

Residual and Resurgent Protestantism in the American Media (and Political) Imaginary

STEWART M. HOOVER¹
University of Colorado Boulder, USA

This essay seeks to introduce more substantive attention to religion into the field of media studies. It argues that religion persists in culture and politics, as demonstrated by political upheavals in the North Atlantic West, and that media scholarship lacks critical theoretical and conceptual resources to address that fact. The essay calls for careful historicism and, as a heuristic, interrogates American Protestantism as a cultural, political, and media project. It references emerging scholarships to suggest ways that Protestantism is expressed as a politics in relation to the public and domestic spheres.

Keywords: religion, media, Protestantism, politics, American cultural studies, historicism

In this essay, I hope to demonstrate how a careful historicism might unpack the puzzle of American cultural studies. The project of producing a particularly American version of culturalism has been widely aspired to and at the same time widely criticized and lamented (Carey, 1997). I suggest a way forward by asking how cultural studies could be American without America? That is, I want to argue that cultural studies in the American context has suffered from a British and continental provenance that has left it with a significant blind spot around something that is very much—and very significantly—American: religion. Along the way, I will be revisiting locations of cultural construction whose received conceptual formations deserve some careful rethinking and are implied by this project, including Protestantism, the domestic sphere, secularism, media, and contemporary politics.

The United States is the most objectively religious of the nations of the North Atlantic West, and it is logical to assume that that fact would mark American culture in specific and knowable ways, and that a careful historicist interpretation of contemporary culture could unpack its form and its role. I intend to

Stewart M. Hoover: hoover@colorado.edu

Date submitted: 2017-04-01

¹ I wish to acknowledge and thank Barbie Zelizer, who directs the Culture and Communication program at the Annenberg School for Communication, as well as Annenberg Dean Michael Delli Carpini. A term as a visiting scholar in that program afforded me the time for focused energy to undertake this project. I would also like to thank the colleagues I was able to interact with there, Sharrona Pearl, Marwan Kraidy, Michael Delli Carpini, Anthea Butler, and Victor Pickard for helpful insights and comments. The comments of anonymous reviewers and further conversations with my colleagues in the Center for Media, Religion, and Culture, University of Colorado, have also proven invaluable.

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be even more specific by suggesting that a careful understanding of American Protestantism is necessary, provocative, and indeed productive. Protestantism is such a significant contributor to American history and experience that it must be somehow located in the American cultural studies project. Further, a set of complex and layered relations between Protestantism and media present themselves across American history, relations that have marked both and led to the particular evolution of each in the American context. My reflections are both stimulated and enhanced by the recent emergence of new historical and cultural scholarship about Protestantism as a cultural and political force.

My thoughts here can be seen in relation to a specific context. The election of Donald Trump and its attendant discourses and implications raise a significant challenge to the relevance of culturalist media research and theory. The Trump movement (along with, to an extent, ethnonationalist impulses in Europe) has been framed by religion, religious cultures, and religious traditionalism in deeply complex and ambiguous ways. Do we, as scholars, have the theoretical resources to address the contemporary political landscape's inflection with religion? When religion has been addressed by mass communication or media studies, it has tended to be inadequately theorized and framed by narrow instrumentalism. It is counterintuitive to suggest that in this one area (that of religion), unlike with gender, race, class, politics, and economy, culturalism must yield to positivism—that the answer resides in positivist conceptions of mediation alone—the ideological manipulations of conservative discourses, or theories of framing, for example. All questions of religion are not answered or answerable only in terms of what it—as an essentialist social force—causes to happen.

Tracing Protestantism

Protestantism has been intertwined with practices, materialities, and political economies of mediation from its beginning, as we know. Printing and the Reformation were deeply connected. Received understandings of this relationship are now nearly banal commonplaces. We know that the availability of printed works made a new kind of religion concerned with individual revelation, practice, and authority (the Protestant *sola scriptura*—only through scripture—doctrine) that led to entirely new religious formations and structures. A deeper reading, inflected with political-economic media studies, has always been available. It would point to the social and class implications of the spread of literacy under Protestant sponsorship, the challenge to clerical authority in religion, and the very beginnings of a sense of religion as a material and commodifiable market.² Even more profound was the implication in Elizabeth Eisenstein's (1979) definitive study of the printing revolution that the emergence of the political economy of the publishing industry, the earliest form of what we know of today as "the media," would become an autonomous locus of social and cultural power that could rise to challenge both religious and state authority.

A fuller account of the complex history of Protestantism and mediation is beyond the scope of this article, but important sources would include Weber's (1930) germinal work on Protestantism and capitalism; Tocqueville's observations and Parsons's theoretical formulations, both focusing on American

² This was—and very belatedly—recognized in at least one quarter in 2017: a series of exhibitions of materials commemorating the 500th anniversary of the Reformation talked explicitly about Luther as a mediator (see Mohn, 2016).

religious volunteerism; the essentially Protestant sensibility at the core of Dewey's ideas about the evolving moral culture of American industrialization; and insights from the Chicago School, as it considered the urban contexts of immigration and diversity. But I do want to trace some specific features of this history, particularly in relation to the role of Protestantism in the American colonial period and then into the 19th and 20th centuries. The markings of the unique relations between Protestantism and media culture are available from both received and emergent scholarships.³

My argument is that it is necessary to understand how Protestantism and the media (or processes, practices, and structures of mediation) are linked historically, materially, and through practice. The historical linkage is, as I have said, rooted in the printing revolution in Europe but also deeply rooted in the emerging print cultures, reading publics, and markets of the age of exploration and of European colonial expansion, the Enlightenment, and in changing state and political structures in the Early Modern period.

