On the August 22, 2005, evening broadcast of The 700 Club, the flagship newsmagazine show of the Christian Broadcasting Network, host Pat Robertson called for covert operatives acting on behalf of the United States to assassinate President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela. “He has destroyed the Venezuelan economy, and he’s going to make that a launching pad for communist infiltration and Muslim extremism all over the continent,” Robertson averred, continuing:

You know, I don’t know about this doctrine of assassination, but if he thinks we’re trying to assassinate him, I think that we really ought to go ahead and do it. It’s a whole lot cheaper than starting a war. And I don’t think any oil shipments will stop. But this man is a terrific danger and the United . . . This is in our sphere of influence, so we can’t let this happen. We have the Monroe Doctrine, we have other doctrines that we have announced. And without question, this is a dangerous enemy to our south, controlling a huge pool of oil, that could hurt us very badly. We
have the ability to take him out, and I think the time has come that we exercise that ability. We don’t need another $200 billion war to get rid of one, you know, strong-arm dictator. It’s a whole lot easier to have some of the covert operatives do the job and then get it over with. (“Robertson”)

In response to the immediate and intense criticism his comments engendered, Robertson issued a press release two days later in which he offered a clarification of his comments. Critical to this clarification was Robertson’s invocation of the figure of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Christian pastor who was executed by the Nazis for his participation in a plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler and who has subsequently been commemorated by many Christians as a martyr (see, for example, Slane). In the press release, Robertson said:

*The brilliant Protestant theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who lived under the hellish conditions of Nazi Germany, is reported to have said: “If I see a madman driving a car into a group of innocent bystanders, then I can’t, as a Christian, simply wait for the catastrophe and then comfort the wounded and bury the dead. I must try to wrestle the steering wheel out of the hands of the driver.” On the strength of this reasoning, Bonhoeffer decided to lend his support to those in Germany who had joined together in an attempt to assassinate Adolf Hitler. Bonhoeffer was imprisoned and killed by the Nazis, but his example deserves our respect and consideration today. (“Pat”)*

Whereas Robertson’s initial call for a state-sponsored assassination of another country’s political leader drew well-deserved protest and outcry, his invocation of the memory of Bonhoeffer went largely unremarked, and perhaps understandably. After all, the analogies he sought to draw, between Hugo Chavez and Adolf Hitler, on the one hand, and between himself and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, on the other, might simply and easily be dismissed as so much absurdist theatre. Bonhoeffer’s theology could not be more diametrically opposed to that of Pat Robertson, from Bonhoeffer’s notion of the church as “the church for others” and his critique of Hitler’s illegitimate attempt to usurp the place of Christ in the Christian community, to, perhaps most importantly, the notion of “religionless Christianity,” which he articulated very powerfully at the end of his life. Even the most cursory knowledge of Bonhoeffer’s theology would make it clear just how
thoroughly incompatible it is with the project of right-wing Christianity in the contemporary United States. I doubt, however, that such an empirical comparison had much to do with the widespread silence on Robertson’s comments about Bonhoeffer; I suspect, rather, that Robertson was dismissed by many people on the simple grounds of rhetorical excess.

Yet, I believe that Robertson’s rhetorical excesses are more than mere theatre: they are an example—albeit an extreme and even ridiculous example—of a broader and growing trend in political discourse as it emerges from certain branches of right-wing political Christianity. This trend mobilizes the language of religious persecution to shut down political debate and critique by characterizing any position not in alignment with this politicized version of Christianity as an example of antireligious bigotry and persecution. Moreover, it routinely deploys the archetypal figure of the martyr as a source of unquestioned religious and political authority. In the case of Robertson’s invocation of Bonhoeffer, the martyr functions in two distinct but related ways: first, the citation of Bonhoeffer diverts attention from Robertson’s original call for covert, state-sponsored violence while seeking cover from the moral authority that comes from aligning oneself with anti-Nazi resistance; and, second, the hagiographical reference aims to silence Robertson’s political critics by suggesting that opposition to his point of view aligns one with those who were responsible for Bonhoeffer’s death and, by extension, with all those who make martyrs of Christians. Such a move is an increasingly frequent and important one in the repertoire of the Christian right wing in the U.S., linked to a broader set of discursive practices that construct the religious majority in the country (Christians as a group) as a persecuted and threatened community.

There are many examples of this rhetorical project, a small sampling of which will suffice to make the point:

- Speaking about the opposition to the nomination of John G. Roberts, Jr. to the Supreme Court in 2005, Republican Senator from Utah Orrin Hatch appeared on Fox News and opined, “It’s a little bit like biblical Pharisees, you know, who basically are always trying to undermine Jesus Christ. You know, it goes the same way. If they can catch him in something, they can then criticize and the outside groups will go berserk” (qtd. Baker and Babbington).
In the summer of 2005, Congressman John Hostettler (R-Indiana) on the floor of the Congress accused Democrats of being anti-Christian in response to a proposal that the House declare its opposition to “coercive and abusive religious proselytizing” at the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs (qtd. in “Democrats”).

A November 2005 article in The Jewish Week, “ADL Breaks with Pack on Church-State,” reported on Abraham Foxman’s call for his organization to change its policy in relation to alliances with evangelical Christian groups, acting on anxiety over the long-stated evangelical goal to “Christianize” America (Besser). The Jewish Week article was reprinted in full on a Web site called “Jew Watch: Keeping a Close Watch on Jewish Communities & Organizations Worldwide,” with the hyperlink direly entitled, “ADL’s Official Declaration of War on Christianity.”

In 2003, then Alabama Supreme Court justice Roy Moore installed a three-ton granite monument inscribed with abbreviated versions of the biblical Ten Commandments in the state courthouse. When a federal court ordered the monument removed from the courthouse, a dramatic scene unfolded with numerous Christians engaging in civil disobedience and emotionally declaring their willingness to lay down their lives in defense of the monument, framing the judicial action barring the monument’s presence as yet another occasion of the persecution of Christians. The setting of the event, Montgomery, Alabama, helped to make a connection that Christian activists seek constantly to reinscribe, linking their struggle to that of the civil rights movement.

Each example, when taken up individually—from Robertson’s effort to place himself in the company of Dietrich Bonhoeffer to the Fox News–generated “war on Christmas” in 2005 (Media Matters for America; Goldberg) and beyond—may strike many observers as simply crude or calculating and therefore hardly demanding serious analysis or critique. Yet the persistence of such rhetorical gestures and their capacity to mobilize the faithful while rendering critique largely ineffective suggest that the constant appearance of the figure of the martyr and the portrayal of
Identity Politics and the “War on Christians”

Christians as an embattled community in the United States are performing important political and ideological work. It is the goal of this essay to explore some of the stakes involved in this work and to analyze the logics of this particular iteration of the Christian persecution complex.

