

## **Myth “Today”: Reading Religion Into Research on Mediated Cultural Politics**

STEWART M. HOOVER  
University of Colorado, USA

The events in Lafayette Square in Washington on June 1, 2020, in which President Trump displayed a Bible in front of St. John’s Church, constitutes a heuristic lens through which to explore the potential of serious scholarship on religion. Culturalist Media Studies, as a field, has traditionally ignored religion and it now does so at its peril, leaving it increasingly unable to account for the emergent political formations of the post-Brexit era. June 1 provided a rich tapestry of visual, iconic, symbolic, discursive, and agonistic formations through which to explore how religion, media, and culture are present in complex and layered ways and that careful scholarship can deepen knowledge and understanding about contemporary social and cultural life.

*Keywords: media, religion, politics, Trump, visual communication, myth, imaginaries*

On June 1, 2020, the president of the United States stood in front of a church across the street from the White House and held up a copy of the Bible. This incident became, within days, a signal event in the contentious, roiling history of Trump politics. As time has gone by, it appears that this incident might well be remembered as the beginning of the end of the Trump administration (though probably not the “Trump project”).<sup>1</sup>

American presidents have always held Bibles. But this president, holding that Bible in that place and at that moment in time, yielded a surplus of meaning (see Figure 1). It was an act of mediation, a visual articulation of an argument. And it was the result of an entire performance that was itself a performative mediation. It was evidence of the extent to which our politics today happen in a context of “deep mediatization” (Couldry & Hepp, 2017) under a performative and constructive regime of “hypermediation” (Echchaibi, 2017) through affective engagement (Hoover, 2019; Papacharissi, 2015).

---

<sup>1</sup> I am advocating that the field of media studies take religion more seriously and begin to understand it in more complex and layered terms. Should the Trump presidency be one term, there will be a temptation to think of it—and of the role of religion in it—as a “temporary political fever” that has broken. Need I point out that our inattention to religion left us unable to account for the new populism this time around, and that there is reason to believe that the formations of the past five years may roil politics for years to come?



**Figure 1. The Bible.**

Most significantly here, it was a mediation that was coded by, afforded by, challenged by, and made possible by religion. It was a moment that, despite its coding as merely political, could not have happened, made sense, or made any difference, were it not for the deep articulation of religion into it. To understand the religion in it reveals trajectories of meaning that afforded it and that flow from it and that will continue to do so.

Observers from the media (i.e., journalists) and from "media scholarship" (my colleagues in the fields devoted to the academic study of media in relation to culture) have historically had a difficult time seeing religion (Hoover, 2017). Of course, we all see it in the sense that when its explicit symbols or ideas are shown or spoken of, we can see them. However, we have a harder time seeing it when it appears in ways that are less explicit or where it interacts with other things, like politics. We prefer to see things as "only" about politics, not about religion.

This myopia makes it difficult to see the full meaning of an incident like President Trump's Bible photo-op. There was much more going on there than met the eye. And although there were journalistic and public scholarly attempts to interpret it in terms of religion, those barely scratched the surface.

In fact, it was an intellectual feast of opportunities for reflection on contemporary media, mediation, mediatization, mythmaking, social semiotics, cultural politics, and religion, but only if we looked hard enough. To do so, we needed to move beyond some of our received shibboleths (in journalism and in media theory and research) about what religion is and how it works. This event gives us an opportunity to consider four of them.

The first of these is the idea that religion has either “gone away” or is “going away.” This looks for evidence of a long-predicted “secularization” process in modern Western societies. Often, this has been quite superficial: that religion would simply fade away as societies achieved greater levels of enlightenment and education and people no longer found religion necessary (for a thorough review, see Calhoun, Juergensmeyer, & VanAntwerpen, 2011). An elementary Marxian version has further coded religion as mere ideology and anticipated that it would be increasingly incompatible with modern consciousness (Morgan, 2013). Although you can describe much of what has happened in the world of religion as “secularization” (e.g., declines in formal religious observance, increasing privatization, and individuation of faith), religion has persisted, even flourished (Gorski, 2017). And there is evidence that it has been transformed by media and mediation into something new and quite different (Hoover, 2020).

Second, both journalists and scholars have adopted what religion scholars call “the essentialist fallacy” that religion is only, or mostly, about faith, belief, doctrine, piety, discipline, and spirituality. Today, as we see vividly here, religion is less about faith and belief and more about public symbolism of social and cultural politics. This has been developing for a long time and is where the myth of “secularization” has most led us all astray. Most elites have been taught to think about the 20th century as one long epoch of secularization and rationalization. This new history began when the residual forces of religious revanchism, in the form of the Fundamentalist movement, were finally and definitively quashed, most notably in the Scopes Monkey Trial of 1925.

Conservative Christianity adapted to its marginalization in the early 20th century by not staying quietly at the side. Instead, its leaders began to build a new, public—and this is significant here—mediated front. This was rooted in the marginal and sectarian spaces of the “Fundamentalist radio preachers” and in prodigious print publishing but found an increasingly public profile at midcentury with the emergence most notably of Billy Graham’s public and media ministries. A key turn, though, was in the 1970s when Jerry Falwell and other leaders led Fundamentalist Christians out of their political quietude and began to forge them into a significant political force. And once again, this turn was based in and largely defined by media. So, although we should not doubt that most conservative Christians are faithful believers, that is not all they are—and that is not the most important thing about them in public life today.

The third shibboleth we must discard is that as they are deployed and are circulated in public, religious symbols need only be interpreted denotatively. That is, they are semiotically closed. Barthes, Sassure, and Pierce have helped us understand the extent to which signs and symbols can also function connotatively (Barthes, 1972). But in the case of religion, we have a hard time thinking of them as “open” in any sense. Thus, Trump holding the Bible is the symbol of only the Bible and its taken-for-grantedness as a sacred text. We can, of course, criticize this symbol in those terms (e.g., “Look, he’s holding it upside down”). But the deployment of that symbol in that context needs to be understood as more than that, and even its denotation moves beyond a first-order reading.

Because of the deep, century-long history of the articulation of religious imagery into contemporary mediation and hypermediation, and because of the century-long articulation of religion into cultural and social politics, religious symbols today are articulated into media circulations in complex and layered ways (Morgan, 2007).

