

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments ix

Introduction i

1 The History of Westboro Baptist Church 14

2 The Theology of Westboro Baptist Church 47

3 The Means, Ministries, and Mission of Westboro Baptist Church 77

4 Cobelligerents in Antigay Activism: Westboro Baptist Church
and the Religious Right 113

5 Civility, Civil Liberties, and Religious Nationalism 138

Conclusion: After Westboro 168

Notes 183

Bibliography 241

Index 249





University Press of Kansas

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am fortunate to owe debts to many colleagues and friends for their support of this project. Chief among them are Norman Yetman, American studies and sociology; Tim Miller, religious studies; Randal Jelks, American studies and African and African American studies; Ben Chappell, American studies; and Brian Donovan, sociology, who provided me with the confidence to see this project as a book. A developing scholar could not have had a more generous dissertation committee, making the University of Kansas a place where, indeed, seldom was heard a discouraging word, and I have continued to benefit from their insight and mentoring. In particular, Norm Yetman's careful and patient lessons in writing significantly improved the text found here, and his genuine enthusiasm for theology inspired me to prioritize that part of this study. Tim Miller's feedback allowed me to place Westboro Baptist Church within a framework of religious tradition and innovation. Randal Jelks has been the biggest booster for the publication of this manuscript; I am grateful for his knack for calling or e-mailing me exactly when I need to hear a friendly voice. I thank Ben Chappell for the Rogerian therapy sessions; he can accomplish a lot with a few clarifying questions. Brian Donovan has encouraged me to take the scholarly risks that make this career a joy. I hope they are pleased with the results of their hard work.

Jason Barrett-Fox, my husband as well as my scholarly colleague; Karen Lombardi, who supported this project from our first visit to Westboro Baptist Church in 2004; the always encouraging Stephanie Krehbiel; my coworkers in the graduate writing program; my indispensable writing partner, Megan Williams; and Susan Kraus, who saw my need for time and place to write and provided it, were instrumental in keeping this project moving forward. Ailecia Ruscin's talent as a photographer is equaled by her generosity as a friend and bravery as an activist and community leader. Friends at Peace Mennonite Church served as belying partners, ready to pull me back if I ever felt the need to tug on the rope, and friends at New Creation Mennonite Fellowship rejuvenated me. Many, many others cheered me on throughout. The University of Kansas Graduate School's

Dissertation Fellowship and Summer Grant, the Norm and Anne Yetman Dissertation Fellowship, and the University Women's Fellowship provided not just financial support for this research but also an affirmation of its value. I am pleased to participate in this project with Kim Hogeland at the University Press of Kansas; everyone should get to work with such a talented editor. I appreciate the hard work of reviewers, including Cynthia Burack, whose feedback helped this manuscript find its final form.

Westboro Baptist Church produces enough public material that a scholarly content analysis of its digital culture would have been enough to fill a book. However, the generosity of church members and ex-church members allowed me to tell a different kind of story, one that, I hope, respects the lived experience of religion within the church and sees value in the members' human relationships. I am grateful for their vulnerability and generosity of spirit and time, particularly from Shirley Phelps-Roper, Steve Drain, and Sam Phelps-Roper, who were patient with me as I grew in my understanding of Westboro Baptist Church theology, and those former members who kindly shared their stories with me. I never left an interview without feeling genuinely cared for, and I hope that church members see an equal care in the analysis I share here.

Each of my three children were infants at one point or another during this research project, and I was able to travel with them to field research because of the willingness of my extended family, both Barretts and Foxes, to care for them when asked. Jason Barrett-Fox has prioritized this work, ensuring that I had the time and intellectual space to do it. Thank you, Jason, for that, without which this manuscript could not have come to fruition.



