

From Doom Town to Sin City: Chick Tracts and Anti-gay Political Rhetoric

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Abstract *The most popular and recognized of all Christian religious tracts are Chick Publications. The comic-book format tracts have been distributed since the 1960s and are now translated into over 100 languages. Some Christian Right opinion leaders regard the tracts with ambivalence, and many outside the Christian conservative community who comment on Chick's career believe that the tracts are no longer available through Christian retail outlets. Not only are the tracts still available, they represent an important form of conservative Christian political pedagogy. The tracts anticipated and continue to reflect Christian Right politics, including the centrality of same-sex sexuality to those politics. On the other hand, the tracts have come to conflict with key dimensions of Christian Right political strategy. This article traces the genealogy of the tracts, examines the anti-gay political rhetoric of Chick Publications and traces Christian Right ambivalence toward the tracts to the movement's efforts to "center" Christian Right politics for mainstream audiences.*

Laying Hands on Chick

The most popular and recognized of all Christian religious tracts are Chick Publications. The comic-book format tracts have been distributed since the 1960s and are now translated into over 100 languages. They are produced by Jack T. Chick, a conservative Christian artist, self-professed propagandist, and entrepreneur.¹ I first encountered Chick tracts in the early 1970s in my rural Texas Baptist Church, and many current collectors and enthusiasts—some of whom dub themselves "Chicklets"—also grew up with Chick tracts. Amateur evangelists place the tracts in public places, including waiting rooms, rest rooms, near phones, and in laundromats. Some enterprising missionaries place them in books and magazines where unrepentant sinners will find them and be led to God.²

¹Until 2004, the tracts were drawn by only two artists: Jack Chick and Fred Carter, a publicity-shy African American minister. Many commentators dismiss rumors of a "third artist," but Kurt Kuersteiner tracks down the storied third artist, who drew for Chick between 1998 and 1992. Much of the work of this artist was subsequently redrawn by Fred Carter. Kurt Kuersteiner, *The Unofficial Guide to the Art of Jack T. Chick: Chick Tracts, Crusader Comics, and Battle Cry Newspapers* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer, 2004), pp. 141–142. Much of the material for his book is drawn from Kuersteiner's "Jack T. Chick Museum of Fine Art" on his "Monsterwax" website at <<http://members.aol.com/monsterwax/Contents.htm>> .

²Since I began this research project in 2003, I have found several tracts in public places, including: the Student Union food court at Ohio State University, my favorite coffeehouse in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, and the Washington, DC Metrorail system.

The Chick Publications motto is “Chick tracts *get read!*,” and those who leave them to be found by strangers clearly put their faith in this claim.³ Whether apocryphal or not, testimonials in the Chick Publications catalog and on the business website testify to the power of these unexpected intersections of sinner (or backslider) with God’s message. For those who are unfamiliar with the tracts, the full texts and illustrations of current Chick tracts, along with selected testimonials, are available on the web at <http://www.chick.com>.

Chick observers speculate that Chick tracts became anathema to many Christians in the 1980s. In what follows I’ll argue that the problem with Chick is not that the conservative Christian movement has outgrown him or that an ideological gap has opened between Chick and Christian conservatives. Rather, the problem with Chick—or at least with his standing in the Christian Right—is that his tracts are intended for a primary audience that is public, mainstream, and unsaved. As well appreciated as the tracts have been by the saved and churched, they are produced to be distributed to the unsaved and unchurched. With their messages of salvation and their busy and informative inside back covers, they are witnessing tracts, inexpensive enough to be purchased in bulk, small enough to be used unobtrusively by those who might be uncomfortable sharing their Christian witness in person. What Jack Chick routinely takes to be the proofs of his efficacy—criticisms by uneasy Christians in addition to the attacks of tenacious sinners—are consequences of addressing the public in terms more appropriate to the ingroup.

The result of Chick’s failure to transform his rhetorical project in sync with the political sophistication of the Christian Right is that Chick can be ignored or disclaimed by opinion leaders of the Christian Right while he continues to represent the social, political, and theological positions of the movement. And he can continue to be popular with the grassroots. The grassroots popularity of crude forms of rhetoric appears to be a liability for the Christian Right—seeding and revealing positions on controversial issues that are better kept within the ingroup. It may be, however, that this liability is balanced by a proportional asset. On the negative side of the ledger, it is difficult for elites to manage grassroots followers with message discipline that is appropriate to collective goals. On this side, Chick’s propensity to talk out of turn is an irritant to a sophisticated national political movement and may always threaten to undermine the pluralistic democratic rhetoric that attracts those beyond the activist core. On the positive side of the ledger, Chick stokes the ideological fires in ways that are essential for keeping grassroots movement activists attentive and active.

Chick’s Christian social movement sin is to refuse to alter his public message in a time of increasing differentiation of these two audiences and message sophistication. For this sin, he has paid some domestic price in profits and in movement status and recognition. At the same time, Chick’s marginal status, the genealogy of his Christian pedagogical enterprise, and his alleged distance from the beliefs and politics of the Christian Right require close attention. The anti-gay beliefs Chick shares with the conservative Christian movement provides a perspective for analyzing his work and its relationship to contemporary politics.

³All emphases in quotes from Chick Publications are in the original. With their italics, underlining, exclamation points, and other symbols, the tract texts are highly dramatic.

The Devil and Homosexuals

"Jack Chick never gives up picking on queers."⁴ Indeed, Chick was never either ambivalent or indirect about the homosexual menace and God's position on it. In tracts such as "The Gay Blade" (1972), "Wounded Children" (1983), "Doom Town (1989)," "Sin City" (2001), and "Birds and the Bees" (2004), Chick addresses same-sex sexuality and its perpetrators at length. The earliest of these primary anti-gay tracts is "The Gay Blade," produced in its original version in 1972. Today "The Gay Blade" is out of print, although Chick Publications will do a print run of 10,000 copies for only \$700 (a savings of 50% off the cover price) and throw in a custom back cover—your logo, church address or missionary contact information—absolutely free. But no matter—the essential "Blade" message is reproduced in more recent tracts. This message has two prongs: first, that the nature of homosexuality and homosexuals is revealed in the Biblical story of Sodom and Gomorrah (or at least in the conservative Christian interpretation of that story), and second, that the contemporary message that God wishes to send about homosexuality is that he hates it. In the tracts, the first message is transmitted through flashbacks and archaeological evidence, while the second message is put into the mouths of a variety of uncompromising Christians characters that testify to those around them.

