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Martyr Mothers, Angel Babies:  
Conservative Christian Pronatalism in the Media Age

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## ABSTRACT

This study is an examination of conservative Christian pronatalist discourse in the contemporary United States and the myriad ways it endangers American women and children. Insofar as conservative Christian pronatalism is part of broader religious and political movement, this study also examines related conservative Christian discourses asserting anti-intellectualism, libertarian economics, Christian nationalism, white supremacy and supernaturalist and apocalyptic imaginations. I argue that pronatalism must be studied as part of this chorus.

Conservative Christian pronatalism is an umbrella term for the various patriarchal systems and discourses that use conservative pan-Christian logics to undermine female reproductive agency, to reduce women's personhood to their bodies' reproductive functions, and subsequently to claim those bodies as public objects, subject to public (male) control. It is a discourse that reinforces the notion that women's highest personal or spiritual purpose is procreation, and that all women want, or should want, to be mothers, even at the cost of their own lives. But it is also a discourse that provides some women a deep sense of meaning. It sacralizes the maternal body, which in turn, puts it at terrible risk. It alienates women from their own bodies while bonding them eternally to the supernatural beings their now-sacred bodies are capable of birthing. It is a threat to women's health and safety, and it is a place where some women find healing, security and even experience transcendence. It celebrates women who risk their lives for their pregnancies and shames women who do not. But it also transforms grief into hope and pain into transcendence, and gives birth to angels.

This dissertation uses a case study of an overtly pronatalist organization, the Institute in basic life Principles, to unveil the logics of the larger discourse and to reveal how they buttress and are buttressed by narratives that assert American exceptionalism, Christian nationalism, and white supremacy. From there, this study shows how these narratives are disseminated through American popular culture via new media platforms like social media, and reality television. I argue that although these narratives remain a danger to women and children, they often go unnoted, or are imagined as pro-feminist, pro-mother, and are illegible as religion at all.

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When I was twenty-four-years-old, I moved to Oxford—the one in Ohio, to attend Miami University's M.A. program in comparative religion. I had never seen so much corn. My advisor, Dr. Peter W. Williams, sensing my urban angst, showed me where to get the best gin martini in town. He also told me that if I squinted, Miami looked a little like Yale. I squinted hard. After working under his mentorship for two years, however, I felt very differently about the place. I never developed an affection for the corn, but I remain grateful for my time in Oxford and even more grateful for the time I spent with Dr. Williams. His wisdom, humor, and kindness strengthened both my work and my character. I have benefitted tremendously from his (literal) encyclopedic knowledge of American religious history—but more significantly, I have

benefitted from his moral example. “Mercy over justice” he once said. I have tried to steer my scholarship, my teaching, and my life, by that axiom. Thank you for pushing me as a scholar, and for embracing me as a “niece in wishes.”

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*For my mother, Lynne Hersche—a force of nature.*



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## INTRODUCTION

### Welcome to Gilead

“The Republic of Gilead,” said Aunt Lydia, “knows no bounds. Gilead is within you.”  
—Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale*

On May 11<sup>th</sup>, 2011, thirteen-year-old Hana Williams deliriously staggered around her family’s back yard, shoeless and nearly naked, while her eight brothers and sisters looked on from the house. When Hana eventually collapsed, her older brother called their mother. Malnourished and hypothermic, Hana died that day with her face in the mud. Hana had been adopted from Ethiopia three years earlier and since then she had been beaten, starved, under-clothed, locked in small closets, her head had been shaved, and she was eventually made to use a make-shift outhouse and sleep outside. No one except her family noticed Hana’s deterioration because she was homeschooled. Larry and Carri Williams of Sedro-Woolley, Washington were also suspicious of mainstream medicine and rarely took any of their nine children to doctors. They worshiped as a family at home. Consequently, very few outsiders, let alone mandatory reporters, ever saw the Williams children. The Williams also eschewed all forms of family planning, having surrendered that area of life to God. In addition to Hana, they had seven biological children and had also adopted a deaf ten-year-old boy from the same orphanage as Hana. Carri Williams described Hana as incurably “disobedient” and “rebellious.”<sup>1</sup> When Carri Williams called 911, she told the operator, “I think my daughter just killed herself. ... She’s

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<sup>1</sup> Jeff Hodson, “Did Hana’s Parents Train Her to Death?” *The Seattle Times*. Nonmember 27, 2011.

really rebellious.”<sup>2</sup> In an interview with child protective services, one of Hana’s siblings suggested she was possessed by demons.<sup>3</sup>

The Williams’ had been using a parenting manual well circulated among families with similar religious commitments—that is, pronatalist, conservative Christian homeschooling families with strictly patriarchal family structures. Michael and Debi Pearl’s self-published, *To Train Up a Child* is part of their broader ministry called NoGreaterJoy.org, which aside from extreme corporal punishment, encourages women to have as many children as “God will give,” to submit to their husbands, to homeschool, and to “stay and pray” with husbands who physically abuse them or their children.<sup>4</sup> Although exact sales numbers for self-published texts are difficult to verify, the *New York Times* estimated that there were 670,000 copies of *To Train Up a Child* in circulation at the time of Hana’s death.<sup>5</sup>

Tragically, Hana was not the first child to die from the Pearl method. In 2006, four-year-old Sean Paddock, one of the Paddocks’ seven children, suffocated while his mother Lynn followed the Pearl’s advice to “defeat him totally” by wrapping him in blankets and tying him to his bed until he submitted.<sup>6</sup> The Paddocks were also conservative Christian homeschoolers who eschewed birth control and espoused a fundamentalist, patriarchal, and Christian nationalist theology. In 2010, the Ethiopian born eleven-year-old, Zariah Schatz and her seven-year-old

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Kathryn Joyce, “Hana’s Story: An adoptee’s tragic fate and how it could happen again.” *Slate*. November 9, 2013. For an excellent treatment of the Conservative Christian adoption boom see also: Kathryn Joyce, *The Child Catchers: Rescue Trafficking and the New Gospel of Adoption*. (New York: Public Affairs Press, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Mike and Debi Pearl, *To Train Up a Child*. (Pleasantville, TN: No Greater Joy Inc. 1994).

<sup>5</sup> Erik Eckholm, “Preaching Virtue of Spanking, Even as Deaths Fuel Debate,” *The New York Times*. November 6, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Lynn Harris, “Godly Discipline Turned Deadly,” *Salon*. February 22, 2010. The phrase “defeat him totally” comes from: Pearl, *To Train Up a Child*, 46.

(biological) sister Lydia mispronounced words during a homeschooling lesson and were beaten with a fifteen-inch piece of plastic tubing—an implement the Pearls recommend in their book and claim is “safe.”<sup>7</sup> Kevin and Elizabeth Schatz battered their daughters for more than nine hours, breaking only to pray. Zariah was hospitalized in critical condition. The younger Lydia did not survive.

The Pearls maintain that their book is not responsible for these deaths. They stand by their methods. They contend that their book recommends “Biblical discipline” and does not recommend abuse.<sup>8</sup> They do, however, recommend “switching” (hitting with a belt, plastic tube, or tree branch) all children, including infants who cry while going down for naps. No baby is too young to be “utterly broken” according to the Pearls. Debi Peal encourages mothers, to “Have the wisdom to begin training... newborns and not wait until they are three months old.”<sup>9</sup> Michael Pearl echoes his wife’s injunction to physically discipline babies. He writes,

I must encourage those of you with small children, train up your children now. Don’t wait until they are one year old to start training. Rebellion and self-will should be broken in the six-month-old or as soon as it first appears.<sup>10</sup>

Hana Williams, the Schatz sisters, and Sean Paddock were all adopted, which might have put them at higher risk for abuse.<sup>11</sup> All three families were enmeshed in a religious discourse that not only demonizes birth control but demands unconditional and cheerful obedience from

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<sup>7</sup> Edecio Martinez, “Kevin and Elizabeth Schatz Kill Daughter with ‘Religious Whips’ for mispronouncing word” *CBS News*, February 22, 2010.

<sup>8</sup> The Pearl’s official statement on Hana Williams’ death is available here: <https://nogreaterjoy.org/ministry/answers/hana-williams-official-statement/>

<sup>9</sup> Pearl, *To Train Up a Child*, 46

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>11</sup> See: Kathryn Joyce, *The Child Catchers*.

women and children. Anything less is “rebellion,” and as pronatalist leader writes, “rebellion is the sin of witchcraft.”<sup>12</sup> Children coming out of foster care, or out of institutional settings are more likely to exhibit behavioral problems stemming from trauma and neglect. Internationally adopted children especially, are more likely to respond negatively to the psychological shock of living in a new in a new country. Consequently, they are more likely to be labeled “disobedient” or even, “witches.”

The religious discourse under examination here is replete with dark, supernatural presences and magical imaginations that are often racialized. Many of the leaders generating and disseminating this discourse contend that sin can be passed between parents and children like a disease and that adopted children often come with the sin-burden of their degenerate parents. Or they argue that African children, like Hana Williams, and Zariah and Lydia Schatz carry a uniquely “demonic” heritage in their blackness, and that they can carry these dark forces into white Christian homes like Trojan horses.<sup>13</sup>

I first encountered the Pearls’ book in 2013, in Sacramento, California at a homeschooling conference organized by the Advanced Training Institute, an offshoot of an enigmatic conservative Christian organization called the Institute in Basic Life Principles (IBLP). The Pearls’ book was being sold on a book table alongside other IBLP approved titles covering a range of topics from “biblical womanhood” and creationism, to the satanic origins of Islam, and the unbiblical nature of income tax.<sup>14</sup> As I would come to learn, the collection of

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<sup>12</sup> Bill Gothard, *Basic Seminar Textbook*. (Oak Brook, IL: Institute in Basic Life Principles, 1986) 80.

<sup>13</sup> The Institute in Basic Life Principles, *How To Make Wise Decisions about Adoption*. (Oak Brook, IL: Institute in Basic Life Principles 1994).

<sup>14</sup> The Pearls’ book was not on sale at similar conferences in 2016 and 2017.

books on sale at the Sacramento conference succinctly represented the various discursive threads that, when woven together, produce a distinctive iteration of American conservative Christianity—from patriarchy and pronatalism, to economic isolationism and libertarianism, to the language of spiritual warfare and the celebration of white power.

Specifically, this project is concerned with one of those threads, namely conservative Christian pronatalism—though I argue that pronatalism can only be understood as woven together with other discursive threads, just as these other discursive threads can only be understood in conjunction with pronatalism. Isolating the various threads is a useful, if arbitrary, tactic for mapping them and for understanding their unique contributions and how they work together—but as Jonathan Z. Smith reminds us, “map is not territory.”<sup>15</sup> Only when we layer our various maps over one another might we get closer to a three-dimensional rendering. What follows is my contribution to that larger rendering. I hope it will be read along with other similar contributions.

### *Defining Conservative Christian Pronatalism*

Conservative Christian pronatalism is an umbrella term for the various patriarchal systems and discourses that use conservative pan-Christian logics to undermine female reproductive agency, to reduce women’s personhood to their bodies’ reproductive functions, and subsequently to claim those bodies as public objects, subject to public (male) control. It is a discourse that reinforces the notion that women’s highest personal or spiritual purpose is procreation, and that all women want, or should want, to be mothers, even at the cost of their own lives. But it is also a discourse that provides some women a deep sense of meaning. It

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<sup>15</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith, *Map is Not Territory*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

sacralizes the maternal body, which in turn, puts it at terrible risk. It alienates women from their own bodies while bonding them eternally to the supernatural beings their now-sacred bodies are capable of birthing. It is a threat to women's health and safety, and it is a place where some women find healing, security and even experience transcendence. It celebrates women who risk their lives for their pregnancies and shames women who do not. But it also transforms grief into hope, pain into transcendence, and gives birth to angels.

Rather than a cohesive religious movement, conservative Christian pronatalism is best understood as part of a web of interconnected movements, ideas, histories, relationships, and practices. Institutionally, this broad discourse is associated with James Dobson's Focus on the Family, Doug Philips' Vision Forum (now defunct), and Bill Gothard's Institute in Basic Life Principals. However, these entities and their agendas do not fully constitute conservative Christian pronatalism. Conservative Christian pronatalism is a discourse that supersedes denominational affiliations and unites conservative Christians from a host of doctrinal traditions, including evangelicals, Catholics, Pentecostals, Mormons and others. In fact, it is often illegible as "religion" at all. It can also manifest as a sensibility, an attunement to certain voices, often at the expense of others, and an (re)imagination of motherhood, childhood, and reproduction in popular culture.

As the abuses described above indicate, conservative Christian pronatalism is not limited to debates over abortion or women's rights. It has serious implications for children, especially for children of color. Though it may seem counterintuitive, the sacralization of pregnancy and babies puts children at risk for neglect and abuse for several reasons. First, resources in large families can be scarce. Second, children are not actually angels from heaven, but tiny humans who cry, and poop, and rarely conform to our romanticized constructions of them. More importantly,



pronatalist discourses set impossible standards for mothers that can push them to the psychological brink. Take for example the high-profile case of Andrea Yates, a conservative Christian pronatalist mother who drowned all five of her children in a bathtub in June of 2001.<sup>16</sup> The Yates murders sparked a nation-wide conversation about postpartum depression, but few journalists addressed how Yates' religion influenced her actions. Like the conservative Christian pronatalist women you will meet in these pages, Yates lived in a terrifyingly enchanted world where demons wait behind every corner. She believed that Satan was coming for her and for her children, and they would be safer in heaven with Jesus.<sup>17</sup>

Yates had also been taught that women must willingly submit to repression, humiliation, and pain, *and* that they must bend their minds to be cheerful in their disempowerment, and grateful for their degradation. Such self-harming acrobatics may not push every woman to kill her children, but for those like Yates, who already suffer from severe depression or other mental illness, it can prove too much. What is more, conservative Christian pronatalist discourses also encourage authoritarian fatherhood, while subtly finding ways of making men's moral failures the fault of women—thereby paving the way for abuse. The fact that pronatalist religious communities often prescribe corporal punishment is also not coincidental. Conservative Christian pronatalism deploys complex and often violent imaginations of dominion and power, agency and will, the human body, its value and purpose, and the meaning of pain. Conservative Christian pronatalism is not just about eschewing birth control, it is an interpretive lens on human embodiment and its spiritual significance.

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<sup>16</sup> Meagan K. Stack, "Religious Zeal Infused Yates' Lives, Testimony Shows" *The Los Angeles Times*, March 1, 2002.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

What is more, conservative Christian pronatalism often aligns with hegemonic religious and cultural Christian narratives already operating in American culture, consequently allowing it to manifest in the broader culture sometimes without announcing itself as expressly religious at all. Political moves that overtly disempower women, like restricting access to birth control, are relatively easy to spot—though difficult to combat. What might be less obvious are the cultural trends that appear to validate and empower (some) women, but enforce narrow, male-privileging definitions of womanhood and subtly police, shame, or silence the women who do not conform to them. This project aims to lift the veil on these dynamics.

I should note that pronatalist ideologies are not unique to Christianity. Orthodox Jewish communities, traditional Muslim communities, among others, also place controls on women's independence and reproductive agency. However, the specific American discourse I am interested in here mobilizes distinctively Christian imagery and narratives. It is also important to note that conservative Christian pronatalism is as much about power, whiteness, politics, and libertarian capitalism, as it is about the divinity of Christ, the Great Commission, or the authority of the Gospel. Therefore, I am not implicating all of Christianity here, nor am I arguing that there is something unique about Christian theology that inspires the abuses I have described. The Christianity under examination here is the white, capitalist, nationalist, and militant Christianity currently gaining traction in the United States. It is the Christianity of the Family Research Council, of political leaders like Catholic Rick Santorum, evangelical Mike Pence, or Methodist Jeff Sessions. Similarly, the conservatism I am interested in here is not the broad political philosophy that favors tradition over rapid social change, or the rights of the individual over the power of the state. The conservatism I am invoking in the term conservative Christian

pronatalism is the radical right-wing ideologies of the present-day Freedom Caucus or the Trump–Pence administration.

Although a distinctive conservative Christian pronatalist discourse has been evolving in print, radio, and television for decades, the generative and dissemination affordances of newer formats like social media, reality television, and digital platforms like YouTube, Facebook, Pinterest, and Etsy, facilitate more diverse and creative engagement and wider distribution. This expansion and diversification is producing radical reimaginings of mothers, pregnant women, and the beings they birth. What is more, these reimaginings lay the groundwork for destructive and dangerous agendas and value systems.

Conservative Christian pronatalist discourse does not always announce itself as reifying a conservative Christian worldview built on the oppression of women and the objectification of children. Nevertheless, that is exactly what it does. It often masquerades as “family values,” as a fight against “government overreach,” as sentimentalism and nostalgia. At times, it even presents as pro-feminist, or as the secular and benign celebration of babies and their “mommies.” However, its dark implications are not going wholly unnoticed. Pushback from women against recent attempts to defund Planned Parenthood, the enormous nationwide women’s marches of January 2017, and the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements suggest that the backlash to the backlash has begun.<sup>18</sup>

There have also been artistic and cultural responses to the growing visibility of conservative Christian pronatalism. The success of Hulu’s television adaption of Margaret

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<sup>18</sup> Here I am borrowing Susan Faludi’s notion of “backlash.” Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2006).

Atwoods's *The Handmaid's Tale* is not coincidental.<sup>19</sup> American women (and men) are noticing some terrifying parallels between the contemporary United States and Atwood's dystopian Republic of Gilead. Protesters have taken up the iconic red capes and white bonnets to fight anti-feminist causes.<sup>20</sup> Countless memes are circulating, connecting the book and television series to current events. Comedian Michelle Wolfe made a blatant connection between the contemporary US and Gilead when she referred to Press Secretary, Sarah Huckabee Sanders as "Aunt Lydia" (the sadistic character who indoctrinates and disciplines Gilead's handmaids) at the 2017 White House Correspondence Dinner. Gilead, of course, remains allegorical. But there is something about it—a place governed by an authoritarian patriarchal, pronatalist conservative Christian regime—that seems hauntingly familiar.

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<sup>19</sup> Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*. (New York : Anchor Books, 1986); Margaret Atwood, Dorothy Fortenberry, Bruce Miller. *The Handmaid's Tale*. Hulu, 2017.

<sup>20</sup> Mary Emily O'Hara, "Here's Why Women Keep Dressing Like the Handmaid's Tale at Statehouse" *NBC News*. June 21, 2017.



Image 1: Protesters Dressed as Handmaids Outside the Capital. Photo by Aaron P. Bernstein, *Reuters*, June 30, 2017.



Image 2 Handmaids meme, creator unknown.

### *Cultural and Legal Manifestations*

In 2006, the Centers for Disease Control issued new guidelines for American women. According to the CDC's new recommendations, all American women of child bearing age

should consider themselves “pre-pregnant.”<sup>21</sup> The CDC report argued that because more than half of all pregnancies are unplanned, all women of child-bearing age should ready their bodies to be possible vessels by taking folic acid supplements, not smoking or drinking, avoiding cat feces, and maintaining a healthy weight, among other things. The medical professionals who authored the report did not acknowledge that these recommendations would be inappropriate or unnecessary for women who only have sex with women, women who do not engage in vaginal intercourse with their male partners, women whose male partners were sterile, women who consistently used a reliable form of female-controlled birth control, or women who had no intention of carrying an unwanted pregnancy to term. When faced with the fact that half of all American pregnancies are unplanned, the CDC did not make recommendations aimed at *preventing* unwanted pregnancies. Rather, the CDC recommended that primary caregivers shift their thinking and begin treating their female patients like walking wombs from their first menstruation to menopause, regardless of the women’s sexual practices and reproductive plans. As Dr. Peter Bernstein who coauthored the report stated, “It’s a simple way of getting primary care providers to think about preconception care... It’s simple and costs nothing.”<sup>22</sup> Such recommendations may save money, but in fact, they cost a great deal.

In addition to the 2006 CDC recommendations, a series of recent legal and cultural victories have made conservative Christian pronatalism’s power and presence undeniable. Chief among them, the 2014 Hobby Lobby Supreme Court decision, allowing employers to deny

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<sup>21</sup> Kay Johnson et. al. “A Report of the CDC/ATSDR Preconception Care Work Group and the Select Panel on Preconception Care” April 21, 2006. A copy of the report is available here: <https://www.cdc.gov/MMWR/preview/mmwrhtml/rr5506a1.htm>

<sup>22</sup> Dr. Peter Bernstein, as quoted in January W. Payne, “Forever Pregnant” *The Washington Post*. May 16, 2006.

female employees access to birth control through their health insurance, based on the employer's religious convictions. The Hobby Lobby decision, along with the elevation of expressly pronatalist politicians like Vice President Mike Pence represent a dangerous empowering of pronatalist policies and beliefs.

State legislators have also been hard at work. Two hundred and thirty-one new restrictions to abortion access were put in place across various states between 2010 and 2014.<sup>23</sup> For example, twenty-six states now require women seeking abortions to undergo unnecessary vaginal ultrasounds. Four states require that women be shown the ultrasound image (whether they want to see it or not) and that doctors describe the characteristics of the fetus before the procedure can be performed. Several states have passed laws requiring doctors to give women seeking abortions inaccurate medical information about the risks involved.<sup>24</sup> Other states have simply driven abortion providers out with Targeted Restrictions on Abortion Providers, or TRAP laws. As of February of 2017, Oklahoma had three abortion providers in the state, Arkansas had three, Kentucky had two and Missouri and Mississippi each only had one provider.<sup>25</sup> Meanwhile, religiously affiliated hospitals are legally allowed to deny pregnant women medical interventions recognized as best practices, if such care would endanger the fetus.

Because abortion is not covered by Medicaid except in cases where the woman's life is in danger, poor women are routinely forced to carry to term for lack of funds. Indeed, one in four female Medicaid recipients report carrying unwanted pregnancies because they could not afford

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<sup>23</sup> These statistics are taken from the Guttmacher Institute, which tracks legislation related to reproductive health.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., <https://www.guttmacher.org/state-policy/explore/overview-abortion-laws>

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., <https://www.guttmacher.org/state-policy/explore/targeted-regulation-abortion-providers>

an abortion.<sup>26</sup> What is more, conservative law makers continue to push for new and inventive ways to make self-induced abortion a crime. Although their efforts are often struck down by the courts, women can get trapped by unconstitutional and often cruel laws while the legal challenges make their way through the system. This has led to a small number of women in the United States being criminally prosecuted for attempting to end their pregnancies on their own.

According to the Self-Induced Abortion Legal team, a legal clinic at University of California at Berkeley Law School, women in the U.S. who attempt to induce their own abortions could be breaking as many as forty state and federal laws.<sup>27</sup> In 2015, Anna Yocca of Tennessee was charged with aggravated assault with a weapon, for attempting to give herself an abortion with a coat hanger. Unable to afford her \$200,000 bail, she spent eighteen months incarcerated, eventually plead guilty to a lesser crime and was sentenced to time served.<sup>28</sup> Purvi Patel, a resident of Vice President Mike Pence's home state of Indiana, was convicted in 2013 of feticide and child neglect for attempting to end her pregnancy with pills she bought over the internet. Patel was sentenced to twenty years in prison.<sup>29</sup> Her sentence was later reduced on appeal to eighteen months. As a point of comparison, six months prior to Patel's release from prison, a judge sentenced twenty-year-old Stanford student, Brock Turner to six months in prison for sexually assaulting an unconscious woman in an alley.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., <https://www.gutmacher.org/evidence-you-can-use/medicaid-funding-abortion>

<sup>27</sup> Jill E. Adams, JD, and Melissa Mikesell, JD, The SIA Legal Team, "Primer on Self-Induced Abortion" (Berkeley, CA: University of California, Berkeley School of Law, 2015)

<sup>28</sup> Liam Stack, "Woman Accused of Coat-Hanger Abortion Pleads Guilty to Felony," *The New York Times*, January 11, 2017.

<sup>29</sup> Emily Bazelon, "Purvi Patel Could Be Just the Beginning," *The New York Times*. April 1, 2015.

<sup>30</sup> Marina Koren, "Why the Stanford Judge Gave Brock Turner Six Months," *The Atlantic*. June 17, 2016.



Cases like Yocca's and Patel's took on new weight when President Trump stated in 2016 that there "should be some kind of punishment" for women who abort their pregnancies.<sup>31</sup> The Trump administration has since walked this statement back, but like many of the statements the President has made and then retracted since his election, it served as a dog-whistle, signaling to the most extreme pronatalist advocates that now is the time to mobilize. For example, Trump's statement inspired Texas lawmaker Tony Tinderholt, who introduced a bill criminalizing abortion in January of 2017. The Tinderholt bill would sentence women who have an abortion to jail time. It has since passed the Texas House and will be taken up by the state Senate after the 2018 summer recess.

To drive his point home, in May Tinderholt also attached an amendment to another bill aimed at strengthening sentencing guidelines for the worst cases of animal cruelty.<sup>32</sup> After a tragic rash of dog-burnings and beatings (some of which were filmed and posted online), the Texas house sought to crack down on animal cruelty by recategorizing the worse offences as class-three felonies.<sup>33</sup> Tinderholt attached an amendment to the bill that would have in fact, lowered the punishment for such acts. He claimed that since abortion is legal in Texas, the state is hypocritical for wanting to protect domestic pets from torture. Tinderholt's cruel amendment was later reworded by the Texas legislature, but efforts like it show that the most extreme pronatalist advocates have been emboldened by recent victories. Women have also been prosecuted and convicted in recent years for endangering their fetuses by attempting suicide,

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<sup>31</sup> Matt Flegenheimer and Maggie Haberman, "Donald Trump, Abortion Foe, Eyes 'Punishment' for Women, Then Recants," *The New York Times*. March 30 2016.

<sup>32</sup> Chuck Lindell, "Texas House abortion-related amendment guts animal cruelty bill," *American Statesman*. May 23, 2017

<sup>33</sup> Bud Kennedy, "Texas House Given a Choice: Dogs or Babies," *The Fort Worth Star Telegram*. May 27, 2017.

taking drugs, drinking alcohol, and driving recklessly.<sup>34</sup> Most of these convictions were eventually overturned, but the fact that women faced charges at all underscores that there is a concerted effort being made to legitimize the idea that pregnant women should be uniquely subject to state supervision and control.

The drumbeat of conservative Christian pronatalism is not just legal. Television shows that normalize and celebrate extremely large families like *Kate Plus 8*, *Out Daughtered*, *19 Kids and Counting*, and *Counting On* garner millions of viewers. Meanwhile, between 2000 and 2014, maternal mortality rates in the United States climbed 26% percent in 48 states (rates decreased in California and Hawaii) and disturbingly, according to the Centers for Disease Control, 60% of those deaths were preventable.<sup>35</sup> As of 2016, the United States is the most dangerous place in the developed world to be a pregnant woman.<sup>36</sup>

It is however, not a bad place to be an infant in need of medical care. In 2014, infant mortality in the U.S. dropped to a historic low, therefore we cannot attribute the rise in maternal deaths to a rise in death tolls over all. Although the U.S. infant mortality rate still lags behind countries like Japan and Denmark, the U.S. is generously investing federal funds in medical research aimed at helping babies, far more so than it is investing in maternal care. A 2016 investigation by the non-profit ProPublica found that the preeminent obstetric research group, Maternal-Fetal Medicine Units Network, had twenty-four federally-funded research projects

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<sup>34</sup> The Center for Reproductive Rights and Justice, at University of California at Berkeley Law school keeps a clearing house for such cases. It is available here:

<https://www.law.berkeley.edu/research/center-on-reproductive-rights-and-justice/>

<sup>35</sup> Centers For Disease Control, “Meeting the Challenges of Measuring and Preventing Maternal Mortality in the United States.” November 17, 2017. See also: Nina Martin, Emma Cillekens and Alessandra Freitas, “Lost Mothers,” *ProPublica*, July 17, 2017.

<sup>36</sup> Centers For Disease Control, “Meeting the Challenges of Measuring and Preventing Maternal Mortality in the United States.”

aimed at improving outcomes for infants, where only four were aimed at improving maternal health.<sup>37</sup> What are we to make of all this?

The simultaneous rise of conservative Christian pronatalist discourse and claiming maternal mortality rates present an unsolvable causation-correlation riddle. We cannot claim that the proliferation of conservative Christian pronatalist discourse is responsible for the alarmingly large number of maternal deaths in America. In fact, it is equally plausible that conservative Christian pronatalism is thriving because of our already existing comfort with maternal suffering and death. Regardless of what came first, new cultural pronatalist products and conversations are emerging and they have the power to make a substantive impact on American women's claims to reproductive autonomy.

### ***Beyond Abortion***

Much like Tracy Fessenden's observation of what she calls "public Protestantism," or the underling "protestant grammar" of seemingly secular American literature from the late nineteenth-century, Journalist Michelle Goldberg notes that Christian nationalistic ideas are so foundational and entrenched in the substructure of contemporary white American conservatism, they simply went unnoted until they were recently laid bare by a variety of cultural trends and shifts.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, Julie Ingersoll's study of Christian Reconstructionism uncovers the Reconstructionist roots of many "mainstream" conservative Christian initiatives, like the

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<sup>37</sup> Nina Martin, Emma Cillekens and Alessandra Freitas, "Lost Mothers," *ProPublica*, July 17, 2017.

<sup>38</sup> Tracy Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption: Religion, The Secular and American Literature*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); Michelle Goldberg, *Kingdom Coming: The Rise of Christian Nationalism*, (New York: Norton, 2007).

homeschooling movement.<sup>39</sup> So it goes for conservative Christian pronatalism. Although the visibility and scale of conservative Christian pronatalist discourse have increased in recent years, white conservative American Christians, particularly those invested in patriarchal, heteronormative, and militaristic constructions of white masculinity, have never been comfortable with women's reproductive autonomy. Reproductive freedom threatens the complex religious imaginations of a white women's place, purpose, and power in an imagined American ideal. Groups like Bill Gothard's Institute in Basic Life Principles make plain that moral and religious distinctions between abortion and birth control only exist for those who hold that women have a right to their own bodies in the first place, and a right to determine the course of their own lives. If they have no such rights, then ethical debates over fetal personhood or over when life begins are irrelevant.<sup>40</sup>

This is where we must confront a reasonable, but flawed assumption—that the conservative Christian pronatalist cultural initiatives we see today are primarily motivated by conservative Christians' opposition to abortion. Though this may seem logical, particularly to those who have watched women's access to healthcare deteriorate under the "pro-life" banner, the history does not bear this out for two reasons. First, abortion was not the central issue of the conservative Christian political and cultural revival sometimes called "the religious right," especially at its beginnings. Second, though abortion became a rallying cry for conservative lawmakers, it was, as it has always been, a straw man.

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<sup>39</sup> Julie J. Ingersoll, *Building God's Kingdom: Inside the World of Christian Reconstruction*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015)

<sup>40</sup> I am certainly not the only person to make this observation, See: Sarah Posner "Pence Amendment Not Just About Abortion, But About Thwarting Contraception," *Religion Dispatches*, February 25, 2011.; Elaine Tayler May, *America and the Pill: A History of Promise Peril and Liberation* (New York: Basic Books 2010)

In his *Evangelicalism in America*, American religious historian, Randall Balmer confronts the etiological myth of the “religious right”—namely that “evangelical leaders were shaken out of their political complacency by the U.S. Supreme Court’s *Roe v. Wade* decision.”<sup>41</sup> In short, the horror of legal feticide spurred men of faith like Jerry Falwell, Tim LaHaye, and Paul Weyrich to action, setting off a chain of events leading directly to the recent debates over the contraception mandate in the Affordable Care Act and the Hobby Lobby Supreme Court case. It is a compelling narrative, and certainly one that paints conservative Christian leaders as the principled defenders of the defenseless unborn. There is only one problem: it is fiction.

Conservative Christian leaders like Paul Weyrich have openly identified the *Green v. Connally* case in 1971, which revoked the tax-exempt status of segregationist evangelical schools, along with Carter administration’s stance on school prayer, as the genesis of the white conservative Christian political coalition later known as the Moral Majority.<sup>42</sup> Falwell’s claim that on that fateful January day, he “sat there staring at the *Roe v. Wade* story, growing more and more fearful...and wondering why so few voices had been raised against it” is apocryphal—to

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<sup>41</sup> Randall Balmer, *Evangelicalism in America* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press 2016) 110.

<sup>42</sup> Weyrich quoted in, William Martin, *With God on Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right*. (New York: Broadway 1996) 173. See also: Joseph Crespino, “Civil Rights and the Religious Right,” in *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970s*, eds. Bruce J. Schulman and Julian E. Zelizer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008) 90-105. It is also worth noting that *Green v. Connally*, and the related *Green v. Kennedy* case were not solely responsible religious right, either. As Darren Dochuck showed in his examination of 1930’s and 1940’s political and religious landscapes of southern California, the religious right did not spring fully formed from the southern minds of Paul Weyrich or Jerry Falwell in 1971 or 1973. The rise of white protestant conservatism in the 1970s and 80s was the result of a complex coalition of ideas, characters, and agendas long in the making. Dochuck, *From Bible Belt to Sun Belt: Plain-Folk Religion, Grassroots Politics, and the Rise of Evangelical Conservatism*. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company; May 14, 2012).

put it kindly.<sup>43</sup> In reality, the fundamentalist leader waited five years after *Roe* to preach his first sermon on abortion.<sup>44</sup>

The shockwaves later attributed to *Roe* were in fact, little more than a tremor. Several months after the verdict, *Christianity Today* published an article entitled, “At What Price Abortion?”<sup>45</sup> The question in the title was not rhetorical, it was earnest. “At What Price Abortion?” softly came down in opposition to the procedure, but not its legality, or the court’s decision, and presented theological arguments for both sides from respected protestant leaders.<sup>46</sup> In this way, the piece reflected the tenor of the American evangelical response. They were not beating the drums of war or putting on hair shirts and sitting in ashes. They were prayerfully asking their pastors, their leaders, their Bibles, and their God, “what does this mean?” Baptists, given their history of political marginalization, were especially sensitive to the privacy issues at the heart of *Roe*. They opposed abortion as a primary method of birth control but were more concerned about the federal government meddling in medicine. The Southern Baptist Convention, the largest protestant denomination in America, expressed as much at its annual meeting in 1976 when it publicly approved the court decision, affirming “the right of expectant mothers to the full range of medical services...”<sup>47</sup>

Of course, there were Christian conservatives who did not need any thoughtful reflection to swiftly condemn the *Roe v. Wade* decision. Billy James Hargis, the fast-talking, baby-faced

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<sup>43</sup> Jerry Falwell, *Strength for the Journey: An Autobiography*. (New York: Simon and Schuster 1987) 334-5.

<sup>44</sup> Susan Friend Harding, *The Book Of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 303.

<sup>45</sup> “At What Price Abortion?” *Christianity Today*, March 2, 1973, p 39

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention*, 1976 (Nashville: Southern Baptist Convention 1976) 58.

southern evangelist who made a career condemning communism wasted no time. He organized Americans Against Abortion in 1973, but to claim that American conservative Christians immediately opposed *Roe* is inaccurate.<sup>48</sup>

This is not to say that conservative Christian pronatalism is not about abortion at all. As Daniel Williams has noted, there was a concerted anti-abortion movement that included liberals and conservatives even prior to *Roe v. Wade*.<sup>49</sup> Conservative Catholics, who have always been part of the conservative Christian pronatalist discourse, have been consistent in their opposition to abortion on moral and theological grounds.<sup>50</sup> For many American Catholics, “pro-life” is an expansive moral position that not only rejects abortion, but the death penalty, doctor-assisted suicide, and euthanasia. It is worth noting however, that for many American conservative Catholics in the 1970s, abortion had as much to do with women’s pain as it did fetuses’ protection. Sociologist and abortion policy expert, Kristin Luker shows that Catholic anti-abortion activists in the mid-to-late twentieth-century sought to protect fetuses but *also* to

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<sup>48</sup> For more on Hargis see: Daniel Williams, *Gods Own Party: The Making of the Religious Right*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012) 117.

<sup>49</sup> Daniel Williams, *Defenders of the Unborn: The Pro-life Movement Before Roe v. Wade*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>50</sup> See: John T. McGreevy, *Catholicism and American Freedom: A History*. (New York: Norton, 2003); Timothy A. Byrnes and Mary C. Segers eds., *The Catholic Church and the Politics of Abortion*. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992); Mary Jo Weaver and R. Scott Appleby, eds., *Being Right: Conservative Catholics in America*. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995). The Church claims to have opposed abortion consistently since the first century, citing the *Didache*, the *Letter of Barnabas*, and other writings from the early Church fathers. However, it also recognizes that important figures like Thomas Aquinas posited alternative theories on the exact moment of fetal ensoulment. See: The *United States Conference of Catholic Bishops*, “*Respect for Human life: The Church’s Constant Teaching*” available here: <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/abortion/respect-for-unborn-human-life.cfm>

enshrine maternal suffering.<sup>51</sup> Popular Catholic anti-abortion crusaders condemned terminating a pregnancy because doing so allowed women to subvert their sacred obligation to bear the disciplining pain of female embodiment with grace.

As Robert Orsi has also documented, there is a Catholic preoccupation with maternal suffering.<sup>52</sup> Well before *Humanae Vitae* (the 1968 encyclical that officially condemned the use of any artificial birth control), or the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's 1974 "*Declaration on Procured Abortion*" (which declared fertilized eggs human life), popular American Catholic devotional media and culture sacralized female pain and humiliation, characterizing such suffering as women's unique vocation. For conservative American Catholics, the suffering of pregnancy and birth served as a conduit for the Holy. It provided women an otherwise inaccessible intimacy with the Blessed Mother and visceral access to the magnitude of Christ's sacrifice. Moreover, it kept society safe from female power. For American-born daughters of Catholic immigrants, flush with freedom and (relative) empowerment, Robert Orsi notes, physical suffering "burned off the threat of women's sexuality, independence, and desire, rendering them safe..."<sup>53</sup>

Upon closer examination, abortion is as much about women as it is about babies. The politically convenient vitriol over the "unborn" that eventually emerged in the mid 1980s and 90s was a thinly veiled attempt to distract from the larger agenda. As American Historian Daniel T. Rogers observes, "the issue [of abortion] turned much more immediately on the control of

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<sup>51</sup> Kristian Luker, *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press 1984).

<sup>52</sup> Robert Orsi, *Thank You Saint Jude: Women's Devotion to the Patron Saint of Hopeless Causes*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press 1996) 80-94.

<sup>53</sup> Orsi, *St. Jude*, 87.



women's sexuality" than on anything else.<sup>54</sup> For white conservative evangelicals especially, *Roe* was not a catalyst. It was a rebranding opportunity. The following chapters will show that examining the workings, influence, and media productions of Bill Gothard's Institute in Basic Life Principles can help tell that bigger story.

The conservative evangelical opposition to abortion was successful at misdirecting public attention from the racist origins of the religious right, splitting conservative and progressive Catholics, and demonizing feminists as "baby killers." But when we decenter the political opposition to abortion and see it as part of a much broader pronatalist religious imagination, several important realities become clear, 1) conservative Christian pronatalism is older and bigger than *Roe v Wade* and the religious right 2) by focusing on the southern and Washington D.C.-based, political machinery of the religious right, we inevitably obscure more grassroots and family-focused initiatives, not to mention the actual women involved in the conservative Christian pronatalist discourse and 3) the focus on cold, dry public policy and legislation has distracted from the fact that conservative Christian pronatalist discourse on the ground is replete with magic, angels, demons, and the supernatural. Moreover, approaching conservative Christian pronatalism in this way disrupts the idea that religion America is on some kind of trajectory toward progressivism or secularism—that it happens in observable patterns, or coherent ebbs and flows. The reality is much messier and disjointed.

### ***Beyond Quiverfull***

Some scholars and journalists have approached conservative Christian pronatalism as a distinctive "other." This is perhaps understandable when confronted with the tragic death of

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<sup>54</sup> Daniel T. Rodgers, *The Age of Fracture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011) 170.

Hana Williams and with the many other similar instances of physical and sexual abuse, but it should be avoided. The desire to pretend that ideologies and practices we abhor exist apart from the broader culture in which they exist can easily cause us to fall into taxonomic methods of analysis, and to label anomalous what may, in fact, be far more common than we are willing to admit. It can also, as David Chidester and Kelly Baker have pointed out in their studies of morally problematic groups, allow us to delude ourselves into thinking that “those people” are nothing like “us.” As Baker writes, “We can cluck our tongues sympathetically at the supposedly brainwashed people deluded into joining these movements, and we can rest easier at night by assuming that our religious commitments must be the safe kind.”<sup>55</sup>

Similarly, scholars have regarded conservative Christian pronatalism as the “fringe” of American Christianity. They have imagined pronatalist ideologies as lurking, as Katheryn Joyce put it, “in the corners of fundamentalist Christendom,” like a creature from the black lagoon.<sup>56</sup> This characterization is both inaccurate and troubling. It assumes that there is an American Christian *mainstream* (or even, as Joyce seems to suggest, a fundamentalist mainstream) and so therefore a *fringe* where pronatalism stands. This is a deeply problematic assumption for several reasons. For starters, the categories of *mainstream* and *fringe* are in and of themselves, fraught. Historically, scholars have bestowed the title of *mainstream* on religious communities with denominational affiliations, established structures, and solid finances, educated clergy, and those aligned with the hegemonic white, middle-class, American values of the moment. Religious movements that did not meet those criteria were often labeled “fringe” regardless of how widespread their ideologies and practices might be.

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<sup>55</sup> Kelly Baker, “Evil Religion” *The Christian Century*. May 1, 2013.

<sup>56</sup> Katherine Joyce, *Quiverfull: Inside Christian Patriarchy*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009) 1.

Spiritualism provides a historical parallel. The practice of communicating with the dead was so popular in the nineteenth-century that President Lincoln hosted seances in the White House.<sup>57</sup> Yet for decades scholars of American religion regarded Spiritualism as *fringe*. The fact that most mediums were women or young girls, and that many spiritualists drew on the folk religious practices of various people of color, walled Spiritualism off from being considered *mainstream*, even if it was widely practiced.<sup>58</sup> This is because the categories of *mainstream* and *fringe* usually have more to do with race, class, and the specific historical contexts than anything else.

Beyond that, discourses are not bounded things. They are dynamic and protean. For this and other reasons, I do not use the term *Quiverfull* in this study. Although *Quiverfull* seems to have been adopted by journalists and by some scholars who I deeply respect, I find it more trouble than it is worth.<sup>59</sup> The term *Quiverfull* is taken from Psalm 127:4-5 “Like arrows in the hands of a warrior are children born in one's youth. Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them.” It was later echoed by Rick and Jan Hess’ 1990, *A Full Quiver: Family Planning and the*

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<sup>57</sup> Jason Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences*. (Chicago: university of Chicago Press 2016) 315.

<sup>58</sup> For more on Spiritualism see: Catherine Albanese, *Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007). Ann D. Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth Century America*. 2d ed. (Indianapolis, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2008); Mark C. Carnes, *Secret Ritual and Manhood in Victorian America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); Robert S. Cox, *Body and Soul: A Sympathetic History of American Spiritualism*. (Charlottesville, Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 2003); Laurence R. Moore, *In search of White Crows: Spiritualism, Parapsychology, and American Culture*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

<sup>59</sup> See: Antonia Blumberg, “What You Need To Know About The ‘Quiverfull’ Movement,” *The Huffington Post*. May 26, 2015; Laura Harrison, Sarah B. Rowley, “Babies By the Bundle: Gender Backlash and the Quiverfull Movement,” *Feminist Formations*. Vol. 23, no. 1. (Spring 2011):47-69; Joyce, *Quiverfull!*; Christy Mesaros-Winckles, “TLC and the Fundamentalist Family: A Televised Quiverfull of Babies” in Alena Amato Ruggerio (ed) *Media Depictions of Brides, Wives, and Mothers*. (Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books, 2012).

*Lordship of Christ*, which became a foundational text for pronatalists.<sup>60</sup> Currently, the term is used far more often by outsiders than insiders.

I find the term problematic for several reasons. First, as it is used and understood, *Quiverfull* connotes an exclusively evangelical community, while conservative Christian pronatalism more accurately allows for the inclusion of other religious affiliations. Second, *Quiverfull* is too implicated in the taxonomic approach I hope to undermine with this study. It is too clean and static. It implies an established set of doctrines and practices, and smacks of denominationalism, as though there are *Quiverfull* Christians and *mainstream* Christians. Moreover, *Quiverfull* implies that the groups, individuals, and ideas presented here are reducible to their pronatalism, or at least that their pronatalism is the most important part of their religious identities. This is not always the case. As I have already noted, conservative Christian pronatalism is inextricably interwoven with other religious and political discourses like white supremacy, libertarian economics, and patriarchy—some of which are more important than pronatalism for some people and less important for others.

The people you will meet in these pages are conservative Christian pronatalists, but they may also be Reconstructionists like Gary North, who is committed to bringing the United States under Biblical Law.<sup>61</sup> North is a pronatalist, but he likely sees his pronatalism as an extension of his Reconstructionist religious identity, not the other way around. Calling North *Quiverfull* even if the description fits, seems to confuse his values and therefore render an inaccurate picture of who he is and why he does what he does. Even if the reverse were true, as it may be for reality

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<sup>60</sup> Rick and Jan Hess' *A Full Quiver: Family Planning and the Lordship of Christ*. (Aurora Colorado: Wolgemuth & Hyatt Publishers, 1990).

<sup>61</sup> Ingersoll, *Building God's Kingdom*, 54.

television star, Michelle Duggar, whose pronatalism appears to be the hub around which the rest of her religious self-understanding revolves, assigning the set moniker, *Quiverfull* obscures the complex interplay between the various discourses that support and are supported by conservative Christian pronatalism. Perhaps most importantly, very few of people I met in the process of this study claimed the term. Most people, including Michelle Duggar, patently reject it precisely because it smacks of denominationalism and they do not want to be defined as anything other than *Christian*.<sup>62</sup>

For those of us who find these theologies and agendas repugnant, *Quiverfull* makes us feel better about ourselves. We can pretend that Hana Williams, Sean Paddock, and Zariah and Lydia Schazt were killed by some subversive cult, by mad men, or by monsters. But they were not killed by monsters. They were killed by people who committed unspeakable acts of cruelty to combat what they believed were very real demonic forces and draw ever nearer to their God. We can never hope to understand their actions until we are willing to first see them as human, and as more like us than we want to admit. These children's deaths did not happen in a cultural or religious vacuum. Conservative Christian pronatalism is not a well-bounded category that can be contained, and safely "othered." It is the result of deep-seeded cultural values and hegemonic power systems in which we, as contemporary Americans are *all* implicated—it is a ribbon of ideas and agendas weaving its ways through American popular culture. We consume it, and we authorize it with our viewership and participation. We need to be willing to open our eyes and face the ways in which we might be complicit.

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<sup>62</sup> Duggar, Jim Bob & Michelle, *A Love That Multiplies: An Up Close View of How They Make it Work*. (Brentwood, TN: Howard Books, 2011)

### *Scholarship and Morality*

The study of lived religion necessarily engenders questions about subjectivity—what do we as scholars owe the people we study? How can we maintain our own values without “othering” those with different ones? Do we have the right to make moral judgments about the religious lives of others? This study is informed by the rich methodological debates surrounding such questions.<sup>63</sup> Some scholars have argued that the people and groups we study should be the ultimate evaluators of our work. As Wilfred Cantwell-Smith wrote, “no statement about a religion is valid unless it can be acknowledged by that religion’s believers.”<sup>64</sup> Others, like Russell McCutcheon, advocate for a more detached approach. Fearing that we will apply different levels of empathy to different groups based on our own subjective affinity with them, McCutcheon calls the scholar to be a “critic” not a “caretaker.”<sup>65</sup> American religion historian, Robert Orsi however has called for “intersubjectivity”—a relational approach that balances

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<sup>63</sup> For a diverse set of arguments see: Wendy Doniger, *Other People’s Myths: The Cave of Echoes*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988). Terry Godlove, “Religious Discourse and First Person Authority.” *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* Vol. 6 (1994):147-161; Russell McCutcheon, “It’s a Lie. There’s No Truth in It! It’s a Sin!’: On the Limits in It! of the Humanistic Study of Religion and the Costs Saving Others from Themselves,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*. September Vol. 74, No. 3 (2006): 720-750; Russell McCutcheon, ed. *The Insider Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion*. (New York: Bloomsbury, 1999); Robert Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars who Study Them*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005). Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1989).

<sup>64</sup> Wilfred Cantwell-Smith, “The Comparative Study of Religion: Whither- and Why?” *The History of Religions: Essays in Methodology*. Mircea Eliade and Joseph Kitagawa, eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959) 42.

<sup>65</sup> Russell McCutcheon, *Critics not Caretakers Redescribing the Public Study of Religion*. (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001); Russell McCutcheon, “It’s a Lie. There’s No Truth in It! It’s a Sin!”

familiarity and difference.<sup>66</sup> Similarly, Ninian Smart has called for “structured empathy,” or empathy that is regulated by the categories of our discipline like myth, symbol, and ritual.<sup>67</sup>

Although, methodologically, I lean toward Orsi and Smart, I take Russell McCutcheon’s concerns seriously as well. Structured empathy is much easier to apply to groups we like than to groups we despise or fear. Moreover, I agree with McCutcheon that we do have the right and authority to present our theories with or without the consent of those being theorized, as long as they are presented as just that, *our* theories. I fully agree with Orsi however, that people must never be regarded as “data,” to use McCutcheon’s infamous term. Scholars must, as Orsi writes, “...find way of honoring their own moral and political values without masking the common humanity both researcher and religious adept share...”<sup>68</sup>

We must not moralize the humanity out of those we study. Yet, this still leaves an important question: is it morally acceptable to apply structured empathy to the Pearls, who advocate for the subjugation of women and the physical abuse of children? Or to Bill Gothard, when more than sixty women have accused him of sexual abuse? How do we make such people *understandable* without slipping into apologetics? To contend with this problem, I looked to scholars like David Chidester and Kelly Baker whose studies of Jonestown and the Klu Klux Klan, respectively, necessarily confronted the problem of studying morally contentious groups.<sup>69</sup>

Chidester writes,

Perhaps I have taken the method of “structured empathy” to the

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<sup>66</sup> Robert Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*.

<sup>67</sup> Ninian Smart, *Religion and the Western Mind*. (New York: SUNY Press, 1987) 4.

<sup>68</sup> Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 192.

<sup>69</sup> Kelly J. Baker, *Gospel According to the Klan: The KKK's Appeal to Protestant America, 1915-1930*. (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2017); David Chidester, *Salvation and Suicide: Jim Jones, the People's Temple, and Jonestown*. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988).

breaking point here. However, if I had to push this brief observation on method a step further, I would argue that the method of structured empathy is already a moral strategy. It requires the recognition of the irreducible humanity of others upon which any ethics of the interpretation of otherness must be based.<sup>70</sup>

The “irreducible humanity of others” is also what undergirds this study. Conservative Christian pronatalists, including people like the Pearls and Bill Gothard must be regarded as fully human. However troubling, the cost of not doing so is too high. I have tried to hold their humanity in the forefront of my mind as I embarked on this project. This has not always been easy. As Baker writes, “Finding humanity is not always an uplifting journey or a tale of liberation. Sometimes, finding humanity means confronting violence, terror, and death. We can be left haunted rather than inspired.”<sup>71</sup> I have certainly been left haunted by this research, far more than I expected.

The “irreducible humanity” of our subjects however, does not exonerate them, or exempt them from our moral evaluation. Indeed, their humanity demands we assess the morality of their actions. Monsters cannot be held accountable for their deeds, but men and women must be—and not just by scholars. The caution against moralizing from Chidester, Baker, and Orsi, is that it leads to easy constructions of good religion and evil religion and allows us all to imagine ourselves on the side of the angels. I am opposed of such self-congratulatory “othering,” but that is not necessarily what we do when we make moral judgments.

What I have tried to do in this study is to occupy the space between moral “bracketing” and blanket demonization—a space we might call humanistic moral discernment. I have avoided

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<sup>70</sup> Chidester, *Salvation and Suicide*, xv.

<sup>71</sup> Kelly J. Baker, “I have tried to recover my sense of humanity...” *Religion in American History*. May 7, 2013.



easy pronouncements like: “this religion is evil, these women are victims or ignorant, and it has nothing to do with me.” I have not, however, backed down from my contention that conservative Christian pronatalism physically and emotionally harms people. Moreover, it is part of a culture in which I live, and in which I am implicated. Therefore, it is my moral obligation to do what I can to oppose it, lest I be complicit. I believe that the words of Archbishop Desmond Tutu apply to scholars as much as anyone else, “If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor.”<sup>72</sup>

### ***Skin in the Game***

There has also been considerable debate among scholars of religion over how to account for women who find deep spiritual meaning and fulfillment in religious communities that appear to undermine their autonomy and put them at physical risk. Most of the scholarship on this problem has been concerned with women’s agency.<sup>73</sup> Why would women freely choose such religious systems? Are they agents? If so, what constitutes their agency? To that point, I want to make my position clear. The conservative Christian pronatalist constructions I have called dangerous and destructive can and do provide some women with authentic and meaningful

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<sup>72</sup> Archbishop Desmond Tutu, as Quoted in Robert McAfee Brown, *Unexpected News : Reading the Bible with Third World Eyes* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1984) 19.

<sup>73</sup> See for example: Lynn Davidman, *Tradition in a Rootless World: Women Turn to Orthodox Judaism* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1993); R. Marie Griffith, *God’s Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997); Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2005). For discussions of agency in feminist studies see: Judith Butler, “Contingent Foundations,” *Feminist Contentions*, Benhabib, Seyla, et al. (New York: Routledge, 1995); Marilyn Friedman, “Autonomy and Social Relationships: Rethinking the Feminist Critique,” *Feminists Rethink the Self*, Meyers, Diana Tietjens ed. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997); Diana T Meyers, *Self, Society, and Personal Choice*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

religious lives. I do not regard these women as dupes, or as unidimensional victims. That said, I remain unconvinced by arguments that attempt to reimagine women's submission or obedience to patriarchal structures as acts of empowerment.

As scholars like the late Saba Mahmood have argued, the language of *agency*, *freedom*, and *choice* may be implicated in a variety of western, secular, capitalist discourses, that assert colonial or racist values.<sup>74</sup> In many ways conservative Christian pronatalist women present a challenge to the “agency turn” in feminist studies of religion. As I explore in chapter four, pronatalist women often willingly offer up their agency as a sacrifice, which symbolically cuts them off from the liberal, “modern,” secular construction of the rational agent, and places them back into a vocational relationship with the divine wherein they do not choose but are chosen.

However, whether they are agents, or divine instruments, or whether the concept of agency requires reevaluation, the women who advance conservative Christian pronatalist ideologies are suspended in a cultural web of male, white, heterosexual, and cisgender privilege—as are all contemporary American women to varying degrees. It is impossible to tease out where those cultural webs of privilege and power end, and where some pure form of agency begins, if it exists at all. The reality is likely that culture and agency are so interfolded, they cannot be distinguished from one another. This study affirms pronatalist women's right to their religious self-understandings whatever they may be, while also calling attention to the discursive forces acting on them with or without their knowledge.

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<sup>74</sup> Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*.

That is why this study is less about the concept of freedom or agency and more about violence and safety. I am not arguing that the women in patriarchal conservative Christian pronatalist communities like the Institute in Basic Life Principles are not *free*, or that they are not *agents*. I am primarily arguing here that they are not *safe*. As R. Marie Griffith argued in *God's Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission*, submitting to this disempowerment may give them some benefit. It may be spiritually meaningful for them—just as other Pentecostal Christians may find transcendence by ritually taking up poisonous snakes.<sup>75</sup> I do not deny the realness of the religious experiences such a practice generates. I do not even presume to know how much of their decision to take up the snakes is their own, and how much is the work of cultural, social, or even supernatural forces. Regardless, the snakes still bite. What is more, most of us would challenge the morality of handing those snakes to a child—or to put it plainly, *I* would challenge the morality of handing snakes to a child. Further, as I am not a snake handling Pentecostal, I would also resist being forced to take them up myself.

Whatever else they may do, the conservative Christian pronatalist constructions some women have chosen to accept and disseminate, threaten their health and safety, and the health and safety of their children. Moreover, they threaten the health and safety of *other* American women who do not need to assent to them, to be harmed by them. The laws that conservative Christian pronatalists are seeking to change or have already enacted, and the culture they are trying to create and have already created, these are threats to *my* health and safety as a

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<sup>75</sup> I use this comparison to intentionally invoke the debate that erupted over a text by Dennis Covington, *Salvation on Sand Mountain: Snake Handling and Redemption in Southern Appalachia*. (Philadelphia: Perseus Books, 1995). The debate was largely between Robert Orsi in his chapter “Snakes Alive” in *Between Heaven and Earth* and Russell McCutcheon in his, “‘It’s a Lie. There’s No Truth in It! It’s a Sin!’”

contemporary American woman of child-bearing age. The detached role of “outsider” was not available to me in this study, even if I had wanted it. I have skin in the game.

I have made every effort to render accurate descriptions and to remain aware of my subjectivity and the role it plays in my work. Moreover, I have tried to present the people in this study as understandable, and “irreducibly human.” But I am not interested in “bracketing” anything. As Stephen Prothero writes, “...it is time to stop ‘otherizing’ ourselves.”<sup>76</sup> Bracketing my moral assessment of a discourse that directly threatens my autonomy would do just that. Conservative Christian pronatalist logics and agendas are already part of contemporary American public life. They are already a part of my life. My goal with this project, is to illuminate and unpack the logics of conservative Christian pronatalism and its related discourses, so that those who are so moved, can use my arguments to formulate their own effective means of resistance and subversion.

### ***Sources***

This dissertation primarily uses rhetorical and narrative analysis buttressed by digital and traditional ethnography. I conducted a survey of the materials produced and endorsed by the IBLP, including most of Bill Gothard’s books and many of the Institute’s numerous pamphlets and mailings, as well as some materials that are no longer in print. For the analysis of the Advance Training Institute (ATI) offered in chapter three, I purchased the whole ATI curriculum at the 2016 Family Conference in Big Sandy, Texas, along with the supplemental *Character*

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<sup>76</sup> Stephen Prothero, “Belief Unbracketed,” *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*. Vol 32. no.3 (Fall 2004):16-18

*Sketches*, several books in the *Heroes of Faith* biography series, and sheet music for several of the *Character Songs*.

This project also employed digital ethnography in examining several online communities including Christian homeschooling groups, blog readerships, and an online community of former IBLP members and ATI students called, RecoveringGrace.org. The goal of this digital ethnography was to collect narratives beyond the official IBLP statements. Obviously, those on Recovering Grace and a similar site called, HomeschoolersAnonymous.org have an agenda, and I could not verify all their claims. I studied *Recovering Grace* to observe the overall tenor and culture of the digital community and to note recurrent themes, common language, and shared experiences. The larger commonalities were ultimately more revelatory than any specifics offered. *Recovering Grace* also proved an invaluable resource for legal documents pertaining to the various law suits filed against Bill Gothard and other members of the IBLP leadership. Similarly, *Homeschoolers Anonymous* serves as a clearinghouse for cases of abuse, murder, and neglect of homeschooled children. Their agenda is also clear, but their legal archive is comprehensive.

I conducted the physical ethnographic research for this project between 2016 and 2017. I attended two IBLP Family Conferences in Big Sandy, Texas, and two in Sacramento, California. All IBLP events are open to the public for a fee. I did not conduct formal interviews or surveys as I did not want to disrupt the events.

### ***Chapters***

The first and third chapters of this project deal specifically with one organization and, even more specifically, one man, Bill Gothard and his Institute in Basic Life Principles (IBLP).

Gothard and the IBLP are a case study in conservative Christian pronatalism. What is more, the organization is also deeply entrenched in the other concurrent discourses that conservative Christian pronatalism supports and is supported by—namely, patriarchy, white supremacy, unregulated consumer capitalism, and dominionism (the idea that Christians have been called to take dominion of the earth and its governments and that the only godly mode of government is authoritarian theocracy).

Bill Gothard has gone largely ignored by scholars of American religion. Given the depth of his influence and the oppressive nature of his ideas, this is surprising. I argue that scholars have missed Bill Gothard primarily for three reasons: 1) The state of conservative Christian studies in the academic study of religion is preoccupied with consensus narratives that overstate the influence of “respectable” neo-evangelicals and understate the influence of white Christian nationalists like Gothard. 2) The academic study of conservative Christianity in America has focused on “the religious right,” meaning the overt Washington-based political activism of groups like Jerry Falwell’s Moral Majority and Ralf Reed’s Christian Coalition rather than family-centered ministries like the IBLP, Focus on the Family, and Vision Forum. 3) Religious studies as field has only begun to attend seriously to new media platforms and genres like social media and reality television, where Gothard’s ideas are on clear display.

The first chapter introduces the IBLP and examines how the organization frames and enforces its pronatalist message. The third chapter is an in-depth analysis of the IBLP’s most popular product, its homeschooling curriculum, the Advanced Training Institute (ATI). The second chapter provides context for the third by situating ATI in the conservative Christian homeschooling movement more broadly. The second chapter offers a cultural and legal history of the homeschooling movement, as well an examination of how “Worldview education”

radicalized conservative Christian homeschooling. The third chapter examines how ATI specifically, contributes to that radicalization by teaching anti-intellectualism, pronatalism and white Christian supremacy as foundational to the “Biblical worldview.”

The fourth chapter moves away from the official leadership of the IBLP to its most famous unofficial spokesperson, Michelle Duggar of TLC’s *19 Kids and Counting*. This chapter unpacks how the Duggars use the unique afforces of reality television and social media to communicate their pronatalist messages. Specifically, it examines Michelle though the lens of sacrifice and unpacks how she uses digital and televisual technologies to perform and prescribe her sacrifices, and to offer herself up as living sacrifice to a pronatalist God.

Finally, the fifth chapter examines the “Angel Baby” phenomenon and the mediated memorializing of miscarried fetuses. The fifth chapter traces changing interpretations of miscarriage in American popular culture to argue that yet another substantive discursive shift has occurred. Chapter five argues that the invention of the “Angel Baby” (how miscarried fetus are now often described) is a manifestation of how conservative Christian pronatalism is influencing broader American popular culture, and specifically popular imaginations of mothers, miscarriage, and fetuses.

## PROLOGUE

*Big Sandy, April, 2016*

It was nine AM and already eighty-five degrees when I arrived at the A.L.E.R.T Academy training camp. Highway 80 had been empty for miles until suddenly traffic slowed to a crawl. My rented Nissan Versa and I were stuck behind a large brown camper with a hand painted cardboard sign in the rear window that read, “We’re Cruising for Cruz!” It was April of 2016 and the Ted Cruz supporters and I were in a long line of mostly oversized vans and SUVs towing campers, ATVs, and golf-carts, most of which looked bigger than what I was driving. We were all going to the same place. The A.L.E.R.T. Academy is an evangelical Christian paramilitary program for young men and one small part of part of a broader, enigmatic organization called the Institute in Basic Life Principles (IBLP). Today was the first official day of the Institute’s biggest event of the year—the largest of its annual “Family Conferences.”<sup>77</sup> The place was packed.

I reached the large front gate in my diminutive vehicle and rolled down the window to find a freckled young man of not-yet-shaving age smiling earnestly down at me from the guard booth. “Morning Ma’am!” He wore dark navy fatigues, a matching cap over his close-cropped hair, and a neatly tucked-in t-shirt with a large military-style emblem on the chest—a symmetrical T reminiscent of the Iron Cross. Encircling the cross were the words, “Extreme Meekness Training.”

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<sup>77</sup> A list of the IBLP’s family conferences is available on their website: <http://iblp.org/seminars-conferences/family-conferences>



I wished the young man a good morning and asked where I should park. "...are you by yourself?" I nodded. He looked momentarily flummoxed and then said, "Ok! Welcome! Um, well I guess you can just park anywhere!" He handed me a map and pointed me to a small gravel parking lot just on the other side of the camp grounds, near an airplane hangar-sized building that would serve as the central meeting hall for the next five days. "Thank you," I replied. "My pleasure, Ma'am!"<sup>78</sup>

As I drove slowly around the camp with the window down, an olfactory cocktail of impending rain, grass land, and pine trees reminded me that I was undeniably in East Texas. Big Sandy, Texas is a sparsely populated rural community in Upshur County, about two and half hours east of Dallas. It is a small town, less than two square miles, and it might not even exist today, had it not been for a local resident named Buck Hammer and his devotion to radio evangelist, Herbert W. Armstrong. In 1953, Hammer donated a parcel of land to Armstrong's Radio Church of God, later called The World Wide Church of God, and eventually, Grace Communion International.<sup>79</sup> The Radio Church of God was a "Sabbatarian" (strictly Sabbath-observing) evangelical organization based in Pasadena, California. It was part of the midcentury evangelical renaissance that gave rise to figures like Billy Graham and Robert Schuler, and transformed religious life in Southern California, and arguably, evangelicalism nation-wide.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> All the descriptions of the Big Sandy event are my first-hand observations from April 2016 and April 2017. Although remote, the conference is open to the public for a registration fee. All statements quoted in this dissertation, with the exception of salutations and short exchanges of pleasantries, were made publicly to a group with no expectation of privacy.

<sup>79</sup> "Donor of original Texas property succumbs at 81" *The Journal: News of the Churches of God*, no. 166. (September 30, 2002).

<sup>80</sup>For more on evangelicalism in Southern California see: Darren Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sun Belt: Plain-Folk Religion, Grassroots Politics and the Rise of Evangelical Conservatism*. (New York: Norton, 2011).

Like the IBLP today, Armstrong was preoccupied with the dictates and rituals of the Hebrew Bible and his theology had a distinctly authoritarian and apocalyptic bend.

Armstrong transformed Hammer's donation into a pilgrimage destination for his followers. He built crude meetings halls, camp grounds, and eventually, an organic farm. The facility functioned like a camp revival site and would eventually draw thousands of believers every year to the church's week-long, "Feast of Tabernacles."<sup>81</sup> In 1964, Armstrong added permanent buildings and dormitories and converted the camp into an additional campus for his already-established Ambassador College in Pasadena.<sup>82</sup> Ambassador College, Pasadena, had flourished quickly, as had many evangelical bible colleges in the midcentury. Armstrong hoped to replicate its success in East Texas.<sup>83</sup>

Institutions like Ambassador College offered evangelical families an alternative to "liberalizing" universities and provided students a "haven" from the gender, racial, and class upheavals of the midcentury.<sup>84</sup> However, Ambassador College, Big Sandy, died in infancy. In the late 1960s Armstrong found himself embroiled in controversy over his unorthodox teachings and his creative bookkeeping.<sup>85</sup> The upheaval caused the east Texas campus to close as a four-year college in 1977. Some students and faculty moved away, but many remained settled in Big

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<sup>81</sup> Original footage of the 1963 Feast of Tabernacles can be viewed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1-IUD1bqw7E>

<sup>82</sup> Edward Fiskes, "A Vast Audience is Reached by Radio Preacher's Organization," *The New York Times*, October 10, 1969.

