Competing Christianities:

Social Dynamics of Religious Change in the Upper South

by

Terry Shoemaker

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

Approved May 2018 by the
Graduate Supervisory Committee:

Linell Cady, Chair
Joel Gereboff
Gaymon Bennett

ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

August 2018

ABSTRACT

This study analyzes competing forms of Protestant Christianity within the Bible Belt of the Upper South (Kentucky, Tennessee, and North Carolina). On one hand, a conservative "culture war" version of Christianity has dominated the South, and deeply influenced national politics, for almost fifty years. This form of Christianity is predicated on white supremacy and heteropatriarchy and regulates religious, as well as sexual, gender, and racial norms. On the other hand, an emerging movement of those once socialized in the culture war version of Protestantism is now reconfiguring the regional traditions. Through ethnographic fieldwork, qualitative interviews, and historical analysis, this study explores the ways these post-culture war Christians are navigating and negotiating relations with family, church, and politics and society more broadly. This work argues that Protestantism in the Upper South is being re-landscaped from the inside by individuals staying within the tradition who seek to reorient regional, national and religious identities. This study goes beyond generalizations about changes in American religion to shed light on the specific motivations, conflicts and dynamics inherent in shifts in lived religion in this particular region. In so doing it also contributes to deeper understanding of processes of religious change more generally.

DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to my family who has shown great patience and support as I completed the research, analysis and writing processes. My wife, son, and daughter are amazing and never wavered in their encouragement. I can never thank you enough for allowing me to pursue my dreams of obtaining a doctoral degree.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work would not have been possible without the contributions and support of numerous people and organizations. I am indebted to the faculty at Arizona State University who has contributed to my training and development within the field of Religious Studies. Numerous faculty and staff have provided me with resources and opportunities to contribute to my career goals. To the administrators who reduce the pressures of graduate school by assisting with paperwork and logistics, you are the unsung heroes. Many thanks to the Center for the Study of Religion and Conflict at Arizona State University for providing much needed funding to both initiate and complete this research project.

The insights, feedback, and direction supplied by my dissertation committee were invaluable. Each member of the committee contributed in specific areas of the project strengthening the approach and analysis. I am particularly grateful to Linell Cady whose expertise was instrumental throughout the research process. As supervisors, teachers, and mentors, the investment of my dissertation committee has taught me much about research, higher education, and scholarship.

In addition, I would like to extend my appreciation to my project consultants in Kentucky, North Carolina, and Tennessee who voluntarily participated in this study. May your journeys find fulfillment.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“I think it is safe to say that while the South is hardly Christ-centered,
it is most certainly Christ-haunted.” – Flannery O’Connor (1969, 44)

Walking through the darkness back to a one-man tent that I had set up the afternoon before, my eyes are drawn to the many campfires that either still burn this late into the evening or consist of weak ashes attempting to live but destined to fade. The smoke rises into the pitch-black night sky, signaling activity in this part of the expansive Appalachian Mountains. Like ghostly apparitions, the smoke fills the humid atmosphere along with faint voices of silhouettes slowly wrapping up the day. Conversations about the day’s activities and traveling faintly echo through the mountains, hills and hollows. The dialogues, like the smoke of the fire, extend well beyond the fire rings. At one camp area, a group of people marches around a large fire accompanied by a dozen people beating hand-held drums allowing the thumping to articulate attitudes, thoughts, feelings and perceptions.

Some say that the community of Hot Springs, North Carolina, once an epicenter of those seeking spiritual refuge and bodily healing, is haunted. The haunters roam the darkness, disturbing the present by reminding of the past. Stories permeate the region about ghostly members of the Cherokee Nation still active in the area. One story includes an attractive Cherokee woman who lures men to a nearby stream only to drown them. Another describes a diffuse Cherokee spirit that prohibits the area from growing too large with tourists and visitors. Likewise, during the American Civil War, troops marched through the town, and some set up headquarters in what was then called Warm Springs, North Carolina. Names change but historical markers tell bloody stories of families splitting over Union or Confederate loyalties. Past commitments, political and religious, eclipsed biological ties. Down the road in the Shelton Laurel Valley, thirteen people, including a thirteen-year-old boy and an elderly man, were executed for their suspected loyalties to Union positions. This past still lives yearly with a reenactment of the Warm Springs battle and Confederate flags decorate many of the homes of community members outside the campground.

The campground is situated between a rising river due to the daily rains of July and a railroad track still carrying cargo through the mountains from the east into the neighboring states of Tennessee and Kentucky. Appalachian Trail hikers stop in the small community to restock their resources and then continue either north or south toward their destinations. Bodies, transportation mechanisms, and natural elements circulate through the community.

In another area of the campground, I hear a group of campers singing old Christian hymns. This group has grown larger throughout the evening. The members stand not around a fire, but around people strumming guitars, banjos, and mandolins. Most of the singers hold a plastic cup of beer in one hand as they joyfully carol, “I’ll Fly Away,” followed by “Amazing Grace.” This singing continues for hours. Men sit around the singing group smoking pipes, drinking beer, and discussing the theological bases of the hymns. When I stood under one of the metal-roofed shelters earlier in the evening, the singers competed with the sounds of the day’s raindrops plummeting onto the tin from the damp leaves above. These songs and conversations remind me that I lost cell service thirty miles out on my way to the campsite but was able to listen to my choice of multiple

Christian preachers and singers on the radio. Each preacher tells a similar story: the United States is in bad shape and only a revival of Jesus can ameliorate the situation. A return is key. The past was full of a romantic and good life.

My headlamp provides only the faintest assistance since the AAA batteries that provide its power wane. The weakness of the batteries along with my ill preparedness for this camping venture creates an opportunity to notice the lightening bugs glowing in the night, providing a rhythm coexisting with the campfires and humans. A small flashing light and then darkness followed by light and darkness. Repeat. Children of the area often grab a Mason jar, cut slits in the aluminum lid, and fill the jar as full of lightening bugs as possible. Eventually the fireflies die from lack of oxygen, but this fails to stop such adventures from happening again.

A group of over three thousand people have descended into the region for a four-day gathering called the Wild Goose Festival. The gathering promises spirituality, justice, and art by its organizers. Several large meeting tents are assembled that provide shade from the sun and each tent is designated with a particular theme. Attendees are free to roam the tents to hear sermons, lectures, or discussions regarding contemporary politics, economics, and religion. Local artists set up makeshift display areas. Paintings and crafts decorate the gaps between trees. Food trucks provide sustenance for the pilgrims journeying in the area. Rainbow flags are staked into the ground near some tents. Shirts state, “Namaste Y’all.” Storytelling is essential. Who is doing what? Why? How is it working?

Once I finally make it back to my tent, I rejoin a group of campers, who all attended a private Christian college in Florida a decade prior. This group, noticing my ill preparedness for the camping trip, adopted me into their fold. Wanting to earn my keep, I assisted in preparing meals. The food supply consisted of harvest from a farm in Georgia brought by one of the attendees who was the farmer. Fresh vegetables, including zucchini, squash, tomatoes, sweet potatoes, peppers, and onions, are diced and thrown in with the meat that also came from a farm in Georgia being ascertained by bartering vegetables.

This evening's conversation around a campfire consists of a group of ten to twelve attendees discussing family life in relation to their religiosity. Most around that circle agree that their parents and siblings fail to understand their version of Christianity. As they sit in camping chairs, one by one they speak of intense arguments, pleadings, and prayers of their parents begging them to return to a particular version of Christianity. Attendees share stories of growing up in an intensely stringent form of Christianity that restricted their thoughts, practices, and allegiances. Now they are all transitioning to another form of Christianity that they find more meaningful, relevant, and liberating. Speaking about familial tensions, one attendee emotionally admits, "My parents hate the Christian that I am." Although everyone in the circle identifies as Christian, their form of Christianity is foreign, offensive even, to their families.

The articulations, tensions, and lived expressions of people transitioning from a conservative form of Christianity into a more liberal version of the same tradition in this region of the Upper South (North Carolina, Kentucky, and Tennessee) are the focus of this project. Three areas of their past and present lives are particularly important – family life, church commitments, and political engagements. By investigating these three areas of this religious shift, the discursive activities of competing Christianities are revealed.

Significantly, the social conditions whereby these shifts materialize also prove extremely important. In this region, where the often-practiced decorum is to not speak directly of religious and political differences, lived realties speak volumes by countering the dominant social norms and values. Thus, like many of the attendees of the Wild Goose Festival, these Christians must learn to navigate and negotiate their form of Christianity socially and relationally. To understand this religious shift, it is best to begin where the interlocutors of the project began – in conservative Christianity.

Culture War Christianity

Conservative Christian political movements, organizations, and objectives remain of clear interest to scholars with emphases highlighting political stances and strategies (Fitzgerald 2017; Steensland and Goff 2014; Lints 2013; Wilford 2012; Elisha 2011; Balmer 2010, 2006; Lindsay 2007; Sandler 2006; Smith 2000, 1998). While some works document the impact of conservative Christians on mainstream politics (Lints 2013; Balmer 2010, 2006; Casanova 1994), others provide a lens into the motivations and objectives of conservative Christians (Smith 2000, 1998; Goldberg 2007; Hedges 2006; Bacevich 2005). These latter works highlight the high energy levels of conservative Christians in political spheres, but disagree on the overall objectives of political engagement. Christian Smith describes Evangelicals as “embattled” or perceiving themselves, their values, and religion under threat (1998). This defensive posture is possibly the primary tool for mobilization, but, as Smith argues, is essentially an attempt to voice a particular kind of Christianity (2000). Alternatively though, others describe conservative Christians as explicitly advocating and working for political power

(Goldberg 2007; Hedges 2006). In this version, conservative Christians seek to establish a theocratic government based on a particular reading of the Bible and a romanticized history of the United States. Needless to say, relevant scholarship underscores the impact of conservative Christians with profound influences in federal government, particularly on American foreign policy, and many of these influences are predicated on apocalyptical understandings of the role of the United States (Lints 2013; Lieven 2004; Sutton 2014).

But contemporary scholarship also acknowledges shifts in conservative Christianity often through a lens of lived religiosities. Shifting focus to the lived, daily realities of conservative Christians, recent scholarship notes the heterogeneity within Evangelical spaces (Strhan 2015; Steensland and Goff 2014; Wilford 2012; Elisha 2011; Lee and Sinitiere 2009; Sandler 2006). In doing so, some highlight the innovativeness of conservative Christians in the religious marketplace of the United States (Lee and Sinitiere 2009), and that these localized religiosities often cross into secular terrains (Steensland and Goff 2014; Elisha 2011). Likewise generational differences indicate new formations and stylizations of conservative Christianity (Sandler 2006).

Where scholarship does find agreement is in the historical development of the Christian Right and the Moral Majority movement into the public sphere (Casanova 1994). The 1960s and ‘70s witnessed a shift in cultural currency across the country from mainline Protestantism to conservative Protestantism (i.e. Evangelicalism). The transition of many to Evangelicalism, broadly speaking, was a political statement about values (Putnam 2000), and as demonstrated by Randall Balmer, the values of Evangelicals, Fundamentalists, Pentecostals, and other players of the Christian Right congealed around resisting racial integration in the public school systems (Balmer 2010). Conservative

Protestants often minimize these racial roots and, instead, pronounce abortion as the formative issue for the congealing of conservative Christians into political engagement. The racial roots of the movement evolved into a national “culture war” related to competing personal rights and values in order to “bring about a moral and conservative revolution” (Jerry Falwell as quoted in Wuthnow 1988, 211).

The Moral Majority movement, the Christian Coalition, and the Christian Right maintained considerable political influence and mobilizations for local, state, and federal elections up until the George W. Bush era. Prominent leaders like Jerry Falwell, Phyllis Schlafly, Francis Schaeffer, and Pat Robertson continued to encourage conservative Christians to enter into politics through organizing, voting, and running for local and state offices (Fitzgerald 2016). These movements successfully created a political legacy that has lasted for over three decades building upon the work of other conservative Christians, like Billy Graham, leading to an “era of Evangelicalism” (Miller 2014).

This legacy is evidenced in continued political goals, church understandings and practices, and generational acculturation processes. Quite possibly, the various conservative Christian organizations most successful legacy has been in the creation and dissemination of a religiopolitical metanarrative, referred to as the culture wars, that maintains a generational prominence. The narrative that the United States plays a divine role in human history and the coupled encouragement and prodding of conservative Christians to ensure that this role continues found traction in the culture war (Bacevich; 2005; Taylor 2005; Hunter 1991). Leaders like Jerry Falwell successfully “constructed a jeremiad that conservative Christians had to get into politics or see the destruction of the nation” (Fitzgerald, 8). This led to a “political and social hostility rooted in different systems of moral understanding. The end to which these hostilities tend is the domination of one cultural and moral ethos over all others" (Hunter 1991, 42). The adoption and dissemination of this metanarrative created strict symbolic boundaries between who was not only Christian, but truly American. By blurring the lines between nation-state and religious identity, the movement engendered political energy revolving around numerous crises of loss – loss of a Christian nation, a Christian majority, Christian principles, and Christian faith – caused by various identified enemies (homosexuals, domestic and international political actors, and minorities).

This culture war version of Christianity continues to captivate multiple strands of conservative Protestants across denominational and categorical lines like Evangelicals, Fundamentalists, Pentecostals, some Mainline churches, and even some Catholics. Because of the complications with taxonomies internal to conservative Protestant Christianity (Evangelical, Fundamentalist, Pentecostal) and due to the successful congealing of the religiopolitical metanarrative, I find it useful to refer to this particular kind of Christianity as culture war Christianity (CWC).[1] Hence I argue that although there are differences in theologies and forms of worship in various denominations, the culture war metanarrative is ubiquitous across conservative Christianity. It's not that distinctions within religious groups are uninformative, but that CWC is determinative in many of the values and engagements of conservative Christian churches.

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[1] Because Protestantism is constituted with various forms each seeking to highlight particular distinctions, categorization is quite problematic. Denominational categories like Baptist, Method, Presbyterian, Lutheran, and Assemblies of God note particular institutional differences of doctrine, structure, and leadership. Many of these denominations can be categorized under broader umbrellas of foundational theological camps like Calvinism, Lutheranism, and Anabaptists. Add to these categories the interdenominational categories like Evangelical, Mainline, Fundamentalist, and Pentecostal and classification begins to become laborious and overlapping. To confuse the varieties of Protestantism further, non-mainstream movements like Jehovah's Witnesses, Amish, Mennonites, Latter Day Saints, and current non-denominational trends seeking to disaffiliate with the denominational, theological, and interdenominational categories listed above muddy the waters of categorization even further.
This presents quite a problem for scholars attempting to utilize monikers to describe exactly what conservative Christianity they are attempting to describe. Randall Balmer decides in his study to use the term "evangelical as an umbrella term to refer broadly to conservative Protestants – including fundamentalists, evangelicals, Pentecostals, and charismatics" (2006, xvi). Balmer argues that each of these interdenominational headings constitute an "evangelical subculture in America"; yet this seems inaccurate when one considers the distinct historical formations of fundamentalists, evangelicals and charismatics. Others try to simply call these conservative Protestants "believers" like Jeffery Sheler and Nancy

As a strategic means of building a formidable force, CWC enlists a mass of conservative Christians to intensely commit to political engagement through the institution of churches. The church is the site of political organizing and disseminating the religiopolitical metanarrative. This dissemination focuses on recruitment and weekly training to weaponize men, women, and young people into the perceived battle. Thus ecclesiological life is central to the strategy of CWC.

Just as CWC heavily informs and influences both political involvement and church activities, the movement also greatly affects the lives of many young people who were acculturated into the movement by parents and religious leaders. The urgent responsibility to train young people for the culture war has resulted in intense parental burdens. Home programs and resources emerged to supplement training that families received within the church. Programs of discipleship reinvigorated the notion of the nuclear family led by the patriarch. Thus a three-fold strategy developed within this form of conservative Christianity predicated on the notion that forces "intent on destroying the Christian faith, family values, and democratic freedoms" existed (Fitzgerald 2016, 361). As a counter to these forces, religion, family, and politics were and are the spaces for culture war Christians to cultivate strategies and training for the ensuing battles.

Ammerman, but then use the terms evangelical and fundamentalist respectively throughout their works (Sheler 2006; Ammerman 1987).

To investigate this CWC, this research relies on the accounts of interlocutors acculturated into it in their youth. These people were trained within churches, attended summer camps, home Bible studies, participated in nightly, family prayer times, and multiple other forms of instruction. The intensity of socialization resounds within the following articulations by attendees at the Wild Goose Festival raised in CWC. Listen closely as these interlocutors describe their socializations and commitments.

Growing up homeschooled in Kentucky, Lauren, white and in her mid-twenties, spent much of her early life with her family and other Christians at her church and parachurch activities. Lauren's dad obtained a doctoral degree from a Christian university and authored a creationist resource for homeschooling children. Creationist views were the primary factor for Lauren's parents to homeschool their children. Alternatives to public education are in high demand in the Bible Belt region and for culture war Christians, but private Christian schooling was not an option for Lauren's family since they are part of a conservative Christian denomination that prohibits the establishment of Christian schools.[2] Instead, Lauren describes waking up early with her siblings to complete the homeschool curriculum of the day before lunch. After lunch, the entire family worked to package her father's homeschool materials to be mailed out to other homeschoolers across the country. Lauren explains to me that her parents reassured her that the children were part of an ongoing struggle against the forces of secularism. By working diligently, they were subverting the dangerous and Satanic pedagogical goals of secularists seeking to marginalize Christianity in the United States.

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[2] Not only does this particular denomination not allow the establishment or participation in Christian schools, but also any parachurch organization (like orphanages, food banks, etc.) that are labeled as "Christian."

When asked about church life, Lauren states that she attended church minimally six times a week. This included Sunday morning service, Sunday evening service, and Wednesday evening Bible study. These three regularly scheduled meeting times are typical of conservative Protestants in the region. But, in addition to the regular meeting times, she attended a youth Bible study, volunteered with others at the church to take meals to "shut ins" or those who were unable to physically leave their homes, and other events scattered throughout the week. The church community was the epicenter of her family life. Robert Putnam notes that conservative Christians "are more likely to be involved in activities within their own religious community but are less likely to be involved in the broader community" (Putnam 2000, 77). This was certainly the case for Lauren and many others within this study.

Baptized at age twelve, Lauren recounts this decision as a mixture of pressure and guilt. Like others, Lauren was terrified of the possibility that she would die and spend an afterlife in hell. But the real fear of hell was the "separation from family" that was repeatedly described. As a youth, the thought of separation, particularly when her social network and support system all revolved around the church and family network, took a mentally traumatic toll that continues to create tension with her family. Speaking of her life today, Lauren acknowledges, "It breaks my parents' heart that I don't love God the same way that they do. It's like we live in two different worlds. The arguments are exhausting."

Likewise, Brad, white, late thirties, describes the ways that his culture war Christianity weaved together the political and theological. Throughout our interview, Brad used the following phrases when referencing the Christianity of his youth: "[My life was about] God, country, and the Republican Party" and "Jesus was definitely a Republican." Interestingly Brad provides a unique analogy of his understanding of the world: "God was quite angry like a cosmic referee running up and down the court waiting to blow the whistle on you." And like Lauren, the notion of a tormenting afterlife loomed ever present for Brad. He reports, "Hell was a real issue for me. The idea that God was going to torture all of creation for an eternity and that people would lose the cosmic lottery was heavy." The religiopolitical metanarrative is reinforced through the theological concept of a watchful deity arbitrating society.

Growing up initially in Florida, but eventually relocating to Tennessee, Brad's lure into church commitments was through the music programs. His mom served as the church secretary for twenty-seven years, and Brad remembers being in the Baptist church "from as early as I can remember" where he spent "at least three days a week, if not more. I was there Sunday morning and night and Wednesday night. [When you're in culture war Christianity] your life revolves around church." Continuing his education at a private Christian academy, Brad enrolled in a Christian college and sang in a traveling choir. He explains the purpose of the educational institutions and the churches, "You were learning a skill with your church people because you were trying to escape the world around you." In this perspective, the world is enchanted with spirits harboring malicious intentions. Thus one must guard oneself and engage in a strategic kind of battling. This battling is founded on what Brad calls a tension between fear and certainty – "fear of God and other people, but confident of God and against other people."

Yet not all of the training is relegated to homes, churches and Christian colleges. Now in her early thirties, Brenda remembers her "grandmother sitting in her chair with her large print Bible using the ‘N word’” in North Carolina. Growing up as a Methodist, it was at school that a friend relayed the culture war Christian salvation narrative that Brenda now remembers as “I’m a worm. I’m scum. Here’s why and here’s what you do about it.” “In all sincerity of heart,” she states, “at thirteen, I got on my knees in my bedroom and said the sinner’s prayer.” At that point in her life, Brenda recalls, “You go to church on Sunday morning, youth on Sunday night, and Wednesday night Bible study. Then we’d spend one to two nights a week at our youth minister’s house. In addition, my junior year [of high school], I was really involved with FCA (Fellowship of Christian Athletes).”

After high school, Brenda decided to attend a state university in North Carolina where her involvement levels only increased. While carrying a full load of coursework pursuing a degree in education, Brenda recounts that she was involved with Campus Crusade for Christ where she led a weekly Bible study in her dormitory and attended mentoring meetings for discipleship. As a student leader within the parachurch organization, she was expected to go room to room and invite other college students to the campus ministry. In addition, she also taught a Sunday School class at a local Methodist church, was a 6th grade small group leader, and volunteered with the children’s ministry. She estimated that she spent at least twenty-five hours per week in some sort of official church or parachurch commitment.

In this region where “when you meet someone, you say your name and then where you go to church,” her commitments paid off as she was offered a job immediately upon graduation at a local elementary school. Brenda admits that she more than likely received the job offer due to the principal of the school attending her church and the principal's daughter being in that small group of 6th graders. And all of this is typical. In the Upper South, Christian symbols are seemingly everywhere. As a way of describing the prominence of Christian symbols, Brenda states, "You'll be in a coffee shop and there'll be people with their Bibles open, heads bowed, and praying. It's very overt."

Although the interlocutors of this project experienced training from a variety of Protestant church denominations (Methodist, Baptist, Church of Christ, Pentecostal, etc.), in the majority of cases, similar stories of socialization emerged. Many describe the relational heritage found in the church. In fact, many could trace back their family heritage through the churches. As Stephen told me, he was "five generations deep" in Oneness Pentecostalism. Likewise, Kathy was "*entrenched* in the Church of Christ teachings and mentality."

In the world of the Bible Belt region, CWC exemplifies the power and prowess of the religiopolitical metanarrative and the ways that these commitments actualize. Churches, Christian colleges, parachurches, along with other Christian symbols permeate the region. These symbols supply a form of external pressure that controls values and norms. In her study of the South, Bernadette Barton describes the dominance of this particular form of Christianity, which she calls Bible Belt Christianity:

> Christian crosses, messages, paraphernalia, music, news, and attitudes saturate every day settings. Bible Belt Christianity thus influences a wide range of local secular institutions like schools and workplaces, and Bible Belt Christians exert a powerful influence on city, county, and state political and cultural institutions (2012, 14).

Because of the powerful influence of this style of Christianity, Barton calls this dominance the "Bible Belt panopticon." Using Foucault's notion of the modern world being surveilled by regimes of power to ensure the regulation of members, Barton argues that this panopticon, “manifests through tight social networks of family, neighbors, church, and community members, and plethora of Christian signs and symbols sprinkled through the region” (24).

Barton’s notion of the Bible Belt panopticon is extremely useful in understanding the dominance of CWC in the Upper South.[3] Unless one has traveled or lived in the area, it is difficult to overestimate how controlling the Bible Belt panopticon operates through both visible and invisible means. Undergirding the panopticon is the culture war metanarrative described above. In other words, the region is regulated: “Evangelical Protestants have been deeply tied to dominant southern cultural styles and traditions, at the very center of a regional context that defined parameters for private selves and public identities” (Wilson 2005, 9). The defined parameters extend to deviations in sexuality and religious norms that are heavily monitored within the region. Brandi, who reappears in Chapter 3, describes the controlling power of the region, "You can't be yourself. You have to watch what you say. You can't be an individual. There's always someone watching and judging."

But at some point each of the interlocutors of this study - those trained to engage in the culture war – transitioned away from CWC. Their stories parallel other demographic shifts within the United States.

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[3] Barton notes the powerful impact and the broad ways that Christianity operates in the Upper South. She prefers to call this form of religion as “compulsory Christianity” (2011). I think that she is correct to note the unavoidability of Christianity in the South. I have noticed in my research that even those who have not attended any church in the area are quite familiar with the religiopolitical narrative described herein. But I find that compulsory Christianity is quite generic in nature. It gives little information as to what it is obliging Christians and non-Christians to adhere to or to practice. Instead Culture War Christianity locates the specific nature of religiopolitical ideology.

Whispers of a Passing Present

Demographically, the United States is diversifying ethnically and racially, spelling the demise of a dominant white, Protestant America (Jones 2016). Recent scholarship points to the erosion of Evangelicalism and a culture war style Christianity (Miller 2014; Jones 2016). Responding to these shifts, Robert P. Jones argues:

> One simple fact remains: White Christian America will be survived by significant numbers of its descendants. There is much at stake for the country in whether these survivors retreat into disengaged enclaves, band together to launch repeated rounds of what the sociologist Nathan Glazer has called 'defensive offensives' – in which a formerly powerful majority recasts itself as a beleaguered minority in an attempt to preserve its particular social values – or find a way to integrate into the new American cultural landscape (Jones 2016, 43-44).

Jones correctly notes that in order to maintain a Christian presence and affiliation, resistance to change or the search for new ways is at the core of possibilities. This second option – social, political, and religious integration into a diversifying landscape – yields numerous Christians socialized into CWC but who are now revising their Christian beliefs and practices if not leaving Christianity altogether; thus not following in their parent's footsteps. Although some work illuminates the ways that individuals navigate modifying religious contours (Drescher 2016; Manning 2015), there exists under researched questions regarding on-the-ground activities, techniques, and strategies of those shifting and/or modifying affiliations, practices, beliefs, or religious communities.

One such location for the gathering of people leaving CWC is the Wild Goose Festival. This annual gathering, started in 2011, aims to be a cultivated space for discourse related to the intersections of justice, arts, music, and spirituality. Structured much like an outdoor music and arts festival, the objective of the fest is to "provide space for courageous, imaginative, and participative social justice work, creative expression, spiritual practice, and astonishing music." Taking its name from the Celtic metaphor of the wild goose as the "Holy Spirit," the festival relocated to its current site of Hot Springs, North Carolina in 2013. Since its inception, the festival has doubled in the number of attendees with the count above three thousand in 2016. Many of the leading organizers and speakers are affiliated with a liberal form of Protestantism known as the Emerging or Emergent Church Movement.

The Emerging Church Movement (ECM), which began in the 1990s, has been a site of religious controversy since its inception. Many of its progressive ideas and inclusive practices create friction with other Christian churches. Presenting itself as a dialogue or conversation, the ECM works to build an equalizing platform for religiosity (see McLaren 2004, 2012; Jones 2008; Kimball 2003 for objectives of the movement). For instance, the church openly welcomes LGBTQ persons and women into membership and leadership positions. The movement seeks to include people from other faith traditions as well; although this movement initially emerged from within Evangelicalism, it now includes Mainline Protestants, Catholics, Jews, and Muslims. Tony Jones, an organizer and writer of the ECM, states the movement is "an attempt to both maintain one's distinctive identity while also being truly open to the identity of the Other" (2008, 39). Because of this objective, leaders like Brian McLaren advocate that Christianity must exist on an equal playing field with other religious traditions (2012).

Scholars argue that the ECM supplies a significant glimpse into contemporary and future forms of religion through the ways in which this movement challenges traditional conceptualizations of Protestantism. For instance, sociologists Gerardo Marti and Gladys Ganiel proclaim, "the Emerging Church movement is one of the most important reframings of religion within Western Christianity in the past two decades" (2014; 5). Harvey Cox utilizes the ECM as exemplar of the ways in which religion is being reshaped in the contemporary world (2009, 218-219). Susan Harding employs the ECM to argue that a "revoicing" of American evangelicalism is currently underway (2010). And anthropologist James Bielo posits that the ECM will continue to strongly impact Christianity within the United States (2011). Importantly, each of these works focuses primarily on the religious activities and values as a foundation for their various conclusions. Or more critically, each of these scholarly examinations begin and end with church as if church life is separate from other aspects of life.

In an attempt to contribute a fuller understanding of the manifesting shifts within conservative Protestantism, this project contends that two important components deserve critical attention. First, the broad power structures influencing and informing the shifts within conservative Protestantism merit explication. Although James Bielo is correct when he states, "New Christian identities are always born into a world of existing and competing Christian traditions, and develop in dynamic interaction with them," he underestimates the concomitant relevance and interactions with social and political formations (Bielo 2011, 198). Second, by centralizing church values and activities in these studies, previous religious trainings and relationships are minimized. Shifting religious values typically begin with inherited religious values and these values are inculcated through relationships inside and outside of the church institution. Once inherited religious values and ideas are rejected or, in some instances questioned, familial and social relationships must still be navigated and negotiated. To remedy this, I argue that a regional analysis together with religious socialization brings into fuller relief the lived realities of those shifting religiosities.

