Peering Beneath the Veil: 
An Ethnographic Content Analysis of Islam as Portrayed on The 700 Club Following the September 11th Attacks

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The 700 Club television program, which broadcasts information, entertainment, and evangelism, holds an important place in the lives of many of America’s Evangelical Christians. That role took on added meaning given the fear, confusion, and search for answers that emerged following the September 11th attacks. Through a qualitative media analysis, this study found that program host Pat Robertson interpreted, framed, and presented the events and issues surrounding the attack to support a particular evangelical worldview. Ultimately, Robertson and his guests used the events to justify the position that Islam itself represents a threat to America and Christianity.

On September 13, 2001, The 700 Club’s Pat Robertson discussed with the Reverend Jerry Falwell the events of 2 days prior. At this point Falwell disclosed his now infamous shopping list of liberal Americans who angered God and shared culpability for the tragedy. Especially notable was Falwell’s phrasing when he stated that God had “lifted his curtain of protection” because of America’s sins. This sounded much like one definition of the Greek word apocalypse, which means “the lifting of the veil” (Gibbs, 2002). Although Falwell and Robertson mitigated the damage from public reaction (which included the office of Republican President George W. Bush), this event reveals deeply embedded subtexts consistently weaving their way through The 700 Club program, especially in the wake of the September 11th attacks.

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With this in mind, I analyze a sample of programs just following the attacks to discover what those texts might be, how they were framed, and why.

**BACKGROUND ON THE 700 CLUB AND PAT ROBERTSON**

*The 700 Club* began regular programming in 1966 as the flagship program of the Christian Broadcasting Network (later under the auspices of the Family Channel, which was sold to the Fox Network and eventually acquired by Disney). The show’s host and founder, Pat Robertson, launched the program as a way to evangelize to the nation and the world. Born Marion Gordon Robertson in 1930, this well-educated son of a U.S. senator decided to pursue the ministry and, after attending seminary, was ordained in the Southern Baptist Church in 1961. Two years earlier, Robertson, who had become an Evangelical and a Charismatic, bought a rundown UHF station for the purposes of becoming a religious broadcaster; he founded CBN the year of his ordination. Five years later, *The 700 Club* went on the air. In 1988, Robertson resigned from the ministry to run for president of the United States; his bid failed, and he returned to CBN and *The 700 Club*, this time calling himself a religious broadcaster, not an evangelist. Robertson’s Christian broadcasting empire has grown into satellite broadcasting and multiple media holdings, its value finally exceeding $1 billion in 1997 (Christian Broadcasting Network, 2002; Erickson, 1992; Melton, Lucas, & Stone, 1997).

Over the years, the show evolved through various forms and cohosts. Initially, Jim Bakker cohosted with Robertson in a freewheeling format that included telling the Gospel, hearing testimonials from guests, casting out demons, and healing members of the audience. Money was raised through telethons and Robertson’s discussion of contemporary social and political issues. In 1972, the show was syndicated nationally and restructured to a set format. By 1980, it had assumed the basic format one sees today (Christian Broadcasting Network, 2002).

**FORMAT OF THE SHOW**

Currently, *The 700 Club* is an hour-long news and information program carried on 95% of the nation’s television markets; it purports to reach a daily average of 1 million viewers (Christian Broadcasting Network, 2002). Its format is patterned in large part after secular morning talk/news shows. The show begins with a videotaped introduction summarizing major stories and feature pieces to follow. The podium appears next, set with three lecterns and the words “Information to Understanding” across the base. Pat Robertson and cohosts Terry Meuwsen and Gordon Robertson (Pat Robertson’s son) walk to the podium amid applause from the studio audience. Then, teases (short comments to pique interest) follow, further high-
lighting segments of the day’s show. The program is then “tossed” (handed off) to the news/commentary segment. Anchor Lee Webb reads stories interspersed with visuals and sound bites and introduces stories filed by field reporters. Frequently, at the end of a story, Webb tosses to Pat Robertson for his analysis and commentary, who then hands the reins back to Webb.

The remainder of the program consists of informational interviews, testimonials, general commentary, human interest features, prayers (typically asking salvation or expressing repentance for social wrongs and other sins), a question and answer period (in which Robertson responds to questions called in or sent by e-mail from the audience), and what one could loosely refer to as an **altar call**—an admonishment to accept Jesus as personal Lord and Savior.

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Various aspects of the electronic church are being examined in an expanding literature on religious broadcasting. These studies include the size and composition of the audience, reasons for the rise of religious broadcasting, the role that religious broadcasting serves for those who view the programs, the messages various programs convey, the business models used by religious television, the influence of religious television on the viewers, and the influence of religious television on the broader culture (see Abelman & Hoover, 1990; Hoover, 1988; Hoover & Clark, 2002; Hoover & Lundby, 1997; Schultze, 1991; Stout & Buddenbaum, 1996, 2001).

In addition, numerous studies focus specifically on *The 700 Club*. Abelman (1988) studied its audiences to learn their motivations for viewing the program, concurring that viewers watch religious programs not just for religious reasons and as a replacement for church but for moral guidance, for information, for entertainment, and as a substitute for secular programs they considered immoral. Abelman found that, in addition to ritualized (those who watch television habitually for diversion) and instrumental (those who watch with certain goals in mind) uses, some viewers were “reactionary” and watched as an alternative to secular programming.

