

DISSERTATION

“ONE NATION UNDER GOD?”: A CALL FOR SECULAR RHETORICAL CRITICISM

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ABSTRACT

“ONE NATION UNDER GOD?”: A CALL FOR SECULAR RHETORICAL CRITICISM

This dissertation explores the need for secular rhetorical criticism, an approach to rhetorical scholarship that centers questions of power, privilege, and marginalization in relation to ir/religious pluralism. I contend that such an interconnected rhetorical approach to studying religion would be beneficial in creating a more cohesive conversation within rhetorical scholarship on the relationship of religious pluralism and power. Secular rhetorical criticism is fundamentally concerned with the lives, experiences, and voices of the ir/religiously marginalized and recognizes religious nationalism as part of a hegemonic system that privileges religious homogeneity and inhibits religious pluralism. In four chapters, I demonstrate the utility of engaging in secular rhetorical criticism by offering different approaches to analyzing the implementation of the phrase “under God” into the U.S. pledge of allegiance in 1954. While the phrase “under God” in the pledge is largely framed as example unifying “American civil religion” or benign “ceremonial deism,” I argue that in 1954 the pledge was transformed into a theistnormative ritual that promoted a Christian nationalist political imaginary while containing Atheists and secularism. In chapter one, I draw on secular rhetorical criticism to urge scholars to be self-reflective of how their own scholarly language and practices maintain religious hegemonies. Specifically, I point to how “under God” as “civil religion” perpetuates the Myth of Religious Tolerance and I offer the conception of theistnormativity as a more critical descriptor for the fusion of belief in God and national identity. In the next chapter, I urge scholars to utilize secular rhetorical criticism as a lens for considering who is contained and negated by

theistnormative texts. By analyzing advocates' justification of the new pledge, I demonstrate how religious and political leaders utilized the rhetorical strategy of prophetic dualism to frame the new pledge as a way to contain Atheists and Secularism. In chapter three, I reflect on how scholars engaging in secular rhetorical criticism need to utilize non-traditional methods to analyze the voices of the ir/religiously marginalized. I demonstrate how the gossip method can be used to speculate about how evidence from archived letters and newspapers suggests political leaders knowingly mischaracterized who supported and opposed the change to the pledge. Finally, I urge scholars to utilize secular rhetorical criticism to disrupt the assumption that the contemporary tensions between secularists and Christian nationalists emerged in the 1960s-1970s. By analyzing the political vocabularies of those writing to President Eisenhower and Congress in response to the new pledge in 1954, I demonstrate how supporters viewed the change as a confirmation of a Christian nationalist political imaginary while those who opposed it saw the new pledge as a threat to democracy from the perspective of a secular political imaginary. Using secular rhetorical criticism to guide my analysis of each chapter, I argue that in 1954 the pledge was transformed into a theistnormative ritual that advanced a Christian nationalist political imaginary while containing Atheists and secularism as part of a larger spiritual-industrial complex. This dissertation looks to the history of the 1950s to reflect on how, in 2022, Christian nationalists are establishing a new spiritual-industrial complex. Rhetorical scholars need an approach to studying rhetoric that will challenge and disrupt this undemocratic movement that undermines the values of religious freedom, tolerance, and equality.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
INTRODUCTION: A CALL FOR SECULAR RHETORICAL CRITICISM.....	1
CHAPTER ONE: CIVIL RELIGION OR THEISTNORMATIVITY: CONTENDING WITH THE MYTH OF RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE	31
CHAPTER TWO: “AN ATHEIST AMERICAN IS A CONTRADICTION OF TERMS”: HOW THE PLEDGE OF ALLEGAINCE BECAME A TOOL OF THEISTNORMATIVE CONTAINMENT.....	69
CHAPTER THREE: RESISTING THE THEISTNORMATIVE RITUAL: UTILIZING THE GOSSIP METHOD TO SPECULATE ABOUT CONTAINMENT AND RESISTANCE	109
CHAPTER FOUR: WRITING POLITICAL VOCABULARIES: ARTICULATING COMPETING CHRISTIAN NATIONALIST AND SECULARIST POLITICAL IMAGINARIES IN RESPONSE TO “UNDER GOD”	151
CONCLUSION: THE NEED FOR SECULAR RHETORICAL CRITICISM.....	192

INTRODUCTION: A CALL FOR SECULAR RHETORICAL CRITICISM

In 1954, members of Congress unanimously passed legislation to add the words “under God” to the U.S. pledge of allegiance, a move that was deeply rooted in anti-Atheist¹ prejudices. Supporters largely framed the change as a form of “spiritual defense” against the growing threat of atheistic communism during the Cold War. Proponents suggested that atheism led to communism and even went so far as to claim that “an atheist American” is “a contradiction of terms.”² Nearly 50 years later, in 2002, anger erupted across the country when the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit ruled in favor of Michael Newdow, an Atheist who was challenging the constitutionality of the ritual of students reciting the pledge of allegiance in schools. Newdow argued that, because of the phrase “under God,” having the pledge recited daily by students was an endorsement of religion within public schools. The notion that an Atheist had successfully argued that the phrase “under God” was unconstitutional before a high U.S. court set off an anti-Atheist outcry reminiscent of the Cold War. Newdow received death threats with critics calling him “un-American” and a “freakin’ commie bastard.”³ Newspapers were filled with letters to the editor brimming with critiques of Newdow and accusations that “Atheism is Utterly Un-American.”⁴ Political leaders and pundits from both major parties publicly voiced their criticism.⁵ Republican Joe Pitts denounced the ruling as being akin to a “Stalinist purge.”⁶ Conservative political pundit Bill O’Reilly lamented that it was “simply unconscionable for activist judges and fanatical atheists to intrude on the history of the United States,” and proclaimed that the “anti-God” stance of Atheists was not who “we are.”⁷ Senator Tom Daschle, the Democratic Majority Leader, argued that the ruling was “just nuts”⁸ while Democrat Robert Byrd, a member of Congress when “under God” was added to the pledge in

1954, called the presiding judge “stupid” and argued that “I, for one, am not going to stand for this country's [*sic*] being ruled by a bunch of atheists. If they do not like it, let them leave.”⁹

Amongst growing outrage across the United States, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals ruling after dismissing Newdow’s case based on a technicality relating to custodial disputes.

The bipartisan, anti-Atheist support for the new pledge in 1954 and similar response to the decision by the Ninth Circuit in 2002 exemplifies a pernicious and ingrained form of what I call *theistnormativity* that has long inhabited the U.S. American consciousness.

Theistnormativity is the assumption that belief in God is normal and thus is the acceptable expression of religious identity.¹⁰ Theistnormative assumptions are deeply invested in drawing connections between belief in and reverence to God and morality, good citizenship, and successful institutions (government, schools, etc.). Theistnormative narratives promote the idea that “true” citizens are theistic—i.e. God-believing and often fearing—or at the very least show reverence to theistic symbolism. Those who fail to be or do so, are deemed “abnormal” and a threat to society. In the United States, these narratives are not new; they are deeply embedded within historical and contemporary discourses of the U.S.-American culture. Attempts to challenge theistnormativity within the United States are often met with accusations of un-Americanism and being anti-religious. Through theistnormative narratives that suggest they are “un-American,” non-theists and Atheists are rhetorically constructed as a “them” who pose a threat to the U.S. American “us.” Theistnormativity is as embedded in U.S. American institutions and culture as white supremacy, heteronormativity, and the patriarchy.

Religion is an undeniable force within society with which rhetorical scholars must contend. In rhetorical scholarship, when scholars engage in critical work that considers questions

of power, privilege, and marginalization, they tend to focus on questions of race, gender, sex, sexual orientation, and class.¹¹ The designation of particular approaches to rhetoric, including racial rhetorical criticism, feminist criticism, queer theory, and Marxist criticism have helped center these important analytic categories within broader ideological and critical rhetorical studies. While there has been a rich history of scholars examining religious texts and narratives¹² religion has “rarely been at the center” of rhetorical studies.¹³ Additionally, outside of attention to the civil rights movement, scholarship on U.S. religious discourse primarily centers white Protestant Christian voices.¹⁴ In recent decades, there has been a push within the field to expand the study of religion to be more inclusive, critically engage with dominant understandings of religion, and highlight questions of power, privilege, and marginalization in relation to religion and ir/religious pluralism.¹⁵ Yet, this critical work has not been articulated as being a part of an amalgamated approach to rhetorical scholarship in the way rhetorical scholarship on race, gender, sexuality, and class have been.

I contend that such an interconnected rhetorical approach to studying religion would be beneficial in creating a more cohesive conversation within rhetorical scholarship in relation to religion and power. I offer the idea of “secular rhetorical criticism” as a potential designation for such scholarship. Secular rhetorical criticism is fundamentally concerned with the lives, experiences, and voices of the ir/religiously marginalized. It recognizes religious nationalism as part of a hegemonic system that privileges religious homogeneity and inhibits religious pluralism. Secular rhetorical criticism highlights the communication strategies used both to maintain and resist religious nationalism and homogeneity. In focusing on the lived experiences of the ir/religiously marginalized, the secular rhetorical critic should confront normativity, challenge the Myth of Religious Tolerance, and de-center white Christian voices while

highlighting the voices and experiences of ir/religious minorities within scholarship on religion and rhetoric.

Questions of power, privilege, and marginalization relating to religion deserve the same critical attention from communication and rhetorical scholars as other analytic categories such as race, gender, sex, and class. Drawing on the work of Lisa A. Flores, I argue that rhetorical scholars should consider the “persistence” of ir/religious “oppression, logics, voices, and bodies” in order to develop work that considers the intersections of religion and rhetoric while making calls for “intellectual, social, and political action and to disciplinary intervention.”¹⁶ Such work would, necessarily, take into consideration how ir/religious identity intersects with race, gender, sexuality, class, citizenship, and ability while recognizing the distinctive features and functions of ir/religious identity.¹⁷ In not centering religion as a foundational matter in critical rhetorical scholarship, scholars have often ignored or downplayed the role religion plays in power, privilege, and marginalization. At times, they have reinforced coercive religious hegemonies that fortify christonormative and theistnormative ideologies and undermine the values of religious freedom, tolerance, and equality.

In this dissertation, I develop and deploy secular rhetorical criticism to analyze how theistnormative rituals function to maintain religious nationalist ideologies at the expense of non-theists. As a form of critical rhetoric, one of the primary goals of secular rhetorical criticism should be to understand how rituals function to maintain hegemonic hierarchies. As Raymie E. McKerrow argues: “The ruling class is affirmed by recourse to *rituals* wherein its power is expressed; its role as ruler is sanctioned, in a negative sense, by the ultimate act of *excommunicating* those who fail to participate in or accede to the rituals.”¹⁸ In other words, rituals maintain the power of ruling groups by containing those who may threaten the hegemonic

hierarchies. For this project, I focus specifically on how the phrase “under God” was added to the U.S. pledge of allegiance in order to change the pledge into a theistnormative ritual that reinforced Christian nationalist ideologies while containing secularism and atheism.

Within both scholarship and popular discourse, the dominant narrative around the phrase “under God” in the pledge frames it as a harmless, inclusive, and unifying “ceremonial deism” or example of “American civil religion” because the “God” referenced in the phrase is vague enough to not blatantly privilege one religion over others.¹⁹ Using secular rhetorical criticism, I offer an alternative reading of the ritual. I contend that the pledge’s theistnormative reference to “God” masks the coercive ways in which the ritual reinforces hegemonic religious hierarchies. As a theistnormative ritual, the revised pledge privileges Christianity, negates non-theists, and perpetuates the Myth of Religious Tolerance that erases the long history of religious discrimination within U.S. collective memory.

Two primary goals drive this dissertation project. The first is to introduce secular rhetorical criticism as a distinct approach to rhetorical criticism and to demonstrate how utilizing this approach can disrupt dominant scholarly and popular narratives that mask and maintain hegemonic religious hierarchies. The second is to use a secular rhetorical criticism lens to explain how the phrase “under God” transformed the U.S. pledge of allegiance into a theistnormative ritual that functions paradoxically to mask and reinforce Christian nationalist ideals over religious political authority and national identity in response to the perceived threat of secularism and atheism. I also center the voices of those who, from its implementation, resisted the theistnormative nature of the new pledge and challenged the hegemonic religious hierarchies that were being reinforced during the 1950s. This project offers historical contextualization for the pervasiveness and lasting implications of Christian nationalist ideologies during the 1950s.

With the intensification of Christian nationalist campaigns in the United States in the twenty-first century, it is imperative for rhetorical scholars to understand how previous Christian nationalists resurgences have shaped U.S. political discourse and symbolism in ways that appear to legitimate the contemporary movement.

In this introduction, I first expand on my definition of secular rhetorical criticism and assert its value within rhetorical scholarship by suggesting three projects that can guide work in secular rhetorical criticism: confronting normativity; challenging the Myth of Religious Tolerance; and decentering white Christian voices and highlighting the discourse and experiences of ir/religious minorities. I also address the question of why “secular” rhetorical criticism is an appropriate term for studying tensions that relate to ir/religious pluralism. Finally, I outline how this dissertation will demonstrate the utility of engaging in secular rhetorical criticism. The next four chapters offer different approaches to analyzing the implementation of the phrase “under God” into the U.S. pledge of allegiance in 1954 from the lens of secular rhetorical criticism. By 1) framing the phrase “under God” as theistnormative rather than “American civil religion,” 2) considering who was being contained by the transformation of a patriotic ritual, 3) utilizing the gossip method as a non-traditional method to uncover the voices of those being silenced by those in power, and 4) reflecting on how support and opposition to the change aligned with competing political imaginaries, I disrupt dominant hegemonic narratives about the function of the phrase in the pledge being inclusive and benign. Using secular rhetorical criticism to guide my analysis of each chapter, I argue that in 1954 the pledge was transformed into a theistnormative ritual that confirmed a Christian nationalist political imaginary while containing Atheists and secularism.

Secular Rhetorical Criticism

Secular rhetorical criticism entails studying the discourses that maintain and resist religious hegemonies and which take into consideration power, privilege, and marginalization in relation to religious pluralism and shifts in religious authority. Notably, secular rhetorical criticism is *not* the critique of religion or religious rhetorics. In fact, it is imperative that scholars studying discourse from the lens of secular rhetorical criticism avoid making value claims about religion or secularism. As a form of critical rhetoric, secular rhetorical criticism is not interested in questioning whether particular theological discourses are “true or false,” but rather “how the discourse is mobilized to legitimate the sectional interests of hegemonic groups.”²⁰ Simply put, secular rhetorical criticism is not intended for intervention in theological debates. Rather, it considers how religiously plural societies negotiate such pluralism and how the values of religious tolerance and equality can be discursively promoted or undermined. While not designed to contribute to theological debates, secular rhetorical criticism does presume a celebration of religious pluralism. In this sense, secular rhetorical criticism is a queer approach to the study of religious rhetoric as it is grounded in the notion that “difference is both desirable and unavoidable.”²¹ Aligned with the goals of queer criticism, secular rhetorical criticism should maintain an activist agenda centered around promoting religious equality, freedom and tolerance. One of the primary goals for scholars engaged in secular rhetorical criticism should be to help inform and facilitate productive interfaith dialogues that take into consideration questions of power, privilege, and marginalization. Such dialogues recognize and include diverse ir/religious

voices, understand and celebrate ir/religious differences, and dismantle oppressive social structures that silence the ir/religiously marginalized.

With this primary goal in mind, I offer three critical projects scholars engaged with secular rhetorical criticism should consider: confronting normativity, challenging the Myth of Religious Tolerance, and decentering white Christian voices and highlighting the discourses and experiences of ir/religious minorities. These are certainly not the only projects that guide such work. Rather, I offer them as a way to provide a foundation of critical questions that can begin to bring together scholars with similar interests and concerns. Nor can these projects be discretely separated from each other. One cannot challenge the Myth of Religious Tolerance or de-center white Christian voices, for example, without confronting how normativity informs myths and traditional practices that center dominant voices. Additionally, scholars engaging in rhetorical scholarship through the lens of secular rhetorical criticism must continually reflect upon our own scholarly practices and rhetoric by inquiring how, as a field, we maintain or challenge religious hegemonies that negate ir/religious minorities.

Confronting Normativity

Since secular rhetorical criticism is grounded in the need to recognize and disrupt religious hegemonies, one of the primary projects that scholars using this lens should undertake is confronting normative assumptions about religion present in mainstream discourses. Secular rhetorical criticism assumes there are hegemonic religious hierarchies that undermine the values of religious freedom, tolerance, and equality by both creating privilege and enforcing oppression. These hierarchies are promoted and maintained, but also resisted, through messages, symbols, and rituals. Scholars studying such rhetorics from a secular rhetorical criticism lens examine how particular messages, symbols, and rituals shape what is considered “normal” or socially

acceptable in terms of religious beliefs and behaviors within a community, while silencing dissenters. In utilizing the work of Benedict Anderson, scholars can consider how these rhetorics help to create understandings of nations as “imagined communities” where members are prompted through public narratives to develop a mental image of who true members of a community are and what they believe in relation to religious ideologies.²²

While such normativity can emerge in various ways and scholars should work to identify different specific manifestations of religious normativity, three forms that have already been named that secular rhetorical criticism lends itself to understanding are theonormativity, theistnormativity, and Christonormativity. Theonormativity is broadly the assumption that having a religious identity is preferred or even inherent.²³ Theistnormativity, more narrowly, is the normalization of belief in God which involves presuming people believe in God, associating religion with a belief in a higher power, and drawing connections between good citizenship with theistic identities. Finally, christonormativity is the “unspoken norm,” promoted through various public messages, symbols, and rituals, that everyone “is Christian unless otherwise specified.”²⁴ All of these forms of normativity create privileges and advantages for those with particular religious and political ideologies while marginalizing others. They reinforce religious nationalism by tying religious beliefs and/or faith in God to good and moral citizenship while framing outsiders as a threat to the imagined community. Scholars engaging in secular rhetorical criticism should focus on questions of what rhetorical strategies are utilized to maintain and resist such normalization.

Challenging the Myth of Religious Tolerance

When engaging questions of normativity, scholars should be cognizant of the way such normalization has been protected through the Myth of Religious Tolerance. This myth minimizes

the tensions that emerge in religiously plural societies over the role of religious authority. As such, secular rhetorical critics should both call out and challenge this myth. The Myth of Religious Tolerance, as it manifests in the United States, presumes that the nation has enjoyed a culture of relative religious tolerance because religious freedom was established as a grounding principle.²⁵ This myth is perpetuated by the narrative taught in most schools that Pilgrims and Puritans came to the United States seeking religious freedom which would later become a foundational value in the United States. This story, however, often leaves out how early European settlers were not willing to extend religious freedom to others and, in reality, regularly responded quite violently to religious dissent and difference.²⁶ Although this myth does not suppose there has been absolute religious harmony, it normalizes the assumption that the United States has avoided the religious turmoil that plagued other continents for centuries.²⁷ This myth also assumes that the people in the United States are unified by a shared appreciation of the general importance of religion within society, which is reflected in the continual use of non-denominational religious-political rhetoric. As I will outline further in the next chapter, in scholarship, as well as in popular discourses, the myth is perpetuated through language that suggests cohesion where there is coercion, such as the terms “American civil religion” and the “Judeo-Christian tradition.”²⁸

Work in secular rhetorical scholarship should aim to challenge the Myth of Religious Tolerance by engaging in historically grounded work that acknowledges and contends with the history of religious intolerance and its contemporary implications. Secular rhetorical criticism, for example, should inquire about the role religion played in and the religious implications of colonization, both in the United States and around the world.²⁹ It should also take seriously the way that Enlightenment rhetoric both expanded and limited the potential for religious

pluralism.³⁰ Part of challenging the myth involves recognizing and addressing the pervasiveness of religious nationalism and how it functions to maintain hegemonic religious hierarchies. In the United States, for example, Christian nationalism, or the belief that Christianity deserves a privileged position within public and political culture, has continually shaped not only laws but perceptions of who “true” citizens are.³¹ In challenging the Myth of Religious Tolerance, scholars should center case studies that highlight how religious hegemonies have been maintained at the expense of religious minorities. Finally, scholars interested in challenging the Myth of Religious Tolerance should consider how collective memory remembers, frames, and forgets religious tensions. Throughout their scholarship, rhetorical critics should be particularly mindful of how our own linguistic choices and categorizations can perpetuate or challenge the Myth of Religious Tolerance and open up or shut down the possibility of more sincere interfaith dialogues that recognize the history of religious privilege and marginalization.

Decentering White Christian Voices

The Myth of Religious Tolerance itself points to another project that is imperative for secular rhetorical criticism, the need to decenter white Christian voices and U.S. focused case studies in rhetorical scholarship on religion. In decentering dominant Christian voices in scholarship, scholars engaging in secular rhetorical criticism should highlight and recover the voices and experiences of marginalized ir/religious groups. Work in religious communication is overwhelmingly focused on white Protestant Christianity in the United States.³² The *Journal of Communication and Religion*, for example, published only twelve articles on Judaism, three on Islam, and two on Buddhism between 1978 and 2009.³³ There have also been only a handful of published articles across rhetorical studies on discourses from or about Atheists.³⁴ While there has been excellent work published on the role of religious rhetoric in the abolition and civil

rights movement, as well as within the genre of “African American preaching,” this work, with a few notable exceptions,³⁵ is primarily limited to the Protestant tradition.³⁶ Attention to non-Christian traditions, particularly those which highlight the voices of non-white rhetors, is relatively limited in the field.³⁷ The tendency to centralize white Protestant discourses within work on religious rhetoric reflects how assumptions about religion itself often comes from a Western context. As religious studies scholar Benson Salor notes, religion “is a term with discrete Euro-American associations....it is therefore difficult, and perhaps inadvisable, to apply it cross-culturally.”³⁸ Indeed, defining what “counts” as a religion was a racist and creedist colonial tactic white Protestants used to maintain power.³⁹ As such, when considering religious rhetoric, scholars engaged in secular rhetorical criticism should embrace decolonial and postcolonial perspectives. In doing so, “instead of merely uncovering hegemony in Western discourses” scholars can critically “examine the power relations that structure [their] own discourses” particularly when offering definitions of religion and selecting case studies that center particular voices.⁴⁰

One of the aims of work in secular rhetorical criticism should be to address the gap in scholarship on non-Christian and non-white ir/religious voices. While scholarship engaging in secular rhetorical criticism should not shy away from engagement with white Christian discourses and voices, it should be mindful of the Eurocentric and U.S.-centric focus within the field of Communication Studies that privileges white Christian voices.⁴¹ Scholarship that centers the voices and experiences of marginalized ir/religious groups and people, and which focuses on religious discourses outside of the United States, should be one of the products of secular rhetorical criticism. Case studies that do focus on the discourses of dominant white Christian voices should consider the implications of such discourses on the social understandings and

experiences of marginalized ir/religious groups and people. Finally, scholars engaging in secular rhetorical criticism recognize the pervasiveness of the “racialization of religion,” or the assumption that an individual’s race is an indicator of their religious identity.⁴² It is imperative within secular rhetorical scholarship to not just resist the racialization of religion but also to understand how the racialization of religion occurs, including how whiteness has become tied to Christianity and the implications for religious and racial minorities.⁴³ By both understanding the racialization of religion and resisting the normalization of that racialization, secular rhetorical scholarship should celebrate the diversity of different ir/religious traditions.

Why “Secular” Rhetorical Criticism?

While I have outlined the potentiality of secular rhetorical criticism, at this point, readers may wonder: why is *secular* rhetorical criticism an appropriate approach for studying how power and privilege manifests in *religiously* inflected rhetoric. Keeping in mind that the approach to rhetorical criticism I am advocating for centers around questions of how religious hegemonies are maintained and resisted, I chose the term “secular rhetorical criticism” because “secularism” reflects shifts in religious norms.⁴⁴ The conception of secularism emerged, in part, from attempts to narrow proper religious practices. During the Reformation, “modern clerical elites,” within both the Catholic and Protestant traditions, wanted to “clean up” religious practices and behaviors that lingered from “pre-Christian folk religion.” They began to “enforce among parishioners standards of piety and orthodoxy previously deemed important only for elites.”⁴⁵ In doing so, they narrowed understandings of what was deemed proper religious belief while simultaneously expanding what behaviors could be labeled as “unbelief-atheism” by dismissing any behavior or deviation from orthodox practices as un-Christian.⁴⁶ These “efforts to get people to be better Christians” set into motion the questioning of religious authority that emerged during

the Enlightenment which would become known as “secularism.”⁴⁷ This history reflects how secularism emerged as a result of shifting religious norms and attempts to limit “deviant” religious behavior while privileging particular orthodoxies. Drawing on this history, I contend that the “secular” in secular rhetorical criticism reflects the resistance that emerges when those in power attempt to limit religious pluralism.

There is extensive scholarship on the conception of “secular criticism,” though there is disagreement over exactly what it entails. Edward Said, proposed the conception of “secular criticism: in 1983, using the term to describe an understanding of criticism as scholarship that “deals with local and worldly situations, and that it is constitutively opposed to the production of massive, hermetic systems.”⁴⁸ Said goes on to argue that productive criticism should always be situated, skeptical, secular, and “reflectively open to its own failings.”⁴⁹ Said’s depiction of good criticism as being secular suggests a distinction between secular criticism as being grounded in freedom and reason and religious criticism while an alternative “religious criticism” is framed as promoting “intolerance and obscurantism.”⁵⁰ Talal Asad rightfully notes, however, that this is a problematic western reduction between the difference between secularism and religion as being about reason and irrationality that is distinctly uncritical.⁵¹ As such, I draw my understanding of secular criticism more from the work of Aamir R. Mufti than Said. Mufti, in expanding on Said’s work, argues that a secular approach to criticism must recognize the relationship between secularism, religious pluralism, and nationalism. He contends that secular criticism must involve a “concern with minority culture and existence” and contend with the “unequal division of the field of national experience into domains marked by religious difference.”⁵² As I will expand on shortly, while scholars engaging with secular rhetorical criticism must be mindful of the problematic use of “secularism” as synonymous with “reason,” I argue Mafti’s understanding of

secular criticism offers a framework for studying questions of power, privilege, and marginalization in relation to religious pluralism.

I am certainly not the first to suggest a focus on secularism in rhetorical studies would be valuable for understanding cultural shifts and pressures connected to religion and religious authority. Ryan Gillespie, for example, points to the possibility of secular rhetorical criticism in his 2016 *QJS* review of three books on secularism by scholars outside of communication and rhetorical studies. Gillespie argues that:

Critical scholars increasingly recognize that secularism, in all its varieties, shapes, orients, and remakes the lives of both religious and nonreligious citizens. Secularism deserves consideration as a crucial analytic category alongside the familiar triumvirate of race, class, and gender. In short, the relationship between religion and secularism is poised to become a vital focus of rhetorical studies as we, in Robert Ivie's words, "dare to try to deliberate democratically in a rhetorical republic."⁵³

Gillespie points to secularism's relation to religion as an important cultural phenomenon that deserves scholarly attention from rhetoricians. As Gillespie notes, secularism is not just one idea, but rather manifests into different "varieties."⁵⁴ Charles Taylor suggests that are three distinct "senses" of secularism that have emerged to reflect modernity.⁵⁵ These varieties of secularism should inform secular rhetorical criticism. Notably, secular rhetorical criticism is not the study of secularism, but rather involves a recognition of how various senses of secularism can prompt different questions about how religious hegemonies are resisted and maintained.

The first two senses of secularism are the most popular connotations of the term. The first sense focuses on understanding secularism as a political ideology. This form of secularism is embodied in the notion that there should be a separation of church and state and that governments need to be neutral when it comes to religion. Secular rhetorical criticism that engages in questions of secularism in this sense, highlights tensions surrounding the

manifestation of the role of religious authority within particular communities. The second sense of secularism focuses more on the beliefs of people, promoting an understanding of secularity as being the decline of religious practices and/or belief in religion and God. Particularly scholars interested in the historical and contemporary experiences of non-theists and those who are irreligious will be informed by secularism in the second sense.⁵⁶

While the first and second senses of secularism are arguably the most popular connotations of the term, these senses have limitations with which critics doing secular rhetorical criticism must contend. To begin, they are often presented as indistinguishable. As K. Healan Gaston argues, “for critics, the term 'secularism' conflated support for strict church-state separation with militant atheism.”⁵⁷ Not only does such conflation frame both atheism and secularism as a threat, but it dismisses how secularism in the first sense is supported by a diverse array of religious and irreligious groups and individuals. Dominant framings of secularism in both of these senses often suggest that secularism is synonymous with animosity towards religion. Such animosity is regularly framed as unwarranted through a perpetuation of the Myth of Religious Tolerance that ignores the intolerance of religious pluralism that secularism formed to respond to. Finally, secularism is often defined by “absence.”⁵⁸ Secular rhetorical criticism should recognize that secularism in either of these senses is not solely about absences but also can be focused on advocacy of particular values, such as religious equality and tolerance. While manifestations of secularism certainly do not always successfully promote these values, scholars, particularly those engaged in secular rhetorical criticism, should recognize that secularism is about far more than “absences.”

Taylor’s third sense of secularism resists the assumption that secularism is purely about absences and instead is reflective of a human need to belong and be accepted. According to

Taylor, “[t]he shift to secularity in this sense consists, among other things, of a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others.”⁵⁹ In other words, secularism in this sense can be understood as the tensions that arise when religious hegemonies have been challenged. To be clear, this third sense of secularism did not only emerge as a result of increases in irreligiosity and atheism but as a part of growing religious pluralism and access to information on world religions. Gaston, for example, points to how increased knowledge about diverse religions, particularly Eastern religions such as Buddhism, brought into question the universalism of Christianity in Western cultures.⁶⁰ This led to new efforts and strategies to maintain the Christian status quo. Secular rhetorical criticism considers the implications of these efforts on various ir/religious groups.

This third sense of secularism is central to secular rhetorical criticism as it points to the tensions that emerge as a result of religious pluralism. Rather than being the opposite of religion, secularism is a condition that grew from the need of those who are both religious and nonreligious to negotiate their beliefs in a world where countless understandings of religion and belief are possible. Those invested in the religious status quo often view secularism, in the third sense, as a threat to the very fabric of society. Those who have the most power within a society may work to shape understandings of national identity to exclude particular ir/religious identities deemed most deviant. Meanwhile, minority ir/religious groups and cultures work to challenge or alter dominant religious hegemonies to be more inclusive, at least in regards to their own marginalized religious group.⁶¹ This leads to negotiations between dominant and minority groups that can shift religious hegemonies.

Returning to the idea that scholars engaged in secular rhetorical criticism should avoid making value statements about religion or secularism, it is also imperative that scholars be mindful to how secularism, as an ideology, has itself limited religious equality and tolerance and/or has maintained, rather than disrupted, religious hegemonies. While secularism may have emerged as a response to religious intolerance, it has itself also been utilized to reinforce intolerant religious hierarchies and norms. As the case of the Soviet Union in the twentieth century demonstrates, secularism can be manifested in ways that are incredibly militant and intolerant of religion. Additionally, while critics often accuse secularists of being anti-religious or specifically anti-Christian, many Western manifestations of secularism are still strongly influenced by and privilege Christianity. Saba Mahmood argues that “the fundamental centrality of Christian norms, values, and sensibilities (however Judaic they are made out to be) to European conceptions of what is deemed secular” can explain why “the Muslim presence in Europe is increasingly cast as a threat to Europe’s civilizational identity.”⁶² In other words, despite the presumed “irreligious” secularism that exists in many Western societies, Christianity remains the norm, thus non-Christian religions are still largely subjected to biases and marginalization that mainstream denominations of Christianity are not, even in presumably secular societies.⁶³ Finally, while Taylor’s work is valuable for understanding different senses of secularism and shifts in religious hegemonies, secular critics such as Nilüfer Göle, José Casanova, and Saba Mahmood critique Taylor’s focus on Christianity and Western society, calling for a need to “decenter the Euro-American understanding of secular modernity.”⁶⁴ Indeed, within broader work on secular criticism, scholarship increasingly focuses on how secularism in Eastern societies have their own unique genealogy, very much separate from the

Christian-centered genealogy of Western secularism that Taylor emphasizes.⁶⁵ Secular rhetorical criticism should not undermine its own goals by ignoring these important aspects of secularism.

Despite the name, secular rhetorical criticism is not necessarily about the study of secularism. Rather secular rhetorical criticism recognizes how the relationship between secularism and religion shapes society, particularly in regard to how cultures contend with religious pluralism and shifts in religious hegemonies. Rhetorical analysis that employs the lens of secular rhetorical criticism recognizes the various manifestations of secularism in order to center projects that bring attention to the lived experiences of marginalized ir/religious groups and the hegemonic religious hierarchies that reinforce such marginalization. By confronting normativity, challenging the Myth of Religious Tolerance, and decentering white Christian voices, scholars engaged in secular rhetorical criticism bring attention to how messages, symbols, and rituals reinforce religious hegemonies and offer alternative narratives to those available in mainstream representations of religious pluralism. These alternative narratives are essential for understanding difference within critical interfaith dialogues that promote religious equality and tolerance in religiously plural societies.

“Under God” Through the Lens of Secular Rhetorical Criticism

While there are extensive possibilities for projects grounded in secular rhetorical criticism which confront normativity, challenge the Myth of Religious Tolerance, and highlight non-Christian voices, I turn to one particular rhetorical ritual to expand on the possibility of employing a secular rhetorical criticism lens: The U.S. pledge of allegiance. The U.S. Congress passed legislation adding the phrase “under God” to the pledge of allegiance in 1954 at the height of the Red Scare. In this dissertation, I challenge the widely accepted notion that the phrase “under God” in the pledge of allegiance is characteristic of “American civil religion” and

an exemplar of “ceremonial deism.” Using tenets of secular rhetorical criticism, I examine discourses that contextualized, accompanied, and responded to this legislative change, arguing that the legislation transformed the pledge into a theistnormative ritual that reinforces Christian nationalist ideologies and elides and opposes secularism and atheism.

Throughout the chapters, this dissertation confronts normativity, challenges the Myth of Religious Tolerance, and highlight the discourses and experiences of those who opposed Christian nationalism in the 1950s. In each chapter I first turn to the case of *Elk Grove Unified School District v. Newdow* and outline assumptions about the phrase that were used to justify maintaining the phrase and criticizing Newdow’s objection to the pledge. Then, using archival documents that reveal the discourses surrounding the implementation, I disrupt these common assumptions. In the chapters, I confront normativity by highlighting the theistnormative arguments used to justify the revised pledge. By drawing attention to common narratives within legal discourses that shape public memory, and then contrasting them with archival documents that reveal the role Christian nationalist political imaginaries played in the revision, I challenge the Myth of Religious Tolerance that has helped to make the revision palatable to a religiously plural citizenry. Finally, by considering the implications of the revised pledged on religious minorities, particularly Atheists, this dissertation highlights the experiences and voices of ir/religious minorities and secularists who were resisting Christian nationalism. This dissertation asks readers to seriously consider what function the current pledge of allegiance has in a religiously plural society. I contend that, rather than being a unifying ritual, it functions to reinforce hegemonic religious hierarchies that privilege Christians, negates non-theists, and demands reverence from religious minorities.

My first chapter addresses the assumption that the pledge is a benign example of “ceremonial deism” or “American civil religion.” In this chapter, I urge rhetorical scholars to reflect on the ways in which their narratives and language usages have perpetuated the Myth of Religious Tolerance, particularly in relation to the 1950s. To do so, I expand on the historical context that led to the rise of what Jonathan Herzog calls the “spiritual-industrial complex,” or the “deliberate and managed use of societal resources to stimulate a religious revival in the late 1940s and 1950s.”⁶⁶ The spiritual-industrial complex was driven by a desire to resist secularism and re-establish the influence Christian nationalism had in the mid-1800s. I contend that, in trying to understand the discourses that emerged during and after the 1950s, scholars have perpetuated the same religious hegemonies the spiritual-industrial complex worked to maintain. I specifically point to the conception of “American civil religion” as an example of scholarly discourse that perpetuates the Myth of Religious Tolerance. I suggest that the concept of civil religion emerged, in part, as an attempt to explain how tensions surrounding religious pluralism were managed within political discourses after the Cold War. While “civil religion” is largely portrayed in scholarship as a reflection of the unifying nature of religious political rhetoric, I contend that the emergence of the term in the 1960s reflected a need to justify the discourses left by the spiritual-industrial complex. The utilization of the term “civil religion” normalizes and advances theistnormative assumptions that not only frames non-theists as deviant but limits interfaith dialogues by advancing the Myth of Religious Tolerance. In other words, rather than engaging in secular rhetorical criticism that exposes and challenges power structures, I suggest that scholars utilizing the conception of “civil religion” often both mask and reinforce coercive religious hegemonies and dismiss the experiences of marginalized ir/religious groups. I argue that much of what scholars have framed as “civil religion” would be better understood as

“theistnormativity.” By reframing particular examples of so-called “civil religion” as theistnormativity, I contend that the coercive and normalizing nature of such discourses become more evident within scholarship.

The second chapter continues to challenge the notion that the motto is an example of “ceremonial deism” or “American civil religion” by disrupting the assumption that the motto does not favor one religion over others. I argue that advocates justified legislation changing the pledge through the utilization of the rhetorical strategy of “prophetic dualism.” Advocates framed U.S. citizens as a theistic collective who were being threatened by an atheistic enemy. While political leaders argued the vague theistic reference in the pledge was inclusive and an appropriate representation of the U.S. American people, they also championed it as a form of “spiritual defense” that would contain secularism, particularly in the second sense. In other words, despite claims that the new pledge was inclusive and would unify people, such unification came at the expense of framing those who were non-theistic as un-American and a threat. As an example of secular rhetorical criticism, this chapter resists the assumption that the new pledge was unifying by taking into consideration how the revised version functioned as a tool of containment that silenced not only Atheists but anyone who critiqued the new pledge.

Chapter three contests the assumption that there has been no serious objection to the revised pledge prior to 2002. Even when the pledge was revised, members of Congress insisted there was no serious objection and that they had received thousands of letters, all in support, from people with diverse religious backgrounds. Few of these letters, however, appear to have been preserved, making it difficult to confirm this claim. By analyzing public letters sent to President Dwight D. Eisenhower and the handful sent to members of Congress that were preserved in archives, I utilize what Pamela VanHaitsma calls the “gossip method” to reflect

how opposition may have been more widespread than critics presume. By looking at “traces” within these letters, I center voices that were silenced through the containment discourses outlined in the previous chapter and, in doing so, disrupt the dominant narrative of cohesion. I point to how letters suggests that opposition may not have only been more widespread than political leaders suggested but that several prominent political leaders may have opposed the change yet were either dismissed by members of Congress or were pressured to support the bill to protect their own political ambitions. Reflective of the queer nature of secular rhetorical criticism, this chapter encourages scholars to utilize queer methods that open up possibilities for studying those who were silenced through religious normative pressures.

Chapter four highlights how secularism and Christian nationalism are competing religious political imaginaries, or fictitious understandings of how democracy functions in relation to religion. More specifically this chapter challenges the prominent narrative that the contemporary tensions between secularists and Christian nationalism emerged in the 1960s-1980s as the two imaginaries aligned with the two opposing major political parties. By analyzing the political vocabularies of those writing to President Eisenhower and Congress in support or opposition of the legislation adding “under God” in the pledge, I demonstrate how the letters reveal how, despite bipartisan support for the change, stances on the legislation aligned with Christian nationalist and secularist political imaginaries. I contend that it is imperative that, in order to understand the current tensions between Christian nationalism and secularism, scholars must consider how the two competing imaginaries have influenced and challenged each other while shaping cultural understandings of the relationship between church and state throughout U.S. history.

Finally, in the conclusion, I consider the contemporary implications of the addition of “under God” to the pledge of allegiance. I highlight how legal decisions regarding the constitutionality of the words “under God” in the pledge exemplify how hegemonically ingrained theistnormativity is within U.S. American culture. I consider how political leaders from both major political parties have since utilized the phrase “under God” to navigate appealing to Christian nationalists in a society where secularism, in all three senses, is also prominent. The continual connection between God and U.S. identity, has helped to propel and legitimize the contemporary Christian nationalist movement which is contributing to the rise of a new spiritual-industrial complex that threatens religious pluralism, freedom, and tolerance. As an approach to rhetoric and religion that highlights questions relating to religion, power, privilege, and marginalization, secular rhetorical criticism offers a lens for understanding how this threat has emerged, how it is being advanced and maintained, and, most importantly, how it can be resisted.

NOTES

¹ I capitalize Atheists to distinguish those whose primary relation to religion revolves around a disbelief in God from those who may be atheist in the sense of belonging to an atheistic religion.

² “Extension of Remarks of Hon. Louis C. Rabaut of Michigan,” Congressional Record-House, February 12, 1954, 1700. Also see: Richard J. Ellis, *To the Flag: The Unlikely History of the Pledge of Allegiance* (The University Press of Kansas, 2005).

³ Ellis, *To the Flag*, x.

⁴ “Atheism is Utterly Un-American,” *Livingston County Daily Press and Argus* (Howell, Michigan), July 14, 2002, 11A.

⁵ “Opinions on the Pledge of Allegiance Ruling,” *CNN* June 26, 2002, <https://www.cnn.com/2002/LAW/06/26/pledge.reax.quotes/>.

⁶ Ellis, *To the Flag*, x

⁷ Bill O’Reilly, “America’s Anti-God Squad Won’t Win” *The Atlanta Constitution* July 5, 2002, A19.

⁸ David Kravets, “Pledge of Allegiance Ruling Put on Hold,” *Morning Call* June 28, 2002, A2.

⁹ “Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals Decision,” 148 Cong Rec. S 6100, June 26, 2002.

¹⁰ Kristina M. Lee, “Theistnormativity and the Negation of American Atheists in Presidential Inaugural Addresses” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 23, no. 2 (2020): 255-291, <https://doi.org/10.14321/rhetpublaffa.23.2.0255>.

¹¹ Using the EBSCO Host database of Communication & Mass Media Complete if one searches “‘race’ AND ‘Gender’ AND ‘sex*’” in “All Text” of manuscripts, there are 13,522. Adding “Class” only reduces the results to “10,818.” Adding “religion” instead of “class” leads to only 3,530 results. Including all five terms offers 2,448 results. If one adds the term “rhetoric*” to the search bar, it decreases the results to 1,119, 839, 354, and 274 respectively. In using any combination of “gender,” “race,” “sex,*” “class,” and “religion” in a search, adding “Religion” comparably offers significantly less results than other combinations. This suggests that scholars in communication studies broadly and rhetorical studies specifically are far less likely to consider “Religion” as an analytic category worthy of the same consideration in relation to identity and power as race, gender, sex, and class.

¹² See: Ronald C. Arnett, “Religious Communication Scholarship: Going Nowhere Correctly.” *Journal of Communication and Religion* 33, no. 2 (2010): 221–246. D. Ray Heisey, “Reflections on Religious Speech Communication,” *The Journal of Communication and Religion* 21, no. 2 (1998): 85–107; Quentin J. Schultze, “The Nature and Future of Religious Communication Scholarship.” *Journal of Communication and Religion* 33, no. 2 (2010): 190–205; Paul A. Soukup “Scholarship and the State of the Religious Communication Association.” *Journal of Communication and Religion* 33, no. 2 (2010): 180–189.

¹³ James Darsey and Joshua Ritter, “Religious Voices in American Public Discourse,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Rhetorical Studies*, eds. Andrea A. Lunsford, Kirt H. Wilson, Rosa A. Eberly (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publication, Inc., 2009), 3.

¹⁴ Arnett, “Religious Communication Scholarship.”

¹⁵ See: “Spiritual Communication Division,” *National Communication Association*, accessed January 17, 2022, <https://www.natcom.org/spiritual-communication-division>.

¹⁵ Ryan Gillespie, “Review Essay: Religion and the Postsecular Public Sphere,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 16, no. 2 (2016): 194-207.

¹⁶ Lisa A. Flores “Between Abundance and Marginalization: The Imperative of Racial Rhetorical Criticism.” *Review of Communication* 16, no. 1 (2016): 5.

¹⁷ The question of exactly how religion functions differently than other foundational concepts is an important question that I do not have room to expand on here but deserves extensive attention. Such work might point to why, despite being such a societal force, religion has generally been excluded from lists of analytic categories.

¹⁸ Raymie E. McKerrow, “Critical Rhetoric: Theory and Praxis,” *Communication Monographs* 56, no. 2 (1989): 93, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03637758909390253>

¹⁹ Robert Bellah includes “under God” as an example of what he calls “American civil religion,” a unique American religion that is “expressed in a set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals” that functions to unify religiously diverse people. Robert N. Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” *Daedalus* 96 (1967): 3–4, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20027022>.

²⁰ McKerrow, “Critical Rhetoric,” 93.

²¹ R. Anthony Slagle “Queer Criticism and Sexual Normativity,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 45, no. 2–4 (2003): 131.

²² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London, England: Verso Books, 2016).

²³ Chris Stedman occasionally used this term “theonormativity” when talking about the experiences of non-religious people. See: Rick Plasterer, “Faith, Diversity, and Sexual Orientation on the Campus,” *Juicy Ecumenism*, February 27, 2013, <https://juicyecumenism.com/2013/02/27/faith-diversity-and-sexual-orientation-on-the-campus/>.

²⁴ Jameelah X Medina, “Body politicking and the phenomenon of ‘passing,’” *Feminism & Psychology* 21, no. 1 (2011) 140, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0959353510384833>.

²⁵ Notably, while secular rhetorical criticism should de-center U.S.-centric case studies, it also needs to contend with the myths traditional scholarship on religion in the United States perpetuates.

²⁶ Kenneth C. Davis, “America’s True History of Religious Tolerance,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, October 2010, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/americas-true-history-of-religious-tolerance-61312684/>.

²⁷ Students do often learn about the Salem Witch Trials as an example of religious intolerance.

²⁸ Both the concepts of “American Civil Religion” and “Judeo-Christian tradition” have been critiqued in other fields, particularly religious studies, yet continued to be utilized regularly in rhetorical scholarship on religion. This issue will be explored further in the next chapter. David Sehat specifically points to the tendency of those advancing a moral establishment to “use the language of consensus [while relying] upon coercion.” See David Sehat, *The Myth of American Religious Freedom* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 284.

²⁹ Colonization was a deeply religiously intolerant practice that often forced assimilation with the Christian tradition. See: Hilary M. Carey, *God's Empire: Religion and Colonialism in the British World, c.1801–1908* (Cambridge University, 2011); Ghulam Murtaza and Shaheena Ayub Bhatti, “Euroamerican Discursive Subjection of Native Americans,” *NUML Journal of Critical Inquiry* 15, no. 1 (2017): 91–107; Tisa Wenger, *Religious Freedom: The Contested History of an American Ideal* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

³⁰ Hans Erich Bödeker, Clorinda Donato, Peter Reill, eds., *Discourses of Tolerance & Intolerance in the European Enlightenment* (Regents of the University of California Press, 2009); Kristina M. Lee, “Why it matters that 7 states still have bans on atheists holding office,” *The Conversation*, June 4, 2021, <https://theconversation.com/why-it-matters-that-7-states-still-have-bans-on-atheists-holding-office-161069>.

³¹ A 2020 PRRI survey found that 46% of respondents agreed with a statement that “being Christian” was important for being “Truly American.” Kelsey Dallas, “What makes someone ‘truly American?’ Here’s how politics affects your answer,” *Deseret News*, November 1, 2021, <https://www.deseret.com/2021/11/1/22757492/what-makes-someone-truly-american-heres-how-politics-affects-your-answer-prri-democrat-republican>.

³² Darsey and Ritter, “Religious Voices in American Public Discourse.” Darsey and Ritter also note there has been limited work on other religious traditions including the rhetoric of Catholicism, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Mormonism, and Christian science.

