SUNDAY CELLULOID: VISUAL MEDIA AND PROTESTANT BOUNDARIES WITH SECULAR CULTURE

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We examine how ministers in two religious traditions use discourse on secular visual media as a means of establishing symbolic group boundaries. We compare content in 100 evangelical and mainline Protestant sermons, each of which makes at least one reference to secular cinema. We find that mainline ministers largely promote "expanding" boundaries with secular culture, that evangelical ministers promote "contracting" and "expanding" boundaries in roughly equal measure, and that ministers from both traditions sometimes promote "selectively permeable" boundaries. We explore prevailing frames employed by ministers to promote the respective boundaries, and we discuss implications for studies of culture and religion.

Symbolic boundaries have become axiomatic in scholarship that examines how social groups distinguish insiders from outsiders. Symbolic resources such as clothing, musical preferences, and language, for instance, can each be employed in different ways to establish, maintain, and transform collective identities based on affiliations such as those delineated by race, gender, and class. Less well researched, however, is the role of visual media, particularly that of film. In this article we explore the relevance of this pervasive element of contemporary popular culture to issues of group identity and symbolic boundary construction.

By looking at two American religious traditions, one more conservative, the other more liberal, we show how discourse regarding secular media plays a vital role in establishing, maintaining, and transforming collective religious identities. Based on our content analyses of 50 sermons preached in evangelical Protestant churches and 50 sermons preached in mainline Protestant churches, we compare patterns and strategies related to ministers' efforts to establish their congregations' collective identities by discussing secular films. We find that a sufficient understanding of the two traditions' cultural orientations requires specifying the ways in which they vary from each other and from common expectations associated with their respective traditions. This comparative analysis contributes to our understanding of group boundaries through a focus on visual media and provides a clear example of how cultural consumption influences identity construction as Protestant clergy persuade their congregations to adopt contracting, expanding, or selectively permeable boundaries.

SYMBOLIC BOUNDARIES AND VISUAL MEDIA

Cultural sociology's main focus with respect to media and arts consumption has been their role in symbolic boundary construction (Gans 1974; Bourdieu 1984; DiMaggio and Ostrower 1990; Bryson 1996; Erickson 1996; Peterson and Kern 1996; Katz-Gerro 2002; DiMaggio and Mukhtar 2004; Lizardo 2006). Symbolic boundaries conceptualize the means by which groups use symbolic resources to establish collective identities by distinguishing themselves from other groups or institutions. These boundaries serve a variety of functions for group members and present a number of complex ways in which groups are empowered. Symbolic boundaries not only make clear who does and does not belong to a given group, but they also promote solidarity, play a crucial role in status acquisition and monopolization of resources, and serve as a basis for more objective forms of social exclusion and segregation (Lamont and Molnar 2002).

Consumption is one process through which symbolic boundaries form collective identities (Zukin and Maguire 2004). Numerous studies have demonstrated how social groups such as those based on class, race, and ethnicity create distinctions between themselves and other groups through the consumption of popular cultural goods such as clothing and music. Lamont and Molnar (2001), for example, argue that black Americans' consumption of various expensive

products is often an effort to undermine the stereotype of a black underclass and demonstrate solidarity with other black Americans. While the study of consumption has historically been on the margins, its relevance today is clear, especially as it pertains to group identity construction.

Consumption of the arts and popular media, in particular, function in contemporary culture to establish belonging through differentiation. Studies of both "high" and "mass" culture have explored cultural tastes and practices and how they help determine symbolic boundaries based on class. Bourdieu (1984) argued that cultural tastes are forms of cultural capital that can be used to establish status in particular social fields. He provided evidence that exclusivity in arts and food preferences functions as a sign of educational achievement and thus class status, forming the basis for a concealed ordering of power relations in French society. Beyond serving simply as indicators of random preferences, cultural consumption habits can further serve as indicators of social location and membership status.

Building on Bourdieu's work, others have introduced additional complexity in the relationship between cultural consumption and social status (Lamont and Lareau 1988; Peterson and Kern 1996; Han 2003; Lizardo 2006). Examining musical preferences, for instance, Bryson (1996) shows that patterns of cultural consumption not only reveal that highly-educated Americans' "multicultural capital" does not extend to formats popular among the less educated, but also that Americans with racist tendencies tend to avoid music they associate with other races. While Bryson, then, continues the trend of examining cultural consumption in relation to class status, she also extends the discussion to racial boundaries. Many others have recognized the relevance of cultural capital aside from issues of class status, such as its role in the construction of racial, ethnic, gender-based, as well as religious identities (DiMaggio and Ostrower 1990; Davila 1999; Katz-Gerro 2002; Kane 2004; Park and Baker 2007).

While research in the study of symbolic boundary construction through cultural consumption has focused primarily on two genres, general arts participation and musical preference, we know less about the role that visual media consumption has on these processes. Without question, visual media, particularly that of film and television, is ubiquitous in industrial and postindustrial societies. Americans, in particular, regularly attend films, watch television and DVDs, and partake in a wealth of other electronic media options that are available through the use of various computerized devices. Research in the field of media studies has shown the complex ways in which visual media, especially television, affects audience behaviors and attitudes

(McLuhan 1964; Gerbner and Gross 1976; Mulvey 1989; Baudrillard 1994). The function of visual media in the construction of groups' symbolic boundaries, however, has received less attention.

Noting the need to develop this area more fully, we draw from the literature on music and arts participation and apply it to visual media. Visual media, like these other forms of cultural consumption, can function as cultural capital. As such, they are likely to be instrumental in helping groups develop symbolic boundaries.