Other studies look more specifically at the content of *The 700 Club*, focusing on its role in pointing out moral decay and shifting the news agenda toward conservatism. In a content analysis, Abelman and Neuendorf (1985) examined several programs (including *The 700 Club*) for its political, religious, and social content, finding that religious themes constitute 46% of the show, with social themes composing 35% and political themes 19%. Abelman and Pettey (1988) found that by 1986, political content had increased to 29%, and religious references had decreased to 34%, with social content remaining about the same at 37%. Abelman and Pettey also found that the programs were increasingly evaluative rather than neutral in content, concluding that the reason was the upcoming political elections. Three years later, the trend continued, with political themes increasing to
45% of the program, religious themes decreasing to 22%, and social themes again remaining static at 35% (Abelman, 1990). Abelman (1990) concluded that Robertson had transformed the program “from evangelical proselytizing to political posturing” (p. 161), in large part because Robertson had failed in his bid for the presidency and the program represented the most promising avenue to effect political and social change in America. Of interest, however, a content analysis of a sample of programs in 1992 indicates political themes dropping to 17%, religious themes growing again to 40%, and social themes also increasing to 43% (Abelman, 1994). Abelman (1994) determined that the program had continued as a vehicle for the political agenda of the religious right, but the discussions had become markedly more neutral and less critical. Abelman attributed this to Robertson’s sound defeat in the Republican primary 4 years earlier, prompting a shift to a greater focus by Robertson toward his role as religious broadcaster.

Hoover (1988) determined that The 700 Club offers not only a source of current issues, inspiration, and information to its audience but provides affirmation of being an Evangelical Christian in a secular American society. He asserted that the program carries cultural power to the broader society by claiming a space for the evangelical worldview in the public realm, all the while carefully tailoring the content to make it more palatable. The program serves as a provider of information, entertainment, and sense of community through a sophisticated forum of ideas and symbols that are easily affirmed by Evangelical Christians. The power is increased through the compelling figure of Pat Robertson, who is charismatic, well educated, and secular in appearance and knowledge, yet clearly evangelical in his beliefs. Hoover maintained that the program addresses Evangelical viewers’ concerns about dissonance between belief and the culture around them—what Hoover referred to as the crisis of modernity.

Timmerman and Smith (1994) examined the content of the news segments of one week’s worth of 700 Club programming. They used Burke’s (1973) framework to conclude that rhetors provide symbolic medicine, or what Timmerman and Smith referred to as “equipment for living for audiences through strategically conceived public messages” (p. 234). This is achieved through the technique of representative anecdote as rhetorical device. They also relied on Lucaites and Condit’s (1985) study of narrative functions, focusing on the dialectical narrative (pursuit of objective, verifiable truths) and the rhetorical narrative (used for persuasion). They found that the program articulates rhetorical narratives (persuasive stories) through the conventions of television news journalism. This technique frames the program content as dialectical narrative (objective, verifiable) while giving the content Robertson’s own “polemical spin” (Timmerman & Smith, 1994, p. 244). Robertson, they argued, uses “political medicine” to establish himself as telepolitical celebrity in two ways. First, Robertson delivers his own exegesis by making sense of current information; second, he appeals to the pictures inside the audience’s heads (Lippman, 1922) by reinforcing Evangelical Christian beliefs through news reports.
Given findings indicating the past use of rhetorical narratives presented as dialectical, the past use of representative anecdote to define an event or situation, the role of The 700 Club program as a key source of information and guidance for Evangelical Christians, and the program’s role in reconciling Evangelicals to the secular world around them, I sought to study the content of the program directly following the September 11th attacks to learn how the show would interpret, frame, and present the events and issues.

**METHODS**

The method of ethnographic content analysis (Altheide, 1996) was employed to examine the content of the programs. This qualitative technique centers on concept development, data collection, and emergent data analysis through repeated study of the content. Initial protocols are quite basic, as much of the thematic substance emerges as the researcher repeatedly works through the material. This technique can be used for theory development but is more oriented toward clear description and definition, which itself is often guided by theory. In this case, I was also guided by my own knowledge and background in broadcasting and television news.

The 2 calendar weeks immediately following the event (inclusive of September 11) were selected for examination to ensure continuity of topics and themes that dealt with the immediate aftermath in terms of explanations, response, and other pertinent aspects. A composite period would not have accomplished this and would have missed important continuity and flow of thematic development. Because the attacks occurred on a Tuesday, the 1st week of programs ran Tuesday through Friday (September 11–14). These dates, added to the 2nd week (Monday, September 17, through Friday, September 21), yielded a total of nine programs.

After videotaping the 2 weeks of programming, the content was transcribed. This transcription was followed by repeated study of the content, both verbal and visual, for what are called themes, frames, and discourse. Themes are the recurring typical theses that run through multiple reports. Frames are the focus—a parameter or boundary—for discussing a particular event. Frames focus the reader of the text on what will be discussed, how it will be discussed, and how it will not be discussed; themes comprise the treatment of the topics as well as the topics themselves. Finally, discourse is the actual symbolic interchange, the words and images used to communicate the themes. Discourse conveys the themes that exist in a given frame or set of frames.