INTRODUCTION

At the September 22, 2011, Republican presidential primary debate in Orlando, Florida, Stephen Hill, a soldier serving in Iraq, submitted a question for the Republican hopefuls via video. In it, he identified himself as gay and asked former Pennsylvania senator Rick Santorum if he would support the reinstatement of Don't Ask, Don't Tell (DADT), the defunct policy that had long prevented openly gay servicemen and -women from serving in the military. Not only did Santorum restate the right wing's unsubstantiated position that allowing openly gay men and women to serve would undermine the effectiveness of the military, but neither he nor any of the other contenders thanked Hill for his service, a convention at such events—nor did any of the debate participants rebuke the audience members who booed Hill.¹ Many who witnessed the debate agreed with the judgment of GOProud, the politically conservative progay organization, which noted, "It is telling that Rick Santorum is so blinded by his anti-gay bigotry that he couldn't even bring himself to thank that gay soldier for his service."² The moment revealed that "gay-bashing is a forever issue for the religious right."³ It trumps its arguments about government staying out of people's personal lives, about the social value of marriages and stable families, and even about the dignity and respect due to soldiers and veterans.

In making their claim that America's military readiness would be undermined by the presence of openly gay soldiers (or even closeted gay soldiers), the Republican contenders linked homosexuality and homeland insecurity. American soldiers, they said, would be fighting an external threat as well as an internal threat as previously closeted gay servicemen and -women fought against the American military from the inside, traitors not only to the natural plan that God intended for human sexuality but to their comrades and their nation. The Family Research Council (FRC), a conservative Christian political advocacy group, warned, "The victims will be America's parents, her sons and daughters, absent husbands and wives."⁴ But beyond that, national security would be endangered, not just by the presence of openly gay soldiers but by an increasing national commitment to the rights of gay people. Or, as Oklahoma state representative Sally Kern has said repeatedly about gay rights, including on the tenth anniversary of the attacks of September 11, "It's the biggest threat our nation has, even more so than terrorism or Islam—which I think is a big threat. . . . It will destroy this nation."⁵

Though Religious Right leaders invoked arguments that, on the surface, are about military stability, troop cohesion, and the religious rights of conservative Christian military chaplains, the language on the inside is all religious. In a "prayer alert" sent to FRC supporters on the day of the repeal of DADT, Pierre Bynun, FRC national prayer director, exhorted subscribers to pray that "*this godless policy be reversed in the not-too-distant future!*" Bynun cited seven Bible passages to support his claim that Christians have a duty to lead their nation away from the sin of toleration for homosexuality, for, as he quotes from Jude 7, the residents of Sodom and Gomorrah—cities, in conservative theological interpretation, destroyed because of their practice and toleration of homosexuality—"serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire."⁶ According to this prayer alert, the duty of good Christians and God-fearing Americans is to foster social policies, including military recruitment policies, that align with God's view of sexuality as understood by the Religious Right—which is that gay people will "suffer the punishment of eternal fire." Or, in other words, gay people go to hell, and if straight Americans are not careful, the whole nation will end up there with them. Or, as

another Bible verse often quoted by Christian conservatives says, “Righteousness exalteth a nation, but sin is a cancer to all people.”⁷

In short, the Religious Right’s argument is based not only on faulty social science that predicts that the military would be unable to function with openly gay members but also on the theological claim that God will not bless a nation that allows openly gay service members. From this perspective, God’s blessing on a nation is measured in military success. This implies a grim and unspoken corollary: that military losses are a punishment from God and thus a sign of his anger. No one in the Religious Right, though, makes this claim explicitly, and all would deny it. Instead, that provocative argument is articulated by only one group on the American religious landscape: Westboro Baptist Church.