Similar to the complexities of naming Protestant groups, this study focuses on a Protestant movement loosely connected with a subgroup referred to as the Emerging Church Movement (ECM).[4] The ECM expressly rejects many of the denominational and interdenominational labels existent in scholarship and in the world of Christianity. To further add to the issues of labels, I discovered that the interlocutors of this study rarely utilize the term Emerging or Emergent Church in describing their religious affiliations or activities. As one interlocutor explains, “Emerging/Emergent was more of a blogosphere trope to make sense of what we were doing. We didn’t really use that language." To be sure, the majority of interlocutors cite resources from Emerging/Emergent Church voices like Brian McLaren, Phyllis Tickle, and Rob Bell, as well as attend what might be labeled as Emerging/Emergent church conferences and trainings; but the moniker of Emerging or Emergent proves less than useful. Instead of Emerging or Emergent Church some of the interlocutors of this project employ “progressive Christian” as the label to describe their subjective and collective religiosity. But none of the churches attended by the interlocutors of this project use “progressive” in the church name. And the term “progressive Christian” is quite troublesome as well since there is currently a separate movement called progressive Christianity that is unaffiliated with those of this project.

Considering all of these factors I simply refer to these Christians as post-Culture War Christians. By post- I call attention to a movement learning to live beyond the rigid boundaries of CWC. These persons must continue to navigate the political, religious, and familial relationships in their lives even as they fashion new Christian formations. Bielo uses the term “emerging evangelical” to describe this phenomenon (2011). I think that this is problematic due to many of my interlocutors denouncing evangelical as a label. I recognize that evangelicals are not monolithic and more progressive voices have been and are present within conservative Christianity. So I am not describing a novel advancement within evangelicalism. The Evangelical Left is certainly still operating with voices like Jim Wallis and many of the leaders of the Evangelical Left influencing the interlocutors of this project. But by post-, I suggest an undetermined religious future. In short, the one common bond of all the interlocutors of this project is the socialization into CWC and the shifting away from this form of Protestanitsm. The data suggest a current stage of interlocutor’s religious formulation that continues to respond to religious socialization of the past instead of attempting to rigidly define subjective or collective religiosities in the present. Nor do I intend to imply by using the label post-culture war Christianity that the culture war or the version of Christianity instantiated in the culture war metanarrative is expired. Although Robert Jones supplies an epitaph for white, Christian America, I, in fact, argue in Chapter 2 that culture war Christianity still maintains a stronghold on the region of the Upper South.

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[4] To add to the complexity of this movement, there exists two labels – Emerging and Emergent – often used as a moniker. These two labels (Emerging and Emergent) are sometimes considered interchangeable and sometimes as a means of differentiation between two strands that diverged at a moment within its history.

Like Jones, others are predicting the eventual demise of the church-centric domination in the Bible Belt predicated on demographic metamorphoses (Thompson 2013). Because of increased urbanization, an influx of immigrant populations, a re-migration of African-Americans back to the South, and a host of other factors, the South is changing. Importantly, “the old fusion of the evangelical religion and the Southern culture is mostly gone, where it survives, it's living on borrowed time" (Thompson 2013, 140). In the midst of these changes, many Southerners, religious and nonreligious, Christian and non-Christian, black and white, are learning to navigate the modifying terrains. And change engenders tensions.

The multiple transformations occurring in the Upper South create a moment in time when snapshots of religious shifts and evolution can be captured. By being attentive to the microscopic details of shifts away from CWC, features and characteristics of religious change come into focus. How *do* post-culture war Christians navigate and negotiate the multiple levels of relational and political engagements, specifically in the region known as the Upper South where the Bible Belt panopticon, supported with a culture war Christianity, regulates? I propose that these post-culture war Christians are conducting complex and arduous work. This project seeks to examine the ways that post-culture war Christians navigate and negotiate the three domains so important to the Christianity of their youth. These three spheres of world construction involve rethinking and reimagining political involvement and affiliations; experimenting with forms of church and religious community; and working to maintain or abandoning relationships with family members who maintain an affiliation with a culture war-styled Christianity. And as will be demonstrated, while working toward new forms of Christian life, post-culture war Christians disrupt the region with their fresh interpretations of and approaches to religiopolitical life.

Methodology and Approach

The religious and social lives of post-culture war Christians are emerging in a social context that is also in flux. Because of these factors, this research assembles and analyzes multiple forms of data and sources. This form of research, referred to as a *bricolage*, is “a pieced-together set of representations that are fitted to the specifics of a complex situation” (Denzin and Lincoln 2003, 5). *Bricolage* as a form of research acknowledges the role of the researcher in quilting together various segments of qualitative data to theorize and tell a cultural story (Denizon and Lincoln 1999; Berry 2004; Kincheloe 2001; Levi-Strauss 1966). Strengths of this research technique consist of being able “to examine phenomena not as detached things-in-themselves, but as connected things-in-the-world” (Rogers 2012, 10) and “understanding the making of identities in highly heterogeneous and fast-changing social contexts” (Altglas 2014, 475). The multiple forms of data of this project include qualitative interviews and participant-observation primarily, but also incorporates secondary resources such as texts and resources highlighted by interlocutors, digital materials, and the generative regional and local histories.

Qualitative interviews provide a method of garnering “central themes in the life world of the subjects” by permitting interlocutors to convey their perspectives, attitudes and experiences in their own words (Kvale 1996; 30, 31). Research based upon qualitative interviews proves effective for multidisciplinary projects and often incorporates a bottom up strategy seeking to understand the lived expressions and social constructions of subjects. During the qualitative interviews, semi-structured questionnaires were utilized. Semi-structured interviews permit more flexibility in the research process by allowing the researcher discretion in determining relevant material (Schensul, Schnesul, LeCompte 1999). Open-ended questions permit a space for interlocutors to develop complex responses, and the researcher can further probe these responses when potential relevant information emerges.

To truly unearth and theorize the lived realities of post-culture war Christians, I began by listening to the ways in which the interlocutors understand and perceive their situations and contexts. I conducted fifty-five qualitative interviews over an eight-month period. Of the fifty-five interviewees, fifty identify as a type of Christian that aligns with what I described as a post-culture war Christian in this study. Each of these interviewees were acculturated into a culture war style Christianity and are currently fashioning a Christianity politically, ecclesiologically, and relationally reactive to their upbringing. Five of the interviewees were rooted in a culture war style Christianity but have made the tenuous decision to disaffiliate with Christianity altogether (either as Spiritual but not Religious, Atheist, or simply as non-theistic). Each of these interviews was conducted individually (with few exceptions) and the audio captured through digital recording.[5] Although current data suggests that this shift in religiosity is primarily a generational shift, interviewee's ages in this project range from early twenties to early sixties demonstrating the broader span of this movement (Pelz and Smidt 2015). Twenty-nine interviewees are male and twenty-six are female. As far as commonalities, all interviewees are white and a majority completed a degree in higher education.

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[5] Although the intention was to digitally record each formal interview, there were two instances where technological issues interfered with the process. In these two instances, hand-written notes were kept and utilized as data.

Educational attainment proves significant in this religious shift of post-culture war Christians as it pertains both to religious and political engagements.

Interviews were recorded in various locations like the homes of interlocutors, local coffee shops, and over video-conferencing software (such as Skype or FaceTime) and most lasted approximately one hour in duration. During interview collection and after interview completion, each interview was coded and thoroughly analyzed for recurring patterns and themes. The content analysis of the subjective responses led to various data taxonomies that ground each of the following chapters.

In addition to the formal interviews, informal interviews and participant observation field notes allow for a fuller picture of research sites. Participant observation is a method by which “a researcher takes part in the daily activities, rituals, interactions, and events of a group of people as one of the means of learning the explicit and tacit aspects of their life routines and their culture” (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011, 1). Because this project seeks to understand the formulations and modes of navigating and negotiating religion, politics, and relationships, participation observation importantly adds to the data collected in the qualitative interviews. The religious communities and gatherings supply rich opportunities to understand the lived practices of the individuals and the collectives. Notes were recorded with pen and paper at the time of the event with more reflective notes recorded after the event. These events include gatherings like the Wild Goose Festival and local religious meetings (services, home groups, etc.). But events also include meals and events of smaller groups of post-culture war Christians gathering informally (outside of the religious institution). This includes holiday gatherings and political assemblies.

Employment of other techniques permitted weaving a richer and fuller picture of the lived religiosities of the interlocutors and selected religious communities. To supplement the qualitative interviews and participant observations this research also analyzes resources created by leading voices within this movement. These leading voices provide articulations of ideals and narratives that many interlocutors reference throughout the interviews. Likewise, digital social media resources like Facebook and Twitter supply a means for these religious communities and individuals to both network and disseminate their message. As such these digital sites provide a valuable resource for understanding dialogues, messages, and goals of these interlocutors.

My selection of research locations focuses on four religious communities in the Upper South of Kentucky, Tennessee, and North Carolina. These four religious communities, composed primarily of white participants, provide snapshots of the various ways that post-culture war Christians traverse the lived religious, political, and relational operations in this region of the United States. Three of the religious communities are typical churches in the sense that they have paid leadership, regularly scheduled gatherings, and maintain facilities. The fourth, however, is a unique church endeavor located in a microbrewing facility. The post-culture war Christian movement in the Upper South exists primarily in urban areas; thus two of the standard religious communities and the micro brewing experimental religious community are located in urban areas within North Carolina and Tennessee. One church in south central Kentucky provides a rural comparison. In addition, the Wild Goose Festival, an annual gathering of many progressive Christians, serves as a germinating and networking location and space for discovering contacts and initiating interviews. The mixture of standard modeled churches, experimental models of church, and festival style gatherings plus the geographical diversity of the sites offers a glimpse into the contemporary field of manifesting Protestant diversity. To protect the identity of the interlocutors, I am intentionally vague regarding some of the specific details of the religious communities' locations.

The lived experiences, techniques, and operations of post-culture war Christians are central to this study. The religious, political and familial spheres are interconnected, but each requires its own specific techniques for navigation. Importantly all navigations and negotiations are in relation to the dominant strand of CWC in the Upper South. Chapter 2 illuminates the structures of the Bible Belt panopticon as undergirded by the legitimating ideology of culture war Christianity. By elucidating the regional power structures of the Bible Belt panopticon and CWC, the trajectories of post-culture war Christians in shifting away from CWC become clearer. Once the relationship between shifting away and the Bible Belt panopticon are detailed, I theorize that many post-culture war Christians continue to disidentify as Christian as a means of engaging fully with the Bible Belt panopticon.

Chapter 3 "Family Matters" introduces the various strains and pressures inherent in interlocutors' shifting away from the Christianity of their youth in the Upper South. Due to religious socialization and familial pressures, the decision to leave CWC is not actualized without intense scrutiny. Accordingly, the majority of interlocutors cite both reasoning and experience as the stimuli for leaving CWC. Once the religious shift is enacted, tensions persist regarding the social networks and subject's contradistinctive understandings of faith. By mapping these religious shifts, the relational stress of culture war Christians and post-culture war Christians become evident. Together Chapters 2 and 3 provide a foundational basis in understanding the generated ecclesiological and political objectives of those transitioning from the Protestantism of their youth.

Chapter 4 “Crafting Church” describes the ways that church life manifests for post-culture war Christians. Through rejecting aspects of their religious socialization, post-culture war Christianity attempts to construct a form of communal religious life that provides both individual affirmation for post-culture war Christians and ecclesiological critique of CWC. Building upon the contextualization of Chapter 2 and the rejected socializations of Chapter 3, Chapter 4 experiments with church structures and practices. Although much scholarship has investigated the religious innovation of post-culture war Christians, I argue that efforts to form a religious community are better understood as a craft, something akin to an artisan venture that aligns with other aspects of their lives.

Paralleling religious transitions, the political engagements of post-culture war Christians work to deconstruct the Bible Belt panopticon. Chapter 5 “Strategic Micropolitics” situates the political engagements of post-culture war Christians as an integral part of a religious journey. Opposed to a culture war metanarrative based on American exceptionalism, post-culture war Christians embrace an inherent critical patriotism that challenges political powers and considers political ramifications for marginalized groups (racial minorities, economically disenfranchised, non-heterosexual persons, and women). By building political alliances with the Other, post-culture war Christians navigate political life through micropolitics in direct opposition to their upbringing. In the end, this chapter argues that the strategy of micropolitics is a type of resistance to the culture war Christianity of the Bible Belt panopticon.

Ultimately, this project concludes by thinking about the complexities of maintaining religion in the modern world and the ways that humans foster religious evolution, particularly in this snapshot of Protestant Christianity in the United States. Through offering a finer grain portrait of the intimate lives of post-culture war Christians in the Upper South, the restructuring, re-formations, and restylizations manifesting in new religiopolitical settlements are revealed. In highlighting the textures of social navigations, I argue that it is not enough to simply capture general religious trends in America but researchers must go deeper into relational spaces and power dynamics to map the challenges and struggles, as creative techniques emerge out of necessity. The in-depth research discovers that religious activities are often constrained by myriad factors seeking to sway decision-making. In doing so, this project also seeks to contribute to the academic conversations on Emerging Christianities broadly speaking. This subject matter is itself emerging within academic scholarship and this project adds to that growing literature. Because the particular regional context is profoundly influential in understanding the shifts and change of post-culture war Christians, I also seek to play a part in the continual investigation of religion in a modifying South.

Journeying Home

The campground at the Wild Goose Festival creates space for discursive activities on multiple topics. Issues such as white privilege, radical inclusivity, and LGBTQ matters proliferate in the multiple tents that supply shading from the sun. Religion topics such as “Religious Nones,” “Spiritual But Not Religious,” and the religious/secular divide permeate the discourse. Campaigning from the 2016 presidential election catches the attention of several attendees questioning the positions articulated by then-Republican candidate Donald Trump. Tables include voter registration forms and information. National and local grass root organizing agencies also attempt to recruit members and possible leaders for future mobilizations. Podcasts are recorded live under tents and later uploaded to the Internet for broader dissemination. One tent dedicated to "troubling the gospel" illustrates the willingness of these Christians to question the application and relevance of Christian scriptures to several contemporary topics. At this festival, attendees discover camaraderie and meet collaborators with similar values and ideas.

As the attendees of the Wild Goose Festival pack up their materials and load up their vehicles, many speak of rejoining at the next year's gathering. They plot strategies for tent locations and meeting points. Several people take a moment to physically embrace and offer well wishes for the journeys home. In what is simply a brief moment in human history, the space returns to its originating form. Attendees return to their homes, many within the states of North Carolina, Tennessee, and Kentucky. Interstate road systems, two lane-highways, and back roads supply multiple vectors of ground transportation. The mobility of the attendees proves important. These are the complex lives of post-culture war Christians in the Upper South.

CHAPTER 2

THE BIBLE BELT PANOPTICON AND DISIDENTIFICATION

“Human existence is an ongoing ‘balancing act’ between man
and his body, man and his world.” Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (1967, 6)

“Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary; that this architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers.” Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punishment* (1975, 4)

In a country that boasts of religious liberty for all citizens, the social constraints on individual freedom are easily effaced. In the Upper South, the Bible Belt panopticon, operating through CWC as a socialization mechanism, works to shape and constrain individual lives. To explicate the evolution from CWC to post-CWC, a fuller picture of the Bible Belt panopticon and the socialization of CWC require elucidation. There are three principal mechanisms whereby the region is surveilled, including the practices of local churches, familial training, and shared understandings of the political histories of the region. As a means of maintaining the Bible Belts’ panoptive reach, each of the mechanisms operates through intense relational pressures. Building upon the contextual analysis, this chapter argues that religious movement away from CWC is primarily a responsive adjustment from a culturally imposed form of religiosity that encompasses all aspects of life. After diagramming the Bible Belt panoptive pillars, I argue that post-culture war Christians employ techniques of disidentification as a way of working with and against the Bible Belt panopticon rather than initially seeking religious alternatives.

To illustrate, I begin the chapter by detailing the religious journey of Mitch who sought early in his life, like other post-culture war Christians, to cultivate proximity with CWC.

Living in Proximity to the Church

"[I] grew up as a fine, young, American Baptist," Mitch explains, and "went to Sunday School before I knew what Sunday School was." Growing up in Tennessee as a young man, Mitch made the decision at an early age "to commit my life to Christ" because "it was sort of the thing that you had to do." Expounding on this statement, Mitch offers that by the age of 12, "everyone else in my Sunday School class had been baptized, so it was about time for me." Throughout his youth, Mitch's involvement with his church (the church of his parents and grandparents) continued with regular church attendance and youth group participation. Mitch even describes a time when his entire youth group underwent a collective, "charismatic experience" that was extremely formative for his understanding of life. He says, "[I was] constantly looking for ways to devote my time to my church. I was all in. Fully invested. I saw my future in proximity to the church. Whatever I'm going to do with the rest of my life will be somehow connected to a church community." Although it never fully manifested, Mitch dreamt of becoming a Christian rock deejay as a means of living out his faith.

To achieve his goal of living in proximity to the church, Mitch enrolled in a conservative Christian college, known as a "Bible college," in Tennessee. During his short time at the Bible college, Mitch recalls that he was, "very Christian, very fundamentalist, but at the same time there were ideas that I had but I didn't have words for." Struggling with certain aspects of theological foundations was certainly a part of

Mitch's journey, but more contentious for Mitch was that "on the outside, I felt like I had to exclude people." Mitch's reference here is specifically the exclusion of homosexuals and racial minorities. By exclusion, Mitch explains that he was instructed not to have gay friends or associate with homosexuals in any way. Mitch eventually transferred to a state school where he continued to be active in college ministries but maintained doubts about the religion in which he was participating. His commitment to CWC continued for two decades after he married and started a family.

But Mitch describes that at some point his social network expanded through his job to include racial minorities and non-heterosexuals. These relationships resurfaced Mitch's lingering doubts about the religion of his youth that created rigid boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. Eventually incongruence between his church's stances and his relational experiences with minorities prompted Mitch and his wife to leave their church. It was upon leaving his culture war Christian church, that Mitch began to understand other ways that church functions within the Upper South. He explains that upon leaving his church, "we experienced lots of isolation from friends and didn't realize that church was the only thing that we had in common. It really was kind of hurtful and caused a lot of introspection for us." This was due in large part because, "church was the only thing that was holding together our first and second tier friends." Now a few years removed from the experience of leaving CWC, Mitch is reflective with how he understands his church peers' reactions to his family's leaving. "It was a feeling of betrayal when people left the church. You are betraying this partnership." Mitch admits that while he was within a culture war Christian church, he also felt betrayed by members leaving the church.

In the early stages of leaving the Christianity of his youth, Mitch and his family decided not to attend any church at all but continued some Christian practices within their home like reading the Bible and praying. Today Mitch and his family attend a post-culture war Christian church in the Nashville area. He states that his understandings of Christianity and values have completely changed through his awareness that, “God’s love is always with the outsider.” By this he references those excluded from participating in the dominant culture war Christian churches, which more than likely alludes also to his family who now consider themselves outsiders. In addition, Mitch sees his religious shift as dramatic. "My 18-year-old self would be appalled with the 40-year-old me." And because he continues to reside in Nashville, he occasionally encounters people from his previous church. He describes these encounters: "It can be weird when you see somebody from what seems like a former life. You realize that they don't know you. They knew who you used to be. It's hard to help them reconcile those two people and to be generous and to help find a way forward."

Because of his history, Mitch struggles with how to articulate his religious identity. He claims, “[My] religious identity changes a lot. Anything that I say comes with baggage.” Ultimately he settles on calling himself a “progressive Christian” but understands that the label can be problematic. He strives to explain his religiosity to friends while trying to avoid any specifics with his parents and siblings. “I haven't found the strength to talk with [my parents and grandparents] about [my shift in religious values]” because revealing his religious ideas and norms would “be destructive.”

Mitch’s story is typical of many of the interlocutors of this study. Like Mitch, many interlocutors relay expectations and intentions to stay within the boundaries of the churches of their youth. To stay within these boundaries guarantees close relationships predicated on the exclusion of specific categories of people. Ideally, a culture war Christian will continue service and training throughout their lives. The training begins at an early age with instructional structures for youth and, in a perfect situation, continues through higher education at a Bible college or Christian university, which includes over half of the interlocutors of this project. After completing early training into CWC, the expectation is for continued participation in such a Christian church. Leaving CWC for many of the interlocutors, like Mitch, results in isolation and feelings of betrayal from the originating church community.

The Bible Belt panopticon establishes specific expectations for those dwelling within its parameters. Or in Mitch's words there are things, "that you had to do." In *Pray the Gay Away: The Extraordinary Lives of Bible Belt Gays*, Bernadette Barton focuses on the ways that sexuality is both monitored and regulated by the Bible Belt panopticon. Through pressures to attend church and relational coercion, people identifying as non-heterosexual must learn to navigate the landscape of the Bible Belt. Importantly, there exist "visual markers in the landscape warn[ing] Bible Belt gays to stay closeted" (2012, 28). These visual markers include a "plethora of Christian signs and symbols sprinkled throughout the region" to impose normative understandings upon the members of communities (2012, 24). Barton's work illustrates the ways in which the Bible Belt panopticon operates as a surveilling mechanism perpetuating the norms and values of CWC. To add to Barton's work, I contend that shared interpretations of Southern history which are sustained through racially charged historical symbols dispersed throughout the region are appropriated by CWC to magnify the panoptic gaze upon residents in addition to the church mechanisms that seek to internally socialize.

Heritage in the Bible Belt Panopticon

Religion in America remains highly structured through competing values and norms within local and regional society. As demonstrated by Robert Wuthnow, post World War II America witnessed a reformatting of American religion making denominations increasingly less pertinent; realigning values within certain religious communities; and a swelling of parachurch institutions like religious lobbying organizations (1988). As the new religious structures manifested, particular political issues became the focus of identity including abortion, gay marriage, the role of women in society and church, and school prayer. These issues emerged as demarcating rigid indicators of where religious organizations and individuals fell within a bifurcated system of moral absolutism or liberal positions. In constructing the bifurcation, these issues served as symbolical boundaries establishing a competition between religious organizations as rivals for the greater political direction of America resulting in a "public image that came to characterize American religion…[as] one in which deep polarization between two monolithic camps" existed (1988, 239). These developments paint a picture of a cultural war scenario wherein the political orientations of a vast number of Americans are based upon religious sensibilities. In short, this metanarrative situates how one identifies religiously in direct correlation with one's political orientations.

As James Davison Hunter explains the culture war binary plot is a misrepresentation of reality, as most Americans situate themselves along a spectrum of religiopolitical positions or are indifferent to the issues altogether (1991). Instead, Hunter argues that the significance of the restructuring of American religion vis-à-vis the culture war is in the power, vitality, and vocal energies of religious institutions and spokespersons within the public sphere. As Hunter deduces the "polarizing impulses or tendencies in American culture…have a life of their own: an existence, power, and agenda" (1991, 43). So although many Americans are indifferent or unengaged in a culture war, the proponents of the culture war loudly proclaim that all members of society are indeed playing an integral role in deciding the direction of the United States through religious and political participation.

According to Wuthnow, the institutional realignments in the culture war modality are constituted by reinterpretations or restructurings of "symbolic boundaries" that guide "much of our behavior and much of our discourse" and are "concerned with making sure that these boundaries are affirmed" (1988, 9). In essence, symbolic boundaries both aid in human understandings and in constructing normative patterns of behavior. The interplay of the symbolic boundaries and the culture war restructuring forms a volatile context where histories, heritages, values, and identities are interpreted in rivaling fashions.

Wuthnow's analysis of the role of symbolic boundaries in the restructuring of American religion illuminates the way in which CWC strategically composes the meanings of numerous symbols in the Bible Belt. The strategic use of symbolic boundaries by the Christian Right creates a chasm within American society promulgating a culture war through competing narratives. The Bible Belt region, like other regions of the United States, is constituted by a composite of shared memories, historical interpretations, and cultural symbols that extend well beyond church institutions. How these markers are interpreted and then transmitted to residents depends primarily upon a complex interplay of dominant power structures. In this case, CWC serves as the interpretative framework through which historical events are filtered. This creates a regional identity in which white, conservative Protestants are championed (publicly and privately) as the gatekeepers of the South – for the sake of the South – but also as carrying a burden for the entire country and Christianity. The ways in which historical events are constructed in the collective memory of white Southerners plus the self-imposed burden to preserve specific aspects of these are instantiated in numerous, physical structures in the region. As Barton suggests about the multiple Christian signs and symbols that "function as shorthand for conservative Christian beliefs, opinions, and ideology," symbols of the past are also construed to correspond with the values and norms of CWC (2012, 28). To expand on the signs and symbols assemblage of the Bible Belt panopticon, one must understand the historically symbolic events that also undergird the norms and values of the region. Although a broad analysis of the formative events of Southern religious history is beyond the scope of this project, by highlighting some major formative events that continue to influence and inform the regional identity of the Bible Belt, a clearer picture of how the pillars of the panoptive structures, its symbolic boundaries, and racialized version of an imagined culture war manifests.

One foundational component of the regional and religious identity of the Bible Belt is revivalism (Boles 1996). The Second Great Awakening, a series of revivals that began in Kentucky in the early 1800s, continues to leave a significant legacy within the Upper South. The revivals sparked a noteworthy turn in the sense that individuals are endowed with autonomy in theological understandings of salvific opportunity. In addition, these revivals led to the development of hundreds of conservative Protestant institutions (churches, hospitals, universities) throughout the region. These institutions eventually took on the role of epicenters for preserving and transmitting to future generations the myths, rituals, and cultural legacies shaping the dominant Southern identity. Furthermore, the revivals also reinforce a collective memory that the region holds a divine importance predicated on the revivalist histories. For many within the Upper South, they live in "God's country." If God chose in the past to intercede in the lives of Southerners, then the possibility of divine intercession holds for the present and future. Often proclaimed in Southern churches today is the mantra "what we need is a good, old-fashioned revival" and, like Mitch's religious episode, collective, charismatic experiences are highly valued. Memories of the revivals also created an ideal by which the religious health of the region is to be measured. Revivalism undergirds a distinctive Southern sensibility and symbolically represents for white Southerners being uniquely and geographically chosen.

Adding to the revivalist sway, the Civil War influenced the development of Southern religion in at least two significant ways. The institutional divides of denominations over slavery created animosity between Christians from the North and South that lasted past the Civil War. Because the church was the epicenter of Southern morals and the institutional preserver of the Southern way of life, most white Southern churches affirmed, or minimally failed to resist, the institution of slavery. This "theological racism," as Paul Harvey refers to it, formed a legitimization tool whereby the white South formed a plausibility structure to understand their social reality and the place of African-Americans within this reality (2005). Closely related and probably inspired by these formations, is the creation of the “religion of the Lost Cause” (Wilson). This regional civil religion construed the South as virtuous, in a mode of resurrection, and built upon white supremacy. New symbols, such as the Confederate flag, expressed this civil religion engendering a reinvigorated collective cause, “all directed toward meeting the profound concerns of postwar Southerners” (Wilson, 11).

Combining with the Lost Cause ideology and revivalist sentiments of the collective Southern mentality, the Scopes “Monkey” Trial served to reinforce the distinctive regional identity of the Bible Belt. Through the broadcasting of the “trial of the century” on the airwaves and newspapers, the defensive articulations of a literal reading of the Bible painted a picture of Southerners as premodern and uncivilized. The Scopes Trial affirmed in the Southern mind that Southerners were different from the rest of the country. The difference included the ways in which Southerners took the Bible seriously, as Southerners might argue. In their eyes, biblical criticism reduced the Bible to texts devoid of exceptional qualities.

The interplay of interpreted symbols of history, including revivalism, the Lost Cause of the Civil War, and the Scopes trial, represent being under attack for a presumed elected position of white Southerners. Lasting sentiments from the Civil War and Scopes Trial left unhealed wounds – wounds that would perpetuate a regional identifying divide between the South and the rest of the country. The Lost Cause lives in the collective memory of white Southerners as federal interference. Monuments work to continually reinforce the Lost Cause mentality across the region. As another component of Southern practice, in direct contradistinction to evolutionary science, the practice of literally reading the Bible symbolically guards against competing forms of biblical interpretations

(Malley 2004). These symbols and their visual markers guarantee that the Southern way of life is *the* way of life proudly fought for, biblically defended, and spiritually proven.

Integrated into the heritage of the South, legitimated through theological understandings, and instantiated in each of three historical markers (Scopes trial, Civil War, and revivals) is a complexly racialized system of white superiority. “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line, – the relation of the darker to the lighter races,” argues W.E.B. Du Bois (1995, 52). And although individual and systemic racism existed historically across the United States, racism has been more pronounced in the Bible Belt region. Institutional slavery, Jim Crow laws and the Civil Rights Movement, and the Southern strategy are all historical periods of the South in which whites utilized racialized authority to disenfranchise and marginalize African-Americans. In each of these periods, the racist arguments altered and transitioned in an effort to perpetuate racist structures. These arguments were grounded in theological, legal, and political tactics that positioned white supremacy as the legitimating force within the Bible Belt (Kidd 2006; Aistrup 2015; Wormser 2003).