The unit of analysis selected is called the program element, which can be considered discrete subsegments distinguished by a shift in topic. The program elements fall into the following categories:

- **Program Open**: Both the videotaped opening of the program and the introduction of upcoming segments and stories by the live hosts.
• **News Story**: Each individual story presented as news.

• **Poststory Commentary/Analysis**: Comment and analysis given by Robertson immediately following and basically related to the news story that preceded it.

• **Informational Interview**: Usually conducted by Robertson, an interview with someone purported to have expertise in a given area or who is there to present a particular position.

• **General Commentary/Discussion**: Comments given chiefly by Robertson presenting analysis or a position but not in the context of reaction to a news story.

• **Purposive Prayer**: Voicing of certain social or political positions in the form of a prayer, often contextualized as asking for guidance or forgiveness.

• **Testimonial Feature/Interview**: Either a live or videotaped interview or a human-interest-style feature story in which the subject or subjects relate some experience of knowing Christ.

• **General Feature**: A feature story that is not testimonial in nature.

• **Question and Answer**: Robertson’s responses to a series of questions called in or sent by e-mail from viewers.

• **Altar Call**: Prayer or discussion asking the viewer to accept Jesus as Lord and Savior.

Each individual manifestation of any of the following categories, be it a 30-sec news story or a 10-min discussion of a given issue, would qualify as a program element. In addition, each of these element types is carefully crafted to make the points and present the position or worldview that Pat Robertson intends to present.

There are certain motifs or elements that make up an evangelical worldview, which serve as the frame through which the data are analyzed. The following have been distilled from numerous sources (Ballmer, 1993; Hoover, 1988; Marsden, 1984; Schultze, 1996):

• **Biblical Inerrancy**: Evangelicals believe the Bible to be inerrant in matters of faith and practice, the divinely inspired word of God that, for most Evangelicals and all Fundamentalists, also calls for a literalist reading. Because the other sacraments of the Christian church, by and large, are stripped of meaning for the Evangelical, there is an enormous emphasis on “The Word” as being the central focus of the faith.

• **Imminent Return of Christ**: Evangelicals are firmly ensconced in discourse on eschatology and millennialism (pre- and postmillennial dispensationalists are tending to merge). At the End of Times, when the Messiah returns, God’s chosen will be saved. God’s promise (the Davidic Covenant) as God’s chosen was extended/transferred to Christians after Jesus.

• **Ambivalence Toward Culture/Worldliness**: Ambivalence toward, or fear or suspicion of, (secular) popular culture and media, the arts, and modernity, often referred to as “worldliness” and seen as a threat to values of their faith; at the same
time, a desire to embrace culture and media for what can be appropriated for evangelizing purposes.

- **Dualism**: Seen as the juxtaposition to moral relativism, Evangelicals tend toward an exclusivistic, unambiguous morality that sees the world in terms of good and evil, right and wrong, easing the way toward passage of judgment; however, Evangelicals tend to be much more ecumenical and less separatistic than Fundamentalist Christians.

- **Logical Certitude**: Evangelicals seek to validate their position to the broader culture, portraying Evangelicalism as being the correct and mainstream position.

- **Satan**: Evangelicals believe that Satan is real and walks the face of the earth, and demonic forces exist throughout the world.

- **Experiential Emphasis**: In terms of religious faith, Evangelicals place emphasis on what might be called a sensorally based, visceral experience of God rather than a more abstract or purely intellectual understanding.

- **Individual Salvation/Conversion**: Faith in the divinity of Christ and literal resurrection from the dead, which translates into a promise of eternal life and healing, is central to Evangelical Christianity. Because only faith in Christ will grant salvation for sins, there is an emphasis on sanctification, or spiritual transformation. In addition, Evangelicals tend to focus on individual conversion as the way to better society rather than trying to overhaul society through social programs, which are typically perceived as part of the liberal agenda.

- **Conservatism**: By and large, Evangelicals are social and political conservatives.

- **America as a Christian Nation**: Evangelicals see America as the land of God’s chosen, a New Israel, continuing in Calvinist fashion. They also tend to practice what Ballmer (1993) called a Christian revisionist history—the view that America was settled for purely religious reasons as a Christian nation, and Evangelicals must try to return to or reclaim those ideals.

- **Charismatic Leader**: Virtually all Evangelical congregations are led by a charismatic leader who articulates and/or defines the faith of the followers.

**FINDINGS**

**Overarching Themes**

The discourse and visual images of the episodes of *The 700 Club* examined yielded a rich, multilayered set of texts. Through multiple examinations of the transcriptions, certain overarching themes began to emerge:

- **Personal Salvation**: One needs to accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior to achieve salvation after death.

- **Pat as Prophet**: Pat Robertson is positioned not only as possessing expertise that enables him to address any subject knowledgeably but as a direct conduit of God’s will to his people.
• **America as a (Prodigal) Christian Nation/God’s Chosen:** America was founded as a Christian nation—its prosperity has been a sign of God’s favor. Now, as it should, America is returning to God and turning to prayer—we are poised for revival.

• **Withdrawal of God/Lifting His Hand of Protection:** Because of America’s sinfulness, marked by a liberal culture and social agenda, God chose not to intervene and allowed the attacks to happen; without God’s protection, we are vulnerable.

