

ABSTRACT

Title of Document: FRAMING THE REV. JEREMIAH A. WRIGHT JR.: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF MAINSTREAM AND ALTERNATIVE NEWSPAPER COVERAGE, 2007-2008

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This case study examined through qualitative textual analysis how a group of mainstream and alternative publications framed their coverage of the Rev. Jeremiah A. Wright Jr. during the historic 2008 U.S. presidential primary campaign when Wright was the pastor of Barack Obama, who emerged from the campaign to become the nation's first black president. Prior to the campaign's conclusion, Obama parted ways with Wright as a result of heightened news coverage of statements Wright had made about the nation's politics and treatment of black people.

The study analyzes 216 news stories, commentaries and editorials produced by *The New York Times*, *Chicago Sun-Times* and *The Washington Post*, which are mainstream daily newspapers, as well as the *Chicago Defender*, *Washington Afro American* and *The Christian Century*, which are alternative news publications. The analysis of their coverage of Wright was further explored by the use of two framing

theories to determine what values might have influenced the ways journalists made sense out of Wright's religious speech and practices. Mark Silk's "Unsecular Media" theory posits that journalists typically rely on a set of religious values to frame their reports of religious issues and figures. Herbert Gans' "Enduring Values" theory posits that journalists typically rely on mainstream secular values to frame their reports of news subjects.

The study's findings showed that on the whole the mainstream publications included in the sample produced coverage that strongly correlated with Gans' secular theory, which holds that subjects often become news worthy because they deviate from mainstream values associated with moderatism and ethnocentrism. The study's comparative analysis concluded that coverage of Wright produced by journalists working for alternative publications consistently reflected values identified by Silk, whose original study was only focused on mainstream publications. The present study's findings demonstrated that mainstream journalists rarely relied on religious sources to produce their reports while many of the writers for the alternative press were themselves religious officials or experts. The study points out ongoing challenges faced by the mainstream press in covering religion as well as the challenges religious figures face when they become the subject of coverage.

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NEWSPAPER COVERAGE, 2007-2008

By

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Preface

“Now, they ain't gone put me on PBS for the nation to see this. This will be around the Chicagoland area. This ain't gon' be in no national cable. But, this is the time for social transformation. And, this is going to be the hardest step we have to take.”
– Jeremiah A. Wright Jr., from the sermon “The Day of Jerusalem’s Fall,” Sept. 16, 2001

For all the debate about whether the Rev. Jeremiah A. Wright Jr. was wrong for saying the things he did about the United States, racial matters and a few other politically-charged issues, this statement taken from one of his sermons that stirred controversy during the 2008 U.S. presidential primary campaign shows he clearly was off the mark in regard to expectation that his words would never be heard by not many more than his Chicago congregation. Indeed, many of the words Wright uttered on that day were not heard by many others. But it turned out that a few words that were lifted from this particular sermon eventually landed Wright on PBS and on national Cable news networks, as well as on the pages of news publications all over the nation and world. It is because of those words and others that some thought were either ill-timed or ill-conceived that I now have completed a study that has consumed my life for the last several years. Now, at last, I stand ready to share the results of what I have come to learn and understand about what happens when a preacher’s speech leaves the pulpit and enters into the public sphere. Simply put, it often is subjected to very different interpretations than what the preacher intended or expected. As you read the pages that follow, you will discover just how differently some in the news media interpreted the words of Wright that landed him in the news spotlight for a season and made him the most talked about preacher, not just in the nation, but perhaps on the planet.

Dedication

To my Dad and Mom – Robert and Frankie Morganfield – the greatest influences in my life and greatest gifts I could ever ask to receive. You have always believed in me and inspired me to go beyond where I might have imagined by your own graceful example. You have stood together as husband and wife for nearly 67 years, and I’m proud to be your progeny. Thanks for birthing in me a spirit that always yearns to rise up and walk by faith.

To the greatest and most supportive siblings in the world: my four sisters—Beverly Kizart, Joyce Tate, JoAnn Williams and Bridget Jones—you Morganfield women always have been superb examples, not to mention cheerleaders of my every move, even when some of them didn’t make much sense; and my baby brother and great friend—Gregory Morganfield—I love you for being such a good guy and a booster of your big brother. I owe you all more than I could ever repay. I am grateful to know you would not accept it, even if it were offered. Your love keeps lifting me higher, just like the love and faith that I have come to know in attempting to follow Christ and to serve God and those who stand in need of such love.

Acknowledgements

I shall forever be grateful to Dr. Maurine Beasley for standing by me through this process and offering her much needed wisdom and guidance. You did not give up on me when I wanted to give up. In addition, I am equally grateful for Dr. Kathy McAdams (Dr. Mc) for stepping in and rescuing this project by offering much needed insight into matters of faith and scholarship that were so much a part of this investigation. I could not have done this without the two of you. I will work hard to make you proud of me as I move on to the next chapters of my career as scholar and teacher. To the other members of my committee, I thank you for your willingness to serve, even though I was largely a stranger to you. I am forever grateful for your feedback that helped me push this project to a higher dimension.

Finally, I wish to acknowledge the patience and support of members of two congregations – St. Mark’s United Methodist Church of Laurel, Md., and The Journey of Faith Church of Waldorf, Md. – who have watched me double-dip as pastor and student working to build people while working to get to the end zone of this Ph.D. process. Indeed, this has been a journey of faith, and I thank you for your prayers and words of encouragement.

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Chapter 1: The Introduction

Barack H. Obama made history when he became the first black man to be elected president of the United States in 2008. But as Obama emerged as a serious contender for the Democratic Party's presidential nominee, a significant amount of campaign coverage focused on his minister, the Rev. Jeremiah A. Wright Jr., pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ on Chicago's South Side. Before the primary campaign was finished, Obama would sever ties with Wright and his church, and Wright would become labeled in press coverage as an extremist with anti-American views. This focus on Obama's pastor and events that followed it inspired the research contained in the pages that follow.

This dissertation is a case study designed to examine ways that three mainstream and three alternative publications portrayed Wright and the conflict surrounding him in their coverage. Case study research focuses on a limited number of events associated with a bigger phenomenon. It is an empirical inquiry that has been heralded for its ability to enhance understanding of complex issues by studying a specific case or subset to add insight to what already has become known through previous research.¹

The study employs textual analysis to find prevalent frames or themes in the coverage of Wright to test theories about news coverage of religious issues and figures associated with them. Frame analysis, as this process is also often called, allows researchers to study how journalists organize and attempt in coherent ways to

¹ Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1984), 23.

make sense of events they report and write about.² Past studies have found inconsistencies in characteristics of religion news coverage (Olasky, 1990; Silk, 1995; Hoover, 1998).³ Through a combined approach of case study and textual/framing analysis, information comes to light about the ways in which journalists are likely to write about religion, particularly in a political context. Findings from the present study may be useful in understanding and helping to improve the often-controversial coverage of religious figures and religion-related news, in testing how theories help explain the coverage, and inspiring further study of similar topics by adding content to readings in journalism education about the treatment of religion and those who practice it in an increasingly diverse world.

Before providing a detailed summary of related scholarly literature in Chapter 2, and outlining research questions, relevant theory and methods in subsequent chapters, background on the focus of this investigation will be provided here in the remainder of Chapter 1.

² Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974), 11. Goffman is credited as being one of the founders of framing theory and the methodological process that sprung from it. See also Daniel A. Stout and Judith M. Buddenbaum, "Media, Religion, and 'Framing'," *Journal of Media and Religion*, 2(1), 2003, 1.

³ See Marvin Olasky, *Prodigal Press: The Anti-Christian Bias of the American News Media* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1988). Olasky argues the press is secularized in its framing of religion. See Mark Silk, *Unsecular Media: Making News of Religion in America* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1995). Silk argues the press regularly uses religious values to frame religion news coverage. See also Stewart M. Hoover, *Religion In the News: Faith and Journalism in American Public Discourse* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1998). Hoover falls somewhere between Olasky and Silk, acknowledging some progress in coverage of religion news but expressing concerns about lingering problems and the potential for more as society and the press changes.

Focus on the Rev. Jeremiah Wright Jr.

The Pew Research Center concluded that Wright was the single most reported topic among all 2008 presidential primary campaign stories,⁴ and the Religion Newswriters Association voted coverage of Wright the top story of the year.⁵ This widespread focus on Wright by mainstream news organizations had been preceded by complaints from conservative commentators and bloggers who shortly after Obama announced his candidacy in February 2007 started critiquing Wright's sermons and the church's theology. A number of these commentators raised questions about Obama's worldview and Wright's suitability as the spiritual adviser to a would-be president of the United States. Some conservative commentators accused the mainstream news media of liberal bias and purposefully ignoring the story.⁶

A few major publications had produced stories during the early stages of the campaign that raised questions about Wright's theology and influence on Obama.⁷

⁴Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, "The Media, Religion and the 2012 Campaign for President," December 14, 2012, 3. The study's summary included a comparison between the 2008 and 2012 presidential campaign coverage.

⁵ The results of the Religion Newswriters Association's 2008 survey are included in a report headlined "Presidential election yields 2008's Top 10 Religion Stories." See full story at: <http://www.virtueonline.org/portal/modules/news/article.php?storyid=9687#UxA3qpWYbIV>.

⁶ Albert L. May offers accounts of how two conservative bloggers—Fran Eaton and Erik Rush—were among the first to accuse Trinity Church of being "black supremacist" in a book chapter titled "The Preacher and the Press: How the Jeremiah Wright Story Became the First Feeding Frenzy in the Digital Age," which appeared in *Campaigning for President 2008: Strategy and Tactics, New Voices and New Techniques*, edited by Dennis W. Johnson (New York: Routledge, 2009). May recalls that Eaton visited the church in December 2006 and described her experience as "a rather pleasant church service reflecting the spirit of Christmas and Christendom" but later discovered the church's Afro-centric creed on the church's web site and wrote about it in a Dec. 31 column, 83. While appearing on Fox News Channel's Hannity & Colmes in February 2007, Rush called Obama "our first stealth black supremacist president," citing his membership at Trinity. May noted that at that point, there were no video clips of Wright's sermons aired by Hannity. Wright was invited to the show the next day and engaged in a heated verbal exchange with Hannity, 84.

⁷ May (2009) credits the *Chicago Tribune* for writing about Wright's association with Obama as early as January 2007 before Obama officially announced his candidacy. *Rolling Stone* magazine and *The New York Times* soon followed. Their stories touched upon what the journalists perceived as Wright's radical theology and even mentioned themes from sermons but did not quote directly from them. The story gained some buzz due to coverage by conservative commentators via blogs and Fox News

However, nationwide mainstream press coverage of Wright did not intensify until March 2008 after ABC News became the first major mainstream news medium to present a story excerpting statements from video recordings of sermons Wright had preached years earlier. Some political pundits and commentators quickly labeled Wright's language inflammatory and unacceptable.⁸ A written version of the story appeared on the ABC network's web site with a headline that read: "Obama's Pastor: God Damn America, U.S. to Blame for 9/11."⁹ The story's lead paragraph stated: "Sen. Barack Obama's pastor says blacks should not sing 'God Bless America' but 'God damn America'."¹⁰ The story's authors—Brian Ross and Rehad El-Buri—reported that ABC News reviewed dozens of Wright's sermons and found that he repeatedly denounced the United States "based on what he described as his reading of the Gospels and the treatment of black Americans."¹¹ Excerpts from two sermons that were highlighted in that story became the major focus of the broader mainstream news coverage of Wright that followed. In a video excerpt of a 2003 sermon, Wright was shown saying:

The government gives them (blacks) the drugs, builds bigger prisons, passes a three-strike law and then wants us to sing 'God Bless America.' No, no, no, God damn America—that's in the Bible—for killing innocent people. God damn

Channel but never graduated to major television networks or most major newspapers and magazines. See May, 82-85.

⁸ Carl A. Grant and Shelby J. Grant are among scholars that cite the March 13, 2008, ABC News report as the turning point in news coverage of Wright. See *The Moment: Barack Obama, Jeremiah Wright, and the Firestorm at Trinity United Church of Christ* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013), 5. Also see May (2009), 86.

⁹ ABC News featured a video news report on air and a printed news article on its web site on March 13, 2008. The news report featured a video compilation of several snippets from sermons by Wright. See Brian Ross and Rehab El-Buri, "'Obama's Pastor: God Damn America, U.S. to Blame for 9/11,'" ABC News, accessed January 10, 2013, <http://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/DemocraticDebate/story?id=4443788&page=1#.T4cqNo5xU>.

¹⁰ Ross and El-Buri, "Obama's Pastor."

¹¹ *Ibid.*

America for treating our citizens as less than human! God damn America for as long as she acts like she is God and she is supreme!¹²

From a sermon he preached the Sunday after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C., ABC featured an excerpt in which Wright said:

We bombed Hiroshima. We bombed Nagasaki. And we nuked far more than the thousands in New York and the Pentagon—and we never batted an eye. We have supported state terrorism against the Palestinians and black South Africans, and now we are indignant because the stuff we have done overseas is brought right back into our own front yards. America’s chickens—are coming home—to roost!¹³

The ABC report catapulted Wright into the national media spotlight, where he was met with widespread criticism from many of Obama’s opponents as well as some supporters who saw him as a threat to Obama’s candidacy. Wright and his supporters argued that the quotes were reported out of context and could not be viewed as representative of his 36-year ministerial career that had seen him celebrated in church, theological and academic circles with recognition as one of the nation’s most notable preachers and theologians.¹⁴ He has received nine honorary degrees.¹⁵ In

¹² Wright preached a sermon titled "Confusing God and Government" on April 13, 2003, during a Sunday worship service at Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago. The sermon’s full text is included in the appendix of this study.

¹³This excerpt was taken from Wright’s sermon titled “The Day of Jerusalem’s Fall.” It became the main focus on news coverage about what his critics labeled his inflammatory rhetoric that blamed America’s actions for triggering the September 11 terrorist attacks. This message was preached at Trinity on the Sunday following the 2001 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, DC. The full texts of this sermon is included as part of the appendix to this study.

¹⁴ Clarence E. Walker and Gregory D. Smithers have argued that much of the news coverage reported Wright’s comments out of context, noting that Wright indicated he had heard Ambassador Edward Peck, a retired United States diplomat who was chief of the U.S. mission to Iraq under President Jimmy Carter, make the statement that “America’s chickens are coming home to roost.” Walker and Smithers said Wright was echoing Peck’s words. *Huffington Post* Political Writer Sam Stein echoed the claim in a March 29, 2008, report titled “Meet the (White) Man Who Inspired Wright’s Controversial Sermon.” Chicago-based researcher David Peterson (2008) concluded in a textual analysis of the sermon that “It is clear to me that the politics behind the Reverend Jeremiah’s Wright’s September 16, 2001, sermon before the Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago was to stay the hand of vengeance on the part of a regime and a people then reeling from the events of 9/11. But it is just as clear that, now seven years later, a disturbingly high percentage of these Americans cannot

addition to those initial excerpts from some of Wright's sermons, other comments by Wright became the focus of mainstream news media coverage because some deemed them controversial.¹⁶ Coverage also focused on the Trinity Church's creedal statements affirming blackness and black liberation theology.¹⁷ Some critics accused the church of practicing racism against white people.

Obama initially defended Wright and his church during a nationally broadcast speech shortly after the ABC report spawned broad national coverage and calls from some critics for Obama to denounce Wright.¹⁸ Obama's speech seemed to help quell the mounting furor as Wright – who long had become a popular speaker in churches, seminaries and conventions across the nation and world – momentarily kept a low

understand this message. Nor for what appear to be doctrinal reasons are they capable...of recognizing in this sermon anything beyond what their worst nightmares eagerly project onto it." See full analysis at www.zcommunications.org/contents/29085.

¹⁵ See "Talking Points: Rev. Dr. Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr. and Trinity United Church of Christ: Basic Biographical Facts," The Connecticut Conference United Church of Christ, accessed February 1, 2014, http://www.ctucc.org/resources/200803_trinityucctalkingpoints.html. *The Chicago Tribune* reported that Colgate University and Valparaiso University are among schools that have bestowed honorary doctorates on Wright. Northwestern University had chosen Wright for the honor but rescinded it just weeks before it was to be presented, saying controversy surrounding Wright could disrupt graduation ceremonies. See Jodi S. Cohen, "Northwestern withdraws Rev. Jeremiah Wright's graduation invite, honorary degree offer," *Chicago Tribune*, May 2, 2008, accessed January 3, 2013, http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2008-05-02/news/0805011029_1_honorary-degree-bienen-northwestern.

¹⁶ Joe Klein (2008) reported in *Time* magazine that Wright had accused the United States government of spreading HIV among blacks. When reporters at the National Press Club asked him if he really believed this, Wright said he had read books that caused him to wonder about the virus' origins and its rapid spread in the African American community. He added "and based on the Tuskegee experiment and based on what has happened to Africans in this country, I believe our government is capable of doing anything" (National Press Club Transcript, 12).

¹⁷ The Trinity United Church of Christ web site includes a statement about the church's history that declares "We are a congregation which is Unashamedly Black and Unapologetically Christian...Our roots in the Black religious experience and tradition are deep, lasting and permanent." The site also notes the church adopted a 12-point Black Value System in 1981, which calls on congregants to commit to promoting the welfare of African Americans through a theology of black liberation. These topics are detailed in Chapter 4, which examines Wright's background and how theological scholars have viewed him and his ministry. The Value System text is included in the appendix.

¹⁸ Obama delivered a speech on March 18, 2008, at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, titled "A More Perfect Union." Fletcher (2009) argued that Obama used the speech to address issues of race while placing Wright's comments within what he called America's "tragic history when it comes to race."

profile. In 2006, prior to Obama's announcement of his candidacy for president, Wright had announced he would retire from the Trinity pulpit by June 2008. He hand-picked his successor Otis Moss III and brought him on as an understudy at that time. Wright preached his last sermon at Trinity in early March 2008 just as the news media focus on him and his ministry was intensifying and entered a brief period during which he had no other public speaking engagements.¹⁹

That would change in April 2008 when Wright resumed his speaking engagements and consented to a major television interview with journalist and fellow United Church of Christ member Bill Moyers on PBS. These appearances became the subject of widespread media critique. Much of the mainstream news media's coverage of Wright culminated with a highly publicized appearance by Wright at the National Press Club on April 28, 2008, during which he gave a speech on the African American religious experience and answered questions from reporters. The live national telecast of this event stirred even more controversy because of Wright's responses to reporters' queries.²⁰

In the days following the National Press Club event, Obama formally denounced Wright and severed personal ties with him. Wright then largely faded from the mainstream news media stage. However, about a month later, another highly

¹⁹ Steven Gray, "The Unretirement of Reverend Wright," *TIME* magazine, June 4, 2008, accessed February 12, 2014. <http://content.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,1811674,00.html>. See also Barack Obama, "On My Faith and My Church," *Huffington Post*, March 14, 2008, accessed February 12, 2014. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/barack-obama/on-my-faith-and-my-church_b_91623.html.

²⁰ On April 28, 2008, Wright delivered a lecture at the National Press Club titled "the African American Religious Experience," in which he sought to place his ministry and theology within the historical framework of the "Black Church" in America. He followed his speech by addressing questions that journalists had presented prior to his speech to Press Club moderator and *USA TODAY* reporter Donna Leinwand. She read the questions one by one and asked Wright to respond. The exchange was often heated with Wright criticizing journalists for not doing their homework and failing to listen to his complete sermons. See National Press Club Transcript in the appendix of this study.

publicized event at Trinity sparked additional controversy. A white Catholic priest invited to preach by Wright's successor mocked and spoke disparagingly of Sen. Hillary Clinton, Obama's chief rival in the Democratic primary. Obama announced shortly thereafter that he and his family would no longer be members of the congregation.²¹

Significance of Wright Coverage

On the whole, Wright, his sermons and the church's theology became the focus of one of the most high-profile religion-themed stories in recent media history.²² This sequence of news media coverage has lingering significance and potential as a research topic as it is intended to contribute to the still emerging scholarship on how religion is reported by journalists. Daniel A. Stout and Judith M. Buddenbaum, who served as founding editors of the first scholarly journal devoted solely to media and religion research, have noted sharp disagreement among scholars interpreting news

²¹Father Michael Pflieger, a Chicago priest, mocked Hillary Clinton during a sermon he delivered at Trinity Church. It had been reported earlier that Clinton cried after losing in New Hampshire. Pflieger suggested in his sermon that Clinton cried because she thought being white meant she was destined to prevail as the Democratic nominee. Pflieger said: "I really believe that she just always thought, 'This is mine! I'm Bill's wife. I'm white, and this is mine!'" He mocked her crying and the audience applauded. Media coverage circulated with widespread criticism. See Lynn Sweet, "Father Michael Pflieger mocks 'entitled' and 'white' Hillary at Trinity United Church," *Chicago Sun-Times*, May 29, 2008, accessed February 19, 2013, http://blogs.suntimes.com/sweet/2008/05/father_michael_pflieger.html. Obama, who had enjoyed a long relationship with Pflieger dating back to his days as a community activist, expressed deep disappointment. Pflieger later apologized, saying his words were "inconsistent with Senator Obama's life and message." A few days later Obama announced his family's resignation from the congregation. See Michael Powell, "Following Months of criticism, Obama Quits His Church," *The New York Times*, June 1, 2008, accessed February 18, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/01/us/politics/01obama.html?_r=0&pagewanted=print.

²²"Running on Faith," a study released in July 2008 by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, found that the Wright controversy pushed religion coverage associated with Obama's campaign from 5 percent of all stories to more than 55 percent of all stories. See <http://www.pewforum.org/Politics-and-Elections/Running-on-faith.aspx>;

Huffington Post listed the story as one of the top 10 religion stories in the first decade of the 21st century. See Paul Brandeis Raushenbush, "The Religious Decade: 2000 to 2010," *Huffington Post*, December 23, 2009, accessed September 13, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/paul-raushenbush/2000-to-2010-the-religiou_b_400826.html?

coverage of religion. However, they credit scholars for exploring what they called an important question: “What is the nature of the process by which journalists present religion to their audiences?” They answer their own question by adding: “One approach to this issue, which has not been adequately applied to the study of media and religion, is framing.”²³ Framing theory posits that journalists use cognitive structures and devices to organize and make sense of the news, which ultimately affect how the news is perceived.²⁴

Study of the Wright coverage is relevant because it seeks to build on literature that looks at “how religion is framed when it is thrust into the public realm through mediated coverage of a particular event.”²⁵ Stout and Buddenbaum argued that the emergence of the “information society” would increase the likelihood that the actions of religious individuals will move beyond the walls of worship centers onto a public stage, leading to discussions with people who might not share their religious views.²⁶ They also pointed out that scholars increasingly had been asking, “How will journalists frame religion in this new age of information and access?” Wright’s case is a classic example of how Stout and Buddenbaum’s predictions were fulfilled. Wright became the focus of public discussions for several months in 2008 after

²³Daniel A. Stout and Judith M. Buddenbaum, “Media, Religion, and ‘Framing,’” *Journal of Media and Religion*, 2 No. 1 (2003): 1. The *Journal of Media and Religion* was launched in 2002. Published by Lawrence Erlbaum and Associates, 10 Industrial Avenue; Mahwah, NJ 07430-2262; journals@erlbaum.com. “The *Journal of Media and Religion* addresses the question of how religion as a social and cultural phenomenon broadens understanding of mass communication in society. It is a forum for scholars, media professionals, and theologians to discuss media and religion from a social science viewpoint” (*Journal of Media and Religion*, 1(1), 2002)

²⁴ See Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974). Goffman is typically considered one of the fathers of framing theory and analysis.

²⁵ Stout and Buddenbaum, “Media, Religion, and Framing,” 2.

²⁶ *Ibid.* The information society refers to increased access to information through various avenues due to technological advances associated with computers, the internet and other digitized formats. Stout and Buddenbaum cite J. Meyrowitz, who has referred to this phenomenon as “loss of physical place due to the mediated environment of information technology.”

journalists obtained and reviewed digitized copies of his sermons. Public commentary and debate came from people who varied widely in religious knowledge and orientation.

To date, very few scholars have published studies examining the media's coverage of Wright. A case study by Albert May chronicled the sequence of major news reports that came to bear on the Wright incident and concluded that it was "the first feeding frenzy in the digital age."²⁷ Edward S. Herman and David Peterson analyzed findings from news databases and concluded that Wright received a disproportionate amount of negative news media coverage when compared to religious leaders associated with other candidates seeking the presidency.²⁸ Hannah Oliha analyzed online posts on YouTube and the *Huffington Post* to examine socio-racial discourses that resulted from what she called "the Jeremiah Wright media spectacle."²⁹ Brian D. McKenzie used national survey data to analyze the differences in how blacks and whites perceived video clips of Wright's sermons.³⁰ Carl A. Grant and Shelby J. Grant offered analysis of news media coverage from the perspective of members of Trinity United Church of Christ, an angle the duo argued was missing from and much needed in coverage of the event.³¹ A complete review of existing literature about the Wright case follows in chapter two.

²⁷ See May, "The Preacher and the Press," 78-101.

²⁸ Edward S. Herman and David Peterson, "Jeremiah Wright in the Propaganda System," *Monthly Review*, September 1, 2008, 1-21.

²⁹ Hannah Oliha, "In love and war: racial disharmony and America's discordant racial articulations in the wake of the Jeremiah Wright media spectacle," *Journal of Multicultural Discourses*, 6:3 (2011), 257-271.

³⁰ Brian D. McKenzie, "Barack Obama, Jeremiah Wright, and Public Opinion in the 2008 Presidential Primaries," *Political Psychology*, Vol. 32, No. 6 (2011), 943-961.

³¹ See Carl A. Grant and Shelby J. Grant, *The Moment: Barack Obama, Jeremiah Wright, and the Firestorm at Trinity United Church of Christ* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013).

The Context of Research on News and Religion

This present study is also significant because it provides an opportunity to fulfill what Buddenbaum calls another fundamental function of scholarly research—to build on “what has gone before.”³² As part of this present investigation, this researcher will revisit the findings of Mark Silk’s 1995 classic media and religion study, which challenged long-held conclusions about the secular nature of the press when it comes to coverage of religion. Silk’s analysis of hundreds of religion stories concluded that news organizations report religion-themed stories from a religious rather than secular worldview as long had been argued by many scholars.³³ Silk promoted what he called an “unsecular media” theory, claiming that the news media—and newspapers in particular—actually use seven principles which he referred to as “topoi” that are borrowed from religious teachings to guide them in covering religious issues. As a result, he argued that the press helps to promote a religious worldview in its news coverage of religion.³⁴

A number of media and religion scholars, including Stout, Buddenbaum and Rick Clifton Moore, conferred classic status upon Silk’s work and praised his findings because they were derived from empirical rather than anecdotal analysis. However, they joined in calling for further testing of Silk’s theory. Stout called Silk’s study “the most significant book on this subject to date” but noted shortcomings – including

³²Judith M. Buddenbaum, “Social Science and the Study of Media and Religion: Going Forward by Looking Backward,” *Journal of Media and Religion*, 1(1): (2002), 14.

³³ Mark Silk, *Unsecular Media: Making News of Religion in America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), xi-xii.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 55.

future theoretical implications – that demanded more study.³⁵ Moore, who authored two peer-reviewed articles that sought to test Silk’s theory, praised Silk for opening “a new avenue” for studying the connection between media and religion. He added, however, that “other scholars must follow his lead if we hope for deeper insight.”³⁶

The present research will explore whether an analysis of the coverage of Wright would support Silk’s thesis. The study also will test Silk’s arguments by holding them up against a secular theory of press coverage. Sociologist Herbert J. Gans developed a theory of eight “enduring values” that he argued generally influence how the news media cover stories. Gans’ seminal work may provide a more suitable explanation of the press’ coverage of Wright, although his theory did not specifically focus on media coverage of religion as Silk’s did.³⁷ Chapter 3 will discuss these theories and others related to framing in greater detail.

A final concern of this study will be to examine whether mainstream journalists appeared to have used markedly different frames in their coverage than journalists working for alternative press publications. This type of comparative analysis is designed to test the prevailing belief that the content produced by publications will

³⁵ Daniel A. Stout, Review of *Unsecular Media: Making News of Religion in America*, by Mark Silk, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 36, No. 1 (1997), 128. Also see Clifton Moore, “Religion and Topoi in the News: An analysis of the ‘Unsecular Media’ Hypothesis,” *Journal of Media and Religion*, 2 (1): (2003), 49-64.

³⁶ Rick Clifton Moore applied Silk’s topos of hypocrisy to an analysis of coverage of the Rev. Jesse Jackson’s marital infidelity to see if the coverage supported or challenged a religious worldview. His finding was not in favor of Silk’s theory. See “Religion and Topoi in the News: An Analysis of the ‘Unsecular Media’ Hypothesis,” *Journal of Media and Religion* 2(1): 2003, 49-64. In an analysis of coverage of the Dalai Lama’s visit to the United States in 2005, Moore found evidence to support Silk’s thesis, but said his findings raised questions because Silk had argued in part that the press covered religion in ways that aligned with western religious values. See “Secular Spirituality/Mundane Media: One Newspaper’s In-depth Coverage of Buddhism,” *Journal of Media and Religion*, 7 (2008), 231-255.

³⁷ In a 1979 study, Herbert J. Gans outlined eight values that journalists use to frame their news stories. Those values, Gans argued, are based on “reality judgments” that are widely held and shared among various sectors of the American public and reflect an understanding of how things ought to be. See Herbert J. Gans, *Deciding What’s News* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University, 1979), 39.

likely reflect their presupposed different philosophical and audience orientations. The literature on alternative news media indicates, however, that the term “alternative” has various meanings associated with it. Marisol Sandoval and Christian Fuchs argue for a definition of “alternative” news media that highlights an organizational structure that is participatory and has a non-commercial financing structure.³⁸ Chris Atton argues that alternative publications focus on opinions of small minorities, often expressing ideas “hostile to widely-held beliefs,” and featuring viewpoints or subjects that do not receive regular coverage in mainstream publications.³⁹ Mainstream news media, on the other hand, typically have been thought of as organizations subscribing to principles of objectivity and fairness; however, they also have been identified as profit-driven organizations characterized by some level of commitment to hegemony and thus tending to support establishment or dominant culture views.⁴⁰

The present study focuses on three mainstream newspapers (*Chicago Sun-Times*, *Washington Post*, and *The New York Times*), two alternative newspapers aimed primarily at African Americans (*Chicago Defender* and *The Washington Afro-American*) and one alternative publication aimed primarily at a progressive religious constituency (*The Christian Century* based in Chicago). Chicago-based publications were chosen for this study because both Wright and Obama call Chicago home. *The New York Times* and *Washington Post* are national newspapers and routinely considered the industry’s elite publications. As such, they are generally thought to produce the best examples of journalistic reporting and writing. African-American

³⁸ Marisol Sandoval and Christian Fuchs, “Towards a critical theory of alternative media,” *Telematics and Informatics*, 27 (2010), 141-150.

³⁹ Chris Atton, “A reassessment of the alternative press,” *Media, Culture & Society*, 21:1 (1999), 51-76.

⁴⁰ David L. Altheide, “Media Hegemony: A Failure of Perspective,” *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (Summer 1984), 476-490.

newspapers and religious periodicals typically offer alternative perspectives from mainstream publications. The rationale for media selection and comparison are further detailed in the study's methodology chapter.

Research Questions

Buddenbaum argues that scholarship is at its best when it looks back while seeking to move forward. Consequentially, it can “open up new lines of inquiry and point to ways for bridging the gaps in the research literature.”⁴¹ That is largely the inspiration for the research proposed here.

Previous research has provided insight into understanding how religion and religious figures are framed in news media coverage, and this dissertation is designed to build on that research by addressing the following research questions:

RQ1: How did journalists frame coverage of Wright, his sermons and theology?

RQ2: Who were the sources of those frames and were they clearly identified in coverage?

RQ3: Does a framing analysis of coverage provide support for Silk's theory or Gans'?

RQ4: Were there major differences in how mainstream publications and alternative publications framed Wright in coverage?

It is hoped studying these questions will lead to insights that provide a better understanding of mainstream and alternative press approaches to covering religion news. In the process, the dissertation will have tested tenets of both Gans' and Silk's media framing theories, which offer competing assumptions about how the press

⁴¹ Buddenbaum, “Social Science Study,” 20.

covers news—from either a secular or unsecular perspective. Both theories are grounded in mainstream value systems and will be fully outlined in the theory and methodology chapters of this study.

The basic thesis of this dissertation is that Wright became the focus of a mainstream news story because his rhetoric violated prevailing mainstream values associated with ethnocentrism and moderatism. In other words, he was seen as outside or deviant from mainstream values. This hypothesis aligns with specific arguments found in Gans' enduring values theory, suggesting that coverage may be secularly oriented. Determining how secular or unsecular the coverage is requires some level of quantification of data that this dissertation provides.

Social Location of the Researcher

John W. Creswell points out that personal interpretation will always be brought to bear on qualitative analysis of data because researchers must filter their data through “a personal lens that is situated in a specific sociopolitical and historical moment.”⁴² As such, Creswell argues that it is important for the researcher to reflect on how his or her personal background shapes and influences the study and then readily acknowledge biases, values and interests that he or she brings to the research. “The personal-self becomes inseparable from the researcher-self,” Creswell writes. “It also represents honesty and openness to research, acknowledging that all inquiry is laden with values.”⁴³ It is for that reason, that Creswell and others support the

⁴² John W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Method Approaches*, 2nd edition (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2003), 182.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

inclusion of statements of personal reflections in introductory portions of the dissertation.

This researcher comes to this investigation of coverage of Wright with several connections to the subject matter. First, he is an African American who formerly worked as a journalist at various mainstream daily newspapers, covering a range of issues, including religion. Second, he holds a Master of Divinity degree and has served throughout his doctoral studies as a full-time pastor of a largely African-American congregation in a context not far removed from that of the main subject of this study. The church he pastors is part of the largely white United Methodist denomination. He preaches regularly on biblical and social issues. Some elements of black theology influence his ministry, but he is not a staunch advocate of the systematized approach to it as outlined by its founders. Adrian Holiday, who has written extensively on qualitative research, encourages the management of subjectivity through systematized approaches to inquiry. But he cautions against creating an illusion of objectivity. “Research needs to be accompanied by accounts of how it was really done,” Holiday writes.⁴⁴ Those details will be outlined in this study’s methods chapter.

In addition to acknowledging personal values that tie the researcher to this present study, Creswell also urges the inclusion of delimitations that narrow the scope of a study and limitations that might weaken the study. The researcher wishes to identify a major delimitation of this study. That is: the study is purposefully not

⁴⁴ See Adrian Holliday, *Doing and Writing Qualitative Research*, 2nd edition (London: Sage Publications, 2007), 7. Holiday’s quote is based on a paraphrase of material from a 1991 study by G. Walford titled “Reflexive accounts of doing educational research” in G. Walford (ed.), *Doing Educational Research*, (London: Routledge), 1-17.

intended to be focused on questions about race, even though race emerged as a major factor in the campaign and is likely to emerge as one of the frames in the analysis of coverage. The researcher is strictly concerned with examining how Wright's religion and his practice of it were framed in coverage. So critical race theory, for instance, is not a part of the framework of this study. Such work does hold potential for future study by this researcher. But presently he will be viewing any focus by Wright on race as religiously or theologically framed, such as in references to the "Black Church" or "Black Liberation Theology" or "African-American religious experience."

A second delimitation of the study is the decision to only analyze written texts to the exclusion of photographs, which scholars have identified as important sources of media frames. The written texts hold particular interest for this researcher as one who hails from a newspaper reporting and editing background. Moreover, his current occupation as a Methodist minister requires the constant analysis of written texts. So the researcher has chosen to narrow the scope of the study for those reasons.

In addition, a few other limitations also should be acknowledged at the onset of this study. The researcher's use of a purposive sample of media for the case study, as well as the use of qualitative methodology, means the study's findings will not be generalizable to all news media coverage of religion. Moreover, the findings could be subject to other interpretations because of the interpretive nature of qualitative research. The researcher will attempt to integrate multiple systematized approaches to analyzing data, including triangulation where feasible, to mitigate any potential weaknesses inherent in the methodological approach.

The study seeks to proceed in a logical fashion from its introductory chapter. Chapter 2 explores the literature on media coverage of Wright to place the issue in context and further establish the need for additional research by pointing out what is missing. Chapter 3 is intended to build on the literature review. It further contemplates the importance of context by attempting to place Wright within his discipline and examining what scholars in that field have said about him over the years. A biography of Wright will be included in this chapter, as well as a review of how the local Chicago media reported on him before Obama's rise to fame, national news media attention on him and the church he led for more than three and half decades. This should serve as suitable contextualization for analyzing the coverage for the period that concerns this study.

Chapter 4 offers a detailed description of the theoretical framework of the study while Chapter 5 outlines the methodology adopted with attendant coding schemes and why these are suitable approaches to be employed in this study. Chapter 6 reports the findings from the textual analysis of the mainstream and alternative coverage of Wright during the period under investigation in this study. Chapter 7 features discussion of the findings, and Chapter 8 ends the study with the researcher's conclusions and suggestions for additional study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The Rev. Jeremiah A. Wright Jr.'s emergence as the single most reported storyline during the 2008 presidential primary campaign might automatically suggest that the news media's coverage of him would become a ripe topic for media research.⁴⁵ There was an avalanche of scholarship examining the election of Wright's longtime parishioner Barack H. Obama, who became the nation's first black president. Within a few short years of the election, a worldwide library database yielded more than 12,500 returns on the search term "Obama." Keyword searches that focused on Obama and the 2008 election yielded returns of 549 peer-reviewed articles, 810 books, 95 book chapters and 86 theses or dissertations. A more focused search on 2008 news media campaign coverage on Obama resulted in 70 peer-reviewed article returns, 31 book chapters, 23 books and two theses and five dissertations.⁴⁶ However, a review of these works showed that much of the scholarship on Obama has largely treated Wright as a footnote about managing a major political liability. Very little research has been generated that examines the media's coverage of Wright, his theology and religious practices, even though the 2008 campaign coverage of Wright made him the subject of one of the biggest religion-themed stories in this century.⁴⁷ Most of the peer-reviewed articles included

⁴⁵The Pew Research Center's "The Media, Religion and the 2012 Campaign for President" noted that Coverage of Wright was the No. 1 campaign story "overall" during the 2008 primary season, accounting for six percent of all stories, 2-3.

⁴⁶ This researcher conducted keyword searches of the University of Maryland's libraries databases with a focus on Barack Obama and the 2008 presidential election. The researcher scanned hundreds of titles and abstracts seeking works that focused on the media's coverage. Subsequent searches focused on Jeremiah Wright.

⁴⁷ *The Huffington Post's* "The Religious Decade: 2000-2010" rated "The Presidential Pastoral Problem" story among the top 10 religion stories of the first decade of the 21st century. The Pew

in the database search results of 2008 media coverage of Obama were not focused so much on coverage as they were on specific aspects or themes that emerged during the campaign. Much of the scholarship focused on issues related to race.

Race, Religion and Research

Eileen L. Zurbriggen and Aurora M. Sherman conducted a content analysis of editorial cartoons published during the election primary period to examine coverage of race and gender, for instance. They found that Obama and other male candidates were portrayed more favorably than Hillary Clinton and concluded that race and gender frames continued to account for a significant amount of media coverage of political campaigns just as in the past.⁴⁸ Charlton D. McIlwain investigated racial content in campaign stories in newspapers and found consistency with previous studies showing that references to race were more frequently found in coverage when at least one candidate is a racial minority. But his study also challenged previous findings that suggested that the saliency of racial content triggers or activates voters' racial prejudices.⁴⁹ Catherine R. Squires and Sarah J. Jackson conducted a content analysis of newspaper and news magazine coverage of the 2008 Democratic primaries and concluded that binary racial frames were predominant with little reference to Obama's biracial makeup. Moreover, most of the racial frames involved what they called "interpersonal insensitivity and misguided statements" while

foundation annually ranks stories based on amount of coverage received from news media and concluded coverage of Wright was No. 2 overall in 2008.

⁴⁸ Eileen L. Zurbriggen and Aurora M. Sherman, "Race and Gender in the 2008 U.S. Presidential Election: A Content Analysis of Editorial Cartoons," *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy*. 10,1 (2010): 223-247.

⁴⁹ Charlton McIlwain, "Racialized Media Coverage of Minority Candidates in the 2008 Democratic Presidential Primary," *American Behavioral Scientist*. 55, 4 (2011): 371-389.

essentially ignoring arguably more important issues related to racial equity and public policy.⁵⁰

Beyond such examples that ignored the religion storyline in the 2008 campaign news coverage, a few studies and books focused on Obama but featured segments or chapters on Wright. These artifacts provide a view of the way many authors and researchers treated the news media's coverage of Wright, placing little emphasis on his religion and theology.

Brian Weeks and Brian Southwell of the University of Minnesota examined what they called the effects of agenda-setting stemming from television and newspaper coverage of a rumor that Obama was a Muslim. Wright was not a focus in their study.⁵¹ The Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism and Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life concluded that the rumors about Obama's religious identity being Muslim became "the single biggest religion storyline in the general election phase of the campaign" after news about Wright had faded from the media's spotlight, once Obama renounced his association with Wright and the church.⁵²

Social theorists Adia Harvey Wingfield and Joe R. Feagin were among scholars to produce works that examined the news media's coverage of Wright. Their study discredits claims by political pundits and others that Obama's successful run for president indicated that America had entered a post-racial age. Calling their study a

⁵⁰Catherine Squires and Sarah Jackson, "Reducing Race: News Themes in the 2008 Primaries," *The International Journal of Press/Politics*. 15, 4 (2010): 375-400.

⁵¹ Brian Weeks and Brian Southwell, "The Symbiosis of News Coverage and Aggregate Online Search Behavior: Obama, Rumors, and Presidential Politics," *Mass Communication and Society*. 13, 4 (2010): 341-360.

⁵² Pew Research Center, "How the News Media Covered Religion in the General Election: Pastor Problems," Nov. 20, 2008, 2.

“sound sociological analysis,” the authors devoted an entire chapter to what they labeled the “Dr. Jeremiah Wright Controversy.”⁵³ Wingfield, who is black, and Feagin, who is white, concluded that “white-controlled” mass media relied overwhelmingly on a “hard racial framing” that cast Wright as angry and militant. Their chapter also raised questions about whether Obama was “by association” framed as an unpatriotic racist who was attempting to conceal his true feelings about America. This frame worked, they concluded, “because it appealed to the central images and commonsense assumptions about black men in the four-centuries-old white racial frame.”⁵⁴ Terry Smith, a distinguished research professor of Law at DePaul College of Law, also argued against post-racial age assumptions, noting in a four-page segment he devoted to the media’s treatment of Wright in his 224-page book that broadcast and print journalists typically condensed their coverage to the most controversial elements of sermons preached by Wright, “which created potentially irreparable political harm to Obama’s presidential candidacy.” Smith chided *The New York Times* for uneven reporting that he said lacked context.⁵⁵ His focus on Wright as a political liability is typical of works that focused on Obama. One of the weaknesses of his critique is that it appears to be based on anecdotal evidence and not empirical research.

In contrast to Smith’s criticism of *The New York Times* coverage of Wright and its potential harm to Obama’s candidacy, Stephen J. Farnsworth and S. Robert Lichter, both of whom teach at universities in the Washington, DC, area, produced a

⁵³ Adia Harvey Wingfield and Joe R. Feagin, *Yes We Can? White Racial Framing and the 2008 Presidential Campaign* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 154-155.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Terry Smith, *Barack Obama, Post-Racialism, and the New Politics of Triangulation* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), 106-107.

series of studies that criticized the newspaper for coverage that they described as “too soft” on Obama. The studies, however, were focused on coverage after Obama’s election. They rebuked the newspaper for engaging in what they called a “media honeymoon” in their coverage of Obama.⁵⁶ The tandem previously had completed a content analysis of network evening news coverage of the 2008 presidential election and found a slight increase in the overall amount of coverage from the 2004 election but a decrease in coverage of policy matters. They concluded that Obama had received the most positive coverage of any major party nominee since the Center for Media and Public Affairs started examining network coverage in 1988.⁵⁷

Bernard Goldberg, a conservative commentator whose website states he has won a dozen Emmy Awards for news reporting he did for CBS and HBO, offered a more caustic review of the news media’s coverage of Wright in a chapter of a book that was uniformly devoted to criticizing what he called the press’ “slobbering love affair” with Obama. He cited anecdotal evidence to accuse the press of liberal bias, and concluded that most of the news media gave Wright a pass:

Ask any reporter if he or she intentionally downplayed stories that might have made Wright look bad. After they finish rolling their eyes they’ll tell you (in a way that makes clear they think you’re a pathetic idiot) that they are in the business of disseminating information, not hiding it.... They don’t fully understand how their liberalism affects their news judgment.... So when they did get around to reporting on Wright, they simply did not tell the full truth. Sure, they described him as ‘controversial’ or ‘passionate’ or even ‘fiery.’ But when they hinted at what made him so ‘controversial,’ they typically diverted the heaviest accusations against him—that he was a racist

⁵⁶Stephen J. Farnsworth and S. Robert Lichter produced two studies on *The New York Times* coverage of Obama, the first focused on new presidents from 1981-2009; the second focused on coverage during 2009 and 2010.

⁵⁷ Stephen Farnsworth and S. Robert Lichter, “Network Television’s Coverage of the 2008 Presidential Election,” *American Behavioral Scientist*. 55, 4 (2011): 354-370. The Center for Media and Public Affairs, based at George Mason University in Virginia, was started by Lichter and his late wife, Dr. Linda Lichter, as a nonpartisan nonprofit that conducts scientific studies of news and entertainment media. See www.cmpa.com.

demagogue—onto the conservatives who dared to discuss Wright’s incendiary sermons.⁵⁸

Pew’s Compendium of Wright Coverage

Although not singularly focused on Wright, the Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism and Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life produced a study on how the media covered religion during the 2008 presidential campaign primary season, which matches the timeframe of this dissertation.⁵⁹ The Pew research offers perhaps the most thorough analysis to date of media coverage of Wright. Pew conducted a content analysis of religion stories produced between January 1, 2007, and April 30, 2008, by 48 news outlets from various media sectors, including newspapers, online, network television, cable television and radio. In an addendum to the study, the authors concluded that:

The press honed in on the words and actions of religious figures associated with (the candidates). What the press did not do, generally, was take those words to the next level, looking deeper into the candidates’ beliefs to examine how they influence their positions on issues and impact their policy decisions.⁶⁰

The Pew research provides some insight, but also falls short on some levels. Pew analyzed how religion figured into the overall presidential campaign coverage and offered summaries of how each candidate’s religion or religious views were covered and how the coverage was divided on a proportionate level. Religion-related

⁵⁸ Bernard Goldberg, *A Slobbering Love Affair: The True (and Pathetic) Story of the Torrid Romance Between Barack Obama and the Mainstream Media* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing Inc., 2009), 66-67.

⁵⁹ The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, “Running on Faith,” July 2008.

⁶⁰ Pew, “Pastor Problems,” 7.

coverage of Obama peaked in early 2008, according to the study, when videos surfaced of Wright making remarks about race in America that some deemed controversial. The study notes that Obama gave a speech on the subject of race and religion to try to place Wright in context, but most journalists covered the event as a story about race or politics instead of a story about religion. Pew's analysis found that only one out of every fifty stories about Obama's speech was framed using a distinctively religious angle. This pattern was characteristic of overall religion coverage, the study found.⁶¹ The study's authors noted that their findings "suggest a continuing discomfort among news organizations in tackling deep questions of how candidates' personal faith may influence their public leadership."⁶²

Despite these insights, Pew's study of campaign coverage of religion-related stories does not provide much context because it does not include a literature review of previous works examining coverage of religion, other than references to its own research that deals solely with religion coverage as part of presidential campaign coverage. The Pew study also did not offer detailed analysis of specific frames used in coverage of Wright and other candidates during the primary season when he was a major news subject; nor did it offer any breakdown of coverage by the specific publications, and the researchers did not integrate any type of theory to help explicate their findings.

⁶¹ Pew, "Running on Faith," 13.

⁶² *Ibid*, 3.

May and the Media Firestorm

Albert L. May, a former newspaper journalist and now associate professor of media and public affairs at George Washington University, produced a case study of the Wright coverage as a chapter in a bigger work examining strategies and tactics candidates used in the 2008 election.⁶³ His treatment of the topic might be classified as a history of the Wright story and its connection to the birth of what May called a “new ecosystem of communication” that essentially has eradicated media boundaries and significantly elevated the impact that video images broadcast on televisions as well as computers have on Americans. May credits Brian Ross, a chief investigative correspondent of ABC News, for igniting a media firestorm when he produced a three-minute report featuring snippets from several of Wright’s sermons that many viewers found highly objectionable a year after mostly print news organizations had reported about Wright’s black empowerment and anti-establishment views. In that intervening year, the story never made it to the three major television networks and essentially died out in all circles, except the conservative blogosphere and political talk shows on Fox News Channel.⁶⁴

May concluded that the broad base of coverage that followed Ross’ account reignited debate about race and religion among the American public and the media, essentially recasting Obama as a black candidate in the minds of some whites instead of a post-racial candidate who happened to be black. Moreover, the Ross/ABC

⁶³ Albert L. May, “[The Preacher and the Press: How the Jeremiah Wright Story Became the First Feeding Frenzy of the Digital Age](#),” in *Campaigning For President 2008, Strategy and Tactics, New Voices and New Techniques*, edited by Dennis W. Johnson, (New York: Routledge, 2009), 78-100.

⁶⁴ Sean Hannity, a political commentator whose *Hannity* show appears on the Fox Network, and Fran Eaton, an editor of the *Illinois Review*, were among conservatives mentioned prominently in May’s report, 78, 80, 83-84.

coverage demonstrated the role of such internet entities as YouTube, founded in 2005, “in amplifying the power of television.”⁶⁵ May sampled 406 videos of Wright that appeared on YouTube—barely a fifth of the total posted by August of 2008—and found that they had been viewed nearly 20 million times.⁶⁶ His analysis of coverage concluded that traditional journalists did most of the legwork on the story, but the internet amplification of cable news and talk show reports “made this media frenzy distinct from those of the past.” May further concluded that YouTube’s practice of replaying television news footage created a new media environment in 2008 that further eroded the influence of traditional media as gatekeepers and highlighted the increased polarity that exists among media outlets.

As an example of the increased polarity, May cited how Fox News Channel’s Sean Hannity included Wright in his programming five times more often than MSNBC’s Keith Olbermann, his liberal counterpart.⁶⁷ He also noted that several major newspapers and magazines had published detailed stories about Wright a year before Ross’ report, but never probed Wright’s rhetoric by examining his sermons, despite their digital availability to the public.⁶⁸ May identified the *Wall Street Journal* as the first newspaper to publish a story referencing videos of Wright—coverage that appeared three days before Ross’ coverage but was focused on whether Wright and other Trinity Church ministers were violating Internal Revenue Service guidelines that prohibit non-profits from endorsing political candidates.⁶⁹ According to May,

⁶⁵ May, “Preacher and Press,” 79

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 81.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 79-80.

⁶⁸ May, “Preacher and Press,” 80. *Rolling Stone*, *Chicago Tribune*, *The New York Times* and the Associated Press were mentioned as news sources of early reporting on Wright’s preaching and theology but with no detailed review of videotapes of his sermons.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 80.

“The *Washington Post* was missing in action to the point that its own ombudsman chided the newspaper.”⁷⁰

May’s study offers useful qualitative and quantitative analysis of traditional media and internet coverage of Wright’s statements labeled as controversial and objectionable by certain segments of the populace and media. But May worked primarily from a political prism rather than a religious one, inviting consideration of theory about the changing nature of the delivery of conflict- or controversy-driven news but failing to offer a comprehensive analysis of the news media’s coverage of Wright. In the end, May only provides limited insight into how traditional news media frame coverage of religion.

Herman and Peterson on *The Demonizing of Wright*

Edward S. Herman, a retired University of Pennsylvania Wharton School professor of finance who has written extensively on the political economy and the media, and David Peterson, a Chicago-based independent journalist and researcher, produced a narrative examination of news media coverage of Wright from March 2008 to the end of the Democratic presidential primaries in early June. They called the nation’s “political class and establishment media’s treatment” of Wright “the most brazen demonization in its history of a person based on his race, his creed, and his ties

⁷⁰ Deborah Howell, “The Post Was Late to Church,” *The Washington Post*, March 23, 2008, B06.

to a presidential candidate.”⁷¹ They also concluded that “this episode provides an outstanding illustration of this country’s racism, chauvinism, and political biases.”⁷²

Herman and Peterson based their conclusions on the sheer amount of reporting about Wright and Obama when compared to other ministers—the Reverends John Hagee, Rod Parsley and Pat Robertson—who had been linked to Republican presidential candidate John McCain. Their analysis of data collected from searches of “all sources” listed within the Factiva and NewsBank databases showed that over a 12-week period from early March to the end of May 2008, the proportion of coverage about Wright and Obama outweighed that of McCain and other ministers by ratios as low as 1.47 to 1 to as high as 39.7 to 1. The average for the entire period was 12.1 to 1.⁷³ Herman and Peterson also made note of what they called hostile language used almost exclusively in media reports to describe Wright, ranging from such terms as “rant” and “rave” to “crazy” and “divisive.” The particular issue of language is relevant to the present study, which proposes a textual analysis to define frames used in news media coverage of Wright. Herman and Peterson noted various instances in which the language used emanated from journalists and not from quotes or statements attributed to independent sources.⁷⁴

Herman and Peterson also analyzed how the news media focused its coverage on the falsity of information stated by Wright. They acknowledged that some of Wright’s statements struck them as false but argued that the ones that didn’t show the

⁷¹ Edward S. Herman and David Peterson, “Jeremiah Wright in the Propaganda System,” *Monthly Review*, Sept. 1, 2008, 1.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 1.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.* See Herman and Peterson’s discussion and statistical analysis of disparaging language directed at Wright by media representatives, 5-9.

United States in a negative light went largely ignored by the news media. One example was Wright's assertion during a PBS interview with Bill Moyers that Iraqi deaths from the United States war totaled between 100,000 to 200,000, figures that Herman and Peterson assert probably understate the Iraqi deaths by six to twelve times. "Despite the gravity of the topic, and what it means to Iraqis, Wright is as free as the rest of his fellow Americans to make mistakes of this kind," they write.⁷⁵ But Wright's suspicions about the United States government's role in the spread of HIV among African Americans drew much media criticism, they noted. Herman and Peterson recalled that when Wright was asked by reporters during his National Press Club appearance in April 2008 if he honestly believed what he had stated previously about the government's role in the spread of the virus, Wright stated that based on a number of things that had happened to black people in the United States, including the Tuskegee experiment, "I believe our government is capable of doing anything."⁷⁶

Herman and Peterson concluded that the news media's coverage of Wright showed that Wright had dared to make statements against the United States that are not permissible "within the circles of American Power" if one aspires to rise to any level of "power and privilege."⁷⁷ They note that very little media coverage dealt with accuracy of statements Wright made about the government's military policies; instead much of the coverage amounted to what Herman and Peterson dubbed "the savage dragging of Jeremiah Wright through the propaganda system" because it seemed to condemn Wright for not remaining silent about the nation's "flattering fictions."⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Herman and Peterson, "Wright in Propaganda," 10.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 10. See full statement made by Wright in National Press Club transcript.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 12.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 20.

Herman and Peterson's critique of news media coverage of Wright, like some other research, relied on anecdotal evidence to buttress some of their arguments that coverage of Wright reflects the media's propensity for racially tinged reporting. They posit that such reporting has been aimed other Democratic hopefuls over the years, including the Rev. Jesse Jackson and former Massachusetts governor Michael Dukakis.⁷⁹ Their analysis did not include a scholarly literature review, and some of their arguments appear impressionistic. One fact that is ignored in their critique is that many white Christians, ministers and scholars over time also have complained about uneven and unfair news media treatment.⁸⁰ Nevertheless, their work raises legitimate questions about the mainstream ethos of many journalists and what some scholars have pointed to as the mainstream press' tendency toward defending the American narrative as articulated by the nation's political elites. This tendency by the mainstream press to defend the established American narrative is seen by some scholars as being opposed to amplifying the free speech rights of individuals, especially those from marginalized groups. They say the mainstream press also often fails to critique the veracity of statements that might conflict with the nation's prevailing narrative.⁸¹ Herman and Peterson's critique of news media coverage supports the need for a comparative analysis of coverage from alternative press.

⁷⁹ Herman and Peterson. The authors argue that coverage of Wright is "reminiscent of how the media have swarmed around other Democratic hopefuls the past three decades, when the scent of vulnerability hung in the air," 3.

⁸⁰See Olasky, Buddenbaum, et al.

⁸¹ Smith argues that blacks who "utter racialized statements that are considered beyond the pale" are often censured while whites "remain abundantly free to engage in offensive racial utterances and hide behind an intent defense." See examples, 106-107. Stephen Mansfield assails the portrayal of Wright as the "crazy old uncle," arguing that he did not get a fair hearing because most journalists and pundits did not objectively examine whether some of his statements were true. See *The Faith of Barack Obama* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008), 147-155. The Hutchins Commission, which issued a report in 1947 on the social responsibilities of the press, noted that the news media were not expanding

Other Media Analysis

Other analyses of media coverage of Wright include one offered by Carl A. Grant and Shelby J. Grant, who raise similar questions about racial bias, asserting that African Americans “are aware that the media is a powerful force in the shaping and framing of issues.”⁸² The two men are brothers—Carl, a professor of education and former chair of Afro-American studies at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, has written extensively on multicultural and social justice education issues. Shelby is a founding member of Trinity United Church of Christ and a former Chicago public school teacher and principal with degrees in history and school administration. They concluded that the news media’s coverage of Wright amounted to an orchestrated attack on Wright, the Trinity Church congregation and the black church as a whole because much of it was “distorted” and effectively muted the voices of the many individuals whose religion was being reported about but who hardly ever were quoted.⁸³

Grant and Grant argued that the coverage raised serious questions about the standards of ethics and fairness that inform media practice. Their study purports to fill in some blanks by including responses and reactions to the news coverage collected from members of the Trinity Church through qualitative interviews. The authors end their study by stating that the “media firestorm” demonstrated a lack of interest in an

efforts to allow more people to express their ideas and opinions through the press. As such, the Commission challenged journalists to provide a forum for exchange of comments and criticism and to represent the various constituent groups in society. This challenge included safeguarding the liberties of individuals, which presumably would include free speech. See The Commission on Freedom of the Press, *A Free and Responsible Press* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1947). See also, <http://pressinamerica.pbworks.com/w/page/18360200/Hutchins%20Commission>.

⁸² Carl A. Grant and Shelby J. Grant, *The Moment: Barack Obama, Jeremiah Wright, and the Firestorm at Trinity United Church of Christ* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2013), 3.

⁸³ *Ibid*, xxi.

honest examination of Wright, the Trinity Church and Black Liberation Theology and consequently has characterized Wright as “Obama’s radical, anti-American pastor.” That, they add, undermines the nation’s call for “unity and diversity.”⁸⁴ Their study, presented in five chapters, is lauded by other African-American scholars for giving voice to marginalized and left-out individuals who were a critical part of the story.⁸⁵ But the study’s focus on race may oversimplify the problems with the news media’s coverage, especially since some journalists who were critical of Wright were themselves black.

Additional studies analyzed other aspects of the news media’s coverage of Wright that are noteworthy but not necessarily critical to the perspective of this present study. Kevin Healey, an assistant professor of communication at the University of New Hampshire, conducted an ethnographic content analysis of news media coverage in order to track what he called competing discourses of Jeremiah Wright and Sarah Palin, who was Sen. John McCain’s running mate. Healey’s study is an example of how scholars often have positioned Wright in their research as if he were a political figure.

Healey used ethnographic content analysis as advanced by David Altheide to help contextualize the coverage of Wright.⁸⁶ Healey concluded that on the whole Wright was cast as an “icon of fear” among white voters who had “little context for

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 158.

⁸⁵ In a section headlined “Praise for The Moment” published inside the book’s cover, laudatory comments by three black professors are featured for the work by Grant and Grant. They include Percy Bates, Professor of Education at the University of Michigan; Anthony Brown, associate professor of curriculum and instruction at the University of Texas at Austin; and Beverly M. Gordon, associate professor of curriculum studies and cultural foundations, at The Ohio State University.

⁸⁶ David Altheide, *Creating Fear: News and the Construction of Crisis* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2002), 17. Altheide argues that both the news media and various social control organizations have produced a discourse of fear that actually benefits their own interests; he uses what he calls “tracking discourse” to study the use of fear in media discourses.

understanding the black prophetic tradition or Obama's complex place within it."⁸⁷ He assigned failure to the news media for adopting the "existing white racial frame" of the issue that had been "selected and mobilized" by Obama's opponents, "even as they denied the controversy had anything to do with race."⁸⁸ Much of Palin's religious rhetoric was normalized, Healey concluded, because she was able to ultimately cast herself as one aligned with mainstream values.⁸⁹ Wright was not running for office, but Healey's analysis suggests the news media treated him as if he were, an observation supported by Wright's appearance and subsequent questioning at the National Press Club, as some scholars in this review have suggested.

Political Research

Brian D. McKenzie, an assistant professor of government and politics at the University of Maryland, examined the political impact that Wright's sermons had on the Democratic presidential primaries.⁹⁰ He tested claims made by commentators that the sermons would negatively impact Obama's chances by analyzing national survey data on how blacks and whites perceived the video snippets of Wright's sermons. McKenzie's analysis found that Wright's comments adversely affected the attitudes of whites toward Obama, causing some to question his ability to unify the nation. Blacks appeared not to be similarly affected, McKenzie said, because they had a better understanding of black theology and thus viewed Wright's statements

⁸⁷ Kevin Healey, "The Pastor in the Basement: Discourses of Authenticity in the Networked Public Sphere," *Symbolic Interaction*, 33, 4 (2010), 545.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ Brian D. McKenzie, "Barack Obama, Jeremiah Wright, and Public Opinion in the 2008 Presidential Primaries," *Political Psychology*, 32, 6 (2011), 943.

differently than did many whites. He concluded that unfavorable media reports hindered Obama's political momentum among white voters, suggesting that was one reason Obama could not solidify his lead over Clinton until summer 2008 when the Wright story had effectively died. McKenzie labeled the Wright coverage as a "litmus test of the prevailing racial climate during the campaign."⁹¹

Hannah Oliha, assistant professor of communication at the West Texas A&M University, examined what she identified as two prevalent socio-racial discourses that emerged in response to what she called the Jeremiah Wright media spectacle. One of those advanced the notion of racial transcendence while the other promoted color consciousness as a means of addressing ongoing racial oppression.⁹² Oliha examined these discourses by analyzing online posts on YouTube and the *Huffington Post* and found evidence to support three strains of thought: "racial scaffolding" should be critiqued and exposed by "speaking truth to power"; America has transcended race and those arguing likewise are unpatriotic and profane; African American claims of ongoing racism reflect ingratitude and are "anti-progress babble." Oliha argues that those competing discourses and the attendant commitments attached to them debunk any notions that the United States "has a unified national discourse on race" and consequently "unhinges the discourse of racial transcendence."⁹³

In addition to the studies already mentioned in this review, this researcher found two dissertations that focused on Wright's rhetoric and preaching style, and five others in which Wright is a secondary focus. Only one of these academic papers

⁹¹ *Ibid*, 957.

⁹² Hannah Oliha, "In love and war: racial disharmony and America's discordant racial articulations in the wake of the Jeremiah Wright media spectacle," *Journal of Multicultural Discourses*, Vol. 6, No. 3, November 2011, 257.

⁹³ *Ibid*, 268.

explored some aspect of news media coverage. Healey authored that particular document, which was a precursor of his previously cited article. Healey's dissertation examined, in part, how new media coverage of Wright demonstrated the role of traditional media sources in promoting debates about religious authenticity.⁹⁴

Media Commentary

A number of media critics weighed in on news coverage of Wright via commentaries and essays that, like much of the research already cited, do not meet strict empirical research standards. Nevertheless, their critiques offer insight into how some observers viewed the press' performance.

Kalefa Sanneh, writing for *The New Yorker*, concluded that through the lens of news media coverage Wright became not just a target for conservatives but liberals as well, a finding previously noted by Herman and Peterson. "There's no denying the intensity of the media barrage," Sanneh wrote. "In a bipartisan display of umbrage, commentators on television and online have largely agreed that Wright is nutty, or insane, or worse."⁹⁵ Political humorist Stephen Colbert lampooned the news media's coverage of Wright and calls for Obama to denounce him. "When it comes to renouncing, how far does one have to go before it is far enough?" Colbert asked. "Is it good enough to break out the Roget's and run through every synonym for 'reject'?"⁹⁶

Jon Stewart's "The Daily Show" satirized the media's coverage of Wright's remarks,

⁹⁴ Kevin Healey, "The spirit of networks: New media and the changing role of religion in American public life," (PhD diss., University of Illinois, 2011). Healey's study examined the intersection between traditional media, such as CNN, and new media, such as YouTube, in shaping public perceptions of religious figures, such as Wright.

⁹⁵ Kalefa Sanneh, "Annals of Religion: Project Trinity," *The New Yorker*, 4 April 2008. para. 8. Retrieved 2013-08-10.