These factors, plus myriad others, generate a set of symbolic boundaries for many white Southerners, and religious institutions serve as the mechanism by which these boundaries are articulated and instituted. As Monica Najar writes, historically, churches “acted, as both civil and religious bodies, creating institutions that drew settlers together, galvanized loyalties, and schooled them in the structures of community – all in a culture that deeply distrusted institutions” (2008, 4). In the age of CWC, the numerous symbols of the Civil War, Scopes Trial, and the scattered revivals of the past are all appropriated as discrete symbolic representations that inform the foundations of the region in ways that blur the lines between religious and political. In addition, two of the strategic moves in the development of CWC include the broad dissemination and adoption of the cultural war metanarrative by numerous conservative churches and the reduction of racism as any contributing factor for social realities.

These historical events also remain very much *alive* in the Bible Belt and grounded in white supremacy. Take for instance, the Scopes Trial. Annually in Dayton, Tennessee, the Scopes Trial is reenacted at a local festival. Bryan College in Dayton, named after William Jennings Bryan and founded five years after the famous trial, requires faculty to sign a statement acknowledging both a literal Adam and Eve and a young earth creationist theory. The emphasis on the stories contained within the book of Genesis highlights more than creationist doctrines, however. Also included in Genesis are the "Curse of Cain" and the "Curse of Ham" stories, both of which have been utilized to validate racial superiority of whites (Kidd 2006). These stories construct a frame through which blacks are understood as inferior by divine design. In thinking about the ways that this biblical racism continues to operate within the United States, Colin Kidd posits that "the American culture wars, accompanied by what appears to be an accelerating retreat from Darwinism – whether into full-blown Creationism or into Intelligent Design – tend to enhance the cultural purchase of Old Testament chronology and biblical literalism" (Kidd 2006, 276). In essence, the fight over Creationism and evolution is actually an attempt to maintain authoritative structures of white superiority.[6]

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[6] More work is necessary to analyze the relationship between creationist positions against evolution and the white supremacist structures in the South. Specifically, the connection between an understanding of evolution as humans "evolving from monkeys" and the racial slur against African Americans as apes or monkeys should be examined historically to see if Southern hesitations to evolutionist theory was predicated on white, racialized perceptions.

More popular than the Scopes Trail reenactment are the numerous battles of the Civil War reenactments that occur all across the South. Civil War historical markers, honoring the Confederate mission and soldiers, populate the region. Tony Horwitz, who traveled the South to discover how the Civil War retains importance states, “Everywhere, it seemed, I had to explore two pasts and two presents, one white, one black, separate and unreconcilable [sic]” (1998, 208). The numerous Confederate markers and statues serve as a reminder of the supremacy of the white population. In fact, historical research indicates that periods of African American advancement were met with an increase in Confederate effigies (Bundage 2017). Racial segregation is nowhere more pronounced than in Southern churches. And many of the churches built around the region that trace their roots back to the great revivals still operate and are popularly utilized for marriage and funeral ceremonies.[7]

Although there are certainly other categorical boundaries to be considered in the heritage of the South – like ethnicity, economy, and gender – religious institutions (i.e. churches, parachurches, and private Christian schools) continue to be the means of articulating and justifying the values, norms, and conditions of the Upper South (Happel-Parkins 2016; Dill and Williams 1992; Wilson 1999; Flynt 2002). Religion in the Bible Belt builds upon and integrates an assemblage of historical events and symbols that develop a distinctive cultural ecology of white supremacy influencing the formation of the dominant religion of CWC.[8] So when conservative Christians promulgated the culture war narrative nationally, white, conservative Christians in the Upper South absorbed the notion of being under attack whole-heartedly. In response, Christianity in a mode of culture war apologetics supplied the justification and language to construct counter arguments for the maintenance of regional distinctions. In many ways, the national culture war narrative vindicated what Southerners already knew – there exists forces in the world strategically seeking to impose cultural norms and standards over and against the instantiated symbolic boundaries of the Bible Belt. To counter these forces, conservative Southern Christians built and continue to sustain a network of institutions designed to preserve the values and norms of the Bible Belt. Like the symbols of the Civil War, historical revivals, and the Scopes Trial, numerous structures and institutions

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[7] It is argued that the “great revivals” in America’s history lacked any type of continuity and real relevance at the time of the revivals (Butler 1982). However, this does not counter the notion that the awakening revivals contain significant relevance within the Bible Belt today.

[8] This argument is not to suggest that religion in the South is relegated to only white, conservative Protestantism. Scholarship over the last half century has increasingly explored other religious groups within

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the context of the South – Jewish, Catholic, and African-American. In some fashions, these groups built insulated institutions or were segregated from the white, conservative Protestant communities. Frequently, these communities wrestled with whether to maintain a unique identity or assimilate into the uniquely Southern mold. As an example, many Catholic groups constructed their own schools, churches, and hospitals as a means of surviving degradation and typical anti-Catholic prejudices, along with a moral order that often diverged from Catholic social teachings. Yet some Catholics actually absorbed the racial systems and defended the Southern structures of slavery (Miller). Small pockets of Jewish communities and persons lived scattered throughout the South. Although most of the Jewish members were non-agrarian, they contributed to the enterprise building within small Southern communities. Yet, "as economic position became increasingly secure, Jews sought to expand their civil and political privileges, but they met resistance in every region that they inhabited" (Dinnerstine and Palsson 4). Moreover, post Civil War, the racial systems were turned on the Jewish population with some Southerners arguing that Jews were "black" in the racialized system (Rogoff 391).

None were more marginalized within the Southern system – through legal, extralegal, and religious demarcation – than African-Americans. Through institutionalized slavery, Reconstruction laws, and Jim Crow systems, African-Americans were forcefully and violently marginalized and oppressed. And these systems were justified historically through religious claims of white superiority. Significantly, however, religion is where African-Americans discovered agency to resist white supremacy, march against the racist structures, and articulate their own arguments for equality. Although many Africans brought to the United States were stripped of their dignities and religious heritages, what Jon Butler calls "racial genocide," the appropriation of American Christianity provided a space to expand voices and mediate the social realities within the South (Noll). By utilizing the Exodus narrative, African-Americans were able to instill a hope for freedom from the oppressive grips by associating with the early Israelite narrative (Glaude; Chappell; Gutterman). These formations continue to influence the operations of African-American churches today (Shelton and Emerson).

Each of these minority groups within the South constructed their own counter narrative to the Bible Belt panopticon and the dominant emergence of Culture War Christianity in the South. These histories become more important in this study as it pertains to post-Culture War Christians attempting to embrace traditions outside the Culture War Christian church.

serve to express and seek to impose a strict standardization of life in the Upper South, including ubiquitous Christian billboards, signs, and medias. Most importantly, however, the institution of the church serves as the primary and most intense form of socialization for its members.

Church and Family in the Bible Belt Panopticon

As stated previously, culture war Christianity is predicated on a religopolitical narrative implicitly grounded in unity and uniformity at three racialized levels – family, church, and politics. The church is the local network that disseminates the justifications and organizing mechanism for CWC. As the foundational ideology of the Bible Belt panopticon, CWC extends into numerous religious, political, educational, and economic institutions within the Upper South. Barton argues, "the church community, God, and scripture are powerful external authorities" in regulating and monitoring the lives of those outside of the church institutions within the Bible Belt (2012, 29). Certainly the authority of the religious institutions extends beyond the walls of the physical church structures. Yet the primary strength of the church institutions is the work internally conducted in socializing members and participants in various ways to perpetuate the strength of the panopticon. Once members are socialized, they become surveilling and weaponized instruments of CWC. And like the racialized history of the South, the panoptive structures are composed of racialized systems, but these systems are typically more covert.

The internal development strategies of CWC focus on the nurturing of generations of culture war Christians through ideological and social means. CWC, as the primary ideology of the Bible Belt panopticon, works through local churches much like Benedict Anderson's "imagined community" wherein participants "will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (1991, 6). Individual churches of various denominations in the Upper South exist in an ostensible competition for participants, but in reality each works in accord to maintain values and norms established through CWC. The church is extremely important in socializing young people to impart to the upcoming generation the values and norms to be maintained while heavily influencing and informing the lived realities of numerous individuals.

"I didn't know any different at the time. I had a good childhood. Both my parents grew up in conservative Christianity. So it was definitely part of my family history. All my aunts and uncles, *we are all the same. We all believed the same things*," describes Amber (thirties, North Carolina). As we sit in Amber's living room, I ask her if she could explain more what she means by "the same things." She responds, "We were all Republican. We were pro-life. Homosexuality was wrong. If you believed any of those things were okay, then you would definitely be outside of the club. And we were predominantly white." The imagined community that Amber describes exists through an assumed, shared homogeneity that is understood as both political and religious in nature – political in the sense that commitments align with the Republican Party's platform and the historical Southern Strategy, which are thought to be most closely paralleling the religious beliefs of CWC (Wormser 2003; Murphy and Gulliver 1971).

In addition to political affiliation and religious ideologies, the racial dimension supplies yet another layer of imagined homogeneity wherein whiteness is recognized "as the normative cultural status and… 'mainstream'" (Tranby and Hartmann 2008, 347).[9] In essence, the political and religious bases for culture war Christians engender a racial structure, grounded in the histories of slavery, the Civil War, Jim Crow, and the Civil Rights Movement, that normalizes whiteness within the Bible Belt. The difference, however, is that the culture war metanarrative suspends discussions of race in lieu of a supposed post-racial and colorblind society. Because of Constitutional amendments and modifications in legal policies, many within CWC, and others outside of CWC, understand racism as an issue of the past. But scholarship demonstrates that racism continues to persist through systemic racism, backstage racism, predominately white institutions, and a white racial frame (Houts Picca and Feagin 2007; Marable 2000; Smith 2016; Feagin 2010, 2006). Joe Feagin's work on racism in the United States highlights the fact that "systemic racism today contains numerous basic features that perpetuate the racial views, proclivities, actions, and intentions of many earlier white generations" (2006, 7). But modern racism operates surreptitiously unlike previous modes of racism. At the individual level modern racism operates on the "backstage" or in private spaces and institutionally modern racism operates as rational-legal frameworks. And collectively, modern racism is institutionalized through the regulating of black bodies. Darron Smith argues that the white frame continues to understand "blacks as dangerous and animal-like," which "leads to the misguided notion that blacks are in need of white surveillance, subordination, and control" (2016, 5). The church becomes an institution where racial segregation is understood as the outworking of voluntary segregation, but in actuality, the racially separated spaces further demarcate the differences in white and black bodies.

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[9] Although not the primary focus of this research, the Bible Belt panopticon and the related culture war Christian narrative operate through a racialized ideology and structure. Michael Emerson and Christian Smith argue that some evangelical congregations seek to racially integrate their churches, but that their efforts actually obstruct the objectives of racial integration (2000). Their argument separates systemic and individual modes of racism. Emerson and Smith argue that evangelicals deny that forms of systemic racism exist and thus refuse to politically, economically, and religiously adjust modern institutions to combat this form of racism. Tranby and Hartmann (2008) push further into this examination with critical whiteness theory. More work needs to be conducted examining the racial structures of the South vis-à-vis the Bible Belt panopticon.

Julia (twenties, Kentucky) expresses very similar memories of the religious community of her upbringing, which she attended from birth to eighteen years of age. She states, "When I was growing up it was very judgmental in a lot of ways, but I did feel comfortable around those people because we all thought basically the same way. So it was easy to have conversations with them because you knew what they were going to say or feel." The imagined shared norms and values created a comfort for Julia in her youth as the imagined community "is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" (Anderson 1991, 7). The comradeship leads to comfort that reduces the unexpected. Continuing, she begins to explain how these norms became shared practices:

> You had similar day-to-day activities that you were going to do. You were going to church twice on Sundays and on Wednesday evenings and this becomes your forced community. You are forced to know each other's darker side, or sins, or whatever your troubles are at the time. So you feel very close to these people in a lot of ways. Other things we always seemed to agree on: no dancing, no drinking, no sex before marriage. Always going to be at church no matter what. There were very few excuses that would be acceptable. No cussing even.

Life patterns are regulated along with shared morals. Common among culture war churches are the moral emphases on inappropriate behaviors that are considered slippery slopes to worse conduct. The moral foundations are disseminated through educational resources within churches, parachurch institutions, private Christian schools, and the home. Strict moral boundaries are erected for youth with great attention on sexual purity (Gish 2013). The shared practices, described by Julia, affirm the imagined (or, in her words, forced) community and build socializing norms, and to find full inclusion, members must perform a rite of passage ritual.

The imagined community of white, culture war Christians depends upon numerous forms of ecclesiological rituals and practices (Van Dyken 2017). Rituals such as public confession reify CWC. Many of the culture war Christian churches incorporate ritual performances referred to by many names such as being born-again or having a salvation experience with the expressed purpose of ensuring a positive afterlife outcome. But these rituals are also a mechanism of socialization. In fact, salvation experiences and performances can be read as a ritual of allegiance, a kind of rite of passage, to the imagined community of the Bible Belt panopticon. To briefly illustrate, Julia describes her salvation experience at age 9:

> You're going to do it now or you are going to go to hell. You don't wait. I was baptized at 2 a.m.; I've always had problems sleeping. So I guess I was up fearful of going to hell and I remember thinking that if I were to die right now then I'm going to burn and damnation and all these things. It was a very fear-based decision. I remember my mom calling the preacher and meeting us at the church. I got baptized and dunked. That was that.

As Julia continues, she starts to work out the social reasons for her baptism: "For me at that moment, it was a greater chance that I'd get into heaven. I can spend eternity with my parents and dead loved ones and my dead grandpa, and I didn't want to suffer forever." The salvation ritual is about extended connection with the imagined community – the community of the past, present, and future. Failure to perform the salvation ritual results in separation from the imagined community, in this life and the next. This type of ritual connecting the past and present communities corresponds with Eric Hobsbawm's notion of "invented tradition" or "a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past" (Hobsbawn 1994, 1). Salvation, in this way, offers opportunity to maintain one's social network through connecting the past, present and future.

Or consider Amber's discussion of her salvation: "Salvation was very important. Making sure that you were saved not by works, but by faith. And that you got baptized by immersion after that. And you became a good member of the church and attended regularly and tithed – all that stuff. We believed the same way." To be sure, variations exist of the salvation ritual – forms of baptism, prayers, ages, and other logistics. But within CWC, the salvation ritual is *the* necessitated ritual utilized to demonstrate full compliance with and allegiance to the Bible Belt panopticon. If one chooses not to perform the salvation ritual, then full membership, with its benefits and opportunities, is withheld.

Once a member does perform the salvation ritual, new types of pressures work to ensure that members conduct themselves within the culture war Christian boundaries. These new pressures can consist of forms of continued allegiance like expectations of participation or punishments like temporary or full ostracizing. Often repeated in the qualitative interviews of this research was an intense pressure and stress centering on such conduct. Interviewees acknowledge the strains to both comport with their church's expectations and to fulfill obligations:

> "I have to act this way or meet these expectations. It was uncomfortable. I felt like I would be disowned. If you stray, you'll be disowned and never spoken to until you come back – a lot of fear and a lot of doubts." – Julia

> “I was an earnest kid in church. I believed it. I wanted to believe it. I wanted to do right by it. I wanted to be a good human being. I wanted to be a good Christian. I wanted to make people happy.” – Jonathan, forties, Tennessee

> “I struggled with Christianity a lot as a kid. I stayed up at night with nightmares thinking about it.” – Chris, twenties, Kentucky

> “I was afraid to think about things. I was terrified of what if I didn’t do enough.” – Debra, fifties, Kentucky

> “I was always on eggshells and you could never fully be yourself. It was such a bubble... Growing up you were tasked to be salt and light. You had to tell everyone about Jesus and you had to go home and pray and have your quiet time. There’s now a weight lifted from that stuff.” – Amber, early thirties, North Carolina

And, Miller (forties, North Carolina), who experienced eventual excommunication from his church, describes how his denomination maintained expectations:

> “Church discipline withholds communion from those under discipline…[and the leaders of the church] announce in every pulpit in this denomination: 'This person does not have salvation.'"

Like these accounts, the majority of interlocutors chronicle an intense anxiety over staying within the Christianity of their youth. Many describe an imposed pressure to conform and note the fear of revealing to their friends and family their doubts and uncertainty related to their religious beliefs and community’s practices. The ardent socialization that occurs internally within culture war Christian churches is an attempt to cultivate the body and minds of young people as the panoptive instrument. Ritual activities and actual sanctions are tremendously significant within culture war Christian communities for these rituals not only carry a spiritual connotation, but also a sociocultural importance. Within this milieu, church rituals signify one’s adherence and assent to broader social structures and norms. In effect, the individual learns to regulate him or herself within the restrictions of the CWC panopticon.

The nuclear family, understood as a microcosm of the church, is an additional means of securing its social objectives. Church is often called family conflating the religious institution and the household body. As male leadership conducts the church, likewise, the father is situated as the conductor of household matters. The father figure is to lead, guide, and teach the wife and children of the family in the ways of CWC. Submission to leadership is expected of family and church members. This creates a submissive rhythm of life for children and women while also actively portraying how masculinity dominates. Men are expected to manage spiritual practices in the home as well. Numerous resources are available to teach men, women, and children the best ways of cultivating a "godly home."[10] The conflation of family even blurs into the political sphere as well, evident in the way political positions are construed under the rubric of "family values."

As demonstrated, those who are raised within CWC encounter intense socializations that include church acculturation but extend beyond the institution of the church. The panoptive gaze extends across the rolling mountains and hills of the geography. To leave CWC then is not necessarily to be outside the regulatory surveillance of the Bible Belt panopticon. As noted by Barton, physical symbols are constructed to remind Bible Belt residents of expectations, and socializations prove difficult to escape. For example, one cannot travel the interstate roadways without visually encountering numerous Christian billboards. Although many of the billboards are advertisements for churches, many others are proclamations of CWC, including pro-life and marriage signs. For years a billboard on Interstate 65, which runs north and south through Kentucky, declared, “Hell is Real” on one side of the billboard and “Jesus is Real” on the other.

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[10] A search on any online search engine produces hundreds of sermons, books, studies, manuals, and sites available for culture war Christians to foster a "godly home."

Diagramming the Panopticon

Life in the Upper South is life under the surveillance of the Bible Belt panopticon. It works through a conglomeration of forces that regulate according to culture war Christian ideology. By tracing the various layers of the panopticon’s reach, the external and internal forces supervising individual lives become apparent. At the regional level multiple Christian symbols and signs work in conjunction with socio-historical imprints to mark religious forms of life that are predicated on heteropatriarchy and white supremacy. These markers form symbolic boundaries that are difficult to traverse. These forces operate upon those who attend a culture war Christian church or not. Working in conjunction with the external symbolic boundaries, for those who are nurtured in CWC, the church supplies socialization through rituals, tight social networks, and intense educational techniques. Salvation closely aligns with full acceptance, allegiance, and participation within a broad systemic structure. As the regional landscape monitors the lives of those in the area, the church adds an additional pressure to comport with the standards of the Bible Belt panopticon. These two layers – the regional symbolic boundaries and church community – construct a powerful force that regulates personal and social life. In fact, the three layers of regional symbolic boundaries, church socialization, and individual religious identification ideally congeal to support the panoptive mechanism. These three components of the Bible Belt panopticon delicately balance upon the foundational ideology of CWC, as shown in Figure 1.[11] The alignment of the political, religious, and familial components creates the pillars of the Bible Belt social structure. The pillars operate in various ways, but all greatly rely on relational networks to perpetuate the system, and, thus, relationships become exceedingly important for those who transition out of CWC.

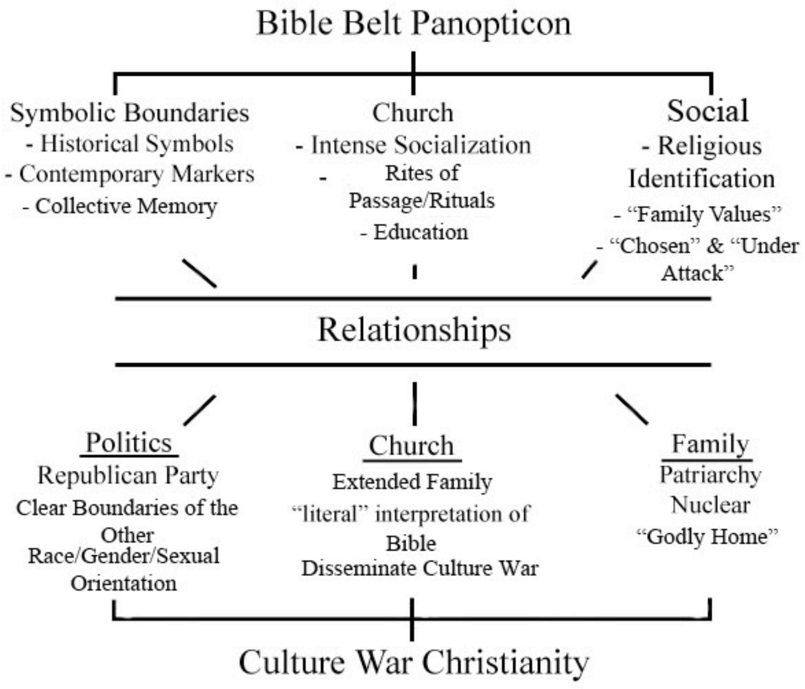
Bible Belt Panopticon
Symbolic Boundaries
- Historical Symbols
- Contemporary Markers
- Collective Memory
Church
- Intense Socialization
- Rites of Passage/Rituals
- Education
Social
- Religious Identification
- "Family Values"
- "Chosen" & "Under Attack"
Relationships
Politics
Republican Party
Clear Boundaries of the Other
Race/Gender/Sexual Orientation
Church
Extended Family
"literal" interpretation of Bible
Disseminate Culture War
Family
Patriarchy
Nuclear
"Godly Home"
Culture War Christianity

Figure 1

I argue that many Southerners would understand the diagram in Figure 1 as simply "heritage" or "religion." These two terms would be indistinguishable for many Southerners. Religion is political, social, and familial in the same way that heritage is political, social, and familial. This is why Southerners aggressively attempt to defend religion. Outsiders might understand certain legal moves as purely political, but Southerners are attempting to defend the Bible Belt panopticon or, simply stated, their religion. Once this is understood, contemporary issues start to make sense.

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[11] Figure 1 is not intended to be an exhaustive diagram of the Bible Belt panopticon and its foundations. Rather the attempt is to demonstrate visually how multiple layers interact and engage to perpetuate a religiocultural system. I gladly encourage others to reform, amend, or add to the diagram.

For instance, over the last few years, state representatives in Tennessee have attempted to pass legislation making the Bible the official book of the State. The Tennessee governor eventually vetoed this piece of legislation, but many thought that the legislation was an obvious move and not a violation of separation of church and state.[12] Or consider the defensive postures of many Southerners when calls to remove Confederate monuments are proposed. In Louisville, Kentucky, a Civil War monument dedicated to Confederate soldiers became a site of conflict. Although some found the monument "a tacit tribute to Confederate cause," the counter position argued, "we need to preserve our history" (NewsWeek 2017). In this particular instance, the monument was relocated to nearby Brandenburg, Kentucky where approximately 400 men dressed as Confederate militia welcomed its arrival. In response to the removal of Civil War monuments, some states are considering legislation that would ban the removal of such memorials. For one last example, consider the controversial "bathroom bill" in North Carolina. House Bill 2 sought to legislate the usage of public bathrooms by transgendered people. Although portions of the bill have been repealed, many North Carolinians understood the measure as preserving the gender distinctions of their religious convictions, which are an essential part of the panoptive pillars. In each of these instances, Southerners consider these attempts to disassemble religion in the region.

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[12] Other states like Mississippi and Louisiana have attempted similar measures.

All of life is undifferentiated and understood as religious by those within CWC. Attacks or even a lack of support for any aspect of the Bible Belt panopticon and the culture war Christian ideology evokes staunch defensiveness. To challenge any one of these aspects is essentially to challenge the entirety of the religio-cultural system.

For those who are post-culture war Christian, all three pillars of the panoptive mechanism are challenged by their relational, ecclesiological, and political actions. By still identifying as Christian, religion serves as a space to challenge the dominant cultural norms and to compose a reformation of those norms. To identify as Christian while cultivating differing norms and values is to operate outside of the regulated ideologies of CWC. Or another way of thinking about this is that post-CWC asks questions outside of the permitted boundaries. As Blake (thirties, Kentucky) explains, “When you grow up in the South, you might disagree on the answers, but everyone is asking the same questions.” Moving beyond established boundaries disrupts the three strategic pillars of CWC.

This is the present journey of post-culture war Christians. It is a journey of engaging the systemic power of the Bible Belt. Importantly, this journey is predicated on engagement with the three support pillars of the panopticon. The following three chapters detail the direct and indirect resistances and encounters of post-culture war Christians in the Upper South. All three areas – family/relational, ecclesiological, and political – paint a composite picture of living life under the gaze of the panopticon. To understand one layer without the others is to paint an incomplete picture because the layers are continually interacting and informing. Thus even individual religious identities are in relation to the panoptive mechanisms. The affiliation of Christian carries with it a specific connotation of one who comports with the Bible Belt panopticon and assents to CWC. This, in effect, creates the need for post-culture war Christians to modify how they religiously identify.

In a Mode of Disidentification

Like other rural panopticons, the Bible Belt panoptive structure consists of "many different institutions designed to exert surveillant power, chained to the inculation of self-disciplining techniques, across the whole terrain of the social field" (Philo, Parr and Burns 2016, 237). To further elucidate how post-culture war Christians begin to refashion understandings of their religious "self" within the milieu, in this section my goal is to theorize how we might understand the complexities of religious identitification vis-à-vis the pantopic gaze.

Religious identity is typically studied in terms of competing categorical identities in relation to structural examination. For example, how does identifying as Muslim expand or constrict employment opportunities in countries that are primarily Christian or Hindu? Or are minority religious identities recognized in governmental policies? Thus Minority Religion X is analyzed in relation to Dominant Religion Y, wherein X and Y are constructed as distinct traditions. What is studied less, however, is how identity plays a role in Variant Religion X versus Dominant Religion X as in our case with the two forms of Christianity.

In addition to the competing forms of religious identity, another method of probing this topic considers the importance of environmental context in forming said identity (Wellman and Corcoran 2013; Silk and Walsh 2008; Stark and Finke 2000;

Smith, et al 1998). These studies supply a basis for understanding how regionalism and smaller city/town formations serve as a discursive agent in formulating varieties of identities. Christian Smith argues that a “subcultural identity” formation provides a way for certain religious groups to orient themselves as a subgroup in distinction to other religious or nonreligious groups (1998). These distinctions can be founded in beliefs as Stark and Finke argue (2000). Both of these studies situate “believers” in contrast to larger nation-state trends rather than within their local and regional contexts where the “believers” might actually be the dominant group, not a subgroup (Wellman and Corcoran 2013).

In the particular case of post-culture war Christians both the location and variances of a single religious identity complicate the ways in which post-culture war Christians articulate their religiosity. When one makes a proclamation of religious identity, the proclamation is in a region where a specific Christianity carries a normative dominance. This creates a discursive challenge for post-culture war Christians. As one interlocutor explains, “When I identify, I always start out with ‘I’m Christian, but…’” or others simply identify as “progressive Christian.” Still others struggle to explain their religious identity altogether. Nathan (thirties, Kentucky) acknowledges, “As much as it might make me uncomfortable at times based on other Christians’ actions, I would identify as Christian, but I tell people that [my family and I] are a little different. I don't really have a name for it." Each of these rhetorical techniques of differentiation highlights the shifting understanding of the category Christian by the project’s subjects. Whether a post-culture war Christian identifies as “Christian + Disclaimer” or attaches “progressive” to Christian as a label, the goal is the same – to claim a form of the identity of Christian which succeeds in adequately describing who they are within the milieu of the Bible Belt. To identify as simply Christian makes one complicit with CWC and therefore all the inherent values and norms associated with it.

Location at different times also affects post-culture war Christians' religious identification. When I ask Julia (twenties, Kentucky) how she religiously describes herself around others, she admits, "I'm reserved depending on the company." Erin (twenties, North Carolina) admits, "[When I'm] at [the university], I basically avoid telling anyone that I go to church. In my mind to say I'm a Christian means that I am my evangelical self of 15 years ago." Or when Jennifer (forties, Kentucky) is out in public, she describes herself as, "a Christian but not a traditionalist."