SECULAR MEDIA AND RELIGIOUS PLAUSIBILITY STRUCTURES

The role of visual media in religious symbolic boundary maintenance has not received great attention. Still, the theoretical basis for such investigations can be readily found in other research that examines how religious groups work to distinguish themselves from others. Christian Smith's (1998) work on evangelical Protestant distinctiveness employs the concept of symbolic boundaries in his "subcultural identity theory." Smith argues that clearly demarcated boundaries are crucial in vitalizing the "thriving" evangelical movement in the United States. Other important studies have examined how religious symbolic boundaries determine, for instance, status and solidarity among workers (Lamont 2000), a sense of national identity based on moral opposition to atheists (Edgell et al. 2006), and language employed to foster ecumenical cooperation within a community (Lichterman 2008). In demonstrating ways in which religious groups widely employ symbolic boundaries, these studies look primarily at religious attitudes among laity.

Attitudinal evidence of religious symbolic boundary construction also is evident in patterns of cultural consumption. Scholarship in cultural studies and semiotics such as that generated by the Birmingham School has investigated the complex ways in which visual media products interact with individuals' systems of meaning (Hall 1980; Morley 1980; Eco 1981; Ang 1985). More recently, scholars such as Stuart Hoover and Lynn Schofield Clark have focused directly on how audiences incorporate media products into specifically religious systems of meaning (Clark 2005; Warren 2005; Beal and Linafelt 2006; Hoover 2006). Our study builds on this tradition by focusing on the "supply-side" of religious symbolic boundary construction as we investigate one of the major sources out of which religious adherents are likely to develop interpretive frameworks: the congregational sermon.

Sociologists have argued that groups' "plausibility structures" reinforce commonly-held beliefs as members interact and engage in collective behaviors and rituals (Berger 1967). The religious congregation is an example of this phenomenon. Through regular engagement in activities such as worship, congregations are able to reinforce common dogma. As with any group, congregations are usually held together in part by the presence and work of leaders, typically "ministers," "pastors," "priests," or "rectors" in Protestant churches. These figures typically hold the most influential roles in congregations with respect to the reinforcement of beliefs, and they achieve this through their ability to direct worship and deliver sermons reminding listeners of collective beliefs about cosmic realities. This discourse by "opinion leaders" (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955) serves to inform and shape the complex networks of opinions and attitudes held by congregants.[1]

PROTESTANT BOUNDARIES WITH SECULAR CULTURE

But not all religious groups are the same, even within major world religions. In contemporary white American Protestantism, evangelical and mainline traditions form two major strands that typically reflect two distinct approaches to culture. The traditions' contrasting modes of engagement with the wider secular culture offer a good setting for examining properties of symbolic boundaries. While evangelical Protestants are often associated with an engaged resistance to mainstream culture as identified in Smith's (1998) study, mainline Protestants exhibit greater accommodation (Hutchison et al. 1991; Stout and Buddenbaum 1996; McKinney 1998; Steensland et al. 2000). The present study looks more closely at this expectation as clergy in these two religious traditions publicly discuss visual media.

Although initial impressions of evangelical discourse on secular media use suggest an antagonistic relationship, the reality may be somewhat more complex. During the past several decades, news accounts have highlighted opposition to secular media by evangelical entities such as Donald Wildmon's National Federation for Decency,

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[1]Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955, p. 99) point out that certain individuals become opinion leaders by virtue of their social location and/or recognized role within a given culture. Ministers are "strategically situated" to influence their congregations. By this, we do not mean to imply that all congregants in a given church are uniformly influenced by their ministers in all matters. Rather, we argue that ministers' social location and recognized role within their churches make them uniquely influential. Even an extremely unpopular minister would likely serve as an opinion leader for some congregants.

Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority, James Dobson's Focus on the Family, and Pat Robertson's *700 Club*. Well-publicized controversies have arisen over mass media releases such as *The Last Temptation of Christ, The Simpsons, Harry Potter*, and *The Da Vinci Code*. And yet, despite these prominent skirmishes, evangelical Protestants have also placed high value on the power of mass media to spread the Christian gospel (Schultze 1990). As Stout and Buddenbaum summarize the relationship, "Because [evangelicals] see it as their duty to Christianize the world, they pin both their hopes and fears on the mass media, which they see simultaneously as an important tool for evangelism and as a threat to their values and beliefs" (1996, p. 37). As a result of this tension and with the availability of affordable mass-marketing production, many evangelicals have supplied and consumed alternative and competing religious media goods (Moore 1994; Hendershot 2004; Park and Baker 2007; Einstein 2008). Despite the growth of these "Jesus-junk" industries, evangelicals have continued to participate in the cultural mainstream. In view of this "engaged yet resisting" dynamic, evangelicals can be characterized as generally exhibiting "contracting" boundaries with secular culture.

In contrast to evangelicals, mainline Protestants have been much less vocal in contributing an alternative Protestant perspective to issues surrounding secular media. During the last few decades, there is little evidence of any mainline response to secular media that counters or supports evangelical rhetoric on these topics. Following Smith (1998) and others, however, mainline Protestantism may very well reflect a more accommodating position with respect to secular media. A consistent message in mainline discourse is that individual reason, rather than behavioral restrictions, need to guide both heavenly and worldly concerns (Fore 1990; Stout and Buddenbaum 1996; Bass 2006). Thus, in contrast to the "contracting" boundaries present in much evangelical discourse, mainline Protestants have generally exhibited "expanding" boundaries with secular culture.