³³ Arnett, “Religious Communication Scholarship.”

³⁴ Kristina M. Lee “The Atheist Dilemma: Studying Non-theists in Rhetorical Studies,” *New Directions in Rhetoric and Religion*, edited by James Vining (Rowman & Littlefield, 2021).

³⁵ There is a strong contingent of work on Malcolm X’s preaching on behalf of the Nation of Islam. See: Josh Grimm, “Hegemonic Framing of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., in Northeastern Newspapers.” *Howard Journal of Communications* 26, no. 3 (July 2015): 313–32, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10646175.2015.1049761>; Kristen Hoerl, “Cinematic Jujitsu: Resisting White Hegemony through the American Dream in Spike Lee’s Malcolm X.” *Communication Studies* 59, no. 4 (October 2008): 355–70, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10510970802467403>; Mark Lawrence McPhail, “A Question of Character: Re(-)Signing the Racial Contract.” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 7, no. 3 (Fall 2004): 391–405, <https://doi.org/10.1353/rap.2005.0013>. Danny Rodriguez, “Reclaiming Malcolm X: Epideictic Discourse and African-American Rhetoric.” *Rhetoric Review* 40, no. 2 (April 2021): 153–66, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07350198.2021.1883823>. Robert E. Terrill, “Protest, Prophecy, and Prudence in the Rhetoric of Malcolm X.” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 4, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 25–53, <https://doi.org/10.1353/rap.2001.0016>.

³⁶ For examples of work Black Religious Rhetoric see: Jacqueline Bacon, “Taking Liberty, Taking Literacy: Signifying in the Rhetoric of African-American Abolitionists,” *Southern Communication Journal* 64, no. 4 (1999): 271–287, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10417949909373143>; Jacqueline Bacon and Glen McClish, “Descendents of Africa, Sons of ‘76: Exploring Early African-American Rhetoric,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 36, no. 1(2006).1–29, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02773940500403603>; Paul C. Brownlow, “The Pulpit and Black America: 1865–1877,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 58, no. 4 (1972): 431–440, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335637209383141>; Andre Johnson, “No Future in this Country:” *The Prophetic Pessimism of Bishop Henry McNeal Turner* (University Press of Mississippi, 2020); William Harrison Pipes, “Old-time Negro Preaching: An Interpretative Study,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 31, no. 1(1945); Walter Pitts, “West African Poetics in the Black Teaching Style,” *American Speech* 64, no. 2 (1989): 137–149, <https://doi.org/10.2307/455040>; Kerran L. Slinger, “Slave Resistance and Rhetorical Self-definition: Spirituals as a Strategy,” *Western Journal of Communication* 59, no. 3 (1995):177–192, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10570319509374516>.

³⁷ While there is somewhat limited work on Indigenous religious/spiritual rhetorics, eastern religious rhetorics, rhetoric from within the Islamic tradition, that does not discount the

exceptional scholarship that resists these trends including: Michelle Colpean, “Muslim Women against FEMEN: Asserting Agency in Online Space,” *Journal of International & Intercultural Communication* 13, no. 3 (2020): 274–90, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17513057.2019.1620837>; Ellen W. Gorsevski, “Posting Notes on Buddhism: Aung San Suu Kyi’s Rhetoric of Postcolonial Subjectivity,” *Journal of Communication & Religion* 36, no. 1 (2013): 173–95. Glenn R. Harwood, “An Historical Evaluation of the Paviotso Ghost Dance Religion of 1890: The Rhetoric of Wovoka,” *Communicator* 8, no. 1 (1978): 22–30; Kevin R. Kemper, “Sacred Spaces: Cultural Hybridity and Boundaries for Visual Communication about the Hopi Tribe in Arizona,” *Visual Communication Quarterly* 19, no. 4 (2019): 216–231, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15551393.2012.735582>; Mary E. McCoy, “Purifying Islam in Post-Authoritarian Indonesia: Corporatist Metaphors and the Rise of Religious Intolerance,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 16, no. 2 (2013): 275–315, <https://doi.org/10.14321/rhetpublaffa.16.2.0275>; Abhik Roy and Robert C. Rowland, “The Rhetoric of Hindu Nationalism: A Narrative of Mythic Redefinition,” *Western Journal of Communication* 67, no. 3 (2003): 225–48. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10570310309374770>; Abhik Roy, “The Construction and Scapegoating of Muslims as ‘Other’ in Hindu Nationalist Rhetoric,” *Southern Communication Journal* 69, no. 4 (2004): 320–32, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10417940409373303>; Abhik Roy and Michele L. Hammers, “Swami Vivekananda’s Rhetoric of Spiritual Masculinity: Transforming Effeminate Bengalis into Virile Men,” *Western Journal of Communication* 78, no. 4 (2014): 545–62, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10570314.2014.914567>; Scott R. Stroud, “The Rhetoric of Conversion as Emancipatory Strategy in India: Bhimrao Ambedkar, Pragmatism, and the Turn to Buddhism,” *Rhetorica* 35, no. 33 (2017): 314–45. <https://doi.org/10.1525/rh.2017.35.3.314>; Scott R. Stroud, “The Pluralistic Style and the Demands of Intercultural Rhetoric: Swami Vivekananda at the World’s Parliament of Religions,” *Advances in the History of Rhetoric* 21, no. 3 (2018): 247–70, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15362426.2018.1526545>. Notably, while there is limited work highlighting the voices of Muslims, there is more work that highlights the experience of Muslims stemming from discourses *about* them and Islam. See: Ahmed H. al-Rahim, “Islam and the White House,” *Middle East Journal of Culture & Communication* 9, no. 1 (2016): 87–122, <https://doi.org/10.1163/18739865-00901008>; Chris Earle, “Good Muslims, Bad Muslims, and the Nation: The ‘Ground Zero Mosque’ and the Problem With Tolerance,” *Communication & Critical/Cultural Studies* 12, no. 2 (2015): 121–38, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14791420.2015.1008529>; Randall Fowler, “Puritanism, Islam, and Race in Cotton Mather’s *The Glory of Goodness: An Exercise in Exceptionalism*,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 21, no. 4 (2018): 571–605, <https://doi.org/10.14321/rhetpublaffa.21.4.0571>; Lee Pierce, “A Rhetoric of Traumatic Nationalism in the Ground Zero Mosque Controversy,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 100, no. 1 (2014): 53–80, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630.2014.888461>; Arlene Stein and Zakia Salime, “Manufacturing Islamophobia: Rightwing Pseudo-Documentaries and the Paranoid Style,” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 39, no. 4 (2015): 378–96, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0196859915569385>.

³⁸ Benson Saler, *Conceptualizing Religion Immanent Anthropologists, Transcendent Natives, and Unbounded Categories* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2000), x.

³⁹ Wenger, *Religious Freedom*.

⁴⁰ Raka Shome, “Postcolonial Interventions into the Rhetorical Canon: An ‘Other’ View,” *Communication Theory* 6, no. 1 (1996), 40–59, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.1996.tb00119.x>, 48.

⁴¹ Shome, “Postcolonial Interventions.”

⁴² Khyati Y. Joshi, "The Racialization of Hinduism, Islam, and Sikhism in the United States," *Equity & Excellence in Education* 29, no. 3 (2006): 212, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10665680600790327>.

⁴³ Joshi, "The Racialization of Hinduism, Islam, and Sikhism in the United States," 212.

⁴⁴ In the field of Communication Studies, the label "religious" has often been used as a mask for the study of Christianity and a gathering of Christian voices. The Religious Communication Association, for example, claims to be a space for scholars of all religions or none, yet the scholarship produced or supported by the organization is overwhelmingly Christian and the rituals incorporated at Religious Communication Association's public gathers (such as prayers before meals) are explicitly Christian.

⁴⁵ Michael Warner, Jonathan VanAntwerpen, and Craig Calhoun, eds., "Editors' Introduction," in *Varieties of Secularism in A Secular Age* (Harvard University Press, 2010), 16.

⁴⁶ Warner, VanAntwerpen, and Calhoun, eds., "Editors' Introduction," 16.

⁴⁷ Warner, VanAntwerpen, and Calhoun, "Editors' Introduction," 16.

⁴⁸ Edward W. Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 26

⁴⁹ Said, *The World*, 26.

⁵⁰ Talal Asad, "Free Speech, Blasphemy, and Secular Criticism," in *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech*, eds. Talal Asad, Wendy Brown, Judith Butler, and Saba Mahmood (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009), 54.

⁵¹ Asad, "Free Speech, Blasphemy, and Secular Criticism," 54.

⁵² Amir R. Mufti, "Auerbach in Istanbul: Edward Said, Secular Criticism, and the Question of Minority Culture," *Critical Inquiry* 25 (1998): 96 and 107.

⁵³ Gillespie, "Review Essay: Religion and the Postsecular Public Sphere," 196.

⁵⁴ This point is emphasized by secular critics broadly, as seen in the title of Warner, VanAntwerpen, and Calhoun book *Varieties of Secularism in A Secular Age*.

⁵⁵ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 3.

⁵⁶ Taylor, *A Secular Age*.

⁵⁷ K. Healan Gaston, *Imagining Judeo-Christian America* (University of Chicago Press, 2019), 10.

⁵⁸ Warner, VanAntwerpen, and Calhoun, eds., "Editors' Introduction," 8-9.

⁵⁹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 3.

⁶⁰ Gaston, *Imagining Judeo-Christian America*, 27.

⁶¹ Wenger, *Religious Freedom*.

⁶² Saba Mahmood, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report* (Princeton University Report, 2016), 8.

⁶³ I include the caveat of "of mainstream denominations of Christianity" because not all Christians have the same privileges. See Susan Schultz Huxman, "The Trag-comic Rhetorical 'Dance' of Marginalized Groups: The Case of Mennonites in the Great War," *Southern Communication Journal* 62 (1997): 305-319; Wenger, *Religious Freedom*.

⁶⁴ Warner, VanAntwerpen, and Calhoun, "Editors' Introduction," 30. See: José Casanova, "A Secular Age: Dawn or Twilight?"; Nilüfer Göle, "The Civilizational, Spatial, and Sexual Powers of the Secular"; Saba Mahmood, "Can Secularism be Other-wise?" all in eds., Michael Warner, Jonathan VanAntwerpen, and Craig Calhoun *Varieties of Secularism in A Secular Age* (Harvard University Press, 2010)

⁶⁵ Domenic Marbaniang, *Secularism in India* (Lulu Press, 2011); Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, Shabnum Tejani, and Paula Richman, eds. *The Crisis of Secularism in India* (Duke University Press, 2007); Shabnum Tajani, *Indian Secularism: A Social and Intellectual History, 1890-1950* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008).

⁶⁶ Jonathan P. Herzog, *The Spiritual-Industrial Complex: America's Religious Battle Against Communism in the Early Cold War* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 6.

CHAPTER ONE: CIVIL RELIGION OR THISNORMATIVITY: CONTENDING WITH THE MYTH OF RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE

“This case requires us to determine whether the appearance of the phrase ‘under God’ in the Pledge of Allegiance constitutes an instance of such ceremonial deism. Although it is a close question, I conclude that it does.” *Justice Sandra Day O’Connor, Concurring Opinion in Elk Grove Unified School Dist. v. Newdow, 542 U.S. 1 (2004)*¹

In 2004, the U.S. Supreme Court, on a technicality, avoided officially declaring whether it was constitutional for schools to have students participate in a daily pledge ritual that acknowledges God. This decision reversed the Ninth Circuit Court’s decision and maintained the status quo of allowing the pledge, with the reference to God, to be recited in schools. Several judges, however, offered concurring opinions in which they expanded on why they believed the pledge was constitutional. In doing so, they utilized several key assumptions about the nature of, not just the phrase in the pledge, but the role of religion in U.S. history. These assumptions, however, dismiss the religious tensions that have long been ingrained in U.S. culture. Justice O’Connor’s opinion focused on the idea that the court had to answer the question of whether or not the phrase “under God” in the pledge of allegiance was an example of “ceremonial deism”—religious appearing symbols or messages that have a “legitimate nonreligious purposes.”² She argued that its “history and ubiquity” pointed to the fact that it was, in fact, ceremonial deism. Notably, O’Connor pointed to its existence in the pledge for the last 50 years and the history of religious references broadly in U.S. history in her appeal to tradition. Similarly, Justice Stevens wrote a concurring opinion where, drawing from the 1954 hearing to change the pledge, he argued that the change was made in recognition that “[f]rom the time of our earliest history our peoples and our institutions have reflected the traditional concept that our Nation was founded on a fundamental belief in God.”³ This focus on history framed “under God” as ceremonial deism

because, as the Justices suggested, the vague “God” reference serves the secular purpose of celebrating the presumed religious heritage rather than a particular religion.

The Supreme Court Justices’ framing of the motto as a piece of “ceremonial deism” which primarily functions to represent the religious heritage of the United States, reflects how legal institutions have worked as ideological state apparatuses invested in maintaining religious hegemonies.⁴ The religious hegemonies reinforced a theistnormative notion that belief in God is tied to the U.S. American identity. Notably, O’Connor’s opinion focused purely on history prior to and after the implementation of the phrase into the pledge. Meanwhile, Stevens cited the legislators who instituted the change, but focused on their use of history rather than the cultural moment of the Red Scare that prompted the change. Their appeal to tradition presumes that the long-standing existence of theistic discourse and symbolism in U.S. politics is proof that such discourses are benign and harmless and suggest that the religious heritage of the United States is a cohesive and natural part of U.S. identity and culture.

As an example of secular rhetorical criticism, this dissertation resists the Myth of Religious Tolerance this framing suggests. Rather, I consider how the “religious heritage” that the justices argue the motto represented is deeply ingrained with Christian nationalist and theistnormative ideals. In doing so, I also recognize that such religious hegemonies are not just maintained through legal institutions. The justice’s defense of the phrase as “ceremonial deism” is similar to academic portrayals of such discourses and symbols as “civil religion.” I contend that the portrayal of theistic discourses, symbols, and rituals as “ceremonial deism” or “civil religion” reinforces religious hegemonies by masking their coercive nature and perpetuating the Myth of Religious Tolerance.

While the subsequent chapters of this dissertation will focus specifically on how the phrase “under God” was implemented to function much more insidiously than as a piece of benign ceremonial deism, the purpose of this chapter is to disrupt the Myth of Religious Tolerance more broadly. First, this chapter focuses on disrupting the Myth of Religious Tolerance by considering how the “religious heritage” of the United States is deeply tied to theistnormative and Christian nationalist ideologies. It is necessary to acknowledge that religion has played an important role in influencing political culture within the United States. Adopting a secular rhetorical criticism approach, this chapter takes seriously the question of how a desire to maintain cultural power was a core aspect of that influence. As I will expand on in the following chapters, the push to add the motto “under God” to the pledge of allegiance was largely a Christian nationalist campaign. It is imperative, however, to understand the history and cultural shifts that Christian nationalists in the 1950s were responding to. The history of Christian nationalism, and religious intolerance broadly, is often forgotten within U.S. public memory, which is reflected in the legal and cultural maintenance of discourses and symbols that are integrally linked with Christian nationalism.⁵ The second purpose of this chapter is to consider how academic examinations of the history of rhetoric and religion in U.S. political culture has perpetuated the Myth of Religious Tolerance through its reliance on the conception of “civil religion” to describe religio-political rhetorics. In this way, this chapter also serves as a review of literature of the major academic work that undergirds existing considerations at the intersection of religion, politics, and communication. I suggest that Robert N. Bellah, who proposed the conception of civil religion to describe the “set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals” that form a unique and unifying U.S. religion, developed the term to try to contend with the continued influence of Christian nationalism and theistnormativity in an increasingly religiously plural and

secular society.⁶ The subsequent adoption of the term in rhetorical scholarship has resulted in the field perpetuating the Myth of Religious Tolerance rather than contending seriously with the way theistnormativity and Christian nationalism are as embedded into U.S. culture as white supremacy, patriarchy, and heteronormativity.

U.S. Religious Heritage: Theistnormativity and Christian Nationalism

There is no doubt that religion influenced early U.S. political culture. The theistnormative assumption that frames belief in God as natural and necessary for good citizenship was one particularly important way that religious views shaped early U.S. culture. Early enlightenment views of democracy and religion, which inspired U.S. political thinkers, tended to be theistnormative, in the sense that they framed theism as necessary for good citizenship while dismissing atheism as a threat to democracy. One of the most prominent examples of this early democratic theistnormativity can be found in the work of John Locke who argued in his 1689 “Letter Concerning Toleration” that, while different religions need to be tolerated within a society, “those are not at all to be tolerated who deny the being of a God. Promises, covenants, and oaths, which are the bonds of human society, can have no hold upon an atheist.”⁷ Locke’s argument was based on the idea that Atheists could not be trusted to honestly fulfill basic functions of citizenship.⁸ While the question of atheism rarely came up amongst the U.S. “founding fathers,” several states advanced the same intolerance of atheism that Locke espoused through including clauses in their state Constitutions banning Atheists from holding public office or being on juries.⁹ This general lack of concern about Atheists by the “founders” and the intolerance of them at the state level reflects how, at the time, atheism was largely a “local problem” rather than a national one.¹⁰ Open Atheists were relatively rare aside from the occasional “village Atheist,” arguably in part because of the stigma tied to non-theism.¹¹ Instead,

during colonial and post-revolutionary times, the tension at the federal level was more focused on Protestant Christianity and deism.¹²

Early U.S. theistnormative discourses were strongly influenced by deism, an Enlightenment religious perspective that largely rejects doctrines tied to organized religion and instead promotes a general “belief in a God who could be known through human reason, attentive to the natural order.”¹³ In the United States “[d]eism institutionalized itself in the Unitarian Church.”¹⁴ Thomas Jefferson, who is arguably one of the best known deists of the U.S. “founders,” avoided explicit Christian language in the writing of the Declaration of Independence, using four broadly theistic references to a deity: “Nature's God," "their Creator," the "Supreme Judge of the world," and “Divine Providence.”¹⁵ Such references reflect a sweeping theistnormativity that was tied to the assumption that most people believed in a deity in general. Jefferson’s use of broad theistic language in government documents and his presidential speeches likely reflected his belief that “the present generation will see Unitarianism become the general religion of the United States.”¹⁶ While not all of the “founders” shared Jefferson’s beliefs and there were tensions amongst them over the official role of religion in government, many were willing to at least accept the use of broad theistic language in government documents and political speeches, often viewing such language as a compromise.¹⁷ While the language may have been dismissive of Atheists, the lack of open Atheists meant that was not a primary concern for most of the “founders.”¹⁸

For many early Christian nationalists, however, deism was a threat to white Protestant Christian power and these broad theistnormative appeals were concerning. They called for explicit Christian references in political documents that would advance the notion of the American people and government being specifically Christian.¹⁹ As outlined in the introduction,

Christian nationalism is a political ideology in which adherents believe Christianity should have a privileged position within the nation. Fearing that the United States would be led astray if it was not basing its laws specifically on Protestant Christian morals, early Christian nationalists in the 1700s and 1800s worked tirelessly, and often successfully, to uphold blasphemy and obscenity laws, promote Protestant teachings in public schools, and advocate for fundamentalist Biblical understandings of issues such as women's rights, temperance, and slavery.²⁰

The goal of early U.S. Christian nationalists was to expand their power and influence to the national level by having the federal government officially acknowledge the United States as a Christian nation. Advocates of Christian nationalism were particularly appalled by the godless U.S. Constitution. Their critiques espoused both christonormative appeals that negated non-Christians rights to full citizenship and theistnormative narratives that framed Atheists as a threat to society. For example, Reverend David Caldwell, a presbyterian minister and delegate for North Carolina at the Hillsborough convention, voted against ratifying the U.S. Constitution because it failed to recognize that the Christian religion made for the best citizens and he feared that the Constitution was an invitation for Jews and Pagans to come to the United States.²¹ After the Constitution was ratified, the popular Reverend John M. Mason gave a sermon suggesting that the yellow fever epidemic of 1793 was a result of God's anger and argued that "should the citizens of America be as irreligious as her Constitution, we will have reason to tremble."²² The Civil War was also framed by Christian nationalists as proof of God's wrath over the founder's "original sin" of failing to acknowledge him in the Constitution.²³ The National Reform Association formed to address this "sin" by proposing a "Christian Amendment" which would alter the Preamble of the U.S. Constitution to acknowledge the government's recognition of and adherence to Jesus Christ. While they never succeeded, their efforts reflect the anxiety Christian

nationalists had about the “founding fathers” *not* making the United States a Christian nation and the intensity of their efforts to correct this founding error.

Notably, this goal stands in contradiction with the anxieties espoused by modern Christian nationalists. While Protestant Christians had immense cultural and political power and privilege, particularly at the state level, the objective of Christian nationalists in the 1700s and 1800s was to correct the error of the “founding fathers” and make the United States a Christian nation. In the 1900s, however, Christian nationalists shifted their narrative to claim that their goal was to *return* the United States to the Christian nation it was founded to be. This shift in narrative was the result of several key cultural and political changes that threatened Christian nationalism and hegemonic Protestant Christian power. First, advancements in science, most notably evolution, brought into question the role of religion with society and education, which not only threatened the hegemonic power of religion within society at large, but also endangered the dominant place of Protestant Christianity in public schools.²⁴ The U.S. Protestant Christian hegemony was also being questioned due to shifts in political structures which occurred alongside the rise in religious pluralism across the United States in the late 1800s. The fourteenth amendment set the precedence that states could not pass laws that contradicted the federal Constitution.²⁵ This change threatened Christian nationalists’ power at the state level. The late nineteenth and early twentieth century also saw a massive increase in Catholic and Jewish immigrants, with each wave swiftly shifting the religious make-up of the United States. While this influx led to more widespread anti-Catholic and antisemitic discourses, it also contributed to a greater call for religious tolerance and interfaith cooperation. Additionally, the rise of communism in the twentieth century, which was infamously tied to atheism and anti-religious sentiments, fueled further anxieties over how atheism may threaten not only Christianity, but

theistic religions in general.²⁶ The combination of these changes caused Christian nationalists to transfer their attention from expanding their power to maintaining their cultural influence. Instead of critiquing the founders for failing to officially make the United States a Christian nation, Christian nationalists shifted their argument by claiming that the United States was always a Christian nation and that secularism, in all three senses, threatened the United States' true Christian nature.²⁷

In light of cultural changes and their need to maintain rather than advance power, Christian nationalists developed new strategies to support their narrative. There was often, however, animosity amongst Christian nationalist about how effective these new strategies were. For example, while the National Reform Association never successfully passed the Christian Amendment, Christian nationalists did work to get the phrase "In God We Trust" added onto coins during the Civil War.²⁸ While the motto was framed by advocates of the change as evidence that the United States was a "Christian nation," in the years that followed some Christian nationalists expressed concern that the motto "no more ties up the government to Christian ethics than it does to the ethics of Mormonism and Islam."²⁹ This anxiety about how much Christian nationalists should expand their network to build coalitions with non-Protestants remained an anxiety amongst Christian nationalists and reflects broadly the complexity of religious freedom and tolerance within the United States. On one hand, the growing number of Jews and Catholics was framed as a threat to the Protestant Christian influence within the United States. Particularly in the late 1800s, this resulted in intense anti-Catholicism and antisemitism. Yet, with growing concerns about secularism, atheism, and communism as a threat to religion hegemonies broadly, some Christian nationalists became more willing to build coalitions with other monotheistic religions, namely Catholicism and Judaism. Notably this tri-faith movement

excluded Muslims, the other prominent monotheistic religion, which was framed as a “foreign exotic” religion.³⁰ This coalition building was carefully manufactured to extend some privileges to particular “white” theistic minority religions while still maintaining white Protestant privilege.³¹

The ambiguity of the “tri-faith” coalition between Catholics, Protestants, and Jews was exemplified through the adoption of the narrative of the “Judeo-Christian tradition,” a theistnormative narrative that tied the three prominent “white” monotheistic religions, Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism, to a shared tradition that arguably inspired western democracies. According to K. Healan Gaston, while the development of the conception of “Judeo-Christianity” is complex, it can largely be traced to the work of anti-secularists who argued Judeo-Christianity is the foundation of the progressive western society and essential for the success of democracy. In the United States, the concept of Judeo-Christianity joined the popular lexicon largely thanks to a British journalist, P.W. Wilson, who published a series of articles in the *New York Times* in the early 1930s about the role of Judeo-Christianity in fighting against authoritarian regimes and secularism.³² Judeo-Christianity was a useful term for Christian nationalists because of its general ambiguity.³³ Many Christian nationalists read the term Judeo-Christianity as representative of the idea that Christianity superseded Judaism and, as such, promoted the idea that Christianity, while stemming from Judaism, was the only true religion to remain from the tradition. For others, however, Judeo-Christianity represented a celebration of the general acceptance of Western theistic religious traditions and religious pluralism and the intertwined relationship between Christianity (specifically Protestantism and Catholicism) and Judaism.³⁴ Thus, the phrase could simultaneously appeal to most Christian nationalists and protect them from accusations of religious intolerance, all while working to

shape public memory to tie the U.S. founding and democracy naturally to the Christian tradition. Despite the fact that the conception of a “Judeo-Christian heritage” would have been foreign to those who wrote the Constitution (and would have been appalling to early Christian nationalists), the term has come to be used to describe the supposed values the United States was founded on. According to Gaston, Judeo-Christian exceptionalists (which I contend is a term synonymous with Christian nationalists) utilized the term to challenge secularism under the premise that democracy relies on particular religious traditions and sentiments. The popularity of the term “Judeo-Christianity” helped to maintain general religious hegemonies while reinforcing the theistnormative mindset by creating a mythicized understanding of the inherent role of religion within democracies that tied theism to moral citizenship in a way that at least appeared to be more inclusive than earlier expressions of Protestant Christian nationalism. Yet religion and the narrative of “Judeo-Christianity” was often tied specifically to Christianity.

The adoption of the conception of the “Judeo-Christian” narrative reflects the volatile nature of the tri-faith movement and its reliance on theistnormative appeals. It is notable that Catholics tended to resist secularism as harmful to religion while Jews generally embraced it, particularly in the sense of separating religion and politics as a way to protect religious minorities.³⁵ Despite these trends, both Catholics and Jews were able to use the conception of secularism to develop coalitions that, to an extent, helped them fight their own marginalization. Catholics and Jews were able to use fear of secularism in all three senses to build coalitions with fundamentalist white Protestant Christians against the fear of irreligion and atheism (both in terms of Atheists and atheistic religions such as Buddhism) through a promotion of religious nationalism.³⁶ They were simultaneously able to build coalitions with more liberal Protestants who embraced secularism in the first sense as a way to protect all religions from the government

intruding on religious practice or privileging one religion over another.³⁷ Such coalitions and narratives, alongside explicit racial appeals,³⁸ helped Jewish and Catholic minorities become encapsulated within the larger narrative of religious tolerance in the United States, at least rhetorically. It did so, however, by erasing the long history of antisemitism³⁹ and anti-Catholic prejudices within the United States.⁴⁰ As Robert O. Smith explains, “the concept of a ‘Judeo-Christian tradition’ [is] a political assemblage offering conditional, incomplete access to structures of white, western Christian power.”⁴¹ The conditionality depended largely on Catholic and Jews being incorporated into dominant narratives about religion while maintaining reverence to specific Protestant Christian symbolism. Particularly for Jewish leaders, such conditional acceptance depended on them tolerating Bible readings in schools, public Christian prayers, or Christian symbolism in politics because “[o]pposing them with too much vehemence could spark a backlash, they feared [would be] further fueling the anti-Semitic fire.”⁴² The notion of Judeo-Christianity reflects the double edged-sword of theistnormativity for theistic minorities. While theistnormative narratives are theoretically inclusive of all theistic religions and can be valuable for minority religions to resist marginalization, the dominant theistic group within society have the power to set the terms of such inclusion. In the case of U.S. theistnormativity, these terms involve an erasure in public memory of religious intolerance stemming primarily from white Protestant institutions. Importantly, it also often includes a racial exclusion on perceived non-white theistic minorities, such as Muslims.⁴³

As the conception of the Judeo-Christian tradition became more commonplace, Christian nationalists worked to resist the growing rise of secularism in all three senses, reframing their goals as a return to the “Judeo-Christian” values of the “founders.” After WWII, Christian nationalists were able to use the rise of the Cold War and the Soviet Union to exemplify the

danger of atheism and secularism. While secularism and calls for religious tolerance continued to influence society, the anxieties produced from the Red Scare helped propel Christian nationalism, now often masked through the Judeo-Christian narrative, to dominate U.S. American thought about the role of religion and U.S. identity. This led to what Jonathan P. Herzog calls “the spiritual-industrial complex” in the 1950s. According to Herzog, “the spiritual-industrial complex represented the deliberate and managed use of societal resources to stimulate a religious revival in the late 1940s and 1950s.”⁴⁴ Various government and social organizations suggested that the best way to fight and win the Cold War was to frame it as a moral battle. The spiritual-industrial complex evolved as a strategic Cold War counter-defense that was aimed at containing secularism through the promotion of a broad theist normativity that appeared tolerant, particularly when compared to the anti-religious tactics of the Soviet Union. The spiritual-industrial complex was driven by Christian nationalists who wanted to both re-establish belief in God and religious (Protestant Christian) values as the cornerstone of U.S. identity and political action while containing the growing influence of secularism. It was supported by theistic minorities who were willing to scapegoat Atheists as the ultimate “other” and who called for, primarily white, monotheistic religions to build coalitions to protect societies from godlessness. The spiritual-industrial complex was maintained through an atmosphere of coercion and expected unity that drove the Red Scare. As U.S. Americanism became tied to theistic religious beliefs and communism with irreligion and atheism, resistance to the spiritual-industrial complex was reframed as pro-communist and anti-democratic.⁴⁵ This helped to normalize the spiritual-industrial complex through framing it as simply a reflection of a cohesive religious collective that was unifying against a common (godless) enemy.

While the coercive spiritual-industrial complex was developed and advanced through schools, military, popular media, and volunteer organizations such as the Knights of Columbus, Veterans of Foreign Wars, and the American Legion, it was also advanced and legitimized through legislation. While there continued to be purist Christian nationalists who wanted explicit acknowledgement of the Christian right to rule by the government (as evidenced by the National Reform Association's attempt to pass the Christian Amendment again in the 1950s), many Christian nationalists were willing to settle for vaguer theistnormative legislation and symbolism. Between 1952 and 1957, Congress helped advance the spiritual-industrial complex through legislation including a bill that made the National Day of Prayer an annual event, adding a prayer room to Congress, making "In God We Trust" the national motto and adding it to all currency, and, in 1954, proposing a bill that would add "under God" to the pledge of allegiance

The successful implementation of the legislation reflected the growing tension between secularism and Christian nationalism and the lasting impact of the spiritual-industrial complex. While society was becoming more "secular," theistnormative symbols and rituals were becoming more prominent. Legislation that established or reinforce such symbols and rituals, which were primarily advanced by Christian nationalists, was effective because its vague religious or theistic references could be read both as explicitly Christian and as inclusive of any theistic religion. Despite early successes, by the end of the 1950s, the spiritual-industrial complex waned. Herzog argues that its ultimate failure came from taking the top-down approach that "inject[ed] God into everything from national pledges to currency," and that, in doing so, leaders "risked weakening religion on the individual and institutional levels." Ultimately, by "binding religious faith to the ebb and flow of the Communist peril, they also ensured that if the perceived threat of Communism receded, so too would the urgent need for revival."⁴⁶ While the spiritual-industrial

complex only flourished for a decade, it had lasting impacts on the public memory of the role of religion in society, in large part due to the prominent theistnormative symbols that were established by Congress at the time. In the decades that followed, the legislation faded from public memory and instead the symbols and rituals, along with the political rhetoric that accompanied them, “seemed less a Cold War construction and more an eternal American truth—passed down, perhaps, from the lips and quills of the founders themselves.”⁴⁷ For many, rather than being a reminder of the Cold War, such symbols and discourses were reflective of a long-standing and unifying religious heritage.

Academic Masking of Religious Intolerance: A Narrative of Consensus and Civil Religion

While the preceding history disrupts the Myth of Religious Tolerance by pointing to how the U.S. “religious heritage” has been strongly influence by ingrained theistnormative and Christian nationalist ideologies that have shifted to meet changing religious norms, it is also important when engaging in secular rhetorical criticism to consider the way scholars have reinforced the Myth of Religious Tolerance. The 1940s and 1950s were a particularly vital moment in shaping public memory surrounding U.S. religious heritage. The seeming contradiction between the religious revival of the 1950s, which appeared more inclusive of Catholics and Jews, and the persistence of secularism drew the attention of scholars from various disciplines. In their attempt to explain, or perhaps justify, the pervasiveness of the spiritual-industrial complex in an increasingly religiously plural and secular society, scholars often reinforce theistnormative narratives and the Myth of Religious Tolerance.

For example, while Jewish Sociologist of Religion Will Herberg’s work *Protestant, Catholic, Jew* is often read as a “defense of liberal tolerance” because of its focus on and celebration of the tri-faith movement, the book, which was published in 1955, reinforced the

anti-secularist and (Judeo) Christian nationalist ideology that drove the spiritual-industrial complex.⁴⁸ Herberg argued that it was the shared religious values of Catholicism, Protestantism, and Judaism which were the foundation of democracy, contended that these three faiths were intrinsically tied to U.S. identity, and suggested the shared principles of the three faiths reflect a common religion that is the “American Way of Life.”⁴⁹ In considering the rise of secularism and communism, Herberg also reinforced the notion that a “prophetic religion” was necessary to protect democracy from internal and external threats. In connecting U.S. identity to shared religious principles and labeling it the “American Way of Life,” while also suggesting religion was necessary for preserving democracy, Herberg advanced a Christian nationalist ideology that frames the United States as a (Judeo) Christian nation. Yet, by expanding the notion of a Christian nation to be grounded in a more diverse tri-faith coalition rather than being explicitly Protestant, Herberg’s work reinforced the Myth of Religious Tolerance and masked the more coercive aspects of the spiritual-industrial complex.

Herberg’s book became one of the most foundational works for understanding the shifts in religious culture in the 1940s and 1950s.⁵⁰ In 1967, however, Robert N. Bellah wrote an article that would have a critical impact on how scholars discussed the symbols, rituals, and beliefs that reflect the U.S. “religious heritage.” Nearly a decade after the spiritual-industrial complex had begun to lose its steam, Bellah pondered how it was acceptable in a supposedly secular society for there to be such prominent examples of religious discourse and symbols in the public sphere. He noted such discourse and symbols, while reflective of Christianity, were also relatively broad which spoke to their appeal to a religiously diverse society. He contended that, alongside churches, there is “a well-institutionalized civil religion in [U.S.] America.”⁵¹ In striving to explain the ubiquity of religious references in the public sphere, Bellah argued that

U.S. American civil religion is “expressed in a set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals” which has “played a crucial role in the development of American institutions” and is reflective of the relative consensus surrounding the importance of the U.S. religious heritage in shaping U.S. identity and values.⁵² Notably, according to Bellah this civil religion is not only reflective of the way religion is utilized in public discourse but also the way people treat secular places (Gettysburg), symbols (the U.S. flag), or events (the 4th of July) with the same reverence one would generally reserve for religious places, symbols, and holidays.⁵³ This broad application of civil religion suggests that the religionization of the secular by citizens (and political leaders) reflects how religious values, veneration, and manners connect an otherwise disparate collective. Bellah specifically tied civil religion to universal values and U.S. identity by arguing that it is “a genuine apprehension of universal and transcendent religious reality as seen in or, one could almost say, as revealed through the experience of the American people.”⁵⁴ While he recognized that civil religion could be “distort[ed]” and used for special interests, ultimately Bellah argued that civil religion, at its core, is the unifying feature of U.S. culture.⁵⁵

Bellah’s original work on U.S. American civil religion, now cited over 4,200 times, has shaped how scholars across academic disciplines have come to understand the function of religious rituals, symbols, and discourses in the public sphere.⁵⁶ The term’s pliability, however, has meant that the concept has expanded to the point where it can be difficult to fully comprehend what civil religion even is. Even Bellah acknowledged that other scholars had reworked civil religion “beyond any coherent concept, or at least beyond anything [he] ever meant by it.”⁵⁷ While even Bellah became disenchanted with his conception and abandoned using the term, civil religion remains one of the most prominent terms in scholarship to describe religio-political rhetoric.⁵⁸ Though other terms such as *public piety*, *political religion*, *religion of*

the republic, and *religio-political* have been utilized in contrast to or alongside civil religion, other terms could not generate “the profound empirical ambiguities that [civil religion] inevitably did.”⁵⁹ The pliability of the term civil religion is problematic because it seems that nearly any fusion of religion and politics can be labeled civil religion, whether it be the religionization of secular places and symbols, the use of (seemingly) benign transcendent reference in political speeches or rituals, or an explicit appeals towards religious/Christian nationalism.⁶⁰ Treating a secular place, symbol, or event with religious reverence, however, is a distinctly different practice than using vague references to a deity in public rhetoric or utilizing the narrative of a Judeo-Christian heritage to appeal to a religiously diverse, though predominantly Christian, audience.

Part of the draw of Bellah’s conception of civil religion is the same appeal that Herberg’s work on the Protestant, Catholic, Jew coalition has: it appears as a defense of liberal tolerance in relation to religious pluralism. I argue, however, that Bellah’s conception of civil religion works to mask the history of religious intolerance and maintain theistnormative and Christian nationalist hegemonies. I would go so far as to suggest that Bellah’s conception of “civil religion” is a product of the spiritual-industrial complex. Bellah’s work was an attempt to understand the convergence of religion and secularism in culture that was particularly prominent in the 1950s and early 1960s by putting it into context with U.S. history. Yet, in doing so, he drew on the same public memory those behind the spiritual-industrial complex were working to shift: A memory of relative religious cohesion despite religious diversity, where Christianity has been influential but not coercive in terms of U.S. identity.

As an example of secular rhetorical criticism, this project resists Bellah’s depiction of the pervasive religious symbols, rituals, and discourses in the public sphere as “civil religion.” To be

clear, this project is not focused on whether there is or is not a form of civil religion. Nor am I suggesting that all public religious references are coercive. Rather, I am resisting the academic tendency that is advanced through the “civil religion” narrative to presume that the use of religious references reflects a unifying consensus surrounding the celebration of shared religious values being tied to U.S. identity. By recognizing how theistnormative and Christian nationalist ideologies are as embedded in U.S. culture as other coercive hegemonies, such as white supremacy, patriarchy, and heteronormativity, I consider how the conception of civil religion both promotes and masks theistnormativity and Christian nationalism. Additionally, I contend that, while scholars in different fields, such as history, sociology, and religious studies, have come to resist the hegemonic implications of the conception of civil religion, work in rhetorical studies has been particularly culpable in reinforcing theistnormative and Christian nationalist ideologies and masking the history of religious intolerance.⁶¹ Bearing in mind that this project as a whole is a call for rhetorical scholars to consider the utility of secular rhetorical criticism, I urge scholars to reflect on how their own labels and academic terms have undermined the goals of such critical work.

In what follows, I contend that much of what Bellah considered “civil religion” would be better understood as “theistnormativity,” “theonormativity, and “christonormativity” through the lens of secular rhetorical criticism.⁶² Theistnormativity, theonormativity, and christonormativity connect good citizenship to belief in God, religion, or being a Christian respectively. The label “civil religion” privileges a perception of unification and consensus in regard to the fusion of politics and religion. In doing so, the conception of civil religion creates a narrative in which such fusion, as long as it is not too obviously denominational or nationalistic, is framed as a positive force that connects a diverse populace. In other words, as Richard Benjamin Crosby’s

observes, “[s]cholarly approaches to civil religion...often focus on its positive intentions.”⁶³ Such framing, however, does not encourage readers and scholars to consider power dynamics and who is excluded from such discourses. Reframing such fusion of religion and politics in relation to theistnormativity, theonormativity, and christonormativity, recognizes that, while such discourses can unify diverse populations, there are normative aspects to such discourses that encourage a demagogic “us” versus “them” mentality through the creation of perceptions of ideal citizenship. The closer one is to the ideal the more “normal” they appear while those further away are framed as deviant.⁶⁴ As such, there is pressure within society for individuals to appear as close the “ideal” or the “normal” as possible.

Even if scholars continue to utilize the term “civil religion,” I contend that it is imperative to consider how the concept is deeply tied to theistnormative, theonormative, and christonormative prejudices and address the implications the label has for shaping public memory surrounding religious in/tolerance. In what follows, I demonstrate how the conception of civil religion often masks religious tolerance through the narrative of consensus and, in doing so, functions to justify and normalize Christian nationalist discourses that reinforce religious hegemonic hierarchies. One of the reasons the conception of civil religion is easily accepted as a defense of liberal religious toleration is because of how it relies on theistnormative prejudices. While civil religion is framed as a way to explain how there is relative religious cohesion in a religiously diverse society, I contend that such cohesion depends on the advancement of theistnormative assumptions that good and moral citizenship is tied to belief in God. In other words, such “civil religion” can only unify so long as those who are openly theistic are tolerated (though often with conditions) while those who are openly atheistic are scapegoated as a threat and thus pressured to pass as theistic. Additionally, U.S. civil religion also requires a particular

reverence to christonormative assumptions that privilege Christianity as the dominant religious influence within the United States. As such, so called “American civil religion,” only unifies so far as theistic minorities are willing to concede that Christianity deserves a privileged place within the conception of U.S. identity.

“Civil Religion” in Rhetorical and Communication Studies

Scholars tend to frame civil religion as a positive, or at least harmless, rhetorical tradition in politics. As David Domke and Kevin Coe suggest, “civil religion in America has been perceived—by many scholars, at least—to be a benignly symbolic practice.”⁶⁵ A survey of 39 books and articles published by communication and rhetorical scholars and in the fields’ journals reflects how such scholars generally privilege the unifying rather than the normative function of civil religion.⁶⁶ Common assumptions throughout rhetorical and communication scholarship are that the primary function of civil religion is to develop unity and a shared national identity⁶⁷ and that the reason civil religion is effective is because it is inclusive⁶⁸ and/or embodies a consensus surrounding the perceived acceptability of the use of religion in politics.⁶⁹ In doing so, scholars have perpetuated the Myth of Religious Tolerance and have masked the pervasiveness of Christian nationalism and theistnormativity within U.S. culture. This framing of civil religion in scholarship undermines the goals of secular rhetorical criticism by assuming consensus where there has been coercion. While a more in-depth analysis of the use of civil religion in rhetorical and communication scholarship would be valuable, in what follows, I focus on outlining a key assumption that should drive work in secular rhetorical criticism focused on the fusion of religion and politics: that the popular conception of civil religion is particularly theistnormative and masks the history of religious intolerance through a narrative of consensus.

To be clear, the notion that civil religion masks the history of religious intolerance is not unique. Historian David Sehat, for example, made a similar observation in his book *The Myth of American Religious Freedom*, arguing that civil religious narratives presume “a kind of uniformity that never existed.”⁷⁰ Yet work in communication and rhetorical scholarship has yet to seriously contend with this argument in relation to religious pluralism and instead continues to perpetuate the notion of a unifying civil religion.⁷¹ While various factors likely contribute to the perpetuation of this narrative, I contend that the way Roderick P. Hart introduced the field to the conception of civil religion as a rhetorical phenomenon in the book *The Political Pulpit* helped framed civil religion in this way. Like Bellah, Hart works to understand the relationship between organized religion, politics, and the people, contending that the three groups have formed a “contract” in which government can use religious symbolism to achieve political goals, as long as it does so strategically and avoids being overly denominational.⁷² Considering the influence of Bellah’s 1967 article and Hart’s 1977 book on work in communication and rhetorical studies,⁷³ I focus specifically on how each of them frame civil religion as a form of consensus and how, in doing so, each perpetuates theistnormative assumptions and masks the pervasiveness of Christian nationalism within the United States.

Secular rhetorical critics need to recognize that the conception of civil religion is directly tied to theistnormative hegemonies that frame Atheists as outsiders. The theistnormative nature of the conception of civil religion can be traced to the earliest manifestations of theories surrounding civil religion. Bellah’s notion of an “American civil religion” draws on the 18th century Enlightenment thinker Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who argued that every civil society requires some form of civil religion to function. According to Rousseau, people can follow any personal religion they desire, as long as, in addition, they adhere to the few dogmas of civil

religion, which create a social bond amongst citizens essential to a collective life and the livelihood of the state. The first of these limited “dogmas” is the presumed existence of a deity.⁷⁴ While Rousseau claims that intolerance is incompatible with civil society, framing the notion of “[o]utside the church no salvation” as antithetical to civil society, he simultaneously argues that for a society to be civil all good citizens must adhere to the broad dogmas of civil religion. He suggests that anyone who does not believe in the dogmas should be banished, or even “punished with death,” not because they are “impious” but because they are “unsociable.”⁷⁵ With one of the required dogmas being belief in or acceptance of a deity, atheism is framed as inherently incompatible with civil society and good citizenship within the framework of civil religion, in a similar way that John Locke suggested atheism was incompatible with good citizenship. This assumption is explicitly theistnormative in the way it presumes that belief in God is necessary democratic responsibilities.

Civil religion has continually been connected to the supernatural, or more specifically a God, in scholarship. This connection is framed as natural and generally positive rather than normalizing and exclusionary. In his foundational essay, Bellah notes that “‘God’ has clearly been a central symbol in the civil religion.”⁷⁶ He goes on to reinforce a theistnormative assumption that “God” is “a word which almost all Americans can accept,” because it is vague enough to be inclusive of many religions beyond Protestant Christianity in the United States.⁷⁷ Other scholars have continued to make this connection, considering that, “by most scholarly accounts, civil religion laces political discourse with religious symbols, but it does so to reinforce the presence and power of the supernatural.”⁷⁸ Particularly in communication studies, the key assumption as to why civil religion is effective is because there is a “national belief in God,”⁷⁹ or

at least acceptance of “God Talk.”⁸⁰ This connection of God is presumed to be acceptable to most U.S. Americans.

Yet the question of how Atheists are to be tolerated has been limited and often dismissive, particularly in communication and rhetorical scholarship. With a few exceptions,⁸¹ scholars in the field have avoided the Atheist question all together. Bellah’s suggestion that “God” is “a word which almost all Americans can accept,” appears to be widely accepted by communication scholars and the assumption that civil religion ultimately unifies all U.S. Americans is a central theme in their scholarship.⁸² Yet, even in Hart’s “contract,” he specifically acknowledges that should political leaders “fail to pay tacit homage to religion, he or she shall be branded un-American and declared non-electable.”⁸³ Notably, while Hart goes into extensive detail about the “contract,” he fails to expand on this specific clause. Twenty-five years later, when a group of communication scholars reflected on Hart’s book in the *Journal of Communication and Religion*, no scholar found this clause notable enough to address. Like Hart, Carolyn Marvin suggests that “civil religion is not a set of optional beliefs for its citizens. In moments of crisis, disloyalty to the national god is intolerable.”⁸⁴ Yet Marvin does not give any credence to the implications this presumed disloyalty would have on those who are Atheistic.⁸⁵ In a particularly telling clause, Martin J. Medhurst suggests that Hart’s civil religious contract made “religiously inclined people second-class citizens,” which, quite absurdly, implies that those who are religiously un-inclined are privileged.⁸⁶ One of the only statements in the forum that explicitly acknowledges Atheists and their relation to civil religion in the forum came from Robert V. Friedenbergh who flippantly argues that civil religion is not “overly religious” and “is almost a decorative rhetoric. Like a decoration, even those who are not ‘true believers,’ can appreciate it for its sentiment and beauty.”⁸⁷ All of these statements, in their own way, dismiss

the experience of Atheists through either not acknowledging the fairly obvious ways civil religious narratives frame Atheists as intolerable, suggesting they are in fact privileged through civil religious narratives, or simply assuming that Atheists can or should appreciate civil religion and God references even if they do not align with their own convictions. Such narratives dismiss the long history of anti-atheism within the United States as well as the vocal opposition Atheists have continued to express surrounding religio-political discourse, symbols, and rituals, despite the risk of isolation they face when they do.

