

THE *LOVE WINS* CONTROVERSY:
A CASE STUDY IN RELIGIOSITY AND SOCIAL IDENTITY

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THESIS: THE *LOVE WINS* CONTROVERSY: A CASE STUDY
IN RELIGIOSITY AND SOCIAL IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT

In March of 2011, pastor and author Rob Bell released a book entitled *Love Wins*, in which he argued for the possibility of universal salvation. Critics responded by labeling Bell a false prophet, a deceiver, and a distorter of the gospel, effectively expelling him from the evangelical community. This study investigates the *Love Wins* controversy from within a broad theoretical framework based on constructs from social psychology and the psychology of religion. A qualitative content analysis of a collection of letters to the editor reveals key distinctions between Bell's supporters and critics, particularly with respect to the role of questioning and authority in religious belief. These individual differences serve to explain how critics responded to the distinctiveness threat raised by Bell's universalist theology. By integrating individual difference and social identity perspectives, this study provides an illuminating example of how various forms of religiosity can affect intergroup conflict over doctrinal issues.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

On February 22, 2011, pastor and author Rob Bell posted a video trailer for his forthcoming book, entitled *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*. In the video, Bell tells the story of an art show held at his church, and of a particular piece featuring a quote from Mahatma Gandhi. As Bell describes:

Lots of people found this piece compelling. They'd stop and sort of stare at it and take it in or reflect on it, but not everybody found it that compelling. Somewhere in the course of the art show, somebody attached a handwritten note to the piece, and on the note, they had written, "Reality check: He's in hell."

Bell goes on to ask several provocative questions:

Gandhi's in hell? He is? And someone knows this for sure, and felt the need to let the rest of us know? Will only a few select people make it to heaven, and will billions and billions of people burn forever in hell? And if that's the case, how do you become one of the few? ... And then there is the question behind the questions—the real question: What is God like? ... How could that God ever be good? How could that God ever be trusted? And how could that ever be good news?

Bell suggests that “this is why lots of people want nothing to do with the Christian faith.” He concludes that “what you discover in the Bible is so surprising, unexpected, and beautiful that whatever we’ve been told or taught, the good news is actually better than that, better than we could ever imagine. The good news is that love wins” (Bell, 2011b).

Bell’s words in the promotional video for *Love Wins* led many to believe that he was promoting *universalism*, which is defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary as “a theological doctrine that all human beings will eventually be saved” (universalism, n.d.). The publisher’s original description of the book seemed to support this conclusion.¹ It stated:

Bell addresses one of the most controversial issues of faith—the afterlife—arguing that a loving God would never sentence human souls to eternal suffering. With searing insight, Bell puts hell on trial, and his message is decidedly optimistic—eternal life doesn’t start when we die; it starts right now. And ultimately, *Love Wins*.

Four days after the promotional video was posted, blogger Justin Taylor published the first of what would become thousands of blog posts debating Bell’s views and his standing within the evangelical community. Taylor’s post was entitled, “Rob Bell: Universalist?” In it, he wrote, “It is unspeakably sad when those called to be ministers of the Word distort the gospel and deceive the people of God with false doctrine.” With regard to Bell’s doctrinal position, he wrote, “I’m glad that Rob Bell has the integrity to

¹ It is worth noting that, as of March 9, 2012, the publisher’s description had been changed to use less definitive language. It now reads: “What if the story of heaven and hell we have been taught is not, in fact, what the Bible teaches? What if what Jesus meant by heaven, hell, and salvation are very different from how we have come to understand them?” (HarperCollins, n.d.)

lay his cards on the table about universalism. It seems that this is not just optimism about the fate of those who haven't heard the Good News, but ... full-blown hell-is-empty-everyone-gets-saved universalism" (Taylor, 2011).

Within hours, another well-known pastor and author, John Piper, tweeted a link to Taylor's blog, along with a three word pronouncement: "Farewell, Rob Bell" (JohnPiper, 2011). Jon Meacham (2011), writing of the controversy for a cover article in *Time*, interpreted this tweet as Piper "unilaterally attempting to evict Bell from the Evangelical community." All of this happened a full month before Bell's book was scheduled to be released.

What was it about the promotional materials for *Love Wins*—a three-minute video and a brief publisher's description—that prompted such a strong response from some within the evangelical community? What prompted Taylor and others to label Bell as not only a universalist, but a deceiver, one who distorts the gospel, and a promoter of false doctrine? And what caused Piper and others to seemingly categorize Bell as no longer belonging to the evangelical community? Was it the questions he asked? Was it what he suggested about the answers to these questions? Was it the fact the he even dared to ask questions in the first place?

This thesis aims to answer these questions by placing the *Love Wins* controversy within a broader theoretical framework based on constructs from social psychology and the psychology of religion. In doing so, it aims to explicate how individual difference and social identity perspectives can illuminate the effect of various forms of religiosity on intergroup conflict over doctrinal issues.

Chapter 2 contains a review of the relevant literature and develops a framework for understanding the *Love Wins* controversy, drawing inspiration from the initial posts by Bell, Taylor, and Piper. Chapter 3 presents a thematic analysis of the content of *Love Wins* from within the context of this framework. Chapter 4 examines the responses of Bell's supporters and critics via a qualitative content analysis of a collection of letters to the editor. Chapter 5 presents a synthesis of the findings from the previous chapters and suggests directions for further research.

CHAPTER 2

RELIGIOSITY AND SOCIAL IDENTITY

In order to better understand the *Love Wins* controversy, it will of course be necessary to take a closer look at what Bell actually wrote in his controversial book. This chapter lays the groundwork for such analysis by surveying relevant perspectives from the research literature.

The *Love Wins* controversy can be classified broadly as a *religious* conflict. However, such a classification is not immediately helpful, as the very concept of religion can be difficult to define. According to Harrison (2006), most definitions of religion fall into one of three major categories: (1) intellectual definitions, which focus on beliefs; (2) affective definitions, which emphasize faith, emotion, experience, and expression; and (3) functional definitions, which concentrate on the individual and social roles and functions of religion.

At first glance, an intellectual framework may seem most appropriate for understanding the conflict surrounding *Love Wins*. Indeed, the central issue seems to be one of belief and doctrine—in particular, Bell’s alleged support of universalism. However, the initial posts by Bell, Taylor, and Piper suggest that the conflict also involved strong attitudes and emotions—affective factors that may have been influenced by the role of religion as a social institution and a source of identity.

Integrating these perspectives, it appears that the *Love Wins* controversy can be best understood not by focusing on one particular definition of religion, but rather by

exploring the interplay of the intellectual, affective, and functional dimensions of religiosity. The framework developed in this chapter accounts for these various components by drawing on both intergroup and individual difference perspectives, as elucidated by theories from social psychology and the psychology of religion.

Realistic Group Conflict Theory

At its most basic level, the *Love Wins* controversy can be viewed as simply a debate over religious doctrine, with some supporting Bell's ostensibly universalist theology and others opposing it. This perspective is consistent with realistic group conflict theory (see Jackson, 1993, for a review), which suggests that intergroup conflict occurs when groups compete over resources or power. According to Pruitt and Kim (2004), realistic group conflict theory assumes that conflict always has a realistic basis—that is, a “resource that is desired by both groups and is in short supply” (p. 29). Consistent with this perspective, Jackson and Hunsberger (1999) suggested that religious conflict often involves competition for the promotion of religious values or even the ability to “win souls” (p. 510).

One could argue, as journalist Martin Bashir did in an MSNBC interview (joegerarden, 2011) that universalism is “warm, kind, and popular” and therefore runs the risk of drawing congregants away from churches that espouse more traditional (and less “palatable,” as Bashir put it) teachings on heaven and hell. Thus, the doctrine of universalism may itself form a basis for competition that is consistent with the tenets of realistic group conflict theory. However, as demonstrated by the famous Robbers Cave

experiment (Sherif, Harvey, White, Hood, & Sherif, 1961), intergroup conflict cannot always be fully explained by its realistic bases. In the case of the *Love Wins* controversy, perspectives from social identity theory may help to provide a more complete understanding.

Social Identity Theory and Religious Ethnocentrism

By its very definition, universalism embodies a rejection of what Altemeyer (2003) refers to as “religious ethnocentrism,” defined as “the tendency to make ‘Us versus Them,’ ‘In-group versus Out-group’ judgments of others on the basis of religious identification and beliefs” (p. 20).

At the heart of religious ethnocentrism is the notion of group identification and social categorization. Social identity theory, originally formulated by Tajfel and Turner (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Tajfel & Turner, 1986), holds that individuals derive a portion of their self-concept and self-esteem from the social groups to which they belong. Ysseldyk, Matheson, and Anisman (2010) argued that religious identification is more powerful than identification with other social groups, owing in part to the fact that religious group membership is often considered “eternal” (p. 60). Furthermore, religious identification is empowered by “the steadfast belief that one’s own religion is *the* truth” (p. 62).

Religious identification can promote well-being and serve a protective function when non-religious aspects of one’s identity are threatened. However, when it is religious identity itself that is threatened, the opposite effect may occur. Ysseldyk,

Matheson, and Anisman (2011) noted that religious identity threats constitute an attack on not only the individual or group, but also on the underlying belief system, which typically serves as a coping resource for religiously identified individuals. Because religious identity threats undermine this coping resource, efforts to protect religious identity can exceed those exerted to protect other aspects of one's social identity.

The particular threat posed by universalist theology pertains to the distinctiveness of the ingroup—in this case, those who are “saved” or destined for heaven. Roccas, Sagiv, Schwartz, and Halevy (2008) noted that ingroup-outgroup distinctions are essential to group identification, and these distinctions often require group members to attribute positive characteristics to the ingroup in order to establish ingroup superiority. Roccas et al. (2008) argued that the superiority aspect of group identification is emphasized when contextual factors make more salient the characteristics on which the group is perceived to be superior. Moreover, researchers have found that those who identify highly with their ethnoreligious group may (1) resist attempts to increase the inclusiveness of the ingroup (Roccas et al, 2008), (2) exhibit higher levels of ingroup bias when the distinctiveness of their perceived ingroup is threatened (Schmid, Hewstone, Tausch, Cairns, & Hughes, 2009), (3) react strongly to distinctiveness threats in an attempt to restore distinctiveness (Jetten, Spears, & Postmes, 2004), and (4) ostracize or marginalize ingroup members who threaten group distinctiveness or blur group boundaries (Ysseldyk et al., 2010).