But these relations between Protestantism and media took on a deep and specific interconnection in the American context. The profile and influence of the colonial pulpit is a well-known force in American history (Miller, 1939 for a more recent account, see Stout, 1991). For media scholars, though, a specific function should be of greatest interest: the role of these rhetorics in marking and claiming the emergent public sphere and their aspiration to make a particularly Protestant moral imagination the generic moral imagination of the new nation. Recent scholarly work by literary historian Tracy Fessenden (2007) has traced this history as a history of mediation,⁴ where Protestant authority articulated a role for itself at the mediatic center of the culture, with ambitious publishing projects focused on stabilizing a Protestant vision for the nation as a moral project, one centered on essentially Protestant values. Another historian who has provided influential accounts of American Protestantism is David Hollinger (2013), who like Fessenden, sees the larger narrative as one of the movement's evolving encounter with modernity and a struggle to define a religious culture for an increasingly diverse national context.

At the center of this was a focus on the gendered and racialized domestic sphere as the locus of the aspirations of Protestant authority. As the colonial era faded, according to Fessenden, Protestant leaders gradually shifted their attention away from rhetorical proclamation and toward publishing (books, tracts, school materials) focused on domesticating the American private sphere under a broad, but Protestant, moral regime. This project was also expressed in the political economy of frontier evangelism, where a geographically diffuse populace was accessed and addressed through new systems of communication and media distribution, bringing materials directly to individuals on the frontier. Important

³ Several significant characteristics of Protestantism as it arrived in the colonies are significant—and deserving of more attention than I can give them here: (a) the idea of the public pulpit, which aspired to claim and mark the public sphere; (b) individualism/volunteerism, that religion was seen to be an autonomous, individual set of beliefs and behaviors; (c) the *sola scriptura* principle; and (d) the idea (certainly contested but nonetheless now dominant) that marketplace logics could authentically qualify the religious.

⁴ I would be remiss if I did not also acknowledge the prodigious contributions of David Morgan in the area of Protestantism and American visual culture, which was a significant part of Protestant production, even in the Colonial era (see Morgan, 1999).

American Protestant movements, notably the Methodists and Baptists, centered their work on such circulation and marketing.

As a result, American Protestantism took on many of what we today would identify as market principles as core logics. Religion was increasingly seen as a marketplace, where autonomous individuals would be positioned to choose between the offerings of several different religious providers. This had the effect of branding religion in significant ways, differentiating sects as distinct in a broader marketplace of supply. At the same time, other Protestant leaders focused on the emergent urban environments of the industrial era. This urban evangelism further instantiated principles of publicity and markets at the core of the Protestant project, adding another feature of interest to media scholarship—emerging taste cultures around sensation and spectacle. Religion then developed even more as a culture of entertainment, with success in these market contexts increasingly coming to define sectarian authenticity and worth. The historian Nathan Hatch (1991) has argued that what resulted was a democratization of religion where clerical authority was increasingly subject to forces of demand among adherents and potential adherents, and individual autonomy in practice became increasingly definitive.

Fessenden (2007) argues that Protestant authority accomplished a shift in its sphere of action across this period. Having secured Protestantism as the implicit authority at the center of American culture, it then concentrated on its concerns about the domestic sphere. In an increasingly diverse nation, and one that necessarily would no longer be entirely under the authoritative sway of the Puritan pulpit, it was thought that what was accomplished in the private sphere (the emergent context of “the home”), in particular what would be accomplished by women as the putative moral center of the home, was of utmost importance. The religiously diverse nation (marked portentously for these authorities by Catholic, and—to a lesser extent—Jewish immigration) would be knitted together by a common moral imaginary that, while implicitly Protestant, would increasingly be read as generic. And, fundamental to my point here, this domestic project was seen largely as a project of mediation through publishing and the broader circulation of rhetorics and definitions of the situation through evolving modern means of communication.

The architecture of this Protestant/media complex then involved several dimensions. The first dimension is the tacit and implicit lodgment of Protestantism at the center of the culture, something described in its mid-20th century form by Digby Balzell (1987) in *The Protestant Establishment*. The second dimension is a profound integration of Protestant practice with emerging and evolving systems and means of communication. Third is a marking of Protestantism by that mediation (and vice versa), felt most profoundly in the so-called democratization of religion through individual practice expressed in the context of religious markets. Fourth is an explicit Protestant project to perfect the home and to develop a powerful imaginary of the domestic sphere as the true moral core of the nation, with all the racial, class, and gender implications accompanying those efforts. And fifth is a tradition of public rhetoric, advocacy, and policy making, focused most directly on that domestic context.

