Hispanic when writing specifically about Spanish speaking Latinxs.

5. Yolanda Alaniz, "Helena María Viramontes," UC Santa Barbara Library, accessed August 5, 2020, https://www.library.ucsb.edu/special-collections/cema/viramontes_helena.

6. Helena María Viramontes, *Under the Feet of Jesus* (New York: Plume, 1995); *Their Dogs Came with Them* (New York: Atria, 2007).

7. Helena María Viramontes, *The Moths and Other Stories*, 2nd ed. (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1985; 1995). Citations refer to the 1995 edition.

with her family, and when she became sick, she called her granddaughter to care for her. At the end of the story, Mama Luna dies, and the narrator washes her grandmother's body in the bathtub, sobbing, as moths fill the room.

"The Moths" does not directly address the Christian Right. Instead, the story critiques conservative Catholic beliefs about women's roles in the home and society and how those beliefs shape Mexican American culture: placing impossible burdens on women, justifying abuse, and dividing families. Yet the narrator also turns to Catholic rituals, praying the rosary and baptism, to express her grief over losing her grandmother and her estrangement from her mother. Together with the moths, imagery from Aztec religion, these Catholic rituals enable her to imagine building new, healing relationships with the women in her family.

Atwood's is a cautionary tale of one possible future for "family values" rhetoric and the socio-political work underwritten by religious discourse and law. Viramontes answers that rhetoric with her own vision of family, conceived in religious language, that defies the patriarchal ideals of conservative Christianity. Though the Christian Right is not the story's focus, in the ways "The Moths" reclaims and reworks Christian language, Viramontes presents alternatives to that dominant voice for religion in U.S. politics.

"The Moths" also complicates the picture of the Christian Right that Powers, Saunders, and Robinson present. Previous chapters have taken up the Christian Right's embattled relationship with mainstream science and especially evolution, the group's support of limited government and free market economics, and its apocalyptic interpretation of 9/11 and George W. Bush's "War on Terror." "The Moths" joins *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments* in addressing Christian conservatives' crusade for family values, and they also recognize Christianity's role in colonialism, slavery, racism and white supremacy.

Given this history, for Viramontes' characters religion plays a complicated and central role in ethnic identity. Religion is raced for Viramontes in a way it is not for writers in previous chapters, and in that way, previous chapters in fact offer an incomplete picture of the Christian (mostly white) Right—a movement more than three quarters white, that in part coalesced in defense of “religious liberty,” or of private religious schools’ refusal to desegregate, and that today increasingly allies with white nationalism.⁸ “The Moths” brings forward what in Atwood’s novels is backdrop, that family values discourse has long been entwined with white supremacy and Christian conquest.

Robinson’s and Atwood’s Strange Twin Gileads

Margaret Atwood dedicates *The Handmaid’s Tale* to Perry Miller, distinguished historian of Puritanism under whom she studied at Harvard, and Mary Webster, her distant ancestor hanged by Puritans for witchcraft. Additionally, in interviews and other reflections on *The Handmaid’s Tale* in the decades since its publication, Atwood has spoken openly about taking the American Puritans as inspiration for Gilead.⁹ In the introduction to a recent edition of the novel, she explains why:

8. Recent counts put the group’s racial make-up at around 76% Caucasian (see Perry, *Rhetorics of Race and Religion on the Christian Right*, xiv). John Fea, *Believe Me: The Evangelical Road to Donald Trump*, 33-34, writes about the pro-segregationist beginnings of the Christian Right and how they can explain the group’s strong support for Donald Trump.

9. Taking their cues from Atwood, scholars often note Puritan customs and beliefs as an important source for *The Handmaid’s Tale*. The sole extended analysis, Alan Turner, “Atwood’s Playing Puritans in *The Handmaid’s Tale*,” in *Cross-cultural Studies: American, Canadian and European Literatures, 1945-1985*, ed. Mirko Jurak (Ljubljana, Slovenia: English Department, Edvard Kardelj University of Ljubljana, 1988), 85-91, considers the American Puritans’ use of biblical typology to make sense of their mission as colonists—taking the role of Israel, God’s chosen people set out to take root in a foreign land and become a light to the nations—and argues that the Gilead regime replicates this kind of typology in how it uses Old Testament stories of servants given to husbands to bear children for barren wives.

Nations never build apparently radical forms of government on foundations that aren't there already; thus China replaced a state bureaucracy with a similar state bureaucracy under a different name, the USSR replaced the dreaded imperial secret police with an even more dreaded secret police, and so forth. The deep foundation of the United States—so went my thinking—was not the comparatively recent 18th-century Enlightenment structures of the Republic, with their talk of equality and their separation of Church and State, but the heavy-handed theocracy of 17th-century Puritan New England—with its marked bias against women—which would need only the opportunity of a period of social chaos to reassert itself.¹⁰

Puritanism is for Atwood a founding mythos for the United States, one with lasting sway over the American political imagination.¹¹ In the story of a nation founded by God's people on divine mission, Atwood sees a narrative that maintains significant political purchase today, enough so that it could plausibly authorize a totalitarian regime. Unlike Robinson, Atwood's interest is less in Puritanism as religion, as it was, and instead in the Puritan mythos that has endured as a political force.

Puritanism's authorizing function for the Gilead regime is on display in a church Offred passes on her way to buy food for her household, one of few sanctioned outings from the Commander's house. Offred describes the church as "one of the first erected here, hundreds of years ago." "It isn't used anymore," she observes, "except as a museum. Inside it you can see paintings, of women in long somber dresses, their hair covered by white caps, and of upright men, darkly clothed and unsmiling. Our ancestors. Admission is free."¹² The church is not a

10. Margaret Atwood, "Preface," in *The Handmaid's Tale* (London: The Folio Society, 2012; reprint, *Lithub*, April 25, 2018), <https://lithub.com/margaret-atwood-on-how-she-came-to-write-the-handmaids-tale/>.

11. In this Atwood echoes Sacvan Bercovitch's foundational study of Puritanism, *Puritan Origins of the American Self* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975). Bercovitch argues that Puritan rhetoric fashioned an essential American self that was foundational to American Romanticism and to how we understand the meaning of America.

12. Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 41.

functioning house of worship, having no congregation and holding no services. It is instead a portal to the past: a museum commemorating Gilead's Puritan predecessors. This is the legacy, Gilead claims, to which they are heirs.

The paintings hanging in the church communicate that legacy. The women they portray are chaste, as their "somber" and "white" clothing signifies, their bodies well-covered and strictly controlled. The "upright" men that accompany them, dressed in dark colors and "unsmiling," reflect the severity of Gileadean society and its heteropatriarchal power structure. In the paintings women are fallible and weak, and men their rightful leaders. This version of America's Puritan past serves to justify Gilead's rolling back of women's rights and its authoritarian control of sexuality and reproduction. The church-museum asserts that Gilead has righted society's wayward course and returned it to its venerable origins. As the Commander later tells Offred, the years between "were just an anomaly, historically speaking . . . Just a fluke. All we've done is return things to Nature's norm."¹³

The church-museum also reflects Gilead's relationship to Christianity. The church maintains its outward scaffolding, those signs that mark it as a religious site, yet the worship it seeks to inspire is of Gilead. It is a church building emptied of a church body and filled instead with a carefully curated narrative of the past that anchors and authorizes Gilead's totalitarian government. Like the church, hollowed out to house Gilead propaganda, Christianity and specifically Puritanism for Gilead provide a set of symbols that sacralize its rule, untethered from whatever beliefs and practices they once signified.

13. Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 250.

In Atwood's rendering, Puritanism is intolerant and repressive, with severe and stringently enforced beliefs about gender and sexuality—the very interpretation Robinson takes pains to discredit. Yet unlike Robinson, Atwood does not aim for a faithful representation of the American Puritans. If Marilynne Robinson returns to Puritan writings to challenge the myth of Puritanism popularly circulating, Margaret Atwood examines the power of the myth. In *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*, her interest is in how the story of Puritanism has been told in the centuries since, and to what ends.

Scholars have acknowledged that Atwood's and Robinson's fictional worlds share a name. Despite their distinct approaches to Puritanism, Atwood's and Robinson's novels also share a central concern: how America's religious past informs America's religio-political present.¹⁴ In debates over the faithfulness of Robinson's readings of Calvin and the Puritans, some readers have suggested that the humanism Robinson attributes to these thinkers she could as well find in any number of others, and with less effort.¹⁵ Yet, Robinson looks to the Puritan

14. A few have also noted Atwood and Robinson's shared interest in American Christianity and politics. Christopher Douglas, *If God Meant to Interfere*, devotes several paragraphs of his introduction to *The Handmaid's Tale* as informed by the Christian Right. As premise to a chapter on *Gilead*, Douglas describes Atwood's *Gilead* as Robinson's "political intertext," with Toni Morrison's *Beloved* as its "formal intertext" (93).

The inspiration for this comparison came from a panel planned by the American Religion and Literature Society for the American Literary Association Annual Conference in May 2020 ("Two Gileads in Contemporary Fiction: Margaret Atwood and Marilynne Robinson," chair Ray Horton), canceled because of the COVID-19 outbreak that spring. A portion of this chapter was intended as a presentation on that panel. Ray has since published a comparison of *The Handmaid's Tale* and Robinson's *Lila*, "Is There a Context for Gilead? Reading *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Lila* under the Christian Right," *Christianity and Literature* 69, no. 1 (March 2020): 15-35, examining how each explores the relationship between reading and belief. He offers these readings as an example of what literature can teach us about the Christian Right that history and sociology cannot.

15. "In the end," writes Christie L. Maloyed, "The Death of Jeremiah?" 217, Robinson's "version of Calvinism may not require Calvin at all." Maloyed concludes that by downplaying covenant theology and the jeremiad, Robinson misses what is central to American Puritanism.

tradition because, like Atwood, she recognizes its political influence. Robinson traces a line from Puritanism to the Christian Right. Shedding the popular caricature of America's religious past can yield, she hopes, an alternative to contemporary conservative Christian politics. Atwood traces the same line, from seventeenth century New England to American religion and politics of the early 1980s.

“A Shining City on a Hill”

While Atwood was beginning work on *The Handmaid's Tale*, Ronald Reagan was making Puritan leader John Winthrop's vision of a “city on a hill” into a hallmark of his presidential rhetoric. Reagan invoked Winthrop's phrase to declare that America had been “chosen” by God, historian Richard M. Gamble writes, and was destined to serve as a beacon of democratic and economic freedom and progress.¹⁶ Over the next decade, Reagan would cement his take on the Puritan mission as a key image of American exceptionalism.¹⁷ Further reinforcing

Todd Shy, “Religion and Marilynne Robinson,” *Salmagundi* 155/156 (2007): 251-264; and Christopher Leise, “‘That Little Incandescence’: Reading the Fragmentary and John Calvin in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*,” *Studies in the Novel* 41, no. 3 (2009): 348-367, also write that Robinson in some ways misses the mark on Puritanism.

16. Richard M. Gamble, *In Search of The City on a Hill: The Making and Unmaking of an American Myth* (London: Continuum, 2012), 142, 149-50.

17. Notably, it was Perry Miller, to whom Atwood dedicates *The Handmaid's Tale*, that brought Winthrop's sermon out of the archives and into anthologies. See Gamble, *In Search of The City on a Hill*, as well as Daniel T. Rodgers, *As a City on a Hill: The Story of America's Most Famous Lay Sermon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018). About Reagan's use of the phrase, Rodgers, 8, writes that in the 1980s, “Winthrop's text suddenly swept from the domains of the scholars into the White House and the rhetorical center of modern American politics. No presidents before Ronald Reagan had used the phrase ‘city on a hill’ to define the very character of the American nation and its place in the world. After Reagan, virtually no serious political figure could escape the obligation to quote it.” Indeed, the same rhetoric of America's divine mission becomes a powerful rhetorical tool justifying George W. Bush's “War on Terror,” as Richard Powers depicts in *The Echo Maker* (see chapter one).

the association of Puritanism with Reagan's key constituency, opponents in those years criticized the Christian Right as Puritan in its negative, stereotypical forms.¹⁸ The association long predates Reagan's famous formulation of Winthrop's sermon, however. Critics equated fundamentalism with Puritanism from its split with mainline Protestantism in the early twentieth century, including H. L. Mencken in his coverage of the Scopes trial.¹⁹

Yet while these critics intended "Puritan" as an insult, members of the Christian Right since the Reagan era have in fact fashioned themselves as the mantle bearers of the Puritan mission.²⁰ Influential among Christian conservatives, Kate Carté writes, is a "distinctively Christian reading" of America's founding, a story that typically begins with the Pilgrims and Puritans, moves next to the Great Awakening as catalyst for the Revolution, emphasizing the "importance of public prayer and the piety" of America's revolutionary leaders, and concludes with the Constitution. The moral of the story: the United States was founded as a Christian nation. Spurred on by this Christian nationalist narrative of the founding era, Christian conservatives imagine themselves working to restore America to its blessed origins.²¹

18. Bremer, *Puritanism: A Very Short Introduction*, 108.

19. Bremer, 107.

20. Historians of early America have documented the link between Puritanism and the evangelical right as well. Sarah Rivett, "Early American Religion in a Postsecular Age," *PMLA* 128, no. 4 (2013): 922, presents that link as one reason among many that historians should revisit the "Puritan origins thesis" (a narrative of American history and identity that begins with Puritanism) that dominated the field under Miller, Bercovitch, and other early scholars, from a postsecular perspective.

21. Kate Carté Engel, "The Founding Fathers in Modern America," in *Faith in the New Millennium: The Future of American Religion and Politics*, eds. Darren Dochuck and Matthew Avery-Sutton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 8-10, 16-20. Writing as Carté Engel, Carté defines Christian nationalism as the belief that "the United States has a special relationship with a Christian God and a divine or even prophetic place in Christian history." That is to say that the Christian conservatives who rallied behind Reagan did not imagine America as a

In framing their cause this way, members of the Christian Right claim that their views are more than right or best for the nation—their beliefs are fundamentally American. In his response to evangelical Christian support of Donald Trump, *Believe Me: The Evangelical Road to Donald Trump*, historian John Fea contends that “the idea that the United States was founded as a Christian nation undergirded the political agenda” of the Christian Right. “Without such revisionism,” he explains,

evangelical arguments for a return of prayer and Bible-reading to public schools, their libertarian rejection of big government, and their opposition to *Roe v. Wade* would lack solid historical footing: that is, they would be just another interest group advocating for its particular point of view. But if America was founded as a Christian nation, conservative evangelicals could invoke the Founding Fathers to defend displaying the Ten Commandments in courthouses, praying at school graduation ceremonies, and even the belief that the First Amendment protections of religious freedoms applied primarily to Christians.²²

Carté likewise contends that the story of America’s “Christian origins” lends legitimacy to the Christian Right’s political agenda, and more. Telling that story, she writes, prepares and rallies adherents for the work of Christian conservatism: “Conservative Christians have turned the act

“shining city on a hill” in quite the sense Reagan expressed. Gamble, *In Search of the City on a Hill*, 157-8, describes Reagan’s “city on a hill” metaphor as “the heart of his civil religion,” that religious aspect of public and political life, usually a “doctrinally vague theism” invoked in civil ceremonies (like “one nation under God” in the pledge of allegiance) that serves to express what Americans believe about themselves. Christian nationalism goes beyond this sort of lowest common denominator deism articulating broad national values. Christian nationalists assert that America was at its origins Protestant Christian and should be today. What was for Reagan a religious metaphor celebrating American exceptionalism would be for Christian nationalists a call to return America to its Protestant Christian foundations.

On the influence of Christian nationalism among conservative Christians, see also Fea, *Believe Me*, discussed below, as well as Katherine Stewart, *The Power Worshipers: Inside the Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020); and Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

22. Fea, *Believe Me*, 35.

of retelling the nation's founding into a religious practice, one that continually reaffirms their vision of the nation's moral purpose and serves as a call to action to rebuild what has been lost."²³ Looking back to the Puritans, Christian conservatives have claimed a privileged place for Christianity in the United States and convinced themselves of the justness of their cause, to make America Christian again.

Atwood's Gilead points to the Puritans to underwrite its heteropatriarchal social order. In this way, she reflects the way the Christian nationalist narrative of America's founding era has functioned for the Christian Right. What that narrative endorses, for Gilead as for the Christian Right, is what the Christian Right has called "family values."

Gilead's "Family Values"

The Republic of Gilead styles itself as an extension of American Puritanism, with Christian Right family values a step between. Offred recognizes the commander's wife, for instance, as Serena Joy, a formerly famous singer and speaker who had once preached on "the sanctity of the home, about how women should stay home," and whom Christopher Douglas identifies as a parody of Tammy Faye Baker and Phyllis Schlafly.²⁴ In *The Testaments*, too, Phyllis Schlafly receives her dues: the women in charge of training handmaids, the "Aunts," have tea and conspire against one another in the "Schlafly café."²⁵ Schlafly was the conservative Catholic and GOP activist who mobilized an ecumenical movement of evangelicals, fundamentalists, Catholics, and Mormons against the Equal Rights Amendment. "By portraying

23. Carté Engel, "The Founding Fathers in Modern America," 9.

24. Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 56; Douglas, *If God Meant to Interfere*, 13.

25. Atwood, *The Testaments*, 180.

the ERA as a symbol of feminism,” Daniel K. Williams writes, “Schlafly transformed the debate over the amendment into a national referendum on ‘women’s lib.’”²⁶ Her work against the ERA had long-lasting effects, Williams concludes, turning “evangelical women into Republican Party activists, which contributed to the conservative takeover of the GOP.”²⁷ As an allusion to Schlafly, Serena Joy represents the Christian Right campaign against the feminist movement, and Offred describes Gilead as a victory for that campaign, Serena Joy’s goals realized. Of course, Offred adds, Serena Joy “doesn’t make speeches anymore. She has become speechless. She stays in her home, but it doesn’t seem to agree with her. How furious she must be,” Offred thinks, “now that she’s been taken at her word.”²⁸ In Atwood’s Gilead novels, the legacy of Puritanism is the Christian Right, and Gilead is heir to both.

In building the Republic of Gilead’s political agenda, Atwood takes her cues from the Christian Right’s family values playbook in the late 70s and early 80s. Schlafly’s STOP-ERA campaign against the Equal Rights Amendment proved a centerpiece in the growing conservative Christian fight against feminism, and the Gilead regime eliminates rights feminists fought for and then some. Women in Gilead lose the right to work outside the home, to own property or handle money, and even to read.²⁹

Wrapped up in conservative Christian anti-feminism and perhaps the issue most central to *The Handmaid’s Tale*, by the early 1980s abortion had become a crucial, unifying cause for the

26. Williams, *God’s Own Party*, 109.

27. Williams, 111.

28. Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, 56.

29. Atwood, 198-202.

Christian Right.³⁰ Unlike Catholics and fundamentalists, southern evangelicals were ambivalent about abortion before *Roe v. Wade* and even in the years immediately following. Yet with his 1979 film series *Whatever Happened to the Human Race*, evangelical pastor and theologian Francis Schaeffer began an influential campaign to bring southern evangelicals around on the issue. Schaeffer argued that abortion would lead to infanticide and euthanasia, and he made the case against the procedure as a defense of human rights.³¹ Adding to Schaeffer's call to defend innocent life, Christian Right leader Jerry Falwell framed the demand for abortion as a product of the ERA, feminism, women's desire to work outside the home, and sexual promiscuity.³²

Following Falwell's approach, Gilead likewise understands abortion as an assault on the family and nation and a symptom of women abdicating their rightful roles as submissive wives and mothers. Having children is a woman's "biological destiny," the Commander tells Offred, her duty "to the common good."³³ As Paul wrote to Timothy, so Gilead proclaims in its wedding ceremonies that women "shall be saved by childbearing."³⁴ Gilead ensures women fulfill this duty by controlling reproduction absolutely, forcing women to become pregnant and stealing their children. Abortion is not just illegal but punishable by death—a penalty considered by the

30. Williams, *God's Own Party*, 207.

31. Williams, 155-6.

32. Williams, 156; Fea, *Believe Me*, 34-6.

33. Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 250-1.