Social Identity Complexity

One possible mediating variable in the relationship between distinctiveness threat and ingroup bias is that of *social identity complexity*, a construct developed by Roccas and Brewer (2002) to explain how individuals construct ingroup representations when they belong to multiple social categories that may overlap only partially.

As an example, note that a white Christian woman may perceive her ingroup to contain only those who share all three of these identifying traits (white, Christian, and woman). Or she may allow one of these attributes to dominate her social identity, so that her ingroup includes anyone who shares that attribute (even though they may be outgroup members on other dimensions) and excludes anyone who does not (even though these excluded others may be ingroup members on other dimensions). She may choose to construct her ingroup differently depending on context, so that, for instance, her Christian social identity is dominant in contexts that emphasize religion, and her identity as a woman is dominant in contexts that emphasize gender. Or, finally, she may develop an inclusive ingroup representation in which ingroup identification is extended to others who share membership in any one of the three identifying categories.

Roccas and Brewer (2002) called these four modes of identification *intersection*, *dominance*, *compartmentalization*, and *merger*, respectively. They suggested that the intersection mode corresponded to the least complex representations of social identity, while the merger mode corresponded to the most complex representation, with dominance and compartmentalization falling between intersection and merger on a unidimensional complexity continuum.

Roccas and Brewer (2002) suggested that social identity complexity requires both an awareness of multiple ingroup categorizations and a recognition that these multiple categorizations do not converge. Thus, a white Christian woman with low social identity complexity may conflate certain aspects of her identity by, for example, operationalizing a belief that all Christians are white or that all white persons are Christians. This simplification allows for more definitive determinations of ingroup membership, whereas more complex representations of social identity tend to blur “us-them” distinctions, rendering ingroup-outgroup categorization more difficult.

High social identity complexity is associated with tolerance for ambiguity and openness to change, whereas low social identity complexity is associated with a high need for closure, which Roccas and Brewer (2002) described as “a tendency to seek immediate and permanent answers ... that avoid the necessity of future revisions and the uncertainty and ambiguity that revision process may entail” (p. 97). Miller, Brewer, and Arbuckle (2009) confirmed the connection between social identity complexity and cognitive style, but found that need for cognition was the predominant psychological predictor of complexity. They suggested that “it is the active *seeking* of cognitive stimulation and experience that promotes more complex representations of one’s multiple, cross-cutting social identities” (p. 88).

Consistent with previous studies that have found the need for closure to be a determinant of ingroup bias (Shah, Kruglanski, & Thompson, 1998), Roccas and Brewer (2002) suggested that social identity complexity may be a mediating variable in responses to ingroup threats. Schmid et al. (2009) confirmed this hypothesis, and Brewer and

Pierce (2005) found similar connections between social identity complexity and outgroup tolerance. In particular, high levels of threat decreased social identity complexity and lowered tolerance of outgroup members. Roccas and Brewer (2002) hypothesized that ingroup threats raise the salience of the threatened ingroup, which leads to a dominance mode of identity representation, with the threatened ingroup serving as the primary arbiter of ingroup membership. Schmid et al. (2009) also found that being highly identified with one's ethnoreligious group was itself associated with lower social identity complexity and higher ingroup bias.

Individual Difference Perspectives

Social identity complexity is one of many variables that serve to elucidate differences in the way individuals conceptualize and operationalize their beliefs and identities.

Allport (1950) was one of the first to investigate individual difference perspectives on religiosity. He formulated the concept of "mature religion," which involved (1) willingness to face complex issues without reducing their complexity, (2) openness to doubt and self-criticism, and (3) a focus on incompleteness and tentativeness (Batson & Raynor-Prince, 1983). Allport's (1950) original concept of mature religion was eventually reformulated into the concept of *intrinsic* religion (Allport, 1966; Allport & Ross, 1967), which involves "a single-minded commitment to religion and reliance on religion as a central, master motive in life" (Batson & Raynor-Prince, 1983, p. 38). Allport (1966) viewed intrinsics as those for whom religion was an end in itself, as

compared to *extrinsics*, who use religion as a means to an end (such as social standing or comfort in times of trial). In Allport's (1966) view, one whose orientation toward religion is intrinsic "takes seriously the commandment of brotherhood, and strives to transcend all self-centered needs" (p. 455). As such, Allport believed that intrinsic religion would inhibit prejudice by leading to more inclusive ingroup definitions.

In addition to the intrinsic and extrinsic religious orientations, Batson and Ventis (1982) introduced the *quest* construct, which conceptualized the type of religiosity characterized by an open-ended search for truth that places value on doubt and uncertainty. Batson and Raynor-Prince (1983) argued while both the intrinsic and quest orientations captures some characteristics of Allport's (1950) concept of mature religion, neither captures all. Furthermore, in contrast to Allport's (1966) original distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity, Batson and Schoenrade (1991) argued that the dimensions of intrinsic, extrinsic, and quest religiosity are "independent, orthogonal, and not interchangeable" (p. 418). In other words, each measures a different aspect of individual religiosity, rather than being points on a single continuum.

The starkest contrast among the various measures of religiosity seems to be found not in the relationships between the intrinsic, extrinsic, and quest orientations, but rather in the distinction between the quest orientation and another widely studied measure of religiosity: religious fundamentalism. Altemeyer and Hunsberger (1992) defined religious fundamentalism as follows:

By 'fundamentalism' we mean the belief that there is one set of religious teachings that clearly contains the fundamental, basic, intrinsic, essential,

inerrant truth about humanity and deity; that this essential truth is fundamentally opposed by forces of evil which must be vigorously fought; that this truth must be followed today according to the fundamental, unchangeable practices of the past; and that those who believe and follow these fundamental teachings have a special relationship with the deity. (p. 118)

Altemeyer and Hunsberger (1992) also observed that, by this definition, there is conceptually very little difference between being a fundamentalist and being a non-quester.

Of course, in addition to considering the various ways individuals conceptualize and operationalize their religious beliefs, it is also important to consider the beliefs themselves. In the literature, one of the more common ways of gauging the content of religious beliefs is to measure the extent to which they agree with widely accepted doctrines of orthodox Christianity. Fullerton and Hunsberger (1982) were the first to develop a scale for measuring Christian orthodoxy, which included beliefs expressed in the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds, as well as beliefs in prayer, miracles, and Biblical inspiration that are commonly held by orthodox Christian groups.

For the purposes of the current study, it is worth noting that none of the items on either Fullerton and Hunsberger's (1982) Christian orthodoxy scale, or the shorter version of it later proposed by Hunsberger (1989), make reference to hell. Rather, they reference beliefs that "there is life after death" and that "God will judge men after their deaths" (Fullerton & Hunsberger, 1982, p. 318), but stop short of addressing any specific

doctrines about the nature of God's judgment or what awaits in the afterlife. The Nicene Creed (2012) makes no reference to hell, and the Apostles' Creed (2012) simply states that Jesus' "descended into hell" or "descended to the dead" (and some denominations omit this phrase when using the creed in worship services).

Religiosity, Prejudice, and Outgroup Hostility

Numerous studies have investigated the relationship between the religiosity variables identified in the preceding section (intrinsic, extrinsic, quest, fundamentalism, and orthodoxy) and various forms of prejudice. Although prejudice can be defined in many ways, it is typically associated with ingroup bias and outgroup hostility—potentially key factors in the *Love Wins* controversy.

Laythe, Finkel, Bringle, and Kirkpatrick (2002) suggested that "because the various dimensions or aspects of religiousness tend to be intercorrelated or confounded with one another, it is notoriously difficult to tease apart the effects of different dimensions in assessing the empirical relationships between religiosity and other variables" (p. 623).

With regard to these intercorrelations, studies have found that: (1) fundamentalism is positively correlated with, but not a proxy for, intrinsic religiosity (Fulton, Gorsuch, & Maynard, 1999; Kirkpatrick, 1993; McFarland, 1989); (2) fundamentalism is negatively correlated with quest religiosity (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992; Kirkpatrick, 1993); (3) fundamentalism and Christian orthodoxy are positively correlated (Jackson & Hunsberger, 1999; Kirkpatrick, 1993; Laythe et al., 2002); and (4)

quest religiosity does not predict low orthodoxy (Batson & Schoenrade, 1991; Batson & Ventis, 1982). With regard to the latter, Beck and Jessup (2004) suggested that

one can remain committed to a religious worldview yet share Quest-like attributes. ... Persons within a religious worldview, in this case Christianity, can be tentative, curious, accepting of other Christian faiths, and not beholden to Biblical literalism. These are Quest-like attributes which do not appear to be incompatible with having reached some fundamental metaphysical conclusions (e.g., Jesus is the Son of God). (p. 290)

With regard to the effect of religiosity on prejudice and outgroup tolerance, studies have painted a complex picture that involves many factors, including (1) who the targets of discrimination are (Herek, 1987; McFarland, 1989), (2) whether the prejudice is prescribed or proscribed by the relevant social or religious institutions (Duck & Hunsberger, 1999; Herek, 1987; Preston, Ritter, & Hernandez, 2010), and (3) whether individuals can distinguish between the “sin” and the “sinner” when faced with a value-violating behavior (Bassett et al. 2002; Batson, Floyd, Meyer, & Winner, 1999; Batson, Eidelman, Higley, & Russel, 2001; Mak & Tsang, 2008; Veenvliet, 2008). Altemeyer (2003) noted that “religious people *tend* to be prejudiced” and suggested that “researchers have often tried to separate the wheat from the chaff by searching for some subset of religious persons who are distinctly unprejudiced” (p. 17). Allport’s (1966; Allport & Ross, 1967) original formulation of intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity was intended to

facilitate such a distinction, although subsequent research has not established the clear contrasts that Allport seems to have envisioned (Hunsberger, 1995).

Fulton, Gorsuch, and Maynard (1999) found that while extrinsic religiosity is consistently positively correlated with prejudice, the relationship between intrinsic religiosity and prejudice is less clear. In particular, intrinsic religiosity has been found to be positively, negatively, and uncorrelated with prejudice. These mixed results may be partially due to differences in the types of prejudice measured by the respective studies. For instance, although intrinsic religiosity is typically found to be negatively correlated with racial prejudice, numerous studies have found a positive correlation between intrinsic religiosity and antihomosexual prejudice (Ahrold & Metson, 2010; Batson et al., 1999; Fisher, Derison, Polley, Cadman, & Johnston, 1994; Herek, 1987). It seems that intrinsic view rejection of outgroups as permissible in at least some cases—particularly when the beliefs or practices of outgroup members conflict with the teachings of the religious ingroup.

