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Heresy and Its Uses

A Twentieth-Century Heresiarch and his Evangelical Detractors

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Abstract

The embers of heresy in Christianity were neither snuffed out in antiquity nor in the Middle Ages. The United States of the twentieth century was home to its own champions of theological unorthodoxy; chief among them was Herbert W. Armstrong, whom conservative evangelicals branded as dangerously and even satanically heretical. Despite Armstrong's straying from traditional Protestant orthodoxy, from the 1930s onward, he was able to create a massive publishing and religious "empire," as evangelicals called it. Although Armstrong had a global footprint, the scholarship on American religion is largely silent when it comes to this religious leader. Even less has been written about the tension between evangelicals and Armstrong, their theological opponent. This article brings to light this history of accusations of heresy, examining the rhetoric that surrounded it and how the allegation of theological unorthodoxy fit and fed into an atmosphere of alarm during the Cold War.

Keywords: Heresy, Evangelicalism, Herbert W. Armstrong, Worldwide Church of God, American Christianity

Introduction

Herbert W. Armstrong spoke into a microphone at his recording studio located on the campus of Ambassador College, a university he had founded in 1947 in Pasadena, California. Outside the recording booth, a whole mass of "co-workers" undulated and swirled, pouring their energy into the "work" of God, as Armstrong referred to it (Armstrong, "Melchisedec - but by Every Word of God"). Armstrong's voice, now polished and trained by decades of radio broadcasts and sermons, slipped onto the airwaves; from there, it ricocheted around the world. In this broadcast of *The World Tomorrow*, Armstrong urged that "God is a family!" To

which he added, “And when we’re born of Him, we’ll be like He is. And we’ll be no longer flesh and blood. We’ll be no longer human; we will be divine. We will be very God” (Armstrong, “The Soul That Sinneth Shall . . .”). Armstrong’s promise of deification for all true believers, a pan-deification of the faithful, was a trope of Armstrong’s religious discourse, repeated oft and in diverse formulations. Towards the final third of the Cold War, almost all areas of the globe had fallen under the tenor of his message, possibly millions hearing his voice (Hopkins 1974). Those not reached sonically might also have been touched by Armstrong’s printed word. *The Plain Truth*, one of his organization’s many publications, was a monthly magazine¹ with a circulation in the millions,² primarily because the publication was free. Armstrong, like so many other evangelicals, had shrewdly harnessed technological developments and created textual spaces for the expansion of his message. The millions of souls regularly or accidentally tuning in to *The World Tomorrow* broadcast were treated to an enthralling admixture of commentary on current events, apocalyptic predictions, advice, and musings about the present and future. In this eclectic, meandering, and international radio program, there was always one constant: Armstrong pounded home his Christian message and theological doctrines with the force and dinging repetition of a blacksmith shaping metal. Armstrong’s message of deification had two valences depending on the possible audience. For the curious listener, unmoored in the shifting and changing seas of religious life in twentieth-century America, the message might have been perceived as unspeakably seductive. Who, in the end, would rebuff the divine for the human? Who would reject omnipotence in exchange for the finiteness and limited nature of the human person? Roger R. Chambers, in his book *The Plain Truth About Armstrongism*, first published in 1972, dismissed Armstrong’s promise of apotheosis for his followers as a perennial and naïve desire of human beings: “Men have always wanted to be God” (1988, 9). While for many the notion that one might become God was tantalizing and appealing – the success of Armstrong’s ministry being powerful evidence for such a claim – other Americans experienced this message in an entirely different way. In the judgement of conservative evangelicals who encountered Armstrong’s movement and watched with palpable unease its growth, this and other doctrines were unbiblical, blasphemous, and registered in their minds almost universally as heresy.

By the mid-1970s, conservative evangelicals³ had published a spate of manuscripts of opprobrium against Armstrong and against what they argued were his errant doctrines

¹ The magazine was eventually translated and printed in six languages other than English: Spanish, Italian, German, French, Dutch, and Skandinavisk [sic]. See The Herbert W. Armstrong Searchable Library: <http://www.herbert-armstrong.org/index.html>.

² According to the April 1984 issue of *The Plain Truth*, the magazine’s circulation stood at 6,664,000 (*The Plain Truth*).

³ Evangelicals are a changing and varied group in the United States, diverse in beliefs, religious practices, and political leanings. Evangelicals, nowadays in the twenty-first century, are also racially diverse with more than a third of evangelicals in the United States coming from the African American, Latino, and Asian communities (Kim 2019). Over 700 churches in the United States today, for example, have incorporated mixed martial arts (MMA) into their ministries (Watson and Brock 2015). This clearly complex, shifting, and diverse religious landscape in American evangelicalism is beyond the scope of this historical inquiry; moreover, the questions of definitions have been dealt with at length elsewhere in the scholarship. In this article, the term “evangelical” will be used to describe white, conservative evangelicals for the reason that the works under examination come from

(DeLoach 1971; Hopkins 1974; Benware 1975; Chambers 1988; Martin 2019). These studies are important for two reasons: first, they are an invaluable register of how evangelicals reacted to fellow Christians, though of a visibly different breed; how evangelicals sought to crush heresy; and how they lodged their complaints. Through these writings, we are provided a first-hand account of how some evangelicals were mobilizing to admonish other Christians and drive them out from the Bride of Christ. Second, these works provide scholars, once one has sifted through the copious chaff of theological tit for tat, with new insights and a breadcrumb trail to other secondary sources. Joseph Hopkins' 1974 *The Armstrong Empire*, for example, provides endnotes, a bibliography, financial charts from the Worldwide Church of God, and a map of the United States, which is bespeckled with locations of Armstrong's churches in almost every American state. In short, it is a valuable compendium of different sources, commentaries, and information on Armstrong's work from the time. These works also present the reader with a critical stance beyond mere theological questions. For example, Hopkins touches upon Armstrong's widely diffused belief in British-Israelism (also called Anglo-Israelism), the doctrine that the British, and by descent Americans, but also northern Europeans (Armstrong, "Wake up and Return to Our God!"), were members of the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel and therefore the true Israel, i.e., God's chosen people. Hopkins and Chambers point out the problems this belief created in terms of race (Hopkins 1974; Chambers 1988). Hopkins identifies the "racist tone. . . beneath the surface" of such rhetoric and the ideology of British-Israelism's problematic relation towards Jews (1974, 68). Another contribution from Hopkins is when he points out the glaring inconsistencies between Armstrong's doctrine that the Old Testament law was binding and must be kept by God's elect today, on the one hand, and the realities in practice on the other. "Most of the Israelite civil statutes and the intricate regulations governing priestly garb and duties, as well as animal sacrifice and outmoded Temple rituals," Hopkins writes, "have been dropped" (1974, 135). Hanukkah, celebrated by Jesus, was also discarded by Armstrong (1974, 145). Hence, Hopkins elucidates, the process by which Armstrong revived the Old Testament law in Christian circles, in the twentieth-century United States, was highly selective: some bits were integrated into his synthetic religious worldview, others were unceremoniously dropped by the wayside. Armstrong's theological palate was eclectic, but also uncategorical. Alongside the works already mentioned, we can place the 1975 study of Armstrong by Paul Benware, who was then a professor of theology at Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, and Walter Martin's *The Kingdom of the Cults*, first published in 1965 (2019). Finally, Charles DeLoach, an actual member of the Armstrong movement, who defected and became a born-again evangelical Christian, wrote his own exposé titled *The Armstrong Error* (1971).

The thesis of this article is that the concept of heresy became a tool amongst Armstrong and rival evangelicals that was wielded with powerful effects. The mutual accusations of heresy, between Armstrong and these evangelicals, were not simply a denunciation of a perceived deviation from revealed truth. Instead, the claims of heresy, or error, became a conceptual space in which both the heresiarch, from the evangelical perspective, and his detractors could elaborate certain types of discourse, participate in various forms of rhetoric.

this segment of American evangelicalism. For more detailed histories of American evangelicalism, see (Marsden 1991; Balmer 1999; FitzGerald 2017).