It might be a surprise for many consumers of "The Gay Blade" to learn that several of its frames are based on photographic images of the young Gay Liberation Movement. The tract does not advertise the provenance of these images, but their source is a photo essay published in the December 31, 1971 issue of *Life Magazine: The Year in Pictures 1971*.⁵ The essay, which is evenhanded for its time, particularly when compared with the tract it helped inspire, moves from images of street protest to images taken from the daily lives of people identified with the movement. The first frame of the tract, in which two men stand in church before a minister in vestments and respond to the question, "Wilt thou have this man as thy wedded spouse?" is a variation on a photo (and accompanying text) in which the Reverend Troy Perry, founder of the Metropolitan Community Church, joins two men in wedlock. In the original photo, shot over Perry's shoulder, we see the men looking into each other's eyes. In the Chick variation, we see the men's backs as they stand before the minister. When we do see the faces of the newlyweds in the next frame, they are strikingly disconsolate. The characters' improbable emotional reaction to their own wedding points up for tract readers the impossibility that this charade of heterosexual probity can lead to anything but despair.

Another photo in the *Life* layout appears over the headline, "Experiments with Different Life-styles: Propagandists." The photo shows three men on a city street in what one commentator describes as "skag drag." Although they are not wearing recognizable drag, these Hollywood denizens are unusual enough to

⁴ Adult! Christianity, "Jack T. Chick's Fairy Tales" (1998). Available online at: <<http://www.postfun.com/pfp/features/98/feb/jtchick.html>> (April 20, 2004).

⁵ Thanks to Dennis Brumm for responding to my questions about his connection with "The Gay Blade." Brumm's *An Early History of Gay Liberation in Ames, Iowa* website can be found at: <http://www.brumm.com/gaylib/gaybladeprotest1974_1.html> (January 13, 2004).

startle at least one passerby—a woman pushing a stroller—with their “outlandish” look.⁶ In “The Gay Blade” rendering of the image, meaningful changes appear: the wrists of the two men depicted turn limp and interlace, and the bystander, who pushes a toddler in the photo, now grabs her older boy and covers his eyes. What is interesting about the translation of the original image from a photo essay in a national magazine to an anti-gay Christian tract is that the photographic image is deemed insufficient for the purpose to which it will be put. Added elements include the stereotypical effeminizing of the figures—nowhere present in the original photo—and a reminder of the seductiveness of same-sex sexuality. The toddler in the original photo who is not even glancing in the men’s direction is transformed into an impressionable boy whose mere glance at the oddly-dressed trio might precipitate his own induction into “Satan’s shadowy world of homosexuality.”⁷

Besides its unremarked reliance on the *Life* photos, there is another connection between the magazine spread and the tract that followed. Both contexts place particular emphasis on same-sex marriage. In fact, 1971 saw the first legal challenge to the ban on same-sex marriage in a Minnesota case, *Baker v. Nelson*. But given the relatively ambivalent political demand in the early Gay Liberation Movement for the right of same-sex couples to marry, this emphasis bears some scrutiny. The *Life* photo essay opens and closes on the subject. Its first image is of a cake that members of the Gay Activists Alliance brought to a wedding protest at the office of the New York City Clerk. A close-up of the cake shows it decorated with a lambda symbol, a male–male couple, and a female–female couple. A heart in the foreground is inscribed in icing: “Gay Power to Gay Lovers.” The essay closes with a montage of religious photos and addresses the controversy over religious blessings of same-sex relations, being careful all the while to place the words “wedding” and “marry” in quotations. It is probably not inaccurate to say that large numbers of Americans considered the possibility (or, if you will, threat) of same-sex marriage for the first time as a result of either *Life*’s “Homosexuals in Revolt” or Chick’s “The Gay Blade.”

After the phenomenal success of “The Gay Blade” came “Wounded Children,” a tract that traces homosexual development in a young man from childhood to adulthood. Kurt Kuersteiner calls this one Chick’s “‘compassionate’ attack on homosexuality,” and that description is consistent with the approach toward homosexual desire that locates its origins in innocent childhood.⁸ David, the

⁶ Ralph Graves, “Homosexuals in Revolt: The Year that One Liberation Movement Turned Militant,” *Life: The Year in Pictures 1971* 71:26 (1971), p. 66.

⁷ The quote is taken from the “The Gay Blade”: “Out of Satan’s shadowy world of homosexuality, in a display of defiance against society, they come forth—those who suffer the agony of rejection, the despair of unsatisfied longing—desiring—endless lusting and remorse crying that gay is good—their tragic lives prove that there isn’t anything gay about being ‘gay.’”

⁸ Kurt Kuersteiner, *The Unofficial Guide to the Art of Jack T. Chick*, p. 139. For a recent account of the developmental narrative of the origins of same-sexuality, see: Cynthia Burack and Jyl J. Josephson, “A Report from Love Won Out: Addressing, Understanding, and Preventing Homosexuality,” Washington, DC: National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute (May 4, 2005). Available online at: <<http://www.thetaskforce.org/downloads/lovewonout.pdf>> ; Cynthia Burack and Jyl J. Josephson, “Origin Stories: Same-Sex Sexuality and Christian Right Politics,” *Culture and Religion* 6:3 (2005), pp. 369–392.

protagonist, goes awry first in his gender identity and then, later, in his sexuality. When David weeps over his painful desires Satan himself stands in for the secular teacher or therapist that many in the ex-gay movement decry, telling the young man: "you're gay! So face it." After David endures the trauma of watching his ex-lover be beaten to death by gay bashers he hits bottom. It is only then that he is receptive to the Christian witness of an ex-gay man and is loosed from bondage to homosexuality. Today, "Wounded Children" is a rare tract and a collectable item. It is the only one of the primary anti-gay tracts that is no longer available in any form from Chick Publications.