<sup>83</sup> For primary source material from the Big Sandy campus see: <http://wwcg-archives.com/ambassador-college-publications/>

<sup>84</sup> For more on Bible colleges see: Randall Balmer, "Bible School," *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989) 133; Peter Williams, *America's Religions: From Their Origins to the Twenty-first Century* 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008) 269-282.

<sup>85</sup> "6 Ex-Students Assail Armstrong's Church," *The New York Times*, November 6, 1977.

Sandy. Many of the roughly 1,300 residents today have some history or affiliation with Ambassador's Big Sandy campus. After his death, Armstrong's church radically revised most of his doctrines and withdrew all his writings from print. The Big Sandy Campus was later purchased by the Green family, the owners of Hobby Lobby and the force behind the landmark 2014 anti-birth control Supreme Court case. In 2001, the Greens sold all 2,250 acres for a whopping ten dollars to man as enigmatic and controversial as Armstrong.<sup>86</sup>

The event that brings believers to Big Sandy today bears a resemblance to Armstrong's "Feast of Tabernacles." It is part camp-revival, part homeschooling conference, part reunion, part graduation ceremony, and part social gathering. There is always plenty of prayer and patriotic pageantry, seminars, sermons, children's programs, jeremiads, and tearful public testimonies. There are also discounted books and homeschooling materials for sale, and s'mores—lots of s'mores.

For many, "Big Sandy" (as the event is colloquially called) is the climax of the year. The families who attend are united by deeply held convictions and an unbending sense of purpose. They come for the comfort of friends in an unfriendly world. They come to be inspired and refreshed, to be validated and vindicated, and they come to be rearmed for the "spiritual warfare" they wage every day. It is a peaceful five-day retreat, but it is also an emotionally intense revival wherein the firebrand militancy of the IBLP takes center-stage. These are the "foot soldiers of Christ," as they sometimes call themselves, and at Big Sandy, they come together as brothers and sisters in arms.

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<sup>86</sup> A record of the sale is available in the Upshur County Clerk's Office and here: <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/1211695-big-sandy-property-records.html>

The A.L.E.R.T. camp is a haphazard collection of structures and sites that reflect its various purposes over the decades. It has a handful of permanent office-park like structures in need of repair, a block of square, squat barracks, groves of towering pine trees that shelter the camp grounds, winding foot paths, a picturesque little pond, and an imposing military-style climbing wall, emblazoned with the word “ALERT,” in huge, gold, vertical letters. As I drove past the wall, A.L.E.R.T. cadets in their uniforms were scrambling up and rappelling down the formidable structure with grace and speed. If these are the “foot soldiers of Christ,” they are well-trained, and fearless.



Image 3: A.L.E.R.T. Cadets on the obstacle course. A.L.E.R.T. promotional materials

I eventually found the small gravel parking lot the young man recommended. It was empty. Unsurprisingly, few people come to this event in small Japanese cars. The IBLP stridently condemns any form of birth control and judging from the behemoth RVs and fifteen-passenger vans parked in a much larger lot across the field, the families gathered at Big Sandy were obedient—and fruitful. They had come from all over. There were license plates from Arkansas, Missouri, Illinois, Indiana, Georgia, Tennessee, Florida, and the Carolinas. There were

even a few from Montana, Idaho, Wyoming and California. The vehicles reflected the economic range of the group. There were plenty of high-end R.V.s, but they were outnumbered by well-loved campers that looked like they might need a few prayers to get home.

The camp grounds were full of tents the size of New York City apartments. There were rows upon rows of barbeques, coolers, long folding tables, and camping chairs. Strollers and bicycles were everywhere—piles of them, in every size. The IBLP does not keep an exact attendance count for the annual meeting at Big Sandy. “We can’t really keep track,” one volunteer told me, “because of the babies.” In 2016, approximately 170 families had registered. Another volunteer assured me that the organizers had bought enough ice cream for 1,800 people. If the ice cream metric was reliable—which I had no doubt it was, given that ice cream is a serious matter when dealing with hundreds of children in Texas heat—they were expecting an average of nine people per family. Children were everywhere.

By the mid-morning, families were spilling over into each other’s camps. Mothers were assembling meals, cleaning up breakfast dishes, tucking in shirts, and locating lost shoes. Little clots of children of various ages ran through the pine needles, giddy with the lack of adult supervision. Teenage girls were entertaining siblings, applying lip gloss, and braiding hair. Fathers were assembling wagons, popping out the awnings of their campers, and giving lessons on how to fix wobbly wagon wheels and errant bicycle chains. There was a palpable sense of belonging. The women greeted one another with deep hugs—the men, with big, friendly handshakes. These were old friends.

Despite the tents and fire pits, few people seemed dressed for camping. Though there were a few dads in t-shirts—usually with some Christian message or image on them—most of the young men who were not in uniform wore pressed slacks and collared dress-shirts. Some

even wore ties. The women and girls wore long dresses, or skirts and modest blouses that covered their shoulders. I noticed one of the IBLP's cultural idiosyncrasies was on full display.

IBLP families sometimes dress in homemade, matching outfits, especially in public, and while their children are young.<sup>87</sup> The matriarchs or older daughters of a family will buy a bolt of fabric and sew play dresses for the girls and then dress the boys in khakis and a polo shirt of a coordinating color. The result looks a little like when the Von Trapp children went running over the hills in *The Sound of Music*. Not every IBLP family does this of course, but the matching outfits make it easier to identify and count your children quickly in public, which becomes very important when you have seven children under the age twelve. They also make laundry easier—no need to sort when everyone wore the same color. The matching outfits are also visual manifestations of female domesticity and a testament to the IBLP's ideal: a unified, and self-reliant nuclear family, set apart from the world.



Image 4: The Bates Family in their homemade dresses, 2006. [www.thebatesfamily.com](http://www.thebatesfamily.com)

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<sup>87</sup> Michelle Duggar extols the virtues of matching outfits in the Duggar family book Jim Bob Duggar and Michelle Duggar, *20 and Counting! Raising One of America's Largest Families—How they Do It*. (Brentwood, TN: Howard Books, 2008) 173-174. Kelly and Gil Bates also discuss the virtues of homemade dresses on their blog, <https://thebatesfamily.com/2011/03/>

Though the women of the IBLP are encouraged to develop domestic skills like sewing, they are also reminded that they are ornaments as much as instruments. Their greatest asset, they are taught, indeed their “glory,” is their hair.<sup>88</sup> Most of the women at Big Sandy wore their hair long and styled in ways that must have taken considerable time and effort. The camp grounds were a sea of cascading curls. This is not a community that demands plainness. Indeed, it celebrates female beauty, emphasizing the importance of drawing attention to a “bright and beautiful countenance” while avoiding “eye traps” like V-necklines and long necklaces that fall suggestively across the breasts.<sup>89</sup> In the IBLP, a woman’s physical attractiveness, or rather, the effort she makes in this area, signals the depth of her faithfulness. Women are encouraged to style their hair, wear moderate makeup, and “watch their figures” as a sign of deference and respect for their “godly authorities.”<sup>90</sup>

I noticed that the teenage girls were particularly skilled at drawing attention to their “glory” and their “countenance.” Their hair lay in perfect waves and they had carefully applied eye makeup and lipstick. It seemed to be working. I caught a coy smile between a young man in a pistachio dress-shirt and a girl with long honey-colored curls before both dropped their gaze to their shoes. A number of young people meet their future spouses at Big Sandy—in part because these families tend to be somewhat insular and Big Sandy presents an opportunity to meet likeminded people. But there is more to it than that. The gathering itself has a kind of romance.

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<sup>88</sup> Gothard discusses female hair styles in myriad places across his writings including in the IBLP’s homeschooling materials, specifically in *Wisdom Book 24* (Oak Brook, IL: The Institute in Basic Life Principles, 2002), and *Wisdom Book 15*, and 8, and in his marriage materials, for example: Bill Gothard, *7 Basic Needs of a Wife*. (Oak Brook, IL: The Institute in Basic Life Principles, 2010).

<sup>89</sup> *Wisdom Book 15*, 625.

<sup>90</sup> Gothard, *Training Faithful Women Resource Manual*. (Oak Brook, IL: The Institute in Basic Life Principles, 1984).

Every year, the families who gather here transform a little corner of East Texas into their version of the Kingdom of God, or at least, into the closest approximation they can render from a broken world.

Somewhere far away, an A.L.E.R.T. brigade was drilling, “left, left, left, right, left,” like a muffled heartbeat, and a slow-tempo melody— “Come Thy Fount of Every Blessing”—came gliding through the pine trees from the main meeting hall, calling us to opening prayers.<sup>91</sup>



Image 5: Family Conference, Big Sandy, Texas, Closing Ceremonies, 2017. [www.iblp.org](http://www.iblp.org)

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<sup>91</sup> Robert Robinson, “Come Thy Fount of Every Blessing” (1757).



## CHAPTER ONE

### Bill Gothard and The Institute in Basic Life Principles

“There is more than one kind of freedom,” said Aunt Lydia. “Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from.”

—Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale*

The Institute in Basic Life Principles (IBLP) and the annual Big Sandy Family Conference is the life’s work of an unusual character in American Christianity named, Bill W. Gothard Jr. What follows is an exploration of the man, his teachings, and the empire he built and lost. I am offering this analysis as a case study in conservative Christian pronatalism and its related discourses. There are myriad unfolding trends and phenomena asserting and reinforcing conservative Christian pronatalist agendas today and they can, when isolated, seem religiously neutral, politically inconsequential, or even pro-feminist. Social and political campaigns to memorialize miscarried fetuses, celebrating heroic and dangerous pregnancies in popular culture, reality television shows that romanticize extremely large families with conservative Christian foundations—these can seem like isolated cultural trends. However, in aggregate they indicate a significant increase in the visibility of previously veiled pronatalist ideas and practices. The IBLP provides a near perfect subject for a case study in conservative Christian pronatalism because, in many ways, the IBLP is what results when the theologies and agendas those isolated examples engender all come together in one institution. By examining and isolating the visual and verbal rhetoric and teachings of the IBLP, we can see that the logics animating its overt pronatalism are in fact working more clandestinely in religious and cultural trends we may not immediately recognize as asserting pronatalist imaginations and agendas.

Bill Gothard ran the Institute in Basic Life Principles from its beginnings as an extension of himself. He maintained complete control over its messages, publications, and myriad sub-

institutions until his resignation in 2014. As both allies and enemies of the organization have noted, Bill Gothard *was* the Institute in Basic Life Principles. He is beloved by many, hated by some, and yet, largely unknown to most Americans. He crafted a deeply influential organization that touched countless families around his capricious dictates and obsessive preoccupations. He is no religious genius, as William James imagined.<sup>92</sup> He has neither the intellectual formidability nor the charisma one would expect from a man of accomplishments. He is a quiet, private, and soft-spoken person. An unremarkable man, who managed to do remarkable and terrible things.

Evangelism was the family business in the Gothard home. Gothard's father, Bill Gothard Sr., worked for The Gideons International, an evangelical Bible and tract society famous for planting Bibles in hotel rooms across the country. As a child, Gothard Jr. struggled in school, repeating grades and scraping by with barely-passing marks. By his own accounts he was bullied for his various shortcomings, but he had a knack for memorization and took solace in learning and reciting long Bible passages by heart—a skill that reportedly made his evangelist father proud. Eventually Gothard made it to Wheaton college where, as part of his master's thesis, he developed what would become the foundation of the IBLP—his “Seven Basic Principles of Life.”

Bill Gothard's ministry formally began in 1963 with a six-day seminar based on those seven principles and aimed at spiritually inoculating white young people against the “rebellion” and social upheaval of the period.<sup>93</sup> Throughout the 1960s, Gothard traveled the country

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<sup>92</sup> William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience a Study in Human Nature*, Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion Delivered at Edinburgh in 1901-1902. (New York: London Longmans, Green, 1902).

<sup>93</sup> Randall Balmer, *Encyclopedia of Evangelicalism* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2004) 297.

preaching to American youth about the virtues of obedience and submission to authority. Like the white conservative evangelical culture more broadly, overt pronatalism was not yet on his agenda. He was primarily concerned with the threat of communism and the racial unrest created by the burgeoning civil rights movement. Throughout the 1960s Gothard capitalized on the moral panic over “juvenile delinquency,” youth rebellion, and loosening social mores.<sup>94</sup>

Gothard was not alone in his concern over American youth. In 1951, Bill and Vonette Bright founded Campus Crusade for Christ at the University of California, Los Angeles and around the same time, a young preacher named Bill Graham began working with an organization called Youth for Christ.<sup>95</sup> Though Gothard’s project was more practical and less inspirational than Youth for Christ, and far less community oriented than Campus Crusade, in many ways he rode the wave these larger organizations created.

Gothard’s seminars were so successful through the 1960s that in 1973 Gothard founded what he then called the Institute in Basic Youth Conflicts and established a permanent headquarters in Oakbrook, Illinois. In 1984, Gothard founded the Advanced Training Institute (ATI), a homeschooling curriculum, which by the 1990s, would become the IBLP’s most influential and popular program. In 1990, Gothard expanded the organization beyond youth issues and changed its name to the Institute in Basic Life Principles (IBLP).<sup>96</sup> In the mid to late

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<sup>94</sup> Paul M. Sharp and Barry W. Hancock, *Juvenile Delinquency: Historical, Theoretical and Societal Reactions to Youth*, 2nd Ed. (New York: Pearson 1997).

<sup>95</sup> For more on Youth for Christ see: D. G Hart, *Deconstructing Evangelicalism: Conservative Protestantism in the Age of Billy Graham*. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2004); George M. Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991).

<sup>96</sup> There is some discrepancy in the accounts of when the IBLP was “founded” since it came together somewhat piecemeal. Some sources say 1964, others 1963. The IBLP itself claims 1963. The Veinots of Midwest Christian Outreach claim it was not until 1968. Randal Ballmer, *Encyclopedia of Evangelicalism*, 297; Wilfred Bockelman, *Gothard, The Man and His Ministry*:

1980s, Gothard joined the emerging evangelical pronatalist and anti-feminist movement and began teaching that attempting to control the size of one's family is a particularly egregious act of willful self-determination.<sup>97</sup> Today, IBLP women, and to a lesser extent, men, are called to submit to the divine will by accepting as many children as God will give, regardless of medical, emotional, or financial consequences.

In addition to his pronatalist teachings, Gothard built his ministry around a set of exhaustive and meticulous lifestyle prescriptions that are as much fetish as theology. They address everything from the nature of God and the Bible, to basic bodily functions, sexual mechanics, hairstyles, diet, what kind of music to listen to, and which children's toys to avoid. All of these prescriptions are presented as universal and equally-important. Both Gothard and the Institute have come under fire at various points in the last three decades for their authoritarian methods, their legalism, the lack of academic rigor in their homeschooling materials, and for sanctioning both child abuse and domestic violence.<sup>98</sup> What is more, Gothard's long career has

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*An Evaluation.* (Fenton, MI: Mott Media, 1976); Don Veinot, Joy Veinot, Ron Hanzel, *A Matter of Basic Principles: Bill Gothard and the Christian Life.* (Lombard, IL: Midwest Christian Outreach, 2008).

<sup>97</sup> It is impossible to determine the exact genesis of the conservative Christian pronatalist movement but two books, *The Way Home* by Mary Pride (1985) and *A Full Quiver* by Rick and Jan Hess (1990) were galvanizing forces. The anti-birth control arguments are made repeatedly across IBLP materials and in Gothard's own books. See: Gothard, *The Advanced Seminar Textbook.* (Oak Brook, IL: The Institute in Basic Life Principles, 1986) 179-182; Bill Gothard, *Our Jealous God.* (Oakbrook, IL: Life Change Books, 2003); Bill Gothard, *Instructions for Our Most Important Battle.* (Oak Brook, IL: Institute in Basic Life Principles 1976). They are also echoed in the sermons and talks available on the IBLP website and those given at the 2016 and 2017 Big Sandy Family Conferences.

<sup>98</sup> Some evangelical leaders have examined Gothard as a "cult" leader. See Rich Poll, "Exegeting Bill Gothard: Three Christian apologists evaluate the conference speaker's life and teachings," *Christianity Today*, March 1, 2003. Midwest Christian Outreach, an organization dedicated to undermining "false biblical teachings" and "cults" leads the charge against Gothard for his legalism, calling the IBLP "a culture of fear." [www.midwestoutreach.org](http://www.midwestoutreach.org). The founders of the organization, Don Veinot, Joy Veinot, and Ron Hanzel, have offered the only monograph on

been repeatedly impugned by allegations of sexual misconduct.<sup>99</sup> Nevertheless, the life-long bachelor, became a powerful authority on education, marriage, and family for many conservative American evangelicals in the late twentieth-century.

Bill Gothard may not be a household name for many, but more people than one might assume are, in fact, familiar with the Gothard way of life—they just do not recognize it as such. Anyone who has flipped through an issue of *People Magazine* in the last ten years has likely heard of Gothard’s most famous devotees: the Duggar family of TLC’s hit reality television show, *19 Kids and Counting*.<sup>100</sup> With nineteen living biological children, the Duggars are one of the largest families in the United States and have a devoted legion of fans. *19 Kids and Counting* ran for ten seasons and at its most popular, pulled in roughly two million viewers per week with those numbers jumping to four million for the much-anticipated Duggar daughter weddings.<sup>101</sup> The Duggars also have a sizable social media following. The family’s Facebook account has just under a million followers, and the eldest daughters alone have a combined Instagram following of just under four million.

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Gothard published since the 1980s. Don Veinot, Joy Veinot and Ron Hanzel, *A Matter of Basic Principles*.

<sup>99</sup> An online community called RecoveringGrace.org formed in 2011 to call attention to Gothard sexual abuse victims and help those traumatized by his teachings. Recovering Grace eventually evolved into a legal action group for Gothard’s alleged victims. They have collected the most comprehensive list of accusations and alleged victim’s testimonies:

<http://www.recoveringgrace.org/tag/sexual-abuse/> see also journalist coverage: Sarah Pulliam Bailey, “New charges allege religious leader, who has ties to the Duggars, sexually abused women” *The Washington Post*, January 6, 2016; Russell Chandler, “More Moral Questions Rock Gothard Ministry” *The Los Angeles Times*, April 5, 1998. Bryan Smith, “The Cult Next door” *Chicago Magazine*, June 20, 2016.

<sup>100</sup> *19 Kids and Counting*. Figure 8 Films. TLC.

<sup>101</sup> Ratings as measured by Neilson Media Research.

The Duggar family, via *19 Kids and Counting*, and its currently running sequel, *Counting On*, gave the IBLP a nationwide platform, even if the family never mentioned the organization by name. The show's producers capitalized on the distinctive Duggar language and family's extreme rules about clothing, education, and dating. Consequently, fans and detractors alike began identifying (and mocking) "the *Duggar* hairstyle," the Duggar's fashion, "the *Duggar* way of dating," and "*Duggar*-ese" or "*Duggar*-isms."<sup>102</sup> In fact, what they were seeing and hearing were prescribed IBLP practices and the distinctive Gothard language, which the Duggars often quoted verbatim from IBLP materials right into the camera. Reality television stars are seldom what they seem, but the Duggar are outliers, sort of. The Duggars are just as faith-filled and resolute as they appear on *19 Kids and Counting On*. From my field research attending both large and intimate events with different members of the family, I can say that that off screen, they appear to sound and act just as they do on camera, but what viewers see on *19 Kids* is just the tip of the iceberg. The Duggars are part of far bigger and far more dangerous movement than the show lets on.

Today, the Duggars may be Gothard's best-known ambassadors, but over the last five decades Gothard created a network of organizations that quietly but effectively disseminated his ideology across myriad platforms. He developed a digital media production and dissemination

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<sup>102</sup> Such comments have been made on a variety of social media sites, particularly one peculiar online forum called "Free Jinger" <http://www.freejinger.org/forum/251-quiver-full-of-duggars/> The site began as a site for "hate-watchers" (viewers who tuned in to *19 Kids* as detractors rather than fans), however, it has now become a contested space between fans and detractors. It follows the readit.com format and the site name comes from a feeling among some Duggar viewers that Jinger Duggar appeared to be the most potentially rebellious of the Duggar children. This has actually turned out to be somewhat true. Jinger married Jeremy Voulo, a professional soccer player-turned-pastor. Voulo is the pastor at a reformed Baptist church and contrary to the Duggars, holds to Calvinist soteriology. Jinger is also the only Duggar woman who wears pants.

platform called Embassy Media, a publishing company, a homeschooling curriculum, a personal finance program, and a religious self-help program designed to speak to every area of a person's life. He founded a paramilitary training camp, a college, a law school (now defunct), and established a medical "institute," none of which bore his name, but all of which were, until recently, under his complete control. The Institute in Basic Life Principles was once worth roughly one-hundred million dollars, and at the height of his popularity, he was routinely drawing thousands of people to his six-day Basic and Advanced Seminars.<sup>103</sup> Though exact numbers are difficult to pin down, it is estimated that roughly 2.5 million people have attended a Gothard Seminar over the last five decades including prominent business leaders, judges, and governors, congressmen, and cabinet secretaries.<sup>104</sup>

Many Americans have been profoundly confused and concerned by the recent rise of the "alt-right," the sudden mainstreaming of authoritarian political rhetoric, overt misogyny, and the elevation of nationalist and isolationist leaders who appear impervious or actively hostile to knowledge, facts, and empirical realities, be they related to climate change, national security, or

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<sup>103</sup> Randall Balmer, *Encyclopedia of Evangelicalism*. (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2004). 297. In the legal documents from the 2015 law suit alleging sexual harassment the IBLP is listed as being worth 100 million dollars. See: *Gretchen Wilkinson, Jane Doe, Jane Doe II, Melody Fedoriw, Charis Barker, Rachel Frost, Rachel Lees, Jane Doe III, Jamie Deering, Ruth Copley Berger v. The Institute in Basic Life Principles and William W. Gothard Jr.*, Case No. L 00980, Circuit Court of the Eighteenth Judicial Circuit, DuPage County, IL. A copy of the suit is available here <https://homeschoolersanonymous.files.wordpress.com/2016/01/iblpamendedcomplaintrev-c010616.pdf> The IBLP is exhibiting signs of financial stress. The IBLP recently shut down and sold its long-time headquarters in Oak Brook, IL, along with other out posts and is consolidating its leadership in Big Sandy, TX.

<sup>104</sup> 2.5 is the number the IBLP uses and has been repeated by journalist and scholars (see above: Baily, *The Washington Post*; Smith, *Chicago Magazine*). Given the capacity of the auditoriums usually used and the number of seminars Gothard gave over the decades, the number would be a reasonable approximation.

even the number of people who did or did not attend a presidential inauguration. These are complex times, and Bill Gothard and the IBLP are not responsible for the Trump Presidency and its myriad unfolding consequences, but they are part of subculture whose influence on mainstream American politics is now undeniable. The IBLP is a microcosm of the conservative Christian right: embattled, fundamentalist, white-nationalist, anti-establishment yet comfortable with authoritarianism, distrustful of evidence-based knowledge production, patriarchal, and pronatalist. Examining the IBLP can help us understand several growing and mutually-reinforcing cultural discourses—white nationalism, patriarchy, pronatalism, dominionism (the idea that Christians are called to dominate the earth and its political systems), and libertarian capitalism—and to see how they are often woven together to produce dangerous cultural and religious narratives.<sup>105</sup> My primary interest is the pronatalist thread of that tapestry, but one cannot understand its logics without the others.

### *Under Recognized*

Bill Gothard remains largely unexamined by scholars of American religion. This is in part because the Institute in Basic Life Principles is an octopus of an organization and in part because Gothard's influence is deep but discrete. Even so, Gothard represents a surprising blind-spot in the academic study of conservative American Protestantism. A handful of scholars have noted Bill Gothard's participation in a variety of conservative Protestant movements, but none have centered him or the IBLP or placed them in conversation with other larger pronatalist or alt-

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<sup>105</sup> For more on dominionism and the economic discourses attached to pronatalism see: Julie J. Ingersoll, *Building God's Kingdom: Inside the World of Christian Reconstruction*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).



right Christian trends. In fact, there are only two published monographs on Gothard. One, by Lutheran pastor Wilfred Brockelman, was published in 1976 and so covers only the first sixteen years of Gothard's long career.<sup>106</sup> The other was published in 2003 by Midwest Christian Outreach, an evangelical organization dedicated to calling out what it calls "cults" and "false biblical teachings." The Midwest Christian Outreach examination is a well-researched summery of Gothard's career. It offers a comprehensive map of Gothard's institutions, publications, and initiatives—no small feat—but its analysis is primarily a defensive evangelical critique of how Gothard's theology threatens what the authors see as the holy work of the Body of Christ.<sup>107</sup> My aim here is to provide substantive scholarly analysis of the IBLP that situates Bill Gothard in the contexts of broader American evangelical history and culture, and unpacks his role in the evolving conservative Christian pronatalism and related discourses.

Gothard has not been wholly ignored. Recent events have prompted religion journalists to examine Bill Gothard's organization and his influence. Religion journalist Katherine Joyce briefly notes Gothard in her work on the "Quiverfull" movement. Joyce only gives Gothard a few brief mentions in her book, but she rightly describes him as, "deeply influential" and "under recognized."<sup>108</sup> Joyce, along with fellow religion journalist Sarah Posner of *Religion Dispatches*, situate Gothard's organization in what Joyce calls, "Christian patriarchy." Both writers covered the circumstances that forced Gothard to resign from the IBLP extensively.<sup>109</sup> The charges

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<sup>106</sup> Wilfred Bockelman, *Gothard, The Man and His Ministry: An Evaluation*. (Fenton, MI: Mott Media, 1976).

<sup>107</sup> Don Veinot, Joy Veinot, Ron Henzel, *A Matter of Basic Principles: Bill Gothard and the Christian Life*. (Lombard, IL: Midwest Christian Outreach, 2008).

<sup>108</sup> Katherine Joyce, *Quiverfull: Inside Christian Patriarchy*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009) 23.

<sup>109</sup> Julie Ingersoll, "Biblical Law in Central Florida House Race" *Religion Dispatches*, September 27, 2010; Joyce, *Quiverfull*; Sarah Posner, "Hobby Lobby, Bill Gothard, and the Submission of Women," *Religion Dispatches*, July 2, 2014.

against Gothard also drew the attention of other news outlets like *Mother Jones*, *Salon*, and *Chicago Magazine*.<sup>110</sup> The best treatments admirably moved beyond the hackneyed, “evangelical leader caught with his pants down,” but understandably, they read Gothard through the lens of the scandals.

If I have any critique of Joyce and Posner’s provocative and thoughtful work, it is that in their attempt to describe accurately the extremity and dangers of “Christian patriarchy,” they leave readers with the impression that the movement is more isolated and subterranean than I believe it is. Joyce is right in her observation that the ranks of anti-contraception activists are growing, and she is right in pointing out that groups like Gothard’s IBLP, and Christian author and homeschooling advocate Doug Phillips’ similar Vision Forum Ministries, is more extreme than the average suburban megachurch. Posner and Joyce’s work mapped a genealogy that linked Doug Phillips with homeschooling lobbyist Michael Farris, and anti-feminist activists, Mary Pride, Phyllis Schlafly, and Nancy Campbell. What I offer goes a step further. By homing in specifically on the rhetoric of the IBLP, this larger project draws discursive genealogy that, yes, links Gothard to conservative notables like Governors Mike Huckabee and Rick Perry, but also to non-evangelical discursive communities, new-age inspired Angel spiritualists, changes in resource allocation in the field of obstetrics that indicate shifting cultural value structures, and emerging trends in popular culture that are pushing the imagination of personhood earlier and earlier in pregnancy.

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<sup>110</sup> David Corn and Molly Redden, “Hobby Lobby Funded Disgraced Fundamentalist Christian Leader Accused of Harassing Dozens of Women: The crafts store chain and its owners gave millions in backing to controversial evangelical Bill Gothard and his Institute in Basic Life Principles” *Mother Jones*, July 2, 2014; Jenny Kutner, “Disgraced Homeschool Leader Explains how Josh Duggar was Cleansed After Sexually Abusing His Sisters” *Salon*, July 2, 2015; Bryan Smith, “The Cult Nextdoor” *Chicago Magazine* June 20, 2016.

In *Building God's Kingdom: Inside the World of Christian Reconstructionism*, Julie Ingersoll briefly examines Gothard's place in the book's titular movement.<sup>111</sup> Christian Reconstructionism is a permutation of conservative Protestantism pioneered by controversial theologian, R.J. Rushdoony (1916-2001), rooted in dominionist theology and bent on replacing American democracy with a Calvinist theocracy resembling Geneva in the 1550s (as they understand it).<sup>112</sup> That is, Christian Reconstructionists assert that Christians are called by God to dominate and rule the earth. They seek to establish biblical law as the only law of the land and to reinstate biblical institutions like slavery. As Ingersoll notes, Reconstructionist thinkers like Gary North (Rushdoony's son-in-law and intellectual inheritor) have praised Gothard for his authoritarianism and his focus on "biblical law."<sup>113</sup> However, Ingersoll argues that he does not fit neatly enough into Reconstructionist ideology or theology to be considered part of the movement. I believe that Ingersoll may be defining Reconstructionism rather narrowly, especially since a comparative look at both Rushdoony's and Gothard's writings indicate that Gothard lifted (if not, outright plagiarized) many of his central ideas, particularly those concerning jurisdictional authority, from Rushdoony—without citation.<sup>114</sup> That said, Ingersoll's assessment of Gothard is also fair. Gothard does not appear to share Rushdoony's Calvinist

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<sup>111</sup> Ingersoll, *Building God's Kingdom*, 110.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 109-11.

<sup>113</sup> Gary North, "Tentmakers: Interdenominational Service," *Institute for Christian Economics* 7, no.4 (July-August 1984).

<sup>114</sup> John Rousas Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law*. (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1973); John Rousas Rushdoony, *Intellectual schizophrenia: Culture, crisis, and education*. (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1961); John Rousas Rushdoony, *The Myth of Over-Population* (Nutley, N.J.: Craig Press, 1971); John Rousas Rushdoony, "An historical and biblical view of the family, church, state, and education," *Journal of Christian Jurisprudence*, 1982, p21-31; John Rousas Rushdoony, "The Private and the Public Domains" (Edward J. Murphy Memorial Issue). *Notre Dame Law Review*, 71(4), 1996, p 631-638.

soteriology (doctrine of salvation), nor is he as overtly politically motivated or preoccupied with state power. For better or worse, Gothard is not half the mind Rushdoony was and his writings are not nearly as intellectually robust. He is also more practically focused. Rushdoony, to my knowledge, never made pronouncements about hairstyles. Though Gothard maintains a wide vision, his specific prescriptions are aimed at individuals and families rather than nations.

That said, the IBLP certainly supports dominionism, Reconstructionism's milder iteration—which is less an organized movement than a religious and political ideology asserting (white) Christians' right to exercise “dominion,” per Genesis 1:26-27, over both the natural world and civil government. Indeed, pronatalism is an extension of dominionist theology. This is a reality that has been obscured by the left's assumption that the conservative Christian position on reproductive issues begins and ends with abortion. In her book, *Kingdom Coming: The Rise of Christian Nationalism*, Michelle Goldberg traces the steady integration of Dominionism, and Christian Nationalism into mainstream Republican politics. Goldberg rightly points out that Dominionism, Christian nationalism, and white supremacy are rooted in a racist, militant, construction of masculinity and white male power, and as such, are foundationally at odds with women's liberation and the goals of the feminist movement.<sup>115</sup> The goals of dominionism and Christian nationalism are contingent on women's subjugation.

Dominionism, Christian nationalism, white supremacy, neo-populism and the anti-intellectualism and fact-relativism they have come to engender, are all implicated in Christian pronatalist agendas. A false nostalgia and a narrative that centers on modernity's betrayal drives them all. My project here is to isolate the distinctly pronatalist thread for the sake of in-depth

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<sup>115</sup> Michelle Goldberg, *Kingdom Coming: The Rise of Christian Nationalism*. (New York: Norton, 2007) 147.

analysis without obscuring the fact that conservative Christian pronatalism is co-constitutive with the other movements and discourses mentioned. The IBLP is a useful point of entry because it encapsulates all the discursive threads weaving conservative Christian pronatalism into being (or, put another way, all the discourses pronatalism is helping to weave into being). Indeed, the IBLP is evidence that conservative Christian pronatalism is not divisible from other conservative Christian discourses asserting white nationalism, Dominionism, economic isolationism, anti-intellectualism, nor the neo-populism that, among other things, gave rise to the Trump Presidency. I will return to various contexts and histories of which Bill Gothard is a part, however, for now, let us examine some of his singular teachings.

### ***Yield Your Rights***

As with similar conservative family ministries like James Dobson's Focus on the Family, the Institute in Basic Life Principles imagines the patriarchal, heteronormative, cisgendered, procreative, nuclear family as the basic unit of a Godly society. The IBLP's objectives are also to unravel the work of feminism and women's and LGBTQ equality movements, to re-center white, protestant, male, narratives in American education, reestablish male headship of the home, church, and government, undermine debt-credit economics, and discredit non-fundamentalist biblical hermeneutics, contemporary science, and mainstream medical and mental health community, as well as train the next generation of "biblically-minded" attorneys, politicians, and civic and business leaders. What is more, the Institute in Basic Life Principles is dedicated to implementing Bill Gothard's "character"-centered programs in as many realms of public life as

possible, including major corporations, local governments, public schools, state prisons and youth detention systems, the US military, and police and fire departments.<sup>116</sup>

The family unit, under male headship sits at the center of Gothard's hierarchical theology. For him and the members of the IBLP, this foundational social structure is not only biblical, but necessary for physical, mental, and social wellbeing. Physical illness, depression, family strife, emotional conflict, political unrest—these are the results of a false sense of entitlement to personal rights. However, “yield your rights” to those in authority over you (parents, husbands, church leaders, civil authorities and eventually, Christ), Gothard promises, and you will find peace.

For Gothard any willful acts of autonomy or attempts at self-determination then reject God's ultimate sovereignty and, consequently, God himself. As he puts it, “True Christians have no rights.”<sup>117</sup> To get a sense of what Gothard means when he commands his followers to *yield*, we can look to some of his instructional materials on the subject. In the textbook for Gothard's six-day Basic Seminar (a heavy hard-copied nine-by-twelve tome, bound in faux-leather and inscribed with gold lettering) a section entitled, “The Cause of Anger: Personal Rights” lists seven “personal rights” that must be yielded though “meekness training.” They are:

1. The right to express personal opinions without being “jumped on”

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<sup>116</sup> The following chapter interrogates these programs more closely, for examples see: Bob Norman, “Little Soldiers in the Culture War: Evangelical Radical Bill Gothard's Character First Curriculum Teaches Students to Obey His Will” *New Time Broward Palm Beach*, Feb 18, 1999; Sally Maxwell, “‘Character First!’ program works, Owasso police chief tells audience,” *Sequoyah County News*, March 30, 2009.; Silja Talvi, “The Cult of Character: How the ‘secular’ Character Training Institute is working to build evangelist Bill Gothard's vision of a First-Century Kingdom of God—one city, one state, one school board, one police force and one mind at a time,” *The Nation*, January 9, 2009.

<sup>117</sup> Bill Gothard, *Basic Seminar Textbook*. (Oak Brook, IL: Institute in Basic Life Principles, 1986) 78.

2. The right to be accepted as an individual
3. The right to plan how free time is spent
4. The right to privacy
5. The right to earn and spend money
6. The right to choose friends
7. The right to control the use of personal belongings.<sup>118</sup>

Gothard then goes on to detail the “inevitable” conflicts that arise from believing that one is entitled to such rights. For example, he provides a benign example of a teenage girl whose sister is always borrowing and damaging her clothes. The solution according to Gothard is for the girl to yield her rights to her clothes and to “dedicate them to God.” That way, when the sister takes the clothes, “she is not taking your clothes, she is taking God’s clothes.”<sup>119</sup> Even if the sister continues to damage the girl’s clothes, “the Lord would use this situation for His own glory—whether it be to teach her a new lesson in trust or to let her sister see her a new attitude in her.”<sup>120</sup> There is no legitimate recourse the girl can take to advocate for herself, no law of fairness or justice to which she can appeal. There is only submission.

The thirteenth-century Swiss Reformation leader and Reconstructionist favorite, Ulrich Zwingli warned, “Christian life, then, is a battle so sharp and full of danger that effort can nowhere be relaxed, without loss.”<sup>121</sup> Nowhere is this truer than in Bill Gothard’s world.<sup>122</sup> In joining the IBLP, families commit in writing to a Statement of Faith that covers far more than

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<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 102

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 103

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>121</sup> Ulrich Zwingli, *Commentary on True and False Religion* Ed. Samuel Macauley Jackson and Clarence Nevin Heller, the American Society of Church History (Durham, NC: Labyrinth Press 1981).

<sup>122</sup> The recurring of theme of danger runs throughout Gothard’s writings, for examples see: Bill Gothard, *The Sevenfold Power of First-Century Churches and Homes*. (Oak Brook, IL: Institute in Basic Life Principles 1976); Gothard, *Instructions for Our Most Important Battle*; Gothard, *Our Jealous God*.

just theology and family planning. Adherents pledge to “yield their rights” to the authorities God places over them and to the Divine Will, as interpreted by the IBLP. Practically, this means that they vow to limit interactions with dissenters, including family members who may not approve of the IBLP.<sup>123</sup> They agree to rid their homes of any media or cultural items that do not conform strictly to the Gothard way of life and to avoid “places of worldly amusement.”<sup>124</sup> Any kind of sexual or sensual content is forbidden as a matter of course, along with anything magical, occult, or non-biblically supernatural.<sup>125</sup> No fairy godmothers, ruby slippers, or young British wizards for the children of the IBLP.

For observers of conservative American evangelical history and culture, these may be familiar prohibitions—but the IBLP goes further than most. The Institute demonizes (literally linking them with demonic forces) books or movies that depict (without problematizing) the following: women having any kind of authority over men; children disobeying parents; any kind of familial disharmony that is not “biblically resolved;” deception (no matter how trivial, in fact, *especially* if it is trivial); or disrespect for authority.<sup>126</sup> What is more, adherents are warned not to underestimate the power of seemingly harmless media. Laughing at the mischievous antics of Bugs Bunny for example, is, “smiling at sin.”<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Gothard, *Advanced Seminar*, 27-28.

<sup>124</sup> *Journey to the Heart: Discover Marvelous Rewards by Experiencing the Greatest Commandment!* (Oak Brook, IL: Institute in Basic Life Principles Publications) 2007, p. 18.

<sup>125</sup> The Statement of Faith has evolved slightly over the decades, today it is most succinctly expressed on the application families must fill out to join the Advanced Training Institute, the IBLP’s homeschooling community and its largest programs. The application is available here: <https://atii.org/apply/>

<sup>126</sup> Gothard, *Basic Seminar*; Gothard, *Advanced Seminar*.

<sup>127</sup> See the ATI Application <https://atii.org/apply/>



Gothard's prescriptions also cover "godly" modes of dress for both men and women in various IBLP publications and in his Basic and Advanced Seminars—long skirts, and high-necked blouses that cover the shoulders for women and long pants for men—though far more pages and time are spent on the dangers of *female* immodesty than on male immodesty. Gothard is particularly preoccupied with women's hair. This is not necessarily unique. Many religious traditions have rituals and prescriptions surrounding hair. Muslim women have the *hijab*, Sheikhs have *Kesh* (the practice of growing one's hair), Orthodox Jewish men grow *payot*. Among American protestants, Apostolic Pentecostal women, along with some other inheritors of the Holiness traditions, refrain from cutting their hair as a way of eschewing "worldliness" and of course, Anabaptists communities also prescribe covering one's hair out of modesty.

Curiously, modesty, worldliness, or respect for God's creation, are not Gothard's concern *vis-à-vis* hair. Gothard is focused on beauty. The leader has a strong personal preference for long, loose curls—a fact confirmed by the former employees who recently sued the IBLP for sexual harassment, claiming that Gothard would erotically caress their hair, in addition to more serious allegations. Regardless, long flowing curls remain popular among IBLP women, even when it means spending a lot of time with a curling iron. The Duggar daughters' flowing locks, much beloved by fans, and the labor-intensive hairstyles I saw at Big Sandy, are signs of obedience as much as aesthetic choice.

### ***Your Hairstyle Should Show Your -***

- |                                |                                       |  |
|--------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--|
| a. Femininity vs. Masculinity  | e. Diligence vs. Weariness            | i. Patience vs. Impatience                   |
| b. Contentment vs. Frustration | f. Softness vs. Hardness              | j. Personal organization vs. Disorganization |
| c. Neatness vs. Carelessness   | g. Self-acceptance vs. Self-rejection | k. Personal discipline vs. Inconsistency     |
| d. Submission vs. Pride        | h. Obedience vs. Defiance             |  |

- ***EXTRA TIME AND EFFORT = EXPRESSION OF REVERENCE.***
- ***DISCOVER AND CONFORM TO YOUR HUSBAND'S REAL WISHES.***
- ***ENCOURAGE HIM TO LEARN PRINCIPLES OF HAIR STYLING.***
- ***EXPLAIN YOUR HAIRSTYLE TO OTHERS ON THE BASIS OF YOUR SUBMISSION TO YOUR AUTHORITY.***

Image 6: Hairstyles, *Training Faithful Women Resource Manual* <sup>128</sup>

As one might imagine, Gothard's prescriptions extend to the bedroom as well. Like many conservative Christians, IBLP families expect sexual abstinence before marriage and fully participate in the ideological and material trappings of "purity culture." But again, the IBLP goes farther than many in its prescriptions. The IBLP forbids hand-holding until engagement, and kissing before the wedding day. It is a testament to the efficacy of Gothard's manipulative methods that young couples in the IBLP will almost unanimously claim that these limitations were *their* idea. They were not laid down by mom and dad, or prescribed by Bill Gothard, or the Institute, but *chosen* by the couple.

In truth, the IBLP and Gothard have published extensively on dating and courtship. Gothard's writings on courtship decry *dating* as "practicing for divorce." Rather than dating, the IBLP prescribes a closely supervised period of "courtship" wherein "two fathers agree to work

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<sup>128</sup> Gothard, *Training Faithful Women Resource Manual*. (Oak Brook, IL: Institute in Basic Life Principles, 1984) 46.

with a qualified young man to win the daughter for marriage.”<sup>129</sup> Notice that the active participants are the fathers who “work with” the young man. The young woman, who is only identified by her relationship to her father, “the daughter,” is a passive object to be “won.” Whether or not she is “qualified” is moot. She needs no qualifications since she is not expected to exert any agency.

“Courtship” culture is not unique to the IBLP. It is part of the much larger evangelical purity culture which scholars like Sara Moslener, Amy DeRogatis, Christine Gardner, and Heather Hendershot have ably examined.<sup>130</sup> The hyper-supervised and medieval-sounding practice has been disseminated more widely in popular books like *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* by Joshua Harris (who later publicly regretted his contributions to purity culture) and *When God Writes Your Love Story*, by Eric and Leslie Ludy.<sup>131</sup> However, many Americans encountered courtship for the first time via the Duggar family, either by watching the television show or by viewing media coverage of the Duggars’ courtships and weddings.

As viewers saw on *19 Kids and Counting*, courtship begins between a father and potential son-in-law. The system creates a quasi-homoerotic dynamic whereby the young man courts the father first, and then the daughter. Gothard explains in his *Establishing Biblical Standards of*

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<sup>129</sup> Gothard, *Basic Seminar*, 180; Bill Gothard, “How Does Courtship Work?” <https://iblp.org/questions/how-does-courtship-work>

<sup>130</sup> Amy DeRegatis, *Saving Sex: Sexuality and Salvation in American Evangelicalism*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Christine Gardner, *J. Making Chastity Sexy: The Rhetoric of Evangelical Abstinence Campaigns*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011); Heather Hendershot, *Shaking the World for Jesus: Media and Conservative Evangelical Culture*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Sara Moslener, *Virgin Nation: Sexual Purity and American Adolescence*. (New York: Oxford University Press 2015).

<sup>131</sup> Joshua Harris, *I Kissed Dating Good Bye*, (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Books, 2003).; Eric and Leslie Ludy, *When God Writes Your Love Story: The Ultimate Guide to Guy/Girl Relationships* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Books, 2009).

*Courtship*, “The proper way to get to know the young lady is by building a relationship with her father...”<sup>132</sup> In the Gothard notion of courtship, the intended couple’s knowledge of one another is relatively unimportant. He explains, “Dating is based on what is presently known about each other. However, God designed courtship to lead to a marriage covenant based on what *He* knows about each partner.”<sup>133</sup> Courtship also sets up highly gendered relational systems that can leave the young women powerless. They know very little about their intended and have to rely on the discretion of their fathers. Fathers who take their daughters’ desires into account, as Jim Bob Duggar apparently did, are lauded as thoughtful patriarchs, but those who do not are still within their biblical authority.

Rigid sexual mores prod young people into marriage, as does a desire for independence. Unmarried children in the IBLP, especially young women, are expected to remain living with their parents until they are married. Consequently, IBLP marriages often start very young. Ten couples in their first year of marriage attended the “newlyweds” seminar at the 2016 Big Sandy Conference. No one, save the leaders (and me), was over twenty-two, and all but two of the young women were pregnant. Further, since higher education is regarded as suspect at best, especially for young women, little stands in the way of a young marriage. Further, Gothard cautions that courtships, once begun, should be as brief as possible and engagements even shorter. These are times of great temptation, and distraction. “The lady in particular” Gothard warns, “may desire to please the Lord, but her attention and affections will be directed to the

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<sup>132</sup> Bill Gothard, *Establishing Biblical Standards in Courtship*. (Oak Brook, IL: The Institute in Basic Life Principles, 2009) 8.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid*

young man who is doing all he can to win her heart. In a short courtship, the focus is for the couple to see how they can please their parents.”<sup>134</sup>

Once married, a new set of elaborate dictates apply. Gothard lays down detailed rules for sexual conduct *within* marriage—no sex during menstruation, for example.<sup>135</sup> Couples are to abstain for forty days following the birth of a boy and eighty following the birth of a girl—echoing the Hebrew Bible.<sup>136</sup> Masturbation, including mutual masturbation within marriage, like other prohibited acts, is linked with demonic forces.<sup>137</sup> Women it seems are especially vulnerable to this kind of demonic possession, which of course, is a well-worn trope from Aquinas on forward, if not earlier. Men’s “sexual sin” according to Gothard is a failure of will, presumably because men are naturally sexually desirous.<sup>138</sup> Women’s sexual sin however, is more disturbing, and more likely supernatural as it goes against their chaste nature. Further, according to one of the few IBLP-approved sex manuals, *Intended for Pleasure: Sex Technique and Sexual Fulfillment in Christian Marriage* (which also appeared on a wedding episode of the popular *19 Kids and Counting*), oral sex is also problematic—especially cunnilingus, which the author derides as a “crutch” that prevents women from reaching orgasm vaginally.<sup>139</sup> The primary author, Dr. Ed Wheat, is, unsurprisingly, a man.

### ***The Body as a Battlefield***

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> Gothard, *Basic Seminar Textbook*, 176.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 175-185

<sup>137</sup> Jim Sammons, “7 Weapons to Maintain Moral Purity”, delivered at the Family Conference, Big Sandy 2008; Paul and Jenny Speed, “God’s Rubber Band,” delivered at the Family Conference, Big Sandy 2014.

<sup>138</sup> Gothard, *Basic Seminar*, 171

<sup>139</sup> Ed and Gaye Wheat, *Intended for Pleasure: Sex Technique and Sexual Fulfillment in Christian Marriage* (Grand Rapids, MI: Revell Publishing, 1997) 86.

Although Dr. Wheat's understanding of female orgasm is dubious to say the least, he did attend medical school. Bill Gothard did not. That fact has never dissuaded the leader from dispensing medical advice to his followers. Gothard has published extensively on health and medical matters and in the mid-1980s, founded the Medical Training Institute of America.<sup>140</sup> The Medical Training Institute is a branch of the IBLP that put out roughly twenty slim volumes called *Basic Care Bulletins* on a host of medical topics from cancer to constipation, to gall stones, and the importance of baking one's own bread.<sup>141</sup> The Institute also published monthly newsletters containing Gothard's answers to (supposedly real) letters from members detailing terrible health problems and testimonies of miraculous healings.

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<sup>140</sup> See for example: Bill Gothard, *The Lies We Believe that Cause Stress and Disease*. (Oak Brook, IL: Institute in Basic Life Principles, 2009); Gothard, *Basic Seminar*, 48-49, 82, 105; The Institute in Basic Life Principles, *How To Make Wise Medical Decisions*. (Oak Brook, IL: Institute in Basic Life Principles, 1990); The Institute in Basic Life Principles, *How to Discover the Rewards of Fasting* (Oak Brook, IL: Institute in Basic Life Principles, 1990); The Institute in Basic Life Principles, *How To Make Wise Medical Decisions about Immunizations*. (Oak Brook, IL: Institute in Basic Life Principles, 1994); The Institute in Basic Life Principles, *How To Make Wise Medical Decisions about Circumcision*. (Oak Brook, IL: Institute in Basic Life Principles, 1992); The Institute in Basic Life Principles, *How To Greatly Reduce the Risk of Common Disease* (Oak Brook, IL: Institute in Basic Life Principles, 1990); The Institute in Basic Life Principles, *How To Understand the Causes and Management of Miscarriages*. (Oak Brook, IL: Institute in Basic Life Principles, 1990); The Institute in Basic Life Principles, *The Vital Role of the Church in Wise Medical Decisions*. (Oak Brook, IL: Institute in Basic Life Principles, 1990).

<sup>141</sup> *The Basic Care Bulletins* are more like packets or pamphlets than books. The author is listed as the Institute in Basic Life Principles. However, it is fair to assume that Gothard either penned them himself or supervised the writing. They are still available for order in hard copy on the IBLP's website: <https://store.iblp.org/health-stress.html> See: The Institute in Basic Life Principles, *Additional Information about Bread-Making*. (Oak Brook, IL: Institute in Basic Life Principles, 1994); The Institute in Basic Life Principles, *How to Avoid Unnecessary Caesarian Sections*. (Oak Brook, IL: Institute in Basic Life Principles, 1990); The Institute in Basic Life Principles, *A Biblical Basis to Evaluate Cancer*. (Oak Brook, IL: Institute in Basic Life Principles, 1995); The Institute in Basic Life Principles, *Discover 5 Causes of All Diseases*. (Oak Brook, IL: Institute in Basic Life Principles, 1996).

Gothard's early health prescriptions are reminiscent of nineteenth-century evangelical health crusaders John Harvey Kellogg and Sylvester Graham.<sup>142</sup> Though Gothard stops short of vegetarianism, like Kellogg and Graham, Gothard puts an emphasis on nutrition, arguing for a whole-grain-based diet. Similarly, Gothard's medical writings are disproportionately concerned with constipation and bowel maladies. He calls constipation, "the most neglected sign and cause of illness," after which he recommends readers keep a journal of bowel movements with detailed descriptions of the size, shape, color, and buoyancy of their waste.<sup>143</sup> However, while many of his directives regarding pregnancy, birthing, and lactation, remain IBLP gospel, it seems that most of Gothard's diet prescriptions have fallen out of favor among his flock. Many, like the Duggars, heed his Levitical prohibition of pork, but most of the IBLP families I encountered at Big Sandy, and at the Sacramento family conferences, ate the standard American diet, protein heavy and chocked-full of processed food-products. In fact, the Duggars are famous, or perhaps infamous, for their sodium-laden tater-tot casserole. Toilet-journaling notwithstanding, this selective disregard is somewhat unfortunate, given that Gothard's whole-foods diet is the only part of his health ministry with any legitimate medical credibility.

Gothard seems to have cobbled together his health theology from various sources—but, as with his borrowing from reconstructionist founder R.J. Rushdonny, Gothard never cites other thinkers. One ministry Gothard seems to have taken a great deal from is run by pastor Henry Wright, who self-published his *A More Excellent Way: Be in Health* in 1999.<sup>144</sup> Wright is now

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<sup>142</sup> For more on evangelical diet culture see, R. Marie Griffith, *Born Again Bodies: Flesh and Spirit in American Christianity*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

<sup>143</sup> IBLP, *How to Make Wise Medical Decisions*, 6,

<sup>144</sup> Henry Wright, *A More Excellent Way: Be in Health*. (New Kensington, PA: Whitacre House Publishing, 1999).

the founder of Be in Health, a ministry aimed at teaching people “how to recognize the root issues behind disease and to overcome the works of the enemy [Satan] in your life.” Wright teaches that “80%” of disease has a spiritual and emotional cause like anger, or rejection, and his programs promise to cure everything from attention deficit disorder, to cancer, to allergies, by pointing out and healing those “spiritual wounds.”<sup>145</sup>

Gothard’s 2008 book, *How to Resolve 7 Deadly Stresses*, parallels Wright’s teachings, though Wright’s work is distinctively kinder.<sup>146</sup> Wright places most of the blame for disease on “the enemy,” or the Devil, and His ability to beguile the human mind and thereby ensnare the body in disease. Though the devil and demons also play a prominent role for Gothard, he sets far more blame on the individual than does Wright. Gothard is less interested in “healing spiritual wounds” than he is in linking “sin problems” with specific areas of the body. Anger, for instance, is linked with the cardiovascular systems, greed with the immune systems, etc. In making these connections, Gothard encourages ill persons to take responsibility for how their own moral failures are manifesting in and on their bodies.<sup>147</sup>

Although Gothard’s later works borrow heavily from Wright, Gothard published most of the earlier Basic Care Bulletins prior to Wright’s, *A More Excellent Way*. Almost all of the “information” put out in the *Basic Care Bulletins* and newsletters is medically unsound and deeply gendered. More folk remedies and magical practices than medical prescriptions, the Medical Training Institute is where Gothard’s penchant for magical practices might be most

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<sup>145</sup> Write, *A More Excellent Way*.

<sup>146</sup> Bill Gothard, *How to Resolve 7 Deadly Stresses*. (Oak Brook, IL: Institute in Basic Life Principles 2008)

<sup>147</sup> The Institute in Basic Life Principles, *A Biblical Basis to Evaluate Cancer*. (Oak Brook, IL: Institute in Basic Life Principles, 1995); The Institute in Basic Life Principles, *Discover 5 Causes of All Diseases*. (Oak Brook, IL: Institute in Basic Life Principles 1996).



apparent. For example, Gothard attributes a host of birth-related maladies—from difficult labors to an infant’s failure to latch—to the presence of demonic items in the home. The items included Troll dolls, subversive music, souvenirs from non-Christian countries, and romance novels.<sup>148</sup>

Gothard also contends that vaccines cause epilepsy, learning disabilities, and sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS), and they are largely ineffective to boot since they cannot address demonic causes of disease.<sup>149</sup> Doctors are helpless in the face of these demonic powers. In their lack of “scriptural grounding,” Gothard contends, doctors “often make extremely unwise and very dangerous medical decisions.”<sup>150</sup>

Continuing the theme of untrustworthy doctors, Gothard strongly suggests home births, even for complicated pregnancies, vaginal births after a caesarian (V-BAC) and for women of advanced maternal age. He warns that hospitals are dangerously demonic places. Not only are doctors often the unwitting dupes of Satan, Gothard contends that a hospital birth can lead to an unnecessary Cesarean section, and that the procedure is not only medically dangerous but *unbiblical* and an open invitation to demonic possession.<sup>151</sup> He writes,

Those who are trained in assisting women in childbirth are often unaware that their training is built on presuppositions that are damaging to women and children. In reality, a war is being waged against women and children. Indeed, since the beginning of time Satan’s agenda has been to destroy the Godly seed.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> Carol Storm, Council Bluffs IA, “How the Exit of Troll Dolls and Dolls was Followed By the Entrance of Babies” *Basic Care Newsletter*, January, 1996; The Institute in Basic Life Principles, *How to Make Wise Medical Decisions*.

<sup>149</sup> The Institute in Basic Life Principles, *How To Make Wise Decisions about Immunizations* (Oak Brook, IL: Institute in Basic Life Principles 1992)

<sup>150</sup> *How to Make Wise Medical Decisions*, 2

<sup>151</sup> The Institute in Basic Life Principles, *How to Avoid Unnecessary Caesarian Sections*, 2.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*

Gothard's preoccupation with demons is somewhat distinctive, but home birthing is an important part of broader conservative Christian pronatalist culture, along with homeschooling and home-churching.<sup>153</sup> Like homeschooling, home birthing reinscribes the isolationist and libertarian dimensions of conservative Christian pronatalist ideology and culture.<sup>154</sup> It underscores the procreative nuclear family as a self-contained and divinely ordained unit and the physical home as distinctly female space.<sup>155</sup> It affirms the religious centrality of pregnancy as the female body's ultimate purpose.

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<sup>153</sup> Though conservative Christian pronatalism and home birthing go hand-in-hand, Pamala Klassen's work on home birthing shows that a variety of women from a variety of religious orientations have embraced home birthing in recent decades. Myriad social factors have contributed to the increased popularity of practice, among them, the baby-boomer back-lash against the medicalization of birth, the consumerization of health care, the moralization of "natural childbirth," and the rise of "alterative" medicine in the broader culture. Pamela E. Klassen, *Blessed Events: Religion and Homebirth in America*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001)

<sup>154</sup> For more on Homeschooling see: James C. Carper and Brian D. Ray "Religion, Schooling, and Home Education: Past and Present" in *Religion, Education, and the American Experience: Reflections on Religion and American Public Life*, Edith Waldvogel Blumhofer ed. (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002) 223-42; Robert Kunzman, *Write These Laws on Your Children: Inside the World of Conservative Christian Homeschooling* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009) Jennifer Lois, *Home is Where the School Is: The Logic of Homeschooling and the Emotional Labor of Mothering*. (New York: New York University Press, 2013); Colleen McDannell, "Creating the Christian Home: Home Schooling in Contemporary America," in *American Sacred Space*, edited by David Chidester and Edward Tabor Linenthal, 187-219. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995)

<sup>155</sup> In this way, conservative Christian pronatalist families share a great deal with their white Victorian predecessors. Religious historians of the nineteenth-century have argued that white middle-class Victorians responded to increasing industrialization and other social changes in part by using newly mass-produced religious material culture, and print media, to sacralize and center the domestic sphere, and to claim it as distinctly female and specifically, maternal space. Or as Pamela Klassen puts it, "with the decline of agriculturally based households and the rise of industrialization, economic production moved out of the home and into the factory, rendering the home solely a site of reproduction" Klassen, *Blessed Events*, 111. See also: Nancy F Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Women's Sphere" in New England 1780-1835*. (New Haven: Yale University Press 1977); Collene McDannell, *The Christian Home in Victorian America, 1840-1900*. (Bloomington: university of Indiana Press, 1986); Barbara Leslie Epstein, *The Politics of Domesticity: Women Evangelism, and Temperance in Nineteenth Century America*.

Ethnographer Pamela Klassen's sensitive and exhaustive study of home birthing shows that for some women, home birthing is an act of dominion. It is a way of taking ownership of both the body and the home as the seat of female power. For others it is an act of submission and dedication.<sup>156</sup> In many ways these are two sides of the same coin. The women of the IBLP experience surely home birthing as dominion, submission, and everything in between. The official IBLP literature however, describes labor and pregnancy as an act of "spiritual warfare" that is as much about men as it is about women.

Though Klassen does not examine the IBLP in any detail, her study happened to include one woman, "Janet," who expressly aligned herself with Gothard's organization. In fact, Klassen found her "enthusiasm" for the organization notable. Klassen writes "Janet gave me a copy of a booklet on morning sickness that she had consulted herself, and that she had recommended to clients she met in her role as a spiritual counselor."<sup>157</sup> The booklet Janet gave Klassen was the IBLP's, "Basic Concepts in Understanding Morning Sickness."<sup>158</sup> As Klassen observes, "Basic Concepts in Understanding Morning Sickness," lays down a detailed prayer schedule for every stage of fetal development. True to Gothard's style, the booklet is painstakingly precise, and like nearly every other IBLP publication, it weaves scientific and medical language in so seamlessly with supernaturalism, it is difficult to notice when one ends and the other begins. As Klassen put it, "Though Janet did not manage to use all the prayers in the chart, she did heartily endorse their

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(Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press 1981); Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985)

<sup>156</sup> Klassen, *Blessed Events*.

<sup>157</sup> Klassen, 162

<sup>158</sup> IBLP, "Basic Concepts in Understanding Morning Sickness" (Oak Brook, IL: Institute in Basic Life Principles, no date)

overall message that bodies are terrain on which God and Satan do battle, and that even such a scientific concept as DNA can be neatly woven into this cosmic duel.”

Pregnancy is women’s highest calling, their “jurisdiction” as Gothard would put it, and evidence of their total submission to God’s control over their wombs, but pregnancy does not belong wholly to them. It is implicated in a holy war, and Gothard’s writings suggest that it is ultimately the purview of men. In Klassen’s account, Janet struggled to affirm her husband’s authority over her body and health, while also recognizing that his “controlling” nature would likely be a hindrance to her while she labored. Janet told her husband that her primary concern for her labor was how they were going to “flow together” and whether he would try to control the process. She warned him that if he did, she would kick him out of the room. Janet’s story epitomizes the paradox many IBLP women are expected to solve—male authority over pregnancy and birth, however “scriptural,” is impractical. Klassen concluded that ultimately Janet was “espousing submission while declaring its limits,” but if that is the case, she got no help from the pamphlet she enthusiastically shared.

“Basic Concepts in Understanding Morning Sickness” uncompromisingly declares male authority over pregnancy and birth. It commands women to bear the difficulties of pregnancy, morning sickness included, with submission and cheerfulness—no matter what.<sup>159</sup> To make this

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<sup>159</sup> The injunction to be cheerful even in labor is not limited to the IBLP or to conservative Christianity. It was also prescribed by counter culture activists like Ina May Gaskin in her work, *Spiritual Midwifery*. Scientologists also have the similar concept of “silent birth” where mothers are trained not to make any sounds during labor and delivery. Ina May Gaskin, *Spiritual Midwifery*. (Nashville, TN: Book Publishing Company 2002); John Carmichael, “Scientology Silent Birth: ‘It’s A Natural Thing’” *Belief Net*. <http://www.beliefnet.com/faiths/scientology/scientology-silent-birth-its-a-natural-thing.aspx>

point, it offers a “testimony” from “a father in Idaho” under the heading, “How a husband conquered his Wife’s Morning Sickness” it reads:

December was a physical disaster for my wife. In the middle of a yeast infection and two serious, back-to-back flu viruses, the doctor confirmed that she was pregnant. She literally could not get of bed for many weeks and her weight dropped to 90 pounds... The flu finally left but the morning sickness stayed.... We began to doubt that our baby would survive.

My wife also began to wonder if *she* would survive, and she finally told me if this was how it was going to be, she just *could not* have any more children... I cried out to God... God who is rich in mercy, reminded me that Satan was also watching. I relayed this information to my wife who promptly repented... Relief was instantaneous and she never experienced another moment of morning sickness!<sup>160</sup>

First, this account, presented in pamphlet about *morning sickness* is written from the perspective of a man. We do not get to hear this poor woman’s account, if she existed at all. In fact, she is presented as the weak link, the one who ultimately needs to repent. This account reinforces Gothard’s view that “God does not state that a woman will be saved *from* difficulty in childbearing, but she will be saved *in* the difficulties associated with childbearing.”<sup>161</sup> Women are weak beings, subject to the wiles of Satan—only through submission and pain are they redeemed.

Second, contrasting this shockingly merciless testimony with Janet’s declaration provides an important reality check. Gothard’s teachings impose impossible, impractical standards on women, while simultaneously telling them they are weak. Consequently, when a situation arises that *demand*s female ownership (e.g. labor), the women of the IBLP have to beg,

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<sup>160</sup> The Institute in Basic Life Principles, “Basic Concepts in Understanding Morning Sickness” (Oak Brook, IL: Institute in Basic Life Principles, 1994).

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

threaten, or otherwise negotiate for what little autonomy they can get. It may be tempting to take Janet's story as evidence that the women of the IBLP do not "practically" accept Gothard's teachings, even if they enthusiastically support his ideals. But the practical is not impervious to the ideal. Any agency Janet may have claimed in threatening to kick her husband out of the birthing room must be viewed in light of the worry she felt over the situation. "That's my biggest concern," she told him, "it's not the pain." More than pain, she was worried about how the doctrines of patriarchal authority were going to exact control over her while she was vulnerable. She wouldn't stand for it because she *couldn't* stand for it; she knew that in order to endure the demands of birth, it would need to be on her terms.

Just as woman's failure to enjoy morning sickness and the perils of pregnancy can endanger men's "Godly seed," Gothard also warns that women's failings can pave the way for Satan's other diseases. According to one *Basic Care Bulletin*, osteoporosis can be caused by a wayward wife. Gothard argues that Proverbs 12:4, which uses the metaphor of crumbling bones to describe a disgraceful wife, is literally referring a bone disease. "A wife that shames her husband is 'as a rottenness of the bones,'" he writes.<sup>162</sup>

Gothard also describes conditions that disproportionately affect women like anorexia, bulimia, and post-partem depression as the result of indulgence and a lack of self-control.<sup>163</sup> Gothard's writings again put women in a difficult double bind. Eating disorders are demonized as moral failure, but so is weight gain. Specifically, Gothard cautions postpartum women to

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<sup>162</sup> The Institute in Basic Life Principles, *Additional Information about Bread-Making* (Oak Brook, IL: Institute in Basic Life Principles, 1994).

<sup>163</sup> Institute in Basic Life Principles, *Wisdom Book 4* (Oak Brook, IL: The Institute in Basic Life Principles) 6.1

“exercise self-control in the area of diet,” lest they become overweight and therefore unattractive to their husbands. Gothard writes,

Many wives struggle with the issue of self-control, especially after giving birth to children. Weight control requires consistent conformity to God’s principles of living. Let God and your husband know you care about your weight. Ask your husband to help you identify and remove hindrances to weight control... Your efforts to stay healthy and physically fit will bless your husband.<sup>164</sup>

This is a prime example of both Gothard’s fixation on the female body as an object ultimately belonging to men, and his tendency to elevate a pedestrian “problem,” like post-pregnancy baby-weight, to cosmic significance. The human body is a battlefield upon which good and evil fight their war. Not only might you lose your husband’s affections if you fail to lose those pounds, but you will cede territory to the “principalities of darkness” and imperil your relationship with the Almighty. It is also worth noting that men’s weight is never specifically discussed in any of Gothard’s materials.

Above all, Gothard contends, the chain of authority must be held in place to safeguard good health. “Anyone who puts himself in the hands of doctors for major medical care before calling for the elders of the church is making an unwise decision.”<sup>165</sup> Doctors, even with their medical training are not to supplant the authority of husbands, fathers, and church elders. The authority of the church, which for the IBLP ultimately rests in Gothard, must come before all.

### ***Beware the Beat***

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<sup>164</sup> Gothard, “Meeting Your Husband’s Seven Basic Needs: How to be a Godly Wife” <https://iblp.org/questions/how-can-i-meet-my-husbands-basic-needs>.

