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Publication Date

2024

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Santa Barbara

Getting Charisma: Media-Makers, Pentecostal Religion and the ‘Pow Factor’

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Master of Arts in Religious Studies

by

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June 2024

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ABSTRACT

Getting Charisma: Media-Makers, Pentecostal Religion and the ‘Pow Factor’

by

Sam Kestenbaum

In 1975, a journalist named Stephen Strang founded *Charisma*, a Florida magazine that would serve and cover what scholars call the neo-Pentecostal or charismatic movement. *Charisma* was both responding to a growing commercial and religious market and helping to create that market through its editorial circulation. The magazine would develop into a multimedia company over the decades, today offering a daily news website, podcasts and a book-publishing house. Over the years, *Charisma* sought to turn its readers into media-makers in their own right, instructing and encouraging their audiences to participate commercially in media creation, in large and small ways. Many scholars have looked at Pentecostal media-makers as a way to argue for a particular type of religious vitality in the modern moment, either as a way of rethinking the religious nature of media itself or as a counterargument against the concept of secularization. The literature raises productive questions, and we do well to elect charismatic and Pentecostal creators for serious consideration. Drawing on archival sources and elements of ethnography, this paper approaches the media-saturated world of *Charisma* with an appreciation for this creative and commercial work and takes into account how it is through these editorial labors that charisma, religious or otherwise, takes shape.

Introduction

In the summer of 2023, I traveled to the humid suburbs of Nashville, Tennessee for a week of spiritual warfare. I joined a team of volunteers and church employees to help stage a massive, multi-day tent revival. We lugged chairs, set up stage equipment and arranged merchandise for sale, all in preparation for the crowd of some 10,000 who would gather to experience deliverance from the unseen demons that plagued them. As the weekend unfolded, a cast of celebrity exorcists appeared on stage, naming and casting out evil spirits and also teaching the assembly how they, too, might learn to become exorcists. The event was hosted by Global Vision Bible Church, a congregation led by Greg Locke, a right-wing firebrand who had in recent years transitioned into a new role of deliverance minister. At night Locke took the stage and paced back and forth, listing the evil spirits hidden among the crowd. It was an eclectic litany: Astrology, dyslexia, ADHD, spirit-channeling, depression, poverty, sexual perversion, gluten-intolerance and dozens more. *Out, out, out!* he shouted. Then, across the packed tent, men, women and children fell and slumped to the ground, howling and shrieking. Smartphones clicked on, streaming the unfolding scenes, and a half dozen cameras whirled from the sidelines, capturing each moment for a forthcoming film the church was producing on the subject. One producer explained to me what they were looking to capture: “The pow factor.”

Stephen Strang, the founder and CEO of a company named Charisma Media, sat in the front row of the event, appraising all that was taking place. Strang never took the stage to speak, but each exorcist greeted him with respect, shaking hands or hugging, and his company logo flashed frequently on the church’s display screens. The organization he founded some fifty years ago helped till the soil, in their way, for the “pow factor” events I was watching that weekend.

Originally a modest church magazine in Florida, *Charisma* became the premier publishing company for American Pentecostals and their charismatic kin. In a 2020 press kit, *Charisma* described itself to potential advertisers as allowing “brands to reach millions of Spirit-filled Christians” through its multi-platform offerings. At the heart of Charisma Media is the flagship news magazine and website which touts itself as “the most trusted source for credible news and insight from a charismatic perspective. That award-winning news coverage... [is] the calling card for the magazine, as believers from across denominations... [turn] to *Charisma* for the latest stories related to life in the Spirit.”¹

Through its magazine and online news site, *Charisma* had helped champion and popularize scores of Pentecostal and charismatic celebrities, including the half dozen exorcists who rotated on stage in Tennessee. And through its book-publishing arm, Charisma House, it was publishing at least four exorcism-themed books authored by ministers here, with tentative plans for more. “We’ve had success in the genre,” Strang told me later. Yet even more than this material support and partnership, what was unfolding under the Tennessee tent owed something to a kind of participatory media-making that has long been championed by Charisma Media. The magazine *Charisma* was not only building up religious celebrities through the pages of its magazine, but also inviting its audience into this process as well, turning them into charismatic “pow factor”-spotters-and-creators in their own right.

In the opening salvo of the magazine, in 1975, Strang explained that they had taken their name because it reflected the ethos behind the new glossy journal. “Charisma” originally “refers to the Holy Spirit” and it was “the word from which the charismatic renewal gets its name,” Strang wrote. “But the name also has a secular meaning,” he wrote, “referring to men who are

¹ 2020 Media Kit, 2020, Charisma Media Consulting, <https://strangmail.com/production/MEDIA-KITS/Charisma-Media-Consulting-Media-Kit.pdf>.

leaders whom others follow.”² Strang was evoking two definitions of charisma, religious and secular, and it is worth pausing to parse each one. The “gifts of the Spirit,” as depicted in the New Testament, are known as *charismata*, from the Greek: speaking in tongues, working miracles, and prophesying, among others. “Charisma” in this theological context, means the Holy Spirit filling humans with extraordinary abilities. “There are diversities of gifts,” reads 1 Corinthians 12:4, “but the same Spirit.” In the first decades of the 20th century, the German sociologist Max Weber borrowed from this theological definition when he set out to theorize and define structures of authority that follow from an individual being perceived as possessing otherworldly powers. For Weber, charisma has a circular quality: charismatic authority exists when this claim to “supernatural, superhuman or at least specifically exceptional powers” is acknowledged and validated by others.³ Weber’s charismatic leaders reveal a transcendent mission, one that is persuasive because the followers believe their leader is extraordinary. By accepting or believing in the leader’s extraordinary qualities, the followers then legitimize his claim to their allegiance. Charisma, for Weber, is an inherently unsteady thing, and may either flame out entirely or undergo processes of bureaucratization or routinization. Strang does not use the terminology of routinization, or evoke German sociology in name, but his Charisma Media enterprise offers participants tools and techniques to cultivate and kindle their own charisma, in both the Weberian and Biblical senses. It is a charisma that is not diluted or weakened by its routinization, but that which finds its very shape and power through its mediation. It is in this brackish water, somewhere between the secular and religious, that Charisma Media operates.

² Stephen Strang, “Introducing Charisma,” *Charisma*, August/September, 1975, 4.

³ Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, trans. T. Parsons (New York: Free Press, 1947), 358.

Backstage at the tent revival, Strang milled about with the ministers, exorcists, and various hangers-on. In one corner, the church film crew had set up a small set to film testimonies and sound bites from attendees, which would be integrated into their forthcoming film. With his magazine and publishing house, Strang had interacted with virtually every Pentecostal celebrity of the last half-century, like Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker, Jimmy Swaggart, Pat Robertson and T.D. Jakes. Around him now was a new generation of celebrities-in-the-making, who he had both helped encourage in their careers and hoped to continue to cover and publish. Appraising the scene, Strang told me, "It's important to keep a finger on the pulse."

When Christian media like *Charisma* has come into scholarly consideration it is most often assessed as a means for spreading political ideology. There are good reasons for this. Pentecostals rallied around Donald J. Trump, and ministers and celebrities, like the televangelist Paula White, were brought into the halls of power in ways that they had not experienced before.⁴ And *Charisma*, as the movement's flagship periodical, published and amplified the notion that Donald J. Trump was prophetically pre-ordained to take the presidency, in both the 2016 and 2020 elections. But understanding *Charisma* chiefly as an instrument for propaganda of the Christian Right may obscure something about the appeal of such media, the kinds of religious actors who participate in its production and circulation, and the nature of the mediated religious experience it cultivates, like the Tennessean tent revival which I helped stage.

Charisma can be seen from multiple angles. It is a niche journalistic outlet that has, since the outlet's founding, chronicled current events about and for Pentecostals and their charismatic

⁴ See Damon Berry, "Voting in the Kingdom: Prophecy Voters, the New Apostolic Reformation, and Christian Support for Trump," *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 23, no. 4, May 2020: 69-93; Leah Payne and Erica Ramirez, "President Trump's Hidden Religious Base: Pentecostal-charismatic Celebrities," *Religion News Service*, August 27, 2020; and Erica Ramirez, "Who's Laughing Now? Pentecostal Disrespectability Politics," *Political Theology Network*, July 8, 2021.

kin. It is also a marketplace and hub offering information on conferences, revivals and merchandise to purchase for a Pentecostal audience. In these respects it is akin to the media studied by Daniel Vaca, who has argued that evangelicals were historically drawn together through commercial technologies and initiatives, which “enabled consumers to cultivate shared ideas, practices, and sensibilities across denominational, ecclesiastical, and geographic contexts.”⁵ Charisma Media is such a site where Pentecostal sensibilities and practices were shaped and shared. But more than that, *Charisma* invited its audience to participate in a Spirit-filled marketplace, through creative and commercial endeavors. Charisma Media is an interactive ecosystem, where the lines between producer, audience and subject are productively porous, where a confusion of category is invited: a reader may become a contributor or topic of a news article; a subject may become a bylined contributor or author of a bestselling book. In the pages of this magazine, audiences, again and again, were given tools and techniques with which they might make themselves *charismatic*, in both senses of the word.

I will say a word about myself. For the last six years, I have been writing about the characters that populate *Charisma* as a journalist. In the pages of *The New York Times*, *Rolling Stone* and other publications, I have reported on the prophets, revivalists and exorcists of the Charisma Media ecosystem. This coverage, even as it takes place from a would-be secular standpoint and applies a critical lens, has pulled me into an awkward kind of mediated partnership, in which my own coverage has worked to highlight the notability, the infamy, or renown — the *charisma* — of my subjects. Just as the tent revival media crew look to project “pow factor” to their audience, I look for a “pow factor” to set down on the page. In this way I claim a kind of editorial kinship with those in this milieu.

⁵ Daniel Vaca, *Evangelicals, Incorporated* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019), 3.

Scholars of American religion have approached the topic of religion and media in several different fashions. And, indeed, many have looked to examples such as the ones which concern me here to argue for a particular type of religious vitality in the modern moment, either as a way of rethinking the religious nature of media itself or as a counterargument against the concept of secularization. The literature raises productive questions, and we do well to elect charismatic and Pentecostal media-creators for serious consideration. We would do even better to approach these media creators with more focused appreciation for their creative and commercial work, taking into account how it is through these editorial labors that their charisma, religious or otherwise, takes shape.

