



Exotics,  
Subversives,  
and  
Journalists,  
1955–1993

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Making  
the  
American  
Religious  
Fringe

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## INTRODUCTION

Cults and fringe groups are everywhere—at least in the mass media. In a 1998 episode of *The Simpsons*, Homer, that animated working-class everyman, is brainwashed into joining a group called the “movementarians.” His wife, Marge, escapes the cult’s heavily guarded compound and arranges for Homer’s kidnapping and successful deprogramming—he renounces his new faith for a glass of beer. In the same year an episode of *Justice Files* on the Discovery Channel featured “criminal cults.” In *Maclean’s* you can read about “killer cults.” Or if you prefer cyberspace, you can visit an unrelated internet website with the same name. For those more geographically inclined, one edition of *Newsweek* in the late 1990s offered a map of the United States marked with groups “Living on the Religious Fringe.” The *New Yorker* in April 1997 contained a back-page humor piece titled “This Just In from Our Cult Desk.” Written by Christopher Buckley, it consists of seven fictitious news stories, including the following two:

INAGADDADAVIDA, Calif.—Over half the forty-eight members of the 2000 Club millennial cult who committed suicide last week by eating live gila monsters and washing them down with peach schnapps had already had their brains surgically removed, according to the Belvedere County Medical Examiner.

“It’s a fairly rare procedure,” he said, “but these folks seemed to know what they were doing.”

WAWAII, Hawaii—The religious cult leader who urged his eighty-four followers to leap into an active volcano told authorities that he had been planning to jump in himself but remembered at the last minute that he had forgotten to pick up his dry cleaning.

Frederick Lugoff, sixty-four, known as Frodo to members of his New Vesuvians cult, was apprehended by park rangers who

became suspicious after they saw dozens of people wrapped in tin-foil holding their noses and jumping into the crater.

The group believed in purification by immersion in molten lava.

Lugoff's lawyer said his client had been depressed recently at not being able to attract new members.<sup>1</sup>

Buckley's piece was published less than a month after thirty-nine people in the Heaven's Gate commune committed group suicide. In March 1997, Marshall Appelwhite and his small following became convinced that the Hale-Bopp comet's appearance signaled their time to leave the physical, earthly plane of existence. On 26 March, the group jointly "exited" their bodies, using a mixture of phenobarbital, alcohol, and plastic bags over their heads.

That the *New Yorker* could extract humor from the tragedy speaks volumes about how many journalists—and their readers—view groups that they label "fringe." In the last thirty years the word "cult," today's most common term for religious groups categorized as marginal, has lost any original sociological meaning and now conjures images of brainwashing, coercion, deception, exploitation, perversion, and fraud.<sup>2</sup> For many Americans, these associations are so much taken for granted that they have become doxa: socially constructed opinions, assumptions, and inclinations so ingrained they seem natural, permanent, and fixed. Unlike many interpreters of groups labeled fringe, my interest is not to attack or defend certain movements. To deny that cruel acts have been committed by some in religious groups is as shortsighted as claiming that all members of new religious movements commit atrocities. Instead, I want to examine how the contemporary negative connotations of *cult*, *fringe*, *sect*, and other such terms became accepted and applied to such a wide range of groups in the mass media. In other words, this book is not about fringe religions, but about the characteristics that many of the largest and most influential magazines attributed to groups that they labeled fringe. I trace mid- to late-twentieth-century reporting on the fringe in one form of American journalism: the magazine. And I consider a range of questions. How have magazine depictions of religious center and periphery changed since the 1950s? What specific motifs did jour-

nalists use to portray groups that they viewed as marginal and mainstream? And ultimately, why might magazine writers and editors consistently have represented the fringe in certain ways?

*Argument One: From Mass Movements, Exoticism, and Subversion to Individuals, Brainwashing, and Coercion*

In this book I offer two theses. The first is historical, answering what happened by attending to questions of change and continuity over time. Using a case study approach, I argue that print media depictions of the American religious fringe in the largest national magazines changed significantly from 1950s to the early 1990s. In the Cold War years, the most prominent fringe portrayals focused on working-class white and African American groups, as well as certain religions prominent in California. Periodicals like *Time*, *Newsweek*, *U.S. News and World Report*, the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Life*, and *Look* reported on the “California cults,” the “Third Force in Christendom,” and the Nation of Islam by using themes of mass movements, exoticism, and subversion. Significantly, and in contrast to the Cold War style of American religion reporting, members of fringe religions were seldom portrayed individually, but instead namelessly grouped as indistinguishable, often fanatical “true believers” in mass movements. Promoting a broad American cultural consensus that stood apart from “godless” communism, news and general-interest magazines occasionally portrayed marginalized religious groups as having those characteristics least suitable for sustaining representative democratic capitalism. In short, sometimes the fringe was un-American.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, subjects and themes changed. Cold War consensus ideology yielded to a growing recognition of cultural diversity spurred by the civil rights and youth counter-culture movements. At the same time, magazine coverage ambivalently framed the gurus, Asian new religions, occult spirituality, and Evangelical Jesus movements that attracted white middle- and upper-middle-class youth. Eventually, coverage would also feature the grievances of a growing “anticult movement” made up of parents who wanted to remove their adult children from these groups. By the mid-1970s, journalistic images of the fringe had