⁹⁶ Jason Linkins, "Colbert Lampoons Media's Wright Obsession," *The Huffington Post*, 30 April 2008. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/04/30/colbert-lampoons-medias-w_n_99435.html. Retrieved 2013-08-10.

dubbing it on one occasion the “festival of Wrights.”⁹⁷ On another, he called it the “Reverending Story.” Stewart argued: “Whatever you want to say about the substance of what the reverend is saying – interpret it as you may – if I had had a rabbi who brought that much game, I wouldn’t have spent this Passover neck deep in a bacon and cheese croissant-wich.”⁹⁸

US Weekly news director Lara Cohen blasted the mainstream news media for being hypocritical in calling publications like hers supermarket tabloids because of their focus on celebrity gossip:

The true hallmark of sensationalized journalism is ginning up controversy to drive sales, and for the mainstream news media Wright was a tailor-made tabloid icon. With newspaper sales at record lows, network news ratings tanking and 24-hour news channels desperate to fill up all 24 hours, Wright’s outbursts were the mainstream media’s equivalent of Tom Cruise jumping on Oprah’s couch—a train wreck no one could turn away from. And so they milked it, regardless of the impact on the very race they were supposedly covering objectively.⁹⁹

Michael Stickings, a liberal blogger, accused the news media of making “much ado...over some inflammatory comments made by Wright.” He argued that some of Wright’s comments were not far off the mark. “The truth hurts,” Stickings concluded, referring to statements Wright made about the United States killing tens of thousands by bombing Japan, supporting “some rather nasty regimes throughout its history,” and making a connection between America’s foreign policy and the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Stickings noted that Osama bin Laden had noted the connection

⁹⁷ “Festival of Wrights.” *The Daily Show, Comedy Central*. <http://www.thedailyshow.com/watch/wed-april-30-2008/festival-of-wrights>.

⁹⁸ Jon Stewart Takes On Wright Coverage: “The Reverending Story,” *Huffingtonpost.com*, 7 May 2008. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/04/29/jon-stewart-takes-on-wright_n_99173.html. Retrieved 8-10-13.

⁹⁹ Lara Cohen, “Who Are You Calling a Tabloid?” *Huffington Post*, 5 May 2008. <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/news/reverend-jeremiah-wright/>

“quite clearly again and again.” He said the media’s coverage showed a “disturbing imbalance.”¹⁰⁰

Clarence E. Walker, distinguished professor of history at University of California – Davis, writes extensively on popular culture and the social and political history of the United States. Walker accused the news media and pundits of “wishful thinking” in the way Wright and the issues he raised were covered and talked about. He argued that many of these individuals were ready to announce prematurely the “demise of white hegemony.”¹⁰¹

Bernard William Bell, emeritus research professor of American and African American language, literature and culture at Pennsylvania State University, accused ABC News reporters Brian Ross and Rehab El-Buri of using a “sensational, fallacious statement” to open their March 13, 2008, report that ignited mainstream coverage of Wright’s sermons. Their opening line: “Sen. Barack Obama’s pastor says blacks should not sing ‘God Bless America’ but ‘God damn America.’” That reference was to an excerpt from the sermon titled “Confusing God and Government,” which Wright preached on April 13, 2003. Bell argued that Wright did not say blacks should sing “God damn America.” He also accused the largely white news media and political pundits of dismissing the historical context of the Black church by reducing Wright’s theology to “spliced controversial sound bites from his sermons.” Bell charged that Wright was “quoted repeatedly out of context” and called media coverage of the sound bites “yellow journalism,” which “fostered the false

¹⁰⁰ Michael J.W. Stickings, “Much Ado about Jeremiah Wright,” <http://the-reaction.blogspot.com/2008/03/much-ado-about-jeremiah-wright.html>. Retrieved 9/01/2013.

¹⁰¹ Clarence E. Walker, “‘We’re losing our country’: Barack Obama, Race & the Tea Party,” *Daedalus* (Winter 2011): 125.

impression that he is an unpatriotic, radical black separatist and racist bigot who deserves vilification and crucifixion.”¹⁰²

Sociologist and author Michael Eric Dyson argued that mainstream America had failed to understand the type of patriotism practiced by blacks, calling it a love of country that is “often far more robust and complicated than the lapel-pin nationalism some citizens swear by.” He pointed out that Wright was among the many blacks who have served in this nation’s military “even as they failed to reap the benefits of their sacrifice when they came home.” Dyson also said Wright’s criticisms of some American practices and policies should be read “as the bitter complaint of a spurned lover.”¹⁰³ He charged Wright’s critics with confusing nationalism with patriotism:

Nationalism is the uncritical support of one’s country regardless of its moral or political bearing. Patriotism is the affirmation of one’s country in light of its best values, including the attempt to correct it when it’s in error. Wright’s words are the tough love of a war-tested patriot speaking his mind—one of the great virtues of our democracy. The most patriotic thing his nation can do now is extend to him the same right for which he was willing to die.¹⁰⁴

Ari Fleischer, former White House Press Secretary to George W. Bush, rejected such arguments as well as criticisms of media coverage of Wright, saying “the issue wasn’t his patriotism. I’m sure he is a patriot, as he sees it. But the issue is his radicalism. The issue is that he has inspired a man who would be our president. . . . You talk about a moral compass that’s way off. He (Wright) is the farthest off of anybody I have heard.”¹⁰⁵ This particular argument of Fleischer’s is in line with one

¹⁰² Bernard William Bell, “President Barack Obama, the Rev. Dr. Jeremiah Wright, and the African American jeremiadic tradition,” *Massachusetts Review*. 50, 3 (2009): 333-334.

¹⁰³ Michael Eric Dyson, “Understanding Black Patriotism,” *TIME* magazine, Thursday, April 24, 2008. <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1734809,00.html>. Retrieved 9/1/13.

¹⁰⁴ Dyson, “Understanding Patriotism,” para. 8.

¹⁰⁵ Larry King Live, CNN, April 28, 2008.

<http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0804/28/Lkl.01.html>

of the enduring values—moderatism—that theorist Herbert Gans lists as an influence on how news is covered.¹⁰⁶

Stephen Thernstrom, a Harvard University history professor, and Abigail Thernstrom, a former senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute and vice-chair of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, dismissed complaints by Wright that the media’s coverage of him amounted to “an attack on the black church” launched by individuals who have no knowledge of the African American religious tradition. They concluded that Wright was not speaking for “mainstream black churches” and had done them a “gross disservice by claiming to do so.”¹⁰⁷ Both Thernstroms are white. They did not note that Wright received affirmation from other black church leaders as well as numerous white theologians associated with seminaries and schools of divinity.

A number of Wright’s supporters lamented what they called the media’s limited scope of coverage that focused on a few excerpts from Wright’s sermons while ignoring the overall body of his work. The Reverend Otis Moss III, who succeeded Wright as pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ, told ABC News that Wright had preached more than 200,000 minutes of Sunday sermons during his 36 years as Trinity’s pastor, and that count did not include midweek services, revivals and preaching engagements across the nation and around the world to what Moss called ecumenical and interfaith communities. “It is an indictment on Dr. Wright’s ministerial legacy to present his global ministry within a 15- or 30-second sound

¹⁰⁶ See Herbert J. Gans, *Deciding What's News: A Study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek, and Time* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1979), 51-52.

¹⁰⁷ Stephan Thernstrom and Abigail Thernstrom. “Examining the United Church of Christ,” May 6, 2008. http://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2008/05/examining_the_united_church_of.html

bite,” Moss posited.¹⁰⁸ The Rev. John H. Thomas, the general minister of the United Church of Christ denomination of which Wright’s former congregation is a member, said, “It saddens me to see news stories reporting such a caricature of a congregation that has been such a blessing to the UCC’s Wider Church mission.”¹⁰⁹

As previously noted, these analyses, couched in commentary, are not based on empirical studies. Indeed, much of the research produced on the media’s coverage of Wright suffered from the same shortcoming. But the limited amount of scholarly research that has been examined here makes a case for looking at the news media’s coverage of Wright in the present study.

Supplementing Available Resources

The lack of media scholarship on the Wright conflict perhaps should not be unexpected, especially given the relatively short period of time that has passed since the Wright event happened. Craig Flournoy noted in his 2003 Louisiana State University dissertation analyzing the media’s coverage of the civil rights movement that he was unable to find a scholarly examination of many of the important events that occurred during the movement in the 1950s and 1960s. The omissions included the Montgomery bus boycott, the Freedom Rides, the Birmingham campaign or major integration stories in Little Rock, at the University of Alabama and University of Mississippi. Flournoy also reported that he was unable to find a single in-depth scholarly examination of media coverage of the entire movement. His work, which he

¹⁰⁸ Michael James, “Obama’s Church Blames Media,”
<http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics/2008/03/obamas-church-b/>

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid*, para. 4.

undertook roughly four decades after the peak of the civil rights movement, quoted a number of researchers lamenting the paucity of scholarship examining the media's coverage and influence on the movement.¹¹⁰ Since Flournoy's study, two former newspaper editors-turned-college-professors—Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff—have chronicled the role the press played in bringing the civil rights struggle to the forefront of the nation's attention, including a thorough examination of the black press' contributions to the civil rights movement. Roberts and Klibanoff were lauded for their work, receiving the 2007 Pulitzer Prize for History.¹¹¹

The present study seeks to add to the scholarly analysis of media coverage of Wright by employing an approach similar to the comparative analyses done by both Flournoy, and Roberts and Klibanoff. The present study's effort to provide a more comprehensive and contextualized perspective on the coverage of Wright includes two other strains of research that seem relevant for this review and offer some linkages to and expansions on the perspectives already highlighted. One is the body of work that generally has explored how news media frame religion issues in the United States; the other is more specifically directed at how the news media have tended to cover religion that deviates from mainstream notions of civil religion.

Religion Coverage Issues

Rick Clifton Moore, a religion and media scholar based at Boise State University, noted that numerous studies of the news media's coverage of religion

¹¹⁰ Craig Flournoy, "Reporting the Movement in Black and White: The Emmett Till Lynching and the Montgomery Bus Boycott," (PhD diss., Louisiana State University, 2003). Flournoy's textual analysis found that the black media outperformed *The New York Times* and other mainstream media in coverage of these issues.

¹¹¹ See Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff, *The Race Beat: the Press, the Civil Rights Struggle, and the Awakening of a Nation* (New York: Knopf, 2006).

highlight long-held concerns about media bias and secularization in the development of stories. These include works by Buddenbaum, 1986; Dart & Allen, 1993; Hart, Turner, & Knupp, 1981; Hynds, 1987; Maus, 1990; Mowery, 1995; Nordin, 1975.¹¹² In their investigation of 648 religion sections appearing in *Time* magazine between 1947 and 1976, Roderick P. Hart, Kathleen J. Turner and Ralph E. Knupp used, for instance, what they described as “content-analytic procedures” to examine how American religion had been defined, described and given “social reality.” They concluded that religion had been depicted as a “conflict-ridden human enterprise.” They also pointed out denominational stereotypes and geographical biases and found that portrayals of religion differed “sharply from demographic and sociological facts.”¹¹³

As a result of such studies, there has been a widely held view among scholars that the news media routinely use negative frames in their coverage of traditional religious institutions, thereby contributing to the antipathy that many Americans are thought to feel toward organized and institutional religious movements.¹¹⁴ Some scholars have long argued that the root cause of what they deem to be poor reporting on religion by the news media is actually a result of the profession’s ignorance of the subject matter.¹¹⁵ This claim of press ignorance about religion, which surfaced often during the coverage of Wright, was voiced by a chorus of complainers who largely

¹¹² Rick Clifton Moore, “Religion and Topoi in the News: An Analysis of the ‘Unsecular Media’ Hypothesis.” *Journal of Media and Religion*, 2, 1 (2003): 49. The works referred to are listed in the bibliography of this dissertation.

¹¹³ Kathleen J. Turner and Ralph E. Knupp. “Religion and the Rhetoric of the Mass Media,” *Review of Religious Research*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (Summer 1980), 256-275.

¹¹⁴ Moore, “Religion and Topoi,” 49. See also Silk, *Unsecular Media*, 38.

¹¹⁵ See Judith Buddenbaum, “An analysis of religion news coverage in three major newspapers,” *Journalism Quarterly*, 63 (1986): 600-606. See also Stewart M. Hoover and Knut Lundby, *Rethinking Media, Religion and Culture* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1997), 15-17.

were different from those who had been raising the issue in past decades. Some researchers went beyond talking about ignorance to conclude that the secular news media are biased against religious groups.

Marvin Olasky, a conservative scholar who holds the distinguished chair in journalism and public policy at Patrick Henry College, is among a relative small band of journalism critics who posit that American news media on the whole are guilty of bias against institutionalized mainstream religions.¹¹⁶ His argument grows out of a broader cultural perspective advanced by conservative scholars and pundits who contend that the United States was founded as a Christian nation but has long since abandoned its core heritage for a secularist world view that often holds religion, and Christianity in particular, with some degree of disdain. To support his arguments for anti-Christian bias, Olasky cites examples of the kinds of stories the mainstream press covers while also citing examples of potential stories that are not covered. He argues that the more damning the story would be deemed to Christianity, the more likely the press would be to cover it.¹¹⁷ Olasky contends that stories about scandals involving television evangelists, such as the lavish lifestyles of the Rev. Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker, became a staple of major mainstream media coverage at a time when Olasky and others in his camp had hoped a federal judge's ruling about the prevalence of secular humanism in Alabama school books would impact the way journalists thought about covering religion.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ See Olasky bio at <http://www.phc.edu/MNOlasky.php>

¹¹⁷ Marvin N. Olasky, 1988. *Prodigal press: the anti-Christian bias of the American news media*. Westchester, Ill: Crossway Books, xii.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid*, xiii

A review of the literature shows that a growing number of scholars have been inclined to acknowledge the Christian roots of American journalism or at least the early presence of Christian practitioners in the field of journalism. With that has come a charge that journalism is another example of secular humanism's grasp on America—that is the belief in the existence of a prevailing worldview based on the Enlightenment Age notion of progress instead of faith in a supreme being.¹¹⁹

Historian Doug Underwood's book traces the evolution of the U.S. news media from a distinctively Christian perspective to a distinctively secular one. He cites the example of a *Philadelphia Inquirer* religion reporter as the prototype of what some critics considered problematic about the state of religion reporting by American news media. The journalist in question was seen as “secular in orientation, implicitly anti-church establishment in outlook, and interested in covering religion only when it involves the bizarre, the entertaining, or the shocking.”¹²⁰

Underwood is among those who believe the seeds of the antipathy that characterize the reviews generated by religiously oriented press critics were sown by a 1980 survey of 238 journalists in so-called elite media positions. The survey, conducted by S. Robert Lichter, Stanley Rothman and Linda S. Lichter, found that 86 percent of the respondents said they seldom or never attended religious services and half reported no religious affiliation.¹²¹ Underwood and other critics have accused the media of not understanding religious matters and covering stories only when they can

¹¹⁹ See Wm. David Sloan, *Media and Religion in American History* (Northport, AL: Vision Press, 2000).

¹²⁰ Doug Underwood, *From Yahweh to Yahoo: The Religious Roots of the Secular Press* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 130.

¹²¹ S. Robert Lichter, Stanley Rothman and Linda S. Lichter, *The Media Elite* (Bethesda, MD: Adler & Adler, 1986), cited in Underwood, 131.

be sensationalized. “A common critique is that three impulses tend to motivate journalists when covering religious issues: ignorance, indifference, or downright hostility,” Underwood concluded.¹²²

Some, however, have criticized the Lichter-Rothman-Lichter survey sample as too limited to draw a general view of journalists because it focused on journalists in two markets—New York City and Washington, D.C., where religion is not as strongly practiced as in some other parts of the nation. Subsequent studies have yielded results that suggest journalists are not as out of step with religion as many might have presumed. A 1992 study by Indiana University researchers David H. Weaver and G. Cleveland Wilhoit found that almost three-fourths of the more than 1,400 journalists they surveyed claimed that religion was either very important or somewhat important in their personal lives.¹²³ In 1993, a study commissioned by the Freedom Forum found similar results among the 99 religion news reporters and 266 editors it surveyed.¹²⁴ However, the study found that the answers of journalists responding to the survey greatly differed from those of some 549 clergy who also offered responses to questions about whether the media was biased against ministers and organized religion. Clergy overwhelmingly agreed that the media were either very or somewhat biased, with 58 percent of the mainline Protestants, 70 percent of Catholics, and 91 percent of conservative Protestant clergy saying so. In contrast, 62

¹²² Stewart M. Hoover, *Religion in the News: Faith and Journalism in American Public Discourse* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage), 56.

¹²³ David H. Weaver and G. Cleveland Wilhoit, *The American Journalist in the 1990s: U.S. News People at the End of an Era* (Mahway, N.J.: Erlbaum, 1996), 13-15.

¹²⁴ John Dart and Jimmy Allen, *Bridging the Gap: Religion and the News Media* (Nashville: The Freedom Forum First Amendment Center at Vanderbilt University, 1993), 39.

percent of the journalists disagreed, with about 42 percent of the editors and 37 percent of the reporters strongly disagreeing.¹²⁵

Underwood points out a dearth of research that probes the relationship between what journalists state as their religious values and how their views influence or show up in the work they produce. He argues that media critics often “pigeonhole journalists” and make generalizations about their religious orientations that force them into such fairly simplistic categories as “believer or non-believer, Christian or agnostic, spiritualist or secularist.”¹²⁶ Underwood contends that media critics will then use those categories as they draw conclusions about coverage that they rarely study empirically.¹²⁷

In the past decade, there have been additional voices arguing that the American news media’s coverage of religion falls short on various fronts because journalists often lack understanding of many of the major religions’ tenets and show little urgency for a need to learn more. In a 2009 compilation of essays about American journalism’s ongoing failings to adequately report on religion, Paul Marshall wrote that journalists often miss or misreport news stories in which religion is a major theme because “they do not take religion seriously, or misunderstand religion when they do take it seriously.”¹²⁸

Others writers represented in that particular volume echo the sentiment, particularly as it relates to news stories that are generally framed as political in nature. In fact, Harvard University religion research scholars Timothy Samuel Shah and

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 36-37.

¹²⁶ Underwood, *From Yahweh*, 131.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

¹²⁸ Paul Marshall, Lela Gilbert, and Roberta Green Ahmanson, *Blind Spot: When Journalists Don’t Get Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 3.

Monica Duffy Toft argue that much of the global political rancor that finds its way into news coverage is at its core what they call “prophet-driven politics.” By this they mean that religious thinking and convictions are often driving the conflicts that surface between various political powers, but the reportage seldom goes far enough to help the public understand the significance and particularities of religion’s impact—because coverage tends to echo the thoughts and feelings of key U.S. political leaders.¹²⁹

Others have argued that U.S. journalists often are out of step with the role that religion plays in politics right here at home. This disconnect may occur because journalists too often dismiss the significance religion plays in the lives of people. One explanation for underestimating the role of religion is that too few journalists have discovered how to manage the media industry’s tendency to be skeptical of individual experiences that cannot be objectified. Roy Peter Clark, a senior Poynter Institute scholar, wrote and stated in interviews after the 2004 presidential election that he just did not understand why so many evangelicals sided with George W. Bush over Sen. John Kerry, thereby returning Bush to the White House despite what he called “a bumbling war and a stumbling economy.” Clark launched his own personal campaign for answers. Clark concluded that journalists needed to acknowledge that they often miss the religion story or get it wrong if they ever expected to improve their coverage.¹³⁰ Observations of Clark and others reflect arguments advanced by critics of the media’s coverage of Wright during the 2008 election. Like much of the

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 27-28.

¹³⁰ Terry Mattingly, “Getting Religion in the Newsroom,” in *Blind Spot*, 143-145. See Roy Peter Clark, “Confessions of an Alienated Journalist: How One Journalist Sees—or Doesn’t See—the World,” PoynterOnline, Nov. 4, 2004, http://www.poynter.org/content/content_view.asp?id=73946.

literature cited earlier in this review, many of these contributions are rooted largely in anecdotal observations.

Religion Coverage: News Values

In an article assessing whether changes made in newspaper coverage of religion actually reflected concerns raised by industry leaders and scholars during the 1990s, Fred Vultee, Stephanie Craft and Matthew Velker point to a 2006 study by P.J. Shoemaker and A.A. Cohen that “identified deviance and social significance as the key predictors of newsworthiness,”¹³¹ factors that had remained consistent over time. As noted by Fleischer, Jeremiah Wright was viewed as a “radical” whose moral compass was out of step with the mainstream. Healey argued that Palin managed to escape similar criticism because she was able to sell herself as being in line with mainstream values. Wright and his supporters might argue that aligning with the mainstream is not part of the mission of individuals hailing from what they call the prophetic preaching tradition. In fact, part of their task would be to unapologetically critique the mainstream. Some scholars have examined news media coverage of religious movements that clash with mainstream sensibilities and generally conclude the results do not favor the religious movements. Vultee, Craft and Velker note an ongoing weakness in the literature—that being the fact that “systematic content analysis has been less common” in works by scholars and critics studying media and

¹³¹ Fred Vultee, Stephanie Craft and Matthew Velker, “Faith and Values: Journalism and the Critique of Religion Coverage of the 1990s,” *Journal of Media and Religion*, 9 (2010): 150-151. See P.J. Shoemaker and A.A. Cohen. *News around the world: Content, Practitioners and the public*. (New York: Routledge, 2006).

religion coverage in contrast to other subjects. Instead, they have tended to rely more heavily on anecdotal evidence and other less scientific indicators.¹³²

Stuart A. Wright, a sociologist and director of research programs at Lamar University, analyzed research on media coverage of what he called unconventional or minority religious faiths—referring not to race but to lack of prominence and prevalence of the religion’s practice and acceptance within mainstream culture. He noted that news media coverage of such groups has been deemed by scholars to be “inflammatory, distorted, and infused with disparaging stereotypes.”¹³³ He added that growing numbers of scholars have accused the news media of producing reports that help to promote a “particularly sinister” view of religious perspectives that veer away from the so-called mainstream norm as if they are “intrinsically pathological or harmful to both their own members and society.”¹³⁴

Stuart A. Wright further highlights six factors that he believes contributes to media bias in coverage of minority religions. Among these factors is what he calls the “degree of cultural accommodation” shown by the religious group that is in the media’s spotlight. He argues it could be hypothesized that “bias increases as the social location of the group moves from center to periphery.”¹³⁵ This argument harkens back to Gans’ enduring value of moderatism. Stuart A. Wright also points out how the journalists’ sources influence the tone of the narratives they produce about groups. He cited reports about so-called cults in which journalists relied on self-described cult experts who were largely connected to what he called “anti-cult

¹³² Vultee, Craft and Velker, “Faith and Values,” 151.

¹³³ Stuart A. Wright, “Media Coverage of Unconventional Religion: Any ‘Good News’ For Minority Faiths,” *Review of Religious Research*, Vol. 39, No. 2 (December, 1997), 101.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 104-105.

organizations.” These “cult experts” usually were presented in press reports as “educational” sources or experts. He also argued that these experts are permitted to “disseminate to news reporters unsubstantiated, distorted, and misleading information regarding new religions.”¹³⁶

“Unfavorable” reporting on religious groups or individuals seen as being on the fringe of mainstream ideologies led Stuart A. Wright to cite work by former University of North Carolina sociologist Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda of Hebrew University. These researchers show evidence that the press has played a significant role in developing what they call “moral panics.” According to Stuart A. Wright, “Stories can be distorted, exaggerated and then repeated, fomenting collective anxiety and fear which contribute, in extreme situations, to destructive actions...”¹³⁷

A “moral panic” is described as an “extreme collective social response,” or what some would call an overreaction to phenomena usually deemed terrifying or seen by members of the dominant culture’s elite groups as a threat to the social order. Some sociologists describe a “moral panic” as a tactic or device employed by elites to detour public attention away from “underlying social problems” and to justify increased scrutiny and control over “potentially rebellious segments of society.”¹³⁸ British sociologist Amanda Rohloff and New Zealand researcher Sarah Wright note that celebrated sociologist Stanley Cohen argued that moral panics become full blown as the nature of threatening or rebellious groups is “presented in a stylized and

¹³⁶ Stuart A. Wright, “Unconventional Religion,” 106.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 104.

¹³⁸ See Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda. *Moral panics: The Social Construction of Deviance*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 24-25. See also Marsha Jones and Emma Jones, *Mass Media: Skills-Based Sociology* (London: Macmillan, 1999).

stereotypical fashion by the mass media” and “the moral barricades are manned” by journalists, politicians and other “right-thinking people.”¹³⁹ Cohen is largely credited with the development of this theory.

Other scholars have conducted studies of religious deviance and media coverage of it. Scholars tend to use such terms as “new” or “minority” religions interchangeably to describe those movements seen as outside of the mainstream. Harvey Hill, John Hickman and Joel McLendon of Berry College in Georgia conducted a quantitative content analysis of two elite national newspapers (*The New York Times* and *Washington Post*) and three wire services (the Associated Press, Reuters News Service, and State News Service) to study religion-themed coverage of news related to the onset of the 21st century. This beginning of a new century was referred to as the “new millennium.” The researchers found that the “more mainstream religious groups” were “typically described in neutral or favorable terms,” while “new religious movements” were “consistently described in pejorative language.”¹⁴⁰

John Dart, a former longtime religion news reporter for the *Los Angeles Times* and now news editor of the *Christian Century*, which is one of the publications examined in this present study, noted in an essay responding to criticism of news reporting on religion that “poor choices and ignorance have harmed news coverage in the past.” Dart went on to note that critics often failed to understand “the dynamics of

¹³⁹ Amanda Rohloff and Sarah Wright, “Moral Panic and Social Theory: Beyond the Heuristic,” *Current Sociology*, 58, 3 (2010): 403-419. See Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (Herts: Paladin, 1972).

¹⁴⁰ Harvey Hill, John Hickman, and Joel McLendon, “Cults and Sects and Doomsday Groups, Oh My: Media Treatment of Religion on the Eve of the Millennium,” *Review of Religious Research*, 43, 1 (2001): 24-38.

how the newsroom collects, interprets and produces information.”¹⁴¹ Dart said religious groups or individuals often are categorized as either “conventional” or “unconventional” based on how they align with mainstream values. He noted that religion reporters at newspapers often report to editors who promote news “filters, which may favor a politically correct view or familiar pattern invoking acceptable cultural themes.”¹⁴² As a result, unconventional religious groups and individuals often do not make the news until something is alleged to have gone wrong, Dart said, adding that some events also are typically treated as unimportant until a news medium reports a factor that “demonstrates new and compelling elements.” A flood of coverage then may ensue—as it did in the case of the Jeremiah Wright controversy once video clips of his sermons surfaced in network news reports. Such coverage may warrant criticism if the coverage “tends to hew to a narrowly defined storyline, despite alternative interpretations that could be reported,” Dart concluded.¹⁴³

Looking Forward

The past decade has seen an increase in studies that have examined how specific religious issues were framed in news media coverage. A number of these studies will be highlighted in the next chapter, which focuses on theory. However, this literature review demonstrates that to date very few studies have even attempted to examine in any significant detail the news media’s coverage of the Rev. Jeremiah Wright during the 2008 election. Those that have addressed this topic typically have

¹⁴¹ John Dart, “Covering Conventional and Unconventional Religion: A Reporter’s View,” *Review of Religious Research*, Vol. 39, No. 2, Special Issue: Mass Media and Unconventional Religion (December, 1997), 150. The *Christian Century* promotes itself as a biweekly periodical for “mainline Protestants and others with a progressive approach to faith.” See <http://www.christiancentury.org/>

¹⁴² Dart, “Unconventional Religion,” 145

¹⁴³ *Ibid*, 145

not relied on empirical research to analyze the frames used by the news media. The refrain throughout this review has been that many critics and scholars have relied heavily on anecdotal evidence to support their arguments about the coverage of Wright. Few have conducted scholarly research. In total, this researcher found roughly two dozen works that have focused on Wright as a primary subject but media coverage of him is not the primary concern in most of those works. Despite a flood of research on Obama, very little attention has been devoted to how the media framed their coverage of Wright or his relationship with Obama. Instead, much of the emphasis has been on how Wright emerged as a political liability to Obama, and even then the amount of work on that subject is not necessarily voluminous.

Questions remain about whether the news media framed their coverage of Wright in fair and balanced ways that demonstrate progress has been made in how religious issues and figures are covered. The opposite conclusion would be that patterns of secular bias remain evident in mainstream coverage and Wright became a casualty of it.

This need for research on coverage of Jeremiah Wright seems a somewhat ironic outcome in light of the amount of coverage devoted to Wright during the 2008 campaign, and in light of observations about problems with media coverage that surfaced during the course of the campaign. Matthew S. Hedstrom, a University of Virginia historian specializing in religion and culture, argues that “detailed theological questions” were posed to candidates during the 2008 presidential campaign. However, he also concludes that “too much of the public conversation about religion in the United States follows predictable patterns,” which includes

“downplaying the magnitude of religious diversity, and, worst of all, following the common journalistic and academic tendency to think of religion as primarily the continuation of politics by other means, and people of faith as either saints or fanatics.”¹⁴⁴ This researcher finds Hedstrom’s assumption interesting in light of pronouncements by leading religion and media scholars that the ways the news media frame coverage of religion “determines the types of information that ultimately contribute to the public opinion about particular religions.”¹⁴⁵ This dissertation will examine how selected news organizations did, in fact, frame their coverage of Rev. Jeremiah Wright, from whence did those frames originate and whether the patterns suggest signs of progress or stagnation in how the press covers religious issues and figures.

¹⁴⁴ Matthew S. Hedstrom. “Seeing Religion Happen in the Other America,” *American Quarterly*, Vol. 61, No. 1, (March 2009), 163.

¹⁴⁵ Stout and Buddenbaum, “Media, Religion and Framing,” 1.

Chapter 3: The Wright Context

Rev. Jeremiah Wright: Pastor, Preacher, Prophetic Theologian

When the first images of Jeremiah Wright's seemingly angry preaching against whites were broadcast on Fox News, most Americans were wondering, 'Why would he say such things about America? It seems so unchristian and unpatriotic.' To understand this, as one of my professors used to quip, 'Context is our friend.'¹⁴⁶

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For a few months in 2008, the Rev. Jeremiah A. Wright Jr. came to be identified as would-be President Barack Obama's dirty little secret after millions of Americans were introduced to Wright via news reports spotlighting portions of sermons in which he rebuked the United States for generally accepted political and cultural practices that Wright declared were not pleasing to God. The statements "sparked outrage in large sections of the United States," observed Clarence E. Walker and Gregory D. Smithers, two political historians who penned a book about Wright's relationship to Obama.¹⁴⁷ But Wright, his religion and his style of declaring it had been widely popular in churches and academic circles for many years before journalists in mainstream news media outlets began focusing significant coverage on him and asking questions about his thoughts and beliefs because then Sen. Obama, who was one of his congregants, had declared his candidacy for the presidency of the United States.

¹⁴⁶ Anthony B. Bradley, *Liberating Black Theology: The Bible and the Black Experience in America* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 35.

¹⁴⁷ Clarence E. Walker and Gregory D. Smithers, *The Preacher and The Politician* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2009), 13.

This chapter seeks to provide an overview of Wright, his theology and his preaching style before and beyond the 2008 coverage that largely will be the focus on this present study. It is intended to review the frames Wright and others have used to define Wright and his ministry. These frames ultimately will provide a context for exploring the frames of the news media outlets whose coverage will form the core of this study's analysis.

Who is Rev. Jeremiah A. Wright Jr.?

Wright, who served as senior pastor of the Trinity United Church of Christ on Chicago's South Side for 36 years before retiring in 2008, was born in 1941 to a Philadelphia, Pa., schoolteacher mother and a Baptist preacher father, for whom he is named. Wright has one sibling, LaVerne, who is seventeen months older and served as his example in all things, as did his parents. He grew up with the nickname "Buddy." Wright noted that his sister "pushed me to be the best student I could be...She held me to a standard of excellence for which I will always be grateful."¹⁴⁸ His family lived in Philadelphia's Germantown area, which was considered a mixed-raced middle-class neighborhood at that time.¹⁴⁹

It was there that Wright was afforded an education at Central High School, considered one of the city's most prominent and academically rigorous institutions. About 90 percent of the student body was white and many of the students went on to college. Entertainer Bill Cosby—who is four years older than Wright—is among

¹⁴⁸ Jeremiah A. Wright Sr., *The Pilgrimage of a Pastor* (Morristown, NJ: Aaron Press, Publishers, 1989), 136. In his autobiography, Wright's father recalls how LaVerne always felt that Jeremiah Jr, whom the family called Buddy, was her responsibility. "On their way to school, when he would lag behind, her famous saying was, 'Come on Buddy'." See also Rev. Dr. Jeremiah A. Wright Jr., acknowledgements to *A Sankofa Moment: The History of Trinity United Church of Christ* (Dallas, TX: Saint Paul Press, 2010), x.

¹⁴⁹ Walker and Smithers, *The Preacher and The Politician*, 24.

famous people to attend the school, though he did not ultimately graduate from it, transferring instead to Germantown High School, which was more racially mixed.¹⁵⁰ When Wright graduated from Central High in 1959, the 211th class yearbook lauded him as “the epitome of what Central endeavors to imbue in its students,” citing his outgoing personality and involvement in numerous extra-curricular activities, such as junior varsity football, band and orchestra. “Always ready with a kind word, Jerry is one of the most congenial members of the 211. His record in Central is a model for lower class [younger] members to emulate,” the yearbook description said.¹⁵¹

Wright left home to attend Virginia Union University in Richmond, where his grandfather and father had studied and earned undergraduate degrees before both earned Master of Divinity degrees from the university’s seminary. Wright’s father also earned a Master of Sacred Theology degree from Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. His mother, who also graduated from Virginia Union, earned a master’s degree from the University of Chicago before she turned 19 years old. She later earned a master’s and doctorate in education from the University of Pennsylvania.¹⁵² She was the first black teacher at Germantown High and at Philadelphia High School for Girls, where she eventually became vice principal. Wright’s father served as pastor of Germantown’s Grace Baptist Church for more than four decades.¹⁵³ A review of newspaper content found that Wright’s father was mentioned in a 1935 *Chicago Defender* story as a member of the Virginia Union

¹⁵⁰ Ronald Kessler, “Obama’s Rev. Wright Mythology,” *Newsmax*, April 13, 2008, paras. 6-8, accessed August 22, 2013, <http://www.newsmax.com/PrintTemplate.aspx?nodeid=323417>.

¹⁵¹ Central High School yearbook verbiage pertaining to Wright is found in accounts by Kessler, “Obama’s Rev. Wright Mythology,” paras. 10-11, and Walker and Smithers, *The Preacher and The Politician*, 24.

¹⁵² “Life, Love and Legacy: Rev. Jeremiah A. Wright Jr.,” www.jeremiahwright.com, accessed August 22, 2013, <http://jeremiahwright.com/about/>

¹⁵³ Walker and Smithers, *The Preacher and The Politician*, 24.

University dramatic ensemble which was honored for one of its performances.¹⁵⁴

More than six decades later, a *Philadelphia Inquirer* writer concluded his entertainment news column by mentioning a celebration planned for the elder Wright. This column cited the prominence in preaching circles accorded to the younger Wright:

One of our city's most venerable pastors, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright Sr. of Grace Baptist Church in Germantown, is getting a 90th birthday bash from his church tomorrow. He was pastor there for 42 years, as well as an author, community activist and the father of one of the top-rated preachers in the country, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright Jr., now of Chicago. It being Father's Day, the junior Wright is expected to be there for Dad tomorrow as well.¹⁵⁵

Jeremiah Wright Jr.'s path to the pastorate was interrupted by a tour of military service. He left Virginia Union in 1961, without a degree, to initially become a Marine. He later joined the United States Navy, where he served as part of a medical team that cared for President Lyndon Johnson after his surgery. When he left the military in 1967, Wright enrolled at Howard University in Washington, D.C., eventually earning both bachelor's and master's degrees in English. He left Washington for Chicago, where he enrolled and earned a Master of Arts in the History of Religions from the University of Chicago Divinity School. Wright later earned a Doctor of Ministry degree from the United Theological Seminary in Dayton, Ohio, where one of his major professors was the Rev. Dr. Samuel DeWitt Proctor, a

¹⁵⁴ "Va. Union Students Win Honors in Play," *The Chicago Defender*, May 19, 1935, 4.

¹⁵⁵ Thomas J. Brady, "Leno Changes Prize To Please Auction Crowd," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, June 19, 1999, (See subhead "Happy Father's Day", accessed August, 22, 2013, http://articles.philly.com/1999-06-19/entertainment/25499955_1_special-olympics-schwarzenegger-and-shriver-eunice-kennedy-shriver).

celebrated pastor and educator who had counted among his students the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.¹⁵⁶

The divinity school at Virginia Union University is now named for Proctor as is a non-profit conference of religious leaders comprising “a cross section of progressive African American faith leaders and their congregations in the United States,” who are devoted to continuing the faith community’s engagement in social justice issues. The group was organized in 2003 with Jeremiah A. Wright Jr. as one of its three founders and “seeks to strengthen the individual and collective capacity of thought leaders and activists in the church, academy and community through education, advocacy, and activism.”¹⁵⁷

Wright’s Church and Theology

Long before Wright had earned the reputation as “one of the top-rated preachers in the country,”¹⁵⁸ he began his ministry in 1972 at Trinity United Church of Christ, which was founded in 1961 and with just 87 members was at the time of his appointment still struggling to grow and searching for its own sense of purpose and direction. In one of the five books that he has authored to date, Wright stated that he was fortunate to have come from good stock. He credited his father’s ministry for teaching him all he needed to know about being a pastor:

¹⁵⁶ Walker and Smithers, *The Preacher and The Politician*, 25.

¹⁵⁷ See Samuel DeWitt School of Theology at www.vuu.edu/samuel_dewitt_proctor_school_of_theology.aspx. See also “About Us,” Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference, accessed August 22, 2013, <http://sdpcconference.info/about-us/>.

¹⁵⁸ See Brady, “Leno Changes Prize,” D11.

His model of ministry also gave me the paradigm that I tried to follow for thirty-six years as the Pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ. My mother, being the financial secretary of our church, taught me church administration when I was still a teenager. I owe them a debt I can never repay.¹⁵⁹

Wright said his association with the United Church of Christ represented a departure from his roots but ultimately a connection with a tradition that came to define much of his theology and preaching. The predominantly white United Church of Christ denomination, often referred to as UCC, is the result of a merger of four denominations, including two—the Congregational and Christian churches—that had long histories of involvement with people of African descent through the Abolitionist movement and two—the Evangelical and Reformed churches—that had none. The UCC had a number of predominantly black congregations in Chicago, but Wright noted that they typically had “worship styles that were similar to the Congregational Church of New England,” which had Puritan roots and was credited with the founding of Harvard, Yale and even historically black Howard University:

The Congregational church’s commitment to Africans, to the Anti-Slavery Movement, to the Abolitionist Movement, and to the plight of Africans in the United States is one of the outstanding aspects of Congregationalism . . . Not all white members of the Congregational church were believers in equality for Africans, however.¹⁶⁰

A number of African-American religion scholars offer thorough accounts of how white missionary associations founded schools and colleges to provide education to freed blacks and newly emancipated slaves.¹⁶¹ Most of the schools, which

¹⁵⁹ Jeremiah A. Wright Jr., *A Sankofa Moment*, ii.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁶¹ See Joyce Hollyday, *On the Heels of Freedom: The American Missionary Association’s Bold Campaign to Educate Minds, Open Hearts, and Heal the Soul of a Divided Nation* (New York, NY: The Crossroad Publishing Co., 2005); Leroy Fitts, *A History of Black Baptists* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1985); E.C. Morris, *The Baptist Tradition: Sermons, Addresses and Reminiscences and Important Correspondence* (New York: Arno Press, 1980); A.W. Pegues, *Our Baptist Ministers and Schools* (New York: Johnson Reprint Corp., 1970).

represented various denominations, were staffed and administered by whites until the early 1900s when blacks gradually began to “assume responsibilities in these important areas.”¹⁶² Those same associations also helped found predominantly black congregations within their denominations. Wright posits that “mission” schools founded by white missionaries from the Congregational Church were pivotal to the development of black communities, producing professionals in a range of fields:

The genius that those mission schools uncovered, cultivated and developed was ‘the blessing’ of those mission schools. The curse of the mission schools, however, was that Africans were taught how to assimilate and to acculturate to white New England Congregational culture. Africans were taught that the way Congregationalists worshipped was the only proper way to worship.¹⁶³

Trinity was one of those churches that adopted that style of worship, sending a message that it was not a typical black church, according to Wright, who calls himself a student of black sacred music, ethnomusicology and African Diasporan studies.¹⁶⁴ But Wright said the assassination of Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968 proved to be a turning point that sparked changes on black college campuses, founded by white missionaries, including what he called the singing of Black Gospel music for the first time. Wright was at Howard University in 1968 when that campus’ first Gospel Choir was founded and was elected to be the group’s chaplain. This movement of growing black identity and awareness eventually made its way into black congregations that had been a part of historically white denominations.¹⁶⁵ But some of these black congregations did not embrace this change, and Trinity was one of them. “Because the music department of Trinity Church would not budge on that issue, however, the

¹⁶² Leroy Fitts, *Black Baptists*, 178.

¹⁶³ Wright, *Sankofa Moment*, 28-29.

¹⁶⁴ “Life, Love and Legacy,” www.jeremiahwright.com.

¹⁶⁵ Wright, *Sankofa Moment*, 39-41.

membership started dwindling,” Wright recalled in his book, which traces the congregation’s history.¹⁶⁶

The congregation also had lost its popular founding pastor, the Rev. Dr. Kenneth Smith, who had led the church to grow to a membership of about 400, with about half that number attending services regularly each Sunday. Smith moved on to do community renewal work outside the church before leading another UCC congregation and eventually becoming the president of Chicago Theological Seminary. Smith’s successor, the Rev. Willie Jamerson, struggled to live up to his legacy and to lead the church to embrace the reality of the world that was changing around them. He left the church at about the same time Wright had left an assistant pastor position he had held for two years in a Chicago Baptist church.¹⁶⁷ Wright had filled out applications for positions in several denominations and was waiting to hear a response when he learned from Smith that the Trinity pulpit was open. Smith encouraged him to file an application. According to Wright, a subsequent meeting with a Trinity Church leader was supposed to last one hour but extended to four hours:

He shared with me the vision of the Trinity congregation. He shared with me how the congregation wanted to change the perception that community members had of them. They wanted to be known as a welcoming congregation. They wanted a worship service that was exciting and attracting to African Americans who were now ‘conscious’ African Americans, unashamed of their history, unashamed of their legacy, unashamed of their culture and highly-skilled in every profession imaginable.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 41-46.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 51.

Wright said it was in that meeting that he learned that an interim pastor had coined a slogan that captured the then current spirit of thought at Trinity, a slogan that would come to define the church's mission under his leadership, but also the slogan that would ultimately be at the root of criticisms the church would face in the mainstream media in 2008 as he would be concluding 36 years of what religious observers familiar with him called fruitful and groundbreaking ministry. The slogan—"Unashamedly Black and Unapologetically Christian" came to be the mantra of Trinity.¹⁶⁹ Under Wright's ministry, the church attracted thousands of ordinary people and well-known individuals such as Oprah Winfrey and a would-be history maker—Barack Obama, who in 2008 was elected the first black president of the United States. During the course of a nearly 20-year association with the church, Obama and his children were baptized by Wright. Wright also presided over Obama's marriage to his wife, Michelle.¹⁷⁰ Obama credited a sermon by Wright as the inspiration for the title of his second book—*The Audacity of Hope*, which went on to become a critically acclaimed bestseller.¹⁷¹

Obama's association with the church eventually turned out to be the reason many Americans who had never heard about Trinity ended up hearing about it. But what they heard did not seem to reflect what Wright, Obama and others came to identify as the Trinity experience—at least not in totale. Prior to Obama's 2007 announcement that he would run for the presidency, Trinity had made headlines in

¹⁶⁹ Susan Williams Smith, *The Book of Jeremiah: The Life and Ministry of Jeremiah A. Wright Jr.* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2013), 154. See also Stephen Mansfield, *The Faith of Barack Obama* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2011), 53-74.

¹⁷⁰ Manya A. Brachear, "Pastor inspires 'audacity to hope'," *Chicago Tribune*, January 21, 2007, 1, accessed August 21, 2013, <http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/ct-member/doc/420553368.html?FMT=FT&FMTS=ABS:FT>.

¹⁷¹ See Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006). The book's cover proclaims it a "#1 *New York Times* Bestseller."

ways that were not particularly distinctive, even though it had grown from a church of about 87 active members when Wright assumed the pastorate in 1972 to more than 8,000.¹⁷² It was and remains the largest UCC congregation, black or white. As the church grew over the years, a review of literature suggests that the mainstream news media—even the local media—wasn't significantly focused on Wright, his theology or his sermons.

Between 1979 and 1989, the *Chicago Tribune*, the city's largest daily newspaper, published a total of nine articles, briefs and announcements that mentioned Wright's name in association with Trinity Church. A search of the newspaper's database dating back to 1963 showed no articles about Wright before 1979. That's when the newspaper reported that Wright and members of Trinity joined forces with an area racing association to raise money for an 11-year-old boy who with his mother were members of the church. The boy had lost his feet earlier in the year when he fell under the wheels of a freight train. The racing association had responded to a request from Trinity to donate proceeds from an upcoming racing event to help defray the cost of artificial limbs.¹⁷³

A 1980 article by Jerry Crimmins reported how Trinity and Wright were preparing to open their facilities to serve as an alternative school after Chicago public school teachers had walked out on strike. Wright is quoted saying he and his church staff had registered just over 10 percent of the roughly 500 public school students he estimated were living in the neighborhoods surrounding the church. They also had

¹⁷² Brachear, "Pastor Inspires."

¹⁷³ Mike Kiley, "Church and friends racing to aid injured youngster," *Chicago Tribune*, November 13, 1979, C3.

recruited teachers and parent volunteers, the story said, and were working to let more people know about the plan.¹⁷⁴

Reporter Thom Shanker listed Wright in a 1984 news story as one of six individuals that then-Mayor Harold Washington had nominated to serve on the City Colleges board of trustees as replacements for members whose terms had expired or who voluntarily left the board. The trustees were charged with overseeing the operation of nine colleges. “In directing our City Colleges, we need exceptional leadership,” Washington said. “These appointments will give us that leadership during an era of dynamic social and economic change.”¹⁷⁵

George Papajohn and John C. White quoted Wright in 1984 as the spokesman for fourteen South Side congregations endorsing the bid of Manford Byrd Jr. to become the superintendent of the Chicago Public Schools. Wright told the newspaper that the association represented congregations whose combined memberships exceeded 10,000. He described Byrd as a “‘great educator’ who is ‘unbought’ and ‘unbossable.’”¹⁷⁶ The story noted that Byrd was a member of Trinity. In another 1984 report, columnist Bill Granger mentions Wright’s announcement regarding the ministers’ support for Byrd in a column in which he questions the move in light of political wrangling taking place at the time.¹⁷⁷

A 1987 news brief highlighting upcoming television programming announced a “Frontline” episode that would feature Pulitzer Prize-winner Roger Wilkins

¹⁷⁴ Jerry Crimmins, “Alternative schools serve few students,” *Chicago Tribune*, January 30, 1980, 2.

¹⁷⁵ Thom Shanker, “Mayor nominates 6 to college board,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 27, 1984, A3.

¹⁷⁶ George Papajohn and John C. White, “14 churches throw support behind Byrd as school chief,” *Chicago Tribune*, August 5, 1984, A8.

¹⁷⁷ Bill Granger, “Half-baked plan for school chief,” *Chicago Tribune*, August 6, 1984, A1.

interviewing Wright about the state of the black church in Chicago.¹⁷⁸ Almost two years later, Wright was listed in the newspaper's TV programming guide as the featured guest on "Chicago Sunday Evening Club," broadcast by the city's Channel 11.¹⁷⁹ Karen M. Thomas quoted Wright in March of that year talking about how several local leaders, including the Rev. Jesse Jackson, had contacted Chicago Schools Superintendent Manford Byrd Jr. to encourage him to accept a one-year contract extension that was being offered after his initial four-year contract was set to expire within a few weeks. "There was a request and a plea to please not leave us and our children in a lurch, even though he had not been treated fairly," Wright said, referring to Byrd.¹⁸⁰

In 1989, Audra D. Strong produced what was a relatively significant account of Trinity's growth under Wright's leadership. The story's headline read, "Message remade to foster black faith," and the report detailed how Trinity was bursting with "pride and devotion" at a time when many churches were stagnating.¹⁸¹ It noted that 14 of the 325 Illinois United Church of Christ congregations were predominantly black; four of those had more than 1,000 members with Trinity ranking as the denomination's largest church. Its membership had reached 4,500 at that time with a budget of \$2.1 million.¹⁸² When Wright arrived, the church had a \$30,000 budget and 87 members. Wright attributed the success of the church to changes the congregation agreed to make just prior to his coming aboard. "Trinity had to ask itself a painful

¹⁷⁸ Maurice Weaver, "TV highlights," *Chicago Tribune*, June 16, 1987, D8.

¹⁷⁹ "Sunday," *Chicago Tribune*, January 1, 1989, J10.

¹⁸⁰ Karen M. Thomas, "Jackson coaxed Byrd to keep school post," *Chicago Tribune*, March 12, 1989, D1.

¹⁸¹ Audra D. Strong, "Message remade to foster black faith: Trinity United Church of Christ bursts with pride and devotion," *Chicago Tribune*, May 26, 1989, 1.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*

question in 1971: ‘Do we want to be a black church in the black community or continue to be a black church in a white faith?’ Wright is quoted saying.¹⁸³

In his book, *Sankofa Moment*, Wright noted that there had been a class divide in some African-American churches started by predominantly white denominations. Trinity reflected that initially because many of its members had been educated in colleges founded by the Congregational Church and had been taught that black worship was too emotional and not fit for students and graduates of one of the mission schools founded by whites. “In other words, Africans were taught that European culture and Christianity were synonymous!”¹⁸⁴ Consequently, Trinity did not seek to attract lesser educated blacks, even though it was located in the heart of the black community.¹⁸⁵ But that changed as the Black Power movement started and Trinity’s membership dwindled in size because growing numbers of its congregants felt the church was “too European.”¹⁸⁶

The 1989 *Tribune* story by Strong notes that Wright became known for his ability to preach messages that resonated with “the educated, the uneducated and the street-wise.”¹⁸⁷ The story also recites the church’s official statement of being committed to its members’ African roots, its affirmation of faith in God through a “cultural expression of a Black worship service and programs which address the black community” and the church’s motto: “Unashamedly Black and unapologetically Christian.”¹⁸⁸

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁴ Wright, *Sankofa Moment*, 29.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁸⁶ Wright, *Sankofa Moment*, 46.

¹⁸⁷ Strong, “Message remade,” 1.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

The Rev. Robert Sandman, identified in the report as associate conference minister for the United Church of Christ, is quoted saying Trinity’s members “play a special role because of their significance in numbers, their place among black leaders, their contributions to the annual budget and because they exercise leadership.”¹⁸⁹ Strong’s account also mentioned the church’s 100-voice choir and the jazzy beats that set the stage for Wright’s sermons. The report went on to state that Wright advocates that blacks “stand by their music and culture in all aspects of life, especially in church.”¹⁹⁰

Strong quotes Wright saying: “We have got to stop using Eurocentric music forms. The average parishioner is a product of his or her culture. Why then when it comes to church, do we have to stop singing and listening to our music?”¹⁹¹ Wright was praised in the story for offering sermons that touch “the educated, the uneducated, and the street-wise.”¹⁹² The church at that time was building a 2,700 seat sanctuary valued at \$8 million, which the story noted was “paid for by its members.”¹⁹³

Trinity, in Wright’s words, had become a black church in the black community.¹⁹⁴ That not only was reflected in the predominance of the church’s membership racial makeup but also in its worship and theological emphasis.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹² *Ibid.*

¹⁹³ Strong, “Message remade.”

¹⁹⁴ Wright, “*Sankofa Moment*,” 47.

The Black Church in Historical Context

In a landmark 1990 study of the black church experience in America, C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya defined the black church in both inclusive and exclusive terms, saying “in general usage any black Christian person is included in ‘the Black Church’ if he or she is a member of a black congregation.”¹⁹⁵

The study limited its operational definition of “Black Church” to seven “totally independent, historic, and totally black controlled denominations.” Those included the African Methodist Episcopal, African Methodist Episcopal Zion, Christian Methodist Episcopal, National Baptist Convention, USA, National Baptist Convention of America, the Progressive National Baptist Convention and the Church of God in Christ. All were founded by black people after the formation of the Free African Society of 1787 and “constituted the core of black Christians.”¹⁹⁶ The term “Greater Black Church” encompasses both the historic black denominations and the predominantly black congregations in white denominations.¹⁹⁷ That would include churches such as Trinity.

The Lincoln and Mamiya study was largely concerned with gathering statistics and other data about black religious phenomena, but the researchers also sought to encompass the “experiential dimension,” which gave rise to the social institution known as the church. They cite Rudolf Otto’s phenomenological description of human beings encountering the divine or sacred as “mysterium, tremendum, et fascinans”—the mysterious, terrifying, and fascinating—as a good

¹⁹⁵ C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press), 1.

¹⁹⁶ Lincoln and Mamiya, *Black Church*, 1.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid*, 441.

universal approach to understanding religion, but argue that attention also must be paid to specific cultural and historical configurations in which the religious experience takes place. Their extensive investigation addressed the religious worldview of African Americans, which they called the “black sacred cosmos,” and they posited that religious experience is a social phenomenon that is shared by groups and ultimately shapes the “cultural screens of human communication and interpretation,” language that echoes with framing theory:

The religious worldview of African Americans is related both to their African heritage, which envisaged the whole universe as sacred, and to their conversion to Christianity during slavery and its aftermath. It has been only (since the 1970s) that scholars of African American history, culture, and religion have begun to recognize that black people created their own unique and distinctive forms of culture and worldviews as parallels rather than replications of the culture in which they were involuntary guests.¹⁹⁸

Lincoln and Mamiya noted that black Christianity shared the same orthodox beliefs as white Christianity—with the central emphasis on a Christian God ultimately revealed in Jesus Christ—but “there were also different degrees of emphasis and valences given to certain particular theological views.”¹⁹⁹ The Old Testament portrayals of God as “an avenging, conquering, liberating paladin” became directly related to “the holocaust of slavery and the notion of divine rescue,” a theme that resonated not only with black Christians in the immediate post-slavery era but also with those who confronted government-sanctioned discrimination in the 20th century more than 100 years after the Emancipation Proclamation, the researchers posited.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁸ Lincoln and Mamiya, *Black Church*, 2.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

²⁰⁰ Lincoln and Mamiya, *Black Church*, 3.

Everett C. Hughes, a white sociologist who became known for work in ethnic relations before his death in 1983, echoed the notion that the “Black Church” first must be understood in its historical context if it is to be understood at all:

Barred from full and equal participation in any of the public institutions of the country and not permitted to develop their own in most realms of life, American Negroes were ‘free’—in an ironic sense—to develop their own family and religious life. By American caste rule, no person of any degree of known Negro ancestry can be ‘kin’ to any person supposedly of no such ancestry. Negro Americans had to make their own family institutions. White Americans....having made Christians of their field hands, did not want to commune with them from the same cup. Hence at birth, confirmation, communion, marriage, death, and all the great turning points and festivals, Negro and white were alien to each other... Religion and family became foci of Negro life in a special degree.²⁰¹

E. Franklin Frazier, a celebrated African-American sociologist noted for his broad body of writings and work with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in the area of race relations, cited the Black Church as the most predominant example of an institution built by and for black people in order to build up black people in America. Frazier argued that the church served as the sustaining force that has allowed black people to survive the various phases of discrimination that have characterized the African-American experience. He posited that the rhythms of black religious life in America could only be understood by studying both the social organization and disorganization of black life in America. In

²⁰¹ Everett C. Hughes, “E. Franklin Frazier: A Memoir,” in E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (New York: Schocken Books Inc., 1974 reprint, 5. The original Frazier work was printed in 1964. Frazier, a noted African-American sociologist, died in 1962. This version of his book was a reprint included in a volume that paired it with a work, by C. Eric Lincoln, titled *The Black Church Since Frazier*.

essence, he held the view that the one—religion or the church—came in large part to reflect the other—life in general—with both its good and bad.²⁰²

There is no unanimity among scholars on issues related to the retention of African religious beliefs and values and just how those influenced what would become the Black Church in America. Some insist that there is simply no way to explain the emergence of a distinctive brand of African-American religious expression without connecting it back to Africa or prior to the arrival of African slaves in Jamestown, Virginia. Henry Mitchell, who enjoyed a distinguished career as a seminary professor and highly sought after preacher, is among those who insist that there was a continuum and argues that “the religious faith and practice of the masses of black Americans goes back even earlier than 1619” when the first slaves arrived in colonial America because the Christian message was similar to the messages of traditional African religion.²⁰³

Regardless of these factors, it would not seem surprising that the Christian religion could become a new basis for social cohesion among African people who had been displaced and disconnected from the emerging American culture. Scholars note that it became common to baptize slaves into the Christian faith, especially once laws rejected any notion that slaves should be freed because they had become Christians. The Anglican Church is typically noted as the first to systematically attempt to Christianize slaves followed by such groups as Quakers, Presbyterians and Catholics, none of which left detailed accounts of the impact of their efforts.²⁰⁴

²⁰² E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (New York: Schocken Books, 1964), 7-8.

²⁰³ Henry Mitchell, *Black Church Beginnings: The Long-Hidden Realities of the First Years* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004), 15.

²⁰⁴ Frazier, *The Negro Church*, 15.

Carter G. Woodson, the famed historian often referred to as the father of Black History, argued that a new era of black Christianity began to emerge following the first Great Awakening in the 1730s and 1740s, which reshaped the thinking and practices of most major American church movements up until that time. The revived and consequently revised church denominations began to place a greater emphasis on guilt over sin and personal piety that was marked by emotional response and talk of being filled or possessed by the Holy Spirit. The Awakening also gave new prominence to what had been relatively small movements of Baptists and Methodists, which was called the impetus for “The Dawn of the New Day” in black American religious development.²⁰⁵

Some scholars have even credited the Awakening with its heightened emphasis on freedom of religious expression to sparking the American Revolution, which was considered pivotal as it ushered in other cultural changes. Church historian Frank S. Mead noted that the Baptist denomination became particularly popular among slaves because of its relatively free-flowing worship style and polity, which allowed blacks to be leaders. That popularity grew even more so after the Civil War and Emancipation Proclamation granted slaves legal freedom:

The lack of formality in Baptist churches, together with the absence of ritual and the freedom and democracy of the local congregation, appealed to blacks more than did the Episcopal structure of the Methodist Church. This was accentuated at the end of the Civil War; a revival spirit swept blacks, creating thousands of new churches. Aided by the Freedmen’s Aid Society and various Baptist organizations nearly 1 million black Baptists worshiped in their own churches within 15 years.²⁰⁶

²⁰⁵ Carter G. Woodson, *The Education of the Negro Prior to 1861* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Son, 1915), 18. See also Carter Godwin Woodson, *The history of the Negro church* (Washington, D.C.: Associated Publishers, 1921).

²⁰⁶ Frank S. Mead, *Handbook of Denominations in the United States* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), 43.

Mitchell argued that the significance of various historical turning points that occurred over the course of a century's time can ultimately be tied to the birth of the first independent black congregations, which came after periods when blacks and whites had worshiped together despite social prohibitions and ostracism directed at blacks. This, he said, was especially true in the South, where black Baptists were the first to establish independent churches in South Carolina, Georgia and Virginia, as early as 1750.²⁰⁷

Grant S. Shockley, a former president of the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta, noted that the first seeds of the nation's first black Christian denomination were sown in the late 1780s with the start of a prayer band led by Richard Allen in Philadelphia after he and other black members of the Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia had been suddenly denied the right to worship alongside white parishioners. The group became the Free African Society in 1787 and several independent black Methodist congregations were established before Allen formally established the African Methodist Episcopal Church in 1816.²⁰⁸ This structural history also produced a history of theological reflection among African Americans that also was shared with white abolitionists, many of whom had roots in the Congregational church—the driving influence on what would eventually become Wright's UCC denomination.

²⁰⁷ Mitchell, *Black Church Beginnings*, 38.

²⁰⁸ Grant S. Shockley, "African Methodist Episcopal Church," in *Encyclopedia of Black America*, edited by W. Augustus Low and Virgil A. Clift (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981), 32.

Black Theology

As previously noted, the “black sacred cosmos” emerged with a strong emphasis on liberation.²⁰⁹ James H. Evans Jr., a longtime professor of systematic theology at Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School in New York, pointed out in his 1992 book that the proslavery forces in colonial America had used the Bible to justify circumscribing black people to the status of slaves. In some cases, proponents invoked cryptic Old Testament passages tied to the story of Noah to argue that God has cursed black people and assigned them to a lower status among all people on the planet because of some sin supposedly committed by the ancestors of African people.²¹⁰ One significant example is taken from Genesis 9:25, which reads, “Cursed be Canaan, a servant of servants shall he be to his brethren. Blessed be the Lord God of Shem, and Canaan shall be his servant. God shall enlarge Japheth, and he shall dwell in the tents of Shem and Canaan shall be his servant.”²¹¹

Evans argued that proslavery advocates surmised that Canaan represented Africans while Japheth represented Europeans and Shem represented Jews. This particular theology about blackness became known as the Hamitic defense of slavery because Canaan was the offspring of Noah’s son, whose name was Ham and is the one thought to have offended his father and thus brought on the curse. Evans posited that proslavery forces tended to argue for the literal truth and infallible authority of the Bible, especially the Old Testament, while anti-slavery abolitionist forces

²⁰⁹ Lincoln and Mamiya, *Black Church*, 2.

²¹⁰ James H. Evans Jr., *We Have Been Believers: An African-American Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 35.

²¹¹ Genesis 9:25 (King James Version).

emphasized the moral thrust of the Bible as an ethical guide, especially the New Testament.²¹²

African slaves were not absent from the fight for their own freedom and began early on using religious texts to make their own case. As such the slaves began to fight fire with fire by reading the Bible with “new eyes” and consequently constructing their “own scriptural world” by utilizing three pillars or paradigms of interpretation.²¹³ Their initial efforts were focused almost entirely on their struggle for freedom, and thus the pursuit of a liberation theology commenced. The slaves identified with the experience of the Israelites, likening their own slavery experience to that of Israel in Egypt and claiming as a Word for themselves the imperative from God sent to Egyptian leaders to “let my people go.”²¹⁴ These slaves also developed a black pride motif by latching onto favorable references to Ethiopia, Cush and Egypt, including references to Moses’ wife as an Ethiopian and the description of Solomon’s bride as “dark and lovely.”²¹⁵ Finally, the slaves as well as freed blacks in the North concluded that the central message of the New Testament was one of hope and could be found in Jesus’ commitment to the downtrodden and oppressed.²¹⁶

Evans noted that these early framers of the black church theology found passages and narratives that assured them that God was mindful of their plight and had sent Christ to deliver them from it, not to merely help them endure it as the

²¹² James H. Evans Jr., *We Have Been Believers*, 36.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 40.

²¹⁴ Exodus 5:1 (New International Version). The passage records the story of Moses who was sent by God to tell Pharaoh to release the Israelites from slavery in Egypt.

²¹⁵ Numbers 12:1 describes the wife of Moses as an Ethiopian. In Song of Solomon 1:5, an unnamed bride is depicted as “dark and lovely” in some translations and “black and comely” in others.

²¹⁶ Luke 4 records the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. In verses 18-19, he quotes from the book of Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord.”

slaveholders had been wont to teach them. Out of this latter discovery came a practice of reading the Bible as a “unified” text, where from start to finish the real story is about God’s desire to set captives free—often through the use of human agency.²¹⁷

Evidence of the early black theology movement can be traced to such writings as David Walker’s *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, which he published in 1829 as a call to “awaken my brethren” to the power of black unity in the struggle for freedom. In it, Walker, a black Boston-based abolitionist, sought to affirm the worth and dignity of black people by identifying them with Egyptians of the Bible, noting that they were “Africans or colored people, such as we are – some of them yellow and others dark – a mixture of Ethiopians and the natives of Egypt – about the same as you see the colored people of the United States at the present day.”²¹⁸ All of the early seeds of black theological thought – whether focused on liberation or affirmation – have continued to fuel the aspirations of subsequent generations of black Christians and scholars who have helped to further develop the religious thought that so often characterizes the Black Church experience in America today. Evans posits: “In the African-American religious community the Bible continues to be read as a unified text whose central thrust guides the interpretation of its individual parts,” and the overarching meaning in all the parts, is “the liberation of the oppressed.”²¹⁹

²¹⁷ Evans, *We Have Been Believers*, 40-44.

²¹⁸ David Walker and James Turner, *David Walker's appeal, in four articles: together with a preamble, to the coloured citizens of the world, but in particular, and very expressly, to those of the United States of America: third and last edition, revised and published by David Walker, 1830* (Baltimore, MD: Black Classic Press, 1993), 17-18.

²¹⁹ Evans, *We Have Been Believers*, 45.

A century after the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 and the 1865 passage of the 13th Amendment abolishing slavery and involuntary solitude, the civil rights movement of the 1960s reflected the ongoing struggles of African Americans for equality in the United States. The 1960s witnessed the rise of the so-called “black-consciousness movement” even as significant voices of those who might have been called prophets of justice and equality had been lost in battle. Medgar Evers and President John F. Kennedy were assassinated in 1963, Malcolm X in 1965, and then both the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy in 1968. Urban uprisings marked the decade. Enraged blacks in various major cities responded to the news of fallen leaders by engaging in riots to express ongoing anguish over lingering injustice. At the same time, the revolutionary “black power” phrase continued to gain momentum. Soul singer James Brown’s anthem “Say it Loud—I’m Black and I’m Proud” was released in September 1968.

This period of black pride proved to be a defining era for Black Church identity and theology in America. Black Church leaders, such as King, had figured prominently in the Civil Rights Movement, though not without some level of resistance from cohorts. Black religion scholars sought to systematize the black theological thought that had come to define so much of the Black American and Black Church experience. James Cone, longtime Charles Augustus Briggs Distinguished Professor of Systematic Theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York, is credited with laying out the first seminal ideas of Black Liberation Theology in a 1969 book that attempted to tie the black power movement to the core message of Christianity. He sought to highlight a connection between liberation as the

very heart of the Christian gospel and the image of blackness in America as metaphor for God's presence with the oppressed.

