

# Televangelism

## REDRESSIVE RITUAL WITHIN A LARGER SOCIAL DRAMA

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... The holy war waged by televangelism's viewers against contemporary American society is obvious, as is their battle to gain greater political power and influence within the wider society as religious conservatives. Viewers are also engaged in a battle that is less obvious: gaining greater recognition and inclusion within mainstream American society. Televangelism's viewers are a "marginalized" social group (Bruce, 1990; Wuthnow, 1989). Their commitment to their narrowly conservative religious belief and

morality and their narrowly conservative position on social and political issues lead mainstream society to push televangelism viewers to its margins. The social mainstream is highly secularized, pluralistic in makeup, and committed to a democratic way of life in the broadest sense.

The American mainstream is itself religious (as shown by the recent study made by the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, 1991). Religion has long played a role in shaping American society, and Americans continue to look

to religion to help shape public values. But mainstream society does not permit any single religion to be the sole supervisor, legitimizer, or arbiter of public values and public life (Bruce, 1988). Although American society and the Christian and Jewish religions are intermeshed, they are not synonymous.

Mainstream society considers the judgmental and exclusive religion of televangelism's conservative Christian viewers incompatible with the democratic way of life. Although viewers embrace democracy—freedom of religious expression makes airing the religious telecasts possible—they are not as tolerant of other views and would restrict the freedom of those not practicing conservative Christian morality. Mainstream society considers as outright hostile the political agenda of the Religious Right for which televangelism is a platform. Conservative Christian politics is viewed as an attempt to impose a narrow religious morality on others by redirecting legislation and court decisions. The American mainstream actively opposes these efforts, from denunciations by the news media, to punitive court decisions, restrictive legislation, challenges at the party precinct level, and the like.

To be sure, televangelism's conservative Christian viewers participate in secular society. They vote, engage in the entertainments, and so forth (Bruce, 1988, 1990; Hunter, 1983, 1987). But viewers are only partly secularized (Bruce, 1990). Their theological beliefs and morality have not changed significantly from the religion of viewers of televangelism in its infancy in the decade of the 1950s (Gerbner et al., 1984). Viewers believe the Bible is literally true, because, it is believed, it has been revealed by God himself. They hold fast to biblical morality, and they subscribe to the millenarian and antiseccular view of scripture. These defining features of viewers'

religion—most are fundamentalists and Pentecostals (Gerbner et al., 1984)—distinguish them from members of mainstream society. Although the social mainstream is religious in the main, their religion has long accommodated the secular worldview and lifestyle. The beliefs of televangelism's viewers lead them to oppose secular society.

Televangelism viewers believe secular society is allied with Satan in an effort to defeat God and God's purposes for the world. The militancy of viewers in promoting biblical morality is motivated by the view that the moral regeneration of the secular world is critical to the defeat of Satan and to God's redemption of creation. Viewers believe that they are God's agents in the world and that their efforts are vital to the defeat of Satan. Their militancy is also motivated by the belief that the cosmic battle between God and Satan for eternal dominion over the Earth is coming to a head, for Satan has stepped up his battle against God in these last days. Viewers believe they will have a share in God's perpetual rule as a reward for remaining faithful to God and to God's purposes.

Conservative Christian belief is not monolithic. There are significant theological and ecclesiastical differences among the viewers of the various programs. Fundamentalists, for example, reject speaking in tongues, the hallmark of Pentecostalism, and the belief that the spiritual gifts are necessary for full salvation. Pentecostals criticize fundamentalists' emphasis on church order. Most viewers, however, share a "fundamentalistic" belief (Gerbner et al., 1984).

