A God More Powerful Than Yours

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American Evangelicals, Politics, and the Internet Age

By

Christopher W. Boerl
and Katie Donbavand

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For my sister,
“The Slayer of Dreams”

You have always been a harbor
When I am without a port.

Thank you.

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PREFACE

When her sister moved from Bedford, Pennsylvania to Akron, New York, Pamela decided to follow suit. There, she met Parker, a part-time auto mechanic in his early 40s who's been proudly sporting a mullet for as long as he can remember. "I guess I've always had it," Parker says of his hairdo. "It's just something people 'round here have." With that, Parker cracks open a can of Molson Ice lager and, before retiring to the front porch, he adds, "See, people think just 'cause we're from New York, we're like all those weirdoes in the city, but that ain't true. Truth is we're nothing like those city folk. 'Round here, people drive Fords and Chevys; they own trucks and guns and go to church, 'least when it's not hunting season," Parker concludes with a wry grin. As the screen door shuts behind him, Parker declares, "This is real America!"

"It's been tough on him," Pamela explains. "President Barack *Hussein* Obama was supposed to fix the economy," Pamela says, placing additional emphasis on the president's middle name. "But he hasn't done a darn thing for people like us. Instead he's been too busy socializing our health care."

I ask if the family has health insurance. "The kids do, thank God," Pamela says. "They get it through the state, but Parker and I haven't since he got laid off full-time from the dealership." I'm tempted to point out the irony in Pamela's thinking. I want to tell her that it isn't God that's insuring her children's healthcare, but rather socialized medicine. However, I know doing so will likely spark a fight, so I decide against it. And besides, despite our vast cultural and political differences, I like Parker and Pamela and I want them to like me. They're good, hard-working, moral people. Proud people who, in the face of a rapidly globalizing world, have for better or for worse refused to adopt the cosmopolitan values that are increasingly defining our time. Not that long ago, people like Pamela and Parker might well have been described as "salt of the earth" type folks. Today however, in our hyper-politicized world, uglier and blander terms are all too often used instead.

"So going back to the Laymen cell…" I say.

"The Laminin cell," Pamela corrects me.

"Right, right, the Laminin cell, you were saying…"

"It's a cell, and it's the glue that holds the body together." She explains. "You can go on the website and I'm sure it's out there, but if you look at

this cell that's in our body underneath a microscope, in this cell is the shape of the cross. And it's proof! That he does exist, and a lot of people don't see this. A lot of *your* scientists won't speak of it," Pamela says emphasizing the word 'your' and deftly drawing the line between us. She concludes, "It's the makeup of our body and it has the cross."

I contemplate for a moment that last statement. I'd never really thought of it before, but I had to admit, Pamela kind of had a point. While I, for instance, admire the great evolutionary biologists, men such as Charles Darwin and Richard Dawkins, Pamela, by contrast, is most assuredly repulsed by their work. I have similar praise for Michael Mann and the countless other largely nameless scientists toiling to decipher the mysteries of disease and unlocking the true cause of climate change. Pamela undoubtedly sees such work as an elaborate hoax (perhaps a conspiracy perpetrated by some Marxist element in the government). At any rate, I have my worldview and Pamela; well…Pamela believes dinosaurs munched on homosapiens.

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It's roughly a seven hour drive from Akron, New York to my house in the Boston suburbs. Having family in the Buffalo area, it's a drive I'm all too familiar with, and aside from the mile markers denoting upcoming towns or rest stations, I can always tell when I'm getting close to home by listening to the radio. Somewhere just east of Albany, the Christian radio stations which seem to occupy nearly every other frequency on the dial begin to fade. But on this particular drive home, I didn't listen to the radio. Instead, I kept replaying the interview I had just had with Pamela. To be honest, I'm not sure why I did. As a student of American evangelicals, I am quite accustomed to hearing statements which many in the wider public would consider outright crazy.[1] But there was something about this

[1] **Who is an Evangelical?**
When an individual identifies oneself as a Catholic, there is little doubt as to what they mean. In all likelihood, they are referring to a specific Christian denomination whose believers are led by the Pope and the Holy See. By contrast, when someone says they are 'evangelical', they are not affiliating themselves with any particular denomination or formal creed. Over the years, significant scholarly work has attempted to answer the question: What is an evangelical? From a historical perspective, the evangelical movement traces its roots to the works of once radical preachers, such as John Wycliffe (1330-1384) and Jan Hus (1372-1415), as well as other pre-reformation theologians such as Peter Waldo (1140-1218) and Girolamo Savonarola (1452-1498). However, the shape of modern evangelicalism is more appropriately attributed to the work of leaders of the Protestant Reformation.

last interview that kept pinging back and forth in my mind like a bird trapped in a bedroom, looking for an open window to escape through. Finally, somewhere outside of Syracuse the epiphany hit.