In the introduction of a revised edition of the book, Cone wrote: "I wanted to speak on behalf of the voiceless black masses in the name of Jesus whose gospel I believed had been greatly distorted by the preaching and theology of white churches."²²⁰ Cone was part of a growing movement of scholars who would share views on what a systematized black theology should include. Others included Gayraud Wilmore, DeOtis Roberts, Major Jones, William Jones, Charles Long, Pauli Murray, Jacqueline Grant and Cornel West.²²¹ Cone was challenging the theological presuppositions and practices of many white Christians in America, but he also was targeting deep-seated beliefs held by black Christians and urged black churches to become involved in the black liberation struggle by turning to black theology for guidance and answers.

In 1969, the National Committee of Black Church Men formulated an official definition for this liberation theology that attempted to address the issues facing black people:

Black theology is a theology of black liberation. It seeks to plumb the black condition in light of God's revelation in Jesus Christ, so that the black community can see that the gospel is commensurate with the achievements of black humanity. Black theology is a theology of "blackness." It is the affirmation of black humanity that emancipates black people from white racism, thus providing authentic freedom for both white and black people. It affirms the humanity of white people in that it says 'No' to the encroachment of white oppression.²²²

²²⁰ James H. Cone, *Black Theology & Black Power* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), vii. The original version of this book was published in 1969 by Harper & Row.

²²¹ Lincoln and Mamiya, *Black Church*, 178.

²²² James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore, eds., *Black Theology: A Documentary History*, Vol. 1: 1966-1979 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), 101.

Historian Henry J. Young argued that those who embraced the concept of “black power,” particularly many young black college students, felt that blacks could not meaningfully integrate into the mainstream of American life without some sense of power and appreciation of their own self-identity. “The black power slogan provided the basis for this self-identity,” he said, and Cone made theological sense out of the movement by coining the term Black Theology and framing it as “Christ’s central message to twentieth-century America.”²²³ Young read Cone’s treatment of the subject as a warning to the church in America: Either reclaim Christ’s identification with the suffering poor or “the church will become exactly what Christ is not.”²²⁴

Lincoln argued that the white church in America had been “a conservator of values, which means that it vests its interests in the status quo.”²²⁵ He also argued that Cone’s theology rested on the idea that black religion must be “self-consciously committed to the destruction of caste in America” because “Christian commitment is inconsistent with powerlessness and lack of freedom.”²²⁶

Cone built his thesis for Black Liberation Theology by not straying far from where the early framers of the Black Church had started nearly a century and a half earlier. He drew heavily from Hebrew Scripture narratives recalling the enslavement and liberation of Israel as well as Jesus’ initial sermon as recorded in the Gospel of

²²³ Henry J. Young, *Major Black religious leaders since 1940* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), 133.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 133.

²²⁵ C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Church Since Franklin*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1974), 135.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*

Luke in which Jesus declares he has been sent to preach to the poor, heal the brokenhearted and bring deliverance to captives and those that have been bruised.²²⁷

Cone made a case for understanding God by using black-and-white terminology as metaphors. Effectively, the term “black” came to be identified as good because it represented suffering in America while white came to be identified as evil because it represented oppressors in America. This stood in contrast to such theological positions as the “Hamitic Curse,” which had become a subtext for white religious practice in the United States and the poor treatment of black people. For Cone, blackness was physiological but also ontological and thus focused less on the color of one’s skin and more on their position in society and attitude toward oppression and liberation:

Being black in America has very little to do with skin color. To be black means that your heart, your soul, your mind, and your body are where the dispossessed are. We all know that a racist structure will reject and threaten a black man in white skin just as quickly as it will threaten a black man in black skin. It accepts and rewards whites in black skins nearly as well as whites in white skin.²²⁸

As Cone was framing his theological rhetoric, there were high-profile examples to support his thesis. In addition to the assassinations of civil rights sympathizers President John F. Kennedy and his brother Senator Robert F. Kennedy, the nation also had witnessed the 1964 Mississippi killings of two white Jewish men – Andrew Goodman, a student from New York, and Michael Schwerner, a CORE organizer, as well as James Chaney, a 21-year-old black man, during a voter registration campaign that came to be called “Freedom Summer.”

²²⁷ Luke 4:18-19 (King James Version).

²²⁸ Cone, *Black Theology*, 151.

Cone's use of blackness as a theological metaphor proved very appealing to many theologians of all races, to black college students and to growing numbers of black church leaders. Wright emerged during this era and Trinity Church leaders also began to embrace a new understanding of themselves and the church during this era. The church's motto and value system were derived from Cone's initial and ongoing systematized approach to theological reflection from a black perspective.²²⁹

Little news media coverage would delve into this theology until nearly 40 years later when Obama and his religion became a political issue. Even then, much of the coverage would soon shift to specific statements made in sermons by Wright, who at that time had already retired from ministry but remained a widely sought-after speaker in African-American and in some academic circles.

News Media Coverage of Trinity and Wright

After the 1989 story by the *Tribune*, which highlighted Trinity's black theology and political activism, the local Chicago media rarely published reports that mentioned the church's motto and theology. Coverage of Wright and Trinity remained sporadic and largely uneventful for much of the time that Obama had been a

²²⁹ Wright, *Sankofa Moment*, 146-151. Wright recalls a sub-committee of Trinity's Executive Council coming together to develop principles for what it meant to be "Unashamedly Black and Unapologetically Christian." The result was a 12-point "Black Value System," which defined commitments members of Trinity were being asked to make. They included commitment to God, the Black community and Black family, as well as dedication to education, excellence, a work ethic, and self-discipline and self-respect. The values also called on members to disavow the pursuit of "middleclassness" that divides the community by class consciousness, and pledge to invest their skills into the Black community, financially support Black institutions, and show their allegiance to Black leaders who support the Black Value System. Finally members were asked to embrace the Black Value System as a lifestyle focused on promoting the general welfare of the Black community and advancement of the liberation of Black people. This system of values became a point of contention during 2008 media coverage of Wright and Obama.

member of the church, starting in 1988—even after Obama’s political star began to rise in 2004 with his speech at the Democratic National Convention and his 2004 election to the U.S. Senate. Between 1990 and 2006, the *Tribune* ran twenty-five stories, briefs or captions that featured a reference to Wright; a few of those were only passing references.

In 1991, Jerry Crimmins reported on the death of James Mix, an 18-year-old Trinity Church member who was killed by his roommate while away at Huston-Tillotson University in Austin, Texas. The story noted that Wright had suggested Mix attend the historically black college because of its record of helping underachieving students succeed. The death was the first murder in the school’s then 116-year history, the story said.²³⁰ Jerry Shnay made a similar reference to Wright in an account of Mix’s funeral.²³¹ Reporter A. Dahleen Glanton noted that Wright was among 3,400 individuals listed in a 1991 guide book highlighting Chicago’s top black leaders. Oprah Winfrey, Marva Collins, Louis Farrakhan and Michael Jordan were also included in the guide.²³² The following year Copeland and Anderson listed Wright as the featured speaker for a tribute to Martin Luther King Jr. being held at the University of Chicago.²³³

It was full five years later that a report by Jerry Thomas cited Wright as one of the “harshest critics” of one-time NAACP head Rev. Benjamin Chavis Jr.’s decision to leave the United Church of Christ to become a member of the Nation of Islam. The story did not quote Wright, but stated “Wright is among a number of critics who have

²³⁰ Jerry Crimmins, “Knifing at college ends teen’s life,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 9, 1991, 8.

²³¹ Jerry Shnay, “Bright future ends in slaying called senseless,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 12, 1991, 2.

²³² A. Dahleen Glanton, “Booklet provides a black who’s who,” *Chicago Tribune*, July 12, 1991, 1.

²³³ Monica Copeland and Rhonda Anderson, “Legacy of Dr. King still manages to bring friends and foes together,” *Chicago Tribune*, January 16, 1992, 2.

worked closely with Chavis in the past and who now wonder how a Christian minister for almost two decades could follow a group that historically has chastised black Christians following ‘the slave masters’ religion.’”²³⁴ Jerry Thomas and Steve Kloehn followed up with a story reporting that some Christian leaders considered Chavis’ conversion to Islam a self-serving political stunt: “In a recent sermon, Rev. Jeremiah Wright, pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago and a nationally known black preacher, compared Chavis to Judas Iscariot, the disciple who betrayed Jesus for 30 pieces of silver.”²³⁵

A 1998 commentary by Salim Muwakkil blasted black ministers who had responded to the growing HIV/AIDS epidemic by preaching that the disease is God’s divine punishment for illicit sexual behavior among homosexuals. Wright was noted as an exception to those doing so.²³⁶ A 1999 Tribune story by Sue Ellen Christian and Steve Kloehn noted that Wright called attention to the need for HIV and AIDS ministries in a sermon broadcast nationwide by satellite. The story also noted that Wright’s Trinity congregation had started a ministry in 1993, which had grown to include 100 members trained in prevention, counseling and visitation strategies. The story noted that Trinity offered training in these areas to other churches.²³⁷ In 2000, Cassandra Fortin highlighted how members of Trinity celebrated Kwanzaa—“a seven-day, non-religious, African-American celebration based on the fruit festivals of

²³⁴ Jerry Thomas, “Chavis reveals mission as ‘bridge builder,’ minister’s role unclear in Nation of Islam post,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 3, 1997, 1.

²³⁵ Jerry Thomas and Steve Kloehn, “Joining with Farrakhan Chavis sees place for Christians in Nation of Islam,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 23, 1997, 1.

²³⁶ Salim Muwakkil, “Who’s to blame?” *Chicago Tribune*, December 7, 1998, 15.

²³⁷ Sue Ellen Christian and Steve Kloehn, “Changes of heart in black churches, more are seeing need for AIDS ministries,” *Chicago Tribune*, December 5, 1999, 1.

Africa,” and Christmas at home and in church. Wright was credited for starting Kwanzaa celebrations at Trinity in the early 1970s.²³⁸

Julia Lieblich and Karen Rivedal cited Wright in a 2002 story as a supporter of Rev. Michael Pflieger, a white Catholic priest at a largely black parish, who was being asked to leave the church against his and his congregation’s wishes because he had exceeded the church’s limit for terms of service. Pflieger had vowed he would start his own church before accepting a transfer to another parish. Wright was mentioned as one who agreed with assertions by Pflieger’s assistant that Cardinal Francis George had failed to renew Pflieger’s contract because the pastor had accused a predominantly white Catholic sports league of racism for rejecting his mostly black parish’s membership. The story did not quote Wright directly but stated that Wright “said the archdiocese has long wanted to quiet Pflieger because of his willingness to confront white Catholics about their racism.”²³⁹ Pflieger would eventually make headlines during the height of the Wright controversy for comments he made about Hillary Clinton. Although he apologized, it was at that point that Obama decided to end his membership at Trinity. “This is not a decision I come to lightly, and frankly it’s one that I make with some sadness,” Obama was quoted as saying.²⁴⁰

A few weeks later, Julie Deardorff described Wright’s involvement in “MAAFA: The Black Holocaust,” a two-day conference highlighting the legacy of

²³⁸ Cassandra Fortin, “Sharing the glory: combining Kwanzaa and Christmas celebrations connects many African-American families,” *Chicago Tribune*, Nov. 19, 2000, 13.

²³⁹ Julia Lieblich and Karen Rivedal, “Cardinal lets Pflieger remain at St. Sabina; Activist pastor gets extension,” *Chicago Tribune*, February 13, 2002, 1.

²⁴⁰ John McCormick and Manya A. Brachear, “Barack Obama cuts ties to Trinity United,” *Chicago Tribune*, June 1, 2008. Accessed September 8, 2013, http://weblogs.chicagotribune.com/news/politics/blog/2008/06/printer-barack_obama_cuts_ties_to_trin.html.

slavery. Trinity co-sponsored the event with a local Baptist congregation. The story noted that “Maafa is a Ki-Swahili word used to describe tragedy and disaster,” and quoted Wright saying “If we forget the chains, the message will be weakened and hopelessly lost. If we forget the chains, we will forget the Dred Scott decision... we will forget Rodney King ... and Amadou Diallo. If we forget the chains, most tragically, we not only lose sight of where we have been, but we also lose sight of where we are going.”²⁴¹

Delle Chatman, a Chicago filmmaker who authored “Free of Eden” starring Sidney Portier, offered praise for Wright in a commentary, describing him as a “prominent Protestant minister in Chicago,” who challenged her to evaluate her determination to remain Catholic in light of the church’s prohibition against women priest at a time when she was feeling called to the priesthood. “He told me to decide if my commitment to Catholicism was ‘bone deep.’”²⁴² She ultimately decided her “bone-deep” commitment was to her faith in God.²⁴³

There were no other mentions of Wright found in *Tribune* coverage until almost two years later when Dan Mihalopoulos reported that African-American Alderman Howard Brookins found himself in conflict with Wright, his pastor, regarding plans to bring a Wal-Mart store to the city’s South Side, where Trinity is located. The store was to be the chain’s first in the city, providing up to 300 jobs. But

²⁴¹ Julie Deardorff, “Conference focuses on slavery’s legacy; Themes include healing, rebuilding,” *Chicago Tribune*, February 24, 2002, 2.

²⁴² Delle Chatman, “Being Catholic in a season of trial and love,” *Chicago Tribune*, December 25, 2002, 31.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*

Wright was among a coalition of nine pastors opposed to allowing Wal-Mart to open the store because of concerns about low wages.

The pastors also wanted the store to agree to hire individuals with criminal backgrounds, who often find it almost impossible to find work once released from prison. Wal-Mart had vowed to support good causes in Chicago. Many area residents supported the idea of the store because they wanted to be able to do bargain shopping in their own neighborhood rather than travel to suburbs. “Rev. Jeremiah Wright, Trinity’s influential pastor, says the company’s backers are ‘pimping’ blacks,” the story said.²⁴⁴ “Whenever price means more to you than principle, you have defined yourself as a prostitute,” Wright was quoted saying in a recent church bulletin.²⁴⁵

A few months later Dawn Turner Trice recalled in a column how Trinity began its HIV/AIDS ministry and had been advocating that more churches join the practice. She quoted Trinity member Connie Starks who recalled losing her brother to the disease while part of a 15-member prayer group at the church. “I addressed the issue with Pastor Wright because so many people were dying from this disease,” Starks said. “He said start a ministry.”²⁴⁶

The 2005 calendar year turned out to be the one in which Wright received the most mentions up to that point in news coverage over a twelve-month period. A school notes column announced Wright as the keynote speaker at an African-

²⁴⁴ Dan Mihalopoulos, “Nobody neutral on Wal-Mart proposals; Community leaders, clerics passionately disagree whether giant retailers will help or harm neighborhoods,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 4, 2004, 1.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁶ Dawn Turner Trice, “Black church has vital role in fighting AIDS,” *Chicago Tribune*, July 12, 2004, 1.

American music revue that was being held at a suburban community college.²⁴⁷ That same month, John Owens quoted Wright in an article spotlighting the rising number of black clergy who were also holding political office. Wright saw the two as incompatible, saying he could not see himself telling his constituents who were of other religious faiths, such as Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist or Hindu, to accept Jesus as Lord. “That’s what I’m supposed to do as a minister, but I can’t do that as an elected official,” Wright said.²⁴⁸

In a story by Margaret Ramirez, Wright also was quoted as being skeptical of Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan’s effort to organize the “Millions More March,” an event targeting a broad range of individuals including Latinos, Native Americans, women and gays a decade after the Million Man March had drawn hundreds of thousands of black men to Washington, DC, in a show of solidarity and a call to accountability. “The Million Man March was a wonderful moment, spiritually,” Wright said. “But, I feel like, what did we do with it? And what are we going to do that’s different this time around?”²⁴⁹ That same month Celia Daniels listed Wright as a no-show for the *Chicago Defender*’s centennial celebration at which he was one of seven leaders to receive “Newsmaker” awards.²⁵⁰

In perhaps the most detailed of all the stories the *Tribune* ran regarding Wright and Trinity in 2005, Margaret Ramirez, who was the newspaper’s religion reporter, detailed efforts by Wright’s daughter, Jeri, to transform what originated as a

²⁴⁷ See “School notes,” *Chicago Tribune*, February 2, 2005, 6.

²⁴⁸ John Owens, “African-American clergy becoming more visible in elected offices,” *Chicago Tribune*, February 25, 2005, 2.

²⁴⁹ Margaret Ramirez, “Farrakhan now opens arms with Millions More march,” *Chicago Tribune*, October 11, 2005, 1.

²⁵⁰ Celia Daniels, “Permanent Press,” *Chicago Tribune*, October 23, 2005, 10.

church magazine into a national publication aimed at the African-American community. *Trumpet* magazine had started 23 years earlier as a way to report church news and had been expanded to reach readers throughout Chicago and thirteen other cities with large black communities.

The story noted that Trinity, under Wright's more than 30 years of leadership had grown to nearly 10,000 members, with 70 ministries and subsidiary corporations and an annual budget of about \$9 million while proclaiming its motto of "Unashamedly Black, unapologetically Christian" and embracing "its African roots in every aspect of worship from interpretation of Scripture to music and ritual."²⁵¹ It also noted that each issue of *Trumpet* featured "a blistering commentary on social injustice" by Wright, who "often writes frankly about his opposition to the war in Iraq, his disgust with Wal-Mart's treatment of workers and the widespread racism he sees throughout the nation."²⁵²

Wright's most recent column had lamented what he considered a theological shift in some black churches away from activism to a more prosperity gospel focus:

The Black church that led the anti-slavery movement, the Black church that was known as the 'underground church,' the Black church that had led in the Abolition Movement and the Black church that had produced Harriet Tubman was now a church that was interested in money, greed, private jets, Bentleys and 'bling-bling,' ... a church that preached prosperity, money and 'go along to get along!'²⁵³

²⁵¹ Margaret Ramirez, "Trumpeting a message of justice to the nation; Magazine started by South Side church is vastly expanding its reach in its bid to engage the larger African-American community," *Chicago Tribune*, November 11, 2005, 12.

²⁵² *Ibid.*

²⁵³ *Ibid.*

Jeri Wright was quoted saying her father “has been much scrutinized for the liberation theology he preaches, but she said there is a need for that message to be heard in the black community.”²⁵⁴ The story did not cite any sources of the scrutiny.

The year’s Wright-related coverage ended with a story by Manya A. Brachear who quoted Wright as one among black pastors whose congregations celebrate New Year’s Eve in church through what are called “Watch Night” worship services. This tradition is dated back to the anticipation among black people waiting to see if President Abraham Lincoln would deliver on his declaration that the Emancipation Proclamation would become law at the dawn of 1863. Wright states that he could not recall a time when he did not ring in the New Year by attending Watch Night service. His parents passed the tradition on to him. Trinity members are encouraged to write down their aspirations for the New Year but discouraged from wishing for material gain, the story states. Wright is quoted saying, “You look forward to a new year in terms of doing some good. What are you going to do in the new year to help someone else? It’s that kind of prayer. If we’re not doing anything here about the social conditions in which people live, our faith is meaningless.”²⁵⁵

In one of two *Tribune* stories featuring remarks from Wright in 2006, Phillip Thompson quoted Wright coming to the defense of Chicago-born rapper Kanye West, who was being criticized by the Catholic League for posing as a Christ figure bearing a thorny crown on the cover of *Rolling Stone* magazine. Wright wondered if the protest was motivated by race and West’s criticism of then President George W. Bush for the federal government’s response to Hurricane Katrina. West had suggested Bush

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

²⁵⁵ Manya A. Brachear, “Ringin’ in year with prayers, not parties; Black tradition recalls first freedoms, renews spirit of community,” *Chicago Tribune*, December 31, 2005, 1.

did not care about the victims because most were black. Wright argued that West's race would make him a more ideal representation of Jesus than the white actors often tabbed to represent him in movies. Wright said: "I know Kanye ain't Jesus; so what's the flap? When you see every movie of Jesus, do you get upset that that's an actor portraying Jesus?"²⁵⁶

Obama and the Wright Factor

The second *Tribune* story that year with a focus on Wright or Trinity was the first story, among those found in searches of the newspaper's databases, to reference Obama's connection to the ministry. It was published just months before Obama would announce his candidacy for the presidency of the United States. Elizabeth Taylor, the newspaper's literary editor, interviewed Obama ("amidst all the 'Will he run?' furor") about his second book, *The Audacity of Hope*. She began the interview by saying she had come to understand that the book's title was drawn from a sermon Obama once heard. Obama responded by saying:

I attend Trinity United Church of Christ, and my pastor, Jeremiah Wright, at a sermon that I heard probably 15 years ago when I was a community organizer—I hadn't joined the church—he gave this wonderful sermon called 'The Audacity of Hope.' He himself had borrowed the sermon from someone else, so it is one of those sermons that get passed through the black church...²⁵⁷

Taylor noted that President John Kennedy was a Catholic president who strove to retain his Catholic identity while representing the masses of people. She

²⁵⁶ Phillip Thompson, "Sticky situation; Some say Kanye went too far by posing as Jesus for Rolling Stone," *Chicago Tribune*, January 27, 2006, 45.

²⁵⁷ Elizabeth Taylor, "There has always been ... this hopefulness about the country," *Chicago Tribune*, October 29, 2006, 3.

asked Obama if that struggle resonated with him. His reply indicated he shared some of the Trinity perspective on key social issues, but he indicated some sensitivity to how others might view that viewpoint:

As an elected official who comes from the African-American community, there are some similarities. You are always trying to reconcile your own personal biography and affiliations with the demands of the broader democracy. And you need to make sure you are representing everybody. That is another theme in the book. How do we exercise more empathy in our public discourse? How do we get the black to see through the eyes of the white? Or the citizen to see through the eyes of the immigrant? Or the straight to see through the eyes of the gay? That has always been a struggle in our politics. And our politics at its best involves us recognizing ourselves in each other. And our politics at its worst are when we see immigrants or women or blacks or gays or Mexicans as somehow separate, apart from us.²⁵⁸

The *Tribune's* main rival, The *Sun-Times*, published 28 news items or captions that mentioned Wright from January 1986 through December 2006. Some of the stories mirrored *Tribune* coverage; many only had passing references to Wright or were announcements about his speaking engagements. Very few made mention of the church's theology or Wright's preaching.

Curtis Lawrence reported that Johnnie Cochran, who had become best known for his defense of O.J. Simpson, was setting up a Chicago office with plans to be in the city on a regular basis. Cochran, who regularly attended church services on Sunday, told the reporter that he would split his Sunday mornings in Chicago between his two favorite congregations in the city. One of them was Wright's Trinity United Church of Christ.²⁵⁹ Public intellectual and university scholar Michael Eric Dyson wrote a first-person account for the *Sun-Times* of a pastoral anniversary celebration

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁵⁹ Curtis Lawrence, "Cochran in Chicago: It's time famed attorney opens Loop firm," *Chicago Sun-Times*, March 3, 2000, 4.

held in honor of Wright for his then 30 years of service in which he called Wright “the Michael Jordan” of preachers. “Unlike Jordan,” Dyson declared,

Wright is not yet past his prime. He can still choreograph a verbal slam dunk to thundering applause. He can still post up any intellectual opposition to his views with skillful linguistic footwork. And he can fade away from apparently taller ideological obstacles to lob his Gospel message over naysaying cultural forces. In short, he still da man.²⁶⁰

The *Sun-Times* reports that made more specific mention of Wright’s and Trinity’s theology did not appear until 2004 and were tied to Obama’s emergence as a rising star of the Democratic Party. He won the Illinois Democratic primary for the United States Senate in March 2004. His keynote address at the Democratic National Convention that summer was followed shortly thereafter by the reissuance of his 1995 memoir *Dreams From My Father*, which went on to become a best-seller and earned Obama various accolades.

Cathleen Falsani provided an extensive account of Obama’s religious practices and views in which Obama told her he has an “ongoing conversation with God,” constantly asking himself what he is doing and why. Obama also called himself a Christian “rooted in the Christian tradition” but one who believes “that there are many paths to the same place” and one who adheres to “values that transcend race or culture, that move us forward, and there’s an obligation for all of us individually as well as collectively to take responsibility to make those values lived.”²⁶¹ Obama also said that he was “a follower, as well, of our civic religion,” with strong belief in the nation’s constitutional structure and the separation of church

²⁶⁰ Michael Eric Dyson, “Preachers serve up a feast for the ears,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, March 5, 2002, 23.

²⁶¹ Cathleen Falsani, “I have a deep faith,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, April 5, 2004, 14.

and state.²⁶² Obama stated his “personal relationship with Jesus Christ” was solidified when he responded to an altar call issued by Wright while attending a service at Trinity United Church of Christ in 1988.²⁶³ “It wasn’t an epiphany. It was much more of a gradual process for me. ...It was just a moment to certify or publicly affirm a growing faith in me,” Obama was quoted as saying. At the time the Falsani article was published, Obama said he attended Trinity’s 11 a.m. Sunday service every week he was able and noted that Wright had become “a close confidant.”²⁶⁴

Obama recalled that his journey to Christian faith had started in 1985 when he took a \$13,000-a-year job as a community organizer working with various churches in neighborhoods that had been dramatically impacted by the shuttering of manufacturing plants and the loss of blue-collar employment opportunities. As he worked with ministers and lay leaders on job-training and afterschool programs, Obama told Falsani that his more intellectual view of religion began to deepen. He said he became “much more familiar with the ongoing tradition of the historic black church and its importance in the community. And the power of that culture to give people strength in very difficult circumstances, and the power of that church to give people courage against great odds. And it moved me deeply.”²⁶⁵

In 2006, Mary Mitchell reported that Obama had emerged preaching his own style of black empowerment to a group of the city’s most “powerful clergymen,” including Wright, during a gathering at a Chicago church. Amid rumors of his plans to run for president of the United States in 2008, Obama told the ministers he still had

²⁶² *Ibid.*

²⁶³ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁵ Falsani, “I have a deep faith.”

work to do. He encouraged pastors to sponsor training programs for ex-felons and approach major companies with a proposal for hiring them. He also encouraged the pastors to pool their churches' financial resources to set up a fund to help launch new minority-owned businesses in their neighborhoods. "Sometimes I hear people complaining about, 'Why are these people (of other races) opening up stores in our community?' It's because they pool their resources to buy the equipment. But we've got more assets in this room and we don't use it. That doesn't make much sense," Obama said.²⁶⁶

A few months later, Falsani highlighted excerpts from Obama's second memoir, *The Audacity of Hope: Reclaiming the American Dream*. She referenced how Obama explained that a sermon by Wright had inspired the title of his book. Among the notable excerpts was one related to political ideology that for Obama arguably also could be tied to his religious ideology: "I reject a politics that is based solely on racial identity, gender identity, sexual orientation, or victimhood generally. I think much of what ails the inner city involves a breakdown in culture that will not be cured by money alone, and that our values and spiritual life matter at least as much as our GDP."²⁶⁷

Amid the growing popularity of Obama's book and speculation that he would run for the presidency, the *Chicago Sun-Times*' rival *Chicago Tribune* published two stories in early 2007 about Obama's relationship to Wright and Trinity. One of those appeared late in January; the other appeared in early February, just days before

²⁶⁶ Mary Mitchell, "Obama reassures ministers he's still on their side," *Chicago Sun-Times*, July 25, 2006, 14.

²⁶⁷ Cathleen Falsani, "Snapshots from Obama's vision of what America should be," *Chicago Sun-Times*, October 15, 2006, A11.

Obama announced his candidacy for the presidency. Brachear profiled Wright as the inspiration for Obama's *Audacity of Hope*, recalling how Wright began his ministry at Trinity in 1972 as "a maverick pastor with a wardrobe of dashikis and a militant message."²⁶⁸

Wright had been in the late 1970s an advocate for the eradication of apartheid in South Africa, placing a "Free South Africa" sign on Trinity's lawn and encouraging other religious leaders to do so, although none followed his lead, the story noted. Obama saw the sign and began visiting the church in 1985. Though not a churchgoer, he "found himself returning to the sanctuary of Trinity United. In Wright he found both a spiritual mentor and a role model."²⁶⁹

Obama told Brachear that Wright did not advise him on strategy but helped him keep "his priorities straight and his moral compass calibrated."²⁷⁰ He said Wright, for him, had become a sounding board that helped him gauge the truthfulness of his own speech while not losing himself in the sea of hype that surrounds national politics. Wright, who was 65 at the time, had recently announced he would retire from the pulpit of Trinity in May 2008 and that he had already hand-picked his successor, the Rev. Otis Moss III, a rising star among black preachers who was serving in ministry at the time with his own father, another revered preacher from Cleveland, Ohio. Brachear described Wright as "a straight-talking pragmatist who arrived in Chicago as an outsider and became an institution."²⁷¹ Wright, she said, had

²⁶⁸ Manya Brachear, "Pastor inspires 'audacity to hope'," *Chicago Tribune*, January 21, 2007, 1.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*

built on Cone's black theology of liberation "by emphasizing Africa's contribution to Christianity rather than that of mainstream white theologians."²⁷²

Seeds of Trouble

Brachear and Sector pointed out how the thorny issue of race, coupled with religion, could and probably would become a major hurdle in Obama's impending announcement of his run for the presidency. "Even the simple act of choosing a church can become fodder in a national political campaign, where every facet of a candidate's life and associations will be put under a microscope. A year before the first primary contests, Obama is taking fire from both the left and the right in these matters."²⁷³ Trinity's adherence to its "Black Value System," also had become a target from conservatives, who were creating buzz on the Internet by talking about the creed's call to be "soldiers for black freedom" and a "disavowal of the pursuit of middleclassness," according to Brachear and Sector.²⁷⁴

Obama argued that critics needed to "understand the document as a whole rather than highlight individual tenets."²⁷⁵ He also argued that the creed's call for commitments to God, community, family, work ethic, self-discipline and self-respect are "values that the conservative movement in particular has suggested are necessary for black advancement. So I would be puzzled that they would object or quibble with the bulk of a document that basically espouses profoundly conservative values of self-

²⁷² Brachear, "Pastor inspires," 1.

²⁷³ Manya Brachear and Bob Sector, "Race is sensitive subtext in campaign; South Side church's tenets spark criticism of Obama by some conservatives," *Chicago Tribune*, February 6, 2007, p. 1.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

reliance and self-help.”²⁷⁶ Obama said it also would be important to rightly interpret the creed’s tenets. To disavow middleclassness, for example, did not mean that black people were being discouraged from pursuing career success. Instead, he said, it meant upwardly mobile church members should not distance or disconnect themselves from less fortunate people, particularly those who worshiped beside them at Trinity. “As I read it, at least, it was a very simple argument taken directly from Scripture: ‘To whom much is given much is required,’” Obama told Brachear and Sectar.²⁷⁷

But conservative bloggers had already begun to read and frame the statements differently, positing that Trinity was not welcoming to whites because it only focused on the black community. “I question his...ability to be able to reach out to a lot of people when he is committed to a group of people who are focused on helping a certain group of people. It seems wrong,” Fran Eaton, editor of the conservative political blog, *Illinois Review*, told Brachear and Sectar.²⁷⁸ Brachear and Sectar foreshadowed other potential challenges Obama could and would face about his religion as he stepped more fully on the national political stage by positing that explaining “religious ideas could prove a difficult task in today’s political world where complex concepts must be reduced to pithy sound bites and attempts at nuance are often considered evidence of being wishy-washy.”²⁷⁹

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁷ Brachear and Sectar, “Race is sensitive subtext,” 1.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

The Tipping Point

A search of the LexisNexis newspaper database found no significant mainstream coverage of Wright and Trinity for much of the next year, but that began to change on March 13, 2008, when ABC News published an article by Brian Ross and Rehab El-Buri headlined “Obama’s Pastor: God Damn America, U.S. to Blame for 9/11.” The story stated that Obama’s pastor had a long history of “inflammatory rhetoric” and was accompanied by video snippets from several of Wright’s sermons.²⁸⁰ Two of those snippets would go on to become the central focus of much of the mainstream media’s coverage of Wright from that point forward. Carl and Shelby Grant suggest that story was the tipping point: “The way in which ABC presented these snippets framed how the subsequent discussion took place, focusing the debate on issues of patriotism.”²⁸¹

Politicos Reactions to Wright

During the height of news media coverage on Wright from mid-March 2008 until early May 2008, A number of political and retired military figures commented on Wright. Some criticized remarks from his sermons but defended him against critics who called him unpatriotic. Others outright condemned Wright; a few of them, however, argued that Obama should not be held accountable for Wright’s remarks.

In a newspaper Op-ed column, Navy Veteran Lawrence Korb, who served as assistant secretary of Defense in the Reagan administration, and Ian Moss, a Marine

²⁸⁰ See Herman and Peterson, “Wright in Propaganda System”; Bell, “Obama, Wright, Jeremiadic Tradition”; Grant and Grant, *The Moment*.

²⁸¹ Grant and Grant, *The Moment*, 6.

Corps veteran, called some of Wright's comments about America offensive but defended him as a patriot because of his voluntary military service:

We've seen on television, in a seemingly endless loop, sound bites of a select few of Rev. Wright's many sermons. Some of the Wright's comments are inexcusable and inappropriate and should be condemned, but in calling him 'unpatriotic,' let us not forget that this is a man who gave up six of the most productive years of his life to serve his country. How many of Wright's detractors, Rush Limbaugh and Bill O'Reilly to name but a few, volunteered to serve...²⁸²

Korb and Moss noted that Wright gave up his student deferment to join the Marines before two years later signing up for a Navy unit that provides medical assistance to Marine and Naval personnel. Wright was valedictorian of his Navy class and went on to become a cardiopulmonary technician. He received three letters of commendation for his service from the White House. In contrast, they point out that Vice President Dick Cheney, and Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush all used deferments to avoid service. "Are the patriots the people who actually sacrifice something or those who merely talk about their love of the country?"²⁸³

During a television interview, former President Jimmy Carter recalled growing up in Plains, Ga., where he and other people in his home church occasionally visited a black Baptist church. "I've heard this kind of preaching all my life... I think that what he's teaching, really, is a liberation theology.... I think the sermons are still shaped by the deprivation of racial discrimination that our country has felt for almost

²⁸² Lawrence Korb and Ian Moss, "Factor military duty into criticism," *Chicago Tribune*, April 3, 2008, accessed September 8, 2013, http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2008-04-03/news/0804020775_1_marines-real-patriot-active-duty.

²⁸³ Korb and Moss, "Factor military duty into criticism."

a hundred years after the Civil War.”²⁸⁴ Carter said he would not have left Trinity if he were a member because Wright “preaches the type of sermon that, I think, appeals to many people. I’ve seen a complete sermon of one of those where they took the excerpts. And if you look at the whole sermon and then you see the excerpt, you see that it is quite anomalous compared to the rest of the sermon.”²⁸⁵

Retired United States Marine Corp. Lt. Col. Oliver North, in a column published on the Fox News website, accused Wright of making a “stunningly inaccurate comment” when Wright referred to North during a question and answer session at the National Press Club while accusing America of supporting the Contras in killing peasants and Indians in El Salvador and Nicaragua during the Iran-Contra scandal.²⁸⁶ North also complained about receiving calls from reporters wanting him to comment on Wright’s assertions, saying “it has illustrated once again how disconnected my ‘colleagues’ in the so-called mainstream media are from the American people.”²⁸⁷ North later added:

Therein lies a problem that is far greater than the Reverend Wright’s hate-filled racist rhetoric or his longstanding antipathy toward all that is good and decent about our country. The potentates of the press, so committed to shallow, celebrity journalism of the moment, are wildly out of touch with the American people they purport to serve.²⁸⁸

Sen. John McCain, who was seeking the Republican nomination for presidency, refused to blame Obama for comments made by Wright. He argued that Wright should be held accountable for his own views. McCain told reporters in a

²⁸⁴ Jimmy Carter made these remarks during an interview on CNN’s Larry King Live show, April 28, 2008. The transcript was accessed September 10, 2013 <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0804/28/lkl.01.html>.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁶ Col. Oliver North, “All the Wright stuff,” FoxNews.com, May 1, 2008, accessed September 8, 2013, <http://www.foxnews.com/on-air/war-stories/2008/05/01/all-wright-stuff>.

²⁸⁷ North, “All Wright.”

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

press conference held in Coral Gables, Fla., that he recently had heard additional comments made by Wright comparing the United States Marine Corps with Roman legionnaires who were responsible for the death of Jesus Christ. “It’s beyond belief,” McCain said.²⁸⁹ He previously argued that Obama should not be judged guilty by his association with Wright:

I think that when people support you, it doesn’t mean that you support everything they say. Obviously, those words and those statements are statements that none of us would associate ourselves with, and I don’t believe that Sen. Obama would support any of those, as well. I do know Senator Obama. He does not share those views. I’ve had endorsements of some people that I didn’t share their views, but they endorsed mine. And so I think we’ve got to be very careful about that part.²⁹⁰

Republican Mike Huckabee, a one-time Republican contender for the presidency and himself a minister, also defended Obama, saying it would be presumptuous to think parishioners agree with everything their pastors have to say. He argued: “That’s rarely the case. Influential sure; necessarily transferable, usually not.”²⁹¹ But Huckabee added that liberals had been equally critical of ministers associated with the conservative candidates:

It’s interesting to me that there are some people on the left who are having to be very uncomfortable with what... Wright said, when they all were all over a Jerry Falwell, or anyone on the right who said things that they found very awkward and uncomfortable, years ago. Many times those were statements lifted out of the context of a larger sermon. Sermons, after all, are rarely written word for word by pastors like Rev. Wright, who are delivering them extemporaneously, and caught up in the emotion of the moment. There are

²⁸⁹ See “Wright’s culture of war comparison,” *Tampa Bay Times*, April 30, 2008, accessed September 9, 2013, <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2008/apr/30/john-mccain/wrights-culture-of-war-comparison>.

²⁹⁰ See “Huckabee joins McCain in Supporting Obama’s Wright Defense,” *Nymag.com*, March 19, 2008, accessed September 9, 2012, http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2008/03/huckabee_joins_mccain_in_supp.html. Account notes McCain made the remarks on Fox News but does not give a date for when he purportedly made the statements.

²⁹¹ See “Huckabee joins McCain in Supporting Obama’s Wright Defense,” *Nymag.com*, 2008.

things that sometimes get said, that if you put them on paper and looked at them in print, you'd say 'Well, I didn't mean to say it quite like that.'²⁹²

Conservative Media Voices

Conservative commentators showed no tolerance for Wright's comments. In the weeks before much of the mainstream media began reporting stories about the content of some of Wright's sermons, Fox News' Sean Hannity began one of his shows with a clip from a Wright sermon, in which Wright is quoted saying: "Barack knows what it means to be a black man living in a country and a culture that's controlled by rich, white people. Hillary can never know that. Hillary ain't never been called a nigger."²⁹³ Hannity followed the clip by pointing out that Obama had failed to distance himself from Wright, who he also condemned for associating with Louis Farrakhan, "a virulent anti-Semitic racist.... We will continue to expose this until someone in the mainstream media has the courage to take this on."²⁹⁴

Interestingly, it was the next day—March 13, 2008—when "Good Morning America" broadcast the clips from Wright's sermons, a shot that it seemed literally was heard around the world. Other mainstream media soon followed with their own reports as conservative commentators continued to call on Obama to denounce Wright.

Conservative African-American commentator Thomas Sowell praised Sean Hannity for reporting on Jeremiah Wright beginning in April 2007, even though "the

²⁹² *Ibid.*

²⁹³ Nicole Belle, "Hannity & Colmes: When Will the MSM (Mainstream Media) Be Brave Enough To Cover Obama's Ties To 'Controversial' Church?" crooksandliars.com, March 12, 2008. Article includes video from Hannity & Colmes, CNN, March 12, 2008, accessed September 13, 2012, <http://crooksandliars.com/2008/03/13/hannity-colmes-when-will-the-msm-be-brave-enough-to-cover-obamas-ties-to-controversial-church>.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

mainstream media saw no evil, heard no evil, and spoke no evil.”²⁹⁵ Sowell accused Obama of leading a double life:

While talking about bringing us together and deploring ‘divisive’ actions, Senator Obama has for 20 years been a member of a church whose minister, Jeremiah Wright, has said that ‘God Bless America’ should be replaced by ‘God damn America’—among many other wild and even obscene denunciations of American society, including blanket racist attacks on whites.²⁹⁶

Fox News Network’s Bill O’Reilly called Wright dishonest. “He preaches anti-white and anti-American rhetoric, all the while making money off of it.”²⁹⁷ O’Reilly said he had learned that Trinity Church had access to a \$10 million line of credit and that Wright drives Mercedes Benz automobiles and would soon move into a multimillion-dollar home. “While Wright preaches that black people are getting hosed, he lives extremely large,” O’Reilly said.²⁹⁸

Academics & Theologians Chime In

Most of Wright’s support came from religion leaders and scholars, who sought to place his preachments into historical or theological context. Cone called the ministry of Trinity Church “the best representation” of black theology: “It’s offensive, because it speaks the truth in harsh, blunt terms.”²⁹⁹ The Rev. James Forbes, pastor emeritus of the prestigious Riverside Church in New York City, argued that Christian ministers have the two-fold task of being pastoral by offering comfort

²⁹⁵ Thomas Sowell, “Double Life of Barack Obama,” *National Review Online*, March 18, 2008, accessed September 13, 2012, <http://www.nationalreview.com/articles/223950/double-life-barack-obama/thomas-sowell>.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁷ Bill O’Reilly, “Honesty in the Public Arena,” FoxNews.com, May 2, 2008, accessed September 13, 2012, <http://www.foxnews.com/story/2008/05/02/honesty-in-public-arena>.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁹ See Kelefa Sanneh, “Project Trinity: The perilous mission of Obama’s church,” *The New Yorker*, April 7, 2008, para. 15.

during troubling times and prophetic by courageously proclaiming judgment when that is a godly response. He refers to the classic work of the late Rabbi Abraham J. Heschel, a highly regarded Jewish theologian and philosopher, to posit that a true prophet is called to speak truth to power. Forbes argues:

The prophet holds up a plumb line against which the present policies of the nation are critiqued by principles of righteousness and justice. The consciousness of the prophet penetrates contemporary circumstances to the core of the moral and spiritual tendencies at work in the society. The prophet foretells and forth-tells what is going to happen to the nation if there is no repentance and restoration of truth, justice and compassion.³⁰⁰

Bernard W. Bell, a scholar in African-American language and culture, argued that Wright was preaching out of the tradition of the biblical prophet Jeremiah, who often warned the nation of Israel of God's impending judgment for their unprofessed sins:

The Rev. Dr. Jeremiah was speaking truth to the people and to power as a preacher and prophet in the African American Jeremiadic tradition when he engaged in hyperbolic rhetoric and passionate denunciations of America for its national sin of racialized slavery, for its violation of the founding principles of the nation with institutional anti-black racism, and for its selective demonizing and violent destruction of nondemocratic, non-Christian peoples as suspected threats and terrorists to the United States.³⁰¹

Bill J. Leonard, dean of the Divinity School and professor of church history at Wake Forest University, argued that Wright's sermons must be considered in a proper context in order to be properly understood. He also said Wright frequently used a

³⁰⁰ James A. Forbes Jr., "The Black Church as Prophet, Patriot," *The Washington Post*, April 30, 2008, accessed September 9, 2012, http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/guestvoices/2008/04/the_black_church_as_cultural_c.htm. Forbes states his understanding of the prophetic ministry was informed by a book, considered a seminal work, by Abraham Joshua Heschel titled *The Prophets* (New York: Harper Row, 1962).

³⁰¹ Bell, "Obama, Wright and Jeremiadic Tradition," 354.

rhetorical device or preaching style referred to as “Jeremiad” in his sermons that is common to African-American and Southern preachers. The story featuring Leonard’s comments noted that a Jeremiad is defined as “a prolonged lamentation or complaint” or “a cautionary or angry harangue” that might use emblematic language. Leonard concluded: “If you start making it literal and pressing it on public issues, you are missing some of the point.”³⁰²

Martin Marty, who was the dean of the Chicago Divinity School when Wright was a student, recalled that he and other professors used to playfully muse that Wright was trying to live up to the seventh-century B.C. biblical prophet who shares his first name. Marty defended Wright as a profound scholar, pastor and prophet:

Though Jeremiah of old did not ‘curse’ his people of Israel, Wright, as a biblical scholar, could point out that the prophets Hosea and Micah did. But the Book of Jeremiah, written by numbers of authors, is so full of blasts and quasi curses –what biblical scholars call ‘imprecatory topoi’ – that New England preachers invented a sermonic form called ‘the jeremiad,’ a style revived in some Wrightian shouts. In the end, however, Jeremiah was the prophet of hope, and that note of hope is what attracts the multiclass membership at Trinity and significant television audiences. Both Jeremiahs gave the people work to do: to advance the missions of social justice and mercy that improve the lot of suffering.³⁰³

Obama, who initially defended Wright, later criticized some sermons that were being critiqued, saying they did not offer any hope. But Marty and others said Wright’s sermons do exactly that when one listens to the entire message. Bell accused Obama of feeling politically compelled to respond to “unrelenting criticism and political pressure...to denounce his retired pastor for righteously reminding his

³⁰²See “Wright’s culture of war comparison,” *Tampa Bay Times*, April 30, 2008.

³⁰³ Martin E. Marty, “Prophet and Pastor,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 11, 2008, accessed September 8, 2012, <http://chronicle.com/article/ProphetPastor/22067>

predominantly black congregation of the wrath and damnation of God to come to America for its alleged, if not actual historical sin.”³⁰⁴

Several seminary professors who specialize in preaching and other church-related studies offered Wright glowing critiques. Brad R. Braxton, who has served as professor of homiletics at Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University and as pastor of Riverside Church in New York, praised Wright as a preacher who “forthrightly addresses the lies white culture has perpetuated about black culture.”³⁰⁵ Anthony Pinn, a professor of religious studies at Rice University who has written extensively on the African-American religious experience, cited Wright as an exemplar of one of best practices employed by black preachers—the ability to appeal to popular culture to find examples and illustrations of biblical stories or principles.³⁰⁶

Martha Simmons and Frank A. Thomas included Wright’s post 9-11 sermon, “The Day of Jerusalem’s Fall,” in a nearly 1,000-page anthology of African-American sermons dating back to 1750. It was excerpts from this particular Wright sermon that brought him scorn from conservatives and other critics for suggesting that America was reaping what it had sown, that its “chickens are coming home to roost.” Simmons and Thomas called the sermons included in the book examples of “fiery preaching born of holy fire that characterizes African American pulpit

³⁰⁴ Bell, “Obama, Wright, and Jeremiadic Tradition,” 332.

³⁰⁵ Brad R. Braxton, *No Longer Slaves: Galatians and African American Experience* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2002), 21.

³⁰⁶ Anthony Pinn, *The Black Church in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 62.

discourse at its best.”³⁰⁷ Wright’s sermon was included in a section titled “From Black to African American and Beyond: 1969 to the Present.”³⁰⁸

Anthony E. Cook, a Georgetown University Professor of Law and a Baptist minister who has completed postdoctoral fellowships in ethics and religion and public values, did a comparative analysis of post 9-11 sermons by Wright, conservative evangelical pastor Jerry Falwell and popular African American televangelist T.D. Jakes. He argued that Falwell and Jakes “end up in the same place—an uncritical endorsement of the policies coming out of the White House in the wake of 911.”³⁰⁹ Wright, Cook added, saw the 911 tragedy as “an opportunity for critical self-examination at the spiritual, interpersonal and social levels...”³¹⁰ Cook noted that Wright’s sermon began with Wright reflecting on the ways he felt God was challenging him to consider his own spiritual state, which suggested he had work to do. Cook concludes: “Wright correctly suggests that a nation—no less than an individual—must ultimately reap what it sows and must be called to account for the wrongs and injustices it has done in this world.”³¹¹

Wright has two books published by Judson Press featuring collections of his sermons on selected themes. The first book—*What Makes You So Strong?*—features messages that celebrate and commemorate the life work of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. In the foreword, William Lawson, pastor emeritus of one of Houston’s most

³⁰⁷ Martha Simmons and Frank A. Thomas, *Preaching With Sacred Fire* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2010), xxi.

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.* Wright’s sermon appears on pages 855-863.

³⁰⁹ Anthony E. Cook, “Encountering the Other: Evangelicalism and Terrorism in a Post 911 World,” *Journal of Law & Religion*, Vol. XX, (1), 2004/2005, 16. This article was originally presented as a conference paper at the Hamline University School of Law/*Journal of Law and Religion* Symposium on Law, Religion & Ethics on October 22, 2004. Cook is noted for working with churches on various social justice initiatives.

³¹⁰ Cook, “Encountering the Other,” 21.

³¹¹ *Ibid.*

prominent African American congregations—Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church—
declares:

This book is not just ten sermons. It is a wonder of insight, powerfully phrased truth, deeply probing discernment, and disarming close-ups of saints and sinners. It is not even just good preaching. It is your soul and mine on paper. It is candid snapshots of God, brought to us in jeans, sneakers, and a baseball cap. It is a *decahedral* treasure. It is a gem. And I am glad I was blessed to have Jerry Wright in my own lifetime.³¹²

Good News! Sermons of Hope for Today's Families, is Wright's 1995 book that features eight sermons, including one that affirms homosexuals. That places Wright well ahead of the most recent efforts by various entities, including some churches, to affirm homosexuals in their fight for acceptance and equality.

This chapter demonstrates that Wright for much of his ministerial career was viewed by Chicago media as an influential and respected pastor, despite their knowledge of his church's theology, and that religious leaders and scholars also viewed him as a high profile pastor, leader and coveted speaker. Of particular note are references that Wright made to the Nation of Islam that indicated no great sense of connection to its leader Louis Farrakhan or his religious movement as an alternative to Christianity. Moreover, the review demonstrates that Obama originally had framed his religious perspectives and the "Black Value System" tenets of his church as principles that align with conservative views of self-help. Along with that, this overview shows that Wright and his theology largely are viewed favorably by both

³¹² See Foreword by James Lawson in *What Makes You So Strong?: Sermons of Joy and Strength from Jeremiah A. Wright Jr.*, edited by Jini M. Kilgore (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1993), viii-ix. The term "dechedral" is an adjective form of a mathematics term (dechedron), which is a reference to a "solid figure with 10 faces." Lawson uses it as a metaphor for the 10 sermons in Wright's book. The term is sometimes interchanged with "polyhedron," which means a solid figure having many faces, according to www.dictionary.com.

blacks and whites within the religious and theological communities in which he places himself, while both black and white individuals outside of those religious contexts often have a less favorable view of him and his theological perspectives.

The review further shows that the Black Church and Black Theology have significant histories of development and reflection that could inform the news media's understanding of them as religious topics to be explored in news reports. These findings offer an interesting subtext for this present study by attempting to place Wright's public life and ministry in context prior to his church and ministry becoming the focus of national news coverage because Obama was running for president. After discussions about theory and methodology, the concluding chapters of this present study will examine in more detail how select mainstream newspapers and alternative publications framed Wright, his religious theology and sermons.

Chapter 4: Theory

Textual analysis, which is a systematic process for analyzing various kinds of texts, also is referred to as framing analysis because at its core it is a study of what “frames” or themes the creator of a text has used to make sense out of a particular subject matter. Media scholars and other social scientists utilizing textual analysis frequently draw on framing theory to help make sense of their findings. Robert M. Entman, considered one of the originators of framing analysis, has noted: “The major task of determining textual meaning should be to identify and describe frames; content analysis informed by a theory of framing would avoid treating all negative or positive terms or utterances as equally salient and influential.”³¹³ On a basic level, frames are words or sentences that depict or characterize subjects in a particular way that might not be wholly representative of the subject but represent how an observer of the subject made sense of what he or she saw or heard.

The present research will apply general framing theory as well as the two specific news-framing theories advanced by Mark Silk (1995) and Herbert Gans (1979) to help identify, categorize and compare frames that appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *Chicago Sun-Times*, as well as the *Chicago Defender*, *Washington Afro-American* and *The Christian Century*. Framing analysis will serve several functions in the present study.

³¹³ Robert M. Entman, “Framing Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm,” *Journal of Communication* Vol. 43, No. 4 (Autumn 1993): 57.

First, it will allow the researcher to review the coverage in order to obtain an overall perspective on how specific publications might have used frames in their coverage of Wright and what sources they relied on in the process. A systematic analysis will seek to increase the reliability of the findings.³¹⁴ Second, the analysis will allow the researcher to search for evidence that supports competing theories about how journalists report religion-themed news, which will either support or not support the stated hypothesis. Third, it will allow the researcher to identify any differences in approaches to coverage based on the type of publication and its target audience.

It is important to note that all approaches to empirical study have inherent strengths and weaknesses associated with them.³¹⁵ Therefore, this chapter will offer a review of framing theory as a means of helping to explain why it is suited for addressing the research questions and hypothesis investigated in the present study.

General Framing Theory

In the scope of this present study, the researcher proposes the use of theory to help explain how journalists made sense of Rev. Jeremiah A. Wright's speech, theology and practice of his religion or to offer some insight into why they reported the story as they did. Framing, as a theory, has been conceptualized in numerous ways, across

³¹⁴ Yan Zhang and Barbara M. Wildemuth argue that "to support valid and reliable references, qualitative content analysis involves a set of systematic and transparent procedures for processing data." See "Qualitative Analysis of Content" in *Applications of Social Research Methods to Questions in Information and Library Science*, B. Wildemuth, ed. (Westport, CT: 2009), pp.308-319.

³¹⁵ See John W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 2003), 13-23. The author points out, as does others, that quantitative methodology is preferred when one is trying to generate statistical data that can be more generally applied to various people and settings while qualitative method is suited for investigations seeking to explore the qualities of a particular phenomenon .

various disciplines with varying definitions and approaches. Generally, it has been identified as “a quality of communication that causes others to accept one meaning over another.”³¹⁶ Framing is rooted in a classic experiment in which a pair of cognitive psychologists demonstrated that the way a proposition is framed or worded can increase the likelihood of its acceptance by those who read or hear it, even if an alternate proposition offers the same outcome. The researchers found, for instance, that respondents to a questionnaire overwhelmingly preferred a frame that used language referring to the number of people who “will be saved” during the “outbreak of an unusual Asian disease.”³¹⁷ A competing frame used language referring to the “probability that no one will be saved,” but the actual number of individuals that would have been saved was the same in both scenarios.³¹⁸ Some analysts have argued that a coherent theory of framing remains elusive because the concept can be “applied to a wide assortment of phenomena.”³¹⁹ Still, framing as a useful theoretical construct has grown in popularity among scholars over time.

Framers of Theory

Several names routinely are mentioned as key players in the theory’s development. Walter Lippmann, an early 20th-century journalist and media critic, is among them. Lippmann argued for a better awareness of how individuals tend to assign meaning to the behavior of others. He said an observer might assign meaning to the behavior of another person not based on what the other person is trying to convey but based on

³¹⁶ Gail Theus Fairhurst and Robert A. Sarr, *The Art of Framing* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1996), xi.

³¹⁷ A. Tversky and D. Kahneman, “The Framing of Decisions and the Psychology of Choice.” *Science*, Vol. 211, 30 January 1981, 453.

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*

³¹⁹ See James N. Druckman, “Foreword” in *Doing News Framing Analysis*, edited by Paul D’Angelo and Jim A. Kuypers, xiii-xiv. (New York: Routledge, 20100).

the observer's own experience of life. In the introductory section to one of his seminal works, Lippmann discusses what he calls "the world outside and the pictures inside our heads."³²⁰ He posits: "The only feeling that anyone can have about an event he does not experience is the feeling aroused by his mental image of that event. That is why until we know what others think they know we cannot truly understand their acts."³²¹

Lippmann concluded that most individuals are too intellectually lazy to invest time and effort into understanding what "others think they know" in order to get to the truth, so most individuals are inclined to settle for pictures in their own heads in order to make sense out of what is going on. Lippmann did not exempt the press from this tendency, raising questions about the ability of the press to offer its readers a comprehensive or fully accurate portrayal of events. He argued that all individuals—including journalists—have a limited knowledge of the world that is clouded by personal experiences and opinions. His analysis of how journalists choose what to include in their reports foreshadowed some of the key principles that would come to be associated with framing. He argued "there are no objective standards," only conventions, as they pertain to how material is selected and positioned for publication.³²²

Some five decades later, Canadian born sociologist Erving Goffman began speaking of those "conventions" as "frames," though his initial references were not

³²⁰ Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1922), 11. This book has been reprinted a number of times. One recent edition was released in 2011 by Digireads.com Publishing.

³²¹ *Ibid.*

³²² Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, 149.

ted to the press and its prevailing practices.³²³ Goffman set out to examine flaws in how people make sense out of events. He argued that one's understanding of an event might lead to a conclusion that appears accurate but could be off the mark. He suggested that any given occurrence could be interpreted in various ways, ranging from a joke, dream, accident, mistake, deception, or theatrical performance. For example, if a person heard someone say, "I'm going to set this place on fire," he or she could conclude that there is a need to alert authorities of a potential threat of arson, when, in fact, the statement might have been made by an entertainer who is confident his forthcoming performance will be enthusiastically received by an audience. Goffman's study concluded that each individual's sense of reality often must be subjected to re-readings because people make sense of what they experience by organizing the events into strips or "arbitrary" slices. This line of thought became the basis for Goffman's theory of framing and a method of analyzing it.³²⁴ Goffman's initial work posits that frames help people make sense of the world, which like a picture frame gives them a structure by which they can hold together or explain what they are experiencing.³²⁵

Stephen W. Littlejohn, who has written on communication, conflict and dialog, credited Goffman with providing a "depth description of how we behave symbolically in a variety of settings." But he also faulted his theory for being "limited to our own culture."³²⁶ Sociology professors Gary Alan Fine, of Northwestern

³²³Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974), 7.

³²⁴. Goffman, *Frame Analysis*, 8-10.

³²⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

³²⁶ Stephen W. Littlejohn, "Frame Analysis and Communication," *Communication Research* 4, 4 (October 1977), 491.

University, and Philip Manning, of Cleveland State University, acknowledge Goffman for providing sociologists a way to study how individuals and groups define and understand their environments, noting that the image of the frame has been widely used in the examination of social movements.³²⁷

Entman, a media and public affairs scholar at The George Washington University, is among those credited for building on Goffman's initial work and moving framing theory toward broader acceptability, particularly as it relates to the study of mass communication. Entman complained about the lack of "...a general statement of framing theory that shows exactly how frames become embedded within and make themselves manifest in a text, or how framing influences thinking."³²⁸

Entman attempted to establish framing as a theory suited for media scholarship, defining it as a process of selection that makes some information more "noticeable, meaningful, or memorable to audiences." He asserts:

Frames, then, define problems—determine what a causal agent is doing with what costs and benefits, usually measured in terms of common cultural values; diagnose causes—identify the forces creating the problem; make moral judgments—evaluate causal agents and their effects; and suggest remedies—offer and justify treatments for the problems and predict their likely effects. A single sentence may perform more than one of these four framing functions, although many sentences in a text may perform none of them. And a frame in any particular text may not necessarily include all four functions.³²⁹

Entman's definition suggests that frames are defined as much by what they omit as they are by what they include. Entman's first function and its reference to "common cultural values" correlate with mainstream sensibilities mentioned in the two specific framing theories used in this study. Entman points out that the texts to be

³²⁷ See Gary Alan Fine and Philip Manning, "Erving Goffman" in *The Blackwell Companion to Major Social Theorists*, edited by George Ritzer (Hoboken, NJ: Blackwell Publishers, 1991), 480-481.

³²⁸ Entman, "Fractured Paradigm," 51.

³²⁹ Entman, "Fractured Paradigm," 52.

studied typically include “key words, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information, and sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgments.”³³⁰

As framing was applied to news media studies, a frame came to be defined as a “central organizing idea for making sense of relevant events and suggesting what is at issue,” according to William A. Gamson, a Boston College sociologist who co-directed the Media Research and Action Project. Gamson argued that placing a fact within the structure of a media frame gives it meaning.³³¹ Media sociologist Todd Gitlin described frames as “principles of selection, emphasis and presentation composed of little tacit theories about what exists, what happens and what matters.”³³² Gitlin argued that journalists use frames to quickly and routinely organize and process large amounts of information. Framing allows them to assign news to cognitive categories and “to package it for efficient relay to their audiences.”³³³

Gaye Tuchman, a University of Connecticut media sociologist, called “the news” a window on the world through which “Americans learn of themselves and others...” But, she added, that what one sees from a window is dependent upon where one is socially and culturally positioned as he or she attempts to look out or in.³³⁴ Colorado State University media studies professor Kirk Hallahan defined frames as cognitive shortcuts or shorthand that “reflect judgments made by message creators” and in turn

³³⁰ *Ibid.*, 52.

³³¹ William Gamson, “News as Framing,” *American Behavioral Scientist*, 33(2), 1989, 157.

³³² Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World is Watching* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1980), 6.

³³³ *Ibid.*, 7.

³³⁴ Gaye Tuchman, *Making News: A Study in the Construction of Reality* (New York: The Free Press, 1978), 1.

shape the “inferences that the individuals make about the message.”³³⁵ Continuous research in the area of framing has resulted in a growing body of work. In a 1992 study, researchers Russell Neuman, Marion Just and Ann Crigler found that journalists used frames of conflict and powerlessness in more than 60 percent of their stories.³³⁶

Framing Applied to Studies

Paul D’Angelo and Jim A. Kuypers, press scholars who focus on political communication, cite framing as “...the most frequently utilized theory in top mass communication journals” since the year 2000.³³⁷ They note that current research focuses on media coverage of topics ranging from health to religion. Much of the research, they say, examines the how “...politicians, issue advocates and stakeholders use journalists and other news professionals to communicate their preferred meanings of events and issues.”³³⁸ D’Angelo and Kuypers argue that journalists rely on the frames they receive from sources “...to make news, inevitably adding or even superimposing their own frames in the process.”³³⁹

It is useful to consider an example of how framing has been applied in media studies that look at various topics. A 1991 study by Entman examined how political figures and other stakeholders influence media coverage. Entman focused on how

³³⁵ Kirk Hallahan, “Seven Models of Framing: Implications for Public Relations,” *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 11(3), 1999, 207.

³³⁶ See W. Russell Neuman, Martin R. Just and Ann N. Crigler, *Common Knowledge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

³³⁷ Paul D’Angelo and Jim A. Kuypers, eds., *Doing News Framing Analysis* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 1.

³³⁸ *Ibid.*

³³⁹ *Ibid.*

U.S. media framed coverage of two events. One was a 1983 incident in which a Soviet fighter plane shot down a Korean Air Lines flight, killing its 269 passengers and crew. The other was a 1988 incident in which a U.S. Navy ship shot down an Iran Air Flight, killing its 290 passengers and crew. Entman looked at how the stories were framed by *Time* and *Newsweek* magazines, as well as the CBS news. The study found that the dominant frame used by the magazines in coverage of the Soviet incident "...emphasized the moral bankruptcy and guilt of the perpetrating nation."³⁴⁰ The dominant frame in coverage of the United States incident "...de-emphasized guilt and focused on the complex problems of operating military high technology."³⁴¹

Entman argued that both incidents were complicated and subject to varying interpretations, but he could uncover no "factual matter" to justify why "...the United States was less morally responsible for the fate of the Iranians than the Soviet Union was for the KAL passengers."³⁴² He concluded that the "...media's emphasis on Soviet guilt and denial of American guilt was somehow predetermined."³⁴³ He connected his findings to the prevailing political narrative about Soviets as well as to the influence and ability of elite political sources to sell that frame to journalists. He elaborated by saying: "News organizations shape their reports to elicit favorable reactions from readers and viewers, and the anticipated reactions of the public also affect the rhetoric and actions of political elites, who are the primary 'sponsors' of news frames."³⁴⁴

³⁴⁰ Robert Entman, "Framing U.S. Coverage of International News: Contrasts in Narratives of the KAL and Iran Air Incidents," *Journal of Communication*, 41, 4, (Autumn 1991), 6.

³⁴¹ *Ibid.*

³⁴² *Ibid.*

³⁴³ *Ibid.*, 9.

³⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

Entman's analysis suggests that elite news sources and news journalists operate on a shared set of values, which might include a shared political narrative about the place and role of the United States in world affairs. Entman notes: "By de-emphasizing the agency and the victims and by the choice of graphics and adjectives, the news stories about the U.S. downing of an Iranian plane called it a technical problem while the Soviet downing of a Korean jet was portrayed as a moral outrage."³⁴⁵

Connecting Framing to the Present Study

The shared values of elite sources and mainstream journalists are relevant to the present study about Wright. The researcher has drafted a hypothesis that predicts an analysis of mainstream news coverage of Wright will show Wright was framed as "deviant" because his views clashed with those mainstream "secular" values shared by elite sources and journalists. Previous studies have explored how the press portrays religious figures whose views clash with mainstream sensibilities, particularly when issues of race and politics are involved. Findings have raised questions about journalistic objectivity and fairness.

A 2001 study by Craig Watkins examined frames used in network television coverage of the "Million Man March," a solidarity rally for African-American men that drew hundreds of thousands to Washington, D.C., in October 1995. Watkins, an associate professor in radio-television-film at the University of Texas at Austin, concluded that the frames journalists used in their coverage focused more on the perceived racial and political views of the march's chief organizer Louis Farrakhan

³⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 6.

than on the issues that generated widespread interest in the march.³⁴⁶ Watkins cited this finding as an example of why "...critical studies of the news media generally support the notion that what gets selected, packaged, disseminated, and received as news is mediated by organizational processes, ideological beliefs, and power relations" more so than by journalistic objectivity. He adds: "Rather than view news as an objective mirror of reality, media researchers contend news is a manufactured cultural product," an assertion previously supported by Tuchman (1978), Fishman (1980) and Cohen & Young (1981).³⁴⁷

Prior to the Million Man March, Farrakhan had previously been framed by much of the mainstream news media as a polarizing racial figure because of critical statements he had made about Jews and white people. In contrast, Farrakhan was celebrated by many within the African-American community for his work to encourage responsible behavior among black people, and men in particular. His Nation of Islam organization had developed a track record of cleaning up some communities and rehabilitating many individuals who had once been involved in criminal activity. However, Watkins said journalists covering the Million Man March concluded that the story was about how outside forces saw Farrakhan:

Journalists effectively screened out other frames that could have rendered the march and the complex web of factors that ignited interests in it more recognizable by making Farrakhan the most salient issue/problem. By emphasizing Farrakhan's relationship to the march, journalists focused much of their attention, and that of the public, on his polarizing style of racial politics. In addition, their framing

³⁴⁶ S. Craig Watkins, "Framing Protest: News Media Frames of the Million Man March," *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 18, 1, (2001), 83.