This latter area is one where American culture, and particularly media culture, has been most obviously marked by the Protestant imagination. The location of Protestantism as the definitive generic moral center of the culture and the primary arbiter of American taste in mass entertainment has been taken for granted in media production and regulation. Production, distribution, criticism, ratings, the FCC’s

"dirty words," and what the television networks used to call standards and practices are all rather explicitly seen in Protestant terms. In his account of the particular context of the film industry, Romanowski (2012) shows how this has worked in public, institutional, and political terms.

Most significantly, this history demonstrates these relations as deeply ambivalent. On the one hand, Protestant authority slips to the implicit background of the culture, while the Protestant moral imagination is in many ways contradictory to emergent popular taste cultures. This ambivalence is then expressed in ongoing moral panics about the culture, which is, in fact, mediated popular culture. At the same time Protestantism saw emergent means of communication as promising channels for the furtherance of its goals, it also saw those same channels as carrying the seeds of pollution of the sacrality of the domestic sphere. And, perhaps most significantly, things in public and media culture that contradicted the generic Protestant moral imaginary would raise doubts about the legitimacy of Protestant authority as the generic American establishment.

Several intriguing avenues of analysis begin to emerge as we think about a media/cultural studies project that would take this Protestant history as a given.⁵ But the tacit and ambivalent nature of the role of Protestantism can provide important avenues for understanding contemporary media practices, tastes, and circulations. Protestantism's own ambivalence (expressed both by Protestant authorities and in individual and private social networks and spheres of action as well as in broader, more generic—but still marked by the implicit Protestant project—voices), is ambivalence and ambiguity born of the unfinished project of marking the domestic and turning it to moral purpose. It is also a measure of how the decision to invest in the domestic will always be frustrated. Too much confidence has been placed in the domestic sphere, and particularly in rationalism and rational action as the organizing center of the domestic when—as media scholarship has shown—taste, sensation, pleasure, ludic sensibilities, and affect are also definitive.

The Challenge to Cultural Studies

If, as I have argued, Protestantism, Protestant values, and, explicitly and implicitly, Protestant frames structure cultural and social experience in the U.S., then what does that mean for an American cultural studies? How and in what ways can and should this framing become part of culturalist media theory and research? To pursue my argument, I quote from Raymond Williams (1958/2016) in "Culture is Ordinary":

A great part of the English way of life, and of its arts and learning, is not bourgeois in any discoverable sense. There are institutions, and common meanings, which are in no sense the sole product of the commercial middle class; and there are art and learning, a

⁵ For example, what Weber called Protestantism's practical rationalism articulates to practices of mediation where production, consumption, and circulation of texts dovetail with a Protestant impulse to autonomous action in meaning making. Seen in a more fundamental way in the historical work on printing and literacy, we might also argue that certain kinds of Protestant media literacies of recent decades are increasingly definitive of what is happening in the remaking of religion and also of social experience in contexts beyond the religious.

common English inheritance, produced by many kinds of men, including many who hated the very class and system which we now take pride in consuming it. (p. 8)

My argument depends on the distinctiveness of the American context and, as should be obvious, does so precisely on this point. Unlike the English way of life, as described by Williams (1958/2016), the American way of life is very much bourgeois. I am not arguing that America is exceptionally successful in realizing a bourgeois vision materially or that there are not the same class relations here as in other countries of the North Atlantic West. What I am arguing is that an often banal and superficial aspiration to a bourgeois project is very much present in American culture. And it is present in a discoverable sense in American commercial culture as well as in deeper structurations of elite aspirations for family and domestic relations. Its tracings are in what I have described as the ambivalent and ambiguous implicit Protestant project. But, again, I am arguing it is largely aspirational, not that it has been realized, or is even realizable. It is not my purpose here to directly challenge Williams, or cultural studies as a field, on this point. In fact, what I have described would point toward a bourgeois project that is aspirational, superficial, and incomplete. But at the same time, it can be a project into which a great deal of cultural and social energy is invested. And, more significantly, an ambiguous and ambivalent project of cultural construction would necessarily be the object of a great deal of culturally constructive effort in American media and political cultures. And the available evidence suggests that it is.⁶

What American Cultural Studies Might Be: Rethinking Carey

James Carey is of course known as a singular voice in culturalist media studies on the American side of the Atlantic. His essay best known as "A Cultural Approach to Communication" (Carey, 1989) has been broadly influential, in particular among the community of scholars who study relations between religion and media. He is looked to as a force in the instantiation of culturalism in the American context. His own works include a number focused on the broad question of the challenge of an American culturalism (most notably, Carey, 1997).

Carey's articulation of the culturalist project in American media studies is laid out in different ways in various works (for a thorough review, see Pooley, 2016).⁷ I hope I do justice to them as I point out what could be described as the key turning point where at least one articulation of an American cultural studies tradition pivoted away from the possibility of following the line of thought I am constructing here. Carey's cogent articulation of the history of communication theory begins with the

⁶ As a thought experiment, one might reread important works on domestic television such as Banet-Weiser (2012), Johnson (2008), Sender (2012), and Spigel (1992), with this framework in mind.