darkened. Magazines like *Newsweek*, *McCall's*, and *Reader's Digest* promoted an image of a growing cult menace by highlighting the dangers that dictatorial leaders of fringe groups posed to the unsuspecting "mainstream" through brainwashing and coercion. The mass suicide in Jonestown in 1978 seemed to confirm the negative stereotypes and led to homogeneous portrayals in a variety of magazines. By 1993 this "cult menace" motif had become so thoroughly inscribed in many magazine narratives that it dominated news stories about the fifty-one-day standoff in Waco between the Branch Davidians and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF).

Despite these changes over time, at least two continuities existed. First, throughout the thirty-nine-year period of study, the largest news and general-interest magazines consistently described groups and individuals as "fringe" if they demonstrated high levels of religious zeal, dogma, and emotion. Labeling certain religious practices and beliefs marginal, writers and editors in the largest news and general-interest magazines broached long-standing debates in American religious history about emotional versus rational religion, exotic versus familiar spirituality, and normal versus abnormal levels of piety.<sup>3</sup> Journalists acted as "heresiographers," identifying false or inauthentic religion and thus symbolically establishing boundaries between a mainstream religious center and a suspect periphery.<sup>4</sup>

The second continuity involves the power of images and words to uphold or subvert social hierarchies. I argue that the largest news and general-interest magazines often labeled religious groups mainstream or fringe in ways that symbolically reproduced and legitimized inequalities of race and class in postwar America. Relegating certain groups, activities, and beliefs to the religious margins, journalists concomitantly banished certain classes and racial groups to America's social periphery. In other words, writers and editors in periodicals like *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *Life* frequently offered, under the guise of objective reporting, a spiritual apologetics for the dominant social order. Overall, and in several ways, magazines like *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Life*, *U.S. News and World Report*, *Esquire*, *Reader's Digest*, and the *Saturday Evening Post* assumed a normative American mainstream that was white, upper middle

and middle class, male, and religiously liberal or nonaffiliated. In presupposing this, they sometimes distinguished religious fringe from mainstream by class and race as much as by theology or the size of a movement. Perhaps unsurprisingly, these periodicals generalized and normalized the perspectives and concerns of the very groups from which surveys tell us the vast majority of their journalists and readers came.<sup>5</sup>

But journalists did not always speak with one voice. The national print media is best viewed as an arena of symbolic production where magazines categorize groups as mainstream or marginal, orthodox or heterodox, religious or nonreligious in ways that accord with the social locations of their producers. The American religious fringe is a constructed and contested category that is constantly in flux, reflecting certain interests, concerns, and power positions. For example, magazines that placed theological considerations before economic, political, or racial ones—like *Christianity Today*, written by and for conservative Evangelicals, or *America*, a Jesuit periodical—sometimes offered categorizations of mainstream and fringe that questioned the overwhelmingly homogeneous portrayals found in *U.S. News and World Report*, *Time*, *Life*, *Newsweek*, *Reader's Digest*, and *Esquire*. Likewise, magazines geared toward African Americans, like *Jet*, held different assumptions and concerns and thus depicted the Nation of Islam very differently from *U.S. News and World Report* or *Time*. In addition, small religious groups like the International Society of Krishna Consciousness (also known as Hare Krishnas) and the Nation of Islam published their own periodicals and pamphlets. These also offered alternatives to the dominant fringe representations. Like the black newspapers in the communications scholar Ronald Jacobs's study of urban unrest coverage, these media sites—created by groups labeled fringe—offered “a place for counteracting the effects of (in this case representational) hegemony, by constructing alternative narratives” about themselves and the so-called mainstream religions.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, however, I will demonstrate that many alternative representations failed to challenge the broader categories and characterizations that the largest magazines had established. Often, rather than question the mainstream and marginal categories themselves, journalists writing “from the fringe” strove

only to improve or reverse their religious, racial, or economic group's status within the existent classifications.

*Argument Two: Societal Change, Identity Construction,  
and the Journalistic Habitus*

While my first thesis traces what happened to American religious fringe coverage over time, my second addresses the more speculative question of why it took such routes. In other words, why did magazine portrayals of the fringe change over time and why did certain continuities in coverage remain? I propose two complementary explanations, one historical and one sociological. First, I suggest that changes in fringe depictions coincided with larger changes in society, culture, and the magazine industry. Socially, the 1950s to the 1990s saw increasing racial, ethnic, and religious diversity. The United States simultaneously witnessed an ideological move from a Cold War consensus culture to one in which pluralism and difference became a significant, and widely accepted, part of public discourse. The media scholar A. J. van Zuilen notes that the magazine industry reflected this shift. General-interest magazines like *Life*, *Look*, and the *Saturday Evening Post*, which strove to speak to and for all Americans, either declined or disappeared by the early 1970s. During the same period, special-interest consumer magazines, made to appeal to niche markets divided by race, gender, age, profession, and hobby interests, came to dominate the industry.<sup>7</sup> In the following chapters, I hope to show that American religious fringe coverage reflected these social, cultural, and industry changes in various ways.

