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"Super Successful People": Robert Schuller, Suburban Exclusion, and the Demise of the New Deal Political Order

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**“SUPER SUCCESSFUL PEOPLE”: ROBERT SCHULLER, SUBURBAN EXCLUSION,
AND THE DEMISE OF THE NEW DEAL POLITICAL ORDER**

A Thesis Presented

by

RICHARD A. ANDERSON

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

September 2011

Department of History

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DEDICATION

To my parents, Reverend Rick Anderson and Ruth Hofmann Anderson, and my sister, Reverend Rebecca Anderson, two pastors and a superlative lay leader who—through a lifetime of discussions on matters of religious belief and practice—provided the intellectual seeds for this project. I am eternally grateful for their boundless love and support.

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ABSTRACT

“SUPER SUCCESSFUL PEOPLE”: ROBERT SCHULLER, SUBURBAN EXCLUSION, AND THE DEMISE OF THE NEW DEAL POLITICAL ORDER

SEPTEMBER 2011

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Between 1955 and 1984, the Reverend Robert Schuller’s Garden Grove Community Church in Orange County, California, blossomed into a ten-thousand-member congregation of regional and national prominence. Straddling the line between evangelical and mainline Protestantism, the church was emblematic of conservative American Christianity in the second half of the 20th century. Likewise, Orange County was the quintessential sprawling, decentralized, postindustrial suburban region. Garden Grove Community Church and Orange County grew together at an exponential rate in the postwar era. Through participation in the devotional, social, and organizational activities of the church, Schuller’s congregation actively constructed their personal and collective identities. They made meaning out of their suburban lives in ways that had long-term political and economic implications for the county, the region, and the country.

The church offered cultural, spiritual, and ideological coherence to a community of corporate, white-collar transplants with few social roots. The substance of that coherence was a theology conflating Christianity with meritocracy

and entrepreneurial individualism. The message resonated with “Sun Belt” suburbanites who benefited from systemic class- and race-based metropolitan inequality. Schuller’s message of self-reliance and personal achievement dovetailed with a national conservative repudiation of the public sector and collective responsibility that originated in the suburbs. This drive to eviscerate the American New Deal political order was nearly unstoppable by the early 1980s, and it received theological aid from institutions like Garden Grove Community Church.

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CHAPTER 1

THE GOSPEL OF ACHIEVEMENT

A. Introduction

On the nights of November 24th through November 27th, 1974, Garden Grove Community Church of Orange County, California, held four consecutive “Harvest of Hope” dinners at the Grand Ballroom of the Disneyland Hotel in Anaheim. The events inaugurated a year-long series of twentieth-anniversary commemorations. In a message printed in the church’s weekly newsletter, Pastor Robert Schuller described the events as “gala, grand, gorgeous, God-honoring dinners in the finest dining room in Orange County.” God had blessed the church, Schuller wrote, and “The best way to celebrate is to serve our lord more beautifully than before!”¹ During its first twenty years the church had garnered nation-wide attention, attracted new members by the thousands, erected monumental buildings, and raised millions of dollars. The congregation had much to celebrate.

Schuller started his Orange County career in 1955 as a clerical curiosity, preaching from atop the snack bar of a drive-in movie theater he rented for Sunday-morning services. Newspaper advertisements purchased by Schuller encouraged prospective congregants to “Come As You Are in the Family Car.”² He was a member of the Reformed Church of America but, in a bid to appeal broadly to Orange County residents, omitted any denominational reference when naming his church in favor

¹ Robert Schuller to congregation, Community Church News, October 23, 1974, “20 Year Celebration,” RS/CCM. Robert H. Schuller/Crystal Cathedral Ministries Papers, 1955-1993, Hope College, Holland, Michigan (Hereafter referred to as RS/CCM).

² Community Church News, April 1957, “GGGC Church Bulletin,” RS/CCM.

of the more inclusive “community.”³ In the early 1960s Garden Grove Community Church captured public attention with the construction of a “walk-in/drive-in” sanctuary with enormous sliding glass doors that allowed Schuller to simultaneously address congregants in the interior and those sitting outside in their cars. By the time of the Harvest of Hope dinners in 1974, the programs of the Garden Grove Community Church had already attracted a membership of more than 7,000; a number that would rise above 10,000 in 1980 when the church opened its new sanctuary—the Crystal Cathedral.

Schuller’s national prominence as an author, television personality, and church growth expert expanded his influence. His books outlining his hopeful theology of “Possibility Thinking” filled best-seller lists. Schuller’s syndicated, Sunday-morning broadcast, the *Hour of Power*, displayed the physical grandeur, social vibrancy, and optimistic theology of the church to Americans across the country. His Institute for Successful Church Leadership provided church growth guidance and organizational training to pastors and lay leaders across the country and established Garden Grove Community Church as an innovative bellwether in American Protestantism.

While Garden Grove Community Church grew precipitously, Orange County expanded as well. In the two decades since Schuller founded his church in 1955, Orange County’s population grew from 200,000 to 1.5 million in 1974. During that same period the county also enjoyed massive commercial and residential real estate development, as well as economic expansion centered on high-technology industries

³ Robert H. Schuller, *My Journey* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 216.

and defense manufacturing. Orange County was also home to a vibrant circle of conservative grassroots political activists, including a sizable contingent of John Birch Society members, who were increasingly influential on the state and national level. One of the county's most notable conservative politicians—and former congressional representatives—Richard Nixon, had even ascended to the presidency. Garden Grove Community Church and Orange County had blossomed together—guided by a set of conservative cultural, economic, and political values—and the Harvest of Hope dinners were a time to celebrate the past and anticipate the future. On each of those four November nights in 1974 more than 1,000 congregants from across Orange County paid \$7.50 per person (\$32 in today's dollars) to attend a celebration of their very unique church.

Every detail of the gala dinners was meticulously planned to reflect the themes of harvest, optimism, and God's beneficence. Correspondence between the church and the Disneyland Hotel reveal that Schuller and his staff vetted details as minor as the arrangement of banquet tables to the placement of the baby grand piano on the stage. Attendees dined on roast beef with au jus, parsley rissole potatoes, and green beans amandine.⁴ During the meal they viewed a slide show narration of the church's history.

Schuller presumably sat at the head table, which according to the contract with the Disneyland Hotel was to be elevated above the other tables and flanked by the flags of California and the United States. The pastor concluded the evening with a special anniversary message reinforcing the gala's message that, "To Celebrate is

⁴ Memo, Garden Grove Community Church to Disneyland Hotel, undated, "20 Year Celebration," RS/CCM.

to Serve,” after which the crowd simultaneously signed pledges of financial support for the coming year. Then, in a moment of carefully orchestrated pageantry, ushers collected the pledges and brought them forward to the stage while the assembled crowd sang the rousing Doxology chorus, which begins with the line, “Praise God from whom all blessings flow.”⁵

This thesis examines how the blessings of postwar American life flowed unevenly across the metropolitan landscape. I ask how the built environment of the United States came to be dominated by ever-expanding residential and commercial sprawl and why large, evangelical churches proliferated in those same regions. More deeply, I examine the central place of free-market, small-government conservatism in suburban Protestant (especially evangelical) churches. Taken together, suburbanization and conservative Christianity altered not only the physical landscape but also the spiritual topography and social fabric of American communities. The increasing prominence of suburbs and the proliferation of large, powerful evangelical churches transformed the way many middle-class, white Americans conceived of—and understood their responsibilities to—their local and national communities. As evangelicals moved to the suburbs in ever-greater numbers they became increasingly more engaged with secular culture and politics, and they gained a large measure of cultural and political power.

Between 1950 and 1970 suburbs added 1.2 million housing units each year and a total of 85 million residents, while central cities grew by only 10 million.⁶

⁵ Louis Bourgeois and Thomas Ken, “Doxology,” public domain, in *Hymns of the Family of God* (Nashville, Tenn.: Paragon Associates, Inc., 1976), 382.

⁶ Robert Fishman, *Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia* (New York: Basic Books, 1987), 182.

During the 1970s suburban municipalities built an additional 20 million housing units.⁷ While only one quarter of Americans lived in suburbia immediately following the Second World War, a majority did so by 1990.⁸ Historians have produced a wealth of scholarship on postwar American suburbs, examining suburbanization in the context of the decline of industrial manufacturing, racial segregation, and conservative politics. Unfortunately, scholars have too often treated questions of residential and commercial sprawl, and economic transformation, in isolation from the growth of evangelical Christianity. The three trends are, I argue, tightly braided together. For the purposes of this project, the most salient fact about Orange County and Garden Grove Community Church is that both grew in the context of the postindustrial transformation of the United States following World War II. Unlike previous nationally prominent pastors in American history like Charles Grandison Finney, Dwight L. Moody, Billy Sunday, or Billy Graham—who were either full-time itinerants or established only temporary home bases—Schuller was rooted in a community and acutely sensitive to its suburban demographics, aesthetics, and politics.

Three central arguments propel this study. First, I argue that Garden Grove Community Church mediated the experience of postindustrial suburban living for white, middle-class families by providing theological, ideological, political coherence to a new form of spatial organization. Second, I argue that the church reflected, reinforced, and ultimately sacralized metropolitan inequality. Third, I argue that

⁷ Fishman, 182.

⁸ Kevin Kruse and Thomas Sugrue, Introduction, *The New Suburban History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006) 1.

Schuller and his congregants promulgated a vision of political economy that favored privatization and entrepreneurial individualism over the public sector and collective responsibility. Thus, I conclude that the rising cultural and political prominence of Garden Grove Community Church and subsequent megachurches in the 1970s and 1980s dovetailed with the ascent of a conservative, anti-liberal political coalition that fought to unravel the policy apparatus of the American New Deal order.

B. The Culture of Postindustrial America

The postindustrial transformation of the United States was an economic process first. It was also a social, cultural, political, and even environmental process—with implications for how and where Americans worked, understood their place in the larger society, constructed communities, shaped the built environment and the physical landscape, and distributed resources on the local, regional, and national level. Postindustrialism is not unique to the United States and certainly not unique to the region of Southern California on which this project focuses.

Nonetheless, the nexus of government policy, corporate hegemony, conservative political ideology, and Protestant Christian theology in Orange County and Garden Grove Community Church illuminates crucial aspects of postindustrial American society.

In describing postindustrialism, I draw heavily on Daniel Bell's elucidation of the term. First, postindustrialism heralds a shift from a manufacturing economy based upon the production of goods to a service economy driven by banking, finance, real estate, insurance, communications, health, education, research, and

government.⁹ Second, postindustrialism heralds the displacement of blue-collar workers by a “professional and technical class” in the occupational hierarchy.¹⁰ Third, this new professional and technical class utilizes “intellectual technology” to rationally manage complex systems, like corporations.¹¹ The chief tension in Bell’s schema was that the social structure of postindustrialism created new occupational roles and compelled individuals to adjust to new status levels, while postindustrial culture—organized around an axis of “fulfillment and enhancement of the self”—militated against that conformity.¹² Likewise, the tension between secular social roles and ethical imperatives of Christian faith was a central theme of Schuller’s sermons and books.

Bell presciently identified the wrenching conflicts that the transition from an industrial to a service economy would present for individuals, but he underestimated the degree to which ideology propelled postindustrialism. Historian Mike Wallace argues that postindustrialism did not germinate from “some mystical urge toward a service economy inherent in the capitalist order” but from specific policy decisions in government and business.¹³ In *Crabgrass Frontier*, historian Kenneth Jackson documents the degree to which federal policy encouraged and subsidized the decentralization of residential development. Thomas Sugrue’s history of postwar Detroit demonstrates the logic by which automobile executives pushed manufacturing first out of the urban core, then out of the

⁹ Daniel Bell, *The Coming of Postindustrial Society: A Venture into Social Forecasting* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 15.

¹⁰ Bell, 14.

¹¹ Bell, 27-29.

¹² Bell, 14.

¹³ Mike Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History: and Other Essays on American Memory* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 93.

Midwestern Rust Belt, and ultimately out of the United States.¹⁴ In the process of deindustrialization following the Second World War, the political judgments and normative preferences of the emerging professional class operated beneath the patina of putatively neutral rational planning and clockwork macroeconomic functioning.

The members of Garden Grove Community Church participated in the industrial-government-political process that reorganized capitalism on a local, regional, and national level. They benefited handsomely from the altered distribution of economic resources that resulted from the postindustrial order. Yet, the status conflict Bell identified is certainly manifest in the literature of Garden Grove Community Church. Schuller's sermons and publications returned repeatedly to issues of occupational challenges, individual aspiration, and the balance between work and family. Furthermore, the membership's Christian faith, deeply influenced by Pastor Robert Schuller, provided tools for navigating the postindustrial political economy. He created a new type of religious institution that appealed to a new type of American worker: the white-collar male. The church ministered to other people as well—not the least of which were the wives and children of these men—but Schuller's theology was uniquely simpatico to the male foot soldiers of the postindustrial economy.

Contemporary observers devoted significant attention to the social contours of the postwar economic reorganization, and to the individual and collective psyche

¹⁴ Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 11; Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 128.

of postindustrial workers. In 1956, William Whyte described the new corporate professional class as a “generation of bureaucrats.”¹⁵ For Whyte, the suburbs were the ideal space in which to study the new archetypal American worker because [t]hey are communities made in his image.”¹⁶ Whyte’s contemporary David Riesman situated the new corporate bureaucrats within the postwar built environment and postwar economic order, noting that suburban regions like Orange County, “with their handsome school plants and their neighborly fraternalism, are the consumption side of the managerial economy.”¹⁷ While Whyte and Riesman evinced ambivalence about the impact of increasingly influential corporate bureaucrats on American society, C. Wright Mills presented them as harbingers of social and political decay in his 1950 book, *White Collar*. Mills presented white-collar professionals as devoid of roots, loyalties, culture and ideology. He argued they had “no plan of life... the malaise is deep-rooted; for the absence of any order of belief has left them morally defenseless as individuals and politically defenseless as a group.”¹⁸ Like Whyte and Riesman, Mills recognized a profound economic shift in the organization of capitalism and linked it to accompanying changes in culture, social interaction, built environment, and residential settlement. Each postulated that some type of psychological malady afflicted white-collar professionals at work and at home in the suburbs. Yet, of the three only Whyte treated religion in any substance, and even he did so in a cursory fashion. In neglecting the prominence of

¹⁵ William Whyte, *The Organization Man* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956), 67.

¹⁶ Whyte, 267.

¹⁷ David Riesman, “The Suburban Sadness,” in William Donbriner, editor, *The Suburban Community* (New York, G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1968), 394.

¹⁸ C. Wright Mills, *White Collar: The American Middle Classes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950), xvi.

Protestant Christianity in the suburban communities that were home to the new postindustrial professional milieu, these three incisive sociological portraits overlooked a crucial aspect of cultural production.

C. Suburbanization

My interpretation of cultural production in Garden Grove Community Church attempts to account for the creativity and diversity with which its suburban congregants actively made meaning out of their environments in ways that were ultimately political. Re-imagining postwar suburbs requires addressing an accumulation of stereotypes about suburban America. Artists and observers across many media have presented suburbs as creatively stultifying, socially homogenous, morally repressive, and furtively deviant. Such themes, in various assemblages, permeate books like *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* and *The Crack in the Picture Window*, films like *The Graduate*, *Ordinary People*, and *American Beauty*, and songs like Malvina Reynolds's 1962 hit "Little Boxes," which laments suburban houses "all made out of ticky tacky" that "all look just the same."¹⁹ Suburbs have indeed served as sites of enforced homogeneity while also harboring private behavior that transgressed carefully established public norms. Yet most portraits of suburbia have failed to take seriously the substance of suburban social life or account for the functional and demographic diversity of the communities. The literature has too often failed to conceptualize suburbs as, in the words of theorist John Archer, the "physical, social, and cultural fabric [landscape as well as ethnoscape] that people

¹⁹ Malvina Reynolds, "Little Boxes," copyright 1962, Schroder Music Company.

both employ and produce as part of their practices of everyday living.”²⁰ Thus, across a variety of disciplines, interpretations of suburbia have lacked sufficient complexity.

Recent scholarship has begun to address the agency of suburbanites and treat seriously the terms with which they understood their lives. In their introduction to *The New Suburban History*, historians Kevin Kruse and Thomas Sugrue examine the suburb and urban core in tandem as part of what they term a “metropolitan” framework.²¹ Kruse and Sugrue suggest that suburban residents labored to establish and preserve the homogeneity of their communities as a bulwark against the inner city and its low-income, minority residents. Robert Self argues in his study of the battles between city and suburb in postwar metropolitan Oakland that the competing ideologies of the Great Society liberalism, the New Right, and Black Power were “grounded in urban space, in the particular metropolitan distribution of wealth, opportunity, and resources.”²² Kevin Kruse’s study of “white flight” in metropolitan Atlanta reframes the spatially organized political battles over desegregation as grassroots efforts to assert a positive suburban ideology. White Atlantans did not simply flee *from* the urban core and encroaching black residents, Kruse suggests, they fled *to* new communities in which collective identity was “predicated on a language of rights, freedom, and individualism.”²³ Matthew Lassiter’s examination of the ordinary Americans

²⁰ John Archer, “Everyday Suburbia: Lives and Practices,” *Public: Art, Culture, Ideas*. Forthcoming 2011.