Through accusing one of heresy, and the rhetoric surrounding it, these historical actors also contributed to an atmosphere of alarm that was an essential ingredient in creating the aroma of the Cold War. Through such charges of heresy, Armstrong and his evangelical foes were able to continually redraw the lines around which collective identity could become visible. Alongside these useful characteristics of heresy-hunting, evangelicals' anathemas had an important consequence in that they cordoned off Armstrong and his style of evangelism by firmly and repeatedly presenting the claim that the radio evangelist was unchristian. Some evangelicals' categorization of Armstrongism as heretical, and therefore outside Christianity, had a negative impact on the scholarly literature in that it delegitimized his ministry. This article is not a historical exploration of the theological truth of one rival camp or another, which is the field and work of apologetics; nor is it an inquiry into the origins of Armstrong's beliefs, a species of genealogy of "heresy," a subject covered largely by the evangelical publications against Armstrong. Instead, what is under examination is the rhetoric surrounding the allegations of heretical belief and practice, and the use of these allegations as a means of continually indoctrinating the faithful and as a vehicle for transmitting the idea that the period in which one was living was an age of deception. A forthcoming article shall explore the relation between Armstrong and evangelicals in more depth.

Herbert W. Armstrong – A Brief History

For a figure who is largely unknown, did not have the popular recognition of a Billy Graham, or does not have a notable footprint in the scholarly literature, a brief introduction to Herbert W. Armstrong's life and work will help situate historically this American religious leader. Armstrong hailed from an Iowan Quaker family. His first forays into the world were not in the realm of the spirit but rather, and aptly for his future endeavors, in the secular world of advertising (Lupo 2002).⁴ Armstrong drank in, without reserve, the culture of success that was expanding in the United States during the first part of the twentieth century, as the historian Michael Scott Lupo brings to the fore in his dissertation (2002). Culturally speaking, material success and social status were strongly infused in Armstrong's thinking for the remainder of his life. After ups and downs in the advertising industry, the future religious leader headed west to Oregon to try his fortunes there. Armstrong was exposed, via his wife in 1926, to Sabbatarianism, the belief that the Sabbath should be held on Saturday instead of the almost universal Christian practice of holding the Sabbath on Sunday. After an arduous bout of self-study, according to Armstrong (Armstrong, "Prove What . . ."), attempting to best his wife and her "religious fanaticism" (Armstrong, "We are to be Like God"), he came to the realization that his wife Loma possessed the truth, and he threw himself headlong into Christian life. In a situation of abject poverty, with little prospect of staying afloat in the social and economic whirlpool of the Great Depression, he and his growing family become involved in a Church of God Seventh Day in Eugene, Oregon. After a brief stint as a pastor and after doctrinal conflicts with the local church's ecclesiastical hierarchy (Lupo 2002), Armstrong, with the help and sacrifice of his wife, set out on an enterprising religious ministry of his own, unfettered by hierarchy, unbound by the burdens of traditional Protestant Christianity. His

⁴ In this, Armstrong and conservative evangelicalism were cut from the same cloth because, in twentieth-century American evangelicalism, there was an explicit and unabashed mental union between the act of selling, on the one hand, and the activity of evangelization on the other (West 2021).

first radio appearance was in 1934 (Lupo 2002). *The Plain Truth*, a humble self-published sheet also appearing in February of that year (1934), would eventually become one of the religious magazines with the largest circulation in the United States. Initially named the Radio Church of God, the church later changed its name to the Worldwide Church of God (Chamber 1988).

The next and most important chapter in Armstrong's life took him to California. There, he expanded his radio ministry. In Pasadena, Armstrong founded the first of his college campuses. Ambassador College would be a crucial space for the training of future disciples in the "true values" (*Envoy* 1958, 7), tapping the labor of students for the promulgation of his message who worked in all aspects of the ministry, and signaling to the world through its lush gardens, millionaire mansions, ever-expanding facilities, and the grandiose concert hall that was eventually erected, that Armstrong, a man of God, had arrived.⁵ Success had been achieved. Ambassador College was one of three campuses: the Ambassador campus in St. Albans, England was created in 1960, the campus in Big Sandy, Texas, was founded in 1964 (Hopkins 1974). The rest of Armstrong's career as spokesman of God was marked by considerable expansion of his church's global reach, infighting between the patriarch and his son Garner Ted and other ministers, and a surprising and almost unwavering fidelity to the version of the Gospel that Armstrong had fashioned. There were also, as is often the case with televangelists, moments of scandal, lawsuits, and extravagant uses of wealth: private jets, globe-trotting, visiting world leaders, and Rolls Royces. Many apostates from Armstrong's church denounced him as controlling, abusive, authoritarian (Hopkins 1974; Chambers 1988). Amidst it all, until the very end, he proclaimed that he was an "apostle" and the only one who possessed the "true Gospel" (Armstrong, "Sermon on the Mount - Part 3").

Armstrong arrived at a variety of beliefs at which most Christians would look askance, beyond the deification of true believers through the reproduction of God and his firm stance on Sabbatarianism. Armstrong's religious tenets, which he believed to be biblically derived, are well documented in the literature produced by evangelicals (Hopkins 1974; Benware 1975; Chambers 1988; Martin 2019). At the most basic level, Armstrong's theological anthropology taught that the soul was not immortal but rather material (Armstrong, "Jesus Is the Bread of Life"). If there was no immortal soul, this soul's eternal damnation and torture in hell was, necessarily, problematic. Thus, hell was dispensed with too (Armstrong, "Hades and Gehenna Explained"). Armstrong also rejected the idea of heaven as an actual future place beyond this life (Armstrong, "Not in Heaven"). Against the orthodox Christian teaching on heaven, Armstrong offered his good news of the wonderful "world tomorrow," a post-apocalyptic physical kingdom on earth that would be ruled by Armstrong and his flock. To the Christian Godhead, Armstrong took his scalpel and started cutting and rearranging. The Trinity was rejected (Hopkins 1974). God was, in his religious system, a family and all true believers would "be like God" (Armstrong, "We Are to Be Like God"). While all these positions were scandalous to evangelicals, perhaps Armstrong's most egregious departure from "historical Christianity" ("Why 'Christianity Today'" 1956, 20), as evangelicals sometimes called it, was the fact that he adopted or appropriated, depending on one's viewpoint, Jewish practices and holidays. As mentioned before, the process of weaving back into Christianity various Judaic

⁵ The yearbooks from Ambassador College, titled *Envoy*, are buoyant representations of space as a signal of worldly success. See, for instance, *Envoy* 1953.

religious traditions was selective. Kosher was kept (Hopkins 1974), other Jewish religious practices and holidays that built community and a collective identity were adopted and made binding: the Feast of Tabernacles, for example, yet other Jewish practices were simply ignored. This stance towards the Old Testament, this insistence that the law of God must be maintained for salvation, placed Armstrong in direct opposition to Protestantism's salvation doctrine (*sola gratia*), where salvation was given upon the admission of one's sins and one's wholly sinful nature, as well as the acceptance of Christ, without the aid of human works. In sum, Armstrong's theology constituted a total loss of center, where the logic of the Christian faith and the psychological value of rebirth and salvation no longer held meaning. For this religious leader and his thousands of adherents and his millions more of readers and listeners, the Christian theology and dogma of the past were no longer feasible options for the faith. Here, we catch a glimpse of a far-reaching revolution in Christian thinking.⁶ This underlying notion of the irrelevance of Christian orthodoxy, these dark tidings from the perspective of the conservative Christian faithful, were heralded by Armstrong, who believed himself a Christian. Hence, by the Cold War, after Armstrong's movement had gathered steam, a radical break with the Christian past was emerging, which resonated with many. The schism was not coming from masses of unbelievers influenced by Soviet communism and its avowed atheism, nor by the modern forces of secularism, but was flowering in the ambit of religion itself.

