

Christianity and the Mass Media in America

Toward a Democratic Accommodation



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Introduction

Iaddress in this book the relationship between the mass media and Christian “tribes” in America. At its core this relationship is a dynamic tension between civil generality, on the one hand, and a sectarian particularity, on the other. The Christian metanarrative of transcendence assumes a theistic perspective where God acts in real human history; this God-oriented view of human affairs is never fully in accord with the mainstream media’s own subnarratives of immanence, which morally assume that human action is the beginning and end of history. Nevertheless, religious groups and the media borrow each other’s rhetoric both to embrace and to criticize one another. They come together harmoniously during media coverage of emotionally charged events such as the funeral of President John F. Kennedy, the landing of an American spaceship on the moon, and terrorists’ destruction of the World Trade Center in New York City.¹ During such historic moments talk of prayer and God in public life seems appropriate. At other times the media and Christian groups fire salvos at each other over issues like political bias in news reporting, the morality of television programming and films, and religious stereotyping. As the studies in this book indicate, the tension between Christianity and the media helps Americans to rediscover their shared public life and gives religious tribes an opportunity to assert their own individualities. Thus the interaction between tribal faith and the mainstream media can contribute positively to public and private life in democratic America.

Although the impact of the media on society has been studied nearly to death, the influence of Christianity on Americans’ understanding of the media barely enters contemporary scholarship. The influence of Christianity on the media extends to the depths of public imaging about technology, community, and progress. James W. Carey shows compellingly that American rhetoric about media technology often is quasi-religious.² He persuasively argues that the dominant paradigm of mass communication, the “transmission view,” emerged from American Protestants’ hopes to fashion the New World into the biblical City upon a Hill.³ Protestants largely controlled mass communication in early America, creating a seductive rhetoric of the “technological sublime” that associated developments in transportation and media technologies with the progressive movement of God in

history.⁴ For some Protestants, America was the arena in which God was equipping Christians to evangelize the rest of the world.

Mainstream American media became the cultural stage on which Americans eventually expressed secular versions of this utopian rhetoric. Religious rhetoric shaped how America as a nation conversed about the media and how the nation institutionalized media technologies in public and private life. Perhaps the most important dimension of this rhetoric during the twentieth century was the way that it seamlessly equated the marketplace with the New Jerusalem. Popularity became a form of public praise in the United States, a means of implicitly and uncritically discerning culture's intrinsic value for society. No matter how much the media and religion in America appear to be at odds with one another, they borrow from each other cultural forms, rhetorical styles, and message strategies that reflect shared modes of understanding the world.

As Carey argues, new media technologies have elicited both utopian and dystopian American rhetoric.⁵ I suggest throughout this book that Americans' rhetoric about new media technologies parallels the hopes and fears expressed in popular Christian theology, particularly evangelical theology. Americans' utopian rhetoric regarding the mass media reflects an evangelistic imagination. Their dystopian rhetoric reflects a moralistic imagination. Most Americans use such evangelistic and moralistic rhetorics to make sense of mass communication, regardless of their religious or secular backgrounds; taken together, these two forms of rhetorical imagining represent a popular theology of the media. This popular theology in turn both influences and is shaped by secular storytelling in society, from television programs and films to the literature of science fiction. Americans often talk about the media alternately as a kind of heaven or hell, Second Coming or Armageddon, Jerusalem or Babylon.⁶

Perhaps only in America could Ray Kurzweil, author of *The Age of Spiritual Machines*, be dubbed a "technopioneer and businessman." And maybe only in the United States would a reviewer write seriously about Kurzweil's prediction that "humans themselves will be sorely tempted to give up their physical bodies entirely in favor of an immortal 'life' as software."⁷ By 2029, says Kurzweil, "we'll be able to match the flexibility and intelligence of the human brain, in part by actually reverse-engineering the brain. . . . We'll also be able to plug in to the World Wide Web directly through our brains, without any external equipment."⁸ Is this the language of philosophy, science fiction, or theology—or all three? In any case it is

distinctly American language formed out of a rhetoric of a popular theology that Kurzweil inherited from both Christianity and the market.

In this book, then, I aim to extend and deepen the scholarly thinking about the connections between Christianity and the media in the United States. I focus on Christianity both because it is the dominant religious expression in America and because among all of the major faiths it has most influenced the nation's rhetoric about the media as well as the media's rhetoric about religion. Along the way I distinguish among various Roman Catholic, mainline Protestant, and evangelical rhetorics about the media. This book is an integrated series of case studies of the rhetorical relationships between Christianity and the media in "one nation under God."

Chapter 1 outlines the five major rhetorical topoi that implicitly guide American sentiments and thought about the mass media: conversion, discernment, communion, exile, and praise. I locate these rhetorical motifs in American cultural history, using the intellectual insights and case studies of the Chicago School of Social Thought and its influential proponents—Charles Horton Cooley, Robert E. Park, Louis Wirth, and, most recently, Carey. I rely extensively on their theoretical insights about communication and culture in order to frame my arguments in distinctly American terms.

The second chapter addresses the historical continuities between popular Christian theology, on the one hand, and American popular rhetoric about the positive social benefits of new media technologies, on the other. My historical inquiry supports Carey's thesis about the "mythos of the electronic revolution."⁹ As Protestants imagined the role of new media in God's kingdom, they "baptized" the latest technologies as tools for converting heathens to faith in God. Their distinctly religious rhetoric in turn increasingly shaped the popular American imagination, creating various quasi-religious understandings of communication technologies. Although this rhetoric of the technological sublime is deeply appealing to Americans, it is also challenged by religious criticism that emerges from particular Christian tribes. Park and one of his colleagues, Ernest W. Burgess, capture the reason for tribal criticism of the media: "Every new mechanical device, every advance in business organization or in science, which makes the world more tolerable for most of us, makes it impossible for others."¹⁰ The very media that would supposedly usher in the kingdom of God on earth became the domain of mammon.

Chapter 3 analyzes some of the nuances in Christian responses to the rise of broadcasting in America. I review every article on the subject of radio and television broadcasting in five periodicals—three Roman Catholic

(*America, Commonweal, and Catholic World*), one evangelical (*Christianity Today*), and one mainline Protestant (*Christian Century*). The subtleties of media criticism characteristic of different Christian traditions suggest that tribal criticism is one source for some profound and provocative ideas about the role of the media in democratic society, not just in religious communities. Tribal media can engage in media criticism that transcends tribal self-interest with a genuine concern for the public good.

Chapter 4 addresses the role of Christianity in the development of American radio. I explain how evangelicals and fringe sects, in particular, were deeply involved in this medium from the beginning. They not only imagined this medium in evangelistic terms; they also took their messages of salvation to their own religious communities and to the public airways. In the 1920s the Federal Radio Commission (FRC) shut down nearly all of these religious broadcasters by appealing to the “public interest.” The commission had the difficult task of distinguishing between tribal interests and the broader public good. In effect, the FRC concluded that the consumer-oriented rhetoric of conversion (advertising) took precedence over all “sectarian” rhetorics of conversion. The FRC’s policies forced evangelicals to learn how to operate successfully in a market system by buying airtime, cultivating financial contributors, and crafting engaging programming. The FRC’s and later the Federal Communication Commission’s dependence on the market, rather than extensive regulation, eventually gave evangelicals an upper hand over the other Christian groups in radio and television broadcasting. As evangelicals championed radio in a market system, however, they also forged a religious consumerism for their tribes. Their rhetoric of conversion backfired.

Chapter 5 addresses the implications of America’s “free-market” policy for the rise of national media. In a market system the mainstream commercial media strive for general narratives that will attract large audiences for advertisers. Television, in particular, becomes a priestly social institution organized by managerial experts for the purpose of garnering mass audiences to its broadly mythological fare. In the United States network television became a mythopoetic behemoth, a quasi-religious TV “altar” for the nation.¹¹ In response to such generic tales, tribal media critics helped their religious communities use tribal metanarratives to critique the mass-mediated subnarratives. I review the media criticism of four tribal critics—Protestants William F. Fore, Edward J. Carnell, and John Wiley Nelson and Roman Catholic Andrew M. Greeley. Once again I discover that some of

the best tribal criticism addresses public interests, not just the penchants of the tribes.

Chapter 6 closely examines the quasi-religious mythology of mainstream television programming. Although the centripetal forces of television tend to homogenize religious faith, mainstream programming still must address mythologically some of the most fundamental questions answered by all major religions. Probably the most compelling question is the origin and nature of evil. The secular “gospel” of television implicitly limits evil to particular kinds of people and to specific types of evil action, thereby affirming the myth that Americans might be able to reduce the hurt and hardship around the globe by eliminating these evil people. American television’s gospel of hope depends on a limited view of human evil that I call civil sin. This nontribal concept of sin is a linchpin of mainstream media’s own rhetoric of communion that seeks to affirm the beliefs of the mass market.

Chapter 7 considers the role of the news media in the relationship between American Christianity and the mass media. The two major news media in the history of early American society were probably the pulpit and the religious press. In the seventeenth century colonial Americans used the “Good News” of the Christian Gospel to frame the “bad news” of the day, thereby interpreting “daily occurrences” in the light of “divine providence.” As commercial, secular news media replaced the distinctly religious press during the eighteenth and especially the early nineteenth centuries, the prophetic role of the reporter was increasingly separated from religious communities of interpretation. By 1900 the secular newspaper greatly overshadowed the power of the tribal press, thrusting mainstream journalists into the role of prophet for the increasingly national society. This is partly why the Chicago School in the early years of the twentieth century looked to the newspaper as an organ of “intelligence” that would supposedly ameliorate urban problems and usher in the Great Community.¹² Early-twentieth-century journalists organized their new professional ideology loosely around objectivity and accuracy, essentially adopting the fundamentalist epistemology of Scottish realism. Twentieth-century American reporters thereby used a rhetoric of discernment to claim superior powers of description, but their underlying hermeneutic had much in common with Protestant fundamentalism as well as with scientism. This reductionistic hermeneutic tends to pit the secular news reporters against most Christian tribes’ more theistic and metanarrational hermeneutic.

