

Gustavus Adolphus College

Battle of the Books:

Secularism and Christianity in Contemporary Bestselling Literature

A Senior Thesis submitted to the faculty of the Religion Department

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Introduction and Thesis:

Matthew Arnold wrote in 1869, "A man's life of each day depends for its solidarity and value on whether he reads during that day, and far more still, what he reads during it." What did you read today? Did the book you read have a narrative that spoke to you and was that narrative able to speak to you? Chances are you either found yourself to be in complete accord with or in complete disgust by the author's intent, views of humanity and the world. Perhaps they spoke of things you found alarmingly true. The fact of the matter is that the novels we read have a voice. This narrative explores society, its values and its reasons. Novels are lenses through which society and its divisions can be explored. "What is it with all these books? Isn't the Book supposed to be in decline—its authority eroding, its informational base fleeing to suburbs of impeccably edged and weeded silicon lawns?" Although that is what Nicolson Baker suggested in 1995, the book is not in decline. Not only does the book still exist as an integral part of society, the book a much greater device than the average person thinks. American society's views on humanity and religion can be explored within the context of fiction literature. By comparing best selling novels from the lists of the New York Times and the ECPA, Evangelical Christian Publishing Association, the similarities and differences in regards to the above mentioned concerns can take place. Opening a conversation between secular and non-secular groups within the United States of America is necessary. Values and ideologies, realities and idealisms, heroes and villains, redemption and downfalls will be all be exposed and explored. As the face of religion in America changes to an inner or private religion, it is important to examine where it is headed and the societal and religious implications of that shift. What if there are two

very different set of values within this country? Does this signify troubles? Is it the beginning of a new religious era? Over the last few decades, Christianity in the United States has become expressed more and more frequently as a private religion. Christian religious fiction has emerged as a direct result of the emergence of private religion, and it has become a lens through which it is possible to explore Christian morality, opinions, and worldviews. By comparing two Christian best sellers taken from the Evangelical Christian Publishing Association's list and two secular Best-sellers taken from the NY Times list, the similarities and differences between the two groups can be compared. By examining the authorial intent, assumptions about humanity, their themes and worldviews, an important discussion between the secular and Christian communities can occur. This discussion will examine the role of religion, the church and private religion's affect on American society as well as on Christianity itself.

Before this discussion can begin, it is necessary to first examine the background of this issue. In the immediately following pages, the validity and methodology for such a study will be explored as well as a close examination of the historical and cultural contexts of the state of religion in the United States. After those imperative issues are discussed, the selected sources will be introduced and the discussion will begin.

Literature, Private Religion and Religious Study

In a world of television why would literature be used as the lens through which to examine the role of religion and pop-culture? The answer to this question is more than two-fold. First, no matter how many hours of television the average person watches, the fact is America still reads. We are a literate nation and whether we use literature for knowledge or escape, books are still selling and people are still reading them. The growth of corporate bookstores has contributed to the accessibility of books. Spring Arbor (CBA) president Larry Carpenter explains, "As a store goes from carrying 12,000 to 20,000 and now to 100,000 titles, that opens up new sections."¹ In one stop, a family can now shop together and each person can leave with a book that suits their particular interests. After all, there are more books available in one store than television shows offered on all channels over the span of an entire day. Add in a cup of coffee, available at many chain bookstores, and you have an entire evening event. Mom, Dad and the kids don't even have to agree on what to do or where to go; the mega bookstore has provided everyone with what they want and each person is satisfied.

In 2003 the publishing industry grossed 157 billion dollars in total sales.² All forms of literature, including both 'high' academic writings and 'low' fiction have a superior ability to articulate any given point. An author chooses words very carefully, dwelling on what his or her chosen word reflects rather than how it will sound when spoken. They espouse their assumptions about the reader, about the world. Novels are an especially good vehicle for an author's voice to be heard. Fiction is much more telling about

¹Nick Harrison. "The evolution of an industry: in the 1990's, Christian publishing has gone from paddling upstream to sailing mainstream. *Publishers Weekly* 245, no.11(1998): S10.

² www.gain.net/industry/index.html

society than a thirty-minute sitcom in its plot development as well. In a novel, there does not have to be a quick solution and situations are not always resolved. Television, as a device of escape, offer only mini-stories and never truly have the time to focus on society's larger issues. They may hold up a mirror, but they rarely offer commentary. Authors of novels usually sell books to make a profit, so often their topics are ones that appeals to readers, either to reflect society or challenge it. Therefore, literature is often well thought out and it pays heed to society in ways that television cannot, making it the ideal lens through which to observe society.

Fiction tells a story. While suspense, mystery and romance novels may sometimes seem like a form of escape, the story is much more than that. Stories are actually wonderful devices for encountering and wrestling complex issues in inventive ways. They are a way for authors to have their voice heard and for their opinions to be expressed. J. Hillis Miller writes in, *The Ethics of Reading*, "...there is a peculiar and unexpected relation between the affirmation of universal moral law and storytelling...the moral law gives rise by an intrinsic necessity to storytelling, even if that storytelling in one way or another puts in question or subverts moral law."³ Validating the use of novels to better understand ethics, he continues, "A given novel, for example, is initially to be accountable for and is accountable to forces, powers, surveillances coming from outside itself. It expresses, in spite of itself, an ideology. No corner is left anywhere for deviation, idiosyncrasy, freedom or performative power. Literature in no sense makes history but is made by it, since the determining forces of history are material means of

³ J. Hillis Miller. *The Ethics of Reading* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 2.

production, distribution and consumption.”⁴ Stories, even without a plot, portray themes, world views and assumptions about the individual reader.

Fiction therefore represents the trends and thoughts within our society, not merely a form of entertainment but a slice of life and society, representing societal morale, ideologies and hopes. In choosing a topic, an author has to make assumptions about what his or her reader is concerned with in culture. As the 19th century Matthew Arnold wrote in 1869 culture is

... a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world, and, through this knowledge, turning a stream of fresh and free thought upon our stock of notions and habits which we now follow staunchly but mechanically, vainly imagining that there is a virtue in following them staunchly which makes up for the mischief of them mechanically.⁵

As a vehicle to embrace or reject society's notions and habits, fiction highlights the viewpoints of the authors. They are a slice of a created world; an author chooses what is of concern and worth writing about. The modern novel is a reflection of matters that concern us.

In the twentieth century, one important aspect of culture has been religion. While many prominent voices of the nineteenth century declared that the twentieth century would see the decline of religion to obsolescence, history has proved them wrong. Religion in America in the twentieth century has hardly become obsolete, but it has come to express itself in new traditions and expressions.⁶ To understand this spiritual journey and growth, it is necessary to keep in mind that “...the twentieth century was marked by

⁴ Ibid., 8.

⁵ Katharine Washburn and John F. Thornton, ed. *Dumbing Down: Essays on the Strip Mining of American Culture*. (New York: Norton and Company, 1996), 19.

⁶ Carrigan, Henry. “Reinventing American religion: the recent shift toward individual spiritual expression has sparked creativity and diversity on the publishing front.” *Publishers Weekly* 245, no.11 (1998):S3.

class conflicts, economic crises, two world wars, brutal dictatorships, systematic slaughter, nuclear bombs, racial hatred and ethnic cleansing..."⁷ The twentieth century also saw great changes in transportation, suffrage, entertainment, speech, the sexual revolution, apparel, etc. With such monumental changes in the secular world, boundaries and concerns of religion were challenged. Religious practice had to be molded to fit a technologically enhanced world. Modernity's many changes affected the morals and thoughts of society.