<sup>165</sup> The Institute in Basic Life Principles, *The Vital Role of the Church in Wise Medical Decisions* (Oak Brook, IL: Institute in Basic Life Principles 1992)

The IBLP's rules for music are just as strident and just as magically focused as those for health. In signing the detailed Statement of Faith, families commit to abstaining from any music with a "strong down beat on beats 2 and 4" or "too many minor chords," even if the lyrics express orthodox Christian themes.<sup>166</sup> The Institute is especially concerned with the dangers of seemingly Christian music and calls the "Contemporary Christian music movement" expressly Satanic.<sup>167</sup> Other IBLP materials elaborate on the dangers of music that might inspire dancing, or compositions that do not follow a "definite order," or are not "cheerful."<sup>168</sup> Music that contains "breathy singing voices," "an attitude of rebellion," or "resistance toward authority" is expressly forbidden.<sup>169</sup> It is important to note that the IBLP does not simply warn its members against some music because it might *lead to* sin, lust, or because it contains material the leadership

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<sup>166</sup> This dictate is taken from the IBLP's application for its homeschooling curriculum. There is a long history of assigning evil powers to certain minor chords. Sometimes called the "tritone" or the "devils interval," these chords were banned from Renaissance church music as they were deemed ugly and unfit to glorifying God. In the nineteenth-century however, composers harnessed the tritone's power and played with its dark evocations. Wagner's 1876 *Gotterdammerung* is perhaps the most recognizable example. The tritone is also common in heavy metal and death metal presumably because its dissonance evokes the subversive social commentary that undergirds the genre. See: F. J. Smith, "Some Aspects of the Tritone and the Semitritone in the *Speculum Musicae*: The Non-Emergence of the *Diabolus in Music*" *Journal of Musicological Research* Vol. 3 (1979): 63–74. See also: Sam Dunn, Scot McFadyen, Jessica Joy Wise. *Metal: A Headbanger's Journey*. Banger Films, 2005.

<sup>167</sup> Michael Ballam, *Music and the Mind*. (Institute in Basic Life Principles Publications, 1996); Institute in Basic Life Principles, *Guard Your Heart*. (Institute in Basic Life Principles, 2008); Kimberly Smith, *Oh Be Careful, Little Ears* (Enumclaw, WA: Winepress Books 1998); Jon Staddon, *The Power of Music* (Oak Brook, IL: The Institute in Basic Life Principles Publications 2012);

<sup>168</sup> The Institute in Basic Life Principles, *Reviewing and Reaffirming Seventeen Basic Commitments: How To Protect Your Sons and Daughters by Cleansing Your Home* (Oak Brook, IL: The Institute in Basic Life Principles Publications 1984)

<sup>169</sup> Gothard, *Basic Seminar*, 106-107



deems objectionable. It identifies it as *demonic* and capable of causing the listener to become demonically possessed.<sup>170</sup>

One cannot help but see the racialized nature of these prohibitions. Historically African-American genres like jazz, hip-hop, rap, blues, and soul, would not pass the “order,” “cheerful,” “rebellious,” or “strong-down beat” tests. One wonders if spirituals would pass muster, what with their rousing rhythms and subversive coded lyrics aimed at undermining slave-owners’ authority. Classical music and hymns are recommended, but curiously, bluegrass, and other white Southern, Ozark, and Appalachian musical traditions (which certainly have strong down beats and dance-inducing rhythms derived from the region’s white settler’s Celtic and Scottish Highland musical traditions) are acceptable. In fact, several IBLP families have formed semi-professional country and bluegrass bands.<sup>171</sup> They release albums and perform at music festivals around the country. Jazz is potentially demonic because “God is a God of order.”<sup>172</sup> But bluegrass is part of America’s “heritage.” This is a minor example of how conservative Christian pronatalist ministries like the IBLP reinscribe constructions of whiteness and white supremacy.

For the IBLP, the danger is not just in the rhythms or lyrics, but in the geographic origins of music. Gothard teaches that music has the power to transmit demonic forces from one region to another. If music comes from a place that is rife with darkness, it is more likely to call satanic emissaries into the places where it is played. For Gothard, Africa is such a place.<sup>173</sup> Parroting

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<sup>170</sup> IBLP, *Guard Your Heart*.

<sup>171</sup> See: “The Bontrager Family Singers” an IBLP family of twelve who specialize in blue grass <https://bontragerfamilysingers.com/>; The Bates Family of UpTV ‘s *Bringing Up Bates* <https://thebatesfamily.com/>; “Southern Raised”, <http://southernraisedbluegrass.com/>

<sup>172</sup> For more on the relationship between religion, race, and Jazz see: Jason C. Bivins’ *Spirits Rejoice! Jazz and American Religion*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

<sup>173</sup> The Institute in Basic Life Principles, *Basic Care Bulletin 17: How To Make Wise Decisions about Immunizations*. (Oak Brook, IL: Institute in Basic Life Principles, 1992); The Institute in

overtly racist Reconstructions leaders like Rushdoony, Gothard repeatedly warns his flock to be wary of anything from Africa, as it is a place where many people “remain in the grip of Satan.”<sup>174</sup>

Gothard’s racist magical imagination also contends that adopted children carry “generational sin” within them in the DNA, particularly if they are from another “spiritual ancestry” (read: “pagan Africa” as Gothard calls the continent).<sup>175</sup> Gothard explains, with just enough scientific jargon to sound authoritative to the layperson, that “scientific researchers” have determined that, “because of the way our DNA is constructed” we quite literally inherit the sins of our fathers. Adopted children therefore, can bring the “familiar spirits from [their pagan] family trees,” or what Gothard calls, “the rollovers” into their new families.

These racist supernatural imaginations are disturbing on their own, but ever more so when we consider the multiple reports of child abuse coming out of the IBLP community. As a rule, the IBLP condones corporal punishment and several families at the 2016 and 2017 Big Sandy conferences casually indicated in their public testimonies on other topics that they spanked their children regularly. Several women also mentioned that they followed the methods

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Basic Life Principles, *Reviewing and Reaffirming Seventeen Basic Commitments: How To Protect Your Sons and Daughters by Cleansing Your Home*. (Oak Brook, IL: The Institute in Basic Life Principles Publications, 1984).

<sup>174</sup> Rousas John Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law*. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing 1973)

<sup>175</sup> The Institute in Basic Life Principles, *How To Make Wise Decisions about Adoption*. (Oak Brook, IL: Institute in Basic Life Principles, 1994). Amy DeRegatis also notes a similar discourse of sin-infected sperm in her examination of evangelical sex manuals. Amy DeRegatis, *Saving Sex: Sexuality and Salvation in American Evangelicalism*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

Gothard’s demonization of Africa is of course, ironic given that Africa has arguably become the global center of conservative Christianity, while Europe has become largely secular. See: Philip Jenkins, “How Africa Is Changing Faith Around the World” *Trend*. (Summer 2016).

of Mike and Debbie Pearl, whose parenting manual *To Train Up a Child*, on sale at the Big Sandy gatherings, recommends harsh beatings, food deprivation, exposure to cold weather, and prolonged isolation, as biblically sound disciplinary methods for children as young as six months.<sup>176</sup>

These tactics become ever more dangerous in the hands of those who believe fervently in demonic possession. Beating, isolating, or starving a child can be easily rationalized by parents who believe that the child is not themselves, but rather an instrument of evil. The racialized links Gothard makes between Africa, adoption, and demonic forces are doubly concerning when we consider the links between conservative Christian pronatalism and the international adoption boom, especially from Africa, of the last twenty years.<sup>177</sup>

### ***Provision***

In addition to the Basic and Advanced Seminars, the IBLP also prescribes the Financial Freedom Seminar, a personal finance ministry taught by Dallas real-estate developer Jim Sammons. The Financial Freedom Seminar articulates the organization's uncompromising no-debt policy. The IBLP denounces any kind of borrowing or lending, including mortgages or car loans.<sup>178</sup> Paying cash for everything means that some families struggle financially. Long term investing becomes difficult and they are unable to build credit, or borrow seed money for ventures that might raise their quality of life later on. According to current and former IBLP families, they often drive unsafe vehicles, go without medical care, basic utilities, or live without

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<sup>176</sup> Michael and Debie Pearl, *To Train Up a Child*. (Pleasantville, TN: No Greater Joy Ministries Inc. 1994).

<sup>177</sup> For more on the international adoption boom see: Katheryn Joyce, *The Child Catchers: Rescue, Trafficking and New Gospel of Adoption*. (New York: Public Affairs, 2013).

<sup>178</sup> Jim Sammons, *Financial Freedom Seminar Textbook*, (Oak Brook, IL: Institute in Basic Life Principles 1981).

appliances like washing machines for long stretches of time. What is more, the IBLP frowns on government assistance as part of their overall vilification of “government overreach.” This means that the poorest families sometimes face malnutrition before they apply for aid. One woman at the 2016 Big Sandy gathering shared that her family had once become so hungry she broke a years old decorative vase stuffed with multi colored pasta and cooked it. This story was strikingly similar to one Jim Bob Duggar tells in the Duggar’s second book, of his own mother resorting to decorative food items to feed her children.<sup>179</sup> Such stories are recounted with pride, as testaments to female industriousness, often years after the fact when the family’s financial situation has improved.

As keepers of the home, women bear the brunt of these sacrifices. Married women are strongly discouraged, if not outright prohibited, from earning money of their own to improve their lot. Some IBLP materials pay lip service to the “Proverbs 32 woman” and her industriousness. However, the same materials stress that the woman praised in Proverbs 32 turns her profits over to her husband to steward.<sup>180</sup> Women’s economic independence is decried as “unbiblical” and a “leading cause” of divorce. “Independence destroys relationships,” Gothard warns, “An independent spirit is the basis for disloyalty.”<sup>181</sup>

The IBLP’s relentless demand for “cheerfulness” works in tandem with the threat of “bitterness” to discourage women from complaining or advocating for themselves.<sup>182</sup> Feeling any

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<sup>179</sup> Duggar, *A Love that Multiplies*. (New York: Howard Books, 2011) 117.

<sup>180</sup> Institute in Basic Life Principles, *Seven Basic Needs of a Husband*. (Oak Brook, IL: Institute in Basic Life Principles Publishing, 2004) 26.

<sup>181</sup> Gothard, *Basic Seminar*, 34

<sup>182</sup> See: Gothard, *Training Faithful Women Resource Manual*. (Oak Brook, IL: Institute in Basic Life Principles, 1984); The Institute in Basic Life Principles, *The Seven Basic Needs of a Husband*.

resentment, no matter how justified, is construed as bitterness. The culture of “cheerfulness” however does not just silence, it demands radical reframing. Finding a silver lining may be a healthy way of coping with hardship, but the women of the IBLP share stories of extreme poverty, want, and pain, with a giddy optimism that borders on the pathological. “When there wasn’t enough for the heating oil, the children slept like puppies in the living room, it was so precious!” one woman shared at the 2017 Big Sandy gathering. Another described carrying (presumably cold) water from a well to bath her children in a paddling pool in the yard while their home was under construction— “they thought it was so fun!” Among devoted IBLP families, these periods of want are recounted as testimonies to God’s provision. Among former members, they are accounts of trauma.

The sacralization of female sacrifice is hardly unique to the IBLP. It exists across religious traditions, and it is the engine that keeps conservative Christian pronatalist discourse moving forward. That said, IBLP women gleefully describe situations and conditions that would make most Americans cringe. They tell stories of “joyfully” hand-washing piles of dirty cloth diapers, of living with five toddlers in homes under active construction, and of cramming families of ten and twelve into tiny two-bedroom homes, or even tents, to save up enough cash for a suitable house. All the while, they repeat platitudes like “having too many children is like having too many flowers.”<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> This is a phrase I heard several times at women’s meetings at IBLP conferences. Michelle Duggar is also found of repeating it. “Reality TV Mom Michelle Duggar is Trying to Get Pregnant With Baby #20!” *In Touch* February 5, 2014. <http://www.intouchweekly.com/posts/reality-tv-mom-michelle-duggar-is-trying-to-get-pregnant-with-baby-20-27042>

This is not to say that they are not allowed to be overwhelmed. What else would testimony be made of if not the overcoming of one's own human frailty? Gothard encourages women in particular to “cry out” for God's help in desperate times (his advice to men is far more proactive). In fact, *The Power of Crying Out* is the title of one of his many books.<sup>184</sup> “Crying out to God” Gothard contends, “is an act of desperation and total concentration. It is a fervent expression of faith in God and trust in His goodness and power to act on your behalf.”<sup>185</sup> In this and in other writings, crying out is touted as the restorative act in and of itself, rather than a mechanism of self-advocacy. Rather than work to change the situation, women are instructed to cry out to God in these moments of pure desperation—including if and when they fear for their safety or the safety of their children—not to prevent violence or suffering, but to express their complete surrender to it. Gothard writes, “When a situation becomes so desperate that only God can deliver you, a cry represents total, unconditional surrender. Don't try to bargain with God—leave your life in His hands.”<sup>186</sup>

### ***Eighteen Women***

At the age of eighty-one, Bill Gothard abruptly resigned from the IBLP in 2014 after eighteen female employees filed sexual harassment suits and charges of sexual assault against him, and they sued the Institute for damages. Ten of these women were minors at the time of the alleged incidents, and most were IBLP employees or interns. These were not the first allegations. More than thirty women have come forward since the 1970s claiming Gothard sexually abused

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<sup>184</sup> Bill Gothard, *The Power of Crying Out: When Prayer Becomes Mighty*. (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah Publishers, 2002).

<sup>185</sup> Bill Gothard, *The Power of Crying Out*, ii.

<sup>186</sup> Bill Gothard, “What Does It Mean to Cry Out To God?” *Anger Resolution Seminar*, <https://iblp.org/questions/what-does-it-mean-cry-out-god>

or harassed them. More than sixty women have claimed that they were raped, harassed, or abused by other IBLP leaders, including Gothard's brother, and with Gothard's full knowledge.<sup>187</sup>

The most recent eighteen women tell hauntingly similar stories. They describe Gothard's "type"—blonde, trim, with long flowing curls. He began grooming them in counseling sessions and Bible studies when they were fourteen, fifteen, eighteen, the oldest was twenty, cultivating the relationships over months and sometimes years. They describe how Gothard gravitated to the most vulnerable among them, to the girls whose fathers or brothers had already beaten, raped, and trafficked them as children, or to those who had already been harassed or raped by other IBLP officials. Gothard took these girls under his wing, met with them privately over months and encouraged them to describe past abuses to him in excruciating detail while he stroked their hair, played "footsie," or ran his hands over their bodies.<sup>188</sup>

Gothard not only never reported the crimes the girls divulged, he convinced them that they were to blame, that they were so beautiful, they tempted their fathers, brothers, or other men into raping and molesting them. He told them that the parents' authority over the child is absolute, even if the parents rapes that child. He taught them to submit and "cry out" to God and allow Him to turn the abuse to "His Glory." He also repeated that *he* was the only person who knew how to counsel rape victims biblically. Gothard separated the girls from their families and

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<sup>187</sup> For more on the scandals before 2015, see Russell Chandler, "More Moral Questions Rock Gothard Ministry," *The Los Angeles Times*, April 5, 1998; Tom Minnery, "Gothard Staffers Ask Hard Question and Press for Reforms in Institute," *Christianity Today*, February 6, 1981; "Bill Gothard Steps Down During Institute Shake Up" *Christianity Today*, August 8, 1980.

<sup>188</sup> *Gretchen Wilkinson, Jane Doe, Jane Doe II, Melody Fedoriw, Charis Barker, Rachel Frost, Rachel Lees, Jane Doe III, Jamie Deering, Ruth Copley Berger v. The Institute in Basic Life Principles and William W. Gothard Jr.*, Case No. L 00980, Circuit Court of the Eighteenth Judicial Circuit, DuPage Country, IL.

communities, asking parents to send specific girls, some as young as fifteen, to live and work at the IBLP headquarters for months at a time, during which they were assigned jobs that amounted to little more than attending to his whims and escorting him on trips. In other cases, parents brought their “troubled” and “rebellious” daughters to Gothard for counseling and Gothard acted as wedge between the girls and their families as he groomed them for abuse. He even managed to convince one girl’s adoptive family to disown her and return her to the care of the state. He kept a cadre of four or five young women around him all the time but pitted them against one another, choosing “pets” and then manipulatively withdrawing his attention. If they complained, he punished them with isolation and threats, insisting that let go of their “bitterness” and yield their rights.<sup>189</sup>

The Board of the IBLP initially stood by their leader when the allegations became public but eventually put Gothard on “indefinite administrative leave” while they conducted a “thorough review process.” Predictably, the “thorough review process” found “no evidence of criminal activity,” but the board did claim that Gothard was guilty of failing to be “above reproach” as befits a “Christian leader.”<sup>190</sup>

After several months, Gothard resigned and issued a statement of his own which has now been removed completely from both the IBLP website and Gothard’s personal website—a platform from which he is currently remaking his image independent of the IBLP. It read:

God has brought me to a place of greater brokenness than at any other time in my life. It is a grief to realize how my pride and insensitivity have affected so many people. I have asked the Lord to reveal the underlying causes and He is doing this.

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<sup>189</sup>Ibid., paragraphs 155-163

<sup>190</sup> Board of Directors, Institute in Basic Life Principles, “Statement Regarding Resignation” March 17, 2014



For many years I have been building the Institute but losing my first love for the Lord...I was finding value and affirmation from the accomplishments of the ministry and those involved in it instead of filling this void in my life with God and His love. I have repented in deep sorrow. However, over the years many people have been offended in different ways because of my lack of genuine love. I put the Institute and its goals ahead of people and their needs. Standards became more important than relationships. People who didn't "measure up" were cut off and those who were not seen as adding value to the ministry were treated as though they were expendable. The more I have listened to people describe their experiences the more grieved and sorrowful I have become.

My wrong focus produced a further consequence. Families were made to feel that they must "measure up." This resulted in some parents putting undue pressure on their sons and daughters in order for the family to be accepted. When there was a lack of love or consistency, sons and daughters saw this as hypocrisy and rejected it. Also, many felt that the expectations were so high that they could never measure up to them. This resulted in a feeling of deep defeat.

This emphasis on outward appearance was also manifested by bringing selected young people to serve at the Headquarters and causing others to feel rejected and offended by my favoritism. My actions of holding of hands, hugs, and touching of feet or hair with young ladies crossed the boundaries of discretion and were wrong. They demonstrated a double-standard and violated a trust. Because of the claims about me I do want to state that I have never kissed a girl nor have I touched a girl immorally or with sexual intent....

My greatest offense has been against God. I have earnestly sought His mercy and forgiveness and have asked Him to allow me to experience more of Him and the power of His resurrection.

Sincerely,  
Bill Gothard

Gothard's resignation is a testimony of brokenness and purported repentance wherein he claims to be "grieved and sorrowful" while simultaneously denying the charges brought against him. The letter is agonizingly confessional, though he confesses nothing. He apologizes to the "young people" he has hurt and admits that his actions crossed a boundary of "discretion." His acts were "wrong" but not done with "sexual" or "immoral" intent. There is no apology for not

reporting child rape, no apology for sexually harassing girls as young as fourteen, kissing their feet or fondling their breasts as the court documents describe. Rather, Gothard apologizes for his “favoritism,” for making them feel like they couldn't “measure up,” and for the way his exacting standards “incited jealousies” among the young women who worked for him. That was his crime, according to Gothard, he expected too much of them, and made them love him too much.

### ***Recovering Grace***

Hundreds of former IBLP members have sought comradery and healing on the online forum, RecoveringGrace.org. Recovering Grace is both a communally supported blog and a legal advocacy group “devoted to helping people whose lives have been impacted by the teachings of Bill Gothard, the Institute in Basic Life Principles (IBLP)...”<sup>191</sup> Contributors to Recovering Grace call themselves, “survivors.” The site is filled with theological arguments against Gothard’s legalism, stories of faith lost and found, updates on the various lawsuits being brought against the IBLP, and heartbreaking and horrifying testimonies of abuse and maltreatment.

A leading researcher in religious child maltreatment and abuse, psychologist Bette L. Bottoms argues that religiously motivated abuse should be considered “distinct from other forms of child abuse.”<sup>192</sup> According to Bottoms, the pain is different, and so requires different therapeutic interventions. Perhaps, scholars of religious studies are uniquely suited to understand and describe that difference. Robert Orsi, in his most recent book *History and Presence*, gives voice to victims of Catholic sexual abuse and the unique and transcendent nature of their trauma. Orsi observes that since survivors of religious child abuse were brutalized by “men who were

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<sup>191</sup> Recovering Grace, <http://www.recoveringgrace.org/>

<sup>192</sup> Bette Bottoms, et al, “In the Name of God: A Profiles of Religion- Related Child Abuse.” *Journal of Social Issues* Vol. 51 No. 2 (1995): 86.

‘like a God’ to them, extricating themselves from the gnawing sense of guilt and culpability that the abuse engendered was a matter as much between heaven and earth as it was between people on earth.”<sup>193</sup> Like the Catholic survivors Orsi describes, those on *Recovering Grace* are attempting to diagnose and heal the spiritual wounds their abusers inflicted, while seeking reconciliation with the unseen beings who failed to protect them.

It is easy to peer into Bill Gothard’s world and dismiss its extremity as anomalous. The IBLP is extreme, but its ideas are not anomalous. Not only are IBLP members on hit reality television shows and serving the halls of government, but as subsequent chapters will show, the disempowering and Orwellian Gothard language reaches well beyond the boundaries of the IBLP. Both inside and outside the IBLP, the abuse of women and children goes hand in hand with contemporary conservative Christian pronatalism and its corresponding racial, political, and economic agendas.

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<sup>193</sup> Robert Orsi. *History and Presence*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016) 230-1.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Conservative Christian Homeschooling As Spiritual Discipline

“Knowing was a temptation. What you don't know won't tempt you.”

— Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*

For some, the term *homeschooler* conjures images of rural families around farmhouse tables, socially awkward spelling bee champions, or vegan earth-mothers in peasant skirts and children named Sundance.<sup>194</sup> Those stereotypes do correlate to some homeschooling families, but in fact, homeschoolers are motivated by a variety of factors and they come from every religious, social, racial, and economic demographic imaginable.<sup>195</sup> What is more, homeschooling is becoming increasingly common. Obtaining reliable numbers for such a broad and unregulated movement is difficult, but a 2012 Department of Education study estimated that between 1999 and 2006, homeschooling in the United States increased by 74%. In 1999, 1.7% of U.S. school aged children were homeschooled. Today, roughly 1.8 million children, or 3.4% of the school aged population in the United States, are currently educated at home. Of that 1.8 million, 64% cite religion as their primary motivation.<sup>196</sup>

Although the homeschooling community in the United States today is diverse, Conservative Christians dominate both the legal advocacy arm of the homeschooling movement

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<sup>194</sup>I use *homeschooler* collectively to refer to both the homeschooling parents and their children. A collective term is appropriate as conservative Christian homeschooling especially aims to permeate family life, involving and implicating both mothers and fathers, and even those siblings too young for formal schooling as well as those who have completed their educations.

<sup>195</sup> Kenneth V. Anthony and Susie Burroughs, “Making the Transition from Traditional to Home Schooling: Home School Family Motivations,” *Current Issues in Education* Vol. 13, no. 4 (2010): 1-33.

<sup>196</sup> National Center for Education Statistics, “Parent and Family Involvement in Education, From the National Household Education Surveys Program of 2012” (2012).

in the U.S. and the homeschooling consumer marketplace.<sup>197</sup> Consequently, even non-Christian homeschooling families are likely to be politically represented by conservative Christian groups, to join support groups or co-ops dominated by Christians, or to use curricula or other resources with Christian themes or agendas. As one self-described atheist homeschooling mother told *The Atlantic*, “you can’t even buy a planner sometimes without there being Bible verses on it.”<sup>198</sup>

Conservative Christian pronatalism and homeschooling are so deeply intertwined ideologically, rhetorically, culturally, and in terms of the participants involved, that they must be examined together. For many conservative Christian women, pronatalism and homeschooling are inseparable parts of a larger anti-government, family-centered religiosity and domestic spiritual discipline that also includes home-birthing, home-churching, and various homesteading practices and domestic arts like growing and preserving food and making clothing.<sup>199</sup> Of course, not all conservative Christian homeschoolers are pronatalists, but nearly all conservative Christian pronatalists are homeschoolers. Indeed, conservative Christians in general have been the most influential force behind the homeschooling movement of recent decades—those who are avowedly pronatalist represent the tip of the sword.

This chapter provides an analysis and limited history of conservative Christian homeschooling in the U.S., but not as a standalone social trend. Rather, I examine conservative

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<sup>197</sup> Vernon L Bates, “Lobbying for the Lord: The New Christian Right Home-Schooling Movement and Grassroots Lobbying.” *Review of Religious Research* 33, no. 1 (1991): 3-17.

<sup>198</sup> Laura Smith as quoted in, Jaweed Kaleem, “Homeschooling without God” *The Atlantic*, May 30, 2016.

<sup>199</sup> Rebecca Kneale Gould, *At Home in Nature: Modern Homesteading and Spiritual Practice in America*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Katherine Joyce, *Quiverfull: Inside the Christian Patriarchy Movement*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009); Pamela E. Klassen, *Blessed Events: Religion and Homebirth in America*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); Mitchell L. Stevens, *Kingdom of Children: Culture and Controversy in the Homeschooling Movement*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

Christian homeschooling as a vehicle or method for legitimizing and fortifying a “worldview” that among other things, asserts a conservative Christian pronatalist ideology. My first goal here is to tune the reader’s ear to the rhetoric and cognitive constructions conservative Christian homeschoolers deploy to shape that “worldview.” Second, this chapter will examine how conservative Christian homeschooling came to dominate the homeschooling community in the United States and how its theologies and practices can endanger the physical and emotional wellbeing of the children involved. The next chapter subsequently builds on the groundwork laid in this chapter by taking a close look at the Institute in Basic Life Principles’ popular homeschooling program, The Advanced Training Institute (ATI). Exploring ATI as a case study reveals the kind of “work” conservative Christian homeschooling programs do to codify and sanctify patriarchy, white Christian nationalism, and conservative Christian pronatalism, while advancing a creedal rather than evidence-based approach to education.

Religion historian, Colleen McDannell rightly observes that the rise of conservative Christian homeschooling has been largely misinterpreted by both sociologists and scholars of religion and education. These scholars have read the homeschooling movement as an educational reform movement rooted in a conservative critique of late-twentieth-century changes in American public education.<sup>200</sup> McDannell argues that contemporary Christian homeschooling is better understood as a “religious reform” movement with political and educational consequences, rather than a political or educational movement with religious consequences. The IBLP, and specifically ATI, provide ample evidence for McDannell’s reframing. As historians

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<sup>200</sup> Colleen McDannell, “Creating the Christian Home: Homeschooling In Contemporary America” in *American Sacred Space*. David Chidester and Edward T. Lilenthal, eds. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).

like McDannell, Betty DeBurg, and David Watt, have shown, contemporary homeschooling falls within “a long tradition of Protestant domestic Christianity” originating in Victorian imaginations of the home, the family, and the child.<sup>201</sup> Put plainly, it is not just about education. Homeschooling is a tool, or a “strategy” to borrow McDannell’s word, conservative Christians deploy to create godly families, godly communities, and many hope, a godly nation from the ground up.

The contemporary Christian homeschooling movement then must be examined as a mechanism for reproducing certain cultural and religious constructions like patriarchy, whiteness, and heteronormativity. Even for those involved, homeschooling is not an end unto itself, but a way of instilling and reinforcing a “biblical worldview,” of which pronatalism is an essential part. As David Waller, the young, newly appointed Administrative Director of the Advance Training Institute is fond of reminding his community, “It is not about homeschooling. It is about changing lives...ATI represents a lifestyle that is yielding every area of our lives to God and His word...The families who are involved have consistently demonstrated a willingness to do whatever it takes to raise sons and daughters to be mighty in spirit!”<sup>202</sup>

### ***Who are Conservative Christian Homeschoolers?***

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<sup>201</sup> McDannell, “Creating the Christian Home” 189; Betty DeBurg, *UnGodly Women: Gender in the First Wave of American Feminism*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990); Colleen McDannell, *The Christian Home in Victorian America, 1840-1900*. (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1993); David Harrington Watt, *A Transforming Faith: Explorations of Twentieth Century American Evangelicalism*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991). For examples of Domestic Christianity see: Catherine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The American Woman’s Home: Or Principles of Domestic Science*. (New York: J.B. Ford and Co., 1896); Billy Sunday, “Home,” *Trenton Evening Times*, January 15, 1880.

<sup>202</sup> David Waller, “Letter of Welcome” included in the Advanced Training Institute Curriculum, 2015.

It is important to clarify to whom we are referring with the moniker, *conservative Christian homeschoolers*. In the term *conservative Christian pronatalist*, the vagueness of *Christian* is an asset as it accounts for the pan-Christian nature of the discourse. *Conservative Christian homeschooling* however, is a narrower category. When scholars and journalists refer to *Christian homeschooling* they are almost exclusively referring to evangelical protestants.<sup>203</sup>

In his oft-cited study, *Kingdom of Children*, sociologist Michael Stevens segments all contemporary American homeschooling into two camps: “believers” who are “heaven-based” (conservative protestant homeschoolers) and “inclusives” who are “earth-based” (everyone else, including New Age spiritualists, neo-pagans, Muslims, Mormons and Orthodox Jews, liberal

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<sup>203</sup> See: McDannell, “Creating the Christian Home,” 191; Stevens, *Kingdom of Children*, 18; Robert Kunzman, *Write These Laws on Your Children: Inside the World of Conservative Christian Homeschooling*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009) 3.

I admit some discomfort with the term. As Randall Balmer has noted, conservative protestants and/ or evangelicals prefer the name *Christian* to any other. Randall Balmer, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: A Journey into the Evangelical Subculture in America*. 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006). For scholars though, *Christian* is annoyingly vague, and for Catholics, Mormons, and mainline protestants, the evangelical coopting of the term can be offensive—particularly when it is used (as it often is) to suggest that evangelicals are the purer, more authentic followers of Jesus Christ.

There is a sizable community of Mormon homeschoolers who would likely describe themselves as both Christian and conservative, but they self-segregate from the people and ideologies under examination here. They also use different rhetoric, different curricula, and have very different doctrinal motivations, such that including them in the *conservative Christian homeschooling* category would be inappropriate See: The National LDS Homeschool Association <http://www.lds-nha.org/>; Abbie Jane Birch, *A Latter-Day Saint Home Education: Passing on a Godly Heritage*. (Salt Lake City: Brigham Young University Press, 1994). Similarly, conservative (as well as liberal) Catholics also homeschool, though they represent a smaller portion of the homeschooling community in part because Catholic parochial schools have been a foundational part of American Catholic culture for more than a century. See: Victoria Benning, “Home-Schooling’s Mass Appeal: More Catholics Turn Away from Public, Parochial Options.” *Washington Post*, January 20, 1997.



Christians etc.)<sup>204</sup> I find Stevens' taxonomy problematic for a host of reasons.<sup>205</sup> However, in bifurcating the homeschooling community, Stevens is really making a necessary point about cohesion. Whereas many liberal homeschoolers resist categorization, conservative Christian homeschoolers have intentionally become a cohesive community with distinguishable boundaries, a shared language, and a discrete set of agendas.

*Christian homeschooling* however leaves out a defining feature of the contemporary movement. To remedy this, I have borrowed from education scholar Robert Kunzman and added *conservative*, to the category. Since the mid-1990s, the Christian homeschooling community has become increasingly political. Powerful homeschooling groups have successfully politicized homeschooling along partisan lines (even if some families wish it otherwise). Though *conservatism* is a broad political, social, and economic orientation with a long and complex history, *conservative* here refers specifically to the far-right political ideology represented by the post-Tea Party, "freedom caucus" wing of the Republican party in the United States.

How then is conservative Christian homeschooling distinct? In his ethnography, Kunzman observed several practical markers. For example, Conservative Christian families tend to take a structured approach to homeschooling. They are more likely to stick to "classical" subjects like rhetoric, grammar, and logic. They are more likely to employ traditional, top-down pedagogical methods and memorization. They read more narrowly than their more progressive counterparts, and favor Eurocentric and Christian-centric literature and history texts, and they

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<sup>204</sup> Stevens, *Kingdom of Children*, 18.

<sup>205</sup> Stevens notes that "believers were comfortable talking about 'Christian home schooling' or 'the Christian homeschool movement' as if they could take for granted that such a thing existed" Stevens, *Kingdom of Children*, 18. I am not sure why Stevens did not simply use the name his *believers* used.

gravitate toward triumphalist, nationalistic American narratives and exclude more global perspectives.<sup>206</sup>

Kunzman also corroborates Stevens' earlier finding that conservative Christians tend to regard children and childhood differently from more liberal, anti-establishment homeschoolers. Where more progressive homeschoolers tend to believe that children have a natural wisdom, Conservative Christian homeschoolers tend to believe that children need diligent guidance and correction. These practical markers are helpful, but I am more interested in unpacking the theological and ideological reasons behind them. To do that, we must understand the movement's history.

### ***Homeschooling's Beginnings***

Many conservative Christian homeschoolers imagine themselves in a continuum dating back to the Puritans and the New England Primer, if not to biblical times. In reality, the contemporary homeschooling movement, as we know it, began in the 1970s and became a distinguishable trend in the 1980s and 90s. Inspired by early twentieth-century educational experimenters like Maria Montessori, the Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner, founder of the Waldorf Schools, and A.S. Neill who founded the Summerhill School in Suffolk, England in 1921, American education reformers and cultural critics like Ivan Illich, and John Holt, began blending Neill's emphasis on "free-play" and "child-directed learning" with their own anti-establishment and counter-cultural ideas.<sup>207</sup> They railed against the post-war culture of

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<sup>206</sup> Kunzman, *Write These Laws Upon Your Children*, 6-10; Stevens, *Kingdom of Children*, 51-55.

<sup>207</sup> John Holt, *Teach Your Own: A Hopeful Path for Education*. (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Books, 1981); A.S. Neill, *Summerhill: A Radical Approach to Child Rearing*. (New York: Hart Publishing Company, 1960); Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society*. (New York: Marion Boyars Publishers Ltd, 1970).

“progress” and the deification of early-childhood development “experts.” Holt and Illich went as far as to advocate for the dissolution of public schools all together, believing that the social turmoil they saw around them, in the fight against Jim Crow and the Vietnam war for example, could be solved by a generation liberated from an educational system designed to maintain the status quo.

While Illich remained philosophical, Holt put his ideas into practice. Holt criticized top-down pedagogical methods and advocated instead for a dialectical approach that nurtured students’ natural inclinations and talents. His 1977 newsletter, *Growing Without Schooling*, and his 1981 book, *Teach Your Own* laid the foundation for what practitioners now call “un-schooling.”<sup>208</sup> Un-schoolers avoid all formal curricula and simply allow their children’s play and curiosity determine what and how they learn. Un-schoolers contend that public schools enculturate children to conform, obey, and accept established authorities rather than question and challenge them (ironically, this is often what conservative Christian homeschoolers claim to want). In aggregate, un-schoolers today are a religiously diverse group, united mostly by progressive cultural and educational values.

In addition to Holt, un-schoolers also often cite education researchers and devout Seventh Day Adventists, Dorothy and Raymond Moore. The Moores’ 1975 *Better Late Than Early: A New Approach to Your Child’s Education* argued that early schooling was detrimental to children’s intellectual, psychological, and moral development.<sup>209</sup> Raymond Moore was

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<sup>208</sup> John Holt, *Growing Without Schooling*, 1977. Holt published his newsletter from 1977 until his death in 1985, after which his staff assumed the task. The last of the 143 total issues was published in 2001.

<sup>209</sup> Dorothy N. Moore and Raymond S. Moore, *Better Late Than Early: A New Approach to Your Child’s Education*. (New York: Reader’s Digest Press 1975).

program director and researcher for the U.S. Department of Education in the late 1960s, though he became suspicious of the direction public education was taking. At a time when districts were putting more and more money in “Head Start” programs, the Moores argued that an emphasis on early formal education inhibited children’s holistic psychological and cognitive maturation. In fact, the Moores are key to understanding how conservative Christian homeschooling ironically grew out what began as a socially progressive, anti-authoritarian movement. On the surface, Holt and the Moores appear to prescribe similar pedagogical methods, but their overall philosophies differed dramatically. Holt’s goal was to foster a generation of free-thinking individuals who would challenge the authoritative structures he saw as the root cause of so many social ills. The Moores on the other hand, hoped to fortify families and build more responsible, confident children by decreasing “peer dependency.”<sup>210</sup>

Like Holt, the Moores encouraged parents to follow their children’s curiosity and not to rush their intellectual development—but as way of establishing and reinforcing top-down parental authority, not undermining it.<sup>211</sup> The Moores maintained that parents (especially mothers) who closely attended to their children’s unique educational needs, rather than delegating that task to an impersonal system, would more readily establish and maintain spiritual and moral authority over their children. They also recommended, as Maria Montessori did fifty years prior, that children spend as much time engaged in “manual labor,” as in intellectual

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<sup>210</sup>Moore, *Better Late Than Early*.

<sup>211</sup> Dorothy N. Moore and Raymond S. Moore, *Home Grown Kids: A Practical Handbook for Teaching Your Children at Home*. (Waco, TX: Word Books 1981); Raymond Moore, T. Joseph Willey, Dennis R. Moore, and D. Kathleen Kordenbock, *School Can Wait*. (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1979); The Moores teachings are now carried by on their foundation, which also offers college scholarships. “The Moore Method” is available in full on the home page of foundation’s website, <http://www.moorefoundation.com>.

pursuits, and stressed the importance of chores, work, and service for building confidence and maturity.<sup>212</sup> Where Holt's approach idealistically assumed that children would become high-minded, nuanced philosophical thinkers all on their own, the Moores' dismissed the importance of such lofty goals in favor of developing strong work ethics and family cohesion. Raising respectful, self-policing, and responsible children was their primary objective.

The Moore's ideas may have shaken up some parents, but they ran so counter to the prevailing wisdom of the time that they would have likely languished in relative obscurity had it not been for the blessing of James Dobson. In 1977, James Dobson, the influential Christian family ministry leader, interviewed the Moores on his *Focus on the Family* radio show, effectively introducing his significant conservative Christian listenership to the idea of homeschooling.<sup>213</sup> Dobson also wrote the forward to the Moores' 1981 *Home Grown Kids* and went on to become a vocal proponent of homeschooling in general, and the Moore method in particular.

In addition to Dobson, both Mike Smith and Michael Farris, founders of the powerful Home School Legal Defense Association credit Raymond Moore with introducing them to homeschooling. Farris writes "Without his influence, my family would not have begun homeschooling and the HSLDA wouldn't exist."<sup>214</sup> Raymond Moore died in 2007, but the Moore foundation remains committed to, "using Biblical principles to encourage the spiritual life

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<sup>212</sup> Moore, *Home Grown Kids*. More on the importance of manual labor at: <http://www.moorefoundation.com>; Maria Montisori, *The Montessori Method*. (London: Frederick E. Stokes Company, 1912).

<sup>213</sup> "School can wait" *Focus on the Family Radio*, 1977..

<sup>214</sup> Court Report Staff, "The Passing of a Pioneer" *The Court Report* (September/ October 2007). Available here <http://nche.hslda.org/courtreport/V23N5/V23N503.asp>

of the whole family while helping them to form and execute an education balanced equally in book knowledge, physical, and practical learning.”<sup>215</sup>

As we will see, the impact of the Moores’ work is evident in curricula like ATI and other conservative Christian homeschooling initiatives that downplay intellectual pursuits in favor of obedience, physical labor, and a self-contained family unit.<sup>216</sup> However, the Moores prescribed a relatively soft and loving way of establishing parental authority. When compared to Dobson, let alone to more dictatorial thinkers like Bill Gothard, and anti-feminist and conservative Christian pronatalist crusader Mary Pride, the Moores seem downright progressive. As the conservative Christian homeschooling discourse developed, the Moore’s ideas were often blended with more authoritarian approaches. In fact, in comparing the Moores to Pride, who began articulating her avowedly patriarchal and pronatalist homeschool vision only a decade later, we can see how quickly the hardliners took control of the discourse.

Mary Pride (mother of nine) was instrumental in knitting Christian homeschooling and pronatalism together. Her 1985 manifesto, *The Way Home: Beyond Feminism, Back to Reality* remains a foundational text for conservative Christian pronatalists, but homeschoolers likely know her best from her copious reviews of curricula and homeschooling guides.<sup>217</sup> She founded and edited four influential homeschooling magazines including *Practical Homeschooling* and

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<sup>215</sup> This text is taken from the mission statement offered on the homepage of the foundation website: <http://www.moorefoundation.com>

<sup>216</sup> For an excellent history of conservative Christian school reform see: Adam Laats, *The Other School Reformers: Conservative Activism in American Education*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

<sup>217</sup> Mary Pride, *The Way Home: Beyond Feminism and Back to Reality* (Wheaton, IL: Cross Books, 1985).

published thirteen books, including the four-volume, *The Big Book of Home Learning* and most recently, *Mary Pride's Complete Guide to Getting Started in Homeschooling*.<sup>218</sup>

While the Moores and Dobson were primarily concerned with what homeschooling offered children, Pride focused on their mothers. Of course, Pride believes that homeschooling “protects” children from sexuality, secularism, evolution, and the like, but she was among the first homeschooling advocates to prescribe homeschooling as a spiritual discipline for women. Pride argues that homeschooling is an extension of “biblical woman.” Pride sees unmitigated child-birthing, child-rearing (including education), and homemaking as inseparable parts of the biblically-mandated female identity. All three practices reinforce the idea that women are called by God to be sacrificial and servile beings. As she writes, “God intended women to spend their lives serving other people...their children, their husbands, their mothers and community at large.”<sup>219</sup>

Even though the Moores were concerned with establishing parental authority, they wrote extensively about the beauty of children and childhood, and about their need for deep, unconditional love. In stark contrast, Pride, and those who followed her, took a stance closer to the one (fellow Calvinist) Jonathan Edwards’ articulated in 1742:

As innocent as children seem to be to us, yet, if they are out of Christ, they are not so in God’s sight but are young vipers—and are infinitely more hateful than vipers—and are in a most miserable condition...<sup>220</sup>

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<sup>218</sup> Mary Pride, *The Big Book of Home Learning*. (Wheaton, IL: Cross Books, 1986); Mary Pride, *Mary Pride's Complete Guide to Getting Started in Homeschooling*. (Wheaton, IL: Cross Books, 2006).

<sup>219</sup> Mary Pride, *The Way Home*, 41-42.

<sup>220</sup> Johnathan Edwards, *Thoughts on the Revival of Religion in New England*. (Northampton, MA: 1742)

Raymond Moore was sad to see the homeschooling movement being dragged to the radical right. In 1994, at the age of eighty, Moore lambasted the Home School Legal Defense Association's leaders, Michael Farris, Mike Smith, and Chris Klicka for their "Protestant exclusivism," for "scaring parents," and "sowing division" among both Christians and homeschoolers.<sup>221</sup> Sadly, despite Moore's condemnation, the HSLDA went on with its work and

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<sup>221</sup> Raymond Moore, "The Ravage of Home Education Through Exclusion By Religion" October 1994. Moore's "white papers" as they are known are available here: [https://a2zhomeschooling.com/thoughts\\_opinions\\_home\\_school/ravage\\_home\\_education\\_p2/](https://a2zhomeschooling.com/thoughts_opinions_home_school/ravage_home_education_p2/)



the Christian homeschooling movement has come to be defined by a radically right-wing religious and political agenda.<sup>222</sup>

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<sup>222</sup> I do not mean to suggest here that the homeschooling world is divided up into un-schoolers and conservative Christians. In fact, there are myriad philosophies at work and families commonly move fluidly between them. For example, there are “classical education” or “great books” proponents whose ethos is probably best encapsulated in: Jessie Wise and Susan Wise Bauer, *The Well-trained Mind: A Guide to Classical Education at Home*. (New York: Norton, 1999). Unlike un-schoolers, classical education proponents often start formally educating their children early, using traditional, structured (some might argue, archaic) methods. Classical homeschoolers, some of whom are also conservative Christians, imagine themselves the inheritors of a great western tradition. They focus on logic, rhetoric, classical languages, and the “western cannon.”

Some African American parents (and other people of color), however have taken issue with this approach. These families roundly reject such “classical” projects as thinly-veiled white supremacy and eurocentrism, and they are increasingly opting to homeschool as well. As Ama Mazama and Garvey Lundy have shown in their series of pioneering articles, a groundswell of African Americans have embraced homeschooling in recent decades. These “Afrocentric” homeschoolers are largely motivated by “racial protectionism,” or the desire to protect their children from both the racism they are subject to in the classroom, and the systemic racism of standard public-school curricula. See: Mazama, A. and Lundy, G. “African American homeschooling as racial protectionism. *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 43 Issue 7, (1999): 723-748; Ama Mazama and Garvey Lundy, “African American Homeschooling and the Quest for a Quality Education” *Education and Urban Society* Vol. 20 Issue 10, (2013): 1-22. See also: Cheryl Fields-Smith and Meca Williams. “Motivations, Sacrifices, and Challenges: Black Parents' Decisions to Home School.” *Urban Review* Vol. 41, (2009): 369-89; Jennifer James, “Homeschooling Helps Black Children Gain Educational Equality.” in *Homeschooling*. Myra Immell, ed. (Detroit: Greenhaven Press, 2009) 20-27; Venus L. Taylor, “Behind the Trend: Increases in Homeschooling among African American Families.” In *Home Schooling in Full View: A Reader*. Bruce S. Cooper, ed. (Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing, 2005) 121-33.

Interestingly, Mazama and Lundy found that a small minority of African American homeschoolers, roughly 15%, were not in fact motivated by race but by religion. These conservative Christian black homeschoolers did not align themselves with the traditional “black church” or its historic engagement with social justice. Rather, these families espoused the embattled fundamentalism more commonly found among white conservative Christian homeschoolers. For these families, race, or what several interviewees called “heritage” was not their primary identity marker. As one interviewee told Mazama, “our heritage is in Christ.” These families are not my focus here, however, they kept returning to my mind as I encountered the blatantly racist teachings in many Christian homeschooling materials. See: Ama Mazama and Garvey Lundy, “African American Homeschoolers: The Force of Faith and the Reality of Race in the Homeschooling Experience.” *Religion and Education* Vol. 41, no. 3 (October 2014): 256-272.

## *Dominion*

Since the Moores, conservative Christian homeschooling has been radicalized while it has grown more widespread. As the movement developed and became more cohesive, it began to incorporate some of the most extreme ideologies within American Protestantism. In her work on Christian Reconstructionism—a previously marginal movement aimed at supplanting all civil law with biblical law—Julie Ingersoll argues that the contemporary conservative Christian homeschooling movement has recognizably Reconstructionist bones.<sup>223</sup>

Christian Reconstructionism is based on *dominionism* or *dominion theology*, which asserts that God commanded Christians to take dominion of the earth and earthly governments.<sup>224</sup> Dominionism also argues that God ordained a hierarchal authority structure within which all people should live. Dominion theologians like Reconstructionism’s founder R.J. Rushdoony, contend that God first empowers parents to exercise dominion over children and husbands over wives, followed by Church elders over congregations, and “biblical” governments over citizens (and for Rushdoony and other hardliners, whites over non-whites).<sup>225</sup> The authority over each sphere is absolute and each sphere of authority must remain sovereign, meaning that

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<sup>223</sup> Ingersoll, *Building God’s Kingdom*, 98.

<sup>224</sup> For a more detailed discussion of dominionism see: Julie J. Ingersoll, *Building God’s Kingdom*, 55-57; James C. Stanford *Blueprint for Theocracy: The Christian Right’s Vision for America*. (Providence, RI: Metacommet Books, 2014). For primary source material on dominion theology see, Gary North’s works, most of which are available for free here: <http://garynorth.com/freebooks/>

<sup>225</sup> Rushdoony for example argued that the Civil War was in fact a religious war and that the confederacy fought on the side of God. Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law*, 60. See also: Ingersoll *Building God’s Kingdom*, 17; Edward Sebesta and Euan Hague, *Neo-Confederacy: A Critical Introduction*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008).

even if some parents do not live up to their responsibilities, the state has no biblical authority to intervene, and doing so would undercut the authority of parents everywhere. As Rushdoony wrote in his 1984 *Law and Liberty*,

Biblical law places power and authority into the hands of the parents, especially the father, and, as long as the family has liberty, liberty based on the power of property, the parents have authority.... transfer of power over education, income, and property from the family to the state has undercut parental power and authority.<sup>226</sup>

The enigmatic and prolific Rushdoony was especially obsessed with the concept of authority. His “jurisdictional” model radically centers the heteronormative, patriarchal, procreative nuclear family as God’s primary sphere of authority. As he put it, “He [God] has ordained and established the family as the basic and central social unit of mankind.”<sup>227</sup> The family is imagined as the blueprint for how larger social systems should be organized—everything stems from the sovereign authority of the family.

Few conservative Christian homeschoolers expressly align themselves with Reconstructionism, but the above passage could have been ripped from any number of conservative Christian homeschooling blogs or advocacy sites. For example, one the earliest and most influential conservative Christian homeschooling organization, the Christian Liberty Academic School System (CLASS), puts it this way,

God instituted the family before either the church or state had existence... The family exercised total responsibility over God’s creation (Genesis 2). God has in the fifth commandment granted only to the parents the adequate and prior authority commensurate with the discharge of this great responsibility (Exodus 20:12). The divine legislation given to Moses commands not the state or the church,

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<sup>226</sup> R.J. Rushdoony, *Law and Liberty*. (Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books 1984) 90.

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

but the fathers to see to the instruction of the children...<sup>228</sup>

It is not difficult to hear Rushdoony's voice in this, if one is tuned to Rushdoony's language.

Like McDannell, Ingersoll contends that unfamiliar scholars have missed the mark on conservative Christian homeschooling and mistakenly presumed Reconstructionists are *marginal* to the movement because hardline Reconstructionist theology is undeniably extreme, or because few homeschoolers expressly claim the label. Ingersoll notes,

though homeschooling families would not identify as Christian Reconstructionist, the movement is an ideal illustration of the way in which Reconstructionist influence shapes the underpinnings of the conservative Christian subculture... One has to be conversant in Christian Reconstruction to recognize it.<sup>229</sup>

Even if most conservative Christian homeschoolers do not fit neatly into the well-bounded theological parameters Rushdoony established (for example, Reconstructionists are Calvinists while most American evangelicals are Arminian), Ingersoll's research shows that reconstructionism's fingerprints are all over the conservative Christian homeschooling community.

To Ingersoll's point about having to be "conversant in Christian Reconstruction," Robert Kunzman notes the centrality of dominionism for Christian homeschoolers, even if he does not identify it as such. He writes, "central in the mindset of conservative Christian homeschoolers is the fundamental conviction that educating their children is a God given right and responsibility,

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<sup>228</sup> "Worldview Rights and Responsibilities" CLASS Homeschooling, <http://www.homeschools.org/worldview/parentalRightsAndResponsibilities.html> . For more on CLASS see, Ingersoll, *Building God's Kingdom*, 106-109; Seth Dowland, *Family Values and The Rise of The Christian Right*. (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015) 98-101.

<sup>229</sup> Ingersoll, *Building God's Kingdom*, 111.

one that they can delegate only at great moral and spiritual peril.”<sup>230</sup> Kunzman observes that conservative Christian homeschooling parents do not just homeschool to keep their children away from evolution and secularism. They are also motivated by the conviction that God has charged parents, and not the state, with the education of their children and that it is a *sin* to ignore that charge. We can see how this idea dovetails with Moore’s milder idea that children thrive when parents remain the primary influence in their lives for as long as possible.

Although the Christian Liberty Academic School System and leaders like Bill Gothard and Mary Pride are explicitly dominionist, Mitchel Stevens notes that, “the hierarchal conception of authority is often invoked implicitly.”<sup>231</sup> We can see this in how some Reconstructionist language has found its way into the mainstream Christian homeschooling discourse. For example, R.J. Rushdoony called the biblically-ordained hierarchal dominions of authority, “jurisdictions.”<sup>232</sup>

The control of property and inheritance is entirely within the jurisdiction of the family in Biblical law... In the United States, the attack on the family is being steadily mounted. The state increasingly claims jurisdiction over the family, its children, income, and property. The state assumes that it knows what is best for children, and it claims the right to interfere for the children’s welfare. As a result, the family is progressively weakened in order to strengthen the power of the state. The authority of parents is legally weakened and children are given legal rights to undercut their parents.<sup>233</sup>

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<sup>230</sup> Kunzman, *Write These Laws Upon Your Children*, 6.

<sup>231</sup> Stevens, *Kingdom of Children*, 112. See also Mary Pride, *All The Way Home* (Wheaton, IL: Corss Books 1989) 168.

<sup>232</sup> John Rouas Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1973); Bill Gothard, *Basic Seminar Textbook*. (Oakbrook, IL: Institute in Basic Life Principles) 25.

<sup>233</sup> *Ibid.* 94-95.

Though Rushdoony remains a controversial figure, his “jurisdiction” model has cropped up across the conservative Christian homeschooling world in interesting contexts, further indicating the diffusion of Rushdoony’s dominionist ideas. Bill Gothard borrowed the term “jurisdictions” from Rushdoony early on in his ministry.<sup>234</sup> In one of his first and most foundational writings, Gothard states,

Under the overarching umbrella of His protection, God has established significant jurisdictional structures... God works through these areas of jurisdiction to train up and protect children, to restrain evil and protect citizens, to stand against Satan and advance the Gospel, and to provide necessary resources for life. We are responsible to submit to these authorities in order to receive their protection and the blessings of living in submission to God’s authority.<sup>235</sup>

Some of Gothard’s followers took the term one step further and operationalized “jurisdiction,” turning the term into a tool for home management. Steve and Teri Maxwell, founders of the conservative Christian pronatalist organization Titus2 Ministries and developers of the popular “Managers of their Chores” home organization system, encourage parents to use the term “jurisdiction” when referring to chores.<sup>236</sup> To expose children early to the idea of jurisdictional authority, the Maxwells recommend that each child be assigned a “jurisdiction” or an area of the home to clean and maintain. They contend that with jurisdictions, children better understand their role in the family and therefore take on the responsibilities of that role without parental monitoring. The Duggar family of TLC’s *19 Kids and Counting* also popularized the

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<sup>234</sup> Gothard, *Basic Seminar Textbook*, 81-85.

<sup>235</sup> “What is an Umbrella of Protection?” *The Institute in Basic Life Principles*  
<https://iblp.org/questions/what-umbrella-protection>

<sup>236</sup> See: <https://www.titus2.com/> and [https://www.titus2.com/managers-of-their-chores.html?utm\\_source=142&utm\\_medium=204&utm\\_campaign=325](https://www.titus2.com/managers-of-their-chores.html?utm_source=142&utm_medium=204&utm_campaign=325)

term on their show and in their books.<sup>237</sup> Michelle explains to her children that, “the home is Mommy’s jurisdiction” but that she delegates part of that responsibility to each child, just as Jim Bob delegates the management of the home to her.<sup>238</sup>

To be fair, Duggars and the Maxwells are probably on to something. They are likely building on the Moores’ research, and on the work of Maria Montessori, which found that age-appropriate chores give children confidence and make them feel as if they contribute something necessary to the family (or in Montessori’s case, the community).<sup>239</sup> Giving children their own autonomous area to control empowers them. But it also implicitly underscores a role-based, rather than ability-based, or self-determined, sense of identity. One is *assigned* one’s role from the power-holder in the hierarchy. One does not choose it. Further, the Reconstructionist term “jurisdiction,” reinforces the idea that one only has power *within* one’s jurisdiction. Outside it, one is fully subject to another person’s authority. By teaching children to think of certain areas of the home as their “jurisdiction,” parent’s like the Duggars and the Maxwells prime their children to imagine the larger world as similarly divided into dominions.

### **Worldviews**

If you ask conservative Christian homeschoolers to describe why they homeschool, you will likely hear one all-important word again and again: *worldview*, or more often, *biblical worldview*. Like Kant’s *Weltanschauung*, *worldview* refers a set of lenses one applies to the

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<sup>237</sup> Jim Bob and Michelle Duggar, *The Duggars: 20 and Counting!* (New York: Howard Books, 2008) 176; “Duggar for a Day” *19 Kids and Counting*. Figure 8 Films. TLC.; “Justin’s Jurisdiction” *19 Kids and Counting*. Figure 8 Films. TLC.

<sup>238</sup> Duggar, *The Duggars: 20 and Counting!*, 176-179; *Raising 16 Children*. Figure 8 Films. 2006.

<sup>239</sup> Maria Montisori, *The Montessori Method*. (London: Frederick E. Stokes Company, 1912).

world.<sup>240</sup> For conservative Christian homeschoolers however, *worldview* does not refer to an imbedded perspective one inherits from cultural, or linguistic contexts, as imagined by Ninian Smart or traditional epistemologists.<sup>241</sup> Nor does it refer to a moral world order resulting from one's experience, as Hegel used it. Rather, for conservative Christians, the *biblical worldview* is a disciplining set of political and religious *a priori* truths around which all other information must be organized, even (and especially) when doing so defies reason. Conservative Christians know all too well that bringing the body and mind fully under the discipline of an all-encompassing, emotionally demanding, countercultural, and often intellectually inconsistent ideology takes work, and constant maintenance—some imagine it as *spiritual warfare*.<sup>242</sup> Part of why many conservative Christians consider homeschooling the best form of Christian education is that it envelopes family life, making instilling and maintaining a comprehensive “biblical worldview” easier.

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<sup>240</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment: Including the First Introduction*, translated by Werner Pluhar, (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987).

<sup>241</sup> See for example: Martin Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, translated by, Alber Hofstadter, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1982) Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* translation by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum 1993); Ninian Smart, *Worldviews: Cross Cultural Explorations of Human Beliefs*. (New York: Scribner's, 1983).

<sup>242</sup> “Spiritual Warfare” is understood in conservative Christian communities as the process by which Christians resist and subvert the forces of Satan. It is derived in part from Ephesians 6:12 “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” The concept of spiritual warfare dovetails with the militaristic imaginations and militant rhetoric of Christian nationalists and dominionists. Various conservative Christian pastors and authors have taken up the topic. Arguably, John Eckhardt is the most prolific on the subject. For a list of his books see his website: <https://store.ransomedheart.com/products/a-battle-to-fight-spiritual-warfare-for-men-mp3-2-part-download?variant=7668353027> . See also for example: James K. Beilby and Paul Rhodes Eddy, eds., *Understanding Spiritual Warfare: Four Views* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012); Edward F. Murphy, *The Handbook for Spiritual Warfare* (New York: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2003).



Though it is impossible to determine exactly when and how the term was first used in this new context, there is considerable evidence that it was Rushdoony who first popularized the idea of a “biblical worldview.” Although the term would not be adopted by mainstream evangelicals for decades, Rushdoony began writing about the “biblical worldview” in the early 1960s.<sup>243</sup> For Rushdoony and other dominionist theologians, *worldview* encapsulated the totality of their mission—they were not just calling for revival or advocating for conservative social issues, they wanted to bring the whole world in line with their vision of Biblical law.

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<sup>243</sup> See Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law*. See also, Ingersoll, *Building God’s Kingdom*, 5; Michael J. McVicar, *Christian Reconstruction: R. J. Rushdoony and American Religious Conservatism*. (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2015); James C. Samford, *Blue Print for Theocracy: The Christian Right’s Vision for America*. (Providence, RI: Metacomet Books, 2014).

The conservative Christian adoption of *worldview* was also likely influenced by the evangelical turn toward post-denominationalism in the early to mid-1990s, and the post-1960’s distaste for the term *religion* in broader American popular culture. The post-denominational turn emerged from earlier evangelical movements like the Jesus movement of the late 1960s and 1970s and the birth of the megachurch movement in the late 1980s. Both movements were born of the post-war, baby-boom generation’s anti-establishment bend and reinforced the longstanding evangelical notion that authentic faith can only be hampered by credal dictates and hierarchal complications. The problem with pared-down articulations of faith however, is that they are imprecise. For embattled conservative Christians, imprecision is dangerous. *Worldview* solves the problem of needing to articulate a complex web of doctrines and political and social agendas, without sounding “anti-modern.” For more on the post denominationalist turn and religion after the Boomers see: Randall Balmer, *Mine Eyes have seen the Glory.*; Courtney Bender, *The New Metaphysicals: Spirituality and the American Religious Imagination*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); Donald E. Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism: Christianity in the New Millennium* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1997); Donald E. Miller. *Inside Calvary, Vinyard & Hope Chapel, Reinventing American Protestantism, Christianity In the New Millennium*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997); Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion*. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999); Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers :The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation*. 1st ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993.) Robert Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion*. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007.); Robert Wuthnow, *America and the Challenges of Religious Diversity*. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007.); Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith since World War II*. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988).

Although the term “biblical worldview” may sound expansive, practically, it is used to indicate a very specific value system. When conservative protestants claim a “biblical worldview,” they are not referring to a commitment to Christ-like passivism, social justice, or an imperative to care for the poor. Most often, “biblical worldview” refers to a fundamentalist biblical hermeneutic, a commitment to Creationism, patriarchal family structures, consumer capitalism, anti-government populism, a cautionary approach to popular entertainment and culture, and an opposition LGBTQ rights, feminism, and access to birth control and abortion. Moreover, because the “biblical worldview” is imagined as incompatible with progressive social causes aimed at correcting systemic racism, or calling attention to historically marginalized or silenced peoples, the term is used almost exclusively by white Christians to advance agendas that implicitly and explicitly maintain white hegemony.

One major player in articulating and spreading the concept the “biblical worldview” was Summit Ministries, whose present tagline reads, “*The Name You Can Trust for Biblical Worldview Products.*”<sup>244</sup> Summit began in 1962 as a series of retreats for Christian students. In 1989, James Dobson (ever the king maker) enthusiastically endorsed the program and its influence skyrocketed. As homeschooling became more and more popular among conservative Christians, Summit began developing curricula and other products specifically for homeschoolers. The organization first used the term “biblical worldview” in 1991, when it put out a series of “worldview education” videos called *Understanding the Times*. *Understanding the Times* has since been expanded and digitized and remains Summit’s most popular program.

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<sup>244</sup> See: <https://www.summit.org/books-media/>

Conservative Christian homeschooling leader Cathy Duffy has also been instrumental in defining and spreading the concept of the “biblical worldview.” Duffy has been reviewing and recommending Christian homeschool curricula for more than thirty years, such that she now enjoys an Oprah-esq power over the homeschooling movement—if she likes it, it sells. Duffy cautions her followers that “home education must include worldview education” and for Duffy, the “biblical worldview” is not just religious, but economic and political.<sup>245</sup> She writes that those without a biblical worldview, “trust government solutions to improve people and fix social problems,” whereas the biblical worldview affirms, “the existence of a God who works within the hearts of men to do the fixing.”<sup>246</sup> Here we can see that although conservative Christians may define the “biblical worldview” hermeneutically or doctrinally, the term also functions as dog whistle for libertarian political agendas.<sup>247</sup>

Ken Ham’s *Answers in Genesis*, creationist ministry much beloved by conservative Christians, homeschoolers and non-homeschoolers alike, provides a useful example of how conservative Christians imagine *worldviews* operate. At Ham’s elaborate Creation Museum in Petersburg, Kentucky, guests are presented with two “starting points” or *worldviews* on human origins and are then shown how important it is to choose the right one—not based on facts—the facts are irrelevant—but based on where one wants to place one’s faith. A prominent display reads:

...we all have the same facts, the same fossils, the same universe, the same rocks, the same plants and animals, the same apes and humans.

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<sup>245</sup> Cathy Duffy, “How to Teach Worldview” *Practical Homeschooling Magazine*, no.13, 1996.

<sup>246</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>247</sup> For more on the connection between conservative Christianity, libertarianism, and corporate power see: Emma Green, “Why Donald Trump Appeals to Evangelicals,” *The Atlantic*, August 8, 2016; Kevin M. Kruse, *One Nation Under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America*. (New York: Basic Books, 2016).

With each of these same facts, however, there are two different views. The different views are based on different starting points, Man's Reason or God's Word.

Same facts, different starting points. There is no such thing as neutral science. Our foundational beliefs govern our thinking in all aspects of life, including how we interpret the world around us.<sup>248</sup>

Of course, the problem with this argument is that we do not all have the same facts. Ironically, conservative Christians have historically criticized post-modernism for asserting moralrelativism. As Stephen Mattson argued in *Sojourners*, its seems now they have become the post-truth relativists they have long despised.<sup>249</sup>

The scientific project here is presented as a *worldview* rather than as a *method* for discovering facts and testing hypotheses. Answers in Genesis assumes that we all place uncritical faith in some set of unchangeable, super-rational, *a priori* truths—that we all, in effect, have *worldviews* that govern our thoughts and behaviors. With that presupposition, Answers in Genesis asserts that conservative Christian *a priori* truths are superior since they come from the revealed word of God, rather than from the flawed minds of men. Most scientists would find this characterization utterly backward. We may indeed make uncritical assumptions about the nature of reality, and it is true that that cultural constructions can be so imbedded they *seem* like *a priori* truths. Most scientists however, would likely argue that the goal of scientific inquiry is to see past these assumptions and constructions, not to assert the inherent value of some over others.<sup>250</sup>

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<sup>248</sup> This text is taken from a photograph of a wall mounted display I took while visiting the Creation Museum in 2009. A similar message can be found on the museum's website, <https://creationmuseum.org/blog/2007/02/06/starting-points/>

<sup>249</sup> Stephen Mattson, "Conservative Christianity Is Now Everything It Once Hated: Post-Modern, Morally Relative, and Post-Truth," *Sojourners*, May 12, 2017.

<sup>250</sup> Neil deGrasse Tyson for example has famously taken a stance against the kind of post-truth claims made by organizations like Answers in Genesis. See Danielle Weiner-Bronner, "Neil deGrasse Tyson Addresses Creationists' Evolution Fears in 'Cosmos'" *The Atlantic*, March 17, 2014.

Among conservative Christians, the concept of a “biblical worldview” has become a kind of purity standard—you may be *a Christian*, you may be *born again*, but do you have a *biblical worldview*? The evangelical think tank, the Barna Research Group conducted a survey in 2009 to determine how many Christians actually maintained a “biblical worldview” which it defined doctrinally as:

believing that absolute moral truth exists; the Bible is totally accurate in all of the principles it teaches; Satan is considered to be a real being or force, not merely symbolic; a person cannot earn their way into Heaven by trying to be good or do good works; Jesus Christ lived a sinless life on earth; and God is the all-knowing, all-powerful creator of the world who still rules the universe today. In the research, anyone who held all of those beliefs was said to have a biblical worldview.<sup>251</sup>

The Barna study, unsurprisingly, confirmed conservative Christians’ worst fears. Only 9% of America adults and only 19% of American “born again Christians” were found to have a “biblical worldview.”<sup>252</sup> Alarms were promptly sounded. Focus on the Family, *Christianity Today*, the Christian Broadcasting Network all covered the study extensively and their articles were republished by smaller Christian media platforms.<sup>253</sup> In 2017, the organization conducted another worldview survey and found similarly dismal results.<sup>254</sup>

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<sup>251</sup> “Changes in Worldview Among Christians over the Past 13 Years”. The Barna Group. (March, 2009) <https://www.barna.com/research/barna-survey-examines-changes-in-worldview-among-christians-over-the-past-13-years/>

<sup>252</sup> Ibid.

