

Others: Comparative Christian Views of Nonbelievers from 1950-2020

by

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Table of Contents

I.	Introduction	4-6
II.	Sin and Salvation: Evangelical Protestantism in the United States	7-40
	a. America's Pastor: Billy Graham	7-27
	b. A Smiling Success: Joel Osteen	28-40
III.	A Universal Mission: Latin American Catholicism	41-63
IV.	Addressing the Elephant in the Room: Chinese Protestantism	64-79
V.	Conclusion	80-81
VI.	Bibliography	82-88

Introduction

The rapid technological advance of the last seventy years allows the faithful of various religious traditions to interact with each other to a greater degree than in prior eras. For example, technological advances now allow for a Catholic in Latin America to communicate online with an individual of a different faith tradition, or none at all, in the United States in a matter of minutes. These advances helped predominantly white European and American Christian missionaries continue their evangelical mission to spread the faith worldwide while simultaneously preaching to audiences back at home from places such as Africa. These interactions between Christians and nonbelievers shaped the contours of global Christian tolerance and evangelization in the second half of the twentieth and first two decades of the twenty-first centuries. Such interactions between Christians and nonbelievers show no sign of abating as the present century moves forward. To understand the roots of these interactions between the Christian faithful and nonbelievers, this thesis turns to the United States, Latin America, and China.

Studying how the United States Evangelical Protestant, Latin American Catholic, and Chinese Protestant faithful view nonbelievers will help to understand the dynamics of global Christian tolerance and expansion from 1950-2020. These three regions each present a distinct set of circumstances for the faithful of these religious traditions. The United States was the world's preeminent Protestant power throughout the second half of the twentieth century. The evangelical faithful came to enjoy a warm relationship with conservative politics and successfully came to exert influence on the national stage. In the predominantly Catholic atmosphere of twentieth century Latin America, the Catholic Church responded to dictatorships, many funded by the United States government, in a myriad of ways from outright resistance to

collaboration. Latin American Catholicism played a major political role in the region while not having the same relationship to a political party as their evangelical counterparts in the United States. Unlike in Latin America and the United States, Chinese Protestants did not exert substantial influence on their government. They were a minority faith group who adapted to, rather than defined, societal religious beliefs. The continued rule of the Chinese Communist Party also forces Chinese Protestants to engage with nonbelievers in a political relationship for a prolonged duration unseen in either the United States or Latin America. I chose these three examples to analyze because Christianity developed globally in a myriad of political contexts so any study of the category of nonbeliever must engage with that variety.

The first section of this thesis addresses Evangelical Protestantism as led by Billy Graham and Joel Osteen. I argue that this faith tradition paradoxically viewed nonbelievers as a source of societal sin but also a means for the faithful to achieve salvation. Without nonbelievers, the evangelical project embodied by these two preachers would not be able to exist. Nonbelievers became a reality that the evangelical faith tolerated out of necessity even while trying to convert them to Christianity.¹

In contrast to their United States Evangelical Protestant counterparts, Latin American Catholicism aimed to forge a tolerant universalism that encompassed nonbelievers. I trace this post Second Vatican Council development through the life of Pope Francis, who spent the majority of his life in Argentina and the surrounding countries. His mission to shape the church

¹ For Evangelical Christians, Judaism and the modern state of Israel is a special category of nonbeliever. Some Evangelical Christians see Israel as a necessary condition for the rapture, making the associated group of Jews who live in the country more than a nonbelieving group to tolerate. I do not delve into Zionism and Evangelical Christianity at length in this thesis because Evangelical Christians view the modern Israeli state as an exception rather than the rule for how to view nonbelievers. For more on American Evangelical Christians' views regarding Zionism in the twentieth century see Samuel Goldman, *God's Country: Christian Zionism in America* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), Chapters 5 and 6.

as a tolerant body that emphasizes those on the margins of society includes dialogue with other faith traditions such as Islam and Judaism. The history of the Catholic Church in Latin America after Vatican II will demonstrate where and why the pontiff wishes to push the limits of toleration in the present day.

To close this thesis, I argue that Chinese Protestantism viewed nonbelievers as a fact of life with which they needed to engage. The definitional atheism of the ruling Chinese Communist Party forced the faithful to adapt to varying levels of sociopolitical hostility throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. For Chinese Protestants, how to interact with nonbelievers, often the state, was *the* defining question of this period.

Sin and Salvation: Evangelical Protestantism in the United States

America's Pastor: Billy Graham

I. Introduction

Billy Graham was one of the most well-known evangelical Christian preachers throughout his long life. He came to represent the values evangelical faithful stood for through his preaching career. Graham often spoke to the faithful about pressing political issues, like communism, by linking in Biblical messages. He spent the vast majority of his preaching career during the Cold War and preached his view of nonbelievers to millions of Evangelical Protestants around the globe. Graham's long-lasting influence makes him an ideal lens through which to analyze how United States Evangelical Protestants consider nonbelievers.

I argue that American Evangelical Protestants view nonbelievers as a source of societal ills, but also salvation. Their dual view of nonbelievers illuminates the tension within evangelicalism around creating what they view as a better society. Nonbelievers are a source of societal problems, in evangelicals' views, because those individuals do not properly align themselves with Christ and therefore behave immorally. At the same time, nonbelievers are a source of salvation for the evangelical faithful that their worldview could not live without. In a world without nonbelievers, evangelicals would need to look for wellsprings of immorality more intensely within their own faith communities as an explanation for why Christ had not yet returned. Creating a better society for evangelicals means evangelizing Christ's gospel, but, paradoxically, perfecting that evangelization would eliminate the need for their own existence. Nonbelievers are necessary for the existence of Evangelical Protestants.

I begin this section with an analysis of Graham's view of nonbelievers during the early Cold War. This examination paves the way for following Graham's evolving thought throughout the

Cold War by examining the sexual and cultural revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s. I close by following Graham as he rides off into the sunset during the 1990s and early 2000s.

II. Communism, Christ, and the Cold War

By the time Billy Graham burst onto the evangelical scene in the late 1940s, evangelicals had already articulated a vision that melded capitalism and Christianity. Evangelicals before Graham had a long history of book publishing to spread their belief in Christ. As far back as the late nineteenth century, famous evangelicals like the preacher Dwight Moody published their sermons to reach a wider audience than one could solely by speaking. While Moody did not focus on monetary gain, his publishers saw a financial opportunity and soon expanded into publishing other Christian denominations' evangelical works for a handsome profit.² As seen by Moody, the embrace of free-market capitalism by evangelicals, distinct from their publishers, was by no means a foregone conclusion.

Support for free-market capitalism did not monopolize evangelical opinion by the 1930s. This is reflected in the Ham and Eggs movement in Southern California. This populist movement preached direct government payments to poor individuals and courted the support of the incoming Christian evangelical migrants from the South. The Ham and Eggs movement, though ultimately unsuccessful at the ballot box, imbued conservative views of racial hierarchy and bigotry with economic populism in an appealing mix to many of these new Southern Californian Christians.³

² Daniel Vaca, *Evangelicals Incorporated: Books and the Business of Religion in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), 38-41.

³ Darren Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sun Belt: Plain-Folk Religion, Grassroots Politics, and the Rise of Evangelical Conservatism* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011), 88-95.

Despite populist movements like Ham and Eggs, the early twentieth century saw publishing companies nudge evangelicals closer towards a full-throttle embrace of free-market capitalism. During this time, businesses like Eerdmans Company and Zondervan Publishing House began to shape evangelical identity. How well they helped shape that identity via book sales was tied to their commercial success.⁴ The creation of these evangelical publishing houses' brands "gave consumers the opportunity to embrace distinct forms of transdenominational identity" by buying a book.⁵ The illiteracy rate in the United States among whites dropped in half between 1900 and 1930.⁶ As predominantly white evangelicals followed this trend, their consumption of mass market books undergirded their identity across class lines. Buying books, like printed versions of preachers' sermons, allowed evangelicals to begin seeing market capitalism as a way to spread their view of Christ. By the 1970s and 1980s evangelicals viewed the expansion of evangelical literature consumption via the free market as a central tenet for their movement's continued growth.⁷

Beyond publishing houses, preachers began to forge close ties with leading businessmen. A meld of individualism and abhorrence of the long-term idea of a large New Deal government led evangelical preachers to move into the educational realm.⁸ They preached a gospel fervently aligned with the interests of rich businessmen like George Pepperdine who believed in capitalism instead of New Deal style socialism.⁹ Organizations founded in the 1930s, such as the National Laymen's Council of the Church League of America, tied the money of rich businessmen to

⁴ Vaca, *Evangelicals Incorporated*, 58-59.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁶ "National Assessment of Adult Literacy," National Center for Education Statistics, accessed August 31, 2021, https://nces.ed.gov/NAAL/lit_history.asp.

⁷ Vaca, *Evangelicals Incorporated*, 125.

⁸ Dochuk, *From Bible Belt*, 60-62, 66-74.

⁹ *Ibid.*

evangelical advocacy against the New Deal.¹⁰ Evangelicals saw businessmen not only as lucrative donors but as a means to “infiltrate” the halls of power in society with the message of a Christian faith inimical to socialism.¹¹ It is ironic that one of Graham’s biggest supporters, the newspaper tycoon William Hearst who provided Graham with widespread favorable coverage beginning in the 1940s, was not religious. Hearst viewed Graham’s hostility toward unions and rejection of beliefs regarding the sinfulness of wealth to fit his own interests.¹² As Graham went mainstream in the 1950s, other business tycoons went beyond favorable newspaper reports to support Graham financially. John Howard Pew, whose father founded Sun Oil Company, gave six figure sums to the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association (BGEA) beginning in the 1950s.¹³ The opportunity to write off donations to the BGEA as tax deductions also helped men like Pew and Hearst stick a crowbar in their wallet to pry out the funds needed for conservative evangelical projects. When Graham founded *Christianity Today* in 1956 to provide a conservative theological outlet on the United States media scene, Pew readily pledged \$150,000 to help bankroll the project.¹⁴ These titans of industry supported Graham due to their similar views on the evils of New Deal socialism. It is within this context of close ties between evangelicalism and the free market that Billy Graham preached during the early years of the Cold War.

Graham’s preaching in the early 1950s, which occurred in the shadow of the Korean War, dealt directly with communism and its atheistic principles as a source of societal ill such as the Cold War. He built on the close link between free market capitalism and evangelicalism

¹⁰ Dochuk, *From Bible Belt*, 29.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 53-55.

¹² *Ibid.*, 56-59.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 72-74.

established in the first quarter of the twentieth century to critique the epitome of governmental interference in the economy: communism. In 1950, he warned of the potential for communism to spread to the United States via the moral, economic, and spiritual collapse of America.¹⁵ Only five years after the conclusion of World War II, America began combat in Korea. The Korean War provided Graham the opportunity to link a lack of Christian faith to the spread of atheistic communism and the American populace's fear of that way of life.¹⁶ Graham declared 1950 "a year when communism unmasked itself and shouted its defiance to the world and boldly began its march to world conquest."¹⁷ He tapped into Americans' existential anxiety over their new place as a world power and warned that nonbelieving atheists would threaten the American way of life. His focus on non-believers was perfectly suited for the structure of American society in the Cold War. Graham's attacks on communism epitomized evangelical fears about the end of time but also Armageddon as a source of potential salvation for the faithful. He preached doom and gloom but predicated his message on the overwhelming power of Christ to defeat nonbelievers, specifically Communists. These nonbelievers tested Christians, but ultimately underwrote Graham's argument behind why believers needed Christ as a way to ensure victory in ideological battle. In this manner evangelicals depicted nonbelievers as the source of societal ills, the Korean War, and as an unwitting tool to bring the faithful closer to Christ and salvation.

Graham recognized that not all believers would immediately accept the need for divine help in the battle against communism and addressed their concerns by appealing to Christ's life. With a flair for the dramatic, Graham stated that the Korean War as a manifestation of the clash

¹⁵ Billy Graham, "Whitherbound," Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, September 16, 1950, <https://billygraham.org/audio/whitherbound/>.

¹⁶ Jay Douglas Learned, "Billy Graham, American Evangelicalism, and the Cold War Clash of Messianic Visions, 1945-1962" (dissertation, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2012), 136.

¹⁷ Graham, "Whitherbound."

between capitalism and Marxism would lead the world to the brink of World War III and the destruction of civilization. He urged his listeners to remember that Christ was known as the King of Peace and had the answers to their present tribulations. Graham also reminded them that man rejected Christ and nailed him upon the cross. They should not reject Christ again for doing so emboldened the unseen spiritual forces that drove world affairs in Graham's view.¹⁸ The only solution according to Graham was to return to God to defy communism's bold "march to world conquest."¹⁹ Appealing to Christ's Passion and mercy gave Graham another way to emphasize that God could give security to a generation enduring the horrors of two wars. Graham intended this message of divinely ordained security to play well with an audience member skeptical of Christianity and hostile to communism. Graham's sermon addressed the faithful's need to reaffirm their belief in Christ, while also providing reasons grounded in the political situation of the day for nonbelievers to convert to Christianity. His sermon embodied the evangelical tension of viewing nonbelievers as souls to be saved, but also enemies to be fought, most obviously on the battlefields in Korea.

Graham also tied the Devil into the Korean War and Marxism. He painted the picture of a chaotic America without a concrete foreign policy for the war. The Devil's activity led to the United States' tribulations via a communist war on God.²⁰ In 1951, Graham addressed a question on whether God loved Joseph Stalin, the closest human being to the Devil in the eyes of Cold Warriors. Graham argued that since God gave His son to save the world, then God loved the atheists and communists, while not loving their principles.²¹ Separating the sin (atheism) from

¹⁸ Learned, "Billy Graham," 160.

¹⁹ Graham, "Whitherbound."

²⁰ Billy Graham, "The Battle for Your Soul," Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, September 16, 1951, <https://billygraham.org/audio/the-battle-for-your-soul/>.

²¹ Billy Graham, "Grace vs. Wrath," Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, September 16, 1951, <https://billygraham.org/audio/grace-vs-wrath/>.

the sinner (communists), Graham held open the spiritual door to atheists while simultaneously condemning their beliefs. This juxtaposition allowed evangelicals to view nonbelievers not only as the enemy in Korea but also fellow children of God. Their shared humanity, created by God, was what made nonbelievers both the source of societal problems and salvation. They rejected God, the ultimate sin in Christianity. The possibility remained, however, for evangelicals to save nonbelievers' souls by teaching them to accept Christ as their personal savior and become full members of God's human family.²²

The Graham of the early Cold War firmly believed in the West, not just the United States, need to turn towards God to avoid disaster at the hands of communist nonbelievers. In his 1955 sermon titled *The End of the World*, Graham criticized the "materialistic philosophies of secularism and humanism" that he claimed swept through Germany and allowed for the rise of Adolf Hitler and the Nazis. Graham argued that those who thought that humanity was always advancing along a ladder of progress were sadly mistaken. Two world wars, the development of the atomic bomb, and, in his view, the moral decline in society called this notion of forward progress into question.²³ Graham saw humanity in 1955, far from progressing, as morally "about the same as his father Adam."²⁴ With this bleak outlook, the end of the world appeared close at hand. Graham explicitly tied nonbelieving secularists to totalitarian regimes, a vivid source of societal problems for an audience who fought World War II and found themselves in the Cold War with the Soviet Union, since they led and supported both the USSR and Nazi Germany. These sermons demonstrated that for evangelicals at this period, secularist totalitarian regimes

²² It is worth nothing that unlike in Islam nonbelievers in the American Evangelical Protestant context include fellow monotheists and atheists.

²³ Billy Graham, "The End of the World," Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, September 16, 1955, <https://billygraham.org/audio/the-end-of-the-world-2/>.

²⁴ Billy Graham, "Sin," Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, September 16, 1955, <https://billygraham.org/audio/sin-2/>.

like the USSR provided a battleground for the fate of humanity, one of progress and eventual divine salvation or regression and sin. The potential for winning on that ideological battleground provided evangelicals with a sense that they embarked on a quest for salvation, one that needed earthly enemies like the secular USSR.

The Graham of the 1950s indirectly attacked nonbelievers in the West in addition to communism to drive home his view that the end of time may be near. While in Scotland, one of Graham's sermons played to the potential for a nuclear World War III and declared that only a spiritual revival to help change human nature could help prevent this problem. He said that peace talks and conferences would not solve the world's problems. That could only happen, Graham stated, when "men and women confess their sins and turn to Jesus Christ."²⁵ Considering that the world's problems in this case referred to a nuclear war, if nonbelievers did not turn to Christ, then the world would practically end for humanity via nuclear apocalypse, an equivalent for the end of times. Graham's continued amalgamation of nonbelievers, even inside the West, with horrid consequences showed that mainstream evangelicalism understood evangelization efforts as crucial not only to the destiny of souls, but also to save their own skin and prevent existential evils like nuclear war.