The last chapter draws some conclusions about the interaction of mass media and religions in twentieth-century America, especially the responsibilities of media and religious tribes. How might religious traditions and the media serve each other in democratic America? What is the larger public good that they both need to affirm? By stepping back from the self-interested rhetoric that influences both tribal and media rhetoric, we can discover some reasonable affinities between the media and religion, some areas for healthy conflict, and even some directions for religious sustenance in an increasingly high-tech world. Four healthy tensions are crucial for the future of tribal religion and mass communication in democracy: (1) balancing space-binding and time-binding culture and communication, (2) balancing tribal and public interests, (3) balancing secular and religious culture, and (4) balancing technology and culture. The particularities of religious traditions challenge Americans' communal desire to embrace everyone democratically in public life, but they also open up insightful media criticism and foster habits of the heart that leaven our otherwise overly instrumental and pecuniary culture. As Martin E. Marty once said of denominations, we cannot live with them and we cannot live without them.¹³ In a similar fashion the mainstream mass media in America cannot live with religion and cannot live without it. Meanwhile Christian tribes cannot live with or without the secular media. A healthy tension between the media and Christianity is ultimately a good thing for democracy in America, as long as both sides are civil even when they disagree.

1

Conversing about Faith and Media in America



Alexis de Tocqueville recalled reading a news story during his visit to the United States in the 1830s about a court in New York where a witness declared that he did not believe in the existence of God or the immortality of the soul. As a result of the witness's confession, the judge refused "to accept his oath, given, he said, that the witness had destroyed in advance all the faith that could have been put in his words." Apparently astonished by the story, Tocqueville added to his report the fact that the newspaper offered no commentary about the judge's decision.¹ Tocqueville wondered how a witness's account of an event could be disregarded simply because the witness did not believe in God. The whole matter astonished Tocqueville but apparently caused little amazement to the reporter who covered the trial.

American democracy depends on religion, but not on any particular religious institutions. Religion in the United States is not fundamentally about church-building programs and theological education, although it certainly includes these kinds of endeavors. Nor is religion largely the pronouncements of Rome, the synodical meetings of Presbyterians, or the conventions of Baptists. As Tocqueville concludes, religion in America

includes dynamic cultural activities anchored deeply in the practices of the people. New World Christianity, writes Tocqueville, is “democratic and republican.” Each sect, he observes, “adores God in its manner, but all sects preach the same morality in the name of God.” As a result, Tocqueville concludes, “America is . . . the place in the world where the Christian religion has most preserved genuine powers over souls; and nothing shows better how useful and natural to man it is in our day, since the country in which it exercises the greatest empire is at the same time the most enlightened and most free.”²

American religious life is like an ongoing discussion, intimate but open-ended and regulated by social propriety. Sharing what Tocqueville calls “an ostensible respect for Christian morality and equity,” Americans join together in religious conversations about who they are and where they are headed as a nation.³ The American future is wide open, just like the outcome of a rich and meaningful conversation among friends. Without the burden of the particularity of one tradition, Americans are not inclined to pay full obeisance to the past. Instead they imagine together a future that is possible, even if not probable. Sometimes such imagining is deeply religious, as within a tribe, whereas other times it is more broadly nonsectarian. In both cases Americans frequently have perceived the hoped-for future in religious metaphors and language. Americans have always seen their collective future partly in the sermons and postworship discussions across the land, in the daily prayer of millions of individuals, and especially in the heart-felt religious enthusiasms of citizens. Religion is still a major part of the unregulated conversation that makes America democratic and republican.

American Christianity, too, is not like a scripted sermon or carefully crafted lecture but rather like a conversation played out on the public stages of porch, pew, and religious periodical. The conversation occurs in all types of media, from pulpits to newspapers and from electronic media to cyberspace. Whereas in many countries peoples’ religious life is purely personal, private, and traditional—anchored largely in the ossified rituals of the past—in the United States matters of faith have always been part of the ongoing discourse of public as well as private life. James W. Carey, one of the most astute communication theorists and historians in America, argues that the freedoms mentioned in the First Amendment—religion, speech, press, and assembly—are together a “compact way of describing a political economy.” The amendment, according to Carey, says “that people are free to gather together without the intrusion of the state or its

representatives. Once gathered, they are free to speak openly and fully. They are further free to write down what they have to say and to share it beyond the immediate place of utterance." Freedom of religion, he adds, was absolutely crucial for maintaining this open process of organizing, speaking, and recording Americans' thoughts: "Of all the freedoms of public life in the eighteenth century, freedom of religion was, perhaps, the most difficult liberty for Americans to adjust to. . . . No one could be excluded from the public realm on the basis of religion, the one basis upon which people were likely to exclude one another."⁴ If Carey is correct, the founders built religious conversation into the symbolic fabric of American society. America's freedom of religion is nothing short of the liberty to gather religiously, to talk religiously, and to publicize religiously.

This chapter describes the major rhetorical topoi that Americans use to interpret the relationships between mass media and Christianity. Along the way, it also accomplishes four purposes behind the entire volume: (1) to offer a rationale for documenting American religious history culturally in the mediated conversations of the people rather than institutionally in the official documents of churches, denominations, and parachurch organizations; (2) to reconstruct some of these American conversations about Christianity and the media as Christians and the general public have expressed them in and through the mass media primarily during the twentieth century; (3) to use the theory of communication developed by the Chicago School of Social Thought to illuminate the dynamic interplay of religion and the media in American life; and (4) to establish the importance of rhetorical imagination in the history of the relationship of media and Christianity in America.⁵ This history, representing national as well as local and parochial conversations, occurs as an ongoing dialogue about Americans' hopes and fears, not just about the media and religion.

The main focus of this chapter, however, is to describe the five major rhetorical topoi that serve as doors to the public arenas in which Americans imaginatively discussed the media and faith. These rhetorical topoi are conversion, discernment, communion, exile, and praise. Each of the subsequent chapters examines how the media and Christian tribes used the topoi in particular contexts. By "rhetoric" I do not mean empty verbiage or purely self-interested persuasion; nor do I mean false talk or ideological jargon. I simply mean the ways that people used meaningful verbal and nonverbal symbols to interpret their world, to build and share those interpretations with others, and sometimes to persuade outsiders to agree with tribal or mainstream beliefs. In this sense, rhetoric is essentially an

intentional form of persuasive communication in which participants pay attention to their public discourse, including how that discourse relates to their own self-identities, to others' identities, and to their private as well as other public interests. As Martin J. Medhurst and Thomas W. Benson suggest, the study and practice of rhetoric have a long and distinguished history in Western culture and certainly include the study of mass-mediated forms of communication.⁶ As a land of ongoing conversations, America is a lively symbolic arena in which tribal and mainstream rhetorics interact partly in and through the media.

The Rhetoric of Conversion

During the twentieth century mainstream American media and the church—by “church” I mean all Christian groups—created contrasting versions of the same vocational rhetoric: a calling to build media organizations that would attract, engage, and convert people to faith. As strange as it might seem today, the mass media in America were grounded in the particularly Protestant notion that communication, including the press, had the power to change people, to beneficially alter their perspective, and to usher them into a new community of shared hope. Tocqueville was amazed at the fact that in America “there is almost no small town that does not have its own newspaper.” He was also surprised at the amount of space in the press allocated to advertising, probably the most characteristically American form of public communication. The press, he recognized, extended to “all opinions of men. It modifies not only laws, but mores.”⁷ Americans negotiated and maintained culture partly through innovative public media, not just through ritualistic obedience to tradition. In other words, the constant process of cultural conversion, of cultural movement toward something new and potentially better, kept America afloat in the turbulent seas caused by the ongoing arrival of new and different people to the land of opportunity. As Alvin W. Gouldner points out, American Puritanism largely replaced the ritual of the Mass with the exhortation of the sermon. “In the sermon,” he writes, “the age of ideology could find a paradigm of righteous and energetic persuasion, the paradigm of a rhetoric that could mobilize men to deeds.”⁸ The advertiser and the preacher were two sides of the same rhetorical strategy—conversion. No matter how much they disagreed about the message, they shared a rhetoric of conversion.

By the time of Tocqueville's arrival in the 1830s, America was a land of open persuasion, propaganda, and presentations of all kinds—a country of

largely unrestricted attempts and wide-open means to convert others to one cause or another. Born out of hope in the future, America embraced a rhetoric of conversion that included both faith and commerce. Modern advertising, which is essentially an American invention, is particularly important as a form of nonreligious conversion. Indeed consumerism itself is a type of evangelization, a means of transforming people into dedicated buyers and then encouraging them to live faithfully in what Daniel Boorstin calls “consumption communities.”⁹ The ways that Americans imaginatively think of the media as means for improving society—whether through public-service campaigns, regulating media content, or winning the nation to Jesus Christ—are formed out of the nation’s strongly Protestant and deeply evangelical roots in a sermonical rhetoric of conversion. Some American Christians complain about the ways that the media try to entertain, inform, and persuade, but they rarely question whether the media should even try to influence citizens; the presumed propaganda function of the media is an accepted part of the mass-media’s evangelistic calling in the United States. Even national disasters become special media events in which Americans claim shared sentiments and call the country to become more of what it claims to be, a place of happiness and compassion, justice and peace. Governmental regulators believe that by shaping how the media are used they can socially engineer a better society—just as their opponents plead persuasively that the free market of unbridled liberty will create a better nation.

The rhetoric of conversion is a crucial aspect of the Protestant impulse in American culture, partly an outgrowth of the country’s legacy of revivalism. Television, of all of the mass media, has most captured the imaginations of Protestants who eagerly hope to use it to ameliorate social and psychological ills. Religious television is largely the product of conversionary-minded American Protestantism.¹⁰ Roman Catholic television, apart from the amazing popularity of Bishop Fulton J. Sheen in the 1950s, is largely imitative and derivative of Protestant programming.¹¹ Even the satellite network of Mother Angelica, one of the most striking Catholic television personalities, is grounded in a tribal call for conversion that beckons Catholic Christians back to the one true faith.¹² Judaism has produced only one moderately popular television celebrity, Jan Bresky; even he shares the conversionary rhetoric.¹³ American Protestants created a powerful rhetoric of conversion that shapes practically every excursion into religious broadcasting. Protestants have long imagined mass-media technologies as powerful tools for

transforming culture, building churches, and teaching society moral lessons. American media endeavors almost inevitably take on a sermonic quality.

