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My Enemy's Fear is My Fun: Print Columnists' Mixed Reactions to the Frights of Religious Dystopia

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Abstract

The Handmaid's Tale is a novel by Margaret Atwood that has won numerous awards for its frightful dystopian imagery. It was recently adapted for series television, an adaptation that has led some to see beyond the confines of the printed word. Columnists for a number of newspapers and magazines have suggested the television series provides insights into contemporary politics and religion. This study examines the way these essayists wrestled with various interpretations of the show. Some writers based their fearful reaction to the show on the Trump administration. Others, though, scoffed at this interpretation and seemed to enjoy doing so. In this study I examine how these dissonant interpretations might raise very good questions about how scholars think about media, religion, and fear.

"Now it's scaring the bejeezus out of us again." These words might seem fitting, and in a suitable context, if coming from the mouth of a reality-television star who pursues ghosts in abandoned Victorian sanitaria. They are a bit striking, however, to be found—without quotation marks—in the headline for a column in *The Washington Post*, one of the United States' most esteemed newspapers. Moreover, they were penned by an author with a bachelor's degree from Bryn Mawr College, and a Masters from Johns Hopkins University.

What the journalist was describing was not some form of paranormal activity. Neither was she speaking of a real-world tragedy that had occurred somewhere just prior to the newspaper's publication. What she was describing was a television series about a dystopian future in America. The program is *The Handmaid's Tale*.

This exploratory study examines the broader discourse in which the quotation above was embedded. I am interested in how some of the most powerful people in the world of nonfiction media (opinion writers at mainstream newspapers and magazines) attempted to make sense of a fiction media phenomenon that many perceive to be a frightening reflection of particular religious and political realities of early 21st century America.

The process of inquiry here will proceed through the following steps: 1) I provide background information on *The Handmaid's Tale* as a book and an episodic television series; 2) I discuss ways of theoretically grounding my inquiry, within research on mass media fear, and the role of religion in evoking fear in the United States; 3) I analyze reviews and columns from national newspapers and magazines that provide insights as to how thought-leaders in the United States have attempted to make sense of the television program and its reception; 4) I conclude with a discussion of the implications of this analysis.

The Handmaid's Tale, Dystopian Drama, and Cultural Relevance

The Handmaid's Tale made a cultural splash in the United States and around the world in 1985, when Canadian author Margaret Atwood released the first edition of her novel to strong popular acceptance as well as critical acclaim. The publisher's account is that the book has sold over 8 million copies in English (Charles, 2018). In regard to peer assessment, it won the Governor's General Award for English language fiction as well as the Arthur Clarke Award for science fiction.

The elemental story of Atwood's book is that a combination of ecological disaster and cultural conflict recently led to a revolution, a violent overthrow of the constitutional government in the United States, and usurpation of power by a group that claims it can address decreasing food supplies and fertility rates. The new nation the revolutionaries create, called "Gilead," includes elements of American Christian Puritanism. The leaders of Gilead spout Bible verses and require allegiance to a state church. They also exhibit elements of 20th century authoritarian systems, where every citizen is confined to his/her role within the regime.

The protagonist of the story is a young woman whose professional career and family are wiped out by the revolution. Separated from her husband (whom she believes is dead) and daughter, she is given a Gileadite role as a "handmaiden" and re-named "Offred." Handmaidens are women presumed to be fertile, and this one is placed in the home of a prominent leader of the new political order, a commander named "Fred." The female character's name demonstrates her status (or lack thereof) in the new system. She is basically property "of Fred," and has only one purpose in life, to bear any children he can produce. This production of offspring does not indicate Offred becomes the commander's wife. He already has a wife who is a devotee of the junta but is unable to conceive. Given all of this, the three characters are obliged, under the rules of the new religious community, to engage in an act the Gileadites call "the ceremony." When Offred is most fertile the

commander has sex with her. This occurs rather systematically, though, under the gaze of his wife, to ensure the act is purely procreative. There should be no pleasure for any involved. This, and other features of the new regime clearly agitate Offred, and much of the book is a reflection of her inner turmoil. Much of it is also about hope of, and plans for, escape.

Generally, perception of the book has been that it has a traditionally "liberal" edge to it, in the 20th century American sense of the word. Some of this perception has been based on elements within text. With its focus on female characters and themes related to reproductive rights and emancipation, the story also has clear feminist dimensions. As Jennifer Keishin Armstrong of the BBC recently explained, Atwood's story "is always discussed as a feminist warning of sorts" (Armstrong, 2018). The tale's description of the consequences of environmental degradation has also played a role in pigeon-holing the work as liberal. Lastly, there is the story's highlighting of the dangers of religion.

Atwood's own life and personal speeches have not lessened perceptions of the liberal nature of the original story. Though she's very cautious with the labels "feminism" and "feminist," (McNamara, 2017), she is outspoken and visible in feminist causes, for example, prominently appearing in the 2017 D.C. Women's March. Her environmental commitment is evident in much of her life, with her personal website even having a "Green Policies" tab. In regard to religion, Atwood actually deals with the subject in nuanced ways that avoid simplistic categories. In spite of this, however, one of the most common questions she receives—according to one recent article—tends to be whether *The Handmaid's Tale* is "anti-religious" (Johnson, 2018).

Though *The Handmaid's Tale* was told in cinematic form in 1990, legal issues clouded questions as to who owned the television rights to the property. Atwood claims there was a period where she did not even know to whom those belonged (Ryan, 2017). Once ownership matters were

settled, however, MGM made arrangements to produce a series with Hulu, the online subscription video service. Veteran producer Bruce Miller was assigned as showrunner.

By all accounts, a major shift occurred as the program was in the shooting stage of the first season. According to Atwood, the day after the 2016 election of Donald Trump, cast and crew returned to the set and said, "We're a different show" (Setoodeh, 2018). Then, upon the release of screeners and the airing of the first episode in April of 2017, critics, and members of the general public began connecting the drama's dystopia to current politics. For many, what had been an abstract story about fictional people in a hypothetical time and place seemed suddenly to have potential to become a frightening reality. In *The New York Times* a headline stated that the show was a "newly resonant dystopia" (Onstad, 2017). Meanwhile, women began appearing at political confrontations dressed in handmaid's outfits, as they did at the Texas state legislature in March of 2017 (Ryan, 2017). Suddenly, *The Handmaid's Tale* was more than a simple television series, it was a socio-cultural phenomenon that many became aware of, even if they had never seen a minute of a single episode.