²¹ Kruse and Sugrue, 6.

²² Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 2.

²³ Kevin Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 6.

constituting the “silent majority” likewise argues that the “grassroots politics produced by suburban sprawl” affected a bottom-up national political transformation founded on the “ethos of middle-class entitlement” and race- and class-based exclusion.²⁴ According to Lassiter, suburban residents did not conceive of themselves as conservative activists but as “homeowners, taxpayers, and school parents.”²⁵ Together, these recent studies suggest that the shifting nature of collective suburban identity powerfully shaped the contours of American politics in the postwar era.

By interrogating the terms with which suburbanites viewed themselves and their communities—the rhetoric they employed to justify their racial exclusivity—the approaches of Self, Kruse, and Lassiter provide crucial local, even neighborhood-level, context to national political trends. Building on the methodological contributions of the New Suburban History, I examine the process by which Schuller and his congregation constructed their collective identity. I proceed with the assumption that they were, as John Archer suggests, present at the creation of their own symbolic lives.

The individual and collective identity of members of Garden Grove Community Church was inextricably linked to the suburban landscape of Orange County and the pan-regional culture of the Sun Belt. Bruce J. Schulman describes how “the mechanization of cotton culture, the steady swelling of cities, the high-technology boom, the ever-narrowing income gap between the regions, the

²⁴ Matthew Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 3.

²⁵ Lassiter, 7.

northward migration of poverty” all created a distinctly prosperous, modern region stretching from the southwest to the mid-Atlantic.²⁶ Sun Belt suburbs were not merely bedroom communities dependent on the urban core; they were at the vanguard of a new metropolitan form. Mark Gottdiener and George Kephart argue that beginning in the 1960s the traditional suburban community was replaced in many locations by a new form of spatial organization: the sprawling, economically self-sufficient, spatially differentiated and specialized landscape they term the “multi-nucleated metropolitan region.”²⁷ Such regions are not dependent on the urban core and in fact isolate themselves from the city by establishing sharp legal and territorial boundaries.

Robert Fishman’s study of suburbia, *Bourgeois Utopias*, captures the fractured, multi-nodal form of community that develops in multi-nucleated metropolitan regions. He argues that sprawling suburbs lack a center that functions like the downtown of old. The only center is “the residential unit,” a point of origin from which

members of the household create their own city from the multitude of destinations that are within suitable driving distance. One spouse might work at an industrial park two exits down the interstate; the other at an office complex five exits in the other direction; the children travel by bus to comprehensive schools in their district or drive themselves to the local branch of the state university; the family shops at several different malls along several different highways... all they need and consume, from the most complex medical services to fresh fruits and vegetables, can be found along the highways.²⁸

²⁶ Bruce J. Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sun Belt: Federal Policy, Economic Development, and the Transformation of the South, 1938-1980* (New York: Oxford Press, 1991), 219.

²⁷ M. Gottdiener and George Kephart, “The Multinucleated Metropolitan Region: A Comparative Analysis,” in Rob Kling, Spencer Olin, and Mark Poster, editors, *Postsuburban California: The Transformation of Orange County since World War II*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 33.

²⁸ Fishman, 185.

The diffuse nature of community—the lack of physical cohesion amid sprawl—echoes the highly mobile, uprooted lives of the professionals who work and reside in these newly developed suburbs. Fishman describes the new suburban model as the “technoburb” in recognition of the concentration of high-tech knowledge industries in these regions but also because of the reliance on technology and telecommunications, which replace the face-to-face contact of the urban core.²⁹ Fishman laments the lack of culture in these technoburbs, arguing that one “can find in these decentralized regions more than enough specialists in the most arcane engineering specialties, [but] cannot hope to attract a large enough audience to support a chamber music concert.”³⁰ Fishman’s analysis is compelling, but such conflation of culture with “high culture” are myopic. If the definition of culture expands to consider the symbols and ritual performance of everyday life, it is clear that a great deal of cultural production occurred in Orange County and in Garden Grove Community Church.

By framing Garden Grove Community Church in the context of postindustrial cultural production I do not mean to reduce religious belief and practice to an instrument of economic structures. I employ Clifford Geertz’s theoretical contributions to argue that Schuller and his congregants actively participated in the creation of both an ideology and a system of daily living that dovetailed with their economic status and their built environment. Geertz suggested that people act out religious belief through rituals in which “the world as lived and the world as

²⁹ Fishman, 1.

³⁰ Fishman, 202.

imagined [are] fused under the agency of a single set of symbolic forms."³¹ Thus, I contend that the members of Garden Grove Community Church created a coherent system of “powerful, pervasive, long-lasting moods and motivations” through the theology of their pastor and their own free-market, small-government political views.³²

D. Evangelicals, Politics, and American Culture

The theology of Robert Schuller provided a powerful system of meaning to the corporate professionals who flocked to the technoburbs of Orange County. As with the study of suburbia, an examination of the changing status of evangelicals in American society encounters the heavy burden of accumulated stereotypes. Evangelicals have routinely been portrayed as rural, atavistic, ignorant, and uncouth. Sinclair Lewis’s 1927 novel *Elmer Gantry* exemplified this school of cultural criticism, with its scathing portrait of a crude, obtuse, charlatan evangelist.³³ A proper contextualization of Garden Grove Community Church must begin with a recognition that evangelical Christianity, like suburbanization in general, as a complex phenomenon—internally differentiated, animated by compelling ideological and theological formulations, and producing deeply felt beliefs and practices that assist its adherents in constructing identities that make sense of their world.

Mark Noll defines evangelicalism as “culturally adaptive biblical experientialism,” in contrast to the separatist tendencies of fundamentalist

³¹ Clifford Geertz, “Religion as a Cultural System,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 112.

³² Geertz, 90.

³³ Sinclair Lewis, *Elmer Gantry* (New York: Harcourt, 1927).

Christianity.³⁴ While the latter traditionally invoked the axiom that Christians should be “in the world but not of it,” the former increasingly engaged the secular community in the middle-part of the twentieth century as part of its evangelistic outreach mission.³⁵ The tension between separatism and cultural engagement led to prominent splits among conservative Christians, as when fundamentalist preacher and university president Bob Jones ended his associations in the 1950s with evangelist Billy Graham and Bill Bright, founder of the evangelistic organization Campus Crusade for the Christ.³⁶ Thus, the line between evangelicalism and fundamentalism is less one of doctrine than of differences over secularism and Christian ecumenicism.

Evangelicalism must also be distinguished from “mainline” Protestant Christianity. Sociologists Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney provide an expansive definition of the mainline: the “dominant, culturally established” institutions that comprise the “center” of American Protestantism, denominations such as the United Methodist Church, Episcopalian Church, Presbyterian Church U.S.A, Congregationalist/United Church of Christ, Disciples of Christ, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church. Mainline churches employ a traditional theology and liturgy, avoiding the emotional experientialism of evangelical worship that sociologist Donald E. Miller describes as a melding of “mind and body.”³⁷ Of course,

³⁴ Mark Noll, *American Evangelical Christianity: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 2.

³⁵ John G. Turner, *Bill Bright and Campus Crusade for Christ: The Renewal of Evangelicalism in Postwar America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 50.

³⁶ See Turner, 75-83; Steven P. Miller, *Billy Graham and the Rise of the Republican South* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 21, 60-61.

³⁷ Donald E. Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism: Christianity in the New Millennium* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1997), 189.

mainline and evangelical Protestantism are not diametrically opposed, and Schuller's place on the continuum of the two strains of Christianity is ambiguous.

Roof and McKinney also count Schuller's Reformed Church of America as a mainline denomination, and the liturgy of Garden Grove Community certainly comported with traditional standards. Yet Erica Renya Robles argues that the RCA historically "elided the distinction between evangelical and mainline practice."³⁸ Schuller's theology, as discussed in Chapter Three, is distinct from both evangelical and mainline orthodoxy, but his heavy emphasis on outreach and conversion mirrored the evangelical approach. More importantly, Schuller's politics rested squarely within the confines of the burgeoning postwar evangelical conservative movement. Indeed, political affiliation represents one of the starkest divisions between evangelicals and mainline Protestants. In the mid-twentieth century, as Schuller was beginning his career, the most visible organizational manifestation of mainline Christianity was the National Council of Churches (NCC), which historian Paul Boyer describes as "the voice of liberal Protestantism."³⁹ Schuller publicly disavowed the NCC in 1961 for its condemnation of anti-communism, and as a result he claimed to be "targeted for abuse by ministers from all mainline Protestant denominations."⁴⁰ This project examines Schuller's politics in detail, and I contend that the history of Garden Grove Community Church illustrates ascension of conservative evangelical politics to the mainstream of American life from a position of striking marginality.

³⁸ Erica Renya Robles, "Mediating Eternity: Media, Worship and the Built Environment at the Crystal Cathedral." Dissertation, Stanford University, June, 2009, 86.

³⁹ Paul Boyer, "The Evangelical Resurgence in 1970s American Protestantism," in *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970s* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008), 30.

⁴⁰ Schuller, *My Journey*, 258.

Most scholars date the twentieth-century nadir of fundamentalist Christianity to the 1920s and the ignominy of the Scopes Trial. H.L. Mencken's scathing accounts of the legal proceedings in Dayton, Tennessee, and the "ghostly science" of fundamentalism in general colored the perceptions of his urban intellectual contemporaries at the time and influenced subsequent generations of writers.⁴¹ Edward Larson's incisive study of Scopes Trial argues that interpretations of the trial inaccurately portrayed the Dayton proceedings as a victory for the "light of reason" over "religious obscurantism".⁴² Simplistic readings of the trial fed stereotypes of conservative Christians as "holy rollers" and "Bible-thumpers" and encouraged the indiscriminate lumping together of Pentecostals, Holiness Christians, fundamentalists from mainline denominations, and non-denominational evangelicals. George Marsden's study of Christian fundamentalism and American culture largely accedes to the periodization of conservative decline in the first third of the twentieth century. He nonetheless argues that evangelicals had previously occupied positions of cultural, social, and political prominence in the United States during the Victorian era and that evangelicals' relationship to secular culture has undergone a series of peaks and troughs over time.⁴³ Thus, the cultural and political marginalization of conservative Christians was neither inevitable nor irreversible.

Yet the question remains of how exactly evangelicals gained (or re-gained) social status in the second-half of the twentieth century. Certainly, the general postwar economic prosperity improved the fortunes of many middle-class

⁴¹ H.L. Mencken, "The Hills of Zion," *Prejudices: Fifth Series*, 1926.

⁴² Edward J. Larson, *Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America's Continuing Debate over Science and Religion* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 206.

⁴³ George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, first printing 1980), 6.

Americans, evangelical or otherwise. Yet, the members of Garden Grove Community Church were not just middle-class—they were bourgeois in the sense that Raymond Williams defined the term: a ruling class at the forefront of the capitalist mode of production.⁴⁴ Postwar evangelicals enjoyed significant cultural and political power. The bourgeois transformation of American evangelicals is best understood in the context of their relocation to suburbia and involvement with culturally and politically influential churches.

E. Consumer Religion

In order to minister to Orange County's corporate professionals, Schuller first had to attract them to his church. This thesis traces the organizational schemes, fundraising activities, and community outreach mechanisms employed by Garden Grove Community Church in order to expand the congregation. Rather than simply minister to a body of devoted Christians, the chief goal of Garden Grove Community Church was attracting new members and shepherding them toward deeper belief and spiritual devotion. Schuller made "unchurched" individuals—people who either eschewed faith, had no exposure to church, or maintained some belief in God and the basic tenets of Christianity but disdain organized religion—the demographic focus of his ministry.⁴⁵ He described the modernist design and de-sacralization of the church sanctuary as a conscious effort to appeal to "unchurched visitors, many of whom might be nervous around the intensely religious symbolism of traditional

⁴⁴ Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 40.

⁴⁵ Anne C. Loveland and Otis Wheeler, *From Meetinghouse to Megachurch: A Material and Cultural History* (Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 127.

church architecture.”⁴⁶ In a clear manifestation of the break with traditionalism, Garden Grove Community Church downplayed its denominational affiliation, substituting any reference to the Reformed Church of America in its name in favor of the “community” appellation that would “sound inviting to the unchurched people we were trying to reach.”⁴⁷ Schuller also spoke and wrote in the generic language of “faith” and “God” rather than Christian dogma. His sermons and books emphasized a simple message—God loves all people and offers them earthly joy and eternal salvation—above doctrinal specifics.

Observers of postwar American suburbs found early on that denominational loyalty declined precipitously as young, professional Americans in white-collar professions moved around the country, diminishing their ties to their kin and their communities of origin.⁴⁸ Wade Clark Roof has argued that the so-called “Baby Boomer” generation developed a highly personal, consumer-oriented approach to religious belief and practice, shopping for a set of symbols and rituals that conformed to their own needs.⁴⁹ Such a consumer approach to religion complemented the lifestyles of the post-World War II middle class, many of whom enjoyed the time and resources to travel long distances for worship and to devote hours and money to church activities. Thus, Garden Grove Community Church adopted the consumer ideology of the postwar era. The focus on consumerism dovetailed with a larger postwar shift in the American political economy that

⁴⁶ Schuller, *My Journey*, 265.

⁴⁷ Schuller, *My Journey*, 216.

⁴⁸ Whyte, 367.

⁴⁹ Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journey of the Baby Boomers* (San Francisco: San FranciscoHarper, 1993), 5.

viewed the aggregate purchasing power of citizens as the guarantor of freedom and prosperity.⁵⁰

F. Gospel of Achievement

Although it returns repeatedly to the affluence of the GGCC and Orange County, this thesis is not concerned first and foremost with the material prosperity of Schuller's congregation and the wider suburban community. As subsequent chapters will demonstrate, Schuller preached the virtues of capitalism and strongly suggested that God bestowed prosperity on those who worked hard. Yet his was not quite a "Gospel of Wealth."⁵¹ Schuller maintained a strong attachment to the Protestant Work Ethic, as explicated by Max Weber, with its notion of material accumulation tempered by Christian morality, sobriety, and thrift. In this way, he never quite jettisoned the merchant ethos of his Reformed roots. Yet when Weber wrote his famous work in 1905 he assumed that a religious system of ethical discipline was necessary at the inception of capitalism to solidify the primacy of its assumptions and practices.⁵² Weber argued that by the twentieth century the capitalist system of rational organization of labor and economic activity was sufficiently entrenched that it could operate independent of a religious mandate.⁵³ Yet, a close examination of Garden Grove Community Church reveals the resilience of what Weber described as "[t]he religious valuation of restless, continuous, systematic work in a worldly calling, as the highest means of asceticism, and at the

⁵⁰ Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 13.

⁵¹ The term "The Gospel of Wealth" was initially a secular call for philanthropic civic responsibility made by Andrew Carnegie, see his essay, Andrew Carnegie, "Wealth" *North American Review*, 1889. The phrase was later applied somewhat indiscriminately to all manner of affluent churches and pastors.

⁵³ Max Weber, *The Protestant Work Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 2nd. edition, Talcott Parsons, trans. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905, 1958), 72 .

same time the surest and most evident proof of rebirth and genuine faith.”⁵⁴ Despite the ostentation and opulence of its physical environment, the congregation collectively strived to realize a goal deeper than simple material accumulation.

Rather than a Gospel of Wealth, I suggest that Schuller’s message amounted to a “Gospel of Achievement.” He and his congregants celebrated the superlative qualities of their church and Orange County, which they believed constituted their earthly reward for Christian devotion. The literature of Garden Grove Community Church is littered with references to the “tallest” tower in Orange County, to the “greatest” choir, the fastest-growing church in Southern California.⁵⁵ Schuller, in fact, advised his staff of his willingness to listen to any suggestion containing a superlative.⁵⁶ The members of GGCC viewed themselves as high achievers who had earned the right to the benefits of their exclusive communities: quality schools for their children, crime-free neighborhoods, attractive homes, and high property values. The self-perception of the church is best-expressed by the title of a sermon Schuller preached in honor of high school and college graduates in May, 1974: “Super Successful People: Be One!”⁵⁷

G. Conclusion

The members of Garden Grove Community Church were, in the aggregate, successful. Their achievements were the product of the power they held in the realms of culture and politics. Certain groups of Americans gained and others lost in

⁵⁴ Weber, 172.

⁵⁵ Newsletter story, unsigned, “90 FOOT CROSS IS RAISED,” Community Church News, November 2, 1967, “Community Church News, 1957, 1961, 1967-1969, 1974”; Newsletter story, unsigned, Community Church News Extra, “Community Church News, 1975, 1976,” RS/CCM.

⁵⁶ Robert H. Schuller, *Move Ahead with Possibility Thinking* (New York: Doubleday, 1967), 81.