Historically speaking, this Protestant enthusiasm for religious television in the United States is hardly surprising. From the printing press to early radio and eventually satellites, Protestants dominated religious mass communication in America. American Catholics and Jews were less interested in evangelization and far more preoccupied with maintaining their religio-ethnic identities across generations or simply assimilating into the largely Protestant nation. In other words, Protestant communication tended toward cultural conversion, while Catholic and Jewish communication tended toward cultural conservation. Of course there have been Protestant pockets of resistance, such as some North American Anabaptist communities and Midwestern enclaves of ethnic Lutheranism and Calvinism.¹⁴ In spite of such countervailing religious sentiments, however, the rhetoric of conversion is so strong in American Protestantism and so deeply entrenched in the public imagination that few religious groups are able to resist the lure of the imagery or to deny the aesthetic delight that such rhetoric elicits. The overall exploitation of mass communication by Americans is stunning. But the story of religious media in the United States is unparalleled around the world. Beginning with Puritan book publishing, continuing with the Bible and tract societies' revolution in mass printing and distribution during the 1830s, and culminating today in Protestant excursions into cyberspace, Protestant mass communication is a crucial element in the story of American cultural history, not just religious history.¹⁵ American history is partly the tale of a heterogeneous people balancing their conversionary desires to change each other with their communal hope to be a cohesive nation. To be American has meant to be both tribal and American, to pursue tribal interests but also those of the public good—both with conversionary zeal.¹⁶

The history of American media reflects the myriad ways that the nation and especially its Protestant tribes have tried to grow through conversion. Historians Harry S. Stout and Nathan O. Hatch address the significance of Protestant communication in early America. Stout's work on early American preaching documents the influential role of the sermon as a public act of cultural formation, not just religious expression.¹⁷ Hatch shows how preaching, music, and later printing generated a multimedia explosion of popular Protestantism.¹⁸ Long before the rise of American fundamentalism and well before the development of broadcast evangelism, American Protestantism was anchored in public persuasion as much as in personal

piety. In this sense, American Protestant culture has always had its evangelistic impulses, and the distinctions between evangelical and mainline groups have often reflected contrasting rhetoric about conversion more than widely different commitments to conversion.¹⁹

As Perry Miller argued, nineteenth-century Protestant thought about the predicted benefits of mass communication largely drove the nation's rapid industrial expansion and paved the way for the twentieth-century explosion in religious media in America. From the mid-nineteenth century to the present, American Protestants became the champions of religiously inspired technological rhetoric. Their evangelistic hopes blended powerfully with the nation's technological dreams and its ongoing industrial progress. Faith *and* technology became faith *in* technology, and eventually it was hard to distinguish between missionary activity and technological innovation.²⁰ Missionary endeavors, more than other religious activities, became matters of technique and causes for technological development and celebration. American Protestants did not just use technology; they thought in terms of technology. In Jacques Ellul's language, they became "technologically minded" religious entrepreneurs.²¹ The rhetoric of conversion drove America's technological imagination.

Of all of the metaphors used by American Protestants to describe earthly paradise, perhaps the most lasting and evocative is the City upon a Hill. New England Puritans such as Massachusetts governor John Winthrop, who used the phrase to coalesce the Puritanical imagination, dreamed of that city. If the Church of England was unredeemable, perhaps America, the virgin wilderness, could become God's new community—a beacon of spiritual light for the world, a truly holy city, the New Jerusalem. Three centuries later, Republican president Ronald Reagan saw the same city. Hardly a Puritan, Reagan was a movie star-turned-political-orator who preached the metaphor, but with a combination of jeremiad and apocalypse. His hilltop city was a providential place of freedom and prosperity, God's chosen beacon of liberty to the rest of the world. But it was also a city of villains, including Democrats and Communists. The Puritans had dreamed of the New Jerusalem in sermons and books. America's president, dubbed the Great Communicator, dreamed on television. His pulpit was the Oval Office of the White House, and his national congregation was a remarkably heterogeneous collection of residents of the New World, including converted Democrats who helped elect him in 1980.

The rhetorical idea of a place for the American Dream—however defined—came alive in this nation's discourse about the media during the

twentieth century. The media came to represent the general hope that society could be improved through the power of mass communication. This rhetoric was an ode to persuasion or, to put it more religiously, an aria to the power of symbols to foster social progress as well as to save souls. This quasi-religious calling appears in virtually every form of mass communication in the United States: when a televangelist gets on the airways to win people to Jesus Christ; when an advertiser pays \$8 million for a handful of thirty-second spots during the Super Bowl; when political candidates try to control the ways that news organizations will present their case to the American people; or when bookstores fill their shelves with the newest round of self-help books. If Americans share any ideas in common, says sociologist Allan Nevins, surely one of them is a hope in the future.²² The future is a source of hope precisely because of the presumed malleability of the human condition through communication, from therapy sessions to self-help literature and workout videos. "A new day is dawning," say thousands of commercials and preach hundreds of Christian radio and television broadcasts; the City upon a Hill is under construction.

In the first half of the twentieth century, Louis Wirth and his colleagues in Chicago expressed this evangelistic optimism in the midst of the city's rapid industrialization and the resulting decline in social solidarity among traditional ethnic groups. Wirth wondered whether the growing "mass" of people could become an "organized group," a people of shared sentiment and common values rather than just a collection of disparate egos and personalities. The mass, he wrote, "has no common customs or traditions, no institutions, and no rules governing the action of the individuals." It is made up of "unattached individuals or, at best, individuals who for the time being behave not as members of a group, playing specific roles representative of their position in that group, but rather as discrete entities." He perceived that mass communication was "rapidly becoming, if it is not already, the main framework of the web of social life." In the midst of the apparent fragmentation of society, Wirth and his colleagues remained hopeful that the media could "hold together" the "human race."²³ If mass media were the problem because they challenged tribal traditions, perhaps they were also the solution that could rebind the nation to a new consensus. If mass communication could break apart relationships and weaken cultural customs, perhaps it could also rebuild new, better American communities of shared values and beliefs.²⁴ After all, argued Wirth, Hitler "and his cohorts" recognized that the media "instrumentalities" were the "principal means for moving great masses of men into at least temporary adherence to their

objectives and in using them for their own purpose. That they almost succeeded and that the rest of the world had to pay a terrible price in blood and treasure at the last moment to avert their domination might serve as a warning to those who minimize the importance of mass communication."²⁵ The media were two-edged swords; they could cut swaths of freedom or of oppression. It was up to democratic America to use communication technologies wisely to build consensus for the future of liberty.

Americans' hopes and fears about the media are two sides of the same rhetoric of conversion. As conversations within American churches and denominations increasingly addressed the growth of the modern mass media, they alternately focused on the perceived problems, especially secularization, and on the opportunities, particularly evangelizing the masses. But in both cases Americans tended to think hopefully about the kind of society and even the type of world that they might be able to produce through judicious use of media technologies. From congregational multimedia systems to the use of computers and the Internet in public schools, Americans still imagine the potential for social and cultural progress as primarily a technical issue.

The evangelistic metaphor of conquering evil gives American rhetoric about the media a moral-spiritual cast. The editors of the official periodical of the United Methodist Church wrote in 1948 about movies, "We believe the support of good pictures by good people is a wider method of winning quality than is censorship. To that end we direct our Board of Education to examine the motion pictures, and to inform our people weekly in *The Christian Advocate* whether these pictures meet our standards of the true, the good and the beautiful, and which are proper for children, youth and adults." The medium is a "powerful persuader," the magazine warned, that "has lured thousands . . . into evil habits," but it can "just as easily turn more thousands against immorality and crime, if it will portray sin in its sordidness."²⁶ The belief that bad can be converted into good resonates deeply with American sentiments about hard work and the promises of the future. "In mass communication we have unlocked a new social force of as yet incalculable magnitude," writes Wirth. "In comparison with all previous social means for building or destroying the world this new force looms as a gigantic instrument of infinite possibilities for good or evil."²⁷ Wirth imagined not just like a humanistic sociologist, but also like an optimistic and pragmatic American.

Americans feel a sense of evangelistic calling to use the media to usher in a better world. No matter how disillusioned they become about particular

misuses of mass communication, Americans remain sanguine about the future, which will presumably introduce even better technologies and more efficient ways of creating a veritable heaven on earth. This kind of optimistic rhetoric may be the most important strain of thought in the interaction of Christianity and the media in the twentieth century. Americans planted secular versions of the rhetoric of the City upon a Hill in virtually every social institution that uses communication technologies. As the nation moved into the twenty-first century, the rhetoric of evangelistic calling was as strong as ever, although its contemporary expressions frequently were disconnected from its religious roots. If nothing else, the media symbolized the potential for transforming a nation of disparate people into one land of shared hope. Nothing held together this rhetoric more powerfully than the fear that America was becoming too diverse. "Today the myth of an intractably divided people—a polyglot people divvied up by race, class, sex, language," writes columnist Paul Greenberg, "is celebrated as diversity. And sure enough, we become more diverse. For we become what we celebrate. Myths still make reality. And the integrity, the oneness of civil life breaks up. From out of the one, we become many."²⁸ The evangelistic calling of Americans is to remake the many as one, to forge unity even while promoting liberty. The problem is that Americans often cannot agree on who or what that "one" is. Meanwhile the mainstream media implicitly take up the cause of consensus, offering the market system as the process for unifying Americans under the creed of consumption. In response Christian tribes often clamor for a rhetoric of discernment to help them keep their cultural distance from the perceived evils of the wider world, including the media.

The Rhetoric of Discernment

If Americans think about using the media to convert everyone to a world of peace and harmony, they also imagine the media as sources of differentiation, diversity, and competing dominions. Religion, as Carey points out, was a crucial part of the U.S. Constitution's First Amendment precisely because religion is a source of tension and disagreement in any multicultural society.²⁹ The nation's competing religions are a crucial dimension of American self-identity. During the twentieth century the United States became a nation of a myriad of international and local faiths, of cults and denominations, parachurch groups and religious movements. When Wirth and Robert E. Park looked at Chicago in the early decades of the twentieth century, they saw growing diversity represented largely by the influx of

Roman Catholics and the public visibility of Protestant denominations that tended to attract different social classes, from upscale Presbyterians and Episcopalians to middle-class Baptists and Methodists, and from working-class Pentecostals to the inner-city black churches that Park fondly studied. "We are forced," Park wrote in "Missions and the Modern World," "to realize that a society whose intellectual direction consists only of unrelated specialisms must drift and that we dare not drift any longer." The task of missions, he argued, is "to create from the existing social and cultural units a common culture and a moral solidarity in which all can share."³⁰

In the American imagination the differences among people are simultaneously the bases for intertribal division and the sources of strength. Taken too far, diversity destroys the common sentiments that hold the nation together culturally. American diversity has come to include special-interest groups based on gender, sexual orientation, leisure activities, political issues such as gun control and abortion, and probably thousands of others. The mass media, as agents of social change, are right in the middle of the fray of competing cultural tribes. As an alternative to forging a society of superficial homogeneity, Americans create, discern, and celebrate differences among themselves—as long as those differences do not fundamentally challenge the "sacred" nonnegotiables of what it means to be an American, such as freedom and hope. The intersection of religion and the media is one of the most cherished and contested public arenas in which Americans discern the many competing self-identities.