The relatively small number of viewers of televangelism accentuates their marginal status in American society. Only around 13.3 million people—5% of the American population—regularly watch some form of religious television, includ-

ing conservative programming. Of these, only 55% report having had a "born-again" experience, the chief indicator of fundamentalistic Christianity. And those who watch religious telecasts are by and large already committed to their religion and are already churched (Gerbner et al., 1984). The small population of viewers is underscored by the relatively small number of conservative Christians. They make up only 16% of the American population (McKinney & Roof, 1987). The number of conservative Christians who watch televangelism is even smaller. The size of the Religious Right is also relatively small, as underscored by the failure of this group to effect the hoped-for sweeping political changes at the national level during the 1980s. Other indicators of the relatively small size of this group are the defeat suffered by Pat Robertson in his bid for the Republican party's presidential nomination and Jerry Falwell's closing down the Moral Majority due to inadequate financial support (Bruce, 1988, 1990). The small number of viewers also calls attention to the marginal religious beliefs and morality of viewers.

Under threat and under fire by mainstream American society, viewers discover in the ritual base and features of televangelism opportunities to legitimate or establish in their own eyes and credibility and significance of their religion and morality as well as of their religious group. Self-legitimation is critical to the efforts of televangelism's viewers and promoters to mobilize politically and to promote their social agenda. At the same time, mobilization serves their interest in defending their religion and religious group, as well as their effort to promote themselves as a significant social group and to push for greater inclusion within mainstream society.

Viewers also discover in televangelism's ritual base and features means of adapting

or accommodating themselves to the secularized outlook and lifestyle of the very society whose secularity and pluralistic makeup are opposed by their religion. Televangelism helps viewers learn more about social and political issues within the wider secular society. It gives them an opportunity to experiment with some of the sensibilities of secular society and with the secular lifestyle. Becoming more like those "out there" in the secular world makes viewers less suspect. Incentive for adapting grows out of the recognition that the social mainstream promises greater inclusion to those who become more secularized, who embrace a way of life that is in keeping with the broader democratic and pluralistic outlook of the social mainstream. Viewers are not just flirting with the secular lifestyle because they find it enticing. Experimentation with secular sensibilities is an adaptive strategy, undertaken to win the acceptance of mainstream society.

Self-legitimation of viewers' religion and adaptation or accommodation to some of the demands of secular society are contradictory ritual roles. The contradiction expresses the cross-pressures of competing religious and social interests pulling viewers in opposite directions. The conflict over televangelism's role as ritual also gives expression to viewers' ambivalence toward secular society—it challenges their religious beliefs—and toward their religion—it prevents them from gaining the acceptance of the social mainstream.

### **Viewers' Ritual Participation in the Telecasts**

Televangelism's effectiveness as ritual in legitimating and adapting viewers is enhanced by viewers' active participation in

the television performances. (I am modifying the conventional understanding of ritual as face-to-face interaction to include home viewers as participants in the telecast performances.)

Viewers put themselves in a position to engage in the telecast performances by first ritualizing their viewing. They watch with regularity, and they also establish ritual routines that prepare them to participate actively in the telecasts. Of the viewers who watch Robertson, Falwell, and Swaggart, and who watched the Bakkers, 43% pray before they turn on the programs, and 77% pray after they turn off the program. Before they turn on the program, 40% read the Bible; and 29% do so after they turn off the program. (Of these, 23% purchased the Bible they use from the TV ministry airing the program they watch. In fact, 63% purchase study materials or mementos from the television ministry.)

Viewers' ritualized preparation serves as a runway leading up to participating in the activities undertaken in the telecasts. Of the viewers who took part in my survey, 82% indicated that they participate in the worship format of the program (51% do so frequently); 82% pray along with the telecast; and 37% read the Bible along with the program.

Ritually engaging in the telecasts enables viewers to tap the transformative power of ritual and to participate fully in the reconstructions of the everyday world and of viewers' identity and status in it that are brought about by the telecast performances. These transformations are made possible as the telecast performances help viewers make a transition away from the everyday world to an alternative context within which the secular world is reconstructed along the lines of viewers' millenarian vision, or within which view-

ers experiment with mainstream views and styles of life.

The transition is begun as viewers ritually prepare to participate in the programs and is continued by the openings of the programs. The telecasts begin with a routine greeting extended by hosts or by an announcer. These are accompanied by the theme music for the various programs or by congregational singing. In the case of Falwell's *The Old-Time Gospel Hour*, the greeting segues into a worship service in progress. Logos identified with the various programs and other visual symbols also help viewers make a transition to the telecast performances. Frequent mention of the religious or moral theme for a particular program also helps viewers shift their attention away from the secular, everyday world and toward the world as reconstructed by the telecasts.