New concerns, new values and new focuses are represented by transitions within American religion. The twentieth century gave rise to a new religious awakening. Religious historian and theologian Martin Marty recognizes this awakening and believes that it has not been adequately studied nor addressed in the field of religion.⁸ In order to examine these eras within religion, it is necessary to look at historian Robert W. Fogel's observations in his book, *The Four Great Awakenings and the Future of Egalitarianism*. In this book, he explains Four Great Awakenings. An awakening for Fogel is a shift represented in the cycles of ethical challenges America has faced that create morality crises and the eventual resolution.⁹ Particularly of interest for this paper are his Third and Fourth Great Awakenings, as pertaining to Christianity. The Third Great Awakening of 1890-1930 was marked by a "shift from emphasis on personal to social sin; more secular interpretation of the Bible and Creeds."¹⁰ This is important because it marks an era of public religion, expressed in external forms. A public Christian religion is one whose

⁷ Editors, "The Christian century: Take two." *The Christian Century* 117, no. 3 (2000): 77.

⁸ Martin Marty. "American Religious History in the Eighties: A Decade of Achievement." *Church History* 62, no. 3 (1993): 335.

⁹ Carpenter, John B. "The Fourth Great Awakening or Apostasy: Is American Evangelicalism Cycling Upwards or Spiraling Downwards?" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 44, no. 4 (2001): 447.

¹⁰ Fogel, Robert W. *The Fourth Great Awakening and the Future of the Egalitarian*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), pg. 65.

values are reflected in social action, performed as communities, denominations or churches. Fogel sees this as having resulted in an "attack on the corruption of the big business and the rich; labor reforms; civil rights and women's rights movements; expressions of enthusiastic religion"¹¹ during the period 1930 to 1970. These public attacks represent a time of social awareness marked by the individual's direct relationship to a larger community. He also notes a Fourth Great Awakening as having started in the 1960s and as still being present today. He writes that there is a "return to sensuous religion and...experiential content of the Bible; reassertion of personal sin."¹² This movement back to personal sin and to a sensuous religion is very important. It represents a historical shift in religion from an era of public religion to an era of private religion.

In a Christian context the shifts from public sin to private sin, from Biblical creeds to enthusiastic religion and straying away from traditional morality is very important because it represent two radical changes within religion during the second half of the twentieth century. This turn towards personal or individualistic religion is a particular nuance of evangelicalism. It is different from the public or external religion that most mainstream protestant churches have and continue to encourage from their parishioners. Wade Clark Roof writes that the religion of latter is represented by a "Golden Rule religion." A Golden Rule religion focuses on theology and doctrine and on the civic-mind of religion. It is concerned with God and neighbor, tending to be "mostly concerned with providing for their families, helping and caring for others, doing good deeds, being friendly, fair and living a good life. Tolerance and respect for people who

¹¹ Fogel, 65.

¹² Fogel, 65

are different; treating others, as you would like to be treated..."¹³ This religion is an external religion, that still finds use and validity in liturgy, sacraments and finds worship to be meaningful.¹⁴ According to Fogel, this corresponds to the Third Great Awakening, the movement towards sin as social in nature, which is still represented today by mainstream Protestant churches.

Growing fast is identification with religious individualism, a nuance of private religion. For the purposes of this paper, religious individualism will be limited to that of the Christian experience. Fogel's Fourth Great Awakening shows this in the movement towards a sensuous or experiential religion. A private religion is subjective, not paying particular attention to doctrine or liturgy and it "revolve[s] around one's immediate world: self, partner, spouse, friends, family, local community, and the realm of the personally spiritual."¹⁵ Erling Jorstad writes about private religion's core beliefs that it, "posit[s] that whatever redemption or fulfillment one would attain in this life would emerge largely from one's private faith and closet relationships."¹⁶ Private faith has a sense of creativity to it. As Americans had become uninterested in traditional religion by the 1960's, it can be understood that private religion "fostered introspection, individuality and creativity." Since public religion is concerned with God and neighbor and following rules to be the best civically minded person possible, it is a social religion. Consequently it has been affected by religious pluralism, seeking to not only tolerate, but also to accept various religious beliefs.

¹³ Erling Jorstad. *Holding Fast/Pressing On: Religion in America in the 1980s* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), 129; Wade Clark Roof. *Spiritual Market Place: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 195.

¹⁴ Roof, *Spiritual Market Place: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion*, 192.

¹⁵ Jorstad, *Holding Fast/Pressing On: Religion in America in the 1980s*, 129.

¹⁶ Jorstad, *Holding Fast/Pressing On: Religion in America in the 1980s*, 129.

Private religion is the religion of the conservative Protestants, evangelicals, fundamentalists, etc. and encompasses a personal faith, which is concerned with and grows from immediate surroundings. The final aspect of personal religion is personal faith. When one ponders God's action in every moment of every day since private religion concerns the self, pop-culture can be experienced as a religious experience. One's own faith is nurtured by one's own surroundings. Many of these Christians today tend to be choosing surroundings that declare themselves as NOT secular. Consequently, a Christian sub-culture has been on the rise as an alternative to pop culture. Pop culture is, as Russell B. Nye writes "those productions, both artistic and commercial, designed for mass consumption, which appeal to and express the tastes and understandings of the majority of the public, free from control by minority standards. They reflect the values, convictions, and patterns of thought and feeling generally dispersed through and approved by American society."¹⁷ Consequently, a religiously themed sub-culture has become important for a growing number of Christians because they have been alienated from the dominant culture.

To sum things up, then, the United States is still reading and people are concerned with religion. Consequently, Christian literature is an exemplary example of personal faith being experienced through popular culture. Not only has it grown from 4.3% of book sales to between 12 and 15% but also its numbers represent that there is a desire for religious fiction.¹⁸ As an industry, Christian fiction has gained recognition and respect by the publishing industry's indicator, Publishers Weekly. Since 1998, Publishers Weekly has included a quarterly special section, 'Religion Update,' which covers the

¹⁷ Russel B. Nye as quoted in Jorstad, *Holding Fast/Pressing On*, 96.

¹⁸ Jana Reiss. "Fiction's growing pains: the awkward adolescence of the Christian novel." *Publishers Weekly* 249, no. 24 (2002): S4.

growth, content, hot topics and issues that face religious literature, paying particular attention to the growth of the industry. Publishers Weekly has gone so far as to announce in their August 23, 2004 issue that religious literature is the fastest growing sector in the publishing industry at present. Obviously, people are finding religious literature, particularly religious fiction, to be useful within their own spirituality and lives. Carol Johnson, founder for the Christy Awards for Christian fiction explains, "...stories are a wonderful vehicle for truth...most of Jesus' teaching was done in stories, in parables."¹⁹ Furthering this idea Jana Reiss writes in Publishers Weekly, "Today's demand for religious fiction confirms once again the ancient power of story to engage, inspire and carry readers away."²⁰ With religious fiction, among other various forms of entertainment within popular culture becoming so popular, the study of religion has started to broaden its focus.

Within the study of religion, pop-culture has recently been recognized as a legitimate course of study. Traditionally the discipline of religion was limited to theological discourses, metaphysics and discussions in high literature. With the dawning of a new religious era, the spectrum of religious study has broadened greatly. Gary Laderman, explains, "The field of the study of religion has loosened up a bit and is not so tied to what we would call 'high' or 'elite' culture so you can study popular music or *The Simpsons* and embedded in these pop culture forms of expression you can begin to see more serious considerations."²¹ We are now all privileged to examine religion through

¹⁹ Kiesling, Angie. "Booksellers pick the winners: with "quality Christian fiction" an oxymoron no more, retailers are finding gold in a crop of new novels." Publishers Weekly 249, no.24 (2002): S19.