In this way, post-culture war Christians within the Upper South find it compelling to both identify as the dominant religious category (Christian) and also attempt to redefine that same category. The term Christian in this sense is more than mere affiliation, but a struggle to define one's self and the religious tradition of Christianity in a particularly repressive context. This form of identification parallels what José Esteban Muñoz's calls "disidentification" (1999). Muñoz recognizes that identity is a way in which people must, "work with/resist the conditions of (im)possibility that dominant culture generates" (1999, 6). Disidentification supplies a more nuanced lens that recognizes the dominant identity formations but also situates these identity formations in relation to structures of power. The regimented and monitored space of the Bible Belt panopticon creates the necessity for post-culture war Christians to engage with the dominant identification of "Christian" while reclaiming their variations on this identity. The working with/resistance to is constituted through laborious, ongoing processes—

working, negotiating, reworking, renegotiating. In this way, disidentification becomes the norm for post-culture war Christians.

In certain spaces, however, post-culture war Christians can simply claim "Christian" as an identity. These spaces are limited, but include gatherings like the Wild Goose Festival and the creation of intimate, religious communities (detailed in Chapter 4). Importantly these spaces allow one to openly and candidly cultivate what Muñoz calls "emerging identities-in-difference" (1999, 7). Muñoz's term is vital in understanding that identity is fluid and in the process of forming. Likewise, the term situates identification in contradistinction to an existent form of the identity. In the majority of spaces, however, identifying simply as Christian fails to articulate the distinctions inherent in their identity. This explains why the "Christian + Disclaimer" or attaching descriptive attributes onto Christian is necessary in the Bible Belt. In these spaces, obviously openness and candidness are discouraged.

Religious identities and affiliations are often more complicated than categorical constructions. As in this case, the term Christian is contested on the ground in the lived realities of post-culture war Christians. Countering movements exist that create a heterogeneity and competition for authenticity. To accompany this heterogeneity is the contemporary power structure that seeks to regulate the boundaries of what is accepted as Christian, who can be Christian, and how Christianity is enacted. These multiple, interacting layers portray the complexities inherent in constructing individualized religiosity. Pressures to conform and comport with existing instantiations of the religious tradition abound. These pressures are transmitted through church socializations and visual symbols. The three pillars of the Bible Belt panopticon attempt to constrain religiopolitical direction for individuals and, ultimately, for the broader region.

Disidentification engages beyond religious identification in working to dismantle and reconstruct all three pillars of the Bible Belt panopticon. Indeed the transition away from CWC disrupts so many aspects of life for post-culture war Christians that social aspects must be refashioned and reimagined. The following three chapters explore the ways in which the fracturing and renovation work ensues. The ideal of the nuclear family is understood as the quintessential foundation whereby the continual acquiescence to the regulatory structures is enacted. To obey one’s parents whole-heartedly is to obey the panopticon and align with CWC. Thus understanding the disruptions within familial and social networks, the focus of the following chapter, lays more of the groundwork for understanding the ecclesiological and political affairs of post-culture war Christians.

CHAPTER 3

FAMILY MATTERS

"Politically and spiritually, my family and I may be said to be dire enemies. Love and loathing coexist. There is talk but no communication. At times it seems we are speaking to one another through an unearthly veil, wherein each party knows it is speaking to an alien. There is a sort of high, eerie, mental whine in the air. This is the sound of mutually incomprehensible worlds hurtling toward destiny, passing with great psychological friction, obvious to all yet acknowledged by none." – Joe Bageant, *Deer Hunting With Jesus* (2007, 187)

There are three general life phases that post-culture war Christians of this project share. Although now in the process of disidentifying from CWC, each interlocutor experienced in his or her youth an intense socialization into CWC. This socialization, as described in the previous chapter, seeks to reduce any form of deviation or individualization that could challenge the norms and values of the Bible Belt panopticon. Second, a combination of intellectual doubt and relational experiences are the impetus for the initial questioning and eventual transition away from the originating version of Christianity. The third phase, during and after the move out of CWC, is constituted by tensions, strife, and conflicts with family, friends, and others within their social networks. This chapter focuses on the movement away from CWC and the resulting social frictions this decision creates for the overwhelming majority (96% of interviewees). As a matter of fact, the experiences of familial conflicts are the most shared factor of the interlocutors. This familial and social dissension is discovered across the spectrum of ages, geography (urban or rural), and gender. The degree of conflict obviously varies, and some interlocutors have managed to repair the tensions pertaining to shifting religion while others are estranged from family completely.

To build a foundation for understanding the tensions existent within the familial and social networks, I review Brandi's journey away from the Christianity of her youth and young adult life as illustrative of the post-culture war Christian course. Although current scholarship highlights many shifts within religiosity in America, it largely ignores the tensions experienced by the participants and the social dynamics involved in modifying one's religiosity. For many of the interlocutors of this project, the decision to shift away from CWC results in a continual state of learning to negotiate social tensions. By analyzing these negotiations, one begins to understand the critiques of post-culture war Christians in relation to the Bible Belt panopticon and culture war Christian metanarrative.

At Arm's Length

Born in the Midwest, Brandi moved with her family to the Nashville area in the 1990s. Initially she was enrolled in public school, but after her parents discovered that an assigned reading contained the word "damn," they decided to enroll Brandi in a private, Christian school. Her parents searched diligently for a school that met their specifications. Despite the fact that there were numerous Christian schooling opportunities in the area, her parents, who were teetotalers, had a difficult time finding an adequate school refusing to send her and her younger brother to a Mainline Protestant or Catholic school due to their stance on alcohol consumption. The family eventually did discover a viable option with a small, start-up, private Christian school associated with an evangelical megachurch in the area.

Though not the initial purpose, the school connection proved fruitful in time as it provided a conduit for Brandi's family to join the megachurch. Brandi remembers being "heavily committed to the church on Sunday mornings and nights as well as Wednesday nights. I was always at church youth group and we went on [international] mission trips." Because Brandi's family was not from the region, the school and church, tied closely together, became the family's primary social network.

As Brandi got older, she stayed in the city and married a member of the family's church. The two of them assisted with the church's youth group successfully transitioning from the trained to trainers. But at a certain point, while still attending and volunteering at their church, Brandi and her husband started to question the tenets of their faith. I ask Brandi if she remembers what triggered the initial change and she mentions both intellectual reasoning and relational experiences outside of her typical social network. She explains:

> A friend gave my husband a book by Donald Miller called *Blue Like Jazz*. After we finished this book we began to ask so many questions and to read more and more. We read *The Irresistible Revolution* by Shane Claiborne and discovered Rob Bell. The books really challenged us, and we started to go hang out with the homeless and feed them. After these experiences with the homeless, we started to question our privilege. We asked questions like, "What kind of God would let me be the way I am (a white, upper middle class person) versus someone living in Africa? What kind of God lets kids die from things that are preventable? What does inclusivity look like? What does diversity look like? These things sound so normal now, but were so new to us then.

Due to these experiences, Brandi and her husband met other Christians who were struggling with their faith in the area. As Brandi and her husband continued to attend their family megachurch, they also started attending parachurch gatherings with other Christians "interested in social justice issues."

The association with Christians interested in social justice, assisting the homeless, along with their newly forming questions initiated a rift, both familial and ecclesiological, that exists to this day. Recalling the earliest stages of their religious segue, Brandi states, “When we first started asking questions, my parents were open to discussing things. But they were still willing to think that we were going in the same direction.” She even recounts that her parents seemed quite open to her and her husband finding their own religious path. Indeed, her parents had once transitioned from a fundamentalist to an evangelical church themselves. But once, “[Brandi] said that people who were homosexual could be Christians, and I wanted them to have the same rights as everyone else, that was the start of the downward spiral in [her and her parents] relationship.” In addition, Brandi and her husband were asked to resign from their positions at the church working with the youth ministry due to attending a Rob Bell speaking event.

Because of familial and ecclesiological frictions, Brandi and her husband decided that they should relocate from the Upper South to another region of the United States. Her parents interpreted the relocation “as an attempt to get away from parents and away from God.” And after Brandi’s husband referred to Brandi as his “partner” instead of the typical moniker of “wife,” Brandi’s dad angrily told them that he did not want them having kids “because [Brandi and her husband] would send them to hell.” Since this event, Brandi, now in her late twenties, describes her life with her parents as deeply troubled and as “a non-relationship.” Today Brandi “holds [her parents] at arm’s length. I don’t tell them the details of my life.” When they do find opportunities to converse, both Brandi and her parents avoid religion.

The relational situation of Brandi and her husband changing to a different form of Christianity reverberates with Randall Balmer's analysis regarding the family life of conservative Christians in the United States (2006). Balmer's work, based on an extensive ethnographic research project into the subculture of evangelicals, fundamentalists, and Pentecostals, gives an account of the varieties of lived religious programming, expressions, and objectives of conservative Christians across the United States. While thinking about the ways in which family life operates, Balmer notes, "The greatest fear that *haunts* evangelical parents is that their children will not follow in their footsteps" (2006, 93; italics mine). The haunting fear of culture war Christian parents that Balmer describes is made apparent by post-culture war Christian shifts. After our interview, Brandi forwarded me an email correspondence that she had received from her father. Brandi's father explains that the relationship with Brandi and her husband is now "very awkward as we feel we have lost the common bond of unity in our beliefs." The troubled father lists several grievances that he understands to have led to their relational divide. This list includes new friendships, differing churches, and practices (like drinking alcohol and gambling). Brandi's father enumerates multiple forms of socialization that he and his wife attempted (Christian school and commitments to the megachurch are included) to put Brandi on the right, religious path. He even describes these events as disturbing his sleep through troubling dreams. In other words, Brandi's dad is haunted by the life that Brandi and her husband choose to live. The newly formed social networks and modified values jeopardize the relational health of parent and child.

Shifts in religiosity, even transitions like Brandi's within an established religious tradition, have consequences for the individual, and their familial relationships. In order to explicate the religious transitions of post-culture war Christians, an examination of various other types of contemporary religious modifications within the American landscape highlights the commonalities of shifting religion while also accentuating a current scholarly move to examine the relational pressures involved in adjusting religion.

Changing Religion in America

The United States is in a dynamic state as it pertains to religiosity. Profound shifts within the United States, primarily post-World War II, and specifically in the 1960s and ‘70s, complicate the religious identities of many Americans. Current quantitative data highlight a decrease in those who identify as Christian with concomitant increases in new religious movements and interactions, non-Christian religions, and no religious affiliation (Smith, et al., 2015; Barker 2013, 2004, 1992; Wilson 1999; Marty 1984; Cornille 2013; Neufeldt 2011; Cousins 1989; Winston 2012; Baker and Smith 2009a, 2009b; Hout and Fischer 2002; Drescher 2016; Channing 2015). As a result, many hybrid and syncretic forms of religiosities are emerging within the American context (Gunther Brown 2013; Albanese 2000). Yet less analyzed are the evolutions of traditional religions, particularly at the level of the lived realities.

The current literature regarding modifications in American religiosity paints a dynamic state of fluctuating affiliations and increases in the numerical choices within the American religious marketplace (Roof 1999). This range of studies offers important aspects to keep in mind as one approaches religion analytically. For instance, from the research on New Religious Movements scholars are alerted to be aware that “religions are constantly changing -- change is the norm…” and that essentializing any religious tradition is problematic (Barker 2013, 1). Even the traditional forms of religious categories are evolving. As religious ideas and practices circulate in the world, their intersections engender new formations, as interreligious studies demonstrate. In the contemporary world, many religious persons seek to purposely communicate with people outside their tradition. These interactions often result in modified forms of religiosity. Easy categorizations then tend to break down in a religiously pluralistic world.

Instead of focusing on the broad categorizations of religiosity, some recent academic works attempt to parse out the particularities of these religious modifications by examining the full life of religious persons within particular contexts or in relation to dominant strands of religiosity. As an example, within the field of studying the Religious Nones, current scholarship is beginning to paint a rich picture of how the Religious Nones live. Elizabeth Drescher's work *Choosing Our Religion* attempts to understand religion as an aspect of people's lives in constant interaction with other elements of life. In describing the move to disaffiliation, she notes, "this self-understanding [of being a Religious None] develops over time as circumstances – relationships, intellectual and physiological development, geographic location, education and employment, economic realities, technologies, and so on – inflect, amplify, redirect, and sometimes substantially reconfigure an ongoing narrative of the self" (Drescher 2016, 53). Religious and spiritual thoughts, commitments, and practices respond to the influences of the holistic ecology of the person's entire life economically, geographically, relationally, etc. Within this ecology are the personal relationships that must be navigated.

Likewise Christel Manning's work on the parenting techniques of Religious Nones supplies a way of thinking about how a decision to not affiliate is lived in the world today (2015). Through the examination of parenting, Manning is able to provide a portrait of the Religious Nones that is in constant negotiation with the surrounding milieu that constructs certain expectations.

Religion, personal and collective, does not exist in a vacuum. Taking into account these insights supplied by scholarship on religious modifications in the United States, one begins to understand changes in religion as reactionary, responsive and social. In order to extrapolate the alterations in religion, one must dig deep into the personal histories and textures of those shifting religion. To quantify religious segues as a simple Point A to Point B choice ignores the strife, tensions, and stress often involved with such shifts. Instead Points A and B, and each sub point in between A and B, are in continual referential interaction.

As noted previously in this study, leaving CWC typically leads to social conflicts within one's family. This is not surprising since the family is one of the primary means of inculcating young people into the practices and rituals of the Bible Belt panopticon. The immediate family is considered a microcosm of how the broader society and religious community should be constructed – patriarchal leadership, rigid authority, and obedience, submission to the culture war Christian metanarrative, and complete allegiance to the panoptive structure. To demonstrate how the church and family structures are interwoven, one can look at leadership requirements within culture war Christian churches. In a majority of culture war churches, male church leaders are expected to control the home. Often cited is the 1 Timothy 3:4, 5, which states, "He must manage his own household well, keeping his children submissive and respectful in every way— for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how can he take care of

God’s church?” (NRSV) Thus any deviation from the norms and values of CWC by family members is understood as the failure of the patriarch – another means of surveilling the actions and beliefs of those under the Bible Belt panopticon. Departure at the family level frequently entails concurrent deviation at the church and political level as well, which is highlighted in subsequent chapters.

In addition to the patriarchal norms perpetuated within the home, another means of inculcating culture war Christians is through practices intent on isolating young members from those perceived as outside of CWC. This is conducted through private or homeschooling education, much like Brandi’s education. Private Christian schools and homeschooling programs seek to supply a religiously based education but also serve to cordon off the young people from those who are deemed influentially dangerous.

In this way, culture war Christianity serves as a proxy for establishing racial, patriarchal, and sexual norms that, practically speaking, motivates many culture war Christians to construct institutions that inculcate those norms. Yet numerous interlocutors of this project describe episodes where relationships developed with people outside of CWC, which adjusted their positions regarding aspects of their inherited Christianity. Interview data suggest that the attempt to construct relational barriers by culture war Christians is strategically near impossible. Several of the interlocutors detail employment, sport, hobbies, and education as specific locations where relationships problematized their religious socialization. Travis (fifties, North Carolina) attributes his critiques of systemic racism to playing on a high school basketball team where he was the only white player. Whether these relationships entail meeting someone of the LGBTQ community or, like Travis, racial minorities, they were informative in their religious and social understandings. And significantly, many noted that it was in interacting with Christians of other denominations that their questions began. For instance, Lauren (twenties, Kentucky) explains that she was connected with a homeschooling basketball team where she met other Christians with various doctrinal understandings. It was these initial experiences, Lauren proposes, that first made her question particularities about her faith and religious community.

Relational experiences profoundly transform and affect the viewpoints of most people within this study. In attempting to understand the alterations in people's views, sociologist Peter Berger posits that an ongoing condition of modernity is the negotiating of one's values and perspectives vis-à-vis the relativizing impact of pluralism. He argues, "any extended interaction with others who disagree with one's own view of the world relativizes the latter" (Berger 2014, 3). The radical expansion of these interactions in the modern world creates a situation in which, "all of life becomes an interminable process of redefining who the individual is in the context of the seemingly endless possibilities" (5). To ameliorate the uncertainty brought about by pluralistic encounters, many people turn to specific institutions as resources of simultaneous stability and deconstruction.

Berger's insights illuminate the situation of post-culture war Christians. The pluralistic encounters, even when parents and church leaders attempt to strategically minimize these encounters, engender incongruence with religious socializations. The incongruence often produces social frictions with family and church members who have been exceedingly instrumental in their human development. The experiences that shape interlocutors' religiosity vary greatly, but, in almost every case, relational interactions fracture the constructed certainty models of CWC.

Processes of Religious Adjustment

Because boundaries are constructed so rigidly, deviation within CWC is heavily regulated and guarded. The ideology governs a vast array of personal life, including religion, sexuality and political commitments. Deviation from the normative expectations is met with opposition and requires that one seek forgiveness from the collective before full participation is reinstated. The objective of this section of the chapter is to detail the stimulus inducing the move away from CWC in order to illuminate the tensions and conflicts within the religious shifts in the following section.

As noted earlier in this chapter, like Brandi, most of the interlocutors detail both intellectual doubt about their religion *and* specific relational experiences that eventually prompt the hard break with the Christianity of their youth. To fully understand the move away from CWC, one needs to understand the shift as a *process* rather than a single decision. One of the commonalities of the interviewees is the acknowledgement of a process of altering religiosity over a varying duration of time. Some interlocutors describe this alteration as lasting years, others months.

In a few instances, critical reflection prompted the movement away from CWC. The religiopolitical narrative logically did not make sense to some of the interlocutors. John (forties), who is an attorney in Tennessee, exemplifies this. He recounts,

> I just one day said, ‘none of this makes sense. It just doesn’t make sense.’ A God who creates a universe with us in a death sentence that can only be commuted if we believe certain things. If that’s who God is then I don’t want any part of it. So I left the faith. And was really agnostic for over a decade.

The religious narrative grounded by penal substitutionary atonement failed to work when filtered through John's legal training. Like John, others found that intellectual doubt prompted their initial moves out of CWC.

Unlike John, however, a few interlocutors refer only to a relational experience as the cause of their move away from CWC. Take for instance, Sophia (sixties, Tennessee) who left CWC due to a personal experience with her family. She and her family had been part of a conservative church for over two decades. She volunteered as the administrative assistant to the pastor and her husband served as a deacon. Sophia's son came out as gay after he was diagnosed with HIV/AIDS. Once her pastor discovered this news, he asked Sophia and her husband to publicly condemn her son's sexuality and remain committed to the church. However, Sophia decided to side with her son, which also meant leaving the church and CWC.

But the processes of shifting away from CWC almost always involve both an intellectual doubting *and* relationally experiential components for the majority of interlocutors. Typically interlocutors admit that they were questioning CWC for a period of time and then an event occurred catalyzing the decision to leave the form of Christianity in which they had been socialized. The following are examples of the intellectual doubting plus catalyzing relational experience model.

Brad (thirties, Tennessee), mentioned in the first chapter, admits that he started to question the Christianity of his youth in his mid-twenties. He discloses that there came a time where he struggled because "I don't know if I believe any of this anymore." Brad's collapsing ability to maintain his faith centered on the concepts of "eternity, damnation, and torture." His ultimate question was, "How is the God who created me not more compassionate than me?" His inability to balance the notion that God is gracious and merciful with the concept of ultimate punishment, led him to being what he calls an "irreverent agnostic." However, Brad kept his questioning confidential and continued to attend church with his wife and family.

It was not until the death of a close family member that Brad decided to reveal his doubts to his wife. Brad's brother-in-law was a committed member of the same church that Brad and his wife attended. When Brad's brother-in-law received a cancer diagnosis, those within the church and close family members outspokenly believed that he would be cured of his cancer due to his devotion to God and church. The brother-in-law was healthy and only in his twenties, but the cancer was aggressive and he died quickly. The family was devastated. At the same time that Brad's brother-in-law was battling cancer, Brad was traveling the world with a Christian relief organization. Both the death of his brother-in-law and the global poverty that he witnessed confirmed to Brad that "God either won't intervene or can't."

With doubts circulating and experiences confirming, Brad claims, "I felt like I needed to come out of the closet to my wife, not with my sexuality, but with my spirituality. I knew that I was about to devastate her." As he sat her down, he told her: "I can't ever lie to our children about what I believe. And I'm not going to pretend to believe in this Christianity thing anymore. I still love that man Jesus, but I don't know that he was God incarnate." Brad told me that he just knew his wife would leave him once he admitted his lack of faith; however, Brad's wife supported him in exploring his doubts. In fact, she joined with him in questioning the religion of their youth. Brad explains that his "journey has come back around to Christianity, but with an adaptation of the Christian faith…[I] let go of some of the dogma, and I have no desire to convert anybody or change anybody."

Like Brad, Lauren (twenties, Kentucky), also referenced in the introductory chapter, confessed that she also maintained doubts about the Christianity of her youth since she was a teenager, but kept it to herself. She was troubled by the actions of professed Christians that she knew that were incongruent with what she thought was the proper form for a Christian. Throughout our interview, Lauren describes culture war Christians as needing "to constantly discredit what everyone else believes" and "spend[ing] 80% of their time reading the Bible, but never doing what it says." Lauren also notes that there were elements like the young earth creationist idea that made her question her faith. She explains that she started to leave her faith "in layers."

But two personal experiences compelled her to leave the religious tradition of her youth. The first involves a close friend who came out as gay. This friend grew up with Lauren and attended all the same church activities. Lauren explained that she simply could not comprehend how this person that she had known for so long could be homosexual. The other experience involved Lauren's divorce. She was married in her early twenties to a young man in the church of her youth. Their family quickly grew as Lauren gave birth to a child. But Lauren explains she could not comport herself into the expected model of being a "godly" wife and mother. She refused to submit to her husband's authority. Once she decided to file for divorce, Lauren states, "I was no longer viewed as a human being. No one cared what I was going through." Her church and family sided with Lauren's husband in the matter and Lauren felt abandoned. Currently she does not attend church, but admits that with her busy schedule of working full time, going to college, and being a mom, she lacks the time to attend. She still considers herself Christian, but says she cannot find a Christian community that aligns with her perspectives and values.

Chris' transition out of CWC also consisted of his intellectual uncertainties and relational experiences. Now in his late twenties and in Kentucky, Chris grew up in a megachurch affiliated with the Southern Baptist denomination. He went to private, Christian school for his primary and secondary education, but decided to attend a state school to pursue economics and business. Chris credits this time at the university as the incubator for his decision to transition away from CWC. He states,

> When you get more educated, the education shows some of the shitty things going on in the world. When you are raised up with a mentality that everything is good - you've asked Jesus into your heart, you're going to heaven, and you live in a very suburban place - you've only saw white people that were Christians because I was sheltered for most of my life. When I started seeing things that weren't that I questioned why isn't the church doing something about that.

Chris' "seeing things that weren't that," corresponded to volunteering at nonprofits due to his university having an emphasis on community service. Accordingly, for Chris, the increase in education plus the active participation in local relief efforts persuaded him that the Christianity of his youth did not offer the plausibility structures needed. Chris tried to convince his church to consider being more involved with local relief efforts. He was able to sway them to start a Christmas program for people in need, but he explains that the program "was so unpopular that they switched to giving the contributions to a building fund." Of his efforts to rally church members to address poverty issues, Chris states, "When you try to help people you get backlash from church and society." He recalls that he was informed that the church’s primary role was to focus on personal salvation and not poverty relief.

Although the experiences of Brad, Lauren and Chris are not directly religious per say (death, divorce, sexuality, and engagement with social issues), some do recount experiences directly tied to religiosity that sway them away from CWC. Erin (twenties, North Carolina) experienced socialization into the culture war metanarrative much like the previous interlocutors. Her dad served on the leadership board of the church while her mom served as the church secretary. Erin attended church, “every Sunday, Wednesday, youth group, Vacation Bible School, and church camps” and soon became a nursery worker in the church herself. Once she graduated high school, Erin made the decision to attend Bryan College, a small, Christian college in Tennessee. As a science major at a Bible college, though, she began to question the young earth and old earth creationist perspectives that she was being taught. Erin did not feel comfortable discussing her thoughts within the classroom or with her friends and family, so she deliberately kept quiet.

After Erin completed her undergraduate degree, she applied to a large university to pursue a Masters degree in evolutionary biology. At this point in her life, she began to attend churches that were more progressive. At one church, she remembers that after every sermon, she “would end up crying. Every sermon was ‘God loves you and it doesn’t matter.’ I was taken by the idea that nothing that I could do would make God love me any less. But the opposite was also true. I can’t do anything to make God love me more. And I had spent my entire life trying to please everyone including God.” As Erin absorbed these religious teachings coupled with the scientific doubts of her education, she transitioned away from the CWC into post-CWC.

Each of these examples illustrates how religious alterations away from CWC occur. Rational reasoning contrary to the scientific, religious, and social inculcations of CWC is prompted by increases in education and the consumption of various Christian and non-Christian resources that directly or indirectly contradict previously held values and norms. Differing types of relational experiences tend to solidify and confirm the questions and criticisms, which completes the impetus for the religious moves. In short, the various relational incidents affirm the incongruence that was typically already apparent.

In addition, most of the interlocutors emphasize the movement away rather than toward something else in the initial stages of their religious transitions. Because of the stress related to nonconforming with the Bible Belt panopticon, most interlocutors were most concerned, not with where their religiosity was heading, but rather how to navigate the shift away, and its likely consequences, which are detailed more fully in the following chapter. This typically leads to a period of inward reflection that is not shared with family members. As Erin recalls her religious transition, she explains, “What was really challenging for me about changing the way that I thought about God’s love was my relationship with my parents. I didn’t know what was changing for me but I knew that it was not what my parents believed.” Like Erin, numerous interlocutors describe mixed emotions regarding their doubt and uncertainties related to the religious acculturation of their youth. The anxieties and tensions related to revealing modified religious orientations to family members continue to result in social conflict in various relationships.

Family Tensions

Alterations in religiosity are always negotiated within social networks. To think that shifts only involve rational critiques of the originating religiosity, i.e. CWC, ignores the relational dimensions that must be negotiated. In this particular evolution within Christianity, the intensive socializations all but guarantee some level of tensions will manifest. In fact, all but four interlocutors reveal conflicts within their social networks due to their changes in religiosity. Danielle (sixties, Kentucky) describes that when she left her church, she also "left her social life. It was more than just a church. We lived life with those people." These tensions and conflicts are extremely important for understanding the religious and political reformulations detailed in the subsequent chapters that challenge the norms and values of the Bible Belt region.

Like Brandi, the majority of interlocutors admit some level of conflict with their parents and in-laws. These types of generational conflict are recognized within scholarly studies at various stages of youth maturation (Stokes and Regnerus 2009; Mahoney 2005; Clarke, et al, 1999). Simply stated, these studies reveal: “when parents and their adult children agree about religion, they also report better intergenerational relationships” (Stokes sand Regnerus, 155). The correlation then between shared religious understandings and healthy relationships inversely connotes that religious differences yield potential conflict. In this study, this proves true particularly because religion is the grounding mechanism to transmit cultural values and norms in the Bible Belt region. Many of the interlocutors of this project maintain “the arm’s length” approach as described by Brandi at the beginning of the chapter. Experience has taught the interlocutors that fully revealing one’s religious views to parents or in-laws is unproductive.

Amber (thirties, North Carolina) and her husband have revealed very few details about the progressive form of Christianity of their religious community to their parents. She stresses over the moment that both her parents and in-laws discover the beliefs and practices of their religious community, “[My parents and in-laws] don’t know too much about us…We want them to know about our religious community so we can’t keep it hidden forever. I don’t know if they have a space to imagine what [any other form of Christianity] could be.” Amber’s strategy is to slowly reveal to her parents particulars as they arise. She describes one such instance and what she fears will emerge in the next conversation: “My mom asked me if I believed in absolute truth and I said, ‘No.’ Then [my mom] shut down. When it comes to the salvation thing, that’s what really worries me. I don’t believe in a moment in time [for salvation] like that. It’s bigger than that to me. The picture is bigger.” Numerous interlocutors have tested the waters of conversations with their parents and experienced a similar “shutting down.” For instance, Chris, mentioned earlier, states, “The reason I don’t talk about religion [with my parents] is because I’ve seen what happens when you talk about it. When you bring up things that you don’t believe in, my parents are like ‘that’s our entire identity.’” Chris even paused a moment during our interview to gather his emotions and slowly said, “It’s a weird thing. I love my family. But how it used to be and how it is now, it’s totally different.”

The emotional strain that revealing religious ideas with parents and in-laws leads often to a tacit agreement to not discuss religion at all. The strain of discussing religion is bi-directional working on both the parent and the interlocutor. Debra (fifties, Kentucky) acknowledges that as it relates to her religiosity, “I’m in the closet and I don’t know how to come out.” For Julia, the effort to engage in discussions regarding religion is pointless: “There’s just a lot that you’ll never see eye to eye on. It’s not worth me trying to change their minds on anything. I don’t want to do that. I never want to be disrespectful because I know that people’s religions are important to them, but it’s too much for me to handle their responses.” And Eric notes, “My mother-in-law knows that her kids don’t believe the same as [my mother-in-law] and it makes her cry.”

