EDITING IDENTITY ONLINE: FILM REVIEWS AS RELIGIOUS NARRATIVES ON
PATHEOS

by

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ABSTRACT

HALEY NICHOLE TWIST. Editing identity online: film reviews as religious narratives on Patheos. (Under the direction of DR. SEAN MCCLOUD)

How do we construct narratives about ourselves, how are these narratives influenced by our religious lives, and how do these narratives look when they appear on the Internet? Exploring the construction of autobiographical narratives and how they are influenced by contemporary society, I am focused on one particular kind of autobiographical storytelling: blogging. I am interested in how religion bloggers narrate their identities through interactions with film. Looking at the convergence of self-narratives and online culture, I study how bloggers edit themselves in particular online spaces, both enabled and constrained by new media technologies and trends in American religion and culture. Specifically, I focus on two writers on *Patheos*—the largest religion blog hub—and how, through film reviews, they translate cinematic ideas into conversations about the current state of their religious beliefs and their own "self-histories."

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INTRODUCTION

Andrew Spitznas and Paul Asay love films. They watch films, they blog about films, and they interpret films as being more powerful than simply a certain form of storytelling, which they explain in their film reviews on Patheos.com. The difference? Their religion. For Andrew, films can act as a secular force for social good. "Some of my favorite films are those that expand my circle of empathy, introducing me to causes and concerns about which I would have otherwise remained under-informed," he writes in a February 2016 blog post.[1] For Paul, films are messages from God. "God isn't picky about the ways in which he communicates with us," he writes in a July 2015 blog post, expressing the importance in paying attention to "what lessons He might be teaching through our movies."[2] Andrew, who explains on his blog *Secular Cinephile* that he identifies as a secular humanist or an atheist, writes that films are comparable to nutrition and exercise. "Watch the latest *Marvel* craptacular, you'll get an ephemeral sugar buzz. Watch a Pure Flix movie, you'll clog your cerebral arteries with its narrowing worldview and its bias-confirming prejudices." But if you choose the right film, "you'll be nourished by good art, not to mention strengthened to do good and be good in our great world."[3] Paul, an evangelical Christian who runs the blog *Watching God: Finding Faith with a Box of Popcorn*, writes that "timeless truths" are told through movies. "We see how God influenced the story of Martin Luther King Jr. in *Selma*, feel the echoes of sacrifice and redemption in *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, muse about the nature of God-given and man-

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[1] Andrew Spitznas, "Movies Generate Empathy and Broaden our Circle of Concern," Patheos Public Square, Patheos.com, patheos.com/Topics/Hollywood-Morality/Movies-Generate-Empathy-and-Broaden-Our-Circle-of-Concern-Andrew-Spitznas-02-17-2016?offset=1&max=1 (accessed October 9, 2016).

[2] Paul Asay, "The Best Use of a Semicolon Ever," Watching God, Patheos.com, sixseeds.patheos.com/watchinggod/2015/07/the-best-use-of-a-semicolon-ever/ (accessed October 9, 2016).

[3] Spitznas, "Movies Generate Empathy and Broaden our Circle of Concern."

driven creation in *Jurassic World*."[4] Though the two bloggers identify as having different

beliefs (and possibly have different taste in movies), their blog posts are actually more

similar than one might think.

How do we construct narratives about ourselves, how are these narratives

influenced by our religious lives, and how do these narratives look when they appear on

the Internet? Exploring the construction of autobiographical narratives and how they are

influenced by contemporary society, I am focused on one particular kind of

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their identities through interactions with film. Looking at the convergence of self-

narratives and online culture, I study how bloggers edit themselves in particular online

spaces, both enabled and constrained by new media technologies and trends in American

religion and culture. Specifically, I focus on two writers on *Patheos*—the largest religion

blog hub—and how, through film reviews, they translate cinematic ideas into

conversations about the current state of their religious beliefs and their own "self-

histories." In this thesis I argue three main things. First, Andrew Spitznas's and Paul

Asay's Patheos blogs allow them to publicly create and recreate their religious identities,

and their initial autobiographies which are filled with the processes of picking and

choosing institute this trend of revising, reconstructing, and editing identity. Second, the

bloggers, as film spectators, are interpreting the films they review in ways that

consistently reaffirm their religious narratives. Third, *Secular Cinephile* and *Watching

God* perform dual functions, as not only do they fulfill a service for their readers, but they

are also personal projects for their writers, serving as anecdotal reflections and

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[4] Paul Asay, "Let Me Tell You a Story: Evangelicalism's Future," Patheos Public Square, Patheos.com, patheos.com/Topics/Future-of-Faith-in-America/Evangelicalism/Let-Me-Tell-You-a-Story-Paul-Asay-07-22-2015?offset=1&max=1 (accessed June 3, 2016).

reconstructions about their beliefs. Putting these blog posts into conversation with scholarly notions of individuality and self-identity, my thesis acts as a case study that explores the convergence of contemporary American religious trends and digital culture.

Methods and Sources

On Patheos.com, readers can learn about the similarities and differences between Christian Science, Paganism, and Sufism without ever leaving the couch or opening a second browser tab. In fact, the three can be easily compared in an organized chart that summarizes their origins, development, beliefs, and "sacred narratives," among other details. This is a feature of Patheos' Comparison Lens, designed to allow its site visitors to choose up to three of 50 different religious traditions that are quickly generated into a side-by-side comparison chart.[5] Labeled as a research tool within the website's religion library, it acts as an attempt to illustrate Patheos' devotion to providing "credible and balanced information about religion."[6]

Created in 2008 by Leo and Cathie Brunnick, Patheos describes itself as the "premier online destination" for people seeking to explore and engage in discussions about religion and spirituality on a global scale.[7] The non-denominational media company features a religion library, home to encyclopedic information about 50 different religious traditions; a digital timeline and origin map that details "when and where every major religion began"; a book club; a monthly symposium called "Public Square"; and an in-house e-book publishing component. Its content aims to create a middle ground for "faith communities, academics, and the broader public," and it receives approximately

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[5] "Side by Side Comparison Lens," Patheos.com, accessed July 22, 2016, patheos.com/Library/Lenses/Side-By-Side.

[6] Patheos, "Side by Side Comparison Lens."

[7] "About Patheos," Patheos.com, accessed November 30, 2015, patheos.com/About-Patheos/About. Though directed at a global audience, all texts are written in English.

682,000 page views daily.[8] When it launched in May 2009, the Brunnicks intended for

Patheos visitors to "view religious history and facts through unique interactive tools that

allow [them] to compare, contrast, and explore religions and belief systems in new and

innovative ways."[9] Today, in addition to the continually expanding religion library,

Patheos houses nearly 500 blogs categorized into 11 "Faith Channels" and ten topical

channels, making it a simple task to identify a sought-after affiliation or subject of

choice.[10] As these subjects mesh differently with particular faith traditions, the resulting

blogs vary, and cover significant ground. For example, readers can find a therapy column

specific to Latter-day Saints, a blog about reproductive health in Muslim communities,

and, say, film reviews through a Christian or secular humanist lens.

My thesis focuses on two of Patheos' film review bloggers. Andrew Spitznas is a

self-identified secular humanist who has been writing on the Patheos Atheist channel

since mid-2015, while Paul Asay, an evangelical Christian, has been writing on the

Patheos Christian channel since 2014.[11] Through in-depth analysis of Andrew and Paul's

film reviews, I show how religion bloggers use the films they review to reiterate beliefs,

edit personal histories, and construct identity narratives. In selecting these two bloggers

on Patheos, I specifically looked for writers engaging with film and using their reviews to

interpret (and reinterpret) notions of their own beliefs. To do this I carefully examined the

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[8] Patheos, "About Patheos."; Alexa, Patheos traffic ranks, alexa.com/siteinfo/patheos.com (accessed July 25, 2015). Alexa calculates the average number of page views on *Patheos* every seven days.

[9] Patheos, "About Patheos."

[10] While 12 Faith Channels are listed, "Christian" is a label that has four subchannels and does not contain any unique content not found in the subchannels. According to the "About Patheos" web page, the religion library is not yet complete. It reads, "Our goal is to have more than 100 of the world's religious and philosophical traditions reflected in the library, as well as religion portals for a variety of the major traditions."

