

# Building a Religious Marketplace: Evangelical Protestantism and the Social Construction of Religion

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BUILDING A RELIGIOUS MARKETPLACE:  
EVANGELICAL PROTESTANTISM & THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF  
RELIGION

a thesis

by

HANNAH E. CLARKE

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# Building a Religious Marketplace: Evangelical Protestantism and the Social Construction of Religion

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This thesis further explores the relationship between capitalism and Christianity by examining current changes to the style in which Evangelical Protestantism is practiced within the context of America's transition to consumer society. Using a theoretical framework of the marketplace theory of religious change and critical cultural studies, I argue that by displacing religion as the dominant mediator of ultimate meaning, the pressure consumer society places on religious content and practices to adapt may be part of a process of colonization through which the alignment between capitalism and Christianity is continued and its potential to be a critical cultural resource is reduced. To this end, I employ a mixed methodology of participant observation, unstructured interviews and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine the cultural content of Lakewood Church in Houston, TX, America's largest Protestant church.

American Christianity has long been entangled with capitalism (Hendershot 2004; Miller 2004; Moore 1994; 2003; Schultze 2003; Tawney 1998; Watson 2007; Weber 1930). A large amount of theoretical insight has been generated by a critical analysis of this association, and this thesis aims to further explore the relationship by examining current changes to the style in which Evangelical Protestantism is practiced within the context of America's transition to consumer society. The reader familiar with the standard sociological writings on Western religion will no doubt recall the work of Weber, Durkheim and Marx; remembering the significance of elective affinities, dead fathers and opiates. Walter Benjamin's fragment on religion ([1921] 1996), in which he equates the history of Christianity with that of capitalism itself, is less familiar, but he proposes that the two are so far bound with each other that their end is to become indistinguishable. Once again, there would be an outward, economic organization of society entirely in tune with its inward, spiritual one.

One of the dominant features of consumer society is its tendency to keep extending its practice into additional parts of social and personal life in order to generate further economic growth. Previously non-market-oriented aspects of human existence are "colonized" through a process that appropriates responsibility for their satisfaction, but addresses it by way of consumer-oriented choices (Baudrillard 1998; Habermas 1981; Miller 2004; Slater 1997). In this way, new aspects of life continue to be integrated into the market. Education, childcare, sex, prestige, etc., all have to be satisfactorily reduced to things that are exchangeable between individuals or accomplishable through the use of goods and services for sale. Using a combination of the marketplace theory of religious

change and critical cultural studies, I will argue that by displacing religion as the dominant mediator of ultimate meaning, the pressure consumer society places on religious content and practices to adapt may be part of a process of colonization through which the alignment between capitalism and Christianity is continued and its newly acquired potential to be a critical cultural resource reduced. To explore this idea, I examine the cultural content of Lakewood Church, America's largest megachurch. Before presenting the case study and empirical findings, I begin with a brief discussion of relevant theory regarding the role of ideology, discourse and the self in late modernity, followed by an overview of the literature on American Protestantism, the marketplace theory of religious change and the ideological potential of religion.

## THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

### *Ideology, Hegemony and Discourse Analysis*

In *An All Consuming Century*, Gary Cross (2000) traces the triumph of market capitalism and its culture of consumerism across the 20<sup>th</sup> Century as he argues that this particular "ism" is what saved America from the more dangerous ideologies of Communism and Fascism that had threatened so many of the other Western political systems over this time period. Consumerism, he argues, served as an effective replacement for the communal and religious ties broken by modernity, and it provided individuals with a sense of freedom that they have accepted, and continue to accept, even as the avenues for non-consumerist alternatives continue to close. Don Slater (1997), too, observes: "in the modern world, core social practices and cultural values, ideas, aspirations and identities

are defined and oriented in relation to consumption rather than to other social dimensions such as work or citizenship, religious cosmology or military role" (p. 24). He adds that this is a "totalizing culture"—emerged from modernity and liberal political thought—meaning that we do not just organize our dominant values through consumerism, but it, in turn, influences our values, as well.

What began as a satisfactory existential solution to modernity's dilemmas has nevertheless taken on a highly independent form, as this economy's continued expansion requires more and more aspects of life to be integrated into the market, even as the environmental and social consequences of such unchecked growth have become clear (Fournier 2008; Fernando 2003; Strong 2009). Likewise, others have argued that this excessive consumption, along with high levels of depression, anxiety and other social ills, are pathologies raised with the excesses of modernity, including hyper-individualism, heavy social isolation and constant competition (Berman 1981; Brennan 2000). The alternatives to this arrangement are not clear, and the political avenues to a satisfactory resolution are complicated, in part, because the triumph of this way of life emerged from the same liberal political and economic tradition, based on human reason and autonomy, that now needs to check it. Contemporary American liberalism encompasses a broad spectrum of beliefs, running from the neoliberals of the right arguing for unfettered market competition to the social liberals of the left asking that the societal and environmental consequences of our economic system be mitigated. The left, however, has hit a very precarious position. Continuing to force these issues requires abandoning the liberal political ideals of individual choice and limited government interference, but

letting it rest with the public requires trusting that American consumers will eventually come around to the sustainable and community-orientated lifestyle choices they have so notoriously ignored.

Jurgen Habermas (2010) is responding to this democratic dilemma by calling for "an awareness of what is missing," by which he means reason and any sense of morality based on it, in an attempt to resuscitate "the minds of secular subjects" so that they will again behave as engaged secular citizens in a democratic community. "Practical reason fails to fulfill its own vocation when it no longer has sufficient strength to awaken, and to keep awake, in the minds of secular subjects, an awareness of the violations of solidarity throughout the world, an awareness of what is missing, of what cries out to heaven" (p. 19). Other scholars from the left, too, have been going back to "heaven" and its religions as a source of deeper, transcendent meaning that can help fill the void left from endless cycles of goods and services, and perhaps reinvigorate the sense of community that has been lost, although hopefully in such a fashion will that keep us moving progressively forward (Bourdillard 2002; Bellah 2002; Habermas 2008; 2010; West 1993). Others (Kramnick and Moore 1996; Neuhaus (1997); Wolfe 2005; 2009) never left religion, arguing that any arrangement that neglects it is inherently flawed since the morality and authority derived from religion has always been essential to the American political system.

Just as these scholars are returning to this source, the dominant and fastest growing American religious affiliation, Evangelical Protestant Christianity,<sup>1</sup> is increasingly embracing the culture of consumption, so much so that scholars of religion



have warned of its impending commodification (Miller 2004; Sargeant 2000; Ward 2007). Since the 1970s, these congregations have increasingly organized their services around the secular features of late modernity. Sociologists of religion have since identified a “new paradigm” for their study that addresses this transition by incorporating rational choice theory into explanations for change. These changes include a decline in denominational affiliation, more use of modern media and marketing practices, adoption of contemporary Christian music and, increasingly, incorporation of prosperity theology.<sup>2</sup> Another prominent feature of these changes is the so-dubbed “megachurches”<sup>3</sup> that have sprouted up around the country during these decades. Not only are these changes associated with the fastest-growing style of religion in America, but they are also tied to a booming Christian culture industry generating billions of dollars a year.<sup>4</sup>

For these reasons, I am using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to explore the processes by which the discourses and practices associated with consumer society are penetrating the discourse and practice of this religion. CDA provides a theoretical framework as well as a method for studying the relationship between changes in language and broader social change. In his outline of the technique, Norman Fairclough (1992) proposes a three-dimensional model that examines the relationship between a text itself,<sup>5</sup> the discursive practices involved (e.g. the context within which a text is produced, disseminated and received) and the larger social practices that shape them both. The model relies on the viewpoint that power is maintained through hegemonic struggle, and it takes Gramsci's notion of the unstable equilibrium of hegemony and Althusser's theory that ideology “interpolates” its subjects (and thus helps to constitute them as social

actors) as its center. This is the link through which language is connected with real power relations. The idea goes further in arguing that since our current orders of discourse are central to hegemonic reproduction, changes or observed disruptions in those orders signal larger social changes that may in turn indicate changes within the current distribution of power. It is therefore an ideal way to bridge insights generated through an interpretive approach with the structural changes associated with late capitalism, and especially so when we consider the vaunted role of language and cultural production in maintaining it.

I use the word "ideology" to refer to political struggle at the level of ideas. However, as a concept, it can be understood at many different levels, none of which have clearly gained precedence over the rest. However, the multiplicity of definitions for the word does illustrate how far it has evolved past the way in which it was used under the banner of "vulgar" Marxism, which considers ideology to be the pure reflection of the ideas necessary to maintain the material economic order (Eagleton 1991). At the least, the relationship is usually acknowledged to be dialectical. Two key questions that remain are to what degree ideology and the material order are interdependent and whether all thought can be dismissed as materially conditioned. If the second were to be true, any basis for granting the non-material realm an independent existence would be denied and ideologies would always have to be considered purely justificatory rather than potentially transformative. Even under their most autonomous definition, ideologies will always remain "discourses unable to curve back critically upon themselves" (Eagleton 1991:60). This is the point, of course, since circling back would mean facing the contradictions

between thought and practice that a dogmatic articulation of the way it is, or the way it should be, serves to hide. It is this blind side that makes ideological belief so powerful a force.

The sociology of knowledge tradition of Karl Manheim sits at one end of this debate, asserting that all thought is, indeed, relative to material circumstances. Knowledge itself would therefore be ideological in the sense that it lacks independent validation and thus any claims to transcendent truth (Bailey 1994). The critical theory of the Frankfurt school, on the other hand, tries to preserve the possibility of truth in thought, or the possibility that it can in some manner contain an independent, objectively valid concept such as the ideal (as in just) society. This tradition therefore approaches any ideological critique from the perspective that somewhere within it lies something of worth, in that it at least reveals a collective preoccupation with what is out of sorts in our understanding of the world around us. In other words, since what makes thought ideological is that it masks a discordance between what is and what should be, it at least can always reveal a current understanding of just what *should* be. Critical theory, therefore, assumes ideological discourse can be broken down and that truth may in that way be revealed.

### *Modernity and the Self: Sacred vs. Autonomous*

Modern political thought, and by extension modern political formation, depends upon an autonomous locus of self that cannot rightly be abdicated, even if it can easily be duped. It relies on the capacity of individuals to reach an unadulterated understanding of the real

conditions of the world around them. The liberal tradition assumes that the individual operates as an individual, although possibly a mystified one, who remains capable of rational thought and critical understanding. The conditions of late modernity test this conception in two primary ways. First, late modernity undermines the assumption of an autonomous subject through its tendency to decenter and fragment the self as it calls upon competing requirements for different social purposes (Eagleton 1991; Fromm 1941; Slater 1997). Second, it challenges the idea that late capitalism, and the political order that maintains it, still needs "permission" from these individuals to operate (Eagleton 1991). Eagleton calls this second point the "end of ideology" and concludes that, if we follow Habermas who suggests that ideas are not needed to justify the inevitable, "ideology in its classical sense is thus superfluous" because there is so little room left for transformative political action that mystifying the individual to protect the current economic system is no longer necessary (1991:38).