34. 1 Tim. 2:15; Atwood, 251.

Texas House of Representatives as recently as April 2019—and women who had past abortions and abortion providers are sentenced retroactively.³⁵

As Schlafly's grassroots STOP-ERA campaign ignited the conservative Christian fight against feminism, Anita Bryant's "Save Our Children" crusade in 1977—against a Miami ordinance that would have prevented hiring discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation—set off the Christian Right's opposition to gay rights.³⁶ In Gilead, homosexuality is illegal. Gay people are declared "gender traitors" and executed.³⁷ As with abortion, Gilead understands gay relationships as traitorous, an offense against the nation. The regime must enforce traditional gender roles and sexual norms to ensure the right kind of women have children and raise them according to Gilead's values, to ensure the nation's future.³⁸ In Gilead, as for the Christian Right,

35. Atwood, *The Testaments*, 171; Julia Jacobs, "Failed Texas Bill Would Have Made Death Penalty Possible in Abortion Cases," *The New York Times*, April 10, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/10/us/texas-abortion-death-penalty.html>.

36. Williams, *God's Own Party*, 148.

37. Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 53. That is unless, like Offred's lesbian friend Moira, they are useful to the regime. As lesbian and feminist activist, Moira is sentenced to become first a handmaid, then later a prostitute at a secret state-run brothel. Handmaids, prostitutes, cooks, maids, and in what the regime calls "the colonies," prisoners in labor camps: women in Gilead can hold no jobs of their own, but they labor to produce the world men enjoy. Robinson critiques Christian conservatives for prioritizing profit at the expense of the poor. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Gilead's strict sexual mores give logic to its stratified society. Christian conservative gender and sexual norms enable its economy of exploitation.

38. Those who reject the nation's mores, like Offred, lose their children to the wives of Commanders. And, as I discuss below, only white women have children in Gilead. What I here describe as Gilead's and the Christian Right's Christian nationalism is more accurately white Christian nationalism.

a Christian nationalist narrative of U.S. history justifies restricting gender and sexuality; and restricting gender and sexuality creates and preserves the Christian nation.³⁹

The final galvanizing event of these years for the Christian Right came in 1976 when, after years of warnings and disputes, the IRS pulled the tax exempt status of private, fundamentalist Christian college Bob Jones University, over its refusal to admit Black students.⁴⁰ Then, in 1983, after years of legal battles, the Supreme Court upheld the IRS' policy on racial discrimination and charitable tax exemption, settling the case against private Christian schools attempting to sidestep *Brown v Board*. As Seth Dowland relates in his history of the family values movement, the two decades prior had seen a boom in private Christian schools, in large part because conservative Christians sought to avoid sending their children to desegregated public schools.⁴¹ As it came together in the late 1970s, the Christian Right was made up both of evangelicals like Billy Graham, who had supported the Civil Rights movement, if tepidly, as

39. On the importance of gender, sexuality, and the family to nationalism, see Jennifer Thomson, "Gender and Nationalism," *Nationalities Papers*, 48, vol. 1 (January 2020): 3-11, DOI:10.1017/nps.2019.98; Anne McClintock, "Family Feuds: Gender, Nationalism and the Family," *Feminist Review* 44 (Summer 1993): 61-80, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1395196>; Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis, eds. *Woman-Nation-State* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1989); and on white nationalism specifically, Sophie Bjork-James, "White Sexual Politics: The Patriarchal Family in White Nationalism and The Religious Right," *Transforming Anthropology* 28, no. 1 (2020): 58-73. On the roles gender, sexuality and the family play in Christian nationalism, see Bjork-James, *The Divine Institution: White Evangelicalism's Politics of the Family* (Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2021); Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, "Is a 'Christian America' a More Patriarchal America? Religion, Politics and Traditionalist Gender Ideology," *Canadian Review of Sociology* 56, no. 2 (May 2019), link.gale.com/apps/doc/A595143559/AONE?u=txshracd2548&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=1d2e37ca; and in white Christian nationalism, Whitehead and Perry, "Christian Nationalism and White Racial Boundaries: Examining Whites' Opposition to Interracial Marriage," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 38, no. 10 (August 2015): 1671-1689.

40. Williams, *God's Own Party*, 163-4.

41. Dowland, *Family Values and the Rise of the Christian Right*, 27

well as fundamentalists like Jerry Falwell, who had preached against it in the 60s.⁴² In fact, Dowland recounts, Falwell founded his own private Christian school, Lynchburg Christian Academy, in 1967, the same year the Lynchburg, Virginia public schools desegregated.⁴³

Building private schools had allowed conservative Christians to avoid both desegregation and what they saw as an increasingly secular, immoral public-school system. Especially as segregation became a less seemly cause into the 1970s, and as some schools eventually began to admit more Black students, they increasingly sold themselves as refuges from secular humanism with the mission to teach children strong family values.⁴⁴ In response to the IRS' action against Bob Jones University, conservative Christians feared their religious enclaves were no longer safe from government interference. They rallied in defense of "religious freedom," arguing that the government was trying to control religious institutions.⁴⁵ Yet as much as the Bob Jones IRS case became for the Christian Right a symbol of government overreach and religious persecution, at its origin was the fury of white Christians being forced to integrate.⁴⁶

The government of Gilead rectifies this swiftly. Citing the "Curse of Ham"—a biblical reference historically used in the United States to justify enslaving Africans—its leaders have forcibly relocated African Americans out of Gilead and out of Atwood's novels. Offred mentions

42. Williams, *God's Own Party*, 70, 76; Dowland, *Family Values and the Rise of the Christian Right*, 28.

43. Dowland, 28.

44. Dowland, 28-30.

45. Fea, *Believe Me*, 34.

46. Balmer, *Thy Kingdom Come*, 13-17, goes so far as to argue that the IRS' action against private Christian schools on segregation was the decisive event that created the Christian Right.

this only a third of the way through the novel, and with little comment. She simply recalls overhearing a newscaster reporting that the “resettlement” to “National Homeland One” was on schedule, and she wonders how they could be “transporting that many people at once” and “what they’re supposed to do, once they get there.”⁴⁷ Besides this brief mention, and this only in passing, Atwood’s novels do not address Gilead’s white nationalism.⁴⁸

Ben Merriman has argued that in this choice, Atwood in fact erases race from the novel. The regime’s treatment of women—forbidding them from reading, forcing some into indentured servitude, including some like Offred into sexual slavery—draws directly from the history of enslaved Africans in the U.S., Merriman observes. Yet Atwood’s novels white-wash and distort the history of sexism in the U.S. by failing to acknowledge how it has been entwined with racism.⁴⁹ The question Merriman raises, whether in making Gilead white Atwood addresses or erases racism in America, has become yet more relevant since the Hulu adaptation of *The Handmaid’s Tale* in 2017 and director Bruce Miller’s choice of a multiracial cast.⁵⁰

47. Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, 98.

48. Gilead also forcibly relocates Jews who fail to convert, we learn from Professor Piexoto in the epilogue.

49. Ben Merriman, “White-Washing Oppression in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*,” *Notes on Contemporary Literature* 39, no. 1 (2009).

50. See for example Ellen E. Jones, “*The Handmaid Tale*’s Race Problem,” *The Guardian*, July 31, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2017/jul/31/the-handmaids-tales-race-problem>; Karen Crawley, “Reproducing Whiteness: Feminist Genres, Legal Subjectivity and the Post-racial Dystopia of *The Handmaid’s Tale*,” *Law Critique* 29 (2018): 333. About the Hulu series’ colorblind clast, Crawley writes, “*The Handmaid’s Tale*’s post-racial aesthetic means that its thematic engagement with gender, sexuality and resistance actively disavows national and international histories of racist state violence and white supremacy.”

To Merriman's point, Offred's offhand allusion to Gilead's second Trail of Tears is startling, first as it reveals that Gilead is full of only white people, and second as it makes plain that none of them, including Offred, has considered this remarkable. The Republic of Gilead has forcibly marched Black people out of its borders. Yet it fashions itself a religious state built not on white supremacy but on a return to traditional marriage and gender norms, to biblical values. Even those at the bottom of this society, like Offred, have accepted this without question.

Gilead's silence on the issue reflects so many of the private Christian schools founded in the late 1960s as white religious enclaves, institutions that billed themselves as refuges preserving Christian family values and biblical morals but that were predicated on white separatism. White supremacy is Gilead's unspoken foundation, as it was for many such schools and the Christian Right rallying behind them, calling for "religious freedom" as they attempted to escape federal pressure to admit Black students.⁵¹ In leaving so much unsaid about Gilead's segregation project, *The Handmaid's Tale* reproduces the Christian Right's attempts to sell segregation as "religious freedom," white supremacy as "family values."

Atwood has repeatedly insisted that she included nothing in Gilead that has not already happened.⁵² What she identified in the United States beginning in the 1980s was the growing Christian conservative movement demanding a return to traditional gender roles and marriage and railing against feminism, abortion, and gay rights. It was an overwhelmingly white

51. On the heteropatriarchal family as a shared rallying cry for both white nationalists and Christian conservatives, see Bjork-James, "White Sexual Politics."

52. On the occasion of the Hulu television-adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood wrote in *The New York Times*, in "Margaret Atwood on What 'The Handmaid's Tale' Means in the Age of Trump": "One of my rules was that I would not put any events into the book that had not already happened in what James Joyce called the "nightmare" of history, nor any technology not already available. No imaginary gizmos, no imaginary laws, no imaginary atrocities."

movement, and some of its earliest supporters, once open segregationists, were by the 1980s fighting for the kind of religious freedom that would allow them to preserve segregation within their religious schools. It was a movement influenced by Christian nationalism, whose members believed they were battling to restore the United States to its foundations as a “Christian nation,” predicated on a selective, distorted narrative of the founding era. It was a movement that evidenced the power, reaching back to the Massachusetts Bay colony, of Christian language to capture and command support for a political vision.

A Warning, But What Else?

Atwood’s novels do not imagine how Christian language might advance a different political vision or a less nightmarish future. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Offred repeatedly recognizes that Gilead has amended the scriptures it feeds its faithful. Recalling her time in the “Rachel and Leah Center,” the indoctrination camp for handmaids, Offred remembers hearing a version of the beatitudes playing over a loudspeaker at meals: “*Blessed be the poor in spirit, for theirs in the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are the merciful. Blessed be the meek. Blessed are the silent*” a man’s voice recited. “I knew they made that up,” Offred recalls, “I knew it was wrong, and they left things out, too, but there was no way of checking.”⁵³ The Bible, Offred explains, was “kept locked up, the way people once kept tea locked up, so the servants wouldn’t steal it. It is an incendiary device: who knows what we’d make of it, if we ever got our hands on it?”⁵⁴ Yet in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, we do not find out. The Bible stays locked away, and Offred offers little alternative to Gilead’s selective, literal, and liberally edited version.

53. Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, 105.

54. Atwood, 103.

In the decades since its publication, most readers of *The Handmaid's Tale* have agreed with Dorota Filipzcak when she concludes that while the novel does not endorse Gilead's interpretation of the Christian Bible, neither does it provide an alternative. In Filipzcak's words, "the Bible that is used to perpetuate the male garden is never allowed to subvert it."⁵⁵ The same is true of Atwood's second Gilead novel, *The Testaments*, published almost 35 years later. In both *Handmaid* and its sequel, the only place for religion in politics is in shoring up an extremist Christian theocracy.

The Testaments is narrated in part by Offred's daughter, Agnes, who unlike Offred does get her hands on that "incendiary device." As Offred attempted to flee across the border to Canada, Gilead guards seized Agnes, placing her in another childless commander's home where she was raised to know nothing of Offred. When *The Testaments* unfolds over a decade later, Agnes is training to become an Aunt, one of the women overseeing Gilead's handmaid program, where she learns to read and eventually receives access to otherwise forbidden texts. When she is finally granted access to the Bible, what Agnes finds there makes her fear she might "lose [her] faith," she confides in her friend and fellow trainee, Bekka.⁵⁶ "God isn't what they say," Bekka replies. "You could believe in Gilead or you could believe in God, but not both," she tells Agnes.

55. Dorota Filippzcak, "Is There No Balm in Gilead? Biblical Interetext in the Handmaid's Tale," *Literature and Theology* 7, no. 2 (June 1993): 183. See also Maria Christou, "Politics of Auto-Cannibalism: Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*," *Literature and Theology* 30, no. 4 (Dec. 2016): 410–425; David Hogsette, "Margaret Atwood's Rhetorical Epilogue in *The Handmaid's Tale*: The Reader's Role in Empowering Offred's Speech Act," *Critique*, 38, no. 4 (Nov. 2012): 262–278; Kristy Tenbus, "Palimpsestuous Voices: Institutionalized Religion and the Subjugation of Women in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*," *Margaret Atwood Studies* 4, no. 1 (Oct. 2011): 3–13; Janet Larson, "Margaret Atwood and the Future of Prophecy," *Religion & Literature* 21, no. 1 (1989): 27–61.

56. Atwood, *The Testaments*, 303.

“That was how she had managed her own crisis” of faith.⁵⁷ Yet with this exchange, the chapter ends, and Agnes does not revisit the Bible. If she has concluded that God is not what Gilead says, she does not say what God is instead.

At the end of *The Testaments*, Bekka helps Agnes escape Gilead to deliver damning evidence of the regime’s corruption to the Canadian press, hoping to bring about Gilead’s reform or collapse. Given the choice between believing in God or Gilead, they do not choose Gilead. Still, readers must guess at the girls’ religious beliefs, and even at their reasons for going through with the escape plot arranged by the head Aunt, Aunt Lydia. Agnes scarcely references the specifics of her faith, and she does not offer a religious rationale for her subversive actions.

The closest either novel comes to an alternative to Gileadean Christianity is in a prayer Offred composes following the structure of the Lord’s Prayer. Offred remembers being forced to kneel in prayer at the Rachel and Leah center, policed for proper form, petitioning God for “emptiness, so we would be worthy to be filled: with grace, with love, with self-denial, semen and babies.”⁵⁸ This memory prompts her to compose a prayer of her own, but not to the God of Gilead. She begins,

My God. Who Art in the Kingdom of Heaven, which is within.

I wish you would tell me Your Name, the real one I mean. But *You* will do as well as anything.

I wish I knew what You were up to. But whatever it is, help me to get through it, please. Though maybe it’s not Your doing; I don’t believe for an instant that what’s going on out there is what You meant.⁵⁹

57. Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, 304.

58. Atwood, 222.

59. Atwood, 223.

Offred imagines that God resides in a heaven within herself, and perhaps she can envision a heaven within, despite the hell without, because with this prayer she conjures for herself a listener, and with that listener she is no longer alone. This prayer is part of Offred's continual effort to imagine a world in which someone hears her story, a future in which she is no longer captive, even a future without Gilead. Sometimes she addresses her thoughts to an unnamed listener, sometimes to her husband, Luke.⁶⁰ Here, she turns to prayer, the discourse of a belief system that has authorized her rape and forced surrogacy, stolen her first child and promised to steal her second. This discourse Offred adopts as her own, attempting to find self-expression and solace. In a way, the discourse authorizing the Gilead regime becomes the language that allows Offred, for a moment, to escape it.

Yet Offred's prayer ultimately reads more desperate than subversive. She prays to a God she does not know and cannot even name, whose plan is unclear. Gilead could not be what this "You" intended, she thinks, but she is also not sure what he or she has intended instead. She finds refuge for a moment in believing she has someone to talk to, someone outside of Gilead. Yet in the end she doubts anyone can hear her. She concludes her prayer and the chapter:

I feel very unreal, talking to You like this. I feel as if I'm talking to a wall. I wish You'd answer. I feel so alone.

All alone by the telephone. Except I can't use the telephone. And if I could, who could I call?

Oh God. It's no joke. Oh God oh God. How can I keep on living?⁶¹

60. In one such instance, Offred thinks of her future listener, "By telling you anything at all I'm at least believing in you, I believe you're there, I believe you into being. Because I'm telling you this story I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are. So I will go on. So I will myself to go on" (302). By telling her story, she creates a listener, and by creating a listener, she manages to survive.

61. Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 224.

We might expect Offred to say she feels that God is not real. Instead, praying this prayer makes Offred feel *she* is not real. The Lord's prayer allows her to imagine God, but not a God that would recognize her existence. She cannot escape the dehumanization she has endured in Gilead. It persists in this prayer drilled into her by the regime, its insuppressible undertone.

In fact, Offred turns to prayer not to challenge Gilead's belief system, but because she struggles to remember life before Gilead. Though her time as a handmaid is vivid to Offred, the years before, especially memories of Luke and her daughter, come to her only in pieces and with difficulty. Before she recounts praying at the center, Offred is trying to remember her husband and daughter's faces. "But they won't stay still for me," she thinks, "they move, there's a smile and it's gone, their features curl and bend as if the paper's burning, blackness eats them."⁶² Without those memories to ground her and give her hope, the language of Gilead is all she has left.

Offred insists Gilead gets God wrong. She does not say what Christianity is instead, let alone what other political vision it might endorse. In *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*, Atwood sidesteps proposing an alternative to extremist Christian conservatism. She refuses to depict what she considers good or true Christianity, even as her characters, suffering extreme abuse in the name of religion, condemn the abuse and not the religion; even as her characters, like Bekka, keep their faith, though they keep that faith private. In Atwood's Gilead novels, public, political religion is the problem. The alternative is private belief that disavows extremism, belief so private that it is only acknowledged—"you could believe in Gilead or you could believe in God," "I don't believe for a minute that what's going on out there is what You

62. Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 222.

meant”—never defined. Gilead is a secularist’s nightmare, and for Atwood, the antidote to Gilead is to return to secularism, to return religion to its rightful place in the private sphere.

I begin this chapter with Margaret Atwood’s Gilead, that strange pair to Robinson’s, because in *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Testaments* Atwood draws heavily on the Christian Right campaign for family values, bringing to life some of the group’s most extreme propositions about women’s rights, abortion, and gay rights. Her critique of those propositions is straightforward. Gilead takes the Christian Right at its strongest words, making conservative Christian beliefs about women—they should submit to male authority, serve their husbands, work in the home, conceive and raise the next generation, never choose to remain childless or to end a pregnancy—into law and enforcing them absolutely. The result is almost universally horrifying to the women living under that law, from Offred to even Aunt Lydia, the most powerful woman in Gilead and, in *The Testaments*, mastermind of Agnes’ escape and architect of Gilead’s downfall.

Atwood’s Gilead also bears out the coded racist, segregationist aims that set off the conservative Christian struggle for “religious freedom” in the wake of Bob Jones University’s feud with the IRS. Yet her novels hardly interrogate them. Atwood’s narrators say so little about Gilead’s whiteness or its plans to expel its Black citizens that the novels better reflect Christian conservatives’ rebranding campaign—the group’s efforts to turn the fight to keep private schools white into a fight to keep the secular government out of children’s moral education.