In the following analysis, we examine the sermons of religious leaders in two prominent religious traditions that have historically exhibited contrasting orientations toward secular culture. Examining sermon texts follows a tradition in sociological studies of religion that recognizes the social functions of discourse (Hunter 1983; Ammerman 1987; Wuthnow 1987; Warner 1988; Wuthnow 1992; Witten 1993). These studies involve, according to Witten (1993, p. 9), identifying the function of social discourse in "constructing and communicating ideas and beliefs, symbolizing self and communities, and modeling ideologies and behaviors." Sermons, in particular, tend to function as the centerpiece of Protestant worship services,

allowing preachers to address issues of doctrine, interpretation of Scripture, exhortation, admonishment, and behavior (Witten 1993, p. 10). In our examination of Protestant sermons, we intend not only to scrutinize each tradition's cultural orientations, but also to identify common methods and motivations evident in the promotion of contrasting types of symbolic boundaries.

METHODS

We investigated attitudes toward secular culture by analyzing a selection of 100 Protestant sermons, each of which makes at least one reference to non-religious cinema. We limited our search to sermons preached and published from 2001–2008 to minimize the influence of time period effects.

Taking advantage of computerized media for purposes of social research (Weare and Lin 2000; Bainbridge 2007), we made use of the vast array of Protestant sermons that are readily available on the Internet. Ministers commonly post written texts, MP3s, and webcasts of their sermons on church websites, websites devoted to providing pastoral resources, as well as personal blogs. In addition to providing information on the discourse taking place when believers meet in person on Sunday mornings, these resources represent a growing marketplace of spiritual discourse that takes place electronically. The Barna Group (2005) found that close to 60% of Protestant churches maintain websites, many of which provide spiritual resources such as sermon texts. As the majority of Americans have used the Internet for religious purposes (Hoover and Park 2004), these sites represent an important portion of the American religious landscape, especially in light of arguments that American religiosity has become increasingly privatized for many members of the Baby Boomer and subsequent generations who are moving toward more personalized experiences of faith (Roof 1993; Roof 1999; Einstein 2008).

Because we limited our search to Internet-available sermons, our selection process was systematic. We utilized Internet search tools to identify sermons from a variety of denominations, with half of the sample coming from evangelical churches and half from mainline churches. We identified churches as evangelical or mainline based on the denominational classification scheme provided on the *Religious Congregations and Membership in the United States, 2000*, collected by the Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies (ASARB) and distributed by the Association of Religion Data Archives (www.theARDA.com).

We began by finding websites, such as SermonCentral.com, Sermonsearch.com, and Biblebb.com, which advertise links to sermon texts. These sites exist mainly as resources for clergy in preparation of their own sermons. The source websites linked us not only to original sermons posted on the source cite, but also to additional church web pages, denominational web pages, and ministers' personal blogs. These destination pages often contained additional links to individual sermons. If the destination site had an internal search feature, we would enter the keywords ''movie'' or ''film'' and the site would direct us to one or more internal links. At that point, we reviewed all film references in the available sermons.[2]

We constructed our sample by including the first available sermons that met our basic requirements. We selected only one sermon per church, considering multiple media references from a single sermon on the few occasions in which that occurred. We also wanted to cast a sufficiently wide net in terms of denominational representation, so in a few cases it became expedient to include a denominational label in the search query. For instance, because Episcopal sermons were notably lacking in the early stages, and because that denomination accounts for a large proportion of American mainline churches, we included a search for ''Episcopal sermons movie.'' This approach allowed us to create a matched sample of evangelical and mainline congregations, including at least a few cases from each of the largest Protestant denominations.

Following Strauss and Corbin (1990), we used a grounded theory approach where our examination of the sermon texts was not restricted to our earlier expectations but allowed for the possibility of alternative categories to emerge. After locating a particular reference, we would proceed by identifying basic characteristics of the sermon: geographical location of the church, denominational affiliation, name of

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[2]Two consequences of our method should be addressed at this point. First, we were only able to examine sermons of congregations who have websites and post sermons. It is possible that these congregations systematically differ in their perspective on visual media from those who do not have websites and post sermons. Our sample could be skewed based on social class, for instance. We believe, however, that if this bias were to exist it would impact evangelical and mainline congregations alike. The overall goal of this study, then, to compare the boundary maintenance of these two traditions, should not have been compromised. In other words, it is possible that American Protestantism as a whole is more opposed to secular visual media than this study indicates; it is unlikely, though, that the design of this study has caused us to misrepresent mainline and evangelical orientations toward media in relation to each other. A second consequence of our method is that we did not identify sermons in which ministers referred to cinema without the accompanying terms "film" or "movie." While this undoubtedly caused us to overlook some sermons, however, we do not think it likely that it led to any systematic sample bias.

the minister, sermon title, date preached, placement of the reference within the sermon, and the url. Next, taking into account the cinematic references, the surrounding texts, and the larger contexts of the sermons, we found evidence that spoke to our conceptual orientation of symbolic boundaries. Sermons were identified as having *contracting boundaries* when all of the relevant comments were critical of secular media. Sermons were identified as having *expanding boundaries* when all of the relevant comments were favorable toward secular media.[3] In addition to contracting and expanding boundary sermons, a third category of boundary maintenance emerged which we define as *selectively permeable*. This category refers to instances in which the speakers would alternately highlight positive and negative aspects of secular culture. Upon designating sermons as promoting particular symbolic boundary types, we analyzed discursive frames (Goffmann 1986) to locate prevailing processes involved in ministers' efforts to shape their congregations' perceptions of secular media.

RESULTS

Figure 1 shows the frequencies of boundary types as found in sermons from each tradition. In the 50 evangelical sermons, 22 (44%) were coded as having contracting boundaries, whereas 17 (34%) were expanding and 11 (22%) were selectively permeable. In mainline sermons, expanding boundaries were clearly the norm. Whereas only two (4%) were coded as having contracting boundaries, 38 (78%) were expanding and nine (18%) were selectively permeable.