In addition to the religious interests viewers bring with them to the telecasts—they share the beliefs and morality expressed by the various programs and are therefore involved along with the telecasts in the production of religious meaning—they also bring their interest in redressing their marginalized social status, although they are not fully aware that they do so. Viewers consciously identify themselves as citizens of heaven first. But as creatures of flesh and blood, they also bring to their viewing their social needs and interests. Viewers find in the special, divine status generated by the telecasts in their role as ritual self-legitimation—that of a people who are special in the eyes of God—the added status of being a significant social group because they are significant to God. And viewers create for themselves the identity of citizens who are at home in the wider world and accepted by it as they experiment with a more secularized identity and lifestyle.

### Ritual Legitimation

Televangelism provides an important venue within which to communicate the message of conservative Christianity and to present an intellectual argument that reinforces it. Televangelism makes the case that the conservative Christian religion, its morality, and its view of the world are true because they are based on God's own truths, which are found in the Bible viewers live by. Thus conservative Christianity is made congruent with a cosmic or divine order. Televangelism provides another important reinforcement. As ritual performance, it evokes certain emotional experiences that provide immediate, firsthand, experiential evidence of the authority of conservative Christianity's accounting of the world as well as the conservative Christian lifestyle as an effective means of negotiating a threatening world. (Geertz, 1973, pp. 87-125).

Televangelism has played an obvious role in *communicating* the millenarian message of conservative Christianity. Not as obvious is televangelism's role in *legitimizing* the message. In the millenarian religion that lies at the heart of the telecasts, viewers find support for their efforts toward self-validation. But it is the legitimation of viewers' beliefs by emotional experiences that ring true to their religious view of the world that makes their religion more convincing and compelling. The telecasts arouse anxiety and even fear as they dramatize Satan's presence in the world, especially in the "persecution" of, or opposition to, conservative Christians by the secular courts, legislative bodies, press, or civil liberties groups. The emotions reinforce the view that secular society is on the side of Satan, that persecution is masterminded by Satan himself as part of his effort the defeat God's purposes in the world by defeating God's people. Anxiety and fear also drive home

the point that conservative Christians must not let down their guard, but must step up their moral battle against secular society during these last days.

These attacks on secular society were illustrated in a video clip aired on a program of Robertson's *700 Club*, which showed Atlanta police dragging to waiting police vans members of "Operation Rescue" who had blocked the entrance to an abortion clinic. It showed the "pro-life" demonstrators later incarcerated behind a high, chain-link fence. The clip was shown in conjunction with a report on the pro-abortion plank adopted by the 1988 Democratic National Convention, then meeting in Atlanta. The effect was to underscore the threat to pro-family, biblical morality and its conservative Christian supporters now represented by one of the nation's political parties.

Relief and exultation are aroused as the telecasts dramatize God's promise to protect and deliver the faithful, and as they dramatize the inevitable and imminent defeat of Satan and punishment of his secular allies, as well as the vindication of conservative Christians when God includes them in his rule over a transformed world. Exultation is also elicited by the reminder that conservative Christians stand in the long line of the nation's "Christian founders" and that they will be blessed by holding the nation to its "Christian heritage" and divinely appointed role as the vehicle through which God will accomplish his purposes in the world. The spiritual high often takes on a triumphalist, self-congratulatory tone. These emotions make God's presence equally real, reinforcing the belief that "God is who he says he is," and that God will protect and bless conservative Christians in return for their faithfulness and commitment to do moral battle against Satan and the secular world.

In the process of legitimating religious belief, the conservative religious lifestyle

and morality are also authenticated. The telecast performances portray the conservative Christian lifestyle as intellectually defensible because it is in accord with the way their religious beliefs say the world is put together. The conservative lifestyle is presented as a reasonable strategy for negotiating the world as described by the religious worldview. The worldview is in turn reinforced when the world is shown to be arranged in such a way as to accommodate a particular style of life. Worldview and lifestyle are made to go hand in hand (Geertz, 1973).