The most consistent results in the literature involve the positive correlations of fundamentalism and quest with prejudice and tolerance, respectively. Laythe et al. (2002) noted that religious fundamentalism has been consistently positively correlated with both racism and homosexual prejudice. In contrast, McFarland (1989) found quest religiosity to consistently predict less discriminatory attitudes, regardless of the targets of the discrimination. McFarland (1989) suggested that while “fundamentalism cloaks a general closed-minded, ethnocentric mindset, ... ‘Don’t discriminate!’ appears to be the overriding attitude associated with quest” (p. 393). Subsequent studies have consistently

supported these conclusions (Batson et al., 2001; Duck & Hunsberger, 1999; Fisher et al., 1994; Mak & Tsang, 2008; Tsang & Rowatt, 2007).

Most of the studies involving religiosity and prejudice emphasize attitudes and behaviors aimed at racial and sexual outgroups. Among the few studies that specifically address prejudice toward religious outgroups, Jackson and Hunsberger (1999) found that religious people in general tend to be prejudiced against religious others, “regardless of whether religiosity [is] conceptualized as religious fundamentalism, Christian orthodoxy, intrinsic orientation, extrinsic orientation, or belief in God” (p. 518). Their conclusion was that “prejudice against religious outgroup members is pervasive” (p. 521). It is notable that Jackson and Hunsberger’s (1999) study did not include measures of quest.

A recent study by Galen, Smith, Knapp, and Wyngarden (2011) found that participants who scored high on a measure of religious fundamentalism preferred associating with religious others more than nonreligious others, and that those who scored low on fundamentalism formed more inclusive ingroups.

Tetlock, Kristel, Elson, Green, and Lerner (2000) investigated the relationship between Christian fundamentalism and responses to threats to sacred values. In particular, participants were asked to reflect on “heretical counterfactuals” such as: “If the three wise men had not believed the warning from God (delivered in a dream) that they should not return to Herod and report the birth of Christ, Herod would have killed Christ in his infancy” (p. 864). Tetlock et al. (2000) found that fundamentalists reacted most strongly to these offensive suppositions and were the most likely to penalize those who endorse them. In addition, Tetlock et al. (2000) found that fundamentalists engaged

in “defensive overkill” by expressing moral outrage and participating in moral cleansing activities designed to exemplify support for the violated norm. With regard to the former, Tetlock et al. (2000) noted that the moral outrage expressed in response to threats to sacred values can include anger and contempt, attempts to ostracize deviant thinkers, and “harsh character attributions to those who endorse the proscribed thoughts and even to those who do not endorse, but do tolerate, this way of thinking in others” (pp. 853-854).

The findings of Tetlock et al. (2000) are consistent with other studies, which have found that fundamentalists think less complexly about religious issues and have difficulty accepting the possible validity of contradictory beliefs (Pancer, Jackson, Hunsberger, Pratt, & Lea, 1995). In contrast, those high on quest religiosity tend to think about religious issues in more complex ways (Batson & Raynor-Prince, 1983). Pancer et al. (1995) suggested that when beliefs are central to one’s identity, simple thinking about those beliefs tends to prevail. Conversely, for fundamentalists, simple thinking seems to be limited to those beliefs that are in fact most central to their religious identity. This observation is consistent with Roccas and Brewer’s (2002) suggestion that ingroup threat increases the salience of the threatened ingroup and leads to a less complex, dominance mode of social identity representation.

The Making and Unmaking of Prejudice

One of Allport’s (1966) most famous observations was that “there is something about religion that makes for prejudice, and something about it that unmakes prejudice” (p. 447). This observation seems to be supported by the research cited in the previous

sections, as well as number of other recent studies. For instance, studies by both Preston et al. (2010) and Johnson, Rowatt, and LaBouff (2011) noted that religious teachings such as the Golden Rule, which seem to promote universal prosociality, stand in tension with concerns for ingroup protection. Preston et al. (2010) suggested that prosociality may be tempered by ethnocentrism, resulting in helping behavior only toward fellow group members. Altemeyer (2003) argued that fundamentalists in particular “tend to have a very small ‘us’ and quite a large ‘them’ when it comes to faith” (p. 27)—an assertion supported by a study in which religious ethnocentrism was found to account for all of fundamentalism’s positive correlations with prejudice.

Altemeyer (2003) suggested that an emphasis on religion early in life may effectively “provide an early ethnocentrism school” and “contribute to the prejudices that are preached against from the pulpit” (p. 27). He argued that it is not one’s religious beliefs that are typically associated with prejudice, but rather the attitude that these beliefs are the only ones that are fundamentally correct. Altemeyer (2003) also cited research indicating that this type of fundamentalist ethnocentrism is common among those who score high on measures of right-wing authoritarianism (RWA).

RWA is typically defined in the literature as a combination of authoritarian submission, aggression, and conventionalism (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992). Whitley and Lee (2000) noted that “persons high in authoritarianism exhibit high degrees of deference to established authority, aggression toward out-groups when authorities permit

that aggression, and support for traditional values when authorities endorse those values” (p. 145).²

Could authoritarianism be the key variable in explaining why religious fundamentalists tend to be more prejudiced and ethnocentric? Numerous studies have suggested that this may be the case. First, RWA has been consistently positively correlated with religious fundamentalism (Altemeyer, 2003; Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992; Duck & Hunsberger, 1999; Laythe, Finkel, & Kirkpatrick, 2001; Laythe et al., 2002) and negatively correlated with quest. In addition, RWA has been consistently positively correlated with prejudice, ethnocentrism, and outgroup hostility (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992; Duck & Hunsberger, 1999; Laythe et al., 2001; Laythe et al., 2002; Tsang & Rowatt, 2007; Whitley & Lee, 2000).

Laythe et al. (2002) used multiple regression to investigate the relative contributions of Christian orthodoxy, RWA, and religious fundamentalism in predicting various forms of prejudice. (See also Laythe et al., 2001). RWA was found to be a significant positive predictor of racism, whereas Christian orthodoxy was a significant negative predictor, and fundamentalism was nonsignificant. They concluded that, in the case of racism, it is the authoritarian aspect of fundamentalism that, as Allport (1966) put it, “makes” prejudice, while the actual doctrines of orthodox Christianity “unmake” prejudice. Christian orthodoxy was positively correlated with homosexual prejudice, but this correlation became negative when fundamentalism and/or RWA were controlled.

² A related construct, social dominance orientation (Whitley, 1999), deals specifically with the tendency toward ingroup superiority and domination of outgroups, but is less relevant for this study, as social dominators tend not to be religious (Altemeyer, 2006).

Fundamentalism, however, remained a positive predictor of homosexual prejudice, even when authoritarianism was controlled. Laythe et al. (2002) suggested that specific beliefs about the immorality of homosexuality (which are distinct from the core doctrines of orthodox Christianity) were responsible for this positive association, and that, consistent with the findings of Fulton et al. (1999), authoritarianism accounted for an excess level of antipathy, above what was required by these beliefs.

Summary and Discussion

To summarize, the research reviewed in this chapter seems to suggest that authoritarianism, and the ethnocentrism that is strongly associated with it, is a dominant factor in the making of prejudice. While Christian orthodoxy per se does not positively predict prejudice, the content of specific religious beliefs can either mitigate or contribute to the development of antipathy toward outgroups. In the context of the *Love Wins* controversy, beliefs about the nature of God—and particularly, the nature of his judgment or wrath—would seem particularly relevant. Not only are such beliefs at the heart of the doctrines in question, but they may also shed light on the way both supporters and critics of Bell have engaged in the debate, both before and after the book was released. As Preston et al. (2010) noted, “If one believes God condones universal kindness toward others, then thoughts of God should promote good will toward all others. If God is perceived as condoning violence and hostility, however, then activating thoughts of God may produce antisocial behavior” (p. 585).

At first glance, Bell's willingness to pose questions about traditionally held doctrines would seem to indicate that he embraces a quest-like brand of religiosity, including its associated rejection of authoritarianism. Bell's ostensibly universalist theology itself represents a rejection of religious ethnocentrism. Moreover, the initial response from Bell's critics is consistent with research on religious identification, which predicts that religiously identified individuals will respond to distinctiveness threats by acting to restore the distinctiveness of the ingroup—at times, by ostracizing those who blur group boundaries. Cognitive and social identity complexity may act as mediating variables in explaining these types of responses.

CHAPTER 3

THE THEOLOGY AND SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY
OF *LOVE WINS*

This chapter contains a thematic analysis of the theological and social psychological principles espoused by Bell (2011a) in *Love Wins*, as well as Bell's apparent motives for promoting these principles. I began this analysis by reading *Love Wins* twice—once before completing the literature review in the preceding chapter, and once after the literature review had been completed. During my initial reading, I informally identified significant themes in the text. Then, during my second reading, I extracted key quotes that were either representative of Bell's positions with regard to each of these themes or related to concepts from the literature review. I organized these quotes into categories, which formed the basis of the sections in this chapter. I then synthesized the quotes in each section to form a coherent narrative.

As a complete exegesis of the text is beyond the scope of this study, this chapter focuses on those aspects of *Love Wins* that are most relevant to understanding the broader controversy surrounding it. For clarity and conciseness, references are abbreviated; all quoted passages are from *Love Wins* (Bell, 2011a), unless otherwise indicated.

Bell's Motives

From the very first pages of *Love Wins* (in the preface, in fact), Bell makes clear that his motivation is primarily pastoral, in that his main concern seems to be that

traditional teachings on heaven and hell serve to alienate potential followers of Christ and ultimately undermine the very teachings of Jesus himself. Bell writes:

A staggering number of people have been taught that a select few Christians will spend forever in a peaceful, joyous place called heaven, while the rest of humanity spends forever in torment and punishment in hell with no chance of anything better. It's been clearly communicated to many that this belief is a central truth of the Christian faith and to reject it is, in essence, to reject Jesus. This is misguided and toxic and ultimately subverts the contagious spread of Jesus's message of love, peace, forgiveness, and joy that our world desperately needs to hear. (p. vii)

Later in the book, Bell explicitly rejects the view that “the only option when it comes to Christian faith is to clearly declare that a few committed Christians will ‘go to heaven’ when they die and everyone else will not”, arguing that “not all Christians have believed this, and you don't have to believe it to be a Christian” (p. 110).