I quickly grabbed my iPhone and replayed the last bit.

"A lot of *your* scientists won't speak of it. It's the makeup of our body and it has the cross."

"And you heard this from a Christian speaker?" I hear myself say.

"It's on a CD." Pamela responds. "I don't know his name," she continues before letting out a frustrated breath. "My mom would know it 'casue I wanted to get it so the kids could hear it."

"And this CD," I ask, "did you get it from the Christian bookstore?"

"Oh yeah."

"And this is where you get a lot of your religious material?"

According to the Institute for the Study of American Evangelicals at Wheaton College, the term 'evangelical' is itself, "A wide-reaching definitional 'canopy' that covers a diverse number of Protestant groups." Noted religious scholar David Bebbington holds that the evangelical adheres to four core tenets. These include Crucientrism, whereby particular focus is placed on the doctrine of substitutional atonement; Biblicism, in which the Bible is placed at the center of corporate worship; Conversionism, a belief which asserts the need for each individual to convert to Christianity in order to achieve eternal salvation; and finally Activism, in which evangelicals openly and actively proclaim the Lord's "Good News." Alister McGrath adds another widely accepted tenet, namely Christocentrism, which holds that God's eternal "Word" became human in the flesh of Jesus Christ who went on to reveal God to all humanity. Collectively, these five tenets are widely regarded as the defining beliefs of the evangelical Christian.

In the United States, political scientists have come to view evangelicals as an important voting bloc in their own right. Occasionally referred to as the "evangelical bloc," or the "evangelical voting bloc," this segment of the population is more commonly identified as the "Christian Right." Culturally speaking, the Christian Right is a political movement of conservative, mostly evangelical Christians and Christian organizations which, despite various denominational differences, have gathered around certain political issues, such as opposition to abortion and gay rights, the teaching of evolution in public schools, and, more generally, the perceived secularization of American society. Throughout this book, the terms "Christian Right," "evangelical bloc," and "evangelical voting bloc," are often used when referring to the political activities of the conservative evangelical community.

On a final note, the word "evangelical" is often preceded in popular and scholarly literature by the word "white," as while many African-Americans are technically evangelical; their political voting habits are quite different to those of the rest of the evangelical bloc. As such, when this book uses the term "evangelical", it is referring more generally to white evangelicals.

"From there and from family and friends at church."

"So you swap a lot of this stuff, CDs and books and what not?"

"Oh yeah. It gets really expensive otherwise."

There's a brief pause in the recording. In the background you can hear a dog bark and a truck drive by on the gravel road in front of the house.

"So, if your minister or a friend from church was to tell you about a certain book, and they said, 'You have to read it,' would you?"

Pamela contemplates my last question for a moment before answering, "I'd be open to it." She then explains further. "I would, because I believe the things the minister says, and I trust my family and friends, so if they told me about something, I'd check it out. I'm not saying that I'd believe it—you know, we all have our own opinions, but oh yeah, it's a starting point. And I think that's how anything starts anywhere, somebody they have faith and trust in says something, and they decide to investigate it. And I think that investigation is real important. Don't just leave it as is. Look. Find out"

I pause the recording.

I realize what Pamela has just described to me is the perfect representation of the confluence of old and new media. The way she goes about gathering data, the means by which her views of the world are constructed and periodically re-formed encompasses the entire media spectrum. It begins with a simple verbal exchange from one person to another. It's the sort of peer-to-peer exchange which media gurus lust for and, in some instances, are willing to spend millions of dollars on an aggressive ad campaign to achieve. It's a genuine word-of-mouth promotion, one that comes from a trusted source such as a friend or member of the family—or better yet, a valued authoritative source such as a religious leader.