³⁴⁷ Watkins, "Framing Protest," 83. See also Gaye Tuchman, *Making News* (New York: The Free Press, 1978); Mark Fishman, *Manufacturing the News* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1980); and Stanley Cohen & Jack Young, eds., *The Manufacturing of News: Social problems, deviance and the mass media* (London: Constable, 1981).

judgments stigmatized the march as an expression of racism rather than a protest against racial inequality.³⁴⁸

Gitlin notes: “The media routinely present performers who are deviant—that is, unrepresentative of the values, opinions, passions, and practices of the larger society. Deviance constitutes their ‘news value’...”³⁴⁹ Watkins adds to Gitlin’s work on deviance, saying that media treatment of individuals such as Farrakhan shows their newsworthiness must be constructed in ways that do not confer upon them “a legitimate status in the arena of American politics.”³⁵⁰ Farrakhan, according to Watkins, was not framed in the Million Man March coverage as a religious figure, and the march also was not framed as such, though it had strong religious support and overtones.³⁵¹ Similar observations have been made about coverage of Wright, which is why theories by both Silk and Gans will be used in examining the frames journalists used in the coverage of Wright. Assertions about how journalists use deviance as a dominant frame in news coverage are echoed in both framing theories being applied to the present study. Silk would argue that negative coverage of Wright would be linked to Wright’s perceived violation of mainstream religious values. Gans’ theory would hold that negative coverage of Wright would be linked to Wright’s perceived violation of a set of mainstream values of secular orientation.

³⁴⁸ Watkins, “Framing Protest,” 98.

³⁴⁹ Gitlin, *World is Watching*, 152.

³⁵⁰ Watkins, “Framing Protest,” 98.

³⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 98.

Herbert Gans' Enduring News Values

Gans, who is a media sociologist, conducted a study of “the news,” which he defined as a description of “...the picture of America as nation and society that appears in the national news media....” He developed a theory of framing he called “enduring values” of the press.³⁵² In the study, Gans sought to find a recurring pattern and structure in news content by examining national television newscasts—CBS and NBC—and stories published in national news magazines—*Newsweek* and *Time*. He concludes:

The news consists not only of the findings of empirical inquiry but also of the concepts and methods which go into that inquiry, the assumptions which underlie concepts and methods, and a further set of assumptions which could be tested empirically if journalists had the time. These assumptions being mainly about the nature of external reality, I call them reality judgments. ... Like other empirical disciplines, the news does not limit itself to reality judgments; it also contains values, or preference statements.... Journalists try hard to be objective, but neither they nor anyone else can in the end proceed without values.

Furthermore, reality judgments are never altogether divorced from values.³⁵³

Gans posits that news values are not explicit. Instead, they are found between the lines and are to be inferred because journalists typically do not “...deliberately insert values into the news.”³⁵⁴ Similarly, Gans argues that different individuals might infer different values from what they read because they possess different preconceptions about issues.³⁵⁵ All of this interaction between individuals and the news echoes the underlying complexities in framing theory. However, the interpretive nature of framing theory has proven useful in studies of media coverage and has emerged as a popular tool for scholars. Gans developed what he called a cluster of eight enduring

³⁵² Herbert J. Gans, *Deciding What's News: A Study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek, and Time*, (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1979), 3.

³⁵³ *Ibid.*, 39.

³⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 40.

³⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 40.

values in the news—ethnocentrism, altruistic democracy, responsible capitalism, small-town pastoralism, individualism, moderatism, social order, and national leadership.³⁵⁶ His framing theory was widely embraced by scholars.

Gitlin credited Gans with giving him a starting point for discussing how certain stories are selected as news. He referred to Gans' enduring values as "journalist-centered" theories that purport to "...explain the news as a product of professional news judgments," which are designed to help the press serve the public's interest "by following its own stated and unstated rules concerning objectivity."³⁵⁷ Stephen D. Reese, in a 2009 study, applauded Gans for providing "remarkable insights" into the press' work and labeled his study "an exemplar of the 'media sociology' approach to newsmaking."³⁵⁸ Gans offered a historical context that, Reese said, helped scholars better analyze how news is constructed and inspired others to study the ways that news is processed.³⁵⁹

The hypothesis of the present study is grounded in the researcher's belief that many journalists writing for the selected mainstream publications used frames in their coverage of Wright that cast him as deviant in light of at least two of Gans' enduring values: ethnocentrism and moderatism. Wright, the researcher is arguing, was portrayed as an anti-American extremist because his criticisms of American political policies were seen as criticisms of America, which violates the principle of ethnocentrism. The tone of his sermons and his views about race and other social

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 42.

³⁵⁷ Gitlin, *World is Watching*, 249.

³⁵⁸ See Stephen D. Reese, "Managing the symbolic arena: The media sociology of Herbert Gans" in L. Becker, C. Holtz-Bacha & G. Reust (Eds.), *Festschrift for Klaus Schoenbach* (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag fuer Sozialwissenschaften, 2009), 279-280.

³⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 280.

issues were portrayed as angry and excessively radical for the present times, which violates the principle of moderatism.

Scholars have highlighted the value that Americans often place on ethnocentrism, calling it an identity issue with a dark side to it.³⁶⁰ Anthropologists Serena Nanda and Richard Warms posit:

Ethnocentrism is the notion that one's own culture is superior to any other. It is the idea that other cultures should be measured by the degree to which they live up to our cultural standards. We are ethnocentric when we view other cultures through the narrow lens of our own culture or social position.³⁶¹

Ethnocentrism is relevant to the present study. Wright became the focus of news coverage because he made statements that were viewed as anti-American by factions of mainstream Americans, placing him in conflict with dominant cultural standards.

In his explication of ethnocentrism, Gans states:

Like the news of other countries, American news values its own nation above all, even though it sometimes disparages blatant patriotism. This ethnocentrism comes through most explicitly in foreign news, which judges other countries by the extent to which they live up to or imitate American practices and values...³⁶²

Gans also points out that ethnocentrism in news is further characterized in accounts that are critical of domestic conditions seen as deviant. The coverage often lifts up the implication, he said, that American ideals must "remain viable."³⁶³

And despite the value that Americans and the news media place on individualism, Gans argues that the value of moderatism serves as a balancing mechanism by which "...groups that exhibit what is seen as extreme behavior are criticized in the news through pejorative adjectives or a satirical tone...polar opposites are questioned and

³⁶⁰ See Harry C. Triandis, *Culture and Social Behavior* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994), 23; see also Larry A. Samovar, Richard E. Porter, Edwin R. McDaniel and Carolyn S. Roy, *Communication Between Cultures* (Boston: Wadsworth, 2013), 8-9.

³⁶¹ S. Nanda and R.L. Warms, *Cultural Anthropology*, 10th edition (Australia: Cengage Advantage Books, 2011), 10.

³⁶² Gans, *Deciding What's News*, 42.

³⁶³ *Ibid.*

moderate solutions are upheld... Lack of moderation is wrong, whether it involves excess or abstention.”³⁶⁴

Ethnocentrism and moderatism intersect with a broader body of literature on news as well as culture. Some specific overarching principles related to generally held news values—as typically taught to aspiring journalists—can help to further explain how Gans’ values can be discerned in news coverage. One of those principles is the idea that conflict or controversy becomes an indicator or trigger for news coverage. This has previously been noted by Gans as it relates to “extreme behavior” that falls outside of the principles associated with enduring values. Scholars who produce textbooks for journalistic training routinely identify conflict as a major news value. “Conflict—whether it involves people, government bodies or sports teams—is often considered newsworthy,” assert textbook authors Bruce D. Itule and Douglas A. Anderson.³⁶⁵ Conflict is recognized as common theme in all types of storytelling, from journalistic to literature to drama, according to Brian Brooks and a team of textbook authors known as the Missouri Group. “Struggles between people, among nations or with natural forces make fascinating reading,” they posit. But they add a warning: “Conflict is such a basic element of life that journalists must resist the temptation to overdramatize or oversimplify it.”³⁶⁶

Over-dramatization or oversimplification often has been one of the flags associated with framing. Such tension is resident in Entman’s definition, which asserts that framing is the practice of selecting “some aspects of a perceived reality”

³⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 51-52.

³⁶⁵ Bruce D. Itule and Douglas A. Anderson (2003). *News Writing and Reporting for Today’s Media* (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2003), 16

³⁶⁶ Brian S. Brooks, George Kennedy, Daryl R. Moen and Don Ranly, *News Reporting and Writing* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2005), 5-7.

and making them “more salient in a communicating text.”³⁶⁷ That suggests that the process of framing is susceptible to leaving out or ignoring contexts that could better explain what is at issue and why. Wright and his supporters often made this claim.³⁶⁸ Tuchman believes the news coverage provided by journalists often is shaped by the ideas of the mainstream or dominant group in society, which defines cultural norms that all individuals are ultimately expected to embrace.³⁶⁹

Cultural studies scholars Sandra Hybels and Richard L. Weaver II distinguish ethnocentrism from patriotism, which they define as devotion to one’s country. “Ethnocentrism carries devotion to the extreme point,” they argue, “where you cannot believe that another culture’s behaviors, norms, ways of thinking, and ways of being are as good or as worthy as your own.”³⁷⁰ Ethnocentrism and moderatism will be key issues in this exploration of how mainstream news media framed the Rev. Jeremiah Wright during the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign. This study also will integrate a 1995 theory advanced by Mark Silk, which will be described in the following pages. Silk’s theory seeks to make sense of how news media cover religion-related news events.

Framing of Religion in News Media

The implications of framing theory for the study of how religion is portrayed by the media are significant, and growing numbers of studies have sought to explore this

³⁶⁷ Entman, “Framing U.S. Coverage,” 5.

³⁶⁸ See Herman and Peterson, Grant and Grant, et al.

³⁶⁹ Tuchman, *Making News*, 205-206.

³⁷⁰ Sandra Hybels and Richard L. Weaver II, *Communicating Effectively* (New York: McGraw-Hill 2012), 238.

topic. Stout and Buddenbaum argue that people react to events or occurrences in the world based, in large part, on information coming to them through frames. Framing, they say, "determines the types of information that ultimately contribute to public opinion about particular religions."³⁷¹

Over time, various theories have emerged about how religion is framed by journalists. The present study will incorporate and test Silk's "Unsecular Media" theory because, as noted in earlier chapters of this study, Silk's work contradicted the prevailing notions held by many media and religion scholars that the mainstream press often missed the mark in reporting about religion because it secularized its coverage of religion. Silk concluded that journalists actually used mainstream religious values to frame their coverage of religion.³⁷² That assertion is one of the driving foci of this present study and is significant in light of what scholars have concluded about framing theory.

Mark Silk's Unsecular Media Theory and Religious Topoi

Studies about how news media framed religious issues have yielded various outcomes.³⁷³ However, within the growing body of media and religion literature, it is

³⁷¹ Daniel Stout and Judith M. Buddenbaum, "Media, Religion, and Framing," *Journal of Media and Religion*, 2 (1), 2003, 1.

³⁷² Silk, *Unsecular Media*, xi-xii.

³⁷³ Cynthia McCune found that public debates about the teaching of evolution in Tennessee were framed by all parties involved and not just by the media. Sherry Baker and Joel Campbell concluded that five factors – media, the Mormon Church, other religions, secularism, and politics – influenced media representations of Mormon identity during the 2008 presidential campaign coverage that was focused on Mitt Romney. Chiung Hwang Chen concluded that many stereotypical images of Mormons were not challenged in coverage of the 2002 Winter Olympics that took place in Utah. Peter A. Kerr found in an analysis of 20 years of network television news that fundamentalists were reported in a "consistent, mildly negative manner" with conflict as the prevailing news value employed by journalists in their coverage. But the study also found that fundamentalists were generally portrayed as patriotic. In a study of coverage about a political fight that erupted in a small Missouri town seeking to add a fish symbol – often associated with the Christian faith – to its city seal, Mark Paxton found that the plaintiff was framed as a "religious outsider" because she was a Wiccan. See Cynthia A. McCune,

Silk who continues to stand out as a decidedly distinct voice. Silk’s “Unsecular Media” theory posits that journalists covering religion issues frame their stories by using a series of topoi—general conceptions or commonplace cultural values and ideas that can help advance or strengthen an argument—that are borrowed from religion and are “stock sentiments and figures that journalists share with their public—and from which they learn not to deviate too far.”³⁷⁴ Silk drew this conclusion after conducting a content analysis of hundreds of newspapers.

Silk outlined seven topoi that he argues should help audiences better appreciate what journalists do. For this present study, the researcher will seek to identify which, if any, of the topoi were used in coverage of Wright. They include:

Good Works as a topos that presupposes that “religion is a good thing” and religious figures and institutions are working to benefit both their members and the communities in which they are situated. Silk argues that this topos is evidenced by the inclusion of church notes, calendar of events and feature stories on what congregations or individuals of various faiths are doing. Silk cited numerous other examples of stories in publications from Boston to Atlanta, highlighting the good works of religious organizations and their leaders. But he also points out that so-

“Framing Reality: Shaping the News Coverage of the 1996 Tennessee Debate on Teaching Evolution,” *Journal of Media and Religion*, 2 (1), 2003, 5-28. Sherry Baker and Joel Campbell, “Mitt Romney’s Religion: A Five Factor Model for Analysis of Media Representation of Mormon Identity,” *Journal of Media and Religion*, 9, 2010, 99-121. Chiung Hwang Chen, “‘Molympics’? Journalistic Discourse of Mormons in Relation to the 2002 Winter Olympic Games,” *Journal of Media and Religion*, 2(1), 2003, 29-47. Peter A. Kerr, “The Framing of Fundamentalist Christians: Network Television News, 1980-2000: *Journal of Media and Religion*, 2(4), 2003, 203-235. Mark Paxton, “Gone Fishin’: A Framing Analysis of the Fight Over a Small Town’s City Seal,” *Journal of Media and Religion*, 3(1), 2004, 43-55.

³⁷⁴ Silk, *Unsecular Media*, 49-50.

called negative stories usually show up when someone is thought to be in violation of the ethos of good works.³⁷⁵

Tolerance, Silk argues, is a topos associated with the protection of religion as articulated in the First Amendment—that government is not to sanction or restrict one religious practice over others and that news media coverage focuses on “the virtue of toleration and the vice of intolerance.”³⁷⁶

Hypocrisy is an important topos for religion given that much of religion is concerned with a call to certain ethical standards or behavior. Indeed, Silk argues that it is a concept deeply embedded in Western religious ideology and is essentially defined as “the false pretense of piety and virtue.”³⁷⁷ As a trigger for news coverage, Silk adds, hypocrisy “is fundamentally a topos of personal moral defect that charges religious leaders with violating norms of behavior that they (are presumed to) profess.”³⁷⁸

False Prophecy comes into play as a topos when norms generally associated with appropriate religious practice “are rejected as a matter of religious doctrine.” It is then that the religion or religious practitioner can be called into question with the “false prophet” being “portrayed as sincere or hypocritical, but either way, he (or she) is an affront to the social order.”³⁷⁹ Silk cites early coverage of the Mormon Church as one example of this, particularly as the news media focused on the practice of polygamy. Interestingly, the religion still battles with this issue today, though it long has since renounced the practice. Other minority religious movements—such as the Church of

³⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 57.

³⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 66.

³⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 87.

³⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 91.

³⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 91.

Scientology, Hare Krishna, and Children of God—have often been labeled as cults and accused of such “control” practices as brainwashing.³⁸⁰

Inclusion is a topos “in which a suspect faith is shown to be composed of good Americans worshipping according to their own worthy lights,” Silk posits.³⁸¹ It is almost as if all new or unfamiliar religious movements are subjected to a probation period of sorts in which both the public and news media look for signs that they are “another authentic religious body whose activities enrich the community at large.”³⁸² Silk notes that Judaism, Mormonism, Jehovah’s Witnesses and Christian Science have been among the religions that faced this type of scrutiny before being accorded a status as “familiar unconventional religious bodies.”³⁸³ “But just as the inclusion topos draws its strength from ambient Americanism, so its anti-topos is foreignness.”³⁸⁴

Supernatural Belief is a topos that is concerned with religious matters that to some extent range from the basic to more complicated, depending upon one’s perspective. On a basic level, the supernatural belief topos is centered on the belief in a supreme being that largely has been conveyed from generation to generation through myths—or stories—and accounts of personal experiences that are beyond what Silk calls empirical determination. Beyond questions about whether God—or gods—exists or the historical accuracy of stories about various supernatural religious figures—such as Jesus Christ—are questions about contemporary claims of supernatural occurrences, such as miracles of healings or sighting of visions. To point

³⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 95.

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 106.

³⁸² *Ibid.*, 107.

³⁸³ *Ibid.*, 108.

³⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 108.

out the inherent tension between news and religious phenomena, Silk quotes John Seigenthaler, the one-time editor of the *Tennessean* newspaper in Nashville and one of the founders of the Freedom Forum's First Amendment Center, who suggests that religion and media are "two alien cultures—one rooted largely in search for facts and the other grounded in a discovery of faith beyond fact."³⁸⁵ For Silk, the news media's role is not to prove or disprove the factuality of supernatural phenomena but rather to "let the word go forth" by reporting the facts associated with such stories and doing so without judgment. "It seems clear that whatever journalists' personal beliefs, the mainstream news media's approach to the supernatural has become more tabloid than skeptical—often less skeptical than that of church authorities."³⁸⁶

Declension is the final topos lifted up by Silk as a means of explaining what journalists do when reporting news about religion and why. The topos is focused on the institutional decline of religion in the United States or the documented patterns that show growing numbers of Americans have departed from mainline Protestant denominations—some to embrace independent religious movements, others to move away from religious practice altogether. Silk points out that this issue has been somewhat constant throughout the history of America, with intermittent periods of heightened spiritual awareness among the populace and seemingly the same periods of decline.³⁸⁷

Silk concludes his study by declaring his analysis of content proves that the news media are "far from promoting a secularist agenda of their own," but many religious people continue to believe otherwise "because people fail to register what gives no

³⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 119. See also Dart & Allen, *Bridging the Gap*, 3.

³⁸⁶ Silk, 122.

³⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 135.

offense,” focusing instead on news accounts that he argues are justifiably “turbulent and contentious.”³⁸⁸

As noted in this study’s introduction, Silk’s “*Unsecular Media*” theory was praised by media and religion scholars as groundbreaking on several fronts. But they also issued a call for more scholars to test his theory in order to more adequately address theoretical implications of his study’s conclusions or how they can be practically applied by journalists or private citizens. Stout lifted up the need for future research but maintained his praise for the study because it “pursued something other than the usual questions about religion news coverage” and provided long overdue suggestions about taking a “closer look at the cultural foundations of our discourse about religion news...”³⁸⁹ As also already noted, few scholars have heeded the call to look deeper at the concepts promoted by Silk. This present study is heeding the call.

The researcher has concluded that framing theory is multifaceted in its definition and application but generally asserts that journalists use concepts or devices to organize and make sense of the news in coherent ways that can ultimately contribute to the public’s opinions about particular religions. A number of specific framing theories have emerged over time regarding how news is generally constructed as well as how journalists frame reports about religion. Among media and religion scholars, the issue of how religion is framed has largely been dichotomized, which suggests additional opportunities of inquiry. Thus, framing theory offers this researcher useful concepts for exploring the present study’s central questions, which include, how did journalists frame coverage of Rev. Wright, his sermons and

³⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 141.

³⁸⁹ Stout, “Review of *Unsecular Media*,” 128.

theology? Who were the sources of those frames and were they clearly identified in coverage? Were there major differences in how alternative publications framed Wright in coverage? Does a framing analysis of coverage provide support for Silk's theory or Gans? The next chapter will connect theories related to framing to the study's methodology.

Chapter 5: Methodology

John W. Creswell, an educational psychology professor at the University of Nebraska, suggests that researchers address critical questions related to methodology as they design a research project.³⁹⁰ This chapter describes the methodological approach utilized in this dissertation, outlines the selection of data to be examined and explains how the material was categorized for analysis. The present study examines how three mainstream and three alternative newspapers framed their news coverage of the Rev. Jeremiah A. Wright Jr. during the historic 2008 Democratic presidential primary campaign, when Wright became newsworthy because he was the pastor of Barack Obama who eventually was elected the nation's first African American president.

This chapter will summarize the methods used in this study to address the following research questions and hypothesis: How did journalists frame coverage of Wright, his sermons and theology? Who were the sources of those frames and were they clearly identified in coverage? Does a framing analysis of coverage provide support for Mark Silk's theory that the press uses religious or unsecular values to cover religion news stories or Herbert Gans' theory that the press generally relies on a set of enduring values (that are secular in nature) to cover the news? Were there major differences in how alternative publications framed Wright in coverage? This study's hypothesis: Wright and black prophetic theology largely were framed as deviant by mainstream publications because his rhetoric violated prevailing

³⁹⁰ Creswell, *Research Design*, 4-5.

mainstream values, particularly those associated with ethnocentrism and moderatism. These are two values Gans (1979) has argued shape the ways journalists report the news.

Methodological Approach

The researcher chose textual analysis as the method for identifying the news frames or themes journalists at the selected publications emphasized in their coverage of Wright. The method also allowed the researcher to analyze theories of press coverage that might best explain why journalists covered Wright as they did.

Textual analysis, which some scholars also call qualitative content analysis, is a systematic methodology employed in the social sciences to study the thematic and symbolic features of content in order to determine the objective or meaning of the communication. Janet Staiger defines textual analysis as a “scholarly analysis of written and oral texts,”³⁹¹ which is what the present study proposes to do. Alan McKee expands on that by saying textual analysis allows researchers to gather information about how humans make sense of the world:

It is a methodology – a data-gathering process – for those researchers who want to understand the ways in which members of various cultures and subcultures make sense of who they are, and of how they fit into the world in which they live. Textual analysis is useful for researchers working in cultural studies, media studies, in mass communication, and perhaps even in sociology and philosophy.³⁹²

This researcher’s primary interests are grounded largely in cultural and media studies, with a strong interest in how religious messages are interpreted by journalists and everyday citizens once those messages enter into the public sphere. That is

³⁹¹ Janet Staiger, *Media Reception Studies* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 8.

³⁹² Alan McKee, *Textual Analysis* (London: Sage Publications, 2005), 1.

largely the focus of the present study—how journalists at selected publications made sense of Rev. Wright’s sermons and theology.

Michael Quinn Patton, an independent evaluation consultant, offers additional support for why a qualitative study is useful for the present investigation. He defines the analysis of texts as “any qualitative data reduction and sense-making effort that takes a volume of qualitative material and attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings.”³⁹³ Hsiu-Fang Hsieh and Sarah E. Shannon prefer the term qualitative content analysis and define it as “a method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns.” They note that it is just one of several methods that can be used to analyze text data. Others include ethnography, grounded theory, phenomenology and historical research. Hsieh and Shannon note that qualitative analysis focuses on content and contextual meaning of texts,³⁹⁴ suggesting that textual analysis might be a very useful tool for working journalists who frequently have been accused of reporting information—and particularly speech—out of context. Yan Zhang and Barbara M. Wildemuth, who also prefer the term qualitative content analysis, assert that it is “one of today’s most extensively employed analytical tools.”

³⁹⁵ For the purpose of consistency, this researcher uses the term textual analysis.

Some scholars have argued that this method is useful because it is flexible, ranging

³⁹³ Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2002), 453.

³⁹⁴ Hsiu-Fang Hsieh and Sarah E. Shannon, “Three Approaches to Qualitative Content Analysis,” *Qualitative Health Research*, Vol. 15, No. 9, November 2005, 1278. See also Renata Tesch, *Qualitative research: Analysis types and software tools* (Bristol, PA: Falmer, 1990). See also Donald G. McTavish and Ellen Pirro, “Contextual Content Analysis,” *Quality & Quantity*, 24: 1990, 245-265.

³⁹⁵ Yan Zhang and Barbara M. Wildemuth, “Qualitative Analysis of Content” in *Applications of Social Research Methods to Questions in Information and Library Science*, B. Wildemuth, ed. (Westport, CT: 2009), 308.

from impressionistic to systematic.³⁹⁶ Gitlin, who completed a landmark study of how the New Left movement was covered by the press, said he had theoretical reasons for choosing what he called an exhaustive qualitative approach to studying that piece of news history:

I wanted the suppleness of the qualitative ‘literary’ approach to cultural artifacts....I wanted to ‘tease out’ those determining but hidden assumptions which in their unique ordering remain opaque to quantitative content analysis. At its best, qualitative analysis is more flexible than the quantitative kind; it aspires to a level of complexity (I do not claim it is bound to achieve it) that remains true to the actual complexity and contradictoriness of media artifacts.³⁹⁷

Hsieh and Shannon identify three distinct approaches to textual analysis, which they say can be used to interpret meaning from content. The first is called “conventional analysis.” It allows researchers to describe a phenomenon when the existing theory or research literature is limited. This approach is useful because the researcher can gain information without imposing preconceived categories upon the data.³⁹⁸ It is an inductive process that allows the researcher to collect information and draw conclusions or develop theories or hypotheses. But there are challenges associated with this first approach, including the potential failure to grasp context and identify key categories.³⁹⁹

The second approach to textual analysis listed by Hsieh and Shannon is called “directed analysis.” It might be preferred if the existing theory or prior research regarding the theory is incomplete or could benefit from additional study and description. The goal of this approach is to either “validate or extend conceptually (an

³⁹⁶ See Stephen Cavanagh, “Content analysis: concepts, methods and applications,” *Nurse Researcher*, 4, 3, April 1997, 5-16.

³⁹⁷ Gitlin, *World is Watching*, 303.

³⁹⁸ Hsieh and Shannon, “Three Approaches,” 1279.

³⁹⁹ *Ibid*, 1280.

existing) theoretical framework or theory,” which classifies this approach as more deductive. “Existing theory or research can help focus the research question” which can “provide predictions about the variables of interest,” Hsieh and Shannon conclude.⁴⁰⁰ This second approach’s major strength lies in supporting and extending existing theory, which helps to inform future research.⁴⁰¹

The third approach is known as a “summative analysis,” which bears greater resemblance to quantitative content analysis because it identifies and quantifies specific words or text content in order to understand their contextual use. But it differs in that it goes on to analyze latent content, which is a process of interpretation that attempts to discover “underlying meanings of the words or the content.” Researchers often use this approach to analyze types of manuscripts or specific content in textbooks. The process often begins with searches for words that are identified and selected in advance and concludes with interpretation of the context in which the word or phrase is used. This approach is lauded for being “unobtrusive and nonreactive” in the study of a phenomenon. But it is assailed for “inattention to the broader meanings present in the data.”⁴⁰²

The study proposed in these pages will rely on some aspects on all three approaches Hsieh and Shannon outlined, but it will be most consistent in using directed analysis because one of the researcher’s chief intentions is to test two specific theories of how journalists report news about religion. Some scholars have been critical of textual analysis, including individuals associated with the Glasgow University Media Group, which had led the charge in producing journalism research

⁴⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 1281.

⁴⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 1281.

⁴⁰² *Ibid.*, 1283-1285.

that favored the culturalist approach. Greg Philo, a professor of communications and social change, had been a part of the group and was at the forefront of the movement. But he issued a stinging critique of stand-alone textual analysis methods, arguing they do not sufficiently integrate the context of production or audience reception. Philo advocated for an approach that seeks to examine “mass communication as a totality” by highlighting the social meanings as they derive from production and move to content and reception.⁴⁰³

Elfriede Fursich was among those who have defended textual analysis against such attacks, asserting that the inherent features of media texts legitimize the singularly-focused approach to studying them:

My central argument is that media texts present a distinctive discursive moment between encoding and decoding that justifies special scholarly engagement. The narrative character of media content, its potential as a site of ideological negotiation and its impact as mediated ‘reality’ necessities interpretation in its own right.⁴⁰⁴

Even so, Fursich lamented what he called lackluster attention by media culturalist scholars to issues of methodology. “A typical cultural studies publication does not elaborate on a method section; sometimes the utilized material and research strategies stay in the dark.”⁴⁰⁵

Some of the debate about the value of textual analysis is tied to a larger debate about the inherent value of qualitative research as a method of scientific inquiry. Stanley J. Baran, a widely published mass communication researcher who has led graduate programs at the University of Texas at Austin and San Jose State University,

⁴⁰³ Greg Philo, “Can Discourse Analysis Successfully Explain the Content of Media and Journalistic Practice?” *Journalism Studies* Vol. 8, 2007, 194.

⁴⁰⁴ Elfriede Fursich, “In Defense of Textual Analysis: restoring a challenged method for journalism and media studies,” *Journalism Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 2, 2009, 238.

⁴⁰⁵ *Ibid*, 239.

and Dennis K. Davis, a scholar in mass communication theory, method and political communication at Pennsylvania State University, suggest that qualitative methodology is not an empirical-research method because it is what scholars consider an interpretive approach that is largely concerned with discovering the qualities that might be resident in particular phenomena. For that reason, they argue that qualitative findings are subject to debate and the resulting “theory’s power lies in its ability to attract adherents and be defended against attacks from opponents.”⁴⁰⁶ Quantitative research, they posit, is conducted based on “prevailing standards” of empiricism and typically generate findings that “can be readily accepted throughout the research community” because the studies easily can be replicated by others who can then report conflicting findings if they are discovered.⁴⁰⁷

However, Creswell and other scholars, such as Robert S. Fortner, a professor of journalism at the American University in Bulgaria, and University of Illinois ethicist Clifford G. Christians, argue that empirical research methods can be divided into two categories: quantitative, which analyzes data using statistical methods, and qualitative, which is rooted in a cultural or humanistic approach, for which “statistically verifiable results are not appropriate.”⁴⁰⁸ They add, however, that such realities do not equate to a lack of rigor, which is one of the standard claims made to affirm the value of quantitative research. Fortner and Christians join others in advocating the value of qualitative research for what it purports to do: examine

⁴⁰⁶ Stanley J. Baran and Dennis K. Davis, *Mass Communication Theory: Foundations, Ferment and Future*, 2nd Ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2000), 219.

⁴⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰⁸ See Robert S. Fortner and Clifford G. Christians, “Separating Wheat from Chaff in Qualitative Studies,” in *Mass Communication Research and Theory*, edited by Guido H. Stempel, III, David H. Weaver and G. Cleveland Wilhoit, 350-351. (Boston: Pearson Education Inc., 2003).

meaning “that has been generated and used by persons who would influence others,” including “those who have created cultural materials as interpretations of existence.”⁴⁰⁹ That would include the production of documents, such as newspaper reports, which are the focus of this present study.

Adrian Holliday, a linguistic professor at Canterbury Christ Church University, argues that qualitative research can be rigorous and disciplined because “there is science within its complex nature.”⁴¹⁰ He said qualitative researchers locate their studies within discrete settings which allow them to explore a wide-range of social variables and establish “manageable boundaries.”⁴¹¹ He notes that the research evolves out of the researcher’s interest and advances with a conviction that “what is important to look for will emerge.”⁴¹² Rigor is the result of what he calls a “principled development of research strategy” that is suited to the scenario.⁴¹³ He said rigor also is best expressed in how the researcher writes, and he urges caution in drawing philosophical distinctions between quantitative and qualitative research:

I shall argue that qualitative research presents a statement about reality and social life that has to be continually argued and reaffirmed. It is this need for constant articulation that makes writing as important as other aspects of doing the research....Social research is a complex area, and attempts to divide it into hard categories will always suffer from oversimplification. Qualitative research will always involve quantitative elements and vice versa.⁴¹⁴

Robert K. Yin, who chairs his own applied research firm and collaborates with Massachusetts Institute of Technology, also argues that no research method is entirely quantitative or qualitative. He is among those who suggest that the best scholarship

⁴⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴¹⁰ Adrian Holliday, *Doing and Writing Qualitative Research*, Second Edition (London: Sage Publications, 2007), 1.

⁴¹¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴¹² *Ibid.*

⁴¹³ *Ibid.*

⁴¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

incorporates some aspects of both methods.⁴¹⁵ British scholars Ros Johnson and Jackie Waterfield posit that qualitative research allows the researcher to delve deeper into issues, particularly those that are complex in nature. They also assert that judgments about the quality of research should be appropriate to each example of research—not a dismissal of the entire methodology. In an attempt to gain greater respect for qualitative research, they note, that some advocate for including features in qualitative work that equate to the quantitative concepts of reliability and validity. But others challenge whether that is appropriate.⁴¹⁶

Another British researcher, Stewart Kirk, suggests it is important to be mindful of what qualitative research can tell the researcher and what it cannot. He asserts that it can answer questions about why and how but cannot answer questions about how much or how many because that is statistical data.⁴¹⁷ The chief research question for the present study probes how mainstream news media framed coverage of Rev. Jeremiah A. Wright Jr. during the period being investigated. Consideration of theory will explore the question of why they did so.

In light of prevailing features of the qualitative research paradigm, there are several reasons why textual analysis is the appropriate method of collecting and analyzing data for this investigation. Chief among them: textual analysis is a flexible approach that offers varied avenues for examining material; as a qualitative study it is

⁴¹⁵ See Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research: Design Methods*, Second Edition (San Francisco: Sage Publications, 1994).

⁴¹⁶ Ros Johnson and Jackie Waterfield, "Making words count: the value of qualitative research," *Physiotherapy Research International*, 9(3), 2004, 121-123.

⁴¹⁷ See Stewart Kirk, "The Value of Qualitative Research," accessed September 12, 2012, http://ezineArticles.com/?expert=Stewart_Kirk

suited for answering questions about “how” and “why”; and it is appropriate for producing an analysis designed to provide insight into a particular subset or case, which is the intention of this present study.

Selection of Data

This study uses 216 news stories, commentaries and editorials from six publications that were purposively selected to be included in this dissertation’s investigation. News stories are published articles written in third person and presumed to be objective accounts because information included in them is attributed to both named and unnamed sources. Commentaries are published articles featuring either first-person language or the opinions and views of the writer with little to no attribution to other sources, except those that buoy the writer’s perspective or opinion. Editorials are published articles written by a board of writers or editors who jointly represent the viewpoint of the publication on a given subject. These three types of published articles will give a full perspective on how each publication covered Wright and issues associated with him.

Because this study is intended to be a comparative analysis, the researcher decided to select both mainstream and alternative publications to be part of the sample population. Mainstream publications are those whose predominant audience comprises the nation’s largest racial group, which is Caucasian or non-Hispanic white. These publications typically are geared toward a general audience and have subscribed to principles of objectivity and fairness but also have been identified as profit driven organizations characterized by some level of commitment to hegemony

or supporting the status quo.⁴¹⁸ This researcher views mainstream publications as those general-interest daily newspapers primarily focused on reaching the dominant or majority race population in the United States.

Alternative publications focus on discrete groups or subcultures. Their audiences are considered minorities either because of their racial background or some special interest. Scholars note that the term alternative has various other meanings associated with it. Marisol Sandoval and Christian Fuchs argue for a definition that highlights an organizational structure that is participatory and has a non-commercial financing structure.⁴¹⁹ Chris Atton argues that alternative publications focus on opinions of small minorities, often express ideas “hostile to widely-held (or mainstream) beliefs,” and feature viewpoints or subjects that do not receive regular coverage in mainstream publications.⁴²⁰

Several other factors influenced the selection of the publications included in this investigation. The researcher hails from a newspaper background and has an interest in how mainstream newspapers report news about religion. Wright is an African American religious figure. This study therefore focuses on three mainstream newspapers (*Chicago Sun-Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The New York Times*), two alternative publications aimed primarily at African Americans (*Chicago Defender* and *The Washington Afro-American*), and one alternative publication aimed primarily at a religious constituency (*The Christian Century* based in Chicago).

⁴¹⁸ David L. Altheide, “Media Hegemony: A Failure of Perspective,” *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (Summer 1984), 476-490.

⁴¹⁹ Marisol Sandoval and Christian Fuchs, “Towards a critical theory of alternative media,” *Telematics and Informatics*, 27 (2010), 141-150.

⁴²⁰ Chris Atton, “A reassessment of the alternative press,” *Media, Culture & Society*, 21:1 (1999). 51-76

The researcher chose Chicago-based publications for this study because both Wright and Obama call Chicago home. The *Sun-Times* was chosen over its rival *Chicago Tribune* because it offered ongoing separate daily reports about the campaign by two staff writers—one black and the other white—which provides an opportunity for additional comparative analysis. *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* are national newspapers and routinely considered the industry's elite publications. As such, they are generally thought to produce the best—most thorough and accurate—examples of journalistic reporting and writing. The researcher chose the three alternative publications because they are situated in key markets associated with the coverage of Wright and target specific audiences that are presumed to be more acquainted with Wright and his theology than the general population. *The Christian Century*, for instance, is focused on a largely white progressive religious constituency that tends to hold more liberal views on issues related to social justice and politics. Its staff and readers are more likely to be familiar with Wright's theological perspective because of Wright's affiliation with a denomination that is among those identifying themselves as progressives. African-American newspapers and religious periodicals typically offer different perspectives from mainstream publications; this study investigates whether there is such evidence in coverage of Wright.

After selecting the publications to be included in this investigation, the researcher conducted extensive database searches to identify all articles featured in each publication that included a reference to the Rev. Jeremiah A. Wright Jr. from the time Obama announced his candidacy in February 2007 until the time that Obama

formally denounced his association with Wright at the end of April 2008. Key search terms included Wright's full name and title, as well as "Trinity United Church of Christ," which is the name of the congregation he oversaw as pastor. The search of the mainstream publications included in this study returned more than 500 articles with references to Wright or Trinity Church. The search of alternative publications included in this study returned about 60 articles with references to Wright and Trinity Church. Articles that were letters to the editors were immediately excluded from the sample.

News stories, commentaries and editorials by the editorial boards of each publication were examined to determine if there were detectable frames related to Wright, his speech, religious beliefs and political worldview. Frames "are manifested" in a text, according to Entman, "by the presence or absence of certain key words, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information, and sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgments."⁴²¹ Frames define problems, diagnose their cause, evaluate the "causal agents and their effects," and suggest remedies or solutions.⁴²² After completing this initial framing analysis, the researcher chose to include 216 published articles in this study because each of them included at least one example that fit Entman's definition of what constitutes a frame. The articles were then categorized into the three main categories: News, Commentary and Editorial (See Table 1). Mainstream publications produced 182 of the reports selected for analysis. Alternative publications produced thirty-four of the analyzed reports.

⁴²¹ Entman, "Fractured Paradigm," 52.

⁴²² *Ibid.*

Categories for Analysis

Hsieh and Shannon note that all the approaches to qualitative textual analysis share similar analytical processes, but they argue that the success of a study is largely dependent upon the coding process, which allows the researcher to systematically organize large amounts of textual data into manageable content categories.⁴²³

Zhang and Wildemuth note that qualitative analyses of content usually focus on “individual themes as the unit for analysis, rather than the physical linguistic units,” such as a word, sentence or paragraph. A theme, however, might be found in a word, phrase, sentence, paragraph or the entire document. “When using theme as the coding unit, you are primarily looking for the expressions of an idea. Thus you might assign a code to a text chunk or any size, as long as that chunk represents a single theme or issue of relevance to your research questions.”⁴²⁴

The initial basis for developing codes and identifying units of analysis for the present study was shaped by the researcher’s decision to pursue what Hsieh and Shannon called a directed analysis of the selected content. The researcher’s objective was to build on existing theory and prior research regarding how journalists cover religion news and why. The themes outlined in theories by Silk (1995) and Gans (1979) served as initial codes for analysis.

Silk outlined seven topoi that he held up as proof that journalists use religious concepts to report about religion-themed news. For this present study, the researcher

⁴²³ See Hsieh and Shannon, “Three Approaches,” 1285. See also R.P. Weber, *Basic content analysis* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1990).

⁴²⁴ Zhang and Wildemuth, “Qualitative Content,” 3.

will seek to identify which, if any, of the topoi were used in coverage of Wright. They include:

Good Works, a topos that focuses on the positive activities of religious figures and the organizations they lead. To identify the good works topos in news stories, commentaries and editorials, the researcher will look for examples that show Wright and his congregation doing things that benefit the members of Trinity or the community at large. Silk suggests that this topos could also come into play when an individual or congregation does things that violate the ethos of good works.⁴²⁵

Tolerance, a topos that highlights the acceptance or rights of religious practitioners.⁴²⁶ This research will define the tolerance topos by language in news coverage that promotes the understanding of Wright and his theological perspective as opposed to language that casts him and his views in controversial terms.

Hypocrisy, a topos that focuses on the violation of widely held ethical standards.⁴²⁷ The researcher will define the hypocrisy topos by identifying frames that charge Wright with violating values he claims to profess.⁴²⁸

False Prophecy, a topos that focuses on violation of mainstream religious doctrine as observed or understood by theologians and religious experts.⁴²⁹ The researcher will define the false prophecy topos by identifying language that characterizes Wright and his religious practices as deviant from mainstream Christianity. Such

⁴²⁵ Silk, *Unsecular Media*, 57.

⁴²⁶ *Ibid*, 66.

⁴²⁷ *Ibid*, 87.

⁴²⁸ *Ibid*, 91.

⁴²⁹ *Ibid*, 91.

characterizations often use words such as “cult” or “cultish” to describe the religious practices or the leader.⁴³⁰

Inclusion, a topos that defines adherents to a particular religious movement as good citizens exercising their faith in ways that align them with most other religious practitioners.⁴³¹ This topos authenticates a religious movement.⁴³² The researcher will define the inclusion topos by identifying examples in which Wright and his religious practices are labeled as mainstream or normative, despite criticisms that might call that type of classification into question.⁴³³

Supernatural Belief, a topos that highlights unexplained occurrences that defy logic or medical science.⁴³⁴ The researcher will identify this topos in news coverage by references to miraculous healings, sightings of divine beings or visions, or any other paranormal activity.

Declension, the last of Silk’s topoi, focuses on the decline in traditional religious practice in America.⁴³⁵ This researcher will define the declension topos in news coverage by identifying language that speaks of the decline of Wright’s congregation or denomination, as well as the decline in adherents of the theology he espouses.

Additional coding themes for this study will be drawn from the work of Gans (1979), who developed a cluster of eight enduring values that he argued shape the ways journalists frame the news. This study will include just two of those values because they are tied directly to the researcher’s hypothesis. The researcher decided

⁴³⁰ *Ibid*, 95.

⁴³¹ *Ibid*, 106.

⁴³² *Ibid*, 107.

⁴³³ *Ibid*, 108.

⁴³⁴ *Ibid*, 119-120.

⁴³⁵ *Ibid*, 135.

that the others do not hold particular relevance for this present study because they represent Gans' broader argument about the various ways that news generally is covered. The researcher hypothesized that two of Gans values can help explain why mainstream journalists tended to frame their coverage of Wright the way they did. These include:

Ethnocentrism, which either upholds or defends American ideas and values as “right” or “supreme” to those of other nations. This theme is particularly evident in news about politics or international affairs, especially when war is an issue. The United States is usually portrayed as exceptional to other nations or cast as “good” in comparison to others who are seen as “evil.” Government principles and practices are not criticized when compared to other nations. For instance, if the United States chooses to go to war with another country, it is presumed to be justified—no questions asked. Those who criticize such decisions are typically labeled as unpatriotic, despite the nation's tenets regarding free speech and the right to protest.⁴³⁶ This researcher will define ethnocentrism in news coverage by identifying language or themes that question Wright's patriotism or challenge his views about the United States government's prevailing political practices—both domestic and international—without offering facts to disprove his claims.

Moderatism is the second of Gans' values that will be tested in this study. Gans argued that journalists will take a critical view of individuals whose behavior or ideology is seen as “extreme” or outside of the American mainstream of thought. In other words, individuals are accused of violating the precept of moderatism when they vehemently disagree with what might be called the status quo or the prevailing

⁴³⁶ Gans, *Deciding What's News*, 42-43.

views of the majority of Americans on various issues that are seen as common sense or already settled (i.e.: historical accounts of events that have shaped America). As it pertains to religious speech, moderatism is violated when religious leaders pass moral judgment on the United States and challenge historical accounts related to various issues that often spark controversy, such as war, race relations and social values. The researcher will define moderatism as a theme in coverage by identifying language that casts Wright, his views or religious practices as deviant or extreme; language that criticizes Wright's tone and content without offering fact-based rebuttal; language that suggests that Wright should retract statements he made but does not offer support for why such a retraction is needed.

In addition to the Silk's seven topoi and Gans' two enduring values, the researcher will rely on what Hsieh and Shannon call a "conventional analysis" of the texts to identify other themes. This process allows themes to emerge from the reading of texts without imposing any preconceived categories. In this study, those themes would be any that do not fit neatly into the categories or frames suggested by Silk or Gans. This conventional analysis of the texts included in this study will be accomplished by again relying on Entman's guidelines for identifying frames in a text: words, phrases and sentences that "provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgments."⁴³⁷ Entman further notes that frames define problems, diagnose their cause, evaluate the person creating the problem and the potential impact his or her behavior will have, and suggest remedies or solutions to the problem.⁴³⁸ These foregoing terms and ideas will be used to define additional themes that might appear

⁴³⁷ Entman, "Fractured Paradigm," 52.

⁴³⁸ *Ibid*, 52.

to emerge from a systematized reading of the texts included in this investigation. Given the context out of which Wright became the focus of news coverage, the researcher anticipates several themes not included in Silk and Gans to emerge. Some of these include “politics,” in which Wright is referred to as an issue in Obama’s campaign; and “race,” in which coverage includes references to Wright’s racial background or theological perspectives that deal with race.

Several other types of additional frames are to be assessed in this process of analysis and will be accorded categories in the study’s findings. These include “primary” frames and “secondary” frames. This type of analysis will help add perspective to the level of significance Wright was given in news coverage over the course of the time in which he remained a subject of ongoing reports. The more primary frames found, one can assume the more important a subject Wright became.

Primary frames will be those in which Wright emerges as the main subject of a news story. This will include stories in which Wright, his thoughts or religious practices are referenced directly or indirectly in the first three paragraphs of a news report, commentary or editorial.

Secondary frames will be those that refer to Wright later in the news report, commentary or editorial after the major theme of the article already has been established.

The researcher also will categorize stories based on where they appeared in the newspapers when they were published. For instance, there will be a “**Page 1**” category and an “**Inside story**” category. This should shed additional light on the significance each publication placed on the coverage in which Wright was featured.

One final area of analysis that will be important in order to fulfill the intention of this investigation. It will be examination of the sources of frames in the news reports, commentaries and editorials. One of the prevailing arguments is that mainstream journalists rely heavily on elite mainstream sources to frame their news reports. These elites include politicians and other politically savvy individuals, such as pundits or lobbyists who are heavily invested in the outcome of particular issues, as well as such official sources as government leaders. Journalists also can rely on experts who are knowledgeable about specific topics or fields of study. Other arguments suggest, however, that mainstream journalists often represent the same views held by many of their elite sources, so often they do not name sources in their reports because the views are their own. This practice raises significant questions about longstanding claims of journalists to be objective voices reporting the news. This analysis will seek to identify the sources of frames by dividing them into at least four categories:

Political sources will be those politicians or other politically positioned individuals (such as lobbyists, political organization leaders or politically appointed government officials) whose thoughts and words generate a frame in a news report, commentary or editorial. These can be either named or unnamed sources.

Expert sources will be those individuals whose words or thoughts help to generate frames based on their perspective from a field outside of the political arena.

Citizen sources will be individuals with no particular official capacity who are quoted in published articles and whose words or thoughts help to generate frames based on their personal perspectives.

Journalistic sources will be the final group of sources to be considered in this area of categorization. If the report makes no reference to an outside source as the one who is framing an argument or point, then the researcher will conclude that it is the journalist who is making the claim.

The chapter that follows will provide an account of the results from the descriptive and conventional analyses as outlined and proposed in the present chapter. The results will be presented and analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively in order to help illustrate and illuminate the study's findings on multiple levels.

Chapter 6: Research Findings

This chapter summarizes major findings from a textual analysis of selected mainstream and alternative publication articles featuring frames of the Rev. Jeremiah A. Wright Jr. during the study's sample period. Frames are thematic clusters of facts or judgments that define problems, diagnose their cause, or evaluate the causal agents and their potential impact. Frames also suggest remedies or solutions to the problem at hand.⁴³⁹ Frames are significant because they ultimately serve as depictions, representations or characterizations of the main subject of news stories, commentaries or editorials. Consequently, frames could inform the impressions or understandings that readers come to have about a subject. Data collected for this study was published in *The New York Times*, *Chicago Sun-Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Chicago Defender*, *Washington Afro American* and *The Christian Century* from the time then-Sen. Barack H. Obama, who was a member of Wright's Chicago congregation, announced his run for the presidency in February 2007 until the end of April 2008, when Obama formally denounced his association with Wright.

Accessing and Assessing Coverage of Wright

As shown in Table 1, 216 articles formed the study's sample. Coverage produced during the first 13 months of the 15-month sample period accounted for 10 percent of all articles included in the study. The publications produced the other 90 percent of the sample's articles in March and April of 2008.

⁴³⁹ Entman, "Fractured Paradigm," 52.

Table 1: Number of articles published by all publications during sample period February 2007 through April 30, 2008. N=216. Table includes a breakdown of the percentage of overall coverage based on when the coverage was produced.

2007	January 2008	February 2008	March 2008	April 2008	Total
14	3	4	91	104	216
6.6%	1.4%	1.9%	42%	48%	100%

Table 2 shows the progression of articles produced by each publication over the 15-month sample period. It also includes a percentage breakdown of when the coverage was produced, as well as a breakdown of the percentage of coverage produced by each publication. The *Chicago Sun-Times* produced the largest number of articles featuring frames of Wright over the course of the sample period while *The Christian Century* produced the smallest number of articles featuring frames of Wright during the sample period. All of the publications produced the bulk of their articles in March and April 2008.

Table 2: Number of articles published by publication during sample period February 2007 through April 30, 2008. N=216. Plus breakdown of percentage of when coverage was produced and what percent of sample was produced by each publication.

Publication	2007	Jan. 2008	Feb. 2008	March 2008	April 2008	Total articles	Percent of sample
<i>Chicago Sun-Times</i>	6	2	1	30	32	71	32.8%
<i>Washington Post</i>	1	1	1	29	30	62	28.7%
<i>New York Times</i>	3	0	1	23	22	49	22.7%
<i>Chicago Defender</i>	3	0	1	4	10	18	8.3%
<i>Washington Afro American</i>	0	0	0	5	5	10	4.7%
<i>Christian Century</i>	1	0	0	0	5	6	2.8%
Total	14	3	4	91	104	216	
Percent of coverage	6.6%	1.4%	1.9%	42%	48%	100%	100%

As shown in Table 3, about five out of every six articles in the sample came from mainstream publications.

Table 3: Number of articles by publication type. N=216

Publication Type	Number of Articles	Percentage of Total
Mainstream	182	84%
Alternative	34	16%
Total	216	100%

The researcher used this initial data to develop additional databases for further analysis of the sample. The study's analysis included articles which featured frames of Wright as a primary or secondary topic in news coverage. A primary topic means Wright was the main focus of the story and his name usually was mentioned in the first two paragraphs of an article. A secondary topic means he was mentioned at some later point in the article. As Table 4 shows, Wright was a primary focus in the coverage slightly more often than a secondary focus.

Table 4: Rev. Jeremiah A. Wright Jr. as a Primary or Secondary Focus in Coverage.

Publication	Primary	Secondary	Total
<i>The New York Times</i>	23	26	49
<i>Chicago Sun-Times</i>	46	25	71
<i>The Washington Post</i>	23	39	62
<i>Chicago Defender</i>	9	9	18
<i>Washington Afro American</i>	6	4	10
<i>The Christian Century</i>	5	1	6
Total	112	104	216

A Pew study found that during the 2008 U.S. presidential primary period Wright was the most frequently reported topic in mainstream campaign coverage beyond the candidates themselves. The present study examined the number of times Wright was featured in stories placed on Page 1 as an additional sign of the level of importance the mainstream and alternative publications placed on him as a news subject. As shown in Table 5, page 1 stories featuring frames associated with Wright accounted for about 10 percent of the all mainstream coverage. Wright was a primary focus in roughly one-third of those articles. None of the *Chicago Sun-Times* articles featuring frames of Wright appeared on Page 1.

Table 5: Number of Mainstream Press Page 1 articles Featuring Frames of Rev. Jeremiah A. Wright Jr. N=18 out of a total mainstream sample of 182.

Publication	Page 1	Primary Focus	Secondary Focus
<i>The New York Times</i>	11	3	8
<i>Chicago Sun-Times</i>	0	0	0
<i>The Washington Post</i>	7	2	5
Total	18	5	13

As shown in Table 6, Page 1 articles featuring frames about Wright accounted for about one out of every five articles in the overall alternative sample. Wright was the primary focus in two-thirds of those articles. The table also shows that the *Chicago Defender* was most likely to feature Wright as front-page news and that Wright was *The Christian Century*'s lead or cover story in one instance, which is the equivalent of a newspaper's Page 1.

Table 6: Number of Alternative Press Page 1 articles Featuring Frames of Rev. Jeremiah A. Wright Jr. N=6 out of 34 total alternative sample.

Publication	Page 1	Primary Focus	Secondary Focus
<i>Chicago Defender</i>	2	1	1
<i>Washington Afro American</i>	3	2	1
<i>The Christian Century</i> *	1	1	0
Total	6	4	2

*The front page of *The Christian Century* is a cover page. Wright was the featured story of one issue of the publication, making him the equivalent of a Page 1 story. The issue featured an editor's note and editorial focused on Wright, as well as feature stories.

Types of Articles

A further analysis of the articles produced by publications included in the study's sample illustrates the nature of the coverage that featured frames of Wright. As shown in Table 7, commentary by individual columnists accounted for just more than half of the coverage included in the study's sample. News reports accounted for most of the rest of the articles while editorials by editorial boards accounted for the final 5 percent of the coverage. News reports are defined as objective accounts of events based on factual reporting while commentaries and editorials include the writers' opinions about a subject. About three-fifths or nearly 60 percent of the coverage on Wright was opinion-centered coverage.

Table 7: Total number of articles included in sample by type and what percentage of total sample they represent. N=216

Article Type	Number of articles	Percent of Total
News	94	43%
Commentary	111	52%
Editorial	11	5%
Total	216	100%

Table 8 shows that the breakdown between news and commentary was almost even among mainstream publications. Table 9 shows that alternative publications devoted more than 70 percent of their total coverage to opinion centered reports.

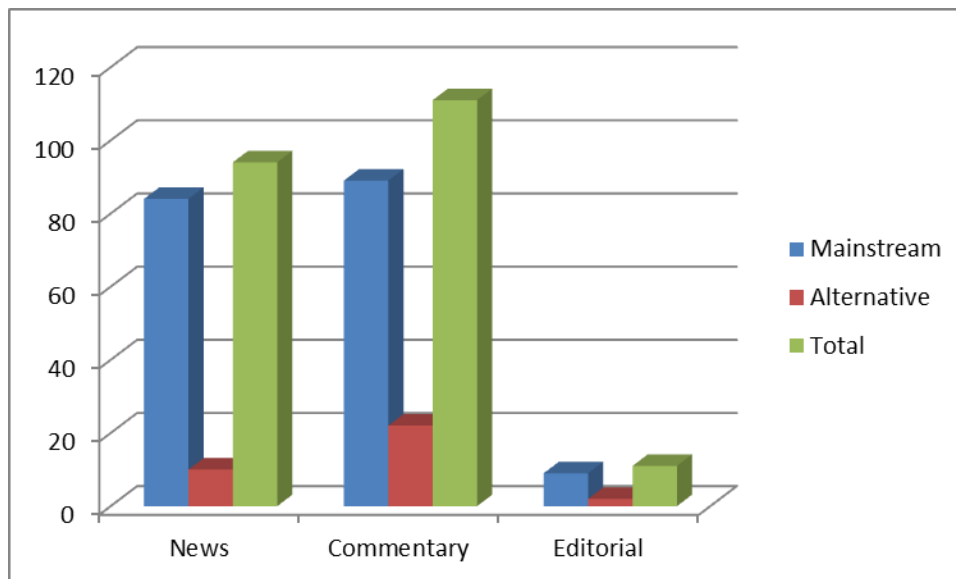
Table 8: Number of articles mainstream publications produced by type and their percentage of total articles in mainstream sample. N=182.

Article Type	Number of articles	Percent of Total
News	84	46%
Commentary	89	49%
Editorial	9	5%
Total	182	100%

Table 9: Number of articles alternative publications produced by type and their percentage of total articles in alternative sample. N=34.

Article Type	Number of articles	Percent of Total
News	10	29%
Commentary	22	65%
Editorial	2	6%
Total	34	100%

The chart that follows shows a breakdown of coverage by categories as produced by mainstream and alternative publications. (In the chart: News total=94; Commentary total=111; Editorial total=11).



These initial findings allowed the researcher to conduct additional analyses designed to explore the questions posed in this investigation. At its core, this study sought to examine how journalists made sense of Wright’s prophetic speech and religious practices. The researcher’s use of theory was designed to help determine if

there was evidence to suggest that journalists used religious or secular values to frame their coverage of Wright. The study employed a directed analysis that used framing categories drawn from two theories to explore how journalists portrayed Wright. Mark Silk's *Unsecular Media* theory (1995) provided seven framing categories derived from mainstream religious values. Herbert Gans' "Enduring Values in News" theory (1979) accounted for two additional framing categories that are secular in nature. The researcher also performed a conventional analysis, which is designed to detect and develop framing categories that did not fit within those proposed by Silk and Gans. Two additional major frames emerged from that analysis. Those findings are outlined the next section of this chapter.

Research Question 1

The following findings emerged from data focused on the study's four main questions. *Research Question 1*: How did journalists frame Wright, his sermons and religious practices in coverage? This question sought to uncover the dominant frames journalists used in coverage by relying on both a directed and conventional analysis of coverage. This first question is largely focused on mainstream coverage, although the analysis covered both mainstream and alternative coverage.

Directed Analysis

Finding 1: The directed analysis began with nine framing categories drawn from Silk and Gans. As shown in Table 10, there were 304 instances of the frames found in the coverage, with multiple frames of Wright appearing in some stories. The two frames associated with Gans' theory accounted for 70 percent of the total frames

found in the directed analysis. Frames suggesting that Wright violated principles associated with “Moderatism” accounted for nearly half of the framing identified in the directed analysis. In mainstream coverage, Wright frequently was portrayed by the use of pejorative descriptors that placed him outside of the mainstream and often was characterized as immoderate or uncivil. A *New York Times* editorial commended Obama for not claiming to be unaware of “Wright’s radicalism or bitterness.”⁴⁴⁰ In a news story, *New York Times* staff writer Jodi Kantor reported that “some say” Wright’s teachings are “overly Afrocentric to the point of excluding whites.”⁴⁴¹ *Chicago Sun-Times* columnist Christopher Hitchens referred to Wright as Obama’s “revolting choice” as a family minister and later called him “a big-mouthed Farrakhan fan.”⁴⁴² Wright’s sermons were labeled as “controversial,” “incendiary,” and “inflammatory” in news reports, commentaries and editorials. One *Chicago Sun-Times* editorial referred to Wright’s “indisputably objectionable remarks” as “most alarming.”⁴⁴³ Frames suggesting Wright violated principles associated with “ethnocentrism” accounted for a fifth of the frames. Wright’s rhetoric frequently was portrayed as “anti-American.” In a reference to news coverage surrounding “snippets of Jeremiah Wright’s sermons, Adam Fairclough of *The Washington Post* wrote that “white Americans heard unpatriotic rants tinged by bitterness and paranoia.”⁴⁴⁴ Four frames—false prophecy, hypocrisy, declension and supernatural belief—generated by

⁴⁴⁰ Editorial Board, “Mr. Obama’s Profile in Courage,” *The New York Times*, March 19, 2008, 18.

⁴⁴¹ Jodi Kantor, “Disinvitation By Obama Is Criticized,” *The New York Times*, March 6, 2007, 19.

⁴⁴² Christopher Hitchens, “Obama gets away with everything,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, March 29, 2008, 15.

⁴⁴³ Editorial Board, “A moving moment in our nation’s history,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, March 19, 2008, 29.

⁴⁴⁴ Adam Fairclough, “His Own Man; The great civil rights leader felt tensions between black and white influences,” *The Washington Post*, April 6, 2008, BW05.

the theories either proved statistically insignificant or non-existent in the coverage. This analysis was based on all articles included in the sample.

Table 10: Number of frames in all articles in sample based on directed analysis. N=304.

Frame	Instances Found	Percent of Total
Ethnocentrism	64	21%
Declension	1	0.3%
False Prophecy	6	2%
Good Works	15	5%
Hypocrisy	2	0.7%
Inclusion	36	12%
Moderatism	149	49%
Supernatural Belief	0	0%
Tolerance	31	10%
Total	304	100%

Conventional Analysis

A conventional analysis followed the directed analysis, allowing the researcher to examine texts for other significant frames or themes that were not inherent in the categories generated by the two theories being applied to the study. As Table 11 shows, two major frames emerged—Politics and Race, appearing a combined 195 times in coverage. In political terms, Wright often was reported as a liability or threat to Obama’s electability. In mid-March 2008, Lynn Sweet reported in her *Chicago Sun-Times* politics column that Obama was seeking “to put behind him two raging controversies jeopardizing his bid:” his relationship with his minister, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, was one of them.⁴⁴⁵ In another account appearing in the same day’s

⁴⁴⁵ Lynn Sweet, “Obama gets it out in the open; He’s looking to get past Rezko, Wright—and turn the heat on Hillary,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, March 16, 2008, 15.

publication, Sweet wrote that Obama was seeking to distance himself from Wright, “signaling how concerned the campaign is over Wright’s racially charged—and videotaped—sermons, the subject or recent news stories and postings on the Web.”⁴⁴⁶ The race frame was used often to describe Wright’s sermons and statements. In a news story, *Chicago Sun-Times* reporter Steve Warmbir described how Obama had “rejected Wright’s racially incendiary comments that have played endlessly in the media in recent days and sparked a feeding frenzy of criticism.”⁴⁴⁷ The race frame also was used to tag Wright as a racist rather than one speaking out on racial issues. Charles Krauthammer, a *Washington Post* columnist, referred to “Jeremiah Wright’s racist rants” on one occasion.⁴⁴⁸ On another, he referred to Wright as “the racist reverend” and questioned how Obama could campaign “on a platform of transcending racial divisions, while in that same year contributing \$26,000 to a church whose pastor incites race hatred.”⁴⁴⁹ Columnist George Will accused Wright of espousing “racialist doctrine.”⁴⁵⁰

Table 11: Number of additional frames by category that emerged through conventional analysis of all publications included in the study’s sample. N=195.

Frame	Instances Found	Percentage of Total
Politics	102	52%
Race	93	48%
Total	195	100%

⁴⁴⁶ Lynn Sweet, “Obama: No to ‘forces of division’; Calls Wright wrong on rhetoric, blames ‘pent-up anger,’” *Chicago Sun-Times*, 22.

⁴⁴⁷ Steve Warmbir, “‘America can change’: Obama; Distances himself from pastor’s comments but cites Wright’s good deeds,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, March 19, 2008, 2.

⁴⁴⁸ Charles Krauthammer, “The Fabulist Vs. the Saint,” *The Washington Post*, April 4, 2008, A23.

⁴⁴⁹ Charles Krauthammer, “Obama’s ‘Distractions,?’” *The Washington Post*, April 25, 2008, A23.

⁴⁵⁰ George F. Will, “A Pastor at Center Stage; And a Parishioner With Questions to Answer,” *The Washington Post*, April 29, 2008, A17.

The Overall Picture of Frames

The first question allowed the researcher to begin analyzing mainstream framing of Wright in order to later complete a comparative analysis. As shown in Table 12, frames associated with violation of moderatism were the most frequent frames mainstream journalists used in their coverage of Wright, accounting for a third of all the frames. Religion-themed frames such as “inclusion,” “tolerance,” “good works,” and “false prophecy” accounted for only about 10 percent of the frames in the mainstream sample. One example of Silk’s inclusion topos was found in a story by Kantor, of *The New York Times*, who wrote: “Mr. Wright’s church, the 8,000-member Trinity United Church of Christ, is considered mainstream,” noting “Oprah Winfrey has attended services, and many members are prominent black professionals.”⁴⁵¹ Silk’s topos of tolerance was seen in a story by Susan Hogan/Albach of the *Chicago Sun-Times* as she described the church as part of a “social activist denomination.”⁴⁵² A news story by Kate Phillips of *The New York Times* also featured the tolerance topos, noting that “Wright’s preaching is out of black liberation theology, which interprets the Bible as a guide to fighting oppression of African-Americans.”⁴⁵³ The Discussion Chapter will elaborate on the findings in more detail.

⁴⁵¹ Kantor, “Disinvitation criticized,” 19.

⁴⁵² Susan Hogan/Albach, “Obama: ‘Go out, do Lord’s work’; Senator addresses United Church of Christ faithful at national meeting,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, June 24, 2007, A10.

⁴⁵³ Kate Phillips, “Pastor Defends His Predecessor at Obama’s Chicago Church,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, March 17, 2008, 14.

Table 12: Number of Mainstream Frames of Wright in coverage based on directed and conventional analyses. N=413.