Throughout *Love Wins*, Bell also expresses a concern that focusing on a future afterlife can serve to distract Christians from enacting the teachings of Jesus in the present. He writes:

It often appears that those who talk the most about going to heaven when you die talk the least about bringing heaven to earth right now... At the same time, it often appears that those who talk the most about relieving suffering now talk the least about heaven when we die. ... Life has never been about just ‘getting in.’ It's about thriving in God's good world. ... A

discussion about ‘just how to get into heaven’ has no place in the life of a disciple of Jesus, because it’s missing the point of it all. (pp. 45, 179)

Bell expresses similar concerns about doctrinal debates, noting that “much blood has been spilled in church splits, heresy trials, and raging debates over issues that are, in the end, not that essential” (p. x). At the same time, Bell affirms that “our beliefs matter. They are incredibly important. Our beliefs shape us and guide us and determine our lives” (p. 176). For Bell, the issues of heaven, hell, salvation, and judgment are worthy of discussion because they impact people’s actions in the present. Echoing the suggestion of Preston et al. (2010) that beliefs about the nature of God can induce either prosocial or antisocial behaviors, Bell writes:

Inquisitions, persecutions, trials, book burnings, blacklisting—when religious people become violent, it is because they have been shaped by their God, who is violent. . . . For some, the highest form of allegiance to their God is to attack, defame, and slander others who don’t articulate matters of faith as they do. (p. 183)

Universalism

Apart from Bell’s motives, the most pressing question pertaining to the *Love Wins* controversy is whether Bell espouses the universalist theology alleged by Taylor (2011) and other critics. This is actually a more difficult question to answer, as Bell stops short of definitively stating his position. In fact, he seems to reject the very possibility of doing so, writing:

Will everybody be saved, or will some perish apart from God forever because of their choices? Those are questions, or more accurately, those are tensions we are free to leave fully intact. We don't need to resolve them or answer them because we can't, and so we simply respect them, creating space for the freedom that love requires. (p. 115)

With that said, the questions Bell poses elsewhere in the book, and the possibilities he considers, suggest that he at least leans strongly toward a universalist position. Bell cites scripture stating that God “wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4 New International Version), and then poses the question: “Will all people be saved, or will God not get what God wants? Does this magnificent, mighty, marvelous God *fail* in the end?” (p. 98). He goes on to ask, “Is history tragic? ... Is our future uncertain, or will God take care of us? Are we safe? Are we secure? Or are we on our own?” (p. 102).

The dichotomies Bell suggests point the reader to the conclusion that God does get what God wants. Ultimately, then, it seems that what Bell means by “love wins” is that, indeed, all people will be saved—that is, “reconciled to God” (p. 109).

Bell's version of universalism, however, is distinctly Christian, in that Bell affirms the biblical teaching that salvation is accomplished only through Jesus Christ. Bell cites John 14:6 (New International Version), which states “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” He then writes:

This is as wide and expansive a claim as a person can make. What he [Jesus] doesn't say is how, or when, or in what manner the mechanism

functions that gets people to God through him. He doesn't even state that those coming to the Father through him will even know that they are coming exclusively through him. He simply claims that whatever God is doing in the world to know and redeem and love and restore the world is happening through him. (p. 154)

Bell's position is rooted in a belief, based on the first fourteen verses of the book of John (New International Version), that Jesus was not just a man, or even a man who shared in God's divinity, but rather "that *divine* life-giving energy that brought the universe into existence," that "gave life to everything and continues to give life to everything" (p. 146). Bell argues that, although Jesus took the form of a man at a particular point in history—or, as the author of the book of John puts it, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (John 1:14 New International Version)—he is in fact "a mystery, something hidden in God, something that has existed and been true and been present with, and in, God since before time" (p. 150).

Bell's conclusion is that "Jesus is bigger than any one religion" (p. 150).

Elaborating further, Bell writes:

Jesus is supracultural. He is present within all cultures and yet outside of all cultures. He is for all people, and yet refuses to be co-opted or owned by any one culture. This includes any Christian culture. Any denomination. Any church. Any theological system. We can point to

him, name him, follow him, discuss him, honor him, and believe in him—
but we cannot claim him to be ours any more than he's anyone else's. (pp.
151-152)

For Bell, the universality of Jesus extends to salvation. Bell writes, “Jesus himself, again and again, demonstrates how seriously he takes his role in rescuing and redeeming not just everything, but everybody” (p. 151). Thus, Bell views Jesus not only as the force behind the creation of the universe, but also the mechanism by which the world—including all of its inhabitants—will one day be fully restored to the way God intends it to be.

Free Will, Heaven, Hell, and Judgment

One nuance in Bell's brand of universalism is a consistent affirmation of free will that leaves open the possibility that some will reject God's love, in essence creating a hell of their own. Bell writes that “it is absolutely vital that we acknowledge that love, grace, and humanity can be rejected.” He argues that “God gives us what we want, and if that's hell, we can have it” (p. 72). For Bell, hell constitutes “the very real consequences we experience when we reject the good and true and beautiful life that God has for us” (p. 93), or put another way, “what happens when people abandon all that is good and right and humane” (p. 71). In contrast, “heaven is that realm where things are as God intends them to be” (p. 42).

Bell argues that heaven is both a concept that Christians are called to usher in to the existing world, and simultaneously a future world that is “free from all death,

destruction, and despair” (p. 39). He writes that “Jesus invites us in this life, in this broken, beautiful world, to experience the life of heaven now. He insisted over and over that God’s peace, joy, and love are currently available to us, exactly as we are” (p. 62).

At the same time,

Jesus teaches us how to live now in such a way that what we create, who we give our efforts to, and how we spend our time will all endure in the new world. ... What we find Jesus teaching, over and over again, is that he’s interested in our hearts being transformed, so that we can actually handle heaven. (pp. 44-45, 50)

The notion that some will be able to “handle heaven” and some will not is intimately related to Bell’s view of judgment in the world to come. Bell writes that “a number of things that can survive in this world will not be able to survive in the world to come” (p. 36), that “judgments have to be rendered” (p. 37), and that prophets in scripture “spoke of a cleansing, purging, decisive day when God would make those judgments” (p. 37). But for Bell, judgment is not synonymous with punishment. In fact, Bell writes that “God has no desire to inflict pain or agony on anyone” (p. 176). Rather, the day of judgment is “the day that God says ‘ENOUGH!’ to anything that threatens the peace, ... harmony, and health God intends for the world” (p. 37). This being the case, Bell argues that “heaven has the potential to be a kind of starting over”, and that “once the sins and habits and bigotry and pride and petty jealousies are prohibited and removed, for some there simply won’t be much left” (p. 50). The point of being a disciple of Jesus then is “to learn from him how to live in God’s world God’s way” (p. 51).

Interestingly, Bell suggests the possibility that the future heaven and hell are not necessarily two distinct locations or realities, but rather two different experiences of the same reality. Bell draws an analogy from the biblical story of the prodigal son (Luke 15 New International Version), in which a father throws a party for his rebellious son who has returned after squandering his inheritance on “wild living” (Luke 15:13 New International Version). Bell focuses on the experience of the prodigal son’s older brother, who refuses to enter the party, instead, as Bell puts it, “sulking and whining about how he’s been a slave [to his father] all these years” (p. 170) and has never had a party thrown in his honor. The older brother is miserable because, in his view, the younger, rebel son is completely undeserving of the love and grace being lavished on him by his father. Thus, the father’s generosity is seen as unfair. For the older brother, “hell is being at the party. That’s what makes it so hellish” (p. 169). Bell argues that “grace and generosity aren’t fair; that’s their very essence” (p. 168), and that for those who cannot accept this apparent inequity, the world to come will indeed be a miserable, hellish place.

Thus, Bell’s argument is that “God extends an invitation to us, and we are free to do with it as we please” (p. 177). In other words, “we’re at the party, but we don’t have to join in. Heaven or hell. Both at the party. ... To reject God’s grace, to turn from God’s love, ... will lead to misery. It is a form of punishment, all on its own” (p. 176).

So if some can reject God’s love and grace, how is it that, as the book’s title proclaims, love wins? Bell resolves this apparent paradox by allowing for the possibility of post-mortem conversion, noting that even Martin Luther, commenting on “the

possibility that people could turn to God after their death” (p. 106), posed the question, “Who would doubt God’s ability to do that?” (as cited in Bell, 2011a, p. 106). Bell then suggests that others throughout church history have “[expanded] the possibilities, trusting that there will be endless opportunities in an endless amount of time for people to say yes to God. As long as it takes, in other words” (pp. 106-107). He then poses the question, “Which is stronger and more powerful, the hardness of the human heart or God’s unrelenting, infinite, expansive love?” (p. 109), suggesting that “thousands throughout the years have answered that question with the resounding response, ‘God’s love, of course’” (p. 109). Thus, Bell suggests the possibility that “the love of God will melt every hard heart, and even the most ‘depraved sinners’ will eventually give up their resistance and turn to God” (p. 107). To Bell, the end result of this way of thinking is that “history is not tragic, hell is not forever, and love, in the end, wins and all will be reconciled to God” (p. 109).

Religious Ethnocentrism

A consistent theme throughout *Love Wins*—and a natural byproduct of any perspective that affirms universal salvation—is a rejection of religious ethnocentrism.

Bell writes:

A gospel that repeatedly, narrowly affirms and bolsters the ‘in-ness’ of one group at the expense of the ‘out-ness’ of another group will not be true to the story that includes ‘all things and people in heaven and on earth.’ (p.

135)

Bell also recognizes the problem of ingroup bias, posing the question, “Whenever people claim that one group is in, saved, accepted by God, forgiven, enlightened, redeemed—and everyone else isn’t—why is it that those who make this claim are almost always part of the group that is ‘in’?” (p. 3).

Bell resists attempts to define an exclusive religious ingroup, noting that “when it comes to people, then—the who of heaven—what Jesus does again and again is warn us against rash judgments about who’s in and who’s out” (p. 54). Bell argues that even scripture itself does not provide a single, unified answer to the question of how one becomes a part of the “saved” ingroup. Bell identifies more than a dozen distinct mechanisms (such as being baptized, asking for mercy, forgiving others, giving away one’s possessions, etc.) deemed by scripture to be either necessary and/or sufficient for salvation. Resisting attempts to construct a narrow, well-defined ingroup, Bell instead opts for inclusivity, noting:

The writers of scripture consistently affirm that we’re all part of the same family. What we have in common—regardless of our tribe, language, customs, beliefs, or religion—outweighs our differences. This is why God wants ‘all people to be saved.’” (p. 99)

This perspective of inclusion is consistent with Roccas and Brewer’s (2002) *merger* model of social identity construction, in which “non-convergent group memberships are simultaneously recognized and embraced in their most inclusive form” (p. 91). This mode of identity representation is indicative of high social identity

complexity and naturally leads to a point where “no sharp ingroup-outgroup distinctions are made on any dimension and all others are evaluated equivalently” (p. 91).