• **Israeli/Jewish Solidarity:** America is positioned with Israel and the Jews, bound by the common background of our faiths and a common enemy.

• **End Times/Revelations/Apocalyptic Themes/Second Coming:** Events are signaling the return of Christ, and his people must be prepared.

• **Islam Is a Threat:** Islam is an evil heresy that threatens all that is good and sacred to Christian America.

In this article I examine this final theme in detail.

**Brief Background on Christianity and Islam**

Before I discuss various themes, some background is needed to place depictions of Islam on *The 700 Club* in historical context. The relationship between Christianity and the West on one hand and Islam on the other has been characterized by a great amount of antipathy stemming from misunderstanding, fear, and, within some circles, outright hatred (Smith, 1999).

This enmity between Christians and Muslims can be traced as far back as the writings of John of Damascus, canonized as a saint in both the Eastern and Western churches (Armour, 2002). John, ordained a monk in 716, established himself as an early Christian theologian through writing tracts and hymns. John also commented on Islam, claiming Islamic belief to be heretical and Muslims to be nothing short of evil forerunners of the Antichrist. Whereas the Christian faith takes its teachings directly from God, John of Damascus continues, Islam is based on human-created perversions of Judaism and Christianity. Armour pointed out that much of this enmity resulted from a misunderstanding of Islam and the mischaracterizations of the religion that resulted, based in no small part because of the competing claims between Christians and Muslims over the divinity of Jesus of Nazareth and Muhammad, respectively.

The spread of Islam across Mediterranean Europe exacerbated the situation, as Christians were forced to live under Islamic law. Despite this, a relatively peaceful coexistence among Muslims, Jews, and Christians in Jerusalem and the surrounding area ensued. However, this was shattered by the Crusades, an attempt both to oust Muslims and to reunite the Eastern and Western Christian churches. The Crusades and subsequent invasions across Mediterranean Europe and into the Holy Lands by Europeans during the next 600 years—a period that was marked by needless slaughter and pillaging—only served to deepen hostility and misunder-
standing between Muslims and Christians (Armour, 2002; Esposito, 1995). All of this was inflamed by Western Christian writings and statements—often exaggerated, fabricated, or based on fallacy and misunderstanding—that vilified and dehumanized Muhammad and Muslims in general. The result was tremendous alienation and distrust of Islam by Christian Western Europe, seeing Islam as a threat to Christianity—economically, politically, and theologically (Esposito, 1995).

This misunderstanding and distrust have continued into modern times. So-called Orientalists—Western historical scholars who specialize in Asia and the Middle East—according to Said (1995), have written about Islam relatively factually but from a position of condescension and disrespect. Contemporary American politicians as well as some Fundamentalist and Evangelical Christians often use reductionist and incendiary rhetoric in claiming that Islam has replaced Communism as the largest threat to the West. Such a discourse has only added to the problem, as has inadequate, inaccurate, simplistic, or sensationalist news reporting. Taken together, all of this has served to paint a negative picture of Islam and further inflame anti-Muslim sentiments (Haddad & Haddad, 1995).

**Thematic Portrayals of Islam on The 700 Club**

Several subthemes emerged in the discourse on Islam; taken together, these rendered a definite frame through which all of Islam was presented. First, militant Islam is an evil, irrational threat to all that is good, including and especially Christianity and America. Second, all Muslims, even moderates, will support the radical militants in terrorism because they are bound by a common faith. Third, any goodness shown by any Muslims is deceit—as a whole, Muslims support terrorism in the name of Islam, and any statements or actions by Muslims to the contrary are disingenuous. Finally, Islam itself is evil heresy and a threat to all that is good, especially Christianity, America, and freedom-loving people around the globe.

**Militant Islam.** Radical or militant Islam is represented as a clear, terrifying, deadly, and invisible threat that knows no boundaries. Given the circumstances, this subtheme was fairly easy to present and served as a base for the subthemes to follow. Correspondent George Thomas expanded on this theme in a September 19th News Story report, which began: “Radical Islam, the call to Jihad sounded from variety of quarters, death to America, death to Israel. A conventional world map of little use … [the terrorist threat has] multiplied, now in allied nations, negotiating partners, in our own neighborhoods.” Islamic religion is at the heart of it, and what is worse, Thomas continued, is the ability of Islamic terrorists to spread across the globe: “Faith is fuel of Jihad, but the key pillar is immigration, to expand the base” (September 19, News Story). Finally, the theme of protecting Jerusalem enters, as Thomas intoned: “The war against Israel and battle for Jerusalem are never far, … [the] best fundraiser and unifier across the Arab world” (September 19, News Story). Not only are immigrants now to be viewed with suspicion and fear
as the growing numbers of terrorists spread across the globe, but the geographical heart of the faith lies in the balance.

Conservative former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu appeared several times on the program as a representative of the Israeli cause and as one who has dealt with Islamic terrorism firsthand. Discussing the appropriate response, he described the deep-seeded animosity that drives all of Islamic fundamentalism and framed the struggle as a fight to save Western civilization:

Fueled by centuries of antipathy … there’s a virulent strain in Islam that Bin Laden and the Taliban and Iran and others represent that says we have to reverse history, reverse the last 1,000 years of Western civilization. In their twisted view, this means dominion over the West, and they believe they have to destroy America. (September 20, News Story)

He compared it to Nazism and asserted that negotiation and understanding cannot be employed—only force will work to stop the offenders:

It’s evil, no matter what grievance real or imagined the supporters put forth. Deliberate murder of innocent civilians—it is an evil that must be wiped off the face of the earth or it will wipe us off the face of the earth. (September 20, News Story)

And Netanyahu seemed to imply a demonic link: “Understand, we’ve received a wake-up call from hell” (September 20, News Story).