Theoretical Conceptualization

What I share above suggests that some among us fear the dystopian scenario portrayed in *The Handmaid's Tale* could occur, and might very well do so in the near future. Given this, discussion of what scholars have learned about how the media deal with cultural "fear" is in order. Though I do not provide a full literature review below, I do wish to make note of a significant body of research that suggests the way "fear" plays out in the media, especially in relation to religion. There are three areas of scholarship that seem applicable here, and I wish to briefly introduce each.

One area of study focuses on how a particular form of Christianity plays a role in the narrow realm of political fear. As will be described here, much attention by scholars who have chosen to study this subject has been on how traditionalists in the West use fear of change as a means of

building and maintaining power. I will suggest that, in many ways, this theoretical dimension can be related to the idea of "moral panic," another area of understanding. Scholars who theorize in this area argue that a means of protecting the status quo is to exaggerate the danger of any threats to it—especially moral threats. Tying these two broad areas together is a third area of theory, the theory of "Islamophobia." Here, much has been written not about how threats *to* traditional religion are exaggerated by the media, but how the threat *coming from* a minority religion is exaggerated. Later I will return to discussion of *The Handmaid's Tale* and the extent to which it might, or might not be well explained by these abstract ways scholars conceptualize media, fear, and religion.

Religion and Fear

To begin, I would note that two books have extensively investigated media, fear, and religion. One of those is by Manuel Gonzales and Richard Delgado, and titled *The Politics of Fear* (2006). The researchers' thesis is that the right wing of the United States consistently creates public anxiety, and then benefits from that uneasiness every November at the ballot box. "Fraudulently whipped-up fear," they say, "has powerful social and political consequences" (p. 82). Specifically, it "solidifies followers, boosts patriotism, and strengthens support for military action" (p. 83). The authors also emphasize the role of religion, and, again, focus exclusively on conservative religious bodies. For these scholars, the ideal object of study related to media and fear is the "New Christian Right" (or, "NCR"). They claim that the development of the NCR came about in the 1970s as ethnic minorities and feminists challenged much of the *status quo*. For Gonzales and Delgado, "fear" in the mass media is generated by a group that is largely "Protestants, especially members of evangelical denominations, mainly Pentecostal-charismatics, and fundamentalist Baptists" (p. 7). Most, they claim, are "fundamentalists," and "live in the South" (p. 8). For Gonzales and Delgado, "the media" consists mainly of journalism and broadcast journalism, professions the authors claim are managed by the right, often, the religious right. Though some specifics of this analysis are

getting dated, they are worth noting. The authors (p. 42) suggest that Cal Thomas, an evangelical Christian, is one of the most visible columnists in the country. The careers of Fred Barnes, labeled as a "born-again Christian," and John McLaughlin, an "ex-Jesuit priest" indicate "little is progressive" in mass media. All of this, according to Gonzales and Delgado, has allowed the right to create "a widespread fear that haunts American society," and has also led to a "conservative ascendancy" (p. 82).

Like the two previous authors, Jason Bivins (2008, p. 216) has studied religion and fear thoroughly, and produced a detailed book on the subject. Also similar to them, he attributes the "religion of fear" to the development of the New Christian Right[1] in the 1970s. In this period, according to Bivins, conservative Christians, especially evangelicals, began to get involved in "media, education, and communication" in ways they had not previously done. For the most part, according to this scholar of religion, the maneuver was defensive. The goal was to uphold "America's divinely appointed status as a beacon to the nations" (p. 219-220). Reaching this goal, according to Bivins, required a high level of diligence and a dedication to an extensive system of communication. As he explains:

> The religion of fear is a mode of social criticism and a political sensibility (which I often refer to as a "discourse," emphasizing its pedagogic and representational aims). Its creators are politically motivated and engaged, drawing on and influencing broader cultural transformations through a social critique expressed in popular entertainments. These pop expressions do representational and rhetorical work for readers and audiences, linking fears of damnation to a carefully identified range of sociopolitical practices and beliefs. Such links are accomplished by creating interpretive frames that identify causes for these perceived ills, invest the discourse with religious and emotional urgency, and situate the

[1] Both sets of authors capitalize this term.

> criticism in hellfire narratives that contend that America's religious and political fortunes have plummeted since the 1960s. (Bivins, 2008, p. 5-6)

Religion, Fear, and Moral Panic

Some scholars take ideas such as those espoused above and add an extra dimension to the discussion by introducing the concept of "moral panic," a concept indebted to the early theoretical work of Cohen (2002). Interestingly, whose "panic" they focus on aligns quite well with the ideas of Bivins as well as with Gonzales and Delgado, showing primary interest in the moral panics of traditional western religious culture. Laycock (2015), for example, uses this concept in his study of fearful reaction to role-playing games. Again, the Christian Right, the state (in the form of crime fighting agencies) and even academics are said to have become overly concerned about the threats games such as Dungeons and Dragons posed to America's youth.

In other scholarship, this pattern of moral panic being a key feature of religious conservatism is prevalent. Just as anxiety about certain fantasy board games of the 1980s was exemplary of moral panic, so is worry about the religious implications of popular juvenile fiction, such as the *Harry Potter* series (Soulliere, 2010). Likewise, concerns of parents about satanic lyrics in popular music demonstrate moral panic (Wright, 2000). Indeed, the suspicion of traditional religions in the face of new religious movements has been described by one set of scholars as a form of moral panic (Richardson & Introvigne, 2007).

The term "moral panic" does not, of course, paint a flattering image of those who express concerns about putative social problems. It suggests that their fear is overblown, even to the point of irrationality or "phobia." Borrowing from a classic text on "moral panic" (Ben-Yehuda & Goode, 2012), scholars usually employ the term "disproportionality" to describe assessments of how

rational a particular fear is.[2] In this way, one can assume that most of the fears ascribed to the religious right, or religious conservatives more generally, are considered to be manifestations of such. Though there might be a basis for concern, according to this critique, the actual threat is slight, and (presumably) the reaction the group demonstrates is far beyond what reality calls for.