⁷ The whole question of an American cultural studies project is something that has concentrated a great deal of scholarly attention, not least by Carey himself and his students. Its definition opens a number of important questions, beginning with whether one wishes to think of it as focused on perfecting a particularly American cultural history (see, e.g., the contributions to Warren & Vavrus, 2002) or a broader and more ambitious rereading of important European sources in British cultural studies and continental cultural theory. Carey (1997) remains a thoughtful but not definitive meditation. The use here, as should be obvious, is intentionally more generic and provocative, leaving such matters of canonical definition for another day.

notion that the social fields of communication across Western history were (conceptually, at least) initially religious (Carey, 1989), but that the large field of engagement and purpose (as articulated in religious terms in the colonial era and by the colonial pulpit) yielded to secularized impulses—that “the religious” essentially evaporated sometime between “then” and “now.” That this happened can be contested both by experience (religion has not faded away—look at contemporary politics) and by careful historicism that details the Protestant framings of rhetorics of American purpose and Protestant actions directed at constructing a specifically American public/media marketplace of moral economy and civic action. The more nuanced and layered version of the history I have presented obviously contests Carey’s implicit secularization hypothesis, as does our daily experience in American political culture.

Admittedly, at the core of the conceptual argument is a claim that will need to stand up to scrutiny, but which, I postulate, for the moment, for the purpose of argument and theory building. That is the problem of conceiving of the Protestant project as generalized and generalizable—as a quality of American culture writ large. There is much anecdotal evidence of this, and it is, of course, frequently said, and it is probably true to some significant degree. But for now, let us assume it. The argument is that an objective and intentional Protestant project of moral world making was—and continues to be—at the core of American culture, and when this project flows into the culture, it and its moral justifications and architecture disappear, or diffuse, and become a banal, tacit cultural Christianity.

Fessenden (2007), of course (as well as Hollinger, 2013), describes how and why this might be the case, that it is a result of the grander confrontation of Protestantism with modernity and the more located negotiations of New England Protestantism with the potentialities and challenges of crafting a new nation rooted in Christian principles. In both cases, Hollinger (2013) is probably right to suggest that the challenge of modernity was felt primarily through the challenge of religious and cultural diversity.

Here is where cultural studies provides valuable tools for understanding this situation in relation to media cultures. If there is such a Protestant project, then it must be located in “structures of feeling” at the domestic level with perfection of the domestic sphere as the quintessential American bourgeois project, evidence of which has been widely described by scholars in the field. So how might we write such an exploration into—or make it part of the intellectual legacy of—culturalist media studies? As a start, I will elaborate Carey’s thoughtful and provocative framing, drawing as well on some other key concepts from media and cultural studies.

Carey (1989) begins (citing Cassirer) with the notion of “man [*sic*]” as “animal symbolicum.” He does this as way of describing communication and mediation, centering these processes as fundamental means of social construction. Therefore, mediation can articulate identity, constructed—and Carey in his various works articulates sophisticated arguments for each of these processes—(a) using media, (b) from media, and (c) in relation to media (for another articulation of this in relation to the domestic sphere, and derived empirically, see Hoover, Clark, & Alters, 2003). Carey thus incorporates a factor later elaborated in greater detail by Silverstone: the notion of media as doubly articulated, media are at the same time about content and about the deployment and social location of technology. This argument also draws from Ricour’s (1991) ideas on the nature of contemporary subjectivity as reflexive “accounts”—thus particularizing and objectifying symbolic experience and expression. We do, and we think about what we

do. Media reception is both about subjectivities positioned as receivers of messages and symbols and about subjectivities that are reflexively aware of their own positionalities.

This view of media and mediation provides yet another frame of analysis important to our exploration: the idea of media and mediation as social imaginary. Drawing on Anderson's (1991) notion of imagined communities, we can begin to see how media and practices of mediation would be so essential to the furtherance of the Protestant framing and imagination of the domestic sphere. Imaginaries of a broader moral framing of public culture (in support of a kind of organic solidarity of the domestic in relation to the public) would also be significant mediations in modernity. That these mediations would come to mark the public sphere recalls Horace Newcomb's (2006) classic notion of the media (he wrote primarily about television) as a "cultural forum" where the larger values and ideas of the culture are exchanged and circulated. For a Protestant moral project, these circulations would become a kind of "index of the culture" through which the progress of the project could be judged. Conversely, these circulations would also provide evidence for anxiety and even crisis or panic over the evolution of the culture, something we have seen again and again as media cultures have evolved in the U.S. context.

This framing of the situation necessarily repositions some received ideas about the role of religion as a moral or institutional force in culture and society. I have described a situation much more like Williams's (1958/2016) argument that "cultural is ordinary." That is, these Protestant cultural articulations are intended to be implicit, subtle, and banal as well as subjective and lived. The aspiration is to mark the "structures of feeling" (to use another term from Williams) in gendered domestic spaces with a certain moral architecture. Cultural studies thus provides important tools and analytical framings through which to elaborate and evaluate these processes. We can see as well certain particular cases of media and mediation at the boundary between private and public, as described by Silverstone and Hirsch (1992), in their work on the household moral economy.