²⁰ Reiss, "Fiction's growing pains: the awkward adolescence of the Christian novel," S4.

²¹ Marcia Z. Nelson. "Pop Goes Theology." Publishers Weekly 250, no. 45 (2003): S10.

popular culture. One particular way to examine the role of religion in the United States is to compare secular and non-secular fiction literature.

By using the top two selling books on a secular best-selling list and the top two best-selling books on a Christian best-selling list, a conversation between secular and non-secular thought as it relates to religion and its values in the United States of America can occur. The secular novels are taken from the New York Times Bestsellers list and the top two best selling Christian books are taken from the Evangelical Christian Publishing Association's Bestsellers list. The New York Times was selected because it has been and will most likely continue to be the most esteemed newspaper in this country. Sunday's edition of the New York Times is a representation of our culture. Highlighting everything from the perfect shoes, restaurant or vacation to global politics, it represents what our culture finds itself to be. The Evangelical Christian Publishing Association, a consortium of various Christian publishing houses, tracks Christian literature's bestsellers. Selection of the presented books was done by going through bestsellers lists after the ECPA was formed in 1998 and eliminating weeks with either The Left Behind Series or Dan Brown's The DaVinci Code. Ensuring that the chosen selection did not include these books was intentional so that this discussion could be more focused on thematic and cultural representations rather than a paper on the religious 'truths' that are represented in the above-mentioned books. The books used to identify cultural themes, concerns and explorations are taken from the September 2003 ECPA Bestsellers list and the September 26, 2003 NY Times Bestsellers list. ECPA's candidates are Southern Storm by Terri Black, coming in at number one and Francine Rivers' And the Shofar

Blew, at number two. For the NY Times Bestsellers list, at number one, Bleachers, by John Grisham and at number two, The Wedding, by Nicholas Sparks.

The Books:

NY Times Best-sellers

Nicholas Sparks, The Wedding

Nicholas Sparks' The Wedding suggests that using romance, changing one's own faults and integrating romance into a marriage can save those that are unsuccessful. It respects the fact that marriage is hard work and that in order to have a successful marriage, both partners must be proactive. Nicholas Sparks is making assumptions about his reader in making marriage a theme and so it must be asked, what is the authorial intent of this novel?

It may seem like the only intent Sparks has in this novel is to sell as many copies as possible to his target audience, forty-something year-old housewives with kids who are in marriages that are decades old. This is assumed to be the targeted reader based on the identity of the "forgotten" character. She has been ignored by her husband, is tired of it and has lost her passion for her marriage. Her husband, the main character, realizes his faults and then desperately seeks to make her fall in love with him again. Sparks is not just trying to sell as many copies of his novel as possible, although his nine NY Times bestsellers suggest otherwise. Sparks is really making assumptions about the American culture when he chooses to write about marriage.

He assumes that people care about saving a failing marriage. Marriage and romance are important. To assume that a reader wants romance to be the predominant theme in a novel means that Sparks is trying to identify and addresses societal concerns. Sparks thinks that putting a spark back in a decades-old marriage, self-reflection, and fair expectations are directly relevant in his readers' lives. He insists that romance is the key

to a successful marriage, on top of being a good, self-reflective, ever-changing partner. Romance for him consists of love-letters, surprises and selflessness. He concludes that romance can ignite a deep love that makes a marriage successful. In order to be romantic, Sparks believes that his readers must learn to be self-reflective and after identifying their own faults, change them so that they are not only a better spouse, but a better person, too. This transformation includes making time for a spouse, undivided attention when listening, etc. When people act with the interests of others at heart, it is possible to expect the same from them. When partners have a deep understanding of both themselves and their partner, a successful marriage is possible.

However, in writing about a failing marriage, Sparks assumes that not all reader's marriages are successful. He believes that time is the greatest enemy of marriage. When the honeymoon phase ends and the romance slowly fades away, the mundane slowly starts to creep in and a marriage seems boring, old and too comfortable for serious issues to be addressed. Sparks addresses the disappearance of passion by the role of marriage itself. The institution of marriage is not questioned and divorce is not found to be an option. Instead, his intent is on showing that with hard work, marriages can be BETTER than what they were in the beginning. Divorce is a reality in our society. With life expectancies greater than they have ever been, a marriage lasts longer. What do you do when you are not the same person at fifty as you were at twenty? Romance in this novel is more than an escapist device to deliver the reader from the mundane. It is what Sparks recognizes as a social concern. Allegorically, Sparks plot topic/ topical theme holds much more significance when observed in a larger, worldlier level, especially with Christianity in mind.

Applying a concern for a successful marriage in The Wedding with other values within the book, the narrative proclaims that believes that with self-evaluation and hard work, obstacles in life can be overcome and met with successful results. Human beings, Sparks' narrative suggests, are equipped to understand their behavior in order to meet the needs of others and make themselves happier. As a narrative, this is an optimistic theme and or conclusion for a modern American author to make. Hurting people emotionally evokes the need to change, and changing is a process that people can and must do to overcome life's many obstacles successfully. Spark's main character realizes that he has hurt his wife by forgetting their anniversary so he examines his faults in a more general way and acts on them. Sparks does not express this ability to change as something attributed to external forces, rather it is something processed and changed internally. God and Christianity are mentioned twice in this novel, but not in the context of overcoming personal problems.

Having Christ as a personal savior is mentioned only as a non-essential characteristic of the main character of this novel. But, by having a Christian as the main character, Sparks offers a critique of Christianity. The fact that the main character's life over the past thirty years is far from being Christ-like, makes this ironic. He was not a 'family man,' and his work came before his wife and before his children. He was selfish, never acted out of love, and did not put their concerns first and did not put his family's concerns first. Sparks points out, though, that he did, indeed, have Christ as a personal Savior. The very mentioning of this suggests to the reader that Sparks has an opinion regarding Christianity. When the main character turns his life around, gains the respect and admiration of his wife and children and vows to lead a more selfless life, he does not

recall his relationship with his personal savior nor does he view his success at overcoming his life's obstacles as done by the grace of God. Instead, there is a certain sense of hypocrisy in the main characters relationship with Christ. In a relationship that should include a willing surrender in order to see results, it is when the main character acts on his own that change is seen. People can overcome obstacles by themselves, and religion is not necessary. Christianity is associated with selflessness but is lived out in selfishness in Spark's mind. Sparks seems to find Christians to be incapable of following their own preaching, thus finding the church to be a hypocritical institution.

Christianity enters this novel again when a minister performs the marriage ceremony, which makes it evident that marriage is still, at least, an institution of the church. However, while the church performs the institution of marriage, it is not there, Sparks suggests, to help renegotiate it at its various stages. The characters did not appeal to the church or its various groups to try and help the marriage, suggesting that for life's real issues, the church is not helpful. Since the church cannot help fix marriage or other issues, humans must rely on sustaining a marriage and fixing their problems with their own capabilities. The church does not even have the capacity or tools to fix its own inventions, let alone larger issues that face humanity. This is shown when the main character contemplates the role of the minister. He boasts that hundreds of people confide in the minister and consider him a close friend, but that the reality is that they are just another number to him. Genuine compassion and concern and individual betterment are not ascribed to the church. Christianity, then, is not an ultimate concern nor advice that achieves the overcoming of obstacles with successful results. Private, inner contemplation along with self-action achieves much more. While there is no need for

public religion for Sparks, he is appealing to the human's spirituality. Not a characteristic of Christian private religion, this is still a form of being religious.