Billy Graham's ministry did not solely focus on communism and the Korean War, and he found ample opportunities to critique Americans on the home front. Public educational institutions caught Graham's ire for not teaching the Bible, a symptom of the "cult of

²⁵ Billy Graham, "Why Scotland," Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, September 16, 1955, <https://billygraham.org/audio/why-scotland/>.

rationalism” in his view. He claimed that professors’ hostility to the Bible in an attempt to be neutral toward all religions covered their real intent, to force atheism onto students.²⁶

Graham’s comments regarding the Bible in public education entered into a larger conversation among evangelicals and nonbelievers about religion in schools stemming from the 1920s. Graham rekindled the debate at the center of the 1925 Scopes Monkey Trial, the validity of the Bible as an educational tool in public education. I do not argue that Graham rejected evolution or science as a means of acquiring knowledge; rather, the trial serves as an example of the longer conversation of religion in schools that Graham entered. William Jennings Bryan argued that teacher John Scopes violated a Tennessee law against teaching evolution, which many evangelicals felt violated the Bible’s creation story, in schools. The trial became a near publicity stunt when Bryan served as a witness testifying for the Bible’s accuracy.²⁷ The court found Scopes guilty and fined him. For our purposes, the trial illustrated the tension surrounding the Bible as an educational resource in schools. Graham’s belief that professors were openly hostile to the Bible and part of a “cult of rationalism” demonstrated a similar conflict about faith in schools. Nonbelievers such as a professor could not, Graham believed, be neutral on religious matters. Religious neutrality was the same as atheistic hostility towards the Bible in Graham’s view. Educational secularism promoted by nonbelievers constituted a great source of societal evil for evangelicals.

In Cold War America, the evangelical definition of a nonbeliever was also inextricably entangled with the fight against communism and the United States’ racial history. During the late

²⁶ Billy Graham, “Message to Youth,” Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, September 16, 1951, <https://billygraham.org/audio/message-to-youth/>.

²⁷ Thomas S. Kidd, *Who Is an Evangelical?: The History of a Movement in Crisis* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019), 71-72.

1950s and 1960s evangelical religious segregationists amalgamated racial intermarriage with communism. They viewed racial integration as cover for communism.²⁸ By contrast, Graham never understood integration in that way. His intellectual journey regarding race relations in the United States represented a unique path among the evangelical faithful during the second half of the twentieth century. Graham's evolving views away from segregation may be attributed in no small part to his student years at Wheaton College where he read *Up from the Ape* by Harvard professor Earnest Albert Hooton. The book challenged "simplistic chauvinism ... arguments for Negro inferiority,"²⁹ while remaining a racist tract. Hooton's work helped Graham begin to challenge his own racist worldview and "reinforced Graham's faith in a Christian gospel open and communicable to all peoples."³⁰ Graham putting aside these assumptions, however, would be tenuous throughout his early career. Revival participants, for example, normally sat in racially segregated areas before *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954.³¹ While Graham did begin to frequently offer integrated crusades after *Brown*, he remained most effective at attracting white attendees in the South. Nevertheless, by the late 1950s, hard line segregationist ministers began seeing daylight between themselves and Graham.³² Segregationists continued to see African Americans as nonbelievers and Communists, invoking the Book of Genesis to argue that God created dark skinned individuals as the "Curse of Cain" on humanity.³³ Graham and his flock, however, began moving away from *de jure* segregation and slowly came to view African Americans as fellow believers. This view, however, did not absolve evangelicalism of the racial

²⁸ Paul Harvey, "Religion, Race, and the Right in the South, 1945-1990," in *Politics and Religion in the White South*, ed. Glenn Feldman (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2005), 108-109.

²⁹ Steven P. Miller, *Billy Graham and the Rise of the Republican South* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 17-18.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 17-18.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 26-27.

³² *Ibid.*, 32, 60.

³³ Tammy Heise, "'Remember Little Rock': Racial (in)Justice and the Shaping of Contemporary White Evangelicalism," *Religions* 12, no. 9 (August 26, 2021): pp. 681-697, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12090681>, 689.

prejudices still prevalent among its predominantly white Southern faithful during the Civil Rights Movement.

III. From War to Revolution

Graham lived through nearly a century of societal changes, none more consequential than the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s. It was during this period that Graham spoke most prominently for evangelicalism as a movement and demonstrated evangelicals' views on nonbelievers changing social dynamics. Graham's penchant for law-and-order in conjunction with his conservative views on the sexual revolution illuminated evangelicals' view of nonbelievers as the source of societal moral shortcomings.

Evangelicals viewed the sexual revolution as a wellspring of societal immorality. Graham harpooned premarital sex, a blatantly immoral act in his view. In his sermons, Graham testified to the danger of "necking" and intimate dating relationships during college, especially at elite institutions like Harvard. All those willing to turn to God, according to Graham, may be forgiven of their sexual sins as He forgave Mary Magdalen.³⁴ These sins exemplified the sense of lawlessness, equated with the anti-Christ, that Graham characterized as pervading the 1960s. He especially criticized the young people who revolted against authority and the moral standards of the Church.³⁵ Graham held firm on his negative beliefs regarding the sexual revolution throughout his lifetime. Twenty years after the 1960s he said that one of the great problems in

³⁴ Billy Graham, "The Moral Problem," Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, September 16, 1964, <https://billygraham.org/audio/the-moral-problem/>.

³⁵ Billy Graham, "Rebels Against God," Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, September 16, 1964, <https://billygraham.org/audio/rebels-against-god/>.

United States society was the breakdown of the American family, meaning the increase of single parent homes and divorce.³⁶

Note that the title of “rebels” conveniently corresponded to nonbelievers revolting against the era’s moral standards. This view allowed evangelicals to continue their evangelization mission and deflect any societal problems they, or their belief system, caused onto nonbelievers. Evangelicals would not themselves claim to be sin free, but their view of the “rebels” permitted the faithful to absolve themselves in large part of structural responsibility for societal problems, such as *de facto* race discrimination.

Parallel to conservative views of economic development, evangelicals targeted the individual as a means of solving society’s problems. Graham declared that “the real issue [in society] is the human heart and its relationship to Jesus Christ.”³⁷ For evangelicals, if their hearts were open to Christ, then major societal ills were not as directly their own responsibility. It fell to those whose heart was not open to Christ to rectify themselves and in turn, convert by convert, society. Evangelicals still viewed it as their duty to evangelize to nonbelievers so that the latter could convert, but the former’s individual hearts were already open to Christ and therefore the “real issue” in society lay primarily in nonbelievers’ laps.

Within the socially liberalizing American culture of the 1950s and 1960s, evangelicals saw their faith as a liberating and civilizing force, both abroad and at home, especially for nonbelievers. On the abroad front, Graham delivered a sermon in 1960 entitled *The Christian in Kenya* while visiting the country. He attributed the tipping point in the war against the Mau Mau

³⁶ Billy Graham, “Family Revolution,” Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, September 16, 1989, <https://billygraham.org/audio/family-revolution/>.

³⁷ Graham, “Rebels.”

Uprising, a failed rebellion against colonial British rule in Kenya, to Christian resistance. It was the cooperation among European and African Christians in this resistance that Graham saw as the best hope the two groups had for working together.³⁸ Graham clearly backed the British against the Mau Mau and saw Christianity as a force to bring stability to the country as well as salvation to the non-Christian native people's souls.

While still in Zimbabwe in 1960, Graham shed more light on his view of evangelicalism as a civilizing force in the world. He said that the "Belgians have done a magnificent job and it [the colonial government of the Belgian Congo] had excellent relations with the people of the Congo until a few months ago, when mobs began to gather from nowhere, shouting for immediate independence."³⁹ The history of colonial cruelty in the Belgian Congo made this statement historically inaccurate, but it shed light on Graham, at the time, having a generous view of European colonialism. In that same speech in Zimbabwe, Graham described Christian missionaries in the Congo as bringing individuals, mostly African, out of sin and into the light of Christ. Graham also declared that God loved both the American and the African. He told the young people in America of the great challenge it would be to answer the call of God and come to Africa as a missionary.⁴⁰ Graham's colonial overtones and implicit "civilizing mission" rhetoric for an American audience back home demonstrated that he saw Christianity as a liberating force for nonbelievers' souls. Only via Christ, in Graham's view, could African nonbelievers solve life's largest problems, hence the need for missionaries. This Zimbabwe speech carried on a belief in evangelicalism's "civilizing mission" that Graham referred to

³⁸ Billy Graham, "The Christian in Kenya," Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, September 16, 1960, <https://billygraham.org/audio/the-christian-in-kenya/>.

³⁹ Billy Graham, "Our Missionaries Need Prayer," Our Missionaries Need Prayer, September 16, 1960, <https://billygraham.org/audio/our-missionaries-need-prayer/>.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

almost a decade earlier when he exhorted Christians to evangelize their faith to “millions of people sitting in darkness” who had not heard of Christ.⁴¹ These speeches demonstrate Graham’s and mainstream evangelicalism’s view of non-European nonbelievers as a source of immorality that needed to be “enlightened” or “civilized,” while nonbelieving “civilized” citizens from Europe or the United States weakened America morally from within. The latter category of nonbelievers posed a more significant threat in Graham’s eyes because their immorality stemmed from a rejection of the true morality embodied by Christianity. For Graham, ignorance of Christ by “uncivilized” people was one thing but willful rejection of the Son of God’s liberating message by his fellow “civilized” citizens was an altogether different matter.

Graham not only preached of evangelicalism’s liberating influence to his American audience from Africa but also from Europe and back in the United States. As early as 1950, Graham counseled that those wishing to throw away “law-and-order,” which in practice meant aggressive policing practices focusing on minority communities, threatened American society. He deplored "immoral" secular literature which he viewed as leading to moral depravity and threatening America. Graham declared that if America returned to God, then He would ensure generations of peace and safety. If America did not return to God, then the country would be destroyed.⁴² Faith in Christ meant liberation from destruction and a set of truths that one could safely rely upon to ensure the peace and prosperity post-WWII America desperately craved.

The most striking example of Graham’s argument for evangelicalism as a liberating movement came in 1960 when he visited Zurich, Switzerland. He told of how Christians in

⁴¹ Billy Graham, “Christ’s Marching Orders,” Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, September 16, 1951, <https://billygraham.org/audio/christs-marching-orders/>.

⁴² Billy Graham, “Answer for Survival,” Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, September 16, 1950, <https://billygraham.org/audio/answer-for-survival/>.

ancient Rome could not be different from the "Godless" pagans without fear of physical harm. He declared that the pressures of conformity, which ancient Christians rejected, from a "Godless" society remained present for Christians in 1960. Graham further stated that Christians in 1960 must not intellectually conform to the world around them but rather conform to the image of Jesus Christ, and reject sinful earthly temptations. Graham said that "the world sewage system [ex: secular temptations like entertainment advertisements] threatened to contaminate the stream of Christian thought."⁴³ This metaphor suggested that nonbelievers, particularly atheistic secularists, caused societal ills, the sinful earthly temptations Graham mentioned. Paganism and secular entertainment fit nicely together as one unit to be ridiculed as an atheistic intrusion on a Christian way of life. The image of Christians under siege by a secular world filled with nonbelievers' intellectual sewage demonstrated the necessity of nonbelievers to evangelicalism. Without them, evangelicals could not have preached the message of a Christianity under siege. Graham needed a world filled with nonbelievers to have any chance of his evangelism succeeding. This siege functioned as a liberating force because the faithful theoretically no longer had to fear the need to conform to the outside world. Fellow Christians would be their companions and together they would clean the world sewage system to ensure the purity of Christian thought.

As the Cold War developed in the 1970s, Graham's sermons evolved to emphasize the end of times in relation to the individual, rather than society as a whole via a cataclysmic event. This choice to focus on the individual dovetailed nicely with evangelicals' emphasis on individualistic free-market capitalism but also showed that evangelicals could not fully control American

⁴³ Billy Graham, "Be Not Conformed to This World," Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, September 16, 1960, <https://billygraham.org/audio/be-not-conformed-to-this-world/>.

society. Emphasizing the individual provided a way for the faithful to focus on attaining salvation after failing to blunt the culture impact of the 1960s. He declared that those who did not believe in Christ would be “punished with everlasting destruction.”⁴⁴ In a separate sermon, Graham drew on an extended judicial trial metaphor and warned the audience that someday God would judge them. In the metaphor, the defendant, an unrepentant sinner, learned of his guilty fate for rejecting God's love and mercy, a sentence to Hell. Graham ended by telling the audience that they have a choice to be like the unrepentant sinner or accept God's love, regardless of one's prior sins.⁴⁵ In stark contrast to his earlier view of unrepentant sinners, nonbelievers, potentially leading the world to nuclear war, Graham preached a message of individual responsibility. This message molded well with the free-market capitalism his conservative evangelical compatriots emphatically embraced in the years preceding the Reagan Revolution. He emphasized God's mercy to engage with nonbelievers and convert them by using a less fire and brimstone sermon. While mainline evangelicals like Graham still viewed nonbelievers as a source of societal ills like premarital sex, which I explore in the next section, the increased emphasis on individual responsibility for one's soul at the end of time marked a break from earlier Cold War views about nonbelievers.

Discussions over the end of the world drew Graham back into the dialogue surrounding science as a means of procuring knowledge. He repeatedly stressed the wicked nature of man by drawing upon the creation story of Adam and Eve to argue that science would *not* triumph at the end of days. Graham did not preach against science as a means of procuring knowledge but argued that only Christ may solve the world's most fundamental problems such as evil and

⁴⁴ Billy Graham, “The Coming Kingdom,” Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, September 16, 1970, <https://billygraham.org/audio/the-coming-kingdom/>.

⁴⁵ Billy Graham, “The Coming Judgment,” Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, September 16, 1973, <https://billygraham.org/audio/the-coming-judgment/>.

death.⁴⁶ Only a year had passed since America put a man on the moon when Graham gave this sermon concerning science. His argument against trusting in the power of science for eternal progress aligned with his previous statements about the evil nature of secular regimes. Without humanity's intellect circumscribed by faith in God and His power, wicked deeds could be carried out in the name of scientific progress. Atheism did not, in Graham's view, hold the power for progress, which he rooted in a belief in Christ.

While Graham attacked nonbelievers as a source of societal problems, one of the United States' biggest problems would emerge under Graham's nose via his close friend and political ally, President Richard Nixon. In a 1972 sermon entitled *A Vote Withheld is a Vote Against Christ*, Graham explicitly told his audience to cast their vote for Jesus Christ and that their voting pattern would determine the destiny of their soul. Christ demanded action Graham said, and that meant voting, or else one may not call himself His follower.⁴⁷ Graham did not explicitly say to vote for Nixon during this speech, but he clearly favored the President in the election. Only two years prior, Graham invited Nixon to one of his crusades at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville. During that crusade, sporadic profane jeers from anti-Vietnam War protestors occurred throughout the service, but the audience overwhelmingly favored the President.⁴⁸ Nixon's speech at the University of Tennessee was the only time Graham allowed a president to speak at a crusade.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Graham, "The Coming Kingdom."

⁴⁷ Billy Graham, "A Vote Withheld Is a Vote Against Christ," Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, 1972, <https://billygraham.org/audio/vote-for-jesus/>.

⁴⁸ Randall E. King, "When Worlds Collide: Politics, Religion, and Media at the 1970 East Tennessee Billy Graham Crusade," *Journal of Church and State* 39, no. 2 (1997): pp. 273-295, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcs/39.2.273>, 285.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 290.

The impending Watergate scandal would teach Graham an important lesson on putting his ministry and reputation so close to politics. Evangelical conservatives' fears of government excess and flawed leaders were ironically vindicated by Nixon's shameful behavior concerning Watergate.⁵⁰ As the crisis unfolded Graham and evangelicals criticized America's moral shortcomings rather than directly attack the President. The *New York Times* reported that Graham said, "that the Watergate scandal was a symptom of the 'permissiveness, corruption and crime' permeating much of American life."⁵¹ All these traits conveniently aligned with the language Graham previously used to describe nonbelievers, though evangelicals did not consider Nixon himself to be a nonbeliever. For the nation's sins, the United States needed "to get down on its knees in repentance before the Lord."⁵² Graham conveniently ignored the fact that at the University of Tennessee in 1970 he urged the faithful to vote for the man who now caused the nation to need to get on its knees in repentance. As late as June 1973, Graham made a strong statement of solidarity with the President when the former said that he "'has confidence in President Nixon" and believed "he [Nixon] will survive [Watergate] and that he will be our President for the next three and a half years. He will have my prayers, and if he invites me to come and preach the Gospel at the White House, I'll go."⁵³

By May 1974, three months before Nixon would resign the presidency, Graham's confidence in the man he helped elect became clearly shaken. Graham said that "We [the American people] ought to pray for the Judiciary Committee, that God will give it wisdom. We ought to pray for the President, that he will be given the wisdom to do what God wants him to do."⁵⁴ No longer

⁵⁰ Dochuk, *From Bible Belt*, 358.