Thinking of this situation as subject to Protestant forces and aspirations would bring this moral economy into greater focus and articulate it more particularly, more specifically, and more productively in relation to the U.S. context. It would take account of such things as Protestant articulations of religion as autonomous and rational belief and action Weber (1930), Tocqueville (2002), and Parsons (see Turner, 2005) had much to say about this, the latter two in relation to the American context specifically). What Carey may have thought of as the evacuation of religion in American modernity might well have been instead religion in a different guise or a different form: religion as a seemingly secular project of private moral action articulated to broader social and cultural discourses about taste and value. Simply put, what appeared at midcentury to be secularism might instead have been a tacit, Protestant presentation of itself as the generic, banal, and implicit moral structure of the culture, focused on perfecting the domestic sphere. Important recent works rethinking the sources of received constructions of secularism (e.g., Jakobsen & Pellegrini, 2008; Mahmood, 2010) have provided important insights into its Protestant origins.⁸

⁸ This passage from Jakobsen and Pellegrini (2008) makes the case of the Protestant origins of received notions of secularism rather directly: "We focus on Protestantism not to the exclusion of other possibilities,

A media analysis is essential to this situation as media are uniquely situated in the spaces where these things are being worked out, and media culture is instrumentally involved in organizing systems of identity, value, and action. And, an account of how this set of relations is constrained by, inflected with, and conditioned by religion deepens our analytic purchase as well as opening up new and promising avenues of inquiry, analysis, and knowledge building.

What “Cultural Work” Is Being Done?

If, as I have argued, the mediated domestic in American culture is in important ways a Protestant project, then in what particular ways would that project reveal itself in the cultural struggles and formations in those spaces? In what way would what we see them to be uniquely marked? What would be the evidence in contemporary cultural projects—locations where cultural work is being done? Where would we look?

A number of possible areas present themselves, all of which are evident in contemporary American cultural discourse. First, as the project has at its core a concern with stable and productive domestic spaces—homes as sources of civic pieties and engagements intended to bring a certain moral imagination into being through what neotraditionalists (citing Edmund Burke) call the “little platoons of the family” (Eberly, 2000, para. 14), then the emergence of Giddens’s (1991) “risk culture” would be a fundamental challenge. For households to be secure, they must be confident of their potential in relation to known fields of practice. Contemporary anxieties about risk necessarily work against such confidence.

Second, there would be fundamental anxieties over the continuing progress of modernity, as traditional values, arrangements, and (particularly) gender expectations come under pressure and scrutiny.

Third, there would be anxieties over the permeability of the domestic sphere itself. Whatever boundaries or barriers delimit it in relation to the broader culture are made problematic by contemporary social life, not least by the media which, more than any other aspect of modern life, lead to the permeability of the private to the public. Traditional Protestant anxieties about the moral challenges of secular culture are heightened.

Fourth, anxieties over lost cultural (including class, racial, and ethnic) centrality. If the moral architecture I have described depends on an instantiation of the domestic project in the context of (and at the same time directly supporting) a broad, tacit, culturally religious moral environment, then evidence of that environment’s decline could be seen by its adherents in changing cultural demographics. This is, of course, at the center of much of the constituency for movements circulating around the Trump campaign.

Fifth, particular and specific anxieties over lost *gemeinschaft*. There is a generalized sense that American anxieties over the progress of modernity are very much about unresolved cultural sensibilities about modernity and the flow of modern life (Giddens, 1991). Within a Protestant frame, this takes on an

but because this dominant narrative forms the collective imagination of what the supposedly universal secularism is, thereby constraining imagination of what other possibilities might be” (p. 3).

additional valence as religions aspire to claim a specific authenticity as natural dimensions of traditional (now lost) patterns of social life.

It almost goes without saying that a great deal of anecdotal and scholarly evidence suggests that such discourses, tensions, and ambivalences do in fact define media circulations in contemporary American culture. These are known concerns and anxieties. Adding a framing of religion to the analytical mix deepens and enriches our understandings of the sources, meanings, and consequences of the cultural media practices that are marked by these concerns and anxieties. We know more about why, where, and how these things are significant.

What Protestantism Imagines and Makes Possible—Socially and Politically—Today

We can then begin to see the outlines of the larger picture of this notional Protestant project in the context of media culture today. The central focus on the context of the domestic is all around us, not least in contemporary political discourses and struggles over social values. Roiling debates over the implications of public policy on reproductive rights, over gay marriage, over race, over changing gender relations, over transgender rights, over school choice, and over many other things are rhetorically constructed as fundamentally about homes and families. Those are the default moral or ethical frames in American social discourse. These move beyond the simple class interests of an emergent or aspirational bourgeois. Instead, they are evidence of a particularly Protestant framing of social relations and a claim that the domestic sphere is somehow their ideal sphere of concern and action.⁹

This is all rooted in a set of contradictions and ambivalences tracing the distance from a Protestant ideal that wishes to combine, in the domestic, both of Weber's (1930) forms of rationality, "value-rationality" and "instrumental-rationality" (Silverstone & Hirsch, 1992). This remains an unfinished (and, really, unfinishable) project due to the nature of domestic space. It is (as Silverstone & Hirsch, 1992, and others have pointed out) a place of emotion and sensation, of lived experiences of the existential and at the same time a location of the organization and orientation of meanings, values, identities, and (again in the words of Silverstone) "histories, biographies and cosmologies" (Silverstone, Hirsch, and Morley, 1992, p. 18). Protestantism provides, both implicitly and explicitly, a way of organizing, contesting, and understanding these relations. But the explicit project, that articulated by Protestant authority, has suggested an instrumentalization of this contested space. Thus, the ongoing ambivalences and unfinished cultural work of normative construction.