We also identified consistently recurring frames associated with each boundary type. These frames are summarized in Table 1. In the following, we investigate the boundaries and their accompanying frames by excerpting passages that speak to our conceptual concerns.

Contracting Boundaries

Contracting-boundary sermons, found almost exclusively in evangelical congregations, involved clear efforts to establish or reinforce tensions between congregations and groups in the surrounding

[3]In some cases, secular media was neither explicitly promoted nor explicitly discouraged. Often, for instance, ministers simply used illustrations from films without providing critical commentary. We determined that these sermons represented expanding boundaries by virtue of the films' inclusion in the sermons. In other words, we believed it would have made little sense for the minister to include the film in the sermon if he or she wanted to indicate that viewing it was sinful or otherwise problematic.
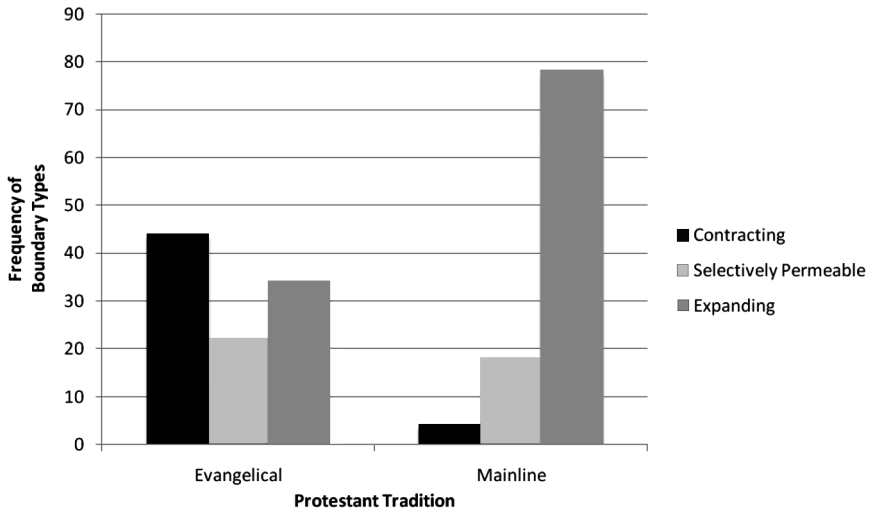
Figure 1. Boundary types by Protestant tradition.

culture. We found that the majority of sermons contained one of two frames. Secular media was either framed as a threat to the normative order or as an impediment to highly-valued religious objectives.

The most common complaint in contracting-boundary sermons involved threats to social norms. In most cases, the norms involved individual piety, sometimes coupled with threats to safety, law, and order. In one such evangelical sermon, delivered in a church in Arkansas, the pastor discussed a news report of a shooting that had occurred after the killer and victim had both attended the film *Get Rich or Die Tryin'* starring the rapper 50 Cent. The pastor, expressing a common sentiment in the more morally restrictive

Table 1. Prevailing frames associated with each boundary type

Contracting boundaries	Selectively permeable boundaries	Expanding boundaries
1. Secular cinema presents threats to social norms, especially those involving individual piety.	1. Secular cinema presents complex issues related to Christian behaviors and beliefs.	1. Secular cinema provides analogies for Christian behaviors and beliefs.
2. Consumption of secular cinema impedes highly-valued religious objectives.	2. Consumption of secular cinema is both problematic and beneficial.	2. Consumption of secular cinema can be incorporated into collective worship.

sermons, asked, "What does this say to us? As a man thinketh so is he and as a man watcheth movies so is he! Or so will he do!" (Shepherd 2005, para. 1). This pastor did not address the possibility of other intervening social or interpersonal factors that might have led to the shooting, and the violence was directly linked to the inescapable influence of the media. In this and many other references, secular media was depicted as a catalyst of sin and danger.

Similarly, threats to sexual piety were common in contracting-boundary evangelical sermons. In one case, sexuality in the media was depicted as part of a vast and deliberate secular conspiracy to propagate sin. At his church in Sun Valley, California, John MacArthur spent one sermon focusing on homosexuality, forcefully rejecting portrayals of the behavior in secular visual media. Positing that portrayals of homosexuality in the media are agenda-driven as gays attempt to alleviate their guilt, he claimed, "These people who are so driven to divest themselves of guilt, to release and free themselves from any assessment that they are sinning, are promoting and selling their perversion as if it's normal on every level in this nation, starting with elementary schools, TV sitcoms, films, and every other form of media" (MacArthur 2007, para. 12).

One sermon suggested consequences for purveyors of threatening media products. An evangelical pastor in Texas suggested capital punishment for those who endanger the moral welfare of children. In a list of offenders, the pastor included sexual predators, irreligious parents, as well as many producers of secular media:

> **What Jesus is making clear is this: Before an adult destroys the soul of a child that adult should die and be prevented from hurting another child ever again. Who would do such a thing and destroy the faith and soul and life of a child? Parents who neglect the spiritual life of their children, sexual predators who use the Internet to lure children into their net of perverse behavior and lead them into a similar immoral life. To be included are the entertainment folks who write and produce TV programs and movies and music that present immoral and godless ways of life as being good and normal and so influence young people to participate in and accept these sins... It would be advantageous that they be removed from this planet before they destroy the faith and soul of any more children. (Gabb 2007, para. 5)**