My second argument is sociological, and I posit it to partly account for the similarities and differences in coverage over time and across various types of periodicals. I argue that the American religious fringe functioned for journalists as a “negative reference group” in a process of identity construction. Here I am indebted to and influenced by the work of the sociologist Christian Smith, who reminds us of the basic sociological principles that “social groups know who they are in large measure by knowing who they are not,” and “almost invariably, social comparison favors the cate-



gories that comprise people's own identities"<sup>8</sup> As a negative reference group, the cultic margins helped to define what writers and editors either desired or perceived themselves, their readers, and American culture as a whole to be. Religious fringe groups served this function by acting as, in Smith's words, "models for what they do not believe, what they do not want to become, and how they do not want to act."<sup>9</sup>

This book is not primarily about those who work in magazine production rooms, nor is it about what goes on in those places. It focuses on the articles produced. At the same time, suggesting that fringe depictions were part of a process of identity construction begs the question of *whose* identity was being defined, especially in the largest and most influential periodicals. In other words, who were the agents and what were the processes that created such representations? As noted earlier, the largest news and general-interest magazines promoted differentiations between mainstream and fringe that symbolically reproduced and legitimized power disparities of class and race. Specifically, magazines like *Time*, *Life*, and *Newsweek* constructed categories of center and periphery that favored certain groups over others. At the same time, and especially before the 1970s, these magazines frequently relegated to the margins religious movements that attracted minority and working-class Americans. In doing this, they attributed certain stereotypical characteristics to varied groups. Journalists imagined the religious mainstream as moderate, tolerant, ecumenical, rational, and implicitly white middle class and upper middle class. They usually depicted the American religious fringe as just the opposite—fanatical, bigoted, parochial, emotional, and implicitly ethnic and lower class. These characterizations served to symbolically legitimize social, racial, and class differences as natural and inevitable.

I argue that these depictions can *partly* be explained by examining the socioeconomics, broader demographics, and professional practices of journalists. Behind the continuities in the portrayals there existed a similarity of social locations. Many (but of course not all) of the largest news and general-interest magazine writers and editors shared approximate dispositions, conscious

opinions, professional obligations, and unconscious assumptions. They shared, to borrow a term from the social theorist Pierre Bourdieu, a journalistic “habitus.”

Bourdieu defines *habitus* as “a system of lasting, transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions.”<sup>10</sup> The habitus, similar to Marxist class consciousness, is “the product of history,” formed by the “structures constitutive of a particular type of environment (e.g. the material conditions of existence characteristic of a class condition).”<sup>11</sup> But unlike Marx’s concept, which implies conscious strategizing, the habitus is mostly doxa, unconscious actions and presuppositions. In other words, and in terms of this study, writers and editors often did not consciously scheme to impute negative characteristics to the American religious fringe and associate it with subordinate classes of people. Rather, as the media scholar Robert Lichter and his colleagues have proposed, it was “not a matter of conscious bias but rather of the necessarily partial perspectives through which social reality is filtered.”<sup>12</sup>

There were, of course, exceptions. Some writers, editors, and publishers carried out explicit agendas through their magazines. Henry Luce and Time Inc. provide an excellent example. The son of missionary parents, Luce created *Time*, *Life*, *Fortune*, and the “March of Time” movie newsreels not just to offer audiences abbreviated news, but to promote Luce’s views on domestic and international policy. *Time*, founded by Luce and his business partner Briton Hadden in 1921, was designed to be a “magazine devoted to summarizing progress,” as well as to reporting the events of the day with a particular point of view.<sup>13</sup> Along with *Life*, founded in 1936, *Time* reflected Luce’s politics and beliefs until his death in 1967. Luce’s periodicals attacked President Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal. They promoted American expansionism and decried isolationism. After World War II, they called for a domestic American cultural consensus and international military intervention to help contain communism at home and abroad. In the early 1960s they supported the Vietnam War. While Luce’s biographer James Baughman notes that most of the news media backed the Vietnam War at the outset, he argues that *Time* in particular

acted “as a virtual extension of the administration,” even to the extent of withholding stories that would have revealed how President Lyndon Johnson’s administration was lying to the public.<sup>14</sup> “I am a Protestant, a Republican, and a free enterpriser,” Baughman quoted Luce in the 1950s. “I am biased in favor of God, Eisenhower, and the stockholders of Time Inc. — and if anybody who objects doesn’t know this by now, why the hell are they still spending 35 cents for the magazine?”<sup>15</sup>