Questions, Uncertainty, and Authority

Bell’s willingness to question traditional teachings on heaven, hell, and salvation suggest that his religious experience may be consistent with the traits typically associated with quest religiosity. His writings in *Love Wins* serve to confirm this impression in a number of ways.

First, Bell consistently affirms the value of questioning and spiritual exploration, while rejecting authoritarian attempts to limit the scope of such exploration. He writes:

The kind of faith Jesus invites us into doesn’t skirt the big questions about topics like God and Jesus and salvation and judgment and heaven and hell, but takes us deep into the heart of them. ... Some communities don’t permit open, honest inquiry about the things that matter most. Lots of people have voiced a concern, expressed a doubt, or raised a question, only to be told by their family, church, friends, or tribe: ‘We don’t discuss those things here.’ I believe the discussion itself is divine. (p. ix)

Second, Bell suggests that one’s understanding of God is constantly evolving, and that “past understandings aren’t to be denied or dismissed; they’re to be embraced” (p. 195). Thus, Bell not only values change, but views it as a necessary component of the Christian life.

Third, Bell rejects authoritarian biblical literalism in favor of a culturally relevant, culturally grounded, and moralistic interpretation of scripture. He writes:

The ancient sages said the words of the sacred text were black letters on a white page—there’s all that white space, waiting to be filled with our responses and discussions and debates and opinions and longings and desires and wisdom and insights. We read the words, and then enter into the discussion that has been going on for thousands of years across cultures and continents. (p. x)

Finally, Bell embraces uncertainty and consistently acknowledges the limitations of the human psyche to comprehend supernatural matters. In fact, Bell’s primary aim seems to be to make a convincing case for the *possibility*—rather than the *certainty*—of universal salvation. Regarding this possibility, he writes:

Hard and fast, definitive declarations then, about who God will or will not organize the new world must leave plenty of room for all kinds of those possibilities. This doesn’t diminish God’s justice or take less seriously the very real consequences of sin and rebellion, it simply acknowledges with humility the limits of our powers of speculation. (p. 116)

Bell does, however, express certainty with regard to three core beliefs: (1) that God loves all human beings; (2) that God respects free will and the corresponding ability of humans to reject his love; and (3) that Jesus is relevant, regardless of one’s beliefs about heaven, hell, and salvation. The first he calls a “sure and certain truth” (p. 172). For the third, Bell reserves some of his strongest language, writing:

As soon as the door is opened to Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and Baptists from Cleveland, many Christians become very uneasy, saying that Jesus doesn't matter any more, the cross is irrelevant, it doesn't matter what you believe, and so forth. Not true. Absolutely, unequivocally, unalterably not true. (pp. 154-155)

Quest and Orthodoxy

Batson and Schoenrade (1991) note that quest religiosity “involves facing existential questions in their complexity, while at the same time resisting clear-cut, pat answers” (p. 417). They also suggest that

an individual who approaches religion in this way recognizes that he or she does not know, and probably never will know, the final truth about such matters. Still, the questions are deemed important, and, however, tentative and subject to change, answers are sought. (p. 417)

In light of the observations in the preceding section, these descriptions appear to be consistent with Bell's approach to religion, as least as it is presented in *Love Wins*.

Finally, it is worth noting that Bell's quest appears to be what both Edwards, Hall, Slater, and Hill (2002) and Beck and Jessup (2004) refer to as a “soft” quest—that is, one that “allows for satisfying belief while remaining open to change and embracing doubts as an inevitable component of religious belief” (Edwards et al., 2002, p. 107). Beck and Jessup (2004) argue that such a quest is characterized by tentativeness, ecumenism, exploration, and moralistic interpretation of scripture—as compared to a “hard” quest that

is associated with greater levels of religious angst, frequently changing religious views, and agnosticism or rejection of orthodox Christian beliefs.

With regard to the latter point, it is notable that Bell affirms many (if not all) of the beliefs assessed on Hunsberger's (1989) short Christian orthodoxy scale (such as the existence of a personal God, the divine inspiration of the Bible, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the divinity of Christ, and forgiveness of sins through the work of Christ). Thus, it seems that Bell's quest orientation and his endorsement of universalism coexist with otherwise orthodox Christian beliefs.

This observation supports another key claim made by Bell in *Love Wins*—namely, that a faith that allows for the possibility of universal salvation is not incompatible with orthodox Christianity. In fact, Bell argues that many orthodox Christians have held similar beliefs throughout the history of Christianity. He writes:

Nothing in this book hasn't been taught, suggested, or celebrated by many before me. I haven't come up with a radical new teaching that's any kind of departure from what's been said an untold number of times. That's the beauty of the historic, orthodox, Christian faith. It's a deep, wide, diverse stream that's been flowing for thousands of years, carrying a staggering variety of voices, perspectives, and experiences. (p. x)

Thus, rather than appeal to a specific creed, authority, or historical teaching, Bell expresses appreciation for diverse perspectives and attempts to situate his own views within this broader context. Perhaps anticipating potential responses to *Love Wins*, Bell suggests that “to shun, censor, or ostracize someone for holding this belief [universal

reconciliation] is to fail to extend grace to each other in a discussion that has had plenty of room for varied perspectives for hundreds of years now” (p. 111).

Of course, Bell ultimately was criticized—and indeed, ostracized—for the beliefs he promoted in *Love Wins*. The study in the next chapter takes a closer look at these critical reactions, contrasting them to the reactions of Bell’s supporters.

CHAPTER 4

RESPONSES TO *LOVE WINS*: A QUALITATIVE
CONTENT ANALYSIS OF LETTERS
TO THE EDITOR

This chapter examines the responses to *Love Wins*—and, to some extent, Rob Bell personally—by both critics and supporters. The methodology used can be best described as directed, qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Kohlbacher, 2005; Mayring, 2000; Macnamara, 2005), although basic quantitative data is also used at times to support the conclusions drawn from the qualitative analysis. As Bryman (2004) observed, qualitative content analysis “comprises a searching-out of underlying themes in the materials being analyzed,” and is “probably the most prevalent approach to the qualitative analysis of documents” (p. 392). Since the goal of the study in this chapter is to identify and analyze themes in written responses to *Love Wins*, qualitative content analysis provides an ideal methodological framework. Moreover, numerous researchers have argued for the value of a qualitative, rather than quantitative, approach to content analysis. For instance, Macnamara (2005) argued that in spite of the strengths of quantitative methodologies, “qualitative analysis of texts is necessary to understand their deeper meanings and likely interpretations by audiences” (p. 5).

The data for this analysis consist of thirty-one letters to the editor from a variety of newspapers and periodicals. Although there have been thousands of posts about *Love Wins* in weblogs and other online forums, I chose to use letters to the editor because of

their relative consistency in terms of length and format, and because of the manageable quantity of data accessible through search engines.

I chose my sample by searching for the phrases “love wins” or “Rob Bell” in Lexis-Nexis, Infotrac, and ProQuest. I restricted my search to newspapers and periodicals published in 2011. I also manually searched the archives of two major newspapers, the *Grand Rapids Press* and the *Holland Sentinel*. I chose these two papers due to their geographic proximity to Mars Hill Bible Church in Grandville, Michigan—the church that Rob Bell founded and pastored until his departure in January 2012. My search returned thirty-eight letters to the editor, six of which were eliminated because they did not meet inclusion criteria of either: (1) referring directly to Rob Bell or *Love Wins*; or (2) referring indirectly to Rob Bell or *Love Wins* by citing a related commentary or editorial piece.

Once I had narrowed my dataset to thirty-two letters, I divided the letters into two groups: those that expressed support for Rob Bell or the views expressed in *Love Wins*, and those that expressed criticism. I classified letters in which both support and criticism were expressed according to which perspective was dominant. Since those who write letters to the editor typically do so to express an opinion, in general it was not difficult to determine whether each letter was predominantly supportive or critical. Consequently, dividing the letters into two mutually exclusive categories was fairly straightforward—with only one exception. One letter, rather than expressing support or criticism, stated the view that it was important to “read the book with an engaged mind” and to “examine the issue with integrity before leveling criticism or lavishing praise.” Consequently, this

letter was excluded, yielding a final dataset that consisted of thirty-one letters, fifteen of which were classified as supportive and sixteen as critical. The letters came from thirteen different newspapers and magazines, including *Grand Rapids Press* (10), *Holland Sentinel* (5), *USA Today* (5), *Christianity Today* (2), *Christian Century* (1), *Dallas Morning News* (1), *Exeter Express and Echo* (1), *The Herald* (1), *Hutchinson News* (1), *Merced Sun-Star* (1), *The Modesto Bee* (1), *New York Times* (1), and *St. Petersburg Times* (1).

After finalizing my dataset, I developed an initial coding scheme based on themes from the relevant research literature. My coding scheme used thirty codes that captured various aspects of letter writers' positions, including (1) support or criticism of Bell's doctrinal positions, (2) support or criticism of Bell as a person, (3) support or criticism of Bell's questioning approach, (4) sources used to support the writer's argument, and (5) the writer's stated views on the relative importance of the doctrinal issues raised by *Love Wins*.

Once I had coded each of the letters, I aggregated quotes pertaining to each code. This aggregation revealed six major categories or themes: (1) expressed views about the importance of the doctrinal issues raised in *Love Wins*; (2) the labels and language used to describe Bell, his theology, his supporters, and his critics; (3) appeals to scripture; (4) the role of questions and uncertainty; (5) appeals to history or tradition; and (6) expressed views about the nature of God's love and judgment. My overall approach to category development was inductive (Mayring, 2000) and consistent with Hsieh and Shannon's (2005) description of conventional content analysis, in which the researcher allows "the

categories and names for categories to flow from the data,” immersing themselves in the data “to allow new insights to emerge” (p. 1279).

Having identified these six themes, I proceeded to re-read the entire set of letters six times—once for each theme. On each pass through the data, I focused on one of the six themes, extracting relevant quotes and categorizing these quotes according to whether their author had been previously identified as a supporter or critic. I then used the quotes I had collected to construct a narrative for each theme that served to illustrate the key similarities and differences between Bell’s supporters and his critics, incorporating perspectives from the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 when appropriate. The remainder of this chapter presents these six narratives and concludes with a discussion of the key insights illuminated by them.