Our sample contained one mainline sermon with a comparable concern over the endangerment of individual piety. In this case, though, the concern had to do not with problematic cinematic content, but with "Hollywood" as a cultural institution that exemplifies

superficiality. A Presbyterian (USA) minister in California referred to
"movie stars" as individuals who depend on drugs and alcohol and
are "tormented by incurable self-doubt" (Coop 2005, para. 35).
For this minister, as well as for a few of our sample's evangelical
pastors, "movie stars" and "Hollywood" symbolize external beauty
that is compromised by internal weakness and sin.[4]

In contrast to those sermons that highlighted threats to social
norms, a number of sermons depicted secular media consumption
as a poor use of resources that could be better utilized in service
of highly-valued religious objectives. Media consumption might
diminish believers' longing for scripture, for instance, as in a
Christian Brethren service in California:

> We can examine our own lives in terms of our response to God's word.
> So in Psalm 119:20 we read, "My soul is consumed with longing
> for your laws at all times." ... What are we longing for? A television
> program? A new movie? Born-of-God people will long for the real
> thing—the word of God, the word that created the universe and
> regenerated them. They crave the word that alone can nourish and
> satisfy their souls." (Mathew 2002, para. 51–52)

Similarly, an evangelical pastor from a Presbyterian (PCA) church
in Baltimore included movies in a list of entertainments that distract
worshipers' attention from God:

> Did you bring the totality of your heart, of your mind and of your will
> to worship this morning? Have you been completely focused on what
> God is all about in your worship today or have some of you thought
> about this afternoon? ... You know, if there is a Ravens game on or
> if there is a ball game on or this or that or the soccer game or there's

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[4]In the only other contracting-boundary mainline sermon found in our sample, the minister
objected to what he perceived to be a direct attack on his denomination's reputation. A minister
in New York City derided Stephen Spielberg's *Amistad* for distorting the role played by Congre-
gationalists in the American abolition movement. Spielberg, according to this minister, went so
far as to vilify the faithful upon whom the success of the abolitionist movement depended. The
minister argued, "[T]he fight to end slavery would never have been won without faithful Christian
men and women willing to risk physical danger, social disapproval, the nastiness of neighbors and
politicians, and the condescension of filmmakers many years after their deaths" (Goldstein 2006,
para. 30). In this case, the minister felt that his denomination's mission of social justice had been
distorted by Hollywood. Thus, secular media had presented a threat to an essential feature of his
denomination's collective identity. In our assessment, this sermon's frame was fundamentally
different from all others in our sample. Nonetheless, this mainline sermon's emphasis on social
justice provides a good contrast to the evangelical tendency to emphasize individual piety (as in
Shepherd 2005, MacArthur 2007, and Gabb 2007).

a movie I am going to see or if there is a picnic that I am going to do? Anybody like that? Or is it just me? (Antonakos 2008, para. 11)

A well-known evangelical pastor identified media as an impediment to a slightly different goal: wise ''stewardship'' of personal finances. In a sermon at Orange County's Saddleback Church, Rick Warren discussed applications of a contemporary translation of Proverbs 21:20: ''Stupid people spend their money as fast as they get it.'' Among other recommendations on the use of personal finances, Warren advised his congregation against wasting paychecks on rash impulses like going to movies (Warren 2003, para. 5). Warren characterized the consumption of secular cinema as a potential impediment to the higher Christian objective of using personal finances to serve God and spread the gospel message.

Expanding Boundaries

Expanding boundaries were identified in sermons that were entirely positive toward secular cinema. In the vast majority of these sermons, secular media provided analogies for Christian behavior and beliefs. In a number of cases, clips from films were shown as part of the worship service. In some cases, entire sermons were based on lessons to be garnered from particular films.

A number of evangelicals in this study showed signs of fully embracing particular secular films, often finding Christian analogies in less-than-obvious cinematic moments. One such example was found in Jerry Falwell's Southern Baptist church in Virginia. Given Jerry Falwell's reputation as an outspoken combatant against secular culture, it was somewhat surprising to find his son, Jonathan Falwell, showing clips from and basing an entire sermon on lessons for Christians found in Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life.* At one point, Falwell compared the intercession of a guardian angel on behalf of James Stewart's character to the intercession of Jesus on the behalf of sinners:

What a perfect picture of hope. When George was about to end his life, Clarence jumps into the water first. He jumped into those icy waters before George. Here we see, at the point of no hope. At the point when nothing is left. At the point where we find ourselves with nothing to live for, Jesus is there. And amazingly, Jesus jumps in before us. Jesus went to that cross before we could pay the price . . . Jesus took our sins upon Himself FIRST! (Falwell 2007, para. 61–62)

An evangelical pastor in a Maryland Baptist church found in the Hollywood film *300* a sermon-length metaphor for the Christian need to depend on Jesus for perseverance. Offering the film's depiction of Spartan courage as a metaphor for Christian courage, he explained, "[T]here are times in my own life when I can identify with this battle. There are moments when I feel like I'm holding a 'pass' against hundreds of thousands of enemy 'troops.' There are times when I feel overwhelmed and am so tempted just to throw in the towel. Can you relate? Are there days when it's all you can do to keep yourself from just giving up?" (Adams 2007, para. 3). Later, the pastor exhorted, "Persevere because even though it's tough at times, following Jesus is the only way to get where we want and need to go" (para. 28). Interestingly, the pastor did not address questions arguably inherent in his assertion that a pre-Christian culture illustrates dependence on Jesus.