So undoubtedly, some American religious fringe stories were consciously contrived to promote certain agendas. But many more were not. Instead, writers and editors unwittingly framed stories in ways that reflected their backgrounds, interests, experiences, profession, and worldview—in a word, their *habitus*. Throughout the period of study, journalists in the largest magazines were overwhelmingly members of gender, racial, educational, and income groups that held the majority of social, political, and cultural power. The media scholar Robert Lichter and his colleagues found that in 1979–80 journalists at the largest national news magazines — as well as in newspaper and television — were 95 percent white, 79 percent male, 68 percent northeastern, and 42 percent urban. Ninety-three percent were college graduates and most (78 percent) reported an individual income over \$30,000 in 1979. Fifty-four percent called themselves politically liberal, 17 percent conservative. Interestingly, 50 percent reported having no religion, 20 percent were Protestant, 14 percent Jewish, and 8½ percent Catholic.<sup>16</sup> In a more narrow study of several media institutions, the media scholar Herbert Gans came up with similar demographics (with the exception of religious affiliation — apparently he didn’t ask) for the years 1965–69, 1975, and 1978. In terms of content, he concluded that magazines tended “to universalize upper-middle class practices as if they were shared by all Americans.”<sup>17</sup> Combined, these studies examine selected journalists from 1965 to 1980. While I have no demographical information for 1955 to 1964, given what we know about the professionalization of magazine journalism after World War II, demographics were likely similar. In terms of gender and race, journalists were likely even less diverse in this earlier period.

Bourdieu suggests that the different categories and classifications used by social groups to organize their worlds tend to

symbolically reproduce—in his term, homologize—existent class relations.<sup>18</sup> Bourdieu is a reductionist who asserts that material interests provide the basis of all competing human concerns and classification schemes. For Bourdieu, “classification struggle is a fundamental dimension of class struggle.”<sup>19</sup> He argues that “different classes and class fractions are engaged in a specifically symbolic struggle to impose the definitions of the social world most in conformity with their interests . . . The (object at) stake is the monopoly of legitimate symbolic violence—that is to say, the power to impose (and even indeed to inculcate) instruments of knowledge and expression of social reality (taxonomies), which are arbitrary (but unrecognized as such). The field of symbolic production is a microcosm of the struggle between the classes.”<sup>20</sup> In terms of my study, this could explain why relatively elite, privileged, white magazine journalists, in constructing insider and outsider identities, would relegate working-class and black groups to the fringe. But Bourdieu’s assertion could also problematically imply that class was the only factor determining all journalistic constructions of the American religious fringe.

Class was an important element in fomenting religious fringe representations, particularly in the largest magazines. But it was not the only factor involved. For example, outside the largest periodicals and in Roman Catholic and Evangelical reporting, theology was frequently most significant in determining who was labeled fringe. In this case, the classification strategies of the religious periodical reporter were determined more by religious interests than material ones. Even in the largest newsmagazines like *Time* and *Newsweek*, where class stereotypes were often explicit, other variables such as race, region, and theology sometimes held equal or greater importance in determining what was fringe. And there is no evidence to show that these variables were always influenced by and subordinated to class concerns. California cults coverage in the 1950s and 1960s, for example, lumped wealthy new religions like the Self Realization Fellowship together with relatively working-class denominations like the Four-Square Gospel Church. In this case, the shared geographic location of the movements diminished the significance of any obvious class differences.

In the largest magazines' portrayals of the religious fringe, class was often a primary tool of distinction. But it wasn't the only one.

Given this caveat, the notion of a journalistic habitus can still be useful in providing interpretations of religion coverage. One need not fully accept the materialist, reductionist basis of Bourdieuan theory to see that "elective affinities" certainly existed between journalists' social locations and the stories they produced. If one conceives of class as more than a status grounded in material circumstances, but also a category of identity rhetorically and symbolically made and unmade through representation, one sees that it served *some* journalists as a prominent implement, like race, politics, theology, and region, that distinguished between insiders and outsiders in American culture. Further, in analyzing competing (dominant and latent) constructions of mainstream and margins in print media, Bourdieu's theories help to explain how and why different magazines struggled to promote certain conceptions of the world that theologically, socially, and symbolically reflected and supported various perceptions, interests, and desires.