Robertson also asserted that there can be no negotiation—that we are dealing with rabid, irrational people who cannot be placated, only eradicated. In response to the question of whether any good has come from the tragedy, Robertson replied:

As we’ve been saying, the nation must wake up. Islamic extremists are not nice people. They won’t negotiate. … Fanatics, instilled with hatred, they’ve been given one desire—to kill themselves and others in a Jihad. We’re the great Satan; they must eradicate us in a Jihad. We’ll begin to defend ourselves and stand more with Israel in her fight. (September 19, Question and Answer)

Robertson also made the demonic link with militant Islam, a theme that runs through much of his discourse. When asked why militant Islam wants to destroy Americans, Robertson replied:

Militant Islam is motivated by the devil. … [The] devil wants to destroy. … They’ve convinced themselves that Israel is evil, [that the U.S. is a] great ally of evil. … [These are] delusions, this is Satanic. … Moderate, nothing. This is demonic. Jihad, we are infidels, and according to their beliefs, it’s okay to kill infidels. (September 13, General Commentary/Discussion)
Here, Robertson also brought into question the very existence of “moderate” Islam.

To personalize the threat of militant Islam, Robertson described attacks on the staff and operations of the Christian Broadcasting Network itself:

We at CBN have suffered in the Middle East … two car bombs at the CBN studio over the years, mortar attack on our microwave link at Beirut, rocket attack on our transmitter, overrun by Hezbollah. … Some ran for their lives, others [were] arrested and jailed for a year for collaborating with Israel—that’s in Lebanon, [which] used to be [a] Christian country. We know firsthand the price of this. (September 20, Poststory Commentary/Analysis)

Here, Robertson not only personalized the threat for 700 Club viewers but exposed what he sees as a major setback in the struggle between Islam and Christianity—that Lebanon, once a Christian country, has been lost to the Muslims.

On several occasions Robertson discussed the appropriate Christian response, which included the challenging task of forgiving one’s enemies—even terrorists:

If we have bloodlust in our hearts, we’re no better than they are. If we turn into savages and killers, they’ll have won the battle; it will transform us into the type of people they are. We have to keep our Christian ideals and can’t be drawn into that vortex of vengeance and hatred. Yes, there’s justice; those people will be executed in field or brought to trial or whatever we do to them, but let’s pray. (September 20, General Commentary/Discussion)

Reminiscent of St. Augustine’s concept of a Just War, Robertson distinguished between vengeance/bloodlust and justice; executing the offenders is acceptable so long as the motives maintain Christian ideals and separate America’s righteous cause from the militants’ evil intent.

**Moderates will support militant Islam.** Robertson asserted that militant Islam is the guiding force for the entire Muslim world, in essence portraying it as a radicalized black hole pulling all Islamic adherents into its gravitational hold. On the day of the attacks, Robertson stated that the “extremists are in charge, and moderate states are becoming captives to radicals in their society” (September 11, General Commentary/Discussion). Later in the same program, drawing on apocalyptic images, Robertson proclaimed:

But this is only the beginning—I think the radical Islamic fundamentalists are going to take the lead, and unwilling so-called moderates are going to be sucked along with them. Soon they’ll have Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Emirates, billions in oil revenues. … This world could be plunged into chaos right now. (September 11, General Commentary/Discussion)
This theme was reiterated in later shows. On September 14th, Robertson named several states believed to be sponsoring terrorism, then generalized them to all Muslims. During his commentary, referring to the video of the small group of Palestinians reported to be cheering over the attack, Robertson said: “We’re looking at a billion Muslims around the world who are going to be saying they’re brothers to these people, they’re our heroes, and Allah is great and all that. … Think about those Palestinian kids, cheering, chanting” (September 14, Poststory Commentary/Analysis). Robertson’s son Gordon echoed this position when he discussed Osama Bin Laden hiding in Afghanistan:

The unity we’re fighting is with the Muslim community. Already, Afghanistan is saying “Prove to us he did it before we hand Osama over.” Incredible they would unify and try to protect him. … We must understand the ideology, that Osama is considered a servant of Allah and they must protect him. (September 19, Poststory Commentary/Analysis)

This message is that there is no such thing as a moderate Muslim. All Muslims are suspect, bound by a common faith. Any Muslim is a potential terrorism supporter, meaning a billion people throughout the planet are willing to side with the radical militants simply because they are fighting for what they believe is a Muslim cause.