The third Chick tract to focus on same-sex sexuality was "Doom Town." Unlike "The Gay Blade," "Doom Town" is a direct rejoinder not only to same-sex sexual behavior but to an organized gay movement. The tract opens with a public panel discussion led by lesbians and gay men. A highlight of the tract is the invocation of a "blood libel": a member of the panel calls for "blood terrorism"—deliberate poisoning of the nation's blood supply by HIV-infected gay men in retaliation for anemic federal spending on AIDS research. It is in this third anti-gay tract that Chick achieves his most florid narrative of the fall of Sodom, aka "doom town." In this story, Chick extrapolates some from the Old Testament tale, for example, when a fat, hairy sodomite approaches a fearful child and announces, "It's that time again!" Although the original caption for this frame read, "the children (of Sodom) were all molested at an early age," the present caption is a more qualified, "even children were not safe from their gross perversions."

Chick insinuates other points of contact between homosexuals and children, a strategy that is consistent with the kinds of political arguments that were current in anti-gay politics in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In the first frame of "Doom Town," gay activists refer to children who will be gay in the future as "OUR CHILDREN." In another frame, two "perverts" share a deep kiss in the foreground while another man in friar robes chases a small boy. In these intersections of queers and children, Chick gives his readers both the theme of recruitment and the theme of child sexual assault.

"Sin City" (2001) is set at a gay pride parade and introduces the theme of hate speech that Chick wields in other tracts. A Christian picketing the parade with a sign that reads, "HOMOSEXUALITY IS AN ABOMINATION!" is savagely beaten by police and then, though hospitalized, is charged with a hate crime for trying to disrupt the festivities. Here too, as in the other tracts, Sodom is invoked as the trumping evidence for the immorality of same-sex sexuality. As in "Doom Town," a gay character comes under conviction and turns to Christ and away from homosexuality. The "Sin City" twist on this ex-gay theme is that the repentant sinner is now also a gay minister. Reverend Ray, the gay minister, is saved in the end, but not before he is exposed as a false Christian—one who, until his conversion, did not even believe that Jesus is the son of God. Ray illustrates the common Christian Right belief that while people with homosexual desires may be Christians, those who claim lesbian or gay identity unapologetically cannot be.

The newest tract in the anti-gay line-up is "The Birds and the Bees." This tract takes a gay male couple and the invisible larval demons who accompany them wherever they go to elementary school to highlight the gay agenda in public education. Fortunately, one student in the class, Susy, is available to instruct her friends that "God *hates* homosexuality"—but only once they are safely off school grounds. Because she refuses to believe what she is told in school she is able to

turn her classmates from the belief that “the way [gays] live is *cool*.” As she testifies, Susy narrates the ubiquitous story of Sodom, blames church–state separation for her friends’ confusion over homosexuality and, finally, leads them to Christ. Undermining one frequent complaint against public school sex education, Susy does not hear of the sin of Sodom for the first time from liberal representatives of the gay agenda. Instead, she is precociously familiar with same-sex sexuality, the Biblical case against it, and the legal changes that have put the verities of the Bible beyond the reach of her peers.⁹

In these anti-gay tracts Chick moves through a variety of speakers, arguments, and forms of evidence about same-sex sexuality. These tracts, which seem similar from one perspective, are actually varied enough to illuminate the many shapes of anti-gay belief and the foundations of anti-gay activism. They are not the only anti-gay messages produced by Chick Publications. Many other tracts have a secondary message that is anti-gay in addition to some other primary message. This variety demonstrates that there are many avenues by which consumers of Chick tracts can absorb some version of the anti-gay message of the Christian Right.

Selling Hate

With translations in 100 languages and millions of domestic customers, it appears that Chick enjoys unmixed success. Yet, those who follow Jack Chick and his tract empire agree that Chick and conservative Christians went their separate ways almost before the Christian Right cohered as a new social movement. The foremost reason given for the separation is the inconsistency between Chick’s theology and that of the Christian Right. In this narrative, the nascent Christian Right gave Chick his walking papers in the 1980s. Although this thesis has some support, it has been overdrawn.

Chick has a well-documented propensity to indulge in conspiracy theory and to lash out at putative allies who question his conclusions. Both tendencies are cited by those who attest to Chick’s declining capital in the conservative Christian movement.¹⁰ There is only one problem with the assumption of the split between Chick and the Christian Right: it isn’t true, strictly speaking, or at least it isn’t complete. It is true that some evangelical Christians were critical of Chick’s Christian cartoon enterprise in its early days—the late 1960s and early 1970s. His work seemed uncomfortably close to the kinds of cultural corruption they despised. It is true that Chick resigned from the Christian Bookseller’s

⁹ On the Chick Publications website, Chick accompanies “The Birds and the Bees” with “A Personal Message from Jack Chick” (the letter can be found at: <http://www.chick.com/birdsandbeesletter.asp>). In it, Chick defends his decision to set an anti-gay tract in a school by citing the aggressiveness of the gay agenda. The letter ends this way: “So please, let the kids read ‘The Birds and the Bees.’ It could save them from a homosexual nightmare in the future.”

¹⁰ See, for example, Gary Metz, “Jack Chick’s Anti-Catholic *Alberto* Comic Book is Exposed as a Fraud,” *Christianity Today* 25:5 (1981), pp. 50–52; George Johnson, *Architects of Fear: Conspiracy Theories and Paranoia in American Politics* (Los Angeles: J. P. Tarcher, 1983), pp. 87–88; Daniel Pipes, *Conspiracy: How the Paranoid Style Flourishes and Where it Comes From* (New York: The Free Press, 1997), p. 148; Richard von Busack, “Comic-Book Theology: Unearthing Famed Christian Artist Jack T. Chick,” (Metroactive Books, 1998). Available online at: <<http://www.metroactive.com/papers/metro/04.02.98/comics-9813.html>> (April 28, 2004). James R. Lewis, *Satanism Today: An Encyclopedia of Religion, Folklore, and Popular Culture* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2001), pp. 45–47.

Association (CBA) in 1981 after an event he hosted—a boisterous and, it appears, mostly well-received session between an anti-Catholic protégé and invited attendees—caused CBA leaders to ask him to be more circumspect about some of his controversial beliefs. And it is also true that some conservative Christians were openly skeptical of Chick’s credulity with regard to a group of his conspiracy-minded associates.