Adam Seligman (2000) also discusses the place of the self in modernity, but he applies a theological perspective. He maintains that the autonomous self that sustains modern political and economic thought is an inherently insufficient standing for any conception of agency that moves beyond the rational, calculating, individual consumer because it denies the legitimacy of authority based on affective or sacred beliefs. Along with other theologians, he prefers a conception that sees the "locus" of the self as sacred. This is clearly different in that it implies that autonomy is a gift rather than a right, but when juxtaposed with the one-dimensional and utility-maximizing extremes of late modernity we can see that these are two traditions now essentially trying to preserve the

same thing: a three-dimensional subject that is capable of seeing beyond just the maximization of individual gain. Seligman makes the case that this is impossible without some sort of inner-acceptance of limitations, which, if it is not to be based on external notions of what is best for the individual, must come from an acceptance of simply what is best. In return for this subordination of needs, however, individuals are retaining a piece of themselves that cannot be sold or pulled away in always-changing directions towards the shiniest new best end. It gives them that "inner sense of authenticity" which the modern identity lacks, resulting in the insecure pursuit of purchasable replacements that offer no permanent sense of stability, sustaining the practice of consumerism (Slater 1997:85).

### *Religion as Social Practice*

Charles Davis (1994) attempts to unite critical theory with this theological perspective using the concept of revelation contained in the Western, monotheistic religions and focusing on the means by which revelation is the revealing of a way of life. While faith, he argues, remains constant, the specific beliefs being advocated within it will always change along with the changing cultural context. He anticipates the argument laid out by Habermas by insisting that religion can only be useful in this regard if it remains open and allowed to take these specific beliefs into the political argument. In exchange for a place at the table, religion, through its faith in transcendent values, preserves the "unrestricted openness to reality" that is a critical foundation of the modern project, which he believes (along with Habermas) has become stagnated in purely utilitarian

thought (p. 37). Religion's marginalization by the modern project in Western countries, then, may so far have saved it to a certain extent from the attention of market forces focused on colonizing the structural space that was left wide-open when religion was first dismissed from the public square. To the extent that its content remains outside of this dominant structure, it retains a critical stance: "Its exclusion from the institutional structure has released it as a permanent critique" (1994:46).

On the other hand, Davis is also maintaining that the Christian tradition can be analyzed as a narrative that keeps its historical continuity through discursive adjustments to structural change. Revelation is communication that contains instructions on how to live a life achieved by way of symbolism and analogy. In order to be understood, these instructions must be coded in a way the recipient can recognize. Therefore the specific language employed will always reflect the specific "secular intellectual context." The negative implication of this line of thought is that these responses are not guaranteed to be progressive, or even, in the long run, continue to remain outside the dominant structure. It is possible that changes will instead end up preserving Weber's elective affinity between Protestantism and capitalism. A relatively large change to the economic system in which a religion operates, such as the transition from industrial to consumer capitalism, would cause enough disruption in the cultural context to necessitate an update in the means used to get its message across. The current dominant ideology of consumerism is legitimizing an economic system that sacralizes material goods, the means of acquiring and displaying them and the self. The Protestant tradition would have to incorporate this emerging symbolic language into its message if it is to remain

relevant. Following this viewpoint, then, prosperity theology could be seen as a new articulation of belief that will “save” the continuity of the Christian tradition during a transitional period, rather than an adulterated or bastardized version of the faith.

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

### *American Protestantism in an American Market: the market-based approach to religious change*

R. Laurence Moore (1994) provides a historical background particularly relevant to this study by tracing the history of American Protestantism along the lines of its use of mass media. For a modernized country, America remains an obstinately religious one, and while the origin of American exceptionalism has multiple ideological roots, one of its distinctive offshoots has always been the country’s ongoing piousness in the face of modernity. This feature is traceable to the particular social and political organization of the country and its Constitution. As a byproduct of disestablishment, American religion has always had to compete for relevance and resources in the market just like any other private institution. This is decidedly different from European states, which have continued to provide financial support to the official establishment even after severing their political ties. Functionally, this is the ideological equivalent of a price floor. Staying solvent for religious institutions in America, on the other hand, has always been a matter of peddling their wares; they must go to the people to survive, including in their use of goods and entertainment, which, prior to the 1920s, was primarily mass-market books and public theatre.

Moore argues that from its beginning the 19th Century progressive Christian movement, or Social Gospel, worked hand in hand with the emerging American consumer culture since so much of its energy was spent trying to influence household consumption practices and the proper allocation of family resources. In order to suitably help the less fortunate, these Christian activists believed they had to instill the values and work ethic that accompanied the dominant vision of success in America at the time. The financial success of these churches, which again were funded almost entirely by patronage, was therefore essential to spreading values considered necessary to the maintenance of the American character. This meant not only keeping a tight operation business-wise, but also catering to what were really the specific interests of the economic elite, who did not necessarily distinguish between American "character" and American "worker." This relationship called for periodic upgrading and rebranding of the faith in order to keep their promotional efforts effective.

With time, however, the power of the mainline Protestant groups<sup>6</sup> slowly faded into pointing the way to wholesome and healthy content, as the culture of mainline Protestantism itself became less distinguishable from middle to upper class white American culture as a whole.<sup>7</sup> Moralizing was hardly compelling to a modern American audience being courted by an entertainment industry that continued to grow both technologically and in influence. This left the market for an innovative and profit generating approach to religious entertainment wide-open for non-mainline and more conservative denominations, such as Baptists, Methodists and Pentecostals. But the role of money in conservative radio and television programming was not just a matter of



straight economic politics. It also involved inter- and intra-denominational infighting and power dynamics.

Up until this period, the Federal Council of Churches (later renamed the National Council), which has a left and progressively leaning membership body, had reigned as the dominant American religious lobby. Although the FCC had initially allotted free public interest airtime to religious groups, the religious establishment at the time, which consisted of mainline Protestant groups represented by the Federal Council as well as some Catholic and Jewish groups, secured these allotments. Denominations with less institutional clout had to buy their way into media access from the beginning. The field was only leveled in this regard by a 1960 FCC decision that free time to religious groups was no longer mandatory. At this point, however, it was hardly a level playing field as the previously excluded conservative and Evangelical Christians already had a 40-year head start on fundraising. In response to their new relative disadvantage, the Federal Council lobbied to ban paid-for religious programming. Moore argues that it was these actions, the Federal Council acting as a "media trade-association group for its member churches" (p. 246), that triggered the formation of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), a conservative-leaning organization, which then went on to form the National Religious Broadcasters, in an effort to get its overwhelmingly conservative content into the media channels and out to the public.

In an effort to continue reaching out to mainstream Americans today, many Protestant churches, especially Evangelical ones, have continued to adopt features of the secular consumer culture with which they compete for power and influence. They

incorporate popular music, multimedia presentations and graphics into their services (Schultze and Woods 2008). Groups market Christian books, movies, music, video games, toys and apparel in an effort to get out the message, provide an alternative and even make a little money in the process (Hendershot 2004). Church growth consultants arrive equipped with a line of accompanying books, sermons, workshops and other mass-produced creations that used to be tailored to the local environment (Sargeant 2000).

This history is crucial to marketplace theories of religious change. Broadly, the line of theory attributes American Protestantism's unique ability to stay relevant in a modern, industrialized nation to our constitutionally mandated disestablishment and lack of interference by the State. Further, since the Protestant Reformation has already sanctioned individual theological interpretation, periodic "reclaiming" of the Bible and its contents by the people is an ever-present possibility.<sup>8</sup> This process enables the belief system to be recontextualized, or upgraded, in order to keep up with whatever new priorities and insecurities emerge within an always-changing culture (Sargeant 2000).

In his essay, "Bringing Theory Back In," Rodney Stark (1997), a scholar at the forefront of the market-based approach to religious change, frames his own role in contributing to this new paradigm for the study of religion within his personal dissatisfaction with theory in the discipline of sociology in general. He cites his admiration of Karl Popper and frustrations with sociologists and their insistence that the inductive method is the only way to generate theory, as opposed to using the deductive method of a proper science. His introduction of rational choice theory to the study of religion was an unapologetic part of an attempt to reassert the role of empirically

verifiable formulas that can be used to predict human behavior. This deductive theory of religion begins with the rational choice axiom: "humans seek what they perceive to be rewards and avoid what they perceive to be costs" (p. 7). His assertion from that point is also worth quoting: "[individuals] enter into a long-term exchange relationship with the divine"<sup>9</sup> and "churches rest upon these underlying exchange relationships." The rest of his points continue in a series of more rational choice axioms and propositions.

The theory was given further weight by Lawrence Iannaccone (1992), an economist, whose work has proved its usefulness both as a theoretical framework and as a means to explain empirical changes in the structure of American religion. For example, he asserts:

[In rational choice theory] the actor's *ultimate* objectives, variously labeled 'tastes' or 'preferences,' are assumed to remain stable. . . . In practice [that] means a rational choice model must explain changing behavior in terms of changing constraints. The assumptions of rational choice and stable preferences thus have the following corollary: *Behavioral changes (over time) are the consequence of changed constraints; behavioral differences (across individuals) are the consequence of differing constraints.* (1997:28; author's italics)

This focus on "constraints" tends to reverse the usual focus of theories of religion on changing demand by the people. This allows sociologists who do take a market-based approach to spend more time accounting for changes to the religious supply. These in turn are often attributed to "religious innovators" who introduce novel practices in order to "win" the attention of religious consumers.

As Steven Warner (1997) observes, this approach has led to some very important insights regarding the American religious scene and provided a framework for understanding why secularization theory is far more useful in Europe, with its state-

sponsored religious institutions, than in the American free market where religions need to compete for both bodies in the seats and the financial resources necessary to keep them there. However, as Iannacone himself pointed out in the above quote, the rational choice model does not account for changes to tastes or preferences because it simply isn't capable. This creates a corresponding need for more demand-side accounts of religious change. Demand-side change is not used here to mean increases in demand due to existential instability, as it has been traditionally understood within the sociology of religion, but rather as *difference* in demand that results from changing needs, tastes and preferences.<sup>10</sup> Although Warner has objections to the deductive method as a whole, he proposes that people for whom its focus on individual choice does not sit well can still use an inductive method to flush out the rational choice approach and expand its application. His hope is to develop a new theory of religion that takes the market approach insight that disestablishment and deregulation allow for creative religious innovation, while leaving aside rational choice theory's insistence that religion is an individual rather than communal matter.

A second approach to the explanation of new paradigm churches also places them within America's free religious market, but much like the theory advanced by Davis, prioritizes the need for a religion to evolve with changing systems of meaning and incorporate relevant cultural symbols if it is to survive through transitional periods. This is the approach taken by Donald Miller (1997), who also emphasizes Protestantism's ability to avoid routinization by way of periodic revivals and shifting practices. He even goes so far as to propose another reformation may be in the works. Although he

acknowledges the discomfort some may feel with the incorporation of modern day business techniques into church operations and the emergence of mass-produced Christian commodity goods, he remains very optimistic about the response of Protestant groups to changes in the American cultural landscape. They allow congregations to remain relevant, provide a place of community and integration, help those in need with challenges posed by modern life and reassert the church's role as a mediator of meaning in the world. He also realizes these congregations are in many ways mimicking the services of the self-growth industry and privatized support structures, but notes that here it is within a context that deemphasizes the narcissism and reinforced insecurity that so often accompanies them.

Others are not so optimistic. Vincent Miller (2004), for example, adds an analysis of the increasing commodification of religion and its consequences for the ability of these traditions "to inform the concrete practices of life" (p. 13) to the literature. He is far more attentive to the negative effects of bringing in new media and technology, such as the disembedding of religious communities from their local context and the endorsing of what is essentially the church's prime competitor for the role of cultural mediator. Nonetheless, Miller remains sensitive to the spottiness of religion's record in ever convincing anyone to live out an "authentically religious life." For him, it is not that religion has finally been incorporated into the market, as a more critical approach will have it. It is rather that the market has appropriated responsibility for addressing, or rather selling products that address, human needs that used to be satisfied outside of it through religion and community, such as a sense of belonging, meaning and love. This is

a nuanced distinction, but it remains an important one, and it tends to come from the perspective of believers, for whom an autonomous religious realm will always exist outside of society and above the reach of reification.