Westboro Baptist Church is the roughly seventy-person Primitive Baptist congregation that gained national attention in the 1990s for its anti-gay activism, particularly its pickets of the funerals of gay people such as journalist Randy Shilts and college student Matthew Shepard. In 2005, the church expanded its pickets to the funerals of fallen servicemen and -women, arguing, in a theological extension of the claims of other conservative Christians, not only that God would stop blessing a nation that tolerated homosexuality but that he already had—and, that, in fact, he was actively punishing America for its sins. Thus, as author of all things, God uses US military losses in Iraq and Afghanistan as a tool to punish the nation. Therefore, when anyone, straight or gay, joins the US military, he or she becomes an enemy of God. And as readers of the Old Testament know, it is God, not armies, who wins battles. Armies that fight against God’s chosen army lose, and when the Israelites lost in battle, it was because God used their enemies to destroy them for his purposes, mostly to teach them obedience—and the ramifications of disobedience. In other words, God always wins—even if that means defeating his own people through the use of foreign armies. Westboro Baptists have simply updated this Old Testament model of warfare and extended the Religious Right’s argument that God is going to punish America if the nation keeps on with its sinful ways. This is the message of the church founder and long-term pastor, Fred Phelps, who died in March 2014. It is a message that continues in the preaching of the small group of male elders—married men who are

eligible to occupy the pulpit for Sunday sermons—in the years since his death.

On September 11, 2011, drawing from the book of Isaiah, Pastor Fred Phelps compared America to ancient Israel in a rhetorical move similar to Pierre Bynum’s of the FRC:

The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master’s crib: but Israel (America?) doth not know, my people doth not consider. Ah sinful nation (USA?), a people laden with iniquity, a seed of evildoers, children (Americans?) that are corrupters: they have forsaken the LORD, they have provoked the Holy One of Israel unto anger, they are gone away backward. . . . Your country (America?) is desolate, your cities are burned with fire: your land (America?), strangers devour it in your presence, and it is desolate, as overthrown by strangers. And the daughter of Zion is left as a cottage in a vineyard, as a lodge in a garden of cucumbers, as a besieged city. Except the LORD of hosts had left unto us a very small remnant, we (Americans?) should have been as Sodom, and we (Americans?) should have been like unto Gomorrah. Hear the word of the LORD, ye rulers of Sodom; give ear unto the law of our God, ye people of Gomorrah (the USA?).⁸

Religious Right leaders often invoke comparisons between ancient Israel and America, both countries once blessed by God that came to reject and defy God by living in ungodly ways. This trope is as old as the earliest Puritans who came to establish a “city upon a hill”⁹—as is conservative America’s linking of national survival and sexual purity. The language abounds in Religious Right materials, from political speeches to abstinence-education curriculum, but only in Westboro Baptist Church is it expressed directly to servicemen and -women. Westboro Baptist Church is writing a script and performing it at military funeral after military funeral so that the Religious Right does not have to articulate the logical end to its argument about American declension. The two can work in tandem to mount a campaign that makes gay Americans, and now openly gay soldiers, the greatest threat to national security that America has ever known.

Yet Westboro Baptist Church makes frequent headlines for its virulent antigay message whereas the broader Religious Right has ensconced its

antigay rhetoric within the language of “family values” and, consequently, is less reviled. Indeed, Westboro Baptist Church first came to broad national attention when, in 1998, members picketed the funeral of gay University of Wyoming student Matthew Shepard and created a “perpetual memorial” to Shepard online that included an image of the young man in hell, screaming that people should heed the church’s warning, acts that earned Fred Phelps memorialization in *The Laramie Project*, a play about Shepard’s murder.¹⁰ When Westboro Baptist church members visited the New York City site of the fallen twin towers a few days after the attacks of September 11, 2001, they gained national attention again, only this time their message was even bigger: God did not just hate gay people—he was punishing America for its tolerance of homosexuality.¹¹ Although Religious Right icons Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson had suggested that God had lifted his protective covering from America on September 11, Westboro Baptist declared that, in fact, God was “America’s terrorist,” actively destroying the nation.¹² Protests emphasizing this theme were repeated in the months that followed at funerals for the first fallen US servicemen and -women killed in the war on terror.¹³