Mainline Protestant ministers heavily favored expanding boundaries. In most cases, various moments from films were provided for the purpose of analogy. Much like the evangelical ministers that found analogies for religious beliefs and behavior in *It's A Wonderful Life* and *300*, a Methodist minister in Arizona identified what she characterized as a profound spiritual analogy in the Disney film *Bambi.* This sermon was part of a multi-week series entitled "The Gospel in Disney" in which the church would show film clips and discuss applications to Christian living. At one point in the sermon, the minister remarked:

> **There are times when the façade of self-sufficiency shatters. We see that we can't make it alone. It is at this most painful moment that Bambi hears the sure strong voice of his father, "Come my son ... " Love is a song that never ends. It is a song that God sings to us through eternity. In our own times of suffering when we cry out to God, God meets us where we lay and urges us, "Come with me." (Cushman 2007, para. 5)**

Although not included in our content analysis, this church also included sermons based on *Pocahontas*, *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, and *The Fox and the Hound.*

A mainline minister from a Presbyterian (USA) church in Texas, discussing God's role as a protector in the book of Jeremiah, offered a potentially shocking spiritual analogy inspired by the Oscar-winning film, *Crash*:

> **... In this most striking scene, a woman (named Christine) is trapped inside her overturned car, which could explode at any minute**

because gasoline is leaking from the tank. The policeman who came to her rescue had, the night before, assaulted her. Terrified of her assailant, who is also her only hope, she tells him not to come near her . . . [I]n the nick of time, she lets go of her fear and puts her trust in him. He pulls her from the car to safety, just before the car explodes. Through this encounter, Christine saves her own life by putting her trust in the policeman who had abused her . . . [T]his Hollywood concoction provides a gripping example of the agonizing choice to let go of your fears, and put faith in what will save you. (Martin 2007, para. 2–3)

This minister pursued a strategy similar to that employed by the abovementioned Protestants who identified Christian analogies in unexpected cinematic moments; in this case, she recognized a Christ-figure in a fictional sexual predator.

Selectively Permeable Boundaries

Apart from contracting and expanding boundaries, a third approach to symbolic boundary maintenance emerged in our analyses. We identify these boundaries as selectively permeable. These sermons offered dual messages regarding Christians' interactions with secular culture. Rather than exclusively discouraging or promoting consumption of secular cinema, these sermons tended to suggest either complexity or paradox. In some cases, ministers actively addressed moral complexities involved in Christian consumption of secular media. These ranged from nuanced theological discussions to brief qualifications (i.e., "We can learn from this movie, but unfortunately there's too much sex and violence"). In other sermons, it would be most accurate to say that the ministers suggested paradox, as incongruous comments regarding secular media consumption were left unresolved. Whether suggesting complexity or paradox, sermons with selectively-permeable boundaries conveyed the message that secular media consumption is neither wholly permissible nor wholly prohibited.

One evangelical pastor from Michigan compared a notoriously violent secular film to a parable told by Christ, and while doing so he directly addressed tensions that might arise from discussing such a film in the context of worship. Comparing the "shrewd manager" in one of Jesus' parables to Vito Corleone, a character in *The Godfather 2*, this Christian Reformed Church pastor remarked:

Now I realize that some of you are at best uncomfortable any time a pastor uses contemporary cinema as a sermon illustration. Further,

considering that the movie I just mentioned is hardly *The Sound of Music* some of your discomfort may now be magnified. A good many people have criticized the *Godfather* films precisely because the main characters are bloodthirsty crooks. . . . [W]hy should mafia thugs be heroic in any story? That is a legitimate question. It's a good question to ask of also [*sic*] Luke 16 . . . [T]he fact is that the "hero" of this parable—the figure Jesus holds up as somehow or another having something to teach "the children of light"—is finally an anti-hero. He's a crook, a swindler, a cheat. And even as some of you may well wish that a person like Vito Corleone would not be mentioned in a sermon, so many along the ages of church history have wished Jesus had not included this shrewd, corrupt manager as the protagonist of a parable. (Hoezee 2001, para. 5–7)

This pastor, then, cautiously offered a controversial metaphor for his congregation's consideration. Namely, he posited that fictionalized sinful behavior can play an edifying role as long as the portrayal is affixed to a larger moral perspective. Neither denigrating nor wholeheartedly embracing secular cinema, his approach acknowledged a degree of complexity.

In contrast to the cautious approach employed by the pastor in the example above, other pastors simply seemed to send mixed signals. This was particularly evident in one evangelical sermon from an Indiana Baptist church. Discussing Star Wars, the pastor said:

[A]nother really popular image or idol of God today is "God is the Force. May the Force be with you." Enjoy *Star Wars* the movie but don't get your theology from it. It's a great flick. I've seen it at least 50 times. It's terrific. But it's just a movie. It's just fiction. It's filled with pantheism . . . That's a bunch of baloney! God is not in everything. God created everything. No doubt about that. But God is not in everything and everything is not God. That is called pantheism. It's about 5,000 years old. The most ignorant groups of people bought into this. (Robinson 2007, para. 42)

This pastor thought of "The Force" as not merely a fictional creation but a representation of an ideology antagonistic to Christian monotheism. Nonetheless, although denouncing the pantheism promoted in *Star Wars*, he also clearly did not think it a problem to spend over 100 hours repeatedly viewing the "terrific" film. His conflicting messages were left unresolved.

We also identified a number of mainline sermons that exhibited selectively permeable boundaries. As did their counterparts in

evangelical sermons (such as Hoezee 2001, above), these sermons contained dual messages regarding the values and problems involved in secular media consumption. One such mainline sermon included a disclaimer about moral content that was similar to moments in many evangelical sermons. Discussing a line from the movie *Speed* that would serve as his sermon's central motif, the Lutheran (ELCA) minister from Indiana acknowledged, "There is a line in a movie that speaks to [my main] point. It has stuck with me for a number of years. The movie is *Speed,* and if you have seen it, you may wonder at how it would ever be appropriate to a sermon, with its profane language and high level of violence. Nonetheless, here is the statement as I remember it . . . " (McKee 2006, para. 14). As with the evangelical minister who discussed *The Godfather 2*, this mainline minister was careful to acknowledge that the film contained some elements that might be problematic for believers. Nonetheless, he felt the film contained a kernel of truth that would edify his congregation. Rather than exclusively denying or confirming the film's worth for Christians, he modeled a qualified recognition of redemptive elements in secular cinema.

