

"I love *Prodigal Press*. As a journalist it really helped to crystallize things for me. This book is important and strategic."

—LEE STROBEL

The New York Times

USA Today

# PRODIGAL PRESS

Confronting the

**Anti-Christian**

Bias of the

American News Media

Revised and Updated

**Marvin Olasky & Warren Cole Smith**



“Not all of us are called to be journalists, but every American—whether he likes it or not—has his thinking shaped by journalism. *Prodigal Press* will help you to understand both the blatant and the subtle ways in which journalists promote liberal and anti-Christian ideas, and what you can do to protect your family from that influence.”

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“Here—in the tradition of Calvin, Edwards, and Machen—is a tough-minded call to spiritual renewal directed to the most tough-minded of our democratic institutions. The impact of this book will be likened to David’s meeting Goliath, with the outcome postponed.”

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“The most important book about journalism I have ever read. *Prodigal Press* is must reading for all Christians and for all reporters, editors, journalism professors, and students.”

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“The twenty-fifth-anniversary edition of *Prodigal Press* is a book that I wish every American would read. Olasky and Smith, veteran journalists themselves, provide an honest and thorough critique of their trade. Well argued and meticulously footnoted, the original edition was a landmark of exposé and insight. This edition—showing what American journalism was, has become, and could be—is needed now more than ever.”

—**Alex McFarland**, Director for Christian Worldview and Apologetics, North Greenville University

“This is a great day: two of my favorite journalists from my all-time favorite newsmagazine, *WORLD*, have issued a twenty-fifth-anniversary edition of one of the truly inspirational books that I remember reading as a young believer. *Prodigal Press* is a captivating narrative chock-full of fascinating stories and historical insight—but

it is more than a story; it is a call to redeem journalism from the bias, spin, and propaganda that masquerade as reporting these days. There has never been a more important time for truth-believers to become truth-tellers. Thanks to Olasky and Smith, we know how to do it.”

—Jeff Myers, President, Summit Ministries

“I loved *Prodigal Press* when it was first published. As someone who became a Christian while working as a journalist, it really helped to crystallize things for me. It’s important and strategic to have this book updated and expanded for a new generation.”

—Lee Strobel, former legal editor, *Chicago Tribune*; author, *The Case for Christ*

“At a time of declining newspaper readership and falling TV ratings, the media’s discrimination against people with a Christian worldview is a form of professional suicide. In this updated version of his 1988 book, Marvin Olasky gives new examples of anti-Christian bias, which ought to motivate more Christian young people to consider careers in journalism instead of cursing the growing darkness made worse by the absence of their light.”

—Cal Thomas, America’s #1 nationally syndicated columnist

“*Prodigal Press* is a masterpiece of historical research, Christian analysis, and practical application. Much change has taken place in journalism and the media since the first edition was published in 1988—much of which was predicted in the book—with the growth of both anti-Christian bias and pro-Christian alternatives. This updated edition adds new examples, addresses contemporary issues, and takes up the new information technology. But the original insights are as fresh as ever. They will make you a more perceptive reader and possibly inspire you to be a more perceptive writer, whether the medium is the printed page or a computer screen.”

—Gene Edward Veith, Professor of Literature and Provost, Patrick Henry College

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Warren Cole Smith**

  
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To all our colleagues at *WORLD* who are not only  
hearers of the Word but doers  
and producers of new words that reflect biblical teaching.



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# Acknowledgments

## Olasky

My wife, Susan, listened to the ideas of this book's first edition during long walks; her intellect and insight improved every chapter. *Prodigal Press* owed its existence to the vision of Christian worldview publishing shared by Howard and Roberta Ahmanson. Special thanks go to Herbert Schlossberg.

## Smith

When I first read this book, it changed the trajectory of my life. I am therefore profoundly grateful to Marvin Olasky for writing this book, and for allowing me to collaborate with him on its revision. Marvin Padgett, now retired editorial vice-president at P&R, gave us the green light for this 25th anniversary edition. To him I return the benediction with which he closed every conversation I had with him: grace and peace to you.



# Introduction to the 25th Anniversary Edition

Marvin Olasky

Prophecy is of two kinds. We read in the Bible about God giving some individuals specific knowledge of events to come. We see others who lack that specific knowledge but realize that once we forget the initial commandments—“I am the LORD your God. . . . You shall have no other gods before me” (Ex. 20:2–3)—everything else falls apart. First we hammer the nails into Christ’s palms. Then we hammer them into our own.

J. Gresham Machen was a prophet of the second kind. In 1924 he wrote a great book, *Christianity and Liberalism*, which exposed theologically liberal Christianity as no Christianity at all. He knew that once we stop believing in God’s sovereignty and the efficacy of Christ’s atonement, we slip-slide into breaking commandments not to kill, not to commit adultery, etc.

Machen would not have been surprised to find Protestant denominations that went liberal on theology in the 1920s embracing abortion in the 1970s and same-sex marriage in these latter days. Aristotle said that man without society is either beast or God;<sup>1</sup> but Machen would have agreed with Communist-turned-Christian Whittaker Chambers, who said, “Man without God is

1. Aristotle, *Politics*, Book 1, Section 2: “He who is unable to live in society, or who has no need because he is sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or a god.”

a beast, and never more beastly than when he is most intelligent about his beastliness.”<sup>2</sup>

Twenty-five years ago I wrote *Prodigal Press: The Anti-Christian Bias of American News Media* and punctuated my analysis of journalism’s descent with that quotation from Chambers. One chapter title, “Spiking the Spiritual,” referred to the tradition of copy editors having a large spike on their desks: stories that didn’t pass muster ended up impaled. I showed how mainstream journalism had abandoned its Christian roots—and the result was fear, loathing, and a wide variety of journalistic, legal, ethical, and economic problems.

P&R Publishing is reprinting this book, with added material from my friend Warren Smith, because some say *Prodigal Press* was prophecy of the second kind. But it was easy to prophesy, as the American journalistic elite had abandoned and scorned Christian press antecedents. The train was already off the rails, and a smashup was inevitable. Technology would soon help alternatives to liberal daily newspapers move from infancy to vigorous adulthood, and in a game of computer/scissors/paper, computers would win.

*Prodigal Press* in the 1980s received some positive and some negative reviews. The negative critics typically stated that I was exaggerating the problem. They said *Newsweek* might occasionally tilt left, but network newscasts still played it down the middle and the Associated Press was rock-solid in its adherence to objectivity in the sense of balancing subjectivities, with liberals and conservatives receiving equal space and editors vigilantly removing loaded adjectives from their young reporters’ prose.

Evidence of bias was exceptionally clear on questions such as how we should treat unborn children, so I followed up *Prodigal Press* with *The Press and Abortion*. But on current coverage of some political and economic issues I had to grit my teeth and

2. Whittaker Chambers, *Witness* (Random House, 1952), 13.



say to hostile reviewers, wait and see. Since what we believe about God inevitably affects what we say about man, watch the cloud on the horizon that then seemed, to some, smaller than a man's hand.

That cloud has now filled the sky and is pelting us with not only rain but hail. I can say this because *WORLD*, the magazine I edit, is a member of the Associated Press, so I read lots of AP stories. In June and July 2011, three interns and I began every weekday by reading a half-dozen stories on controversial political, economic, and social issues. We asked: Are they balanced enough to put on our website? Or—because of their bias, their superficiality, or both—do they need lot of work prior to publication?

A list of the lowlights would be long, and I will mention only a few. It was no surprise that Associated Press reports during those months were highly tilted in favor of same-sex marriage, with AP regularly connecting battles for racial equality with those for redefining marriage. Conservatives received treatment like that of segregationists fifty years ago. One AP reporter on June 21 called conservative legislators “the last hurdle” to be jumped and didn’t balance that with the view that they could be considered “the last defense” against societal breakdown.

The AP reports were not balanced, and it would be silly to expect them to be when mainstream journalists see critics of the gay movement as defenders of social cancer. No one sees the need to balance news of a new anticancer drug with statements by pro-cancer proponents. But AP’s liberal bias on political and economic questions was also evident. Think of it algebraically, with AP standing for coverage of person A, who who has a problem, and person P, the politician who purports to have a solution. The Associated Press typically did not bother to cover person F, the one paying taxes so that person P can gain glory for sending aid to person A.