Suddenly, Westboro Baptist Church had found a message that brought it constant attention: God is killing US soldiers. Individual states responded by passing laws banning funeral pickets,¹⁴ and in 2006, President George W. Bush signed into law the Respect for America’s Fallen Heroes Act, outlawing such pickets in national cemeteries.¹⁵ The Patriot Guard Riders, a motorcycle brigade, formed to counter Westboro Baptist Church’s pickets.¹⁶ Shirley Phelps-Roper, spokesperson for the church, started appearing on national television news shows and talk shows. In political speeches, news reports, and online discussion boards, disgust for the church was expressed vehemently and, frequently, with threats of violence. Then, in 2011, the Supreme Court decided against the father of a fallen marine, Albert Snyder, who had brought a multimillion-dollar lawsuit, and won at the lower level, against church members for the intentional infliction of emotional distress.¹⁷ In preparation for the decision, the FBI prepared for increased attacks against the church and its members,¹⁸ and, indeed, Internet attacks as well as threats increased after the decision, with many online commentators citing the failure of the juridical

process to squelch Westboro Baptist Church activism as reason for their frustration. Within a few weeks of the March 2011 decision in favor of the church, Maine senator Olympia Snowe introduced the Sanctity of Eternal Rest for Veterans (SERV) Act, which was passed into law as the Honoring America's Veterans and Caring for Camp Lejeune Families Act of 2012. The act prohibits pickets of military funerals in federal military cemeteries for up to two hours before or after a funeral and sets a 500-foot buffer zone around the funeral location.¹⁹ Individual states produced a spate of similar laws intended to stop demonstrations by Westboro Baptist Church.²⁰

Though media attention to Westboro Baptist Church increased dramatically after the start of its pickets at the funerals of soldiers in 2006, the church had been running an antigay campaign since 1991 and began picketing at funerals about a year after that.²¹ The church's web site reports that, to date, it has held more than 55,000 pickets, including ones in Iraq during the Saddam Hussein reign and in Canada.²² The pickets began in 1991, when Fred Phelps complained to Topeka's city council about the use of Gage Park, a public city park, by gay men for sexual encounters. When the city failed to respond to Phelps's satisfaction, church members picketed to protest what they perceived as a cultural tolerance of homosexuality.²³ In their production of picket signs, they found that the words "God Hates Fags" fit perfectly on a poster board. Not coincidentally, the signs are highly visible, easy to read from the road or on a television screen, and inflammatory.

It was these words, according to Shirley Phelps-Roper, that really fired the church's campaign. "Fag," she says, is not the controversial word on their placards; many people participating in the events being picketed use the word themselves to refer to gay people, she argues. In other words, it is not Westboro Baptist Church's homophobia that alienates those toward whom the pickets are directed. Instead, the controversy is in the words "God hates," she says. The people of Topeka, Kansas—and Laramie, Wyoming, and even New York City—do not like homosexuality, says Phelps-Roper, and she contends that they probably agree with Westboro Baptist Church that unrepentant gay people go to hell.²⁴ In a 1995 interview with the *Washington Post*, Judy Miller of Topeka's Gay and Lesbian Task Force agreed, admitting, "I'm afraid there are a lot of people who secretly in

their heart of hearts agree with the Phelpses, and don't really want them to be stopped,"²⁵ a claim bolstered by Paul Froese and Christopher D. Baden's analysis that finds that nearly one-third of Americans believe in an authoritative God who actively intervenes in human life to punish those who fail to adhere to his standards.²⁶ Instead, the public is most upset that its image of God as loving and merciful is challenged by the idea that God can "hate."²⁷ Indeed, when nine-year-old Josef Miles countered Westboro Baptist's signs with one of his own declaring, "God Hates No One" in May 2012, his act was reported in the *Huffington Post* and on National Public Radio, and he received considerable praise from the public.²⁸ Yet this countermessage means little to Westboro Baptist Church, which identifies the claim that "God loves everyone" as "the greatest lie ever told," listing on its web site God Hates Fags 701 Bible passages to refute this contention, which is central to the theology popularized by most evangelical Christians today.²⁹