<sup>253</sup> Del Tackett, “What is a Christian World View?” *Focus on the Family*. (March, 2009). <https://www.focusonthefamily.com/faith/christian-worldview/whats-a-christian-worldview/whats-a-worldview-anyway> ; Ed Setzer, “Barna: How Many Have a Christian Worldview?” *Christianity Today*. (March 9, 2009); Staff Writer, “How many Americans Have a Biblical Worldview?” *CBN News*. (March 1, 2017).

<sup>254</sup> “Competing Worldviews Influence Today’s Christians” The Barna Group. (March 9, 2017). <https://www.barna.com/research/competing-worldviews-influence-todays-christians/>

The Barna studies are incredibly revelatory cultural artifacts. Although the actual surveys are so clearly biased and their questions so leading as to render the data useless, they show the evolution of the term *biblical worldview* and they identify exactly what conservative Christians imagine as antithetical to their worldview today. For example, the 2009 Study used the term “Christian worldview” and “biblical worldview” interchangeably, but by 2017 “Christian worldview” disappeared altogether, indicating a further distancing from traditional “religion” language and possibly, an increased emphasis on biblical literalism.<sup>255</sup> The 2017 study also contrasted the “biblical worldview” with four other competing worldviews: “new spirituality,” “secularism,” “post-modernism,” and “Marxism.”<sup>256</sup> These worldviews were positioned as an inherent threat to the “biblical worldview” but easily compatible with one another, further indicating the good vs. evil binary that marks contemporary conservative Christianity.

These competing worldviews were also interestingly defined. For instance, the study reads: “The secular worldview prioritizes the scientific method as an explanatory framework for life and advances a rational and materialistic view of the world.”<sup>257</sup> But to determine if participants had a “secular worldview,” they were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with three statements, one of which reads: “a person’s life is valuable only if society sees it as valuable” – as though secular Americans were incapable of believing in the intrinsic value of human life.<sup>258</sup> Similarly, if participants agreed with the following: “if you do good, you will receive good. If you do bad, you will receive bad,” the study diagnosed them as having a “new

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<sup>255</sup> Ibid.

<sup>256</sup> Ibid.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid.

spirituality worldview.”<sup>259</sup> By this standard, the Catholic interpretation of good works could be considered part of a “new spirituality” worldview. Unsurprisingly, the Barna study concluded that Catholics had “a below average likelihood of having a biblical worldview.”<sup>260</sup>

The inclusion of Marxism among the competing worldviews underscores the centrality of capitalism in the “biblical worldview.” This is not new. Evangelical leaders like Billy James Hargis and even Bill Graham built their early careers by demonizing communism during the cold war.<sup>261</sup> What is interesting about the 2017 Barna study however, is that, like Duffy, it subtly sanctifies not just capitalism or private property, but unregulated big business. For example, one of the statements participants were asked to agree or disagree with was: “if the government leaves them alone, businesses will mostly do what’s right.”<sup>262</sup> The belief that corporations require government regulation to “do what’s right” is apparently antithetical (or at least a threat) to the biblical worldview. Moreover, the analysis section of the study, specifically warns that “some of the key economic and political tenets of a Marxist worldview are supported by practicing Christians” and an increasing number of other Americans, as evidenced by the fact that “Bernie Sanders came very close to winning his party’s nomination last year in the democratic primaries.” Like Catholics, Democrats were found to have “a below average likelihood of having a biblical worldview.”

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<sup>259</sup> Ibid.

<sup>260</sup> Ibid.

<sup>261</sup> See: Heather Hendershot, *What's Fair on the Air? Cold War Right-Wing Broadcasting and the Public Interest* (University of Chicago Press; 2011); Willaim Martin, *With God on Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right*. (New York: Broadway Books, 1996); Daniel K. Williams, *God's Own Party: The Making of the Religious Right* (New York: Oxford University Press. 2010);

<sup>262</sup> “Competing Worldviews Influence Today’s Christians” The Barna Group. (March 9, 2017).

The Barna studies did not come out and specifically endorse homeschooling as a way of instilling a “biblical worldview,” however, George Barna stated that “the generational pattern suggests that parents are not focused on guiding their children to have a biblical worldview.”<sup>263</sup> What is more, the studies were co-sponsored by Summit Ministries which produces homeschooling curricula. The alarmist coverage of the studies also disproportionately focused on children and education. When James Dobson interviewed George Barna after the 2017 study came out, Dobson specifically deputized women stating that, “it was my great grandmother and my grandmother that taught me my biblical worldview...”<sup>264</sup> Barna then doubled down on the gravity of the task for parents, “this [instilling a “biblical worldview”] must be your priority...you lose at this, it’s not just like you wrecked one life, that’s bad enough, but that life will then go on to wreck many other lives.”<sup>265</sup>

### ***Teaching Mothers***

Organizations like CLASS may like to assert that “the divine legislation... commands not the state or the church, but the fathers to see to the instruction of the children,” but in practice, *fathers* do very little homeschooling. While fathers might be enthusiastic about the religious and political impetus behind homeschooling, multiple studies on homeschooling have confirmed what is already obvious to any casual observer: mothers do the work.<sup>266</sup> Disproportionally,

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<sup>263</sup> George Barna, *Revolutionary Parenting: What the Research Shows Really Works*. (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale Momentum, 2007). Kindle, ch. 3.

<sup>264</sup> “A Christian Worldview Crisis: A Conversation with George Barna” *Family Talk with Dr. James Dobson*, August 3, 2017.

<sup>265</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>266</sup> Katherine Joyce, *Quiverfull: Inside the Christian Patriarchy Movement*. (Boston: Beacon Press 2009); Robert Kunzman, *Write These Laws on Your Children*; Jennifer Lois, *Home is Where the School Is: The Logic of Homeschooling and the Emotional Labor of Mothering*. (New York: New York University Press, 2013); Stevens, *Kingdom of Children*.



mothers are the ones who choose the schooling materials, mothers teach, mothers organize activities, and mothers track and attend to their children's intellectual and emotional development. Indeed, homeschooling is as much about mothers as it is about children.

This gender imbalance is evident across homeschooling communities. Sociologist, Mitchel Stevens found that homeschooling provided religious liberal or secular mothers with a justification for leaving the paid workforce (especially white, middleclass mothers).<sup>267</sup> For these women, homeschooling was a way of reconciling traditional gender roles with feminist values, especially in social systems that equate white, middle-class women's liberation with their labor. By homeschooling, these mothers assumed the role of teacher, thereby legitimizing their homeschooling labor as a *bona fide* profession regardless of pay.

Conservative Christian women however, do not need to justify leaving the workforce. For them, motherhood does not need to be professionalized for it be to a legitimate full-time occupation. Stevens argues that for conservative Christian mothers, homeschooling reinforces their religious commitments to strictly gendered spheres of authority and imbues the female domestic sphere with an even greater sacred mission.<sup>268</sup> His findings echo McDannell's historical argument that the contemporary homeschooling movement is a reiteration of Victorian domestic Christianity.<sup>269</sup>

Jennifer Lois's ethnographic study of homeschooling mothers and what she calls, "the emotional labor of mothering" confirms Stevens' observations that homeschooling is as much, if not more, about mothers and their identities, than it is about children and their education.<sup>270</sup> Lois

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<sup>267</sup> Ibid, 76-85.

<sup>268</sup> Stevens, *Kingdom of Children*, 75.

<sup>269</sup> Colleen McDannell, *The Christian Home In Victorian America*.

<sup>270</sup> Lois, *Home is Where the School Is*, 8.

observes that all homeschooling mothers (indeed, all mothers) are subject to impossible cultural imaginations of the “good mother.”<sup>271</sup> Secular or progressive homeschooling mothers often have the added burden of reconciling their own feminist values with the gendered division of labor in their families—that is, their husbands’ lack of involvement in homeschooling and failure to contribute equally to home-keeping and child-rearing. One could argue that in this way, conservative Christian homeschooling is more the more honest endeavor.

The gendered spheres conservative Christian homeschooling moms occupy mean that they interpret these same realities differently. Lois is quick to point out that the religious women she encountered suffered just as much as the secular women when confronted with the tremendous emotional and intellectual labor of homeschooling—but that the religious women had certain narratives in place to better articulate that suffering and make it *meaningful*.<sup>272</sup> Whereas secular women saw homeschooling as a mechanism for legitimation, Conservative Christian women embraced homeschooling as a spiritual discipline. It is a way to practice submission and “develop a servant’s heart,” as Michelle Duggar likes to put it.<sup>273</sup>

Conservative Christian women “seek wise council” and “encouragement” from their husbands when they need it, but they expect little else from them. Homeschooling becomes an extension of their role as joyful, sacrificial beings. They are also diligent about reframing their

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<sup>271</sup> Ibid, 8-10. For more on social constructions of the “good mother” see: Donna Bassin, Margaret Honey and Meryle Mahrer Kaplan. Eds. *Representations of Motherhood*. (New Haven: Yale University Press 1994); Ann C. Hall, and Mardia Bishop. Eds. *Mommy Angst: Motherhood in American Popular Culture*. (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2009) ; Sharon Hayes, *The Cultural Constructions of Motherhood*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996); Shari L. Thurer, *The Myths of Motherhood: How Culture Reinvents the Good Mother*. (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1994).

<sup>272</sup> Lois, *Home is Where the School Is*, 103-109

<sup>273</sup> Jim Bob and Michelle Duggar, *A Love That Multiplies: An Up Close View of How They Make It Work*. (New York: Howard Books, 2011) 99.

experiences as part of a larger practice of holy, happy self-denial. When they fail or become overwhelmed they talk about “being humbled” by the “precious gifts” [their children] God had “entrusted” to them.<sup>274</sup> They transform their darkest moments into a testimony and then share it publicly on blogs or at conferences—airing the failures and “giving God the Glory” for their successes.<sup>275</sup>

Conservative Christian women are not immune to burnout, no matter how effective their narratives might be. They wonder if they are wasting their talents, or failing their children in choosing to homeschool, just as secular women do. But the conservative Christian homeschooling moms are constantly being disciplined (though the word they use is “encouraged”) implicitly and explicitly by a robust and cohesive discourse. Consider the following well-circulated poem written by Roy Lessin, a much-beloved Christian inspirational author and founder of DaySprings Cards, one of the largest Christian greeting card companies in the country. He is also the author of several parenting books including, *How to be the Parent of Happy & Obedient Children*, wherein he offers the following poem:

*Continue On*

A woman once fretted over the usefulness of her life. She feared she was wasting her potential being a devoted wife and mother. She wondered if the time and energy she invested in her husband and children would make a difference.

At times she got discouraged because so much of what she did seemed to go unnoticed and unappreciated. “Is it worth it?” she often wondered.

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<sup>274</sup> For examples see: Confessions of a Homeschool Mom: <http://www.confessionsofahomeschooler.com/blog/2012/01/our-family-mission-statement-2012.html> ; My Blessed Home <http://www.myblessedhome.net/> ; Joy in the Home <https://www.joyinthehome.com/about-me/> ; My Joy Filled Life <https://www.myjoyfilledlife.com/>  
<sup>275</sup> Lois, *Home is Where theh School Is*, 108; Stevens, *Kingdom of Children*, 75-77; Kunzman, *Write These Laws Upon Your Children*, 55-62.

“Is there something better that I could be doing with my time?”

It was during one of these moments of questioning that she heard the still small voice of her heavenly Father speak to her heart.

“You are a wife and mother because that is what I have called you to be. Much of what you do is hidden from the public eye. But I notice. Most of what you give is done without remuneration. But I am your reward.

Your husband cannot be the man I have called him to be without your support. Your influence upon him is greater than you think and more powerful than you will ever know. I bless him through your service and honor him through your love.

Your children are precious to Me. Even more precious than they are to you. I have entrusted them to your care to raise them for Me. What you invest in them is an offering to Me.

You may never be in the public spotlight. But your obedience shines as a bright light before Me. Continue on. Remember that you are My servant. Do all to please Me.<sup>276</sup>

Lessin’s poem is an example of how conservative Christian homeschooling rhetoric disciplines women by sacralizing their invisibility and their servitude, by invalidating their desire for a different life, and undermining their anger toward those they are expected to serve. Such rhetoric teaches women and girls that achievement outside of motherhood is meaningless, while praising their ability to quietly endure repression, invisibility, and sacrifice.

Michelle Duggar uses this poem in her book to encourage overwhelmed homeschooling moms.<sup>277</sup> It is also a favorite Pin on Christian Pinterest boards. In fact, it is difficult to overstate the importance of digital media platforms like blogs and Pinterest in disseminating conservative Christian homeschooling and pronatalist rhetoric. Popular Christian homeschooling blogs, and

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<sup>276</sup> Roy Lessin, *How to be the Parent of Happy & Obedient Children*. (New York: Omega Publications, 1978).

<sup>277</sup> Duggar, *A Love That Multiplies*, 217.

sites like Pinterest are replete with posts and Pins with titles like “To the homeschool mom who feels like she’s failing,” “When you feel unqualified to homeschool,” and “Was today just another wasted day?”<sup>278</sup> These despairing titles are then followed by articles or posts that rebuke women for getting angry and remind them to stay “joyful.”

For example, one popular blogger encourages women to memorize James 1:20, and offers a helpful injection to drive the point home, “for the wrath of man [*mom*] does not produce the righteousness of God” (emphasis original).<sup>279</sup> Other blogs discipline homeschooling women just by their names, “My Blessed Home,” “My Joy filled life,” or “Joy in the home.” These platforms imagine homeschooling as inherently sacrificial, and therefore “blessed.”<sup>280</sup> Being exhausted, overwhelmed, and personally unfulfilled is apparently the secret to “joy.”

These platforms disseminate these disciplining messages, connect homeschooling mothers with each other, and they afford creative new ways of articulating and visualizing the conservative Christian pronatalist ideology. Pinterest especially marries text and images in ways that mimic successful advertising. The Pins aimed at conservative Christian women also have a particular aesthetic. They almost exclusively feature young, thin, attractive white women with long hair, in casual but fashionable clothes doing something outside. Images of hands holding coffee mugs (always with manicured fingers in a youthful fashion-forward color) are especially popular, evoking “self-care” and the elusive contemplative down-time homeschooling mothers

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<sup>278</sup> <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/229472543491841374/> ;  
<https://www.pinterest.com/pin/373446994096036311/> ;  
<https://www.pinterest.com/pin/250653535495408450/>

<sup>279</sup> <http://www.confessionsofahomeschooler.com/blog/2012/01/our-family-mission-statement-2012.html>

<sup>280</sup> My Blessed Home <http://www.myblessedhome.net/> ; Joy in the Home <https://www.joyinthehome.com/about-me/> ; My Joy Filled Life <https://www.mjoyfilledlife.com/>

idolize but rarely get. The visual rhetoric in these Pins conveys the message that patriarchy, homeschooling, and pronatalism are not regressive, “old fashioned” ideologies, but rather, revolutionary, youthful new ways to stand apart from the dominant culture.

That visual rhetoric has also been commodified. Etsy, the online boutique retail platform, is full of merchants selling material culture items like t-shirts and coffee mugs that feature pro-homeschooling and pro-large family messages. Some read: “Coffee Drinking, Bible Reading, Arrow Raising, Homeschool Kind of Mom” (a reference to both exhaustion, the coffee, and Psalm 127:3-5 and the Quiverfull movement), “Stressed Blessed and Homeschool Obsessed,” or “Yes I have my hands full, but you should see my heart” in trendy, youthful fonts with hipster graphics.<sup>281</sup> These messages again emphasize how difficult, stressful, and demanding, homeschooling can be, while positioning it youthful, trendy, and the only way to true fulfillment.

One overtly political t-shirt takes aim at Hillary Clinton’s oft-repeated axiom, “It takes a village to raise a child”—it reads, “Homeschool: Because I’ve seen the village and I don’t want it raising my kids!”<sup>282</sup> These items will also often have hashtags printed on them like, #proverbs31 (a reference to the discourse of “biblical womanhood”) or #homeschoolmom,

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<sup>281</sup> “Coffee Drinking...”: <https://www.etsy.com/listing/567113431/coffee-drinking-bible-reading-arrow>; “Stressed, Blessed, and Homeschool Obsessed” : [https://www.etsy.com/listing/497102520/stressed-blessed-homeschool-obsessed?ga\\_order=most\\_relevant&ga\\_search\\_type=all&ga\\_view\\_type=gallery&ga\\_search\\_query=blessed%20homeschool%20mom&ref=sr\\_gallery-1-5](https://www.etsy.com/listing/497102520/stressed-blessed-homeschool-obsessed?ga_order=most_relevant&ga_search_type=all&ga_view_type=gallery&ga_search_query=blessed%20homeschool%20mom&ref=sr_gallery-1-5) ; “Yes I have my hands full, but you should see my heart”: [https://www.etsy.com/listing/594260580/hands-full-heart-full-tshirt-hands-full?ga\\_order=most\\_relevant&ga\\_search\\_type=all&ga\\_view\\_type=gallery&ga\\_search\\_query=homeschool%20mom&ref=sr\\_gallery-2-35](https://www.etsy.com/listing/594260580/hands-full-heart-full-tshirt-hands-full?ga_order=most_relevant&ga_search_type=all&ga_view_type=gallery&ga_search_query=homeschool%20mom&ref=sr_gallery-2-35).

<sup>282</sup> “Homeschool: Because I’ve seen the village and I don’t want it raising my kids!”: [https://www.etsy.com/listing/594783715/homeschool-mom-shirt-homeschooling-gift?ga\\_order=most\\_relevant&ga\\_search\\_type=all&ga\\_view\\_type=gallery&ga\\_search\\_query=homeschool%20mom&ref=sr\\_gallery-1-17](https://www.etsy.com/listing/594783715/homeschool-mom-shirt-homeschooling-gift?ga_order=most_relevant&ga_search_type=all&ga_view_type=gallery&ga_search_query=homeschool%20mom&ref=sr_gallery-1-17)

further reinforcing the social-media relevance and youth of the movement. These items not only project the values of conservative Christian homeschooling into world, they also discipline (or encourage) the buyer to continue the work when they wear or use them.

### ***Homeschooling and the Law***

Coffee mugs and T-shirts may be good marketing tools for an already established movement, but the material and digital culture of conservative Christian homeschooling owes everything to the legal advocacy wing of the movement. There are complex social, cultural, political and religious reasons why Christian homeschooling grew and flourished, but there is one foundational reason: in the last thirty years, the laws regulating homeschooling in the US have been gutted.

The first blow to compulsory formal education came in 1972 with *Wisconsin v. Yoder* wherein the United State Supreme Court ruled that Amish families had the right to withhold their children from public schools on religious grounds.<sup>283</sup> The precedent the court cited was a 1923 case, *Meyer v. Nebraska*, which struck down a World War I era Nebraska law prohibiting the teaching of German in public schools.<sup>284</sup> In *Meyer v. Nebraska*, Justice James C. McReynolds, writing for the majority ruled that that the fourteenth amendment protections of due process guaranteed the right “to engage in any of the common occupations of life, to acquire useful knowledge, to marry, establish a home and bring up children, to worship God according to the dictates of his own conscience...”<sup>285</sup> Ironically, in the same opinion, Justice McReynolds also wrote, “Practically, education of the young is only possible in schools conducted by especially

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<sup>283</sup> *Wisconsin v. Yoder*, 406 U.S. 205 (1972)

<sup>284</sup> *Meyer v. Nebraska*, 262 U.S. 390 (1923)

<sup>285</sup> *Ibid.*

qualified persons who devote themselves thereto. The calling always has been regarded as useful and honorable, essential, indeed, to the public welfare.” Nonetheless, *Wisconsin v. Yoder* and *Meyer v. Nebraska* became the legal backbone of the early homeschooling movement.

Homeschooling is currently legal in all fifty states, but the country is a patchwork of laws and regulations. For our purposes, states fall roughly into three categories: those that require no notification that parents intend to homeschool, those that require notification but nothing more, and those that require notification and compliance with various oversight measures. Twenty-four out of fifty states fall within the first two categories essentially allowing parents full autonomy over the content and quality of their children’s education.<sup>286</sup> Oversight regulations also vary widely by state. Some states only require immunization records, or proof that homeschooling parents hold a high school diploma or the equivalent. Others require that parents meet with a school official, or provide local school officials with lesson plans, or student records (which would be impossible for “unschooling” families who keep neither), and/or require children take standardized tests. It is also worth noting that even when regulations exist, they are often not enforced, or are practically unenforceable. Few of them do more than keep a record that a family is homeschooling. New regulations are often met with formidable resistance.

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<sup>286</sup> In Alabama, Arkansas, Arizona, California, Kansas, Kentucky, Michigan, Mississippi, Montana, Nebraska, New Mexico, Nevada, Utah, and Wyoming, parents are required to register as homeschoolers, but are free to teach what and how they want with no oversight. They are also free to “graduate” their children whenever they see fit. Alaska, Connecticut, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Missouri, New Jersey, Oklahoma, and Texas do not require that parents even notify state or local officials of their intention to homeschool—homeschooled children in these states are, essentially “off the grid.”



The legal matters become even more complex as homeschooling families fight school districts for resources.<sup>287</sup> Twenty states currently ban homeschool students from participating in public school-funded extracurricular programs like band or athletics. Twenty states however, allow homeschoolers full access to the programs offered by the district in which they live. The other ten allow some access under various conditions. The poster-child for homeschool athletes is none other than National Football League quarterback and evangelical icon, Tim Tebow. As a homeschooler in Florida, Tebow had access to the football program offered by his local public school, which obviously served him well. Tebow's example has inspired legislation in other states like Texas, where homeschoolers are currently banned from school athletics but where football and conservative Christianity are all but inseparable. As of 2017, "the Tim Tebow Bill" has been taken up by the Texas state legislature and is currently under consideration. Tebow also represents a cultural victory for homeschoolers.<sup>288</sup> In 1972, when *Wisconsin v. Yoder* came under consideration, homeschooling was, as the case indicated, the purview of isolationist religious groups, or countercultural left-leaning collectives, not mainstream, all-American sports-stars. To

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<sup>287</sup> For more on these battles see: Sherry F Colb. "Homeschoolers Should Be Denied to Public School Resources." In *Homeschooling*, Myra Immell ed. (Detroit: Greenhaven Press, 2009) 148-155; Valerie Delp, "Allowing Access to Public School Resources May Harm Homeschooling." in *Homeschooling*, Myra Immell ed. (Detroit: Greenhaven Press, 2009) 146-47; Myra Immell, "Should Homeschooled Children Have Access to Public School Resources?" in *Homeschooling*, Myra Immell ed. 128-30; Preston Williams, "Sports Are an Extension of the Classroom and Should Thus Exclude Homeschoolers." In *Homeschooling*, Myra Immell ed., 156-59.

<sup>288</sup> For a copy of the Bill see Texas State Senate Bill 640, 2017. For more see: <http://www.timtebowbill.com/> ; Associated Press, "Virginia's 'Tebow bill' defeated by education committee" January 30, 2018. ; Texas Homeschool Coalition Association, "Tim Tebow Bill Filed" <https://www.thsc.org/2017/01/press-release-tim-tebow-bill/>

paraphrase the feminist theorist bell hooks, conservative Christian homeschooling as moved “from margin to center.”<sup>289</sup>

### ***The Home School Legal Defense Association***

Most of the legal victories for homeschoolers have been won by one organization, the Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA). The HSLDA is an expressly conservative Christian organization founded by attorney Michael Farris in 1983. It has since become the most powerful legal advocacy group for homeschooling in the US. The HSLDA offers free legal assistance to any of its more than eighty-thousand dues-paying members, should they need it, and mobilizes member families to intentionally challenge homeschooling and other laws in their states. The HSLDA can marshal a formidable grass-roots constituency when necessary and proved as much in 1994, when Farris and the HSLDA brought the United States House of Representatives to a standstill.

The “battle,” as the HSLDA characterizes it, was over a one-sentence amendment to H.R. 6 written by Democratic Congressman from California, George Miller.<sup>290</sup> H.R. 6 was a 12.7 billion-dollar omnibus re-appropriations bill for the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. The Miller amendment made federal education funding dependent on each state’s ability to provide assurance that, “each full-time teacher in schools under the jurisdiction of the agency is

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<sup>289</sup> bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. (New York: Routledge, 1984). I am not the first to borrow hook’s phrase to talk about conservative Christianity in the United States. See: Mark T. Edwards, “Evangelical Sexuality: From Margin to Center” *Religion in American History*. November 22, 2014; Michael W. Apple, *Educating the "Right" Way: Markets, Standards, God, and Inequality*. (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2006) 144.

<sup>290</sup> “The Battle of H.R. 6” [https://hsllda.org/content/about/history/battle\\_hr6.asp](https://hsllda.org/content/about/history/battle_hr6.asp)

certified to teach in the subject area to which he or she is assigned.”<sup>291</sup> Miller did not intend to take aim at homeschoolers, but his amendment to H.R. 6 *could* have been used to require that homeschooling parents be certified teachers in states that claim public jurisdiction over homeschoolers.

The HSLDA sounded the alarm and an expansive, fear-mongering phone, fax, and mail campaign got quickly underway. Meanwhile, Farris deputized conservative broadcasters like Pat Buchanan, Marlin Maddoux, Rush Limbaugh, and Beverley LaHaye to lobby congress and American Christians from their microphones. Farris himself did dozens of high-profile television and radio interviews on outlets like Pat Robertson’s *The 700 Club*, and James Dobson’s *Focus on the Family* radio, arguing that the amendment trampled on the religious freedoms of Christian homeschoolers.<sup>292</sup>

Two days after the HSLDA’s “urgent alert” went out, representatives were already getting bombarded by their constituents, homeschoolers and non-homeschoolers alike. The congressional switchboard had to be shut down on several occasions and representatives had to weave through crowds to get to their offices. In attempt to subvert the HSLDA’s panic machine, Democrats William Ford and Dale Kildee postponed a clarifying amendment, adding the word “public” before the word “school” in the Miller amendment, all but insuring that the certification requirement could only apply to public school teachers. It passed, but by then the HSLDA was fighting for more than just a legal victory. The Ford-Kildee amendment gave homeschoolers all

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<sup>291</sup> H.R. 6, 103 Congress 1993-1994. The full text of the bill is available here: <https://www.congress.gov/bill/103rd-congress/house-bill/6>

<sup>292</sup> For more on the H.R. 6 fight, see Stevens, *Kingdom of Children*, 158-65; For a primary source account see the HSLDA website, “The Battle of H.R. 6” [https://hsllda.org/content/about/history/battle\\_hr6.asp](https://hsllda.org/content/about/history/battle_hr6.asp)

protection they could want, but the public outcry over H.R. 6 empowered Farris to issue a decisive ultimatum to republican legislators: publicly support Christian homeschoolers or we will turn our political machine on you.

Republican Representative Dick Armey partnered with the HSLDA and proposed the “Home School/Private School Freedom Amendment” expressly stating that nothing in the bill could be used to place federal controls on homeschoolers. Notably, non-Christian homeschooling groups like the Islamic Homeschool Group of America, the Jewish Home Educators’ Network, and the Later-Day Saint Home Educators opposed the redundant Armey amendment. They worried the amendment was a political stunt that could quickly become a referendum on homeschooling more broadly. Nonetheless, every Republican member of the house voted for it and it carried.

Since 1994, the HSLDA has cemented its place as the most powerful homeschooling advocacy group in the nation through other important victories in several states. It opposes all regulation of homeschooling and works to undermine other “government intrusions” into family life. The HSLDA also does not hesitate to publicly attack legislators who propose even the meekest homeschooling or child-protection regulations. In 2013, Ohio Senator Capri Cafaro proposed a bill that would require homeschooling families to be interviewed by social services.<sup>293</sup> Cafaro proposed “Teddy’s Law” in response to the death of fourteen-year old Theodore “Teddy” Foltz Tedesco, whose mother and step-father pulled him out of public school

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<sup>293</sup> Ohio Senate Bill 248, 2013.

to homeschool him after being accused by school officials of abusing him and eventually beat him to death.<sup>294</sup>

The HSLDA condemned the bill calling it “Worst ever homeschool law proposed in Ohio” and encouraged its members to make their voices heard.<sup>295</sup> Cafaro withdrew the bill two weeks later after receiving thousands of angry phone calls and death threats.<sup>296</sup> Arkansas State Representative, David Cook, one of the state’s few Democratic lawmakers, became the target of the HSLDA after proposing bills in 2005 and 2009, attempting to hold homeschoolers to state education standards.<sup>297</sup> The HSLDA sounded the alarm in its customary, hyperbolic style, and Cook’s office was inundated. His co-sponsors all withdrew their names and both bills died in committee. The same thing happened to New Jersey Senate Majority Leader Loretta Weinberg in 2003, 2011, and 2012, New Hampshire State Representative Judy Day in 2009, and Michigan State Representative Stephanie Change in 2015.<sup>298</sup> All of these bills were inspired by cases of child abuse and murder among homeschoolers. Stephanie Change’s legislative director described her dealings with HSLDA to *ProPublica* reporter this way: “I’ve never seen a lobby more powerful and scary.”<sup>299</sup>

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<sup>294</sup> The website Homeschoolers Annoymous maintains a database of such deaths, see: <http://hsinvisiblechildren.org/commentary/some-preliminary-data-on-homeschool-child-fatalities/>

<sup>295</sup> See: “Worst Ever Homeschool Law Proposed in Ohio” <https://hsllda.org/hs/state/oh/201312170.asp>

<sup>296</sup> Doug Livingston, “Senator pulls child-safety bill after backlash from homeschoolers” *The Akron Beacon Journal* . December 21, 2013.

<sup>297</sup> Arkansas House Bill 2439, 2005; Arkansas House House Bill 2144, 2009.

<sup>298</sup> Jessica Huseman, “Small Group Goes to Great Lengths to Block Homeschooling Regulation” *ProPublica*, August 27, 2015.; A list of all HSLDA efforts can be found on their website, <https://hsllda.org/legal/state/default.asp>.

<sup>299</sup> Ellen Heinitz as quoted in, Jessica Huseman, “Small Group Goes to Great Lengths to Block Homeschooling Regulation” *ProPublica*, August 27, 2015.

Through its direct political endorsements and its political action committee, the HSLDA has successfully made homeschooling a partisan issue. It has also broadened its scope to include issues Farris argues are consistent with homeschooling advocacy though they have nothing to do with education—put another way, they part of the “biblical worldview.” For example, the HSLDA fought to oppose marriage equality and opposes birth control and abortion access across the board. It defeated laws in Washington and Maine aimed at giving grandparents visitation rights (which would allow them to intervene if they felt their grandchildren were being educationally neglected or otherwise abused) and it is currently working to fight government funded pre-kindergarten programs.<sup>300</sup>

The HSLDA’s fight for homeschooler “freedom” has had the unfortunate consequence of making child abuse among homeschoolers increasingly difficult to prevent and stop. There is no substantive evidence suggesting that homeschoolers are more likely than other families to physically abuse or neglect their children—though several conservative Christians pronatalist and homeschooling leaders like James Dobson, Mary Pride, and Bill Gothard teach that parents have a biblical mandate to use physical disciplinary measures including confinement, hitting, and depriving children of food.<sup>301</sup> The larger issue is that because of the HSLDA’s efforts,

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<sup>300</sup> See: Montana Senate Bill 44, 2011; See: H.R. 2343, “Education Begins at Home” Act, <https://hsllda.org/Legislation/National/2007/HR2343/default.asp>; Washington House Bill 1108 and Senate Bill 5071; William A. Estrada, Esq. “Smother Mother Strikes Again: Why Government Should Stay out of Pre-K” September, 2008 <https://hsllda.org/docs/news/200809080.asp>;

<sup>301</sup> James Dobson, *Dare To Discipline*. (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1970); Mary Pride, *The Child Abuse Industry: Outrageous Facts About Child Abuse & Everyday Rebellions Against a System that Threatens Every North American Family*. (Wheaton, IL: 1986). The Biblical mandate is taken largely from Proverbs 13:24, “He who withholds his rod hates his son, But he who loves him disciplines him diligently” and Proverbs 22:15, “Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child; The rod of discipline will remove it far from him.” Contrary to popular belief the phrase “spare the rod, spoil the child” is not Biblical.

homeschooled children rarely come into contact with mandatory reporters. Further, the HSLDA has taken specific aim at social workers who look into homeschooling families.

In several of its publications, the HSLDA has painted social workers as malicious government operatives bent on “traumatizing” innocent Christian families. Michael Farris even wrote a novel entitled, *Anonymous Tip*, where in an innocent homeschooling mother stands accused of child abuse.<sup>302</sup> In the HSLDA’s imagination, social workers are out of control, taking children from their parents willy-nilly without cause. Senior Council for the HSLDA, Christopher J. Klicka, wrote an article for Mary Pride’s magazine, *Practical Homeschooling* in 2005 entitled, “No Fear: Social Workers Restrained!” and it reads like the opening lines of horror-movie screenplay:

There is a knock at the door. The homeschool mom answers and to her horror, a social worker is there! He simply informs the innocent mother that she has been accused of “child abuse.” He will not tell her anymore unless she immediately lets him in her house and interrogate the children alone.<sup>303</sup>

The subtext of sexual violation here is about as subtle as a frying pan to the head. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 83% of US social workers are female, but the one imagined here is a man, who forces his way into a woman’s home, and then demands to be alone with her children.<sup>304</sup>

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<sup>302</sup> Michael Farris, *Anonymous Tip*. (Nashville: B&H Publishing Groups, 1996).

<sup>303</sup> Christopher Klicka, “No Fear: Social Workers Restrained.” *Practical Homeschooling*, no. 65, 2005.

<sup>304</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey” 2015, <https://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat11.htm>

The HSLDA is intent on “protecting families” from this kind of intrusion. To that end, Klicka also put out a memo entitled “The Social Worker at Your Door: 10 Helpful Hints.”<sup>305</sup> Tellingly, the list ends with this cautionary advice on how to avoid the attention of child welfare agencies all together: “Do not spank children in public. Do not spank someone else’s child unless they are close Christian friends.”<sup>306</sup> Apparently, the HSLDA assumes that Christian families hit their children and that the practice is so wide spread, one could reasonably strike another person’s child if they were “close Christian friends.” Interestingly, the instructions are not, “do not spank another person’s child unless they are close friends,” or “unless you have their permission to do so,” or the safest option, “do not spank another person’s child.” The religion of the other family is a central authorizing factor in striking their child. If one happens to be close friends with Jewish family, best keep your hands off their kid.

In this memo and elsewhere, the HSLDA actively promotes physically disciplining children and works to make serious abuse less visible. The organization has successfully fought federal and state legislation that would expand the number of mandatory reporters.<sup>307</sup> It has fought to make anonymous tips of child abuse illegal and to prosecute tipsters whose allegations

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<sup>305</sup> Christopher Klicka, “The Social Worker at Your Door:10 Helpful Hints.” *Practical Homeschooling*, no. 37, 2000.

<sup>306</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>307</sup> U.S. Senate Bill S. 1877, 2011. The HSLDA’s memo on S. 1877 is available here: <https://hsllda.org/content/docs/news/201112150.asp>. See also, California A.B. 2380, which would have made those who work with children as part of a non-profit mandatory reporters. The text of the bill is available here, and the HSLDA’s opposition is available here, <https://hsllda.org/content/hs/state/ca/201008250.asp>.



turn out to be false.<sup>308</sup> It defends parents charged with child abuse and endorses what it calls “reasonable corporal punishment” but never defines “reasonable.”<sup>309</sup> In fact, the HSLDA fights efforts to define and limit corporal punishment like a proposition in California that would have expanded the definition of abuse to include “the use of an implement, including, but not limited to, a stick, a rod, a switch, an electrical cord, an extension cord, a belt, a broom, or a shoe.”<sup>310</sup> According to the HSLDA, Proverbs 13:24 “Whoever spares the rod hates their children” is a literal injunction in need of legal cover.

Compounding the problem of invisibility, the HSLDA has also taken up the cause to deny children identification documents like birth certificates and/or social security numbers and it has the backing of some well-connected leaders. For example, former State Attorney General from Virginia, Ken Cuccinelli, has been a vocal opponent of identification mandates. Cuccinelli is an outspoken pronatalist, father of seven homeschooled children, and frequent HSLDA speaker.<sup>311</sup> In 2010 he said the following at a HSLDA event:

We’re gonna have our 7th child on Monday, if he’s not born before. And, for the very concerns you state, we’re actually considering – as I’m sure many of you here didn’t get a Social

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<sup>308</sup> See: Pennsylvania State Senate Bill 28, which made making a flase alligaiton illegals, signed into law in 2013. Testimony of Christopher Klicka, Senior Counsel of the Home School Legal Defense Association Hearing on the Reauthorization of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act Subcommittee on Select Education of the House Committee on Education and the Workforce, October 16, 2001. Available here:

[https://hslda.org/content/docs/news/hslda/200305/200305022/CAPTA\\_Testimony.pdf](https://hslda.org/content/docs/news/hslda/200305/200305022/CAPTA_Testimony.pdf)

<sup>309</sup> See for example: <https://hslda.org/content/hs/state/ks/20060906.asp> ; The Stumbo Family, <https://nche.hslda.org/courtreport/V19N4/V19N401.asp>

<sup>310</sup> California A.B. 2943, 2008. The text of the bill is available here:

[http://www.leginfo.ca.gov/pub/07-08/bill/asm/ab\\_2901-](http://www.leginfo.ca.gov/pub/07-08/bill/asm/ab_2901-2950/ab_2943_cfa_20080414_123533_asm_comm.html)

[2950/ab\\_2943\\_cfa\\_20080414\\_123533\\_asm\\_comm.html](http://www.leginfo.ca.gov/pub/07-08/bill/asm/ab_2901-2950/ab_2943_cfa_20080414_123533_asm_comm.html) and the HSLDA’s opposition paper is available here, <https://hslda.org/content/Legislation/State/ca/2008/CAAB2943/default.asp>

<sup>311</sup> For example he was the keynote speaker at the Generation Joshua “Future of America Banquet” in 2011, see: <https://hslda.org/content/docs/news/201112020.asp>

Security number when you were born, they do it now – we’re considering not doing that. And a lot of people are considering that now, because it is being used to track you.<sup>312</sup>

In 2002 the HSLDA’s political action committee funded Cuccinelli’s bid for State Senate, and in 2013, it deployed two hundred homeschool high-school volunteers in his campaign for governor. Cuccinelli narrowly lost the gubernatorial race, but went on to serve as a campaign advisor to the Ted Cruz in 2016, and he remains active in Virginia politics.

Homebirths, which are common among conservative Christian pronatalists, in conjunction with homeschooling, make it increasingly possible for children to go completely undocumented. As in communities like the Amish and some Mormon Fundamentalists, denying children documentation reinforces an authoritarian ethos of captivity and the need for “protection.” When older children, especially girls, cannot produce identifying documentation they are unable to apply for college, get a driver license, work, or open a bank account—thus reinforcing their dependence on male authority figures.

That is what happened to a young woman in Texas named, Alecia Faith Pennington. Pennington was born at home, never attended school, and never saw a conventional doctor. At nineteen, she had no proof of her existence, or her citizenship, and was unable to get a driver’s license or a secure a job.<sup>313</sup> She took to YouTube with her plight and inspired a law in Texas (HB

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<sup>312</sup> The speech is available on YouTube at:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=4&v=c-ie2WFZkMY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=4&v=c-ie2WFZkMY)

<sup>313</sup> Samatha Laine, “Alecia Pennington can’t prove she’s an American – or even exists. What would you do?” *The Christian Science Monitor*. February 12, 2015.

<https://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Society/2015/0212/Alecia-Pennington-can-t-prove-she-s-an-American-or-even-exists.-What-would-you-do>

2794), which took effect in 2015 now making the failure to obtain a birth certificate a criminal offense. The HSLDA however, continues to fight such laws in other states.<sup>314</sup>

### ***The HSLDA's Pronatalist Agenda***

Today the HSLDA is more than just a homeschooling legal advocacy group. It is working for nothing short of a cultural revolution. Farris is fond of telling audiences that one day soon, conservative Christian homeschoolers will occupy the highest positions of power and influence in the nation. To make that dream come true, Farris founded two educational organizations that buttress the mission of HSLDA: Generation Joshua and Patrick Henry College. Generation Joshua trains conservative Christian homeschool students (ages 11-19) in civics and government and then deploys them as volunteer teams for “pro-family” candidates endorsed by the HSLDA’s political action committee. Generation Joshua is touted as providing young people with leadership and organizational skills, which it does. It *also* provides conservative Christian pronatalist candidates with a cadre of fresh-faced volunteers at their beck and call.

Farris’s other venture, Patrick Henry College in Purcellville, Virginia, just an hour outside of Washington D.C, is the first institution of higher learning designed exclusively for homeschooled students. Politically, and religiously, Patrick Henry College makes Jerry Falwell’s Liberty University look like *Animal House*. “Harvard for Homeschoolers” as Farris is fond of calling it, Patrick Henry Collage is a “training ground for political missionaries” where Nietzsche

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<sup>314</sup> Texas H.B. 2795, 2015  
<https://capitol.texas.gov/BillLookup/History.aspx?LegSess=84R&Bill=HB2794>.

and Darwin are taught as “opposition research.”<sup>315</sup> It recruits high performing students and shapes them into the conservative Christian leaders of tomorrow. Patrick Henry students can major in Government, Strategic Intelligence for National Security, or Journalism (among other subjects), but not biology, chemistry, or mathematics. It seems to serve them well. Patrick Henry students regularly intern with Congressmen, conservative lobbying firms, and powerful think tanks. In 2017, there were more students from Patrick Henry interning at the White House than from Georgetown University. It is worth noting that almost all these well-connected interns are men. According to Journalist Hanna Rosin, female students struggle to reconcile their college’s phases on political leadership with its views on women.<sup>316</sup> Some female graduates do go on to careers in journalism and start a business, most however become full-time mothers.<sup>317</sup>

Both Patrick Henry and Generation Joshua are militantly pro-life and pronatalist. Indeed, Farris came to his pronatalist convictions through Bill Gothard. Vickie Farris details the couples’ decision to abandon birth control after attending one of Gothard’s Basic Seminars, in her book *A Mom Just Like You*.<sup>318</sup> After Gothard was brought down by sexual scandal, Farris distanced himself, and the HSLDA, from Gothard’s patriarchal theology and publicly criticized its impact on women and girls.<sup>319</sup> However, whatever lip service Farris gives to supporting women and

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<sup>315</sup> For more on Patrick Henry see, David Kirkpatrick, “College for the Home-Schooled Is Shaping Leaders for the Right.” *The New York Times*, March, 8, 2004

Hana Rosin, *God’s Harvard: A Christian College on Mission to Save America*. (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2007).

<sup>316</sup> Rosin, *God’s Harvard*.

<sup>317</sup> Rosin makes this observation in her books and it is confirmed by an informal review of the alumni profiles, <https://www.phc.edu/alumni-profiles?hsCtaTracking=d6a3a8af-78f6-4f9b-afd2-0708a8e2c891%7Cd1f56d86-83b0-427c-bb64-ec7126be113b>

<sup>318</sup> Vickie Farris, *A Mom Just like You*. (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2002).

<sup>319</sup> Michael Farris, “A Line in the Sand,” *The Homeschool Court Report*. August, 2014.

[https://hsl.org/courtreport/V30N2/V30N202.asp?utm\\_source=&utm\\_term=&utm\\_content=&utm\\_campaign=&utm\\_medium=](https://hsl.org/courtreport/V30N2/V30N202.asp?utm_source=&utm_term=&utm_content=&utm_campaign=&utm_medium=)

girls should be balanced by the fact that Gothard was accused by more than sixty women over three decades, but Farris routinely invited Gothard to speak at HSLDA conferences up until the very *public* accusations in 2015.<sup>320</sup> Beyond that, Farris and his wife remain fierce pronatalist activists.

Moreover, Farris' Patrick Henry College is built on patriarchal theology, teaching that women are biblically commanded to submit to male headship. The *two* full-time female professors at Patrick Henry are prohibited from mentoring male students.<sup>321</sup> Incidentally, neither woman is tenured, even though one of them has been at the college for a decade. The "Dean of Students" is a currently a woman, but her title expressly states that she advises on non-academic policy only. At Patrick Henry, the "The Dean of Men also serves as Apprenticeship Coordinator and oversees Career Services."<sup>322</sup> There is no "Dean of Women." Further, Patrick Henry employs men like patriarchy crusader, Stephan Baskerville who has railed against the "matriarchal leviathan" of the U.S. Government, called the many reports of sexual abuse on college campuses "a hoax," and argued that the terms "domestic violence" and "rape" are "ideological constructions designed to create hysteria and mean nothing."<sup>323</sup>

### ***Farris' Next Chapter***

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<sup>320</sup> In the wake of scandal, the HSLDA has tried to obscure its connections with Bill Gothard. However, he still appears on the conference schedule websites from years past see for example the 2010 schedule: <https://www.regonline.com/builder/site/tab3.aspx?EventID=856115>

<sup>321</sup> Patrick Henry College Student Handbook, <https://cdn2.hubspot.net/hubfs/1718959/2017-2018%20-%20Student%20Handbook%20-%20FINAL.pdf>.

<sup>322</sup> Patrick Henry College Student Handbook, 21. <https://cdn2.hubspot.net/hubfs/1718959/2017-2018%20-%20Student%20Handbook%20-%20FINAL.pdf>

<sup>323</sup> Steven Baskerville, "The Sexual Revolution Turns Ugly" *Crisis Magazine*. November 16, 2017. <https://www.crisismagazine.com/2017/sexual-revolution-turns-ugly>

Most recently, Farris has assumed leadership of the pronatalist legal advocacy group, Alliance Defending Freedom. Alliance Defending Freedom was founded by Campus Crusade for Christ founder Bill Bright, but in recent decades has become a “legal ministry” dedicated almost exclusively to reproductive issues. Most recently, it fought a California law requiring that anti-abortion “pregnancy crisis centers” provide patients with *accurate* medical information on abortion and information on how to avail themselves of state-funded medical care. The law also required that centers post that they are not licensed to provide medical care.

The California law was imagined as a consumer protection measure. Currently, many pregnancy crisis centers masquerade as medical facilities. The centers are designed to look like doctors’ offices and staff will often don medical scrubs for added effect. They are legally allowed to provide medically unsound information linking abortion to infertility, breast cancer, and mental illness. Further, they rarely, if ever, inform patients that they may be eligible for state-funded services like medical care, child-care training, or other assistance. Proponents of the California law contended that pregnancy centers manipulate or frighten women into having children they do not want. Farris and Alliance Defending Freedom argued that forcing pregnancy center workers to provide information on abortion violates their first amendment right to free speech.

In June of 2018, the US Supreme Court ruled in favor of the pregnancy centers. Justice Clarence Thomas, writing for the five-four majority argued that the pregnancy centers could not be compelled to give women any kind information about abortion (accurate or inaccurate), or to

say anything else they disagreed with, per their first amendment rights.<sup>324</sup> In writing for the minority Justice Stephen G. Breyer pointed to a profound hypocrisy in their majority's opinion. In twenty states (California is not among them), licensed medical providers are required to read a statement containing *inaccurate* medical information to patients seeking an abortion.<sup>325</sup> In 1992, the court upheld the constitutionality of these laws in *Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pennsylvania et al. v. Casey, Governor of Pennsylvania, et al* arguing that they did not present an “undue burden” on women seeking abortion. It seems that the state cannot compel religious pregnancy crisis center workers to tell the truth, but it can compel doctors to lie.

As we have seen, it is difficult to determine where conservative Christian pronatalist rhetoric ends and conservative Christian homeschooling begins. Both discourses use dominionist theology and a narrow definition of the *biblical worldview* to advance an agenda aimed at disciplining women and children, spiritually, emotionally, and physically. The following chapter takes a close look at the Advanced Training Institutes homeschooling curriculum and how it puts these discipline ideologies to work.

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<sup>324</sup> Supreme Court of the United States, *National Institute of Family and Life Advocates DBA, NIFLA et al v. Becerra, Attorney General of California et. al.* No. 16–1140. Argued March 20, 2018—Decided June 26, 2018.

<sup>325</sup> *Ibid.*

## CHAPTER THREE

### The Advanced Training Institute

“Ignoring isn’t the same as ignorance, you have to work at it.”  
 –Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale*

Alissa Wilkinson is a movie critic for *Christianity Today*, and a former student of The Institute in Basic Life Principles’ (IBLP) homeschooling program, the Advanced Training Institute (ATI). She described her experience in ATI this way:

Over and over, I have attempted, and failed, to explain ATI to people who have never heard of it. Those who have not encountered ATI think I’m making it up; those who had brushes with it in their own youth usually have to make jokes in order to ignore their own memories.<sup>326</sup>

The Institute in Basic Life Principles’ (IBLP) homeschooling program, the Advanced Training Institute (ATI), is its most popular product and perhaps its most useful artifact for deep study. Although the organization has grown considerably, the ATI materials have remained surprisingly consistent since 1984 when they were first published. In ATI, we can see how the logics of Gothard’s pronatalism are constructed out of, and with, the logics of related agendas and ideologies like dominionism and white supremacy. As with the IBLP more broadly, ATI is a case study in how conservative Christian pronatalism reinforces, and is reinforced by, a variety of discourses beyond those concerned with gender and women’s equality, including discourses of supernaturalism, white supremacy, white Christian nationalism, neo-populism, and anti-intellectualism.

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<sup>326</sup> Wilkinson originally posted this on her blog but has since removed it. It is however, available here: Alissa Wilkinson, “A Sound Foundation,” *Medium*. February 27, 2014.



Further, ATI materials reveal a great deal about the complicated religious worlds of those who use them and how those worlds are constructed and policed. More than just a collection of doctrines and lessons, ATI is a window on a “worldview” and the mechanics of worldview production. The following is a snapshot of how the curriculum constructs and supports certain gender, racial, and political ideologies. Moreover, the following aims to convey the psychological and emotional experience of ATI. As I will show, the ATI curriculum uses a variety of rhetorical strategies to undermine student agency, to disempower students, and to prime young women especially, for manipulation and abuse.

The ATI curriculum is comprised of fifty-four *Wisdom Booklets* meant to be used year after year by kindergarteners and twelfth graders alike. The *Booklets* are written at a roughly eighth-grade reading level.<sup>327</sup> Consequently, from the very beginning, students are given materials far more advanced than they are capable of understanding. Families receive eight *Wisdom Booklets* per year. If families keep the pace, that amounts to slightly less than seven years of instruction, after which families either stop, or circle back. The program is strikingly anti-academic and geared toward instilling Bill Gothard’s “character qualities” through scripture memorization and rote repetition of key Gothard phrases. The Character Qualities Chart—a grid of forty-nine virtues like “meekness” and “self-control,” and their “operational definitions”—is the foundation for the ATI program and the IBLP more broadly.<sup>328</sup>

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<sup>327</sup> To determine the reading level, I showed the *Wisdom Booklets* to librarians specializing in children’s and young-adult collections at public libraries in Evanston, Illinois, and Palos Verdes, California. They agreed the reading level should be set between 7<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade, though two of the librarians expressed concern that given some of the content, the *Booklets* would not be “appropriate” for 7<sup>th</sup> graders. When I explained that they were used for children as young as six years old, all three librarians expressed deep concern.

<sup>328</sup> A copy of the full chart is available for free download via the ATI website: <https://atii.org/family/curriculum/character/>

In Gothard's world, *character* is more than integrity and honesty. It is a complex construction that encompasses a person's moral fortitude, one's relationship with God, and one's ability to bring mind and body under an exacting discipline, to subjugate the self, and to break one's "willful spirit." "Instilling character" is the ATI's highest priority and the curriculum materials, along with parents, and the ATI culture, as I observed it at several homeschooling conferences, often contrast "instilling character" and "developing wisdom" with traditional educational goals like developing language, math, or critical thinking skills, as though the latter endeavors threaten children's (especially girls') moral, physical, and spiritual "purity."<sup>329</sup>

Each *Wisdom Booklet* is organized around one character quality, its definition, and a corresponding Bible verse. For example, *Wisdom Booklet 4* is dedicated to "Humility," which the booklet defines as, "Recognizing that it is actually God and others who are responsible for the achievements in my life."<sup>330</sup> The corresponding scripture is from the fourth chapter of James: "Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble

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<sup>329</sup> Anne Braude notes a similar phenomenon among nineteenth-century spiritualist mediums. Young girls, women of color, and women with no education were often considered more "pure" and open "vessels" for the spirits of the dead, as education was thought to interfere with the spiritual transmissions. This view also reinforced notions of white, male, European intellectual superiority as such men were considered more "reasonable" and so therefore less prone to "emotional" experience of channeling the spirits. Ann D. Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth Century America*. 2d ed. (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2008).

<sup>330</sup> The Advanced Training Institute, *Wisdom Booklet 4*. (Oakbrook, IL: The Institute in Basic Life Principles, 2002) 100. A note on pagination and editions: The *Wisdom Booklets* have been reprinted six times, between 1984 and 2002. In conducting this research, I consulted the original set from 1984, and the 2002 edition. The booklets differ only slightly from edition to edition. Most of the changes are in the design. The new set has updated images and photographs and is printed in color. Almost no content changes were made. The most significant change is in pagination. The original set used consistent pagination through all fifty-four booklets. The 2002 set restarts the pagination with each *Wisdom Booklet*. For the sake of clarity, I used the original consistent pagination system in citing the *Wisdom Booklets*.

yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.” The rest of the *Wisdom Booklet* proceeds around the theme of mourning, not for the dead or for some loss, but for one’s own wretchedness before the Lord. The goal of *Wisdom Booklet 4* is to “develop a truly mourning spirit.”<sup>331</sup>

What makes ATI effective has less to do with the topics it covers or ignores than it does with how it makes the family (mostly the child and mother) *feel* in the process of learning and teaching. The ATI curriculum is a disorienting maze of circular logics, contradictions, disconnected “facts,” and serpentine examinations of seemingly unrelated and decontextualized subjects. Even the way the physical materials are designed is distracting. They are replete with taxonomies, lists, and tables, most of which are not fully explained, and lots of text crowded on to each page in tight, Bible-like columns. The ATI curriculum oscillates between being bewilderingly detailed and far-reaching and then suddenly obtuse and vague. This is intentional. One of the most oft-repeated Biblical passages in the ATI and IBLP culture is Proverbs 3:5, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding.” ATI is expressly aimed at undermining students’ trust in their own understanding.

### *A “Way of Life”*

With the rise of conservative Christian homeschooling in the U.S., ATI has become the primary entry point into Bill Gothard’s world. In fact, the IBLP no longer puts on the live Basic or Advanced Seminars that built Bill Gothard’s empire. It has radically restructured so that that the seminars are now only available in digital or DVD formats and are interwoven with the ATI curriculum. ATI has become the engine that sustains the IBLP. With ATI, the IBLP can groom

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<sup>331</sup> *Wisdom Booklet 4*, (Oak Brook, IL: Institute in Basic Life Principles) 100.

the next generation of devotees from childhood, and given Gothard's pronatalist theology, there are a lot of children to groom.

To keep the IBLP community tightly like-minded, families must apply to receive the Advance Training Institute curriculum, and the organization claims to have specific admission standards though there is no evidence suggesting they enforce them.<sup>332</sup> According to the ATI application, families with mothers with full-time careers are barred, though women may help in family businesses or make other small contributions to the household income, provided that their husband and children remain their priority.<sup>333</sup> Families with an unrelated adult living with them will also not be allowed to join. Mutually agreed upon divorce is another disqualifier—even in cases of infidelity, imprisonment, domestic violence, marital rape, or child abuse. The IBLP asserts that divorced and remarried people are adulterers regardless of the circumstances. Divorced people seeking to rebuild their marriage are considered suitable, provided they go through the IBLP's "Rebuilders" program—a series of seminars and marriage retreats aimed at marriage reconciliation and provided they submit a written testimony avowing their "commitment to the goals of a *Rebuilder*."<sup>334</sup> Those who contested their divorce or those whose spouses abandoned them are also allowed, but only if they agree never to remarry (except to their original spouse). However, it is worth noting that the IBLP has no means of enforcement for any

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<sup>332</sup> No one at the IBLP headquarters could (or would) tell me how many applications they receive every year or how many they accept or reject. My sense is that they do not reject many families, in part because the questions on the application are worded leadingly. It is clear there is only one acceptable answer. I believe it is fair to assume that families self-select upon seeing the application.

<sup>333</sup> A copy of the application is available here: <https://atii.org/apply/>

<sup>334</sup> Advanced Training Institute application. Bill Gothard, *Rebuilder's Guide*. (Oak Brook, IL: The Institute in Basic Life Principles).

of these restrictions. Consequently, the application is more a statement of the Institute's values than a gate-keeping mechanism.

In applying to be an ATI family, mothers and fathers must also submit written testimonies explaining the “basis of your salvation,” detailing how they came to Christ and how, “God has led you to ATI.” They must commit to abstaining from alcohol, tobacco, rock music, immodest dress, and “sensual reading material.” They must also commit to not having cable television or unfiltered internet access in their home (the organization recommends several internet firewall companies), and they must testify in writing that they are “committed to living as ‘salt and light’ to draw others to Christ”—a reference to the Matthew 5:13-16.<sup>335</sup> What is more, if any of the children object to joining ATI, the application instructs parents to include statements from them detailing their reasons—but it reassures parents “some of the most effective young people in ATI were originally enrolled by their parents against their own wishes.” As the application indicates, ATI is not just a homeschooling program, it is, as its director is fond of saying, “more than a curriculum... it is a way of life.”<sup>336</sup>

Unlike many other religious and secular homeschooling programs, ATI is not designed to be modular or customizable. Though some families use other Christian homeschooling materials as supplements, it is designed to be sufficient and all-encompassing. Parents are discouraged from purchasing ATI homeschooling materials for their children and then using them as they see

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<sup>335</sup> Matthew 5:13-16 reads, “You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot. You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.”

<sup>336</sup> Advanced Training Institute, Application.

fit. They are also discouraged from sharing the curriculum with outsiders. The IBLP warns that Bill Gothard's marriage and financial seminars, along with the other required pre-ATI training seminars are essential for understanding the homeschool curriculum, and without them, its ideas could be misunderstood or misrepresented. The curriculum cannot even be purchased whole. It is doled out over several years. For the first year, a family is considered an "ATI Preliminary family" and they remain so until *all the members of the family* have completed their obligatory seminars and retreats. The first year costs \$675, plus the \$25 application fee. Subsequent years cost less, depending on the number of children in the family, however there is \$630 per year cap to ensure that larger families are not penalized for an overabundance of God's blessings.<sup>337</sup>

ATI is also unusually low-tech, even when compared to the rest of the IBLP. Most in the conservative Christian homeschooling community have long been early adopters of new technologies. For example, in 1993, the first issue of *Wired* magazine featured anti-feminist pronatalist author and homeschooling advocate, Mary Pride. Pride, along with her husband Bill, a Massachusetts Institute of Technology graduate, and their eight children (they have nine today) were pictured in a living room "stuffed with a Mac, Apple IIGS, Amiga, a 386 clone, various CD-ROM devices, Nintendo, a Miracle piano system, and so on."<sup>338</sup> The advent of the internet gave conservative Christians even more homeschooling options. Pride went on to review countless computer-based curricula for her various publications. By contrast, ATI materials are only available in hard copy and they require no more than a pen and paper.

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<sup>337</sup> Although ATI will not sell all 54 wisdom booklets at once, all the materials are on sale at the Family Conferences and are offered at a discount.

<sup>338</sup> Kevin Kelly, "Crash Tested Homework," *Wired*, January 1, 1993.

Some ATI families supplement the materials with other digital curricula and educational games. The Duggars for example, use *Switched on School House* from Alpha Omega but maintain that the ATI's *Wisdom Booklets* are the foundation of their homeschooling.<sup>339</sup> Other families however only use ATI and the Bible. At the 2017 Big Sandy gathering, one mother shared that she even went as far as to remove *all* the books from her home, except the *Wisdom Booklets*, the Bibles, and an old family cookbook, for a full year to “get the Word deep in them” [her children]. Those gathered seemed to regard this as an admirable experiment.

One does not “buy” the ATI curriculum, one “joins” ATI. It is a “way of life” for the entire family. Families are also required to purchase the various IBLP videos and seminar materials aimed at parents and disseminated via the IBLP's media platform, Embassy Media. They are also expected to attend family conferences and participate in the age and gender-specific weeklong retreats called Journey to the Heart. Young men are expected to join the ALERT cadets and to eventually go through the ALERT basic training, after which they can choose to return for more advanced training in emergency response tactics, paramedics, fire-fighting, search and rescue diving, or aeronautics. The homeschooling curriculum is only one part of ATI. The program is intended not only to educate children, but to discipline the entire family in a worldview and corresponding lifestyle.

The culture of ATI seems to celebrate ignorance as a mark of piety and to impugn the spiritual purity of educated people. Echoing the populist fundamentalists of the 1920s and 30s, ATI families are fond calling themselves “simple people” and seem far more concerned about

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<sup>339</sup> Jim Bob and Michelle Duggar, *The Duggars: 20 and Counting!* (New York: Howard Books, 2001) 113-120.

what their children could *learn*, than with what their children could *miss*.<sup>340</sup> When I asked a group of mothers at Big Sandy in 2016 about the limited mathematics instruction in the ATI curriculum, they all assured me that ATI “protects” their children and builds “character” and “life skills.” They told me there were math supplements available (there are none published by the IBLP), if I had “some kind of *genius* child.” From their tone, genius was clearly not something you wanted your child to possess. I shouldn’t worry though, one woman assured me, she had raised ten children on the *Wisdom Booklets* and they had provided, “all they needed.”

*All they need*, begs the question, for *what*? ATI does not provide what students need to become physicists, or historians, or engineers, or even what they need to get into a reputable college. For ATI families, *all they need* means all they need to maintain resolve in a fallen world. It means, all they need to “automate Godly habits” and modes of thinking.<sup>341</sup> The poverty of the ATI curriculum is exactly what makes it valuable to its subscribers. The Advanced Training Institute takes its name from Proverbs 22:6, “Train up a child in the way that he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it.” *Training* is the operative word.

### ***“Wisdom” and the Biblical Worldview***

At the center of ATI is an imagined tension between wisdom and knowledge. Wisdom is a stand-in for the “Biblical worldview” we examined in the previous chapter. “Rather than

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<sup>340</sup> For more on evangelical fundamentalists see: Douglas C. Abrams, *Selling the Old-Time Religion: American Fundamentalists and Mass Culture, 1920-1940*. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001); Randall H. Balmer, *Blessed Assurance: A History of Evangelicalism in America*. 4<sup>th</sup> Edition (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999); George M. Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism*. (Grand Rapids: Wm. E. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991); Christian Smith, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.)

<sup>341</sup> ATI Promotional Brochure. (Oak Brook, IL: Institute in Basic Life Principles).



relating knowledge back to scripture,” Administrative Director David Waller explains, “your studies will begin with Scripture and then explore traditional academic subjects from this foundation.”<sup>342</sup> Wisdom, according to ATI is the ability to interpret information from “God’s perspective.”<sup>343</sup> Gaining knowledge without “wisdom” therefore, is a dangerous enterprise. One needs a set of interpretive lenses firmly in place before the pursuit of knowledge is safe. Only after the Biblical worldview, or “wisdom” is established, should students proceed. The ATI brochure puts it thusly,

The primary objective in studying each subject is to discover deeper truths in the Scripture passage. The two secondary objectives are to grow in wisdom—that is, to comprehend the particular academic subject from God’s perspective—and to understand the application of the subject to life.<sup>344</sup>

Here we see that the stated objective of the ATI program is to understand the Bible better, by which it means, to align oneself with the fundamentalist, patriarchal, dominionist, and pronatalist interpretations offered by the IBLP.

The fifty-four *Wisdom Booklets* that make up the bulk of the curriculum are designed to be sufficient, but they can be supplemented with the *Character Sketches*, which are slim volumes that expound further on one of Gothard’s “Character Qualities.” The IBLP also publishes a “resource catalog” of books and materials it deems acceptable—many of which are written by Gothard, ATI families, and other IBLP leaders. Families are strongly encouraged directly and through the defensive culture of the IBLP to stick to these approved supplements, and the warnings from within the IBLP community and its leaders of the possibly Satanic nature of other seemingly “Christian” media are so dire, it is difficult to imagine many parents deviating.

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<sup>342</sup> David Waller, ATI Welcome Letter. (Oak Brook, IL: Institute in Basic Life Principles).

<sup>343</sup> ATI Promotional Brochure. (Oak Brook, IL: Institute in Basic Life Principles).

<sup>344</sup> Ibid.

Every *Wisdom Booklet* is comprised of five sections, “Linguistics, History, Science, Law, and Medicine.” The History lessons jump around chronologically and have no coherent narrative arc. For example, *Wisdom Booklet* 13 examines the work of missionary Hudson Taylor in nineteenth-century China with very little context. *Booklet* 15 jumps back to the Crusades. By *Wisdom Booklet* 17 students are examining Napoleon III’s Battle of Solferino in 1859, but the French revolution is not introduced until *Wisdom Book* 18. The science and medicine sections contain a host of dubious information which we will examine in a moment. The Law lessons do not contain much information on landmark court cases, or civics, or on how laws function in American democracy. Mostly, they either reinforce Gothard’s notion that individuals have no rights, and dominionist constructions of God’s law vs. man’s laws, or they are dedicated to rhetorical strategies—most of which are meant to be used in missionizing endeavors. In the Law section of *Booklet* 4 for example, the focus is only how to ask questions. Rule number one of ten reads, “never ask a question for which you do not already know the answer.”<sup>345</sup>

The ATI curriculum contains no high-school-level physics or chemistry, and no required literature outside of the Bible and the optional resource materials. No Shakespeare, no Homer, no *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and certainly no Mark Twain, Ray Bradbury, or Maya Angelou. As noted above, there is no designated section for mathematics and the few math lessons ATI contains are sporadic and ineffective for teaching math. They are however, likely very effective for instilling a “Biblical worldview.”

For example, a lesson on reflection and refraction appears briefly in *Wisdom Booklet* 17.<sup>346</sup> It provides complex-looking equations and diagrams, introduces the trigonometric concept

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<sup>345</sup> *Wisdom Booklet* 4, 133.

<sup>346</sup> *Wisdom Booklet* 17, 702.

of sine, but is not preceded by any material that would prepare students to understand what sine is or how it is used, nor does the lesson provide equations for students to practice solving. Instead, the section is followed by a set of questions like, “How do the laws of refraction explain why the world will usually misunderstand the good works of Christians?”<sup>347</sup> The result is that students are left with trace exposure to a mathematical concept, probably a great deal of confusion and certainly no ability to apply it. But the questions at the end of lesson emphasize the intended take away: a sense of Christian distinction and embattlement, key components to the “Biblical worldview.”