In the nineteenth century, Yale professor William Graham Sumner had offered a similar equation and called person F “the forgotten man.” In the twenty-first century, AP regularly broke its pledge to be evenhanded by highlighting person A and forgetting Mr. F. For example, early in July AP covered Minnesota’s brief government shutdown by noting, “Poor families are scrambling after the state stopped child care subsidies. . . . Minnesota’s most vulnerable residents and about 22,000 laid-off state employees began feeling the effects on Friday.” True enough, but in 1,200 words the AP reporter didn’t bother to ask a Mr. F what he thought about paying for all the programs.

Another AP story from the July Fourth weekend told us, “California college students are bracing for higher tuition bills and fewer courses and campus services under a new state budget that once again slashes spending on higher education.” The state budget inflicted “the latest blow” on California higher education, which has already seen “deep cuts” that have “eroded” instructional quality. The reporter did not mention taxpayers’ death by a thousand cuts, or that tens of thousands of Californians have moved to Texas, Idaho, or other states.

Week after week my interns and I saw these types of stories. A May 25 AP story, “Broken Budgets, Struggling Schools,” quoted ten teachers, administrators, or union executives decrying budget trends and no one—no taxpayer, no conservative legislator—providing a different perspective.

AP reporters did not question the assumption that Washington should be deciding the sugar content of cereal and saying, in essence, “Silly rabbit, Trix aren’t for kids.” AP could have asked whether a Congress debating trillion-dollar deficits and authorizing funds for three wars should be debating whether eight or ten grams of sugar per serving makes a cereal grrreat.

The interns and I saw AP reporters exuberantly praising the politically and environmentally correct. For example, a plan to

install solar panels on the White House meant “returning the power of the sun to the pinnacle of prominence.” AP’s adjectives indicated its position on abortion. A June 26 story complained about South Dakota’s “new restrictive state law” on abortion that imposed “stringent counseling requirements.” (A different perspective could have noted “a new protective state law” requiring “thorough” or “comprehensive” counseling requirements.)

AP’s basic assumptions were readily evident: the federal government should be involved in every problem that arises, and federal spending should increase. A July 17 story included typical drumbeating: “Time is running out for Washington to raise the country’s borrowing limit and avoid a default. Wall Street isn’t panicking yet. But if the unthinkable happens, a default could strike financial markets like an earthquake.”

In February 2011, I interviewed Tom Kent, AP’s deputy managing editor and standards editor, and asked him about studies showing that conservatives are rare in major mainstream news organizations and conservative Christians nowhere in sight. Kent responded, “I don’t see this as an issue because we don’t focus on it. There are people whom I’ve worked with for twenty, thirty years, and I don’t know how they vote. That would not be useful information for me to know.” It seems to me that the lack of discussion indicates this should be an issue. When an organization includes a diversity of views, people know it.

The liberal bias of Associated Press and other major mainstream organizations has grown worse, but the past quarter-century has also seen an expansion of conservative alternatives—talk radio, blogs, and Fox News—and Christian alternatives. In 1987 I was writing from theory, but in 1990 I joined *WORLD*’s board, and in 1992 became its editor, and have now been able to put theories into practice.

Now, I continue to recommend biblical crusading and biblical sensationalism (chaps. 11 and 12), but I’ve learned more about

the joy of journalism. In what other endeavor do craftsmen get front row seats at a different circus every week?

I've learned the pleasures of reporting not just because it's fun but because of the fun of glorifying God. As John Piper writes, "Every joy that does not have God as its central gladness is a hollow joy and in the end will burst like a bubble." Piper points out that we should aspire "to study reality as a manifestation of God's glory, to speak and write about it with accuracy, and to savor the beauty of God in it."<sup>3</sup> Our goal at *WORLD* is to discover and communicate the reasons that exist for honoring Christ in all things and above all things. The Bible teaches us that God created this world to be his theater, so the more we report accurately what happens in it, the more we will praise him.

*WORLD* sometimes highlights good news, and that praises God, for our natural selfishness means we readily see what is good as coming from him. We cover compassionate ministries because God most showed his glory when Christ lowered himself to live among us and then suffer and die for us. Since Christ so amply displayed compassion, our trying to follow in some of his steps glorifies God. We also praise Christ by showing bad news about the results of sin—because the bad shows how desperately we need him.

We try to have zeal for God's glory characterize all our editorial decisions. Why do we praise marriage and hate abortion? Our natural tendencies are toward selfishness—so when a mom sacrifices her freedom to care for a child and when a dad sacrifices his freedom to provide for his family, that glorifies God. Some of our news and feature articles praise God without specific mention. They take after the biblical book of Esther, which never speaks of God explicitly but shows God's sovereignty in every chapter. Other stories specifically refer to God, as did the

3. John Piper, *Think: The Life of the Mind and the Love of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011).

early American newspapers and magazines discussed in part one of *Prodigal Press*.

I've learned more from editing *WORLD* about the importance of provocative and evocative news stories that come out of pavement-pounding rather than thumb-sucking. We make mistakes, but we stand for factual accuracy and biblical objectivity, trying to see the world as best we can the way the Bible depicts it. Journalistic humility for us means trying to give God's perspective. We distinguish between issues on which the Bible is clear and those on which it isn't. We also distinguish between journalism and propaganda: we're not willing to lie because someone thinks it will help God's cause.

Over the past quarter-century I've learned more about the importance of offering salt, not sugar. We print what we believe to be true, not what we'd like to be true. *WORLD* is generally conservative; but we try to be biblical first, conservative second, which means taking positions on compassion, immigration, prison reform, and other issues which don't always fit within the conservative box. We practice journalism, not public relations, which means we are willing to criticize prominent Christians when they are hurting the cause of Christ.

We try to speak up for those it's convenient to forget: the unborn, the unemployed (during a Democratic administration, since the mainstream media cover this issue relentlessly during Republican administrations), the uneducated (victimized by poor schools), and the politically unfashionable. We see government as often the problem rather than the solution, yet we honor those who are in authority over us and recognize the God-given place of the state. We are fallen sinners, but we aim to present sensational facts with understated prose. In a high-decibel society we try to have a no-scream zone.

We value on-the-ground reporting from Africa, Iraq, Afghanistan, China, and U.S. inner cities, and we put less trust in abstract essays. We emphasize the human touch by spending less

time inside the Beltway and more on the prairie. We are willing to pass by some geopolitical analysis so as to emphasize the lives of harassed or persecuted Christians. We try to cover cultural developments beyond Christian ghettos and comfort zones.

*WORLD* began publishing as I was writing *Prodigal Press*, and I mentioned the new publication. Happily, *WORLD* founder Joel Belz and I had a similar sense of how Christian journalism should develop: the *WORLD* mission statement states well the need “to report, interpret, and illustrate the news in a timely, accurate, enjoyable, and arresting fashion from a perspective committed to the Bible as the inerrant Word of God.” Beginning in 1992 Joel graciously allowed me to put ideas into practice. To me *WORLD* is a dream walking, and *Prodigal Press* explained why we had to dream.

My colleague Warren Smith began reading *WORLD* about the time I became its editor. After four years as first an occasional and then regular freelance writer, he joined *WORLD* full-time in 2010. He has written most of the new material for the second edition of this book. When I published the first edition of *Prodigal Press* in 1988, the Internet was in its infancy and cable news, dominated by CNN, was only a slightly more mature toddler. We are still much closer to the beginning than the end of the media revolution created by these new technologies, but we are now far enough along to have much new to say.

Some of what I said before is now outdated, so our updating includes a revision of chapter 8, “Perceptive Media Watching,” and a much more substantial revision of chapter 9, “Network News and Local Newspapers.” We also have an entirely new chapter—chapter 10, “The Devil in the Electrons”—that highlights both the promise and opportunity provided by electronic media, but also identifies how new manifestations of anti-Christian bias appear.

Chapter 13, “A Christian Journalism Revival?,” also has significant new material, some of it related to our experiences at *WORLD*.

## Introduction to the First Edition

One of Jesus' best-known parables is of the prodigal son who squandered his inheritance. Ridiculed and abused, the son saw the misery of his life and decided to return to his father, who greeted him warmly. The prodigal's brother, however, was angry, because a great banquet was served in honor of the returnee, but the brother who had led an upright life all along was not receiving attention.

The father told the jealous son: "You've done well, but he was lost and now is found, so let us rejoice." We do not know how the jealous son responded to that good advice. For a long time the jealous son probably had been angry at his prodigal brother for abandoning the homestead, leaving him without company and assistance. It was probably hard for him to break out of an established pattern of thought.