Therefore, the wedding illustrates that people are equipped, by the very nature of being human to overcome life's many adversities. As a worldview, this translates to a fairly positive statement about the world. Nicholas Sparks maintains that with hard work, people and the world can change for the better, just like his many characters. Sparks is ambiguous about what it is in our human nature that allows for us to desire change, but he does know it exists. The world as he portrays it is a dark place, but can be changed by motivated people.

John Grisham, Bleachers

In John Grisham's Bleachers the small town high school football star can never live down his early heroism. His 'famous' past haunts him until he confronts it. Even after he confronts it, he does not necessarily achieve success. There are stereotypes associated with the high school football star and his successes, and John Grisham does not fail to address them. The high school hero was created by sports that eventually ruin him. He is still talked about and recognized by not only his peers, but by the townspeople (keeping him habitually elevated). He had dumped the high school good-girl for the high school slut, and he never makes much out of his life after high school. In choosing to write about football in high school, John Grisham is appealing to his mostly male reader's sense of nostalgia.

Middle-aged men with a slight beer belly, gray hair who are mid-career and have nostalgia for the memories of high school are John Grisham's target audience. His target audience happily relives their high school days when they were more handsome, more

popular, and more suave but also enjoyed life quite a bit more. This audience also seems prime to be the target audience for Grisham's typical courtroom suspense-thrillers. After all, both target someone whose life has slipped into the comfortable and a little spice, even if it is gotten from a novel, is welcomed. Using sports as a plot line, John Grisham shows his assumptions about his readers and potential readers.

In choosing a plot based within the context of football, Grisham believes that his reader can identify with sports as an important theme. He assumes sports help the reader identify with successes and failures. An obscure plot theme with complex and twisted ideas is not used to convey his points in this novel. Grisham realizes that Americans both know and can identify with football. After all, aren't sports a metaphor for life? Isn't football the folklore of modern society? In the United States, Grisham points out that sports are a cultural context. He also assumes that his readers and potential readers knew or knew of someone who represented the stereotypical high school hero/most popular person.

Grisham knows the reader can understand who the high school hero was and what their actions entailed. His assumption about his reader is that they are interested in what happened to the high school hero. People want to know out of curiosity and envy whether or not that person has achieved success. They want to know if their life has been more fruitful and rewarding than the most popular person, a justification for their life is desired. Grisham knows the reader is curious, and so he provides answers. The high school 'good girl' finds out that the high school slut leads an unsuccessful life and looks tired out. The high school hero has to face that she has married very well and has not only a life that is put together, but has a wonderful husband, attractive children and plenty

of money. The reader can most likely identify with the underdog, and so John Grisham provides a successful underdog.

It is also assumed that the reader has been affected by a difficult or disappointing relationship in their life. Keeping within the limits of sports, Grisham provides a sadistic coach. While brutal in his coaching methods, the coach is always there for his players in the broader context of their lives. He was there for support during court appearances, to give loans, or to support them in their darkest hours. The reader can probably not decide, nor could the characters in this book decide, whether or not they loved or hated the coach. Grisham speculates that the reader probably cannot figure out whether or not they love or hate the person with whom they had such a difficult love relationship. Despite the rough times with such a person, Grisham assumes that character is built in such a relationship. This person served as an icon in many people, especially the high school hero's lives. One ex-player goes so far as to say that it was memories of the coach's expectation for success got him through Vietnam.

The narrative implies there is a larger theme at play in this novel, representing John Grisham's worldview. That theme that though one may come to grips with the ghosts of one's past, this may not change the course of one's life. As a narration, this is a fairly pessimistic outlook on life. Grisham does not seem to think that change is possible. While some people may have the capacity to change, Grisham shows that not everyone is able to change, not even with hard work. Our demons are anything that distracts us from moving towards a better life; they prevent improvement. Humans are missing whatever it is that keeps them focused and on track. What is missing, though, is not religion.

Christianity, as portrayed in this book, does not equip individuals with what it takes to overcome rough times and conquer life's obstacles.

John Grisham presents a few distinct religious commentaries in this novel. While religion is not a major topic of this book, its exclusion from a theme surrounding the capacity of humans to change is important. Secular redemption has replaced the Christian sense of salvation.

Christianity as a literary device was used in this novel to make characters less static, which proves that it is not necessary for people to overcome their own demons. The sadistic coach is identified as being a Christian, but it does serve him in overcoming his problems. The coach was blamed for the death of a player during a grueling practice. After the death of his player, he was fired from his job and disappears from his once very public life to living a life of a recluse. After he lost his job, he would only leave his house at the crack of dawn, for daily mass and to watch football games from afar. Religion does not help the coach regain a normal life, nor does it assure someone of God's grace and forgiveness. Even when the coach repents, it is shown that repentance is not enough for him to overcome this demon. On the other hand, the high school hero also does not overcome his obstacles. He tries to overcome them without religion, but he too is unsuccessful. Religion is useful to sustain a person, but not necessarily to change them.

A small, meaningless church sits next to the overwhelming football stadium, lost in its shadows. It is in the football field that people congregate and find life on a weekly basis, not in the church. By mentioning this church in the midst of the gigantic and impressive football stadium, John Grisham suggests that the church is not where people

find meaning anymore. Religion is devalued in this novel, after all, when a football stadium's shadow is cast over a church both literally and figuratively, its authority has been called into question. Grisham suggests that the reader can identify with the winning and losing as found in sports, not with the salvation of a Redeemer or the grace of God.

Salvation is not needed for secular redemption. Jesus the Redeemer is not needed to change from a failure to a success. God's grace does not make up for mistakes. The human capacity to overcome is not a guaranteed success. John Grisham's statement about the modern world is ambiguous. He does not assert that the good in us, or in religion, will help good to overcome and beat evil. He is ambivalent about supplying a happy ending; the high school hero makes no vow to act differently. In fact, nothing is every absolutely settled in this book. Grisham does not resolve his characters issues, perhaps fearing redemption. His worldview is ambivalent. Grisham does not see the world as good or bad; he sees lots of good in bad and some bad in the good as well. The high school hero does hope to change, and he does reconcile parts of his past, he is just not called to action. Redemption then is ambivalent, portraying a very dark world view.

ECPA Best-sellers

Francine Rivers, And the Shofar Blew

Francine Rivers' And the Shofar Blew is an overtly Christian novel. Rivers is a self-identified born-again Christian who was once a best-selling secular author. She moved to religious fiction, reflecting her change from being a secular person to a person of faith. This book loudly espouses her values: even the title represents a religious symbol. A shofar is a trumpet, and is used in the Old Testament to call the Children of Israel, either

in warning or in gathering. In this novel, the shofar represents God's calling of two very different men.

The setting of this novel is a Christian context. A young man is called to be the pastor of a dying church and to help turn it around. Unfortunately, he is only concerned with having the largest church possible, and soon the church is without substance. The pastor then becomes concerned only with things of this world: attendance, money, building and prestige. His original call is lost. In the end, after cheating on his wife and having a near-death experience, he re-dedicates his life to God. He then gives up the pulpit, and vows to be a better husband.

In contrast to the misled preacher is the recovering alcoholic who finds Christ. At first, upon hearing the Gospel, the recovering alcoholic is not sure that he deserves God's unconditional love or Christ's salvation, but he realizes it is something unearned, leading him to live his life as a Christian. He finds himself no longer concerned with things of this world and he encourages others to follow suit. After leaving the pastor's church, he starts a small Bible study, one that has substance. In the end, he has several followers encouraging him to be the preacher.