There is no precise origin point for the contemporary discursive project of the Christian persecution complex, though political activism organized under the sign of “religious persecution” and “religious freedom” has certainly grown substantially in the last decade and most pressingly in the post-September 11th context. For those who have upped the ante by recently deciding to characterize the circumstances of Christians in the United States as the “war on Christians,” the historical turning point tends to reside in the mid-twentieth century, when a series of federal and Supreme court decisions declared certain public institutions off-limits for sectarian religious activity (e.g., prayer and Bible reading in public schools). For the Christian activists who view these court decisions as opening skirmishes in the war on Christians, the decisions and the “activist judges” who promulgated them effectively—and dangerously—banned God from the public square. Since these court decisions, which were rendered in the years after the conclusion of the Second World War, historically preceded the social and political upheavals of the 1960s, many Christian activists argue that there is a causal relationship between “the banning of God from the public square,” on the one hand, and the rise of various liberation movements, especially feminism and gay activisms, on the other. According to the “war on Christians” activists, the so-called banning of God from the public square also signaled the general decline of American Christian values and the perilous ascendency of American secularism. On this reading, when the Supreme Court decided Roe v. Wade and Doe v. Bolton in 1973 and thereby legalized women’s access to abortion, a watershed moment occurred: the eviction of God from the public square was complete. Under this logic, activist judges imposed their irreligious perspectives on a Christian nation, resulting in the perverse undermining of the institution of the family by feminists, homosexuals, and the judges who sympathize with them. The ensuing (and self-evident) moral decay of the country is, depending on the interpreter’s perspective, either the result of the ascendency of “anti-Christian” secularists or the punishment that God rightfully imposes on a disobedient nation.

Because of the centrality of these various court decisions in the story of America’s decline told by conservative Christian activists, the judiciary has been the object of special opprobrium from those who promote
the notion that the “war on Christians” is raging in the United States today. Hence, it was no surprise when Christian activists joined with right-wing political leaders in a series of highly publicized events traveling collectively under the name “Justice Sunday” in 2005 and 2006. These events involved simulcast broadcasts to churches around the country, warning of the imminent threats under which Christians live because of an unbridled, activist judiciary. The “Justice Sunday” events are organized by a group called the Family Research Council (FRC), which was founded by James Dobson (of Focus on the Family) and directed at one time by Christian activist and some-time presidential hopeful Gary Bauer. Now under the leadership of Tony Perkins, the FRC “champions marriage and family as the foundation of civilization, the seedbed of virtue, and the wellspring of society” and “promotes the Judeo-Christian worldview as the basis for a just, free, and stable society” (FRC Web site, “About FRC”). The rhetoric of the Justice Sunday movement is emblematic of the “war on Christians” worldview as a whole; the simulcasts provide a critical “insider” look into the arguments and logics that underpin the broader discursive turn.

The original Justice Sunday took place on April 24, 2005. The event drew the interest of mainstream media because one of its featured speakers was then Senate majority leader Bill Frist, Republican of Tennessee. The goal of the event was unabashedly political: its organizers sought to mobilize conservative Christians to pressure Democratic senators to abandon their use of the filibuster against President Bush’s nominees to the federal bench. Frist was viewed by many of his coreligionists and political allies as courageous for linking his reputation and public persona to this religio-political event. Others criticized Frist for having overstepped the carefully monitored line that purportedly clearly divides the religious from the political in U.S. culture.

The apparent success of Justice Sunday inspired the Family Research Council to assemble Justice Sunday II four months later, this time organized around the entreaty: “May God Save this Honorable Court!” Justice Sunday II, held on Saturday, August 13, 2005, and broadcast the following day, focused specifically on the Supreme Court nomination of John Roberts. Speakers at the event included James Dobson (chairman of Focus on the Family), Tom DeLay (then representative from Texas, now under indictment for violations of campaign finance laws), Chuck Colson (chairman of Prison Fellowship and former Watergate conspirator), Bishop Harry Jackson (senior pastor of a church in Maryland), Bill Donohue (president of the Catholic League), Zell Miller (former Senator
from Georgia), Phyllis Schlafly (from the Eagle Forum), and Ted Haggard (then president of the National Association of Evangelicals, who resigned his post in fall 2006 under a cloud of scandal after a gay sexworker whose customer he had been for several years “outed” him).

The rhetoric of the event emphasized several overlapping claims: the United States was founded by “our oppressed pilgrim forefathers” (Zell Miller) who based the society they created on biblical principles. With several Supreme Court decisions in the 1960s and 1970s—specifically Griswold v. Connecticut (in 1965, establishing the principle of privacy as a constitutionally protected right in the practice of contraception); and Roe v. Wade and Doe v. Bolton (in 1973, together overturning two different state laws restricting women’s access to abortion)—the Court “imposed a radical social policy agenda on this nation” (Perkins), laying the foundation for “out-of-control judges,” “activist judges,” “unelected judges” to “legislate from the bench” and indulge in “judicial tyranny.” Phyllis Schlafly called these judges “supremacists” as she also does in her book by the same name. Meanwhile, one-time Supreme Court nominee Robert Bork, who appeared during the simulcast only in briefly interspersed video clips, claimed that Supreme Court justices represent “the moral views of elites, universities, media, Hollywood, and so on” and offered a non sequitur in between two speakers when he observed darkly, “When the Court says that homosexual sodomy is a constitutional right and is on the way to making homosexual marriage a constitutional right, there is nothing the states can do about it, nothing the people can do about it.”

All of the Justice Sunday speakers frame the matter at hand as a question of democracy, where the majority of Americans believe one thing but the minority position holds sway—a minority position promulgated and shored up by the left, liberals, secularists, judges “drawing their inspiration from leftist influences in Western Europe [. . .] guided not by the United States Constitution or by legal precedent, or by American opinion [. . .] but by opinions expressed in that most liberal area of the planet” (Dobson). America here is posited as Europe’s other. Meanwhile, the specter of European colonialism—an indisputable fact of the history of the United States—curiously haunts the proceedings: on the one hand, it is disavowed as an element of American history, but on the other, it is projected threateningly upon America’s uncertain future. Europe was, according to this narrative, the place of religious persecution that “our oppressed forefathers” escaped when they came to America; by this logic, “our forefathers” were not Europeans (and thereby responsible for their
colonial actions) but Americans (chosen by God for an errand in the wilderness, to use the Puritan formulation). “Europe” here functions as a sign for secularism, liberalism, and elitism—all (foreign) elements threatening homegrown American religiosity, conservatism, and populism.