Good Muslims negated. The previous point is emphasized further through implications that any displays of goodness are meaningless, duplicitous, or insincere. On September 12th, a News Story item stated: “The attack drew condemnation, including from the Taliban and Yassar Arafat. But on West Bank, some rejoiced saying, ‘God is great.’ … But that was rare—reactions such as sorrow, grief, anger and shock have dominated since the sneak attacks.” Although reports of the celebration were mitigated by mention of the “rareness” of such displays, that was trumped later in the same program following anchor Lee Webb’s comment that they had heard of rejoicing, but now it was subdued. Robertson explained it by saying:

Arafat has passed the word to stop; shocking response. … They’re doing it because of passions enflamed by state-sponsored propaganda day after day that they must practice hate against America and Israel. Not surprising, we’re the Great Satan, so we must stop this propaganda. (September 12, Poststory Commentary/Analysis)

The following day, Webb commented that many Palestinian leaders offered sympathy and support, and he mentioned again that Arafat donated blood. That was immediately followed with a story reporting outrage by the Foreign Press Association against “attacks on journalists by Palestinian police … while trying to cover the celebration by hundreds of Palestinians over the attacks” (September 13, News Story). The number actually celebrating was never confirmed. The following day,
reports indicated it was only one cameraman claiming he had been threatened. Webb read a story in which the Palestinian Authority insisted it did not threaten the cameraman, followed by a statement attributed to a Palestinian Authority cabinet secretary saying they could not guarantee the life of the cameraman if the video was released (September 14, News Story). An Israeli official was quoted as calling it “journalism under terror.”

**Islam itself is a heretical evil threat.** Throughout the programs, Robertson frequently framed the faith of Islam together with militant Islamicism to the point that the two became virtually interchangeable. Islam itself, in fact, was portrayed as being at the heart of the problem in a variety of ways. To position Islam as being a threat to Christianity, Robertson called into question the faith’s validity. In response to a question about whether there was a biblical basis for the conflict between Muslims and Christians/Jews, Robertson responded: “We’re now seeing militant Islam, a raid against Judeo-Christian traditions. It’s been said Islam is Christian heresy, draws from our traditions; Mohammed added to it, intense struggle between two conflicting different spiritual ideologies” (September 17, Question and Answer).

Once again generalizing radical Islam to all Muslims, Robertson assumed that Osama Bin Laden had widespread support in the wake of the September 11th attacks: “Bin Laden is a hero throughout [the] Muslim world, a giant killer—celebration in streets, shouting God is good, Allah is good, and so forth; they think they need to destroy America” (September 20, General Commentary/Discussion). Robertson continued to blur the lines between Islam and militant Islam, as well as juxtapose Islam and Christianity/Judaism as ideologies historically opposed to each other, when he commented:

This isn’t just a war for money or territory, it’s a spiritual struggle with people whose vision of God is warped and distorted but includes the destruction of the infidels and those who stand in their way. America [is] the biggest obstacle to their goal of taking over the middle East and Israel. Years ago western Christian nations stood up against Islam. … [Islam] expanded so rapidly, converted people by persuasion if possible, and the sword if not possible, doing what the prophet Mohammed told them to do—issue of Jihad against the infidels. (September 19, Poststory Commentary/Analysis)

Robertson positioned Islam itself as a tyrannical belief system historically driven to destroy Christianity.

On more than one occasion, Robertson took direct aim at the basic tenets of the Islamic faith. On September 17th, cohost Terry Muewesen posed a viewer question that commented on hearing that Islam was a peace-loving religion and that the Qur’an denounced killing. Robertson’s response was unequivocal:

America gets a sanitized version of Islam that is not preached in mosques overseas. Mohammed taught his followers to pursue Jihad against infidels. … Europe was over-
run by Muslims—a bloody conflict, they believed killing infidels would be a way to heaven. To call them peace-loving is just not true. … I know scriptures in Qur’an can give you that impression, but some passages say infidels must be converted at the sword if need be. (September 17, Question and Answer)

During the same segment, in response to Gordon Robertson’s comment that, to a true Muslim, peace comes only when everyone is Muslim and living in a Muslim state, Pat Robertson summarized Islam by utilizing the following representative anecdote in his response: “Sudan is an Islamic state, and they practice genocide on the Christians” (September 17, Question and Answer).

To emphasize the point even further, cohost Terry Meuwwsen volunteered that a recent network news program featured a Muslim leader who stated that the Qur’an does not encourage killing infidels. Robertson’s answer was quick and derisive:

Look, they’re going to spin this thing to be as sanitized as possible for [the] American audience. Just like a Palestinian leader speaks in English in sweetness and light and in Arabic talks hatred, inciting people to kill the Jews and the Christians. Christians in Palestinian territories have been killed, driven out of the country. … Anwar Sadat’s [the assassinated Egyptian leader] son was imprisoned and beaten because he wanted to become a Christian. … Tell me it’s peace-loving; it just isn’t. I’m sure there are people of the Islamic faith who are peace-loving and nice people and want nothing to do with this, but there are many of their fellow religionists who are. (September 17, Question and Answer).

Here, Robertson asserted not only that Islam is intrinsically violent but that its followers keep people from knowing Christ. Robertson qualified the commentary by acknowledging that there may be some good Muslims, but Islam itself is an evil threat to Christianity and freedom.