However, the relationship between Chick and the Christian Right isn’t so much a divorce as it is an affair—known and relished by intimates at the same time that it is disavowed by the uninitiated. As such, Chick’s views are a resource for deciphering the contemporary theology and politics of the Christian Right, including its foundational positions on same-sex sexuality. Raeburn acknowledges this when he issues this invitation to readers: “examine the historical and theological forbears of little Chick and you’ll find an awful, and I do mean awful, lot of mainstream beliefs . . . Chick tracts and the violence in them are as American as apple pie.”¹¹

Curious about the assumption that Chick tracts are eschewed by Christians and no longer available in Christian bookstores, I carried out a casual experiment. Between 2003 and 2006, I visited bookstores and found Chick tracts in many states: California, Georgia, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Minnesota, Montana, Ohio, South Dakota, Tennessee, and Virginia. This is an unscientific nonprobability sample, but the results are nonetheless provocative. Far from having disappeared, Chick tracts are often available. Customers may not be “flocking to Christian bookstores . . . to buy these pieces of trash,” but clerks and customers alike recognize them and talk about them enthusiastically.¹² I also discovered the source of the misunderstanding about the tracts’ disappearance: while they are not available in large franchise Christian bookstores such as Christian Family Stores and Lifeway Christian Stores, they are sold at many smaller and independent stores throughout the American heartland and through such online sources as Armageddon Books.¹³ Indeed, when I inquire about Chick tracts in bookstores that do not stock them, clerks often direct me to the Chick Publications website so I can place my own bulk order.

One caveat: to say that Chick tracts are sold in many Christian bookstores is to be less specific than necessary. Catholic stores do not stock Chick tracts—not surprising given the anti-Catholic character of many tracts and of Chick’s own convictions. In the early 1980s, Catholic bookstores and organizations led the boycott of Chick Publications because of Chick’s aggressive anti-Catholicism. Today, with the wide range of tracts available, Protestant stores do not always stock the anti-Catholic tracts. Indeed, when I shopped at the Pathway Bookstore in Cleveland, Tennessee—home of New Life Bible College—a young clerk assured me that the tracts are very much in demand. Then he confided spontaneously that the store doesn’t stock the anti-Catholic and “anti-Islam” tracts. The Pathway Bookstore bills itself as “The Nation’s Largest Christian Bookstore.” Laid out like a

¹¹ Daniel K. Raeburn, *The Holy Book of Chick with the Apocrypha and Dictionary-Concordance*. King Imp Edition (Chicago: Imp Publications, 1998), p. 1.

¹² Richard McMunn, quoted in Metz, “Jack Chick’s Anti-Catholic *Alberto* Comic Book is Exposed as a Fraud,” p. 52. McMunn, editor of the Catholic publication, *Our Catholic Visitor*, was quoted on the Chick tract phenomenon in 1981.

¹³ See the website of Armageddon Books at: <<http://www.armageddonbooks.com/>>.

Borders or Barnes and Noble, it provides a modern shopping experience with books, music, a children's play area, and a central gazebo coffee bar for thirsty shoppers.

Interestingly, the same concerns with ecumenism do not prevail at Christian Books and Gifts in Manhattan, Kansas. Christian Books and Gifts did carry "The Pilgrimage" (1999), "The Traitor" (1990), "The Tycoon" (1993), and "The Last Generation" (1972), tracts that point out the Satanic basis of, respectively, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Catholicism. "The Last Generation" is more coy than many of Chick's anti-Catholic tracts, but the Roman setting of the Antichrist's lair and the cult of the Mother Goddess telegraph its meaning. Indeed, ecumenism is obviously not the trumping value to many conservative Christians, as they continue to sell and distribute tracts that expose the evils of Catholicism and other religious faiths. If "The Last Generation" is indirect in its indictment, these tracts, which I purchased at Rainbow Christian Discount in Columbus, Ohio, are not: "Are Roman Catholics Christians?" (1981), "The Death Cookie" (1988), "The Beast" (1988), and "Man in Black" (2003). These tracts reveal lies, blasphemies, conspiracies, "occultic murders," and diabolic abuses of power committed by the Catholic Church and its minions throughout history. Everything old is new again.

Politics and Witness

The belief that Chick tracts are no longer sold in Christian bookstores because Chick's views are too extreme is widespread among those who comment on the tract phenomenon. How accurate is the second half of this assumption? The evidence shows that Chick's views do not lie outside the boundaries of polite Christian Right politics. Further, a close examination of the political content of Chick tracts suggests that Chick is a prescient contemporary Christian conservative. Chick's politics line up with the core agenda of the Christian Right without remainder, a feat that might suggest coordination but more likely just permits students of the movement to trace the emergence and maturation of its politics and rhetoric.

It is not tendentious to refer to the political agenda of Chick tracts. Although they are witnessing tracts, intended to bring the good news of the gospel to unbelievers, the tracts collectively construct a body of beliefs that are social and political as well as theological. One difference between Chick and the Christian Right, and not a small one, is that Chick does not urge his consumers to engage in political action. Throughout the 1970s, political activism was already being pressed as a responsibility of Christian conservatives, but this aspect of new Christian Right formation has largely passed Chick by.¹⁴ However, reading Chick tracts in retrospect, students of political ideology can see the political agenda of the New Christian Right coalescing. In the virtual world of Chick commentary, those who have followed the tracts for decades attest to their didactic potential in suggesting, repeating, confirming, and consolidating a set of viewpoints on key social and political questions of recent times. Here is political instruction beneath the radar of political elites, parties, and mainstream political institutions.

¹⁴See Susan Friend Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

Chick's relative indifference to political action mitigates against too much specificity in the views he expresses in the tracts. Indeed, on first blush, it might be difficult to derive *political* positions from these cartoons at all. The cartoon frames include intimate set pieces and dialogue between characters—not just editorial jeremiads on public issues. In reality, it is the intimacy of the medium that lends itself to a particular kind of indirect political pedagogy, delivered by Godly characters in the context of personal relations with which the reader can identify. Constituting a political believer at the moment when a religious believer is born (again) is powerful pedagogy. It is moral instruction of a sort that is perfectly consistent with recent public conversations about how a real Christian would—or would not—vote.