⁵¹ "Graham Asks Nation to Kneel in Repentance," *New York Times*, May 1, 1973.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ "Watergate Termed 'Judgement of God'," *New York Times*, June 15, 1973.

⁵⁴ "Billy Graham Calls for Prayers for Nixon and the House Panel," *New York Times*, May 11, 1974.

did Graham speak of Watergate as an example of immorality permeating American life. His message became increasingly concerned about the event itself and what it meant for the future of his ministry. Nonbelieving wellsprings of immorality that contaminated Christian thought turned out not to be the straw on the camel's back for the United States. In my view, it is ironic that the man whom evangelicals ardently supported for the Presidency did more immoral harm to the office and society than any nonbelieving American up to that point in history. Graham learned his lesson from Watergate and never again tied his preaching so closely to one politician. Evangelicalism would follow a different path and become even more deeply entrenched in United States conservative politics over the coming decades.

IV. At World's End

The Cold War gave way to the 1990s when the United States was the sole superpower on the globe. On the domestic front, the immediate post-Cold War period brought forth the first Democratic president since Jimmy Carter in the 1970s. Jerry Falwell's famed Moral Majority, in which Graham did not explicitly partake following his experience with Nixon, propelled Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush to the White House before regrouping during the Clinton years to successfully help George W. Bush claim the United States Presidency in 2000. The younger Bush's presidency saw increasing vitriol spewing from leading figures on the Religious Right. By way of example, Pat Robertson, host of the evangelical TV show *The 700 Club*, stated after an unfavorable court ruling concerning a textbook advocating intelligent design that the involved parties may face a divine strike.⁵⁵ The culture war raged on in the early 2000s and evangelicals

⁵⁵ Stephen J. Nichols, *Jesus Made in America: A Cultural History from the Puritans to The Passion of the Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 201.

like James Dobson, founder of Focus on the Family,⁵⁶ built influential empires that openly advocated against nonbelievers' presumed liberal values. Graham took a different path than these fellow conservative evangelicals regarding nonbelievers during this period.

As Graham entered his ninth decade, he departed from focusing on the imminent end of time to focus on the end of the earthly world for individuals: death. In one of his last crusades, Graham cited several examples of evil in modern times, like child kidnapping, to argue that individuals should study the Bible and Christ to help understand the world. He told the story of Noah building the ark to weave together an understanding of God's power and death. We all will die said Graham, but at the end of the world those who kept God at the center of their lives as Noah did shall be saved by God's mercy.⁵⁷ By this time in his life, Graham's focus on every individual's potential for salvation with a belief in Christ contrasted sharply with his earlier amalgamation of atheists and nuclear war. Nonbelievers continued to imperil their souls and spread societal immorality in his view, but they no longer posed an existential threat to the world's existence. Evangelicals still needed nonbelievers to look for ways to explain faults within society and evangelize the Gospel. I do not argue that Graham's softening rhetoric compared to his early sermons or increasing focus on individual salvation ushered in a period of tolerance within evangelical Christianity. His changed views, however, reflected a changing perception of nonbelievers among the faithful over a prolonged period.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 201-204.

⁵⁷ Billy Graham, "The End of the World (Part 1)," Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, September 16, 2005, <https://billygraham.org/audio/the-end-of-the-world-part-1-2/>.

V. Conclusion

Billy Graham more than any other preacher embodied Protestant Evangelicalism throughout his lifetime. He argued that nonbelievers immorality led to societal ill but also the opportunity for the faithful to attain salvation via evangelization. The Cold War shaped his harsh early rhetoric surrounding nonbelievers as a force threatening the future of America. As the Cold War wound down, Graham softened his views on nonbelievers and avoided explicit engagement in culture war issues that dominated American politics. He remained steadfastly conservative in his views regarding societal changes like the sexual revolution. After Nixon's resignation, Graham never again engaged nonbelievers on what would become culture war issues during the early Cold War. Nonbelievers occupied a tenuous place as both the causes of society's problems and also its hope of redemption via religious conversion throughout Graham's lifetime. As America's pastor rode off into the sunset, one of the most prominent preachers to fill the void was a telegenic man named Joel Osteen, the subject of the following chapter.

A Smiling Success: Joel Osteen

I. Introduction

One of the few American religious leaders to hold sway among the faithful to the degree of Billy Graham is Joel Osteen. His megachurch, Lakewood, sits in Houston, Texas and regularly draws thousands of worshipers on a weekly basis. With this level of influence, Osteen's Prosperity Gospel preaching continues trends present in Graham's sermons while wedding evangelicalism even closer to American style capitalist consumerism.

I argue that the mainstream Prosperity Gospel, represented by Joel Osteen, continues the trend of evangelicalism viewing nonbelievers as a source of societal ill, but also salvation. Osteen needs nonbelievers on a practical level to fulfill his version of the Prosperity Gospel. His message, however, belies an underlying theological tension regarding the existence of nonbelievers. Osteen breaks from Graham and prior mainstream evangelicalism by viewing nonbelievers as tools in God's plan for one personally receiving God's favor. As we saw for Graham, by contrast, nonbelievers served as a source of salvation since they provided the evangelical faithful with an outlet to evangelize Christ's gospel.

This chapter begins with the early years of the Osteen family and the founding of Lakewood Church by Joel's father, John. This background paves the way for analyzing how Joel Osteen needs nonbelievers for the Prosperity Gospel. I conclude the chapter with an examination of how these nonbelievers also occupy an ostensibly contradictory role as enemies of the faithful.

II. Joel's Journey with Lakewood Church

The journey of Joel Osteen to America's preeminent Prosperity Gospel pastor is bound at the hip to the story of Lakewood Church, where he ministers. John Osteen, Joel's father, founded

Lakewood Church in 1959 in humble circumstances. John's ministry rooted itself in the neo-Pentecostal movement and devoted substantial efforts to faith healing. In the early 1960s, John became a full-time itinerant preacher and left Lakewood Church on its own, though he remained in close contact with the group's leadership. By the end of the decade, John returned to lead Lakewood Church to new heights.⁵⁸ John spoke alongside some of the biggest names in evangelicalism during the 1970s such as Jimmy Swaggart and Oral Roberts. Throughout the 1970s John adopted a variation of positive confession theology that emphasized imagining better circumstances for oneself and speaking of one's faith in God to help those circumstances come to fruition. This period saw the elder Osteen adopt warlike language to bemoan the "cultural carnage" of the age manifesting itself on college campuses and the breakdown of traditional families. Lakewood grew to have over 2,000 members by the late 1970s, but John's congregation remained located in the poor, predominantly African American area of Houston during this decade. When he had the financial means to do so, however, John moved his family out into Houston's suburbs.⁵⁹ As a sign of John's success, when Lakewood opened its new church in the late 1980s, state representatives and Houston's mayor attended the ceremonies.⁶⁰ John's prosperity gospel preaching focused on financial blessings for the faithful, but also on faith healing, two topics his son would adapt to fit twenty-first century preaching. Joel's mother Dodie was diagnosed with terminal cancer in 1981 only to later be found cancer free, a phenomenon she and John attributed to divine intervention.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Phillip Luke Sinitiere, *Salvation with a Smile: Joel Osteen, Lakewood Church, and American Christianity* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2015), 19-36.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 39-50.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 49-50.

Long before Joel became Lakewood's pastor he went to school and then worked at the church. He attended Oral Roberts University (ORU) in 1981 for one year in a bid to pursue his dream of becoming a television producer. After dropping out of ORU, he began working in television production for his father at Lakewood. His time at college left an indelible mark on Joel by shaping his attitude that the best preachers were those who can draw people in even with the sound on mute. In short, the smilers.⁶² He clearly took this lesson to heart as he is now known as the smiling preacher.

While his smile shimmers on television screens throughout the globe, Joel originally did not want to become a pastor. His father began planning for Lakewood's future in the late 1990s by pushing the reluctant Joel to succeed him. Having worked in the church for nearly twenty years at this point, Joel had a solid grasp of church operations. Joel listened to his father's sermons over a thousand times while he prepared footage for John's eponymous broadcast.⁶³ Succumbing to his father's entreaties, Joel preached his first sermon at Lakewood a week before his father died in 1999.⁶⁴

John's influence on his son shines through in the latter's writings. In his 2019 book *The Power of Favor: The Force That Will Take You Where You Can't Go On Your Own*, Joel tells the story of his aunt Mary, John's sister, and her experience with divine healing. She needed round the clock care and frequently went to the hospital. John heard God say that Mary would be healed and decided to go see her instead of embarking on a preplanned trip. Mary became alert and walked on her own, when John spoke, saying that she heard God at that moment.⁶⁵ In a prior

⁶² Ibid., 114-115.

⁶³ Ibid., 64.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 60.

⁶⁵ Joel Osteen, *The Power of Favor: The Force That Will Take You Where You Can't Go on Your Own* (New York, NY: Faith Words, 2020), 127-129.

book, Joel mentioned the miraculous healing of his friend's daughter Shari at the age of three.⁶⁶ Joel went beyond recounting divine healing among friends and family by modernizing the vessel for his message to include popular celebrities. In one instance he recounts the story of Paralympian and ESPN broadcaster Victoria Arlen who spent years in a vegetative state in hospital during her childhood only to miraculously recover via, he claims, God's grace.⁶⁷ Joel clearly acknowledged the reality of divine healing that his father so often referenced. As pastor, Joel began adapting the concept of divine healing to reach a twenty-first century audience by moving away from an association with miraculous divine intervention towards an emphasis on caring for one's own body. Having a healthy body such as Joel's meant that you revered God by respecting and improving yourself, an extension of God's creation.⁶⁸ Capitalism and the corresponding individual consumption of expensive goods became a manner of improving oneself and ultimately pleasing God.

As Joel rose to fill his father's shoes, the question of what his theological beliefs would be came center stage. Joel, like his father, drew on a tradition of positive thinking stretching back to Pastor Norman Vincent Peale's book *The Power of Positive Thinking*, which wed cognitive psychology with Christian faith.⁶⁹ Drawing from Peale's intellectual well is common for Prosperity Gospel preachers, and Joel followed a well-trodden road by taking this path. Joel also embraced a literal interpretation of the Bible while imbuing passages with metaphorical moral lessons. He spoke of Jonah actually surviving for three days in a whale while simultaneously

⁶⁶ Joel Osteen, *It's Your Time: Activate Your Faith, Achieve Your Dreams, and Increase in God's Favor* (New York, NY: Free Press, 2009), 73.

⁶⁷ Joel Osteen, *Blessed in the Darkness: How All Things Are Working for Your Good* (New York, NY: Faith Words, 2017), 137-140.

⁶⁸ Sinitiere, *Salvation with a Smile*, 89-92.

⁶⁹ Shayne Lee and Phillip Luke Sinitiere, *Holy Mavericks: Evangelical Innovators and the Spiritual Marketplace* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2009), 28-30.

focusing on the second chance God offered his prophet.⁷⁰ These biblical stories aim to “guide people toward healthy and happy living, rather than moralize about a holy, sinless existence.”⁷¹

Osteen can only guide and influence those who listen to his message. How does Osteen, the embodiment of the contemporary Prosperity Gospel, view nonbelievers who do not listen to him?

III. Practical Necessity of Nonbelievers

Joel Osteen views nonbelievers as instruments that God uses to bless the faithful with favor. He preaches of a God who will shower the faithful with abundance compared to those without God’s favor. To make this comparative point regarding favor, Osteen needs the existence of nonbelievers. Osteen defined favor as God putting “something on you that gives you an advantage, something that will open doors that you can't open, something that will make you stand out in the crowd.”⁷² He went on to say that “favor will cause good breaks to come to you. Favor will take you from the background to the foreground. Favor will give you preferential treatment, things you don't deserve.”⁷³ God’s favor will act during momentous occasions and small daily occurrences. Osteen gave the example of pulling into a parking lot and “get[ting] that up-front spot. That wasn’t a lucky break. That was the favor on your life.”⁷⁴

To understand why Osteen needs nonbelievers for his preaching on a practical level, consider the hypothetical scenario that all humanity faithfully follows Osteen’s religious teachings. If everyone is a believer, then God should bless everyone with abundance. Everyone having X item

⁷⁰ Sinitiere, *Salvation with a Smile*, 66-67.

⁷¹ Lee and Sinitiere, *Holy Mavericks*, 44.

⁷² Osteen, *The Power of Favor*, 1.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Osteen, *The Power of Favor*, 23.

means that nobody would see a relative increase in material abundance, undercutting Osteen's materially laden prosperity message. One does not, however, need to measure an increase in abundance relatively, an absolute scale is also an option. In this scenario then everyone now having X item does not theoretically undercut Osteen's preaching. Abundance for a world full of faithful could theoretically occur under Osteen's Prosperity Gospel, but the practical reality of relative abundance means nonbelievers remain essential to his preaching. This discussion of abundance gets at the heart of nonbelievers being both "enemies" and avenues for the faithful to receive God's favor.

Due to the jealousy inherent in humans for certain items or lifestyles which they cannot have, relative abundance in a nutshell, Osteen needs an "other" to define his faithful against. He used differences between individuals' lifestyles to demonstrate God's favor: rich versus poor, thin versus fat. Osteen drew upon societal status conceptions, such as thinness being associated with beauty, to define this "other" unfavored class of people that do not sufficiently believe in God and have only themselves to blame for their life's predicaments.⁷⁵ Osteen demonstrated his classification of the favored and nonfavored classes when he wrote:

God is going to do some things that bring you into prominence, into new levels of influence and credibility. People can debate what you can say, but they can't debate what they see. When they see you running the company, paying your house off, and graduating with honors, they'll know God is endorsing you.⁷⁶

When one person receives God's endorsement by worldly success, the individual who did not succeed, following Osteen's logic, did not receive that endorsement from God. Osteen needs the

⁷⁵ Luke A. Winslow, "The Imaged Other: Style and Substance in the Rhetoric of Joel Osteen," *Southern Communication Journal* 79, no. 3 (2014): pp. 250-271, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1041794x.2013.872173>, 264-266.

⁷⁶ Osteen, *The Power of Favor*, 6.

nonbelievers, particularly the downtrodden, in the world so that he can demonstrate to his flock who they will not become if they keep faith in God.

Osteen echoes the common Prosperity Gospel message that God is not “El Cheapo,” but rather generous and plentiful. He tells his readers that “God is a God of increase, not decrease... Every setback is simply a setup for a comeback.”⁷⁷ Setbacks like unexpected medical debt can sometimes feel crippling to the faithful. Osteen reassures them that no matter how mighty the obstacle God will always be there:

He [Jesus] couldn't carry it [His cross] any further. There was a man named Simon who just happened to be right there. He picked up the cross and carried it the rest of the way. You don't have to be strong all the time. Even Jesus fell down under the weight of the cross. The good news is that there will always be somebody there to help you, to carry you, to get you to where you need to be.⁷⁸

This message perennially fails those believers and nonbelievers alike who never get the right breaks nor have support to rise out of lifelong hardships like cyclical poverty. The consumerism faith Osteen preaches does not address those who do not have the luxury of discretionary consumption. For such persons, Osteen’s God may indeed look like El Cheapo.

Nonbelievers play the key role in Osteen’s Prosperity Gospel as sources of salvation for God’s faithful. Throughout his preaching Osteen molds his message to the American Dream “which emphasizes equality of opportunity, upward social mobility, success, pulling oneself up by one’s own bootstraps, home ownership, and consuming an ever-increasing amount of consumer goods and services to fill one’s home.”⁷⁹ The promise of increased consumption for the faithful means nonbelievers plays a key role in the process. Nonbelievers serve as part of an

⁷⁷ Osteen, *It's Your Time*, 43.

⁷⁸ Osteen, *Blessed in the Darkness*, 153.