Sources and Methodology

Various evangelical authors during the Cold War were aware of Armstrong, documented his beliefs, and frequently spoke out against him. The scholarly literature on Armstrong, in contrast, offers a far different picture. The purely academic literature, untinged by religious sectarianism, is almost silent on Armstrong and his Worldwide Church of God from the church's beginnings in the 1930s until the religious leader's death in 1986. Many important and excellent studies of American religion and American evangelicalism neither make mention of him nor attempt to situate Armstrong's brand of Christianity in the wider terrain of American religious belief.⁷ Professor of Christianity Brian Stanley's sweeping global study *Christianity in the Twentieth Century* is one example; Armstrong was not made a part of Stanley's history. Where Armstrong might appear – in the section on British-Israelism – Armstrong, one of the most famous exponents of this religious ideology in the United States, is absent (2018, 24–25). Far from being a stain on Stanley's scholarship, this occurrence is perhaps a natural consequence of “the activity of contemplation, *theoria*, intensive *seeing*.” (Park 1983, 382). In order to bring something into focus, other things must pass from view, and

⁶ The evangelicals who wrote against Armstrong and his beliefs would largely disagree with this statement. Many of these works take great pains to inform readers that Armstrong's movement was nothing more than a hodgepodge of previously tried and now defunct forms of heresy, which had first reared their heads in the ancient world. To their eyes, “Armstrongism” was nothing but a resurrection of ancient heretical systems: Gnosticism (Hopkins 1974, 128); legalism of the variety that sprang up among the believers of Galatia (Hopkins 1974, 125–27); “the ancient Ebonite [Ebionite] error” (Chambers 1988, 9).

⁷ Numerous scholarly works, foundational works even, that touch on a variety of subjects—radio ministries, international evangelism, evangelicalism in general, American Christianity, premillennial apocalypticism—subjects where Armstrong naturally might enter the discussion, make no mention of him. The reader is pointed to the following examples: (Diamond 1989, 1995; Balmer 1999; Armstrong 2000; Lahr 2007; Sutton 2014; FitzGerald 2017).

Armstrong has passed by largely undetected. Apart from the various constraints facing scholars—time, financial resources, access, space, interests—there are two additional reasons why this general oversight might have occurred, which stem from the form Armstrong’s various organizations took. First, as Chambers recognizes, Armstrong had a massive global presence through radio, television, and physical churches; despite this, his ideas remained largely unknown (1988). A reason for Armstrong’s lack of acknowledgement could be attributed to the distribution of his ideas via pamphlets and other publications, which were presented to readers and listeners upon request but did not always present his ideas as clearly and explicitly as possible. His magazine, *The Plain Truth*, was spiced with biblical references; its main goal was to engage with the public with an intense focus on current events, as opposed to a direct exposition of doctrine. There was, in many cases, a carefully crafted public message and then there were the weeds of Armstrong’s theology into which one might become lost once one entered more deeply into the fold. Another plausible reason scholars of American religion have largely missed Armstrong is the development of secretive practices in his churches, which placed distance between Armstrong’s elect and the wider world. For instance, Armstrong’s satellite churches met in rented spaces with the understanding that they would soon outgrow a new, physical church. The absence, at times, of physical and identifiable spaces allowed the church to operate in a fog. Armstrong’s ministers were unlisted in phone directories and the general public was discouraged from attending church services until their doctrinal conformity could be properly sussed out (Chambers 1988). These catacombic religious practices were, according to Chambers, relaxed in 1973 (1988). Armstrong’s absence in the academic literature raises an important theoretical question: How could a religious leader who preached to millions for decades, had churches scattered throughout the world, met frequently with heads of state, and founded three university campuses be glossed over with such ease?

Though Armstrong is notably absent from studies about American religion, some studies do exist.⁸ One crucial piece of the historiography comes from Lupo, mentioned previously. In his 2002 dissertation *Advertising the Time of the End*, one of the few lengthy studies of a scholarly nature, Lupo explores Armstrong’s “world tomorrow” in the context of American culture before and during the Cold War. Lupo provides confirmation of the conclusion stated earlier, namely, that conservative evangelicals have largely dominated the understanding of Armstrong and that almost all studies had an intense focus on Armstrong’s perceived heresies. Lupo points out, quite rightly, that there was a tendency in these evangelical monographs to portray Armstrong as a “doctrinally-aberrant religious leader” (2002, 1). One of Lupo’s insights is that his history challenges the narrative put forward by some evangelicals regarding the work of Armstrong. While many conservative evangelical Christians attempted to paint Armstrong as merely a confusing and incorrect religious leader, Lupo disregards the idea that Armstrong was simply bizarre and “misguided” (2002, i). Instead, Lupo shows that Armstrong floated

⁸ Though not relevant to this historical inquiry for various reasons, the reader is pointed to other scholarly studies on Armstrong (Tricia and Thomas 2009; Martin 2018). Armstrong is mentioned in a footnote, in the afterword, of *Mapping the End Times: American Evangelical Geopolitics and Apocalyptic Visions* (Dittmer and Sturm 2010). Armstrong also made it into another footnote (number 33) in an article on the anti-cult movement in the United States (Kaplan 1993, 291).

leisurely on the currents of American life and culture during the twentieth century. Nowhere was this more apparent than Armstrong's thinking about success, which was, according to Lupo, appropriated from the surrounding American culture in the first part of the twentieth century (2002). Far from being a mere theological abnormality, Armstrong's life, work, and message were less a product of mere heresy and more the outgrowth of the times in which he was living. The focus of Lupo's scholarship did not allow for an exploration of the confrontational relationship between Armstrong and conservative evangelicals. The present study, therefore, complements Lupo's findings.

Given that this article deals with Christian heresy, one area of scholarship necessarily elbows its way into the discussion. The scholarly literature on Christian heresies spans vast geographies, cultures, and periods of time. Though this scholarship is usually moving in historical moments other than the twentieth century, it offers insights that are relevant to a discussion of Armstrong's deviation from conservative evangelical orthodoxy and the reaction it produced in some evangelicals. Professor of religious studies Joseph F. Kelly focuses on debates surrounding heretical belief as a causation for identifiable and repeated forms of discourse, social interaction, and anxiety, in his 2012 *History and Heresy*. While Kelly condemns the past violence that often-accompanied denunciations of those who strayed away from the righteous path of orthodox belief, the author views the condemnation of a heresy and a following counter-apologetic or exposition of theological truth as a perfectly legitimate type of religious behavior (2012). In Kelly's exploration of one ancient heresy—Montanism—he identifies clear rhetorical tactics and patterns of action surrounding the ancient second-century controversy in the early Christian Church. Kelly observes that it was the adherents of orthodoxy itself who codified the official knowledge of the heresy in question. The sites and literature of a heresy were at times annihilated. As such, only a partial portrait is what we are left with. The orthodox believers of old were also those who had the power of naming and creating the terminology through which an intellectual or religious movement was identified. The proponents of accepted orthodox belief also raised serious doubts about the legitimacy of unorthodox prophecy, thereby undermining the very authoritative foundation from which some heresies spring to life. One additional aspect that Kelly identifies is that, surrounding heretical movements and their impassioned denunciations, one often encounters the use of slander or an emphasis on scandal as instruments of delegitimization (2012). Another study that can be used to add depth to the understanding of heresy in its previous historical iterations is Silvia Federici's *Caliban and the Witch*. Set in the European Middle Ages, Federici's work shows that, while heretical movements existed, in the sense that they were deviations from traditional and institutionally accepted belief, beneath these unorthodox creeds swirled copious and powerful social critiques. Thus, in medieval Europe, the suppression of a given heresy was not only a matter of religion but became a clear project of maintaining intact certain socio-economic relations, certain protected provinces of social privilege, and was imbued with a desire to maintain or transform social relations between men and women (Federici 2009). The American historian Henry Charles Lea in his 1906 history of the inquisition similarly observes that the heresies of the Middle Ages "were no longer, as of old, mere speculative subtleties propounded by learned theologians and prelates in the gradual evolution of Christian doctrine" (1906, 60). Two patterns, according to Lea, emerged in these medieval heretical movements: some were antisacerdotal, directed at the clergy, its power, its corruption, its

wealth; and others were Manichaeian in their leanings, thoughts, and actions, spurning the flesh and the material in favor of the spiritual. Both forms of heresy were being mobilized against the feudal system and its abuses and excesses (Lea 1906).