Francine Rivers knows her audience. The fact that she used to be a secular best seller means that she knows that the switch to religious fiction was not one that would appeal to her former audience. Intentionally, Rivers provides novels for the Christian. She assumes that her reader is comfortable with born-again language, and characters who pray often. She also assumes that the reader has conservative moral values. Divorce, disobedience and faithlessness are not options in this novel. This novel does have more of an appeal to a female audience, since the character that is most greatly affected in this

novel and is at most times the main character, is the pastor's wife. Identifying with the pastor's wife would be other pastor's wives as well as women who believe in a subservient role to their husbands (this will be discussed later). In placing this novel in such a context, Rivers intention seems clear.

In choosing to write about the call to God of two very different men, Rivers is preaching the Gospel. At times, the salvation that Christ offers is laid out, making no pretenses. The main theme of this novel is that God is bigger than this world. God is bigger than alcoholism or prestige. It is through Christ, and only through Christ, that humans will find abundance in this life. When the characters do not have Christ in this novel, their lives are in disarray. When they come to life in Christ, things fall into place. There is a wrong way to live in Christ and a right way. Having a preacher be unholy and an alcoholic live according to the Gospel represent this reversal. As they change, so do their lives. Her intent is to show that life is better with Christ in it. Because Francine Rivers is writing the story of two men's call to God, she is making the assumption that Christians had a moment in which they felt called to be God's children and that there are people who have not heard God's voice. The latter Rivers insists, must listen; after all, the shofar *is* blowing.

Francine River's worldview is no different than her main theme. Both are centered on the salvation of Christ and the freedom that he offers from the oppressions of this world. Her narrative is concerned with the salvation that Christ offers and making sure this is a clear message. Therefore, her worldview is that there is a God and that God is very real and is speaking to humanity and that their eyes and ears must be opened. Her narration

points out that people can listen to God or they can let things of this world distract them and have a miserable life.

Christians in general experience their callings differently. Some Christians are able to stay strong in their faith their entire lives, like the preacher's wife. Others hear their calling only to be led astray by things of this world and lose their faith. Some regain their faith, while others do not. There are people who are weak without God, and a calling leads them to become stronger in their faith. When acting according to God's will as dictated in the Gospel, life on earth is much easier. God makes getting through the temporal world less difficult and promises an eternal world. Therefore, life for Francine Rivers is much better with God in it.

Christianity is portrayed as the way to live in this novel. It does not enter this novel at various points; it is the entire rationale for the novel. A few major issues that surface are worth discussing. First is the concept of hypocrisy. The pastor in this novel is a terrible shepherd and leads his flock to things of this world rather than God. He does this by becoming more concerned with attendance, which he believes is driven by entertainment, and having a larger and nicer facility rather than being concerned with the Word of God. As a pastor, he is the person who should lead the congregation to God and should preach the Gospel with his life. His fascination with all things of this world has consequences, leading to adultery and blasphemy. Through this character, Francine Rivers in this character is explaining that to be a Christian is to be concerned with things of the spiritual world. She is also saying that as Christians, it is easy to talk the talk, but to walk the walk is very hard. When Christians fail, they have no true grasp of God and without the

weekly entertainment of the mega-church, God is not known to them. She also suggests that Christians who speak louder than their actions alienate people from Christianity.

Christian forgiveness is an important concept in this novel. Francine Rivers highlights three different types of forgiveness: secular forgiveness, Christian forgiveness and the forgiveness of Christ. Secular forgiveness is not a successful endeavor for Rivers. It might guide someone through the steps of forgiveness, but their heart does not feel reconciled. Christian forgiveness is a successful way to let go of transgressions because God aids in the removing of obstacles that prevent the human heart from letting go. Forgiveness that originates from Christianity is true forgiveness it allows people to live a life that glorifies God rather than to focus on the negativities of humanity and this world. Forgiveness of Christ is that people have been forgiven for their misdoings the moment they accept Christ. This is because his blood washes away the sins of humanity. Everyone is able and worthy, no matter what their past, to receive this forgiveness. Christ's forgiveness ensures a better life because the recipients know love and grace and can act on those virtues.

Francine Rivers examines marriage from secular and Christian viewpoints. By using the pastor and his godly wife's marriage as a setting for an affair, Rivers sets out to give what she views to be the Christian response to grave tensions in a marriage. The pastor does truly repent, after his near death experience, and his marriage is 'saved.' Saving the pastor and his wife's marriage was saving something that had been neglected for many years. He was cruel to her, not paying any attention to her or her needs and she allowed herself to be treated in such a way. She was miserable and talked frequently of her misery; yet it is God's will for her to stay in her marriage, even after her husband cheated

on her. She made vows before God and those vows are more important than her misery on earth. While the pastor does eventually repent, she slowly warms, and it is her burden to forgive and embrace him once again. The pastor's wife makes it known that divorce was never an option, and this, from the most godly-character is Rivers' view on divorce. The secular notions of divorce are that if it gratifies your desires, divorce is acceptable. Secular beliefs are concerned with feeling good on earth and are not concerned with the eternal consequences of actions.

Overall, Christianity encounters the secular world in this novel to show that life with God is a better life than a life with out God. God's goodness provides fruitfulness in a world of strife. God conquers evil on this earth and will conquer evil in the end. Life with God and life with out God; good against evil, good will prevail. If we allow God to be the loving-master of life in this world, life eternal is promised. Francine Rivers truly espouses evangelical Christian beliefs.

Terri Blackstock, Southern Storm

Southern Storm is the second of several novels in a suspense series. This ECPA bestseller is a thriller with a Christian twist. Terri Blackstock writes a suspense novel that pits good against evil in the South, hence the title, Southern Storm. The storm is best understood as evil's attempt to destroy tranquility and happiness. While Christianity and knowing God are a central part of this novel, one does not have to be a Christian to be a potential reader of this novel.

Blackstock has both fervent Christians in this novel as well as adamant non-believers. While the non-believers do come to Christ by the novel's end, Christianity is not intimidating in this novel. Mysteries are a perfect vehicle to discuss a variety of topics

that will appeal to a broad audience. Their spiciness keeps most readers alert and many subtle nuances can be woven in to interest all readers. Blackstock provides a little romance for the women as well as, suspense and violence for the men. For parents there are issues pertaining to raising a teenager, and for the teenagers, there are lessons on how to obey (since parents have the best intentions). For the detective in all of us, a professional does not solve this mystery. By writing for so many people, Terri Blackstock is able to include a message that she wants the world to know. In writing a novel that can appeal to such a broad audience, Blackstock is making assumptions about humanity.

Terri Blackstock knows that humans are curious. Thriller novels keep readers on the edge of their seats because they want to know what happens. They pit good against evil, and we want to know which prevails. This battle evokes curiosity because it is prevalent in society. Rhetoric of good against evil is everywhere. Politics use the word evil as though it were harmless; television encourages behavior that is less than pure with plotlines that make immoral behavior the norm. In having good triumph over evil in Southern Storm Blackstock believes that reader wants to be assured that good can prevail. Blackstock assumes that there is a way for this to happen. She also speculates that humans want to know if change is possible. While her Christian characters remain stable and happy throughout this novel, her non-believer characters are able to change. When the non-believers do create a relationship with God, they are at peace, and good does prevail. Assuming that humanity does want to change, Blackstock tells the reader how this is truly possible: through Jesus Christ. Blackstock assumes that humanity needs and desires to know Christ, even if they are resisting it.