Imagine, though, what the jealous son's feelings would have been had the prodigal not only taken the money and run, but boasted of the offense daily? What if the jealous son had received daily sneering letters from the prodigal? What if the prodigal son had constantly lied about his industrious brother, libeling and ridiculing him? How much greater the anger! And how much greater the need to pray for the prodigal's return, and to remind him constantly that he, despite sins, is still a member of the family.

American journalism is one of Christianity's prodigal sons. Until the mid-nineteenth century American journalism was Christian. But as the first part of this book will show, journalists influenced by anti-Christian humanism and pantheism abandoned their Christian heritage and ended up wallowing among the pigs. For many years it was difficult to see the analogy because the biblical prodigal son was soon starving. The prodigal press, on the other hand, managed to live lavishly for a century on the material and reputational capital its Christian heritage had accumulated. But in spirit, the living death is parallel.

The flight of the prodigal press has been hard on American Christians precisely because journalism has departed in spirit but not in physical presence. The prodigal frequently files reports full of hatred for Christianity. Many Christians have responded angrily. Just as church bashing is a favorite sport among some reporters, so media bashing is the pastime of many Christians. This book, however, points out ways for Christians to reclaim American journalism. We need to examine not just the abuses but the uses of sensationalism and crusading. We need to contribute our time and money. Most important, we need to pray for journalism and journalists.

Christians in the early twenty-first century should work hard on the reclamation project, because every year shows more clearly how journalism can have a positive as well as a negative impact on American society. Let's go back a way to two sensational stories from 1987, one involving Gary Hart and the other the televangelists Jim and Tammy Bakker.

U.S. Senator Gary Hart was a rising star in the Democratic Party and a front-runner for the Democratic nomination for president. His candidacy derailed when the *Miami Herald* and other newspapers published photos of him at a party with a young woman sitting on his lap. The accompanying story laid out the details of an adulterous affair. Some Christians criticized the



press for breaking and then pushing the story of the presidential candidate who could not keep his pants on. The story was more than titillation, though. It provided essential voting information for Christians, and for some non-Christians. Biblically, we should not vote for adulterers (unless the incident happened long ago and has been repented). Adultery is a grievous sin against God as well as spouse.<sup>1</sup> It shows not only a lack of judgment but a lack of trustworthiness.<sup>2</sup>

Many Christians know this, but how do we apply these general principles to choosing leaders unless we learn about leaders' behavior? And how will we learn without journalism? Many Christians are queasy about looking at the underside of life. Biblically, however, truth must come out, even when it hurts. If Christians are to reclaim American journalism, we need to be hard-hitting, within biblical principles. This book discusses exactly how to do that.

The Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker scandal, and the subsequent fall of their PTL (Praise The Lord) Network, also showed the importance of journalism, in a different way. Just as presidential candidates used to be chosen by those who knew their personal habits and character traits, so congregant members could see their ministers up close and personal each Sunday. They would know if he was spending money unwisely or getting too close to an attractive member of the flock.

The political equation changed with the advent of mass primaries. Voters, making choices directly, became dependent on information provided by reporters covering campaigns. Religious relationships also changed as televangelism emerged. Contributors who wanted to know how their money was spent

1. Jeremiah and the other prophets repeatedly describe the "spiritual adultery" involved in Israel's worship of other gods. Similarly, physical adultery separates what God has covenantally united.

2. First Corinthians 7 notes that a husband's body belongs to his wife. If a husband steals from his wife, won't he steal from others?

had to depend on public relations reports rather than firsthand observation. Christians capable of doing investigative reporting backed off, not wanting to help atheistic antagonists of the ministries. As Joel Belz was starting up *WORLD*, he received tips from readers that something was amiss at PTL, but he did not have the capability to pursue the story. “I regret that,” he said twenty-five years later. “I sometimes wonder if things might have turned out differently there if Christian journalists rather than secular journalists had broken that story.” Christian journalists, Belz believes, might have approached the story in ways that could have led to restoration rather than destruction.

Because no Christian outlet investigated the story, contributors did not receive information needed to make informed choices. By the time the story attracted the attention of secular outlets, tens of millions of dollars had poured into PTL coffers. The Bakkers and the senior leadership at PTL were intoxicated on money and their celebrity status. They indulged in mansions, private jets, and luxury automobiles. The PTL Network ultimately collapsed in financial, sexual, and legal scandal. The *Charlotte Observer* ultimately won a Pulitzer Prize for its coverage of the Bakker scandal.

Many Christians learned the importance of looking before we pledge. Many saw the difference between invading privacy and puncturing hypocrisy. Those are positives. But the Bakker coverage had many negatives also.

First, it’s important to remember what was happening when the scandal broke. Federal District Court Judge Brevard Hand had just ruled that some Alabama school textbooks were promoting a religion by advocating secular humanism, the belief that universal moral standards have no relevance to our lives. His was a serious decision on a serious subject. It was becoming harder for anti-Christian journalists to ridicule all Christian thought. Many tried. For example, the editor of the *Austin*

*American-Statesman* yelped about “book burning” and sneered at the judge who “made up a religion.” But his sneers were not very convincing. Coverage of the Bakker scandal allowed journalists to return to familiar ground—Elmer Gantry revisited—at just the time when it looked as if they finally might have to deal with basic presuppositions.

Second, the PTL scandal diverted reporting resources from important stories. While Jim and Tammy were on the front page of *USA Today*, Christians in the Soviet Union continued a decades-old struggle that would soon contribute to the demise of the Soviet Union. As one Soviet Christian, Alexandr Ogordnikov, wrote after eight years in the Gulag, “Concentration camps are scattered over the vast expanse of Russia, behind tall fences of barbed wire and high-voltage cables . . . you are buried in the tomb-like twilight of solitary punishment cells; the oppressive silence of faceless days turns time itself into an instrument of torture. Your tongue cleaves to the roof of your mouth in a senseless babble of misery. Hunger gnaws your belly, the cold numbs your flesh and desperation courses through your blood.”<sup>3</sup>

Major American media did not spotlight the reality of Christians suffering. They played with Tammy Bakker’s furs and air-conditioned doghouses. The Bakker scandal showed Christians that activities of the church needed close coverage, but the front-paging of the story for months and months also showed bias. Which events receive coverage? Which do not, and why? Christians have been asking these questions more insistently over the past year.

In this book we examine the influence of worldviews on reporting. We analyze the meanings of objectivity, sensationalism, and crusading, and the impact of legal, ethical, and

3. Alexandr Ogordnikov quoted in Koenraad De Wolf, *Dissident for Life: Alexander Ogordnikov and the Struggle for Religious Freedom in Russia* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013).

technological changes. We explain how to read a newspaper with discernment and how to look at the lives of journalists with sorrow and sometimes pity.

What we refrain from is indiscriminate media bashing, because the prodigal son deserves compassion, not condemnation. We have reported for and edited newspapers, and still love them. We like many reporters, most of the time. The object of this book is not to wail, but to suggest how we can be God's servants in helping to bring that prodigal press home.

## PART 1

---

# ***DEPARTURE***

All the devils in hell and tempters on earth could do us  
no injury if there were no corruption in our own natures.

—*Charles Haddon Spurgeon*



# I

## The Decline of American Journalism

A 1986 study by New York University Professor Paul Vitz found that the vast majority of elementary and high school textbooks go to great lengths to avoid reference to religion. Vitz found American history textbooks defining pilgrims as “people who make long trips” and fundamentalists as rural people who “follow the values or traditions of an earlier period.” One textbook listed three hundred important events in American history, but only three of the three hundred had anything to do with religion. A world history textbook left out any mention of the Protestant Reformation. A literature textbook changed a sentence by Nobel Prize laureate Isaac Bashevis Singer from “Thank God” to “Thank goodness.”<sup>1</sup>

Standard journalism history textbooks provide similar distortions in their accounts of early nineteenth-century newspapers. Two chapters in the most-used textbook, Emery and Emery’s *The Press and America*, deal with the 1800–1833 era of American journalism without once mentioning the Christian worldview that then characterized many major American newspapers and magazines.<sup>2</sup> The textbook does not even mention the

1. Paul Vitz, *Religion and Traditional Values in Public Textbooks* (Washington, DC: National Institute of Education, 1986). For comments on Vitz’s study, see *Newsweek*, July 28, 1986, 20; *Saturday Evening Post*, July–August 1986, 16; *Christianity Today*, January 17, 1986, 49; *Christianity Today*, March 7, 1986, 15.