In this exploration of what evangelicals interpreted as a twentieth-century heresy, and the reaction to it, two sets of primary sources have been used. The first set of primary sources have been limited to the radio programs and sermons of Armstrong. This in no way constitutes the bulk of Armstrong's evangelistic work, given that Armstrong, his adherents, and his various organizations produced a staggering number of magazines, pamphlets, books, radio programs, calendars, sermons, and other related materials. Despite the exclusion of some sources, the radio programs and sermons examined offer a faithful representation of Armstrong's message, his beliefs, his rhetorical style, and his estimation of how his church fit into the larger religious mosaic of the United States. These primary sources have been taken from the digital repository Herbert W. Armstrong Library (HWA Library).⁹ The digital library presents problems from the perspective of academic precision and detail. Dates, for example, are not always provided; when they are provided for audiovisual sources, there is no way to authenticate them. The radio addresses and vast print resources, while astoundingly complete, are, in the end, the ones provided. One cannot judge what gatekeeping methods have been used, what has been archived, and what has, for whatever reason, been left out. The second type of literature that will be used are secondary sources on Armstrong himself, five studies that were written by evangelical Christians. What in certain instances serve as secondary sources, here will be analyzed from a different vantage point and used as primary sources, as historical textual evidence of how perceived heresy was identified, denounced, and the historical uses of the conceptual idea of being heretical.

The findings of this article contribute to the already vast scholarship on American religion in two ways. First, the exploration of how conservative evangelicals dealt with Armstrong's straying from their theological doctrines adds an additional layer of understanding regarding how evangelicals were operating in the twentieth century. There has been much ado about the theological conflicts between liberal Protestants and conservative evangelicals in the twentieth century (Sutton 2014; FitzGerald 2017; Stanley 2018). Far less has been said about how evangelicals engaged with those who dwelled beyond the horizon of traditional belief or, to put it differently, how they attempted to slice off certain members from the body of Christ. The evangelical movement, such a powerful force in American society and politics, has been widely studied; conservative evangelicals' heresy-hunting has not. Second, this article casts light on a man and his evangelistic enterprise, who has largely remained a blurred figure in the landscape of American religion, recovers him from the margins, and places him back in the midst of American religious life.

The Rhetorical Framework of Heresy and its Hunting

The complexion of Armstrong's Christianity naturally struck evangelical champions of orthodoxy as a heretical divergence. Contemporaneous and parallel to Armstrong's growing ministry was the conservative evangelical movement. In the 1930s, Christian fundamentalists were mobilizing and organizing, especially against President Franklin D. Roosevelt, whom they

⁹ Herbert W. Armstrong Library: <https://www.hwalibrary.com/>.

labelled the antichrist, and the president's New Deal (Sutton 2012). In the 1940s, important parachurch organizations of conservative Protestant Christianity were put in place such as the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), and the famous evangelist Billy Graham, affectionately dubbed "America's Pastor" (Wacker 2014), had already begun his career as an evangelist. In the 1950s, as the Civil Rights Movement began to break up the long night of racial segregation and systemic oppression of African Americans and other racial minorities, many conservative evangelicals challenged and attempted to undermine this movement (Dupont 2013; Jones 2020). These efforts and this activism, along with an ever-more robust communications apparatus in the form of radio, the printed word, and later television, meant that when the 1960s came into view, conservative evangelicals were an established, formidable, and expanding religious phenomenon (Schäfer 2013).

A useful starting point for an inquiry into the twentieth-century heretical controversy between evangelicals and Armstrong is the rhetorical framework in which charges of heresy were levelled. A crucial beam in this rhetorical framework was the act of naming. On its face attaching a name or series of terms to a complex and decades-long religious enterprise might appear straightforward or mere rhetorical flair. Far from being insignificant, the process of naming was highly important in the identification, condemnation, and possible eradication of perceived religious heresies. In many historical instances, the naming of a heresy was the privilege of theological opponents and of the victor in theological struggles (Kelly 2012). Names and terms have the function of supplying the mind with a category of thought into which a given phenomenon might be placed and become fixed. Regarding Armstrong, the names and terminology fashioned to describe him, his beliefs, and his disciples in the Worldwide Church of God served, on the one hand, to delineate the acceptable bounds of Christianity and, on the other, were also ways in which the smudge of difference could mark the flesh of the supposed unbeliever. The terminology created was not, however, only an innocent means of spatial orientation. That which was outside the delineating lines of Christianity was also perceived and presented as a form of transgression. Boundaries and their maintenance, crucial conceptual factors for making sense of the world (Douglas 2005), were not only felt but were solidified rhetorically. With Armstrong, this ancient practice of creating distance through names was avidly continued by twentieth-century evangelicals who saw themselves as zealous defenders of Christian orthodoxy. In the context of an expanding evangelicalism in the United States and Armstrong's widening movement, evangelical texts of denunciation did not simply present Armstrong as an alternative form of Christian belief and practice. Nor was this a denomination like any other. Evangelicals labelled the Armstrong phenomenon as an "ism." The most easily identifiable heretical category presented in the evangelical literature on this figure was "Armstrongism" (Hopkins 1874; Benware 1977; Rogers 1988; Martin 1965). Because a new "ism" had been born, naturally, a corresponding term was created for a member of this form of religion, which was, to evangelicals' minds, beyond the frontiers of Christianity: an "Armstrongite" (Benware 1977, 2). Through such terminology, these particular evangelicals clearly conveyed their conviction that Armstrong was anything but a messenger of the Gospel of Christ. Likewise, Armstrong's followers were not walking in the footsteps of the Lord; instead, there were followers of a mortal man.

With Paul N. Benware's 1977 study *Ambassadors of Armstrongism*, this designation would be innocent enough if it were not for what confronts the reader in the opening pages. In the

second paragraph, the reader is informed that “Orthodox Christianity is being confronted with an intensification in the propagation of erroneous doctrines” (Benware 1977, 1). Chief among these propagandists of error was Armstrongism, “one of the fastest growing cults in the world” (Benware 1977, 1). Added to this portrait of dangerous theological deviation and a cultlike religious movement was the notion that Armstrongism had “opened an attack” on true, biblical Christianity (Benware 1997, 1). Here, Benware was engaging in a type of metaphor that was and is widespread in American culture, politics, and evangelicalism: that of war and violence (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Quite effectively, evangelical detractors of Armstrong constructed a tension in people’s mind in which a “cult,” with all its inherently negative connotations, was waging a war against the true Church itself. In such rhetoric, the discussion had moved far away from a debate of doctrinal differences. Just as Armstrong’s evangelism was framed as an attack, so too was the evangelical response couched in such terms. The Cold War evangelical manuscripts presenting and denouncing Armstrong’s theological divergence are intertextual: they cite each other. In *The Armstrong Empire*, Hopkins cites Roger R. Chambers’ *The Plain Truth About Armstrongism*. Hopkins describes his fellow evangelical’s literary work as an “attack” (Hopkins 1974, 220). Amidst what evangelicals perceived or mentally construed as a battle, Chambers lays out quite plainly to the reader his intentions. Chambers examines one doctrine: Armstrong’s British-Israelism, which elevates the United States and the British Commonwealth to the chosen status of Israel. If this doctrine is false, Chambers asserts, “Armstrongism is destroyed” (1988, 12). While it may be expected in such theological debates, which since antiquity have roused and directed human passion, to find these forms of rhetoric, the fact remains that it offers scholars of religion in the United States one additional layer of understanding. Conservative evangelicals in the United States were not looking to engage in a benign form of “cultural custodianship,” as the scholar James A. Patterson suggested (2006, 811–12). Destruction is not usually part of the social praxis of the custodian. Nor was it simply theological disagreement and debate. Attacks and destruction are not the usual characteristics of open debate – instead, the game had become one of life or death, destroying or being destroyed, or so these utterances would have us believe. By using such forms of speech, Evangelicals were participating in and contributing to a rhetoric that was widespread in the United States. To be fair, Armstrong’s evangelical inquisitors do not couch every critique in the verbiage of war and violence. They also presented their claims, throughout these books, in a straightforward and matter-of-fact-way. One can safely conclude that these monographs were an admixture of measured critique and chock-full with a rhetoric of danger, deviation, war, and undoing.