*The Postmodern Consumer: Politics and the Cult of Consumer Capitalism*

The religious features of consumer capitalism have been taken up in common parlance both in jest, as with the consumer "holiday" of Black Friday and other national shopping rites, and in serious critique of a culture that many view as becoming detrimentally materialistic. Still, John Boli (1995) argues that we should be careful with how we apply the word "materialistic" for what has really taken place here is the ascendancy of the economic realm in structuring our sacred order and creating meaning in the world. The material aspect of an object or event in itself, he maintains, does not eliminate its significance in the life of the individual or even make that life less moral. It's just the reality of our time. Our economic structure has "absorbed" the sacred. This structure contains a belief system, most commonly known as consumerism, which is a way of viewing the world that allows an individual to actively construct an identity out of a capital-driven collection of signs and symbols. Whether we might say that capitalism is competing with "real" religion for the role of ultimate mediator in late modern society or that religions themselves are just various forms of ideology being absorbed by the continued expansion of the economy is a matter of personal preference.

Regardless, the ideology behind consumer capitalism and various forms of religious or political belief offer opposing methods of structuring meaning in the world

and constructing identity. Marx referred to capitalism as a fetish religion because, like the divestment of human power unto a god of our creation, the products of our labor are separated, mystified and given a value that is completely divorced from our use for them. But, although the belief structure behind capitalism lacks texts and dogma, that does not mean it doesn't function as a "real" religion in the word's more anthropological sense.<sup>11</sup> Durkheim, for example, ascribed religion with the role of uniting a moral community through shared rituals and notions of the sacred, and Graham Ward (2007), in his essay addressing what he views as the crisis of reified religion, points out that the cult of capitalism, or at least consumer capitalism, most definitely counts. He suggests that Marx was, perhaps, too focused on Christianity. The value of a commodity revolves around a shared meaning, a sacredness embedded in the good, and the continuation of the economy on the ritual practices of consumption.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, as Boli also points out, we are constructing our identities and communicating them to those around us through this participation: as a worker, as a buyer and as a believer. Faith in economic rationality and progress is backing the system.

Tricia Sheffield (2006) presents a noteworthy variation of this argument using Durkheim's conceptualization of religion and account of totemism to highlight the religious function of modern advertising campaign. Sheffield's thesis is that as the United States shifted to a consumer society with a consumption-driven economy, citizens came to rely on the use of commodity totems and their shared meanings for participation.<sup>13</sup> In order to be a part of this national consumer society clan, the individual must be aware of the meaning of each of these totems within it. According to Durkheim,

the mediation of the meaning of the totem was undertaken through religious rites that reinforced its symbolic power and thus the social cohesion of the clan underneath it. Since it is advertising (and other mediated cultural content) that assigns meaning to these commodities, advertising now functions as the primary mediator of meaning between an individual and society. In other words, as far as advertising embeds meaning in a commodity by filling the semantic space around the product and commodities are used to signal one's status in the community to others, advertising defines the parameters by which individuals construct their social identity in relation to the group. And as far as it operates in this meaning-making capacity, Sheffield argues, its operation is religious.

A secondary aspect of Sheffield's argument is the function of this media content in assigning the normative aspects of various roles, such as those associated with gender, family or race. Religion is only one of the agents of socialization whose influence in this regard has declined, but this does shed more light on why identity creation through personal consumption is more than just a personal project, as some have argued. The communal dimension of this process makes it a bounded construction, not a free-formed one. Focusing on personal consumption through this lens undermines the credibility of arguments that see the late modern consumer as liberated.<sup>14</sup> If a socially elite group mediates communal attitudes regarding particular goods and lifestyles, then the reference points by which this kind of identity project are navigated are at least previously defined if not normative. In this particular function, the media is certainly less static than a traditional institution such as religion, and perhaps also less identifiable, but it is no less



of a force. Unless consumers are remarkably insulated from the standards of the group, it seems unlikely media representation will fail to delineate their choices.

Given the role these commodities play in a consumer society, the granting of symbolic value to the object is more than a fetish. It is a new construction of the sacred. Though a theologian or a religious believer might still insist on seeing such materialism as profane, or perhaps in Marx's case as just a waste, the societal function of such a construction isn't any different. For instance, Luedicke, Thompson and Giesler (2010) chronicle the use of commodities in "brand-mediated moral conflicts" through which individuals assert their own ideological beliefs and repudiate those of others within a mythic framework of good and evil (i.e. the same Hummer driver that is viewed as a selfish purveyor of destruction by a self-identified green crusader is quite sure his choice of vehicular transport embodies the freedom-loving, rugged American character). They refer to this as a *moral* identity project and it adds an even deeper structural attachment to the symbolism granted a brand by its community and conveys a righteousness that is eerily transferable between a range of viewpoints and products.

These types of practices are beginning to infect the expression of traditional religious beliefs as well. Work being done at the intersection of consumption and religious studies has established a link between religiosity and the purchase of religious commodity goods (Cosgel and Minkler 2004; Smith 1998; Park 2007). This relationship takes on political significance when it is examined in light of the identity demarcation thesis. Smith (1998), for example, proposes that this correlation results from a process of "culture boundary work" just like any other. "Witness-wear," then, such as a 'Jesus Is My

Homeboy' sweatshirt or a 'What Would Jesus Do' keychain, is the signifying of a religious identity through the purchase and display of a symbolic good associated with the specific lifestyle. It is a symptom of what Miller (2004) considers one of the crucial effects of our consumer "mode of being" on our relationship with religion. The purchasing of a religious product becomes a substitute for a religious act in the same way that buying a 'support our troops' magnet can substitute for any meaningful political action on the troops' behalf.

*The Postmodern citizen: culture, ideology and social action*

The motivational power of religious ideologies for social movements has been noted by political scientists such as Juergensmeyer (2003), as well as sociological thinkers such as Baudrillard (2002), Billings (1990), Williams and Alexander (1994) and Williams (2003; 2004), and is considered in large part to exist because a religious group retains power over its own symbols and can provide collective support for alternative viewpoints. These in turn give the group a moral platform and social cohesion. Whether these resources result in separatism or engagement depends on internal factors such as a mission to proselytize or the degree of discordance between the vision and culture of the group and that of the broader society. The greater the distance, the more the religion of the group will begin to function like an alternative political ideology.

Rhys Williams (1996) utilizes the work of Clifford Geertz and Antonio Gramsci to provide a working distinction between religion as culture and religion as ideology in order to better understand its relation to politics. According to Geertz, religion can shape

politics because it is a "cultural system" that provides "a world ethos and a vision of what is and what ought to be." Religion slips into a political ideology only when shared cultural understandings of meaning fail due to some sort of collective breakdown.<sup>15</sup> Williams takes issue with the passivity this understanding attributes to culture—and therefore religion as he understands it—arguing that Geertz has done culture little better than Marx. To support his understanding of culture's role in social action, he incorporates Gramsci's argument that you "need to engage hegemony with your own." By this he means that to affect change you need to harness the power of groups who adhere strongly to their own alternative belief structure in order to challenge a dominant one. Williams therefore sees religion as a "tremendous political resource, combining," as it does, "the emotional and cognitive elements of action with a universalist legitimation" (p. 374).<sup>16</sup> Alternatively, and leaving aside the merit of its spiritual aspirations, we can simply say that, politically, religion would here be functioning as an oppositional ideology. It would be a causal variable.

Despite an inordinate amount of media coverage and broad sentiment within popular opinion, the majority of American Evangelical Christians groups are not fundamentalist in the Bible-beating, backwoods sense of the term. Evangelizing may be a key component of practicing the faith, but, as has already been noted, the majority of churches are not emphasizing withdrawing from society or abstaining from popular culture. Instead, their intention is often to use these cultural forms to convert as many people as possible. Though, at a certain point, that line between accommodating current cultural forms and fully incorporating them ceases to exist. Exactly when this happens,

whether it has happened already or if it matters at all is a current debate within religious studies (Dionne 2008; Miller 2004; Moore 2003).<sup>17</sup> If it has happened, the belief system being peddled has a worldly application that is no different than the materialist, secular culture its advocates purportedly seek to wean people away from.

The blanket charge of fundamentalism so often levied against religious Americans is therefore unconvincing. At least, there is nothing authoritarian in much of the new paradigm Protestantism. No doubt much of its appeal is actually the hope of being included with society's winners, with rewards and favor falling to those whose only investment is faith, a positive attitude and lots and lots of praise. But there is still a darker side to this. In a society where the knowledge needed to become and remain successful, or even to be a good parent, partner or citizen, is rapidly and always changing, success itself may start to seem as arbitrary or magical as the preacher's promised favor. This may be particularly so for those who do not start very near the top to begin with, or who, for whatever reason, do not have the time or other resources to invest in perpetual self-evolution and self-signifying. Alternatively, retrenchment amongst the non-rational forces of religion, the "guarding of the mind," could also be seen as a positive act of agency. There is no reason to start with the assumption that such an outlook is a timid retreat instead of an assertive choice.

Jean Baudrillard's (2001) postulation of an active passivity appears relevant to the resurgence of religious belief, at least for the relatively well-positioned American worker. Rather than an ignorant refusal to accept current versions of knowledge, a massive turning away from rational thought may instead be conceptualized as an active refusal to

participate in what is now such a constant feed of information that meaning itself is obliterated. Baudrillard calls it "massive devolution . . . not through alienation of voluntary servitude . . . [but] a sort of radical metaphysics whose secret is that the masses are deeply aware that they do not have to make a decision about themselves and the world; that they do not have to wish; that they do not have to know . . ." (2001:221). This desire to give up one's will, to refuse to make an informed choice, is in this sense a divesting of the burden of self that is so essential to modern political theory and its conception of citizenship. Saying "no," that is, "to the other demand [of the system] to constitute ourselves as subjects, to liberate, to express ourselves at any price, to vote, to produce, to decide, to speak, to participate, to play the game. . . ."

Finding fault with such an inclination is to assume that what is right is to take on the expectations of citizenship and accept a personal project that Baudrillard suggests was neither initiated by the so-called masses nor experienced by them as liberation. Instead, he argues, liberalism is really about the experience of the Enlightenment philosopher within his own alienation and need to exert his own will. This philosopher has universalized the desire to a population that may neither want nor have need of what is now such an infinite illusion of choice. Slater notes this viewpoint, as well, observing: "for liberalism, choice is a hard-won freedom, wrested from the social order." Alternatively, choice can also be seen as "a requirement and compulsion, something we are forced into by the absence of a stable social order" (1997:84). Quoting Giddens, he writes, "we have no choice but to choose" (1997:84; Giddens 1991:81). The incorporation of these anti-modern elements into American religious discourse would

further undermine the contention that religion is still capable of providing that critical foundation of self so essential to the citizens of a liberal democracy.