Even the words "God hates" were not enough to generate a consistent public outcry against Westboro Baptist Church on the national level, though local organizations found creative ways to protest the church's activities.³⁰ When the church began to picket the funerals of fallen servicemen and -women, however, public outcry against it intensified. Prior to this, some liberal churches—such as those where Westboro Baptist Church had picketed the funerals of people who had died from AIDS-related illnesses—had decried Westboro Baptist Church's activism, but the funeral pickets of soldiers prompted a wide range of Religious Right churches to publicly disavow Westboro Baptist Church. This distinction was important to other conservative antigay churches, especially Baptist churches that share the same label, because at the same time that the Afghanistan and Iraq wars escalated, the debate over same-sex marriage was becoming a major domestic issue, and Religious Right leaders were speaking out clearly against same-sex marriage and homosexuality more broadly while also supporting US-led invasions abroad. Religious Right groups, as well as conservative politicians advocating anti-gay rights laws, spoke forcefully against Westboro Baptist Church in order to avoid confusion between their own antigay rhetoric and the antigay and antipatriotic rhetoric of Westboro Baptist Church.³¹ The result could only please

Westboro Baptist Church, for the more isolated it remains in its position, the more assured it is of its correctness. It sees itself as a lone remnant, a prophetic voice crying in the wilderness, and its isolation reinforces its special role.³² Indeed, “many trials to our faith ensure that we follow God out of love,” explains elder Steve Drain.³³ This embattled posture is expressed in church texts such as “WBC v. The World,” a short, talking-head-style video about the church’s lone witness against contemporary sin. Being alone in opposition to sin is not problematic for the prophets of God, though, because “that’s how it has to be if we are going to find fidelity in the words of our Lord Jesus Christ.”³⁴ As the Religious Right has maintained and even reinforced its own antigay stance, it has rhetorically distanced itself from Westboro Baptist Church, and Westboro Baptist Church has responded by claiming that the Religious Right has sacrificed its religious integrity in order to consolidate its power.³⁵

This book examines the relationship between the antigay and antipatriotic theology and activism of Westboro Baptist Church and the antigay and patriotic theology and activism of the broader Religious Right. It contends that the difference in the responses of religious, civic, and political leaders to Westboro Baptist Church’s pickets of gay people’s funerals and to pickets of presumably straight servicemen and -women’s funerals reveals that, broadly, Americans value the lives of servicemen and -women more than those of gay men and women—or, at least, that politicians find the cause of banning pickets at servicemen and -women’s funerals to be more politically potent than banning pickets at the funerals of gay men and women. It considers Westboro Baptist Church’s distinctive history and theology but also seeks to place these in the contexts of conservative socioreligious groups and the broader heteronormative American public. It offers a conclusion different from interpretations that marginalize Westboro Baptist Church: that the church members are speaking in a way consistent with their own history and theology, and thus their words are, for those aware of this history and theology, unsurprising. Indeed, by comprehending Westboro Baptist Church in these multiple contexts, Cynthia Burack concludes that “Phelps’ importance lies in the fact that his extremism and that of other far right-wing actors [work] to center the views of Christian right leaders like Falwell, Robertson, James Dobson,

Gary Bauer, and others.”³⁶ This book’s analysis of Westboro Baptist Church also exposes the contradictions of Religious Right groups that denounce Westboro Baptist rhetoric while denying their alignment with its antigay theology and the similarity of their political visions of American nationalism. Thus, although Westboro Baptists are the central subjects of this book, they are studied in order to understand broader trends among those who collapse religion and nationalism in contemporary America.

A NOTE ON METHODOLOGY

Although the public unanimously deplores funeral pickets, failing to engage Westboro Baptist Church beyond excoriating church members for outrageous rudeness ignores the fact that the church does more than simply act uncivilly in these contexts. Warning about researchers’ temptation to use studies of unloved groups to affirm the dominant culture, sociologist Kathleen Blee notes that scholars must not use the unloved groups as “a foil against which we see ourselves as righteous and tolerant.” Instead, scholars must take “a direct, hard look” at even the most unlikable research subjects, “acknowledging the commonalities between them and mainstream groups as well as the differences.”³⁷ Similarly, Westboro Baptist Church should not be treated as a straw man in an argument against hate groups; instead, scholarship should focus on what this group reveals about broader antigay sentiment.