Alongside this naming was other descriptive terminology used to identify, in a sweep, Armstrong’s movement. One illustrative example is “empire,” which was included in the title of Joseph Hopkins’ 1974 study. The term “Armstrong empire” was also used by Benware (1975, v). This term is, in the first instance and most obviously, a *conceptismo* of the immense size and startling reach of the Worldwide Church of God. Armstrong’s physical and radio church were large both in the number of actual members, geographies covered, but also in terms of fellow travelers, the occasional readers and listeners that made up Armstrong’s audience. Tagging Armstrong’s evangelistic work as an empire was an invocation of bigness. Yet, the term must also be read from the vantage point of the transgression that evangelicals clearly felt Armstrong and his church represented. The term empire must be nestled alongside

the ideas put forward by evangelicals of attack and cult. Thus, these evangelicals used the term to conjure up a notion of a gigantic and global, but also dangerous and iron-willed, march of legions. Empires destroy just as much as they create, and these authors deployed such a term so as to invoke the notion of unacceptable and dangerous otherness in the minds of readers.

In the shifting frontiers of American Christianity, with its myriad denominations, groups, and personalities, the rhetoric of heresy cut both ways. Though Armstrong was worlds away in terms of belief, in the competitive field of Christian religion, his rhetoric bore a striking and not insignificant symmetry to his evangelical counterparts. The twentieth-century religious leader also utilized his communication platforms to bathe other Christians in a less than flattering light. Indeed, it may be safely argued that his species of Christianity was crafted with a constant eye to what evangelicals were doing in terms of practice and belief. Catholicism was obliquely mentioned from time to time, but the bulk of Armstrong's condemnations in his radio addresses targeted conservative Protestants, which indicates that the contours of the Worldwide Church of God's collective identity were chiseled vis-à-vis evangelical orthodoxy. The alleged heresies of evangelicals threw Armstrong's religion into relief. Just as evangelicals zealously attempted to delegitimize Armstrong, connect him with the ideas of error, falsehood, danger, and "confusion" (Rohrer 1970, 3), so too did Armstrong seek to undermine evangelicalism. While evangelicals wrote of attacks and cults, Armstrong believed other Christians, and there is every reason to believe he was thinking about evangelicals, were "dumb," "stupid," and "ignorant" (Armstrong "The Seventh Day"). In a radio broadcast titled "The Seventh Day," Armstrong sculpted a biting rhetorical frieze: "Some people will say today that Christianity is not a way of life, it's just a matter of professing or confessing or making a decision for Christ or something like that, of exalting Christ" (Armstrong "The Seventh Day"). Here, Armstrong described and subsequently dismissed as false the moment of spiritual rebirth in Christ, and he did so in undeniable "evangelicalese," to use author Amanda Montell's term (2021, 42). From the phrasing of this statement, it can be gathered that Armstrong had evangelicals firmly in mind. It also becomes clear that he had been thoroughly exposed to conservative evangelical Christianity. He was so well versed in it, could employ with such ease its verbiage, that he could use it to negatively derive his own religious outlook. After clearly summoning before the minds of listeners whom he was talking about, Armstrong proceeded to inform his audience what these other Christians were:

We're like even the professing Christians mostly, they're like a lot of dumb; and I mean mentally dumb, ignorant. I don't mean dumb of speech, I mean dumb of comprehension. The way we use the word in perhaps a slang expression today, stupid. That's a fact. Let's look down into our own minds and hearts and recognize it my friends, it's true (Armstrong "The Seventh Day").

Armstrong and his followers were in danger of becoming like this "lot of dumb, stupid, lost sheep that have lost their way" (Armstrong "The Seventh Day," n.d.). Deviation from true belief was the pretense, but the game quickly degenerated into open disparagement. The essential difference was that evangelicals could name. Armstrong, at least publicly in the context of mass radio evangelism, was in a weaker position and attempted to not single out certain evangelical sects or leaders overtly, and thereby he avoided potentially alienating his audience. Judiciously crafted allusion, then, was his public mode of denunciation. Generalized

Protestant Christianity was his target. The leader of the Worldwide Church of God first sketched an outline of the opposing form of Christianity for his audience and then undermined it.

In 1979, in one of the rare occasions that Armstrong provides specifics on his radio program, he fingered fundamentalists as agents of deception and as promoters of a false form of Christianity. These Christians believed in the facts but then so did the devil, Armstrong reasoned. “But just believing something in an empty faith and believing in a fact, my friends, will not save anyone,” Armstrong informed (Armstrong 1979b). In Armstrong’s theology, the evangelical formula of salvation was bankrupt, something more was needed. There was a tangible difference between Armstrong’s rhetoric designed for mass consumption and the rhetoric that was deployed in sermons and meant to nourish the faithful. How heresy was identified and denounced differed, with Armstrong, in the public and private spheres. In sermons, his faithful were treated to names, specifics, and tangible figures. One illustrative example comes from a recording (two hours and fifteen minutes long) of a sermon from February 1981. Armstrong admonished the faithful that “Jesus came and preached the gospel of the Kingdom of God. Jesus didn’t say, ‘Please accept Me as your Savior.’ He didn’t come on a soul-saving crusade. Maybe Billy Graham thinks He did, but He didn’t” (Armstrong 1981). To his audience of the already converted, in the safety of the closed doors of the church, Armstrong felt comfortable and empowered enough to denounce what he considered a heretical and vapid form of Christianity: mere acceptance of Christ as Savior. Whereas, Armstrong believed, Jesus had come to preach the Kingdom of God, an actual physical reign on earth that would take place in the future. Armstrong, in his well-hewn eclecticism, had appropriated and integrated into his religious scheme premillennial apocalypticism, a stalwart belief of American evangelicalism and Christian fundamentalism (Noll 1994; Lahr, 2007), though he transparently redeployed this form of eschatology towards other theological ends. But in this slice of life between Armstrong and his congregation, a moment of intimacy that this primary source provides, the heresiarch, as evangelicals saw it, did not just criticize evangelicalism’s most important figure—Graham—and his mode of evangelism—the crusade—Armstrong named names. In the same sermon, in the face of a growing Pentecostalism, Armstrong also spewed forth his proscription against this charismatic form of Christianity. The heresy of the Pentecostals, to Armstrong’s mind, was that they neither followed the teachings about the Kingdom of God nor upheld the Old Testament law. Moreover, Armstrong condemned, they were drunkards, spiritually “drunk” in their charismatic and emotion-laden rituals (Armstrong 1981). They were, Armstrong preached in another sermon in 1983, “on a sort of emotional jag, or drunk” (Armstrong 1983). The fundamentalist leader Jerry Falwell, in the privacy of the Worldwide Church of God, was also singled out and denounced in this sermon (Armstrong 1983).