Mass media, as agents of diversification and differentiation, enable new religious groups and quasi-religious movements to form across the boundaries of geographic space and even across traditional religious groups. These new groups and parachurch movements are usually grounded in such things as shared moral standards, ideological beliefs, missionary causes, and self-help philosophies. Most of these organizations encourage members to take their faith seriously by participating financially if not symbolically in social movements that transcend American individualism. Evangelicals may be the major media participants, but mainline Protestants and Roman Catholics are involved as well. These diverse groups and movements enliven local churches while contributing to what Robert Wuthnow cogently calls the "restructuring of American religion" into ideologically polarized, cross-denominational categories.³¹ American public conversation during the twentieth century increasingly addressed the growing differences among citizens rather than their shared beliefs and collective

actions—the same trends that troubled the Chicago School decades earlier. The line between healthy cultural differentiation and destructive social conflict is not always clear in America. Rhetorics of discernment enable a cultural group to identify itself as a distinct tribe and to strengthen its cohesiveness across space, but they can also challenge the common cultural threads of cross-tribal national identity.

For their limited experience with electronic media, members of the Chicago School captured an amazingly persuasive snapshot of how mass media fostered cultural fragmentation in America. “The characteristic feature of public opinion in our society,” writes Wirth, “lies both in the fact that so many human beings are affiliated with a variety of organized groups, each of which represents only a segment of their interest, and that another large proportion of our fellow men is unattached to any stable group.”³² Public consensus, he realizes, depends on agreement among diverse individuals and groups. If the concept of “public opinion” is to mean anything more than a statistical rendering of how people in such a heterogeneous society feel about a given issue or problem, then such consensus somehow has to help reconnect the various competing groups that make up the nation. But if public opinion replaces all tribalism it will also destroy the cultural distinctions necessary for strong tribes. “In modern society,” says Wirth, “men exercise their influence and voice their aspirations through delegated powers, operating through functionaries and leaders, through lobbies, party organizations, religious denominations, and a variety of other organized groups.”³³ In other words, the mass media depend on other mediating bodies in society for democracy to work well; “organized groups,” in particular, can participate through such media in the wider social world. If an American is no longer comfortable in one or another group, he or she can simply move along to other voluntary associations. Without such mediating organizations, Americans might only be able to participate in society as lone individuals or as an incoherent mass.

The interaction of the media and Christianity in America is part of this massive shift from relatively small rural towns and local geographies of shared culture to a heterogeneous nation of many identity-forming groups with their own speech communities and their distinct modes of cultural discernment. Carey, relying extensively on the work of Canadian scholar Harold Adams Innis as well as that of the Chicago School, uses the term “centrifugal” to describe this process of social and cultural fragmentation and diversification.³⁴ Mass-media technologies, he argues, help facilitate the development of “specialized media of communication located in ethnic,

occupational, class, regional, religious and other 'special interest' segments of society." These segmented groups, formerly dependent upon "face-to-face contact," are increasingly organized into new, national groups held together by mass-mediated symbols that "transcend space, time, and culture."³⁵ In the early twentieth century, while mainstream American media were evangelistically gathering up massive national audiences for advertisers of consumer goods, tribal media were helping subcultures to stake out their own symbolic terrain within the national landscape. In the early years of the century, religious groups did this almost entirely through in-house publishing, but by the 1920s the centrifugal energy moved partly to radio, then to television in the 1950s and 1960s, and eventually to the Internet in the 1990s. Thus, while national media enabled the formation of relatively homogeneous consumer cultures, they also facilitated the creation and expansion of all kinds of specialized national tribes. Indeed the cultural threats of secular media elicited flurries of tribal responses through their own media. Rhetorics of conversion led to opposing rhetorics of discernment.

American Christian groups, from denominations to parachurch ministries, used media to build their distinctive identities and to differentiate themselves from others in the expanding nation. In fact, the tribal call to conversion was often not so much a reaching out to the unsaved as it was a means for Christian movements and institutions to assert their own beliefs to themselves, on the one hand, and to legitimize their particular beliefs to the rest of society, on the other. Christian tribes immediately began using radio in the 1920s to express publicly their distinctive beliefs and to discern the differences between themselves and what they imagined as apostate mainstream culture. Of course the people who operated these early radio stations claimed that they were evangelizing the nation, but there is not much evidence that most of them were very successful. Clearly, however, a public presence on the radio helped such tribes convince themselves that they were a group to be reckoned with in American society—that they had a distinct message and the God-given authority to express themselves. One after another, dozens of Protestant denominations started radio ministries largely to show their own group that they were important in the expanding national culture. Mass communication became the major public means for a kind of self-referencing legitimacy among American religious groups, especially Protestants. They perceived broadcasting as a vehicle to help them step out of the parochialism of the religio-ethnic tribe and into the cosmopolitan world of the new, expanding

America. Religious groups could thereby articulate their own rhetorical voice across geographic space. Christian journals of comment and opinion, for instance, became public but also tribal voices of discernment for particular Roman Catholic and Protestant traditions. Like organizations that today launch public ministries on the Internet, thereby circumventing the older, established media, these organizations that operated radio and later television ministries took their distinct messages directly to American listeners and viewers.

The growth of the mass media in twentieth-century America, then, did not simply homogenize Christianity within the expanding industrial nation—although it did diminish the importance of some demarcations among Christian groups—but instead facilitated forms of religious discernment already begun by print media in the nineteenth century. Throughout the book the word “tribe” refers to each of the Christian groups and movements in America. I mean no disrespect by that term. Rather I hope to encourage discussion about the ongoing “tribalization” of American Christianity. Christianity in the United States is remarkably dynamic and diverse, with a plethora of different groups claiming dominion over their own, distinctive versions of the faith. Often these tribes differ as much in their cultural sensibilities and styles of rhetoric as they do in their official beliefs. They cultivate distinct habits of the heart and modes of expression, not just opposing worldviews or theological and biblical doctrines. Some of these are independent local congregations, for instance, while others are relatively small but amazingly cohesive associations and parachurch ministries that exist in and through their own specialized media, from magazines to broadcast programs and Web sites. Carey argues that beginning in the 1970s such cultural fragmentation exploded under the pressures of new media, from cable TV to the VCR and eventually cyberspace.³⁶ But American Christianity has been tremendously diverse at least from the early years of the twentieth century forward. For all of the apparent standardization and homogenization among so-called megachurches during the 1980s and 1990s, and in spite of the weakening of some denominational allegiances, American Christianity is still a smorgasbord of tribes.

Using rhetorics of discernment, the various Christian groups in America formed their own social institutions, including specialized mass media, partly to shore up support for their local groups grounded in familial, ethnic, and community ties. Religious tribes engaged print and electronic media as rhetorical mediating structures between the mainstream media institutions and the individual members of their tribes.³⁷ No reading of the

history of the relationships between Christianity and the media would make sense without recognizing that the social interactions among religious and nonreligious groups, including between the media and local churches, often are influenced by other social institutions, from schools to denominations and religious media. In his early sociology textbook, *Social Organization: A Study of the Larger Mind* (1909), Charles Horton Cooley identified the crucial importance of the “primary group” in shaping individual self-identity. Primary groups, in his view, included “the family, the play-group of children, and the neighborhood or community of elders.”³⁸ Church communities often provided religion-based primary groups that somewhat insulated the local tribe from the mainstream mass media.

But Cooley also argued that the “existing creeds” of the churches, “formulated in a previous state of thought, have lost that relative truth that they once had and are now, for most of us, not creeds at all, since they are incredible.” “We need to believe,” he wrote, but “we shall believe what we can.”³⁹ So what could people believe in twentieth-century America? Could traditional religious and orthodox creeds, often expressed in printed media, meaningfully differentiate among religious groups in America? “Without some regular and common service of the ideal, something in the way of prayer and worship,” wrote Cooley, “pessimism and selfishness are almost sure to encroach upon us.”⁴⁰ Cooley could not shake off his own intellectual pretensions in order to see more lucidly the grassroots dynamism of populist Christianity. He hoped for a new, rational faith anchored in basic principles that everyone, including the well-educated person, could believe. Like later Progressives, Cooley wanted to overcome the nation’s competing rhetorics of discernment with a rational rhetoric of communion, but the new mass-mediated alternatives to the primary group would make such national consensus increasingly unlikely. Tribes often generated their own personality cults and in-house experts who depended on strong rhetorics of discernment to maintain tribal status and authority.

Cooley and the other members of the Chicago School believed that the mainstream national media could serve a “quasi-religious” purpose by fostering rational substitutes for the primary group and local tribes. John Dewey thought, for instance, that the newspaper could help to usher in “‘one world’ of intelligence and understanding.”⁴¹ Faith no longer needed to be expressed with parochial particularity because, as Cooley put it, “Jesus himself had no system: he felt and taught the human sentiments that underlie religion and the conduct that expresses them. . . . The perennial truth of what Christ taught comes precisely from the fact that it was not a system, but an

intuition and expression of higher sentiments the need of which is a central and enduring element in our best experience." Cooley even argued that the "less intellectual a religious symbol is the better, because it less confines the mind." He concluded that the church is "possibly moving toward a differentiated unity, in which the common element will be mainly sentiment—such sentiments as justice, kindness, liberty and service. These are sufficient for goodwill and cooperation, and leave room for all the differentiation of ideas and methods that the diversity of life requires."⁴² Cooley's Social Gospel essentially rejected the tribalization of faith in favor of a more generic and unified religion that would rise above the clatter of denominations and squelch the cacophony of sects and cults. Cooley saw the importance of local primary groups, but he also perceived the need for new groups that would reach beyond parochial mythology for a more scientific, cultured, and universal approach to the religious life. Cooley and his colleagues discerned a fundamental difference between formal, rational forms of knowledge and more informal, personal ways of knowing.⁴³ They sought a new type of non-religious knowing that would somehow combine science and religion. In other words, they hungered for a national rhetoric of discernment that would have the power to distinguish between knowledge and superstition, between mere custom or habit and rational thought and action.