Bellah skirts the issue of atheism in his own essay on civil religion. His acknowledgement of non-theists is limited to the question: “could we have an agnostic president? Could a man with conscientious scruples about using the word ‘God’ the way [Presidents] Kennedy and Johnson have used it be elected chief magistrate of our country?”⁸⁸ Bellah does not answer the questions but notes that if civil religion were to be inclusive of non-theists it would mean reshaping civil religion, including possibly removing God from the concept. He contends that while the God of civil religion has no clear meaning, “[i]f the whole God symbolism requires reformulation, there will be obvious consequences for the civil religion, consequences perhaps of liberal alienation and of fundamentalist ossification that have not so far been prominent in this realm.”⁸⁹ In other words, Bellah suggests that if civil religion was to shift to not having a vague God at the center there may be fundamentalist backlash against liberal religious tolerance that would create a religious fundamentalist coalition that, he claims, has not been prominent in U.S. politics to date.

This suggestion that, by 1967, there was relative consensus surrounding support for civil religion and that there was no pervasive religious fundamentalist coalition prominent in U.S. politics reflects how the conception of civil religion masks the pervasiveness of Christian

nationalism as an ideology in the United States. Both Bellah and Hart emphasized that civil religion is an expression of a form of consensus amongst the U.S. American people about shared values. The crux of Bellah's argument focuses on the notion that civil religion is a unifying phenomenon because it relies on "certain common elements of religious orientation that the great majority of Americans share."⁹⁰ Drawing on Bellah's understanding of civil religion as reflecting the shared values of the U.S. people, Hart contends that civil religion is "perhaps the clearest and most virulent expression of our national ideals and values, of a unique and very American consensus."⁹¹ This unifying consensus that civil religion represents presumes that people do not oppose particular uses of religio-political rhetoric because they can identify with it and view it as aligned with the basic values of the United States.

While neither suggest there has been no religious strife within the United States, Bellah and Hart both perpetuate the Myth of Religious Tolerance by downplaying this history through their framing of the effectiveness of civil religion. They contend that, particularly compared to other nations, the United States has avoided intense religious conflict, with Bellah arguing that civil religion was the primary reason "the relation between religion and politics in America has been singularly smooth"⁹² and Hart maintaining that civil religious rhetoric represents the fact that, from its beginning, "the [U.S.] American people were uniquely able to escape" the religious turmoil that their forebears in most parts of the world, especially Europe.⁹³ Both framed this avoidance of conflict as particularly impressive considering the importance of religion generally in relation to U.S. identity. Such statements dismiss the pervasiveness of Christian nationalism within the United States, the long history of debate over the role of religion in politics, and the distinct privileging of Protestant Christians over religious minorities in politics. The accreditation of civil religion as being a reflection of a spiritual heritage that supposedly unifies a religiously

plural society downplays the history of coercion that contributed to conditional coalitions between white theistic religions outlined previously in this chapter.

While Bellah appears somewhat resistant to the Christian nationalist narrative that the United States is a “Christian nation,” critiquing what he calls “an American-Legion type of ideology that fuses God, country, and flag,” he simultaneously reinforces the same public memory that Christian nationalists utilize to justify the perception that the United States is a Christian nation.⁹⁴ Bellah emphasizes that his conception of civil religion should not be mistaken for Christianity, yet he recognizes that much of civil religion has been “selectively derived from Christianity” and that it is rife with “Biblical archetypes” including Exodus, the Chosen People, and the notion of the Promise land.⁹⁵ Notably, sociologists Andrew Whitehead and Samuel Perry have found that Christian nationalism is also not tied directly to sincere religious belief but rather is reflective of a deeply held belief in the connection of U.S. identity to the same Biblical themes Bellah associates with U.S. civil religion.⁹⁶ Bellah’s dismissal of Christian nationalism is reliant on his critique of overt Christian nationalism, as evidenced by his suggestion that the “overt religiosity of the radical right” is a distortion based on special interests and that such Christian nationalism has a “tenuous” relationship with civil religion.⁹⁷ Yet, such an observation fails to recognize how Christian nationalists in the early twentieth century worked to make their Christian nationalist appeals more covert to offer the appearance of consensus and cohesion where there was coercion and conditional coalitions. While overt Christian nationalism is widely resisted in the growingly religiously plural society, more vague appeals which are tied loosely to Biblical themes serve to normalize Christian nationalism. Bellah’s framing of such appeals as “civil religion” not only downplays the more subtle ways Christian nationalism is ingrained into

public rhetoric but helps to normalize it through framing such vague religious and Biblical references as inclusive and reflective of U.S. religious heritage.

In his book, Hart explicitly downplays the influence of Christian nationalism in his framing of civil religion as a signal of unification and consensus surrounding shared values. In the opening pages of *The Political Pulpit*, Hart suggests that Reverend Bill Bright's appeal for the nation to return to its "proper Christian heritage" during his invocation at the 1974 Orange Bowl was not criticized by the "sizable Jewish population" in Miami because it is an example of American civil religion or civic piety.⁹⁸ The assumption here, and in much of the proceeding rhetorical scholarship on civil religion, is that the lack of criticism of religious references in politics, even ones that exemplify a Christian nationalist call for a return to a Christian heritage, is a result of consensus and not any type of cultural coercion. Hart's conclusion that a Jewish population's lack of critique of Reverend Bright proved such discourse is accepted through consensus fails to engage in the long history of antisemitism in the United States that pressures Jewish Americans to avoid criticism of public Christian nationalist discourses out of fear it would "spark a backlash."⁹⁹ Put simply, failure to critique does not always prove consensus. It is often a symptom of normative powers pressuring compliance in exchange for tolerance. The fact that this antidote was the first example Hart turned to as a model of civil religion suggests that the conception of civil religion justifies and normalizes Christian nationalist appeals for understanding the United States as a "Christian nation."

The conception of civil religion works to shape collective memory in a way that normalizes and downplays the pervasiveness of Christian nationalism. It is telling that, in a later reflection on the role of religion and scholarship, Bellah argued that the conception that there is a "wall of separation" between government and religion, "distorts the entire history of the

American understanding of religion.”¹⁰⁰ While I agree that the “wall of separation” metaphor promotes a collective memory amongst secularists that dismisses the privileged position that religion, particularly Protestant Christianity, has held within the U.S. politics and culture,¹⁰¹ I argue that Bellah’s conception of “civil religion” also “distorts the entire history of American understanding of religion.” Bellah, and subsequent scholars’ use of civil religion have promoted a narrative of religious tolerance where there has been coercion. This masking reflects how civil religious narratives shape public memory and public forgetting in relation to religious freedom and tolerance in the United States. Public memories are shared beliefs about the past.¹⁰² Such memories:

help us fabricate, rearrange, or omit details from the past as we thought we knew it. Issues of historical accuracy and authenticity are pushed aside to accommodate other issues, such as those surrounding the establishment of social identity authority, solidarity, [and] political affiliation.”¹⁰³

Scholarship on civil religion that presumes that the fusion of religion with politics is reflective of consensus surrounding religious heritage in the United States contributes to a public memory that fails to recall the long history of Protestant Christian privilege and religious animosity that was outlined earlier in this chapter.

Bellah and Hart’s engagement with theistnormative legislation, specifically legislation related to the phrase “under God” in the pledge and the motto “In God We Trust,” reflects how scholarship has reinforced a public memory that has masked the coercive work achieved through the spiritual-industrial complex in the 1950s. In his 1967 article, Bellah used the phrase “under God” in the pledge as an example of civil religion, arguing:

The president's obligation extends not only to the people but to God. In American political theory, sovereignty rests, of course, with the people, but implicitly, and often explicitly, the ultimate sovereignty has been attributed to God. This is the meaning of the motto “In God we trust,” as well as the inclusion of the phrase “under God” in the pledge to the flag.¹⁰⁴

Bellah not only frames acceptance of God's sovereignty (and thus existence) as a necessary criterion for a president recognizing their obligation but assumes that the meaning of "under God" in the pledge is a recognition of the sovereignty of God. Ten years later, Hart also uses the phrase "under God" in the pledge as an example of civil religion, arguing that there is no "aspect of compulsion" in phrases such as "In God We Trust" or "Under God."¹⁰⁵ Notably, neither Bellah or Hart address the history of how the phrase "under God" was added to the pledge of allegiance or offer any clear evidence to back-up their interpretation of function or nature of this specific rhetorical symbol in the pledge. Rather, they presume the phrase's function and nature is obviously about unification and consensus. In doing so, Bellah and Hart frame the theistnormative nature of the revised pledge as harmless or even essential for the democratic process.

Conclusion

The way the theistnormative symbols and rituals produced through the spiritual-industrial complex are framed in legal and academic circles indicate just how successful theistnormative legislation has been for the Christian nationalists. While the manufactured spiritual revival of the 1950s was short-lived, it produced lasting symbols that were established to reinforce a Christian nationalist view on U.S. identity, albeit symbols that were less obviously Christian nationalist due to their theistnormative nature. The vagueness of theistnormative symbols and rituals helps to mask their coercive function and history through framing them as simple reflections of U.S. heritage or a unifying "civil religion."

Nostalgic appeals to U.S. religious heritage downplay the long history of religious intolerance and Protestant Christian privilege in the United States in a way that undermines the

aforementioned goals of secular rhetorical criticism. When judges and scholars frame the vague theistic references, particularly the phrase “under God” in the pledge, as “ceremonial deism” or “civil religion” that celebrate a pluralistic religious heritage and reflect a uniquely “American consensus,” they reinforce rather than challenge the Myth of Religious Tolerance. While the United States was founded on the notion of religious freedom, that freedom has not been applied equally and certainly has not meant tolerance. As Warren J. Blumenfeld, Khyati Y. Joshi, and Ellen E. Fairchild argue:

In the United States, we have “freedom of religion,” the right to choose and practice the faith we hold dear. But having a choice is not the same as to have that choice accepted and supported rather than ignored, marginalized, exoticized, or demonized. Notwithstanding the United States' history of having minority religions present and the nation's self-image as a haven for those fleeing “religious oppression,” the reality of life in U.S.-America as a follower of Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Santeria, Sikhism, Wiccan, etc. is one of misunderstanding, missed opportunities, and outright abuse.¹⁰⁶

The history that the Supreme Court Justices turned to in 2004 and which Bellah and Hart describe dismisses how the “religious heritage” of the United States is not one of consensus but one that has involved perpetual privileging and marginalization as tensions surrounding ir/religious pluralism have emerged. It is not one that takes seriously the questions of how religious minorities and non-theists have had to negotiate their existence in a society where Christian nationalism is an ingrained ideology.

The presumed benign nature of the phrase “under God” in the pledge of allegiance is reflective of the need in U.S. culture to defend the narrative that the United States was a haven for religious persecution, despite the long history of ir/religious intolerance within the United States. This dissertation resists the narrative that the phrase “under God” reflects a cohesive religious heritage that represents the importance of religion broadly in a religiously plural society. As an example of secular rhetorical criticism, this project takes seriously the need to

disrupt the Myth of Religious Tolerance through rigorous engagement with the rhetorical histories surrounding religious tensions within the United States. Such engagement reflects how the phrase “under God” in the pledge was a product of the growing tensions between Christian nationalism and secularism which resulted in the spiritual-industrial complex of the 1950s. Part of the “religious heritage” the phrase represents is a history of intolerance and containment. In the following chapters, I center a secular rhetorical criticism perspective to complicate the dominant narrative surrounding the function and nature of the phrase “under God” in the pledge of allegiance. While a deeper and more wide-ranging engagement in the rhetorical nature of the spiritual-industrial complex and its various products is necessary, I focus specifically on considering how the addition of one specific theistnormative ritual within the spiritual-industrial complex begs questions about our understanding of the “benign” nature of theistnormative symbols, rituals, and discourses. In doing so, I ask readers to take seriously the question of how the history of religious intolerance has been masked within U.S. culture through one of the most prominent theistic rituals utilized within the United States.

NOTES

¹ Justice O'Connor, "Concurring Opinion," *Elk Grove Unified School District v. Newdow*, No. 02-1624 (June 14, 2004).

² O'Connor, "Concurring Opinion."

³ Justice Stevens, "Concurring Opinion," *Elk Grove Unified School District v. Newdow*, No. 02-1624 (June 14, 2004).

⁴ Ideological state apparatuses are state institutions that function to maintain dominant power structures through reinforcing hegemonic ideologies. See: Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)," in *Media and Cultural Studies Keywords*, eds, Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner (Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 80-89.

⁵ Thomas Jefferson, et al, July 4, Copy of Declaration of Independence. July 4, 1776.

⁶ Robert N. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *Daedalus* 96, no. 1 (1967): 8, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20027022>.

⁷ John Locke, "Letter Concerning Toleration," 1689, <http://www.let.rug.nl/usa/documents/1651-1700/john-locke-letter-concerning-toleration-1689.php>.

⁸ While research suggests that while people are less likely to trust Atheists, this distrust is based on prejudices rather than reality. See: Will M. Gervais, Azim F. Shariff, and Ara Norenzayan. 2011. "Do You Believe in Atheists? Distrust is Central to Anti-Atheist Prejudice," *J Pers Soc Psychol*, 101, no. 6: 1189-1206, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0025882>.

⁹ Kristina M. Lee, "Why it matters that 7 states still have bans on atheists holding office," *The Conversation* June 4, 2021, <https://theconversation.com/why-it-matters-that-7-states-still-have-bans-on-atheists-holding-office-161069>.

¹⁰ Morton Bordon, *Jews, Turks, and Infidels* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984)

¹¹ The notion of the "village Atheist" was popular in literature in the mid to late nineteenth century, a picture that often framed Atheists in a lonely, unflattering light. Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Village Atheists: How America's Unbelievers Made Their Way in a Godly Nation* (Princeton University Press: 2016). Just because open Atheists were rare, however, we should not presume that means there were no atheists. Considering the theistnormative culture that tied theism to morality and good citizenship, it would not be surprising if many people who did not believe in God kept their private beliefs to themselves and passed as theistic. Again, this is one reason, I distinguish between open Atheists and closeted atheists or members of atheistic religions through the use of capitalization.

¹² Please note that I similarly trace this history in an article currently "in press." See: Kristina M. Lee, "'In God We Trust?': Christian Nationalists' Utilization of Theistnormative Legislation," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 52, no. 5 (2022): in-press.

¹³ Richard Hughes, *Myths America Lives By: White Supremacy and the Stories that Give Us Meaning* (University of Illinois, 2018), 63.

¹⁴ Hughes, *Myths America Lives By*, 63.

¹⁵ Derek H. Davis, "Religious Dimensions of the Declaration of Independence: Fact and Fiction," *Journal of Church and State* 36, no. 469 (1994): 472.

¹⁶ “Letter from Jefferson to James Smith,” December 8, 1822, available at <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/98-01-02-3202>.

¹⁷ David Sehat traces the religious tensions amongst the founders in *The Myth of American Religious Freedom* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 1-72.

¹⁸ This is not to say the topic of Atheism never came up amongst the “founders.” The 1800 election of Thomas Jefferson and the accusations that he was an Atheist from political opponents reflects the anti-atheism that existed, particularly regarding the notion of an Atheist holding public office. See: Frank Lambert, “God--and a Religious President [or] Jefferson and No God: Campaigning for a Voter-Imposed Religious Test in 1800,” *Journal of Church & State*, 1769 (1997); Edward J. Larson, *A Magnificent Catastrophe: The Tumultuous Election of 1800, America’s First Presidential Campaign* (New York: Free Press, 2007).

¹⁹ The rise of Protestant Christian nationalism in the early nineteenth century, commonly referred to as the Second Great Awakening, was, in part, a response to and critique of deism. See: Barry Hankins, *The Second Great Awakening and the Transcendentalists* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2004), 1-5; Hughes, *Myths America Lives By*, 84-89.

²⁰ For more on limitations to religious freedoms due to Christian nationalist agenda’s and norms in early U.S. history see: Warren J. Blumenfeld, Khyati Y. Joshi, and Ellen E. Fairchild, eds., *Investigating Christian Privilege and Religious Oppression in the United States* (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2009); Khyati Y. Joshi, *White Christian Privilege: The Illusion of Religious Equality in America* (New York University Press, 2020); Sehat, *The Myth*; Schmidt, *Village Atheist*; Tisa Wenger, *Religious Freedom: The Contested History of an American Ideal* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

²¹ Neil H. Cogan, *The Complete Bill of Rights: The Drafts, Debates, Sources, and Origins* (Oxford University Press), 68. Also see: Blackwell P. Robinson, “Caldwell, David,” *NCPedia*, accessed August 31, 2021, <https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/caldwell-david/>

²² John Mitchell Mason, *The Complete Works of John M. Mason, D.D.* (New York: Baker and Scribner 1849), 53. Also see: Steven K. Green, *Inventing Christian America: The Myth of the Religious Founding* (Oxford University Press, 2015).

²³ Anthony A. Cowley, “From When We Came: A Background of the National Reform Association,” in *Explicitly Christian Politics: The Vision of the National Reform Association* (Fredericksburg, VA: BookCrafters, 1997), 3.

²⁴ James C. Carper and Thomas C. Hunt, *The Dissenting Tradition in American Education* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007); Sehat, *The Myth*, 155-182

²⁵ Sehat, *The Myth*, 319.

²⁶ Wenger, *Religious Freedom*.

²⁷ While I am planning to outline this shift in Christian nationalists’ narratives in a future project, I do briefly outline this shift in an upcoming article. See: Lee, “In God We Trust?”

²⁸ Lee, ““In God We Trust?,”” in-press.

²⁹ Morton Borden “The Christian Amendment,” *Civil War History*, 25, no 2 (1979): 166, <https://doi.org/10.1353/cwh.1979.0032>.

³⁰ Leigh E. Schmidt, “Pluralism, Secularism, and Religion in Modern American History,” *Modern American History* 1 (2018): 87–91, <https://doi.org/10.1017/mah.2017.11>.

³¹ I say “white” to emphasize how, particularly for Jewish-Americans there have been important shifts in understanding people’s Jewish identity in relation to race or religion. As Tisa Wenger argues, “In the wake of the Second World War, Jews in the United States would largely

escape the racial stigma that had previously haunted them and would gain general acceptance as racially white.” Wenger, *Religious Freedom*, 146.

³² P.W. Wilson, “The Christian Faith Through the Ages Since Calvary,” *New York Times*, June 28, 1931, BR2; P.W. Wilson, “An Epic View of Christianity,” *New York Times*, Dec 20, 1931, BR1; P.W. Wilson, “Man’s Hope of Immortal Life,” *New York Times*, Sep 25, 1932, BR10; P.W. Wilson, “The World Stirred By Religious Strife,” *New York Times*, Sep 24, 1933, SM9. Also see: K. Healan Gaston, *Imagining Judeo-Christian America* (University of Chicago Press, 2019), 72-76.

³³ Gaston outlines different understandings of the term in the first few chapters of *Imagining Judeo-Christian America*.

³⁴ Gaston, *Imagining Judeo-Christian America*, 35-50.

³⁵ Gaston, *Imagining Judeo-Christian America*, 66-71.

³⁶ Gaston, *Imagining Judeo-Christian America*, 64-71; Wenger, *Religious Freedom*, 173, 179-185.

³⁷ Gaston, *Imagining Judeo-Christian America*, 10.

³⁸ Wenger, *Religious Freedom*.

³⁹ The Anti-Defamation league shifted from using anti-Semitism to antisemitism, “Spelling of antisemitism vs. anti-Semitism,” *ADL*, accessed June 16, 2021, <https://www.adl.org/spelling>.

⁴⁰ Gaston, *Imagining Judeo-Christian America*; Adam Zagoria-Moffet, “The Myth of a Judeo-Christian Tradition,” *State of Formation* April 7, 2014, <https://stateofformation.org/2014/04/the-myth-of-a-judeo-christian-tradition/>.

⁴¹ Robert O. Smith, “Disintegrating the Hyphen: The “Judeo-Christian Tradition” and the Christian Colonization of Judaism,” *ReOrient* 5, no. 1 (2019), 73-91, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.13169/reorient.5.1.0073>. Also see: Rachel Gordon, “FDR and the Judeo-Christian Tradition,” *Religion in American History* April 29, 2013, <http://usreligion.blogspot.com/2013/04/fdr-and-judeo-christian-tradition.html>

⁴² Wenger, *Religious Freedom*, 166.

⁴³ As Gaston notes in *Imagining Judeo-Christian America* that “The religio-racial implications of Judeo-Christian discourse were apparent in the term’s exclusion of Muslims from ‘Western civilization’—and of racialized cultural and religious minorities from ‘tri-faith America.’ But the discourse also created important forms of leverage for those marginalized groups that could mobilize the moral power of the Judeo-Christian framework,” 3.

⁴⁴ Jonathan P. Herzog, *The Spiritual-Industrial Complex: America’s Religious Battle Against Communism in the Early Cold War* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 6.

⁴⁵ Herzog, *The Spiritual-Industrial Complex*, 39-71.

⁴⁶ Herzog, *The Spiritual-Industrial Complex*, 8.

⁴⁷ Herzog, *The Spiritual-Industrial Complex*, 108.

⁴⁸ Gaston, *Judeo-Christian America*, 194-195; Schmidt, “Pluralism, Secularism, and Religion.

⁴⁹ Will Herberg, *Protestant--Catholic--Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology* (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday & Co., Inc, 1955), 75.

⁵⁰ According to Google Scholar, the book has been cited over 3600 times as of March 23, 2022.

⁵¹ Bellah, “Civil Religion,” 1.

⁵² Bellah, “Civil Religion,” 8.

⁵³ Bellah suggests that, while American civil religion draws heavily on Protestant, Biblical archetypes including narratives that celebrate the symbolic Sacrificial Death and Rebirth, and that paint the United States as the “Promised Land” or “New Jerusalem” with its citizens being God’s “Chosen People,” it has its own unique martyrs (the founding fathers and Abraham Lincoln), sacred events and places (The Civil War and Arlington Cemetery), and its own solemn rituals and symbols (Inauguration Day, the American Flag, and Memorial Day) that all citizens, no matter their personal religious beliefs can celebrate and honor. Bellah, “Civil Religion” 9-11). Also see: Peter Gardella, *American Civil Religion: What Americans Hold Sacred* (Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁵⁴ Bellah, “Civil Religion.”

⁵⁵ Bellah, “Civil Religion,” 12 and 14.

⁵⁶ This number is based on the metrics available on Google Scholar and is likely much higher.

⁵⁷ Robert N. Bellah, “Religion and Legitimation in the American Republic,” *Society* 15 (1978): 16.

⁵⁸ Philip S. Gorski, “Civil Religion Today” (ARDA Guiding Paper Series). State College, PA: The Association of Religion Data Archives at The Pennsylvania State University, 1, <http://www.thearda.com/rrh/papers/guidingpapers.asp>.

⁵⁹ Bellah, “Religion and Legitimation,” 193.

⁶⁰ As Raymond Haberski Jr. notes “civil religion is a strange beast; it can often appear to mean almost anything to anyone at anytime,” *God and War: American Civil Religion Since 1945* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 5.

⁶¹ Leilah Danielson, “Civil Religion as Myth, Not History,” *Religions* vol. 10, no. 374 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10060374>; Wade Clark Roof, “American Presidential Rhetoric from Ronald Reagan to George W. Bush: Another Look at Civil Religion,” *Social Compass* 56 (2009): 297; Sehat, *The Myth*, 284; Rhys H. Williams, “Public Religion and Hegemony: Contesting the Language of the Common Good”, in William H. Swatos and James K. Wellman, Jr., eds. *The Power of Religious Publics: Staking Claims in American Society* (Westport: Praeger, 1999), 168–86.

⁶² Chris Stedman has used the term “theonormativity” to describe the tendency to normalize religious belief in society. See: Rick Plasterer, “Faith, Diversity, and Sexual Orientation on the Campus,” *Juicy Ecumenism*, February 27, 2013, <https://juicyecumenism.com/2013/02/27/faith-diversity-and-sexual-orientation-on-the-campus/>.

⁶³ Richard Benjamin Crosby, “Civil Religion, Nativist Rhetoric, and the Washington National Cathedral,” *Journal of Communication and Religion* 39, no. 4 (2016): 69.

⁶⁴ See Thomas K. Nakayama and Robert L. Krizek, “Whiteness: A Strategic Rhetoric,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 81, no. 3 (August 1995)

⁶⁵ David Domke and Kevin Coe, *The God Strategy: How Religion Became a Political Weapon in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 6.

⁶⁶ The majority of these articles were found on the Communication & Mass Media Complete and ComAbstracts databases, as well as a handful of others collected through my past research on civil religion. I limited by focus to articles and books that were published by scholars who identified themselves as associated with communication or rhetorical studies or which were published within rhetoric or communication journals. While early drafts of this chapter did engage with the differences in definitions utilized by communication and rhetorical scholars, I determined that such a project was not necessary for the larger goals of this specific dissertation.

I do, however, plan to revise that earlier draft into a separate project that explores how specifically scholars in Communication and Rhetorical scholarship utilize the conception of civil religion.

⁶⁷ Michael L. Butterworth, "Saved at Home: Christian Branding and Faith Nights in the 'Church of Baseball,'" *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 97, no. 3 (2011): 311, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630.2011.585170>; Richard Benjamin Crosby, "Toward a Practical, Civic Piety: Mitt Romney, Barack Obama, and the Race for National Priest," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 18, no. 2 (2015): 304, <https://doi.org/10.14321/rhetpublaffa.18.2.0301>; Crosby, "Civil Religion, 57; Steven R. Goldzwig, "Official and Unofficial Civil Religious Discourse," *Journal of Communication and Religion* 25, no. 1 (2002): 106; H Daniel C. Hallin and Todd Gitlin, "Agon and Ritual: The Gulf War as Popular Culture and as Television Drama," *Political Communication* 10, no. 4 (1993): 420, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.1993.9963002>; H Jeffrey R. Halverson, Scott W. Ruston, and Angela Trethewey, "Mediated Martyrs of the Arab Spring: New Media, Civil Religion, and Narrative in Tunisia and Egypt," *Journal of Communication* 63, no. 2 (2013): 313, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcom.12017>; Andrew C. Hansen, "The Religious Text in Daniel Webster's 'First Bunker Hill Address,'" *Southern Communication Journal* 71, no. 4 (2006), 383-400, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10417940601000493>; Michael J. Hostetler, "Joe Liberman at Fellowship Chapel: Civil Religion Meets Self-Disclosure," *Journal of Communication and Religion* 25, no. 2 (2002): 150; Christina Littlefield, Theresa de los Santos, Patrick G. Rear, and Savannah Janssen, "Patriotism and a Free Press: A Content Analysis of Civil Religion in Aaron Sorkin's *The West Wing* and *The Newsroom*," *Journal of Media and Religion* 17, no. 2 (2018): 42-43, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15348423.2018.1531624>; Jason R. Moyer, "Turning the Prophetic into Civil Religion: Barack Obama's March 4, 2007 Sermon in Selma, Alabama," *Poroi* 11, no. 2 (2015): 3, <https://doi.org/10.13008/2151-2957.1240>; John M. Murphy, "Power and Authority in a Postmodern Presidency," in *The Prospect of Presidential Rhetoric*, ed. James Arnt Aune and Martin J. Medhurst (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008), 30; Nneka Ifeoma Ofulue, "President Clinton and the White House Prayer Breakfast," *Journal of Communication and Religion* 25, no. 1 (2002): 51; Nicolas Rangel Jr., "Ambiguously Articulating 'Americanism' The Rhetoric of Hiram Wesley Evans and the Klan of the 1920s," *American Communication Journal* 11, no. 2 (2009); Alyssa Samek & Karrin Vasby Anderson, "The Day the Campaign Died: The Wellstone Memorial, Civic Piety, and Political Propriety," *Communication Quarterly* 49, no. 2 (2011): 158, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01463373.2011.563438>; Paul Stob, "Sacred Symbols, Public Memory, and the Great Agnostic: Robert Ingersoll Remembers the Civil War," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 19, no. 2 (2016): 296-297, <https://doi.org/10.14321/rhetpublaffa.19.2.0275>; Ann Strahle, "Finding Belief Systems in Modern War Movies: An Analysis of the Film *The Messenger* Through the Lens of the American Civil Religion," *Journal of Communication and Religion* 40, no. 1 (2017): 8.

⁶⁸ Denise M. Bostdorff, "George W. Bush's Post-September 11 Rhetoric of Covenant Renewal: Upholding the Faith of the Greatest Generation," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 89, no. 4 (2003): 294, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0033563032000160963>; David Frank, "Obama's Rhetorical Signature: Cosmopolitan Civil Religion in the Presidential Inaugural Address, January 20, 2009," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 14, no. 4 (2011): 609, <https://doi.org/10.2307/41935240>; Steve Goldzwig, "A Rhetoric of Public Theology: The Religious Rhetor and Public Policy," *The Southern Speech Communication Journal* 52, no. 2

(1987): 132, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10417948709372684>; Roderick P. Hart, "God, Country, and a World of Words," *Journal of Communication and Religion* 25, no. 1 (2002): 147.

⁶⁹ Robert V. Friedenberg, "Rhetoric, Religion and Government at the Turn of the 21st Century," *Journal of Communication and Religion* 25, no. 1 (2002): 39; William F. Harlow, "Nixon's Use of Civil Religion to Justify Economic Treaty Violation," *American Communication Journal* 12 (2010); Roderick P. Hart, *The Political Pulpit* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1977), 1-2.

⁷⁰ Sehat, *The Myth*, 284.

⁷¹ While Vanessa B. Beasley does acknowledge that civil religion contributes to a false "Shared-beliefs hypothesis" in her book *You, the People*, she does not specifically engage in the implications of that in terms of religious identity and marginalization.

⁷² Notably, Hart was somewhat resistant to the label "civil religion" often using the phrase "civic piety" instead, but he made it clear he was referring to the same phenomenon as Bellah and would continue to use the conception of civil religion alongside civic piety in his book.

⁷³ Of the books and articles I reviewed from communication and rhetorical studies, nearly all of them cited either Hart or Bellah, with most citing both.

⁷⁴ Jean Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1968), 253

⁷⁵ Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 253.

⁷⁶ Bellah, "Civil Religion," 15.

⁷⁷ Bellah, "Civil Religion," 3.

⁷⁸ Stob, "Sacred Symbols," 297.

⁷⁹ Harlow, "Nixon's Use of Civil Religion," 5.

⁸⁰ Domke and Coe, *The God Strategy*.

⁸¹ David A Frank and Paul Stob have explicitly attempted to include Atheists in their consideration of civil religion, but I argue that, in doing so, both downplay the marginalization of atheism within U.S. culture. Frank, for example, has argued that Obama embraced a "cosmopolitan civil religion" that is a more "universal civil religion" that assumes that religions other than Christianity and "nonbelievers" all "have access to truths" and that "the religious and nonreligious have a sacred responsibility to others." See: Frank, "Obama's Rhetorical Signature," 609. Though, as I have argued elsewhere, while Obama did acknowledge Atheists, he still reinforced a theistnormative narrative within his Inaugural. See: Kristina M. Lee, "Theistnormativity and the Negation of American Atheists in Presidential Inaugural Addresses" *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 23, no. 2 (2020): 273-274, <https://doi.org/10.14321/rhetpublaffa.23.2.0255>. Paul Stob also attempted to expand understandings of civil religion to include Atheists by arguing that one of the most famous "Infidels" in American history, Robert Ingersoll, had already been using a form of civil religion to effectively give speeches to religiously diverse audiences. Stob suggested that Ingersoll's rhetoric offers an "alternative civil religion" that avoids "God Talk" but that still pulled on common religious themes as metaphors that could be interpreted in secular or sacred ways, which Stob suggests is more suitable for a religiously plural audience. Stob's work, however, begs the question as to whether someone religious can sincerely use Stob's/Ingersoll's alternative civil religion. Because of his reputation as "The Great Agnostic," when Ingersoll spoke of "cherubims," "holy fire," or "heaven," one can assume he was using religious imagery as metaphors, not literally. Can one so easily make that same assumption with a religious person speaks? If William Jennings Bryan used the same words that Ingersoll had, could it possibly be

the same “pluralistic civil religion?” Furthermore, while Stob suggests that Ingersoll’s alternative civil religion is more unifying, Stob himself also acknowledges that Ingersoll was unable to run for office himself because he was an Atheist, which suggests that even for Atheists this alternative civil religion only has so much power. See: Paul Stob, “Sacred Symbols, Public Memory, and the Great Agnostic: Robert Ingersoll Remembers the Civil War,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 19, no. 2 (2016): 275–306, <https://doi.org/10.14321/rhetpublaffa.19.2.0275>.

⁸² Bellah, “Civil Religion,” 3.

⁸³ Hart, *The Political Pulpit*, 43.

⁸⁴ Carolyn Marvin, “A New Scholarly Dispensation for Civil Religion,” *Journal of Communication and Religion* 25, no. 1 (2002): 24.

⁸⁵ Marvin, “A New Scholarly Dispensation,” 24.

⁸⁶ Martin J. Medhurst, “Forging a Civil-Religious Construct for the 21st Century: Should Hart’s ‘Contract’ Be Renewed?” *Journal of Communication and Religion* 25, no. 1 (2002): 98.

⁸⁷ Friedenberg, “Rhetoric, Religion and Government,” 39.

⁸⁸ Bellah, “Civil Religion,” 15.

⁸⁹ Bellah, “Civil Religion,” 15.

⁹⁰ Bellah, “Civil Religion,” 3.

⁹¹ Hart, *The Political Pulpit*, 1-2.

⁹² Bellah, “Civil Religion,” 13.

⁹³ Hart, *The Political Pulpit*, 30.

⁹⁴ Bellah, “Civil Religion,” 14.

⁹⁵ Bellah, “Civil Religion,” 7 and 18.

⁹⁶ Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* (Oxford University Press, 2020)

⁹⁷ Bellah, Civil Religion 12 and 14.

⁹⁸ Hart, *The Political Pulpit*, 7.

⁹⁹ Wenger, *Religious Freedom*, 150 and 166. Also see: Naomi Wiener Cohen, *Jews in Christian America: The Pursuit of Religious Equality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

¹⁰⁰ Bellah, “Religion and Legitimation,” 195.

¹⁰¹ Sehat, *The Myth*, 8.

¹⁰² Greg Dickinson, Carole Blair, and Brian L. Ott, *Places of Public Memory: The Rhetoric of Museums and Memorials* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2010), 6.

¹⁰³ Barbie Zelizer, “Reading the Past Against the Grain: The Shape of Memory Studies,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 12 (1995), 217.

¹⁰⁴ Bellah, “Civil Religion,” 100.

¹⁰⁵ Hart, *The Political Pulpit*, 56.

¹⁰⁶ Blumenfeld, Joshi, and Fairchild, *Investigating Christian Privilege*, x.

CHAPTER TWO: “AN ATHEIST AMERICAN IS A CONTRADICTION OF TERMS”:
HOW THE PLEDGE OF ALLEGAANCE BECAME A TOOL OF THEISTNORMATIVE
CONTAINMENT

“No religious acknowledgment could claim to be an instance of ceremonial deism if it explicitly favored one particular religious belief system over another.”- Justice Sandra Day O’Connor, Concurring Opinion in Elk Grove Unified School Dist. v. Newdow, 542 U.S. 1 (2004)¹

Elk Grove Unified School Dist. v. Newdow hinged on the question of whether or not the phrase “under God” was an endorsement of religion, and thus a violation of the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. Justice O’Connor had previously outlined a judicial test to determine whether religio-political symbols and rituals violated the Constitution through what she called the “endorsement test.” She noted that, symbols, rituals, and discourses can be considered endorsements if they send a message to “nonadherents that they are outsiders, not full members of the political community, and an accompanying message to adherents that they are insiders, favored members of the political community.”² She argued that determining whether a symbol or ritual is an exclusionary endorsement relied on a “reasonable observer” who was “fully cognizant of the history, ubiquity, and context of the practice in question” and who “must embody a community ideal of social judgment.”³ Based on this criteria, O’Connor contended that “although it is a close question,” a reasonable observer would not consider the phrase in the pledge an endorsement. O’Connor argued the pledge did not send a message that one group was “insiders” or that another was “outsiders” for four reasons: 1) the history and ubiquity of vague God references, 2) the fact the pledge did not call for a prayer or call to worship, 3) there was no reference to a particular religion in the pledge, and 4) because the religious content in the pledge was “minimal.”⁴

As an example of secular rhetorical criticism, this project is not aimed at making an argument for whether or not the phrase “under God” in the pledge of allegiance is constitutional. Rather, it is concerned with how legal, political, and cultural discourses work to maintain or challenge religious hegemonic norms. In a case such as *Elk Grove Unified School Dist. v. Newdow*, the Justices offered interpretations of the function, and thus the implications of, the phrase “under God” in the pledge.⁵ The Justices, without officially ruling on whether the phrase was constitutional, suggested that the pledge was not an endorsement of religion. For O’Connor, that meant it did not send a message that members of one group were “insiders” while those of another were “outsiders.” Yet, while O’Connor emphasized the importance of history and context, she did not address the specific history or context surrounding how the phrase “under God” was added to the pledge in 1954, at the height of the Red Scare, before determining the religious reference was vague, minimalistic, and, thus, non-exclusionary. Meanwhile, in a move that dismissed the historical context of the implementation, Justice Rehnquist contended that, other than Representative Rabaut who proposed the bill that was adopted, “we do not know what other Members of Congress thought about the purpose of the amendment.”⁶

A consideration of the rhetorical history surrounding the addition of the phrase “under God” into the pledge, including reviewing the Congressional hearings where congressmembers explicitly stated what they viewed the purpose of the revised pledge to be, however, reveals how the addition was a product of the spiritual-industrial complex. It functioned to advocate the primary goal of the complex which was to “convince Americans that religious participation was a normative act” while framing atheism and strict secularism as a danger to democracy.⁷ Using secular rhetorical criticism as a lens for studying the rhetoric surrounding the law’s implementation, I argue that advocates for the change worked to transform the pledge into a

theistnormative ritual aimed at persuading audiences to see themselves as a theistic collective. In doing so, they framed Atheists and strict secularists as outsiders who were a threat to democracy. Advocates for the change relied on the rhetorical strategy of prophetic dualism to frame theistic beliefs amongst U.S. Americans as the norm and atheism and secularism as a threat to the “American way of life” that needed to be contained.⁸ This strategy of prophetic dualism divides the world into two camps: those who are on the side of God and democracy and those are not. Prophetic dualism functions as a form of rhetorical containment, or a strategy of discourse “that tames a potential threat to hegemonic power in the status quo.”⁹ Through the use of prophetic dualism, institutional leaders advocating to add “under God” to the pledge suggested the best way to protect democracy was to contain secularism and atheism. Notably, while, O’Connor pointed to the vague use of “God” as proof that the phrase did not advocate a particular religion, I demonstrate throughout this analysis, how advocates for the change utilized the vague theistnormative nature of the phrase “under God” to help negotiate the competing values of religious pluralism and Christian nationalism.

In what follows, I first define containment rhetoric and prophetic dualism, explain how they function separately and together, and consider how they can inform understandings of religion and power through a lens of secular rhetorical criticism. In doing so, I work to develop scholarly understandings of both concepts by considering how atheists and secularism are contained through domestic policies advanced through prophetic dualism. Next, I analyze both George M. Docherty’s February 7, 1954 “Under God” sermon and statements made by members of the U.S. Congress, both publicly and during congressional hearings, justifying the change to the pledge. Their discourses demonstrate how, through the use of prophetic dualism, advocates saw the revised pledge as a way to contain atheism and strict secularism by encouraging those

who recited it to see themselves as part of a theistic collective. I analyze Docherty's sermon in addition to the rhetoric that emerged from congressmembers not only because Docherty directly influenced their rhetoric but also because such a comparative analysis demonstrates how the spiritual-industrial complex was just that: complex. It involved the influence of voices from various ideological state apparatuses to help advance the narrative that belief in God is inherently tied to U.S. identity.

The Rhetoric of Cold War Domestic Policies

Containment rhetoric is a powerful form of discourse that silences non-normative identities. Containment rhetorics “tame the threat of alternative views through discipline and confinement, clearly articulating the other as outside of the dominant values and structures” within a culture.¹⁰ Such confinement was a driving goal of anti-secularists who were anxious about how the rise of secularism, in all three senses, threatened traditional dominant values tied to religious hegemonies. As noted in the previous chapters, the rise of secularism challenged theistic religions' hegemonic status. Charles Taylor argue secularism is, in part, the realization that belief in God is no longer a given and there are alternatives for understanding the world and human existence/experience.¹¹ In other words, secularism threatens the long-standing hegemonic power of theistic religions, specifically Christianity. When a hegemonic ideology is challenged by alternative ideologies, proponents of the status quo either need to dismiss that alternative, find ways to incorporate the alternative into the dominant ideology, or be replaced by it.¹² One way to dismiss the alternative is through containment. Within a “containment culture” there is a “faith in normality” that provides individuals with “unofficial citizenship” and a bond with other “normal” individuals within society.¹³ Put another way, as Ross Singer depicts it, containment rhetoric “creates an appearance of consensus.”¹⁴ Those who fail to appear normal and question

or challenge the consensus are alternatively framed as foreign or a threat. The ever-present threat of being framed as an outsider for challenging the norm works to contain the spread of the alternative ideologies. The Red Scare that emerged in the 1950s contributed to an atmosphere where containment rhetoric became particularly effective for restricting various non-normative behaviors, identities, and beliefs, including secularism in all three senses outlined in the introduction of this dissertation.

While the containment strategy is commonly associated with early U.S. Cold War foreign policy,¹⁵ scholars have argued that containment also describes domestic life in the United States.¹⁶ As Alan Nadel observes, during the 1950s there were constant attempts “to make impossible distinctions between Other and Same, partner and rival, for the purpose of acquiring or excluding, proliferating or containing proliferation.”¹⁷ For instance, alternative gender roles that moved away from the traditional woman as homemaker and man as breadwinner tropes were framed as a danger to the family unit and thus an “other” who was a threat to the productivity and morality of society.¹⁸ The power of dominant cultural narratives, which are reinforced through media, churches, schools, and political discourses and policies, come from their ability to “unify, codify, and contain. . . .the personal narratives of its population,” though Nadel suggests that “*intimidate*” may be a better word to describe how such dominant narratives functioned during the Cold War.¹⁹ Domestic containment rhetoric in the 1950s maintained gender, sexual, and racial norms that privileged the white middle-class nuclear family.²⁰ The pressure to conform to the national norms espoused through the dominant narrative is the defining feature of containment discourses.

U.S. containment rhetoric also normalizes theistic understandings of religion and works to associate religion, ideally Christianity, with U.S. identity. In other words, containment

narratives privilege the white, *Christian*, nuclear middle-class family.²¹ One of the primary functions of the spiritual-industrial complex in the 1950s was “spiritual containment” which was based on the idea that if communism and theistic beliefs were incompatible, then communism could be contained if citizens of a nation threatened by communism believe in God.²² For example, John Foster Dulles, a prominent political figure and the U.S. Secretary of State from 1953-1959, suggested in 1946 that spiritual containment was necessary because “Soviet leaders would know that their project is impractical against a people who believe that their freedoms come from their Creator.”²³ While political leaders framed democracy as inherently tied to belief in a higher power, they also specifically connected that belief to Christianity. Cold War containment narratives specifically promoted religion, though often with the caveat of religion being associated with the “Judeo-Christian” tradition.²⁴ Yet, as noted in the previous chapter, this notion of “Judeo-Christian” tradition often limited the acceptance of Jews. Nadel, for example, explains that these religious containment narratives often portrayed “true Jews” as actually Christian and secularists Jews as “disguised atheist intellectuals, that is, communists.”²⁵ While Jews were framed as being included in the religious coalition that was tied to U.S. identity, the inclusion was conditional. They were only tolerated so far as they were willing to be framed as Christian and actively resisted secularism. If not, they would be dismissed as non-religious and thus outside of the ideal U.S. identity.

The need to contain atheism and secularism was at the core of U.S. religious containment narratives. During the Cold War, religious containment rhetoric often manifested in the specific rhetorical strategy of prophetic dualism. Philip Wander defines prophetic dualism as a strategy used to justify foreign policy in which the rhetor “divides the world into two camps” in which “one side acts in accord with all that is good, decent, and at one with God's will. The other acts in

direct opposition.”²⁶ Within the narrative of prophetic dualism, there can be no compromise, the conflict can only be resolved “through the total victory of one side over the other.”²⁷ Cold War prophetic dualism specifically promoted the demagogic idea that the world was divided into those who supported godless communism and those who supported god-loving democracies. As a form of containment rhetoric, prophetic dualism reinforces the theistnormative mindset by advancing the notion that the recognition of God is what unites good, democratic people while associating godlessness with a threat to democracy. As such, it is a form of containment rhetoric that should be of particular interest to scholars engaged in secular rhetorical criticism. The use of prophetic dualism can help explain how religious hegemonies are maintained.

While rhetorical scholars have primarily focused on prophetic dualism in relation to foreign policy, the rhetoric of prophetic dualism was also used to justify domestic policy.²⁸ Wander focuses on how prophetic dualism helps build domestic support for foreign policy, arguing that one of the most effective aspects of prophetic dualism is how it suppresses debate.²⁹ When it came to persuading domestic audiences, Wander contends that “there are advantages for state managers to be gained from the use of prophetic dualism. Put quite simply: God dampens public debate. How can one argue with God’s will when it is clearly expressed?”³⁰ Wander’s observation points to the domestic use of prophetic dualism. I contend that prophetic dualism was a driving rhetorical strategy within the spiritual-industrial complex of the 1950s that focused on domestic actions. Those pushing the complex utilized the rhetoric of prophetic dualism to persuade the public that the United States can only remain free if citizens and political leaders recognize the role God plays in democracy.

Theistnormative legislation became important pieces of domestic policy in containing secularism and atheism through recognizing the importance of God within the United States. The

power of theistnormative legislation as a piece of domestic policy designed to influence perceptions of the American people as a theistic collective is particularly evident in the addition of the phrase “under God” in the pledge of allegiance. The pledge was published in 1892 by Francis Bellamy, a socialist Baptist minister, in honor of the 400th anniversary of the arrival of Christopher Columbus.³¹ The original version read: “I pledge allegiance to my Flag and to the republic for which it stands; one nation indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.” In 1923 “my flag” was replaced with “the flag of the United States” and “of America” was added in 1924, all in an effort to try to ensure loyalty from immigrants. In 1945, Congress made the updated version the official pledge of the United States.³² In 1954, Congress altered the pledge for the last time to include the phrase “under God” after “one nation.” By altering the pledge that was recited daily by millions of school children across the country to include a recognition of God, political leaders, inspired by a sermon delivered by a local Washington D.C. preacher, worked to evolve the pledge into a theistnormative ritual.

This ritual was aimed at containing atheism and secularism by “educating” citizens, specifically children, about the “true nature” of democratic citizenship and its supposed reliance on a higher power. In their justification for the change, proponents made explicit appeals to contain atheism. Their appeals to contain secularism were less explicit, reflective of the tensions surrounding the competing values of Christian nationalism and secularism in the 1950s. Secularism and atheism were often portrayed as synonymous during the Cold War, thus the use of one often implied the other.³³ Yet, not all secularists were atheists and advocates needed to be mindful of theists who may also advocate for secularism, in the first sense of it being a separation of religion and the public sphere. As such, many advocates were careful to frame the

change so as not to violate the separation of church and state; yet in doing so, they simultaneously contained secularism by offering a narrow definition of it.