[11] While cross listed in the topical "Entertainment" channel and in the "Evangelical Christian" and "Progressive Christian" channels, in May 2016 Paul's blog moved from the main Patheos website to "Six Seeds," Patheos' new Faith and Family channel. His first blog post on this new platform was published May 25th, 2016.

"Entertainment" section of Patheos, which filters all media-focused blogs despite their differing religious categories, and determined that Andrew Spitznas (*Secular Cinephile*) and Paul Asay (*Watching God: Finding Faith with a Box of Popcorn*) were the two best options for various reasons. Most importantly, both bloggers are consistently engaged in film analysis. They write multiple posts per week and review new films as they are released—often the *same* films.[12] From October 2015 through October 2016 I read their weekly blog posts, in addition to reading the entirety of their archived posts. This totaled 214 blog posts, with Andrew's 79 posts and Paul's 135 posts.

<p style="text-align:center">Overview of Scholarship</p>

This thesis engages with three areas of scholarship: religion and media, religion and contemporary society, and personal narrative telling. They overlap in many ways, but also allow me to identify three distinct fields to which I hope my work will speak. In what follows I look at each of them and provide responses to their relationship with my own study.

<p style="text-align:center">Scholarship on Religion and Media</p>

There is a division in the contemporary scholarship of religion and media. These two kinds of scholarship—audience versus representation—differ depending on the focus of the researcher. While audience-focused studies are examinations about the ways in which various media, such as print, television, film, and the Internet, impact the audiences who consume them, representation-focused studies examine the discourses that

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[12] Additionally, I found that other Patheos film bloggers were not as focused on new films as they were on older ones, while others only focused on films that dealt directly with religion. Lastly, other bloggers consistently wrote about various media outside of cinema, including books and music, while Spitznas and Asay focus solely on films.

these different mass mediums *produce* about religion or specific religions.[13] My research

bridges these two kinds of scholarship as I am exploring the ways in which bloggers

narrate their identities through interactions with film. My study notes how and what these

bloggers are interpreting when watching films and I do this by studying their film

reviews.

My thesis has been sparked by the growing scholarship on variations of digital

religion—a fairly new sub-field that has seen its share of terminological and conceptual

change. Surfacing in the mid- to late 1990s as "cyber religion" and known today as

digital religion, this is an area that religion and media scholars like Stewart Hoover

identify as religion comprised in new ways through the cultures of digital media.[14] Heidi

Campbell defines the field as "the technological and cultural space that is evoked when

we talk about how online and offline religious spheres have become blended or

integrated."[15] My research is significantly influenced by Campbell's scholarship on

religion and new media, and it is her definition of the term I am invoking when I mention

it; thinking about the spaces that emerge from the convergence of religion and digital

technologies. Campbell also investigates how Internet users develop discourses about

their online activities that "conceptualize the Internet for acceptable use" within religious

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[13] Examples of audience-focused studies include Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill University of North Carolina Press, 1984) and Lynn Schofield Clark, *From Angels to Aliens: Teenagers, the Media, and the Supernatural* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003). Examples of representation-focused studies include Sean McCloud, *Making the American Religious Fringe: Exotics, Subversives, and Journalists, 1955-1993* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004) and Mary Beth Swetnam Mathews, *Rethinking Zion: How the Print Media Placed Fundamentalism in the South* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2006).
[14] Stewart Hoover, "Foreword: Practice, Autonomy and Authority in the Digitally Religious and Digitally Spiritual," in *Digital Religion: Social Media and Culture: Perspectives, Practices, and Futures*, eds. P.H. Cheong, P. Fisher-Nielsen, S. Gelfgren, and C. Ess (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2012), vii-xi.
[15] Ibid, 3-4.

frameworks.[16] Her study follows the "negotiation" tactics behind the religious shaping of technology and determines a set of common discourses and corresponding narratives often employed by religious Internet users. Identifying a discourse that describes religious identity, this characterizes the Internet in a way that affirms the religious lifestyle of the user.[17] Her observation is particularly relevant to my study, as my subjects interpret films in ways that consistently *re*affirm their own beliefs. While Campbell's study limits itself to institutional and "traditional religions," she begins an important conversation about religious narratives found online that I extend in my own study, also shifting her observation about narratives of negotiation to those of justification.[18]

Because my study is concerned with online constructions of the self, the work of Katherine Walker is important. She explores the presentation of the self specifically on personal online home pages, and poses questions about the Internet's extent to allow these presentations to develop.[19] Noting that the Internet is often associated with isolation and that "some feel that the Internet interaction is by definition removed from the older idea of community and relationships," she argues that this medium can actually augment older forms of communications, offering new methods to create and display networks and communities.[20]

<div align="center">Scholarship on Religion and Contemporary Society</div>

Sociologist Anthony Giddens studies contemporary identity narratives as products of a culture that have been significantly shaped by developments in mass

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[16] Heidi Campbell, "Spiritualising the Internet: Uncovering Discourses and Narratives of Religious Internet Usage," *Online—Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 1.1 (2005):1.

[17] Ibid, 18.

[18] I find that the bloggers I study tend to justify their film interpretations by reiterating their beliefs.

[19] Katherine Walker, "'It's Difficult to Hide It': The Presentation of Self on Internet Home Pages," *Qualitative Sociology* Vol. 23, No. 1 (2000).

[20] Ibid, 104, 113. An example of scholarship that explores these ideas is Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More From Technology and Less From Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011).

communications.[21] His arguments have helped me place my study in its appropriate

social context, allowing me to understand that the narratives written by the Patheos

bloggers are very much a product of the contemporary culture he describes. The

bloggers' "About Me" narratives, in addition to the smaller narratives that their

subsequent blog posts detail, serve as examples of Giddens's descriptions of self-identity

creation—processes filled with the practices of picking and choosing, of revising and

reconstructing, of *editing.* I agree with Giddens's argument that identity narratives are

"continuously revised" and expand this idea in my study, as well as convert it to a

language of "editing" to fit the context of a digital writing space.

I also look to Robert Wuthnow who argues that "the deeper meaning of

spirituality seems to be moving in a new direction in response to changes in U.S.

culture," and that many Americans are focused less on remaining with a particular

religious institution and more on exploring various religious options.[22] As Giddens'

contemporary culture is one of uncertainty, and therefore anxiety-producing, Wuthnow

argues that people "who are faced with a dizzying array of choices and who experience

so much uncertainty and change must negotiate and renegotiate their relationships, if not

their very identities."[23] I find Wuthnow's arguments beneficial for my study for two main

reasons. First, the idea of picking and choosing religious practices and beliefs goes hand

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[21] Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991). When Giddens writes about a "risk culture," he does not mean that "social life is inherently more risky than it used to be," but instead the exploration of unknown territory— "risks deriving from the globalised character of the social systems of modernity (3-4)."

[22] Robert Wuthnow, "From Dwelling to Seeking," in *After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 1-4.

[23] Sociologist Jennifer Silva, in her 2013 book, *Coming Up Short: Working-Class Adulthood in an Age of Uncertainty,* studies the anxieties produced by the job market in the postmodern "mood economy," exploring the "making of the working-class adulthood" and how paths to this adulthood "are being reshaped by the powerful forces of race, class, and gender—and how, in turn, young working-class men and women are putting the pieces of adulthood back together amid the chaos, uncertainty, and insecurity of twenty-first century life (8)."; Robert Wuthnow, "From Dwelling to Seeking," in *After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 7.

in hand not only with Giddens's arguments about reflexive identity construction and Walker's arguments about the online presentation of the self, but it is also evident in the posts of the *Patheos* bloggers. One in particular briefly recounts his religious history, documenting his experiences as a Lutheran, a Baptist, a Buddhist, and an Agnostic before settling into a comfortable Atheism. Moreover, with every new blog post the authors are making choices about what to include in their narratives and what to leave out. These are more than mere editorial choices—they are deliberate selections about their current state of affairs; they are reaffirmations of their religious beliefs as they presently stand, and justifications, through film interpretations, *about* those beliefs. Second, Wuthnow emphasizes the importance of "display and image" when discussing the shift from dwelling to seeking.[24] He is not only talking about the ways in which the language of seekers shifts to one of performance, but also about the changes in how these individuals are viewed. Display and image are key components to most personal narratives, but play an even more important role in digital ones, as these are less about first impressions and instead are archived accounts of the self.