The tensions also often lead to strategically plotting to avoid physically visiting parents during typical religious meeting times. Many of the interlocutors do not want to be invited to the religious service and dread the conversation that would ensue with the invitation. Take for instance Nathan and his family. His dad was a preacher in a culture war Christian church. At the age of twelve, Nathan performed the salvation ritual of baptism, but once Nathan graduated high school, he stopped attending church altogether. Nathan explains, “Growing up and seeing the inner workings with my dad being the preacher, I got to see the politics of the church. That probably influenced me dropping out of church in college.” As he reflects on his life growing up in CWC, Nathan says, “It’s hard not to look back on those experiences negatively. You basically had to tow the party line of the church. If you asked questions, then you were hinting that people who made religious decisions in the past might have been wrong, then you were ostracized.” Again the “invented tradition” of the Bible Belt panopticon prohibits the questioning of church doctrine, norms and values, threatening possible exclusion.

Nathan’s dad took a preaching position in Texas while Nathan and his family relocated to Kentucky. Nathan even explains that as a result of him leaving church for so long, his name was published on a “lost list” that is circulated within the church community of his youth. Nathan did eventually find his way into church but into a post-culture war church that he says is much different than the religion of his youth. Today, Nathan admits that he has a strained relationship with his father and “I know that religion plays a huge role in that.” Because our interview took place in mid-November, Nathan confesses that he was stressing about visiting his parents and siblings in Texas for Thanksgiving. To ameliorate this tension, he purposefully scheduled his family’s trip to arrive on Wednesday evening and leave on Saturday to deflect any pressure to attend his dad’s church.

The avoidance of conversations, planning around specific times to avoid religious conversations and gatherings, and minimal revealing of actual perspectives and beliefs are woven into the lives of many of the interlocutors of this project. Often these strategies are agreed upon by an unspoken social contract between parents, in-laws, and children as a means of mitigating any possible direct conflict that might occur. But in some situations, direct engagement with differences does transpire.

Take for instance the journey of Kathy (twenties, Tennessee) and her husband. Kathy’s story demonstrates the lengths to which parents are willing to go in persuading their children to reconsider their religious beliefs and commitments away from CWC. In her youth, Kathy’s grandparents took on the responsibility of taking Kathy and her sister to church every Sunday morning and evening. This particular church is important in Kathy’s heritage for her great-grandparents, grandparents, and parents all grew up attending this church. During her youth, Kathy’s parents worked long hours of overtime on Sundays and could not take their daughters to church. Yet the entire family did gather together, including aunts, uncles, and cousins, each Sunday for a shared meal.

Religious commitments are of such importance, that even after Kathy was married in her early twenties, she attended the family church while her husband attended a different church for the first five years of their marriage. And at this time, Kathy's parents, now working less hours, also renewed their attendance at the family church. She explains that because she "was very entrenched in the [church's] teachings and mentality" she could not leave her family church or the Sunday meal gatherings.

Yet when Kathy and her husband began to discuss having children and starting a family, they decided it would be best for them to attend his post-culture war church together. Kathy's segue into post-CWC is discussed in the following chapter, but she transitioned into a more progressive form of Christianity and eventually transferred her membership from her family church. Even though she transferred her membership, Kathy and her husband continued to attend Sunday meals with her parents and grandparents. On one occasion, when Kathy was eight months pregnant, she was surprised to walk into the house for a Sunday meal and discover the preacher of her parent's church. Thinking that the preacher was simply invited as a dinner guest, Kathy was surprised to find that a type of religious intervention had been planned. Kathy explains, "[My parents] told me that they were disappointed with me and that I was going to hell. My grandmother was crying and saying that she didn't want me to go to hell...It was a major issue." In the midst of the emotional conversation, the pastor, who had set up a projector and screen, began a PowerPoint presentation detailing the inherent ramifications of Kathy's leaving the church of her youth. Angered that her family would take such measures, but still wanting to be respectful to her family, Kathy and her husband listened to the preacher's presentation. Afterward, they thanked the preacher, who exited the house, and asked her parents to never plan such an event again. Like many other interlocutors, when direct engagement does occur, it is eventually swept under the rug and not discussed any further. Kathy says, "Now we don't mention it. We love each other. We still gather on Sunday afternoon for lunch, but we just don't talk about it…[not discussing religion] keeps the peace and I love my family. I don't want to be estranged from them."

These stories highlight the ways in which shifting religion can adversely affect the relationship between parents and adult children. In some instances, religion is concealed for fear of causing a break or disruption in the relationship; in other cases, planned events, like the religious intervention, acknowledge the differences in religion and attempt to engage the discussion directly. In the majority of instances, the strain placed on parental relationships results in the privatization of religion. Family members enact a type of agreed upon moratorium on the topic of religion altogether. This privatization is not necessarily driven by secularization[13], but rather by conflicts inherent in the micro level of social networks. In essence, a part of one's identity, practices, and commitments are relegated to the margins of discussion.

In some cases, adult children exert some influence upon the parents' religiosity. Erin, mentioned earlier, notes, "Even my dad is becoming less confident in what he has believed." She acknowledges that her father is the single person of her close family structure with whom she can discuss religion. Their discussions of religion, in Erin's perspective, seem to have had an influence on her dad’s religiosity. Chris acknowledges an opposite kind of influence. Because of his modified religiosity, he thinks that his parents have actually responded by moving into a more conservative form of Christianity. He says, “My parents know in the back of their mind that I am not religious [like my parents are]; this has almost driven them into an extreme form of Christianity.” But the majority of interlocutors describe religion as a discursive space of friction with their parents and in-laws.

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[13] This appears to be a trend over the last decades within the American religious landscape, but typically for those who identify more as None, Atheist or Spiritual But Not Religious. For more information see http://commons.trincoll.edu/aris/.

Furthermore, tensions extend beyond the parent/child relationship into other social associations. Although extensive literature exists analyzing conflict between siblings in general (Ross and Lazinski 2014; Abuhatoum and Howe 2013; Tucker and Kazura 2013), scant investigations attempt to examine potential religious conflicts between siblings. Within many of the family situations described in the qualitative interviews conducted for this research, religion, or the tensions between parents and children due to religion, generate varying frictions between siblings. In situations where one child rejects the inherited socialization, other children within the same family might choose to continue to embrace the values and norms transmitted at youth or adjust the socialization in acceptable forms. Another possibility is that a sibling might very well reject the socializations in more extreme ways. John (forties, Tennessee), mentioned earlier, and his siblings exemplify these scenarios. During a previous holiday gathering, John says that at family events his, “younger brother struggled with his liberal theology, but my middle brother will look at me and say, ‘you are far too well-read and far too intelligent to believe any of this.’” John admits that these discussions between siblings serve to further complicate his relationship with his parents. And interestingly, John finds himself in the middle of a spectrum of sibling religiosities.

Religious conflict between one sibling continuing to affiliate with the Christianity of their youth and one sibling who has transitioned away from CWC can also lead to severe divisions. For Stephanie (twenties, North Carolina), the family rupture from her transition away from CWC resulted in short-term but intense depression. Stephanie went to counseling for help with her depression, but found herself one night on the verge of committing suicide. At this moment, she decided to call her sister for assistance. When she called her sister for help, her sister told her, "You know that I can't talk to you. So I have to set up a boundary right now. You can call me when you get right with God." Although Stephanie eventually worked through her depression with her counselors' assistance, she has decided to sever all communications with her family. Stephanie's story is exceptional but highlights how religious movements away from CWC can precipitate sibling division.

In situations where families maintain a relationship, some interlocutors describe themselves as the "black sheep" of the family. In these cases, the siblings of interlocutors tend to be much closer to the parents and the originating church community. And in some scenarios siblings feel pressure to remain a participant in CWC because of their sibling's transition away from the originating form of Christianity. For example, Kathy thinks that her sister stays within their family's church because "she's loyal to my grandparents. None of the rest of my cousins are in the church so she is kind of the lowly hold out…[there is] lots of pressure on her [to stay in]."

To limit resulting social conflicts to the immediate family of one's youth neglects the many social networks of human interaction. These include marriage tensions, dating strains, and business obstacles. The following examples briefly demonstrate each of these difficulties.

Like Brad (thirties, Tennessee), mentioned earlier, other interlocutors admit the stress placed on marriages once one spouse shifts away from CWC. Take, for example, Bryce's journey. Bryce (twenties, Kentucky) grew up in a Pentecostal form of CWC in a church that his grandfather founded. He maintains fond memories of the church of his youth, particularly the close social ties. As Bryce relocated after high school to attend college, he met his future wife, who also attended a culture war church. According to Bryce, because of geographical freedom and their educations, slowly Bryce and his wife began to question the religion of their youth. He explains that as he went back to his home church, he began to notice the political inferences and overt racism from family members. But the pressure for Bryce to continue within the church is intense. At the time of our interview, Bryce was in the process of transitioning to a post-culture war church, but had yet to divulge this information to his parents and grandparents. He states, "I would rather take my chances in a car wreck," than to have the revealing conversation about his religious beliefs and values with his family. Simultaneous with Bryce's shift, his wife also transitioned out of culture war Christianity. She, however, is much more outspoken about her position as an atheist. Now in his late twenties, Bryce struggles to share his continued religiosity with his wife. His wife knows that he attends church, but to some "extent, my wife doesn't even know what I believe." Bryce states that he is anxious about any religious disputes between the various members of his family and his strategy is to avoid completely the topic of religion.

Other interlocutors also detail the strain placed upon their marriage once the religious shift is revealed. Lauren and John, mentioned earlier, relay that their religious transformations ultimately led to divorce with their respective partners. But not all marriages buckle under the weight of shifting religion. Some couples admit that they are at differing stages from their partners in their religious journeys but agree that this is acceptable in their relationship. In other cases, interlocutors also share how difficult it is to find dating partners once they reveal where they go to church or their beliefs. Likewise, friendships are often severed due to segueing away from CWC. Like family relationships, social agreements to avoid discussions pertaining to religion often lead to shallow relationships. Julia notes that with her friends who still maintain CWC, “We don’t have anything deep to talk about. Those relationships can only go so deep.”

The inclusion of children into the existing social realities amplifies conflicts. As Brandi notes in the beginning of our chapter, her father suggested that she and her husband not have children because of religious differences. Disagreements in child education and nurturing bring to the surface the often-subterranean enmity that exists. Amber, who is pregnant at the time of our interview, describes her anxiety related to raising a child and navigating the relationship with her parents: “We have to tiptoe so much around them. A child doesn’t need to know how to do that. A child doesn’t know our history and doesn’t know that we don’t go there. I can kind of see a lot of awkward moments in the future.” Likewise, when Erin’s grandmother gave her child a *Baby’s Bible Friends* book, she considered it unhelpful and intrusive. Like Erin and Amber, others report what they perceive as intrusions in their efforts to raise their children. But as Amber notes, post-culture war Christians interpret actions like the gift book through a lens of historical acculturations and conflicts.

Business dealings and employment, like marriages, sometimes suffer from religious commitments away from CWC. Numerous interlocutors describe being terminated from jobs because they left their originating church community. Many note that they received jobs due to their church social network in the first place. But once they transitioned out of their church, their bosses, often members of the originating church, found reasons to terminate their employment. For those who continued in their employment, they found it tedious to navigate religious conversations when they arise. Others detail complications with business relationships, like the loss of investment capital once they revealed which religious community they attended.

Overturning the Relational Power Dynamics

The forms of social stress for post-culture war Christians extend into multiple relational vectors. The home, social networks and workplace are spaces where religious decisions impact social relations. To mitigate these impacts, many interlocutors and their networks take religion as a topic off the table of discussion. Maintaining the health of the relationships appears dependent on avoiding religion. In some cases, geographical distance relieves the tensions of religious strife. Relocating supplies a freedom for the interlocutors to more comfortably search for religious communities of their choosing or simply adopt an indifferent attitude toward religion altogether. Like a moratorium on religious discourse, geographical relocation indirectly engages the issues offering a passive form of amelioration.

Thus the overwhelming majority of post-culture war Christians interviewed for this project practice a type of avoidance strategy as it relates to negotiating and navigating religious strain within the family unit. However, interlocutors did recount one technique for a more active engagement with social relationships connected to CWC. This active engagement technique depends on inverting power dynamics without attempting to be overly corrective or disparaging. By inverting power dynamics, I refer once again to the power of the Bible Belt panopticon. Barton notes that in the Bible Belt region, “people typically do not contradict one another, and especially do not disagree with authority figures like parents, preachers, and teachers. Doing so invites censure and isolation” (2012, 31). In a milieu with strict norms regulating authority, evasion and prevarication are techniques that align with the rules of the surveillance mechanisms. Hence techniques that challenge, particularly at the individual level, the authority of parents and church leaders must do so obliquely.

“Don't respond to the dialogue directly, but say 'I have strong opinions on that too, and I can't believe how far apart we are,’” is how Brett (sixties, Kentucky) suggests post-culture war Christians navigate religious differences. This initial statement levels the field. It implicitly positions those in dialogue as “we” – both with strong and sincere views – and imagines any disparities as unexpected. Yet the technique moves forward by delaying the immediate conversation. Brett explains, “But hold it there and tell them that we can discuss it at a later date.” By stopping the conversation and pushing it to a later time, the technique seeks to allow both parties time to unemotionally gather information, possibly decreasing emotional responses, and allows post-culture war Christians the upper hand in controlling the time of the conversation.

Additionally, the move to delay the conversation also permits post-culture war Christians the opportunity to respond in a strategic fashion. This became clearer when hearing how Tom (fifties, North Carolina) recounts what he seeks to refrain from in navigating religious conflicts: "I do have to silence my own demons about correcting and challenging…I have to work awfully hard not to offer rationales, explanations – an apologetic if you will – for the kind of progressive Christianity that I'm in. Because I don't think that's useful." Tom notes that some within his post-CWC community adopt the evasion strategy, what he calls "hide the beer families," but Tom describes a technique similar to Brett's.[14]

> We're not a 'hide the beer family.' We've got lots of 'hide the beer families' at [our religious community] who come from very conservative roots. Many of them use an avoidance strategy. I tend not to be a huge fan of avoidance. But more of a polite respectfulness of telling the narrative of what one's doing and what one believes instead of telling it as a comparative narrative. When I do encounter conflict, I leave it as a tension. I offer it as an assumption that you're a faithful person. You're probably for the same stuff, right? Although I know deep down religiously they are probably different.

Again the intention of the technique is to invert the power dynamics by reversing the assumptions and norms. In order to do this, Tom levels the playing field (we're both faithful persons) and positions his views as the normative stance. This reverses normativity constructed by the culture war Christian narrative and situates the values and norms of post-CWC as co-equal with other forms of Christianity. These ways of controlling the conversation subvert the dominant perspectives.

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[14] The production, sale, and consumption of alcohol have a long and complicated history within the Upper South. Although this region is known for bourbon and whiskey many culture war Christians maintain teetotaler stances on alcohol. Since prohibition many cities, towns, and counties have maintained "dry" laws that prohibit any production or sales of alcohol. Alcohol, in its various forms, has been understood as evil and sinful by past generations. However, many of these laws are being repealed, which is another sign of the decreasing strength of the culture war Christian narrative and Bible Belt panopticon. In Kentucky, since 2014, twenty-three cities or counties have voted to legally sell alcohol. This results in dry counties being in the minority. See Estep, Bill. "Legal Alcohol Sales Spread in Kentucky as Economy, Laws, and Attitudes Change," *Lexington Herald Leader* July 2013 found at http://www.kentucky.com/news/state/article87501707.html.

Social Engagements and the Bible Belt Panopticon

In the case of post-culture war Christians in the Upper South, a particular form of discursive triangulation exists. Multiple social engagements occur in everyday life. The discourse is not limited to the individuals on the ground for "the Bible Belt panopticon adds another, more personal layer of surveillance. Instead of functioning through anonymous and invisible state authorities, this panopticon also manifests through tight social networks of family, neighbors, church, and community members…" (Barton 2011, 81). The social relationships are operating as a surveillance mechanism for the Bible Belt panopticon. Thus we must understand that as the numerous forms of interactions exist (parent/adult child, husband/wife, parent/child, employer/employee, etc.), the panopticon hovers over the area scrutinizing lived realities.

The socialization of children focusing on the transmission of religious values, norms, and heritage can have a formidable influence on adult life. As the child matures into adulthood, the socialization is filtered through developing knowledge and experiences. In these cases, the inherited socializations are incongruent with the developments of individual lives. Once aspects of the socializations are rejected or refined, tensions arise between parents and adult children. The created tensions have a way of then informing the continued lives of both the parents and adult children.

Indeed the lack of social support and the negative interactions existent for the interlocutors of this project compel them to search for new and differing forms of social networks. Brandi explains, “for us, our friends had to be more important because our family couldn’t understand us. I needed to find a group of friends to unlearn faith with. That’s my community. We needed to journey out of it. It’s kind of like family, but more real.” The social conflicts inherent in leaving CWC in the Upper South along with the domination of the Bible Belt panopticon is exceptionally significant when understanding the religiopolitical context that manifest within the region. In fact, the religious and political lives of post-culture war Christians are in direct response to and direct engagement with previous socializations, experiences of exclusion, and dominant power structures.

CHAPTER 4

CRAFTING SUBVERSIVE CHURCH

"The local church as a concept is really alluring to me." Abigail (thirties, NC)

"Being in a church community tugs at the better part of me." Kasey (thirties, NC)

"The problem of technology is almost the opposite of how it is usually posed: the problem is not 'instrumental rationality,' it is rather that we have come to live in a world that precisely does *not* elicit our instrumentality, the embodied kind that is original to us. We have too few occasions to *do* anything, because of a certain predetermination of things from afar."
Matthew Crawford (2009, 69).

Building from the understanding of a regulative Bible Belt panopticon and the rupturing of social networks inherent in the processes of disidentification, this chapter analyzes the often-complicated ecclesiological operations of those within post-CWC in the Upper South. I argue that these new ecclesiological formations can best be understood if one examines the experiences that lead people to the communities in the first place. Paying attention to the experiences and social pressures that prompt transitioning religious communities keeps at the forefront the notion that the religious moves are in negotiation with previous forms of practices and regulative structures. Starting with the religious trajectories of interlocutors, this chapter highlights the generative histories of individual and relational experiences that lead to a new commitment to openness toward experimentation and radical inclusion within religious community. The numerous shared stories of exclusion within previous forms of CWC lead to reform movements that encourage experimental religiosities while also intentionally seeking religious Others with whom to collaborate. Furthermore, staying within a form of religiosity that maintains monikers of Christianity and church is a subversive move, possibly unintentional, in challenging the religious and social conventions engendered by the panoptive mechanism. As such, the constitution of church can be greatly broadened as a means of subverting normative structures related to culture war conceptualizations.

Deconversion and Religious Trajectories

As suggested in the previous chapter, intellectual doubt and relational experiences are the impetus for religious change for many post-culture war Christians who find that the socializations of their youth fail to accurately describe the world in which they dwell. Importantly, to leave CWC in the milieu of the Upper South is a decision that confronts the broader structures of society not just religiosity. To question CWC, which is heavily guarded, is to question regional heritage, racial and sexual norms, and family structures. These decisions are not made lightly and are difficult to keep confidential for within "rural panopticons," "it is difficult to keep secrets; and not only is it difficult to keep secrets, it is difficult to keep any part of one's life private" (Philo, Parr and Burns 2016; 234).

Significantly, the data made clear that the majority of interlocutors describe their initial move as simply transitioning away from CWC, not as moving deliberately toward a different religious alternative, Christian or otherwise. This corresponds with Philip Harrold's notion of "deconversion" within the Emerging Church Movement (ECM) (2006). Within his study, Harrold exposes the "the distancing of oneself from a faith community…more than the turning-to orientation which has traditionally marked the successful religious conversion" (79). By studying the numerous blogs and published works of the ECM, he discovers that the transition away from the originating religious community is emphasized more in the ECM's articulations than any sort of ultimate religious destination. Although Harrold's work lacks any consideration of broader structural dynamics influencing and informing deconversions, his emphasis upon transitioning away from a particular religiosity is supported by this study. In fact, I argue that the socialization techniques through the ideology of CWC and the strength of the Bible Belt panopticon are so formidable that initial moves to distance oneself take extended, if varying, periods of time. Furthermore, the process of deconversion begins often, not with the physical relocation to another religious community, but while one is still within the originating religious community.

In the data collected for this research, three trajectories surface all with an originating point in CWC. Each interlocutor situates somewhere within the trajectories described below.

Trajectory 1, which describes about a quarter of the interlocutors of this project (23%), starts with (a) a socialization into CWC that transitions to something akin to categories like (b) Religious None, Spiritual But Not Religious (SBNR), or Atheism, and then moves into (c) post-CWC. Stage (b) is important to note. Most of the interlocutors of this project were under the impression that only one version of Christianity, broadly speaking, existed. To be sure, many knew of other churches and denominations, but assumed that all churches were based in a similar culture war mode. Many exited CWC for a time period with no expectation of ever returning to any religious institution. Stage (b) of Trajectory 1 then is a liminal period in which these interlocutors are simply skeptical of religious institutions altogether. This skepticism toward institutional religion does not mean though that they were not religious during this time period. Indeed, many acknowledged that they continued to pray, read a Bible, or even dabble in other religious traditions; but ultimately, they each found their way back to a more liberal form of Christianity that they find quite distinct from CWC.

One way to understand this path is that the socialization processes are so successful that many within CWC find any other religious option invalid even upon leaving CWC. Thus the only viable move religiously is deconversion. In some cases, interlocutors acknowledge that their families would rather them not attend any religious institution than to attend the post-culture war Christian church that they attend presently. For all within Trajectory 1, during the transition from stage (a) to (c), no available post-CWC community existed during most of the liminal period. One might assume that had a post-culture war Christian religious community existed the liminal period might be non-existent in their history, or at least shortened. In sum, Trajectory 1 maps a religious trajectory of CWC to deconversion, initially expressed in terms of disaffiliation, and ultimately to disidentification.

Trajectory 2, on the other hand, is a direct transition from Culture War Christianity to a post-CWC, with no liminal period. Finding resources, building networks, or stumbling into a differing form of Christianity that was deemed to be more appropriate marks this trajectory. Many on this trajectory, 65% of those within this study, stayed within CWC until a viable alternative was discovered and then transitioned. The pressures to commit to CWC are so strong that the majority within this trajectory knew that leaving without another church available was not an option; but the early stages of deconversion also exists for these interlocutors while in the originating religious community. This trajectory shares many similarities with Trajectory 1. Obviously, access to resources and the availability of a post-CWC community are determining factors in this transition. This trajectory then includes both deconversion and disidentification from CWC.

The third trajectory inverts stages (b) and (c) of Trajectory 1. A small number of the interlocutors began in CWC, transitioned to a post-CWC, but eventually left Christianity altogether. Ultimately ending in disaffiliation, those on this trajectory use affiliations like atheist, spiritual, or none to describe their religiosity today. The post-CWC became the liminal period of eventually disaffiliating altogether. When Chris (twenties, Kentucky) discusses his transition to post-Culture War Christianity, he says that he, "met people who were using Christianity in a lot more positive light and were thinking out loud." He journeyed with these post-culture war Christians for a few years, which he describes as simply "living life and not having to worry about eternal damnation." But he admits that during this time he "also gave up on [Christianity] a little bit." In this project, interlocutors on Trajectory 3 discovered that leaving Christianity altogether is the best option for them. In each of these situations, though, those who left Christianity altogether admit that today they cannot fully reveal their religious disaffiliation to family members and many of their closest friends. To reveal that one is not Christian, in the perspective of these interlocutors, would be too devastating to their social networks.

These three paths demonstrate the relative instability of religious affiliations, but also how external forces can shape religious decision-making. When a person experiences the acculturations of CWC within a region guarded by the Bible Belt panopticon, initial choices to deconvert can come with severe anxiety and social conflict, as is apparent in the previous chapter. Understanding deconversion as a first step apart from a structural system that regulates multiple aspects of individual life challenges a theory of unrestricted free religious markets. Often interlocutors remain within a culture war Christian community to meet the expectations of friends and families. As Erik Sengers notes, “No religious market is completely free” (2007, 296). Sengers focuses on the ways in which governments regulate markets of religiosity. In this case, an assemblage of other churches, histories, and relational structures oversee individual decisions. Or otherwise stated, various external factors and pressures can impede upon unencumbered religious decision making. To be sure, some of the interlocutors use what could be understood as “religious market place” language to discuss their transition to their current religious community, but the majority simply understands their decisions as a necessary move in advancing away from CWC. This move, consequently, is more like finding an adequate, mutually beneficial religious community that offers support and encouragement for transitions away from CWC.

In the earliest stages of this research project, the parameters included a focus on individual shifts within the Christian tradition. Qualitative interviews were conducted with interlocutors who had journeyed or were journeying on the three trajectories within the geographical context of the Upper South. Yet, significantly, for a majority of interlocutors, the importance of being a part of a religious collective affiliated with the Christian tradition resurfaced time and again during the interviews. Because the religious community retained an important role for a majority of interlocutors, those within Trajectories 1 and 2 are the focus of this chapter. As a means of providing an example of the social pressures and processes of shifting from CWC to post-CWC, I introduce the religious course of Evelyn and Kasey.

I Don’t Fit In With Most Christian Churches

Evelyn (twenties) and Kasey (thirties) are married with one small child. They attend a post-culture war church in the Research Triangle area of North Carolina. Both of their parents are Christian missionaries in different parts of the world and both Evelyn and Kasey grew up as MKs or “missionary kids.” Evelyn spent time growing up in Europe and Africa while Kasey’s family served as missionaries in South America. Since missionaries often maintain a home base in the United States for communications and fund-raising, both of their families cultivated relationships in North Carolina. Because of this cultivation, both Evelyn and Kasey relocated to North Carolina once they graduated high school abroad. The couple met when Kasey was completing a degree at a local university in computer science. Although each maintained questions about their faith, they continued to be heavily involved in culture war Christianity of their youth and campus ministries like InterVarsity while in the region.

As Kasey came closer to completing his collegiate studies, the couple decided to marry and enter into a short-term commitment with the Peace Corps to continue their world travels together. While in the Peace Corps, they both admit that they began to struggle seriously with their faith. Kasey acknowledges that he “has serious problems with how women are treated in church.” Like others in this project, they describe their experience with social issues like equality as a primary reason for their intellectual doubts and questioning. In addition, they discovered the podcasted teachings of Rob Bell, then-pastor of Mars Hill Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan and a leading voice in the ECM. Evelyn states, “Bell had a profound influence on our trajectory. As he was transitioning [religiously], we found some mirroring thoughts.” The couple quit attending church abroad and relied primarily on ECM books and podcasts to inform their spiritual journey. Maintaining their beliefs without attending a formal church institution, the couple echoes Grace Davie’s notion of “believing without belonging” (1990). This liminal period provided the geographical distance, resources, and time to rethink much of their religious positions.

To compliment their intellectual doubts, the couple served in a region where abject poverty is common witnessing the struggles of hundreds of people trying to find enough food for their families. Evelyn’s religious shift proved to be quite traumatic. She describes her religious change:

> I’ve had some dark spiritual times in my life. Like what is the point of praying? So much stuff happens in the world. It weighs heavy on me to the point where I think that I can’t pray about anything. It feels like God’s not doing anything. Is it worth it? My thoughts on this have shifted…I’m not certain anymore that [prayer is] helpful.

She explains that she has attempted to discuss her doubts with her parents who continue to serve as missionaries. Yet she finds that “it’s easier to, most of the time, to let it go because I get frustrated in conversations with my mom.”

Once they completed their Peace Corps commitment, the couple relocated to Indiana so that Kasey could complete a master’s degree in Economics. With their return to the United States, they together resolved that they did want to belong to a religious community, and they enumerated specific qualities for a possible church community that they might attend. Kasey explains, “We decided that we would find a church on our terms. We wanted the possibility of a woman in leadership, a church that cared about the environment and directed their gaze beyond themselves. We wanted a church to at least acknowledge that there are things happening in the world." While in Indiana, they found a church but were quickly disgruntled when they discovered that Evelyn would not be permitted to become a member because she taught a yoga class in the community. The church explained that teaching yoga was at odds with their religious beliefs and practices.

So when the couple relocated back to North Carolina after Kasey finished his graduate degree, they had low expectations that they would be able to find a church community that met their standards. During separate interviews, I asked Evelyn and Kasey why they wanted to continue attending church at all. Why not simply quit church? They both gave very similar answers. Kasey provides his explanation:

> There was a part of us that didn't really want to go to church. But we wanted community. We wanted to have relationships with like-minded people and find friends that we could invest in and have them invest in us…*But* really our families – there's an expectation [that we would attend church.] Both our parents are missionaries. We've never really had honest conversations with our parents about where we are in our faith, our struggles, our doubts. If we were actively not going to church, we would have to confront that.

Evelyn echoes Kasey when she admits, "[My parents] just want us to be part of a church. I think that's reassuring to them that we follow in that same faith path. It's worrisome to them." The familial pressures compounded their search even with their parents living abroad. Evelyn feels more pressure from her parents than Kasey's particularly from her mother who in Evelyn's perspective "just keeps saying the same things over and over again" like, "We hope that you find the right church. We're praying that you go to church." But Evelyn confesses, "I don't fit in with most Christian churches in that some of my beliefs have broadened outside of Christianity" and "most of my friends are not

Christians. I have more in common with people of varying faiths than most Christians around here. I just have more in common with them."

