THESIS

# WHO GETS DOMINION OVER US? A BURKIAN ANALYSIS IDENTIFYING JESUS IN THE *HE GETS US* CAMPAIGN

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ABSTRACT

WHO GETS DOMINION OVER US? A BURKIAN ANALYSIS IDENTIFYING JESUS IN THE *HE GETS US* CAMPAIGN

In 2024, political scientist Paul Djupe found that 40 percent of American Christian adults believe "God wants Christians to stand atop the '7 mountains of society,' including the government, education, media, and others." Capitalizing on these Christian desires is the Christian Evangelical mass marketing effort, "He Gets Us" (HEGU), which advertises Jesus' narrative to America as a relatable source of values-based practices to endure the current historical moment. It is a privileged instantiation of Christian discourse in the public sphere that provokes questions of 1) Who is the Jesus represented in the campaign, 2) Who is behind it, and 3) What are their motives? In this thesis, I investigate HEGU as a manifestation of a Christian doctrine called Dominionism, which aims in part to control the media landscape in the U.S. I utilize Kenneth Burke's theory of persuasion by identification to examine the campaign's strategic presentation of Jesus as a rhetorical means of moving audiences towards a Christian value system. My analysis looks at a limited set of texts and 13 images used by HEGU related to the loving act of foot washing. This study builds off the work of religious studies scholar Stephen Prothero's 2003 examination of the cultural figure of Jesus throughout American history as a "Rorschach test of ever-changing national sensibilities." I examine how the man from Nazareth is being sold through visual and textual website materials that mirror the marketers' ideological beliefs around social conflict. While HEGU claims to be spreading the authentic word of Jesus, their message

privileges the beliefs of the wealthy conservative Christian class. This novel partnership between popular mass marketing and Christian cultural reform politics is a harbinger of future Christianizing media in the public sphere, and in response I suggest a critical need for attending to religious discourse. These discourses shape our students and thus their writing, which demands our attention to those enculturating religious messages.

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# Chapter 1 - Introduction

WWJD?

Many Christians are familiar with this acronym. Even a non-Christian reader may recognize the phrase beneath it offering a guiding question when faced with a choice to make: What would Jesus do? As shorthand wisdom for making neighborly decisions, I don't believe it's a bad approach. But recently I have come to the think that in 2025, it really depends on which Jesus we're talking about.

Growing up as a believing Christian for most of my adolescent years, there was nobody better to aspire to be than Jesus himself. From the day I was born, Christianity was the best way to believe in my family. Nothing less than reverence for the Savior above was recognized throughout my home, my school, my friends, and my media consumption. What I knew as "secular" entertainment was thoroughly mixed in, but ultimately I knew to be wary of it. Even though I haven't been a practicing or believing Christian for the past 12 years, that kind of upbringing deeply affects the way I perceive the world still to this day. It's one of the literacies I grew up with, and I can't help but be attuned to the Christian symbols and language that appear even in ostensibly secular places in my everyday experience. In this country, they can be hard to avoid, but this is nothing new. "In God We Trust" is on every denomination of our currency, nativity scenes sit on lawns across the nation every winter, and every participant in a courtroom takes their oath of honesty on a Bible.

What is new, however, is "He Gets Us," which is a nationwide advertising campaign meant to soften up the public to the idea of a Christian-run country. Their messages are at professional baseball games, hockey games, and NASCAR races; they

are found on YouTube, entwined in Reddit feeds, and penciled into Super Bowl coverage for three consecutive years. "He Gets Us" (abbreviated as HEGU throughout) is a sleek marketing campaign spanning virtually every popular social media platform with video, images, and text revolving around the idea that "He"—Jesus—"gets us." He understands our struggles, our frustrations, and our pains. The campaign is filled with depictions of people from different backgrounds, all with the aim of trying to sell a particular narrative of Jesus as someone who relates to them. Believers have been trying to spread the good word of the Bible for millennia, but this is the first time that there has been an entire marketing apparatus dedicated to getting that message out to an entire country on a repeated basis, straight into homes and personal devices. It is an incursion of religiosity into citizens' lives, believers or not, and there is a whole production team behind the scenes crafting it and tweaking it according to best marketing principles.

Examining HEGU on multiple rhetorical levels as a well-financed marketing campaign frames how I evaluate the motivation(s) underlying its production. It is a mass media phenomenon with nothing for purchase, so what is HEGU "selling?" That is the starting point for the inquiry I undertake here. Critical audiences would do well to ask in addition, as with any marketing campaign: What are its purposes? For whom is the message intended? Who is authoring it, and what are those authors' affiliations and ethos? In order to grasp the motives of the ad campaign, there needs to be an understanding of its genealogy, tracing its rhetorical situation and interrogating what alternative purposes, if any, lie beyond the cover of a traditional Evangelical echo to love thy neighbor as thyself according to Jesus' example.

It isn't just the fact that HEGU is a novel marketing act with a distinctly Christian approach that draws my critical analysis. I see HEGU's appearance as a kairotic

occurrence, emerging alongside other masses of Christian influence in the current socio-political climate of the U.S. With the re-election of Donald Trump to the presidency, once again relying on the Christian vote (Smitana, 2024; PRRI, 2024), there is a new and devoted effort to re-shape the culture of the U.S. according to a Christian fundamentalist value system. Throughout the new administration, a particular version of Christian imperatives pervade. At his inauguration, Trump himself proclaimed he was "saved by God to make America great again." Immediately after being confirmed as the new Secretary of Defense, Pete Hegseth's first words were "All praise and glory to God, His will be done." Russell Vought, one of the architects of Project 2025–a detailed policy manual for how to remake the government in a radically right-wing vision–has been appointed as the new budget chief. And an executive order has been signed establishing an "Anti-Christian Bias Taskforce" in order to root out supposed anti-Christian bias within the federal government. It's a suspect mission when the most consequential positions of authority are filled by individuals whose strategy aims at the supremacy of Christianity. Such fundamentalist adherents want to turn America into a Christian theocracy, a government run according to their interpretation of Biblical law, also known as a theonomy. It is in this unsettling historical situation that HEGU must be examined, as it exists at a time when self-proclaimed Christians are increasingly open about their intentions to mold America in the shape of their version of a Christianity that holds new imperatives.

### Dominionists and the Seven Mountains Mandate

The particular name given to this reconstructive effort to install Christian authority at every level of society is Dominionism, a once-obscure strain of American Christianity that has been growing in popularity and political power over the last decade or so

(Clarkson, 2016; Ladner, 2022; PRRI, 2023). One forthright believer is House Speaker Mike Johnson. He's a "Bible-believing Christian" who belongs to the parallel evangelical movement called the New Apostolic Reformation, which appoints "apostles" who aim to carry out the Christian takeover (Davis, 2023). Key political positions in the U.S. government are currently occupied by adherents to this notion, but all Christians have a role to play in making it a reality and increasingly view it as a necessity. According to political scientist Paul Djupe at Dennison University, 41 percent of American Christian adults believe in this God-ordained mission (2024). That number represents an increase of 10 percent from 2023, reflecting the rapid adoption of this idea within Christian circles. Kery Ladner (2022) in *The Christian Century* describes the Dominionist doctrine as arguing "that Christians can and must reform society so that it becomes progressively better. Only then will Christ return." Rather than wait for God's return, Dominionists feel that Christians are anointed to create a Christian society here on Earth, which will *then* bring on the Lord's return. Because Dominionists act on God's will, this takeover is not negotiable. It is a question of good vs. evil, and this duality is reflected politically in the religious right's contempt for anything perceived to oppose its political mission.

One prominent example of Dominionism's plan is Project 2025, referenced above and made famous during Trump's third presidential campaign. It lays out the playbook for taking control of or dismantling the governing apparatuses of America believed to prop up an illegitimate political order. Those supporting such an institutional takeover are referred to as Christian Nationalists, and they view the new administration as champions of their desire to see Christian cultural values and policies take control over the nation's laws. Christian Nationalists believe that Christian spiritual authority,

manifested in divinely anointed leaders, overrules consensually agreed upon democratic governance. According to a 2024 survey by the Public Religion Research Institute, “roughly three in ten Americans qualify as Christian nationalism adherents or sympathizers,” showing that this movement is not some fringe belief system. Project 2025 reflects the belief in the necessity of Christian influence in the government. In important respects, this victory is a long-desired outcome of Reagan-era movements like Jerry Falwell’s Moral Majority, which mobilized conservative Christians as a political force and grew through the efforts of Republican politicians such as one-time House Speaker Newt Gingrich. But the government is only one dimension of Dominionists’ vision.

At the center of the overall Dominionist mission is the idea of the Seven Mountains Mandate, which asserts that Christians must take control of not just the government, but the entire “seven mountains” of culture in America: business, education, entertainment, family, government, media, and religion (Morgan, 2025). Evangelical preacher Lance Wallnau released *Invading Babylon* in 2013, which originated the name and outlined the contours of the Seven Mountains Mandate, popularizing it with modern Christian audiences. In it, he claims, “By rejecting the culture, we reject our spiritual authority to influence that culture. In the last days, however, there is no neutral territory” (Lehmann, 2024). Not only does the mandate proclaim spiritual authority to influence culture but it leaves no room for neutrality, only opposition that must be defeated. Adherents of Dominionism and the worldview of the Seven Mountains Mandate could reasonably be considered zealots, uncompromising in their religious pursuit. With a clear grasp on the government “mountain” already achieved, I suspect that plans pertaining to the remaining six are underway.

Amidst this Dominionist encroachment, HEGU appears to make its own claim for Christian influence in the arena of mass public media, clearly connecting to the "media" mountain. This observation tracks with Federalist Society leader Leonard Leo's comments to NPR in November 2024 about "crushing liberal dominance" of American culture in Wall Street, Silicon Valley, and Hollywood (Inskeep, 11/25/24). Leo is one of the architects of Project 2025 and was a key figure for getting Neil Gorsuch and Amy Coney Barrett appointed to the Supreme Court. In this interview, he expresses the intention to transform the media landscape of the U.S. to be more explicitly conservative and Christian. Clearly he is referring to the "media" mountain of the Seven Mountains Mandate. It's in the midst of this rhetoric that HEGU begins to take on a more sinister character. While not overtly visible as a play for Christian cultural dominance, HEGU may intuitively be seen as action for taking over the "religion" mountain. However, my attention is placed on the insidious way that HEGU is playing a part in softening up the public to Christian dominion through control of the "media" mountain.

Rhetorical scholarship has not been totally ignorant of Dominionism's rising influence. In 2008, rhetorician Sharon Crowley warned about the increasing political involvement of Christian Fundamentalists in her book *Towards a Civil Discourse: Rhetoric and Fundamentalism*. She expressed concerns about the inadequacy of liberal argumentation against rising apocalyptic Christian arguments which aren't amendable to the tolerant, rational reasoning that liberal rhetoric employs. She observed how "a version of Christian fundamentalism is in hegemonic contention with liberalism because it motivates the political activism of the Christian Right" (p. 5). Her concern proved prescient. Kristina Lee's (2022) recent research in *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* examines the rise of Christian Nationalists' legislative efforts that try to use the motto "In God We

Trust" as a logical basis for justifying Christian laws and policies. Similarly, Jonathan Edwards' (2024) biographical study of the immensely influential conservative theologian RJ Rushdooney, intellectual founder of the "Christian Reconstructionist" movement, relates the movement's vision for "a new totality—an end beyond democratic politics—based on the absolute dominion of God's law and the unquestionable authority of White, Christian men." Rushdooney was a fierce advocate for the Christian homeschooling movement, and his writings were early inspirations for the Seven Mountains Mandate. His fight to insulate children's education from secular influence is emblematic of Dominionists' zealous belief that American society must turn away from what is ungodly and toward a fundamentally Christian way of life.

I pair a focus on HEGU's mass media presence with the idea that its function can fairly be assessed as contributing to the Dominionist takeover of the "education" mountain as well. Advertisements do their share of socially educating us. Critical cultural theorist Joe Kincheloe uses the term "cultural pedagogy" to refer to "the ways dominant cultural agents produce particular hegemonic ways of seeing" (2012, p. 164). These agents can take the form of television, movies, music, and, pertinent to this discussion, advertisements. The idea of cultural pedagogy, as Kincheloe uses it, recognizes that the media we consume and are exposed to also carry an educational function by imparting messages about how the world is and how it works. In his view, "the notion of 'cultural pedagogy' asserts the new 'educators' in the electronically wired contemporary era are those who possess the financial resources to use mass media" (p. 164). Pairing this idea with Leonard Leo's plan to bring more conservative influences to public U.S. media places HEGU in a new light. To the extent that I consider HEGU a Dominionist actor, my suspicion is that they have "branded" Jesus in a way that

comports with Dominionist goals of harnessing mass media to their own ends. Whatever cultural teaching HEGU is doing through Jesus aligns with the Dominionist goal of taking over the "media" mountain of America. By doing so, I believe they intend to make the mass media milieu in America a place where only Christian-approved messaging is allowed free expression to a public that has become desensitized to it.

**Who Has the Privilege of Preaching for Jesus?**

So, in a nation as dominated by Christianity as the US is, who is controlling the narrative and the representation of Jesus? Who *gets to*? Who is speaking for him, and–more importantly–*through* him? This gets at the foundational inquiry of this research as it investigates the He Get Us campaign as an organized and public instance of Jesus being appropriated to spread a nationwide message about Him, and by extension, Christianity. The public is being taught things about Christianity through this effort, and as language and writing educators, it falls within our sphere of concern to know what those things are and why they are being done. Being surrounded by pervasive Christianity in this country demands that critical thinkers interpret the cultural sites that the American Christian religion inhabits. Religious studies scholar Diane Moore's (2006) cultural studies method is a way to approach the study of religion by situating it within context-specific historical and social circumstances. A social-cultural or deeply contextual approach to religious literacy is central to her research, and it informs the approach I am taking in my research. I hope to provide an overarching analysis of HEGU wherein Christianity is not placed in some privileged epistemological or ideological position but is situated as the dominant religious force in this country. As a dominant ideology, it is not immune to but instead requires critique; and writing and rhetoric scholars may be uniquely qualified to provide such critique.

I see this work as carrying on the historiographic research of religious studies scholar Stephen Prothero's *American Jesus* (2003), which examines the way that the figure of Jesus has evolved and changed in American culture since the early days of the republic. HEGU is different from previous narratives about Jesus, however; HEGU is explicitly conducted as a form of near ubiquitous marketing, and it acts persuasively in rhetorically appropriate ways. My study looks at this latest manifestation of Jesus by HEGU as an attempt to re-position Jesus to the public on a national stage, and conceivably as a nationally unifying figure. What is it trying to do? What are its aims? What do they want us to do to be like Jesus? And why? One hypothesis is that HEGU is an attempt to reframe Jesus as the *sina qua non* of role models, which is reason enough for this campaign to deserve rhetorical scrutiny. Framing Jesus as a cultural figure isolates him from theological conversations and allows Him to be read as a situated instance of public Christian broadcast akin to a public service announcement. This is preaching in a novel way, and we should understand the social values that Jesus is being positioned to endorse.

It is also an escalation, without alarm, fearmongering, or hyperbole. There is a narrative being constructed that is nonviolent, even pastoral. It is a retelling and a seemingly innocuous attempt to persuade using the most widely familiar figure, probably ever. This instance of religious mass public indoctrination being normalized or even pastoralized is troubling. In a similar way as we can imagine that there was a time before pharmaceutical companies advertised on air, so too might this be the start of open Christian campaigns across US public media. This is the escalation. Students might grow up where this is a genteel form of state propaganda. Jesus is, after all, canonically one of history's greatest teachers (Ferdinando, 2013). His grand public

appearance must not escape serious criticism, especially as it starts to implicate the "education" mountain being overtaken by Christianity through HEGU's extracurricular form of sermons disguised as advertisements. The goal is to impart ethical lessons in Christian behavior. Can we imagine other religions doing something like this? No! It's a bit absurd to think about. My response is to investigate an effort which *has,* already, appropriated the name of Jesus and His teachings in the name of "us."