What is more, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. never appears, neither does Tecumseh, or Susan B. Anthony. From the ATI’s limited treatment of WWII, it would be easy to conclude that Christians were as persecuted as Jews in the Nazi concentration camps. In fact, the Holocaust is only covered briefly in *Wisdom Booklet 35* as part of a biography of Corrie ten Boom, a Christian woman who helped Jews escape Holland. Corrie ten Boom was eventually caught by the S.S. and taken to Ravensbrück concentration camp, though she survived.<sup>348</sup> The biographical treatment is meant to showcase Boom’s commitment to Christ and the power forgiveness. It praises her bravery in saving Jews but it ends triumphantly by celebrating her for forgiving the Nazis for their crimes.

It was after a church service in Munich that Corrie first had the shock of meeting one of her former jailers. ...Seeing his face brought back a flood of painful Ravensbruck memories...She remembered him clearly as one of the cruelest guards. “You mentioned Ravensbruck in your talk,” he was saying. “I was a guard there. Since that time I’ve become a Christian. It’s wonderful to know that God has forgiven me for all the cruel things I did there, but I want to hear it from you, too, Fraulein. Will you forgive me?”

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<sup>347</sup> *Ibid.*, 704.

<sup>348</sup> *Wisdom Booklet 35*, 1757-1768.

The man was reaching out to shake her hand...It was the most difficult thing she ever had to do, but finally Corrie reached out stiffly to take his hand. As she did, an incredible thing happened. She felt a surge of warmth, beginning at her shoulder and running all the way down her arm. Suddenly, she found there was love in her heart for this stranger, and she was almost overwhelmed by the power of it. "I forgive you, brother, with all my heart," cried Corrie.<sup>349</sup>

This story highlights several important values at the core of the IBLP, which I argue are also the values shaping the broader conservative Christian imagination of the "Biblical worldview." First, the Nazi is completely assured that God has forgiven him despite his participation in one of the greatest atrocities of the modern age. There is no self-recrimination. His certainty is almost arrogant. No crime is too great, he can rest easy in his salvation. Second, Boom experiences God's peace as a bodily sensation, akin to John Wesley's heart being "strangely warmed." Third, the story is one of a woman forgiving a man for abusing and terrorizing her. The obligation to forgive is a weapon used to silence women. Throughout the ATI curriculum, and the broader conservative Christian discourse, women are presented as longsuffering founts of forgiveness, willing to subject themselves to abuse all so they can display Christ-like forgiveness.<sup>350</sup>

Finally, the lesson implies that the Holocaust is not to be understood as the most traumatic blow to Judaism, Jewish identity, and the Jewish imagination of God since the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E., or even as modernity's greatest challenge for Christian theodicy. According to ATI, the attempted genocide of the Jewish people was a tool God used to

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<sup>349</sup> Ibid., 1767.

<sup>350</sup> Of course, this is not unique to ATI or to conservative Protestantism. For a discussion of the role of female sacrifice in Catholicism see: Robert Orsi, *Thank You Saint Jude: Women's Devotion to the Patron Saint of Hopeless Causes*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996).

teach us the importance of a unified body of Christ. The story of the Holocaust is a story of Christians forgiving other Christians. We can also see this perspective echoed in the conservative Christian support for the state of Israel because of its prophesied role in the Battle of Armageddon—Jews are a means to Christian ends.<sup>351</sup>

### ***Bewilderment***

As we saw in the previous chapter, another cornerstone of the “Biblical worldview” is the commitment to creationism and a rejection of the scientific method. However, I want to call attention to several common creationist rhetorical strategies to show how these strategies do more than just assert a fundamentalist explanation of human origins. Julie Ingersoll notes that there is more at stake for creationists than a view of human origins.<sup>352</sup> Ingersoll argues that creationism functions as a powerful method of conservative Christian mythmaking and social formation.<sup>353</sup> Ingersoll also argues that the contemporary creationist movement owes a great deal to Reconstructionist Christianity and dominionist theology. Reconstructionist leader R.J. Rushdoony believed that evolution and scientific explanations of human origins were based on chance and disorder and were therefore, blasphemous.<sup>354</sup> For Rushdoony, whose theology hinged on his imagination of Biblical law, creationism was necessary as it asserted a completely

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<sup>351</sup> See more: Christopher Connelly, “Why American evangelicals are a huge base of support for Israel,” *Public Radio International*, October 24, 2016; Craig Horowitz, “Israel’s Christian Solders,” *New York Magazine*, September 29, 2003; Joseph Williams, “The Pentecostalization of Christian Zionism,” *Journal of the American Society of Church History*, Vol. 84. no. 1 (March 2015): 159-194.

<sup>352</sup> Julie J. Ingersoll, *Building God’s Kingdom: Inside the World of Christian Reconstruction*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

<sup>353</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>354</sup> Rousas John Rushdoony, *The Mythology of Science*. (Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, 1967).

knowable set of God's laws as revealed in the Bible, as opposed to an unpredictable ongoing process of discovery.

Other American evangelicalism scholars have noted however that despite their distaste for science, creationists are fond of strategically mobilizing the language of science to give their arguments the veneer of credibility.<sup>355</sup> This is particularly true of ATI. This generates a strange tension. To seem credible, creationists claim scientific authority, while undermining the validity of scientific authority. For example, the IBLP claims that the beauty of God's word is that no one needs a Ph.D. to understand it, all while boasting about every man in the IBLP leadership with an advanced degree, even when those degrees are in fields like optometry or dentistry. We can see this tension also at Ken Ham's Creation Museum and his newest venture, the \$102 million "replica" of Noah's ark called, Ark Experience. Both attractions mobilize a host of subtle cues and complex jargon to claim the authority of science—for example, the Creation Museum uses a NASA-like font for all its promotional materials—then uses that authority to undermine scientific claims.

There is another tension at work in creationists discourse as well. The claim that creationism is "common sense" is also often braided together with another strategy perhaps best described as intellectual overwhelm or simply, *bewilderment*—this strategy is also key to

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<sup>355</sup> Randall Balmer, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: A Journey into the Evangelical Subculture in America*. 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Timothy H Heaton, "A Visit to the New Creation 'Museum.'" *Reports of the National Center for Science Education*, Vol. 27, no. 1 (January 2007): 21–24; Dennis Knepp, "Dinosaurs, Drowned or With Noah?" *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Vol. 53, no. 40 (August 2007): B13–14.; Peter Slevin, "A Monument to Creation: Kentucky Museum Discounts Centuries of Research, Critics Say," *The Washington Post*, May 27, 2007; Peter W. Williams, "Creation Museum," *Material Religion*, Vol. 4, no. 3 (November 2008): 373–75; Staff Writer, "Misinformation Museum: Creationist Attraction Sets Back Science Education in the Tri-State Area." *The Columbus Dispatch (Ohio)*, May 27, 2007.

understanding how ATI functions more generally. Rather than trying to make information more approachable, the bewilderment strategy deploys extreme detail and context-less information to give the impression of rigor and comprehensiveness while undermining critical thinking and evidence-based knowledge production. By oscillating between extremely simple or “common sense” assertions, and extremely complex and difficult concepts relatively quickly, organizations like ATI and others leave students with the impression that the world is at once simple, black and white, and yet beyond their comprehension. ATI is built on this strategy, but it is not unique to ATI.

Ken Ham’s *Answers in Genesis* also uses the bewilderment tactic in conjunction with the claim of “common sense” to reinforce the notion of the “Biblical worldview.” It puts forth a series of logically consistent “common sense” assertions that are ultimately based on fallacies and strawmen, but seem reasonable and easy to understand. This strategy mirrors the Protestant populist notion that anyone can read the Bible and through the Holy Spirit correctly determine its meaning. By making each small assertion seem reasonable, visitors can be lead to absurd conclusions—like the claim that dragons were once real creatures but were eventually killed off by intrepid knights. But what makes this tactic truly effective is the *Answers in Genesis* deploys it in tandem with bewilderment.

At the Creation Museum visitors are led through an immersive series of exhibits called “The Time Tunnel.” These are a series of dioramas dedicated to depicting the Biblical narrative, Protestant history, and eventually, the broken and violent contemporary world, desperately in need of redemption. It is a highly structured and controlled experience. Guests walk from exhibit to exhibit sequentially, urged down a set path through lighting and sound. Suddenly, however,

when the narrative portion of the museum ends, visitors find themselves somewhere else entirely.

They are ushered into a brightly lit, white room, laboratory clean, and festooned with computer screens, high resolution, close-up pictures of cells and neurons, and other markers of high technology. This is what the museum calls The Wonders Room. Unlike the Time Tunnel, there is no guidance in this room. There are twenty-seven exhibits and eighteen videos and they all play at the same time. The various computer screens vie for your attention as they make scientific sounding claims for the divine origins of DNA and RNA.

If one is so inclined, the arguments made by the low-tech diorama exhibits are easy to refute. Their circular logics and supernatural claims are predicated on the supposition that the Bible is a literal, infallible history. The Wonders Room is different. As one moves from computer screen to computer screen, a series of science-y sounding words and phrases blare from the screens. It looks like science and sounds like science, and unless one is familiar with microbiology or organic chemistry, it is bewitchingly convincing. It mobilizes the rhetoric and aesthetics of “science” to give its creationist argument credibility, but it also leaves the viewer with a sense of awed confusion.<sup>356</sup> There is no logical progression, as in the “Time Tunnel,” just the vastness of space and then the amazing unseen microscopic world. Julie Ingersoll’s work confirms that this tactic is wide spread throughout the creationist community. She observed a

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<sup>356</sup> Using “science” as a legitimizing touchstone is not unique to the IBLP. New religious movements in the United States began doing this in the late nineteenth century and the practice continues. Other examples include, Mary Baker Eddy’s Church of Christ Scientist, New Thought and New Age traditions like The Church Divine Science, and The Church of Religious Science, Scientology and other “metaphysical” religions. For more see: Catherine L Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit :A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).



similar display of “scientific” grandstanding at the Demand the Evidence Conference—a creationist conference put on by the Institute for Creation Research. “It was all very complex...[and] impossible to unpack without some background in science.” Ingersoll notes, “The whole presentation can be very convincing.”<sup>357</sup>

ATI uses a similar zoom-out/ zoom-in bewilderment tactic throughout its curriculum but especially when dealing with supposedly scientific material. For example, one of the most popular products ATI sells is a supplementary game called Creation Cards, designed by Dr. Jobe Martin. As noted above, the IBLP likes to claim the authority of science while denying the need for science. Martin is a perfect example. A frequent speaker at ATI conferences, Martin is always referred to as “Dr. Martin.” Indeed, he even has a habit of referring to himself in the third person this way. From his book, *The Evolution of the Creationist*, as well as from his talks, one gets the impression that Martin was a professional scientist and researcher.<sup>358</sup> He is in fact, a dentist. Again, Ingersoll, noted something similar at the Demand the Evident conference.

According to Ingersoll,

Everyone at the Demand the Evidence sported the title Dr. before his name and in each case there was an effort to foster the implication that the speakers were scientists with doctoral-level credentials when in fact for the most part their advanced degrees are in other fields, mostly ministry, apologetics, and education.<sup>359</sup>

Martin’s shtick is essentially a conversion narrative. He presents himself as “former evolutionist doctor” who embarked on a rigorous self-gilded exploration of the natural world

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<sup>357</sup> Ingersoll, *Building God’s Kingdom*, 131; Courtney Bender, *The New Metaphysicals: Spirituality and the American Religious Imagination*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

<sup>358</sup> Jobe Martin, *The Evolution of a Creationist: A Layman’s Guide to the Conflict Between the Bible and Evolutionary Theory*. (Rockwell, TX: Biblical Discipleship Publishers, 1994).

<sup>359</sup> Ingersoll, *Building God’s Kingdom*, 129.

looking for specimens that “prove the theory of evolution.”<sup>360</sup> He claims to have found via his “research,” irrefutable proof that an intelligent design is the only rational explanation for the natural world. He then cataloged his findings and turned them into an educational tool for children.

Creation Cards use a number unusual flora and fauna and their idiosyncrasies to “teach biology” and undermine evolutionary science by overwhelming students with detail. Like baseball or Pokémon cards, each of Martin’s cards is devoted to one particularly anomalous plant or animal. One card for example, features the slow loris—a small, southeast-Asian creature distinguished as the only venomous primate. The goal, according to Martin, is not necessarily to understand the natural world— as he puts it, “that is secondary.”<sup>361</sup> The goal is to overwhelm students with the complexity and weirdness of individual specimens, such that a Divine Creator with supernatural methods, becomes the only logical way out of their bewilderment. Martin is not interested in teaching the Biblical creation narrative as much as he is in using isolated bits of information and “common sense” to debunk the theory of evolution by natural selection. To use Martin’s words, the aim is to make awe-struck students ask, “a venomous primate?! How could this have ever evolved?”<sup>362</sup> It is a shrewd strategy. By keeping students focused on amazing details and anomalies like the slow loris, one can teach science as an accumulation of disconnected data points, rather than a method of analysis. This gives the impression that the curriculum is comprehensive, when what it really does is inhibit pattern recognition, critical

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<sup>360</sup> These quotes are taken from Martin’s website: <http://biblicaldiscipleship.org/>

<sup>361</sup> Martin said this in a public speech entitled, “Teaching Your Children to Love Jesus,” Wednesday April 20, 2016. ALERT Academy, Big Sandy Texas.

<sup>362</sup> Ibid.

analysis, and it leaves the student with a sense of palpable wonder and/or confusion. Not only do they not understand, they are led to believe that the world is not understandable.

One former ATI student named Sarah Jones wrote a blog post on growing up in ATI called, “Is it just me?” She explains the bewilderment tactic this way,

When trying to explain what it was like as a Gothard follower, it’s hard to communicate the sheer volume of information that we had to take in. At a seminar, there was never time to pause and reflect on what he said. We were furiously writing answers in our workbooks, forced to ignore the dozens of Scripture references he listed, overwhelmed and exhilarated by the entire experience.

Later, as the foundation of our education, we read the Wisdom Booklets — thousands upon thousands of words about random, unconnected subjects. Each section started with a point, ranged widely over several other claims, and ended up at a conclusion that Gothard said was God’s, with a Bible verse tacked on to seal his claim. It was an intensive and bewildering way to approach God and life.<sup>363</sup>

Roughly one hundred commenters posted to tell Jones that is was emphatically not, “just her.”

One commenter who identified themselves only as “the Quiet one” writes,

Confusion is an understatement. When I was young, I used to boast that I’d already done trigonometry, because there was a Authority through Accuracy (ugh, that title is a trigger) section on cosines pretty early on in the series. But I didn’t really understand it at all. By the time I was finished, I didn’t know what I did and did not know. My mind was a jumbled chaos of ‘facts’, many of which have turned out to not be facts. I’ve had the opportunity to make up a few high school credits since then, and the contrast between the ordered study of school grades and the randomness of the Wisdom Booklets could not be greater.<sup>364</sup>

As these former ATI students can attest, the ATI approach focuses on individuals rather than contexts. The curriculum provides data, but not patterns. Conclusions, but not methods, and

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<sup>363</sup> Sara Jones, “An ATI Education, Chapter 2: Is It Just Me?” *RecoveringGrace.org*, October 20, 2015.

<sup>364</sup> The Quiet One, comment on, “An ATI Education, Chapter 2: Is It Just Me?” October 25, 2015: <http://www.recoveringgrace.org/2015/10/an-ati-education-chapter-2-is-it-just-me/>

information, but not critical analysis.

### *Learning in Wonderland*

The bewilderment tactic conveys the incomprehensibility of an intelligent designer, but it also serves another purpose. Namely, it overwhelms students and thereby instills a sense of dependence and inferiority. In fact, ATI claims bewilderment is necessary if one is to align oneself with God's will. As noted above, one of the foundational proof-texts for ATI is Proverbs 3:5, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding." Of course, there are myriad ways to interpret this passage, but ATI appears to interpret it as a cognitive discipline that must be instilled and enforced.

To accomplish this, the curriculum is designed to systematically undermine students' confidence in their own minds.<sup>365</sup> Rather than using a quiz at the end of the lesson to assess student learning, every ATI *Wisdom Booklet* begins with a trickily worded true-or-false quiz presumably show students how little they know. The quizzes are comprised of leading questions that appear to have logical answers, only to reveal that those seemingly reasonable answers were the wrong ones. One former ATI student describe the materials and the quizzes this way, "Each Wisdom Booklet began with one of these quizzes. The questions were worded to elicit a certain answer, which was then shown to be wrong."<sup>366</sup> For example, *Wisdom Booklet 4*'s includes this question: true or false, "To comfort those who are mourning means to draw them to ourselves and give them reassurance." It seems reasonable (and compassionate) that the answer would be,

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<sup>365</sup> Florence Rush, "The Best-kept Secret: Sexual Abuse of Children," *Human Services Institute*, (February 1992): 81.

<sup>366</sup> Sara Jones, "An ATI Education, Chapter 2: Is It Just Me?"

true. However, the “correct” answer is false. The Booklet explains, “Since God is the Source of all comfort, those who are mourning must be directed to Him.”<sup>367</sup> In this and in other ways, the program seems engineered to make the student and the teacher feel incompetent and dependent. It seems designed to instill not only a “Biblical worldview” but a deep sense of inadequacy, and given that women are the assumed teachers, the program also seems aimed at instilling a sense of dependence and brokenness in them.

What is more, the explanations offered are often incoherent. For example, *Wisdom Booklet 49* centers Mathew 7:13 “Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction.” This passage is displayed on the quiz page just above the questions. The first quiz question then asks, true or false, “As the strait way leads to the narrow gate of life, so the broad road leads to the wide gate of destruction.” It seems obvious that they answer would be, true. But no! The answer is, false, because: “A gate denotes jurisdiction, and Jesus referred to Himself as the door. Thus, the strait road is for those who enter the gate rather than for those who are looking for the gate.” This is an example of how ATI slowly conditions students to nonsensical arguments. It is like education *a la* Lewis Carol. The Mad Hatter’s unanswerable riddle, “How is a raven like a writing desk?” would not be out of place in a *Wisdom Booklet*, save its lack of Biblical proof-texting.<sup>368</sup>

It is unsurprising then that, like Alice, many ATI students have declared, “But I don’t want to go among mad people.”<sup>369</sup> RecoveringGrace.org is an anti-Gothard legal advocacy group and online community where former IBLP members and ATI students digitally gather to share

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<sup>367</sup> *Wisdom Booklet 4*, 99.

<sup>368</sup> Lewis Carol, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. (London: Macmillan Press 1862) 98.

<sup>369</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

their stories of trauma and healing. It is a rich archive of first-hand accounts of growing up in ATI. Most posters and commenters on Recovering Grace seem to have remained religious people. They often use the site to describe how they have worked to reimagine their relationships with God, and how their faith today differs from the religious imaginations of ATI and the IBLP.<sup>370</sup> In this way, Recovering Grace is a kind of digital religious community as well as an advocacy group. Perhaps the most powerful thing Recovering Grace does is connect former ATI students with one another. It allows people to realize that they are not alone, or crazy, and that others have recovered from similar traumas —something that would have never been possible on the same scale prior to the advent of the internet.

As a digital forum, we cannot verify the details of many of the accounts given (though there is an editorial board who act as gatekeepers), but most of the posts on Recovering Grace convey similar themes and these commonalities are worthy of consideration even if the details are not verifiable. Many Recovering Grace contributors have reflected on the emotional experience of learning via ATI and how powerless and demoralized the materials made them feel. Rachel (Bruzaz) Foster, another former ATI student wrote about the emotional and psychological toll of the tactic,

It has been difficult for me to learn to trust my instincts or myself, especially when answering questions-- I was trained and conditioned to always know that my answer was ALWAYS going to be wrong.<sup>371</sup>

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<sup>370</sup> See for example: Anonymous, “My Journey: Legalism, Atheism, and Finally Freedom,” *Recovering Grace*. September 5, 2011.

<sup>371</sup> Rachel (Bruzaz) Foster, comment on, “An ATI Education, Chapter 2: Is It Just Me?” October 20, 2015. <http://www.recoveringgrace.org/2015/10/an-ati-education-chapter-2-is-it-just-me/>

Still another former ATI student writes, “Add to that the habit of always being wrong, and it leaves you in kind of a mess.”<sup>372</sup>

This tactic of convincing students they their instincts are wrong while providing nonsensical explanations as though they were reasonable, is strikingly similar to *gaslighting*. Gaslighting is a term taken from the 1944 film, *Gaslight*, starring Ingrid Bergman. It means to manipulate someone into doubting their own sanity. Or, as Florence Rush put it in her study of child sexual abuse, gaslighting is “an attempt to destroy another’s perception of reality.”<sup>373</sup> It is an insidious form of psychological abuse, commonly deployed on women, and often to keep the victim from reporting other forms of abuse.<sup>374</sup> It is a favored tactic of narcissists and sociopaths (Gothard has been accused of being both), but family researchers have found that it is also very common among married couples, with wives almost exclusively being the victims.<sup>375</sup> The long cultural history of doubting women’s sanity, diagnosing them with hysteria, dismissing them as uncontrollably emotional, and the like, makes women particularly vulnerable to gaslighting.<sup>376</sup> Feminist ethicist, Hilde Lindemann Nelson argued that a woman’s “ability to trust her own

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<sup>372</sup> Sarah J. Comment on “An ATI Education, Chapter 2: Is It Just Me?” <http://www.recoveringgrace.org/2015/10/an-ati-education-chapter-2-is-it-just-me/> October 20, 2015

<sup>373</sup> Florence Rush, *The Best-kept Secret: Sexual Abuse of Children*. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1991) 81.

<sup>374</sup> Ibid. See also: Martha Stout, *The Sociopath Next Door*. (New York: Random House, 2006). R Cawthra, G. O'Brian, F. Hassanyeh, “Imposed Psychosis': A Case Variant of the Gaslight Phenomenon” *British Journal of Psychiatry*. 150 (4), 1987. 553–6.

<sup>375</sup> G.Z Gass, W.C. Nichols, “Gaslighting: A Marital Syndrome.” *Journal of Contemporary Family Therapy*. 10 (1) 1988, 3–16.

<sup>376</sup> See: Elisabeth Bronfen, *The Knotted Subject: Hysteria and Its Discontents*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014); Barbara Ehrenreich, *For her Own Good: Two Centuries of Expert’s Advance to Women* 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. (New York: Anchor Books, 2005).; Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980*. (New York: Virago, 1987).

judgments” was essential in resisting gaslighting.<sup>377</sup> As we can see, ATI seems tailored to undermine that trust.

Of course, young men are subjected to ATI’s demoralizing tactics as well. They, too, are expected to obey authorities and internalize a sense of sinful brokenness. The difference being that the young men of ATI will eventually grow up to be authorities. They will eventually be empowered patriarchs and therefore required to rely at least practically on their own understanding, even if they faithfully seek divine council. The young women, however, have no such hope. Unless they actively rebel, they will remain in a state of dependence, fearful of trusting their instincts, and vulnerable to the whims of those in authority over them.

### *Godless Utopias*

As we saw in the previous chapter, conservative Christian homeschooling has been deeply influenced by Reconstructionist thinkers like R.J. Rushdoony and ATI is no exception. Rushdoony argued for a hierarchical structure of authority whereby Biblical law would replace all civil law. Gothard borrowed heavily from Rushdoony throughout his career, especially latching on to Rushdoony’s emphasis on the patriarchal family as the foundational sphere of Biblical authority. Despite the IBLP’s penchant for patriotic pageantry, it is deeply critical of democracy. The IBLP, and by extension ATI, does not imagine the American project as rooted in the pursuit of equality and liberty. Indeed, Gothard has articulated his own “Law of Liberty” which he describes thusly,

As we obey the Law of Liberty we experience freedom to accomplished God’s will for our lives. Freedom is not the right to do what we want but

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<sup>377</sup> Hilde Lindemann Nelson, *Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001) 31–32.



power to do what we ought.<sup>378</sup>

For Bill Gothard and his community, the United States is a place where God's people must be free to institute and enforce His law. To that end, several ATI *Wisdom Booklets* contain dominionist-inspired lessons on "The Dangers of Democracy" and the "heresy" inherent in the struggle for equality.<sup>379</sup>

Consider how the *Wisdom Booklet 18* describes the French Revolution,

How did the destruction of God's law in France produce the Reign of Terror? 'Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity' was the battle cry of the violent masses during the French Revolution. The people of France experienced a horrible decade of anarchy and bloodshed because they violated principles of governmental authority and attempted to establish a democracy that made every citizen a law unto himself.<sup>380</sup>

The booklet goes on to demonize Enlightenment thinkers like Voltaire and Rousseau. It also dismisses the idea that the revolution had anything to do with the abject poverty and political oppression of the French people at the hands of wealthy monarchs,

The chief cause of the anarchy and destruction that occurred in France from 1789 to 1799 was the tragic rejection of God as the sole source of governmental authority by the philosophers of the Age of Enlightenment.<sup>381</sup>

True to Gothard's and Rushdoony's preoccupation with the family, the lesson seamlessly connects the rebellion of the revolution with the rejection of traditional marriage:

All governmental authority is ordained by God... The proper picture of authority in any relationship is established when that authority comes from above (God to government, parent to child, and husband to wife). ...During the French Revolution, chaos and anarchy were the tragic by-products of wrong attitudes toward the origin of authority. ...

In September 1792, the revolutionaries legalized divorce and abolished

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<sup>378</sup> *Wisdom Booklet 18*, 765

<sup>379</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>380</sup> *Ibid.*, 770.

<sup>381</sup> *Ibid.*, 766.

the marriage ceremony as a religious privilege. How is the rejection of marriage a symptom of basic rebellion?<sup>382</sup>

According to the ATI curriculum, the United States too has fallen victim to this corruption. Our revolution was Godly and virtuous as it was the work of good Christian men setting up a republic they imagined would embody the laws of God—or so the *Wisdom Booklets* say—except Jefferson and Franklin who missed the mark in being too cozy with the godless French *philosophes*.<sup>383</sup> The curriculum characterizes Jefferson’s famed “wall of separation” thusly: “Thomas Jefferson . . . built a ‘wall of separation’ between himself and God by denying the deity of Christ.”<sup>384</sup>

According to the ATI curriculum, the “utopian” views that inspired the French revolution have infected the U.S. in part through deists like Jefferson and through utopianism *a la* Thomas Moore. The *Booklets* also take a few quick swipes at Catholics by pointing out that the Church canonized Moore despite his “heresy.”<sup>385</sup> “Utopianism,” or the idea that people can and should strive to create a perfect society that guarantees and protect the rights of all citizens, is touted as an example of willful self-interest, and rebellion against God, as it denies the utterly depraved nature of the human soul and our need for a supernatural savior.

“Utopianism” according to the *Wisdom Booklets* also denies the sovereignty of God over human rights and is therefore, heresy. Rights, we must remember, are not things that Bill Gothard believes in, especially if one is not a heterosexual, white man. In a section entitled, “The Utopian Struggle for Civil Rights Results in Civil Wrongs,” *Booklet 33* claims,

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<sup>382</sup> *Ibid.*, 768.

<sup>383</sup> *Wisdom Booklet 33*, 1664.

<sup>384</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>385</sup> *Ibid.*

The utopian outlook that government can and should confer rights on its citizens has given rise to the recent liberation movements. Various groups have attempted to persuade or force others to create laws that give them the rights to which they feel they are entitled. This puts the government in the position of playing God.

During the 1960s and 1970s, women, members of ethnic minorities, and sodomites began to demonstrate and strike in order to obtain their rights. ...Utopianism presupposes not only the existence of the right to happiness, but also the governmental power to grant rights to its citizens. Such a philosophy leads naturally to a totalitarian form of government, which is exactly what the United States has been headed toward for a number of years.<sup>386</sup>

The civil rights movement then was a heretical rebellion organized by people of color, women, and “sodomites,” attempting to claim rights that did not Biblically belong to them. But as the final line of the above section indicates, these rebellions—the Civil Rights movement, the women’s movement, and the struggle for LGBTQ rights—can be traced back to a “tragic” moment in US history, when the God-ordained authority of the State was heretically undermined. That moment, according to ATI materials, occurred on the 28<sup>th</sup> of July, 1868, when in the aftermath of the Civil War, Congress ratified the fourteenth amendment, granting citizenship to “all persons born or naturalized in the United States” regardless of their race. The United States rebelled against God’s authority in allowing black men to be considered fully human Americans. *Wisdom Booklet 33* puts it plainly:

The Civil War marked not only the end of slavery in the South, but also the abolition of the constitutional form of government that had ruled the United States up until that time....

Abolitionists not only wanted to get rid of slavery, but also attacked the Constitution because of its emphasis on local rather than national control of government. Some of them saw the South with its Calvinistic theology

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<sup>386</sup> Ibid., 1666.

as standing in the way of their efforts to usher in a utopian millennium. As radicals, they were willing to use any means, even war, to achieve their goal.

After the war, a radical Congress put the Southern states under the absolute control of the federal government and forced the ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment. The framers of the amendment did not intend it to change the role of the federal government, but opponents saw it as a potential threat to the constitutional form of government...

By its inaccurate interpretation of the Fourteenth Amendment, the Supreme Court has made the Bill of Rights into a legal instrument for restricting the actions of individual states. This has given the Court its overwhelming power and paved the way for the invasion of the federal government into almost every aspect of our daily lives.

Instead of protecting private property, a utopian government tries to redistribute wealth... Seen in this light, the fundamental change in our system of government brought about by the utopian philosophy of the Supreme Court must be considered a move toward totalitarianism rather than a victory for individual liberty.<sup>387</sup>

Here the white supremacy inherent in the ATI's dominionist agenda is laid bare. Consider the phrases: "The Civil war marked not only the end of slavery..."; "Abolitionists not only wanted to get rid of slavery." Nowhere in these passages is there any hint or subtle cue to indicate that abolishing slavery was a good thing, even if the *Wisdom Booklets* want to argue that it was unconstitutional. For Gothard and ATI, slavery is Biblical. A "radical congress," abolished the Biblically-sanctioned institution of slavery and then proceeded to undermine the constitution itself. Why? Because the south was keeping the Calvinist tradition alive despite the onslaught from "atheistic utopianism." The righteous Calvinist south fought for their "property rights" but was ultimately thwarted by a totalitarian-minded court intent of "redistributing wealth" by unlawfully turning their "property" into human beings.

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<sup>387</sup> Ibid., 1667-8

### ***George Washington Carver and John Newton***

ATI favors teaching history through decontextualized biographies and seems oddly preoccupied with certain historical figures. For example, the ATI curriculum contains very little material on the trans-Atlantic slave trade and its implications. Indeed, it is only mentioned twice in the whole of the curriculum. Rather than broad historical narratives, students are encouraged to read biographies from the ATI's *Heroes of Faith* series—a series of biographies of prominent Christian missionaries, and other Christian notables—like the one of botanist and inventor, George Washington Carver. The slim volume praises Carver for his faith, his industriousness, his frugality and humble lifestyle, and his devotion to researching the peanut and other crops. It notes that he was born a slave but otherwise completely ignores his race.<sup>388</sup>

Carver curiously appears again and again across ATI materials. In addition to the *Heroes of Faith* book, he appears in *Wisdom Booklet 17* and *35*, various other publications in the ATI “resource Catalog.”<sup>389</sup> He is also featured in Gothard’s Character First program—a “secularized” version of ATI used in public schools around the country.<sup>390</sup> Carver is even the subject of an episode of TCL’s *19 Kids and Counting*, where in the Duggar family visit the George Washington Carver National Monument and make “peanut milk.”<sup>391</sup> Carver is certainly the most prominent African American in the entire ATI curriculum. His long-time colleague at the

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<sup>388</sup> Institute in Basic Life Principles, *Heroes of Faith: Washington Carver*. (Oak Brook, IL: Institute in Basic Life Principles, 2002).

<sup>389</sup> *Wisdom Booklet 17*, 31-37.; *Wisdom Booklet 46*, 2423.

<sup>390</sup> For more see: <http://www.characterfirsteducation.com/c/about.php>

<sup>391</sup> “Duggar and Bates: 37 and Counting” *19 Kids and Counting*. Figure Eight Films. March 28, 2011.

Tuskegee Institute and activist, Booker T. Washington, is mentioned only in passing as part of the larger narrative on Carver.

Why center George Washington Carver? A clue is in how Carver is discussed in the episode of *19 Kids and Counting*. At the Carver monument, Jim Bob Duggar explains to his family, “see, he was offered a lot more, a big laboratory, but decided to stay here and study the peanut.” This is also another example of the Duggars parroting IBLP language on their show. The statement however is wholly untrue. The monument outside Diamond Missouri commemorates Carver’s birthplace and where he spent time as a boy. It is a notable site, the first national monument dedicated to African American, but the fact remains that Carver *was* offered a “big laboratory” at the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama and he took it. He also toured the country and used his celebrity to bring further attention to his agricultural work, the Institute, and the cause of racial harmony. But the IBLP presents Carver as a man who was offered greater things but chose to remain singularly minded and humble. In truth, Carver was a humble man and an outspoken critic of economic materialism in large part because of how it dehumanized and kept the black community oppressed. Those motivations are not mentioned in the ATI curriculum. Carver spent a great deal of time and energy advocating for racial issues in his time but the most prominent black man the ATI curriculum is celebrated for his humility, and agricultural expertise, not racial advocacy.

ATI’s love of Carver reflects how Carver is revered by white conservative Christians beyond ATI and IBLP. Indeed, George Washington Carver is the subject of many books by creationist apologists, not because he was a creationist by any of today’s definitions, but because

he was *scientist* who was public about his faith.<sup>392</sup> He led Bible studies at Tuskegee and sometimes referred to his lab as “God’s little workshop.” But Carver was a mystic. He spoke to plants as much as spoke to God—if he understood those activities to be different at all. He was a protestant to be sure, but hardly a fundamentalist. What is more, his personal life seems to fly in the face of IBLP values. He never married and kept company almost exclusively with men with whom he was often physically affectionate. There is no way of knowing Carver’s sexual orientation, but biographers suggest that he did not fit squarely into cisgendered, heterosexual norms. Whether sexual or not, the important relationship of his life appeared to be with a man. In the final years of his life, he was almost never apart from his closest companion, Dr. Austin Curtis. Carver and Curtis would walk the grounds of the Institute arm in arm and when Carver died, he left his entire estate to Curtis.<sup>393</sup> None of this is in the ATI materials. As the Carver example illustrates, the goal of the ATI history curriculum is not to expose students to full historical narratives or social science, to foster critical thinking, or to equip them with as much information about their world as possible. The goal is to give students the bare minimum without disrupting white-male-protestant-supremacist narratives.

There is one other mention of African slavery in the ATI curriculum in a long biographical sketch of John Newton, a nineteenth-century slave ship captain turned evangelist and author of the popular hymn *Amazing Grace*. The treatment of Newton in *Wisdom Booklet 46*

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<sup>392</sup> Collins, David R. *George Washington Carver: Man's Slave, God's Scientist*, (New York: Mott Media, 1981); William J. Federer, *George Washington Carver: His Life & Faith in His Own Words*. (Nashville: AmeriSearch January 2003); G. R. Kremer, ed., *George Washington Carver: In His Own Words* (St. Louis: University of Missouri Press, 1987); H. M. Morris, *Men of Science, Men of God* (Green Forest, AR: Master Books, 1982); E. C. Barnett and D. Fisher, *Scientists Who Believe* (Chicago: Moody Bible Institute, 1984).

<sup>393</sup> Christian Vella, *George Washington Carver: A Life* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2015).

further exemplifies the white supremacist agenda at the heart of ATI and the IBLP. Newton is portrayed sympathetically, but not because of his famed transformation from slave trader to abolitionist. The ATI narrative emphasizes the pain he suffered at the hands of cruel employers as he built a career. It praises his hard work as slave trader, as though diligence and hard work are virtues in and of themselves, even when the work is the buying and selling of human beings. The *Booklet* explains, “John learned from Mr. Clow [Newton’s employer] how to inspect and bargain for slaves...he worked hard and handled a number of different responsibilities quite well.”<sup>394</sup> This passage is accompanied by an image taken from the library of congress of a white man fastening a chain around the neck of nearly naked black man whose hands are already in irons.

The account goes on to detail how Newton fell ill while in Africa collecting human beings for sale, and how he was treated by the African woman identified as “P.I.” charged with his care:

For a while P. I. took care of John, but as his illness lingered, she began to neglect him and even to treat him with cruelty. All John had for a bed was a thin mat laid over a wooden chest. He used a small log for a pillow. At times the woman would not even bring him a drink of water. After his fever left and he regained his appetite, she would allow him only a little food, while she enjoyed a veritable feast at every meal. ...

The young man suffered greatly from this physical neglect, but the emotional anguish he went through during this period was just as bad. From time to time, P. I. would come to his room just to taunt and insult him. Later she would order him to get up and walk so that she and the slaves could mock him. Sometimes they pelted him with limes or even with stones, laughing all the while.<sup>395</sup>

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<sup>394</sup> *Wisdom Booklet 46*, 2451.

<sup>395</sup> *Ibid.*, 2454



The bones of the narrative are accurate. Newton did fall ill in west Africa and according to his own accounts, he was poorly treated by the African woman in charge of his care, but this is hardly the story most Newton biographers choose to highlight. For ATI students, the story of John Newton is one of a hardworking young white man left to suffer at the hands of cruel and mocking slaves. Nonetheless, according to the ATI narrative, Newton enjoyed his African company, as they were like him, godless heathens.

He was fascinated by African superstitions and religious ceremonies. Having rejected the one true God, he found himself strangely attracted by the Africans' many gods. He felt he would be content to spend the rest of his days among these people.<sup>396</sup>

The narrative goes on to eventually cover Newton's moment of repentance in which he accepts "the one true God." However, according to ATI, Newton's redemption is not rooted in his repudiation of slavery and the years he would spend advocating for its abolition, but in his final acceptance of Christ, completely irrespective of the horrors of the slave trade.

John had come to the inescapable conclusion that God is. It was a conviction that went against his reason and was completely contrary to his preferences, but there it was—irrefutable...<sup>397</sup>

Notice that a central part of Newton's conversion was that it "went against his reason." Here we see again, how ATI teaches students to "rely not on their own understanding." Eventually the biographical sketch says that Newton worked with men like William Wilberforce to end the "evils of the slave trade" and became a committed abolitionist. However, none of these "evils" are ever delineated.<sup>398</sup> Given that Newton's slave trading work was previously praised and that

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<sup>396</sup> Ibid., 2451.

<sup>397</sup> Ibid., 2454.

<sup>398</sup> Ibid, 2460.

the only African characters presented are either cruel or godless, it is difficult to imagine ATI students coming away with any compassion for the millions of human beings subjected to the unimaginable brutality of the slave trade.<sup>399</sup> What is more, Biblical slavery is discussed at length throughout the ATI curriculum, especially debt-slavery—a practice the IBLP roundly endorses.

First-century slaves who became Christians were commanded not to chafe under bondage... The purpose of debt-slavery in the Bible was not punishment, but discipline. It was designed to turn a man into a responsible member of the community.<sup>400</sup>

The curriculum also tends to use the terms *servant* and *slave* interchangeably.

...debt always creates a master-servant relationship. Though not as visible as the slavery that existed in America before the Civil War, the bondage of indebtedness is very real.<sup>401</sup>

Equating slavery with indebtedness again discounts the brutalities inherent in slavery. Though financially crippling, and psychologically stressful, being in debt is hardly equal to having one's humanity denied, one's freedom completely curtailed, and one's family ripped away and sold at auction like cattle. The rhetorical slippage glosses over the enormous difference between *employing* a person and *owning* a person. Further, "developing a servant's heart" is an

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<sup>399</sup> In her book *Educated*, Tara Westover, a formerly homeschooled writer describes her experience of learning about the Holocaust and the Slave trade for the first time in college. Tara Westover, *Educated*. (New York: Random House, 2018). Westover's experience maps on to what many other former homeschool students have described on sites like HomeschoolersAnonymous.com . These students were often shocked to learn that slaves were ill-treated as they had been taught that the relationship between slave and master was one marked by Christian benevolence. See: Nick Ducote, "White Nationalism and Racism in Christian Patriarchy's Background." *Homeschoolers Anonymous*. November 12, 2014.

<sup>400</sup> *Wisdom Booklet 35*, 1789.

<sup>401</sup> Ibid. The IBLP's anti-government and anti-debt policy is also likely influenced by the southern Appalachian cultural distrust of government "hand outs" and debt. For more see: Alec MacGillis, "The Original Underclass," *The Atlantic*, September, 2016; J. D. Vance, *Hillbilly Elogy*. (New York: Harper Publishing, 2016); Steven Stoll, *Ramp Hollow: The Ordeal of Appalachia*. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2017).

oft repeated adage within the IBLP. Servanthood is celebrated. Reading the Newton biography in conjunction with ATI's celebration of the Confederate cause in the American Civil War, and the curriculum's uncritical acceptance of Biblical slavery as a useful social tool for turning reprobates into "responsible member[s] of the community," ATI students are presented with the message that slavery is morally ambiguous, if not fully sanctioned by God.

### ***Reading, Writing, Arithmetic, Sodomy, and Rape***

Like Gothard's other writings the *Wisdom Booklets* are also especially preoccupied with marriage, and sex, and many of the ATI lessons circuitously find their way back to those subjects. A lesson on Mayan culture in *Wisdom Booklet 24* contains a lengthy description of sodomy—and describes the how Mayan and Aztec "sodomites" were slaughtered by righteous conquistadors,

Spanish conquistadores invaded Mayan territory and this proud, sensuous, sodomite people quickly succumbed to their captors....  
When Vasco de Balboa came to the isthmus of Panama and discovered the Pacific Ocean, he also encountered a vast section of the New World given to the practice of sodomy. As Balboa and his men explored the isthmus of Panama with their ferocious war dogs, they came upon a harem of young men. This sight so enraged them that they set the dogs to kill the entire group....Many other civilizations have followed the same pattern of rejecting God's truth, believing Satan's lie, and experiencing God's judgment.<sup>402</sup>

This violent response to homosexuality is presented as though it was wholly justifiable or at least reasonable. What is more, the lesson asserts that it was not the conquistadors who brought down these New World civilizations, but God's just wrath. Sodomy shows up sixteen more times in

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<sup>402</sup> *Wisdom Booklet 24*, 1101.

*Wisdom Booklet 24* alone and several other times in other *Booklets*. For comparison, World War II shows up four times in the entirety of the curriculum.

Similarly, an entire *Wisdom Booklet* (26) is devoted to marriage. Various other aspects of marriage like sacrifice and property ownership are also covered in five other *Wisdom Booklets*.<sup>403</sup> The lessons on marriage stress the importance of wifely submission, the permanence of the union, and the meaning of “becoming one flesh” (metaphorically, and in the DNA of children produced from the marriage). Most of the lessons on marriage make a host of unfounded Gothard connections. They ask, “What is the relationship between divorce and cancer?” and “How do math factors illustrate marriage?”<sup>404</sup> Although the booklet contains more than ten pages on the meaning of “becoming one flesh,” there is no mention of sex, or reproductive anatomy. There is a very brief discussion of “fertilization,” a disembodied process whereby male and female “gametes” connect (presumably in some undefined ethereal space), but the words uterus, vagina, penis, testicles, fallopian tubes, ovaries, etc. never appear.<sup>405</sup>

One can only assume that these words were deemed inappropriate for young students – odd, given that *rape* and *whoredom* make regular appearances in the curriculum. *Wisdom Booklet 15* for example includes a lesson on the anatomy of the human eye which details the perils of a winking woman, “An attractive but immoral woman can use a wink to communicate lustful desires...those who fall to her whoredom are stripped of resources and vibrancy of life.”<sup>406</sup> The winking woman lesson is just one example of how the *Wisdom Booklets* alienate both female students and their mothers. Little girls are taught just as little boys are about the

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<sup>403</sup> *Wisdom Booklets, 4,5,15,24,53.*

<sup>404</sup> *Wisdom Booklet 24, 1086*

<sup>405</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>406</sup> *Wisdom Booklet 15, 619.*

winking woman even though the lesson clearly assumes that only the boys can “fall to her whoredom.” Women are the whores, and men are their victims. Similarly, *Booklet 25*, asks “What practical steps should we take so that ‘looking at a woman’ would not become lust?”<sup>407</sup> Leaving one to ask, who is the “we” in this lesson?

The message is obviously that female sexuality is dangerous, that men are only partially to blame for their sexual dalliances, and that other women are not to be trusted. “Whoredom” may seem like a strange educational topic (especially for small children) if one assumes that the aim of the curriculum is to develop an understanding of the human eye. But these lessons serve the real goal of instilling the “Biblical worldview”— a value system that imagines female sexuality as inherently dangerous, and homosexuality as aberrant, sinful, and unnatural. The ATI treatment on rape however makes the winking woman lesson look benign.

First, the fact that rape comes up multiple times in a homeschooling curriculum with no age restriction should give us pause. How it is presented, however, is even more troubling. In *Wisdom Booklet 36* the “law” section is devoted to a lengthy taxonomy of crimes and their corresponding Biblical punishments. This “law” lesson is entitled, “How has God provided deliverance from evil with the Law of Crying Out?”<sup>408</sup> Readers might remember from the first chapter that Gothard wrote an entire book on *The Power of Crying Out* wherein he asserts that “crying out” is an act of trust in God and that it is the victim’s responsibility.<sup>409</sup> Failure to do so renders her as guilty as her abuser or rapist. The lesson in *Wisdom Booklet 36* is the distilled

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<sup>407</sup> *Wisdom Booklet 25*, 1139.

<sup>408</sup> *Wisdom Booklet 36*, 1838

<sup>409</sup> Bill Gothard, *The Power of Crying Out: When Prayer Becomes Mighty*. (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah Publishers, 2002).

version of the book, adapted for children. It offers some “guidelines” on the responsibilities of the victim:

The law of crying out God has established some very strict guidelines of responsibility for a woman who is attacked. She is to cry out for help. The victim who fails to do this is equally guilty with the attacker.<sup>410</sup>

But what does “crying out” mean? The ATI lesson details exactly what a woman should do, should she find herself in danger of sexual assault. She apparently has several options. First, she could “call for help” or “cry out to God for help.”<sup>411</sup> If no one comes or if God does nothing, she can at least rest easy knowing she met her Biblical obligation. Alternatively, she could “Rebuke the attacker,” “Ask God to rebuke the attacker,” or the best option according to the *Booklet*, “Witness to the attacker.”<sup>412</sup> In short, the lesson for the young female students is: think rape as an opportunity to save a soul. The ATI lesson then recounts some “true stories” of women who did just that to drive home how effective these tactics can be. For example:

A woman was startled one night by an intruder who broke into her apartment. The attacker stated his intentions, and she replied, “You’ll have to kill me first because I’ve given my body and my life to the Lord.”... The man became angry until she got her Bible, turned the light on, and read aloud, “... the wages of sin is death ...” ...For the next fifteen minutes she reproved him with Scripture and told him of the wrongfulness of man’s deeds. She then told him to leave, and he obeyed.<sup>413</sup>

Daring a man who intends to rape you to kill you first does not seem like the safest course of action, though perhaps it works if one is lucky enough to get an unusually patient would-be

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<sup>410</sup> *Wisdom Booklet* 36, 1839. This quote is taken from the 1984 version. In the 2002 edition this passage reads: “God has established guidelines of responsibility for one who is attacked. When a woman is attacked, she is to cry out for help. The victim who fails to do this is considered guilty, even as the attacker is guilty.”

<sup>411</sup> *Wisdom Booklet* 36, 1839-40.

<sup>412</sup> *Ibid.*, 1841-42.

<sup>413</sup> *Ibid.*, 1841.

rapist who is willing to sit quietly for fifteen minutes while you “rebuke” him. Just below this account, the *Wisdom Booklet* offers another supposedly true story:

As a woman got into her car, a wild-looking man approached her with a gun, demanded her money, and ordered her into the passenger's seat. As they drove off, the woman began praying out loud. Suddenly the man began to sob and talk about his unhappy past. A deep peace came over his intended victim, and she began to pray for him that God would release him from the power of Satan. She then read Scripture passages to him and explained to him how he could become a Christian. Finally, he pulled over to the side of the road, bowed his head, and prayed, “Jesus, I am sorry for everything I have ever done. Please save me.” He then emptied the bullets out of his gun, gave them to the woman with the promise that he was going to be different, and left.<sup>414</sup>

Stories like these endanger students in several ways. First, they encourage recklessness by giving the false impression that the Gospel alone will protect women from physical harm. Second, they lay an enormous burden on the victim not only to save herself, but to turn her attacker to Christ. Third, they suggest that women are only raped by armed strangers who break into their homes or cars, when most women and girls are assaulted or molested by people they know. Some former ATI students have posted their reactions to this lesson on the support site, Recovering Grace. Sara Jones put it this way:

Our “responsibility” was clear, then. It did seem harsh that, at a time when a woman was at her most panicked and most vulnerable, God demanded that she fulfill the proper rituals to maintain her innocence. But by the time we got to *Wisdom Booklet* 36, attended all those conferences, read those newsletters, and worked in Gothard’s training centers... that was the God we knew.

He was the God who didn’t speak directly to us, but only through our authorities. He punished us for making our own decisions. He demanded that we keep not only his Laws, but a myriad of other rules provided by Gothard. If we failed in any area, it was because we weren’t being obedient enough or humble enough for God to grant us enough grace. This

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<sup>414</sup> *Ibid.*, 1843

was a God who would hold a woman guilty for her own rape. And no matter how it hurt our spirits to do it, we agreed, because the alternative was destruction at the hand of this same God.<sup>415</sup>

One can hear the powerlessness and desperation in Jones' statement. That powerlessness is compounded by what ATI prescribes as punishment for the rapist:

If a man forces a married woman to have an immoral, physical relationship with him, God commands that he shall be put to death. (See Deuteronomy 22:25.) If a single man entices or forces an unmarried woman to have a physical relationship with him, "... he shall surely endow her to be his wife. If her father utterly refuses to give her unto him, he shall pay money according to the dowry of virgins."<sup>416</sup>

According to this lesson, unmarried rape victims should be married off to their rapists unless their fathers object. Their own objections, should they have them, are apparently meaningless.<sup>417</sup>

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<sup>415</sup> Sara Jones, "An ATI Education, Final Chapter: Guilty Silence," *RecoveringGrace.org*, January 3, 2016.

<sup>416</sup> *Wisdom Booklet 36*, 1839.

<sup>417</sup>The anti-child marriage advocacy group, Unchained at Last cites 248,000 children, most of them girls, were married in the United States between 2000 and 2010. Most of these marriages were between underage girls and adult men. Unchained at Last asserts that victims of sexual abuse or coercion are often encouraged by their parents to marry their attackers to assuage their family's embarrassment. Happily, statistics indicate that the child marriage in the US has been declining since 2000. However, forty-nine states allow underage marriage in some circumstances—Delaware only banned the practice without exception in May of 2018. Some states require parental permission, thirteen states require a judge's approval for underage marriage. Ten states allow clerks, not judges, to issue marriage licenses to parties of any age. Fifteen states require that parties be at least sixteen, but Arkansas, Indiana, Maryland, New Mexico, North Carolina, Ohio, and Oklahoma, allow that number to drop to fourteen if the girl is pregnant. Twenty states have no minimum age for marriage at all.

See: <http://www.unchainedatlast.org/child-marriage-shocking-statistics/> The Tahirih Justice Center also produces a useful chart for understanding child-marriage laws see:

<https://www.tahirih.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/2018-State-Marriage-Age-Requirements-Statutory-Compilation.pdf>

According to the Pew Research Center, an estimated 31,644 girls ages fifteen to seventeen were married in 2014. That year, "Texas had the highest child marriage rate for girls: Nine out of every 1,000 girls ages 15 to 17 in that state were married. Gender differences are even wider at older ages: Among married young adults ages 18 and 19, 66% were female." David McClendon



### *Courageous Boys, Contented Girls*

In addition to ATI, the IBLP offers extra circular programs for children and young adults. Young men have ALERT (Air Land Emergency Response Training), a Boy Scout-style organization and paramilitary camp. ALERT claims to teach first responder and disaster relief training, but Katheryn Joyce notes in her study, *Quiverfull*, it more accurately serves as a boot-camp-style ministry meant to ingrain a particular definition of Christian manhood in the young “cadets.”<sup>418</sup> ALERT appears ripped directly from the late nineteenth-century muscular Christianity movement. Like the followers of revivalist Billy Sunday, the ALERT cadets are taught that Christian manhood demands sobriety, physical fitness, patriotism, and discipline.<sup>419</sup>

An annual six-week boot camp held at the ALERT campus in Big Sandy serves as a rite of passage for many of the young men who complete the ATI homeschooling program. Scripture

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and Aleksandra Sandstrom, “Child Marriage is Rare in the US Though This Varies By State,” *Pew Research Center*. November 1, 2016.

Of course, child-marriage happens across religious communities. Governor Chris Christy vetoed a bill in 2016 that would make the practice illegal in New Jersey for fear of upsetting the Orthodox Jewish community there. For a copy of the bill see: Assembly, No. 3091, State of New Jersey, 217th legislature, February 18, 2016. For more see: Matt Friedman, “Ban on child marriages conditionally vetoed by Christie,” *Politico*, May 11, 2016. Although child marriage happened across religious communities, Texas, West Virginia, Arkansas, and Oklahoma lead the nation in child marriages, suggesting that teenage marriage is as much a conservative Christian practice than an Orthodox Jewish one. For more on child brides in the US see: Nicholas L. Syrett, *American Child Brides: A history of Minors and Marriage in the United States*. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016).

<sup>418</sup> Katheryn Joyce, *Quiverfull: Inside the Christian Patriarchy Movement*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009).

<sup>419</sup> For more on muscular Christianity see: Mark C. Carnes, *Secret Ritual and Manhood in Victorian America*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); Allen, L. Dean. *Rise Up, O Men of God: The “Men and Religion Forward Movement” and the “Promise Keepers.”* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 2002); Donald Hall, *Muscular Christianity: Embodying the Victorian Age*. (New York: Cambridge University Press 1994).

memorization and Gothard's "Character Qualities" are taught seamlessly alongside first-aid and CPR. For example, a timed training sequence might require cadets to scale a wall, secure a belay line, tie a tourniquet on a training dummy, stop to write out Isaiah 12 from memory, and then race through a mud course to the finish line. Inserting the scripture tests into the first responder training is almost comical. It is difficult to imagine an emergency wherein the ability to perform CPR and the ability to quote Isaiah would be equally valuable. However, the ALERT leadership claims that memorizing "God's Word" gives the young men the mental and emotional fortitude to withstand whatever challenges they might face as first responders.<sup>420</sup>

Young women have a parallel program within the IBLP called, Commit. Commit is a smaller and newer program for middle and high school-aged girls dedicated to "Cultivating Obedience, Ministering Mercy, [and] Internalizing Truth."<sup>421</sup> Unlike ALERT, Commit directs girls away from conventional academic and professional achievement toward "self-denial," sacrifice, and nurturing. It discourages leadership and stresses the need to develop a "servant's heart." For example, A 2016 Commit workbook asks its teen reader to,

Name five people who won an Olympic Gold medal at the last Olympics. Name ten people who have won the Nobel prize. How many could you think of? The point is, we don't remember the people who achieve these things.<sup>422</sup>

This language foreshadows Gothard's cautions to mothers who wonder if their lives are best spent changing diapers and homeschooling. It reinforces the idea that a woman's greatest

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<sup>420</sup> See: <https://alertacademy.com/cadet/>

<sup>421</sup> Commit pamphlet, collected at the IBLP Family Conference at Big Sandy in 2016.

<sup>422</sup> Commit workbook, collected at the IBLP Family Conference at Big Sandy in 2016.

accomplishment is motherhood and that other achievements are at best distractions toward which God is indifferent, or at worse, active defiance of God's appointed role of helpmeet and mother.

Like other Gothard materials, Commit also grooms young women to be the accepting recipients of physical and emotional pain. The same workbook asks the Commit girl to write down a time when someone caused them pain. This is followed by a lined notes section decorated with little pink flower doodles. It then provides the following script:

Will I forgive this? (Yes, it was wrong. But Jesus has forgiven me of even more. I choose to accept this pain. I choose to forgive.)<sup>423</sup>

This is followed by a suggested prayer script for the young woman to recite,

Lord, I'm sorry for getting angry. Will You please forgive me?  
Will you cleanse me with the blood of Jesus? In the name and through  
the blood of Jesus, will You take back the ground that I gave to Satan?<sup>424</sup>

One wonders, what if the girl wrote down something far worse than anything she has ever done? What if she wrote about a time she was beaten, or sexually abused? The assertion that "Jesus has forgiven me of even more" assumes and reinforces innate female guilt and the declaration "I choose to accept this pain," primes young women to expect and willingly accept abuse. The prayer that follows undermines her right to justice and to her own emotional experience. Commit does not teach girls they should not *act* on anger, but that they should not *feel* it when they are harmed. By characterizing any anger, justified or not, as "ground that I gave to Satan," Commit trains girls to joyfully accept victimization, lest they empower the devil—who is a very real and truly terrifying personage within ATI culture.

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<sup>423</sup> Ibid.

<sup>424</sup> Ibid.

Tellingly, ALERT materials do not downplay Nobel prizes and gold medals. In fact, they celebrate men's achievement, leadership, physical strength, and toughness.<sup>425</sup> ALERT is full of specific role models. The ALERT Academy Training Camp is decorated with paintings and sculptures of accomplished and famous men, mostly military and political leaders. Biographies of Christian leaders, missionaries, and the founding fathers are packed onto every bookshelf in main dining and recreation hall. The ALERT table at the Big Sandy 2016 conference featured a 10-foot-high display of four life-size posters of imposing cadets in their various uniforms, looking very masculine and stern. The table was decorated with actual firefighting gear, oxygen tanks, and large ax. The men who manned the table were adult "commanders" in full uniform, fulltime employees of the Academy.

By contrast, the Commit table was small, low, festooned in pink bunting and featured no images of strong-looking women or anyone else. It was presided over by three polite and cheerful girls of about fourteen years old in pink Commit T-shirts and long skirts who were handing out Commit brochures and sample workbooks. Their table had no axes or gear, but it did have a few books on display. One, was *Before You Meet Prince Charming: A Guide to Radiant Purity*—a popular IBLP text, and a picture book for preschoolers entitled *The Person I Marry: Things To Think About Before (and After) Saying I Do*.<sup>426</sup>

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<sup>425</sup> Institute in Basic Life Principles, *ALERT Cadet Basic Training Manual*. (Big Sandy, TX: International ALERT Academy, 2003)

<sup>426</sup> Garry and Jan Bower, *The Person I Marry: Things To Think About Before (and After) Saying I Do*. (Traverse City, MI: Storybook Meadow Publishing, 2008); Sarah Mally, *Before You Meet Prince Charming: A Guide to Radiant Purity*. (Marion, IA: Tomorrow's Forefathers 2006).

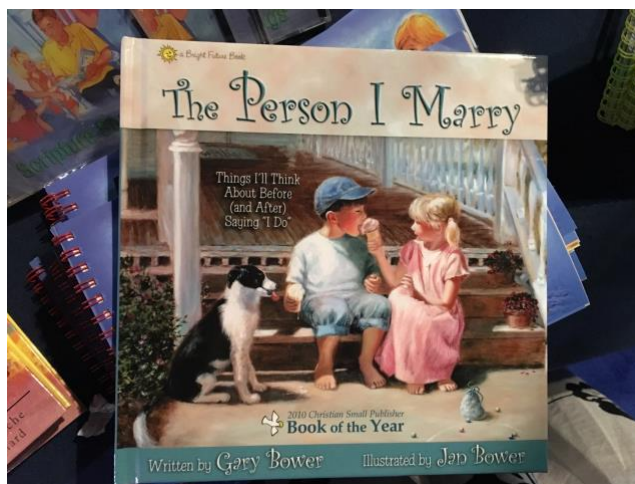


Image 7: The Person I Marry, Personal photo, Big Sandy Texas 2016

The message was stark. There are no women of note because a woman's real value is in her anonymity. We do not see the female heroes because their invisibility is what makes them heroes. A girl's highest aspiration should be to remain nameless, a mother, a Mrs. There was one book, however, offered on the Commit table that named an actual woman. It did not look like it was part of the official Commit offerings (perhaps it was placed there by mistake) but there it was on display, nonetheless. It detailed the life of a woman missionary to India and was called, *A Chance to Die: The Life and Legacy of Amy Carmichael*.<sup>427</sup> There is also no corresponding material on forgiveness in the boys' ALERT handbook. The young women of Commit are trained to forgive, presumably because they are the ones who will be harmed. Even the names of the programs are indicative of their agendas. *Alert* is a state of being; it is a description. *Commit*

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<sup>427</sup> Elizabeth Eliot, *A Chance to Die: The Life and Legacy of Amy Carmichael*. (Ada, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2005). Amy Carmichael was a protestant missionary who worked in India at the turn of the twentieth-century. Carmichael was devoted to rescuing Hindu girls who had been dedicated to a temple and subsequently forced into prostitution. The title of the book is taken from a letter Carmichael wrote to a would-be missionary woman, "Missionary life is simply a chance to die."

is referential, it cannot stand alone, it requires both an object and a subject. *Commit* is a command.

### ***Conclusion***

The *Wisdom Booklets* contain countless lessons on subjects most other American students will never encounter. Here is just a sampling: “How do lines and angles illustrate the importance of following God's will?”<sup>428</sup> “How do the changes in bankruptcy laws illustrate society's movement away from God's ideal?”<sup>429</sup> “How does the laser illustrate the potential of unified Christians?”<sup>430</sup> “How are acids and bases like debt?”<sup>431</sup> “How did the Republic of Plato come from a reprobate mind?”<sup>432</sup> and so on. The *Booklets* are full of these strange connections and nonsensical conclusions. A lesson on chemistry becomes about the perils of debt. A lesson on geometry teaches the importance of obedience, and the lesson on lasers is really about the importance of a united Body of Christ.

ATI is not the most popular homeschooling program on the conservative Christian market, nor can we assume that ATI students swallow its lessons whole—although the testimonies on *Recovering Grace* suggest that they make an impression. As such, it may be easy to dismiss ATI as fringe, but much of the ideology it asserts runs through the broader conservative white Christian discourse and that discourse is shaping larger debates. Countless political and cultural commenters have observed that we have entered a post-truth era of

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<sup>428</sup> *Wisdom Booklet 33*, 1655.

<sup>429</sup> *Wisdom Booklet 35*, 1789.

<sup>430</sup> *Wisdom Booklet 15*, 44

<sup>431</sup> *Wisdom Booklet 24*, 1086.

<sup>432</sup> *Wisdom Booklet 24*, 1090.

American discourse.<sup>433</sup> In fact, “Post-Truth” was the Oxford Dictionary’s 2016 “Word of the Year.” Lies are repackaged as “alternative facts.” Truths are denied even in the face of incontrovertible evidence. Conspiracy theories run rampant and go unchallenged. The Trump administration has become down right Orwellian in how it dispenses and then recounts information, but President Trump is as much a symptom as he is a disease.

Margaret Atwood wrote, “Ignoring isn’t the same as ignorance, you have to work at it.” Ignorance is directionless, ignoring has an agenda. For the IBLP and for conservative American Christians more broadly, that agenda asserts anti-feminist pronatalism, Christian nationalism, white supremacy, and the conflation of freedom with free-markets. Anti-intellectualism, fact-relativism, bewilderment, and shame are the tactics being used to advance that conservative Christian agenda., ATI and the broader conservative Christian discourse specifically targets women and girls. Their disempowerment is a necessary part of the agenda under examination here, which indicates to me that the empowerment of women and girls is the most powerful weapon against it.

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<sup>433</sup> William Davies, “The Age of Post-Truth Politics,” *The New York Times*, August 26, 2016; Lee McIntyre, *Post-Truth: How we arrived in a post-truth era, when “alternative facts” replace actual facts, and feelings have more weight than evidence.* (Boston: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2018); Shankar Vedantam, “Persistence of Myths Could Alter Public Policy Approach,” *The Washington Post*, September 4, 2007.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Michelle Duggar, Icon of Sacrifice

“We are two-legged wombs, that’s all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices.”

—Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale*

On the second evening of the 2016 Institute in Basic Life Principle’s Family Conference in Big Sandy, Texas, a young couple from Irvine, California walked on the stage of the main meeting hall. There were few families from California at the conference, and this couple looked decidedly out of place. For starters, they were the only non-white adults I had seen since I arrived (I did see a fair number of non-white children who had been adopted by white parents). He was Latino, and she later told me she was Filipino. They also dressed like southern Californians. They maintained the modesty standards of the IBLP, but, they were dressed more casually and fashionably than anyone else in the room. Most fathers at the conference sported the typical suburban-dad-uniform—a short sleeved polo or button-down shirt tucked into jeans or khakis, and white running shoes. He wore a black T-shirt with a Rip-Curl (a surf and skate apparel company) logo on the front, long green cargo shorts, and flip flops. She was trim and pretty in a just-above-the-knee-length jean skirt (short, by IBLP standards) made modest by the black leggings she wore underneath. Her hair was tied up in a trendy top-knot. They were there to say a few words about the upcoming Family Conference in Sacramento, but before they did, they went “off book.”

They wanted to say something to, “some folks you might know, who mean a lot to us.” They shared that after their first two children, they thought they were done. “Until I saw your family,” the woman said to Michelle Duggar, who beamed back at her from far-left stage. They had been Christians, the mother explained to the gathered crowd, but their “walk with the lord”



was “shallow.” The crowd nodded knowingly. The Duggars, their hit reality show on TLC, *19 Kids and Counting*, and the IBLP changed that. The father jokingly stuck his thumb out like a hitchhiker and gestured toward his wife, “When she first talked to me about homeschooling and having more kids, I thought she was *nuts!*” Everyone chuckled. “I was like, we already have two kids, we’d have to get a bigger car! And I want to go on vacation!” More laughter. “But the Lord changed my heart, you know?” He turned around to look right and Jim Bob and Michelle standing behind him. He looked as though he was holding back tears, “And now I look at them,” he pointed to his to his children in the audience, five little brown faces smiled up at him, “and think about everything I would have missed and everything they would have missed not having each other. Our three youngest wouldn't be here without you guys.” Jim Bob and Michelle came forward to sounding applause. Michelle wrapped her arms around the woman, and both women wiped tears from their eyes.

The Duggar’s were not on the official schedule that year. They had been removed (or asked to be removed) some months back, but they spoke for fifteen minutes anyway about the difficult year they had—their eldest son had been caught in a sex scandal and subsequently, TLC canceled their show. “But it is so good to be among *friends*,” Michelle assured the congregation, “and we know, He,” she pointed upward, “works all things for good.” They led us in a prayer and then introduced four of their daughters, Jana, Jessa, Jinger, and Joy-Anna, who stood shoulder to shoulder and began to sing a favorite Duggar hymn, *It's Through the Blood*.