<div align="center">Scholarship on Personal Narrative Telling</div>

As the above scholars' work has given me the social and historical context to better understand the actions of my research subjects, I also look to scholars of folklore and personal narratives to gain more perspective about the ways in which identities are *narratively* constructed. My thesis keeps in mind Jeffrey Todd Titon's argument that life stories and personal histories are traditional "fictions," crafted by affective responses,

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[24] Ibid, 8-9.

performances, and memories.[25] Furthermore, it takes into consideration the work of Erving Goffman and Richard Bauman. Goffman compares peoples' face-to-face daily-life interactions to theatrical performances, and Bauman argues that "performance, as a mode of spoken verbal communication," should indeed be studied as verbal art.[26] I incorporate these ideas about studying autobiographical narratives as forms of performance in my study, keeping two things particularly in mind.

First, the Patheos blogs are performing dual functions: they read as anecdotal reflections about their authors' personal beliefs, yet they also fulfill a service by reviewing films for their readers. Perhaps by regularly reiterating the state of their own beliefs, often using ideas seen onscreen to interpret what one should or should not believe, they are acting as advisors for those who read their content, even functioning as authoritative voices. It is important to keep in mind that these bloggers are not only writing for themselves but for an *audience*. As two of only 12 entertainment blogs in the Patheos network, also categorized into their corresponding religious identification (atheist and evangelical, in the case of those I am studying), these bloggers serve as authoritative figures for both film and the religions to which they adhere and publicly explore. As such, I observe these blog posts both as personal projects for their writers as well as performances that function as public services.

Second, I look even deeper into this idea of autobiographical narratives as personal projects, and examine the social influences of the narrative authors on a smaller scale. In addition to contemporary trends in American religion and culture, I pay close

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[25] Jeff Todd Titon, "The Life Story," *Journal of American Folklore* 93(1980): 176-92; Jeff Todd Titon, *Powerhouse for God: Speech, Chant, and Song in an Appalachian Baptist Church* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1988), 1-7.
[26] Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1959); Richard Bauman, *Verbal Art as Performance* (Prospect Heights, Illinois: Waveland Press, 1977), 11.

attention to the deeply personal, familial, and religious influences found in the everyday lives of the Patheos bloggers as they document these in their posts.[27] In exploring these topics I am heavily influenced by Mary Jo Maynes, Jennifer L. Pierce, and Barbara Laslett's scholarship. They analyze the construction of personal narratives and argue not only that studying these narratives can help us better understand selfhood and human agency, but also that they can tell us about the relationship between the individual and the social.[28] The authorial trio identifies individuals as "social actors" and provides various case studies about the direct social influences that deeply shape individuals' narrative choices, and I apply these kinds of analyses to my own study. I take note of the editorial choices made in the construction of the bloggers' autobiographical narratives and attempt to provide thoughtful consideration not only of the larger social factors that have aided in shaping these narratives, but also to the more intimate and direct experiences the bloggers mention.

<div align="center">Caveats and Benefits</div>

While I have identified bloggers who I think offer interesting representations of my three primary areas of study, I am significantly limited in that I am only studying two bloggers instead of a larger number that might provide a more comprehensive analysis. By default, then, the bloggers are only representative of two different religious areas— evangelical Christianity and secular humanism. In addition to this, my thesis represents only one area of race, gender, and class, as these bloggers both happen to identify as middle-class white men. While this is important to my specific interests, I am also limited

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[27] Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 2.

[28] Mary Jo Maynes, Jennifer L. Pierce, and Barbara Laslett, *Telling Stories: The Use of Personal Narratives in the Social Sciences and History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 2.

in that I have narrowed my study to bloggers who talk about religion through the context of film specifically, as well as the fact that they both appear on only one blogging website. While I am interested in the statuses of the religious present for these two bloggers, however they describe that to be, this also requires me to take note of their change through time. I limited the scope of this study to one full year versus using the bloggers' full archives, as Andrew has only blogged on Patheos since May 2015 while Paul has been blogging since September 2014.

Moving on to the benefits of this study, conversely, I think it can also be considered a *strength* that I am only using two bloggers instead of a larger number. I study their writing in depth, and I aim for my thesis to be a case study that says something about the convergence of religious studies and Internet studies as well as what can be learned about contemporary lived religious practice by studying spaces that are not always deemed "religious." The weekly blogging activity of Andrew and Paul show that the bloggers are actively engaged in a larger conversation that my thesis identifies. Viewing films through their religious (or non-religious) lenses, they then interpret these films in ways that allow them to make much larger statements about themselves. With the constant development of new digital communications technologies, I think my thesis will provide a snapshot of a space in which religious discourse and digital technologies converge.

NARRATIVES OF WELCOME: RELIGIOUS AUTOBIOGRAPHIES ONLINE

This section explores the intersection of religion, contemporary society, and personal narrative telling by examining the bloggers' identity narratives in their first posts on Patheos. I examine the initial religious histories crafted by the bloggers, the similarities between them, and the ways in which the bloggers are editing their identities to welcome readers and position themselves as film reviewers of a specific kind. As products of a contemporary culture, these initial narratives showcase trends in the American religious and digital landscape that affect identity and self-expression. Andrew Spitznas's and Paul Asay's Patheos blogs allow them to create and recreate their religious identities, and their initial autobiographies institute this trend which is filled with the processes of picking and choosing, of revising and reconstructing, and of editing identity.

"About Me"

The first blog posts of film reviewers Paul and Andrew have much in common. Though hosted on Patheos but otherwise unaffiliated, their "welcome" posts are strikingly similar in length, structure, and language—both also featuring *Star Wars*. These similarities (sans *Star Wars*) are suggestive of larger trends that influence the ways in which personal narratives are constructed, and here I focus on those narratives when they are written specifically as "welcome" or "about me" narratives online. Studying Internet home pages, which tend to house similar summative content about the web page's owner, sociologist Katherine Walker examines the extent to which trends in digital culture affect "[presentations] of the self on the Internet."[29] Questioning whether the Internet determines the form an identity statement can take, Walker argues that it

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[29] Katherine Walker, "'It's Difficult to Hide It': The Presentation of Self on Internet Home Pages," *Qualitative Sociology* Vol. 23, No. 1 (2000), 100.

allows people to experiment with different forms of self-expression without commanding

its content.[30]

Andrew's first post reads like a popular joke. Titled "A Lutheran, Baptist,

Buddhist, Agnostic, and Atheist Walk into a Movie Theater…," the tone changes with his

first sentence, as he quickly corrects his readers and writes that instead, "that's just me at

various points in my life."[31] Accompanying the May 2015 post is a regal photo of The

Senator—the first cinema in Baltimore, the city where Andrew was born—donning *Star

Wars Episode 3: Revenge of the Sith* across its vintage backlit banner. The post continues

and Andrew writes, "By way of introduction, here's my spiritual and philosophical

journey in three short paragraphs." He lists his contentions with the religious traditions to

which he used to adhere, and in doing so constructs a platform on which to review films

through a comfortable secular lens.[32] Identifying his intentions for his blog *Secular

Cinephile*, Andrew closes with a warm welcome to his future readers.

While Paul's first post on his blog *Watching God: Finding Faith with a Box of

Popcorn* also uses his love for *Star Wars* as a jumping off point to document his love for

films, he also uses it to resurrect a crucial religious conflict. "When I was about eight

years old, my mom took me to see *Star Wars*. I've never been the same since."[33] The next

two paragraphs of the September 2014 blog post memorialize the film series as one of the

most important influences in his life. "Watching *Star Wars* was one of the seminal points

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[30] Ibid, 101, 113.
[31] Andrew Spitznas, "A Lutheran, Baptist, Buddhist, Agnostic, and Atheist Walk into a Movie Theater…,"
Secular Cinephile, Patheos.com, patheos.com/blogs/secularcinephile/2015/05/hello-world/ (accessed
September 22, 2015).
[32] Ibid.
[33] Paul Asay, "Welcome!" Watching God: Faith with a Box of Popcorn, Patheos.com,
patheos.com/blogs/watchinggod/2014/09/welcome/ (accessed September 22, 2015).

of my childhood," he continues.[34] "I was pretty bummed when I learned that it was the work of the devil."[35] Detailing an account of Christian theologian Norman Geisler warning Paul's conservative church about dangerous messages George Lucas's then-trilogy spread upon unsuspecting filmgoers, Paul writes, "I didn't *feel* like Obi Wan was trying to turn me into a Taoist," but continues, "Was my love for *Star Wars* eclipsing my love for Jesus?"[36] The rest of Paul's post explores his own religious ponderings about the meaning of *Star Wars*, positions him as a Christian film reviewer, and lists the hopes he has for the readers of his future posts.