1. Religion and media: Beyond propaganda

Historians who work on American history will regularly note that religion and mass media were wrapped up with one another in the early days of the republic. This entanglement has continued to be the subject of much scholarship, even as there are disagreements on the exact nature of that relationship: A sully of something pure and holy? Competition between two evangelizing forces? Much of the scholarly and popular work on Pentecostal and charismatic media, including that dealing specifically with *Charisma*, shares a theory of how media operates: as an instrument or tool. Underlying this instrumentalist analysis lie ideas about the control and manipulation of audiences. In their influential 1944 essay “Dialectics of Enlightenment,” cultural theorists Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno articulate a version of this anxiety about the emerging media technologies of their time, outlining a view of “the culture industry” as seeking to manipulate the masses and lull them into submission and passive consumption. It is this theory

of media — of media as propaganda, primarily — that lies within much writing about Christians and their media.

Scholars of American Christianity often argue that religion and mass media are animated by a shared impulse to persuade or convince audiences. In this formulation, the history of media itself owes something to a preexisting religious impulse. The scholar Quintin J. Schultze calls this a “rhetoric of conversion” which he calls “particularly Protestant notion that communication, including the press, had the power to change people, to beneficially alter their perspective, and to usher them into a new community of shared hope.”⁶ Historians drawing on this idea argue that new forms of media played a critical role in early American missionizing efforts, and that certain evangelicals in turn played a role in the development of media. Such scholars take as a point of origin Gutenberg’s press and the Protestant Reformation, before moving on to the religious use of tracts, newspapers and radio in America specifically. Schultze writes, “From the printing press to early radio and eventually satellites, Protestants dominated religious mass communication in America.”⁷

Bible tract societies are widely credited with helping to develop and innovate modern printing and distribution networks, including the development of the technique of stereotyping, steam printing and machine paper-making in the United States. As the historian David Paul Nord writes, “By 1830 in some sections of the country — long before the success of the penny press or the dime novel or the cheap magazine — [evangelical Christian publicists in the tract and Bible societies] had nearly achieved their goal of delivering their message to everyone.”⁸ Scholar of

⁶ Quintin J. Schultze, *Christianity and the Mass Media in America: Toward a Democratic Accommodation* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2003), 11.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁸ David Paul Nord, “The Evangelical Origins Of Mass Media In America, 1815-1835,” *Journalism Monographs*, 88 (Columbia, SC: Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, 1984), 3.

media and religion Stewart Hoover has argued that religious institutions' use of the printing press helped set the stage for the very institutionalization of the publishing industry.⁹ In *Unsecular Media*, Mark Silk argues that, because they are "systems of communication" that seek to provide information, religious institutions and media institutions have historically been locked in a kind of competition for hearts and minds. This competition can be especially tense, Silk writes, when journalists and news outlets set out to write about religion. "When the news media set out to communicate religious subject matter, they run up against institutions jealously guarding what they take to be their own prerogative," Silk writes. "For religions are themselves systems of communications — designed, in the first instant, to facilitate the exchange of information between the mundane world and the realm of the sacred."¹⁰

While some historians attribute the growth of communication technology to an underlying Christian impulse to evangelize and influence — arguing for a kind of kinship between the two — others may suggest that religious actors are strategically appropriating foreign, secular tools when they make use of media. In his history of the first generation of American Pentecostals Grant Wacker attributes the movement's success to Pentecostals' unique ability to fuse "otherworldly aspirations" with "thisworldly shrewdness."¹¹ "Thisworldly shrewdness" or "pragmatism" is defined by Wacker as Pentecostalism's ability to "work within the social and cultural expectations of the age," including the printing of numerous publications in the movement's early history.¹² In this formulation, religion, in its aspirational form, may be seen as something otherworldly, and media as something earthly. Historian Mathew Avery

⁹ Stewart M. Hoover, "Religion in the Media Age," *The Expository Times*, volume 113, no. 9 (June 2002): 301.

¹⁰ Mark Silk, *Unsecular Media: Making News of Religion in America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 3.

¹¹ Grant Wacker, *Heaven Below* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), xi.

¹² *Ibid.*, 14.

Sutton helpfully analyzes the 1920s celebrity evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson as a Pentecostal who was able to utilize tools, like the radio and newspaper, for remarkably successful religious evangelizing. Sutton writes that it was McPherson's dazzling "theatrics and a penchant for publicity" that made McPherson one of the most "famous American personalities of the interwar years." She was "the first religious celebrity of the mass media era" who "mastered print, radio, and film for use in her evangelical mission" and that it was her novel "integration of the latest media tools with a conservative creed" that established precedents for the rest of the century.¹³

For a body of other researchers concerned primarily with that "conservative creed" of the Christian Right, evangelicals' marshaling or exploitation of media played a key role in spreading that political movement. The journalist and sociologist Sara Diamond argues that it was media, in the form of televangelism, that was the "single most important ingredient in the rise of the Christian Right."¹⁴ Focusing on the evangelical television networks Christian Broadcasting Network, Trinity Broadcasting Network, and Praise the Lord, Diamond argues that these "media empires" essentially gave political marching orders for conservative Christians.¹⁵ She cites Pat Robertson's mastery of what she calls "propaganda techniques," such as "loaded language" and the both-sides news format, as key to his success in "shifting audience viewpoints rightward."¹⁶ In *Kingdom Coming*, journalist Michelle Goldberg similarly views "multimedia empire[s]," such as the Coral Ridge Ministries and programs like the 700 Club as key elements of what she calls a "hydra-headed thing, sometimes contradictory but unified enough to be called by a single name,"

¹³ Matthew Avery Sutton, *Aimee Semple McPherson and the Resurrection of Christian America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 4.

¹⁴ Sara Diamond, *Spiritual Warfare: The Politics of the Christian Right* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1999), 1.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

what she calls “the Christian nationalist movement.”¹⁷ Diamond and Goldberg’s books are representative of a kind of work that is interested in sounding an alarm about the rise of what they would call an anti-democratic Christian Right. This work appears concerned with Christian media and its creation insofar as such media is understood as the propagandistic arm of that conservative religious project.

Other scholarship, sometimes of a theological bent, looks to Pentecostal and charismatic media-creators and diagnoses their supposed media excesses and unscriptural religion as related problems of bad taste and bad religion. In the 1991 edition of the book *Charismatic Chaos*, the Baptist minister and writer John F. MacArthur bemoaned that “Charismatic extremists can promote any idea they fancy on Christian television and radio” before pointing to, among other outlets, *Charisma* magazine as the “movement’s flagship periodical.”¹⁸ Research on the New Apostolic Reformation (commonly rendered as NAR), a charismatic religious movement closely associated with Fuller Seminary teachers C. Peter Wagner and John Wimber, also highlights the importance of media as a tool of propagandizing. This research, also of a cautionary and theological nature, includes John Weaver’s *The New Apostolic Reformation: History of a Modern Charismatic Movement* and Holly Pivec and R. Douglass Geivet’s *A New Apostolic Reformation? A Biblical Response to a Worldwide Movement*. Both books point to media and *Charisma* specifically as an important political player and platform for the NAR. “NAR leaders have become a significant voice by partnering with Christian media,” Pivec and Geivet write, and Charisma Media “has actively promoted NAR teachings through its large book publishing company, Charisma House, and its flagship publication, *Charisma* magazine... The magazine

¹⁷ Michelle Goldberg, *Kingdom Coming: The Rise of Christian Nationalism* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), 6.

¹⁸ John F. MacArthur, *Charismatic Chaos* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1993), 14.

regularly features articles by and about NAR apostles and prophets and even publishes their prophecies.”¹⁹ In Weaver’s work, he appraises that “*Charisma* has been little more than a mouthpiece for the NAR for more than a decade.”²⁰

The NAR has become of increasing journalistic and scholarly interest in recent years due to its associations with Donald Trump and the role that some members of the NAR allegedly played in the Jan. 6 riot on the capitol. In a 2020 book about Trump’s white evangelical supporters, the journalist Sarah Posner highlights *Charisma*’s role in promoting “the careers of televangelists like [Trump advisor Paula] White and a widening circle of self-styled prophets.”²¹ In Harvey Cox’s *Fire From Heaven*, an otherwise sympathetic history of Pentecostalism, he criticizes the work of figures associated with the NAR and charismatic movement. Cox compares the movement’s “fetish” on topics like spiritual warfare to the cheapness of the supermarket tabloid *Weekly World News* and describes this as a “dangerous obsession, especially when combined” with Pentecostals’ involvement in politics.²² In this formulation, there is something garish and déclassé, if not outright heretical, about certain combinations of religion and media.

Much of this scholarship and research draws, implicitly or explicitly, on the “transmission theory of media” or the “propaganda paradigm,” as identified by James W. Carey in his influential 1975 essay “A Cultural Approach to Communication.” Carey identified two competing conceptions of communication, what he called “transmission” and “cultural.” For Carey, the transmission model regarded individuals as largely passive recipients of information,

¹⁹ R. Douglas Geivett and Holly Pivec, *A New Apostolic Reformation? A Biblical Response to a Worldwide Movement* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014), 30.

²⁰ John Weaver, *The New Apostolic Reformation: History of a Modern Charismatic Movement* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2016), 639.

²¹ Sarah Posner, *Unholy: Why White Evangelicals Worship at the Altar of Donald Trump* (New York: Random House, 2020), 24.

²² Harvey Cox, *Fire from Heaven*, (Boston: Da Capo Press, 1995), 287.

like those described by Horkheimer and Adorno. For Carey, this “propaganda paradigm” potentially both overstated the persuasive power of the media as well as undercut the agency of the consumer, falling prey to what Jeremy Stolow would later call “instrumentalist presumptions about technological efficacy.”²³ How can we know how effective or persuasive media is? And who benefits from overstating its effectiveness? Carey proposed instead something he called the “cultural approach to communication” which regarded the purpose of media not just in the transmission of data but “in the construction and maintenance of an ordered, meaningful cultural world that can serve as a... container for human action.”²⁴ Carey challenged scholars to be mindful of the underlying theories of media at work in their research, and to be attendant to the ways that media can act as a site of meaning-making and negotiation, such as play or entertainment.

Scholars working at the intersection of media and religious studies have taken up Carey’s challenge. Religious studies scholar David Morgan has articulated the many benefits to this “cultural approach,” including revealing “how media practices offer access to and draw from collective imaginaries, the shared cultural resources of symbols, images, sounds, songs, ideas, and personae whose knowledge and symbolic use invest individuals in broad patterns of feeling that constitute their participation in communities of different kinds.”²⁵ None of this, Morgan writes, is to deny that media can be used as “political propaganda and public relations... to one degree or another” yet the challenge “is to integrate the study of production, circulation, and reception” into any portrait of such mediated religion. Newer religious studies scholarship has

²³ Jeremy Stolow, *Deus in Machina: Religion, Technology, and the Things in Between* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 9.