Beyond warning against what Christian Right (white) family values could look like as law of the land, Atwood’s Gilead novels consider why Christian conservatives believe they should be—why the United States should privilege Protestant Christianity, and why their values should be America’s values. The Republic of Gilead claims to return society to its rightful order

as exemplified by its forebearers, the American Puritans. In the same way, Christian conservatives have believed themselves engaged in a war to return the United States to its intended path, one forged by its founders, as a nation in special relationship with a Christian God. In this way, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments* emphasize the influential role U.S. history—and for Christian nationalists, U.S. history as religious history—plays in Christian conservative discourse. Indeed, the sophistication of Gilead as Atwood imagines it is not in its use of Christian discourse. Offred finds Gilead's revisions of the Bible transparent and unconvincing. It is hardly a sign of its persuasiveness that to keep Gileadeans from questioning their official religion, Gilead's leaders have resorted to locking up their sacred text, making it illegal for women to read, and threatening violence against the smallest dissent for good measure. Instead, the Gilead regime's more astute appropriation is of American religious history—of the discourse, and especially visual discourse, of American Puritanism.⁶³

As Atwood's ghost of Christian Right future, the Republic of Gilead uses Christian language and a selective reading of American history to justify remaking society in the image of the heteropatriarchal family. Though the narrators of both Gilead novels insist that Gilead gets religion wrong, neither *The Handmaid's Tale* nor *The Testaments* fleshes out an alternative to Gilead's version of Christianity or of religion's role in politics. They warn against political religion altogether and studiously avoid replacing Gilead's gospel with another. At most, for Offred, the Lord's Prayer affords a momentary escape. She alters the language of her captors'

63. Angela Laflen, "'From a Distance it Looks Like Peace': Reading Beneath the Fascist Style of Gilead in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*," *Studies in Canadian Literature* 32, no. 1 (2007): 82-105, examines Gilead's uses and abuses of history beyond Puritanism.

faith in an attempt to imagine a listener, a connection with someone or something beyond Gilead's reach.

In "The Moths" Helena María Viramontes joins Atwood in critiquing Christian conservative family values for motivating and excusing abuse and oppression of women. Christian language also allows her narrator to challenge those values, and to imagine like Offred relationships unconstrained by them, that become for Viramontes' narrator an alternative foundation for the Chicanx family. For Viramontes, the United States' "Christian foundations" are a fiction. Christianity was neither the only nor the original religion of the Americas; the story of its arrival is not a story of divine providence and calling, but of conquest and coercion. That history defines her narrator's relationship to Christianity and Christian language. She confronts Catholicism's colonialist and patriarchal foundations as she reinvents what practicing Catholicism and what family mean for her narrator.

Latinxs and Catholicism: Oppression and Liberation

Catholicism came with Spanish colonialism, which predated Jamestown by nearly 40 years. Spanish colonists established the first European settlement in the present-day United States in St. Augustine, Florida in 1565.⁶⁴ In preface to their documentary history of Latino Catholics in the United States, Timothy Matovina and Gerald E. Poyo write that with St. Augustine, the Spanish likewise began "the establishment of Christianity in the 'New World'" by way of "the conquest and destruction of indigenous and African religious traditions." "In studying Latino Catholicism," they continue,

the immensity of this painful experience should not be underestimated or forgotten: a historical process often driven by greed, racial and cultural oppression, and exploitation

64. Timothy Matovina and Gerald E. Poyo, eds., *Presente!: U.S. Latino Catholics from Colonial Origins to the Present* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2015), 5.

gave birth to new societies that to this day live with the legacy. Many Europeans offered religious justifications for their colonialism, but others, driven by a sincere desire to spread the gospel, often understood and decried the hypocrisy of utilizing religious doctrine to justify conquest, enslavement, and exploitation. Indeed, seeing the injustices of these emerging colonial communities, many evangelizers spoke up in defense of the Indians, and less often of African slaves, but generally to no avail.⁶⁵

Across the Americas, Catholicism was the religion of colonizers and enslavers, and it put a moral sheen on their mission to “civilize”: to wipe out native beliefs and traditions, to steal indigenous land and wealth, and to steal people.

Concluding the Mexican-American war in 1848, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo drastically reshaped the present-day American Southwest and the lives of Spanish-speaking people there. In it, Mexico ceded almost half of its territory to the U.S., and Mexicans living in that territory were promised American citizenship and protection for their property. In reality, as U.S. settlers poured into the territory, violence against Mexicans soared. Anglo-American settlers forced Hispanics off their land and out of political office, and people of Mexican descent became an underclass.⁶⁶ As with the Spanish colonization of indigenous land that began 300 years prior, spreading Christianity served as a spiritual rationale for the U.S. conquest of Mexico. Anglo-American Protestants, Matovina and Poyo write, “adopted a view of religious ‘manifest destiny’”; they believed Hispanic Catholics were “inherently inferior,” and that Protestants were destined to profit from the land won in the Mexican-American War and to convert its depraved inhabitants. Even newly arrived Catholic leaders often disdained Hispanic Catholic traditions.⁶⁷

65. Matovina and Poyo, *U.S. Latino Catholics from Colonial Origins*, 1-2.

66. Matovina and Poyo, 45-7.

67. Matovina and Poyo, 49-50.

The former Mexican territories were a wasteland void of “true” religion, and U.S. settlers had come to civilize and Christianize.

In resistance to Protestant American settlers taking over their communities and denigrating their religion, Mexicans living in what had suddenly become the United States leaned on their Catholic beliefs and traditions. As Matovina documents in an earlier study of the aftermath of Guadalupe Hidalgo, they often “defend[ed] their political rights by identifying themselves as descendants of Spanish-speaking Catholic ancestors that founded and developed their communities.”⁶⁸ For people of Mexican descent living in the United States after the war, Catholicism was a source of cultural identity and a basis for political resistance, and the same has been true for U.S. Latinxs into the next century. In the nearly 175 years since the U.S. expanded its borders to include so many former Mexican citizens, Latinxs have also immigrated to the United States from across Central and South America. For both those recently arrived in the U.S. and those predating it, national parishes have served as the heart of Latinx communities, allowing them to cultivate and preserve their ethnic identities.⁶⁹ When the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) affirmed that theology should be adapted to local contexts and cultures, it set the stage for liberation theology, spearheaded by Gustavo Gutierrez’s call in *A Theology of Liberation* for a theology that privileges the perspective of the poor and fighting injustice.⁷⁰

68. Timothy Matovina, “Conquest, Faith, and Resistance in the Southwest,” in *Latino Religions and Civic Activism in the United States*, eds. Gastón Espinosa, Virgilio P. Elizondo, and Jesse Miranda, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 27.

69. Matovina and Poyo, *U.S. Latino Catholics from Colonial Origins*, 91, 97-8.

70. Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, trans. Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973); Matovina and Poyo, *Latino Catholics from Colonial Origins*, 244; Gastón Espinosa, Virgilio P. Elizondo, and Jesse Miranda, eds., *Latino Religions and Civic Activism in the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 9-10.

Together these shifts in the Catholic Church have influenced and supported Latinx activism in the years to follow, including the Chicano movement in the 1960s and 70s and the work of Católicos por La Raza, Las Hermanas, PADRES, and Cesar Chavez's United Farm Workers movement.⁷¹ For Chicanxs, Catholicism has been both an instrument of colonial oppression and a force for Chicanx liberation.

For Chicana feminists, Christianity's potential as a force for liberation is also necessarily "linked," as Cherríe Moraga writes, to its part in patriarchal oppression. In *Loving in the War Years: Lo Que Nunca Paso por Sus Labios*, her 1983 work bridging autobiography, poetry, and political theory, Moraga observes,

Women of color have always known, although we have not always wanted to look at it, that our sexuality is not merely a physical response or drive, but holds a crucial relationship to our entire spiritual capacity. Patriarchal religions—whether brought to us by the colonizer's cross and gun or emerging from our own people—have always known this. Why else would the female body be so associated in Christianity with sin and disobedience? Simply put, if the spirit and sex have been linked in our oppression, then they must also be linked in the strategy toward our liberation.⁷²

71. On Católicos por La Raza, see Mario T. García, *Católicos: Resistance and Affirmation in Chicano Catholic History* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008). García devotes chapter five to "Religion in the Chicano Movement: Católicos por La Raza." On Las Hermanas, see Lara Medina, "The Challenges and Consequences of Being Latina, Catholic, and Political," in *Latino Religions and Civic Activism in the United States*, eds. Gastón Espinosa, Virgilio P. Elizondo, and Jesse Miranda (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 81-110. On PADRES, see Mario T. García, "PADRES: Latino Community Priests and Social Action," in *Latino Religions and Civic Activism in the United States*, 77-96. On Cesar Chavez, see also Stephen R. Lloyd-Moffett, "The Mysticism and Social Actin of Cesar Chavez," in *Latino Religions and Civic Activism in the United States*, 35-52; Luis D. León, "Cesar Chavez and Mexican American Civil Religion" in *Latino Religions and Civic Activism in the United States*, 53-64. Counter to Moffett, León argues that while Chavez may have been religious, the political movement he led was not Catholic. Instead, León writes, Chavez used Catholic symbolism to achieve his political ends.

72. Cherríe Moraga, *Loving in the War Years: Lo Que Nunca Paso por Sus Labios* (Boston: SouthEnd Press, 1983), 122-3.

Catholic beliefs about women's sexuality have played a central role in the history of Chicanas' oppression, Moraga writes, reflecting the relationship between religion and sexuality for other women and communities of color. For this very reason, she charges, spirituality and sexuality must work together in their fight for freedom.

Catholic influence on Mexican American views of gender and sexuality is illustrated in "marianismo," an ideal of Latina femininity modeled after the Virgin Mary.⁷³ According to the values of marianismo, women are pious, the spiritual centers of their families. They are chaste and pure; sexuality is for reproduction, and women find fulfillment as wives and mothers, caring for their families with submission and self-sacrifice.⁷⁴ The counterpart to marianismo is machismo, an ideal masculinity according to which men are traditionally heads of their families, providers, and protectors. Where under marianismo women are passive and chaste, machismo can involve sexual conquest and aggression. Machismo can be in response to social and economic powerlessness, especially among working class Latinos who must contend with both racial discrimination and few economic opportunities; machos combat their experiences of powerlessness by exerting dominance over their families.⁷⁵ Scholars have disputed marianismo and especially machismo as unrepresentative and reductive of lived Latina femininity and Latino

73. Miguel A. De La Torre, "Marianismo," in *Hispanic American Religious Cultures*, vol. 1, ed. Miguel A. De La Torre (Santa Barbara: ABC-Clio, 2009), 346.

74. De La Torre, "Marianismo," 236-7.

75. Gabriel Estrada, "Machismo," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Latinos and Latinas in the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), <https://www-oxfordreference-com.proxy.libraries.smu.edu/view/10.1093/acref/9780195156003.001.0001/acref-9780195156003-e-546>.

masculinity.⁷⁶ Yet that this version of idealized womanhood is cast in terms of devotion to the Virgin Mary demonstrates the role and reach of Catholic beliefs about women and gender in Mexican American and the wider Latinx culture.

These traditional gender roles, and the heteropatriarchal family unit they assume, have influenced even the Chicano movement in the 1960s and 70s and Chicana cultural politics in the years since, Richard T. Rodriguez argues. In his analysis of the family in Chicana nationalist discourse and cultural productions, Rodriguez interrogates the heteronormative and patriarchal values encoded in “la familia” as “a crucial symbol and organizing principle” of Chicana nationalism. The strong father figure leading the charge, fighting for his family, the dutiful mother supporting him in his fight, and their children, the next generation, shepherded by their mother and learning from their father’s example—this is the image of “la raza” that animated Chicanos’ struggle, Rodriguez writes. Defined in this way, the family was a blueprint for the nation activists sought to build and of the roles men and women could play in the movement.⁷⁷

Yet Rodriguez also considers how Chicano gay men and Chicana feminists and lesbians, including Moraga, have challenged, “revised” and “reinvented” la familia as “alternative kinship relations.”⁷⁸ Chicana feminists and liberation theologians have likewise reclaimed and

76. On reevaluating machismo, see J. B. Torres *et al*, “The Myth of Sameness Among Latino Men and Their Machismo,” *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 72 (2002): 163-181, doi:10.1037/0002-9432.72.2.163; G. Miguel Arciniega *et al*, “Toward a Fuller Conception of Machismo: Development of a Traditional Machismo and Caballerismo Scale,” *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 55, no. 1 (Jan. 2008): 19-33, doi: 10.1037/0022-0167.55.1.19; and Richard T. Rodriguez, *Next of Kin: The Family in Chicano/a Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 23-4. On marianismo, I rely on M. Ascencio, “Marianismo,” in *Encyclopedia of Immigrant Health*, eds. S. Loue S. and M. Sajatovic (New York: Springer, 2012), 484, <https://doi-org.proxy.libraries.smu.edu/10.1007/978-1-4419-5659-0>.

77. Rodriguez, *Next of Kin*, 33-5.

78. Rodriguez, 2-3.

reinterpreted devotion to the Virgin Mary in the form of La Virgen de Guadalupe, depicting her as powerful, not submissive, and sexual, not chaste.⁷⁹ Sandra Cisneros writes about Guadalupe as “the sex goddess,” who represents for her passion, creativity, and sexual liberation.⁸⁰ Gloria Anzaldúa describes Guadalupe as another name for the Aztec goddesses Coatlicue and Tonantzin, arguing that the Spanish split Guadalupe from these figures and “desexed” her.⁸¹ These Chicanxs have confronted traditional beliefs about the family and women’s roles in it as they have been endorsed by the Catholic Church, persisted in Chicanx culture, and even served as a rallying cry for Chicanx liberation movements. Especially as Chicana feminists have reclaimed the Virgen de Guadalupe, they have imagined what Moraga describes as the spirit and sex working together for liberation.

79. The Virgen de Guadalupe is the name for the Virgin Mary as she appeared in sixteenth century Mexico to the indigenous man Juan Diego, as a Nahuatl-speaking mestiza. “Today,” writes Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 3rd ed (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2007), 52, “*la Virgen de Guadalupe* is the single most potent religious, political, and cultural image of the Chicano/mexicano.” On Chicana artists reinterpreting the Virgen de Guadalupe, see Juan Alvarez Cuauhtemoc, “Virgen de Guadalupe,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Latinos and Latinas in the United States*, eds. Suzanne Oboler and Deena J. González (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). Socorro Castaneda-Liles, “Our Lady of Guadalupe and the Politics of Cultural Interpretation,” in *Mexican American Religions: Spirituality, Activism, and Culture*, eds. Gastón Espinosa and Mario T. García (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 153-179, considers the work of artists as well as writers. On the range of theological interpretations around the Virgen de Guadalupe, see Timothy Matovina, “Theologies of Guadalupe: From the Colonial Era to Pope John Paul II,” *Theological Studies* 70 (2009): 61-91.

80. Sandra Cisneros, “Guadalupe: The Sex Goddess,” *Ms.* 7 (1996): 43.

81. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 49-50.

Catholicism in Chicana Literature

A growing recognition among literary scholars complicates the roles that religion, and especially Catholicism, has played in the Chicano movement and Chicana literature.⁸² Since in his pioneering analysis of *Bless Me, Ultima* David Carrasco called for a more expansive attention to religion beyond normative Christianity in the Chicano experience, scholars have been examining diverse religious traditions in Chicana literature, including the ways it revises traditional Catholic language, practices, and figures like la Virgen de Guadalupe.⁸³ Building on Gloria Anzaldúa's concept of "spiritual mestizaje," Theresa Delgadillo has documented contemporary Chicana writers creating a new spiritual identity to express a borderlands consciousness.⁸⁴ Bridget Devane has described a "very modern, postcolonial merging of faiths" in contemporary Latino novels, including a chapter on two by Chicana writers (including Viramontes' 2007 novel, *Their Dogs Came With Them*).⁸⁵ Ellen McCracken has explored

82. In contrast, Matovina and Poyo, *U.S. Latino Catholics from Colonial Origins*, 194, write that the Chicano movement and Latinx activists have not often recognized "the church as a potential ally in their struggle." In his history of Chicano Catholic activism, García, *Católicos: Resistance and Affirmation*, 14, observes likewise that there remains a "lingering impression" in Chicano studies that "religion played little role in the movement." Espinosa, Elizondo, and Miranda, *Latino Religions and Civic Activism*, 3-4, make a similar observation about Latino activism broadly, that there persists a "long-standing perception that religion has not had an important role in Latino political, civic, and social action." Even in the case of Chavez, they write, "the role that his faith and the Catholic Church played in his struggles have been largely overlooked."

83. David Carrasco, "A Perspective for a Study of Religious Dimensions in Chicano Experience: *Bless Me, Ultima* as a Religious Text," *Aztlán* 13, no. 1-2 (1982): 195-221.

84. Delgadillo, *Spiritual Mestizaje*.

85. Bridget Devane, *Profane & Sacred: Latino/a American Writers Reveal the Interplay of the Secular and the Religious* (Lanham, MD.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008), 4.

popular Catholicism in the work of Sandra Cisneros, Denise Chavez, and Mary Helen Ponce as a practice that “rereads official doctrines and rites,” adapting them “in light of contemporary social concerns.”⁸⁶ A number of scholars have also considered how Chicana writers have interrogated and reinterpreted la Virgen de Guadalupe.⁸⁷

In *La Llorona's Children: Religion, Life, and Death in the U.S.-Mexican Borderlands*, Luis D. León surveys what he calls the “religious ecology” of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands (15). There, he observes, “religious belief and practice are continuously redefined by devotees of various traditions that started in and were transformed by, brought to and found, throughout the borderlands.”⁸⁸ León is particularly attuned to how the meaning of religious discourse shifts where the U.S. meets Mexico, what he describes as a “poetic impulse in religious practice.” “Through a strategy of performed and narrated religious discourse, *tactics*, and strategies,” he contends, “social agents change culturally derived meanings,” “deftly inventing and reinventing the signification of symbols—especially those held sacred.”⁸⁹ *La Llorona's Children* is primarily a religious history and ethnography, with some attention to major texts like Anzaldúa's

86. Ellen McCracken, “Voice and Vision in Chicana Religious Practice. The Literary Re-elaborations of Mary Helen Ponce, Denise Chávez and Sandra Cisneros,” in *Mexican American Religions: Spirituality, Activism, and Culture*, eds. Gastón Espinosa and Mario T. García (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 243-4.

87. Castaneda-Liles, “Our Lady of Guadalupe”; Ana Maria Carbonell, “From Llorona to Gritona: Coatlicue in Feminist Tales by Viramontes and Cisneros,” *MELUS* 24, no. 2 (1999): 53-74; Christi Cook, “Holiness and Heresy: Viramontes, *la Virgen*, and the Mother-Daughter Bond,” in *Critical Insights: Literature of Protest*, ed. Kimberly Drake (Salem, VA: Salem Press, 2013), 233-256. Carbonell's study includes Viramontes' “The Cariboo Café,” and Cook's includes *Under the Feet of Jesus*.

88. Luis D. León, *La Llorona's Children: Religion, Life, and Death in the U.S.-Mexican Borderlands* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2004), 15.