Religion, Fear, and Islamophobia

The studies mentioned above center their inquiry on how groups of citizens (especially "the right") believe that certain newer cultural norms have been divorced from, or are in complete contradiction to traditional religious visions of what is good. That is, for this line of theory, religion is the basis upon which other cultural forms are seen as a threat. There is one area of research in religion and media that entails a very different focus. It examines particular religious beliefs that are not the basis of threat perception, but the basis of the threat itself. Those beliefs are not Christian in nature; they have to do with Islam. There is now a sizable body of scholarship that uses a theoretical lens suggesting that mainstream mass media consistently generate irrational fear of an established religion. Scholars have even adopted a name for this phenomenon, "Islamophobia."

A number of researchers have claimed that one of the first uses of the term Islamophobia was in a report by a British think tank. That organization produced a study on the topic in 1997 (Runnymede Trust, 1997) which provided record of anti-Muslim prejudice in the United Kingdom. Most importantly, it created terminology that allowed for continued study of attitudes that had long-existed but gained little scholarly attention. The attacks of September 11, 2001 increased United States media attention on Islam, and allowed media researchers to consider themes and trends in that coverage. Since that time, a significant body of study has been developed. Recent scholarship in the area provides adequate summary of over a dozen years of consistent inquiry. For example,

[2] Cohen's (2002) terminology is similar, suggesting that the reactions of those engaged in moral panic are "fundamentally inappropriate."

Ahmed and Matthes (2017) found that post-9/11 portrayal of Muslims and Islam was "mostly negative, with Muslims and Islam being framed within the context of religious extremism" (p. 231). Similarly, Ekman (2015) claims that "modern Islamophobia is preoccupied with the idea that Muslims pose an inner threat to the 'West'" (p. 1989).

To recap what has been presented above, then, much of the scholarship on "fear" and "religion" in the context of mass communication suggests that conservative or right wing organizations utilize and benefit from mediated messages that develop fright among their audiences. Heightened anxiety and "moral panics" are considered to be the end goal of traditional religion (and political allies thereof). The media, following along with this, create and maintain a political system that works in the favor of the religious right. Within this area of theory, "religion" is not an inherent part of the frightening *messages* of the media, but the consolation that audiences are to seek upon being terrified by the messages that show the horrors that follow abandonment or denial of traditional principles. There does appear to be notable exception to what was just described, though. In the case of Islam, religion *is* presumed to be a part of mediated messages, negative messages that play a significant role in manufacturing fear toward this minority (in the West) religion.

Of course, all of this stands in sharp distinction to the broad topic of the current investigation. *The Handmaid's Tale*, as a book, and a TV series, has at its core a message that is very much *about* particular kinds of religion. Nominally, at least, the Republic of Gilead is said to borrow many of its theological and ecclesiastical principles from Christianity. According to some media reports, this portrayal of Christianity (not defiance of, or threats against Christianity) appears to have been the basis by which people developed a great sense of "fear." This seems to reflect a rather rare set of circumstances, given most everything that has been shared in the review above. On that basis, the following exploratory questions seem appropriate.

Question 1: With a more thorough analysis of mainstream channels, what reactions to the portrayals within *The Handmaid's Tale* actually appear in the media?

Question 2: What is the overall tone of the discourse?

Question 3: What are the implications for the broader study of media, fear, and religion, based on what we see in regard to this unique phenomenon?

Study Design

As noted, my goal hear is to provide insights into the discourse that the media have created around Margaret Atwood and Bruce Miller's production. A number of good studies have already begun to analyze the text of Hulu's adaptation of the story itself (Hendershott, 2018; Maher, 2018; Phoenix, 2018). The emphasis here will be different. Rather than focusing on what the show might contain in the way of story, imagery, and meaning, I want to better understand how the media reflect that content in secondary form. Admittedly, streaming of *The Handmaid's Tale* is not "news," in the sense of a concrete event taking place in society. On that basis, I have chosen not to examine news stories about the show, but columns and opinion pieces instead. I am interested in how columnists and opinion writers have tried to make sense of the show, especially in relation to the place and time in which it was produced. As Kelling and Thomas (2018, p. 398) explain, in spite of the fact that opinion writers have prominent roles in our society, far less research is dedicated to them and their work than to traditional journalism.

To find a sample of reports that should provide a reasonable representation of what the media have to say about our subject, I began with a "Nexis Uni" (formerly LexisNexis) search using the "Advanced Search" settings, looking for the title of the series in the "Headline," "Title," or "Headline and Lead Sections" boxes. This allowed discovery of columns for which the show was the main focus, and avoided those that simply made passing reference to it. The Hulu production of the story premiered on 26 April 2017. So to keep the number of articles manageable for a qualitative analysis, the date range for searching articles was set from 1 April 2017 to 30 June 2017. I then limited "Location by Publication" to states within the U.S., and avoided counting identical

articles from multiple channels (e.g., a story from *The Washington Post* also showing up in smaller publications) by using Nexis Uni's "Group Duplicates" filter. I followed similar methods in several other search engines, such as ProQuest and EbscoHost. As the typical search in some of these databases includes news websites, the boundaries of which are very difficult to discern, I limited findings to newspapers and magazines that have print editions in the United States. I also rejected articles that were popular reviews or simple recaps, such as the *New York Times* provided for every episode of the show. (For example, see, Bastien, 2017). In addition, I rejected what were clearly popular reviews intended to indicate whether viewers would like the show, or articles focused primarily on its aesthetics (e.g. Fraser, 2017). What I sought were articles that revealed educated opinions from professional media writers who had observed *The Handmaid's Tale* and contemplated what it might tell us about our social-political environment, especially our fears.