Because the tracts are not in the first instance political, it makes sense that they express political views not as specific issue positions or policy recommendations but as general categories whose terms can be filled in by more activist movement partners. Chick's categories are refined and operationalized by the Christian Right today, but they are not substantially altered. Another way to express this relationship is to say that none of Chick's political categories have become obsolete to the conservative Christian movement today. What are these political views that are so closely shared between Chick and the contemporary Christian Right? Chick's political views fall into five categories that I express in negative terms because Chick frames them all as indictments against an essentially corrupt and libertine social reality. They are: anti-abortion, anti-gay rights, anti-evolution, anti-social provisioning, and anti-separation of church and state.

Students of American religion and politics would not be surprised to note the remarkable agreement between Chick and the Christian Right on these broad categories of political concern. Indeed, Chick tracts reflect a long, potent, and tenacious conservative strain in American life and politics. Yet three things are striking and worthy of close consideration. First, although he has not received credit or recognition for it, Chick quietly primed the conservative Christian political agenda for many years for his millions of readers without engaging in overt political discourse. Second, whatever differences of opinion there are between Chick and the leaders of the Christian Right movement, they do not put Chick tracts and conservative Christian political opinion at odds with each other. On the contrary, they expose incontrovertible agreement, if not deliberate coordination. And finally, it is possible for at least some well-informed observers to mistake Chick's refusal to engage in contemporary forms of message discipline for substantive political disagreement. I do not doubt that some Christian Right leaders and activists are exasperated with Chick, but it is not because they do not share his politics. Rather, it is because—an old school Christian in a focus group world—he does not share their commitment to strategy.

It is not difficult to demonstrate the parallels that prevail between Chick's political categories and their contemporary Christian Right manifestations. Chick's opposition to abortion, expressed in "Baby Talk" (1995) and "Who Murdered Clarice?" (2000), is today evident in a range of policies in the George W. Bush Administration. On his first day in office, Bush reimposed the Reagan-era global gag order that prevents international family planning groups and facilities that receive US federal funding from giving women information about abortion. The administration has also created obstacles to the availability of the emergency contraceptive drug, Plan B, and has supported a

multitude of anti-abortion laws and policies that aim to reverse the right to legal abortion established by *Roe v. Wade*. Immediately after the 2004 election, Christian Right leaders announced their expectation that the Bush Administration's Supreme Court appointees would share their opposition to legal abortion. Nor is Chick unaware of these political currents. In "Clarice," it is not only the "butcher" who is judged in heaven, but also a member of the Supreme Court, who asks a hovering angel, "Uh, I was a Supreme Court Justice, am I involved?"

Chick is well known for his opposition to same-sex sexuality and gay rights—indeed, he was an early expositor of many arguments associated with the issue. Today, a wide palette of same-sex issues are on the front burner of state legislatures, federal courts, Congress, and federal bureaucrats. These include same-sex marriage, civil unions, and domestic partnerships; and family policies regarding child custody and adoption rights. The June 2003 Supreme Court decision in *Lawrence v. Texas* that reversed the Court's 1986 decision in *Bowers v. Hardwick* was read by the Christian Right as "America's moral 9/11."¹⁵ One effect of this conservative movement political defeat was to energize a variety of electoral initiatives as well as the Christian Right's long-standing campaign against judicial independence. In part as a response to the decision in *Lawrence*, Pat Robertson launched an initiative he called "Operation Supreme Court Freedom" to encourage followers and other Christians to "cry out to our Lord to change the Court."¹⁶ Other influential Christian Right leaders, such as James Dobson, routinely link court judgments favorable to gay and lesbian rights to the need to transform the judiciary so that judges rule in accordance with God's will.

With regard to the anti-evolutionism of Chick tracts, the earliest of the creationist tracts is "Big Daddy," originally created in 1970. In the tract, a polite and well-groomed student confronts a biology professor over the evidence for evolution. Barred from discussing his faith, and forced to fight with the weapons of the adversary, the student systematically undermines each piece of the increasingly hysterical professor's evidence. In the end, no longer able to defend his science, the professor abdicates, and the student leads the class to Christ. "Big Daddy," "perhaps the most popular and widely distributed piece of creationist literature ever," is still around 35 years and many revisions later.¹⁷ Since its introduction, it has been updated many times, both to shed anachronisms (such as the students' "far out") and to include more putatively lethal rejoinders to evolution. The student's case for divine creation is premised on Fred Carter's recasting of the "Ascent of Man," an illustration in a 1968 Time-Life book.¹⁸

Chick's opposition to evolution as an explanation for human origins is no longer tainted with its history of know-nothingism and anti-intellectualism. New

¹⁵ TFP Committee on American Issues (The American Society for the Defense of Tradition, Family and Property), *Defending a Higher Law: Why We Must Resist Same-Sex "Marriage" and the Homosexual Movement* (Spring Grove, PA: TFP, 2004).

¹⁶ Pat Robertson, "Operation Supreme Court Freedom," *The Official Site of Pat Robertson* (2005). Available online at: <<http://www.patrobertson.com/PressReleases/supremecourt.asp>> (January 16, 2006).

¹⁷ Tom McIver, *Anti-Evolution: A Reader's Guide to Writings Before and After Darwin* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), p. 38.

¹⁸ F. Clark Howell, *Early Man* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Silver Burdett Press, 1987).

think tanks, educational institutions, and activist organizations demand an end to the monopoly of agnostic science—otherwise known as the “philosophy of Naturalism”—on the education of children and advocate the rewriting of science standards and the institutionalization of Intelligent Design. Intelligent Design is the version of creation science that has been crafted by proponents of creationism to circumvent decisions such as the one in the 1987 Louisiana case, *Edwards v. Aguillard*, that prevent the teaching of creationism in public schools. A variety of state and local political projects concerning the origins of life have recently become visible to mainstream publics. For example, in Kansas, scientists boycotted hearings the State Board of Education held in 2005 to highlight the naturalistic bias in traditional science education. The attempt in Dover, Pennsylvania to mandate the teaching of Intelligent Design was curtailed in 2005 by the federal court ruling in *Kitzmiller v. Dover*. However, activists in many states continue to profess confidence that changes in the judiciary and broad public support for the teaching of alternatives to evolution will eventually bring the movement success.