⁷⁹ Peter Munday, “The Prosperity Gospel and the Spirit of Consumerism According to Joel Osteen,” *Pneuma* 39, no. 3 (2017): pp. 318-341, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15700747-03903018>, 339.

economy that allows for the favored to consume and live the American Dream. With increasing consumption comes the potential for jealousy and restlessness among the faithful when they see those more economically successful. Osteen assuaged such woes by writing:

You're going to become like whoever you're connected to. Are you connected to anyone who has what you want, people who are more blessed, people who are more successful?... Don't be intimidated because they're further along. Don't be jealous because they have more. Celebrate them, honor them, and sow into them. If you do this, I believe and declare, because you're connected to favor... your boat is going to be full.⁸⁰

Osteen never precluded nonbelievers from being those more successful than a faithful believer.

Sometimes a nonbeliever may have what one wants and should be someone who one tries to connect with according to Osteen. In this way nonbelievers serve as conduits for the faithful to achieve God's favor and the corresponding material blessings. Nonbelievers, both poor and rich, play their respective roles for faithful in the consumption focused Prosperity Gospel.

Osteen's Prosperity Gospel mixes Protestant romantic and ascetic consumerism, the latter defined by lack of indulgent consumption, to temper the faithful's consumption and avoid idolatry. God will fulfill the believer's needs, according to Osteen, but he encourages the faithful to ask their heavenly Father for more personal material abundance. Dressing well and buying new things for oneself while working hard, such work being a key characteristic of ascetic consumerism, is a way of living in God's favor and demonstrating it to others. For Osteen, the discipline needed to live austere in this ascetic spirit is only a means to later increase one's financial situation and demonstrate God's favor.⁸¹ One must trust in God according to Osteen and not worry about what one wants. If one worries, then wants, Osteen writes, "can become like an idol to us. It's all we think about, all we pray about, always at the forefront of our minds. Turn it

⁸⁰ Osteen, *The Power of Favor*, 47-48.

⁸¹ Munday, "The Prosperity Gospel," 322-335.

over to God. Pray, believe, and then leave it in God's hands.”⁸² Osteen promotes consumerism but carefully circumscribes it with acknowledgements of God’s power and favor as the reason for consuming.

Demonstrations of God’s favor via consumption functions as a way to evangelize to nonbelievers. The evangelical impulse remains present in Joel Osteen’s message, just less explicit compared to Billy Graham’s messaging in the prior section. Osteen declares that “the Scripture speaks of how you've been called out, set apart... You're not ordinary; you're not like everyone else.”⁸³ The you Osteen refers to is the faithful believer materially blessed via God’s favor. I previously quoted Osteen saying that people “can’t debate what they see,” by which he means material wealth. That inability to debate serves as a way for the faithful to attract attention to themselves and their belief system by displaying wealth.

Osteen leaves open one thread regarding nonbelievers in the practical realm. He explained that the “Most High God has set you apart. He could have chosen anyone, but He handpicked you, called you out.”⁸⁴ If God did not choose everyone but could have chosen anyone, then some people were not handpicked. The faithful believer, the you to whom Osteen refers, is better than those non handpicked by God. Osteen never explicitly states who are those non handpicked people. The immediate answer would be nonbelievers. Regarding the poor and downtrodden nonbeliever, this implicit categorization by Osteen makes sense within his Prosperity Gospel message. Osteen never precluded nonbelievers from being more successful than a faithful believer. If nonbelievers are not handpicked by God, but some are more successful than the

⁸² Osteen, *Blessed in the Darkness*, 52.

⁸³ Osteen, *The Power of Favor*, 49.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

faithful, tension exists within Osteen's theology that promises the believers material abundance. We now turn to examine that tension.

IV. Tension Filled Theology

Osteen's theology retains a tension filled view of nonbelievers as "enemies" and instruments for the faithful's salvation with God's favor. I use the term enemies because Osteen often employs the word himself. In this context, "enemies" does not mean a people or entity to destroy, but rather a concept, that I argue is synonymous with nonbelievers, to struggle against. A prime example of this concept comes via Osteen telling a Bible story:

God doesn't disqualify you because of how you were raised. You may come from a family that didn't honor God. There might be a lot of compromise and dysfunction in your past. The good news is, that doesn't have to stop you. As Jacob did with Manasseh and Ephraim [his grandsons via Joseph with Asenath], God is adopting you in spite of what you did or didn't do.⁸⁵

Osteen paints a portrait of a forgiving God that willingly accepts prior nonbelievers as part of His flock regardless of their past. Before the conversion of a nonbeliever to the faith, Osteen addressed their relationship to the faithful by declaring that "God is going to show out so your enemies—the opposition and the critics—will all see you promoted, honored, in a position of influence, in a public display."⁸⁶ Osteen never explicitly defines critics as nonbelievers, but they do not believe in God's favor for His followers, a key tenet of Osteen's Prosperity Gospel which the faithful use to overcome enemies.

Osteen draws heavily on the idea of overcoming enemies to illuminate the faithful's relationship to nonbelievers. He explicitly addressed that relationship when he tells the story of

⁸⁵ Ibid., 133.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 85.

the faithful, David, defeating his nonbeliever enemy Goliath as a means to argue that "God has some of these times when He's going to prove to people who you are."⁸⁷ Osteen also recounted the Biblical story of the plagues and Moses leading the Israelites out of Egypt as a demonstration of the favor God gives his followers. The nonbelieving pharaoh's subjects, the enemies of God, on the other hand suffered greatly until pharaoh let the Israelites leave Egypt.⁸⁸ Nonbelievers, the pharaoh and his subjects, in this occurrence are expressly portrayed as a source of societal ill, the plagues, but those ills do not affect the believers in God due to His favor. The faithful remain set apart from the nonbelievers even while the former retains little temporal power. Only by the latter's presence could the faithful receive God's favor in the form of deliverance from slavery in Egypt.

This view of nonbelievers as enemies presents tension with Osteen's view of them helping the faithful attain God's favor. Osteen recounts the story of David Yonggi Cho who was not a Christian when diagnosed with tuberculosis, from which he recovered. He subsequently converted to Christianity after a college student prayed with him for recovery. Cho went on to found the Yoido Full Gospel Church, one of the largest churches in the world.⁸⁹ Osteen did not present Cho as an enemy but as a fellow Christian to whom the faithful could look to as an example of God's favor. The originally nonbelieving Cho became an instrument for helping other faithful attain God's favor when he opened a church.

Since not all the faithful can found megachurches like Cho, Osteen writes that those important decisions in one's own life regarding nonbelievers also serve as a path to favor. He tells the story of a Christian family who adopted an albino, presumably nonbelieving, girl named

⁸⁷ Ibid., 87.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 50-52.

⁸⁹ Osteen, *Blessed in the Darkness*, 155-156.

Sheila from Haiti where she suffered from inadequate medical care. According to Osteen, she became a loved member of the family, and presumably a Christian, enriching their lives with her presence.⁹⁰ This story shows how, in Osteen's view, nonbelievers like Sheila can be an object of the faithful's favor and simultaneously enhance their favor and her own by contributing to the family. Nonbelievers can enhance the faithful's God ordained favor and partake in it themselves.

Nonbelieving "enemies" in opposition to the faithful also serve as a means for the latter to obtain favor. Osteen wrote that "God does not have to use your friends or associates [to bless you]. He can use your enemies, your critics, the people who are trying to push you down. He'll use them to push you up."⁹¹ As an example of this statement in practice, Osteen told of a powerful local executive who strongly opposed Lakewood moving into the Compaq Center, where the church currently is located, to demonstrate how one can overcome critics to achieve success.⁹² The reality that nonbelieving critics and adversaries exist demonstrates the tension filled role of nonbelievers in Osteen's theology. They serve as obstacles to be overcome while simultaneously being gateways for the faithful to access God's favor for personal salvation.

V. Conclusion

Osteen embraced the tension filled view of nonbelievers as a source of societal ill, but also an opportunity for the faithful to receive God's favor. He broke from Graham's evangelical tradition by not seeing nonbelievers as avenues to salvation primarily through religious conversion. The faithful, in Osteen's eyes, could use nonbelievers as tools in God's plan to achieve temporal material benefits. Osteen also associates nonbelievers with enemies to set apart the faithful and

⁹⁰ Osteen, *It's Your Time*, 237-238.

⁹¹ Osteen, *Blessed in the Darkness*, 80.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 80-82.

demonstrate who they would not become if they kept faith in God. The dual view of nonbelievers as a group set apart as less than the faithful and simultaneously used to help advance believers' favor epitomizes the Prosperity Gospel's tension regarding nonbelievers. We now turn to a less materially focused Christian faith, Latin American Catholicism, to understand how nonbelievers fit into the Roman Catholic Church's worldview.

A Universal Mission: Latin American Catholicism

I. Introduction

Latin American Catholicism post Second Vatican Council viewed nonbelievers as a source of dialogue to incorporate into a tolerant Catholic universalism for the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Catholics still believed in their religious faith but came to view nonbelievers as individuals to live with and convert where possible. Whereas for American evangelicals, as represented by Graham and Osteen, nonbelievers served as a source of societal ill and salvation, as well as individual prosperity in the case of the smiling preacher, nonbelievers for Latin American Catholics were not a source of societal problems by definition of their unbelief. However, these nonbelievers did, most notably in the case of communists and dictators, present a threat to the Catholic faith if not properly engaged, defined as in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council as articulated by the church leadership.

The chapter begins with an exploration of the life of Jorge Bergoglio, the future Pope Francis. This journey paves the way for examining the immense impact of the Second Vatican Council on Catholicism's view of nonbelievers in theory and practice. I close this section by returning to Jorge Bergoglio's ascension to the papacy and its implications on the future of the Catholic Church.

II. Glimpsing Jorge Bergoglio

Understanding the Argentine Church in which Bergoglio grew up provides the necessary background before moving on to an examination of his life and those of Latin American Catholics after the Second Vatican Council. Jorge Mario Bergoglio's family arrived in Argentina

from Italy in the late 1920s. His grandmother Rosa, a seamstress, participated heavily in Catholic Action, a Catholic labor movement. Pope Francis's father, Mario, obtained high grades and despite the family's poverty, entered the banking industry in Italy due to his intelligence. The family's move to Argentina, where the brothers of Rosa's husband, Giovanni, lived since the early 1920s, cut Mario's promising banking career short.⁹³ Before the end of the next decade the Bergoglio family welcomed their newest member, Jorge Mario Bergoglio, in 1936. The boy worked hard during his youth by cleaning factories at age thirteen before school. At the age of seventeen he felt a calling to become a priest and only four years later experienced a near fatal encounter with pneumonia.⁹⁴ The recovery process from pneumonia caused Bergoglio excruciating pain. In the preface to an interview with Bergoglio after he became Pope Francis, the two journalists Sergio Rubin and Francesca Ambrogetti wrote that "every day, saline was pumped through his body to clean out his pleura and scar tissue. A chest tube was connected to a drainage system, producing a trickle of water."⁹⁵ Bergoglio recalled that during his suffering a nun named Dolores "said something that truly stuck with me and made me feel at peace: 'You are imitating Christ.'"⁹⁶ His later pastoral emphasis on the poor and suffering fits into a longer arc including his own near-death encounter. Through what he viewed as an imitation of Christ Bergoglio became convinced to join His Church as a Jesuit priest. A few years later in 1958, he fulfilled that conviction and entered the Society of Jesus, wishing to carry

⁹³ Austen Ivereigh, "What We Still Don't Know About Jorge Mario Bergoglio," *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 104, no. 415 (2015), 261-272, 262-264.

⁹⁴ Phillip Berryman, "The Argentine and Latin American Background of Pope Francis," *American Catholic Studies* 127, no. 2 (2016): pp. 55-70, <https://doi.org/10.1353/acs.2016.0031>, 56-58. Mario I. Aguilar, *Pope Francis: His Life and Thought* (Cambridge, UK: Lutterworth Press, 2014), 40-41.

⁹⁵ Sergio Rubin and Francesca Ambrogetti, *Pope Francis: His Life in His Own Words* (New York, NY: G. P. Putnam's & Sons, 2013), 23. Each chapter of the book consists of an interview with Pope Francis about various topics from theology to his favorite literary work.

⁹⁶ Quoted in *ibid.*, 24.

out missionary work in Japan. However, his prior health scare with pneumonia denied a chance to pursue this dream.⁹⁷

The Catholic Church that Bergoglio entered into and the national government of his native Argentina enjoyed a close relationship in the early twentieth century, with priests going to the prestigious South American College in Rome on the state's dime. The two institutions both wished to become the lodestar of Latin American Catholicism, though ultimately failed in achieving that goal. As the 1930s turned into the 1940s, Juan Perón transitioned from a leadership role in the military government to become Argentina's democratically elected president in 1946, ruling until the country's military coup overthrew him in 1955. Catholicism began to splinter into varying conservative and left-wing sects in the 1960s, which would allow Catholics to align themselves with radicals of all political stripes, but in the middle ground stood numerous Catholics including a young Jorge Mario Bergoglio, the future Pope Francis.⁹⁸ Catholics of all political stripes would soon experience the greatest change to the Church in centuries with the onset of the Second Vatican Council.

III. Second Vatican Council (1962-1965)

The Second Vatican Council, also referred to as Vatican II, brought widespread changes to the Church. For the purposes of this thesis, the two most important changes the council made permitted the translation of the liturgy into vernacular languages⁹⁹ and the European clergy, the

⁹⁷ Ibid., 36.

⁹⁸ Miranda Lida and Mariano Fabris, "Argentina and the Pope from the End of the World: Antecedents and Consequences," *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 22, no. 2 (2013): pp. 113-121, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569325.2013.800472>, 114-115.

⁹⁹ This change caused immense strife within conservative sections of the Catholic Church which continues to the present, as seen by Pope Francis's crackdown in December 2021 on the celebration of the Latin Mass. The

historical bastion of Catholicism, not dominating the event.¹⁰⁰ Regions outside of Europe like Latin America began to occupy a larger chair at the ecclesiastical table.

The scope of Vatican II's intended audience shed light on the Church's aim to create a tolerant Catholic universalism that engaged nonbelievers as objects in this project. Vatican II called for dialogue with those who did not follow the Church's teachings such as atheists, Communists, Jews,¹⁰¹ Muslims, and other Christian churches.¹⁰² The Church's December 1965 document *Gaudium et Spes*, one of the last documents released by the council, declared that "this Second Vatican Council, having probed more profoundly into the mystery of the Church, now addresses itself without hesitation, not only to the sons of the Church and to all who invoke the name of Christ, but to the whole of humanity."¹⁰³ With this remark the Church signaled its

archconservative Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre founded the Society of Saint Pius X, which prizes the Latin Mass, in response to Vatican II. Pope John Paul II later excommunicated Lefebvre for consecrating bishops against papal instruction. His successor Pope Benedict XVI attempted to bring the society back into the fold by lifting the excommunication of the bishops ordained by Lefebvre. "Pope Benedict Lifts Excommunication of Bishops Ordained by Lefebvre," Catholic News Agency, January 24, 2009, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/14881/pope-benedict-lifts-excommunication-of-bishops-ordained-by-lefebvre>. For further reading on Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre and the Society of Saint Pius X see: Allan Stoekl, "French Catholic Traditionalism and the Specter of Reactionary Politics," *South Central Review* 23, no. 1 (2006): pp. 89-106, <https://doi.org/10.1353/scr.2006.0016>., Brian Sudlow, "The Frenchness of Marcel Lefebvre and the Society of St Pius X: A New Reading," *French Cultural Studies* 28, no. 1 (2017): pp. 79-94, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957155816679919>., Jeremy Rich, "Marcel Lefebvre in Gabon: Revival, Missionaries, and the Colonial Roots of Catholic Traditionalism," in *Views from the Margins: Creating Identities in Modern France*, ed. Kevin J. Callahan and Sarah A. Curtis (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2009)., Gilles Routhier, "The Hermeneutic of Reform as a Task for Theology," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 77, no. 3 (2012): pp. 219-243, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021140012443635>.

¹⁰⁰ "The Church since Vatican II" (Encyclopædia Britannica, n.d.), <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Roman-Catholicism/The-church-since-Vatican-II>.

¹⁰¹ Bergoglio's active dialogue with Jews in Buenos Aires throughout his career, which I will touch on later in this thesis, demonstrates the influence of Vatican II on his intellectual journey. To see the extent of this dialogue one may turn to the forward written by Rabbi Abraham Skorka in Sergio Rubin and Francesca Ambrogetti, *Pope Francis: His Life in His Own Words* (New York, NY: G. P. Putnam's & Sons, 2013), xi-xv.

¹⁰² Aguilar, *Pope Francis*, 20-22.