89. León, *La Llorona's Children*, 244, 4.

Borderlands and Anaya's *Bless Me Ultima* as supplements to what León finds in interviews and archives. What he observes among devotees to Guadalupe in East L.A. and on pilgrimage to Tepeyac, *curanderos* and those seeking their help, *espiritualistas* and *evangélicos*, gives context to Viramontes' reinvention of Catholic symbolism in "The Moths" as a renegotiation of institutional religion taking place in other forms across the U.S.-Mexico borderlands.⁹⁰

Studies of these kinds of diverse, popular, and unorthodox religious beliefs and practices in Chicana literature have not typically included Viramontes.⁹¹ She is a key figure in Chicana feminism for her portrayal of working-class Chicanas struggling against the constraints of patriarchy and poverty, and for her work as a literary critic and activist.⁹² Scholars of *The Moths and Other Stories* as well as her novels also explore how Viramontes' characters navigate a borderlands identity, with some attention to the role indigenous and Catholic beliefs play in those

90. In the spirit of León's work on popular religious identity and invention in the borderlands, Elisa Facio and Irene Lara, eds., *Fleshing the Spirit, Spirituality and Activism in Chicana, Latina, and Indigenous Women's Lives* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2014), tells the story of Chicanas incorporating spirituality—non-traditional, non-institutional forms of religious belief and practice, as they define it—in their social justice work.

91. The exception being Kevane, *Profane & Sacred*, considering *Their Dogs Came With Them*, discussed above.

92. See for example Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs' introduction to *Rebozos de Palabras: An Helena María Viramontes Critical Reader* (Tucson University of Arizona Press, 2013).

identities.⁹³ A number have described the narrator's spiritual transformation in the final scene of "The Moths."⁹⁴

What I foreground with this analysis of "The Moths," and what the story contributes to critical understanding of religion in Chicana literature, are its narrator's discursive strategies for assigning new meaning to traditional Catholic rituals. In a story only six pages long, Viramontes works in the language of institutional Catholicism, revises it in the tradition of liberation theology, weaves in Aztec religion alongside curanderismo, a popular spiritual healing practice, and frames them in the generic conventions of magical realism. As she does so, she presents a path for how Chicanas like her narrator, who have been marginalized within their families and

93. On borderlands identity in "The Cariboo Café," see Jesus Benito Sanchez, "Hosts, Guests, and Parasites in Helena María Viramontes' 'The Cariboo Café,'" *Miscellanea: A Journal of English and American Studies* 58 (2018); and Wendy Swyt, "Hungry Women: Borderlands Mythos in Two Stories by Helena María Viramontes," *MELUS* 23, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 189-201. About "The Moths," see Linda Rader Overman, "Mestiza Consciousness of La Fronter/Borderlands in Sandra Cisernos and Helena Maria Viramontes," in *Cambridge Companion to Literature of the Americas*, ed. Steven Frye (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 170-183, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316155097.014>; and Jennifer Colon, "Gendered Spaces and Subject Formation in 'The Moths' by Helena María Viramontes," *Label Me Latina/o* 2 (Spring 2012): 1-13.

Yvonne Yarbo-Bejarano, "Introduction," in *The Moths and Other Stories*, 2nd ed. (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1995), 11-12, notes that the Catholic Church often plays a role in enforcing the rigid gender roles Viramontes' characters are seeking to escape. Swyt, "Hungry Women," analyzes how Viramontes works with Aztec mythology in "Cariboo Café," another story in *The Moths and Other Stories*, to subvert the tropes of La Virgen, La Malinche, and La Llorona. Cook, "Holiness and Heresy," traces the interplay of the same figures in *Under the Feet of Jesus*. On Catholicism as a key institutional space in several of Viramontes' short stories, see Margarita T. Barcelo, "Tapestries of Space-Time: Urban and Institutional Spaces in Helena Maria Viramontes's Short Fiction," in *Rebozos de Palabras, An Helena María Viramontes Critical Reader*, ed. Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2013), 122-146.

94. See Overman, "Mestiza Consciousness," and Colon, "Gendered Spaces," as well as Christina Garcia Lopez, "With the Sacredness of a Priest: The Body as Ritual Site of Feminist Knowledge in Helena María Viramontes' 'The Moths,'" *MELUS* 43, no. 4 (Winter 2018): 175-193.

their families' religious communities, can confront the beliefs and institutions that have harmed them, center themselves in their religious beliefs and practices, and build communities that serve them.

This complex interplay of Catholic, Aztec, and curanderismo imagery informs the spiritual transformation readers have recognized at the end of the story. The narrator is an outcast at home, alienated from her sisters, her mother, and even herself as she struggles to live up to her family's conservative Catholic ideals of femininity—an experience she describes in terms of rosary prayers. Yet at the end of “The Moths,” the narrator frames caring for her grandmother's body as a kind of baptism, one that allows her to grieve Mama Luna's death and her alienation from her mother. As moths begin to fly from Mama Luna's mouth and fill the room around them, they remind the narrator of stories her grandmother once shared, stories with roots in Aztec beliefs about the soul and the goddess Itzpapalotl, guardian over children who die in childbirth. The moths also allude to Mama Luna's folk healing practice, suggestive of curanderismo, in which water is curative, connecting the living and dead. The moths transform the narrator's baptism into a ritual of mourning and of healing, wherein her bond with Mama Luna enables her to imagine building relationships with the women in her family outside of a Catholic patriarchal paradigm.

The narrator reinterprets the Catholic rituals of prayer and baptism from her perspective as an outcast from family and church. She challenges the patriarchal power structure of both, and she transforms these rituals to speak for how patriarchal Catholic beliefs have harmed her. As imagery from Aztec religion and curanderismo supersede that of baptism, they bring forward the Catholic Church's history of oppressing indigenous peoples and suppressing their religions. They

challenge the Catholic Church's religious and cultural authority in the Chicana community, and they provide the narrator with a basis for family rooted in its precolonial history.

In a period when Christian conservatives have dominated the conversation about religion, and especially religion and family, in U.S. politics, "The Moths" demonstrates what other roles religious language, even conservative Christian language, can play in political discourse. It becomes Viramontes' language in "The Moths" for transcendent, transformative bonds between Chicanas, her foundation for Chicana family.

Alienation and Abuse at Home in "The Moths"

As "The Moths" opens, the narrator reflects on her place in her family as an adolescent, and she remembers falling short of the traditional femininity they valued. She describes her difference from her sisters in terms of her hands, clumsy and uncooperative with domestic work. She "just couldn't do the girl things" her older sisters could, she remembers, because her hands "were too big to handle the fineries of crocheting or embroidery. I always pricked my fingers or knotted my colored threads time and time again while my sisters laughed and called me bull hands with their cute waterlike voices."⁹⁵ Her sisters mocked her with a title that suggests both masculinity and the awkwardness of a "bull in a china shop," her ineptitude at her work at home and her discomfort with herself.

She was not passive or polite, either, as her family expected. "Bull hands" also evokes the physical aggression of a charging bull, and the narrator responded in kind. When her sisters called her names, she would retaliate with "a piece of jagged brick" she kept in her sock "to bash my sisters or anyone who called me bull hands."⁹⁶ In response, her hands became instruments of

95. Viramontes, "The Moths," 27.

96. Viramontes, 27.

confrontation and violence. Her mother would often send her to Mama Luna's house to prevent more fighting. Yet even there, the narrator felt she struggled to act as a woman should. She "wasn't respectful either," she remembers, even to her grandmother. Once, after Mama Luna treated the narrator for a fever by placing potato slices on her forehead, she questioned her grandmother's methods. When Mama Luna "snapped back" at the narrator, she felt such regret that she "couldn't look into" Mama Luna's eyes.⁹⁷

For her family, the narrator's biggest fault was her refusal to attend Mass. She remembers that her father would "scream that if I didn't go to Mass every Sunday to save my goddamn sinning soul, then I had no reason to go out of the house, period. Punto final." Then "he would grab my arm and dig his nails into me to make sure I understood the importance of catechism." When she still refused, her father turned on her mother, blaming her for raising daughters to be "disrespectful and unbelieving." Her sisters would join him, threatening that if she "didn't get to Mass right this minute, they were all going to kick the holy shit out of" her. How could she be "so selfish," they would ask. "Can't you see what it's doing to Amá, you idiot?"⁹⁸ As her father's and sisters' language makes painfully, ironically clear, her family's Catholic faith was coercive and violent, threatening and abusing the narrator into pretended faithfulness. Finally, the narrator would agree to leave for Mass, though she would instead flee to Mama Luna's house. She could not be the pious and self-sacrificing daughter her family demanded.

As the narrator reflects on her adolescence in the first pages of "The Moths," she describes the sort of woman she tried and failed to be: delicate and domestic, meek and

97. Viramontes, "The Moths," 27.

98. Viramontes, 29.

submissive, religiously devout, and devoted to her family's needs above her own. She reflects, too, on how her relationships with the other women in her family suffered for it. Her sisters shamed and excluded her. Her father blamed her mother, and her sisters blamed the narrator for their father's anger and abuse toward their mother.

Only Mama Luna accepted her. Overwhelmed with regret for questioning her grandmother about the potato slices, the narrator remembers, her hands had begun "to fan out, grow like a liar's nose until they hung by my side like low weights." In response, her grandmother "made a balm out of dried moth wings and Vicks and rubbed my hands, shaping them back to size." "It was the strangest feeling," she remembers, "like bones melting. Like sun shining through the darkness of your eyelids."⁹⁹ The narrator again manifested her shame in her hands, but Mama Luna was kind to her granddaughter in her embarrassment. As she massaged the narrator's hands, she touched her where she felt most vulnerable, cared for her unconditionally, and helped her feel like herself again.

As Mama Luna grew sicker, the narrator felt her alienation from her father, mother, and sisters all the more intensely. She once found her mother crying over her grandmother's condition and, longing to connect with her but sure she would be rejected, the narrator provoked her mother instead. "Abuelita fell off the bed twice yesterday," she told her mother, whom she calls Amá. The news "only made Amá cry harder," she remembers, and look "at me again, confused, angry," her eyes "filled with sorrow."¹⁰⁰ Leaving her mother in tears, she went to sit outside Mama Luna's house, where she "dozed off repeating the words to myself like rosary

99. Viramontes, "The Moths," 27.

100. Viramontes, 30.

prayers: when do you stop giving when do you start giving when do you . . . and when my hands fell from my lap, I awoke to catch them” (ellipses original).¹⁰¹ Faced with losing her grandmother and unable to seek support from her mother, the narrator pleads for an answer to her alienation. In desperate ruminations, her own kind of rosary prayers, she asks how much she should sacrifice to please her family.

Traditionally a Catholic rosary consists of a long string containing five sets of ten small beads, each separated by a larger bead. Where the ends meet, a smaller string contains two more large beads and three small, and a crucifix on the end. Each element corresponds with a prayer, which the petitioner recites while following the beads as prompts.¹⁰² These prayers are a form of meditation on the lives of Christ and Mary, with the intention of knowing and imitating Christ through identifying with Mary.¹⁰³ Along the main string, each large bead signals the Lord’s prayer and for the petitioner to meditate on an important event from Mary and Jesus’s lives like the Annunciation, when the angel Gabriel visits Mary to tell her she will be the mother of Christ.¹⁰⁴ The ten small beads then correspond with a Hail Mary, a prayer honoring Mary and asking her to intercede on behalf of the petitioner before God.¹⁰⁵ A petitioner concludes the rosary prayers with a final prayer to Mary for intercession before God (“Hail Holy Queen”) and

101. Viramontes, “The Moths,” 31.

102. Gary Wills, *The Rosary* (London: Penguin, 2006), 13.

103. John Desmond Miller, *Beads and Prayers: The Rosary in History and Devotion* (London: Burns and Oats, 2002), 5; Wills, *The Rosary*, xiv.

104. As Wills, 8-9, explains, there are four sets of five events or “mysteries,” to correspond with the five large beads around the main string, and the set is sometimes chosen based on the liturgical season or day of the week.

105. Wills, 21-22.

another prayer to God (“Final Prayer”) asking that through meditating on events from the lives of Mary and Christ, the petitioner would “imitate what they contain and obtain what they promise.”¹⁰⁶

The narrator suggests her family’s Catholic beliefs were the basis for the gender dynamics in her family, describing her father’s anger at its pinnacle over her refusal to attend Mass. In this passage, she turns to a Catholic ritual to convey the internal conflict and pain these beliefs have caused her. Hers is not a meditation on the lives of Mary and Christ, however, or a prayer for help imitating them. Catholicism for the narrator is bound up with her father’s abuse, and with her guilt over failing to please her family and protect her mother.

The narrator’s rosary prayers become a meditation on her relationship with and responsibility to her family. She does not seek to identify with and model herself after Mary, but instead confronts the unattainability of that ideal of womanhood—the grace, meekness, piety, and self-sacrifice, exemplified in the Virgin Mary, that her Catholic family expected of her. She laments her alienation from them and expresses the overwhelming guilt she feels, but she does not ask for forgiveness. In these rosary prayers, she is not repenting of her failures in her family’s eyes, but instead asking how she could possibly give what they have asked of her.

The narrator’s approach to the rosary resembles a hermeneutics distinctive of liberation theology, the religious movement growing out of Catholicism after the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s. Liberation theology centers the poor and oppressed, interpreting scripture in terms of their experiences. As theologian Christopher Rowland writes, it “engages the whole person in

106. “Prayers of the Rosary,” Rosarycenter.org, accessed October 20, 2020, <https://www.rosarycenter.org/homepage-2/rosary/prayers-of-the-rosary/>.

the midst of a life of struggle and deprivation. It is theology which, above all, often starts from the insights of those men and women who have found themselves caught up in the midst of that struggle, rather than being evolved and handed down to them by ecclesiastical or theological experts.”¹⁰⁷ Growing out of this tradition, *mujerista* theology, a Latina feminist liberation theology, takes as its starting point the everyday experiences and struggles of “grassroots Latinas,” what founding theologian Ada María Isasi-Díaz calls “lo cotidiano.”¹⁰⁸ In *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century*, Isasi-Díaz describes “lo cotidiano” as the basis from which *mujerista* theology interprets scripture, as well as other traditions and institutions of orthodox Christianity.

Does *mujerista* theology pay any attention to what Scriptures tell us about God, what the doctrines and dogmas of our churches tell us about the divine, what theologians throughout the centuries have said about God? We certainly reject any and all regurgitation of the past. Reflexive use of the past is *no* good. But reflective use of the past is an important method in *mujerista* theology. . . Using *lo cotidiano* of Hispanic women as the source of *mujerista* theology is an act of subversion. Our theology challenges the absolutizing of mainline theology as normative, as exhaustively explaining the gospels or Christian beliefs. Using *lo cotidiano* as the source of our theology means that Latinas are not the object of *mujerista* theology. Hispanic women are the subjects, the agents of *mujerista* theology.¹⁰⁹

Mujerista theology finds knowledge of God in the lives of women like the narrator, and it is theology as practice, a “reflective action that has as its goal liberation.”¹¹⁰

107. Christopher Rowland, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), <https://doi-org.proxy.libraries.smu.edu/10.1017/CCOL0521868831>, 1-2.

108. Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Orbis Books, 1996), 1, 66.

109. Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology*, 72-3.

110. Isasi-Díaz, 62.

The narrator of “The Moths” is not doing theology in exactly the way Isasi-Díaz describes, speaking about who God is or what it means to practice Christianity. She is bringing her perspective as a Chicana, and the suffering she experienced as a young girl in her patriarchal Catholic family, to how she interprets a Catholic ritual. The narrator makes this ritual her own, expressing through praying the rosary her grief and guilt and attempting to make sense of them. She does not seek to identify herself with Mary, but to step out of her shadow. She does not ask for forgiveness, and she does not ask to be transformed. She asks for freedom. She revises rosary prayers in the spirit of *mujerista* theology, from the context of her suffering and into a meditative practice toward her liberation. In the story’s conclusion, the narrator takes a similar approach to baptism.

Baptism Reinterpreted: Toward an Alternative Family Values

When Mama Luna dies, the narrator takes on the role of priestess preparing to baptize her grandmother. Returning to her grandmother’s house and finding she has died, the narrator fills a basin with water and carries it to her grandmother’s room. Then, she remembers, “I went to the linen closet and took out some modest bleached white towels. With the sacredness of a priest preparing his vestments, I unfolded the towels one by one on my shoulders.”¹¹¹ She compares the care she takes collecting towels with the attention and reverence of a priest collecting his liturgical garments, special clothing set aside for public worship. Unfolding the towels across her shoulders, she may have imagined a priest’s alb, a white, floor-length gown usually belted by a cincture; the stole, the long band of silk draped around the back of the neck and hanging in front;

111. Viramontes, “The Moths,” 31.

or the chasuble, a sleeveless robe worn over other garments.¹¹² The stole and chasuble are often colorful, but for baptism typically white.¹¹³ Describing collecting the towels in this way, she frames what follows as a religious rite.

As the narrator next washes her grandmother's body and submerges herself and her grandmother into the bathtub, she evokes the sacrament of baptism. In the Catholic Church, as in most Christian traditions, baptism serves as a public declaration of a believer's faith in Christ and her intent to join the Christian community. The baptized is sprinkled with or immersed in water in the name of the Trinity, symbolizing the purification of the body and so the purification of the soul before God.¹¹⁴ As she describes caring for her grandmother, the narrator of "The Moths" brings the body to the foreground. She remembers the details of her grandmother's body, how she towed her grandmother's "shoulders and breasts," "the creases of her stretch-marked stomach, her sporadic vaginal hairs, and her sagging thighs," found "a mapped birthmark on the fold of her buttock," and "removed the lint between her toes." Cleaning her grandmother's back, she noticed scars "as thin as the lifelines on the palms of her hands," and reading her body in this way, the narrator "realized how little I really knew of Abuelita."¹¹⁵ Finally, having finished with

112. Adrian Fortescue, *et al*, *The Ceremonies of the Roman Rite Described* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2009), <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.proxy.libraries.smu.edu/lib/bridwell/detail.action?docID=601489>, 32.

113. Evyatar Marienberg, *Catholicism Today: An Introduction to the Contemporary Catholic Church* (New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2014), <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.proxy.libraries.smu.edu/lib/bridwell/detail.action?docID=1744171>, 84; Fortescue, *The Ceremonies of the Roman Rite Described*, 424.

114. Marienberg, *Catholicism Today*, 97.

115. Viramontes, "The Moths," 31.

the basin and towels, the narrator covers Mama Luna with a blanket, carries her to the bathtub, and steps down into the water holding her.¹¹⁶

In the way she cares for her grandmother's body, the narrator both draws on the Catholic sacrament of baptism and gives it new meaning. She signals this first when she describes herself in the role of priestess. She is neither credentialed nor ordained, and as a woman in the Catholic Church, she could not be. Yet the narrator steps into a priest's clothing and claims for herself a role of spiritual authority. She will perform this baptism from her perspective as a young woman, outcast from her conservative Catholic family and grieving the one person who accepted her.

The narrator emphasizes cleansing her grandmother's body more than purifying her soul. Rather than imputing forgiveness, a ritual washing away of sin, her baptism is an act of acceptance. The details she recalls speak of Mama Luna's life before the narrator knew her: the stretchmarks of childbirth and motherhood, the birthmark of her own birth and childhood, the scars indicating that perhaps she too endured abuse. She traces across her grandmother's body the marks of a difficult life, the toll taken by caring for others, by injury, and by aging. Expressing her deepened understanding of her grandmother, the narrator remembers over and over again telling Mama Luna as she cleaned and bathed with her, "There, there, Abuelita" and "I heard you."¹¹⁷ She embraces what she finds, and she treats her grandmother's body tenderly.