⁹ This is all, of course, also inflected with and mapable in relation to American racial politics. I should also add that the Protestantism I describe here can rightly be called "White Protestantism." There are, of course, deep, influential, contested, and significant American "Protestantisms" that are African American, Latino, and Asian. Further explorations of my argument would necessarily trace the relations between these various forms, including their shared provenances as well as their historical conflicts and contrasts. For an example focused on the Black Church that contextualizes the range of issues implied by my arguments, see Butler (2007).

The instability of the project is given particular and specific force and focus in the American context in relation to the post-World War II context of suburbanization. The decade of the 1950s is widely understood to have been the time when these things worked the way they were supposed to. Never mind that this imagined past is, in Stephanie Coontz's (1992) trenchant phrasing, "the way we never were." To the extent that "the 50s" was ideal, it was the result, as Coontz points out, of aggressive social policy and public investment and resulted in an artificially produced domestic sphere available only to certain classes and ethnicities.

Nonetheless, that imagined past provides a powerful symbolic framing of values and ideals for received, commonsense, traditionalist readings of American cultural history. As evidence of this, a poll, released during the 2016 presidential campaign, found that 75% of Trump supporters saw the 1950s as the ideal decade, the one they wanted to bring back. To recall my earlier argument from the historical accounts, that decade was marked both by an artificially constructed (and not incidentally racialized) domestic ideal but also by a broader culture aspirationally marked by implicit Protestant ideals and an implicit Protestant moral imagination and architecture. It is remembered as a time of stability and a time before a series of social shocks that could be seen as directly confronting that settled situation. These shocks include the School Prayer decision of 1962, the broader social and sexual revolutions of the 1960s, and the African American civil rights movement. All of these called into question the ability of Protestant moral authority to live up to its promise as the tacit and taken-for-granted guarantor of America's moral geography. Both parts of this project—(a) the implicit authoritative establishment at the center of the structures of power of the nation and (b) the focus on the domestic sphere as the central context of deliberate and explicit action—have seemed less stable and trustworthy in the intervening decades, something that seems to be at the heart of the social and cultural anxieties that reside beneath the cultural politics of recent decades. The range of anxieties and cultural projects detailed here are in one way merely elaborations of this basic dynamic. It is also important to note that it is in many ways the mediation of these factors, their presence in media cultural expressions circulating around the domestic, and their exposure in the cultural forum of the broader mediated public sphere, that makes these tensions and relations particularly profound, even (emically) existential. They are media phenomena.

The Protestant Mediated Public Sphere

All of this gives us some insight into another aspect of contemporary social and cultural politics. It could be argued that much of the ambivalence and ambiguity with which religiously inflected discourses encounter the broader culture is rooted in the Protestant imagination of the public sphere. It is not neutral as regards religion, but inflected with broadly Protestant values and—more importantly—had been under Protestant sponsorship, at least up until midcentury. Broader publics may find confusing the discourse about "religious liberty" expressed in Presidential-election rhetoric and in the legal battles over the recognition of same-sex marriage or the right of a religious exception to various Federal regulations. To those outside of conservative religion, these seem to be claims of the right to discriminate based on narrow, personal moral objections. In fact, they are claims about the role of religion in marking and constraining the public sphere. Any challenge to that marking is, in the minds of adherents, not merely a political disagreement, but an attack on religion itself.

As experienced and expressed, these arguments seem confusing and contradictory. How does a gay marriage affect heterosexual marriage? It of course does not, except to the extent that its very existence undermines the imagined and aspired central place of (conservative)¹⁰ values in the culture. This helps explain things such as the claim by one Evangelical Protestant leader that the Sandy Hook Elementary School children were actually victims of the Supreme Court decisions on School Prayer and Bible Reading, and the claim by televangelist Jerry Falwell that the 9/11 attacks were the fault of feminists and liberals. If the whole culture or whole nation is the responsibility of a Protestant moral project, then catastrophes befalling that culture or nation can be seen to have religious/moral causes. This is how a claim to religious liberty, which should be a claim to individual autonomy and freedom from coercion, becomes instead a claim for coercion. The religious liberty that is sought is not a liberty to practice religion in private, far from public view. It is instead a liberty to have the whole public sphere marked by a certain religious-moral imaginary. This is, in fact, a long-standing feature of the Protestant civic sphere in America, dating back at least to the so-called Bible Wars (between immigrant Catholicism and Protestant authority) of the 19th century (Fessenden, 2007).

These articulations and contestations express an even deeper implication of this history: its articulation into evolving understandings of relations between the religious and the secular. As Saba Mahmood has persuasively argued, it is no longer tenable to see these as separate and distinct categories. Rather, they are deeply intertwined in modernity, where each is necessarily implicated in defining and constraining the other (Mahmood, 2017). Contemporary contestations over religion in the mediated public sphere and the relations between private belief and public regulation, such as the ones detailed, provide powerful evidence.