**Who Does Jesus Get?**

This "us," however, requires closer scrutiny. An obvious motive behind a massive marketing campaign like this is to sell something–in this case, an idea. The idea is that "we" should be like Jesus; HEGU's representation of Jesus, to be exact. There is no mistaking the proselytizing impulse behind such a manifestation of American Christianity. Bill McKendry, the founder and Chief Creative Officer of BrandHaven, the agency behind HEGU, spoke about the campaign's goals with *Christianity Today*, saying, "Is the goal that people become Christians? Obviously. But more importantly for now… we need to raise their level of respect for Jesus, and then they'll move" (Baer, 2022) They have a target audience in mind for these would-be converts. "We're trying to get the message across to people who are spiritually open, but skeptical," says BrandHaven president Jason Vanderground (Meyer, 2023). It's Marketing 101: You gotta know who your audience is. But this calls attention to another disturbing notion of the campaign; this marketing-informed attitude means those targeted consumers are being treated to a different message than what should be the universal gospel of Jesus. It's instead a demographically tailored version made to appeal to non-believers. McKendry even explicitly states, "The church needs to understand that this campaign isn't for them" (Baer, 2022). What else are we supposed to call that but proselytizing? Or

maybe just plain old preaching? This is a public sermon to people who have not asked for it. Churches are never far from wherever you live in America; people know where to go for the Gospel. But this is different in that it evangelizes in a well-financed way and reaches a broad non-assenting public. HEGU has decided that Jesus, or at least the Jesus ad campaign, will come to get not just you but the whole of the U.S.

This study of HEGU clarifies not only who that envisioned audience is but also informs a reading of this modern American Jesus who is proclaimed to be just that empathetic role model we can, and should, all emulate. The peculiar thing is that, considering the visual based campaign that HEGU is, they never actually show a depiction of Jesus. They insist, however, that He was (is?) just like the demographic slice most directly targeted by their probing marketing metrics. What they want to happen is for “someone to see themselves in Jesus.” That’s according to Hobby Lobby founder David Green, one of the campaign’s principle financial supporters (Donald, 2023). But there are no reproduced images of Jesus, so how do they expect that to happen? Their solution is simple and rhetorically smart: They depict “us” in place of Jesus. “This is what Jesus did in that situation,” so this is what *you* should do too. Their claim is that the ameliorative attitude of Jesus is the only way forward in this messed up world of conflict and grief. HEGU’s imagery shows exactly where they imagine the audience dealing with the hardest societal battles, and this is the mirror they hold up to the world of their audience and the audience themselves. The whole campaign is heavily image-based and frequently uses pictures of modern-day people. I try to reflect that feature in this thesis. Examples from the website (seen below) show how HEGU often uses imagery alongside text to ask audiences to identify with Jesus, claiming that He too could be described in such contemporary parlance as:

The Rebel

The Influencer

Refugee

There is no realm where Jesus was not equipped with the proper wisdom to act. By narrativizing Jesus into our modern-day struggles, HEGU intends to sell the Jesus-like approach to the ideological locations where we supposedly clash the most. In this way, HEGU may be seen as creating a sort of “popular Christianity,” one that anybody could

agree with and emulate. Of the many actions we could be advised to take in response to adversarial conflict, one primary act recommended by HEGU is a quintessential Jesus act: the washing of feet.

The parable of Jesus washing feet happens the night He is going to die (John 13: 4-17, New King James Version). As one of His final lessons to His twelve disciples, Jesus washes each of their feet. While some disciples initially refuse to allow their teacher, friend, and savior to perform the job typically done by servants, Jesus insists that they would have no place with Him if they refuse. Jesus undertakes this act as an example of how they, and everyone, should act. If He could do it for all of His disciples, even Judas Iscariot, who Jesus knew would go on to betray Him, then they could do it as well. The lesson is about being humble and serving others. Nobody is so above another that they cannot treat all with such humility.

Foot washing imagery is the most image-heavy depiction of a discrete act displayed by HEGU, and it's the "us" pictured in it that I give my attention to. I use Kenneth Burke's rhetorical theory of identification to examine the campaign rhetoric around the notion of "foot washing" in HEGU's image and textual materials. By applying this theory, I analyze the campaign's method of creating consubstantiality between the audience and Jesus himself. Consubstantiality refers to the rhetorical strategy of creating a sense of sameness or similar substance between a rhetor and their audience. The more this occurs, the greater the likelihood that the American public will gradually come to accept Christian forms of social relations that invite, if passively, Biblical doctrines. This appeal to mutual identification subsequently reveals how viewers are being encouraged to change their attitudes and behavior to fit the goals of Christian suasion and comport with Dominionist goals to Christianize the public's value system.

The camaraderie of Jesus might be welcome today in 2025, in what is widely understood as a fractured and fraught time, and this notion may confer a certain amount of grace for HEGU from an uncritical audience. I know from my own Christian background that good people readily associate with Christianity and Jesus' lessons. This includes many people who raised me, my mother included, and I know she is a good person because she helped to raise me into the good person I believe I am. I've seen the good it can do in a person's life. In a hellscape of consumerist capitalism and violent neoliberalism, religion is something that provides support, release, safety, and community. People look to things for comfort and direction, and a reason for the conditions humans have to endure. When you don't have anything else, you can find a god.

But is HEGU's version one we should feel comfortable with? Whereas Jesus approached people with humility, HEGU's splashy appearances during the Super Bowl are anything but. From the outset, the form that HEGU's Jesus takes is not like the Jesus of the Bible. The media strategy on display is one of grand scale, and even the private delivery of their messages across social media platforms speaks to the pervasive nature of HEGU's targeting tactics. It implies the message that *they* know who needs Jesus, and what people need to hear of Jesus' message. HEGU's Jesus is born of arrogance, with the work proudly paraded while it fails to benefit anyone in any immediate sense. HEGU hopes to make a spectacle of Jesus' story and a nationally unifying force of His words as they are spread during the country's largest remaining shared civic events. It contrasts with Jesus' humble message of compassion and forgiveness that I was raised to emulate, and as a rhetorician, I am compelled to analyze HEGU's market-driven message in comparison.

In this thesis, I start by sharing some contextualizing background information about the rhetors behind HEGU, such as the funding and marketing agents that support it. I then lay out my review of the literature which explores the current ideas about religion in other disciplines such as religious studies and follows my own tracing of developments in rhetoric and composition scholarship that pertains. After explaining my methodology and reasons for examining foot washing, I present and explain my analysis of HEGU's idealist depictions of Jesus' ameliorative act using Kenneth Burke's rhetorical theory of persuasion by identification. I undertake an abbreviated Burkian analysis of the specific rhetorical approaches used in the foot-washing texts of the HEGU campaign. My hypothesis is that these images can be perceived as a Dominionist reflection of desire for American socio-cultural values. The world that is projected depicts the manifestations of a nation made subservient to Christian influence. By interrogating the ideological values that seep through, I show what implicit lessons Jesus is being co-opted to teach. There is a Dominionist message here that is an attempt to influence audiences to passively accede to a gradual transformation of America's social order.

As a result of this research, I am led to posit, ultimately, that Jesus is a figure that can and needs to be recovered. He first needs to be contextualized and situated, yes, but the fact that he *can* be resituated is meaningful because Jesus has indeed taken on different causes and driven different efforts and ideologies (Prothero, 2003). I worry about him in 2025. It has been a strange way for me to come back to Jesus. He has become something different for me since the reunion, and after getting reacquainted, I believe you might also want to keep an eye on the person called Jesus, particularly as depicted in the HEGU campaign.

# Chapter 2 - Background

## The Collaboration Behind HEGU

Because HEGU is a novel and niche instance of rhetoric, I will provide background information that I believe is necessary to understand the context of my overarching argument. It is important to know something about the various actors who are collaborating to make HEGU happen. It's not just an isolated occurrence, no one-shot ad buy. Sustained marketing—creating an ongoing *campaign*—is about creating a narrative (Alonso, 2024), and HEGU is being operated by those with an intentional desire to create one. The relationship between HEGU and Jesus is analogous to the act of a ventriloquist, who speaks in such a way that it appears their voice is coming from a different location. The advertising messages appear to be coming from Jesus, but there is a collection of operators making it appear as such. Who is claiming to speak for Him and having Him say that He "gets" us? Who is the "us" that these actors have in mind? By examining and closely scrutinizing these voices, I simultaneously hope to lend credence to my earlier stated suspicions of HEGU supporting Christian Dominionist goals, specifically ones that strive for Christianity to be the prevailing cultural force shaping America's media landscape.

To guide this inquiry, I attend to various sources of dialogue pertaining to HEGU's ongoing operation. I source quotes from interviews with those responsible for HEGU, take excerpts from news outlets, and make comparisons with language from HeGetsUs.com and other websites that relate to the campaign. Some of the diverse outlets HEGU gets popular attention from include *Rolling Stone*, *Associated Press*, and *Christian Broadcasting Network*. Their messages also appear behind home plate in

MLB games, on the stadium screens of NHL arenas, on Ty Gibb's Nascar wrap, and as ads placed prominently (and expensively at $8 million per 30-second promotion) during the Super Bowl for three years in a row now. With an outwardly religious appeal and at this large advertising scale, it was bound to draw both media coverage and scrutiny from an array of observers. In response to scrutiny, the rhetoric of the Christian faith typically defends its mission in manifold terms of God's will, divine intervention, revelation, prophecy, or Biblical tenets for its language of justification. With HEGU on the scene, Christianity is articulated through the language of "marketing." A specific form of Jesus' gospel is being jammed into the national media landscape of America, and it is marketers' voices who provide the keys to understanding the strategies of campaign narrative. Their words open the gate to understanding HEGU's story.

When it comes to statements and interviews about HEGU, the Minnesota-based marketing firm BrandHaven is the public-facing voice. It is a modern marketing team with years of professional advertising experience, values statements, sleek websites, and anything else one would expect from a high-level marketing operation. It *looks* good, and it features people who know what they are doing. Given that, one might correctly suspect BrandHaven to be quite welcoming of most varieties of attention because that's what carries cultural currency. Media platforms are well-suited to the story-sharing attitude of Evangelical strains of Christianity so common throughout Christian America. Accordingly, top management at BrandHaven is quite upfront about what HEGU is trying to do. The firm's President and HEGU co-creator Jason Vanderground helpfully proclaims their message is for "people who are spiritually open, but skeptical" (Meyer, 2023). This quote is notable for making plain that the story of Jesus is explicitly positioned as being targeted toward a particular group. HEGU's message is also *not*

targeted at other possible demographics. Going by what Vanderground said, HEGU is implicitly *not* for people that already believe in Jesus of the Christian faith. This campaign directive makes sense. Why would Christians market to other Christians who are likely already on board with Jesus and His message?

It is not surprising that a well-done marketing campaign is going to be rhetorically crafted for effectiveness with a specific audience, yet the fact that HEGU's Christian message has a target audience bears consideration. The candid nature of this admission and others already signals, as is natural in any piece of communication, that the message is being crafted to fit a particular audience's expectations. Gone is the pretense to a strict interpretation of the Bible as they confess the obvious: that the campaign has been curated with a demographic segment in mind. HEGU's creative direction is confident enough in its approach to even explicitly rebuke the audience that is nominally aligned with their message. "The church needs to understand that this campaign isn't for them, it's for Jesus," says BrandHaven founder and Chief Creative Officer Bill McKendry. "It's to reach an audience we're not currently reaching" (Baer, 2022). He plainly explains that HEGU is about Christians—perhaps the "we" in his quote?— addressing non-Christians about Jesus, His story, and His answers to modern day issues. This does not sound far removed from preaching, or perhaps proselytizing, on the national media stage. If there is a version of Jesus' message that is more suited to non-believers than believers, then that means the target audience is being delivered an adjusted message, different from what existing believers would get.

Some people were suspicious of this message from the beginning. HEGU's very first Facebook post came on November 15th, 2021. Days later, on the 18th, user 'Bee Kay' commented, "Beware. These people are redefining Jesus of the Bible." It looks like quite

a prescient proclamation. The reception to HEGU's Jesus reveals a startling rejection. One look at any comments sections below one of HEGU's professionally produced videos, across YouTube or Facebook, shows that self-identifying Christian commenters have *a lot* of issues with it, some quite damning. There are claims of heresy, of inaccuracy, and what might be the worst accusation to some, wokeness. There is something repulsive about HEGU in the eyes of many Christian viewers. But if we take McKendry at his word, then the campaign's strategists are not concerned with self-proclaimed Christians who may be among those people who hate it the most.

I don't know if Bee Kay had any knowledge of who "these people" are, or if that information was accessible or available at the time of the comment, but the skepticism is well-founded. There is enough public information now to be able to construct an insightful picture of "who" the founding investors are, which can substantiate claims about rhetorical motivations. After all, BrandHaven is a consulting firm. They do marketing on someone's behalf, not of their own accord. The identity of the investors is at once narrowed by one of the primary critiques of the campaign: it takes huge sums of money to produce. Attacks on the claims come from many different commenters, as the hypocrisy is seemingly obvious to many. What people are most ready to levy against HEGU is the choice to spend such vast amounts of money on *this*. On advertising, rather than putting that money to use assisting the needy. It's more than a fair critique as HEGU's very first nationwide commercial came during the Super Bowl.

HEGU is the biggest campaign for Jesus in history, according to BrandHaven's website, and this kind of high-profile location is showy evidence supporting an initiative with broad objectives. Very few groups could kick off an advertising campaign like this. There is nothing grassroots or community-based about it. What's striking about HEGU's

emergence is that it is simply economically unfeasible for most groups trying to spread a message. In 2023 alone, their made-for-the-Super-Bowl advertisements cost roughly $20 million. It has been unhindered by financial considerations since day one. What got HEGU started was an initial budget of $100 million provided by 75 wealthy anonymous donors, and a year later, the budget was $300 million (White, 2023). According to Vanderground, "the goal is to invest about a billion dollars over the next three years" (Smietana, 2023). He goes on to clarify that that's just "phase one."

Where is all this money coming from, and who is giving it? That information is largely unknown, in part because it is not the project of any single individual. HEGU was originally started by a non-profit group called the Servant Christian Foundation, now mainly referred to as the Signatry, which serves as a Christian donor advised fund. Donor advised funds are 501(c)(3) nonprofit entities that perform as investment vehicles for wealthy individuals who are looking for anonymity and assistance when they choose something to invest in. A donor establishes a donor advised fund with a qualified sponsor like the Signatry and makes tax-deductible donations into the fund. The sponsor legally controls the fund and works together with the donor to make grants based on the donor's stated preferences. So actors who want to financially support HEGU set up a donor advised fund to funnel tax-deductible money toward the marketing effort. Wealthy people want to be able to make large gifts without needing to set up their own foundation, and not only is a donor advised fund generally a simple way to do that, it is also apparently popular with Evangelical investors, according to Maria Baer of Christianity Today (2022).

For HEGU's investors, it appears that the legal anonymity granted to them and their contributions as a result of using the Signatry's services is useful for directing

funds because it keeps their identities secret. A benefit specific to the Signatry is that it pursues goals that go beyond operating as a donor advised fund sponsor and is "more importantly a Christian ministry seeking to build the Kingdom of God by inspiring world-changing generosity" (The Signatry). So the general profile of a HEGU donor is Christian, wealthy, and interested in promulgating a more Christian society, all of which align with the identity and goals of Dominionist actors. Jesus is being constructed from the top-down perspective of these wealthy, anonymous individuals who have vested interests in maintaining their wealth and power and therefore will align HEGU's messaging with forces that will preserve it. It is they who are choosing to ventriloquize Jesus, and they direct the message from a rhetorical position of obscurity and privilege.