Connecting with her grandmother in this way allows the narrator to connect with her own body and with her grief. Christina Garcia Lopez describes how the narrator cares for her grandmother in this final scene as an "embodied ritual action" wherein the narrator shares in her

116. Viramontes, "The Moths," 31.

117. Viramontes, 32.

grandmother's suffering.¹¹⁸ "While her previous suffering in the story isolates her from others," Garcia Lopez writes, through this "ritualized cleansing" the narrator is able to "engage her own emotions" and "open up to her personal sorrow."¹¹⁹ Throughout the story, the narrator's body is a source of shame for her, especially her "bull hands." In the story's final scene, as she embraces her grandmother's body, the narrator embraces the hurting parts of her own and expresses her pain over her family's rejection.

As she carries Mama Luna to the bathtub to complete the baptismal ritual, she is almost overwhelmed by what she has lost. She finds that her grandmother is not heavy, "and yet," she remembers, "my legs were tired, shaky, and I felt as if the distance between the bedroom and bathroom was miles and years away. Amá, where are you?"¹²⁰ Nearly collapsing under the burden of caring for her grandmother in her death, the narrator calls out for her mother. She is grieving her grandmother, and she is also grieving her estrangement from her family, especially her mother, absent now when the narrator needs her most. For many Christians, baptism symbolizes death and resurrection; as the baptized enters the water, the old self passes away, and a new self emerges from the water.¹²¹ For the narrator, stepping into the bathtub with her grandmother is an act of mourning. She comes to understand Mama Luna more deeply in her death, and that allows her to feel and express the weight of what she has lost, both her

118. Garcia Lopez, "With the Sacredness of a Priest," 177.

119. Garcia Lopez, 189. Lopez's reading aligns with what León, *La Llorona's Children*, 248, observes about religion in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, that the interplay and redefinition of religious beliefs and practices in the borderlands "provides an alternative mode of knowing based on knowledges of the body."

120. Viramontes, "The Moths," 31.

121. Marienberg, *Catholicism Today*, 97-8.

grandmother and her mother. The celebratory element of a Catholic baptism, wherein the baptized rises from the water, reborn, is muted.

The narrator places her caretaking in conversation with this centuries-old expression of belief in Christ and commitment to a Christian community, and she amends it. Where in a Catholic baptism washing the body symbolizes purifying the soul, the narrator brings the body forward as sacred itself. As she washes her grandmother's, she honors the suffering she finds inscribed there. She does not join a community of believers, but finds a deeper connection with her grandmother, even as she grieves losing her. She does not rise from the water to find a family that accepts her. The narrator remains in the bathtub, mourning her grandmother. Instead, as she allows herself to feel the devastation of her family's rejection, she makes it possible to imagine belonging. Feeling her legs shaking beneath her and calling to her mother, the narrator begins to express her grief and cry out for connection.

"Then," as the narrator recalls, "the moths came." Moving into a scene framed as a Catholic baptism comes imagery from stories she remembers her grandmother once shared. She describes the moths as "small gray ones that came from her [grandmother's] soul and out through her mouth fluttering to light, circling the single dull light bulb of the bathroom." "Dying is lonely," she thinks, remembering the moment,

and I wanted to go to where the moths were, stay with her and plant chayotes whose vines would crawl up her fingers and into the clouds; I wanted to rest my head on her chest with her stroking my hair, telling me about the moths that lay within the soul and slowly eat the spirit up; I wanted to return to the waters of the womb with her so that we would never be alone again. I wanted. I wanted my Amá.¹²²

122. Viramontes, "The Moths," 32.

The moths emerging from Mama Luna's soul and filling the room are a catalyst for the narrator to put into words the kind of relationships she longs for with her mother and grandmother. In earlier confrontations, faced with her family's shaming or rejection, she hung her head, lashed out, or fled. Surrounded by the moths, repeating "I wanted," she asserts herself and her desires. The moths also remind the narrator of how her grandmother once described them. At the end of "The Moths," this ancestral knowledge of death eclipses the imagery of Catholic baptism in giving shape to the narrator's mourning. Experiencing Mama Luna's passing as the flight of moths, as her grandmother foretold, enables the narrator finally to envision intimacy with the women in her family.

The story Mama Luna shared about the moths has resonances in borderlands folklore, and in Aztec mythology. In folk legends of Mexico and the U.S. Southwest, moths are associated with death, and in Mexico, the black witch moth is colloquially called the "mariposa de la muerte," or butterfly of death. Superstition holds that when the black witch moth flies into a home of a sick person, it is an omen of death.¹²³ The Aztecs held beliefs about butterflies and death that echo Mama Luna's stories yet more closely. In Aztec culture, the butterfly symbolized the human soul, especially the soul leaving the body after death.¹²⁴ Working with early Spanish

123. Gary Clark, "Witch Moth Flies High in the Texas Sky," *Houston Chronicle*, August 11, 2017, <https://www.houstonchronicle.com/news/article/Witchy-moth-flies-high-in-Texas-sky-11750353.php#photo-13674980>.

124. James Maffie, *Aztec Philosophy: Understanding a World in Motion* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2014), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qhkh2>, 233; Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant, *The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols*, trans. John Buchanan-Brown, 2nd ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1997), 141.

ethnohistories of the Aztecs, James Maffie finds evidence that the Aztecs believed the soul of a warrior killed in battle would become a butterfly.¹²⁵

The moths represent ancestral knowledge in contrast to official Catholic church teachings, and they also reference popular and indigenous beliefs. The narrator longs for relationships with the women in her family that are unburdened by the patriarchal family dynamics she credits to their Catholic faith. For the narrator to envision those relationships, the story's imagery shifts away from baptism. She begins to experience her grandmother's passing not in terms of the Catholic faith of her father's house, but in terms of her grandmother's stories and of Aztec religion.¹²⁶

Together with the imagery of the womb and of birth that mark the story's conclusion, the moths also allude to the Aztec goddess Itzpapalotl. Known as the "Obsidian Butterfly," Itzpapalotl is depicted with a skeletal face, talons, and the "wings of a silkmoth or butterfly."¹²⁷ In Aztec mythology, she is associated with childbirth and its dangers. Itzpapalotl cares for

125. Maffie, *Aztec Philosophy*, 233. See also Cynthia Conides, "Figures in Action: Contextualizing the Butterfly Personage at Teotihuacan, Mexico," in *Visual Culture of the Ancient Americas: Contemporary Perspectives*, eds. Andrew Finegold, Ellen Hoobler, and Esther Pasztory (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2017), 110. Examining butterfly imagery in painted ceramic fragments excavated from Teotihuacan, Conides likewise notes that work on butterflies in Aztec ceramics has often understood the butterfly to symbolize the soul of a dead warrior.

126. Paula Moya, *The Social Imperative: Race, Close Reading, and Contemporary Literary Criticism* (Stanford: Stanford, 2015), 89, additionally understands Mama Luna's name as an allusion to Coyolxauhqui, an Aztec goddess associated with the moon; and Garcia Lopez, "With the Sacredness of a Priest," 180, echoes that reading.

127. Sonya M. Alemán and Flor de Maria Olivio, "Guided by the Itzpapalotl Spirit: Chicana Editors Practice a Form of Spiritual Activism," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 40, no. 1 (2019): 262.

children that die in birth or shortly after, feeding them until they are prepared to be born a second time. She also watches over women in labor and protects women who die in childbirth.¹²⁸

The narrator turns to the language of birth as the moths fill the room, first when she describes wanting “to return to the waters of the womb” with her grandmother “so that we would never be alone again.”¹²⁹ As she settles into the bathtub holding Mama Luna, she imagines returning to the original, physical bond between a mother and child in utero and sharing that connection with her grandmother. The womb is a place of nurturing and protection where nothing can come between a mother and child. It is also an image of possibility. Imagining her return to the womb, she can imagine being born anew.

The narrator extends this imagery in the story’s final lines, as she holds her grandmother in the bathtub and begins to cry. “The bathroom was filled with moths,” she remembers, “and for the first time in a long time I cried, rocking us, crying for her, for me, for Amá, the sobs emerging from the depths of anguish, the misery of feeling half-born, sobbing until finally the sobs rippled into circles and circles of sadness and relief. There, there, I said to Abuelita, rocking us gently, there, there.”¹³⁰ The narrator describes her pain, shame, and anger at failing her family’s expectations and facing their rejection as the “misery of feeling half-born.” The image suggests she feels not fully herself, as if part of her has not yet been fully brought to life. It suggests, too, that she feels not fully part of her family. She has wanted for the unconditional welcome and care a newborn seeks in her parents’ arms.

128. Alemán and Olivio, “Guided by the Itzpapalotl Spirit,” 262.

129. Viramontes, “The Moths,” 32.

130. Viramontes, 32.

Itzpapalotl, the “Obsidian Butterfly” with wings of a silkmoth, watches over women in childbirth and, when children do not survive it, cares for them until they can be born again. Surrounded by moths, the narrator grieves her own birth gone awry. In the language of returning to the womb and being half-born, she longs for intimacy with her grandmother and mother and for belonging that does not require her to submit to the strictures of conservative Catholic femininity. The narrator does not imagine who she would be apart from that ideal, from the standards of grace, submissiveness, and piousness by which she has been judged and found wanting. The story ends without the narrator being “born anew”—without finding those relationships, or herself. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Offred confronts the limits of the Lord’s Prayer to help her imagine a world outside of Gilead. In “The Moths,” Viramontes holds back from prescribing, in any language, what this alternative family must be. Still, as an allusion to Itzpapalotl, the moths signify nurturing and protection over the narrator, and they signify the possibility for rebirth.

The narrator begins caring for Mama Luna’s body as a form of baptism, one wherein she embraces her grandmother’s body and finds a new depth of connection with Mama Luna, and so with her own grief. When the moths enter this final scene, they amend the ritual in another way. The moths bring an Aztec understanding of death, passed down through the narrator’s grandmother, into the baptismal scene. They represent an alternative to the patriarchal Catholicism espoused by her abusive father. As they take flight, the narrator imagines starting over with her mother and grandmother, being born into a lineage of nurturing women, not divided by the pressure to please husbands and fathers or the shame of failing.¹³¹ Alongside the

131. Scholars have longed believed that Aztec society was itself highly patriarchal, complicating Viramontes’ turn to Aztec imagery as an alternative to patriarchal Catholicism. Yet Caroline Dodds Pennock, “Gender Life Cycles,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Aztecs*, eds.

imagery of birth, they evoke Itzpapalotl, signaling that the narrator may yet rise from her grandmother's bathtub to create for herself a different kind of family than the one she was born into.

Additionally important to understanding the moths' role in this final scene: Viramontes does not present them, and the narrator does not respond to them, as a supernatural intrusion into reality. Though their appearance is significant and moving to the narrator, she responds to the moths alighting from her grandmother's mouth and filling the room around her as a natural, normal occurrence at the end of someone's life. That is to say they follow the conventions of magical realism, the genre growing out of Latin America in the 1940s and 50s and reaching its apex with Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.¹³² By the 1990s, when Viramontes was writing "The Moths," magical realism had become a global phenomenon, and Viramontes in fact studied under Márquez on fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts.¹³³ Scholars traditionally understand magical realism as a critique of "empiricism" and

Deborah L. Nichols and Enrique Rodríguez-Alegría (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 388, documents scholars' changing understanding of Aztec gender roles and argues Aztec women held power, rights, and roles different from Aztec men that were "equivalent," if not "equal."

132. Gabriel García Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, trans. Gregory Rabassa (New York: Harper and Row, 1967); Stephen M. Hart and Wen-chin Ouyang, eds., *A Companion to Magical Realism* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, England: Boydell & Brewer, 2005), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7722/j.ctt9qdpbr>, 11.

133. Hart and Ouyang, *A Companion to Magical Realism*, 11; "Helena María Viramontes." *VG/Voices From the Gaps*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Digital Conservancy, 2009, <https://conservancy.umn.edu/bitstream/handle/11299/166347/Viramontes,%20Helena%20Maria.pdf;sequence=1>, 2. On Latin American magical realism and its relationship to the genre's global evolution, see Lois Zamora Parkinson and Wendy B. Faris, eds., *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, 1st ed (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995).

“empire,” as Stephen M. Hart and Wen-chin Ouyang neatly put it in their introduction to the genre.¹³⁴ In this they follow Homi Bhabha’s well-known description of magical realism at its peak as “the literary language of the emergent post-colonial world.”¹³⁵ As part of this tradition, fantastical elements in Viramontes’ otherwise realistic story undermine Western enlightenment and colonialist Christian paradigms, especially as they draw from indigenous myth and religion.¹³⁶ As magical realism, the moths formally challenge a colonialist Catholic understanding of death and elevate indigenous insights.¹³⁷

Magical realism appears once earlier in the story, in the first memory the narrator shares about her grandmother. The narrator remembers her hands fanning out and becoming oversized to match her embarrassment over contradicting Mama Luna, and she describes how Mama Luna made a paste of Vicks and dried moth wings and massaged her hands back into shape.¹³⁸ This early scene foreshadows the moths’ role in the story’s conclusion, and when they appear again in

134. Hart and Ouyang, *A Companion to Magical Realism*, 14.

135. Homi K. Bhabha, *Nation and Narration* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 7.

136. Hart and Ouyang, 14. Some have also critiqued this type of magical realism as primitivist, a form of commodifying and exoticizing indigenous beliefs. See Wendy B. Farris, “The Question of the Other: Cultural Critiques of Magical Realism,” *Janus Head* 5, no. 2 (2002): 101-119.

137. As she turns to indigenous and especially Aztec religion to find an alternative to colonialist Catholic beliefs, Viramontes joins Chicana feminists like Anzaldua and Cisneros who likewise reinterpreted Aztec religious figures as symbols for sexual liberation and resistance to racial and gendered oppression. Sheila Marie Contreras, *From La Malinche to Coatlicue: Chicana Indigenist Feminism and Myth Native Women* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), 30-40, documents and complicates Chicana feminists’ turn to indigenism; she finds it has at times essentialized native peoples and traditions, and she traces parallels with modernist primitivism.

138. Viramontes, “The Moths,” 27.

the final scene, the moth wings in Mama Luna's paste take on additional meaning. As Mama Luna shapes the narrator's hands back to size, she affirms by her healing touch that she accepts her granddaughter as she is. Her paste of moth wings, an image of the soul, help return the narrator's soul to her body, returning the narrator to herself.

Mama Luna's remedy in this early scene evokes *curanderismo*, a folk healing tradition. León describes *curanderismo* as a borderlands phenomenon that melds Catholicism and Mesoamerican beliefs reaching back before Spanish colonization. It typically involves massage, which Mama Luna performs here, as well as herbs, which the narrator remembers helping her grandmother plant and tend, and which Linda Overman also reads as a practice of "folk medicine" Mama Luna passes down to the narrator.¹³⁹ In *curanderismo*, healing has physical, mental, and spiritual aspects, and Mama Luna's remedy for the narrator's hands similarly treats her physical ailment as well as an emotional wound.¹⁴⁰ As in the story's conclusion, popular and indigenous borderlands beliefs order the story world, and they bring the narrator healing.

As an allusion to *curanderismo*, this early exchange between Mama Luna and the narrator suggests a final context for the narrator's baptism at story's end. In *curanderismo*, León writes, water "has curative properties," and it "is especially powerful because it functions as the physical connection between the realms of the living and the dead."¹⁴¹ When the narrator steps into the bathtub with Mama Luna, the act has significance in the Catholic tradition of her father, the tradition she evokes when she compares herself to a priest preparing his vestments. It also has significance in *curanderismo*, the tradition her grandmother evokes when she cares for the

139. León, *La Llorona's Children*, 129-34; Overman, "Mestiza Consciousness," 179.

140. León, 129-134.

141. León, 134.

narrator's hands. As in curanderismo water connects the living and dead, so the narrator connects with her grandmother in her passing. Though "The Moths" concludes with the narrator expressing only grief and longing, as water in curanderismo is curative, so too may expressing that grief in this ritual bath begin the narrator's healing.

Imagery from Aztec mythology, in magical realist form, and from curanderismo join that of Catholic baptism, reimagined in the spirit of *mujerista* theology, to structure the narrator's mourning in the final scene of "The Moths." The moths conclude the story, superseding realism and Catholic ritual. They frame the narrator as she expresses what she has lost and longs for: acceptance from her family and acceptance of herself. As an evocation of *Itzpapalotl*, and together with water's role in curanderismo, the moths convey that the narrator may yet find it.

"The Moths," Catholic Discourse, and the Christian Right

"The Moths" critiques traditional gender roles, and the Catholic Church's endorsement, in Chicanx culture. The narrator is an outcast from her family because she lacks her sisters' feminine grace, gets into fights and questions authority, and above all refuses to be an obedient, faithful Catholic daughter. Her father is violent in his insistence that she attend Mass. He blames her mother for the narrator's failures, and he enlists her sisters to shame her. In Viramontes' story, patriarchal Catholic beliefs sanction abuse against women and alienate them from one another. Trying and failing to live up to the standards of traditional femininity, the narrator is alienated from herself.

The narrator describes what these beliefs have cost her in the language of her abusive father's faith, using the Catholic rituals of praying the rosary and baptism. The rosary is the narrator's way of expressing the impossible burden of pleasing her family. Baptism is her way of grieving her lost relationships with the women in her family and with herself.

When “The Moths” rejects the patriarchal family and its Catholic foundations, the story by implication rejects the symbolic role the traditional family, or “la familia,” has played in the Chicano nationalist movement. Sonia Saldívar-Hull writes that “The Moths” “illustrates border feminism’s rebellion against the sacrifice of women for the sake of family unity, the nationalist allegory of the safe site against capitalist and Anglo domination.”¹⁴² Richard T. Rodriguez recognizes the same rebellion in the work of gay and lesbian Chicana writers like Ramón García, Rodrigo Reyes, and especially Cherríe Moraga, who likewise confront normative family relationships and reconfigure them. Where “The Moths” stands apart from what Rodriguez documents in *Next of Kin*, its “rebellion” more complex than in Saldívar-Hull’s account, is in how the story confronts and reconfigures Catholic discourse about the family. Viramontes works in the language of the very religious beliefs underpinning those normative family relationships. “The Moths” reinterprets Catholic discourse to reimagine family bonds, presenting an alternative, religious vision of belonging.

Tenderly washing her grandmother’s aged and scarred body, the narrator frames her final act of caretaking as her own kind of baptism. In her interpretation, the ritual becomes an embodied embrace, allowing her to connect more deeply with Mama Luna. As she grieves for her grandmother and her strained relationship with her mother, this baptism also allows the narrator to imagine a different kind of family. It frees her to imagine a different basis for Chicana community, built on bonds between women no longer defined or divided by the limits of conservative Catholic gender roles.

142. Sonia Saldívar-Hull, *Feminism on the Border: Chicana Gender Politics and Literature* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2000), 132.

Viramontes' focus in "The Moths" is on gender politics and Catholicism in the Chicana community, a group with only tenuous connections to the Christian Right and their fight for "traditional family values." Though Catholics were an important part of the Christian Right coalition as it came together in the late 1970s, they have long had an uneasy alliance with the majority Protestant movement. There has been even greater political distance between this group of mostly white, conservative evangelicals and fundamentalists and Latinx Catholics.