For years now, Christian filmmakers have been eagerly exploiting this very intimate and human dynamic in promoting their own films. For instance, when Mel Gibson released *The Passion of the Christ* just before Easter 2004, Icon Productions, the studio behind the movie, had only a modest budget to promote the film. While traditional advertisements such as television and radio commercials aired in promotion of the film, Mel Gibson enjoyed his greatest advertising success by holding countless advanced screenings across the country and around the world for respected church leaders. Moved by the film's graphic imagery, many of these leaders then used their pulpits to encourage their own congregation to see the movie. Even Pope John Paul II got in on the action when he endorsed the film, saying, "It is as it was."

But as Pamela notes, while the opinions of her family and friends matter greatly to her, she remains her own person. Before deciding to get a particular book, or Christian CD, Pamela claims that she'll do her own research first. Exactly how extensive this research is, or what it involves, I do not know, but her past comments hint that this research takes place in the new media environment when Pamela conducts her online searches, and it is precisely this new media component which warrants greater attention.

Humans have been exchanging ideas by word-of-mouth for longer than history has been recorded. Older media platforms such as the printed word and, more recently, electronic broadcasts such as radio and television, have impacted nearly every aspect of our life and society more broadly—and in ways difficult to fully comprehend. The Internet, by contrast, is relatively new and its ever evolving nature makes its study considerably more dynamic. Like previous forms of media, the new media environment has greatly altered the way we live our lives and organize society. Much of this has already been documented, yet despite this knowledge, our overall understanding of how the Internet continually re-negotiates our relationship with the wider world remains both under-explored and ever changing. Given the immeasurable influence evangelicals exercise over the American political process, and their deep roots into the very fabric of American culture, a more comprehensive understanding of the ways in which the new media environment is impacting American evangelicals is due.

Let us begin…

CHAPTER ONE

THE MEDIUM AND THE MESSAGE

When the gods of ancient Egypt quarrelled, the great sun god Ra would turn to his fellow deity Thoth—the half-man, half-ibis god of justice, knowledge, and wisdom—to serve as his cosmic arbitrator. In this capacity, Thoth proved himself to be a competent jurist, and his fairness and impartiality earned him the respect of both gods and mortals alike.

One day, as legend goes, Thoth found himself wandering the earth when he happened to cross paths with Thamus, King of the Nile Delta. Well aware of Thoth's reputation as the supreme purveyor of learned pursuits, King Thamus invited Thoth to share with him his most recent insights. Thoth happily obliged.

As Thoth described to the king each of his latest discoveries, which included the development of the sciences and the creation of mathematics, the good king sat in amazement, expressing his sincere pleasure and deepest gratitude. Impressed by all he had seen, King Thamus eagerly awaited Thoth's final presentation, for surely the wise Thoth had saved the best for last. Yet, as Thoth's list of cerebral discoveries came to an end, he described for the king his invention of writing, declaring proudly, "Here is an accomplishment, my lord the King, which will improve both the wisdom and memory of the Egyptians." King Thamus was unable to give his approval.

"Most ingenious Thoth," the king began, "One man has the ability to beget arts, but the ability to judge of the usefulness or harmfulness to their users belongs to another; and now you, who are the father of letters, have been led by your affection to ascribe to them a power the opposite of that which they really possess."

Surprised by the king's response, Thoth implored Thamus for an explanation. The king continued, "Wise Thoth, do you not see how this invention will produce forgetfulness in the minds of those who learn to use it, for they will not practice their memory? Their trust in writing, produced by external characters which are no part of themselves, will discourage the use of their own memory." It was a reply Thoth had not expected and one which, in his considerable wisdom, he had failed to foresee. To bring his

point home, King Thamus concluded by saying, "For this thing that you call writing is an elixir not of memory, but of reminding; and far from offering your pupils true wisdom, you instead offer them the appearance of wisdom, for they will surely read a good many things without receiving proper instruction and will therefore seem to be knowledgeable, when they are for the most part ignorant and hard to get along with, since they are not wise, but only appear wise."[1]

To be certain, King Thamus's critique of writing, though harsh, is not without merit. For who among us would argue that the introduction of the written word, which, as King Thamus correctly observes, is a means to record, has not diminished humanity's need for memorization? That said, Thamus's criticism of the written word should not go unscrutinized. As writing has certainly displaced the need for oral recollection and arguably lessened humanity's cognitive memory, the representation of language as a retrievable textual medium in which signs and symbols are used as a non-symbolic expression of language, flung open the gates to previously unknown avenues of human knowledge and greatly enhanced our aptitude for compositionality, representation, and commitment; as embedded within written language is the very means to create elaborate civilizations capable of creating enduring representations of ourselves.[2]

Few innovations can possibly rival the written word in terms of their impact on civilization. With that said, history is chock-full of technological breakthroughs that have dramatically altered humanities within the broader world and altogether changed our historical trajectory. And as if it were an unwritten law governing the invention of new technologies, the most profound of these human innovations are often utilized in a manner completely un-prescribed by their creators. Take for instance the mechanical clock.