Blackstock insists that when you know the truth, you must fight for it, even when obstacles are in the way. The plotline supports this when characters overcoming their adversities (but God is needed in this part). Having hope when nobody seems to be believe you is a very difficult thing. One character experiences this when she fights to find and rescue the innocent cop when everyone else has decided he is the perpetrator. For Blackstock this is symbolic of fighting for your faith as well. To be a strong believer one must accept that God is good and accept God's infinite goodness despite life's many adversities. While the innocent cop is saved by a non-believer, she accepts Christ realizing that even in the midst of life's storms, God is there as a refuge. As a refuge God is there to lend support and thrive in God's own goodness.

The world is a fallen place for Blackstock. It is a dark and sad place, unable to redeem itself. It exists as such because the Avenger waits at every turn, eager to overtake another aspect of the world. Blackstock is deeply saddened by the state of the world, yet she is filled with hope, which comes from the redemption that Christianity offers. Blackstock is ambiguous when considering whether or not the world can be redeemed in its entirety. The world for her is not a solid, unified thing. The world is broken. Redemption of the world is therefore not what Blackstock is concerned with. She is concerned with the redemption of individual souls. The characters who are unbelievers are warned that not knowing redemption in Christ results in an eternal suffering which far more than suffering in this world. Christians are in part responsible to spread the word of God and make his warm embrace, a frequent allusion in this novel, known. The world is a place for all people to hear God's call and to find safety and peace.

As mentioned before, this novel revolves around the battle between good and evil and good's ability to prevail. Blackstock is concerned not only with her character's salvation, but with her reader's salvation as well. A large part of her plot is concerned with bringing unbelievers to God, focusing on their experience of call.

Forgiveness is also explored in this novel. It is not always evident whether or not the characters are able to forgive. One thing that appears to shape the ability to forgive is Christianity. This is expressed in several instances in this novel. After having their parents murdered in the first novel of this series, the Christian character has been able to forgive and continue on with her own life while the non-Christian sibling seems to wallow in misery and is not able to forgive or move on. One teenage girl who has had a hard life and lives with Christian foster parents falls to peer pressure and lies to them. She seeks forgiveness from them, but her relationship and righteousness in the eyes of God is never made clear. A Christian wife apologizes to husband, and he accepts her apology. The only forgiveness in this novel that seems to be guaranteed is in a Christian context. Forgiveness seems to be a Christian action, perhaps suggesting that to forgive and be forgiven can only happen when Christ's forgiveness is known.

Several interesting nuances of Blackstock's beliefs are expressed in this novel. First, as is true of many most mystery novels, the idea that it is okay to kill the evil perpetrator is upheld in this novel. If one has taken innocent babies and cops, it is okay to shoot to save your own life. This is an interesting point for her to make considering the fact that the whole plot is based on the Biblical story of the cities of refuge. They are mentioned because the innocent cop accidentally kills a man when he steps out in front of his car. He seeks out the Biblical stories of the Cities of Refuge in comfort. In the end he finds

that Jesus has been the true refuge all along. But the spilling of more blood, despite its guilt is never really addressed. Second, Blackstock does not find it appropriate for a Christian to marry a non-Christian. She makes this clear when her Christian cop waits for years for an unbeliever to turn to God. He could not disappoint God by having a relationship with someone who did not share the same faith. This is resolved in the end when the non-Christian turns to God; a romance suddenly blossoms and the reader is left with their hearts melting. Another nuance of Blackstock's beliefs is that she thinks that humans put obstacles in their own life by not pointing their thoughts and actions towards God.

Narration Speaks: The Novels enter Discussion

The Representation of the World

Secularism views the world with ambiguity. Many secularists tend to see the world as a depressing place. Interestingly, the fate of a sad world is a place where secularists disagree, Grisham and Sparks illustrate this. Grisham finds no redemption in the world, whereas Sparks' believes that the original sorrow of the world can be overcome and happiness can be achieved. The fact that these two authors hold very different views of the world is quite significant. Secularists cannot decide how the world should be viewed. They are not sure of redemption, nor are they sure if life's many obstacles can be overcome. This ambiguity finds itself seeping into pop-culture and into the mindset of the masses. Americans are not sure what they expect from life. Can they expect happiness and successes or misery and failures? The lack of a societal answer to such questions can be seen in ambiguity. Grisham and Sparks question all human institutions. They are not sure what you can get from the world. Consequently, the world cannot exist as a fluid and sensical thing.

Nicholas Sparks writes for a female audience while John Grisham writes for a male audience. It is interesting and worthwhile to note that a book targeted for men leaves the world in a state of ambiguity while a book targeted at a female resolves issues and consequently the world. What does this say about the sexes? Is it part of a female's nurturing that she needs the world to be a generally good place? What about men is content with ambiguity? Unlike the secular views of the world, the Christian view of the world is more universal among them.

In the two Christian novels, the world is viewed as a sad place. However, the Christian authors believe that this darkness can be overcome. Evil battles good constantly in the world. Bad things happen on Earth, irreligious things happen and the world exists in a state that is far from perfect. However, the Christian authors do believe that good will ultimately be triumphant. To stomp out the darkness, the Christian authors believe that salvation is necessary, especially the individual salvation. Contemporary Christians are not sure if they are saving the world or souls. Mission work centers on both making the world a better place and preaching the Gospel to individuals. The change salvation offers is on a personal, not societal level.

Is the world or the individual redeemable?

Considering the fact that the Christian and secular authors have different views of the world, it is worthwhile to explore whether or not they think that the world, the individual or both are redeemable. It is important to explore views of redemption because it is a telling sign of whether or not the belief that good will and does conquer evil still prevails.

Nicholas Sparks and John Grisham do not share the same opinion regarding redemption. Grisham does not believe that the individual can ever overcome his/her adversities in order to be redeemed. Sparks on the other hand eagerly suggests that redemption is possible. With hard work, people can conquer their bad tendencies, change for the better and find happiness. Redemption is possible if we work harder. Society also has the capacity to change. As a whole, redemption lurches between naïve optimism and heavyhearted despair. Some people are equipped to change while others are not.

One reason secularists believe that some cannot change is because society and its

institutions do not equip people for change. They think that some institutions are out of touch with modernity, and thus are not redeemable.

The Christian authors believe that the individual is redeemable but not through their own will. The ultimate point of their novels is that God calls all of his children should they be willing to listen. His call offers them salvation. Blackstock makes a very similar point: humans are called from the miseries of the world to be children of God. Humans are surely redeemable. However, the Christian viewpoint is not clear as to whether or not the world as a whole can be redeemed. It is concerned with the salvation of souls, but never in the selected novels is the salvation of the world explored. Rivers' novel presents a congregation that is not scriptural and is leading people from God. By choosing to put emphasis on the righting of individual's ways rather than righting the ways of the church, it may perhaps may represent that redemption cannot occur on a corporate level, only at the individual level. As a private experience, religion offers individual salvation. Private religion does not seem to offer societal redemption.

The Representation of Religion in The United States of America

The objective of this paper, stated at the very beginning, sought to examine four novels, two secular and two non-secular novels, in order to have a better understanding religion in America. Now, with an understanding of the four novels, it is time to move on to the overall view of religion in the world as portrayed by the novelists, including, the various moods of religion, the place of religion, whether it is something that should occur in the public or private realm, and the institution of the church.