¹⁰³ Paul VI, "Gaudium et Spes," December 7, 1965,

https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.

intention to lead a universal project rooted in Catholicism but also willing to engage with nonbelievers in an increasingly secularized world.

Vatican II aimed for a tolerant Catholic universalism for the twentieth century and beyond by framing the Church as a transnational and transreligious agent for justice. *Gaudium et Spes* set out this mission in clear terms when it stated that

since in virtue of her [the Church] mission and nature she is bound to no particular form of human culture, nor to any political, economic or social system, the Church by her very universality can be a very close bond between diverse human communities and nations.... For this reason, the Church admonishes her own sons, but also humanity as a whole, to overcome all strife between nations and race in this family spirit of God's children, and in the same way, to give internal strength to human associations which are just.¹⁰⁴

Not tying the Church to a certain political, economic, or social system gave it the flexibility to adapt to local conditions around the globe via the process of inculturation. Catholic theologian Dennis Doyle defines inculturation as “a process of engagement between the Christian Gospel and a particular culture. The term is intended conceptually both to safeguard the integrity of the Gospel and to encourage sensitivity to various cultural contexts.”¹⁰⁵ Twenty years later in 1985, Bergoglio clearly drew on this aspect of Vatican II when teaching at the Jesuit university Facultades de Filosofía y Teología de San Miguel in Argentina by organizing the first conference about the "evangelization of culture and the inculturation of the gospel" in Latin America.¹⁰⁶ While an embrace of inculturation gave clergy like Bergoglio a powerful tool to evangelize a

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Dennis M. Doyle, “The Concept of Inculturation in Roman Catholicism: A Theological Consideration,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 30, no. 1 (2012): pp. 1-13, <https://doi.org/10.1353/cht.2012.0000>, 1.

¹⁰⁶ Juan Carlos Scannone, *La teología del pueblo: Raíces teológicas del papa Francisco* (Maliaño, ES: Sal Terrae, 2019), 207. In 2018 the Catholic News Agency (CNA) reported that Scannone most theologically influenced Bergoglio, the future Pope Francis. Elise Harris, “The Theological Formation of Pope Francis,” Catholic News Agency, March 17, 2018, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/37989/the-theological-formation-of-pope-francis>. Given Scannone’s arguments in *La teología del pueblo* and Pope Francis’s similar emphasis on the poor, but not via liberation theology, I agree with the CNA’s report in this regard. I will address the concept of *La teología del pueblo* later in this thesis.

tolerant Catholic universalism to nonbelievers and faithful alike, the dictatorships that took over Latin America throughout the 1970s would push how far the Church would adapt to a totalitarian sociopolitical context.

In the midst of Vatican II these challenges still lay far in the future for Latin American Catholics and the council continued its evangelical focus beyond inculturation. The Latin American historian John Schwaller argues that Vatican II defined the Church as the pilgrim people of God to imply “that the Church is the body of all the faithful, engaged in a journey of revelation moving toward the full and complete revelation of the kingdom of God.”¹⁰⁷ Pope Francis’s primary teacher while becoming a Jesuit in Argentina, the late Juan Carlos Scannone, wrote that “Vatican II was the first council to deal not only with directly religious topics, but also - in its pastoral constitution- with society, culture, politics, economics, and international relations, in the light of evangelism.”¹⁰⁸ Taken together, Schwaller’s and Scannone’s arguments reveal that the council aimed to bring the pilgrim people of God together in an all-encompassing evangelization mission moving towards the end goal of revelation. The key part of any such mission is how the evangelizers view the nonbelievers.

Vatican II redefined the Church’s relationship with non-Catholics as peoples to engage in dialogue. The council addressed the issue in *Nostra Aetate*, writing that:

In our time, when day by day mankind is being drawn closer together, and the ties between different peoples are becoming stronger, the Church examines more closely her relationship to non-Christian religions. In her task of promoting unity and love among men, indeed

¹⁰⁷ John Frederick Schwaller, *The History of the Catholic Church in Latin America: From Conquest to Revolution and Beyond* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2011), 228.

¹⁰⁸ Scannone, *La teología*, 192.

among nations, she considers above all in this declaration what men have in common and what draws them to fellowship.¹⁰⁹

Part of this reexamination meant the Church explicitly called for Catholics to respect the other two Abrahamic religions, Islam and Judaism, in *Nostra Aetate*.¹¹⁰ As part of this universal aim the Church openly condemned anti-Semitism and the notion of hereditary Jewish guilt for Christ's Passion.¹¹¹ The Church did not stop with Judaism and Islam in *Nostra Aetate*, but went on to declare that:

other religions found everywhere try to counter the restlessness of the human heart, each in its own manner, by proposing 'ways,' comprising teachings, rules of life, and sacred rites. The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men.¹¹²

A Catholic can encounter a ray of truth, but the question remains about what to do when seeing the sun from which the ray came. The council "exhort[ed] her sons" to not run from the light back into the Church's comforting shade, but rather encouraged them to engage "dialogue and

¹⁰⁹ Paul VI, "Nostra Aetate," October 28, 1965, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html.

¹¹⁰ For the point regarding respecting Muslims see the following portion of *Nostra Aetate*: "The Church regards with esteem also the Moslems... though they [Muslims] do not acknowledge Jesus as God, they revere Him as a prophet. They also honor Mary, His virgin Mother; at times they even call on her with devotion. In addition, they await the day of judgment when God will render their deserts to all those who have been raised up from the dead. Finally, they value the moral life and worship God especially through prayer, almsgiving and fasting."

¹¹¹ For the Church's vision on dialogue and unity with Jews see the following portion of *Nostra Aetate*: "Since the spiritual patrimony common to Christians and Jews is thus so great, this sacred synod wants to foster and recommend that mutual understanding and respect which is the fruit, above all, of biblical and theological studies as well as of fraternal dialogues. True, the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ; still, what happened in His passion cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today. Although the Church is the new people of God, the Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God, as if this followed from the Holy Scriptures. All should see to it, then, that in catechetical work or in the preaching of the word of God they do not teach anything that does not conform to the truth of the Gospel and the spirit of Christ. Furthermore, in her rejection of every persecution against any man, the Church, mindful of the patrimony she shares with the Jews and moved not by political reasons but by the Gospel's spiritual love, decries hatred, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism, directed against Jews at any time and by anyone. Besides, as the Church has always held and holds now, Christ underwent His passion and death freely, because of the sins of men and out of infinite love, in order that all may reach salvation. It is, therefore, the burden of the Church's preaching to proclaim the cross of Christ as the sign of God's all-embracing love and as the fountain from which every grace flows."

¹¹² Paul VI, "Nostra Aetate."

collaboration with the followers of other religions, carried out with prudence and love and in witness to the Christian faith and life.”¹¹³ At Vatican II, the Church jumped off the historical diving board into new evangelical waters to find an updated more tolerant version of its faith conducive to the twentieth century.

While the Church engaged in ecumenical efforts, it also warned of the threat nonbelievers and the faithful posed to Catholicism if they engaged with it improperly. When it addressed the rise of atheism the Church did not absolve the atheists themselves of blame, but simultaneously blamed the faithful “to the extent that they neglect their own training in the faith, or teach erroneous doctrine, or are deficient in their religious, moral or social life, they must be said to conceal rather than reveal the authentic face of God and religion.”¹¹⁴ Catholics who did not engage atheists with a firm foundation in their faith risked fueling the rise of the phenomena the Church wished to stop. Despite its evangelical focus, Vatican II saw nonbelievers as a threat to the Catholic faith if not properly engaged.

I conclude this section with the council’s strong endorsement of religious freedom as one of the central duties of government because this topic will loom in the background throughout Latin American Catholicism’s meeting with dictatorships in the 1970s. The council declared via the document *Dignitatis Humanae* that

the human person has a right to religious freedom. This freedom means that all men are to be immune from coercion on the part of individuals or of social groups and of any human power, in such ways that no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his own beliefs, whether privately or publicly, whether alone or in association with others,

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Paul VI, “Gaudium et Spes.”

within due limits... it would clearly transgress the limits set to its [government's] power, were it to presume to command or inhibit acts that are religious.¹¹⁵

It is notable that *Dignitatis Humanae* addresses religious freedom without continually singling out Catholicism. The document pursues religious freedom as a right for all humanity, including nonbelievers, giving further evidence that Vatican II aimed for a tolerant Catholic universalism. The council leaves open for discussion the meaning of the phrase within due limits. Where would the Church draw the line? Would outwardly pro-Catholic policies at the expense of other religions by governments like the Argentine military junta in 1978¹¹⁶ be “within due limits”? This is the type of question that Bergoglio and Latin American Catholicism would need to wrestle with as Vatican II met the real world.

IV. The Tsunami Makes Landfall

The Vatican II tsunami made landfall in the Catholic Church right as Bergoglio neared the end stages of his Jesuit formation. Bergoglio spent the early 1960s as a Jesuit studying in Chile before returning to Argentina in 1963 to teach at the Colegio de la Inmaculada Concepción de Santa Fe. By the end of the decade, he received his licentiate in theology and continued along the path of a Jesuit priest. He rose to be the head of all Jesuits in Argentina by 1973 and served another three-year term beginning in 1976 amid a deteriorating social situation in the country.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ Paul VI, “*Dignitatis Humanae*,” December 7, 1965, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651207_dignitatis-humanae_en.html.

¹¹⁶ The junta forced religions other than Catholicism to register with the government, which had already banned three religious sects. Unregistered religions could be banned and the government could reject a religion’s registration application, effectively banning it from the country. “Religions in Argentina Ordered by Government to Register or Face Ban,” *The New York Times*, February 15, 1978, <https://www.nytimes.com/1978/02/15/archives/religions-in-argentina-ordered-by-government-to-register-or-face.html>.

¹¹⁷ Aguilar, *Pope Francis*, 53-58.

In order to understand Latin American Catholics' relationship, and in particular that of Bergoglio, to nonbelievers in the post-Vatican II era of the 1970s, when dictatorships blossomed in his home continent, one must take a step back into post World War II Argentinian history. Juan Perón came to power in Argentina in 1946 and was overthrown in 1955 by a military coup. His time in power initially saw a heavy Keynesian influence via state nationalization of key industries like gas and foreign owned railroads. The labor movement that played a crucial part in Perón's rise to power did succumb to his influence via handpicked leadership, but always remained an active expression of the workers that never fully capitulated to the state. The two sides enjoyed a mutually beneficial relationship throughout much of the late 1940s as material prosperity grew in Argentina. Juan Perón's wife Eva, often known as Evita, became a beloved figure among the working classes and served as a successful liaison between the unions and the government until her death in 1952, which happened to correspond with a period of economic crisis in Argentina. Three years later a military coup overthrew Perón, though his eponymous political thought, Peronism, would play a major role in Argentina politics through the twentieth and into the twenty-first century.¹¹⁸ Between 1955 and 1966 a series of minor coups and fragile electoral governments ruled Argentina.

The year 1966 set in motion the chain of events that would set the stage for the atmosphere in which Argentine Catholics like Bergoglio would operate in the 1970s and 1980s. In 1966 another military coup took control of the Argentinian state with General Juan Carlos Onganía taking power until 1970. The junta wished to suppress communists and targeted

¹¹⁸ Luis Alberto Romero, *A History of Argentina in the Twentieth Century*, trans. James P. Brennan (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2013), 91-130.

the universities, leading to the flight of intellectuals from the country. The new government also censored personal expression such as long hair and miniskirts with overt support from the Catholic Church in Argentina, which regarded such modern trends as emblematic of Communism.¹¹⁹ The late 1960s brought protest and general dissatisfaction with wealth distribution to Argentina. The Latin American bishops declared their particular concern for the impoverished in society in 1967. A year later Pope Paul VI attending the Latin American Bishops' Council in Medellín, Colombia, lent a sprinkle of legitimacy to these bishops' ideas that became known as liberation theology. As the military junta began to lose power armed revolutionary groups across the political spectrum, including Catholics, sprung up in Argentina. The varied activism against the junta found a collective face in the return of Juan Perón to the presidency in 1973, though he ruled for less than a year due to his death in 1974. Isabel Martínez de Perón, Juan Perón's third wife, assumed the presidency after his death until another coup in 1976 forced her into exile.¹²⁰

The military junta that took over in 1976 undertook a series of "disappearances" that entailed the arrest and subsequent torture of Argentinian citizens, often to death, in what became known as *La guerra sucia* (the Dirty War). The state often publicly arrested citizens at their workplace or home to intimidate the witnesses. Throughout *La guerra sucia* mothers of the "disappeared" began protesting in the Plaza de Mayo across from the presidential palace. They became known as the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo. Despite their resistance to the junta, the state of free expression in Argentina became one where, in the translated words of historian Luis

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 174-175.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 184-198.

Alberto Romero, "only the voice of the state remained, addressing itself to an atomized collection of inhabitants."¹²¹

Catholics in Latin American countries, including the Church itself, responded to the military juntas that plagued the region in the 1970s and 1980s through varying degrees of collaboration and resistance. Unlike other Latin American countries such as Chile, the Argentine Church leadership in the 1970s was primarily conservative and outnumbered the progressive bishops. The absence of an effective Christian Democratic Party in Argentina, unlike in Chile, prevented any viable Catholic challenge to the Church leadership's control of the line between legitimate and illegitimate Catholic political behavior while the junta reigned (1976-1983).¹²² Chile and Argentina demonstrate how Latin American Catholics interpreted Vatican II's "within due limits" clause according to the Church's on the ground leadership. The vision of a tolerant Catholic universalism espoused by Vatican II found its voice in Chilean resistance to authoritarianism. In the Argentine case the Church's decision to tenuously cooperate, a form of dialogue, with the junta showed the threat dictatorships posed to the Church when it did not properly engage with the state as the latter could outlaw the former.

It was in this context that Bergoglio entered the most controversial period of his life while leading the Argentine Jesuits. The Argentinean bishops did visit the junta leadership over twenty times between 1976-1983 to press them on their human rights abuses. Ultimately, these men failed to lead by not publicly opposing the junta.¹²³ When Bergoglio led the Jesuits in Argentina,

¹²¹ Ibid., 184-198 217-219. Quote from 219.

¹²² Jeffrey L. Klaiber, *The Church, Dictatorships, and Democracy in Latin America* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), 76-79. It is plausible, but not supported with definitive numerical data, that the Catholic populace viewed the Chilean Church's route more favorably since applicants for clerical vocations also increased when Augusto Pinochet wielded power. Schwaller, *The History*, 241-243.

¹²³ Klaiber, *The Church*, 79-80. Klaiber was a Jesuit priest who lived in Peru for over 35 years and worked there as an academic throughout much of his career.

the group remained split among various political loyalties. Some had ties to the military dictatorship while others remained loyal to various rebel groups. No Jesuit died in the Dirty War and Bergoglio helped dozens escape. The two Jesuits, Franz Jalics and Orland Yorio, that suffered torture each refused Bergoglio's orders to return from their shantytown. In part, his order meant to reign in the shantytown priests and ensure they remained committed Jesuits rather than effectively breaking off from the order on their accord.¹²⁴ Controversy remains over Bergoglio's role in the two Jesuit priests' cases. One side, including Nobel Peace Prize winner Adolfo Esquivel, claims that Bergoglio was not complicit with the dictatorship, while others like Horacio Verbitsky, a left-wing investigative journalist and former guerrilla fighter, take a diametrically opposed view.¹²⁵ In Bergoglio's own recollections of this period he said that "at the beginning [of the dictatorship], little or nothing was known; we [society] became aware gradually. I myself, as a priest, knew that something serious was happening and that there were a lot of prisoners, but I realized it was more than that only later on."¹²⁶

Bergoglio occupied a leadership position in society during the junta, but his experience only makes clearer how mainstream Latin American Catholicism viewed nonbelievers¹²⁷ as a threat to

¹²⁴ Berryman, "The Argentine," 60-61.

¹²⁵ Ibid. Esquivel still offers pointed yet measured criticisms of Bergoglio's efforts regarding his time as leader of the Jesuits in Argentina, specifically with regard to the two priests. For example, see Juan Ignacio Irigaray, "El Nobel de la Paz Pérez Esquivel defiende al Papa durante la dictadura," *El Mundo*, March 14, 2013, <https://www.elmundo.es/america/2013/03/14/argentina/1363278494.html>. For other views on the role of Bergoglio in the case of the two Jesuit priests see Juan Eduardo Bonnin, "Scenes of Explicit Catholicism: The Pope and the Political Meanings of Religion in Argentina," trans. Philip Derbyshire, *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 22, no. 2 (2013): pp. 123-138, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569325.2013.803953>, 129-130. Aguilar, *Pope Francis*, 68-69, 71-82.