Invented by Benedictine Monks sometime between the twelfth and thirteenth century, the mechanical clock revolutionized the way in which society perceived and recorded time. Suddenly time possessed a quantifiable quality. In the hands of merchants, tradesmen, and artisans, measurable time proved to be a segmental commercial resource, one as easily bought and sold as any other commodity. The commercial applications of the clock were hardly what the Benedictines had in mind when they first invented them. Instead, the clock was designed to provide "precise regularity" to the routines of Benedictine monasteries, "Which

[1] *Phaedrus* dialogue on rhetoric and writing (274b-277a).

[2] For a further reading on the written word and birth of civilization, see John Searle's, (2010) *Making the Social World: The Structure of Human Civilization* (New York: Oxford University Press).

required among other things, seven periods of devotion during the course of the day." According to Postman, what was needed to signal the passing of canonical hours was a technology that "Could provide precision to the rituals of devotion."[3] The mechanical clock achieved just this.

What the Benedictine Monks failed to see, however, was that in addition to keeping track of the hours, the clock could just as easily be used to synchronize and control the actions of individuals. By the middle of the fourteenth century, the mechanical clock had found its way beyond the cloistered walls of monastic communities and had begun filling space in village squares.

As public commons became familiar places to find mechanical clocks, and the bells which tolled the hours of these clocks grew louder, measurable regularity gradually strengthened its grip on "life of the workman and merchant." The clock, while invited to bring humanity closer to God, led us instead to the worship of another. With its precision, the clock has proved to be the ultimate tool in the scheduling of daily life, the regulation of commerce and trade, the accumulation of wealth and property, and, ultimately, in the embrace of Mammon.[4]

Much like the mechanical clock and the written word before it, the printing press is another technology that has forever and profoundly changed the whole of human existence. Following the arrival of the printing press, Europe became much more than Europe with movable type or Europe absent of scribes. Instead, the introduction of the printing press played a pivotal role in the spread of Luther's rebellion against the Catholic Church, and is today widely credited as having given rise to the Protestant Reformation. It is similarly easy enough to trace the birth of Protestant Christianity to the advent of the modern nation-state, but that is another book altogether.

Broadcast media and, in particular television, is yet another example of a technology that has changed who we are and the way we live.

Given the sheer amount of time Americans spend watching television, it is impossible not to consider the massive impact that this form of broadcast media has on both individuals and society at-large. Fortunately, countless studies (dating from the early 1950s, when television was first becoming popular and continuing to present day) have sought to better gauge the effects of television viewing. While many of these studies have proved quite controversial and several results are disputed, among the more widely accepted effects of television viewing include lowered social

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[3]Neil Postman, (1993) *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Vintage Books).

[4]Postman, 1993.

IQs, diminished ability for social empathy, decrease in one's metabolic rate, reduced physical activity, and higher rates of obesity. Studies have also found a positive correlation between increased television viewership and aggregate diagnoses of Attention Deficit Disorder, to name but a few.

A bit later in this book, we will be returning to the subject of broadcast media as it specifically relates to the rise of the American Christian Right, but for the moment, it is important to remember that society today finds itself in the midst of another technological revolution. Indeed, recent advances in computer sciences have dramatically altered the way we live, communicate, and understand the world around us.