Our final example provides a peculiar intersection of elements involved in media consumption and symbolic boundary maintenance. An Episcopalian rector in Virginia identified potential problems involved in viewing a controversial secular film, but concluded that the film presented an opportunity to talk to people about Christianity. Discussing the release of the film version of Dan Brown's book, *The Da Vinci Code*,[5] the rector cautioned his congregation not to let Brown's alleged distortions of history alter their conception of Christian truth. He argued, "[L]et me be very clear. While Dan Brown is free to tell the story as he wishes, he is not free to change what is true and what is not . . . " (Merola 2006, para. 7). Later in the homily, however, the rector insisted that the movie's release was an opportunity, rather than a barrier, for Christians:

> . . . Friends, let me give you a little challenge this week. If you have a copy of *The Da Vinci Code,* carry it around with you this week. I guarantee you it will open the doors for you to engage in spiritual conversations

[5]This sermon is unique in our sample because it deals with a book that is adapted into a film. The rector introduced *The Da Vinci Code* by discussing the film's impending release. He then proceeded to discuss how parishioners should respond to the book *and* the film, the content of which he did not distinguish. We concluded that, whether or not the rector was accurate in equating the content of the film with that of the book, his sermon is a good example of how discourse on secular visual media can be used to negotiate symbolic boundaries.

with the people around you. Use this as an opportunity to guide spiritually sensitive people to the real Jesus story...the one that has made all the difference in my life, and, I hope, in yours. (para. 17)

While marking a boundary with Brown's approach in *The Da Vinci Code,* the rector nonetheless depicted the film's release as an occasion that could support congregants' efforts at evangelism. Thus, the rector framed perceptions of a media product that allegedly provides a distorted frame of the Christian message in order to empower the audience in their efforts to spread the Christian message. Congregants who took the rector's advice to carry the book around with them would have presented an idiosyncratic instance of selective permeation, in which they would have been symbolizing their involvement with the culture in order to engage in conversations that would highlight their ultimate distinction from the culture.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

We have argued that responses to visual media offer important clues in understanding the negotiation of symbolic boundaries. Indeed, responses to visual media are particularly significant in defining collective identities for mainline and evangelical Protestants as ministers in these traditions encourage their congregations to engage in particular patterns of consumption. Recurring frames associated with each of three boundary types suggest identity features that are actively promoted by opinion leaders in each tradition.

With regard to contracting boundaries, we find support for the perception that evangelicals are considerably more likely than mainline Protestants to express resistance to secular culture. The majority of contracting-boundary sermons provide one of two common frames. Each of these, following Smith's (1998) subcultural identity theory, contributes to congregational vitality through the promotion of specific modes of resistance.

In the first and most common frame, secular media is depicted as a threat to social norms, especially those that involve individual piety. These ministers build collective identity, in part, by identifying negative reference groups such as gays, environmentalists, "secular humanists," and the like. Their depiction of the erosion of norms in a hostile modern world and a tendency toward conspiratorial, outraged, or retributive rhetoric might fairly be identified as fundamentalist. Rather than representing a retreat to a "sheltered enclave" (Hunter 1983), though, their rhetoric may serve to reinforce a

common oppositional identity. In the language of semiotics, these ministers tend to promote oppositional reading of dominant codes as the primary interpretive framework within their congregations (Hall 1980). To the extent that ministers and congregations share this interpretive framework, secular cinema can provide cultural rallying points for evangelicals who see themselves as guardians of concerns over individual moral improvement (Hunter 1983; Smith 1998).

A second frame characterizes secular media as problematic to highly-valued Christian objectives. By depicting media consumption as a potential waste of religious resources, many evangelical pastors reinforce a distinctly instrumental orientation toward culture. A sermon included in this study that exemplified this frame was preached by Saddleback Church's Rick Warren, and it is perhaps useful to consider his bestselling book, *The Purpose-Driven Life* (2002). As the title suggests, evangelicals such as Warren believe in establishing and working toward clearly articulated religious goals. Thus, whether media consumption is discouraged or promoted, the justifications are likely to focus on the usefulness of consumption in relation to larger religious objectives.[6] The collective identity promoted by these pastors does not appear to be based, as it is in the more fundamentalist sermons, on antagonism. Rather, these pastors promote communities that are proactive and hard-working in their mission to lead sinners to salvation, a mission that they believe must not be deterred by irrelevant or detrimental distractions such as those provided by secular media products.