Catholics generally sit between political parties, leaning Republican on what many scholars of Catholicism have called "life issues," abortion most prominently as well as other issues of sexual morality, while tending left on "social issues" like immigration and welfare.¹⁴³ Since the New Deal Catholics had been reliable Democrats, but as Mark J. Rozell documents, with *Roe v. Wade* began the "splintering of the once solid Catholic vote for the Democratic Party."¹⁴⁴ In the decades since, Christian Right groups have partnered with conservative Catholics to oppose abortion and to champion traditional marriage and gender roles.¹⁴⁵ Catholics have no longer been a standby bloc for the DNC, and the "Catholic vote" has roughly followed the national vote.¹⁴⁶

143. See Mark M. Gray and Mary E. Bendyna, "Between Church, Party, and Conscience: Protecting Life and Promoting Social Justice among U.S. Catholics" in *Catholics and Politics: The Dynamic Tension between Faith and Power*, eds. Kristin E. Heyer and Mark J. Rozell (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2008), 75-92; Rozell, "Introduction: The 'Catholic Vote,'" 1-22.

144. Rozell, 3.

145. Mark J. Rozell, "Political Marriage of Convenience? The Evolution of the Conservative Catholic-Evangelical Alliance in the Republican Party," in *Catholics and Politics: The Dynamic Tension between Faith and Power*, eds. Kristin E. Heyer, Mark J. Rozell, and Michael A. Genovese (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2008), 30-1.

146. Rozell, "Political Marriage of Convenience?" 40. Additionally, Rozell, "Introduction: The 'Catholic Vote,'" 3, documents, by the late 1970s the Catholic Church had

The political divide among Catholics since the 1970s has been a rift along racial and ethnic lines. While white Catholics have moved right, Latinx Catholics overwhelmingly vote Democratic. In a 2016 Pew study, Latinx Catholics favored Democrats by a margin of almost three to one, 56% to 21%.¹⁴⁷ Rozell explains Latinx Catholics' allegiance to the DNC in terms of the party's positions on immigration and poverty. Even so, he writes, Latinxs "tend to be more socially conservative than white Catholics in the USA" and "are more likely than white Catholics to oppose abortion."¹⁴⁸ Latinx Catholics tend to share the Christian Right's social conservatism on issues like gender roles, marriage, sexuality, abortion, and gay rights, even if they do not tend to vote for conservatives.¹⁴⁹

shifted demographically as well; fewer Catholics were immigrants, more were affluent, and fewer faced discrimination than in decades past. Margaret Ross Sammon, "The Politics of the U.S. Catholic Bishops," in *Catholics and Politics: The Dynamic Tension between Faith and Power*, eds. Kristin E. Heyer, Mark J. Rozell, and Michael A. Genovese (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2008), 11-26, echoes this analysis of why Catholics shifted right. In 2004, George W. Bush won 52% of the Catholic vote against John Kerry, a Catholic; in 2008, Barack Obama won 50% of Catholics' vote, and in 2012 54%; and in 2016, Donald Trump won 52% of Catholics to Clinton's 45% (Rozell "Political Marriage of Convenience?" 39; "Introduction: The 'Catholic Vote,'" 2).

147. "The Shifting Religious Identity of Latinos in the United States: Nearly One-in-Four Latinos are Former Catholics," Pew Research Center, May 7, 2014, <https://www.pewforum.org/2014/05/07/the-shifting-religious-identity-of-latinos-in-the-united-states/>. Similarly, while in 2016 Trump won a majority of the Catholic vote overall, Latinx Catholics supported Clinton 67% to Trump's 26%, as Rozell, "Introduction: The 'Catholic Vote,'" 8, documents.

148. Rozell "Introduction: The 'Catholic Vote,'" 8.

149. In a study of Latinx Catholic voting in the 2000, 2004, and 2006 elections, Adrian Pantoja, Matthew Barreto, and Richard Anderson, "Politics Y La Iglesia: Attitudes toward the Role of Religion in Politics Among Latino Catholics," in *Catholics and Politics: The Dynamic Tension between Faith and Power*, eds. Kristin E. Heyer, Mark J. Rozell, and Michael A. Genovese (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2008), 113-126, find that Latinxs reported interest in conservative causes, but still supported John Kerry over George W. Bush at a rate of three to two in the presidential elections, and Democrats over Republicans in 2006. Timothy Matovina, *Latino Catholicism: Transformation in America's Largest Church*

“The Moths” explores a family dynamic based on conservative Catholic beliefs about the patriarchal family and women’s roles in it. Viramontes is writing about how Catholicism influences Chicana culture, not about the Christian Right. Still, “The Moths” confronts conservative Christian gender and sexual politics, if not the Christian Right directly. In the ways the story reinterprets Catholic rituals, “The Moths” demonstrates how religious language can contribute to political dialogue in an era of Christian Right ascendancy.

“The Moths” presents Catholicism from the perspective of a young Chicana who feels unwelcome in church and outcast from her family. The narrator replaces traditional interpretations of the rosary and baptism with versions that reflect the rejection, guilt, and isolation she experiences. Centering her experience in interpreting these Catholic rituals is a powerful way to make that discourse pliable to dispute traditional Catholic teachings about

(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), also discusses Latinx Catholic political beliefs that defy simple left/right categorization, in a chapter entitled “Public Catholicism.”

Catholicism deeply influences Chicana culture, not just the beliefs of Chicana Catholics. In fact, only about half of all Latinxs identify as Catholic, including 61% of Mexican Americans. See Olivier Richomme, “A Catholic Latino Vote?” in *Catholics and U.S. Politics After the 2016 Elections: Understanding the “Swing Vote,”* eds. Marie Gayte, Blandine Chelini-Pont, and Mark J. Rozell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 161-192; Jens Manuel Krogstad, “Mexicans, Dominicans Are More Catholic than Most Other Hispanics,” Pew Research Center, May 27, 2014, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/05/27/mexicans-and-dominicans-more-catholic-than-most-hispanics/>. Yet Moraga, *Loving in the War Years*, contends that patriarchal religions have deeply influenced the communities of color she addresses. Richomme, “A Catholic Latino Vote?” 164, echoes Moraga in his analysis of the Catholic Latino vote when he observes that non-Catholic Latinxs are just as likely to be socially conservative as Latinx Catholics. García, *Católicos: Resistance and Affirmation*, 274, in his work on popular Catholicism, suggests likewise. García concludes based on numerous interviews and case studies of popular Catholic religiosity that “the study of Latino ethnic identity cannot be divorced from religious identity. Religion, both in its popular religious manifestation as well as in its more institutionalized form, remains a very powerful influence among many Latinos in the United States. Its influence on values, practices, and consciousness is profound.”

gender. As the *mujerista* and broader liberation theology movements have affirmed, in “The Moths,” knowledge of God comes through the poor, oppressed, and powerless.

For those excluded from or silenced within a religious community, bringing their experiences forward in the language of that religious community is a compelling strategy for bringing their needs forward. This is true both within a religious community and in a society shaped in its image, as Chicanx culture has been influenced by Roman Catholicism and as the United States has been shaped by Christianity, especially Protestantism. If we discount religious contributions to political dialogue, we discount the contributions of those who believe or belong. We discount also the input of others—outsiders, like the narrator—who would respond to the social and political influence of institutional religions in their own languages.

In “The Moths,” the knowledge Mama Luna passes on to the narrator with roots in pre-colonial and mestiza religions supersedes the language of Catholicism, the religion of Anglo settlers. In this way, the story raises the Catholic Church’s role in Spanish colonization of Mexico and the American Southwest, and in suppressing popular and indigenous religious practices there. Imagery from Aztec religion and *curanderismo* supply what Catholic ritual does not for the narrator. In baptism, she connects to and grieves for her grandmother. Yet the moths portray her hope for a new kind of family, built on bonds between Chicanas. These religious discourses in “The Moths” do not work together, then, as in Saunders’ *Lincoln in the Bardo*. In *Lincoln*, Saunders interweaves Tibetan Buddhist and Protestant Christian visions of the afterlife to convey the novel’s vision of human agency and responsibility. In “The Moths,” Aztec imagery supplements and ultimately supplants Catholic imagery.

The story demonstrates how the language of one religious tradition can speak back to the political influence of another. When Viramontes counters conservative Catholic teachings about

gender in the terms of Aztec mythology, she challenges their spiritual authority. In her story, the Catholic Church does not speak the only or final word on how to live a good life or what pleases God. In bringing this critique in the terms of a religious tradition that predates Catholicism in Mexico, Viramontes undercuts Catholicism's cultural authority. She places belief in traditional gender roles in the context of the Catholic Church's history with the Aztecs and other indigenous peoples of Mexico and the United States, a history marred by the church's role in justifying colonization and enslavement, and in suppressing indigenous beliefs. These are critiques of the traditional Catholic family that could come only in the language of another religious tradition, one with this unique historical relationship to Catholicism.

To follow the complex ways "The Moths" references, amends, and combines religious imagery, and so the fullness of its commentary on gender and the family in Chicanx culture, readers need to be familiar with multiple religious traditions and their histories. In this way, Viramontes primarily addresses Chicanxs, especially Chicanas, who share her characters' culture and experiences. Others must learn them. The story demonstrates what we have to gain if we set aside religious neutrality and universal accessibility as our paradigms for productive social and political dialogue. Religious political discourse invites those unfamiliar into the work of learning a religious tradition, its history, and its influence on culture and politics. This kind of religious discourse, as in "The Moths," promotes, even requires, active work toward mutual understanding and empathy.

Political Possibilities of Religious Discourse, Before and Beyond the Christian Right

In *Public Religions in a Modern World*, José Casanova's influential revision of the secularization thesis, Casanova depicts liberation theology in Latin America as a parallel

movement to the rise of the Christian Right in the United States.¹⁵⁰ In both cases, he argues, religion moves from the private to the public and political spheres. In her history of liberation theology, Lillian Calles Barger takes Casanova's comparison further. Calles Barger contends that liberation theology preceded and inspired the Christian Right, providing the model for cultural and political engagement that conservative Protestants followed. Calles Barger's characterization of the Christian Right does not account for conservative Christians' political involvement earlier in the century.¹⁵¹ Still, understanding the Christian Right as a counterpart to liberation theology, as political Christianity taking two divergent directions, makes plain: the Christian Right's was not the inevitable course. The U.S. Republican Party is not Christians' natural, necessary political home, though this form of political Christianity has dominated in U.S. politics for 40 years. And though Christian nationalists have upheld conservative Christian values as America's true, founding values, as Atwood depicts.

The other texts I consider in this dissertation critique Christian conservative discourse and reinterpret it to convey alternative, critical perspectives. Liberation theology, and Viramontes' "The Moths," drawing on that tradition, remind us that Christian conservative discourse was already, itself, a reinterpretation. There has always been the potential for Christian

150. Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, 120, focuses on the Brazilian Catholic Church as representative of shifts in Latin America, both because Brazil has the largest Catholic Church in the region and because shifts in that country were the most pronounced, so that even the institutional Brazilian Church embraced and was transformed by those shifts.

151. Lillian Calles Barger, *The World Come of Age: An Intellectual History of Liberation Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). Fundamentalists were politically involved from the outset, when their split from mainline Protestantism culminated in the Scopes trial, through mid-century anti-communism, and into the culture wars of the 1960s and earlier 1970s. A lack of cross-denominational alliances argues Williams, *God's Own Party*, and not a lack of interest or involvement in politics, kept these groups from wielding political influence on the scale of the Christian Right in the years to follow (see especially Williams' first and third chapters, "From Isolation to Influence" and "God and Country during the Kennedy Presidency").

language to communicate a different politics, and to speak for others' experiences. When the narrator of "The Moths" speaks, Catholic language laments for the family she does not have, for one that would accept her. It expresses the radically transformative power of family bonds, of her relationship with her Abuelita.

In Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*, family values rhetoric comes to dark fruition. Underwriting the Christian Right's family values platform, Atwood suggests, is a Christian nationalist narrative of America's founding. These are not just Christians' beliefs; they are the beliefs on which America was built. In "The Moths," Helena María Viramontes critiques conservative Catholic beliefs about gender and the family in Chicanx culture, and she offers an alternative vision of Chicanx family in religious language. In the way her narrator reinterprets Catholic rituals, she negotiates the complex history of Catholicism in the Chicanx community. "The Moths" undermines the Christian nationalist narrative of Christianity in the Americas. In it, Viramontes reaches back before conservative American Protestantism, before Spanish Catholicism and colonialism, to recover a language and foundation for family bonds apart from and preceding Christian patriarchy.

CONCLUSION: THE CHRISTIAN RIGHT IN THE TRUMP YEARS

In many ways, the natural pairs to *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments* are Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*.¹ *Parable of the Sower* is set in Los Angeles in 2024. The United States has crumbled under the pressures of climate change and income inequality. Basic resources are scarce, violence and drug use are rampant, and those with means attempt to migrate north or find safety in gated communities. Like Atwood's novels, *Sower* takes the form of journal entries. Its owner, 15-year-old Lauren Olamina, lives in a gated community until drug addicts break in, set fire to her neighborhood, and kill her family. Lauren escapes and leaves L.A. for northern California, gathering a group of fellow migrants along the way and building a community she calls "Acorn."

In *Parable of the Talents*, Lauren's journal entries from her years at Acorn are interspersed with commentary by Lauren's daughter, Larkin. In the years since Lauren founded Acorn, a fundamentalist Christian group, "Christian America," has swept the United States. Christian American Andrew Steele Jarret wins the presidency with the slogan "Make America Great Again." He vows to save America by rooting out the depraved in their midst, non-Christians who have incited God's wrath. Jarret's supporters invade Acorn, enslave the adults, and steal a newborn Larkin from Lauren. They give Larkin to a Christian American family. She

1. Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower* (New York: Four Walls, Eight Windows, 1993; New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2000); *Parable of the Talents* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 1998).

learns of Lauren only decades later, and she turns to her mother's journals to make sense of what has happened.

A yet closer pair to Atwood's Gilead novels is Louise Erdrich's 2017 epistolary dystopia, *Future Home of the Living God*.² *Future Home*'s Cedar Hawk Songmaker is pregnant with her first child when she learns that something has gone wrong with the natural world. The novel is set in a near future where climate change has taken its toll, as in Butler's and Atwood's novels, and infertility is already climbing. Now as far as scientists can tell, evolution is reversing, and the child Cedar carries may not be human. In response to the crisis, a fundamentalist Christian government takes control and begins rounding up pregnant women to give birth in prison hospitals. Cedar is eventually caught and imprisoned in a high-security hospital ward. There she learns that the government is imprisoning women of childbearing age on the smallest pretenses and inseminating them to ensure human reproduction continues. When Cedar finally gives birth to her son, a healthy human baby, the doctors take him, and the novel ends.

Atwood warns against the dangers of political Christianity in the United States, and indeed political religion altogether. Viramontes, like the other writers in this dissertation, reinterprets Christian language to critique Christian conservatism and to imagine alternatives. Butler's *Parable* novels and Erdrich's *Future Home* do not share Viramontes' investment in reappropriating Christian conservative discourse. Erdrich's character Cedar subscribes to a mix of liberal Catholicism she understands as wholly distinct from conservative Christianity, Ojibwe teachings (Cedar was raised by white parents, but her biological mother is Ojibwe), and a theology of her own invention that she publishes in a magazine called *Zeal*. Butler's Lauren goes

2. Louise Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God* (New York: Harper, 2017).

further, creating a new religion she calls “Earthseed.”³ Neither Butler’s nor Erdrich’s novels see a way forward with Christian discourse.

Yet both the *Parable* novels and *Future Home of the Living God* echo Atwood’s alarm at the Christian nationalist element of the Christian Right. In Erdrich’s dystopia, Cedar’s captors rationalize abducting pregnant women and stealing newborn babies by describing their work as God’s work. A government figurehead Cedar calls “Mother” tells the women in the detention center they are jailed because “God felt it was your time.” They have done something wrong to earn their places in this ward, she tells them, yet they can “completely win back God’s love, by contributing to the future of humanity.”⁴ In *Parable of the Talents*, Jarret promises to return the United States to God’s favor. His “Christian American” followers believe America was founded as a Christian nation and will be prosperous only if Americans repent of their waywardness and return to Christianity. Like Atwood’s Gilead, these are futures for the United States in which Christian fundamentalists claim power in the wake of ecological disaster and social upheaval. They make their beliefs law, warning that the fate of the nation rests on obedience to a Christian God, which means obedience to a radical realization of Christian Right family values.⁵

3. Lauren writes that she draws inspiration from her father, a Black Baptist preacher, as well as from Buddhism, Darwinism, Sufism, and Existentialism. The result is a belief system all her own; its first teachings are that “God exists to be shaped” and “God is change” (Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 25-6).

4. Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God*, 254-5.

5. In *Future Home*, as in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, birth becomes the business of the state. In the *Parable* novels, Christian Americans restrict sex to heterosexual marriage, and they beat a woman to death at Acorn when another prisoner reveals she has been engaged in a lesbian relationship. In all three, only the faithful are deemed fit to raise children.

Butler and Erdrich also explore, like Atwood and Viramontes, how religious language can create a community. Cedar writes that she initially joined a Catholic parish to find “connections.” “I wanted an extended family,” she reflects, “a whole parish of friends.”⁶ She builds her own religious community of subscribers to her theological magazine. Lauren gathers a group of travelers into a community by sharing her Earthseed verses. She organizes the community she builds, Acorn, around Earthseed teachings, and when the Christian Americans destroy it, she gathers followers to build a second.

Richard Powers, George Saunders, and Marilynne Robinson each use Christian language to explore philosophical questions raised by evolutionary theory and refined by cognitive neuroscience. Powers turns to Christian language to express what neuroscientific models of the brain do not account for about our experience of the mind. In *The Echo Maker*, Christian language depicts humans’ desire to find a reason for our existence, what evolutionary theory explains as the result of random mutations, an accident of an indifferent universe. Saunders uses Christian language to explore whether we choose freely and consciously, and Robinson whether we can act selflessly, in the context of advances in brain imaging, psychopharmacology, human genetics, and our understanding of human behaviors as evolutionary adaptations. Robinson follows Powers, too, in considering in Christian language how our experiences of consciousness square with scientific explanations of it. I have described these as questions about what it means to be human: What sets us apart from other living things? What characterizes human nature? How do we experience and understand ourselves?

6. Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God*, 6.

Butler's *Parable* novels and Erdrich's *Future Home*, like Atwood's Gilead novels and Viramontes' "The Moths," use Christian language for examining and imagining relationships. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred turns to the Lord's Prayer to imagine a listener outside of Gilead, though vaguely and desperately, and though she doubts she will reach one. Viramontes' narrator fashions out of Catholic baptism a ritual for connecting with her grandmother who has died and for imagining acceptance from her family.

These writers ask different things in religious discourse and of religious discourse. Their narrators live in societies that do not recognize or respect their full humanity. We could understand these writers' focus as a version of the same question, what makes us human? For them, the question is instead, who counts as human? Who is afforded full rights, full belonging and participation in a family, in a community, and in a nation? They use Christian language to make sense of their experiences of dehumanization and to speak of connection in the face of suffering, and of the bonds that allow them to survive.

I conclude with Butler's *Parable* novels and Erdrich's *Future Home* because they, like Atwood's Gilead novels, are prescient. They predict significant shifts in the United States over the last five years. Atwood, Butler, and Erdrich each foresee the slow disintegration of the social fabric in the United States, rising inequality, and plummeting trust in government. They depict ecological disasters that push the nation into crisis. In response, they foretell a rise in Christian nationalism and support for authoritarianism.