Once worldview and lifestyle are legitimated or authenticated as ideal models of the world, they become models for viewing and living in the world. The ritual performances thus help viewers shape the everyday world, bringing it in line with their religious vision for it as viewers put into action conservative Christian religion and morality, whose credibility and authority have been reinforced (Geertz, 1973). Although the religious message of the television programs plays an important role in televangelism's power to move viewers, the ritual experiences created by the telecasts enhance the power of the religious message. The renewed experience of their religion as a powerful vision or explanation of the world and an effective strategy for living in it is critical to the mobilization of conservative Christians to do battle with the secular world on the political front, and thereby to enhance their power and standing in American society.

### Ritual Adaptation

Televangelism's ritual nature also gives it the capacity to broaden viewers' horizons. . . . The programs introduce a range of perspectives on Christian doctrine, represented by hosts and guests, often pre-

sented on the same program. The programs move viewers toward a religion that is more open to the universe of the Christian religion, more aware and accepting of the diversity of religious belief and doctrine within Christianity, and more aware of the parochial character of traditional doctrine and its limited view of the world. . . .

As ritual, televangelism offers viewers a nonthreatening context within which to open themselves to the wider world and to explore ways of looking at the world and of living in it that are more in keeping with the secularized views and lifestyle of a changing American society. As ritual, televangelism provides viewers an opportunity to relax their grip on their conservative religion. Even as viewers turn to televangelism to legitimate their conservative religion, they discover in its liminal features the opportunity to let go with the other hand and to experiment—if tentatively—with certain features of the secularized view and style of life. Televangelism has introduced viewers to, or has made them more familiar with, secular politics and has encouraged them to become more politically involved. It has introduced them to views on social and political issues that compete with their own. Televangelism has also introduced viewers to, or it has made them more familiar with, attitudes, dress, language, music, and other sensibilities of the secular world that fundamentalism and Pentecostalism have traditionally opposed.

Televangelism routinely reports on and discusses news events and social issues within the wider world. Although analysis is offered from the conservative Christian perspective, the commentary and news segments nonetheless expose viewers to the wider world, or further acquaint viewers who are more aware with the secular world. . . .

Additional exposure to the wider world comes with reports and discussions of chal-

lenges from the secular world to conservative Christian belief and lifestyle. There is discussion of challenges to marriage, rearing children who face the pressure to experiment with drugs and alcohol, and so forth. Robertson's program takes the lead, offering more straightforward opportunities to learn about the wider world through discussions on how to invest or how to run a business.

Through music and visuals, these television programs also expose viewers to some of the aesthetic sensibilities of the secular world—especially programs such as the *700 Club* and the Bakkers' *PTL Club* that have mimicked commercial television. These sensibilities loosen up the staid attitudes of more conservative viewers. The programs also adjust the attitudes of more conservative viewers toward entertainment, enjoyment, leisure, pleasure, and creature comfort. And the telecasts introduce more conservative viewers to the dress, hairstyles, makeup, current lingo, and attitudes of the secular world. These are introduced by hosts and guests, many of whom are personalities in the entertainment world, sports heroes, and successful business entrepreneurs (as well as the occasional politician) or Christian authors, musicians, and entertainers. Seeing hosts and guests display these secular sensibilities gives viewers the impression that they can do the same and encourages them to emulate the television personalities. The new identity of citizen of the wider world stands in tension with that of conservative Christian, however.

### Conclusion

Televangelism is also attractive to viewers because it has the potential as ritual to create among themselves the community

they seek but do not find in their relations with mainstream American society.

Turner (1974) argues that ritual's essential role is to create a more communitarian society. He observes that the relaxation of normative social roles and statuses and obligation to them in ritual liminality allows participants to encounter one another in more direct and egalitarian ways. Ritual permits and creates the experience of *communitas*, or human community. Ritual liminality invites participants to experiment with communitarian relations as alternatives to their everyday exchanges, which are principally mediated by the narrow roles and statuses they currently hold within society. The experience of community invites participants to create alternative, communitarian arrangements, or to infuse the traditional roles about to be assigned with communitarian purpose. Ritual's fundamental role is to put social structure into the service of community.