The fourth shibboleth of religion held by journalistic and public scholarly discourse is that religion serves to elide or obscure true interests in the social and structural sphere. Class interests are, of course, the most notable of these, and an elementary Marxian view contributes the idea that religion misdirects people's attentions from what really should matter to them. The problem is that there is much evidence that people can be motivated, even to risk life and limb, by things other than their manifest material interests. We can argue about whether the final logic still in fact needs to be critiqued in terms of fundamental interests (Garnham, 1995). Indeed, I'd agree that today's "Trump voters" fail to see the extent to which their needs are not actually being met by his policies. And their focus on the religious, cultural, and political outcomes (such as court nominees) may not be the most important thing for them to be thinking about when they vote. But they disagree, and they are motivated, and they march and contribute and vote based on the less material and more cultural interests, and they helped swing the 2016 election, and we all now live with the consequences. That is and should be of deep interest to culturalist media scholarship.

My project here is a careful media-cultural analysis of the Trump-Bible event and the various trajectories of meaning-making, imaginaries, and political and cultural purpose that circulate in, through, and from it. A deep reading of it reveals much about contemporary media, religion, and politics. Through such an analysis, we can move through and beyond the conceptual dead ends represented by these shibboleths and move toward an analytical purchase that places media, religion, and cultural politics in relation to one another in contemporary political cultures in the U.S. and beyond.

There was more to this than the simple gesture of the raised Bible. It was a larger cultural performance staged in, through, and with the object of mediation. On June 2, Trump engaged in a second symbolic performance (or simply extended the one of the day before) by travelling—accompanied by the first lady—to a shrine dedicated to the late Pope John Paul II (see Figure 2). This event became entangled in the first, and in the cultural politics of the growing protests for racial justice, because protestors showed up to confront them at the shrine, and—more significantly—because the Catholic Archbishop of Washington, like Anglican Bishop Mariann Budde the day before, quickly condemned the visit. The Catholic Bishop, Wilton Gregory, is one of the most prominent Black bishops in the Catholic Church. He specifically singled out the Knights of Columbus (a powerful, conservative lay Catholic organization), which owns the shrine, for allowing the visit to happen.



**Figure 2. At the shrine.**

Bishop Gregory's condemnation further connected Trump's acts of construction with the politics of the worldwide racial justice protests. It also explicitly labeled the gestures as political and as an attempt to link religion with politics visually and through mediation. The visit's performative staging was further demonstrated because pool press photography was not allowed inside the shrine, but administration photographers—perhaps from the first lady's office—were allowed in, and several staged images were circulated. Like the Bible image from the day before, these were, aesthetically, clearly polemical. Both POTUS and FLOTUS's bodies appear stiff and posed, though in one image they are both shown kneeling at the shrine's altar.

These two gestures (the Bible and John Paul II's shrine moments) combine in some subsequent accounts. Broader trajectories of argument flow from each. And, as we shall see, these trajectories reveal much about the nature of the construct binding media, religion, and culture in today's politics. The idea that this constellation of constructive moments has not been forgotten in the rush of events is worth considering. The Trump-Bible incident promises to retain some measure of iconicity. An editorial cartoon from *The Washington Post*, July 4, 2020, by Anne Telnaes, demonstrates this (Figure 3).

## Another meaningless Trump photo op



**Figure 3. The icon.**

Its durability is that it was not merely a symbolic act or acts. It was, in fact, an interpolation of “soft” gestures of symbolism and imaginaries with “hard” gestures of militarization, police violence, constitutional powers, and political intentions. It had in it, “said,” and invoked all those things. In this moment, roiling controversies about presidential power and prerogative, the portent of autocratic rule, and hard electoral politics came to be focused around a photo-op. That this is plausible is a testament to our mediatic and hypermediatic moment (not to mention the enduring legacy of Daniel Boorstin’s classic 1962 work on “pseudoevents”). The chairman of the joint chiefs of staff issued a highly unusual apology for participating in the walk across the square. That his apology was plausibly about something as seemingly ephemeral as a photographic opportunity is notable. Of course, it was not just about a photograph; but because the act of photography as political rhetoric is now so commonplace, it is evidence of how deeply mediaticized our politics have become, and—this is critical to culturalist scholarship—how they’ve become deeply mediaticized.

And, of course, these were not just any photographs. The Bible picture and the less-iconic images from the Catholic shrine were intended to “mean.” They were intended to “want” things (Mitchell, 2005; see also Zelizer, 2010) from us. And they were interpreted as meaning more than their denotations. Among the arguments they made were about an iconic rendering of “religion” as a currency of politics. Beyond denotation, then, we learn that religion is a significant currency of political exchange, and that its currency can be realized through mediation in broader cultural markets.

Most subsequent coverage (and there was quite a lot) suggested that the president wanted to make a specific statement. He felt defensive with the roiling protests in Washington and was unused to being unable to direct the daily political discourse. He was further troubled by the symbolism of bunkering in the White House and by reports that he and his family had been taken to a secure shelter over the weekend. On Monday morning, then, he felt it necessary to project strength and resolve and to symbolically “break out” of the White House. According to accounts, over the course of the day those intentions coalesced into a well-publicized walk across Lafayette Square to the nearby St. John’s Church.

This was, then, a calculated cultural performance, one that would work only if it were mediated. Its central acts (the march to the church—described by Attorney General Barr as the “right of a president”—and the gesture of holding up the Bible) were symbolic and media gestures, intended to invoke imaginaries of interest and value. These gestures are significant: First, the symbolic (and the actual physical) cleansing of the space—interpreted by some of the actors as a sacred space in both religious and “secular” terms. Second, the march itself, with the president in the lead, accompanied by his putatively powerful administration, including—very significantly from a visual standpoint—the general in his battle fatigues. Third, the president’s pose in front of the church (as Bishop Budde pointed out, he didn’t go there to go in or to pray) with the Bible. Importantly, there was a fourth gestural moment: the widely reported provenance of the Bible itself. It was brought by First Daughter Ivanka Trump in an expensive handbag, handed to the president once he arrived, and then awkwardly held aloft.