Importance of Doctrine

A key difference between Bell’s supporters and his critics is their view of the importance of the doctrines of heaven, hell, and salvation. One critic wrote, “Rob Bell is not questioning peripheral issues, but core ones.” Another suggested that anyone who agrees with Bell’s message “does not hold basic, fundamental Christian beliefs.” Critics suggested that Bell’s teachings turn Christianity into “just another worldly philosophy” and render the gospel “no gospel at all.” From this perspective, Bell’s teaching “contradicts the reality of good and evil; and the reality that we are sinners by nature and by choice.” For critics, Bell’s viewpoint had the potential to undermine the very foundations of the Christian faith, thus forming a realistic basis for the ensuing

controversy. As one critic asked, “Why indeed did Jesus die for our sins and rise again for our justification if everyone is ‘saved’ anyway?”

In contrast, Bell’s supporters consistently minimized the importance of the particular doctrinal issues in question, arguing that other issues deserved more attention. One supporter wrote, “If you don’t agree with a book written by a 40-year-old minister, read something else.” Another wrote that “the First Amendment assures us of our right to believe or not to believe in hell.” Some supporters voiced a desire to “respect the belief of others” and “move on.” Others expressed the view that Christians should be focused on solving problems pertaining to social justice, compassion, hunger, pain, and hatred—rather than “debating over dogma” or “dueling over doctrine.” One supporter stated that people needed to “stop dreaming of a future fantasy place” and seemed to dismiss the possibility of an afterlife. This perspective is noteworthy, as it indicates that some of Bell’s supporters may not be highly religiously identified and, unlike Bell, may hold views that are inconsistent with Christian orthodoxy, at least as it was conceptualized by Altemeyer and Hunsberger (1982).

Labels and Language

Both Bell’s critics and his supporters used strong language at times to express their views, and both sides engaged to some degree in personal attacks, oversimplifications, mischaracterizations, and attributional bias.

Critics conceded that Bell’s “heart was in the right place,” that he was “right about God loving everyone,” and that he “began earnestly in the truth.” However, the

predominant language used to describe Bell was negative. Critics labeled Bell a false prophet, a “rock-star pastor” who doesn’t believe “the whole Bible” and has “made up his own religion.” One critic wrote that Bell “has become big enough in his own estimation to declare that the creator and upholder of this vast universe has no right to send people to hell.” Others labeled Bell as one who lacks discernment, waters down God’s word, suppresses the truth, rejects the authority of the Bible, and “cheats” people through “philosophy and empty deceit.” For this, one critic concluded that Bell was subject to “wrath [that] no denial on his part will enable him to escape.”

Speaking to Bell’s motives, one critic suggested that Bell fulfilled the prophecy that “a time will come when we will not endure sound doctrine and will gather people around us who will ‘tickle our ears’” (a version of 2 Timothy 4:3). Others seemed to affirm this perspective by referring to Bell as a teacher who says “what [people] want to hear” and one who is “making money for [himself] but leading many down the wrong path.” One critic pointed to an alleged “infatuation with elements of old-school liberalism,” indicating that the “root issue” is that “Rob Bell is accountable to Rob Bell—not to a hierarchy, denomination, or the larger stream of Christian thought (expressed via the church fathers, for instance).” Others stated that Bell “claims to belong” to the evangelical community or used quotation marks to qualify the use of the word Christian as it applied to Bell. For example, one critic referred to Bell as “an influential ‘Christian.’” This use of language could be interpreted as an attempt to cast Bell as being outside the realm of not just evangelicalism, but of Christianity in general. One critic also specifically applied similar labels to a columnist who was supportive of Bell, arguing

that he “does not hold basic, fundamental Christian beliefs,” that “he seems to particularly dislike fundamental Christians and stereotypes Christians in general trying to paint them in a poor light.”

Critics characterized Bell’s message in *Love Wins* as a “feel good gospel,” one that is characterized by a “totally inclusive Jesus” and contains “no judgment and thus no hell.” One critic wrote that “Rob Bell’s words do not hold true when evaluated through the inerrant word of God.” Another called Bell’s positions “misguided, harmful and contrary to the clear teaching of Scripture and the great standards of the Christian faith.” Yet another wrote that “Rob Bell’s latest assertions are as old as Satan’s.” Interestingly, one critic interpreted Bell’s teachings to mean that people get to heaven by “just being good,” writing that “there is only one way to heaven: through Jesus, God’s son.” Of the latter assertion (but not the former), it appears that Bell would agree completely.

In contrast to his critics, supporters painted Bell’s message as being “the original teaching of Christianity and the apostles” and “the kind of universalism kindhearted people wish for.” To supporters, this kind of universalism emerges out of “doubt about eternal punishment” and a “conviction that God loves all humans without exception” and “desires to save them all.” One supporter labeled Bell’s interpretation of scripture as “something too amazing for any of us hypocrites, judges and sinners,” using the word “grace” to characterize Bell’s overall message. While acknowledging that Bell’s teachings were “perceived to be controversial” and lacked “orthodox talking points,” supporters painted these features in a positive light, arguing that Bell had articulated “the progressive message of the gospel,” providing “fresh insights” into a “troubling subject”

by articulating an “open-minded view of heaven” and a “different interpretation of hell.” Some supporters argued that Bell is a “true evangelical Christian” and that “affirming the divinity of Jesus and the historical truth of the Resurrection places Bell squarely in the evangelical fold.” Other supporters called Bell a “hip pastor” and a “preacher who makes sense.”

Some supporters described traditional teachings on hell as “not only unfair but illogical” and reminiscent of the “savagery of the old testament.” One supporter criticized “so-called Christians telling me that I'm going to Hell because I don't believe in the vengeful God that they do.”

Most of Bell's supporters focused their criticism not on traditional doctrines of hell, but rather on Bell's critics and their responses to *Love Wins*. Supporters characterized critics as being well-meaning but self-righteous and overzealous—“hooked on the ol' fire and brimstone” as one supporter put it. Another supporter described Bell's critics as being “self-appointed spokespersons for the Almighty” who felt “emboldened to speak for God because they, too, know it all.”

Supporters described critics as having “judging hearts” and “delicate dispositions.” Critics were seen as being quick to “skew the book's message,” to “promulgate harsh criticisms,” to make “vitriolic demands,” and to “berate” Bell by “heaping scorn and contempt on him.” One supporter argued that those critical of Bell “share his conviction about the universality of the love of God” but “condemn his conclusion”—an observation that this supporter classified as “worse heresy” than that of which Bell was accused.

The strong reactions from both critics and supporters alike suggest that both were responding aggressively to a perceived threat. For critics, the threat (posed by Bell) was to a doctrine viewed as an essential part of Christian belief—and one with eternal consequences. For supporters, however, the threat (posed by Bell’s critics) was to the quest-like values of open-mindedness, uncertainty, and tolerance. The responses of each group suggest efforts to neutralize these threats. Critics vigorously defended traditional teachings on hell and used labels and language that served to discredit and marginalize Bell. Supporters, on the other hand, reserved their strongest criticism not for the traditional doctrines espoused by Bell’s critics, but rather for the way critics responded to Bell when he questioned these doctrines.

Appeals to Scripture

One of the most significant distinctions between Bell’s critics and his supporters was the frequency and manner in which they used scripture to support their views. First, critics were almost twice as likely³ to appeal to specific passages or teachings from the Bible. Given the relatively small sample size, one must be careful not to draw too many conclusions from this quantitative difference. However, critics did not merely reference scripture *more* than supporters; they also espoused a view of the authority and certainty of scripture that was not articulated by supporters.

Critics viewed scripture as clear, consistent, inerrant, authoritative, knowable, unchanging, certain, and not subject to human interpretation. One critic stated that scripture was “clear as day” about hell. Another suggested that “[God’s] word allows no

³ Twelve of the sixteen critics appealed to scripture, whereas only six of the fifteen supporters did.

room for compromise.” A third critic argued that “we don’t get to vote on issues in the Bible,” concluding that “when someone uses their own opinion about God’s word, this means he has made up his own religion.” Yet another wrote, “I will not buy or read Rob’s book, ... Not because I’m narrow-minded, but because I already know what God’s word says and I’m not interested in the opinion of one who is watering it down.” For critics, the Bible was viewed as the ultimate arbiter of truth, an authoritative text to be read at face value and accepted without question. As one critic put it, “there is no argument for someone who rejects the authority of the Bible.” Or, stated differently by another critic, “You need to decide whose authority you want to be under: the Bible’s or Rob Bell’s.” One critic’s entire letter consisted of the following: “Is hell a real place or not? Go to the source. Someone please give Rob Bell a Bible.”

While some supporters cited passages suggestive of universal salvation, they appeared to speak, at least explicitly, more to the *existence* of such passages than to their *authority*. For instance, one supporter argued that “in St. Paul’s Epistles there is clearly, along with many of the sayings of Jesus, the kind of universalism kindhearted people wish for (this can also be found in the Hebrew Scriptures).” Another supporter, after making the claim that “universal salvation is not a new teaching,” argued that “the New Testament teaches that as in Adam all have fallen, in Christ all will be made alive.” A third supporter suggested that “The ‘all in all’ is found on [sic] many Bible texts” and even went on to cite a specific passage of scripture (1 Corinthians 15) as “proof” that “God is the savior of all mankind.”

The use of the word “proof” suggests an authoritative view of scripture, and other supporters used similar language, though with less frequency than critics. For instance, one wrote, “God told us to forgive 70 times seven. Is not he going to do that? Yes, He will, ‘for the Bible tells me so.’” Another referred to “the *historical fact* [emphasis added] that the Old Testament does not advocate life after death.” The same supporter who wrote this latter statement also argued that “many Old Testament passages seem to refer to an afterlife, but in actuality do not.”

In spite of these fairly definitive interpretations of scripture, explicit statements about the authority of scripture were absent from supporters’ letters. Moreover, the firm positions taken by some supporters appear to have emerged not from an authoritarian view of scripture, but rather from a more nuanced reading that at least implicitly acknowledged the possibility of alternative interpretations.

Questions and Certainty

Supporters’ and critics’ varying uses of scripture seem to be reflective of broader differences regarding the role and appropriateness of questions—particularly those that pertain to “essential” doctrines. One critic wrote that Bell’s questioning of “core issues... should be unsettling to any Christian, particularly to a pastor.” In contrast, one supporter wrote, “This is a troubling subject and everyone senses it. Why not say so? ... Before criticizing specks in the eyes of others, Christians ought to examine their own views with some degree of self-criticism.”