Docherty's "Under God" Sermon

The move to add "under God" to the pledge was years in the making. The notion that the nation was "under God" was introduced into popular lexicon by President Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. It was not until the 1940s, however, that the phrase began to be used regularly by political leaders.³⁴ Influencers of the spiritual-industrial complex began utilizing the phrase as they tied notions of U.S. heritage and identity to theistic religious beliefs. The Knights of Columbus, a fraternal Catholic organization, was one such group. After leaders passed an internal resolution to add "under God" to the organization's version of the pledge in 1951, they embarked on a three-year campaign to get Congress to change the official pledge to match their version. In April 1953, at the behest of the organization, Michigan Representative Louis Rabaut unsuccessfully proposed House Joint Resolution 243 to change the pledge.³⁵ It was not until the following year when a Protestant Reverend named George M. Docherty gave a sermon encouraging the change on February 7, 1954, with President Eisenhower present, that Congress was moved to pass legislation to revise the pledge.

Docherty's sermon focused on the idea that the pledge should include the words "under God." To support his thesis, Docherty utilized a form of prophetic dualism that divided the world into those who love God and freedom against atheistic and secular communists. He started his sermon by arguing that "The American Way of Life" is inherently tied to a belief in God. He then contrasted this against secularist and atheistic communist countries, suggesting that belief in God was the fundamental difference between the United States and communist states. Docherty concluded that, in the midst of a moral war, actions should be taken to ensure that the pledge

reflected the “American Way of Life” that distinguished it from communism. The conclusion of Docherty’s sermon, which outlines why the change is inclusive and not a violation of the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, reflects how Docherty negotiated the interests of religious pluralists and those of Christian nationalists at the time.

Docherty framed the sermon as being in honor of President Lincoln’s birthday and he relied on the public memory of Lincoln to defend his proposed change to the pledge. He argued that the issues Lincoln worked to resolve were “precisely the issues” the U.S. faced in 1954. For Lincoln those issues were the result of slavery while for contemporary leaders they were “sparked by a militantly atheistic Communism.”³⁶ Through juxtaposing the contemporary moment with the trials of the Civil War, Docherty, who was a fierce advocate of civil rights, framed the threat of the Cold War as equally dangerous to democracy as the issue of slavery.³⁷ In his framing both slavery and atheistic communism were a threat to democracy because they threatened freedom. Thus, he argued that, in honor of Lincoln’s birthday, it would be appropriate to consider the importance of freedom.

Docherty’s sermon framed “The American Way of Life” as inherently bound to theistic religious beliefs, specifically Christianity. Initially, Docherty offered an eclectic collection of rituals and symbols that he contended embody this way of life, including capitalistic rituals and symbols such as going to ball games, drinking Coca-Cola, shopping at department stores, reading comic books, and girls wearing jeans; benign actions, such as sitting on the porch after church or children’s laughter; as well as contrasting racial symbolism including “Negro Spirituals” and the “lonely proud statue of Lee on Gettysburg field.”³⁸ He argued that all these symbols and rituals can be traced back to the Puritans who came to the United States to escape tyranny and who stressed the “fundamentals,” which he contended came from the Ten Commandments and the

New Testament. “This,” Docherty argued, “is the ‘American Way of Life.’”³⁹ In tracing contemporary secular actions and rituals to early Christian traditions and tying them all to the “American Way of Life,” Docherty focused the beginning of his sermon on establishing an association between religion, specifically Christianity, and U.S. Americanism. His use of examples that could appeal to a racially diverse audience, some who viewed “Negro Spirituals” as part of U.S. heritage and others who had reverence towards the Confederate General Robert E. Lee, suggests that such a connection could tie even those with competing views of Americanism together.

In building connections between religion and freedom, Docherty continued to draw on the public memory of Lincoln, specifically his Gettysburg Address. Docherty tied this notion to an understanding of how free government should work, contending that:

Lincoln claims that it is under God that this Nation shall know a new birth of freedom. And by implication, it is under God that ‘government of the people, by the people, and for the people shall not perish from the earth.’ For Lincoln, since God was in His Heaven, all must ultimately be right for his country.⁴⁰

Docherty framed Lincoln’s statement as a recognition the “God in Heaven” would protect the United States and, consequently, democracy. To support his claim that God is key to the “American Way of Life,” Docherty went on to argue that Lincoln was drawing on the work of the Founding Fathers, specifically the theistic references in the Declaration of Independence, when he claimed that the nation was “under God.” While, as noted in the previous chapter, Jefferson’s references were deistic in nature, Docherty seamlessly connected Christianity and this broad theistnormativity as one in the same. While Docherty did not explicitly claim that the United States was a “Christian nation,” he drew connections between a broad belief in God, specific Christian doctrines of a Heavenly Father, and the success of democratic freedom.

After outlining how the “American Way of Life” was tied to a belief in God and Christianity, which he suggested was emblemized by Lincoln’s notion of the nation being “under God,” Docherty was primed to introduce his thesis: That the pledge failed to recognize God, thus failed to reflect what it truly means to be a U.S. American. Docherty recounted ruminating on the meaning of the pledge of allegiance his children recited daily at school. As Scottish immigrant, he suggested that by learning the pledge for the first time as an adult, instead of as a child who would grow to just repeat the words without thinking of them, he was able to reflect on each word of the pledge. He proclaimed that, after doing so, he came to the conclusion that “the characteristic and definitive factor in the American way of life” was “missing in this pledge.”⁴¹ He argued that, other than the reference to the United States, there was nothing uniquely American about it and that he could imagine “little Muscovites” repeating a similar pledge because Russia also claims to be indivisible and have liberty and justice.⁴² According to Docherty, if the pledge was so generic that even a communist Russian could say a similar pledge, it needed to be altered to be more reflective of true, unique Americanism. He suggested that the pledge should teach students where U.S. freedoms truly come from: God.

Docherty utilized the strategy of prophetic dualism to emphasize the urgency of changing the pledge. He argued that what separated the democratic United States from the communist and totalitarian Soviet Union was the belief in God, thus the pledge of allegiance should reflect that difference. He painted a Manichaeian picture of the Cold War as a battle of good vs. evil, arguing that they were facing “a theological war” that was not about political or economic differences but moral ones. Docherty argued that this war came down to “the view of man as it comes down to us from Judeo-Christian civilization in mortal combat against modern, secularized, godless humanity.”⁴³ In utilizing prophetic dualism, Docherty promoted the idea that the Cold War was

ultimately a religious battle. This was the same framing advocates of the spiritual-industrial complex regularly utilized to advance their initiatives. Within this framework, the godless and secularists were the enemy. In order to fight their godless enemy, the United States needed to do more to assert their religious values and remind citizens their freedoms come from God.

Docherty argued that the pledge offered an opportunity to do so, proclaiming that “[t]o omit the words ‘under God’ in the pledge of allegiance is to omit the definitive character of the ‘American Way of Life.’”⁴⁴ He concluded that incorporating the language ‘under God’ would help U.S. Americans recognize what makes their freedoms unique from those proclaimed in communist countries. In doing so, Docherty framed the addition as a move to protect Americans against encroaching communist/atheist/secularist ideologies.

Docherty was keenly aware that this proposal could be controversial. The last portion of his sermon was a careful appeal to religious pluralists and secularists, during which Docherty contended that the revision would not “be a violation of the First Amendment to the Constitution.”⁴⁵ While such a move might suggest it was only Atheists and not secularists being contained within Docherty’s narrative, I argue that his defense actually contained secularism by offering a narrow understanding of what secularism should be. Docherty argued that the Constitution only prevents a state church from being established and that the idea of separation of church and state “is not, and never was meant to be, a separation of religion and life. Such objection is a confusion of the First Amendment with the First Commandment.”⁴⁶ The latter part of Docherty’s comment suggests that he was primarily reflecting on Christian secularists, such as Jehovah Witnesses, who might argue that placing God in a pledge to the country was a form of idolatry. While it appears he was focused specifically on Christian secularists, his appeal was also an attempt to ease the anxieties of secularists broadly by suggesting he had considered the

Constitutional consequences. Yet his defense simultaneously contained secularism, by only recognizing legitimate views of secularization as being relatively narrow.

Docherty continued to justify the change for liberal pluralists by attempting to downplay how the revised pledge was not explicitly Christian, but rather inclusive of most theistic religions. While he acknowledged that some Christians might want to add “under Jesus Christ” he challenged such a change, stating:

one of the glories of this land is that it has opened its gates to all men of every religious faith. . . . There is no religious examination on entering the United States of America – no persecution because a man’s faith differs even from the Christian religion. It must be “UNDER GOD” to include the great Jewish Community, and the people of the Moslem faith, and the myriad of denominations of Christians in the land.”⁴⁷

While Christianity has long held a privileged position within the United States and Docherty was speaking to a Christian audience in his sermon, he relied on theistnormative narratives to suggest that “every religious faith” (though he only included monotheistic ones) was welcome in the United States and that a reference to God in the pledge should be inclusive of all (monotheistic) religions. He even included Muslims into the theistic collective in his framing. In doing so, Docherty not only perpetuated the myth of religious tolerance by suggesting the United States was welcoming to all religions but framed the new pledge as a celebration of religious tolerance, albeit a tolerance limited to theistic religions.

Despite the attempt to expand inclusivity to all theistic religions, even those beyond the Protestant-Catholic-Jew tri-faith coalition, Docherty reinforced explicitly theistnormative appeals that framed atheists as un-American. While Docherty claimed that the new addition did not violate the First Amendment because it did not specify a particular religion, he did recognize that Atheists would not be able to sincerely say the revised pledge. He justified the exclusion by arguing that: “[p]hilosophically speaking, an atheistic American is a contradiction of terms.”⁴⁸

Interestingly, Docherty went on to use a pluralistic approach that countered typical prophetic dualist framings by suggesting that Atheists are not “wicked” but “dialectically honest, and would rather walk with the unbelievers than sit hypocritically with people of the faith.”⁴⁹ He seemed to almost contradict his previous claim that an Atheist American is a “contradiction of terms” by suggesting that he had known many Atheists who “are fine in character; and in their obligations as citizens and good neighbors, quite excellent.”⁵⁰ Yet, he simultaneously justified their exclusion from the new pledge by arguing:

But they really are “spiritual parasites.” And I mean no term of abuse in this. I’m simply classifying them. A parasite is an organism that lives upon the life force of another organism without contributing to the life of the other. These excellent ethical seculars are living upon the accumulated Spiritual Capital of a Judeo-Christian civilization, and at the same time, deny the God who revealed the divine principles upon which the ethics of this Country grow. The dilemma of the secular is quite simple. He cannot deny the Christian revelation and logically live by the Christian ethic. And if he denies the Christian ethic, he falls short of the American ideal of life.⁵¹

This justification for excluding Atheists is particularly indicative of how theistnormative narratives were advocated for by many liberal pluralists. While he did not fully demonize Atheists, which offered the illusion of tolerance, he went on to suggest that Atheists could not be truly American because they do not acknowledge God. Instead, he dehumanizes Atheists by framing them as “parasites,” suggesting not only that they leach off society but that they have the potential to harm society due to their lack of reverence to the “divine principles” that are key “ethics” within the United States.

Docherty’s statement on atheism also reveals how theistnormative narratives and legislation in the United States simultaneously frame theism broadly as important for ideal citizenship while also privileging Christianity. While Docherty initially justified the addition by framing it as fully inclusive, his argument against Atheists promoted a Christian nationalist framing of good citizenship. Docherty did not argue that Atheists fail to be true Americans

simply because of their lack of belief in God but specifically because they deny “the Christian ethic.” This contradicted his previous argument that any religion was welcomed within the United States. Notably, the religions Docherty initially included were the theistic Abrahamic religions of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. In shifting to justify excluding Atheists, Docherty dropped Muslims from the inclusion by arguing that Atheists were capitalizing on the rewards of the *Judeo-Christian* civilization and he made a specific connection to Americanism and the *Christian ethic*.

Docherty’s sermon called for the pledge to be revised into a theistnormative ritual that would remind citizens that their freedoms came from God and, thus, they are part of a theistic collective. By connecting the notion that the United States is “under God” to religious heritage and the “American Way of Life,” Docherty promoted a core Christian nationalist belief that ties religion to democracy. While he proclaimed that the change was inclusive of any theistic religion, he simultaneously made consistent and explicit connections between Christianity and democracy. Consequently, while his sermon could appeal to liberal pluralists by offering the illusion of inclusion, it also directly appealed to Christian nationalist ideologies. In relying on prophetic dualism, Docherty simplified a complex political conflict into a moral battle that urgently called on U.S. Americans to embrace their theistic (Christian) nature in order to protect themselves from an encroaching godless and secular enemy.

Transforming the Pledge into a Theistnormative Ritual of Containment

Docherty’s sermon quickly sparked support for the change to the pledge. According to Docherty, President Eisenhower told him after the sermon that he endorsed the idea wholeheartedly.⁵² The sermon was reported in newspapers across the country and copies of Docherty’s proposal was distributed amongst members of Congress.⁵³ A massive letter-writing campaign

was promoted by several Christian nationalist organizations in the weeks and months after the sermon.⁵⁴ According to the *New York Times*, Congress was “flooded” with letters demanding that the pledge be amended.⁵⁵ Docherty’s sermon and the public support for it, combined with the growing success of the spiritual-industrial complex, helped prompt a climate where Congress viewed the change as a valuable step in domestic policies in fighting the Cold War. In the weeks after Docherty’s sermon, individual members of Congress scrambled to propose bills to change the pledge, with at least 16 resolutions being introduced in just the House (nine from Republicans and seven from Democrats) in addition to two resolutions proposed in the Senate.⁵⁶ Representative Rabaut, who had failed to get much traction on the bill the year before, was one of the most vocal proponents of the change. He reintroduced House Joint Resolution 243 within five days of Docherty’s sermon. In justifying the amendment, Rabaut drew directly from Docherty’s sermon, invoking the public memory of Abraham Lincoln, arguing the pledge was too generic and that even “little muscovite [sic] children” could say the pledge. He further quoted Docherty while emphasizing that belief in God is part of “the American way of life” and that “an atheistic American...is a contradiction in terms.”⁵⁷ Docherty’s sermon would continue to be a model for political leaders’ justification of the revised pledge

Congress relied on three primary arguments to support the addition: the need for spiritual defense against atheistic communism, the historical precedents of Americans recognizing God, and the power of the pledge as an educational tool.⁵⁸ These arguments relied on the rhetoric of prophetic dualism and worked together as a form of containment rhetoric that framed atheism as a danger to the United States while attempting to constitute the American people as theistic. Like Docherty, they carefully framed their support for the change, and the containment it would produce, in a way that could appeal to both liberal pluralists and Christian nationalists. Notably,

they also supported the change by claiming that there was universal support for the bill across the nation. This latter argument, however, is one I will explore more in depth in the next chapter.

Spiritual Defense

Members of Congress were quick to utilize prophetic dualism to frame the change to the pledge as an act of spiritual defense at the domestic level. Just three days after Docherty's sermon, there were calls in the U.S. Senate, led by Republican Senator Homer S. Ferguson from Michigan, to add the phrase to the pledge to support a spiritual national defense. Drawing on the same prophetic dualism that Docherty invoked, Ferguson argued that the modification was necessary because:

it highlights one of the real fundamental differences between the free world and the Communist world, namely, belief in God....Spiritual values are every bit as important to the defense and safety of our Nation as are military and economic values. America must be defended by the spiritual values which exist in the hearts and souls of the American people. . . .We have an infinite lead over the Communists, in terms of our spiritual and moral values because of our firm belief in God and because of the spiritual bankruptcy of the Communists.⁵⁹

Through framing the Cold War as a moral and spiritual battle and tying that morality specifically to the belief in God, Ferguson painted a picture where the United States needed to advance a domestic spiritual defense to maintain their "lead" over Communist morality. Incorporating a recognition of God into the pledge was framed as clear way to promote this defense while distinguishing the United States from the U.S.S.R. Ferguson's statement is reflective of similar arguments various congressmembers including Representatives Rabaut (Democrat, Michigan), Charles Oakman (Republican, Michigan), Peter Rodino (Democrat, New Jersey), Usher L. Burdick (Republican, North Dakota), Charles A. Wolverton (Republican, New Jersey), and Barratt O'Hara (Democrat, Illinois), would reiterate over the next four months: That the "fundamental difference" between the United States and places ruled by communism was the

belief in God. While the United States was framed as morally superior, congressmembers suggested that, in order to remain so, actions needed to be taken to advocate and defend the spiritual values that, they argued, defined the American people.

The form of prophetic dualism the members of Congress invoked was founded in justifying domestic policies that would help keep the U.S. moral and on the side of God. The notion that by adding “under God” to the pledge Congress was performing an act of defense, reflects how the legislation to change the ritual functioned as part of the spiritual-industrial complex. Representative Oakman pointed to the need of such a complex, arguing, “[w]e take pride in the new look we have given our powerful military machine. I believe we need a new look just as urgently in our spiritual armor.”⁶⁰ Representative O’Hara acknowledged that this was not necessarily a traditional approach to defense but that contemporary contexts must lead to modern solutions.⁶¹ Such modern defense strategies would involve domestic policies that helped build a “spiritual armor” in the hearts and minds of those who said the pledge. Changing the traditional pledge to a theistic one was framed as a logical and strategic form of defense within the spiritual-industrial complex to help strengthen this armor

This spiritual defense was a domestic version of the foreign containment strategy. It suppressed communism through the containment of atheism, and by association, secularism. Members of Congress emphasized that atheism was not just a value of communism but the foundation of it. As such, atheism could be framed as a threat to democracy if it was allowed to infiltrate the United States in great numbers. While there had always been Atheists in the United States, the rise of the freethought movement and secularism in the late 1800s and early 1900s had resulted in growing interest in the intellectual arguments of atheism and freethought.⁶² The Red Scare and coinciding reinvigoration of Christian nationalists stifled the movement greatly.⁶³

The emphasis to contain the spread of atheistic or strict secularist ideas became a central argument within the development of the spiritual-industrial complex. In his February statement on proposing the change, Rabaut argued not only that belief in God was the “unbridgeable gap” between the United States and “Communist Russia” but that “[f]rom the root of atheism stems the evil weed of communism.”⁶⁴ He went on to warn that if the U.S. American people were not “willing to affirm our belief in the existence of God” then they would be “open[ing] the floodgate to tyranny and oppression.”⁶⁵ In case the message was not clear, Rabaut concluded with the reminder that “An atheistic American, as Dr. Docherty points out, is a contradiction in terms.”⁶⁶ Throughout the Cold War, political leaders often framed atheism and communism as synonymous or suggested that what made communism dangerous was the fact that it was atheistic.⁶⁷ Congress reiterated this fear of atheism by suggesting that communism was an atheistic concept and that atheism is the root cause of political dictatorship. Rabaut’s suggestion that failure to recognize God would lead to tyranny and his reinforcement of Docherty’s claim that an atheist American was a contradiction of terms framed atheism as the threat that needed to be contained. It reinforced the theistnormative myth, which tied together atheism and secularism, that a failure of the government and the people to recognize God would lead to democracy’s downfall. The revised pledge was framed as a way to contain the threat. In reiterating this point at a hearing for the resolution to change the pledge in the House of Representatives in May of 1954, Representative John R. Pillion (Republican, New York) argued that the addition would work “to deny the atheistic and materialistic concept of Communism.”⁶⁸ Ultimately, the change was framed as a rhetorical and spiritual defense against communism through the way it would deny the key characteristic that members of Congress associated with communism: godlessness.

Historical Precedents

In their use of prophetic dualism, congressmembers framed atheism as the foundation of communism and tyranny while juxtaposing the belief in God as the foundation of democracy and freedom. This association largely manifested in their second primary justification for the change to the pledge: that the change was an extension and celebration of U.S. religious heritage. They relied heavily on historical references to religion in the United States to promote the idea that the nation has always relied on theistic acknowledgments. In doing so, they painted a theistnormative picture where belief in God was tied to understandings of U.S. heritage. Many invoked founding documents to support their claim that belief in God is foundational to democracy. While God is not mentioned in the U.S. Constitution, several members invoked the reference to God in the Mayflower Compact, which Oakman argued was “the first constitution for complete self-government of the people.”⁶⁹ They also relied heavily on the Declaration of Independence, emphasizing that a Creator is referenced four times in the single document.⁷⁰ Rabaut suggested that the references to God by the founders demonstrates how the nation “is founded ‘under God,’” thus the change to the pledge was simply an extension of their beliefs.⁷¹ Beyond the founders, advocates of the change invoked quotes from other prominent U.S. Americans that suggested a recognition of God is invaluable for democratic success in the United States. Oakman, for example, pointed to a statement by William Penn, a prominent Quaker in the 17th century, who argued “[t]hose people who are not governed by God will be ruled by tyrants,” a quote that reflected both the Enlightenment wariness of atheism in relation to democracy and the contemporary fear of godless communism leading to tyranny.⁷² These historical references to the founding document and pre-revolutionary views promoted the congressmembers’ argument that the official acknowledgement of God was a truly U.S. American tradition. Oakman argued

that the current moment “calls for a return to the belief of our forefathers and their fervent faith in Almighty God,” emphasizing that, like their forefathers had, the current leadership needed to recognize “the inherent truth that any government of and by the people must look to God for divine leadership in order to protect itself from tyranny and despotism.”⁷³ Through their arguments, congressmembers suggested that the “founding fathers” would have fully supported their current legislation and thus their legislation was simply an extension of the U.S. religious heritage. K,m

To justify the specific phrase “under God,” most of the congressmembers, like Docherty, drew on the public memory of Lincoln and framed their actions as ones that Lincoln would have taken. Representative Melvin R. Laird (Republican, Wisconsin) quoted the end of the Gettysburg Address in full arguing that “President Lincoln recognized that only under God could this nation win a new birth of freedom.”⁷⁴ David Zarefsky argues that presidents have immense power when it comes to defining political reality through their rhetoric.⁷⁵ They shape political reality both while they are alive and in how they and their rhetoric are remembered. Abraham Lincoln has a particularly “sacred place in our public memory.”⁷⁶ By emphasizing that recognizing the country as “under God” was Lincoln’s idea, Congress could frame themselves as champions of freedom in similar ways that Lincoln was understood in public memory.

Advocates also looked to the motto “In God We Trust,” another prominent piece of theistnormative legislation, to support their claim that there is historical precedence for their current legislation.⁷⁷ In doing so, members of Congress not only associated the new pledge with the motto but appealed to the Christian nationalist sentiments that had long been tied to the motto. Representative Oakman also pointed to the use of the motto on coins, along with the public memory of Lincoln, noting that Congress first put the motto on coins during Lincoln’s

presidency. He went on to cite the letter send from the Secretary of the Treasury, Samuel P. Chase, to the Director of the Mint about the change in which Chase proclaimed: “No nation can be strong except in His defense. The trust of our people in God should be declared on our national coins.”⁷⁸ Oakman went on to implore: “If this recommendation has been followed in a material symbol such as our coins, should not the same idea be infinitely more appropriate in relation to the pledge of allegiance to our flag and country.”⁷⁹ In Oakman’s framing, having already had material evidence to demonstrate that the United States was a theistic collective that relied on God for defense was proof that a similar reference was necessary for the ritualistic pledge to the flag and country. Similarly, Ferguson pointed to “In God We Trust,” which had been carved above the south entrance of the Senate chamber during a 1950-1951 renovation, and its implications for national defense when arguing that “[u]nless those words amount to more than a carving in stone, our country will never be able to defend itself. Those words must have a very real meaning in the heart of every American.”⁸⁰ Members of Congress associated the recognition of God in the pledge as an extension of the motto “In God We Trust.” As noted in the previous chapter, however, the motto’s initial use on coins was largely a Christian nationalist campaign. It was later defended by Congress in 1909 as a way to not only spread “Christian thought and Christian ideas” but to help stamp infidelity (atheism) “out of our country.”⁸¹ In other words, it an example of theistnormative symbolism aimed at promoting the association of theism and U.S. identity while containing atheism and simultaneously promoting Christian nationalism. While members of Congress were generally careful to avoid explicit Christian nationalist appeals during the 1954 hearing on changing the pledge, the notion that “In God We Trust” and “under God” were similar symbols in the way they inform U.S. Americans about their identity suggested an appeal to Christian nationalism.

Ultimately, members of Congress utilized a public memory of a democratic U.S. religious heritage that justified the addition of the phrase “under God” to the pledge. This public memory was reliant on the myth of religious tolerance, insofar as it painted a picture of consensus about the role of religion in politics and culture in the United States. In doing so, atheism and secularism were contained because they did not fit into the national history where belief in God was a foundational value that drove U.S. democracy. Furthermore, other more recent theist normative symbols, specifically the motto “In God We Trust,” were further normalized within the narrative of U.S. political and religious heritage as inherent symbols of what values united U.S. Americans. Such symbols represented the supposed true meaning of U.S. democracy that Americans needed to recognize in order to defend themselves against an atheistic enemy that was incompatible with the traditional U.S. values that were tied to the supposedly shared religious heritage.

Educating the People

The need to remind or, more specifically, educate the public about the “true meaning” of the United States and the importance of God as a democratic value was the third prominent selling point for the addition of “under God” to the pledge. While members of Congress were particularly concerned about the education of children, they framed the change as an important step for reminding *all* Americans about the value of acknowledging God. In doing so, adding “under God” to the pledge was framed as legislation that would help to achieve the educational component of the spiritual-industrial complex. Education was a major focus for advocates of the complex who were concerned about how to protect children from communist ideologies. Within the framing of prophetic dualism, there could be no compromise between godless communism and God-loving/fearing Americans and thus godless communism could not be allowed to

infiltrate the United States. On the domestic front, however, there was a realization that it already had, to a degree, and so the focus was on containing its spread within U.S. borders. Children were seen as a particularly vulnerable part of the population who could be corrupted by the godless communism that had already infiltrated the spiritual nation. J. Edgar Hoover wrote in his popular book *Masters of Deceit* that “[i]n American today many hundreds of children, growing up in communist homes, are captives of this alien ideology. These youngsters are taught from the earliest years that God does not exist.”⁸² While Hoover published his book in 1958, it reflected a fear that had driven much of the action of the spiritual-industrial complex. For example, on February 7, 1954, the same day as Docherty’s sermon, the American Legion, an influential organization behind the spiritual-industrial complex, aired their annual “Back to God” campaign. This program encouraged U.S. Americans to engage in three religious acts to help protect them against communism: regularly attending church, praying daily, and educating children about religion.⁸³

In step with the goals of the spiritual-industrial complex, political leaders framed the change to the pledge as a way to educate children about the importance of religion in the United States, even if they were not getting that education at home. Rodino, for example, argued that the change would ensure that students would recall that, when they say the pledge of allegiance, “they do so with recognition of God.” He contended that this recognition was particularly important as society faced “the godless Communists who recognize no God.”⁸⁴ Rodino’s claim aligned with Hoover’s later suggestion that the godlessness of communism was a threat to children who needed to be taught to recognize God. The pledge of allegiance was portrayed as a valuable educational tool that would help educate and remind children that, as U.S. Americans, they were part of a theistic collective.

This education was explicitly tied to the notion that belief in God was necessary for good citizenship. Rabaut argued that adding the phrase to the motto would set the foundation for children to grow to become productive and moral citizens when he claimed:

the children of our land, in the daily recitation of the pledge in school, will be daily impressed with a true understanding of our way of life and origins. As they grow and advance in this understanding, they will assume the responsibilities of self-government equipped to carry on the traditions that have been given to us. Fortify our youth in their allegiance to the flag by their education of ‘on nation under God.’”⁸⁵

Rabaut’s statement suggests the theistnormative idea that good citizenship and allegiance to America relies on a belief in and recognition of God. The pledge was not just an educational tool but a form of *civic* training that would help shape students into respectable and virtuous citizens.

It was not just children who members of Congress suggested needed to be educated. Rabaut argued that the addition would bring “the true meaning of our country and its form of government” into “the consciousness of the American people.”⁸⁶ While children were the greatest concern, a general fear that drove the spiritual-industrial complex was that the people were turning away from God and spirituality, which reflected the anxieties surrounding secularism. The people needed to be reminded of the important role God played and thus turn “back to God.” It was the government’s responsibility to remind the American people of the “true meaning” of the United States and democracy. Additionally, the change to the pledge would function to educate the world about the importance of God to American democracy and the American people. This ideas was exemplified in Rodino’s expressed belief that “all the more we must make evident to the people of the world that our strength is through God and, as a democracy, we will be better able to survive if we recognize this fact.”⁸⁷ “Under God” in the pledge was intended to function as evidence not only to U.S. citizens but to the entire world about the necessity of acknowledging God in a successful democracy. In an uncompromising

world being fought over by godly champions of freedom and godless tyrants, U.S. Americans and the world needed to be reminded of how belief in God was a characteristic of those on the side of good.

These three strategic justifications for revising the pledge: a modern need for spiritual defense against atheistic communism, connecting belief in God to U.S. religious heritage, and the need for education, all advanced a theistnormative narrative in which belief in God was associated with U.S. identity and secularism/atheism were framed as ideologies that needed to be contained. They are reflective of the wider goals of the spiritual-industrial complex to create a religious revival amongst the U.S. American people that was seen as a form of defense during the Cold War. It is notable, however, that these justifications were largely framed in broad theistnormative appeals which made the legislation appear inclusive, other than the clear scapegoating of Atheists.

A Pluralist/Nationalist Appeal

Part of what made these three strategies effective was the way that members of Congress were able to skillfully navigate the anxieties surrounding both liberal pluralists and Christian nationalism while simultaneously appealing to both. As a piece of theistnormative legislation, the call to add “under God” to the pledge was successful because its vagueness could be interpreted differently depending on individuals’ perspectives. Just as Docherty had appealed simultaneously to liberal pluralists and Christian nationalists in his single sermon, congressmembers were careful to frame their legislation as one that was inclusive and aligned with the First Amendment by not establishing a religion while also reinforcing notions that theistic religions, specifically Christianity, deserved a privileged position within understandings of U.S. identity. Within such narratives Atheists remained a group that Christian nationalists and

many religious pluralists seemed to be willing to exclude from being part of the understandings of who “the people,” and, as such, good citizens were.

As secularism in the first sense had increasingly become a prominent force in the United States, with the Supreme Court emphasizing the notion that there was a “wall of separation between church and state” in *Everson v. Board of Education* just seven years earlier, members of Congress had to be careful to frame this domestic policy as constitutional. In doing so, they simultaneously validated and contained secularism by confirming the notion of there being a “wall of separation” but offering a narrow definition of what that separation should mean. This balancing act was particularly evident within the rhetoric of Representative Oakman. Oakman offered one of the most comprehensive defenses for why the addition was not unconstitutional in his February 10 statement, though his ideas drew heavily from Docherty’s sermon and were ones he did not seem to find necessary to repeat at the later, more private, congressional hearings on the issue. First, he reinforced Docherty’s claim that the phrase “under God” was “inclusive of all religions” and “has no reference whatever to the establishment of a state church.”⁸⁸ In doing so, however, he reinforced the notion that “all religions” involve a belief in God, a move that excluded atheistic religions and Atheists from the inclusion.⁸⁹ The second part of his argument pointed to the often contentious question of what exactly the clause “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion” in the U.S. Constitution meant.⁹⁰ Oakman interpreted the clause as specifically being about establishing an official state church and he made an appeal to secularists when he claimed that one could recognize the state was “founded upon a belief in God” while still accepting “the doctrine of separate church and state.” After all, “a distinction,” he argued, “exists between the church as an institution and the belief in the sovereignty of God.”⁹¹ Through Oakman’s interpretation of the First Amendment, as long as the federal

government did not privilege one particular church, the government could advance religious principles. In this case, having the government confirm that the United States viewed itself as “under God” was not an establishment of religion but an acknowledgement about a fact of what the people and government believed about where power comes from.

Unlike his colleagues, Oakman’s argument went so far as to suggest that the addition did not exclude Atheists. His argument reflects a more liberal use of theist normative logics, one that suggests that being a non-theist is a right within a democracy yet simultaneously suggesting that Atheists should be willing to show reverence to religious symbols and the idea that democracy depends on the sovereignty of a God they do not believe in. He contended:

the right of a person to disbelieve in God [is] a fundamental of free democracy. However, [there] is a vast difference in making a positive affirmation on the existence of God in whom one does not believe, and on the other hand making a pledge of allegiance and loyalty to the flag of a country which in its underlying philosophy recognizes the existence of God.⁹²

Notably, Oakman’s defense is incredibly similar to that used by Judge J. Frank McLaughlin two years earlier when he denied Walter Plywaski citizenship after he requested an alternative to saying “So help me God” in his oath to citizenship because he was an Atheist.⁹³ McLaughlin defended the decision by arguing that, while he respected a person’s right to be an Atheist, “if you join an organization that has principles based on the existence of a Supreme Being.... you must abide by the rules of that organization.”⁹⁴ The notion that a person has a right to be an Atheist but as a U.S. American they must be willing to openly acknowledge God reflects how Atheists are only tolerated under strict conditions in which Atheists must be willing to put their American identity above their irreligious one. Notably, Oakman’s statement contrasted the repeated claim that an Atheist American is a “contradiction of terms.” This inconsistency reflects

how, while some advocates were willing to be inclusive of Atheists, to an extent, blatant dismissals of Atheists as citizens were not grounds for pause when considering the legislation.

Throughout the hearings, many of the advocates of the change refrained from using explicit Christian language. There were, however, exceptions. Representative Wolverton, when speaking about the historical references to God, argued that “[n]othing could make more plain [the founders’] intention to make this a Christian Nation than to study the early statutes and laws of our several colonies.”⁹⁵ Wolverton’s argument both drew on the notion that the vague use of “God” was a reference to the Christian God and pointed to the power of Christian nationalism at the state level during colonial times. The memory of the influence of Christian nationalism in states was framed as proof that the United States was, and should continue to be, a “Christian nation.” Representative E.L. “Tic” Forrester (Democrat, Georgia), who made the final statement of the day at the May 5 hearing, offered one of the most explicit appeals to Christian nationalism when he proclaimed:

I do not think any member of this committee would dispute the fact that this nation was born under God. About the only statement I would like to make would be to state that we do not have to start with the Declaration of Independence. But on the first page of the Holy Bible, I think from the very beginning to the end of that book we will learn that any nation that is not under the leadership of God will perish. I think that is absolutely proven. Nations perish just as individuals perish when we do not accept God Almighty as our leader and director. . . . We had a spiritual birth and we have to keep spiritual if we are to ever maintain democracy because that is the only way on earth that democracy can exist.⁹⁶

Forrester’s, along with Wolverton’s, comments suggest a clear interpretation that the phrase “under God” specifically references Christianity, or at best Judeo-Christianity. Forrester used Christian nationalist appeals to justify the theistnormative legislation by invoking the “Holy Bible” and arguing that nations and individuals “perish” when they fail to “accept God Almighty.” In doing so, he advanced the notion that democracy needs a government and citizens

who believe in the God of the Bible in order to survive. As will be outlined further in the next chapter, several members of Congress had emphasized that all religions supported the change which helped them defend the legislation as not privileging one religion over others. Yet, when Forrester completed his statement, the specific invoking of Christianity, while seeming to contradict other senators' statements that the change was more broadly representative of "all religions," was not questioned by the hearing committee and stood as the final word on the matter for the hearing. One month later, on June 14 of 1954, President Eisenhower signed Rabaut's bill into law, officially changing the pledge of allegiance into a theistnormative ritual.

Conclusion

Fifty years after "under God" was added to the pledge, Justice O'Connor contended that anyone familiar with the history or context surrounding the pledge would conclude that the phrase was an example of ceremonial deism because it did not send a message to "nonadherents that they are outsiders" nor did it send "an accompanying message to adherents that they are insiders, favored members of the political community."⁹⁷ Yet, the rhetorical history analyzing the justifications for the change when the phrase was implemented reveals a different narrative. It reflects how the 1954 legislation to change the pledge into a theistnormative ritual was a part of the spiritual-industrial complex that framed those who believed in God as insiders and those who did not as dangerous outsiders. Rather than being a benign example of ceremonial deism, the phrase "under God" is a product of the Red Scare and the containment narratives of the 1950s that offered the illusion of consensus where there was coercion.

The arguments used to justify adding "under God" to the pledge constituted the American people as a theistic body. Throughout the hearing, congressmembers described the American people as believers in a higher power and framed the addition as a move that would remind

people of those beliefs. The notion that the change was meant to constitute the American people as believers in a higher power became particularly evident when members were debating whether “under God” should go after the word “indivisible” or “under God” in the pledge.

Representative Rodino successfully argued:

I think there is one thing we might bear in mind. That is, when we put the words “under God” after “one nation” it would be apparent that we recognize the Almighty rather than that the Almighty keeps us indivisible. The important thing is that we re-affirm our recognition of the Creator.⁹⁸

Rodino made it clear that the change was meant to be a statement of what “we the people” believed in: God.

Docherty’s and congressmembers’ justifications for the change, demonstrate how the phrase “under God” was added to the pledge of allegiance to evolve it into a theistnormative ritual that not only reminded U.S. Americans they were a theistic collective but that could work to contain atheism and secularism. While a few advocates downplayed how the motto excluded Atheists, the expectation became clear that people should be theistic or at the very least put aside their non-theistic identities to show reverence to a God they did not believe in to show loyalty to their country. Throughout their justification for the revised pledge, they framed the threat of communism as stemming specifically from godlessness and strict secularism. By extensively tying belief in God to the success of democracy, they framed Atheism as a “contradiction of terms” and strict secularism as incompatible with traditional understandings of the role of religion and politics. Such incompatibility, in turn, suggested atheism and strict secularism was a threat that needed to be contained. Adding “under God” to the pledge transformed it into a theistnormative tool of containment that could contain atheism and secularism (and, in turn, communism) through having citizens participate in a ritual in which they openly associated U.S. identity with a recognition that democratic values come from God. In doing so, those

participating in the pledge were encouraged to see themselves as part of a theistic collective and atheists/secularists as outsiders.

As an example of secular rhetorical criticism, this chapter reflects on the necessity of examining how specific religio-political discourses and symbols were established in order to better understand how they function and who they might exclude. While political leaders and scholars have dismissed the phrase as “ceremonial deism” or “civil religion” which both suggest that the phrase is unifying and reflective of a shared religious heritage, this chapter challenges this assumption by demonstrating how “under God” was added to the pledge, through the efforts of religious and political leaders, to transform it into a theistnormative ritual aimed at persuading audiences to see themselves as a theistic collective. The use of the phrase in the pledge is a product of the spiritual-industrial complex that arose alongside the Red Scare. While judges and scholars have suggested that the vagueness of the phrase “God” proves that it is non-coercive, this chapter utilizes a secular rhetorical criticism lens to resist this conclusion. Rather, by considering how leaders needed to negotiate between the competing values of religious pluralism and Christian nationalism, I contend that the vague use of God points to its strategic dualism. It could be read vaguely as a God that any theist could appreciate while simultaneously being read as the Christian God. Meanwhile, Atheists were consistently scapegoated as those who do not need to be tolerated within a religiously plural society, unless they were willing to set aside their atheistic identities for the good of the country. The question of whether any theist could truly appreciate or being included, however, was never explicitly addressed throughout the justifications. While Docherty pointed to Muslims being able to be included within the new pledge, Congress never confirmed they wanted Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, or those practicing various indigenous faiths to be included.

By utilizing a secular rhetorical criticism lens, this chapter also calls on scholars to reconsider the rhetorical strategy of prophetic dualism, particularly how it was used to push domestic narratives and policies aimed at containing atheism and secularism. Prophetic dualism is a theistnormative discourse in that it advances the notion that the recognition of God is what unites good, democratic people while associating godlessness with a threat to democracy. Beyond just being theistnormative, however, the use of prophetic dualism in the defense of the revised pledge also contained secularism. Secularism that would call on a government not to recognize the sovereignty of God, was framed as dangerous. As such, secularism was contained to a narrow definition of separation of church and state that only applied to the establishment of a state church. The addition of the phrase “under God” to the pledge of allegiance was portrayed as an important piece of domestic policy because it reminded people of their theistic nature as well as making it clear that secularism should not be read as a strict separation of church and state. It is imperative for scholars who align themselves with the goals of secular rhetorical criticism to consider how prophetic dualism, as a rhetorical strategy, has reinforced theistnormativity and contain dissenters of religious hegemonic hierarchies.

This chapter has outlined how Docherty and Congress utilized prophetic dualism to advance their cause and how they appealed to both religious pluralists and Christian nationalists. I outlined how Congress specifically utilized three strategic justifications for revising the pledge: arguing for the need for spiritual defense against atheistic communism, connecting belief in God to U.S. religious heritage, and framing the revised pledge as an educational tool. In doing so, they drew heavily on Docherty’s sermon, which utilized similar justifications. I also alluded, however, to a fourth justification that members of Congress relied on: the notion that there was universal support for the bill across the nation. The next chapter explores this justification

further, the consequences such justification had on containing dissent during the Red Scare, and the possibility of alternative research methods for uncovering those silenced voices.

NOTES

- ¹ Justice O'Connor, "Concurring Opinion," *Elk Grove Unified School District v. Newdow*, No. 02-1624 (June 14, 2004).
- ² O'Connor, "Concurring Opinion."
- ³ O'Connor, "Concurring Opinion."
- ⁴ O'Connor, "Concurring Opinion."
- ⁵ O'Connor, "Concurring Opinion."
- ⁶ Justice Rehnquist, "Concurring Opinion," *Elk Grove Unified School District v. Newdow*, No. 02-1624 (June 14, 2004).
- ⁷ Jonathan P. Herzog, *The Spiritual-Industrial Complex: America's Religious Battle Against Communism in the Early Cold War* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 150.
- ⁸ Philip Wander, "The Rhetoric of American Foreign Policy," in *Cold War Rhetoric: Strategy Metaphor, and Ideology*, eds., Martin J. Medhurst, Robert L. Ivie, Philip Wander, and Robert L. Scott (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1997).
- ⁹ Ryan Neville-Shepard, "Containment Rhetoric and the Redefinition of Third-Parties in the Equal Time Debates of 1959," *Communication Quarterly* 66, no. 5 (2018): 523, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01463373.2018.1458041>.
- ¹⁰ Kristan Poirot, "Domesticating the Liberated Woman: Containment Rhetorics of Second Wave Radical Lesbian Feminism," *Women's Studies in Communication* 32, no. 3 (2009): 265, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2009.10162391>
- ¹¹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 3.
- ¹² Peter Ives, *Language and Hegemony in Gramsci* (London: Pluto Press, 2004).
- ¹³ Alan Nadel, *Containment Culture: American Narratives, Postmodernism, and the atomic Age* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), x
- ¹⁴ Ross Singer, "Framing of Elite Corruption and Rhetorical Containment of Reform in the Boeing-Air Force Tanker Controversy," *Southern Communication Journal* 76, no. 2 (2011): 98, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10417940903180167>.
- ¹⁵ John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy During the Cold War* (Oxford University Press, 2005); Elizabeth Edwards Spalding, *The First Cold Warrior: Harry Truman, Containment, and the Remaking of Liberal Internationalism* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2006).
- ¹⁶ Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books: 1988); Nadel, *Containment Culture*.
- ¹⁷ Nadel, *Containment Culture*, 6.
- ¹⁸ May, *Homeward Bound*. Also see Nadel, *Containment Culture*, 117-154.
- ¹⁹ Nadel, *Containment Culture*, 4.
- ²⁰ Jane Sherron De Hart, "Recreating Founding Paradigms: The Cold War and America's National Identity," in *The Unfolding of America's National Identity*, edited by Roland Hagenbuchle and Josef Rabb (Tubingen: Stauffenburg, 1999), 350
- ²¹ Notably, in the United States, religious containment narratives often function to uphold the specific Christian status quo. For example, Christopher Duerringer argues that the more contemporary discourses surrounding the "war on Christianity" represent "a particular rhetorical strategy of containment available to the hegemon. They attempt to reframe policies aimed at

restorative justice and pluralism as unjust, unprovoked offenses against a natural order” In other words, alternative calls for more pluralistic discourses and practices that challenge Christian privilege are reframed as attempts to persecute Christians. Christopher Duerringer, “The ‘War on Christianity’: Counterpublicity or Hegemonic Containment?,” *Southern Communication Journal* 78, no. 4 (2013): 323, <https://doi.org/0.1080/1041794X.2013.792866>.

²² Herzog, *The Spiritual-Industrial Complex*, 111.

²³ John Foster Dulles, “A Religious Faith,” *Life*, December 28, 1942,

²⁴ Nadel, *Containment Culture*, 3.

²⁵ Nadel, *Containment Culture*, 114.

²⁶ Wander, “Rhetoric of American Foreign Policy,” 157.

²⁷ Wander, “Rhetoric of American Foreign Policy,” 157.

²⁸ Mary E. Stuckey, “Competing Foreign Policy Visions: Rhetorical Hybrids After the Cold War,” *Western Journal of Communication* 59, no. 3 (1995): 214-227, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10570319509374518>; Wander, “Rhetoric of American Foreign Policy”; Jamie Warner, “Tyranny of the Dichotomy: Prophetic Dualism, Irony, and *The Onion*,” *The Electronic Journal of Communication* 18, nos. 2, 3 & 4 (2008), <http://www.cios.org/www/ejc/EJCPUBLIC/018/2/01841.html>; Kenneth S. Zagacki, “Constitutive Rhetoric Reconsidered: Constitutive Paradoxes in G. W. Bush's Iraq War Speeches” *Western Journal of Communication* 71, no. 4 (2007): 272-293, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10570310701653786>.

²⁹ Wander, “Rhetoric of American Foreign Policy”; Also see, Stuckey, “Competing Foreign Policy Visions,” 216.

³⁰ Wander, “Rhetoric of American Foreign Policy,” 158.

³¹ Recently there has been some debate as to whether Bellamy actually wrote the pledge or if he had in fact plagiarized it from a 13-year-old boy. See: Sam Roberts, “We Know the Pledge. Its Author, Maybe Not,” *New York Times* April 2, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/02/us/pledge-of-allegiance-francis-bellamy.html>.

³² For overviews of the history of the Pledge of Allegiance, see: Lee Canipe, “Under God and Anti-Communist: How the Pledge of Allegiance Got Religion in Cold War America,” *Journal of Church and State* 45, no. 2 (2003): 305–323, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcs/45.2.305>; Richard J. Ellis, *To the Flag: The Unlikely History of the Pledge of Allegiance* (The University Press of Kansas, 2005).

³³ K. Healan Gaston, *Imagining Judeo-Christian America* (University of Chicago Press, 2019), 10.

³⁴ In 1892, Benjamin Harrison became the first president to use the phrase after Lincoln. While, according to the *Presidency Project* database, Woodrow Wilson, Warren G. Harding, and Herbert Hoover each used the phrase once during their presidencies, the phrase itself did not become popular by the use of presidents until World War II, where Franklin D. Roosevelt invoked the phrase at least seven times between 1941 and 1945. By the late 1940s and early 1950s, political and religious leaders increasingly relied on theistnormative narratives in their framing of the Cold War and the notion that the United States was, and needed to remain, a nation “under God” became increasingly popular with the growing fear of the implications of secularism and atheism. As Gaston argues, when the Cold War intensified, people “regarded totalitarianism as the apotheosis of nonbelief—the political outcome of the West's increasing secularity and moral relativism” and many believed that “only states whose citizens and leaders saw them as truly 'under God' could withstand this temptation and avoid devolving into

totalitarianism.” President Harry Truman referred the United States as being “under God” at least 17 times throughout his presidency. By the time Eisenhower won the presidency in 1952, the notion that the nation was “under God” was well established within the U.S. American lexicon. The common use of the phrase, and its connection to President Lincoln would become important in the arguments used to justify adding the phrase to the official United States pledge of allegiance two years later. See: Gaston, *Imagining Judeo-Christian America*, 14.