Frame	Instances Found	Percentage of Total
Moderatism	136	32.3%
Politics	93	23%
Race	78	19%
Ethnocentrism	61	15%
Inclusion	18	4%
Tolerance	12	3%
Good Works	9	2.2%
False Prophecy	3	.8%
Hypocrisy	2	.5%
Declension	1	.2%
Total	413	100%

Research Question 2

Research Question 2: Who were the sources of those frames and were they clearly identified in coverage?

The second question sought to examine how journalists came to describe Wright as they did. Were they relying on outside sources or their own instincts? Articles were analyzed to determine the sources of frames in articles. The researcher divided sources into three categories beginning with the journalists who produced the articles. (If a frame was introduced with no attribution to an outside source either named or unnamed, the researcher assumed the journalist to be the source of the frame). The second category was religious experts who were named in association with particular frames in the articles. The third category was labeled “others” for

individuals who might have ranged from politicians and political pundits to public officials and private citizens.

Mainstream Journalists as Sources of Frames

Finding 2: As Table 13 shows, journalists accounted for more than half of the sources of frames in articles published in mainstream publications while religion experts accounted for about 11 percent. Other sources, including politicians and other political pundits, accounted for a third. Obama was a frequent source. Descriptions of Wright and his sermons frequently appeared in news stories, commentaries and editorials without attribution. Wright was often referred to as controversial with no sources in the reports calling him that. Howard Kurtz, a *Washington Post* writer, mentioned “the offensive sermons by Barack Obama’s former pastor,” with no source describing them that way.⁴⁵⁴ Ginger Thompson of *The New York Times* wrote that Wright’s “Afro-centric sermons have been construed as antiwhite,” but did not mention who had construed them to be so.⁴⁵⁵

Table 13: Number of Mainstream Press Sources. N=244.

Publication	Journalists	Religious Experts	Others	Total sources
<i>New York Times</i>	38	6	32	76
<i>Chicago Sun-Times</i>	56	12	25	93
<i>Washington Post</i>	40	9	26	75
Mainstream Totals	134	27	83	244*

*Denotes the total number of sources in all mainstream publication articles.

⁴⁵⁴ Howard Kurtz, “Megyn Kelly, Fox News’s Fast-Rising Anchor,” *The Washington Post*, April 14, 2008, C01.

⁴⁵⁵ Ginger Thompson, “Seeking Unity, Obama Feels Pull of Racial Divide,” *The New York Times*, Feb. 12, 2008, 1.

Alternative Sources of Frames

Table 14 shows a similar breakdown for alternative articles by category. Religion experts accounted for the largest percentage of sources in articles published in alternative publications, at about 43 percent, followed by journalists, some of whom were themselves religious figures. Wright was either framed positively in alternative coverage or framed in ways that defended or explained his actions. Randolph Walker, a Baptist pastor and professor of church history, argued in a commentary that Wright was being “unjustly demonized for his shockingly radical but true sermon about the United States.”⁴⁵⁶ Theresa Fambro Hooks, a lifestyle columnist, described Wright as “the beloved and much revered senior pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ,” but did not cite any sources referring to him as such.⁴⁵⁷ Just as mainstream reports used pejorative descriptors in matter-of-fact ways, so did alternative reports use positive descriptors in matter-of-fact ways.

Table 14: Number of Alternative Press Sources. N=40.

Publication	Journalists	Religious Experts	Others	Total sources
<i>Chicago Defender</i>	10	7	3	20
<i>Afro American</i>	4	5	2	11
<i>The Christian Century</i>	2	5	2	9
Alternative Totals	16	17	7	40*

*Denotes the total number of sources in all alternative publication articles.

Research Question 3

Research Question 3: Does a framing analysis of coverage provide support for Silk’s theory or Gans’? In other words, did journalists use religious values, as Silk

⁴⁵⁶ Randolph Walker, “The unfair treatment of Reverend Jeremiah Wright,” *Chicago Defender*, April 3, 2008, 6.

⁴⁵⁷ Theresa Fambro Hooks, “Teesee’s Town,” *Chicago Defender*, March 5, 2007, 13.

posits, to frame their coverage of Wright or did they use secular values that fall more in line with theory posited by Gans? The primary focus of this question was geared toward mainstream coverage but its answer for alternative coverage offered additional insights about the nature of mainstream coverage.

Secularity of Coverage

Finding 3: As Table 15 shows, a total of 499 frames were found in the 216 articles that formed the sample for this study. Values found in Gans’ theory accounted for a plurality of those frames or about 43 percent. Frames associated with moderatism were the most used frames in all of the coverage while frames associated with ethnocentrism were the fourth most commonly used frames in the coverage. Politics and Race frames ranked second and third on the list of most commonly used frames. Frames associated with Silk’s theory were the least used overall. However, there were instances in which Silk-related frames were stated strongly, even as Wright was cast as immoderate. A *Chicago Sun-Times* editorial, for instance, began by using frames that called Wright “wrong” and labeled statements from Wright’s sermons as “ugly and incendiary.”⁴⁵⁸ The same editorial later used Silk’s “good works” topos by referring to Trinity church as “an institution that does tremendous good in the black community.”⁴⁵⁹ The editorial also featured Silk’s inclusion topos by noting that black parishioners across America hear sermons weekly similar to Wright’s “typically delivered in a larger, positive context – as it was at Trinity – that

⁴⁵⁸ Editorial Board, “Obama’s addressing race issue head-on,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, March 18, 2008, 21.

⁴⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

no 30-second sound bite could catch. Wright’s message,” the editorial posited, “is not about black superiority or separatism, but about self-determination, about blacks doing for themselves.”⁴⁶⁰ That type of theme or framing was rarely featured in mainstream reports.

Table 15: Number of frames of Wright in total coverage based on directed and conventional analyses of mainstream and alternative publications. N=499. *denotes Silk value; **denotes Gans value; *denotes other value.**

Frame	Instances Found	Percentage of Total
Moderatism**	149	30%
Politics***	102	20%
Race***	93	19%
Ethnocentrism**	64	13%
Inclusion*	36	7.2%
Tolerance*	31	6%
Good Works*	15	3%
False Prophecy*	6	1.2%
Hypocrisy*	2	.4%
Declension*	1	.2%
Total	499	100%

Table 15 Results Summary	
■	Silk=*18%
■	Gans=**43%
■	Others=***39%

⁴⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

News Story Frames

An additional level of analysis revealed that the pattern of frames used by journalists was fairly consistent regardless of the type of article being produced. As shown in Table 16, frames associated with Gans’ theory accounted for almost half of all frames found in news stories. Moderatism was the most prevalent, accounting for about a third. Ethnocentrism ranked fourth, accounting for about a sixth of all frames. Politics and race together accounted for about a third of all the frames.

Table 16: Number and type of frames found in “News Reports,” plus the percentage of the frames’ representation in news reports. N=213.

Frame Total	News (MS)	News (ALT)	Total	Percent of
Moderatism	66	3	69	32%
Politics	37	3	40	19%
Race	30	3	33	15%
Ethnocentrism	34	0	34	16%
Declension	1	0	1	.5%
False Prophecy	2	0	2	1%
Good Works	5	1	6	3%
Hypocrisy	1	1	2	.5%
Inclusion	11	4	15	7%
Supernatural Belief				
Tolerance	7	5	12	6%
Total	194	19	213	100%

*(MS) denotes number of frames found in Mainstream articles; (ALT) denotes number of frames found in Alternative articles. “Total” represents total frames featured in all six publications included in the study’s sample.

Commentary Frames

As shown in Table 17, frames associated with moderatism also were most prevalent in commentaries written by columnists. Politics and race also ranked second

and third in order of prevalence but in this instance they together accounted for slightly more than Gans’ related values. Silk-related values were more prevalent in commentaries than news stories but still trailed the other categories.

Table 17: Number and type of frames found in “Commentaries” by columnists, plus the percentage of the frames’ representation in commentaries. N=255.

Frame Percent of total	Commentary (MS)	Commentary (ALT)	Total
Moderatism 28%	64	8	72
Politics 22%	51	5	56
Race 21%	42	11	53
Ethnocentrism 10.5%	24	3	27
Declension			
False Prophecy 1.5%	1	3	4
Good Works 3%	2	5	7
Hypocrisy	1		
Inclusion 7%	6	12	18
Tolerance 7%	4	13	17
Total 100%	195	60	255

*(MS) denotes number of frames found in Mainstream articles; (ALT) denotes number of frames found in Alternative articles. “Total” represents total frames featured in all six publications included in the study’s sample.

Editorial Frames

The pattern of framing found in commentaries mirrored the pattern found in editorials. As shown in Table 18, frames associated with moderatism were again the most common frames found in these articles followed by politics, race and ethnocentrism.

Table 18: Number and type of frames found in “Editorials” by Editorial Boards, plus the percentage of the frames’ representation in editorials. N=255.

Frame Total	Editorial (MS)	Editorial (ALT)	Total	Percent of
Moderatism	6	2	8	26%
Politics	5	1	6	19%
Race	6	1	7	23%
Ethnocentrism	3		3	9.6%
Declension				
False Prophecy				
Good Works	2		2	6.4%
Hypocrisy				
Inclusion	1	2	3	9.6%
Supernatural Belief				
Tolerance	1	1	2	6.4%
Total	24	7	31	100%

*(MS) denotes number of frames found in Mainstream articles; (ALT) denotes number of frames found in Alternative articles. “Total” represents total frames featured in all six publications included in the study’s sample.

Research Question 4

The study’s final question was focused on comparative analysis. The findings to the previous questions offered clues about the answer to this final question.

Research Question 4: Were there major differences in how alternative publications framed Wright in coverage?

Comparative Analysis

Finding 4: The researcher used the same framing categories to examine both mainstream and alternative coverage and found that the frames most emphasized by mainstream journalists were least emphasized by alternative press journalists. Conversely, those categories most emphasized by alternative journalists also matched those least emphasized by mainstream journalists. As Table 19 shows, mainstream coverage correlated more directly with values posited by Gans.

Table 19: Number of frames found in all mainstream coverage of Wright and their representation as a percentage of mainstream coverage. N=413.

Frame of total	All Mainstream Categories	Percent
Moderatism	136	33%
Politics	93	22.3%
Race	78	19%
Ethnocentrism	61	15%
Declension	1	.2%
False Prophecy	3	.7%
Good Works	9	2%
Hypocrisy	2	.5%
Inclusion	18	4.3%
Supernatural Belief		
Tolerance	12	3%
Total	413	100%

Table 20 shows alternative coverage correlated more directly with values posited by Silk. Silk-related frames accounted for more than half of the frames in alternative coverage compared to just more than 10 percent of the frames in mainstream coverage.

Table 20: Number of frames found in all alternative coverage of Wright and their representation as a percentage of alternative coverage. N=413.

Frame	All ATL Categories	Percent of Total
Moderatism	13	15.1%
Politics	9	10.5%
Race	15	17.4%
Ethnocentrism	3	3.5%
Declension		
False Prophecy	3	3.5%
Good Works	6	7%
Hypocrisy		
Inclusion	18	21%
Supernatural Belief		
Tolerance	19	22%
Total	86	100%

Silk Frames Appear

Table 21 shows alternative and mainstream journalists used almost the same number of Silk-related frames, despite the wide variance in the number of articles each sector of publications produced. The table shows that four of Silk's topoi appeared in alternative coverage compared to the six that appeared in mainstream coverage. In order of prevalence, Inclusion, Tolerance and Good works were the top three categories found in mainstream coverage. Tolerance, Inclusion and Good works were the top three in alternative coverage. Alternative publications accounted for just over 50 percent of Silk topoi used in coverage of Wright.

Table 21: Number of Silk's Topoi used to frame Wright in Mainstream and Alternative Publications. N=91.

Publication Type	Good Works	Tolerance	Hypocrisy	False Prophecy	Inclusion	Declension	Total Silk Frames
Mainstream	9	12	2	3	18	1	45
Alternative	6	19	-	3	18	-	46
Category Total	15	31	2	6	36	1	91

*Denotes total number of Silk-related frames appearing in all mainstream publication articles.

Gans Frames Dominate

The contrast in how mainstream and alternative publications framed their coverage of Wright is consistent regardless of the type of article produced for publication. In general, mainstream publications leaned heavily toward secular frames, with frames associated with Gans' moderatism value leading in news, commentary and editorial articles. Ethnocentrism-related frames ranked fourth in each of the categories of articles. The majority of alternative frames were associated

with Silk's values except in the case of editorials. Table 22 shows the number of frames found in mainstream news coverage and their percentage of the total frames found in news stories. Secular frames accounted for almost nine out of every 10 frames in mainstream news stories.

Table 22: Number of frames in Mainstream News Stories by type. N=194.

Frame Total	News (MS)	Percent of
Moderatism	66	34%
Politics	37	19%
Race	30	15.5%
Ethnocentrism	34	17.5%
Declension	1	.5%
False Prophecy	2	1%
Good Works	5	2.5%
Hypocrisy	1	.5%
Inclusion	11	6%
Supernatural Belief		
Tolerance	7	3.5%
Total	194	100%

Table 23 shows a comparative analysis of alternative news coverage, where secular frames accounted for slightly less than half of the frames in alternative news stories. Frames associated with Silk's theory were more prevalent with Tolerance and Inclusion leading the way.

Table 23: Number of frames by type in Alternative News Stories. N=19.

Frame	News (ALT)	Percent of Total
Moderatism	3	16%
Politics	3	16%
Race	3	16%
Ethnocentrism		
Declension		
False Prophecy		
Good Works	1	4%
Hypocrisy		
Inclusion	4	22%
Supernatural Belief		
Tolerance	5	26%
Total	19	100%

In commentaries written by mainstream columnists, the writers used even a higher proportion of secular frames in their reports. As shown in Table 24, more than nine out of every 10 reports featured a secular frame, but the order of prevalence was unchanged.

Table 24: Number of frames by type in Mainstream Commentary coverage of Wright. N=195.

Frame	Commentary (MS)	Percent of Total
Moderatism	64	33%
Politics	51	26%
Race	42	21.5%
Ethnocentrism	24	12.5%
Declension		
False Prophecy	1	.5%
Good Works	2	1%
Hypocrisy	1	.5%
Inclusion	6	3%
Supernatural Belief		
Tolerance	4	2%
Total	195	100%

As shown in Table 25, the pattern of framing in commentaries published in Alternative publications was fairly consistent with the frames found in news stories. Silk-related frames again were most prevalent, accounting for more than half of the frames.

Table 25: Number of frames by type in Alternative Commentary coverage of Wright. N=60.

Frame	Commentary (ALT)	Percent of Total
Moderatism	8	13.3%
Politics	5	8.3%
Race	11	18.4%
Ethnocentrism	3	5%
Declension		
False Prophecy	3	5%
Good Works	5	8.3%
Hypocrisy		
Inclusion	12	20%
Supernatural Belief		
Tolerance	13	21.7%
Total	60	100%

When Wright was the subject of editorials, Table 26 shows that frames associated with moderatism and race were the most common frames in mainstream coverage. On the whole, secular frames accounted for eight out of every 10 frames featured in editorial coverage of Wright.

Table 26: Number of frames by type in Mainstream Editorial coverage of Wright. N=24.

Frame of Total	Editorial (MS)	Percent
Moderatism	6	25%
Politics	5	21%
Race	6	25%
Ethnocentrism	3	12.5
Declension		
False Prophecy		
Good Works	2	8.3%
Hypocrisy		
Inclusion	1	4.1%
Supernatural Belief		
Tolerance	1	4.1%
Total	24	100%

Table 27 shows that moderatism and Inclusion were tied for the most prevalent themes in alternative editorial coverage of Wright. This was the only alternative category in which secular framing of Wright outpaced religious framing of Wright. It should be noted that the alternative sample only included two editorials.

Table 27: Number of frames by type in Alternative Editorial coverage of Wright. N=7.

Frame	Editorial (ALT)	Percent of Total
Moderatism	2	29%
Politics	1	14%
Race	1	14%
Ethnocentrism		
Declension		
False Prophecy		
Good Works		
Hypocrisy		
Inclusion	2	29%
Supernatural Belief		
Tolerance	1	14%
Total	7	100%

This chapter was designed to offer a quantitative summary of the study's key findings by offering examples to support them without attempting to interpret their meaning. The researcher presented the results deemed most relevant to the questions that the study investigated. The Discussion Chapter, which follows this one, will attempt to further interpret the results and analyze significant qualities of the coverage. That will be followed by the researcher's conclusions and suggestions for further research.

Chapter 7: The Discussion

The findings of this study offer insights into the ongoing challenges that mainstream journalists face in covering religion-related news, as well as the challenges religious figures face when they become the focus of mainstream reports, particularly in a political context. The study shows that the dominant frames journalists used in their portrayals of Wright relate to values that reflect mainstream sensibilities about what is considered uncivil religious discourse. The mainstream press included in this study's sample largely viewed what Wright and some theologians called his "prophetic" speech and religious practices as outside of the American mainstream. Journalists produced reports about Wright using frames most associated with issues regarding moderatism, political liability, racism and ethnocentrism. The findings suggest that mainstream journalists often generated the frames based on their own perspectives or borrowed them from conservative political pundits, rather than relying on religious experts to help them make sense of what Wright called his prophetic ministry. The study's analysis found that the dominant frames in coverage correlate with a secular value system, not a religious one.

The purpose of this chapter is to offer a detailed discussion of the findings by tracing the coverage from its beginning point to its ending, and explaining how the study's findings fit in with existing knowledge and help to expand it. The present chapter is structured in a format that is similar to Chapter 3, which focused on how Wright was portrayed and framed prior to becoming the focus on campaign-related news coverage. Examining the coverage that was the focus of the present study in this

way allows one to see the stark contrast in how competing communities of observers view the prophetic component of a Christian minister's speech.

Framing the Subject

Secular religion coverage cannot, at least overtly, favor one brand of religion over another. It must tread carefully in the presence of articles of faith and maintain a cautious distance from supernatural events. To the religious, this studied neutrality can look like indifference or worse. Yet it is worth considering the degree to which the constraints may reflect not a secular bias on the media's part but a common understanding of what is acceptable discourse in the public square.⁴⁶¹ –Mark Silk

This quote by Silk captures the essence of how much of the mainstream coverage of Wright took shape, but mainstream interest in the story developed slowly. The researcher's database searches found 61 instances in which Wright was mentioned in stories, columns or editorials published by the six publications in this case study from the time Obama launched his presidential candidacy in February 2007 through February 2008. Of those, 21 were included for analysis in this study because they included frames or themes regarding Wright, his ministry at Trinity, sermons or the church's theology. The excluded articles typically only mentioned Wright's name. The other 195 articles included in the study's sample were published in March and April 2008.

⁴⁶¹ Silk, *Unsecular Media*, 7-8.

Narrative Review of Frames in Coverage

In the first story *The New York Times* published in 2007 that featured Wright, Wright recalled the night he received a phone call rescinding an invitation to the event that ultimately served as the kickoff to the historic 2008 U.S. presidential election. The voice on the other end of the phone was that of the man who would become the nation's first black president—then Sen. Barack H. Obama, who previously had asked Wright to lead a prayer at his Feb. 10, 2007, presidential campaign announcement at the Illinois state capitol in Springfield. “Fifteen minutes before Shabbos I get a call from Barack,” Wright said. “One of his (campaign team) members had talked him into uninviting me.”⁴⁶²

This *New York Times* report featuring Wright's recollection of his disinvitation and the political implications associated with it came almost a month after Obama, who had been a member of Wright's Trinity United Church of Christ congregation for about 20 years, announced his run for the presidency. Among the six publications included in this case study the *Times*' story—published on March 6—was the first in 2007 to feature Wright as a subject in association with the 2008 Democratic presidential primary.

After introducing Wright as the senior pastor of the “popular” Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago and “spiritual mentor” to Obama, the story went on to state that Obama had chosen to “distance his campaign” from Wright out of “fear” that mainstream America might perceive Wright's teachings to be “overly Afrocentric to the point of excluding whites.”⁴⁶³

⁴⁶² Kantor, “Disinvitation is criticized,” 19A.

⁴⁶³ *Ibid.*

By this time, the conservative blogosphere and talk show circuit had begun to seize upon Wright and the 8,000-member congregation he led as a political issue they wanted to use to their advantage, Kantor wrote, before quoting conservative commentator Tucker Carlson, who called the Trinity Church's precepts "racially exclusive" and "wrong." Erik Rush, another conservative commentator, was quoted calling the church "quite cultish, quite separatist."⁴⁶⁴ This type of framing of Wright and Trinity was evolving at that moment, even though the church had white members and was a part of a largely white denomination. Neither of those facts was mentioned in Kantor's report. Nor did the story offer any dissenting voices to the claims made by Carlson and Rush.

Kantor described Trinity as a mainstream church that attracted influential blacks to its services. However, she added that Trinity is "more Afrocentric and politically active than standard black congregations."⁴⁶⁵ The article also identified Wright as one who "helped organize the 1995 Million Man March on Washington."

⁴⁶⁶

Kantor's mentioning of the Million Man March in the story is an example of how framing theorist Robert Entman argues what is not said can be as powerful as what is actually stated.⁴⁶⁷ Louis Farrakhan, the leader of the Black Muslim movement known as the Nation of Islam, was the organizer of the Million Man March, which received support from hundreds, if not thousands, of black pastors across the country who encouraged participation in the event because of its focus on spiritual renewal

⁴⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶⁷ See Entman, "Fractured Paradigm," 51-52.

and accountability among black men. Kantor did not mention Farrakhan's name at that point in the story, but Craig Watkins is among the scholars to note that the event was largely framed as a Farrakhan event by many mainstream news outlets and had come to be viewed unfavorably by many whites because of Farrakhan's rhetoric about race.⁴⁶⁸

In that sense, Wright was being portrayed or framed as radical or outside of the American mainstream. Kantor's story concluded with a claim by Wright that Obama had rescinded his invitation for him to lead the prayer at his presidential announcement after *Rolling Stone* magazine published an article titled "The Radical Roots of Barack Obama." Wright said Obama told him: "You can get kind of rough in the sermons, so what we've decided is that it's best for you not to be out there in the public."⁴⁶⁹

Based on the limited coverage that Wright received for much of the rest of 2007 from mainstream publications included in this case study, Obama seemed to be getting just what he wanted. As Table 1 showed, the publications produced just 10 percent of the articles included in the sample during the first 13 months of the 15-month coverage period. But the way Kantor framed her initial story of Wright would prove to be a harbinger of *themes* to come.

Politics and race frequently appeared as themes in early coverage, but much of the emphasis of those reports focused on debates about what some saw as Wright's out-

⁴⁶⁸ University of Texas scholar S. Craig Watkins has argued that journalists made Farrakhan "the most salient issue/problem" in their coverage of the Million Man March and "effectively screened out other frames" that could have led to a better understanding of the event. "Their framing judgments stigmatized the march as an expression of racism," he concluded. See Watkins, "Framing Protest: News Media Frames of the Million Man March."

⁴⁶⁹ Kantor, "Disinvitation by Obama."

of-bounds perspective. In a March 2007 commentary, *Chicago Sun-Times* columnist Monroe Anderson accused conservatives of “insincerely espousing color blindness, while holding the race card” up their sleeves, as they attacked Wright and the Trinity congregation for its black values system, a set of theological affirmations directed toward African Americans.⁴⁷⁰ Anderson said the use of “black” in the church’s creedal statements was being misinterpreted as racially exclusive when it was meant to convey a sense of cultural identity, a practice that he argued is common among such groups as Polish and Irish Americans. “This is how African Americans find ourselves in a trick bag. We’re defined racially even when we’re acting like any of this nation’s ethnic groups,” Anderson said.⁴⁷¹

A month later, singer Mavis Staples, who was the lead vocalist in a once popular gospel and soul group “The Staple Singers,” defended Wright against similar attacks. Staples told the *Chicago Sun-Times* that Trinity had been life-changing and affirming during times when racism was rampant for both her and her late father, longtime members of the congregation. Wright, she said, “didn’t act militant, but he would talk to us in the same way Pops (her father) talked to us. ‘Don’t allow anyone to put you down. Stand up for yourself....’”⁴⁷²

⁴⁷⁰ Monroe Anderson, “Ethnic identity isn’t black and white,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, March 25, 2007, B7.

⁴⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷² Dave Hoekstra, “You draw on church for your strength,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, April 22, 2007, D12. Rev. Jeremiah Wright was quoted in the article saying “Pops” Staples was an active member at Trinity up until his death in 2000, attending services weekly and always purchasing copies of Wright’s sermons to share with sick and shut-in Trinity members whom Staples would visit during the week. The Staples Singers featured patriarch Roebuck “Pops” Staples, who passed away at age 86, and four of his children, including Mavis, a Trinity member. The group was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and received the Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award as well as the Grammy Hall of Fame Award. See “The Staples Singers Biography,” at [rockhall.com](http://rockhall.com/inductees/the-staple-singers/bio/), accessed March 17, 2014, <http://rockhall.com/inductees/the-staple-singers/bio/>.

Nearly two months after her first article with references to Wright appeared, Kantor produced a second story. This one attempted to describe and explain in some detail Obama's history with the church and with Wright. The story recalled how Obama "had sampled various faiths but adopted none until he met Mr. Wright, a dynamic pastor who preached Afrocentric theology, dabbled in radical politics and delivered music- and profanity-spiked sermons."⁴⁷³

A year after Kantor's first story in March 2007, it was excerpts from Wright's sermons that came to be the focus of most news coverage of Wright. Very little news coverage that included references to Wright appeared during the early part of March 2008. Both *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* featured reports on March 1 that highlighted challenges Obama was facing in trying to assuage concerns from Jewish leaders and voters about his position on the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict and his ties to Farrakhan, who recently had voiced support for Obama's candidacy. The *Times* reported that Wright also had "been viewed with suspicion" by the Jewish community because he had feted Farrakhan during an annual celebration hosted by Wright's *Trumpet* magazine, which was edited by one of Wright's daughters and circulated in several major cities across the country.⁴⁷⁴ A commentary by *Washington Post* columnist Colbert I. King mentioned how Hillary Clinton's campaign staff had ignited controversy among Jewish voters by circulating emails that questioned Obama's relationship with Wright because Wright's magazine

⁴⁷³ Jodi Kantor, "A Candidate, His Minister and the Search for Faith," *The New York Times*, April 30, 2007, A1.

⁴⁷⁴ Neela Banerjee, "Obama Walks a Difficult Path as He Courts Jewish Voters," *The New York Times*, March 1, 2008, A1.

honored Farrakhan and Wright had stated Farrakhan “truly epitomized greatness.”⁴⁷⁵ Mainstream coverage that referred to Jewish voters, while political in nature, often centered upon themes associated with race as well as ethnocentrism. The reports often highlighted American values and called into question any ideas that challenged the nation’s longstanding posture in regard to support of Israel. Some stories treated the issue as if Israel and America were one in the same. Wright’s presumed association with Farrakhan was portrayed as anti-American/anti-Semitic. Race was a subtext.

Chicago Sun-Times writers Mary Mitchell, who is black, and Lynn Sweet, who is white, each produced reports on March 2 regarding Obama’s pledge a few days earlier during a Democratic candidate debate to reject Farrakhan’s support. “Obama continues to explain to Jewish voters his relationship with his pastor, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright,” Sweet wrote in her report, noting the magazine’s decision to honor Farrakhan. She added: “Last Sunday, Obama said Wright ‘is like an old uncle who sometimes will say things that I don’t agree with’.”⁴⁷⁶ Mitchell’s piece chastised debate moderator Tim Russert, who before his death a few months later was NBC Washington Bureau chief. Mitchell wrote that Russert was not satisfied with Obama’s response regarding Farrakhan, so he “dragged” Wright into the fray:

The point here, of course, is that these men—one the pastor of an 8,000-member congregation where the church roll reads like a ‘Who’s Who of the Chicago black elite,’ and the other the leader of an organization that has historically saved young men from crime and drugs—are unfit to even speak of Obama. After Sen. Hillary Clinton challenged Obama, saying ‘denounce’ wasn’t strong enough, Obama told Russert he would ‘reject and denounce’ Farrakhan’s support. The whole exchange made me ill.⁴⁷⁷

⁴⁷⁵ Colbert I. King, “A Double Standard on ‘Reject and Denounce,’” *The Washington Post*, March 1, 2008, A15.

⁴⁷⁶ Lynn Sweet, “Problems back home?” *Chicago Sun-Times*, March 2, 2008, 4.

⁴⁷⁷ Mary Mitchell, “Why Obama ‘denounced’ Farrakhan; It wasn’t candidate’s best move—but most blacks understand,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, March 2, 2008, 12.

The press then fell silent on reports mentioning Wright until the March 13 ABC News reports, which featured the sermon snippets highlighted in this study's introduction. One of those snippets came from a sermon that Wright preached on September 16, 2001. The message, titled "The Day of Jerusalem's Fall," was delivered at Trinity Church on the Sunday after what has become known as the "September 11" or "911" terrorist attacks on the United States, during which men thought to be Islamic fundamentalists hijacked United States commercial airline jets that they ultimately crashed into major United States landmarks in New York City and Washington, D.C. The attack resulted in thousands of American fatalities. It was an event that forever changed the nation's psyche regarding terrorism and the way the United States airline industry operates.

According to a transcript of his post-911 sermon, Wright began by stating he would attempt to preach from what he considered a "difficult" biblical text found in the last three verses of Psalm 137 as found in the Bible.⁴⁷⁸ He said he had been prompted to preach on the text "as many of us try to sort out what it is we are feeling and why it is we are feeling what we feel after the trauma and tragedy of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, symbols of who America is, the money and the military."⁴⁷⁹ Those verses from Psalm 137, according to Wright, refer to a Bible story found in Second Kings, Chapter 25, which tells how the city of Jerusalem

⁴⁷⁸ See Wright, "Day of Jerusalem's Fall," appendix.

⁴⁷⁹ Wright made specific mention of Psalm 137:7-9, which states "⁷ Remember, LORD, what the Edomites did on the day Jerusalem fell. 'Tear it down,' they cried, 'tear it down to its foundations!'

⁸ Daughter Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is the one who repays you according to what you have done to us. ⁹ Happy is the one who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks" (New International Version). The quote from Wright comparing how Americans were feeling to how residents of Jerusalem quoted in the biblical text were feeling was part of his introduction to the sermon as he explained why he would be preaching from the text he had chosen as his focus. The full sermon can be found in this study's appendix.

was attacked and overtaken by the Babylonians and how the inhabitants of Jerusalem had been left angry and declaring a need for revenge.⁴⁸⁰

In his sermon, Wright referred to “senseless killings” that took place in that story and compared those acts to what occurred on September 11.⁴⁸¹ Wright is quoted in the sermon saying: “Some of the feelings we have, as people of faith in the 21st century, are similar to the feelings the people of faith had in the 6th century, B.C.”⁴⁸² But it was not what Wright said at the beginning of the sermon that jumped out at ABC reporters who are credited with first reporting and showing the snippet that would make Wright a fixture on YouTube and in the daily news. It was one of the statements he made later during the sermon.⁴⁸³ ABC showed a video clip of Wright stating:

We bombed Hiroshima. We bombed Nagasaki. And we nuked far more than the thousands in New York and the Pentagon—and we never batted an eye. We have supported state terrorism against the Palestinians and black South Africans, and now we are indignant because the stuff we have done overseas is brought right back into our own front yards. America’s chickens are coming home to roost!⁴⁸⁴

Another snippet featured in the ABC report showed Wright preaching during the Palm Sunday service at Trinity on April 13, 2003. This time he was presenting an argument that “Governments lie” and is shown saying,

⁴⁸⁰ See Second Kings 25:1-7 (King James Version).

⁴⁸¹ Wright, “Day of Jerusalem’s Fall.”

⁴⁸² Quoting Verse 7 of Second Kings 25 (King James Version), Wright said the Babylonians who invaded Jerusalem “slaughtered, senseless killings, they slaughtered the sons of Zedekiah and made him watch it. Then they put out his eyes, so that would be the last thing he had any visual image of, like a commercial airliner or passenger plane slamming into an office building, two commercial office buildings, killing thousands for no reason other than hatred. Remember O’ Lord the Edomites. The day of Jerusalem’s fall.” This passage from Wright’s sermon was not reported by the press. It can be found in the full sermon included in the appendix of this study.

⁴⁸³ ABC reporters Brian Ross and Rehab El-Buri produced a story featuring a compilation of snippets from several sermons by Wright in print form on the network’s web site and broadcast on air March 13, 2008. Scholars generally agree that this story sparked broad news media coverage of Wright. See Albert May, “Feeding Frenzy.”

⁴⁸⁴ See Ross and El-Buri, 2008. See also Wright, “The Day of Jerusalem’s Fall,” in appendix.

The Government gives them (blacks) the drugs, builds bigger prisons, passes a three-strike law, and then wants us to sing ‘God Bless America.’ No, no, no. Not ‘God Bless America’; God Damn America! That’s in the Bible, for killing innocent people. God Damn America for treating her citizen as less than human. God Damn America as long as she keeps trying to act like she is God and she is supreme!⁴⁸⁵

It was in that same sermon that another claim made by Wright also would eventually become the focus of news media coverage to follow. Wright stated: “The Government lied about inventing the HIV-virus as a means of genocide against people of color. Governments lie!”⁴⁸⁶

Between March 14 and March 17, references to Wright’s comments were either a primary or secondary focus in five reports that were published in *The New York Times*. Writer Jodi Kantor reported how “attention shifted to the Obama camp, after a report was shown on ‘Good Morning America’” featuring clips from Wright’s sermons. “Bloggers and television commentators spent the day picking over his stinging social and political critiques in the pulpit,” Kantor wrote, referring to Wright.⁴⁸⁷ The report noted it was not the first time questions had been raised about Wright, whose statements also raised questions about Obama’s beliefs. The next day Kantor reported that Obama “called a grab bag of statements” by Wright “inflammatory and appalling.”⁴⁸⁸ Radio commentator Rush Limbaugh was quoted in the story calling Wright “a race-baiter and a hate-monger.”⁴⁸⁹ It was in this report that

⁴⁸⁵ See Ross and El-Buri, 2008. See also Wright, “Confusing God and Government,” in appendix.

⁴⁸⁶ Wright, “God and Government.”

⁴⁸⁷ Jodi Kantor, “Pastor’s Words,” A18.

⁴⁸⁸ Jodi Kantor, “Obama Denounces Statements of His Pastor as ‘Inflammatory,’” *The New York Times*, March 15, 2008, A13.

⁴⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

Kantor also began using what would become a familiar descriptor of Wright's sermons as "incendiary."⁴⁹⁰

A March 16 story signaled a shift toward more ethnocentric themes as it noted that Obama had removed Wright from his campaign's religious advisory team "after videotapes surfaced of him referring to the United States as the 'U.S. of the K.K.K.A.'"⁴⁹¹ A report that appeared in the newspaper the next day referred to Wright's sermons as "incendiary" and "controversial." It also pointed out that his "remarks have been characterized as anti-white and anti-American."⁴⁹² But it did not attribute those characterizations to a source. The present study found that more than half of the framing of Wright appeared to originate with journalists. A commentary by Op-Ed columnist William Kristol quoted the "God damn America" excerpt from Wright's 2003 sermon and later made reference to "Wright's thoroughgoing and conspiracy-heavy anti-Americanism."⁴⁹³ The next day Kantor and Jeff Zeleny reported that Obama, facing increased scrutiny, would seek to quell growing furor over Wright by delivering a speech on the topic of race in America. Some of his advisers had urged him not to touch upon the thorny topic, but Obama had insisted that he must. The story once again referred to Wright's comments as incendiary and controversial and noted his "characterizations of the United States as fundamentally

⁴⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹¹ Jeff Zeleny and John M. Broder, "With Race Likely to Continue after Pennsylvania, Democrats Court Other States," *The New York Times*, March 16, 2008, A39.

⁴⁹² Kate Phillips, "Pastor Defends His Predecessor at Obama's Chicago Church," *The New York Times*, March 17, 2008, A14.

⁴⁹³ William Kristol, "Generation Obama? Perhaps Not," *The New York Times*, March 17, 2008, A19.

racist and the government as corrupt and murderous.”⁴⁹⁴ Those characterizations were not attributed to a source.

A similar flurry of coverage was found in the *Sun-Times*, which featured eight news stories and commentaries referencing Wright between March 15-March 18. Reporter Abdon M. Pallasch reported that Obama “denounced controversial statements” by Wright, “but said he still had a great deal of respect for the man who married him and baptized his children.”⁴⁹⁵ Pallasch quoted Obama saying, “I have been frustrated by how the church has been described as a ‘separatist’ church—this is a terrific, welcoming church...that has a record of helping the homeless and dealing with HIV/AIDS.”⁴⁹⁶ The story did not quote anyone calling the statements controversial.

On March 16, Lynn Sweet reported a speech that Obama gave at an Indiana high school in which he stated he would not be surprised if people had been “shocked about incendiary statements” Wright had made.⁴⁹⁷ Obama, she added, attempted during the speech to depict Wright as “someone who bears the scars of racism.”⁴⁹⁸ In that same issue, Mary Mitchell described Wright as the “charismatic” and “activist” pastor credited with building Trinity into a mega-church. She noted that Fox News’ “Hannity & Colmes” had accused Wright of “leading a ‘cult’ and ‘separatist’

⁴⁹⁴ Jodi Kantor and Jeff Zeleny, “On Defensive, Obama Plans Talk on Race,” *The New York Times*, March 18, 2008, A1.

⁴⁹⁵ Abdon M. Pallasch, “Obama denounces rhetoric but stands behind his pastor,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, March 15, 2008, 3.

⁴⁹⁶ Pallasch, “Obama denounces rhetoric,” 3.

⁴⁹⁷ Lynn Sweet, “Obama: No to ‘forces of division’; Calls Wright wrong on rhetoric, blames ‘pent-up anger,’” *Chicago Sun-Times*, March 16, 2008, 22.

⁴⁹⁸ Sweet, “No to Division,” 22.

church.”⁴⁹⁹ Obama told Mitchell and other journalists that his campaign had placed “burdens” on the church and its members because it had come under scrutiny from conservative talk show hosts after Obama launched his campaign for the presidency. Obama also said it had become virtually impossible for him to attend services at Trinity “because of the attention that I draw . . .and obviously the controversy surrounding Rev. Wright.”⁵⁰⁰ Mitchell described Trinity as “a pillar of social activism in the black community.”⁵⁰¹ That statement was not attributed to an outside source.

A March 18 *Sun-Times* commentary by Steve Huntley stated that Wright “exploded in Obama’s face” after “videos surfaced” of Wright “denouncing America.”⁵⁰² Huntley said the Trinity Church has “done many wonderful things” but faulted congregants for “loudly applauding Wright as he shouted, ‘God bless America. No, no, no, God damn America.’”⁵⁰³ His report included no response from congregants or religious sources to shed light on what that applause might have meant to them. A *Sun-Times* editorial in that same edition praised Obama for denouncing Wright’s “ugly and incendiary comments from his South Side pulpit about America, whites, Hillary Clinton and Israel.”⁵⁰⁴ But it also stated, “Wright’s words, as ugly as they are, are rooted in the experience of many blacks in America.”⁵⁰⁵ The editorial praised Obama for plans to deliver a speech that night about race that would be aired nationwide.

⁴⁹⁹ Mary Mitchell, “Attacks on his church trouble Obama; He has criticized his pastor, but he won’t abandon Trinity,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, March 16, 2008, 12.

⁵⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰¹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰² Steve Huntley, “Dem race mired in liberals’ victim politics,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, March 18, 2008, 21.

⁵⁰³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰⁴ Editorial Board, “Obama’s addressing race issue head-on,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, March 18, 2008, 21.

⁵⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

The speech by Obama proved to be another flashpoint in news coverage. But as noted by the Pew study, much of the news coverage ignored or minimized the focus Obama also placed on religion during the speech. It was around this time that *The Washington Post* started focusing coverage on Wright. A series of quotes from Wright's sermons appeared in the newspaper on March 15 with no story to explain them. The opening line of the report said: "Some of the Rev. Wright's most controversial remarks."⁵⁰⁶ One statement came from a 2005 book co-edited by Wright in which he declared: "We are descendants of Africa We have a culture that is African in origin—not European. The Bible we preach from came from a culture that was not English or European."⁵⁰⁷ The report never stated why this statement by Wright was controversial. Nor did it cite a source calling it so. It was presented as if it were common sense.

Inside that edition of the newspaper was a story written by the Religion News Service that highlighted how the United Church of Christ was reveling in the attention it was receiving because of Obama's association with the denomination. The story featured the first example of framing that Silk defined as "declension" because it began by noting that the 1.2 million-member denomination had lost more than 40 percent of its membership since the 1960s when it had a membership of about 2 million. It noted that few of the denomination's leaders seemed "fazed by criticism

⁵⁰⁶ See "Preacher with a Penchant for Controversy," *The Washington Post*, March 15, 2008, A06.

⁵⁰⁷ Ibid. See also Iva. E. Carruthers, Frederick D. Haynes III, and Jeremiah A. Wright Jr., eds., *Blow the Trumpet in Zion!: Global Vision and Action for the 21st Century Black Church* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005). The book advocates the prophetic preaching dimension of Black Liberation Theology.

directed at remarks” by Wright’s videotaped sermons that among other things suggested that “the Sept. 11 attacks were brought on by U.S. policies.”⁵⁰⁸

On the day that Obama was scheduled to speak in Philadelphia about race and religion issues that surfaced as a result of attention directed at Wright, *The Washington Post* featured two news stories and two commentaries that included references to Wright. One was a 900-word report that predicted in its final paragraph that during the speech Obama would “explore his relationship with the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, a controversial Chicago pastor.”⁵⁰⁹

The other was a column in which Richard Cohen questioned why it took Obama “so long to ‘reject outright’ the harshly critical statements about America made by his minister, Jeremiah Wright, not to mention the praise the same minister lavished on Louis Farrakhan just last November?”⁵¹⁰ Cohen acknowledged that the nation’s historical treatment of black people was problematic and conceded that he could understand that Wright and Farrakhan know “a different America from the one familiar to most whites,”⁵¹¹ but he argued that Obama’s decision to run for the presidency called him to operate “in a different context” in which the media has the right to “examine everything about him for the slightest clue about character.”⁵¹² In regard to Wright, Cohen wrote, “Obama has shown a worrisome tic.”⁵¹³ He argued that “a public figure has an obligation to denounce bigotry, as well as those who

⁵⁰⁸ David Briggs, Religion News Service, “UCC is Happily Riding Obama’s Coattails; Candidate’s Church of Inclusion Enjoying Renewed Interest,” *The Washington Post*, March 15, 2008, B11.

⁵⁰⁹ Jonathan Weisman and Shailagh Murray, “Wall Street Crisis Forces Candidates to Shift their Focus,” *The Washington Post*, March 18, 2008.

⁵¹⁰ Richard Cohen, “Obama’s Pastor Problem,” *The Washington Post*, March 18, 2008, A19.

⁵¹¹ Cohen, “Pastor Problem,” A19.

⁵¹² *Ibid.*

⁵¹³ *Ibid.*

praise the bigots.”⁵¹⁴ Cohen’s report served as another example of how journalists raised issues associated with ethnocentrism by condemning criticism of America before linking that issue to concerns about Jewish issues, by referencing Farrakhan and Wright’s perceived support of him.

Additionally, *The Washington Post* ran a lengthy—1,744-word—story that focused on Wright and the Trinity United Church of Christ. It began by reporting that more than 3,000 Trinity members had gathered on the preceding Sunday to pray for Wright who had recently retired from the pulpit, calling the media’s treatment of him a “modern-day lynching.”⁵¹⁵ In the story, the writer described Wright’s preaching as “provocative rhetoric” and referred to Wright as “a radical who also inspired women to preach, gays to marry and predominantly white youth groups to visit his services.”⁵¹⁶ This story represented an attempt to explain or make sense of Wright’s preaching and the church’s theology. It was a rare instance of mainstream coverage that included quotes from the current pastor as well as other prominent black ministers and theologians, including James Cone, the seminary professor and preacher who largely has been credited for theologically framing “Black liberation theology.” Cone, a professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York, is quoted saying: “The Christian faith has been interpreted largely by those who enslaved black people, and by the people who segregated them. Black liberation theology is an attempt to understand religion without apologizing for being black. [Wright] is really

⁵¹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵¹⁵ Eric Saslow, “Congregation Defends Obama’s Ex-Pastor; Criticism Seen as Attempt to Silence Voice of Black Church,” *The Washington Post*, March 18, 2008, A1.

⁵¹⁶ *Ibid.*

the one who took it from my books and brought it to the church.”⁵¹⁷ Cone’s quote offers a context that largely was missing from much of the reporting by mainstream newspapers in this case study. The analysis showed that 9 percent of mainstream coverage featured explanatory frames.

The fourth example taken from *The Washington Post* on the day that Obama was scheduled to give his race speech also demonstrates how ethnocentric frames appeared in news coverage of Wright. This framing often upheld American political policies as noble and appropriate. The frames offered no support for why the policies should not be questioned. The report focused on a meeting Jewish leaders held a day earlier to discuss the 2008 presidential election with representatives of Obama, Clinton and Senator John McCain. Writer Dana Milbank wrote that Obama was “in trouble because his pastor... was caught on tape preaching such gospel as ‘God damn America’ and accusing Israel of ‘state terrorism against the Palestinians’.”⁵¹⁸ Milbank reported that the meeting room filled to the brim and people had to be turned away at the door, but he offered no details on the room or crowd size. Later, as the story recounted some of the exchanges to take place during the meeting, Milbank reported how Princeton University professor Dan Kurtzer, a former ambassador to Israel serving as Obama’s representative, had attempted to defuse controversy surrounding Wright. “For many of you who belong to synagogues and Jewish community centers, as I have all my life, we would not want to be judged by words of rabbis who sometimes say ridiculous things,” Kurtzer said.⁵¹⁹ The report said Clinton representative Ann Lewis, who was identified as a former White House official,

⁵¹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵¹⁸ Dana Milbank, “The Audacity of Chutzpah,” *The Washington Post*, March 18, 2008, A2.

⁵¹⁹ Milbank, “Audacity of Chutzpah,” A2.

raised questions about Obama’s loyalty to Israel. Kurtzer argued that Obama had not committed to automatically sanctioning what some called a pro-Israel view but instead favored a “plurality of views” on the issues at hand.⁵²⁰ Milbank noted that the response from the audience was “silence in the room.”⁵²¹ Milbank then quoted Lewis saying: “The role of the president of the United States is to support the decisions that are made by the people of Israel. It is not up to us to pick and choose from among the political parties.” Milbank added: “The audience members applauded.”⁵²²

The Pew Center found in its analysis of news coverage of Obama’s speech that 51 percent of the stories focused on race while only 1 percent focused on religion. The publications included in this case study mirrored that pattern. Each of the three mainstream outlets published relatively large blocks of reports that had the speech as a major focus. *The New York Times* published nine reports, including three news stories, four commentaries, one analysis and one editorial. Wright was the primary focus in three of those reports and a secondary focus in six of them. Just one of the nine reports had a distinctively religious focus. Jeff Zeleny produced the newspaper’s main story about Obama’s speech, calling it an effort to “dispel the furor over inflammatory statements by his former pastor.” He also used the term incendiary to describe Wright’s comments.⁵²³ The *Times*’ editorial board credited Obama for finally stepping up and “dealing with the controversial remarks of his spiritual mentor

⁵²⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵²¹ *Ibid.*

⁵²² *Ibid.*

⁵²³ Jeff Zeleny, “Obama Urges U.S. to Grapple with Race Issue,” *The New York Times*, March 19, 2008, A1.

and former pastor, the Rev. Jeremiah A. Wright Jr., who denounced the United States as endemically racist, murderous and corrupt.”⁵²⁴

Columnist Maureen Dowd described Obama’s speech as “sophisticated damage control on his problem with *Jeremiad* Wright,”⁵²⁵ perhaps a Freudian slip of her pen. The term “jeremiad” is a theological term that is tied to the prophetic preaching style to which Wright subscribes. *Meriam Webster Dictionary* defines it as “a long, mournful complaint or lamentation; a list of woes.”⁵²⁶ Dowd goes on to describe Obama’s speech as a pitch to “superdelegates queasy about his spiritual guide’s Malcolm X-ism, virulent racial pride, the separatism, the deep suspicion of America and the white man—the very things that Obama’s ‘post-racial’ identity was supposed to have transcended.”⁵²⁷ She did not say who conferred this “post-racial identity” upon Obama. Dowd accused Wright of having “anti-American, anti-white and pro-Farrakhan sentiments.”⁵²⁸

Other reports produced by the *Times* the day after Obama’s speech referred to Wright as “a fiery minister who has characterized the United States as systematically oppressive to minorities and the government as murderous and corrupt”⁵²⁹ and mentioned “videotaped snippets of the incendiary race rhetoric of Mr. Obama’s longtime pastor.”⁵³⁰ The next day columnist Nicholas D. Kristof referred to Wright’s “inflammatory sermons” and concluded that “Mr. Wright has indeed made some

⁵²⁴ Editorial Board, “Mr. Obama’s Profile in Courage,” *The New York Times*, March 19, 2008, A18.

⁵²⁵ Maureen Dowd, “Black, White & Gray,” *The New York Times*, March 19, 2008, A19.

⁵²⁶ See <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/jeremiad>.

⁵²⁷ Dowd, “Black, White & Gray,” A19.

⁵²⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵²⁹ Susan Saulny, “In Chicago, More talk about Race after Speech,” *The New York Times*, March 19, 2008, A15.

⁵³⁰ Janny Scott, “A Candidate Chooses Reconciliation Over Rancor,” *The New York Times*, March 19, 2008, A14.

outrageous statements. But he should be judged as well by his actions—including a vigorous effort to address poverty, ill health, injustice and AIDS in his ministry.”⁵³¹ Still, other *New York Times* reports referred to “the political fallout over remarks by Mr. Obama’s former pastor,”⁵³² rehearsed Wright’s HIV and 9/11 quotes,⁵³³ and dubbed Wright as “Obama’s frenzied former pastor.”⁵³⁴ In addition to the speech-related coverage, *The New York Times* published an additional eight reports before the end of March that referenced Wright, including five news stories and three commentaries. Wright was a primary focus in three of those *Times* reports and a secondary focus in five of them. The reports referred to the “incendiary words” of Obama’s “longtime spiritual adviser and former pastor,”⁵³⁵ “the racially incendiary” and “anti-American remarks of Mr. Obama’s longtime pastor,”⁵³⁶ and “explosive excerpts of sermons” by Obama’s pastor. That last reference was included in the newspaper’s one report produced with a religion focus.⁵³⁷

That story, which was the only such religious-themed reportage produced during this period by any of the publications in this case study, explored how issues raised by Obama’s race speech would influence Easter sermons in churches across the nation. It noted that Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox and white evangelical pastors were less likely to talk about the controversy than pastors in black and mainline

⁵³¹ Nicholas D. Kristof, “Obama and Race,” *The New York Times*, March 20, 2008, A27.

⁵³² Larry Rohter and Michael Luo, “Groups Respond to Obama’s Call for National Discussion about Race,” *The New York Times*, March 20, 2008, A21.

⁵³³ William Kristol, “Let’s Not, and Say We Did,” *The New York Times*, March 24, 2008, A23.

⁵³⁴ Bob Herbert, “With a Powerful Speech, Obama Offers a Challenge,” *The New York Times*, March 25, 2008, A27.

⁵³⁵ Jeff Zeleny, “Obama works to Shift Campaign Back to Domestic Issues,” *The New York Times*, March 20, 2008, A21.

⁵³⁶ Patrick Healy, “Clinton Treats Obama Pastor with Extreme Caution,” *The New York Times*, March 21, 2008, A18. See also Adam Nagourney and Jeff Zeleny, “First a Tense Talk with Clinton, Then Richardson Backs Obama,” *The New York Times*, March 22, 2008, A1.

⁵³⁷ Laurie Goodstein and Neela Banerjee, “Obama Talk Fuels Easter Sermons,” *The New York Times*, March 23, 2008, A1.

Protestant churches.⁵³⁸ Elsewhere in coverage, *Times* columnist Timothy Egan called Wright a “nutball,”⁵³⁹ while Dowd labeled him “the wackadoodle.”⁵⁴⁰ Other *New York Times* news reports referenced “inflammatory anti-white and anti-American rhetoric by Wright”⁵⁴¹ and “racially charged comments from his sermons”⁵⁴² with no attribution to sources. Altogether, *The New York Times* published 46 articles during the month of March that mentioned Wright. This study’s sample included 23 of those because they included what the researcher considered specific frames of Wright. A significant portion of the reports raise flags about fairness and accuracy as noted by Berry College professors Hill, Hickman and McLendon, who were cited earlier in this study. These scholars argued that improving the quality of religious-themed reporting would require more attention to “a neutral and unbiased stance toward different religious groups,” including terminology used to describe groups or individuals.⁵⁴³

They posit:

When pejorative terms displace neutral terms in the text of a news article, emotional reaction by the reading public may displace rational, dispassionate consideration of specific fact and logical inference and thus subvert the informational and deliberative purposes which are supposed to be served by news coverage.⁵⁴⁴

The main storylines in the *Times* following coverage of Obama’s speech were mirrored in the other publications in this case study with some notable differences in some of the reports’ tone. Of the 30 Wright-related reports the *Chicago Sun-Times* published in March 2008, eight preceded Obama’s speech. Ten of the reports focused

⁵³⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵³⁹ Timothy Egan, “Donner Party Democrats,” *The New York Times*, March 22, 2008, A13.

⁵⁴⁰ Maureen Dowd, “Haunting Obama’s Dreams,” *The New York Times*, March 23, 2008, WK10.

⁵⁴¹ Janny Scott, “Talk about Race,” *The New York Times*, March 23, 2008, WK1.

⁵⁴² Julie Bosman and Patrick Healy, “Clinton Criticizes Obama Over His Pastor,” *The New York Times*, March 26, 2008, A19.

⁵⁴³ Hill Hickman and McLendon, “Cults and Sects and Doomsday groups,” 25.

⁵⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

on Obama’s speech, including two news stories, one news analysis, six commentaries and one editorial. Wright was the primary focus in five of those reports and the secondary focus in the other five. The Chicago newspaper’s framing of Wright was on the whole more reserved than what appeared in the New York newspaper. The news analysis referred to “inflammatory rhetoric” that “triggered a crisis,”⁵⁴⁵ while news stories referred to “racially incendiary comments”⁵⁴⁶ and “divisive comments.”⁵⁴⁷ The *Sun-Times* commentators avoided name calling, relying instead on more nuanced language to refer to Wright’s statements. One article referred to Obama’s speech as a response to “the fast-growing controversy over the words” of Wright and “Wright’s most extreme views.”⁵⁴⁸

The Washington Post published 13 reports that featured some focus on Obama’s race speech and offered frames of Wright in the process. Wright was the primary focus in nine of those reports and a secondary focus in four of them. Six of the reports were commentaries, one was an editorial, one was an analysis and five were news stories, including one produced by the Religion News Service, in which writer Adelle M. Banks credited Obama with taking “pains to explain the ethos of some black churches,” which become the only places where “congregants may speak openly about racial tensions that often cannot be addressed elsewhere.”⁵⁴⁹ Banks’ story also quotes McMickle, the seminary professor and author referenced earlier in

⁵⁴⁵ Lynn Sweet, “‘America can change’: Obama: Great speech had enduring truths—did it give political cover?” *Chicago Sun-Times*, March 19, 2008, 3.

⁵⁴⁶ Steve Warmbir, “‘America can change’: Obama Distances himself from pastor’s comments but cites Wright’s good deeds,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, March 19, 2008, 2.

⁵⁴⁷ Lynn Sweet, “Richardson endorses Obama; America’s only Hispanic governor—a former Bill Clinton insider—backs ‘once-in-a-lifetime leader,’” *Chicago Sun-Times*, March 22, 2008, 8.

⁵⁴⁸ Mark Brown, “He spoke with wisdom, voice of experience; Politics forced Obama’s hand—and he should be grateful,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, March 19, 2008

⁵⁴⁹ See Adelle M. Banks, Religion News Service, “Obama Finds Pulpit in Center of Racial Divide,” *The Washington Post*, March 22, 2008, B11.

this study's chapter on Wright, along with several other black church scholars. Banks did not use any descriptors for Wright, other than calling him Obama's former pastor.⁵⁵⁰

Most of *The Washington Post* reports used nuanced language in framing Wright. For example, one story referenced "controversy over video snippets of sermons,"⁵⁵¹ while another referred to "incendiary excerpts of sermons."⁵⁵² A number of others referred to inflammatory statements, snippets or rhetoric.⁵⁵³ No sources for those characterizations were quoted in *Post* reports, as was the case in other publications. Eugene Robinson, an African-American *Post* columnist who won a Pulitzer Prize for his writing about Obama during the 2008 presidential election, made reference to "racially charged remarks" and "incendiary sound bites from the Rev. Jeremiah Wright's sermons."⁵⁵⁴ Another *Post* columnist, Michael Gerson, labeled Wright in harsher terms, calling him a "charismatic angry pastor" who uses "words of hatred and division."⁵⁵⁵ He also called Wright "a political extremist" and

⁵⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵¹ Kevin Merida, "Obama, Trying to Bridge America's Racial Divide; Pastor's Remarks Spurred Need to Address Subject," *The Washington Post*, March 19, 2008, C01.

⁵⁵² Alec MacGillis and Eli Saslow, "Tackling a Sensitive Topic at a Sensitive Moment, for Disparate Audiences," *The Washington Post*, March 19, 2008, A06.

⁵⁵³ See Courtland Milloy, "Invited to Wrestle in a Racial Mud Pit, Obama Soars Above It," *The Washington Post*, March 19, 2008, B01. See also Editorial Board, "Moment of Truth: Prompted by the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, Barack Obama squarely addresses the issue of race," *The Washington Post*, December 19, 2008, A14; and Howard Kurtz, "A Complex Speech, Boiled Down to Simple Politics," *The Washington Post*, March 20, 2008, C01.

⁵⁵⁴ Eugene Robinson, "Obama's Road Map on Race," *The Washington Post*, March 19, 2008, A15. In honoring Robinson with the Pulitzer Prize for Commentary, jurors cited him "for his eloquent columns on the 2008 presidential campaign that focus on the election of the first African-American president, showcasing graceful writing and grasp of the larger historic picture." Accessed March 27, 2014, <http://www.pulitzer.org/citation/2009-Commentary>.

⁵⁵⁵ Michael Gerson, "A Speech that Fell Short," *The Washington Post*, March 19, 2008, A15.

charged him with promoting an accusation that is “batty, reflecting a sputtering, incoherent hatred for America.”⁵⁵⁶

Once the speech story coverage subsided, the *Post* published nine additional reports in March that included references to Wright. Wright was a secondary focus in six of those reports. Most of the reports used frames such as “controversial” or “racially charged” sermons in reference to Wright. A few had neutral references to Wright, only mentioning his name. At least two reports sought to explain the history of the black church and some of its cultural values. Both were written by black staffers, who like Robinson have been awarded Pulitzer Prizes. Colbert I. King referred to Wright “as a gift to all who would bring down Obama.”⁵⁵⁷ However, he sought to tie Wright and the Trinity congregation to Absalom Jones and Richard Allen, two black men who started the nation’s first black Christian denomination after they and other blacks were denied the right in 1787 to pray at the altar in a white Methodist church. Blacks had been restricted to sitting in the balcony of that white church in Philadelphia. Jones and Allen founded the African Methodist Episcopal Church. King argued that church history helped him to understand why Obama had chosen to stay at Trinity and why characterizations of Trinity as “racially exclusive” were off the mark.⁵⁵⁸

Washington Post writer Robin Givhan argued that “popular culture has largely reduced the black church to a caricature,” of saintly and passive people and singing

⁵⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵⁷ Colbert I. King, “Why Obama Stands With His Church,” *The Washington Post*, March 22, 2008, A13. King won the Pulitzer Prize for Commentary in 2003. See <http://www.pulitzer.org/citation/2003-Commentary>.

⁵⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

and swaying choirs.⁵⁵⁹ She noted how in New York City, black churches are a part of tour stops, where mostly white tourists pop into Sunday morning services just to hear the music and then leave before the sermon. “Much of the acrimony” regarding Wright, she argued, “might have been avoided if white tourists were just as interested in praying alongside blacks as they were in listening to them sing.”⁵⁶⁰

Post columnist E.J. Dionne Jr. offered a level of context that was unique among white columnists by comparing what some called Wright’s angry speech to language uttered by a now revered icon. “One black leader who was capable of getting very angry indeed is the one now being invoked against Wright,” Dionne wrote. “His name was Martin Luther King Jr.”⁵⁶¹ Dionne argued that King mastered the art of switching idioms when he spoke to different audiences. He then quoted an excerpt from a 1968 sermon King delivered “at his own Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta,” which referred to the Vietnam War and sounded similar to comments by Wright:

God didn’t call America to engage in a senseless, unjust war....And we are criminals in that war. We’ve committed more war crimes almost than any nation in the world, and I’m going to continue to say it. And we won’t stop it because of our pride and our arrogance as a nation. But God has a way of even putting nations in their place.⁵⁶²

Dionne noted that “King then predicted this response from the Almighty:

‘And if you don’t stop your reckless course, I’ll rise up and break the backbone of

⁵⁵⁹ Robin Givhan, “A Failure to See Shades of Gray in the Black Church,” *The Washington Post*, March 23, 2008, M01. Givhan won the 2006 Pulitzer for fashion criticism, accessed March 27, 2014, <http://www.pulitzer.org/citation/2006-Criticism>.

⁵⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶¹ E.J. Dionne Jr., “Another Angry Black Preacher,” A17.

⁵⁶² *Ibid.*

your power’.”⁵⁶³ But Dionne stopped shy of offering such a benevolent assessment of Wright:

I cite King not to justify Wright’s damnation of America or his lunatic and pernicious theories but to suggest that Obama’s pastor and his church are not as far outside the African American mainstream as many would suggest. I would also ask my conservative friends who praise King so lavishly to search their consciences and wonder if they would have stood up for him in 1968.⁵⁶⁴ Dionne’s use of such harsh language in regard to Wright after comparing him

to King appears to reflect the thesis advanced by theorist Craig Watkins, who posited that deviant performers must not be portrayed in ways that give them honor in the political arena.⁵⁶⁵

During the month of March 2008, alternative publications featured nine reports with frames focused on Wright. These included three news stories and six commentaries. Wright was a primary focus in five of those and a secondary focus in the other four. Six of the nine reports—almost 70 percent—included distinctively religious framing and focus, which is significantly higher percentage than what appeared in mainstream publications. Several of the commentaries were authored by pastors and theologians. All of the pieces offered a defense of Wright and his rhetorical style.

Writing for the *Chicago Defender*, Cheryle R. Jackson, who at the time was president and CEO of the Chicago Urban League, referred to Wright’s “racially inflammatory comments” as being “emblematic of the country’s racial tensions, the pain and frustration in the Black community and a lack of understanding and

⁵⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶⁵ See Watkins, “Framing Protest,” 98.

acknowledgment of that pain by members of the majority community.”⁵⁶⁶ Kathy Chancy, a *Chicago Defender* staff writer, wrote a story about Obama’s race speech and likened it to a school lesson for “those who needed a refresher course on racial division in the United States.”⁵⁶⁷ Chancy noted that Obama had been prompted to speak because of “the seemingly inflammatory remarks his former pastor made from the pulpit years ago.”⁵⁶⁸ Her report included various comments from local and national black religious leaders.

The *Chicago Defender*’s managing editor Glenn Reedtis argued that Wright had been “castigated in right wing news outlets” and Obama had been pressured to denounce him, even though Wright’s style of preaching had been around and widely known for many years.⁵⁶⁹ Reedtis eschewed characterizations of Wright and the Trinity congregation as “racist” or “separatist,” saying the conclusions do not make sense because the church is voluntarily a part of a largely white denomination, whose officials “have yet to censure him.”⁵⁷⁰ So, he asked, “what credibility do those who neither belong to the denomination nor Trinity have in the matter of sermon topics?”⁵⁷¹

One of the five reports appearing in the *Washington Afro American* was a front-page commentary submitted on behalf of the Trinity congregation and highlighting what Silk referred to as the “good works” topos. It noted that Wright was retiring after 36 years and would leave a legacy of more than seventy ministries and

⁵⁶⁶ Cheryle R. Jackson, “The church plays critical role in Black American life,” *Chicago Defender*, March 19, 2008, 13.

⁵⁶⁷ Kathy Chancy, “Faith community responds to Obama’s speech,” *Chicago Defender*, March 19, 2008, 3.

⁵⁶⁸ Chancy, “Faith community responds to speech,” 3.

⁵⁶⁹ Glenn Reedtis, “Obama rises above attacks,” *Chicago Defender*, March 26, 2008, 17.

⁵⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷¹ *Ibid.*

eight corporations, including a day care center and two senior housing complexes. After its introductory sentence, the article included a Bible quote which seemed to speak to the current mainstream analysis of Wright. It said: “Whether they listen or fail to listen—for they are a rebellious house—they will know that a prophet has been among them.”⁵⁷² Later, the commentary highlighted Silk’s topos of inclusion by noting that a number of leaders within the congregation and from religious communities across the nation were standing in unity to support Wright’s ministry. About fifty names were listed at the end of the editorial, including that of the Trinity congregation’s new pastor Otis Moss III. A few weeks later on March 22, 2008, Barbara Reynolds, who had been a *USA TODAY* columnist before becoming an ordained minister and professor at Howard University Divinity School, argued in a commentary that without ministers like Wright and the kind of ministry he had developed Obama would not be in a position to be taken seriously as a presidential candidate. Reynolds posited that there was nothing “weird” or “separatist” about Wright. “He loved his country enough to serve in the U.S. Marines,” she wrote.⁵⁷³

Ron Walters, who was a widely published University of Maryland political scientist and government analyst before his death in 2010, wrote a commentary that appeared in the *Afro American* on March 22, 2008, in which he charged “race-sensitive whites” with putting Obama into what he called a “Black box” because Obama’s ascension to political power represented a threat to white power in the

⁵⁷² See “Blessed and Beloved Man of God,” *Washington Afro American*, March 8, 2008, C5. The Bible quote in this story is taken from the Bible book of Ezekiel 2:5 (New International Version). This book is based on the sayings of the Old Testament prophet by that name. Wright claimed that his own preaching and teachings were inspired by that tradition.