But it was all quite awkward. It is an open and equivocal set of symbols and gestures.<sup>2</sup> Its construction was obvious. Everyone was made to know that it was made possible by violence. The sounds of street clashes as peaceful demonstrators were suddenly charged by the police without warning could be heard by the press gathered to hear a statement by the president and were audible in the recordings. The bodies depicted walking through the newly cleared square appear not to be in any particular formation, just a group seemingly recently emerged from a conference room—reminiscent of academics roused from a late-morning conference panel to walk down the hall to the buffet (Figure 4). General Milley stands out, as does the president, though only because he is at the center. Attorney General Barr wears no tie. In subsequent photos, Press Secretary Keyleigh McEnany stands awkwardly with the group, a violation of formal protocol in almost any organization.

---

<sup>2</sup> And its openness and equivocation is clearer when read through the frame of religion.



**Figure 4. Walking across Lafayette Square.**

And then, the complete incoherence of Trump's manipulation of the Bible itself. Some images show him looking at it oddly, and the final image—the central purported purpose of the entire effort—where he holds it up in his right hand, like a prize he's just won at a raffle. A reporter asks him, "Is that your Bible?" He replies, "It is a Bible."

A cultural analysis of this performance must recognize how a superficial or first-level account of what it attempted is quite banal. Most observers could "read" what was intended. The president wished to project power and resolve against the demonstrations (which, for conservative ears, he could portray as threatening instability and the portent of military intervention or full militarization). He could do so with a ritual clearing and a walk. And, in what must have seemed to his advisors to be a brilliant act of parsimony, he could make the object of the clearing and the walk a gesture toward his religious base. This all made sense on one level. However, I should note—and it is significant here—that the commentary from supporters and critics alike was a mixture of confirmation of the act on its own terms (for example, Robert Barr and Keyleigh McEnany's accounts) and evaluation of it as an act and its relative success or failure in achieving its goals.

As is the case with most events in the age of hypermediation, we, as the objects of these mediations, engage in both the consumption of mediated texts and tropes and in the practices of evaluation and curation of them. We are reflexive. We consume, and we observe ourselves (and others) consuming. This incident proved to be open to—and to stimulate—extensive discourse. We all accept that it makes sense for a political figure to arrange to have a certain image made and circulated. The question is, how successful was the image in relation to the effort it took to make it? How good an imagemaker is this or that leader?



This, of course—and this is an example of mediatization of politics—becomes one of the qualities expected of contemporary political figures: How good are they at “media”?

In an age when the material and structural sources of the provenance of a thing like an image are necessarily transparent, the question becomes, “For whom is this image coherent?” It was clearly intended for, and consumed by, different audiences. As a performance, it performed power and violence—an act of geographic “claiming” and boundary-building, suppression of certain bodies, and elevation of others—an assertion of authority for its own sake, and, ultimately, the production of the intended image. The intentional openness and transparency of the whole cycle was important. Again, this is an affordance of the hypermediatic moment. All actors in the symbolic production and circulation are reflexively engaged.

We can illustrate by a religious reading of the performance. A story by *The Guardian* about how people presumed to be in Trump’s religious “base” consumed the Bible incident included this passage.

“My whole family was flabbergasted,” said Benjamin Horbowy, 37.

The Horbowys had gathered in Tallahassee, Florida, to watch live as Trump walked from the White House to St John’s. “My mother just shouted out, ‘God give him strength! He’s doing a Jericho walk!’”

A Jericho walk, in some evangelical circles, refers to the biblical book of Joshua, where God commanded the Israelites to walk seven times around the opposing city of Jericho, whose walls then came crashing down.

Horbowy already supported Trump politically—he heads the local chapter of a pro-Trump motorcycle club and is campaigning for a seat in Florida’s state senate—but when Trump lifted the Bible, Horbowy and his family felt overcome spiritually.

“My mother started crying. She comes from Pentecostal background, and she started speaking in tongues. I haven’t heard her speak in tongues in years,” he said. “I thought, look at my president! He’s establishing the Lord’s kingdom in the world.” (Teague, 2020, para. 4)

This moment of consumption depends on the performative openness of the event. A superficial account of the sign (Trump holds Bible) would expect it to be read as a gesture toward his base, and perhaps nothing more (and, in fact, that is how much of the journalistic commentary interpreted it). Instead, we can see contemporary practices of reflexive consumption interpolating Trump’s performative and constructive act at a deeper and more meaningful (to these readers) level. Interestingly, this moment of consumption also depends on a hypermediatic blending of millenarian religious expectation (something we think of as backward or archaic) with modern media affordance. These readers of Trump’s act saw it for what it was—an aspired moment of media construction—and interpreted it not in a framework of conventional, imagined “interests,” but through an imaginary that infused it with other registers or levels of meaning. And

importantly, they engaged in these practices of visual consumption in and through media and through processes of mediation rather unproblematically.

That there are these kinds of interpretive registers for consumption of the incident is not the only way in which we might judge its meanings. It also articulated several contradictions (Figure 5). Imaginaries are on one level all about contradictions. As Anderson (1983) suggested in his germinal work, there is a distance among the structural, cultural, and political conditions that define the modern state and the imaginative resources that perfect it as an expression of nation. More recent work along these lines has pointed out that this is not limited to the kind of unitary project Anderson described, but that we can see imagination and imaginaries functioning in a range of registers and in layered ways to address the distance between actually existing conditions and the normative expressions that can be perfected in imagination.



*Figure 5. Trump supporters.*

Cultural Studies addresses such contradictions. It is about accounting for the ways that various expressions emergent from culture enable senses or "structures of feeling" that can overcome, forget, elide, or resolve them. The complexity of the Trump-Bible cycle demands a culturalist analysis of this kind. The contradictions are not only in the obvious tensions between the political positions that it attempted to advocate or address, but also in a repertoire of other cultural and social positions, some of which were generally obvious and others that were obvious to particular groups or communities, and still others that would become more generally obvious through the publicness of the effort and its reception. And religion is further interpolated into these events by the virtue that many of these types of contradictions were themselves layered articulations of "the religious" into and out of these meaning systems. These matters are complex, but culturalist analysis must aspire to careful interpretation of the complex.