The Self Online

Though crafted from the minds of men who identify as having vastly different beliefs, these two virtual autobiographies are too similar to discount. Most noticeably similar in structure, both bloggers craft their personal religious histories, constructing introductory blog posts that allow them hnto explore films *based* on those histories. They establish and settle into their places in Patheos' blended atmosphere of religion and film, ready to move forward with their subsequent blog posts, which is notable for two main reasons: it institutes themselves as authority figures on these intertwined topics and it allows them to tweak, edit, and rearrange their personal histories in ways that make the most sense to them for their blogging purposes. While I will explore in detail the bloggers as authority figures to their audiences in section three, here I am focused on the ways in which they set a precedent to create and recreate themselves in their blogs. Walker argues

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[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid.

that not only do these kinds of narratives reveal identity, but they also *create* identity.[37]

Furthermore, I argue that platforms like Patheos, and blogs in general, give bloggers a

space to arrange and rearrange their stories, characteristics, and interests in ways that best

fit their narrative of choice—to edit themselves for a particular audience or purpose.

Sociologist Anthony Giddens, who studies contemporary identity narratives,

describes the contemporary "self" as one that is narratively constructed. He calls these

constructions "[projects] of the self" that have been significantly shaped by the

development of mass communications.[38] "In the post-traditional order of modernity, and

against the backdrop of new forms of mediated experience, self-identity becomes a

reflexibly organized endeavor," he writes.[39] These identity projects, "which [consist] in

the sustaining of coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narratives, [take] place

in the context of multiple choice as filtered through abstract systems."[40] These

biographical narratives can be even further explored when put into conversation with the

work of sociologist Eva Illouz, who studies therapeutic discourse and its impact on

contemporary notions of identity. As Giddens argues that autobiographies exist at the

core of self-identity in a contemporary social life, Illouz sees therapeutic discourse as

engrained throughout the main institutions of today's society.[41] "Therapeutic discourse

represents a formidably powerful and quintessentially modern way to institutionalize the

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[37] Katherine Walker, "'It's Difficult to Hide It': The Presentation of Self on Internet Home Pages," *Qualitative Sociology* Vol. 23, No. 1 (2000), 105.

[38] Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 2-5. When Giddens writes about a "risk culture," he does not mean that "social life is inherently more risky than it used to be," but instead the exploration of unknown territory— "risks deriving from the globalised character of the social systems of modernity (3-4)."

[39] Ibid, 5.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Ibid, 76; Eva Illouz, "Triumphant Suffering," in *Saving the Modern Soul: Therapy, Emotions, and the Culture of Self-Help* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 9.

self," she argues.[42] Particularly focused on the culture and language of self-help, Illouz

writes that contemporary "self-help ethos" mixed with therapeutic discourse "has

produced a narrative of self that has deeply transformed autobiographical discourse, that

is, how life stories are conceived, told, and negotiated in interpersonal interaction,

thereby also transforming identity."[43] Her emphasis on therapeutic language is important

because it *too* is a product of contemporary society—a creation of the abstract systems

Giddens discusses.[44] Giddens insists that self-identity presumes a narrative, and Illouz

identifies a discourse with which to produce those narratives.[45] Both scholars help to

illustrate two significant factors in contemporary culture that are important in regards to

the two Patheos bloggers' autobiographies: the self as constantly reconstructed and

continuously revised, and the therapeutic language of self-help and self-transformation

that greatly impacts the way people talk about themselves and their experiences.

But how do contemporary narratives of self-identity look when further influenced

by our religious lives? Religious biographies can act as personal identity narratives all on

their own. Sociologist Robert Wuthnow notes the changes in American religious culture

over the last fifty years that are significant to these narratives. The change most relevant

to this study is a shift from emphasis on the institution to emphasis on the individual.

Wuthnow argues that many Americans have shifted from what he calls "dwelling" to

"seeking."[46] While "dwelling emphasizes *habitation*," or secure, boundary-laden

religious institutionalization, "seeking emphasizes *negotiation*" or a journeyed "freedom"

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[42] Ibid.

[43] Ibid, 155.

[44] Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991).

[45] Ibid, 76; Eva Illouz, "Triumphant Suffering," in *Saving the Modern Soul: Therapy, Emotions, and the Culture of Self-Help* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 9.

[46] Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 1-4.

to pick and choose elements of religion in ways that best fit one's identity. It's the

difference between someone who is consistently content adhering to the same set of

religious beliefs over a lifespan versus someone who instead moves between doctrines or

faiths, either searching for something of a particular enjoyment or for the enjoyment *of*

the search. But with more choices comes more *uncertainty*, and Wuthnow writes that

these religious seekers often must negotiate and renegotiate their very identities.[47]

This kind of renegotiation is found throughout Andrew's personal history, and his

story seemingly aligns with Wuthnow's "seeking" as he uses much of his first blog post

to revisit the varied religious traditions he has explored over the years. He writes that for

20 years he "lived [his] faith vigorously" as a Lutheran, but in his early 30's "doubts

began to slowly encroach."[48] "I started asking questions about a loving god sending non-

believers and gay people to hell, about Christianity's ugly past and often grotesque

present, and about the Bible's exclusive claims to spiritual truth," he writes.[49] After

"[dabbling] briefly" in Buddhism, spending a few years as a "closet agnostic," and then

discovering a handful of "provocative" books (mostly written by religious scholars or

popular atheist writers), Andrew was "[liberated] to unblushingly embrace atheism,

rationalism, and a generous humanism."[50] The religious history Andrew details sounds

very much like the "dizzying array of choices" that Wuthnow describes, as well as the

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[47] Sociologist Jennifer Silva, in her 2013 book, *Coming Up Short: Working-Class Adulthood in an Age of Uncertainty,* studies the anxieties produced by the job market in the postmodern "mood economy," exploring the "making of the working-class adulthood" and how paths to this adulthood "are being reshaped by the powerful forces of race, class, and gender—and how, in turn, young working-class men and women are putting the pieces of adulthood back together amid the chaos, uncertainty, and insecurity of twenty-first century life (8)." Silva's study is representative of the negotiation and renegotiation that Wuthnow argues.; Robert Wuthnow, "From Dwelling to Seeking," in *After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 7.
[48] Spitznas, "A Lutheran, Baptist, Buddhist, Agnostic, and Atheist Walk into a Movie Theater…"
[49] Ibid.
[50] Ibid. Scholars include: William Lobdell, Bart Ehrman, Michael Shermer, A.C. Grayling and the work of four prominent atheistic writers known as the "Four Horsemen."