⁵⁷³ Barbara Reynolds, “America needs the Jeremiah Wrights of the World,” *Washington Afro American*, March 22, 2008, A7.

United States.⁵⁷⁴ He added that mainstream media had no understanding of “Black preaching, which has always used apocalyptic language to cut deep into the heart of the truth, and they really do not understand the perspective by which Blacks view public events which comes from the pain of their disproportionate sacrifices.”⁵⁷⁵ Obama’s foray into presidential politics brought with it, Walters said, an expectation to “display an unerring patriotism whether or not the country has killed hundreds of thousands of innocent people in pursuit of a misguided illegal and disastrous war policy.”⁵⁷⁶ That, according to Walters, had produced a “culture clash” between the Black community and the presidential political arena.⁵⁷⁷ In one article, Walters introduced frames associated with race, politics, ethnocentrism as well as religious tolerance and inclusion.

After publishing a total of 21 stories and commentaries with frames of Wright during the first 13 months of the study period, the six publications in this case study significantly increased the number of such reports in March 2008. *The Washington Post* produced 29 articles and *Chicago Sun-Times* produced 30 reports. *The New York Times* produced 23 reports during that month that were included in the study. The alternative publications produced nine reports. Those articles brought the number of reports to be included in the study’s sample to 114. Very few of these reports included recent or live quotes from Wright. But that would change in April when Wright accepted several speaking engagements.

⁵⁷⁴ Ron Walters, “A clash between Black culture and presidential politics,” *Washington Afro American*, March 22, 2008, A6.

⁵⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

Framing to the Finish

Newspapers and magazines are better than television or radio for explaining the impact of an issue or the causes of a conflict. Scholars have learned that, although most people say they get most of their news from television, few can remember very much of what they've seen or heard on a newscast. But print can't compete with television in speed or emotional power. The differing strengths and limitations of each medium make it more likely that you'll find a lengthy explanatory story in a newspaper or magazine, whereas you're more likely to learn of an event from television, radio or the Internet. The newspaper lets you read the details of a budget or a box score, but television shows you the worker whose job was cut or the player scoring the winning basket.⁵⁷⁸

– Brian Brooks et al, University of Missouri.

While such claims as those stated in the quote above might generally be true, few “lengthy explanatory” stories about the Rev. Jeremiah A. Wright Jr., his theology, his sermons and his church’s ministry appeared in mainstream and alternative publications during the first fourteen months of the period selected for this study. As the coverage moved into the final month of this study’s focus, the publications under review appeared to be settling into somewhat consistent patterns of tersely mentioning Wright in their reports and moving on to how Obama was faring in the campaign.

Such a pattern is often common in the framing of issues over extended period of time and serves a purpose, according to theorists Gail T. Fairhurst and Robert A. Sarr, who point out how “a mere turn of a phrase” helps to create alternate views of issues, situations and even of the world.⁵⁷⁹ “Our language choices are critical to the management of meaning through framing,” they note. “Highlight the negatives, and a problem looks overwhelming. Accentuate the positives, and a solution seems just

⁵⁷⁸ Brooks et al, “News Reporting and Writing,” 6.

⁵⁷⁹ Fairhurst and Sarr, *The Art of Framing*, 7.

around the corner.”⁵⁸⁰ Fairhurst and Sarr argue that people typically use jargon and catchphrases to frame a subject in familiar terms.⁵⁸¹ “These terms help stabilize and secure what are, at first, vaguely held perceptions,” they posit. “Through our use of language, we categorize.... Thus, our memory is triggered by language.”⁵⁸²

Heading into the month of April, the mainstream publications in this study seemed to have settled on a basic framing or categorization of Wright as a potential presidential spiritual adviser with a penchant for saying all the wrong things and thereby stirring up controversy. During the first 10 days of April 2008, eight reports that mentioned Wright appeared in *The New York Times*. In an April 2 commentary focused on a Clinton strategist shopping for superdelegates, *Times* columnist Maureen Dowd referred to how the strategist was trying to capitalize on “the Rev. Wright issue.”⁵⁸³ An April 4 story highlighted how support for Obama had softened in the previous month “as voters have taken a slightly less positive view of him than they did after his burst of victories in February” 2008.⁵⁸⁴ The 829-word story did not mention Wright until its next to last paragraph, noting:

Of those respondents who said they had heard about the controversy involving Mr. Obama’s pastor, the Rev. Jeremiah A. Wright Jr., 36 percent of the general electorate said it made them look less favorably on Mr. Obama. Sixty-two percent said it made no difference. And 77 percent of Democrats said the episode had not affected their view of Mr. Obama. Twenty-six percent of the general electorate voters who heard the speech that Mr. Obama gave to try to deal with the controversy said it made them feel more favorable about him. And 74 percent of Democrats said Mr. Obama would be the kind of candidate who would unite the nation; 60 percent said the same of Mrs. Clinton.⁵⁸⁵

⁵⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁵⁸² *Ibid.*, 7-8.

⁵⁸³ Maureen Dowd, “The Hillary Waltz,” *The New York Times*, April 2, 2008, A27.

⁵⁸⁴ Adam Nagourney and Megan Thee, “Obama’s Support Softens in Poll, Suggesting a Peak Has Passed,” *The New York Times*, April 4, 2008, A21.

⁵⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, A21.

From April 11 through April 24, the *Times* published another 10 reports in which Wright was mentioned – one time in each report. Two news stories referred to Wright as “controversial.”⁵⁸⁶ Three other news stories described his comments or remarks as “incendiary,” including one reported by Jacques Steinberg that pointed out how more than 17,600 comments had been posted on the ABC network’s web site to complain about questions asked of candidates by Democratic primary campaign debate moderators Charles Gibson and George Stephanopoulos. Steinberg noted that some “rapped the journalists for dwelling on matters that had been picked over for weeks, like the incendiary comments of Mr. Obama’s former pastor...”⁵⁸⁷ Another news story published by the *Times* referred to “inflammatory statements” made by Wright.⁵⁸⁸ One commentator also referred to “incendiary” comments by Obama’s “former pastor.”⁵⁸⁹ An editorial by the newspaper’s editorial board mentioned “the racist oratory” of Obama’s “longtime pastor” in a sentence that described how “talk of religion” had become “particularly perilous” for Obama.⁵⁹⁰ The editorial was about how guns and religion had been topics on the campaign trail. It offered no examples of Wright’s “racist oratory.” A few days later, a commentary mentioned how Obama had been asked in a recent debate “to explain his relationship with the frightening

⁵⁸⁶ See Jeff Zeleny, “Powell Has Praise For Obama,” *The New York Times*, April 11, 2008, A17. See also Patrick Healy, “Clinton Clearly Outduels Obama in Pennsylvania,” *The New York Times*, April 23, 2008, A1.

⁵⁸⁷ Jacques Steinberg, “Who Lost the Debate? Moderators, Many Say,” *The New York Times*, April 18, 2008, A16. See also John Harwood, “First Question for Clinton: be Aggressive or Lay Off?” *The New York Times*, April 14, 2008, A20. Julie Bosman and Jeff Zeleny, “Clinton Impugns Obama’s Toughness,” *The New York Times*, April 19, 2008, A13.

⁵⁸⁸ Adam Nagourney, “For Democrats, Questions over Race and Electability,” *The New York Times*, April 24, 2008, A1.

⁵⁸⁹ Alessandra Stanley, “Using a Shiv, But Look Like a Saint,” *The New York Times*, April 14, 2008, A21.

⁵⁹⁰ Editorial Board, “Guns and Bitter,” *The New York Times*, April 16, 2008, A24.

Reverend Wright.”⁵⁹¹

One of the values of textual analysis of news texts is that it allows one to study the ways in which journalists make sense of the events that they cover.⁵⁹² Historically, it has been argued that the journalists who do the best job of this are those who work for print media, presumably because their format gives them more space to explain to their audiences what is going on in the world around them. Up until April 24, Wright had not been a primary focus in any of the newspaper’s coverage. As a secondary focus, he had become a mere appendage to the bigger story about Obama’s run for the presidency, with very few details explaining why. Readers could surmise or be reminded that Wright had made some remarks that some found to be incendiary, controversial or inflammatory and that he made the news because he had been Obama’s pastor before recently retiring. The use of the term “racist” by the *Times* editorial board to refer to Wright’s oratory also marked a pattern that moved away from the classic definition of the word. A number of academic textbooks defer to the definition advanced by Bruno Leone, a professor of European intellectual history at San Diego State University:

Racism is the belief in the inherent superiority of a particular race. It denies the basic equality of humankind and correlates ability with physical composition. Thus, it assumes that success or failure in any societal endeavor will depend upon genetic endowment rather than environment and access to opportunity.⁵⁹³

That definition suggests that a racist is one who practices racism, which “in many ways is an extension of stereotyping and prejudice,” according to Samovar et

⁵⁹¹ Charles M. Blow, “All Atmospherics, No Climate,” *The New York Times*, April 19, 2008, A19.

⁵⁹² McKee, *Textual Analysis*, 14.

⁵⁹³ Bruno Leone, *Racism: Opposing Viewpoints*, (Minneapolis, MN: Greenhaven Press, 1986), 1. See also Larry A. Samovar et al, *Communication between cultures*, 238.

al.⁵⁹⁴ Journalists writing for the *Times* and other publications in this study's sample occasionally concluded that the word is a fitting descriptor for Wright, whose church is voluntarily associated with a 90 percent white denomination, whose congregation includes white members and whose white former seminary dean spoke favorably of his ministry and attended the church's services often. Such examples point out why passing references and the use of catchphrases might not adequately explain topics or individuals. But there was little depth of coverage about Wright found in the *Times* during the first three and half weeks of April 2008.

Coverage in the *Chicago Sun-Times* during that period mirrored that of *The New York Times* in the sense that many reports treated Wright as an appendage, assigning to him similar descriptors, including incendiary and controversial, or in a few cases none at all. The *Sun-Times* featured 17 reports between April 1 and April 23 that featured frames of Wright. He was a secondary focus in most of those reports and most mentions of him were reserved to one sentence or paragraph within reports. While the subject matter was a bit more diverse, some mentions of Wright seemed gratuitous.

For instance, a feature story on the hip-hop singer and rapper known as "Common" included a quote in which he reflected on his childhood and said: "I went to church every Sunday at the Trinity United Church (of Christ). My pastor, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, has been a big influence in my life in a positive way."⁵⁹⁵ One might conclude that the rapper was well aware of controversy surrounding Wright based on

⁵⁹⁴ Larry A. Samovar et al, *Communication between cultures*, 238.

⁵⁹⁵ Cindy Pearlman, "Common-er to 'King'; Chicago hip-hop artist draws on 'Street' upbringing for new role," *Chicago Sun-Times*, April 8, 2008, 29.

how he framed his statement with the use of the word “positive.” Wright was not mentioned again in that story.

A commentary by Christopher Hitchens began with a focus on the 40th anniversary of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. and his memories of the event. But then he shifted to a book he was reading that mentioned how a promise of reform by President Franklin D. Roosevelt had led to the cancelation of a planned march on Washington by blacks in 1941. On the same weekend he was reading that book, Hitchens said he “absorbed a news item about the Rev. Jeremiah Wright.”⁵⁹⁶ Hitchens then went on to repeat the news that the Trinity Church congregation that Wright led for 36 years had agreed to build him a \$1.6 million retirement home in a “prosperous white suburb.”⁵⁹⁷ Before moving on to his next item, he concluded his discussion of Wright with the following statement:

There used to be a secularist line about fat shepherds and thin sheep, but the joke here is not just at the expense of a man who never pretended to be much more than a hustler. The joke is on those of the ‘flock’ who tithed themselves to achieve this level of comfort for a man who must be pinching himself when he wakes up every day.⁵⁹⁸

From a textual analysis perspective, Hitchens’ reference to Wright as a “hustler” introduces an idea associated with Silk’s topos of false prophecy as Hitchens concludes Wright is living a lavish lifestyle as evidenced by his impending move to a “prosperous” suburb. Moreover, the writing suggests that Hitchens has concluded that Wright is being a hypocrite by moving to a “white” suburb because he has read Wright’s rhetoric on race to mean that Wright hates white people.

⁵⁹⁶ Christopher Hitchens, “Obama’s friends are hardly admirable,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, April 12, 2008, 17.

⁵⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

Hypocrisy also is among Silk's topoi. However, Hitchens does use clearly religious language or sources to introduce the notions of false prophecy or hypocrisy. Hitchens supported his critique with what he called a "secularist" line that did not offer an explanation for his statements about Wright. His report also did not include background on Wright or other voices to substantiate his claims.

Similar patterns emerged in another commentary reflecting on King's assassination written by Neil Steinberg. He began by recalling he was 7 years old when he first heard of King's death. He shifts to asking a question about whether blacks who rioted on Chicago's West Side at that time had been justified in doing so. He then connected that issue to current events, which led him to mention Wright, whom he said he would not comment on "personally, because I don't know him and refuse to judge him based on snippets posted by political skills."⁵⁹⁹ Still, he added commentary that reflected a strong ethnocentric theme:

But (Wright's) infamous 'God damn America' is an attitude not unknown in the black community, where victimhood and bitterness and anger are too addictive for some to avoid. We see this attitude in Wright's congregation, and its fervid, knee-jerk reply to critics—we were wronged! Which shows they don't understand that many Americans don't know and don't care about the troubles they've seen, but do notice and do care when somebody trashes our country—a riot of the heart, as it were. Like the West Side rioters, they only hurt themselves or, rather, they hurt the first black candidate with a real shot at the White House. America was the tool of injury, true, but it is also the instrument for repair, the only one available. Rev. King understood that. The wise man doesn't burn down—or run down—his own home.⁶⁰⁰

Alan McKee, an Australian scholar who has written extensively on textual analysis, posits that the reports produced by journalists are themselves the result of textual analyses the journalists have done of the subjects of their reports. Journalists

⁵⁹⁹ Neil Steinberg, "A riot of the heart; Tearing down America hurt blacks' cause in King's day—and now," *Chicago Sun-Times*, April 6, 2008, 17.

⁶⁰⁰ Steinberg, "A riot of the heart," 17.

read or analyze a text and determine what they think the creator of the message is trying to say.⁶⁰¹ In the case of the present study, journalists have analyzed snippets from Wright's sermons and determined what they mean (to the journalists and others who make sense of reality as they do). Steinberg draws conclusions about Wright and various other groups that do not jibe with what others might say. For instance, he accused Wright's congregation of conveying an attitude of victimhood while his *Sun-Times* colleague Mary Mitchell, who is African American, often referred to the congregation as a place that attracts many of Chicago's black elite and offers many ministries of self-help to the community.⁶⁰²

McKee argues that all individuals read texts from a cultural perspective. "Different cultures make sense of the world in very different ways," McKee asserts.⁶⁰³ That, he noted, is why there is such a thing as "culture shock" and why some organizations produce guides designed to help people overcome such shock by trying to help them understand how others experience reality:⁶⁰⁴

Studying other cultures makes clear that, at many levels, the ways of making sense of the world can be quite different. . . . The idea that different cultures make different value judgments about things is common sense—we already know this. But the differences in sense-making practices in various cultures go much further than this.⁶⁰⁵

McKee cites such factors as differences in the existence of abstract things and concrete things, as well as differences in the relationships between things, and in reason and thinking. He concludes:

⁶⁰¹ McKee, *Textual Analysis*, 1.

⁶⁰² See Mary Mitchell, "Why Obama denounced Farrakhan," *Chicago Sun-Times*, March 2, 2008, 12. See also Mitchell, "Attacks on church trouble Obama," *Chicago Sun-Times*, March 16, 2008, 12.

⁶⁰³ McKee, *Textual Analysis*, 4.

⁶⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁶⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

People from different sense-making systems can literally see the world differently...If we accept that different cultures have different sense-making practices and that they see reality in a variety of different ways, the next question is: how do we judge those different ways of making sense of the world?⁶⁰⁶

McKee offers three different approaches that, to some extent, resemble the competing research methods of how knowledge is acquired. First is a “realist,” who would argue his or her culture has it all right. “It simply describes reality. Other cultures are wrong.”⁶⁰⁷ That perspective aligns with notions of ethnocentrism. Second is a “structuralist,” who might argue that various cultures seem to be making sense of the world differently, but they all have common structures. So they are really not very different. Third is a “post-structuralist,” who typically concludes it is not possible to say one culture is right and others are wrong; people just “experience reality differently.”⁶⁰⁸ What all of that means, according to McKee, is:

Depending on what approach you take to judging different cultures’ sense-making practices—the different ways they make sense of the world—you analyze texts in different ways. From a “realist” perspective, you look for the single text that you think represents reality most accurately, and judge all other texts against that one. From a ‘structuralist’ perspective, you look for the deep structures that aren’t actually apparent in the text, but that you can find by specialized training. From a ‘post-structuralist’ perspective, you look for the differences between texts without claiming that one of them is the only correct one.⁶⁰⁹

Steinberg’s commentary seems to reflect the “realist” perspective. Steinberg’s tone and content suggest that Wright and the others he mentions are wrong based on his reading of them, and Steinberg is right because he is aligned with “most Americans” who in the words of McKee apparently “represent reality most

⁶⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁶⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰⁸ McKee, *Textual Analysis*, 9.

⁶⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 12-13.

accurately.”⁶¹⁰ Most of the mainstream reports that voiced objection to Wright and his views reflected a similar “common-sense” disposition.

The Washington Post printed more stories and commentaries that mentioned Wright than both the *Times* and the *Sun-Times* from April 1 to April 25, but none of the 20 reports focused significantly on Wright. Most of the references to him were terse. Depending on who did the writing, the references generally were benign. In this sense all three mainstream newspapers featured similar reports. The *Post*’s references to Wright were probably the most generic, with practically all the coverage that mentioned Wright centered primarily upon the campaign and upcoming primaries. One report published early in the month focused on the anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination. In it, historian Taylor Branch spoke of King’s critique of America and his challenge to the nation to “take our national purpose seriously, which is the full promise of equal citizenship.”⁶¹¹ The report featured a quote from Lawrence E. Carter, the dean of the Martin Luther King Jr. International Chapel at Morehouse College, who said, “When (King) chastised us for being the greatest perpetrator of violence in the history of the world, think about Jeremiah Wright.”⁶¹² An April 6 report reviewed a new book that purported to show another side of Martin Luther King Jr.’s rhetoric. The writer, Adam Fairclough, began with a reference to Wright:

We have heard a lot in recent weeks about the distinctive language and theology of the African American church. Exposed to snippets of Jeremiah Wright’s sermons, white Americans heard unpatriotic rants tinged by bitterness and paranoia. To black Americans, on the other hand, the Chicago

⁶¹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹¹ Kevin Merida, “The Other Side of the Mountaintop; Scholars Assess Nation’s Progress—and an Icon’s Rougher Edges—Four Decades After Assassination,” *The Washington Post*, April 4, 2008, A01.

⁶¹² *Ibid.*

pastor's preaching expresses righteous indignation over injustice, a voice that comports with the prophetic role that history has assigned to the black minister. After all, black churches owed their existence to the racism that permeated white denominations, and black ministers possessed the independence to preach a gospel of freedom. The black church has been rightly proud of its commitment to the brotherhood of man, and it has never been truly segregated in the sense of excluding white people. At the same time, however, the black church has encouraged racial solidarity, black leadership and even Black Nationalism.⁶¹³

Fairclough's review provides additional support for ideas advanced by McKee regarding how different groups of people have different ways of making sense of reality. In contrast, Charles Krauthammer framed Wright as a racist in a commentary about the problems facing both the Clinton and Obama campaigns.⁶¹⁴ Krauthammer then called Obama's "swoon-inducing Philadelphia speech" an "invitation to move on" from discussions about Wright, adding that "after the speech it became an article of faith that even referring to Wright's comments was somehow illegitimate, the new 'Swift-boating.'"⁶¹⁵ Like *The New York Times* editorial, he also did not detail what made Wright racist. In many of the reports published in the *Post* during this period, the writers were focused on horse-race campaign issues for the most part with seemingly obligatory mentions of Wright included.

One shortcoming in news media coverage is the failure to integrate statements from culture experts into their reports to help explain why such differences in perspectives exist. McKee's analysis about the various sense-making perspectives is helpful in framing the perspective of Wright and offering additional insights into why some mainstream journalists used the frames they did in writing about him. During the final weeks of coverage focused on Wright, mainstream commentators took him

⁶¹³ Fairclough, "His Own Man," BW05.

⁶¹⁴ Krauthammer, "Fabulist Vs. Saint," A23.

⁶¹⁵ *Ibid.*

to task for views he expressed about cultural differences. Wright conveyed ideas that aligned with what McKee called a “post-structuralist” perspective. Three public appearances by Wright in less than a week’s time culminated the news media’s focus on him as a major news topic.

On April 25, 2008, PBS aired an interview that television journalist Bill Moyers, who is a member of the United Church of Christ, had recently conducted with Wright. It marked the first broadcast interview with a journalist since Wright had become embroiled in controversy for his remarks and how they reflected on his relationship with Obama. *The New York Times* reported in advance that Wright would be featured on PBS and included excerpts from the interview. Wright is quoted telling Moyers that his words had been twisted “for some very devious reasons,” resulting in what he called “unfair” and “untrue” characterizations.⁶¹⁶ ⁶¹⁷ Writer Julie Bosman then reported that Wright used language that seemed to attack notions of America’s ethnocentrism, saying that his critics intended for the fusing of snippets from his sermons to convey “‘Something’s wrong with me. There’s nothing wrong with this country... for its policies. We’re perfect. Our hands are free. Our hands have no blood on them.’”⁶¹⁸ Bosman also reported that Wright told Moyers that “he understood when Mr. Obama denounced his remarks. ‘I do what I do. He does what politicians do. So that what happened in Philadelphia where he had to respond to the sound bites, he responded as a politician’.”⁶¹⁹

⁶¹⁶ Julie Bosman, “Pastor Defends Himself,” *The New York Times*, April 25, 2008, A24.

⁶¹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶¹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶¹⁹ *Ibid.*

The *Sun-Times* published two reports related to Wright's upcoming public appearances, but the primary focus shifted away from PBS to a planned appearance by Wright scheduled the following week. Lynn Sweet began the report by saying:

The controversial Rev. Jeremiah Wright – Sen. Barack Obama's pastor – is speaking at the National Press Club as part of a divinity conference of black church leaders. Wright's decision to headline an event at the Press Club – open to all media – risks giving Obama's critics more fodder, as if they don't have enough already. Meanwhile, PBS is touting an interview with Wright to be broadcast Friday on 'Bill Moyers' Journal.' Fresh material from Wright – no matter how well-intentioned – is not what Obama needs.⁶²⁰

Sweet framed her report as if Wright were part of Obama's campaign, rather than an internationally known preacher who had been speaking all over the nation and world long before Obama became a presidential candidate. While his invitation to appear on the Moyers show was prompted by the controversy surrounding the campaign, Wright's appearance in Washington was connected to ministry-related activities he normally would be doing. The Press Club appearance mentioned in the news report was part of the Samuel D. Proctor Conference, which Wright had co-founded. The event is held annually in a different major city.⁶²¹ Sweet's story noted that the Obama campaign strategist David Axelrod had asked friends at a public affairs firm to provide free advice to Trinity on "how to handle the crush of media coverage."⁶²² The firm's president told the *Sun-Times* "We were not asked to provide our advice about the reported speech of Rev. Wright in Washington."⁶²³ Sweet added the firm did not know about it until it was scheduled.⁶²⁴

⁶²⁰ Lynn Sweet, "Wright offering fresh fodder to Obama critics; TV, Press Club stints not what candidate needs," *Chicago Sun-Times*, April 24, 2008, 22.

⁶²¹ This researcher has attended Proctor Conferences. At the conclusion of each conference, an announcement is made about where the next year's conference will be held.

⁶²² Sweet, "Wright offering fresh fodder," 22.

⁶²³ *Ibid.*

⁶²⁴ *Ibid.*

The next day a *Sun-Times* story on Wright's PBS appearance reported snippets in which Wright claimed "he has wrongly been painted 'as some sort of fanatic'."⁶²⁵ *The Washington Post's* coverage of the Moyers interview also was based on excerpts PBS released to news outlets. Shailagh Murray reported that Wright told Moyers "that inflammatory statements from his sermons were taken out of context, but he said he didn't begrudge the Democratic candidate for denouncing him."⁶²⁶ Murray quoted an excerpt featured in *The New York Times* coverage but with additional context, pointing out how publications can abbreviate quotes and thus potentially alter the meaning that readers might gain from it. Murray quoted Wright saying: "He's a politician. I'm a pastor. We speak to two different audiences. And he says what he has to say as a politician. I say what I have to say as a pastor. But they're two different worlds."⁶²⁷ Murray described Wright as "a well-known preacher and theologian, but often combative at the pulpit."⁶²⁸

After Wright's interview with Moyers aired on a Friday night, Wright was the keynote speaker a few nights later for a Detroit chapter of the NAACP fund-raising event that was attended by nearly 10,000 people, according to *The New York Times*. Nick Bunkley described Wright as "Obama's former pastor whose sermons have been criticized as inflammatory, anti-American and racially polarizing."⁶²⁹ Bunkley reported that Wright blamed the media for politicizing him. He was quoted saying:

⁶²⁵ Mike Thomas, "Wright blasts foes who try to portray him as 'fanatic'; Says his remarks have been taken out of context," *Chicago Sun-Times*, April 25, 2008, 9.

⁶²⁶ Shailagh Murray, "Rev. Wright, in PBS Interview, Defends Sermons and Calls Coverage 'Unfair,'" *The Washington Post*, April 24, 2008, accessed April 4, 2014, <http://voices.washingtonpost.com/44/2008/04/rev-wright-in-pbs-interview-de.html>.

⁶²⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶²⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶²⁹ Nick Bunkley, "Former Pastor to Obama Faults News Coverage," *The New York Times*, April 28, 2008, A21.

I am not here for political reasons. I am not a politician. I know that fact will surprise many of you, because many of the corporate-owned media have made it seem as if I have announced that I am running for the Oval Office. I am not running for the Oval Office. I've been running for Jesus a long, long time, and I'm not tired yet.⁶³⁰

The *Chicago Sun-Times* featured a report in which Wright “lamented his ‘public crucifixion,’” during his “sermon” to the NAACP, adding that “Wright said the people who call him ‘bombastic’ and ‘divisive’ simply don’t understand a religious experience that’s different from theirs.”⁶³¹ The report called Wright’s speaking engagements “a public relations blitz by Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama’s controversial former pastor.”⁶³² Wright was accused of “reigniting a racially charged controversy” at a time when Obama was trying to convince the Democratic Party’s leadership that he could appeal to blue-collar white voters.⁶³³

Wright’s appearances in Detroit and Washington drew press attention because they marked the first times he was speaking publicly since national coverage of him had picked up in March following the ABC reports, but most reports failed to acknowledge that fact. Scholars Birgit Meyer and Annelies Moors note that the entry of religion into the public sphere requires “special attention,” and they recall how Jürgen Habermas “saw the emergence of the public sphere and the public decline of religion as dependent on each other.”⁶³⁴ Habermas, they add, “regarded religion as privatized, stating that religious convictions emerge in public debate only as opinions

⁶³⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶³¹ Kathy Kiely, Gannett News Service, “Bad timing for Obama; Concedes Wright’s return to public stage not good for senator,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, April 28, 2008, 5.

⁶³² *Ibid.*

⁶³³ *Ibid.*

⁶³⁴ Birgit Meyer and Annelies Moors, eds., *Religion, Media, and the Public Sphere*, Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2006, 4.

and thus have to engage with other (non-religiously informed) opinions in line with agreed-upon, rational discursive rules.”⁶³⁵

In this sense, Meyer and Moors echo the sentiment aired by Silk, who argued that the mainstream news media coverage of religion and religious figures often reflects what is considered “acceptable discourse in the public square.”⁶³⁶ The rules that guide the public square are not the same as those that guide the religious world, according to Silk, because individual religions often have unique expressions and ideologies.⁶³⁷ When those expressions go beyond the walls of their faith, the rules change, according to Silk, and those religious figures deemed to be in violation of the public sphere’s rules are subjected to special scrutiny:

Of course, not all American religious bodies choose to operate within the constraints. They pay a price, however, for refusing to conform. When an uncivil religion like the Nation of Islam repeatedly attacks Jews in classic anti-Semitic fashion, not only is it criticized by other religious bodies but the news media also join in, publishing the violations of civil speech and providing a forum for condemnation of the offender. Bound by rules of public religious discourse, the media help to enforce them as well. In this regard, a word needs to be said about the media’s quasi-religious role as purveyor of values and supplier of contemporary rituals.⁶³⁸

Wright’s comments suggest that he has some understanding about politics and the public sphere, but he also seems to be arguing that he has been involuntarily injected into that arena. In his interview with Moyers, Wright said his critics were attempting to use him to undermine Obama. “I think they wanted to communicate that I am un-American, that I am filled with hate speech, that I have a cult at Trinity United Church of Christ. And by the way, guess who goes to his church, hint, hint,

⁶³⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶³⁶ Silk, *Unsecular Media*, 8.

⁶³⁷ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

⁶³⁸ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

hint?”⁶³⁹ Wright seemed to acknowledge the expectation that he should retract comments that some found offensive. He argued that would violate tenets of his faith.

The Pastor Meets the Press

By the time Wright appeared at the National Press Club Speakers Breakfast on April 28, 2008, the stage was set for a showdown with the mainstream news media. Inside the Press Club, Wright was greeted by a contingent of supporters as well as a corps of reporters who had gathered to hear him speak on the topic “the African American Religious Experience.” The presentation was to be followed by a press conference, during which the Press Club moderator, *USA TODAY* reporter Donna Leinwand, read questions journalists presented in advance.

In her introduction of Wright, Leinwand noted that Wright’s “fiery” sermons had drawn “unflattering media attention” to Obama, who had been a member of Trinity for 20 years.⁶⁴⁰ She further noted that Obama had credited a sermon by Wright as the inspiration for his best-selling book *The Audacity of Hope*, a title he also used for his 2004 Democratic Convention speech. But she said the relationship between the two had become strained:

Obama is now distancing himself from the preacher. Reverend Wright, who has announced that he is stepping down from his pulpit, says the media have plucked his comments out of context in an attempt to brand him as an extremist. He says his detractors used the comments to stoke fear among Americans who are unfamiliar with the African-American church. Reverend Wright, we welcome you to the Press Club and to take some questions from—

⁶³⁹ Shailagh Murray, “Wright Defends Sermons,” *The Washington Post*, April 24, 2008, accessed April 1, 2014, <http://voices.washingtonpost.com/44/2008/04/rev-wright-in-pbs-interview-de.html>.

⁶⁴⁰ “National Press Club Transcript,” 2.

laughter—from this gigantic audience. We have here reporters. And so, Reverend Wright, the floor is now yours.⁶⁴¹

Wright said to the audience at the National Press Club that history dictated the perspective of the black church as well as his own perspective. He indicated that the ultimate intent of his messages was reconciliation, suggesting that one of the great impediments to true reconciliation was a lack of honest dialog. Throughout his speech, audience members applauded often and some shouted out affirmations of support.⁶⁴² Wright concluded his talk by advancing a “post-structuralist” argument for the right of different cultures to co-exist in the United States without being denigrated for being distinct or different:

The prophetic theology of the black church has always seen and still sees all of God’s children as sisters and brothers, equals who need reconciliation; who need to be reconciled as equals in order for us to walk together into the future which God has prepared for us. Reconciliation does not mean that blacks become whites or whites become blacks or Hispanics become Asian or that Asians become Europeans. Reconciliation means we embrace our individual rich histories, all of them... We root out any teaching of superiority, inferiority, hatred or prejudice. And we recognize for the first time in modern history, in the West, that the other who stands before us with a different color of skin, a different texture of hair, different music, different preaching styles and different dance moves; that other is one of God’s children just as we are, no better, no worse, prone to error and in need of forgiveness just as we are. Only then will liberation, transformation and reconciliation become realities and cease being ever elusive ideals.⁶⁴³

When Wright finished his speech, Leinwand posed the first question: “You have said that the media have taken you out of context. Can you explain what you mean in a sermon, shortly after 9/11 when you said the United States had brought the

⁶⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴² *Ibid.*

⁶⁴³ *Ibid.*

terrorist attacks on itself, quote, “America’s chickens are coming home to roost”?⁶⁴⁴ Wright responded by asking Leinwand: “Have you heard the whole sermon?” There is laughter and applause from the audience. Wright then repeats: “Have you heard the whole sermon?” Leinwand responds “I...most...” The audience chuckles before Wright chimes in,

No, no, the whole sermon. That’s yes or no. No, you haven’t heard the whole sermon? That nullifies that question. Well, let me try to respond in a non-bombastic way. (Applause) If you heard the whole sermon, first of all, you heard that I was quoting the ambassador from Iraq. That’s number one. But number two, to quote from the Bible, ‘Be not deceived; God is not mocked, for whatsoever you sow that you also shall...’⁶⁴⁵

Audience members chimed in “Reap.”⁶⁴⁶

The exchange between Wright and Leinwand during that first question came to typify the press conference portion of his presentation. Wright often criticized the questions and occasionally accused the news media of attributing points to him that he had never uttered. Leinwand ultimately asked Wright about 20 questions. Most of them were focused on political issues, including one in which she asked if he felt that he owed the American public an apology. “If not, do you think that America is still damned in the eyes of God?”⁶⁴⁷ To that question, Wright responded by saying his comments were aimed at the government policymakers and that he already had told Obama that if he were elected, he would come after him in the same spirit, if he made the decisions that Wright deemed to be out of line with biblical teachings about justice. “It’s about the policy, not the American people,” Wright said. He added that he attempted to address this question during his interview with Moyers, but some of it

⁶⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

was edited. Wright said his point is “God doesn’t bless everything. God condemns some things. And D-E-M-N, ‘demn,’ is where we get the word damn. God damns some practices.”⁶⁴⁸

The coverage produced by the mainstream publications in the present study’s sample also edited out most of these kinds of comments by Wright. Most of the questions were framed as if they were being posed to a candidate for political office. Wright chided journalists for referring to him as Obama’s “spiritual mentor,” saying “I’m his pastor.”⁶⁴⁹

He said, The Press Said

The New York Times featured four reports on the event in the next day’s editions. A page 1 commentary by its chief television critic Alessandra Stanley began by stating Wright “has wriggled out from under sound bites and screen-grab loops to put himself into context...”⁶⁵⁰ Stanley then described Wright’s presentation as “a rich, stem-winding brew of black history, Scripture, hallelujahs and hermeneutics.” She went on to describe Wright as “cocky, defiant, declamatory, inflammatory and mischievous” before adding “he was all over the place, performing a television triathlon of interview, lecture and live news conference that pushed Mr. Obama aside and placed himself front and center in the presidential election campaign.”⁶⁵¹

⁶⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵⁰ Alessandra Stanley, “Not speaking for Obama, Pastor Speaks for Himself, at Length,” *The New York Times*, April 29, 2008, A1.

⁶⁵¹ *Ibid.*

Stanley described Wright in unflattering terms throughout her report, calling the presentation “a rambling disquisition on race, African tradition and theology” and framing Wright as someone seeking publicity. “Now it turns out that Mr. Wright doesn’t hate America, he loves the sound of his own voice,” she quipped. She later described Wright as “a voluble, vain and erudite entertainer, a born televangelist who quotes Ralph Ellison as well as the Bible and mixes highfalutin academic trope with salty street talk.”⁶⁵² Stanley reported that Wright frowned as Leinwand read questions from reporters then stepped “up to the lectern with feisty rejoinders and snappy retorts, looking as pleased with his replies as a contestant in a high school spelling bee who has just correctly spelled the final word.”⁶⁵³

A news story of the event was written by John Holusha and began with a focus on Wright’s assertion that “attacks on him are really attacks on the black church.”⁶⁵⁴ Wright, according to Holusha, had argued “that political opponents of Senator Obama were exploiting the fact that the style of prayer and preaching in black churches was different from European church traditions—‘Different, but not deficient’, he said.”⁶⁵⁵ Holusha’s report mentioned that Wright had answered various questions after he finished his prepared remarks. He reported various responses Wright gave to questions before concluding with Wright dismissing critics who had called him unpatriotic because of some of his remarks. Holusha wrote that “Rev. Wright noted that men and women from his congregation had fought in all the

⁶⁵² *Ibid.*

⁶⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵⁴ John Holusha, “Wright Says Criticism Is Attack on Black Church,” *The New York Times*, April 29, 2008. Accessed from newspaper database; did not include a page number designation. Newyorktimes.com version accessed April 7, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/29/world/americas/29iht-28cndwright.12415475.html>.

⁶⁵⁵ Holusha, “Criticism Is Attack on Black Church.”

country's recent wars, 'while those who call me unpatriotic have used their positions of privilege to avoid military service'."⁶⁵⁶

Jeff Zeleny reported that Obama stated it should be clear after Wright's Press Club appearance that his campaign has no control over Wright. "He does not speak for me," Obama was quoted saying.⁶⁵⁷ Zeleny reported that Wright repeated "some of his more controversial statements" during the Press Club presentation, which marked the third high-profile appearance he had made in four days.⁶⁵⁸ According to Zeleny, Wright suggested that the September 11 attacks on the United States were payback for America's terrorism abroad, maintained that the United States "might have invented H.I.V.," and "defended the Rev. Louis Farrakhan."⁶⁵⁹ Zeleny's account was framed in ways that suggested that Wright brought these topics up, not that they surfaced because he was asked about them. Zeleny's descriptions of the event raise questions about accuracy. For instance, Leinwand asked, "What is your relationship with Louis Farrakhan? Do you agree with and respect his views, including his most racially divisive views?"⁶⁶⁰ Wright began by defending himself against claims that he is "anti-Semitic because of what Louis Farrakhan said 20 years ago."⁶⁶¹ Wright then said he believes it is important for people of all faith perspectives to work together for the good of the country, but added "Louis and I don't agree on everything."

Before calling Farrakhan "one of the most important voices in the 20th and 21st century," Wright asked "how many other African-Americans or European Americans

⁶⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵⁷ Jeff Zeleny, "Obama Adds to Distance From Pastor and Opinions," *The New York Times*, April 29, 2008, A14.

⁶⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶¹ *Ibid.*

do you know that can get 1 million people together on the mall (in Washington)?”⁶⁶²

Wright was referring to the 1995 Million Man March, which Farrakhan organized.

Wright also said: “Now, I am not going to put down Louis Farrakhan any more than

Mandela will put down Fidel Castro...” Wright concluded by saying “Louis

Farrakhan is not my enemy...”⁶⁶³ Zeleny reported that Wright defended Farrakhan

without reporting the details Wright offered in his response to the question posed to

him.

Zeleny’s reporting of Wright’s comments about HIV also lacked context.

Wright stated he had read several books in which presumably the government

genocide claim was made; he also referred to the infamous “Tuskegee experiment”

and then he asserted that the United States government sold biological weapons to

Saddam Hussein “that he was using against his own people. So anytime a government

can put together biological warfare to kill people and then get angry when those

people use what we sold them, yes, I believe we are capable.”⁶⁶⁴ Whether Wright’s

assertion is accurate or not, it does add a layer of context that helps to explain why he

might be inclined to say what he has said about that matter. That does not come

across in Zeleny’s report.

New York Times columnist Bob Herbert, who is an African American, also

accused Wright of grandstanding for his own glory. He began his report by stating

Wright “went to Washington on Monday not to praise Barack Obama, but to bury

him.”⁶⁶⁵ He accused Wright of “mugging it up for the big-time news media” and “all

⁶⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶⁴ See “National Press Club Transcript,” 12.

⁶⁶⁵ Bob Herbert, “The Pastor Casts A Shadow,” *The New York Times*, April 29, 2008, A19.

but swooning over the wonderfulness of himself.”⁶⁶⁶ Herbert further accused Wright of plowing old ground by highlighting America’s history of mistreatment of black people. He acknowledged the lingering effects of racism aimed at black people, but seemed to dismiss the issue as insignificant. Herbert wrote: “The question that cries out for an answer from Mr. Wright is why – if he is so passionately committed to liberating and empowering blacks – does he seem so insistent on wrecking the campaign of the only African-American ever to have had a legitimate shot at the presidency?”⁶⁶⁷

The *Chicago Sun-Times* published five reports on Wright’s Press Club appearance, including an editorial. Lynn Sweet began her report by recalling how Obama had declined to disown Wright after videotapes of his sermons surfaced. “In return,” she reported, “an unapologetic Wright launched a speaking tour, ending Monday, drawing outsized coverage on the hot-button issues of God and race days before crucial votes in Indiana and North Carolina, threatening Obama’s presidential bid.”⁶⁶⁸ Sweet’s report went on to point out that Obama campaign officials “were stunned that Wright did not realize the potential harm he could do to Obama’s candidacy by reviving stories about Obama’s relationship with his pastor.”⁶⁶⁹ Sweet reported that Wright had dominated the news since Friday. She mentioned his appearance on PBS, noted that he had delivered two sermons at a Dallas megachurch and was the keynote speaker at the Detroit NAACP event. She framed the information about Wright’s public appearances as if Wright was inviting attention to

⁶⁶⁶Herbert, “Pastor casts a shadow,” A19.

⁶⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶⁸ Lynn Sweet, “Obama backs away from Wright; Senator says he too was offended by some of former pastor’s remarks,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, April 29, 2008, 2.

⁶⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

himself instead of noting that journalists had now began paying attention to Wright's speaking engagements. Her report, as others, made no mention of the fact that Wright long had been a popular circuit speaker. "Instead of keeping low," Sweet wrote, "Wright is seeking the spotlight as he wraps up 36 years as senior pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ on Chicago's South Side."⁶⁷⁰ She did not quote Wright or any other source saying he was seeking the spotlight.

Mary Mitchell began her report by stating Wright had "rekindled the fire that erupted after his videotaped sermons became fodder for conservative pundits."⁶⁷¹ Mitchell reported how Wright had addressed a number of topics during his presentation. His theme, she reported, was on reconciliation, but his message "mostly reaffirmed his belief that America has unfinished business when it comes to race."⁶⁷² Mitchell pointed out the large number of journalists who attended the event, including dozens of photographers and television camera crews. The balcony, she wrote, was filled with print journalist. "I haven't seen a black man get this much news coverage since Obama announced his intention to run for the presidency—an irony not lost on Wright," Mitchell wrote.⁶⁷³ She later added she understood Wright's need to try to clear his name, but she concluded that "Wright's comments won't change the hearts of the media pundits who are driving the backlash."⁶⁷⁴ The editorial board of the *Sun-Times* joined with the voices that seemed most concerned about the political fall-out of Wright's recent round of appearances:

⁶⁷⁰ Sweet, "Obama backs away from Wright," 2.

⁶⁷¹ Mary Mitchell, "Obama backs away from Wright; Obama's former pastor says his piece in a move that could leave the senator's presidential campaign in pieces," *Chicago Sun-Times*, April 29, 2008, 3.

⁶⁷² *Ibid.*

⁶⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

What is the Rev. Jeremiah Wright thinking? Just as the controversy over Obama's pastor was coming off the front burner of American politics, Wright has cranked up the heat again, full blast. The reverend has made the rounds in recent days to defend himself, his patriotism, his church. He has the absolute right to do so, especially after a barrage of withering attacks, many of them unfair. But his timing is appallingly selfish and egotistic—if he cares one bit about Obama.⁶⁷⁵

Steve Huntley, who consistently had criticized both Wright and Obama, agreed with the board's assessment, but he was most critical of Wright's assertion that attacks on him amounted to attacks on the black church. "If he succeeds in framing the debate that way," Huntley wrote, "the cause of further improving race relations won't be helped."⁶⁷⁶

The Washington Post featured eight reports on Wright's Press Club appearance the day after it occurred. Two of them were news stories. One was an editorial by the editorial board. Five were commentaries. Shailagh Murray and Peter Slevin reported that Wright "capped a weekend media offensive with an appearance in Washington in which he revisited many of his most controversial comments."⁶⁷⁷ Their report framed Wright's speaking engagements as a media campaign, as did others; the report also suggested that Wright resurrected comments from the past, instead of noting it was the press that "revisited" those comments by asking him questions about them. Later Murray and Slevin reported that Wright gave prepared remarks in which he "traced the origins of the African American church in a

⁶⁷⁵ Editorial Board, "Wright did Obama no favors," *Chicago Sun-Times*, April 29, 2008, 23.

⁶⁷⁶ Steve Huntley, "Obama takes another hit," 23.

⁶⁷⁷ Shailagh Murray and Peter Slevin, "As Minister Repeats Comments, Obama Tries to Quiet Fray," *The Washington Post*, April 29, 2008, A01.

measured tone and academic language. But during the question-and-answer session that followed, he was defiant.”⁶⁷⁸

A commentary by the *Post*'s Dana Milbank mirrored many of the same patterns, describing Wright's engagements as “a media tour.” Milbank reported that “Wright seemed to be looking to stir controversy.”⁶⁷⁹ He then wrote that Wright praised Farrakhan, called America terroristic, when he “repeated his belief that the government created AIDS to extinguish racial minorities, and stood by his suggestion that ‘God damn America’.”⁶⁸⁰ Milbank's statements, as noted in classic framing theory, further affirm the way journalists made sense out of what Wright was saying. Milbank reported later that Wright “mocked the media.”⁶⁸¹ Most of the next day's reports on Wright's appearance at the Press Club that appeared in the *Post* and other publications included in this study devoted little ink to Wright's prepared statements. Instead, they focused most of their coverage on his responses to questions from reporters, none of which had to do with his talk because they had been submitted in advance of the event. That suggests that the news media came to the presentation with one main agenda, which is tied to framing theory: To “offer and justify treatments for the problems (defined in their initial framing of Wright) and predict their likely effects.”⁶⁸²

A number of reports noted, for instance, that Wright did not back down from, or that he repeated, previous statements. Milbank started one paragraph this way: “Far

⁶⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷⁹ Dana Milbank, “Still More Lamentations from Jeremiah,” *The Washington Post*, April 29, 2008, A03.

⁶⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸² See Entman, “A Fractured Paradigm,” 52.

from softening his provocative words, he held himself out as a spokesman for millions of churchgoing African Americans.”⁶⁸³ One *Post* report focused on black religious leaders who had come to hear Wright’s presentation, hoping it would help “calm the controversy surrounding him.”⁶⁸⁴ A number of them told the newspaper that they felt Wright had brought to the fore issues that needed to be discussed and dealt with by the American public as well as political leaders. At least one, however, wondered if Wright would have been better served by not addressing the media’s questions. The Rev. Henry P. Davis III, pastor of the First Baptist Church of Highland Park (Maryland) located just outside of Washington, D.C., was quoted saying: “The risk for all of us in ministry is when we operate outside of our normal roles. While Reverend Wright has done so many good things down through the years, I am reminded of the song, ‘May the Work That I Have Done Speak for Me.’ That doesn’t take any commentary at all.”⁶⁸⁵ Davis’ comments suggest that preachers are not schooled to deal with the news media.

An editorial by *The Washington Post* uses adjectives to argue that statements lifted from sermons by Wright had been rightfully criticized. Within the headline and the first sentence of the editorial, the words “repugnant,” “incendiary” and “controversial” are used to describe Wright’s words.⁶⁸⁶ In the opening paragraph, Wright is said to have “strutted” to the podium to make an “audacious claim.” The editorial board rebuked Wright for his claim that the attack on him was tantamount to

⁶⁸³ Milbank, “Still More Lamentations,” A03.

⁶⁸⁴ Hamil R. Harris, “Preaching to the Choir, and Feeding the Fire; Before Black Ministers From Around the Country, Wright Courts Further Controversy,” *The Washington Post*, April 29, 2008, A06.

⁶⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸⁶ Editorial Board, “The Audacity of Rev. Wright; A tale of a candidate, a pastor and some repugnant remarks,” *The Washington Post*, April 29, 2008, A16.

an attack on the “Black Church.” The editorial listed some of the “good works” performed by his congregation over the years, but asserted that Wright had earned the scrutiny he was receiving because of his “charged rhetoric that has come back to haunt him and Mr. Obama.”⁶⁸⁷ Wright’s bigger sin, the editorial argued, was that the Press Club appearance provided him the perfect opportunity to retract previous statements about a federal government conspiracy to infect the black community with AIDS, as well as “his blame-America-for-Sept. 11 stance...” But “Wright was unrepentant” and he even “stood by” his remarks, the editorial stated.⁶⁸⁸ The editorial board added it was not calling on Obama to renounce all association with Wright but predicted others would. In the end, voters would decide how much Wright’s statements and Obama’s response to them mattered, the editorial concluded.⁶⁸⁹

Washington Post columnist Eugene Robinson framed Wright as a liability to both Obama’s presidential aspirations and the black church. Robinson, who is black, stated that he has “had it with Wright.”⁶⁹⁰ His message: it’s time for Wright to disappear into a place where he can do no more damage to Obama’s chances of election as well as public perception of black church leaders.⁶⁹¹ Meanwhile, columnist George Will likened Wright’s statements about cultural differences between blacks and whites in America to co-signing ideas “used to justify various soft bigotries of low expectations regarding blacks, and especially black children.”⁶⁹²

⁶⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹⁰ Eugene Robinson, “Where Wright Goes Wrong,” *The Washington Post*, April 29, 2008, A17.

⁶⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹² George F. Will, “A Pastor at Center Stage; And a Parishioner With Questions to Answer,” *The Washington Post*, April 29, 2008, A17.

This line of thinking, Will added, “has a long pedigree as a rationalization for injustices. Slaveholders and, later, segregationists loved it,” Will said.⁶⁹³

Will’s arguments illustrate a point McKee and theorist Stuart Hall have made about how individuals representing dominant or realist perspectives often interpret the “texts” of others from that dominant perspective and thus assign meaning to the texts or statements that does not match the messenger’s intention.⁶⁹⁴ Wright seemed to be arguing against low expectations by emphasizing different is not deficient. His bigger argument was a post-structuralist perspective that there needed to be a greater recognition of differences so that teaching styles and other relevant tools could be adjusted or expanded to acknowledge the value inherent in those differences. Wright argued that America suffers from an unalterably Euro-centric culture that has come to define the United States and that often denigrates different cultures. As such, Wright is attacking ethnocentrism. But Will concluded that “Obama should be questioned about whether he agrees about ‘different’ learning styles from others.”⁶⁹⁵

The next day’s coverage indicated Obama’s response to that and other questions about Wright’s comments at the Press Club. On April 30, *The New York Times* published a news story and editorial indicating that Obama had officially renounced his ties to Wright. The news story said Obama “broke forcefully” with Wright “in an effort to curtail a drama of race, values, patriotism and betrayal that has enveloped his presidential candidacy at a critical juncture.”⁶⁹⁶ Jeff Zeleny and Adam Nagourney reported that Obama held a news conference at which he “denounced

⁶⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹⁴ See McKee, *Textual Analysis*, 4-13. See also Davis, *Understanding Stuart Hall*, 43.

⁶⁹⁵ Will, “Pastor at Center Stage,” A17.

⁶⁹⁶ Jeff Zeleny and Adam Nagourney, “An Angry Obama Renounces Ties to His Ex-Pastor,” *The New York Times*, April 30, 2008, A1.

remarks” Wright had made in recent days during his highly publicized speaking engagements. They quoted Obama saying of Wright: “His comments were not only divisive and destructive, but I believe that they end up giving comfort to those who prey on hate, and I believe that they do not portray accurately the perspective of the black church. They certainly don’t portray my values and beliefs.”⁶⁹⁷ The writers added that Obama’s voice welled with anger as he “tried to cut all his ties to—and to discredit—Mr. Wright, the man who presided at Mr. Obama’s wedding and baptized his two daughters.”⁶⁹⁸

The *Times* editorial stated: “It took more time than it should have, but on Tuesday Barack Obama firmly rejected the racism and paranoia of his former pastor, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright Jr., and he made it clear that the preacher does not represent him, his politics or his campaign.”⁶⁹⁹ The editorial credited Obama for his Philadelphia speech’s “powerful commentary on the state of race relations” in the United States:

We hoped it would open the door to a serious, healthy and much-needed discussion on race. Mr. Wright has not let that happen. In the last few days, in a series of shocking appearances, he embraced the Rev. Louis Farrakhan’s anti-Semitism. He said the government manufactured the AIDS virus to kill blacks. He suggested that America was guilty of ‘terrorism’ and so had brought the 9/11 attacks on itself.⁷⁰⁰

The *Times* editorial board reached the same conclusion about Wright’s remarks at the Press Club, as did other mainstream journalism voices, despite what the transcript of the event shows Wright said. The editorial accused Wright of embracing Farrakhan’s anti-Semitism, which was not defined by any specific

⁶⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹⁹ Editorial Board, “Mr. Obama and Rev. Wright,” *The New York Times*, April 30, 2008, A18.

⁷⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

examples in the editorial or any other reports published in the newspaper during the period of this study's investigation. The editorial quoted Obama saying: "I want to use this press conference to make people absolutely clear that obviously whatever relationship I had with Reverend Wright has changed as a consequence of this" National Press Club appearance.⁷⁰¹ The *Times* called Obama's denunciation of Wright "the most forthright repudiation of an out-of-control supporter that we can remember."⁷⁰² But then added: "It is an injustice, a legacy of the racist threads of this nation's history, but prominent African-Americans are regularly called upon to explain or repudiate what other black Americans have to say, while white public figures are rarely, if ever, handed that burden."⁷⁰³

With Obama's denunciation of Wright, the fourth aspect of framing had been achieved—the problem had been solved. The *Chicago Sun-Times* published six reports about Obama's decision to renounce ties with Wright. Lynn Sweet reported from Washington that:

On Monday, a combative Rev. Jeremiah Wright noted – with some smugness – at a press conference here that Sen. Barack Obama 'did not denounce me. He distanced himself from some of my remarks.' Following what Obama called Wright's 'rants' at that session, Obama – with some anger – denounced his pastor 'very clearly and unequivocally' on Tuesday.⁷⁰⁴

Mary Mitchell, Sweet's black counterpart, began her report like this: "Well, it is likely that Sen. Barack Obama won't be going back to Trinity United Church of Christ. Not after this."⁷⁰⁵ Mitchell reported that Obama had responded to Wright's

⁷⁰¹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰² *Ibid.*

⁷⁰³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰⁴ Lynn Sweet, "This time, Obama makes it clear; A day after simply distancing himself, senator denounces pastor," *Chicago Sun-Times*, April 30, 2008, 8.

⁷⁰⁵ Mary Mitchell, "This time, Obama makes it clear; on the verge of making history, Obama opens a can of worms," *Chicago Sun-Times*, April 30, 2008, 9.

“ill-timed defense by condemning his former pastor’s fresh comments as ‘ridiculous,’ ‘outrageous,’ and ‘appalling.’”⁷⁰⁶ Mitchell then quoted Obama as saying of Wright:

When he states and then amplifies such ridiculous proposition as the U.S. government somehow being involved in AIDS, when he suggests that Minister Farrakhan somehow represents one of the greatest voices in the 20th and 21st century, when he equates the United States wartime effort with terrorism, then there are no excuses.⁷⁰⁷

Mitchell and Sweet take very different approaches to hammering out the finer details of this confrontation between Wright and Obama. For Sweet, Wright failed a big test when he appeared at the National Press Club. In her analysis, she repeated Wright’s various offenses, including his comments about the AIDS issue and the 9/11 attacks. She recalls how Obama stopped short of denouncing his relationship with Wright. She then says of Wright: “But given an opportunity to repudiate these remarks during a question-and-answer session at the National Press Club –following a non-controversial speech about the black church – Wright only repeated them.”⁷⁰⁸ Sweet again affirms what journalists apparently expected and how that aligns with notions associated with framing theory. For her part, Mitchell points out the difficulty associated with navigating Wright and Obama’s relationship. Mitchell argues that Obama has dismissed what she called “an orchestrated assault” on Wright’s “character and on his ministry.”⁷⁰⁹ She also argued that Obama failed to recognize the black church’s importance in the black community:

The notion that white pundits can dictate what constitutes unacceptable speech in the black church is repulsive to most black people. Even so, after Wright’s fiery speeches surfaced on the Internet, most African-Americans understood

⁷⁰⁶ Mitchell, “Obama makes it clear,” 9.

⁷⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰⁸ Sweet, “Obama makes it clear,” 8.

⁷⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

why Obama had to distance himself from Wright. Obama's cross-cultural appeal, which, by the way, made some blacks suspicious of him early in his campaign, is largely because of his ability to make white people feel comfortable with his blackness. But Wright speaks to a different audience, and that audience has been supportive throughout his ordeal. On Monday, for instance, when Wright spoke at the National Press Club, the predominantly black crowd cheered, clapped and punctuated Wright's speech with shouts of 'amen.' So when Obama says America was 'offended' by Wright's harsh language, he isn't speaking for or to Black America. He is speaking to White America. As much as I want to see Obama make history by becoming the first black man to be elected president, I don't want to see a warrior like Wright denigrated to prove to white voters that Obama is not a radical.⁷¹⁰

The twin accounts by the *Sun-Times* further illustrate how different people make sense of reality differently. It also points out the issues of salience as raised by framing theory. *The Washington Post* reported that Obama used "his sharpest language yet" to denounce Wright. Peter Slevin noted that Obama argued that he was attempting to bring people together because "we all share common hopes and common dreams as Americans and as human beings." But he reported that Obama added that Wright presented "a very different vision of America. I am outraged by the comments that were made and saddened over the spectacle that we saw yesterday."⁷¹¹ Another *Post* commentator noted that "Obama's problem, and the Democrats', goes well beyond the malignant nonsense of the Rev. Jeremiah Wright."⁷¹²

The alternative press featured little coverage of Wright's speaking engagements during the days leading up to Obama's denunciation of him. This probably reflected the publications' publishing cycles. The *Chicago Defender* included three reports that made references to Wright in its April 30 editions, the day

⁷¹⁰ Mitchell, "Obama makes it clear," 9.

⁷¹¹ Peter Slevin, "Obama Strikes Back, Denouncing Wright," *The Washington Post*, April 29, 2008, accessed April 8, 2014, <http://voices.washingtonpost.com/44/2008/04/obama-strikes-back-denouncing.html>.

⁷¹² Harold Meyerson, "Landing the White Whale," *The Washington Post*, April 30, 2008, A19.

after Obama's denunciation of Wright. A news story recounted Wright's speech in Detroit, calling it an appeal for racial tolerance.⁷¹³ An editorial called on black voters to speak up about efforts to make Wright a campaign issue. "It is past time for Black voters to speak in unison to the Democratic National Committee, the major television networks—including their cable colleagues and Clinton's campaign and tell them Rev. Wright's remarks are not what this campaign is about," the editorial said.⁷¹⁴

Chicago Defender editor Lou Ransom mentioned Wright in a commentary, arguing that Obama had been framed as being "too black" for some white voters. "The North Carolina Republican Party is airing an ad that says Obama is 'too extreme' for that state, and they show scenes of Obama's former pastor, Rev. Jeremiah Wright," Ransom wrote. "That is guilt by association, and basically says any Black pastor is 'too extreme'."⁷¹⁵ The headline on Ransom's column raised a question that many journalists pondered in regard to how Wright's latest comments might have affected the election's outcome. It read: "What if Obama loses?" In the end, that turned out to be a moot question. But perhaps questions remain about whether Obama would have prevailed had he not denounced Wright. There appears to be some evidence that the way the news media framed their coverage of Wright might have influenced his decision to cut ties with Wright. But Obama claimed it was his own reading of Wright that led to that decision.

⁷¹³ Bankole Thompson, "Rev. Jeremiah Wright preaches racial tolerance," *Chicago Defender*, April 30, 2008, 5.

⁷¹⁴ Editorial Board, "Obama's campaign not about Wright," *Chicago Defender*, April 30, 2008, 13.

⁷¹⁵ Lou Ransom, "What if Obama loses?" *Chicago Defender*, April 30, 2008, 14.

Discussion Summation

The narrative of the framing that appeared in the coverage helps to illuminate the study's findings. Four framing categories associated with issues surrounding moderatism, political liability, racism and ethnocentrism dominated the vast majority of news stories, commentaries and editorials and provided an answer to Research Question 1 about how mainstream journalists in this case study framed coverage of Wright. The narrative summary also helped to illuminate findings associated with Research Question 2 regarding the sources of frames. The analysis of data found that mainstream journalists generated more than half of the frames without using named or unnamed sources. Religious sources were the least used of all.

In regard to Research Question 3, the narrative echoes the findings that show mainstream journalists used frames that correlated with secular values outlined by Gans significantly more than the religious values outlined by Silk. The findings and the narrative also show that when compared to mainstream coverage, the answer to Research Question 4 is clearly yes. Alternative publications covered the story significantly differently from how mainstream publications did. Alternative publications relied much more heavily on the religious values outlined by Silk than they did on secular values highlighted by Gans.

Both the findings and narrative support the original thesis of this study. Wright's newsworthiness was framed largely by the mainstream press through Gans' enduring values theory related to moderatism and ethnocentrism. Wright was seen as one who violated those values. In this regard, the study's findings reaffirm what previous research has found regarding deviance of news subjects and secularization

of religious coverage. But the findings also build on previous research by providing a specific theoretical basis that helps explain the secularization of coverage and offers a basis for further research and future testing of theory. Chapter 8 will conclude the present study by offering conclusions and recommendations for future research.

Chapter 8: Conclusions and Recommendations

This research was inspired by an understanding that one of the primary functions of the U.S. news media is to help the public make sense of events and issues that shape the world by presenting fact-based reports that are free from undue propaganda, which is defined as “information, especially of a biased or misleading nature, used to promote or publicize a particular political cause or point of view.”⁷¹⁶ The moniker “free press” is in large part a reflection of that type of understanding.⁷¹⁷ However, the politically complex nature of society often results in conflicting interpretations of what constitutes bias.

Conclusions

Issues associated with tendencies toward competing interpretations served as drivers for the present study and ultimately converge in ways that contribute to the researcher’s overarching conclusions regarding the study’s findings. Chief among those conclusions are:

- 1. Textual analysis is an appropriate method for examining *what* sense journalists make of the subjects they cover because their news accounts are expressions of a sense-making process.**

- Textual analysis is a systematic analysis of thematic and symbolic features of oral and written texts, to determine their objective or meaning. Alan McKee commends the

⁷¹⁶ This definition of propaganda was listed at the top of a Google search of the keyword “propaganda,” which listed more than 31 million results. <https://www.google.com/#q=propaganda+definition>. Meriam Webster Dictionary defines propaganda as “ideas or statements that are often false or exaggerated and that are spread in order to help a cause, a political leader, a government,” etc. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/propaganda>.

⁷¹⁷ Robert Audi, “The Function of the Press in a Free and Democratic Society,” *Public Affairs Quarterly*, Vol. 4, No. 3, July 1990, 203.

method as useful to researchers seeking to understand the ways members of various cultures and subcultures make sense of themselves and the world around them.⁷¹⁸

Mainstream journalists portrayed Wright and his prophetic speech as angry anti-American rhetoric that raised questions about Barack Obama's authenticity because of his association with Wright. Journalists cast themselves as judges or watchdogs of what Silk called acceptable discourse in the public sphere.

2. There is evidence in news coverage of Wright to support general framing theory as a plausible explanation for how and why journalists construct their reports as they do.

- Framing theory and textual analysis are related in the sense that both revolve around the sense-making process, which is why the theory and the method often are coupled in media studies examining news coverage. Goffman posited that frames help people to make sense of the world by serving as a structure (or summarization) to hold together or explain what they are experiencing.⁷¹⁹ Entman pointed out that frames define problems, diagnose their causes, make moral judgments and suggest remedies.⁷²⁰ The analysis of coverage of Wright found consistent themes or frames that cast Wright's speech as a problem because they were deemed politically extreme and raised questions about Obama's own beliefs since Obama had indicated Wright had served as a significant spiritual influence in his life. Frames in the coverage frequently indicated that Wright needed to retract his speech or Obama needed to denounce Wright and his association with him in order to remedy the problem.

3. Specific framing theories by Gans and Silk provide additional insight into how and why journalists construct their reports about religious subjects and figures as they do.

- Both theories posit that journalists are guided by specific values that help them make judgments about issues and figures associated with them. Gans argued that journalists

⁷¹⁸ McKee, *Textual Analysis*, 1.

⁷¹⁹ Goffman, 7.

⁷²⁰ Entman, 52.

rely on “enduring” mainstream values associated with ethnocentrism and moderatism to make those assessments. Thus, speech that criticizes U.S. policy or challenges prevailing mainstream narratives of historical events is eschewed and the speaker’s comments are labeled as extreme or outside of the mainstream of thought. These values are widely embraced and are secular in nature. Silk argued that religious issues and figures are judged in mainstream coverage by religious values that are likewise widely embraced. His unsecular media theory held that any of seven religious topoi generally guide how journalists frame their reports. These include declension, false prophecy, good works, hypocrisy, inclusion, supernatural belief and tolerance. Negative portrayals of issues and figures can be traced to violation of these religious values, Silk argued. Scholars suggest that frames can be identified in a sentence or by a single word and that journalists often rely on catch phrases, pejorative adjectives or satirical tone to define performers who have been cast as deviant from mainstream standards. The analysis found that descriptors such as controversial or incendiary often were used to describe Wright and his speech, but some commentators used more profoundly personal descriptors—such as “nutball” and “wackadoodle”—that mocked Wright and even dismissed him as one not to be taken seriously.

4. Gans’ theory provided a more suitable explanation for mainstream coverage of Wright because of dominant frames and themes in coverage that correlated with issues associated with ethnocentrism and moderatism.