When I think of Heaven and all the sights I'll see,  
 the walls of jasper, gates of pearl, the clear and golden streets.  
 Why should I be present? Why should I enter in?  
 After all my sinful living, and the wicked one I've been.

In the Presence of Jehovah, As I stand before the throne

the accuser of the brethren, starts to read the things I've done.  
 As I hear the awful charges, the question fills my mind  
 Why should I not be put in hell, to suffer for all time?

It's through the blood, that's all I have to plea.  
 It's through the blood, that Jesus shed for me.  
 Not by works of my own righteousness, for filthy rags are they,  
 but because of that old rugged tree, hanging on dark Calvary,  
 that is my only plea, it's through the blood.

The sweetness of the melody and the young women's high, angelic voices seemed incongruous with the harsh, self-recriminating lyrics, and the emphasis of the word, *blood*, which falls on the longest note of the song. Yet, in that moment, the Duggar daughters singing *It's Through the Blood* also perfectly encapsulated the ideology and culture of the IBLP and the broader conservative Christian pronatalist discourse—women performing traditional femininity, on display, asserting their own worthlessness, and begging for redemption via blood sacrifice.

Over the course of the five-day 2016 Big Sandy Conference, several families publicly testified to how their “hearts were turned to the Lord” by watching *19 Kids and Counting*. Most of the testimonies came from women. They praised Michelle especially—her dedication, her “sweet spirit,” her “servant’s heart,” and how she made it all look so manageable. “If she can do it, I can do it” one woman shared. Everyone who credited the Duggars with their conversion or renewed faith was careful to note that they no longer watched television, (it is *verboten* by the IBLP) but stressed that they were inspired by the Duggar’s show, and Michelle especially, to join the community, to homeschool their children with the Advanced Training Institute curriculum, and to “trust the Lord” with the size of their family.

Previous chapters centered the official rhetoric of the IBLP and its leadership, primarily its founder, Bill Gothard. The following chapter unpacks the visual and verbal rhetoric, and

symbolic work, of one the IBLP's most visible and influential, but unofficial leaders—Michelle Duggar. Specifically, this chapter examines how Michelle uses new media platforms like reality television to collapse the public-private binary, and to thereby offer up her private life, her body, her pregnancies, and her children as public sacrifices.

As theorists like Henri Hubert, René Girard, Marcel Mauss have noted, the nature of sacrifice is violently transformative.<sup>434</sup> It requires that one thing be destroyed as a way of converting it into something else. In publicly destroying her agency, Michelle reinscribes the sacrificial logics of conservative Christian pronatalism, which imagines female sexuality as a powerfully destructive force that must be contained by patriarchy, and then destroyed through the display of the suffering female body and transformed *via* pain into sacred, asexual motherhood.<sup>435</sup> However, as Jonathan Z. Smith notes, sacrifice is not just transformative but transactional.<sup>436</sup> It is a method of communication and exchange between the human and the divine. In imagining her children as sacrificial beings, particularly, Caleb, the first child the Duggars lost in miscarriage, Josie, who was born prematurely, and Jubilee, the child she lost in miscarriage in late 2011, Michelle seeks to symbolically redeem the suffering and death of her children for the millions of unborn children endangered by abortion access.

Further, religion scholar, Jon Paul argues that, “although sacrifices may be intentional acts of discrete ritual performances, they may also be largely unconscious systems of substitution

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<sup>434</sup> René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*. Patrick Gregory, trans. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1972); Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Functions*. Midway Reprint (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964).

<sup>435</sup> Robert Orsi unpack how a similar process played out on Catholic immigrant women and their daughters. Orsi, “Imagining women” in *Thank You St. Jude*, 70-95.

<sup>436</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jamestown*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

that symbolically channel fears and desires.”<sup>437</sup> Michelle is also engaged in this more expansive construction of sacrifice. The sacrifice narratives she crafts channel the conservative Christian pronatalist fear of unchecked female independence into a construction of motherhood that completely obliterates female agency by smothering women with the holy.<sup>438</sup>

### ***Meet the Duggars!***

In 2004, American television audiences met the Duggar family via an hour long special on the Discovery Channel entitled *14 Kids and Pregnant Again!*<sup>439</sup> With bouncy music and the guidance of an upbeat narrator, the special introduced a former Arkansas State Representative named Jim Bob Duggar, his unusually fecund wife, Michelle, and their fourteen, soon to be fifteen, children. The fifteenth child, Jackson, was born on camera, providing an exciting climax for the television special.

The Duggar’s found their way to reality television via Jim Bob’s political career. In 1994, Jim Bob Duggar was inspired by the work of a Christian nationalist organization called Wall Builders, to run for office.<sup>440</sup> Wall Builders is a dominionist ministry aimed at “restoring” the United States to its white, patriarchal, conservative Christian “foundations.” The organization takes its name from the Hebrew Bible book of Nehemiah, which chronicles the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem in the second temple period. Upon surveying the dilapidated gates of the holy

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<sup>437</sup> Jon Pahl, *Empire of Sacrifice: The Religious Origins of American Violence*. (New York: New York University Press, 2010) 7.

<sup>438</sup> Robert Orsi describes a similar process of female disempowerment in early twentieth-century Catholic literature. See: Robert Orsi. *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People and Make and the Scholars who Study Them*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

<sup>439</sup> *14 Kids and Pregnant Again!* Figure 8 Films. Discovery Channel. September 4, 2004.

<sup>440</sup> Jim Bob & Michelle Duggar, *20 and Counting!: Raising One of America’s Largest Families—How they Do It*. (Brentwood, TN: Howard Books, 2008) 91.

city Nehemiah declares, “You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, so that we may no longer suffer disgrace” (Nehemiah 2:17). That is Wall Builders ethos. In their view, the United States currently lies in ruins and conservative Christians are in disgrace. When Donald Trump began shouting, “Build a wall!” during his 2016 Presidential campaign, he may have only been spewing his xenophobic approach to immigration reform, but many of his supporters likely heard a more layered message.<sup>441</sup>

Paraphrasing Wall Builders founder David Baron, Jim Bob Duggar writes, “Christians are needed in politics...to carry on the Godly heritage handed down to us by America’s Founding Fathers.” In addition to his founding Wall Builders, Baron is known for his revisionist histories of the founders, including a bestselling book on Thomas Jefferson that the *History News Network* at George Washington University called, “the least credible history book in print.”<sup>442</sup> Nonetheless, Jim Bob writes, “God laid on my heart the idea that He wanted me to run for legislature.”<sup>443</sup> He ran for the Arkansas State House of Representatives and won. He served for served for two terms.

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<sup>441</sup> Although I think “build a wall” played on the existing religious imaginations of many Trump supports, I am not convinced President Trump had any such intentions. I doubt President Trump has read Nehemiah. Indeed, I doubt he could identify Nehemiah as a book in the Bible given that in January of 2016 he repeatedly referred to Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians as “two Corinthians” as though it was the start of corny joke, “two Corinthians walk into bar.” Staff Writer, “Trump’s ‘Two Corinthians’ reference draws laughs at Liberty University,” *The Washington Post*, January 18, 2016.

<sup>442</sup> David Austin Walsh, “What is the least credible history book in print?” *History New Network*, July 16, 2012. David Barton, *The Jefferson Lies: Exposing the Myths You’ve Always Believed About Thomas Jefferson*. (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2012).

<sup>443</sup> Duggar, *20 and Counting*, 92.

When God told Jim Bob to run for U.S. Senate in 2002, he obliged.<sup>444</sup> This time, he lost badly in the primary to the incumbent—but on election day, a photographer with the *New York Times* snapped a shot of the whole Duggar clan (there were only a dozen children then) in their matching outfits.



Image 8: The Duggar family heading to the polls, 2002. [www.theduggarfamily.com](http://www.theduggarfamily.com).

The photo ended up in a story that barely mentioned the Duggars, but it caught the attention of *Parents* magazine.<sup>445</sup> *Parents* approached the Duggars in the spring of 2003 about running a feature on the family. Michelle ended up writing the article and it came out in September of that year.<sup>446</sup> Some months later, the Discovery Channel contacted Jim Bob and Michelle, who had fourteen children by then, about doing a short documentary on their family. They agreed under the condition that the network “not edit out our faith.”<sup>447</sup> The network was true to its word and the Duggar “family ministry” (their term for the show) was born. “We realized,” Jim Bob and

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<sup>444</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>445</sup> Drummond Ayres, “Senator Running on Family Values Has a Tough Race After Divorce,” *The New York Times*, April 15, 2002.

<sup>446</sup> Michelle Duggar, “Raising 14 Kids,” *Parents Magazine*, September, 2003.

<sup>447</sup> Duggar, *20 and Counting*, 106.

Michelle write, “the documentary could provide a way for us to share with the world our belief that children are a blessing from the Lord.”<sup>448</sup>

*14 Kids and Pregnant Again!* gave rise to four more hour-long specials which chronicled two more births, a Duggar road trip, and the construction of the family’s seven-thousand-square-foot, mortgage-free home in Tonitown, Arkansas.<sup>449</sup> In 2008, TLC (a Discovery Channel subsidiary) signed the Duggars to a weekly half-hour show called, *17 Kids and Counting*, then *18 Kids and Counting*, and finally *19 kids and Counting*. The weekly show ran for ten seasons until May of 2015 and at its most popular, pulled in roughly two million viewers per week, with numbers jumping to four million for much-anticipated events like the Duggar children’s weddings.<sup>450</sup> The shows also garnered an audience for three books—two by Michelle and Jim Bob and one by the eldest Daughters—and a considerable social media following.

Of course, some *19 Kids and Counting* viewers tuned-in just to laugh at the Duggar’s comic naiveté, their frumpy homemade matching outfits, their back-woods affectations, and their lack of pop-culture knowledge. For instance, in one episode, the mayor of Pigeon Forge, Tennessee (home of Dolly Parton’s theme park, Dollywood) offers the family an all-expense-paid trip to his town. He arranged for them to be part of Pigeon Forge’s annual Dolly Parade and to meet the country music legend.<sup>451</sup> The problem was, no one in the Duggar family knew who Dolly Parton was. The Duggars even laughed at the irony. “*Hee Haw!* Is that right? Was she on

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<sup>448</sup> Ibid.

<sup>449</sup> *Raising 16 Children*, Figure 8 Films. Discovery Channel. March 13, 2006.; *16 Children and Moving In*, Figure 8 Films. Discovery Channel. March 15, 2006; *On Road with Sixteen Children*, Figure 8 Films. Discovery Channel. June 11, 2006; *Duggars’ Big Family Album*, Figure 8 Films. Discovery Channel. September 22, 2007.

<sup>450</sup> Ratings as measured by Neilson Media Research.

<sup>451</sup> “Duggars Meet Dolly,” *19 Kids and Counting*. Figure 8 Films. TLC. July 21, 2009.

*Hee-Haw*?” Michelle asks the producers, referencing a country-themed sketch comedy show from the early 1970s. Dolly Parton was not on *Hee-Haw*. But where some viewers saw laughable bumpkins, others saw something admirable in the Duggars. As evidenced by the public testimonies offered at the 2016 Big Sandy conference, some viewers saw something they wanted to emulate. These viewers noticed that Michelle never raised her voice, that the children never talked back, and that Jim Bob never seemed to lose his temper. Watching *19 Kids and Counting* was like watching a real-life version of nostalgic family comedies like the 1970s *The Brady Bunch* or the 1950s classic film *Cheaper By the Dozen*. Despite the inevitable chaos of life in such a large family, the well-scrubbed, color-coordinated Duggar clan appeared genuinely happy and remarkably unflappable.

Bill Gothard’s sacralization of conformity and family unity was also central to *19 Kids and Counting*’s visual rhetoric. Like other IBLP families, the Duggars often dressed in matching outfits.<sup>452</sup> The boys all sported the same neatly styled crew cut, while the girls labored over those long curls Bill Gothard likes so much—and just case the message of family unity was still not clear enough, all the Duggar children’s names start with the letter J (a tradition eldest son Josh and his wife Anna continued with the letter M). Season after season, the Duggars faced everything from weekly chores to major medical crises together and with unshakable optimism, shirts tucked, hair brushed, and smiles at the ready. The show was also meticulously conflict-free. No family member ever said anything remotely negative about another. There was never an onscreen argument between anyone older than four. The children set about their “jurisdictions”

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<sup>452</sup> “Cheaper By the Duggars,” *19 Kids and Counting*. Figure 8 Films. TLC. October 20, 2008.



(their chores), their homeschooling work, and music practicing without prompting or complaining.

*19 Kids and Counting* was not just freak-show reality television. It was pronatalist evangelism. Michelle Duggar made being constantly pregnant seem fun and fulfilling. She never appeared in a pair of sweats looking haggard. Even in labor, she prays, “praise Jesus, praise Jesus.”<sup>453</sup> The Duggars see their show, their celebrity, and in fact, the entirety of the lives as a “ministry”—as something they themselves have relinquished claim to and given over to divine authority. They view their show as a vehicle for spreading their conservative Christian pronatalist theological, social, and political message. Indeed, for the Duggars, *every* act and thought, on camera or off, public or private, is implicated in both a cultural and political battle, and in a cosmic struggle “not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places” (Ephesians 6:12).

What is more, the Duggars became mouth pieces for Bill Gothard’s words and concepts, often parroting them verbatim into the camera, while viewers were none the wiser. In one episode Michelle repeats one of Gothard’s most central teachings, “Obedience is instant, thorough, unconditional, and *cheerful*.” In other episodes, she repeats the need to “train your heart to be *cheerful*,” describes the family’s homeschooling by using Gothard’s language of *character* and explains the family’s no-debt policy using language taken directly from the IBLP’s Financial Freedom Seminar.

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<sup>453</sup> “Bringing Home Baby Duggar,” *19 Kids and Counting*. Figure 8 Films. TLC. February 24, 2009.

Although they never mention Gothard by name on the show, the Duggars were often seen using the IBLP's homeschooling materials and singing the "Character Quality" songs. Eldest son Josh even sang "The Loyalty Song" at his wedding as part of his vows (which turned out to be rather ironic). All the Duggar children who have married thus far, have followed Gothard's exacting courtship standards, including intense parental involvement, constant chaperones, no hand holding until engagement, and no kissing until "I do." Several episodes featured the family's trips to the Big Sandy Family Conference and the children's participation in IBLP programs like ALERT and Journey to the Heart.<sup>454</sup> The Duggar's did not have to overtly endorse Bill Gothard to be effective missionaries. They made living by his unyielding prescriptions look like the recipe for family harmony and the TLC producers seemed equally invested in presenting the Duggars in the best possible light and keeping their institutional affiliations under wraps. The producers showcased the Duggar's charming idiosyncrasies like the family's extreme love of pickles, while downplaying or simply ignoring their homophobia, their anti-intellectualism, and their affiliation with the IBLP. In short, *19 Kids and Counting* produced televisual iconography that reinforced religious and cultural values of conservative Christian pronatalism, namely, maternal sacrifice, and fetal sacrality.

### ***Michelle, Celebrity, Icon***

Of the family members, Michelle Duggar has been the most visual ambassador for the IBLP and its conservative Christian pronatalist ideology. Although the whole Duggar family

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<sup>454</sup> See the following episodes of *19 Kids and Counting*: "Big Family in Big Sandy," January 16, 2009; "Duggar's Take Flight," April 23, 2013; "Duggar School Daze," June 2, 2009; "School House Duggars," October 4, 2011; "Duggar Home Alone," May 25, 2010; "A Duggar on Her Own," September 25, 2012.

often appears at events together, Michelle is routinely invited to speak to women's and mother's groups on her own, while Jim Bob almost never appears without his wife. *19 Kids and Counting* also centered Michelle. She is interviewed on the show far more often than any other family member, and hers is the voice we hear at the opening of every episode: "This is story of *my* family. That's me, I'm Michelle. There's Jim Bob, my *wonderful* husband, and our children..."

One could situate Michelle Duggar in a history of female religious leaders—alongside Shaker founder, Ann Lee, Christian Science founder, Mary Baker Eddy, the abolitionist Sojourner Truth, the Hollywood evangelist, Aimee Semple McPherson and countless others, — women leaders who have simultaneously undermined and reinforced systems of female religious authority.<sup>455</sup> But Michelle Duggar does not preach from a pulpit like Truth or McPherson, nor does she enjoy any institutional authority like Lee or Eddy, and unlike contemporary anti-feminist leaders like Beverly LaHaye or Phyllis Schlafly, Michelle Duggar has not made a career

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<sup>455</sup> For more on these women and other women religious leaders see: Mary Farrell Bednarowski, *New Religions and the Theological Imagination in America*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989); Mary Farrell Bednarowski, *The Religious Imagination of American Women*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999); Ann D. Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth Century America*. 2d ed. (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2008); Ann D. Braude, *Sisters and Saints: Women and Religion in America*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Catherine A. Brekus, ed. *The Religious History of American Women: Reimagining the Past*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Betty A. Deburg, *Ungodly Women: Gender and First Wave of American Fundamentalism*. (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2000); Jean Humez, *Mother's First Born Daughters: Early Shaker Writings on Women and Religion*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993); Elaine Lawless, *Handmaidens of the Lord: Pentecostal Women Preachers and Traditional Religion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988); Susan Lindley, *You Have Stepped Out of Your Place: A History of American Women and Religion*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996); Nell Irvin Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol*. (New York: Norton and Company, 1996); Mathew Avery Sutton, *Aimee Semple McPherson and the Resurrection of Christian America*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

out of telling women not to have careers.<sup>456</sup> She does not have to. The platform of reality television allows Michelle Duggar to circumvent the previously unavoidable hypocrisies in which conservative Christian women advocates like LaHaye and Schlafly necessarily trafficked.

In this way, conservative Christian pronatalism and reality television make strange but remarkably compatible bedfellows. Reality television (along with social media, which Michelle uses often) collapses the public and private binary such that Michelle can make herself a visible icon of conservative Christian pronatalism without ever leaving the confines of her sacred role as helpmeet and mother. Rather than overtly preach, she can subtly prescribe her religious values to American women with her visual rhetoric without even leaving the house. Moreover, these platforms allow for new modes of narrative and symbol production which in turn, generate new ways of producing meaning. Consequently, even though Michelle does enjoy a considerable amount of authority, especially among conservative Christian women, I argue she is less of a traditional religious leader, and more of a religious celebrity and an icon. These two constructions, *celebrity* and *icon* are implicated in religious authority and leadership, but they possess nuances worth noting.

Icons are symbolic images that are inherently conductive. They concentrate and channel religious power, moving it from one place to another. They are also apparatuses that make the ineffable, effable. They are molds into which practitioners pour amorphous religious imaginations, and complex emotional experiences, to give them form, make them legible and thereby assign them meaning. Further, Katheryn Lofton argues that “icons are multivalent

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<sup>456</sup> For more on Beverly LaHaye and Phyllis Schlafly see: Susan Faludi, “The Politics of Resentment: The New Right’s War on Women” *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2006); William Martin, “We—Some of Us—Are Family” *With God on Our Side*. (New York: Broadway Books, 1996).

objects and ideas, simultaneously engendering ritual worship and being engendered by such ritual adoration.<sup>457</sup> As we will see, Michelle Duggar fits all these definitions. She is ritually adored by fans who use her as an inspirational super-human figure, while simultaneously drawing nearer to her through challenges and struggles. She channels the events of her life into powerful ritual narratives that communicate a concentrated, affective, pronatalist theology. She assigns specific political and religious meaning to pain, both her pain and her children's pain. Finally, she invites her viewers to use the ritual processes she presents as formulas for rendering pronatalist meanings from the events of their own lives.

Cultural historian Mel van Elteren observes that in our contemporary media worlds, “the celebrity becomes a key site of media attention and personal aspiration, as well as one of the major places where cultural meanings are negotiated and organized.”<sup>458</sup> Like icons, celebrities are symbolic figures onto which we project our values, aspirations, desires, and fears. Like icons, celebrities conduct and amplify power, and like icons, celebrities are made. Celebrity is not reducible to notoriety or fame. Rather celebrities are constructed through specific processes of surveillance, discipline, and conversion. Such processes radically distil a human *identity*, in all its complexity, into a *brand* (or as Michelle might prefer, a *ministry*) which can then be easily communicated, marketed, and consumed.<sup>459</sup>

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<sup>457</sup> Kathryn Lofton, *Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011).

<sup>458</sup> Mel van Elteren, “Celebrity Culture, Performative Politics, and the Spectacle of ‘Democracy’ in America.” *The Journal of American Culture*, Vol. 36 no. 4, (December 2013): 263-283.

<sup>459</sup> There is a sizable body of scholarship exploring the intersection of religion and celebrity see: Gary Laderman, *Sacred Matters: Celebrity Worship, Sexual Ecstasies, the Living Dead, and Other Signs of Religious Life in the United States*. (New York: The New Press, 2010); P. David Marshall, *Celebrity and Power: Frame in Contemporary Culture*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Richard Schickel, *Intimate Strangers: The Culture of Celebrity in America*. (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2000); Peter Ward, *God Behaving Badly: Media Religion and*

Kathryn Lofton in *Consuming Religion* argues that the processes by which celebrities are made have sacrificial logics.<sup>460</sup> To become a celebrity, a person must be displayed and dramatized, such that she is transformed into a symbol and then consumed by the public. Out of this process a new being emerges. Michelle Duggar proves an interesting example of Lofton's sacrificial construction of celebrity in that she occupies two simultaneous and overlapping sacrificial roles, one as a maternal sacrifice to the conservative Christian pronatalist God, and another as reality television star who offers up her private pain for public consumption to project and prescribe her pronatalist meaning-making narratives.<sup>461</sup>

With these constructions of *icon* and *celebrity* in mind, Michelle Duggar can be imagined as an icon of sacrificial motherhood who concentrates, narrativizes, and amplifies conservative Christian pronatalist religious imaginations, and as a celebrity who is at once, the sacrifice and the architect of sacrifice.

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*Celebrity Culture*. (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2011); Darrell M. West and John M. Orman, *Celebrity Politics*. (Prentice Hall, 2003).

<sup>460</sup> Kathryn Lofton, *Consuming Religion*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

<sup>461</sup> Similarly, Sarah McFarland Taylor's work on another TLC reality television star, "Honey Boo Boo" of *Toddlers and Tiaras* and *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* provides another example of how reality television can be a vehicle for practices of *imitatio Dei*. The foul-mouthed child known as "Honey Boo Boo" would likely vex even holy mother Michelle Duggar, but both work as televisual icons and as sacrificial beings. Where Honey Boo Boo inspired fans to imitate her sassy "white trash" style by purchasing the products she uses—such that she saved small businesses from ruin and buoyed the economies of whole towns—Michelle Duggar has inspired viewers to adopt her parenting techniques and pronatalist religious imaginations and brought several families to the IBLP. What is more, Honey Boo Boo, also called the "red neck messiah" is presented as kind of child sacrifice. Like Michelle's lost children, she is dramatized, crafted, and positioned so as to serve as an offering to a viewership that seems to relish the objectification of children. Sarah McFarland Taylor, "Shopping and Consumption" *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture*. John C. Lynden and Eric Michael Mazur eds. (New York: Routledge, 2015) 317-335.

*Caleb*

The theme of sacrifice runs throughout to the Duggar family's narrative, beginning with the reason they have the number of children they have. The Duggars have a testimony that they repeat in print, on their show, and in their public speeches of how they came to abstain from family planning. It functions as their conversion narrative, and it revolves around a child they named Caleb.<sup>462</sup> The story of Caleb is the Duggar' familial etiological myth, and like all myths, it is a generative, meaning-making construction that shapes religious self-understanding and reinforces how the human-divine relationship is understood. To paraphrase the preeminent religious studies scholar, Mircea Eliade, it is a true story that may or may not have happened.<sup>463</sup>

When we [Jim Bob and Michelle] got married in on July 21, 1984, we decided to plan our family size ourselves. Michelle took birth control pills for three years before we decided we were ready to become parents. After our first child, Josh was born in March 1988, we again used oral contraceptives, thinking we would decide the spacing of our children.<sup>464</sup>

Then the unexpected happened, followed by the unthinkable: Michelle got pregnant, even though she was still taking birth control pills... Then between her second and third month, Michelle miscarried. When the doctor told us the miscarriage probably happened because she had conceived while still on the pill, we were devastated. To us, it meant that something we had *chosen* to do—use the pill—had caused the end of the pregnancy... Due to our lack of knowledge, we had destroyed the precious life of our unborn child.<sup>465</sup>

We cried. We got down on our knees and cried out to the Lord, "Father,

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<sup>462</sup> The Duggars write that they did not decide to start naming their children exclusively with names beginning with J until their fourth child, Jill. After four, they say, the J's hit critical mass. They were not sure how many more children God would provide, and they did not want future children to feel left out. See: Duggar, *20 and Counting*, 14.

<sup>463</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality*. (New York: Harper Row Publishing, 1963).

<sup>464</sup> Duggar, Jim Bob & Michelle, *A Love That Multiplies: An Up Close View of How They Make it Work*. (Brentwood, TN: Howard Books, 2011) 80.

<sup>465</sup> Duggar, *20 and Counting*, 40.

forgive us!”<sup>466</sup>

We prayed and studied the bible and found a host of references that God considered children a gift, a blessing, and a reward. Yet we had considered having another a child an inconvenience....we agreed that we would stop using any form of birth control and let God decide how many children we would have. Just a couple months later Michelle became pregnant with Twins! A double blessing!<sup>467</sup>

Michelle and Jim Bob named their miscarried child Caleb—although at eight to twelve weeks gestation, it would have been impossible for them to know that the fetus was male. It is also worth noting that the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, along with a host of other medical professional associations have stated time and again that “no scientific evidence indicates that prevention of implantation actually results” from oral contraceptives.<sup>468</sup> Meaning that even if we define pregnancy at conception (the consensus among medical professionals is that pregnancy begins at implantation) oral contraceptives are *not* abortifacients—if they were, more women would likely use them to intentionally end unwanted pregnancies. However, conservative Christian pronatalists keep attacking the pill because their opposition to abortion is only one small part of their larger opposition to female sexual, educational, and

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<sup>466</sup> “Duggar’s All You Wanted to Know,” *19 Kids and Counting*, Figure 8 Films. TLC. August 10, 2010.

<sup>467</sup> Duggar, *20 and Counting*, 41. I am struck by the word “ourselves” in the line “we decided to plan our family size ourselves,” as though family is customarily done by an outside expert. Although the Duggars clearly mean to imply that God should be the only one in charge of family planning, the word “ourselves” also invokes another popular reality television genre—the do-it-yourself home renovation show. “We decided to plan our family size ourselves” echoes those shows where naive couples take on DIY project only to create a money-pit for themselves— “we decided to plan our family size ourselves” sounds strangely like, “we decided to remodel the bathroom ourselves” and of course, both end in tragedy.

<sup>468</sup> R. Rivera, I. Yacobson, D. Grimes, “The mechanism of action of hormonal contraceptives and intrauterine contraceptive devices.” *American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology*. Vol. 181 (November 1999): 1263-1269.



financial empowerment, which the pill facilitates. They keep the lie alive because it allows them to chip away at female autonomy under the guise of persevering fetal life. Most recently, the false claim that the pill could be abortifacient was invoked in October of 2017 by the Trump administration in its regulation aimed at undermining the contraception coverage mandate in the Affordable Care Act.<sup>469</sup>

Even though miscarriage between eight and twelve weeks is very common, and even though it is unlikely that the Duggars' miscarriage was caused by contraceptives, Jim Bob and Michelle tell the story of Caleb as though they committed involuntary manslaughter, unknowingly taking the life of their own child because they selfishly wanted to control the size of their family. The Duggars were deeply troubled by their assumed culpability in Caleb's death and they made amends by offering up Michelle's body and thereby transforming her from a self-determining reproductive agent, into a reproductive subject at the mercy of Divine will. This sacrificial transformation was also transactional in that the sacrifice of Michelle's reproductive agency became the purifying, redemptive act that reconciled Duggars with their God.

When they surrendered their claim to reproductive self-determination, they were "rewarded" with twins. In the narrative, the twin birth is evidence that God has forgiven them. If Caleb's death ruptured the relationship between the couple and God, the twins, Jana and John David, were proof of reconciliation. Each subsequent child then became an echo of that reconciliation. God did not just forgive them. He *blessed* them, and then He blessed them again,

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<sup>469</sup> The Trump administration's regulation that falsely links oral contraception with miscarriage and abortion is entitled, "Religious Exemptions and Accommodations for Coverage of Certain Preventive Services Under the Affordable Care Act." It is available here <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2017/10/13/2017-21851/religious-exemptions-and-accommodations-for-coverage-of-certain-preventive-services-under-the> Effective October 6, 2017.

and again, and again... This is yet another characteristic of sacrifice: it has the power to transform both the past and the future. It rights a past wrong, but it is not merely punitive. Sacrifice creates a new reality that the parties involved inhabit from that time forward.

Caleb also serves as an unintentional sacrificial being in the narrative. If the logics of sacrifice require something to be destroyed so that a rupture can be mended, and a new and different reality created, then Caleb can be read as a Christ-like figure. He (we will imagine with the Duggars that the fetus was a “he”) was a sinless being, and like Christ, fully human, but also spirit. Fully embodied, while also not. Further, he died (again, in the narrative) by the hands of those who knew not what they did. Through his death, he ushered in a new era for the Duggars, defined by the possibility of boundless life (at least until menopause).

The implement of the rupture in the Duggar narrative is also significant. The birth control pill is a cultural emblem of feminism. It symbolizes female empowerment, sexual liberation, and financial and personal autonomy. As Elaine Tyler May notes in her *America and The Pill*, oral contraceptives were revolutionary in that they prevented pregnancy, which in turn empowered women and saved countless lives, but the pill also represented a symbolic blow to patriarchy.<sup>470</sup> The pill put reliable contraception in the hands of *women*. Provided they could get it, women could take the pill with or without a man’s consent, indeed, even with or without his knowledge.

Beyond feminist implications however, the pill represents a victory of medicine and science over the mystery of creation, and the hand of God. Without reliable contraception women are subjects to men, but also to nature, to fate, to divine will; with it, they are agents who can stand against those forces. Note that Jim Bob and Michelle never imply that *God* took Caleb

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<sup>470</sup> Elaine Tyler May, *America and The Pill: A History of Promise Peril, and Liberation*. (New York: Basic Books) 2010.

as *punishment*. God did not kill Caleb. In the Duggar narrative, it is their unthinking participation in the modern culture of science, feminism, and individualism that killed Caleb. This characterization dovetails with the dominionist undercurrents of the Duggars' show. In dominionist theology, the foundational unit of "jurisdictional authority" is the family, not the individual. For dominionists like the Duggars, we all are all subjects to some authority, some of us more than others.<sup>471</sup> The family only has the right of self-determination as far as God's law allows, and the Bible is very clear on whose "jurisdiction" pregnancy falls under.

The sacrifice of her reproductive agency, along with the sacrifice of her child, allows God again actively to work and speak into her life. In refusing to use contraception, Michelle is reclaiming her body not only from feminism, but also from science and a culture that celebrates self-determination. She is placing herself back into a time and place wherein God related to women through the bodily act of childbearing and thereby women had a very real, sensory, and substantive connection to the divine. In sacrificing her reproductive agency, Michelle is re-subjecting her body to the mysteries of divine will and thereby asserting God's power.

*19 Kids and Counting* serves as yet more evidence that "modernity" is not as disenchanted as the secularization thesis asserts.<sup>472</sup> As religion historian, Jason Josephson-Storm notes, "A great many theorists have argued that one of the things that most makes the world modern ... is that we have eliminated ghosts, demon, and spirits from the contemporary world

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<sup>471</sup> For a more detailed discussion of dominionism see: Julie J. Ingersoll, *Building God's Kingdom: Inside the World of Christian Reconstruction*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015) 55-57.; James C. Stanford *Blueprint for Theocracy: The Christian Right's Vision for America*. (Providence, RI: Metacomet Books, 2014).

<sup>472</sup> See: Max Weber, Peter R. Baehr, Gordon C. Wells, *The Protestant Ethic and the "Spirit" of Capitalism and Other Writings*. (New York: Penguin Classics, 2002); Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

view.” Max Weber is arguably the original architect of secularization thesis but contemporary philosophers and sociologists have followed suit. For example, Charles Taylor describes the Weberian shift from “pre-modern” to “modern” as the establishment and entrenchment of bifurcation rather than the result of events or scientific discoveries. He argues that modernity is marked by the development of the “buffered self” made possible by well-policed processes of compartmentalization. According to Taylor, the boundaries between the self and the world, the body and the mind, heaven and earth, the public and private, are less porous in the “modern” present than they have been in centuries past. Taylor contends that “everyone can agree that one of the big differences between us and our ancestors of 500 years ago is that they lived in ‘enchanted’ worlds and we do not.”<sup>473</sup> The problem with Taylor’s argument is that *not* everyone agrees. There are in fact, millions of “unbuffered” “enchanted” people in the world who stubbornly insist that they too are “modern.” Some of them even have reality television shows. Indeed, *19 Kids and Counting* shows how the “modernity” of the Enlightenment exists concurrently with the deeply enchanted modernity of conservative Christianity.

The Duggars are a testament to Bruno Latour’s 1991 contention that, in fact, *We Have Never Been Modern*.<sup>474</sup> Latour connects the construction of “modernity” to the establishment of distinctions. Latour argues that the taxonomic nature of the scientific method served to define “science” as unbounded by history and immune to other cultural forces, and “society” conversely as a product of history and culture. These mutually exclusive definitions created arbitrary distinctions, which obfuscate the interrelatedness of culture, science, and society. Further they set

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<sup>473</sup> Charles Taylor, “Buffered and Porous Selves,” *The Imminent Frame*. September 2, 2008.

<sup>474</sup> Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

up evaluative hierarchies, wherein the public, the scientific, the intellectual, the institutional, and the male are privileged as true and real, and the private, the cultural, the emotional, the experiential, the female are dismissed as unreal and inauthentic.”<sup>475</sup>

If we accept then that modernity is a series of distinctions that serve a certain set of agendas, that though they appear “buffered,” are in fact not, then what we see in the Caleb narrative is Michelle’s self-conscious choice to free herself from Weber’s “iron cage” of “instrumental rationality”—which might be why the Duggars tell this story as a kind of conversion or salvation narrative.<sup>476</sup> It is when their relationship to God really began. That freedom, however, has a price. It must be bought with a sacrifice.

### *The “Sacrifice of Praise”*

Despite her cheery disposition and seemingly superhuman tolerance for domestic chaos and noise, Michelle Duggar is occasionally overwhelmed by what life under divine sovereignty requires. Michelle has written and spoken repeatedly about one night in particular, when she nearly succumbed to despair but managed to overcome her weakness by making “a sacrifice of praise.” She was just thirty, raising and educating seven children under the age of ten in a tiny two-bedroom home, on a shoe-string budget. She was understandably overwhelmed.

It was 1:00 AM in the morning as I stood folding a mountain of laundry with tears streaming down my cheeks. Feelings of being overwhelmed flooded my mind. I cried aloud, “LORD I NEED YOUR HELP, I can't do it all! I feel so inadequate! Diapers, dishes, laundry, meals, cleanup, school lessons, baths, hugs, kisses, praise, correction...” My list seemed to go on and on.

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<sup>475</sup> Misha Kavka, *Reality Television, Affect and Intimacy: Reality Matters*. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008) 7.

<sup>476</sup> Weber, *The Spirit of Capitalism*, 91.

Then it was as if a still small voice said, “Michelle, it's easy to praise ME when things are going good, but are you willing to praise ME now?” Immediately the scripture that says, “Offer up a sacrifice of praise,” came to mind. I said, “OK Lord, I will praise you even now! It really is a sacrifice!” So through the tears I began to sing, “The joy of the Lord is my strength.”<sup>477</sup>

Like the story of Caleb, the story ends with Michelle being blessed for her sacrifice of praise.

The next day, a kind acquaintance happened to remark that Michelle looked rundown. “As we talked more she said that she actually enjoyed doing laundry and that she would be glad to come and help me!”<sup>478</sup> This narrative is a significant one for Michelle’s religious self-understanding. It appears in both of the Duggar’s books, and on the family website. Michelle often repeats it during public appearances. She told it to a group of mothers at both the 2016 and 2017 IBLP Family Conference in Big Sandy. Like the testimony about Caleb’s death, the laundry story serves as a foundational narrative for how Michelle constructs her relationship with God.

In the laundry narrative, the sacrifice is an act of corralling emotion. Michelle is offering up her praise in the face of despair as a “sacrifice of praise,” (likely a reference to Hosea 14:3), but what is being destroyed is not the despair, but her claim to the *right to feel* the despair. She is committing an act of religious self-discipline —she is policing her emotions, praising God rather than collapsing into tears. Like the sacrifice of reproductive agency, the sacrifice of praise serves to establish Michelle as subject to divine sovereignty. She has given over her body to God, and now she is offering up her emotional self. Parroting Gothard, Michelle describes this discipline as “dying to the self.”<sup>479</sup> This concept is at the center of the Duggar’s religious life. The call is

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<sup>477</sup> Taken from the Duggar Family Website: <http://www.duggarfamily.com/content/mothers>

<sup>478</sup> Duggar, *Love That Multiplies*, 216.

<sup>479</sup> Ibid.

not to death, but to perpetual *dying*, or repeatedly relinquishing any claim to one's own inner life. It is a never-ending process of emotional and intellectual suicide and it is especially expected of women.

In sacrificing her right to emotional experience, she creates conditions where in the ordinary disenchanting experience takes on religious significance. Through offering up a "sacrifice of praise," she reinvigorates the divine presence in her life. The seemingly tedious acts of folding laundry, washing dishes, and changing diapers become religious rituals. Here Michelle reinscribes a neo-Victorian imagination of the sacred domestic sphere and the four values of what Barbara Welter called the "cult of domesticity"—piety, purity, submission and domesticity.<sup>480</sup> Further, by doing these chores joyfully, offering the sacrifice of praise, Michelle is remaking her domestic experience into a sacred encounter. Indeed, motherhood itself, from pregnancy to the domestic chores, is reinscribed as a religious experience, first through the sacrifice of agency then through the sacrifice of praise.

Consider for a moment the character of the God to whom Michelle has offered up her reproductive and emotional agency. In this narrative, he is not the comforting, "feminized" deity so often invoked by Protestant imaginations of sacred domesticity. This is not the Jesus, "who walks with me and talks with me and tells me I am his own" as the old hymn goes.<sup>481</sup> This God is not interested in Michelle's complaining. When a tired and broken mother comes to Him in despair saying, "I need Your help," He does not offer succor or reassurance, he demands, "Praise

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<sup>480</sup> For a discussion of Victorian sacred domesticity see: Colleen McDannell, *The Christian Home in Victorian America 1840-1900*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986); Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860" *American Quarterly*. Vol. 18, no. 2 (Summer, 1966): 151-174.

<sup>481</sup> C. Austin Mills, "In the Garden." The Hall- Mack Company, 1912.

ME.” This God has given her the multitude of children. He has ordained that she do the household chores, per the role to which He has assigned her. He controls every part of her life, and then, like an abusive husband, He demands she thank Him for it.

### *Josie*

Michelle’s willingness to sacrifice her own body became very real in December of 2009 when Michelle, then 43, was twenty-four weeks pregnant with her nineteenth child. The first six months of the pregnancy had been normal and healthy. However, just before Christmas, Michelle developed preeclampsia—a condition of severely elevated blood pressure in pregnant women that can lead to stroke and death. The only course of treatment for severe preeclampsia is to deliver the pregnancy. Michelle was taken by emergency helicopter to Arkansas Children’s hospital to ensure that she would deliver at a facility equipped with a neonatal intensive care unit (NICU). The episode chronicling her near-fatal birth showed the usually unflappable Jim Bob visibly concerned for his wife’s life. He was fighting back tears as he tried to explain what was happening to the cameras and his children (via phone),

...this could kill mama and the baby...but you know, we praise God when all the good things are happening, and we’re going to praise God, even through this difficult situation... just pray, just tell everyone to pray.<sup>482</sup>

Michelle was clearly suffering, and she was keenly aware of the danger she was in. However, as she lay very still in her hospital bed, her face flushed from her elevated blood

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<sup>482</sup> “A Special Duggar Delivery,” *19 Kids and Counting* Figure 8 Films. TLC. January 31, 2010.



pressure, her eyes closed in obvious agony, she whispered, “please Jesus, please Jesus, save my baby.” Even when it became clear that Michelle would have to be delivered or die, she hesitated.

The doctor’s statement made it clear that we had no choice. Still, we asked for a moment alone to pray. “Father, if this is not Your will for us, please show us,” we prayed. “Give us a sign by having Michelle’s blood pressure come down. Please God, make Your will clear to us.” The nurse came in and checked my blood pressure again. Instead of going down, it had skyrocketed.<sup>483</sup>

In the Duggar narrative, God made his will clear. He wanted Josie born at twenty-four weeks. They were not put into the position of having to choose between Michelle’s life and the life of the child—though the fact that she did not immediately follow the doctor’s orders to save herself sends the message that she was prepared to die. Her blood pressure had not gone down as a “sign” that God wanted her to continue to suffer, but instead it had “skyrocketed.” The narrative implies the Duggars were not going to be held responsible by God for what would happen next. The Duggar’s nineteenth child, Josie Brooklyn Duggar was born three months premature, weighing only one pound and six ounces.



Image 9: Josie Duggar, [www.theduggarfamily.com](http://www.theduggarfamily.com).

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<sup>483</sup> Duggar, *A Love that Multiplies*, 39.

In the years since Josie's birth, the Duggars have crafted and retold the story of Michelle's on camera, near-martyrdom. They have repeated it so many times in print, on television and at many speaking engagements, it is almost scripted. Indeed, it is the primary subject of their second book. Michelle interprets her experience as *imitatio Dei* or the imitation of God. She views her near-death experience through the lens of Christ's suffering on the cross and writes that her agony deepened her connection with Jesus, as it allowed her to experience suffering akin to what he might have undergone:

I certainly would not have chosen to experience the agony and pain of preeclampsia, but on this side of the situation, I see how my own suffering helped me understand more personally the tremendous suffering Jesus went through when he died an agonizing death through crucifixion.<sup>484</sup>

Again, here we see that Michelle's near-martyr motherhood is the primary vector for her relationship with the divine. Her willingness to risk her life allows God to work actively in her life, and through the trials of Josie's birth, she draws ever nearer to God by accepting the possibility of martyrdom.

Michelle understands herself as a sacrificial vessel for her children, even for the children who have yet to be born. When asked if her near fatal preeclampsia would deter her from future pregnancies, she responded with:

Looking into the face of Josie, I would do it again. I would do it again, I would. I worry about my health, but I thought long and hard about that, I realized that there is no greater love than that, that a man would be willing to lay down his life. I think as a mom and a parent, you'd be willing to do that for your child, even the child that's not here yet.<sup>485</sup>

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<sup>484</sup> Duggar, *Love That Multiplies*, 77.

<sup>485</sup>“Duggars: All You wanted to Know,” *19 Kids and Counting* Figure 8 Films. TLC. November 8, 2011.

Here again, Michelle is imitating the divine. She is rearticulating the Arminian doctrine of soteriology, that Christ's sacrifice redeemed all believers, present and future. Like Christ she is willing to suffer and die not just for the children who are already here, but for those who are yet to be.

However admirable that may sound, the prescription Michelle is making with this narrative is startling. Many mothers would sacrifice their lives for the lives of their children, as would many fathers. But that is not what Michelle is describing. A mother sacrificing her life for her child's is one thing, a woman *choosing* to conceive a child even when it means she will *die* in the process of bringing it into the world is another thing entirely. However, Michelle is using an appeal to sentimentality, and a healthy dose of guilt, to imply that anything less makes one a bad mother. When the only way to be a "good mother" is to be a sacrificial subject, open to as many children as God will give even unto death, as conservative Christian pronatalism asserts, then women's value is measured by their willingness to bring children into the world thereby rendering their lives secondary to the lives of their children.

Like Caleb before her, in this narrative Josie too becomes a sacrifice to the pronatalist God who demands *life* at all costs. The episodes that chronicled the Duggar's displacement in Little Rock repeatedly showed Josie's tiny body hooked up to wires, and tubes, as she struggled to breath. The cameras caught every gasp and sputter as she tried to drink, often unsuccessfully, from a bottle, with Michelle propping her billiard-ball-sized head up between her finger and thumb. They caught her inhuman-sounding little cries as the nurses stuck her, trying to find a vein that could support her I.V. As Michelle recalls,

Our precious gift from God had a soft, downy cap of dark blonde hair, and her skin was so transparent it seemed that every vein and

artery was visible. Tubes and wires protruded from her little body as she lay twitching in her tiny bed.<sup>486</sup>

Some mothers might understandably lash out at God who allows such suffering. Some mothers might demand, *why?* But as the Duggar's like to say "We don't' ask *why*."<sup>487</sup> Michelle interpolated Josie's pain back into a pronatalist political narrative and by so doing, made Josie into a symbolic representation of all other fetuses her age:

Josie was born at about the age of viability. If she had been much younger, she probably would not have made it. We were able to watch the end of her second trimester and her whole third trimester *outside* the womb. Our prayer is that the world will see that each baby, even the tiniest ones like Josie, are precious creations of God.

The subtext here is clear. When they look at Josie, Michelle wants her viewers to think about the fact that that while doctors and nurses labored around the clock to keep Josie alive, fetuses just like Josie were being killed somewhere else.

As medical advancement pushes the age viability earlier, more complex moral questions about the ethics of abortion will inevitably emerge. However, what made Josie an effective as a symbol, indeed what made Josie *sacred*, was not just the fact that she was a human life, but that she was a *suffering* human life. Her political and religious purchase came from her pain. For Michelle, theodicy is not a problem. She knows why God allowed Josie to suffer. According to Michelle's narrative, she suffered to change hearts and minds. She suffered so that that viewers (especially women) could watch a third trimester unfold outside the womb and be converted to the "pro-life" cause.

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<sup>486</sup> Duggar, *A Love That Multiplies*, 90.

<sup>487</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

I am reminded again of Margaret Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale* and the question the "Aunts" (who are instruments of Gilead's patriarchal, pronatalist, and fundamentalist regime) repeatedly pose to the young women they are indoctrinating, "Why would God allow such a terrible thing to happen?" They ask. The answer is always the same, to "teach her a lesson."<sup>488</sup> The presence of evil in the world is always the fault of women. Michelle's characterization similarly lays the weight of Josie's pain on women, specifically on women who demand reproductive freedom. Why would God allow such a terrible thing to happen? To teach you a lesson. Will you, viewer, let the innocent suffer for nothing, or will you accept your lesson?

In this, Michelle appears to present a challenge to Nancy Jay's feminist reading of sacrifice.<sup>489</sup> Jay contends that women are almost universally excluded from sacrifice, indeed, that sacrifice was invented by men, for men, to quell male anxieties over their exclusion from childbirth. For Jay, sacrifice is men's attempt to coopt birth and its power, and to reimagine it as male. Michelle obviously challenges Jay's thesis as *she* is the architect of Josie's sacrifice and she is certainly *not* alienated from the experience of birth. However, Jay might argue that Michelle's sacrifices are in fact prescribed by, if not committed by, men who seek to control women's bodies, particularly, pregnancy and birth. Further, these sacrifices ultimately serve patriarchal agendas and legitimize male dominance, as Jay argues sacrifices almost always do. Shaming women with the sacrifice of Josie's pain serves the patriarchal, conservative Christian

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<sup>488</sup> Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*. (New York: Anchor Books, 1986) 72.

<sup>489</sup> Nancy Jay, *Throughout Your Generations Forever: Sacrifice, Religion, and Paternity*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1992).

pronatalist agenda—which is controlled by men, for men, even if women like Michelle Duggar willingly (even cheerfully) reinforce it.

### *Jubilee*

In November of 2011 *The Today Show*'s Ann Curry braced herself as she sat before the assembled Duggar family, "Michelle, I'm almost a little afraid to ask..." Curry winced and squeaked out, "I understand you've got a big an announcement, this morning?" Curry's clearly uncomfortable tone was a marked change from past Duggar appearances on *The Today Show*.<sup>490</sup> Since Jackson's on-camera birth, the Duggars announced each subsequent pregnancy on the popular morning show. Each announcement was met with congratulations and compliments on how well behaved the children are, how young and vibrant Michelle looks, and so on. This time was different. "I do! We are expecting!" Michelle responded without a trace of apprehension or fear.

After everything the Duggars went through with Josie's premature birth it seemed either tragically naïve, callous, or downright ghoulish to express such unqualified delight at yet another pregnancy. Viewers had just nearly witnessed Michelle's death. For weeks they watched Josie cling to life in a NICU isolate. They saw the older Duggar daughters tire, if cheerfully, under the burden of their mother's absence. They also saw the youngest children struggle with the upheaval. While in Little Rock, the camera crew caught Jordyn's first steps. Michelle missed them. She was at the NICU. Consequently, audiences were dismayed when Jim Bob and Michelle joyfully announced another "blessing." At the very least their excitement seemed tone-

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<sup>490</sup> *Today Show*, NBC. November 8, 2011. <http://www.today.com/moms/20-kids-counting-michelle-duggar-announces-shes-pregnant-again-1C7398117>

deaf, especially for a family who has been so media savvy. Audiences were asking the same question Curry asked, "...why isn't 19 enough for you?"<sup>491</sup> The Duggars however, remained resolute, "We've given this area of our life to the Lord...children are a blessing." I do not think that the Duggars' enthusiasm was an unintentional media misstep. It was missionizing. In showing no apprehension, the family was attempted to present a united pronatalist front to viewers. Joy at all costs. Their joy was short lived. Roughly one month after the family appeared on the *Today Show*, they announced on their website that the pregnancy had ended in miscarriage.

A "special episode" (as TLC marketed it) of *19 Kids and Counting* entitled "A Duggar Loss" chronicled the excruciating details of the family tragedy.<sup>492</sup> Watching "A Duggar Loss" is an intensely voyeuristic experience. All reality television is, in some way, voyeuristic, but this episode was different. The Duggars announced the loss of their twentieth child on their website in December of 2011, but "A Duggar Loss" did not air until the following March. In the interim, fans, journalists, and bloggers had spread the story. *People Magazine* had already done two cover stories on the family's grief.<sup>493</sup> What's more, TLC was rabidly promoting "A Duggar Loss" for weeks before it aired, and as the titled suggested, we all knew how the episode was going to end.

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<sup>491</sup> *Today Show*, NBC. November 8, 2011. <http://www.today.com/moms/20-kids-counting-michelle-duggar-announces-shes-pregnant-again-1C7398117>

<sup>492</sup>, "A Duggar Loss," *19 Kids and Counting*. Figure 8 Films. TLC. March 27, 2012.

<sup>493</sup> Alicia Dennis, "Michelle Duggar Miscarries," *People Magazine*. December 8, 2011.; Alicia Dennis, Hundreds Attend Jubilee Duggar's Memorial," *People Magazine*. December 15, 2011; Alicia Dennis, "How the Duggar Kids are Handling the Loss of Jubilee" *People Magazine*. December 18, 2011.

The special episode moves at a glacial pace and repeats scenes again and again. Every commercial break set ups the impending tragedy. The episode previews the most intense scenes to come, then shows them, then reviews them to capitalize on the evocative power of every moment. Lingering on every shot of Michelle smiling with anticipation, the episode takes its time getting to the climactic moment when the unsuspecting Duggars are finally let in on the horrible secret we've all known for months. At sixteen weeks, the pregnancy ended in a miscarriage, an unfortunate but not uncommon occurrence for a forty-six year-old-mother of nineteen. Three days after the ultra-sound Michelle delivered the remains of a baby girl at home. They named her, Jubilee Shalom. The structure and marketing of the "special episode" did more than entice viewers. Kathryn Lofton notes that sacrifices, "must be ritualized, and dramatized in order to be *sacrifices*. Such procedure delimits time and space, highlighting the importance of every gesture, marking the event as 'set apart' from ordinary activity, ordinary labor, and ordinary loss."<sup>494</sup> The generic conventions of reality television—the repetition, the dramatization, the elevation of the ordinary—coalesce with the logics of sacrifice in "A Duggar Loss" to render Jubilee a powerful sacrificial being.

"A Duggar Loss" begins with the family gathered together for their nightly "bible time." With little ones in pajamas, Jim Bob tells the children that they are going to find out the "gender" of the baby the following day. Everyone buzzes with excitement as the family brainstorms baby names. "Jefferson!" "Justice!" All the suggestions, of course, begin with the letter J. The next morning Michelle is seen on her elliptical machine (in her usual long skirt, full make-up and hair curled) reassuring audiences that she is doing everything she can to stay healthy considering

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<sup>494</sup> Lofton, *Consuming Religion*, 117.



what they went through with Josie. She and Jim Bob then head to the doctor's office and Michelle sits excitedly, giggling in the waiting area, while Jim Bob cracks *almost* off-color jokes. With a wide grin, he says to Michelle, "From now on, honey, we'll just be shaking hands."<sup>495</sup>

When they are called back into the examining room, the giggles stop. The camera hovers over the ultrasound technician's distressed expression as Michelle, still lying on the table, plaintively looks back and forth between her and the monitor. Finally, after a painfully long silence, the technician says, "I don't see a heartbeat. I'm so sorry, Michelle." The camera moves to a tight close-up of Michelle's still half-smiling face. It takes a moment for the information to sink in. Her smile fades. "You don't....?" she trails off, staring at the ultrasound screen. She begins to cry, and as the emotions wash over her she whispers, "the Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away, blessed be the name of the Lord."<sup>496</sup> Another child sacrifice is complete, and with it comes another sacrifice of praise.

Just as with the life-threatening delivery of Josie, the Duggars immediately sublimated their own private pain by affirming the universal sovereignty and goodness of God. This is not to say that they were fully successful. They clearly struggled emotionally with the news, but in their words, "We have stopped asking 'why?'... We purpose to praise God in all things... The Bible tells us that He works all things for good."<sup>497</sup> In scene after scene in "A Duggar Loss" the camera is focused on Michelle's tear-streamed face, clearly this is a difficult theology to live out. Later

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<sup>495</sup> Ibid.

<sup>496</sup> Ibid.

<sup>497</sup> Jim Bob Duggar and Michelle Duggar, *20 and Counting*, 46.

in the episode, during an interview Michelle again affirms in a distinctively pedagogical tone, “God is the giver of Life, and He has the right, and privilege, to take life as well.”<sup>498</sup>

Television and media scholars have rigorously examined how televisions, as apparatuses, bring the “public sphere into the private spaces” and how reality television further complicates the public private binary.<sup>499</sup> Reality television scholar Misha Kavka however, pushes the observation further and notes that reality television collapses the public private binary in on itself and serves as evidence that both constructions require reevaluation. The private intimacies of a family, their pain and joy, are made the subject of public discourse, which are in turn viewed and interpreted by private individuals who connect to and interpret the subjects being viewed through the generation of “affective proximity.”<sup>500</sup> For Kavka, reality television is not a “hybridization of the public and the private, which presumes the mixing and grafting of separate spheres, ...[but is rather] an affective form that is indifferent to the logic of such difference.”<sup>501</sup>

Interestingly, Robert Orsi makes a similar argument about how one should study religion. Orsi argues that religion does not play by the public-private binary rules. In fact, when scholars insist on viewing it as such, it leads to constructions of “good” religion—which is “public” or under the governing (male, usually western) watch of the institution (canon, liturgy, doctrine, and social codes)—and “bad” religion—which is private, often embodied, subaltern, unfailingly feminine, and unbound by institutional powers (“folk” religion, “superstition,” home shrines,

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<sup>498</sup>, “A Duggar Loss,” *19 Kids and Counting*.

<sup>499</sup> Misha Kavka, *Reality Television*, 50. See also: Leigh H. Edwards, *The Triumph of Reality TV: The Revolution in American Television*. (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2013); Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette, ed. *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: New York University Press, 2008); Alison F Slade, Amber J. Narro, and Burton P. Buchanan, eds. *Reality Television: Oddities of Culture*. (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014).

<sup>500</sup> Kavka, *Reality Television*, 51.

<sup>501</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

possession, visions, callings etc.). Orsi contends that if we are to escape the Protestant-centric, sexist, racist, and colonial implications of the historic study of religion, we must construe it not as “public” or “private,” but as a “network of relationships between heaven and earth involving humans of all ages and many different sacred figures together.”<sup>502</sup>

We can see this collapsing of the public and the private clearly in the episode of *19 Kids and Counting* that chronicles Jubilee’s miscarriage/death. Even in this difficult time, the family did not seem to mind the camera presence, in fact they insisted on it. Indeed, just as they saw this tragedy as a way to teach their children the value of unborn life, they saw it as an opportunity to teach their audience as well. By becoming mediated figures, they are able to channel their grief and the grief others may feel in response to their own similar losses, into their political and religious agenda. The episode “A Duggar Loss” cuts back and forth from Michelle addressing her children, to addressing the camera using the same parental, reassuring tone, “I know we will see her again...Her short life had a purpose...she brought us so much joy...she is in a much better place...she is rejoicing...she is with Jesus.”<sup>503</sup> This is just example of Michelle collapsing her public and private selves to remake herself into an icon, or a mediator of religious power. As viewers watch her parent; they are in some ways being parented. As audiences watch her teach, they are being taught. She never stops occupying her submissive and holy role as mother, and she never takes up a pulpit, but she becomes a conductive figure that interprets and concentrates divine Presence.

Throughout “A Duggar Loss” and the episodes that followed, various members of the Duggar family translated their own grief over their personal loss, into the grief they wanted the

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<sup>502</sup> Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 5.

<sup>503</sup>. “A Duggar Loss,” *19 Kids and Counting*.

public to feel at the loss of “millions and millions of precious gifts from God who have been aborted.”<sup>504</sup> The elder Duggar Daughters especially were keenly aware that the viewing public had known about the twentieth Duggar child. Janna, Jill, Jessa and Jinger write in their recent book, “the news was reported in newspapers around the world. Now the headlines around the world reported Jubilee’s passing.”<sup>505</sup> Their hope was to capitalize on the public attention. Indeed, even naming an 18-week-old fetus is a political and religious statement. As the young women write, “The world would know...she was worth naming.”<sup>506</sup>



Image 10: Michelle holding Jubilee's Feet, [www.theduggarfamily.com](http://www.theduggarfamily.com)

Jim Bob and Michelle understood that this was a tragic opportunity to assert their pronatalist ideology. This was not an experience they laid any private claim to. For them, it need to be displayed as “a Light unto the world” (Mathew 5:14). To that end, the Duggars organized a

<sup>504</sup> Jana, Jill, Jessa, and Jinger Duggar, *Growing Up Duggar: It's All About Relationships*, (New York: Howard Books, 2014), 89.

<sup>505</sup> Duggar, *Growing Up Duggar*, 84.

<sup>506</sup> Duggar, *Growing Up Duggar*, 84

memorial service for Jubilee. Michelle, again aware of her role as a public mother, wrote that she “hoped the memorial service would help other mothers who had lost babies... Every life deserves to be recognized.”<sup>507</sup> During the service, Michelle read (via pre-recording) a letter she had written to her Jubilee, and the family showed a series of post-mortem black and white photographs of Michelle’s finger tips holding up Jubilee’s impossibly tiny hands and feet. After the service, the Duggars posted both the pictures and the letter on their family blog. The photographs were taken by a non-profit company called Now I Me Down to Sleep, a network of photographers who volunteer their services to families dealing with perinatal loss. The response was explosive. There were loud voices of support, but many viewers felt that the pictures were disturbing and exploitive. Other’s argued that the photographs underscored the humanity of fetus and its right to life.

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<sup>507</sup> Michelle Duggar, “Healing the Family After a Miscarriage” *The Duggar Family*. January 4, 2011. Available here: [http://duggarfamily.com/content/article/31240/Healing%20the%20Family%20After%20a%20Mi](http://duggarfamily.com/content/article/31240/Healing%20the%20Family%20After%20a%20Miscarriage)scarriage

## MICHELLE HOLDING JUBILEE'S HAND



JUBILEE SHALOM DUGGAR - DECEMBER 11TH, 2011  
**YOU ARE LOVED AND MISSED!**

**LISTEN TO MICHELLE'S AUDIO LETTER TO JUBILEE DUGGAR**

**LISTEN NOW**

Image 11: Michelle holding Jubilee's hand, [www.theduggarfamily.com](http://www.theduggarfamily.com)

Clearly this latter view is what the Duggars intended. The letter Michelle composed opens with an overtly political statement that encapsulates Duggar ministry and the cultural and spiritual war they envision themselves fighting:

Dear Jubilee Shalom,

Mommy wanted to write a letter to her precious baby girl. You know, your name, Jubilee Shalom Duggar means joyful celebration of peace. We were so thankful to God when we found out we were expecting you. So often in society babies are looked on as a problem, trial, or responsibility. But God says babies are a blessing. We do not believe that babies are a bother, a headache, or a financial drainer, or a career interrupter. We love babies.<sup>508</sup>

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<sup>508</sup> "A Duggar Loss" *19 Kids and Counting*.

Your siblings did not view you as the competition. They are truly saddened and disappointed to not have really known you. Only God knows how much you were already loved. You were not loved any less because you were Duggar baby number twenty-one or Duggar grandbaby number twenty-three.

We are blessed because you lived. you were only here with us short time, its a awesome thought to me that you fulfilled your life's purpose in such a short time. What a blessing it is to know, that you are in arms of Jesus. And that it was his face that you saw first. You were loved, you were wanted. ...

I will miss listening to your heartbeat and praying for you as you grew in my womb. I will miss feeling you kick in my tunny. I will miss cradling you in my arms and singing to you. I will miss teaching you to sing Jesus Loves Me. I will miss watching you grow up and learn. I will miss seeing life through your eyes as I have enjoyed with all the other children. I will miss doing mommy things with you and for you. I will miss noticing how you do things like the others, or how you are different. I will miss your smile. I will miss holding you and hugging you and kissing you and touching your soft skin. I will miss hearing your voice and your songs. I will miss watching you play and watching you work. I will miss taking pictures of you and seeing you experience things for the first time. I will miss taking you to the zoo. It overwhelms me t think of all that I will miss about you. You are a love I was able to touch for such a short time and a life I will forever hold in my heart.

I do not know God's purpose for taking you on to heaven. But I know that your short life will help me to remember truly how fragile life is. It will help me to more fully enjoy the time I have her with the other family members. It will help me to focus on what is truly important in life, and help me to be more aware of heaven and the ultimate destination. It will help me to delight in every moment of growing up that your siblings have in my presence. I will not forget you. I will look forward to meeting you someday... From now on, when I'm asked how many children I have, the answer will be twenty-one. Nineteen here and two in heaven.

You are precious to me Jubilee, Mommy loves you.

The letter is clearly both a personal expression of grief and an indictment of a culture that does not embrace children as readily as Michelle and Jim Bob do. It contains a rebuttal to every criticism the Duggars routinely receive: large families are fiscally irresponsible, or a burden on women, or keep women from careers, children in large families are loved less, and they compete with their siblings for parental attention. The letter dismisses all of this. The subtext behind the

line “we love babies” is: if you prioritize your health, your career, or your finances over procreation, you do not love babies.

It is also striking that the letter seamlessly moves between the personage of Jubilee, and the larger generic category of “babies.” Moreover, Michelle begins with what she emotionally “misses” about Jubilee, e.g. feeling her kick, and what she will “miss” in that she will not experience e.g. taking her to the zoo. In so doing, the letter complicated the question: who was Jubilee? *What* is Jubilee? Jubilee was simultaneously present and absent, a reality and an abstraction. Michelle stated she “hoped the memorial service would help other mothers who had lost babies... [because] every life deserves to be recognized.”<sup>509</sup> The aim of the funeral was to underscore Jubilee’s personhood, but her non-personhood is exactly what made her an effective symbol of conservative Christian pronatalism. She was made into a blank canvas upon which other mothers could project their own lost babies.

Jubilee was a personage without personality capable of being both actuality and possibility at once. To borrow from Robert Orsi, the Duggar’s display transformed her from a sixteen-week-old fetus into a tremendously powerful “special being” who now worked as a conduit between heaven and earth.<sup>510</sup> She subsumed public and private, into her powerful indeterminate-ness. She was Jubilee, she was every aborted fetus, every fetus that would be aborted, and every unmarked miscarriage. She was a testimony, a sacrifice, evidence of divine sovereignty, a political statement, and a site for the Michelle to again “train her heart” to “die to herself,” publicly, prescriptively, all at once. In this moment the *19 Kids and Counting* and Duggars are clearly “indifferent” to the logics of the public private binary. Their personal grief is

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<sup>509</sup>Michelle Duggar, “Healing the Family After a Miscarriage.”

<sup>510</sup> Robert Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*.



interwoven with political commitment, all of which is utterly sublimated under divine sovereignty.

Kavka argues that “the political purchase of reality television” is not in its content, but in that which “evokes affective responses from the viewers which are in excess of a controlled meaning-production.”<sup>511</sup> “A Duggar Loss” is a paradigmatic example of how reality television can evoke those affective responses. The actual content of the episode is strange, but profoundly evocative. The memorial service held for Jubilee—a being who could only be described in terms of her possibility—was an elaborate spectacle attended by hundreds of mourners. All the trappings of the funeral ritual were observed. There was a eulogy, music, flowers, symbols, and photographs of both Jubilee’s lifeless body and Michelle’s pregnant belly. Further, it did not end there. The episode also follows the family to an interment ceremony. The theatrics are so genuine and yet almost absurd. The Duggar women seated at the gravesite, while the Duggar sons in dark suits serve as “pal bearers” for a casket scarcely bigger than shoebox. If they had added in a 21-gun salute, it would have fit right in.

### *Counting On*

*19 Kids and Counting* ended abruptly the same year Bill Gothard resigned from the IBLP. Leaked juvenile court documents revealed that Joshua Duggar, the oldest child of the Duggar family, a spokesperson for the Family Research Council, and an outspoken advocate for Gothard’s organization, had sexually molested his sisters and a family friend a decade earlier.<sup>512</sup>

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<sup>511</sup> Misha Kavka, *Reality Television*, 7.

<sup>512</sup> Sydney Ember, “Josh Duggar Molested Four of His Sisters, His Parents Tell Fox News.” *The New York Times*. June 4, 2015.

A few weeks later—with the family still defending Josh as a stand-up family man, Josh was caught on a dating website called, AshleyMadison.com aimed at married people looking to cheat.<sup>513</sup> This new revelations took the family entirely by surprise. They were already knee-deep in a public relations quagmire for their “failure” to disclose Josh’s previous convictions. They had rushed to support Josh, pointing out that he was just a minor when he molested the girls (he was fourteen to fifteen) and that the documents had been illegally leaked. That support evaporated when the AshleyMadison.com leak broke.

With the revelations about Josh came a kind of collective awaking among fans who had been won over by the Duggars and captivated by their elaborate weddings and fairytale courtships. One well-circulated article from *Cosmopolitan* put it plainly, “Why did we ever make the Duggar’s famous in the first place?”<sup>514</sup> The sudden discomfort with the Duggar’s religion emerged largely from the public’s feeling of betrayal. They had watched Josh and Anna’s chaste courtship and first kiss at the marriage altar. It had seemed extreme, even strange, but many viewers saw it as “refreshing” and “a good example.” Now, in light of the scandals, it suddenly seemed cultic, and oppressive. But not for long.

