

1-1-2003

Religion and Topoi in the News: An Analysis of the “Unsecular Media” Hypothesis

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An earlier draft of this manuscript was presented at the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, 2001 Convention.

Abstract:

Mark Silk has proposed in *Unsecular Media* that journalists operate with a limited series of topoi and that these are borrowed from religion. Silk thus claims when journalists write about religion, they do so in a way that ultimately supports religious values. In this study, I apply topic analysis to recent news coverage of Jesse Jackson’s marital infidelity to determine the extent to which the topos of hypocrisy was employed and whether this employment supported or challenged a religious (as opposed to secular) worldview.

Introduction

Numerous studies have investigated the relationship between the mass media and religion (e.g. Nordin, 1975; Hart, Turner & Knupp, 1981; Buddenbaum, 1986; Hynds, 1987; Maus, 1990; Dart & Allen, 1993; Mowery, 1995) often examining the specific issues of bias and secularization. Popular conception is that the media negatively portray traditional religious institutions and thus add to a putative detachment many Americans feel toward those institutions (Silk, 1995, p. 38). Partly on the basis of such popular concerns, researchers have through various means attempted to determine historic changes in the *amount* or *nature* of news coverage of religion.

One relatively recent discussant in these issues is Mark Silk whose book *Unsecular Media* challenges the findings of many earlier studies. Silk makes the claim that the media do not challenge basic teachings of established religion in America, and in fact honor it by using crucial concepts from religion in the very act of covering religion.

Silk has worked out this explanation of the media/religion relationship by using the concept of “topos,” commonplace ideas that circulate in a given culture and can be used in argumentation. Using this concept as a crucial tool in analyzing journalistic practice, Silk has attempted to understand what “topoi” (plural form of the singular “topos”) are most important in covering spiritual aspects of American life. In doing so, he attempts to demonstrate that rather than coming to bury the church, the media come—wittingly or not—to praise it.

This paper attempts to continue investigation along the lines that Silk has set up. If topoi are a useful way of understanding American news coverage of religion, their applicability should continue into present and future coverage. If theoretically sound, topic analysis should help us understand current media reports of religious activities just as much as it has past reports. With this in mind, I propose using Silk’s concept of topoi to better understand recent news coverage of the Reverend Jesse Jackson. Jackson, a long time religious activist and civil rights crusader, was accused of (and eventually confessed to) having an affair with a staff worker and fathering an illegitimate child with her. Numerous national and local news organizations carried reports of the “scandal.”

This also bears some similarity to the two examples of religion news to which Silk gives thorough analysis in his book, the cases of Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart. Both men’s reputations were severely tarnished by sex scandals in the 1980s.¹ In describing news coverage of the two preachers, Silk suggests that it is through the topos of

hypocrisy that the news media dis-empowered Bakker and Swaggart, while empowering the church as a whole. Silk claims that by choosing to view the two men's transgressions through the lens of hypocrisy, the media supported, rather than challenged religious tradition. As he states it, such news coverage does *not* show that the media are in a tense relationship with religion, rather that "tension is far less important than Western religious culture per se in explaining how the American news media cover religion" (p. 54).

In the following pages, I will attempt to investigate the extent to which the topos of "hypocrisy" helps understand the way the media have covered the Jesse Jackson case, and the extent to which such coverage might or might not reflect a process of "secularization." More specifically, I will argue that Silk fails to recognize the flexibility of topoi and the ability of the media to use topoi that could be perceived to be religious in nature in such a way that their religious dimension is vacated. Though only one topos is examined here, its use in the Jackson case does not appear to support the hypothesis that the media are more unsecular than secular.

Topoi and Coverage of Religion

Silk's affinity for topoi as a means of understanding the relationship between media and religion is in some ways a reflection of a deeper dissatisfaction with traditional means of analyzing such. In his chapter titled "The Phantom of Secularism," Silk reviews the debate on media bias toward religion and feels that the results of numerous studies are contradictory and inconclusive. As one example, he analyzes coverage of two papal visits—one in 1980, the other in 1993—and concludes that the concept of "secular bias" (quotation marks his) does not elucidate the similarities and differences in coverage between the two. Bias, according to Silk, does little to explain why religion coverage in the media is the way it is.

As an alternative, Silk (1995) proposes analyzing the "general conceptions" (p. 50) that reporters use in writing their stories. These general conceptions, or topoi as the Greeks called them, are commonplace notions that can be used over and over again within the political, social, and religious discussions of a culture. These "offer jurors moral principles for rendering judgment" and "provide the focus (indeed, the rationale) for journalistic narratives" (p. 51). In other words, the topoi of a culture are a reflection of its deep-seated beliefs. They "cast light on our own system of values" (p. 51).