The overarching picture created by the chorus of speakers at Justice Sunday II is of an America where the voices of praying children are silenced by black-robed tyrants. The Christian right has frequently organized its anxiety around the figure of innocent children who live under the constant threat of coercion and violence from the “cultural elite” (Burlein). In this context more particularly, the mobilization of tropes of innocence (“praying children”) and judicial tyranny tap directly into the archetype of the Christian martyr story, which endlessly recycles the images of innocent suffering and legalized moral outrages.

The Justice Sunday project consistently frames the issues involved in terms of religious freedom, arguing that Christians are the victims of bigotry, second-class status, and court-sanctioned injury. Speakers at Justice Sunday II sought to place their cause in a lineage that includes the civil rights movement and, in the case of one speaker (Zell Miller), the women’s suffrage movement. They repeatedly invoked martyrological themes, aligning their own cause with that of two quintessential American martyrs: Martin Luther King, Jr. and Abraham Lincoln. The invocation of Lincoln (framed as the great emancipator) and especially Martin Luther King, Jr. (singled out as the iconic leader of the civil rights movement) and their rendering as analogies and precursors for the Justice Sunday project are hardly accidental. The speakers are making several connections here: analogies between slavery and abortion, between race and religion, between the religiously infused impulses that propelled the civil rights movement and the “God-intoxicated” (Haggard) drives that animate the contemporary political project promoted by the Justice Sunday speakers, which is, as Bishop Harry Jackson put it, to “bring the rule and reign of the cross to America.” Brushing away concerns that the program of the Justice Sunday coalition is theocratic, its leaders claim simply to represent a democratic majority over against the elitist, oligarchic, secularist minority. Here, Christians are a majority that is persecuted, a majority of second-class citizens, a majority relegated (in Bill Donohue’s words) to seats in the back of the bus.

The Justice Sunday movement has inspired other events, most recently the October 2006 Liberty Sunday simulcast from a church in Boston, a program devoted to the theme “Defending Our First Freedom”—religious
freedom. The roster of speakers includes the familiar—Tony Perkins from the FRC and James Dobson from Focus on the Family—but also then Massachusetts Governor and current presidential hopeful Mitt Romney and his wife, Ann, along with Catholic Charities President and CEO Father J. Bryan Hehir (former head of Harvard Divinity School), and Bishop Wellington Boone, a prominent member of the Christian men’s movement, the Promise Keepers.¹⁰ The religio-political project of Liberty Sunday emerges most clearly when its foundational conceptual elision manifests itself: for, whereas the announced theme of the simulcast is “defending our first freedom” (e.g., religious freedom), the actual content of the speeches contained in the program comprise solely arguments against gay marriage and homosexuality more generally. In this elision, one sees the discursive project unfold: by framing gay marriage and homosexuality as fundamentally contrary to the Christian message, these activists can then make the next logical turn, characterizing efforts to defend or shore up the rights claimed by gay people as an aggressive attack on Christianity itself and translating the movement for civil rights for sexual minorities into a critical front in the war on Christians. Gay activism becomes, in this framing, itself a violation of religious freedom and (by implication) a challenge to the First Amendment. As a consequence, gay activism, on this reading, is unconstitutional and therefore essentially un-American. Efforts by gay people to seek redress in the courts become acts of religious intolerance and persecution.¹¹ That this set of claims reflects a strategic misreading of the First Amendment, which circumscribes the actions of the state and not the actions of private citizens, is noteworthy; here, as elsewhere, the Constitution functions for these activists more as a tactical weapon than as a source of principles for organizing the life of society.¹²

Striking in the rhetoric of the Justice Sunday activists and their allies in this movement that seeks to redraw the political map of the United States as a battle plan in a religious war is its imperviousness to criticism. The “war on Christians” is not staged on empirical grounds, nor can one engage its proponents effectively with empirical argument.¹³ Yet, the “war on Christians” rhetoric is more than mere rhetoric; rather, it is a critical element of a comprehensive theo-political framework that blends the sacred and the secular and that sees the story of America unfolding as a story of God’s covenantal promise to a chosen people. In addition, the “war on Christians” discourse draws upon the nearly archetypal Christian story of martyrdom and persecution, playing off the ambiguities inherent in a mythical story of vindication through suffering. But if the scripturally
conceived story of America’s chosenness blends here with the Christian figure of the martyr; this is only part of the picture of the “war on Christians” discourse. For this discourse also makes use of particular genres ranging from the jeremiad sermonic tradition to the venerable rhetorical form of invective. Moreover, it taps into more contemporary strategic resources, seeking to capture the legacy of the civil rights movement—a critical form of cultural capital at this stage of American history—while also appropriating the arguments and logics of identity politics, using this politics of moral injury and collective suffering as a resource for staking a political claim on behalf of Christians qua Christians.

The theological discourse of Christian persecution has a long and paradoxical legacy: indeed, Christianity itself is founded upon an archetype of religio-political persecution, the execution of Jesus by the Romans. Certainly, the earliest Christians routinely equated Christian identity with suffering persecution, as the gospels and letters in the New Testament amply attest: “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake,” Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account” (Matthew 5.10–11). Meanwhile, in the Gospel of John, Jesus warns his students with these words: “Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will persecute you” (John 15.20). Decades before these gospels were written, the itinerant preacher and missionary Paul wrote to the fledgling Christian community in Corinth: “For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities; for when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Corinthians 12.10). By the end of the second century, the north African church father Tertullian would link the Christian experience of persecution to the expansion of the church in what has over the centuries become a near-slogan of the Christian movement: “The blood of Christians is the seed [of the church]” (semen est sanguis Christianorum) (226–27). By the early fourth century, the tables had turned, and a writer like Lactantius could create a work like his On the Deaths of the Persecutors, in which he offers an almost gleeful portrait of the grotesque fates to which the persecutors had eventually succumbed. And by the post-Constantinian era of the fourth and fifth centuries, after Christianity had mastered the language of empire (Cameron), Christian imperial legislation effectively deployed the familiar image of formerly dominant pagans as the persecutors of Christians as a rationale for outlawing their
religious practices (see *Codex Theodosianus* 16.10 [Pharr trans. 472–76]) while exuberant Christian monks justified anti-pagan acts of violence, such as breaking into the homes of prominent pagans and destroying the religious objects found therein, by recourse to the claim that they (the monks) were by definition without guilt since they acted as martyrs (witnesses) for Christ (Shenoute of Atripe; Gaddis).

The link that some Christians assert between their religious identity as Christians and the idea of persecution, then, has a long heritage. In the contemporary U.S. political context, the story of Christian martyrdom has become intertwined with two different threads of political argument and positioning: with, on the one hand, what historian Richard Hofstadter diagnosed presciently in the early 1960s as “the paranoid style in American politics” and, on the other, the legacy of 1960s and 1970s identity politics. The resulting persecution complex is melodramatic in tone and, like all melodrama, tends to traffic in caricature and larger-than-life allegorical figures that lend themselves to broad-stroke morality portraits. But in addition to these, I see an even more complicated historical blending here, with several strands being woven together into the discursive process: the story of Christian martyrdom being braided together with the American jeremiad tradition (grounded in the Puritan sermonic practice) and identity politics, all three promoting a utopian vision of looming danger and moral injury, collective struggle and perseverance, and holding out the promise of redemption—whether it be spiritual, moral, or political.