¹²⁶ Rubin and Ambrogetti, *Pope Francis*, 188. To his credit, Bergoglio lists the other priests who did understand and take action on page 189. Chapter 14 of the book is Bergoglio's defense of his actions during the Argentinian dictatorship along with the thoughts and recollections of Dr. Alicia Olivera, an Argentinean human rights attorney during the dictatorship and friend of Bergoglio.

¹²⁷ The Argentinian dictator Jorge Rafael Videla (1976-1981) claimed to be Catholic but relentlessly persecuted select Catholics. Gustavo Morello, "Catholics and the Torture Chamber," OUP Blog, June 4, 2015, <https://blog.oup.com/2015/06/argentina-catholic-church-dirty-war/>. The true extent of his piety is not definitively known, but I will treat him as a nonbeliever as he led a government that intentionally persecuted various Church figures such as selected priests.

the faith when not properly engaged. Like most individuals living under dictatorships, Bergoglio faced a threat to his person if he outwardly resisted the junta. By failing to provide a public backbone of resistance to authoritarianism like in Chile, the Church leadership in Argentina endangered the spirit of Vatican II by improper engagement with the nonbelieving authorities. *Gaudium et Spes* admonished all of humanity “to overcome all strife between nations and race in this family spirit of God's children, and in the same way, to give internal strength to human associations which are just.”¹²⁸ The Argentine branch of the Church gave internal strength to the junta, an unjust human association, by outwardly appearing to lend it legitimacy. Nonbelieving authorities posed a threat to the Church by wielding power in an unjust manner and advocating for the Church to support their acts or face persecution.¹²⁹ This analysis of dictatorship and the Church in Latin America would be incomplete without the discussion of liberation theology to which we now turn.

Liberation theologians often took explicit stances against dictatorship and provided a more radical interpretation of Vatican II regarding social justice and nonbelievers. The soil of liberation theology gained a plentiful boost when the Conference of Latin American Bishops at Medellín, Colombia in 1968 paved the way for an acceptance of a Church social doctrine placing emphasis on the poor. In the words of historian Mario I. Aguilar, "what was initiated [at Medellín] was not a new academic or philosophical theology, but the transformation of the very structures and methods of the practice of theology. To be faithful and authentic, it was decided that Christian theology must spring from the spiritual experience of the believing community,

¹²⁸ Paul VI, “*Gaudium et Spes*.”

¹²⁹ Löwy Michael, *The War of Gods: Religion and Politics in Latin America* (New York, NY: Verso, 1996), 81-93. This section describes the Brazilian Church’s overarching resistance to their country’s dictatorship in the 1970s and 1980s after the Catholic hierarchy was initially disposed to cooperation with the junta in the 1960s.

grapple with its history and respond to its situation."¹³⁰ Liberation theology would draw on Medellín to emphasize the material situation of its predominantly poor adherents. Amongst the Church, the Jesuits responded swiftly to the Medellín Conference with internal reforms designed to respond to criticism that their heavy educational focus supported unequal social strata by focusing on teaching the rich children. Large numbers of Jesuits left their order, but those that stayed began to live among the poor and open churches and schools in the physical peripheries of society. Given that the Jesuits controlled the best educational institutions in South America, their reforms simultaneously began an attempt to reform society and the Church as a whole.¹³¹

Amidst this reformist atmosphere, priests such as the famed Gustavo Gutiérrez espoused liberation theology as a means to address the reality lived by the poor Catholic faithful. In the early 1970s Gutiérrez published his seminal work *A Theology of Liberation: History Politics and Salvation* in which he wrote that “the process of liberation requires the *active participation of the oppressed*... the realization emerges that it is the poor who must be the protagonists of their own liberation.”¹³² This view breaks from the Church’s historical emphasis on charity for the downtrodden to emphasize the poor’s ability to reform their own situation when given the opportunity in fair conditions. Gutiérrez sought to go even farther than simply emphasizing the poor population’s own potential when he wrote that “the denunciation of injustice implies the rejection of the use of Christianity to legitimize the established order. It likewise implies, in fact, that the Church has entered into conflict with those who wield power.”¹³³ This line of reasoning shows that the liberation theologians viewed the Church as a revolutionary institution to fight

¹³⁰ Aguilar, *Pope Francis*, 29.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 30-34.

¹³² Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, trans. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 113. Italics in the original.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 115.

worldwide injustice. In this respect they drew upon Vatican II's conception of the Church as a transnational agent of justice, but their polarizing Marxist inspired view of Catholicism's role in society turned the heads of clergy at the highest level.

The Polish Pope John Paul II came to St. Peter's throne in 1978 and marked a difficult time for liberation theologians. This man, deeply committed to the defeat of communism in Eastern Europe, did not share the Latin American liberation theologians positive view on Marxist social analysis. The Vatican punished prominent liberation theologians like the Brazilian Boff brothers throughout Latin America.¹³⁴ Rome tasked the intellectual heavyweight Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the future Pope Benedict XVI, with its official response to liberation theology. His 1984 document *Instruction on Certain Aspects of the "Theology of Liberation"* took liberation theologians Marxist roots to task. He wrote that:

Let us recall the fact that atheism and the denial of the human person, his liberty and rights, are at the core of the Marxist theory.... this misunderstanding of the spiritual nature of the person leads to a total subordination of the person to the collectivity, and thus to the denial of the principles of a social and political life which is in keeping with human dignity... If one holds that a person should not be the object of hate, it is claimed nevertheless that, if he belongs to the objective class of the rich, he is primarily a class enemy to be fought. Thus, the universality of love of neighbor and brotherhood become an eschatological principle, which will only have meaning for the 'new man', who arises out of the victorious revolution... the 'theologies of liberation,' which reserve credit for restoring to a place of honor the great texts of the prophets and of the Gospel in defense of the poor, go on to a disastrous confusion between the poor of the Scripture and the proletariat of Marx. In this way they pervert the Christian meaning of the poor, and they transform the fight for the rights of the poor into a class fight within the ideological perspective of the class struggle.¹³⁵

Ratzinger ruled that liberation theologians used conflict as a means to spread a perverted Christian faith. Ratzinger maintained Catholicism's hostile stance against the definitionally

¹³⁴ Maria Clara L. Bingemer, *Latin American Theology: Roots and Branches* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2016), 26-29. For a description of the life of Leonardo Boff see Schwaller, *The History*, 231-232.

¹³⁵ Joseph Ratzinger, "Instruction on Certain Aspects of the 'Theology of Liberation,'" August 6, 1984, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19840806_theology-liberation_en.html.

atheistic Communists in the midst of the Cold War. However, he did not categorically forbid using inspiration from Marxism as a means to inform one's understanding of the Gospel, but such analysis needed to remain subservient to Church teaching, not vice versa. Ratzinger left the door ajar that Vatican II opened for discussion with nonbelievers but also demonstrated the limits of dialogue. A Catholic dialogue with nonbelievers meant the faithful learning about, to borrow the Vatican II phrase, the rays of truth in other religions. Liberation theologians, in Ratzinger's view, mistook the Marxist ray of light for the sun and accordingly subordinated Church teaching to an intolerant atheistic universalism.¹³⁶

Despite the Vatican's preoccupation with liberation theology, it never gained a durable mass following in Latin America. Historian Michael Cook persuasively argued that the explicit mix of politics and religion by Liberationists did not fit what the vast majority of the Latin American poor wished to gain from the Catholic Church. From anecdotal examples, one sees that the Church's ostensible distance from the political realm provided solace for the poor. Liberationists removed that sentiment by consistently reminding the populace of the problems from which they sought relief.¹³⁷

Mainstream Latin American Catholicism did not entirely reject liberation theology but drew on the same central problem of inequality to critique the global capitalistic world order. For Bergoglio, this took the form of *la teología del pueblo*.¹³⁸ This philosophy took root as the sun

¹³⁶ It is worth noting that liberation theology in Latin America initially viewed the "other" primarily as the poor, with little regard for dialogue with other religious traditions, including Protestantism. Since the 1990s, ecumenical efforts gained steam in Latin America among liberation theologians. Central figures like Gustavo Gutiérrez now place interreligious dialogue as one of the leading contemporary issues facing the Catholic Church, while not discounting the necessity for a preferential option for the poor. Bingemer, *Latin American Theology*, 109-113.

¹³⁷ Michael Cook, *Ancient Religions, Modern Politics: The Islamic Case in Comparative Perspective* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 205-201.

¹³⁸ The English translation is the theology of the people, but this does not capture the full meaning of the term. *El pueblo*, which can also mean town or village, in this context carries with it an implication about communal social ties that the term people does not.

rose on the 1980s and the Church issued a document in 1981 entitled "The Catholic Church and the National Community" that endorsed a preference for democracy and represented a weakening of the junta's relationship with the Church.¹³⁹ With the junta's fall in 1983, democracy once again returned to Argentina with the election of President Raúl Alfonsín. He presided over a consolidation of Argentina's nascent democracy but lost the 1989 election to Carlos Saúl Menem due to hyperinflation and the associated social unrest.¹⁴⁰

La teología del pueblo took root amidst this sociopolitical context. It was a philosophical movement that stressed *el pueblo* in a distinct manner from Marxism. *La teología del pueblo* catered towards the poor by emphasizing, similar to liberation theology, their capacity to liberate themselves, but firmly rejected Marxist inspired violence. This theology fit well into the Peronist Argentinean sociopolitical atmosphere.¹⁴¹ Drawing on the Jesuit thought of Francisco Suárez, Scannone, Pope Francis's teacher in his early Jesuit years, explains that at the heart of *la teología del pueblo* is the belief that "humanity is not the sum of individuals each on their own, but is historically made up of diverse peoples, in reciprocal interrelation, each one subject of its own culture; God summons all who belong to these peoples to form his faithful people, which is the [Catholic] Church."¹⁴² Bergoglio drew on a similar conception of gathering diverse peoples by writing that "the superiors [in the Church] must implement, as soon as they can, this direct contact with the poor, knowing that there, in direct contact with the Christ's wounds, produces the sensitivity, apostolic action and, finally, structural change."¹⁴³ Bergoglio goes on to note that the human heart is the root of all structural change and the place where fighting

¹³⁹ Romero, *A History*, 238-239.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 285.

¹⁴¹ Samuel Gregg, "Understanding Pope Francis: Argentina, Economic Failure, and the Teología Del Pueblo," *The Independent Review* 21, no. 3 (2017): pp. 361-374, 367-371.

¹⁴² Scannone, *La teología*, 239.

¹⁴³ Jorge Mario Bergoglio, *Reflexiones espirituales sobre la vida apostólica* (Bilbao, ES: Mensajero, 2013), 279.

injustice must start.¹⁴⁴ This conception of change strikes at the heart of *la teología del pueblo*, a philosophy emphasizing the inclusion of society's marginalized in pursuit of a tolerant Catholic universalism. As the clock turned to the 1990s, *la teología del pueblo* needed to learn to operate in an increasingly neoliberal environment.

The Argentine President Menem firmly aligned himself with the prevailing neoliberal economic policies, free trade and an economic opening up for foreign investment, embodied by the United States government to try and fix the hyperinflation issue in the 1990s. He also endured bribery scandals that hurt his presidency.¹⁴⁵ Ultimately Menem failed to control the hyperinflation and by 2002, three years after he relinquished the presidency, annual inflation rested at a ludicrous twenty-one percent with half the country living below the poverty line. The economic crisis hit Buenos Aires particularly hard.¹⁴⁶ At the start of Menem's rule Bergoglio lived in the Argentina city of Córdoba from 1990 until 1992 as a result of his contentious leadership of the Argentinian Jesuits during the Dirty War.¹⁴⁷ Bergoglio became an auxiliary bishop of Buenos Aires in 1992 at the urging of the city's archbishop Antonio Quarracino, who pushed through bureaucratic objections to his appointment. Quarracino's noted dialogue with the Jews carried over into Bergoglio's work once he assumed Quarracino's position after his death in February 1998.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Romero, *A History*, 289-291.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 338-339.

¹⁴⁷ Ivereigh, "What We Still," 267. The extent to which this mini exile influenced Bergoglio's theology remains heavily debated.

¹⁴⁸ Aguilar, *Pope Francis*, 84-86, 96. To see the extent of Bergoglio's dialogue with Jews one can again turn to the forward written by Rabbi Abraham Skorka in Sergio Rubin and Francesca Ambrogetti, *Pope Francis: His Life in His Own Words* (New York, NY: G. P. Putnam's & Sons, 2013), xi-xv or Jorge Mario Bergoglio and Abraham Skorka, *On Heaven and Earth: Pope Francis on Faith, Family, and the Church in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Diego F. Rosenberg, trans. Alejandro Bermudez and Howard Goodman (New York, NY: Image, 2013)..

The Argentinean financial crisis of 2001-2002 created dire circumstances for the Catholic faithful in the country and their tolerant universalist project embodied in *la teología del pueblo*. Two years before the crisis, the tolerant Catholic universalism project remained alive and well as Bergoglio wrote of “the need to establish in all areas a space for serious dialogue, effective, not merely formal or distracting. An exchange that destroys prejudices and builds, based on a common search and sharing, and strives for the interaction of wills in favor of a common task or a shared project.”¹⁴⁹ During Bergoglio’s time as Cardinal in Buenos Aires, Argentina defaulted on its national debt in late 2001, which led to rioting and looting in the city. The philosopher Massimo Borghesi cites Bergoglio in January 2002 referring to the default events as “economic-financial terrorism”¹⁵⁰ since individuals literally saw their life savings flowing out of the country’s banks to pay foreign owed debt. While Argentina continued to experience the fallout of its debt default in 2003, Bergoglio kept alive the *la teología del pueblo* and the push for a tolerant Catholic universalism by writing:

The parable of the Good Samaritan shows us the initiatives that can rebuild a community when carried out by men and women who feel and act as true partners (in the old sense of fellow citizens). Men and women who make it as their own and accompany the fragility of others; who do not allow a society of exclusion to be built, but who draw closer—become neighbors—and raise and rehabilitate the fallen, so that the Good will be held in Common.¹⁵¹

Bergoglio’s usage of the parable of the Good Samaritan also shows that those nonbelievers, like the Samaritan, can aid the Catholic faithful in creating a more just society in the spirit of Vatican II, even in the face of cataclysmic economic collapse.¹⁵² Above all else, it was this compassion

¹⁴⁹ Jorge Mario Bergoglio, *In Your Eyes I See My Words: Homilies and Speeches from Buenos Aires, Volume 1: 1999-2004*, ed. Antonio Spadaro, trans. Marina A Herrera (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2019), 22. Emphasis removed.

¹⁵⁰ Massimo Borghesi, *Catholic Discordance: Neoconservatism vs. the Field Hospital Church of Pope Francis*, trans. Barry Hudock (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press Academic, 2021), 140-144.

¹⁵¹ Bergoglio, *In Your Eyes*, 197.

¹⁵² Bergoglio went on to encourage dialogue with nonbelievers even after Argentina passed through its period of economic difficulty via his later homilies. For an example see: Jorge Mario Bergoglio, *In Your Eyes I See My*

for the other that Bergoglio would carry over into the next journey of his life and that of the whole Catholic Church.

V. Jorge Bergoglio Meet Francis: Ascending Saint Peter's Throne

In 2013, Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio became the leader of the Catholic Church as Pope Francis. He made history as the first Pope from the Americas and the inaugural Jesuit to hold the office. This history making man would bring *la teología del pueblo* and the project of Catholic universalism to the heart of the Church. In November 2013, Pope Francis released *Evangelii Gaudium* in which he continued his career long emphasis on the downtrodden by writing that it “is essential to draw near to new forms of poverty and vulnerability, in which we are called to recognize the suffering Christ, even if this appears to bring us no tangible and immediate benefits. I think of the homeless, the addicted, refugees, indigenous peoples, the elderly who are increasingly isolated and abandoned, and many others.”¹⁵³ *Evangelii Gaudium* gave theological might to the Pope's attempts to place the Church as the central agent of justice, even for nonbelievers, in the world. In July 2013, for example, while visiting the island of Lampedusa, filled with migrants reaching Italy, Pope Francis celebrated Mass with objects such as the lectern constructed out of materials from the refugees' boats. His homily focused on Church unity and solidarity with immigrants regardless of their religious creed, a germane message since Muslims in the audience began Ramadan that same day.¹⁵⁴ Francis went further towards addressing

Words: Homilies and Speeches from Buenos Aires, Volume 3: 2009-2013, ed. Antonio Spadaro, trans. Marina A. Herrera (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2021), 168.