Silk is not naïve in assuming that such values never conflict. Often societal consensus is hard to reach, and topoi will be inconsistent. Editorial writing, for example, is a site where topoi are often made explicit (Silk, 1995, p. 51). Moreover, Silk admits that occasionally cultural changes occur and topoi must follow (p. 52). Along these lines, nowhere does he suggest that secularization of American society is impossible. He simply indicates that he sees little evidence for such, especially when news is examined from a topical framework.

In doing his examination, Silk tries to lay out a series of topoi he feels become apparent when we closely inspect the way the news media write about religion. As noted above, Silk feels that these general conceptions are the conceptions not of a secular ethos, but a religious one. Where many critics of the media look at television reports, radio actualities, newspaper stories, and magazine features and see a consistent bias against the religious, Silk sees a pattern of reporting that reflects a willingness to consistently frame stories with conceptual categories that are historically religious in nature. Hence he says of those who produce the stories we call "news":

Ignorant of religion, even hostile to it, some news professionals may be; but the images of religion that they put on display reflect something other than their personal ignorance or hostility. When the news media set out to represent religion, they do not approach it from the standpoint of the secular confronting the sacred. They are operating with ideas of what religion is and is not, of what it ought and ought not be—with topoi—that derive, to varying degrees, from religious sources. (Silk, 1995, p. 55)

Thus Silk sets out in his book to identify some of the basic topoi that are used to cover religion within the American media, and to demonstrate that such topoi are rooted in Western religious practice. Admitting that his list is not exhaustive, he names seven topoi in his book. Those are: good works, tolerance, hypocrisy, false prophecy, inclusion, supernatural belief, and declension (Silk, 1995, p. 55).

Hypocrisy as Topos

As noted above, our purpose is to examine one of Silk's topoi as a means of discussing the thesis of his work as a whole. That topos was chosen on the basis of its applicability to a recent news event that was religion-related.² The topos I have chosen for discussion is "hypocrisy."

Hypocrisy is, in Silk's eye, a popular journalistic subject because "pursuing hypocrites can be fun and games" (Silk, 1995, p. 89). Moreover, given journalism's perception of itself as watchdog, pursuing hypocrites is virtuous as well. Silk even perceives the media's tendency to seek out hypocrites within religious bodies to be a reflection of the journalist having the role of "protector of people's faith" (p. 82).

This is the theme that Silk sees in news coverage of Bakker and Swaggart. Following the basic thesis of his book as a whole, Silk suggests that the news media had no vendetta for the two preachers on the basis of their religiosity. Rather, the news media used a religious principle, the principle of hypocrisy, to protect the legitimate religious flock (a flock that might be damaged by the two leaders). From this perspective, pointing out the hypocritical actions of Bakker and Swaggart was less a negative action than a positive action.

Hence, within the theme of *Unsecular Media* as a whole, news reporting on Bakker and Swaggart represents not an attack on organized religion, but a means of supporting it. Silk claims that these cases, along with earlier news coverage of Henry Ward Beecher (a famous Congregationalist clergyman accused of adultery in the 19th century), and the Hollywood depiction of Elmer Gantry, reflect a willingness for the media to play by rules set up by established religion.³ Those rules suggest that acts of religion must be sincere; they suggest that religious practice must be real. For Silk, this perspective makes no sense outside of Western religious tradition. As he describes it:

Hypocrisy, it need hardly be added, is not a violation of the law. It is a deeply embedded Western religious concept, taken from a Greek term for play-acting and used in Job, Isaiah, and the Gospels to denote the false pretense of piety and virtue. (Silk, 1995, p. 86)

From Silk's perspective, hypocrisy is thus a tool that the media use to let religion be religion, and to let the people know what true religion should be. It is the means by which the media walk beside religion and sustain it. And, the recurring use of topoi such as hypocrisy when the media are called upon to describe religious activities is concrete evidence (for Silk, at least) of the way the media and religion are in a complementary, not agonistic, relationship.

Bakker, Swaggart, and Jackson: Differences and Similarities

Though Jesse Jackson is in many ways very different from both Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart, his recent media scandal demonstrates clear similarities he shares with the two televangelists. Moreover, the differences Jackson exemplifies from the other two offer a tremendous locus for examining the power and flexibility of the topos of hypocrisy.