**Insight From Behind the Scenes**

One exception to the desire for anonymity is David Green, the founder and CEO of Hobby Lobby, who is open about his major investment in HEGU. His sponsorship provides a window into the thinking behind those supporting HEGU's cause. Hobby Lobby is semi-famous for court battles over insurance requirements to provide employees with birth control and contesting trans employees' rights to use the bathroom which accords with their gender identity. Hobby Lobby has been involved in legal battles reflecting many of the most heated cultural issues of our time and represents a clear right-wing Christian faction. The values displayed as a result of these controversies are another clue into the ideological makeup of those financing HEGU. In a podcast hosted by popular Conservative political commentator Glenn Beck, Green talks about HEGU in a manner that casually implies the mission of Dominionism within. A short excerpt is below:

> Green: *You're gonna see it at the Super Bowl, "He Gets Us." So we're wanting to say—'we' being a lot of different people—that He gets us, He understands all of us. He loves who we hate, and so I think we need to let the public know and create a movement, really.*
>
> Beck: *But that's a different movement. I agree with you on that, there's lots we have to do. But that's one of the most important movements I've heard, if that's the movement you're doing. He loves those who hate us. So, we have to find a way to love—it doesn't mean don't stand against it. You've got to be firm and clear on your stance, and I'm not moving. But I can't* hate *them.*
>
> Green: *That's right. We have to present the only answer to this, and it's not politics. And you've already said it it's Him. It's Jesus who died for us, loves us. And until we accept Him and know Him and His scriptures and His book that He's given us, we can't settle the problems we have.*
>
> (Beck, 2022, emphases mine)

In Green's words, it's only Jesus and the Christian message that can fix America's existential woes through His love, as aligned with Dominionists who would agree and use this as a moral pretense for enacting social change of a certain sort and clearly out of step with grassroots social change which seeks to unseat power rather than reassert it. While HEGU's overt messaging may be one of mutual identification with Jesus, Green enunciates the political and social philosophy that inspires the effort. This is the intent that other similarly minded donors likely also share with Green when it comes to mutual motives for supporting HEGU. They at least believe that Jesus needs to be brought to the masses, which is odd because people who want to read the Bible in America would find it very easy to do at no cost and with little inconvenience. Plus, church workers

abound that would explain it to curious non-believers and help guide their encounter. Instead, Jesus, His scriptures, His book, and His narrative are all now being reworked and retold to unconsenting masses across America. He gets you, and now He'll get you in locations across the mass media landscape.

**Jesus, not Christianity**

What is important to note is that the campaign is specifically centered around "Jesus" and not "Christianity." Advertising in the name of Christianity could be a fraught pursuit in the United States when it's so entangled in current national and state politics. That's perhaps why HEGU chose to center Jesus as the messenger. Their reasoning may also have to do with a 2023 poll conducted by Ipsos on behalf of the Episcopal Church, which found that while 84% of Americans (including 50% of non-religious respondents) believe Jesus was an important spiritual figure, about half of non-Christians associate Christians with such traits as hypocrisy, being judgmental, and self-righteousness. According to BrandHaven founder Bill McKendry, the market research found "skeptics were more likely to be convinced their values lined up with Jesus' than other religious figures" (Baer, 2022). Barna Group (2023) is the consulting group that HEGU got its audience attitude metrics from, and their research shows 58% of non-Christian and 40% of non-religious people have a positive view of Jesus, compared to 36% and 21% respectively who have a positive view of Christianity itself. The numbers are even lower when asked about Evangelicals. Just 24% of Christians and 9% of non-religious people have a positive view of Evangelical Christianity. In short, Americans like Jesus and His message more than they like Christianity or its followers. I would imagine HEGU is aware that people likely already have preconceived notions of Christianity (the beliefs, the desires, the history), and HEGU doesn't want those preconceptions to get in the way

of their message. There is baggage which accompanies Christianity that Jesus as a figure does not have.

HEGU shows the lack of desire to associate themselves with Christianity based on how infrequently that word appears throughout their website. On their FAQ, they consistently distance themselves from it and recourse to language that emphasizes their goal of being for *everyone*. Two examples from the FAQ illustrate this point:

*"Is He Gets Us affiliated with a certain religion?"*

- It's about Jesus, so it's certainly affiliated with Christianity, but our point is that the story of Jesus doesn't belong to anyone. It has something to offer everyone.

*"Who is behind He Gets Us?"*

- The movement is not funded by or affiliated with any single individual, political position, church, or faith denomination. We have a coalition of supporters who represent a variety of lived experiences that have led them to wildly different perspectives on many things.

Even while they admit that the connection to Christianity is there, the focus of HEGU is trying to stay on Jesus. However, they also don't seem to want to make direct statements about who they think He *is*. Their FAQ features the question, "Who does He Gets Us believe Jesus is?" which seems straightforward enough. However, it's answered by the near-dodge answers of "we believe there is something in the story of Jesus for everyone," and "many of those collaborating with He Gets Us believe Jesus is who the Bible says he is." These responses don't disclose much besides a desire to generalize and slough off the responsibility of subjecting the depiction of Jesus to scholarly and theological interpretation. Instead, there is a stated belief that he was "human and

divine" and "rose from the dead," which is attributed to the latest group to take over the HEGU project, called Come Near. Shifting the scene to Come Near's website provides the clearest view yet of HEGU explaining their ventriloquist act with Jesus.

**What HEGU Wants From Jesus**

In 2024, HEGU changed hands and is now being run by a new non-profit named Come Near, which features David Green's son, Mart, on its board of directors. They describe themselves as "an idea and innovation studio" on their FAQ. HEGU is characterized as just "one of our projects that we acquired," which is "focused on (re)introducing people to Jesus and inviting them to explore his life and teachings in today's context." What carries weight for this investigation, however, is other writing in their FAQ that claims, "We create disruptive and personally engaging stories and experiences that reveal the *authentic* Jesus" (emphasis mine). Elsewhere on the FAQ they claim to be "creating space to doubt, question, and learn from the authentic Jesus." Their stance appears to be that HEGU, now run by Come Near, has the authority and knowledge to make it clear who Jesus *really* is. They are making a claim to Jesus, but by claiming rights to the "authentic" Jesus, they are instilling themselves with the authority to do so. They have given themselves permission.

Why do they think they can do that? It's an unearned authoritative stance to take when, as shown earlier, they claim on the HEGU website that "the story of Jesus belongs to everyone." Those behind HEGU contradict themselves when they ventriloquize and preach on Jesus' behalf while simultaneously claiming that nobody owns His story. There is tension in this message between the marketing having a target audience of skeptics and the website claiming the story is for everyone. A plausible explanation that

resolves this tension could be that HEGU is supporting the Dominionist mission of taking over the "media" mountain of cultural influence.

My interpretation of what it means for Dominionist Christians to take control of the "media" mountain doesn't equate to wholesale control of the American media apparatus (yet). It is more about what HEGU's arrival into the media landscape signals as a soft introduction for the American people to what they can expect to see and how HEGU uses that opportunity to repetitively impart ethical lessons. Advertisements are delivered innocuously into American's lives, which for HEGU means Christianity is being home delivered. By naturalizing their right to speak for Jesus, HEGU is simultaneously taking it upon themselves to produce this Christian message of morality for the masses and taking space in our world of limited attention. People may not want it but there is no choice; much like Dominionism's plans for social renewal. Jesus *has* to be for everyone in the country because that is the totality of Dominionism's aspirations. At the same time, it's only the non-believers who need to be nudged toward accepting Jesus' loving attitude. That is how the tension between HEGU's campaign language of Jesus being "for everyone," and the marketing architects' words of directing an authentic message towards "non-believers," can begin to logically make sense. Those producing HEGU believe they have the ordained right and the divine understanding to preach to America through the mass media. In this way HEGU is setting a new standard about what is normal public media discourse in this country, and this is the step toward control of the "media" mountain that I perceive HEGU participating in. Jesus may thus also be playing a gentle role in nationalist dreams of a united state narrative. HEGU is softening up the American public to the idea of benevolent Christian messages in their day to day lives, positioning Jesus as an integral character in the national fabric.

Any audience interpretation of HEGU's message which results in acceptance that Jesus "gets" them is probably a win in HEGU's mind, even if viewers don't become outright Christians. In fact, I think HEGU would likely be happy with outcomes that fall along a spectrum. McKendry says as much: "Is the goal that people become Christians? Obviously." This answer shouldn't come as a surprise. Below the Jesus-centered messaging still lies a desire to convert audiences to the Christian faith. It's a fundamental aspect of Evangelical Christianity. What is perhaps more telling is the marketing-speak he follows this up with as he goes on: "But more importantly for now… we need to raise their level of respect for Jesus, and then they'll move." Not "convert," but "move" in how they as an audience member relate to Jesus. This reveals a subtle subgoal of the campaign, which is akin to a dispositional change. This approach comports with Burke's notion: "yet often we could with more accuracy speak of persuasion 'to attitude,' rather than persuasion to out-and-out action" (1950, p. 50). In the case of HEGU, it's not conversion toward "Christianity" precisely that is the goal but the subtext behind spotlighting Jesus in this country, which suggests that more sympathetic attitudes toward Christianity in general are still an intended outcome. Outright conversion and assuming of Christian behaviors and self-identity would be a well-achieved goal for the campaign, but so could other responses. A viewer could explore the teachings and adopt some lessons. They could bring it up in conversation with people around them. They could join a church and become missionaries themselves. There is a range of ways that someone might "move" as a result of HEGU's message that may encourage them to be more amenable to Christian cultural influence in places where such influence hasn't been present.

The pursuit of dispositional shifts is reinforced by Vanderground in an interview about HEGU's ongoing presence during the Super Bowl where he explains that the "goal is to put Jesus on display in the biggest moments we have in culture. We think Jesus and his example should be part of those moments." And not only should He be present in our biggest shared experiences of culture, but as a result "we (HEGU) want to have a cultural change towards his value system" (CBN, 2024). Jesus' values are reflective of Christianity's, and a more accepting attitude toward one would plausibly mean a more accepting attitude of the other. A change like Vanderground is suggesting toward Jesus' value system is going to entail behavior according to Christianity's value system. So while people may not become born-again Christians, they might be moved to accept Christian value systems. In a Dominionist's mind, I believe this passive acceptance is quite alright and even desirable. An increase in the permissive acceptance or tolerance of Christian values could encourage acceptance to Christian policies, language, or logics in consequential areas of our lives, such as politics. Not every strand of Christian influence is Dominionist, but that doctrinal ambiguity works in favor of those Dominionists who opaquely maneuver to inculcate Christian religious doctrine at all levels of society. Sheltered under the umbrella of "Christian," the manifestations of the doctrine of Dominionist Christianity are obscured. But I believe HEGU is one such manifestation. Based on what I've shared here, HEGU might be understood to be using Jesus' values as a proxy for teaching Christian values.

The language I have highlighted here and how it points back to Jesus is a big reason that my analysis in this thesis focuses on Him and His portrayal. That is who the marketers centralize and who acts as a conduit for the ethical lessons at work in the effort. The marketing and campaign discourse I have detailed here hopefully provides a

metanarrative over the whole effort by adding critical context to the authors and their motivations that point toward Dominionist goals. The background I have provided also presents HEGU as a novel religious rhetor in the public sphere of mass marketing communication in a way that begins to blur the boundaries between that and the private sphere of people's religious beliefs. I will now move on to a review of some literature surrounding religious rhetoric, understood through a postsecular lens which speaks to the blurring between what were once considered separate spheres of the secular and religious.

# Chapter 3 - Literature Review

## Current Scholarship on HEGU

At the time of this writing, there are only two scholarly articles that directly name He Gets Us as an object of study. At this early stage in its existence and considering how niche it is, it may not be surprising that there are only two pieces of literature. But what is interesting about these two journal publications is how disparate the areas of their research interests are. One piece was published in the *Journal of the Evangelical Missiological Society,* where Missiologists[1] Michael Cooper and Matthew Harbour (2023) ask the same research question as I: Who is the Jesus of HEGU? In "The Jesus of 'He Gets Us': Sorting Our Christology," the authors take account of the observable theological arguments being made about Jesus in the campaign materials of HEGU to come to conclusions about the theological accuracy of His portrayal. Theirs is a perfectly reasonable religious-based inquiry based on the concerns of their discipline.

Elsewhere, in a dialogue published in *Advertising & Society Quarterly*, marketing critic Dr. Mara Einstein and journal co-editor Edward Timke (2023) discuss the marketing tactics of HEGU as it tries to sell a relatable version of Jesus to audiences. They see the advertisements blurring the line between "brand acceptance" and "faith conversion" in their attempts to get audiences to identify with Jesus. What they observe at work in HEGU is a marriage of "preaching" and "selling," occurring within the faith-based advertising industry's adoption of the idea of "marketing evangelism." For them, strategies aimed at inducing audiences to identify with a product are perceivable as a

[1] Missiologists study Christian missions methodology and history. They seek to understand and articulate scripture from a theological basis, following through on the commandment to spread the word of God.

goal for both marketers and missionaries, with Jesus being the product in HEGU's case. Here is where the arguments of both articles come into interesting conversation; Cooper and Harbour's own expert analysis concludes that Jesus has been stripped of His necessary divinity and been cast as "a created being and great teacher but not God" (p. 2). Simply put, "there is a failure to reflect the *reality* of Jesus" (p. 15, italics in original). But I think this is exactly the point. To turn Jesus even further to His human side is how He becomes relatable. *Marketable*. If HEGU wants to create a sense of relatability, then it is important for there to be a sense that He is attainable. How better to do that than by insisting that Jesus is like you? A person, not a savior.

Cooper and Harbour see this as a problem because it strips Jesus of His divinity, while I see the intention of this move as a marketing tactic meant to decrease the cognitive distance between Jesus and the target audience. But this is also a distinctly rhetorical move. HEGU wants viewers to recognize their own humanity in Jesus and identify with Him, and so they emphasize His humanity. The move to strip Jesus of His divinity is a theological move as much as it is a marketing one in the context of constructing campaign copy. As Kenneth Burke says, "you persuade a man insofar as you can speak his language," and that kind of rhetorical strategy is appropriate for both religious conversion attempts and marketing efforts meant to foster brand familiarity. According to Einstein and Timke, "religious organizations use the tools of marketing and advertising" more and more, as they embrace the similarities in goals. At the authorial level, HEGU is a marketing campaign, which is typically understood as a *secular* enterprise, but they use Jesus as their central figure who is unambiguously *religious*. Does that create a totally incongruous combination? Must it be one or the other?

**Religion and Marketing**

HEGU straddles a sacred/secular barrier as it sits at the transdisciplinary intersection of these two fields with similar drives. Evangelical missiology is about delivering a message with a driving motive behind it, and so is mass marketing. Of course, the comparison needs to be taken much deeper than that in any serious investigation of the relationship, but wherever there is a conscious motive to rhetorical action, there are intensely deliberated strategies being employed to achieve the desired outcome. Both evangelical missiologists and marketers take serious consideration of their audience into account. While not addressing these two terms exactly, there is a similar congruence studied by McLaughlin et al. in "Why Scholars of Religion Must Investigate the Corporate Form" (2020). This piece engages with an emerging area of research that describes "connections between religion and economic activity through the language of commodification and marketization" (p. 693). Both kinds of secular and religious activity are active in their desire to convert people over to their idea or product. McLaughlin et al. summarize the entanglement of these two nominally distinct approaches, saying "the corporate form allows social phenomenon to manifest *as* religion or *as* market activity without assuming from the outset that a particular behavior is properly one or the other, or *not* one while it is the other" (p. 698). When compared with the observations of Timke and Einstein above in the field of advertising, it is clear this idea has resonance across scholarly orientations to the study of contemporary religious manifestations as they appear in novel forms such as advertisements.

This is emblematic of a larger discussion happening around the very idea of religion maintaining a distinctly separate domain from what's considered secular. In

contemporary scholarship concerned with the status of religion, scholars in sociology (Goldstein, 2024; Cochran, 2024) and those affiliated with the American Academy of Religion (Watts and Mosurinjohn, 2022; McLaughlin et al., 2020; Schilbrack, 2010; 2012) have contested the meaning of "religion" as a concept that has enduring, stable manifestations that maintain its distinction from what is non-religious. According to Kevin Schilbrack (2012), "the concept of 'religion' is not a cultural universal but rather emerged under particular historical and political conditions in the modern post-Reformation west." The resulting view positions what we might consider "religion" as a social construct along the lines of race and gender that is not attributable to a single identifiable quality but is culturally constituted. Religious activity, in these scholars' understanding, can describe far more than just the enactment of traditional doctrinal belief systems like Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, etc. "It is a troublesome phenomenon," says James Cochran. "Chameleon-like, religion reflects its environment and alters its appearance accordingly" (2024).

Einstein and Timke, in their combination of marketing and evangelizing, show this kind of chameleonizing move happening in real time. Is HEGU preaching or selling? What they seem to be saying is that HEGU is part of an evolving variety of marketing that makes the difference indiscernible. Pertinent to the project of McLaughlin et al., "studying the corporate form provides scholars of religion with conceptual tools that allow us to conceive of power, capital, rituals, and other social practices as co-constitutive" (2020, pp. 697-698). This idea is insightful for re-framing religions as cultural ideals which adjust to historical circumstances and find new modes of expression as they interact with other social practices. HEGU is one of those new

religious modes, and the novelty itself could be reason enough for a rhetorician to analyze it.