### *Methods*

My theoretical orientation is shaped by ongoing discussions in the study of American religions. The field, under the influence of such scholars as Thomas Tweed, Robert Orsi, and others, has moved away from consensus views of American culture to one that focuses more on the contacts and contestations between different religious and cultural groups.<sup>21</sup> My approach sees no unified "American culture and values" out there, but argues that different groups within society often seek to promote their own values and cultures as the most natural and acceptable for all.<sup>22</sup> This separates me from studies of the media and religion like Mark Silk's *Unsecular Media*, which presents a consensus view of culture by arguing that there are cultural norms, based in Christian topoi, that all Americans agree upon, and that journalists use when writing religion news. Whereas Silk argues that news media "approach religion with values and presuppositions that the American public widely shares," I stress that there are actually *multiple*, sometimes

overlapping American publics that hold a variety of complex, divergent, and often contradictory views.<sup>23</sup>

I am also informed by ongoing discussions about the purpose and goals of religious studies. I agree with the religion and cultural studies scholar Susan Mizruchi, who suggests that the study of religion should be “an exercise in disruptive classification, interrogating earlier modes of classification regarding religion and culture while at the same time developing categories for capturing what has been mystified (as opposed to specified in contemporary theory) and unified (as opposed to fractured or fragmented in historical practice).”<sup>24</sup> This work strives to be an exercise in disruptive classification by unveiling the power relations and unquestioned assumptions underlying normative categories like mainstream and fringe. In recent years, several scholars have noted the tendency of American religious historians to situate particular groups as central or peripheral to the story of religion in America.<sup>25</sup> Robert Baird’s division of Evangelical and non-Evangelical denominations in 1844, William Warren Sweet’s differentiation between the “great Protestant churches” and the “unhealthy offspring” of revivals in 1930, and Sydney Ahlstrom’s presumption in 1972 of a grand Puritan epoch all exemplify past historians’ assumptions that classifications of mainstream and fringe were fixed and unproblematic.<sup>26</sup> But the use of center and periphery language in American religion scholarship, more often used to describe mainstream versus fringe practices, and beliefs versus unequal power relations, has always obscured more than it has revealed. By interrogating such classifications in national print media, I hope to contribute to the growing scholarship in American religion that eschews using such simplistic categories and instead makes them the object of study.

Finally, in dealing with magazine images and words, this work is informed by the growing interdisciplinary scholarship, particularly in the field of cultural studies, on representation. Representations directly shape our everyday, embodied experiences and perceptions. The media scholar Stuart Hall writes that “in part, we give things meaning by how we represent them—the words we use about them, the stories we tell about them, the images of them we produce, the emotions we associate with them, the ways we

classify and conceptualize them, the values we place on them.”<sup>27</sup> Representations both shape and mirror social relations. They can be liberating, even revolutionary. Representations can symbolically subvert social hierarchies. But perhaps more often, they do the opposite. The power to represent is entwined with social, economic, and political power. Representations can take the form of stereotypes that uphold unequal power relations and even foment violence. Representations of marginalized groups in the United States have sanctioned not only dismissive humor pieces in the *New Yorker* but pipe bombs in Laotian Buddhist temples, riots outside Catholic convents, vandalism to southern black churches and midwestern Muslim temples, and—as I argue in Chapter 5—the government assault in 1993 on a Texas sectarian commune of the Branch Davidians.

### *Sources*

Most scholarship on religious fringe representations focuses on groups that journalists label cults. The majority of this work fails to clearly define the object of study, and instead often uses broad terms such as “media” and “mass media” as if they were a monolithic and undifferentiated whole.<sup>28</sup> More systematic studies examine newspapers or a small selection of national newsweeklies.<sup>29</sup> Most focus on coverage of only one group or a predetermined cluster of groups.<sup>30</sup> Few are longitudinal, and only one study that I am familiar with examines in detail any form of mass media coverage before 1972.<sup>31</sup> In this work, I analyze one specific media form over an extended period of time—including the seventeen years prior to 1972.

My primary sources are magazines distributed nationwide and indexed in *The Reader’s Guide to Periodical Literature*.<sup>32</sup> Most had large circulations during the period under study, distributing between one and eight million copies an issue, though some special-interest magazines—especially religious ones like *Christian Century*, *Christianity Today*, and *Catholic World*—had distributions between 20,000 and 155,000.<sup>33</sup> I divide my sources into three categories. The first, and the one I highlight, is newsmagazines. These had some of the largest circulations and include *Time*, *Newsweek*,

and *U.S. News and World Report*. The second type is general interest magazines. These included news, but their topical reach extended to fiction, human interest, and other subjects. *Life*, *Look*, *Reader's Digest*, and *Saturday Evening Post* fall under this category. The third category of periodicals appealed to special interests. These include journals of politics and opinion (*National Review* and *The Nation*), gender-specific magazines (*Esquire*, *McCall's*, and *Ladies Home Journal*), age-specific ones (*Seventeen*, and *Senior Scholastic*), those directed at African Americans (*Jet* and *Ebony*), and several religious periodicals, including two that were Protestant (the conservative Evangelical *Christianity Today* and the liberal ecumenical *Christian Century*), two that were Catholic (*Catholic World* and *America*), and one that was largely Jewish (*Commentary*).