²⁴ James W. Carey, “A Cultural Approach to Communication,” *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society* (Boston: Unwin Hyman), 19.

²⁵ David Morgan, *Key Words in Religion, Media and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 2.

sought to avoid “a determinist view of media effects without ignoring the fact that media do work to shape response, even if consumers are not captive to intended influences.”²⁶

There are several entrants into this field that seek to look at evangelical media-makers outside of the propagandistic paradigm. In her book *Shaking the World for Jesus*, Heather Hendershot takes up Christian media as her subject, but she seeks to move away from an instrumentalist model. While still recognizing evangelicals’ aspirations to evangelize, she believes that research in this propagandistic paradigm ends up not looking at the media at all, really, but rather at its supposedly animating politics instead. More often, she argues, it is not evangelical media but “evangelical politics... that are subjected to scholarly investigation.” Here, she points to journalists, activists, and scholars like Diamond. “If such researchers consider evangelical media at all, they view it as propaganda,” she writes, “overtly political, painfully unsubtle, and inherently dangerous.”²⁷

In *Evangelicals, Incorporated*, Daniel Vaca contributes to understandings of American evangelicalism and media by highlighting how the “evangelical market and the evangelical population have taken shape continually through commercial and cultural effort.”²⁸ While acknowledging the theological traditions that historians and theologians have long associated with the idea of evangelicalism, Vaca argues that that “those traditions and associations continually have been drawn together through commercial technologies and initiatives, which have enabled consumers to cultivate shared ideas, practices, and sensibilities across denominational, ecclesiastical, and geographic contexts.” Although some critics argue that such expansive commercial activity has diluted or otherwise corrupted what they understand as an

²⁶ Ibid., 3.

²⁷ Heather Hendershot, *Shaking the World for Jesus* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 3.

²⁸ Vaca, *Evangelicals, Inc.*, 2.

evangelical tradition, “this activity is what allowed evangelicalism to loom so large in American religious history and culture during the twentieth century.”²⁹ Vaca’s study points towards ways we might appreciate how Pentecostals and charismatics have similarly shaped and been shaped by marketplace engagements.

Studies of evangelical and Pentecostal media also engage, and sometimes challenge, the secularization thesis. Rendered simply, the secularization thesis is the idea that in modernity, religion decreases. Many of the studies listed above engage this idea explicitly, sometimes playing with the supposed irony or unlikeliness of this supernatural flourishing in modernity. The sociologist Margaret Poloma writes that “the charismatic movement, complete with its myth and mystery, is not only surviving media technology but using it to its advantage.”³⁰ Wacker also points to the growth of Pentecostalism in the 20th century (at the time of printing, in 2000, Wacker counted more than 10 million Pentecostals in America, a number excluding charismatics and with many more millions overseas) as a plain challenge to notions of secularization. He states that, “the story of the early pentecostals casts grave doubt on the glib use of secularization theory.”³¹ Wacker attributes Pentecostals’ success to their ability to hold a “primitivist” impulse — “to return to a first century world where the Holy Spirit alone reigned” — simultaneously, and without compromise, with their “pragmatic” impulse — “an eagerness to do whatever was necessary in order to accomplish the movement’s purposes” creating “a knot of behavior patterns so tangled and matted as to be nearly inseparable.”³² Also on the topic of secularization,

²⁹ Ibid., 4.

³⁰ Margaret Poloma *The Charismatic Movement: Is there a New Pentecost?* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1982), 187.

³¹ Grant Wacker, *Heaven Below* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 17.

³² Grant Wacker, “Searching for Eden with a Satellite Dish: Primitivism, Pragmatism, and the Pentecostal Character,” in *Religion and American Culture: A Reader*, ed. David G. Hackett (New York: Routledge, 2003), 451.

Hendershot asks if modern life supposedly “dilutes religious belief” how can we explain “not only the continued presence of evangelicals in America but also the fact that their ranks seem to be growing?”³³ Hendershot’s answer to this question, like Wacker’s, is that evangelicals have been extraordinarily adaptive in their engagements with media. In her words, it is not that evangelical media have simply become “more secular” — one might assume this by looking at Top Forty success of subtly Christian acts like Sixpence None the Richer. Hendershot argues instead that Christian media have become “not more secular but more ambiguous” — or “fuzzy” — through their engagement with popular media forms.³⁴ Examining a wide range of Christian material culture, Hendershot argues that evangelicals have not simply “sold out” or been “secularized” but rather “evangelicals have used media to simultaneously struggle against, engage with, and acquiesce to the secular world.”³⁵

In *Selling God*, religious studies scholar R. Laurence Moore analyzes Christian media as part of his broader argument about secularism and the commodification of religion. Moore writes that what is often taken as “secularization” has less to do with the “disappearance of religion,” but rather its commodification.³⁶ For him, Pentecostal media-makers are of special interest because they appear to have been so good at this commercial work. It is conservative evangelicals — a category that, for Moore, includes televangelists such as Pentecostals Oral Roberts and Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker — who have earned considerable credit (or “blame”) for the “commodification of religion over the past twenty years.”³⁷ Taking Pat Robertson, the founder of the 700 Club, as a then-contemporary example, Moore writes that Robertson’s

³³ Hendershot, *Shaking the World for Jesus*, 5.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

³⁶ Moore, *Selling God*, 5.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 255.

commercial efforts, like Aimee Semple McPherson's, are based on the "belief that the spread of Christianity depends upon an aggressive use of the media."³⁸ Describing a visit to a Christian bookstore Moore writes that, for him, it is difficult to "imagine any aspect of popular culture that has been left uncloned" by Christian media producers.³⁹

On the topic of commodification, Hendershot introduces the notion of "textual poaching" — taken from Michel de Certeau and used by media scholar Henry Jenkins in his influential work on fandom, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. Jenkins has described the mechanics of popular culture as a process of appropriation or resistance, of poaching or pirating aspects of mass culture for counter-hegemonic ends.⁴⁰ This type of poaching, Hendershot notes, is typically understood as an act of resistance against "conservative" mass culture. With evangelicals, Hendershot posits, we see a kind of resistance that is "very different" than described by most researchers who have formulated poaching as a progressive or counter-hegemonic practice, in that it is furthering a conservative worldview.⁴¹

2. *Pentecostals and charismatics: A media history*

When stories are told of American Pentecostalism, overwhelmingly, these will begin with an account of the Azusa Street Mission in Los Angeles, beginning in 1906, a revival lead by the Louisiana-born pastor and son of emancipated slaves William J. Seymour. I will note: the social

³⁸ Ibid., 252.

³⁹ Ibid., 254.

⁴⁰ Hendershot, *Shaking the World for Jesus*, 13.

⁴¹ Ibid., 14. For similar arguments with respect to "conservative" counter-hegemony and use of media, see Saba Mahmood *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005) and Charles Hirschkind *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

and theological roots of Pentecostalism are varied and date back further than this, drawing from Holiness, Baptist, and Methodist traditions. Important work is being done, and more is to come, that will complicate this origin story. But because I am interested in the mediated dimensions of Pentecostalism, this is the mythic origin point with which I want to begin. As the scholar Arlene M. Sánchez-Walsh notes, “Nothing matches the mythic proportions of that event held in Los Angeles.”⁴² Scholarly and popular accounts of Azusa note early contemporaneous press coverage from the *Los Angeles Times*, which begins with the stacked headline: “Weird Babel of Tongues, New Sect of Fanatics is Breaking Loose, Wild Scene Last Night on Azusa Street, Gurgle of Wordless Talk by Sister.”⁴³ The valence of this un-bylined coverage is, just as dependably, interpreted by scholars as pejorative (“scoffing” in historian Vynson Synan’s words) and an example of the secular press ridiculing what would become among the most influential religious movements of the century.

Insiders and outsiders alike — now, then, and with different investments — highlight the racial mix of that revival. Some note the racist language of press coverage. The author of the *Los Angeles Times* article, for example, described the group as “colored people and a sprinkling of whites,” and did not know or use Seymour’s name but instead described “an old colored exhorter, blind in one eye, who is major-domo of the company” as well as “an old colored mammy” in attendance. That same *Los Angeles Times* article also rendered the scene in thick, descriptive language, recreating accents and the shouts and cries of the congregation — “You-oo-oo you-loo-loo come under the bloo-oo-oo boo-loo,” one person is quoted as saying — before appraising those exuberant sounds as the “strangest harangue ever uttered.” The racial mix of the

⁴² Arlene M. Sánchez-Walsh, *Pentecostals in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), xx.

⁴³ “Weird Babel of Tongues, New Sect of Fanatics is Breaking Loose, Wild Scene Last Night on Azusa Street, Gurgle of Wordless Talk by Sister,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 18, 1906.

revival has been figured more optimistically, by scholars, as “providing the vision of a truly color-blind congregation”⁴⁴ or demonstrating “the ways in which Seymour’s group contested racism in the church and society.”⁴⁵

Quebedeaux writes that the newspapers like the *Los Angeles Times* picked up the story of the revival, “giving the fledgling movement... negative publicity.”⁴⁶ Yet it is hard, really, to know how surprising this coverage would have been to a daily reader, or how much disdain it would have provoked. Novel and odd religious life had been a topic of popular interest — an exotic commonplace — at this point for nearly a century, at least. Scholars have noted that the 19th century saw a shift in focus with regard to how the popular news press covered religion in antebellum America, moving from the exegetical or devotional to embracing the “gossipy,” the sensational and the exotic.⁴⁷ The pages of papers such as the *New York Herald*, under the auspices of James Gordon Bennett, for example, were often noted for their satirical and irreverent treatment of religion.⁴⁸ Such papers were filled with descriptive, often humorous, coverage of Mormons and Mesmerists, Spiritualists and sex scandals. New religious forms benefited from this attention, R. Laurence Moore argues, adversarial as it might seem at first blush, and at various times produced their own newspapers and other tracts in response.⁴⁹

Appraising the coverage of the *Los Angeles Times* about the “weird babel of tongues,” the Azusa

⁴⁴ Cecil M. Robeck, *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988), 36.