**Religious Rhetoric in the Field of Rhetoric and Composition**

What I perceive, however, is that religion and religious discourse is mostly absent from rhetoric and composition's common disciplinary discussion and discourse about cultural identification. Anecdotally, I am at the end of a two-year MA at a Research 1 institution in a nationally recognized program, having been drowned in readings through survey courses and seminars, and I cannot recall much, if any, explicit attention to religion. This may be understandable given how small of a subfield religious rhetorics is but I nonetheless contend that its absence from the rhetoric and composition canon disables students in terms of their ability to first see and then critique religious rhetoric. To add further support to the claim of marginal status in the field, I offer some basic textual evidence drawn from the previous eleven years of CCCC's annual conference programs (2013-2024). In each of these past searchable programs, I did an in-text search for the words "religion" and "religious." I excluded instances of both when encountered in early sections on policy convention like "Mutual Respect & Anti-Harassment Policy" or in sections serving as an index for the conference, for reasons of relevance and replication respectively. What I found was 93 instances of the word "religious," so about 8.5 uses per conference, and 39 instances of "religion," about 3.5 per. These numbers are meager, and they even overstate the issue. Consider that multiple occurrences of these terms are often grouped together in session titles, panel descriptions, and paper precis', providing plenty of overlap. There is a lot of variation between years as well, like zero uses of "religion" in 2014, 2021, and 2022, and "religious" being as numerous as 16 times in 2023 and as low as 2 times in 2021. And

then consider that the *Rhetoric and Religious Traditions* standing group descriptions carried an outsized number of mentions across every year. This rudimentary research is certainly not exhaustive, but I think it is suggestive of a shortcoming in the field's general scholarship interests. To take a note from religious studies scholars and consider the social construction of religion through "power, capital, rituals and other social practices" would be well within the scope of our research in writing studies and rhetoric and composition particularly. The greater field of writing studies seems to not be taking full account of how religious rhetoric is functioning in society. Additional indicators might be gleaned from the number of instances of journal article titles related to religious rhetoric in major publications in the field, such as *College English*, *Research in the Teaching of English,* and *College Composition and Communication*. Such research is beyond the scope of this study.

It may be that there are outdated conceptions of religion that are a holdover from earlier disciplinary history. To elaborate on what that entails, I take a cue from Paul Lynch and Matthew Miller's (2017) massive annotated bibliography titled, *Twenty-Five Years of Faith in Writing: Religion and Composition, 1992-2017.* They catalogue "an explosion of research," over 200 articles in 25 years of religious scholarship in composition, although if the numbers I introduced earlier from CCCC conferences are any indication, it is still flying under the radar. I take their starting point as instructive, when in 1992 Maxine Hairston's "(in)famous" article in *College Composition and Communication*, "Diversity, Ideology, and Teaching Writing," called out educators' lack of attention to student's religious identities in pedagogy that purported to be multicultural. Comments from then-scholars instead were made about how dissident religious students are as non-rational thinkers, and how their dogmatism gets in the way

of serious critical thinking. This alienation may have played a part in the eventuality of contemporary rejection of universities as unwelcoming spaces for religious students today. In what were proclaimed to be multicultural classrooms, they didn't consider the culture of the religious student and rebuked religiously informed opinions and arguments from students of faith. She notes how "religion plays an important role in the lives of many of our students, but it's a dimension almost never mentioned by those who talk about cultural diversity and difference" (p. 191). Her inclusion of religion as an additional dimension of cultural diversity was an important moment because it highlighted how it had, inadvertently or not, been left out of the multicultural matrix of identities. A brief look at three major publications which examine the field's ideological position and were released in the year prior to her speech evidences just the gap Hairston pointed out.

In *Politics of Writing Instruction* (Bullock and Trimbur, 1991), there is no chapter pertaining to religion or religious politics. As would be expected, it is heavy with political concerns yet still makes space for the time period's acceptable cultural categories, as displayed by the title of Michael Holzman's chapter: "Observations on Literacy: Gender, Race, and Class." Religion is left out as irrelevant to rhetoric and composition's disciplinary politics.

*Composition and Resistance* (Hurlbert and Blitz, 1991) similarly leaves religion out of its class, labor, and culture heavy contents. As in *Politics*, literacy is conceptually connected with ideological conversations in Miriam T. Chaplin's "Teaching for Literacy in Socio-cultural and Political Contexts." Judging by the book's thematic title and

religion's exclusion, religiosity is not considered conducive to resistance, as it is perhaps stuck in an ethical conservatism that doesn't allow for change.[2]

Finally, *Contending with Words: Composition and Rhetoric in a Postmodern Age* (Harkin and Schilb, 1991) speaks of disciplinary philosophy, postmodernism, and subjectivity, with the closest thing to religion being mentioned is William Covino's intriguing chapter on magic as rhetoric. This book includes Sharon Crowley writing about "Reimagining the Writing Scene" where she resists naturalizing the writing classroom as a harmonious space apart from the outside world, insulated from its influence. In fact, "the composition classroom imagined in these essays is located within and penetrated by the social, institutional, and cultural contexts that surround it" and as a result every person involved "inevitably bring[s] with them the patriarchal, racist, or classist discourses of the dominant culture" (p. 190). The authors are aware of the virulent rhetorics that students might unwittingly harbor, but the ideological categories that supply them don't ever include religion by name. The non-academic world looms large outside, and "whether we like it or not, the alienating conflicts that exist in our culture surround and infiltrate our writing classroom," Harkin and Schlib argue (p. 194). From the collection of texts just cited, it isn't clear that these authors considered religion as one such alienating conflict. Opting to ignore or downplay religion as a site of conflict doesn't feel quite feasible now, if it ever was, especially if we consider how the term "religion" itself is being contested by scholars in other fields.

What a brief review of these books shows, and what Hairston asserted, is that even when the instructors she was criticizing centered their freshman writing class

[2] Thankfully this was rectified in 2023 at the "Rhetoric and Religious Traditions" CCCC standing group's conference, Rhetoric and Religion as Resources for Resistance.

around multicultural content and ideological critique, religion was not included. It was not seen as an element of students' culture and lived experience in the same ways as race, class, and gender. The larger point I see is that she called attention to religion being put in a category of its own, not to be addressed in conversations about culture because religion is not a constituent part of cultural identity. And even within Lynch and Miller's substantial bibliography, with 96 topical tags to categorize the texts' focuses, there is a single article (Cohen, 1999) with the tag "cultural studies." This is one indication that religion has not been much considered as a constituent part of culture in the scholarship on religious rhetoric.

Thinking in this way may have been understandable at one time. It aligns with a popular 20th century sociological theory called "the secularization thesis." Sociologist Bryan Wilson defines this theory as the idea that "people will act less and less in response to religious motivation: they assess the world in empirical and rational terms, and find themselves involved in rational organizations and rationally determined roles" (p. x). The modern scholarly enterprise is reflective of this reliance on reason vs. belief. This way of thinking also assumed that as people got on with more rational, objective, and scientific ways of thinking, there wouldn't be a place for religion anymore, according to Wilson. The characteristics of the secular would overtake the influence of the sacred, and religion would be hollowed out of society. Secularization would eventually vindicate the authors cited in the trio of publications above for their lack of attention to religion. Our discipline of rhetoric and composition was likely not immune from the assumptions of secularization theory.

But even our own field's production of contemporary religious rhetorical study shows that this abolition of religious rhetoric has, so far, not come to fruition. There are

multiple religious rhetorics scholars publishing in consequential areas like religious discourse in rhetorical theory (Bernard-Donals & Jensen, 2021; DePalma et al., 2023; Geiger II, 2022), possibilities for inclusive practice in the classroom (DePalma, 2011, 2017; Lynch 2018, 2024; Ringer, 2013; Thomas-Bunn, 2017), and the intermixing of religious discourse with the discourse of the public sphere (DePalma et al., 2008; Earle, 2018; Edwards, 2024). The secularization thesis is struggling to remain coherent within our field and has been for a while. The reality that religiosity has refused to fade away in society, as some theorized it would, is captured by what is referred to as the postsecular. Jurgen Habermas, the first person thought to use the term, described a postsecular society as one in which "religion maintains a public influence and relevance" (p. 21). It is a direct refutation of the secularization thesis. As time has passed and society has changed, people still believe in many of the same religions that they did when the thesis was popular. One consequence is scholarly research that acknowledges the need to return religion to a place of academic interest. But the religion that returns is not the same one that was supposed to have left. In *The Rhetoric of Secularization*, Daniel Weidner and Joel Golb (2014) challenge the narrative of secularization's inevitability and what to do now that we are left with a word, secular, that was largely defined in a negative way as the absence of religion. With religion still around, where are the boundaries that differentiate the secular anymore? They imply in their introduction that religion itself also needs to be reexamined in this aftermath, saying "even if at present there is general talk of a return of religion, the implication here is that it previously vanished, and indeed usually that in returning it has changed, since every return represents a distortion" (p. 1). This change he speaks of is the theoretical basis for postsecularism, as it presumes and examines this new phenomenon bearing the label

religion. In my estimation, the change has been an adaptation. Like the "marketing evangelism" mentioned at the beginning of this review, one adaptation has been to move dissemination of The Word to multimedia advertising (Steinberg and Kincheloe, 2009).

**Postsecularism**

The idea that religion has adapted is usefully captured in the program for University of Warwick's 2017 conference, *(Post)secular: Imagining Faith in Contemporary Cultures*. It notes that "the term 'postsecular' is often used to indicate a renewed interest in religion as a social, political and cultural force." In the US, the political force of religion might be more visible than it ever has been. Christians make up 87% of voting members across the legislative branch of government (Pew Research, 2025). A national prayer breakfast has invited politicians to share in prayer annually since 1953. Our current Attorney General consistently appears with a crucifix necklace poignantly hanging from her neck at each public appearance. And, according to Reuters, the U.S. Secretary of Defense, Pete Hegseth, now plans to lead a monthly Christian prayer service at the Pentagon (Reuters, 2025). These are manifestations of religious force adapted to the political realm, and they were brought there in part by socio-cultural forces. Religion lives on in newly complicated ways and in locations that necessitate continued rhetorical study through a postsecular lens that no longer sees a clear boundary between what is religious and what is not. Into this context steps the HEGU campaign, which seems to have participated in or precipitated this moment.

Within the subfield of religious rhetoric, scholars have recently started directly confronting the research implications of postsecularism. Lynch and Miller's bibliography was published eight years ago, and a simple Ctrl+F reveals zero instances of the word "postsecular." Instead, in their list of 96 navigational tags they list

“sacred/secular,” which speaks to the continued existence of a binary, rather than the collapsing of the two terms that postsecularism suggests are now more appropriate. Six years after the publication of that bibliography, major religious rhetoric scholars contributed to a collection that explicitly engaged in a postsecular framework. In *Rhetoric and Religion in the Twenty-First Century: Pluralism in a Postsecular Age* (DePalma et al.,2023), the editors introduce the essays within as finding “powerful forms of symbolicity, practice, motivations, and moods within the diverse intersections of religion and rhetoric in a postsecular context” (p. 9). The writing of the contributors explores the newly available rhetorical landscape revealed when religions are no longer bounded off in their own non-secular realm but interact in the complex ways that other disciplines also suggest they do. They’re all writing in the “postsecular supernova,” as the authors quote from philosopher Charles Taylor (p. 8). In the aftermath, what we call religious needs to be understood as spanning a “spectrum of concerns and possibilities” (p. 7) rather than along simplistic divisions like faith and science or belief and facts. Religiosity can be explored in what might have previously been unconsidered ways, as DePalma et al.’s collection of multicultural religious research intersects with varieties of identity that would have been unthinkable to authors of those 1992 texts. The study of religious rhetoric has remained under the radar and evolved along with religious belief itself. My study takes place within this changing disciplinary landscape and attempts to build on postsecularism-informed work, which acknowledges how religion intersects with an array of cultural phenomena.

Within DePalma et al.’s collection of postsecular religious scholarship, I want to highlight Janice Fernheimer’s examination of the growth of the Jewish rhetorical tradition in *Creating Pathways for Ethical (Inter)Actions* for the resonances it has with

my own inquiry into HEGU and their portrayal of Jesus. Her piece is noticeable for how the subject of her essay, Jewish rhetorics, evokes a fundamental methodological question for postsecular inquiry. As she ends her introduction, she asks, "Is the descriptor 'Jewish' meant to delineate religious practices, rituals, prayers, and beliefs or a set of cultural practices, values, and ethics?" (p. 146). In some ways I think this question encapsulates the postsecular problematization of the word "religion" because it troubles the line previously drawn between religion and culture. More specifically, I believe the same blurry status applies to HEGU, for while it is secular in form, it is religious in content. Their public featuring of the most famous Jew in the world situates Him in both realms. Jesus has always been both human and holy, and through HEGU He can be both private and public. Jesus is a postsecular crossover. This is the theoretical space that Jesus lives in, with HEGU housing Him as He traverses the postsecular cultural expanse. If religion is not going away, then neither is He.

**American Jesus**

While HEGU itself may be a novel postsecular entity, Jesus already has a history in the United States as a postsecular figure. The story of Jesus in this country is told by Stephen Prothero in his 2003 book, *American Jesus,* where the narrative of Jesus is revisited as a cultural history that evolves from Thomas Jefferson's time to the earliest days of the 21st century. He argues that Jesus stood, "not on some unchanging rock of ages, but on the shifting sands of economic circumstances, political calculations, and cultural trends" (p. 8). As America has changed, so has the character of Jesus in the social imagination. In a sense then, Jesus has always been postsecular, changing in response to cultural tides and showing His responsiveness to historical change. He has been depicted as "black and white, male and female, straight and gay, a socialist and a

capitalist, a pacifist and a warrior, a Ku Klux Klansman and a civil rights agitator" (p. 8). Jesus has embodied the important idea underlying postsecularism that what the term "religion" captures is not inert. Whatever ideological position the nation and its peoples have needed Jesus to take, He surely has been capable of.

Prothero's historical review helps mark the discrete cultural boundaries for my own study of Jesus, as it is not just any manifestation of Jesus that I am examining here but the *American* Jesus. His research substantiates the historic postsecularity of Jesus, and in a succession of updated versions, HEGU's is the latest. Prothero wrote, "to see how Americans of all stripes have cast the man from Nazareth in their own image is to examine, through the looking glass, the kaleidoscopic character of American culture" (p. 7). He holds particular importance in the religious environment of America because he embodies the dominant religion of the country. According to the Public Religion Research Institute (2023), 66% of Americans identified as Christian. Jesus has always been right at home here. And why shouldn't he be? Jesus is "as American as baseball or apple pie" according to Stephen Nichols in *Jesus Made in America* (2008). Jesus the individual can be distinguished from Christianity overall as a belief system, but He is its greatest educator and spokesperson in the United States. With the introduction of HEGU, He has taken the national stage in a way unlike any other in history, or in any other nation.

**Religious Literacy**

What I find at work in Prothero's historiographic examination of American Jesus is something he doesn't name yet clearly underlies his methodological approach. He is employing *religious literacy* to understand Jesus in His changing cultural contexts over time. Rhetoric and composition scholarship does not readily engage in the notion of

religious literacy, so I refer to the work of Religious Studies scholar Diane Moore for a definition of it. Her definition reads:

> Religious literacy entails the ability to discern and analyze the fundamental intersections of religion and social/political/cultural life through multiple lenses," and the religiously literate person will possess "the ability to discern and explore the religious dimensions of political, social, and cultural expressions across time and place (2006).

Her conception seems tailor-made to function as an interpretive tool for use in understanding our postsecular era. It speaks to the intersectional nature of religion as a cultural force that doesn't exist in a sphere apart from others. Jesus has a variety of manifestations in America, and Moore's religious literacy lets us understand Him in whatever circumstances He's encountered in. I see this at play in Prothero's work as he studies Jesus not only in missionary tracts and theological treatises, "but also in novels, films, biographies, musicals, hymns, spirituals, and the visual arts" (p. 10). Thus, his work on two fronts has inspired my own research: his use of religious literacy and his concern with the cultural figure of Jesus. I do both here, and my own research is an extension of his—but with a key difference. He doesn't take a critical approach that pays attention to how Jesus has been implicated in dynamics of social, cultural, or political power. Given the dominionist force I posited HEGU is a manifestation of in my introduction, that power component is vital to my own investigation into Jesus. While Prothero employed religious literacy in one understanding of it, there is another version that I think augments Moore's in a critical way.