Again, I want to stress how important it is to understand these relations in terms of media and mediation. To the extent that there is a conflict between broadly Protestant social values aspiring to be tacit and generic, and emerging social trends and fissures that challenge those values, it is through the media, through what Newcomb (2006) called the "public forum," that they happen. The contradictions become obvious through the circulation of images, tropes, and message systems of the media sphere, and the media sphere becomes the context in which the struggles are fought, with the media sphere doubly articulated as both the context and as an object of these struggles. The status of the mediated public sphere is a legacy of Protestantism, which, as noted, came to the American colonial period with a powerful claim to that sphere as a sphere of religious moral action.

Turning more directly toward the political dynamics revealed in the 2016 presidential campaign, we can see evidence of this Protestant framing of the public sphere, at least in aspirational form, in the voices of conservative Christians. What I have described as a tacit Protestant suzerainty manifests itself as religious interference and discrimination in the debates over what is called religious liberty and in the religiously inflected appeals Trump made through his promise to restore a lost America. We can trace the

¹⁰ I should make clear that there are, in fact, also liberal and progressive Protestants who would very much disagree with conservative Protestants on issues such as gay marriage, racial reconciliation, reproductive rights, and immigration. Their relationship to the history I have laid out here is at the same time a complicated one.

provenance of this across history by recalling how Protestant elites became satisfied with the latent, tacit arrangements, expressed in cultural tropes and cultural circulations. That was the settled position of tacit Protestant control of the moral economy of the public sphere through the middle part of the last century. But a series of shocks, beginning with the Supreme Court's School Prayer decision, began to unsettle this settlement and led to the rise of more explicit and self-conscious expressions in the public sphere by emergent leaders and laity who had not invested in the accommodation. These were the so-called neo-Evangelicals of the 1970s.

An emergent media environment of cultural exchange became the turf on which this battle was fought, beginning in the 1950s, with the rise of Billy Graham. Graham represented a gambit on the part of establishment Evangelicals to regain that tacit public sphere, this time much more explicitly marked. Other Evangelical actors, such as the pioneering televangelist Oral Roberts, saw instead in media technology (just as Fundamentalist radio preachers had at the turn of the century) a powerful tool for separatist identity and advocacy. Evangelical Christianity in both of these forms (the more centrist and publicly acceptable and influential Graham—who became the chaplain to presidents such as Richard Nixon—and the more separatist forces of televangelism) were both mass-mediated phenomena. This affirmed the fundamental fact of the public media sphere as the definitive frame for the organization of American religion. The Protestant pulpit began as a mediated (public spectacle and publishing) project. It had to, in a new nation where democratic, diffuse, flattened, and mixed national and political entities needed to be engaged. Settled arrangements of affinity and influence no longer held. It became a democratic marketplace, and democratic religion resulted.

But, the shocks of the 1960s and 1970s called for, in the minds of conservative Christians, the need to reclaim the public sphere for a Protestant moral vision, and to do so more explicitly. And, significant of the fact that Protestantism became evermore marked by media across the last century, this was acted out in a mediated public sphere. The contradiction of a claim to religious liberty being in effect a claim of a right to discriminate makes sense in this historical context. This claim is in fact a call to an earlier, remembered and imagined¹¹ past, a liberty to inhabit that remembered moral universe, and to make explicit a certain, narrow vision of Protestantism's moral claims in areas of reproductive rights and gay rights. This project of the construction or reconstruction of a Protestant moral order or a new collective moral order (albeit a narrowly conservative one) is then the object of a claim to be able to recreate a normative past.

Summary and Conclusion

I will conclude this article by reviewing where I have taken my argument. I began by suggesting that the much-discussed question of a particularly American cultural studies might well be addressed through the recovery in conceptual and theoretical terms of something that has been quintessentially American and at the same time largely overlooked by media/cultural studies: religion. I proceeded to

¹¹ The notion of imagination is, of course, far from a trivial matter. As Charles Taylor (2002) and a sophisticated cultural scholarship focused on social and cultural imaginaries have shown, these are powerful, definitive, and politically potent formations.

elaborate this through a specific historicist account of American religion, rather than a generalized or essentialized account of the religious. To do so centers Protestantism as both the predominant religious form in North America and as a religious form that has a profound and specific linkage to American media culture. Protestantism is not just any religion in terms of media and mediation. It carries a historical legacy within the evolution of systems and practices of mediation in modernity, a legacy which has marked it by evolving patterns and affordances of mediation (and which in turn has marked the media) in the U.S. context.

I have argued that this task is justified on two scholarly grounds. First, to more fully account for religion will necessarily mean to more fully account for American culture(s). Second, there are specific and specifically productive learnings that can help us build knowledge about or address important contemporary challenges to cultural scholarship, such as in contemporary politics.

The interconnection of Protestantism and mediation is complex, as I have attempted to demonstrate. I will stipulate that to chart this from the Early Modern through the Modern and into the Contemporary era in the North Atlantic West would be a much larger task than is possible here. Instead, for this argument it is more important to focus on how Protestantism evolved in the American colonial and postcolonial periods as a cultural project. It was more than just a religion. It was *the* religion, and one that was unique and particular in its aspirations for the new American nation. In the voices and the aspirations of Protestant authorities, we can see the aspiration to Protestantism becoming the singular moral architecture of the nation, enforced in such a way as to make it a deeply and profoundly present, yet at the same time a tacit and implicit establishment.