After this process, a total of 33 essays were available, all dealing directly and specifically with the Hulu edition of *The Handmaid's Tale*, all from newspapers or magazines with editions printed in the United States, and all in the form of opinion, not mere description of the show. In the next stage of the research, I relied on a broad theoretical framework of critical discourse analysis, as exemplified by van Dijk (1980). For more specific steps, I used Vos and Singer (2016) as a model for methodology. Similar to their inquiry into entrepreneurial journalism, I was striving for "modest empirical goals" (p. 149), merely trying to gain an initial understanding of how media professionals wrestle with their own reflections on the show. The main objective was to gain broad conceptualization of the discourse in which these professionals engaged when presented with a popular, critically-acclaimed cultural phenomenon that might be considered to rely heavily on "fear," but stands outside what scholars claim to be the main media use of that emotion. Following the model of Vos and Singer, the unit of analysis was the discourse about *The Handmaid's Tale*. In repeatedly reading the columns that had been gathered, I asked several questions, modeled after

those of the earlier researchers: 1) What were the ways in which the show was conceptualized within American entertainment and political culture? 2) What was the overall tone of the depictions? 3) What range of meanings is reflected in the discourse of elite columnists who have the opportunity to reflect on the show? As Vos and Singer (2016, p. 150) share, in addressing such questions, "relevant themes" begin to emerge. For this study, there were two that eventually stood out from any other points of concern in the discourse studied.

Analysis

Relevant Fear and Anxiety for Some

For large numbers of the writers studied here, the recurring themes developed in regard to the show were twofold. One was about how troubling or frightful it was. Another was about how much of the its power was a product of its contemporary "relevance," or "resonance." This latter element was largely a result of connecting *The Handmaid's Tale* to contemporary political events, namely, the election and presidency of Donald Trump.

Gail Pennington, for example, of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* writes,[3] "With its themes of feminism, fascism and fundamentalism, 'The Handmaid's Tale' feels as significant today as ever—and as chilling." In making this argument, she quotes Margaret Atwood, who in the foreword to a new edition of the book describes how "fears and anxieties proliferate. Basic civil liberties are seen as endangered, along with many of the rights for women won over the past decades and indeed the past centuries." Pennington ends her essay with the following solemn declaration. "Viewers and readers may understandably see 'The Handmaid's Tale' as cautionary."

A number of other writers seen here emphasize similar themes of timeliness or relevance. Hillary Busis, writing in *Vanity Fair*, claims that "at this particular moment in time," *The*

[3] For a variety of reasons, I've chosen to describe the comments of the essay writers in present tense.

Handmaid's Tale "feels especially current, cutting, and vital." That, according to the opinion writer, is because our epoch is "marked by a powerful but misguided nostalgia, and religious zealotry." In praise of Atwood, Busis suggests that she could not have accurately predicated how powerful the book would be over three decades after its publication. Indeed, says the columnist, *The Handmaid's Ta*le turns out to not only be a "warning about a possible future," but also "a blueprint for how the future might come to pass."

Hank Stuever, of *The Washington Post* writes that the Hulu production "describes a situation that seems at first outlandish, yet its plausibility has a way of creeping up on the viewer, much as it crept up on the society it depicts." According to Stuever, the TV program should alarm viewers by showing how little freedoms disappear first, and then the entire world is reorganized in frightening ways. Sensing, perhaps, that his ideas might seem alarmist, he adds:

> To some viewers, I suppose, this will all seem like liberal, feminist fear mongering that borders on (to use the worst term at hand) hysteria. The phrase 'now more than ever' has become a tiresome cliché in the past few months, but so what: "The Handmaid's Tale" is here and it demands our attention, now more than ever.

Katrina Onstad's essay in *The New York Times* runs with similar themes. It begins with analysis of the segment of the book when a precipitous revolution changed the United States into the Republic of Gilead. Long-established rights were quickly revoked, she says. Martial law was summarily declared. Onstad describes how the confused protagonist Offred raised a very good question in the midst of her turmoil. "What world is this?" The implication, clearly, is that the world of Gilead seems foreign to Offred, but so does the world U.S. citizens were seeing around them when a disruptive president took office. Adding punctuation to this, Onstad declares that "the television adaptation arrives with a newfound and unexpected resonance in Trump's America."

In *Harper's Bazaar*, Emma Dibdin begins her essay about the Hulu series with what seems to be a mild effort to dismiss the paranoia of those who worry the show is an accurate, and frightening, reflection of contemporary realities. She starts with the claim that "all of pop culture becomes commentary" in "Trump's America." She then provides a handful of examples of television programs that have been mined for the sake of explaining political realities. After that she shifts gears, however, explaining that those shows were filmed before Donald Trump took office. In spite of those consolations, then, Dibdin ends up with the same argument as do other authors discussed in this portion of our study. At the end of her opening paragraph she claims, "But you won't see a more timely or essential onscreen story this year." Why? Because Atwood's original tale has been "reimagined as a fundamentalist nightmare for the Mike Pence era." In support of this, Dibdin points out that Gilead has numerous similarities to a world the Trump presidency exhibits, or wishes to create. For example, the columnist explains, in Gilead, there is little respect for science, and that women are valued only for their ability to get pregnant. Her main concern is with the fictional political realm's treatment of women, especially the aspects related to control of female fertility. Presumably, the reader of Dibdin's essay should recognize how close Gilead's situation seems to her own. "For anyone engaged in real-world debate about women's reproductive rights," she explains, "the show is also too bleak to binge." Basically, this is "a series of familiar ideas taken to their illogical extreme."

One fascinating aspect of the recurring theme of the frightening, and relevant, realities of *The Handmaid's Tale* is that they appear to occur in such varied publications. Even a pedestrian magazine such as *TV Guide* reveals a column that clearly fell into the theme described thus far. Liz Raftery, writing for that publication, shares many of the same ideas we've already encountered. Maybe seeing a need to "one up" the numerous writers who have played the "relevant" card, she takes it a step further. Yes, the show and its source material certainly seem relevant, she explains.