The jeremiad is probably the most significant rhetorical form to emerge in the American frame, and although it had European precursors, its American iteration has distinctive features. A name for the sermonic form that grows out of the tradition associated with the biblical prophet, Jeremiah, the jeremiad performed critical rhetorical and ideological work in the first Puritan generations of American colonization, and it has been revivified by Christian preachers in the contemporary scene, not uniquely but most singularly in relation to the “war on Christians.” It is a rhetorical form that gives voice to a vision of human social life that sees the details of quotidian existence thoroughly embedded in sacred history, an expression of the Puritan colonial project as the “errand in the wilderness” (Danforth; Miller), resulting in “a fusion of secular and sacred history,” as literary historian and critic Sacvan Bercovitch puts it (9). Bercovitch opens his study of the American jeremiad by noticing the durability of the form and its capaciousness, its ability to transgress traditional boundaries separating political and cultural left and right and to encompass all of their claims:
Here was the anarchist Thoreau condemning his backsliding neighbors by reference to the Western errand; here, the solitary singer Walt Whitman, claiming to be the American Way; here, the civil rights leader, Martin Luther King, descendant of slaves, denouncing segregation as a violation of the American dream; here, an endless debate about national identity, full of rage and faith, Jeffersonians claiming that they, and not the priggish heirs of Calvin, really represented the errand, conservative politicians hunting out socialists as conspirators against the dream, left-wing polemics proving that capitalism was the betrayal of the country’s sacred origins. The question in these latter-day jeremiads, as in their seventeenth-century precursors, was never “Who are we?” but, almost in deliberate evasion of that question, the old prophetic refrain: “When is our errand to be fulfilled? How long, O Lord, how long?” And the answers, again as in the Puritan jeremiads, invariably joined lament and celebration in reaffirming America’s mission. (11)

The structure of the jeremiad, as Bercovitch outlines it, is tripartite and progressive, grounded in scripturally based normative claims to which the entire community is held accountable, moving through the diagnosis and denunciation of the failures of the community to live up to these scriptural norms, and arriving finally in the realm of the prophetic promise, resolving the incommensurability between the idealized norm and the empirical reality (16).

The American Puritan jeremiad [. . .] made anxiety its end as well as its means. Crisis was the social norm it sought to inculcate [. . .]. The future, though divinely assured, was never quite there, and New England’s Jeremiahs set out to provide the sense of insecurity that would ensure the outcome. Denouncing or affirming, their vision fed on the distance between promise and fact. (23)

The rhetoric of the “war on Christians” takes up the tripartite structure of scriptural citation, moral condemnation, and prophetic promise that is the legacy of the jeremiad tradition. This sermonic structure provides the scaffolding that supports the characterization of American Christians under constant and immediate assault, as “war on Christians” activists would have it. Crisis is, as Bercovitch explains, the dominant mood of such argumentation, and as a consequence, one hears in the “war
on Christians” discourse an unmistakable tone of urgency and immediacy, broadcast at a very high volume indeed. Just so, one of numerous Web sites devoted to the “war on Christianity,” this one actually calling itself *The Jeremiah Project*, offers an example of this crisis-steeped rhetoric:

> Here in America the persecution of Christians has not yet reached the feverish pitch as in other parts of the world. There is still a Constitution that protects them and allows them to freely practice their faith. But, broiling beneath the surface, the same hatred of God that exists in other parts of the world is festering in all our institutions. Slowly, methodically, and incrementally the anti-God forces are working to remove that Constitutional barrier. (“War”)

While the jeremiad provides the rhetorical scaffolding and the sermonic form for “war on Christians” discourse, argumentative strategies and interpretive frames adapted from contemporary American identity politics offer the “war on Christians” activists an idiom for expressing their distressed sense of their own status as the victims of moral injury. Identity politics has historically been both a dominant framework for describing and making sense of the circumstances of disenfranchised groups of people as well as a resource for organizing such groups politically to make demands upon the society and its systems for the rectification of injustice. Built upon a civil rights and liberationist foundation whereby personal experience comes to be interpreted in collective, political terms, identity politics has been a critical dimension of progressive social movements since the 1960s. As has happened more broadly across U.S. culture, with the political right taking up various elements of the language and arguments of the left, the “war on Christians” movement has increasingly sought to recast democratic debates over social policy as acts of religious intolerance and persecution in themselves, with “Christians” emerging as an identifiable and homogenous group that has become the object of discrimination and victimization.

The jeremiad sermonic tradition, the Christian martyr story, and the appropriation of identity politics came together in a striking fashion in a theo-political conference, “The War on Christians and the Values Voter,” held in an upscale hotel in Washington, D.C., in March 2006 and attended by nearly four hundred Christian activists (and a few outside observers, including myself). Like their jeremiad-preaching historical predecessors, conference speakers grounded their arguments in
scriptural norms, repeatedly citing 2 Chronicles 7.14 (“If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land”) as the scriptural foundation of their activism. Like their Puritan forefathers, they thunderingly denounced the contemporary situation (focusing on Hollywood, homosexuality, and the judiciary) yet offered the promise of social and political renewal through spiritual battle.

But the structuring of the conference’s rhetoric was more complex than this, since it also elevated the Christian martyr story to near-scriptural status—impervious to analysis or critique—while simultaneously seeking to claim the terrain of “true” civil rights and “authentic” identity politics for Bible-believing Christians while banishing all other claimants to rights and relegating the persuasive power of other identity-based groups’ claims to the wilderness of illegitimacy. The suffering of persecuted innocents emerged repeatedly at the conference, visually and verbally: Gordon Klingenschmitt, a Navy chaplain who was subsequently court-martialed for his refusal to follow the Navy’s guidelines concerning nonsectarian prayer at public Navy events, spoke at the conference and projected a photograph of himself next to a photograph of Abdul Rahman, the Christian convert in Afghanistan who had recently been condemned to death for being an apostate within Islam. The juxtaposition of these images sought to analogize the two men and their experiences: both persecuted innocents, both victims of religious intolerance, both casualties in the war on Christians. Later on in the conference, when Texas Congressman Tom DeLay spoke—for the last time before he resigned his seat in the U.S. House of Representatives because of his federal indictment for violations of campaign finance laws—the conference’s convener, Rick Scarborough, dismissed the legitimacy of the indictment, claiming that it simply reflects the fact that DeLay is “the target of all who despise the cause of Christ.” After DeLay had finished speaking, Scarborough reassured the crowd about the disgraced congressman’s future: “You all know,” he said, “God always does his best work just after a crucifixion.” One sees in such moments how the rhetoric of “the war on Christians” operates outside of the empirical field, creating a self-referential and self-generating logic that begins from the premise that Christians are by definition perennially locked in battle with “the enemy” in a cosmic war without end. From here, every occasion or instance of resistance to the program promoted by these Christian activists becomes necessarily another iteration of the same
story: as the Gospel of John records Jesus speaking, “[I]f they persecuted me, they will persecute you” (15.20).