⁴⁵ Lloyd D. Barba, “Jesus Would Be Jim Crowed: Bishop Robert Lawson on Race and Religion in the Harlem Renaissance,” *Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Religion* 6, no. 3, August 2015, 1.

⁴⁶ Richard Quebedeaux, *The New Charismatics II: How A Christian Renewal Moment Became Part of the American Religious Mainstream* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), 29.

⁴⁷ Moore, *Selling God*, 128.

⁴⁸ Bennett’s coverage of religion in the *Herald* is sometimes evoked as paradigmatic of sensational and damaging coverage of religion from this time, yet his treatment of the subject is more complex and deserves a fuller examination. For background see Judith M. Buddenbaum, “The Religion Journalism of James Gordon Bennett,” paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, August 1986.

⁴⁹ Moore, *Selling God*, 128.

minister named Frank Bartleman wrote, with some humor: “The newspapers began to ridicule and abuse the meetings, thus giving us much free advertising. This brought the crowds. The Devil overdid himself again. Outside persecution never hurt the work.”⁵⁰

Yet that *Los Angeles Times* coverage was just one small media artifact circulating in that year. The Azusa revivalists were not simply objects of media fascination but chroniclers in their own right. Indeed, Bartleman was himself a newspaperman. He did arguably more than the oft-quoted anonymous *Los Angeles Times* reporter to publicize and document the Azusa Street revival, contributing reportage about the event to local and national newspapers, such as Pasadena’s *Daily News*, the *Wesleyan Methodist*, and various Holiness press outlets, like *God’s Revivalist*.⁵¹ The Azusa mission would go on to found its own popular newspaper, *Apostolic Faith*, which was published fourteen times between September 1906 and June 1908, and became, in historian Grant Wacker’s words, the “revival’s flagship periodical.” Each issue of that paper contained news items, testimonies, and letters. The paper turned up in homes and street cars in “all parts of the continent and many parts of the world,” Wacker writes. And *Apostolic Faith* was just the tip of the revival-media iceberg. There were an estimated seventy (and likely many more) weeklies and monthlies published in the first decade of Pentecostalism’s emergence, with the editors and contributors of such publications acting as the nascent “movement’s working theologians,” in Wacker’s words.⁵² A partial list includes: *Glad Tidings*; *Latter Rain Evangel*; *Midnight Cry*; *Pentecostal Testimony*; *Apostolic Witness*; *Blessed Truth*; *Gospel Truth*; *Grace and Truth*; *Present Truth*; *Truth for the Times*; and *Whole Truth*.⁵³ These periodicals reported on

⁵⁰ Frank Bartleman, *Azusa Street* (Plainfield, NJ: Logos International, 1980), 46.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁵² Wacker, *Heaven Below*, 234.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 76.

events unfolding in real time, Wacker writes, “like a television newsroom on election night” and were filled with accounts of supernatural encounters.

Terminology is a tricky thing. This first generation of participants — the pastors and healers, editors and promoters — used many names to describe themselves. The word “Pentecostal” did not come into common usage until the 1910s and 1920s, and prior to that people now understood as belonging to a unified movement identified themselves with a variety of terms like “full gospel,” “full salvation,” “latter rain,” “Holy Ghost,” “Holy Spirit,” or just “Spirit-filled.”⁵⁴ It is in these publications that one can see such terminology being sorted out. These newspapers were never limited to theological debates or testimonies but were important hubs for commerce. Wacker describes how such periodicals sold ephemera such as calendars; replicas of Jesus’ cross; reduced-rate Bibles; books containing heroic tales of Christian heroes; and branded vials of anointing oil. These were not necessarily large, well-funded outlets. Wacker suggests that the majority of such periodicals were actually launched, edited, and run as one-man or one-woman operations. There was such an interest in this creative and commercial production that many of these editors continued to publish even after joining larger churches with their own official publication.⁵⁵ The picture that comes into focus is a network of print publications made for and by the first generation of Pentecostals, in which participants were telling their own stories for themselves. Wacker does well to draw on these types of early sources, which Pentecostal institutions have also taken an interest in preserving for research. Hundreds of thousands of pages of such literature have been digitized by the Flower Pentecostal Heritage Foundation, a member of the Consortium of Pentecostal Archives.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 17.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 29.

The theme of renewal and restoration weaves through early periodicals, booklets and other self-published works. This reflects a yearning to return to a “primitive” Christianity or life as lived in the early days of the church, the apostolic days of wonder, and remains a recurring theme for those who look to early Pentecostals as their progenitors. The history of Pentecostalism is, to this day, most often recounted as one of “waves” of spontaneous renewal. I wish to handle the theological and naturalizing valence of such terms with sensitivity — or, at the very least, to understand them as promotional in part. Versions of this normative Pentecostal narrative can be seen, for example, in the work of historians Vinson Synan, himself a Pentecostal, or Harvey Cox, a largely sympathetic outsider.⁵⁶ Following the first generation of Pentecostals, this oft-repeated history highlights periodic “outpourings” in America and overseas. The first “wave” of Pentecostal pioneers produced what has become known as the “classical” Pentecostal movement, which launched denominations such as the Assemblies of God and the Church of God. In the following decades, Pentecostals produced numerous celebrity evangelists, known for their innovative publicity and healing crusades, whose styles and media techniques would become templates for future generations. In the 1920s, the previously mentioned Aimee Semple McPherson interpolated Hollywood stagecraft into her services, wowing crowds from her imposing Echo Park church. In the 1940s, Oral Roberts broadcast his healing crusades over the radio dial. The 1960s saw several “neo-Pentecostal” or charismatic waves which some historians trace to an Anglican church in Van Nuys, California. Within a decade, this movement was spreading to Baptist, Methodist, Mennonite, Presbyterian, and United Church of Christ churches, among others.⁵⁷ By the late ’60s, the charismatic renewal

⁵⁶ Vinson Synan, *The Holiness-Pentecostal Tradition: Charismatic Movements in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: Eardmans, 1997) and Harvey Cox, *Fire from Heaven*, (Boston: Da Capo Press, 1995).

⁵⁷ Poloma, *The Charismatic Movement*, 125.

movement had taken root in the Catholic Church in Pittsburgh through students and faculty at Duquesne University.⁵⁸ In the 1970s, celebrity faith healers included Kenneth Copeland (a prosperity minister and Oral Roberts' former pilot) and Kathryn Kuhlman (known for her syndicated TV series, "I Believe In Miracles").⁵⁹ This "wave" generated its own wave of scholarly and popular attention, often placed in the context of a broader religious efflorescence of the 1960s and '70s.⁶⁰ This period of religious activity included the California-centered, counterculture-flavored Jesus People movement. The Jesus People have been figured differently over the years, sometimes as "evangelical" or "fundamentalist," and also, at times, as a Christian corollary or response to the rise of interest in Eastern religion and occultism. Generally speaking, it was during this period that religious practices once thought the domain of Pentecostalism proper — speaking in tongues, miraculous healings and prophesying — were taken up by a much wider array of practitioners, from historically disparate denominations and churches.⁶¹

Scholars looking at this time regularly note the varied media publications associated with these revivals. There was, for example, the psychedelic-looking *Hollywood Free Paper*, known for its underground comics-style design.⁶² The historian Larry Eskridge calls this publication the "movement's premier Jesus paper" which came to have a national following before folding in 1979.⁶³ In her book *The Charismatic Movement: Is there a New Pentecost?* Poloma argues that there was "definitely a reciprocal relationship between the development of the charismatic movement and the dissemination of its ideology through the communications media." Television

⁵⁸ Quebedeaux, *The New Charismatics II*, 73.

⁵⁹ Poloma, *The Charismatic Movement*, 86.

⁶⁰ Quebedeaux's first study, *The New Charismatics*, came out in 1976; Poloma's *The Charismatic Movement*, in 1982.

⁶¹ Poloma, *The Charismatic Movement*, 11.

⁶² For an account of the *Hollywood Free Paper* see Duane Pederson, *Larger Than Ourselves: The Early Beginnings of the Jesus People* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015).

⁶³ Larry Eskridge, *God's Forever Family: The Jesus People Movement in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 256.

and radio provided productive means of “promoting movement growth,” Poloma writes, noting influential charismatic magazines including *Charisma*.⁶⁴

Poloma writes that, from the beginning of the Pentecostal movement, members have established their own publishing houses and outlets, outside that of mainstream media, and that this only increased with the new charismatic revival. “The media are available now, as never before, to publicize the movement,” she writes.⁶⁵ In *The New Charismatics II*, Richard Quebedeaux also highlights *Charisma* as providing “news of the movement” for a national audience.⁶⁶ *Charisma* appears in the literature as one of the most important outlets to come out of the neo-Pentecostal movement alongside *New Wine* (founded in 1969); *New Covenant* (established in 1971, billed as the “monthly magazine of the Catholic Charismatic renewal”); and *Catholic Charismatic* (founded in 1976, with a similar bent). These publications wrote about themselves both as evidence of a renewal sweeping Christendom as well as a source for information about becoming involved in this renewal. Yet *Charisma* would be the only magazine from that period to remain vital into the 21st century.

3. *Stephen Strang and the beginnings of Charisma*

Stephen Strang, as a young student, honed his skills as a journalist at the University of Florida, where he graduated in 1973, and proved himself to be a gifted reporter by winning the prestigious William Randolph Hearst Foundation Journalism Award, given out annually to student journalists. Strang landed a spot as a cub reporter with the *Sentinel Star*, a respected

⁶⁴ Poloma, *The Charismatic Movement*, 185.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 186.

⁶⁶ Quebedeaux, *The New Charismatics II*, 82.