For as useful as Moore's conception of religious literacy is, the functions of religious power are not explicitly addressed, which leaves her idea in need of

supplementation. Here is where I draw on a second understanding of religious literacy from Beth Daniell in DePalma et al. (2023). In one of the book's interludes (short, personal essays), she writes about her realization during graduate school about the deep connections between religion and literacy as they both relate to social power. She recounts learning that historically "there are connections between literacy and power. And in some societies, religion holds the power" (p. 79). This historic version of religious literacy focuses on the power bestowed on those early "scribal elites (mostly men)" who can not only read but, crucially, *interpret* what the sacred books say (p. 80). Being able to read the holy word of God comes with the privilege of getting to craft how the message is relayed to those who are unable to read it. Prior to the Reformation in the 16th century, those with high social status (at least through the clergy) had the privilege of literacy and could use it to proclaim on God's behalf. This was before it was translated into commonly spoken languages like German and French. These days, there exists free and open access for people to encounter Christianity's holy book firsthand which diminishes the need and power of a mediator. But the question of who gets to speak on Jesus' behalf remains, and this connects back to my original inquiry into HEGU as the privileged ventriloquizers of His words. The assertion to do so at all, and on the massive, pervasive scale of HEGU, supports my suspicion of them as motivated by dominionist impulses to create a more Christian cultural milieu.

Both understandings of religious literacy are useful for robust rhetorical evaluation and analysis. Moore's focus on how religious literacy functions as a lens that helps us understand religious social-cultural dynamics and has stuck around casually, taking up experiential space, needs to be synthesized with Daniell's question of who gets privileged access to religious literacy in terms of power. Daniell's conception pays

necessary attention to religious rhetorical power, and holistically theorizing Moore's definition is incomplete without the critical viewpoint added by Daniell's because it is attentive to how religious rhetoric gets deployed and by whom. Together, these theorists articulate the possibility of what I'm calling *critical religious literacy*. This is a tool ready to use for analyzing and critiquing the diverse cultural manifestations of Christianity and Christian rhetoric in a postsecular America. That is the lens I am looking through to evaluate and criticize HEGU and their portrayal of Jesus, postsecular and imbricated in power as it is.

**Christonormativity**

The privilege that HEGU employs to circulate Christian discourse as a cultural force through mass advertising is enabled by what is termed *Christonormativity*. Abby Ferber (2012), writing in the *Journal of Social Issues*, defines Christonormativity as "the normalization and privileging of Christianity as the dominant religious and spiritual culture in the United States." Christonormativity implies a passive acceptance of the existence and commonplace use of Christian references, and in Ferber's mind, grants Christianity power to exert cultural influence as a result. In coming to this conclusion, I would offer again that this author has utilized (this time critical) religious literacy in their research without calling it that explicitly. Ferber sees an America where Christianity and its doctrinal values constitute a cultural hegemony. In Sharon Crowley's (2006) view, "the borders of a hegemonic discourse are defined by the limits of its power to interpellate adherents." The most powerful discourses are ones with uninhibited ability to penetrate and alter people's perceptions and thoughts. This is not to say that there are overt efforts (yet) to enculturate citizens with Christian values, but that its privilege allows it to exist unexamined as a normalized part of Americans' lives. As this

privilege relates to HEGU, there are no barriers to their production and circulation of Christian discourse, which exists on a scale that only other Christian-identifying sects would dare to try.

According to secularization theory, Christonormativity should be impossible. But analyzing religion critically as a cultural force reveals Christian religious traditions have not only continued but are hard to untangle from the American experience as our society bears discursive markers of that history. Historic expressions of "God Bless America," victorious athletes everywhere thanking their "Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" in postgame interviews, and billboards with Jesus on them strung out across the country's rural highways are all distinct markers and makers of Christonormativity. Shirley Steinberg says normativity is "*how things should be*," and in ordering that appropriate course, "dominant culture prescribes the normal way, the expected way, to negotiate the world" (p. 132). The normal and expected experience of living in America means dealing with Christianity's influence. HEGU's very existence is an example of Christonormativity, in that there is an assumption of a norm which implicitly allows for such a widespread marketing campaign. There is a multi-pronged privilege assumed 1) to speak for Jesus, 2) that to do so is righteous and good, and 3) that Jesus' message is at least passively acceptable to a general American audience. HEGU not only signals a christonormative society, but also further entrenches it. The perpetuation of Christianity as the dominant belief system in America crowds out alternative, increasingly marginalized viewpoints and threatens to create a social climate where Christian values overrule or marginalize others.

Expanding a bit on the third point above, to choose to feature Jesus in the first place signals a belief in His attraction as a social role model. The audience is assumed to

even *want* to be like Jesus and that His example is good, desirable, and resonant with some shared American cultural values. Marketing teams don't pick elements of their campaign at random. There is, at least initially, the assumption that whatever is used as the throughline holding it all together is reliably and broadly understood to be positive in key respects. HEGU partnered with the research firm Barna Group (2023) for their marketing research, and together they conducted the "Spiritually Open" project to gather data on American views of Christianity. Their conclusions confirmed that Christianity has "a welcome presence in the U.S.," and further that "Americans like Jesus & His message…but not so much his messengers." HEGU knows they have a good product and a possible audience because they did market research. Instead of trying to "Christianize," HEGU "christonormativizes." It is not an overt missionary effort but instead exemplifies "a mainstream normalizing culture [which] includes themes and messages assumed to be acceptable by populations" (Steinberg, 2009, p. 132). HEGU is taking part in further solidifying Christian culture as the dominant religious force in America, a key goal of Dominionism.

The specifically Christian manifestations of popular media like HEGU are the focus of cultural theorists Joe Kincheloe and Shirley Steinberg's *Christotainment: Selling Jesus through Popular Culture* (2009). Christotainment is an outgrowth of Christianity's gradual warming up to the idea of producing its own popular culture and claiming space in the media landscape. Rather than principally repudiate what they consider secular culture, producers of christotainment "take popular culture seriously as a conduit through which to reach the potentially and already converted" (Steinberg, x). The marketing of Christianity as a lifestyle, value system, and discourse community to join has created a community of consumers that invited believing in God to become

equated with buying His products. Christian marketers have adopted the same successful tactics as other marketing efforts, such as identifying a niche audience, creating a brand identity, and associating it with certain values. HEGU is using those tactics to advertise *their* gospel of Jesus to popular audiences in the christonormative confines of America as a form of christotainment. In a sense, this brings the review full circle back to the two articles it opened with that examine HEGU from both a religious and secular perspective. After this review, I argue HEGU is an object of study that is best understood from a postsecular perspective, using critical religious literacy to analyze the rhetorical strategies it employs as the re-presenter of Jesus' message in a christonormative environment. To do so is to observe the oncoming of Dominionists' deliberate advances into the public domain.

# Chapter 4 – Analysis of foot washing images

## Kenneth Burke's Theory of Identification

Kenneth Burke, in *Rhetoric of Motives* (1950), theorizes in terms that are well-suited for my own investigation of HEGU. In *Rhetoric of Motives*, Burke explores how the principle of identification can be used to explain and further theorize the persuasive strategies of rhetoric. Burke sees identification as an "accessory" to persuasion, which itself ranges across "the bluntest quest[s] of advantage, as in sales promotion or propaganda, through courtship, social etiquette, education, and the sermon" (p. xiv). As it turns out, any and all of these labels could be applied to HEGU. I use his theory because it speaks in terms that logically connect to the persuasive motivations to get viewers to identify with Jesus, envision themselves in HEGU's texts and images, and emulate that activity in accordance with values attributed to Him. Burke submits that a rhetor's goal of persuasion is advanced by causing their audience to feel as though both interlocutors are of a similar kind, emotion, or substance. As he puts it, "You persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, [and] identifying your ways with his" (p. 55). HEGU, being the marketing effort that it is, aims for the same effect.

Jason Vanderground, President of BrandHaven, said in an interview with the Christian Broadcasting Network (2024) that:

> The campaign's goals are to have people draw nearer to Jesus. For them to just look at what He taught, the example He laid out in the gospels for us. To be intrigued by them, to want to explore and learn more, and draw closer to Him.

There is nothing tangible to buy. Instead, HEGU's purposed value is the instruction on love derived from Jesus' example, as told through Biblical parables. "The thing that we want to happen," says David Green on the Lifestyle Investor podcast, "is for someone to see themselves in Jesus" (Donald, 2023). I follow my own interpretive path by using Burke's theory to examine who their constructed Jesus is. By viewing HEGU as a marketing campaign, my examination operates under the knowledge that each rhetorical choice is made under careful consideration according to audience analysis and aesthetic appeal. Marketing and religious conversion efforts both aim for identification, and Burke's theory maps well over these similar rhetorical goals. I use it to interpret HEGU's representation of Jesus as an example of how to act that aligns with values that they want audiences to embody.

This Burkean analysis is a continuation of a logical line laid out for me by listening to the words of those responsible for creating the HEGU campaign. Bill McKendry, founder of BrandHaven, says most of the campaign messaging has been about "what Jesus modeled, what he taught, and what he experienced," and how He modeled and talked about "a third way, which is really how we're supposed to treat each other" (White, 2023). They want the audience to change behaviors to be more in line with what Jesus did and one way they forward that is by talking about how Jesus washed feet.

The macroscopic view of HEGU's rhetoric I took in the Background section is paired here with a closer analysis specifically of the act of foot washing as depicted by the HEGU campaign. According to BrandHaven's founder and Chief Creative Officer, Bill McKendry:

> We've gone to great lengths to make sure that this is not politicized. There's no agenda here other than we just want people to see what Jesus modeled, and we believe we would be a better society if we all learn from that (White, 2023).

An air of neutrality is put on by HEGU's creators, but the portrayal of Jesus, as "authentic" as they claim to re-present it, is still admittedly slanted toward HEGU's target audience. It's precisely the nature of HEGU as a marketing campaign that creates tension with such claims of neutrality because they do in fact have lessons they'd like to impart according to the designers' goals. Burke is skeptical of such disavowals as well, arguing that "[i]n accordance with the rhetorical principle of identification, whenever you find a doctrine of 'nonpolitical' esthetics affirmed with fervor, look for its politics" (p. 28). There is little room for apolitical views of Christianity in America right now, and by analyzing the political undertones found in HEGU's projections of the world, I identify HEGU's own implicit bias. What HEGU tries to get audiences to identify with is informative of their own ideological positions, and Burke's theory directs my attention and illuminates rhetoric that reveals those positions. A close textual and visual analysis of the campaign will contribute additional evidence to my overarching claim that HEGU is functioning as a Dominionist actor.

Within Burke's theory of identification, he outlines rhetorical principles at work in a persuasive effort, and my analysis builds off of three of them: consubstantiality, property, and autonomy. To begin, consubstantiality seeks that one agent identifies themselves with another who is apart from them. While the two are not literally identical, "insofar as their interests are joined, A is *identified* with B. Or he may *identify himself* with B even when their interests are not joined, if he assumes that they are, or is

persuaded to believe so[3]" (p. 20, emphasis in original). Substitute "A" for viewers, and "B" for Jesus in this equation, and there is one aspect of HEGU's persuasive effort. Burke further explains that "[i]n being identified with B, A is 'substantially one' with a person other than himself" (p. 21). Shared interests are one avenue to this consubstantiality, as are shared principles. HEGU speaks to both dimensions, aligning their audience's interests and principles with Jesus'. They consubstantiate viewers with Jesus via empathetic textual appeals and by resituating His parables of life in 2020s terms.

Burke's identifying principle of property speaks to the metaphysical features which rhetors assimilate in order to identify with those whom they want to persuade. He says, "such identification is frequently by property in the most materialistic sense of the term" (pp. 23-24). We are distinguished by the properties we confer upon ourselves and those set on us by others, and they contribute to the division that makes identification necessary in the first place. The "moral growth" of people is organized through "properties in services, in position or status, in citizenry, [and] in reputation" (p. 24). When somebody with one set of properties encounters another with different properties, here, claims Burke, is the "characteristic invitation to rhetoric" (p. 25). This principle is useful for analyzing depictions of the audience in HEGU's textual and visual materials. It helps characterize the interactions that are being portrayed when "ideological others" are depicted in sites of societal tension that HEGU imagines are relatable enough for a viewer to identify with.

[3] The sexism of Burke's exclusive use of male pronouns is found throughout his cited book.

The third principle of Burke's that I employ is that of "autonomy," which insists on contextualizing the texts and images of an activity in the broader situation in which it exists. He states that "the fact that an activity is capable of reduction to intrinsic, autonomous principles does not argue that it is free from identification with other orders of motivation extrinsic to it" (p. 27). Foot washing isn't enacted in isolation or autonomously; it involves unequal relations of time and place between two unique individuals sharing a common physical space. Burke presents the idea of a "specialized activity," whereby an activity is recognized as occurring within a moral field of action. He explains that "any specialized activity participates in a larger unit of action" and isn't enacted in isolation from other motivating factors (p. 27). The presentation of context matters. A robust analysis would be incomplete without it, and Burke's principle of "autonomy" requires a critical reader to analyze the scenery of the foot washing images for additional rhetorical clues. Two reasons drive this aspect of my analysis. For one, the background is, of course, its own rich source of rhetorical data. Second, it is important that I respect HEGU as an author that is well funded, professional, and attentive to the details of their advertising materials. I must assume they recognize that the backgrounds of the images are unmistakable opportunities to augment and refine the visual argument being made and guiding their composition. The foregrounded characters are found washing feet in meaningful, detailed backgrounds. They can't be separated.

**How I Examine Who "He" Is**

HEGU's website, found at www.hegetsus.com, is the primary source for all of my visual and textual data concerning Jesus. Although HEGU is a multiplatform effort, with a presence across national TV, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok, the website is

what offers the most thorough rhetorical data related to the campaign's major messages and themes regarding who Jesus was and would be. Any other platform could be thought of as the beginning of a pipeline that hopefully ends at the website. As Vanderground states in an interview with the Christian Broadcasting Network, "what we're trying to do is to show certain qualities of Jesus that the American people can relate with and then invite them to our website to learn more" (CBN, 2024). They make clear that the narrative of Jesus is what they want the focus to be on and engaged with through the website as opposed to the in-person experience of church (for now). "No," they say in their "About Us" section, "He Gets Us is not a back to church campaign. We are inviting people to [re]consider Jesus and why his story matters." HEGU wants people on the website, which is the central location for their storytelling about Jesus' life, experiences, and teachings.

The bulk of my rhetorical data comes from the three web pages that encourage visitors to metaphorically wash feet. Secondary pieces of supporting data are collected from across the website to collectively add supporting data. HEGU narrativizes using both alphabetic text and visual imagery; even music plays a part. It is multi-sensory, which I try to reflect in my own presentation by embedding images from the campaign directly into this thesis. Because I know HEGU is well-funded, I work from the assumption that HEGU is a high-quality production put on by professionals who know how to leverage the rhetorical power of marketing.

The first step in my analysis is to compile and make a list of rhetoric from the website that functions to create consubstantiality between the audience and Jesus. Taking text from all over the website helps me articulate a case for one of the overarching messages intended for visitors to the site. I read them using Burke's theory

to ascertain how HEGU is framing their portrayal of Jesus as consubstantial with the audience. This powers my claim that the construction of Jesus' narrative is meant to relay to viewers that He is so much the same as you that it's just His example that they should follow. Littered throughout the website is language enacting all the campaign's language of focusing on Jesus as a human, perhaps even the ultimate human, worthy of emulating, as explained in my Background section. This data collection shows the congruity between what HEGU's designers say is the goal and where that is visible in the discourse of campaign materials.

Once I establish that the goal is indeed to create a sense of consubstantiality between Jesus and the audience, I evaluate the properties attributed to the target audience HEGU hopes will emulate Jesus. For this part of my analysis, I examine articles and images that portray and describe the act of foot washing, which was featured in HEGU's advertisements during the Super Bowl in 2024. This connects to an article on the HEGU website titled "What is foot washing and what does it symbolize?"[4]; another titled "Loving your neighbor is nearly impossible. How can we do it?"[5]; and then a gallery of 13 images that were commissioned specifically for HEGU to use as promotional material[6]. These images were shot by international fine art photographer Julia Fullerton-Batten. The two articles explain the act of foot washing being done in the images, which is meant to portray the attitude of Jesus. The images themselves depict two "ideological others" who are supposed to represent two opposing sides that are being urged to emulate Jesus' love via the act of foot washing—a broad metaphor in

[4] https://hegetsus.com/en/articles/what-is-foot-washing-and-what-does-it-symbolize
[5] https://hegetsus.com/en/articles/loving-your-neighbor-is-nearly-impossible-how-can-we-do-it
[6] https://hegetsus.com/en/articles/foot-washing-image-gallery

Christian tradition that places a clearly superior actor in the subservient position of footwasher, suggesting the overarching moral superiority of this humble actor.