Robertson reemphasized the point three days later, stating:

These groups that are filled with hatred, they want to do one thing, that’s to bring down America. They lost greatly hundreds and hundreds of years ago, when Islam [was put] down, [and the] West gained ascendancy; they now want to put down the Christian West and reestablish Islam as the dominant political force in the world. If we think it’s just a few terrorists, we’ve missed the point. (September 20, Poststory Commentary/Analysis)

Robertson used the technique of “sourcing”—having an outside and seemingly objective source express the opinion held by the interviewer or journalist (Herman & Chomsky, 1988)—to legitimize his opinions. On September 18th, Reza F. Safa, author of the book Inside Islam (Safa, 1997), appeared as a guest on the show. Safa was raised a Muslim but became a charismatic Evangelical Christian later in life—hence, his views meshed quite well with those of Pat Robertson, but he could be presented as a knowledgeable insider regarding the Islamic faith. In response to
Robertson’s carefully posed questions, Safa gave what could be considered a primer on Islam, but from an evangelical perspective.

To refute the Muslim position that Allah is the God of Abraham, Isaac, Moses, and Jesus, Safa stated: “[Islam] means submission, submission to Allah. … They believe it’s the same God we pray to, but in the Qur’an, he is of a very different character” (September 18, Informational Interview). The commentary then set up Mohammed, the founder of the faith, in direct conflict with Christ. Robertson stated that Muslims have a representative to whom they must submit—meaning Mohammed—and then cited Mohammed’s 12 wives as showing he was “not all that exemplary,” to which Safa replied, “They believe Mohammed was sinless, [the] holiest person on Earth, [a] reverent person” (September 18, Informational Interview).

The discussion then moved to the Ayatollah Khomeini’s Iranian revolution during the 1970s and the “reign of terror,” to use Robertson’s words, in the name of Allah. Safa explained this was motivated by the spirit of Jihad. This is a spirit force that wants to wage war, in my opinion, against everything that is from God, that is holy, against freedom … submitting to the will of Allah; so if you try to refuse that, you are an infidel or an enemy of Islam. (September 18, Informational Interview)

Safa also established a demonic link in his discourse by stating that this Jihad spirit presents an assault against everything that is “of God.”

To emphasize the threat of world domination, the tyrannical destruction of everything in Islam’s path, and the frighteningly overwhelming numbers of those who represent the threat to Christianity and freedom, Safa commented: “Islam expanded from the 7th to the 17th centuries and caused nation after nation to fall. Now, they have about 1 billion adherents” (September 18, Informational Interview). Robertson then referred to a passage from the Qur’an that calls on followers to kill those who join other gods wherever one finds them. Safa replied: “Absolutely, the teaching of Islam. Those yielding to the spirit of Jihad—these fanatical fundamentalists are yielding to it—they follow the scriptures” (September 18, Informational Interview). When Robertson asked whether the average Muslim knows the Qur’an, Safa responded: “No. … They have an idea maybe, but most people don’t really know. … They say you must understand the Qur’an in Arabic … [but for most] it’s a foreign language” (September 18, Informational Interview). Put another way, most followers are blind to the scriptures they are bound to uphold.

Safa then served as apologist for that majority of followers who are simply unaware of the scriptural basis for their faith and reiterated the Satanic link:

Most Muslim people are wonderful, loving people, and we need to differentiate between them and these groups who are yielding to that spirit of Jihad. Once they have
yielded to Jihad, it’s a very vengeful, hateful, demonic death of spirit. (September 18, Informational Interview)

At this point, with Islam itself exposed as a terrifying threat, Robertson and Safa showed how all Muslims are complicit in an evil, violent heresy. Robertson asked why so many peace-loving Muslims would, as he put it, “tolerate these crazies,” to which Safa replied with an example that goes to the heart of his own faith:

Within them is that feeling I used to have, that this is part of what we believe and we have to fight for it. But like Charismatics, many believe in the Holy Ghost, speaking in tongues, gifts of the spirit … but many Christians do not believe in that baptism; they don’t walk in it. So for many Muslims, they haven’t yielded to that spirit of Islam. (September 18, Informational Interview)

To the now Charismatic Christian Safa, “gifts of the spirit” are the ultimate experience of God, the implication being that the “spirit of Jihad” is the ultimate religious experience to a Muslim. Safa continued by saying that the spirit of Jihad is growing, and we must pray because this is a very dangerous time. The unspoken message is that true believers of Islam represent an irrational, deadly threat and are possessed in demonic fashion, and those not yet possessed are at minimum complicit in the murderous movement and still could be possessed by the spirit of Jihad at any time.

Robertson and Safa concluded the interview by showing the moral high ground of Christianity. Robertson asked how Safa escaped Islam, prompting Safa to reply:

The love of Jesus—the solid, raw love of God. Years of praying and fasting, I never saw it. [Other Muslims are seeking the same thing] at this time. … We have 6 to 8 million Muslims in America, and we need to love them. (September 18, Informational Interview)

DISCUSSION

A range of subthemes runs through the discourse of The 700 Club’s discussion of, and the attempts presented by the program at lending understanding to, the events and world circumstances of the September 11th attacks. However, each of these is bound up in the particular perspective that sets the agenda for the program. Given the aims of the program and the techniques it employs, when set strictly in the frame of the evangelical worldview, not only do these themes make sense, but there is little room for oppositional perspectives or even oppositional or alternative readings of the texts.