After a short time of looking for a church community in North Carolina, Evelyn and Kasey discovered online a small church with many of the values that they sought. Kasey explains, "[The church] values are really what attracted us. The service is a dialogue where you can participate as an attendee. They have an art table where people can just do art during the dialogue." I ask Kasey what else is unique compared to the churches that he was part of before. He responds, "Since I've been at church I don't think that we've prayed yet." Evelyn chimes in that, in addition, "Our church doesn't sing Christian songs." And Kasey and Evelyn are both excited that their church designated itself as a safe space for people who identify as LGBTQ. Kasey accounts theologically for their participation in this post-culture war church: "If God is a loving God, then this is more in-line with what he would want on this earth. And even if I'm wrong, he will understand the heart behind my embracing a more liberal church."

Like others within this project, Evelyn and Kasey found themselves seeking not just another individualized religiosity outside of the CWC socialization of their youth but a community of people on similar trajectories with whom to share. In many ways, their personal stories are demonstrative of numerous others' search for a religious community within this project. For many to leave the CWC of their youth necessitates a creative space to disclaim many of the theological and religio-political acculturations insistently advanced upon them and to articulate new values, models, and ideas. Like Evelyn, many interlocutors experienced some level of exclusion or expulsion from a culture war church, which often serves as a personal impetus for more inclusionary practices. In addition, like most of the project's interlocutors, the relational pressures form the basis by which one considers their religious moves. These three elements – shared trajectories, creatively rethinking Christian community, and exclusionary experiences – each offer ways in which a religious marketplace theory based upon instrumental rationalism and consumerist models insufficiently explains religious decisions related to religious community selection.

Religious Marketplace Theory

Religious marketplace theory prioritizes economic and rational choice in understanding the reasons why people make commitments to particular religious communities (Sengers 2007; Stark and Bainbridge 1996; Stark and Finke 2000). Accordingly, the notion of an unencumbered self pursing self-interest shape understanding the religious moves that individuals make. The religious moves are thought to be based upon correlating values and tastes. For instance, a religious marketplace analysis might consider whether the religious attendee's (consumer) preferences align with the music, ambiance, and teachings of a particular institution. The marketplace then positions religious communities in a direct competition in attracting and maintaining numbers of people. As a means of measuring these competitions denominational and (para)denominational supply and demand are analyzed to identify which groups are more marketable within specific contexts.

In a religious marketplace context, the American South is a competitive market. Tennessee's number of megachurches, which are primarily Southern Baptist, ranks in the top five of the country (Bird and Thumma 2011). Many of the megachurches offer an abundance of services like gym memberships, travel opportunities, and self-help groups. Additionally, Chattanooga, Tennessee ranks as the most weekly attended church city in the United States with cities in Kentucky and North Carolina both making the top ten as well (Barna 2017). ExpertGPS software cites over 5,000 churches within the Commonwealth of Kentucky and almost 9,000 churches in the more populated North Carolina (ExpertGPS.com). The national market indicates that a high number (42%) of people have switched churches or religions in their lifetime providing a consumerist demand for religious offerings (Pew Research Center 2015).

This project focused on five sites, as discussed in the opening chapter, identified again here. After attending the Wild Goose festival with the initial interlocutors, other individuals who met the parameters of the project were selected for interviews. These interviews led to participant observations at the sites along with specific interlocutors. Three sites are more traditional in their structures. By traditional, I denote that each maintains a meeting location, ministry staff, and weekly meetings. No demographic information was collected regarding membership or attendees of the religious communities, but a scan of the facility reveals that the communities are predominantly composed of white attendees with a very small portion of the congregations being People of Color. The ages of attendees ranged greatly. These three sites hold a weekly meeting of music, prayers, teachings/sermons, and offerings. In addition, there are religious education opportunities and programs for children and young people. The Wild Goose festival, as discussed in the opening chapter, is an annual gathering that is much more racially diverse than the traditional sites. The last site, which is described later in this chapter, is entrepreneurial and experimental unlike the traditional sites or the Wild Goose festival.

Evelyn and Kasey searched the marketplace for a new church by combing through websites, which can be understood as consumer research. The church that Evelyn and Kasey discovered is loosely connected with what recent scholarship is terming "Emerging Christianities" (Moody and Reed 2017; Beilo 2017; Marti and Ganiel 2014).[15] By using the epithet Emerging Christianities, the objective is to demonstrate a version of Christianity in formation that problematizes many of the previous subcategories within the Christian tradition.

Some scholars are very explicit about their examinations of Emerging Christianities through a religious marketplace lens (Lee & Sinitiere 2009; Reed 2014). Many of these studies work from the assumption that traditional American Evangelicalism is losing members due to a lack of innovation and, thus, Emerging Christianities are the luring reformation attracting former Evangelicals. Take Shayne Lee and Phillip Sinitiere's work that places Brian McLaren among other Evangelical innovative voices. They posit that McLaren is an "innovative Evangelical" attempting to construct a space to meet the religious market demands. Through a religious marketplace lens, the evangelical church failed to meet the demands of the religious market, thus new forms of Christianity in a free marketplace are filling aspects of that void. Consumers then decide simply to attend and possibly commit to these newer Emerging Christian communities, but always with the opportunity to make reconsiderations. Certainly some of the interlocutors of this project describe particular attributes of their church communities that seem highly resonant with market demands. Here are a few examples of interlocutors describing their current church:

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[15] I use the descriptor loosely connected to point to the untethered connections and imprecise terminologies instantiated within the "Emerging Christianities" moniker.

> I don't know what I believe and I don't know what I can believe. And the new church community said, 'It doesn't matter what you believe, we are here to stand with you and to walk beside you.' Miller (thirties, NC)
>
> We're inclusive. We are radically inclusive. There is no category or genre of people that we exclude. Travis (fifties, NC)
>
> I was accepted from day one. Basically we were one of them. Seth (forties, KY)
>
> My church doesn't ask me what I believe or if I affirm certain beliefs. Nathan (thirties, KY)
>
> It's the only place that I can go that resonates with me intellectually. John (forties, TN)

As noted by these examples, the intimate nature of the community, intellectualism, open acceptance and lack of doctrinal stances correspond with the values and preferences of interlocutors. These sites construct an ethos with a particular kind of value system often highlighted physically within the church spaces as well as on the church websites. For instance, one church facility displays a banner prominently upon entering the church facility proclaiming, "there's no room to hate here." The banner lists several oppositional identities (gay/straight, conservative/liberal, believer/doubter) and poetically offers an invitation to be included. Another includes a small "safe space" sticker indicating that members of LGBTQ community are welcome within that space. This church's website also reads, "welcoming all persons into our midst, without regard to race, age, gender, sexual orientation, or physical abilities."

Yet what the religious marketplace studies fail to recognize are the relational factors that influence why people decide to transition to the more progressive forms of religious communities in the first place, the ways in which these moves are hampered by social pressures, and how these religious communities attempt to subvert religious and cultural norms. In other words, religious marketplace approaches mistakenly assume that the market is naturally occurring and unregulated. James Bielo gets at this critique when he argues, "Conceptualizing change via market share tracks where bodies are institutionally located, but it does not begin to account for why bodies move from one location to another or what broader effects that movement is having" (Bielo 2017, 20). The current study focuses on the ways in which religious decisions are not simply marketplace decisions but evolutions within a cultural milieu where reasons for disidentification with CWC and dissatisfaction with other cultural norms exist. Building from the role of deconversion in relation to CWC, I argue that indeed the goal of the religious communities is to modify Christianity, but that this is for broader reasons in dismantling the Bible Belt panopticon and pacifying external pressures. The data of this study reveal inter-related reasons, broadly speaking, why many culture war Christians seek different religious communities. The first reason relates to the personal and shared experiences with friends and loved ones. These experiences are motivation to be more open and welcoming, which, in turn, leads to experimentation within ecclesiological structures. Moreover, these experimentations are a form of playing with disidentification and ecclesiology, as well as a means of strategically destabilizing the pillars of the Bible Belt panopticon.

Spaces of Relational Cultivation

Once one begins to deconvert from CWC, social networks tend to fracture. Since religious community is the centralizing and mobilizing institution of CWC and the Upper

South's panoptic structures, it might make sense that many deconverts would look outside of religious community as a means of rebuilding social networks. In fact, this is the case in several instances (particularly for those within Trajectory 3). Numerous interlocutors discuss yoga and art classes, sporting commitments, and hobby groups that they find allow them to reconstruct communal life.[16] But more often than not, church community continues to be the primary place to construct relational life and networks. By detailing more relational, religious experiences of interlocutors specifically related to the communion ritual, a fuller understanding of post-culture war church values begins to manifest. As underscored in Chapter 2, the communion ritual in CWC is a means of acknowledging and granting full membership into the church community but also into the broader authority system. Thus, the ritual of communion serves as a mechanism by which parameters are established and exclusion practiced. Often these moments of exclusion underscore subversive awareness of the panoptive pillars.

Transitioning to a post-culture war community can often provoke discomfort since the norms can be quite different. Kathy's experiences accentuated in the previous chapter highlight the often-fragile family relationships that exist after one decides to deconvert from CWC. As a reminder, Kathy (twenties, Kentucky) experienced a religious intervention concocted by her parents and grandparents as an attempt to convince her to return to CWC. But another aspect of her religious story proves instrumental in her transition as well. Speaking of her involvement with the Christianity of her youth, Kathy describes herself as "entrenched in the mentality" of CWC. Thus when she made the decision to begin attending church with her husband who attends a post-culture war church, she explains that she was originally uncomfortable in the new church space. Two aspects of her husband's church really disturbed her CWC sensibilities. The first aspect dealt with people's attire at the post-culture war church. Her previous church experience included very specific, formal ways for women and men to dress. Women wore dresses and men wore shirt and tie. Although this initially perturbed her, she admits that she quickly adjusted to more informal attire.

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[16] More work should be conducted on this topic. To limit religious, spiritual, or sacred activities to institutions recognized by scholarship as religious creates a restrictive set of guidelines for constructing analyses. Works highlighting fandoms, popular culture, sporting commitments, etc. could provide keen insight into how many culture war Christians transition into other forms of "religion."

The other, more troubling, element of the post-culture war church, according to Kathy, pertained to the communion ritual. Unlike her previous church that restricted communion to members only, the post-culture war church practiced a weekly open communion table – anyone, visitor/member, Christian/non-Christian, is permitted to participate in the ritual. Another interviewee proudly describes a time when a Sikh visited the church and took communion with everyone else in attendance. Even after a discussion with the lead minister, Kathy recounts that she still maintained her position regarding the exclusivity of the Eucharist. But during our interview, she chronicles that a return visit to the church of her youth changed her position regarding communion. Kathy told me that her church holds a "homecoming service" each year to attract those who were a part of the church and have either transitioned to another church or have relocated away from the area. She was happy to attend with her parents and grandparents. Yet at the communion time of the service, the elders of the church prepared the ritual elements, which they began to distribute in the church. It is customary in many Southern Protestant churches to have the male leadership disseminate the bread and wine (grape juice) pew by pew. Kathy describes what happened: "I went back to visit [my previous church]. I had already removed my membership. I was not offered communion. They skated right by me." Continuing Kathy explains, "I felt rejected, overlooked, looked down upon. I felt apart from the community." After reflecting on this experience, Kathy decided that the open practices of the post-culture war church resonated with her. "It meant a lot to be excluded. I don't like the hate."

Kathy's personal religious experience of exclusion altered her perspectives regarding the primary sacrament of her Christian faith. Kathy informs me, "It's one of the reasons that I have not been back [to the church of her youth]." Like Kathy, others in this study relay stories of religious exclusion that pushes them to be more welcoming of others within religious spaces.

Take for instance, Miller (thirties, North Carolina) who details his story of excommunication. Born in North Carolina, he states, "I was raised in a religiously moderate home. You went to church because that was the right thing to do." After participation in some parachurch organizations like FCA (Fellowship of Christian Athletes) at his high school, Miller claims, "I became way more conservative in my faith than my parents were." When explaining why this was the case, he suggests that CWC, "offered me a certain kind of rigidness. This was an expression of faith that made sense to me for about ten years."

His participation within this church came to a close, however, when he and his wife chose to get a divorce. At this point, Miller recalls that formal proceedings were initiated to excommunicate him from his church and denomination. He had been an active member within the music program of the church, even traveling the country representing the denomination. "It was sad, shameful and hilarious at the same time.

Church discipline withholds communion from those under discipline. They announce in every pulpit in the [denomination's conference], 'This person does not have salvation.'" Because of the withholding of communion and the ostracizing, Miller left his culture war church seeking another Christian community.

Like Kathy, Miller's personal experiences of exclusion from the church inform his more inclusionary values and practices today. Numerous other stories of personal exclusion manifest during the interview processes. Supplementing the stories of personal exclusion are the similar experiences of family and friends. Joan (forties, Kentucky) recounts that as a little girl, the members of her culture war church volunteered to physically erect a new church building. She remembers her stepfather, who was not a member of the church, laboring each evening after he completed his day job as a carpenter to assist with the building. When she asked why he was so adamant in assisting with the construction project, he simply responded, "It's the right thing to do." At the completion of the project, the church held a grand opening service. Her stepfather proudly attended since he had built strong relationships with the men of the church during construction. Yet her stepfather was prohibited from taking the communion even after he had contributed his labor and time. Joan says, "This experience stuck with me after all these years." To this day, Joan supports the open communion table.

The stories reveal a disproportionate level of control within the religious marketplace of the Upper South. Those who attend specific religious communities are not always granted equal access to rituals, memberships, and opportunities. Evelyn Bush recognizes this in her critique of the religious marketplace theory when she argues that the theory "posits market success to be primarily a function of product appeal, while downplaying variation in the power and resources that allow for production and distribution" (Bush 2010, 305). Certainly many culture war churches offer numerous services that are attractive to consumers in the Upper South, but to focus solely on these products ignores the power dynamics at play within this milieu. The withholding of the communion ritual, for example, demonstrates the ways in which social dynamics are regulated within the religious community.

In addition, relational interactions also can have the effect of fracturing the constructed certainty models of CWC for post-culture war Christians. The episodes of relational dissonance engender an uncertainty about the entire plausibility of the Bible Belt panoptive pillars. If the central means of perpetuating the Bible Belt panopticon is through relational cultivation, then relational splintering results in a rupturing of the entire system. To personally experience ostracization from one's religious community within a CWC milieu can effectively motivate the ostracized to work toward alleviating such practices for themselves and others.

Furthermore, because relational fissures, both familial and ecclesiological, heavily influence the deconversion from CWC then previous forms of church, broadly speaking, become suspect. This institution is at the center of the Bible Belt panopticon's regulatory system. As the panoptive mechanism reveals itself as exclusionary during the deconversion processes, new modes of disidentification manifest seeking to create a religious community that works both within the authority structure but also challenges that same structure. I argue that this is one way in which the experimental models of post-culture war church begin to emerge. Thus what post-culture war church communities supply at this moment relates to the perceived inability of CWC to proclaim effectively an authentic form of Christianity. In short, CWC is understood as a now corrupted version of Christianity. As a result, church becomes a space for trying new forms of religious cultivation. Numerous interlocutors denote the exploratory modes of operating within their religious communities:

> We teach people to experiment with alternative forms of Christian community. Lucas (twenties, NC)
>
> We are in an unfolding tradition and story. So there are always new things to be said, new experiences to be had. Jackson (thirties, KY)
>
> We are orthodox in that we are comfortably struggling with and within the Christian tradition. Travis (fifties, NC)
>
> You can't understand freedom of worship until you've been a slave in worship. Claire (sixties, KY)
>
> We are looking at some of these different elements of Christianity – the life of Jesus, God, heaven or the afterlife – we're looking at all of these more traditional elements and saying, 'yes and it's so much bigger than we ever realized.' Which is really exciting and fun for us. Which parts of the traditions that we carry so deeply within us are helpful as we continue on this journey. What pieces of that feel genuine and true that would be helpful and healthy to carry with us. Abigail (thirties, TN)

Religious community then becomes a place for creatively and collectively imagining what religious community could be in direct contradistinction to CWC. The way in which most interlocutors discuss religious expressions is with *we* or *us* positioned within a richer tradition of Christianity. Thus, the many historical fragmentations of Christianity are understood as previous modes of experimentation preceding the current post-CWC embraced by interlocutors.

The idea, however, that these churches are simply spaces for cultivating religious orientations obscures the broader purposes of the religious community. Church for those socialized into CWC extends beyond the institution and is also political, religious, personal, educational, and relational. This holistic concept of church is a carry over from CWC. Church is still understood as a place to experiment with religious expression, but the institutional model of church is expanded to include domains outside of traditional forms to build relationships.

At one of the church sites for this research, a leader within the church explains, "We want to have a space for people to gather and let people do what they do." At first, this sounds like a Pentecostal form of church worship where minimal planning occurs to allow the "spirit to move." But the statement from the church leader references intentionality outside of the church worship service. In fact, the leader is identified with the title of *cultivator* not as minister, pastor, or reverend. This person's job is to create spaces for people to build relations around physical work. Lucas (twenties, NC) describes some of the spaces as "cultivating the soil, beekeeping, and raising chickens" with a purpose of "making connections." He went so far as to explain, "creating community is church." I inquire whether this is simply a marketing maneuver to increase membership. He responds, "Participants don't have to believe like us. It's not a backdoor 'come to our church.' That's not our plan. It's not our job to dictate belief."

This church emphasizes the usage of their space for the cultivation of relationships through what Matthew Crawford calls *soulcraft* (2009). Critiquing modern marketplace, Crawford argues that the agency of human "interaction with his world through hands…highlight[s] the appeal of manual work in a way that is neither romantic nor nostalgic, but simply gives credit to the practice of building things, fixing things, and routinely tending to things, as an element of human flourishing" (64). He continues to posit that working with one's hands is what it means to be human. Using Crawford's insights, church then becomes a workshop of sorts for interfacing with the milieu through hands-on techniques. Like Crawford's notions, another experimental model of church that I discovered during my field operations provides insights into how the concept and institution of church is being reimaged.

During the Wild Goose Festival, I met a small group of people who started a microbrewery in the Upper South. Although only a few months old, two distinctive aspects of this microbrewery are revealing. The brewery includes a "common space" for community events and the entrepreneurs are theologically trained ministers with understandings that the brewery is church. The facility itself is built with a large, open area that can house various types of events. Thus far the microbrewery has housed wedding ceremonies, weekly open-mic nights for the local community arts program, community potluck meals, and room for those organizing and participating in political marches. Yet the space is also unique for what is not physically present. There are no Bibles, no crosses, no Bible studies, and no attempt to convert anyone to a particular religion. The brewery is not an outreach of a church or denomination with the intentions of recruiting members. One owner notes that cultivating the common good is church and that brewing the best beer possible is his Christian discipline. He further explains that he holds his Christianity loosely (as far as a label) and seeks to discover the "path of Jesus through the economics of the brewery, the relationships with the community, and through everyday theological conversations in a non-violent and non-forceful way."

Church, like other recent moves to value craftsmanship (farmers markets, mechanics, artistry), can be understood as a space that highly respects and values the physical nature of life lived and creative explorations. Church in this way might be thought of as an active humanist venture where systemic theology becomes less relevant, but using one's hands to construct the sacred is prized. Due to this, the frameworks of denominations or doctrines collapse under the weight of these ventures; instead, analytical frameworks that include beauty, relevance, authenticity, relational components, and craftsmanship supply more appropriate ways of approaching these phenomena. In other words, to craft a good beer might correspond to crafting a good church.

If we understand the constructed world of the Upper South as greatly regulated for numerous people, broadly speaking but also including ecclesiological structures, then one can begin to see the correlations of artisanal projects and the valuing of handiwork and craftsmanship within these religious communities. And relationships are one of the numerous forms of cultivation. We might begin to understand this as a new epistemology in the Heideggarian sense where, "the nearest kind of association is not merely perceptual cognition, but, rather, a handling, using, and taking care of things which has its own kind of 'knowledge'" (1996, 63). For the interlocutors of this project, to know church is to craft church. This form of ecclesiological epistemology works at religious life by coming at it indirectly. More than religious marketplace demands, the post-culture war religious communities can be understood as a posture of attentiveness to a project. Crawford suggests, "Getting it right demands that you be *attentive* in the way of conversation rather than *assertive* in the way of a demonstration" (2009, 82). Therefore, the way for post-culture war Christians to work in forming what church should be is through the ongoing process of tinkering with the elements and introducing new components. Differing ecclesiological variations yield new results, both of failure and success. Yet beyond the epistemological aspects of post-culture war church life, the construction of these church structures also engages with the rural panopticon of the Bible Belt by engaging the structures and appeasing social pressures.

The Bible Belt Backlash and Strategic Religion

The religious communities of post-culture war Christians include laborious fashioning and are heavily influenced by previous, exclusionary religious episodes. Many new experimental and experiential forms of church provide a venue for post-culture war Christians to build new relationships with people with various religious orientations seeking to discover what church can be. Nevertheless, these religious communities physically exist in a region regulated by an enormous network of churches, communities, and associations. Like the personal relationships that must be navigated with family and friends, collective groups must also negotiate numerous interactions with other churches and parachurch organizations.

Each of the post-culture church sites described various kinds of backlashes from CWC churches:

> Do we get pushback? The denominations at times don't know what to do with this…What kind of metrics do you use for [our church]? Maybe our metric is the stories that we tell and how we know each other? Lucas (twenties, NC)
>
> [Our church] is not very popular at all. There have been Facebook posts with pastors calling us heretics from traditional churches. It's difficult. I'm a traditional guy and grown up around here and all of a sudden people react differently to me. It's a serious thing. Taylor (fifties, KY)
>
> When you challenge people's long held religious beliefs, they can really get upset. It's interesting how it works out. We've had a backlash from other churches when we invited certain speakers to our church. Jackson (thirties, KY)

Like inviting certain speakers, some of the actions of the church receive particularly harsh reactions from community members. For example, one of the churches took a group from their congregation to a local Islamic center to meet with the Imam with a goal of breaking down any possible stereotypes of Muslims that congregants might maintain. After the event, one of the church staff members posted some pictures of the event with a caption of “Our Muslim brothers and sisters” on the church’s social media page. This resulted in several threatening responses from other Christians of the area. Other instances include one church being picketed by the infamous Westboro Baptist Church once they announced that they were gay affirming. Moreover, the children of members of these churches are often the targets of bullying within the local school systems. Diana (forties, KY) recounts that her son has been the object of mocking at his school because he “doesn’t go to a real church” or that his pastor is a “heretic.” Another post-culture war Christian in Tennessee told me that other churches “gun for them” – a revealing metaphor. She claims that her daughter was also “bullied about her religion.”

Facing many challenging circumstances individually and collectively, post-culture war Christians are engaged within a discourse of differing, and often competing, Christianities and with the power structures instantiated in the Upper South. This competition reveals another layer of power dynamics at work within the religious marketplace beyond competition for bodies to fill the pews. Instead this competition indicates a regulated market for those claiming church, particularly in a Protestant mode. Church institutions and social connections attempt to coerce and compel individual choices, especially as it pertains to religious choices.

This is not to say that post-culture war churches are immune to the loss of members and participants. The institutional forms of post-culture war church experience episodes where portions of the membership leave the church altogether due to specific decisions (i.e. accepting women into leadership positions, gay-affirming, etc.). “With every broadening of the boundaries, you lose people. People that you love. That’s the down side,” conveys Martha (forties, TN). As a female in leadership of her church, she explains, “I’m a target on all sides. I’m a target because I’m a woman, outspoken and strong, a woman with position and platform. It’s complicated and empowering all at the same time.” Many of the interlocutors of this project might agree with Martha’s “complicated and empowering” description. Certainly the post-culture war churches in this region are supplying a space to develop a social network and a place to cultivate ecclesiological formations. Both of these serve to fill voids left from leaving CWC.

Furthermore, I contend that these communities also provide another value for post-culture war Christians. I ask Abigail (thirties, TN) why she continues to maintain the label Christian and participate in church as she transitions away from CWC. Her response is revealing:

> [Leaving Christianity], that’s the final frontier. You can still label yourself [as a Christian], but differ on beliefs. We can call ourselves Christians and disagree on whatever points of theology, but once you remove that label of Christian, then what? Then you’re just floating out in the ether. So letting go of that last little thread, that’s the thread that connects everything. And once you let go of that thread, then what? I’m still willing to call myself a Christian and that doesn’t bother me at all. It’s more a matter of whether that’s allowable to the rest of the world. I’ll just let [my Christianity] evolve into whatever it may be. That’s the nature of my Christianity.

Abigail indicates that a world outside of the Christian category results in floating untethered. She keeps asking, “then what?” For many who have been socialized into CWC, the idea of withdrawing completely from Christianity is unimaginable at this moment in their lives. “That’s the thread that connects everything,” astutely argues Abigail. Christianity is understood as the continuing means of social cohesion.

She also asks if her identification as Christian is allowable. Her response recognizes the structural dynamics of her context, which regulates who can and cannot identify with the Christian tradition. This problematizes aspects of the religious marketplace theory and possibly some quantitative surveys regarding religious identification in America. Scholars rarely take into consideration the permissibility of religious affiliations by specific persons in particular social circumstances.

Furthermore, Abigail's response recognizes the importance of maintaining a Christian designation. If her response is read through the social realities of Bible Belt panopticon, to disaffiliate completely with Christianity is to lose a strategic means of challenging the regulatory system. Within this region, the labels of Christian and church carry with them a social and political currency. To fully disaffiliate from *Christian* results in a diminished ability to further disidentify. As Muñoz clearly offers, "Disidentification is about recycling and rethinking encoded meaning. The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs that encoded message of a cultural text that both exposes the encoded message's universalizing and exclusionary machinations" (1999, 31). Thus the collective groups of post-culture war disidentifiers can both confront and cooperate with the panoptive system. This is strategically important because, "The political, cultural, and linguistic territory of movements such as the Religious Right must be occupied, colonized, and relandscaped from internal and contrary points of view" (Harding 2010, 36). An aberration that continues to claim the title Christian and collectively as church within the structures of the Bible Belt panopticon both conforms to particular norms while simultaneously disputing the norms. The result of these religious communities is collective disidentification attempting to dismantle or subvert the Bible Belt norms.

Structurally, in order to achieve any level of success in destabilizing the panoptive grid, Christianity is the *lingua franca* to engage in a continuing dialogue.

But by attending church, many of the interlocutors are navigating the expectations placed upon them by family and friends. Like Evelyn and Kasey, numerous persons recounted that attending the post-culture war Christian community placates external pressures placed upon them. One attendee explains that he aligns more with a Unitarian Universalist church but cannot attend because his ex-wife, a culture war Christian, forbids him taking their two children to the local Unitarian Universalist church. However, the ex-wife does permit him to take their children to the post-culture war church because, as he explains, “she doesn't know what we do here.” In this way, the post-culture war church provides a subversive means of practicing a non-conforming religiosity and mediating relational pressures. In addition, these stories reveal the constraints that can be placed upon individual decision-making regarding religious communities.

This emerging form of Christianity exists in relationship (i.e. marketplace competition) to other forms of Christianity to be sure. But, more significantly, this emerging form of Christianity exists in relationship to the regulatory devices of the Bible Belt. This is exceedingly important in understanding this movement. In order to achieve other levels of engagement with the Bible Belt panopticon, political engagements outside of the institutional church compliment the work being conducted inside of the church institutions. It is to the third pillar of politics that we turn our attention.

CHAPTER 5

STRATEGIC MICROPOLITICS

"Either religion will disappear due to the challenge [of globalization] or it will re-emerge as a force for renewal that offers resistance to globalization and provides alternative readings of reality." Richard Falk (1999, 140)

"I'm terrified of people who can look at things that are not okay and not stand up and say, 'That's not okay.'" Caleb (forties, Tennessee)

In a highly controlled context, which includes regulated relational boundaries and church forms, post-culture war Christians experiment with church structures that prioritize relationship building over religious identification. Exclusionary experiences are formative in compelling post-culture war Christians to expand social boundaries within their religious communities. In a corresponding mode, these Christians seek also to stretch the borders of political engagement. In this chapter, my goal is to describe and theorize the political involvements of post-culture war Christians in the Upper South. To tackle this objective, I utilize the concept of "micropolitics," which provides a lens to recognize the emerging political ethos of post-culture war Christians focusing on localized practices that engage with the broader social and political norms. Because of its panoptive strength, micropolitical strategies are adopted to build alliances with subgroups previously marginalized in CWC. This is the area where differences manifest across different sites of this study since each religious community is engaging with issues specific to its location. In conducting the micropolitical activities, confrontation and challenges to relational and political norms emerge. The resulting ongoing navigation and negotiation of political identity through grassroots efforts offer opportunities to reorient regional and national identities of Southern and American. In this chapter, I first introduce several ethnographic vignettes regarding micropolitical maneuvers to ally with those typically marginalized within the South. Afterward, I focus more explicitly on the implications of these practices for reconfiguring American and Southern identities. In each case, I offer snapshots of interlocutors who embody the ethos of those of this study. To be sure, there are variations regarding how national and regional identities are constituted by post-culture war Christians, but these illustrations supply a foundation from which to understand the current reorientations.