I attempt to relay the implicit ideological values transmitted by HEGU utilizing the labels that characterize those pictured. All labels come from Fullerton-Batten's personal website and are notably only found there and not on any of HEGU's materials[7]. I arrange the labels into a table that organizes them according to the oppositional positions of love and hate, as derived from the campaign's narrative of Jesus' values. HEGU admits the images "look a little strange and disconcerting," and indeed this strangeness draws my attention because, given the authors of HEGU, this dualism or binary reflects the world through their eyes, which might be summarized as the position of a mainstream right-leaning, conservative Christian perspective. The characterizations of the individuals are quite generalized, but in combination with the background images, they reveal conservative ideological subtexts woven throughout the foot washing images. I focus on three aspects of the foot washing rhetoric to code those subtexts:

1. The characterizations given to the depicted individuals themselves.
2. The combinations of individuals.
3. The position of the foot washer vs. the one having their feet washed.

Across 13 images, HEGU had many different stories they could have chosen to tell about factional strife in the US, but they chose these. They provide inklings, and in some cases overt demonstrations, of an ideology that is implicitly offered to audiences as reality.

[7] https://juliafullerton-batten.com/types/he-gets-us/

Finally, I take Burke's principle of autonomy to more closely examine the background details of two foot washing images. In accordance with Burke's principle of autonomy, these background details envision foot washing as occurring within a larger socio-political context. Specific visual details are pointed out which further reveal HEGU's conservative political views. I take note of the circumstances in which the foot washing individuals are placed to articulate in more stark terms the ideological vision of the world HEGU intends to convey and persuade audiences to identify with.

**Findings: Jesus Gets You**

Something surprising arises upon investigating the representation of Jesus in the campaign. There is no visual depiction of Jesus anywhere despite the message being centered on Him. Through all the descriptions and narratives surrounding the person and mythos of Jesus, the audience is encouraged to fill in the representational gaps themselves. HEGU's Jesus is a non-physical, disembodied Jesus built on narratives, not moral directives. The absence of direct representation of Jesus himself is replaced by text, images, and videos of modern everyday people in situations they analogize to the ones Jesus lived through. He is narratively put in our contemporary shoes, along with discourse that identifies Jesus in the same ways that audiences might identify themselves. When navigating HEGU's website I found it repeatedly uses rhetoric that suggests that the intent is to create a sense of consubstantiality between Jesus and the audience. Throughout the website Jesus is positioned adjacent to the audience to create a sense of consubstantiality with phrases like:

- Jesus was sick of hypocrisy, too.
- Jesus was fed up with politics, too.
- Jesus rallied for justice, too.

- Jesus overcame bias, too.
- Jesus felt sorrow and despair, too.
- He came from a dysfunctional family, too.
- Jesus let his hair down, too.
- Jesus had strained relationships, too.
- Jesus felt pressure to be a good example, too.
- Would Jesus be fed up with our politics, too?
- Jesus' Christmas wasn't picture-perfect, either.
- Jesus didn't feel welcomed by religious people either.
- Jesus was no stranger to controversy, either.

HEGU signals the desire to consubstantiate the viewers with Jesus by repetitious use of the adverbs "too" and "either" regarding how Jesus felt and what He did. The repeated instances at the end of so many pronouncements directly implies that "we" share these sentiments. Jesus' values are inferred to be aligned with our own. Terms like "bias," "hypocrisy," "politics," and" justice" relate to concerns that many viewers might harbor themselves. They further claim elsewhere that Jesus "experienced every human emotion." We *can* be like him because He *is* like us. His humanity is emphasized, and the discourse is stripped of much divine language and holy propriety. It is important to note that He is always referred to as "Jesus," never "Jesus Christ." Stephen Prothero explains that the addition of "Christ" emphasizes His divine nature as the Messiah: "To invoke Jesus Christ is not simply to name a person but to affirm that person's status as the liberator long awaited by the Jewish people" (2003, p. 9). But audiences can't identify with that side of Jesus; hence, He must remain humanized and kept separate

from that aspect of His divine identity and instead kept squarely in the human category. This humanization is in line with the theological conclusions of Missiologists Cooper and Harbour (2023) mentioned earlier, who also recognized that the Jesus of HEGU has been stripped of a key divine element.

Instead of focusing on His ability to save, what is highlighted is His propensity for love; this is the primary property that HEGU attributes to Jesus. They want people to love like Him, which is how they can *be* like Him. On their "About Us" page, they feature a video that concludes with this statement: "The campaign exists to remind us of the example that Jesus set, while inviting all to explore His teachings, *so we can follow His example of confounding, unconditional love*" (emphasis mine). HEGU's narrative of Jesus claims to revolve around this basic principle that nominally drives Christian ethics. It's simple to understand and easy to identify with. As it functions persuasively according to Burke's theory, it can be said that "two persons may be identified in terms of some principle they shared in common (p. 21)," and who among viewers would not also say that love is a part of who they are? Much of Jesus' narrative force is undergirded by His life being the ultimate example of love, and that is a fundamental part of His attraction as a role model to consubstantiate with.

But there is a small problem for HEGU. They pose it as a question: "How did the story of a man who taught and practiced unconditional love become associated with hatred and oppression for so many people?" They conflate hostility toward the religion of Christianity with hostility for Jesus in particular, while references to Christianity are rare across the website. But framed within HEGU's marketing effort, it's a real issue that some perceive Jesus on the side of hate when their stated agenda is to "move beyond the mess of our current cultural moment to a place where all of us are invited to rediscover

the love story of Jesus." Elsewhere they provocatively claim, "our culture is addicted to hateful human conflict." David Green on the Lifestyle Investor podcast laments:

> As Christians, we're known as haters. We hate this group, we hate that group. But we're not. We are people that have the very, very best love story ever written, and we need to tell that love story. So, our idea is: let's tell the story. As a Christian, you should love everybody. Jesus loved everybody (Donald, 2023).

Thus, part of HEGU's intent is to re-present Jesus as a figure of love amidst what HEGU suggests is prevalent societal hate.

Hate is visible across the website as well, strategically set up as the obviously antithetical principle to Jesus' love. They set Him up as the paradigmatic opposite with messaging on the website like:

- Jesus loved the people we hate.
- Jesus didn't teach hate or assume the worst.
- Jesus overcame hate because He "loved louder."
- Jesus responded to the ever-increasing volume of hate with quiet and deliberate acts of love.
- What could possibly be louder and more powerful than hate? The love we see in Jesus.

HEGU drives home a message of love as the ultimate virtue directing Jesus' life and actions. It was all about love in His time, and that's what we need in ours, which is filled with hate, cultural messiness, and anger. Jesus' type of love is the antidote to the hate of today. That's what they choose to set up as their core messaging, and this love/hate dualism is an intentional rhetorical positioning, as impossible to argue against as it is obvious for a Christian campaign to stand on. After all, who would say that hate is

better than love? This moral choice is what BrandHaven founder Bill McKendry is gesturing to when he says that HEGU's messaging is about "what Jesus modeled, what He taught… a third way, which is really how we're supposed to treat each other" (White, 2023). HEGU is tying Jesus to a core message stating that audiences should copy Jesus' love for all, which is how the hatred that is so prevalent in society is overcome. HEGU hopes that audiences will identify with this message in a way that will cause them to consubstantiate with Jesus.

### Who Gets to Wash Feet?

HEGU puts a strong emphasis on Jesus' kind of love as the value that audiences should see in Jesus and strive for themselves. This is how society will be able to push back against hate like He did. But the consubstantiating discourse about Jesus and His love is mostly generalities and vague attributes of what that love entails. There are stories of things He did as well, but they are the parables of Jesus' own time and offer loose lessons in attitude or empathy rather than recommending a particular action. It's not about what to *do* but rather how to *be*. Foot washing, however, is distinguishable as the most specific act of Jesus described and depicted across most materials on the website. The rhetorics that pertain to it are unique instances where "we" are given instruction on what it means to instantiate Jesus-like action. The discourse around foot washing on HEGU's website forms a bridge between an act of Jesus' love and the possibility for the target audience to follow suit. Building off the language of consubstantiality identified above, HEGU depicts particular formations of individuals who are imitating Jesus in the images of foot washing.

On the two pages titled "What is foot washing and what does it symbolize?" and "Foot washing image gallery," there is a video titled "Foot Washing." HEGU showed this

video during the Super Bowl's halftime show in 2024. The video is merely a slideshow of the foot washing images, and thus is mostly redundant as a site of analysis. However, two things are uniquely noteworthy about the video itself for this rhetorical analysis. First, it features background music from INXS's "Never Tear Us Apart," where the video's crescendo is preceded with the line "and they could never tear us apart." This lyric combined with the imagery of foot washing being the central act of the video conveys that this is the kind of love they hope to see, and it will bring us together rather than maintain our separation. Second, at the very end comes an emphatic connective pronouncement: "Jesus didn't teach hate. Jesus washed feet." Here, directly, is the act of foot washing made analogous with Jesus' love and used as the antithesis to the hate of the people depicted in the images that they overcome by washing feet.

The story of Jesus washing feet is recounted in parable fashion on HEGU's page containing the gallery of feet washing images:

> The night before he died, Jesus got his friends and followers together and washed their feet as a symbolic example of how they should humble themselves while dignifying and valuing others. He then instructed them to wash one another's feet.

When Jesus washed his disciples' feet, He set an example of how we should treat one another, "even those people with whom we don't see eye to eye" (What is foot washing?). Washing another's feet is a bridge over the division between people who don't agree, have irreconcilable views, or even hate each other. In any case, the abstracted individuals are positioned as being on opposite sides. Whoever somebody may be, HEGU echoes the Biblical sentiment that viewers should see them as a neighbor. "What

would it look like if we all made an effort to love ours?" they ask. The foot washing images provide HEGU's answer, as shown below.

*Figure 1:* Feat. Traditional and Arab Couple (He Gets Us, 2024)

What audiences need to do is follow that quintessentially Jesus-style wisdom to "love your neighbor as yourself," no matter who they are. They concede that this is not an easy thing to do in the article titled, "Loving your neighbor is nearly impossible. How can we do it?" The acknowledgment creates a gap in need of addressing, and this mirrors Burke's idea about the rhetorical situation surrounding the creation of identification between rhetors. A key understanding of Burke's theory is that it implies a natural division to begin with: "Identification is affirmed with earnestness precisely because there is division. If men were not apart from one another, there would be no need for

the rhetorician to proclaim their unity" (p. 22). HEGU has to (re)create division, conflict, and hate in these images, and through this act of imagination their ethical stance(s) are made visible. For HEGU to proclaim the necessity of Jesus-like love, they need to show that it is necessary in the first place. In each image, the battle lines are drawn to represent a different ideological conflict and reveal who they see as socially problematic actors. Staying with Burke's ideas, he also suggests that "images are so related to ideas that an idea can be treated as the *principle* behind the systematic development of an image" (p. 88, emphasis in original). One principle I propose is hate or conflict as perceived through a conservative ideological vision of the country, addressed and remediated into these still images. The relationships implied in the arrangements are decisions made about where social hatred primarily lies and who needs to come together to ameliorate it.

*Figure 2:* Feat. LGBTQ and Clergy (He Gets Us, 2024)

### Examining the Foot Washing Images

In the page featuring the gallery of foot washing images, HEGU writes, “we reimagined a world where people, especially those with opposing ideologies, took off their shoes and washed each other’s feet. The images create a surreal and magical view of human interaction that we could all aspire to.” That aspirational human interaction is emulating the values espoused by Jesus. As a source of HEGU’s view of the world, the composition of the foot washing images shows an encounter between pairs of people who are supposed to have antagonistic ideologies or positions. It is pegged sometimes as someone who you just “don’t agree with,” sometimes phrased as “your enemy,” but the sides are always rendered in terms of their opposition. While the campaign uses varied language to convey that there is antagonism present in the images between individuals, for simplicity I will mainly use the word “hate,” as a basic opposition to “love.” In response to people’s hate, HEGU describes foot washing in the following ways, using language specifically attributed to how Jesus used it:

- “Foot washing symbolizes the act of removing the ego from the self, setting differences aside, and actively showing love to others.”
- Foot washing is “a symbolic example of how they should humble themselves while dignifying and valuing others.”
- Foot washing “sets an example of how we should treat one another.”
- Foot washing is “a symbol for all of His followers to see how they should treat one another.”

Foot washing is associated with the property of Jesus’ loving attitude, because that’s what He did. It is also about humility and mutual respect. By choosing to portray only one person out of a pair doing the foot washing in each image, they are identifying the

positive attributes of foot washing with that person. In this way, the foot washers are identified with the property of love and therefore are made Jesus-like. The other side, because they are *not* washing feet, are denied that same identification. But by getting their feet washed, they still participate in the interaction by taking up the opposite position, and so too have a property affixed to them. If it can't be love, then I propose it to be hate. This is based on the rhetoric of the campaign found in the conversation of Robert Greene, the articulation of love in opposition to hate throughout HEGU's website, and the dualistic evil/good theology of Dominionists. It would particularly be in line with the dualism established earlier about what Jesus embodied and rejected. The "hate" of HEGU's imagination is as unrefined as their idea of "love," and they are simplified as polar opposites. Both sides are implicated in conflict and division, but the foot washer is doing the Jesus-like act of looking past sinfulness in order to cleanse the other side of their hatred. While perhaps subtle, this represents an intentional marketing choice with a message underlying it.

Below are a few examples of what the images look like and the array of positionalities they portray. The love/hate dualism is mirrored and reinforced through the composition of the images into a left/right split. Other parts of the scene that are thematically allied with one side are bunched together with their respective ally in the scene. Each image is a different arrangement of rhetorical data and contains a different reading of the ethical relationship surrounding their foot washing engagement—itself a source of the symbolic principle of Jesus' unique ability to love another seemingly unlovable other, a fallen sinner. Highlighting HEGU's decision to pair certain people together in opposition begins to illustrate this point.

*Figure 3:* Indie and Popular

*Figure 4:* Boomer and Gen Z

Not every image carries overtly political thematics. Some of the images portray passing cultural squabbles, such as “Indie and Popular,” depicting two members of different secondary school cultural cliques who need to put their differences aside. “Boomer and Gen Z” presents a familiar division between generational cohorts, implying a need for individuals across lifespans to respect the conflicting attitudes each generation grew up with. One visual hint toward conservative attitudes appears here in the depiction of the wife being the one to set the family dinner table.

*Figure 5:* Addict Mother and Daughter

*Figure 3:* Rancher and Native

Furthermore, in these initial examples some of the value judgments HEGU betrays are also visible, such as the "addict" mother being placed opposite her daughter. Is addiction the problem, or is it the mother's squalid condition? It's not clear, but being addicted—in this case it appears to be alcohol—is a problematic property in HEGU's mind.

Lastly, in this initial group of images, "Rancher and Native" features an escalation in the stakes of the scene. It is a rhetorical foray into disputed histories involving one group historically disenfranchised and subjugated by the legacy of white Christian colonialism. HEGU does acknowledge the conflict by choosing to depict an Indigenous ("Native") person; however, it's his positionality relative to the foot washer, and the foot washer's label, which grants insight into how HEGU chooses to characterize the causal agent(s) involved in the conflict. Consider if "ranchers" are ultimately whom "natives" would consider their ideological other or chief antagonist rather than a representation of colonizing, imperialist force. HEGU reveals their Conservative biases through such subtle implications. What is implied offers a misleading suggestion about who the problematic actors really are. The construction of such narratives collectively, across every image, forms a holistic narrative of disputes conforming to typical right-wing cultural disputes.