At first glance, Jesse Jackson would seem an odd pairing with the duo whose demise Silk describes. Silk mentions that "neither Swaggart nor the Bakkers [Jim or his wife Tammy Fae] engaged heavily in politics" (Silk, 1995, p. 87). Jackson, on the other hand, has been deeply involved in politics since the 1960s, even running for President on two occasions. In addition, politically and socially, the earlier televangelists would easily be labeled "conservatives," whereas Jackson is the quintessential liberal. Finally, Bakker and Swaggart were considered to exist on the geographical, social, and political fringes of society—for example, choosing to operate their "ministries" from small cities in the South. When describing them in his book, Silk says they are "hardly from the mainstream" (p. 83). Jackson, in contrast, is widely considered an insider in Washington, D.C., the nation's capital and seat of great power and prestige.

But there are also strong similarities between Jackson and the earlier victims of scandal coverage, and the similarities are important for this discussion. Certainly Jackson can be linked to the other religious leaders in that he built a large "parachurch" organization as they did. With Jackson, perhaps, this distance between the organization (namely Rainbow/PUSH) and the church is quite great, but the religious dimension is still evident. For example, the

official organization webpage consistently refers to Jackson as “the Reverend Jesse Louis Jackson” (www.rainbowpush.org). News organizations also use Jackson’s religious title and sometimes highlight the religious dimension of his political/social work. One of the most recent news stories on the civil rights leader began with the words “For decades Rev. Jesse Jackson has picketed and prayed and negotiated on behalf of bus drivers, coal miners and steelworkers” (Davey, 2001, p. 1).

As noted in this quotation, another similarity can be seen in media visibility. Bakker and Swaggart had for several years before their downfall developed a keen sense of how to use the media. Silk suggests that this was a key factor in their downfall. In his reading of the events, journalists felt that “living by the media, they deserved to perish by the media” (Silk, 1995, p. 87). Certainly Jackson is as adept if not more adept at developing media exposure. In fact, Jackson’s media exposure has most often been in the news media themselves, while much of Bakker and Swaggart’s prominence in the media was due to paying for airtime or developing their own broadcast channels.

Whether this will lead Jackson to “perish by the media” is yet to be seen. But a third similarity lies in the anticipation of such by some bodies. In the earlier case of Jim Bakker, Silk (1995, p. 83) reminds us that it was Jimmy Swaggart who first celebrated Bakker’s negative press, presumably hoping it would lead to his own increase in power—as if they were in a zero sum game. Marvin Gorman, another evangelist was then instrumental in exposing Swaggart (p. 86). In the end, Silk claims it was Jerry Falwell, who gained long-term benefit from the fall of the other two (p. 87).

Nobody can guess whether Jackson’s prestige will suffer significant damage due to recent news reports about marital infidelity, illegitimate paternity, or inappropriate use of funds. At least one news organization has suggested there are those would like to see him unseated. Belluck (2001) describes it as follows:

Ambitious members of the black clergy have begun suggesting publicly that Mr. Jackson's role as the nation's pre-eminent African-American figure is on the wane and that the time is right for a new generation of leadership.

The basis on which Jackson’s role would be waning is open for dispute. And dispute has already begun in the media. In the process of that dispute, much is revealed about the nature of “hypocrisy” as a topos by which the media report news of religion.

The Jackson Scandal in the News

Though Silk does not give a careful description of his method, his general goal is to understand how topoi are used to frame news stories. In analyzing the topos of hypocrisy, he uses the Bakker and Swaggart scandals as his chief cases. During the process of analyzing these cases he cites two newspaper stories, two stories from *Penthouse* magazine, one from *Newsweek*, one from *Editor and Publisher*, and two books on the subject (see Silk, 1995, pp. 89-90).

For our current purpose of investigating the Jackson case, a more systematic method has been used. The Jackson scandal first reached the national press on January 17, 2001 when Jackson openly admitted that he had fathered a child out of wedlock. National newspapers first published the story on January 18th. For the purposes of this study, I have done an online search of four national newspapers (*The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*) between January 18th and January 31.⁴ The keyword searched was “Jesse Jackson.” As the intent was to understand how newspapers as a medium utilize topoi, both news stories and editorials were considered for analysis. Letters to the editor and editorials by guests who had never published in a given newspaper were eliminated from the sample.

In the end, fifteen stories were used for this study. *The Wall Street Journal* gave little coverage to the incident, only registering one article. The other three newspapers were nearly equal in regards to the number of stories they wrote on Jackson during this period.

Hypocrisy as Topos in the Jackson Scandal

On January 18, 2001, certain embarrassing aspects of Jesse Jackson's private life became public knowledge. When a tabloid came to him with evidence of a child he had fathered with a former colleague, Jackson was forced to reveal details of his life he had hidden for some time. Jackson, married to Jackie Jackson for 38 years, released a statement in which he admitted to having an affair with Karin Stanford who was at the time of the newsbreak caring for their 20 month old child in the Los Angeles area.