## THE CASE STUDY

### *Methods*

Existing social scientific studies of religion dependent on quantitative analysis and survey data are very good at identifying current trends in American religion, such as what types of church features and worship styles are working. They do not address how they are working or why, and what other factors may be brought to bear on the adoption or provision of this form of worship beyond rational choice.<sup>18</sup> While applying the analytical techniques of cultural studies to religious practice may be grating to people who consider the relationship with religion to be spiritually—i.e. not cognitively—based, it should be noted that the spiritual validity of religion was never a concern of this study. In fact, it is hardly relevant.<sup>19</sup> Regardless of deeper merit, the economic approach to religion signals a subsuming of yet another aspect of life to the logic of the market during a time when some social theorists have begun to look back at religion as a source of community and empowerment that had hitherto largely escaped it. Any negation of this potential role is politically significant.<sup>20</sup> And while a definitive answer as to why the trends we are witnessing are happening now is beyond the scope of any study, bringing interpretive methods to the forefront does provide a much-needed balance to the existing explanations for change.<sup>21</sup>

Lakewood Church was chosen as the site of observation because of its instrumental value as an extreme example. Lakewood is located in the regional heart of the megachurch phenomenon and contains all of the largest features of new paradigm Protestantism. It is known for being very celebratory, rather short on "hard" theology and heavy on the Prosperity Gospel, it hosts well over the two-thousand attendees a week threshold to pass the megachurch qualification, makes extensive use of new media both in-house and in outreach efforts, facilitates small group interaction and hosts other niche demographic events, employs a business-modeled national training network for pastors and the distribution of its church building materials, has embraced a synergistic relationship with contemporary Christian worship music and is non-denominational. The church is so successful that it periodically takes the service on the road for "A Night of Hope" at major US cities across the country. Both Joel Osteen, its charismatic pastor, and his wife and co-pastor, Victoria, are bestselling authors and the beneficiaries of a fair amount of national news coverage.<sup>22</sup>

It should be added that the religious establishment, including the current Evangelical Christian leadership, does not always look upon Osteen and his church's style of worship favorably. While it may be conceded that Lakewood, and other churches like it, seem like perfect examples of a church giving the people what they want and in return gaining institutional success, challenges have been made both to the propriety of its methods and even its right to consider itself legitimately following Christian precepts (Carosso 2010; MacDonald 2010). These may be legitimate concerns, many of which no doubt extend onto a theological level that I do not pretend to address here. Nonetheless,

the establishment is losing a good part of its people to these innovations, and loss of institutional control, or the control to grant legitimacy to religious practice and to sanction specific Biblical interpretations, may very well be informing the conflict. As noted in the introduction, more and more Evangelical churches are turning away from denominational affiliation and, as a consequence, from the constraints of the traditional religious establishment, and instead connecting with church-growth industries and leadership academies such as Rick Warren's Saddleback Church, The Willowcreek Association and the Association of Vineyard Churches, all of which, non-incidentally, are transnational networks.

The participant observation portion of the study was conducted over three weeks at the church site during which time I attended thirteen live services, two smaller services targeted to my demographic, three Compass Groups (e.g. Bible studies) and the first of six sessions of Lakewood's introductory course, New Beginnings. I watched the three young adult services that took place over those weekends live via webcast. I also conducted 33 unstructured interviews with a theoretical sample<sup>23</sup> of attendees and volunteers regarding their experiences with religion and within the Lakewood church, itself. These discussions were informal, lasting generally between 15 and 45 minutes. The field notes, as well as the interview data, were combed (separately) for categorical themes using the standard techniques of grounded theory.

The sample of individual perspectives included in this study is insufficient for generalizations across the church membership as a whole, but with such a large number of weekly attendants at each church,<sup>24</sup> multiple visits to the site, rotating my location



during each visit and using the theoretical sampling technique should have provided for increased variation. Thick description was used at points to provide depth and clarity to insights that did emerge.<sup>25</sup> Most importantly, however, the goal of the study was never to pinpoint the source of meaning for each individual, but rather to watch the symbolism emerging from what will always remain the ritual practice of a group, united under what must be some sort of collective understanding between them, which, even at its simplest level, is choosing to be alone together. As Robert Wuthnow describes it, these types of cultural events "provide an occasion to examine the social circumstances in the moral order that may arouse interest in particular kinds of rituals and symbols that help to reaffirm collective values" (1997:127).

Thus the third part of the analysis applied Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to the communicative content of the church. This included the messages delivered during each service,<sup>26</sup> bulletin information presented on the Jumbotrons, event and scheduling updates disseminated electronically via email or on the website and some content contained in print and video material published by the pastors. The content sample is six weeks of church communication, the time period from December 5th, 2010 to January 9th, 2011 (from three weeks prior to my visit to its end). It includes eight main-service messages (four from Joel Osteen and four given by co-pastors Lisa Comes, Paul Osteen and Marcos Witt), "This Week at Lakewood" church bulletins and the other church announcements during this time and five of Lakewood Choir & Orchestra's most popular songs, all of which I saw performed live. This data was also coded into categorical themes along with the more detailed linguistic analysis.

Major weaknesses associated with CDA include its tendency to separate a text from its social context and its assumption that the analyst represents its typical consumer. I hoped to offset both of these weaknesses by including participant observation and interviews in the study. In their overview of CDA, Jan Blommaert and Chris Bulcaen (2000) argue that since this lack of social context may be the method's biggest weakness, ethnography has much to offer the approach at its micro-level given its ability to add social context as well as individual perspectives to the analysis. At the macro-level, Blommaert and Bulcaen suggest a more robust grounding of discursive practices within their historical and contemporary contexts. I have therefore tried to provide the reader with a piece of this historical background, and while I do believe very fruitful separate studies can be done on the relationship between religion and restraints related to production (particular media-related), many of its aspects have already been addressed by the market approach to religious change, speaking as it does to issues of the proper methods of practice that private institutions must now adopt to survive.

## FINDINGS

### *Discursive Practices: i.e. the context*

Like any other current ideological offering, Lakewood Church is pushing its message on a plane that is dominated by the features and practices of consumer capitalism. I do not want to repeat here why a church seeking new members might want to install a cafeteria or add a movie night to its social calendar. Instead, I focus on the discursive element to these changes, as in the language-oriented communication methods of this church as it

competes for ideological power. Specifically, this includes elements of: *interdiscursivity*, or the incorporation of outside discourses associated with consumerism; *intertextual chains*, or how the message is transformed as it is constructed for different audiences, whether that be regulars, seekers or casual viewers; *conditions of discourse practice*, as in the social practices associated with the discourse event such as singing, shopping or listening to a sermon; and *manifest intertextuality*, or the manner in which an outside text, such as the Bible, is presented to an audience. For example, Fairclough observes that the translation of a formal written text into informal speech is a linguistic shift that has the effect of collapsing perceived distinctions in power. What follows is an excerpt from the message delivered on Christmas day that illustrates the casual, accessible and positive presentation of the church:

We find the story in Luke, chapter 2. It's an amazing story, the story of the birth of Jesus. Luke tells us in a way that shows us that God has a flair for the dramatic big announcement. Required: doing it in a big way. I love that about God. When he wants to share something with us, He makes sure we hear it . . . well, in Luke chapter 2, we see some shepherds on the side of the hill. It's night time, they're done with their daily duties and they've laid the sheep down, and they're probably chatting about the day's activities and what they've done . . . and all of a sudden, Luke says, in chapter 2, 'and the angel of the Lord appeared then and the glory of the Lord shown round about then and they were terrified!' . . . the first thing out of the angel's mouth is, 'do not be afraid!' . . . and then God decides to ratchet it up just a little bit more. I love it. As if one angel, hanging in the sky, surrounded by the glory of the Lord speaking in a booming voice isn't enough, God picks up the microphone and says, 'queue the choir.' . . .<sup>27</sup>

*Tangible goods: The Bible as a commodity.* The literal authority contained in "The Word" of the Bible is a central tenet of any evangelical faith, and the Lakewood pastors do not abandon the traditional genre of the sermon, building their messages around a specific section or sections of the Bible in order to make a larger point each

week. A central part of discursive change, however, functions through the manner in which these words are presented, or translated, for the benefit of an audience. A more specific linguistic discussion will be conducted in the next section, but attention is also needed to the *way* in which these words are communicated. Is the pastor reading directly from the authoritative source? Encouraging the audience to follow along in their own Bibles? How actively is the presenter updating the message of the source, and, if extreme, how much or how little room are independent interpretations of the text given at the time?

Attendees at Lakewood are encouraged to bring their Bibles to each worship service and sometimes to follow along. They are always encouraged to attend and complete the free introductory courses offered by Lakewood, in which learning how to read your Bible is the main focus, and to attend Bible-reading classes and join small groups for Bible discussion. Although Lakewood's official recommendation remains the King James translation, the bookstore carries annotated versions that are tailored to specific demographic groups. There are Bibles for men, women, couples, the elderly, single women, teenage boys, even the recent graduate. The Bibles are also part of the service themselves as material objects. Joel Osteen begins each of his services by leading the audience in the following prayer:

Hold up your bible and say it like ya' mean it, 'This is my bible, I am what it says I am, I have what it says I have, I can do what it says I can do. Today I will be taught the word of god. I boldly confess, my mind is alert, my heard is receptive, I will never be the same. I am about to receive the incorruptible indestructible ever-living seed of the word of God. I'll never be the same, never never never, I'll never be the same, in Jesus' name.'

Couples often hold a Bible in the air together. Congregants hold up iPads, BlackBerrys and other electronic devices. The stored electronic version or "Bible app" is their Bible.

The Lakewood bookstore is located directly en route to the main exit of the building. The sheer number of Bible types is striking, along with the Bible covers, music CDs, t-shirts, Witness Wear products, jewelry, greeting cards, inspirational books and many other Christian-themed consumer items. It is also directly next to the daycare. The kids have their own kid-size entrance that opens to and from the lobby to the daycare area and the children's section. Many people do stop in the bookstore either before or, more often, after a service. It is a spot to buy, rest or browse while waiting for the rest of your group. A portion of the items for sale are geared towards tourists or other casual attendees. Some of the people I interviewed noted this aspect of the store, indicating also that they were more likely to buy things when they first started attending, like a new Bible, for instance, a Lakewood Church and Choir CD, or supplemental items like prayer books, books of affirmation or one of Joel or Victoria's books. Others said that they often use the bookstore for gifts for family members or friends, whether it is an inspirational book or a more promotional item like a message DVD that they think another should hear. Although I did not include any teenagers in my interview sample, I did see that many of them choose to carry their Bibles in one of the personalized Bible covers. I can only speculate as to their appeal, but the behavior reminded me of the individualized textbook covers I used to apply to my schoolbooks in middle school. To the outside observer, the effect is that they could just as easily be carrying a netbook.

*Selling the product: production, showmanship and marketing.* It is a Sunday morning, 11AM service and I am standing in the arena looking above me as seas of people pour through the doors of the balcony sections above. This service will be broadcast. One at a time, overhead lighting flashes upon a specific section upstairs, the doors open and ushers direct attendees, many of whom have already had free progress impeded by the caverns of downtown parking garages, to fill the rows in as orderly a manner as possible. The band plays on, as it will for the first 30 minutes or so, and I make a mental note of the coordination present in what otherwise feels like such a spontaneous celebratory moment. The stage frontmen and women are well dressed, performing as is expected from professional entertainers, ready for close-ups that will appear on the Jumbotron above the lyrics to these familiar songs. The volunteer choir members are stacked in graduated rows that line the back of the stage, some with microphones, others without, all dressed in clothes that, while their own, are black and purple colored only. A large golden globe rotates on the stage. A large American flag hangs from the back section of the arena, and earth, water, sky and fire make up the other imagery present on the stage. A nighttime lighting scheme illuminates the ceiling, which has microphones hanging down, dispersed throughout the space. A production booth rests unobtrusively about three quarters back on the ground floor. Today, the arena will fill to capacity by the time the band stops.