Chick’s opposition to social provisioning and Christian social justice is less evident in his tracts but present nonetheless. Daniel Raeburn points out that Chick’s gospel of salvation is indifferent to “works” and to the well being of the world. He gives as an example “The Poor Pope,” (1983), a tract in which Chick repudiates “social welfare” and “social justice problems” as appropriate concerns of Christianity.¹⁹ There is little in Chick’s work to suggest that he is as enthusiastic a supporter of market fundamentalism as is the contemporary Christian Right. But there is still common ground in these repudiations of government intervention in the economy on behalf of the vulnerable. Chick repudiates “liberation theology” as well as communism in “Fat Cats” (1989). In this tract, the protagonist, Juan, is introduced to Father Dominic, “a good communist.” Juan asks the priest how he can “be a follower of Jesus and be a communist”; Father Dominic’s response begins with Chick’s trademark, “Haw, haw, haw!”—an interjection much beloved of Chicklets that Chick usually puts into the mouths of demons—followed by the claim that “Jesus was a communist.” Here, Chick identifies the social justice orientation of many Catholics and mainline Protestants with despised Cold War communism.²⁰

Finally, Chick is no respecter of church–state separation. In “The Birds and the Bees,” children receive corrupt moral instruction because God has been driven from public schools. In “Sin Busters” (1991), the point is driven home unambiguously when police beat a teenager for posting the Ten Commandments to a school bulletin board and a student bystander explains that “It’s against the law to talk about the Bible or God in school anymore.” Certainly, Chick’s perspective on church and state is crude and uninformed by sophisticated legal and rhetorical strategy. Having failed in many efforts to eradicate boundaries between church and state, the Christian Right now employs a more effective legal strategy that relies on

¹⁹ Raeburn, *The Holy Book of Chick*, p. 12.

²⁰ For the development of the synergy between rejection of state provisioning and social conservatism in the politics of the 1960s, see Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001). McGirr does not mention Chick in her impressive analysis of the conservative movement of Orange County and vicinity, but she provides a context for Chick’s work that is not available in other studies of New Right formation.

the Free Speech Clause of the First Amendment.²¹ Individual battles that receive media attention include displaying the Ten Commandments and Christian symbols in the public square, vouchers for religious school education, as well as the older and venerable battles over prayer and religious instruction in public schools.

Of the positions Chick proselytizes most forcefully, there is one—theological rather than political—that does not anticipate the platform of the Christian Right. This is his opposition to other faiths besides born-again Protestant Christianity. For those who pay attention to Chick tracts today, the buzz centers mostly on his unapologetic anti-ecumenism. This public anti-ecumenism is more unusual today than it was 30 years ago, but there is more at stake in these new coalitions between disparate faith communities than tolerance and comity between believers. What's more, the tenets of faith that drive Chick's adversarial relations with Catholicism, Islam, and other faiths continue to be central to conservative Protestant theology today. What has changed is the success of political coalitions and the need to cultivate productive relations between conservative Protestants and those—many of them unborn-again—of other religious traditions.

Pure Rapture

Chick's positions on other faiths—particularly his convictions regarding Catholicism and the Pope—make his work a dirty little secret of right-wing Protestant born-again evangelicalism. Chick's anti-Catholic tracts are without question shocking in their bigotry. They hark back to a time in American history when Protestants aimed the most vile anti-Catholic sentiments and violence at undesirable immigrant groups such as Irish, Italians, and Eastern Europeans; when conspiracy theories linked the Pope with international financiers and Satanic cabals; when pornography about the prurient habits of nuns and priests circulated through underground pop culture.²² What survives of these views and acts in mainstream political culture today is the residue of Catholic and Protestant theological discord and a continuing Catholic wariness toward conservative Protestants.

Chick's anti-Catholic impiety is shocking today. However, the anti-Catholic quality of Chick tracts allows other aspects of his theology to go relatively unnoticed. One fruitful reading of Chick tracts highlights conservative Protestant eschatology, an aspect of his theology that both departs from Catholic teachings and confirms his location in the mainstream of the Christian Right. Chick tracts are advertisements for premillennial dispensationalism; they "make the Rapture the central hope of the Christians in these times."²³ Well before Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins sat down to plot the "Left Behind" book series that has held much of America in thrall to Christian conservative beliefs about the end-times, Chick was elucidating premillennialism. It turns out that Chick's eschatology is indeed key

²¹ Steven P. Brown, *Trumping Religion: The New Christian Right, the Free Speech Clause and the Courts* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2003).

²² See David H. Bennett, *The Party of Fear: The American Far Right from Nativism to the Militia Movement* (New York: Vintage, 1995).

²³ Yonder Moynihan Gillihan, "Rapture," in Brenda E. Brasher (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Fundamentalism* (New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 407. See also Matthew Goff, "Apocalyptic Literature," in *The Encyclopedia of Fundamentalism*, p. 33.

to understanding his convictions and obsessions, including his orientations toward the Catholic heresy and same-sex sexuality.

Politically, conservative Muslims and Catholics often concur with the anti-gay positions of their conservative Protestant brethren. At the same time, there are significant differences in the ideologies and goals that motivate these positions. For conservative Protestants, including Jack Chick, anti-gay politics are consistent with a particular kind of soul-saving mission—the requirement that all sinners accept Jesus Christ and become born again. However, even though Chick tracts appear to eschew every purpose but witnessing to those in need of salvation, Chick also has another mission that corresponds with that of the larger Christian Right. This is stamping out large-scale sinfulness, the kind of sin that prevailed in Sodom and Gomorrah and that persuaded God to destroy mankind while saving Noah and his family. In “Sin City,” the character who voices Chick’s theology asks, “Tell me, Ray, of all the sins, lying adultery, stealing, etc., can you think of any other sin . . . where God Himself wiped out entire cities, to remove *that* sin?” Readers learn from the various versions of the Sodom story in Chick tracts that homosexuality can precipitate the pouring out of God’s devastating wrath.

Same-sex sexuality is central to Chick’s theology and to the political implications that follow from it. Chick’s response to homosexuality reveals important dimensions of a premillennial case for the end-times. And so does Chick’s response to other religious traditions, especially Catholicism—the tradition that is most challenging to the version of American Protestantism for which Chick speaks. In an array of tracts—such as “The Last Generation” (1972), “The Only Hope” (1985), “The Last Missionary” (1987), “The Beast” (1988), “The Great Escape” (1991), “Here He Comes” (2003), and “Who’s Missing” (2003)—Chick rehearses a response to Catholic faith and sexual sin that is geared primarily to an end-times vision. This vision is consistent in its details with the premillennialism of, for example, the *Left Behind* novels and other nonfiction treatments of the theme.