Christian Trumpism

When I began writing this dissertation, Donald Trump was in the first year of his presidency. Trump was an unlikely favorite for the Christian Right. He was a celebrity who made his name in Manhattan real estate and on reality television. As even Ralph Reed, executive

director of the Christian Coalition through the 1990s, writes in *For God and Country: The Christian Case for Donald Trump*, Reed knew of Trump from his “tabloid past and gilded Manhattan social status.”⁷ Reed did not, that is, know of Donald Trump as a religious person or a social conservative. Trump did not hit the campaign trail with a story of being “born again” like George W. Bush. He did not speak fluent evangelical, like many of his fellow Republican candidates, and he was not a model of Christian conservative “family values.”⁸ And still, Christian conservatives like Reed liked Trump. By July 2016, after Trump had selected Mike Pence as his running mate and released a list of judges he would consider nominating to the Supreme Court, a Pew poll found that 78% of white evangelicals planned to vote for him.⁹ That November, as many as 81% did.¹⁰

7. Ralph Reed, *For God and Country: The Christian Case for Donald Trump* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 2020), 2. The Christian Coalition was formed in 1987 by Pat Robertson, stepping into a vacuum left after the Moral Majority’s disintegration in the mid-1980s. With Reed’s help, Robertson focused on local politics, exerting such influence that by the mid-90s, writes Williams, *God’s Own Party*, 231, “it was becoming increasingly difficult to tell the difference between the Christian Coalition’s issue positions and the GOP platform.”

8. Trump is twice-divorced, has paid off a porn star to keep quiet about an affair, and has bragged publicly about sexually assaulting women.

9. Fea, *Believe Me*, 39; “Evangelicals Rally to Trump, Religious ‘Nones’ Back Clinton,” Pew Research Center, July 13, 2016, <https://www.pewforum.org/2016/07/13/evangelicals-rally-to-trump-religious-nones-back-clinton/>. In January 2016, before the Iowa caucuses, 42% of white evangelicals supported Trump. Nearly half backed him in the primaries, a strong plurality, though never quite a majority. See Kristin Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* (New York: Liveright, 2020), 1; Fea, *Believe Me*, 27.

10. Newport, “Religious Group Voting.” According to a Pew exit poll, 57% of white mainline Protestants voted for Trump. Only 3% of Black Protestants reported voting for him. 52% of all Catholics, 60% of white Catholics versus 26% of Hispanic Catholics, voted for Trump. See “An Examination of the 2016 Electorate, Based on Validated Voters,” Pew Research Center, August 9, 2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2018/08/09/an-examination-of-the-2016-electorate-based-on-validated-voters/>; and Gregory A. Smith, “White Christians Continue to Favor Trump Over Biden, but Support Has Slipped,” Pew Research Center, October

Trump did not win the white evangelical vote without dissent from some prominent evangelicals, including Russell Moore, president of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission. In an op-ed in *The Washington Post* a month before the 2016 election, Moore wrote that Trump has "reaffirmed who he is over and over again, even during this campaign — from misogynistic statements to racist invective to crazed conspiracy theorizing," and warned of the "damage" that would be "done to the gospel witness this year" by the evangelical leaders who defended him.¹¹ Moore entitled his op-ed, "If Donald Trump has done anything, he has snuffed out the Religious Right." Moore was wrong. Christian conservatives, including a strong majority of white evangelicals, have continued to support Trump. Two years into his presidency, as Sarah Posner documents in *Unholy: Why White Evangelicals Worship at the Altar of Donald Trump*, 71% of white evangelicals approved of Trump compared to 37% of all Americans, making them the demographic group most supportive

13, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/10/13/white-christians-continue-to-favor-trump-over-biden-but-support-has-slipped/>.

11. Russel Moore, "If Donald Trump has done anything, he has snuffed out the Religious Right," *The Washington Post*, October 9, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2016/10/09/if-donald-trump-has-done-anything-he-has-snuffed-out-the-religious-right/>. After the election, some questioned what Trump's victory meant for evangelicalism. The president of Fuller Theological Seminary, Mark Labberton, edited a collection of soul-searching essays by prominent leaders and pastors entitled *Still Evangelical? Insiders Reconsider Political, Social, and Theological Meaning*. This March, Beth Moore, the popular evangelical speaker and best-selling author of dozens of Christian Bible studies, left the Southern Baptist Convention. After years of speaking out against Trump's misogyny, the Christian leaders who supported him, and sexual abuse in the Church, Moore concluded that she could no longer "identify with some of the things in our heritage that haven't remained in the past." See Mark Labberton, ed., *Still Evangelical? Insiders Reconsider Political, Social, and Theological Meaning* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2018); Laurel Wamsley, "Prominent Evangelical Beth Moore Announces Split from Southern Baptists," *NPR.org*, March 11, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/03/11/976124629/prominent-evangelical-beth-moore-announces-split-from-southern-baptists>, par. 5.

of the President “by significant margins.”¹² In 2020, between 76% and 81% of white evangelicals voted for Trump, depending on the poll.¹³

Trump did not have the Christian conservative bonafides of Mike Pence, known for campaigning for the House of Representatives and the Indiana Governorship as “a Christian, a conservative, and a Republican, in that order.”¹⁴ Trump had a different kind of appeal. As Robert Jeffress, Pastor of First Baptist Church, Dallas, put it, “I don’t want some meek and mild leader or somebody who’s going to turn the other cheek. I’ve said I want the meanest, toughest SOB I can find to protect this nation.”¹⁵ From interviews with evangelical pastors and leaders, congregants and conference-goers, Posner observes that white evangelicals see Trump “not as a sinner but as a strongman, not as a con man but as a king who is courageously unshackling them

12. Sarah Posner, *Unholy: Why White Evangelicals Worship at the Altar of Donald Trump* (New York: Random House, 2020), 11.

13. Newport, “Religious Group Voting,” par. 4. 53% of white mainline Protestants voted for Trump, several percentage points fewer than in 2016. Approximately 9% of Black Protestants reported plans to vote for Trump as late as October, representing a marginal increase. Fewer Catholic voters supported Trump in 2020 than in 2016, between 47-50%, with 57% of white Catholics and 32% of Hispanic Catholics. See David E. Campbell, James R. G. Kirk, and Geoffrey C. Layman, “Religion and the 2020 Presidential Election: The Enduring Divide,” *The Forum*, 18, no. 4 (2021): 588; Smith, “White Christians Continue to Favor Trump Over Biden”; Newport, “Religious Group Voting”; Daniel A. Cox, “The 2020 Religion Vote,” Survey Center on American Life, November 6, 2020, <https://www.americansurveycenter.org/the-2020-religion-vote/>, par. 4; Elana Schor and David Cray, “AP VoteCast: Trump Wins White Evangelicals, Catholics Split,” *The Associated Press*, November 6, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/votecast-trump-wins-white-evangelicals-d0cb249ea7eae29187a21a702dc84706>, par. 10.

14. Maureen Groppe, “Mike Pence in His Own Words,” *The Indianapolis Star*, July 14, 2016, <https://www.indystar.com/story/news/politics/2016/07/14/pence-his-own-words/87083676/>, par. 2.

15. Michael J. Mooney, “Trump’s Apostle,” *Texas Monthly Magazine*, August 2019, <https://www.texasmonthly.com/articles/donald-trump-defender-dallas-pastor-robert-jeffress/>, par. 32.

from what they portray as liberal oppression.”¹⁶ Ralph Reed voices a similar sentiment in his defense of Trump. Evangelical Christians today face “bigotry,” Reed writes. “In a legal and political culture that is often hostile to their faith and First Amendment rights to express it,” he argues, Christians should “seek protection wherever it can be found.”¹⁷ Though Trump did not model family values in his personal life, he was willing to appoint Christian conservatives to federal agencies and most importantly courts, allowing them to advance their goals of restricting abortion and LGBTQ rights.¹⁸ Over the last five years Trump has divided conservative Christians, and still he won at least three quarters of white evangelicals’ support in 2020. The Christian Right stood behind Trump because he promised them protection, and he promised them power.

The President at St. John’s Church

On June 1st, 2020, one week after George Floyd was murdered by a white police officer in Minneapolis, several thousand protesters gathered in Lafayette Park in Washington D.C., across from the White House.¹⁹ At 6:30 pm, law enforcement suddenly began forcing the

16. Posner, *Unholy*, 12.

17. Reed, *For God and Country*, 14, 17. As part of their study of Christian nationalism, Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, *Taking America Back for God*, 16, document evangelical Christians’ belief that they are under attack. “Christian nationalism,” they write, “motivates Americans—whether they are evangelical or not—to see Trump as the defender of the power and values they perceive are being threatened.”

18. Trump’s “willingness to stack the courts and federal agencies with Christian right loyalists,” writes Posner, *Unholy*, 260-1, “and to give them full authority to transform a secular liberal democracy into a Christian nationalist autocracy,” has earned Trump “more gratitude for his presidency than for the presidency of any other Republican since the advent of the modern Christian right.”

19. Jill Colvin and Darlene Superville, “Tear Gas, Threats for Protestors Before Trump Visits Church,” *The Associated Press*, June 1, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/donald-trump-ap-top-news-dc-wire-religion-politics-15be4e293cdebe72c10304fe0ec668e4>, par. 1.

peaceful protesters back from the square, firing tear gas and flash bangs. At 7 pm, President Trump left a press conference at the White House Rose Garden, walked out the White House gates, and made his way across the park law enforcement had just cleared, where tear gas still hung in the air. He crossed the street and stood in front of St. John's Episcopal Church, where he held a Bible aloft and posed for photos.²⁰ He did not read from the Bible, or pray, or deliver any prepared remarks. He had come only for a photoshoot, and he stayed fewer than twenty minutes.²¹

Amidst national unrest, uncertainty, and grief, the President responded with a show of force. He cleared a park of peaceful demonstrators protesting for justice so he could walk to a church and lift a Bible in triumph before a crowd of cameras. That Trump did not open the Bible he brandished, pray, or even address the church that had been set on fire in a riot earlier that week, made clear that he did not walk to St. John's to practice his faith or to seek God on behalf of the nation. The boarded-up church and the Bible he held were props meant to send a message. As Trump silently held that Bible aloft, he declared that God was on his side. This is what the Christian Right's chosen leader stood for—a strong nation, one that answers peaceful protesters

20. Tom Jackman, Rebecca Tan, Rachel Chason, Hannah Natanson, Perry Stein, and Michael E. Miller, "Police in D.C. Make Arrests After Sweeping Peaceful Protesters from Park with Gas, Shoving," *The Washington Post*, June 1, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-v/2020/06/01/dc-protest-george-floyd-white-house/>.

21. Katie Rogers, "Protesters Dispersed with Tear Gas So Trump Could Pose at Church," *The New York Times*, June 1, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/01/us/politics/trump-st-johns-church-bible.html>, par. 5. When asked by a reporter if he had any thoughts, Trump replied, "We have a great country. That's my thoughts. Greatest country in the world. We will make it greater. We will make it even greater. It won't take long. It's not going to take long. You see what's going on. You see it coming back." See Brian Bennett, "President Trump's Big Moment in Front of a Church Shows He Has Missed the Point of the Protests," *Time Magazine*, June 2, 2020, <https://time.com/5846449/trump-church-protests/>, par. 12.



Figure 1. Doug Mills, “President Trump holds up the Bible outside the St. John’s Church in Washington in June,” *The New York Times*, September 18, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/18/technology/no-trump-did-not-hold-the-bible-upside-down-at-lafayette-square.html>.

with force; for a nation that refuses to acknowledge systemic racism; for a Christian nation, where God is on the side of white Christians who hate destruction of property more than they hate the destruction of Black lives. This is how that leader used Christian language, to declare this nation, his America, blessed by God.

When Trump lost the 2020 election in November, another sort of protests followed. Trump supporters staged demonstrations against voting fraud across battleground states, and some appealed to God to overturn the election results.²² Jericho March, a Christian pro-Trump

22. Mimi Dwyer and David Shephardson, “Faced with Defeat, Armed Protesters in Arizona Insist Election Stolen,” *Reuters*, November 7, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-election-lawsuit-arizona/faced-with-defeat-armed-protesters-in-arizona-insist-election-stolen-idUSKBN27N10U>; Kelly Yamanouchi, “Trump Supporters Gather for Atlanta Protests,”

organization, called on Christians to reenact the Israelites' siege of Jericho as described in the book of Joshua. In Joshua's account, God caused the walls of Jericho to collapse before the Israelites. Jericho Marchers prayed that Vice President Mike Pence would reject electoral votes from battleground states that Joe Biden won.²³ Jericho Marches and other protests for "election integrity" lasted for months, culminating in the "Save America Rally" on January 6th that turned riot when a crowd stormed the Capitol, leaving five dead.²⁴

Many Christian leaders, including Trump supporters, condemned the attack on the Capitol. Ralph Reed tweeted that the siege was "an assault on democracy and representative government," and "does not represent our movement or the cause of Christ."²⁵ Robert Jeffress told *The New York Times* that the siege "has absolutely nothing to do with Christianity."²⁶ Yet the rioters that breached the Capitol also believed God was on their side. When a group of insurrectionists made their way into the Senate chamber, they rifled through papers, posed for

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, November 21, 2020, <https://www.ajc.com/news/trump-supporters-gather-for-protests-in-downtown-atlanta/NRBWISLQK5FQ5NXXNAFNPVS6VA/>.

23. Bob Smietana, "Jericho March Returns to Pray for a Trump Miracle," *Christianity Today*, January 5, 2021, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2021/january/jericho-march-dc-election-overturn-trump-biden-congress.html>, par. 3, 11-12; Josh. 6: 1-27. The marches were to involve blowing a shofar, a Jewish ritual horn, and marching in prayer around government buildings seven times.

24. Khadeeja Safdar, Erin Ailworth, and Deepa Seetharaman, "Police Identify Five Dead After Capitol Riot," *The Wall Street Journal*, January 8, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/police-identify-those-killed-in-capitol-riot-11610133560>, par. 1.

25. Schor, Elana, Luis Andres Henao, and David Crary, "Faith Leaders, Including Trump Allies, Condemn Capitol Riot," *The Associated Press*, January 6, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/donald-trump-riots-ralph-reed-violence-democracy-958fbf612ab94cd9fa1f0f3738eb90dc>, par. 2-3.

26. Elizabeth Dias and Ruth Graham, "How White Evangelical Christians Fused with Trump Extremism," *The New York Times*, January 11, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/11/us/how-white-evangelical-christians-fused-with-trump-extremism.html>.

photos, and then crowded around the Vice President's chair, raising their hands in prayer.

“Thank you heavenly father for gracing us with this opportunity. Thanks to our heavenly father for this opportunity to stand up for our God-given unalienable rights,” they prayed. “Thank you . . . for filling this chamber with your white light and love, with your white light of harmony. Thank you for filling this chamber with patriots that love you and that love Christ . . . Thank you for allowing the United States of America to be reborn.”²⁷ Among the mob that stormed the Capitol were militia members, white supremacists, and neo-Nazis.²⁸ There were also Christian nationalists, who believed they were taking America back for Trump, and back for God.



Figure 2. Screenshot from video by Luke Mogelson, “A Reporter’s Video from Inside the Capitol Siege.”

27. Luke Mogelson, “A Reporter’s Video from Inside the Capitol Siege,” *The New Yorker*, January 17, 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/video-dept/a-reporters-footage-from-inside-the-capitol-siege>, 8:03-9:20.

28. Jaclyn Diaz and Rachel Treisman, “Members of Right-Wing Militias, Extremist Groups are Latest Charged in Capitol Siege,” *NPR.org*, January 9, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/sections/insurrection-at-the-capitol/2021/01/19/958240531/members-of-right-wing-militias-extremist-groups-are-latest-charged-in-capitol-si>, par. 1-2.

The Christian Right, Past and Future

Given how Christian conservatives have rallied behind Donald Trump over the last five years, and given how Christian nationalism has influenced their support, these final texts' picture of how religious language can imagine and create communities becomes more urgent. Offred and Varamontes' narrator turn to Christian language to imagine spiritual bonds that transcend Offred's captivity, and that transcend the patriarchal dynamics of the narrator's family. These characters have little control over their circumstances, yet they imagine relationships that exist outside of the strictures they face, and that are invulnerable to them. There is a parallel in Atwood, Butler, and Erdrich's novels, in how the Christian nationalist governments they imagine win supporters. These are novels about societies facing crises that lead to chaos. In them, people who feel they have no control over their circumstances build a religious community and turn to a religious narrative to make sense of what has happened and to provide a solution.

In response to a mass social reckoning over racism, protests, and riots, the President walking to a church and silently holding up a Bible seems an absurd, hollow response. Yet these novels suggest a different interpretation. For Trump's supporters who opposed the protests, the image of Trump clearing protesters by force demonstrated his control of a chaotic situation. The image Trump curated of himself presenting a Bible, wordless, with an expression of certitude—it is simplicity and clarity of message, "God with us," in answer to a complicated situation, in place of explanation or action, in place of substance. That is its power.

These novels suggest that lacking evidence of voter fraud, with avenues for legal recourse closing one after another, religious narratives became all the more attractive to Trump's supporters. Their belief that God ordained Trump's second term and would bring it to pass persisted not despite a lack of evidence, but because of it. When people feel they are out of

options, these novels imagine, they find refuge in religious language that can bond them together and allow them to imagine an alternative reality.

The texts I consider in this dissertation confront the Christian Right of a different era, before Donald Trump. Yet they offer insight into where today's Christian Right came from and how we got here. Richard Powers and Marilynne Robinson both describe Christian creationists' long war against evolutionary science, and George Saunders writes "Escape from Spiderhead" in the context of Christian conservatives' alarm over genetic determinism, as Robinson also takes up in *Gilead*. The culture wars around evolution in public school curriculums have quieted in recent years. Yet Christian conservatives' distrust of scientific authority has persisted. Amidst rising COVID-19 cases in the summer of 2020, white evangelicals were less likely to wear masks, and they have been the least likely religious group to get vaccinated against COVID-19, with 45% reporting in March of 2021 that they did not plan to get vaccinated.²⁹

Trump's economic policies departed from traditional conservative economic goals of promoting free trade and reducing government spending.³⁰ Yet what Robinson describes as the

29. Ryan P. Burge, "White Evangelicals' Coronavirus Concerns are Fading Faster," *Christianity Today*, June 23 2020, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2020/june/evangelicals-covid-19-less-worry-social-distancing-masks.html>; "Intent to Get Vaccinated Against COVID-19 Varies by Religious Affiliation in the U.S.," Pew Research Center, March 22, 2021, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/03/23/10-facts-about-americans-and-coronavirus-vaccines/ft_21-03-18_vaccinefacts/. Christian conservatives' reticence about vaccines prompted Russell Moore to write an op-ed in *The Washington Post* exhorting evangelicals to get vaccinated and dispelling conspiracy theories about vaccines containing aborted fetal tissue or imparting "the mark of the beast" from the book of Revelation. See Russell Moore, "Not the Mark of the Beast: Evangelicals Should Fight Conspiracy Theories and Welcome the Vaccines," *The Washington Post*, February 24, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2021/02/24/evangelicals-covid-vaccine-russell-moore-walter-kim/>.