The New Media Environment

In a lecture for the popular online educational series TED Talks, author and New York University media professor Clay Shirky states, that prior to our current time (what he calls the most recent media revolution), "There [have been] only four periods in the last 500 years where media has changed enough to qualify for the label of 'revolution.'"[5]

These revolutionary periods include: the invention of the printing press; the advent of two-way communication and conversational media, first with the telegraph, then with the telephone; the introduction of recorded media other than print, such as photography, sound (records), movie reels; and finally, the broadcast age. Today, however, we are living through what Shirky argues is, "The largest increase in expressive capability in human history."[6] To validate this point, Shirky notes a curious asymmetry of the older media regimes, "The media that is good at creating conversation is no good at creating groups, and the media that is good at creating groups, is no good at creating conversation."[7] The Internet, however, is the first medium in human history that Shirky notes, "has native support for groups and conversations at the same time."[8]

A key component of this "native support" is digitalization. Professor Shirky explains, "As all media gets digitized, the Internet also becomes the mode of carriage for all other media. Phone calls migrate to the Internet, magazines migrate to the Internet, movies migrate to the Internet, and that

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[5]Clay Shriky, (2009) "Clay Shirky: How social media can make history," *TED Talks*. Found online at:
<http://www.ted.com/talks/clay_shirky_how_cellphones_twitter_facebook_can_make_history.html> (Accessed March 10, 2012).
[6]Shirky, 2009.
[7]Shirky, 2009.
[8]Shirky, 2009.

means that every medium is right next-door to every other medium."[9] As media increasingly finds a home online, the Internet becomes less of a source for information only and increasingly more of a network for coordination as well. To better illustrate this point, it is worth recalling the work of noted social observer Marshall McLuhan. In describing the media environment of the day, he famously used the term "media ecology." He writes that such ecology is the:

> "…arranging [of] various media to help each other so they won't cancel each other out, to buttress one medium with another. You might say, for example, that radio is a bigger help to literacy than television, but television might be a very wonderful aid to teaching languages. And so you can do some things on some media that you cannot do on others. And, therefore, if you watch the whole field, you can prevent this waste that comes by one canceling the other out.[10]

When speaking of the new media environment today, we are referring to the consolidation of McLuhan's media ecology into one easily accessible and navigable platform: the World Wide Web. In this ecology, McLuhan explains, "What matters here isn't technical capital, it's social capital."[11] After all, while most of us are competent computer users—sending e-mails, navigating the net, and updating our blogs—few of us are programmers or otherwise truly understand the technical components that serve as the backbone of our digital lives. As such, new media tools, as Shirky aptly notes, "Don't get socially interesting until they get technologically boring,"[12] When this happens, crucial barriers which might otherwise inhibit widespread adoption of a particular information and communication technology (ICTs) are overcome. McLuhan puts it another way: "It isn't when the shiny new tools show up that their uses start permeating through society, it's when everybody is able to take them for granted."[13]

Today, new media has largely succeeded in becoming more socially capable and, as a result, we now find ourselves in an environment where, according to Shirky, "Innovation can happen anywhere that people can take for granted the idea that we are all in this together."[14] Indeed,

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[9]Shirky, 2009.
[10]Stephanie McLuhan and David Staines eds., (2004) *Understanding Me: Lectures and Interviews by Marshall McLuhan*, (Cambridge: MIT Press), pg. 271.
[11]Shirky, 2009.
[12]Shirky, 2009.
[13]Shirky, 2009.
[14]Shirky, 2009.

innovation is happening everywhere. Previous distinctions between media consumers and media producers are now_not so much blurred, as non-existent.

New Media and American Evangelicals

There is little doubt about it: Media has had, and continues to have, a tremendous influence in shaping American values and defining the American character. One historical example of this is the heavy reliance of the early American patriots on local newspapers and printed pamphlets to help propagate their message of liberty and convince others to join their cause for national independence. For instance, patriot Thomas Paine penned *Common Sense*, a 79-page pamphlet offering plain arguments for American secession. In the first three months of its publication, it sold more than 120,000 copies in the colonies alone and helped solidify public support for the Revolution.

Nearly a quarter of a millennium since the signing of the Declaration of Independence, America has changed in remarkable ways. During this time, the American Republic has grown from being little more than a scattered collection of loosely affiliated state governments to the world's leading economic and military power. Despite America's many changes over the years, certain characteristics have undergone relatively little change. In particular, religion, much as it was in 1776, remains today an indelible source of identity for millions of Americans. As the Pew Research Center notes:

> Religion is much more important to Americans than to people living in other wealthy nations. Six-in-ten (59%) people in the U.S. say religion plays a very important role in their lives. This is roughly twice the percentage of self-avowed religious people in Canada (30%), and an even higher proportion when compared with Japan and Western Europe. Americans' views are closer to people in developing nations than to the publics of developed nations.[15]