That, in the early 1980s, Armstrong named and dismissed Graham, Falwell, and Pentecostals was neither accidental nor insignificant. Graham, already by the early 1960s, had established himself as one of the most influential evangelists, captivating audiences in the United States and across the world. C. Ralston Smith, a minister from Oklahoma writing in *Christianity Today* in 1961, reported that Graham had preached to an estimated 30 million people and that, because of Graham’s evangelistic work, some 900,000 individuals had turned their lives to the Christian Savior (Smith 1961, 4). While the accuracy of these numbers is

perhaps open to question, what is undeniable was Graham's public presence—through radio, crusades, magazine, meetings with elected officials—and his appeal. Falwell, too, was becoming a powerful force in American life. Falwell, had made a name for himself through his radio and television program *The Old-Time Gospel Hour*, founded Liberty University in 1971, and directly intervened and reshaped American politics through his organization the Moral Majority, founded in 1979. Just as with Graham and Falwell, Pentecostalism and the Charismatic Movement, with its renewed focus on the Holy Ghost and the gifts of the Spirit, spread rapidly in the United States from the 1960s to the 1990s (Stanley 2018). From its appearance in the United States, this form of Christian belief and practice would be exported to the far corners of the world. Thus, on the one hand, Armstrong engaged with the most prominent features of religious life in the United States at the time. He and his congregation were naturally aware of these phenomena. On the other hand, for Armstrong's project, these were growing and budding elements of American religion, and as such, were perceived as a creeping danger. From Armstrong's theological perspective, both evangelists and the Pentecostal movement were heretical. At the same time, these modes of American Christianity were formidable forms of competition. Armstrong identified these competitors, denounced them, and attempted to delegitimize them in the minds of his congregants. It can therefore be concluded that the heresy of others, from Armstrong's religious milieu, was not only a point of egregious theological deviation but that it was a tool in a highly competitive struggle for the social reproduction of one's type of religious life. The identification and condemnation of the heresy of others was a means of policing the belief and movements of the faithful, establishing a safe distance between the congregation and powerful currents in American religion.

The interpretation that heresy was also a mechanism for continually regulating one's flock gains currency when one considers the historical reality of religion in the United States. The landscape of American religion, scholars agree, because of the disestablishment of the church and the separation of church and state, was and is characterized by a competitive environment to win souls and expand (Noll 1994; Casalini 2007). Churches in the United States have been left to their own devices and, in order to survive, must appeal directly to the faithful, as they could not look to the state as an overt source of support. Given this historical reality, the apologetics found in these works were, in the first place, a theological activity focused on defending what was believed to be true Christian doctrine. In the second place, it was a much-needed tool for keeping the faithful in the pews. This was abundantly clear with Armstrong. In the competitive and changing environment of American religion, conversion was not the only event in the life of the believer; the religious journey was also punctuated, on occasion, by inculcations of orthodoxy. Looked at from this perspective, evangelicals too used the expanding publishing arm of their movement to discipline readers and remind them of true belief.

Sins of Deception

The heresiarch and conservative evangelicals were locked in a continual game of identification of false belief and its rotund condemnation. The rhetorical tricks employed were naming, so as to place the other outside the bounds of true Christianity, militarized

terminology, and accusations that the other posed a danger.¹⁰ Heresy was neither mere theological debate, nor was the discourse confined to mere theological truths. In the age of the Cold War, with its myriad of dangers and endless sirens of alarm, goading populations up mountains of hysteria, conservative white evangelicals issued endless proclamations of social crisis, societal collapse, a veritable and perhaps permanent setting of the sun on the West. The watchwords of the hour in *Christianity Today*, conservative evangelicalism's premier intellectual publication, were "crisis" (Henry 1960, 3) and "decline" (Kirk 1960, 5). Meshing perfectly with these rhetorically manufactured mirages of decline, which touched everything from morals to culture, was a new sort of enemy: cults and irreligion. The perceived threat of irreligion stemmed from a variety of different phenomena in the United States during the Cold War, particularly the godless ideology of Soviet-style communism and a perception that secular forces in the United States were gaining power. Already in 1960, in *Christianity Today*, the threat of cults was being presented to the readership. Harold Lindsell, the then professor of missions at Fuller Theological Seminary, wondered if cults might not be "outpacing our churches" (1960, 3). Two years later, an editorial in the magazine, whose title confronts readers with the harrowing possibility of a "post-Christian era," offered more of the same. "The wavering phalanx of Protestantism has been beleaguered by the astounding growth of the so-called religious 'sects,'" the editorial reads, "Our country has itself made room for over 200 of these aberrant denominations" ("Hope in a 'Post-Christian' Era" 1962, 20). "Irreligion," other evangelicals wrote in the magazine, was sweeping the land ("Life for a Wayward Society" 1964; Marcel 1964). *Christianity Today* did not exist and thrive in a compartmentalized world of its own; Hopkins, the author of *The Armstrong Empire*, also wrote for and read the magazine (1971; 1986). To the minds of some conservative evangelicals, the age of the Cold War was a space of growing dangers and transgressed boundaries, where new and ominous forces were gathering on the horizon and contained within them the polluted Geist that surely would bring about the destruction of American life.

It was in such a historical landscape and common apprehension of the world that evangelicals viewed the man whom they saw as the heretic from Iowa. Armstrong was made a part of this world of decline, which evangelicals perceived but also crafted through their written discourse. Chambers, having been moved by this same sentiment about the state of American society and culture, opened his book on Armstrong with the line "the spiritual vacuum of the twentieth century is the inevitable womb of a durable cultism" (Chambers 1988, 7). To Chamber's mind, the United States was indeed experiencing a moment of decay and decline. And connected to this moment were phenomena like Armstrong's version of

¹⁰ A brief diachronic analysis, a stepping back in time, will serve to somewhat deflate this observation and will show that to a large degree, when heresy was involved, attention was heightened and tongues were sharpened, and, therefore, that these evangelical forms of speech were very much in keeping with historical precedent. While many historical examples can surely be summoned, the Venerable Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* provides an illustrative example. Bede, in his history, turns to the Arian heresy and its entrance into the island of Britain, and he does so in emotionally charged and biological terms. He wrote that Arianism was an "insanity" [*vesania*], "infecting the whole world" [*quae corrupto orbe toto*], as a "disease" [*pestilentia*], and as a "venom" [*virus*] (Bede 1930, 44–45). The point is that when it comes to heresy, the tone and urgency of such forms of speech, whether it be evangelicals in the twentieth century or a monk in the eighth century, changed little. What Bede had done by promiscuously taking from the experience of the body and applying to the realm of theology, evangelicals achieved by other means (militarism and warnings of societal collapse).

Christianity. Those evangelicals who were attuned to the activities of Armstrong charged him with falsehood and error. An illustrative example comes from the endorsement of DeLoach's book *The Armstrong Error*. Herbert Vander Lugt, the Research Editor of Radio Bible Class in Michigan, praised the work and warned that many were being "deluded by a cult which is a masterpiece of Satanic deceit" (Lugt, quoted in DeLoach 1971). Because such satanic forces were being unleashed upon the earth, Lugt urged that "every evangelical Christian" needed to read this book. The audience, to Lugt's mind, was American evangelicals, who were in danger of falling prey to Armstrong's alleged falsehood. Armstrong, quite clearly in Lugt's assessment, not only deceived but was in league with the devil. The charge of both Chambers and Lugt reveal much more than mere opposition to Armstrong and his movement. Both these evangelicals attempted to further the idea that Armstrong was willfully and dangerously deceitful. Indeed, falsehood and error are the *leitmotifs* of these works.