The mainstream press began delving into the story immediately after Jackson's admission. Within 24 hours *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Los Angeles Times* all ran stories. All three led their stories with the issue of paternity. The lead of *The New York Times* stated that Jackson acknowledged "he had fathered a child out of wedlock." From *The Washington Post* the wording was that "Jackson has fathered an out-of-wedlock daughter." From *The Los Angeles Times* it was that "he had fathered a daughter out of wedlock."

Jackson's persona was certainly a factor in the coverage. All three initial stories (in fact, *all* of the news stories studied here) used his title "Reverend" in the first reference to him. *The LA Times* designated Jackson as a "Baptist preacher," while the *New York Times* labeled him a "Baptist minister." *The Post* made no reference to his religious position other than his ecclesiastical title.

Even so, the religious dimension of the story was strong, and hypocrisy was certainly a key feature in framing the story early in the coverage. One article (Tobar and Slater, 2001) even mentioned "cries of hypocrisy" in the headline. Only four articles used the word "hypocrisy" or an etymological derivative in their copy. But numerous journalists used wording that indicated hypocrisy was a key topos. Some made the connection themselves; others quoted sources that drew the necessary inferences to bring hypocrisy into the discussion.

Many writers intimated hypocrisy by simply making mention of Jackson's moral and religious ties. Kurtz (2001b), for example, quoted television commentator Britt Hume, who stated, "this is Reverend Jackson, whose standing as a spokesman on racial and moral issues stems at least in part from the collar he figuratively wears." Tom Oliphant, a well-known editorial cartoonist was also quoted by Kurtz. For Oliphant, as with Hume, the moral-religious dimension of Jackson's work was a key factor by which his actions are to be judged. He claimed that Jackson's problems are fair game for the media because Jackson "talked to all of us about morality and sin as well as appropriations." Oliphant made the hypocrisy line blatant—with words reminiscent of Silk's definition of hypocrisy—when he stated, "there's a private life that's at variance with the public one." Finally, though Donna Britt (2001), spoke for herself in her Op-ed piece rather than quoting another journalist, she also sees hypocrisy stemming from the moral/religious dimension of Jackson's life. "When you set yourself up as having considerable moral heft, as Jackson has—and when you court attention that assiduously—your missteps are as much fodder for mindless gossip as Helen Hunt's rumored face-life" (Britt, 2001).

Jackson's spiritual stature (in itself) does not appear to have been the biggest factor in precipitating the hypocrisy topos, however. At least six different voices were brought forward to suggest that Jackson's hypocrisy was not a general hypocrisy of being religious yet not following one's religious code. By far the most resonant accusation of hypocrisy in all of the articles had to do with Jackson's willingness to visibly counsel Bill Clinton during the midst of the President's own sex scandal. Saltonstall (2001) mentions that Stanford gave birth "months after Jackson began counseling Clinton over the Monica Lewinsky scandal." Belluck (2001a) reminds us that Jackson "served as a spiritual adviser to the Clinton family." Kurtz (2001b) is less delicate, stating that the "tawdry tale was boosted by Jackson's audacity in bringing his then-pregnant girlfriend, Karin Stanford, to pose with Bill Clinton while the reverend was counseling the president over the Monica Lewinsky affair." Kurtz (2001b) then goes on to quote two other journalists who use the Lewinsky connection to justify reporting about Jackson. Steve Coz states, "you've got the spiritual leader for Bill Clinton during the Monica sex scandal embroiled in an affair of his own...It's also legitimate from the aspect of Reverend Jackson's preaching about the moral fiber of America." Clarence page points out "The White House held up Jackson as a model of moral authority to whom Clinton was turning." Lastly, Tobar and Slater (2001) tied the Lewinsky angle back to the general connection to religiosity. They reminded readers that the "child was born during the time that Jackson served as 'spiritual advisor' to Clinton." In addition, they explained that this would have an effect on "Jackson's role as a political leader with a religious standing, the sort of speaker who sprinkles biblical references into his oratory."

Worth noting here, however, is that most references to hypocrisy came early in the reporting of the events. On January 20th, the focus of the news story shifted slightly as financial exchanges between Jackson and Stanford became a key issue of investigation. In addition, Jackson made public appearances in which allies demonstrated continued support for the civil rights leader. At this time, four stories appeared (“Rainbow Coalition Stands,” 2001; Belluck, 2001b; “Jesse Jackson Plans,” 2001; “Jackson Thanks,” 2001) that played down the hypocrisy topos, making no juxtaposition of words and deeds. In these stories the deeds are listed in brief factual manner and no critics of Jackson are summoned forth. In fact, the Reverend Jerry Falwell is cited in one story (“Rainbow Coalition Stands,” 2001) and is listed as having “praised Jackson for speaking forthrightly about the affair.” In none of these stories was a reference made to the hypocrisy of the advisory role during the Clinton/Lewinsky matter, other than one brief one (“Jesse Jackson Plans,” 2001) where it was downplayed significantly. In that story, *The Times* reported, “Mr. Jackson said he received a call from former President Bill Clinton, to whose side Mr. Jackson rushed when Mr. Clinton’s own extramarital relationship threatened to topple his presidency.”