⁵⁷ Newsletter article, unsigned, Community Church News, May 3, 1974, “Community News, 1957, 1961, 1967-1969, 1974,” RS/CCM.

the postwar contest over economic resources. My guiding assumption is that both suburbanization as a process and suburban Protestant churches as institutions are both political. Garden Grove Community Church contributed a key voice in a larger chorus of institutions and interest groups that rose in opposition to the social welfare and regulatory commitments of the American postwar liberal state. The messages disseminated by Schuller bolstered a postindustrial political economy characterized by the privatization of government functions, corporate hegemony, and the globalization of capitalism. The members of Garden Grove Community Church embraced an ideology that brought employment opportunities, tax benefits, and real estate development to their communities at the expense of other communities—those in rural areas, the inner city, or the older urban regions of the Midwestern and Northeastern Rust Belt left behind in the postindustrial embrace of cheap labor, high technology, specialized services and other “knowledge industries”.⁵⁸

Schuller’s application of corporate business practices and values to all facets of his ministry—his transmutation of Christian devotion and ministerial care into commodities—corresponds to Mills’s vision of the mid-century United States as a “great salesroom” of manipulation and exploitation.⁵⁹ According to Mills, the commodification of the white-collar world was de-humanizing and demoralizing, creating soulless automatons; moreover, he presented white-collar workers as passive actors buffeted by the winds of economic structures imposed from above.

⁵⁸ See Margaret Pugh O’Mara, *Cities of Knowledge: Cold War Science and the Search for the Next Silicon Valley* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 2.

⁵⁹ Mills, 161.

To the contrary, I suggest that the corporate professionals who filled the pews of Schuller's church relished the world in which they lived and worked. They not only assented to postindustrial economic and social conditions, but they participated in the creation of those conditions.

This study does not uphold Orange County or Garden Grove Community Church as a singularly illustrative of postindustrial America. Historians have uncovered aspects of suburban life in other regions that are distinct from the portrait of Orange County I present. Yet, for reasons I examine in the following chapters, evangelical suburban churches like Garden Grove Community Church and communities like Orange County were uniquely influential in ushering the rise of postindustrial era and the vitiation of the liberal state during the 1960s and 1970s.

CHAPTER 2

ORANGE COUNTY: COME AS YOU ARE IN THE FAMILY CAR

A. Introduction

Robert Schuller was in many ways the quintessential Orange County figure: ambitious, self-made (in his own telling), and originally from elsewhere. The trajectory of his life before and after his move to California dovetailed with the story of many people who relocated to Southern California in the decades following World War II. The synchronicity begins to explain Schuller's ability to attract the transplants to his church in such great numbers.

The youngest of five children, Schuller was born in 1926 into a farm family in Sioux County, Iowa, in the northwest part of the state. The Schullers were not impoverished, but they lived simply. The family home lacked electricity until Schuller was thirteen years old, and the family used only an outhouse until his high school years.¹ The First Reformed Church of Newark, a town nearby the Schuller homestead, was the social center of his childhood, and Reformed Christianity was the moral anchor of the Schuller family.²

The Reformed Church of America (RCA) is the oldest Protestant denomination in the United States, tracing its founding back to New York (then New Amsterdam) in 1628. One of two major Reformed denominations in the United States, the RCA is a small Calvinist sect with a large degree of ethnic homogeneity. The denomination is most prominent in Midwestern states with areas of heavy Dutch concentration, like Iowa and Michigan. In his upbringing and professional

¹ Schuller, *My Journey*, 29.

² Schuller, *My Journey*, 19-21.

training, Schuller was deeply ensconced in the doctrinal and ecclesiastical procedures of the Reformed tradition. Nonetheless, the relationship between Garden Grove Community Church and the RCA would become increasingly labored as Schuller gained national prominence and embraced an ecumenical, even secular, approach to communicating his theology.³

In his autobiography, published in 2001, Schuller frames his childhood in terms of an evolving realization of the limits of Sioux County and the corresponding opportunities offered by the wider world. In his telling, Schuller determined that his future was attached to a mythical “somewhere” beyond the farm and the country folk. Such memories may project backward in a distorted fashion, but the projection nonetheless illuminates crucial aspects of Schuller’s carefully crafted image, his ideological message, and his self-identity. Schuller wrote that as he prepared to enter high school he walked through the streets of Orange City, the county seat, ruminating on the tension between his stultifying present and a possibly exhilarating future:

How could I transform the dull and visionless expressions worn by my stuck-in-a-rut neighbors and help them to see and yearn for a better unknown? Could they not see? Did they not know? Would they not grasp for their tomorrows with vigor and determination? Why were people always so slow and cautious to try something new and better than what they were used to?⁴

Schuller’s seeming lack of appreciation for the subjective experience of life in Sioux County, Iowa—his suggestion that rural, agriculture life equaled timidity and narrow-thinking—echoes a similar incomprehension evinced in Schuller’s writings

³ For a succinct summary of RCA history, see Robles, 37-41. For tension between Schuller and the RCA, see Scott Fagerstrom, “Schuller’s Remarks Upset Reformed Church Officials,” *Orange County Register*, April 30, 1987. “Correspondence--General, 1977-1991,” RS/CCM.

⁴ Schuller, *My Journey*, 69.

and sermons for people of modest success or those who lack “ambition.” Regardless, Schuller’s eagerness to succeed, at least in his own retrospective narration, was boundless and would eventually yield impressive professional results.

B. College and Schuller’s Nascent Theology

College provided Schuller was his entrée into the world beyond the farm, although he only managed to finance his tuition through a loan from his older sister.⁵ Nonetheless, a barely seventeen-year-old Schuller left Iowa for Hope College in Holland, Michigan, in the fall of 1943.⁶ Hope was a small liberal arts college run by the RCA. Holland, as the name suggests, resided at the center of Dutch enclave on the edge of Lake Michigan in the southwest part of the state.

Schuller was by his own admission a mediocre student. He majored in history but received top grades only in speech and debate.⁷ Yet, Schuller’s uneven academic record should not be confused with inattention to theological or philosophical concerns on his part. As an undergraduate—and later as a seminarian—Schuller wrestled with the Calvinist legacy of the RCA and his Dutch Reformed upbringing, with its traditional belief in predestination and the total depravity of human beings. The personal theology Schuller developed had profound consequences for the direction of his ministerial career, the content of his books and sermons, and the church growth strategies that he disseminated. Schuller’s deep reading of the theological canon led him to substitute the “theological negativism” of his upbringing with “theological positivism.”⁸ He concluded that the severity of

⁵ Schuller, *My Journey*, 81.

⁶ Schuller, *My Journey*, 86.

⁷ Schuller, *My Journey*, 97.

⁸ Schuller, *My Journey*, 126.

Calvinist doctrine was the product of Calvin's well-intentioned but misguided followers. Calvin himself, Schuller wrote, offered teachings that "revealed a theology of hope and joy, liberating humanity from a shaming, blaming, cowering Christianity."⁹ The reading of an incipient message of positive thinking into Calvin required a confrontation with the great theologian's doctrine of the inherent sinfulness human beings. Schuller argued that "man isn't totally depraved" but that sinfulness is a "reality of life."¹⁰ He defined sinfulness as a "condition rather than an action: (though that condition is often revealed in action) an inborn absence of faith more than a turning from faith."¹¹ The implication was that sinners lacked faith, an assertion which would find a corollary in Schuller's later argument that success revealed Christian devotion and failure revealed its absence.

Yet, Schuller did indeed embrace a "positive" rendering of the Christian life. He contrasted the doctrine of Saint Paul, who "railed against sin," with the career of Jesus, who "never called anyone a sinner. His ministry was the teaching of peace, love, and joy."¹² Schuller infused his later writings and sermons with those three values, although "peace" was understood as an inner condition distinct from the martial geopolitics of the Cold War.

The theological revelations of Schuller's collegiate days also informed his subsequent approach to outreach and pastoral care. According to Schuller, the view of sin and faith he developed as a seminarian guided the guided his later rejection of fire-and-brimstone sermonsmessages that harangued parishioners for their actions.

⁹ Schuller, *My Journey*, 126.

¹⁰ Schuller, *My Journey*, 127.

¹¹ Schuller, *My Journey*, 127.

¹² Schuller, *My Journey*, 126.

People, he believed, generally understood that they were sinners.¹³ Schuller instead preached that God's love, and earthly joy, through salvation. He extolled the virtues of self-esteem and individual redemption through Christ were available to each individual. "I didn't know it at the time," Schuller later wrote, "but expounding this liberating force [of self-esteem] would become my life's work."¹⁴ The theological principles worked out by Schuller as a student eventually formed the basis for his 1982 theological manifesto, *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation*.

C. Early Career

After completing his bachelor's degree, Schuller attended Western Theological Seminary, an RCA institution affiliated with Hope College and also located in Holland, Michigan. His clerical career began at a small RCA church in Dolton, Illinois, just south of Chicago. He accepted a call to the Dolton's Ivanhoe Reformed Church just after ordination. He arrived with his new wife, Arvella (whom he had met and courted during trips back home to Iowa), in the summer of 1950.¹⁵ Erica Reyna Robles notes that Dolton itself was relatively small but was located within the orb of metropolitan Chicago, providing Schuller with an opportunity to develop his church growth strategies in an urban context.¹⁶ Faced with a quarreling, bitterly divided congregation, Schuller determined to bring new members into the church who would not "be a part of the congregation's [contentious] history."¹⁷ The need for an improvised response to congregational divisiveness led to Schuller's practice of canvassing the community surrounding the

¹³ Schuller, *My Journey*, 291.

¹⁴ Schuller, *My Journey*, 99.

¹⁵ Schuller, *My Journey*, 145.

¹⁶ Robles, 65.

¹⁷ Schuller, *My Journey*, 162.

church, introducing himself and interviewing residents about their opinions of church. (Schuller repeated this practice in Orange County.)

In Dolton, Schuller also began to follow the teachings of Norman Vincent Peale—pastor of the flagship RCA congregation, Manhattan’s Marble Collegiate Church—and author of the best-selling *The Power of Positive Thinking*.¹⁸ Peale’s 1952 book became the standard of Christian-inflected self-help manuals, and Schuller would later borrow both the elder pastor’s style and his phrasing when framing his own theology of “Possibility Thinking.” Schuller’s relationship to Peale would be a crucial catalyst to the growth of his ministry and provide Schuller an entrée into the circles of the well known and well heeled. Yet his appreciation for Peale evolved significantly over a period of years. As a seminary student Schuller and his classmates derided Peale as a pandering showman who appealed to emotions in an undignified vernacular.¹⁹ Schuller even entertained the other seminarians with an impersonation of Peale’s histrionic preaching style. Yet, as a young pastor in Dolton, Schuller read *The Power of Positive Thinking* during a period when he questioned the efficacy of his own preaching. Schuller converted to Peale’s style of colloquial communication:

Peale’s words were therapy; professorial words were arguments. Peale’s style, spirit, and substance were humble and helpful; classroom lectures were full of facts and theories, but they weren’t inspirational or motivational. No wonder I was losing my audience!²⁰

Schuller also began to take cues from secular culture. He “stop[ped]

¹⁸ Norman Vincent Peale, *The Power of Positive Thinking* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1952).

¹⁹ Schuller, *My Journey*, 140-142.

²⁰ Schuller, *My Journey*, 170.

preaching heavy sermons” and employed real-life “inspirational stories” rather than scriptural exegesis in his sermons.²¹ He eschewed traveling evangelists’ focus on rapid conversion in favor of a softer approach design to “encourage” people and gradually lead them to the realization of God’s love and salvation. Schuller “decided to adopt the spirit, strategy, and substance of a ‘therapist’ from the pulpit.”²² The substantive emphasis on uplift, and the institutional focus on a gradualist approach to individual conversation, became a hallmark of Schuller’s career.

During Schuller’s five-year tenure in Dolton, the church began to outgrow its smaller sanctuary. The congregation had raised only a few hundred dollars toward a possible expansion when Schuller received advice from a Chicago architect that would resonate throughout the remainder of his career. “Never compromise on the fine details of design,” the architect told him.²³ Taking that advice to heart, Schuller employed a professional fundraising firm that helped the Ivanoe church secure the money for the building addition.²⁴ Schuller later served as his own fundraiser, but he learned his first lesson in the benefits of business techniques came in Dolton. The approach paid dividends. Ivanhoe Reformed Church grew from a member of thirty-five to almost five hundred during Schuller’s five-year tenure in Dolton.²⁵

In the autumn of 1954 Schuller accepted an invitation through a high-placed friend in the RCA denomination to start a church in Orange County, California. Schuller was not “called” (the Protestant term for the formal invitation offered to prospective clergy) by the regional body of the denomination but by the RCA’s

²¹ Schuller, *My Journey*, 170.

²² Schuller, *My Journey*, 172.

²³ Schuller, *My Journey*, 179.

²⁴ Schuller, *My Journey*, 180.

²⁵ Robles, 65.

Domestic Board of Missions, meaning that he would receive minimal institutional support and would have to build the a church figuratively—and also literally—from the ground up. Southern California was home to only a small population of Reformed Christians. Schuller would be an evangelist for the denomination in foreign territory. Without a church to welcome and financially support him and his family (which by then included two small children), Schuller’s salary would be paid during the first year by the national mission board and the California RCA’s mission board.²⁶

The prospect of long-term financial support was uncertain, and Schuller’s move was a significant risk. Yet as Robles notes, Schuller would operate with considerable latitude, considering his distance from the center of RCA authority. Furthermore, his status as an agent of the RCA’s mission apparatus provided him a unique opportunity to employ “a series of alternative techniques tailored to the cultural conditions of his new field.”²⁷ Southern California was indeed growing and changing rapidly—and it was far different from any community the Schullers had yet encountered.

D. Orange County

Orange County, like Southern California in general, was fertile ground for someone with ambition and the ability to tell a compelling story about the future. Journalist Carey McWilliams has written that “the region had progressed amazingly by a succession of swift, revolutionary changes, from one level of development to

²⁶ Schuller, *My Journey*, 192.

²⁷ Robles, 67.

another, offsetting natural limitations with an inventive technology.”²⁸ Schuller arrived in early 1955 during a period of economic, demographic, and physical transformation. The social and physical contours of the community were very much in flux. The Anglo-American presence in the region was of relatively recent vintage. In many ways, as McWilliams suggested, Southern California’s long history was a tale of continual expansion and economic opportunism—from Spanish and then American colonial conquest to the discovery of oil, the solidification of the motion picture industry in Hollywood, and the creation of Disneyland.

Suburbanization and the growth of the postindustrial service economy after World War II was, for better or for worse, the latest iteration of Southern California’s continual reinvention. Furthermore, the growth of California had been on a consistent upward trend between 1860 and 1960, despite short-term peaks and troughs.²⁹ In its ability to attract newcomers and affect quick economic transformation, California pioneered the development of what would come to be known after the middle of the twentieth century as the Sun Belt.

Following the conquest of California by the United States’ in 1848, the new state legislature voided existing land titles, allowing a small group of Anglo settlers to purchase property long held by the Mexican cattle ranchers who dominated the region.³⁰ Yet the culture of Southern California remained heavily inflected with Spanish-Mexican influences until a new influx of Anglo-American settlers arrived

²⁸ Carey McWilliams, *Southern California: An Island on the Land*, 2nd edition, (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Peregrine Smith, Inc., 1946, 1973), 6.

²⁹ D.B. Luten, “The Dynamic of Repulsion,” in Carey McWilliams, ed., *The California Revolution* (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1968), 15.

³⁰ Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 24.

during a speculative real estate boom in the 1880s.³¹ Agriculture replaced ranching as the predominant economic activity in the region. Native Californians of Spanish and Mexican descent experienced an “occupational erosion” as the skilled *vaqueros* (“cowboys”) and sheep-shearers of the rancho regime became unskilled farm laborers or livery-stable hands.³²

In 1889 the townships that would constitute Orange County legally broke away from Los Angeles County to the north under the leadership of prominent Anglo merchants and landowners in the Santa Ana Valley.³³ Although speculators had found silver in the Santa Ana Mountains in the 1880s and oil beneath the ground in the 1920s, Orange County remained a quiet, largely agricultural area up to the Second World War. In 1940, the county’s population numbered only 113,000 people.³⁴

World War II initiated a period of exponential economic growth, population increase, and real estate development for California and especially Orange County. Conveniently located on the Pacific Ocean, Orange County attracted an army air base to Santa Ana, a Naval ammunitions depot to Seal Beach, a naval air station to Los Alamitos, and the U.S. Marine Corps Air Station to El Toro.³⁵ Defense manufacturing followed the military to Orange County. In the late 1950s, Hughes Aircraft moved to the county, adding 10,000 jobs to the local economy. Autonetics (now part of Boeing), a division of North American aviation specializing in missile navigation

³¹ McWilliams, 50.

³² McWilliams, 65-66.

³³ Martin J. Schiesl, “Designing the Model Community,” in Kling, Olin, and Poster, 56.

³⁴ McGirr, 24.

³⁵ McGirr, 25.

systems, settled in Anaheim.³⁶ Ford Aeronutrics employed 2,800 workers at its Fullerton facilities.³⁷

Ancillary economic growth followed the expansion of high-tech manufacturing, as the new corporations and residential communities required supporting products and services: employment in retail, entertainment, and construction increased sharply beginning in the 1950s.³⁸ Between 1950 and 1980 the percentage of county employment in the information sector rose from 30.8% to 46.6% and in the service sector from 19% to 28.8%, while the agricultural sector declined from 11.9% to 2.1% and the industrial sector slipped from 38.3% to 22.5%.³⁹ As the statistics indicate, the trend in employment was toward service, knowledge-related industries, and high-technology manufacturing. White-collar jobs replaced blue-collar jobs at a rapid rate.