"freedom" to pick and choose religious options that factor into the creation of an identity—that assist in the quest to uncover what Illouz calls the "authentic self."[51] Moving from religion to religion, Andrew documents his massive transition from what he considers to be *wrong* for him to what he considers to be *right* for him. Discovering and embracing atheism was the liberation from his struggles, and a liberation that he documents in a way that uses the therapeutic language Illouz describes.[52]

      While Paul's religious history details self-transformation and the quest for an "authentic self," it lacks the spiritual "seeking" that Andrew's blog post describes and instead illustrates what Wuthnow calls "dwelling." Paul's post does not question the presence of Christianity in his life, nor does it detail the "dabbling" in different religious traditions. It does, however, reflect a search for his own *authentic form* of Christianity—a quest that heavily uses film as a means of interpretation. He uses *Star Wars* as the primary example, and writes that after witnessing Norman Geisler's lecture on the dangers of watching the trilogy, he was "fascinated. And horrified. And deeply conflicted."[53] "[Geisler] was speaking in a time when some people swore that you could hear demonic messages on heavy metal albums if you listened to them backwards, and when some Christian parents wouldn't even let their kids watch *anything*," he writes.[54] Noting that more than 30 years have passed since he asked the question about whether his childhood love for *Star Wars* was taking over his love for Jesus, he claims that he can now fairly answer, "no."[55] Though recognizing elements of what he calls "eastern

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[51] Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Eva Illouz, *Saving the Modern Soul: Therapy, Emotions, and the Culture of Self-Help* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 182.
[52] Ibid, 184.
[53] Asay, "Welcome!"
[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid.

spirituality" in the films, he *also* recognizes elements of his own faith. "When Darth Vader turns his back on the evil Emperor to save Luke in 'The Return of the Jedi,' the core of the story feels almost…Christian," he writes.[56] "In Darth Vader, we find a flawed sinner who deserved death. And yet, when he turned from sin to save another, he found a measure of redemption—and new life, even as he died."[57] Paul's virtual autobiography details the search for a genuine understanding of the beliefs he holds, and uses his childhood reactions to *Star Wars* in order to sort out his questions about Christian authenticity. Paul's emphasis on childhood memory is central to his narrative in an attempt to seemingly *free* himself from those old conflicts. His post reads as an exercise of sorts, to rid himself of his religious concerns and to come to a "fair" conclusion, allowing him to, as he writes, "look at the culture a little differently, and maybe better see God's fingerprints on the stories we see, hear, and fall in love with."[58]

Comparing Andrew and Paul's first blog posts shows the personal narratives they construct reflect the religious, cultural, and technological changes that have occurred in recent American history—even in the last 15 years since Walker's study. The blogs on Patheos provide an example of these spaces in which religious discourse, personal narratives, and digital technologies converge.

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[56] Ibid.
[57] Ibid.
[58] Ibid; Asay, "Welcome!"

REMAKING WORLDS: "MAD MAX" AND LANGUAGES OF JUSTIFICATION

This section explores how Andrew and Paul, as film spectators, are interpreting the films they watch in conjunction with their religious narratives. I examine the ways in which their interpretations about films differ based on their personal histories, worldviews, and memories, and question how they are constructing and reconstructing worlds, both onscreen and off. In doing so, I argue that the bloggers' interpretations of what they see onscreen act as reaffirmations of their own beliefs, and that studying these reaffirmations, in addition to broader media such as films and blogs, can help us better understand lived religious practice in the contemporary U.S.

What does it mean for a viewer to engage with a film? To communication scholars Carrielynn Reinhard and Christopher Olson, spectator engagement with a film includes interpretation, appropriation, and sense-making, but ultimately equates to meaning-making.[59] "The meaning of a film comes from the interaction of the film and the spectator, and spectatorship becomes an activity of engaging with a text to make sense of it," Reinhard argues.[60] Viewers "making sense" of cinema is a topic that has long been studied by scholars of film, communications, and even religion. Theologian Clive Marsh notes that there are active elements in film spectatorship, as most spectators interpret what they see onscreen in ways that makes sense to them. "Viewers are not simply

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[59] Carrielynn D. Reinhard and Christopher J. Olson, "Introduction," in *Making Sense of Cinema: Empirical Studies into Film Spectators and Spectatorship*, eds. Carrielynn D. Reinhard and Christopher J. Olson, 2016), 3.

[60] Carrielynn D. Reinhard, "Making Sense of the American Superhero Film" Experiences of Entanglement and Detachment," in *Making Sense of Cinema: Empirical Studies into Film Spectators and Spectatorship*, eds. Carrielynn D. Reinhard and Christopher J. Olson, 2016), 213.

passive recipients of whatever 'message' a film may be deemed to convey," Marsh

argues.[61] Instead, they may expand that message, or interpret an entirely different one.

Reinhard, Olson, and Marsh argue that paramount to the ways in which viewers

make meaning from a film is personal experience. "All film-watching happens within a

cultural context," Marsh argues.[62] "All viewers bring to a film life-experience, immediate

concerns, and worldviews."[63] Similarly, Reinhard and Olson argue that watching films

can also help viewers better understand their own experiences, as these shape how they

see, hear, and interpret what is onscreen and allow them to make meaning in ways

specific to their personal histories.[64] Religion scholar S. Brent Plate further expands the

idea of meaning-making, focusing on a broader creation (or recreation) of worlds.[65]

"Films create worlds," Plate argues, and he claims that "we watch, hoping to escape the

world we live in, to find utopian projections for improving our world or to heed prophetic

warnings for what our world might look like if we do not change our ways."[66] Also

arguing that there are blatant similarities between religious practice and film

spectatorship, Plate contends that the two are akin as "they both function by recreating

the known world and then presenting that alternative version of the world to their

viewers/worshippers."[67] "We go to the cinema and to the temple for recreation, to escape,

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[61] Clive Marsh, pg. IX

[62] Clive Marsh, *Cinema & Sentiment: Film's Challenge to Theology* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2004), IX.

[63] Ibid.

[64] Carrielynn D. Reinhard and Christopher J. Olson, "Introduction," in *Making Sense of Cinema: Empirical Studies into Film Spectators and Spectatorship*, eds. Carrielynn D. Reinhard and Christopher J. Olson, 2016), 2.

[65] S. Brent Plate, *Religion and Film: Cinema and the Re-Creation of the World* (London: Wallflower Press, 2008).

[66] Ibid, 1.

[67] Ibid, 2.

but we also crave the re-creative aspects, maintaining the canopy of meaning over our individual and social lives as we imagine how the world could be."[68]

World-Making Through Religion and Film

I use Plate's idea of world-creation as a way to understand how the Patheos bloggers, Andrew and Paul, are interpreting the worlds they see onscreen in ways specific to their beliefs. Considering their audience and their platform, the two bloggers are interpreting films in a unique way. As their blogs are hosted on Patheos.com, a website claiming to "[host] the conversation on faith," their readers are not only looking for film reviews, but are looking for a specific *kind* of film review—one that aligns with a certain religious perspective.[69] Here I focus on the film reviews and the ways in which they showcase the bloggers' film interpretations in ways that both directly and indirectly reaffirm their beliefs. To do this I explore the ways in which Andrew and Paul interpret George Miller's 2015 film *Mad Max: Fury* Road, identifying the similarities and differences between the worlds they construct and the ways their personal religious narratives impact these constructions.

Mad Max: Fury Road: Apocalyptic Perceptions vs. Faith-Fueled Redemption

In Miller's dystopian action film *Mad Max: Fury Road*, the visceral cinematic world is the audience's focal point, and Andrew and Paul recreate that world in different ways. To Andrew *Fury Road* is stark social commentary while to Paul it's a tale of hope and salvation. The two reviewed the film on the same day—three days after its May 2015 release. Both in nearly 1000 words, Andrew and Paul recount the plot in noticeably

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[68] Ibid, 13.
[69] Patheos, "About Patheos." The Patheos slogan reads, "Hosting the Conversation on Faith."

greater detail than usual for their reviews, dissecting in particular the world within *Fury Road* and what it means for the characters who live within it.

Much of *Fury Road*'s screen time is devoted to showcasing Miller's futuristic, unforgiving desert wasteland as navigated by former cop Max Rockatansky, escapee Imperator Furiosa, and brainwashed "War Boy" Nux. Together, the crew flees the Citadel—the only remaining city that houses the now rare water and greenery— controlled by the murderous tyrant Immortan Joe. In their film reviews, Andrew and Paul deconstruct and reconstruct this desolate universe and the characters who wander within it in ways that, though similarly structured, are significantly different interpretations.

<center>*Fury Road* as Social and Cultural Commentary</center>

Andrew begins his blog post with a mini rave review. "Not since Christopher Nolan's superb *Inception* has an action film so effectively combined story ideas, characters, and world creation."[70] Describing Miller's onscreen universe as a "mental and geographic wasteland," "primitive nuclear world," and "post-apocalyptic landscape," Andrew offers a lengthy plot summary before diving into deeper analysis: Max, haunted by his failure to stop the deaths of his wife and child, is enslaved by the War Boys of Immortan Joe. When another slave, Imperator Furiosa, attempts to escape with five of Joe's concubines on an armored semi-truck, the fates of Max and Furiosa become intertwined, and the runaways pick up war boy Nux along their escape from the "the grotesque Citadel society."[71]

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[70] Andrew Spitznas, "'Fury Road' revitalizes and surpasses the classic Mad Max trilogy," Secular Cinephile, Patheos.com, patheos.com/blogs/secularcinephile/2015/05/fury-road-revitalizes-and-surpasses-the-classic-mad-max-trilogy/ (accessed November 3, 2015).
[71] Ibid. This is summarized from Andrew's lengthier plot description.