2. Edwin Emery and Michael Emery, *The Press and America*, 5th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1984), 109–38.

*New York Christian Advocate*, in 1830 the weekly with the largest circulation in the country, or the *Boston Recorder*, which had the second largest circulation in that city.<sup>3</sup>

Other textbooks still in use have similar blinders.<sup>4</sup> They ignore comments by early nineteenth-century press watchers who noted, "Of all the reading of the people three-fourths is religious . . . of all the issues of the press three-fourths are theological, ethical and devotional." They do not mention that New York City alone boasted fifty-two magazines and newspapers that called themselves Christian, or that from 1825 to 1845 over one hundred cities and towns had explicitly Christian newspapers.<sup>5</sup> The facts, though, are irrefutable, once they are dug up: in the early nineteenth century, American journalism often was Christian journalism.

In those days, many Christian newspapers covered everything from neighborhood disputes to foreign affairs. They did not restrict themselves to church activities. The *Boston Recorder*,

3. Roberta Moore, *Development of Protestant Journalism in the United States, 1743–1850* (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Syracuse University, 1968), 237.

4. Frank Luther Mott's *American Journalism*, rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1950), has one paragraph on page 206 about the "religious newspapers" of the 1801–1833 period. According to Mott, about one hundred such publications, scattered across the country, covered both secular events and church activities: The newspapers were "a phenomenon of the times" and "often competed successfully with the secular papers." Mott noted that "many of these papers were conducted with great vigor and ability."

Mott did not go into detail, but his brief mention was more than these newspapers have received in other journalism history textbooks written in the twentieth century, such as James M. Lee, *History of American Journalism* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1917); George H. Payne, *History of Journalism in the United States* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1920); or Sidney Kobre, *Development of American Journalism* (Dubuque, IA: Wm. C. Brown Co., 1969). A history written in the late nineteenth century, Frederic Hudson, *Journalism in the United States from 1690 to 1872* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1873), is also unsympathetic to the Christian press, but at least provides some information. A monograph by Waley Norton, *Religious Newspapers in the Old Northwest to 1861* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1977), and dissertations by Moore (noted above) and Kenberry (see note 5 below), provide useful records.

5. Howard Kenberry, *The Rise of Religious Journalism in the United States* (unpublished dissertation, University of Chicago, 1920), 35.



for example, included news of everyday accidents, crimes, and political campaigns. Its circulation success allowed one editor to conclude that the *Recorder* had gained “the attention of the public” and “stirred up the minds of Christians to duty.”<sup>6</sup>

*Recorder* cofounder Nathaniel Willis was an experienced journalist. Born in 1780, he edited the *Eastern Argus*, a partisan newspaper in Maine, during the early years of the new century. In 1807, though, Willis’s life changed. He went to hear what he thought would be a political speech by a minister, but the minister went back to biblical basics. Willis, in his own words, “was much interested, and became a constant hearer. The Holy Spirit led me to see . . . that the Bible is the Word of God—that Christ is the only Saviour, and that it is by grace we are saved, through faith.”<sup>7</sup>

The new vision changed Willis’s life. He began to moderate the severity of political advocacy in the *Argus*, and he excerpted from other papers articles on religious subjects. He wanted to make the *Argus* an explicitly Christian newspaper, but local politicians who had backed the newspaper were opposed. Willis gave up the *Argus* and moved to Boston. He opened up a print shop there and investigated the journalistic marketplace.

Some newspapers, Willis found, were largely political and commercial, others largely church public-relations organs specializing in ecclesiastical news. Willis closely analyzed three religious weeklies in particular and would not even count them as newspapers, for “a proper newspaper . . . contains secular news, foreign and domestic, and advertisements.” With coeditor Sidney Morse, Willis then produced the first issue of the *Boston Recorder* on January 3, 1816. According to the Prospectus published that

6. *New York Observer*, June 23, 1849, 98.

7. *Puritan Recorder*, October 21, 1858; quoted in Hudson, *Journalism in the United States from 1690 to 1872*, 290. Willis had had no particular theological interests and did not attend church, “but spent my Sabbaths in roving about the fields and in reading newspapers.”

day, the *Recorder* was to be a newspaper with “the earliest information of all such events as mankind usually deem important,” rather than a set of abstract sermonettes.<sup>8</sup>

Willis stuck to his plan, and did not consider it lacking in piety. He knew that news stories could be written in a way showing the consequences of sin and the need for Christ. For example, an article in 1819 headlined “Shocking Homicide” reported that a man had killed his own son after being “for a long time troubled with irreligious fears, and a belief that his sins were too numerous to be pardoned.”<sup>9</sup> An 1820 article criticized Admiral Stephen Decatur for fighting a duel for fear of being declared a coward: he forgot “that there is no honor, which is valuable and durable, save that which comes from God.”

For Willis, in his own words, all kinds of stories provided “occasion to record many signal triumphs of divine grace over the obduracy of the human heart, and over the prejudices of the unenlightened mind.” The *Recorder*, he wrote, was a record of “these quickening influences of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>10</sup>

Christian-run newspapers in other cities had similar formats and success. The *Baltimore Chronicle*, in its international coverage, described the troubles of one king: “A bloody cloud now swims before his vision, distilling blood instead of rain; the agitated monarch sees nothing but mangled limbs and bleeding bodies. . . . If Divine Providence had intended to have produced a living instance of the worthlessness of human grandeur, could a more awful example have been afforded?” The *Portland Gazette*, for its local coverage, described how two persons were killed by lightning within a house, for want of a lightning rod. It then concluded, “By such events, as well

8. *Boston Recorder*, January 3, 1816, 1.

9. *Ibid.*, September 11, 1819, 147. (The *Recorder* produced four-page issues but numbered its pages consecutively throughout the year.)

10. *Ibid.*, December 23, 1817, 202; August 25, 1826, 136.

as by a multitude of electrical experiments, Providence is teaching us.”<sup>11</sup>

Christian newspapers through the mid-nineteenth century attempted to provide a biblical worldview on all aspects of life. One Ohio newspaper declared in 1858 that the Christian newspaper should be a provider of not “merely religious intelligence, but a news paper, complete in every department of general news, yet upon a religious, instead of a political or literary basis.” Another, the *Northwestern Christian Advocate*, proclaimed in 1860, “Let theology, law, medicine, politics, literature, art, science, commerce, trade, architecture, agriculture—in fine, all questions which concern and secure the welfare of a people—be freely discussed and treated, and this, too, for God, for Jesus Christ, and the advancement of the Redeemer’s kingdom among men.”<sup>12</sup>

Overall, many early Christian journalists showed an awareness of how the Bible uses bad news to show us the wages of sin and to prepare us for understanding the necessity of the Good News. The journalists knew that general statements about man’s corruption were far less gripping than coverage with specific detail of the results of sin and misery.

### **A Great Christian Newspaper: *The New York Times***

Harvard, Yale, and other universities founded by Christians now preach an atheistic gospel. A similar story could be told of some of the great newspapers of the land, including the *New York*

11. Contents of the early publications could be almost as varied as those of newspapers. One early Christian magazine became a bit carried away in describing its variety: *The New England Magazine* contained, according to the editors, “Relations Wonderful, and Psalm, and Song, / Good Sense, Wit, Humour, Morals, all ding dong; / Poems and Speeches, Politicks, and News, / What Some will like, and other Some refuse; / Births, Deaths, and Dreams, and Apparitions, too . . . To Humour Him, and Her, and Me, and You.” Kenberry, *The Rise of Religious Journalism in the United States*, 64.

12. *Presbyterian of the West*, December 30, 1858; *Northwestern Christian Advocate*, November 28, 1860; quoted in Norton, *Religious Newspapers in the Old Northwest to 1861*, 2.

*Times*, established in 1851 by Henry Raymond, a Bible-believing Presbyterian.<sup>13</sup> The *Times* became known for its accurate news coverage and for its exposure in 1871 of both political corruption (the “Tweed Ring”) and abortion practices. Tales of the *Times’* political exposes may be found in journalism history textbooks.<sup>14</sup> The abortion story is ignored, but it had a far greater long-range impact, one that shows how significant Christian journalism could be.<sup>15</sup>

Abortion was officially illegal but nevertheless rampant in New York City from the 1840s through the 1860s. *Times* editorials complained that the “perpetration of infant murder . . . is rank and smells to heaven.”<sup>16</sup> But little was done about it until the *Times* sent one of its reporters, Augustus St. Clair, to carry on an undercover investigation of Manhattan’s abortion businesses. For several weeks St. Clair and “a lady friend” visited the most-advertised abortionists in New York, posing as a couple in need of professional services. The result was an August 23, 1871, story headlined “The Evil of the Age.”