Population growth in Orange County matched economic expansion. The population rose from approximately 200,000 in 1950 to 700,000 in 1960 to 1.4 million in 1970 to 1.9 million in 1980.⁴⁰ Certain municipalities grew with particular rapidity: Garden Grove saw a staggering 18,000% population increase between 1940 and 1960.⁴¹ People from across the country followed the trail of white-collar

³⁶ McGirr, 27; Boeing's website notes that a monument in central Anaheim commemorates the contribution of Autonetics to the first submarine voyage beneath polar ice caps in the early 1960s. See Boeing website, "History: Postwar Development and Innovations," <http://www.boeing.com/history/narrative/n051naa.html>.

³⁷ McGirr, 27.

³⁸ McGirr, 27-28.

³⁹ Rob Kling and Clark Turner, "The Information Labor Force," in Rob Kling, Spencer Olin, and Mark Poster, eds., *Postsuburban California: The Transformation of Orange County Since World War II* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1991), 96. The authors' definition of information services is capacious, including lawyers, accounts, stockbrokers, clerks and others who "record, process, or communicate information as a substantial part of their work." See Kling and Turner, 92.

⁴⁰ M. Gottdiener and George Kephart, "The Multinucleated Metropolitan Region: A Comparative Analysis," in Kling, Olin, and Poster, 40.

⁴¹ McGirr, 28.

jobs to Orange County. In 1960, only 39% of county residents had been born in California.⁴² Historian Lisa McGirr found that, like the Schuller family, nearly 35% of the transplants came from the Midwest, while a quarter arrived from the southeast.⁴³ Everyone, it seemed, had left home for the “somewhere else” Schuller had longed to find in his youth.

Yet entry into the dream-fulfilling landscape of Orange County was not open to all groups equally. In 1960, people of color accounted for less than 10% of the county’s population, with the majority of that group being Hispanics of Mexican descent. African-Americans accounted for less than one-half of one percent of the population.⁴⁴ In later years, the Hispanic and Asian population of Orange County would rise precipitously and transmit what public policy analyst Rob Kling and historians Spencer Olin and Mark Poster describe as a “cosmopolitan” social composition to the region.⁴⁵ Nonetheless, the representation of “community” constructed in the literature, devotional life, and social activities of Garden Grove Community Church consistently obfuscated the presence of racial minorities, the working class, and any individuals who did not conform to the hetero-normative nuclear family ideal.

The physical and social terrain of the county was inchoate in nearly every way when Schuller arrived. The demand for new housing enticed many farmers to sell off their land for development.⁴⁶ Residential subdivisions sprouted with dizzying speed.

⁴² McGirr, 45.

⁴³ McGirr, 46.

⁴⁴ McGirr, 44.

⁴⁵ Kling, Olin, and Poster, “The Emergence of Postsuburbia,” in Kling, Olin, and Poster, 18.

⁴⁶ McGirr, 25.

Some communities were built completely from the ground up, while others with a long history expanded from quiet settlements into municipalities of substantial size. The incorporation dates of the cities illustrates how the growth of the county accelerated in the postwar decades. The city of Garden Grove did not incorporate until 1956—the year after Garden Grove Community Church began—and was followed by Westminster in 1957, San Juan Capistrano in 1961, Yorba Linda in 1967, and the city of Irvine in 1971.⁴⁷

Irvine’s evolution from a vast agricultural holding—owned and operated by the Irvine Company since the 1870s—to a vast planned community—also operated by the Irvine Company—that would eventually host a branch of the University of California illustrates the degree to which the decisions and imperatives of corporations in concert with public money drove the development of Orange County. Historian Martin Schiesl notes that the Irvine Company shifted from small-scale residential development in the 1940s and early 1950s to mass subdivision in the early 1960s at precisely the same time that commercial development was encroaching on the northern portion of the ranch, raising both the value of the land and the company’s property tax burden.⁴⁸ The citrus groves of Irvine Ranch gave way to neatly ordered clusters of residential dwellings (with amenities like tennis courts and club houses) and, in 1965, to a gleaming new state university. The combination of corporate initiative and public money created a model for future suburbanization in Orange County. In fact, county supervisors officially adopted the Irvine Company’s master

⁴⁷ Spencer Olin, “Intraclass Conflict and the Politics of a Fragmented Region,” in Kling, Olin, and Poster, 228.

⁴⁸ Schiesl, 58.

plan as the template for future development in the mid-1960s.⁴⁹

Although Irvine designers set out to avoid “aimless urban sprawl” and demographic homogeneity, Schiesl notes that the new city followed a path of class- and race-based exclusivity—company officials and residents opposed low-income housing—and automobile-based decentralization—the planned public transportation failed to materialize.⁵⁰ Lisa McGirr notes that the residential development of Orange County—whether uncontrolled and “follow[ing] the anarchy of the market” in the northwest or carefully managed in the southeast and along the coast—in general promoted “artificial communities [that] were constituted by developers who had a free hand in constructing their own visions of ‘community,’ visions that emphasized individual privacy, private property, and public spaces defined by consumption.”⁵¹ The peculiarities of the built environment helped shape Schuller would undertake in Southern California.

As discussed in Chapter One, historian Robert Fishman, along with geographers Mark Gottdiener and George Kephart, documented the social atomization that results from centrifugal sprawl in places like Orange County. The decentralization of the county’s urban landscape presented a challenge to the formation of cohesive communities. Yet as McGirr indicates, developers, planners, and residents forged social bonds based on shared values, ideologies, and everyday practices. The proliferation of Protestant churches, particularly conservative evangelical and fundamentalist congregations, in Orange County between 1950 and

⁴⁹ Schiesl, 62.

⁵⁰ Schiesl, 63-69.

⁵¹ McGirr, 40.

1960 attests to the role of Christianity in reifying abstract notions of “community” in the suburban landscape.⁵²

Suburban churches functioned as a “liminal spaces,” defined by Sharon Zukin as “a ‘no-man’s-land’ open to everyone’s experience yet not easily understood without a guide.”⁵³ Zukin argues that “[a]s the social meaning of such spaces is renegotiated by structural change and individual action, liminal space becomes a metaphor for the extensive reordering by which markets, in our time, encroach upon place.”⁵⁴ The community fashioned by evangelical churches—or, more specifically, the process by which that fashioning occurred—illustrates the social and ideological consequences of postindustrial transformation in suburban regions like Orange County.

Thus, when Robert Schuller arrived in Garden Grove in the winter of 1955, he encountered a population eager to find institutions that offered them a sense of belonging and hungry for a message that made sense of the new corporate, suburban universe of Orange County. The conditions were ripe for church growth if only Schuller could attract people. In this regard, he was virtuosic.

E. “Come As You Are In The Family Car”

The social terrain was not self-evidently welcoming to Schuller. In 1955 the RCA only had 787 churches nationally and a total membership of slightly less than 200,000.⁵⁵ Schuller quickly realized he could not build a congregation by appealing to Reformed Christians alone. Perhaps more challenging was the lack of available

⁵² McGirr, 48-49.

⁵³ Sharon Zukin, *Landscapes of Power: From Detroit to Disneyland* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991), 269.

⁵⁴ Zukin, 269.

⁵⁵ Robles, 63.

rental space in a town where residential and commercial buildings were in high demand. After investigating numerous options, Schuller persuaded the manager of the Orange Drive-In Theater, in what was then the sparsely populated eastern edge of Garden Grove, agreed to rent Schuller the space for services at a rate of \$10 per Sunday.⁵⁶

The Schullers purchased a second-hand organ with which Arvella would accompany hymn singing, and also obtained a rickety trailer they would use to haul the organ to and from the drive-in every week. Schuller built a wooden, four-foot by four-foot by six-foot alter and ten-foot-high cross which would adorn the snack bar on which he planned to preach. A notice in the local newspaper announced the new church with the tag line, "Come As You Are in the Family Car."⁵⁷ Schuller estimated that one hundred people attended the first drive-in service on March 27, 1955.⁵⁸ The crowd heard a sermon from Schuller entitled, "Power for Successful Living."⁵⁹

The church was on its way, but Schuller faced the opprobrium of Christian skeptics. He later recalled being "both pitied and criticized as word spread through my staid old denomination that I was going to preach from the sticky tar-paper roof of the snack bar of a drive-in theater."⁶⁰ A local RCA pastor warned Schuller against holding services in a "passion pit," to which Schuller countered that the Apostle Paul had preached on Mars Hill, the site reserved for ancient Athenian judicial and civil discourse.⁶¹ This was an early iteration of Schuller's position that churches must

⁵⁶ Schuller, *My Journey*, 206.

⁵⁷ Schuller, *My Journey*, 207.

⁵⁸ Schuller, *My Journey*, 212.

⁵⁹ Schuller, *My Journey*, 212.

⁶⁰ Schuller, *Move Ahead with Possibility Thinking* (New York: Doubleday, 1967), 22.

⁶¹ Schuller, *My Journey*, 208.

engage the wider secular culture.

Despite charger of heterodoxy from religious circles and the church's stark break with traditional Protestant "spatial order," Robles notes that the innovative presentation of Garden Grove Community Church fit comfortably within the "drive-in craze" of the 1950s; moreover, churches in Florida and Michigan had already pioneered the form of drive-in worship.⁶² Southern California in general pioneered numerous "innovations in vernacular roadside architecture."⁶³ Garden Grove Community Church reflected the diffuse spatial organization of suburbia, which Kenneth Jackson has framed within the context of a larger "drive-in culture."⁶⁴ From its earliest days the church marketed itself as a regional congregation, responding to the aggregate needs of anyone in Orange County willing to drive up to the altar.

The vehicular mobility of Orange County's population allowed people to approach religious practice as consumers, sampling a variety of church-related products in the local marketplace. Schuller's ministry encouraged such a consumerist approach to Christian practice. His focus on the "unchurched," outlined in Chapter One, was evident by the congregation's first summer. A statement of church principles described it as "a community church including people from dozens of religious backgrounds, broad enough to make room for everyone, yet narrow enough to maintain the distinctiveness of the Christian faith."⁶⁵ Schuller's language also demonstrated a focus on consumerism. When inclement weather threatened a service in the church's early days, Schuller resisted cancellation after

⁶² Robles, 69.

⁶³ Robles, 77.

⁶⁴ See Jackson's discussion of automobiles and suburbia, 245-271.

⁶⁵ Church Bulletin, August 29, 1955, "GCCC Church Bulletin," RS/CCM.

sensing God telling him, “Schuller, you’re not in management but in sales. Management is in my hands! You just get out there like you’re supposed to and sell your product.”⁶⁶ Schuller also followed a market-driven approach by repeating the practice from his Illinois days of canvassing the surrounding communities, yellow-legal pad in hand, to meet residents face-to-face and ask what they desired in a church. Schuller claimed to have rung more than thirty-five hundred doorbells during his first year as he traversed the residential subdivisions of Garden Grove, Orange, Anaheim, and Santa Ana.⁶⁷

The marketing was effective. The church added members every week and garnered enthusiastic newspaper coverage. The unchurched residents drawn to the church were assured of not only God’s love but of the earthly rewards of an efficiently orchestrated, beautifully realized service. An announcement about upcoming Easter services in 1957 promised that although a record crowd was expected, “[p]olice will be on hand to smoothly direct the flow of traffic; a skillful plan for ushering the cars in and out will promises that it will be a genuine pleasure to attend this open air service.”⁶⁸ Robles astutely notes the striking juxtaposition of the unorthodox worship space and the traditional Reformed service; Garden Grove Community Church from its earliest days into the present has followed a standard Reformed liturgy beginning with a musical prelude and moving from the processional to the call to worship through a series of hymns, prayers, offering

⁶⁶ Schuller, *My Journey*, 216.

⁶⁷ Schuller, *My Journey*, 220.

⁶⁸ Community Church News, April, 1957, “Community Church News, 1957, 1961, 1967-1969, 1972-1980,” RS/CCM.

collection, sermon, and benediction with little variation.⁶⁹ At the same time, Schuller regularly played up the novelty of the drive-in worship experience. After the service, he greeted parishioners in their cars. Signs reminded congregants to return the portable speaker to its rack before driving away. The banner of the weekly bulletin welcomed visitors to “Southern California’s Famous Drive-In Church.”⁷⁰ The insignia for the church during those early years featured a sketch of Schuller preaching atop the snack bar, silhouetted against the movie screen with Arvella beneath the pulpit at the organ.⁷¹ He was already branding himself.

F. Early Church Growth

The charm of the outdoor theater gave way to practical concerns and the church soon began work on a traditional chapel. The RCA had purchased two acres of land, three miles west of the Drive-In, as a possible site prior to Schuller’s arrival in California. Appalled by the preference of some in the congregation to build a simple structure themselves (one member had expertise constructing cattle barns), Schuller successfully argued for working with a professional architect. Invoking the lesson from his days in Illinois (“Never compromise on the fine details in design”) he asked the architect for a design evoking the grandeur of European cathedrals that “honored God” in their beauty and monumentality.⁷²

The new, two-hundred-and-fifty person chapel, complete with stained glass windows and a giant cross looming above the pulpit, was more traditional than later

⁶⁹ Robles, 73.

⁷⁰ Community Church News, April, 1957, “Community Church News, 1957, 1961, 1967-1969, 1972-1980,” RS/CCM.

⁷¹ Community Church News, April, 1957, “Community Church News, 1957, 1961m 1967-1969, 1972-1974,” RS/CCM.

⁷² Schuller, *My Journey*, 221.

structures built by the church. In one of the few instances of the church seeking capital from a financial institution rather than its members, Orange County Savings Bank provided a loan for the construction costs. The chapel opened in September of 1956. After initially planning to abandon the Drive-In, Schuller decided that the ministry served many people who, for physical or psychological reasons, preferred to worship in their cars. For the next five years the church held an early morning service at the Drive-In and a second service at the chapel.

Media attention increased in the summer of 1957 when Schuller persuaded Norman Vincent Peale to preach at the Drive-In. Schuller had never met the RCA's most prominent pastor, but after his change of heart regarding Peale's message he had avidly followed Peale's career. Peale's wife Ruth headed the RCA's Domestic Missions Board and had arranged for Schuller to arrive in California two years earlier with a letter of introduction from her husband. In the summer of 1957 Peale provided his imprimatur to the burgeoning church, drawing a crowd of almost 4,000 to the Drive-In service.⁷³

G. The Walk-In/Drive-In Church

The stress of weekly services in separate locations wore on Schuller, as did the fractured nature of a congregation that was never truly physically unified. In 1958 Garden Grove Community Church began planning for the construction of a new structure that would combine in one location drive-in functionality with the amenities of a traditional church sanctuary. Schuller sketched his vision of a hybrid building with high, sliding glass doors opening to the parking lot. When members of

⁷³ Schuller, *My Journey*, 227.

the congregation balked at the potential cost Schuller replied with what would be a mantra through his career: “There’s never a money problem; there’s only an idea problem.”⁷⁴ From the earliest years of the church, finances were secondary to vision.

After a contentious congregational meeting in October of 1958 the church agreed to purchase ten acres of land for \$66,000 in a still sparsely populated area one mile west of the Drive-In, at the corner of Chapman Avenue and Lewis Street in Garden Grove.⁷⁵ The Santa Ana Freeway was less than a mile away and a planned re-routing soon brought it closer. A “Flash Bulletin” sent to the congregation following the meeting announced the sale and trumpeted its prime location “at the very hub of four large and growing communities... The city of Anaheim borders the property on the north, the City of Garden Grove on the west, the City of Orange on the east and the City of Santa Ana on the south. The location promises to be the ‘center of the center’ of Orange County.”⁷⁶ The language of announcement provides a clear example of the church’s conscious conflation of its growth with the prolific expansion of the suburban region.

The designer of the church’s still-new chapel demurred at Schuller’s walk-in/drive in idea, but recommended Richard Neutra—who would become a leading practitioner of modern architecture—for the job. Schuller and Neutra discovered they shared a similar aesthetic sensibility. Schuller desired a structure that “incarnated the beauty of the Twenty-Third Psalm” with its evocation of “green

⁷⁴ Schuller, *My Journey*, 239.

⁷⁵ Schuller, *My Journey*, 242.

⁷⁶ “Flash Bulletin,” October 21, 1958, “Correspondence, 1956-1959,” RS/CCM.

pastures” and “still waters” that restored the soul.⁷⁷ Neutra instructed Schuller that physical design could mimic the “tranquilizing” effect of nature, if only natural elements like sun, water, and vegetation were incorporated into the space.⁷⁸ For this reason, stained glass was anathema to Neutra because it inhibited one’s communion with nature.⁷⁹ All subsequent design initiatives of Garden Grove Community Church, from the walk-in/drive-in structure to the Crystal Cathedral—designed by architect Philip Johnson—to the Rancho Capistrano retreat center built in the 1980s, evoked tranquility and incorporated natural elements into the built environment.

In 1960, the church completed construction of a new multi-purpose building housing a fellowship hall, Sunday School classrooms, and offices at the Chapman Avenue and Lewis Street site. Schuller celebrated the milestone with a message in the church bulletin entitled, “Dreams Do Come True,” arguing that both the expansion was both inspired by, and a glorification, of God. He began by citing the words Apostle Paul from Acts 26:19: “I have not been disobedient unto the heavenly vision.” The message further suggested that boldness of the kind demonstrated by the church’s expansion effort was not only permissible but an absolute prerequisite for proper Christian living. Thus, expansion projects both furthered the goal of evangelism while also reaffirming the faithfulness of the congregation.