The degree to which I witnessed what could be called an overtly religious message varied according to the specific event I was attending. The style of each weekly service is different. For example, the Sunday 11AM service was by far the most

entertaining and coordinated, clearly displaying elements of production appropriate to a televised event. It is also the service with the highest attendance. However, many of these people are casual users. It is the service you would pick to be entertained, to be seen, or, perhaps, to pitch the church to a family member, co-worker or friend. In the words of one such ambivalent attendee:

Lakewood is unique. I think they do mean well, the mainlines are having all sorts of problems. People want to go to church, they just don't want to go to traditional church. But you go in there, and, it's like, they don't even have any pictures, religious pictures, they never talk about Jesus. It's just you and God this, and you and God that.

Perhaps according to the buttoned-down feel of the event, people leaving early, especially from the Sunday services, is a problem. Joel made several appeals for people to "respect the House of the Lord" and refrain from early exits unless work or family emergencies called. The 8AM Sunday service is similar to the 11AM, with the same message delivered and the same songs, but there are fewer people, and those that I witnessed were more likely to be solitary and older adults rather than families and younger people. Parking for this service is more convenient, and desirable seats are more likely to be available. It is almost like a dress rehearsal. Saturday and Wednesday night services were far smaller in total attendance and more laid-back, in the populist sense of the term. The Wednesday service takes place after an hour-long Women's Ministry group meeting (daycare is provided for both events) and corresponds with a separate service run by the Canvass Groups ministry, which targets teenagers and young adults. The people I spoke with all had reasons for preferring one service to another, whether it be for Saturday's casualness, Wednesday's practicality or the festiveness of the Sunday services.

It is during the more laid back and smaller services that you hear the expected "dos and don'ts," as in less accepting prescriptions for daily living and other harsher articulations of the Christian faith. For example, it was in the smaller services that I heard the boldest talk of "enemies" of the Christian faith, paying your dues to God, accepting your limitations, respecting the sanctity of marriage, recognizing the authority of your boss and other such negative requirements of being a good Christian. The Sunday services, on the other hand, were almost entirely positive, emphasizing the positive benefits of conversion right up to the point of being rewarded for nothing. It is easy to see Joel as a setup man. He is the face of the organization for when you first get them in the door, after which attendees are funneled towards smaller settings where more active participation is asked in return for the services being provided. Joel retains the practice of shaking hands with attendees after each service. As I passed a long line on the way to the exit, a young woman, while waiting, peered eagerly over the bodies ahead of her, then turned to her companion, saying, "I think he's really short."

Mark Chaves (2006) proposes that economies of scale may be a factor in the megachurch trend because these churches are relatively cost-effective. The Sunday show at Lakewood may be seen from a similar perspective. Curious tourists and casual attendees often do drop a few dollars in the tithe bucket, despite not being active members, and this money goes into the pool with the rest to fund other church activities. I am not saying that the televangelist model is without fault, greed or ample room for exploitation. However, in addition to being a social as well as a spiritual setting, Lakewood does offer its members free social services such as substance abuse



counseling, marriage counseling, and other support networks (with daycare provided); financial skills classes and even tax preparation. As I have already noted, the money to support these offerings must come from the congregation itself. Generating additional revenue through non-traditional methods, such as what is essentially a free rock concert, or adding a bookstore that offers consumer items people want to buy anyway, is not all that different from holding a bake sale.

The style of the niche-market services is also tailored to appeal to a targeted demographic. These stylistic variances include the type of music played, the lighting of the venue, the emphasis of the messages themselves and the specific metaphors employed. Youth pastors attempt to relate. This inevitably leads to passive endorsement of secular lifestyles, however harmless:

How many of ya'll have an iPhone? I know people love it, or hate it if they don't like Sprint, but me and my wife just switched to Sprint, left Verizon, so I got an iPhone, and I love it. I'm always playing with it, flashing it around, but anyway, my wife asked me to go online and track a package for her- she knew it'd been shipped but wanted to know what the status was- she's waiting on it, so I bring it up on ups.com or whatever, and I see the status, 'in transit', and it just hit me: that's it, the perfect way to put it. God's abundance for you is 'in transit.'<sup>28</sup>

Fairclough (1992) notes when discussing the presentation of an official public document in a news report: "the process of translation [for an audience] involves shifts away from the legitimate terminology of written language towards a spoken language vocabulary . . . from written monologue to conversational monologue . . . drawing upon a metaphor which has resonances in popular experience and mythology" (1992:109). Like these newsmen, pastors, too, are acting as cultural mediators and they are finding ways to

effectively get the message of the Bible across to people already versed in a specific social vocabulary.

Lakewood has also embraced the role of technology in modern marketing campaigns by using all manner of electronic media to aid in evangelizing efforts. All Lakewood main services are streamed in full online, and messages are available free via podcast and available for purchase on CD or DVD online, at the bookstore and at booths immediately after each service. Weekly programs are disseminated electronically at the beginning of each week, as are other announcements regarding special events or regularly held demographic events. Youth-oriented groups also use Twitter and Facebook. Regular "announcements" are made on the Jumbotrons prior to each service. This aspect reminded me of arriving early to a movie theatre and watching the commercials, some of which were simply fliers put up on the screen and others that were very, very sophisticated audio-visual appeals, presented one-by-one across the screen. The media is there and so is the audience, so why waste the space and opportunity? During New Year's Eve weekend, business cards were dispersed that said, "Be my guest," and listed Lakewood Church's hours. Joel encouraged attendees to give them to friends, co-workers and people at the gym since it is an opportune time to evangelize: "[just as there are] never more people at the gym than in January—everyone is willing to go to church at Christmas, Easter and New Year's."

*Self-actualization and lifestyle advertising: enhancing your Lakewood experience.*

Two outside genres stand out readily from the traditionally religious discourse within the church: lifestyle branding and the self-help/self-actualization narrative. The two are

interrelated, but I will begin with the former. One of the changes accompanying creeping commodification is the spreading adoption of the buyer and seller logic of the market. Everyone becomes a customer to be marketed to no matter the specific cultural setting. This involves appealing to them as consumers of a service who have a choice about their options. Accentuating what the service can do for them and why they might desire it tends to take over the language and presentation used, despite the fact that the communicator—be it a salesman, ad team or institution—may in fact hold the major share of power in the potential exchange.

The advertisements for supplemental activities and services at Lakewood employ these tactics, emphasizing what Lakewood can do for you, your family, your health, your finances and your overall quality of life. For example, the main slogan is "Discover Lakewood and enhance your Lakewood experience," and there are periodically updated promotional videos that feature upbeat music or positive messages, such as "you are an overcomer," "victory is in store," etc. Lakewood congregants are constantly reminded that they are special; they are winners. Even outreach efforts regarding negative behaviors are put in terms that emphasize freedom of choice. For example, the "Freedom Series" classes are "designed to help you live your best life by teaching proven biblical strategies to achieve freedom and victory in the following areas: Anger, Unforgiveness, Fear Worry and Anxiety, Rejection, Past Hurts and Offences, Bitterness, Generational Strongholds, Marital Problems, Divorce, Grief." Youth are invited to "Experience the Lakewood NIGHTLIFE" in a video introductory to the youth service and promotional campaign that highlights its cool, urban element. As Joel put it, "I'm not here asking you

to convert or 'get religion'. I'm inviting you to develop a personal relationship with Jesus Christ."

Additionally, Lakewood, like modern advertising, utilizes the advantages of the visual in promoting elements of lifestyle. A well-constructed picture or video can convey far more about a way of life, and far more quickly, in a given amount of semantic space (Fairclough 1992; Giddens 1991). Like other evangelical congregations, it is essential to Lakewood that others "want what we have." It would be a huge tactical mistake to completely dissociate Christian lifestyles from the most coveted lifestyles of secular society. To take one of the most challenging examples, it is difficult to integrate a desirable secular teenage lifestyle with Christianity. This has not stopped these organizations from trying. Lakewood utilizes a "Be cool with Christ" advertising campaign to promote the Campus Groups ministry with images of stylish, happy and healthy teens. The cool factor is also seen in the style of the pastors, the performers and the musicians, similar to the techniques of the Contemporary Christian Music industry in general, the only distinction is in the lyrics. Superficially, they present themselves like any other secular performers.

Automatically positioning the Lakewood attendee as a consumer in church appeals is an example of what Fairclough refers to as intertextuality, whereby a discourse that is part of the social order of consumerism is being integrated with the discourse of the church. Through its inclusion, it accepts, or at least presupposes, without challenge or question, that this is how subjects constitute themselves, and by incorporating these texts helps to perpetuate the idea of one way of being as the reality of being. The same can be

said of the emphasis Lakewood places on self-actualization. While I am arguing that it is a legitimate role of the church to help its members acclimate themselves to the necessary ways of life, by embracing the notion of perpetual self-development as a given, they passively accept that this is, in fact, the way of life, and not just one way out of many. In the message below, Joel addresses this need for constant improvement when discussing trials, tribulations and growth explicitly, although fittingly in terms that highlight its function for God:

Your character is being developed, that pearl's bein' polished. First Peter 4:12 says that trials are to test our quality.<sup>29</sup> We may not like it but trials are beneficial. They bring to light things we need to deal with. Most often, we will be tested in the areas we need to improve in. For instance, if you struggle with being impatient, don't be surprised if you get behind every slow driver that's out there. You'll get caught by every stoplight, find every freeway with construction, get caught by every train. God has you there for one reason, not to frustrate you, but to refine you. You have to recognize that trial, that irritation is not a coincidence; it's a test of your quality. Are you gonna get upset, lose your cool, maybe like you've done in the past? Or are you gonna say, 'I recognize this is an opportunity to grow. I know I wouldn't be here if I didn't need this, so I'm gonna stay in peace, keep a good attitude and pass this test'? When you do that, you're comin' up higher. Anytime you pass the test, you're headed for promotion.<sup>30</sup>

*Soothing anxiety: connection, grounding and touch.* As I sat, on my first visit to the church, notebook in hand, waiting for the service to begin while I listened to the chatter of my neighbors, I was interrupted by the darkening of the house and a flash of a light bulb on the three Jumbotrons. It was the beginning of an introductory message given by Joel Osteen's brother, Paul Osteen, M.D. Latecomers were quickly ushered into empty seats, and I was then suddenly brought to my feet by a loud introductory music video, a cue, I quickly learned, to stand and, for many, clap or dance to the music. The

tempo accelerated, and I felt the floor begin to move through the vibrations of the movings and shakings of the audience and what is, no doubt, a very impressive subwoofer.

Existential grounding as an antidote to anxiety is a prominent feature of many styles of religion, and it is heavily accentuated at Lakewood Church. Not only is the message of Lakewood itself reassuring, but the social practices that take place at each service reinforce the material and connective, or tactile, side to a search for greater meaning. This stands out through what is arguably the church's most prominent feature: the Lakewood Choir & Orchestra, which plays a large and lengthy role in the church service and has the sound system it deserves. As one young woman said, "you can just feel the energy from the crowd. Makes you feel like the Lord is here." Another emphasized its function for her family:

It's nice to come somewhere where the kids can sit still for most of it cuz they do get to move, get up and down with the music. That's a big deal when you're trying to worship . . . church is for a family to do together.