Josh cost the Duggars their first show, but in contemporary American popular culture, celebrity trumps outrage every time. Almost as soon as TLC pulled *19 Kids and Counting*, the network began working on a way to keep capitalizing on the Duggar brand. The episodes of *19 Kids and Counting* featuring Jill and Jessa’s relationships, engagements, and weddings, were

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<sup>513</sup> “Josh Duggar Admits Cheating on Wife After Ashley Madison Hack.” *Reuters*. July 31, 2015.

<sup>514</sup> Oddly enough the Duggar daughters were a frequent topic for *Cosmopolitan*—despite their chaste message and the magazine’s seeming obsession with providing women with “new and exciting” ways to perform oral sex. Jill Filipovic, “Why Did We Ever Make the Duggars Famous in the First Place?” *Cosmopolitan*. May 27, 2015.

ratings boons. After a few short weeks, TLC announced that they were filming *Jill and Jessa: Counting On*, two specials featuring the young women, their new husbands, and growing “baby-bumps.”<sup>515</sup> The new shows aired that December. *Jill and Jessa: Counting On*, quickly evolved into a regular show titled, *Counting On*. *Counting On* remains focused on the adult Duggar children and their courtships and weddings. Michelle is no longer the center of the Duggar media presence, but her daughters carry on her mission, having baby, after baby and using their celebrity to advocate for a sacrificial construction of marriage and motherhood.

TLC’s relationships with the Duggars remains tenuous in part because of the dynamic relationship between reality television and social media. It seems that fans, and the network, are willing to tolerate certain expressions of conservative Christian pronatalism—the constant pregnancies, the virgin brides, the sacrificial motherhood, the memorialization of miscarried fetuses, but not others. When the Duggars voice unvarnished expressions of their conservative Christian values on social media, without the benefit of TLC’s complimentary framing, viewers often react with a level of surprise reminiscent of Captain Renault’s famous line in *Casablanca*, “I am shocked! Shocked to find that gambling is going on here.”<sup>516</sup> While watching the Duggars buy wedding gowns and set up lemonade stands, many viewers appear to conveniently forget that the family are spokespeople for a fundamentalist, misogynistic, and homophobic strand of conservative Christianity. Most recently, Jill Duggar’s husband, Derick Dillard was reportedly removed from *Counting On* after he tweeted a series of hateful comments about another TLC

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<sup>515</sup> *Jill and Jessa: Counting On*. Figure 8 Films. TLC. December 13, 2015.

<sup>516</sup> Michael Curtiz, Humphrey Bogart, Ingrid Bergman, and Claude Rains. *Casablanca*. Warner Bros. 1942.

reality show star, Jazz Jennings, who is transgender and a minor.<sup>517</sup> Dillard's tweets represent cracks in the Duggar's façade that fans would rather not see, so the solution seemed to be to simply remove him, and count on.

### *Conclusion*

However humiliated the Duggars may have felt by Josh's actions, they have never expressed any regret for letting the cameras into their lives. Through their show, they were able to broadcast evocative meaning-making narratives about Caleb, Josie, and Jubilee and turn their private lives into a public pronatalist ministry of sacrifice. Indeed, the Duggars the imagine the show itself and the fame that came with it as a kind of sacrifice, and they seem to see it as having accomplished what it was meant to. They write,

From the beginning...we've said that the challenges of being in the spotlight would be worth it if someday we hear that one girl who was considering an abortion heard us say that children are a blessing from God—and decided to keep her baby. How blessed we have been, over the years, to receive letters and e-mails telling us that prayer was answered.<sup>518</sup>

My hope is that this chapter has successfully shown two things. First, that reality television's ability to collapse the public private binary and to thereby generate emotional intimacy makes it a uniquely effective mechanism for communicating religious ideas and ideologies which are themselves inherently relational. I hope *19 Kids and Counting* has proven a

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<sup>517</sup> Erin Jenson, "TLC severs ties with Derick Dillard following more tweets about Jazz Jennings" *USA Today*. November 13, 2017. The tweet is available at: @derickmdillard, August 2, 2017. <https://twitter.com/derickmdillard/status/892938651469922304>

<sup>518</sup> Duggar, *A Love That Multiplies*, 78.

paradigmatic example of this affinity. Because of the emotional affordances of the genre, Michelle was able to communicate her sacrificial narratives to millions and to thereby prescribe such sacrifices to other women. Second, I hope the above discussion demonstrates the multivalent power Michelle Duggar has and uses as a celebrity, an icon, and a sacrificial being. Duggar offers up her agency, her body, and her children as sacrifices to both the public and to her God. In doing so, she makes herself into a televisual icon that is at once a powerful force advocating for conservative Christian pronatalist understandings of female identity, while embodying the symbolic representation of female disempowerment.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Inventing the *Angel Baby*

“What we prayed for was emptiness, so we would be worthy to be filled: with grace, with love, with self-denial, semen and babies.”

–Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale*

Lexi Fretz was expecting her third child when she went into premature labor. On Friday June 14, 2013, her son, Walter Joshua Fretz, was born at nineteen-weeks gestation and did not survive. Fretz and her family were heartbroken. As a professional photographer, she felt the need to capture the fleeting moments she and her family had with Walter’s body. Fretz specializes in birth and newborn portraits. Her work captures new parents beaming at their swaddled newborns, and Anne Geddes-inspired images of cherubic sleeping babies in fanciful poses. The images she took of her own son however struck a very different tone.



Image 12: Lexi Fretz, “Walter Joshua Fretz” f2 Photography, June 26, 2013

Fretz and her husband took candid and posed pictures of Walter’s body. They took pictures of their young daughters smiling uneasily for the camera while holding Walter wrapped in a satin blanket. They took candid photographs of Lexi holding Walter skin-to-skin against her

chest. In some of the posed shots, Walter was positioned with the Fretz's wedding rings slipped onto his tiny arms like enormous bracelets. Featuring wedding rings in newborn (and maternity) portraits has become a fairly common practice. The rings mark the children (or pregnant bellies) as the legitimate products of loving, heterosexual marriage. The images of Walter with his parents' rings convey that this child was legitimate and, like the gold and diamonds, precious and valued. But unlike similar images of living children, the Fretz's rings dwarf Walter's birdlike frame and call attention to fact that the Fretzs posed and positioned their son's dead body for the sake of crafting the shot.

Fretz posted the images of Walter on her blog, she wrote, as an act of public grieving. Despite her conservative evangelical faith and a brief direct mention of her anti-abortion stance in the blog narrative, Lexi Fretz claims she never intended to make a political statement. This was her son. Taking the photographs was a way of making sense out of an overwhelmingly amorphous sense of loss. Making them public was a way making that grief known. Perhaps most importantly, Fretz claimed, it was a way of making Walter real for the world.<sup>519</sup>

Many viewers found the images of Walter beautiful and poignant. They wrote on the blog's comment board that the images showed that although fatally diminutive, Walter's body was "perfectly formed." Some used the popular name for a miscarried fetus, "Angel Baby." The majority of the comments referred in some way to a Christian God, Jesus, Heaven, Angels, or the Bible. Some quoted Psalm 139, remarking that Walter had been "fearfully and wonderfully made." Others formatted their comments as prayers, ending them with, "In Jesus name, Amen" or signed their comments with their names and scriptural references like, "Jody, Hebrews 13:5."

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<sup>519</sup> Lexi Fretz, "Walter Joshua Fretz" *f2 Photography*, June 26, 2013.

For these viewers, the images were a testimony to fetal personhood, the miracle of life, and the sovereignty of God. Commenters reassured Lexi that God would use her pain for good and that Walter was “an angel,” “waiting for her in heaven,” “in the arms of Jesus.”<sup>520</sup> One commenter wrote, “I know that Jesus is just loving on him like crazy right now.”<sup>521</sup> More than offering support, blog readers remarked that viewing the images provided emotional healing for their own past miscarriages and renewed their trust that they would be reunited with their lost children in heaven. Three years after the post, viewers continue to express their sorrow, support, religious testimonies, and stories of healing.

Other viewers felt very differently about the family’s decision to document their son’s body. Some were horrified and accused the Fretzs of exploiting their son’s death. They called the family’s choice to publicize the images “sick” and “demented.” They accused them of “traumatizing” their young daughters by including them in the photo shoot.<sup>522</sup> However fair or unfair these comments may have been, negative reactions were bound to erupt simply because the images themselves are so stark. Fretz’s images captured a child only halfway through gestational development. Walter’s eyes and mouth were not yet formed, his lifeless body was skeletally thin—small enough to be cupped in one hand. His head was disproportionately large with the protruding forehead indicative of his gestational age. His translucent skin looked slick and shiny and he was red and purple, making him appear bruised and bloodied. Where some saw

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<sup>520</sup> These phrases repeatedly appeared in multiple comments on Lexi Fretz, “Walter Joshua Fretz” *f2 Photography* June 26, 2013 - June 30, 2014.

<sup>521</sup> Paula, comment on Lexi Fretz, “Walter Joshua Fretz” *f2 Photography*, June 29, 2013.

<sup>522</sup> These words were used multiple times on the comment boards of news stories covering Walter’s images, see: Alex Greig, “Mother shares heartbreaking pictures of son born at just 19 weeks” *The Daily Mail*, January 19, 2014; Tom Roberts interview with Lexi Fretz, “Mother of stillborn child shares story” *MSNBC Live with Tom Roberts*, September 29, 2015.



the perfect work of a loving God, others saw unsanitized human embodiment and the arbitrary nature of death.

Regardless of how viewers felt about the images of Walter and the family's choice to post them, the pictures accomplished what Lexi Fretz intended: Walter was made visible and thereby he was made real to the world. The images asserted his personhood and transformed his dead body into a living symbol, casting Walter somewhere, as American religion historian Robert Orsi puts it, "between heaven and earth."<sup>523</sup> Beyond that, he was made "really present."<sup>524</sup> Walter would exist perpetually in various forms across the Internet—some of which even his mother would later not recognize.

### ***Inventing Angel Babies***

Walter Fretz is one among thousands of miscarried and stillborn beings who have been documented, displayed, memorialized, sanctified, mobilized, and transformed through digital media. Some families, like the Fretzs, take stylized post-mortem photographs and post them on blogs, Facebook pages, and other social media sites. Other families take similar images and arrange them into short photomontage videos set to sentimental music and often post the videos to sites like Youtube.<sup>525</sup> Some take their own pictures and others use professional photographers from organizations like Now I Lay Me Down To Sleep, a company of volunteer professional

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<sup>523</sup> Robert Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People and Make and the Scholars who Study Them*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

<sup>524</sup> Robert Orsi, *History and Presence*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

<sup>525</sup> See for example: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NniRzFy4pyc>;  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=euTPXBw3YxQ>;  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZQjuHOrdOSA>

photographers who specialize in post-mortem photographs of miscarried or stillborn children.<sup>526</sup>

Women who may not have images of their own often assemble bricolage Pinterest boards full of images and common symbols, child angels, tiny foot prints, butterflies, stylized Bible verses, and quotes about children and miscarriage.

These composite boards especially represent the kind of symbolic enveloping this phenomenon engenders.<sup>527</sup> Individual losses are transformed via the use of generic symbols into one collective loss—therefore prescribing that all miscarriage be interpreted in certain ways. Put another way, the production, dissemination, and viewing of fetal memorial media fetishizes the fetus, subsuming individual fetuses into *the Sacred Fetus* and eventually, the *Angel Baby*, a powerful accretion of symbols, images, relationships, and meanings, capable of bridging the gap between the human the divine. As we saw in the previous chapter with Jubilee Duggar, miscarried fetuses insofar as they are indeterminate beings, are especially apt for this kind of fetishizing. They already exist between two worlds, therefore imagining them as relational, or as intermediaries between heaven and earth is not difficult.

The Institute in Basic Life Principles represents an overt articulation of conservative Christian pronatalist ideology and practice. Shows like *19 kids and Counting* and *Counting On* and the transmediated iconography generated by Michelle Duggar and her family show how those ideologies can be translated and marketed to a wider public and thereby legitimized and romanticized. This chapter deals primarily with discourses related to miscarriage, how cultural

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<sup>526</sup> See: [https://www.nowilaymedowntosleep.org/families/services-for-families/?gclid=Cj0KCQjwvezZBRDkARIsADKQyPnTavqJUot1GbBMAedxUrda5Kr05ED-PuMAzEPQB3GbIDb0etFpNo4aAnP\\_EALw\\_wcB](https://www.nowilaymedowntosleep.org/families/services-for-families/?gclid=Cj0KCQjwvezZBRDkARIsADKQyPnTavqJUot1GbBMAedxUrda5Kr05ED-PuMAzEPQB3GbIDb0etFpNo4aAnP_EALw_wcB)

<sup>527</sup> See for example:

[https://www.pinterest.com/search/pins/?q=angel%20baby&rs=typed&term\\_meta\[\]=angel%7Ctyped&term\\_meta\[\]=baby%7Ctyped](https://www.pinterest.com/search/pins/?q=angel%20baby&rs=typed&term_meta[]=angel%7Ctyped&term_meta[]=baby%7Ctyped)

interpretations of miscarriage have changed to reflect new religious imaginations and evaluations of pregnancy, motherhood, and fetuses. Specifically, this chapter is concerned with how fetal memorialization has generated a new category of sacred being, namely, the *Angel Baby*.

American religious historian Tracy Fessenden's work on the "public Protestantism" of nineteenth-century American public life provides a useful framework for understanding how representations of miscarriage in contemporary American media and popular culture prescribe certain religious imaginations without having to overtly announce themselves as part of a powerful religious agenda aimed at curtailing women's reproductive agency, if not their agency more generally. Fessenden warns that the more "universal" or even "secular" the religious expression appears, the more religiously powerful it becomes. As she puts it, an ideology "becomes more entrenched and controlling even as its manifestations have become less visibly religious."<sup>528</sup>

As I have argued in chapters past, the conservative Christian pronatalist discourse is not exclusively Protestant, therefore I am not invoking Fessenden to argue that there is a specifically Protestant grammar to conservative Christian pronatalism. Indeed, conservative Christian pronatalism is powerful in part because it transcends denominational affiliations. I want to call attention to Fessenden's point about certain religious values systems becoming so ubiquitous as to render them synonymous with American public life and thereby concealing their religious underpinnings. As religion scholar Catherine Albanese notes, we are often unaware of the systems of religious and cultural dominance at work in our worlds.<sup>529</sup>

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<sup>528</sup> Tracy Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption: Religion, The Secular and American Literature*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 6.

<sup>529</sup> Catherine Albanese, *America: Religions and Religion*. (Santa Barbara: University of California Press, 1999).

Representations of miscarriage that either directly assert, or unknowingly serve a conservative Christian pronatalist imagination of miscarriage have become pervasive enough in digital media and public culture such that they are often illegible as religion at all. Knowingly and unknowingly, women (and men) are creating, sustaining, and disseminating media that asserts a conservative Christian pronatalist agenda under the auspices of sentimentality and public grief. The result has been a cultural move toward regarding miscarried fetuses of any gestational age as fully formed *persons* who have *died* and often as *supernatural beings*.

Angel babies are now all around us. They are created and sustained through Facebook pages, Pinterest boards, greeting cards, books, jewelry, memorial rituals, hospital policies, and government legislation. This chapter will show how unmarked conservative Christian pronatalist agendas lie beneath the surface even of seemingly feminist discursive shifts aimed at healing maternal grief by making specific imaginations of miscarriage, and the beings they generate, more visible.

Taking a historical approach can show how revolutionary the invention of *Angel Babies* has been. Before there were *Angel Babies*, there were what feminist historian Leslie Reagan called “pregnancy-loss movements.” She writes,

a new social movement has arisen that encourages women to speak about their grief following miscarriage. The resulting public attention to women's grief has changed the venues in which women's words and memories have been published. Women's reproductive health and emotions are no longer confined to women's and health magazines. For the first time, articles about miscarriage are appearing in national mainstream news magazines and newspapers. Such coverage indicates the success of both the women's health and pregnancy-loss movements.<sup>530</sup>

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<sup>530</sup> Leslie, Reagan. “From Hazard to Blessing to Tragedy: Representations of Miscarriage in Twentieth-Century” *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 29, no. 2 (Summer, 2003): 356-378.

Reagan's observation that discourse venues have changed over time is astute. Since her article was published in 2003, those venues have continued to change—from news media and popular publications to digital and social media.<sup>531</sup> Pregnancy-loss narratives are increasingly visual rather than textual as more image-driven platforms like YouTube, Facebook and Pinterest grow in popularity.<sup>532</sup> As the discourse shifted from “pregnancy-loss” to fetal memorialization, the central figure of these loss narratives has shifted as well, from the expectant mother to the lost child—the *Angel Baby*.<sup>533</sup> This shift is only the latest in a history of changing understandings of miscarriage in the United States.<sup>534</sup> Despite her worthy contributions, Reagan and other

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<sup>531</sup> For more on the growth of religion on social media see: Heidi Campbell ed. *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*. (New York: Routledge, 2013); Pauline Hope Cheong, “The Chronicles of Me: Understanding Blogging as a Religious Practice,” *Journal of Media and Religion*, Vol. 7 (2008): 107–131; Pauline Hope Cheong, “Twitter of Faith” in *Digital Religion, Social Media and Culture: Perspectives, Practices and Futures*. Pauline Hope Cheong Peter Fischer-Nielsen, Stefan Gelfgren, Charles eds. (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2012) 191-206; Reina Lewis, “Marketing Muslim Lifestyle: A New Media Genre” *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, Vol. 6 no. 3 (Fall 2010): 58-90.

<sup>532</sup> As of 2006 YouTube was one of the fastest growing websites on the Internet boasting 100 million videos per day and 20 million visitors per month. See: [http://www.videodownloadx.com/pr\\_060721\\_2.pdf](http://www.videodownloadx.com/pr_060721_2.pdf) . It was bought by Google in 2007. As of 2012 YouTube was clocking in at 4 billion views per day. Alexei Reskovic, “YouTube hits 4 billion daily video views” *Reuters*. January 23, 2012. According to a Pew Research Center study, Instagram and Pinterest have more than doubled their users between 2012 and 2015. According to the Pew study Pinterest ranks below Facebook in terms of growth over the last three years, followed by Instagram, LinkedIn and Twitter respectively. Perhaps more importantly, Pinterest and Instagram have also seen an uptick in what is called “engagement” or the degree to which users engage with the service a daily basis. Maeve Duggan, “Mobile Messaging and Social Media 2015,” *Pew Research Center*, August 19, 2015.

<sup>533</sup> Ann Kaplan makes a similar argument in her studies tracing the shift from the maternal subject to the fetal subject in American film. See: Ann Kaplan, “Sex, Work, and Motherhood: Maternal Subjectivity in Recent Visual Culture” in *Representations of Motherhood*. Donna Bassin, Margaret Honey, and Meryle Mahrer Kaplan. eds. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); Ann Kaplan, “Look Who's Talking, indeed! The meaning of fetal images in recent USA visual culture” in *Contested Terrains: Social Constructions of Mothering*, L. Forcey and E. Glenn, eds. (New York: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>534</sup> My focus here is on the contemporary United States, Canada, the UK, and Australia. However, a wealth of scholarship exists on changing attitudes toward miscarriage in other parts

feminist scholars have made the mistake of assuming that the religious implications of this recent shift are more or less confined to debates over abortion.<sup>535</sup> Although fetal memorial visual culture certainly aids anti-feminist and anti-abortion agendas, as we have seen in previous chapters, the conservative Christian pronatalist discourse is inextricable tied to other conservative Christian agendas asserting dominionism, Christian nationalism, anti-intellectualism, and white supremacy. The *Angel Baby* is a multivalent being and, like the angels of Christian mythology, it is as much warrior as messenger or protector.

### *I Will Carry You*

The *Angel Baby* phenomenon provides a rich archive for religion and media studies. Methodologically, it underscores the fact that scholars of lived religion should regard new media platforms like blogs and social media sites as places where people negotiate and share their religious identities. Media and Religion scholars like Deborah Whitehead, Lynn Schofield Clark, Stewart Hoover, Heidi Campbell, and Pauline Hope Cheong have already take up this challenge.<sup>536</sup> In fact, Deborah Whitehead's studies of infant and fetal memorial practices on

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of the world. See: Roseanne Cecil ed., *Anthropology of Pregnancy Loss: Comparative Studies in Miscarriage, Stillbirth and Neo-natal Death*. (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 1996); Robbie E. Davis-Floyd and Carolyn F. Sargent eds., *Childbirth and Authoritative Knowledge: Cross Cultural Perspectives*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997); Peter J Kastor, and Conevery Bolton Valencius. "Sacagawea's 'Cold': Pregnancy and the Written Record of the Lewis and Clark Expedition" *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, Vol. 82 (2008): 276–310; Laura R. Wolvier, *The Political Geographies of Pregnancy*. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002).

<sup>535</sup> Linda L. Layne, "Breaking the Silence: An Agenda for a Feminist Discourse of Pregnancy Loss," *Feminist Studies* Vol. 23 (Summer, 1997): 300-4; Linda L. Layne, *Motherhood Lost: A Feminist Account of Pregnancy Loss in America*. (New York: Rutledge, 2003).

<sup>536</sup> Heidi Campbell, *Exploring Religious Community Online: we are one in the network*. (New York: Peter Lang, 2005); Lynn Schofield Clark. *Religion, Media, and the Marketplace*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007); Stewart Hoover and Knut Lundby, eds.

evangelical “mommy blogs” clearly illustrate how the unique affordances of new media platforms birthed the *Angel Baby*.<sup>537</sup>

Whitehead followed the stories of Angie and Todd Smith who, in 2008, learned that the fetus Angie was carrying had a host of fatal abnormalities. Angie Smith defied her doctors’ advice to terminate the unviable pregnancy and carried her dying child to near-full term. They named her Audrey. On her blog, *Bring the Rain*, Smith chronicled the family’s attempts to give Audrey as much of the world as they could while her heart was still beating. They “took” her to Disney World, the beach, and the zoo, and permanently inscribed her as a member of their family by symbolically representing her in family photographs.



Image 13: “Disney World” The Smiths’ three daughters and Audrey represented by the mouse hat on the right.<sup>538</sup>

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*Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture*. (London: Sage Publications, 1997).

<sup>537</sup> Deborah Whitehead, “The Evidence of Things Unseen: Authenticity and Fraud in the Christian Mommy Blogosphere” *Journal of The American Academy of Religion*. Vol. 83, no. 1 (March 2015): 120-150; Deborah Whitehead, “The story God is Weaving Us Into: Narrativizing Grief, Faith, and Infant Loss in US Evangelical Women’s Blog Communities” *New Review of Hypermedia and Multimedia*, Vol. 21 no. 1-2 (2014): 42-56.

<sup>538</sup> Angie Smith, “Disney World” [www.angiesmithonline.com](http://www.angiesmithonline.com). February 2, 2008.

As Whitehead observes, Smith's blog quickly became a communally constructed space for religious meaning making around pregnancy loss. The Smiths also created a memorial video for Audrey, featuring an original song by Todd Smith (who is the lead singer of the popular Christian music group, Selah) entitled, "I will carry you." Hundreds if not thousands of fetal memorial videos now also use the song. "I will carry you" quickly became the *de facto* hymn of fetal memorial media.<sup>539</sup> Today, there are more options. Those who wish to make similar memorial videos now have a host of songs from secular artists to choose from including, "Slipped Away" by Avril Lavigne, "Take My Place" by Lily Allen, and of course "Heartbeat" by feminist icon, Beyoncé.

Whitehead's analysis of the Smiths shows that blogs and other new media platforms can be powerful spaces for religious meaning making and community building. She argues that the blogging format allows grieving mothers to "(re)narrativize" their experiences in particular ways and to thereby generate religious meaning from their grief. What's more, her work shows that just as individual fetuses are subsumed into the aggregate *Angel Baby*, readers participate in the narrative construction such that the wholistic narrative becomes, "all our stories" and eventually

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<sup>539</sup>Selah, "I will Carry You" *You Deliver Me*. Curb Records. August 25, 2009.

"I will Carry You" was also featured on the *19 Kids and Counting* episode chronicling Michelle Duggar's 2011 miscarriage memorial service. "A Duggar Loss," *19 Kids and Counting*. Figure 8 Films. March 27, 2012. The song has become so associated with fetal memorial practices the phrase, "I will carry you" is commonly etched on miscarriage jewelry such as charm bracelets and necklaces. For an example see: [https://www.etsy.com/listing/150148637/personalized-memorial-necklace-hand?utm\\_source=google&utm\\_medium=cpc&utm\\_campaign=shopping\\_us\\_c-jewelry-necklaces-monogram\\_and\\_name\\_necklaces&utm\\_custom1=fc343228-5bb2-4f33-b56a-d5168f8d1f06&gclid=CJ3p8MDc7M0CFYhqfgodEhAP8A](https://www.etsy.com/listing/150148637/personalized-memorial-necklace-hand?utm_source=google&utm_medium=cpc&utm_campaign=shopping_us_c-jewelry-necklaces-monogram_and_name_necklaces&utm_custom1=fc343228-5bb2-4f33-b56a-d5168f8d1f06&gclid=CJ3p8MDc7M0CFYhqfgodEhAP8A)

For an example of how the song is commonly used in memorial YouTube videos see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dkgPZtQHGLY>



even, “the story God is weaving us into.”<sup>540</sup>

### *A Miscarriage or a Baby Who Has Died?*

In contemporary colloquial parlance, the term *baby* has come to refer to all stages of fetal development. However commonplace, using the term *baby* is a powerful act of personalization with not only therapeutic, but also religious and political consequences.<sup>541</sup> *Baby* is not just a descriptor. It is a value judgment. *Babies* are wanted. Even committed pro-choice women will often refer to their own wanted fetuses as *babies*. Referring to miscarriage as a *baby who has died* steepens the event in tragic significance and gives it to the corporate public to mourn.<sup>542</sup> On the other hand, referring to the same event as *miscarried pregnancy* centers the woman and her body’s reproductive function. The woman may or may not grieve the loss, but it is not a public event and nothing has *died*. A basic biological function, *pregnancy*, has gone awry. A *miscarried pregnancy* or *pregnancy loss* is an experience a woman has within her own interiority. It is not

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<sup>540</sup> Whitehead, “The Story God is Weaving Us Into,” 1.

<sup>541</sup> There is a considerable body of scholarship across many disciplines on the ontological and political consequences of naming. See for example in religious studies: Catherine Albanese, *America: Religions and Religion* (Santa Barbara: University of California Press, 1999); Winona LaDuke, *Recovering the Sacred: The Power of Naming and Claiming* (New York: South End Press, 2005); Jonathan Z. Smith, *Map is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978). In science and mathematics: Loren Graham, “The Power of Names in Culture and in Mathematics” in *Naming Infinity: A True Story of Religious Mysticism and Mathematical Creativity*, Loren Graham and Jean-Michel Kantor eds., (Harvard University Press, 2009). In Feminist theology: Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973); Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza ed., *The Power of Naming: A Concilium Reader in Feminist Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books 1996). In literature: Ursula Le Guin, “She Unnames Them” *The New Yorker*, January 21, 1985.

<sup>542</sup> For more on the “public fetus” see: Janelle S. Taylor, *The Public Life of the Fetal Sonogram: Technology, Consumption, and the Politics of Reproduction*. (New York: Rutgers University Press, 2008); Janelle S. Taylor, “The Public Fetus and the Family Car: From Abortion Politics to a Volvo Advertisement.” *Public Culture*, Vol. 4 no. 2 (1992): 167-183.

even necessarily relational. The *death of baby* is a very different experience. Who and what determines which experience a woman is authorized or expected to have? Ideally, the woman would decide, but contemporary American women are suspended in an increasingly pronatalist culture that emotionally manipulates, shames, expects, or otherwise encourages them to experience the latter. Neither characterization is more “truer” or more “real” than the other and for women who *want* to imagine miscarriage as the death of a baby, this new normal is incredibly validating. For those who do not, however, it can represent the public coopting of their private experience.

In order to see the culture in which we are suspended—to be the fish who see the water, to borrow Marshal McLuhan’s metaphor—it is helpful to juxtapose colloquialisms with the medical language.<sup>543</sup> Medically, *fetus* refers to an intrauterine being between eight weeks gestation and birth. *Miscarriage* refers to a pregnancy that ends prior to twenty-weeks gestation and *stillborn* is reserved for fetal death occurring between twenty-weeks gestation and birth. Children who are born with a heartbeat or any other sign of life at any stage are medically considered live births and are generally referred to as *babies* by medical professionals. They are often referred to as *fatally premature babies* if they are born alive but are not viable.

Conservative Christian women like Lexi Fretz do not like the word *fetus*. Fretz wrote on her blog that she “wanted to slap” one of her doctors for referring to Walter as a “fetus” even though the doctor was trying to give her hope by telling her that her “fetus may still be viable.”<sup>544</sup> Despite being medically accurate, *fetus* has been dragooned into ongoing battles over

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<sup>543</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium is the Message*. (New York: Gingko Press. 9th edition, 2001).

<sup>544</sup> Lexi Fretz, “Walter Joshua Fretz” *f2 Photography*, June 29, 2013.

abortion and reproductive freedom. For women like Fretz, the term *fetus* dehumanizes a being they experience as wholly human and perhaps even super-human, “angelic.” By insisting on *baby*, abortion-rights opponents create a semantic continuum from zygote to newborn, hoping that consistency in terminology will cause the rights of the latter to be extended to the former. To them, *fetus* is a mask pro-choice advocates use to obscure the unborn’s humanity. For abortion-rights advocates however, the medically incorrect use of *baby* is a cheap appeal to sentimentality aimed at emotionally manipulating women out of their reproductive rights.

It is also now common for women, especially conservative Christian women, to reject the term *miscarriage* entirely. These women refer to their *babies* as being *stillborn* regardless of gestational age.<sup>545</sup> The linguistic slippage is not only present in overtly religious or political discourse. Once again confirming Fessenden’s hypothesis, the religious language appears in unexpected places. “Secular” psychologists and support groups now assert the therapeutic value of referring to *all* perinatal losses as the *death of a baby*.<sup>546</sup> This is where the movement to make miscarriage and stillbirth more visible, which can easily be read as a feminist movement, reinforces conservative Christian pronatalist discourses which are detrimental to women’s social, religious, and political empowerment, as well as to their health and safety.

In rendering my findings, I have tried to be deferent to the weight these terms carry and to the experiences they connote. For the sake of clarity, I only use the term *stillbirth* for

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<sup>545</sup> This phenomenon can be observed in myriad places including: online miscarriage support communities, in Pins and in blogs, in Facebook posts and comments. Other scholars who have noted this linguistic choice include: Linda L. Layne, *Motherhood Lost*; Lynn M. Morgan and Meredith Wilson Michaels eds. *Fetal Subjects Feminist Positions* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999).

<sup>546</sup> See for example, Share, a national support group and resource hub for miscarriage: <http://nationalshare.org>

pregnancies that end in fetal death after twenty weeks. My primary focus here is *miscarriage* or *fetuses* twenty weeks or younger. I argue that this is the category that has been the most dramatically reimagined. Out of respect and for readability, I do sometimes use the terms women themselves use to describe their pregnancies, children, and experiences, but I do not do so uncritically. I favor the medically accurate terms, but again, with the understanding that these are not neutral simply because they are official. When a miscarried or stillborn fetus or child is named, I use their names.

### ***Changing Views on Miscarriage***

For American women today in the peak years of their fertility, between eighteen and twenty-eight years old, one in five pregnancies will not come to term. As women enter their thirties, that number moves to one in four. By thirty-five, it is one in three and by forty, nearly half of all pregnancies end prior to the twentieth week of gestation.<sup>547</sup> There are racial and economic disparities but these statistics generally reflect the reality for most contemporary American women. In other places or segments of society where malnutrition, inadequate prenatal care, and violence against women are more widespread, those numbers obviously climb.<sup>548</sup> For women who carry their babies to full or near-full term, one in one hundred and sixty, or roughly twenty-six thousand per year will be stillborn after twenty weeks.<sup>549</sup>

An experience so common has obviously generated innumerable religious, cultural, political and emotional responses. Race, class, nationality, age, marital status, religious

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<sup>547</sup> These numbers are taken from the Mayo Clinic website accessed April 4, 2016.

<sup>548</sup> Pamela E. Klassen, *Blessed Events: Religion and Homebirth in America*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001) 138-139.

<sup>549</sup> Mayo Clinic website accessed April 4, 2016.

affiliation, sexual orientation, education level, family culture, citizenship status, and myriad other factors all effect how women in the United States relate to their pregnancies, the pregnancies of others, and to miscarriage.<sup>550</sup> Cultural responses to miscarriage have never been universal and have always been constructed by a host of ever-evolving social factors.<sup>551</sup> Tracing changes in how miscarriage has been interpreted by women and in the media through the twentieth-century reveals how these interpretations have both reflected and contributed to the development of conservative Christian pronatalism. Today conservative Christian pronatalism has so influenced American public discourse that miscarriage is often represented as the death of a child and a personal tragedy from which women may never recover. Obviously, this has not always been the case.<sup>552</sup>

We take for granted today that the majority American women survive pregnancy, miscarriage, and stillbirth. The memorialization of *Angel Babies* can only arise from a context that is not constantly coping with angel mothers. Even if miscarriage is safer today, it remains

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<sup>550</sup> For more on cultural, racial and class discrepancies in miscarriage and pregnancy in the U.S see: Sandra Lane, *Why are All Our Babies Dying: Pregnancy, Birth, and Death in America*. (New York: Rutledge, 2008); Ruth Gomberg-Munoz, *Labor and Legality: An Ethnography of a Mexican Immigrant Network*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>551</sup> For cross cultural and historical understandings of miscarriage see: Roseanne Cecil ed. *Anthropology of Pregnancy Loss*; Davis-Floyd and Sargent eds., *Childbirth and Authoritative Knowledge*; Kastor and Valencius, “Sacagawea’s ‘Cold’”; Wolvier, *The Political Geographies of Pregnancy*; Linda L. Layne, *Motherhood Lost*; Morgan and Michaels eds. *Fetal Subjects Feminist Positions*.

<sup>552</sup> For an excellent history of miscarriage in the US see: Linda L. Layne, *Motherhood Lost*. For accounts of miscarriage in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries see: Mark Jackson, “‘Something More Than Blood’: Conflicting Accounts of Pregnancy Loss in Eighteenth-Century England” *The Anthropology of Pregnancy Loss: Comparative Studies in Miscarriage, Stillbirth and Neonatal Death*. Rosanne Cecil, ed. (Oxford: Berg, 1996)197–214.; Linda A. Pollock, “Embarking on a Rough Passage: The Experience of Pregnancy in Early-Modern Society” *Women as Mothers in Pre-industrial England*. Valerie Fildes, ed (New York: Routledge, 1990) 39–67.

physically demanding and often debilitating. The pronatalist preoccupation with fetal memorialization obscures the physical suffering women continue to endure during miscarriage and it certainly presumes that all women who miscarry *wanted* to be pregnant. This is the fiction upon which pronatalist discourse is built and it is a fiction that can only survive when maternal safety is assumed, either because women are actually safer, or because their suffering is ignored, or justified and sanctified by religious narratives. At the turn of the twentieth-century, such a flat denial of reality would have been impossible.<sup>553</sup>

Medical historian Shannon K. Withycombe's study of nineteenth-century American women's response to miscarriage confirms that women rarely personified their pregnancies in that period, nor did they always mourn their loss.<sup>554</sup> In fact, Withycombe's research confirms that many nineteenth-century American women were so desperate to escape the relentless cycle of pregnancy and birth that an uncomplicated miscarriage was often greeted as a blessing.

Emily McCorkle FitzGerald, for example, the wife of an Army surgeon stationed in Sitka, Alaska, wrote to her mother in 1875,

I did not think I would tell you until I saw you, but I will now. I had a miscarriage about five or six weeks ago, but I lost a great deal of blood and all my strength. ...I have not gotten over it yet. ... I am thankful now that I did have it, as another Sitka baby would have been my fate.<sup>555</sup>

Two years earlier and a continent away, newlywed Annie Van Ness of Yonkers, New

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<sup>553</sup> See: Irvine Loudon, *Death in Childbirth: An International Study of Maternal Care and Maternal Mortality 1800-1950*. (New York: Clarendon Press, 1993).

<sup>554</sup> Withycombe, Shannon K. "From Women's Expectations to Scientific Specimens: The Fate of Miscarriage Materials in Nineteenth-Century America." *Social History of Medicine*, Vol. 28, no. 2 (2015): 245–262.

<sup>555</sup> Emily McCorkle FitzGerald, *An Army Doctor's Wife on the Frontier: Letters from Alaska and the Far West, 1874–1878*, ed. Abe Laufe (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1962) 5–66.

York found herself pregnant. She confided in her diary that her pregnancy made her, “very cross” and that she was suffering from depression. Her demeanor however, changed upon miscarrying. With a startling lack of sentimentality by today’s standards, VanNess wrote,

‘Quite a change has come over me ...I am happy again, a week ago last night I was taken sick at the supper table, I went to my room and retired early, to make a long story short I will say ...any body might imagine from reading this that I had a baby, but I haven’t! It was only what they call a miss—...it wasn’t any larger than a jointed doll’.<sup>556</sup>

Sentiments like VanNess’ were likely also shared by many husbands. Child bearing not only endangered their wives’ lives, but also brought doctor bills they could not pay, strained existing resources, and often put the family’s economic stability in peril. This might be why in 1879, Mary Bushnell Cheney of Connecticut, mother of nine, informed her husband Frank of her miscarriage by paraphrasing the then-popular jovial musical *H.M.S Pinafore*, “O Bliss! O Rapture unforeseen!”<sup>557</sup>

This is not to say that all women were blissful, enraptured or relieved upon miscarrying, or that the experience never evoked sadness or disappointment. Of course, it did. However, nineteenth and early twentieth-century representations of miscarriage in the United States largely focused on the *physical* risks involved, women’s survival, and methods of healing, rather than emotional grief.

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<sup>556</sup> Annie L. Youmans Van Ness, *Diary of Annie L. Van Ness, 1864–1881* (Alexandria, VA: Alexander Street Press, 2004) 637.

<sup>557</sup> MaryBushnell Cheney to Frank Cheney, July 9, 1879. Cheney Family Papers, Sophia Smith Collection. Smith College, Northampton, MA.



Image 14: Victorian era postcard, artist unknown.

Pioneering birth control advocate Margaret Sanger used women's first-hand testimonies to highlight the economic and physical suffering miscarriage caused. In her 1928, *Motherhood in Bondage*, Sanger reminded readers that experiencing multiple miscarriages is physically debilitating and potentially fatal.<sup>558</sup> The women who wrote letters to Sanger begged for contraception to avoid chronic miscarriage and the resulting physical suffering. They did not speak of emotional grief over lost babies, or the hope of a heavenly reunion—they were primarily terrified of dying.

In the mid-twentieth-century, mainstream women's magazines began covering miscarriage and interpolating the experience into the period's preoccupation with male scientific authority.<sup>559</sup> After the Second World War, popular women's magazines in the United States (aimed mainly at white middleclass women) like *Good Housekeeping*, *Redbook*, and *Ladies*

<sup>558</sup> Margart Sanger, *Motherhood in Bondage*. (New York: Brentano's Inc., 1928).

<sup>559</sup> For more on the rise of scientific authority in American culture see: Stephanie Coontz. *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*. (New York: Basic Books 1992).



*Home Journal*, published articles on miscarriage largely aimed at assuaging women's fears and encouraging good humor.<sup>560</sup>

The cultural contexts had changed dramatically since Sanger gave voice to the millions of American women longing for contraception.<sup>561</sup> The post-war United States was in a period of economic growth and considerable social change.<sup>562</sup> A burgeoning consumer culture was helping define a new kind of white middle class and a great deal of that consumer culture was aimed at women.<sup>563</sup> Mediated discourses on miscarriage therefore, shifted the conversation away from pain and healing, to prevention and hope. Like today, articles from this period presumed that all pregnancies were wanted and born from happy heteronormative marriages, but *unlike* today, they did not focus on grief, nor did they indicate that miscarriage created supernatural beings to whom women are eternally bound.<sup>564</sup> Rather, popular representations of miscarriage in the 1940s, 50s

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<sup>560</sup> Reagan, *From Hazard to Blessing*.

<sup>561</sup> This is not to say that women in the mid-century did not seek out abortions and contraception. They did, and both remained difficult to get. See: Rickie Solinger "Extreme Danger: Women Abortionists and their Clients before Roe v. Wade," *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Post-war America*, Joanne Meyerowitz ed. (Philadelphia; Temple University Press 1994); Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War*. (New York: Basic Books, 1988); Elaine Tyler May. *America and The Pill: A History of Promise Peril, and Liberation*. (New York: Basic Books, 2010); Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions: A Social History of American Family Life*. (New York: The Free Press, 1988).

<sup>562</sup> David Habersham, *The Fifties*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993); Thomas Hine, *Populuxe* (New York: Overlook Books, 2007); David Riesman, et al., *The Lonely Crowd* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961).

<sup>563</sup> Susan Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media*. (New York: Random House, 1994); Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound*; Vance Packard, *American Social Classes in the 1950s: Selections from Vance Packard's The Status Seekers*. (New York: Bedford/St. Martins, 1995); Kathy Piess, *Hope In A Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998); Janelle S. Taylor, Linda Layne, Danielle Wozniak eds., *Consuming Motherhood*. (New York: Rutgers, 2004).

<sup>564</sup> Linda Layne, *Motherhood Lost*, 140-50.

and early 60s emphasized developments in the science of reproduction and their saving power.<sup>565</sup>

On this, and many other subjects, the midcentury was marked by the deification of science.<sup>566</sup>

The cold war period was the age of the expert. When white middle-class American women suffered a miscarriage, or had questions about pregnancy, birth, or childrearing, they no longer looked to their mothers, midwives, and nurses, they looked to men in white coats like the famed Dr. Spock—or at least, they were *supposed* to.<sup>567</sup> The men in white coats certainly had an awful lot to say.<sup>568</sup> According to these men, if women wanted to avoid miscarriage, they needed to stop being so stubborn and follow their doctor’s directions.

Dr. Herman Bundesen, an obstetrician in Chicago reminded the readers of *Ladies Home Journal* in 1952 that,

We doctors are able to tell all but a small handful of expectant mothers, “Follow directions, and there is no reason you should not have a fine, full-term baby.”

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<sup>565</sup> Robbie Davis-Floyd, *Birth as an American Rite of Passage*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Pamela E. Klassen, *Blessed Events*, 25-29; Richard W. Wertz and Dorothy C. Wertz, *Lying In: A History of Childbirth in America*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

<sup>566</sup> For more on the role of science and scientism in cold-war American popular culture see: Ken Hollings, *Welcome to Mars: Politics, Pop Culture, and Weird Science in 1950s America* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books 2014); Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics: Science Fiction, Super Hero Comics, and the Paranormal*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); Karal Ann Marling, *As Seen on TV: The Visual Culture of Everyday Life in the 1950s*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996); Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound*.

<sup>567</sup> Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were*; Ann C. Hall and Mardia Bishop. Eds. *Mommy Angst: Motherhood in American Popular Culture*. (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2009); Judith Walzer Leavitt, *Brought to Bed: Childbearing in America, 1750-1950*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Elaine Tyler May, *America and The Pill*; Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound*.

<sup>568</sup> For more on the medicalization of childbirth see: Charlotte Borst, *Catching Babies: The Professionalization of Childbirth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995); Carol Schrom Dye, “The Medicalization of Birth” in *The American Way of Birth*, Pamela Eakin ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986); Pamela Paul Star, *The Social Transformation of American Medicine*. (New York: Basic Books 1982); Barbara Ehrenreich and Deidre English, *For Her Own Good: 150 Years of the Experts’ Advice to Women*. (Garden City, NJ: Anchor Books, 1979) 76-90.

...If she wants her baby badly enough to follow her doctor's instructions with scrupulous care, she can have it in most instances.<sup>569</sup>

Many of the messages in women's magazines were meant to assure women that they were in capable hands, but of course, they also undercut women's authority over their own pregnancies. Dr. Bundesen blamed women's willfulness for their miscarriages and suggested that women who were unwilling to blindly follow male orders did not *really* want children at all. Other doctors and "experts" echoed this charge in other women's magazines.<sup>570</sup> Clearly, pregnancy was better handled by men. These men prescribed pills, vitamins, and hormone therapies — most of which, like the widely prescribed diethylstilbestrol, mornidine, and thalidomide lead to birth defects, cancer, infertility, or death —and women once again lost ownership of the most quintessentially female experience.<sup>571</sup>

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<sup>569</sup> Herman N. Bundesen, "Miscarriage," *Ladies Home Journal*, October 1952; Maxine Davis, "Most Women Can Have Babies," *Good Housekeeping*, September 1940; Maya Pines, "New Ways to Prevent Miscarriage," *Redbook*, April 1963.

<sup>570</sup> Lan F. Guttmacher, "The Truth about Miscarriage," *Parents Magazine*, October 1955; Gretta Palmer, "Saving the Unborn," *Ladies Home Journal*, March 1941; Maya Pines, "New Ways to Prevent Miscarriage," *Redbook*, April 1963.

<sup>571</sup> See: P. Knightly and Elaine Potter, *Suffer the Children: The Story of Thalidomide* (New York: Viking, 1979); Trent Stevens and Rock Brynner, *Dark Remedy: The Impact Of Thalidomide And Its Revival As A Vital Medicine* (New York: Perseus Publishing, 2001).



Image 15: Mornidine Advertisement, 1959<sup>572</sup>

During the 1950s and 60s miscarriage was not as widely taken up by mainstream media as it would later be, but when it was, the message was consistently optimistic and forward-looking.<sup>573</sup> Nothing had died, something had just gone wrong and it was not anything modern (male) medicine could not handle. “Most Women Can Have Babies,” *Good Housekeeping* assured readers. The midcentury media made little, if any, space for maternal grieving. Indeed, female psychological “maladjustment” was cited as a cause of miscarriage.<sup>574</sup> Hopeful optimism

<sup>572</sup> Mornidine was a commonly prescribed medication aimed at nausea and miscarriage prevention during pregnancy. It was removed from the market in 1969 after reports of liver toxicity and death.

<sup>573</sup> For example: Evan McLeod Wylie, “Why You Won’t Lose Your Baby,” *Good Housekeeping*, March 1960.

<sup>574</sup> Medical journals from this time used the term “spontaneous abortion” or sometimes just “abortion” for what we now call miscarriage. For medical journal articles linking miscarriage to women’s psychological wellbeing see: Theodore Mandy et al., “The Psychic Aspects of Sterility and Abortion,” *Southern Medical Journal* Vol. 44 (November 1951): 1054-59; Edward C. Mann, “Psychiatric Investigation of Habitual Abortion,” *Obstetrics and Gynecology* Vol. 7 (June 1956): 589-601; Carl T. Javert, “Psychosomatic Aspects of Habitual Abortion,” *Medical Times* Vol. 90 (February 1962): 115-21; Myron Silverman, “Psychological Aspects of Habitual Abortion,” *Psychiatric Communications*, Vol. 13 (1970): 35-43.

was required. Bouncing babies were just around the corner!

Articles like “Most Women Can Have Babies,” used images of chubby infants and rambunctious “little scamps” getting into mischief. By the 1980s the images had grown somber and there were far more of them. The infants were conspicuously absent. Women in white nightgowns sat alone in dimly lit rooms staring at empty cradles. They sat on bathroom floors in crumpled heaps, stared despondently out of rainy windows, and wore rumpled sweatpants in unmade beds and cradled their heads in the hands. These images prescribed sympathy and deep grief. There were no dead babies, or *Angel Babies* yet, but they were getting closer. Maternal pain again took center stage as it had at the beginning of the century, but by the 1980s it had become entirely emotional. The images in magazines like *Glamour* and *Ms.* were dark and almost always featured a white woman alone. Article after article spoke of loneliness, invisibility, and silence. But American popular media was anything but silent on the subject.



Image 16: *Glamour*, June 1981, 233.

During the 1970s four articles were published on miscarriage in popular women's magazines, by 1985 the number was closer to fifty.<sup>575</sup> On television, in magazines, and in print, women were being shown how lonely they were, how depressed and despondent they must be, and how isolated they must feel.<sup>576</sup> These messages were clearly a corrective to the midcentury injunction to buck up and put on a happy face, but they were just as universalizing. It was not that popular media manufactured women's grief. Many women felt genuinely isolated by culturally enforced mechanisms of silence and invisibility. Nonetheless, American women in the 1980s and '90s were bombarded with messages and images depicting them as victims of a pervasive cultural silence.<sup>577</sup> The argument that millions of American women were being forced to suffer their grief in obscurity, however, is difficult to swallow when it is being made by the renowned *New York Times* columnist, Anna Quindlen in the pages of *Glamour* magazine.<sup>578</sup>

Focusing on women's grief was touted as therapeutic, and a boon for (white) women's presence in the public sphere.<sup>579</sup> It may have been, but it was also a Trojan horse. Miscarriage

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<sup>575</sup> These number were taken from the database, *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature*.

<sup>576</sup> For television examples see: "New Job," *Thirty Something*, 1989; "A Womb With A View," *Moonlighting*, 1988. For an extremely helpful examination of miscarriage on television in 1980s see: Lynne Joyrich, *Re-viewing Reception: Television, Gender and Postmodern Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996); For magazine examples see: Sheila Weller, "Miscarriage: Understanding the Special Grief Women Feel," *Glamour*, November 1988; Kim Wright Wiley, "After Miscarriage: Healing the Hurt," *Health*, May 1987; "The Grief of Miscarriage: How to Cope," *Glamour*, March 1984.

<sup>577</sup> Leslie Bennetts, "Preventing Miscarriage," *Parents*, February 1994; Mary Scott Welch and Dorothy Hermann, "Why Miscarriage Is So Misunderstood," *Ms.*, February 1980; Janice Billingsley, "The Child Who Never Arrived," *Ladies' Home Journal*, November 1980; Perry-Lynn Moffitt, "Miscarriage: The Baby Who Wasn't," *Parents*, April 1987; Anna Quindlen, "The Truth about Miscarriage," *Glamour*, June 1981; "Miscarriages," *Newsweek*, August 1988; Tim Page, "Life Miscarried," *New York Times*, January 27, 1985.

<sup>578</sup> Anna Quindlen, "The Truth about Miscarriage."

<sup>579</sup> Miscarriage mourning was depicted in popular feminist magazines as a feminist act. See for example: Donna Moriarty, "The Right to Mourn," *Ms.*, November 1982.

mourning was an essential weapon in what Susan Faludi would later call the “backlash” against feminism.<sup>580</sup> Publicizing white women’s miscarriages was “safe” feminism. It appeared to defy misogynistic practices that swept women’s pain under the proverbial rug, but it actually reinscribed childbearing as a woman’s ultimate purpose and suggested that women *needed* to be pregnant lest they succumb to depression and a life devoid of meaning. On popular television shows like, *Thirty Something*, and in bestselling books like *The Birth Dearth*, the “infertility epidemic” fiction took hold and miscarriage became the price white “career women” paid for their independence.<sup>581</sup>

As the 1980s brought unprecedented media attention to white miscarriage, characterizing it as a universally devastating loss, women of color were conspicuously absent from mass media representations of miscarriage. Of course, women of color have long been underrepresented in media and popular culture generally, but conservative Christian pronatalism actively works to keep the existing imbalance of power in place.<sup>582</sup> Ironically, conservative Christian pronatalism

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<sup>580</sup> Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War on American Women* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1991)

<sup>581</sup> Ben Wattenberg’s *The Birth Dearth* was an influential popular book spreading these ideas: Ben Wattenberg, *The Birth Dearth: What Happens When People in Free Countries Don’t Have Enough Babies?* (New York: Pharos Books, 1987); For a historical view of infertility see: Margaret Marsh and Wanda Ronner, *The Empty Cradle: Infertility in America from Colonial Times to the Present*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

<sup>582</sup> For more on black women in American popular media see: Adria Y. Goldman VaNatta S. Ford, Alexa A. Harris, Natasha R. Howard, eds. *Black Women and Popular Culture: The Conversation Continues* (London: Lexington Books, 2013); Bradley S. Greenberg, Dana Mastro, and Jeffery E. Brand, “Minorities and the Mass Media: Television into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century” *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Jennings Bryant and Dolf Zillman eds. (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2008); Melissa V. Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizens: Shame Stereotypes and Black Women In American* (New Haven: Yale University Press. 2011) 85-98; Judith Weisenfeld, *Hollywood Be The Name: African American Religion in American Film, 1929-1949* (Berkley: University of California Press, 2007); For a helpful discussion of depictions of black families on television in the 1980s see: Herman Gray, “Television, Black Americans and the American Dream” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* Vol. 6, Issue 4

bears strong family resemblances with the eugenics movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth-century.<sup>583</sup> As we have seen previously, conservative Christian pronatalism is built as much on white-supremacy as on theologies of God's sovereignty over reproduction. As the "pregnancy-loss movement" unfolded during the 1980s, black women, Latinas, and other women of color were (and continue to be) popularly depicted as less intelligent, hyper-emotional, oversexed, welfare-mothers who should not be having children in the first place.<sup>584</sup> Consequently, popular media did not authorize them to grieve their miscarriages, as their children were not socially valued.<sup>585</sup>

The 1980s saw both the demonization of the non-white mother, and the demonization of the white professional woman who was either completely child-free or delaying childbearing to build her career and therefore having fewer children.<sup>586</sup> Both were failing America, one by

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(1989): 376-386.

<sup>583</sup> For more on eugenics in the U.S. see: Nancy Ordovery, *American Eugenics: Race, Queer Anatomy, and the Science of Nationalism*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

<sup>584</sup> For more on the social construction of the "welfare mother" see: Maura Kelly, "Regulating the Reproduction and Mothering of Poor Women: The Controlling Image of the Welfare Mother in Television News Coverage of Welfare Reform" *Journal of Poverty*, Vol. 14, Issue 1 (2010): 76-96; Karen Seccombe, Delores James and Kimberly Battle Walters, "'They Think You Ain't Much of Nothing': The Social Construction of the Welfare Mother" *Journal of Marriage and Family* Vol. 60, No. 4 (November 1998): 849-865

<sup>585</sup> There is a long history in the United States of forced sterilization of black and native American mothers see: Randal Hansen, *Sterilized by the State: Eugenics, Race, and the Population Scare in Twentieth Century America*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Paul A. Lombardo, ed. *A Century of Eugenics in America: From the Indiana Experiment to the Human Genome Era*. (Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press, 2011); *Dorothy Roberts, Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*. (New York: Random House, 1997).

<sup>586</sup> The 1980s was rife with this racialized discourse but the discourse itself had been developing for decades, see: Regina G. Kunzel, "White Neurosis, Black Pathology: Constructing Out-of-Wedlock Pregnancy in the Wartime and Postwar United States," *Not June Cleaver*, 304-31; Rickie Solinger, *Wake Up Little Suzie: Single Pregnancy and Race Before Roe v. Wade*. (New York: Routledge, 1992).



populating the nation with the “wrong” kind of children, and the other by failing to perpetuate the white race.<sup>587</sup> If white women delaying parenthood to further their careers put the security of American whiteness in peril, then white women aborting their pregnancies threatened to obliterate white hegemony all together. As American religious historian Randal Balmer observes, the white fetus, in its innocence and vulnerability, became the perfect symbol for white Christian conservative’s sense of “beleaguerment and helplessness” in the face of social change.<sup>588</sup>

Despite the fact that the conservative pronatalist messages continue to ripple through American popular culture, the early leaders of what would become “the religious right” and the “family values” movement, did not originally organize under the “life” banner. White supremacy was their first rallying cry. As Paul Whyrich explained to Balmer,

Let's remember... that the Religious Right did not come together in response to the *Roe* decision. No,... what got us going as a political movement was the attempt on the part of the Internal Revenue Service to rescind the tax-exempt status of Bob Jones University because of its racially discriminatory policies.<sup>589</sup>

The religious right turned white women’s fecundity into a national crisis by demonizing black mothers and by perpetuating the myth of the infertile professional woman—but abortion was the lynchpin. It is important to remember that the evangelical right was largely ambivalent

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<sup>587</sup> For more on the intersection of whiteness and gender see: Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness*. (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1993); Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People*. (New York: Norton and Company 2010). Nicola Beisel and Tamara Kay have also produced an insightful commentary on the racialized nature of the abortion debate and called for a more nuanced approach to intersectionality: Nicola Beisel and Tamara Kay, Abortion, Race, and Gender in Nineteenth-Century America *American Sociological Review*. Vol. 69, no. 4 (August, 2004): 498-518

<sup>588</sup> Balmer, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*, 160.

<sup>589</sup> Randall Balmer *Thy Kingdom Come: How the Religious Right Distorts the Faith and Threatens America*. (New York: Basic Books, 2006) 13-14.

on abortion for seven years after the *Roe v. Wade* decision. In fact, major evangelical outlets like the conservative *Christianity Today* published articles by prominent pastors and conservative seminary deans in support of abortion rights.<sup>590</sup> In 1971, The Southern Baptist Convention even passed a resolution stating that although some members advocated for limiting abortion access to cases where the mother's life was at risk, this was too extreme. In their words,

We call upon Southern Baptists to work for legislation that will allow the possibility of abortion under such conditions as rape, incest, clear evidence of severe fetal deformity, and carefully ascertained evidence of the likelihood of damage to the emotional, mental, and physical health of the mother.<sup>591</sup>

It was not until the election cycle of 1980 that abortion became the galvanizing force it is today.

Conservative Christian leaders like Paul Weyrich, Jerry Falwell, and Tim LaHaye used popular media to make white abortion into the moral panic *du jour*. Their hope was that the issue would divide the devotedly democratic Catholic electorate and unite conservative white Catholics with conservative white evangelicals, thereby weakening the democratic stronghold in urban areas in the Northeast and Midwest and forming a wider republican base.<sup>592</sup> It worked beautifully. The once essential unified bloc called “the Catholic vote” disappeared. As a result, anti-abortion crusades from the right have successfully placed unprecedented limitations on

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<sup>590</sup> *Christianity Today*, Vol.3 Is. 13, November 8, 1968.

<sup>591</sup> The Southern Baptist Convention, Resolution on Abortion, St. Louis, MO 1971. Full text available here: <http://www.sbc.net/resolutions/13/resolution-on-abortion>

<sup>592</sup> For more on the religious right see: Randall Balmer, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory.*; Susan Friend Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Lienisch, Michael. *Redeeming America: Piety and Politics in the New Christian Right.* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993); William Martin, *With God on Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right In America.* (New York: Broadway Books, 1996); Garry Wills, *Under God: Religion and American Politics.* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990).

American women's access to birth control and abortion—many of which have been enacted in the last decade.

Today, the claim that miscarriage remains shrouded in taboo and stigma goes unchallenged. Certainly, some women feel unwarranted shame and guilt, along with a host of other emotions, upon miscarrying. They may feel like they have done something wrong, or like their bodies have betrayed them, or that have failed their baby or family.<sup>593</sup> These destructive notions are likely wrapped up in misogynistic cultural messages that “empower” women by telling them they can be “supermoms” if they just “lean in” or “opt out,” or eat “super foods” and transform their post-partem bodies into “hot mommy” bodies via the latest and greatest fitness trend.<sup>594</sup> These discourses remain pervasive and they shift the burden of responsibility from

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<sup>593</sup> A national survey published in *Obstetrics and Gynecology* found that 41% of those surveyed felt that they had done something to cause their miscarriage and 47% reported feelings of guilt. Jonah Bardos, MD, MBE; Hercz, Daniel MSc; Friedenthal, Jenna MD; Missmer, Stacey A. ScD; Williams, Zev MD, PhD, “National Survey on Public Perceptions of Miscarriage” *Obstetrics & Gynecology*, Vol. 125 - Issue 6 (June 2015): 1313–1320.

These feelings are also reported anecdotally by women and taken up by “experts” see: “Stillbirth: your Stories” *The New York Times*, July 28, 2015. Myriad women also repeat these feelings via social media, see: <https://www.facebook.com/miscarriage/> For examples of “expert” advice on these feelings see: Julie Indichova, *Inconceivable: A Women's Triumph over Despair and Statistics*. (New York: Random House, 2002); Bruce Young M.D., *Miscarriage Medicine and Miracles: Everything You Need to Know About Miscarriage*. (New York: Random House, 2008).

<sup>594</sup> For primary source materials on “super mom” and “super women” messages see: Amy Chua, *The Battle Hymn of The Tiger Mother*. (New York: Penguin, 2011); Sheryl Sandberg, *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead*. (New York: Knopf, 2013). Gwyneth Paltrow's popular weekly online newsletter and website *Goop* is arguably the consummate example of white affluent “super mom” culture. *Goop* features articles aimed at mothers on parenting, cooking for children, keeping in shape, fashion etc. Its tone is unmistakably white, privileged, and distinctively Californian. *Goop* favors “alterative” health practices, New-Age inspired spirituality, consumer-based activism, and demanding parenting practices like baby-wearing, co-sleeping, and attachment parenting. Under the cooking tab of the website, for example there is whole category for “Detoxes and Cleanses.” It is the place to go if you are a would-be supermom who shops at Wholefoods, has a personal trainer, does yoga, and want to confirm your fear of gluten and GMOs. [www.goop.com](http://www.goop.com)

structural mechanism of male privilege to individual women's "failure" to "empower" themselves.<sup>595</sup>

Women may also not know how to tell people about their miscarriage.<sup>596</sup> People may not know how to comfort them, or may say the wrong things in the effort to help, but that is true of bereavement more generally.<sup>597</sup> Telling a woman who has had a miscarriage, "don't worry, you'll try again" may not be terribly sensitive, but it does not constitute a silencing mechanism, as many of the therapeutic books and articles assert, any more than does telling a widow, "don't worry, your husband's in a better place." Miscarriage remains an often sad and physically demanding experience for many women, perhaps in part, because the trauma is being culturally prescribed.<sup>598</sup> The idea that miscarriage remains a hushed secret, or that women are not culturally authorized to grieve, however, deserves interrogation.

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<sup>595</sup> For more on false "empowerment" messages in American media and advertising see: Sarah Banet-Weiser, "'Confidence You Can Carry!': Girls in Crisis and the Market for Girls' Empowerment Organizations," *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 29, no. 2 (March 4, 2015): 182–93.

<sup>596</sup> Informing others of a miscarriage and responding correctly to the information appears to be a significant concern as evidenced by the plethora of how-to's available. See for example: "Telling Other's About Your Miscarriage *WebMD.Com* <http://www.webmd.com/baby/telling-others-about-your-miscarriage> ; Monica Bielanko, "The most important thing to say to someone who has suffered a miscarriage" *Babble* <https://www.babble.com/pregnancy/the-most-important-thing-to-say-to-someone-who-has-suffered-a-miscarriage/> ; Jessica Leader, "Coping with miscarriage: Greif, recovery and how to tell people" *Today's Parent*, May 14, 2012 <http://www.todayparent.com/pregnancy/coping-with-miscarriage-grief-recovery-how-to-tell-people/> ; Dr. Jessica Zucker, "What to Say (Or not) to Someone Who Has Had a Miscarriage" *Modern Loss*, <http://modernloss.com/what-not-to-say-to-someone-who-has-had-a-miscarriage/>

<sup>597</sup> For evidence of this in bereavement unrelated to miscarriage see: Mark Epstein, "The Trauma of Being Alive" *The New York Times*, August 3, 2013; Jerusha Hull McCormack, *Grieving: A Beginners Guild*. (New York: Paraclete Press, 2006); Meghan O'Rourke, "Good Greif: Is there a better way to be bereaved" *The New Yorker*, February 1, 2010.

<sup>598</sup> Donna Bassin, "Maternal Subjectivity in Culture and Nostalgia: Mourning and Memory."

Since the 1980s, miscarriage has been abundantly covered in the mainstream news media. News outlets like *The New York Times*, *The Huffington Post* and *The Los Angeles Times* have recognized the National Miscarriage and Stillbirth Remembrance Day (October 15th) by running special issues full of articles the subject. The Remembrance Day itself was set by United States House of Representatives in 2006.<sup>599</sup> Women are organizing and attending miscarriage memorial

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<sup>599</sup> President Reagan issued a presidential proclamation (Proclamation 5890) on October 25, 1988 declaring October “National Pregnancy and Infant Loss Remembrance Month.” The specific National Miscarriage and Stillbirth Remembrance Day (October 15) was established in House Resolution 254, by the 107<sup>th</sup> Congress, passed on October 9, 2001, sponsored by Congressman Richard Armey, republican from Texas’ 26<sup>th</sup> district.

A similar concurrent resolution (issued from both the House and the Senate) passed in 2006, sponsored by Congressman Tom Latham of Iowa’s 4<sup>th</sup> district and 54 co-sponsors. H.Con Res. 222 added to the 2001 resolution by requesting that the president issue a presidential proclamation “calling upon the people of the United States to observe such a day (October 15) with appropriate programs and activities.” H. Con. Res 222 (109<sup>th</sup> Congress), September 28, 2006. President George W. Bush did not issue an additional proclamation. Governors from all 50 states have issued similar proclamations.

The movement has also spread to the UK, Canada, and Australia. The Canadian provinces of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia have passed similar declarations observing October 15, as have Western Australia and New South Wales, Australia. In the UK, the movement is not legislative but there is a concerted grass roots and social media effort to recognize the week of October 15 as “Baby Loss Week” and to commemorate it with “secular” and “nondenominational” memorial services at places like Westminster and the Canterbury Cathedral. For more on these services see <http://www.sayinggoodbye.org> For recent examples of articles on miscarriage in the popular press see: Nicholas Bakalar, “Getting Pregnant After A Miscarriage,” *The New York Times*, February, 23 2016; Brett Blumenthal, “Miscarriage and My Battle with the Internet,” *The Huffington Post* October 15, 2015; Carolina Bolonga, “How a Remembrance Tattoo Help One Mom Heal After Miscarriage,” *The Huffington Post*, June 22, 2016.; Kim Delatorre, “Things Only a Miscarriage Survivor Would Understand,” *The Huffington Post* May 5, 2016; Mary K. Moore, “After A Miscarriage, Seeking Permission to Grieve,” *The New York Times*, August 11, 2014; Kathy Radigan, “The Importance of Sharing our Pregnancy Loss Stories,” *The Huffington Post*, June 14, 2016; Candy Schulman, “Just an Ordinary Miscarriage,” *The New York Times*, October 25, 2015; Erica Schweigershausen, “15 Women and Their Miscarriages,” *New York Magazine*, September 18, 2014; Stacey Skysak, “A mother’s Day With Empty Arms,” *The Huffington Post*, May 5 2016.; Monica Wesolowka, “A Mother With a Candle to Light,” *The New York Times*, October 13, 2013; Ann Zamudio, “They May Not Have Children, But They Are Still Mothers” *The Huffington Post*, May 3, 2016; Jessica Zucker “Saying it Loudly: I had a Miscarriage,” *The New York Times* , October 14, 2014.

ceremonies.<sup>600</sup> They are telling their miscarriage stories on Facebook.<sup>601</sup> They are Tweeting about their miscarriages.<sup>602</sup> They are creating public Pinterest boards full of miscarriage memorial imagery.<sup>603</sup> They are creating memorial videos and posting them to YouTube.<sup>604</sup> The hash tag #Ihadamiscarriage continues to trend on Twitter and Instagram. Women are buying and wearing miscarriage jewelry, they are making miscarriage memorial items and selling them on Etsy.<sup>605</sup> They are adding “angel” decals to the popular car decals that represent individual family members. They are including their miscarried children symbolically in their family Christmas card photographs. Celebrities like Mark Zuckerberg, Gwyneth Paltrow, Lindsey Lohan, Mariah Carey, and Beyoncé Knowles have publicly discussed their miscarriages (or in Zuckerberg’s case, his wife’s).