Armstrong was highly aware of the accusations against him, of the mobilization of other Christians determined to undermine him and his message. The words of these evangelicals stung him, and he spoke out to the world of his hurt. What emerged between Armstrong and these evangelicals was a type of truncated and stilted dialogue, neither direct, nor concrete, nor sustained in time. It was almost as if human communication was breaking down. Here and there Armstrong would mention his naysayers on his radio program, acknowledging them and addressing them in the emptiness of the radio airwaves. "A lot of people will tell you that I'm a false prophet," he told his listeners in one broadcast (Armstrong, "The One True Church"). The criticisms and accusations of heresy against him were all reduced and made part of a logic of persecution and victimhood. In one broadcast of *The World Tomorrow*, Armstrong gave his take on those who schemed to undo both him and the work of God: "Now, I have had other enemies because in the work that God has called me to, and set me in, I have had to suffer a great deal of opposition and persecution of all kinds. If I hadn't, I couldn't be the servant of God" (Armstrong 1979a). Persecution was converted, in this particular religious cosmos, into a sign of the truth of one's ideas and values. Outside opposition to his movement was transformed into a form of legitimization. Though Armstrong did not address them by name, though he did not speak to them directly (at least in the sources that were analyzed), and though his ripostes were occasional, Armstrong was not impervious to evangelical barbs; they would occasionally sink beneath the unorthodox evangelist's armor and wound him. There appears to have never been a direct dialogue between these evangelicals and Armstrong (Hopkins did conduct an interview with Armstrong's son Garner Ted) (Hopkins 1974). In lieu of interfaith dialogue, it seems, both sides were content to remain in their own habitats and from time to time to send abroad their detractions and accusations of heretical doctrines.

Though Armstrong was perturbed by the criticisms against him and although he crafted such critiques into an elaborate theater of victimhood, he himself was not above hurling the same allegations at evangelicals. Armstrong, too, was a mastermind at fashioning and presenting a perception of the world in which the average person was being, at every turn, maliciously deceived. The world was moving, in Armstrong's words, in an "age of deception." In a radio broadcast on the "purpose of the Christian life" (date not given), he informed the listening audience:

Well, in the first place my friends, you're wrong. You've been deceived, you're in an age of deception. Sure you're honest. Sure you believe it. Of course you

do. You believe what's been stuffed in your mind. You believe what you've always heard. You believe what other people believe because you're all like sheep and you go right along with the crowd (Armstrong, "The Purpose of the Christian Life").

In short, choppy, and easily digestible phrases, infused with a casual and familiar chumminess, the religious leader moved beyond the anonymity and impersonal nature of a radio audience, establishing a "community" of "friends" into which he inserted firmly and repeatedly the listener by clever use of the second person singular. It was not someone in abstracted form that Armstrong was talking to; rather, it was you, an individual. Then Armstrong constructed for this community of friends the reality of deception of which evangelicals, to this religious leader's mind, were an integral part. The words Armstrong spoke did more: they reached into the minds of those tuning in and deposited beliefs, instructed listeners in what they thought, and performed the act of thinking for them. "You believe," Armstrong repeated three times, driving home his message. No time was given to the listeners to reflect upon whether they did in fact believe this. The sonic moment was brought into perfection by the use of negative accusations of blindly following the masses, something which many would instinctively want to disassociate themselves with.

Evangelicals and Armstrong contributed continually and artfully to the atmosphere of decline that was part of the Cold War and of which a theological opponent could be made a part. The background was cataclysm, decline, crisis, and deception; in the foreground, one could sketch theological opponents. But even here, in such formulations, it is apparent that what was happening was not simple theological discordance. The back-and-forth allegations of deception are significant for the reason that evangelicals and Armstrong added to a growing atmosphere of alarm in American society during the Cold War. The Cold War was a moment of tension on the geopolitical plain and on the existential level in the face of atomic destruction. Other social changes such as the Civil Rights Movement and the student movement challenged the understanding that many had of their nation. But the era was also a moment in which tension was not only felt but created in the domestic sphere. The tension of the Cold War spilled over, far beyond the political space, into the internecine strife in the Body of Christ. The Cold War has been described as a religious war, and quite rightly (Inboden 2008; Wallace 2013). However, one important component has been left out of this analysis. The Cold War era was a moment of international and domestic conflicts in various forms. But on the domestic front, one contributing factor to making the Cold War was the creation and circulation of a notion that all around one there were creeping agents of deception, all around God's elect were agents of falsehood. These evangelicals and Armstrong continually spread messages that one was endlessly being deceived, and the consequence of these repeated messages was an undermining or at least cracking open of one's *fundus rerum* (Augustine 2014, 12),¹¹ one's foundation of reality.

One final consideration is the question of how evangelicals' reactions to Armstrong fit into the mosaic-in-motion that was American religion during the Cold War. The opposition of born-again Christians to Armstrong was not unique per se. The evangelical sources

¹¹ Augustine's original, in the *Confessions*, reads: "usque ad fundum rerum" (2014, 12).

examined here took considerable pains to point out, for instance, that Armstrong held beliefs that overlapped with Mormonism and Jehovah's Witnesses (Hopkins 1974; Chambers 1988), though no evidence was ever mobilized to show an explicit connection between Armstrong and these two religious communities. The point is that in making such connections, these evangelicals were delegitimizing Armstrong's belief system, saying it was nothing more than a distorted copy of some contemporary religious movement or merely a reiteration of an ancient heretical system. Walter Martin's *The Kingdom of the Cults* is a useful source for placing the opposition explored in this article in the context of wider tensions between conservative American evangelicalism and other religious movements. Martin wrote in 1965:

The Christian Church in this atomic age is faced with the highly 'fissionable' problem of accelerated cult activities both in the continental United States and on every major mission field throughout the world. Today, as never before, the danger of a 'Cult-Bomb' detonating in the Christian world grows ominously closer as the Church delays unified action against the looming specter of insidious cultism (Martin, quoted in Martin 2019, 11).

Martin, here, drew dramatically from the times in which he was living to discuss the question of religious experience in the twentieth century. The boundaries between atomic apocalypse and different religious movements were being cleverly smeared, leaving the reader with a *sfumato* mental image where the confines between cults and atomic weapons technology were no longer visible. It wasn't that they were equated but rather that the two phenomena, in his mind, had the same destructive potential. A cult, which was a "danger" and "threat" (Martin, quoted in Martin 2019, 11), had become almost synonymous and interchangeable with the concept of heresy itself. What is intriguing about Martin's massive study, one that was updated over the years, was the use of the term "cult" itself. Cult, as the title of his book suggests, became an umbrella term for a variety of religious experiences. The chapter on Armstrong was placed alongside movements connected with Christianity like Mormonism, Christian Science and Jehovah's Witnesses. But also included in Martin's study were other religions such as "Eastern Religions," Islam, and Buddhism. And new religious movements like Scientology formed another category. Cult had clearly acquired in Martin's hands a convenient elasticity. All things that Martin, a Baptist minister and believer in biblical inerrancy (Martin 2019, 14), understood as "rivals of historic Christianity" (Martin 2019, 575) he slid into this category. The term cult, in Martin's usage had also ceased to denote a "relatively small group of people"¹² engaging in what some deemed were bizarre or deviant practices. The term was now being applied to mass and global religious movements or religions. Armstrong's church clearly had these features of size and geographical reach, and Martin identified his movement, placed it alongside other forms of Christianity, new religious movements, and other historical religions, and all of these could be collapsed into the concept of cult. All of them, to Martin's mind, were full of "false doctrines" and potentially "evil" (Martin 2019, 19). Thus, it is important to make clear, Armstrong was not singled out as the exclusive target of this evangelical's ire. Nor was Martin's treatment of Armstrong essentially different from the identification and denunciation of other alleged heresies and cults. The chapters in Martin's book proceed in a general presentation of "heretical doctrines" (Martin 2019, 441), followed by a refutation of

¹² *Oxford English Dictionary*, OED online, s.v. "cult, b," 2021.

those doctrines. This was the case for both Armstrong and for other so-called cults. To a certain degree, then, the phenomenon of Armstrongism and its multiple denunciations by evangelicals can be situated in the growing anti-cult movement, a game of “cult/counter-cult,” in the United States beginning in the 1960s (Kaplan 1993).