Nearly every person I spoke with mentioned the music at Lakewood as his or her number one reason for choosing this church. The pastors mentioned several times during services that people ask them about the excessive level of celebration at the church. As Joel put it, they say, "Why do ya'll sing so much? Why ya'll so loud?" His answer is that "well, praise precedes the victory." Maybe so. But as for its appeal to the people, what stood out for me is a comment made by one of the performers as he was kicking off another long segment of celebratory music and reminded them: "God gave you joy. No one can take that away from you."

The cynic in me wondered if the spirit being felt in the arena was the bass. In terms of sound quality, the performance is on par with a concert. In terms of an event, however, with the music, crowd participation, rituals, even the Jumbotrons, the closest equivalent is a modern sporting event. The people attending are extremely engaged with the moment, everyone is on the same page, and a similar general vibe emerges out of the crowd. Lyrics to the songs flash across the screens for those who don't already know them. Many dance, sometimes in their seats, sometimes in the aisles, but there are also ritualized movements that accompany some of the songs, triggered by the performers, like a hand pump, that the crowd does in unison at the appropriate times. The people are going through the same steps at each service; they recognize them, reaffirm them, and do them together. There is a lot of time devoted to the music and that space crowds out room for spoken word; although, it is still present in the lyrics. God is still the center around which all of this is organized, but there's something to the music. As one of the Lakewood pastors said, "that's why we love our band, music connects you with God."<sup>31</sup>

Another ritual that was frequently mentioned by the people I interviewed was "prayer partnering." This is a time during the service, accompanied by music, when church attendees (you do not have to be a formal member) queue up in front of designated church volunteers stationed around the arena. The volunteers embrace the attendees and pray for them. A few of the services I attended also added hand-holding or shoulder-touching. Paul Osteen led one of these moments, directing: "put your hand on the shoulders around you. Through that connection the depression, fear, anxiety is broken." This kind of statement is typical. Emphasis is placed on the security of being

connected in communion with others, such as through touching or holding hands, reminding them that they are a family, that God has a purpose for each of them, God has brought them here tonight, He has accepted them, etc. In short, God loves you and we do, too.

### *The Discursive Text*

The second dimension of Fairclough's model uses the techniques of formal linguistics to analyze the text itself. H.G. Widdowson (2003) asserts that in this CDA attempts a logically impossible wedding of formal linguistic analysis with communicative context, since the former must by definition be done in isolation, and the effect seems to be that researchers are picking and choosing the linguistic features best suited to the interpretation they wish to make. I do not dispute that this method remains interpretive. However, the choice of specific linguistic features in a text, especially metaphor, ethos and nominalization, are highly relevant for the purposes of this study, given that the point of these words is to construct a meaningful and recognizable connection with real life for the audience. They are no more accidental here than they would be in a piece of political propaganda, and formal linguistics does provide a ready toolkit for categorizing these choices and analyzing their function.

For the purposes of the text analysis, Fairclough divides these linguistic categories according to their functions. The first set addresses the construction of selves and includes: *interactional control*, or who controls the event; *modality*, which is the degree of affinity with the propositions presented or the audience that is expressed by the



speaker or writer; *politeness*, which is used or not used to mitigate differences in power relations; and *ethos*, which is an encompassing category that attempts to gauge how the text as a whole positions the self as a self. The last category is about who "I", the consumer of the text, am supposed to be in the communicative exchange and, as Fairclough (1992) notes, it highlights the role of discourse in constructing a "particular version of the self." He continues:

What [the focus on expression in linguistics] leaves out is the crucial perspective of construction: the role of discourse in constituting or constructing selves. When one emphasizes construction, the identity function of language begins to assume great importance, because the ways in which societies categorize and build identities for their members is a fundamental aspect of how they work, how power relations are imposed and exercised, how societies are reproduced and changed. (P. 168)

The second group of features concerns the construction of society, including: *connectives and argumentation*, or the overall rhetorical strategy; *transitivity and theme*, which addresses the ideational features being signified, as well as the presentation of agency; *word meaning and wording*, or examples of a word or an assembling of words being used ambiguously or to signify a not yet formally codified meaning; and *metaphor*, which looks at the cultural and ideological factors that may affect one choice over another. This, if not theme, is arguably the most important category when analyzing changes in the presentation of religious concepts since "metaphors are not just superficial stylistic adornments of discourse. When we signify things through one metaphor rather than another, we are constructing our reality in one way rather than another" (Fairclough 1992:194).

*Word meaning and themes: health and wealth.* One thematic change, especially within the megachurch movement, is the increasing incorporation of prosperity gospel, alternatively known as the gospel of health and wealth, which emphasizes material success, bodily and mental well-being and a happy and productive family life. These priorities go against the selfless and ascetic values traditionally associated with Christian culture and especially those of the New Testament. Before continuing with this section, however, one of the things I'd like to emphasize is that health and wealth, while not new from an evolutionary perspective, are still very real, very modern, concerns. Turning away from these worldly pursuits remains, as always, an option, but the price for such opting out is quite high in social relations. Financial success is more important than ever to the perception of overall success. Moreover, health, too, has taken on a new level of preoccupation as the cost of medical treatment continues to escalate, along with the proliferation of a wellness discourse that emphasizes the societal benefits of individual overall health and happiness to society. To initially dismiss these concerns as trivial in such a climate is both unfair and naive.

Lakewood emphasizes money. In fact, if any theme stands foremost in its messages, it is most certainly that of prosperity. I could make an argument that they have pushed the concept that God wants you to prosper to its extreme, manipulated it even, in letting the meaning take on such strongly associated connotations of material success only, and this is probably true. On the other hand, long term social and environmental consequences aside, if we consider what it means to prosper, in its full sense, and concede that prospering is a completely legitimate aspiration for any person, I am not

sure that wanting money so that we can buy stuff is such a superficial desire anymore, even when it is placed at the center of religious practice. My interviews confirmed over and over again that, whatever it is that Lakewood is really saying about God, people consider it "relevant," "practical," "useful," "inspiring" and, most importantly, "hopeful." The question is whether it can also be legitimate.

Below are three excerpts from a message Joel delivered at Lakewood over the New Year's weekend entitled, "Wear Your Blessings Well." He presented an interpretation of Psalm 118:23, which reads, "this is the LORD's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes,"<sup>32</sup> combined with a story of Ruth from the Old Testament in which she, while attempting to survive by scavenging wheat leftover by fieldhands, is relieved of her struggle by the owner of the field, who, through the benevolence of God, instructs his workers to start leaving "handfuls on purpose."<sup>33</sup> In the first excerpt, Joel is referring to his father, John Osteen, who founded Lakewood church after being forced to leave his former parish over differences in doctrinal opinion:

1. My father was raised during the great depression and his family was very poor, and Daddy grew up with this poverty mindset. Even in seminary, he was taught that you were supposed to be poor to show that you were holy...One day, he broke out of that poverty mindset, he began to, he read that scripture in Psalms, 'God takes pleasure in the prosperity of his children'. He began to understand that it brings a smile to God's face when we live an abundant life, when we prosper in our health, in our relationships, and in our finances. . . .

2. And I say this respectfully, but you, you have to, we have to fight that religious spirit that says we're supposed to be poor, and broke, and defeated so that we can prove that we're humble. Because when we're poor and broke and defeated, all that proves is that we're poor and broke and defeated. Nobody's gonna want what we have. I can be poor, broke and defeated without serving God. We're supposed to be examples of

what it means to live for the most high God. We should be so blessed, so prosperous, so generous, so happy that other people want what we have. . . .

3. See, we think small. We think limited. God owns it all. The earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof. We have to expand and enlarge our vision. So often we think, 'is it wrong for me to wanna live in a nice house? Is it wrong for me to want a bigger piece of property? Is it selfish for me to wanna drive this nice car? Is it okay for me to wanna bless my children and leave them an inheritance?' God is saying, 'it's okay'. Wear your blessings well. As long as you keep God first place you're not making those things an idol, but you're, you're doing your best to please Him. God wants to give you the desires of your heart. He takes pleasure in seeing you prosper. . . .

Obviously this follows the style of a sermon, and it reads like one. In terms of how society is being constructed within the text, there are several prominent themes, most notably that it is perfectly okay to want and then display your prosperity, including your material success. Furthermore, God will reward those who worship Him by giving them prosperity, and this prosperity does not necessarily get distributed fairly. Another feature that stands out is the room given to the "meaning potential" of the word "prosperity" itself. Word meanings are transitory; this is despite the fact that they may appear static, and we attempt to reinforce this appearance by codifying them in dictionaries (Fairclough 1992). As anyone who has ever tried to translate will remember, words often have more than one possible codified meaning at any one time, and they are given additional ambiguity when an author is using figurative speech. Meaning potential is the sum of this potential meaning. As speakers and interpreters we must make a choice as to intended meaning, and as the former we must also choose how best to convey it. For example, Merriam-Webster lists two definitions under prosperity:<sup>34</sup>

- 1: to succeed in an enterprise or activity; esp: to achieve economic success
- 2: to become strong and flourishing: to cause to succeed or thrive

The second definition is archaic and the first modern. The Bible is an archaic text. The message above is not. The context downplays its second possible meaning to the degree that what is being signified is just material success, and the potential spiritual and character aspects of being strong and flourishing are lost.

The same can be said of his use of the word "blessing," which is defined as follows:<sup>35</sup>

- 1 a: the act of one that blesses b: approval. encouragement
- 2: a thing conducive to happiness or welfare
- 3: grace said at a meal

Clearly, the third meaning is neither intended nor will be inferred from the above text, but as for the first two there is some potential ambiguity. The word "blessing" has clear religious connotations and blessings are traditionally understood in terms of their qualitative function: "a thing conducive to happiness or welfare." But by listing possessions, such as a house, a car or an inheritance as examples, he again tilts the meaning in favor of material things themselves, and in the process he is conceding that they *do* make us happy. Moreover, the phrase "His goodness" refers to the bestowing of these items, which God "owns" and will disperse without potential to "bankrupt heaven." The metaphors, that is, are heavily commercial.

*Ethos: power and agency in the construction of self.* A theme that stands almost as equally with money at Lakewood is just how much "you," as in "I," are worth.

Constantly, there are reminders that you are a unique individual who is loved, protected and has a purpose. This is reinforced through all of the church discourse; it is in the

messages, the small groups, the announcements, graphics and, in a very emotional sense, in the songs. Below is an excerpt from the song, "I know Who I Am,"<sup>36</sup> in which both purpose and possession figure prominently:

I was runnin'  
and you found me  
I was blinded, and you gave me sight  
you put a song of praise in me

ohhhh-a-oh-oh  
I was broken, and you healed me  
I was dying, and you gave me life  
Lord, you are my identity

I know, I know, I know, I know  
I know who I am  
I know who I am  
I know who I am  
I am yours, I am yours  
I know who I am  
I know who I am  
I know who I am  
I am yours, I am yours and you are mine  
Jesus, you are mine  
you are mine  
Jesus, you are mine

I am forgiven  
I am your friend  
I am accepted  
I know who I am  
I am secure  
I'm confident  
that I am loved  
I know who I am  
I am alive, I've been set free  
I belong to you  
you belong to me

These lyrics are highly representative.