In any given month, some 63% of American adults claim to attend worship service at a Christian church, while 67% will utilize some form of Christian media such as listening to Christian radio, watching a televangelist on television or reading a Christian book. These statistics

[15]Pew Forum Staff Writer, (2002) "U.S. Stands Alone In Its Embrace of Religion among Wealthy Nations," *Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life*. Found online at: <http://pewglobal.org/2002/12/19/among-wealthy-nations/> (Accessed August 15, 2014).

equate to roughly 132 million American adults attending church each month and 141 million interacting with Christian media.[16] The Barna Group further notes that an increasing number of Americans are, "Using the Internet for faith exploration and communications."[17]

Though religion remains a powerful force in American politics, relatively little work has analyzed the relationship between the new media environment and evangelical political activity. This deficit is perplexing, particularly when one considers the vast literature already exploring the relationship between broadcast media and the rise of the Christian Right. Perhaps more important, however, is the fact that we know so little about how the new media environment is affecting the politics of American evangelicals, and in particular, the Christian Right. It is troubling to say the least, especially given the considerable influence the Christian Right continues to wield within the Republican Party. To that end, this book attempts to shed greater light on the effect of the new media environment on American evangelicals. In utilizing a variety of research methods and historical analyses, this book addresses the present academic void by tracing the impact of the new media environment on American evangelicals and their continued engagement within the political process.

Broadcast media, such as radio and television, while identified as mediums with high entrance costs have nonetheless proved adept at unifying core cultural values, religious beliefs, and political principles. By contrast, the Internet, as a many-to-many medium with much lower entrance costs, has created a plural media environment, one far more conducive to the development of diverse opinions, including religious ones.

This latter fact is of particular importance since evangelical Christianity often appears homogenous to outside observers but, at its core, is a rich and diverse religious tradition. One reason for this perception of uniformity is due to the fact that broadcast media has enabled a small group of religious leaders to fix down important religious messages and meanings, while simultaneously emphasizing shared cultural values, such as the protection of "unborn life" and so-called "defense of marriage." In this regard, broadcast media has played an important role in helping those with control of the medium to advance a narrowly defined conservative

[16]Barna Group Staff Writer, (2002) "Christian Mass Media Reach More Adults With the Christian Message Than Do Churches," *The Barna Group*. Found online at: <http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/5-barna-update/77-christian-mass-media-reach-more-adults-with-the-christian-message-than-do-churches> (Accessed May 22, 2011).

[17]Barna Group, 2002.

agenda, all while effectively dismissing smaller theological squabbles and minor scriptural disputes which have plagued previous evangelical unification efforts.

The Internet, however, lowers thresholds for engagement and amplifies the voices of the many—including those on the evangelical periphery. It subverts the centralized nature of broadcast media and instead affords greater decentralized ownership of material and content, while facilitating broader engagement. Put more simply, while broadcast media is uniquely suited to fix meaning and aid the monopolization of messaging, the Internet instead enables a diverse set of users to challenge prevailing ideas and values, thus leading to ever greater fragmentation.

As evangelicals increasingly turn to the Internet for purposes of religious devotion, guidance, and education, the amalgamating effects of the broadcast age are weakened, resulting in growing theological splintering. In particular, growing support for evangelical environmentalism (or "Creation Care," as it is commonly known) and the emerging church movement (social justice evangelicalism) have proven to be sources of considerable religious unrest within the evangelical community.

This book focuses on these specific movements. Through their examination, much can be learned about how the confluence of new media technologies and American evangelicals is reshaping both the religious and political landscape in the United States. Elevating issues such as environmental protection, economic inequality, Creation Care, and emerging church movements are reorienting religious dialogues away from the so-called "culture war" issues of the 80s and 90s, and in so doing, are creating new political realities and tensions.[18]

The past three decades have been an unusually intense period of religious fervor and significant religious political activity—even by American standards. During this time, Evangelical Christianity has

[18]The term "culture war" is a metaphor often used to describe the political and social tensions between conservative and progressive Americans. While the term itself has long been used in one form or another, it entered the American popular lexicon in the 1990s and has received considerable lip service since 1992 when Pat Buchanan declared at the Republican National Convention that, "There is a religious war going on in our country for the soul of America. It is a cultural war, as critical to the kind of nation we will one day be as was the Cold War itself." For a complete transcript of Buchanan's speech, see Patrick J. Buchanan, (August 17, 1992) "Address to the Republican National Convention," *American Rhetoric.* Found online at:
<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/patrickbuchanan1992rnc.htm>
(Accessed July 9, 2011).