- Wright, a religious figure, was often framed in political terms and his speech was deemed as extreme and unacceptable because it clashed with traditional American values that honor dispassionate speech that ultimately casts America as a model for the rest of the world, despite any historical or current shortcomings. Much of this is seen as common sense without need for further explanation. Press reports discounted statements made by Wright and did not offer, in most cases, facts to refute Wright’s arguments. Most wrote about his comments as if they were too outrageous to consider valid. In contrast, Silk’s theory provided a more suitable explanation for alternative coverage of Wright because

of dominant frames associated with inclusion, tolerance and good works. Wright was framed by the alternative press as being representative of a prophetic tradition that is broadly practiced and understood by religious practitioners. The coverage was heavily focused on explaining why Wright would say what he was saying.

5. The practice of framing, though useful to journalists, appears problematic in coverage of complex issues because framing is essentially a system of shortcuts.

- Frames highlight some issues while ignoring other issues that might offer additional insight into a subject or give it context, which is generally defined as “the circumstances that form the setting for an event, statement, or idea, and in terms of which it can be fully understood and assessed.”⁷²¹ On a more basic level, context refers to parts of a written or spoken communication that immediately precede or follow a word or passage and consequently contribute to clarifying the meaning the communicator had in mind for that word or passage. It also refers to the background, situation or circumstances under which a particular communication was delivered. Eddo Rigotti and Andrea Rocci are among scholars who argue that meaning “can be properly understood only if its context is known and taken into account.”⁷²² Helen FitzGerald adds, “The situational context in which communication occurs plays a significant role in determining the nature of that communication, and findings from one situational context cannot always be extrapolated to other dissimilar contexts.”⁷²³ Wright and his supporters complained that his statements were being interpreted out of context both structurally and situationally. The practice becomes potentially more problematic based on the sources journalists use to inform their reports. Mainstream journalists seldom consulted religious experts and assigned meaning

⁷²¹ This definition was derived from a Google.com search of the phrase “context definition,” which yielded 382 million results. See <https://www.google.com/#q=context+definition>.

⁷²² Eddo Rigotti & Andrea Rocci, “Towards a Definition of Communication Context: Foundations of an Interdisciplinary Approach to Communication,” *Studies in Communication Sciences*, 6/2 (2006), 161.

⁷²³ Helen Fitzgerald, *How Different Are We? Spoken Discourse in Intercultural Communication*, Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 2003. *eBook Collection (EBSCOhost)*, EBSCOhost (accessed February 16, 2015).

to the Trinity congregation's reactions and responses to Wright's sermons without interviewing those individuals to determine how they themselves processed the messages and what they took away from them. Grant and Grant argued that the perspective of that original audience often was left out of mainstream reports, raising serious concerns about mainstream press ethics.

Implications

Several key implications emerge from these conclusions. First, textual analysis could be a valuable tool for improving how journalists frame their reports about religious issues and figures associated with them. This researcher posits that news reports are themselves the result of textual analyses performed or conducted by journalists. However, it is not clear that journalists would consciously use this term to define their work and it is not evident from an analysis of coverage that they are skilled at using the technique. Based on the definition of the methodology itself, journalists utilizing textual analysis would first seek to understand how Wright and others who share his sense-making tradition made sense of Wright and the world around him before offering their own interpretations of his speech and religious practices. This type of analysis could have led more mainstream journalists to understand prophetic preaching less as an expression of "anti-American" sentiments and more as a statement against some American policies and practices, voiced by a group of Americans with perhaps more altruistic aspirations for the nation than others. That seemed to be reflected in alternative reports about Wright and other practitioners of black prophetic theology.

That is one of the reasons why this study includes a chapter that reviews literature on Wright before he became the focus of the 2008 coverage. While some of that material is based on news reports, much of the rest is based on Wright's own writings and reviews of Wright from Wright's contemporaries. These reflections collectively represent what McKee describes as a subculture's way of making sense of its own self and how its members fit in the world.⁷²⁴ The researcher began Chapter 3 with a quote from King's College Theology Professor Anthony B. Bradley saying news reports of Wright's "seemingly angry preaching" caused many Americans to wonder why he would say the things he said. "To understand this," Bradley quipped, "Context is our friend."⁷²⁵ Textual analysis opens the way for providing context that sheds more light on issues. That kind of context was largely missing from mainstream reports.

Consequently, a second, and perhaps more profound, implication from the study's conclusion is that knowledge of textual analysis could have allowed journalists to offer more objective reports by drawing on and potentially benefiting from insights that qualitative researchers find useful. For instance, much of Wright's language and perspective aligns with what McKee and other scholars refer to as a "post-structuralist" perspective that holds people experience reality differently so there is no one culture is judged to be right while all others are wrong. In contrast, a "realist" perspective would argue that there is one reality and all other perspectives are invalid. In a sense, the mainstream perspective as upheld by power elites in the United States and often validated by the news media represents this realist

⁷²⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷²⁵ Anthony B. Bradley, *Liberating Black Theology: The Bible and the Black Experience in America* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 35.

perspective. A journalist aware of textual analysis could have framed reports to show Wright voicing post-structuralist views in a realist-centered society. That would help explain the controversy, rather than simply labeling it as a controversy.

The late British theorist Stuart Hall, who was widely credited for most fully explicating textual analysis as a tool within mass communication study, was among scholars who preferred the post-structuralist approach to analysis and interpretation because he did not believe a single meaning typically exists within a text.⁷²⁶ Instead, Hall and other textual analysis theorists have claimed “meaning resides in the dialectical process between the text and reader, which takes place in a particular context.”⁷²⁷ Hall was among those who argued that the polysemic nature of language also makes texts polysemic, meaning there are multiple meanings resident within them.⁷²⁸ For Hall, that meant that language was linked with ideology, which is “the power of language to shape perception and knowing such that social agents accept their role in the existing order of things, either because they can see or imagine no alternative to it, or because they see it as natural and unchangeable because they value it as divinely ordained or beneficial.”⁷²⁹ In this sense Hall saw the media as agents in a process he defined as a “signifying practice,” whereby the media seek to construct reality instead of working to reflect it. The result is a dominant culture reading of a text, “which positions the reader in relationship to the text.”⁷³⁰ As a consequence, a textual analyst is charged with the task of identifying and determining the various

⁷²⁶ Patricia A. Curtin, “Textual Analysis in Mass Communication Studies: Theory and Methodology,” 6. Paper presented at the Association of Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Washington, DC, August 1995.

⁷²⁷ Curtin, “Textual Analysis,” 6.

⁷²⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷²⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁷³⁰ *Ibid.*

layers of meaning that are resident within a text, including what Hall would call preferred and alternative readings, “even if they are contradictory to the dominant form.”⁷³¹ Hall’s language aligns with that of McKee as outlined in Chapter 7 of this study. But as noted, such analysis was largely absent from mainstream reports.

This leads the way to a third implication of the study’s conclusions, which is, in this case study, mainstream news media including the much vaunted *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, may not be the best sources for gaining understanding of complex religious issues such as prophetic preaching. Mainstream newspapers offered relatively few explanatory reports and infrequently relied on religious experts. The present study’s findings do not necessarily contradict the contention by Brooks and his University of Missouri associates that newspapers are best at explaining the impact of an issue or cause of conflict.⁷³² Mainstream reports explained Wright’s impact and the cause of conflict surrounding him from a political perspective. Alternative publications explained from a religious perspective why Wright would speak as he did and why his statements created conflict with secular understandings of events and issues.

A fourth implication is that framing and sourcing practices by mainstream journalists suggest that some of the assumptions Gans and other scholars made about how news stories are constructed need to be revisited. Gans’ enduring values theory was widely embraced by scholars for helping to “...explain the news as a product of professional news judgments” designed to help the press serve the public’s interest

⁷³¹ See Stuart Hall, “The rediscovery of ideology: Return of the repressed in media studies,” 56-90, in Michael Gurevitch, ed., *Culture, Society and the media*, 1982.

⁷³² Brian Brooks et al, “News Reporting and Writing.”

“by following its own stated and unstated rules concerning objectivity.”⁷³³ Part of the praise for Gans’ study was the sociological or cultural dimension that it brought to research about news coverage. Gans posits that news values are not explicit. Instead, they are found between the lines and are to be inferred because journalists typically do not “...deliberately insert values into the news.”⁷³⁴ Thirty years after Gans produced his study, Paul Marshall (2009) criticized the way that journalists covered religion news but he echoed conclusions voiced by Gans. He quoted a CNN political analyst who observed: “On the national level, the press is one of the most secular institutions in American society. It just doesn’t get religion or any idea that flows from religious conviction. The press is not necessarily contemptuous of serious religion. It’s just uncomprehending.”⁷³⁵ The findings of this study call such assumptions into question, particularly in light of the prevailing practice by many mainstream journalists to use descriptors of subjects without attributing them to sources, even in news reports. The findings also showed consistency in how journalists framed coverage of Wright whether they were producing news articles, commentaries or editorials.

A fifth and final implication is that the mainstream press doesn’t view itself as a mediator called to make sense of complex religious issues with competing interpretations of events associated with them. Conflict and controversy continue to drive the framework upon which mainstream journalists produce their news reports about religion as opposed to frames designed to equip or help readers make sense of complex religious issues. For instance, when religious speech is considered uncivil,

⁷³³ Gitlin, *Whole World*, 249.

⁷³⁴ Gans, *Deciding What’s News*, 40.

⁷³⁵ Marshall, “*Blind Spot*,” 2009.

the mainstream news media is more inclined to side with the status quo than highlight constitutional defense of free speech rights of religious thinkers. This tendency supports arguments posited by McKee and Hall because in such instances the news media then becomes a purveyor of a mainstream dominant or realist reading of a subculture's message—meaning that subculture's message is judged from the perspective of the majority culture. That judgment does not weigh the message on its own merits and is not based on the meaning the subculture voices are attempting to communicate. One Chicago *Sun-Times* report included in the study's sample amplified this concern by noting that Trinity Church members had hoped “critics of Wright...will understand their congregation ... in their words, before passing judgment.”⁷³⁶ Writer David Roeder added: “Theirs is a mainstream Christian theology, but shaped by oppression that they feel yields a connection to the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. It's a church they said most Americans could embrace if they only got beyond media sound bites.”⁷³⁷ The story pointed out that on Easter 2008 the Trinity Church celebrated 84 baptisms in one service and 17 new confessions of faith in Jesus Christ at another. Prayers also were offered for the sick, the needy and one member who was about to ship off to military service in Afghanistan. That is not the Trinity that came to be the focus of news media coverage.

⁷³⁶ David Roeder, “Easter Sunday at ... The most talked about church in America; Parishioners defend embattled minister,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, March 24, 2008, 3.

⁷³⁷ *Ibid.*

Future Research

The present study yielded a few insights from the conventional analysis of the data that the researcher did not discuss in detail due to limitations of the study's scope. However, those areas are worthy of in-depth analysis and further research. To no degree of surprise, the conventional analysis found that when religion becomes part of a political story, religious issues and figures associated with them are framed in political terms. The conventional analysis found that the politics frame was the second most prevalent of all frames identified in coverage. Wright, a religious figure, was featured in many political stories as a political issue confronting Obama. The Pew research confirmed this pattern. It also showed that when a person of color is involved in an election campaign, the "race" frame is also more prevalent in news coverage. The present study's conventional analysis showed that race was the third most frequent frame in all of the coverage of Wright. The researcher purposefully did not focus the study or much of its analysis on race because complaints about religious coverage have not been restricted to only certain racial groups. Some of the most consistent complaints have come from white religious conservatives who are at the opposite end of the spectrum from Wright on various socio-political issues. However, there are some factors regarding racial framing of religious figures that may merit additional research, particularly in regard to prophetic voices that raise issues about race. Louis Farrakhan, whose name was frequently invoked in coverage of Wright, is one example. Some analysts argued that Wright was more heavily scrutinized than white ministers associated with candidates. Earlier analysis showed that none of those other ministers were pastors of candidates.

The researcher also picked up new insights that will be the focus of his future research. One of those is related to a broader cultural studies approach to understanding the nature of how journalists make sense of reality. The study's findings that raise issues regarding context open the door for future research, particularly as it pertains to what cultural studies scholars call "high context" cultures and "low context" cultures.⁷³⁸ Hybels and Weaver point out that in high-context cultures, a message's meaning is "implied by the physical setting or is presumed to be part of the individual's beliefs, values and norms."⁷³⁹ In other words, what words and messages mean depend upon the setting in which they are being communicated. It suggests that people have the ability to separate the wheat from the chaff. Hybels and Weaver note individuals from "low-context" cultures conclude that the majority of a message's "information is in the communication itself—not in the context."⁷⁴⁰ In other words, statements often are isolated and interpreted independently of a contextual setting. That was the great tension regarding the excerpts from Wright's sermons. The specific words were being critiqued, not the overall message that Wright was attempting to communicate or how those who were his intended audience heard those words. It is to be noted that the dominant framework of the native cultures of individuals associated with what the United States calls racial minorities—Asian, African, Latin American—lean toward "high-context" understandings of communication. However, most Western or Caucasian cultures lean toward "low-context" understandings of communication. Could that offer insight into why mainstream journalism reports focused on specific words uttered by Wright with little

⁷³⁸ Hybels and Weaver, *Communicating Effectively*, 236.

⁷³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

regard for context? The researcher thinks so. In contrast, could this type of analysis also offer insight into why Wright and his supporters complained about lack of context? Again, the researcher thinks so. It is interesting to note that Wright raised these issues in his last round of public appearances, as he talked about cultural differences that are not necessarily universal but prevalent. He argued “different is not deficient.”⁷⁴¹ In the United States, these issues are increasingly significant as the makeup of the nation becomes increasingly diverse.

The researcher also thinks the National Press Club transcript could become a road map for future research on several levels, particularly as it pertains to examining how news coverage that followed the press conference often lacked context that would have changed the meaning derived from the framing of some stories. Moreover, that transcript also could lead to meaningful research about the nature of questions journalists pose to religious figures and what those imply about journalistic values and their interest in knowledge of religious issues. For instance, journalists argued that Wright was a legitimate target for investigation because the public has a right to know about those who are influential in the lives of candidates for the U.S. presidency. However, none of the questions posed to Wright or to Obama, for that matter, sought to explore what Wright hoped that his listeners would take from his messages or what the listeners took from the messages. Some considered it unbelievable that Obama could be sincere in his pronouncements about racial unity having sat under the teaching and leading of Wright. That type of conclusion dismisses what Stuart Hall and other culturalist would call the ability of a receiver of a message to edit what he or she hears to make it suited to his or her own way of

⁷⁴¹ See Summary Narrative in Chapter 7. See also National Press Club Transcript in appendix.

thinking or communicating. Hall would call it a negotiated reading. McKee would call it a structuralist or post-structuralist reading. That is part of the value of textual analysis and its potential usefulness to media practitioners.

Recommendations

This study's conclusions, implications and suggestions for future research suggest opportunities for both the journalism education sector and the professional news sector to step up efforts to make sure practitioners are adequately trained and exposed to issues that could improve coverage of complex religious issues and figures associated with them. This researcher recommends that textual analysis training, intercultural communication training and cultural studies training be included in college curricula at undergraduate and graduate levels, and become part of ongoing training in newsrooms. Enhancing the knowledge of journalists in these key areas could help promote more accurate readings of religious texts and issues associated with them. This could help improve the quality of coverage.

The Last Word

This case study suggests that not much progress has been made in how religious issues and figures are covered by the mainstream press, particularly in a political context. Patterns of secular bias emerged in the coverage of Wright, which resulted in Wright not being framed in balanced ways. In summary, Wright was quoted and often framed out of context because the mainstream press relied on Gans' secular values to frame or make sense of Wright's religious speech. This suggests the mainstream press needs to pay more attention to context when religious speech becomes a political issue.

The present study's findings indicate that mainstream journalists de-emphasized religious frames and failed to consult religious experts that may have led to reports that promoted more understanding of Wright's perspective, even if there was not agreement with them. It appears that in regard to prophetic theology and other religious issues that do not align with secular understandings of them, the mainstream news media choose to focus on controversy and conflict instead of providing explanatory frames that could have promoted religious understanding.

The words of former *USA TODAY* columnist Barbara Reynolds, who crossed over from full-time mainstream news media practice to become a theologian seem advisable. In a column in which she compared Wright's rhetoric to that of the now much revered Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., Reynolds stated:

Whether you disagree or agree with Wright's controversial statements, it is a terrible disservice to ignore his contributions as a theologian, pastor, and educator. It is ludicrous that a pastor who has preached more than 207,000 minutes for the past 36 years at Trinity on Sundays, not to mention his

weekday worship services, revivals and global preaching, should be judged by a couple of 15- or 30-second sound bites.⁷⁴²

This researcher leaves this investigation thinking that a big part of the problem with how news is framed is that journalists and their supervisors are perhaps confusing gaining an understanding of a subject matter with embracing or validating its particular perspective. In the case of Wright, to understand his prophetic tradition could have led journalists to understand why it clashed with mainstream values and perhaps allowed them to draw different conclusions that would have better served the public and the historic function that the news media has been assigned to play in society. One perspective that readers might have expected to see lifted up in news coverage about the nature of Wright's prophetic Christianity is perhaps best explained by Michael Warren, a professor of religious education and catechetical ministry at St. John's University, New York. Warren posits that one function of religious culture is resistance to popular culture:

In a time when the wider culture's meanings and values, both positive and negative, are communicated through the incessant and vivid imagery of electronic media, it seems more and more likely that religious groups will retain their vision and way of life only by becoming centers of cultural resistance to those elements in the wider culture not acceptable to their religious insight. Such resistance calls us to take the world not less seriously but more seriously. It seeks to escape not the world but the trivialization of the world by which other persons become instruments of one's self-will rather than temples of the living God.⁷⁴³

The works of many journalists included in this study were void of religious sources such as Warren, who could have helped to contextualize Wright, his

⁷⁴² Barbara Reynolds, "America needs the Jeremiah Wrights of the World," *Washington Afro American*, March 22, 2008, A7.

⁷⁴³ Michael Warren, *Communications and Cultural Analysis: A Religious View* (Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, 1992), 13.

statements and reactions. A number of reports labelled Wright a stubborn old preacher who refused to apologize for statements those outside the church found unacceptable. Warren argues that “resistance is a necessary form of any true cultural agency.”⁷⁴⁴ He refers to a book penned by Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutierrez to explore the “spirituality of resistance needed by the poor and politically marginal people.”⁷⁴⁵ Warren observes:

Early on, Gutierrez uses a telling phrase to name the effort of the powerful to withdraw from the poor every source of meaning and value that gives them strength. He calls this effort a work of ‘cultural death.’ Opposing and countering such a cultural death is the deep, life-giving spirituality that reverses the dignity of each person and calls each to ratify that dignity in the struggle for justice. Gutierrez’s title titled *We Drink from Our Own Wells* offers a compelling metaphor for the spirit-sustaining possibilities of religious groups as zones of signification. Implied in his title is the importance of refusing to imbibe cultural pollution, with its false and poisoning versions of human life concocted by unseen elites. This asceticism of disengagement is to be bonded to an asceticism of engagement. In the latter, people have access to their own wells, their own versions of reality, and their own sources of cultural life and nourishment. A religion, then, embodies a vision, and its rituals and disciplines are designed to enable people to focus their attention on this vision. Since attention is not automatic, all religions have procedures to maintain attention on matters not immediately obvious to all.⁷⁴⁶

Warren’s summation seems to reflect Wright’s “post-structuralist” view that “different does not mean deficient.”⁷⁴⁷ However, it is this researcher’s conviction that in the final analysis, the issues revealed in this investigation are much bigger than a preacher whose words some people considered unacceptable in the public sphere. In

⁷⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 13-14.

⁷⁴⁷ See National Press Club Transcript. Wright argued that African Americans have some different cultural values; those, he posited, are not better or worse, just different. Few publications reported his statements in context; some commentators dismissed them as racist.

an article challenging what they called the media's construction of reality, scholars William A. Gamson, David Croteau, William Hoynes and Theodore Sasson write:

Ideally, a media system suitable for a democracy ought to provide its readers with some coherent sense of the broader social forces that affect the conditions of their everyday lives. It is difficult to find anyone who would claim that media discourse in the United States even remotely approaches this ideal. The overwhelming conclusion is that the media generally operate in ways that promote apathy, cynicism, and quiescence, rather than active citizenship and participation. Furthermore, all the trends seem to be in the wrong direction—toward more and more messages, from fewer and bigger producers, saying less and less. That's the bad news.⁷⁴⁸

When I was a practicing journalist, I would have unequivocally dismissed this type of critique of the news media, especially if it were directed at newspapers. Now I have no answer to counter it, so I am committing to pursuing scholarship that may hold promise for contributing to the improvement of the enterprise.

⁷⁴⁸ William A. Gamson, David Croteau, William Hoynes and Theodore Sasson, "Media Images and the Social Construction of Reality," *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 18, (1992), 373.

Appendix A: List of Sample Articles

Articles included in “Framing Rev. Jeremiah A. Wright Jr.” Study Sample

2007

The New York Times

1. Jodi Kantor, “Disinvitation By Obama Is Criticized,” *The New York Times*, March 6, 2007, A19.
2. Jodi Kantor, “A Candidate, His Minister and the Search for Faith,” *The New York Times*, April 30, 2007, A1.
3. Laurie Goodstein, “Faith Has Role in Politics, Obama Tells Church Convention,” *The New York Times*, June 24, 2007, A22.
4. Ginger Thompson, “Seeking Unity, Obama Feels Pull of Racial Divide,” *The New York Times*, February 12, 2008, A1.
5. Neela Banerjee, “Obama Walks a Difficult Path As He Courts Jewish Voters,” *The New York Times*, March 1, 2008, A1.
6. Jodi Kantor, “Pastor’s Words Still Draw Fire,” *The New York Times*, March 14, 2008, A18.
7. Jodi Kantor, “Obama Denounces Statements of His Pastor as ‘Inflammatory,’” *The New York Times*, March 15, 2008, A13.
8. Jeff Zeleny and John M. Broder, “With Race Likely to Continue After Pennsylvania, Democrats Court Other States,” *The New York Times*, March 16, 2008, A30.
9. Kate Phillips, “Pastor Defends His Predecessor at Obama’s Chicago Church,” *The New York Times*, March 17, 2008, A14.
10. William Kristol, “Generation Obama? Perhaps Not,” *The New York Times*, March 17, 2008, A19.

11. Jodi Kantor and Jeff Zeleny, "On Defensive, Obama Plans Talk on Race," *The New York Times*, March 18, 2008, A1.
12. Jeff Zeleny, "Obama Urges U.S. to Grapple With Race Issue," *The New York Times*, March 19, 2008, A1.
13. Editorial, "Mr. Obama's Profile in Courage," *The New York Times*, March 19, 2008, A18.
14. Maureen Dowd, "Black, White & Gray," *The New York Times*, March 19, 2008, A19.
15. Janny Scott, "A Candidate Chooses Reconciliation Over Rancor," *The New York Times*, March 19, 2008, A14.
16. Susan Saulny, "In Chicago, More Talk About Race After Speech," *The New York Times*, March 19, 2008, A15.
17. Larry Rohter and Michael Luo, "Groups Respond to Obama's Call for National Discussion About Race," *The New York Times*, March 20, 2008, A21.
18. Nicholas D. Kristof, "Obama and Race," *The New York Times*, March 20, 2008, A27.
19. Jeff Zeleny, "Obama Works to Shift Campaign Back to Domestic Issues," *The New York Times*, March 20, 2008, A21.
20. Patrick Healy, "Clinton Treats Obama Pastor With Caution," *The New York Times*, March 21, 2008, A18.
21. Adam Nagourney and Jeff Zeleny, "First a Tense Talk With Clinton, Then Richardson Backs Obama," *The New York Times*, March 22, 2008, A1.
22. Timothy Egan, "Donner Party Democrats," *The New York Times*, March 22, 2008, A13.

23. Maureen Dowd, "Haunting Obama's Dreams," *The New York Times*, March 23, 2008, A10.
24. Laurie Goodstein and Neela Banerjee, "Obama talk Fuels Easter Sermons," *The New York Times*, March 23, 2008, A1.
25. Janny Scott, "Talk About Race," *The New York Times*, March 23, 2008, WK1.
26. William Kristol, "Let's Not, and Say We Did," *The New York Times*, March 24, 2008, A23.
27. Bob Herbert, "With a Powerful Speech, Obama Offers a Challenge," *The New York Times*, March 25, 2008, A27.
28. Julie Bosman and Patrick Healy, "Clinton Criticizes Obama Over His Pastor," *The New York Times*, March 26, 2008, A19.
29. Jeff Zeleny, "Powell Has Praise For Obama," *The New York Times*, April 11, 2008, A17.
30. Alessandra Stanley, "Using a Shiv, but Looking Like a Saint," *The New York Times*, April 14, 2008, A21.
31. John Harwood, "First Question for Clinton: Be Aggressive or Lay Off?" *The New York Times*, April 14, 2008, A20.
32. John M. Broder, "At Forum on Faith, Democrats Wrangle Over Words and Beliefs," *The New York Times*, April 14, 2008, A21.
33. Editorial, "Guns and Bitter," *The New York Times*, April 16, 2008, A24.
34. Jacques Steinberg, "Who Lost the Debate? Moderators, Many Say," *The New York Times*, April 18, 2008, A16.
35. Charles M. Blow, "All Atmospherics, No Climate," *The New York Times*, April 19, 2008, A19.

36. Julie Bosman and Jeff Zeleny, "Clinton Impugns Obama's Toughness," *The New York Times*, April 19, 2008, A13.
37. Patrick Healy, "Clinton Clearly Outduels Obama in Pennsylvania," *The New York Times*, April 23, 2008, A1.
38. Adam Nagourney, "For Democrats, Questions Over Race and Electability," *The New York Times*, April 24, 2008, A1.
39. Julie Bosman, "Pastor Defends Himself," *The New York Times*, April 25, 2008, A24.
40. Editorial, "A Shameful, Ugly Ad," *The New York Times*, April 26, 2008, A20.
41. Bob Herbert, "Heading Toward The Danger Zone," *The New York Times*, April 26, 2008, A21.
42. Michael Cooper, "McCain Criticizes Clergyman's Remarks," *The New York Times*, April 28, 2008, A21.
43. Nick Bunkley, "Former Pastor To Obama Faults News Coverage," *The New York Times*, April 28, 2008, A21.
44. Alessandra Stanley, "Not Speaking for Obama, Pastor Speaks for Himself, at Length," *The New York Times*, April 29, 2008, A1.
45. Jeff Zeleny, "Obama Adds to Distance From Pastor And Opinions," *The New York Times*, April 29, 2008, A14.
46. Bob Herbert, "The Pastor Casts A Shadow," *The New York Times*, April 29, 2008, A19.
47. John Holusha, "Wright Says Criticism Is Attack on Black Church," *The New York Times*, April 29, 2008, NP/ web.
48. Jeff Zeleny and Adam Nagourney, "An Angry Obama Renounces Ties to His Ex-Pastor," *The New York Times*, April 30, 2008, A1.

49. Editorial, "Mr. Obama and Rev. Wright," *The New York Times*, April 30, 2008, A18.

Chicago Sun-Times

1. Laura Washington, "National Media can't get enough of Obama," March 12, 2007, 33.
2. Monroe Anderson, "Ethnic identity isn't black and white," *Chicago Sun-Times*, March 25, 2007, B7.
3. Dave Hoekstra, "You draw on church for your strength," *Chicago Sun-Times*, April 22, 2007, D12.
4. Susan Hogan/Albach, "Obama's liberal church under the microscope; Presidential candidate to speak at group's convention," *Chicago Sun-Times*, June 21, 2007, 12.
5. Susan Hogan/Albach, "Obama: 'Go out, do Lord's work'; Senator addresses United Church of Christ faithful at national meeting," *Chicago Sun-Times*, June 24, 2007, A10.
6. "Choir Conductor Killed," *Chicago Sun-Times*, Dec. 25, 2007, 13.
7. Susan Hogan/Albach, "Peace, politics, turmoil mark religious scene; Trials of faith: New priest accusations, church disputes, as Dalai Lama continues search for enlightenment," *Chicago Sun-Times*, December 28, 2007, 17.
8. Lynn Sweet, "Obama takes heat over Farrakhan link," *Chicago Sun-Times*, January 16, 2008, 23.
9. Deborah Douglas, "Back off criticism of Obama's church," *Chicago Sun-Times*, January 18, 2008, 29.
10. Lynn Sweet, "Still something to explain; Obama assures Jewish leaders on religion, Israel stance," *Chicago Sun-Times*, February 25, 2008, 19.
11. Abdon M. Pallasch, "Obama denounces rhetoric but stands behind his pastor," *Chicago Sun-Times*, March 15, 2008, 3.

12. Lynn Sweet, "Obama: No to 'forces of division'; Calls Wright wrong on rhetoric, blames 'pent-up anger'," *Chicago Sun-Times*, March 16, 2008, 22.
13. Lynn Sweet, "Obama gets it out in the open; He's looking to get past Rezko, Wright—and turn the heat on Hillary," *Chicago Sun-Times*, March 16, 2008, 15.
14. Mary Mitchell, "Attacks on his church trouble Obama; He has criticized his pastor, but he won't abandon Trinity," *Chicago Sun-Times*, March 16, 2008, 12.
15. Maureen O'Donnell, "Name of Obama's pastor 'is being assassinated'; Leaders lash out at critics," *Chicago Sun-Times*, March 17, 2008, 2.
16. Zay N. Smith, "Happy days are here again," *Chicago Sun-Times*, March 17, 2008, 32.
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Appendix B: Day of Jerusalem Sermon

September 16th, 2001
Reverend Jeremiah A. Wright Jr.

(This is the text of the sermon titled "The Day of Jerusalem's Fall." Transcription by Kofi Khemet from an audio recording posted by Roland Martin. All rights reserved 3/28/2008).

Text begins here:

Would you repeat these words after me. Remember O' Lord
[Echo from audience] against the Edomites [Echo] the day of
Jerusalem's fall. [Echo] Most of us are only familiar with what we
read earlier in the service today, the first 6 verses of Psalm 137. They
contain the powerful and immortal words of a people who are in
exile. Words that have been made into anthems and sacred songs
both in North America and in Jamaica. Forty years ago when I was in
college our college choir sang Psalm 137, "by the waters of Babylon,
we sat down and wept when we remembered thee O' Zion." Twenty
years ago almost everybody in the Caribbean was singing the
Jamaican version, "by the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and
wept."

The captives in Babylon asked the question, "How shall we sing
the Lord's song in a strange land?" The captives in America answered

that question by creating an entirely new genre of music, the Spirituals. They sang sorrowfully, "Sometimes I feel like a motherless child a long way from home". They sang thoughtfully, "Nobody knows the trouble I've seen, nobody knows, but Jesus." They sang defiantly, "O' freedom, O' freedom, O' freedom over me, before I'd be a slave, I'd be buried in my grave and go home to my god and be free."

To quote Dr. Martin Luther King, they took Jeremiah's question mark and straightened it out into an exclamation point. Jeremiah, who saw his people in exile, asks the question "Is there no balm in Gilead?" The Africans who were in exile, in a strange land, said yes there is "O' yes there is a balm in Gilead."

The exiles in Psalm 137 ask the question, "How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" The Africans in exile in America answer their question and said, "I sing because I'm happy, I sing because I'm free." "His eye is on the sparrow and I know he watches me." Psalm 137 is a psalm that has inspired anthems and spirituals, poems and sermons.

Psalm 137 is a song that has inspired the hearts of millions, as they have reflected on the beauty and splendor of the city of god,

Jerusalem. If I forget you O' Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning. Let my right hand, the Hebrew says, become useless. Let my right hand, my strength, just wither away. Let my tongue designed to sing praises cling to the roof of my mouth; if I do not remember you O' Jerusalem; if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy.

Most of us are familiar with just that part of Psalm 137. Most of us are only familiar with the first 6 verses of Psalm 137. Most of us have not read or heard the last 3 verses of this song, and most of us – I can guarantee you – have never heard a sermon that touched any of the thoughts or feelings expressed in these last 3 verses.

I told Freddie Haines this week that in all of my years of preaching. I was licensed to preach in May of 1959, I was ordained in January of 1967, and I became a pastor in March of 1972. But, in all my years of preaching I have never preached a sermon which dealt with these difficult verses, these last 3 verses in Psalm 137, these brutally honest verses. And, these verses which express what the people of faith really feel after a day of devastation and senseless death. And, that is exactly what these three verses express.

Now, in our class sessions, on our church study trips, I have lifted up these verses to help our church members understand much

of what it is they feel as they have stood in the slave castles in West Africa; as they have stood among the poverty in Ethiopia; stood in the townships of South Africa; and stared at the favelas in Salvador do Bahia and Rio De Janeiro, in Brazil. African Americans have a surge of emotions as they see the color of poverty in a world of wealth and begin to understand that it is no accident that the world's poorest are one color and the world's richest are another color. And, and when they, when they tie together the pieces of 500 years of colonialism, racism and slavery with what it is they see in in 2001, a surge of emotions hits them. And, the last 3 verses of Psalm 137 help them to understand what it is they are feeling. I have treated these verses in a classroom setting and on the study tours that our congregation has taken, but I have never touched them in a sermon.

Today I was telling Freddie Haines the spirit of god has nudged me to touch them and to treat them prayerfully; as many of us try to sort out what it is we are feeling and why it is we are feeling what we feel after the trauma and the tragedy of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, symbols of who America is, the money and the military.

Some of the feelings we have, as people of faith in the 21st century are similar to the feelings of the people of faith had in the 6th century, B.C. And, when you read and, and study this Psalm, in its entirety. The parallel between those feelings becomes almost eerily crystal clear. That's why I didn't want you to stop at the famous and familiar verse six. I wanted you to read, to hear and to experience all nine verses of Psalm 137 to get the full scope of what it is this song is saying. Pray with me for just a few moments on this subject.

The day of Jerusalem's fall. The day of Jerusalem's fall. The day . . . of Jerusalem's fall. If you got your Bibles with you turn back to Second Kings the 25th chapter, Second Kings 25th chapter. In that chapter, there is a graphic description of the carnage and the killings that took place, on the day of Jerusalem's fall. The King of Judah, with all of his army, fled. Verse 4, they tried to run, but the army of the Chaldeans pursued the king, captured the king and literally committed murder.

Verse 7, of Second Kings 25, says they slaughtered, senseless killings, they slaughtered the sons of Zedekiah and made him watch it. Then they put out his eyes, so that would be the last thing he had any visual image of, like a commercial airliner, or passenger plane

slamming into an office building, two office buildings, killing thousands for no reason other than hatred. Remember, O' Lord the Edomites. The day of Jerusalem's fall.

Verse eight of Second Kings 25 says, Nebuzaradan a soldier in the service of the King of Babylon came to Jerusalem and burned. Now get this image clear. Burned! Get it in your mind. He burned the house of the Lord. He burned the King's house. He burned all the houses of Jerusalem. And, every great house he burned down. Remember, O' Lord, against the Edomites. The day of Jerusalem's fall. All the army of the Chaldeans who were with the captain of the guard broke down the walls of Jerusalem.

Now, you got to remember the real and the symbolic significance of the walls of Jerusalem. Our choir sings about it. You can read about it when you get home. Most of you just enjoyed the sound of the music, and miss the meaning of the words to the music. Read Psalm one, Psalm 48 when you get home.

Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised in the city of our god. Jerusalem! Let Mt. Zion rejoice Jerusalem! Let the daughters of Judah be glad. Walk around Zion. That's Jerusalem! Go 'round about.

Account its towers, its towers. Tell the towers don't miss this, don't miss this. Tell the towers thereof. The towers of Jerusalem were the visible symbols of her greatness, her power and her invincibility! Mark ye well her bulwarks and consider her palaces. This is Jerusalem! Invulnerable, Jerusalem! Invincible, Jerusalem! The city where God dwells, Jerusalem. The Chaldeans smashed and shattered that sense of security and invincibility. When first and Second Kings 25:4, look a breach was made in the invincible walls.

One side of the Pentagon was wiped out and the people who were in there, like the people of Jerusalem who defended Jerusalem, on that wall wiped out. First there was a breach in the wall in verse four, and then verse 2, 10. Verse 10 says they broke down all the walls of Jerusalem. Then they burned everything they could burn and took most of the people into exile.

Remember, O' Lord against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem's fall. The symbol of power was gone! The substance of their military and their monetary system was gone! The Towers of Jerusalem were gone. It took 8 months to, pardon me eight years, to build the World Trade Center. It took Solomon 7 years to build the temple in

Jerusalem, with its towers and within 8 hours it was gone. It took Solomon 14 years to build his palace, the symbol of wealth, the symbol of magnificence, the symbol of might and majesty and within 8 hours it also was gone.

The writer of Psalm 37 says look, look, look what they said in Psalm 137, tear it down, tear it down, down to its foundations O' daughter Babylon you devastator. The day of Jerusalem's fall was a day that changed these people's lives forever. The day of Jerusalem's fall was a day of pain, a day of anger, a day of rage, a day of terror, a day of outrage, a day of death, a day of destruction. And, verse 8 of Psalm 137 says a day of devastation.

The people who sang this song saw their loved ones die. The people who sang this song saw senseless carnage. The people who sang this song saw their landmarks burned. They saw their church burned. They saw their town burned. They saw their places of employment burned. They saw their places of enjoyment burned. Some of the people they worked beside, they would never see again. Some of the people they walked beside, they would never see again. Some of the people they lived beside, they would never see again.

And, the day of Jerusalem's fall was a day that would live forever in their memories. The day of Jerusalem's fall was a day that changed their lives forever. The day of Jerusalem's fall was a day for the people of faith; remember these are people of faith. It was a day of pain. It was a day of anger. It was a day of rage. It was a day of outrage. It was a day of terror. It was a day of fear. It was a day of death. It was a day of destruction. It was a day of devastation.

And, when you read this song of remembrance, "By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and we wept, when we remembered." When you read this song of remembrance, look what you see, look what you see. Look! Look! You see the people of God. The people of faith move, 3 distinct moves:

They move, first of all from reverence, reverence, reverence. The thought of Jerusalem. Those thoughts are thoughts of reverence. The memories of Jerusalem are memories of reverence. Jerusalem is where the house of God was, reverence. Jerusalem is where the temple of Solomon was, reverence. March about Zion and go 'round about her. Tell the towers thereof, for this God is our God, forever, reverence. The Lord is in his holy temple, reverence. Isaiah said in the year that King Uzziah died I saw also the Lord sitting on a throne

high and lifted up. And, the train of his garment, the hem of his robe filled the temple, reverence. The Seraphim were in attendance above the Lord. Each had six wings. I said now Isaiah six wings?

Two, they covered their face with 2. They covered their feet and with the other 2 they flew and crawled out, one into the other. Holy! Holy! Holy is the Lord of hosts. The earth is full; the whole earth is full of his glories, reverence. Jerusalem means reverence.

When Solomon prayed and asked God's blessing on that temple in Jerusalem. You know the story; fire came down from heaven, in second Chronicles 7. And, the Glory of the Lord filled the temple, the priests could not go in and the people fell down and worshipped. The thoughts of Jerusalem in Psalm 137 are thoughts of reverence. If I forget you O' Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning, reverence. Let the tongue, my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you Jerusalem, reverence. If I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy, reverence.

But, keep on reading. The people of faith move from reverence in verses 4 to 6, to revenge in verses 8 and 9. They want revenge! They want somebody to destroy those who devastated them. In fact, in fact they want God to get even with those who did evil. Remember

O' Lord against the Edomites. Remember O' Lord the day of Jerusalem's fall. The first move is where the people of faith move from reverence to revenge. The second move in this text is a move from worship to war. Jerusalem is where they worship. Now, they have declared war!

Let me put it another way. Let me put it another way. The second move is a move from the thoughts of paying tithes. Jerusalem is where the people of faith paid tithes. Solomon led the people of God in paying tithes at the temple, in Jerusalem. Jerusalem, the temple of God, the House of God, is where the people made sacrificial offerings to God. Way after the temple was restored and rebuilt, way down 600 years later, when Jesus was born the temple in Jerusalem, the House of God, is where the people of God brought their tithes and their offerings. Jesus' mother and father brought him to the temple to present him to the Lord. When the time came for their purification then they brought a sacrificial offering. Jerusalem, the temple, the House of God is where the people or God pay tithes and sacrificial offerings to God.

What, what does God, God's self say in Malachi 3:10? Bring all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in my house,

the temple. And, prove me now, here with the second move in Psalm 137, is a move from paying tithes to the thoughts of paying back. O' daughter of Babylon you devastator. Happy, blessed shall they be who pay you back for what you did to us. That's payback. The "Big Payback."

Every public service of worship I have heard about so far in the wake of the American tragedy has had in its prayers and in its preachments sympathy and compassion for those who were killed and for their families, and God's guidance upon the selected presidents and our war-machine as they do what they got to do - pay backs. There's a move in Psalm 137 from thoughts of paying tithes to thoughts of paying back. Move if you will from worship to war. A move, in other words from the worship of the God of creation to a war against whom God has created. And I want you to notice, very carefully, the next move. One of the reasons this psalm is rarely read in its entirety. Because it is a move that spotlights the insanity of the cycle of violence and the cycle of hatred.

Look at verse 9, look at verse 9, look at verse 9, "Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rocks. The people of faith are the rivers of Babylon. How shall we sing the

Lord's song if I forget the (unintelligible). . . The people of faith have moved from the hatred of armed enemies, these soldiers who captured the king, who slaughtered his son, they put his eyes out, the soldiers who sacked the city, burned the towns, burned the temples, burned the towers, and moved from the hatred of armed enemies to the hatred of unarmed innocents, the babies, the babies. "Blessed are they who dash your baby's brains against a rock." And that my beloveds is a dangerous place to be. Yet, that is where the people of faith are in 551 BC and that is where the people of faith are, far too many people of faith are in 2001 AD.

We have moved from the hatred of armed enemies to the hatred of unarmed innocence. We want revenge. We want paybacks and we don't care who gets hurt in the process. Now I-I-I asked the Lord, "What should our response be in light of such an unthinkable act?"

But before I share with you what the Lord showed me, I want to give you one of my little faith footnotes. Visitors often get faith footnotes, so that our members don't lose sight of the big picture. Let me give you a little faith footnote.

Turn to your neighbors and say "faith footnote."

I heard Ambassador Peck on an interview yesterday. Did anybody else see him or hear him? He was on Fox news. This is a White man and he was upsetting the Fox news commentators to no end. He pointed out. You see him John? A White man he pointed out – an Ambassador! He pointed out that what Malcolm X said when he got silenced by Elijah Mohammad was in fact true. America's chickens are coming home to roost!

We took this country by terror away from the Sioux, the Apache, the Arawak, the Comanche, the Arapaho, the Navajo. Terrorism! We took Africans from their country to build our way of ease and kept them enslaved and living in fear. Terrorism! We bombed Grenada and killed innocent babies, non- military personnel.

We bombed the black civilian community of Panama with stealth bombers and killed unarmed teenagers and toddlers, pregnant mothers and hard-working fathers. We bombed Gadhafi's home and killed his child. Blessed are they who bash your children's head against a rock! We bombed Iraq. We killed unarmed civilians trying to make a living. We bombed a plant in Sudan to payback for the attack on our embassy. Killed hundreds of hard-working people;

mothers and fathers who left home to go that day, not knowing that they would never get back home.

We bombed Hiroshima! We bombed Nagasaki, and we nuked far more than the thousands in New York and the Pentagon, and we never batted an eye! Kids playing in the playground, mothers picking up children after school, civilians – not soldiers – people just trying to make it day by day.

We have supported state terrorism against the Palestinians and Black South Africans, and now we are indignant? Because the stuff we have done overseas has now been brought back into our own front yard! America's chickens are coming home to roost! Violence begets violence. Hatred begets hatred and terrorism begets terrorism. A White ambassador said that y'all not a Black Militant. Not a reverend who preaches about racism. An Ambassador whose eyes are wide open, and who's trying to get us to wake up and move away from this dangerous precipice upon which we are now poised. The ambassador said that the people we wounded don't have the military capability we have but they do have individuals who are willing to die and to take thousands with them and we need to come to grips with that. Let me stop my faith footnote right there and ask

you to think about that over the next few weeks if God grants us that many days. Turn back to your neighbor and say, "footnote is over."

Now, now come on back to my question to the Lord. "What should our response be right now in light of such an unthinkable act?" I asked the Lord that question Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday.

I was stuck in Newark New Jersey. No flights were leaving LaGuardia, JFK, or Newark airport. On the day the FAA opened up the airports to bring into the cities of destination because those flights that had been diverted, because of the hijacking; a scare in New York closed all three airports and I couldn't even get here for Mr. Bradford's funeral. And I asked God, "What should our response be?" I saw pictures of the incredible. People jumping from the 110th floor. People jumping from the roof cause the stairwells above the 9th floor were gone. No more. Black people jumping to a certain death. People holding hands jumping. People on fire jumping. And I asked the Lord, "What should our response be?" I read what the people of faith felt in 551 BC. But this is a different time. This is a different enemy. This is a different world. This is a different terror. This is a different reality. "What should our response be?"

And the Lord showed me three things. Let me share them with you quickly and I'm going to leave you alone to think about the faith footnote, number one. The Lord showed me that this is a time for self-examination. As I sat 900 miles away from my family and my community of faith, two months after my own father's death, God showed me that this is a time for me to examine my relationship with God; my own relationship with God, my personal relationship with God. I submit to you that it is the same for you.

Folks flocked to the church in New Jersey last week. You know that foxhole religion syndrome kicked in, that emergency cord religion; you know that old red box cord to pull in case of emergency, it showed up full force. Folk who ain't thought about coming to church for years were in church last week. I heard that midweek prayer services all over this country, which are poorly attended 51 weeks of the year, were jammed packed all over the nation the week of the hijacking the 52nd week filled full. But the Lord said, "This ain't the time for you to be examining other folks' relationship, this is a time of self-examination"

The Lord said to me, "How is our relationship doing Jeremiah? How often do you talk to me personally? How often do you let Me

talk to you privately? How much time do you spend trying to get right with Me, or do you spend all your time trying to get other folks right?" This is a time for me to examine my own relationship with God. Is it real or is it fake? Is it forever or is it for show? Is it something that you do for the sake of the public or is it something that you do for the sake of eternity? This is a time to examine my own and a time for you to examine your own relationship with God, self-examination! Then this is the time, in light of the unbelievable tragedy, this is a time to examine the relationship with my family, self-examination.

As soon as the first plane hit the World Trade Center I was on the phone talking to Marcus Cosby about him flying up there to preach for me, while I could fly home to do Mr. Bradford's service. He said, "you got the T.V. on?" I said no, what channel? He said, "it don't matter what channel." And, as I turned it on and watched the first tower burn, I saw the second one fly into it. As soon as the first plane hit The World Trade Center I called home and I called my mother.

Ramah was taking Jamila to the school bus. My mother's phone was busy. And, the thought hit me! Suppose you can never talk to her again? Suppose you never see Jamila, Janet, Jerry, Stevie, Jazzy, Jay or

Ramah ever again? What is the quality of the relationship between you and your family? The soul station in New York kept playing Stevie Wonder songs with these three words; when is the last time you took the time to say to your family, honey I love you?

And, and then that family thought led me to my extended family, and my church family. We, we fight. We disagree. We, we fall out. We have diametrically opposed views on some critical issues. But, I, I still love you. When is the last time you said that to your church family? When your daddy died? Well, that was two months ago reverend. You need to say that every chance you get. So, let me just say it to you now. I love y'all! I love you! [applause] I love you! Listen, listen! Don't, don't clap; don't clap! Turn to the person sitting next to you, worshipping next to you and say it while you have a chance. Say I love you! [Echo] Listen, listen; listen! This, this past week was a grim reminder of the fact that you might not have the chance to say that next week. So, say it now. I love you! [Echo]

I had two deacons, two deacons. When they realized I could not fly home, Detrick wanted to be anonymous, but Detrick Roberts and Deacon Reggie Crenshaw, they got in a car and drove 12 straight hours, put my bags in the trunk, put me in the back seat, turned right

around and drove back 12 hours, because they love me. And, I want them to know 'I love you man. I love you! I love you!' [applause] I thank God for you. Turn back and tell your neighbor one more time, I love you! [Echo] This is what a church family is, the beloved community, a community of love. Fights, yes! Disagreements, yes! Falling out, yes! Different viewpoints, yes! Doctrinal disputes, yes! But, love that is of God and given by God, who loved us so much that while we were yet sinners God gave God's son, rather than give up on us.

This is a time of self-examination. A time to examine our personal relationships with God. A time to examine our personal relationships with our families. And, a time to examine our personal relationships with our extended family, the family of God. Then the Lord showed me that this not only a time for self-examination. This! This is also a time for social transformation. **Now, they ain't gone put me on PBS for the nation to see this. This will be around the Chicagoland area. This ain't gon' be in no national cable. But, this is the time for social transformation. And, this is going to be the hardest step we have to take.**

But, now is the time for social transformation. We have got to change the way we have been doing things. We have got to change

the way we have been doing things as a society, social transformation. We have got to change the way we have been doing things as a country, social transformation. We have got to change the way we have been doing things as an arrogant, racist, military superpower, social transformation. We just can't keep messing over people and thinking that can't nobody do nothing about it. They have shown us that they can and that they will. And, let me suggest to you that rather than figure who we gon' go to declare war on, maybe we need to declare war on racism! Maybe we need to declare war on injustice! Maybe we need to declare war on greed!

Those same lawmakers you saw gathered at the capitol praying are the same lawmakers who just passed a 1.3 trillion dollar gift for the rich. Maybe we need to rethink the way we do politics and declare war on greed! Maybe we need to declare war on AIDS! In 5 minutes the Congress found 40 billion dollars to rebuild New York and the families of those who died in sudden death. Do you think we could find the money to make medicine available for people who are dying a slow death? Maybe! Maybe! Maybe! We need to declare war on the healthcare system that leaves a nation's poor with no health coverage! Maybe we need to declare war on the mishandled

educational system and provide quality education for everybody, every citizen, based on their ability to learn, not their ability to pay!

This is a time for social transformation. We, we, we can't go back to doing business as usual and treating the rest of the world like we've been treating them. This is a time for self-examination. This is a time for social transformation. But, then ultimately, as I looked around and saw that God had given me another chance to try to be the man that God wants me to be. Another chance to try to be the person that God meant for me to be. Another chance to try to be the parent that God knows I should be. Another chance to try to make a positive difference in a world full of hate. Another chance to teach somebody the difference between our God's awesomeness and our nation's arrogance. When I, when I looked around and saw that, for whatever the reason, God had let me see another day, I realized that the Lord was showing me that this is not only a time for self-examination, this is not only a time for social transformation, but this is also a time for spiritual adoration.

In other words, this a time to say "Thank you Lord!" This is the day that the Lord has made. I will rejoice and be glad in it. I may not have tomorrow, so I'm going to take this time, on this day, to say

thank you Lord! Thank you for my life. You didn't have to let me live. Thank you for my blessings. I could have been on one of those airplanes. I could have been in downtown New York, or a few blocks from the Pentagon. But, for whatever the reason you let me be here.

So, while I am here, I'm going to take this opportunity to adore you and to say, thank you Lord! Thank you for the lives of those who were lost! Thank you for the way in which they touched our lives and the way in which they blessed other lives! Thank you Lord! Thank you for the love we have experienced, for love itself is an inexpressible gift. And, then thank you Lord for the gift of our lives, because when I look around, I realize that my life itself is a gift that God has given me. And, so I say thank you. Thank you Lord, while I have another chance. Thank you to say it! Thank you Lord, for my friends and my family. Thank you Lord, for this opportunity! Thank you for another chance to say thank you! If you mean that from your heart throw your head back and adore Him this morning! Say thank you Lord [Echo]! Thank you Lord, for another chance, another chance to say thank you!

It's time for spiritual adoration.

Psalm 137 (NIV)

1 By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered
Zion.

2 There on the poplars we hung our harps,

3 for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded
songs of joy; they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"

4 How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land?

5 If I forget you, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill.

6 May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember
you, if I do not consider Jerusalem my highest joy.

7 Remember, O LORD, what the Edomites did on the day Jerusalem
fell. "Tear it down," they cried, "tear it down to its foundations!"

8 O Daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is he who
repays you for what you have done to us-

9 he who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks.

Appendix C: Analysis of “DOJ” Sermon

Blog Analysis of Wright Sermon



The Day of Jerusalem’s Fall

By [David Peterson](#)

April 4, 2008

<https://zcomm.org/zblogs/the-day-of-jeruselems-fall-by-david-peterson/>

Posted in: [Obama Admin](#), [Politics/Gov.](#) | [No comments](#)

It is clear to me that the *politics* behind the Reverend Jeremiah Wright’s September 16, 2001 sermon before the [Trinity United Church of Christ](#) in Chicago was to *stay the hand of vengeance* on the part of a regime and a people then reeling from the events of 9/11. But it is just as clear that, now seven years later, a disturbingly high percentage of these Americans cannot understand this message. Nor for what appear to be doctrinal reasons are they capable — even when one lays the Rev. Wright’s sermon directly in front of them, the way that online video services such as [YouTube](#) and [Blip.TV](#) enable us to do — of recognizing in this sermon anything beyond what their worst nightmares eagerly project onto it.

Many of us have seen the advertisement (1987 -) by the Partnership for a Drug-Free America which depicts eggs frying in a skillet. The voiceover warns: "[This is your brain on drugs.](#)"

Well. Here’s an even better one for the archives at the Smithsonian Institution, which has the merit of deriving from the real world. From the moment on March 13 that [ABC – TV’s Good Morning America](#) first aired a series of excerpts from the Rev.

Wright's sermons, the near-universal denunciation of the sermons has been evidence of an American Mind fried by racial scapegoating and demonization.

Wright tells his congregation that he wants to examine [Psalm 137](#) in its entirety — the "powerful and immortal words of a people who are in exile."

"[I]n all of my years of preaching," he explains, "I have never preached a sermon which dealt with these difficult verses, these last three verses in Psalm 137, these brutally honest verses, and these verses which express what the people of faith really feel after a day of devastation and senseless death. And that is exactly what these three verses express."

The last three verses of [Psalm 137](#) express the desire for vengeance of the people who have suffered the destruction of Jerusalem, and now live as slaves under the foreign power who destroyed it:

7 Remember, O LORD, what the Edomites did
on the day Jerusalem fell.
"Tear it down," they cried,
"tear it down to its foundations!"

8 O Daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction,
happy is he who repays you
for what you have done to us —

9 he who seizes your infants
and dashes them against the rocks.

Although Wright says that he had never preached a sermon that dealt with the faithful's desire for vengeance, 9/11 changed this. "Today...the spirit of God has nudged me to touch [these verses] and to treat them prayerfully, as many of us try to sort out what it is we are feeling and why it is we are feeling what we feel after the trauma and the tragedy of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, symbols of who America is — the money and the military."

Wright continued:

Some of the feelings we have as people of faith in the 21st century are similar to the feelings that people of faith had in the 6th Century BC. And when you read and study this Psalm in its entirety, the parallel between those feelings becomes almost eerily crystal clear. That's why I didn't want you to stop at the famous and the familiar Verse 6. I wanted you to read, to hear, and to experience all nine verses of Psalm 137 to get the full scope of what it is this song is saying....The day of Jerusalem's fall. The day of Jerusalem's fall. The day of Jerusalem's fall.

In what follows, I will transcribe a little shy of ten minutes of Wright's September 16, 2001 sermon. My reasons for undertaking this are twofold. The first is for the sake of the record: I don't believe that a transcript of this sermon exists — certainly Wright's own church hasn't made one available. As this sermon — particularly its "chickens coming home to roost" fragment — has been maliciously misrepresented and attacked since March 13, it can't hurt the historical record to place at least a segment of it into circulation. (The sooner that Trinity United Church of Christ gets these "controversial" sermons transcribed, the better. They can serve as a basis for libel and slander lawsuits.)

But my second reason is dearer to me. — I am at a loss for words to describe how much fear and hatred lie behind the scapegoating and demonization of the Rev. Wright and his sermons — so much so, in fact, that even though it is possible, as in the case at hand, to draw evidence from the actual sermon to show that it has been grotesquely misrepresented, racial fear and hatred are so embedded in the dominant (white) American culture that people keep insisting that it is Wright who is full of fear and hatred. As with all projection, the fear and hatred within the people engaging in this psychological phenomenon are falsely attributed to the object; and given the media available to us all — though to some far more so than others — the projection takes on a socio-psychological life of its own.

The Rev. Jeremiah Wright has been accused of preaching hatred in this sermon. Although false, this charge has stuck. It sticks because the people who make it and who repeat it want to believe that it is true. But whatever it was that the Reverend's God may or may not have told him as he waited to return to Chicago from New Jersey during the first four days after 9/11, the self-examination that the Reverend preaches never hurt any person. And in 2008, self-examination is precisely what the racial scapegoating and the demonization of Wright and his sermons — likely repeated with his other sermons too — deliberately deny us.

["The Day of Jerusalem's Fall"](#) (**Video-file**), September 16, 2001

["The Day of Jerusalem's Fall"](#) (**Audio-file**), September 16, 2001

(This transcript picks-up the Rev. Wright's sermon at the 14-second mark of the YouTube video-clip, and at the 17:04 – minute mark of the [SonicMountain](#) audio-clip. Standard ellipses (...) indicate where I've not bothered to transcribe something in the sermon. But as I'm providing both video- and audio-clips, this should cause no problems.)

[00:14 / 17:04] Every public service of worship I have heard about so far in the wake of the American tragedy has had in its prayers and in its preachments sympathy and compassion for those who were killed and for their families, and

God's guidance upon the selected presidents in our war machine as they do what they do, and what they gotta do: Payback.

There's a move in Psalm 137 from thoughts of paying tithes to thoughts of paying back.

A move if you will from worship to war.

A move, in other words, from the worship of the God of Creation to war against those whom God created.

And I want you to notice very carefully the next move, one of the reasons this Psalm is rarely read in its entirety, because it is a move that spotlights the insanity of the cycle of violence and the cycle of hatred.

[1:16 / 18:05] Look at the verse. Look at Verse 9. Look at Verse 9.

"Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rocks."

The people of faith — by the rivers of Babylon, how should we sing the Lord's song, If I forget thee, O Jerusalem — the people of faith have moved from the hatred of armed enemies — these soldiers who captured the King, those soldiers who slaughtered his son and put his eyes out, the soldiers who sacked the city, burned the towns, burned the temple, burned the towers — they have moved from the hatred for armed enemies to the hatred of unarmed innocents.

The babies. The babies. Blessed are they who dash your babies' brains against a rock.

And that, my beloved, is a dangerous place to be.

[2:12 / 19:02] Yet, that is where the people of faith are in 551 BC, and that is where far too many people of faith are in 2001 AD.

We have moved from the hatred of armed enemies to the hatred of unarmed innocents. We want revenge, we want paybacks, and we don't care who gets hurt in the process.

Now, I asked the Lord: What should our response be in light of such an unthinkable act? —

But before I share with you what the Lord showed me, I want to give you one of my little "Faith Footnotes," visitors I often give "Faith Footnotes" so that our members don't lose sight of the big picture....

[3:15 / 20:04] I heard Ambassador Peck on an interview yesterday — Did anybody else see him or hear him? He was on FOX News — this is a white man, and he was upsetting the FOX News commentators to no end. He pointed out — Did you see him John? — a white man, he pointed out — an ambassador — that what Malcolm X said when he got silenced by Elijah Muhammad was in fact true: America's chickens are coming home to roost.

[3:50 / 20:40] We took this country by terror away from the Sioux, the Apache, the Arawak, the Comanche, the Rappaho, the Navajo. Terrorism.

We took Africans from their country to build our way of ease and kept them enslaved and living in fear. Terrorism.

We bombed Grenada and killed innocent civilians

We bombed the black civilian community of Panama with stealth bombers

We bombed Qaddafi's home and killed his child. "Blessed are they who bash your children's heads against a rock."

We bombed Iraq. We killed unarmed civilians trying to make a living....

We bombed a plant in Sudan

We bombed Hiroshima. We bombed Nagasaki. And we nuked far more than the thousands in New York and the Pentagon — and we never batted an eye.

Kids playing in the playground. Mothers picking up children after school. Civilians — not soldiers — people just trying to make it day-by-day.

We have supported state terrorism against the Palestinians and black South Africans, and now we are indignant, because the stuff we have done overseas is now brought right back into our own front yards. America's chickens are coming home to roost.

[5:32 / 22:22] Violence begets violence. Hatred begets hatred. And terrorism begets terrorism. A white ambassador said that, y'all. Not a black militant. Not a reverend who preaches about racism. An ambassador who's eyes are wide open, and who's trying to get us to wake up, and move away from this dangerous precipice upon which we are now poised. The ambassador said the people that we are wounded don't have the military capability that we have. But they do have individuals who are willing to die and to take thousands with them. And we need to come to grips with this.

Let me stop my "Faith Footnote" right there

[6:20 / 23:10] Now. Now. Come on back to my question to the Lord. What should our response be, right now, in light of such an unthinkable act?

I ask the Lord that question Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday. I was stuck in Newark, New Jersey. No flights were leaving La Guardia, JFK, or Newark Airport.

[7:05 / 23:55] And I asked God: What should our response be?

I saw pictures of the incredible. People jumping from the 110th floor. People jumping from the roof, 'cause the stairwells and the elevators above the 89th floor were gone, no more. Black people jumping to a certain death. People holding hands — jumping. People on fire — jumping.

And I asked the Lord: What should our response be?

I read what the people of faith felt in 551 BC. But this is a different time. This is a different enemy. This is a different terror. This is a different reality. — What should our response be?

[7:52 / 24:44] And the Lord showed me three things. — Let me share them with you quickly, and I'll leave you alone to think about the "Faith Footnote."

Number One: The Lord showed me that this is a time for self-examination.

As I sat 900 miles away from my family and my community of faith, two months after my own father's death, God showed me that this was a time for me to examine my relationship with God. My own relationship with God. My personal relationship with God. I submit to you that this is the same for you.

Folk flocked to the church in New Jersey last week. You know. That "Foxhole religion syndrome" kicked-in. That emergency-cord religion. You know. That little red-box you see: "Pull in case of emergency." It showed up full-force. Folk who ain't thought about coming to church for years were in church last week. I heard that mid-week prayer services all over this country which are poorly attended 51 weeks a year were jam-packed all over the nation, the week of the hijackings, the 52nd week. Filled with folk.

But the Lord said: This ain't the time for you to be examining other folk's relationship. This is a time of self-examination. The Lord said to me: How is our relationship doing, Jeremiah? How often do you talk to me, personally? How often do you let me talk to you privately? How much time do you spend trying to get right with me, or do you spend all your time trying to get other folk right?

This is a time for me to examine my own relationship with God. Is it real or is it fake? Is it forever or is it for show? Is it something that you do for the sake of the

public, or is it something that you do for the sake of eternity? This is a time to examine my own and a time for you to examine your own relationship with God.

Self-examination. [#####] [9:55 / 26:45]

"Obama's Pastor: God Damn America, U.S. to Blame for 9/11," Brian Ross and Rehab El-Buri, *Good Morning America*, ABC – TV, March 13, 2008

Psalm 137 (New International Edition)

Trinity United Church of Christ, Chicago, USA
Trinity United Church of Chicago's YouTube Webpage

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Appendix D: Confusing God and Government Sermon

Full text of Rev. Jeremiah A. Wright Jr.'s sermon titled "Confusing God and Government." It was delivered at Trinity United Church of Christ on April 13, 2003. This text was retrieved 01/25/2012 from: <http://www.blackpast.org/?q=2008-rev-jeremiah-wright-confusing-god-and-government>

Blackpast.org

An Online Reference Guide to African American History

Quintard Taylor

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University of Washington, Seattle

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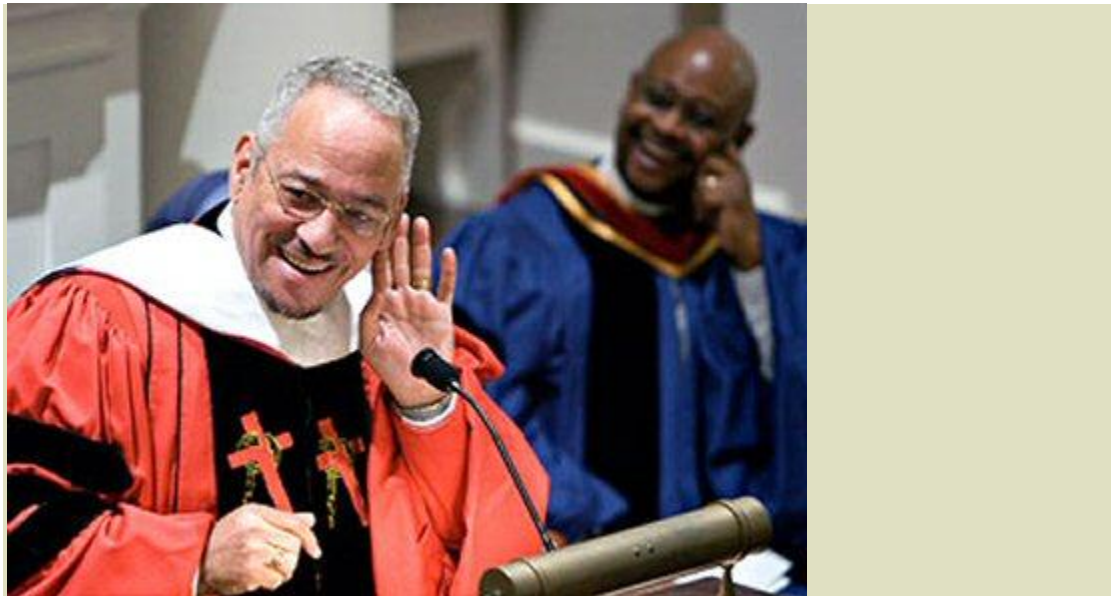


Image Courtesy of Amherst College/Jessica Mestre

During the 2008 Presidential campaign, Rev. Jeremiah Wright, pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ, whose most famous congregant was Illinois Senator Barack Obama, burst unto the national political scene when media outlets reported and aired segments of previous sermons. The segment which appeared most frequently and generated the greatest controversy was his phrase, "God damn America" for its treatment of people of color. The entire sermon, delivered at Trinity on April 13, 2003, appears below.