Micropolitics

Attempting to measure political participation or positions of various types of American Christianity is complicated. Many quantitative studies employ a technique of dividing respondents into categories of Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox, and Mormon and then go further with subcategories like white/black Protestant or white/Latino Catholic to present varieties of perspectives and positions within those who claim a Christian affiliation (Fowler, et al. 2010; Wald and Calhoun-Brown 2010). These studies comb through the gathered survey data and then attempt to find theological or cultural reasoning for held positions. As it pertains to conservative Protestants, these studies purport to find some level of homogeneity on particular political positions like abortion, gay marriage, or political party affiliation. However, recent data demonstrate that younger, conservative Protestants tend to hold different and often counter positions to older generations of conservative Protestants (Flory 2016).

Specifically analyzing political positions of Emerging Christianities, several studies indicate a shift to more liberal stances related to a number of social, theological and public issues (Reed 2014; Burge and Djupe 2014; Stuvland 2010). The findings of Burge and Djupe denote a clergy within these religious communities that is often much more liberal than the community itself (2014). Randy Reed describes the political shifts as “a radical political realignment” that builds upon “an abandonment of patriotism” (2014, 81).

Like other religious persons, post-culture war Christians employ a range of strategies at their disposal to assist in the articulation and work of critical engagement. Highlighted in the work of Gerardo Marti and Gladys Ganiel is a practice of deconstruction that incorporates “a form of micropolitics in which actors establish competitive arenas in response to pressures for conformity” (2014, 26). Focusing primarily on the ecclesiological activities of those within the “deconstructed church,” Marti and Ganiel add that deconstruction is related to the “personal religiosity of members…to push off religious pressures to comply with standard narratives” (2014, 26). The term *deconstruction* is utilized by some of the interlocutors of this project to describe the work being conducted within their religious community. Of those specifically using the term deconstruction, they posit that deconstruction is a technique to disassemble their religious heritage and begin the process of construction anew.

Marti and Ganiel’s work is helpful in understanding the focus of Emerging Christianities on cultivating relationships and constructing less constraining forms of religious life. Building from their work, the data of this research indicate that forms of micropolitics extend beyond the church institution into broader social and political arenas. “Micropolitics focuses on the ways in which power is relayed in everyday practices. It discloses the subterranean conflicts, competitions and minutiae of social relations," argues Louise Morley (2006, 543). Recognizing that institutions impose specific expectations upon individual constructions of the self, micropolitics "takes up a position somewhere between identification with an organization and opposition to it." (Goffman, as quoted in Marti and Ganiel, 27). In this way, micropolitics can be understood as an institution level version of disidentification. Individuals often discover that there are small spaces, Goffman calls these "the cracks" of life, wherein identities can be practiced and reoriented. Micropolitical practices then play an integral role in how one understands political and religious notions of self.

The interlocutors of this study were socialized into a form of Christianity that energetically embraces the idea of an actual ongoing war transpiring within the United States. This militarized notion of religiosity trains young people to participate in the culture war in everyday religious exercises but also through local, state, and national politics. Once interlocutors of this project shift out of the Christianity of their youth, they are perceived as either a deserter of the war, or worse, as an enemy combatant. This results in a severe form of disorientation for interlocutors as it pertains to political identification. Interlocutors within this research found political labels such as Republican and Democrat less than useful. When asked how they politically identified, many noted that they resist any of the popular party affiliations; instead, many turned the interviews to discussing how they actively live their politics.

In order to ameliorate the continued pressures of conformity and the disorientation, many of the interlocutors of this research pursue an intentional form of political action that is predicated on one-to-one relationships seeking to cultivate an intimate knowledge of people often cast as the Other. Because this research was conducted during the 2016 election period and in January 2017, which inaugurated a newly elected president, many of the interlocutors of this project, when asked about political engagements, note that they intentionally cultivate relationships with those vilified in the national election season. Take for instance Mitch (forties). When I ask Mitch about life in Tennessee as Inauguration Day 2017 approached, Mitch pauses and explains that he and his family were planning to have dinner with a close Palestinian family to “celebrate friendship.” And then he adds, “That's our small, tiny protest that no one has to see."

This aligns with micropolitical engagements that one sociologist defines as “the attempted construction of alternative or utopian social relations in the present, either in parallel with, or in the course of, adversarial social movement protest” (Yates 2015, 1). The need to stand in opposition to a dominant course of political rhetoric and practice that disparages immigrants, non-heterosexual persons, refugees, and people of color compels many of the interlocutors of this project to construct relationships with the intentional purpose of formulating alternative lived realities and understandings that simultaneously attempt to dismantle the panoptive mechanisms.

The objective to develop these relationships does not occur simply at the one-on-one level but is also part of the politically charged organizing activities of the collective religious community. In essence, another aspect of the emergent religious community is the space to cultivate relationships with those marginalized within their society in contradistinction to many who felt relationally constrained in their religiopolitical upbringings. These interlocutors find collaborative politics over and against a domination-style politics offer a better path of engagement. To compliment this perspective, the practice of building relationships with those oppressed and marginalized by the political and social norms of the conservative Christian South is essential. Here I offer four brief examples of micropolitical practices discovered in my fieldwork that are predicated on relationship building. Each provides further insights into the lived realities of post-culture war Christians within the Upper South particularly as they seek to journey through political life. It is my argument that the micropolitical activities of relationship building serve as a form of systemic criticism of injustices within the Upper South sustained through CWC and regulated by the Bible Belt panopticon. In this way, politics is an additional means of de-weaponizing their inherited faith system.

Practicing Micropoliitcs Example #1

Raised in Alabama, Gail (fifties) grew up Southern Baptist "like everyone else" in the South. Her life in the South included family members that she described as overtly racist. The overt racism included being forbidden to watch any television show primarily about African-American families (i.e. *The Jeffersons* or *Good Times*). In addition, Gail described her mom as a strong woman who was greatly constrained. As an example, Gail offered that her mom was never permitted to drive an automobile. Later in life, Gail relocated to Tennessee with her husband. Together they attended a Southern Baptist church; but after twenty years of attendance and service to the church, Gail and her husband became increasingly disillusioned with the church when the issue of homosexuality repeatedly served to ostracize church members in favor of accepting persons who identified as LGBTQ. This resulted in Gail and her husband leaving the church after one of the church pastors was fired for refusing to exclude homosexuals from church membership. Explaining their decision to leave the church, she states, “I knew too many people who were gay and who were incredible people. And they were shunned.” In this situation, Gail specifically notes the exclusionary practices of the church as the impetus for their discontinued participation. This decision was based upon knowledge accumulated from relationships, not necessarily theological understandings. Gail and her husband eventually found a community of post-culture war Christians who were gay-affirming in Tennessee and immediately began volunteering.

As Gail and I sat in a mall food court, she explains that she found herself severely distraught over the 2016 election results. In the subsequent days after the results were announced, she realized that she “needed to be the one to make the change.” In order to advance this change, Gail organized a day of microprotests at her church scheduled on Inauguration Day. Unlike others around the United States, who gathered to march in Washington D.C., Gail and a small group of ten to twenty people planned a day of doing “the tiniest drop of what we need to be doing.” Building from relationships already established with members of the religious community, this group volunteered at various locations around her community with those they feared would be most affected by the incoming administration’s decisions. This volunteerism included creating meals for newly relocated refugees, working at an AIDS resource center and reading books at a lower-income public school. In each of these activities, the participants fostered dialogue with those being served and continue to sustain these relationships.

The goals of that day were advanced in a flyer distributed at the church: “a day to bring us all together…black, white, American, immigrant, straight, gay, hungry, homeless…we must stand together now more than ever.” At the end of the volunteer day, Gail and her volunteers gathered to write letters to their governmental representatives. Significantly, before direct communication with representatives was initiated, political activity on a relational level was practiced. Forms of political activity are typically initiated after a foundation of relational networks informs the positions of post-culture war Christians.

Practicing Micropolitics Example 2

"We are about to walk into a regime that is not fundamentally aware or doesn't care about justice. It is fundamentally working against us." This is how Judith (thirties, Kentucky), a female minister, describes the emergence of a Trump administration. She continues citing her uncertainty and distress, "Under the best circumstances our work is hard. And under the future circumstances, I don't know." When I press Judith on what specifically concerns her about the incoming administration, she states, "It matters for us because Ben Carson was appointed to HUD [Housing and Urban Development]. We need someone who can fix the affordable housing issue. Our market is such that black people cannot afford to live in housing. Will [Ben Carson] cut the funding for that? Maybe so."

Judith's story was similar to many of the other people that I interviewed. She had volunteered with specific agencies and started to build relationships with those receiving assistance. Once she started listening to the narratives of those being assisted, she discovered that there was "lots of charity but little justice work occurring." Noticing gaps in how charity is administered within her context, she dedicated her life to "disrupting cycles of poverty and journeying with the marginalized and to educate our community." The goals of education and poverty amelioration are common among nonprofit organizations. What is less typical is the expressed interest in “journeying with the marginalized.” At the moment that the interview was conducted, Judith was working to build “microhomes” on the property of a local church. In order to accomplish this, she had secured funding from the local Jewish and Hindu communities to assist with this endeavor.

There is no expectation in her work that anyone who receives any assistance would convert to any particular religion. Judith makes this quite clear to me:

> My experience has not been a one-time awakening but a lifetime journey. And being part of a community that is intentional and loving and caring. And whose backbone is the life of Jesus…This has been my experience, but I don't want anyone to feel like it has to be their experience.

In this example, there is no agenda to proselytize Christianity. Instead the political work itself is the working out of religiosity. Judith explains that she understands no difference between religion and politics in this way.

Practicing Micropolitics Example 3

“At [my church] people are passionate about social justice and politics. These are linked,” details Lori (thirties, North Carolina). Her pastor explains, “We are a progressive, Christian community. We are activists. We are actively working for structural change in our society.” As a means of conducting this activism, both Lori and her pastor, as well as others from the religious community, participate in Moral Mondays, a group of religious and non-religious activists that includes the NAACP and other partnering organizations, as well as another organization seeking to mobilize religious groups and neighborhoods.

Lori describes her involvement in these organizations that includes "very prominent rabbis and imams" addressing such issues as gerrymandering, racial profiling, living wages, and reproductive rights. She explains that as a white Christian in the area, it is best that she not be put into leadership but ally herself with others. And Lori, as well as other members of her religious community, has been jailed for their protesting activities. She notes that her trajectory has deviated from the Moral Majority participation of her parents and her education as a homeschooled student.

These forms of political organizing are comparatively more sophisticated within this religious community than the others of this study. The grassroots organizing of the religious community in collaborative efforts with those in the local area focuses on the ways in which resources are distributed within the region. These resources include voting rights, income distribution and agential access. These forms of micropolitics still foreground the importance of relational development. These interactions correspond with Yate's study that discovered "micropolitics, community-building, mutual learning and coherence between values and actions to all be significant politically – that is, related to the process of creating social change (with micropolitics understood broadly as a tool for change on a micro-social level, particularly in the power relations between individuals and groups)" (Yates 2015, 12). Micropolitics creates a space for co-resistance against the unequal distribution of local resources.

Practicing Micropolitics Example 4

"There is something wrong with the [American] prison system," is how Steven (fifties, Tennessee) starts our conversation. Over two decades ago, Steven discovered the story of a young man who had been indicted on murder charges along with two other people. Although the young man was only a teenager at the time, he was charged as an adult and sentenced to two life sentences in prison. Compelled by this story, Steven started writing to this young man in prison and eventually started visiting him even though the prison was located two states away. The more that Steven visited the inmate he realized that there were several similar stories from other prisoners. Responding, Steven began to invite others to travel with him to visit other inmates and learn their stories. Now several people from his post-culture war Christian community devote time to visiting those imprisoned across the South, which Steven explains echoes the words of Jesus in Matthew 25: "I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." When asked why he is so compelled to visit the inmates, Steven offers, "We seek to minimize the gap between us and [the prisoners]."

Steven's focus on the relationship building underscores the micropolitical approach to addressing systemic injustices by those within post-culture war Christianity. Through these efforts, an understanding that the American justice system is corrupt manifests. Contemporary scholarship, likewise, suggests that the American incarceration system or the "Prison Industrial Complex" is a highly racialized and inequitable system (Alexander 2010; Lukemeyer and McCorkle 2006). Grounded on the relationships that have been built with prisoners, Steven and others from the post-culture war Christian community work with attorneys to reduce sentences and voice concerns to representatives hoping for clemency. Steven's efforts have inspired many within his religious community to work with local prisoners "to offer a message of hope." Like the previous examples of micropolitics listed here, the goal is not to convert, but to offer a humanistic message of worth.

Steven also demonstrates the ways in which people's religious trajectories change course. Although he grew up Mennonite, he has participated in several churches over his sixty plus years. From Church of Christ to nondenominational churches, he has spent his entire life attending and participating in congregational life. And for more than a decade now he has been a member of a post-culture war Christian "community that is on a journey." Steven explains that he maintains a "simple theology:" "There is a God. He loves me. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

In each of these examples, relational micropolitics are inextricably interwoven with political understandings and positions. In essence the notion of *community* is expanded beyond ritual participants or those committed specifically to the religiosities or spiritualties of the interlocutors. Like the art of crafting an ecclesiological community, intentional and relational contact with those likely to be affected by legislative regimes and policies must be cultivated. Political positions and activities are not predetermined by party allegiances, but rather by an assemblage of dynamic relationships, generative histories, and religious understandings. These small steps of nonconformity with the dominant narratives trouble and problematize the Bible Belt panopticon and hegemony. "Strong statements are made by mobilizing the support of diverse and heterogeneous agents," argue Stephan Fuchs and Steven Ward (1994, 486). Likewise, in the world inhabited by post-culture war Christians in the Upper South, these movements articulate a resistance to long maintained practices and positions.

Ultimately, the micropolitical activities serve to engage with the structures of the Bible Belt panopticon. The political activities of the various church sites typically align vis-à-vis national issues but also diverge to engage with particular social issues more prevalent in the different regions. For instance, although racism is overt throughout the Upper South, the church in North Carolina directly confronts this issue because of specific gerrymandering and racial profiling noted in the community. Likewise, at the time of this research, poverty is specifically confronted in Kentucky while refugee and LGBTQ issues are addressed in Tennessee.

Another key aspect to keep in mind is that these churches exist independently, without denominational structures, which heavily influences their strategy in working with the marginalized. In other words, a lack of institutional resources necessitates that they build forms of alliances outside of denominational structures. Post-culture war Christians are a minority within the Upper South; thus in order to numerically increase political power, they must align with other marginalized groups. To engage these issues requires fostering connections with those whom they affect the most and then actively voting, registering others to vote, and lobbying representatives. Consequently, working with religious communities of color informs post-culture war Christians of “an identity that increases in responsibility, not just privilege,” as one interlocutor notes.

Regional, national, and global identities are in constant negotiation for the individual and for the religious community. The ways in which post-culture war Christians operate politically serves to disidentify with other imposed political expectations of the panoptive structures. In the following two sections, I argue that the micropolitical religious practices are simultaneously reconfiguring what it means to be a

Southerner and an American. The political activities of post-culture war Christians are still taking shape and form. Thus what follows are two ways of understanding the complex entanglement of regional, national, and global identities, religiosity, and the cultural pressures of the Bible Belt panopticon. The current snapshot indicates an attempt to reorient the inherited forms of regional and national identities. It remains to be determined whether the identity of American or Southern will remain compelling for post-culture war Christians.

Southern Disidentification

Through building alliances with other marginalized subgroups within the Upper South, post-culture war Christians are challenging the dominant interpretations of what it means to be Southern. In this milieu, personal interactions are a primary form of resistance. Remaining within the category of Christian permits interlocutors to operate with a certain level of power. The interlocutors of this project appear committed to using that power to build a more equitable society, particularly concerning race, sexuality, and class.

Through participating in micropolitical activities, these groups attempt to de-weaponize political positions, social relationships, and the theological underpinnings of CWC. By concentrating on specific issues and retaining the label of Christian, post-culture war Christians establish an alternative to what it means to be Christian in the world of the Bible Belt. Each of the issues adopted by the post-culture war churches confront the pillars of the regulative panopticon. Take for example, marriage equality, which is a resolved issue for post-culture war Christians in favor of civil unions. Because members of the LGBTQ community are affirmed and offered the same civil rights as others as well as a place within the religious community, this counters the culture war ideal of the model, nuclear family. Committed, homosexual relationships are understood as commensurate with committed, heterosexual relationships. Likewise, women are welcomed and trained into church leadership, breaking down the patriarchal norms so long instantiated in the region. To be sure, women within leadership roles are primarily found in Mainline churches in the Upper South, but their acceptance as leaders in post-culture war churches voices a different kind of challenge to the social structures. Furthermore, post-culture war Christians wrestle with aspects of white privilege. Reflection on and recognition of individual advantages within power structures is an integrated practice within the communities and gatherings. This results in often-acknowledged privileges as post-culture war Christians approach race relations in their local communities. Many of the interlocutors are active with movements like Black Lives Matter and the Women's March.

Broader than religious identity, post-culture war Christians are also engaging with the designation of Southerner as well. As noted in Chapter 2, the conflation of heritage and religion instills a sacred quality to the historical symbols and particular events of the Civil War in the South. Confederate monuments are ubiquitous across the Southern landscape and planation life is often romanticized. Similarly, various identities – regional, national, and religious – are also blended to form an identity that typically gets cast as Southerner. To be a Southerner is often thought of as correlating with being a proud Christian, American, resident of the Bible Belt region, and something notably distinct from other regions. John (forties, Tennessee) tries to articulate how this operates:

“The rest of the country really doesn’t understand what it means to be a Southerner. Christianity is in my DNA. Part of being a Southerner is that Christian language, Christian culture, Christian symbols are your DNA. It’s your natural spirituality.” Some would even extend this further and say that mere residency is not enough. One must be able to track their heritage as a Southerner. Being able to trace one’s family roots to specific counties or communities is highly prized. Again, in describing himself as a proud Southerner, John uses his heritage as a proof of his identity: “Both sides of my family goes back generations in the South. My mother’s family are hill people from East Tennessee. And my father’s family are sharecroppers and cotton farmers from northern Mississippi. We’ve been here a long time.”

Raising three children of his own, John recognizes both the positives and negatives of being a Southerner. In this regard, he lists several aspects of living in the South that are favorable. He explains, “I like the fact that there’s a regional identity. There’s a sense of time and space here that I like for my kids.” Specifically, he proposes that specific urban locations within the South (i.e. Atlanta, Nashville, Birmingham) are economically viable: “I think the South is a place of real economic opportunity and growth. The South is a place with a lot of opportunity.” Complimenting the economic possibilities is the long held notion that there’s a southern hospitality within the Southern population. He claims, “I do like our sense of friendliness. The Southerner is actually raised better than everyone else. We’ve got a genuine friendliness.” A specific kind of rooted connection with the geography, economic possibilities, and Southern hospitality create a place that many Southerners, most of the interlocutors of this project included, hold dear.

As John continues to enumerate the complimentary attributes of living in the South, he articulates his thoughts on the complexities of racism. He argues that racism within the South is lived in a particular way that is often unrecognized by outsiders:

> It sounds ironic because on a macro level [Southern] instincts are wrong, but on a micro level, I find race in the South to be far superior to race in other places. I think I've watched culturally people who have macro level racist views have no racist practice on the micro level in the South. In the South, we mix it up more. On a micro level, we communicate with one another. We do all right with one another. That's part of that friendliness. What a lot of people don't understand is that race is a lot more complex.

In this way, John separates systemic and individual racism. As a Southern apologist his understanding that Southerners maintain a peculiar southern hospitality informs his understanding of how racism works in the South. Yet he also recognizes that systemically, Southern states operate through racist norms. He continues, "There's a complexity of being a proud Southerner and a progressive thinker. You don't have to necessarily discard one for the other." Others within this study would not concur with John's suggestion that race is as sanitized at the individual level, but most would agree that the racial aspects of living in the South are extremely complicated.

As proud as John is about his Southern heritage, its opportunities, and identity, he also offers a critique of the region. In this way, he embraces the both/and aspects of being a Southerner. Foremost, John admits that the hyper masculine culture of the South greatly effects how sexuality and gender are handled. When asked if any aspects of the South trouble him, John responds,

> Yes, cultural attitudes about human sexuality. Not only do we have all the machismo about if you're gay and male, but I think that you have a cultural Christianity that says there's something innately sinful about being gay. And now with the issue of transgenderism, the gross conservatism of the state legislatures in the South on issues of sexuality is a problem.

Likewise, he acknowledges that poverty also “is hard to take,” since, “Southern states won’t extend healthcare to its working poor.”

John blames these issues on two factors. First, he suggests that the Southern priority of investing in churches misdirects how funds should be spent: “The immense sums of money spent in the South on church buildings, properties, and missions combined with the extreme poverty that exist in the South is wrong.” And as we work through our conversation, he eventually explains that the Southern identity actually impedes any positive advancement in ameliorating the machismo and poverty that exists. He argues, “We still have an unhealthy level of regionalism. We still have the sense that someone from the outside is coming in and is going to disturb the way we do things. Implied in that is that the way that we do it is fine. Our default setting is someone is trying to meddle with us. We’ve got to get past that.”

John’s perspectives and attitudes demonstrate the ways in which post-culture war Christians challenge and embrace aspects of the Southern life. As he states churches retain a prominence within communities as preservers and perpetuators of the Southern heritage (Shoemaker 2014). Because this heritage is filtered through a culture war style of Christianity, the mechanisms of the church supply *the* means of disseminating not only a Christian message but also a message of what it means to be Southern. This is conducted through pulpit messages that disparage certain actions and through the bonding occurring within these communities. As I have argued elsewhere, “it is the religious institutions which facilitates the difficult work of preservation including identity constructions (including gender roles), rhetoric, food cultures, hermeneutical practices, political positions, and Southern culture" (Shoemaker 2014, 85). These churches work in unison to propagate the pillars of the panopticon. As the American South transforms demographically, religiously, and economically, other forms of identity are understood as competition. The loose unity of the numerous conservative Protestant churches in the region serve as a bulwark against these trends.

So for post-culture war Christians to align themselves and their communities with other religious communities (Christian and non-Christian) and political organizations is also working to broadly disidentify with the dominant notion of Southerner. Similar to John, many of the interlocutors of this project discuss the connection they still feel with the region and highlight their family heritage as Southerners. The religious and political engagements of post-culture war Christians directly expand the parameters of the regional identity by welcoming the marginalized as collaborators. In short, political disidentifying and the micropolitics of relationship building with those deemed as outsiders dismantle the identity of Southerner. But dismantling is not complete removal. Instead the interlocutors hope to reconfigure the Southern identity.

Another result of the religious shift of post-culture war Christians is a new discernment of specific symbols throughout the region. In her work regarding rural crosses in Canada, Hillary Kaell argues, "religion may become ambient – unnoticed yet present, condensing at particular moments around seen/unseen objects" (2016, 139). In other words, religious symbols can often become backgrounded because of their ubiquity. This seeming contradiction corresponds with how the numerous religious symbols operate within the Bible Belt region. The many physical representations of Christianity maintain a level of authority due to their invisibility. As Kaell posits, "the fact that [religious symbols] sometimes go unseen is precisely what makes them powerful objects" (140). She suggests that the specific location of certain symbols cultivates a pressure to conform to specific cultural norms, but, "when noticed, they may provoke a sudden emotional response" (142). Likewise, socialization into CWC relies heavily on the regional symbols. For many socialized into this form of Christianity, the multiple religious symbols imposing an identity of Southern-Christian-American are largely invisible. Significantly, once one begins to deconvert from CWC, the symbols are much more noticeable. As Brenda (thirties, Kentucky) told me, "There are churches everywhere. They're massive…and so white. I never noticed before." The attention to the various CWC symbols stirs, not only an emotional response, but also political responses as a means of subversively interacting with the regulative symbols.

The Southern identity is greatly compounded by the reorientation of Christian values and the integration of micropolitical activities. To be a Southerner typically includes a particular kind of assuredness, confidence, and pride. Many post-culture war Christians embrace aspects of this regional identity, while also being much less certain about the viability of an imagined white regionalism. The welcoming and convivial reputation long attributed to Southerners is often accepted and nurtured. Alternatively, the ethos of patriarchy and hypermasculinity is often rejected in favor of broadening the sexual and gender options and rights within the region. Race remains a contested aspect for post-culture war Christians. Many seek to defend the South against charges of racism by distinguishing between systemic and individual racism. Others within this study argue that racism permeates throughout the region at both the macro and micro level.

National Disidentification

Like regional identity, national identity is a space for post-culture war Christian reorientation. To be American in a Southern mode contains very specific connotations within the Bible Belt region of the Upper South. Due to the history of the Civil War, many Southerners still feel the need to prove their national commitments. These Southerners perceive no paradoxical tension between the attempted secession of the South with their current nationalistic fervor. This creates a world in which Confederate loyalties are understood to correspond with national allegiances. To be Southern is to be proudly American in a way that must be continually demonstrated. American flags proudly permeate the region and the United States military is disproportionately composed of Southern recruits (Bender, et al. 2014). For those nationalistically conditioned in this region through their church, to be American is intimately bound to being Southern, Christian, and white. Thus for post-culture war Christians, American identity is another aspect of their previous life that requires renegotiation. In this section of the chapter, I offer the thoughts and experiences of Blake and Belinda as illustrative of the tenor and dispositions of many post-culture war Christians in the Upper South in that national identity impedes their attempts at radical, global inclusivity of all humans. This does not mean that post-culture war Christians are necessarily un-American, but that they tend to think in transnational terms and against certain aspects of the Southern conception of national identity.

I first met Blake (thirties, Kentucky) and his wife, Belinda (thirties, Kentucky), during a previous research project. Blake had organized a church meeting in a local coffee shop, and I had received an invitation to come observe and participate. The shop was closed for business on Mondays, so Blake had arranged with the owners, friends of his, to utilize the space for a church meeting. That night the coffee shop, located in southern Kentucky, served as a make-shift religious space for approximately twenty-five people predominantly in the twenties age range and white. The facility contained no pulpit, alter, or religious iconography, but there were subtle attempts made to reclaim the ambiance for this specific event. This included music playing in the background as people slowly made their way into the venue, and candles strategically placed around the area.

That particular evening, a representative from the ONE Campaign had been invited to lead a discussion regarding global poverty. After the representative gave a brief explanation enumerating the goals of the campaign, she asked all attendees to consider signing a petition requesting the United States to increase its global budgetary allotments to assist in developing poverty stricken nations. Once completed, Blake, an ordained United Methodist minister, invited participants to reflect upon the talk through several available art mediums. Some participants chose the outside porch area to work with spray paint to develop a graffiti styled response, while others remained inside either composing poetry, journaling, or constructing written prayers. The meeting ended with a very brief charge, led again by Blake, requesting everyone to consider their role in ameliorating global poverty, while also discovering ways of being active in local issues as well. Participants lingered in the space for some time examining each other’s art, discussing the night’s theme, and making future plans. This would be the first of several meetings to follow.

The conversation regarding global poverty that autumn evening in 2008 had deeper motivations for Blake. For afterward, Blake confided in me of his future plans to relocate with his wife to Africa to assist in community development and AIDS alleviation. By 2012, Blake, Belinda, and their newborn child, had secured employment with a Catholic orphanage in southern Africa. The family, motivated by their religious devotion, sold the majority of their material possessions and relocated that summer. Blake and I have remained in contact over the years via email as he updates me on his continuing work in Africa.

To appreciate fully Blake's narrative, it is important to know that Blake was a committed culture war Christian most of his early life. He grew up attending a rural Methodist church and was active in his church's youth group where he met his wife. He continued his religious devotion in college by volunteering to lead a men's bible study group and majoring in religious studies. Subsequently, he obtained a master's degree from a seminary and afterward served on church staff at a local Methodist church. His position at this church was to facilitate service opportunities in the local community. When I met Blake in 2008 at the coffee shop, he had grown disillusioned with CWC, specifically the limited role offered to women and the church's stance on civil unions - thus the experimenting within the coffee shop.

While conducting research for this project, Blake and his family, which now includes the addition of a second child, had returned to the United States for an extended visit. Blake and I sat down at the same coffee shop, which has been converted to a local microbrewery, to discuss his international work for the last five years. Our conversation begins with discussing religion and religious beliefs. He claims, "There are still elements of Christianity that I very much value, but not much has changed in my life and values since becoming a non-theist.” Blake explains that he still identifies as a Christian even while holding his non-theistic position. As we discuss more about Christianity and religion broadly, he suggests, “Maybe these questions [about religion] don’t matter anymore.” He admits that his transition away from the Christianity of his youth is “painful,” and notes that he “generally doesn’t talk about [faith] because I don’t find it necessarily useful.”