To review some of these contradictions: First, the setting. Trump and Barr's definition of the place, St. John's Church, was that it was denotatively a center of American civil religion and thus a geography that would rightly serve as a backdrop for a broad symbolic act of political locating. This contradicted the reality (noted by some journalists) that it is, in fact, a congregation whose progressive theology and social ministries were in direct conflict with the policies of the Trump administration. Thus, a first-order denotative violation of the "sacred space" of the church in service of profane politics was only one of the contradictions. This deeper and more complex reading depends on a deeper reading and understanding of the nature of contemporary religion and religious politics.

A second and more searing contradiction was widely noted: that the performance was made possible by violence. A first-order analysis of the violence noted its contradiction to the implicit "message" of the Bible and of "church."<sup>3</sup> Trump and Barr's aspiration to make the clearing of the square something symbolic of power, authority, action, boundaries, and the claiming of territory was, however, read differently in different religious registers, as the quote above demonstrated. But there were other framings in conservative religion as well, with many conservative Christians expressing support for Trump's efforts to "restore order."

There was also a contradiction in the formal performance of geographic boundary-building or claiming. Lafayette Square was frequently described in the news accounts as a gathering place for public-making and public expression. The performance of violent clearing, followed by the odd procession of administration officials, presented a contradiction between the sacrality of the space to American democratic participation and its profanation by an expression of power by the state. It was, thus, a contradiction rooted in civic or "civil" religion, but that was nonetheless intelligible as a discourse of "the sacred."

Also embedded in this performance is the longstanding and longnoted contradiction between Trump's personal image and the attempted normative image here of submission to the power of God or the authority of the Bible (Figure 6). The equivocal nature of this visual gesture was obvious in the awkwardness of the moment (e.g., "Is that your Bible?"). There is much to unpack here. On a denotative level, Trump the man seems so contradictory to the aspired normative model of Christian manhood and fatherhood. The contradiction between Trump and the values of his evangelical base remains a confusing feature of the Trump era for many observers (Posner, 2020). This is one of the most complexly layered—as well as portentous and politically significant—features of the religious, symbolic circulations around Trump and religion. On a pure level of political interest, as has been widely noted, his evangelical base is able to forgive much of who he is for what he has done for them (Weiss, 2018). But the explanation or the justification goes much deeper, as suggested by the passage from *The Guardian*. Indeed, there exists on the Christian right a complex imaginary that codes Trump's very defects as measures of his significance in God's plan for America (Hoover, 2020). Certain Christian theological circles, most notably "dominion theology," envision a religion-

---

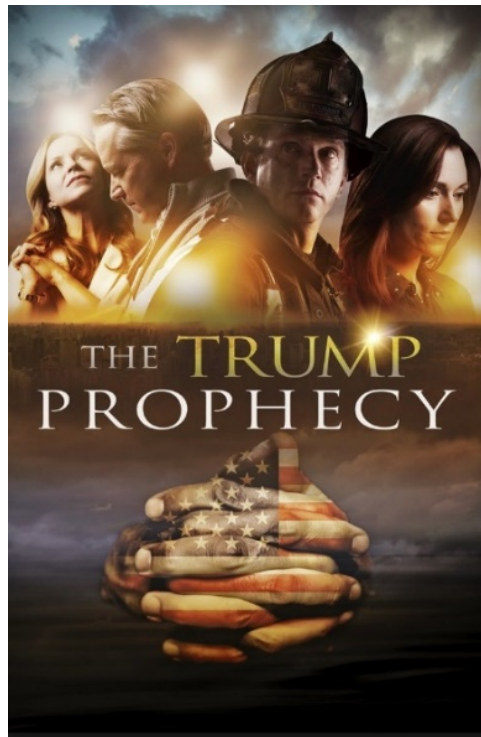
<sup>3</sup> Though, of course, there is violence in the Bible, and church through history has not been unequivocally a sign of peace—there is yet another layer here. This history was, in fact, one dimension of the larger Black Lives Matter reckoning, with the complicity of white churches in slavery and oppression emerging as a theme.

centered America where political figures, even ones as flawed as Trump, are part of a millenarian future for the country (Ingersoll, 2015).



***Figure 6. Trump's evangelical cabinet prays over him.***

And tellingly, the more symbolically ambivalent he appears denotatively, the more he is seen in these quarters as a powerful instrument of divine purpose (Figure 7).



**Figure 7. Trump's divine purpose revealed in a 2018 film.**

An account of participants at Trump rallies in *Vanity Fair* provides evidence of another register of Trump's religious meaning to his base. Its author, Jeff Sharlet, sees a modern Gnosticism in certain Trump followers. They are motivated to understand the forces in the world as a battle between those who are deployed by elites and, more importantly to these followers, those who are unseen, mysterious, and intentionally shielded from view. They see Trump as a champion in a contemporary mystery cult, devoted to the destruction of the power of the "deep state" that has fallen into hideous corruption. (This bears much in common with the higher-profile "Q-Anon" conspiracy, and it is not clear they are distinct.) What is most interesting to those of us focused on media, though, is Sharlet's finding that the practical materiality of media, their affordances, are read into this worldview as deploying specific power—obvious only to those who have eyes to see. Mediatic performances provide the keys to this special knowledge. For example, Trump's tweets (Figure 8):

"The tweets?" I ask.

"Yes," says Pastor Dave. "They matter."

"Right," I say.

"They mean things," he explains. He points. There: a shirt. And there, up in the seats. Another shirt. And there, and there, and there. As if repetition itself is all the proof needed.

"It's not a joke?" I ask Dave. The shirts seem like a rebuke to Black Lives Matter.

"No!" Dave isn't offended. It's unthinkable that anyone down here, so close to Trump's podium, could really believe that. "It's like—" he looks for a word.

"Scripture?" I say.