Of course in hindsight Cooley and his colleagues misread the times. First, the mainstream media never were able to provide the kind of public enlightenment that would make parochial religious belief unnecessary. Walter Lippmann, who shared many of the Chicago School's sentiments about merging faith and science, later argued in *Public Opinion* that American society should have the equivalent of Plato's philosopher-kings who would use the national media to spread truth and wisdom.⁴⁴ As Carey has suggested, Lippmann rejected the need for a public; the news experts would somehow be able to know truth and to act upon that truth without the vagaries of public sentiment or the traditionalism and parochialism of the tribe. Lippmann's own rhetoric of discernment distinguished between experts and common citizens, between the intelligentsia and the less-discerning citizens. He created a new tribe of reporter-kings while rejecting the possibility for a cross-tribal public. The "public," argues Carey, was actually the "God term of the press, the term without which the press does not make any sense. In so far as the press is grounded, it is grounded in the public."⁴⁵ Under Lippmann's scenario, the religious tribes in America are part of the problem rather than part of the solution to the nation's need for

unity; religious groups foster special-interest rhetoric, unenlightened discernment, and eclectic dominion.

The Chicago School was wrong, secondly, in its hope that a new Social Gospel would replace sectarian religion. The so-called liberal church movement gained momentum early in the twentieth century, but the real story of American Christianity, in terms of growth and impact, was the uncanny ability of traditional denominations to more or less keep their spiritual and theological moorings in the midst of the turbulent storms occurring in the surrounding culture.⁴⁶ The United States was created largely by Europeans seeking religious and other freedoms; since then one religious group after another has taken its own rhetorical place in the nation's conversations about what it means to be American. As a result, America is about as religiously tribalized as one can imagine in a unified land, with new religious groups born every year and older ones transforming themselves into new and varied institutions—a stunning array of religious variety maintained partly in and through tribal media. If anything, the rhetoric of the Social Gospel was subsumed by liberal democratic thought and increasingly disappeared as a distinct theology with its own public conversation. At least this is what happened at formerly religious American universities that tried to hang on to the ethos of the Social Gospel without maintaining the particularity of Christian tradition and the close ties to sponsoring denominations.⁴⁷ When a cultural group fails to discern its differences with the wider culture, it is often assimilated and ceases to exist as a separate tribe with its own conversations. As Raymond Williams posits, a religion is a distinctive zone of signification that simultaneously exists within a wider culture and society.⁴⁸ Although a religious tribe's membership may be relatively small, usually its rhetorical claims are broader and deeper than those of the wider culture. This is partly why in America religious rhetorics of discernment will always represent a threat to democracy even as they foster the moral backdrop necessary for civil discourse. There can be no democracy without the freedom to discern. Religion and public opinion, in particular, are both expressions of the social will, as Ferdinand Tönnies suggests, and therefore will always more or less conflict.⁴⁹

The Rhetoric of Communion

Cooley and his compatriots in Chicago recognized that emerging centripetal media were increasingly shaping the cultural contours of American life. Citizens willingly consumed these mainstream media, presumably

because they enjoyed the narratives, sentiments, and personalities of popular culture. In addition, Americans desired to be “one,” to find a common culture in the midst of their cultural and ethnic diversity. Most American Christians were not only tribal but also patriotic; they loved the land of the free and wanted the best for those who identified with other tribes. John Locke believed that to be a member of the public was to accept a calling.⁵⁰ If he was right, members of the Christian tribes heard two callings and resided in two worlds, which Augustine called the “City of Man” and the “City of God.”⁵¹ Members of the tribes had dual allegiances, two masters. National freedom made it possible for tribes both to cultivate their own subcultures and to participate in the cross-tribal culture disseminated through mainstream mass media. These national media gave Americans an opportunity to participate in this supratribal world of shared national sentiment and belief. The telegraph launched electronic national communication in the 1830s, eventually creating the national news services and national news media. National magazines also contributed to coast-to-coast consumer cultures beginning in the 1890s. By the 1930s the new medium of radio was part of the national system of communication. As Carey puts it, “Modern communications media allowed individuals to be linked, for the first time, directly to a national community without the mediating influence of regional and other local affiliations.”⁵² Wirth observed that the new mass media “transcend the peculiar interests and preoccupations of the special and segmental organized groups and direct their appeal to the mass.”⁵³ Mass media symbolized a new American unity, a national communion of all people from every tribe.

The interaction of Christianity and the media occurs in the midst of the rise of increasingly visible and powerful national media. By and large these mainstream media had little interest in distinctly religious issues and institutions throughout the twentieth century. The major nationally syndicated newspaper columnists and radio and television networks generally overlooked the proliferation of religious tribes. Mainstream news media historically ignored religion unless it was directly related to events that were politically or economically newsworthy. Similarly, network television, arguably the major American storyteller of the 1950s through the 1990s, only occasionally paid attention to Christianity. Christian individuals consumed large quantities of mainstream media, but mainstream media were interested primarily in garnering heterogeneous audiences for advertisers, not in addressing the specialized interests of religious groups. Indeed the various sections of any contemporary issue of *USA Today*—sports, money,

life, and news—reflect which secular groups were granted rhetorical space in the emerging, national media already in the 1930s. As Wirth put it, “Mass communication is rapidly becoming, if it is not already, the main framework of the web of social life.” Striving to garner larger audiences, these media “tend furthermore to be as near everything to everybody and hence nothing to anybody as it is possible to be.”⁵⁴ In other words, visible national media yoked themselves abstractly to national markets instead of to existing tribal cultures, creating new means for Americans to create rhetorics of communion across geographic space.

Without a state church and with a largely free-market approach to media regulation, the United States was a fertile ground for the interaction of the Christian metanarrative with the mainstream media’s own subnarratives—those mediated stories not linked explicitly to any particular worldview or to a political philosophy. Indeed a major part of the story of church-media interaction is the rhetorical tensions and continuities between the Christian Gospel and the everyday stories of mainstream news, drama, comedy, sports, and advertising. Within each of the Christian tribes, Christianity’s core narrative—the Gospel, or the Christian metanarrative—interacts with the more general and contingent narratives of mainstream media. Instead of eclipsing tribal culture, the large mass-media empires found themselves increasingly at odds with the various tribes’ own public spokespersons, from media critics to lobbyists and media boycotters. The deeper that the mainstream media were able to penetrate American mass audiences, the more feisty and in some cases resilient many religious tribes seemed to become. Intratribal communion was often much more powerful than nationalistic, consumer-oriented, and market-driven communion. As Chapter 3 shows, religious periodicals’ responses to the rise of television were sometimes finely tuned and deeply penetrating critiques of the media, but such critiques were almost entirely for tribal rather than general consumption. If religious journals wanted to maintain their own tribal audiences, clearly they had to address subjects and concerns that their readers shared. A large measure of the interaction of media and Christianity in the twentieth century was the creative ways that Christian tribes and their media critics assessed and evaluated mainstream media. Tribes often assumed that the nation’s mainstream media and broader culture were one and the same. By discerning the difference between themselves and the mainstream culture, the tribes unified their own ranks and built national communities of resistance. Tribes often were far more interested in internal rhetorics of communion that directly served the cohesiveness of the tribe than they were in

supratribal rhetorics of communion that seemingly threatened tribal autonomy and integrity.

Nevertheless, the growth of mainstream media put Christian tribes on the defensive with respect to both social control and social status. For good or for bad, the mass media became enormously important agents of social control that tended to serve the interests of mass markets and advertisers more than the needs of either the general public or any of the special-interest tribes. American communication companies became experts at identifying markets and producing media products and programming that would attract economically viable audiences and readerships. The systems of public polling and market research, as Carey says, became substitutes for the public. "Public life started to evaporate with the emergence of the public opinion industry and the apparatus of polling," writes Carey. "In political theory, the public was replaced by the interest group as the key political actor. But interest groups, by definition, operate in the private sector, behind the scenes, and their relationship to public life is essentially propagandistic and manipulative."⁵⁵ Polling, market research, and all kinds of consumer- and political-oriented research gave the mainstream media and their allied agencies an influential role as seemingly legitimate agents of social control. The national media became the real evangelists, the main tag team that carried the mantle of social control directly into the various tribes that made up "mass society." Meanwhile religious tribes responded both defensively and proactively through their own centrifugal media and somewhat through the mainstream media to assert their particular interests and to express their sentiments in order to protect their stake in the American Dream.

The mainstream media's rhetoric of communion entered the cultural contest for social status as well, creating a phenomenal national system of fame, celebrity, and popularity. Although the secular media pay attention occasionally to national religious figures such as Billy Graham, they focus primarily on entertainers, newsmakers, and experts. Americans were inclined to identify themselves with particular consumption communities as much as with religious, ethnic, or other traditionally defined groups. By the end of the twentieth century there was essentially no difference between Christians' and non-Christians' rates of adoption of new media technologies, while the older technologies such as television and radio had saturated the Christian tribes. Interpreting some of the most revealing data of all, researcher George Barna says that it "is possible to argue persuasively that many Christians have been seduced by the power of the tools

they have acquired. Born again adults spend an average of seven times more hours each week watching television than they do participating in spiritual pursuits such as Bible reading, prayer, and worship."⁵⁶ Certainly tribes continued to develop their own media and to create tribal rhetorics of communion. Mainstream national media never fully eclipsed alternative, centrifugal media and their tribal cultures. Park defined the word "communication" in the context of "self interest" or ego. Communication, he said, is "a form of interaction or a process that takes place between persons—that is to say, individuals with an ego, individuals with a point of view, conscious of themselves and more or less oriented in a moral world."⁵⁷ But national news and entertainment media seemed to offer American tribes an attractive means of celebrating shared culture. Such national culture looked more cosmopolitan and sophisticated, if not simply more interesting and more fun, than tribal cultures.

As personal communication is a means for individuals to express their independent egos, the media are means for people to create, maintain, and change common cultures—shared ways of life, collective egos. "Culture includes," writes Park, "all that is communicable. . . . Communication creates, or makes possible at least, that consensus and understanding among the individual components of a social group which eventually gives it and them the character not merely of society but of a cultural unit. It spins a web of custom and mutual expectation which binds together social entities as diverse as the family group, a labor organization, or the haggling participants in a village market." Park summarizes this cultural process as "transmitting tradition" and argues that communication can maintain traditions in two dimensions, space and time—that is, across geographic space and through generational time. He makes his case with one of the most-quoted sentences from Dewey's writings: "Society not only continues to exist by transmission, by communication, but may fairly be said to exist in transmission, in communication."⁵⁸ Communication is a form of communion—literally a way of cocreating culture and maintaining shared ways of life in time and space. Although communication can drive people apart through argument and antipathy, it can also bring them together through empathy and consensus. In the twentieth century, national entertainment and news media became enormous arenas in and through which individuals could transcend their tribal affiliations to participate in national rhetorics of communion.