³⁵ Ellis, *To the Flag*, 131. While the Knights of Columbus have claimed credit for the addition that came in 1954. Yet, while they may have set the groundwork for the addition, their petitions seemed to do little to motivate members of Congress make the change. See: Knights of Columbus, “How the words “UNDER GOD” came to be added to the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag,” accessed June 13, 2021,

<https://www.kofc.org/un/en/resources/communications/pledgeAllegiance.pdf>.

³⁶ George M. Docherty, ““UNDER GOD’ Sermon,” Christian Heritage Ministries, February 7, 1954 (Archives), 1-2.

³⁷ George M. Docherty, *I’ve Seen the Day* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1984),

³⁸ Docherty, “UNDER GOD,” 2-3.

³⁹ Docherty, “UNDER GOD,” 3.

⁴⁰ Docherty, “UNDER GOD,” 3-4.

⁴¹ Docherty, “UNDER GOD,” 4

⁴² Docherty, “UNDER GOD,” 4

⁴³ Docherty, “UNDER GOD,” 6-7.

⁴⁴ Docherty, “UNDER GOD,” 7.

⁴⁵ Docherty, “UNDER GOD,” 7.

⁴⁶ Docherty, “UNDER GOD,” 7-8.

⁴⁷ Docherty, “UNDER GOD,” 8-9.

⁴⁸ Docherty, “UNDER GOD,” 9.

⁴⁹ Docherty, “UNDER GOD,” 9.

⁵⁰ Docherty, “UNDER GOD,” 9.

⁵¹ Docherty, “UNDER GOD.”

⁵² Docherty, *I’ve Seen the Day*, 159.

⁵³ Ellis, *To the Flag*, 133; Kevin Kruse, *One Nation Under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), 107.

⁵⁴ I address this campaign, which was primarily pushed by The Christophers, in the next chapter.

⁵⁵ Clayton Knowles, “Big Issue in D.C.: The Oath of Allegiance: Proposal to Change It Draws Heavy Mail On Capitol Hill,” *New York Times*, May 23, 1954, sec. review of the week editorials.

⁵⁶ Herzog, *The Spiritual-Industrial Complex*, 104.

⁵⁷ “Extension of Remarks of Hon. Louis C. Rabaut of Michigan,” Congressional Record-House, February 12, 1954, 1700.

⁵⁸ “H. J. Res. 243 and Other Bills on Pledge of Allegiance,” House of Representatives, subcommittee No. 5 of the Committee on the Judiciary May 5, 1954.

⁵⁹ Homer S. Ferguson, “Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag,” Congressional Record-Senate, February 10, 1954, 1600-1601.

⁶⁰ “Extension of Remarks of Hon. Charles G. Oakman of Michigan,” Congressional Record-House, February 12, 1954, 1697.

⁶¹ “Statement of the Honorable Barrett O’Hara, a Representative in Congress for the State of Illinois” in House of Representatives Subcommittee No. 5 of the Committee on the Judiciary “H.J. Res. 243 and Other Bills of Pledge of Allegiance,” May 5, 1954, 32-33.

⁶² Eric Chalfant, “Atheism in America,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*, January 24, 2018, <https://oxfordre.com/religion/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.001.0001/acrefore-9780199340378-e-420>; R. Laurence Moore and Isaac Kramnick, *Godless Citizens in a Godly Republic: Atheists in American Public Life*. (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2018); Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Village Atheists: How America’s Unbelievers Made Their Way in a Godly Nation* (Princeton University Press: 2016).

⁶³ For example, E. Haldeman-Julius’s popular “Little Blue Books” sold between 300-500 million copies between 1919 and 1949. While the books addressed a variety of topics, they were advertised as an “Appeal to Reason” and often addressed questions of religion and atheism. Demand for the publications only declined after WWII when J. Edgar Hoover put Haldeman-Julius on the “FBI’s enemies list,” another example of the strategic containment of secularism and atheism during the Cold War. See: Chalfant, “Atheism in America.”

⁶⁴ Rabaut, “February 12, 1954 Congressional Record—House,” 1700.

⁶⁵ Rabaut, “February 12, 1954 Congressional Record—House,” 1700.

⁶⁶ Rabaut, “February 12, 1954 Congressional Record—House,” 1700.

⁶⁷ Kristina M. Lee, “Constituting the Un-American Atheist: Eisenhower’s Theistnormativity and the Negation of American Atheists.” (Master’s Thesis, Colorado State University, 2018).

⁶⁸ “Statement of the Honorable John R. Pillion, a Representative in Congress for the State of New York” in House of Representatives Subcommittee No. 5 of the Committee on the Judiciary “H.J. Res. 243 and Other Bills of Pledge of Allegiance,” May 5, 1954, 11-12.

⁶⁹ “Statement of the Honorable Charles G. Oakman, a Representative in Congress for the State of Michigan,” in House of Representatives Subcommittee No. 5 of the Committee on the Judiciary “H.J. Res. 243 and Other Bills of Pledge of Allegiance,” May 5, 1954, 15.

⁷⁰ “Statement of the Honorable Peter W. Rodino, a Representative in Congress for the State of New Jersey,” in House of Representatives Subcommittee No. 5 of the Committee on the Judiciary “H.J. Res. 243 and Other Bills of Pledge of Allegiance,” May 5, 1954, 36.

⁷¹ “Statement of the Honorable Louis C. Rabaut, a Representative in Congress for the State of Michigan,” in House of Representatives Subcommittee No. 5 of the Committee on the Judiciary “H.J. Res. 243 and Other Bills of Pledge of Allegiance,” May 5, 1954, 5-6.

⁷² “Statement of the Honorable Charles G. Oakman,” 15.

⁷³ “Extension of Remarks of Hon. Charles G. Oakman,” 1697.

⁷⁴ “Statement of the Honorable Melvin R. Laird a Representative in Congress for the State of Wisconsin,” in House of Representatives Subcommittee No. 5 of the Committee on the Judiciary “H.J. Res. 243 and Other Bills of Pledge of Allegiance,” May 5, 1954, 25.

⁷⁵ David Zarefsky, “Presidential Rhetoric and the Power of Definition,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 34 (2004): 612.

⁷⁶ Kirt H. Wilson, “Debating the Great Emancipator: Abraham Lincoln and Our Public Memory,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 13, no. 3 (2010): 458, muse.jhu.edu/article/405026.

⁷⁷ Kristina M. Lee, “‘In God We Trust?’: Christian Nationalists’ Utilization of Theistnormative Legislation,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 52, no. 5 (2022): in-press.

⁷⁸ Extension of Remarks of Hon. Charles G. Oakman of Michigan,” 1697.

⁷⁹ Extension of Remarks of Hon. Charles G. Oakman of Michigan,” 1697.

⁸⁰ Ferguson, “Pledge of Allegiance,” 1601

⁸¹ Lee, “‘In God We Trust?,”” in press.

⁸² J. Edgar Hoover, *Masters of Deceit* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1958), *Kindle Edition* 100. Notably, Hoover was a leading voice in advocating the containment of non-theism. In his book he argued that “The Communist Party is attempting to exploit the rise of materialism, irreligion, and lack of faith in our society,” 102.

⁸³ “The American Legion ‘Back to God’ Handbook,” Box 787, Central Files, Presidents Personal File: American Legion 1954-1955 (1), American Legion 1956-1957 (2), Eisenhower Presidential Library.

⁸⁴ “Statement of the Honorable Peter W. Rodino,” 37.

⁸⁵ “Statement of the Honorable Louis C. Rabaut,” 8.

⁸⁶ “Statement of the Honorable Louis C. Rabaut,” 7.

⁸⁷ “Statement of the Honorable Peter W. Rodino,” 37.

⁸⁸ “Extension of Remarks of Hon. Charles G. Oakman,” 1697.

⁸⁹ This move also excluded polytheistic religions which reflects how U.S. theistnormativity is explicitly monotheistic.

⁹⁰ James Arnt Aune, “Three Justices in Search of Historical Truth: Romance and Tragedy in the Rhetoric of Establishment Clause Jurisprudence,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 2, no. 4 (1999): 573-597, <https://doi.org/10.1353/rap.2010.0068>; Leonard W. Levy, *The Establishment Clause: Religion and the First Amendment* (University of North Carolina Press, 1994); Sehat, *The Myth of American Religious Freedom*, 35-45.

⁹¹ “Extension of Remarks of Hon. Charles G. Oakman,” 1697-1698.

⁹² “Extension of Remarks of Hon. Charles G. Oakman,” 1697-1698.

⁹³ Kristina M. Lee, “70 years ago Walter Plywaski fought for atheists’ right to become citizens – here’s why his story is worth remembering,” *The Conversation* August 2, 2021, <https://theconversation.com/70-years-ago-walter-plywaski-fought-for-atheists-right-to-become-citizens-heres-why-his-story-is-worth-remembering-164758>.

⁹⁴ “Religion: God's Country,” *Time*, May 4, 1953, <http://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,818392,00.html>.

⁹⁵ “Wolverton comments on Amending the Pledge of Allegiance,” Congressional Record-House, June 7, 1954, 7762.

⁹⁶ “Statement of the Honorable E.L. Forrester a Representative in Congress for the State of Georgia,” in House of Representatives Subcommittee No. 5 of the Committee on the Judiciary “H.J. Res. 243 and Other Bills of Pledge of Allegiance,” May 5, 1954, 39.

⁹⁷ O’Connor, “Concurring Opinion.”

⁹⁸ “Statement of the Honorable Peter W. Rodino,” 27.

CHAPTER THREE: RESISTING THE THEISTNORMATIVE RITUAL:
UTILIZING THE GOSSIP METHOD TO SPECULATE ABOUT CONTAINMENT AND
RESISTANCE

*“The citizens of this Nation have been neither timid nor unimaginative in challenging government practices as forbidden “establishments” of religion.... Given the vigor and creativity of such challenges, I find it telling that so little ire has been directed at the Pledge.”- Justice Sandra Day O’Connor, Concurring Opinion in Elk Grove Unified School Dist. v. Newdow, 542 U.S. 1 (2004)*¹

In her 2004 opinion on *Elk Grove Unified School District v. Newdow*, Justice O’Connor contended that there had been limited opposition to the phrase “under God” in the pledge over the past fifty years. She suggested that this lack of opposition points to there being a relative consensus that the words were not an establishment of religion. She pointed to several cases where students and teachers had challenged the teaching of specific religious topics as evidence that U.S. citizens were not hesitant to work to uphold the establishment clause in relation to schools and religion.² In terms of the phrase “under God,” O’Connor argued that, to her knowledge, the pledge had only been legally challenged three times, which she concluded suggested there was not serious contention over the pledge.³ In further pointing to the consensus, she suggested that one of the reasons there was not strong objection was that a “reasonable observer” who was “fully aware of our national history and the origins of such practices” would not consider the use of “under God” in the pledge “as signifying a government endorsement of any specific religion, or even of religion over non-religion.”⁴ While this latter narrative, that the pledge does not favor religion over non-religion, was challenged in the previous chapter, the former two aspects, that there was limited opposition and that it was not an endorsement of any specific religion are addressed here.⁵

Notably O'Connor's insistence that there has been limited objection to the pledge and that the phrase does not favor one religion over others reflects a similar defense that was used by U.S. congressmembers in 1954. Yet, like O'Connor's statement, there is reason to question these earlier claims. Legislators claimed that they had received thousands of letters from people of all different faiths in support of the change to the pledge. According to these legislators, if we were able to read the letters, we would find proof that there was overwhelming consensus from people of all religions that the U.S. American people wanted "under God" added to the pledge. Some members claimed they had not received any letters of opposition.⁶ Yet only a handful of these letters were specifically used within the court hearings. Most of the letters sent to Congress do not appear to have been preserved in archives, or, if they were, the representations⁷ of the letters in finding aids and collection descriptions make them difficult to track down.⁸ As such, we can only take these legislators, who have all long since passed, at their word on the content of the letters and who sent them.

Yet, there are good reasons to be skeptical of the assessments made by congressmembers at the time. To start, the very nature of the Cold War put pressure on people to offer the illusion of consensus in order to protect themselves of accusations of being communists and, thus, un-American. Additionally, it was overwhelmingly Christian organizations, specifically ones that advocated Christian nationalist ideologies, which were campaigning the hardest for the change, which suggests it may not have been as religiously neutral as members of Congress claimed. Perhaps the most damning evidence against congressmembers' claims are the archived letters sent to President Eisenhower asking him to oppose the change. While we do not have hard evidence that members of Congress were knowingly misleading in their representation of the

support and opposition for the change, there are more than few reasons to support such a hypothesis.

The case of these letters calls for a novel rethinking of standards of proof in assessing historical discourses around opposition to the pledge change. As work in queer theory, feminist criticism, critical race studies, and archival studies has suggested, a desire for “hard evidence,” particularly when looking at historical narratives, is not a value free request. Rather, ideologically infused evidentiary standards and the politics of archives often silence the voices of marginalized groups—like Atheists and religious minorities—to perpetuate narratives that maintain hegemonic hierarchies.⁹ Marginalized voices are often constrained from the ability to produce texts or have their records preserved. This may be due to lack of resources, such as education, that would allow individuals to create records. It may be a result of archival practices which only preserve the voices of those with power, deemed worthy of remembering.¹⁰ Such constraints may also be the result of social norms that pressure individuals with non-normative identities to hide their identity. Thus, when scholars are compelled to only produce arguments that can be backed by physical evidence in records, they become constrained in what arguments they can make and about whom. As José Esteban Muñoz suggests, there are “ideological underpinnings” in scholarly principles such as “rigor and evidence.”¹¹ When “good” evidence (and thus good arguments) are tied to record keeping, patriarchal, white supremacist, heteronormative hegemonies are maintained. Scholars in queer theory, feminist criticism, and critical race studies have argued that researchers need to expand notions of what constitutes valid evidence and methodology in order to challenge these ideological underpinnings perpetuated by traditional approaches to scholarship.

I contend that such practices also maintain religious hegemonies, and thus expanding approaches of what constitutes valid evidence is also necessary when engaging in the critical rhetorical study of religion. Further, I argue scholars engaged in secular rhetorical criticism should utilize and expand the methods suggested by work in critical queer, feminist, and racial rhetorical criticism that are focused on highlighting marginalized voices. Such methods can help challenge the christonormative and theistnormative ideological underpinnings of much of the work on religion in rhetorical studies, address how religious hegemonies are maintained at the expense of religious pluralism, and help shed light on the experiences of marginalized ir/religious groups.

In demonstrating such a practice in secular rhetorical criticism, I utilize what rhetorical scholar Pamela VanHaitsma calls the “gossip method” to analyze how members of Congress may have misrepresented the supposed “consensus” surrounding the support of the pledge. In doing so, I encourage readers to speculate about how legislators may have helped mask the influence of Christian nationalists on the change while silencing dissenting voices within the debate over the new pledge. Gossip is a rhetorical method that can be used to queer archival and historical documents and methods to draw connections about the experiences of marginalized groups that may not be saved in the records of archives, and, as result, for which we have no or limited physical evidence. This method allows scholars to speculate about how marginalized groups resisted their marginalization or navigated the norms of a society that often negated them.¹² In relation to the addition of “under God” to the pledge, for example, while we cannot know with certainty what was in the letters that were sent to Congress and what members may have omitted from their testimony, we can look for traces in the handful of letters preserved in the National Archives, the letters sent to Eisenhower about the legislation and preserved in the

Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library & Museum, and newspaper articles published at the time to speculate about how members misrepresented the correspondence they had received. By enacting a rhetorical methodology of gossip, I offer several potential narratives that challenge the claims of consensus that has been used to not only justify maintaining phrase “under God” in the pledge but which has allowed it to be accepted an example of a unifying “civil religion” within academic discourses.

This chapter proceeds as follows: First, I outline the prominence of the “consensus” narrative surrounding the addition of the phrase “under God” to the pledge of allegiance. Next, I provide an overview of the gossip method and its utility in the study of archived letters. I then utilize the gossip method to disrupt the dominant narrative surrounding support and opposition of the change. In doing so, I open up possibilities of alternative realities to that of a theistnormative consensus surrounding support for the phrase “under God” in the pledge.

Questioning the “Consensus” Surrounding “Under God”

In regard to the addition of the phrase “under God” to the pledge of allegiance, there were several assumptions used to justify the change that were utilized by political leaders and supporters of the change, which were outlined in the previous chapter. Additionally, they also justified the change by arguing that support was nearly universal, that the support came from people of all religious backgrounds, and that it did not advance one religion over others. Representative Charles A. Wolverton, for example, suggested the addition of the phrase “seems to have struck a note of universal approval, indicating an underlying acknowledgement of our indebtedness to God and our dependence upon Him.”¹³ Throughout the May 5 hearing, numerous representatives argued that there was universal support for the addition. Specifically, they claimed that support came from all different religions, a move that was framed as a way to

justify why the addition was not a violation of the First Amendment. Representative Thomas J. Lane (Democrat, Massachusetts) asked several advocates of the legislation if support had come from all races, nationalities, and religions. When Representative Louis Rabaut was asked the question, he simply responded “Yes, Yes.”¹⁴ Representative Charles Oakman stated that he had received dozens of letters from clergy members of all faiths and that he had “not received one critical letter.”¹⁵ Similarly, Representative Barratt O’Hara claimed he had received thousands of letters from people of all faiths, including “many letters” from people “who apparently have no church affiliation” and, like Oakman, claimed he had received no critical letters.¹⁶ Within the legislators’ justification for the change, opposition did not exist and there was religiously diverse support for the legislation. In doing so, they framed the change as one that was universally acceptable and representative of all U.S. Americans.

While dominant narratives about the change framed support as nearly universal, what little opposition supporters acknowledged was quickly dismissed by congressmembers. Representative Charles A. Jonas (Republican, North Carolina) stated that “it is almost universally acknowledged that all groups and segments of society that can think above the letter A in the alphabet are in favor of this change,” a move that implicitly framed any potential opposition of the bill to be coming from an uneducated position.¹⁷ Oakman confirmed Jonas’ logic by responding “that is correct.”¹⁸ When Representative Lane asked Representative John R. Pillion whether support for the change came from “all nationalities and all groups and all religions” Pillion responded “I would judge so. There is no one particular religious group that is supporting it. It is supported and can be supported by anyone with a sense of moral righteousness.”¹⁹ Pillion’s claim suggested that anyone who is moral does and can support the change, which implied anyone opposing the bill lacked moral righteousness. Such a claim

reinforced the theistnormative notion that support for theistic symbolism reflected a sense of moral citizenship while opposition to such symbolism reflects a threat to the moral fabric of society.

While these assumptions justified the addition of “under God,” they also made their way into legal justifications (as noted above) as well as into scholarship on religio-political discourse. In his inaugural essay on civil religion, Robert Bellah argued that people do not protest against such discourses because they are general enough that anyone can supposedly appreciate them.²⁰ This assumption is at the crux of scholarship on civil religion: the idea that the vague use of religious references unites the people in consensus over their shared theistic commitments and histories. Within such scholarship, the lack of major criticism is framed as proof of consensus and there is a focus on how such discourses unify people, which presumes civil religion is a positive form of rhetoric. As noted in chapter one, Roderick Hart, advanced similar assumptions arguing that “religion-filled political rhetoric” is a clear expression of a “very American consensus”²¹ and that if people opposed such rhetoric, they would demand the government stop utilizing it.²² Such assumptions dismiss the obstacles such normative narratives create for those who may wish to criticize so-called “civil religion” and, in doing so, they reinforce the hegemonic narrative about religious consensus that ignores the lived experiences of religious minorities and Atheists. In addition to claiming there is consensus around “civil religion,” Hart specifically notes that “the 1950s was a period of unparalleled rhetorical escalating of the American civil religion.”²³ These two claims together ignore how marginalized religious or secular groups and individuals, particularly Atheists, were constrained or silenced by the religious hegemonies reinforced by the Cold War.

In the 1950s, the public was incredibly wary of Atheists due to the association of them and communism, which created an atmosphere where open opposition to theistic references was risky. In 1954, the same year the pledge was changed, the Board of Directors of the Fund for the Republic ran a study with over 6,000 participants that focused on people's perceptions of communism. The survey revealed how the connection between communism and atheism shaped how the public perceived Atheists. When asked what communists generally believe in, the most common response was that they were "against religion."²⁴ 16% of respondents answered "yes" to the question "If an American opposed churches and religion, would this *alone* make you think he [sic] was a Communist?"²⁵ Several respondents framed communists as immoral or un-American specifically because of their lack of belief in the Christian God which reflected how religion and U.S. identity was primarily associated with Christianity. One respondent claimed that "people who don't believe in Christ are so warped they can do almost anything," while a clergyman from Texas argued that communists "teach people against Christianity, ungodly things, and this is against our country. We believe in Christianity."²⁶ On the survey, respondents included "didn't believe in Christ, heaven, or hell," "would not attend church and talked against God," and "didn't believe in the Bible and talked about war" as reasons for why they thought someone they knew was a communist.²⁷ These comments suggested that being an atheist or opposing religion, specifically Christianity, could get someone accused of being a communist, an accusation that was particularly dangerous during the Cold War. Journalist David L. Cohn highlighted this problem further in a 1954 article in the *Saturday Review* in which he noted that Illinois Governor Adlai Stevenson II was accused of being an "Atheist" and a "godless Communist" after he did not mention God in several speeches and that some Democrats at the televised National Convention were accused of being "godless heathens" for not standing and bowing their heads in

prayer. As Cohn noted, within the climate produced within the Red Scare (and the spiritual-industrial complex), “unless a man's head upon such an occasion droops like a sunflower's, he is obviously heathen and perhaps a communist to boot.”²⁸ To be religious, specifically Christian, was to be American, and one had to publicly show their theism to avoid accusations of atheism and, by proximity, communism.

In the last chapter, I outlined how advocates used prophetic dualism to contained atheism and secularism through the association of them with communism. The pledge was framed as an education tool to education the U.S. American people of their supposed “true” theistic nature. Such coercion was further emphasized by President Eisenhower’s statement after signing Resolution 243 into law on June 14, 1954. In it, Eisenhower proclaimed: “[t]o anyone who truly loves America, nothing could be more inspiring than to contemplate this rededication of our youth, on each school morning, to our country's true meaning.”²⁹ His statement suggested that anyone who opposed it did not love America, a move that silenced critique of the bill by framing such opposition as un-American. As such, opposition was further contained as the change was put into law and the illusion of consensus could be maintained.

Claims of consensus during the Cold War, particularly in relation to religion or political ideology, should be met with skepticism considering the pervasiveness of McCarthyism. There were consequences for not participating in or protesting patriotic rituals, even on religious grounds, that likely compelled religious minorities to avoid openly criticizing the new legislation. Just 14 years earlier, when the Supreme Court initially ruled that schools could compel students to stand and recite the pledge in 1940, people interpreted the decision as proof that Jehovah Witnesses, who had brought up the case, were “traitors.”³⁰ Following the decision, people attacked over 1,500 Jehovah Witnesses and burned their houses of worship and

businesses.³¹ While the Supreme Court reversed its decision three years later, the response to Jehovah Witnesses refusal to participate in a patriotic ritual was likely fresh in other minorities' minds. While Jehovah Witnesses had religious convictions that, for many, took precedence over the material and physical harm they risked in challenging patriotic rituals, for groups such as Atheists and agnostics there would be less motivation to openly defy patriotic norms. If an individual believes this is the only life they have, why would they risk bringing themselves physical or material harm, when they could simply stay quiet or say a few words they do not personally believe? While for some, the principles of religious liberty may motivate them to take the risk, it would not be unreasonable for others to choose to silently conform to theist normative legislation for the sake of their own well-being.

Looking at the apparent religious consensus of the 1950s through the lens of secular rhetorical criticism calls for scholars to find ways to analyze those silenced by normative narratives and who have been largely dismissed in discussions of such a "consensus." The gossip method can be utilized by scholars engaged in secular rhetorical criticism to challenge dominant narratives that protect those in power and, in doing so, undermine the accounts espoused that protect hegemonic structures. Claims of "consensus" is one such narrative that protects those in power by framing them as simply doing what the people wanted rather than furthering a hegemonic agenda. The gossip method offers possibilities to analyze those who are silenced due to pressures to conform to religious norms and, in doing so, the method can challenge dominant narratives about consensus.

Gossip Method

In identifying the rhetoric of the marginalized, scholars often have to look for traces and silence within and between apparently normative texts. Work in queer theory, feminist criticism,

and critical race studies have all pointed to tactics and strategies scholars can use to uncover the texts—or even the faintest echo of a text—of those who may not have the same access to text production and preservation as dominant groups. Muñoz, for example, reflects on how queerness has constrained visibility and has often had to be expressed “as innuendo, gossip, fleeting moments, and performances that are meant to be interacted with by those within its epistemological sphere—while evaporating at the touch of those who would eliminate queer possibility.”³² Because queer texts may need to be more elusive for the protection of the producers and certain audiences, Muñoz suggests that engaging in queer texts requires scholars to expand their understanding of what merits good evidence and methods in scholarship. Studying queerness, Muñoz suggests, means having to go beyond archives and methods that have been utilized and employed by traditional scholarship. Similarly, in a search for such “an alternative analytic paradigm” that makes the experience of African American women accessible for rhetorical analysis, Jacqueline Jones Royster suggests the utilization of “critical imagination,” which involves seeing “possibility” by drawing connections between texts and contexts, particularly when looking at historical narratives where texts in the traditional sense may not have been created or archived.³³

Drawing on the work of Royster, as well as queer studies scholarship, Pamela VanHaitsma offers the “gossip method” as one particular method for utilizing critical imagination when engaging in historical narratives and archival documents.³⁴ VanHaitsma suggests that “gossip is a speculative methodology” as a method for studying the rhetoric and experiences of those who fall outside normative expectations of identity.³⁵ When utilizing the gossip method, scholars treat traces found in archival documents as pieces of gossip. While there may be limited, little, or even no evidence to support claims about the experiences of

marginalized groups, these traces, when put in conversations with larger historical contexts, allow scholars to speculate about the possibility that certain claims suggested by the traces *might* be true. Such methodology, according to VanHaitsma, particularly lends itself to feminist and queer historiography. I contend that there is also value in utilizing the gossip method for studying secular historiographies from the lens of secular rhetorical criticism. Such an approach recognizes that Atheists and those who supported secularism have often had their voices silenced which has allowed for dominant narratives to presume consensus where there has been coercion. The gossip method offers the opportunity to engage with the rhetoric of those silenced and contained through theistnormative pressures through speculation based on traces available in archival texts.

VanHaitsma outlines three features of gossip as a rhetorical methodology that disrupt dominant understandings of what merits credible communication and evidence. The first feature is what VanHaistma calls “crucial feminist speculation.” This first feature recognizes that the need to embrace the calls of feminist scholars to “speculate methodologically” in order to highlight the voices and experiences of marginalized groups. VanHaitsma points to gossip as a tool for speculation. Gossip has served as an important form of communication for marginalized groups, partially because it is often dismissed by dominant groups as trivial, petty, or malicious.³⁶ In utilizing gossip as a rhetorical methodology, scholars acknowledge its potential for empowering marginalized voices who are constrained from the production of typical texts due to their non-normative and/or marginalized status. In doing so, scholars embrace gossip as a way to speculate about the experiences of marginalized groups and accept gossip both as credible evidence and as a viable method, despite it being non-normative and outside of typical expectations of scholarly texts and practices. In other words, this feature involves embracing

gossip as a “queerly illicit resource.”³⁷ Art historian Gavin Butt suggests that while gossip may be “unreliable,” which would normally make it a form of illicit evidence in term of scholarly analysis, it “can nevertheless be seen to *bear witness*, to act as *trace* of some historical real—of some event, act, or identity.”³⁸ In embracing gossip as evidence, scholars themselves become “the gossiper” and in doing so “deconstruct the bases of authoritative constructs of truth” that dictate what forms of evidence are deemed legitimate.³⁹ By looking for traces and drawing connections to *potential* historical events, acts, and identities, scholars create more *possibilities* within historical and contemporary narratives. The final feature of gossip as a form of rhetorical methodology is an adoption of “suggestive openness.”⁴⁰ Such openness recognizes the importance of power dynamics through the questioning of *who* gossips and who gossip and speculation belongs to. While VanHaitsma notes that the methodology is “particularly suited to speculation about queer, as in non-normative, genders and sexualities” she contends that the gossip method has the potential to be utilized for the study of rhetorical practices of various oppressed or non-normative groups. This suggestive openness recognizes that there are indefinite possibilities of experiences within groups that may utilize or retell gossip in their own ways. Such suggestive openness points to how the gossip method recognizes the subjective experiences of various groups and, in doing so, works to moves claims from universally factual to universally contested. This shift can work to challenge dominant narratives and empower and highlight the experiences of marginalized groups.

Like critical imagination, while the gossip method challenges normative academic practices it is still grounded in rigorous research, analysis, and interpretation. When utilizing the gossip method, scholars should first gather what evidence is available to establish what “we know.”⁴¹ The next step is “to think between, above, around, and beyond this evidence to

speculate methodologically about probabilities, that is, what might likely be true based on what [the scholar has] in hand.”⁴² In other words, researchers can speculate or gossip about traces found within texts or within the silences of texts by drawing connections between different traces, traces and the concrete evidence we find in archives, and traces and historical contexts. Even without traditional evidence, scholars can use the gossip method to speculate about how texts themselves were created, circulated, and utilized based on traces in the texts and contextual clues. They may also gossip about the subjects or creators of texts, even when there is limited information available about them. In remembering the feature of suggestive openness, scholars should, however, be careful to limit claims and acknowledge that they are not making claims about what is or was but what *might* be or have been. By resisting factual claims, gossip encourages readers and scholars to remain “curious about what more there is ‘to be found in one’s world.’”⁴³

The gossip method is particularly valuable in the reading of archival materials. Archival scholars have brought attention to the tensions surrounding power and silence in archives through calls for archivists to engage in “critical archival studies.”⁴⁴ One key aspect of critical archival studies is a recognition of what voices are present or excluded from archives. As Rodney G.S. Carter observes, “archival power is, in part, the power to allow voices to be heard.... The power to exclude is a fundamental aspect of the archive. Inevitably, there are distortions, omissions, erasures, and silences in the archive. Not every story is told.”⁴⁵ Archival scholars are increasingly calling on archivists to reflect on how archival practices, from appraisal to representation practices privilege or marginalize voices within archives. Rhetorical scholars have also called on rhetorical scholars to reflect on how they can challenge power and silence in archives through their methods, often through the process of “queering” archives.⁴⁶

VanHaitisma's gossip method is a direct response to these calls, as a method that queerly embraces uncertainty, particularly in archives. It involves looking for "traces" or recorded accounts of events and experiences in archives. While such traces typically are utilized to make factual claims that shape modern memory about the past,⁴⁷ utilizing the gossip method involves speculating beyond the traces to expand the possibility of what archives can tell us about the past and the experiences of people.

One form of record that is common in archives, which lends itself to the gossip method, is letters.⁴⁸ Letters, particularly those written to politicians and saved in archives, offer valuable insight into the lives and opinions of everyday people who may otherwise go unnoticed in political conversations. While personal letters of politicians and prominent figures are often preserved in archives—even published in edited collections—the letters of "ordinary" or everyday people were not collected in preserved as often until more recently.⁴⁹ Those letters from ordinary people, such as those written to politicians, can be difficult to write about because we often lack context, particularly surrounding the individuals writing the letters. Konstantin Dierks, however, argues that "such letters are windows into a darkness, one that demands an imagination of history beyond the surviving evidence."⁵⁰ While we may not know as much context about the individual writers, we can view such letters as "political action."⁵¹ Using critical imagination, specifically in the form of the gossip method, scholars can speculate about letter writers and motivations connected to the act of writing the letters through an analysis of the traces left in the letters and the contextual clues available for understanding the need for political action. In doing so, we can utilize the gossip method to better understand the agency and constraints involved in letter writing and consider how traces left in private letters confirm or challenge public narratives.

The implementation of “under God” offers insight into how dominant narratives surrounding consensus of so-called “civil religion” or “ceremonial deism” may be challenged using the gossip method. Members of Congress defended the change by claiming that, based on the letters they had received from the public, support came from people of all (and no) religious backgrounds, and that there was no credible opposition. Most of the letters sent to Congress, however, were not preserved. Letters sent to Eisenhower along with a handful preserved in the National Archives, newspaper clippings, as well as a recognition of the coercive nature of the Red Scare, however, bring into question the consensus narrative promoted by legislators. By utilizing the traces found in the letters that were preserved and other contextual clues, I become the “gossiper,” offering vignettes that suggest legislators may have knowingly painted an incomplete narrative about supposed “consensus” surrounding the addition of the phrase “under God.”⁵² These vignettes, which introduce each new section in my analysis below, point to the possibilities that emerged through my reading of letters and newspaper articles. Like gossip, some vignettes are more speculative than others. They all, however, bring into question, and thus disrupt, the dominant narrative advanced by members of Congress about what was in the letters sent to them from the public. These vignettes point to how, in the atmosphere of the spiritual-industrial complex, there was a narrative of consensus and inclusivity where there was, in fact, coercion. Such coercion works to silence marginalized voices not only at the time, but from history. Such gossip works to undermine the lasting power of those in the spiritual-industrial complex who had the ability to control the narrative during the Red Scare.

Gossiping About Those Who Supported the Change

One of congressmembers’ most repeated arguments in support for the change was that there was nationwide support of the legislation and that backing came from people with different

religious and even irreligious backgrounds. Legislators' claims that universal support came from all religions was not just about showing consensus, but about resisting the argument that the new change *avored* one religion over another. We can ask critical questions, however, about who actually supported the change. Letters in support in archives suggest that advocates for the change largely came from Christian backgrounds. Furthermore, there appeared to be a concerted effort by groups who openly advocated Christian nationalism to implement the change. With these discrepancies in mind, we can gossip about whether there was more to adopting the change than Congress claimed. Indeed, we might contend that rather than being seen as legislation that was aimed at unifying a religiously diverse (though theistic) population, the letters suggest the change was an attempt to appease Christian nationalists who feared that the rise of secularism would threaten Christian privilege. As such we can gossip about who actually supported the change and how they may have influenced government support for the addition.

"It seems that support came from almost exclusively from Christians, not 'people of all faiths,' like members of Congress claimed."

Despite legislators' claim that support came from people of all faiths, the letters available paint a different story. Of the letters in support sent to Eisenhower, the only ones that mentioned their own religion were Christians. Writers identified themselves as Christians, Sunday school teachers, preachers, and nuns. They came from Christian organizations and churches, particularly Catholic ones, such as the Catholic Physicians Guild, Catholic Daughters of America, St. Charles Holy Name, the Ursuline Sisters Convent, Trinity Lutheran Church, Sisters of the Visitation (Monastery), Bethel Methodist Church, the First Free Methodist Sunday School, Knights of Columbus, First Church of the Nazarene, Catholic Civic Club, Sacred Hearts School, Mount Washington and Duquesne Heights Ministerial Association of Pittsburgh, Allegheny Presbytery

of the United Presbyterian Church of Northern America, Providence Diocesan CYO Youth Council, First Baptist Church, and the Sisters of Divine Providence, to name a few. While membership in a Christian denomination alone does not automatically mean an individual or a group were ambassadors of Christian nationalism, it is telling that, despite claims that the God of the new pledge was not explicitly Christian, the addition invoked just such a response for those who identified as Christian and from Christian organizations/churches. If “under God” was not meant to be a promotion of the Christian God, why were Christians so motivated to support the change?

It appears that congressmembers may have misrepresented support when they claimed it came from all faiths, including those who were religiously unaffiliated. While support did come from a wide variety of Christian denominations, including Catholicism, not a single letter of support found in archives had anyone identifying themselves as Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, religiously unaffiliated, Atheist, or any other non-Christian identity. Perhaps more letters do exist that would demonstrate members of Congress were honestly representing their correspondence with the public and I was just unable to find them. Maybe they existed at one point but were not preserved in archives. Or maybe members of Congress viewed ecumenical support as diverse enough for their purposes. Thus, when they claimed that “all faiths” supported their cause they felt secure in dismissing non-Christian religious minorities from the religious make-up of the American people.

“Many of those writing in support of the new pledge appear to have been influenced by a strategic Christian Nationalist Campaign.”

In addition to claiming that support came from all religions, legislators defended the change by arguing it was not an establishment of religion nor did it favor one religion over

others. Yet, a look at the letters sent to Eisenhower, as well as several newspaper articles, suggest it was overwhelmingly Christian nationalist organizations that pushed the letter writing campaign to change the pledge. Several Christian social organizations, which were central to the spiritual-industrial complex and regularly pushed Christian nationalists' narratives relating to the idea that the United States is/should be a Christian nation with Christian people, were central voices of support for the new pledge. As outlined in the previous chapter, the Knights of Columbus had been advocating a legal change to the pledge for several years and were quick to encourage their members to support the change.⁵³ Similarly, leaders of the American Legion, who actively engaged in the spiritual-industrial complex through their "Back to God" program, encouraged members to support the legislation and signed resolutions to show their support.⁵⁴ Another group, The Christophers, appear to have been particularly impactful in persuading the public to support the change. Looking at the traces in letters sent to Eisenhower, we can speculate about how the Christian nationalism espoused by such groups persuaded the public to support the change. I focus specifically on an article calling for a letter writing campaign published by The Christophers in May of 1954. Such work suggests that the public push to add "under God" was a Christian nationalist initiative, rather than a naturally pluralistic one. Such supporters saw the addition as a way to affirm their narrative that the United States was a Christian nation.

While we certainly cannot know what motivated every letter writer, there are hints within the letters as to why Christians, specifically Catholics, wrote so strongly in support: they were subscribers of publications that advocated Christian nationalism and which called on readers to write letters in support of the change. Several writers noted that they had learned about the legislation proposing the change to the pledge in *Christopher News Notes*, a publication

produced by The Christophers, a Catholic organization aimed at “empower[ing] people from all walks of life with the ideas that they have a God-given purpose that belongs to no one else—and that constructive action works miracles.”⁵⁵ While the Christophers are a Catholic organization, they do not limit membership to Catholics and they claim to argue for “religious tolerance.”⁵⁶ Yet, like much of the religious tolerance of the 1950s, such acceptance was only offered so far as groups were willing to oppose secularism. James Keller, who founded the organization was a strong critic of secularism and advocated for Christians to make “Government Your Business.”⁵⁷ K. Healan Gaston notes that Catholics had been some of the earliest critics of secularism and tended to promote the notion that secularism would lead to the privileging of atheism.⁵⁸ The Christophers, as an organization, advocated this belief. In 1951, Keller urged followers to join a campaign to add “In God We Trust” plaques in public schools, arguing that such action “might be the turning point in offsetting the ceaseless efforts of those who are striving to change the United States from ‘This Nation Under God’ to ‘This Nation Without God.’”⁵⁹ By the early 1950s, over 400,000 people were subscribed to the *Christophers News Notes*, a publication aimed at advancing the Christophers’ mission. This mission combined Christian nationalism, which had traditionally advanced Protestantism, with calls for religious tolerance amongst the prominent white theistic religions.⁶⁰

In May 1954, an article was published in *Christophers News Notes* in which they encouraged readers to write to Congress to request they pass the bill that would alter the pledge of allegiance. The article reflects how Christian nationalist ideologies were deeply ingrained in the call to add “under God” to the pledge. The Christophers emphasized that the change was needed to remind people “of the truth upon which our nation is founded—and without which it cannot survive.”⁶¹ The notion that the United States’s foundation was deeply tied to the belief

and existence of God and that belief and recognition of God is essential to the success of democracy is the central conviction of Christian nationalism. Within Christian nationalist ideologies, secularism is a threat to democracy, an idea that was also perpetuated within The Christophers's article when they warned that there are a "handful of Americans who strive to eliminate God from all phases of public and private life [who] would naturally like to see this resolution buried in Committee."⁶² The publication's utilization of Christian nationalism suggested that the motto was viewed as a way to advance/protect Christian nationalism. They also invoked people's religious identities and obligations, imploring "It is up to you to decide for yourself whether or not your wish to make your voice heard. *It is between you and your conscience—between you and God*" (emphasis in original).⁶³ While they framed taking action as people's own decision, their call suggested that failure to support adding the phrase to the pledge would make individuals bad Christians.

The letters sent to Eisenhower, the vast majority of which arrived between mid-May and mid-June, after the publication of The Christophers' article, are remarkably similar to the wording used in the *Christopher News Notes* call. The article focused on Senator Homer Ferguson's proposed bill and cited his public statements at length. This included emphasizing that the phrase was used by Abraham Lincoln, that the new pledge would highlight that belief in God was the "fundamental difference" between the United States and Communist countries, that spiritual values were equally important to the defense of the United States and military and economic values, and that to remain free the United States needs to recognize God. Several writers in support included a copy of the *Christopher News Notes* or identified themselves as "Christophers." Additionally, individuals wrote to "Letters to the Editor" in which they cited the *Christophers News Notes* publication and encouraged people to write to Senators, warning that

there was “danger in delay,” a phrase also utilized in the original article.⁶⁴ Simply put, the organized efforts of the Christophers appeared to play a key role in encouraging those sympathetic to the Christophers mission to write letters in support of the change.

Even within letters that did not explicitly mention the article, there are traces to suggest that The Christophers’ publication had influenced many of the writers. Despite the facts that it was Representative Louis Rabaut who was the most active legislator advocating for the change and that there were over 16 bills proposed by different members of Congress, it was Senator Ferguson who was most often noted by writers. In their letters, supporters regularly invoked Lincoln, argued that belief in God is what set the United States apart from Communist nations, emphasized the need to recognize “spiritual values,” and suggested the change was necessary for the future protection of the United States. While many of these sentiments are reflective of the larger manufactured narrative espoused through the spiritual-industrial complex that dominated the early 1950s, one cannot help but wonder how many writers had copies of the *Christopher News Notes* article in front of them when writing their letters. In the article, The Christophers encouraged readers to “write your message in your own words,” a move that suggested that they did not want the support to appear manufactured. Even if they did not explicitly mention the publication in their letter, traces suggest that many writers were motivated by a Christian nationalist campaign to support the revised pledge.

“Government officials may have been trying to pacify Christian nationalists using theistnormative legislation.”

While we can utilize traces in letters to speculate about the role groups advocating Christian nationalism played in encouraging public letter writing, we can also look at the letters to find traces of how government officials viewed the legislation as a way to appease Christian

nationalists. Congressmembers argued that the change did not advance a specific religion or violate secularist values. If the letters sent to members of Congress were similar to those sent to Eisenhower, however, members of Congress would likely have noticed that it was overwhelmingly Christians who appeared to be motivated to write in support, despite their suggestion that the phrase was not explicitly referring to the Christian God. Christians did make up the majority of the population, so letters coming primarily from Christians is not necessarily surprising or suspicious. Yet, congressmembers continually insisted support was much more diverse than they appeared to have been, which painted a picture of religious pluralistic support where there was not.

One can speculate about whether members of Congress saw the phrase “under God” as being a compromise between the calls for tolerance by religious pluralists and the continued persistent appeals from Christian nationalists that there needed to be an explicit recognition of the Christian right to rule by the federal government. In 1946 “The Christian Amendment Movement” formed with the explicit goal of getting an amendment passed to the U.S. Constitution that would recognize the “authority and law of Jesus Christ” in order to “afford a constitutional basis for Christian legislation.”⁶⁵ The movement had introduced the amendment nearly annually since 1947, though with limited success. Such an amendment would arguably be a fairly clear example of establishing a religion, or at least favoring one over others. While there were attempts to contain secularism, it had already become ingrained enough within society that many politicians would be wary of supporting such an explicitly Christian amendment. While the vague theist normative legislation was not as desirable as an explicit recognition of Jesus Christ in the Constitution, a daily recognition of God by school children certainly seemed to appeal to the Christian nationalist agenda and was better than nothing.⁶⁶

Government officials, appear to have hoped that the new pledge would be enough to satisfy those wanting the “Christian Amendment.” On June 19, 1954, Eisenhower was sent a letter from a woman named Agnes Maddox from Illinois. In the letter she implored Eisenhower to encourage Senators and congressman (whom she had already written) to support the Christian Amendment. Sherman Adams, Eisenhower’s chief of Staff, responded to Maddox by informing her that the president had signed House Joint Resolution 243 to amend the pledge of allegiance.⁶⁷ Despite Maddox’s letter focusing on the Christian Amendment, and not even mentioning the pledge, Adams’s response solely highlighted the new pledge. Considering the timing, it is possible that Maddox’s letter was simply misread, received the generic response to letters written in support of the new pledge, and archived with other letters about “under God.” It is also possible, however, that Eisenhower’s staff was hesitant to give a direct response to a letter encouraging them to pass the Christian Amendment, knowing it was unlikely such a bill would pass. Rather it is possible they strategically utilized the passage of the legislation on “under God” to attempt to appease requests to support the Christian Amendment, knowing writers would read the theistnormative legislation as more christonormative. One cannot help but wonder if the new pledge was strategically aimed at appeasing Christian nationalists, despite its vague theistnormative language.

Gossiping About Those Who Opposed the Change

A second question we can speculate about based on traces in archives is whether, or to what extent, Congress ignored opposition to altering the pledge. As previously noted, members of Congress continually emphasized that they had received no opposition in their public statements. What little opposition did appear to exist was dismissed through the suggestion that anyone who was moral or educated would support the change. While ignoring, dismissing, or

mischaracterizing opposition is certainly not unique or surprising in relation to Congressional debates, it is worth speculating about in this case, as consensus was, and remains, a key point in defending the phrase in the pledge and designating it as “ceremonial deism” in legal discourses and “civil religion” in scholarly ones.

“It looks like the representatives from Illinois might have been ignoring their constituents.”

While we cannot know what was in the letters sent to legislators such as O’Hara and Oakman, because they do not appear to have been saved in archives, we can look at traces within the letters sent to Eisenhower. These traces can help us speculate about how members of Congress may have misrepresented their correspondence from the public. Several of those writing to Eisenhower noted that they had written to their Senators and Representatives as well. Albert Parker, who like O’Hara was from Chicago, lamented to Eisenhower that he had “written my Senators and Congressman....to no avail.”⁶⁸ While Parker did not appear to live in O’Hara’s district, he clearly cared about the issue enough to write several members of Congress and the President to urge them not to change the pledge. Is it possible he wrote to O’Hara as well and was ignored? Without O’Hara’s collection we cannot know for sure. Based on Parker’s district, he at the very least appeared to have written to Republican Representative Fred E. Busbey. While Busbey did not appear to be active in the debate to add “under God” to the pledge, two years earlier he had been a vocal supporter of legislation that established a “National Day of Prayer.”⁶⁹ What had Busbey done with Parker’s letter? It appears he would have at least had evidence that there was opposition in his and O’Hara’s home-state but his support for other theistnormative legislation might suggest he may not have been inclined to share the concerns of his constituents with his colleagues. Or perhaps he did inform his fellow Illinois representative about Parker’s letter and they agreed such opposition should not be taken seriously.

“Representative Oakman wanted to discuss something off the record! I bet he is talking about the Detroit Jewish News article!”

Despite their claims that they had received no letter of opposition, some legislators were clearly aware that criticism of the legislation existed and it is possible they discussed this opposition during a congressional hearing but kept the discussion off the record. While some members claimed they simply had not personally received any letters from those opposing the change, others dismissed opposition. As previously noted, several members of Congress dismissed opposition as uneducated or immoral. Within such demagogic framing, opposition to the change could be easily dismissed. Yet that did not mean such criticism did not exist. In some cases, the criticism was fairly public.