¹⁵³ Francis, “*Evangelii Gaudium*,” November 24, 2013, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

¹⁵⁴ R. Tina Catania, “Making Immigrants Visible in Lampedusa: Pope Francis, Migration, and the State,” *Italian Studies* 70, no. 4 (2015): pp. 465-486, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00751634.2015.1120951>, 476.

nonbelievers in *Evangelii Gaudium* and said that “as believers, we [Catholics] also feel close to those who do not consider themselves part of any religious tradition, yet sincerely seek the truth, goodness and beauty which we believe have their highest expression and source in God. We consider them as precious allies in the commitment to defending human dignity, in building peaceful coexistence between peoples and in protecting creation.”¹⁵⁵ Francis instructed Catholics to properly engage with nonbelievers as a source of dialogue in the Church’s self-claimed project of defending human dignity. As part of the tolerant Catholic universalism project, Pope Francis’s pontificate marks an ongoing effort to dialogue with nonbelievers and carry out the evangelical vision at the heart of both the Second Vatican Council and *la teología del pueblo*.¹⁵⁶

VI. Conclusion

In the post Second Vatican Council Catholic Church nonbelievers served as a means to achieve a tolerant Catholic universalism. It is through the debates and movements after the council that the Catholic Church in Latin America figured out what a tolerant Catholic universalism meant in practice. This ongoing project addressed how the faithful should interpret Marxism and increasingly comes with a Latin American touch influenced by the Argentine Pope Francis. The faithful’s leader lived through the turbulence of the 1970s-1990s in his home country and brought his tolerant perspective on nonbelievers to the papacy. His efforts mark an

¹⁵⁵ Francis, “*Evangelii Gaudium*.”

¹⁵⁶ Francis, “*Fratelli Tutti*,” October 3, 2020,

https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html. *Fratelli Tutti* reinforces the positions articulated in *Evangelii Gaudium*. For example, under the section in *Fratelli Tutti* entitled *Globalization and Progress Without a Shared Roadmap* Pope Francis quotes the Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together that he signed with Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Ahmad Al-Tayyeb in 2019. His remarks regarding one’s homeland and belonging to a larger human family speak to the universalist project as in *Evangelii Gaudium*.

ongoing struggle in the Catholic Church over its future role in the world. Thousands of miles away, Christians in China also debate their place in the world. It is to their situation that we now turn.

Addressing the Elephant in the Room: Chinese Protestantism

I. Introduction

Christianity in China began as a foreign religion imported by missionaries such as the Jesuit Matteo Ricci and the voluminous amounts of Protestant evangelists that accompanied the imperial powers after the First (1839-1842) and Second (1856-1860) Opium Wars. Upon the collapse of the Qing Dynasty in 1912, China descended into warring states over the coming decade. The subsequent civil wars between the Guomindang and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as well as World War II brought further instability to China. Within this chapter, I argue that Chinese Protestants belonging to state sponsored institutions viewed non-believers as a fact of life whom they needed to engage. On the other hand, their underground counterparts worshipping outside of state supervision saw nonbelievers as corrupt entities unworthy of their submission. Unlike Latin American Catholicism or United States Evangelical Protestantism, nonbelievers were *the* central question for Chinese Protestantism given their country's ruling party being definitionally atheistic. These nonbelievers tied into the faithful's role in creating the changing vision of the Chinese nation put forth by the CCP.

I will begin with an overview of the chaos of the 1920s through 1940s in China, out of which the first generation of contemporary indigenous Chinese Protestant preachers like Wang Mingdao emerged. We then move to an analysis of Chinese Protestantism from when the Chinese Communist Party claimed control of mainland China in 1949 to 1966, the start of the Cultural Revolution. After focusing on the aforementioned preachers, my analysis will largely shift to address the state-sponsored Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM), also known as the Three-Self Church (TSC). This focus reflects the more readily available source base for the state-sponsored institution as well as the TSPM's nuanced view of nonbelievers, primarily the CCP.

The next section centers on the faithful in the period immediately following Mao's death to the present. I choose to focus on Protestantism rather than Catholicism in China because of the former's rapid growth since 1949.¹⁵⁷ The stories of these two faiths in China are intertwined but substantially different due to the hierarchical structure of the Catholic Church and its turbulent relationship with the CCP.

II. Chaos and Christ

The end of the Qing Empire in 1912 marked the last time an imperial dynasty ruled China and the beginning of a chaotic period of war and revolution that shaped the first generation of modern indigenous Chinese Protestant preachers. The perennial revolutionary, Sun Yat-sen (1866-1925), found himself thrust into the role of the new nation's president in 1912 for a grand total of forty-five days before handing over power to the military general Yuan Shikai, who failed to revive the monarchy with himself at the helm and ruled until 1916.¹⁵⁸ The Treaty of Versailles granted Japan the rights to railroads in Shandong and other infringements on China's sovereignty, leading to the escalation of Social Darwinist fears among the Chinese populace that their country would soon be erased from the world map. This treaty led to the May Fourth Movement, a protest started by Chinese students in 1919 in opposition to the agreement, which ignited a deeply held national desire to refute foreign imperialism in China.¹⁵⁹ The following decade of the 1920s saw the birth of the CCP and the launch of the Northern Expedition in 1924 by the Guomindang with the aim of unifying China, led by Sun Yat-sen's protege Chiang Kai-

¹⁵⁷ Vincent Goossaert and David A. Palmer, *The Religious Question in Modern China* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 387.

¹⁵⁸ Bergère Marie-Claire, *Sun Yat-sen*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 213.

¹⁵⁹ Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, Third (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2013), 277, 286-295.

shek, in conjunction with their tenuous Communist allies.¹⁶⁰ The culmination of these efforts resulted in Kai-shek theoretically unifying much of modern day China and subsequently purging his CCP allies. In response, the CCP launched a guerrilla war that lasted for ten years until popular pressure and the Xi'an Incident in 1936 forced Kai-shek to turn and fight Japan as part of a fraught Second United Front with the CCP. After the Allied victory in WWII, in which Kai-shek's China played a part, the CCP and Guomindang resumed their civil war, culminating with the Mao Zedong led CCP victory in 1949.

In these chaotic years the next generation Protestant clergy came of age. Even in this hostile atmosphere, Christian men and women like Chen Chonggui, a future founder of the TSPM, became Christian.¹⁶¹ He rose to lead seminaries in China primarily throughout the 1930s and 1940s. Missionary schooling provided Chen an avenue for social mobility to rise from the blistering poverty of his forefathers.¹⁶² Chen's story reflects the larger trend that in the early twentieth century Protestantism was a religion of the poor in Chinese society. Chen was not the only future high-profile figure to practice Christianity in that time period. Eventual TSPM leader Wu Yaozhong, also known as Y.T. Wu, converted to Christianity in 1918 at the age of twenty-five before going to study in the United States at Union Theological Seminary and Columbia University for three years beginning in 1924.¹⁶³

In addition to future TSPM leaders, the 1920s and 1930s witnessed the intellectual formation of influential independent Chinese Protestants that pushed a millenarian version of the faith. One

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 310.

¹⁶¹ Chen Chonggui became Christian in the early 1900s though the hostile environment towards Christianity in that period mirrored that of the 1920s.

¹⁶² Daniel Bays, "Foreign Missions and Indigenous Protestant Leaders in China, 1920-1955: Identity and Loyalty in an Age of Powerful Nationalism," in *Missions, Nationalism, and the End of Empire*, ed. Brian Stanley and Alaine Low (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 2003), 162.

¹⁶³ Gao Wangzhi, "Y. T. Wu: A Christian Leader Under Communism," in *Christianity in China: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present*, ed. Daniel H. Bays (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 339.

of the most fervent preachers was Wang Mingdao. A month before Wang Mingdao's birth in 1900 his father hanged himself due to fears of the Boxer Rebellion. This action caused Wang to grow up impoverished in Beijing, surrounded by prostitution and gambling.¹⁶⁴ When it came time to go to university in 1919, his obligation to stay near his mother and sister in Beijing dashed his educational dreams. Wang then took a poorly paid job at a Presbyterian sponsored school in Baoding, which subsequently fired him in January 1921 for clashing with superiors.¹⁶⁵ Given this difficult upbringing and early career struggles, it is no wonder that Wang wrote that "the Christian life may be compared to rowing upstream"¹⁶⁶ and that Christians "must be prepared for self denial."¹⁶⁷ His message for the faithful assumed that the religious environment in China, and the nonbelievers who determined it, would remain hostile to Protestants. Wang chose to focus on the impact of this situation on the faithful rather than harpoon nonbelievers. However, he viewed these nonbelievers as part of the small beginnings from which "all calamities such as wars develop."¹⁶⁸ The confident Wang Mingdao remained assured of the truth of his faith, which would soon be put to the test under Japanese occupation.

In 1939 Wang Mingdao disobeyed an order from the occupying Japanese forces to publish a set of propaganda in his periodical the *Spiritual Food Quarterly*. Surprisingly, the Japanese did not imprison him on account of this brazen disobedience.¹⁶⁹ This act demonstrates that Wang Mingdao viewed the Japanese nonbelievers as unworthy of his congregation's submission. It

¹⁶⁴ Lian Xi, *Redeemed by Fire: The Rise of Popular Christianity in Modern China* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 111-113.

¹ *Ibid.*, 113-114.

¹⁶⁶ Wong Ming-dao, *Spiritual Food*, trans. Arthur Reynolds (Southampton, Hants: Mayflower Christian Books, 1983), 32. These translated passages by Arthur Reynolds come from *Spiritual Food Quarterly*, which Wang Mingdao actively published in the 1930s and 1940s. Reynolds does not give selected dates for each selected passage.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 135.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁶⁹ Wong Ming-dao, *A Stone Made Smooth*, trans. Arthur Reynolds (Southampton, Hants: Mayflower Christian Books, 1984), 210-214.

remains plausible that even if the Japanese forces were Christian that Wang would have opposed their orders out of a sense of Chinese patriotism. Nevertheless, his refusal to submit to the nonbelievers rooted itself in his Christian faith, implicitly bringing the nonbelieving aspect of the Japanese troops into the calculus behind Wang's disobedience. After the start of further Japanese offensives in China, Wang Mingdao doubled down on his Christian message of otherworldly salvation.¹⁷⁰ Historian Lian Xi argued that the certainty of Wang's fundamentalist Protestant faith appealed to the Chinese people suffering from decades of war with their only remaining hope seeming to be divine salvation.¹⁷¹ Michael Cook's argument, which I cited in the last chapter, that the Liberationists' failures were in part because they continually reminded the Latin American Catholic faithful of the burdens from which they sought relief strengthens Lian Xi's claim.¹⁷² As in Latin America, the Protestant faithful following Wang sought relief from their sufferings through the hope of divine salvation. Wang succeeded where the Liberationists failed and provided the necessary ostensible distance of the church from the political realm to provide the faithful relief from the daily struggle of poverty and war through divine salvation. The success of the religious movement depended on how well the leaders embraced that hope for relief while addressing real world challenges but not consistently reminding the faithful of their misery.

The 1930s and 1940s also marked the decline of foreign funding for churches in China.

Denomination churches in China garnered nearly sixty-six percent of their income from Western

¹⁷⁰ D. E. Mungello, "Reinterpreting the History of Christianity in China," *The Historical Journal* 55, no. 2 (2012): pp. 533-552, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0018246x11000574>, 547. Wang Mingdao notoriously despised liberal faith organizations like the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) and even classified them as nonbelievers. For further explanation on this relationship see Xi, *Redeemed by Fire*, 117-118.

¹⁷¹ Xi, *Redeemed by Fire*, 130.

¹⁷² For Cook's argument see Cook, *Ancient Religions*, 205-211.

missions during the initial stages of World War II.¹⁷³ This meant that the Japanese occupation of large swaths of China in the late 1930s and early 1940s paralyzed these churches as their sources of funding dried up and communication networks out of the country broke down. After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, any remaining Western missionaries in Japanese occupied China found themselves in internment camps.¹⁷⁴ In contrast, the independent Chinese preachers and churches not tied to Western funding survived World War II as unscathed as possible given the wartime circumstances.¹⁷⁵

The changing geopolitical situation of the 1920s through the 1940s saw the intellectual formation of Protestant preachers Wang Mingdao, Y.T. Wu, and Chen Chonggui. As the CCP began to concentrate power at the end of this period, the paths of these three individuals would demonstrate the possible routes for the future of Chinese Protestantism.

III. Christianity Under Chairman Mao

Mao Zedong's reign marked a period when the state could finally exert its will over the Chinese populace and demand that the Christian faithful make choices about whether to work with the new government. In the early 1950s, before their destruction at the hands of Mao's political campaigns, independent Protestant groups accounted for over two hundred thousand followers in China, roughly twenty percent of all Protestants in the country.¹⁷⁶ As one of the most prominent of these preachers, Wang Mingdao made his choice by writing a 1955 article

¹⁷³ Xi, *Redeemed by Fire*, 179-180.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 179-180.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 187-190.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 202.

entitled "We, Because of Faith" that criticized the TSPM as a group of nonbelievers.¹⁷⁷ It was remarkable that Wang stayed out of prison before 1955 since the escalation of the Korean War, in conjunction with the Three and Five Anti Campaigns in 1951 and 1952, led to a pressure filled environment that urged Protestant pastors to sign the Three-Self Manifesto to signify their cut with foreign religious groups and loyalty to the CCP.¹⁷⁸ Wang's subsequent imprisonment in 1955¹⁷⁹ for writing this article showed how his attitude of nonbelievers as unworthy remained consistent with his actions under Japanese occupation regardless of the nonbelieving organization's political or ethnic affiliation. After about a year in prison, Wang signed a confession writing that "using the excuse of theological differences I was always stirring up believers against unbelievers, believers against the Government, and creating opposition."¹⁸⁰ Shortly after he recanted his confession and remained imprisoned until the CCP released him in 1980. The intellectual giant of Chinese Christianity that was Wang Mingdao suffered like millions of others during Mao Zedong's various campaigns and purges but retained his unflinching conviction in the righteousness of his faith and view of nonbelievers.

While Wang Mingdao suffered in prison camps, Y.T. Wu and Chen Chonggui aimed to take a different route by collaborating with the CCP via founding the TSPM. Before delving into their stories, I make the brief point that I follow Nathan Faries in rejecting narratives of a good underground church and bad collaborationist TSPM.¹⁸¹ The nature of the TSPM's relationship to

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 200.

¹⁷⁸ Daniel H. Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 159-160.

¹⁷⁹ Xi, *Redeemed by Fire*, 201.

¹⁸⁰ Wang Ming-tao, "Wang Ming-Tao's 'Self-Examination,'" in *Documents of the Three-Self Movement: Source Materials for the Study of the Protestant Church in Communist China* (New York, NY: National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA, 1963), 118. I do not think that Wang would have used the term unbelievers as different from nonbelievers.

¹⁸¹ For Faries' argument see Nathan Faries, *The "Inscrutably Chinese" Church: How Narratives and Nationalism Continue to Divide Christianity* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010), 22.

the CCP and questions of its responsibility in serving as an accomplice to mass campaigns of state-sponsored persecution remains complex. It is, however, analytically unhelpful to view TSPM church members as duped into their religious beliefs while the underground faithful remain a beacon of "true" Chinese Christianity.

The TSPM began as a means for the faithful to deal with the nonbelieving CCP that appeared to end the political chaos through which members of Y.T. Wu and Chen Chonggui's generation lived. The Three-Self name came from Rufus Anderson and Henry Venn, both nineteenth-century missionaries intent on creating native African and Asian Christian churches that were self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating.¹⁸² It is highly ironic that in order to officially sever the influence of foreign missionaries the CCP chose to create an institution premised on the ideas of the individuals epitomizing the project they wished to end.¹⁸³

To start this project in 1950 several pastors including Chen and Y.T. Wu signed the Direction of Endeavor for Chinese Christianity in the Construction of New China, more commonly known as the Three-Self Manifesto (TSM). They declared their purpose in writing the document was "to heighten our [Chinese Christians] vigilance against imperialism, to make known the clear political stand of Christians in New China, [and] to hasten the building of a Chinese church whose affairs are managed by the Chinese themselves."¹⁸⁴ With this document the TSPM ship sailed from port straight into the maelstrom of the 1950s and 1960s. Land reform campaigns

¹⁸² Christie Chui-Shan Chow and Joseph Tse-Hei Lee, "Covert and Overt Activism: Christianity in 1950s Coastal China," *Frontiers of History in China* 11, no. 4 (2016): pp. 579-599, <https://doi.org/10.3868/s020-005-016-0034-9>, 580.