But it is questionable whether that is a good thing. After describing numerous elements of the production that make it seem "modern and familiar," Raftery distances herself briefly from the point of view with which she began the essay, asking whether the current political climate plays a role in viewers' perceptions of the show. In this process, however, she provides clear indications of her own viewpoint regarding the political climate, describing it as a period when we find "women's rights again on the chopping block." The columnist also reveals her own sense of urgency in regards to the show's reflections of our political realities by ending the piece with a line from Elisabeth Moss's character Offred. "I was asleep before. That's how we let it happen." Clearly the author is communicating that the show's relevance is more than a matter of mere aesthetic consideration.

Phoebe Reilly, writing in *Rolling Stone* shares similar sentiments in regard the visibility of the connections that exist between the show and the political milieu of the late teens. Oddly, she begins with a bit of a misstep, at least, an etymological one. She claims that since its publication *The Handmaid's Tale* "has been prescient." Why is that? Because "the horrific details" of the novel were not created out of nothing by the author, but "plucked from history." In spite of this, though, Reilly perceives the Hulu version of the story to be neither historical, nor prescient, but (as with so many commentators) "relevant." In more detail, Reilly states:

> The imagination doesn't have to stretch to see the ways in which our own country already treats fertility and motherhood like a punishment instead of a power: America's appalling lack of mandated maternity leave, or the frequent challenges to birth control access and abortion. In part, this is what makes *The Handmaid's Tale* so relevant to each successive generation.

Reilly does not appear to believe that the potential threats described in the TV show are exclusively the product of the Donald Trump's tenure. The notion is simply that the era is deeply frightening for her, and for many other fans of the show. Easily noted, though, is that much of the contemporary

political imagery she alludes to can easily be connected to Trump, his administration, or his policies. Reilly cites, travel bans that target Muslims, potential funding cuts for Planned Parenthood, "sanctioned fear" of transgender people, and, a final kicker, a vice president who refuses to dine with women other than his wife. According to Reilly, then, the "germ of all of these reactionary ideas were (sic) already there."

To summarize all this with a few more examples, the "reactionary ideas" that are so evident in the political setting of the Trump administration are a large part of what makes *The Handmaid's Tale* so haunting. The perception these writers share is that the Trump era is awful because it stands in stark contrast to the halcyon days of the Obama administration, and actually points back to days long ago that the authors of these essays found very comforting. Writing in *Forbes*, Howard Homonoff says that the most "frightening" moments in the Hulu show are not the tortuous moments in Gilead, but the "flashbacks to the world before the fully dystopian future." In other words, only in watching the program does he see how dreadful America had become, and how much was lost in such a short amount of time. Basically, for Homonoff, the images of the show wake him up to the jarring fact that his rebarbative world is radically different from where he resided just a few years earlier. To put a fine point on it, he claims, "the show's arrival illustrates the kinetic magic when stunning content meets a unique point in time within which that content can so powerfully resonate." Sarah Jones, writing in *The New Republic*, seems to feel the same way. In her mind, "Texas is Gilead and Indiana is Gilead and now that Mike Pence is our vice president, the entire country will look more like Gilead, too."

Mocking Misplaced Fear

Clearly, a common media response to Hulu's depiction of dystopia was fright. More specifically, it was a fear heightened by a perception of the program's resonance with the real political environment. There was another thematic response that was equally evident, though. What

is odd is that the authors who shared this alternative interpretation of the show were highly dependent on the columnists cited above. For this second wave of columnists, a recurring focus was on how odd and/or misguided the other writers' feelings of dread might be. Basically, a large group of contributors believed that initial reactions to the show were over the top. Moreover, some of columnists who made note of this hyper-inflated fear—as they perceived it, at least—had tremendous fun doing so.

Christine Rosen's piece in *Commentary* serves as an excellent introductory example of this. She begins with a twist on a famous line from a classic work of political theory, writing, "If history repeats itself first as tragedy and then as farce, dystopia repeats itself as a streaming miniseries." The target of Rosen's most acerbic comments, though, is not *The Handmaid's Tale* itself; it is the way audiences and critics have reacted to it. Oddly (according to the author), they seek solace in formulaic Hollywood dystopias. Rosen claims that she does grasp how such a large part of our population could respond in such a manner. Explanation is found in the fact that the audience (and many of the reviewers who have commended the show) all fall into the "liberal" camp. She writes: "Their former standard-bearer, Barack Obama, kite-surfs in tropical locales and collects nearly half a million dollars for a speech while their hope curdles." This does not mean that Rosen believes the American left is suffering in some way. She suggests that fans of the Hulu show fail to recognize that they have largely won the culture wars. Given this, she feels that most of the left's reactions to the program are "overheated musings."

In another tongue-in-cheek essay, Heather Wilhelm makes observations very similar to those made by Rosen, but especially finds humor with the "fear" element of the handmaid experience. She seems to admit that the show itself, as a story, is quite frightening. What she cannot abide is claims that fear generated by the story should carry into politics, especially reproductive politics. This ends up being much of Wilhelm's focus. So, when encountering Sarah Jones's claim

(cited earlier in this study) that Texas and Indiana are already Gilead and the entire country will soon follow, Wilhelm's response is:

> Sheesh. You'd think that, as a woman, I would have noticed the collapse of the world around me, but hey, it's been a busy spring. I've had a packed social schedule, and as the old saying goes, you never notice the brutal rise of a women-enslaving dystopia when you're attending a gala celebrating successful women entrepreneurs just a few blocks down from a clinic that cheerfully offers almost-free government-subsidized IUDs!