"Yes," he says with a youth pastor's grin. "Like Scripture." Every tweet, every misspelling, every typo, every strange capitalization—especially the capitalizations, says Dave—has meaning. "The truth is right there in what the media think are his mistakes. He doesn't make mistakes." The message of the shirt to Dave is: Study the layers. "Trump is known as a five-dimension chess player," Dave says later. And he's sending us clues. About the Democrats and Ukraine and his plans. "There are major operations going on," Dave tells me months later, suggesting that Trump is using COVID-19 field hospitals as "a cover" to rescue children from sex trafficking.<sup>4</sup> (Sharlet, 2020)



**Figure 8. T-shirt.**

---

<sup>4</sup> NB also the parallels to Meyer's (2011) important work on media as "sensational forms."

It is critical here to see how the openness of the performance of the sign is everything. The imaginaries that support these various views of Trump-as-religious-icon depend on the contradictions between his persona and his significance to religious-political purpose. And this is also a complexly layered moment of hypermediatic mediatization. Trump's excess and decadence are, after all, mediatized images and expressions. Religious audiences have access to those constructions and symbolic framings. His positionality as a "media figure" is central to their account of him and brings additional frisson to the meaning of him as someone who is significant on a broader framework of social and political action. The media made the man—and the mythology.

Some broader theoretical insights begin to emerge in our exploration of these events. We can avoid the shibboleth of seeing religiously coded signs as closed, but there is much more here. The denotative status of these signs is, of course, important, but it is not rooted in the authority of the sign. In fact, one of the most significant implications of the "media age" for religion is in its effects on authority (Hoover, 2016). Religious authority can no longer aspire to control its own signs and symbols. They flow out into the culture and become the property of reflexive practices of engagement and circulation. Religious symbols retain some of their denotative meaning, but it is now a shared social meaning. Their status in public circulation depends on their plausibility as symbols, but this is always a negotiation, always partial, always conditional and contextual.

To call again on Barthes, we could say that the Trump-Bible image need not be closed in its own terms and need not be denotative. The contradictions I've discussed (obvious to most of the interpretive communities to which it matters) are rendered too pressing by the social and political conditions of the moment. Instead, its connotative performance becomes denotative for certain specific attention publics. The meaning is, again, in the performance. This drives processes and practices of mediation and the larger theoretical questions related to hypermediation and mediatization to the center as we try to account for it.

So, we can think of the Trump-Bible performance at St. John's Church on June 1 as a complex and layered moment of meaning circulation. They are not just any symbols, symbolic performances, circulations, receptions, and recirculations. They are these ones—instantiated by and linked to the social moment. This also suggests that we must understand it in terms of its cultural, political, and religious elements that are understood historiographically. They have specific and known provenances and trajectories. We can't have a full grasp of it without this more complete analysis.

The performances at St. John's Church and the John Paul II shrine were intended to be connected and a trajectory that cuts through these points to other—also complex and layered—registers of meaning. The visit to the shrine was a rather self-evident gesture toward another, slightly less integrated part of Trump's religious "coalition": conservative Catholics. The broader plausibility of Trump politics depends on this coalition and is rooted in his administration's efforts to satisfy these religious interests through nominees to the federal courts and other measures focused on reproductive rights, gender relations, gay and transgender rights, and the broad and diffuse grievance over "religious liberty" (Fea, 2018).

This package of issues includes some that are expressible in concrete policy and others that are less concrete and exist more in the realm of social imaginaries. The desire to limit access to abortion—something that conservative Catholic and Protestant interests share—is expressible in concrete terms. The related issue of access to contraceptive services—something of more interest to Catholics than to Protestants—is also

expressible in concrete policy. The other issues have more diffuse implications for conservative Christian interests. The Obergefell decision, legalizing gay marriage, is assumed by most—including those on the right—to now be settled law, so the "interest" in it shifts to a posture of resistance and grievance related to its deployment and its implications for broader social acceptance of gay people. Other concerns, which are demonstrably integral to the conservative Christian package of interests, are less clearly articulated into policy and are expressed and expressible more in the realm of imaginaries and the "imagined communities" these various groups wish to inhabit. They are structures of feeling or ways of feeling.

This makes the project of crafting, expressing, deploying, and circulating symbolic resources critical. Those are the ways and places that social imaginaries happen. The Trump-Bible-John Paul II shrine cycle of symbolic performance was thus coded in relation to this project of imagination. The interests to whom these events mattered each articulated them in its own way, and these contrasting interpretations then became and will continue to be important markers of, and resources to, the political agonism of the long Trump era.

We've already seen how the thematic system of these two acts and their deployment of affect invoked a complicated, layered set of interests, emotions, and purposes, focused around an aspiration to demonstrate certain things about power, and to direct that aspiration in a way that defines meaning and identity boundaries among competing publics.

But its productivity flowed well beyond, which we can see by looking at one specific trajectory flowing out of the June 2 visit to the John Paul II shrine (Figures 9 and 10).



**Figure 9. Archbishop Gregory decries the visit.**





**Figure 10. At the shrine.**

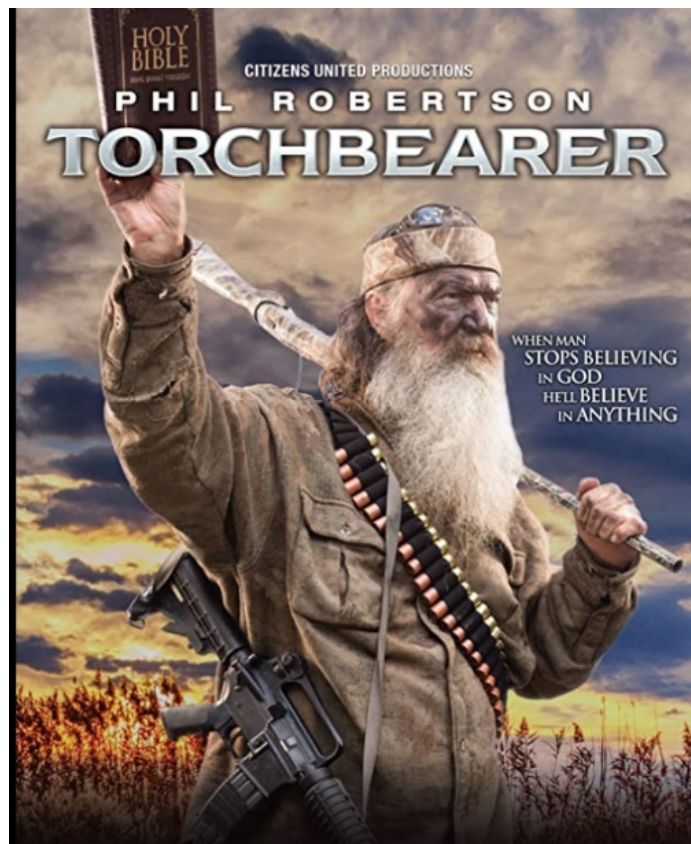
Archbishop Gregory's criticism of the shrine visit clearly implied that it was intended to distract from the growing public movement for racial justice arising as a response to the police killing of George Floyd. The landscape of that movement had clearly isolated the president, who had then positioned himself as a critic of the protests. Thus, the president's intent in performing these public acts of location self-evidently invoking religion and "the religious" was broadly legible to most observers and a protest against one of these gestures clearly positioned Bishop Gregory.