The following table lists every label of the characters in the gallery of foot washing images and which side of the interaction they identify with. Again, these are pulled from the website of the photographer, Julia Fullerton-Batten, who was commissioned by HEGU to create the images. They aren't listed on HEGU's website and are only found on her personal website. Their omission from HEGU's site may be noted as a disinclination to make these positionalities explicit. These are the official titles which name the

characters who are supposed to hate each other and identify those who are "ideological others." All these identities are supposed to be an "us" who represent the divergent sides of America in HEGU's view. These people represent, supposedly, U.S. culture's contentious social problems. It depicts those who need to wash or be washed in order for the world to become a more loving place.

| **Foot Washer, analogical Jesus and therefore who acts in love** | **Foot Washed, analogical Other and therefore harbors hate** |
|---|---|
| Daughter | Addict Mother |
| Gen Z | Boomer |
| Oil Worker | Environmentalist |
| Suburban | Migrant |
| Clergy | LGBTQ |
| Cop | Teen |
| Traditional Couple | Arab Couple |
| Popular | Indie |
| Pro-Life | Pro-Choice |
| Rancher | Native |
| Parent | Teacher |
| College Protestors | |
| **Neutral depiction – no foot washer or foot washed** | |
| Black and White Old Timers | |

If you recall the conservative, right-leaning actors behind HEGU, the table tells an ideologically colored story. It so happens that the majority of those pictured doing the foot washing are also those granted more privilege or materially possessing more power than their imagined counterparts in a politically and culturally conservative society. Those in the left column either *have* or *would have* a higher social status in a Christian-ruled society such as the one that Dominionist are working toward. This dynamic

gradually appears clearer as one analyzes successive images with this ideological schema in mind. I explore those dynamics in the captions below.

Pro-Life" and "Pro-Choice" are prominent positionalities in opposition and make some sense as a pairing of opposed ideologies. The pro-life elder woman needs to show humility and love for a young girl who is making the "wrong" choice to get an abortion. But does the young woman need to love the individuals advocating for her right to bodily autonomy to be outlawed?

With "Oil Worker and Environmentalist" however, there is incongruous nature to their supposed opposition. Is it really the oil workers themselves who environmentalists protest? Environmentalists might be more properly opposed to the large corporations who fund, stage, and perpetuate the climate deteriorating activity of fossil fuel production, not necessarily the blue-collar occupation of the Oil Worker.

A “Cop” is here opposed to the nondescript “Teen.” HEGU chooses these lines rather than any tension based on actual contemporary antagonisms like race or class – despite the fact that these elements are visible in the physical depictions of the individuals and the scene for their interaction. This elides more authentic hostilities police have with others.

Finally, that “Teacher and Parent” was even chosen as a dichotomy is quite revealing. While others may be downplayed on the basis of normative visions of conflict, parents and teachers are only set in conflict through a conservative political vision which seeks to restore parental authority over the education that children receive. Notably, this is the only image HEGU doesn’t use anywhere, hiding the clear bias.

The visual rhetoric paired with the characterizations given to the individuals on either side of these interactions display a power dynamic, but it is an inversion of the Jesus parable where Jesus, the (humble) man from Nazareth is replaced by persons who hold power and influence in the culture. In each of the above examples, the persons placed in Jesus’ position as the foot washer are also those who hold a more privileged or empowered social status in a politically conservative America. Pro-life protestors are situated as morally correct but humbling themselves to show love (and forgiveness) to the woman seeking reproductive freedom. The Oil Worker weirdly becomes forgiving of the Environmentalist, with a subtext being that he, the oil worker, represents fossil fuel industries which forgive the environmentalist, implying that the fossil fuel industry should be allowed to continue their ecological devastation to maintain economic dominance over the energy market. Cops always already have more power than any

citizen, and the Teen who is having his feet washed, when looked at from another perspective, might not even get a choice of whether to have his feet washed or not. He will be punitively corrected into doing so. Lastly, the parent washes the feet of the teacher, implying that parents might not yet always be perceived as holding a privileged position over Teachers, even though they do; the American Right seems to be campaigning here for parental rights to decide what their children are being taught in schools. The compositions all reimagine the *more* powerful individual as the *less* powerful, thus subverting the message of the humble servant, Christ, and instead asserting a "loving," if also patronizing, Jesus.

What is depicted also presumes that the other side of the conflict holds a certain hate that needs to ameliorated and calmed. Humility is needed for the haters to accept the loving act of foot washing from those merely trying to "love" them. The young Pro-choice girl should be humble and accept an interaction that neutralizes the real tension created by her making a decision out of bodily autonomy. Environmentalists are trying to maintain a habitable planet for all, but they need to come together with those acting against the existential interests of humanity. Teens need to subject themselves more than they're already forced to by the Cop's badge and gun. Teachers are underpaid professionals who are being undermined by efforts to intrude on their pedagogical activity and yet are positioned here as if there is some hatred they hold for parents rather than outside control being brought to their professional lives.

These depictions imply equivocation of mutually hateful sentiments, but they are reductive interactions, and in reality, these situations are neither pragmatically nor politically equal. There is a distinct sense of "all sides" rhetorical flattening in the assignment of responsibility for social conflict. The nature of the two sides' divisive

"hate" is not equal and neither is the impetus for foot washing as an act of "love." Even less so is every interaction in need of some mutually compassionate amelioration given the power differentials at play. HEGU wants to stop the hatred and conflict, but what is the nature of the "hatred" shown by an LGBTQ individual toward the Clergy when it is the Clergy who degrades their sexual orientations as aberrant, unnatural, or sinful? Opposite the Cop is a Teen, yet the message fails to address the racially inflected reasons many people hold antagonistic attitudes toward policing in this country. Nevertheless, the Teen is rendered as a person of color inhabiting a barbed-wire back-alley ghetto; perhaps there would be less hate directed at law enforcement if this situation weren't unfortunately likely to end in the death of the unarmed Black citizen. The "hatred" of the Others doesn't always make much sense. For what reason does an "Arab couple" *hate* a "Traditional couple?" Or why does a "Migrant" hate a "Suburban?" HEGU is trying to preach love, but in the process, they gloss over legitimate social imbalances which lead to violence being done—mostly toward the people getting their feet washed. These images are thus misrepresentations of the "hating" being done by each side, equating positions when they are not comparable.

The oppositions are conservative constructions more than authentic representations of mutually harmful disagreement. HEGU hopes that the overarching message of love will be what audiences submit to, but an analysis like what I undertake here reveals the subtext in their creative choices. We shouldn't underestimate the influence these reconstructions can have on impressionable viewers who are under the influence to be "moved" by HEGU's marketing. As Burke says, "put identification and division ambiguously together, so that you cannot know for certain just where one ends and the other begins, and you have the characteristic invitation to rhetoric" (p. 25). In

the case of these images the invitation is to see the world of conflict existing as HEGU's conservative ideology suggests it does. *These* are the sides, *these* are the problem areas, and *these* are where the lines of love and hate are drawn. HEGU offers only two possible identities to side with, each curated to fit a social conflict of their own creation. Viewers will reflexively choose a side, and either choice by a viewer subliminally validates the dualistic perspective HEGU is offering.

In the unique case of "Black and White Old Timers," however, there is no decision to make. While every other image shows someone definitively in the position of Jesus as the foot washer, this one shows two supposed ideological others in a state of peaceful equality. It is an odd juxtaposition given that these images are claimed to contain conflict as a central concept, but here the amelioration has appeared to already have happened. Perhaps it is no coincidence either that it is the only one which names race explicitly. And, given the history of race relations in the country, it may be understandable that HEGU elected to have them share a water basin and not put either individual in a hierarchical position over the other.

*Figure 4:* Black and White Old Timers (He Gets Us, 2024)

Why HEGU even chose to create this variation is at first a bit confusing. However, the absence of foot washing also removes the properties it represents: love and humility across difference. There is no foot washing going on because none is needed. It speaks to the conservative fantasy of a post-racial society. Each showcased example thus far has contained its own narrative, and they cut an intersectional array of race, gender, and fantasy on the level of the interaction between the pictured individuals. “Black and White Old Timers” speaks to fantasies on a national social and political level. It is not the only one, and the final section reveals this persuasion at play in two other images using Burke’s principle of autonomy.

**View of the Background: Analyzing the Background Features of the Images**

We don't hate in a vacuum, and HEGU has to situate "us" in situations for the audience to identify with. The characters shown so far sit in front of backgrounds with contextualizing rhetorical force that adds opportunities for interpretation. Foot washing marks the focal point for an instructional image with a message based on how to act like Jesus; however, in accordance with Burke's principle of "autonomy," if the focus is solely on the intrinsic good of the act of foot washing, it becomes abstracted from the external world in which it exists and which motivates the act. Applying this principle means not assuming that what is happening in the background is insignificant. Where is this perspective situated? What is chosen for inclusion or exclusion? The principle of "autonomy" refuses a view from nowhere. The final two images I examine solidify that any claims to neutrality by HEGU are hollow.

Each choice, even subtle ones, are up for evaluation. For example, consider the location of "LGBTQ and Clergy" above in Figure 2. Placing them on the beach could be a subtle allusion to the LGBTQ-friendly environments of West Coast cities like Los Angeles or San Francisco. That might be a simplistic or reductive example, but it serves to gently illustrate the interpretive possibilities. The backgrounds show "where" the problems are. The Environmentalist's problems are in the oil fields, not corporate boardrooms; the Pro-choice's problems are in the reproductive health clinics, not the courtrooms. The backgrounds tell viewers what circumstances present an accurate portrayal of antagonism.

In the image below, the conflicting parties are labeled as "Migrant and Suburban." As I mentioned above, this combination implies some mutual conflict that in reality is not power-balanced. The background rhetorically positions viewers in the

Suburban's home territory, where a group of Migrants is unloading their meager belongings. Burke's principle of "autonomy" encourages a reading of the background that informs the reader of the trespass committed by the Migrant.

*Figure 5: Migrant and Suburban*

Migrants are presented here as disruptors of this idealistic suburban setting. It's a story of intrusion. Idyllic white-picket neighborhoods are being disturbed by groups of immigrants. The underlying narrative this image perpetuates is about foreigners being dumped in peaceful God-fearing suburban neighborhoods with no proper place to stay. In this unique case, however, rather than depicting a full-on situational fantasy of conservative fears, this image has a chronological analog in real life occurrences around the time these images came out in early 2024. Texas Governor Greg Abbott infamously

bussed in migrants to suburban areas of the city from detention centers in Texas (CBS News, Dec. 2023). The only ounce of reality conveyed in this image is the product of a cruel political stunt by a politician ideologically allied with those producing HEGU.

Even viewed without knowledge of this reality, it still carries a political resonance by portraying foreigners entering otherwise peaceful American neighborhoods. Never mind that a bus full of immigrants heading to Chicago is not typically going to be dropped off in the center of a middle-class neighborhood, but positioning this encounter in just such settings indicates the larger locations of societal tension which HEGU tries to present as normative. HEGU opted to stretch reality to position a *freshly arrived* “Migrant” anywhere near a “Suburban” (whatever that means). The Suburban is the foot washer, symbolically Jesus, but this scene would be a real miracle because it doesn’t happen. The particularly conservative political imagination of how Jesus’ love works oozes out in this representation. If HEGU wanted their depiction to have any relationship at all to reality, they could have depicted who would *actually* be there to wash migrants’ feet when they got to America: no one.

The final image in my analysis is perhaps the most unique among the set of 13 images. It is not named after two ideological others like the rest but is characterized as representing a collective. It is titled “College Protestors.” Not only is there foot washing going on, but there is also a depiction of overt conflict surrounding it that is absent from any other foot washing image. Foot washing is occurring amidst the chaos of two sides in protest. The visual of foot washing operating autonomously from the chaos around it endeavors to show the way out from that chaos by acting as Jesus would. He would not get caught up in all that fighting, Jesus would be above (or below, in this case) the fray.

This is the “third way” referenced by BrandHaven founder Bill McKinley at the top of this analysis: “the way we should treat each other” according to Jesus’ example.

*Figure 6:* College Protestors

These “college protesters” are unfashionably neutral, but the scene is clearly meant to portray a modern day protest—on a college campus, of course—through abstracted eyes: multiple megaphones; nothing but screaming at the other side with no civility; the mask pull of the man front-left for aggressive emphasis; and most interesting as it pertains to the political ideology of the image, the multiple telltale cardboard signs pertaining to free speech and censorship. “Stop fascism” may even appear buried in the back of the upper-right corner and partially obscured. Even without any other political markers except signage around censorship, the First

Amendment rights antagonism situated by the background offers plenty of meaning for determining who these opposing groups are meant to represent on both sides of the left/right conflict. There is still a foot washer in this scene though, subtly aligned with the protestors fighting against censorship—a popular virtue to rally behind within right-wing politics. Even without the explicit details attributing each side of the scene to Republicans or Democrats, we know who the two sides are supposed to represent in this conflict. What's additionally telling for HEGU is that seeing this conflict as a fight over freedom of speech brings some ambiguity to the "Him" referenced on two of the signs saying "Shut him up," and "Let him speak." Are they still talking about Jesus when they say "him?" Or is some contemporarily anointed right-wing political messiah the one being vigorously defended? Given all I have attributed to HEGU thus far in this thesis, a double entendre is not implausible, where Trump and Jesus are both reasonable and appropriate fill-ins for "him."

# Chapter 5 - Discussion and Implications

## What Is (Un)Seen in the Foot Washing Images

Now that I have examined HEGU's textual and visual rhetoric concerned with foot washing, I will end this thesis with a discussion about some implications of my analysis. While HEGU may rely on a pretense of neutrality or simply sharing the good word of Jesus, applying three principles from Burke's theory of identification—consubstantiality, property, and autonomy—shows that the foot washing images were conceived from a discernably right-wing narrative. HEGUs marketing strategies clothe their rhetoric under a veneer of simple, Jesus-based love for one's enemies to obscure their true motives. This concluding discussion will focus on what representations HEGU neglects to give any attention in the foot washing images and suggests these missing elements further implicate HEGU as motivated by Dominionist intentions.

However, it isn't simply because the foot washing images portray far-right fundamentalist perspectives that makes them Dominionist pieces of rhetoric, even though in combination with the information provided in the background section I do believe my assertion of HEGU's Dominionist rhetoric is indeed made more credible. What will round out my investigation of HEGU's role as a Dominionist agent are the findings from the underside of the visible rhetorical features I examined in the above analysis of foot washing. As a reminder, HEGU's own campaign language, as spotlighted earlier in this thesis, consistently claims that Jesus alone is the driving force behind their marketing. HEGU wants to push the message that they are *just* trying to get people to connect with Jesus, *just* trying to make the world a more loving place, *just* trying to share Jesus' "authentic" story. They're engrossed in preaching to viewers that the story

of Jesus is for everyone, and they heavily rely on that messaging to build credibility and promote their earnest intentions.

The effect of so fastidiously preaching this primary motivation may fall along the lines of what Burke says here: “Hence, having woven a rhetorical motive so integrally into the very essence of his conception, the writer can seem to have ignored rhetorical considerations” (p. 37). By applying this principle, it appears HEGU’s rhetorical strategy to color their aims as pure and guided by humble obedience to Jesus’ values is a bit of a ruse. They downplay their motivations and deny their own positionality, thereby betraying HEGU’s amalgam of authors who do indeed harbor goals of their own that motivate the tactics of the identification-driven advertising. In Burke’s words, “This aspect of identification, whereby one can protect an interest merely by using terms not incisive enough to critique it properly, often brings rhetoric to the edge of cunning” (p. 36). There is little authentic identification to be had between the very wealthy people composing HEGU and the actual target audience, which is why Jesus is a necessary intermediary to preach their gospel. There is a rhetorical savviness in coopting Jesus to proclaim, in effect, *“He* will preach to you because *we* are not in a position to.” HEGU may implicate their “side” in the foot washing images (pro-life, cops, parents), but that is a different matter from implicating *themselves*.

All the available foot washing discourse declares *here* is where Jesus needs to intervene, *these* are the tensions to be addressed, and *they* are the ones that should reconcile. HEGU fixes the camera, acting in a way as His eyes, to very particular configurations of strife. That overall form is a secular world of conflict from their perspective. It is their terministic screen that motivates what they choose to display as consequential social fault lines for their market-tested audience’s recognition and

education. An attempt is made to address societal hate and venomous ideological conflict but in a way that doesn't point any blame at themselves. Since those behind HEGU are Christian, they believe themselves to be already on the right side of any social conflict and thus are absent from images that portray that conflict. HEGU doesn't think they participate or contribute to any of these ideological tensions, which again would comport with a Dominionist point of view that believes a Christian belief system is morally pure; thus they are anointed to direct society from above and behind the scenes to follow Jesus' example and value His kind of love. All one must do to identify what attribute ties these Dominionists together is to observe who is absent from foot washing.