One of the more prominent examples of public criticism for the change came from the Jewish community. On March 5, 1954, *The Detroit Jewish News* published a lengthy article specifically calling out Senator Ferguson, Representative Oakman, and Representative Rabaut, all from Michigan, for their support of legislation changing the pledge. In the article, the author, while careful to not be aggressive with their opposition, outlined several potential concerns about whether the amendment violated the Constitution, previous Supreme Court rulings, and the tradition of upholding secularism in Michigan.⁷⁰ Their careful framing of their concerns may have suggested their awareness of need of the Jewish community to approach opposing such fusion of religion and politics with care, as to not jeopardize their inclusion in the tri-faith movement. On March 26, Representative Rabaut wrote a lengthy response to the article, arguing that the Declaration of Independence invokes God and that the change simply reflects the sentiment expressed by Supreme Court Justice William Douglas in *Zorach v. Clauson* (1952) that “We are a religious people whose institutions presuppose a Supreme Being.” Rabaut

reinforced the containment of secularism highlighted in the previous chapter, concluding his retort by arguing “There are no questions of Church-State relations involved in this proposal and only a strained secularists interpretation of the First Amendment can raise any question as to its Constitutional propriety.”⁷¹ A week later, on April 2, a letter from Senator Ferguson to the editor was posted in *The Detroit Jewish News* in which he defended his proposed bill. He argued that it does not violate the Constitution and that the existence of “In God We Trust” on coins proves it is not a violation. He contended that “the mere words ‘under God’ . . . is not the establishing of a religion nor can it, by any stretch of the imagination be construed as a prohibition of the free exercise thereof.”⁷² Both Rabaut’s and Ferguson’s responses reflect that they were aware of opposition but dismissed it. Rabaut’s argument framed secularist criticism as “strained” while Ferguson suggested such criticism was not valid by any “stretch of the imagination,” thus dismissing such opposition as excessive and irrational.

Representative Oakman, who was also called out by the article, did not publicly respond but it is possible he acknowledged the opposition during the May 5th hearing, despite his claim that he had “not received one critical letter.”⁷³ While there is no clear evidence Oakman was aware of the article, considering that his Michigan colleagues had been driven to respond to it, one might reasonably assume that the three members of Congress discussed it together. During Oakman’s May 5th testimony, he highlighted how support came from American Legion posts, the Catholic War Veterans, and “clergy of all faiths.”⁷⁴ After offering several anecdotes from those who supported the change, he turned to the Chairman and said “I think this should be off the record” before proceeding to have what the transcript describes as a “discussion off the record?”⁷⁵ In a discussion about adding “under God” to the pledge of allegiance, what could be perceived as sensitive enough to be spoken off record? Could Oakman have been discussing

some of the concerns brought up by *The Detroit Jewish News* and his rebuttal to the criticism? By keeping the conversation off the record, Oakman would avoid putting any official recognition of opposition in the record. Because the criticism came from the prominent Jewish newspaper in Oakman's home state, he could also evade any potential criticism of his dismissal of a Jewish perspective on the issue, particularly considering that Jewish constituents tended to support secularism. While Oakman claimed there was no opposition, one has to wonder if this off the record discussion involved a recognition that there were people who opposed, even if Congress did not agree with the arguments of opposition. Yet rather than openly discuss opposition, any record of criticism of their actions may have simply been "off the record" thus not made available for public (or scholarly) scrutiny.

"Members of Congress appear to have ignored 'Mr. Flag's' opposition to the new pledge."

There was one particular letter that was preserved in the National Archives that brings additional doubt to the claim by Congress that there was no opposition or that opposition came from those of dubious morals. On May 23, 1954, Gridley Adams sent a letter to the Senate Judiciary Committee. Adams was the founder and director of the United States Flag Foundation, had been chairman of the National Flag Code Committee since 1924, and was considered the leading authority on the American Flag, so much so that his nickname was "Mr. Flag."⁷⁶ His message, written on United State Flag Foundation letterhead, strongly critiqued the resolution to change the pledge. In his letter he wrote, "I protest again against your passing a bill that is before your Committee for approval unless you wilfully [sic] want to violate ethe First Amendment," suggesting that this was not the first letter he had sent to the committee.⁷⁷

Adams's letter suggests that perhaps there was more prominent opposition to the change than Congress had suggested. Adams was not a communist. He specifically noted in his letter that he was not anti-religious. He certainly thought "above the letter A in the alphabet," and by all accounts was a well-respected man who likely would not have been regarded as someone who did not have "a sense of moral righteousness."⁷⁸ He was also the leading authority on flag etiquette and code, maintaining a public service career built on developing patriotic behavior and rituals. His opinion in opposition to the change certainly carried authoritative weight. Yet, his letter indicates that he had not heard any response to his previous letter(s) and he felt compelled to send another one to beseech the Judiciary Committee to not pass the legislation adding God to the pledge of allegiance. While the letter was housed in the National Archives, there is no indication it was discussed during any of the hearings (unless it was what was discussed off the record). Thus, it appeared "Mr. Flag's" authority ended where his resistance to theistnormative legislation began.

There is another important trace in the letter Adams sent: it appears "Mr. Flag" himself did not believe in God. He ended his letter with a passionate plea and, somewhat shocking confession for someone to make during the Red Scare:

American Citizenship requires no religious affiliation, nor rejects those who "are not yet convinced." To insert those words will alienate thousands of [*sic*] Citizens from ever "Pledging allegiance to the Republic for which it stands." And I am one of those!⁷⁹

Adams identified himself as the "son of an Episcopal minister" and emphasized he was not against religion, however, he contended that the change would prevent him from being able to say the pledge. While it is not clear if Adams simply rejected organized religion or if he identified as agnostic or Atheist, his clear concern that the phrase "under God" would exclude him from being able to participate in the pledge suggests the latter. If Adams was indeed an

“atheistic American,” he would have been a “contradiction of terms” according to Rabaut and Reverend Docherty’s defense of the altered pledge. His opposition alone, according to Eisenhower’s statement on the matter, would also suggest that he did not “truly love America.” Adams's letter reveals how dominant narratives in defense of the new pledge framed someone widely regarded for their patriotic authority as un-American.

Arguably, there was more opposition to the new pledge than what is recorded in archives or expressed in public papers. Adams was in his late 80s when he sent his letter to Congress, revealing his identity as possibly an Atheistic American. Adams’s age, along with his reputation as the leading authority on the flag code, may have been factors that helped Adams decide to be more open about his opposition and identity. His ethos challenged dominant framings of those who critiqued the new addition and may have protected him from potential widespread criticism. Yet, even if there was open backlash for his non-religious identity, his age meant such criticism would likely not have a serious impact on his career or livelihood. There were others, however, who may not have had the same level of security which allowed them to openly critique the new theistnormative legislation, let alone reveal a non-theistic identity. Considering the framing of atheism and secularism during the 1950s as being associated with Communism alongside the growing threat of McCarthyism and the Red Scare at the time, it would not be surprising if there was far more opposition to the new pledge than is available in the records. As outlined in the previous chapter, such opposition was contained. But that does not mean we cannot speculate about what opposition might have existed and why people remained silent.

“It is possible that John F. Kennedy opposed adding ‘under God’ to the pledge.”

In May 1954, Eisenhower received a letter from a man named William Potter from Massachusetts opposing the change. In the opening line, Potter noted that “Senator John F.

Kennedy, of Massachusetts, has written me that the Senate Resolution inserting ‘under God’ was cleared for your signature on June 8.”⁸⁰ I was unable to find a copy of the letter Kennedy sent to Potter and it is not clear the relationship between the two men. The reference to Kennedy in the letter from Potter to Eisenhower, however, makes one wonder what Kennedy wrote. Was he writing to Potter and mentioned the new legislation in passing? Did he think Potter would be interested in the legislation? Or perhaps he wrote to express his own concern about the change and he hope that Eisenhower would not sign the bill into law, a sentiment that would be far too risky for the rising politician to express publicly.

While the new legislation did pass unanimously in both the House and the Senate, that does not mean that all members of Congress supported the bill. It would have been risky for Kennedy, or any member of Congress, to openly oppose the new legislation. As one critic wrote to Eisenhower, “I realize the political position this proposal strapped on the back of you and every congressman. It would have been political suicide to have voted against it, I’m sure.”⁸¹ By 1954, the spiritual-industrial complex was well established. Combined with the containment tactics of the Cold War, the growing emphasis on the importance of religion as an American value, particularly in relation to fighting communism, meant that openly critiquing, or even simply not embracing, religion or religious symbolism was dangerous. As previously noted, just two years earlier many of these same politicians had been accused of being “Godless heathens” for not bowing their heads in prayer during the televised Democratic National Convention.⁸² If simply not bowing one’s head during a prayer could get a politician accused of being a “Godless heathen,” imagine what accusations would be thrown their way if they had opposed passing legislation to add “under God” to the pledge of allegiance. Rather than there actually being consensus by Congress, it seems more likely that some members simply weighed the pros and

cons of voting for or against the bill. It was clear the bill was going to pass. Opposing it on principle, while perhaps honorable, would have given political opponents valuable ammunition during the Cold War to accuse members of Congress who voted against the legislation of being anti-God. If the legislation was going to pass anyway, some members of Congress probably just voted for it to avoid scrutiny.

It is possible that Kennedy was one of those legislators. Kennedy was in a precarious position. He already had ambition to be the first Catholic President.⁸³ Opposing the addition could potentially harm support from his Catholic base. Additionally, being accused of being an Atheist was even more dangerous for one's political reputation than being a Catholic, thus not voting for the change risked attracting additional negative attention to the question of Kennedy's religion. Consequently, Kennedy had to be careful in how he handled any religious question or legislation. His political career involved a careful balance of advocating religion as an important value to the American people while also supporting secularism.⁸⁴ According to John Huntington, Kennedy's famous "Address to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association," is "one of the clearest calls for a separation of church and state...[and] religious liberty."⁸⁵ During a question and answer session after the speech, Kennedy regularly "parried" questions by referencing his own dedication to the separation of church and state as a public servant.⁸⁶ Kennedy's support for secularism suggests he may have been hesitant about adding "under God" to the pledge but recognized it as a battle not worth fighting for the sake of his political career. Instead, it is possible he beseeched William Potter to write to Eisenhower to express concerns in hopes that Eisenhower would not sign the bill into law.

Conclusion

U.S. Legislators in the 1950s claimed that the change to the pledge was universally supported by a religiously diverse populous. Yet traces in archival documents paint a different story. While I have no evidence that members knowingly mischaracterized support and opposition, these traces act as illicit gossip to suggest that they did. By utilizing these traces, as a scholar I become the gossipier that speculates about the possibility for how the dominant narratives about the consensus surrounding the implementation of “under God” is problematic. These traces suggest that, rather than being a pluralistic push, the change was driven by Christian nationalists. More damning is the suggestion that members of Congress may have known that support was not as universal as they suggested. Nonetheless, in their desire to appeal to both liberal pluralists and Christian nationalists, they willingly misrepresented support as well as opposition. This narrative of consensus has remained a prominent defense for the revised pledge, as demonstrated by O’Connor’s statement defending the phrase as ceremonial deism fifty years later.

It is impossible to know how many people who may have opposed the change to the pledge chose not to openly do so. The fear of being accused of being an Atheist, a communist, or simply un-American is a factor that one has to consider when looking at the presumed consensus surrounding theistnormative symbolism and rituals broadly. One also must consider how secularists had to choose their battles carefully. As Kevin Kruse argues, at the time “under God” was added to the pledge, organizations such as the American Civil Liberties Union was pre-occupied with the threat of McCarthyism, and thus paid little attention to “the new religious rhetoric.”⁸⁷ The focus on policies that have immediate impacts over those that have normalizing consequences is one of the factors that allows theistnormative legislation to go largely

unchallenged. It is not necessarily because people support it, but the soft power of rhetoric and symbolism is not always seen as having the same threat as the hard power of legislation that more explicitly takes away or grants particular rights. Another reason the change to the pledge may not have been opposed as strongly may have simply had to do with timing. The change to the pledge, like much of the theistnormative symbolism and rituals that emerged during the spiritual-industrial complex, happened quite quickly. Nearly all of the letters of opposition Eisenhower had received came after the bill had been approved by the judiciary committee. Many may have assumed that, like Rabaut's original attempt to add the phrase a year earlier, the proposal would die in committee. It did not and, due to the desire to have the bill signed on June 14 (Flag Day), Congress moved the bill through incredibly quickly, giving the public little time to respond to the realization that the addition was actually being approved. Far more people may have opposed the change if people had more time to realize it was happening. Once it was signed and the president of the United States made it clear that support for the change signaled love of the United States, opposition was further halted. As such, the narrative pushed by members of Congress that the phrase "under God" in the pledge was universally accepted and reflected a consensus surrounding the use of God references in political discourse and rituals became framed as a fact. This "fact" would be accepted by politician, scholars, and judges in the years ahead.

When we gossip, we challenge claims of facts and recognize the potential contestations surrounding commonly accepted narratives. In doing so we open up the possibility for realities that may otherwise go unnoticed. Notably, some of the vignettes forwarded in this chapter are more speculative than others. For example, there is little doubt that The Christophers newsletter influenced writers. There is clear evidence in archives, such as writers including the newsletter

with their letter to Eisenhower, that demonstrate it influenced some writers. The speculation forwarded in this chapter, however, is about just how influential this newsletter was. Based on numerous traces in the letters, I suggest that a large portion of the letters sent in support were influenced by this Christian nationalist campaign, even though I cannot prove that many of the writers had been prompted by the newsletter to write. The gossip simply opens up the possibility that many had based on the traces and, most importantly, this speculation based on the evidence available suggests that support was motivated by a desire to advance Christian power rather than a vague “civil religious” sentiment. By contrast, I have little evidence to support the Kennedy opposed “under God.” A single trace in which one opposer noted he learned about the revised pledge from Kennedy simply sparked the question of was it possible that Kennedy opposed it as well. A deeper consideration of the context surrounding Kennedy’s political career and the atmosphere of the Cold War simply suggests that the question may have merit. Such a speculation, that a prominent political figure may have personally opposed the change but did not openly challenge it in order to protect their political career, points to how one should perhaps pause before assuming that a unanimous vote in support for a bill means there was a true consensus. It is imperative that we consider how and why individuals, including those in power, may be pressured to maintain the illusion of consensus.

We also can use gossip to undermine the power of those who often control the dominant narrative. While those in power may have more agency to advance narratives that can harm and contain, gossip can chip away at the credibility and power of those who are privileged. In the case of adding “under God” to the pledge of allegiance, dominant narratives advanced claims of consensus where there was coercion. While certainly the majority of U.S. Americans did not openly oppose the new addition, this lack of opposition does not necessarily reflect a cohesive

consensus. Such dominant narratives mask the role Christian nationalism and ingrained religious hegemonies played in advancing the legislation. It also dismisses the opposition that did exist, as well as the opposition that could not be preserved by being written or spoken out loud. The gossip method offers opportunities to consider how religious minorities, Atheists, and secularists were constrained by the status quo, the coercive nature of the Cold War, and the spiritual-industrial complex. In doing so, the “unifying” and religiously pluralistic nature of the new pledge can be brought into question.

NOTES

¹ Justice O'Connor, "Concurring Opinion," *Elk Grove Unified School District v. Newdow*, No. 02-1624 (June 14, 2004).

² O'Connor, "Concurring Opinion." Interestingly, O'Connor only pointed to critiques of religious minorities practices and the rights of Christians when offering examples of such "creative" critiques.

³ At this point, the pledge had, in fact, been legally challenged more than three times, with major cases including: *Dist. 21*, 980 F. 2d 437 (CA7 1992); *Smith v. Denny*, 280 F. Supp. 651 (ED Cal. 1968). She did not, however, include *Matter of Lewis v. Allen*, 5 Misc. 2d 68, 159 N.Y.S.2d 807 (N.Y. Sup. Ct. 1957), *Lewis v. Allen*, 11 A.D.2d 447 (NY 1960), or *Parker v. Board of Education of Prince George's County, Md.*, 237 F. Supp. 222 (D. Md. 1965).

⁴ O'Connor, "Concurring Opinion."

⁵ Notably, historian Richard J. Ellis has already extensively critiqued O'Connor's claim, noting there is a much more extensive history of opposition than O'Connor suggests, particularly in terms of legal cases. See: Richard J. Ellis, *To the Flag: The Unlikely History of the Pledge of Allegiance* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005), 149.

⁶ "Extension of Remarks of Hon. Charles G. Oakman of Michigan," Congressional Record-House, February 12, 1954, 16; Statement of the Honorable Barrett O'Hara, a Representative in Congress for the State of Illinois" in House of Representatives Subcommittee No. 5 of the Committee on the Judiciary "H.J. Res. 243 and Other Bills of Pledge of Allegiance," May 5, 1954, 31; "Statement of the Honorable Louis C. Rabaut, a Representative in Congress for the State of Michigan," in House of Representatives Subcommittee No. 5 of the Committee on the Judiciary "H.J. Res. 243 and Other Bills of Pledge of Allegiance," May 5, 1954, 8.

⁷ The term "representation," as well as the term "value" (see note 7) are terms in archival studies used to discuss the archival collection process, with value being how those donating or curating archives make decisions about how documents contribute to understandings of the events or people at hand and representation being the description of particular records or collections. Michelle Caswell argues that scholars outside of archival studies often fail to engage in the work of archival scholars or use the vocabulary of archivists when discussing the archives. Throughout this chapter I try to use this vocabulary and acknowledge the work that archival scholars have done on the questions of power and marginalization in archives. See: Michelle Caswell, "'The Archive' is Not An Archives: Acknowledging the Intellectual Contribution of Archival Studies," *Reconstruction: Studies in Contemporary Culture* 16, no. 1 (2016).

⁸ For each of the congressmembers who discussed receiving letters, I tried to track down where they might have donated the letters through the help of archivists at the individual libraries. While the majority of them did donate their papers to archival collections, it appears these letters were not deemed to have archival "value" either by the congressmembers themselves, those in charge of donating their papers, or archivists, if the letters still were available at the time of donation. This speaks to larger tensions in archival studies about the difficult process of archival work where it is impossible to decide what records have the most public value, who has the power to make those decisions, and how records that do make it into are represented. This is work that archival scholars are deeply engaged in: see: Rodney G.S. Carter, "Of Things Said and Unsaid: Power, Archival Silences, and Power in Silence," *Archivaria* 61 (2006), 215-33; Michelle Caswell, "Seeing Yourself in History: Community

Archives in the Fight against Symbolic Annihilation,” *Public Historian* 36, no. 4 (2014): 26–37; Terry Cook, “What is Past is Prologue: A History of Archival Ideas Since 1898, and the Future Paradigm Shift,” *Archivaria* 43 (1997); Terry Cook, “Evidence, Memory, Identity, and Community: Four Shifting Archival Paradigms,” *Archival Science* 13, no. 2–3 (2013): 95–120; Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook, “Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory,” *Archival Science* 2, no. 1–2 (2002): 1–19;

⁹ Rodney G.S. Carter, “Of Things Said and Unsaid: Power, Archival Silences, and Power in Silence”. *Archivaria* 61 (2006): 216, <https://archivaria.ca/index.php/archivaria/article/view/12541>; Michelle Caswell, Ricardo Punzalan, and T-Kay Sangwand. “Critical Archival Studies: An Introduction,” in “Critical Archival Studies,” eds. Michelle Caswell, Ricardo Punzalan, and T-Kay Sangwand. Special issue, *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 1, no.2 (2017). <https://doi.org/10.24242/jclis.v1i2.50>; Gesa E. Kirsch and Jacqueline J. Royster, “Feminist Rhetorical Practices: In Search of Excellence,” *College Composition and Communication* 61, no. 4 (2010) 640-672, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27917867>; Charles E. Morris III and KJ Rawson, “Queer Archives/Archival Queers,” in *Theorizing Histories of Rhetoric*, ed. Michelle Ballif. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2013); José Esteban Muñoz “Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts,” *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 8, no. 2 (1996): 5-16, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07407709608571228>; Jacqueline Jones Royster, *Traces of a Stream: Literacy and Social Change Among African American Women* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000); Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa E Kirsch, *Feminist Rhetorical Practices: New Horizons for Rhetoric, Composition, and Literacy Studies* (Southern Illinois University, 2012).

¹⁰ See note 7.

¹¹ José Esteban Muñoz “Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts,” *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 8, no. 2 (1996): 11, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07407709608571228>.

¹² Pamela VanHaitsma, “Gossip as Rhetorical Methodology for Queer and Feminist Historiography,” *Rhetoric Review*, 35, no. 2 (2016): 135-147, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07350198.2016.1142845>.

¹³ “Wolverton comments on Amending the Pledge of Allegiance,” Congressional Record—House, June 7, 1954, 7762.

¹⁴ “Statement of the Honorable Louis C. Rabaut,” 8.

¹⁵ “Statement of the Honorable Charles G. Oakman, a Representative in Congress for the State of Michigan,” in House of Representatives Subcommittee No. 5 of the Committee on the Judiciary “H.J. Res. 243 and Other Bills of Pledge of Allegiance,” May 5, 1954, 16.

¹⁶ “Statement of the Honorable Barrett O’Hara,” 31.

¹⁷ “Statement of the Honorable Charles G. Oakman,” 14. It is unclear from the transcript whether Representative Edgar A. Jonas or Charles R. Jonas made the statement.

¹⁸ “Statement of the Honorable Charles G. Oakman,” 14.

¹⁹ “Statement of the Honorable John R. Pillion, a Representative in Congress for the State of New York” in House of Representatives Subcommittee No. 5 of the Committee on the Judiciary “H.J. Res. 243 and Other Bills of Pledge of Allegiance,” May 5, 1954, 12.

²⁰ Robert N. Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” *Daedalus* 96, no. 1 (1967): 1-21, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20027022>.

- ²¹ Roderick P. Hart, *The Political Pulpit* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1977), 1-2.
- ²² Hart, *The Political Pulpit*, 90.
- ²³ Hart, *The Political Pulpit*, 12.
- ²⁴ Samuel A. Stouffer, *Communism, Conformity, and Civil Liberties: A Cross-Section of The Nation Speaks Its Mind* (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1963).
- ²⁵ Stouffer, *Communism*, 167.
- ²⁶ Stouffer, *Communism*, 157-164.
- ²⁷ Stouffer, *Communism*, 176-177.
- ²⁸ David L. Cohn, "Politics in a God-Fearin' Key," *Saturday Review*, April 3, 1954.
- ²⁹ Dwight D. Eisenhower, Statement by the President Upon Signing Bill To Include the Words "Under God" in the Pledge to the Flag. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project* <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/232153>
- ³⁰ Shawn Francis Peters *Judging Jehovah's Witnesses: Religious Persecution and the Dawn of Rights Revolution* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2000) 72-95; "The Courage to Put God First," *Awake!* 72, no. 22 (1993), 12-17, <https://wol.jw.org/en/wol/d/r1/lp-e/101993526>.
- ³¹ Peters *Judging Jehovah's Witnesses*, 10.
- ³² Muñoz "Ephemera as Evidence," 6.
- ³³ Royster, *Traces of a Stream*, 83; Gesa E. Kirsch and Jacqueline J. Royster, "Feminist Rhetorical Practices: In Search of Excellence," *College Composition and Communication* 61, no. 4 (2010) 640-672, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27917867>; Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa E Kirsch, *Feminist Rhetorical Practices: New Horizons for Rhetoric, Composition, and Literacy Studies* (Southern Illinois University, 2012).
- ³⁴ VanHaitsma, "Gossip as Rhetorical Methodology," 135-147, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07350198.2016.1142845>. Also see: Henry Abelow, *Deep Gossip* (University of Minneapolis Press, 2003).
- ³⁵ VanHaitsma, "Gossip as Rhetorical Methodology," 136.
- ³⁶ VanHaitsma, "Gossip as Rhetorical Methodology," 138; Ned Schantz, *Gossip, Letters, Phones: The Scandal of Female Networks in Film and Literature* (Oxford University Press, 2008); Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Gossip* (New York: Knopf, 1985).
- ³⁷ Vanhaitsma suggests that this feature distinguishes "queer gossip" from "feminist critical imagination" in that it is not simply speculation but a specific challenge to "basic scholarly methodologies." VanHaitsma, "Gossip as Rhetorical Methodology," 139. Also see, Royster and Kirsch, *Feminist Rhetorical Practices*, 71.
- ³⁸ Gavin Butt, *Between You and Me: Queer Disclosures in the New York Art World, 1948-1963* (Durham: Duke UP, 2005), 7.
- ³⁹ VanHaitsma, "Gossip as Rhetorical Methodology," 139.
- ⁴⁰ VanHaitsma, "Gossip as Rhetorical Methodology," 141.
- ⁴¹ VanHaitsma, "Gossip as Rhetorical Methodology," 142. Also see: Royster and Kirsch, *Feminist Rhetorical Practices*, 71.
- ⁴² VanHaitsma, "Gossip as Rhetorical Methodology," 142. Also see: Royster and Kirsch, *Feminist Rhetorical Practices*, 71.
- ⁴³ VanHaitsma, "Gossip as Rhetorical Methodology," 142, citing Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: U of California Press, 1990), 23. For example, in VanHaitsma's project, while she had no evidence that letter writers in queer and same-sex

relationships were using popular letter-writing manuals, she identified traces within letters that suggest it is a possibility they did. She then utilized these traces to speculate about how those in same-sex relationships appropriated texts designed for heteronormative couples to navigate communicating within their queer relationships.

⁴⁴ Caswell, Punzalan, and Sangwand. "Critical Archival Studies."

⁴⁵ Carter, "Of Things Said and Unsaid," 216.

⁴⁶ E. Cram, "Archival Ambience and Sensory Memory: Generating Queer Intimacies in the Settler Colonial Archive." *Communication & Critical/Cultural Studies* 13, no. 2 (2016): 109–29, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14791420.2015.1119290>; Cheryl Glenn, and Jessica Enoch. "Drama in the Archives: Rereading Methods, Rewriting History." *College Composition and Communication* 61.2 (2009): 321–42; Davis W. Houck, "On or About June 1988," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 9, no. 1 (2006): 132–137; Charles E. Morris, "The Archival Turn in Rhetorical Studies; Or, the Archive's Rhetorical (Re)Turn," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 9, no. 1 (2006): 113–115; Charles E. Morris, "Archival Queer," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 9, no. 1 (2006): 145–151; K. J. Rawson, "Archive This! Queering the Archive," in *Practicing Research in Writing Studies: Reflexive and Ethically Responsible Research*, Katrina M. Powell and Pamela Takayoshi, eds. (New York: Hampton P, 2012). 237–50. Unfortunately, rhetorical scholars have often lamented about issues of power in archives without engaging in the scholarship from archival scholars on "critical archival studies" and, in doing so, have dismissed the scholar voices of archivists, who are predominately female. See: Michelle Caswell, "'The Archive' is Not An Archives: Acknowledging the Intellectual Contribution of Archival Studies," *Reconstruction: Studies in Contemporary Culture* 16, no. 1 (2016).

⁴⁷ Carter, "Of Things Said and Unsaid," 220.

⁴⁸ Archival scholars have written extensively about the association of archives and letters. See: M.T. Clanchy, "'Tenacious Letters: Archives and Memory in the Middle Ages," *Archivaria* 11 (1980), 115–25. <https://archivaria.ca/index.php/archivaria/article/view/10842>; Richard J. Cox, "Yours ever (well, maybe): Studies and Signposts in Letter Writing. *Archival Science* 10 (2010): 373–388, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-010-9121-2>; James Daybell, "The Afterlives of Letters" in *The Material Letter in Early Modern England. Early Modern Literature in History* (Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2012); William Merrill Decker *Epistolary Practices: Letter Writing in America before Telecommunications* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Gregory Fewster, "Archiving Paul: Manuscripts, Religion, and the Editorial Shaping of Ancient Letter Collections," *Archivaria* 81 (2016): 101–28, <https://archivaria.ca/index.php/archivaria/article/view/13560>; Paul Wake, "Writing from the Archive: Henry Garnet's Powder-plot Letters and Archival Communication. *Archival Science* 8 (2008): 69–84, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-008-9072-z>.

⁴⁹ There have been efforts to think about history, particularly U.S. history, through the eyes of marginalized groups or everyday citizens rather than leaders. See, for example: Nikole Hannah-Jones, *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story* (New York Times Company, 2021); Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States* (HarperCollins, 2015).

⁵⁰ Konstantin Dierks *In My Power: Letter Writing and Communications in Early America* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), xvii. For more on the letter writing of "everyday" people see: Decker, *Epistolary Practices* and Theresa Strouth Gaul and Sharon M. Harris, eds, *Letters and Cultural Transformations in the United States 1760–1860* (Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2009).

⁵¹ Mary E. Stuckey, *Political Vocabularies: FDR, the Clergy Letters, and the Elements of Political Argument* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2018), xxxiv.

⁵² Notably, VanHaitsma suggests that, while scholars utilizing the gossip method should always limit their claims, they should avoid “calling attention” to their “methodological uses of critical imagination,” 143. In this chapter, I resist this suggestion. While I recognize the utility of minimalizing attention, and thus critique, of the method, I argue that an open embracement of taking on the identity of the gossip can help normalize the method and destigmatize the conception of gossip in relation to scholarship.

⁵³ Andrew Fowler, “How Knights Added ‘Under God’ to the Pledge,” *Knights of Columbus* July 2, 2020, <http://www.kofc.org/en/news-room/knightline/special-edition/week-of-june-29/knights-added-under-god-to-the-pledge.html>.

⁵⁴ “National Executive Committee Meeting” *National Headquarters The American Legion* May 2, 3, and 4 1954; Letter 3 for;

⁵⁵ “About Us,” *The Christophers*, accessed December 10, 2021, <https://www.christophers.org/about>.

⁵⁶ “History of the Christophers,” *Christophers Ephemera Collection: OhioLINK Finding Aid Repository*, accessed December 10, 2021, http://ead.ohiolink.edu/xtf-ead/view?docId=ead/ODaU0037.xml;chunk.id=bioghist_1;brand=default.

⁵⁷ James Keller, *The Government is Your Business* (1952).

⁵⁸ K. Healan Gaston, *Imagining Judeo-Christian America, "Religion, Secularism, and the Redefinition of Democracy* (University of Chicago Press, 2019), 46-71.

⁵⁹ “Christophers Start Drive to Put ‘In God We Trust’ Plaques in Public Schools,” *The Observer*, October 28, 1951, <http://obs.stparchive.com/Archive/OBS/OBS10281951P07.php>,

⁶⁰ “Christophers Start Drive.”

⁶¹ “Do You Want God’s Name in Pledge of Allegiance?” *Christopher News Notes* 59, (May 1954).

⁶² “Do You Want God’s Name in Pledge of Allegiance?”

⁶³ “Do You Want God’s Name in Pledge of Allegiance?”

⁶⁴ “One Nation, Under God,” *The Post-Standard* (Syracuse, New York), May 5, 1954; “Enlightening Comments,” *Chillicothe Gazette* (Chillicothe, Ohio), May 15, 1954; “Letters to the Editor: Pledge of Allegiance” *Evansville Courier and Press* (Evansville, Indiana), May 16, 1954; Edith Johnson, “Flag Pledge ‘Under God,’” *The Daily Oklahoman*, May 19, 1954.

⁶⁵ “The Christian Amendment Movement - What It Is, Why America Needs It,” Baptist and Religious Collections - Institute for Church-State Studies (1960-1969), <https://digitalcollections-baylor.quartexcollections.com/Documents/Detail/the-christian-amendment-movement-what-it-is-why-america-needs-it/816085?item=816086>.

⁶⁶ Theistnormative legislation in the form of the motto “In God We Trust” on coins, had already been used to appease Christian nationalists wanting the Christian Amendment. See Lee “In God We Trust?”

⁶⁷ Agnes Maddox to Dwight D. Eisenhower, June 13, 1954, 1-D, 1954 (1), Box 10, General Files, Members-Endorsements, Eisenhower Presidential Library.

⁶⁸ Albert E. Parker to Dwight D. Eisenhower, June 10, 1954, 1-D, 1954 (1), Box 10, General Files, Members-Endorsements, Eisenhower Presidential Library.

⁶⁹ Steven B. Epstein, “Rethinking the Constitutionality of Ceremonial Deism,” *Columbia Law Review* 96, no. 8 (1996): 2083–2174, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1123418>.

⁷⁰ Philip Slomovitz, “Purely Commentary: Proposal to Add ‘Under God’ Phrase to Pledge to the Flag Raises Questions of Conflict with First Amendment—Issue Traces to Early Days of Michigan History,” *The Detroit Jewish News* March 5, 1954, <https://digital.bentley.umich.edu/djnews/djn.1954.03.05.001/2>.

⁷¹ “Congressman Rabaut Defends Idea of ‘Under God’ Phrase in Flag’s Pledge,” *Detroit Jewish News*, March 26, 1954, <https://digital.bentley.umich.edu/djnews/djn.1954.03.26.001/18>.

⁷² “Our Letter Box: Sen. Ferguson Defends ‘Under God’ Amendment,” *Detroit Jewish News* April 2, 1954, <https://digital.bentley.umich.edu/djnews/djn.1954.04.02.001/8>.

⁷³ Extension of Remarks of Hon. Charles G. Oakman of Michigan,” 16.

⁷⁴ Extension of Remarks of Hon. Charles G. Oakman of Michigan,” 14.

⁷⁵ Extension of Remarks of Hon. Charles G. Oakman of Michigan,” 14.

⁷⁶ E. J. Kahn, “Three Cheers for the Blue, White and Red,” *New Yorker*, June 27, 1952. “Mr. Flag” was written on Adams tombstone when he died in 1956 see. “Charles Samuel “Gridley” Adams,” *Find A Grave* accessed December 20, 2021, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/13662382/gridley-adams>

⁷⁷ “Gridley Adams to Senate Judiciary Committee Regarding ‘Under God’ Addition,” May 23, 1954, Record of U.S. House of Representative Committee on the Judiciary, Box 1114 *National Archives*.

⁷⁸ “Statement of the Honorable John R. Pillion,” 12.

⁷⁹ “Gridley Adams to Senate Judiciary Committee Regarding ‘Under God’ Addition,” May 23, 1954, Record of U.S. House of Representative Committee on the Judiciary, Box 1114 *National Archives*.

⁸⁰ William F. Potter to Dwight D. Eisenhower, June 14, 1954, 1-D, 1954 (1), Box 10, General Files, Members-Endorsements, Eisenhower Presidential Library.

⁸¹ Florian J. Wineriter to Dwight D. Eisenhower, June 16, 1954, 1-D, 1954 (1), Box 10, General Files, Members-Endorsements, Eisenhower Presidential Library.

⁸² David L. Cohn, “Politics in a God-Fearin’ Key,” *The Saturday Review*, April 3, 1954.

⁸³ “Life of John F. Kennedy,” *John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum*, accessed December 20, 2021, <https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/life-of-john-f-kennedy>.

⁸⁴ This balance was particularly evidence in Kennedy’s response to the 1962 Supreme Court decision to limit officially sponsored prayer in schools. In his response, he contended we must support the Supreme Court’s decision while also encouraging the public to use this decision as motivation to engage in religion more in their homes. John F. Kennedy, *The President's News Conference Online* by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/235987>

⁸⁵ John Huntington, “The Kennedy Speech that Stoked the Rise of the Christian Right,” March 8, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/03/08/the-kennedy-speech-that-stoked-the-rise-of-the-christian-right-123369>.

⁸⁶ Huntington, “The Kennedy Speech.”

⁸⁷ Kevin Kruse, *One Nation Under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America* (New York: Basic Books, 2015); XV and 99.

CHAPTER FOUR: WRITING POLITICAL VOCABULARIES: ARTICULATING COMPETING CHRISTIAN NATIONALIST AND SECULARIST POLITICAL IMAGINARIES IN RESPONSE TO “UNDER GOD”

“This decision is part of a 35-year effort by radical secularists who would twist the freedom of religion into a freedom from religion. We must reject this course of judiciary decisions. I pledge myself to fight every decision by the judiciary that seeks to drive expressions of faith, the Ten Commandments and voluntary prayer from schools, out of every corner of American life, so help me God.”- Representative Mike Pence, Congressional statement in response to the Ninth Circuit Court’s decision in *Elk Grove School Dist. V. Newdow*,¹

As outlined in the introduction of this dissertation, when Mike Newdow won his case in the Ninth Circuit Court it sparked national outrage. Congress quickly passed legislation to reaffirm the phrase in the pledge. Republican Representative and future Vice President Mike Pence was one of the earliest and most vocal critics of the decision. Pence, who has often received criticism for his Christian nationalist rhetoric, framed the change as part of a “35-year effort by radical secularists” to remove religion from the public sphere.² He suggests that “radical secularism” is a relatively new ideological movement that, since the 1960s, has been trying to reshape the relationship between religion and politics. Notably, he highlights how his defense of the phrase is grounded in a Christian nationalist perspective by framing “under God” as serving a similar function in the public sphere as Ten Commandment iconography. This move to paint the “culture war” between secularists and Christian nationalist as a relatively new phenomenon is a common depiction of the relationship between the opposing ideologies. This narrative points to the emergence of secularism as a radical, politically left movement that won several cases on the topic of the separation of church in the 1960s-1970s and helped prompt Christian nationalists’ development of the “religious right” in the 1980s.³ By categorizing secularism as a new radical movement, Pence minimalizes secularists’ criticism of the phrase “under God” in the pledge. Within Pence’s framing, secularists attack on “under God” was unprecedented and was simply

an example of a radical group that was trying to twist core values of the United States. This framing, however, dismisses how the competing political imaginaries of secularists and Christian nationalists in the United States is as old as the country itself.

Secular rhetorical criticism offers a lens through which to challenge and offer a more complete history about the relationship between Christian nationalism and secularism than that espoused by Pence. Secular rhetorical criticism entails studying tensions that emerge in relation to religious pluralism and shifts in religious authority. In the United States, those tensions often manifest within the competing views of secularists and Christian nationalists. I contend that it is imperative for those engaging in secular rhetorical criticism to resist the assumption that these tensions are a contemporary phenomenon that stem from the partisan alignment of the “secular left” and “religious right.” As outlined in chapter two, these tensions have much deeper roots.

Throughout U.S. history there have been competing Christian nationalist and secularist political imaginaries, or collective conceptions about the proper organization and function of the political, that shape public understandings of the role of religion in democratic structures.⁴ Within a Christian nationalist political imaginary there is a presumption that political order in a democracy must be maintained through a recognition of God’s sovereignty. In the United States, the imaginary emerges as the understanding of the United States as being founded as a “Christian nation.” For political secularists, on the other hand, their political imaginary is grounded on the notion that the United States was founded as a secular nation where sovereignty comes from humanity. Both frame their own imaginaries as reflective the true nature of democracy and dismiss other imaginaries as a threat to political order. Christian nationalist and secular imaginaries have competed to be the dominant imaginary throughout U.S. history and have often had to frame and reframe themselves in relation to the other. For example, the Christian

nationalist imaginary, which is more hegemonically ingrained, had to reframe itself as incorporating selected non-Protestant Christians in order to maintain its prevalence when political secularists imaginaries normalized expanding religious equalities beyond Christianity. Even when one imaginary becomes dominant, such as the Christian nationalist imaginary did in the 1950s, the other resists and challenges the democratic efficacy of the political shifts that occur during those times. Scholars engaging in secular rhetorical criticism can analyze the political vocabularies of the competing imaginaries to understand how they legitimize and develop themselves at pivotal moments of religio-political change and tension. I contend that, despite the 1950s regularly being depicted as a moment of religious cohesion, the dominance of Christian nationalism and the attempts to silence secularism through theistnormative legislation suggests it is such a moment of religio-political tension.

In this chapter, I conduct an analysis of the discourse of those who supported or opposed the change to the pledge in 1954. I argue the political vocabularies within letters sent to President Eisenhower reveal how secularists and Christian nationalists were legitimizing their own political imaginaries surrounding the role of religion and U.S. culture in the 1950s. These political vocabularies, or the “linguistic components of stable sets of political debate,” act as “rhetorical markers” of shifts in political paradigms and can give an indication to how groups with competing views of democratic power justify and negotiate their positions.⁵ My analysis demonstrates how those who supported the addition of “under God” in the pledge of allegiance saw it as a confirmation of their Christian nationalist imaginary while those who opposed it understood the theistnormative pledge as a threat to secular democratic values. More to the point, I argue this revelation points to need to understand how secularist and Christian nationalist

political imaginaries were negotiated in relation to politics prior to the contemporary understanding of the competing ideologies being aligned with the partisan politics.

In order to analyze how responses to the phrase “under God” reveal how Christian nationalists and secularists articulated their imaginaries in the 1950s, this chapter proceeds as follows. First, I provide a brief overview of scholarship that points to the relationship between Christian nationalist and secularist political imaginaries and political vocabularies. In this section, I also explain why letters from the public to Eisenhower may serve as viable texts for studying political vocabularies and imaginaries. Next, I demonstrate how the political vocabularies within the letters reveal that support came from those adhering to Christian nationalist imaginaries while opposition was motivated by a politically secularist imaginary. These political vocabularies reflect how writers located authority, depicted the current crisis, utilized myths, and constructed social hierarchies in a way that aligned with and legitimized their own political imaginaries. For supporters, the phrase “under God” was a confirmation that democratic societies needed to recognize the relationship between the nation and God in order to survive while opposition saw the legislation as a violation of the Constitutional principles of religious freedom and equality. My analysis disrupts dominant assumptions surrounding the supposed inclusive nature of the new pledge and the lack of criticism when it first was implemented. It also advocates the need for scholars engaged in secular rhetorical criticism to consider how Christian nationalist imaginaries and politically secular ones are constructed, negotiated, and maintained.

The Political Vocabularies of Political Imaginaries in Public Letters

Tension over political change is inevitable within societies. While some groups are invested in maintaining certain hegemonies, others propel society towards new ones. Such

tensions reflect the constant negotiation between competing political imaginaries. Yaron Ezrahi defines political imaginaries as the “fictions, metaphors, ideas, images, or conceptions that acquire the power to regulate and shape political behaviors and institutions in a society.”⁶ In other words, political imaginaries are “reality-producing fictions” that shape public understandings of political governance. While drawing from the work of Benedict Anderson’s “imagined communities” which explains “the embodiment of nations” and Charles Taylor’s “social imaginaries” which focus on the “constitution of modernity” and “modern moral order,” Ezrahi contends that political imaginaries enable democracy.⁷ Ezrahi argues that a democracy “must be imagined and performed by multiple agencies in order to exist” yet rarely is there full consensus over the imagination of what democracy should be.⁸ As such, there are often shifts in the dominant political imaginaries within a society that shape democratic practices.

Christian nationalism and political secularism offer competing political imaginaries that are focused on developing public understandings of the role of religion in democratic societies. Contemporary Christian nationalists and political secularists legitimize their imaginaries by turning to traditional rituals and imaginings that act as evidence that the political leaders who came before shared their understanding of democracy. For Christian nationalists this includes looking to the persistent use of religious references in political speeches and documents, the tradition of opening legislative meetings with prayer, and the impact Christian leaders have had on social movements. Political secularists point to the lack of religious references in the U.S. Constitution, the notion that there should be a “separation of church and state,” and the influence of freethinkers in social movements to legitimize their political imaginary. Such attempted legitimization reflects how dominant political imaginaries depend on their power to appear congruent with norms in order to appear “real” rather than imagined.⁹

As political imaginaries are consistently competing with alternative ones, they need to be articulated through new ways of understanding society, politics, and national identity that reinforce their apparent normative nature. Mary Stuckey argues that rhetorical scholars can analyze the political vocabularies utilized to legitimize competing political imaginaries. As noted previously, political vocabularies are the “rhetorical markers” that emerge through articulations of competing social imaginaries, particularly in times when political understandings are shifting.¹⁰ This includes analyzing how individuals and groups locate authority within a democracy, depict society, understand social hierarchies, utilize myths, and endorse specific policies. Analyzing political vocabularies offer insight not simply into what the beliefs of competing political perspectives are but in what ways they articulate and legitimize their political imaginaries.¹¹

While scholars can study the discourses of the politically elite to identify how political vocabularies circulate, reinforce, and evolve political norms, Stuckey contends that there is also value in analyzing the vernacular discourses of the public.¹² She points specifically to letters written by members of the public to politicians as texts that can reveal how vernacular discourses circulate political vocabularies that hint at shifts in political imaginaries. Such letters offer insight into the lives and opinions of everyday people who may otherwise go unnoticed in political conversations.¹³ They can be “understood as a form of political action in their own right, a ‘self-narration’ that allows writers to demonstrate their agency and to make demands on the political system.”¹⁴ Such demands are largely based on the political imaginary the letter writer subscribes to and are articulated through political vocabularies within their letters. Simply put, the study of letters reveals how political vocabularies emerge within non-elite, local

vernaculars and to how those in the public were negotiating between competing political imaginaries as they developed their understanding of democracy.

This chapter offers three areas of expansion to Stuckey's work on political vocabularies. First, this chapter is a study of political vocabularies that have not yet been attached to a particular political party and which emerge in response to bipartisan legislation. Stuckey contends that the most important political disagreements become associated with political parties; thus, scholars should study political vocabularies within the context of partisan politics.¹⁵ I counter, however, that political vocabularies should also be explored in the context of how they contribute to the articulation of differing political imaginaries *prior* to those positions being associated with a political party. In Stuckey's project on political vocabularies, she analyzed how stances on different policies reveal shifts in political imaginaries that aligned with political party differences. In this project, however, I look to how letter writers were responding to a single non-partisan policy. The political vocabularies demonstrate how support or opposition for the phrase "under God" was motivated by Christian nationalist and secularist imaginaries rather than by party alignment.

Second, this project highlights the value of studying political vocabularies at times of apparent consensus. Stuckey's study suggests that political vocabularies emerge when there is "a national debate over the nature of power."¹⁶ In contrast, the 1950s are typically framed as a time of consensus rather than a time of "national debate" over power, particularly in relation to religion.¹⁷ Yet, while the lack of national debate may have offered the illusion of consensus, a study of local vernaculars reflects how political vocabularies surrounding secularist and Christian nationalist imaginaries were circulating within the public in the 1950s before they re-emerged as part of a national debate in the following decades.

Finally, as an example of secular rhetorical criticism, this chapter explores how political vocabularies were used to help maintain or challenge *religious* hegemonic hierarchies. Stuckey observes in her study that overwhelmingly there seemed to be a consensus amongst clergy members writing to President Franklin D. Roosevelt that “[f]or leadership in a democracy to be understood as legitimate” it had to acknowledge “God’s will.” Stuckey attributes this language as reflective of a “broad cultural consensus on the Judeo-Christian (understood as Protestant) underpinnings of the nation.”¹⁸ I argue, however, that this supposed cultural consensus is part of the Christian nationalist political imaginary. Scholars need to look at how Christian nationalists utilize political vocabularies to position their political imaginary as part of a “cultural consensus” and how alternative imaginaries negotiated the hegemonically ingrained Christian nationalism.

This chapter also expands research on Christian nationalism. While most scholarship on the “religious right” recognizes that there have been surges of Christian nationalism throughout U.S. history, rarely do scholars point to the 1940s-1950s as being one of those times. Rather, they focus their attention on the history of evangelical Christians when describing the history of the “religious right.” Within this narrative, while evangelical Christians had been active in politics, they were dealt a blow after the humiliation and death of evangelical preacher William Jennings Bryan after the Scopes Trial in the 1925 and they largely retreated from the political sphere until they re-emerged in the 1970s.¹⁹ This narrative equates white evangelicalism with Christian nationalism; however, although white evangelicals do tend to adhere to Christian nationalist imaginaries, Christian nationalism is far more ingrained culturally.²⁰ Furthermore, this narrative dismisses the way Christian nationalists drove the spiritual-industrial complex in the 1950s. A look at the political vocabularies that emerged within the 1950s demonstrates how

Christian nationalism, as well as secularism, were actively influencing U.S. society between the years of 1925 and 1970.