I found my sources by using the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature* and later by turning the magazine pages to find additional, unindexed articles. I examined numerous stories on specific groups, from Methodists to Mormons, Baptists to Anglicans. I also looked for terms that lumped theologically disparate groups together. Articles with "cults" and "sects" in their titles caught my attention. I found that the terms "offbeat" and "fringe" served similar functions. To my surprise, extended coverage of single groups that were labeled sects, cults, or fringe proved insubstantial until the early 1970s. One exception was the Nation of Islam or, as the news media called them, Black Muslims. From 1959 to 1965 over sixty articles appeared on that group, making them the most covered "fringe movement" until the mass suicide of the Peoples Temple in November 1978. Because journalists reported so much on the Nation of Islam, Chapter 2 focuses on depictions of it.

I collected well over 500 articles from the period 1955–93, a relatively small number for thirty-nine years. To give some perspective, consider an estimated 390 articles on Catholicism listed in the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature* between 1961 and 1962 alone. Fifty-eight of these appeared in nonreligious magazines. I read for content, tone, editorial point of view, choice of images and captions, and narrative frame. I considered journalists' word choices particularly important, heeding Hartley's and Montgomery's reminder that "particular selections in vocabulary are thus part of particular modes of representation doing particular kinds of ideo-



logical work.”<sup>34</sup> I realize that my own latent assumptions and situatedness, just like those of the journalists whose stories I write about, inevitably govern my authorship. As a scholar of American religion with a rural, nonreligious, working-class background, my narratives and conclusions are as situated as those of journalists. So while I tried to be fair, it seems rather disingenuous to merely suggest that I did my best to let the primary sources guide my case study choices. I agree with the assertion of the feminist philosopher of science Donna Haraway that “translation is always interpretive, critical, and partial,” but I also agree with her suggestion that the “only way to find a larger vision is to be somewhere in particular.”<sup>35</sup> As the religious historian Thomas Tweed suggests, “it is precisely because we stand in a particular location that we are able to see, to know, and to narrate.”<sup>36</sup> I conceived this work from a particular social location. The conclusions I reach seem fairly convincing from this site. Of course, readers will decide whether they are persuasive from other social locations.

### *Caveats*

I have identified my main arguments, sources, and approach. But I also must offer several caveats. First, one can find religious fringe depictions in newspapers and comics, on websites and television—even on t-shirts. A study of these other media would likely yield somewhat different conclusions. For example, the sociologist David Bromley suggests that coverage of “cults” has historically been more negative in local than in national newspapers.<sup>37</sup> It is also unclear how denominational journals might compare to national mass-market magazines. But these questions are beyond the current study’s focus. The “mass media” is large and diverse in both technological form and representational content. This study considers primarily one, albeit a large and influential, mass media site. Although I do discuss other forms of media, for the most part I focus on periodicals and resist the temptation to generalize beyond them.

Readers also might ask why, given its conspicuous presence, television is not my primary source. As early as 1959, forty-four million American homes had television sets.<sup>38</sup> By the mid-1960s,

most Americans owned televisions and watched them six to seven hours a day.<sup>39</sup> Robert Lichter and his colleagues have noted that “the development of a national media network did not really come to fruition until the late 1950s and early 1960s.” “This,” they argue, “was due, in part, to the emergence of television.”<sup>40</sup>

Despite the obvious importance of television, I use print sources for several reasons. First, although television became the most popular medium in the period under study, most magazines did not decline in circulation until the early to mid-seventies. Some, like *Time* and *Newsweek*, have not declined at all.<sup>41</sup> Lichter and his colleagues even argue that “paradoxically, the advent of television increased the influence of a few East Coast newspapers and magazines.”<sup>42</sup> Television did not make magazines uninfluential: it became another, complementary medium. Second, with some reservations, I agree with Herbert Gans that the similarities between electronic and print news media are often more decisive than their differences.<sup>43</sup> On the other hand—and perhaps most important—magazines, because of their style and format, contained more lengthy and sustained religious fringe discourse than television or any other media form. Interestingly, national magazines, television news, and even mass-market paperbacks frequently entered into symbiotic relationships when representing the American religious fringe. In my research, I found that television newscasts about the Nation of Islam inspired interest from the print media, and articles in newsmagazines about “cult deprogrammers” inspired interest from the television news. Popular books like Eric Hoffer’s *The True Believer* also found their way into 1950s and 1960s representations. Because of this relationship among media forms, television news stories and popular books do appear in this study, even if I do center on magazines.

Granting me the right to focus on magazines, some readers might still question the value of analyzing together such varied types. After all, newsmagazines in some ways have more in common with newspapers than with general-interest magazines, and religious journals obviously differ in style and content from those devoted to other special interests. I suggest in response that only by examining various stripes of religious, news, general-interest, and special-interest magazines side by side, commenting on the same

topics during the same period (sometimes even the same week), can one begin to see how theological, social, political, racial, and economic concerns partly dictated how certain religious groups were covered.