Meanwhile, the congregation labored to raise the \$500,000 necessary to build the more ambitious walk-in/drive sanctuary. In the spring of 1958 the

⁷⁷ Community Church News, November, 1961, “GCCC Church Bulletin,” RS/CCM.

⁷⁸ Schuller, *My Journey*, 249-250.

⁷⁹ Schuller, *My Journey*, 251.

Consistory issued \$250,000 worth of promissory notes for sale to the congregation at 6% interest.⁸⁰ Although Schuller later wrote that the church's bank was unable to provide a loan, a message to the congregation in April of 1958 argued that the bond sale was preferable to a bank loan because the church members and no other entity would own the building. The message also stated the church's preference for borrowing from members and not a bank so as to "keep the money in the hands of God's people."⁸¹ Another message noted that the "denomination has been in the business for 330 years in the United States of America and has always repaid its promissory notes promptly."⁸² The church also solicited contributions through an advertisement in the *RCA Church Herald*, inviting readers to support a thriving ministry "in this booming part of Southern California."⁸³ This was the first instance in which the Garden Grove Community Church cast its fundraising net nationally. Future projects of the church would receive significant supplementary funding from supporters (and later television viewers) across the country.

Construction ended in November of 1961. The church newsletter announced that: "A dream has come true. A prayer has been answered. A big idea has materialized."⁸⁴ Peale once again traveled west to offer his invocation. Schuller believed the structure had established his church as an innovative force, writing to Neutra that he was confident the "design of our church has the potential to be truly a masterpiece... as much a work of art as an Alexander Pope poem or a symphony by

⁸⁰ Community Church News, April, 1958, "GGCC Community Church News March 1958-Oct. 1965," RS/CCM.

⁸¹ Community Church News, April, 1958, "GGCC Community Church News March 1958-Oct. 1965," RS/CCM.

⁸² Community Church News, March 1958, "GGCC Community Church News March 1958-Oct. 1965," RS/CCM.

⁸³ Press release, GGCC to the Church Herald, April 6, 1959, "Correspondence, 1956-1959," RS/CCM.

⁸⁴ Community Church News, November 1961, "GGCC Church Bulletin," RS/CCM.

Beethoven.”⁸⁵ Reporters flocked to the church, and Schuller encouraged the publicity. He also inquired about the possibility of submitting Neutra’s design for competition at an annual conference on church architecture in 1962.⁸⁶

H. Tower of Hope

In the early 1960s Schuller focused briefly on anti-communist activism, a topic discussed in depth in Chapter 3. Yet expansion was never far from his mind. The next big project, the Tower of Hope, germinated with the numerous requests for counseling the church staff received. Inspired by the twenty-four-hour telephone counseling mission founded by an Australian pastor, Schuller began planning his own center. With limited open space remaining on the church campus, the congregation settled on plans—again designed by Neutra—for a fourteen-story high-rise tower containing offices, the counseling operation, and a chapel, and topped by a ninety-foot cross to be illuminated at night.

To finance the Tower of Hope construction, the church needed to raise more than \$1 million from members and supporters. (Schuller also signed a book contract, the proceeds of which he dedicated to the building fund.) By that point in the mid-1960s the church had entered into a near-constant state of aggressive fundraising. A message to the congregation in the weekly bulletin in late October, 1965, announced that nearly \$900,000 had been raised for the Tower of Hope and that the church expected members to donate the remaining \$100,000 at the upcoming Tenth Anniversary dinner.

In November 1967, workers raised the cross to the top of the unfinished

⁸⁵ RS to Richard Neutra, January 20, 1961, “Correspondence-Richard Neutra, 1959-1962,” RS/CCM.

⁸⁶ RS to Richard Neutra, January 12, 1962, “Correspondence-Richard Neutra, 1959-1962,” RS/CCM.

tower. The weekly newsletter noted that “[t]he top of the cross rises to a height of 250 feet above the nearby Santa Ana Freeway, topping by 32 feet the big A of Angels Stadium, making the Garden Grove Community Church, for a time at least, the tallest structure in Orange County.”⁸⁷ The announcement also boasted that the “the cross is reportedly seen from as far west as Westminster and as far east the Newport Freeway where it enters the Santa Any Canyon,” situating the new tower within the geography of the suburban region.⁸⁸

Garden Grove Community Church often celebrated significant milestones, such as the raising of the cross, with an elaborate public ceremony. Such performative rituals reified the accomplishments of the church and were central to the construction of the congregational “community.” In honor of the new cross in the fall of 1967, the church held an official lighting ceremony at the conclusion of the annual anniversary dinner, hosted that year in the Anaheim Convention Center. The assembled guests followed their pastor into the parking lot after dark and turned east toward the church grounds one mile away in anticipation of the illumination. Schuller recalled that “[e]veryone in the crowd was instructed to lay his or her hands on the shoulders of the person ahead, connecting us all as one long chain of caring individuals, a symbol that together we could bring hope to others.”⁸⁹ Then Schuller dialed a number on a special telephone connected directly to a light switch in the tower, illuminating the cross for all to see. The highly visible cross announced the monumentality of the church to the community at-large.

⁸⁷ Community Church News, November 2, 1967, “Community Church News, 1957, 1961, 1967-1969, 1972-1980,” RS/CCM.

⁸⁸ Community Church News, November 2, 1967, “Community Church News, 1957, 1961, 1967-1969, 1972-1980,” RS/CCM.

⁸⁹ Schuller, *My Journey*, 282.

The Tower of Hope officially opened the following September with the by-then almost perfunctory appearance of Norman Vincent Peale at the dedication. Schuller's office and a conference room for church board meetings occupied the twelfth floor. The top floors above were dedicated to the "Chapel in the Sky," a 150-seat sanctuary with twenty-four-foot ceilings and walls consisting almost entirely of glass which provided a 270-degree view of the church campus.⁹⁰ Sunday school rooms, the counseling center, the twenty-four-hour "New Hope" telephone hotline service, and additional offices filled the rest of the tower.

I. The Corporate Culture of Garden Grove Community Church

The sheer size and scope of the church's operations necessitated a bureaucratic, hierarchical organizational structure. By the late 1970s, Garden Grove Community Church had a paid staff of 150, as well as a 4000-person network of volunteers.⁹¹ The church's annual budget was \$1.2 million in 1975 and rose to a staggering \$42 million by 1987.⁹² An executive committee, headed by Schuller as senior pastor, oversaw a range of departments and sub-departments—each with its own head staff person. Schuller operated as chief executive officer, a visionary manager of systems and complex growth strategies. His leadership style combined delegation with an intricate grasp of administrative and financial detail and tight control of overall decision-making. The constant fundraising of Garden Grove Community Church rendered such efficient management imperative. Yet, the

⁹⁰ Robles, 120.

⁹¹ "Fact Sheet for GGCC-1978," "Garden Grove Community Church Booklet, 1978," RS/CCM.

⁹² For 1975 figures see, Community Church News Extra, undated, "Community Church News, 1975, 1976," RS/CCM; for 1987 figures see, Leslie Berkman and Mark I. Pinsky, "\$42-Million Budget : Schuller Sheds Light on Finances," *Los Angeles Times*, July 17, 1987. http://articles.latimes.com/1987-07-17/news/mn-2554_1_robert-schuller-ministries/10. Retrieved on November 4, 2010.

bureaucratic organization church also reflected the corporate operating practices so familiar to many of its members.

In addition to modeling its administrative organization on a corporate model, the church also offered individuals from the corporate business community a prominent platform as members and guests. Schuller was enamored of corporate leaders and management experts and assiduously forged collaborative associations with them. He developed a longtime personal and financial relationship with Chicago real estate mogul W. Clement Stone—who contributed \$1 million to the construction of the Crystal Cathedral and served on the national fundraising committee for the church—and Victor C. Andrews, an Orange County investor and real estate developer who served as a key fundraiser for Richard Nixon and later worked as chief executive officer and vice chairman of Robert Schuller Ministries. Schuller’s success in drawing such prominent individuals to the church testified to the cultural power, and political influence, that had accrued to the congregation. Membership or association in Garden Grove Community became a marker of social status in Orange County during the 1960s and 1970s.

The following years brought a succession of milestones for the church. In 1970, *The Hour of Power* went on the air and the Institute for Successful Church Leadership began holding seminars in Garden Grove. Schuller’s book continued to occupy best-seller lists. The newsletter featured regular page-long announcements listing new members. The church increasingly trumpeted its iconic status, hosting a special celebrity guest in the pulpit nearly every Sunday: athletes like Pittsburgh Steelers’ Super Bowl-winning quarterback Terry Bradshaw and his then-wife,

former Ice Capades star JoJo Starbuck; musician Tony Orlando; actors George Kennedy and Della Reese; and political activist Reverend Jesse Jackson. From the mid-1970s on, staff and laity alike devoted increasingly large amounts of time to planning and fund raising for the church's biggest project ever, the Crystal Cathedral.

J. Congregational Life

Amidst the rapid growth of the campus, the high profile of the church, and the super-star status of the pastor, one may reasonably ask whether members worshipped and donated money in anonymity, sacrificing the close social bonds of a small church for luster of a famous institution. The published literature of Garden Grove Community Church reveals an impressively broad array of social and spiritual activities available to anyone attending the church. The church offered congregants in nearly every demographic category the opportunity to claim membership in a smaller associational circle founded on social, spiritual, professional, or leisure interests.

The church maintained an expansive pastoral care program under the Rev. David Bailey, the Minister of Family and Congregational Life. Bailey oversaw a network of nearly 500 "Parish Shepherds," lay volunteers who served as personal contacts for individuals and families for the purposes of offering fellowship and information sharing. On a wall in Bailey's office hung a large map of Orange County divided into forty-two "divisions" and 342 "zones," illustrating the geographic boundaries into which the Parish Shepherd program grouped church members. "No

matter where you live you are not far from a G.C.C.C. member,” a Parish Shepherd publication assured readers.⁹³ The pastoral care operations illustrates the degree to which the church employed organizational systems similar to those of large bureaucratic institutions.

In addition to pastoral care services, Garden Grove Community Church offered congregants the opportunity to participate in a variety of activities depending on their needs and interests. Programming for children and adolescents was especially vast. Such programs were imperative for Christian families in Orange County mortified by the permissive youth culture of the 1960s. (One program for college students promised to provide the rhetorical tools necessary to combat “[t]he junior who’s promoting that ‘leftist’ action group on Campus”.⁹⁴ A sample of activities during the summer of 1974 highlights the breadth of youth and young-adult programming, which could be either purely leisure-oriented or spiritually directed. Elementary school children could attend a weeklong Vacation Church School in June at the San Bernardino National Forest. Each Wednesday, the church’s Youth Center hosted children and their families for evenings of “dinner, sports, skits, singing, mini-concerts, and family study.”⁹⁵ The Junior High group, nicknamed the “Mountain Movers,” visited the amusement park at Knott’s Berry Farm.⁹⁶ In August, a representative of the Christian youth ministry Teen Challenge lectured the high

⁹³ Community Church News, April 18, 1976, “Community Church News, 1957, 1961, 1967-1969, 1972-1980,” RS/CCM.

⁹⁴ Community Church News, March 31, 1974, “Community Church News, 1957, 1961, 1967-1969, 1972-1980,” RS/CCM.

⁹⁵ Community Church News, May 19, 1974, “Community Church News, 1957, 1961, 1967-1969, 1972-1980,” RS/CCM.

⁹⁶ Community Church News, May 19, 1974, “Community Church News, 1957, 1961, 1967-1969, 1972-1980,” RS/CCM.

school students on “Witchcraft and the Occult.”⁹⁷ Whether recreational or devotional, Garden Grove Community Church supplied families and young adults with an all-encompassing array of wholesome activities that sharply contrasted with the counter-cultural ethos of Southern California.

Adults in the church encountered a similarly broad menu of activities. Married couples could participate in regular marriage workshops and weekend “renewal” retreats. The church also organized periodic vacation luxury cruises for couples, frequently to the Caribbean or the Mediterranean, with the latter destination offering stopovers in “the Holy Land.”⁹⁸ Elderly church members participated in the “Keen-Ager” social group.⁹⁹ Congregants also availed themselves of the church’s psychological counseling or substance-abuse services. Other activities focused on practical issues such as financial planning and estate planning.

While some church activities were designed for entire families or for couples, others were clearly demarcated by gender. The weekly Wednesday-morning Men’s Prayer Breakfasts and Possibility Thinkers Luncheons for Business and Professional People, which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3, targeted the male entrepreneurial and managerial class of the congregation and the wider Orange County community. The language of the announcements framed the events in terms that were not only business-oriented but unmistakably masculine as well. A promotion for the appearance of the Los Angeles Rams’ football star Jack

⁹⁷ Community Church News, May 19, 1974, “Community Church News, 1957, 1961, 1967-1969, 1972-1980,” RS/CCM.

⁹⁸ Community Church News, April 28, 1974, “Community Church News, 1957, 1961, 1967-1969, 1974,” RS/CCM.

⁹⁹ 1975 Church Yearbook, RS/CCM.

Youngblood suggested congregants invite “a son, a buddy, a business associate, or a neighbor and be motivated to accomplish even greater accomplishments in life.”¹⁰⁰ Both the terminology and the competitive sports theme suggest the masculine focus of the luncheon. The scheduling of social events at the church also revealed distinct gender divisions. The Possibility Thinkers Luncheons occurred at noontime and had clear time limits. Likewise, the Wednesday prayer breakfasts began at 6:30am. Church leaders assumed that those attending the prayer meetings and luncheons were male professionals working a standard 9am to 5pm job and adjusted the scheduling accordingly.

In contrast to men’s activities, the church held women’s social events at midday, with an open-ended time frame that revealed the assumption that the women did not work outside the home. In addition, the themes of the women’s ministry programs emphasized emotion, artistic expression, relationships, fashion, and domestic concerns. A church bulletin from April 1974 listed an upcoming women’s seminar series with titles like: “Fulfilling Womanhood,” “Oil Painting,” “Radiant You,” “Let’s Go Gourmet,” “Dust Off Your Bible,” and “Handbell Choir.”¹⁰¹ A womens’ outreach luncheon in June of that year, “Dreams of Satin and Lace”, featured women from the church “modeling their past and present satin and lace wedding gowns, trousseau clothes, and some of their precious baby clothes.” A Dr. Frank Freed was scheduled to speak “on the great subject of love.”¹⁰² Although the

¹⁰⁰ Community Church News, October 27, 1974, “Community Church News, 1957, 1961, 1967-1969, 1972-1980,” RS/CCM.

¹⁰¹ Community Church News, April 28, 1974, “Community Church News, “Community Church News, 1957, 1961, 1967-1969, 1972-1980,” RS/CCM.

¹⁰² Community Church News, May 26, 1974, “Community Church News, “Community Church News, 1957, 1961, 1967-1969, 1972-1980,” RS/CCM.

counseling and charity programs of the church suggest an institutional recognition that individual live sometimes deviated from the path of sobriety, matrimony, faithful devotion, and professional success, the overwhelming majority of activities illustrated a church-wide assumption that members fulfilled “traditional,” gender-appropriate social roles.

Cutting across both men’s and women’s programming were assumptions about class. The men’s events revolved around a 9am to 5pm, Monday-through-Friday business schedule, with no provision made for second- or third-shift workers. Women’s events, as noted above, catered only to women outside the labor market. Both the scheduling and substance of the church conformed to the suburban norms for family organization and gender roles. Underlying those norms was, in turn, a political economy emphasizing homeownership and consumerism.

The programs of Garden Grove Community Church reflected, in subtle and not-so-subtle ways, the ideological predilections of the congregants and its leadership. While the documentary record does not necessarily demonstrate that Schuller and his congregants shared identical beliefs, the substance of the programming suggests that the church members often encountered the values espoused by their pastor in his books and sermons.

K. Conclusion

Schuller had traveled a great distance from the Iowa barnyard of his youth to the height of professional success, not to mention celebrity-status in television and print media. As a young man he believed he was headed somewhere, and by the early 1970s he had arrived at a position of significant cultural influence in the center

of the quintessential postwar American region: corporate-dominated, middle-class, suburban Orange County, California. Garden Grove Community Church had evolved from a drive-in congregation of a few hundred people, notable mostly for its novelty, into the vanguard of a new breed of culturally and politically prominent Protestant church. Time and again, in Schuller's telling, the congregation extended itself beyond its means in an effort to grow larger, to reach more hurting people, and to glorify God through the construction of beautiful physical monuments. In every instance, the church reached a moment when they could have declared their goal "impossible," but they persevered, righteously expecting God to provide. They had yet to be disappointed.