30. Trump's "America First" agenda led him to trade protectionism, including increasing tariffs, especially on China. The federal deficit reached nearly 1 trillion dollars in 2019, up from 665 billion in 2017, even before the COVID-19 pandemic. Following Trump's lead, Republican lawmakers have recently proposed increased government support for families and for U.S.

Darwinist impulse in Christian conservative political discourse, that demonizes opposing views and cultivates an “us versus them” mentality, has only intensified in the Trump years. The conservative Christian media echo chamber Saunders parodies in *Tenth of December* is just as relevant. In Christian Right descriptions of September 11th and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, Powers depicts a rhetoric of good versus evil, confidence in God’s blessing on U.S. leadership and in the certain destruction of its enemies. Those enemies are no longer abroad, but within. The “Stop the Steal” movement after the 2020 election depicted the struggle to prevent Joe Biden’s inauguration in the same terms Christian Right leaders used in the aftermath of 9/11. The United States was, and is, engaged in a spiritual battle to overcome enemies of the United States, who are enemies of God.³¹ Over a quarter of white evangelicals subscribe to QAnon, which

manufacturing. See Jeff Stein, “Trump’s Quest to Shatter GOP Economics Reached Its Culmination in 2019,” *The Washington Post*, December 27, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2019/12/27/trumps-quest-shatter-gop-economics-reached-its-culmination/>, par. 33; Heather Long and Jeff Stein, “U.S. Deficit Hit \$984 Billion in 2019, Soaring During Trump Era,” *The Washington Post*, October 25, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2019/10/25/us-deficit-hit-billion-marking-nearly-percent-increase-during-trump-era/>, par. 1-5; Gerald E. Seib, “How Trump Has Changed the Republicans,” *The Wallstreet Journal*, August 21, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-trump-has-changed-the-republicans-11598023026>, par. 7-8.

31. In his coverage of the Jericho March on Washington D.C. in December, conservative Christian writer Rod Dreher describes speaker after speaker who declared God had spoken to them in dreams and visions of Donald Trump’s victory over Joe Biden. They spoke of battling for Trump as “the silent army of the Children of Light,” as Catholic Archbishop Carlo Maria Vigano, former Vatican ambassador to the U.S., put it. In contrast, Dreher documents how the rally’s speakers described Trump’s opponents and the forces keeping him from a second term as God’s enemies. In Dreher’s account, leaders at the Jericho March spoke of a coming war, echoing Eric Metaxas, popular Christian author and radio host, when he vowed to Trump during an interview that he would “be happy to die in this fight.” See Rod Dreher, “What I Saw at The Jericho March,” *The American Conservative*, December 12, 2020, <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/dreher/what-i-saw-at-the-jericho-march/>, par. 33, 57; Emma Green, “Eric Metaxas Believes America is Creeping Toward Nazi Germany,” *The Atlantic*, February 14, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2021/02/eric-metaxas-2020-election-trump/617999/>, par. 2. Dreher is author of *The Benedict Option* (New York: Sentinel, 2017) in which he proposes that Christians should form intentional, separate communities within

claims that a group of liberal Hollywood elites and Democratic politicians have conspired against Trump, among other nefarious plots, and literally worship Satan.³² The vitriolic discourse Robinson describes, Christian conservatives' embattled stance toward outside perspectives that Saunders depicts, these have found expression in the Christian Right's embrace of Trump's election fraud lies.

The fight for "family values" has evolved in recent years into a fight for "religious freedom." When Ralph Reed writes that Christians face "bigotry" today in the United States, he means that Christians face persecution when they express their belief in traditional gender roles, when they oppose LGBTQ relationships or rights, or when they oppose abortion. He repeatedly describes the threat Christians face to their "First Amendment rights," and this is the way Christian conservatives have framed their opposition to gay rights, abortion, and other "family values" issues in recent court battles.³³ Yet the "family values" that become law in Atwood's

American society with their own institutions and economies that would preserve their ability to live out socially conservative beliefs, especially regarding gender, sexuality, and marriage. The book was widely reviewed and discussed in both Christian circles and mainstream press (for example, David Brooks, "The Benedict Option," *The New York Times*, March 14, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/14/opinion/the-benedict-option.html>).

32. Jack Jenkins, "QAnon Conspiracies Sway Faith Groups, Including 1 in 4 White Evangelicals," *Christianity Today*, February 11, 2021, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2021/february/white-evangelicals-qanon-election-conspiracy-trump-aei.html>.

33. Reed, *For God and Country*, 12. In a case last year before the Supreme Court, a Catholic aid organization won an exemption to the Affordable Care Act's contraception mandate on religious grounds, following the precedent set in *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby* in 2014 (*Little Sisters of the Poor Saints Peter and Paul Home v. Pennsylvania*, 591 U.S. __ (2020); *Burwell, Secretary of Health and Human Services, et al., v. Hobby Lobby Stores Inc., et al.* 573 U.S. __ (2014)). In 2018, in *Masterpiece Cakeshop LTD v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission* (584 U.S. __ (2018)), the Court ruled that a baker could not be compelled to create a cake for a same-sex couple's wedding, based on his rights to free speech and free exercise of religion. In a case pending before the court, *Fulton v. City of Philadelphia* (593 U.S. __ (2021)), the city of Philadelphia has attempted to cancel its foster care agency contract with Catholic Social Services because the agency will only place children with married heterosexual couples. Catholic Social

Gilead have remained central to the Christian Right under Trump, though Christian conservatives have shifted their focus to the courts. Trump appealed to the Christian Right by vowing to champion their strategy of reshaping the judiciary. His promise to install conservative judges, and his success in appointing three Supreme Court justices, each hailed by Christian conservatives, along with more than 200 federal judges won him the loyalty of the Christian Right.³⁴ It has even made imminently possible the Christian Right's long-held goal of overturning *Roe v. Wade*.³⁵

The conservative Christian patriarchalism Viramontes critiques in "The Moths," too, finds expression in Christian Trumpism. As historian Kristin Kobes du Mez describes it, Trump's appeal for white evangelicals has been his "embrace of militant masculinity," which she describes as "an ideology that enshrines patriarchal authority and condones the callous display of power, at home and abroad."³⁶ By branding himself a "tough SOB," as Robert Jeffress put it, and by filling federal courts with Christian Right favorites, Trump has become a hero for the "family values" movement.

Services has sued the city on First Amendment grounds. See also Jack Friedman, Timothy Shah and Thomas Farr, eds., *Religious Freedom and Gay Rights: Emerging Conflicts in the United States and Europe* (Oxford University Press, 2016). This collection examines the increasingly frequent clashes between LGBTQ rights and religious freedom in the U.S. and elsewhere.

34. Gramlich, "How Trump Compares With Other Recent Presidents," par. 1.

35. In May, 2021, the court agreed to hear a case concerning a Mississippi law that bans abortions after 15 weeks of pregnancy, addressing the question of "whether pre-viability prohibitions on elective abortions are unconstitutional." See Adam Liptak, "Supreme Court to Hear Abortion Case Challenging *Roe v. Wade*." *The New York Times*, May 17, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/17/us/politics/supreme-court-to-hear-abortion-case-challenging-roe-v-wade.html>, par. 27.

36. Kobes du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*, 3-4.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the leaders of Gilead depict themselves as heirs to Puritanism. Atwood's novels recognize the power of nostalgia to authorize a political vision, and Butler recognizes the same in *Parable of the Talents*. The novel's "Christian American" president wins the office with the slogan that would win for Trump 18 years after Butler penned it, "Make America Great Again." MAGA imagines a bygone era, a time when the United States was more prosperous, stronger, safer, more "free," in the way Christian conservatives like Reed imagine the freedom to live out their religious convictions without compromise for the rights of others.³⁷ It also disregards the inequality and injustice that have characterized much of United States history and the progress we have made in protecting the rights of people of color, women, and the LGBTQ community; or, for some, expresses resentment over just such progress.

In *The Handmaid's Tale* Atwood also acknowledges, if insufficiently, the white supremacy and white nationalism that have been historically entwined with Christian nationalism, its erstwhile unspoken foundation. Under Trump, it became explicit. His supporters cheered his attacks on "political correctness." He has denigrated immigrants and defended white supremacists, including those mixed among the self-described "patriots who love Jesus," and who overran the Capitol.³⁸

37. See Trump's explanation of how he came up with his well-known slogan and what he originally intended by the phrase in his interview with *The Washington Post*, Karen Tumulty, "How Donald Trump Came Up with 'Make America Great Again,'" *The Washington Post*, January 18, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/how-donald-trump-came-up-with-make-america-great-again/2017/01/17/fb6acf5e-dbf7-11e6-ad42-f3375f271c9c_story.html.

38. "We love you. You're very special," he told the rioters, some of whom carried Confederate flags and brandished other white supremacist symbols. Trump condemned white supremacists and Neo-Nazis at the "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, VA, in 2017, only to insist there were "very fine people on both sides." See "Transcript—'Go Home': Trump Tells Supporters Who Mobbed Capitol to Leave, Again Falsely Claiming Election Victory," *WBUR.org*, January 6, 2021, <https://www.wbur.org/news/2021/01/06/go-home-trump-supporters-us-capitol-transcript>, par.7; Marissa J. Lang and Razzan Nakhlawi, "Identifying Far-

In the last year, conservatives have set their sights against Critical Race Theory, the academic discipline turned culture war proxy. Among conservatives critical of Critical Race Theory, it has become a shorthand for the belief that the United States is fundamentally, systemically racist.³⁹ Among evangelicals, protests after George Floyd's murder prompted much discussion and media coverage of how tenants of both Critical Theory and Critical Race Theory do or do not line up with Christianity (most concluded they do not).⁴⁰ Critical Race Theory soon

Right Symbols that Appeared at The U.S. Capitol Riot,” *The Washington Post*, January 15, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/interactive/2021/far-right-symbols-capitol-riot/>; “Read the Complete Transcript of President Trump’s Remarks at Trump Tower on Charlottesville,” *The Los Angeles Times*, August 15, 2017, <https://www.latimes.com/politics/la-na-pol-trump-charlottesville-transcript-20170815-story.html>, par. 44, 5.

39. In September 2020, Trump banned any federal training on “critical race theory” or “white privilege,” and any training that “teaches or suggests either (1) that the United States is an inherently racist or evil country or (2) that any race or ethnicity is inherently racist or evil.” See Russel Vought, “Memorandum for the Heads of Executive Departments and Agencies” (official memorandum, Washington, D.C.: Executive Office of The President, September 4, 2020), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/M-20-34.pdf>.

40. See David French, “On the Use and Abuse of Critical Race Theory in American Christianity,” *The Dispatch*, September 13, 2020, <https://frenchpress.thedispatch.com/p/on-the-use-and-abuse-of-critical>. French discusses the Southern Baptist Commission’s resolution, “On Critical Race Theory and Intersectionality” (Southern Baptist Convention, “On Critical Race Theory and Intersectionality,” SBC.net, June 1, 2019, <https://www.sbc.net/resource-library/resolutions/on-critical-race-theory-and-intersectionality/>). Tim Keller writes about race and Critical Theory, though without mentioning Critical Race Theory by name, in the quarterly newsletter for his church, Redeemer, in New York City; see Timothy Keller, “A Biblical Critique of Secular Justice and Critical Theory,” *Quarterly.gospelinlife.com*, August 2020, <https://quarterly.gospelinlife.com/a-biblical-critique-of-secular-justice-and-critical-theory/>. See as well John Piper’s two-part analysis on his podcast, *Ask Pastor John*: “Critical Race Theory, Part 1,” *Ask Pastor John*, November 23, 2020, <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/critical-race-theory-part-1>; and “Critical Race Theory, Part 2,” *Ask Pastor John*, November 24, 2020, <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/critical-race-theory-part-2>. Predating the 2020 protests and backlash, see also Neil Shenvi and Pat Sawyer for *The Gospel Coalition* (an organization of evangelical churches), “The Incompatibility of Critical Theory and Christianity,” *The Gospel Coalition*, May 15, 2019, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/incompatibility-critical-theory-christianity/>. What these responses to Critical Race Theory tend to have in common is essentially a warning that CRT is built on secular assumptions, that it understands individuals in terms of their position in society, by race and gender and other identity categories, rather than in

became, as influential evangelical theologian and pastor John Piper describes it, a “pejorative label” Christians use to “slander” fellow believers and invalidate their views on race and racism in the U.S.⁴¹ To claim systemic racism is to subscribe to Critical Race Theory, and to subscribe to Critical Race Theory is unbiblical and un-Christian. The term has become a kind of four-letter word for Christian conservatives, a catchall for rejecting the reality of systemic racism.

In the 1970s, white evangelicals and fundamentalists responded to desegregation by starting private Christian schools to prevent Black students from learning alongside their white children. Now, as then, the Christian Right’s resistance to confronting racism in the U.S. is playing out in schools. Republican-led state legislatures have moved to ban Critical Race Theory from public school curriculums in more than half a dozen states across the South and Midwest.⁴² What Atwood depicts and reproduces in *The Handmaid’s Tale* has persisted. As then, Christian conservatives have reframed government efforts to address racial injustice as an assault on their right to teach their children their values. They have refused to acknowledge the racist foundations of the nation and instead imagined themselves battling to protect our children.

The stories and novels I have explored here recognize in Christian Right discourse of the last four decades creationists’ suspicion of scientific expertise and sometimes hostility toward it. They diagnose a tendency toward dismissing and demonizing other points of view and an

terms of their relationship to God, and that it seeks social transformation rather than individual salvation. Among more thoughtful responses to CRT, the critique is not that systemic racism does not exist so much as that CRT is a totalizing philosophy that seeks to replace a Biblical worldview. French makes these points particularly clearly, and he outlines how they inform the SBC statement as well.

41. Piper, “Critical Race Theory, Part 1,” par. 17.

42. Sarah Schwartz, “8 States Debate Bills to Restrict How Teachers Discuss Racism, Sexism,” *Education Week*, April 15, 2021, <https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/8-states-debate-bills-to-restrict-how-teachers-discuss-racism-sexism/2021/04>, par. 2.

atrophying impulse toward empathy and believing the best of others. They confront Christian conservative beliefs about gender, sexuality, and abortion, the social issues that continue to drive the movement. They recognize the Christian nationalist impulses in Christian conservatism and how they lend authority to Christian conservatives' vision for American society as fundamental to the United States' founding, fundamentally American. The dystopian novels with which I began this chapter, like *The Handmaid's Tale*, see a rise in Christian nationalism coming in response to social and ecological crises, answering chaos with certainty in a spiritual vision of the nation's coming triumph. The literature I consider in this dissertation identifies, too, the white supremacism and nationalism woven into the history of the family values movement, and woven into the Catholic Church, with its patriarchal and colonialist history. They make sense of how the Christian Right continues to resist confronting these forces.

Yet *The Echo Maker* also recognizes in Christian creationist and apocalyptic discourses the need to believe we stand apart from other living things and believe our lives have purpose. "Escape from Spiderhead" and *Lincoln in the Bardo* demonstrate the value of a Christian ethic and Christian expression for affirming people's capacity for change and to sacrifice for others. *Gilead* presents Christian language as an antidote to the venom and villainization in contemporary political discourse, as a tradition that recognizes the good in people. "The Moths" depicts how religious discourses can critique one another and can voice the experiences of those marginalized within a religious tradition. For Viramontes' narrator, religious discourses, including Christian discourse, imagine relationships and community into existence when they have been denied her, as *The Handmaid's Tale* also depicts, if ambivalently, and as do Butler's *Parable* novels and *Future Home of the Living God*. This literature finds Christian discourses meaningful for telling stories about the human mind, will, purpose, and belonging.

The Christian Right in Translation

Increasing political polarization over the last five years has left much of the United States living in separate realities.⁴³ This is more than disagreements over solutions to the nation's problems or about what those problems are. Donald Trump's presidency culminated in mass denial from the president and his supporters about the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic that at its worst killed more than 3,100 people each day in the United States.⁴⁴ He spent his final months attempting to overturn a presidential election with unsubstantiated claims of voter fraud. Two weeks before he left office, a crowd of Trump supporters violently overran the Capitol demanding that Trump be given the second term they insisted was rightly his, believing themselves at war to save the democracy and the nation. Around 800 people stormed the Capitol on January 6th.⁴⁵ More than half of Republicans, and 25% of all Americans, believe the election

43. On increasing political polarization in the United States, see James A. Morone, "The Rise of Tribal Politics in Historical Perspective" in *Dynamics of American Democracy: Partisan Polarization, Political Competition and Government Performance*, eds. Eric M. Patashnik and Wendy J. Schiller (Topeka: University Press of Kansas, 2021), 11-30; Gordon Heltzel and Kristin Laureins "Polarization in America: Two Possible Futures" in *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences* 34 (2020): 179-184, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cobeha.2020.03.008>; "Partisan Antipathy: More Intense, More Personal," Pew Research Center, October 10, 2019, https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2019/10/10/partisan-antipathy-more-intense-more-personal/?utm_source=link_news9&utm_campaign=item_268982&utm_medium=copy; and especially Alberto Alesina, Armando Miano, and Stefanie Stantcheva, "The Polarization of Reality," *AEA Papers and Proceedings* 110 (2020): 324-328, <https://doi.org/10.1257/pandp.20201072>.

44. "More than 590,000 People Have Died from Coronavirus in the U.S.," *The Washington Post*, May 25, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/national/coronavirus-us-cases-deaths/>, par. 2.

45. Michael Balsamo, Nomaan Merchant, and Mary Clare Jalonick, "Acting Capitol Police Chief Says Riot Much Bigger Than Intel Suggested," *PBS News*, February 25, 2021, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/watch-live-house-appropriations-hearing-on-jan-6-attack-and-capitol-security-failures>, par. 6.

was stolen and that Trump is the rightful president.⁴⁶ This is a group of people working from drastically different understandings of what is real and what is fake, and of how we can find and verify the truth.

Well over three quarters of Republicans identify as Christian.⁴⁷ Christian conservatives have steadily increased their influence over the GOP's policies and priorities since the rise of the Christian Right in the late 1970s. They have proved Trump's most loyal supporters. Christian conservatives' faith shapes how they understand the events of the last year, and it gives them a language to make sense of them. Understanding this language, as this literature does, even speaking it, can open up that world.

These narratives critique Christian conservative politics, but more than that, they examine how Christian conservatives speak about politics. To speak the language of the Christian Right, but to speak against it, requires that these texts recognize what that language means for Christian conservatives. Speaking this language back to the Christian Right is a way of getting into their world, by getting into their words, literally on their terms. Then these writers make them their own.

When they respond in this language, they refuse to cede political Christianity or political religion in the United States to the Christian Right. They picture other roles religious language, including Christian language, could play in American politics, and what they have in common is

46. "Ipsos/Reuters Poll: The Big Lie," *Ipsos*, May 21, 2021, <https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2021-05/Ipsos%20Reuters%20Topline%20Write%20up-%20The%20Big%20Lie%20-%2017%20May%20thru%2019%20May%202021.pdf>, 6.

47. "Republicans and Republican Leaners." According to Pew's 2014 Religious Landscape Study, the most recent of its kind, 82% of Republicans identify as Christian. Evangelical Protestants make up the largest group at 38%, with Catholics second at 21% and mainline Protestant third at 17%.

that they depict religious discourse that looks to see the good in others and to understand them. They imagine it welcoming, and indeed voicing perspectives Christian conservatism would preclude. They hold a conversation with Christian conservatism, in its language, and they imagine Christian political discourse that can open conversations. This is no small task, today, attempting to understand one another.

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