Stepping aside from her sarcasm for a moment, the author presents several facts about reproductive freedom in the United States. She then admits that calling awareness to such details will probably be of little value. The facts she shares in her article will be, she predicts, largely ignored, because the hysteria created by the show is of little consequence. Rather than talking about serious matters like nuclear weapons in Korea, Wilhelm says, fans of Hulu want to discuss Mike Pence's rules about dining with women. Of the relationship between the Vice President's sexual mores and what she sees in the TV program, Wilhelm chuckles, "Well. That escalated quickly." Her main point is that our social environment, one with cheap, readily available birth control, is not going to disappear, and that feminists should recognize this, and focus their attentions on their own agency. In fact, at the end of her piece she turns the tables to suggest that many of those so frantic about Gilead are fighting imaginary aspects of it. According to Wilhelm, these critics misjudge the sources from which real threats to liberty might emanate. To end, she writes:

> Weirdly, for all of their talk about women needing to "control their own bodies," feminists often act as if women are helpless and completely incapable of doing so on their own — unless, that is, they're guided by a large, expansive, paternalistic government. Good heavens. Forgive me, but for a moment, that almost sounded like *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Charlotte Allen, writing in *The Los Angeles Times,* plays with some of the same themes Wilhelm does, suggesting that frights generated by the "feminist" elements of the television series are either not justified, or misdirected. She begins by disputing the many claims of what she labels "the liberal media," among them that *The Handmaid's Tale* is "timely," or that Trump's 2016 election changed the show from fiction to a documentary. To Allen, such claims are baseless. As she notes, the Trump's ignorance of Christian scripture is legendary, as is his avoidance of church attendance. The notion, then, that his administration could be the wedge of a spear to gradually create a transition to a Gilead-esque theocracy is ludicrous. Where she has her greatest fun with "liberal paranoiacs," however, is when she flips the script and suggests our liberal-created social environment is more analogous to Gilead than is anything Donald Trump has proposed. In Allen's mind, the "elite-class wives" of the show are eerily similar to millionaires in media and technology who mostly lean to the political left. As in Gilead, these contemporary United States citizens have a cadre of "Marthas"—that is, low-wage workers—ready to serve their every need. Most importantly, Allen argues that if audiences are looking for similarities between the United States and Gilead, they should not gaze into some potential world of sexual oppression created by Trump and Pence, they should look to our liberal acceptance of commercial surrogacy, a system in which poor women, in order to be able to pay their bills, agree to carry the babies of the rich for nine months. In the end, she seems willing to concede that *The Handmaid's Tale* might be a documentary. "It just doesn't happen to be the documentary that the liberals think it is," she says.

In one of the more nuanced essays that poked fun at common reactions to the show, Ross Douthat, a regular contributor to *The New York Times* continues with the theme of erroneous interpretations and extrapolations. To begin, he describes what he sees as a perverse sort of comfort liberals get from watching the show. He speculates that it might be a reflection of the fact that in suffering through *The Handmaid's Tale* they can imagine themselves to be dedicated resistance

fighters. Or, perhaps, watching the Hulu series reminds them things could be worse than they are at the moment. Getting to the actual thesis of his essay, though, Douthat says comparisons between Gilead and Trump's USA obscure more than they reveal. He suggests that feminists in the era in which Atwood wrote the original text would be appalled at the way today's citizens who wear the same label have acquiesced to both pornography and commercial surrogacy (echoing Charlotte Allen on the latter point). More importantly, says Douthat, an increasing level of male impotence—both literal and figurative—at the time of the original publication of the book did not lead to significant religious revival. Instead, it gave us what the *NY Times* columnist sees as two powerful forces that differ dramatically from those in Gilead. On the one hand, there are "moralistic post-Protestants" in academia and the media who are trying to create some order out of a consent-based sexual revolution. On the other there is a "laddish, bro-ish, and, yes, Trump-ish bachelor culture" that takes tremendous glee at mocking the former group's failed attempts at scorn. In the end, Douthat welcomes his readers to watch the show and enjoy its alternate-universe frissons. He clearly believes, however, that anybody who thinks our own universe is close to Gilead's is suffering the shivers of a fever-dream.

In a *New York Post* column, Kyle Smith share's Douthat's perceptions about delusions. He begins his composition in a way that is eerily similar to many that were described in the "Relevant Fear and Anxiety for Some" section of this paper. "The show is an eerie, too-perfect encapsulation of the Trump Era," he writes. Through a series of steps Smith's thematic ploy is revealed, however. He describes some of the starker elements of the show: The fact that the handmaidens must all wear scarlet robes; the shortages of food due to warfare; and the public hanging of gays, priests, and abortionists. He ends the paragraph with a one-word question. "Prophetic?" He acerbically continues, adding a few more adjectives to make the contrasts between Gilead and the United States more obvious—and outlandish. "The story is downright unerring." He notes the "Mother Superior

types armed with tasers," the fact that all college professors have been sent to the colonies, and the sex parties where everyone must be completely clothed and mutter Bible verses during the act. After this panoply of evidence revealing how Gilead is *not* like the United States, he explains that it is American journalists who are leading us to believe otherwise. In his own words: "The country's journalists are, praise be, shining a bright light on Atwood's uncanny accuracy." With quotations from *The New York Times*, *The Hollywood Reporter*, *Slate*, and other periodicals, he argues that the press has conned the public into believing what Atwood penned is now present, or, at least, it very quickly will be. As Smith sees it, since the years of Ronald Reagan, liberals have always believed the threat of right-wing totalitarianism is just around the corner. Thus, he is not too preoccupied when they claim to see the next threat's arrival. One element from the series did bring things to clarity for him, though. The *Handmaid's Tale* scene where a woman had her genitals removed lead him to think of a Michigan-based doctor who had been indicted for allegedly "mutilating the genitals of 7-year-old girls in a religious-based ritual." He then mentions that the culture implicated in this event is also responsible for capital punishment of gays, making women second-class citizens, and putting religious bodies in charge of criminal proceedings. Back to being sarcastic, he ends the essay by sharing: "It's all chilling, it's all based on religious zealotry backed by terror, and it's clearly all to the everlasting shame of President Trump."