The story began on a solemn note: “Thousands of human beings are murdered before they have seen the light of this world, and thousands upon thousands more adults are irremediably robbed in constitution, health, and happiness.” St. Clair then

13. For details on Raymond, see *New York Times*, June 19, 1869, 4 (obituary); June 22, 1 (funeral); June 28, 8 (eulogy); also see Francis Brown, *Raymond of the Times* (New York: Norton, 1951), and Augustus Maverick, *Henry J. Raymond and the New York Press for Thirty Years* (Hartford: Hale, 1870).

14. See Emery and Emery, *The Press and America*, 215. When Raymond died in 1869 he was succeeded by his long-time partner George Jones in the business management of the *Times* and, after two short-lived appointments, by Louis Jennings as editor; both Jones and Jennings were Christians. When Jones turned down a \$5 million bribe offered him by Boss Tweed, he said the Devil never again would offer him so high a price.

15. One pro-abortion article cited in the U.S. Supreme Court’s *Roe v. Wade* decision suggests that newspaper stories contributed to a long-lasting abortion setback. See Cyril C. Means, “The Law of New York Concerning Abortion and the State of the Foetus, 1664–1968: A Case of Cessation of Constitutionality,” *New York Law Forum* (Fall 1968): 458–90.

16. *New York Times*, November 3, 1870, 4.

skillfully contrasted powerlessness and power. He described the back of one abortionist's office: "Human flesh, supposed to have been the remains of infants, was found in barrels of lime and acids, undergoing decomposition." He described the affluence of a typical abortionist: "The parlors are spacious, and contain all the decorations, upholstery, cabinetware, piano, book case, etc., that is found in a respectable home."

St. Clair also listed leading abortionists by name and noted their political connections: "You have no idea of the class of people that come to us," one abortionist said. "We have had Senators, Congressmen and all sorts of politicians, bring some of the first women in the land here." St. Clair concluded with a call for change: "The facts herein set forth are but a fraction of a greater mass that cannot be published with propriety. Certainly enough is here given to arouse the general public sentiment to the necessity of taking some decided and effectual action."<sup>17</sup>

When the *Times* laid out the basic facts, public interest evidently was aroused, but a specific incident still was needed to galvanize readers. Tragically for a young woman, providentially for the anti-abortion effort, an ideal story of horror arrived within the week. St. Clair published his expose on August 23. On August 27 a *Times* headline at the top of page 1 read: "A Terrible Mystery."

General facts of the story were miserable enough: the nude body of a young woman was found inside a trunk in a railway station baggage room. An autopsy showed that an abortion had led to her death. The *Times* provided evocative specific detail: "This woman, full five feet in height, had been crammed into a trunk two feet six inches long. . . . Seen even in this position and rigid in death, the young girl, for she could not have been more than eighteen, had a face of singular loveliness. But her chief beauty was her great profusion of golden hair, that hung in heavy

17. Ibid.

folds over her shoulders, partly shrouding the face. . . . There was some discoloration and decomposition about the pelvic region. It was apparent that here was a new victim of man's lust, and the life-destroying arts of those abortionists."

Details of the exciting "trunk murder" detective story were played out in the *Times* during the next several days, as police searched for the perpetrator. Meanwhile, the *Times* reminded readers every day that this particular incident showed what went on "in one of the many abortion dens that disgrace New York, and which the TIMES had just exposed as 'The Evil of the Age.'"<sup>18</sup> The police arrested one of the abortionists whose advertisements had been quoted in St. Clair's story, and the *Times* followed with an editorial, "Advertising Facilities for Murder." An editorial quoted St. Clair's article, discussed the death of the "golden-haired unfortunate," and asked whether "the lives of babes are of less account than a few ounces of precious metal, or a roll of greenbacks?"<sup>19</sup>

The *Times* also printed a superbly written follow-up by St. Clair. "A Terrible Story from Our Reporter's Note-Book" revealed how St. Clair, in his undercover research for the expose, had visited several weeks earlier the accused abortionist's Fifth Avenue office, with its "fine tapestry carpet" and "elegant mahogany desk." St. Clair described one of the patients he had seen: "She seemed to be about twenty years of age, a little more than five feet in height, of slender build, having blue eyes, and a clear, alabaster complexion. Long blonde curls, tinted with gold, drooped upon her shoulders, and her face wore an expression of embarrassment at the presence of strangers."<sup>20</sup>

18. Ibid., August 28, 29, 30, 1870, 8. A boy who had helped carry the trunk into the station tried to find a man and a mysterious lady who had delivered the trunk. Readers daily absorbed the strategy of the detective in charge, Inspector Walling, who "issued orders which practically put every policeman in the force upon the case."

19. Ibid., August 29, 1870 8; August 30, 4.

20. Ibid., August 30, 1870, 8.

St. Clair then noted the abortionist's reply when St. Clair asked what would happen to the aborted infant: "Don't worry about that, my dear Sir. I will take care of the result. A newspaper bundle, a basket, a pail, a resort to the sewer, or the river at night? Who is the wiser?" On his way out, St. Clair glimpsed once again the beautiful young woman he had seen on his way in. This time, as a fitting conclusion to his story, he drove the point home: "She was standing on the stairs, and it was the same face I saw afterward at the Morgue."<sup>21</sup>

The abortionist received a seven-year sentence. The *Times* insisted, though, that legal action by itself was not enough. Only a change of heart among New Yorkers would bury the abortion business for several generations. Providentially, New Yorkers had been "grievously shocked by the terrible deeds of the abortionists," the *Times* could report, and it was clear that abortion would no longer receive approval.<sup>22</sup> Abortion continued to be considered disgraceful until the 1960s, when a much-changed *New York Times* and other newspapers began pushing pro-abortion positions.

A reading of the *New York Times* through the mid-1870s shows that editors and reporters wanted to glorify God by making a difference in this world. They did not believe it inevitable that sin should dominate New York City or any other city. They were willing to be controversial. One *Times* anti-abortion editorial stated, "It is useless to talk of such matters with bated breath, or to seek to cover such terrible realities with the veil of a false

21. Ibid. What would be called today a "free press vs. fair trial" issue does emerge here: With one of its own reporters giving a firsthand account, the *Times* sometimes seemed to be convicting the abortionist in the press.

22. Ibid., December 8, 1871, 2. The *Times* did recommend passage of a bill "far-reaching enough to catch hold of all who assist, directly or indirectly, in the destruction of infant life," and gave its recommendation one additional populist thrust: "The people demand it." The New York legislature of 1872 passed tough new anti-abortion laws, with easier rules of evidence and a maximum penalty of twenty years' imprisonment. Enforcement also was stepped up.

delicacy. . . . From a lethargy like this it is time to rouse ourselves. The evil that is tolerated is aggressive.”

The editorial concluded that “the good . . . must be aggressive too.”<sup>23</sup>

### Sunset for Christian Journalism

Aggressive journalism by Christians disappeared soon after one of its major successes, for four particular reasons and two underlying causes.

First, looking at the *New York Times* specifically, one generation died or departed. Owners and editors who knew not Joseph emerged. The newspaper’s slogans became “It Does Not Soil the Breakfast Cloth” and “All the News That’s Fit to Print.” Evil unfit for breakfast table discussion or considered unfit to print was ignored and thereby tolerated. Several generations later, it was embraced.<sup>24</sup>

Second, many Christian publications began to prefer “happy talk” journalism. They ran stories about individuals who seemed overwhelmingly decent, cooperative, responsible, and benevolent. Such coverage hardly left the impression that man is a fallen creature desperately in need of Christ. The refusal to cover evil also led to a certain dullness of copy, because without real villains there is little real drama. The *Central Christian Herald* once ran the following news report: “There is literally nothing stirring.”<sup>25</sup>

Third, many Christian publications refused to meet the communication demands of an increasingly fast-paced marketplace. There is a place for both popular and elite publica-

23. Ibid., November 3, 1870, 4.

24. The *New York Times* continued to run anti-abortion stories through the remainder of the century. Chapter 12 has more discussion of the overall anti-abortion campaign.