Already in the early years of the twentieth century the rituals of the commercial media were substituting for the more organic and historic

traditions of particular American tribes. In short, the escalating power and authority of the mainstream mass media reflected largely the interests of the behemoths of advertising, public relations, marketing, and audience research. The national, commercial media had little or no interest in transmitting cultural tradition, let alone religious tradition. The media were busily creating new, consumer-driven rituals such as nightly television viewing, daily newspaper reading, and especially regular shopping—first at downtown department stores and eventually at suburban malls, which by and large substituted for the pub in American culture. Moreover, the national media companies became increasingly sophisticated at carving out national niche markets for various groups, especially American youth. The music industry and radio stations collaborated to transform much of the radio business into a fairly national and highly standardized system of musical “hits” and personalities.⁵⁹ Radio “stood at the very center of American society,” argues Daniel Czitrom, “an integral part of economic, political and cultural processes. In its mature state radio succeeded not in fulfilling the utopian visions first aroused by wireless technology, but in appropriating those urges for advertising interests.”⁶⁰ Later the media added MTV to the mix—the most researched television channel in the history of America. MTV was a marketing machine that transformed commercials for rock music recordings and concerts into a popular entertainment form.⁶¹ Mainstream media were uninterested, at best, in tradition, let alone religious traditions. If anything, the American mass media helped to transform established religious traditions such as Christmas into consumer events.⁶² Shopping became a ritual of communion in consumer society—a means symbolically of connecting with others and affirming a collective identity. Consumer markets replaced much local community and religious tradition.

Of course the subnarratives of the media, anchored in their own mythology of consumerism and secular hope, could not eclipse all religious traditions built on the Christian metanarrative. The interaction of the subnarratives of mainstream media with the metanarrative of Christianity, interpreted by the faith’s own communities of interpretation, is an enormous part of the story of the interaction of Christianity and the media in the twentieth century. Using their own centripetally organized media, Christian groups established distinct national identities and fostered communities of resistance against mainstream culture. They also used their own communication channels to critique the wider cultural world in which they lived and in so doing reminded themselves who they were and what they believed and felt. In this sense, tribal leaders used media in a priestly way

to maintain rhetorics of communion and thereby to confirm and maintain their own, distinct tribal subcultures in the face of perceived threats from mass culture. As the mainstream media coalesce national consumer cultures, they also elicit moralistic tribal responses that reinforce unity within the tribe. Park perceptively suggests that Dewey's definition of communication as the "transmission of culture" seems to "identify the social with the moral order and limit the term 'social' to those relations of individuals that are personal, customary, and moral."⁶³ Tribal media in America helped religious subcultures to keep their own culture "close to home," both morally and theologically. In spite of the threats of mainstream national media to the ways of life of distinct Christian groups, tribal media continued to play a crucial role in maintaining separate and often critical communities of cultural resistance. Americans juggled their national and tribal commitments in order to maintain religious diversity in the midst of their growing communion within the wider consumer culture. With few exceptions, they simultaneously broke bread at two communion tables—the nation and the tribe.

The Rhetoric of Exile

No matter how deeply American Christians dug themselves into the growing national consumer culture, many of them simply did not feel at home there. Throughout the twentieth century even some of the most financially successful Christians criticized the wider culture. The tribes have always felt uneasy about the media's self-serving representations of truth, happiness, and security.⁶⁴ Theologian Donald B. Rogers suggests, "Today the people of faith find themselves once again the minority in a mildly hostile cultural environment. The environment is hostile in that it presents patterns, values and symbols that are in significant dissonance with those envisioned and put forth by the faith community." The automobile, he writes, transformed parish life, enabling people of faith to cut their ties to the neighborhood in which they worshiped and to "ignore that neighborhood's problems."⁶⁵ Similarly, television is transforming the context in which the church lives and ministers. The church in twentieth-century America is in exile, he concludes, walking a "tight-rope in a foreign culture" and trying to keep from losing its "cultural/faith identity." And as with the exile of the Old Testament Jews, the contemporary exile is a "time of humble yet determined waiting for a future that would become the reality only for subsequent generations. . . . Exile called for a strategy of quixotic character

rather than heroic, a strategy of comedic tendencies rather than tragic." He urges this exiled people "to maintain tenaciously the ritual and educational activities that communicated the richest parts of their past to the next generations."⁶⁶ In both Hebrew and Christian history the exiled community became self-consciously aware of its need to reassert its uniqueness for fear the tribe would otherwise lose its own role in redemptive history.

The interaction of the media and Christianity in the last century is partly the story of religious tribes finding themselves in exile and then re-creating their distinct ways of life in a new rhetorical vernacular. American Christians today are in a cultural situation oddly similar to that of minority faiths in ancient Greece. There was no single Greek religious tradition any more than there is *an* American religious tradition. The Greek polis had no "priests of the gods" or even "priests of a god."⁶⁷ Instead the Greeks used individual priests in order to address specific gods at particular temples. Myth was local and particular. Poets, on the other hand, were the "theologians" who made mention of gods and endeavored "to support a religious ethic by the sanctions of deities singularly ill fitted to the task." Greek philosophy, not the local Greek cult, advised "the more articulate Greek on the way life should be lived."⁶⁸ In addition, the tension in Greek society was not between myth and philosophy, but rather between *mythos* and *logos*. Just as philosophy dominated public life in Greece, the mainstream media dominate public life in the United States. Christian "mythology," like Greek *mythos*, seems particular, local, parochial, and exclusive—certainly nothing to inform the public square and to shape public philosophy. To the extent that the United States now has a working public philosophy as a basis for national discourse, the philosophy is formed not among the many religious tribes but rather out of the philosophy of life implicitly enacted like a national ritual in the mainstream media.

American Christians are fully able to participate, like other religious believers, in the life of the nation, but the vernacular of participation frighteningly seems to require them to shed their distinctive beliefs. Richard J. Neuhaus refers to this religiously compromised society as the "naked public square," a public place, both geographically and intellectually, without a strong sense of the presence of God or even the presence of people who believe in God.⁶⁹ Faith commitments are relegated to private space, so that anyone who enters the public square with a religious interest is likely to be dismissed as a fanatic or criticized as an interloper. Just as reporters do not normally admit their personal political biases, people of faith should be careful not to reveal publicly their religious commitments unless they can

express them generically in a way that will overcome the appearance of parochialism. Similarly, mainstream television programming shies away from explicit and particular expressions of religious commitment in dramatic and comedic programming. When the networks do offer expressions of faith, it is usually newsworthy and a cause for comments and criticisms from secular and religious observers alike. The mainstream music industry has been so inhospitable to explicitly Christian recordings that in the 1970s evangelicals formed a separate industry for producing and marketing religious recordings.⁷⁰ Similarly, the Christian book-publishing industry operates largely independent from the American Booksellers Association and its distribution systems. As David Paul Nord argues, religious publishers and reform organizations “are usually overlooked by business historians because they stood apart from the main current of market capitalism in nineteenth-century America. But precisely because they operated against the marketplace, they were very early forced to gather their entire business enterprise within the purview of administrations.”⁷¹ Across the spectrum of media in America, Christian tribes have acted like exiles that are deeply concerned with maintaining their own subcultures in the face of large, hostile social forces that threaten to take them completely captive. Rhetorics of exile enable tribes to share their concerns and fears, to discern their captors, and to encourage themselves to reclaim and reassert their tribal culture in the face of perceived threats.

Exilic Christian tribes feel vulnerable, beleaguered, and even exploited—just like other special-interest groups in American society. R. Laurence Moore uses the term “religious outsiders” to describe how some Christian groups perceive their position in the broader culture.⁷² But outsiders are also often the most cognizant of their situation and the most likely to take extraordinary efforts to counter external threats. Less taken in by mainstream culture, outsiders are more open to meeting God, recognizing their distinctive identity, and searching for a mission. In American popular culture, from Hollywood films to prime-time television and popular novels, outsiders are likely to speak with a purpose and act with conviction. Americans often feel trapped by a national culture seemingly created by people who disrespect their tribes’ particular beliefs and sentiments—perhaps even disrespect the tribes’ freedom to express their own rhetorics of discernment and communion. Over the last few decades, some of the most distraught and agitated religious outsiders have fought for their own piece of the public square. From Rev. Jerry Falwell’s Moral Majority to Rev. M. G. “Pat” Robertson’s Christian Coalition, evangelicals have led tribal

attacks on mainstream politics, Hollywood, the Supreme Court, and beyond.⁷³ Sometimes these right-wing religious attacks elicit left-wing religious counterattacks, such as those led by Norman Lear's People for the American Way. One could argue that the American Christian groups that were pushed the farthest to the perimeter of mainstream American culture have worked the hardest to build strong self-identities. They taught themselves how to use tribal media effectively to build their own constituencies, raise funds, and launch cultural attacks on their foes. As insiders to American society during the first half of the twentieth century, mainline Protestant tribes were much less likely to perceive and to act upon the cultural gap between themselves and mainstream culture. By contrast, an evangelical such as author and radio personality James Dobson organized strong and influential lobbying efforts through his Focus on the Family organization and the more directly political Family Research Council.⁷⁴ A rhetoric of exile identifies the enemies, coalesces the tribe, and directs tribal action toward a "reclamation" of American life.

Clearly Wirth and his colleagues in Chicago could not have predicted that subcultures of exile would develop their own mass-mediated opposition. Wirth wrote that modern society has two essential types of groups: (1) organized groups, ranging from "informally constituted intimate groups to highly formalized organizations such as the modern corporation, the union, the church, and the state," and (2) the "detached masses held together, if at all, by the mass media of communication."⁷⁵ In fact, parachurch organizations and Christian special-interest groups combine elements of both of these types of groups in order to use mass-media technologies and informal networks of churches and nondenominational groups to build elaborate fund-raising apparatuses, launch political-action groups, and enter the culture wars. These organizations sometimes feel little "consensus" with the broader society.⁷⁶ American Christianity begins to look more and more like the rest of society as a collection of special-interest and even single-issue groups with short-term goals and largely pragmatic, political agendas. When religious tribes enter the public arena as special-interest movements, they too often identify the public interest with their own penchants. In some cases they even use pollsters and public relations specialists to make their cases as persuasively and professionally as possible. Religious tribes then resemble corporations and governments that also act privately with communication plans and marketing strategies, relying on propagandistic and manipulative strategies to conform society to their own interests. A tribe in exile can begin to look

and act like its captors as it fights for freedom. Anabaptists have taken a much tougher stand than most other Christian groups on this issue, arguing that the primary obligation of the tribe under exile is to maintain its distinctive self-identity as a community of faith.⁷⁷ In general, however, the proliferation of tribal rhetorics of exile reflects the politicization and cultural diminution of tribal culture, not just the rebirth of religiously informed cultures of discernment.