The message promulgated by Schuller resonated with the spiritually hungry transplants who flocked to Southern California by the hundreds of thousands in the decades after World War II. Schuller and his congregation constructed a religious community in their own image—a church that was bold, inspiring, and superlative. The beliefs that drove the church from the top-down were an amalgam of Schuller's theological interpretations of Calvin, St. Paul, and the Gospels, in addition to insights borrowed from Christian and secular motivational literature. Nonetheless, the theology and ideology of Garden Grove Community Church cannot be separated from the politics and culture of the postwar United States. Behind the generalities and folk-wisdom of Schuller's sermons and books lay a vision of political economy deeply implicated in the conservative transformation of the United States during the 1960s and 1970s. The next chapter examines the political economy of Garden Grove Community Church and its relationship to the conservative political ascendancy.

CHAPTER 3

THE POLITICAL ECOOMY OF GARDEN GROVE COMMUNITY CHURCH

A. Introduction

In April 1975, Robert Schuller received an imploring letter from Adolf Schoepe, an Anaheim businessman and member of Garden Grove Community Church. Schoepe wrote ominously that “[f]uture generations may not be able to enjoy” the benefits of American capitalism unless concerned citizens like him and Schuller rose to its defense.¹ The letter illustrated how the church’s endorsement of small government and unrestrained capitalism dovetailed with the burgeoning conservative political activism of Orange County. The members of Garden Grove Community Church did not always trumpet their political convictions, but in certain instances they took firm positions on issues they considered fundamentally important. Schuller likewise disavowed any partisan allegiance, but he nonetheless affirmed the political conservatism of his congregants with unmistakable clarity. Schuller’s exchange with Schoepe revealed the underlying political economy of Garden Grove Community Church.

Schoepe was founder and president of Fluidmaster, Inc., a company in nearby San Juan Capistrano that manufactured plumbing components. He was also a generous financial supporter of Schuller and his ministries. Schoepe operated at the nexus of civic, business, and conservative political circles in Orange County. He sat on various philanthropic and civic committees. In the 1950s and early 1960s, Schoepe chaired the industrial and economic development committee of the

¹ Adolf Schoepe to RS (Hereafter referred to as RS), April 11, 1975, “Correspondence, 1976,” RS/CCM.

Associated Chambers of Commerce for Orange County.² Through the chamber, Schoepe helped push for a countywide master plan for industrial development in 1956 and also led an initiative to encourage businesses from across the country to relocate to Orange County.³ In 1965 Schoepe was elected president of the Orange County Crime Commission, a private, non-profit organization established to monitor local law enforcement agencies, as well as to assist in investigations of official malfeasance, organized crime, drug use and other perceived threats to the community.⁴ Schoepe was also active in local Republican Party affairs, partnering with conservative activists like Carl Karcher--a fast-food chain entrepreneur and social conservative--to support both mainstream Republicans and members of the far-right John Birch Society.⁵ Schoepe's affiliations with these organizations--and the fact that he had Schuller's ear--demonstrated that Schuller was not far removed from the tight knot of conservative civic boosters and Christian businessman who helped engineer the development of Orange County and drove the rightwing thrust of its political life.

² "Civic Progress Week Starts at Anaheim," *Los Angeles Times*, May 8, 1951.

³ "Chamber Group Urges Master Plan for County Industrial Development," *Los Angeles Times*, May 13, 1956; Don Smith, "Associated Chambers Committee to Woo Industry Across Nation," *Los Angeles Times*, September 22, 1960.

⁴ "Private County Crime Commission Formed," *Los Angeles Times*, January 21, 1965.

⁵ Karcher, like Schoepe, was a longtime supporter of John G. Schmitz, a John Birch Society member who represented Orange County in both the U.S. House of Representatives and the California State Legislature. In 1972 he succeeded George Wallace as the presidential candidate of the American Independent Party. Karcher served as chairman of Schmitz's reelection campaign for the House in 1972, with Schoepe acting as finance co-chairmen, see Howard Seelye, "Restaurant Owner to Head Schmitz Drive," *Los Angeles Times*, April 25, 1972. Karcher was also a financial supporter of the so-called Briggs Initiative, a ballot proposition in 1978 sponsored by Orange County state representative John Briggs that sought to fire gay public school teachers in California. Estimates of the size of Karcher's donation vary widely, see Mary Ann Galante, "Beef With Karcher, At UCI, Some View Proposed Carl's Jr. as Political Poison," *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 26, 1988, http://articles.latimes.com/1988-02-26/business/fi-30191_1_carl-karcher. In 1978, Karcher spoke at one of Garden Grove Community Church's "Possibility Thinkers Luncheons." See "Display Ad 11--No Title," *Los Angeles Times*, June 2, 1978. See also Howard Seelye, "Political Notebook," *Los Angeles Times*, April 25, 1972.

The letter Schoepe wrote to Schuller in 1975 crystalized the political, economic, and religious concerns of the county's conservative elite. Schoepe explained that he had tried unsuccessfully for the previous two decades to persuade leading corporations to trumpet the virtues of the free market in their advertising campaigns. He lamented that his fellow industrialists had failed to heed his call and had "supported the conspiracy or at least members of the conspiracy with their spending."⁶ Schoepe did not elaborate on the source of "conspiracy" or explain the nature of the threat to free enterprise, but his affiliation with staunch anti-communist conservative activists suggests that the specter of Marxist central planning was his central concern. The letter went on to urge Schuller to preach the virtues of American capitalism, using his national television profile to help Americans "learn to appreciate the private enterprise system that has made possible the opportunities that we have enjoyed."⁷

Schuller never directly acknowledged the letter. But in October of 1975 he mailed Schoepe a resolution Schuller had drafted and which was approved by the regional governing body of the RCA. The resolution urged Christians to address world poverty and hunger but urged believers to embrace specific political solutions to the problems. The message described capitalism as "unsurpassed in historical record of lifting people through the self-dignity-producing private enterprise system to higher level of human welfare."⁸ It also warned that "forced economic

⁶ Adolf Schoepe to RS, April 11, 1975, "Correspondence, 1976," RS/CCM.

⁷ Adolf Schoepe to RS, April 11, 1975, "Correspondence, 1976," RS/CCM.

⁸ Draft Press Release, California Synod, Reformed Church of America, October 1, 1975, "Correspondence, 1976," RS/CCM.

redistribution” would quickly eliminate all wealth. In the margins of the draft sent to Schoepe, Schuller handwrote the words, “Adolf, Note-I heard you!”⁹

The exchange demonstrated Schuller’s ability to deftly negotiate the political conservatism of his congregants while maintaining his putative non-partisanship. Schuller endorsed Schoepe’s politics without doing so in the public forum Schoepe suggested. Schoepe’s status as a major contributor to the church compelled Schuller to respond. Two months after Schuller mailed the resolution, Schoepe and his wife Virginia contributed \$1,000, separate from their regular tithe, to the church. The Schoepes also informed Schuller that they planned to place a codicil in their will devoting a portion of their estate to his ministry.¹⁰

The correspondence between Schuller and Schoepe was the most explicit melding of Christianity, capitalism, and anti-communism in the entire corpus of Garden Grove Community Church. Schoepe’s and Schuller’s endorsement of unrestrained capitalism and their denigration of shared social responsibility did not occur in a vacuum. In the mid-1970s conservative Americans perceived themselves to be under assault from a voracious liberal state that veered perilously close to communism.

Garden Grove Community Church, and later the Crystal Cathedral, added its collective voice to an anti-tax, anti-statist chorus at crucial points in the conservative ascendancy. In the early 1980s, Schuller and his congregation reveled in the apotheosis of a decades-long expansion effort with the opening of the Crystal

⁹ Draft Press Release, California Synod, Reformed Church of America, October 1, 1975, “Correspondence, 1976,” RS/CCM.

¹⁰ Adolf and Virginia Schoepe to RS, Dec. 23, 1975, “Correspondence, 1976,” RS/CCM.

Cathedral. At the same time, the Republican administration of Ronald Reagan engineered deep tax cuts, sharply reduced spending on social welfare programs, and vitiated government regulations, while also raising the defense budget that brought so many jobs to Orange County.¹¹ Liberalism was in retreat and Garden Grove Community Church was at its height of fame and cultural influence.

The previous chapter tracked the parallel trajectories of Garden Grove Community Church and Orange County. The church and the county boomed together, growing rapidly from the mid-1950s into the 1980s. Matthew Lassiter and Kevin Kruse argue persuasively that postwar suburbs instantiated a political economy founded on low taxes, small government, property rights, and freedom of association. The ideology held that suburban exclusion was organic, the result of color-blind meritocracy, rather than product of race- or class-based discriminatory legislation.¹² The suburban political economy also framed its defense of suburban privilege by appropriating the language of rights developed by the civil rights movement.¹³ Understanding how members of the congregation situated themselves within their individual communities and the larger metropolitan region is central to grasping the significance of Garden Grove Community Church specifically and the suburban evangelical churches generally. This chapter employs Sharon Zukin's definition of "place" to contextualize Garden Grove Community Church within Orange County. Zukin argues that "place expresses how a spatially connected group of people mediate the demands of cultural identity, state power, and capital

¹¹ Sean Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan: A History, 1974-2008* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), 140-150.

¹² Lassiter, 8.

¹³ Kruse, 9.

accumulation.”¹⁴ Garden Grove Community Church was an institution that offered social, spiritual, and ideological coherence within a unique place: the rapidly developing suburbs of Orange County. The message preached from the pulpit and embraced by church members constituted a vision of political economy that celebrated small government, the private sector, and capitalist competition.

B. American Liberalism and the Conservative Ascendancy

This chapter attempts to explain how Schuller’s celebration of American capitalism--founded in his ideological embrace of meritocracy and entrepreneurial individualism--manifested itself in the theological teachings, religious practice, and social activities of the church. The sermons, published literature, and private correspondence of the church reveal four doctrinal and programmatic manifestations of the political economy of the congregation. First, Schuller’s career-long opposition to communism exemplified his profound conviction that capitalism produced material abundance and spiritual sustenance. Communism, according to Schuller, stifled individual competition and thus diminished the opportunities for achievement that he argued were central to personal fulfillment. Schuller preached that only capitalism generated the healthy self-confidence that God desired for all people.

Second, Schuller’s doctrine of “Possibility Thinking” provided the theological justification for the church’s cycle of capital accumulation, property acquisition, and physical transformation. The doctrine ultimately sanctified the individual and collective affluence of the church; moreover, Possibility Thinking excused and even

¹⁴ Zukin,12.

justified the unequal distribution metropolitan resources. As outlined in Chapter One, Schuller's message amounted to an "Gospel of Achievement" that celebrated the superlative nature of the congregation and the broader Orange County region.

Third, Garden Grove Community Church embraced the practices and values of the corporate business community. Schuller's approach to church operations linked Christian faith and business acumen. The melding of faithful Christian conduct with secular business practices provided a theological gloss to the aggressive fundraising operation that drove church expansion. The business philosophy of the church also linked Christian stewardship with individual self-interest and financial health.

Finally, Schuller purported to be apolitical, but members of his congregation such as Adolph Schoepe had deep connections within the rightwing circles of Orange County. Without minimizing Schuller's charisma, I argue that the partisanship of Garden Grove Community Church was bottom-up, not top-down. The political orientation of the congregation reflected the local and national drift toward conservatism; moreover, Christian leaders like Schuller provided a theological justification for prosperous suburbanites to reject the commitments of the New Deal political order that had rewarded them so handsomely. Schuller and his congregation believed liberalism threatened their hard-earned success and, as such, they were eager to defend the fruits of their labor.

This chapter also looks beyond Southern California to consider how the history of Garden Grove Community Church relates to larger political trends in the United States. The local context is ultimately central to the history of the church, but

the congregation also consciously situated itself within the national political culture of the United States during the 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s. During those decades the United States experienced a burgeoning electoral rejection of the ideological assumptions and policy commitments of postwar liberalism. Alan Brinkley identifies public spending for social welfare and measured government regulation in economic affairs as two basic features of the American liberal state.¹⁵ The modern Democratic Party coalition—established by Franklin Delano Roosevelt and consisting of organized labor, the working-class, liberal elites, and African-Americans—served as the steward of the liberal political order. Contrary to the rhetoric of the burgeoning conservative counterrevolution, Brinkley asserts that liberalism did not fundamentally challenge the structures or operations of capitalism.¹⁶ Particularly in the postwar era, public policy in the United States relied upon mass consumerism in the private economy to provide the prosperity necessary to ensure a high standard of living for all citizens and to secure “loftier social and political ambitions for a more equal, free, and democratic nation.”¹⁷ While mass consumption produced jobs and profits, it also saddled Americans with mortgages, car payments, and consumer debt.¹⁸ Furthermore, the limitations of the New Deal order and its postwar successor—its neglect of racial minorities, women, the poor, and labor unions—were thus present at the creation of American liberalism.

¹⁵ Alan Brinkley, *Liberalism and Its Discontents* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 50-53.

¹⁶ Brinkley, 60.

¹⁷ Cohen, 13.

¹⁸ Zukin, 11.

To be sure, proponents of the postwar liberal political order could point to measurable policy results that redistributed economic resources in the direction of marginalized sectors of the population. The political culture that conservatives in Orange County began inveighing against in the mid-1960s--both the new initiatives of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society and its inherited New Deal policy apparatus--involved substantive government regulation of economic activity and industrial practices, as well as "War of Poverty" initiatives like Aid to Dependent Children, Medicaid, and Head Start. Government spending on social welfare programs doubled to \$61 billion in the latter-half of the 1960s, with much of that money benefiting the poor and racial minorities.¹⁹ The racial vector of Great Society programs, especially the War on Poverty, also galvanized resentment from white, middle- and working-class voters who saw affirmation action, busing programs, racial quotas, and other "compensatory efforts" as privileging inner-city blacks at the their expense.²⁰

The citizens who comprised the so-called "silent majority" of the 1960s and 1970s believed that an intrusive, capacious state threatened their liberty. They also took umbrage at the cultural effrontery of civil rights activism, urban riots, anti-war protests and the counterculture. In this context, many Americans embraced Richard Nixon's "law and order" campaign in 1968 as an alternative to what they perceived as the social democratic expansiveness of the Great Society. The voters who embraced anti-statist populist appeals in increasing numbers between Nixon's

¹⁹ Ira Katznelson, "Was The Great Society a Lost Opportunity," in Fraser and Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930-1980* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 197.

²⁰ Jonathan Rieder, "The Rise of the 'Silent Majority,'" in Fraser and Gerstle, 254.

election and Ronald Reagan's victory in 1980 viewed liberalism as an aggressively transformational left-wing program. That perception, however, ran counter to the fundamentally conservative, pro-market nature of the liberal state, a contradiction that rendered Schuller's theological critique of liberalism politically useful to conservative activists intent on removing even minimal restraints on capitalism.

Recent historiographical contributions argue that the revolt of the Silent Majority was national in scope but had its center of gravity in the suburban communities of the "Sun Belt".²¹ Thomas Edsall and Mary Edsall argue that the so-called "tax revolts" of the late 1970s were galvanized by a perception among middle-class whites that race-conscious federal economic policies transferred finite resources from suburban communities to poor, minority communities in the urban core.²² Although suburban development received massive state and federal subsidies, "suburban homeowners nonetheless claimed that they were under siege and victimized" throughout the 1960s and 1970s.²³ Thus, the grassroots "tax revolts"—epitomized by California's successful Proposition 13 ballot initiative in 1978 to sharply limit property taxes statewide—signaled that voters "were prepared to sacrifice vital public services and traditions of liberal social welfare" in order to "institutionalize the fiscal advantages that suburban segregation afforded."²⁴

The tax revolts, the reduction of support among working-class voters experienced by the Democratic Party, and the increasingly vociferous condemnation of government programs by the right wing of the Republican Party signaled a broad

²¹ Lassiter, 10-14.

²² Thomas Byrne Edsall and Mary Edsall, *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics* (New York: WW Norton, 1992), 131.

²³ Self, 256.

²⁴ Self, 293.

national opposition to the liberal state. The election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 confirmed the viability of the rightwing movement, and it institutionalized the rejection of American liberalism within the structures of government.²⁵ The deregulation of industry, deep cuts in social spending, and massive tax rate reductions of the early Reagan administration fatally weakened the pillars of the liberal state.

This chapter asks how a liberal policy regime so thoroughly attenuated in scope and flawed in execution engender such vitriolic opposition from Schuller's congregation. Many working-class whites struggled in the 1970s under the effects of inflation, high marginal tax rates, and stagnating family income.²⁶ Yet affluent suburban residents, like those in Orange County, did not experience economic vicissitudes of the same magnitude. The congregation of Garden Grove Community Church raised vast sums of money, purchased new property, expanded its range of services and programs, and constructed costly new facilities throughout the 1970s. In the fall of 1980, as Ronald Reagan completing his successful run for president on a platform of rolling back the oppressive liberal state, the church opened the ultimate testament to its collective wealth and success: the Crystal Cathedral. Accompanying this achievement was Schuller's message that the success of the church was founded on free-market capitalism, competitive individualism, and steadfast Christian faith.

²⁵ Wilentz, 144.

²⁶ Thomas Byrne Edsall, "The Changing Shape of Power," in Fraser and Gerstle, 278-279.