Raving about *Fury Road*'s well-paced action scenes, casting choices, and visual creativity, it is not until the last few paragraphs of Andrew's review that he offers his interpretation of the film.[72] "By way of the Citadel, *Fury Road* serves up pointed commentary on two key forces that devalue humanity in the real world, our global economy and our religions," he writes.[73] Andrew sees the "unnamed denizens" of the Citadel to be "soullessly categorized" by their use to the tyrannical Immortan Joe. "Joe rules over a literal trickle-down economy, as he even controls the intermittent flow of water to the needy folk below him," he writes.[74] "Is it just me, or does this bear more than a passing resemblance to our current system, breaking the minds and backs of domestic minimum wage earners and overseas sweatshop laborers?"[75] Continuing, he appoints Immortan Joe as the "god" of the Citadel, "mythologized as creator and savior."[76] "His underlings are expendable religious pawns who credulously chant, 'I live, I die, I live again,' as they martyr themselves in anticipation of a chrome-plated afterlife," he writes.[77] "The parallels here to the self-negating aspects of every major religion are just as irresistible as the comparisons to our present day economy."[78] Andrew ends the review as he always does—with a five-star rating, giving *Fury Road* a 4.5 out of five stars, and a parent's guide, noting the film's R-rating and intense violence.[79]

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[72] It is worth noting that most of Andrew's film reviews have a ratio of about two-thirds dedicated to plot summary and analysis while about one-third offers his thoughts about how the film can translate into commentary about religion. On the other hand, most of Paul's reviews offer a 50-50 ratio between the two.
[73] Spitznas, "'Fury Road' revitalizes and surpasses the classic Mad Max trilogy."
[74] Ibid.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Ibid.
[77] Ibid.
[78] Ibid.
[79] Ibid.

Fury Road as a Quest for Salvation

Unlike Andrew, Paul weaves his perceived *Fury Road* religious implications

through his review from its opening line. "We Christians talk a lot about our broken

world," he writes.[80] "And let me tell you, worlds don't look much more broken than they

do in the *Mad Max* movies. So given all that brokenness, maybe it's not so surprising that

religion and faith are important thematic elements in *Mad Max: Fury Road*."[81] Paul

continues, offering a plot summary that reads similarly to Andrew's, until it's clear that

the two bloggers have come to different conclusions about the film. While to Andrew the

film follows Max, Imperator Furiosa, and Nux on their search for freedom from an

oppressive tyrant-led society, to Paul *Fury Road* "isn't really about Max at all. It's about

these two characters—Nux and Furiosa—and their quest for salvation."[82]

"They use the language of faith to express their yearnings," Paul writes, and he

uses a similar language to describe these characters. To Paul, Nux believed he was

destined to die "a martyr for Joe's unholy cause," but when he survives a battle, he

experiences "the sort of despair that can only come from losing your religion."[83] And as

for Furiosa, instead of looking for a "glorious afterlife" she is instead "on a pilgrimage of

sorts—a journey of redemption."[84] While "Nux pins his faith in a faulty god," Furiosa

puts hers "on a half-remembered heaven."[85] "They're looking for salvation in all the

wrong places," Paul writes.[86] "Just like so many of us."[87] Paul considers Max "the voice

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[80] Paul Asay, "Mad Max and the Furious Road to Redemption" Watching God, Patheos.com, sixseeds.patheos.com/watchinggod/2015/05/mad-max-and-the-furious-road-to-redemption/ (accessed November 3, 2015).
[81] Ibid.
[82] Ibid.
[83] Ibid.
[84] Ibid.
[85] Ibid.
[86] Ibid.

of dystopian pragmatism" through most of the film, as the character does not believe there is hope for the runaways' long-term survival. And for Paul, hope is key to the message his readers can take away from *Fury Road*. "Max is wrong: Hope is not a mistake. Turns out, hope was the only thing that helped push Furiosa and Nux past their own brokenness, and gave them faith in a brighter world that they never, at the outset, imagined. Hope gave this frenetic story its redemption."[88]

Concluding the review, Paul accompanies his final thoughts with a Bible verse from Romans 8:24. "For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees?"[89] He writes that at first Nux and Furiosa put their hope on what they could "see"—in a repressive leader and in the memories of "a paradise long gone." But after that "false hope" fails them, they find hope grounded in "love and sacrifice." "And in this hope, in their own ways, both are saved."[90]

<p style="text-align:center">Languages of Justification</p>

While Andrew and Paul interpreted *Fury Road* in ways that led them to entirely different conclusions, I argue that the narratives in their blog posts are actually quite similar. Through their reviews, they are interpreting films in ways that reaffirm their beliefs—the ones they explained in their first blog posts.

Heidi Campbell studies the discourses that Internet users develop about how their online activities converge with their religious lives.[91] Examining how religious users frame Internet technology, Campbell explores the narratives that emerge from this, and

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[87] Ibid.
[88] Ibid.
[89] Ibid; I believe Paul is using the English Standard Version of the Bible in this post.
[90] Ibid.
[91] Heidi Campbell, "Spiritualising the Internet: Uncovering Discourses and Narratives of Religious Internet Usage," *Online—Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 1.1 (2005).

identifies what she calls a discourse of negotiation. For example, referencing a case study

illustrated by Oren Livio and Keren Teneboim, who studied the discursive processes of

female Internet users within an Ultra-Orthodox community in Israel, Campbell writes that

these women deliberately spoke of their Internet usage in ways that framed it as

compatible with their community values.[92] They negotiated with a secular technology in

ways that made it acceptable within certain religious boundaries. Her discursive inquiry

about religious narratives found online lends itself to my own study, as in the case of

Andrew and Paul, their narratives transcend negotiation but instead reflect a language of

justification. Their film reviews are written in ways that justify their religious (or secular)

beliefs, and their interpretations of the films they review come to conclusions that align

with these justifications. Campbell also identifies an online discourse that reflects

"religious identity," and notes that this describes the Internet "as a technology that can

affirm religious lifestyle, [empowering] users to see the Internet as a place to also affirm

their religious identity."[93] The blog posts of Andrew and Paul indicate the use of a similar

discourse because they also interpret films in ways that consistently *re*affirm their beliefs.

       Though Andrew saves his biting commentary for the end of his review, he hints at

his thoughts early on through his word choices. He constantly references the enslaved

nature of the film's main characters, refers to Nux as a "refugee," and writes that through

the film's duration he counted "five unique cultures, each distinguished by their differing

vehicles, attire, weapons, and rituals."[94] His first description of Immortan Joe details the

character as the self-appointed "ruler and deity" of the Citadel, and Nux as "wrestling to

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[92] Ibid, 6-7; Oren Livio and Keren Teneboim, "Discursive Legitimation of a Controversial Technology:
Ultra Orthodox Jewish Women in Israel and the Internet," Unpublished paper presented at the AoIR 5.0,
University of Sussex, England, (2004).
[93] Ibid, 18.
[94] Ibid.

unchain his mind from Joe's indoctrination."[95] His words have been carefully selected to reflect his interpretation that *Fury Road* is representative of a society doomed by religion and a corrupt economy. Scrolling through this blog post, readers see that directly after this analysis appears Andrew's shortened biography that lives at the bottom of all his posts. "I'm a late arrival to atheism," it reads.[96] "First, I spent decades as a Sunday school teaching, mission trip taking evangelical Christian. But starting in my 30's, insightful books and a freethought community guided me to secular humanism."[97] This mini-narrative reminds readers of Andrew's stance—as a secular human who sees the world, or at least sees films, through secular eyes. To Andrew, atheism is freeing while religion is restrictive and self-negating, and *Fury Road* warns against these dangers.