But one crucial difference between the Christian tribes and many of the other self-interest groups working under their own rhetoric of exile is the authenticity of the rhetoric. Whereas politicians and pundits often play for the audience, changing their symbolic colors like chameleons, Christian tribes in America tend to be much more difficult to mold from the outside and much more committed to their own principles. If American religious tribes bow to priestly forms of propaganda, it is usually because their leaders are trying to appeal primarily to in-house groups, not because they realistically expect to conquer American public opinion. Tribal priests tend to restrict most of their rhetoric to their own tents, telling the tribe more or less what it wants to hear. With few exceptions—such as highly polarizing issues like gun control and abortion—exilic rhetoric is largely intratribal and therefore politically impotent in the broader public sphere. Evangelicals, in particular, may claim to be able to vote or act as a bloc in society, but the truth is that all of the different Christian tribes in America are relatively diverse and diffuse, held together more by the metanarrative of the faith than by every jot and tittle of theology, politics, and culture. They operate as much from a sense of divine order and tribal allegiance as from political or specifically cultural viewpoints. The more respected Christian media critics are amazingly cogent and forthright about the particular ways that their biblical and theological convictions direct their own critiques of mainstream media. Clever tribal leaders can use rhetorics of exile to build tribal cohesion and to enhance their own standing in the tribe, but they rarely are able to leverage exilic rhetoric outside of the tribe as part of a broadly appealing public philosophy. This is an unfortunate aspect of exilic rhetoric because, as Michael Sandel suggests, religious beliefs often are matters of conscience rather than merely matters of choice; at their best religious beliefs can “promote the habits and dispositions that make good citizens.”⁷⁸

Strangely enough, the biggest threat to such tribal cultures in exile might be their willingness to sell their own traditional culture in the broader marketplace in order to earn a voice that the mainstream culture

will find attractive and persuasive. Typically exile is a time for a tribe to build its idiosyncratic rhetorics of discernment and communion. As Rogers argues, the tribe must focus on its differences with the captors' culture, becoming sure about what it believes and being able to articulate those beliefs first of all to itself.⁷⁹ But in a kind of Faustian bargain, some tribal leaders point the tribe to the easy way out of exile, the back door out of their predicament; they steer the tribe to the doorway that opens onto the media stage, where the tribe learns the value of celebrity status, the power of imitating the dominant culture, even the apparent joy of defining success in worldly terms. In Jean Bethke Elshtain's language, the exilic tribe gravitates toward "pride and forgetfulness."⁸⁰ The so-called electronic church, for instance, has tried to mimic Hollywood and successful network-television programs, from talk to variety, while mainline Protestant broadcasting has generally failed to get beyond talking heads and pedantic presentations of theology and cultural analysis.⁸¹ The mainline tribes might not have garnered large audiences or captured the imagination of the news media, but neither have they simply appropriated cultural styles of presentation from the marketplace. Evangelicals, on the other hand, frequently have managed to move from the tribal subcultures to the mainstream media stage, but in the process usually weakening their own distinctive self-identity with its particular rituals and forms of public and private life. Religious radio, for instance, increasingly adopted the programming strategies, personality-driven formats, and commercial revenue formulas that mark mainstream radio. When these stations and networks manage to climb out of the "religious radio ghetto," as some in the industry call it, they dive into the quagmire of market-driven media. Along the way they lose the distinction between marketing and ministry. The tribal journey out of exile frequently leads proudly to a mainstream cultural co-optation in which the tribe forgets who it is.

Finally, tribal attitudes toward technology frequently lead to a mythological exile in which tribes perceive their cultural bondage as the result of a lack of technological power and authority. American Protestants historically saw this nation potentially as the City upon a Hill, the bucolic land where believers could build the New Jerusalem. Secular variations on that metaphor have so captivated mainstream American culture that it is nearly impossible to have serious public conversations about the benefits and drawbacks of media technologies and their accompanying social arrangements. Americans as a whole tend to be held captive by a nearly unquestionable enthusiasm for new technologies, to the point where any criticism

raises cries of “Luddite” and draws blank stares from everyone else.⁸² Without any dominant tradition-conserving elements in American society, we seem unable to know exactly who we are and whether any new idea or technology is really good for both the individual and the broader society. In the words of historian John Lukacs, tribes are losing their capacity to be “reactionary”—to deny the “immutable idea of immutable progress: the idea that we are capable not only of improving our material conditions but our very nature, including our mental and spiritual nature.”⁸³ Tribes tend to lack a reasonable public rhetoric of dissent that places important issues into public discourse, engenders insightful debates in the light of history, and illuminates the shadows of contemporary America. The liberal legacy, which admits few traditional perspectives into public discourse, affects tribal rhetoric and culture as well.

If tribes see their problem as exile, they often perceive the solution as more technology—the very thing that threatens the tribe in the first place. Both the nation and the tribe are so unswervingly committed to progress and so favorably disposed toward the latest media technologies that they wrongly assume that being technologically “backward” will lead them into a negative form of cultural exile. A rhetoric of exile offers tribes an opportunity to question mainstream culture, nurture deeper discernment and establish greater internal consensus, but in the United States such rhetoric also can lead tribes to place their hope in the same technologies and techniques that oppress them. A tribe does not gain freedom by becoming like its captors. Instead it has to remember who it is and then react wisely and civilly to its oppression with a public voice that invites those outside the clan to join the discussion. After all, tribes have a stake in how well the nation articulates the common good, not just how much it supports voluntary tribal liberties.

The Rhetoric of Praise

The interaction of the media and Christianity in the United States is also a struggle between conflicting and shared rhetorics of praise. Rhetorics of conversion often lead both religious and mainstream media to produce popular culture, the major medium of symbolic exchange in market economies. To be “popular” in American society, rhetorically speaking, is to be successful, important, and legitimate. Although some citizens in the twentieth century looked unfavorably upon all kinds of popular culture, most Americans tended to view positively any culture that attends to

widespread interests, whether measured by the box office, audience ratings, or circulation data.⁸⁴ Many of the conversations between religious tribes and the media address implicitly the value of cultural popularity. In fact, some rhetorics of discernment contrast popularity with quality, truthfulness, and authenticity. The conflicts between tribes and mainstream culture often are struggles over popularity as a form of cultural legitimacy. Evangelistic rhetoric, too, sometimes equates mere popularity with success in the marketplace. As one manager of recording artists in the Christian music industry told an industry gathering, the goals of ministry and marketing are “exactly the same—market share.”⁸⁵ Popularity becomes a public vehicle for establishing the praiseworthiness of people, artifacts, and organizations. American rhetoric about the media turns pundits and celebrities into icons of praise. Popular culture in a market system offers a widely shared arena for expressions of public praise.

Although some academic critics assume that popular culture is inferior to fine art and insignificant in civilization, history tells a very different story about its value and impact. The idolization of fine art in modern society is based on a number of false assumptions about the nature of art and its historical role in society, including that fine and popular art are mutually exclusive categories of artifacts and that fine art challenges existing human beliefs while popular art merely confirms them. Cultural elitists frequently invoke these assumptions as defenses for elitist views of storytelling and culture. But such elitists wrongly assume that popular narrative is culturally ineffective, aesthetically inferior, and hence unworthy of serious study. They undervalue the mythopoetic functions of most art throughout the ages. In effect, they want to classify and categorize art in secular terms and according to the political, cultural, or economic interests of particular people. No doubt much popular art is merely the product of markets rather than part of the ways of life of particular tribes. But such simplistic dichotomies between fine and popular art obfuscate the significance of popular forms of tribal expression. Moreover, they fail to capture the evangelistic thrust of so much tribal popular culture. Finally, they wrongly apply one narrow standard of cultural praise across all forms of culture.

Categorizing works as fine or popular art ignores the history of human culture and the social nature of human action. Over the centuries the uses of and ideas about particular artifacts changed as cultures and artistic communities redefined the significance and purpose of art. The most important development has been the “museumization” of art—its separation from daily life, including the life of the church. Much historic Christian art today

is recontextualized in galleries without its original social setting of cathedral or palace. Such separation defines the function of the art narrowly as aesthetic contemplation, when in fact the original social function might have been closer to community worship and collective confirmation of belief. Simplistic categories, such as fine and popular art, obscure real similarities and differences among cultural artifacts, stereotype their social uses, and overlook their influences on each other.⁸⁶ Moreover, such typologies typically confuse the intended purpose behind the creation of a work of art with how the various artifacts are actually used. Park, for instance, discusses scholars' persistent tendency to distinguish between referential and didactic art, on the one hand, and expressive art, on the other. The former was supposedly the communication of ideas, and the latter was "where sentiments and attitudes are manifested."⁸⁷ Although such a distinction is quite helpful for categorizing art, it hardly helps people to evaluate it.

In order to make sense of tribes' normative judgments about popular media, we need a theory of communication that also embraces a theory of culture. We especially require a theory of rhetorical praise that illuminates, exegetes, and critiques tribal rhetorics of praise in particular social and cultural contexts. We need to know how narratives host cultures and how society maintains multiple and competing subcultures, each with its own signifying system and sometimes with its own metanarrative. Although it has become fashionable for communication scholars to assume that popular stories are sociologically important and therefore worthy of careful analysis and interpretation, most mass-media research is not grounded in any explicit theory of narrative or even in any theory of communication or culture.⁸⁸ Popular-culture research tends to be sociologically and epistemologically thin, driven more by an abstracted methodology—such as content analysis—than by a theory that actually takes into account how people use popular culture in everyday life. This is especially true, for example, of television criticism, which, even when insightful and cogent, rarely elucidates the assumptions undergirding its methods of interpretation and critique.⁸⁹

When examining religious as well as mainstream popular culture, scholars have tended to assume that popular narratives can be dissected scientifically and abstracted like chemical reactions in a test tube. Such quasi-scientific approaches are bound to fail because they ignore the subjective nature of popular culture. As Wirth put it in his presidential address to the American Sociological Association, "The scientific study of social phenomena is not yet institutionalized like the study of physical and biological phenomena. The student of society will be plagued by the difficulties of

achieving 'objectivity,' by the existence of social values, by the competition with common-sense knowledge, by the limits of his freedom and capacity to experiment, and by other serious and peculiar handicaps which trouble the natural scientist less or not at all." Nevertheless, continued Wirth, the social scientist can "avoid studying the processes and problems of man in society only by pretending to be something he is not, or by lapsing into such a remote degree of abstraction or triviality as to make the resemblance between what he does and what he professes to be doing purely coincidental."⁹⁰

Park and his cohorts tentatively resolved this dilemma of objectivity in the social sciences by defining and interpreting culture ethnographically. They studied cultures from within, as participant observers, rather than merely from outside, as dispassionate assessors. This methodology led them to take cultural expressions very seriously as embodiments of particular groups' values, beliefs, and especially sentiments. Park writes that culture is "attitudes and sentiments, folkways and mores," which are "the warp and woof of that web of understanding we call 'culture.'"⁹¹ Instead of anchoring their research in positivistic theories and purely quantitative methods, the Chicago School looked to the humanities for their theories, concepts, and methods. In so doing they created an approach to understanding culture, including popular culture, that is carved distinctively out of the American quest for unity amid diversity.⁹² Park, Wirth, and their colleagues assumed that humans desire consensus more than conflict, whereas contemporary British and Continental philosophers such as Walter Benjamin and Jürgen Habermas emphasized class conflict.⁹³

These Americans' research was anthropologically sensitive to the varieties of cultural discernment and the striving for communion that always influenced American social life. Moreover, when Dewey and the others defined culture more or less as the understanding and practice of a "moral order," they implicitly moved popular culture to the domain of ethics and religion and, conversely, moved religion to the domain of culture, including popular culture.⁹⁴ To put it differently, the Chicago School perceived the crucial role of values and morality in all human culture and thereby kept distinctly religious culture on the intellectual agenda and in the national conversation about culture and society. Moreover, their approach viewed both traditional and mass-mediated culture as serving essentially the same overall functions in society, namely, providing meaningful rituals and elaborate webs of shared meaning in geographical space and across generational time.