“The Only Hope” (1985) is representative of the genre. “Hope” opens with a vista of the sins that drove God to destroy the world with a flood. Introducing a small motif that recurs in the anti-gay tract “Doom Town,” one man warns another, “Take your hands off him. @*#! He’s my wife.” The tract brings this sinful scenario up-to-date, confirming that our contemporary landscape of degeneracy mirrors that of Biblical times. Chick outlines the institutional infrastructure of the last days as centered around the Catholic Church and the Antichrist who arises from it. He cites authorities to bolster his eschatology, noting the “leaders of major Protestant denominations [who] *all* called the pope ANTICHRIST”: Luther, Calvin, Wesley, Knox, and Cotton Mather. “The Blessed Hope”—including the Rapture—is God’s promise to his Church (the true body of believers—not the false universal Church) with regard to the wicked and secular world.

Chick’s eschatological tracts educate their readers about the contemporary Christian Right. This is so because critiques of same-sex sexuality and Catholicism are not independent but connected through the conservative Protestant interpretation of the last days. Besides the close identification between Pope and Antichrist, Rapture theology illuminates an additional wedge between Catholicism and conservative Protestantism. This is Catholic amillennialism. Amillennialists, including many members of mainline Protestant denominations, reject what premillennialists like Jack Chick and most other conservative

Protestant leaders today take to be the literal reading of Revelation and, instead, read that book as symbolic. They deny the Rapture and locate the millennium in the present and past rather than in a future time to be preceded by a dreaded tribulation. For the Church, the social hegemony of premillennial dispensationalism requires a rejoinder that stakes out the Catholic doctrine of Last Things. In this version of the end-times, the Antichrist is not a feared political dictator, and the Rapture does not catch believers up into the air.²⁴ Neither do believers await a seven-year tribulation that is the direct fruit of sexual, religious, and national deviations from God's will. Chick tracts are witnessing tracts and thus are one means to the goal of saving individual souls, an end that remains important to the Christian Right today. The soul-saving mandate is evident in the eschatological tracts—Chick begs sinners to give their lives to Christ before the onset of the tribulation signals that it may be too late. But it is also possible to read the end-times tracts as frenzied calls to avert the wrath of God by turning from sexual sins and corrupt faith. To the extent that premillennial eschatology is central to the politics, including the anti-gay politics, of Christian conservatism, the rejection of this eschatology always threatens to disrupt the stability of the conservative Christian coalition. This danger is managed when Christian Right opinion leaders can carefully frame the movement's aims and ideas for audiences inside and outside the coalition.

Framing the Message

Mainstream Christian conservatives today are often abjured from indulging in public utterances that begin with the phrase, "God hates." This proscription is consistent with the public narrative about same-sex sexuality that emphasizes democratic norms and standards of argument. In continuing to violate this proscription, Chick is a brother-in-arms of the Reverend Fred Phelps of Topeka, Kansas's Westboro Baptist Church. As many Americans know, Phelps's motto is "God hates fags"; indeed, he is so wedded to the phrase that it is the address of his website: <http://www.godhatesfags.com>. The difference between Chick's and Phelps's rendering of this sentiment is the object, which corresponds to the distinction between status and conduct. This has been a key distinction in, for example, debates over gays in the military. However, in distinguishing between forms of political rhetoric, we should shift our attention from the variable objects of such sentences to the consistent subject and verb.

There is a reason why many Christian conservative leaders now proscribe the phrase *God hates* in public discourse regardless of its object. Such a phrase exposes both the religious roots of political argument and the assumption that its proponents can speak for God's attitudes with confidence. Of course, such beliefs are common bases of religious discourse, but they are not—or not yet—successful bases for political arguments in liberal democracies. Even so, Chick perseveres in

²⁴There are many sources for Catholic amillennialism. Some of these are oriented toward ordinary readers in forms that are easy to consult. One example of an accessible source that is an obvious response to the popularity of the *Left Behind* series is Fr. Sean Wales, *What You Should Know About the "End Times"* (Liguori, MO: Liguori Publications, 2004).

disseminating God's messages, and the attention he gets from friend and foe alike testifies to his success in attracting an audience.

Christian conservatives resist the social, cultural, and political changes of the last few decades, especially changes in mores and their implications, by testifying that God is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Chick takes pride in the unalterable convictions he conveys in his tracts, comic books, and other Christian products. And he protects his creations through threats of legal action against trespassers. As timeless as his religious convictions are, however, Chick is not unaware of the social and political changes of the New Right period. In several tracts Chick notes that he has been accused of hate speech and names his accusers: Catholics and homosexuals. Chick first began to receive hate mail and threats in the years after he published "The Gay Blade." However, he believes that he has made his most lasting and dangerous enemies among the Catholics whose faith he excoriates. It is they who organized to execute the bookstore boycott of the early 1980s that has gone down into Chick lore. In his turn, Chick refuses the ecumenism that is key to strategic cooperation between the Catholic Church and the Protestant Christian Right.

"The Trial" is Chick's rejoinder to charges from gay and Catholic activists, as well as other critics, that he engages in "hate speech." In this 1996 tract, the Word of God is taken to court as hate literature, and a small girl is indicted for pushing the literature to a friend in the schoolyard. In the course of the "trial," a Catholic Bishop, a Moslem, a Rabbi, and a theology Professor testify against the Christian child, "Annie," and insist that the text of John 14:6 ("I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me") be expunged from the Bible. The victim's hysterical mother gives Chick the opportunity for parody, directed at those who point out the emotional costs of being objects of hatred: "The emotional stress of this *hateful* attack has almost caused me to have a breakdown," she wails.