One of the responses to the bishop pointed to yet another level of meaning and trajectory of religious and political struggle. A few days after Gregory's criticism of Trump, a conservative Catholic group [released a video](#) criticizing him and calling him "an accused homosexual," "a Marxist," and "an African Queen." The story went on to identify the source of the video:

Church Militant, a Catholic website known for its incendiary editorial style and whose mission is to "battle against sin, the devil and the demonic," published the video. . . . Michael Voris, the founder of Church Militant, repeatedly refers to Gregory as "the African Queen" throughout the video. He also accuses the archbishop of lying when the cleric criticized the St. John Paul II Shrine in Washington for hosting Trump last week. (Jenkins, 2020, paras. 2-4)

Several things are immediately evident. First, the criticism of a prominent Black official specifically in terms of his race is not new and is a common challenge for such leaders. The references to "the devil and the demonic" in the organization's mission statement, of course, point to archaic and reactionary Catholic theology, but also invokes some of the spirit of the modern cultic Gnosticism noted earlier.

Some other things are less obvious except as we might look more carefully at the evolving geographies of religious politics. "Church militant" is a label that codes a movement of revanchism within Catholicism whose most prominent figure is former Trump advisor Steven Bannon (Gaffey, 2017; Teitelbaum, 2020). A thorough exploration of this specific movement is beyond my purpose here. But Bannon continues to be an active producer of media products (Figure 11) of the type that I have elsewhere described as "affective infrastructures" supporting new religious and political formations in contemporary nationalist and populist politics (Hoover, 2019). For our explorations here, the significant thing is that this Catholic group chose to invoke a set of tropes related to Bishop Gregory that point toward a broader social imaginary.



**Figure 11. Bannon's film Torchbearer.**

The activism of Bannon and the church militant group is part of a revitalized religious nationalism that is emergent across the globe (Hoover, 2020).<sup>5</sup> Newly prominent in the post-Brexit era of neo-populist politics, these groups link across various national contexts. American evangelicals make league with conservative Orthodoxy in Putin's Russia. Political Pentecostals in Bolsonaro's Brazil link with both groups. Militant Catholicism is an important source of support for Duda in Poland. And it is not only Christian movements; there are interesting linkages into the Hindutva movements in Modi's India as well.

Roger Friedland (2002) describes the outlines of contemporary religious nationalisms. All are driven by an interest in returning the nation to the geography of religion, and this involves extensive constructive efforts in registers of imagination and affect. Friedland observes that questions of sex and gender are always at the heart of these movements. I have elsewhere (Hoover, 2020) developed an argument that in these contemporary religious-nationalist movements of the neo-populist era, we can identify three primary goals. First, there is the desire to imaginatively and nostalgically celebrate and re-create lost halcyon pasts. These are, of course, deeply marked by race and traditionalist constructions of racial differences and exceptionalism. Second, there is a deep concern with, and focus on, gender, gender relations, and the domestic sphere. This involves, of course, political positions about such things as gay, transgender, women's, and reproductive rights. Finally, there is a compelling desire to once again mark the culture with religion. That these movements would thus be deeply interconnected with the deployment of the symbolic resources and affordances of the hypermediatic age is not surprising. But one can see in them the kind of material connection with mediation that we've identified with the Trump supporters above. Deep mediatization of this kind, then, implies that political economies of media production are deeply articulated into the imaginative media practices that make politics happen.

This emergent religious nationalism's presence within the Trump movement can help explain some anomalies. For example, what motivates William Barr to continue as Trump's attorney general when he has had to engage in activities that perplex many in the legal world? As many accounts note, he has always held the "unitary executive" view of presidential power, which gives that branch extra weight vis-à-vis the other

---

<sup>5</sup> It is worth noting Bannon's productions that articulate the imaginary of religious nationalism very explicitly. This worldview and its mediation, by means of "affective infrastructures" (Hoover, 2019), is beyond the scope of this effort. They help locate this movement within the American religious history and politics noted here. For just a taste, here is a passage from Bannon's 2016 film *Torchbearer*. The narrator is Phil Robertson, who may be remembered as the grandfather in the popular *Duck Dynasty* franchise who was separated from that show for his public antigay bias. The script has Robertson reflecting on American history from this revisionist nationalist point of view. Here is an account of how the film deals with the repudiation of Fundamentalism early in the last century:

Robertson says the Scopes trial on the teaching of evolution, during which H. L. Mencken mocked religious opponents of teaching evolution in schools, was "a watershed event that would slowly unravel the bond that wove the Creator into the very fabric of American life. God would be cast out of the public square, out of education, out of national discourse, out of the popular culture altogether." (Montgomery, 2016, para. 8)

branches. But to what end? There is a larger, religiously inflected purpose to Barr. *The New York Times Magazine* explains:

He is committed to the "hierarchical" and "authoritarian" premise that "a top-down ordering of society will produce a more moral society." That isn't too far away from what Barr himself articulated in a 2019 speech at the University of Notre Dame. In Barr's view, piety lay at the heart of the founders' model of self-government, which depended on religious values to restrain human passions. "The founding generation were Christians," Barr said. Goodness flows from "a transcendent Supreme Being" through "individual morality" to form "the social order." Reason and experience merely serve to confirm the infallible divine law. That law, he said, is under threat from "militant secularists," including "so-called progressives," who call on the state "to mitigate the social costs of personal misconduct and irresponsibility." At their feet, Barr places mental illness, drug overdoses, violence and suicide. All these things, he said, are getting worse. All are "the bitter results of the new secular age." (Schwartz, 2020, para. 19)

This places Barr, arguably the most important single figure in the Trump administration besides the president himself, in league with these forces of religious nationalism. His motivation is a religious one, though not rooted in faith so much as in the kind of politicized religiosity I earlier attributed to Jerry Falwell and other conservative Christian leaders. This has echoes of the Dominionist view of state authority, of course, but also places him squarely in the kind of religious nationalism Roger Friedlander points to—and that I identified on a more global scale. Barr doesn't say so explicitly, but this would be the reason, for example, that his Justice Department would take the positions it has in recent Supreme Court cases dealing with civil rights, and explains his keen interest in the "religious liberty" movement. And Barr is not the only one. Secretary of State Pompeo is of a similar mind<sup>6</sup> and is very forthcoming about his views of an expansive religion-infused role of government and leadership, as can be [seen in a video](#) on the official Department of State website. This means that, lurking beneath the chaos of the Trump era, exists a broad agonistic project connected with a religious-nationalist purpose. In addition to [Barr](#) and [Pompeo](#), others in the Trump circle can be identified with these politics, including, of course, the vice president, Press Secretary [Kayleigh McEnany](#), and White House Counsels [Pat Cipolone](#) and [Jay Sekulow](#). This nationalist project is also implicit in the religion agenda of the current U.S. Supreme Court (which is dominated by conservative Catholics), and in such prominent political forces as the conservative Christian fellowship "the Family" depicted in the [2019 Netflix series](#) of the same name.

This religious-nationalist strain within contemporary conservative politics deserves a more extensive treatment than I can give it here. Let me make it clear that I am not lifting up these individuals and groups simply because of their religiosity. This is not directly rooted in questions of their faith or beliefs. Rather, this is about their engagement in a broader nationalist imaginary that desires a religiously marked government and public sphere, and one directed at the three symbolic centers I noted earlier: a nostalgia for a remembered past, a commitment to traditionalist ideas about the domestic sphere including gender relations and resistance

---

<sup>6</sup> Significant to my argument here, Barr is Catholic, Pompeo evangelical. This underscores my argument that denotation of religion as "faith" or "belief" is inadequate.

to advancements in LGBTQ rights, and a desire to once again mark the culture with religion. And it is essential to note that this project of imagination is absolutely dependent on media and mediation.

We can see, then, that the criticism of Bishop Gregory by means of both racial and homophobic slurs is more than just a trivial matter of bigotry. It codes a much larger and more portentous global effort in religious politics. It is about pointing to a particular imaginary—a “neo-traditionalist” one—where a Black body in a position of authority standing against the aspired purpose of religiously imagined senses of identity and nationhood, must be “othered” (and no figurative “holds” are barred) both for its Blackness and further identified with a putative project of undoing the idealized imaginary of domestic identity—a kind of *heimat*—for which conservative Christians must carry a legitimate (in their view) grievance. And—I cannot emphasize this enough—as a project of imaginaries, these forces depend heavily on, and are effectively coded within, media circulations, and are thus rightly the concern of culturalist media scholarship.

### Conclusion

My primary purpose has been to use this cycle of events to explore the ways that interpretation and analysis might take account of both media and religion and understand the ways that each of them and their interactions might be more significant in our work. Culturalist media scholarship has ignored religion far too long and has done so at the peril of not being able to fully or seriously account for important social and cultural developments. This has been a problem for many years, but it has come to a head with the post-Brexit and Trumpist politics of the North Atlantic West. Regardless of what happens next, the interests and media affordances that have come into relief in the Trump, Johnson, Putin, Bolsonaro era are not going away. I would hope that this analysis would provide signposts for such work and would demonstrate that serious scholarship can yield deeper insights and learnings than is possible without it.

We’ve seen, for example, that the events of June 1 and 2 coded important political forces and interests by means of invocation of religion in several different registers. There were, of course, the obvious and denotative registers of the symbols and gestures. But these were not seamless; there were seams all around them. The fissures and the intentions and aspirations were easily read both by those who were antagonistic and were supportive of Trump. The facile reading by antagonists and skeptics—that this ham-handed gesture, where Trump’s actual engagement with faith was again shown to be tenuous—missed the depth of the point. Others who were more supportive could read it as a gesture in the right direction at least, and still others, as we saw, could read special compelling signs into it. We should not forget that what affords this multivalent reading are characteristics of the age. They involve an integration and interpolation of media materialities into these complex projects. This is a kind of “deep mediatization” but one that we must interpret through the complexity and transparency of its forces, gestures, and technologies. We can also see within this event cycle the functioning of “affect.” These are impulses, discourses, and potent moments of association and articulation that exist as much on the level of social imaginary as in material and structural spheres. They are not disconnected from their “bases,” but there is much more going on here.

We’ve seen here the limitation of reading religious signs denotatively. They are not closed in contemporary discourse and in hypermediative cultures. They are “open,” often read on levels far removed

from their authoritative provenance. In the media age, religions have essentially lost control over their own symbols. Those symbols have become differentiated, relativized, and branded. But this investigation shows that this dissociation from authority does not render these symbols religiously meaningless. Instead, they become denotatively meaningful in new ways, in new registers, and in new contexts. Further, the intelligibility of these readings and renderings can become legible to us, as scholarly observers, through careful historiographic inquiry.

These open signs and symbols can be read in multiple ways and by multiple publics. Careful cultural analysis can help us unpack these readings and understand their relationships to contemporary politics and culture. Media analysis lets us see how media materialities further code these symbolic discourses and add value for certain publics in certain situations. Most obvious here, of course, are those Trump supporters who read special signs and symbolic resources into his tweets. But there are other, often more subtle, examples.