Articulating Competing Christian Nationalist and Secularist Political Imaginaries

In this chapter I analyze letters sent to President Dwight D. Eisenhower and preserved in his presidential library. I also include a handful of letters sent to members of Congress that were preserved in the National Archives. I divided the letters I discovered by those who supported and opposed the change to the pledge. Most letters were hand-written and I excluded any letters that were illegible. While there were hundreds of letters sent in support, I excluded any generic one or two sentence messages simply thanking Eisenhower for changing the pledge without offering insight to the author's political imaginaries beyond their support for the change. Additionally, I excluded any generic messages sent by school children thanking Eisenhower for the change that appeared to be a part of an assignment. Most of these were quite short and it is difficult to determine if the letters reflected each student's own thoughts or they simply regurgitated their teachers' or school's perspectives. Most of the letters in support were part of larger petitions in which people simply signed their names or attached generic letters shared by other organizations. While I included letters and resolutions written by those in charge of the petitions, I did not include the duplicated pre-written letters. This left me with 57 letters in support and 23 letters in opposition in which the authors expanded on their opinion, thus offering insight into their imaginaries.

In analyzing these letters, it quickly became clear that there was rarely a clear indication of writers' partisan affiliations.²¹ This suggested that letter writers were not motivated by partisan politics in writing in support of opposition. On the contrary, the few who did indicate a possible political affiliation typically emphasized that their political affiliation may be different

than their stance suggested. One letter in support, for example, noted that “We are Democrats but if you will help bring our country back to God and use your efforts to get rid of a certain senator and a few old fuddie duddies in your party we will give you our votes.”²² A couple writers who opposed the change made it a point to emphasize that they generally supported and liked Eisenhower and his policies.²³ Gardner Williams, President of the Toledo Humanist Society, for example, strongly critiqued the change but went on to say that, other than this particular issue, he strongly admired how Eisenhower handled foreign and domestic issues.²⁴ As such, the political vocabularies evident within the letters do not necessarily reveal the author’s political party affiliation. Rather, they point to how the authors’ political imaginaries shaped their understanding of the relationship between religion and democracy.

This understanding is evident through the way writers located authority, depicted the current crisis they saw the new legislation in relationship to, depicted myths to legitimize their stance, and articulated their understanding of social hierarchies in a democracy. These political vocabularies suggest that those who supported the change to the pledge saw it as a confirmation of a Christian nationalist imaginary that framed belief in God as necessary for democratic success. Those who opposed the change, on the other hand, saw it as a threat to politically secular imaginaries that undermined the values of religious freedom and equality.

Locating Authority

One of the primary elements of political imaginaries are the articulations of where political authority is located and how it should be enacted. Supporters of the change invoked political authority that was primarily tied to a belief in a transcendental power, reflective of a Christian nationalist imaginary in which political leaders are responsible for guiding citizens to morality by enacting laws that are aligned with God’s will.²⁵ Meanwhile, those who opposed it invoked

secularist appeals in which authority is tied to human sovereignty rather than to the transcendent. Both sides located authority within the presidency, urging Eisenhower to use his presidential authority to pass or veto House Joint Resolution 243. Within the U.S. democratic system, the role of the U.S. presidency is inherently tied to authority.²⁶ In order to adhere to established democratic norms, those espousing particular political imaginaries must recognize such authority, though they may aim to limit the authority of the presidency if it appears a president is not committed to their imaginary.

Those who supported the change located Eisenhower's authority as legitimized through his religious identity. They placed the ultimate authority, however, with God. Eisenhower's own religious and political authority was framed as credible because he was willing to acknowledge God's authority. A supporter from California articulated the credibility of Eisenhower's authority by praising him as an honest man who was willing "to admit that he is depended upon a higher power in which to govern a nation."²⁷ In acknowledging his own and the nation's dependence on a higher power, supporters contended that Eisenhower's action would lead to God using His authority to reward the nation. A Sunday school teacher offers an example of this locating of authority by expressing delight over the thought that "God will surely bless you and our nation for your acknowledgement of Him."²⁸ Within this Christian nationalist imaginary, God would use His authority to reward political leaders who used their political authority to praise and carry out His will. Eisenhower's signing of the bill inspired supporters to write to him to confirm that such action had "bolstered [their] faith" in him as their President and gave them hope for the future of the democracy.²⁹ James Walsh, a supporter from Illinois, expressed not only an appreciation of Eisenhower's religious expression but also proclaimed a desire for more political leaders to embody Eisenhower's religious authority, writing, "Your action in signing [the bill] is

most praiseworthy. Would that more of our great men give praise and recognition to God.”³⁰ For Walsh, Eisenhower represented the ideal political use of authority in a democracy. Such an ideal political leader was one who openly praised and recognized God’s authority while passing legislation that encouraged others to do the same.

Supporters of “under God” were willing to extend Eisenhower’s authoritative power as long as he continued to use the authority to legitimize and promote a Christian nationalist imaginary. They saw the new pledge as a steppingstone to further legislation and behaviors that would confirm the Christian nationalist imaginary. In their letters, they encouraged Eisenhower to use his authority to call for a national period of fasting and prayer,³¹ to ensure the phrase “in the year of our Lord” remained in all U.S. legal documents,³² to change “Fathers’ Day” to “parents day” in order to not blasphemy God in Heaven who the Bible says is the only one to be called father,³³ and to support the “Christian amendment” that would add an acknowledgement to both God and Jesus Christ into the U.S. Constitution.³⁴ These supporters shared in a political imaginary where the president’s authority should include invoking further legislation that helps confirm God’s place in society, brings the American people together as a theistic (ideally Christian) collective, and that honors the Bible and will of God. For many of the supporters, Eisenhower’s religious authority came specifically from his identity as a Christian. One letter, for example, applauded Eisenhower, proclaiming, “we Christians today are so glad you are an unafraid Christian standing for what is right like our dear Lincoln” The writer went on to exclaim “Thank God we have ‘the Bible’ and the wonderful American Constitution built on it.”³⁵ In positioning Eisenhower alongside Lincoln as examples of good Christian leaders and framing the U.S. Constitution as a document built on the Bible, the writer affirmed that Eisenhower’s authority was as powerful as that of a previous great Christian president. Furthermore, while they

looked to the Constitution as having legal authority, such authority came from the presumption that it was a document built on the Bible, thus having religious authority.

While supporters granted Eisenhower political authority and were willing to expand it, so long as he used his authority to further legitimize a Christian nationalist imaginary, those who opposed the bill were more inclined to articulate a limitation on presidential authority. They did so by locating legal authority over Eisenhower's executive authority. Opposition framed the potential failure to veto the bill as anti-democratic within a politically secularist imaginary, thus an abuse of Eisenhower's authority. They located judicial authority as a way to balance such potential abuses. Kenneth Bonnell from California, for example, argued that the bill violated "the principle of separation of church and state" and warned Eisenhower that if the bill was passed "Parents with atheistic or agnostic leanings will be forced to take action through the courts of the nation to remove the pledge from public schools."³⁶ Within this framework, while Eisenhower had the authority to uphold secularist policies and resist Christian/religious nationalist legislation, the courts had the authority to keep presidents in check if they failed to do so.

Those advancing a politically secular imaginary framed the U.S. Constitution as the ultimate source of legal authority. Edward Williams writing on behalf of the Social Science Institute of Chicago noted that the organization opposed the change because they viewed it as a "direct contradiction of the spirit and intent of the United States Constitution"³⁷ while the Toledo Humanist Society argued more specifically that they opposed the change because they believed it violated both the First and Fifth Amendments.³⁸ By looking at the Constitution to help them determine that the change to the pledge should not be supported, opposition offered an imaginary where legal authority should drive policy support and such legal authority should be derived from reading the Constitution.

Letter writers were also careful to locate their own authority in their letters. Secularists reclaimed their own authority as U.S. Americans. In speaking of their own acts of citizenship such as saying the pledge, highlighting their own subscriptions to democratic values, and emphasizing their identity as loyal Americans, many of the critics challenged the dominant narrative that those opposing the change did not truly love America or were not themselves true Americans. In critiquing the Christian nationalist imaginary that had been perpetuated by the spiritual-industrial complex, Albert Parker wrote to Eisenhower proclaiming: “We agnostics are truly alarmed at the progress of some of these movements to make America religious. It will be difficult for us agnostics to pledge allegiance to our flag if this particular change is approved. We love our country as much as anyone.” Parker challenged the narrative that religious identity was central to U.S. American identity. Using the label agnostic, which still indicated a lack of belief but held less stigma than the term atheist, Parker articulated a political imaginary where even those who did not believe in God were just as committed to love of country as anyone else. One critic signed their letter with the valediction “An American,”³⁹ while a resolution sent in opposition to the change was described as have being passed by “a group of serious and loyal citizens.”⁴⁰ By identifying themselves as Americans and loyal citizens who loved the United States and wished to participate in patriotic rituals, the writers reclaim their authority as citizens despite the dominant narratives suggesting otherwise.

In contrast, many of the letters written in support contained identification markers where the writers expressed their own religious beliefs or role in religious institutions. All of the explicit religious identification markers identified supporters as Christians or belonging to Christian churches. While some writers only vaguely referenced their belief in God, there was no indication the writers were referring to any God other than the Christian one. Throughout the

letters supporters foregrounded their religious identities rather than giving indication of their identification as U.S. citizens. For supporters, their citizenship and loyalty to the United States appeared to be a given, tied to their religious beliefs. They framed their religious identities as a characteristic vital to good citizenship which would play a crucial role in helping Eisenhower bring the country back to God. Many informed Eisenhower that they were praying to God to help guide and protect him and the nation. In this framing, supporters located their authority in their roles as mediators between the president and God.⁴¹ As Christians and members of Christian churches, they served as the connection between God and Eisenhower and would use their authority as Christians to encourage Eisenhower to follow God's will and ask God to protect Eisenhower and the country in return.

Some of those who opposed the change also located their authority within their religious identity or their positive relationship with religion. In doing so, they portrayed the secular imaginary as not just the imaginary of the un-churched. The rare public acknowledgement of opposition to the pledge had framed it as coming from "communists," "atheists," and "agnostics."⁴² This articulation of framing advocates for secularism as atheists and anti-religionists would, in the coming decades, become a prominent political vocabulary of the Christian nationalist imaginary.⁴³ Yet the political vocabularies in the letters sent to Eisenhower suggest that those who identified as religious while espousing a political secular imaginary were already working to challenge this portrayal. June Smith of Pennsylvania noted that "although a church member" she was "a firm believer in the separation of church and state."⁴⁴ Gridley Adams, while suggesting he was not religious (see chapter three), highlighted his own positive relation to religion, imploring "in making this plea (I as the son of an Episcopal minister) see it is not from any hiss for or against religion."⁴⁵ By emphasizing they were not anti-religious, these

secularists challenged the dominant narrative that only non-theists would oppose the change and that opposition was motivated by anti-religious views. Particularly in the case of Smith's letter, she articulated her identity as a church member as evidence that she was not biased which gave her the authority to offer an objective view on the matter of the fusion of religion and politics.

Where letter writers located authority reflects how they understood power within a democracy and how they saw the addition of "under God" legitimizing or harming that power. For supporters, God had the greatest power to influence the success of democracy. As such, good and powerful leadership and citizenship was defined by an individual's relationship and recognition with God. Adding "under God" in the pledge was framed as a recognition of God's authority that political leaders and citizens needed to revere. For those who opposed the pledge, on the other hand, God has no authority in terms of political power. Instead, authority came from man-made institutions. If one branch of government abused their authority by putting God into politics, other institutions, particularly judicial ones, had the authority to keep them in check. Additionally, most of those who opposed the change suggested that having a religious identity did not give any person more authority than others. The public's authority came from their citizenship and loyalty to country rather than their belief and reverence to a higher power.

Depicting the Current Threat and Past Precedence

How letter writers articulated authority can help explain how the public viewed the crisis of the 1950s. For supporters, the undermining of God's authority was a threat to democracy while for secularists the undermining of legal authority constituted the crisis. Letter writers relied on rhetorical depictions of the political and social world that portrayed a crisis aligned with their own political imaginary. Rhetorical depictions, which are "strategic pictures, verbal or nonverbal visualizations that linger in the collective memory of audiences as representations of their

subjects,”⁴⁶ reflect how particular ideological perspectives can become ingrained within a “national psyche.”⁴⁷ Rhetorical depictions emerge as political vocabularies that offer “impl[ied] narratives” about a community and the different groups within it. Such depictions emphasize the essentiality of a particular political imaginary.⁴⁸ Stuckey argues that “for political vocabularies to be viable, they must be understood as accurately describing the political world. Old vocabularies fail because the broader political environment in which they were embedded changes.”⁴⁹ In the letters written to Eisenhower about the new pledge, those in support of the change depicted the crisis of the 1950s as one in which democracy was in danger due to atheistic communism while those in opposition portrayed the threat of the moment as the pervasiveness of religious and Christian privilege. Both offered depictions of the past that not only legitimized their anxiety over the crisis, but which confirmed that their stance on the revised pledge was reasonable in the context of U.S. democratic norms.

Like Reverend Docherty and members of Congress, supporters used prophetic dualism to depict a world that divided it between those who were moral and God-loving against those who were not.⁵⁰ Within this depiction, writers argued that “atheistic communism” was a driving threat and if the United States was to “survive as a free nation” then “we must maintain and manifest our belief in God.”⁵¹ While most writers used more vague theistnormative language in their use of prophetic dualism, others presented the United States as “a Christian nation” and applauded Eisenhower for using his authority to promote “spiritual means” for fighting against the “spreading evil” that was communism.⁵² Public supporters use of the same prophetic dualism that religious and political leaders used to defend the change reflects how the rhetorical strategy functioned as a depictive example of a political vocabulary that articulated and normalized a Christian nationalist imaginary both amongst the political elite and the general public. Within

this imaginary, a society where the people and leaders do not turn to God and fight against atheism will inevitably fail to survive as a democracy. Yet, the varying degrees in which the public utilized vague theistnormative versus more christonormative depictions reflects a division within the Christian nationalist imaginary. The letters suggest that there were some committed to older political vocabularies, that emphasized depictions of the *Christian* nation, while others, while still operating within a Christian nationalist imaginary, were embracing new political vocabularies that appeared more inclusive of theistic religions broadly.

Those writing in opposition depicted the threat to democracy in the 1950s as emanating not from Atheistic communism but from the pervasiveness of religious privilege. They depicted such privilege as undermining the constitutional values of religious equality and the separation of church and state. Warren and Minnie Albertson described this privilege as being exacerbated by various governmental policies that benefited those who were religious, noting that “we agnostics are alarmed at the power of religious people who are given every favoritism possible-tax exemptions, gambling exemption, reduced transportation fares, etc.”⁵³ Similarly, Eldron Scholl lamented that Eisenhower’s signature on the new law “will be another piece of evidence that believers always have forced belief on others.”⁵⁴ Scholl went on to argue that “the Constitution is for believers and unbelievers.”⁵⁵ Through this depiction, the U.S. Constitution, and thus democracy, were being undermined by the Christian nationalist imaginary that had dominated political action.

Those in opposition of the new pledge further depicted the threat as a legal one through an emphasis of the metaphor of there being a wall of separation of church and state.⁵⁶ This metaphor created a visual picture in the minds of others of how government should treat matters of religion and policy.⁵⁷ Through this picture, the secularist imaginary in which the revised

pledge was unconstitutional was common sense. Writers implored Eisenhower to use his authority to ensure the separation of church and state, “which is basic to our way of life” by vetoing the incorporation of religion into the pledge.⁵⁸ Notably, this judiciary precedence for the “wall of separation of church and state” was relatively recent. While the idea was espoused by Thomas Jefferson and cited in the 1878 Supreme Court Case *Reynold v. United States*, it was not until 1947 that the Supreme Court articulated the notion of there being a “wall of separation” between church and state as a part of the Establishment Clause.⁵⁹ The only major Supreme Court case that had ruled in favor of Atheists in relation to the establishment clause leading up to 1954 was the 1948 case *McCollum v. Board of Education*.⁶⁰ Yet, secularists viewed the 1948 case as a significant shift and depicted the notion of “the wall of separation” as commonly accepted legal practice by 1954. Their use of the metaphor in their letters suggested they were confident that courts would rule in the favor of secularists when those in power tried to put religion into schools or required citizens to acknowledge God. They upheld this depiction of legal norms, despite secularists losing a similar church and state battle in the 1952 *Zorach v. Clauson* case. This reliance on the depiction of the metaphor as legal precedence, despite its relatively new judiciary usage and inconsistent success, reflects how secularists in the 1950s were negotiating their imaginary in the context of a history where Christian nationalism had often been a dominant hegemonic ideology.

In negotiating and legitimizing their own imaginaries, writers offered cherry-picked historical depictions that suggested that their concerns over the current crisis and their stance on the pledge were reasonable. Notably, both supporters and opponents argued that history shows failure to adhere to practices that aligned with their own imaginaries results in the fall of democracies. Such depictions confirmed their fears that the current moment was a threat to

democracy. Mildred and Marie Hendrich of Kansas praised Eisenhower for approving the change emphasizing that “history speaks forcibly, that the nations which forget God and follow their own inclinations, gratifying their own whims and wicked pleasures: decay and crumble into dust.”⁶¹ They suggested that the Christian nationalist imaginary protected democracy, contending that the country must “earnestly endeavor to know God and do God’s will in all our dealings” in order to survive.⁶² While those writing in opposition also offered depictions of democracies failing, they contradicted supporters’ portrayals by arguing that when a country mixes religion and politics, freedoms will be limited and democracies can fall. Writers highlighted Greece, Rome, India, Spain, Italy, Ireland, and England as places where democracies collapsed, or where religious minorities were persecuted as a result of the intertwining of religion and politics.

Writers also offered competing depictions of U.S. history in order to justify their stance on the pledge. Most notably, the writers offered differing public memories about the stances of the “founding fathers” and President Abraham Lincoln through offering competing depictions over how the legislation corresponded with past leaders’ intentions and how they would have responded to calls to add “under God” to the pledge. Supporters framed the change as being “in full accord with the principles and objects of our Founding Fathers in their establishment of our constitutional government”⁶³ and claimed that it “echo[ed]” their beliefs.⁶⁴ Unsurprisingly, supporters also invoked the memory of Lincoln with several of the writers specifically mentioning Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address in their letters. In doing so, they suggested Lincoln would have supported the change.⁶⁵ By depicting previous leaders as supporters of such theistnormative legislation, advocates framed the use of theistic symbolism as naturally aligned with traditional democratic values.

In contrast, those in opposition argued that the founders recognized that “faiths differ” and had promoted the freedom of religion and the establishment clause.⁶⁶ Several writers specifically pointed to Thomas Jefferson and his advocacy for religious freedom and the separation of church and state as evidence of the secular founding.⁶⁷ One writer appealed to Eisenhower’s authority (and character) by suggesting that, while she realized that there were social pressures making it “political suicide” to vote against the revised pledge, “Jefferson and Lincoln, and men of their caliber” would not have put their own political ambitions over what was right.⁶⁸ Such depictions of previous leaders legitimized an imaginary where good leadership involves protecting religious pluralism and thus putting democratic values over individual political ambitions. These opposing depictions of how past leaders would have responded to the change reveal how Christian nationalist and politically secular imaginaries are shaped through particular public memories about the history of the United States.

Ultimately, these depictions functioned to justify letter writers’ stances on the pledge. For supporters, like those in power who advanced the legislation, they depicted the current crisis as being the threat of atheistic communism. As such, the addition of the phrase “under God” was a form of spiritual defense during the Cold War Crisis. The opposition, on the other hand, depicted the spiritual-industrial complex and the pervasiveness of Christian privilege as a threat to the religious pluralism that their secularist imaginary was grounded in.⁶⁹ Their depictions of the past legitimized both their concern for what they portrayed the crisis to be and their proposed solution for Eisenhower to either pass or veto the new legislation.

Reinforcing Political Myths

The use of history is perpetuated in another form of political vocabularies: Myths. Political myths are used to naturalize a political perspective in order to make the stance appear to

be common sense and coherent within the history of a society.⁷⁰ Myths are deeply embedded within a society and reveal the ingrained ideologies of that culture. Yet, these myths evolve as cultural ideologies change. Those purporting particular political imaginaries utilize and adapt myths to help advance their perspectives. In doing so, they carefully frame myths as part of the memory of a society rather than the invention of those with competing political imaginaries.⁷¹

Many of the myths that are foundational to the United States are grounded in theistnormative and Christian nationalist assumptions and reflect how the Christian nationalist imaginary is hegemonically ingrained within society. Richard T. Hughes outlines four primary myths that blatantly connect God to the success the United States and to U.S. identity: The Chosen Nation/American Exceptionalism Myth, the Myth of Nature's Nation, the Christian Nation Myth, and the Myth of the Millennial Nation.⁷² These myths not only presume (the Christian) God's existence, but frame citizens' and the government's commitment to God as integral to the future of the United States as a free country and a democracy. The myths frame the United States as being especially chosen by God to spread both democracy and Christianity around the world. Openly rejecting a belief in God means forgoing "a connection to national identity and belonging."⁷³ Thus, while Christian nationalists utilize such myths to naturalize their perspectives, secularists have to turn to other myths to advance their cause. David Sehat argues that, contemporarily, Christian nationalists on the right rely on the Christian Nation Myth while secularists on the left rely on the Separation Myth, both of which offer incomplete narratives surrounding the complex role religion and religious (in)tolerance played in the foundation of the United States.⁷⁴ The use of these myths by Christian nationalists and secularists can be found in the responses to the addition of "under God" to the pledge. Those in support of the change utilized the Chosen Nation, Millennial Nation, and Christian Nation myths when legitimizing the

change. Opposition, on the other hand, employed the Separation Myth and the American Dream Myth. Notably, both sides operationalized the Myth of Religious Tolerance to frame their perspectives as being aligned with the religious freedom clause of the U.S. Constitution.

Two prominent, and closely related myths that supporters utilized to legitimize their support for the revised pledge were the Myth of the Chosen Nation and the Millennial Nation Myth. The Chosen Nation Myth suggests that the United States was chosen by God, has a special mission in contemporary times, and will be blessed by God if it advances its mission.⁷⁵ The Millennial Nation Myth is an expansion of the Chosen Nation Myth in that it suggests God chose the United States to “bless the world with the unfolding of a golden age.”⁷⁶ Within this myth’s narrative, the United States has a God-ordained mission to spread truth (including the truth about God), freedom, morality, justice, and democracy around the world in order to help all of mankind. Several writers emphasized that the United States was successful because God created and blessed the nation.⁷⁷ They stressed that the United States would only survive if the people recognized God, the nation’s “total dependence upon him”⁷⁸ and on the “proper upbringing of our children, the citizens of tomorrow, and the inculcating in them of proper God-fearing principles.”⁷⁹ Through this utilization of the two myths, supporters framed the new pledge as a way to recognize that the United States was specially chosen by God and would only remain blessed if the people publicly acknowledged and showed reverence towards God. Supporters also framed the new pledge as a key tool in helping the United States achieve its mission of spreading Godly democracy by suggesting it would lead to peace not only in the United States, but around the world.⁸⁰ As articulated in a letter from the Sisters of the Visitation, for them, the new legislation:

raised our hopes that soon the world would realize that it has strayed from its Creator and from the awareness of the sublime destiny of the soul. Our Heavenly father has inspired you as leader of the Nation and enlightened you in those things that bring true peace.⁸¹

This notion, that the change to the pledge would help spur a recognition around the world of the existence and importance of God for democracy helped to legitimize theistnormative legislation within the framework of the Millennial Nation Myth. The legislation was an example of how political leaders and the U.S. American people were actively working to save the world from atheistic communism and spread awareness of God.

Many of the supporters also employed the more explicit Myth of the Christian Nation to legitimize their Christian nationalist imaginary and the role the new pledge played in upholding it. This myth presumes that the United States was founded as a Christian nation and, as such, passing policies based on the Christian tradition aligns with the goals of the “founding fathers.”⁸² The specific reference to the United States being a “Christian nation” emerged in several letters to Eisenhower and Congress, with supporters celebrating the fact that the new pledge would help remind and inform the world that the United States is a “Christian nation.”⁸³ One writer framed the new pledge as a piece of legislation that helped solidify the United States as a Christian nation, noting that “in pledging our allegiance first to God we became the perfect Christian nation.”⁸⁴ Despite claims that the new pledge did not favor one religion, the identification of this myth as a prominent political vocabulary within letters of supporter suggests that those advancing a Christian nationalists imaginary saw the new pledge as a confirmation of the Myth of the Christian Nation which was the foundation of their view of democracy.

In contrast to supporters, the opposition had to turn to non-religious myths to help support their position. The Separation Myth was one that, unsurprisingly, secularists relied on

extensively in their letters. The Separation Myth presumes that the founders intended the United States to be a secular nation in which religion and government should remain separate.⁸⁵ This myth legitimizes the politically secular imaginary, while challenging the Christian Nation Myth. As previously noted, those criticizing the new pledge relied heavily on the metaphor of the wall of separation of church and state, an important depiction for the Separation Myth. Within the myth, this metaphor is framed as deeply ingrained and commonly accepted within a society. The Liberal Religious Youth utilized this myth when writing to Eisenhower, arguing that “this disposition poses a serious threat to our American heritage of separation of church and state.”⁸⁶ The Separation Myth posits that secularism, in the sense of keeping religion out of the public sphere, is part of a shared heritage and thus any attempt by the government to pass theistnormative legislation or endorse theistic rituals, such as the new pledge, violated the core values and principles within the United States.

Another myth that one critic, Albert Parker, utilized was the Myth of the American Dream. This myth emphasizes the importance of individual initiative rather than institutional power. This narrative suggests “good” citizens are self-reliant. Parker based his critique of the new change largely on this myth, writing:

Americans must retain their own self-reliance....When we come to the point that we no longer have faith in ourselves, but must depend on something supernatural then we are on the road to oblivion.... No sir, I want my America to stand on its own feet, solve its problems with its own intelligence, and remain a free and pagan nation.⁸⁷

Parker’s use of the American Dream Myth framed the Christian nationalist imaginary that the American people needed to have faith and depend on a higher power as a threat to democracy. Rather than rely on a God, Parker suggested that U.S. citizens and the government needed to rely

on themselves and only in doing so would the United States remain a successful and powerful democracy.

Notably, both those in opposition and support relied on the Myth of Religious Tolerance to justify their position on the legislation. This shared use of the myth reflects how the competing imaginaries were negotiating their stances within the context of the other. Despite the long history of religious intolerance and oppression, particularly in the 1800s, secularists advanced the narrative that there had been “relative harmony” amongst different religious groups within the United States.⁸⁸ Critics argued that the change would lead to an unprecedented intolerance with several writers expressing concern that the new pledge would be the end of religious freedom and would result in disunity amongst the people.⁸⁹ They grounded this myth within the same logic as the Separation Myth, in which they contended “our founders endowed us with religious tolerance.”⁹⁰ In drawing on a narrative in which the United States had long been a tolerant nation in terms of religion, secularists could frame their position of advancing religious equality as aligned with values of past generations. They could justify criticizing the Christian nationalist imaginary and the theistnormative legislation they supported as a violation of the presumed historical religious tolerance the United States had supposedly enjoyed.

Yet, the Myth of Religious Tolerance was utilized by some adhering to the Christian nationalist imaginary as well. While it may appear incongruent for supporters to both argue that the change reflected a specific validation of the Christian Nation Myth as well as the Myth of Religious Tolerance, this discrepancy reflects the way competing myths can be used to legitimize a position depending on the need. As I have argued elsewhere, theistnormative legislation is a valuable rhetorical tool for Christian nationalists because they can present it both as inclusive and explicitly Christian.⁹¹ While many of the writers viewed the change to the pledge as a

legitimization of the Christian Nation Myth, others framed the phrase as more inclusive. Jean Buttock, from New York, was one such supporter. In their letter, they argued that they “have found no one who could give me an argument which would hold ground with the majority of the people. ‘Under God’ pertains to any God—any that any American believes and trusts in.”⁹² Such support relied on the Myth of Religious Tolerance through framing the vague use of God as inclusive for the majority of Americans, thus aligned with the values of religious freedom and tolerance. When aligned with other theistnormative myths that advance the Christian Nationalist imaginary, such religious tolerance only needed to be extended to those who believed in a God

Confirming Hierarchies

The final element of political imaginaries articulated through political vocabularies are the confirmation of ideological hierarchies. An analysis of political vocabularies reveals how political hierarchies are “created, naturalized, and circulated” within competing political imaginaries.⁹³ The political vocabularies within the letters sent to Eisenhower offer insight into how those with Christian nationalist and secularists imaginaries understood social order and how they viewed the new legislation as either upholding or threatening the hierarchal structure. Through their articulations of “the people” and the warrants they relied on, writers offer insight into how they viewed the proper and natural social order within a democracy

How those with competing political imaginaries articulate the conception of “the people” suggests how those adhering to those imaginaries view social order. Michael McGee argues that notions of “the people” are rhetorically constructed, not necessarily as an accurate portrayal of lived people, but as “an idea of collective force.”⁹⁴ This imagined understanding of “the people” needs to be “constituted” or brought into being through rhetoric.⁹⁵ Those writing in support of

the change depicted “the people” as part of a theistic collective. The Board of Alderman in Massachusetts offered this construction in their defense of the new legislation, arguing:

WHEREAS, we are a God-fearing country and every person in this land of opportunity believes in God in whatever form they desire, and WHEREAS, we are proud of our beliefs in the Almighty and proclaim to the world our everlasting faith in the creator, and WHEREAS, the Communist Countries are in the condition they are because of their disbelief in God and oppress and persecute all people who wish to practice their religion and proclaim their faith in the Almighty.⁹⁶

The Board of Alderman not only utilized prophetic dualism in juxtaposing the godly and tolerant United States against the intolerant godless communists, but they painted a theistnormative picture in which “the people” were clearly believers of God. Within this framing of “the people,” true Americans believe in God while those who are godless are a danger to society. In an even more explicit example, an American Legion post justified their support for the change by arguing “it is common knowledge that a God-fearing and God-loving people make the best citizens and are the backbone of any democratic nation.”⁹⁷ This statement aligned with American Legion’s “Back to God” program, which aimed at turning people back to God under the premise that belief in God made citizens better. The new pledge was justified because it aligned with a theistnormative hierarchal understanding of good moral citizenship being tied to a belief in God.

Opposition, on the other hand, offered a depiction of “the people” as being ir/religiously diverse. A 12-year-old girl from Chicago, for example pointed out that “there are more than Christians and Jews in this great land of ours” noting that there are also “Hindus, Buddhists, and Agnostics who do not belief in God as you and I.”⁹⁸ Others challenged the dominant theistnormative narrative by arguing that far more people were not theistic or church members than those adhering to Christian nationalist imaginaries were purporting.⁹⁹ Scholl, who had critiqued Eisenhower for forcing his religious beliefs onto others, argued that “there are many

thousands of true Americans who can not honestly believe, possibly a million,”¹⁰⁰ while Donald Sweet argued that “millions” in the United States would object to the change, even if they “are too much occupied” to openly contest it.¹⁰¹ While some acknowledged that the majority of people were theistic, they contended that majority does not outweigh the rights of the minority.¹⁰² The political vocabularies of those opposing the change suggested they understood “the people” to be religiously diverse and far less religious than suggested within dominant narratives. Their focus on religious diversity suggested that they understood social hierarchy as involving the treatment of people of all or no religion and viewed the phrase “under God” in the pledge as endangering such equality.

Another way to identify hierarchies within texts is to look for the warrants, or the justifications for political stances. While supporters favored the pledge because it aligned with a theistnormative hierarchal understanding of good citizenship, they relied heavily on Christian religious warrants to justify the change to the pledge. These Biblical warrants reflect how supporters had adopted a Christian nationalist imaginary in which national policy could be considered legitimate if it aligned with the Bible or the Judeo-Christian tradition. One supporter praised not only the legislation but also Eisenhower’s June 14 statement upon signing it into law, writing “in listening to [your statement]...I notice that your words are backed by Christian ideals and principles.”¹⁰³ Others more specifically pointed to the Bible to highlight which Christian ideals and principles backed the new legislation. A writer from Oklahoma praised the new recognition of God, noting that God said “seek ye first the Kingdom of heaven and these things shall be added unto you”¹⁰⁴ In invoking the Bible and Christian ideals, supporters reinforced a Christian nationalist hierarchy where religion, specifically Christianity, could warrant what was proper policy.

Meanwhile, opposition relied on legal warrants to justify their critique of the new pledge. The opposition mostly utilized references to the U.S. Constitution to argue change to the pledge violated religious freedom and liberty, and thus threatened core values of democracy.¹⁰⁵ They often used rhetorical questions to encourage Eisenhower and congressmembers to consider the potential legal and social consequences of the new pledge on maintaining religious equality. Scholl, for example, who had argued that the Constitution is for “believers and unbelievers,” asked “what will the penalty be for a person who does not add the words ‘under God?’ The stake?”¹⁰⁶ Others asked if belief in a god would become a requirement for being a citizen and whether “humanism and the religious liberal” will be seen as “un-American”¹⁰⁷ or if refusing to participate in the pledge and being public about their opposition would result in “non-deists” becoming “suspected of being disloyal?”¹⁰⁸ These rhetorical questions suggested that the consequences of the pledge would violate the principles of religious freedom, equality, and tolerance. Eric Barnitz, in using his own livelihood as an example, argued that the change went beyond the jurisdiction of the government, put opposition in a double-bind, and ultimately was a violation of constitutional values, thus undermined a social hierarchy founded in religious equality:

The proposed pledge would face me with a dilemma: should I take it with mental reservations, or refuse to take it? The first of course would be dishonest. The second open to misinterpretation. I do not want this congress to tie up beliefs in liberty and justice with belief in relevance of religion to our government. To recur to Jefferson, ‘the opinions of men are not the object of civil government, nor under its jurisdiction’ and I do not want to be faced with a ready-made package of opinions, done up so that I must subscribe, in effect, to all or to none. If I were the only person in the United States who felt this way about the proposed bill, it would make no important difference. I hope that before it votes, your committee will consider, not the amount of pro and contra on this measure, but the principles of liberty of opinion involved.¹⁰⁹

Barnitz’s letter suggests that if a law puts any citizen in such a double bind, where they feel pressured to hide their identity or beliefs or risk being accused of being “misinterpreted” as anti-

American, then that law violates the principles of liberty and is unconstitutional. By focusing on how the pledge violated the constitutional value of religious equality and freedom, opposition advocated for a power structure in which, unlike within a Christian nationalist imaginary, theism or religion should not have a privileged position within society.

Conclusion

My analysis of the political vocabularies of those in support or opposition to the implementation of “under God” in the pledge in 1954 reveals how those motivated to write to Eisenhower and members of Congress articulated their stance as aligning with competing political imaginaries. These letters offer insight into how those adhering to a political secular versus a Christian nationalist imaginary understood the function of the new pledge within the United States democratic system. The letters also point to how these bipartisan imaginaries were being negotiated during the 1950s. While dominant narratives, such as that espoused by Pence in response to a 2002 challenge to the pledge, suggests that the tension between secular and Christian nationalism has primarily been contained to the past half a century, these imaginaries have a long history of shaping U.S. culture. Those engaging in secular rhetorical criticism need to consider how the negotiation between the two imaginaries have evolved over time and how they are continuing to shape political and social life in the United States.

Ultimately these letters offer insight for how writers saw the function of the phrase “under God” in the pledge and how they understood that function either advancing or threatening their political imaginary. For supporters, the change to the pledge was framed as a daily reminder, especially for children, of the nation and its people’s “dependence” on and belief in God.¹¹⁰ They considered the change as a way to openly “express our Faith in [God]” which will lead to His protection of “our beloved land.”¹¹¹ Some writers viewed the addition as a more

explicit recognition of the Christian God. The letter from the Hendrichs, for example, celebrated that the change suggested Eisenhower had “plainly indicated to the people of our country that if our nation is to continue to be ‘indivisible’, she must be true to the God of our Fathers, the true and living God of the Bible.”¹¹² For supporters, the change was a confirmation of the Christian nationalist imaginary that a democratic society needs its leaders and citizens to acknowledge and revere God if it is going to survive. Those who opposed the change similarly saw the addition as a declaration of there being a relationship between government and belief in God. They, however, understood this as “establishing a religion” and thus a violation of the First Amendment.¹¹³ They considered the pledge to be a loyalty oath for all citizens and contended that the government has “no right to require an affirmation of religious faith on our statement of loyalty to our secular government.”¹¹⁴ Opposition framed the theist normative legislation as a violation of the Constitution’s establishment clause that would function to compel citizens to express a belief in (the Christian) God in order to be seen as U.S. American. As such, they considered the legislation mandating the change as a clear violation of the secular imaginary of the relationship between religion and government.

The letters pertaining to the revised pledge not only reveal how the political imaginaries of Christian nationalists and secularists offered competing political vocabularies to articulate their imaginary as the norm, but also point to strife amongst those within the individual imaginaries. While many supporters saw the change as specifically promoting Christian values, others argued the new pledge pertained “to any God” that “any American believes and trusts in.”¹¹⁵ These competing understandings by supporters reflect how the Christian nationalist imaginary was being negotiated within an increasingly plural society. Some supporters were still committed to old political vocabularies that expressly depicted the Christian nationalist

imaginary as favoring Protestant Christians while others were adopting newer vocabularies that reflected the Christian nationalist imaginary expanding to include those more broadly within the “Judeo-Christian” tradition. The disparate readings of the “God” in the pledge as being the Christian God or a general god reflects how the strategic polysemy of theist normative legislation, symbols, and rituals advance a Christian nationalist imaginary in a society where a politically secular imaginary is also influencing society. The vague use of God can continue to speak directly to those committed to more conservative manifestations of the Christian nationalist imaginary who read God as the Christian God while also appealing to those who may be committed to a more liberal Christian nationalist imaginary that frames those holding particular theistic religious beliefs more broadly as integral to democratic success. While more conservative and liberal Christian nationalist may not fully agree on how inclusive the imaginary was in terms of religious pluralism, they agree that for democracy to succeed, belief in God is a necessity.

Notably, there is also suggested strife within the secular imaginary as well. While opposition to the pledge certainly existed, it was relatively limited. This can, in part, be explained by the atmosphere during the Red Scare where there was pressure to align with national consensus. As highlighted in the previous two chapters, secularism and atheism were largely contained during the Cold War. While some individuals may have been willing to risk openly (even if just in letters to the president) critiquing the change, others who may have viewed democracy from within the perspective of a politically secular imaginary may not have seen the risk of becoming publicly engaged with promoting that imaginary as viable. Even active secularist groups put only limited effort in 1954 into challenging the change. Kevin Kruse, however, points to how those groups had limited resources and were focusing on other more

explicitly Christian programs being promoted within the spiritual-industrial complex.¹¹⁶ The continued question within the secular movement of where to focus their energy, on vague theistnormative symbols and rituals or more explicit christonormative legislation, reflects how there are competing understandings of how to best challenge Christian nationalist imaginaries and promote an alternative secular one.

These competing vocabularies both between secularists and Christian nationalist imaginaries and amongst those adhering to the same imaginary can offer insight into contemporary manifestations of the imaginaries.¹¹⁷ While within contemporary “culture war” narratives, politics are currently divided between the “secular left” and the “religious right,” the partisan division of these imaginaries is not so clear cut. A 2021 survey by the Public Religion Research Institute found that 63% of Republicans and 35% of Democrats believe that “Being Christian” is an important trait “associated with being truly American.” Furthermore 78% of Republicans and 45% of Democrats consider “Believing in God” to be an important trait.¹¹⁸ This study suggests that, while the “religious right” is more inclined to adhere to a Christian nationalist imaginary, many Democrats also embrace a Christian nationalist understanding of good citizenship. Furthermore, across political parties, a theistnormative grounded Christian nationalist imaginary is more pervasive than exclusively christonormative ones. This bipartisan adoption of a liberal theistnormative Christian nationalist imaginary can explain how, despite the characteristic of Democrats being “secular,” the challenge to the pledge in 2002 still resulted in bipartisan support for re-affirming the change. There remains a strong Christian nationalist association between the belief in God and American identities across the political spectrum. Those adhering to either a more conservative or liberal manifestation of a Christian nationalist imaginary would not view the phrase “under God” as problematic within their understanding of

democracy. Furthermore, there continues to be tensions amongst those adhering to a politically secular imaginary over whether to prioritize challenging theistnormative rituals and symbols.¹¹⁹ As demonstrated in the introduction, challenging theistnormative legislation continues to result in accusations of un-Americanism. Meanwhile, Christian nationalists are using their institutional power to fund Christian organizations, get Christianity back into public schools, and pushing conservative Christian policies such as limiting abortion rights.¹²⁰ These are the battles most secular organizations tend to focus on. Accepting vague theistnormative symbols and rituals may be a necessary concession for those adhering to politically secular imaginaries as they negotiate competing with Christian nationalist imaginaries.

NOTES

¹ “Shocked and Appalled by Ninth Circuits Decision,” *Congressional Record*, June 27, 2002, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CREC-2002-06-27/pdf/CREC-2002-06-27.pdf>.

² Jeremy Scahill, “Mike Pence will be the Most Powerful Christian Supremacist in U.S. History,” *The Intercept* November 15, 2016, <https://theintercept.com/2016/11/15/mike-pence-will-be-the-most-powerful-christian-supremacist-in-us-history/>; Michael Peppard, “Mike Pence’s Idolatrous RNC Speech: Old Glory to God,” *Commonweal Magazine*, August 30, 2020, https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/old-glory-god_.

³ When discussing the “culture war” between secularists and Christian nationalists, scholars generally start their studies with the 1960s. See: Michelle Goldberg, *Kingdom Coming: The Rise of Christian Nationalism* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006); Andrew Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars* (University of Chicago Press, 2015).

⁴ Yaron Ezrahi, *Imagined Democracies: Necessary Political Fictions* (Cambridge University Press, 2012)

⁵ Mary E. Stuckey, *Political Vocabularies: FDR, the Clergy Letters, and the Elements of Political Argument* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2018), xvi.

⁶ Ezrahi, *Imagined Democracies*, 3.

⁷ Ezrahi, *Imagined Democracies*, 33.

⁸ Ezrahi, *Imagined Democracies*, 1.

⁹ Ezrahi, *Imagined Democracies*, e.

¹⁰ Stuckey, *Political Vocabularies*, xvi.

¹¹ Stuckey, *Political Vocabularies*, 150

¹² For more on vernacular discourse, see: Olga Baysha, “Mythologizing Modernity Through Vernacular Discourses.” *International Journal of Communication (19328036)* 6 (January 2012): 2985–3005. Calafell, Bernadette Marie, and Fernando P. Delgado. “Reading Latina/o Images: Interrogating Americanos.” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 21, no. 1 (March 2004): 1–24, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0739318042000184370>; Hauser, Gerard A. “Vernacular Dialogue and the Rhetoricity of Public Opinion.” *Communication Monographs* 65, no. 2 (June 1998): 83, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03637759809376439>; Ono, Kent A., and John M. Sloop. “The Critique of Vernacular Discourse.” *Communication Monographs* 62, no. 1 (March 1995): 19, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03637759509376346>.; Webster W. Newbold, “Traditional, Practical, Entertaining: Two Early English Letter Writing Manuals.” *Rhetorica* 26, no. 3 (Summer 2008): 267–300, <https://doi.org/10.1525/rh.2008.26.3.267>.

¹³ See: William Merrill Decker *Epistolary Practices: Letter Writing in America before Telecommunications* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Konstantin Diercks, *In My Power: Letter Writing and Communications in Early America* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009); Theresa Strouth Gaul and Sharon M. Harris, Eds., *Letters and Cultural Transformations in the United States 1760-1860* (Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2009);

¹⁴ Stuckey, *Political Vocabularies*, xxxiv-xxxv.

¹⁵ Stuckey, *Political Vocabularies*, xvi.

¹⁶ Stuckey, *Political Vocabularies*, 5.

¹⁷ This coercive national consensus is reflective of the containment narratives outlined in chapter three.

¹⁸ Stuckey, *Political Vocabularies*, xxxi.

¹⁹ Goldberg, *Kingdom Coming*; Katherine Stewart, *The Power Worshipers: Inside the Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019).

²⁰ Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* (Oxford University Press, 2020), 23-53.

²¹ Notably, President Eisenhower had an unusual bipartisan appeal with both Democrats and Republicans asking him to run for president on their ticket. See: Chester J. Pach, Jr., "Dwight D. Eisenhower: Campaigns and Elections," *UVA Miller Center*, Accessed June 1, 2022, <https://millercenter.org/president/eisenhower/campaigns-and-elections>.

²² Mr. and Mrs. D.M. Rowley to Dwight D. Eisenhower, June 14, 1954, 1-D, 1954 (2), Box 10, General Files, Members-Endorsements, Eisenhower Presidential Library.

²³ Gardner Williams to Dwight D. Eisenhower, June 15, 1954, 1-D, 1954 (1), Box 10, General Files, Members-Endorsements, Eisenhower Presidential Library; William R. and Frances H. Remington to Dwight D. Eisenhower, December 22, 1954, 1-D, 1954 (1), Box 10, General Files, Members-Endorsements, Eisenhower Presidential Library

²⁴ Gardner Williams to Dwight D. Eisenhower.

²⁵ David Sehat traces the religious tensions amongst the founders in first section of *The Myth of American Religious Freedom* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

²⁶ Stuckey, *Political Vocabularies*, 18.

²⁷ Mrs. Carl James Linke (sic) to Dwight D. Eisenhower, July 6, 1954, 1-D, 1954 (1), Box 10, General Files, Members-Endorsements, Eisenhower Presidential Library.

²⁸ Mrs. Raymond McDowell to Dwight D. Eisenhower, June 14, 1954, 1-D, 1954 (1), Box 10, General Files, Members-Endorsements, Eisenhower Presidential Library.

²⁹ Evelyn T. Mechler to Dwight D. Eisenhower, June 16, 1954, 1-D, 1954 (2), Box 10, General Files, Members-Endorsements, Eisenhower Presidential Library.

³⁰ James Valsh to Dwight D. Eisenhower, July 14, 1954, 1-D, 1954 (1), Box 10, General Files, Members-Endorsements, Eisenhower Presidential Library.

³¹ Mrs. Grover Rigdon to Dwight D. Eisenhower, June 14, 1954, 1-D, 1954 (1), Box 10, General Files, Members-Endorsements, Eisenhower Presidential Library.

³² Mr. and Mrs. D.M. Rowley to Dwight D. Eisenhower

³³ Unknown writer to Dwight D. Eisenhower, June 19, 1954, 1-D, 1954 (1), Box 10, General Files, Members-Endorsements, Eisenhower Presidential Library.

³⁴ Agnes Maddox to Dwight D. Eisenhower, June 13, 1954, 1-D, 1954 (1), Box 10, General Files, Members-Endorsements, Eisenhower Presidential Library.

³⁵ Miss Heaton Lee to Dwight D. Eisenhower, N.D., 1-D, 1954 (1), Box 10, General Files, Members-Endorsements, Eisenhower Presidential Library.

³⁶ Kenneth H. Bonnell to Dwight D. Eisenhower, June 11, 1954, 1-D, 1954 (1), Box 10, General Files, Members-Endorsements, Eisenhower Presidential Library.

³⁷ Dr. Edward Williams to Dwight D. Eisenhower, May 30, 1954, 1-D, 1954 (1), Box 10, General Files, Members-Endorsements, Eisenhower Presidential Library.

³⁸ Gardner Williams to Dwight D. Eisenhower

³⁹ Edron Scholl to Dwight D. Eisenhower, June 14, 1954, 1-D, 1954 (1), Box 10, General Files, Members-Endorsements, Eisenhower Presidential Library.