Confusing God and Government

If you were to ask the average Christian, "did Jesus cry?" almost every Christian would quote for you that John 11:35 verse, which most Bible students call the shortest verse in the Bible: "Jesus wept". It is the verse, you will remember, that is found in the middle of the story about the death of Lazarus, the Lord Jesus' friend. Jesus loved Lazarus, his friend; Lazarus had died. Jesus was outside the village of Bethany - he had not yet reached the city limits - Martha had met him, and he and Martha had talked. Martha was mad, and she let the Lord know that she was mad. Jesus had reassured her with words she did not understand, "I am the resurrection and the life: whosoever believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live again: and whosoever liveth and believeth shall never die."

He had reassured her - she didn't understand those words, but at least he had calmed her down for just a little bit. She left Jesus there, went back to the house and called her sister Mary and told her privately, "Jesus is here and he is calling for you." And when Mary heard those words she got up quickly and went to where Jesus was just outside of Bethany. When those who were grieving with her saw her get up quickly and go out, they ran along with her - you find that story in John 11. They thought she was going to her brother's grave site to grieve. When Jesus saw her crying, and Jesus saw those who were trying to console her crying, he started weeping.

The text says "he was greatly disturbed in spirit and he was deeply moved."

He asked Mary and Martha, "where have you laid him?" and they said "Lord, come and see" and he cried: "Jesus wept." You know, death will make you weep. When you lose someone that you love, you will weep. When you lose somebody that was close to you, the tears will come; I ain't telling you about nothing that I read in a book somewhere, I'm telling you what I know from personal experience. I'm not telling you what I studied in pastoral counseling, I'm telling you what I have lived - for when the pain of death hits and the pain is deep, when the pain of death hits and the pain is personal, when the finality of death comes crashing in on you, and those words "never again" move from the region of possibility to the heart-wrenching realm of reality, that smile that made your day, never again will you see it.

That laughter that lit up your world, never again will you hear it. That wisdom that anchored your soul, never again will you experience it in this life. When that happens to you, my beloved, you will weep. You will cry. Jesus wept; Jesus cried. And most Christians learn very early in their walk of faith that John 11:35 verse - what does it say?

Congregation: Jesus wept.

You know that's the first Bible verse you memories. You usually go around the table and have to say a Bible verse at dinner; "What's your verse?" "Jesus wept." But guess what? Guess what? Tonight's text teaches us that that is not the only time that Jesus wept. On this day that we call Palm Sunday, when the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God and joyfully - as we just read - for all the deeds of powers that they had seen - on the Sunday that we call Palm Sunday, as Jesus rode on the colt - on the Sunday before Maundy Thursday, the

Sunday before Good Friday, while some of the Pharisees in the crowd tried to stop the praise of the profession that was taking place – on the Sunday before he was put to death on a cross, stretched between two thieves, the Sunday that he said if these who are praising me hold their peace, then the rocks will cry out – on the Sunday before he sealed our salvation as he came near the city, the text we just read said, in the midst of the praise, Luke tells us that he wept over the city; he cried for his people who did not know the things that make for peace.

He cried for his people because they were blinded by their culture, they were blinded by their condition, they were blinded by their circumstance, they were blinded by their oppression, they were blinding by being in a spot where they desired – deeply desired – revenge, and they could not see the things that make for peace. We keep forgetting, we keep forgetting, and we need to remember; Jerome Ross wrote about it like he reminded you of it, write it down so you don't forget it. These people had, in Luke 19, an occupying army living in their country. Jesus in verse 43 calls them their enemies – say enemies; their enemies had all the political power. Remember, they had to send Jesus to a court presided over by the enemy; a provisional governor appointed by their enemies ran the civic and the political affairs of the capital. He had backing him up an occupying army with superior soldiers – they were commandos trained in urban combat and trained to kill on command.

Remember, it was soldiers of the Third Marine regiment of Rome who had fun with Jesus, who was mistreated as a prisoner of war, an enemy of the occupying army stationed in Jerusalem to ensure the mopping up action of Operation It's Really Freedom; these people were blinded by the culture of war. Do you know what it's like to live under military rule 24/7, 365? These people were blinded by their circumstance of oppression; their enemies not only had all of the political power, with Governor Pontius Pilate – y'all call him "Pontus Pilot" – he's Italian, Pontius Pilate – Pontus Pilot was running the provisional government; their enemies also had the military power. They not only had political power, they had the military power. It was Roman soldiers who kept Jesus up all night.

It was the Italian army who led Jesus out to Calvary on Friday morning. It was the occupying military brigade who forced Simon of Cyrene to carry the cross for Jesus. These people were tired of their oppression, they wanted the enemy up out of their land (some of them did, some of them didn't; not the businessmen, not those in bed with the enemy, let's be clear, let's be clear) but the average citizen wanted them out, but they also wanted revenge. They wanted their King to get this military monkey off their back – they wanted a "regime change", if you will. And look what they called Jesus, look at it in verse 38; they called Jesus the "King". Look at it, look at it, look at verse 38. They call him the King. "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord." They wanted their King – see, their King – they saw God the Lord getting ready to do something about this situation. Blinded by the pain of their situation, they could not see the things that made for peace, y'all. So Jesus cried.

Let me help you with something. Let me help you, let me help you. The military does not make for peace. The military only keeps the lid on for a little while. The military doesn't make for peace, and the absence of armed resistance doesn't mean the presence of genuine peace. Somebody needs to hear me tonight, you're not hearing me. War does not make for peace. We said at the eleven o'clock service "Fighting for peace is like raping for Virginity". War does not make

for peace, war only makes for escalating violence, and a mindset to pay the enemy back by any means necessary. When your wife or your children have been crushed by the enemy, when your mother or your father have been mowed down by the military, peace is not on your mind. Payback is the only game in town.

You just bide your time and you wait for your opportunity, but somebody is going to pay dearly for the permanent damage that has come into your life and wrecked your world as it rocked your world. Military might does not make for peace; war does not make for peace. Occupying somebody else's country doesn't make for peace. Killing those that fought to protect their own homes does not make for peace. Press conferences claiming victory do not make for peace. Regime change, substituting one tyrant for another tyrant with the biggest tyrant pulling the puppet strings of all the tyrants; that does not make for peace! Colonizing a country does not make for peace! If you don't believe me, look at Haiti, look at Puerto Rico, look at Angola, look at Zimbabwe, look at Kenya, look at Astra Boys in South Africa. Colonization does not make for peace. Occupation does not make for peace, and subjugation only makes for temporary silence. It does not make for peace.

These people who wanted a new King were blinded by their circumstances, and it made Jesus cry because they missed the meaning of his ministry. Turn to your neighbor and say "missed the meaning of his ministry." When Jesus says, when Jesus says "you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God" down in verse 44, Jesus is saying you did not recognize the time of my ministry. You did not see the meaning of my ministry. You are missing the real things that make for peace. You are – you are, you are confusing external appearances with external power. You are looking at the man and you are not looking at the one the man represents. You are looking at the miracle – that's verse 37, when the deeds of power they are praising, that's the miracle: sight to the blind - deeds of power; hearing to the deaf – deeds of power; speech to the mute – deeds of power; cleansing of the lepers – deeds of power; wholeness to the broken – deeds of – you are looking at the miracles and missing the meaning behind the miracles. A miracle is just a sign.

A sign only points to something, or points the way to something. Don't get fixated on the sign and miss completely what the sign is pointing to. The deeds of power point to a God who is greater than any physical limitation, and a God who can overcome any limiting situation. The things that make for peace, only God can give. Y'all looking to the government for that which only God can give. No wonder he wept. He had good cause to cry. The people under oppression were confusing God and Government.

Say "confusing God and Government". Now if you don't mind, if you don't mind, I'm going to hang out here, homilificate for just a little while, and then I'm going to let you go home. I've got to pause here, however, as a pastor because a lot of people still confuse, 2000 years later, they still confuse God with their Government. Now we can see clearly the confusion in the mind of a few Muslims – and please notice I did not say all Muslims, I said a few Muslims – who see a law a condoning killing and killing any and all who do not believe what they believe. They call it "jihad". We can see clearly the confusion in their minds, but we cannot see clearly what it is that we do: we call it "Crusade", when we turn right around and say our God condones the killing of innocent civilians as a

necessary means to an end.

That we say God understands collateral damage, we say that God knows how to forgive friendly fire, we say that God will bless the Shock and Awe as we take over unilaterally another country – calling it a coalition because we’ve got three guys from Australia. Going against the United Nations, going against the majority of Christians, Muslims and Jews throughout the world, making a pre-emptive strike in the name of God. We cannot see how what we are doing is the same Al-Qaida is doing under a different color flag, calling on the name of a different God to sanction and approve our murder and our mayhem!

Let me tell you something; let me tell you something, Jesus said something about that too. Oh yes he did. Jesus said “how can you see the speck in your brother’s eye and can’t see the log in your own eye?” Well, I submit to you we can’t see it first of all ‘cause we don’t see nobody who don’t look like us, dress like us, talk like us, worship like us as brother – and Jesus calls them brother. We demonize them and that makes it all right to kill them because our God is against demons. Then we can’t see the speck most of all because we equate our Government with our God.

We confuse Government and God. Let me tell you something; we believe in this country, and we teach our children that God sent us to this “Promised Land”. He sent us to take this country from the Arawak, the Susquehanna, the Apache, the Comanche, the Cherokee, the Seminole, the Choctaw, the Hopi and the Arapaho. We confuse Government and God. We believe God sanctioned the rape and robbery of an entire continent. We believe God ordained African slavery. We believe God makes Europeans superior to Africans and superior to everybody else too.

We confuse God and Government. We said in our founding document as a Government, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal” – created, that means God – “and endowed with a certain inalienable right” – that means given by God, and then we define Africans in those same documents as three-fifths of a person. We believe God approved of African slavery.

We believe God approved segregation. We believe God approved Apartheid, and a document says “all men are created more equal than other men” – and we’re talking about White men. We confuse God and Government. We believe that God approves of 6% of the people on the face of this Earth controlling all of the resources on the face of this Earth while the other 94% live in poverty and squalor, while we give trillions of dollars of tax breaks to the White rich. We believe God was a founding member of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Look at the lily-whiteness of the G-7 nations the next time you see a picture and you tell me if you see anything wrong with that picture.

When you hold it up against a picture of the color of the world’s population. We confuse God and Government. We believe God is on the side of the wealthy. We believe it is all right to send our military to fight – and if necessary, to die – in Iraq and anywhere else we decide is part of the “Axis of Evil” while George W. cuts the military benefits so when those boys and girls come back home, they can be as bad off as some of the Iraqis that we just “liberated.” We confuse God and Government.

We do. We believe, we believe, we believe we have a right to Iraqi oil. We believe we have a right... Venezuelan oil. We believe we got a right to all the oil on the face of the Earth, and we've got the military to take it if necessary; or as George W. piously says, "as God so leads" him. We confuse God and Government. We believe it is all right to decimate the Afro-Colombian community by arming the paramilitary with United States tax dollars – our dollars – by hiring military whose real job is to protect the oil line owned by United States companies tied to the Presidency which was stolen by the oil interests. We're confusing God and Government, and it gets worse – it gets worse.

We got a paranoid group of patriots in power that now, in the interests of Homeland Stupidity – I mean Homeland Security, 'scuse me – they are taking away the Constitutional right of Free Speech because it's "harmful to the interests of national security" – and those interests equate God with Government. Our money says In God we Trust, and our military says we will kill under the orders of our Commander-in-Chief if you dare to believe otherwise. We are still confusing God and Government in the year 2003, just like confused Luke 19. Well, in case you are in that great number and I understand from the polls that the number has gone up, still confused; if you are in that number of confused folk 2000 years after Christ, let me share three quick things with you just to help clear up your confusion. Turn to your neighbor and say, and listen you got to say it right, say it with attitude and with Ebonics, say "He fitting to help somebody tonight." Turn to the other side and say "fitting to".

Governments – number one – Governments lie.

This Government lied about their belief that all men were created equal. The truth was they believe all White men were created equal. The truth is they did not believe that even White women were created equal, in creation nor in civilization. The Government had to pass an amendment to the Constitution to get White women the vote. Then the Government had to pass an "Equal Rights" amendment to get equal protection under the law for women. The Government still thinks a woman has no rights over her own body, and between Uncle Clarence – who sexually harassed Anita Hill – and the closeted clam court that is a throwback to the 19th century, hand-picked by Daddy Bush, Ronald Reagan, Gerald Ford, hung between Clarence and that stacked court they're about to undo Roe v. Wade, just like they're about to undo affirmative action. The Government lied in its founding documents and the Government is still lying today. Governments lie.

Turn to your neighbor and say "Governments lie". The Government lied about Pearl Harbor. They knew the Japanese were going to attack. Governments lie! The Government lied about the Gulf of Tonkin – they wanted that resolution to get us into the Vietnam War. Governments lie! The Government lied about Nelson Mandela, and our CIA helped put him in prison and keep him there for 27 years. The South African Government lied on Nelson Mandela. Governments lie! Turn back to your neighbor and say again "Governments lie." The Government lied about the Tuskegee experiment; they purposely infected African-American men with syphilis. Governments lie! The Government lied about bombing Cambodia, and Richard Nixon stood in front of the camera, "Let me make myself perfectly clear, we are not... Governments lie! The government lied about the

drugs for arms Contras scheme, orchestrated by Oliver North and then they pardoned – the Government pardoned – all of the perpetrators so they could get better jobs in the Government. Governments lie!

The Government lied about inventing the HIV-virus as a means of genocide against people of color. Governments lie! The Government lied about a connection between Al-Qaida and Saddam Hussein, and a connection between 9/1-1/01 and Operation Iraqi Freedom. Governments lie! The Government lied about Weapons of Mass Destruction in Iraq being a threat to the United States' peace. And guess what else? If they don't find them some Weapons of Mass Destruction, they're going to do just like that LAPD and plant them some Weapons of Mass Destruction. Governments lie!

But I'm fitting to help you. I'm fitting to – turn to your neighbor, say "He fitting to help us."

Where Governments lie, God does not lie. Read Numbers 23:19; it says "God is not Man that he should lie." That's the Kings James translation. The New Revised Translation says – repeat it after me so that you won't forget it – "God is not a human being that he should lie." Say it again. "God is not a human being that he should lie." Let's say it together. "God is not a human being that he should lie." Where Governments lie, God does not lie. That's number one.

Number two: Governments change.

Long before there was a Red, White and Blue colonization, the Egyptian government was doing colonization. They colonized half the continent of Africa; they colonized parts of the Mediterranean. All colonizers ain't White. Turn to your neighbor and say "oppressors come in all colors." Hello, hello, hello. But while the Government of Egypt and Pharaoh ran it, they don't run a thing today, and why? Because Governments change. When the Babylonians carried away the people of promise into exile, the Babylonian Government was the baddest government around. But when King Nebuchadnezzar went crazy, his government was replaced by the government of King Belshazzar. King Belshazzar held a great big feast, big banquet, defiled the sacred vessels stolen from the temple in Jerusalem and a hand appeared out of nowhere and started writing on the wall, "Mene, Mene, Tekel, Parsin".

And Daniel translated the writing for the king, and told him "here's what it means, king" – you can find this in Daniel 5 – "Mene: God has numbered the days of your government and brought it to an end." Governments change. "Tekel: you have been weighed on the scales of justice and you're too light to balance the scales." "Parsin: that's from the verb Peres; your kingdom, your government is divided and given now to the Medes and to the Persians." And the Bible says that night, that same night, King Belshazzar was killed and Darius the Mede took over the government. Governments change, y'all. Darius was replaced later on by another government, and then another 70 years later King Cyrus said to the people of promise, y'all can go back home. All I'm trying to get you to see is that Governments change.

Prior to Abraham Lincoln, the Government in this country said it was legal to hold Africans in slavery in perpetuity. Perpetuity's one of those University of Chicago words, it means forever. From now on. When Lincoln got in office, the

government changed. Prior to the passing of the 13th, 14th and 15th amendments to the Constitution, the government defined Africans as slaves, as property – property! – people with no rights to be respected by any Whites anywhere. The Supreme Court of the government – same court, granddaddy court of the one which stole the 2000 election – Supreme Court said in its Dred Scott decision in the 1850s: no African anywhere in this country has any rights that any White person has to respect at anyplace, anytime.

That was the government's official position, backed up by the Supreme Court – that's the judiciary – backed up by the Executive branch – that's the President – backed up by the Legislative branch and enforced by the military of the government, but I stopped by to tell you tonight that Governments change! Prior to Harry Truman's government, the military in this country was segregated. But Governments change.

Prior to the Civil Rights and Equal Accommodations laws of the government in this country, there was Black segregation by the country, legal discrimination by the government, prohibited Blacks from voting by the government, you had to eat in separate places by the government, you had to sit in different places from White folk because the government says so, and you had to be buried in a separate cemetery. It was Apartheid American-style from the cradle to the grave, all because the government backed it up. But guess what? Governments change!

Under Bill Clinton, we got messed up Welfare-to-Work bill, but under Clinton Blacks had an intelligent friend in the Oval Office. Oh, but Governments change.

The election was stolen. We went from an intelligent friend to a dumb Dixiecrat, a rich Republican who has never held a job in his life – is against affirmative action, against education, against health care, against benefits for his own military, and gives tax breaks to the wealthiest contributors to his campaign. Governments change – sometimes for the good, and sometimes for the bad. But I'm fitting to help you again; turn back and say "He's fitting to help us again."

Where governments change – write this down, Malachi 3:6 – "thus sayeth the Lord:" – repeat after me – "for I am the Lord, and I change not." That's the Kings James version. The New Revised says, "For I the Lord do not change." In other words, where Governments change, God does not change. God is the same yesterday, today and forevermore. That's what is name, "I am", means you know. He does not change. There is no shadow of turning in God; one songwriter puts it this way: "As thou hast been, thou forever will be.

Thou changes not. Thy compassions, they fail not. Great is thy faithfulness Lord unto me." God does not change! God was against slavery on yesterday, and God who does not change is still against slavery today. God was a God of love yesterday, and God who does not change is still a God of love today. God was a God of justice on yesterday, and God who does not change is still a God of justice today. Turn to your neighbor and say, "God does not change."

Where Governments lie, God does not lie. Where Governments change, God does not change. And I'm through now. But let me leave you with one more thing.

Governments fail. The government in this text comprised of Caesar, Cornelius, Pontus Pilot – Pontius Pilate – the Roman government failed. The British government used to rule from east to west. The British government had a Union

Jack. She colonized Kenya, Ghana, Nigeria, Jamaica, Barbados, Trinidad and Hong Kong. Her navies ruled the seven seas all the way down to the tip of Argentina in the Falklands, but the British failed. The Russian government failed. The Japanese government failed. The German government failed. And the United States of America government, when it came to treating her citizens of Indian decent fairly, she failed. She put them on reservations. When it came to treating her citizens of Japanese descent fairly, she failed. She put them in internment prison camps. When it came to treating her citizens of African descent fairly, America failed.

She put them in chains. The government put them in slave quarters, put them on auction blocks, put them in cotton fields, put them in inferior schools, put them in substandard housing, put them in scientific experiments, put them in the lowest paying jobs, put them outside the equal protection of the law, kept them out of their racist bastions of higher education and locked them into position of hopelessness and helplessness. The government gives them the drugs, builds bigger prisons, passes a three-strike law, and then wants us to sing "God Bless America." No, no, no. Not "God Bless America"; God Damn America! That's in the Bible, for killing innocent people. God Damn America for treating her citizen as less than human. God Damn America as long as she keeps trying to act like she is God and she is supreme!

The United States government has failed the vast majority of her citizens of African descent. Think about this, think about this. For every 1 Oprah, a billionaire, you got five million Blacks who are out of work. For every 1 Colin Powell, a millionaire, you got 10 million Blacks who cannot read. For every 1 "Condeskeeza" Rice, you got one million in prison. For every 1 Tiger Woods, who needs to get beat at the Masters with his cat-blazing hips, playing on a course that discriminates against women; God has this way of bringing you short when you get too big for your cat-blazing britches.

For every 1 Tiger Woods, we got ten thousand Black kids who will never see a golf course. The United States government has failed the vast majority of her citizens of African descent. But I'm fitting to help you one last time – turn to your neighbor and say "he's fitting to help us one last time." Turn back and say "Forgive him for the 'God Damn', that's in the Bible Lord." Blessings and cursing is in the Bible, it's in the Bible. But I'm fitting to help you one last time. Let me tell you something.

Where governments fail, God never fails.

When God says it, it's done. God never fails. When God wills it, you better get out the way. 'Cause God never fails. When God fixes it, oh believe me, it's fixed. God never fails. Somebody right now, you think you can't make it, but I want you to know you are more than a conqueror, through Christ you can do all things, through Christ who strengthens you. To the world, it looked like God has failed in God's plan of salvation when the savior that was sent by God was put to death on a Friday afternoon. It looked like God failed. But hallelujah, on Sunday morning the angels in Heaven were singing, "God never fails." You can't put down what God raises up. God never fails.

You can't keep down what God wants up. God never fails. If God can get a three-day Jesus up out of a grave, what's going on in your life that in anyway can't

match what God has already done? He'll abide with you, he'll reside in you, and he'll preside over your problems if you take them to Him and leave them with Him. Don't take them back – turn to your neighbor and say "stop taking your problems back." Should we always bring our problems to the altar and then do we just them right on back to our seats? Turn and say "Stop taking them back!" God never fails. Turn and tell them "God never fails!" God never fails!

God never fails.

Sources:

Source: Sluggite Zone, Jeremiah Wright's Sermon, "Confusing God and Government,"
(<http://www.sluggy.net/forum/viewtopic.php?p=315691&sid=4b3e97ace4ee8cee02bd6850e52f50b7>).

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Appendix E: Trinity Black Value System

THE BLACK VALUE SYSTEM

Trinity United Church of Christ – Chicago, IL.

http://www.trinitychicago.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=114

Trinity United Church of Christ adopted the Black Value System, written by the Manford Byrd Recognition Committee, chaired by the late Vallmer Jordan in 1981.

Dr. Manford Byrd, our brother in Christ, withstood the ravage of being denied his earned ascension to the number one position in the Chicago School System. His dedication to the pursuit of excellence, despite systematic denials, has inspired the congregation of Trinity United Church of Christ. Prayerfully, we have called upon the wisdom of all past generations of suffering Blacks for guidance in fashioning an instrument of Black self-determination, the *Black Value System*.

Beginning in 1982, an annual Black Value System - Educational Scholarship in the name of Dr. Byrd was instituted. The first recipient of the Dr. Manford Byrd Award, which is given annually to the man or woman who best exemplifies the Black Value System, was our brother, Dr. Manford Byrd.

These Black Ethics must be taught and exemplified in homes, churches, nurseries and schools, wherever Blacks are gathered. They consist of the following concepts:

1. **Commitment to God.** "The God of our weary years" will give us the strength to give up prayerful passivism and become Black Christian Activists, soldiers for Black freedom and the dignity of all humankind. *Matthew 22:37 - Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.*

2. **Commitment to the Black Community.** The highest level of achievement for any Black person must be a contribution of strength and continuity of the Black Community. *I John 4:20 - If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother [or his sister], he is a liar; for he that loveth not his brother or sister whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?*

3. **Commitment to the Black Family.** The Black family circle must generate strength, stability and love, despite the uncertainty of externals, because these characteristics are required if the developing person is to withstand warping by our racist competitive society. Those Blacks who are blessed with membership in a strong family unit must reach out and expand that blessing to the less fortunate. *Deuteronomy 6:6-8 - And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest*

down, and when thou rises up. And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thine hand, and they shall be as frontlets between thine eyes.

4. **Dedication to the Pursuit of Education.** We must forswear anti-intellectualism. Continued survival demands that each Black person be developed to the utmost of his/her mental potential despite the inadequacies of the formal education process. "Real education" fosters understanding of ourselves as well as every aspect of our environment. Also, it develops within us the ability to fashion concepts and tools for better utilization of our resources, and more effective solutions to our problems. Since the majority of Blacks have been denied such learning, Black Education must include elements that produce high school graduates with marketable skills, a trade or qualifications for apprenticeships, or proper preparation for college. Basic education for all Blacks should include Mathematics, Science, Logic, General Semantics, Participative Politics, Economics and Finance, and the Care and Nurture of Black minds. *Matthew 22:37 - Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul and with all thy mind.*
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5. **Dedication to the Pursuit of Excellence.** To the extent that we individually reach for, even strain for excellence, we increase, geometrically, the value and resourcefulness of the Black Community. We must recognize the relativity of one's best; this year's best can be bettered next year. Such is the language of growth and development. We must seek to excel in every endeavor. *Ecclesiastes 9:10 - Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do [it] with thy might; for [there is] no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest.*
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6. **Adherence to the Black Work Ethic.** "It is becoming harder to find qualified people to work in Chicago." Whether this is true or not, it represents one of the many reasons given by businesses and industries for deserting the Chicago area. We must realize that a location with good facilities, adequate transportation and a reputation for producing skilled workers will attract industry. We are in competition with other cities, states and nations for jobs. High productivity must be a goal of the Black workforce. *II Thessalonians 3:7-12 - For yourselves know how ye ought to follow us: for we behaved not ourselves disorderly among you; Neither did we eat any man's bread for naught; but wrought with labor and travail night and day, that we might not be chargeable to any of you: Not because we have not power, but to make ourselves an ensample unto you to follow us. For even when we were with you, this we commanded you, that if any would not work, neither should he eat. For we hear that there are some which walk among you disorderly, working not at all, but are busybodies. Now them that*

are such we command and exhort by our Lord Jesus Christ, that with quietness they work, and eat their own bread.

7. **Commitment to Self-Discipline and Self-Respect.** To accomplish anything worthwhile requires self-discipline. We must be a community of self-disciplined persons if we are to actualize and utilize our own human resources, instead of perpetually submitting to exploitation by others. Self-discipline, coupled with a respect for self, will enable each of us to be an instrument of Black Progress and a model for Black Youth. *1 Peter 1:4-7 - To an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you, Who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. Wherein ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations: That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perishes, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honor and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ.*
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8. **Disavowal of the Pursuit of "Middleclassness."** Classic methodology on control of captives teaches that captors must be able to identify the "talented tenth" of those subjugated, especially those who show promise of providing the kind of leadership that might threaten the captor's control. *Proverbs 3:13-14 - Happy are those who find wisdom and those who gain understanding, for her income is better than silver and her revenue better than gold.*

Those so identified are separated from the rest of the people by:

- Killing them off directly, and/or fostering a social system that encourages them to kill off one another.
 - Placing them in concentration camps, and/or structuring an economic environment that induces captive youth to fill the jails and prisons.
 - Seducing them into a socioeconomic class system which, while training them to earn more dollars, hypnotizes them into believing they are better than others and teaches them to think in terms of "we" and "they" instead of "us."
 - So, while it is permissible to chase "middleclassness" with all our might, we must avoid the third separation method - the psychological entrapment of Black "middleclassness." If we avoid this snare, we will also diminish our "voluntary" contributions to methods A and B. And more importantly, Black people no longer will be deprived of their birthright: the leadership, resourcefulness and example of their own talented persons.
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9. Pledge to Make the Fruits of All Developing and Acquired Skills Available to the Black Community.
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10. Pledge to Allocate Regularly, a Portion of Personal Resources for Strengthening and Supporting Black Institutions.
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11. Pledge Allegiance to All Black Leadership Who Espouse and Embrace the Black Value System.
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12. Personal Commitment to Embrace of the Black Value System. To measure the worth and validity of all activity in terms of positive contributions to the general welfare of the Black Community and the Advancement of Black People towards freedom.

Our History

http://www.trinitychicago.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=12&Itemid=27

We are a congregation which is Unashamedly Black and Unapologetically Christian... Our roots in the Black religious experience and tradition are deep, lasting and permanent. We are an African people, and remain "true to our native land," the mother continent, the cradle of civilization. God has superintended our pilgrimage through the days of slavery, the days of segregation, and the long night of racism. It is God who gives us the strength and courage to continuously address injustice as a people, and as a congregation. We constantly affirm our trust in God through cultural expression of a Black worship service and ministries which address the Black Community.

Read the Black Value System [Here](#).

Appendix F: National Press Club Transcript

April 28, 2008

NATIONAL PRESS CLUB SPEAKER BREAKFAST WITH THE REVEREND DR. JEREMIAH WRIGHT, SENIOR PASTOR OF THE TRINITY UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST, CHICAGO, ILLINOIS TOPIC: THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE MODERATOR: DONNA LEINWAND, REPORTER, USA TODAY, AND VICE PRESIDENT OF THE NATIONAL PRESS CLUB

THE NATIONAL PRESS CLUB, WASHINGTON, D.C. 9:00 A.M. EDT,
MONDAY, APRIL 28, 2008

MS. LEINWAND: Good morning. Good morning, and welcome to the National Press Club for our speaker breakfast featuring Reverend Jeremiah Wright. My name is Donna Leinwand. I'm the vice president of the National Press Club and a reporter for USA Today.

I'd like to welcome club members and their guests in the audience today, as well as those of you watching on C-SPAN. And I -- we have many, many guests here today.

We're looking forward to today's speech, and afterwards I will ask as many questions as time permits. Please hold your applause during the speech, so that we have time for as many questions as possible. For our broadcast audience, I'd like to explain that if you hear applause, it may be from the general public and guests of members who attend our luncheons (sic) and not necessarily from the working press. (Laughter.) And there are a lot here today.

So I'd like now to introduce our head table guests and ask them to stand briefly when their names are called.

From your right, we have Melissa Charbonneau, CBN News, and vice chair of the Speakers Committee; Frederick Douglass IV, founder of the Frederick Douglass Organization and publisher of FrederickDouglassiv.org; Jerry Zremski, past National Press Club president and a reporter for the Buffalo News -- bureau chief, actually, for the Buffalo News; Kim Chipman of Bloomberg News; the Reverend Dr. Iva Carruthers, general secretary of the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference; Kevin Chappell of Ebony and Jet magazine; Reverend Ramah E. Wright, the wife of the pastor.

We'll skip over the podium and go to Angela Greiling Keane of Bloomberg News and chair of the Speakers Committee.

And skipping our guest, the Reverend Dr. Barbara A. Reynolds, president of Reynolds News Service and the Speakers Committee member who organized today's event.

We have Jeri Wright, a daughter of the pastor and president of Grace of God Incorporated; April Ryan of American Urban Radio; Greta Van Susteren of Fox News; Dorothy Gilliam, director of Prime Movers Media Program at George Washington University; and Clarence Page of the Chicago Tribune. (Applause.)

The Reverend Dr. Jeremiah A. Wright Jr. has preached the Christian Gospel from the pulpit of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago for more than 36 years. When Wright became pastor at Trinity in 1972, the church had 87 members. It now has 8,000. He is acclaimed for using charismatic style, music and soaring rhetoric to attract thousands of people to the inner-city church and for developing social outreach programs for the community. The church's motto: Unashamedly black, and unapologetically Christian.

He has spoken forcefully and openly about problems in his city, his country and the world. He has spoken against U.S. involvement in Iraq and for divestment in South Africa. He pushes for African- American churches to use music traditional to black culture, rather than what he calls Euro-centric hymns.

The most widely quoted and most controversial was a 2003 sermon in which he condemned America for mistreatment of its black citizens and for racism. His quote: "Not 'God bless America,' 'God damn America,'" he said. "God damn America for treating its citizens as less than human."

In another sermon, he accused American policymakers of being under the sway of the Ku Klux Klan -- the U.S. of KKK A., he said.

Last month these fiery sermons draw unflattering media attention for Senator Barack Obama, a member of Wright's congregation for 20 years. Obama said it was Wright's sermon "The Audacity to Hope" that inspired the title of his best-selling memoir and 2004 Democratic National Convention speech. Obama is now distancing himself from the preacher.

Reverend Wright, who has announced that he is stepping down from his pulpit, says the media have plucked his comments out of context in an attempt to brand him as an extremist. He says his detractors used the comments to stoke fear among Americans who are unfamiliar with the African-American church.

Reverend Wright, we welcome you to the Press Club and to take some questions from -- (laughter) -- from this gigantic audience. We have here reporters. And so, Reverend Wright, the floor is now yours. (Cheers, extended applause.)

AUDIENCE MEMBER: We love you, Reverend Wright! (Laughter.)

REV. WRIGHT: Over the next few days, prominent scholars of the African-American religious tradition from several different disciplines -- theologians, church

historians, ethicists, professors of Hebrew bible, homiletics, hermeneutics and historians of religions -- those scholars will join in with sociologists, political analysts, local church pastors and denominational officials to examine the African-American religious experience and its historical, theological and political context. The workshops, the panel discussions and the symposia will go into much more intricate detail about this unknown phenomenon of the black church -- (laughter) -- than I have time to go into in the few moments that we have to share together.

And I would invite you to spend the next two days getting to know just a little bit about a religious tradition that is as old as and, in some instances, older than this country. And this is a country which houses its religious tradition that we all love and a country that some of us have served. It is a tradition that is in some ways like Ralph Ellison's "The Invisible Man". It has been right here in our midst and on our shores since the 1600s, but it was, has been and, in far too many instances, still is invisible to the dominant culture in terms of its rich history, its incredible legacy and its multiple meanings.

The black religious experience is a tradition that at one point in American history was actually called "the invisible institution," as it was forced underground by the Black Codes. The Black Codes prohibited the gathering of more than two black people without a white person being present to monitor the conversation, the content and the mood of any discourse between persons of African descent in this country.

Africans did not stop worshipping because of the Black Codes. Africans did not stop gathering for inspiration and information and for encouragement and for hope in the midst of discouraging and seemingly hopeless circumstances. They just gathered out of the eyesight and the earshot of those who defined them as less than human.

They became, in other words, invisible in and invisible to the eyes of the dominant culture.

They gathered to worship in brush arbors -- sometimes called hush arbors -- where the slaveholders, slave patrols and Uncle Toms couldn't hear nobody pray.

From the 1700s in the North America, with the founding of the first legally recognized independent black congregations, through the end of the Civil War and the passing of the 13th and 14th Amendments to the Constitution of the United States of America, the black religious experience was informed by, enriched by, expanded by, challenged by, shaped by and influenced by the influx of Africans from the other two Americas and the Africans brought into this country from the Caribbean, plus the Africans who were called "fresh blacks" by the slave traders, those Africans who had not been through the seasoning process of the Middle Passage in the Caribbean colonies, those Africans on the sea coast islands off of Georgia and South Carolina, the Gullah -- (changing pronunciation) -- we say in English Gullah; those of us in the black community say Geechee -- those people brought into the black religious experience, a flavor that other seasoned Africans could not bring.

It is those various streams of the black religious experience which will be addressed in summary form over the next two days, streams which require full courses at the university and graduate- school level and cannot be fully addressed in a two-day symposium, and streams which tragically remain invisible in a dominant culture which knows nothing about those whom Langston Hughes calls the darker brother and sister.

It is all of those streams that make up this multi-layered and rich tapestry of the black religious experience, and I stand before you to open up this two-day symposium with the hope that this most recent attack on the black church -- this is not an attack on Jeremiah Wright; it is an attack on the black church. (Applause.)

As the vice president told you, that applause comes from not the working press. (Laughter.)

The most recent attack on the black church -- it is our hope that this just might mean that the reality of the African-American church will no longer be invisible. Maybe now, as an honest dialogue about race in this country begins, a dialogue called for by Senator Obama and a dialogue to begin in the United Church of Christ among 5,700 congregations in just a few weeks -- maybe now, as that dialogue begins, the religious tradition that has kept hope alive for a people struggling to survive in countless hopeless situations, maybe that religious tradition will be understood, celebrated and even embraced by a nation that seems not to have noticed why 11:00 on Sunday morning has been called the most segregated hour in America. We have known since 1787 that it is the most segregated hour. Maybe now we can begin to understand why -- (audio break).

And maybe now we can begin to take steps to move the black religious tradition from the status of invisible to the status of invaluable, not just for some black people in this country, but for all the people in this country.

Maybe this dialogue on race -- an honest dialogue that does not engage in denial or superficial platitudes -- maybe this dialogue on race can move the people of faith in this country from various stages of alienation and marginalization to the exciting possibility of reconciliation. That is my hope as I open up this two-day symposium, and I open it as a pastor and a professor who comes from a long tradition of what I call "the prophetic theology of the black church."

Now, in the 1960s, the term "liberation theology" began to gain currency with the writings and the teachings of preachers, pastors, priests and professors from Latin America. Their theology was done from the underside. Their viewpoint was not from the top down or from a set of teachings which undergirded imperialism. Their viewpoints, rather, were from the bottom up, the thoughts and understandings of God, the faith, religion and the bible from those whose lives were ground under, mangled and destroyed by the ruling classes or the oppressors. Liberation theology started in

and started from a different place. It started from the vantage point of the oppressed.

In the late 1960s, when Dr. James Cone's powerful books burst onto the scene, the term "black liberation theology" began to be used. I do not in any way disagree with Dr. Cone, nor do I in any way diminish the inimitable and incomparable contribution that he has made and that he continues to make to the field of theology. Jim, incidentally, is a personal friend of mine.

I call our faith tradition, however, "the prophetic tradition of the black church," because I take its origins back past Jim Cone, past the sermons and songs of Africans in bondage in the transatlantic slave trade. I take it back past the problem of western ideology and notions of white supremacy. I take and trace the theology of the black church back to the prophets in the Hebrew bible and to its last prophet, in my tradition, the one we call Jesus of Nazareth.

The prophetic tradition of the black church has its roots in Isaiah, the 61st chapter, where God says the prophet is to preach the gospel to the poor and to set at liberty those who are held captive. Liberating the captives also liberates those who are holding them captive. It frees the captive and it frees the captors. It frees the oppressed and it frees the oppressors. The prophetic theology of the black church during the days of chattel slavery was a theology of liberation. It was preached to set free those who were held in bondage, spiritually, psychologically and sometimes physically, and it was practiced to set the slaveholders free from the notion that they could define other human beings or confine a soul set free by the power of the gospel.

The prophetic theology of the black church during the days of segregation, Jim Crow, lynching and the "separate but equal" fantasy was a theology of liberation.

It was preached to set African-Americans free from the notion of second-class citizenship, which was the law of the land. And it was practiced to set free misguided and miseducated Americans from the notion that they were actually superior to other Americans based on the color of their skin.

The prophetic theology of the black church in our day is preached to set African-Americans and all other Americans free from the misconceived notion that different means deficient. Being different does not mean one is deficient. It simply means one is different, like snowflakes, like the diversity that God loves. Black music is different from European and European music. It is not deficient. It is just different. Black worship is different from European and European-American worship. It is not deficient. It is just different. Black preaching is different from European and European-American preaching. It is not deficient. It is just different. It is not bombastic. It is not controversial. It's different. (Laughter, applause.)

Those of you who can't see on C-SPAN, we had one or two working press clap along with -- (laughter) -- the non-working press. (Laughter.)

Black learning styles are different from European and European- American learning styles. They are not deficient. They are just different.

This principle of difference does not mean deficient is at the heart of the prophetic theology of the black church. It is a theology of liberation.

The prophetic theology of the black church is not only a theology of liberation; it is also a theology of transformation, which is also rooted in Isaiah 61, the text from which Jesus preached in his inaugural message as recorded by Luke. When you read the entire passage from either Isaiah 61 or Luke 4, and do not try to understand the passage or the content of the passage in the context of a sound bite, what you see is God's desire for a radical change in a social order that has gone sour.

God's desire is for positive, meaningful and permanent change. God does not want one people seeing themselves as superior to other people. God does not want the powerless masses -- the poor, the widows, the marginalized and those underserved by the powerful few -- to stay locked into sick systems which treat some in the society as being more equal than others in that same society. God's desire is for positive change, transformation; real change, not cosmetic change, transformation; radical change or a change that makes a permanent difference, transformation. God's desire is for transformation, changed lives, changed minds, changed laws, changed social orders and changed hearts in a changed world. This principle of transformation is at the heart of the prophetic theology of the black church.

These two foci of liberation and transformation have been at the very core of the black religious experience from the days of David Walker, Harriet Tubman, Richard Allen, Jarena Lee, Bishop Henry McNeal Turner and Sojourner Truth through the days of Adam Clayton Powell, Ida B. Wells, Dr. Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks, Malcolm X, Barbara Jordan, Cornel West and Fannie Lou Hamer.

These two foci of liberation and transformation have been at the very core of the United Church of Christ since its predecessor denomination, the Congregational Church of New England came to the moral defense and paid for the legal defense of the Mende people aboard the slave ship Amistad, since the days when the United Church of Christ fought against slavery, played an active role in the Underground Railroad and set up over 500 schools for the Africans who were freed from slavery in 1865. And these two foci remain at the core of the teachings of the United Church of Christ as it has fought against apartheid in South Africa and racism in the United States of America ever since the union which formed the United Church of Christ in 1957.

These two foci of liberation and transformation have also been at the very core and the congregation of Trinity United Church of Christ since it was founded in 1961, and these foci have been the bedrock of our preaching and practice for the past 36 years.

Our congregation, as you heard in the introduction, took a stand against apartheid

when the government of our country was supporting the racist regime of the Afrikaner government in South Africa. (Applause.) Our congregation stood in solidarity with the peasants in El Salvador and Nicaragua while our government, through Ollie North and the Iran-Contra scandal was supporting the contras who were killing the peasant and the Miskito Indian in those two countries. (Applause.)

Our congregation sent 35 men and women through accredited seminaries to earn their master of divinity degrees with an additional 40 currently being enrolled in seminary while building two senior citizen housing complexes and running two child-care programs for the poor, the unemployed, the low-income parents on the south side of Chicago for the past 30 years. Our congregation feeds over 5,000 homeless and needy families every year while our government cuts food stamps and spends billions fighting in an unjust war in Iraq. (Cheers, applause.)

Our congregation has sent dozens of boys and girls to fight in the Vietnam War, the first Gulf War and the present two wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. My goddaughter's unit just arrived in Iraq this week, while those who call me unpatriotic have used their positions of privilege to avoid military service while sending -- (cheers, applause) -- while sending over 4,000 American boys and girls of every race to die over a lie. (Boos, jeers.)

Our congregation has had an HIV/AIDS ministry for over two decades. Our congregation has awarded over \$1 million to graduating high school seniors going into college, and an additional one-half million dollars to the United Negro College Fund and the six HBCUs related to the United Church of Christ while advocating for health care for the uninsured, workers' rights for those forbidden to form unions and fighting the unjust sentencing system which has sent black men and women to prison for longer terms for possession of crack cocaine than white men and women have to serve for the possession of powder cocaine.

Our congregation has had a prison ministry for 30 years, a drug and alcohol recovery ministry for 20 years, a full-service program for senior citizens and 22 different ministries for the youth of our church from preschool through high school all proceeding from the starting point of liberation and transformation, a prophetic theology which presumes God's desire for changed minds, changed laws, changed social orders, changed lives, changed hearts in a changed world.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Yeah!

REV. WRIGHT: The prophetic theology of the black church is a theology of liberation. It is a theology of transformation.

And it is ultimately a theology of reconciliation. The Apostle Paul said, "Be ye reconciled one to another, even as God was in Christ reconciling the world to God's self."

God does not desire for us, as children of God, to be at war with each other, to see each other as superior or inferior, to hate each other, abuse each other, misuse each other, define each other or put each other down.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Yes.

REV. WRIGHT: God wants us reconciled one to another, and that third principle in the prophetic theology of the black church is also and has always been at the heart of the black church experience in North America. When Richard Allen and Absalom Jones were dragged out of St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia during the same year, 1787, when the Constitution was framed in Philadelphia, for daring to kneel at their altar next to white worshipers, they founded the Free African Society, and they welcomed white members into their congregation to show that reconciliation was the goal, not retaliation.

Absalom Jones became the rector of the St. Thomas Anglican Church in 1791, and St. Thomas welcomed white Anglicans in the spirit of reconciliation.

Richard Allen became the founding pastor of the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church. And the motto of the AME Church has always been "God our Father, man our brother, and Christ our Redeemer" -- the word "man" included men and women of all races back in 1787 and 1792 -- in the spirit of reconciliation.

The black church's role in the fight for equality and justice from the 1700s up until 2008 has always had as its core the non-negotiable doctrine of reconciliation, children of God repenting for past sins against each other. Jim Wallis says America's racist -- sin of racism has never even been confessed, much less repented for. Repenting for past sins against each other and being reconciled to one another -- Jim Wallis is white, by the way -- (laughter) -- being reconciled to one another because of the love of God, who made all of us in God's image.

Reconciliation, the years have taught me, is where the hardest work is found for those of us in the Christian faith, however, because it means some critical thinking and some reexamination of faulty assumptions.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: That's right.

REV. WRIGHT: When using the paradigm of Dr. William Augustus Jones, Dr. Jones, in his book "God in the Ghetto," argues quite accurately that one's theology, how I see God, determines one's anthropology, how I see humans, and one's anthropology then determines one's sociology, how I order my society.

Now the implications from the outset are obvious.

If I see God as male; if I see God as white male; if I see God as superior, as God over us and not Immanuel, which means God with us; if I see God as mean, vengeful,

authoritarian, sexist or misogynist, then I see humans through that lens.

My theological lens shapes my anthropological lens. And as a result, white males are superior; all others are inferior. And I order my society where I can worship God on Sunday morning, wearing a black clergy robe, and kill others on Sunday evening, wearing a white Klan robe. (Cheers, applause.)

I can have laws which favor whites over blacks, in America or South Africa. I can construct a theology of apartheid, in the Afrikaner church, and a theology of white supremacy in the North American or Germanic church.

The implications from the outset are obvious. But then the complicated work is left to be done, as you dig deeper into the constructs, which tradition, habits and hermeneutics put on your plate.

To say, I am a Christian, is not enough. Why? Because the Christianity of the slaveholder is not the Christianity of the slave. The God to whom the slaveholders pray, as they ride on the decks of the slave ship, is not the God to whom the enslaved are praying, as they ride beneath the decks on that same slave ship.

How we are seeing God, our theology, is not the same. And what we both mean when we say, I am a Christian, is not the same thing. The prophetic theology of the black church has always seen and still sees all of God's children as sisters and brothers, equals who need reconciliation, who need to be reconciled as equals, in order for us to walk together into the future which God has prepared for us.

Reconciliation does not mean that blacks become whites or whites become blacks or Hispanics become Asian or that Asians become Europeans. Reconciliation means we embrace our individual rich histories, all of them. We retain who we are, as persons of different cultures, while acknowledging that those of other cultures are not superior or inferior to us; they are just different from us.

We root out any teaching of superiority, inferiority, hatred or prejudice. And we recognize for the first time in modern history, in the West, that the other who stands before us with a different color of skin, a different texture of hair, different music, different preaching styles and different dance moves; that other is one of God's children just as we are, no better, no worse, prone to error and in need of forgiveness just as we are.

Only then will liberation, transformation and reconciliation become realities and cease being ever elusive ideals. Thank you for having me in your midst this morning. (Applause.)

MS. LEINWAND: We do want to get in our questions. Thank you. Thank you, everybody.

I do want to repeat again, for those of you watching us on C-SPAN, that we do have a number of guests here today. And so the applause and the comments, that you hear from the audience, are not necessarily those of the working press, who are mostly in the balconies.

You have said that the media have taken you out of context. Can you explain what you mean in a sermon shortly after 9/11 when you said the United States had brought the terrorist attacks on itself, quote, "America's chickens are coming home to roost"?

REV. WRIGHT: Have you heard the whole sermon? (Laughter, applause.) Have you heard the whole sermon?

MS. LEINWAND: I -- most -- (chuckles) --

REV. WRIGHT: No, no, the whole sermon. That's -- yes or no. No, you haven't heard the whole sermon? That nullifies that question.

Well, let me try to respond in a non-bombastic way. (Applause.) If you heard the whole sermon, first of all, you heard that I was quoting the ambassador from Iraq. That's number one. But number two, to quote the Bible, "Be not deceived; God is not mocked, for whatsoever you sow that you also shall" --

AUDIENCE MEMBERS: "Reap."

REV. WRIGHT: Jesus said, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." You cannot do terrorism on other people and expect it never to come back on you. Those are biblical principles, not Jeremiah Wright bombastic divisive principles. (Applause.)

MS. LEINWAND: Some critics have said that your sermons are unpatriotic. How do you feel about America and about being an American? (Laughter.)

REV. WRIGHT: I feel that those citizens who say that have never heard my sermons, nor do they know me. They are unfair accusations taken from sound bites, and that which is looped over and over again on certain channels.

I served six years in the military. Does that make me patriotic? How many years did Cheney serve? (Cheers, applause.)

MS. LEINWAND: Please, I ask you to keep your comments and your applause to a minimum, so that we can work in as many questions as possible.

Senator Obama has -- (talk from audience members) -- please, we're trying to ask as many questions as possible today, so if you can keep your applause to a minimum.

Senator Obama has tried to explain away some of your most contentious comments

and has distanced himself from you. It's clear that many people in his campaign consider you a detriment. In that context, why are you speaking out now?

REV. WRIGHT: On November the 5th and on January 21st, I'll still be a pastor. As I've said, this is not an attack on Jeremiah Wright. It has nothing to do with Senator Obama. This is an attack on the black church launched by people who know nothing about the African- American religious tradition.

And why I am speaking out now? In our community, we have something called playing the dozens. If you think I'm going to let you talk about my mama -- (laughter) -- and her religious tradition and my daddy and his religious tradition and my grandma, you got another thing coming. (Applause.)

(To audience members.) Bless your hearts.

MS. LEINWAND: What is your relationship with Louis Farrakhan? Do you agree with and respect his views, including his most racially divisive views?

x x views?

REV. WRIGHT: As I said on the Bill Moyers show, one of our news channels keeps playing a news clip from 20 years ago, when Louis said 20 years ago that Zionism, not Judaism, was a gutter religion. He was talking about the same thing United Nations resolutions say, the same thing now that President Carter's being vilified for and Bishop Tutu's being vilified for. And everybody wants to paint me as if I'm anti-Semitic because of what Louis Farrakhan said 20 years ago.

I believe that people of all faiths have to work together in this country if we're going to be build a future for our children, whether those people are -- just as Michelle and Barack don't agree on everything, Ramah and I don't agree on everything, Louis and I don't agree on everything. Most of you-all don't agree -- you got two people in the same room, you got three opinions. (Laughter.)

What I think about him, as I said on Bill Moyers and it got edited out -- how many other African-Americans or European-Americans do you know that can get 1 million people together on the mall? He is one of the most important voices in the 20th and 21st century; that's what I think about him. I said, as I said on Bill Moyers, when Louis Farrakhan speaks it's like E.F. Hutton speaks. All black America listens. Whether they agree with him or not, they listen.

Now, I am not going to put down Louis Farrakhan any more than Mandela will put down Fidel Castro. You remember that Ted Koppel show where Ted wanted Mandela to put down Castro because Castro is our enemy, and he said, "You don't tell me who my enemies are; you don't tell me who my friends are."

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Yeah!

REV. WRIGHT: Louis Farrakhan is not my enemy. He did not put me in chains, he did not put me in slavery, and he didn't make me this color. (Cheers, applause.)

MS. LEINWAND: What is your motivation for characterizing Senator Obama's response to you as, quote, "what a politician had to say"? What do you mean by that?

REV. WRIGHT: What I mean is what several of my white friends and several of my white Jewish friends have written me and said to me. They said, "You're a Christian. You understand forgiveness. We both know that if Senator Obama did not say what he said, he would never get elected." Politicians say what they say and do what they do based on electability, based on sound bites, based on polls -- Huffington, whoever's doing the polls. Preachers say what they say because they are pastors. They have a different person to whom they're accountable.

As I said, whether he gets elected or not, I'm still going to have to be answerable to God, November 5th and January 21st. That's what I mean. I do what pastors do. He does what politicians do. I am not running for office. I am hoping to being vice president. (Laughter.)

MS. LEINWAND: In light of your -- in light of your widely quoted comment damning America, do you think you owe the American people an apology?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: No!

MS. LEINWAND: If not, do you think that America is still damned in the eyes of God?

REV. WRIGHT: The government of leaders, those -- as I said to Barack Obama, my member -- I'm a pastor; he's a member. I'm not a "spiritual mentor" -- hoodoo. I'm his pastor. And I said to Barack Obama last year, "If you get elected, November the 5th I'm coming after you, because you'll be representing a government whose policies grind under people." All right?

It's about policy, not the American people.

And if you saw the Bill Moyers show, I was talking about, although it got edited, I was -- do you know, that's biblical? God doesn't bless everything. God condemns something. And D-E-M-N, demn, is where we get the word damn. God damns some practices.

And there is no excuse for the things that the government, not the American people, have done. That doesn't make me not like America, or unpatriotic.

So when Jesus says, not only you brood of vipers, now he's playing the dozens because he's talking about their mamas. To say brood means your mother is an asp,

A-S-P. (Laughter.) Should we put Jesus out of the congregation?

When Jesus says, you will be brought down to hell, that's not -- that's bombastic device of speech. Maybe we ought to take Jesus out of this Christian faith. No.

What I said about and what I think about and what -- again until I can't -- until racism and slavery are confessed and asked for -- we asked the Japanese to forgive us. We have never as a country -- in fact, Clinton almost got in trouble because he almost apologized at Goree Island.

We have never apologized as a country. Britain has apologized to Africans. But this country's leaders have refused to apologize. So until that apology comes, I'm not going to keep stepping on your foot and asking you, does this hurt do you forgive me for stepping on your foot, if I'm still stepping on your foot. Understand that? Capisce?

MS. LEINWAND: All right.

Senator Obama has been in your congregation for 20 years. Yet you were not invited to his announcement of his presidential candidacy in Illinois. And in the most recent presidential debate in Pennsylvania, he said he had denounced you.

Are you disappointed that Senator Obama has chosen to walk away from you?

REV. WRIGHT: Whoever wrote that question doesn't read or watch the news. He did not denounce me. He distanced himself from some of my remarks, like most of you, never having heard the sermon, all right?

What was the rest of your question? I got confused in that the person who wrote it hadn't --

MS. LEINWAND: Were you disappointed that he distanced himself?

REV. WRIGHT: He didn't distance himself. He had to distance himself, because he's a politician, from what the media was saying I had said, which was anti-American.

He said I didn't offer any words of hope. How would he know? He never heard the rest of the sermon. You never heard it.

I offered words of hope. I offered reconciliation. I offered restoration in that sermon. But nobody heard the sermon. They just heard this little soundbite of a sermon.

That was not the whole question. There was something else, in the first part of the question, that I wanted to address.

MS. LEINWAND: You weren't invited.

REV. WRIGHT: Oh, all right.

I was not invited, because that was a political event. Let me say again, I'm his pastor.

At a political event, who started it off? Senator Dick Durbin. I started it off downstairs with him, his wife and children in prayer. That's what pastors do.

So I started it off in prayer. When he went out into the public, that wasn't about prayer; that wasn't about pastor-member. Pastor-member took place downstairs. What took place upstairs was political.

So that's how I feel about that. He did, as I said, what politicians do. This was a political event. He wasn't announcing, "I'm saved, sanctified and filled with the Holy Ghost." He was announcing, "I'm running for president of the United States."

(Laughter.)

MS. LEINWAND: You just mentioned that Senator Obama hadn't heard many of your sermons. Does that mean he's not much of a churchgoer, or does he doze off in the pews? (Laughter.)

REV. WRIGHT: I just wanted to see -- is that your question? That's your question.

MS. LEINWAND: That is.

REV. WRIGHT: He goes to church about much as you do. What did your pastor preach on last week? (Laughter.) You don't know. Okay. (Shouts, laughter, applause.)

MS. LEINWAND: In your sermon, you said the government lied about inventing the HIV virus as a means of genocide against people of color. So I ask you: Do you honestly believe your statement and those words?

REV. WRIGHT: Have you read Horowitz's book "Emerging Viruses: AIDS and Ebola"? Whoever wrote that question, have you read "Medical Apartheid"? You've read it?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: You are -- (off mike).

REV. WRIGHT: I --

AUDIENCE MEMBER: (Off mike.)

REV. WRIGHT: Oh, you -- is that one of the reporters?

MS. LEINWAND: Please, no questions from --

REV. WRIGHT: No questions from the floor.

I read different things. As I said to my members, if you haven't read things, then you can't -- and based on the Tuskegee experiment and based on what has happened to Africans in this country, I believe our government is capable of doing anything.

In fact, in fact, in fact, one of the -- one of the responses to what Saddam Hussein had in terms of biological warfare was a non- question, because all we had to do was check the sales record. We sold him those biological weapons that he was using against his own people.

So any time a government can put together biological warfare to kill people and then get angry when those people use what we sold them, yes, I believe we are capable.

MS. LEINWAND: You have likened Israeli policies to apartheid and its treatment of Palestinians with Native Americans. Can you explain your views on Israel?

REV. WRIGHT: Where did I liken it to that? Whoever wrote the question, tell me where I likened them. Jimmy Carter called it apartheid. Jeremiah Wright doesn't "liken" anything to anything.

My position on Israel is that Israel has a right to exist; that Israelis have a right to exist, as I said, reconciled one to another. Have you read *The Link*? Do you read *The Link* -- Americans for Middle Eastern Understanding, where Palestinians and Israelis need to sit down and talk to each other and work out a solution where their children can grow in a world together and not be talking about killing each other; that that is not God's will.

So my position is that Israel and the people of Israel be the people of God who are worrying about reconciliation and who are trying to do what God wants for God's people, which is reconciliation.

MS. LEINWAND: In your understanding of Christianity, does God love the white racist in the same way he loves he loves the oppressed black American?

REV. WRIGHT: John 3:16. Jesus said it much better than I could ever say it: "For God so loved the world" -- "world" is white, black, Iraqi, Darfurian, Sudanese, Zulu, Kosha (sp). God loves all of God's children, because all of God's children are made in God's image.

MS. LEINWAND: Can you elaborate on your comparison of the Roman soldiers who killed Jesus to the U.S. Marine Corps? Do you still believe that is an appropriate comparison? And why?

REV. WRIGHT: One of the things that will be covered at symposiums over the next two days is biblical history, which many of the working press are unfamiliar with.

(Laughter.)

In biblical history, there's not one word written in the Bible, between Genesis and Revelation, that was not written under one of six different kinds of oppression: Egyptian oppression, Assyrian oppression, Persian oppression, Greek oppression, Roman oppression, Babylonian oppression.

The Roman oppression is the period in which Jesus was born. And comparing imperialism that was going on in Luke, imperialism was going on when Caesar Augustus sent out a decree that the whole world should be taxed -- they were in charge of the world; sounds like some other governments I know -- that yes, I can compare that. We have troops stationed all over the world, just like Rome had troops stationed all over the world, because we run the world. That notion of imperialism is not the message of the Gospel of the Prince of Peace nor God, who loves the world. (Applause.)

MS. LEINWAND: Former President Bill Clinton has been widely criticized in this campaign. Many African-Americans think he has said things aimed at defining Senator Obama as the black candidate. What do you think of President Clinton's comments, particularly those before the South Carolina primary?

REV. WRIGHT: I don't think anything about them. I came here to talk about the prophetic theology of the black church. I'm not talking about candidates or their positions or their feelings or what they have to say to get elected.

MS. LEINWAND: Well, okay. We'll give you a church question. Please explain how the black church and the white church can reconcile.

REV. WRIGHT: Well, there are many white churches and white persons who are members of churches and clergy and denominations who have already taken great steps in terms of reconciliation. In the Underground Railroad, it was the white church that played the largest role in getting Africans out of slavery, in setting up almost all 40 of the HBCUs. It was the white church that sent missionaries into the South.

As I mentioned in my presentation, our denomination, all by itself, set up over 500 of those schools. You know them today as Howard University, Fisk, LeMoyne-Owen, Tougaloo, Dillard University, Howard University. So they've done --

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Morehouse.

REV. WRIGHT: -- Morehouse, Morehouse; don't forget Morehouse -- (chuckles) -- Spelman -- that white Christians have been trying for a long time to reconcile, that for other white Christians to understand that we must be reconciled is to understand the injustice that was done to our people as we raped the continent, brought those people here, built our country and then defined them as less than human.

And more Christians, more of us working together, not just white Christians but whites and blacks of every faith, and ecumenically working together -- Father Pflieger, by the way -- he might be one of the ones -- (applause) -- modeled out what it means to be reconciled as brothers and sisters in Christ and brothers and sisters made in the image of God.

MS. LEINWAND: You said there is a lack of understanding by people of other backgrounds of the African-American church. What are some of those misunderstandings, and how would you purport to fix them, particularly when some of your comments are found to be offensive by white churches?

REV. WRIGHT: Carter G. Woodson about 80 years ago wrote a book entitled "The Miseducation (of the Negro)." I would try to fix it starting at the educational level in the grammar schools, as Dr. Asa Hilliard did in his infusion curriculum -- starting at the grammar schools to tell our children this story and to tell our children the true story. That's how I'd go about fixing it, because until you know the true story, then you're reacting to my words and not to the truth.

MS. LEINWAND: Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No man cometh unto the Father but through me." Do you believe this?

And do you think Islam is a way to salvation?

REV. WRIGHT: Jesus also said, "Other sheep have I who are not of this fold." (Cheers, applause.)

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Yeah!

MS. LEINWAND: Do you think people of other races would feel welcome at your church?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Yeah!

AUDIENCE MEMBER: No!

REV. WRIGHT: Yes. We have members of other races in our church. We have Hispanics. We have Caribbean. We have South Americans. We have whites. The conference minister -- please understand, United Church of Christ is a predominantly white denomination of, again -- some of you do not know United Church of Christ, just found out about liberation theology, just found out about the United Church of Christ. The conference minister, Dr. Jane Fidler Hoffman, a white woman, and her husband not only are members of the congregation, but on her last Sunday before taking the assignment as the interim conference minister of the Southern California Conference of the United Church of Christ, a white woman stood in our pulpit and said, "I am unashamedly African." (Cheers, applause.)

MS. LEINWAND: You first gained media attention -- significant media attention for your sermon several weeks ago. Why did you wait so long before giving the public your side of the sound bite story?

REV. WRIGHT: As I said to Bill Moyers -- and he also edited this one out -- because of my mother's advice to me. My mother's advice was being seen all over the -- all over the corporate media channels, and it's a paraphrase of the Book of Proverbs, where it is better to be quiet and be thought a fool than to open your mouth and remove all doubt. (Laughter.) The media was making a fool out of itself because it knew nothing about our tradition.

And so I decided to let them make a fool as long as they wanted to and then take the advice of Paul Laurence Dunbar in "'Lias, 'lias, bless de Lawd. Don' you know de day's abroad?" Don't make me come cross this room. I had to come cross the room because they started -- understand, when you talking about my mama, once again, and talking about my faith tradition, once again -- how long do you let somebody talk about your faith tradition before you speak up and say something in defense of -- this was not an attack on Jeremiah Wright. Once again, let me say it again, this was an attack on the black church.

And I cannot, as a minister of the gospel, allow the significant part of our history -- most African-Americans and most European- Americans, most Hispanic-Americans, half the names I called in my presentation have never heard it because they don't know anything at all about our tradition. And to lift up those -- they did not -- they would have died in vain had I just kept quiet longer and longer and longer and longer.

As I said, this was an attack on the black church. It was not about Obama, McCain, Hillary, Bill, Chelsea; this was about the black church. This was about Barbara Jordan. This was about Fannie Lou Hamer. This was about my grandmamma. (Applause.)

Q Do you think it is God's will that Senator Obama be president?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: No! Come on!

REV. WRIGHT: I said I would offer myself for candidacy for vice president. I have not offered myself for candidacy of God; I can't presume to know what God would want.

In my tradition, however, what everybody has been saying to me as it pertains to the candidacy is, what God has for you is for you. If God intends for Mr. Obama to be the president, then no white racist, no political pundit, no speech, nothing can get in the way, for God will do what God wants to do.

MS. LEINWAND: Okay. We are almost out of time. But before asking the last

question, we have a couple of matters to take care of.

First of all, let me remind you of our future speakers. This afternoon we have Dan Glickman, chairman and CEO of the Motion Picture Association, who is discussing "Trading Up: Movies and the Global Marketplace." On May 2nd, Bobby Jindal, the governor of the state of Louisiana, will discuss "Bold Reform That Works." On May 7th we have Glenn Tilton, CEO, United Airlines, and board member of the American Transport Association.

Second, I would like to present our guest with the official centennial mug and -- brand new --

REV. WRIGHT: Thank you! Thank you. (Applause.)

MS. LEINWAND: You're welcome. And we've got one more question for you.

Chris -- we're going to end with a joke. Chris Rock joked, of course, "Of course Reverend Wright's an angry 75-year-old black man. All 75-year-old black men are angry." Is that funny? Is that true? Is it unfortunate? What do you think?

REV. WRIGHT: I think it's just like the media: I'm not 75. (Laughter, applause.)

MS. LEINWAND: I'd like to thank you all for coming today. I'd also like to thank National Press Club staff members Melinda Cooke, Pat Nelson, Jo Anne Booze and Howard Rothman for organizing today's breakfast. Also, thanks to the NPC library for its research.

The video archive of today's luncheon is provided by National Press Club Broadcast Operations Center.

I'd ask you all to stay in your seats until the program ends and also to stay in your seats until Reverend Wright has a chance to leave the room.

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For more information about joining the Press Club, please -- please, can I ask you to stay in your seats until the program ends? -- for more information about joining the Press Club, contact us at 202- 662-7511.

Thank you. We're adjourned.

END.

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