Florida daily based in Orlando. He worked run-of-the-mill beats there — writing on cops, courts and real estate disputes — as well as the occasional story on religion, a topic in which he had a personal investment, counting himself among Florida’s growing number of Pentecostals. While not a shaggy-haired hippy, Strang did watch with special interest as the Jesus People movement attracted wide attention through coverage in national magazines like *Time* and *Life*, as well as in the *Hollywood Free Paper*. Strang’s life path was a bit more conventional than the Jesus Freaks. He had wed young, marrying his college sweetheart, Joy, a year before graduating college, and the two shared an interest in journalism. The young couple began attending Calvary Assembly, a growing Pentecostal megachurch led by Roy Harthern, an enterprising British pastor based in Florida. Harthern had an entrepreneurial streak himself (his career had begun as part of a father-and-son touring group) and when Strang suggested they launch a publication through the church, the board of the church lent its financial support.⁶⁷

Strang’s vision for *Charisma* was for something grander than a provincial church newsletter and livelier than a theological-oriented journal. He wanted to put his journalism experience and education to use and build something flashy and fun. The fledgling magazine’s opening column, in 1975, provided an editorial salvo and mission statement going forward. It would be snazzy (“we didn’t want to become the kind of boring publications many ‘religious’ journals are,” Strang wrote); on par with national outlets (“we decide to go first-class, with colorful, lively layouts and top-notch writing”); modern (“we decided to be contemporary so we could speak to the secular community while still being a religious publication”); and pragmatically profit-driven (“we accepted advertising... our readers, after all, are consumers”).⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Rustin Lloyd, “The Politics Of The Righteous: A Religious And Political History Of Conservative Neo-evangelicals In Central Florida” (MA thesis, University of Central Florida, 2013), 21.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

At the beginning, Strang straddled his obligations at the *Sentinel*, where he remained on staff, and at the newly-minted *Charisma*. In his writing at the *Sentinel*, Strang was able to show off his craft as a scene-setting feature writer, especially when it came to religious subjects. In one profile for the paper's Sunday magazine, for example, Strang deftly rendered the idiosyncratic stuttering speech patterns of the faith healer Kathryn Kuhlman ("Father God-d-d, we bow in in the presence of the Father, Son-nn and the Holy Spirit," he wrote, "we vow-w-w to give You-u-u all the glory") and interspersed his copy with italic asides of the praise songs that echoed through the church.⁶⁹ In time, Strang left his secular reporter gig, but the magazine would remain invested in such feature-writing that emphasized scene, feeling and affect.



In the early issues, the *Charisma* logo design was done in thick quasi-psychedelic font with a dove nestled above, and shows whispers of the Jesus People movement from which the magazine had drawn some inspiration. The writing throughout, though not boundary-exploding,

⁶⁹ Stephen Strang, "The Incredible Kathryn Kuhlman," *Sentinel Star*, April 27, 1975.

⁷⁰ *Charisma*, cover, August/September 1975.

was immediately stylish, with an emphasis on religious feeling (describing, for example, a performance of Calvary Assembly worship leader Thurlow Spurr as “star-Spangled, razzle-dazzle, put-a-lump-in-your-throat”). Though national in its ambitions, the first issues of *Charisma* appear now as rather homespun. Most of the advertisements were for local business, most in the Orlando area, and several from Calvary Assembly members. Yet *Charisma* would in time expand its reach and corner the charismatic news market. In 1983, Strang purchased *Charisma* from Hathern, becoming the sole owner of the company and shedding any official Calvary Assembly association. *Charisma*’s reach expanded, in part due to the folding of competing outfits, including *New Wine* in 1986. That same year, *Charisma* absorbed the readership of *Christian Life*, a competitor, as well as the affiliated Creation House Book and *Christian Bookseller* magazine, later renamed *Christian Retailing*.⁷¹

By the middle of the ’80s, the magazine would come to fashion itself a one-stop-bazaar for Spirit-filled needs. At the very least, it had survived competitors and reflected the nondenominational approach that would characterize the publication. In scholar Kate Bowler’s words, *Charisma* became the “era’s most widely read charismatic periodical,” its circulation reaching 100,000.⁷² A given issue might include: a regular column from Strang and another from the evangelist Larry Lea, recruiting readers to write in and join an army of prayer intercessors (“What do you want, casual Christianity or cutting-edge Christianity?”); news briefs about pastors Benny Hinn, Jerry Falwell and Rolf McPherson (son of the pioneering Sister Aimee); a *Charisma*-sponsored tear-out Bible reading plan (“If you stick with us and read through the Bible

⁷¹ “The 1980s: Trends, Triumphs, Tragedies, Transitions,” *Charisma & Christian Life*, December 1989. 44-53.

⁷² In Bowler’s study, *Charisma*’s advertisements and promotions figure as data about the densely-networked “pentecostal conference circuit” and prevalence there of the prosperity gospel. Kate Bowler, *Blessed* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013), 79.

in 1988 we will send you a certificate”); ads for an upcoming a National Pastors Conference featuring charismatic stalwarts John Wimber, Carlton Pearson and Robert Tilton (“Evangelism through Signs and Wonders”); finance advice from End Times author Jim McKeever (“a strategy that is scientifically accurate, Biblically sound, and easy to understand”); how-to deliverance ministry videos from Charles and Frances Hunter (“12 Hours of Video Advanced Teaching *HOW TO HEAL THE SICK*”); spiritual warfare manuals (“Familiar Spirit, Spirit of Divination, Jealousy, Lying, Haughtiness, Heaviness, Whoredoms, Fear, Infirmary, Bondage, Anti-Christ, Error, Death, Dumb & Deaf spirit and Seducing spirit”); opportunities to be ordained via mail and Christian dating services; and Marilyn Hickey’s Bible Encounter tour (“BONUS: Special Anointing Service”).⁷³ It is in this tableau that signs and wonders and financial advice and dating services and anointing and Bible read-alongs mesh and blend. In this blending, readers are joined together in what the musicologist Antoin Hennion has called, in other contexts, a shared community of taste, meaning a socially constructed set of aesthetics.⁷⁴

In the pages of *Charisma*, music and book reviews were not simple boosterism or promotion, but could at times be cutting, with such cultural criticism assessing not only a given book’s Christian-ness or doctrinal purity, but on whether it was any *good*. In 1989, Christian horror author Frank Peretti wrote *Piercing the Darkness*, a sequel to his bestselling *This Present Darkness*. A reviewer in *Charisma* described the new book as a baggy and long-winded read at “a grueling 441 pages.”⁷⁵ As *Charisma* House’s roster of book authors expanded, the magazine would regularly print excerpts of their own authors in the magazine. The professional trajectory of a leader can be tracked in the pages: faces drift from the backpage advertisements to the news

⁷³ These items have been pulled, at random, from *Charisma & Christian Life*, January 1988.

⁷⁴ Antoine Hennion, “Those Things that Hold Us Together: Taste and Sociology,” *Cultural Sociology* 1, no. 1 (2008).

⁷⁵ Stephan Lawson, “Peretti’s New Supernatural Battle,” *Charisma & Christian Life*, September 1989, 42.

section to the book review section. A partial list of magazine contributors and book authors includes: Paula White; Mike Bickle; David Yonggi Cho; Kim Daniels; Benny Hinn; Juanita Bynum; Jack Hayford; Rod Parsley; John Hagee; Max Lucado; and Jordan Rubin.

4. *Charisma and participatory culture: 'The more you are involved, the more you will like the magazine'*

From the start, *Charisma* sought to usher readers into the editorial process of the magazine, and by extension the unfolding charismatic story with which the outlet was so closely associated. This can be understood as an example of what the media scholar Henry Jenkins calls a “participatory culture,” as opposed to “consumer culture” which “transforms the experience of media consumption into the production of... a new community.”⁷⁶ Audiences were not passively receiving marching orders or instruction, but playing an active role and were regularly polled for feedback. This was, from Strang’s perspective, a way to better serve audience needs and tastes. He also sought to educate readers in the methods and aesthetics of good storytelling and media production in general. “We know the more you are involved, the more you will like the magazine,” Strang once wrote. “And that’s our goal — to involve you so that this is your favorite magazine.”⁷⁷ These efforts of creating a collaborative environment included soliciting input on coverage and design; carrying out periodic polls about readers’ media tastes and demographics; encouraging readers to bring in more subscribers; and instructing, in several ways, how readers might themselves become religious media-creators.

⁷⁶ Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 46.

⁷⁷ Stephen Strang, “Prizes for Renewal,” *Charisma & Christian Life*, May 1988, 9.

The magazine invited readers to see themselves as part of a theologically diverse yet unified audience, periodically publishing demographic information that they gathered from reader polls. Editors would report back findings of audience surveys, so that readers might better understand their community's demographics and consumer style. The periodical also recruited readers in efforts to expand the magazine's reach, asking subscribers to send in the names and addresses of friends who would then receive a free issue of *Charisma* highlights. At times, in this spirit of transparency, Strang would share rather wonky data. In 1988, for example, Strang reported that 71% percent of readers said they read "all or nearly all" of each issue; half said they pick up the magazine "four to six times a month to read it and hang on to it for at least half a year and two-thirds passed along the magazine to someone else. A majority was pleased with the magazine's articles: five percent said that articles were too long; seven percent said they were too short and 89% said they were just right.⁷⁸ *Charisma* features on what were apparently touchy topics — AIDs, homosexuality, New Agers, or Satanism, for instance — would be accompanied with sidebars inviting audience reactions and feedback about the tone of coverage. Such invitations for input read: "Have you ever received a personal prophecy?;" "We live in a secular society that fears censorship by Christians, yet God wants us to have godly standards in every area of our lives. Given this, what should we do in response to television's new brazenness?;" "How dangerous is the New Age? Are we overreacting? Not responding enough? Should we ignore it?;" "Does racism still exist in the church?;" and "Are you ready to drop the charismatic and Pentecostal label and just be called evangelical or even Christian?"⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Stephen Strang "The Best Pastors in America," *Charisma & Christian Life*, June 1988, 9.

⁷⁹ *Charisma & Christian Life*, September 1989, 56; *Charisma Magazine*, August 1989, 55; *Charisma & Christian Life*, May 1989, 61; *Charisma & Christian Life*, October 1989, 79; *Charisma & Christian Life*, November 1989, 104.

Charisma also solicited input on questions of style and aesthetics. When the magazine did an editorial overhaul, including updating its original logo, for example, Strang broached the topic with readers in his regular column. “I hope you can tell we are trying to improve the magazine each month,” he wrote, including tweaking the covers, fonts and graphics. “[T]he way we lay out the magazine is designed to make a more pleasant reading experience,” he explained, which included developing a “particular term that is called its ‘logo.’” “For nearly 13 years we have had the same cursive logo (which has been our patented trademark),” he went on. The magazine now worried it looked passé. “We found that readers either tended to love or hate the logo,” Strang wrote. “Those who love said it was unique and that it ‘flowed’ like the Holy Spirit. Those who did not like it said it was hard to read and looked dated from the mid-70s when it was designed... We tried to find a logo that had the same ‘feel’ as our original logo, yet was more legible and up-to-date.”⁸⁰ The new design, ultimately, was decided in conversations with select readers and debuted in 1989.