As would be expected, critics raised fewer objections than supporters to the concept of hell as a place of conscious, eternal torment. It is unclear, however, if critics actually embrace this doctrine, or if they have simply been taught not to raise questions or voice objections about such matters. For instance, one critic did acknowledge personal struggles with the concept of eternal punishment, writing, “I find the thought of people suffering for all eternity impossible to grasp.” This statement, however, was followed immediately by one that effectively subjugated the author’s concerns to the authority of scripture: “Yet there it is in the Word, clear as day, for all to know and fear.”

Supporters, however, appeared less encumbered by the constraints of authoritarianism, particularly in the questions they posed. For instance, one asked, “What about kids in Africa, or my good friend Bobby?” Another asked, “If Jesus took the sins of the world for us, and he was not tortured forever, how does one person suffer something worse for his or her own individual sins?” Yet another asked, “So many millions have never heard of God. Are they doomed for eternal punishment?”

In general, critics expressed their views with greater certainty and in more absolute terms than supporters. For instance, one critic wrote, “I still sin, but I know I’m going to heaven. It’s really a no-brainer.” Similarly explicit expressions of certainty were absent from letters written by supporters, and words like *know*, *clear*, and *authority* were all more prevalent in letters from critics than those from supporters.

Appeals to History and Tradition

Both supporters and critics made reference to historical precedents, at times citing church tradition or the views of other influential Christians. A key distinction, however, was that critics generally appealed to the *authority* of these precedents, while supporters appealed to their *diversity*. For instance, one critic wrote that Bell's positions are "contrary to... the great standards of the Christian faith, such as the Three Forms of Unity and the Westminster Standards." Another wrote, "My home pastor taught that God's good news and grace must be balanced with the law and judgment." Yet another wrote, "Jonathan Edwards, a colonial-era pastor, had it right." (Edwards is most widely known for his 1741 sermon entitled *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, which included vivid images of hell and God's wrath.)

In contrast to these specific appeals to authority, supporters emphasized the diversity of religious thought throughout both American and Christian history. One supporter argued that "the gut-wrenching, hell-and-damnation sermons preached by the likes of Jonathan Edwards were rejected by the colonists" and noted that "the founders of this country were Universalists, Unitarians, Congregationalists, Methodists, Episcopalians, Presbyterians and Catholics all men of faith in their own ways." Other supporters argued that "the church's teaching on [hell] has changed," that "universal salvation is not a new teaching," that "the theology expressed in [Love Wins] is not new," that "liberal preachers... have been preaching about different interpretations of hell for decades," and that "numerous Christians have voiced unorthodox opinions on the subject."

The Nature of God

Supporters and critics also differed in the extent to which they explicitly related their views about *Love Wins* to their beliefs about the nature and character of God. Supporters, when referring to attributes of God, spoke primarily of his “love for all souls,” whereas critics argued that God’s love must be balanced with “the law and judgment.” One critic wrote, “God is loving and forgiving but also a God of justice. We cannot have just a part of Him. If we try to, we are saying Jesus died for no reason.” Another wrote that “love requires that sin (rebellion against God) be dealt with in this life and the next.” A third critic argued that “if everyone receives eternal life whatever they do in their lives without repentance and the acceptance of Jesus as Saviour and Lord then it brings the judgement of God into disrepute.” Others spoke of God as being unchanging, “holy and just,” and a God that “never adjusts himself or his word to the tastes of men,” so that “all must come to him on his terms.” One critic argued that “discipline and consequence” must coexist with God’s love.

Interestingly, some critics affirmed Bell’s view of free will, arguing that “God doesn’t force himself on people” and that “God never sends anyone to hell and desires that no one perish but that all come to him through Jesus. He makes the offer to all and asks to be let in but will not violate man’s freedom of choice.” Critics seemed to differ with Bell, however, about the possibility that this choice could take place after death.

Overall, critics were more likely than supporters to relate the *Love Wins* controversy to their beliefs about the nature and character of God.⁴ This observation is consistent with critics' emphasis on correct doctrine, in contrast to supporters' emphasis on tolerance, diversity, and open-mindedness. It also indicates that critics may have viewed Bell's teachings as a threat to God's reputation—specifically, God's holiness and justice—and responded accordingly in God's defense.

Discussion

Viewing these six themes as a whole, some key differences between Bell's supporters and critics emerge. First, for Bell's critics, the message of *Love Wins* represented a threat not only to doctrines viewed as essential to the Christian faith, but to the very nature of God. Critics acted to neutralize these threats by attempting to label Bell as one who should not be listened to—a false prophet and deceiver who is outside the realm of orthodox Christianity and subject to God's wrath. Critics supported their views by invoking authoritarian appeals to scripture and tradition, while arguing that certain questions should not be asked, but should be “out of bounds,” as one critic put it.

In contrast, supporters, while at times offering defenses of universal salvation, expressed greater concern about the attitudes and behaviors of Bell's critics. Supporters viewed critics as harsh, judgmental, and self-righteous. They appealed to scripture less frequently and from a less authoritarian perspective. In addition, supporters' appeals to tradition and historical precedent emphasized diversity rather than authority. Supporters attempted to cast Bell as an open-minded pastor offering a perspective on hell that was

⁴ By a conservative count, eight of the sixteen critics made specific assertions about God's attributes or intentions, whereas only three of the fifteen supporters made analogous statements.

not only consistent with orthodox Christianity, but that had been espoused by numerous other orthodox Christians in the past. Supporters also indicated that issues pertaining to social justice were more deserving of attention than doctrinal debates.

Viewing the responses of Bell's supporters and critics from within the broader context of the research literature reviewed in Chapter 2, the key distinction between these two groups seems to be that of a quest versus authoritarian approach to religion. Both Bell and his supporters seemed to embrace a quest-like faith that acknowledges multiple perspectives and allows difficult questions to be considered in their complexity. Bell's critics, however, viewed questions as a potential threat to essential doctrines. They responded by endorsing a more simplistic, clear-cut interpretation of scripture and deferring to established traditions and authorities.

It is worth noting that, while explicit references to ingroup/outgroup distinctions were not prevalent in the letters analyzed, the few comments that were present were generally consistent with previous studies that found authoritarianism to be positively correlated with ethnocentrism (Altemeyer, 2003). For example, one critic argued that "the Scriptures are consistent in addressing two groups of people; the wicked and the righteous, the ungodly and the godly." Another critic quoted Revelation 20:15, which states that "anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire" (Revelation 20:15 New International Version). A third critic wrote, "The only ones in heaven will be those who have accepted Jesus' free gift of forgiveness and made him lord and ruler."

Of course, one could object that these statements are not evidence of religious ethnocentrism, but rather doctrinal beliefs that are shared by many Christians. This is a valid point, and one that raises an important question: Do the doctrinal beliefs themselves serve to promote religious ethnocentrism—that is, do they encourage “the tendency to make ‘Us versus Them,’ ‘In-group versus Out-group’ judgments of others on the basis of religious identification and beliefs” (Altemeyer, 2003, p. 20)? If so, do these types of judgments always manifest themselves in negative ways? Or is it possible to hold traditional beliefs on heaven and hell while resisting the superiority identification that would seem to naturally accompany such beliefs?

Much of Christian evangelism seems to rely on such a possibility. In fact, one could argue that it is religious ethnocentrism itself—in particular, the identification of a heaven-bound ingroup and a hell-bound outgroup—that motivates some Christians to engage so vigorously in activities aimed at converting the “unsaved.” Furthermore, if one truly believes that all those outside of Christianity are destined for conscious, eternal torment, then it can be argued that the *only* ethical course of action is to attempt to save as many souls as possible. Unfortunately, those who are the subjects of such efforts do not always perceive them in such a positive light.

Kinnaman and Lyons (2007) studied perceptions of Christianity held by those outside the faith. Among the major themes that emerged in the study, outsiders perceived Christians to be judgmental and too focused on getting converts. Thus, it appears that even well-intentioned actions that stem from religious ethnocentrism can have negative consequences. More research is needed to investigate variations in the manifestation of

religious ethnocentrism, and to identify the role of individual differences in predicting the consequences of ethnocentric theologies.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The controversy surrounding the release of *Love Wins* serves as an interesting case study in how individual differences in religiosity can affect intergroup conflict over doctrinal issues. In this case, a variety of factors converged to create a perfect storm of sorts—that is, a conflict that involved both realistic and social identity components, as well as key distinctions between Bell, his supporters, and his critics.

Realistic Bases

As hypothesized in Chapter 2, the doctrine of universalism provided a realistic basis for the controversy surrounding *Love Wins*. At the heart of the conflict was Bell's questioning of traditional doctrines of heaven and hell, which suggest that those who are "saved" will spend eternity in a joyous place called heaven, while those who are not saved will be punished forever in hell. Bell expressed concerns about the implications of such a doctrine—in particular, its effect on people's beliefs about God and how these beliefs impact their desire to associate with Christianity. While professing otherwise orthodox Christian beliefs, Bell articulated a type of Christian universalism that allowed for the possibility that, through Jesus Christ, God would one day reconcile all people to himself. Bell's key aim seemed to be to suggest that such a belief was not incompatible with orthodox Christianity, and that one could question or even reject traditional teachings on heaven and hell while remaining firmly within the Christian fold.

This nuance in Bell's position—in particular, his argument for the *possibility* rather than the *certainty* of universal salvation—is easy to miss, as Bell himself seems to lean strongly toward a universalist theology. Bell expresses a firm conviction that God's love will prevail in the end, and to him, the fact that “love wins” seems naturally to imply the conclusion that, indeed, all will be saved. But Bell stops short of making this conclusion normative or suggesting that universalism is the *only* viable consequence of a belief system that affirms God's unconditional love for humanity. Rather, Bell argues that Christians should hope for the possibility of universal salvation, and that such a hope is fully compatible with orthodox Christianity. He writes, “Whatever objections a person might have to this story, and there are many, one has to admit that it is fitting, proper, and Christian to long for it” (Bell, 2011a, p. 111).

Bell's critics rejected this assertion, arguing that to embrace or even hope for universal salvation is to reject Christianity, to call God's reputation into question, and to render the work of Christ irrelevant. But critics did not only reject Bell's doctrine. Rather, they rejected Bell himself, using strong language to cast Bell as a false prophet and deceiver, one who was outside the boundaries of orthodox Christianity. Bell's supporters, on the other hand, reacted most strongly not to doctrinal differences, but rather to perceptions that Bell's critics were harsh, judgmental, and self-righteous.