25. *Central Christian Herald*, September 2, 1852; quoted in Norton, *Religious Newspapers in the Old Northwest to 1861*, 32.



tions, and there is always a need for careful scholarship, even when short attention spans become typical. Some Christian magazines, though, seemed to pride themselves on unnecessary verbiage. The classic statement of literary arrogance was offered by the editor of one very dull magazine, *Spirit of the Pilgrims*, when he announced that “extended and labored articles” were the best kind. Readers who “are uninterested in communications of this nature,” the editor wrote, “may as well give up their subscription and proceed no farther with us.” *Spirit of the Pilgrims* soon went out of business.<sup>26</sup>

Fourth, denominational infighting was on the rise. Some newspapers spent much of their space attacking their brethren. Other newspapers, noting that splits had resulted from differences on key issues such as slavery, thought that divisions could be resolved if Christian newspapers steered away from controversial issues.

Overall, however, the problem was not particular villains, but two underlying theological trends. One was anti-Christian, one operated within Christendom, but they worked together to provoke journalistic retreat.

The outside trend is obvious: during the last two-thirds of the nineteenth century, American society generally was casting aside the Christian principles on which it had been founded. This shift affected every area of American life.

The *Boston Recorder*, located in the New England cockpit of theological liberalism, was hit very early by the great slide. It held its own against Unitarianism, which had captured Harvard College. *Recorder* editorials frequently explained the fallacy of believing in man’s natural goodness, and complemented those editorials with stories showing the outworkings of original sin.<sup>27</sup>

26. Quoted in Kenberry, *The Rise of Religious Journalism in the United States*, 158.

27. See 208 of each *Recorder* volume during the 1820s for a list of such articles. See also *Recorder*, January 27, 1837, 14.

But in the mid-1830s, a new attack emerged from a peculiar merger of materialism and pantheism.

The threat had grown for a long time. Rousseau, Kant, and other purveyors of intellectual romanticism—the idea that man’s reason did not have to operate within God’s revelation, but could actually create truth out of its own resources—had long been read at Harvard and absorbed by Unitarian ministers. But Harvard’s alternative to Christianity seemed cold until 1836. In that year Ralph Waldo Emerson’s essay “Nature” appeared, and the Transcendental Club, composed of young Unitarian preachers, began meeting at the parsonage of George Ripley, who later became an editor of the *New York Tribune*.

Emerson laid out the Transcendentalist challenge in “Nature,” and more precisely in his 1838 speech at the Harvard Divinity School. Christianity, he said, speaks “with noxious exaggeration about the person of Jesus,” instead of emphasizing “the moral nature of man, where the sublime is.” Humanity, Emerson proclaimed, “is drinking forever the soul of God” and becoming Godlike itself. Speak no further of man’s sin and his responsibility before God, Emerson suggested: man is God, or at least part of God, because a little bit of godstuff is sprinkled everywhere.<sup>28</sup>

If God is everywhere in Emerson’s sense, though, God is nowhere. Theoretical pantheism could merge nicely with practical materialism. Transcendental thinking was spread in magazines such as *Dial* and then popularized through non-Christian newspapers and the new public school systems set up by Unitarian Horace Mann and his disciples. There was no need to report on “God’s providence” if news events arose from a combination of natural chance and man’s godlike skill. The movement away from Christianity was heightened after midcentury when

28. Emerson’s address is published in many books, including Volume 5 of the *Harvard Classics*, ed. Charles Eliot (New York: Collier, 1937), 25–42.

Charles Darwin provided a convenient way to satisfy the long-felt desire of haughty hearts.<sup>29</sup>

Following the traumatic Civil War, even editors of some Christian publications succumbed to intellectual trendiness. For example, editor Lyman Abbott of the *Christian Union*, a large-circulation weekly newspaper of the 1870s, decided that the Bible was fable rather than fact. He became known for attacking God's sovereignty in the name of Darwin. With the support of others similarly swayed, Abbott eventually took Christianity out of the magazine's title as well as its pages, with the name becoming *Outlook* in 1893. By that time, other anti-Christian doctrines—Marxism and a general emphasis on “science” as mankind's savior—had kicked in also, or soon would.<sup>30</sup>

And yet, just as those trends were gaining power, a counter influence was developing. The period of great advances for anti-Christian thought also was a great era of revivals. During the last two-thirds of the nineteenth century, God used great evangelists such as Charles Finney and Dwight Moody to expound the gospel of grace to millions. Many were saved through their preaching. Many also learned, as Proverbs 1:7 notes, that “the fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge” and wisdom. They thus stayed clear of belief in evolutionary or Marxist scriptures.<sup>31</sup>

29. This chapter has room to mention only in passing the major theological and social developments. It does not attempt to be anything more than a quick overview. For general discussions of the period, see Perry Miller, *The Life of the Mind in America: From the Revolution to the Civil War* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1965), and Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972). For a discussion of Unitarianism and the public schools, see Samuel Blumenfeld, *Is Public Education Necessary?* (Boise: Paradigm, 1985). For a discussion of the impact of evolutionism, see appendices to Gary North, *The Dominion Covenant* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1982), 245–454.

30. Abbott's books include *The Evolution of Christianity* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1900); *The Other Room* (New York: Grosset, Dunlap, 1903); *Christianity and Social Problems* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1896); and *Reminiscences* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1915).

31. This discussion of Christian trends is, again, just a quick overview. For further information and perspective, see George Marsden, *The Evangelical Mind and the New*

Revivalism, though, did not particularly help those Christian newspapers that were endeavoring to cover every aspect of God's creation and perhaps "stir up the mind of Christians to duty." The great revivalists' focus on evangelism tended to be specifically individualistic. Worldview was not stressed. Furthermore, many Christians began to believe that the general culture inevitably would become worse and worse. They thought that little could be done to stay the downward drift. Christian publications should cover church news, they thought, and ignore the rest of the world.<sup>32</sup> The anti-Christian trend and separatistic Christian reaction combined to end the Christian presence in newsrooms. Journalists who embraced materialism and/or pantheism advanced in newspaper and magazine work. Christians who embraced separatistic revivalism retreated. Some Christian newspapers may have died after being overrun, but many evacuated the social realm without ever engaging the invading forces.

The general result of these two underlying movements—revivalism and separatism within the church, and an increasing materialism and pantheism without—was neglect of the Reformational idea of Christ as Lord of all of life. Relations of ministry and laity, and of sabbatical and general church activities, also were affected. Calvin and other leaders of the Protestant Reformation had argued that good work outside the pulpit glorified

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*School Presbyterian Experience* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970); Timothy L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1957); James F. Findlay Jr., *Dwight L. Moody: American Evangelist, 1837–1899* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969); John Woodbridge, Mark Noll, and Nathan Hatch, *The Gospel in America* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979).

32. As historian George Marsden has noted in *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (London: Oxford University Press, 1980), the 1860–1900 period brought with it "a transition from a basically 'Calvinistic' tradition, which saw politics as a significant means to advance the kingdom, to a 'pietistic' view of political action as no more than a means to restrain evil." This movement led to what Marsden calls the "Great Reversal" early in the twentieth century, with social concerns becoming suspect among revivalist evangelicals. Meanwhile, the older Reformed concern for social action was transmuted into a "social gospel" clung to by many who no longer held to the biblical gospel.

God as much as the activities of the ministry proper.<sup>33</sup> But as views of inevitable cultural decay began to grip nineteenth-century American Protestantism, some editors began to consider journalism inferior to preaching. The editor of one Ohio newspaper said that “the work of a Christian minister” was far more important than the work of an editor.<sup>34</sup>

As Christian publications became less significant, selection of editors became more haphazard. Often those who could, preached, while those who could not, edited—and the latter knew that they were considered second-class Christians. One minister thrown into an editor’s chair in Cincinnati wrote: “I had never seen a newspaper made up. . . . I was stunned by the cry of ‘copy!’ ‘copy!’ ” That newspaper ceased publication when a follow-up editor took a vacation and never came back. The editor of the *Southern Christian Advocate* proclaimed that it was better to “wander through the earth on foot, preaching Christianity, than to be the editor of a religious newspaper.”<sup>35</sup>

33. See Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (1899; repr. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983). Also see Henry Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1959), and John T. McNeill, *The History and Character of Calvinism* (London: Oxford University Press, 1954). Primarily, see John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1559 ed., trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960).