Oddly, after this shift in tone, no more hard news stories occurred in the four dailies for the month of January. Op-ed pieces took their place, with five being published by the end of the month. Within these five essays, various perspectives were provided on Jackson’s style and the appropriateness of the moral judgment that had been provided in the media thus far. Within this discussion, the hypocrisy topos became much less certain.

Michael Eric Dyson’s (2001) piece can be summarized with his claim that we “need to acknowledge that our leaders will occasionally disappoint themselves and us.” Charges of hypocrisy are inappropriate here, according to the author. “Because Mr. Jackson has so prominently urged young people to take the high road of personal responsibility, some conclude that his actions reveal hypocrisy,” he states. “But it is not hypocritical to fail to achieve the moral standards that one believes are correct. Hypocrisy comes when leaders conjure moral standards that they refuse to apply to themselves and when they do not accept the same consequences they imagine for others who offend moral standards.” Dyson (2001) thus concludes:

The obsession with sexual sin has distorted our understanding of the morality of leadership. Our leaders cannot possibly satisfy the demand for purity that some make. And neither should they try. Leaders who are blemish-free often possess a self-satisfaction that stifles genuine leadership.

For Dyson, then, hypocrisy is not the topos of the story because Jackson is not a hypocrite. Jackson is presumed to be willing to live with the consequences of his actions. And, he is presumed to apply those same consequences to others. Hypocrisy is not simply a matter of saying one thing and doing another.

Hank Stuever (2001) also reduces the power of the hypocrisy topos, but by other means. In a tongue-in-cheek piece about the nature of the “love child” (borrowing a term from an old tune by Diana Ross and the Supremes), Stuever suggests that the nation was too busy “finger-wagging” at President Bush’s inauguration and President Clinton’s pardons to devote much energy to Jackson. In addition, from Stuever’s somewhat sarcastic perspective Jackson’s actions were not really that hypocritical.

Men of the cloth still have a way of shocking us with their love children. We think they should have a special clarity on fidelity, and it hurts to learn over and over that they don’t. Jesse Jackson goes into this category, though not quite like priests and bishops or televangelists. Maybe because he doesn’t lecture people about sex and purity, sticking instead to equality and politics. (Stuever, 2001)

Jackson’s selection of politics—rather than sexuality—as a moral message thus gives him more sexual freedom than other religious leaders. We learn here that to label public persons hypocrites is more difficult when they do not publicly address an area in which they are weak.

This does not give Jackson a complete pass, however. Writing in *The Wall Street Journal*, Holman W. Jenkins Jr. suggests that it is Jackson’s political and economic statements that should draw the most scrutiny. As in many other articles I have studied, Jenkins plays up Jackson’s religious affiliation, referring to him as a “civil rights agitator,

preacher, and presidential candidate.” Most of all, however, he focuses on Jackson’s ability to make financial gain while preaching “victimology.” In fact, Jenkins suggests the sex scandal was leaked to the press by Jesse’s own staff because of disgruntlement not over the sexual infidelity, but financial malfeasance. In Jenkins’ own words, the staff was “concerned less with fornication than with where the funds came from to set up his ex-mistress.”

Smith (2001) echoes this nonchalance toward the sexual dimension of the scandal, offering an analysis from a French perspective. Her thesis is that Americans are very uptight about sexual matters because of our moral debts to religious Puritans. In France, where the Puritan movement had little impact, extramarital affairs and illegitimate children are not scandalous, as they are in the United States. Smith acknowledges that many Americans do not have a penchant for French morality, claiming “many people saw his actions as hypocritical.” Even so, she tries to get to the root of those views. With the assistance of quotes from a “sexologist at the City University of New York,” she explains to her readers that Americans are more hypocritical than people from other countries are because “we’re still laboring under puritanical, Victorian views.” Smith thus brushes off Jackson’s hypocrisy as a cultural condition, and even offers hope that such matters will be less salient in the future due to “progress over the last 100 years toward maturity in our sexual attitudes.”