Indeed, at no point is there a sympathetic or even benign portrayal of Islam, either through spoken text or visual image. Practitioners of the Islamic faith are
clearly presented as the Other—especially once it has been established that they
do not worship the same God as Christians and Jews—and Islam is set in direct
competition with and as a clear threat to Christianity, the Judeo-Christian tradi-
tions, America and its ideals, and Western civilization. Drawing from the motifs or
elements that compose the frame of the evangelical worldview as a guide, the need
to position Islam as the program has portrayed it becomes clear. The following mo-
tifs and elements carry the most salience regarding this issue:

- **Dualism:** Virtually every subtheme presented, as well as the discourse em-
ployed, is steeped in an ethos of dualism. Within an orientation of exclusivity, there
can be only one right position, and all else must stand in opposition; Islam com-
petes with Christianity for souls, and claims about Mohammed pose a challenge to
the divinity of Christ. The world displayed here is clearly one of an intense struggle
between the forces of good against evil, right against wrong, truth against duplicity,
which can end only in total victory or defeat.

- **Satan:** Demonic inferences and descriptors consistently weave their way
through discussions about Muslims and Islam, be they bluntly calling Islam satanic,
describing the potential for the spirit of Jihad in terms clearly invoking demonic
possession, or alluding to the duplicity of Muslims or the invisibility of the Islamic
threat. The hand of the Antichrist is being seen in Israel and America—Satan is
real, he walks the face of the earth, and his face is that of a Muslim.

- **Biblical Inerrancy:** This frame plays out in at least two ways. There is an eye
cast constantly toward the search for events to validate sacred texts. Hence, the
events of September 11th and the conflicts leading up to and continuing beyond it
are interpreted as fulfilling the prophecies, especially those related to the Second
Coming of Christ. In addition, the tremendous emphasis placed on scripture and
the central position of The Word in the basic theology of the Evangelical enables
(and potentially requires) use of the Qur’an as a tool of criticism toward Islam. Be-
cause certain passages of Islam’s holy text are interpreted as calling for violent over-
throw of all non-Muslims, the true believers—those who place the same emphasis
on the Qur’an that Evangelicals place on the Bible—must believe this as a basic
tenet of their faith. Hence, faithful adherents are a threat to all held sacred by
Christian Americans.

- **Imminent Return of Christ:** Events and conflicts surrounding the attacks are
interpreted as pointing toward the return of Christ as has been foretold in the
millennialist interpretive scenarios and the prophecies laid out in the apocalyptic
scriptures. To an Evangelical, the chaos and conflict are all part and parcel of the
Second Coming, which includes the armies of the Antichrist amassing in northern
Israel. Before Christ returns, certain events must take place. This belief also figures
into the overwhelming messages of solidarity with Israel and the fierce rejection of
any Muslim claim of land in the Middle East, including and especially Jerusalem.
For the Messiah to come (again), the temple must be rebuilt at the site of the Tem-
ple Mount, the holiest site in Judaism and one of the holiest in Christianity. This is
also the site of the al-Aqsa Mosque, one of the holiest sites in Islam. Put simply, Muslims and Islam stand in the way of the prophecy and thus threaten the return of Christ, and so they must be driven out.

- **Individual Salvation/Conversion:** Belief in the divinity of Jesus as the sole manifestation of God in human form requires refutation of any competing claims. In this case, the claim of Mohammed's sinlessness presents an affront to the belief in Jesus as Christ—the basis of the Evangelical Christian faith—which not only cannot be tolerated but must be actively attacked as heresy. There is redemption for Muslims, but only through conversion. Their value lies in the potential for saving their souls through Jesus, leading them from demonic heresy into Truth. One way to end the threat is through making the offenders one of their own.

- **America as a Christian Nation:** God’s Chosen live in the nation that Evangelicals consider the New Israel, so any threat against America is also an attack against God. In addition, any dilution of the United States as a Christian nation is seen as a slide toward losing its identity, power, and favor with God. Its Christian identity is to be fiercely defended and preserved, which also speaks against allowing “the Other” into our nation to work and live.

- **Logical Certitude:** The issues and events surrounding September 11th can be fashioned, in post hoc, ergo propter hoc fashion, as confirming evangelical claims and explanations concerning events and issues as well as justifying evangelical positions against non-Christians, especially Muslims and the Islamic faith. To the Evangelical, the events substantiate their faith and claims to the world.

- **Charismatic Leader:** Clearly, Pat Robertson serves as the source of knowledge, wisdom, and guidance, the filter through which Islam and Muslims are defined to The 700 Club audience.

- **Culture/Worldliness:** American secular culture presents a pluralism that is anathema to Pat Robertson’s vision of America, a pluralism that affirms competing belief systems and would allow the inclusion of the practice of Islam in this country.

It is apparent that, using such devices as representative anecdotes and rhetorical narratives, Robertson has effectively blurred the borders and situated Islam and Muslims within the same frame as militant Islam, radical Muslims, and terrorists. Robertson’s 700 Club has defined militant Islam and the associated terrorism as only the most conspicuous manifestation of what is represented as an evil yet powerful belief system: the Islamic faith. Indeed, given the starkly competing claims Islam presents to a dualistic Evangelical Christian worldview and given the rise and establishment of Islam, through immigration and conversion, as an ethnic, cultural, and political force in the United States and in other Western nations—as well as the challenge Islam is perceived to present to the Judeo-Christian dominance in this country and the West—Islam can only be viewed as a threat that strikes at the very core of an Evangelical Christian’s beliefs and therefore must be portrayed that way.
REFERENCES