34. Norton, *Religious Newspapers in the Old Northwest to 1861*, 38.

35. Just as the *Boston Recorder* had been one of the first to see the entire society as a journalistic mission field, so it was one of the first to drop out under the twin pressures of Boston transcendentalism and the tendency to turn inward. Circulation during the 1840s was stagnant at a time when non-Christian newspapers were soaring. A *Recorder* editorial in 1848 suggesting “encouraging prospects” for the newspaper was belied by both appearance and context. Type size was smaller, typography was muddy, and page size had decreased. Those pages were filled with monthly, quarterly, and annual reports of various church groups, indicating clearly that the *Recorder* had died as a newspaper and had become a public relations organ. In 1849 the *Recorder* officially merged with the *Puritan*, a ten-year-old newspaper. Examination of one advertisement in the last issue of the *Recorder*, though, makes the agreement seem more like a subscription list buyout than a merger. The little notice, placed by the *Recorder* itself, offered “the type and other printing materials which are now used in this office—the whole comprising all the fixtures of a weekly newspaper establishment.” *Recorder*, January 7, 1848, 2; May 4, 1849, 71.

Sometimes it even seemed that a sense of “Whew! Glad I’m saved!” had replaced a strong sense of God’s sovereignty over all areas of human life. The theological vision of social defeatism and separatism had some immediate practical consequences. With many Christian journalists hiding their light under a bushel, the newspaper field was wide open for the triumph of “yellow journalism” at the end of the nineteenth century, and the expulsion of God from the front page early in the twentieth.<sup>36</sup> By 1925, Christians often were voiceless, except in publications that largely preached to the choir.

The almost total dominance of major newspapers by non-Christians showed up in the way they covered news stories generally, and major news stories with obvious theological dimensions in particular. One of the most striking involved coverage of a 1925 trial that divided believers in the biblical account of creation from those who had made their peace with materialism, pantheism, or some combination of the two.<sup>37</sup>

### Journalistic Monkeys

Two faiths were in conflict at that Dayton, Tennessee, “monkey trial.” The *New York Times*, greatly changed from the 1870s, editorialized for “faith, even of a grain of mustard seed, in the

36. An interesting test arose in 1899 and 1900, when international attention was focused on the battle in South Africa between the Boers and the British. Race was not an issue at the time, since neither side spoke much of the black inhabitants; the issue was social Darwinist “progress,” and to the *New York Times* the Boers seemed least likely to succeed, due to their fundamentalist religious beliefs. “Poor, hidebound, Bible reading, otherwise illiterate Boers,” the *New York Times* sniffed. The Boers’ religion, according to the *Times*, makes them a “very stubborn people . . . in a state of arrested development. They are not much different from the Dutch of this island two centuries ago. That is to say, they are simple minded, Bible-reading, God-fearing people” with an “idiotic-heroic attitude” (August 24, 1899, 6; August 10, 1899, 6).

37. *New York Times*, July 26, 1925, Section 2, 4. Leslie H. Allen, ed., *Bryan and Darrow at Dayton: The Record and Documents of the Bible-Evolution Trial* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1925), 1, conveniently assembles materials against which press reports may be checked.

evolution of life. . . .” Realizing that only two ways led upward from sin and misery—God’s grace or man’s evolution—a *Times* editorial stated that evolution offered the most hope: “If man has evolved, it is inconceivable that the process should stop and leave him in his present imperfect state. Specific creation has no such promise for man.”<sup>38</sup> That faith ran up against Christian faith in God’s sovereignty and the hope offered by Christ’s sacrifice.

The events leading up to perhaps the most famous trial of the twentieth century began when Tennessee legislators passed a law forbidding the teaching of evolution as scientific truth. The battle was joined when one young Dayton teacher, John T. Scopes, responded to an American Civil Liberties Union plea for someone to agree to be the defendant in a test case, with the ACLU paying all legal expenses. Clarence Darrow, the most famous lawyer of the era, and an atheist, headed the defense. William Jennings Bryan, thrice-defeated Democratic presidential candidate, former Secretary of State, and a fundamentalist Christian, became point man for the prosecution.

The issue and the superstars brought out the journalists. More than one hundred reporters came to the trial. They wired 165,000 words daily to their newspapers during the twelve days of extensive coverage in July 1925. In theory, trial coverage could have been an opportunity to illuminate the theological debate that lay behind the creation versus evolution issue. But in practice, with few if any Christians among those reporters, the position established early on by columnist H. L. Mencken went largely

38. The importance of the Dayton trial, for both prosecution and defense, lay in the chance to debate the issues of the case. The judicial proceedings themselves were not of great interest. The case was open-and-shut, deliberately designed for conviction on obvious lawbreaking so that the decision could be appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court for a ruling on the act’s constitutionality. (Ironically, although Scopes was convicted, as planned by the ACLU, and although the anti-evolution law itself was upheld by the Tennessee Supreme Court, the Tennessee Supreme Court also overturned the conviction on a technicality involving the imposition of a \$100 fine without jury approval.)

unchallenged: "On the one side was bigotry, ignorance, hatred, superstition, every sort of blackness that the human mind is capable of. On the other side was sense."<sup>39</sup>

Journalists from major city newspapers saw the story as one of evolutionist intelligence versus creationist stupidity. Nunnally Johnson, who covered the trial for the *Brooklyn Eagle* and then became a noted Hollywood screenwriter, remembered years later, "For the newspapermen it was a lark on a monstrous scale. . . . Being admirably cultivated fellows, they were all of course evolutionists and looked down on the local fundamentalists." Such ridicule was not merely a function of geography or politics. Both liberal and conservative newspapers lambasted the creationists. Journalists constantly attacked the theology of the creationists, perhaps because it was something their cultures had only recently "outgrown."<sup>40</sup>

39. *Baltimore Sun*, July 9, 1925, 1. Mencken attacked the Dayton creationists (before he had set foot in the town) as "local primates . . . yokels . . . morons . . . half-wits." Mencken put aside his typical amusement with life to ride Paul Revere-like through the land with dire warnings about the trial: "Let no one mistake it for comedy, farcical though it may be in all its details. It serves notice on the country that Neanderthal man is organizing in these forlorn backwaters of the land, led a by a fanatic, rid of sense and devoid of conscience" (*Baltimore Sun*, July 18, 1925, 1).

Mencken's intolerance was parallel to that of many pro-evolution spokesmen. Columbia University dean Henry H. Rusby demanded that universities not recognize degrees from universities that did not accept evolution. A leading liberal minister, Charles Francis Potter, argued that "educated and enlightened men ought not to rest until the possibility of such dense mental darkness is removed." The *New York Times* then editorialized against "the mental and moral infection which has been let loose upon the land" (*New York Times*, July 12, 1925, section 1, 2; *Arkansas Gazette*, June 16, 1925, 2). Fundamentalists had some justification for believing that they were being told not "live and let live," but "your diseased religion does not deserve to exist."

40. Acid-tongued Westbrook Pegler, who covered the trial briefly, admired Mencken and imitated his coverage, but noted years later concerning the creationists, "They were intelligent people, including a fair proportion of college graduates. Nevertheless, the whole Blue Ridge country was ridiculed on religious grounds by an enormous claque of supercilious big town reporters." Such ridicule was not primarily a function of politics. It underlay the politics of liberal and conservative newspapers. The liberal *New York Times* editorialized that the creationist position presented a "breakdown of the reasoning powers. It is seeming evidence that the human mind can go into deliquescence without falling into stark lunacy" (July 13, 1925, 16). The conservative



The *New York Times* even noted at one point “a certain unexpectedness in the behavior and talk of the Dayton people. The unexpectedness comes from the absence in these Dayton people of any notable dissimilarity from people elsewhere except in their belated clinging to a method of Scriptural interpretation that not long ago was more than common in both North and South.” The *Times* writer in those two sentences understood that fundamentalist beliefs were far from bizarre. In fact, the newer method of scriptural interpretation had been regarded as bizarre in Times Square as well as Tennessee only a short time before.<sup>41</sup>

The Christian exile from mainline journalism—the absence of salt—led to poor reporting. The evolutionists, without anyone to check them, wrote that Christians were trying to make one pro-evolution book “a book of evil tidings, to be studied in secret.”<sup>42</sup> This was nonsense. Hundreds of pro-evolution writings were on sale in Dayton. Even a drugstore had a stack of materials representing all positions. John Butler, the legislator who introduced the anti-evolution bill, had a copy of Darwin’s *The Origin of the Species* for his teenage children to read. He told reporters, “I am not opposed to teaching of evolution, but I don’t think it ought to be taught in state-supported schools.”<sup>43</sup>

The key issue, clearly, was not free speech, but parental control over school curricula. Even in Tennessee, Christian parents were already beginning to sense that their beliefs were being excluded from schools they were funding. William Jennings Bryan spoke for them when he said he “never advocated teaching the Bible in public schools,” but believed “school children should . . . hear of Bible characters as well as other characters. In other words, there is no reason why

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*Chicago Tribune* sneered at fundamentalists looking for “horns and forked tails and cloven hoofs” (July 19, 1925, 5).