While Paul's blog post asserts that he feels the opposite way, he too justifies his beliefs by interpreting the film in ways that reaffirms them. To Paul, Immortan Joe is the "only god in this apparently God-forsaken place."[98] Joe's brainwashed War Boys are "sheep for his alter"—Nux his most "devoted little lamb."[99] Indeed saved for a special purpose, Nux is not "a martyr for Joe's wacky religion," but is instead a "lamb-like savior for the people he loves."[100] Imperator Furiosa, not a "true believer" in Joe, finds her "redemption" by displaying faith and hope in something better.[101] Paul finds *Fury Road* to be a tale of redemption and salvation; a story about the consequences of instilling hope in false gods, and the prosperity that comes from finding faith in the *right* God. The film is about a journey—a pilgrimage. And it teaches a valuable lesson.

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[95] Ibid.
[96] Spitznas, "'Fury Road' revitalizes and surpasses the classic Mad Max trilogy."
[97] Ibid.
[98] Asay, "Mad Max and the Furious Road to Redemption."
[99] Ibid.
[100] Ibid.
[101] Ibid.

  Andrew and Paul review films, but by examining the religious narratives that flow throughout their weekly blog posts, I find that what's worth noting is not the reviews themselves but the discourses found within them. Though typed from the fingers of men who have opposite religious beliefs, their narratives are constructed in the same ways, filled with a common language of justification that reiterates and reaffirms the beliefs they uphold.

IN DEFENSE OF MY RELIGION: REFLEXIVE NARRATIVES AS PERSONAL
PROJECTS

Though *Secular Cinephile* and *Watching God* offer film reviews to their

readers—reviews that are heavily influenced by the bloggers' personal narratives—their

first blog posts (featuring their religious autobiographies) showed us that the blogs are

also providing something for their *authors*. In this section I argue that *Secular Cinephile*

and *Watching God* perform dual functions, as not only do they fulfill a service for their

readers, but they are also personal projects for their writers, serving as anecdotal

reflections and reconstructions about the bloggers' beliefs.

Examining the ways in which Andrew and Paul continually revisit and revise their

religious narratives, here I focus on two blog posts that seem to fulfill a similar purpose

for Andrew and Paul. Though their blogs are primarily home to film reviews, the writers

will occasionally post content that explores other topics. Sometimes it's a life update,

sometimes it's commentary on a current event, and other times it's a revisitation of their

beliefs in a way that does not use film to help convey them. The latter is the theme I

explore here, as both Andrew and Paul have crafted a blog post that communicates and

defends the status of their beliefs in ways that represent what Anthony Giddens calls

"reflexive projects of the self."[102] Their blog posts almost read as manifestos about their

beliefs, and while they are published on a public platform for readers to view, Andrew

and Paul are encapsulating their religious autobiographies in ways that make their blogs

personal projects.

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[102] Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 5.

"Why I'm Not a Christian"

"Well, it's happened again," writes Andrew in a spring 2016 blog post.[103] "A friend with whom I'm no longer especially close has used the interwebs to message me their grief and concern for my non-Christian soul."[104] Since "coming out" as an atheist, Andrew periodically receives questions and concerned comments about his well-being and religious status. "First, there's nary an opening query about how I arrived at my non-theistic worldview," he writes.[105] "Next, there's a smug assumption about their own rectitude (since they're trusting in the Word of God, after all). Then comes the hurtful devaluing of my character."[106] After stating his frustrations with these "proselytizers" and "meddlesome [individuals]" who question his religious stance, Andrew scripts a lengthy blog post in which he defends his atheism and lists no less than seven reasons why "godless humanism is a better guide than Christianity."[107]

He begins with his qualms about the Bible, which include that it is "a book of savagery" and "an absurd, contradictory work of fiction."[108] "I wasn't wired to be a Chinese menu Christian, picking what I like from Old Testament column A and New Testament column B," he writes.[109] For Andrew, either the entire book is coherent and reliable, "or it's all bunk."[110] So after deciding that he doesn't agree with the Bible's violence, historical and archeological accuracy, and its "multiple contradictions," noting in particular those found in Jesus' four canonical biographies, he determines that it's not

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[103] Andrew Spitznas, "Why I'm an Atheist and Secular Humanist: An Open Letter to Drive-By Proselytizers" Secular Cinephile, Patheos.com, patheos.com/blogs/secularcinephile/2016/04/why-im-an-atheist-and-secular-humanist-an-open-letter-to-drive-by-proselytizers/ (accessed April 25, 2016).
[104] Ibid.
[105] Ibid.
[106] Ibid.
[107] Ibid.
[108] Ibid.
[109] Ibid.
[110] Ibid.

for him. Next on Andrew's list, and with the shortest explanation, is "the problem of suffering."[111] He writes that the suffering of even one child eliminates the possibility of a benevolent deity who is omnipotent and omniscient.[112] "After all, such a god could've foreseen that Satan (whom he created, don't forget) and his humans would make such a mess of things. Which leads me to the next point."[113] For Andrew, the god he details is a "narcissistic sociopath" who is jealous, wrathful, and has followers who display "nasty behavior."[114] For example, Andrew questions the "warped mind game Jehovah played on his favorite son Abraham, telling him to sacrifice Isaac before psyching him out with the ram in the thicket."[115] Andrew's blog post is laced with images between every few paragraphs that illustrate his points, one in particular showcasing the scene of Abraham and Isaac with a caption that reads, "Do you think Abraham has a 'World's Best Dad' coffee mug?"[116] He lists various examples of the "[bad behavior]" certain Christian groups have enacted throughout history, starting with the Saint Cyril-sanctioned lynching of Hypatia in Alexandrian streets in the fifth century and ending with the current events of his "God-and-guns" state of Tennessee, home to preachers who tell county commissioners "that gays are worthy of death."[117] Claiming that "reason, compassion, and science offer better answers" than Christianity, Andrew argues that "the bible codified slavery, misogyny, and religious intolerance" and that Christians "are nicer people" when they don't follow their Bible's messages literally.[118] Finally, Andrew's last reason for his atheism is simply that he's happier now that he devotes his energy to the

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[111] Ibid.
[112] Ibid.
[113] Ibid.
[114] Ibid.
[115] Ibid.
[116] Ibid.
[117] Ibid.
[118] Ibid.

world he physically sees "rather than a fictional realm. And churchless Sundays are a lot more fun, too!"[119]

<p style="text-align:center">Hope for Millennial Evangelicalism</p>

"Colin, my 24-year-old- son, is a Millennial's Millennial," writes Paul in a summer 2015 blog post featured on Patheos' Public Square.[120] He lists the "telltale characteristics" of the Millennial generation that his son embodies, such as being well-educated, idealistic, and tech-savvy. "He climbs rocks, follows English football, and listens to the most obscure bands imaginable," Paul writes.[121] "And, like a growing number of young Americans, he doesn't go to church."[122]

Paul authored this blog post to explore the future of evangelicalism in America, which, as Paul notes, seems to be decreasing. "While 26.3 percent of Americans claimed to be evangelical in 2007, just a smidge over 25 percent would say so today," he writes.[123] Noting that just 19 percent of younger Millennials are evangelical Christians, Paul expresses concern that about 36 percent are entirely unaffiliated.[124] "It's not like all those unaffiliated Millennials are converting to atheism (though a growing number, admittedly, are)," he continues. Instead, "many are like my son: not hostile to faith, but suspicious of its earth-bound practitioners."[125] Acknowledging the percentages of Millennials who find hypocrisy and scandal prevalent in their views of Christianity, Paul empathizes and admits that their skepticism is often warranted. As a child, Paul watched as televangelists Jimmy Swaggart and Jim Bakker confessed "to a host of moral

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[119] Ibid.

[120] Asay, "Let Me Tell You a Story: Evangelicalism's Future." This blog post was featured on Patheos' Public Square on the topic of Future of Faith in America: Evangelicalism.

[121] Ibid.

[122] Ibid.

[123] Ibid.

[124] Ibid; Paul's use of "younger Millennials" refers to Americans born between 1990 and 1996.