Instead, Blake focuses his attention on his work in Africa and around the globe. He states, “We have traded religion for this idea of global citizenship. As opposed to looking to the Bible or church for answers, we have a multi-cultural world perspective to answer those questions.” He continues, “We were basically deemphasizing religion, even spirituality, while we were emphasizing community development and involvement. This is something that ‘salvation-only Christianity’ has missed.” Significantly, Blake stresses the value and importance of involvement with a broader world over and against what he perceives as a confined religiosity.

As we begin to conclude our conversation, I ask Blake if there is anything that he would like to add. At this moment, one of his children jumps into his lap. Blake looks at his child and says, “There’s value for us in being embedded in the community. For us, we wanted our children to have a much broader perspective than what [my wife and I] were given. When it came to issues of immigration, we wanted our kids to know what it means to be an outsider.” To add to this statement he spends time detailing his recent traveling experience with his wife and kids. He describes a moment in an international airport where his children “are literally playing with kids from all over the world,” and concludes by saying, “That’s the imagery. That’s what we are looking for.”

Like Blake, others within this project describe the importance and value of expanding their relational networks to include those who typically were excluded in the Christianity of their youth. For Blake, his religious progression motivated him in this direction toward community involvement while at the same time religion became less central on his trajectory. To be active in relief efforts and attempts to improve social conditions for others are prioritized. Although none of the other interlocutors of this project relocated their families across the globe, an intense focus on social justice and activism was apparent in an overwhelming majority of the interviews. To embrace diversity and pluralism is central in the ethos of post-culture war Christians. More than doctrines, creeds, or orthodox beliefs, intentional acts embracing the Other figure prominently in the religious communities of this study.

Like Blake, many of the interlocutors of this project dismiss the significance of theology. Caleb (forties, Tennessee) explains, “Its irrelevant at this point to think and talk about theological creeds like the virgin birth.” Although many continue to identify as Christian, such topics as God, biblical hermeneutics, or the afterlife are minimized. Instead, the interlocutors are more concerned with the events in the social world. As one form of religiosity, with the political and social forms that accompany it, collapses a new religio-political synthesis takes shape. In fact, as an attempt to mitigate the failed theological and political concepts of CWC, many post-culture war Christians engage in a form of politics that attempts to think beyond national identity. In other words, the identity of American denotes less importance than a broadly shared collective identity with all of humanity. This global awareness informs how post-culture war Christians take part in local citizenry.

A leading voice exploring the way that religion can impact nationalistic understandings and visa versa is Richard Falk. Falk proposes that current processes of globalization *require* religiosity or spirituality to integrate empathy, action, and relational aspects into the discourse and praxes related to imagining identity beyond the nation-state model (2002). Ethical input from religious persons is needed to counteract dominant economic prioritizations. Falk refers to this as a “globalization-from-below” that is dependent upon religious and spiritually minded “citizen pilgrims” who embrace their roles and responsibilities within the transnational civil society. For Falk, religious actors will ameliorate and mediate the current unjust realities across the globe because the “citizen pilgrim” model is built upon an “ethos of solidarity,” which includes (1) “the unity of all creation, and, with it, the sense of both wholeness of human experiences and the dignity of the individual” and (2) “a sign of religious inclusiveness and celebration of religious diversity” (2002, 29). Both of the required ethical components allow space for religious persons to maintain particularities while simultaneously embracing universalities. Falk’s proposed ethos also recognizes an inherent wholeness or a connectedness to “creation.” Pilgrim denotes the process of journeying in a dynamic state wherein national identity is considered inadequate in describing commitment to a shared humanity.

A key component of a Falkian citizen pilgrim requires a critical patriotism that acts transnationally. Critical patriotism requires one to be “both devoted to American political values *and* possess a critical understanding” of how these values actually operate within the nation and beyond (Parker 2010, 98).[17] The critical patriotism embraced by post-culture war Christians, exemplified in their micropolitics and political engagements, expands their sense and scope of political and moral obligations. Reed argues that "an abandonment of patriotism and allegiance to US values" are heralded in post-culture war Christian communities, but I think that Reed misreads the critical patriotism of post-culture war Christians as a lack of patriotism (2014, 81). To be sure, there are some examples in Reed's study that call for complete loyalties to their faith rather than to any state, but instead of disengagement with politics, my study reveals intense political engagement. Caleb (forties, Tennessee) probably best articulates the both/and of critical patriotism when he states, "The mixing of nationalism and religion is a frightening thing to me…The ways that I'm patriotic are in the ways that I have the right to say, 'I question all of my patriotism.' That sense of freedom and those rights, that's how I'm patriotic." In our conversation, Caleb repeatedly critiques the notion of borders as somehow determining enemies and allies. He cites the example of the Good Samaritan as an example of how life should be structured and how one "expands one's tribal instincts." He says, "All it took was one act of love to expand the border." The critical patriotism corresponds to Falk's notion of the citizen pilgrim's political identity:

> This distinctively religious understanding of essential political identity by reference to a spiritual journey that is unseen and unlikely to be completed within the span of a lifetime but the value of which is an object of intense faith and dedication that extends beyond prescribed and instinctive loyalties to nation and state (2002, 30).

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[17] Within the context of the United States there exists a rich history of critical patriotism. For more information, see Berns, Walter. *Making Patriots*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001.

Others within the study echo Falk in the ways in which the transnationalism influences their religious and political positions. Liam (sixties, North Carolina) explains:

> We are part of a major ethical period. We're realizing that oppositional identities in the presence of nuclear weapons and in the presence of global problems threaten our survival. It is a game changer. It is forcing us to question how we have group identities that enhance our survival rather than threaten human existence.

Adding to this, Liam goes one step further than nation-state or global identity when he argues, "We need a global identity not just of the human being. We need an identity that is porous in its relationship to biology, botany, geology, and the whole picture. We're having to see ourselves as part of the whole planetary ecosystem." Global awareness exudes a profound effect upon the highlighted political activities of post-culture war Christians.

Significantly, many of the interlocutors of this project who bring a transnational awareness to religo-political discussions formed their global perspectives through working in international Christian organizations and non-religious organizations. Numerous interlocutors describe impactful trips that were for the purpose of evangelizing. But more than mere evangelization, these international trips inform post-culture war Christians in other ways. "Everything that I was taught in my received faith is not actually playing out in real life to work the way that I was told that it would," claims Martha (thirties, Tennessee) when she describes her international travel with Christian organizations. This corresponds with Aaron Stuvland's conclusions that "this shift is emblematic of a more globalized social reality, a reality in which the church must operate and come to terms with…those outside of the nation-state or given culture" (2010, 226). The emphasis of CWC in promoting its ideology across the globe then can have the unintended result of actually creating a global mindset that ends up critiquing the ideology of CWC.

Falk's notion of citizen pilgrim also incorporates a sacred quality to the work of citizenship. Blake describes how he understands a universal story of humanity that undergirds his perspective of religion and politics:

> As I mentioned before, it is the "narrative trajectory of redemptive history" that captured me as I was wrestling with my own place in evangelicalism. It was a movement away from salvation of the individual and into an understanding of salvation as being more universal – the redemption and restoration of all things. Therefore, being "religious" was not about you getting right with God, but about joining God in making all things right. I may not believe in God anymore, but I still hang on to that imagery and motivation that the world is on an upward trajectory towards restoration and improvement of all things for all people. And, that it isn't about me getting my stuff right, but about being a part of the work to make things right for the broader world.

Residual from Blake's early American evangelical period is an insistence that global humanity is on a progressive course. The result is a progressive course understood as transcendent and fundamentally about individual and collective duties. Although Blake and Belinda are unique in their commitment to relocate their family internationally for a long-term mission deployment, they do represent a particular emerging ethos within post-culture war Christianity. Post-culture war Christians are adverse to the "America First" slogans that many culture war Christians support; instead, post-culture Christians adopt a position that all global populations should be considered within national and international decision making. Post-culture war Christians are still actively involved with politics, locally and nationally but place less emphasis on their American identity. This ethos is worked out locally with under-resourced and marginalized populations while global impacts are also considered.

Conclusion

Religion, in the case of post-culture war Christians, remains tied to political engagements and positions. Just as new religious commitments, both beliefs and communal practices, expand the boundaries of who is accepted into the religious space, political orientations shift in tandem. Political relationships serve to either reinforce or challenge religious ideas and customs. Nathan (thirties, Kentucky) told me, “I can have better conversations with people outside of Christianity than I can with people inside Christianity.” This chapter has demonstrated the numerous ways in which relationships intersect with politics. As we have repeatedly seen, post-culture war Christian associations with LGBTQ members or people of color impacts the religious conceptualizations. And new religious sentiments contribute to cultivating associations that had previously been discouraged if not prohibited.

The correlation between religion and politics also aligns deeper as it relates to the construction of identity. “Identity is an effect of discursive practices,” argues Judith Butler (2007, 24). In this case, the various aspects of post-culture war Christian identity form in relation to those engaged with micropolitics. Aligning oneself against structural racism and economic poverty engenders, in this case, relational associations that, in turn, inform the understandings of one’s self. Moreover post-culture war Christian identity is also in constant discursive navigation with individual’s socializations into CWC and the ongoing relationships with culture war Christians. Religious and political stances and selfhood are ever responsive to the context in which they exist. The religious community appears to be the primary place for post-culture war Christians to cultivate such unfinished and continually forming orientations. In sum, collective religious understandings and values continue to be the reference point from which all forms of identity are constructed. This is due to the fact that post-culture war Christians must de-weaponize their whole self. As previously conditioned instruments for the culture war, prior regional and political identities are fused with religiosity. The church space then retains a value in constructing versions of American and Southern identities that are committed to less violence.

In many ways, the micropolitical engagements can be described as stealth. Although many post-culture war Christians march in public demonstrations, on-the-ground relationships fostered with the Other operate outside of the spotlight. This is probably an attempt to protect both parties. Though it might be dangerous and risky for post-culture war Christians to build relationships with refugees, immigrants, people of color, etc., it is riskier for the latter to be demonstrating in public and constructing relationships with the former. For instance, a pastor reveals to me that he has members who are gay in his religious community, but they ask the church leadership "to not make a big deal about their sexuality since they still have to live in the community, which isn't safe or gay accepting."

The complex web of relationships and the ways in which those associations are navigated are based upon multiple layers of interactions – one-to-one, communal, and political – and are in constant negotiation along with the individual identity. The CWC panopticon remains a powerful force within the Upper South that constrains individual identity formation and any deviation thereof. Many people within the Upper South still choose to live within the parameters established by the ideology of CWC. But the current movement of post-Culture War Christians diverges from these parameters *and* labors to dismantle the structural forces. This assemblage of activity creates identities that are constantly in negotiation and navigation all while external forces attempt to impose normativity.[18]

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[18] Equally important, post-CWC provides one potentiality regarding the conceptualizing of global identity by religious persons. Whereas many within the globalization discourse marginalize or eliminate religion from positively contributing to the processes of globalization, post-CWC could conceivably furnish a way of conceptually producing new responsibilities through religious frameworks. This process depends more on values, which recognize a universal worth of humans and just economic practices, and less on doctrinal and belief systems. It is too early at the present time to speculate on the future of global citizenship, but, to be sure, current and future contributions of religious persons should not be overlooked or minimized.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS

"Every social system is a field of tension, full of ambivalence, of
co-operation and contrasting struggle." Max Gluckman (1963, 127)

"I've had to learn how to navigate my family relationships
as an 'outsider' now." Bo (thirties, North Carolina)

"My family members don't understand the journey that I've been on and why I'm where
I am right now. I can't explain four years to them." Charlotte (sixties, Tennessee)

This study elucidates a religious shift within the Bible Belt region of the Upper South. This religious shift emerges out of an ostensibly immutable form of Protestantism that has dominated the South, and deeply influenced national politics, for almost fifty years. Those shifting away from the dominant Protestantism share similarities with what is commonly referred to as the Emerging Church Movement and includes, as others have noted, innovative aspects of religiosity such as ecclesiological restructuring (Marti and Ganiel 2014; Lee and Sinitiere 2009). On the surface, these types of religious moves can appear as consumerist dissatisfaction or as a new generation seeking fresh modes of expression in music, aesthetics, and message. So understood, religion is simply one of many choices that unencumbered and rational agents make in the modern world. This study counters this interpretation; it unearths specific motivations, conflicts and dynamics inherent in the lived religion in this region that problematize the idea of individual rational agents operating in a religious marketplace.

It is impossible to understand this religious movement within the Upper South without taking into account the structural realities shaping individual and collective life. External pressures operate within multiple realms of life including family, peer networks and institutional churches. As the second chapter demonstrates, the contemporary, prevailing form of Protestantism in the Bible Belt is built upon the idea of an ongoing culture war within American society. This culture war Christianity constructs exclusivist parameters of insider/outsider dynamics that continue to racially segregate churches and local institutions, privilege heterosexual and patriarchal norms, and grant white Christians superiority. These cultural norms diffuse throughout the region to form a regulative force in maintaining a status quo, a Bible Belt panopticon. For many people within the region, the panoptive gaze and church socializations create intense pressures to comport with the norms of the Bible Belt region. Thus to transition away from culture war Christianity, what I have called post-culture war Christianity, is always in direct relation with structural forces seeking to constrain it. This study demonstrates that social bases have a significant influence upon those attempting to modify their subjective and collective religiosity.

During the course of collecting research for this project it increasingly became clear that there exists an inchoate religious shift that is shared by numerous people in the Upper South. The religious shift of post-culture war Christianity is fluid and in the process of formation. There is no singular conversion to a fully developed alternative; instead, post-culture war Christianity is incrementally developing, influenced by myriad factors. This developmental process is largely neglected when discussing religion, obscured by overly general categories. Importantly, as part of the incremental development, there exist undetermined final destinations related to the religious movement of post-culture war Christianity in the Upper South. The disidentifying nature of post-culture war Christianity forms possibilities for the future of this movement like remaining within the Protestant tradition, creating a new form of Christianity altogether, transitioning to a Unitarian-styled community, or shifting toward post-religion. This is an accepted reality of most of the project's interlocutors and forms ambiguous categories of identifying religiously and politically.

The lives detailed in this research paint a rich portrait of common experiences – socializations, religious commitments and values, and political understandings – that critically inform the individual and collective work of modifying faith, family, and politics. Those reorienting and re-landscaping their religiosity share a moment in which they are conducting serious subjective and intersubjective work. This work is constrained by social pressures, to be sure; however, emerging forms of subjectivity are rendered that retain aspects of the rich Southern history and religion while also reorienting the labels, histories, and contexts vital to Southerners. In fact, the shared experiences of interlocutors' pasts are central to the present in forming creative and free flowing spaces of intersubjective work within church institutions and beyond. The ambiguity and subjective work configures both a symbiotic and countering relationship with the culture of the Upper South. While a majority of interlocutors maintain Christian, Southern, and American identities, most push against the normative connotations carried with those labels in the Bible Belt region. In vital ways, these identities are disentangled – religious identity is being decoupled from the regional and national identities. In Chapters 4 and 5, the disentangling and reorientation of identities is illuminated through the process of disidentification.

What are more difficult to disassemble are interlocutor's relationships with friends and family members. As Chapter 3 highlights, the stressors on social networks due to religious shifts often situate family members in oppositional camps. The competition between these two forms of Christianity is an unrelieved clash. The culture war version of the faith seeks to maintain a social order with its racial, sexual, and gender norms that are increasingly challenged. Post-culture war Christians argue that greater inclusion develops a healthier kind of faith and society, and a future oriented approach is necessary. Both sides work toward the creation of a particular kind of society. The visions for that society, however, are drastically different. This interaction and dialogue is a civil war within the culture war. This civil war pits family members, religious communities, and political positions at odds. The battles are expressed often as a war for the soul of the faith, but extend into the public realm as a war for the soul of the nation. Hence arguments over Confederate monuments are also internal debates about a particular religious tradition. This war also expresses itself as a cold war in that tangential actors are brought into the internal battles. Like the Cold War era, the battles are fought in third party territories as we have seen in regard to political and social issues like poverty and racial equality. Particular allegiances and relationships are strategic maneuvers that speak to the struggle. Thus although post-culture war Christians might imagine that they are transitioning out of the culture war, the gravitational pull of the culture war continues to draw the religious communities back into the campaigns. For now, these two camps are mutually constitutive *and* dependent. Religion and politics remain central even as these topics are often neutralized for the sake of the relationships. But the lived religiosity of both camps, CWC and post-culture war Christianity, is discursively engaged through their continued religious rituals and practices making these actions all the more important to decipher. Because CWC & post-CWC remain conversant, this study reveals important aspects about each.

Culture War Christianity

Throughout this work, and specifically in Chapter 2, the forms of imagined community and invented traditions are explicated to reveal the intention of culture war Christians in retaining a status quo through socialization and dominance. The influence of the culture war church penetrates into various aspects of public life. The past is utilized to generate a present normativity for those dwelling in the region. Embracing these realities, culture war Christians work diligently to preserve cultural norms. In particular contexts where religion, race, politics, gender, and regionalisms are understood as converged into a singular identity (i.e. Southern or Christian), a peculiar authority permeates.

In this way, culture war Christianity shapes the private and public lives of those who are active participants within the culture war institutions, as well as those who are not because of a broader public presence and influence. The influential social extensions emphasize loyalty to the three pillars of the panoptive structure. Religion, in this case, is life undifferentiated, inseparable from politics and culture. There is an expectation that culture war Christians will recognize the supremacy of their race, cultural norms, and political stances. Within this study, conditioned culture war Christian youth will live all aspects of life in committed relation to the church for this institution is central in ensuring that particular cultural norms are maintained. The church institution is the ultimate preserver and perpetuator of cultural norms. The quality of one's Christianity situates one's degree of belonging within the church and family.

Attached to the culture war Christian ideology and preservationist tactics is an intense victimization complex that perceives all aspects of Southern life as threatened by the progressive advancement of society. Because many within this context are themselves weaponized as combative instruments for the culture war, what's at stake extends well beyond religiosity. Inherited cultural norms, regional and national identity, and familial acceptance are all at risk. To question any of these elements is to effectively denounce the entire system of the Bible Belt panopticon – heritage, culture, and identity. Deviation is dealt with through complete ostracization or a degree of rejection. Yet culture war Christianity sustains energy from the growing disaffection within its ranks. Progressive shifts from within confirm the current crises and volatile nature of religious life. If those socialized within culture war Christianity can be seduced away from the tradition then more intense efforts and new strategies are required. In essence, this religious shift out of culture war Christianity further fuels the culture war narrative.

Post-Culture War Christianity

There are those once socialized into culture war Christianity who are challenging the cultural norms so dominant in the area. In doing so, a new form of religiosity manifests that competes with the dominant form of CWC. This countering form of Christianity attempts to de-weaponize the religious tradition evidenced in Chapter 4. By continuing to practice specific rituals, like communion, these religious communities reorient the ritual to expand boundaries inscribed in CWC. This is a move beyond theology in direct conflict with the cultural norms and socialization. Continuing to perform specific rituals but with strategic deviation demonstrates a form of practiced disidentification. Reorienting subjective religious identity is a means of direct engagement with the dominant form of that religious identity. In this case, maintaining the label of Christian offers an opportunity to assimilate *and* confront the authoritative form of religion.

Religion, in this case study, gets worked out in both private and public spaces. Countering postures and positions constitute much of this work. Although the movement of transitioning out of culture war Christianity is relatively under organized, there are developing resources and shared counter strategies. Resources addressing faith crises of transitioning away from culture war Christianity include Kathy Escobar's *Faith Shift: Finding Your Way Forward When Everything You Believe Is Falling Apart* (2014), *Out of Sorts: Making Peace With An Evolving Faith* (2015) by Sarah Bessey, and Rachel Evan's *Faith Unraveled: How A Girl Who Knew All the Answers Learned To Ask Questions* (2014). These are just a few of the works that detail personal experiences out of a conservative, rigid Christianity into a more progressive form of faith. Likewise, other episodic resources are also addressing the internal struggle of faith and the dominant religiopolitical structures within the region. For instance, a tour called "Loosen the Bible" travels across the South offering support for those disaffiliating with CWC. This traveling group includes a disaffected culture war pastor and a lesbian comedian with the purpose of expanding civil liberties for LBGTQ members in the South. Or consider a strategic revival targeted at Lynchburg, Virginia, the location of Liberty University and Jerry Falwell, Jr. This revival series is a direct strategy to reach out to culture war Christians in order to prompt a rethinking of political stances vis-à-vis faith. These efforts demonstrate a nonviolent, direct action momentum being developed by post-culture war Christians in affecting culture change within the Upper South and its broader political reach. The aim is to re-landscape the contours of the South.

As a means of reorienting Christian life outside of the Upper South's norms, post-culture war Christians suspend numerous aspects of the Christian tradition. Because belief, confession, evangelism, and the Bible are weaponized aspects of the Christianity of their youth, other religious values and aspects are centralized. This includes building communities based upon radical inclusivity with experimental forms of church. The experiments are trials to create something sacred but less violent – a working on the self within a community. Religion, in this mode, inverts Grace Davie's (1990) argument that modern religious shifts include "believing without belonging." Post-culture war Christians focus on "belonging without believing," wherein a need for community eclipses doctrinal uniformity. In fact, diversity is the centralized value. Religious community is about taking the time to cultivate a reorientation of whom one is vis-à-vis who one has been trained to be.

The context, previous conditionings, and current attempts to reorient Christianity complicate the ways in which post-culture war Christians religiously identify. Throughout the data gathering process, a fatigue from having to religiously identify was pervasive. Forms of identification within the religious communities are rarely discussed. Older forms of identity, like denominations and subcategories, maintain relevance, for sure, but there is a trend to resist prior labels altogether and fashion something both connected and distinctive without categorical dependence.

Contributing Factors and Future Directions for Consideration

Thus far in the project, I have hesitated to explicate the various causal factors inducing the transition away from CWC. In Chapter 3, I discuss the ways that personal experiences serve as a tipping point for the intellectual doubts typically existent already for many within a culture war-styled Christianity. In reality, there are myriad factors contributing to individual development that impact religious transitions. This project's objectives did not directly include identifying causation, but the qualitative interviews shed light on this issue. The interlocutors highlighted several contributing factors. In this section, I explore these factors not only to paint a fuller picture of the journeys of this project's interlocutors but also to identify areas that warrant further research. Each of these factors works in connection with the others and should not be considered as singular causations.

In this project, a strong majority of interlocutors hold a degree from higher education, whether from a Christian or Secular institution. At least 80% of interlocutors obtained a bachelor's degree, and at least fifteen of the interlocutors hold or are working toward a master's degree.[19] Although the purpose of this study is not to argue direct causal relationships between education and religiosity, many interlocutors referenced their college and/or university experience when discussing the significant aspects of their religious shifts. Post-culture war Christians greatly respect intellectual attainment. This could be due to the fact that many post-culture war Christians now understand their upbringings as educationally stultifying. During interviews, many interlocutors referenced specific resources that were prohibited like non-Christian materials and scholarly works that challenged certain Christian premises. Responsive to this perceived suppression, many make use of the opportunity to explore numerous religious and scholarly texts in their current life.

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[19] In the data degree of education was not initially part of demographic information collected. However, several interlocutors made reference to their college/university life at some point during the interview process. The 80% represents the number of confirmed interlocutors with degrees. This number is probably higher and only two respondents indicated no higher education at all during the interviews.

Many culture war Christians fear that secular universities maintain an agenda to purposefully persuade young Christian adults to denounce their faith. These fears lead many culture war Christian to attend private, religious schools throughout their education. Conservative Christian popular culture, like the film *God's Not Dead*, directly position the university professor as an enemy within the culture war with the intention of disproving and ridiculing religious beliefs. In this way, it is presupposed that intellectual reasoning through, what are perceived to be, skewed truth claims will lure culture war Christians away from their religious foundations. But the interlocutors of this research, who did attend secular universities, place more emphasis on learning with a diverse cohort of peers than upon knowledge dissemination for their changing religious views. For example, many from rural Kentucky noted that their contact with people of various faith traditions outside of Christianity, various forms of Christianity, and non-religious persons had more influence on their development while they studied at a university. The intermixing of people with various backgrounds discussing ideas related to religion and politics proved to be extremely influential in their worldviews. Corresponding with Phillip Schwadel's (2011) study, higher education impacted more the exclusivist elements of those socialized within culture war Christianity, but altered less their specific notions of God or an afterlife. Further research is needed to specify the experiences within secular university life that influence religiosity, particularly of those who are acculturated into an exclusivist form of conservative Christianity.

Christian colleges and universities within this region specifically aim to continue religious training and discipline, thereby validating the held beliefs, values, and practices of culture war Christians. But the data of this research show that in some instances, Christian schooling can have unanticipated effects of altering religious beliefs, values, and practices. Many of the interlocutors describe experiences in which disseminated information at Christian colleges was incongruent with their positions on theology and politics. Some note that the institution, typically associated with a particular Christian denomination, held such extreme views that the entire experience made them question their faith practices. Others describe instances wherein Christian professors challenged many of the precepts they maintained when entering into the school. These moments of critical reflection led to further inquiries into the tradition. Both secular and Christian educational institutions prompted a reforming of religious orientations but not a complete disaffiliation. Future studies are needed to discover how religious education leads to religious modifications and how these alterations occur.

Like Christian education, other forms of socialization intend to affirm the cultural norms and values of CWC but can also work to generate doubts about the faith system. One such area is short-term mission activity. Current research proposes that short-term mission experiences result in stronger commitments but also notes considerable variances in these experiences (Trinitapoli and Vaisey 2009; Priest, et al. 2006). Mission activity occurs both within the United States and beyond its borders. Some interlocutors of this project referenced specific mission episodes where their culture war Christianity and actual experience failed to align. Experiences with abject poverty and international relief type efforts challenge the worldviews espoused by CWC. This tends to dismantle some aspects of the culture war plausibility. Supplementary analyses are needed to uncover which aspects of the mission experience affirm the culture war ideology and, in an opposite direction, what parts of mission activity conflict with those socializations.

Closely related, what other kinds of external pressures influence and inform the ways that people religiously identify within the United States? Recent work demonstrates that identifying as Religious None carries with it constant pressure to conform to traditional forms of religion (Manning 2015). A small portion of my consultants admitted to disaffiliating with Christianity altogether but was not able to admit this to their parents and grandparents. How are other forms of religious identity complicated by social expectations? What are the limits of revealing one's values and beliefs as it pertains to religiosity? What other strategies permit religiously divergent family members to maintain interactions? The layers and degrees of external forces and factors that enable and constrain personal religious formation and identification must be varied depending on particular circumstances. By explicating the circumstances, a clearer portrait of how and why religion maintains a high level of prominence in the United States would be discovered.

An important people's history of the religious right or the culture wars would offer substantial insights into the daily lives of conservative Protestants. Much of the literature investigating the culture war focuses at the highest levels of leadership. These studies are obviously valuable since these efforts have gained so much national attention and governmental influence. Just as valuable though are the perspectives and lived practices of culture war Christians, especially as it pertains to home life, religious community, and political activities. A comparative analysis of family members previously or currently involved with the culture wars would offer both perspectives of this internal struggle for the Christian faith. This study relied solely on the perspectives of those who transitioned away from CWC. In what ways would culture war Christians understand the religious shifts of their sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, and friends? How would those perspectives conflict and parallel the interlocutors of this and similar projects?

Conclusion

The religious landscape of the Upper South is slowly changing. Alongside the various Christian communities, immigrant and refugee temples, mosques, and religious centers now populate the urban areas. There are some tensions resulting from these new religious communities, but overall, the Bible Belt is beginning to welcome these groups. Religious diversity is simply one indication of a changing South. For some the altering of the landscape compels them to work toward preserving specific codes, values, and heritage. The anxiety produced by social transformation can be frightening. Religion in this region has served as a resistance mechanism for generations, particularly as a strategy to counter forces seeking to overturn a racialized, social order. Yet for others, the modification within the terrain of the Upper South signals a need to alter the religious values, beliefs, and practices. Instead of resisting change, they embrace change. In this way, religion can be quite malleable. Change fails to result in religion's demise; rather, change illustrates religion's resourcefulness.

After conducting qualitative interviews, it is obvious to this researcher that the culture war must be taken seriously on its terms. Although some might reject the argument that the culture war constitutes an actual war, for numerous people across the United States, the culture war is real and frightening. Physical and mental preparations of training and disciplining condition youth and adults. Feelings of marginalization coupled with anticipation for a complete overhaul of the American system propel fear and hope. This results in a specific kind of lived trauma for those conditioned for the culture war, something akin to PTSD. Church, in this way, reorients its purposes and serves as a kind of support group for those disaffected.

Taken as a whole, this study demonstrates that individual religious shifts are compounded by various external factors that attempt to sway individual religious and political orientations. These factors highlight the ways that regional culture is deployed upon the individual in transmitting normativity. Religion is an orientation or way of life that is inescapably tied to issues of conformity and nonconformity. Within shifts in religion, there are numerous points along the religious trajectory that must be illuminated as a means of understanding how religious commitments are negotiated in the modern world. This ethnography details the struggles, battles, points of departure, navigations, successes, trials, and disruptions in negotiating religious identification, commitments, relationships, and values, providing a snapshot into the ever-changing dynamics of lived religion.

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