41. *New York Times*, July 20, 1925, 14.

42. *Arkansas Gazette*, July 18, 1925, 5.

43. *Baltimore Sun*, July 10, 1925, 1. Also see *Atlanta Constitution*, July 9, 1925, 10.

the reading of the Bible should be excluded while the reading of books about other characters in history, like Confucius, should be permitted.”<sup>44</sup>

Tennessee legislators saw their anti-evolution bill not as a way of putting Christian religion into the schools, but of forbidding proselytizing for what they saw as a trendy but unproved evolutionary faith. Tennessee Governor Peay opposed the uncritical acceptance of evolutionary material “that no science has established.”<sup>45</sup> One anti-evolutionary organization called itself the Defenders of True Science versus Speculation, contending that evolution “is a theory not yet approved by science,” particularly since species-transitional fossils (“missing links”) had not been found. “Demonstrated truth,” Bryan insisted, “has no terrors for Christianity.”<sup>46</sup>

Journalists, instead of explaining that, wrote leads such as “Tennessee today maintained its quarantine against learning.” The battle was “rock-ribbed Tennessee” versus “unfettered investigation by the human mind and the liberty of opinion of which the Constitution makers preached.” Reporters regularly attacked Christian faith and “this superheated religious atmosphere, this pathetic search for the ‘eternal truth.’”<sup>47</sup>

One journalist described Scopes, the teacher-defendant, as an imprisoned martyr, “the witch who is to be burned by Dayton.” (Actually, Scopes did not spend a second in jail and received regular dinner invitations from Dayton Christians.) If the creationists win, another wrote, “The dunce cap will be the crown of office, and the slopstick will be the sceptre of authority.” Residents of Dayton were “the treewise monkeys” who “see

44. *Arkansas Gazette*, July 12, 1. Also see *Arkansas Gazette*, June 23, 1925, 1, and June 28, 1925, 1; *Washington Post*, July 16, 1925, 6.

45. *Arkansas Gazette*, June 27, 1925, 1.

46. *Atlanta Constitution*, July 2, 1925, 1; July 8, 1925, 22.

47. *New York American*, July 18, 1925, 1; July 14, 1925, 1; *Arkansas Gazette* (New York Times/Chicago Tribune news service), July 16, 1925, 3.

no logic, speak no logic and hear no logic.” When William Jennings Bryan Jr., an attorney, arrived for the trial, a columnist wrote, “Junior is bound to be a chip off the old blockhead. . . . Like father, like son, and we don’t like either.”<sup>48</sup>

Dayton jurors, who following the trial gave thoughtful accounts of the proceedings, were described in one New York headline: “Intelligence of Most of Lowest Grade.” It seemed that “All twelve are Protestant churchgoers.”<sup>49</sup>

Reporters did not even cover accurately the debates between creationists and evolutionists. For instance, when Bryan debated Darrow’s associate Dudley Malone on July 16, the court transcript shows strong and intelligent orations by both sides. Bryan, within Christian presuppositions, made a sophisticated and coherent argument. He stressed the evolutionary theory’s lack of scientific proof and emphasized its inability to answer questions about how life began, how man began, how one species actually changes into another, and so on. He pointed out the irreconcilability of Darwinian doctrines of extra-species evolution with the biblical account of creation, original sin, and the reasons for Christ’s coming.<sup>50</sup>

Malone stated the evolutionist position in a similarly cohesive way. Both sides apparently did well. But journalists wrote that Bryan’s speech “was a grotesque performance and downright touching in its imbecility.”<sup>51</sup> Reporters often salted their stories with sarcastic biblical allusions: “Dayton began to read a new book of revelations today. The wrath of Bryan fell at last. With whips of scorn . . . he sought to drive science from the temples of God and failed.”<sup>52</sup> According to the *Chicago Tribune*, the debate proved that “the truth as

48. *New York American*, July 13, 1925, 1; July 15, 1925, 4; July 16, 1925, 2; July 17, 1925, 2.

49. *New York American*, July 12, 1925, 1; see also *Arkansas Gazette*, July 11, 1.

50. See Allen, ed., *Bryan and Darrow at Dayton*.

51. *Baltimore Sun*, July 17, 1925, 1.

52. *Arkansas Gazette*, July 12, 1925, 1; July 13, 1925, 1; July 17, 1925, 3.

applied to man's origin was not locked in a book in the days of Moses.”<sup>53</sup>

Overall, most major newspaper reporters produced so many unobservant stories that it often seemed as if they were closing their eyes and not even seeing the trial at all. The ultimate in this came when one New York scribe, under the headline “Scopes Is Seen as New Galileo at Inquisition,” wrote that the “sultry courtroom in Dayton, during a pause in the argument, became hazy and there evolved from the mists of past ages a new scene. The Tennessee judge disappeared and I racked my brain to recognize the robed dignitary on the bench. Yes, it was the grand inquisitor, the head of the inquisition at Rome. . . . I saw the Tennessee Fundamentalist public become a medieval mob thirsty for heretical blood. . . . [It was] 1616. The great Galileo was on trial.”<sup>54</sup>

It seemed that most reporters in Dayton, even when they tried to be fair—some had no such intention—could not help seeing the atheistic side as plausible and the Christian view as “nonsensical.” The life and beliefs of one of the best of the Scopes trial reporters, Raymond Clapper, shows the pattern. In 1912, ready to enter college, he was leading Presbyterian church meetings in Kansas. But after four years at the University of Kansas, he chose “a more reasonable belief.” By 1923 Clapper and his wife had “discarded the orthodox teachings of our youth. We could not believe the Old Testament prophets, whose teachings no doubt fitted well the savage age in which they lived but suited

53. *Chicago Tribune*. See also *Arkansas Gazette*, July 14, 1925, 5.

54. *New York American*, July 14, 1925, 1. One more bizarre twist to the trial deserves mentioning. The last Bryan-Darrow confrontation arose unexpectedly on the final day of the trial. Many reporters were off swimming or carousing, with the result that other reporters, after telegraphing their own stories, hastily rewrote parts and sent them to the missing reporters' newspapers in order to cover for their friends. Several reporters asked Scopes himself to write parts of the new articles; so journalistic coverage of the trial concluded with a bizarre touch: the defendant reporting on his own case under someone else's byline. See John T. Scopes and James Presley, *Center of the Storm: Memoirs of John T. Scopes* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967), 183.

our world no better than the Greek oracles. The story of Christ we thought was moving and beautiful but we could not accept the virgin birth or the resurrection.”<sup>55</sup>

Before Clapper arrived in Dayton to cover the trial, his mind already was made up. He believed “the whole case of fundamentalism [was] ridiculous.” It was no surprise, then, when Clapper’s stories argued that “fundamentalist justice has plugged up the ears of this Tennessee mountain jury.” Olive Clapper, his wife, argued that “unbelievable as the trial was to intelligent people, it did have value because the end result was greater enlightenment of people on the subject of evolution.” Clapper had done his best to provide that enlightenment.<sup>56</sup> The Clapper story could be repeated many times. Journalists who were or had become opposed to the Bible wanted to teach readers the anti-Christian “truth” as they saw it. There was no one to counterbalance their emphases, because Christians no longer had much of a presence in American journalism. Yes, there were denominational magazines and church newsletters, but coverage of major events such as the Scopes trial was in the hands of those who might be ever watching but never seeing.<sup>57</sup>

Mainline news coverage in the United States is still in those hands, as the next chapter will indicate.

55. Olive Clapper, *One Lucky Woman* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1961), 34, 51, 109.

56. *Ibid.*, 99.

57. The *Atlanta Constitution* editorialized about the trial coverage’s potential effect: “Thousands of columns of newspaper debate have been published under Dayton date lines in the past two weeks, and from it all the cause of the religion of Jesus Christ has not been helped, but the world has been broadcast with the seeds of doubt and skepticism, and only the future can tell what the harvest will be . . . among the millions of people who congest the bumper ground between science and the Bible there may be thousands who will now find themselves drifting into the easy-going channels of agnosticism” (July 22, 1925, 6).

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