Strang wrote contentedly at the time, “We asked a wide variety of readers if they liked this [new] design, and nearly everyone told us they did.” In Strang’s running columns from this period, his tone is at once instructional and deferential. He wants input from his constituents, but is also acting as a teacher, of sorts, introducing the occasional technical editorial term and explaining what, from an editorial perspective, makes for a “pleasant” reading experience.

⁸⁰ Stephen Strang, “Prizes for Renewal,” *Charisma & Christian Life*, May 1988, 9.

Charisma regularly encouraged readers to contribute their own writing and photography to the magazine, too. When putting out such calls, the editors offered helpful tips on what makes especially compelling materials, and the type of content that would reflect the sensibilities of the outlet. This included periodic photo contests. One, in 1988, asked for “your best color photographs that capture any aspect of Christian truth or Christian living.” The call continued: “Do you have an interesting shot of Christians in action?” The entries would be judged by editorial staff and top entries awarded with cash prizes and publication in the magazine. “It’s easy to produce religious cliches or poor-quality photos,” the invitation warned, “but please avoid sending such photos.” “Christian life and Christian truth are the most exciting and intriguing messages people will ever hear,” they wrote. “Can you capture on film the dynamic, beautiful expression of that message? Can you show us something about Christian life or Christian truth from a fresh angle? You know you can! Let us see your best effort!”⁸¹ Communicating the “exciting and intriguing messages” of Christian life was a particular art — one that could be cultivated — and something that must elevate beyond bland cliché.

In another example, *Charisma* created opportunities for its audience to experiment with Christian fiction. Around the release *Piercing the Darkness*, *Charisma* held a Peretti-themed competition, titled the “Angels, Principalities and Powers Fiction Contest.” The magazine wanted the punchiest, scariest, most exciting tales of demonic battle that readers might conjure. “Can you write a gripping short story about spiritual warfare?” the magazine asked. “If you can, *Charisma & Christian Life* wants it. Not just any old fiction will do. We want riveting short stories of 1,500 to 2,400 words... Stories about angels, force of darkness and spiritual conflict —

⁸¹ “Announcing the 1988 Charisma Color Photo Contest,” *Charisma & Christian Life*, July 1988, 61.

where ordinary believers armed with the power of God must fight invisible foes to extend the kingdom of God on this earth.”⁸²

That contest was organized by *Charisma* and a frequent collaborator called the Christian Writers Institute, or CWI, a group founded in 1945 by *Christian Life* publisher Robert Walker to educate members, through correspondence courses, in the ways of publicity and general editorial skills. Strang would come to lead CWI in 1986, when *Christian Life* merged with *Charisma*. Advertisements for CWI appeared often, from that year on, in *Charisma*. A typical item read:

Have you always wanted to be a writer but didn't know how to get started?

Would you like to see your name in print?

Do the words 'free-lance writer' appeal to you?

If you answer 'yes' to any of those three questions, then it's time to contact Christian Writers Institute.⁸³

In 1988, *Charisma* ran a feature written by one of the CWI instructors with a sidebar penned by Strang. “Like the United States Marines which look for a few good men, the editors of *Charisma* & *Christian Life* are constantly looking for a few good writers,” Strang wrote. Editors at that time were receiving articles from “about 80 free-lancers a week,” he continued, but “nearly all are unacceptable for our magazine.” Why? Sometimes writers would send in poems or long pieces of fiction, genres *Charisma* very rarely published. Others were trying to “tell personal stories with no strong ‘take-away’ or message,” Strang wrote, then helpfully outlined the sorts of pieces *Charisma* did want: articles on “trends in the Christian community” or “articles on significant charismatic ministries.” “In every issue,” he went on, “you will find brief news items

⁸² “Angels, Principalities, Powers, Fiction Contest,” *Charisma & Christian Life*, November 1989, 120.

⁸³ *Charisma*, January 1992, 42.

on People & Events of interest in the charismatic, Pentecostal and evangelical communities.” Often *Charisma* would employ ghostwriters to work on such articles but frequently run into trouble finding authors to take on assignments in far-flung locales. “How can you become a published author in *Charisma & Christian Life* magazine?” Strang wrote, then wound up to his pitch, which was to attend a gathering of the CWI that coming spring, held at Wheaton College, in Illinois, and overseen by Strang, *Charisma* editorial director Bert Ghezzi, and others. “There you will learn what it takes to be a good writer... We will enjoy talking with you and sharing more specifically about how you can be a published author in this magazine.”⁸⁴

This article and invitation brought in some 600 responses, Strang would write later, and attendance at the conference was reportedly a record high. Strang summarized the event to readers, saying he was deeply impressed by “the caliber of writers I met at the conference, and I believe we will get many good writers from that contact.” He restated his needs as an editor, saying they still needed “more good writers” to contribute. This would require attention to something that Strang had a hard time putting specific words to, but hoped he might still convey: it was not just about writing with depth and knowledge of a subject, but communicating it all a way that *hooked* readers. “Specifically,” he wrote, “we need magazine feature writers who have experience delving into a story and explaining its many aspects impartially so the reader understands what is happening in a new way but also gets what we call ‘a good read.’”⁸⁵ It was not just about finding good, charismatic subjects (the “significant charismatic ministries”), but the manner in which those subjects were rendered — “riveting,” no cliché, elevating a given story into something more: “a good read.”

⁸⁴ Stephen Strang, “We’re Looking for a Few Good Writers,” *Charisma & Christian Life*, March 1988, 67.

⁸⁵ Stephen Strang, “A New Song Revisited,” *Charisma & Christian Life*, August 1988, 7.

5. *Televangelist scandals: ‘Making stars out of some who need to be servants’*

At the conclusion of the 1980s, *Charisma* published a special review package, titled “Trends, Triumphs, Tragedies, Transitions.” It was the first full decade that the magazine had chronicled, giving a special weight to the occasion. This timeline of the decade drew from the magazine’s past coverage and included, running along the top of the page, some of its standout cover designs, including profiles of Maranatha Ministries; explorations of “Computerization and the Church;” and portraits of CBN’s Pat Robertson; and the Christian Contemporary Music icon Carman. Overlapping themes come into focus: updates on denominations and higher education (“The Assemblies of God chose a new leader for the first time in 25 years”); growing political clout (“M.G. ‘Pat’ Robertson formally announced his candidacy for president”); happenings at media outfits serving a similar audience (“*New Wine* magazine, which had been serving the charismatic Christian community since 1969, ceased publication with its December 1986 issue”). *Charisma*, perceptively, wove its own editorial updates into this timeline with items about its growth as a company, revealing a keen sense of its own place in this ecosystem, including the company’s absorption of *Christian Life* and Creation House Books. The impressive ten-page spread makes the case for both *Charisma*’s centrality as a movement chronicler as well as player in that history itself.

Some of the biggest stories of this time period involved high-profile sex and financial scandals, most prominently involving Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart. These stories — understandably, given the fame and wealth of the subjects — garnered significant coverage in the mainstream press. The story of 1980s televangelism was, in the eyes of the mainstream media “the hottest, juiciest religious scandal of the twentieth century,” the scholars Jeffrey K.

Hadden and Anson Shupe write, adding that the scandals of the 1980s “damaged all television ministries” and religious broadcasting and media more broadly.⁸⁶ This coverage is sometimes figured by scholars and commentators as an example of how secular journalists pounce on religious scandals or skewer religious subjects — similar to how the columnist H.L. Mencken had done in 1925 with his acerbic coverage of the Scopes Monkey Trial. In his survey of the American press, Sean McCloud writes that journalists began at this time to describe televangelism in condemnatory language, using the sorts of pejorative descriptors once reserved for “cults and their leaders.”⁸⁷ Many in the public followed this story with satisfaction, R. Laurence Moore writes, convinced that the exposure of religious hypocrisy would put an end to the type of mediated religion that the Bakkers personified and “go back to something respectable.”⁸⁸

Yet it was not just the *National Enquirer*, *Playboy* or *National Lampoon* gawking at religion. For *Charisma* editorial members, these scandals were also a storyline editors had been following for much longer than their would-be secular peers, and one they intended to cover closely now too. Editors and reporters at *Charisma* paid close attention to the vicissitudes of the televangelical world and placed these media spectacles in context for their readers. To be a good Spirit-filled Christian, it would seem, meant also to be a good interpreter of such media spectacles, and to learn from them. “Believe me, I have examined my own life recently,” Strang wrote at the time. “I ask myself if *Charisma* has somehow contributed to or participated in making stars out of some who need to be servants. I tell myself we do not try to... make them

⁸⁶ Jeffrey K. Hadden and Anson Shupe, *Televangelism: Power and Politics on God's Frontier* (New York: Henry Holt, 1988), 16.

⁸⁷ Sean McCloud, *Making the American Religious Fringe: Exotic, Subversives & Journalists, 1955-1993* (University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 167.

⁸⁸ R. Laurence Moore, *Selling God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 248.

out to be more than they are.” His job as a journalist was to include the full picture, warts and all. “For example, when we write about a ministry or a person, we try to include the criticisms and weaknesses as well as the success,” he wrote. “As professional journalists, my staff and I have always tried to be objective so that you can trust what we report to you.”⁸⁹

Religious studies scholars, including Moore, have argued that scandals often work in the favor of religious groups, providing free publicity to evangelize. In the case of *Charisma*, editors’ public mandate was not to evangelize, exactly, but to inform. So, the magazine embraced the scandals as editorial opportunities. Rather than being a topic to shy away from, editors found a productive opportunity for analysis, coverage and discussion about the topics of religion, media, and celebrity. Here was a chance to articulate and rearticulate their editorial mission, and flex their reporting chops. Strang gave an overview of the outlet’s approach at the beginning of 1988, reminding readers of stand-out stories. “In the pages of *Charisma & Christian Life*, we have reported on the events and changes at PTL and we have tried to add perspective in how to understand what has transpired,” he wrote. Some of the coverage included a cover story by the popular *Charisma* columnist Jamie Buckingham, “God is Shaking His Church” (June, 1987); an interview with then-PTL chairman Jerry Falwell (August, 1987); and an interview with the then-new PTL trustee David Clark (February 1988). In April 1988, *Charisma* printed Jimmy Swaggart’s tearful confession verbatim.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Stephen Strang, “The Need for Repentance,” *Charisma & Christian Life*, April 1988, 9.

⁹⁰ “Swaggart’s Confession,” *Charisma & Christian Life*, March, 1988, 19.