emerged as both the nation's dominant religious identification and as an important pillar of Republican political support. Communication technologies have played a crucial role in the success of the evangelical tradition; yet such technologies do not operate in a cultural vacuum and are instead influenced by any number of external social factors. Understanding the historical context within which these technologies emerged will provide us with a clear picture of America's ever evolving religious and political landscape.

CHAPTER TWO

END TIMES IN AMERICA

School children learning the history of the American people are often taught that the Puritans came to the New World in search of religious freedom. This is simply not true. Religious liberty, after all, was a luxury the Puritans had long enjoyed in their adopted Holland. Instead, the real impetus propelling the Puritans from the shores of Europe was their yearning to reform society along strictly biblical lines. Among the Puritans, it was believed that accomplishing this goal would hail the return of Christ and set in motion the beginning of the End Times.

For her part, Queen Elizabeth I begrudgingly accepted the Puritans and their increasingly fringe theology. Throughout her reign, Elizabeth I was almost always at war with either the Catholic Church or one of its fiercely loyal allies, the most notable being Spain, who by all metrics was a vastly superior military power. In the Puritans, Elizabeth I found not so much a dependable friend, but rather an equally reliable sect ready to cut their teeth in their hatred for all things Catholic and papal. Moreover, in understanding the precarious nature of her rule, as well as England's vulnerable military state, Elizabeth I correctly judged that it was a far better thing to remain silent on some of the more radical and ultimately subversive teachings of the Puritan community (such as their belief that all earthly monarchs should be abolished) than to add this deeply devout and ever growing community to her already long list of enemies.

When Elizabeth I died and King James I united both the English and Scottish thrones, his tolerance for the Puritans was considerably less. Just one year after assuming the English Crown in 1604, King James I famously expelled the Puritans from Hampton Court. As head of the Anglican Communion, James I similarly oversaw a number of liturgical reforms which brought the Church of England, at least stylistically, ever closer to Catholic Mass. Knowing that these reforms would not go over well within the Puritan community, James I made it a crime to speak out against the Church of England. Those who did risked having their ears chopped off and were subjected to branding, a particularly cruel

punishment in which hot iron rods were used to sear a permanent image into the flesh of a living human.

As persecution escalated in England, several Puritans found their way to the far more tolerant Holland. While the Puritans were able to practice their faith as they saw fit in Holland, life amongst the Dutch was not without its challenges. In particular, the Puritans found themselves barred from several Dutch guilds. Their exclusion from these guilds was a particular economic blow to the Puritans, as guild membership was crucial to economic success in 17th century Holland. Yet as challenging as economic life proved to be in Holland, it was not the reason the Puritans ultimately decided to leave. Economic hardship, after all, had been a daily reality for many of the Puritans prior to leaving England. Instead, the Puritans looked at Holland as a land awash in sin; where personal values and social norms were far too relaxed. Worse still, the Puritans viewed the Dutch as unwilling to change their ways, and thus, unwilling to adopt the strict religious reforms which the Puritans sought.

Frustrated, the Puritans increasingly turned inward and became a more insular community. The outside world had turned its back on Christ, and now the Puritans were turning their backs on the world. But isolation, the Puritans knew, would not bring about the second coming of Christ. It would not hail the beginning of the end. It would not bring about God's heavenly rule here on earth. To achieve this, the Puritans' society needed a fresh start, somewhere free from the established corruption of Europe. Fortunately for the Puritans, the newly discovered Americas promised just that.