In the last entry of the month, Howard Kurtz (2001a) revisited media coverage of the Jackson affair. He did so not from the perspective of journalists as he did in his earlier essay (Kurtz, 2001b), but from the perspective of those who are politically involved. His claim is that the trend in coverage of political sex scandals has become quite predictable. When a conservative is victim of the exposé, conservatives blame the liberal press while liberals claim hypocrisy. When a liberal is victim, the right displays disgust at liberal values and the left attempts to demonstrate that private lives have no impact on public policy. Within the media themselves, “most of the commentariat splits along ideological lines in stunningly knee-jerk fashion.”

The most striking thing about Kurtz’s article is that despite the headline (“After Jackson’s fall, a rush to judgment.”), the essay veers quite far from the original subject and becomes a treatise on media coverage of scandal in general, not Jesse Jackson’s infidelity. After concluding that commentary on and reception of the Jackson affair are predictable, Kurtz discusses two recent editing decisions at the *LA Times* that have nothing to do with Jackson or reporting on hypocrisy. Perhaps Kurtz is communicating that a rush to judgment in the Jackson case is ill advised, so no judgment is possible whatsoever. Certainly the overall message is that any charge of hypocrisy is itself suspect.

Discussion

What is clearly evident from the above description is that the topos of hypocrisy is still used in the news media when discussing religious issues. The times when hypocrisy seems to have been most integrated into the discussion of these issues is when Jackson’s moral and religious persona was most directly relevant to the allegations against him.

What is also evident though, is that the topos of hypocrisy is not the only means of addressing the story at hand and that many in the media prefer other approaches with fewer religious overtones. During the second stage of reporting described above, little mention of hypocrisy was given in spite of the fact that such was possible. Jackson is well known for his discussion of economic matters (particularly economic justice) and any financial improprieties that might be uncovered could certainly be analyzed as examples of saying one thing and doing another.⁵

But this issue simply shows the multi-faceted nature of many news stories and the way the media are able to focus on those issues that they choose. Whether media practitioners choose on the basis of their own orientations or based on perceptions of audience interest is not certain, but in this instance there are obvious repercussions in terms of the secular or unsecular nature of the media reports.

For example, in the Jackson case the earliest reports consistently framed stories on the issue of paternity, not marital infidelity. This is problematic from the “unsecular media” perspective. As Silk points out, the topos of hypocrisy tends to relate to matters that are moral, not legal. Hypocrisy, Silk says, “is not a violation of the law” (p. 86). Yet adultery, an issue that is largely moral and has few legal ramifications, received little discussion in the news reports. Paternity, which implies issue of legality (at least in civil law), received much attention. As investigation into financial matters in Jackson’s non-profit organizations is ongoing, only time will tell if the issue that could relate to

criminal law registers with reporters. In any case, of the two issues studied here—adultery and paternity—the one that is least likely to be a legal matter (it is thus a “moral issue,” not simply a “violation of the law”) gained least attention. If hypocrisy is the dominant topos and charges of hypocrisy are religion based—not law based—we might expect an even greater emphasis on adultery, not paternity.

One might also argue that between these two issues, most Western religions say more about the former (adultery) than the latter (paternity). Whereas proscription of adultery is undeniably one of the Ten Commandments to be honored by Christians and Jews, no direct mention is made in the Decalogue of siring illegitimate children. And for Christians, the topic of adultery is included in the Sermon on the Mount, one of the most sacred texts on ethics.⁶ For many adherents of traditional Western religious traditions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam included) sexual purity in itself is an important aspect of religious life.

Yet in the media reports studied here, this is not the crucial link. And though commentators openly expressed reasons for not dwelling on Jackson’s original sexual transgressions, such explanations are not necessarily helpful in demonstrating the unsecular nature of the media. Several of those commentators suggested that Jackson’s illicit sexual relations were not (in themselves) that important because Jackson spends little time discussing such matters directly. Presumably then, hypocrisy is only applicable for those areas of a person’s life on which he/she speaks out publicly. If hypocrisy is saying one thing and doing another, the best way to avoid such is to *not* say anything. From this perspective, in the earlier cases of Bakker and Swaggart, tortured analysis of their sexual sins was appropriate because both had occasionally spoken out on issues of sexual sin. As logical sequitur, since Jackson’s focus is usually politics, not sexual morality, his extramarital relationship is not (in and of itself) worthy of media attention.⁷ Apparently paternity is more of a “political” issue, and thus fair game.

This logic does not appear to reflect the unsecular world that Silk envisions. It demonstrates that a topos can be borrowed and twisted in a way that actually defeats its original purpose. French sociologist/theologian Jacques Ellul demonstrated this in his book *The Betrayal of the West* when he pointed out that many use accusations of hypocrisy in a way very different from the original Christian use. He wrote:

When Jesus called the scribes and Pharisees hypocrites, he was challenging them to live up to the principles they proclaimed. At the present time, the same accusation is nothing but an attempt at self-justification, an excuse for abandoning principles. (Ellul, 1978, p. 55).