Research on unloved groups must be sensitive to the danger of producing results that reflect the researcher’s own perspectives and desires, especially when, as with hate groups, the living research subjects and the researcher have different worldviews and different goals. “Religion,” in particular, says Roger Friedland, was “used to bolster the rule of the state, to set states into conquest and war, to spark civil wars, and to establish the ethical habits conditioning the accumulation of productive wealth” but was, via the Enlightenment and modernity, “sequestered, made safe and platitudinous.”³⁸ By articulating a public, far-reaching, and radical religion, Westboro Baptist Church sees itself as diametrically opposed to these trends. Research methods that dismiss or trivialize this self-assessment are disrespectful of the subject and, moreover, result in naive

understandings of the group that may ignore or underestimate its potential power.³⁹

At the same time, scholars of unsympathetic groups and people must be aware that such research projects have “the power to publicize even as they scrutinize” and “may subtly lend an academic gloss” to dangerous or hurtful behavior.⁴⁰ In *When Religion Is an Addiction*, Robert N. Minor complains that right-wing religionists in the United States today “are setting the agenda to which other political, religious, and activist groups are having to respond. And the responses have often been like those of an addict’s enablers.”⁴¹ For example, counterprotests often argue that “the media” is complicit in promoting Westboro Baptist Church’s message and that ignoring the church is the best way to address it. In one regard, this is true. Passersby who are confronted with offensive images on picket signs should probably ignore the church, for church members are unlikely to be persuaded by displays of anger or even respectful engagement, and the Supreme Court’s increasingly narrow definition of “fighting words” has not included the words that Westboro Baptists share on the picket line, depriving would-be respondents of one legal avenue of shutting them up.⁴² In short, unless addressing picketers contributes to the well-being of the passerby, he or she should simply ignore them. However, ignoring the church will not silence its members. One member explained about the church’s decision not to follow through with an announced military funeral picket in April 2011: “Once the media covers the story of our coming, they do the work for us.”⁴³ In this sense, ignoring church members might demotivate them from picketing—but if the church’s announcement of a picket does not produce a response, members are more likely to attend. Given that Westboro Baptists have announced their intention to publicly spread their message until Jesus’s second coming, ignoring it will not silence them. Therefore, scholarly research about the group is required to understand it, situate it, and learn the lessons that it has to teach about the formation and motivation of social movements. Accidentally publicizing or encouraging such a group “are dangerous outcomes,” notes Kathleen Blee, “but the consequences [of not doing the scholarship] are worse.”⁴⁴

The opportunity for—or the risk of—the “possible transformative effect of the anthropological encounter”⁴⁵ occurs when researcher and

subject are culturally distant but not in conflict. “However,” as Faye Ginsberg notes about researching abortion, “when the ‘other’ represents some very close opposition within one’s own society . . . taking on the ‘native’s point of view’ is problematic in different ways, especially when research is focused on a social and political conflict.”⁴⁶ In short, cultivating empathy for Westboro Baptists is challenging, not because they have so little in common with non-church members but because Westboro Baptists are indeed ordinary in so many ways; the differences in theology, politics, and civic engagement are brought into even sharper focus as a consequence. In writing about her research with racist groups, Kathleen Blee recalls “an eerie sense of the familiar colliding with the bizarre” as she witnessed “disturbingly ordinary” aspects of her subjects’ lives, “especially their evocation of community, family, and social ties.”⁴⁷ At Westboro Baptist Church, though, family and community life is so intimately tied to the church’s antigay mission that such “disturbingly ordinary” moments are frequently punctuated by reminders of the distinctive antigay activism of the church.