“What was the Holy Spirit doing through the events and behind the scenes of the 1980s?” an accompanying sidebar of the magazine’s decade-end package read, then summarized some key themes, such as “an increasing acceptance of charismatic distinctives by the wider evangelical community.” Whatever would come in the following years — revival, celebration and, yes, scandal — *Charisma* wished to be the place where readers would turn for commentary, news and analysis. “What is ahead for the 1990s?” the editorial asked. “For a closer look at the coming decade, be sure to read next month’s issue of *Charisma & Christian Life*.” Whenever new “waves” or reports of religious revival and renewal emerged — such as the Brownsville Revival, the Toronto Blessing or the New Apostolic Reformation — *Charisma*’s news team would cover them closely, following news that other outlets might not. In 1997, the company’s book-publishing arm collected and expanded on such coverage in a volume titled *Charisma Reports: The Brownsville Revival* by the news and features editor Marcia Ford. “[F]ew in the

⁹¹ Stephen Strang, “The Other Side of the Story: Tammy Faye Shares Information She Says the Media Left Out,” *Charisma & Christian Life*, March 1991, 90.

media took note of what was happening,” that book’s intro read. “But *Charisma* noticed.”⁹²

While the original magazine remained the flagship offering of *Charisma*, the 1980s had seen the company diversify with the times, a trend that continued into the 1990s. In 1983, Strang launched a spinoff publication, *Ministry Today*; in 1995, *New Man*; in the 1990s, Strang tried his hand at broadcast journalism with a short-lived *Charisma* program on Trinity Broadcast Network.⁹³ By the 2000s, *Charisma* had expanded into audio production, and today its Charisma Podcast Network hosts hundreds of podcasts, including Strang’s own weekly offering, the *Strang Report*.

6. *Media ‘heresiography’ and representation: a story in 3 parts*

The work of journalists factors often into how religious studies scholars write about their subjects. This media coverage may be figured, at times, as a barometer for how the public feels about something, and at others, for how popular discourse is manipulated or shaped through media representation. It may be figured in the general, as “the media,” or the specific, as a singular reporter, outlet or publisher. It may be used, and often is, as a foil and opportunity for academic intervention and correction. Several of the sources discussed previously point to secular journalists to form arguments about how religion, in general, is represented in the public, and the impact of those representations. In his study of the latter half of the 20th century, Sean McCloud writes that, in writing about the “cultic fringe” journalists “acted as ‘heresiographers,’ identifying false or inauthentic religion and thus symbolically establishing boundaries between a

⁹² Marcia Ford, *Charisma Reports: The Brownsville Revival*, (Orlando, FL: Creation House), vii.

⁹³ J. Gordon Melton, Phillip Charles Lucas, and Jon R. Stone, *Prime-Time Religion: An Encyclopedia of Religious Broadcasting* (Phoenix, AZ: Oryx Press, 1997), 357.

mainstream religious center and a suspect periphery.”⁹⁴ In doing this work, “writers and editors in periodicals like *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *Life* frequently offered, under the guise of objective reporting, a spiritual apologetics for the dominant social order.” As a point of clarification, and to explain his methodology, McCloud notes that his study “is not primarily about those who work in magazine production rooms, nor is it about what goes on in those places. It focuses on the articles produced.”⁹⁵ Yet what of those who work in magazines and newspapers? If religion is shaped through the representations produced in newsrooms, we might be served to interrogate these daily, weekly and monthly creative and editorial processes.

In the following three snapshots, I wish to show how the production of journalistic products, like any creative process, is a messy work. It is collaborative labor, between writers, editors, photographers, public relation flaks, assistants, and subjects themselves, all of whom play a role in shaping the outcome. On the topic of religion more specifically, the relationship between the would-be secular chronicler and would-be religious subject may be combative and collaborative all at once.

Editors express concerns in the following vignettes about such things as: the sincerity of subjects, and how they and I, as the reporter, might interrogate or depict sincerity or insincerity on the page; going “too easy” or “too hard” on subjects; and try to anticipate the public attention or criticism such coverage might draw. At times, the following exchanges may seem to support McCloud’s charge that journalists work as “heresiographers,” signaling what actions or behaviors are beyond the pale to readers. Yet journalists are, just as often, after things aesthetic. In this way we are similar to the religious creators detailed throughout this paper: the making of a “good read,” as Strang might say; the crafting of “riveting” headlines and attention-grabbing

⁹⁴ McCloud, *Making the American Religious Fringe*, 4.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

images; or looking to spot “the pow factor,” as the Tennessee revivalists might say, and convey that in rich description.

Subjects, in the following snapshots, are not passive bystanders or victims of media coverage. They work, and sometimes succeed, in shaping stories as they are happening. Well aware of the editorial process — some more than others — they may ask at various stages, with suspicion: *So, what’s your angle?* Hoping, I suppose, that the asking of this simple question will act as a kind of secret passcode, forcing a reporter to tip their hand or concede editorial control. One never knows, in the end, how such journalistic products will be received, by either the subject or the public. A writer sure that their portrait of a subject was sympathetic may be shocked to see that subject recoil and lash out. A writer sure that their portrait was critical may be shocked to see their subject celebrate the portrait as a validation.

I first encountered *Charisma* while working as a reporter at *The Forward*, a Jewish newspaper in New York City. Like many in digital newsrooms, hyper-focused at that time on analytics and speed, I spent much of my time scrolling the internet looking for story leads. My beat, at that time, involved covering topics on the fringe of Jewish communal life, for example: Jews for Jesus; Black Hebrew Israelites; so-called “lost tribes;” and a group of Jews who became Sufi Muslims. A colleague once told me they saw my niche as covering everything “Jew-y but not exactly Jewish.” This also meant writing about evangelicals and Pentecostals who adapted or appropriated Jewish rituals and ritual objects into their worship. Research on this topic led me to look into people like the televangelist Sid Roth, a Jewish convert to Pentecostalism and host of “It’s Supernatural!;” Jonathan Cahn, a Messianic rabbi and pastor from New Jersey known for his prophecy-themed books; and Kirt Schneider, host of “Discovering the Jewish Jesus.” The main news source for these characters, providing regular updates, was *Charisma*. Often,

Charisma was not just covering these religious figures, but also publishing their books or sermons.

For me, reading *Charisma* at this time felt like tapping into an expansive web of collaborating characters, largely unknown to my peers in *The Forward*'s newsroom. It was a densely-networked media sphere, something I came to think of as the Charisma Extended Universe. I would spend the next several years writing about these characters and their media network, for *The Forward*, *The New York Times* and elsewhere, trying to convey to readers what it was that I found so compelling about the topic. This reporting involves a drawn-out dance with primary sources, public relations handlers, personal assistants, and multiple editors which spans years. What follows now are abbreviated snapshots of this process, a curated behind-the-scenes of editorial products that typically seek to conceal the process of their own making.

i. *The rabbi*

I had known of Jonathan Cahn for several years before I first heard him speak in person. One winter evening, I took the bus to his spacious New Jersey church, Beth El, where he lectured weekly to an in-person crowd of several hundred and tens of thousands more online. A media crew manned a booth overlooking the sanctuary, adjusting lights, as one man operated a camera crane overhead. Cahn's lectures cleaved closely to the central theme of his several bestselling books. These texts read like a mix of Dan Brown and Hal Lindsey and offer an alluring interpretation of hidden prophetic codes in scripture as they relate to the headlines of the day. In recent years, Cahn had focused almost exclusively on the idea that Trump's election was foretold in scripture, and this was the hook and reason for my coming. Cahn referenced his Jewish

background often, wearing a prayer shawl and interpolating Hebrew words and phrases into his speech. After each service, helpers would lay out Cahn's books, numbering ten at the time, to be purchased near the cafeteria. I approached Cahn after services and told him I wished to write about him for *The New York Times*. He agreed on the spot, then put me in touch with his secretary, a woman with whom I would exchange emails in the following months. The reporting process for this story involved my returning many more times to Beth El, interviewing Cahn in person backstage and also on the phone. I also spoke with colleagues and critics for additional interviews.

Once a first draft of the piece was filed to the *Times*, my editor and I began a fairly involved string of exchanges, discussing what elements we might want to expand and what might be cut. My editor had a background in magazine feature-writing and was especially interested in fleshing out detailed character descriptions in one or two scenes. The editor prompted me with a set of questions about Cahn: "Is he a smooth scammer? Does he have a serious religious air?... you could get a lot of mileage by describing his personal bearing in a couple of scenes." Another suggested change was our final scene. In the first draft, I had closed the article with a description of Cahn prompting the audience to buy his books after the service. For my editor, the scene was a little too on-the-nose, a bit cliché: the televangelist urging parishioners to make a purchase. He suggested closing on a different scene of two attendees I had interviewed after services. I was unsure about the change, but warmed to it in time. It was more ambiguous, and the story felt stronger for it.

After *The New York Times* piece was published, Cahn posted to his 270,000 followers on Facebook something that read: "SPECIAL WORD FROM JONATHAN — REPORT ON MAR A LAGO & THE NEW YORK TIMES." In this message he recounted a trip he had recently

taken to visit “Trump’s house in Florida” and wished also to comment on the *Times* feature. He wrote: “it was a dramatic weekend... The New York Times ran a feature length article on me and the ministry, taking up two full pages, and most of the front page of the metro section. Of course, the New York Times is of a secular liberal bent and has a reputation for being hostile to anything having to do with faith, the Bible... So, of course, the article has the New York Times secular slant and angle... and with inaccuracies (including the surprising note that I have ‘political aspirations’ (!) Take all that with a grain of salt... BUT On the other hand, it also presented a lot — points from *The Harbinger*, *The Paradigm*, etc. and mentioned the newest book that will be coming out this September.”⁹⁶ Included in his post was a photo of the paper’s print edition.