When news media representatives charged Bakker and Swaggart with “hypocrisy,” then, they did not *necessarily* agree with the sexual mores the two televangelists were preaching from the pulpit. According to Ellul’s description of modern charges of hypocrisy, it is possible that the reporters completely *disagreed* with the morality the preachers espoused. But by bludgeoning Bakker and Swaggart with their own morality, reporters could feel superior and remove people who proposed that morality (all the better if the reporters *did* disagree with it). That is, if hypocrisy is seen as saying one thing and doing another, there are two solutions when it is encountered. Jesus’ solution—as described by Ellul—was to do as one says. But if hypocrisy is saying one thing and doing another, the other option is to simply to stop saying what you are saying. In this instance, stop making pronouncements about sexuality.

But if pronouncements about sexuality are indeed part of the religious practice of a people, to ask them to cease and desist is to move them toward secularity. This is quite different from what Silk envisions. He sees the media as strengthening religion by protecting the morality of the church. Succinctly, he states:

the topos of religious hypocrisy is all about, and why there was a remarkably united front of media, evangelicals, *Penthouse* readers, and “Nightline” watchers to heap abuse on the hypocrites. (Silk, 1995, p. 88)

What had happened at PTL, what Jimmy Swaggart had done, was not just a private matter, was not just financial fraud and sexual peccadillo. It was an abuse of the faith of their followers and, by extension, of all believers. At bottom, that is what But this all assumes that Bakker and Swaggart would stop behaving as they did, would stop their engagement in adulterous affairs. Once they did so, presumably, they could return to talking about the evils of adultery. To see this as the goal of “*Penthouse* readers” is dubious at best.

Moreover, the abuse heaped on Bakker and Swaggart was heavy, whereas the abuse heaped on Jesse Jackson was short lived, if it was heaped at all. Several reporters were wondering about the effect of their reporting from the start. Kurtz (2001b) noticed right away that “there’s no immediate feeding frenzy.” Tobar and Slater (2001) ended their report with a quote from a Democratic political consultant who said “I would be shocked if two years from now (sic) we don’t look and see Jesse Jackson on the radar screen.” And Jenkins (2001) noted within a week of the breaking news that “the Jackson rehabilitation has been accomplished in an eye-blink.” Oddly enough, one article on the Jackson affair made direct reference to Bakker and Swaggart. Sean Hannity, interviewed by Kurtz (2001b), asked, “Will Jesse Jackson get the same treatment that Jimmy Swaggart and Jim Bakker got when they were exposed? Will the media shame him off the public stage?” At this point, the evidence suggests the answer to both questions is negative.

Conclusions

One possible reason for the difference in coverage of these scandals is that Jackson’s religion is much less evident than either Bakker’s or Swaggart’s. Such an interpretation does not corroborate Silk’s thesis. In addition, such an interpretation is based on limited evidence available here and is worthy of further empirical investigation. As noted above, in this instance the topos of hypocrisy was used briefly. Once it was abandoned, much of the writing tended to question the reasonableness of high expectations of sexual fidelity itself. Rather than discussing means by which extramarital affairs can be avoided—no article offered this—the articles focused on whether marital faithfulness is a worthy and realistic expectation.

This in itself raises questions about the secular or unsecular nature of the media. Other general findings do so as well. As discussed above, the use of the topos of hypocrisy need not support religious belief. To begin with, the concept of hypocrisy *need not* be founded on religious principles. Silk admits this when he says that the topoi used to report about religion are derived from religious sources “to varying degrees.” In the case of the topos of hypocrisy, two simple questions demonstrate this. Might not one atheist charge another atheist with hypocrisy? If so, does use of the topos indicate religious adherence?

Ellul suggested that the answer to the first question is yes, and the second is no. Charges of hypocrisy can be used by anyone, and the purpose may be the abandoning principles, not the strengthening thereof. Though no article directly requested that its readers abandon certain moral principles, some suggested our principles (as a culture) are outdated and abandonment might be worthy of consideration. Given the fact that some of those principles are imbedded in Western religious traditions, labeling such abandonment as “unsecular” seems illogical.

This is not to say that those who recommend abandoning those principles are immoral or amoral. What should be noted is that they are simply proposing codes of morality that are very different from those held by many Americans, Americans who perceive their morals to be based on religious—rather than secular—principles.⁸ To propose alternatives to these religious-based principles is certainly permissible (perhaps even admirable) in a democracy. The key area of interest for Silk is whether the media more often align their ideas with those whose morals are perceived to be based on Western religious traditions, or those who perceive themselves to obtain their morals elsewhere. In regards to the topos of hypocrisy, the media seem to be suggesting non-religious traditions as sources for moral authority just as much (if not more) than religious ones.