C. Anti-Communism and the Defense of Capitalism

Throughout most of his career, Schuller practiced religious ecumenicism and political neutrality. Yet the substance of his clerical life betrayed a deeply rooted political philosophy founded in laissez-faire capitalism and the “free market.” Schuller’s politics defied simple partisan dichotomies. His views conformed more closely to the Republican Party, but Schuller’s robust defense of capitalism fit comfortably within both major political parties, as evidenced by the Democratic Party’s embrace of the mass consumption as the foundation of the liberal state the postwar era. The central political themes of his writing and preaching—pro-business and anti-big government—sprang from a foundation of anti-communism. The evolving contours of Schuller’s anti-communism illuminate the implicit and sometimes explicit political economy of Garden Grove Community Church. His ideological defense of capitalism was constant but the method of delivering the message grew subtler as Schuller’s career progressed. In various ways, Schuller preached that capitalism and Christianity were not just symbiotic but mutually constitutive.

In the early 1960s Schuller condemned communism from the pulpit and attended anti-communist events organized by southern California conservative activists like Dr. Fred Schwartz, an Australian-born physician from nearby Long Beach who founded the Christian Anticommunist Crusade, and Walter Knott, owner of the Knott’s Berry Farm amusement park in Buena Park.²⁷ As described in Chapter One, Schuller pilloried the National Council of Churches during this period for what

²⁷ Schuller, *My Journey*, 254.

he believed was its weak stance on the Cold War. He also warned publicly of communist infiltration in Orange County. In the fall of 1960 Schuller preached a series of anti-communist sermons. In a mid-week letter to the congregation promoting his next sermon, “How You Can Defeat Communism,” Schuller expressed his prayerful hope that “the story [of world history] should never include the fall of democratic government.” Invoking the Gettysburg Address, Schuller implored the congregation to “join this week with Lincoln praying that government of the people, by the people, and for the people shall not perish from this Earth.”²⁸ In this and other statements, Schuller offered Christian piety as a bulwark against the existential threat from the Soviet Union. In his writings and sermons, Schuller often paired Christianity with capitalism as the paramount weapons in the Cold War arsenal of the United States.

In later years, Schuller was at pains to explain his anti-communism, describing it as an aberration that distracted from the work of reaching wounded people for Christ.²⁹ After the early 1960s he avoided public pronouncements on partisan issues because he feared alienating the “unchurched” residents of Orange County he hoped to attract.³⁰ Yet anti-communist critiques continued to permeate Schuller’s sermons and books throughout the 1960s and 1970s. In his role as the gentle, amiable prophet of Possibility Thinking, discussed below, Schuller was a more effective exponent of pro-capitalist and anti-communist dogma. Schuller’s anti-communism, shorn of its vitriol and hyperbole, preached the virtues of

²⁸ RS to church members, 1960, “Membership Mailings, 1960-1963,” RS/CCM.

²⁹ Schuller, *My Journey*, 256.

³⁰ Schuller, *My Journey*, 259.

entrepreneurial individualism and meritocratic achievement. The message was emblematic of his deep devotion to a political economy founded on small government, privatization, and the putatively free market of capitalism.

Schuller drew a direct link between Christianity and capitalism, informing his readers in 1963 that

you have a God-given right to be a capitalist. No wonder that the Christian and Jewish countries have given rise to the capitalist system! We have been taught that it is wrong to take help from the state if we can pay our own way. No wonder the Christian religion has not been historically associated with socialism. We have been taught it is a sin to steal from the rich and give to the poor.³¹

In Schuller's rendering, capitalist competition offered spiritual and psychological benefits to the individuals that flowed outward to benefit society at-large. Schuller thus re-cast his preoccupation with self-esteem into a patriotic duty to expose oneself to the rigors and uncertainties of the free market. He wrote that

[s]elf-reliance and self-confidence are real security. When communism collects people together and spares them from competition, protects them from the possibility of failure, and shelters them from the possibility of poverty, is it really offering security? It is perhaps eliminating the fear of poverty and starvation, but the absence of fear is no proof of courage.³²

Sustenance could be bestowed on the individual, Schuller suggested, but only competitive effort could produce true satisfaction in one's personal or professional life. Communism was insidious because it sapped individual initiative and the competitive instinct of individuals. Schuller thus placed Christians on a knife's edge in which competition was necessary and even salutary, but failure was anathema,

³¹ Schuller, *God's Way to the Good Life* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1963), 84.

³² Schuller, *Move Ahead with Possibility Thinking*, 194.

even un-American. The spiritual implications of failure were similarly dire. Schuller's formulation of Possibility Thinking held that the vitality and durability of individual Christian faith found its chief expression in one's record of victories or defeats. In the quotidian life of his congregation, Schuller's doctrine blessed competition, acquisition, and achievement.

D. Possibility Thinking

In the mid-1960s Schuller introduced a popular theology that served as his guide to Christian living and personal fulfillment for the next four decades. Drawing on Peale's work, Schuller developed a theology of "Possibility Thinking". Examining the assumptions of Possibility Thinking helps explain precisely how Garden Grove Community Church rendered sacred its decades-long process of expansion and growth, as well as justifying the individual and collective prosperity of the church. Schuller's theological formulation linked meritocratic achievement and entrepreneurial individualism to successful Christian living. The concept found mass appeal in the consumer book market, yet it also permeated Schuller's sermons and the internal correspondence of the church. As a systematic approach to spiritual and daily life, Possibility Thinking aided the pursuit of achievement that, according to Schuller, stimulated by capitalism and inhibited by communism.

Possibility Thinking promised that material abundance, professional accomplishment, and personal satisfaction would accrue to those with strong Christian faith. But Possibility Thinking promulgated a very specific type of faith: a bold, optimistic, "mountain-moving faith" that God provided for those who believed

in Him.³³ The term “mountain-moving faith” was inspired by a passage of scripture from Matthew 17:20 in which Jesus promised that: “If you have faith as a grain of mustard seed you can say to this mountain: move! And it will move! And nothing will be impossible to you.”³⁴ For Schuller, faith in one’s own abilities and faith in God’s benevolent plan for one’s self were inseparable. The intertwining of faith and self-confidence render imperative ambitious, aggressive conduct in the professional lives of Christians and in the collective life of the church.

Possibility Thinking celebrated the faith and the fruits of high-achieving Christians, but it offered a less generous assessment of the spiritual devotion of people for whom personal and professional success was elusive. In a message to the congregation celebrating the groundbreaking of the Walk-in/Drive-In sanctuary in September, 1959, Schuller ruminated on the church’s effort to complete the structure and the necessity of remaining faithful to ambitious goals. He warned the congregation that “many people quit just when they are about to win,” adding, “how pathetic.”³⁵ Possibility Thinking assumed that obstacles to personal and professional success existed only in the mind of the individual. In a 1972 memo, Schuller implored senior staff to continue “thinking possibilities, and not become negative or short-sighted, or panicky or hysterical which would led us to make decisions in violation of the very successful principles that brought us to where we are.”³⁶ Garden Grove Community Church was Schuller’s model for the successful

³³ Schuller, *Move Ahead With Possibility Thinking*, 187.

³⁴ Schuller, *Move Ahead With Possibility Thinking*, 32.

³⁵ Community Church News, September, 1959, “GCCC Church Bulletin,” RS/CCM.

³⁶ RS to Business Administration Committee, June 16, 1972, “Correspondence, 1968-1973,” RS/CCM.

Possibility Thinking institution. He offered himself and his congregation as proof that God rewards audacious optimism.

Schuller's formulation of mountain-moving faith produced a circular logic wherein an individual's success signified his or her faith while failure betrayed the weakness of his or her Christian commitment. He argued that many individuals "claim to exercise real faith yet they accomplish little or nothing."³⁷ Failure was ipso facto evidence of weak faith. The conflation of success with strong faith suggested that no one's failure was pre-determined and every success was earned. When applied to Garden Grove Church, Possibility Thinking theology exculpated its members of responsibility for the metropolitan inequality that benefited their community.

According to Schuller, the responsibility to improve one's own lot applied even to people with a lack of education or an impoverished upbringing. He argued that "no one's background or past is a disadvantage unless he makes it so in his thinking!"³⁸ Possibility Thinking prescribed a similar palliative to racial minorities subjected to discrimination. In one of Schuller's few overt references to race in his sermons or books, he argued that Possibility Thinking was "the greatest weapon that a person who feels inferior because of race or nationality can acquire."³⁹ The assertion illustrates Schuller's belief that urban ghettos did not constitute structural barriers to personal and professional achievement. Possibility Thinking intimates that impoverished racial minorities created their own economic and social isolation.

³⁷ Schuller, *Move Ahead With Possibility Thinking*, 187.

³⁸ Schuller, *Move Ahead With Possibility Thinking*, 41.

³⁹ Schuller, *Move Ahead With Possibility Thinking*, 42.

Schuller's views on race dovetailed with his views on market dynamics. Possibility Thinking asserted that large-scale economic changes did not exempt individuals from the responsibility for solving their own problems. In *Move Ahead With Possibility Thinking*, Schuller recounted the story of his friend Clark Dye, who had owned a hardware store in downtown Santa Ana since the late 1940s. Many downtown businesses struggled following the construction of shopping centers and malls in outlying areas, Schuller explained. But Dye's store continued to thrive. Schuller attributed his friend's economic survival to a positive attitude. Dye "saw growth as a challenge that could kill him or make him rise higher."⁴⁰ So he invested in the best inventory and maintained the widest selection of tools in the area. "With a keen buying mind, a top sales force, and way out in front in quality, his store is where the buyers go," Schuller concluded, adding that, "[p]arking is no problem because the other stores are so inactive that the streets are clear for his customers."⁴¹ The clear import of the anecdote was that individuals could survive economic vicissitudes with strong personal character, business acumen, and Christian faith. The political economy of Garden Grove Community Church as articulated through Possibility Thinking refused to acknowledge that political and economic forces dispensed opportunity in unequal doses through metropolitan Los Angeles.

Possibility Thinking portrayed the ideal Christian--and the ideal member of Garden Grove Community Church--as an aggressive, confident entrepreneur. Schuller averred that "nothing succeeds like success" and "no one likes to follow a

⁴⁰ Schuller, *Move Ahead With Possibility Thinking*, 108.

⁴¹ Schuller, *Move Ahead With Possibility Thinking*, 108.

loser.”⁴² Garden Grove Community Church certainly projected an image of winning. The many expansions, abundant programming, and self-congratulatory publications advertised that it was a church on a continual upward trajectory of success. Possibility Thinking provided the theological justification for the church’s cycle of capital accumulation, property acquisition, and physical transformation. It did so by equating good Christian living with business ingenuity.

E. The Business of Church

Possibility Thinking theology buttressed Garden Grove Community Church’s embrace of the practices and values of corporate business culture. In addition, the relentless program of expansion and growth drew upon the twin lodestars of business rhetoric and Possibility Thinking.⁴³ As the church augmented the pace and scale of its projects and its programming in the 1970s it likewise employed the corporate idiom with increasing regularity. The embrace of the practices and values of business culture dovetailed with its anti-communism and Possibility Thinking theology to form the foundation of the church’s political economy. The political economy of Garden Grove Community Church favored privatization, entrepreneurial individualism, and meritocracy over the public sector and collective responsibility. At heart, the church’s antipathy toward postwar public policy revealed a

⁴² Schuller, *Move Ahead With Possibility Thinking*, 199.

⁴³ Paul Johnson provides a model study of Christian discipline and capitalism among nineteenth century merchants and managers who presaged the Prosperity Gospel of the twentieth century, see Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeeper’s Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978). For an examination of collaboration between corporations and evangelicals in the post-World War II United States, see Darren E. Grem, “The Blessings of Business: Corporate America and Conservative Evangelicalism in the Sunbelt Age, 1945-2000” (PhD diss., University of Georgia, 2010); Bethany Moreton, *To Serve God and Walmart: The Making of Christian Free Enterprise* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

fundamental opposition to the liberal state and its regulatory, taxation, and social welfare functions.

The emulation of business culture at Garden Grove Community Church provided a system for members to live out Possibility Thinking in a concrete fashion. The link between Christian faith, business rhetoric, and church programming was most evident in the monthly Possibility Thinkers Luncheons for Business and Professional People. Beginning in the early 1970s, the church hosted monthly noontime lunches. The guest speakers were entrepreneurs, attorneys, professional athletes, military veterans, and occasionally politicians and entertainers who offered Christian-inflected advice to those in attendance. Prominent speakers included former White House aide and convicted Watergate conspirator turned-evangelical-activist Charles Colson, “Mrs. Jack LaLanne” (Elaine LaLanne), football star-turned-actor Merlin Olsen, and Mary Kay Asher, founder of Mary Kay Cosmetics. The church newsletter explained that May Kay Cosmetics had “traveled on a combination of vehicles: people and products, ideas and ingenuity, enthusiasm and confidence, youth and experience, and certainly trial and error.”⁴⁴ The language of the announcement reflected the deep interest of the church leaders in the intricacies of business practice.

Wednesday morning men’s prayer breakfasts carried a message similar to that of the Possibility Thinkers luncheons: the symmetry between achieving success in one’s Christian life and in one’s occupation. An announcement for a 1974 men’s breakfast appearance by R. Stanley Tam, president of States Smelting and Refining

⁴⁴ Community Church News, Jan. 23, 1977. “Community Church News, 1977,” RS/CCM.

Corp of Lima, Ohio, reflected the church's linkage of Christian faith and business acumen. The newsletter promised that Tam's talk, entitled "God owns My Business," would reveal "how, with \$37.00 and God, his business was built into a multimillion dollar enterprise serving giant corporations in America today."⁴⁵ As with Asher's promotion, the message linked faith, entrepreneurship, and material success.

F. Fundraising

Garden Grove Community Church inculcated business values through its programming, but it also embraced business practices in the management of the church, especially in regard to fundraising. The goal of such business tactics was first to increase membership and financial contributions. The deeper purpose of the church's business approach was to maximize the efficiency with which it offered both healing on Earth and eternal salvation to Orange County residents. Schuller's argument that expansion and growth fulfilled a divine mandate elevated fundraising to a sacred duty. In addition, the fundraising apparatus and financial organization of the congregation further reflected the degree to which the principles and sometimes the values of the business community permeated the church.

Schuller wrote in *Move Ahead with Possibility Thinking* that his fundraising philosophy flowed from an aphorism W. Clement Stone, the Chicago insurance executive who was a large contributor to church expansion projects and later a national member of Schuller's finance committee: "You can build your fortune on borrowed money."⁴⁶ Borrowing money was not a hazard for Possibility Thinkers

⁴⁵ Community Church News, April 14, 1974. "Community Church News, 1957, 1961, 1967-1969, 1972-1980," RS/CCM.

⁴⁶ Schuller, *Move Ahead with Possibility Thinking*, 105.

whose faith and confidence would assure success and produce handsome returns for investors. Schuller instructed his readers that “[d]ebt is material evidence of a man’s courage and confidence.”⁴⁷ The church’s fundraising practices mirror the orthodox free market argument that capital expands infinitely if managed properly. Although he carefully stressed the ethical and practical imperative of debt retirement, Schuller staked his career and the solvency of his church on the premise that an unending reserve of money existed for the ambitious entrepreneur.

The early expansions of Garden Grove Community Church were financed by a combination of bank loans, contributions and loans from the denominational coffers of the Reformed Church of America, and congregational tithes. In 1958 the board elders decided to sell \$250,000 worth of promissory notes to “the church at large” in order to refinance short-term debt and also to “liquidate” bills from the construction of the congregation’s first chapel building. Members were “encouraged” to purchase the notes, which would be sold at amounts of \$50 or higher and pay 5% interest.⁴⁸ Bond sales and the increasingly frequent solicitation of tithes and additional financial pledges linked the mission of the church with the financial health of individual members. The concept of Christian stewardship compelled members to tithe ten percent of their earnings to the church. Thus, increased personal financial success for the congregation members meant a larger budget for the church.

As the scale of the church’s projects grew with the Tower of Hope and then the Crystal Cathedral, so too did the intensity of the appeals for tithes and extra

⁴⁷ Schuller, *Move Ahead with Possibility Thinking*, 105.

⁴⁸ Community Church News, March 1958, “GCCC Church Bulletin,” RS/CCM.

financial contributions for specific land purchases, construction costs, or debt obligations. A 1965 newsletter insert titled “How to make \$385,000 in ten minutes” explained the fundraising aims of the upcoming 10th anniversary dinner.⁴⁹ A chart helpfully outlined the exact number of pledges needed at various increments in order to meet the fundraising goal. In subsequent years, the pages of *Community Church News* were filled with explanations of fundraising goals and pledges still needed for the year. An announcement in January 1977 reported that the church had met its 1976 budget goal of \$1.75 million, and had received more than \$1.2 million toward its 1977 target of \$2.06 million. “God is calling GGCC to even greater accomplishments in 1977!” the message proclaimed, informing readers that pledge cards were available in the pew racks.⁵⁰

Just as the affluence of its members benefited the church, the church also linked Christian stewardship and personal finance. Garden Grove Community Church actively encouraged estate planning through its Department of Planned Giving. The estate planning initiative promoted bequests from members under the rubric of prudent family finance management. The Department of Planned Giving offered frequent no-cost workshops for “people who sincerely sense the importance of a ‘Christ-centered’ will and estate plan.”⁵¹ The church’s voluminous published literature on estate planning emphasizes not only the benefits to the church but also to the individual. “Proper estate planning lets the owner enjoy important income tax, capital gains tax, and gift tax benefits now,” explained the 1975 church

⁴⁹ Community Church News, Oct. 27, 1965, “GCCC Church Bulletin,” RS/CCM.