The argument that a war on Christians is raging in America has, not surprisingly, produced a range of activist responses, and they are striking precisely because they use the language of revolution and total commitment, as well as the language of militarism. Christian groups that embrace the language of militarism and a warrior ethic manifest their commitment to fighting back in the “war on Christians” in a range of ways, but all seem equally alarmed about the pervasive and corrosive effects of “the culture” upon Christian values and Bible-based living. For “war on Christians” activists, the necessary response to “the culture,” then, must be a biblical response: putting on the armor of God and going fearlessly into battle against secularism, media, feminism, homosexuality, and the government itself. There are different institutional and organizational manifestations of this project, some seeking to stake out a more centrist terrain while others clearly embrace their place on the extreme edge of this movement.

The Wilberforce Forum, an organization founded by former White House Counsel and convicted Watergate felon Charles Colson, sponsors a distance-learning program called “The Centurion Program” that trains Christians to bring “the Christian worldview” into debate with “alternative worldviews.” By comparison to other organizations in the “war on Christians” movement, Colson’s Wilberforce Forum and its training program for Christian activists does not appear to be especially bellicose or militaristic. The curriculum for the distance-learning program consists of a heavy dose of right-wing political theory and rhetoric, and the weapons of choice in this movement are ideas, arguments, and worldviews. The name selected for the program, however, invites further analysis: the Forum claims that the title of the Centurion program derives from the organization’s desire to train one hundred new Christian activists in each class. But the term “centurion,” of course, also suggests another set of associations. After all, centurions were the military elites of the Roman empire, responsible for embodying and displaying the power of empire especially in its remotest reaches. Centurions carried the imperial message from the center to the periphery, into the provinces of Rome’s massive empire, and they inscribed that message on provincial subject populations through acts of coercion and violence and calculated displays of ruthlessness. Centurions were not philosopher-soldiers. They did not use arguments to win adherents to the cause of empire through reason and persuasion;
they were, rather, as officers in the Roman army the enforcers of imperial will. Of course, it is unlikely that the Wilberforce Forum actually intends to fashion imperial enforcers through its year-long required curriculum of books—C. S. Lewis, a variety of conservative Christian theology, critiques of postmodernism (including Douglas Groothuis’s biblically based primer on postmodern thought, *Truth Decay*)—and a suggested lineup of Hollywood movies for the Centurion Project. Nevertheless, the evocation of Roman imperialism can hardly have escaped the Project’s organizers as they undertook to create a program through which

students learn to handle accurately the word of truth as it applies to every area of life and culture—including politics, education, mass media and the arts, bioethics, business, and marriage and family. And they gain confidence to speak truth persuasively and winsomely amid the stew of distorted beliefs and values. (Centurion Program Web site)

If the Centurion Program presents itself rather temperately as one training ground for the adult defenders in the “war on Christians,” other groups focus on children and teenagers as the new foot soldiers in this spiritual battle, and it is these groups that tend to demand the most complete surrender of one’s life to the logic of the movement, with some groups embracing practices and goals that even they quite readily describe as “extreme.” One notable group in this regard is the Christian natalist movement, Quiverfull, which has committed itself to reestablishing the patriarchal family as the social norm, opposes contraception as a sinful manifestation of human hubris (when God alone decides when conception should take place), and advocates that Christian women have as many children as possible so that they might grow up to be “arrows for God” (Joyce). Meanwhile, the 2006 Academy award–nominated documentary, *Jesus Camp*, drew attention to the grassroots training of Christian children to be warriors for God by focusing on a camp in North Dakota run by adults who see their religious training school serving as both mirror and antidote to the Islamic madrassa.

But the organization that seeks to situate itself most spectacularly on the frontlines of the “war on Christians” (as modern-day children’s crusade) is the Texas-based ministry, Teen Mania, which has put significant resources in recent years into a project called, “Battle Cry for a Generation.” Battle Cry is a Christian youth revival project that began in the late 1990s under the name, “Acquire the Fire,” staging mass revivals for
teenagers in large sports stadiums around the country. The events include pounding Christian rock music, rousing sermons about teenagers under cultural siege by the “virtue-terrorists,” staged morality plays in which the dramas of teenage existence are sensationaly played out, and calls to arms blended with more traditional altar calls. The rhetoric of Battle Cry is mobile and parasitic, borrowing easily from a wide range of cultural idioms and exemplars. Combing the Bible for warrior talk, the Battle Cry movement is looking for soldiers, not club members.

At the “War on Christians” conference that I attended in March 2006, Ron Luce, the president and founder of Teen Mania and lead organizer of “Battle Cry,” was one of the featured speakers, and he devoted his time to warning the crowd about the dire circumstances of American teenagers and issuing a call to arms. He rounded out his plenary address by uttering what struck me at the time as an odd and rather non sequitur admission: “I kind of feel like the Levite,” he confessed. And then he began to chant, as his words pulsed across the PowerPoint projection screen: “cut up the concubine! cut up the concubine! cut up the concubine!” The audience roared its approval, with many people rising to their feet in an exuberant standing ovation.

I kind of feel like the Levite. Cut up the concubine.

Behind Luce’s unsettling admission and chanted imperative lies a biblical text, the story of “the Levite’s concubine” told in Judges 19 in the Hebrew Bible. In the story, the woman who is called “the Levite’s concubine” has left the Levite (either out of anger or out of harlotry, the text is unclear) and has returned to her father’s house in Bethlehem. The Levite comes to retrieve her and spends several days and nights eating and drinking with the woman’s father before setting off with her to return home. Because of the length of the return journey, the Levite and the woman stop overnight to accept hospitality at the home of an old man. That night, “men of the city” come to the door, demanding that the host turn the Levite over to them “that they might know him.” The host, scandalized by the request, refuses to deliver his guest over to the assailants who are threatening sexual violence, but he offers them instead his own virgin daughter and the woman who is traveling with the Levite. When the assailants reject the offer, in a panic, the Levite hastily expels the woman—the “concubine”—from the house, consigning her to a night of gang rape and other brutalities. The following morning, upon finding the woman’s dead body on his host’s doorstep, the Levite dismembers her corpse and sends her body parts out to the twelve tribes of Israel as a provocation to revenge.
I kind of feel like the Levite. Cut up the concubine.