A second caveat concerns agency in the production of fringe representations. As noted earlier, this study is about the words and images produced in newsrooms, not the newsrooms themselves. At the same time, who produced the images and words—and how and why they did—are important questions. In examining primary documents, some historians analyze information about individual authors in an attempt to understand the personal motives that underlay creation of the documents. In examining fringe representations in news and general-interest magazines, and despite examples like that of [founder Henry] Luce and Time Inc., I often found the psychological motivations of individual journalists less important than their general social locations and professional practices.<sup>44</sup> I agree with the media scholar Wendy Kozol, who argues that the institutional structure of mass media means that authorship is *always* multiple rather than individual. Writing about *Life* magazine, Kozol argues that “to speak only of an individual producer, whether [Henry] Luce, the editors, or the photographers . . . underestimates the commercial structures and social conditions that affected production.”<sup>45</sup> In their study of *National Geographic*, Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins similarly suggest that in editing and production rooms, “producing pictures, captions, and layout is a social and creative act in which negotiation and unacknowledged struggle result in the ultimate artifact, rather than a single plan deliberately followed through.”<sup>46</sup> Given these considerations, I suggest that the journalistic habitus proves a useful interpretive tool. While it would be erroneous to claim that all journalists in a given magazine had the same demographics, it is not shocking that people from similar social locations did favor certain ways of framing stories.

A third caveat recognizes that this work focuses on stories primarily about movements that journalists considered fringe. Because of this, I say less about coverage of groups that they considered “mainstream.” There are no chapters on Methodists, Baptists, or Episcopalians, even though these groups sometimes received

more attention in newsmagazines than those featured here. In my research, I found that “non-fringe” religion news in magazines like *Time* ranged from the quirky (YMCA’s in Israel and the theology of Charles Schulz’s comic strip *Peanuts*) to the doctrinal (Anglicans debating the proper age at which to baptize members) to the dull (reports on annual denominational conventions).<sup>47</sup> But more important, my analysis of this coverage supported—rather than challenged—my arguments. Regardless of the topic or featured group, religion articles in the largest news and general-interest magazines consistently viewed as fringe high levels of exoticism, dogma, and emotion. Longitudinal studies of newsmagazine coverage of Methodists, Episcopalians, and other once-named “mainline” denominations would be valuable additions to scholarship.<sup>48</sup> But this is beyond the present study’s scope.

A fourth caveat reminds readers that I examine depictions of the American religious fringe in national mass-market magazines, not reader responses to them. Identifying the interpretive patterns of magazine articles is one task; gauging the response of readers is quite another. As with the photographers for *Life* in the 1950s studied by Wendy Kozol, magazine reporting about the religious periphery “sought to win consent for a preferred reading through discursive strategies that constrained the range of options” that readers had.<sup>49</sup> In other words, writers and editors framed stories and accompanying photos in ways that suggested which topics were most important and who the “heroes” and “villains” of the news were. On the other hand, Kozol argues, “photographs are polysemic texts, that is, they are open to different interpretations and can be read in a variety of ways . . . although representations are abundantly meaningful, those meanings are neither unified or stable, nor are they read the same way by all audiences.”<sup>50</sup> My textual sources, like Kozol’s photographs, are polysemic: though writers framed them in ways that suggested a particular reading, readers might choose to authorize alternative ones. For example, a series in *Christian Century* in 1957 by Marcus Bach covered the Unity church, Baha’i faith, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Psychiana, a mail-order religion founded by Frank Robinson in 1929. Many readers responded with letters asking how they could get in touch with the groups.<sup>51</sup> Dismayed, the managing editor, Theodore Gill, vehe-

mently responded with an essay condemning all four movements as heretical.<sup>52</sup> As in that instance, what writers and editors want to communicate may not be what readers choose to receive.

While it is hard to gauge how individual readers respond to journalistic accounts, the media undoubtedly influence audience perceptions.<sup>53</sup> Stuart Hall argues that “the mass media are more and more responsible (a) for providing the basis on which groups and classes construct an ‘image’ of the lives, meanings, practices and values of other groups and classes; (b) for providing the images, representations and ideas around which the social totality, composed of all these separate and fragmented pieces, can be coherently grasped as a ‘whole.’”<sup>54</sup> Similarly, though more in terms of initiating action, Bourdieu asserts that “the very fact of reporting, of putting on record as a reporter, always implies a social construction of reality that can mobilize (or demobilize) individuals or groups.”<sup>55</sup> I agree with both Hall and Bourdieu in accepting that national periodicals have established connections between certain characteristics and the religious margins that audiences have accepted. For example, the contemporary association of the terms “cult” and “brainwashing” has been partly constructed and inculcated by American mass media. Since at least the late 1970s, as readers might guess, polls show that many Americans hold suspicious and even negative views of religious groups they consider marginal. For example, a Gallup poll in 1989 asserted that 62 percent of Americans would not want religious sects or cults as neighbors, twice as high as the second-most disliked and almost equally press-beaten category, fundamentalists.<sup>56</sup> A poll conducted by *USA Today* three days after the Branch Davidian standoff ended in flames found that 93 percent of respondents blamed the tragic outcome on the group’s leader, David Koresh.<sup>57</sup> To this day, however, there has been no substantive evidence proving how the fire began, though assertions have ranged broadly from Davidian mass suicide to FBI malfeasance. Although I would never claim that representations by the mass media caused these unfavorable public responses, they certainly contributed by promoting negative, unnuanced images of the groups in question.