And much of what Protestantism aspired to, what it accomplished, and what it became, was through the evolving capacities of systems, practices, and structures of mediation. Protestantism, in the American context, is a large, complex, layered, and nuanced media project. The early colonial pulpit was the public context of mass mediation of its day. Protestant practices of religious dissemination were mediated through publishing and through emergent systems of commodified circulation and the aggregation of new audiences and markets. Through this mediation, American religion more generally became a system accommodating competitive markets of supply and demand. That American media cultures could themselves be so easily and facily enabled by market logics is probably at least partly a legacy of this trajectory. That religion, with all its claims to legitimacy and authenticity, could so easily accommodate itself to such logics laid the groundwork for a public culture that also accepted them.

Articulating higher order projects and aspirations through systems of commodities and mediations might well also have been enabled by the Protestant legacy as instantiated in American culture. Weber's (1930) notion of Protestantism as inscribed with a practical rationalism might prove indicative. Such rationalism would be expressed in at least two dimensions. First, a sense of autonomy from clerical authority, where individual revelation and individual action come to the fore. Second, a sense that, as enabled by this inspiration and consciousness, individuals also have a mandate to moral action in the material sphere expressed through sober and disciplined practice (the Calvinist strain of Protestantism) is a kind of coaffordance with emergent materialities of mediation as they become increasingly instrumentalized in individual, autonomous, private action. Simply put, it might be argued

that American Protestantism provided an architecture of private action linking higher order aspirations with conventions of practice that interacted in positive and expansive ways with emergent means, practices, systems, and instantiations of mediated communication.

But a more material and explicit trajectory of Protestantism and media also exists, as I described earlier. Protestantism on the frontier exploited emergent means and systems of communication and publicity in profound ways. The later era of urban evangelism furthered this, with new forms of spectacular and sensational mediation coming to important force and effect through the course of the 19th century. At the end of that century, the emergence of new forms of religious circulation and advocacy within Protestantism—what came to be known as Fundamentalism—coevolved with the mass-media era in publishing, and more importantly, with radio. The trope of the Fundamentalist radio preacher points to the essential interconnection between that significant branch of Protestantism and systems and affordances of mediation. Later, as Fundamentalism aspired to a more moderate and culturally acceptable (and thus influential) tone, mediation was seen as central, as is obvious in the rise of the outstanding icon of that aspiration: Billy Graham.

The cultural struggle represented by Graham's rise—the emergence of a neo-Evangelical movement expressing itself in culture and politics, came to the fore in the context of a larger Protestant project, that described by Fessenden (2007) and her work on the public/cultural aspirations and accomplishments of Protestant authority. Her thesis provides valuable insights into how Protestantism might be found as an implicit yet profound force in the bourgeois project of the American domestic sphere. Indeed, as I have suggested, much of what media scholars have identified as the ambiguous and ambivalent cultural circulations in private and domestic life can be seen as legacies of the trajectory Fessenden describes.

Protestantism chose to mark the public sphere with a specific moral architecture. That project, as it encountered the problem of cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity, became more and more an implicit (though still influential) structuration rather than an explicit set of moral rhetorics or ideologies. Retreating from an explicit role at the level of the Habermasian (with all the problematics that implies) public sphere, it focused its energies instead on perfecting the domestic. As a result, American social and political rhetorics exhibit a profound and particular moral framing not found in the same form elsewhere. American ordinary cultures are projects of a specific kind, and their structures of feeling are, at least in part, constrained and focused according to that moral imaginary.

I have described the outlines of that imaginary (and I use that term in a way consistent with Taylor's [2002] formulation) as it has been expressed through circulations and practices. It is most parsimoniously described as a set of anxieties. These anxieties focus on lost *gemeinschaft*, on rising senses of risk, on a collapse to the domestic as a safe haven, on recovering a lost way we never were, including in racialized and gendered terms. It is significant to note as well how deeply these anxieties are expressed in relation to media. Media form an ever-present context of challenge and portent to the domestic sphere, and the moral panics that ensue are best understood not as specific responses to specific effects, but as a set of challenges to fears about a lost and hoped-to-be-recovered past. This imaginary is of the domestic as a coherent project, not unlike Silverstone (see Silverstone, Hirsch, and

Morley, 1992) described in his work, but directed at a characteristic project: a certain kind of ever-receding bourgeois vision.

I have also pointed to the explicit commonplaces, that across the last century and into this one, marked public tastes and standards in media, in popular culture, and in elite culture, as "Protestant."

Finally, I argued that to understand the Trump phenomenon around its rhetorics of lost and desired pasts, and specifically around its invocation of a seemingly contradictory rhetoric of religious liberty, one needed to understand the Protestant sources and architectures of contemporary mediated public discourses in cultural politics.

As I have said, these relations are layered and they can seem complex and subtle. But in interests of substantive accounts of the evolution of American culture, and in interests of culturalist readings of the contemporary situation, attention to religion—and to one particular religion—are called for. Could these contribute to an invigorated tradition of American cultural studies?

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