Rich Lowry, in a *Houston Chronicle* piece, has similar fun making evident what he perceived to be the odd reaction so many citizens had toward the television series. He also ends on a note that echoed Smith's final observations, which were clearly allusions to Islam. Lowry admits that *The Handmaid's Tale* is sometimes quite gripping. The overall theme Lowry imposes on the article, however, is that the show's fans, and some of its creators, are wrong-headed in trying to connect its appeal and relevance to Trump's America. For Lowry, the idea of linking "a thrice-married real estate mogul who has done cameos in Playboy videos" with Cotton Mather is

laughable. Equally humorous, is the notion that Trump's America is a place that mirror's Gilead in regard to the revocation of important rights. Lowry suggests the program's creators and also fans, who see the present as a period of decreased reproductive rights are delusional. After all, he says, the kinds of things these people fear are the defunding of Planned Parenthood, and limiting Obamacare's contraception mandate. Lowry envisions such potentialities as a lower level of government intervention in our lives, a net positive, not a revocation of rights. For him, though, one of the biggest problems within elite response to *The Handmaid's Tale* is not chimerical fears, it is limited sight, or even hypocrisy. Many fans of the show, he notes, fear what they see as potential theocracy in their own country, and never protest such rule elsewhere, as in Saudi Arabia. Why so much ink, he seems to suggest, about potential Christian oppression, when actual religious-based oppression already exists? In what he labels an "uncomfortable fact for Christian-fearing feminists," none of the anti-female theocracies that exist in the world are Christian. In the end, the opinion columnist argues that *The Handmaid's Tale* is a cautionary tale, but not one about how we lose our rights. It's "a cautionary tale about how sophisticated people lose their minds."

Worth noting for purposes of a transition is Lowry's reference to what he perceived to be true theocracies, places where people really are persecuted by political leaders who are beholden to specific religious ideologies. In making connections to Saudi Arabia, he is clearly communicating that the Islamic country is far more a model of Gilead than is Trump's America. Kyle Smith offers similar allusions, with subtle and not-so-subtle references to genital mutilation, religious-based patriarchy, and Sharia law.

Several other essays support their blasé response to the horrors of Gilead by claiming that Islam is a greater threat than is "fundamentalist" Christianity. For these essayists, however, there is little to laugh about. Writing in *The New York Observer*, Michael Sainato and Chelsea Skojec (2017) frame their entire essay around how life in Saudi Arabia is much more similar to the frightful

repression of the Hulu show than the United States is. At the end of their piece, they beg for Western democracies to not "turn a blind eye to countries where *The Handmaid's Tale's* world already exists." Mona Eltahawy, writing in *The New York Times,* is even more brazen with such a claim, with the title of her article being "Why Saudi Women Are Literally Living 'The Handmaid's Tale'." American women who are shocked by the fiction of Gilead, she says, should recognize how detached the show is from their own experience, yet how connected it is for women who live today in another part of the planet. "One woman's dystopia is another woman's reality," she writes. Providing numerous examples from the Hulu series (for example, women's confiscated bank accounts), she explains that women in Saudi Arabia do not have to play make-believe with such horrors; they live them. Basically, her lack of patience for overreactions to the show is based on her perception that there really exists a "modern Gilead" in the world, and the West pays it little attention.

Discussion

One objective of this study was rather simple and straightforward. The goal was to determine how writers for newspapers and magazines made sense of the message of *The Handmaid's Tale*. Another, more challenging, goal was to consider the ways that media reactions to the Hulu series might develop better understanding of key theoretical questions related to media, religion, and fear.

For the simple question, there was a simple answer. Writers seemed to make sense of the content of the Hulu series based on predispositions toward certain political and religious beliefs. A significant number of the columnists reveled in the fear the show created, especially fear of the fictional oppressive religious environment of Gilead. In addition, they attempted to convince their readers that the show's power was based on the fact that—according to them—it reflected the horrors of the religious and political aspirations of the Trump administration. Even so, there were

also writers who found this perspective to be ridiculous, and they seemed to take great pleasure in saying as much. Most all of them argued that any claim of similarities between Gilead and the contemporary U.S. social environment was flimsy at best. All of them indicated there is minimal likelihood of American citizens losing significant rights due to some unprecedented surge in Christian hegemony. Finally, some suggested that the greatest threats to freedom posed today are from liberal governments and religions other than Christianity.

These simple observations of column content, interestingly, provide some immediate takeaways related to the theoretical questions I wished to address. The reaction of the first group is worth noting in how it stands in such stark contrast to what both Bivins (2008) and Gonzales & Delgado (2006) indicate to be a recurring pattern in contemporary mass media. Those researchers claim that fear is a tool used by the religious right to achieve particular purposes. Yet, there is little in the drama of *The Handmaid's Tale* that could be said to promote the views, or achieve the goals, of the religious right. As columnists pointed out, the fright generated by images of Gilead is fright that comes from the possibility that (for example) the freedom to marry a person of the same sex might be taken away. Contrary to expectations, then, the Hulu series, and the columnists who fanned the flames of its fear were doing exactly what Bivins says the right wing has been doing for years, but in the opposite direction. The show, and the columnist's description of it, certainly did "representational and rhetorical work for readers and audiences" (Bivins, 2008, p. 5), but not for those Bivins claimed typically benefit from that "work." Similarly, though one could not accuse the media messages studied here of what Bivins describes as "linking fears of damnation to a carefully identified range of sociopolitical practices and beliefs," the messages did clearly indicate that some sociopolitical practices and beliefs are presumed better than others, and that the better ones are under attack. The beliefs presumed better tended to be secular beliefs. They were under attack by conservative religious bodies.

In consequence, one is not surprised to see that the columns studied here did two other things Bivins accused the political and religious right of doing. The columnists conveyed a sense of "emotional urgency," and they communicated that our "religious and political fortunes have plummeted." After all, numerous writers here focused on the loss that June observed with the fall of her once-liberal government. Equally important, they attempted to depict that fall as being analogous to Hillary Clinton's defeat at the hands of Donald Trump in the 2016 election. In sum, the columnists studied here exhibited responses to culture that earlier research has indicated is a predominant feature of what is commonly labeled the religious right, but here they were a feature of the secular left.

The narrower "religious" dimensions of both the show itself, and columns about it, can also be insightful here. When once asked about spiritual practices of the leaders of Gilead, Margaret Atwood told *Sojourners* magazine that she did not consider them to be Christians, because they did not show in their behavior what she considers to be the "core of Christianity" (Laycock, 2017). In spite of this, a number of columnists who emphasized the frightful nature of *The Handmaid's Tale* suggested that its villains were "fundamentalists Christians" (e.g., Jones, 2017, Stuever, 2017). Moreover, a number of columnists (e.g., Dibdin, 2017; Gilbert, 2017; Jones, 2017) in this category made specific reference to Vice President Mike Pence as an emblem of American Gileadite tendencies. Perhaps these columnists were not attacking Christianity, *per se*. If they were not, however, there are good questions about the extent to which they perceived Pence to be a representative of that religion. More importantly, even those who did not mention the Vice President by name seemed to believe that he and others like him are eager to impose their religious will on the country. The columnists seem to believe a planned trumpet blast will indicate the moment such crypto-Gileadites are to usurp government power and bring about a "theocracy" (Onstad, 2017).