⁴⁰ Donald H. Sweet to Dwight D. Eisenhower, June 9, 1954, 1-D, 1954 (1), Box 10, General Files, Members-Endorsements, Eisenhower Presidential Library.

⁴¹ Stuckey notes a similar authoritative move from clergy members, Stuckey, *Political Vocabularies*, 7.

⁴² Edith Johnson, "Flag Pledge 'Under God,'" *Daily Oklahoman* May 19, 1954, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/449653182/?terms=%22All%20communists%20would%20oppose%20it%20most%20atheists%20%22&match=1>.

⁴³ This framing is evident in the introduction of this dissertation when critics of Newdow critiqued those who wanted to get rid of the phrase "under God" as Atheists broadly and suggested they did not want the country run by a bunch of Atheists.

⁴⁴ June R. Smith to Dwight D. Eisenhower, June 14, 1954, 1-D, 1954 (1), Box 10, General Files, Members-Endorsements, Eisenhower Presidential Library.

⁴⁵ "Gridley Adams to Senate Judiciary Committee Regarding 'Under God' Addition," May 23, 1954, Record of U.S. House of Representative Committee on the Judiciary, Box 1114 *National Archives*.

⁴⁶ Michael M. Osborn, "Rhetorical Depiction," in *Form, Genre, and the Study of Political Discourse*, Herbert W. Simons and Aram A. Aghazarian (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1986), 79-107.

⁴⁷ James R. Andrews, "The Imperial Style: Rhetorical Depiction and Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee," *Western Journal of Communication* vol. 64, no. 1 (2000), 55, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10570310009374663>.

⁴⁸ Lisa M. Gring-Pemble, "'Are We Going to Now Govern By Anecdote?' Rhetorical Consturctions of Welfare Recipients in Congressional Hearings, Debates, and Legislation, 1992-1996," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 87, no. 4 (2001): 343, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630109384345>.

⁴⁹ Stuckey, *Political Vocabularies*, 29.

⁵⁰ In fact, some letters directly quoted the statements of members of Congress such as Senator Ferguson's claim that change was important because "it highlights on of the real fundamental differences between the free world and the Communist world, namely, belief in God." The Commonwealth of Massachusetts Office of the Secretary Resolutions Memorializing the Congress of the United States in Favor of the Adoption of the Resolution to Add the Words "Under God" to the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag. May 31, 1954, 1-D, 1954 (1), Box 10, General Files, Members-Endorsements, Eisenhower Presidential Library.

⁵¹ Ursuline Sisters to Dwight D. Eisenhower, April 28, 1954, Record of U.S. House of Representative Committee on the Judiciary, Box 2149, *National Archives*. Also see Albert J. Drake to Dwight D. Eisenhower, March 10, 1954, 1-D, 1954 (1), Box 10, General Files, Members-Endorsements, Eisenhower Presidential Library. and Mrs. Carl James Linke (sic) to Dwight D. Eisenhower.

⁵² T.E. Malur to Dwight D. Eisenhower, May 5, 1954, 1-D, 1954 (1), Box 10, General Files, Members-Endorsements, Eisenhower Presidential Library.

⁵³ Albert E. Parker to Dwight D. Eisenhower, June 10, 1954, 1-D, 1954 (1), Box 10, General Files, Members-Endorsements, Eisenhower Presidential Library.

⁵⁴ Edron Scholl to Dwight D. Eisenhower

⁵⁵ Edron Scholl to Dwight D. Eisenhower

⁵⁶ Letters against Kenneth H. Bonnell to Dwight D. Eisenhower, Albert E. Parker to Dwight D. Eisenhower; June R. Smith to Dwight D. Eisenhower; Gardner Williams to Dwight D. Eisenhower; William R. and Frances H. Remington to Dwight D. Eisenhower, 16.

⁵⁷ Michael M. Osborne, "The Trajectory of My Work on Metaphor," *Southern Communication Journal* 74, no. 1 (2004): 79-87, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10417940802559131>.

⁵⁸ William R. and Frances H. Remington to Dwight D. Eisenhower. Also see: T.E. Malur to Dwight D. Eisenhower.

⁵⁹ John S. Baker Jr., "Wall of Separation," *The First Amendment Encyclopedia*, 2009, <https://mtsu.edu/first-amendment/article/886/wall-of-separation>.

⁶⁰ Baker Jr., "Wall of Separation."

⁶¹ Mildred and Marie R. Hendrich to Dwight D. Eisenhower, June 20, 1954, 1-D, 1954 (2), Box 10, General Files, Members-Endorsements, Eisenhower Presidential Library.

⁶² Mildred and Marie R. Hendrich to Dwight D. Eisenhower

⁶³ O'Rourke Camp No 60, Sons of union Veterans of the Civil War resolution in support of HJ Res 502, May 12, 1954, 1-D, 1954 (1), Box 10, General Files, Members-Endorsements, Eisenhower Presidential Library.

⁶⁴ Letter for Evelyn T. Mechler to Dwight D. Eisenhower.

⁶⁵ The Commonwealth of Massachusetts; T.E. Malur to Dwight D. Eisenhower; Maude Keith-Downing to Dwight D. Eisenhower, April 28, 1954, 1-D, 1954 (1), Box 10, General Files, Members-Endorsements, Eisenhower Presidential Library.

⁶⁶ Letter against Gardner Williams to Dwight D. Eisenhower; Florian J. Wineriter to Dwight D. Eisenhower, June 16, 1954, 1-D, 1954 (1), Box 10, General Files, Members-Endorsements, Eisenhower Presidential Library; Donald H. Sweet to Dwight D. Eisenhower; William and Mary Joe Hendrie to Dwight D. Eisenhower, July 17, 1954, 1-D, 1954 (1), Box 10, General Files, Members-Endorsements; Thomas Horace Evans, M.D. to House Judiciary Committee, May 15, 1954, Record of U.S. House of Representative Committee on the Judiciary, Box 1114 *National Archives*.

⁶⁷ Dorothy M. Muller to Dwight D. Eisenhower, June 12, 1954, 1-D, 1954 (1), Box 10, General Files, Members-Endorsements; Florian J. Wineriter to Dwight D. Eisenhower; Eric Barnitz to Hon. Chauncey W. Reed, Record of U.S. House of Representative Committee on the Judiciary, Box 1114 *National Archives*.

⁶⁸ Florian J. Wineriter to Dwight D. Eisenhower.

⁶⁹ This is not to say that a secular imaginary *must* be grounded in religious pluralism. Just as there are tensions within the Christian nationalist imaginary amongst how inclusive it should be, some manifestations of secularism advance a desire for religious pluralism while other manifestations suggest an intolerant desire to completely remove religion from society. The letters sent to Eisenhower and Congress, however, generally appeared to be more aligned with the former, as they emphasized the need for religious equality.

⁷⁰ Stuckey, *Political Vocabularies*, 99.

⁷¹ Stuckey, *Political Vocabularies*, 102-105. Also see Richard Hughes, *Myths America Lives By: White Supremacy and the Stories that Give Us Meaning* (University of Illinois, 2018); Thomas B. Farrell, *Norms of Rhetorical Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 234.

⁷² Hughes, *Myths America Lives By*

⁷³ Stuckey, *Political Vocabularies*, 101.

⁷⁴ Sehat, *The Myth*, 1-12

⁷⁵ Hughes, *Myths America Lives By*, 32-59; Stuckey, *Political Vocabularies*, 123-124; Wade Clark Roof, "American Presidential Rhetoric from Ronald Reagan to George W. Bush: Another Look at Civil Religion," *Social Compass* 56 (2009)

⁷⁶ Hughes, *Myths America Lives By*

⁷⁷ Jean Bullock to Dwight D. Eisenhower, June 11, 1954, 1-D, 1954 (2), Box 10, General Files, Members-Endorsements; T.E. Malur to Dwight D. Eisenhower.

⁷⁸ Letter for #14c

⁷⁹ Albert J. Drake to Dwight D. Eisenhower.

⁸⁰ See for example, letter 9, letter 31, 36, and 39.

⁸¹ Letter for #7c.

⁸² Hughes, *Myths America Lives By*, 82-129; Sehat, *The Myth*, 1-12

⁸³ Letters for Agnes Maddox to Dwight D. Eisenhower and 14c

⁸⁴ Letter for #9c.

⁸⁵ Patrick M. Garry, "The Myth of Separation: America's Historical Experience with Church and State," *Hofstra Law Review* 33, no. 2 (2004): 475-500, http://scholarlycommons.law.hofstra.edu/hlr/vol33/iss2/4?utm_source=scholarlycommons.law.hofstra.edu%2Fhlr%2Fvol33%2Fiss2%2F4&utm_medium=PDF&utm_campaign=PDFCoverPages.

⁸⁶ Nancy Wynkoop to Dwight D. Eisenhower, August 15, 1954, 1-D, 1954 (1), Box 10, General Files, Members-Endorsements, Eisenhower Presidential Library

⁸⁷ Albert E. Parker to Dwight D. Eisenhower.

⁸⁸ Dorothy M. Muller to Dwight D. Eisenhower.

⁸⁹ William and Mary Joe Hendrie to Dwight D. Eisenhower; "Gridley Adams to Senate Judiciary Committee Regarding; Donald H. Sweet to Dwight D. Eisenhower; Florian J. Wineriter to Dwight D. Eisenhower.

⁹⁰ Mildred Havill to Dwight D. Eisenhower June 15, 1954, 1-D, 1954 (1), Box 10, General Files, Members-Endorsements, Eisenhower Presidential Library

⁹¹ Kristina M. Lee, "'In God We Trust?': Christian Nationalists' Utilization of Theistnormative Legislation," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 52, no. 5 (2022): in-press.

⁹² Jean Bullock to Dwight D. Eisenhower.

⁹³ Stuckey, *Political Vocabularies*, 64.

⁹⁴ Michael C. McGee, "In Search of 'The People': A Rhetorical Alternative, *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 62, no. 3 (1975): 238, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335637509383289>.

⁹⁵ Maurice Charland, "Constitutive Rhetoric: The Case of the People Québécois," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 73, no. 2 (1987): 133-150, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335638709383799>.

⁹⁶ City of Chelsea Massachusetts Board of Alderman Resolution in Support, May 17, 1954, 1-D, 1954 (1), Box 10, General Files, Members-Endorsements, Eisenhower Presidential Library.

⁹⁷ William E. Sheridan Police Post #1059, American Legion to Dwight D. Eisenhower, March 10, 1954, 1-D, 1954 (1), Box 10, General Files, Members-Endorsements, Eisenhower Presidential Library.

⁹⁸ Mildred Havill to Dwight D. Eisenhower.

⁹⁹ William F. Potter to Dwight D. Eisenhower, June 14, 1954, 1-D, 1954 (1), Box 10, General Files, Members-Endorsements, Eisenhower Presidential Library. Also see: Edron Scholl

to Dwight D. Eisenhower; William R. and Frances H. Remington to Dwight D. Eisenhower; Donald H. Sweet to Dwight D. Eisenhower

¹⁰⁰ Edron Scholl to Dwight D. Eisenhower.

¹⁰¹ Donald H. Sweet to Dwight D. Eisenhower.

¹⁰² Eric Barnitz to Hon. Chauncey W. Reed.

¹⁰³ Mrs. Carl James Linke (sic) to Dwight D. Eisenhower.

¹⁰⁴ Mrs. Grover Rigdon to Dwight D. Eisenhower.

¹⁰⁵ See: Fred R. Moors to Dwight D. Eisenhower, June 15, 1954, 1-D, 1954 (1), Box 10, General Files, Members-Endorsements, Eisenhower Presidential Library. Also see: Edron Scholl to Dwight D. Eisenhower, 8, Edron Scholl to Dwight D. Eisenhower; William and Mary Joe Hendrie to Dwight D. Eisenhower; Thomas Horace Evans, M.D. to House Judiciary Committee; Eric Barnitz to Hon. Chauncey W. Reed; John G. MacKinnon to Mr. Reid to Mr. Reid June 1, 1954, Record of U.S. House of Representative Committee on the Judiciary, Box 1114 *National Archives*; “Gridley Adams to Senate Judiciary Committee Regarding ‘Under God’ Addition.”

¹⁰⁶ Edron Scholl to Dwight D. Eisenhower

¹⁰⁷ Florien J. Wineriter to Dwight D. Eisenhower.

¹⁰⁸ William F. Potter to Dwight D. Eisenhower.

¹⁰⁹ Eric Barnitz to Hon. Chauncey W. Reed

¹¹⁰ Margaret M. V. McNulty to Dwight D. Eisenhower, June 15, 1954, 1-D, 1954 (1), Box 10, General Files, Members-Endorsements, Eisenhower Presidential Library.; William E. Sheridan Police Post #1059; St. Charles Holy Name Society Resolution, Record of U.S. House of Representative Committee on the Judiciary, Box 2149, *National Archives*.

¹¹¹ Sister Fiona, C.D.P to Dwight D. Eisenhower, June 15, 1954, 1-D, 1954 (1), Box 10, General Files, Members-Endorsements, Eisenhower Presidential Library.

¹¹² Mildred and Marie R. Hendrich to Dwight D. Eisenhower.

¹¹³ Florien J. Wineriter to Dwight D. Eisenhower; William and Mary Joe Hendrie to Dwight D. Eisenhower.

¹¹⁴ Dorothy M. Muller to Dwight D. Eisenhower. Also see Kenneth H. Bonnell to Dwight D. Eisenhower; Nancy Wynkoop to Dwight D. Eisenhower.

¹¹⁵ Jean Bullock to Dwight D. Eisenhower.

¹¹⁶ Kevin Kruse, *One Nation Under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), 100.

¹¹⁷ This is not to say there is no strife within the politically secular movement. There were not enough letters sent in opposition to the pledge, however, to point to where the strife emerges within this particular case study.

¹¹⁸ “Competing Visions of America: An Evolving Identity or a Culture Under Attack? Findings from the 2021 American Values Survey,” *PRRI*, November 1, 2021, <https://www.prii.org/research/competing-visions-of-america-an-evolving-identity-or-a-culture-under-attack/>.

¹¹⁹ “Reality Check: Being Nonreligious in America,” United States Secular Survey, Accessed May 8, 2022, <https://www.secularsurvey.org/>.

¹²⁰ Stewart, *The Power Worshipers*.

CONCLUSION: THE NEED FOR SECULAR RHETORICAL CRITICISM

While *Elk Grove Unified School Dist. v. Newdow* received national attention, it was by no means the first time the phrase “under God” was challenged in the courts. Despite the pressure and stigma surrounding critiquing the revised pledge, the first major court case challenging the constitutionality of the change was ruled on in 1957, just three years after “under God” was added to the pledge. In *Lewis v. Allen*, the Freethinkers of America argued that the New York State Commissioner of Education needed to remove the phrase from the pledge because it was a violation of the First Amendment.¹ In a “controversial” opinion, New York State Supreme Court Justice Isadore Bookstein, rejected the Freethinkers’ claim based on four counts.² First, citing the 1952 ruling in *Zorach v. Clauson*, he argued the pledge was a reflection of how U.S. Americans were a “religious people.”³ Next, Bookstein contended that if the phrase was unconstitutional, all references to God, whether in the Declaration of Independence or presidential speeches, would be off limits to discuss in schools, a notion he deemed absurd.⁴ Third, he acknowledged that while an Atheist may be labeled a “dissenter” for not saying the pledge which could be “humiliating,” the U.S. Constitution does not protect against such embarrassment.⁵ Bookstein went on to suggest that Atheists could avoid public degradation and maintain their sincerity by simply not saying “under God” when reciting the pledge.⁶ Finally, he argued that removing the phrase “under God” from the Pledge of Allegiance would favor those who did not believe in God over those who do.

Bookstein’s argument exemplifies how hegemonically ingrained theistnormativity is within the U.S. American culture. More to the point: his opinion provides further evidence of how the phrase “under God” reinforces the coercive nature of a theistnormative ideology. In fact,

each of Bookstein's four points reveals a different dimension of how that coercive discourse functions. In regard to his first argument that U.S. Americans are a "religious people," he reinforced a Christian nationalist imaginary that frames Atheists, non-theists, and/or those who are irreligious as outsiders. In his second argument, Bookstein conflated all vague theistic references together, presuming that if one was acceptable, all must be. In doing so, the difference between adding an acknowledgment of God in a "loyalty pledge" that students recite daily and reading historical documents or speeches that include theistic references are rendered inconsequential. Third, while he acknowledged there are social consequences for Atheists objecting to the revised pledge, Bookstein downplays the consequences to be about "humiliation" rather than ostracization. Furthermore, he suggests that such consequences can be avoided if Atheists respect the status quo and perform any objection silently as to not draw attention to themselves. This move contains Atheism through dismissing the marginalization that open Atheists face and by calling on them to keep their objections to themselves as to not cause disruption but framing such suggestion as for Atheists own good.⁷ Yet it is Bookstein's last argument that perhaps best reflects theistnormativity's coerciveness. In researching this project, I found no examples of supporters of the change claiming that the original pledge favored Atheists. Rather, one of the key arguments was that the pledge was too generic and that anyone, even an "atheistic communist" could say it. Just three years after the addition of the phrase "under God," the original godless pledge went from being simply too generic to a pledge that *favored* Atheists. The power of theistnormativity lies in how it establishes and reinforces an association of belief in God and U.S. identity. While theistnormative discourses, symbols, and rituals may clearly negate Atheists, such marginalization is considered normal and appropriate within a society where the Christian nationalist imaginary is dominant. Atheists, along with

anyone who adheres to a politically secular imaginary, must accept this reality silently if they are to be tolerated.

Bookstein's ruling in *Lewis vs. Allen* is, sadly, emblematic of the deterrents Atheists and secularists confront in contesting theistnormative legislation, particularly the phrase "under God" in the pledge of allegiance. While legal challenges to the pledge persist, many secularists have determined it no longer makes sense to endlessly crash into these same, tired legal impediments. Frankly, the high probability of loss and attendant negative press in such cases are harmful to the secular movement and many secularists do not believe it is worth the risk.⁸ Furthermore, some secularists argue that the secular movement should not waste time and resources fighting words when there are other secular issues they view as more pressing, such as opposing religious exemption laws that allow for discrimination, access to abortion, LGBTQ+ equality, and preventing the public funding of religious schools.⁹ Of course, we know that few prominent political symbols, discourses, and rituals should be so easily dismissed as "just words." Those words, such as the phrase "under God" in the pledge which is recited daily by school children and regularly in political meetings, shape societal understandings of who U.S. Americans are and what their values should be. Dominant narratives suggest that these words, if not ceremonial, are only meant to unify. But this dissertation challenges this dominant reading, instead demonstrating how "under God" in the pledge transformed it into a theistnormative ritual aimed at reinforcing a Christian nationalist imaginary and containing secularism.

One of the central claims of this dissertation is that it is imperative to recognize the ways Christian nationalism is hegemonically ingrained and reinforced within the United States. Contrary to the Myth of Religious Tolerance that circulates in public, legal, and scholarly discourse, the values of religious freedom, equality, and tolerance are ones the United States has

continually failed to uphold. Christian nationalist ideologies help maintain Christian privilege through normalizing a connection between Christianity and U.S. identity. While there certainly is a “continuum of Christian privilege” based on various historical factors which can help explain why white Protestants enjoy a greater degree of Christian privilege,¹⁰ Clark et al. argues that “all Christians benefit from Christian privilege regardless of the way they express themselves as Christians in the same way that all White people benefit from White privilege.”¹¹ Such Christian nationalism and privilege manifests within society in various ways, but an analysis of the strategic use and maintenance of theistnormative discourses, symbols, and rituals reveal how such privilege is masked as innocuous and the norm. As I have demonstrated throughout this dissertation and elsewhere, while prominent theistnormative symbols and rituals such as “under God” and the national motto “In God We Trust” have largely been framed as benign ceremonial deism or unifying civil religion, an analysis of the discourses of those who have implemented and utilized them reveals their Christian nationalists’ roots.¹² Such theistnormativity is effective because it can appeal to religious pluralists by being read as inclusive of any theistic religion while simultaneously appealing to more radical Christian nationalists who read the God as the Christian God. Notably, rather than considering the possibility that those symbols and rituals are manifestations of the ingrained hegemonic Christian nationalism, scholars have leaned into the former reading in order to dismiss Christian nationalists’ use of theistnormative rituals, discourses, and symbols as a “misuse” of them.¹³ Furthermore the acceptance of such theistnormative symbols and rituals as appropriate in a society that supposedly values religious freedom, equality, and tolerance reflects how non-theists are a perpetual “other” who is not truly part of “the people.” Rather they, and anyone who advocates for them, are a threat to democracy that needs to be contained.

The Need for and Utility of Secular Rhetorical Criticism

The introduction of this dissertation outlines the need and potentiality of “secular rhetorical criticism” as an approach to rhetorical scholarship that takes seriously questions of power, privilege, and marginalization in relation to religious pluralism. Secular rhetorical criticism is fundamentally concerned with the lives, experiences, and voices of the ir/religiously marginalized and recognizes religious nationalism as part of a hegemonic system that privileges religious homogeneity while constraining religious pluralism. This critical rhetorical approach highlights the communication strategies used both to maintain and resist religious nationalism and homogeneity. Three projects that secular rhetorical critics should consider include: confronting normativity, challenging the myth of religious tolerance, and decentering white Christian voices while highlighting the rhetoric and experiences of ir/religious minorities. Such work not only aims to expand rhetorical scholarship on religion to being more critical and inclusive but calls on scholars in rhetorical and communication studies more broadly to consider ir/religious identities as analogously crucial for understanding privilege and marginalization as race, class, gender, and sexuality. This dissertation turns to the implementation of the phrase “under God” into the pledge of allegiance as a case study that lends itself to exploring the possibility of employing a secular rhetorical criticism lens. Using a secular rhetorical criticism lens, I argue that the legislation to add “under God” transformed the pledge into a theistnormative ritual that reinforces the Christian nationalist political imaginary while containing secularism and atheism.

In chapter one, I address the problematic tendency in rhetorical scholarship to utilize the conception of “civil religion” in a way that both masks and reinforces coercive Christian nationalist hegemonies and dismisses the experiences of marginalized ir/religious groups. I introduce the conception of “theistnormativity” as a more critical characterization of the fusion

of vague religious and god-centered rhetoric within politics. Unlike civil religion, theistnormativity highlights how such rhetoric functions to reinforce dominant religious hegemonies. This chapter highlights how theistnormativity is ingrained in U.S. culture and has been perpetuated and utilized by Christian nationalists to maintain their dominance in an increasingly religiously plural society. In doing so, this chapter disrupts the Myth of Religious Tolerance that masks a history of religious coercion in the United States through a narrative of consensus. Ultimately, I call on rhetorical scholars to be self-reflective of how the narratives and labels they often take for granted can perpetuate religious hegemonies and inequalities. By critically engaging in the efficacy and accuracy of particular narratives and scholarly terms that relate to religious pluralism and politics, secular rhetorical critics can offer more complete pictures and understandings of the relationship between religious identity, pluralism and privilege, power, and marginalization.

In chapter two, I assess how those advocating for the addition of “under God” justified the addition using the rhetorical strategy of prophetic dualism. As an example of secular rhetorical criticism, this chapter not only calls on scholars to consider the domestic implications of prophetic dualism on non-theists but to seriously engage with questions relating to who is contained by seemingly “unifying” religious discourses. This chapter reveals how justifications for the change reflect how advocates wanted to transform the pledge into a theistnormative ritual that would promote a Christian nationalist understanding of U.S. citizens as being part of a theistic collective who were being threatened by atheistic communists. In doing so, the revised pledge would also function as a way to contain the secularism and atheism that threatened the hegemonic power of Christian nationalist ideologies in the United States. This chapter further disrupts the notion that the phrase “under God” in the pledge of allegiance as being a unifying

“American civil religion” or benign “ceremonial deism” by demonstrating how those who advocated for the change were actively working as part of the spiritual-industrial complex of the 1950s to reinforce religious hegemonies that were threatened by secularism.

Chapter three takes into consideration the challenges of studying marginalized ir/religious and secularists’ voices and calls for scholars engaging in secular rhetorical criticism to utilize non-traditional methods when studying rhetoric and religious pluralism. In expanding on the implementation of “under God” as a case study, I offer Pamela VanHaitsma’s gossip method as one such approach. Despite congressmembers claiming there was diverse and nearly universal support for the legislation changing the pledge, traces in archives and newspapers suggest that political elites were misrepresenting who supported and opposed the change. In the case of “under God,” support appeared to come extensively from Christian nationalists and it appears quite likely that political leaders knowingly ignored and mischaracterized opposition. Looking at the apparent religious consensus of the 1950s through the lens of secular rhetorical criticism calls for scholars to find ways to analyze those silenced by normative narratives and who have been largely dismissed in discussions of such a “consensus.” As demonstrated in this chapter, scholars can use the gossip method to challenge dominant narratives that protect those in power and, in doing so, undermine dominant narratives that protect hegemonic structures and highlight the voices and experiences of those who are often contained by those structures.

Finally, chapter four demonstrates how secular rhetorical criticism can bring attention to how those with opposing views of the relationship between religion and democracy legitimize and negotiate their political imaginaries. Considering a core feature of secular rhetorical criticism is the recognition that religious nationalism is part of a hegemonic system that privileges religious homogeneity, it is imperative for scholars looking at religion in the United States to

understand the manifestation of the Christian nationalist political imaginary and the secular imaginary that challenges it. By analyzing the political vocabularies of those with opposing stances on whether “under God” should or should not have been added to the pledge, I demonstrate how, despite there being bipartisan support for the change to the pledge, those who supported it were largely committed to a Christian nationalist imaginary while those who opposed it adhered to a politically secular imaginary. This chapter calls on scholars to consider how Christian nationalist imaginaries were circulated, evolved, and legitimized prior to the contemporary “culture war” in which contemporary Christian nationalism and secularism are largely framed as new ideologies that emerged in the second half of the twentieth century. Rather I contend that it is imperative that, in order to understand the current tensions between Christian nationalism and secularism, scholars must consider how the two competing imaginaries have influenced each other and shaped cultural understandings of the relationship between church and state.

Contemporary Implications of “Under God” in the United States

The change to the pledge of allegiance has functioned to reinforce a connection between belief in God and U.S. identity over the past seventy years. Interestingly, thirty years after the pledge was revised, Reverend George M. Docherty expressed regret over his role in the process, lamenting: “the new Pledge unfortunately served as one more prop supporting the civil religion that characterized the institutional Christianity of the fifties. There was no evidence of a ‘religious revival of significance.’”¹⁴ Docherty’s disappointment reveals how he never intended his suggestion to be read as simply a form of civil religion. He had wanted to change the pledge into a ritual that would bring more people to religion. While the change may not have caused a religious revival, I contend it has functioned as far more than just a form of unifying civil

religion that fuses God and country. Rather it reinforces a theistnormative mindset that excludes Atheists from dominant understandings of “the people,” while also fortifying Christian nationalism. The way that the phrase “under God” has been utilized by political leaders over the past seventy years reflects how the motto perpetuates Christian nationalist imaginaries by both Democrats and Republicans.

Theistnormative discourses have become valuable for both Democrats and Republicans in negotiating the tensions between the presence of secularism and Christian nationalism in the United States. Several social issues in the decades after the 1950s led to realignments within the two major U.S. political parties that contributed to Democrats being associated with secularism and Republicans with Christian nationalism.¹⁵ This division has propagated the notion that the parties were on either side of a “culture war” over the “soul of America.”¹⁶ Both political parties, however, have had to contend with the continued dominance of the tension between secularism and Christian nationalism within U.S. culture. While Democrats tend to vote for policies that align with secular imaginaries, the support of secularist policies has led democratic leaders, even Christian ones, to be framed as “irreligious” or “anti-religious” by opposition.¹⁷ In other words, while Democrats generally embrace religious pluralism and advocate for secularism in their policies, they have to negotiate doing so in a society where religious identity and values are deeply ingrained in the sense of who “the people” are. Republicans on the other hand, tend to embrace a conservative Christian nationalism but have been accused by opponents of limiting the religious freedom of religious minorities while privileging Christianity.¹⁸ As such, Republicans have to navigate maintaining conservative Christian nationalist agendas in a religiously plural society where the overt intolerance of religious minorities is largely frowned upon.

While politicians reinforce theistnormative logics broadly, the phrase “under God” has become increasingly commonplace in political discourse in the past seventy years.¹⁹ For example, *The Presidency Project Database* indicates that the phrase “under God” was used by presidents and presidential candidates 34 times before 1954. Since the pledge was revised, however, it has been used over 700 times by presidents from both major parties.²⁰ This increase points to how the change to the pledge influenced presidential rhetoric. The common use of the phrase by political leaders from both parties reinforces a collective understanding of the United States citizenry as a theistic body.²¹ The ways political leaders from either party utilize the phrase, however, points to how they view it as a means for negotiating competing Christian nationalist and secular imaginaries.

Republicans rely on the phrase “under God” regularly to justify religion in the public sphere despite the pressures of secularism. Ronald Reagan, in particular, utilized the phrase extensively throughout his campaign and presidency, invoking it nearly 100 times. In the spring of 1983, for example, he was asked at several school visits about his views on the removal of prayer from public schools. His response reflects how he navigated appealing to both secularists and Christian nationalists, arguing that while a prayer would need to be non-denominational and voluntary:

I don't know of anyone that was ever hurt by [school prayer]. And I do believe that, if you look back—speaking again of history—if you look back to the collapse of great civilizations like the Greek and the Roman and all, you'll find that one of the characteristics of those civilizations was they began to desert and abandon their gods. That was one of the first signs of decline. And I think we have to keep in mind we are a nation under God. And if we ever forget that, we'll be just a nation under.²²

While Reagan avoided making explicit appeals to *Christian* nationalism by suggesting prayer in public schools would need to be voluntary and not “one particular church's prayer,” he drew on

similar anti-atheist narratives from the early Cold War to suggest that the United States was “under God.”²³ He utilized the same political vocabularies as those who had supported the change to the pledge three decades earlier by depicting other democratic societies that ceased to share a collective belief in God as declining because they failed to legitimate a Christian nationalist imaginary that tied belief in God to the success of democracy. In his response he also argued that by removing prayer from school, “we have in effect diminished the importance of religion and thus of morality in the minds of students”²⁴ In doing so Reagan reinforced the theistnormative and Christian nationalist assumption that morality and good citizenship relied on adherence to a religion, which he connected to a recognition and belief in God.²⁵

Republicans have not always hidden the connection between the phrase “under God” and Christian nationalism so carefully. In November of 2021, Donald Trump’s former national security advisor Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn, argued to a group of evangelical Christians that “if we are going to have one nation under God, which we must, we have to have one religion, one nation under God and one religion under God.”²⁶ Flynn’s statement was widely interpreted as an appeal to Christian nationalism and that the “one religion” he was calling for was a conservative evangelical Protestantism.²⁷ White evangelical Protestants are some of the strongest advocates of Christian nationalism and the phrase “under God” is often directed at them as a way to appeal not only to their adherence to Christian nationalism but also their anxiety over secularism.²⁸ For example, during the 2020 Democratic National Convention, two of the Congressional caucuses, the LGBTQ Caucus and the Muslim Delegates and Allies Assembly, omitted the phrase “under God” when reciting the pledge during their meetings. In response Donald Trump tweeted:

The Democrats took the word GOD out of the Pledge of Allegiance at the Democrat [sic] National Convention. At first I thought they made a mistake, but it wasn't. It was done on

purpose. Remember Evangelical Christians, and ALL, this is where they are coming from – it's done. Vote Nov 3!²⁹

Trump misconstrued the omission by suggesting that Democrats broadly had omitted the phrase from the pledge during the convention when, in fact, the pledge had been recited in full daily by the larger assembly. In doing so Trump framed Democrats as a secularist threat to democracy, making an explicit appeal to Evangelical Christians in the process. The assumption that Evangelical Christians would be particularly appalled by the omission reflects the connection between the phrase and Christianity, specifically Christian nationalism. His emphasis that “all” should be concerned by the act of not reciting the phrase “under God” demonstrates how the motto in the pledge is tied to national identity and, as such, is something all “true” U.S. Americans should be alarmed by if removed.

While Democrats are generally less inclined to utilize explicit Christian nationalist discourses (though certainly not immune from it), they have still utilized “under God” in ways that reinforce the same theistnormative ideology that drove the spiritual-industrial complex in the 1950s. While such discourse may appear inclusive, it is grounded in the assumption that “the people” are theistic and offers the implication that those who are not are outsiders. President Clinton, for example, in his 1992 acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention, argued that:

for too long politicians have told the most of us that are doing all right that what's really wrong with America is the rest of us. Them. Them, the minorities. Them, the liberals. Them, the poor. Them, the homeless. Them, the people with disabilities. Them, the gays. We've gotten to where we've nearly themed ourselves to death. Them and them and them. But this is America. There is no them; there's only us. One nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty, and justice, for all. That is our Pledge of Allegiance, and that's what the New Covenant is all about.³⁰

While Clinton critiqued the separation of the American people into a demagogic “us” versus “them” mentality, he proceeded to describe the “us” as one nation “under God” that needed to be a part of a “New Covenant.”³¹ In doing so, non-theists were framed as the unspoken “them” excluded from the “one nation.... indivisible.” Similarly, in 2021, Joe Biden attempted to create unification using the motto after the contentious 2020 election and the subsequent January 6 insurrection. Early in his First Inaugural Address, he proclaimed “we come together as one Nation under God, indivisible, to carry out the peaceful transfer of power as we have for more than two centuries.”³² Like Clinton’s rhetoric, Biden’s inaugural address was a call to unify and to move away from the demagogic “us” versus “them” mentality. In doing so, however, he relied on the theistnormative phrase that constituted the American people as a theistic collective while negating non-theists as the unspoken “them.”³³ Considering Atheists are one of the most politically active groups in the United States,³⁴ are overwhelmingly Democrat,³⁵ and that the religious “nones” played a key role in getting Biden elected,³⁶ Biden’s exclusion of them in his description of how “we” come together is particularly revealing. It reflects how, despite their growing influence, Atheists and non-theists can continue to be dismissed at best and demonized at worse in the rhetoric of politicians from across the political spectrum as there continues to be a need to appeal to the notion of the U.S. “people” as being part of a theistic collective. Democrats, while advancing secularism in their policies and much of their rhetoric, can appeal to Christian nationalist ideologies through the reliance on theistnormative discourses and symbols, such as “under God,” that appear inclusive to anyone other than non-theists.

The bipartisan reinforcement of theistnormativity through the use of the phrase “under God” is particularly violent when one considers how the phrase has been used to punish Atheists and secularists in classrooms over the past seventy years. While technically, students have the

legal right to not say the pledge or leave out “under God” when saying it, that has not prevented the hostility they receive when they do so. In 2014, for example, two students’ grades were marked down when they did not say the words “under God” while leading the pledge for a speech and debate class assignment.³⁷ Such punishment reflects how, while dissenters may be able to take Judge Bookstein’s suggestion to just leave out “under God” when they say the pledge privately, they are still compelled to perform the theistnormative ritual if leading the pledge. When high school student Jessica Ahlquist challenged an explicitly Christian prayer that was hanging on the wall of her Rhode Island public school in 2010, she faced immense backlash from her community. This included her classmates turning to her and yelling the words “UNDER GOD” during the daily recitation of the pledge of allegiance.³⁸ In doing so, her classmates sent her a clear message that she had violated a serious social norm by challenging a Christian prayer in schools and the phrase “under God” acted as validation for their perspective of her actions. That same year, when the Charlotte Atheist Association put up a billboard with the phrase “One Nation Indivisible” it was quickly vandalized with the words “under God” spray painted on it.³⁹ These are just a handful of examples of how the phrase “under God” has been utilized to ignore, dismiss, or attack Atheists and secularists. While it may be a tool that leaders from both major U.S. political parties can utilize in order to unify a theistic collective, it ultimately reinforces a theistnormative narrative that punishes anyone who challenges either the ingrained theistnormative or Christian nationalist ideologies within U.S. culture.

Utilizing Secular Rhetorical Criticism to Address the Threat of Christian Nationalism

Rhetorical scholars are uniquely equipped to analyze and understand how religious hegemonic hierarchies are advanced, maintained, and resisted within societies. This includes understanding how Christian nationalism is perpetuated within U.S. culture, both historically and

today. Unfortunately, rhetoric scholars have continually reinforced the theistnormative mindset in their engagement with religio-political rhetoric, particularly through their characterization of such rhetoric as “civil religion.” Secular rhetorical criticism offers the possibility of a self-reflective comprehensive critical approach to rhetorical criticism that engages in questions of power, privilege, and marginalization in relation to religion.

While there are copious possibilities for the utility and expansion of secular rhetorical criticism, I argue that one of the most pressing issues secular rhetorical criticism lends itself to is the pervasiveness of religious nationalism. As outlined throughout this dissertation, in the United States this nationalism specifically manifests as Christian nationalism. Scholars engaging in work on Christian nationalism have argued that it is one of the greatest threats to U.S. democracy in the 21st century.⁴⁰ Rhetoric scholars have a crucial role to play in developing understandings for both how Christian nationalist discourses have developed over time in relation to secularism and how political leaders and organizations from across the political spectrum advance, reinforce, and challenge Christian nationalism.

In order to understand contemporary Christian nationalism, it is imperative to recognize it is an ideology as hegemonically ingrained in society as white supremacy, capitalism, patriarchy, and heteronormativity, one of the core assumptions of secular rhetorical criticism. One project that should be central to work in secular rhetorical criticism is an analysis of the rhetorical histories relating to Christian nationalism and secularism. In the United States, for example, contemporary discussions surrounding the two ideologies often tie them to the modern “culture war” and focuses on how secularism and Christian nationalism have emerged and functioned in politics over the past fifty years. The two ideologies, however, have been in contention and have been shaping U.S. culture for hundreds of years. As David Sehat notes, when contemporary

Christian nationalists claim the U.S. was founded as a “Christian nation” and modern secularists advance the narrative it was founded as a “secular” one, they are both pulling from truths of the role their corresponding ideology played in shaping the United States but also dismiss the importance of the opposing ideology in U.S. culture.⁴¹ Secular rhetorical criticism not only recognizes these tensions but actively engages in questions of what communication strategies were used in advancing, resisting, and negotiating between these ideologies. Work in secular rhetorical criticism should acknowledge the important role religion plays in shaping culture, while also resisting the myth of religious tolerance. In doing so, secular rhetorical critics resist the assumption that historical precedence of the use of particular religious language and rituals is an indication of cohesion in terms of religion. In the case of the phrase “one nation under God,” for example, secular rhetorical critics should recognize, in the words of historian Richard Ellis, that the phrase is “logically akin to the statement that the United States is ‘one nation under white males’—historically accurate perhaps, but exclusionary nonetheless.”⁴²

Engagement with secular rhetorical criticism can point to how contemporary issues surrounding religious tensions mirror historical ones. I contend that the rhetorical situation that led to the rise of the spiritual-industrial complex and the resurgence of Christian nationalism in the 1950s is similar to our current moment in 2022. As outlined in chapter two, the conflict between Christian nationalism and secularism in the United States has persisted since its founding. Christian nationalist and secularist imaginaries have consistently shifted back and forth in terms of dominance and cultural influence. From the 1920s-1940s, secularism made massive strides which contributed to an increased number of U.S. Americans identifying as non-religious, increased religious pluralism, and changes in legal precedence requiring states to uphold the religious clause of the U.S. Constitution. This shift, however, led to a counterattack by Christian

nationalists through the development of the spiritual-industrial complex in the 1950s that reclaimed and maintained the power of Christian nationalists in a growing pluralistic society. Christian nationalists established theistnormative rituals and symbols that would help reinforce their cause over the next seventy years. In the decades after the 1950s, however, secularism re-emerged with such force that the two major political parties began to realign around the two opposing imaginaries. While Christian nationalism maintained a level of dominance, secularism was increasingly normalized to the point where the United States is now regularly referred to as a “secular” society⁴³ and trends in the religious make-up of the United States continue to point to a decline in Christianity and a rise in religious pluralism, with the religious “nones” being one of the fastest growing minorities.⁴⁴ By the mid-2010s, secularism reached a point of cultural influence it had not enjoyed since the 1920s.

Yet a new spiritual-industrial complex in response to the rise in secularism has already begun to develop in the United States. The election of Donald Trump and the culmination of decades of ideological shifts in the Supreme Court point to the re-emergence of Christian nationalist dominance and a renewed attempt to contain secularism. While many factors played into the election of Donald Trump, adherence to Christian nationalist imaginaries was one of the leading indicators for support of Trump.⁴⁵ During his 2016 campaign he continually appealed to the anxieties of Christian nationalists. During the same infamous campaign speech where he proclaimed he “could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody” and not “lose any voters,” Trump also made explicit appeals to Christian nationalists. He proclaimed: “I will tell you, Christianity is under tremendous siege, whether we want to talk about it or we don’t want to talk about it.”⁴⁶ Trump went on to lament that Christians are a majority but that “we don’t assert the power that we should have” and that “we are getting less and less and less

powerful.”⁴⁷ He declared that if elected “Christianity will have power without having to form [a coalition] because if I am there you will have plenty of power.”⁴⁸ Despite Christians continuing to hold the majority of political power in the United States, Trump played into the anxiety surrounding religious pluralism and the loss of power of Christians. As president, Trump eased anxieties by appointing judges and Supreme Court justices who resist secularist interpretations of the First Amendment and instead advance a form of moral establishmentarianism that favors conservative Christianity.⁴⁹ He also supported legislation that offered “religious exemptions” from discrimination laws. These policies can and have been used by Christian organizations to justify discrimination against LGBTQ+ communities and ir/religious minorities.⁵⁰

These fear appeals and the subsequential legislation reflect a step backwards in terms of religious freedom and tolerance. When the fear of losing privilege is reframed as persecution, religious pluralism and diversity become a threat. Trump’s rhetorical appeals to Christian nationalists’ anxieties over secularism, in all three senses. In the past five years, Christian nationalist organizations have become increasingly fervent in working to re-establish previous levels of dominance and re-contain secularism, and Trump has helped to pave the way for legal support. Arguments by contemporary Christian nationalists in defending such legislation reflects similar patterns to those utilized during the spiritual-industrial complex, including appeals to religious heritage, arguments that secularism is a threat to democracy, and the misleading proclamation that their legislation is not religiously intolerant.⁵¹ Yet, while it may be easy to assume that Trump’s appeals primarily function as a call to a conservative base, as noted in the previous chapter, nearly 50% of Democrats appear to be inclined to accept Christian nationalist assumptions to what “true” citizenship looks like; thus they may also be inclined to be drawn into the same anxieties surrounding the loss of privilege. There is regularly bipartisan support for

theistnormative legislation, including “In God We Trust” bills being pushed by the Christian nationalist organization the Congressional Prayer Caucus Foundation through their campaign commonly known as “Project Blitz.”⁵² In Louisiana, for example, a Democratic governor signed an “In God We Trust” bill that required the motto be prominently displayed in public schools. Democratic State Senator, Regina Ashford Barrow defended the bill by arguing that “[t]his is our national motto. It’s also on our currency. So I think it’s really important that we ensure that young people understand the patriotic history of our country and how it was founded and its purpose.”⁵³ Barrow’s statement reflects how Democrats justify supporting theistnormative legislation. While not explicitly Christian, there is an assumption that belief in God is central to the foundation and purpose of the United States. This manifestation of Christian nationalism, while perhaps less exclusionary than more conservative manifestations, still reinforces a hegemonic understanding of religion and belief in God being inherently tied to U.S. identity.

It is imperative that scholars identify the rhetoric that reinforces Christian nationalist hegemonies. I argue that any fusion of Christianity with U.S. identity is a manifestation of the Christian nationalist imaginary. I would even say any fusion of God and U.S. identity should be understood as Christian nationalist rhetoric. While such a statement challenges the perpetuation of the Myth of Religious Tolerance much of the rhetorical scholarship on religio-political rhetoric reinforces through the “civil religion” narrative, the implications of this claim must be taken seriously by those engaged in critical rhetorical scholarship. It is not a big jump from “we are one nation under God” to “we are the one nation under the Christian God.” It is then even less of a jump to calling for policies to be passed based on their adherence to particular readings of Christianity and for leaders to be selected based on their advocacy of a Christian nationalist imaginary. One need to only look at the current legislation being pushed by Christian nationalist

organizations to see how they are making these connections.⁵⁴ Scholars engaging in secular rhetorical criticism should examine how contemporary Christian nationalists are creating a new twenty-first century spiritual-industrial complex and how Christian nationalism is embedded into cultural appeals across the political spectrum. The theistnormative symbols and rituals left over from the last spiritual-industrial complex are valuable rhetorical weapons that Christian nationalists are using today to legitimize their agenda. For those who value religious equality and want to fight against the rise of a new spiritual-industrial complex, it is essential to recognize that if the United States is truly to be one nation indivisible, it cannot be divided by a Christian nationalist God.

NOTES

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² “Isadore Bookstein, Es-State Justice, 82,” *New York Times*, May 9, 1973, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1973/05/09/90948150.html?pageNumber=50>.

³ “MATTER OF LEWIS v. ALLEN| N.Y. Misc. | Law | CaseMine,” accessed July 26, 2018, <https://www.casemine.com/judgement/us/5914c9ebadd7b049347f6312#>.

⁴ “MATTER OF LEWIS v. ALLEN

⁵ “MATTER OF LEWIS v. ALLEN

⁶ “MATTER OF LEWIS v. ALLEN

⁷ For more on the marginalization of Atheists, including the negative impacts of not saying the pledge, see: Degan Loren and Carol Rambo, “God Smites You!”: Atheists’ Experiences of Stigma, Identity Politics, and Queerness*, *Deviant Behavior* (2018); Hemant Mehta, *The Young Atheist’s Survival Guide: Helping Secular Students Thrive* (Englewood, CO: Patheos Press, 2012).

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¹⁰ Warren J. Blumenfeld, Khyati Y. Joshi, and Ellen E. Fairchild, eds., *Investigating Christian Privilege and Religious Oppression in the United States* (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2009), vii.

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¹³ Robert N. Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” *Daedalus* 96, no. 1 (1967), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20027022> and Roderick P. Hart, *The Political Pulpit* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1977)

¹⁴ George M. Docherty, *I’ve Seen the Day* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1984): 160.

¹⁵ These issues include, but are not limited to: abortion access, civil rights, prayer in schools, and LGBTQ+ rights. See: Karin Fry, *Beyond Religious Right and Secular Left Rhetoric: The Road to Compromise* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Michelle Goldberg, *Kingdom Coming: The Rise of Christian Nationalism* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006); Katherine Stewart, *The Power Worshipers: Inside the Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019)

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²¹ Lee, "Theistnormativity."

²² Ronald Reagan, "Remarks and a Question-and-Answer Session With Local High School Honor Students." Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project* <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/262318>.

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²⁴ Reagan, "Remarks and a Question-and-Answer Session."

²⁵ Reagan, "Remarks and a Question-and-Answer Session."

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The Congressional Prayer Caucus, their goal is “to protect the free exercise of traditional Judeo-Christian religious values and beliefs in the public square, and to reclaim and properly define the narrative which supports such beliefs.” See: “Report and Analysis on Religious Freedom Measures Impacting Prayer and Faith in American: 2018-19,” Congressional Prayer Caucus Foundation , <https://www.au.org/sites/default/files/2019-01/Project%20Blitz%20Playbook%202018-19.pdf> and Mark A. Chancey, “Project Blitz's Bible Literacy Act and the 2019 Bible Course Bills,” *The Bible and Interpretation*, June 2019, https://bibleinterp.arizona.edu/articles/project-blitzs-bible-literacy-act-and-2019-bible-course-bills#_edn4.