[125] Ibid.

failings."[126] As a journalist, Paul covered Ted Haggard as he "fell from grace for his dealings with a male prostitute."[127] And as a practicing evangelical, Paul witnessed pastor Mark Driscoll "quit the pulpit doe to a litany of allegations ranging from plagiarism to bullying members of his own staff."[128] Paul digresses that evangelicals have given Millennials "plenty of reasons to leave the church," which he says will never be entirely free of scandal and hypocrisy, as churches are run by those who are "human still."[129] And those are not the only problems between Millennials and evangelicals in Paul's eyes. For example, "nearly three-quarters of Millennials favor same-sex marriage, while the majority of evangelicals would consider it a sin," Paul writes.[130] In addition, "a great many Millennials have been turned off by Christian political activism, and no group of Christians has been more active the last few decades than evangelicals."[131] Moreover, Millennials "don't want to be told what to do from a pulpit," he writes.[132] "They want to sit and talk. They want to swap stories." For Paul, this is the future of the evangelical church, because Christianity "is not based on a set of rules or a group of authority figures: It is, at its core, a story."[133]

For Paul, stories are a way to bridge the gap between young unaffiliated Americans and evangelical Christianity. "Timeless truths are conveyed through movies and music," Paul writes, which echo themes like sacrifice and redemption that go hand in

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[126] Ibid.
[127] Ibid; Ted Haggard, an American evangelical pastor, was the president of the National Association of Evangelicals.
[128] Ibid; Mark Driscoll was a pastor who co-founded the Mars Hill megachurch, from which he resigned in October 2014.
[129] Ibid.
[130] Ibid.
[131] Ibid.
[132] Ibid.
[133] Ibid.

hand with "God's overarching story."[134] While Paul notes that "nearly four out of ten non-Churched Millennials don't go to church because they 'find God elsewhere,'" he believes that "God will, in turn, find them—and perhaps lead them back into the Church's flawed but welcoming arms."[135]

<div align="center">Personal Narratives, Personal Projects</div>

While Andrew and Paul are writing for different reasons in their posts—Andrew to fend off "drive-by proselytizers" and Paul to express hope for an American evangelical future—I argue that the narratives in their blog posts are once again quite similar. Through their blog posts they are further editing their ongoing religious narratives, capturing the way they currently define their beliefs, and practicing personal projects that pose questions about the nature of their digital spaces as both public and private.

Revisiting the work of Anthony Giddens, it is important to reiterate his argument that personal narrative constructions are continuously revised.[136] Influenced by various facets of contemporary social life, Giddens argues that "individuals are forced to negotiate lifestyle choices among a diversity of options," which becomes "increasingly important in the constitution of self-identity."[137] In simpler terms, there are various influences in life that affect one's personal narratives. Sociologists Mary Jo Maynes, Jennifer Pierce, and Barbara Laslett agree, and argue that it's important to pay attention to the direct social influences that are specifically mentioned in one's narratives, as they clearly shape the individual's narrative choices and can help us understand "the connections between the evolution of an individual's sense of self over time and lifelong

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[134] Ibid.
[135] Ibid.
[136] Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 5.
[137] Ibid.

practices of self-narration."[138] In their blog posts, both Andrew and Paul are certainly

writing in response to an issue that has been sparked by a direct influence in their lives,

but their posts speak to something larger.

Andrew begins his blog post with a frustrated story about having been offended

by a message from an old friend. Clearly this has happened more than once. "Fears have

been expressed that I'm corrupting the people in my sphere of influence (never mind that

I'm raising three happy kids with whom I have a solid respectful relationship, or that I

work 55-90 hours per week in a caring profession)," he writes.[139] Feeling the need to

defend himself against the comments of his friend, among the others who treat him with a

similar sentiment, he expresses his irritation and establishes that he's "not going to take it

anymore."[140] "So even though these proselytizers didn't ask me, I'm going to set out the

reasons why I'm no longer a religious believer, and why I'm convinced that secular

humanism is a far more satisfying philosophy of life," he writes.[141] "The next time I

receive one of these drive-by missives, I'll respond with a link to this article."[142] Paul's

blog post begins in a similar way. Though his character has not been attacked, he is

frustrated with his son's choice to not attend church. "Never mind that he was raised in

an evangelical family and his pop writes for, primarily, an evangelical audience," he

writes.[143] "Never mind that my wife and I—like the good evangelical parents we are—

constantly shovel Christian books into his car and invite him to church. He doesn't see

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[138] Mary Jo Maynes, Jennifer L. Pierce, and Barbara Laslett, *Telling Stories: The Use of Personal Narratives in the Social Sciences and History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 30.
[139] Spitznas, "Why I'm an Atheist and Secular Humanist: An Open Letter to Drive-By Proselytizers."
[140] Ibid.
[141] Ibid.
[142] Ibid.
[143] Asay, "Let Me Tell You a Story: Evangelicalism's Future."

the point."[144] And "he's got company," Paul writes, using his son's situation as a way to delve into the larger decline of American Christianity, and Evangelicalism specifically.

Here we can clearly see an example of direct social influences that have deeply shaped the blogger's narrative choices. And though both bloggers may have been sparked to write these posts by a specific encounter with someone in their lives, I argue that these posts do something larger, and more personal. They serve as ways for Andrew and Paul to continually reconstruct their religious narratives, and in this case, defend their beliefs. Andrew offers a straightforward list detailing why his beliefs, versus Christianity, allow him to live an "authentic" and "far more satisfying" life.[145] "Ordinary life throws plenty of hardship our way," he writes.[146] "Neurotic preoccupation with original sin and shaming by manipulative preachers made life worse, instead of better. And the cognitive dissonance when dogma and reality didn't mesh was mentally exhausting."[147] Paul, in working through some of the issues that plague American Christianity, is able to defend a religion that he recognizes as "flawed but welcoming."[148] And he suggests that if younger Americans can understand that Christianity is "at its core, a story," they might be able to better connect with it.[149] "The themes in God's overarching story are, I think, woven into our DNA," he writes.[150] "I believe that's why culture's most resonant stories touch us so. They contain elements of our own."[151]

Maynes, Pierce, and Laslett argue that "personal narrative sources…are infused with notions of temporal casualty that link an individual life with stories about the

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[144] Ibid.
[145] Spitznas, "Why I'm an Atheist and Secular Humanist: An Open Letter to Drive-By Proselytizers."
[146] Ibid.
[147] Ibid.
[148] Asay, "Let Me Tell You a Story: Evangelicalism's Future."
[149] Ibid.
[150] Ibid.
[151] Ibid.

collective destiny."[152] In this way, Andrew and Paul are using specific sources as a jumping off point to delve into deeper issues they want or need to explore. Their blog posts, though created for an audience, are also personal projects that encapsulate different stages in their religious and larger autobiographical narratives.

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[152] Mary Jo Maynes, Jennifer L. Pierce, and Barbara Laslett, *Telling Stories: The Use of Personal Narratives in the Social Sciences and History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 3.

CONCLUSION

As Andrew and Paul's individual blog posts suggest something larger about their religious lives as told through their personal narratives, I hope this case study sparks a larger conversation about the convergence of contemporary American religious trends and digital culture. I argue that blogs can help us to study contemporary religious discourse and can help us better understand lived religious practice. Additionally, platforms like Patheos, and blogs in general, allow bloggers a space to arrange and rearrange their stories, characteristics, and interests in ways that best fit their narrative of choice—to edit themselves for a particular audience or purpose. Andrew and Paul are certainly engaged in processes of editing themselves in their narrative constructions, and their revisions are documented and archived, cemented into cyberspace, and act as historical records of themselves. A digital platform also brings entirely new options to the crafting of personal narratives, and sparks questions about the nature of the digital spaces. My case study attempts to bridge a gap between understanding the Internet as both public and private, investigating a place where the two spaces merge. [153] Additionally, *Secular Cinephile* and *Watching God* represent spaces in which technology converges with contemporary notions of identity, as the bloggers' posts feature personal histories—ones curated and edited to fit their digital home—that reflect their search for their own versions of an "authentic" identity and purpose. My case study examines this convergence of digital trends and contemporary culture, exploring the role of religion and the Internet in two writers' blogged self-identities.

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[153] Kelsey Burke has completed a similar study that is helpful in understanding the Internet as both a public and private space: Kelsy Burke, *Christians Under Covers: Evangelicals and Sexual Pleasure on the Internet* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2016), xiii-3.

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