Many Chick tracts have been revised over the years in which they have remained active Chick products. In his massively researched book, Robert Fowler documents these changes for collectors.²⁵ It is important to note that these changes fall into a number of categories, four of which seem most useful for deciphering Chick's relationship to Christian Right politics. First, there are revisions that take account of actual historical change.²⁶ A second category of revisions consists of those that add evidence for Chick's propositions or bring his claims up-to-date. The early 1980s addition of AIDS to the final frames of "The Gay Blade" falls into this category, as do extensive changes to the anti-evolution tract, "Big Daddy?" (1970). Third, Chick sometimes alters tracts to remove anachronisms, although most Chicklets would no doubt agree that some of the unintentional humor of the tracts is associated with anachronistic elements that are not expunged. Clothing, hairstyles, cultural touchstones, and language all fall into this category of graphic elements that do not age well. Finally, and contradicting most assumptions about Chick, he sometimes changes the text and images of tracts to soften them for anxious readers. This he has done with tracts such as "Somebody Loves Me" (1969), "The Visitors" (1984), "The Poor Little Witch" (1987), and "The Royal Affair" (1990), among others.

²⁵ Robert B. Fowler, *The World of Chick?* (San Francisco: Last Gasp, 2001).

²⁶ An example in this category includes the tract "Love the Jewish People" (1976).

Revisions such as these constitute the strategic softening of a message to abet its reception. In fact, many scholars and other observers of the institutionalized Christian Right have noted a softening of anti-gay public rhetoric over the last decade.²⁷ At the same time that more compassionate or democratic forms of political rhetoric have become commonplace, the conservative Christian movement has become more effective at designing and deploying multiple modes of address—different rhetorical tones, emphases, or arguments directed at ingroup and outgroup audiences.²⁸ For students of the Christian Right, examining the strategic component of Chick tracts and other forms of popular conservative Christian rhetoric can help us understand how Christian Right opinion leaders put multiple modes of address into practice. This is not so because Chick practices the kind of sophisticated targeting of ingroup and outgroup practiced in other precincts of the Christian Right movement. Rather, the differences between Chick's style of unapologetic exposure of conservative Christian theology and political foundations can alert scholars to ingroup assumptions and aspirations. Chick's theological message has not changed over the decades. This is so even if he is willing to compromise in small ways in order to produce Christian conservative ideology and to close the deal with receptive sinners.

Strictly Speaking

For over four decades, millions of believers around the world have evangelized with Chick tracts. In the beginning, the tracts were the product of a social movement that was marginal to mainstream political institutions and leaders. They were born in the 1960s, a time when rock-ribbed social conservatives who shared Chick's beliefs were vying for power but still regarded as outsiders to a liberal political consensus. By the 1980s, with a coalition of social and economic conservatives in ascendance, Chick was already perceived as a partial liability. There was no question that his positions on salvation, eschatology, and human behavior and relations were those of conservative Christians. Indeed, they were the very positions that continued to be explicated by a wide variety of Christian Right authors, preachers, televangelists, media personalities, and builders of political organizations. However, in his tracts and other publications, Chick telegraphed too much information—in far too coarse a fashion—to the readers for which his tracts were intended. In spite of the increasing communicative sophistication of the conservative Christian movement, and regardless of his standing with the institutional Christian Right, Chick has doggedly continued his mission to evangelize to the world's unsaved.

²⁷ For a critical analysis of this softening of Christian Right rhetoric, see Ann Burlein, *Lift High the Cross: Where White Supremacy and the Christian Right Converge* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

²⁸ A similar formulation is "multiple modes of outreach" in Julia Lesage, "Christian Media," in Linda Kintz and Julia Lesage (eds.), *Media, Culture, and the Religious Right* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p. 28. While Lesage uses this term to describe institutional and organizational outlets for Christian Right ideology, I use a variation on this formulation to point toward the rhetoric itself rather than the outlets through which it is disseminated. See Cynthia Burack, "Getting What 'We' Deserve: Terrorism, Tolerance, Sexuality, and the Christian Right," *New Political Science* 25:3 (2003), pp. 329–349.

It is clear from the many reactions and rejoinders to Chick tracts that many past and present consumers do not embrace the “sacred story” the tracts relate.²⁹ It is also clear, however, that the tracts have enjoyed great popularity among conservative Christians and that they bolster and reinscribe the theology and politics of the Christian Right movement. For believers, Chick tracts are attractive for many reasons: to many, they are visually appealing; they express Gospel truths in an unflinching and nonnegotiable language; they confront the permissiveness of American society on moral, and especially sexual, issues; and they insist upon the malevolent existence and power of Satan in the world.³⁰ George Lakoff’s model of how thinkers on the political left and political right use binary cognitive schemas to conceptualize politics in terms of family life helps to make sense of the popularity and political utility of Chick tracts. For both liberals/progressives and conservatives, “the family” operates as a metaphor for particular—and starkly different—conceptions of morality. Christian conservatives rally to a “strict father Christianity” that prioritizes authority and order and that entails punishment for violations of the moral order.³¹ Such a model provides a lens through which to view Chick’s political views as well as his attitude toward alternative, and even diverse Christian, theological paradigms.

On the other hand, strict father Christianity is complicated today by other political and theological currents. The conservative Christian movement increasingly uses compassion as a key theme of its witness on issues that range from abortion to same-sex sexuality.³² In addition, Protestant conservatives increasingly rely upon domestic and international coalitions with Catholics, Mormons, and Muslims to accomplish social and political goals. Chick tracts remind students of religion and politics that a strict and traditional model of morality, authority, and politics remains relevant today and that the model historically is implicated in the repudiation of a wide range of faith traditions. In this way, the tracts may serve not only those who use them to assert conservative Christian orthodoxy, but also those who use them as a window into the orthodox foundations of Christian Right politics.

²⁹ See David Gutterman, *Prophetic Politics: Christian Social Movements and American Democracy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press). For Gutterman, sacred stories “serve as the fundamental narrative, which is invested with meaning as if it were divinely authorized” (p. 31). Emphasis is in the original.

³⁰ On the erosion of belief in Satan, see Andrew Delbanco, *The Death of Satan: How Americans Have Lost the Sense of Evil* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1995).

³¹ George Lakoff, *Moral Politics: What Conservatives Know that Liberals Don’t* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). Lakoff analyzes “two models of Christianity” in Chapter 14. Note: a 2002 edition of this book was published with the subtitle *What Liberals and Conservatives Think*.

³² For a skeptical interpretation of this compassionate discourse, see Carol Johnson, “Narratives of Identity: Denying Empathy in Conservative Discourses on Race, Class, and Sexuality,” *Theory and Society* 34 (2005), pp. 37–61.