Religion in the New World

With the dawning of the age of exploration, the great European powers found themselves embroiled in a near continuous struggle for control of newly discovered lands and the riches held within. At the helm of this great race were the Kingdoms of Spain and Portugal, followed by the lesser naval powers of England, France, and The Netherlands.[1] By 1600, the Kingdoms of the Iberian Peninsula had laid claim to the 'good lands' of South and Central America, where gold and other precious metals were easily found. Unable to compete directly for these riches, England took to looting Spanish and Portuguese fleets whenever they could and focused

[1]Giles Milton's, *Big Chief Elizabeth: The Adventures and Fate of the First English Colonies in America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000) offers both an informative and enjoyable read on early European colonization of the Americas.

much of their colonization efforts in North America. At that time, however, England was considerably inexperienced in the business of colonization (save perhaps for Ireland, Scotland, and Wales). Previous attempts to settle the New World had ended disastrously for the English and, more specifically, those early English settlers who either had to be rescued by subsequent voyages or who perished altogether. As word of these failures spread throughout the British Isles, it became increasingly difficult for the royally chartered London Company to recruit individuals willing to brave the perils of a long and arduous trek across the Atlantic, only to face near certain starvation and endless misery in a distant and foreign land. But just as recruitment levels sank to unsustainable lows, the London Company was approached by two representatives from the Puritan congregation in Leiden, Holland. The congregation, it seemed, was eager to relocate but only under one condition: that they be allowed to govern their colony in accordance with their faith.

Having witnessed his nation fall further and further behind in the race to colonize the Americas, King James I had few options but to agree to the Puritans' request and grant them their much desired land. With their grant secured and the financial backing of the London Company, the Leiden congregation boarded a vessel by the name of Speedwell and departed for the New World. First however, they would rendezvous with another Puritan congregation from Plymouth, England and add the smaller Mayflower to their fleet.[2]

The Puritans' first setback occurred while in port. The Speedwell began taking on water and was quickly deemed unseaworthy. It has long been suspected that the Speedwell had fallen victim to saboteurs who were having second thoughts about colonizing the New World. Whatever the case, the original passenger load was cut dramatically to accommodate the smaller Mayflower. In all, some 102 Puritans along with roughly 30 crew departed England late in the summer of 1620.

For the next 65 days, the passengers aboard the Mayflower were forced to endure cramped and unsanitary quarters. Strong Atlantic storms battered the tiny Mayflower in the second month of its journey. Yet through all of their hardships, just two lives were lost during the trans-Atlantic voyage (a remarkably low mortality rate for the day) while another, an infant named Oceanus, was born en route.[3]

On November 9, 1620, the Mayflower landed on Cape Cod, some 400 miles north of its intended destination of modern-day Manhattan. To the

[2]Nathaniel Philbrick, *Mayflower: A Story of Courage, Community, and War* (New York: Viking, 2007).
[3]See Philbrick, 2007.

surprise of many, the voyage had been met by incredibly good fortunes. Undoubtedly, the Puritans saw this as divine providence. With winter fast approaching and the maps of North America unreliable at best, the decision was made that any attempt to sail for the Chesapeake would be too dangerous. As such, the Puritans would stay put in Massachusetts.

In the months that followed, roughly half of those who survived the voyage across the Atlantic perished, as disease, starvation, and exposure to the elements took their toll. Such a high death toll undoubtedly lowered spirits in the newly founded Plymouth Colony, yet those who survived likely took refuge in their faith and the belief that what they were doing on those cold and desolate shores would one day bring God's celestial Kingdom to earth.

The Puritans continued to endure the ravages of disease, starvation, and exposure to the elements throughout their first year on American soil.[4] On the anniversary of their arrival in Massachusetts, the Puritans broke bread and gave thanks that their aspirations could still be fulfilled. And though the years that followed at first proved tough, the Puritans welcomed them with open arms. After all, if humanity was to be rewarded with Christ's return, it would first have to earn it. As such, the Puritans worked diligently to establish a fundamentalist society which they hoped England (and the rest of the world) would eventually look to as an example of pious living. Plymouth became a city upon a hill in which God's law reigned supreme.[5]

As time passed, life in New England became less daunting, while the appeal of the New World grew steadily. As new colonists arrived to North America, existing colonies grew larger and more settlements were founded. With this population growth, the Puritans found it increasingly difficult to enforce their strictly pious ways and narrow biblical worldviews.[6] Eventually, the Puritans' postmillennial belief (that is, the belief that Christ's second coming would happen only after humanity had lived for a thousand years in accordance with God's will) gave way to premillennial dispensationalism, an alternative theological persuasion which views Christ's second coming as imminent.

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[4]Philbrick, 2007.
[5]Philbrick, 2007.
[6]David D. Hall, *A Reforming People: Puritanism and the Transformation of Public Life in New England* (New York: Random House, 2011).