Further, these interpretive logics suggest that we think of media as "infrastructures of affect" (Hoover, 2019; Papacharissi, 2015) or "sensational forms" (Meyer, 2011). This is based in a deep history of visual religion that has instantiated the mediatic into the religious. It is not just that religious traditions have lost control; it is that mediatic traditions of religion have become plausible and authentic to certain publics and in certain places. It is no longer a question, for some, of whether mediated religion is authentic.

We've seen how emergent, racialized religious-nationalist impulses can find plausible articulation in these deployments of media and mediation. For such movements, the ability to articulate imaginaries of cultural value and political purpose makes the "infrastructures of affect" afforded by hypermediation vital. The world that these nationalists wish to inhabit is, in actuality, a way we never were—a set of relations that are not possible. Where they are possible is in the imaginative realities of sensational media forms.

Let me close by turning to the issue of whether we should look at things as purely religious or purely social or political or cultural. Can we explain religion entirely in social or sociofunctionalist terms? Following Weber's lead, could we not say that religion is nothing but a proxy for class? Let me submit that this is really the wrong question. To begin, what would be the necessity of explaining away religion in the first place? But beyond that, I hope my discussion here has demonstrated that making religion visible in our interpretations enhances and deepens scholarship on at least two levels. First, religion is a social fact. It is a system of cultural practice and meaning-making that exists in explicit forms across cultures. It clearly motivates people to action and functions as a point of identity and meaning construction. Second, it is increasingly obvious that religion is interpolated with media (and has been in the West since at least the dawn of the age of print). And though it is beyond the scope of this discussion, there is ample evidence that to the extent that religion is persisting and evolving, it is doing so in and through media.

This has been shown in the emergence of new religious forms outside the boundaries of authority. But it can also be seen here, where more conventional religious impulses and ideas (the ones associated with racially coded religious nationalism, for example) can find force and affect through mediated religious imaginaries.

### References

- Anderson, B. (1983). *Imagined communities*. London: Verso.
- Barthes, R. (1972). *Mythologies*. London, UK: Paladin.
- Boorstin, D. (1962). *The image: A guide to pseudo-events in America*. New York, NY: Vintage.
- Calhoun, C., Juergensmeyer, M., & VanAntwerpen, J. (Eds.). (2011). *Rethinking secularism*. New York, NY: Oxford.
- Couldry, N., & Hepp, A. (2017). *The mediated construction of reality*. London, UK: Polity.
- Echchaibi, N. (2017). *Hypermediation as an argument*. Discussion paper, Seminar Series, Center for Media, Religion, and Culture. University of Colorado, Boulder.
- Fea, J. (2018). *Believe me: The evangelical road to Donald Trump*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- Friedland, R., (2002). Money, sex, and God: The erotic logic of religious nationalism. *Sociological Theory*, 20(3), 381–425.
- Gaffey, C. (2017, September 11). Steve Bannon's long struggle with the Catholic Church. *Newsweek*. Retrieved from <https://www.newsweek.com/steve-bannon-60-minutes-pope-francis-catholic-church-663021>
- Garnham, N. (1995). Reply to Grossberg and Carey. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 12(1), 95–100.
- Gorski, P. (2017). *American covenant: A history of civil religion from the puritans to the present*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Teague, M. (2020). (2020, June 3). He wears the armor of God: Evangelicals hail Trump's photo op. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from [https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/jun/03/donald-trump-church-photo-op-evangelicals?CMP=Share\\_iOSApp\\_Other](https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/jun/03/donald-trump-church-photo-op-evangelicals?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other)
- Hoover, S. (2016). Religious authority in the media age. In S. Hoover (Ed.), *The media and religious authority* (pp. 15–36). State College: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Hoover, S. (2017). Residual and resurgent Protestantism in the American media (and political) imaginary. *International Journal of Communication*, 11, 2982–2999.
- Hoover, S. (2019, February 22). *Affective infrastructures*. Retrieved from <https://hypermediations.net/content/affective-infrastructures>

- Hoover, S. (2020). Modes of understanding of the religion "object" in North Atlantic modernity. *Journal for Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society*, 5(2), 353–377.
- Ingersoll, J. (2015). *Building God's kingdom: Inside the world of Christian Reconstruction*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Jenkins, J. (2020, June 11). *Conservative Catholic group criticized for calling black archbishop "African queen."* Retrieved from <https://religionnews.com/2020/06/11/church-militant-conservative-catholic-group-publishes-video-calling-black-archbishop-wilton-gregory-african-queen/>
- Meyer, B. (2011). Mediation and immediacy: Sensational forms, semiotic ideologies, and the question of the medium. *Social Anthropology*, 19(1), 23–39. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-8676.2010.00137.x>
- Mitchell, W. (2005). *What do pictures want: The lives and loves of images*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Montgomery, P. (2016, August 4). *Duck Dynasty's Phil Robertson is star of bizarre new right-wing movie.* Retrieved from <https://www.alternet.org/2016/08/duck-dynastys-phil-robertson-star-new-citizens-unitedbreitbart-film/>
- Morgan, D. (2007). *The lure of images: A history of religion and visual media in America*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Morgan, D. (2013). Religion and media: A critical review of recent developments. *Critical Research on Religion*, 1(3), 347–356.
- Papacharissi, Z. (2015). *Affective publics*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Posner, S. (2020). *Unholy: Why white evangelicals worship at the altar of Donald Trump*. New York, NY: Random House.
- Schwartz, M. (2020, June 1). William Barr's state of emergency. *New York Times Magazine*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/01/magazine/william-barr-attorney-general.html>
- Sharlet, J. (2020, June 17). He's the chosen one to run America: Inside the cult of Trump, his rallies are church, and he is the gospel. *Vanity Fair*. Retrieved from <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2020/06/inside-the-cult-of-trump-his-rallies-are-church-and-he-is-the-gospel>
- Teitelbaum, B. (2020). *War for eternity: Inside Steve Bannon's far-right circle of global power brokers*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.
- Weiss, B. (2018, June 20). Why hasn't Trump lost the evangelical vote: Ralph Reed explains. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/20/opinion/trump-evangelicals-ralph-reed.html>



Zelizer, B. (2010). *About to die: How news images move the public*. New York, NY: Oxford.