Turner argues that although social structure is necessary to organize society in the interest of more effectively meeting its material needs, it also works against human community. By nature, social structure is divisive, alienating, and exploitative; and thus it cannot meet the need for community, an equal social need. Turner's theory of ritual "anti-structure" goes against the view best articulated by Clifford Geertz, that ritual's essential role is to legitimate the existing social order. Instead, Turner (1993) argues that when ritual serves the existing order, its anti-structural core has been "circumscribed, . . . pressed into the service of" the status quo (p.85). . . .

The efforts of televangelism's viewers to create community among themselves are undercut, however, by the television medium itself, which does not permit direct interaction among them. Here com-



munity is not direct or immediate and spontaneous, as in the case of the usual, face-to-face forms of ritual that embody community.

The authoritarian, center-outward structure and interests of the television ministers and ministries and the manipulation of audiences to meet these interests (which promote political and economic interests) also limit the possibilities of community. . . .

The emphasis in televangelism's role as ritual has shifted away from legitimation and adaptation toward encouraging community among viewers. Although televangelism continues to serve as legitimation and adaptation, the programs have increasingly focused on the need to build a nurturing community among viewers following the defeat and humiliation, even ridicule, suffered by televangelism: the defeat of Robertson's presidential candidacy and Falwell's Moral Majority, the exposure of Bakker and Swaggart for sexual indiscretion, and the exposure of Bakker's questionable business practices. Robertson returned from the campaign trail, and Falwell from leading his political lobby, to pastoring, counseling, and guiding their faithful followers, which each announced to be his new priority. Swaggart and Bakker received forgiveness from their flocks (or for Bakker, from a small remnant of the faithful). They were then rehabilitated and set about to restore harmony and support among followers.

Ritual legitimation and ritual adaptation are both strategies for gaining a more significant place and role within mainstream society—the first by force, and the other by accommodation, in an attempt to win the approval of mainstream society along with greater inclusion within it. Legitimation and adaptation are thus flip sides of the same coin.

Televangelism's roles as legitimation and adaptation are at cross-purposes, however. The contradiction cross-wires televangelism, crippling the conservative Christians' efforts to gain greater inclusion in mainstream American society as religious conservatives. In its role as adaptation, televangelism is a secularizing force on conservative Christianity. Ritual adaptation undercuts viewers' effort to legitimate their conservative religion as well as their effort to mobilize themselves as conservative Christians and push for their religious interests. The ongoing effort to legitimate viewers' conservative religion is a countervailing force that works against full accommodation to mainstream society and greater inclusion in it. Legitimation for viewers of a religion that is suspicious and condemning of the wider society, and legitimation in the eyes of viewers of their conservative Christian community as a community of the saved, puts in place "we-versus-they" distinctions that close off viewers from the social mainstream rather than encourage more open encounters. Reinvigoration of conservative Christianity only encourages the social mainstream to keep viewers at a distance and even to oppose them. In addition, the new focus on community among viewers turns their attention inward, rather than toward creating greater community with mainstream society.

As ritual, televangelism nonetheless affords viewers an opportunity to respond to their social marginalization rather than to remain entirely subject to the forces of secularization and social change or completely at the mercy of the mainstream society. As ritual, televangelism puts viewers in the position to become active agents who can adjust to their social circumstances rather than be allowed to be determined by them. It offers viewers vehicles by which to address and attempt to work out the larger social struggle in which they are caught up.



Televangelism's ritual capacities and roles help viewers concretize their struggle. To be sure, televangelism gives viewers a platform from which to protest against their exclusion from mainstream society . . . and the . . . ritual legitimation mobilizes viewers to go on the offensive. Ritual adaptation is an inverted form of protest. Ritual accommodation concretizes viewers' interest in being included in mainstream society by actually moving them closer to acceptance. Ritual adaptation transforms them into citizens of the wider world, if only by inches, and if only as ambivalent citizens. Televangelism's attractive power includes the opportunity it presents conservative Christian viewers to become active subjects of their own lives as they embody their struggle for empowerment within the wider American society.

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