Of course, there was another group of media professionals who scoffed at all of this. They did not appear to believe that the United States has experienced the seismic shifts that have so greatly bothered the first group. Neither did they anticipate an imminent theonomist coup.

An important starting point for discussion of these matters is that the second group of columnists could, upon reflection, be seen as representing "the right." In some ways, this was made obvious by the fact that this group did not shrink from pointing out who, specifically, was being carried away by the anxiety produced by the Hulu series. Christine Rosen, for example, made many caustic remarks about "the left" in her column.[4] In fact, Rosen used the term "the left" five times in her short piece. Ross Douthat seems to have preferred to use the word "liberal," or some derivation thereof, doing so five times in his essay. Interestingly, he referred to Charlotte Allen's earlier-published work about overreaction to the show as "polemical," though she relied on the word "liberal" only one more time than he did. Admittedly, she upped the ante by sometimes adding the word "elite" and also referring to "liberal media outlets" as the conduit through which so much early *Handmaid's Tale* paranoia was being pandered. On that note, I might mention that the essays studied here used some variation of the word "paranoia" eight times.

Worth noting is that some columns that appeared in daily papers (e.g., *The Houston Chronicle*) also appeared in *National Review*, a periodical clearly aligned with conservative American politics. Ross Douthat, whose work appeared in *The New York Times*, is a regular contributor to that newspaper, but, more importantly, a rather conservative Roman Catholic.[5] Christine Rosen's composition was published in *Commentary*, once the bastion of "neoconservatism" and still considered a channel for a number of conservative American ideals.

[4] On one occasion she mentioned "the left" and in a sarcastic parenthetical correction apologized and referred to them as "The Resistance." This certainly connects the fearful columnists discussed earlier with the political movement against the Trump presidency. As noted elsewhere, one aesthetic aspect of resistance in the era was wearing handmaid costumes to important political events (such as the Kavanaugh confirmation hearings).

[5] He also critiques motion pictures for *National Review*.

The channels in which some of them published did provide indication of their left-right predilections, and their terminology provides some indication of the pleasure they took in skewering their professional colleagues on the left. One might surmise, perhaps, that some of that pleasure has to do with a general cultural understanding of the earlier scholarship on the right's use of fear. Perhaps the right, having been accused for years of engaging in what many think to be the immoral act of using fear to sway public thinking on religion and politics, cannot resist the opportunity to seek revenge. Imagine what joy conservatives might have in suddenly contemplating the possibility that their liberal enemies can be accused of the ignorant and disreputable practice of inciting "moral panic."

The theoretical dimensions of this also apply to earlier discussion on how moral panic applies specifically to panic caused *by* fear of religion. Scholars have been keen to consider how anxiety toward "new religious movements" can be used to sway public opinion. They also have devoted considerable energy to examining how the media have used apprehension about Islam—certainly not a new religious movement—to drive social policy. Might they also need to consider how the media create distrust of well-established and culturally-pervasive religions? Put differently, if media-created "dread or hatred of Islam" (Runnymede Trust, 1997, p. 1) is a theoretical concern, might media-created dread or hatred of Christian fundamentalism be also?

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

As I admitted from the start, this study was intended to be exploratory in nature. As the TV series *The Handmaid's Tale* became a cultural phenomenon, there were indications that something interesting was going on with professional reactions to it. Those reactions seemed to reveal that there was a unique element of fear in the show that might somehow relate to previous research on religion and media. Studying this phenomenon more closely, by examining the discourse of media professionals, I assumed, might provide additional data on an important area of research. I hope that

this is the case, and that the observations I have shared will be of value to those who contemplate the varied interactions between media and religion.

The choice of examining this single incident through a qualitative manner certainly has limitations, however. This is merely one case, examined through a methodology that sacrifices reliability for the sake of validity. These limitations indicate conceptual and methodological questions left to be addressed. To what extent is this truly a singular incident? If the analysis were broadened, and studied in a more quantitative manner, might we see some of the patterns described here are not unique? On the positive side, the limitations of this particular inquiry are also invitations for investigate further.

Everything shared above does seem to indicate potential blind spots within media/religion scholarship, at least, as the study relates to "fear." Scholars such as Gonzales & Delgado, Bivins, and many others who study "Islamophobia," seem fixated on how the American right uses popular culture to instill fear in the populace. Meanwhile, little attention has been paid to the possibility that the left might use "fear" messages. Is this because one side of the political spectrum is less inclined to use this tactic? If so what are we to make of the evidence provided above, that *The Handmaid's Tale* trafficked in fear at a level quite similar to what scholars have accused the religious right of doing? Are there similar powerful cultural incidences that scholars should be seeking to expose and understand? Have earlier scholars who have studied media/religion/fear simply overlooked such cases of fearmongering on the left? Or, perhaps, were they rare or nonexistent? That latter possibility raises other questions. Has the religious and political world in the U.S. morphed in ways that have yet to be assessed by researchers? Might it be that when earlier scholars surveyed the entire realm of media they really did find it to be mostly populated by right-wing operators, but that world has now changed into something very different?

All of these areas of inquiry have the potential to be refined into more detailed research questions. Mainly, though, this exploratory study into media reactions to *The Handmaid's Tale* should indicate how shallow our understanding of media debates surrounding fear and religion might be. The material above should indicate to scholars of media that "fear" might be a weapon that is used by people with a wide range of religious views. Additionally, those who communicate to large audiences through the mass media might use fear to accomplish a wide range of objectives. Though scholars might take pleasure in focusing on the fears of a limited range of these human beings, doing so blinds them to a broader understanding of a negative aspect of media that deserves understanding that is both deep and wide.

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