Each of the four novels views the role of religion within the world or society quite differently. For John Grisham religion is understood as being useful to sustain a person,

but not necessarily capable of making them a better person. Religion for him has a large shadow cast over it; it is hard for the average American to identify with successes and losses as related through religion, it makes more sense to use pop-culture to make moral suggestions and criticisms. Nicholas Sparks identifies religion in the same light- as something that can aid a person in life, but not as something that encourages someone to act morally. He too reverts to a different context to explore morality, romance and marriage. The very fact that religion was ascribed as an attribution of characters in these novels, but was not responsible for the changes within them does portray Grisham or Sparks as having an endearing opinion of religion. Francine Rivers, on the other hand, sees religion in the world as the ultimate. She deems that all things are better done with religion and that it has the capability to change humans and their lives for the better. Terri Blackstock wants her reader to understand the power and meaning of the Bible. It is the script for living a Christian life. A Christian life for Blackstock is the most fulfilling because it offers hope.

As far as the role of religion in the United States is concerned, there seems to be a division on the role of religion between the secularists and the self-identified Christians. The secular authors identify religion as something that can, indeed, hold importance. But the fact that they do not believe that it is enough to create change limits this importance. Religion does not produce external results that can necessarily be judged and for these secular authors is a valid thing if it is private. The moment it ventures into the public realm, it is not of much worth, nor is it valid.

Religion in the United States is concerned with numbers. The Christian authors suggest that the Christian community needs to be concerned with the real concerns of

religion rather than growing big churches with little substance. Rivers and Blackstock, believe churches should be preaching Christ's salvation. Upon hearing about Christ's salvation, the lives of the congregants should be changed time and time again. Despite the fact that many churches become interested in the wrong things, the Christian authors suggest that religion itself is still valid. Churches are necessary because the world is evil and the church may offer a glimmer of hope.

Self-identified Christians seem to be retreating into a sub-culture that doesn't want to associate with the loud, coarse, critical voices of the secularists. Like the secular authors, the Christian authors see validity in the privatization of religion. Conservative Christians see validity in private religion because it allows for Christians to focus on saving the individual and not the world. Private religion is supported by both the far left and the far right. However, mainstream protestant churches continue to view religion much differently. Mainstream protestant churches view religion as a public affair. While they, like the conservative Christians, have chosen to live by Christ's rules, they do not see reason to retreat into a community of only believers. Rather the mainstream protestant churches continue to be civic-minded. They still see themselves as servants of God and the neighbor.

What about the church?

40% of Americans claim that they regularly attend a religious service on a weekly basis. Even with the privatization of religion, institutionalized religion has survived (or has it?). If religion is viewed as a private expression by both the secular and self-identified Christian authors, is there still a need for institutionalized religion?

The secular authors find no transformative role for institutionalized religion. It is useless for dealing with life's real issues. It does not help people to overcome life's many adversities; it does not provide adequate counseling for marriages, it does not absolve people of their guilt, it is at best a mediocre institution that is outdated and impractical. Americans can no longer relate to the ultimate questions of life when presented in religious contexts. It is overshadowed by sports and by pop-culture which offer society a much more thorough analogy of winning and loosing and what it is to overcome. The church has become little more than a cultural relic, and a generally hypocritical institution. The secular authors suggest that many Christians are loud about their faith, but their actions are missing. They want Christians to recognize this and act accordingly so that their lives *are* the Gospel. This is what makes the practiced private religion public.

Both the secular and non-secular authors agree that the church does not appeal to the average American. They also agree that many Americans are actually indifferent towards the church. Secularists suggest this is because the church has no real affect on a person's life. Christian authors suggest this is because people do not want to identify with Christianity for another reason- it is a religion based on pain. To identify with a religion that focuses on the blood and suffering of a savior to redeem the rest of humanity's sins seems to be strange and sadistic. Focusing on the blood of Christ is not the Easter-bunny, soft and inviting religion that many people seek. The Christian authors suggest that catering to the desires of the masses is not the role of the institutionalized church. On the contrary, the role of the church is to preach the scriptures and encourage moral conduct in its congregant's lives. ECPA's best-selling authors view the church as an institution that

is mainly concerned with saving the world, one soul at a time, only. It is not a valid institution if it is catering to the entertainment desires of society. If there is no meat to the church's message, the church can lead its members astray. In order to be a valid institution the church must preach the salvation of Christ and his suffering for all of humanity's sins. However, for someone to claim Christ as their own is still a personal experience. It does not occur on a social level. The Christian authors explain this by utilizing call narratives in their novels. Many of the call narratives occur for non-Christians or in front of those who do not claim to be Christians. Both the secular and Christian authors agree on another point pertaining to the church as well.

Both the Christian and secular authors believe that the church can be a hypocritical institution. It is in its hypocrisy that both groups suggest that non-believers are turned off from ever believing and some believers turn away from their faith. When the world witnesses Christians preaching a life that is far from their own, it is hard to believe that Christianity offers a better life. The secular authors go so far as to hint that the church is useless in American society.

The self-professed Christian authors opinion on the role of religion in the United States is more complex. Religion, specifically Christianity is necessity for these authors. It provides stability in an evil world. However, in that sense, the Christian authors also view religion in the United States as a private endeavor. It is a way in which to retreat from the demons of this world and to retreat into a safe sub-culture of like-minded believers. The non-secular authors support a private expression of religion because they believe that it is possible to change the individual, but they are not sure the world is redeemable.

If both the secular world and conservative Christians see the role of religion as a private experience, does religion still hold a public voice in America? Mainstream churches believe that they do. But, as it can be seen from the exploration of these four novels, the voice of the Mainstream Christian is lost in America at present. Private religion has offered Christians and immediate, materially expressed experience of God that does not require responsibilities to the neighbor, as do public religions. It seems as though the Protestant, mainstream churches do not fully understand the to which they have been marginalized. Christianity used to mean the Protestant Church, but now it is associated with the far right wing. Spirituality has been claimed by pluralistic doctrines and is included in non-Christian private religion. In order for the Protestant church to survive, they will have to make a response to the manifestation of private religion.

Callings to Christ or to Change; has the secular world replaced salvation with change?

Narratives of a calling are present in the Christian literature. A narrative of a calling in these novels is not the character being called to a job, task, etc. but rather the character being called to God and to accept Christ as their savior. This narrative is expressed in the form of a testimony. A testimony in a Christian context is an individual's story as to how they came to Christ, important to an individual's conversion experience. Like Paul on the road to Damascus, most born-again Christians claim to have a moment in which God called them in a clear manner. In many Christian organizations the telling of testimonials is an important part of the their religious experience. Testimonials are used to retell calling experiences serves as a sort of ministry. They are told in order to encourage those who have not accepted Jesus Christ to do so. By using their character's lives to give a

testimony, the Christian authors are providing a sort of ministry. They are using their novels as a vehicle to bring the Gospel to their reader. By providing a testimony, they are hoping that their reader knows Christ, and if they do not, that by reading about other imperfect humans coming to him, they will know that Christ will love them too.

Narratives of a calling in the Christian literature are concerned with the salvation of individuals. Individuals are the target audience for the message of salvation; the world cannot be saved in one fell swoop, so these books focus on bringing people, one by one, to Christ. The Christian authors seem to get this notion of saving individuals first from the idea that you cannot help others until you have helped your self; on an airplane you cannot put on the mask of another unless you have used yours to ensure that you will have oxygen. To save the entire world is too much for one person to worry about, instead focusing on telling the Gospel and a conversion experience to win individuals is more feasible.

These novels truly are an embodiment of private religion. They tell a story, just like the Bible, only in a modern way that readers may be more able to identify with. The story they tell depends on the Gospel, their characters are not complete without it. Likewise, the reader is also not complete without the Gospel. By reading these novels, the reader may have a religious experience. Maybe the reader has never known Christianity and this will lead to a further inquiry or to a conversion, perhaps this novel will reaffirm reader's beliefs. Mainly, though, these novels can serve as a reminder of Christianity's value for its target audience. In reminding the audience of the lifestyle they have chosen, these Christian novels serve as sermons.