Of course, Silk lists seven topoi that he claims demonstrate the unsecular nature of the media. I have had time to deal with only one of them. Each of the others is worthy of empirical study. For example, Silk claims that the media pursue “false prophecy” within religious institutions just as zealously as they do hypocrisy. In doing so, according to Silk, the media lend support to legitimate religious bodies. Is there evidence that the media thus distinguish and honor “true” prophets? Similar questions can be asked of the topos of “good works.” As example of this, Silk notes positive coverage of efforts to feed the hungry. But this might be one good work among many that a religious body performs. For example, some religious groups would think it a “good work” to prevent abortion by blocking the entrance to a women’s clinic. Hence we may ask when Silk claims that the media honor religion by recognizing its “good works,” is there any evidence of activities that religious institutions perceive to be “good works” but are denigrated by the media? Finally, Silk claims that Western religious institutions are by their very nature “tolerant” and the media are supportive of religion when they expose intolerance in religion. Is his description of most Western religious traditions as “tolerant” accurate? When media expose the intolerance of religious bodies, is the end result greater appreciation for religion as a whole, or simple post-modern relativism toward moral and religious questions?

As with the study just presented, in each of these cases there is a need for thorough investigation of the topos, the accuracy of Silk's description of it, and the effects of its use in the media. The overriding finding here is that a topos may have some of its roots in a religious tradition and yet be used in a way that calls into question traditional religious practice. Perhaps this insight (if accurate) adds to our understanding of the process Silk is encouraging us to contemplate. Silk has thus admirably opened up a new avenue for investigating the relationship between the media and religion. Other scholars must follow his lead if we hope for deeper insight.

Endnotes

¹ Of course, Bakker's case was more than a sex scandal, as there were also issues of fraud, issues that eventually were cause for his criminal prosecution and conviction. Jackson's sexual scandal has also led to investigative reporting into whether the civil rights leader's books are in order.

² The extent to which the Jackson story is "religion-related" will be discussed later.

³ The case of Elmer Gantry is an interesting one worthy of further investigation. Silk makes an effort to distinguish between the literary account (by author Sinclair Lewis) and the "mass media" account (as portrayed in Hollywood cinema). Within this framework, the claim is that the literary account was too strong "for the mass media" (Silk, 1995, p. 81). In this way, Silk seems to be suggesting that literature is not a mass medium and does not follow the general patterns he lays out in the rest of his book. Nowhere however, does he discuss what makes a medium a mass medium, and if the "unsecular" nature he describes varies from medium to medium. One might infer from his comments, though, that the news media are more "unsecular" than literature.

⁴ Understandably, these four publications do not necessarily demonstrate how "the media" utilize topoi in covering religion. They should, however, give some sense of how national media do. Clearly more studies of how smaller, more localized media cover such issues are in order. Silk tends to focus on national media in his book, though occasionally relying on accounts from smaller outlets such as the *Charlotte Observer*.

⁵ News coverage of the Jackson case has extended beyond the time frame marked for this paper. In those stories since January 29th much attention has been given to Jackson's financial dealings. The extent to which these are framed from a topos of hypocrisy is worthy of future investigation.

⁶ Though the Sermon on the Mount stresses the importance of righteousness (in matters of adultery, for example), many understand it to also communicate that humans cannot achieve righteousness in their own actions. Thus the sermon encompasses both the subject of not judging others, but also the importance of seeking righteousness. A common understanding is that ultimately true righteousness can only come from Jesus Christ's atoning sacrifice.

⁷ This assumes that reporters are reasonably aware of the public rhetoric of religious leaders and can make accurate distinctions between the content of various leaders' rhetoric (a questionable assumption). When Stuever (2001) claims that Jackson does not lecture people about sexuality, he is clearly suggesting that other religious leaders do. One might hesitate to claim that Jackson never makes pronouncements on sexuality. Moreover, certainly Jackson holds particular beliefs about what is right and wrong. Are we to believe that since Jackson never preached on adultery that he takes no moral stance on the issue?

⁸ Understandably, some who attack morals based on certain religious principles are simply using different interpretations of the same religious tradition to do so. A good example of this is the debate about homosexuality within the Christian church wherein adherents of various positions on the issue all claim to honor Christian scripture (see Batalden Scharen, 2000; Stott, 1998). In the news media accounts here, though, no alternative religious foundations were given. Note how Smith (2001) sets up the Puritan tradition within Christianity as a source of moral authority, and contrasts it with an a-religious system of morality based on French aristocratic behavior and modern sexology. She gives no basis in Catholic theology for a different view of sexual morality than the "Puritanical" view.

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