¹⁸³ K.H. Ting, the leader of the TSPM from 1981-1996, saw no irony in this history. For his view see K. H. Ting, *A Chinese Contribution to Ecumenical Theology: Selected Writings of Bishop K.H. Ting*, ed. Janice Wickeri and Philip Wickeri (Geneva, CH: WCC Publications, 2002), 64.

¹⁸⁴ "Direction of Endeavor for Chinese Christianity in the Construction of New China," in *Documents of the Three-Self Movement: Source Materials for the Study of the Protestant Church in Communist China* (New York, NY: National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA, 1963), 19.

initiated by Mao in the early 1950s eliminated the physical land holdings of many rural Christian communities.¹⁸⁵ These campaigns had a more devastating effect on other religions like Buddhism, whose monks and nuns relied heavily on the rent produced from their landed temple complexes.¹⁸⁶ As Chen Chonggui's story at the beginning of this chapter demonstrated, Christianity was the religion of the poor in China. Though the elimination of churches' lands was not helpful for Protestants, it did not substantially disrupt the congregations' economic model, gathering meager financial donations from the faithful, compared to Buddhism.¹⁸⁷

Chen Chonggui's life after signing the TSM demonstrates the careful tightrope that even TSPM leadership walked with the nonbelieving CCP. Chen voiced criticism of the CCP's crackdown on religious believers in the early 1950s during the Hundred Flowers Campaign (1956-1957). The CCP's Anti-Rightist Campaign (1957-1959) that followed rewarded Chen with denunciations and the stripping of his TSPM leadership position. However, he was spared the brutality of the forced labor camp and died in 1963.¹⁸⁸ Chen's situation epitomizes a broader trend in the late 1950s in Chinese Christianity. At the start of the Great Leap Forward, the CCP "re-educated" TSPM clergy and sent most of them to labor camps, leaving the Protestant faithful without ministers and resulting in over ninety percent of churches closing in Beijing and Shanghai.¹⁸⁹ TSPM members like Chen believed that they needed to engage with the nonbelieving CCP as an attempt to create a China that would not fall into the chaos of the past.

¹⁸⁵ Chow and Lee, "Covert and Overt," 583.

¹⁸⁶ Xiaoxuan Wang, *Maoism and Grassroots Religion: The Communist Revolution and the Reinvention of Religious Life in China* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2020), 41-44.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 46-49.

¹⁸⁸ Bays, "Foreign Missions," 159-161. The early 1990s witnessed a rehabilitation of Chen by the TSPM.

¹⁸⁹ Goossaert and Palmer, *The Religious Question*, 161-162.

Even for these individuals, criticizing their nonbelieving CCP counterparts came with substantial risk, including death.

The leadership of Chen's colleague Y.T. Wu during this time demonstrates the TSPM's aforementioned view of nonbelievers. Wu returned to his alma mater, Union Theological Seminary, in 1937 to study under the left-wing theologians Reinhold Niebuhr and Henry Frederick Ward, leading to speculation that this time period influenced his decision to collaborate with the CCP.¹⁹⁰ Two years before signing the TSM Wu already interpreted history and religion through a modified Marxist lens by stating, for example, that "the religious revolution created Protestantism, and the industrial revolution created capitalism. What Protestantism opposed was the dogmatism and tyranny of Roman feudalism, and what the industrial revolution smashed was that feudalism."¹⁹¹ By 1951 Wu took his views to the presidency of TSPM, a post he would hold through 1979, though the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) effectively cut his career short.

Wu's time as TSPM president marked a period when the faithful officially bent and twisted themselves in every which way to theologically engage with the nonbelieving CCP. In writing about how the CCP educated him, Wu stated that:

I had formerly thought that since all Christians are children of God they must be all members of one big family... Accordingly, Christianity is above class and should not encourage class warfare. But the Communist party showed me that the whole of organized Christianity has a class nature... According to the historical understanding of materialism, the culture of a given period is only the ideology of that society. Christianity

¹⁹⁰ Wangzhi, "Y. T. Wu," 340-343.

¹⁹¹ Y.T. Wu, "The Present-Day Tragedy of Christianity," in *Documents of the Three-Self Movement: Source Materials for the Study of the Protestant Church in Communist China* (New York, NY: National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA, 1963), 2.

is inseparable from culture, and so it is possible for the Christianity of one age to change its nature completely and become a tool of cultural and political aggression.¹⁹²

This understanding of Christianity goes beyond Liberation theology, analyzed in the last chapter, to view Christianity as a tool. Liberationists saw Marxism as a tool for Christians to utilize while Wu and the TSPM interpreted it in the reverse. The exception at this time was K.H. Ting, the future TSPM leader after the Cultural Revolution. He saw Marxism's emphasis on human actions bringing social systems into being to be a useful analytical tool in avoiding a Christian faith solely attributing injustice to "man's sinful nature."¹⁹³ The TSPM's ultimate loyalty was to God but they believed their faith could change its nature and become a weapon against China. This belief in change echoed fears of Christianity as a foreign religion and demonstrated that the TSPM before the Cultural Revolution engaged with the nonbelieving CCP in a submissive manner.

Wu and the TSPM also created cracks in their attempts to centralize control over the faithful during the period before the Cultural Revolution. They officially took over all Protestant churches in China in 1958 and often forced various denominations to attend church with one another. The scholar Gao Wangzhi traces this forced 1958 unification as the birth of the house church movement, still present in contemporary China, since individuals who did not wish to worship with other denominations would form groups to pray outside of the TSPM's purview.¹⁹⁴

This rich dialogue full of intellectual gymnastics between Chinese Protestants and the state came crashing down in 1966. The Cultural Revolution put the effective influence of the TSPM

¹⁹² Y.T. Wu, "How the Communist Party Has Educated Me," in *Documents of the Three-Self Movement: Source Materials for the Study of the Protestant Church in Communist China* (New York, NY: National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA, 1963), 53.

¹⁹³ K.H. Ting, "Christian Theism," in *Documents of the Three-Self Movement: Source Materials for the Study of the Protestant Church in Communist China* (New York, NY: National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA, 1963), 162-163.

¹⁹⁴ Wangzhi, "Y. T. Wu," 347-348.

on a ten-year hiatus and ended the career of Y.T. Wu. The late historian Daniel Bays described the history of Christianity during the Cultural Revolution as "a black hole, the details of which are very scarce."¹⁹⁵ One of the rays of light to escape the black hole's gravitational pull pertains to a militia dispersing a Christian worship gathering attended by the minority Miao ethnic group in 1974.¹⁹⁶ This single incident, only two years before the end of the Cultural Revolution, shows the remarkable resiliency of Christianity. After nearly eight years of purges, pockets of Christianity remained prominent enough to warrant armed opposition. Beyond this singular incident, the lack of information regarding Chinese Christianity as a whole leaves a ten year gap whose effects on TSPM Chinese Protestantism I will now examine.

IV. Christianity After the Cultural Revolution

As the Cultural Revolution ended Hua Guofeng replaced Mao as China's leader only for Deng Xiaoping to push him out of power in 1981. Deng came with a determination to push through his Reform and Opening Policy in order to increase Chinese material prosperity via the limited introduction of free markets. The 1980s and 1990s also saw a period when China attempted increased regulation and tolerance of religious life, including the resurrection of the TSPM.

The CCP pursued these ostensibly contradictory goals in order to regain a semblance of control of the religious scene in China. They sought to push underground church gatherings, the only kind available to the faithful during the Cultural Revolution, into a controlled setting where

¹⁹⁵ Bays, *A New History*, 181.

¹⁹⁶ Xi, *Redeemed by Fire*, 209.

the CCP could enjoy greater control of the message pastors preached from the pulpit.¹⁹⁷

Unsurprisingly, the decision of whether to join the TSPM after the Cultural Revolution sparked schisms within Chinese Protestant congregations. Worshipping under the auspices of the CCP that hunted them for a decade in the Cultural Revolution remained unappealing for some Protestants while others were grateful for the opportunity to once again worship publicly with less fear of repercussions. The split became so severe that opposition to the TSPM became a rallying cry for independent preachers wishing to formulate their own brand of Christianity.¹⁹⁸

The 1980s and 1990s saw the rise of Christianity, both Catholic and Protestant, in urban environments, a major shift since the faithful previously lived in rural environments. The reasons for this development are twofold. First, churches gained membership in this period by emphasizing healing and miraculous intervention as a source of relief for the faithful's ills while economic liberalization ate away at the previously state provided social safety net.¹⁹⁹ Second, as the faithful migrated from the countryside to the city for work, they brought along their religious faith.²⁰⁰ While these migrants were often poor, the economic elites of the time also began to embrace the religion. For example, roughly ten percent of Wenzhou, a rich coastal city, identified as Christian. These economic elites latched onto a form of the Prosperity Gospel to justify their success amidst the new market economy.²⁰¹

It is within this socioeconomic context that K.H. Ting led the TSPM from 1981-1996 with the same overarching aim as his predecessors: to engage with the CCP. If numerical values alone

¹⁹⁷ Wang, *Maoism and Grassroots*, 144. Merle Goldman, "Religion in Post-Mao China," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 483, no. 1 (1986): pp. 146-156, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716286483001013>, 150-151.

¹⁹⁸ Wang, *Maoism and Grassroots*, 148-154.

¹⁹⁹ Xi, *Redeemed by Fire*, 230.

²⁰⁰ Bays, *A New History*, 181, 193.

²⁰¹ Goossaert and Palmer, *The Religious Question*, 301-302.

may reliably judge success, Ting did a respectable job by establishing over 16,000 churches during his tenure.²⁰² In 1981 Ting praised Y.T. Wu for breaking the shackles of previous theologians he viewed as too heavily exposed to Western capitalism. Wu went on to argue that “only when Christianity in any country can achieve independence from the influence of foreign political powers and the bounds of foreign historical traditions can the radiance of Christ beam through the prism of national culture and come out with a brilliance all its own.”²⁰³ Ting saw the TSPM as participating in a project to strengthen China in coordination with the CCP. He thought that “the whole Chinese people [including Christians] need[ed] to unite as one so as to work together for national prosperity.”²⁰⁴ He aimed to continue shedding Chinese Christianity of any vestige of its foreign imported past. Ting acknowledged that he did not embrace but did respect Marxism, in large part due to Wu’s theological influence.²⁰⁵ The nonbelieving CCP began to appear more like fellow faithful in Ting’s eyes than foreign Protestants, because the former participated in the national project of strengthening China in conjunction with the TSPM.

Ting still needed to address the problem of Marxism’s view of religion as the opiate of the people. He argued that this thesis had merit but was not fully accurate. Ting stated that religion previously did serve to anesthetize the people, but it also mobilized them into revolutionary struggle. Moreover, the Basic Viewpoint and Policy on the Religious Question during our Country’s Socialist Period, the document outlining the CCP’s view on religious policy during the

²⁰² Xi, *Redeemed by Fire*, 210.

²⁰³ Ting, *A Chinese Contribution*, 45.

²⁰⁴ K. H. Ting, *God Is Love: Collected Writings of Bishop K.H. Ting* (Colorado Springs, CO: Cook Communications Ministries International, 2004), 553.

²⁰⁵ Ting, *A Chinese Contribution*, 51.

1980s, did not delve into the opiate thesis, an intellectual breakthrough in Ting's view that showed the fruits of engaging with the nonbelieving CCP.²⁰⁶

The twenty-first century shows the successes and failures of Ting's leadership in the 1980s and 1990s. The experiences of journalist Ian Johnson recorded in his book *The Souls of China: The Return of Religion After Mao* prove illuminating in this regard. Johnson visited a Christian congregation who the government knew worshipped at a specific church. He noted that the police took the name, address, and contact information of the individuals attending this church. Government informants also attended certain sanctioned activities such as Bible study at the church.²⁰⁷ The continued presence of these churches shows that Ting succeeded in showing the CCP that their policy of religious regulation and tolerance after the Cultural Revolution was a worthy one. In another instance, Johnson witnessed a Christian congregation in China serve as a support network for the families of imprisoned individuals. The church's pastor likened these families to the untouchable casts in India. Due to their family member's imprisonment, they would lose all means to support themselves. The Christian congregations funded by internal Chinese donations, the pastor claimed, were the families' only safety net. This social support function extended to the church's work in helping the margins of society, such as a man who had a stroke before being subsequently kicked out onto the streets by his family.²⁰⁸ This man's experience shows that while Ting succeeded in helping the TSPM thrive he failed to create an organization capable of coordinated action to preach to and support the margins of society. While the Liberationists explicitly aimed to create a transnational movement aimed at the poor, the TSPM left individual congregations to their own accord in this regard. Amidst the rapid

²⁰⁶ Ting, *God Is Love*, 532.

²⁰⁷ Ian Johnson, *The Souls of China: The Return of Religion After Mao* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2018), 58-59, 167-169.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 152-165.

economic liberalization of the 1980s and 1990s the inability by the TSPM to create such a safety net goes down as a failure by Ting. Social inequality in China remains a contemporary problem, but one which the CCP is now eager to address via Xi Jinping's regulatory crackdown in the name of "common prosperity." It remains to be seen how the Christian faithful respond to this recent government policy and whether income inequality will drive or dampen the TSPM or underground Protestantism in China.

V. Conclusion

The nonbelieving CCP forced Chinese Protestants to tolerantly support the state or refuse and risk imprisonment. Courageous individuals such as Wang Mingdao endured decades of prison for their staunch refusal to work with the nonbelieving CCP. Simultaneously, Protestants such as Y.T. Wu and K.H. Ting viewed the TSPM as the best way to engage with the nonbelieving government. The TSPM leaders saw opportunities for the faithful to help strengthen China and avoid the chaos of the past. These leaders performed mental gymnastics to create an amenable theology in pursuit of this national project. Nothing definitionally precluded Christian participation with the CCP in the eyes of these leaders. How to interact with nonbelievers was *the* question for Chinese Protestants in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Conclusion

Throughout this thesis I argued that studying the place of non-believers in the thought of American Evangelical Protestants, Latin American Catholics, and Chinese Protestants provides a way to understand the dynamics of global Christian tolerance and expansion from 1950-2020. Evangelical Protestants in the United States, as represented by Billy Graham and Joel Osteen, viewed nonbelievers simultaneously as sources of societal ill and salvation for the faithful. Graham emphasized nonbelievers as an outlet to evangelize the faith whereas Osteen saw them as tools in God's plan for the faithful to personally receive His favor. In both of these visions nonbelievers played the crucial role of being the "other" that the faithful both tolerated out of necessity and simultaneously wished to evangelize out of existence. By contrast, Latin American Catholicism aimed to forge a tolerant universalism that encompassed the margins of society, including nonbelievers. The emphasis on dialogue between religious faiths in Pope Francis' pontificate makes nonbelievers critical to the future of the Catholic Church. Only through nonbelievers could the Catholic faithful aim to forge this universalism while also preventing outside nonbelieving ideological influences such as Marxism from dominating the church. In China, Protestants found themselves forced to engage with nonbelievers due to the atheistic nature of the CCP and the minority position the faithful occupied in society. Some preachers like Wang Mingdao engaged the ruling party with outright disobedience and paid for it with imprisonment. Others like the TSPM leaders Y.T. Wu and K.H. Ting performed intellectual gymnastics to have the faith buttress the image of China articulated by the CCP. All Protestant faithful in China had no choice but to engage nonbelievers and shape portions of their faith around this engagement.

The three aforementioned regions demonstrate the varying degrees of expansion and tolerance present in global Christianity in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. All these faiths wished to gain converts but how each incorporated their evangelizing mission varied substantially from sources of societal ill to a fact of life. In this thesis, I have shown that the manner in which Christian faithful in each region viewed nonbelievers illuminates their larger intellectual worldview. United States evangelicals saw nonbelievers as a means to an end for the faithful to achieve salvation. Their religious worldview focused on the faithful rather than the other. On the other hand, Latin American Catholicism post Vatican II began viewing the nonbelieving other as an equal from whom to learn rays of truth. The Catholic Church focused on a universal project centered on the faithful but by no means focused upon them at the expense of the nonbelieving other. Chinese Protestants have occupied the middle ground between these two faith traditions. They paid more attention to nonbelievers than United States Evangelical Protestantism due to the nature of their government but have not sought to incorporate the CCP into their religious project. The TSPM incorporates itself into the CCP's political project when necessary or advantageous but not as a means to create a transnational worldview among the faithful. In all three of these regions, nonbelievers occupied a central role in determining how the Christian religious faithful decided the limits of tolerance amidst their efforts to expand the faith via evangelization.

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