⁵⁰ Community Church News, Jan. 9, 1977, “Community Church News, 1957, 1961, 1967-1969, 1974, 1977,” RS/CCM.

⁵¹ Church Yearbook, 1975, 128. RS/CCM

yearbook, “while allowing estate tax and inheritance tax savings to reduce estate costs after the estate owner’s death.”⁵² The church also established a separate corporate division, Inspiration Foundation, to receive bequests. The “capital” received by Inspiration Foundation was invested, often through loans to other churches—a violation of the biblical injunction against charging interest to other Christians.⁵³ When the congregation purchased bonds or made tax-deductible tithes and pledges, they invested in the church just as they had individually invested in their homes or the stock market. Schuller suggested that they could, and should, expect a return on that investment. The success of the church and their personal success went hand-in-hand.

The link between Christian stewardship and personal finance reflects the growth strategy of Garden Grove Community Church, but it also begins to reveal the contours of the congregation’s political views. Both Schuller’s private letters and the published literature of the church reveal a deep antipathy toward taxation. As noted above, the church framed charitable giving and financial contributions as a means of reducing one’s tax burden. The preoccupation with taxation was one of several manifestations of congregational disapproval of the reach of local, state, and federal government. This antipathy toward an expansive public sector reveals a fundamental opposition to the postwar liberal state, which employed its powers of taxation and budget allocation to finance social welfare programs and wielded regulatory authority to temper the excesses of the capitalist economy.

⁵² Church Yearbook, 1975, 128. RS/CCM

⁵³ Church Yearbook, 1975, 128. RS/CCM.

Taken together, the congregation's anti-communism, its Possibility Thinking theology, its embrace of the practices and values of business culture, and its aggressive fundraising all illustrate a political economy that favored privatization, entrepreneurial individualism, and meritocracy over the public sector and collective responsibility. Schuller and his parishioners saved their deepest animus for what we now call the "welfare state" and the system of taxation that supported it. The political economy of the church was often subliminal, yet at certain critical points in its history, Garden Grove Community Church took dead aim at liberal public policy in defense of capitalism.

G. Politics and Partisanship

Although Schuller cultivated a non-partisan public image, his decades-long message was nonetheless deeply political. Yet the substance of his political message did not center on partisan allegiance or elections. Schuller's private letters express his fondness for Republican presidents Nixon and Reagan, but these statements amounted to encomiums to their personal character. However, he also courted Democrats, welcomed several into the pulpit as guests on *The Hour of Power*. Schuller's ideology focused not on short-term political events but long-term issues of political economy. For example, his contention that communism vitiated the competitive thrust of capitalism contained an explicit critique of government-sponsored social welfare programs. Schuller often invoked the aphorism that a hand up was preferable to a hand out.⁵⁴ Yet he also offered explicit condemnations of

⁵⁴ Schuller, *Move Ahead with Possibility Thinking*, 161.

government-sponsored social assistance programs. Invoking the Eighth Commandment that “Thou Shalt Not Steal,” Schuller wrote that

the moral principle implied in this commandment is violated by the man who takes charity when he can get along without it. I watched a man ahead of me in a supermarket buy two six-packs of beer and three cartons of cigarettes, and pay for these items with a local welfare check! I object to that. I object to the unemployed woman’s complaining because she had received an offer to go back to work...What is happening to America?⁵⁵

Written two years before the inception of the anti-poverty programs of the Great Society, Schuller’s sentiments on welfare hinted at the animus toward public assistance already percolating in the United States.

Schuller’s theology and vision of society rested upon the notion of meritocracy. Although Garden Grove Community Church engaged in charitable work—collecting food and clothing for the “needy” through its “Helping Hands” program, funding the construction of a hospital in Chiapas, Mexico, contributing to anti-hunger campaigns—the thrust of Schuller’s message was self-reliance. But self-reliance could only blossom in the rough seas of free market competition. “Self-confidence cannot be inherited,” Schuller averred. “It must be earned by each individual, each generation, each new regime.”⁵⁶ The broad sweep of Schuller’s statement illuminates his belief that the defense of free market capitalism was not a fleeting necessity but an epochal duty for American Christians.

With varying degrees of explicitness, members of Garden Grove Community Church defended “free enterprise” during the first thirty years of the church. No episode illustrated congregational opposition to the liberal state more starkly than

⁵⁵ Schuller, *God’s Way to the Good Life*, 83.

⁵⁶ Schuller, *Move Ahead with Possibility Thinking*, 194-195.

its tax dispute with the state of California in the early 1980s. In late 1982 the state Board of Tax Equalization attempted to revoke the tax-exempt status of the church (re-named the Crystal Cathedral in 1980) in response to a string of for-profit events on the premises, including scheduled concerts by Tony Bennett, Robert Goulet, and the Fifth Dimension. The board also ruled that the Crystal Cathedral owed more than \$400,000 in back taxes for the years 1979-1982. Without the exemption, for example, the church would have been assessed \$215,000 in property taxes for 1982, rather than the \$15,000 it actually paid.⁵⁷ In addition, the board listed several other activities or services offered on church grounds—including a travel agent’s office, aerobics instruction, weight-loss classes, fundraisers in the sanctuary, and a Ticketron booth in the lobby—that appeared to violate the requirements for tax-exempt religious institutions. The Crystal Cathedral denied that the activities were for-profit and claimed to lose money on many of the ventures.

The church appealed the decision and fought back tenaciously against the state of California, creating their own small-scale “tax revolt” that mirrored the successful grassroots initiatives of the late 1970s. Nationally, the administration of President Ronald Reagan had been in power for nearly two years, sharply reducing taxes and slashing the budgets of federal agencies, especially those related to welfare. The Crystal Cathedral launched its campaign against the California Board of Tax Equalization at a propitious moment for anti-tax, anti-government sentiment.

The response of Schuller and members of the church to the board’s efforts, in both intensity and substance, illustrates the degree to which opposition to the

⁵⁷ “Calif. Tax Board ‘excommunicates’ a church”, *UPI*, Dec. 21, 1982, “News Clippings-Tax Exemption, Dec. 1982-June 1983,” RS/CCM.

public sector and collective responsibility permeated congregational life. In a sermon the week after the board's ruling, Schuller vowed that the church would "never pay a tax on the cross or the pulpit, or the "two big drive-in worship doors."⁵⁸ The church launched an aggressive public relations campaign. Schuller told reporters that "[o]nly God knows how much we have saved the local taxpayers that would otherwise have been expanded police services, added welfare costs of unemployed persons, added social services."⁵⁹ His argument framed the conflict in terms redolent of the burgeoning local and national ideological preference for privatization of social services.

Members of the church and supporters spoke to the media frequently during the eighteen-month stand off. The statements revealed latent class hostility among the congregation and its allies. A family from Newport Beach argued in a letter to the *Costa Mesa Pilot* that the United States was "overwhelmed these days with taxers, spenders, financial leachers, takers, and procrastinators."⁶⁰ The letter framed Schuller, by contrast, as a "maker" who earned money through vision and effort. In addition to articulating resentment of less affluent citizens, the media outreach of the congregation brought into sharp relief anti-government sentiment in the church. Crystal Cathedral member Jackson Simmons told the *Los Angeles Times* he believed the tax conflict "was brought about by poor losers, some jealous people." He added that the church had been "pretty successful," implying that less privileged

⁵⁸ Marcida Dodson, "Schuller vows to fight ruling on tax status", *Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 22, 1982, "News Clippings-Tax Exemption, Dec. 1982-June 1983," RS/CCM.

⁵⁹ Janet Kaye, "Pastor pleads to keep tax status of Crystal Cathedral," *Orange County Register*, Dec. 22, 1982, "News Clippings-Tax Exemption, Dec. 1982-June 1983," RS/CCM.

⁶⁰ Henry Burke, letter to the editor, *Costa Mesa Pilot*, Dec. 28, 1982, "News Clippings-Tax Exemption, Dec. 1982-June 1983," RS/CCM.

citizens coveted the wealth of the congregation. The language invoked the same image of slothful recipients of public assistance employed to devastating effect by Ronald Reagan in his portrait of black, urban “welfare queens.”⁶¹ The same article quoted church member Frank Coly comparing the tax conflict to the period of the American Revolution. “It is religious persecution,” Coly said. “Two hundred and fifty years ago, we fought a war over this. You destroy religion and the next thing is total government control.”⁶²

The protracted dispute with the tax board punctured the patina of sunny optimism and political neutrality that Schuller so carefully crafted. When challenged by a government institution—and what they imagined to be lazy, greedy individuals—the often-submerged political economy of the congregation emerged in stark terms. By the early 1980s, Schuller and the congregation had forcefully aligned themselves with the growing national repudiation of publicly financed social welfare programs and government involvement in the economy that were both so central to postwar liberalism.

H. Conclusion

In the summer of 1983 the Crystal Cathedral paid the \$400,000 tax bill under protest, borrowing the money from Orange County Savings Bank. The board of equalization and the church eventually reached a settlement in 1984 wherein the church eliminated most of its for-profit programming and retained its tax-exempt status, while paying a reduced tax bill of \$165,000 for the years 1979 to 1982.

⁶¹ Gil Troy, *Morning in America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 107.

⁶² Marcida Dodson, “Schuller Vows to Fight Ruling on Tax Status,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 22, 1982, “News Clippings-Tax Exemption, Dec. 1982-June 1983,” RS/CCM.

Whether or not the settlement represented a victory for the Crystal Cathedral is debatable. But unquestionably, the national retreat from a robust public sector and collective responsibility, the rollback of the New Deal political order that was incubated and galvanized in the suburbs, had gained irresistible momentum by the mid-1980s. The presidential administration of Ronald Reagan instituted at a national level the illiberal policy preferences that had already found local expression in places like Orange County.

In his 1968 essay, "The Suburban Sadness," sociologist David Riesman minimized the intensity of political and civic activity in suburbia. Riesman argued that suburban residents had "retreated from the great problems of the metropolis, and perhaps the nation, to the more readily manageable ones of the periphery."⁶³ Yet issues of taxation, regulation, and social welfare were acutely contested in the suburbs. As this chapter illustrates, the members of Garden Grove Community Church and their pastor engaged in conflicts that were at the center of debates over the nature of the American political economy in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. The church may not have triumphed in its tax battle with the state of California, but Schuller's congregation was on the winning side of the larger contest over the distribution of economic resources and political power in the postwar United States. The super successful people of Orange County realized their most significant victory in the arena of politics.

⁶³ Riesman, "The Suburban Sadness," 383.

CHAPTER 4

THE END OF SUCCESS

In October 2010 the Crystal Cathedral filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection. Crystal Cathedral Ministries—the corporation overseeing the church’s business operations, properties, and the *Hour of Power* television broadcasts—owed \$7.5 million to unsecured creditors and claimed a total debt of more than \$50 million.¹ The episode is an ignominious coda to the career of Robert Schuller, who gradually transferred day-to-day leadership of the ministry to his daughters and sons-in-law between 2006 and 2009. The succession coincided with a period of financial turmoil for Crystal Cathedral Ministries. The economic recession in the United States inhibited fundraising efforts, and revenue from the *Hour of Power* broadcasts declined thirty percent in 2009.² In February 2010 a group of vendors sued the Crystal Cathedral, claiming they were owed more than \$2 million for providing dry cleaning, public relations—and even camels, horses, and sheep—for the church’s annual Christmas pageant.³ The lawsuits coincided with the organization’s decision to terminate all operations at its retreat center in nearby San Juan Capistrano and to solicit buyers for the property.⁴ The retreat center, known as Rancho Capistrano, opened in 1985 on a one hundred acre parcel donated by a married couple in the congregation. The project was the church’s ambitious successor to the construction of the Crystal Cathedral. Under the weight of so many

¹ Deepah Bharath, “Crystal Cathedral Blames a Few Creditors for Bankruptcy,” *Orange County Register*, October 18, 2010, <http://www.ocregister.com/news/cathedral-271669-creditors-bankruptcy.html>.

² Deepah Bharath, “Crystal Cathedral Cancels ‘Glory of Easter,’” *Orange County Register*, January 29, 2010, <http://www.ocregister.com/news/cathedral-231772-schuller-church.html>.

³ Deepah Bharath, “Lawsuit Alleges Crystal Cathedral Owes Millions,” *Orange County Register* April 2, 2010, <http://www.ocregister.com/news/cathedral-242180-church-vendors.html?pic=3>.

⁴ Deepah Bharath, “Megachurch prepares to shut down retreat center,” *Orange County Register*, February 5, 2010, <http://www.ocregister.com/articles/cathedral-232851-church-retreat.html>.

debts, however, the church calculated in 2010 that it could not afford to maintain Rancho Capistrano. Still, not even the prospect of a major infusion of cash from the sale of the property could forestall bankruptcy.

In announcing its bankruptcy filing, the leadership of the Crystal Cathedral argued that a small number of recalcitrant creditors, rather than internal financial miscalculations, had forced the court filing.⁵ The denial of responsibility contrasted sharply with Schuller's decades-long emphasis on individual accountability for success and failure. Regardless of where responsibility lies for the massive debt of Crystal Cathedral Ministries, the church's aggressive program of expansion and property acquisition may have finally presented Robert Schuller with a mountain too big to climb. The recent struggles of the Crystal Cathedral also mirror the wider economic crisis in the housing and financial markets, a symmetry that casts a measure of doubt on the free-market assumptions that propelled Robert Schuller and his church for the last fifty-five years.

This project examined the history Garden Grove Community Church in order to illuminate certain trends in American urban landscapes, economic organization, evangelical theology, and political ideology. I emphasize the spatial dimension of postindustrialism, evangelicalism, and the resurgence of political conservatism. Future studies of religion and politics in suburbia would do well to compare Orange County and its evangelical churches to those in other parts of the United States with different demographics and political compositions. How did suburban evangelicals in, for example, Atlanta and Chicago, respond to postindustrial transformation? In

⁵ Rebecca Cathcart, "California's Crystal Cathedral Files for Bankruptcy," *New York Times*, October 18, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/19/us/19crystal.html?scp=3&sq=Crystal%20Cathedral&st=cse>.

what ways did race factor differently in the expansion of suburbia in those two cities as opposed to Orange County? Do regional distinctions matter, or are suburban corporate professionals a national “freemasonry of transients,” as William Whyte argued in 1956.⁶

The literature of postwar religion should also broaden its focus beyond prominent leaders. Robert Schuller looms quite large in this history of suburban evangelicalism, as do a small number of prominent business professionals and politicians. Yet between 1955 and 1984, tens of thousands of people attended services at Garden Grove Community Church and participated in its weekly activities. The church and its message clearly resonated with the residents of Orange County, complimenting and enriching their quotidian lives. More broadly, legions of ordinary people participated in the creation of postwar suburbia. They lived, worked, raised families, forged friendships, and took part in the civic life of these communities. Their voices deserve a much more prominent place in the historiography of suburban evangelicalism.

The methodologies of oral history offer a useful approach to uncovering the experiences of everyday life in suburbia. One of the critical insights of the discipline—Paul Thompson’s observation that the practice of oral history serves to illuminate the agency of ordinary people and thus transform “both the content and the purpose of history”—dovetails with the theoretical aim of this project.⁷ I have to demonstrate how Garden Grove Community Church offered Orange County’s

⁶ Whyte, 268.

⁷ Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, 3rd edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 3.

residents a space in which to construct a collective identity that comported with their economic status and their political beliefs. Robert Schuller supplied his congregation with language and ideas that aided the process of identity formation, but the congregation itself actively participated in making meaning out of their suburban existence. Historians, especially those skilled in the practice of oral history, must devote more scholarly attention to the bottom-up experience of suburban identity.

Oral history also allows historians to illuminate the subjectivities shrouded by collective identity. Different groups of social actors experienced Garden Grove Community Church in different ways, as the brief discussion of gender in Chapter Two illustrates. The overwhelming presence of men in positions of authority in Garden Grove Community Church indicates the degree to which gender mediated the experience of suburban evangelicalism. Historians of suburbia and evangelicalism should interrogate more thoroughly the gender distinctions evident in institutions like Garden Grove Community Church. This project emphasizes political outcomes, but—as two generations of cultural historians have demonstrated—power also operates in the cultural spaces occupied by gender and sexuality.

Finally, neither Garden Grove Community Church nor Orange County represents the only possible model of, respectively, the suburban evangelical church or the postwar suburban region. This thesis is only the starting point of what will hopefully be a more extensive study of how various churches in a various locations mediated the transition to postindustrialism in the United States between the 1950s

and the 1990s. Scholars should consider of how the process of cultural and ideological adjustment to postindustrialism occurred in communities as diverse as a wealthy, upwardly mobile black megachurch in suburban Houston, a shrinking mainline Protestant church in an Iowa community devastated by methamphetamine and the vicissitudes of the meat-packing industry, or a modest Puerto Rican storefront church in a blighted New England factory town. In each of these cases, as with Garden Grove Community Church, the scholarly challenge is to do justice to the material circumstances, ideological convictions, and especially the religious experiences of the people for whom the churches meant so much.

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