The story of the Levite’s concubine is not the average Bible story. For reasons that should be rather obvious, it does not appear in most lectionaries or liturgical cycles for public Bible reading, and it is not customarily the scriptural basis for preaching. Rather, it is the kind of Bible story one might save for that place in the argument where one wants to prove that the Bible is a violent, grotesque, misogynistic horror show—should one want to substantiate such a claim. Feminist biblical scholar Phyllis Trible gives pride of place to this story in her early work of feminist literary interpretation, *Texts of Terror*. Mieke Bal, who takes issue with some elements of Trible’s reading in her own book, *Death and Dissymmetry*, offers a close reading of the layers of violence done to the unnamed woman in this story—in the action of the story itself, in the subsequent scripturalizing of the story, and in the generations of philological analysis to which the text has been subjected by dispassionate, scholarly readers. Bal concludes by observing that the woman in the story is reduced to a token of sacrificial exchange between powerful men.

What did Ron Luce hope to signal by ending his plenary address at the “war on Christians” conference with, “I kind of feel like the Levite—cut up the concubine!”? The story is, at one level, about a heterosexual man’s extreme fear of homosexual rape, a fear so profound that he is willing to abandon a woman to rape and murder in order to avoid his own violation and victimization. It is also a story about that same man’s excessive and violent response in calling for revenge in the form of war-making and more rape. And if this story is evoked allegorically or analogically in relation to contemporary U.S. culture, who exactly is “the concubine” who is forsaken in an act of panic, cowardice, and self-preservation, later to be dismembered and distributed piecemeal into the crowd in a bloody call to arms? Does Luce mean to point to the last verse of the Book of Judges—“In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes”—in a call for political change, from anarchy to monarchy?

Although Luce’s “cut up the concubine” chant seemed to be a non sequitur utterance, it nevertheless punctuated the broader theme of his comments and that of the conference as a whole—the call for the audience to rise up as Christian warriors. Soon after I published a brief report on the conference (“Notes”), I received an e-mail from a young activist who has been attending and documenting Luce’s “Acquire the Fire” revival events for the last several years. In our subsequent correspondence, she assured me that the Judges 19 reference was not an accidental outburst at the Washington conference. Rather, as it turns out, several Acquire the Fire
revival events have in recent years concluded with staged reenactments of Judges 19 and 20, culminating in the dismemberment of a female mannequin on stage and the distribution of the “body parts” into the crowd of thrilled teenagers (Kniesly). “Cut up the concubine” is, it appears, integral to the “battle cry for this generation.”

Coming at the end of the emotionally charged two-day revival meetings, the reenactment of the abandonment, gang-rape, murder, and dismemberment of the unnamed and sacrificial woman serves as a sadistic and libidinous call-to-arms. As the body parts are carried out into the audience and distributed to the performatively constituted twelve tribes, all of the participants in the reenactment and the audience are pulled into imaginative and experiential engagement with the chaotic revenge fantasy laid out in the text and brought to life on stage.

The primary targets of the Battle Cry movement are popular culture and mass media, with mtv looming large in the pantheon of “virtue-terrorists.” Embodying the jeremiad tradition, Luce frequently engages in hyperbole that is characteristic of his rhetoric, as his identification of music videos with “terrorism” makes clear. But the rhetoric is also fluid, syncretistic, and malleable. Moving easily from the idiom of terror to the idiom of public health, Luce frequently accuses mtv and other mass media addressed to teenagers of spreading what he calls “second-hand sex”—as dangerous to the moral health of teenagers, he argues, as second-hand smoke is to the physical health of nonsmokers: smoking has been banned in virtually all public facilities in the United States in response to activists concerned with the health risks of second-hand smoke; sexually explicit media representations, Luce argues, could be vulnerable to the same kind of activism if people would simply band together to point out the nefarious effects of “second-hand sex.”

Luce’s response to these forms of media is to produce his own spectacles, like the revival events that culminate in the Judges 19 reenactment. This move is reminiscent of the efforts of early Christian preachers and leaders to divert Christians away from the dominant forms of entertainment of their own day—the theatre, the circus, the games—with the promise of Christian spectacle in the liturgical reading of martyr stories and the apocalyptic spectacle of the end of time (Castelli, *Martyrdom* 104–33). Just as some ancient church fathers reveled in the expectation that the enemies of God would suffer grotesquely violent ends, Luce, too, embraces a model of righteous Christian violence in his Battle Cry program. In his case, however, it is a model that attaches itself parasitically to a this-worldly military model.
Indeed, at a Battle Cry event held in Philadelphia in May 2006, the reenactment of Judges 19 and 20 was displaced as the show’s finale by another spectacular show-stopping performance: a pyrotechnic, guns-blazing “assault” on the arena where the revival took place by camouflage-wearing, automatic-weapon-bearing men who staged a “spiritual invasion.” But the movement does not only produce such spectacles as attention-getters. Battle Cry speaks in a biblical dialect but with an idiom shot through with militarism and revolution. The Battle Cry manual announces: “After the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, we Americans suddenly realized there is an enemy and that we must fight him. The president said, ‘We are now at war.’ But a wartime mentality is completely different from a peacetime mentality” (Luce 61). Rhetorically linking the battle against popular culture, the media, and consumerism with the Bush administration’s war on terror, Luce seeks to establish an equivalence between one purported enemy and all the others. Whereas the peacetime mentality focuses on the self, the trivial, and the theoretical, the wartime mentality focuses on survival, victory, endurance, and the real. The movement urges young people to enlist in God’s revolutionary army, surrendering completely to its divine commander-in-chief, committing to an ongoing battle that Ron Luce insists is not symbolic or metaphorical, but real.

Media and rhetoric intersect in the Battle Cry events and movement, traveling superficially across the terrain of contemporary culture—offering an easy critique of “the media” while using the same tools to market and merchandise a Christian militarism. Battle Cry embraces the language of youth culture, promising experiences that are extreme, authentic, real over against those of the secular culture while working the metaphors of militarism (calling for enlistment in God’s army, demanding to know of the young people in the audience, “Are you ready for a fight?” summoning teenagers to submission to orders, evoking the imagery of heroism) into a model of ideal Christian identity. The femininity of the movement is perhaps most apparent in Luce’s “cut up the concubine” fantasy, but it is routinely present in the sermonic rhetoric of the movement as well. Seeming to channel the early-twentieth-century evangelist, Billy Sunday, Luce elevates warrior values, mocks weakness (and frames it as homosexuality), derides pacifist Christianity as diluted and decaying, and evokes American patriotism in the figure of Patrick Henry (“give me liberty or give me death”):

*It says this, Joel chapter three verse nine: “Proclaim this among the nations. Prepare for war. Rouse the warriors. Let the fighting*
men draw near and attack.” Do we have any fighting men and women in here ready for a fight for some souls? You notice, he didn’t say, didn’t say, “let all the weak-kneed, limp-wristed jellybacked I-hope-people-don’t-see-me-pray-in-public kinds of Christian,” it says, “let all the fighting men draw near and get ready to go to war.”