Conclusion

Certain conclusions about the history of twentieth-century American evangelicalism in the United States can be gathered from this exploration of some aspects of this combative relationship between evangelicals and Armstrong. In the first place, conservative evangelicals did not view only liberal Protestants as their theological opponents. The liberal-conservative, or modernist controversy, was a part of evangelicalism’s development (Henry 1946). This has been well documented by scholars. Yet, other controversies swirled, and these turbulences have gone largely unrecorded. In the second place, American evangelicalism expanded through the positive and Christ-affirming message of their interpretation of the Christian Gospel after World War II. Alongside this spreading of their version of the Gospel, conservative evangelicalism expanded, published, and constantly readjusted the boundaries of collective Christian identity through negativity, through this antithetical relation to Armstrong (and to other religious movements or historical religions). Third, evangelicals in their anathemas and denunciations were largely successful in delegitimizing “Armstrongism” as a valid form of Christianity; their words cast him if not into oblivion than at least into a forgotten limbo. The consequence of their exile of Armstrong from the body of the elect is that scholars have been left in a haze of unknowing. It would be entirely historically inaccurate to lay all the blame on evangelicals for what constitutes a large lacuna in the historiography of American religion. That said, at least an iota of responsibility can safely be placed at the feet of evangelicals; conservative evangelicals were Armstrong’s earliest interpreters, and these interpretations produced a species of *damnatio memoriae*. Lastly, the crusade against the Armstrongites of the twentieth century can be viewed, ultimately, as successful in light of what happened after Armstrong’s death. The Worldwide Church of God, the fruit of Armstrong and so many others’ labors, splintered.¹³ This fragmentation occurred, of course, for various reasons. But from the standpoint of the champions of evangelical orthodoxy this delightful fact, this fall of an empire, can be counted as a great achievement. Beyond the church’s fracture, a large contingent of Armstrong’s followers abandoned the “heresies” of their spiritual father and were pulled into the embrace of mainstream evangelicalism. The prodigal return of the remnants of Armstrong’s worldwide movement was sealed through the acceptance of the main splinter group – Grace Communion International – into the National Evangelical Association (NEA) in 1997 (Martin 2019). Though obstinate heretics remained, from the standpoint of adherents to conservative evangelicalism, “heresy” was “destroyed,” to use Chambers’ telling verbiage, and the evangelical body of Christ was expanded. Declaring others heretics and using this conceptual tool, along with all the ideas that accompany it, we learn, pay dividends.

¹³ Chambers reports, for example, that after a sex scandal involving Armstrong’s son, Garner Ted Armstrong, 5,000 members abandoned the Worldwide Church of God in 1972, along with some 40 ministers (Chambers 1988). Martin, too, mentions some “fifty splinter groups” that broke away from Armstrong’s church during the leader’s life, see Martin 2019, 414. See also Benware 1975.

This contemporary tale of belief and deviance, along with the attempts to squelch differing theological approaches to God, also brings greater audibility to who Armstrong was and to his message. While a great deal remains to be said about Armstrong, one concrete and vital conclusion can be extracted from this present inquiry: conservative evangelicals and Armstrong differed vastly in terms of doctrine, beliefs, and socio-religious practices. This is glaringly apparent, and we are, by both sides, reminded of it constantly. While in terms of doctrine there was seemingly insurmountable difference, in terms of what these two religious movements were doing, there was a visible and continual similarity. Conservative evangelicals and this modern heretic (from the evangelical perspective) were operating very much in the same way, moving along the same lines, dancing to the same rhythms. Their style of rhetoric enjoyed an admirable symmetry; it was a finished product from the same workshop. That Armstrong “detected and damned” a heresy (Bede 1930, 44),¹⁴ and to his mind evangelicals were clearly heretics, in the end, brought Armstrong and evangelicals in ever closer proximity. In the realm of heresy, its pursuit, and its denunciation, what emerged was less irreconcilable difference and more a telling identity.

Finally, a word can be said about how heresy itself has changed and how, in the contemporary world, heterodox belief was deployed towards highly different ends. Armstrong’s alleged heresy in this specific case in the United States during the twentieth century¹⁵ differed vastly from the constantly emerging heresies of the Middle Ages in Europe. In these past iterations, in their cutting antisacerdotalism and Manichaeism, there was perhaps the most developed critique of feudal Europe and its most dangerous enemy before the Enlightenment. Beneath heresies like Waldenism and Catharism, there was a revolutionary spirit that sought to fundamentally undermine the structures, privileges, abuses, and monopolies of power that existed in medieval European societies. Armstrong’s body of doctrine, which had been fully dipped in the river of heterodoxy, in that it diverged from traditional Protestantism, did nothing of the sort. On the contrary, there is every indication that Armstrong, his values, his beliefs, his leadership, and his lifestyle further glued men and women to the world, fastening them to a plethora of nodal points of modern existence. In the Armstrong wing of Christianity, one does indeed find critiques of twentieth-century life: his church’s pacifism (Chambers 1988) and his pro-ecological bent and denunciation of our modern wholesale destruction of the natural world are just some examples (Armstrong 1979c). Yet, more often, one finds in Armstrong’s messages, conveyed through sonic and written word, a celebration of the world. Abstract notions of success, financial success, getting “everything you lack and everything you need” (Armstrong, “Freedom from Fears and Worries”), nationalism, all these things indicate a palpable and telling accommodation to American life. Armstrong thought himself a prophet of “the World Tomorrow,” the apocalyptic Kingdom of God, yet his message of a “great consummation” (Cohn 2001, 112)

¹⁴ The Venerable Bede, in his ecclesiastical history of England (c. 731 CE), mentioned the Arian heresy. His original phrasing was “*cuius temporibus Arriana haeresis exorta et in Nicaena synodo detecta atque damnata*” (Bede 1930, 44).

¹⁵ If we move beyond the geography of the United States, this assertion might not hold. As Manuel Ríos points out, in the context of Nicaragua during the Cold War, liberation theology was a form of heresy in the eyes of many and a form of “heteropraxis,” which means that heresy and social reform, to which liberation theology was certainly geared, in some cases, still might walk hand in hand (2009, 7, 10, 16).

looked more like the world as it was. From this, it might be concluded that “heresy” was coopted, and far from posing a danger to the existing order of things, it seemed to further that social order.

Armstrong’s multi-fanged “heresy” was not designed to bite into the world because it was not motivated by a desire to challenge the social and economic structure of American society, nor was Armstrong’s theological colorfulness a means of democratizing the Church and dismantling clerical or ecclesiastical power, which was the case with medieval heresies. Armstrong’s denunciation of traditional evangelical doctrines and repeated delegitimization of Protestant orthodoxy were clear means of solidifying his authority within the Worldwide Church of God. It is evident that freeing himself from the conservative evangelical mainstream was a necessary step in erecting within his church and the various associated organizations a doctrinal rigidity and dogmatism that would produce admiration in any inquisitor. The Worldwide Church of God was rife with defections and its history is littered with doctrinal disputes, points of theological conflict on which, generally, Armstrong was impervious to pleading and suggestion. Disfellowship, the act of excommunication, was an institutional religious practice of his movement (Hopkins 1974). Those who did not conform saw themselves left out in the cold like a rebellious Holy Roman Emperor after his Walk to Canossa. Above all, Armstrong loudly proclaimed that he was an apostle of Christ’s “true Gospel” and that he spoke with all the authority of Christian Scripture and the Christian deity (Armstrong 1982). Many would defect from Armstrong’s “true church.” Those who fled Armstrong’s religious community created a whole genre of literature and counter-propaganda (Lupo 2002). The charges of authoritarianism against this twentieth-century apostle, both from evangelical observers and apostates from Armstrong’s movement, mar his reputation (Hopkins 1974). In the end, if we are to believe these numerous accusations, “heresy” in the twentieth century had also become, through cutting people off from traditional Christianity, an iron glove by which to stranglehold the faithful.

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