The second type of symbolic boundary we considered, that of expanding boundaries, was the overwhelming trend in mainline congregations. These boundaries also surfaced in evangelical sermons, however, at a ratio that precludes characterizations of evangelicals as monolithic in their opposition to secular culture. In both traditions, these references to cinema consistently provided analogies for Christian behaviors and beliefs. These analogies were often quite

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[6]This instrumentality is pervasive in Warren's sermons and appears to guide his depictions of secular media as either positive or negative. In contrast to the contracting-boundary sermon excerpted in this study, for example, we found later sermons by Warren praising a distinctly religious media good in Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*. Warren encouraged his congregation to buy tickets for friends, as he did when he bought tickets for 600 community "majors." Warren called the film "an unbelievably magnificent cinematic masterpiece" and "the single greatest opportunity to share Jesus Christ with a friend in your entire lifetime" (Warren 2004, para. 11). These sermons were not included in this study's analysis, but offer a good sense of the instrumentality that influences his efforts at boundary construction. Whether he is discouraging media (in the sermon on stewardship) or encouraging it (with *The Passion*), the point is the larger mission of living faithfully and spreading Christianity around the globe.

innovative, and were taken from sources as seemingly innocuous as *It's a Wonderful Life* as well as those as potentially objectionable as *300*. Some ministers included actual film clips as part of the worship service. In discussing and displaying visual media, these ministers utilized cultural resources presumably well-known to a wide audience. In many cases, this strategy is likely motivated by the need to attract congregants who might otherwise be drawn to competing "religious suppliers" (Stark and Finke 2001) or to nonreligious activities that function as substitutes. Visual entertainment is pervasive in American culture and likely to be one of the most prominent competitors for congregants' attentions. Rather than competing with these products by providing an alternate good, some ministers simply incorporate the competing entertainments as part of the worship service and thus identify their church as open-minded and accepting.[7] This activity could be cited as evidence of an implicit acknowledgement by some Protestants that their religious authority requires validation by nonreligious culture. This observation would be consistent with arguments that modernity is associated with a decline in the authority of religion (Cassanova 1994; Chaves 1994).

A third type of boundary, best understood as neither expanding nor contracting, was evident in our research. We identified a minority of sermons in each tradition as exhibiting selectively permeable boundaries. These sermons alternately promoted and discouraged secular visual media consumption. Selectively permeable boundaries appear in both traditions, and their presence indicates a common problem approached from different directions. For evangelicals, who have in many cases exhibited fervent opposition to secular culture, selectively permeable boundaries evidence tension as the whole movement inches in a more accommodating direction. This tension is identified in much recent research on the movement (Hutchison et al. 1991; Stone 1997; Shibley 1998; Lindsey 2007). These evangelicals demonstrate a growing willingness to interact with the larger culture, but their traditionally restrictive collective identity still discourages a thoroughly accommodating stance. Moments of caution, hesitation, or even disorientation may result in many cases, especially when discussing films that contain traces of sin or heresy. In such cases, pastors often remind their congregations that, while some inclusion

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[7]Promotion of expanding symbolic boundaries by many mainline and evangelical Protestants may even reflect an additional symbolic boundary: not with secular culture, but with Christian fundamentalists and other less tolerant religious groups. Ironically, then, some ministers might promote expanding boundaries with the wider culture in order to promote contracting boundaries with other Protestants.

of secular culture is inevitable or welcome in some areas, boundaries must still be reinforced. The principle of boundary contraction persists, although the particular application might change. In contrast to evangelicals, though, a welcoming orientation toward secular culture has long been evident in many mainline congregations. Selectively permeable boundaries, then, may reflect an urge to highlight their distinctively religious identity. Some mainliners may feel pressure to partially contract their boundaries out of a sense that their relevance to culture ultimately depends on a significant differentiation from culture.

Selectively permeable symbolic boundaries are indicative of the tensions experienced by religious groups as they adjust to the wider culture. Considered from the perspective of either evangelical or mainline Protestants, selectively permeable boundaries reflect the difficulty of appearing both relevant and distinct in a culture where religious and nonreligious organizations compete for individuals' allegiances. Taken together, it is entirely likely that these larger tensions are related, again, to perceptions of Protestantism's declining authority in the culture. The tensions might, then, reflect a fear that secular culture's permeation of religious boundaries is inevitable. Still, these ministers are deliberate about the conditions under which this permeation is permissible, and thus their efforts demonstrate a strategy to maintain group identity by dictating the terms of acceptance. This response to perceptions of declining authority could function as an adaptation that, beyond merely reflecting decline, is aimed at forging a new identity that is uniquely relevant to a changing culture.

Our study contributes to studies of culture by focusing on efforts by opinion leaders to shape collective interpretations of visual media. Analyzing such efforts provides insight into the different dynamics that guide two similar religious traditions' contrasting interactions with the wider culture. A number of alternate strategies would complement this study's approach. First, future research might benefit by investigating how our conceptualization of symbolic boundary dynamics informs research on other social groups, such as those defined by ethnicity, politics, sexuality, and religious identifiers other than Protestant affiliation. Second, it would be instructive to compare whether and how different media formats are used by leaders to shape group symbolic boundaries. Our focus on cinema was partially motivated by the ubiquity of the medium in popular discourse; it would be informative, though, to identify differences in boundary maintenance relative to contrasting media formats. Finally, our study concentrates on the role of opinion leaders in the construction of symbolic boundaries. Future studies should investigate the extent

to which leaders' proffered frames are shared with their "audiences," a strategy that would provide greater insight into the complex processes by which individuals receive information and translate it into systems of meaning. Along these lines, it would be useful to continue to investigate religious social discourse by interviewing parishioners, especially in contexts where researchers and subjects are able to view and discuss the same sermons. Such a strategy might also allow for more nuanced analysis of additional factors that might shape responses to particular frames. Important factors to consider include race, ethnicity, class, and gender, as well as attention to body language and vocal inflection on the part of the ministers.

This study builds on investigations of the formation, maintenance, and transformation of symbolic boundaries. By analyzing the rhetoric of local religious leaders, we are able to gain a more robust sense of how symbolic boundaries are formed and maintained. Leaders who play key roles in shaping plausibility structures are important resources in understanding how social groups distinguish those within from those without. By understanding how religious leaders use secular visual media to draw these lines, we gain greater insight into the changing ways that cultural boundaries serve to strengthen group identities.

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