Although the pastors at Lakewood adopt an informal rhetorical strategy fitting to the populist roots of the evangelical tradition and humor is a large part of their style, they simultaneously express a high degree of affinity with their audience and with the objective content of their message, which fits their status as an authoritative, yet still human, figure. They reinforce over and over again that God is accessible and He wants to reach you. If we consider this in terms of how ethos, or the “I,” is being constructed, I am quite special. The one-on-one divine relationship with God is what separated Protestantism from Catholicism in the first place, but Evangelical Protestantism takes this to an extreme by emphasizing this divinely *personal* link from God to the Bible to you. Language takes on extraordinary importance, as The Word is the essential mediator between *you* and God. For example, during the Christmas service, we were reminded that God has been doing "supernatural, miraculous things just to get through to you":

You see, God moved stars and angels. Did all kinds of things just to communicate His love to man. He's still moving things. He has me standing here in front of you. To tell you He loves you. He moved on that family member to drag you here today. Because He loves you. He's been blaring His love to you all around you for the last twenty or thirty days, we've been hearing Christmas music everywhere we go. That's God blaring His love to you. Saying, 'I love you. Please let me be born in your life'.<sup>37</sup>

In sum, the self is being constructed in a manner that emphasizes its individual life course, yet also attempts to mitigate the sense of disembeddedness, powerlessness and loss that accompanies it. God has a plan, we are told. He has a purpose for you even if society does not: "The Bible says that God has ordered your days, designed your life since before you were born."<sup>38</sup>

Below is another excerpt that emphasizes individual worth. It also introduces additional themes at the Lakewood services relating to the presentation of good, evil and agency. It is the message from a Wednesday service delivered by Lisa Comes (Joel's sister).<sup>39</sup>

I wanna give you just five bullet points that we can take away from [Daniel:11] and the first one is this: the first thing that Gabriel said to Daniel was this, 'you who are highly esteemed'. I mean, that's powerful right there, that's how God sees you, as one who is highly esteemed. He doesn't see you as a failure. He doesn't see you as a sinner. He sees you as a saint, amen. He highly esteems you. You are valuable in his eyes.

And you know what? Number two: when you speak, God listens. You know they used to say when Edith Hutton speaks, God, people listen. Well, listen, when you speak, God listens. Because the Bible says, 'your words were heard, Daniel. I've come in response to your words.' Listen, don't get upset just because you don't get an immediate answer cuz that doesn't mean that God hasn't heard you. The day you pray, God hears your words. God is listening to you.

And number three: we can learn that God dispatched the answer the first day that Daniel prayed. Now that's just powerful revelation knowledge that we all need to get deep down into our spirits. The very first day that Daniel prayed God dispatched the answer. The day you pray, God dispatches your answer. The day you pray, the tide of the battle turns. When you pray in faith, God responds, God listens.

Number four: we can learn that Satan tried to stop the answer. You see there was opposition in the spirit world. God just, you know, used this passage of scripture to pull the veil off the spirit world. Here we live in the natural world but there is another world that we cannot see. But God just pulled the veil away, and he showed us through this passage of scripture what happens behind the veil in the spirit world, and it says that, uh, there was an evil spirit that opposed Gabriel and so he was faced with this opposition.

But listen, don't worry about that because, number five: we learn, is that we have backup. Say, 'I have backup.' You see, Gabriel got out his cell phone, and he called Michael, his fellow angel, and he says, 'Mike, I'm callin' for backup'. And Michael came, and he held those, the Bible says that he held those forces of evil back so that Gabriel could break through to deliver the answer. Now, that's just powerful to me. You see, you've



got backup! We've got backup in the spirit realm. We're not alone. 'They that for us are more than they that be against us.'

Listen, don't ever forget this: when Satan fell from heaven, did you know that the Bible indicates that he took one third of the angels with him and those are his demon forces that he has organized underneath him that the Bible talks about in Ephesians 6? Spiritual forces of darkness in dominions, you know the different types of leaders, those were his demon forces now. But listen, do you remember? And always remember that two thirds of the angels were left in heaven, and so really they that be for us are more than they that be against us. You see, they're outnumbered, two to one, amen. And so you have to realize, that we have backup in the spirit realm. . . .

Notice that adversity is presented as a legitimate struggle but its societal aspect is completely ignored. Instead, obstacles and victories are abstracted all the way into a supernatural realm with agents all its own. That Christianity projects human capacities onto an outside being is not a revolutionary observation. Its tendency to pacify has been asserted most classically by Marx, as well as by others. While this is true, it does have the capacity to inspire agency in addition to quelling it. At Lakewood, however, agency is most often masked.

*Transitivity: victors not victums.* Another prime example of how agency is minimized in church discourse is the frequent use of nominalizations. Similar to the concept of reification, nominalization is the actual linguistic process by which actions or relations are abstracted or hardened into new "things" in themselves. In presenting something as a thing in speech, it can become an object of attention, masking its personal, relational or actionable element (Fairclough 1992). Again, this is very similar to Marx's conception of reification, and it is also associated with commodification. Newly made things can be problematized, and as newly made problems, they can be solved through

the use of commodities (Slater 1997:86). An instance would be Lakewood's adoption and frequent use of the word "overcomer." Presumably, this is one who has overcome (an object), but it has transitioned from the achieved state of having actually done something into an ascribed state bestowed by God and revealed through the correct mindset. God's power to conquer, control and protect is reiterated over and over again, but these qualities lie only with Him and not with the individual. The passivity is continued in frequent talk about truth and lies in which it is not clear exactly who is doing the lying behind vague talk about enemies. In spite of this, since the enemy will surely lie to you, it is important to guard your mind by tuning out these lies and the negative thoughts they produce, including the ones that are coming from media sources.

#### *Discourse As Social Practice*

The discursive practices and text of Lakewood is only one instance within a large network of late modern social practice. The third dimension of CDA aims to examine how this particular discourse sits in relation to these larger practices and the dominant orders of discourse that help sustain them. Although there are no concrete rules, Fairclough (1992) suggests we first consider the position of the discourse in relation to the "social matrix of discourse" in which it is taking place. In this case, that would be the competition taking place on the religious field. Next, we look at its relation to the dominant orders of discourse. Slater (1997) organizes seven key features of consumer society, observing that it is a culture of consumption and a culture of marketplace society that is: "in principle, universal and impersonal," "identifies freedom with private choice

and private life," views consumer needs as "in principle unlimited and insatiable," is "the privileged medium for negotiating identity" and, finally, "represents the increasing importance of culture in the modern exercise of power" (pp. 26-31). Finally, Fairclough advocates that we should return to the ideological and political effects of the particular discourse in question, with special regard to its relation to the hegemonic systems of knowledge, social relations and selves and whether it serves to challenge or sustain them (pp. 237-8).

*Market competition.* Lakewood Church is built to survive in a religious marketplace. It is an extremely efficient business organization. Church functions are completely compartmentalized. There is a program in place to train lay ministers that are then authorized to help other members of the church. The church maintains its own program for training pastors for employment at Lakewood, as well as for other churches, and it exists outside of the religious establishment. Evangelizing has never been far from marketing, and it is a rational business decision to adopt the most modern techniques if your goal is to convert as many people as possible. This probably interferes with Lakewood's spiritual mission. On the other hand, it also allows it, unlike many affiliated churches, to continue to run.

Furthermore, the implication of a belief system that underlines God's "supernatural" favor clearly benefits an economic system that does not distribute its benefits fairly. In this regard, the message is very reminiscent of Calvinism and the doctrine of predestination. Although not nearly as heartless, it is just as pacifying. This is consistent with Peter Berger's global uncertainty thesis regarding the recent reassertion

of religious life.<sup>40</sup> If religion is rising with the forces of globalization, as he argues, it is possible Evangelical Christianity may offer forms of belief that help positively orient people to the economic and social requirements of global capitalism, whether it be in America or elsewhere.<sup>41</sup>

*Unlimited abundance and the sacralization of material goods.* The essential role of consumer goods in negotiating identity and navigating our social world has already been noted. The entire purpose of advertising is to convince people that they need what you have, and a most effective way to do that is to successfully establish a link between the commodity and who these people aspire to be. The right qualities are achievable through the use of the right products. Lakewood has accepted that material goods are an integral part of our happiness. Joel even preached that we have to lose "that religious mindset" that said otherwise. We can also see how much the discourse at Lakewood emphasizes abundance and acquisition. The phrase "enlarge your vision," which is present in many of Joel's messages and books, sums up the church's primary message on consumption: more is better. Consuming is well tied into church practice, as well, as is illustrated by the prominence of the bookstore and what is for many that first initial step of purchasing the right Bible.

*Ontological insecurity and the project of the self.* Lakewood is directly addressing a desire for material goods, but it is also addressing the need to develop ourselves by way of outward acquisitions and achievements informed by an awareness of the right choices. Anthony Giddens (1991) discusses just how much pressure this responsibility places on an individual. Nothing is ascribed now at birth as it

was before. There is no "I will do this because my people did that." He proposes that the constant pressure to make the right choice, about everything, is an ongoing part of a "project of the self" that constitutes a key feature of modernity. For not only must individuals make the choices themselves, they must also stay in constant awareness of just what these right choices are by keeping up with information continually disseminated by experts, with whom they have little to no personal contact, who are talking about knowledge with which they have little to no personal experience. It must simply be trusted. Taken on faith. At the same time, the responsibility for these choices and their consequences rests solely with them. The cumulative effect of all this is the creation of Ulrich Beck's "risk society;" it is highly anxiety producing, as the turnover of necessary knowledge seems to apply to everything: what to wear, what to eat, who to know, how to be. All of these, Giddens's implication goes, are now crucial to our self-development.

Giddens proposes that lifestyle narratives serve to reinforce an individual's sense of ontological security, or the feeling that there is a stable and solid foundation on which we rest, by providing continuity to what is otherwise an open-ended life course.

Modernity presents us with far too many choices, he argues. Even the ones beyond any logical reach are presented to us as viable options via the media. Economic limitations may deny individuals from fully participating in certain lifestyle choices, but these unreachable options can still be reflexively engaged as possibilities, or even as possibilities denied. This may or may not be experienced at the discursive level, and Giddens adds that it may lead to depression rather than comforting fantasies. We saw the lifestyle narrative in the Lakewood discourse, particularly in its advertising and

marketing efforts, but, as a whole, the practices and discourse of the church also try to alleviate anxiety through means other than consumption. This was shown most clearly through the music and the prayer partnering, but it was also shown through what exactly God is bestowing on his followers: worth.

The lack of agency and the warnings to guard your mind from excessive and misleading information can also be seen as a reaction to and a rejection of the abstract systems of knowledge of which Giddens speaks. In this regard, there is certainly more of Baudrillard's massive turning away than there is constant striving to keep up with new information. It seems there are alternatives. Consuming new things provides a temporary reprieve from the anxiety that accompanies increased risk and uncertainty. Denying that anxiety all together through complete trust in the authority of a supreme being is another way to do it. Whether it has the effect of ultimately undercutting consumptive practices, however, or if it is perhaps a lack of resources to pursue the consumerist alternative that encourages this participation in the first place, is certainly not answered here, although these are questions that could be taken up in further studies.

Finally, Lakewood also allows the individual to weave from anonymity to involvement, much like many of the features of modern life that so often leave us alone among others. The size of the congregation is large enough that participation is a choice even if you're already there. That, I believe, does constitute an important part of its appeal. As one young woman who had recently moved to Houston put it: "It's nice to be around people when you don't really know anyone in the city yet. Plus, they don't pressure you—even with all the born again stuff—if you want to just come and go, you

can...it's not what I expected. I would never go to a Baptist or other Southern-type church, but this is okay."