We don’t need some trite little altar call, that makes us feel all mushy, makes us feel warm fuzzies, the emotions are flowing, snot is flying, we don’t need that. What we need is a meeting with God that changes our heart where we make real commitments. We need a revolution.

We don’t need any, mamby-pamby, kumbaya, pasty-mouth, watered-down, maggot-infested, mold-infested, candy-coated tired excuse for Christianity anymore. We need a revolution!

Patrick Henry said, the battle is not to the strong but to the vigilant, the active, and the brave. Do we have any vigilant, active, and brave in the house tonight? We really have no other choice, we must either fight, or become slaves.¹⁰

Battle Cry’s syncretistic idiom is visual and iconic as well as verbal, as the variety of graphics used by the organization makes clear. The red flag is ubiquitous, and the American teenaged participants in Battle Cry events seem contentedly ignorant of the historical resonances of this iconic image. Stanley Rogouski, whose photographs document the Philadelphia event, reports that Battle Cry participants seemed not to know either the link of the red flag to communism nor, indeed, why they carried this particular color at all. Finally, one participant suggested to Rogouski that the red symbolized the blood of Christ.

But Battle Cry borrows freely and eclectically from iconography, visual vocabulary, and even mass media imagery in efforts to articulate its call to teens. The cover of the 1999–2000 Acquire the Fire convention manual, for example, cites the iconic image of U.S. soldiers raising the American flag at Iwo Jima during World War II—though, in the image, Acquire the Fire teens are notably raising a quite different flag: not the U.S. flag, but the Christian nationalist flag. Subsequent manuals for the events evoke Hollywood-style space invaders’ imagery (2000 “Stand Up” and 2002 “Stand Up—the Invasion”). The 2004–5 manual urges teens to “keep it real” but, by 2005, “there is a battle raging,” and teens are told “It’s
time to enlist” and “Run to the battle.” Participants can enroll in “basic training for warriors,” following the lessons contained in an educational package by the same name; they can don Battle Cry dog tags and sew “Follower of Christ” military-style patches onto their clothing.

The effects of the discursive production of the “war on Christians” are multiple: on one level, they become self-generating, caught in a repetitive circuit that amplifies and legitimates the claims of religious persecution through each successive level of iteration, regardless of any counterinterpretation or presentation of empirically grounded counter-evidence. Working at the level of sloganeering, the language of the “war on Christians” creates an interpretive frame through which any number of political and cultural moments come to be viewed. But the “war on Christians” discourse is also a productive discourse, with the capacity to contribute to the transformation of social policy at the highest levels. The history of the passage and implementation of the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 demonstrates its impact on u.s. foreign policy (Castrelli, “Praying”). On the domestic front, far-reaching policy shifts related to such concerns have taken place: as a 2006 Boston Globe article reported it, since 2003, the Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice has hired many fewer lawyers with civil rights experience. “At the same time, the kinds of cases the Civil Rights Division is bringing have undergone a shift. The division is bringing fewer voting rights and employment cases involving systematic discrimination against African-Americans, and more alleging reverse discrimination against whites and religious discrimination against Christians” (Savage). In this latter move, we see some effects of the “war on Christians” movement’s pragmatic and strategic efforts to lay claim to the historical legacy of the civil rights movement: the legitimation and routinization of a new, Christian identity politics based on the historical model of struggle against racial discrimination by African Americans but displacing African Americans and their ongoing claims for political and economic justice in the process. As the battle over “true victimhood” (Cole) continues to be waged, the emergence of Christians as the singular exemplars of innocent victims in the “war on Christians” presents a complicated new chapter in the ongoing debates within American society about identity and rights, injustice and its redress, and the very foundations of democracy and its reach. Finally, the “war on Christians” generates ever more varieties of Christian militarism, as Battle Cry and other examples show. As resentments and self-diagnosed feelings of moral injury rise and as the language of liberation and rights loses its anchoring
in the historical narratives of the dispossessed and disenfranchised, what political theorist William Connolly has dubbed “the evangelical-capitalist resonance machine” takes over (869), and we are left with the Christian persecution complex—a discursive entity impervious to critique, self-generating and self-sustaining.

The research for this essay began at the Center for Religion and Media at New York University and continued at the Pembroke Center at Brown University, where Religious Studies doctoral student Debra Scoggins worked very efficiently and helpfully as my research assistant. I am especially grateful to Pembroke Center director, Elizabeth Weed, and 2005–6 Pembroke Seminar leader, Carolyn Dean. I owe special thanks for many conversations about this material to many people at nyu, especially Omri Elisha, Jeff Sharlet, Adam Becker, Ann Pellegrini, Faye Ginsberg, and Angela Zito. In addition, James McBride, Jeremy Stolow, Erin Runions, Jennifer Glancy, Janet Jakobsen, Randall Styers, Elisabeth Bernstein, and Sheila Briggs have generously helped me develop my thinking about these matters.

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Notes

1 Bonhoeffer also holds pride of place as a Christian martyr in the narrative told about him at the U.S. Holocaust Museum.

2 In a full-page advertisement in the New York Times, the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty also framed opposition to the appointment of Samuel Alito to the Supreme Court as the imposition of a religious test, a threat to religious freedom, and a violation of the U.S. Constitution (see Becket). The ad closes with a final paragraph, which begins with curious assertion about the nature of religion itself: “To be sure, not every mention of religion is improper. Religion, like ethnicity or race, is a natural part of one’s background and may be referred to as naturally—and as respectfully—as those other things are” (my emphasis).

3 The Air Force Academy has been the site of major contestation over issues of religious freedom and coercion. A team from Yale Divinity School visited the Academy in the summer of 2004 and produced a report critical of the “stridently Evangelical themes” and “overwhelmingly Evangelical tone of general protestant worship” at the Academy (Morton; “Report of Americans United”). The Air Force produced its own lengthy report on the controversy (“Report of the Headquarters Review Group”), concluding that there was no systematic problem of religious intolerance at the Academy and that any issues that do exist can be addressed effectively with sensitivity training. In response to the Yale report, Representative David Obey (D-Wisconsin) proposed an amendment to the 2006 National Defense Authorization Act criticizing the “coercive and abusive religious proselytizing” at the Academy; the amendment was removed from the bill before it was put up for a vote. The Military Religious Freedom Foundation (http://militaryreligiousfreedom.org)
has emerged in response to the controversy, devoting itself to lawsuits on behalf of military personnel who experience unwanted proselytizing from their peers and superiors in the armed services.