Rhetorics of praise often challenge all forms of cultural elitism that embrace the criteria of a select academic group or social class over those of other people. Tönnies rightly argued that public opinion emerges in society as a replacement for the church and its “priestly” leaders.⁹⁵ But if the alternative to religious priests is scientific priests, rationalistic epistemologies are hardly an improvement in the social process of mass communication. Americans want a means to regulate popular sentiment, not a priestly class of religious or scientific judges presiding over national or tribal culture. The rhetoric of praise in America is occasionally only tribal, but it tends to look much more broadly to the consensus that forms out of widespread belief and open inquiry. This is why popularity is the most common form of cultural affirmation in the United States. Popularity invariably tends to disenfranchise elitists, although it can be co-opted by a market-driven rhetoric of praise. American religious belief and practice generally support popular culture per se as praiseworthy; tribes frequently criticize the content of popular culture but rarely the merits of its broad appeal. And tribal elites who do criticize popular culture per se typically have acquired that cultural attitude from other elites outside of the tribe.

Popularity as a form of praiseworthy merit is anchored deeply in American Protestant sentiment. “In the early republic,” writes historian Leonard I. Sweet, “a tidal wave of democratic principles and populist sentiments washed away the old hierarchical information flow in American Christianity.”⁹⁶ Tocqueville wrote that immigrants brought to America “a Christianity that I cannot depict better than to call it democratic and republican.” Tocqueville also suggested that American Roman Catholics formed the most “democratic class” in the nation.⁹⁷ Although the Reformational concept of the “priesthood of all believers” extends back to the heart of the Protestant revolt against ecclesiastical hierarchies, the broad cultural power of such grassroots faith was not unleashed until Protestants began refashioning the faith in the context of American democratic principles. In one sense, American Protestantism became highly individualistic, with each person interpreting the Scriptures and deciding what to believe. In the broader context of the nation’s popular sentiments, however, religion joined all other cultural arenas as a vehicle for converting people through popular messages that appealed to wide ranges of people.

The democratic impulse in American Christianity was a way not just of protecting people from a state church but even more a means of letting the people decide for themselves in the court of popular sentiment who or what was praiseworthy. That cultural idea, which linked value with

popularity, is at the center of the interaction of Christianity and the media in the United States throughout the twentieth century. American religion, like American culture more generally, became a deeply bardic discourse tied to commonsense experience and integral to the identity of the church tribe as well as to the national popular culture.⁹⁸ Popularity created tribal love-hate relationships with mainstream culture. Who could discount the apparent praiseworthiness of a hit TV show or Hollywood box-office smash? As William D. Romanowski suggests in *Pop Culture Wars*, religious tribes, the entertainment industry, and secular critics often battled over whether the market was a means of adjudicating the value of cultural products in America.⁹⁹ Popularity became a kind of proof of value that tribes had to address if they expected to be taken seriously by the wider society. Either they had to question the real popularity of cultural artifacts out of tune with the tribal rhetoric of praise or they were not likely to be accepted in public discourse. Praise and popularity are still difficult to untangle in American rhetoric about the quality or value of culture.

As long as the study of communication and culture attends to the need for moral order in society, it remains open to humans' corresponding desire to find things that are worthy of praise. Humankind's relationship to culture is like the religious believer's association with the local church—a communal avenue to discerning and sharing what is praiseworthy. This impulse to praise something outside of one's self is not simply an Arnoldian quest for fine art or high civilization; it can also be a recognition of the sheer joy of everyday life, such as the satisfaction of conversation and the enjoyment of reading the newspaper. The drive to praise is part of a fundamentally human need to find value beyond the limits of the self, to recognize that as human beings we are neither islands nor gods. The interaction of the media and Christianity in America is partly a conversation about what is or should be praiseworthy in a democratic nation that nearly enshrines the "priesthood" of all makers of truly popular culture.

Conclusion

Christian tribes in the United States entered the twentieth century calling variously for conversion, discernment, communion, exile, and praise. Like all of the other subcultures in America, Christian groups alternately were enchanted by and disgusted with the mainstream media. Driving for market share and advertising revenues, the mainstream commercial media, to paraphrase Wirth, seemed to be creating media content for everyone in

general and no one in particular.¹⁰⁰ As the century ended, consumerism shaped the arenas of the daily news media and local radio. Although few tribes cut themselves off completely from mainstream culture, neither did most religious groups feel completely comfortable with the surrounding culture represented in even some of the most popular media fare.

Modern media waxed and waned in two, often contradictory directions. The new centripetal media enabled all geographic and demographic parts of the nation to be linked together as one complex web of news, entertainment, and persuasion. Driving these centripetal developments was a distinctly American, religiously shaped “mythos of the electronic revolution,” to use Carey’s term.¹⁰¹ Under the spell of this public rhetoric about the benefits of media technologies, Americans often felt like they were living in a new Eden, although tribal dissidents warned that an apocalypse might be just around the corner. As the next chapter suggests, religious tribes championed technological innovation and delighted in the apparent power of new media to serve the church as praiseworthy agents of conversion and communion.

Such tribal optimism, however, was somewhat naive, maybe even a sign of Americans’ Pollyannaish attitudes toward technology and mass communication. As Flannery O’Connor writes, “The fleas come with the dog.”¹⁰² Technology enables, but it also disables; in the process of making some worthwhile things happen, it prohibits other good things from taking place—even things that are primarily matters of the spirit or habits of the heart. Moreover, the unexpected consequences of new media are sometimes more powerful than the carefully planned ones. Many Christian tribes were similarly unconvinced of the sublimity of the new media; their rhetoric of discernment led them away from mainstream culture and into cultural exile. Some of the more liberal groups attacked the media for their commercialism and for their unwillingness to give public voices to the poor and alienated in society. Serving a prophetic role, these salvos from mainstream Roman Catholic and Protestant tribes often echoed the concerns of nonreligious groups in society. Occasionally mainline Christian churches and denominations directly entered public discussion about the media, especially in matters of governmental regulation of the broadcast industry. United Methodists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and other mainline groups worked through the National Council of Churches to enter collectively the public policy debates and to influence how the federal agencies allocated radio and television frequencies as well as how the agency would require broadcasters to serve all members of society.¹⁰³ The media were

not always praiseworthy, even in the hands of technical experts and political masters who supposedly should know better.

Evangelicals during the same period spent far less time criticizing the media and much more time building the kinds of in-house media empires that would give them a national tribal voice and might even enhance their social status in the expanding industrial nation. Evangelicals criticized the media, but typically for immoral content in Hollywood movies, television programs, music, and comic books.¹⁰⁴ If mainline Christian organizations served a prophetic role in criticizing the mainstream media, evangelicals served much more of a priestly role within their own tribes, encouraging members to keep the faith. By the end of the twentieth century, evangelicals were the champions in America at using the media for building religious organizations. But as leaders they also seemed to be mimicking the ways and means of the mainstream media, especially the commercialization and the technological wizardry. They were just as apt as other Americans to equate success in the media marketplace with popularity as a sign of conversionary power. Praising technology, evangelicals seemed to lose some of their critical, prophetic voice amid the awe and wonder of the latest media fad. Theologian Eugene H. Peterson suggests that some Christians end up “hauling in truckloads of rationalism and technology from the world” in order to “be more spiritual!” In the process, they take on life more as a “problem to be solved” than a “mystery to be explored.” Moreover, says Peterson, we “live in jerky times, assaulted by ‘urgent’ demands. For most of our ancestors in the Christian way, Scripture and prayer were embedded in routine and validated by social structures. Today those routines have been replaced by fax and telephone.”¹⁰⁵ Evangelicals are spreading among their own ranks the very consumer culture that the mainline Christian tribes have repeatedly criticized in popular media. Such a state of affairs challenges the stereotypical categories of “liberal” and “conservative” faith.

There is little serious public discourse about the interaction of media and religion. The topic is not usually a major part of Americans’ own conversation about their society. Christian tribes, like the rest of society, are consumers, first, and critics and dissenters, second. The First Amendment encourages public dialogue and guarantees that people will not be excluded because of their faith. That amendment, Carey says, was designed to “create a conversational society, a society of people who speak to one another, who converse. . . . While people often dry up and shy away from the fierceness of argument, disputation, and debate, and while those forms

of talk often bring to the surface the meanness and aggressiveness that is our second nature, conversation implies the most natural and unforced, unthreatening, and most satisfying of arrangements.”¹⁰⁶ The early church was countercultural partly because it was so decentralized, dynamic, and discourse driven. People sometimes talk about Christianity as a religion of the “Book,” when in fact it has always been a faith primarily of the Word—both in the sense of the Word of God in scripture and the Word-made-flesh in Jesus Christ. The vibrancy of Christian tribes even in twentieth-century America depends significantly on how well they cultivate conversation. If it lacks strong tribal cultures anchored in orality and community, Christianity will follow the ways of the wider society toward amorphous consumerism and weak public participation. Strong religious tribes are much more likely to challenge mainstream media. As the case studies in this book suggest, such tribal challenges nevertheless can transcend parochial interests and enliven public discourse about the good life that we all seek.