*Implications for social change.* Despite all this, the discourse at Lakewood remains mixed. Old school religious values are interspersed with the new almost to the point where different pastors appear to contradict each other, if not themselves. This mixing is highly indicative of discursive change (Fairclough 1992). The message should be cohesive, but the less so it is in the present, the more likely it is that competing issues are at stake. For example, during a Wednesday service, Paul presented on mitigating the stresses of modern life. Using a metaphor of our bodies as cars and listening to them as paying attention to the dashboard, he spoke of finding ways to resist the demands of modern culture, to "downshift," emphasizing that you are responsible for replenishing your mind, body and spirit by finding down-time, refusing to let your things consume you, seeking quality in your relationships and taking care of your body. Failure to do so, he warned, means there is no difference between those who follow Jesus and those that do not. Again, a pastor at Lakewood was saying, "otherwise, no one is going to want what we have." But which "what" it will be is still unclear. Is it the material rewards of modern life, as Joel stresses so often in his messages, or is it the ability to control modern life, step outside and retain an outside understanding of the way to live as Paul is suggesting?

## CONCLUSION

Ultimately, when a social order changes, its corresponding orders of discourse will begin

to be integrated into others, including, presumably, religious discourse. However, during periods of transition, this integration will be rougher and thus more obvious. We will be able to see, as in the final segment above, what Fairclough refers to as “contradictory interpolations” in which the subject is pulled in two different directions by a text. Davis argued that religion was released as cultural critique when it was excluded from the dominant social structure, but there is no guarantee that it will continue in that way. It now looks like at least one fringe of American religion may be reintegrating. A gradual reintegration of religious discourse and practices would culminate in fully collapsing the ideological distance between the two and, if it were to happen, yet another potential critical resource for challenging the current social order would be eliminated.

Widespread adoption of these types of changes within the Christian tradition would be consistent with American Protestantism’s history of adapting to new dominant economic and social requirements. It would also be consistent with Benjamin's proposal. Protestantism is unique in its ongoing need to transmit a message through language which is directly between an individual and God, rather than subject to the conservative effects of a mediating institutional clergy. This process leaves it particularly vulnerable to whatever hegemonic order currently dominates a society, making it an inherently more effective cultural tool for acclimating individuals to the social order rather than challenging it. Elective affinity *ad infinitum*. In an ideal form, Seligman is not wrong in that it does provide the inner preservation that keeps an individual from succumbing to the fragmenting and limitless requirements of consumer culture. Nonetheless, Weber



underscored how ineffective actual theology is in directing real life. People will do with it what they want.

Christianity, and especially American Evangelical Protestantism, is certainly not the only possibility for locating a renewed sense of community and solidarity that Habermas notes is so desperately lacking from much of the world right now and so desperately needed to revitalize the participatory democracies, and I do not mean to overstate the relevancy of one particular belief system within a pluralistic, let alone global, society. Christianity does, however, have a long and deep history in this country, and, as noted by Brennan (2000), is a faith that carries the individualistic and utilitarian values that accommodate market society exceedingly well. Part of America's religious past, it looks well positioned to continue to play a large part in her future, but if it is subordinated to the logic of the market, its inner piece of individual authenticity goes with it. Its content is no longer inexhaustible. Habermas is right: an awareness of just what is missing is crucial to any social movement that seeks to preserve a sense of human community and ultimately, perhaps, find some sort of counter-hegemonic vision that will transcend identity politics and offer a united alternative front. Unfortunately, the potential of American Protestantism to play a part in this role may be quietly fading away.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> One out of four Americans now identify as an Evangelical Christian. Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life. 2007. Retrieved May 14, 2010 (<http://religions.pewforum.org/reports>).

<sup>2</sup> Prosperity theology is a religious message that God offers the promise of material and bodily health in exchange for frequent praise and blind devotion. While it has a distinctly American history going back into the 19th Century, it took its current form in the 1970s and is often associated with televangelism, although it has never been confined to it. See Hummel (1991) and Broersma (1985) for a fuller historical and theological account.

<sup>3</sup> A megachurch is generally understood to consist of at least two thousand members. A 2008 study conducted jointly by the Leadership Network and the Hartford Institute for Religion Research estimates there are approximately twelve-hundred of these churches in America with membership numbers that continue to grow. Retrieved May 14, 2010 ([http://hirr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/megachurch\\_attender\\_report.htm](http://hirr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/megachurch_attender_report.htm)).

<sup>4</sup> Thomas (2009) cites the Christian gospel industry alone at 4 billion in 2004.

<sup>5</sup> "Text" is the content of a message, which may or may not be only a matter of words. Pictures, graphics and other non-verbal communication fall under this category; in short, the medium is still part of the message.

<sup>6</sup> During this time period, Mainline Protestant groups consisted mostly of Prebyterians and Episcopians. Although it is now as much a tradition associated with more liberal theology and political leanings as it is a composition of the specific denominations who

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comprised the first wave of immigrants to America, these groups were then overwhelmingly "white" and among the first groups to accumulate money and education.

<sup>7</sup> Drawing on Niebuhr's work, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (1929), in which he argues that denominational divisions were heavily weighted by differences in social status, Robert Wuthnow (1988) observes that these divisions seem to have held up until the period shortly following World War II. After the late 50s and early 60s, however, the significance of social status in determining religious affiliation notably and continually declined.

<sup>8</sup> Periodic revivals are a key part of Evangelical Christianity and its history. Noll (2001), for example, argues successful waves have reinvigorated Protestantism throughout American history during times when the religious establishment was perceived to be increasingly out of touch with the needs of regular folk.

<sup>9</sup> Taking care not to offend, Stark spends a paragraph explaining "briefly the implications of theorizing about religion for the plausibility of religious doctrines," he continues: "It would be entirely wrong to claim that by offering rational explanations of why religions will, for example, tend to conceive of the gods in rational terms, the truth of religious doctrines is called into question. . . . On the contrary, if the supernatural is as described by traditional Jewish-Christian-Moslem theology, then we live in a reality in which our theory about the nature of the gods *ought* to hold. . . . The idea that social science can comprehend religion *because* God is rational is entirely parallel with the notion that the laws of physics are susceptible to reason and discovery" (p. 16).

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<sup>10</sup> Ellingson (2009), for example, calls for more "audience data" since we still "do not fully understand why people attend; why they join, stay or leave; how they experience the worship, fellowship or theology of megachurches . . . without data from attendees . . . we cannot fully assess the accuracy of cultural/market explanations because we cannot know with certainty if and how megachurch programs resonate with the interests of audiences or help individuals address their religious questions" (p. 28-9).

<sup>11</sup> Graham Ward and Walter Benjamin both make this argument. Benjamin notes: "It adds to our understanding of capitalism as religion to realize that, to begin with, the first heathens certainly did not believe that religion served a 'higher,' 'moral' interest but that it was severely practical. In other words, religion did not achieve any greater clarity than about its 'ideal' or 'transcendental' nature more than capitalism does today. Therefore it, too, regarded individuals who were irreligious or had other beliefs as members of its community in the same way that the modern bourgeoisie now regards those of its members who are not gainfully employed" ([1921]1996:290).

<sup>12</sup> Baudrillard's concept of floating signifiers undermines the "shared" in this. However, despite their free-floating existence as pure exchange value, someone/something still has to assign them a symbolic value within the culture itself, even if this value is up for contestation. And while part of the cycle of consumer society can be done on a purely individual level, revolving as it does around an endless production of need, the other part is communicative: a signifying to others of who I am and what I am worth.

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<sup>13</sup> The idea of a brand "clan" is somewhat dated, but not, I believe, is her presentation of advertising as a mediation of meaning. Perhaps "lifestyle group" would have been a better term.

<sup>14</sup> See Twitchell, *Shopping for God: How Christianity Went from in Your Heart to in Your Face*, for one such elaboration along these lines. Also Giddens (1991), although he makes this point to a lesser extent.

<sup>15</sup> In her theory of how culture interacts with social structure Swidler (1986) argues that culture's relation to social action is best seen as a "tool kit of resources from which people can construct diverse strategies of action" (p. 281). During unsettled times, however, cultural strategies lose their assumed character and instead become specifically articulated ideologies as groups struggle to assert their now precarious hold on meaning.

<sup>16</sup> Williams also brings in Billings's critique (1990) of Gramsci's sociology of religion. Among other elements of his argument, Billings thinks Gramsci did not give enough attention to the "non-rational" elements of consciousness raising.

<sup>17</sup> This is the central concern of Miller's *Consuming Religion* (2004), in which he maintains: "having one's symbol system exploited for marketing purposes is not the same as being politically neutralized. The relationship of beliefs, narratives, and symbols to concrete practice is always complex. In consumer cultures it is particularly so, owing to advanced capitalism's protean power to exploit critique. This ability to encompass dissent is a serious concern for theology, because it presumes that the beliefs, narratives, and symbols that it stewards inform the life and politics of the Christian community" (p. 2).

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<sup>18</sup> See Neitz and Mueser (1997) who advocate for the strong ability of qualitative methods to supplement the data on religion generated by rational choice theory.

<sup>19</sup> Bellah, for one, argues that religion can be viewed as a human construction without automatically precluding its ability to reach a deeper level of meaning than other cultural forms.

<sup>20</sup> West gives a succinct warning about the political consequences of market encroachment on religion on p. 24 of *Prophetic Thought in Postmodern Times*.

<sup>21</sup> Even Iannaccone acknowledges the need for "more attention to microlevel questions," as in: "Do people really perceive some religions as more costly or risky than others, and are those perceptions consistent enough to justify cost-benefit analysis? Do individuals and organizations actually trade off between time and money when they 'produce' religious commodities?" This is despite his view that the "rate of return to [rational choice] research has proved high enough to justify investing in new empirical studies aimed squarely at the theory and its predictions" (1997:41).

<sup>22</sup> This includes an appearance on Larry King Live (Dec.16, 2006) and coverage by Fox News (Feb.3, 2004), CBS News (Oct.14, 2007), The New York Times (March 30, 2006) and BusinessWeek (May 23, 2005).

<sup>23</sup> Glaser and Strauss (1967).

<sup>24</sup> Total weekly attendance averages 43,500.

<sup>25</sup> Geertz (1973), "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture."

<sup>26</sup> Lakewood's pastors do not deliver a sermon but a "message." From what I can tell, the only difference is the choice of wording, although that in itself is a significant change.

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<sup>27</sup> Marcoss Witt, Christmas program 2010.

<sup>28</sup> Nick Green, C30/The Journey service, January 7th, 2011.

<sup>29</sup> The King James translation of this verse is: "Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you."

<sup>30</sup> Joel Osteen, Develop Your Pearls, message #487.

<sup>31</sup> Nick Green, C30/The Journey service, January 7th, 2011.

<sup>32</sup> 1769 Oxford King James Bible.

<sup>33</sup> Ruth 2:16. The full verse reads: "And let fall also [some] of the handfuls of purpose for her, and leave [them], that she may glean [them], and rebuke her not." *ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary 8th ed.

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Chris Tomlin & Israel Houghton, 2007 Inegrity Praise! Music, performed by the Lakewood Choir & Orchestra.

<sup>37</sup> Marcoss Witt, Christmas program, 12/26/2010.

<sup>38</sup> Nick Green, youth service, 12/26/10.

<sup>39</sup> She is using Daniel 10:11-13.

<sup>40</sup> Peter Berger, once one of the foremost advocates of secularization theory, sees the reassertion of religion globally as a reaction to increasing levels of insecurity resulting from assaults on local culture and traditions in addition to economic and material uncertainty.

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<sup>41</sup> Others have also explored Evangelical Christianity's influence as a global movement with ties to capitalism and fundamentalist values, including; Brouwer et al (1996), Coleman (2000) and Cox (1995).



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