A sense of call is present in the secular novels. However, they are much different from a narrative that seeks to act as a religious statement/message/calling. In secular literature, people are called to change. Change includes self-reflection, critique and correction. Character's lives serve as testimonies about the state of society's values. When characters are able or are not able to change, secular authors are determining the results of their call. If a character is able to change, the world is redeemable, a place that can be bettered with hard work. The reader, like the characters can change, as the characters testimonies suggest. If a character is not able to change, the world for that author is not redeemable and whether or not the reader is called to change the results are more likely to be ambiguous than measurable as a success or failure.

Change appears to play the same role in the secular novels/world as salvation for the Christians. However, salvation/redemption is open to everyone in the Christian novels while change is not always possible in the secular novels. Consequently, there is a large discrepancy between the two groups regarding who can be redeemed. To believe in universal redemption as the Christian authors do, is to believe that good can and will conquer evil to win individual souls. The Christian position is one of hope; it hopes for an external force to lift the individual up above the bleakness of the world. On the other hand, the secularists believe that change/redemption is not always possible. Without change, the misery of the world cannot be overcome. Therefore, there is a gap between what the world is and can be through change/redemption for the secularists and Christians.

Secularism and Christianity

After having read, explored and compared Christian and secular literature, it is appropriate to redefine what the secular and Christian voices are. By allowing the authorial intent and narratives of the novels to define the secular and Christian voice, it can be seen that the two groups have dissimilar views, interests and ideals.

The secularists as represented by The Wedding and Bleachers, tend to view the world with some ambiguity. The world not a particularly gentle, easy or happy place, and there may or may not be redemption for the characters. Secularists are those who are neither religious nor spiritual.²² Often, as is true in Bleachers, there is no resolution. This fear of sanctification seems to stem from the secular belief that nothing is ever absolutely settled and that religion is hypocritical. Redemption is an intimidating concept when one is not sure of their belief that, in the end, good will conquer evil. Secularism, as portrayed through the explored literature, has a worldview that is ambivalent. A dark vision of the world is a typical characteristic of many secularists. However, there are secularists who are optimistic about the world, but even they are critical of its institutions. Some optimistic secularists fault human institutions because they do not find them to be relevant. Nicholas Sparks appeals to a sappy motif perhaps to avoid having to make statements about the state of the world. He avoids tough subjects, burying them layers deep in his novels. But since both pessimistic and optimistic secularists are ambivalent about the world, Wade Clark Roof explains that they "are often fairly inarticulate about what they really believe."²³ However, their voices tend to be heard and so there seems to be much confusion in the world. It is an ambiguous subject and their determination of this has left the distinction between success and failure vague. Therefore, secularism is a fairly ambiguous voice that finds the world to be a dark and grim

²² Roof, 212.

²³ Roof, 214.

place. Some secularists subscribe to the notion that humanity can overcome their inherent darkness through their version of redemption, or change. Secularism questions existing institutions and does not offer alternatives other than seeking to change one's self.

The Christians as represented by And the Shofar Blew and Southern Storm have a much common vision of the world. They see the world as a sad, helpless place. However, while the world may be a bleak place, redemption for the individual is always possible. God speaks in each and every moment, all people have to do is listen. Christians, as identified by the Christian novels authorial intent and narratives, can appeal greatly to private religion. Since the world is a dark place, private religion can offer hope to the Christian. One such manifestation of private religion is, indeed, the Christian novel. The Christian novel mediates God's word to the reader so that God's word can be sensed and offer an immediate experience. Christianity is, therefore, a personal experience brought on by a calling. The world exists as a dark place prior to one's calling to God. After becoming a child of God and accepting Christ as one's own Savior, the world still exists as a dark place. However, the individual is redeemable and is able to exist in the light. The Christian voice is consequently concerned with finding ways to bring people to God. Once the individual has come to God and accepted Christ, it is time to live out the Gospel. The Christian voice as represented by And the Shofar Blew and Southern Storm proclaims the worth of private religion. Since the Christian voice is concerned with the saving of the individual, whatever it is that can bring the individual to salvation is a worth while endeavor. Having an immediate sensation of religion is important to Christians because it mediates God in the moment and to the individual. One such way for Christians to experience private religion is through media. Books, such as those explored, can serve as a testimonial or calling. Many Christians have found the

messages of such media, whether it be literature, music or movies, to be worth while.

Consequently, many Christians are surrounding themselves with all things Christian.

Therefore, a Christian sub-culture is on the rise.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that there is a gap between the interests of secularism and Christianity. Statistics, such as the rapid growth of the Christian Publishing industry, suggest that people are picking up on private religion. Private religion seeks to find an immediate sensation of God. In a consumerist society, private religion has manifested itself in mass media that can be purchased. With the decline of family values, interest in material wealth and sense of urgency within life in general, private religion offers the practitioner an immediate response. God becomes mediated by 'stuff,' and this 'stuff' offers a supposed immediate experience of God. A materialistic society is able to rely on purchased individual experiences. This media attempts to mediate God to the participant. Media such as literature, movies, music, etc. all have Christian sectors, suggesting that a self-identified Christian sub-culture has emerged. This Christian sub-culture and the secular culture, which is currently best represented by American pop-culture, express radically different visions concerning the state of the world, humanity and religion. Rather than bridging this gap, the self-identified Christian sub-culture continues to find new forms of media in which to manifest itself. This gap between cultures seems to be deeply dividing the American populace.

The implications of this conflict are both interesting and far-reaching. What will the impact of private religion mean religiously, politically, socially and economically? These are all questions that have yet to be explored.

Christianity in the United States will be affected by the incorporation of private religion into evangelical Christianity. Protestant, mainstream churches are losing parishioners and it seems as though the popularity of private religion as experienced

through media is contributing to the decline of them. Mainstream Protestant churches must find a way to respond to this movement, or they will not survive as we know them.²⁴

The consequences of private religion on society are less obvious at this point. A value gap within our populace indicates future conflict. This confrontation between secular and self-identified Christian thought may have already started to play out in a public arena. Personal morality was cited as the major deciding factor in how people chose to vote in the last election. With all the recent outrage about morality as a justification for voting, were the motives of personal religion expressed in this election? Americans do not claim to vote according to a group or corporate morality. Does that mean that they are not concerned with their obligation to the poor and uneducated, but rather they are concerned with things that directly affect them? Private religion leads to personal morality, concerning individuals with only their direct surroundings. Was this truly an effect of private religion as expressed through personal moral expressions? Yes. Society has just started to experience the effect of private religion. Will economics be impacted by private religion? Will our international relationships fail if we cannot think about our global neighbors because we have learned to focus only on our own needs?

Is the self-identified Christians' private religion making an impact on society?

Absolutely. Rather than answering a lot of questions, this paper has raised several new

²⁴ Traditionally, mainstream Protestant churches have had large concerns about mission giving. The wider mission of the 'public' church is to meet the needs of all people around the world. Private religion is concerned with the individual; it does not worry about social justice. Will subscribers of private religion be able to give if they are not necessarily able to see its results?

In my mind the most likely consequences of private religion on Christianity seems to be the continued growth of private religious materials and the further decline of mainstream churches. Mainstream churches, the public churches of God and neighbor, must find a way to respond to this personal practice or they will suffer greatly.

questions. Our efforts must now be focused on exploring the various consequences, both positive and negative, that private religion will have on Christianity and society.

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