I have written about related movements elsewhere: see “Praying for the Persecuted Church” on the U.S.-based religious freedom activism that produced the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 and “Theologizing Human Rights,” which discusses the political dimensions of religious freedom activists’ deployment of human rights discourses.

The locution “war on Christians” is most likely a result of semantic bleeding, as it were, whereby “the war on terror” as the war-without-end generates an interpretive frame whereby every debate and conflict immediately escalates into a war. See my report on the March 2006 conference The War on Christians and the Values Voter, in Castelli, “Notes from the War Room.”

See Everson v. Board of Education (1947), Illinois ex. rel. McCollum v. Board of Education (1948), Engel v. Vitale (1962), School District of Abington v. Schempp (1963). David Limbaugh, in his 2003 book Persecution: How Liberals Are Waging War on Christianity, devotes the first part of his argument (and nearly half the book’s entire text) to what he calls “The War in Our Public Schools.” Thus, according to his narrative, the story of the war on Christians finds its roots in the history of American education and specifically in the constraints placed on prayer and Bible study in public schools. It is worth noticing that Limbaugh’s description of the war in public schools culminates in a polemic specifically aimed at higher education, focusing on both public and private institutions, where the theo-political character of Limbaugh’s argument becomes especially clear. See the chapter “The Battle for the Academy.”

Limbaugh titles the second part of his book, “The War for the Public Square.” His indictment focuses on the judiciary for “purging Christianity from the government and government property” (149–75), “muzzling public officials, employees, and appointees” (177–204), “public attacks on churches and Christians and purging the private sphere” (204–34), and “state endorsement of non-Christian values and hypocrisy in our culture” (255–63). The discussion switches in the final chapter of this section of the book to a polemic against “the media and Hollywood wars against Christianity” (265–95).

It is especially ironic that the “war on Christians” movement has sought to place itself in the historical lineage of abolitionists and antislavery activists when its historical forebears were most certainly those Christians who used the Bible and literalist biblical interpretation to legitimate slavery. This history of the uses of the Bible and biblical interpretation in the debates over slavery has been well documented by many scholars, most recently, by Albert Harrill and Sylvester Johnson. For the earlier history of the Bible in legitimations of slavery and colonialism, see Goldenberg; Kidd.

James McBride has helpfully reminded me that this majoritarian view of democracy is at odds with the precepts of constitutional democracy, which are predicated on the rights of all—including the minority. The Constitution is only invoked by the Christian right when it is read as a palimpsest
through which “biblical rights and responsibilities mandated by God” can be discerned.

Boone is the founder of a non-denominational Christian church in Atlanta called The Father’s House: An International Church for All People. He is also the founder of Wellington Boone Ministries and a leader in the Promise Keepers, a Christian men’s movement devoted to the restoration of the patriarchal family (see Kintz 111–39). Boone has become especially well known on the Christian lecture circuit for his denunciation of gay activists’ efforts to lay claim to the legacy of the civil rights movement, and his rhetoric frequently lapses into vituperation: he routinely refers to gay people as “sodomites” and, at a recent meeting of Christian activists, he recalled his childhood when “we saw guys that don’t stand strong on principle, we called them ‘faggots’ [. . .]. I just believe that God hasn’t called us to be sissies on a principle level. We’re called to be, to stand up and be men” (Boston 9).

A similar form of argumentation has emerged in a different arena of social life in the U.S.: arguing that their religious freedom is at stake, a growing number of Catholic and evangelical Protestant pharmacists across the U.S. have refused to fill prescriptions for contraceptives. In defense of their refusal to dispense legal medications, these practitioners have argued that being required to do so would constitute a violation of their religious beliefs and therefore their religious freedom. In response, several states have passed legislation allowing pharmacists to refuse to fill prescriptions on religious grounds. See Castelli, “Theologizing Human Rights” 675.

Thanks to Jim McBride for making this point especially clearly.

Kintz makes a similar argument about feminist responses to the projects of the conservative Christian organization, Concerned Women for America (19).

The classic study of the jeremiad in its American iteration is that of Sacvan Bercovitch, published in 1978. See Harding’s use of Bercovitch’s notion in her study of Jerry Falwell and Christian fundamentalist language and politics (Harding 153–81).

Bernstein provides an excellent overview of the literature on identity politics. On the left, the efficacy and political implications of identity politics have been the subject of significant critique in the last decade or so; see, for example, the Autumn 2000 issue of New Literary History devoted to the question, “Is There Life after Identity Politics?” as well as Wendy Brown’s important critique in States of Injury. The right, meanwhile, has made identity politics and the concomitant politics of victimhood the object of sustained critique, as Alyson Cole demonstrates so clearly in her recent study.

The Centurions Program is described on the Web site of Charles Colson’s Prison Fellowship. For general information about the program, see www.breakpoint.org/generic.asp?ID=2748. A list of the required reading for the Centurions Program may be found at www.breakpoint.org/generic.asp?ID=2627, and a much longer list of recommended films appears at www.breakpoint.org/generic.asp?ID=2640. The films are categorized as follows: “Films with a Christian Theme,” “Films with Moral Themes,” “Other
Worldviews and Philosophies” (included here are, among others, *Star Wars*, *Gandhi*, *The Hours*, and several Woody Allen films), “Children’s Films with a Strong Biblical Worldview,” and “Recommended by Centurions” (including, oddly enough, the first two *Godfather* films).

17 These activists call their organization, “Acquire the Evidence,” and they make their documentation available online at www.acquiretheevidence.com.

18 There is some confusion about who, exactly, these “soldiers” were: Battle Cry has an ongoing collaborative working arrangement with members of Force Ministries, an evangelizing missionary group made up of current and former members of the U.S. military who describe their ministry in these terms: “FST [Force Skydiving Team] Assault is a loud and live seal demonstration with exciting dramatics, pyrotechnics and firepower. Following the demonstration is a message to the heart of the warrior in all of us, a message about the fight for the ‘Holy Land’ of your heart, your destiny and the decisions that surround that fight. It will prove to be a highly explosive show complete with all the up-close, live action you could hope for” (www.forceministries.com). Activists who attended the Philadelphia revival reported that the invaders were Navy Seals (see, e.g., Rogouski), whereas journalist Jeff Sharlet reports that they were merely actors.

19 These are quotations from the video record of the first Acquire the Fire revival, held on April 24, 1999, at the Pontiac Silverdome in Michigan. A partial transcript, with video clips, is available at www.acquiretheevidence.com/sources/dayone-luce-revolution.html. The full video record is available for purchase from Teen Mania. Teen Mania claims that seventy thousand teens were in attendance at this event.

Works Cited