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<sup>600</sup> See: Janal Atals, “Memorializing Your infant after Miscarriage or Stillbirth,” *Babble*, 2010; Krissi Danielsson, “8 Miscarriage Memorial Ideas,” *About.com*.

<sup>601</sup> Individual women often tell their personal miscarriage stories on there Facebook pages. Public group sites also exist, see: “A Place for Our Angels, Miscarriage and Stillbirth Memorials” *Facebook*, [https://www.facebook.com/miscarriagememorials/photos\\_stream?tab=photos](https://www.facebook.com/miscarriagememorials/photos_stream?tab=photos) .

<sup>602</sup> See: Twitter search #Miscarriage <https://twitter.com/search?q=%23miscarriage&src=tyah&lang=en>

<sup>603</sup> A few examples: Nicole Smith, <https://www.pinterest.com/seeingsunshine1/miscarriage/> ; Tiffany, <https://www.pinterest.com/babybokeh/miscarriage/> ; Jennifer Rader, <https://www.pinterest.com/jdr21/miscarriage/>; Sara Wright, [https://www.pinterest.com/sara\\_1\\_wright/miscarriage/](https://www.pinterest.com/sara_1_wright/miscarriage/); Amanda K, <https://www.pinterest.com/aknopp1031/miscarriage/> ; Mrs. Hazer, <https://www.pinterest.com/jlhazer/miscarriage/>

<sup>604</sup> See examples here:

“Levi and Rowan”, <http://angelbabymemorials.blogspot.com/2010/09/in-loving-memory-of-levi-and-rowan.html> ; “Baby Justice” [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w\\_Dr5xVIAE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w_Dr5xVIAE); Cate and Cole <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1MGndijGHg4>

<sup>605</sup> See: [https://www.etsy.com/market/miscarriage\\_jewelry](https://www.etsy.com/market/miscarriage_jewelry)



Image 17: Necklace designed to showcase footprints of actual miscarried fetus, Designed by Jill Campa<sup>606</sup>

Amidst all of this hyper-visibility, the call to action remains: fight the silence!<sup>607</sup> Which begs the question: what silence? Is it possible that the fight against a silence long-defeated, is actually now doing more harm than good? I am not arguing women's miscarriage experiences have *not* been historically silenced and invalidated. I am calling attention to the fact that the mechanisms of silence that remain now seem to privilege narratives that affirm miscarriage as the death of a child. The fight against the miscarriage taboo has become a phantom war that

<sup>606</sup> [https://www.etsy.com/shop/NowThatsPersonal?ref=profile\\_shopname](https://www.etsy.com/shop/NowThatsPersonal?ref=profile_shopname)

<sup>607</sup> Injunctions to 'break the silence' around miscarriage are abundant, see for example: Holly Cave, "Breaking the Silence on Miscarriage," *The New Republic*, March 1, 2016; Ingrid Kohn and Perry-Lynn Moffitt, *A Silent Sorrow, Pregnancy Loss: guidance, and support for you and your family*, (New York: Routledge, 2000); Hope Ricciotti, "Miscarriage: Keep Breaking the Silence," *Harvard Health Blog*, November 10, 2015.

does as much to assert fetal personhood and conservative Christian pronatalist agendas as it does to help women heal.

### *The Rise of “Secular” Therapeutic Culture*

The miscarriage “mourning culture” of the 1980s coincided with the rise of therapeutic culture and the self-help-publishing boom.<sup>608</sup> Many of the books aimed at helping women cope with miscarriage laid the groundwork for today’s digital miscarriage memorial media.<sup>609</sup> They also illustrate how a movement crafted supposedly to break the silence surrounding miscarriage quickly became a movement that pushed the women themselves back into shadows.

The 1982 *Empty Arms: Coping with Miscarriage, Stillbirth and Infant Death* became a widespread, popular psychological text on miscarriage and stillbirth.<sup>610</sup> Author Sherokee Ilse blended her professional psychological training with her personal miscarriage experience to help women make sense of their losses. The main aim of *Empty Arms* is to undermine mechanisms of invisibility and isolation Ilse saw surrounding prenatal loss. Ilse’s book encourages women to do “unconventional” things like name and photograph their “babies.”<sup>611</sup> She encourages them to organize funerals. If the children are delivered in a hospital, Ilse encourages mothers to *insist* on

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<sup>608</sup> For more on the rise of therapeutic culture and self-help publishing see: Timothy Aubry and Trysh Travis eds. *Rethinking Therapeutic Culture*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015); Frank Furedi, *The Therapy Culture: Cultivating Vulnerability In an Uncertain Age*. (New York: Routledge, 2004); Boris Kachka, “The Power of Positive Publishing: How Self-Help Ate America,” *New York Magazine*, January 6, 2016.

<sup>609</sup> Some of these books include: Alexa H. Bigwarfe and Regina Petsch, *Sunshine After the Storm: A Survival Guide for the Grieving Mother*. (New York: Kat Biggie Press, 2013); Pan Vredevelt, *Empty Arms: Hope and Support for Those Who Have Suffered a Miscarriage, Stillbirth, or Tubal Pregnancy*. (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah Publishers, 1984); Jack Hayford, *I’ll Hold You in Heaven*. (Bloomington, MN: Chosen Books, 1986);

<sup>610</sup> Sherokee Ilse, *Empty Arms: Coping with Miscarriage, Stillbirth and Infant Death*. (Maple Plain, MN: Wintergreen Press 1982).

<sup>611</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.



seeing and holding their children's bodies before they are cremated or interred. She acknowledges that such insistence would likely be met with resistance as it went against many hospital's protocols and doctor's advice at the time. Her tone is clearly corrective and empowering. "What may have been 'right' for your parents 35 years ago... may not be 'right' for you. Don't let others talk you out of doing things you want to do."<sup>612</sup> Although Ilse makes no mention of publicizing the images, and in fact seems to assume that they will be kept as private mementos, her book was part of the broader cultural shift toward making miscarriage visible in so far as it was understood a heartbreaking and tragic loss of a child.

Like *Empty Arms*, the 1991 *Empty Cradle, Broken Heart: Surviving the Death of Your Baby* exemplifies popular psychological literature on miscarriage and stillbirth.<sup>613</sup> Author Deborah L. Davis has established herself as a preeminent expert in prenatal loss. Like Ilse, Davis prescribes viewing, holding, and photographing the fetal body whenever possible. She insists that this practice is not just helpful for some, but universally cathartic and necessary. She writes, "Usually, when a baby is born too early for any chance of survival, the mother is not allowed to see the body, for fear that it will upset her. But for the mother to see her baby is to validate that the child existed and lived inside her."<sup>614</sup> In Davis' estimation, fetal visibility, and the acceptance of fetal personhood, is essential for maternal healing.

In *Empty Cradle*, Davis remarkably makes no distinction between an early miscarriage and a newborn infant death. She is expressly intentional about using the term "baby" to refer to all stages of fetal development. Other authors do this as well without justification. Davis explains

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<sup>612</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>613</sup> Deborah Davis, *Empty Cradle, Broken Heart: Surviving the Death of Your Baby*. (Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 1991).

<sup>614</sup> Ibid., 52.

her choice to conflate the categories of miscarriage, stillbirth, and infant death by arguing that the grief many women feel after an early miscarriage is often callously dismissed by the prevailing culture. “Early miscarriage is often discounted, or seen... as nature’s way of ‘weeding out the weak’...” she writes, “...but for many, miscarriage is a baby who has died.”<sup>615</sup> The book is only for that “many.”

Davis is admirably attempting to validate all types of grief, but the uncritical use of *baby* reflects the larger trend in therapeutic literature and the mental health community. Interestingly, Davis does not seem concerned that a mother who lost a child to SIDS (sudden infant death syndrome) might feel deeply *invalidated* by the conflation of her experience with that of a woman whose pregnancy ends after only six weeks. Similarly, neither Davis nor Ilse allow space for women who, for whatever reason, do *not* relate to their miscarriages as “babies who have died.” They advise women to follow their gut rather than convention, but also seem to talk women out of their feelings if those feelings are anything other than the emotions the authors sanction.

In the chapter entitled “Affirming Your Baby,” Davis reiterates the importance of taking photographs even if mothers do not feel they want them at the time. She cites three examples of such women, two of whom are riddled with regret and one who declined postmortem photographs only to discover several months later, that the hospital had taken them anyway. This third woman, according to Davis, rejoiced that the staff had ignored her wishes. Thank goodness her authority was undercut.<sup>616</sup> There are no stories of women who wished they could *unsee* the fetal remains. No stories of women who were left haunted by the postmortem images. There are

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<sup>615</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>616</sup> *Ibid.*, 57-59.

no stories of women who responded to their miscarriages with less emotional intensity or women who greeted their miscarriage with relief. These women exist but they are completely absent in the new pregnancy-loss discourses. Their experiences remain invisible.

### *Pronatalism, Medicine, and the State*

As the cultural shift around miscarriage unfolded, American medicine in general was in the midst of a foundational shift toward more patient-centered approaches.<sup>617</sup> Throughout the 1980s and 90s (and beyond), many hospitals and clinics were intentionally trying to dismantle the “white coat effect” born from the 1950 and 60s beatification of male scientific authority. Feminist critiques of the medicalization (read: male take-over) of pregnancy and birth, along with the steadily increasing number of female gynecologists and obstetricians also produced more holistic and “mother-centered” standards of care. The result was a slow but steady sea change.<sup>618</sup>

What Ilse and Davis were encouraging their readers to *demand* has now become standard in contemporary medical practice—at least for women in well-equipped American hospitals. Poor women in underfunded hospitals and hospitals abroad likely have a variety of different experiences. Most hospitals now allow and even encourage women to hold, bath, and dress their

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<sup>617</sup> Paul Star, *Social Transformations of American Medicine*. For a feminist critique of male-centered birthing practices from the period see: Sheryl Burt Ruzek, *The Women's Health Movement: Feminist Alternatives to Medical Control*. (New York: Praeger, 1978).

<sup>618</sup> For more on reactions to the medicalization of birth see: Pamela Klassen, *Blessed Events*; Brian Burtch, *Trials of Labor: The Re-emergency of Midwifery*. (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994); Judith Price Rooks, *Midwifery and Childbirth in America*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press 1997); Barbara Katz Rothman, *In Labor: Women's Power in the Birthplace*. (New York: Norton, 1982); Paul Star, *Social Transformations of American Medicine*.

miscarried or stillborn children when possible. Most hospitals will take photographs, facilitate a family's access to clergy, and allow families to take fetal remains with them or release them to a professional funeral service provider. Some hospitals have built specific grieving rooms for women who have experienced miscarriage or stillbirth.<sup>619</sup>

As a whole, these changes have been beneficial for women. Allowing women who want to see their miscarried or stillborn children access to them is clearly therapeutic. Woman-centered birthing policies and better communication between doctors and patients are also boons for women's health. It is also a good thing that children who might not have been deemed viable in years past might now benefit from life-saving medical advancements. What should give us pause, however, is that many religiously affiliated hospitals have refused necessary medical treatment to women during miscarriage and that even in non-religiously affiliated hospitals, many now-standard practices are presented as apolitical and "secular," when they are nothing of the sort.<sup>620</sup>

Many hospitals today offer grief counseling for women who have suffered a miscarriage or stillbirth.<sup>621</sup> Interestingly, anthropologist Ryna Rapp observes in her study of women's reactions to amniocentesis, that these services are largely not offered to women who elect to have abortions after an unfavorable diagnosis.<sup>622</sup> Rapp points out that these losses are treated as purely medical events, rather than as personal tragedies. I would go further and argue that women who choose to terminate pregnancies diagnosed with non-lethal genetic abnormalities like Downs

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<sup>619</sup> See for example, Jane's Room in Chicago. <http://www.janebwellstein.org>

<sup>620</sup> Leslie Reagan, *From Hazard To Blessing*.

<sup>621</sup> Rayna Rapp, *Testing Women, Testing the Fetus: The Social Impact of Amniocentesis in America*. (New York: Routledge, 1999); Leslie Reagan, *From Hazard To Blessing*.

<sup>622</sup> Rayna Rapp, *Testing Women, Testing the Fetus*.

syndrome are vilified in public discourse and compared to eugenicists.<sup>623</sup> Ohio, Indiana, and North Dakota have gone so far as to ban abortions based on Downs or other non-lethal genetic abnormalities despite the fact that these pregnancies will produce children with significant life-long medical needs families may not be equipped to meet.<sup>624</sup> All the while, wealthy public figures like Sarah Palin and Rick Santorum thrust their disabled children into the spotlight at every opportunity to show the world that they made the “selfless” decision, and they are lauded for it.<sup>625</sup>

Women who have ectopic pregnancies and/or undergo medically recommended abortions do often regard those experiences as personal tragedies.<sup>626</sup> Yet, when women make the choice to end a pregnancy, even if the choice is necessary to save their own lives, and even if it breaks

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<sup>623</sup> “When Does Abortion Become Eugenics,” *The Atlantic*, May 24, 2016; Mark Laurence Shrad, “Does Down Syndrome Justify Abortion?” *The New York Times*, September 4, 2015.

<sup>624</sup> Guttmacher Institute

<sup>625</sup> Sarah Palin’s son, Trig Palin was diagnosed with Downs syndrome in utero and Palin has made her decision to carry to term a central part of her political career. On February 6, 2012, Newsweek put out an entire special issue entitled “Poster Mom” on Palin’s relationship with her son and her stance on issues related to abortion and disabilities. Palin penned an article for the edition entitled, “Life with Trig.” See also: Harold Pollack, “Governor Palin Delivers long Awaited Speech on Children with Disabilities,” *The Huffington Post*, November 28, 2008. Among conservative Christians, children with Downs syndrome have become potent religious and political symbols. Choosing to carry a child with the condition affords a woman the opportunity to live out her faith and thereby gain considerable moral and spiritual cache in her religious community. Images of Downs children are commonly used in conservative Christian mission paraphernalia. At conservative Christian homeschooling conferences and gatherings like those affiliated with the Institute for Basic Life Principles, children with Downs syndrome are often called to the stage as living testimonies to the sanctity of life, or otherwise made into a spectacle. Katherine Joyce has observed in her study of evangelical international adoption, that for many families, adopting children with conditions like Downs has become a political and religious statement as much as a way of building a family. Kathryn Joyce. *The Child Catchers: Rescue Trafficking and the New Gospel of Adoption*. (New York: Public Affairs Press, 2013) 217.

<sup>626</sup> See this collection of stories from women who opted to terminate wanted pregnancies: Christy Brooks ed. *Our Heartbreaking Choices: forty-six women share their stories of interrupting a much-wanted pregnancy*. (New York: iUniverse Inc. 2008).

their hearts, they apparently lose the right to grief and sympathy. Rapp's study underscores what fetal memorial media suggest—that neither the pregnancy-loss movements nor the fetal memorialization trend is “constructed by or for women's interests.”<sup>627</sup> Both are constructed to assert fetal personhood and sacrality, and to impose that self-sacrificing motherhood is a woman's only means of fulfillment.

Women indeed, are not the only ones generating fetal memorial media. Official “secular” hospital pamphlets, and materials on miscarriage and stillbirth often bear little footprints, butterflies, or angel wings—symbols made popular and routinely deployed by pro-life advocates. It is now standard for hospitals to take photographs and footprints of miscarried (if possible) or stillborn babies, just as they do for live babies. At many hospitals, parents of stillborn or fatally premature children are also presented with all the material items parents of live babies take home as mementos—the hospital blanket, a baby book with footprints, photographs, a ceremonial birth certificate, and if possible, a lock of hair.<sup>628</sup>

This is not universally appreciated. Some women do not *want* to hold their miscarried or stillborn children, some do not want to see them, or name them, or know their sex. Some do not want photographs, or certificates, or baby books with hauntingly tiny footprints in them. These practices can place the value of the fetus over the wishes of the mother. They can undermine a woman's ownership of her own experience and impose a specific definition of motherhood on women who may not want to claim it. In a culture shaped by unmarked public pronatalism, these

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<sup>627</sup> Rapp, *Testing Women*, 279.

<sup>628</sup> Leslie Regan, Linda Layne, and Rayna Rapp all note this in their studies. For confirmation I surveyed 6 Kaiser Permanente hospitals in the greater Los Angeles Area, Mt. Sinai Hospital in New York City and Texas Children's Hospital in Houston from March 2016-April 2016 all of which send home these mementos.

women are marginalized, shamed, or ignored. Sarah Klagsbrun was one such woman. In a 1998

letter to the editor of the *New York Times*, Klagsbrun wrote,

The hospital staff pressured my husband and me to hold and name the baby and take home mementos that included photographs, footprints and a lock of hair...The staff was reluctant to accept our wishes and we were made to feel that we were not mourning properly.<sup>629</sup>

Making a baby book for a woman who does not want one may be a relatively benign hospital policy, pressuring her to hold and name her dead child is less so. But even these impositions pale in comparison to other ways the culture of conservative Christian pronatalism asserts power over women's bodies. Catholic hospitals across the country refuse to treat women undergoing miscarriage until the fetal heart beat stops on its own. This can mean women endure hours of profuse bleeding, acute pain, and even sepsis before anyone will help them.<sup>630</sup> Catholic hospitals in the United States are bound by The Ethical and Religious Directives of the US Council of Bishops, a document penned by leaders of Church, all of whom are men and none of whom are medical professionals. The directives state that even when the fetus' death is inevitable, doctors cannot provide women with the safest and least painful medical interventions if those interventions include aborting or delivering the pre-viable fetus.<sup>631</sup>

Tamesha Means of Muskegon, Michigan went to Mercy Heath Partner's Hospital emergency room in December of 2010 after her water broke in the eighteenth week of her pregnancy. The staff sent her home. They did not inform her that there were procedures they

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<sup>629</sup> Sarah Klagsbrun, letter to the editor, *The New York Times*, November 28, 1998.

<sup>630</sup> Julia Kaye, Brigitte Amiri, Louise Melling, and Jennifer Dalven, "Health Care Denied: Patients and Physicians Speak Out About Catholic Hospitals and the Threat to Women's Health and Lives," *American Civil Liberties Union*, Data provided by Merger Watch, May 2016.

<sup>631</sup> United States Conference of Bishops, "Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services," 5th edition, November 17, 2009.

could perform but would not. They also did not inform her that by allowing the miscarriage to occur “naturally” Means was at risk for developing potentially fatal sepsis. She returned the next day in severe pain, was diagnosed with a “significant infection,” and sent home again, with Tylenol. Eventually Means would completely miscarry and would then be treated with an intensive regime of antibiotics.<sup>632</sup> Mercy Health Partners is the only emergency room in Muskegon County. If Means wanted to be treated at a non-Catholic hospital, she would have had to travel more than 60 miles, but since she was never told that another hospital would have provided different care, she did not consider it. It is not just that the Bishops’ directives forbid performing abortions, they forbid informing miscarrying patients that the procedure is often the safest option available. Means later sued the hospital group. The case was dismissed by the Hon. Robert Holms Bell. Judge Bell ruled that the court did not have jurisdiction over church doctrine. In the opinion, Judge Bell determined, “the Court shall not adjudicate the negligence claim against any Defendants because it would impermissibly intrude upon ecclesiastical matters.”<sup>633</sup>

Kathleen Prieskorn of Manchester, New Hampshire, was luckier than Means.<sup>634</sup>

Prieskorn’s water broke at fourteen weeks and her doctor told her that he was not allowed to perform an abortion and a dilation and evacuation (D&E), although he knew it to be the best course of action for her health. A Catholic hospital group had recently acquired the hospital with which he was affiliated. Prieskorn would need to travel eighty miles to another hospital for the procedure. With no car, and no health insurance, Priskorn was facing a financial as well as a medical crisis. She was bleeding and suffering from an infection but she could not afford the

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<sup>632</sup> Kaye, Amiri, Melling, and Dalven, “Health Car Denied.”

<sup>633</sup> Robert Holms Bell, *Tamesha Means v. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops*, June 20, 2015.

<sup>634</sup> Molly M. Gingty, “Treatment Denied” *Ms.*, Spring 2011.



ambulance ride. Her doctor gave her four-hundred dollars from his own wallet and put her in a cab.

In 2009, St. Joseph's hospital in Phoenix, Arizona defied the US Council of Bishop directives. When a twenty-seven-year-old woman (who has remained anonymous) came into the emergency room eleven-weeks pregnant with her fifth child and suffering with severe pulmonary hypertension, the hospital ethics committee led by Mercy Sister Margaret McBride, decided to inform her that an abortion was the only way to save her life. She consented and it did. However, when Bishop Thomas Olmstead learned of the abortion in his diocese he immediately denounced the life-saving procedure saying,

While medical professionals should certainly try to save a pregnant mother's life, there are some situations where the mother may in fact die along with her child. But — and this is the Catholic perspective — you can't do evil to bring about good. The end does not justify the means.<sup>635</sup>

He then excommunicated Sister McBride and the Sister of Mercy resigned her post.

These are examples from Catholic hospitals protected by the First Amendment and empowered to value religious doctrine over women's health. Perhaps we should not be surprised. The trope of the suffering or martyred mother has been part of Catholic popular culture in the United States for nearly a century.<sup>636</sup> However, the martyr mother is starkly absent from contemporary fetal memorial media that assumes female safety, sentimentalizes miscarriage, and depicts it as a primarily emotional trauma.

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<sup>635</sup> Barbara Bradley Hagerty, interview with Bishop Thomas Olmstead, "Nun Excommunicated For Allowing Abortion," *National Public Radio*, May 19, 2010.

<sup>636</sup> For more on Catholic maternal suffering in popular culture see: Robert Orsi *Thank You St. Jude: Women's Devotional to the Patron St. of Hopeless Causes* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press 1996).

Since *Humanae Vitae* the Catholic Church has made its views on women's reproductive freedom abundantly clear and those views impact women's lives around the globe.<sup>637</sup> However, conservative Christian pronatalism in the United States, which draws from a spectrum of conservative Christianities, reaches beyond expressly religious institutions and often goes unmarked in civic life. Conservative Christian pronatalism has become so pervasive it has been woven into state power structures under the guise of a purely "civic" value system.

Shea Hicks Register, a veterinarian in Birmingham, Alabama understood this all too well in April of 2015. Twenty weeks into her pregnancy, Register and her husband learned that their son had several congenital abnormalities and that he would die in utero, but no one could tell them when. Like Angie Smith, who has since fashioned a monetized ministry out of her decision to carry her fatally diagnosed pregnancy as long as possible, Shea Hicks Register had to face a difficult reality.<sup>638</sup> Angie Smith was, and continues to be, celebrated for her decision to ignore her doctors' advice to terminate her pregnancy.<sup>639</sup> Smith did not simply make a medically ill-advised choice, she threw down a gauntlet to all women: make the "self-less" choice, carry your doomed pregnancy to term no matter the cost to your health, and while you are at it, fly to California, and walk your pregnant body around Disneyland so that your unborn child can "experience" It's a Small World, because that is what good mothers do.<sup>640</sup>

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<sup>637</sup>Pope Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae*, Encyclical Letter, "On the Regulation Of Birth" July 25, 1968.

<sup>638</sup> Angie Smith began her blog *Bring the Rain* to chronicle her terminally diagnosed pregnancy but it has since become the webpage for her professional ministry. After the public reactions to her story, Smith began a career as a paid speaker and author. She has since written seven books for adults and children. In 2016 she booked eighteen speaking engagements around the country, has slightly more than 48,000 Instagram followers, 58,000 Facebook likes, 77,700 twitter followers and 2,500 people following her 13 Pinterest boards.

<sup>639</sup> Angie Smith, *Bring the Rain* <http://angiesmithonline.com> ; Angie Smith, *I Will Carry You: The Sacred Dance of Grief and Joy*. (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2010).

<sup>640</sup> Since Smith's story became public, other similar injunctions that women carry terminal

Shea Hicks Register, however, was not going to be given the chance to make the “self-less” choice, the State of Alabama had made it for her. In Alabama, abortions after twelve weeks are illegal; inducing labor before thirty-seven weeks is also illegal. The state of Alabama was going to force Register to carry a dying fetus until thirty-seven weeks when he could be delivered by induction, or until he died within her, or until her life was sufficiently endangered by the host of medical issues that would invariably arise.

She later wrote on her Facebook page,

I never realized how our government would affect me and my baby until I was in the 1% of women whose child had severe lethal congenital problems at 20 weeks into pregnancy... It's a very scary place to be in and women and their doctors need support to do what THEY feel is right for themselves and their babies.<sup>641</sup>

The thought of being forced to feel her son struggle for weeks, and eventually die within her, was too much to bear. “I pleaded with my doctor to find a way...” she remembers.<sup>642</sup> Luckily, Register and her husband had the means to take time off from work, and travel to another state where she was induced. She wrote, “My heart breaks for the mothers living in Alabama that are forced to silently suffer as they carry their deceased child for months. Mothers deserve better.”<sup>643</sup>

A culture shaped by conservative Christian pronatalism celebrates women like Smith while either demonizing or ignoring women like Register. Shea Hicks Register did not transform

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fetuses have appeared from evangelical and catholic authors. For example: Amy Kuebelbeck, *Waiting with Gabriel: A Story of Cherishing a Baby's Brief Life*. (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 2008); Amy Kuebelbeck and Deborah L. Davis, *The Gift of Time: Continuing Your Pregnancy When Your Baby's Life is Expected to be Brief*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011).

<sup>641</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/hickssk>, Posted October 1, 2015

<sup>642</sup> Shea Hicks Register as told in, “Stillbirth: your Stories,” *The New York Times*, July 28, 2015.

<sup>643</sup> Ibid.

her son into a symbol. She does not get to turn her tragedy into celebrity, or her experience into a popular children's book.<sup>644</sup> She chose to end her own suffering. The issue of pain is central here. Women are expected to suffer in miscarriage, emotionally and to a lesser degree, physically. But the suffering must be passively accepted, romanticized, and sacralized. Centering emotional pain at the expense of physical pain underscores the notion that women exist for the purpose of child bearing, that pain is their natural state, and that women are and should be willing to suffer any amount of physical anguish for their children. If women refuse to accept physical suffering, if they demand measures be taken to alleviate their pain, they forfeit their right to sympathy.

Only women who privilege their fetus' wellbeing over their own, who assume the mantle of motherhood after any length of pregnancy, who experience miscarriage as the death of a child, and who transform their fetuses into powerful conduits between the human and the divine are legitimized in popular media and increasingly, by the state. For example, in 2001, after a concerted grass roots campaign, Arizona became the first state to pass a "Missing Angels" bill. Missing Angel bills allow states to issue legal birth certificates for stillborn babies (babies born dead at 20 weeks or more) upon parental request.

Prior to 2001, stillbirths were issued fetal death certificates but only live births received birth certificates. Hospitals often provide ceremonial certificates and private organizations like the National Memorial for the Unborn and Life United issue decorative certificates for a fee. Some families though, needed more. They felt that in not issuing birth certificates to their stillborn children, the state was denying their children's personhood. Since 2001, thirty-one other states have passed similar legislation, all of which have been dubbed "Missing Angel bills."

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<sup>644</sup> Angie Smith, *Audrey Bunny*. (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2013).

These bills have been sympathetically covered in the mainstream press.<sup>645</sup> However, they are not without controversy. The debates over Missing Angel bills center on who the state legitimizes as a person. Missing Angel bills suggest that personhood is determined by emotion rather than ethics. In many of the thirty-one Missing Angel states, abortion is legal beyond twenty weeks. Issuing birth certificates for a twenty-week stillborn fetus while allowing women to abort at up to twenty-four weeks or more, complicates the already ambiguous issues surrounding fetal personhood and seems to suggest that personhood is determined by whether or not a fetus is wanted.

In 2007, the debate escalated when a Missing Angel bill was under consideration in California. Opposing the bill was the National Organization for Women, Planned Parenthood of California, the ACLU, NARAL, the California Medical Association, and the California American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology. The Missing Angel campaign responded by producing a four minute “public service announcement” with images of women and couples of various races speaking directly into the camera and demanding that their “babies” no longer be “hidden in the closet and pushed into the shadows.”<sup>646</sup> The ad, along with its creators, asserted that Missing Angel initiatives were apolitical, secular, and beyond the abortion debate. In fact, the Missing Angel ad went as far as to co-opt abortion rights language, claiming “its about choice” (as well as the LGBTQ rights language of “the closet”). This claim is reminiscent of the “post-feminist” argument that any choice a woman makes is inherently a feminist choice,

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<sup>645</sup> Maichael Bejamine, “Protecting Abortion—But Not Women,” *The New York Post*, July 19, 2011.; Richard Jerome, “Proof of Life,” *People*, December 11, 2006.; Katie Moisse, “New Pennsylvania Law Allows Birth Certificates for Stillborns,” *ABC News*, July 15, 2011.

<sup>646</sup> The four-minute add ran in 2013, it can be accessed now on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZNVTDTK-0Jk>.

regardless of her cultural contexts and even if the choice reinscribes her oppression.<sup>647</sup> One Missing Angel advocate told *People Magazine*, “we don't want to get into the abortion debate—we're not asking for proof that fetuses are living beings...It's a matter of asking the state to ... recognize that we had a baby...”<sup>648</sup> Missing Angel bills then are somehow above the abortion debate and are not asserting that fetuses are living beings, but are entirely about the state recognizing their personhood.

Whether or not Missing Angel bills contribute to the erosion of women's reproductive agency seems almost beside the point. By their very nature, they do. These bills discursively enforce conservative Christianity's dominance in the public sphere. In popular public discourse, and in law, stillborn fetuses are now *angels*, supernatural beings that travel between heaven and earth. The very name of the bills suggests that there is a cadre of helpless spiritual children lost somewhere beyond the veil, needing to be reunited with their families via the power of the state. Rather than *never here*, or *dead*, they are *missing*. They continue to exist and presumably continue to act on the world in various unseen ways.



Image 18: “Angel Baby” car decal

<sup>647</sup> For more on post-feminism see: Rosalind Gill, “Postfeminist media culture: Elements of a sensibility.” *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, Vol. 10 no. 2 (2007); Angela McRobbie, *Feminism and Youth Culture*. (Basingstoke, England: Macmillan Education, 1991); Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

<sup>648</sup> Richard Jerome, “Proof of Life” *People*, December 11, 2006.

These new beings have the power to grant women social visibility and validation if they maintain their relationships with them. Discursively, having a *miscarriage* entitles women to nearly nothing, provides nothing, and means nothing. Becoming a *mother* to an *Angel Baby* entitles a woman to deep sympathy, state recognition, and generates an eternal relationship with an unseen being with personality and purpose, capable of creating a fissure between the human and the transcendent. The use of *angel* and *Angel Baby* in miscarriage discourse in fact, is so common as to appear irreligious. These Angel Baby bills, and the terms they use, are presented as apolitical and completely secular when nothing could be further from the truth.

#### *Walter*

In 2013, Lexi Fretz made her son Walter real for the world. The work Walter would do in world though, had only just begun. Two years after Fretz posted Walter's images they resurfaced in a very unusual context. Amidst the 2015 congressional battles to defund Planned Parenthood, abortion opponent David Dalieden staged a series of hidden camera "stings" at a California Planned Parenthood clinic, and claimed that he had caught the healthcare provider profiting off the sale of fetal remains. Dalieden's claims had no grounding in fact and the footage he released was misleadingly edited and dubbed.<sup>649</sup> He was later indicted by a Grand Jury on felony and misdemeanor charges related to his fraud.<sup>650</sup> Despite the apparent fiction, his videos went viral, in part because they contained disturbing images of a supposedly aborted fetus and

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<sup>649</sup> See Jackie Calmes, "Planned Parenthood Video Were Altered, Analysis Finds" *The New York Times*, August 27, 2015.

<sup>650</sup> The misdemeanor charges for attempting to buy and sell human organs were thrown out by a Harris County, Texas court on June 14, 2016 under the argument that the Grand Jury did not have jurisdiction over the misdemeanor charge. See: Manny Fernandez, "2 Abortion Foes Behind Planned Parenthood Video are Indicted" *The New York Times*, January 25, 2016.

gruesome testimony from a woman claiming to have witnessed a doctor harvest the fetal brain while his heart was still beating.<sup>651</sup> The fetus in the video was Walter Fretz.

Lexi Fretz learned from a friend who had seen the videos, that the photographs she and her husband had lovingly taken of their son had been co-opted by Dalieden, doctored slightly to look as though they had been taken covertly with a grainy hidden camera, and passed off as the images of an aborted and dissected fetus. Lexi Fretz's response to the fraud provides the ultimate window on the role of the miscarried fetus in the conservative Christian pronatalist imagination. Fretz told Tom Roberts of MSNBC's *Live with Tom Roberts*,

We were shocked at first, but we are extremely proud of our son and this path that the Lord has put him on just to help, I mean he has saved many many unborn lives. I have had stories of people that have been sitting in the clinic waiting for an abortion and have changed their minds. I have had people come up to me personally in the street and say 'I didn't know' ...<sup>652</sup>

Roberts followed up: "Have you felt betrayed in any way by Walter's life being used and mischaracterized...?"

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<sup>651</sup> Dalieden founded the deceptively named nonprofit, "Center for Medical Progress." The "center" is actually a group of three self-described "citizen journalists" better known as anti-abortion extremists —Dalieden, Troy Newman, and Alan Rhomberg, none of whom are educated as journalists or medical professionals. Newman is a former electrical engineer who also runs Operation Rescue, another anti-abortion extremist organization. Newman has repeatedly called for the murder of abortion doctors. See: Sandya Somashekha, "One of The Nation's Most Controversial Antiabortion Activists," *The Washington Post*, October 2, 2015; Austin Ramzy, "Australia Set to Deport Troy Newman, Head of U.S Anti-Abortion Group," *The New York Times*, October 2, 2015. Alan Rhomberg is known for harassing women attempting to enter Planned Parenthood clinics in Sacramento and was arrested 1991 for disrupting the inauguration California Governor Pete Wilson. See: Tillie Fong, "Anti-Abortion Activists Protest New Site For Sacramento Clinic," *The Sacramento Bee*, August 6, 2013. Despite being debunked, the videos are still available on the group's YouTube page, see:

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCXSI8qkDPz1CZj1u9I8Wbcg>

<sup>652</sup> Tom Roberts interview with Lexi Fretz, "Mother of Stillborn Child Shares Story" *MSNBC Live with Tom Roberts*, September 29, 2015.



I was a little surprised at first, not being directly asked, but at the same time our lives are in Gods hands and my husband and I, we are trusting God and his ultimate perfect plan and we're trusting that he's going to use Walter for His good... I just believe that every child should have a chance... we have so many little lives that are being lost and thrown away each day. And I wish so much my son was here, we miss him, and the short time we had with him was so precious, but I know his purpose, his purpose is to help to educate the world to what a child really looks like...<sup>653</sup>

For Fretz, Walter is actively working on the world, fulfilling his divinely ordained purpose. When asked if she had any desire for an apology from the video makers for using Walter's image without permission, she dismissed the mere suggestion, saying, "No! My husband and I are fine with it having been used."<sup>654</sup> The Fretz's "lives are in God's hands," the fraud must have been part of His "perfect plan."

For Lexi Fretz, her miscarriage not only served as a testimony to her conservative Christian faith and her commitment to pronatalist theology, it generated an autonomous, holy being with the power to execute God's will on Earth. Walter is present, doing real supernatural work, changing hearts and minds, and saving his fellow unborn fetuses from death. Fertz is not in control of his actions anymore, nor does she lay claim to them. Like any mother witnessing her child's achievements, Lexi Fretz is simply, "extremely proud" of her son.

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<sup>653</sup> Ibid.

<sup>654</sup> Ibid.

## CONCLUSION

### The Long Arm of the IBLP

“I believe in the resistance as I believe there can be no light without shadow; or rather, no shadow unless there is also light.”—Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale*

The fact that Bill Gothard has escaped scholarly attention is startling when we look closely at the depth of his influence. There is hardly a leader in the conservative Christian pronatalist, homeschooling, or family-ministry movements who has not been inspired by him in one way or another. As previous chapters have shown, his devotees include Doug Philips, founder of the (now disbanded) “family-values” ministry and media company, Vision Forum; Michael Farris, founder of Patrick Henry College, Generation Joshua, and the Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA), the most powerful advocacy group for homeschooling in the US; and the Duggar Family of TLC reality television shows *19 Kids and Counting* and

Other Gothard affiliates include Steve and Terri Maxwell, founders of the popular homeschooling resource website, Titus2.com, and corporal punishment advocates Mike and Debi Pearl, founders of No Greater Joy Ministry. The Maxwell’s, who are regular speakers at IBLP conferences, invented the “Managers of their Own Chores” programs, including the widely used “chore packs” beloved by homeschooling families around the country, including the Duggars and consequently, some of their viewers.<sup>655</sup> The Pearl’s connection with the IBLP is less direct, but their controversial parenting book *To Train Up A Child* and Debi Pearl’s *Created to his Helpmeet* are sold at IBLP events and there is a clear overlap in their audience.<sup>656</sup>

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<sup>655</sup> See Titus2.com : <https://www.titus2.com/managers-of-their-chores.html>

<sup>656</sup> Mike and Debi Pearl, *To Train Up a Child*. (Pleasantville, TN: No Greater Joy Inc. 1994); Debi Pearl, *Created to his Helpmeet*. (Pleasantville, TN: No Greater Joy Inc. 2008).

Gothard is not just popular among homeschoolers and expressly pronatalist groups.<sup>657</sup> He is (or perhaps, was) well regarded by established, “mainstream” evangelical leaders. Charles Stanley, a renowned elder statesman in evangelical broadcasting, founder of the globally popular In Touch Ministries, and former president the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), cites Gothard as a significant influence on his life and ministry. Stanley claims, Gothard’s work made “an indelible impact on my life.”<sup>658</sup> Similarly, Adrian Rogers, another former SBC president and the pastor of the influential Memphis megachurch, Bellevue Baptist Church, wrote that, “Bill Gothard’s teaching has been transformational in my life, giving me a foundational understanding of biblical truths, especially on authority.”<sup>659</sup>

Gothard’s influence also reaches high up in civil government and conservative politics. While serving as the chairman of the House Committee on Ways and Means in 2011, Congressman Sam Johnson (Republican of Texas) also served as the Chair of the Board of Directors for the IBLP. Johnson went as far as to praise the IBLP’s efforts at a “Training Center” it established in Moscow, Russia on the House floor in 1997.<sup>660</sup> Rep. Dan Webster (Republican of Florida), who won the Freedom Caucus’ endorsement for Speaker of the House in 2015, has been a Gothard follower for decades and a frequent IBLP speaker. Webster has been dubbed, “Taliban Dan” by his critics for his views on the role of women in society, though few critics

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<sup>657</sup> Vision Forum’s statement on pronatalism and patriarchy can be found here: [https://web.archive.org/web/20131203012839/http://www.visionforumministries.org/home/about/biblical\\_patriarchy.aspx](https://web.archive.org/web/20131203012839/http://www.visionforumministries.org/home/about/biblical_patriarchy.aspx)

<sup>658</sup> Charles Stanley, as quoted on the back cover of Bill Gothard, *The Power of Crying Out* (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah Books, 2002) Back Cover.

<sup>659</sup> Adrian Rogers as quoted on the back cover of Bill Gothard, *The Power of Crying Out* (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah Books, 2002). Mesaros-Winckles

<sup>660</sup> Congressional Record Volume 143 number 62, pages E-901-E902, Tuesday May 13, 1997, <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CREC-1997-05-13/html/CREC-1997-05-13-pt1-PgE901-4.htm>

seem to know that those Taliban-reminiscent views are stock-and-standard IBLP theology. In 2003 Webster cited Gothard's teachings as "the basis for everything I do."<sup>661</sup> Finally, the Secretary of Agriculture for the Trump administration, former Georgia Governor, Sonny Perdue has also been a longtime Gothard adherent. In 2011, Perdue helped lead a Gothard seminar for international leaders and business people. He also spoke at the 2008 IBLP Family Conference in Nashville. Incidentally, Perdue was also the "designated survivor" (a person in the Presidential line of succession who is kept intentionally out of the capital building during the speech unless there is an attack) for President Trump's 2018 State of the Union speech, a fact that should give us all pause.

What is more, conservative Christian pronatalist ideologies reach into the highest offices of the land, even if Gothard himself does not. Vice President Mike Pence vowed to end women's reproductive autonomy within the Trump-Pence administration. "We will see *Roe vs. Wade* consigned to the ash heap of history where it belongs" Pence told supports at a rally in July of 2016."<sup>662</sup> But again, conservative Christian pronatalism is not just about abortion. It is about women's autonomy more generally. Then Congressman Mike Pence sponsored the first bill that defunded Planned Parenthood in 2011. Planned Parenthood however, was not using the Title X federal funds for abortion. That was already against the law. The Pence bill made it so that the nation's largest women's healthcare provider could not use federal money for breast cancer screenings, low-cost gynecological exams for poor women, pre-natal care, postpartum care, cervical cancer screening and treatment, contraception, or education. What is more, Pence

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<sup>661</sup>As quoted in, Sarah Posner, "Taliban Dan's Teacher: Inside Bill Gothard's Authoritarian subculture" *Religion Dispatches*. February 9, 2011.

<sup>662</sup> Mike Pence as quoted in "Pence: Prayer and a pledge to end *Roe v. Wade*," *Reuters*. July 28, 2016.

and his wife attended College Park Church, an evangelical megachurch in Indianapolis, where Pastor Mark Vroegop regularly preaches on “complementarian” theology—or the idea that men and women have different, “complimentary” roles ordained by God and that women are commanded to submit to male authority.<sup>663</sup> Christy Mesaros-Winckles, the chair of Communications at Adrian College has noted that, “The rhetorical impact of this ideology is far more pervasive than most people understand.”<sup>664</sup> Indeed, as Mike Pence attests, conservative Christian pronatalism has permeated the highest levels of American power.

### *Character First*

In the early 2000s, Governor Rick Perry of Texas, who delivered an address at the IBLP’s Big Sandy gathering in 2005, partnered with powerful San Antonino businessman Jim Leininger. Leininger, a former IBLP Advisory Board member, bankrolled much of Perry’s political rise and the two eventually partnered with IBLP board member, Tom Hill to bring a “secularized” version of Gothard’s materials to Texas public schools. The program is called Character First. Though Character first remained legally and financially separate from the IBLP, it shared office space with the IBLP’s *Oklahoma City Training Center for years, and Tom Hill remained on the IBLP board while also running Character First.*

The Character First program removed any overt references to God or the Bible, but the program maintained Gothard’s teachings on authority, obedience, and submission, and everything else.

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<sup>663</sup> For an example: Mark Vroegop, “The Beauty of a Submissive Wife” College Park Church, March 19, 2017. The sermon is available here: <https://www.yourchurch.com/sermon/the-beauty-of-a-submissive-wife/>

<sup>664</sup> Christy Mesaros-Winckles as quoted in, Sarah Stankorb, “The Daughter’s Great Escape.” *Marie Claire*, June 15, 2018.

Character First uses Gothard’s Character Qualities chart and each character quality is defined using Gothard’s original language, minus the word God. Just like the *Character Sketches* published by the IBLP as part of its homeschooling curriculum, in Character First, each character quality gets its own booklet, and each quality has a corresponding animal. Attentiveness for example is represented by a deer. All the animal-quality pairings in the two programs are the same. The result is that Character First even *looks* like the IBLP’s homeschooling materials.

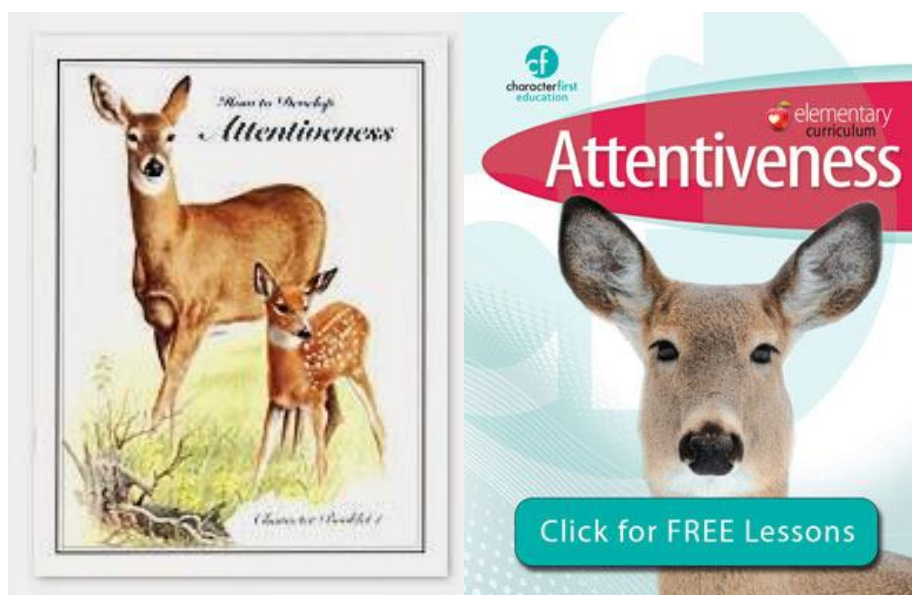


Image 19: The “Attentiveness” Booklets for the IBLP (left) and Character First (right)

As with the IBLP’s Character Qualities, each quality in Character First gets its own song, and every song comes with hand motions. For example, this is the IBLP’s “Obedience Song,”

Obedience [salute] is listening attentively, [clap!]  
 Obedience [salute] will take instructions joyfully, [clap!]  
 Obedience [salute] heeds wishes of authority, [clap!]  
 And obedience [salute] will follow orders instantly! [clap]

Character First’s “Obedience Song” is identical, right down to the hand motions. Indeed, all the songs are identical to their IBLP counterparts.

Character First was bought by a company called Strada Leadership in 2015. Strada Leadership admits that, “Character First based its original list of character qualities and artwork on the Institute’s [the IBLP] ‘Character Sketch’ books (adapted with permission),” though it maintains that the program is now completely secular.<sup>665</sup> However, representatives from Character First spoke at the 2016 Big Sandy Family Conference—strange behavior for an organization with no religious aspirations.<sup>666</sup> Character First has reached beyond Texas as well. States that currently use Character First in public schools include: Texas, Arkansas, Kentucky, Georgia, Florida, and Oklahoma, as well as dozens of individual districts in other states.

Character First has also evolved into a larger web of initiatives. For example the Character First program has been adapted into a multi-day seminar (a format Gothard knows well) for business and community leaders. As journalist Silja Talvi reported for *The Nation* in 2009,

The list of Character First! seminar attendees already reads like a who’s who of top corporations and government institutions: McDonald’s, Burger King, Aflac, Costco, Coca Cola, the Correctional Corporation of America, the Better Business Bureau, Tyson Foods, the U.S. Air Force, U.S. Navy, U.S. Marine Corps, U.S. Coast Guard, U.S. Bureau of Prisons, the Arkansas Prison System and the U.S. District Attorney’s office are all mentioned, in addition to more than a dozen school districts (including Denver, Memphis and Ft. Lauderdale), and eight healthcare companies and hospitals.<sup>667</sup>

In addition to Rick Perry, Governors Sarah Palin, and Mike Huckabee are all also alumnae of the Gothard’s IBLP Basic and Advanced seminars and each implemented Gothard-inspired “Character” programs in their state governments while in power. Huckabee is also the father of

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<sup>665</sup> <http://www.strataleadership.com/history.php>

<sup>666</sup> Character First makes such claims on its website: <http://www.characterfirsteducation.com/c/>

<sup>667</sup> Silja Talvi, “The Cult of Character: How the ‘secular’ Character Training Institute is working to build evangelist Bill Gothard’s vision of a First-Century Kingdom of God—one city, one state, one school board, one police force and one mind at a time,” *The Nation*, January 9, 2009

White House Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders. While mayor of Wasilla, Alaska, Palin lead her city to join the International Association of Character Cities, a program aimed at implementing Gothard's "Character-based" programs in local governments, police departments, fire departments, and prison systems. Approximately three hundred other cities have also declared themselves "Character Cities," including Oklahoma City, Denver, and Memphis.



Image 20: Bill Gothard (right) and Gov. Mike Huckabee at a fundraiser in 2007.

### *Prisons within Prisons*

The IBLP has also made significant inroads in the nation's prisons and juvenile detention centers. In 1993, Stephen Goldsmith, the two-term mayor of Indianapolis, and later domestic policy advisor to President George W. Bush partnered with Gothard to build an IBLP Training Center on city-owned property in his hometown. Goldsmith sold the Property to the IBLP for one dollar.<sup>668</sup> Once established, the Indianapolis Training Center (ITC) functioned as an

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<sup>668</sup> The sale records are available at the Marion County Clerk's office in Indianapolis.



alternative juvenile detention facility for years, despite multiple investigations into child abuse and neglect. Hundreds of children were sent to the ITC rather than to state run juvenile detention centers. The youth incarcerated at the Indianapolis Training Center were “educated” per the Gothard method, memorizing scripture and “automating” Gothard teachings like unconditional obedience to authority.

According to an extensive undercover investigation by the local NBC news affiliate and a subsequent investigation by Child Protective Services, children were routinely placed in small solitary confinements called “prayer rooms,” sometimes while handcuffed, for days and sometimes weeks at a time.<sup>669</sup> John Krull was the executive director of the Indiana Civil Liberties Union at the time of the investigations. He called the Training Center, “a shadow world where these kids almost disappear.”<sup>670</sup> According to Child Protective Services, children as young as ten were beaten for being “disobedient” and “rebellious” and left handcuffed in solitary confinement. Sixteen and seventeen-year-old girls were routinely paddled across their buttocks by grown men.<sup>671</sup> One young woman reported being tackled by several grown men. Another, named Natasha Zimmerman, was locked in solitary confinement for more thirty-two days after making eye contact with a boy. Zimmerman, who was seventeen while incarcerated at ITC suffers from endometriosis, a common uterine condition that causes extremely painful menstrual periods and excessive bleeding, and which is usually treated with oral contraceptive pills. Unsurprisingly, Zimmerman reports that she was not allowed her medication and so suffered excessive bleeding and pain while in solitary confinement. She reported that she was she given

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<sup>669</sup> Warren Mills, “Dark Secretes” *WTHR Indianapolis*. June 13, 2002.

<sup>670</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>671</sup> *Ibid.*

inadequate sanitary products and that she was rarely given anything for the pain. Zimmerman alleges that she was often taunted by staff with Tylenol who used the promise of the pain killer to manipulate her.<sup>672</sup> Despite undercover video footage and allegations like Zimmerman's, the Marion County Prosecutor chose not to press charges.

How did the ITC become an alternative for state-run juvenile centers? The answer has to do with juvenile court judge (aptly) named James Payne who began sending children to the facility in the late 1990s. Judge Payne was well acquainted with Gothard and the IBLP before Goldsmith partnered with Gothard to build the ITC. Indeed, Goldsmith's wife, Margaret worked for Payne for years prior. It is unclear whether she introduced Payne to the IBLP or vice versa, but the connections run deep. Payne also required his employees to attend Gothard's Character Training Seminars. In fact, Marion County paid the IBLP more than five thousand dollars in tax-payer money for the training.<sup>673</sup> Judge Payne was eventually made the Director of Indiana Child Services but was forced to resign in 2012 amid allegations of ethics violations unrelated to the ITC.<sup>674</sup>

Gothard's materials have also been used extensively in adult prisons around the country. In 1996, Governor Mike Huckabee instituted a Gothard-based prison ministry that is still in place in the Arkansas Department of Corrections. In his words, "As a person who has actually been through the Basic Seminar, I am confident that these are some of the best programs available for instilling character into the lives of people."<sup>675</sup> The ministry has been in place for more than a

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<sup>672</sup> Ibid.

<sup>673</sup> Ibid.

<sup>674</sup> Norman Cox, "Indiana Department of Child Services Director James Payne resigns amid ethical questions" *RTV 6 ABC*. September 24, 2012.

<sup>675</sup> Gov. Huckabee is quoted on the IBLP website. <http://iblp.org/news/how-prisoners-are-finding-freedom>

decade, but it has come under considerable scrutiny of late. In 2015, prison chaplain Kenneth L. Dewitt, who Huckabee appointed to bring Gothard's teachings to Arkansas women's prisons, was charged with fifty counts of third-degree sexual assault against female inmates.<sup>676</sup> However, this has not done very much to call the prison ministry's methods into question. The IBLP has also contracted with the largest private prison company in the United States, Core Civic (formally the Corrections Corporations of America) to bring Gothard's "character education" to inmates across the country.<sup>677</sup> Core Civic runs sixty-five federal correctional centers and detention facilities in nineteen states. According to the company website, the Core Civic incarcerates up to ninety-thousand individuals at any given time.<sup>678</sup>

### ***Soft Patriarchs?***

Conservative Christian pronatalist poster-dad, Jim Bob Duggar, along with other public IBLP father's like IBLP Chairman, Gil Bates are the kind of men sociologist Bradford Wilcox examined in his work, *Soft Patriarchs, New Men: How Christianity Shapes Fathers and Husbands*.<sup>679</sup> Wilcox's detailed study surveyed men in what he delineated as unaffiliated, mainline, and conservative Protestant subgroups and looked specifically at how their religious ideologies around gender influenced their parenting and marriages. Wilcox was surprised to find that the fundamentalist patriarchs who espoused authoritarian values and lived in strictly

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<sup>676</sup> Suzi Parker, "Prison Chaplain Charged With Rape Studied Minister Accused of Sex Abuse," *The Daily Beast*. December 21, 2015.

<sup>677</sup> These numbers are taken from the company website. CoreCivic. "CoreCivic: Better the Public Good." [www.cca.com](http://www.cca.com).

<sup>678</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>679</sup> Bradford Wilcox, *Soft Patriarchs, New Men: How Christianity Shapes Father's and Husbands*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

gendered spheres were freer with their affections and emotions than their more egalitarian counterparts. Moreover, he found that women in these patriarchal marriages reported higher levels of happiness. Therefore, he concluded that the conservative Christian sacralization of the family “domesticated men” causing men in such communities to invest more of themselves in their families, which in turn made their wives happier. Wilcox then took this to mean that their patriarchy was merely “symbolic.” What are we to make of such findings in light of the previous five chapters? My own research into the IBLP supports Wilcox claims about emotional expression, though I argue that Wilcox’s quantitative methods lead him to conclusions that obscure some important realities.

Like the conservative Protestant men in Wilcox’s study, the men of the IBLP (on and off camera) are quick to tears, they communicate openly about *certain* feelings, mainly those related to anger and nostalgia, and they heap lavish (often melodramatic) praise upon their wives and daughters. However, it is worth noting that, based on my participant observations, they are far less expressive with their sons. What is more, their emotional range appears to be prescriptively narrow. Male feelings in the IBLP are simple things. “Women are like the 64 pack of crayons,” one speaker at the 2016 Big Sandy Conference explained, “There’s all kinds of colors in there! Aqua marine, burnt sienna. Glory! What on earth is burnt sienna?” The audience nodded and chuckled knowingly. “You know what we men got?” He looked down shaking his head amused, then with perfect timing, he shot back, “Red.” The audience roared. “We got red. And blue, and green, and if you’re lucky we have orange, but that’s kinda it, ladies. You gotta understand, we’re like the eight-pack of crayons, some of us might even be the four pack, like you get at Denny’s.” More laughter. “We want to know your hearts! We really do, but we just don’t have burnt sienna in our box!” This kind of sentiment of course is not limited to conservative

Christian pronatalist groups. It permeates the whole gendered discourse of American popular culture—women are complex emotional beings, men are cave dwellers. The problem is, such imaginations are as prescriptive as they are descriptive.

Wilcox claims that although these “soft patriarchs” were more likely to use corporal punishment, and although they did almost no house work, and left almost all child-rearing to their wives, their wives somehow felt more loved and appreciated than the women in more egalitarian relationships.<sup>680</sup> He concluded that their iron-fist authority was really just a front, and that, in fact, patriarchal religion brought wayward fathers back into family life, thus improving the overall stability and emotional health of the family. He writes,

conservative Protestantism domesticates men by linking male authority to a demanding ethic of male familial involvement. It offers men a “patriarchal bargain” that accords men symbolic authority in the home in return for their exercise of greater responsibility for the well-being of their families.<sup>681</sup>

In light of the discursive work presented in this study, I find Wilcox’s characterization bizarre. How demanding can the ethic of involvement be when it does not require any actual child-rearing or home-keeping labor? What a “bargain,” indeed. To get men *not* to abandon their families, women need only relinquish any authority they may have to men who refuse to share in the work. Some deal. But Wilcox’s study claimed that women’s most important metric of marital happiness was their husband’s ability to connect emotionally with them—not their husbands’ willingness to share household or parenting labor, or to sexually satisfy them, or to provide a stable income—and that conservative Christian men have the mechanisms in place to develop

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<sup>680</sup> Wilcox, *Soft Patriarchs, New Men*, 191.

<sup>681</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

better emotional skills than their more egalitarian counterparts. My research suggests that when we take conservative Christians at their word, Wilcox is right; but, when we scratch the surface and examine the hegemonic discourses that discipline and police the emotional lives of conservative Christian women, a more complex picture emerges. I am not suggesting that the women in Wilcox's study are not happy, perhaps they are, but I am arguing that any rendering that does not take those powerful discourses into account is fundamentally flawed.

Wilcox's research admirably documents the emphases conservative Christians place on male emotion—a reality that has indeed, been overlooked. However, Wilcox fails to account for the fact that many conservative Christian women, like those in the IBLP, are taught often from childhood, to have *no* positive expectations for their husbands—or as Gothard and the Duggars like to say, “expectations ruin relationships.”<sup>682</sup> They are however taught to expect men to be angry, violent, sexually demanding, and overbearing. They have also been trained to make boundless excuses for them. As my grandmother used to say, “God bless him, he's *just* a man.” Conservative Christian women have embraced this paradoxical gospel of a patriarchy built on male incompetence. As we saw with Michelle Duggar in chapter four, they expect them not to listen, not to emote, not to connect, such that the bar is lowered to the ground. Consequently, when these men act like decent human beings, they become heroes. “That's Jim Bob,” Michelle says at the beginning of every *19 Kids and Counting* episode, “my *wonderful* husband.” The danger of Wilcox's conclusions is that they can reinforce this monumental moral imbalance.

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<sup>682</sup> Bill Gothard, *7 Basic Needs of a Wife*. (Oak Brook, IL: The Institute in Basic Life Principles, 2010). Duggar, Jim Bob & Michelle, *A Love That Multiplies: An Up Close View of How They Make it Wor.*, (Brentwood, TN: Howard Books, 2011) 181.

The celebrated novelist and essayist, Michael Chabon commented on this reality in his essay collection on fatherhood, *Manhood for Amateurs*, after being stopped in a grocery store by a woman who, upon observing him with his child (who, Chabon notes, was ill-kempt, sticky, and misbehaving), told him he was a good father.

I don't know what a woman needs to do to impel a perfect stranger to inform her in the grocery store that she is a really good mom. Perhaps perform an emergency tracheotomy with a Bic pen on her eldest child while simultaneously nursing her infant and buying two week's worth of healthy but appealing breaktime snacks for the entire case of the *Lion King Jr.* In a grocery store, no mother is good or bad; she is just a mother, shopping for her family.<sup>683</sup>

Chabon encapsulates the point I am making about Wilcox's supposedly "soft patriarchs." In conservative Christian families especially, good fathers, soft patriarchs, need only show up and not beat anyone for their wives to celebrate them. Wilcox's surveys fail to account for that fact. Having subterranean expectations for their husbands and impossibly high ones for themselves, women with "involved" partners would of course report higher levels of satisfaction, especially when they have been saddled with the expectation of perfect cheerfulness. Further, can we really call a father who does no housework, changes no diapers, and wipes no noses, "involved" simply because he, like Jim Bob Duggar, deigns to listen to his wife's emotional expressions and meet her, on this one and only metric, half way? How nice it must be to be celebrated for so little.

### ***Angry Men***

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<sup>683</sup> Michael Chabon, *Manhood for Amateurs: The Pleasures and Regrets of a Husband, Father, and Son*. (New York: Harper Collins, 2009).

Wilcox also claims that authoritative religious communities provide systems that check male aggression and keep women safer. Other studies of evangelical men's groups like the Promise Keepers have made similar claims.<sup>684</sup> We can see some evidence for this in Gothard's male-only Anger Resolution seminars. There is a system in place, but that does not mean that it makes women safer. The fact that these seminars exist reinforces the notion that men are angry beings. Anger is their expected default emotion. It is the "red" in their four-pack of emotional crayons.

Moreover, conservative Christian rhetoric around marriage makes it clear that it is women's duty to help men overcome that anger. When Wilcox argues that conservative Christianity "domesticates men," he is obscuring the fact that conservative Christian *women* are the agents of that domestication. It does not happen without women, and women in these authoritative religious communities do it because they are told they must, lest they fall victim to violence and rage. Rather than laying the moral burden of male anger on men, conservative Christianity asserts that although male anger may not be wholly *caused* by women, women have been uniquely tasked by God with diffusing it, or living through it, if they can.

Take for example the Duggar daughters' most recent book wherein the daughters write about how lucky they are that their father, Jim Bob, does not "erupt in anger."<sup>685</sup> They know many girls who are not so lucky, they tell their readers.<sup>686</sup> The Duggar daughters have taken up

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<sup>684</sup> John P. Bartkowski, *The Promise Keepers: Servants, Soldiers and Godly Men*. (New Brunswick, NJ: University Press, 2004).; Allen, L. Dean. *Rise Up, O Men of God: The "Men and Religion Forward Movement" and the "Promise Keepers."* Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 2002.

<sup>685</sup> Jana, Jill, Jessa, and Jinger Duggar, *Growing up Duggar: Its All About Relationships*. (New York: Howard Books 2014) 29.

<sup>686</sup> *Ibid.*



where their mother Michelle left off. On their show *Counting On* and in their book, they use the trappings of late-capitalist wedding culture as a shibboleth to less-conservative or “mainstream” viewers. By participating in all the ritual purchasing, the dress, the flowers, etc., they signal to viewers that they are just like them, but happier and with better hair.<sup>687</sup> They present a version of conservative Christian pronatalism that results in romantic courtships, lavish white weddings, and eventually, cute “baby bumps” they can show off on Instagram. Yet, in their book, and nowhere else, they admit that they often hear from women and girls whose home lives are not so sunny.

According to the Duggar women, they regularly hear from girls whose fathers struggle with alcoholism and drug abuse, who “explode in rage, throwing things, slamming doors, even hitting or pushing their wives.”<sup>688</sup> Such things are never mentioned on the show. Their advice for the girls in such families is reminiscent of Michelle’s advice to beleaguered wives. They tell these girls to “pray for their fathers,” and “to continue to honor their dads in any way they can.”<sup>689</sup> They do *not* advise these girls to leave if they can or to call the police. They do not tell their readers that such that abuse is never their “fault,” that it is not their responsibility to “fix” it, nor do they “deserve” it. Rather, they speak glowingly of the many “strong women of faith” who

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<sup>687</sup> For more on the intersection of religion and shopping see: Kathryn Lofton, *Consuming Religion*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017); Sarah McFarland Taylor, “Shopping and Consumption” *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture*. John C. Lynden and Eric Michael Mazur eds. (New York: Routledge, 2015) 317-335.; Laurence R. Moore, *Selling God: American Religion and the Market Place of Culture*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Bethany Morton, *To Serve God and Wall Mart: The Making of Christian Free Enterprise*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

<sup>688</sup> Duggar, *Growing up Duggar*, 50.

<sup>689</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

persevere in their marriage to these violent, eruptive men, hoping one day to “win them for Christ” by their steadfast devotion.<sup>690</sup>

### *Conclusion*

Wilcox writes of the men in his study,

They do a smaller share of household labor than most husbands, they are more likely than other fathers to use corporal punishment, and they affirm the importance of male headship in the family more than anyone else. But theirs is a very soft patriarchy.<sup>691</sup>

I cannot help but ask, *for whom?* This patriarchy is certainly not “soft” for the children who are spanked or beaten for their misdeeds. It is not “soft” for the women whose bodies and minds break down under the crushing weight of birth after birth, breastfeeding, homeschooling, potty-training, cooking and cleaning, scrimping and budgeting, not to mention keeping the Satanic forces at bay, with little or no help from their husbands. It seems to me that Wilcox is describing a patriarchy that is only “soft” for the men, who “God bless them,” have managed the monumental feat of talking about their feelings.

The study I have presented here focused on women and pronatalist imaginations of mothers, fetuses, babies and children. As the body of scholarship on masculinity and the intersection of religion and fatherhood grows, my aim is for this study to inspire others to be careful with celebrations of so called “soft patriarchs” and not to forget for a moment that being born a white man in the United States is, as Chabon puts it, “like pulling into a parking space with a nickel in your pocket to find that someone left you an hour’s worth of quarters in the

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<sup>690</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>691</sup> Wilcox, *Soft Patriarchs New Men*, 191.

meter.” A careful study of conservative Christian pronatalism that focuses on fathers would present an illuminating compliment to what I have presented here, and very may well challenge some of the conclusions I have come to. However, as scholars, we must not give credit where it has already been given and given and given and given.

Conservative Christian pronatalism must be understood as a wholly human discourse in which we are all implicated—in that it is not produced or disseminated by monsters, innately evil villains, or other comfortingly otherworldly beings. One of the things this study offers is a tool, or resource, for approaching conservative Christian pronatalism and conservative Christianity more generally as a powerful but *understandable* discourse. However, studies that attempt to reimagine conservative Christian pronatalism or its related discourses as somehow *acceptable*, must also be read against the pain, abuses, and deaths I have chronicled here.

My hope is that this project will prompt other scholars to look closely for the overt and covert manifestations of contemporary conservative Christian patriarchy and pronatalism in American popular culture and public life and to hold them to account. Both inside and outside the Institute in Basic Life Principles, the abuse of women and children goes hand in hand with Christian patriarchy, conservative Christian pronatalism, and its corresponding racial, political, and economic agendas. We can no longer afford to ignore the fact that even in its most genteel forms, “complementarianism,” or the notion that God has ordained men and women for different roles, is the theological equivalent of “separate but equal.” It is just as farcical and just as dangerous. If the IBLP teaches us anything, let it be this: however, “soft” patriarchy may appear, it is never safe.



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