At all times during this research project, church members were generous with their time and provided ample information, though they frequently showed impatience toward those who lacked fluency in the rhetoric of conservative Protestantism, including police officers, reporters, and ideological opponents. The church members did not interpret such communication breakdowns as evidence of their own failure to represent themselves accurately but instead viewed them as evidence that their audience was willfully ignorant of God. They declare on their web site, “We are not really interested in a dialogue with you demon-possessed [sic] perverts. We are not out to change your minds, win your soul to Jesus, agree to disagree, find common ground upon which to build a meaningful long-term relationship, or any other of your euphemisms for compromising in our stance on the Word of God.”⁴⁸

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

The first part of this book draws upon anthropological methods to provide an ethnography of Westboro Baptist Church. The first chapter, “The

History of Westboro Baptist Church,” provides a historical overview from the church’s founding to the present, including a biography of founding pastor Fred Phelps and an account of church membership over time and the group’s political activism.

The second chapter, “The Theology of Westboro Baptist Church,” analyzes the church’s theology and its place in American Christianity, beginning with an explanation of its hyper-Calvinism, its focus on sin, its theology of sexuality, and its belief that individual sin and national tragedy are causally related. Though “the relationship between doctrine and life is richer and more complex than predicted by theory,”⁴⁹ doctrine plays an important role in Westboro Baptist Church members’ self-understanding and activism. Because theology is “a continuous effort to relate the apostolic faith to the conditions, needs, and temptations of men,”⁵⁰ a review of the evolution of Westboro Baptist Church theology reveals the “conditions, needs, and temptations” that church members have faced over the more than sixty years of the church’s existence.

The third chapter, “The Means, Ministries, and Mission of Westboro Baptist Church,” describes the multiple ministries of Westboro Baptist Church, including funeral pickets and multimedia preaching. It assesses the theological motivation for the church’s public activities at the local, national, and international levels, contending that the confluence of mobilized resources and a ready audience has allowed theologically justified pickets and preaching to continue.

The second half of the book considers Westboro Baptist Church in the context of the contemporary antigay Religious Right. The fourth chapter, “Cobelligerents in Antigay Activism: Westboro Baptist Church and the Religious Right,” defines the contemporary Religious Right, contextualizes its antigay activism in the history of moral legislation, and articulates its theological opposition to homosexuality. It also offers explanations of Religious Right antigay activism other than those rooted in theology. In addition, it examines how, in recent years, Religious Right antigay rhetoric has generally jettisoned its use of theology in public debates about sexuality in favor of pseudoscientific arguments in order to garner more respect from a public wary of overtly religious laws. It also examines the similarities and differences expressed in the antigay rhetoric of the

Religious Right, conservative politicians who advocate antigay policies, and Westboro Baptist Church, noting the overlap in the theology of sexuality of Westboro Baptist Church and Religious Right groups. The fifth chapter, “Civility, Civil Liberties, and Religious Nationalism,” considers how, given the overlap in both the theology and antigay political goals of Westboro Baptist Church and Religious Right groups, members of the Religious Right and conservative political leaders counter the church’s antipatriotic, but not its antigay, message. The chapter concludes by discussing what debates about funeral pickets reveal about contemporary American culture, especially its commitment to the ideal of the straight, Christian soldier as a national hero. The concluding chapter considers changes in Westboro Baptist Church as the second generation of antigay protesters come of age in an America increasingly accepting of sexual diversity.

The goal of researchers, notes anthropologist Rosemary Wax, “is to realize what they have experienced and learned and to communicate this in terms that will illumine significant areas of the social sciences.”⁵¹ Only a more thorough examination of the theology and religious context of Westboro Baptist Church, gained through ethnographic research, rhetorical analysis, discourse analysis, visual analysis, and critical legal analysis, will yield a fuller understanding of how and why Westboro Baptist Church operates and what the public’s response to it says about broader American culture. In this way, this book seeks to contribute to the meager scholarship completed on this church, which proclaims that it stands as “this world’s last hope”⁵² to hear God’s truth.