Comments below the Facebook post numbered more than 500, including: “The New York Times is right up there with the *Enquirer*,” “Their newspaper is good for toilet paper in emergencies and that's about it,” “This is awesome! Hopefully someone at The Times found God this week as a result of this article!,” “Liberal dumb arrogant lying evil wicked atheist rag paper!!!,” and “Modern day form of stoning. It will not work.” Cahn’s response to the article on Facebook and in person (he also brought the weekend paper on stage at his church and held it aloft on the pulpit) was something that would be familiar to me and most reporters who cover such public figures. Regardless of the content or tone of the article, perhaps especially if the piece can be understood as critical, the coverage itself serves a purpose. Interestingly, Cahn's response to his online and local flock elided his own level of participation in the production of this article — our numerous conversations, including lengthy fact-checking phone calls and the

⁹⁶ Jonathan Cahn, “Special Word from Jonathan,” March 19, 2019.
<https://www.facebook.com/jonathancahn.official/posts/2411779638845705/>

facilitation of a photo shoot — and our close and civil correspondence following publication. I was not put off by it, though. We still exchange emails today.

ii. *The healer*

In the summer of 2021 I had come to learn about a woman named Kathryn Krick in Los Angeles who was holding outdoor faith-healing and deliverance services throughout the city. Dramatic, edited clips of her services circulated widely on TikTok and Instagram. I attended several times, as a spectator, and then contacted her ministry to see if they might participate in a profile. They quickly agreed. I pitched the story to an independent Los Angeles magazine called *The LAnd*, founded by an acquaintance of mine a few years prior. An early set of questions from an editor there, posed to me early on in the pitching process, had to do with whether I would be able to spend significant time with Krick; if and how she was different from “that Hillsong guy that ran Bieber’s church;” and if I thought she was a scammer or “just a really sincere weirdo.” I thought about how best to respond to these questions for a bit. I ultimately wrote: “She’s different from Carl Lentz (Bieber’s old guy) or Judah Smith (Bieber’s new guy) in that this is a really grassroots start-up show... Is she sincere or a scammer?... It’s mercurial, a mix. It’s all certainly a SHOW, a real staged performance. If people are getting scammed or tricked (which they may be) they’re also super into the scam, eager participants in the whole theater of the thing.” We left it at that. The story was assigned.

I spent several months, off and on, reporting this story. I attended many more outdoor services, spoke with attendees, and interviewed Krick a handful times. We drove around in her hulking SUV after services and sipped coffees at a local cafe. Of special interest to me was

Krick's use of social media, and these electrifying, short video clips she made of casting out demons. She described a narrative arc she was interested in capturing in each tightly-edited clip which might show a wheelchair-bound woman standing and weeping, or a demon-possessed teenager puking in a bucket. "I don't want it to be too creepy," she told me. "Because demons can look kind of creepy." These videos showing demon-manifesting (faces contorting, voices deepening) were her calling card. They regularly went viral online and led to her coverage on the *Charisma* website, a point of pride for the up-and-coming faith healer.⁹⁷

I also wanted to know what kind of person Krick had been before she had gone viral. To that end, I went separately to two different churches she had previously attended, including that of a Kenyan pop singer-turned-deliverance pastor named Lovy Longomba Elias, known to his fans as Prophet Lovy.⁹⁸ At one point during our conversations, I asked Krick about her time at Prophet Lovy's church and she bristled. "I don't see why you want to mention him," she said, showing an edge I hadn't seen before. I had confirmed their relationship, through an assistant, but she was uneasy with this being known to the public. Krick had her reasons to be concerned, perhaps, and her associations with Lovy, and others like him, have been a topic that her online detractors (she has many) would point to as evidence of a problematic association with un-Christian, African forms of charismatic religion. Many of these criticisms had a racist feel to them, with ministers like Lovy figured as "witchdoctors." Regardless, her time at his church was worthy of inclusion in my article, I reasoned, and contributed to a fuller portrait. Krick was unhappy. "You have a story," she said, "but this is *my* story." After publication, I did not hear a

⁹⁷ Marti Pieper, "Anointed in God's Power: Kathryn Krick Shares Her Hunger for Revival" *Charisma*, May 24, 2022.

⁹⁸ Kathryn Krick, phone interview by Sam Kestenbaum, August 11, 2021, Los Angeles, CA.

word from Krick. She has since gone on to expand to a brick-and-mortar rental space and publish her first book, *The Secret of the Anointing*. There is no mention of Lovy.

iii. *The publisher*

In early 2021, I approached Stephen Strang himself, hoping he might himself agree to be the subject of a feature in *The New York Times*. At that point, *Charisma* had been an important voice in publicizing the prophetic pronouncements of numerous religious leaders around the 2016 election of Trump. Strang, for his part, had written four books about Trump, highlighting these prophecies and other spiritual dimensions of the Trump presidency.⁹⁹ When Trump failed to win a second term, this caused a minor crisis in the Pentecostal and charismatic circles where these prophecies had circulated. This struck me as a newsworthy moment to profile Charisma Media. I wanted to understand how the company had weathered the political upheaval, from an editorial angle. I asked around for Strang's email and carefully composed my query. His first response came quickly, with a blunt subject line: "No interview with me." The message continued, "after being misquoted by the New York Times I've learned my lesson and won't agree to an interview." I thanked him for his reply but would not be so easily put off. I continued to check in for several months. In the summer, I saw that Strang was releasing a new book, his first since the election. The new book was on the topic of "cancel culture" and made up of reporting undertaken during the pandemic. Strang was unrolling a multimedia promotional campaign and sent me the book and wrote that afterwards, maybe, "we can discuss a possible

⁹⁹ Stephen E. Strang, *God and Donald Trump* (Lake Mary, FL: FrontLine, 2017); Stephen E. Strang, *Trump Aftershock* (Lake Mary, FL: FrontLine, 2018); Stephen E. Strang, *God, Donald Trump and the 2020 Election* (Lake Mary, FL: FrontLine, 2020); Stephen E. Strang, *God, Trump and Covid-19* (Lake Mary, FL: FrontLine, 2020).

interview.” The book, after a long delay, arrived at my door. We set up a time for a Zoom interview (recorded, as per Strang’s request) and he had another request, not exactly a quid pro quo, but something that felt close: “I’ve written an op-ed about Cancel Culture. I’d like to submit to the NYT. Any advice or name of someone to send it to?” I gave him the contact of a colleague, and that seemed to seal the deal.

My reporting proceeded — a series of conversations with Strang, some archival work, and numerous other interviews — and then the piece was filed. While going through one round of edits, my editor asked if we might introduce, in her words, “someone with a brief critical perspective... on why Strang was particularly effective and why it resonated in a concerning way in terms of propaganda.” We needed a critic to deliver some naysaying, she was telling me, and that naysaying would have something to do with “concerning... propaganda.” I did not object to the edit and had in my notebook a quote from someone that I thought might fit the bill, and be able to appraise Strang critically: John Fea, an evangelical historian who, in his 2018 book *Believe Me: The Evangelical Road to Trump*, had singled out Strang as an example of what he dubbed “court evangelicals.”¹⁰⁰ When Fea and I had spoken, he wished to know whether he would be quoted as a critic or expert, two roles he was comfortable toggling between. A short quote from Fea, along with his academic bonafides, satisfied my editor’s wish. For his part, Strang did not seem displeased with the article overall, and we exchanged several more emails in the months afterwards.

There are many hands involved in setting religion down on the page. In three examples, Cahn, Krick and Strang, I wish to show the collaborative nature of this media-making, involving

¹⁰⁰ Fea writes, “Strang’s book on the 2016 campaign, *God and Donald Trump*, provides the best introduction to this wing of court evangelicalism and its apostles who prophesied Trump’s election,” John Fea *Believe Me: The Evangelical Road to Donald Trump*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018), EPUB format, Chapter 4.

sources and editors, and the many factors involved in the creation of an editorial product. One *Times* editor wished to beef up descriptions and soften a potentially too-pointed closing scene; a *The LAnd* editor was concerned with the subject's sincerity; and a second *Times* editor wished to include the voice of an expert and critic of religious propaganda. Subjects were, at turns, collaborative and adversarial. Through these editorial processes, different definitions and ideas of how religion operates are negotiated, sometimes in quickly dashed out emails, on deadline. These works of media, which I helped create, took shape through a complex, multi-sided process.

My relationship with Strang and Charisma Media has continued over the years. In August 2023, I traveled to Tennessee where I was to report on a multimedia tent revival taking place and would once more find myself in the world of Charisma Media. Strang was milling backstage when I approached him and reintroduced myself. He searched my face for a moment and then recalled who I was. One of Strang's assistants stepped forward to hand me two new Charisma House books, one by Strang and another by Cahn, to take home. I flipped to the back to show Strang that Cahn's biography now read "as featured in The New York Times." "That's because of me!" I said. It was not pride, exactly, but more a remark on the awkward way that our careers had braided together. If *Charisma* was a place where Strang had provided paths for people to become charismatics, in both senses of that word, I was also playing a role in that same process.

7. *The Pow Factor*

It is a familiar refrain, heard at journalism conferences and industry roundtables on the subject, that the media has failed to understand religion. It is a self-flagellation and incantation:

The media doesn't *get* religion. This is evoked, most often, to say mainstream journalists in America misunderstand religious people, in some way, and if they understood them correctly we would all be better off for it. *The New York Times* publisher Dean Baquet famously said this after Donald Trump's victory in 2016; there was the criticism site *Get Religion*, founded by longtime journalist Terry Mattingly, to highlight supposed bias in secular news outlets; religious literacy advocates, from varied flanks, and with their own theological commitments, will also repeat a version of this idea. The reporter tasked with interpreting the religious, a version of this mantra follows, ought to be especially mindful and sensitive, to do a better job of covering the faithful subject. This is at once a scold and flattery, resting on the idea that such subjects need and require special repertorial translation. In this refrain the religious is the *sui generis* otherworldly; the media, the epitome of the profane thisworldly. The two are positioned as being ultimately discreet and in some fundamental opposition. Yet standing shoulder to shoulder in Tennessee with career revivalists, working with a team of cameramen in search of the "pow factor," it is a distant notion, harder and harder to hold on to. These are not lonesome characters, passive and silent without my pen, or that of any other journalist, but those who understand well that the religious is at once banal and spectacular, a thing given life through this very showmanship. In the Charisma Extended Universe, aspiring healers and prophets and exorcists may equip themselves with the commercial and editorial tools to cultivate and kindle their charisma — to *get* charisma — religious or otherwise, and make a vocation for themselves.

My profile subjects would, on the one hand, seem to be different from myself: men and women who understand Jesus to be the son of God, who testify to the literal existence of demons and angels, unfolding revelation and the contemporary movement of the Holy Spirit in their lives. During one meeting with staffers in Tennessee, I was introduced as an outsider, of sorts,

with regards to religion. A Jew, a non-believer. Yet these creators also understood me, and I understood them, as kin and peers: storytellers and media producers. As the tent revival died down, one member of Locke Media, Inc. asked if they might get me for an on-camera interview before we packed up. One of the cameramen smiled at me and said: “You could make the cut!” As my reporter’s notebook filled and Locke Media cameras rolled, and we both roamed about looking for “pow” here and there, I was left to wonder just how different, in the fullness of time, our creations would be from one another.

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