The most noticeable absence is of any wealth-based oppositions. No wealthy against poor. No owners against laborers. No billionaires against the unhoused. No bankers, no investors, and not one iota of luxury or upper-class. Revisit the table above with each labeled oppositional pair and look again at the (lack of) markers of wealth in the images. (I used all 13 available.) Elite socio-economic status is missing from any of the labels or visual depictions. Only in the background do we get a range of lower-middle class socioeconomic statuses, while the other extreme end of the spectrum isn't pictured. It's as if that dichotomous dimension of extreme inequality doesn't exist: no rich and poor, or disadvantaged and highly privileged. While these antagonistic oppositions present viscerally experienced, ideologically motivated locations of strife in society, they are ignored by the HEGU campaign. As such, it seems that HEGU is fine with showing the other problems they perceive, but they either don't think that income disparity is an issue or that they would rather not draw any attention to wealth inequality's deleterious effect on society.

Or perhaps it undergirds an assumption that the wealthy don't need to be shown how to be like Jesus because they are implicitly assumed to already understand these things, and it's only the "lower" class that needs to be retaught these lessons. Whatever the case, the absence of wealth in the campaign is striking. It reveals who HEGU thinks needs to be like Jesus, what they would like that audience to believe, and how HEGU would like them to act. But those not pictured are also those not spoken to, not encouraged to act as a part of "us." The wealthy are left out of the overarching "acting together" that is supposed to be the way forward under a Jesus-modeled ethics of relating to one another. To return for a moment to Burke's principle of consubstantiality, the idea in HEGU is for audiences to feel as though they are one with Jesus. Further elaborating on that idea of "substance" at the root of consubstantiality, Burke says, "For substance was an *act*; and a way of life is an *acting-together*; and in acting together, men have common sensations, concepts, images, ideas, attitudes that make them con substantial" (p. 21). But the implication of wealthy individuals' absence in the foot washing images is that those supporting HEGU do not act-together with the poor target audience, nor with Jesus.

In fairness, there are no unhoused folk or trans folk pictured either, but I'm afraid their absence may betray a darker epistemological position. The people running HEGU might not even consider such identities to *be* people at all. And because HEGU has decided to speak for Jesus, they might consider themselves to not be people either, but closer to divine beings. HEGU seems to position itself as a collective of wealthy Christians who are authoring a palliative public service announcement to treat the collective ills of those lesser creatures than their deservingly affluent selves.

The result is akin to a parable about hubris; the tremendous wealth that allows HEGU to be the historically unique, mass-advertising effort that it is also becomes the biggest thing they leave out of Jesus' otherwise all-encompassing scope of foot washing love. HEGU shows that the wealthy are not the audience by neglecting to include anything that they could identify with. In effect, Jesus does not get them. They are not pegged as needing to be like Jesus and they do not need to change their ways to be more like Him. They admit by omission two damning interpretive possibilities: either Jesus is not like them, the wealthy, conservative Christian elite or they are not like Jesus, failing to share in His love and compassion for all people. HEGU truly offers a Jesus meant for the poor and hungry masses. He Gets "*You*" would be the more appropriate title. This rhetorical position also explains HEGU's insistence on portraying a dismal state of existence. "The worst things in the world constitute *your* world, destitute viewers, not ours," says HEGU. *Your* world is full of conflict. It is messed up, and it is up to *you* to change it by being like Jesus and washing others' feet.

**It's up to <u>You</u>**

The absence of any collective cooperative action or group activity is a subtle display of rhetorical "cunning" that neutralizes any hope that foot washing could actually change the material circumstances of those who do it. HEGU's images of feet washing convey the notion that emulating Jesus is an individual responsibility and a result of personal piety. The absence of any group activity falls in line with American values of individualism and Biblical doctrines of personal salvation. It is in small acts such as washing feet where peace will be found, not through larger scale organization and agitation. HEGU claims that:

> Figurative foot washing can be as simple as giving a compliment to a co-worker or paying for a stranger's lunch. Acts of kindness done out of humility and respect for another person could be considered the equivalent of foot washing.

Jesus' love comes through minute acts that, while certainly polite and pleasant, are grounded in smallness and local scale. In this way, HEGU is formulating the nature of the antagonism *and* the ameliorative gestures as occurring on a person-to-person level. It is a 1-to-1 malfunction, not a societal one. The real issues are local, not global; they are personal and private rather than systemic and political.

Within the larger rhetorical move to persuade audiences by identification, encouraging the act of foot washing can be read as a way that HEGU sells Jesus-like behavior as an act of individualistic motivation. It is a safe and abstract form of love that the campaign can freely encourage and insist people partake in. It's individual, simplistic, and feel-good. There is no conflict of interest in asking "everybody" to undertake this mission of love. It threatens nothing of the socio-political order in which it exists and which upholds those responsible for HEGU in their privileged positions.

**The Wealthy Don't Need to Wash Feet**

While He Gets Us is purported to be about "us" (e.g. everyone), its producers are nowhere to be seen. In an ironic, roundabout sense, they have called themselves out. Without any depictions of themselves among the antagonistic scenes of the campaign, the founders and creators of HEGU have implicitly exempted themselves from any responsibility for the poor state of social relations in America. They acknowledge that the situation isn't good and present a fundamentalist fix to the suffering souls of the country, now reduced to washing feet as the extent of their capacity to change the world for the better.

I close this discussion with one last claim that HEGU is participating in Dominionism. The people who are portrayed in the foot washing images occupy a social status distinct from the uber wealthy class of America that is not pictured here. I'm unsure what term besides "common" folk may be appropriate to capture the population left over—perhaps the 99%. In any case, contextualized within the increasingly prominent theme of "struggle" that HEGU is adopting, it certainly appears that HEGU is peddled to those who know struggle, poverty, and/or disenfranchisement. That's who the "us" is. HEGU isn't pitching Jesus to the wealthy because they don't know any of those existential ailments. Their prominent financial status confirms them as already blessed. Theirs is a prosperity gospel theology, which is a doctrine in Christianity that believes and affirms financial success is a result of godly behavior or steadfast faith. Christlike behavior is the paradigm for the right life, as only it will invite the blessings of the Lord. From there, the Dominionist narrative implores that they spread the word to the rest of the country for its own salvation.

This arrogance powers the Christian Dominionist enterprise. They believe themselves to be above others. They believe they have a right to instruct others how to live. They believe it is their destiny to take control of America. In addition to belonging to a rare class that *could* produce HEGU, they are also the only ones who *would*. Ultra-wealthy Christian theology manifests as a Dominionist effort to control the "media" mountain in the form of HEGU.

# Chapter 6 - Conclusion

## What's Next for Me and HEGU

In this thesis, I looked at a campaign still in its infancy, and I inevitably used material that has already been supplanted because HEGU's marketing is continuously being updated. As such, my selected texts and images reflect a perhaps already outdated time in the HEGU campaign. What I have basically done is look at what has become the archive of HEGU, taken a snapshot of a moment in its evolution and perhaps, in this sense, have unveiled some of the foundational aspects of the HEGU mission. The view I offer here is a view of it while still in the earliest stages and first iterations—but the marketing will adjust. HEGU's website has already updated on multiple occasions as I worked on this thesis. The designers will get more clarity on what is working, and the message will be augmented to better attune to those discoveries. That is what a nimble and well-run campaign does. It changes according to trends, perceived effectiveness, and evolution of goals. The marketing strategy I have observed here may well already be outdated, but what will likely remain is the use of Jesus as the spokesperson. HEGU will continue to use Him to spread a message that aligns with wealthy Dominionist Christian beliefs and preserves an ideological environment which ensures that their status isn't threatened.

Consider this final image in light of what has been presented:

*Figure 7:* A tweet from HEGU (Source: He Gets Us, 2023).

HEGU and its backers are actively trying to devalue things that they themselves enjoy and grant them the immense privilege they have. Material wealth and possessions are devalued as viewers are encouraged to cast them aside. Higher education is written off, and along with it the kind of critical religious literacy I am advocating for in composition instruction. The HEGU founders benefit from such ignorance among the citizenry. Coming off of the marketing for the 2025 Super Bowl, their current website homepage is about "greatness" and our misconceived notions of it. In one video, they preach that Jesus' version of greatness has nothing to do with "our achievements, our reputation, or our superiority," while crossing out images of a trophy, a crown, and a dollar sign. The latest message projected from Jesus preaches that "He showed that the greatest thing we could be is a humble servant, sacrificing our needs for others." Authorially, HEGU would like to continue playing as God above, spreading their message unabated through mass marketing straight to people's homes and devices, keeping them stuck on earth to

play the role of humble recipients and servants. HEGU's designers do not identify with nor practice what they preach.

From here I see future research resulting from observing how HEGU's rhetoric changes over time. The multifaceted progression of it demands my continued attention to it. I will keep a rhetorical eye on it, and what it will become. I feel like somebody has to. HEGU has said this is "phase 1" and Come Near says they have more things in the works. It may not divert from its focus on Jesus, but it is evident HEGU is fully intent on comporting Jesus' message to whatever the present context is. It will speak to concerns of unfolding, successive *nows*. As those change, so will HEGU. It could last a very long time, like a PSA that successive generations grow up being used to. In this sense, my work will continue for a while as I keep track of it. I will be a historian of HEGU, and this comprises the personal significance of this work. HEGU is a novel break in the secular/religious binary, and I believe it is indicative of a larger socio-cultural shift that is being pursued in the name of Christian Dominionism.

While my hypothesis about HEGU operating as a Dominionist actor may still require additional perspectives, my prognosis is that with the growth and reflexivity of the campaign, my assertion will become increasingly accurate. I believe this is a moment in American media worth noting, worth documenting, and worth rhetorical scrutiny if my conception of the creeping onset of the Seven Mountains Mandate is accurate, insofar as the tenets of the mandate are being affected right now in the America of (Project) 2025. The Christonormativity, the immense anonymous wealth, and the presumption to preach a customized version of the Word of God to the unconsenting masses are a rhetorical phenomenon that portends a change in the media landscape of America. HEGU's appearance and message has already been normalized. From the

beginning, it was a spectacle of Christonormativity, and now it is even further entrenched as such. Of the Seven Mountains, the main ones I observe at play with HEGU are the “religion” and “media” mountains of cultural influence, recognizing that advertising is a mainstay of our media ecosystem in the US. HEGU is doing double mountain duty out of the gate. It is Christotainment of a new variety that is specifically aimed and circulated at those beyond a believing Christian demographic.

The way that it responds to a political situation that is intent on challenging and reforming what has previously been considered the separate spheres of the religious and secular in America will be informative. With a nominally Christian administration that has a *plan* for what this might look like, HEGU is a wake-up call. It is a harbinger. Part of my takeaway here is that rhetoricians, compositionists, and any scholars who study culture as a location of knowledge creation should be similarly scrutinizing HEGU and teaching students in our schools and colleges to do the same. Religious rhetoric needs attention from scholars and teachers who are concerned with the larger context in which rhetorical and writing studies are situated on a national level.

Students bring all different aspects of themselves to the writing classroom, and that, of course, includes religion. But even students who do not come from a traditionally religious background have ideas about what a religion like Christianity preaches, and now it is HEGU that is playing a teaching role about what the dominant religious belief in America is really about. While we as instructors may only see them a few hours a week, a campaign like HEGU may be massaging students with their message at any point in the day. The kinds of literacies needed to thoughtfully engage with something as sleek as HEGU’s marketing crosses the kinds of rhetorical boundaries that I don’t see as much attention to as HEGU’s appearance suggests might be necessary.

With greater and evolving Christianizing efforts like HEGU very possibly on the horizon, there is an increasing need for students to understand the intricate rhetorical features at play to receive or resist the messages they are being sent. I therefore argue for critical religious literacy as an immediately important addition to the composition curriculum.

**Who Could "Our" Jesus Be?**

I believe it is partially to HEGU's own detriment to speak so directly to audiences, those whom they are shaping the message for on behalf of some "authentic" Jesus. This effort to shift public perception exposes them, and they are foolish to reveal their project, its goals, and its curated message. The reason I say this is because of an odd rhetorical consequence of the campaign: they put Jesus up for grabs. Drawing back to the mission statements made in their "About Us" section, they say it themselves that "the story of Jesus belongs to everyone." On one hand, this gives explicit permission to question and critique HEGU's own campaign—as I have done here—as an effort which undermines that very message by taking control over Jesus' story themselves. And on the other hand, they offer an opening for others to take and shape Jesus' according to *their* own distinct needs and causes. HEGU themselves say that Jesus is open for others to examine in their own way. If Jesus is up for grabs, then we scholars of writing and rhetoric might well take some interest in exploring the consequences of that.

That consideration is what I want my work to extend toward with its critique of HEGU's Jesus. Yet another version of Jesus is possible to invoke, and that is an argument I believe my study begins to suggest an opportunity to explore. Jesus is a dynamic, widely unassailable cultural figure who, in this national moment, has been made the spokesperson for a particular amalgamation of powerful people's moral framework. The lessons HEGU uses Jesus as a model for are aimed at educating the

ethics of a diverse citizenry that HEGU has little connection with, questionable concern for, and zero incentive to empower en masse. But now the possibility exists to ask: Who could another Jesus be? A legitimately grassroots, caring-for-others Jesus could do something very different and locally impactful even in the hands of non-Christian-identifying activists. He doesn't have to be left in the hands of those who ventriloquize Him for their own rewards. Postsecular Jesus can be for anyone.

I wish to end with a suggestion for anyone who endeavors to mount an oppositional campaign against the powerful currents of ongoing authoritarian waves in US politics and culture: Religion cannot be rhetorically sidelined or relegated to a personal arena of concern given the religious makeup of this country. American Christianity is now intertwined with political enterprises rather than remaining as a private spiritual experience. Religion occupies a crucial place of importance in the minds and ballots of people across the United States, and it has helped carry presidents to the White House for decades. Looking back at religiously attuned post-election commentary in the 2004 and 2024 elections offer eerie and dismaying similarities. There were lamentations about Democrats' inability to coherently speak to religious peoples in the aftermath of both (Ehrenreich, 2004; Prothero, 2004; Glueck, 2024; Reese, 2024). HEGU's incursion could alternatively be viewed optimistically as an opening for Jesus' recovery in pursuit of means that push back against the malformed political ends He has been put to use for. I believe that Jesus has been given a bad name. He has been kidnapped and accosted and perhaps it is *He* who needs to be saved now. Or salvaged, if you prefer. If you're unconvinced that this is possible, consider that the effort to rethink Him and the religion He spawned is already underway.

Critical theorist Peter McLaren's (2021) recent work is actively renarrativizing Jesus as a communist. His work extends the thinking of both moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre (1984) and decolonial theorist Enrique Dussel (2024), who both reclaim Marxist convergences with Christian thought that poke holes in the dominant interpretation of what it means to call oneself a Christian. They point the way toward radical revisions of religiosity, and their work can be carried forward by not sidelining religion as a topic ill-suited for secular university discussion. As HEGU continues to exert influence that reshapes Jesus in the public consciousness, I believe they further preclude some of the more radical potentialities for a liberatory theology that scholars like these dare to imagine.

To close with a final ray of possibility, one mainstay of Jesus that HEGU gives curious little attention to is the inherent hope in His message. They want us to love, sure, but alongside the absence of salvationary rhetoric is a lack of forward-looking future imaginings of a world made better by acting like Jesus. Any co-optation of Jesus for more radical desires could fill that gap in His narrative that HEGU leaves behind. After all, is Jesus' enduring lesson of hope for a better future all that different from what drives the dream of higher education?

And that is only attendant to one corner of religious ideation and belief from a specifically Western tradition. A postsecular view of what constitutes religion may well break open the idea of becoming something we too can utilize as a framework for our goals, mission, and resistance. In her 2023 CCCC Chair's Address, Staci Perryman-Clark pointed toward a similar horizon:

> We invest [in higher education] because we believe, and many of us believe in its promises and many of its practices similarly to the ways in which we believe in

organized religion. Put simply, many of us treat higher education as our religion (2023).

While disentangling such a statement and wrangling with its consequences is beyond the scope of this essay, I think it's an enlightened claim, and in fact I choose to embrace my own pedagogical efforts as such. Not that I think we need to embrace *Christian* beliefs and practices specifically, but there is a question to consider from their efforts to spread their beliefs across the globe and their success in doing so. What do we, scholars of rhetoric, miss by not attending to a rhetoric that is so pervasive and persuasive? Where are the boundaries between teaching and preaching?

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