In explaining the national print media’s role aiding in readers’ constructions of the American religious fringe, I find Stuart Hall’s

concept of “articulation” useful. Hall defines articulation as “the form of the connection that can make a unity of two different elements . . . a linkage which is not necessary, determined, absolute, and essential for all time.”<sup>58</sup> A “point of articulation,” to use Gilbert Rodman’s expanded phrase, is a social site where unrelated phenomena may become linked such that their mutual association appears inherent and natural.<sup>59</sup> The sociologists James Richardson and Barend van Driel have noted that print media coverage of cults disproportionately focuses on crime and conflict, calling it the “stream of controversies” approach.<sup>60</sup> In such stories, brainwashing and coercion are often associated with the groups. As I noted earlier, “cult” is the most common contemporary moniker that journalists use to denote groups they consider marginal. In an extension of this process of articulation, then, brainwashing and coercion become associated with a wide range of groups labeled fringe. In this book, I focus on points of articulation—California cults, the Third Force, the Nation of Islam, Asian Gurus, the Jesus movement, the Occult, and the “Cult Menace”—that connected various motifs and themes to the American religious fringe.

### *Organization*

This book consists of five chapters, grouped into two sections. The first section, titled “Monitoring the Marginal Masses: Exoticism, Zealotry, and Subversion during the Cold War, 1955–1965,” contains two chapters. The first looks at how journalists of the period 1955–65 characterized some religious groups in American society as central and others as peripheral. I discuss the conception in the 1950s of what Will Herberg has called the “triple melting pot” of mainline Protestants, Catholics, and Jews. I then analyze two fringe categorizations that connected a variety of theologically disparate movements. The “Third Force in Christendom,” a term first proposed by the liberal ecumenist Henry Van Dusen in 1955, linked a diverse group of working-class denominations, ranging from Pentecostals to Jehovah’s Witnesses. Similarly, journalists used “California cults” to connect and exoticize miscellaneous groups based in California. Chapter 1 makes two points. First, a classist, Cold War discourse ran through many newsmaga-

zines' articles on the Third Force and California cults. This latent discourse reflected ambivalence toward "lowbrow" culture and the working classes, associating them with fanaticism, mass hysteria, and dangerous religious zeal. Second, religious fringe classifications were contested. For example, Evangelical and Catholic periodicals proposed alternatives to the Third Force classification that centered their own faiths, while marginalizing liberal Protestants.

In the second chapter, I argue that the largest news and general-interest magazines viewed the Nation of Islam as a lower-class group with subversive tendencies—like all working-class mass movements in their view. But race, of course, played the major role in magazine depictions. Here, during the volatile civil rights era, were blacks who refused both the adjective and the noun in the classification "American Negro." They identified themselves as Muslims, which for them also signaled non-American, and they shunned the word "Negro," favoring "black." For white print media journalists, the Nation of Islam was a movement of "others" four times removed: by class, race, national self-identity, and religious affiliation. In this chapter, I identify three themes that dominated the group's coverage, chronicle alternative representations, and suggest why print media reporting on the Muslims abruptly changed in 1965.

The second section, "Reconstructing an American Religious Fringe, 1966–1993," traces the gradual emergence of recurring "cult menace" motifs in the national print media and carries the study into the 1990s. Chapter 3 charts the beginning of a decisive shift in journalists' representations. In the late 1960s and early 1970s Asian religions, the Jesus movement, and the all-inclusive "occult" appeared in the pages of the largest periodicals as harmless, even banal, curiosities. By 1975, however, journalists consistently depicted these same movements as imminent dangers and generalized certain negative incidents beyond particular groups to "cults" in general. I suggest that a number of elements, including the anti-cult movement, combined to account for this change. Another important factor was that many of these religions attracted white middle-class youth—part of the group whose social location was idealized in the largest magazines.

In Chapter 4 I examine the appearance of brainwashing, deprogramming, and cult apostate accounts. I argue that changes in the business of journalism, as well as a propensity to accept simplistic brainwashing theories, led magazines of all stripes to increasingly portray the fringe as dangerously deviant. I end the chapter with coverage of the mass suicide at Jonestown in 1978, a point of articulation that decisively welded dangerous cult images to the American religious fringe. Chapter 5 brings the study of fringe representations up to 1993, ending with print coverage of the stand-off between the Branch Davidians and the ATF that ended with a smoldering commune and over eighty Davidians and several federal agents dead.