These reactions provide further insight into the realistic bases of the *Love Wins* controversy, especially when viewed in light of Jackson and Hunsberger's (1999) previously noted observation that religious conflict often involves competition for the promotion of religious values or the ability to “win souls” (p. 510). From the perspective

of Bell's critics, the threat posed by universalism is twofold. First, universalism has the potential to render Christ irrelevant (an assertion rejected by Bell), thus impeding evangelism. Second, universalism may be viewed as more welcoming and attractive than its alternatives, and, as such, may serve to woo potential adherents away from churches that promote more traditional doctrines.

For Bell's supporters, the most significant threat arose not from differences over doctrine, but rather from a perceived attack by Bell's critics on the cherished values of tolerance, open-mindedness, and diversity. Bell's critics espoused a competing set of values—namely, certainty, authority, and uniformity. Thus, the realistic bases of the *Love Wins* controversy included both doctrinal and values differences.

Social Identity, Distinctiveness Threat, and Anti-Norm Deviance

For both supporters and critics, this conflict began with a realistic basis. However, the responses of Bell's critics are also consistent with predictions from social identity theory, which suggest that threats to the distinctiveness of a perceived ingroup can: (1) increase the superiority aspect of group identification (Roccas et al., 2008); (2) strengthen ingroup bias (Schmid et al., 2009); and (3) induce efforts aimed at restoring distinctiveness (Jetten et al., 2004; Tetlock et al., 2000), which can include ostracizing or marginalizing ingroup members who threaten group distinctiveness or blur group boundaries (Ysseldyk et al., 2010).

Bell's support for universalism—and his resulting rejection of religious ethnocentrism—could certainly be perceived as a threat to the distinctiveness of the

“saved” ingroup. Moreover, research on normative conflict and anti-norm deviance suggests that Bell may have been viewed as a “black sheep” and evaluated more harshly due to his status as a member of the very ingroup that he threatened (Abrams, Marques, Bown, & Hogg, 2000; Packer, 2008).

Along these lines, it is worth noting that other influential Christians have articulated views similar to Bell’s but have managed to escape the intense criticism that characterized critics’ reactions to Bell. C. S. Lewis is one notable example. In his classic book, *Mere Christianity*, Lewis (1996) posed the question, “Is it not frightfully unfair that this new life should be confined to people who have heard of Christ and been able to believe in him?” (p. 65). His response was to suggest that

God has not told us what His arrangements about the other people are.

We do know that no man can be saved except through Christ; we do not

know that only those who know Him can be saved through him. (p. 65)

Lewis’s fictional works include similar themes. For instance, *The Great Divorce* (Lewis, 2001) allows for the possibility of post-mortem conversion; in particular, characters from the “grey town” symbolic of hell are transported to heaven and given the opportunity to remain (though few choose to do so). In *The Last Battle* (Lewis, 1994), a soldier from an enemy army who had served a rival god is accepted by Aslan (the Christ figure) and allowed to enter the re-created Narnia (symbolic of heaven or what Bell calls the “new world”).

In spite of these writings that, at the very least, blur traditional group boundaries between “saved” and “unsaved,” Lewis has been and remains a revered figure within the

evangelical community. In fact, *Christianity Today*, a self-described “magazine of evangelical conviction” labeled C. S. Lewis as a “superstar” (Smietana, 2005) and listed *Mere Christianity* as number three on its 2006 list of “The Top 50 Books That Have Shaped Evangelicals” (“The Top 50 Books...,” 2006).

Several factors could play a role in evangelicals’ differential evaluations of Lewis and Bell. Among these are the fact that Lewis, while allowing for the possibility of salvation for those outside of Christianity, stopped short of explicitly professing a fully universalist theology. Moreover, in spite of the continued popularity of his writings within Christian circles, Lewis’s influence may be viewed as limited due to the fact that he is no longer living. At the very least, Lewis’s writings are fully known and no longer subject to change; in other words, there is no chance that he will espouse some new doctrine that may in fact be “out of bounds.” Equally important, however, is the fact that Lewis was, according to Smietana (2005), “anything but a classic evangelical, socially or theologically.” Consequently, while both Bell and Lewis may have been viewed as what Abrams et al. (2000) termed “anti-norm deviants,” Bell’s status as an ingroup member may have led to him being evaluated more harshly than Lewis, who was perceived to be an outsider, albeit a beloved one.

Individual Differences and Social Identity Complexity

In addition to the realistic and social identity bases of the *Love Wins* controversy, individual differences, particularly with regard to variables related to various forms of

religiosity, played in key role in the development of the conflict and the expression of views related to it.

Statements by Bell and his supporters provide evidence of a quest-like approach to faith, in which beliefs remain open to change and questions are not only accepted but embraced. Bell and his supporters emphasized the diversity present within orthodox Christianity and articulated a view of scripture that acknowledges complexity and remains open to multiple interpretations. Bell's critics, on the other hand, emphasized the authority of both scripture and tradition, rejecting alternative interpretations and asserting doctrinal positions that they perceived to be clearly established and unquestionable.

The distinctions observed between Bell's supporters and his critics are consistent with the research reviewed in Chapter 2, which demonstrated a clear contrast between the opposing values of quest religiosity and fundamentalism (in particular, the authoritarian aspects of fundamentalism). The consistent positive correlations of quest religiosity with tolerance, and of religious fundamentalism with outgroup hostility, seem to have been reflected in the responses of Bell's supporters and critics. In particular, while critics responded by reaffirming doctrine and attempting to marginalize Bell, supporters denounced the attitudes of Bell's critics and emphasized the importance of social engagement over correct doctrine.

Social identity complexity may be useful as a mediating variable that can help to further explain the differences between Bell's supporters and critics. Although the letters from Chapter 4 do not provide direct evidence of differences in social identity complexity, they do speak to differences in religious identification, complexity of thought

about religious issues, and the inclusivity of religious ingroups. Specifically, critics appeared to view the content of their religious beliefs as a more defining aspect of their identity than supporters. In addition, critics favored clear-cut interpretations of scripture and expressed greater degrees of certainty about their religious beliefs. By virtue of their defense of traditional doctrines of heaven and hell, critics exhibited a resistance to expanding the inclusiveness of their religious ingroups. All of these observations provide evidence that Bell's critics may have been operationalizing less complex social identity representations. This hypothesis is supported by the work of Schmid et al. (2009) and Jetten et al. (2004), who found high religious identification to be associated with lower social identity complexity, greater ingroup bias, and stronger responses to distinctiveness threats. Moreover, Roccas and Brewer (2002) found that high threat levels served to lower social identity complexity, while tolerance of ambiguity and openness to change were associated with more complex social identity representations.

When viewed in light of these findings, the responses of Bell's critics are consistent with a model in which one's religious identity is held in a dominance mode (that is, it becomes the primary factor in determining ingroup/outgroup membership), while the beliefs that define the religious ingroup are held in an intersection mode, so that a rejection of any one of these beliefs is sufficient to warrant dismissal from the ingroup. This view is also consistent with the observations of Fullerton and Hunsberger (1982), who wrote:

It is the official position of the Christian religions that the beliefs are not independent, but rather are so many elements, each necessary to the

definition of Christian orthodoxy. Refutation of any of these points has, in fact, been termed heresy until recent times. (p. 318)

Further research could shed light on whether this proposed combination of dominance and intersection is in fact a predominant mode by which religious individuals—or perhaps some subset of religious individuals—represent their social identities.

The Making and Unmaking of Prejudice

Recall that Allport (1966) observed that religion both “makes” and “unmakes” prejudice. Others (Johnson et al., 2011; Preston et al., 2010) have elaborated on Allport’s observation, noting that the prosociality promoted by many religious teachings can be diminished by concerns for ingroup protection. Altemeyer (2003) noted that these concerns are particularly prominent among religious fundamentalists, with ethnocentrism accounting for virtually all of fundamentalism’s positive correlations with prejudice. Numerous studies have suggested that it is the authoritarian aspect of fundamentalism that is responsible for ethnocentrism and prejudice among religious fundamentalists.

In the *Love Wins* controversy, it is certainly the case that Bell’s critics exhibited both authoritarian tendencies and intolerance of doctrinal differences. Critics’ attempts to marginalize and ostracize Bell for his promotion of universalism provide strong evidence of an impulse toward ingroup protection. In contrast, Bell’s supporters resisted authoritarian appeals to both scripture and tradition, instead arguing that doctrinal differences should not only be tolerated, but valued.

One interesting factor in the *Love Wins* controversy is that the primary doctrine in question—that is, universalism—is itself intimately related to religious ethnocentrism. One could argue that to embrace universalism is to reject religious ethnocentrism, and vice versa. It is therefore not entirely surprising that Bell’s critics exhibited behaviors and attitudes associated with ethnocentrism, whereas Bell and his supporters did not.

Consistent with the predictions of Preston et al. (2010), the responses of both supporters and critics mirrored the way each group conceived of the nature of God. While both critics and supporters affirmed God’s love for humanity, critics additionally identified justice—in particular, punitive justice—as one of God’s essential defining attributes. Consistent with this view, critics responded punitively to Bell’s endorsement of universalism, while supporters reserved their strongest criticism for the critics themselves, whom they perceived to be harsh, self-righteous, and judgmental.

As noted earlier, it is possible to conceive of a notion of religious ethnocentrism that induces efforts to expand, rather than protect, the “saved” ingroup. This goal is ostensibly the basis of most Christian evangelism, but there is a catch. In particular, outsiders are typically welcomed as ingroup members only after they have subscribed to a particular set of defining beliefs and values. Moreover, one’s status as a member of the ingroup can be tenuous, as deviance from group norms can lead to punishment, marginalization, or even expulsion from the group. Bell’s treatment by the evangelical community provides a clear illustration of this phenomenon. Unfortunately, the benefits of religious belief and experience seem too often to be overshadowed by the authoritarian

demands of organized religious groups, a fact that may very well undermine the long-term effectiveness of much well-intentioned Christian evangelism.

Limitations and Further Research

One limitation of this study is the relatively small sample used in the analysis from Chapter 4. Although the sample contained nearly equal numbers of critics and supporters, it may not be representative of Bell's critics and supporters on a broader scale. In addition, the nature of the content analyzed (letters to the editor) may have had an impact on both the substance of the opinions contained therein and the manner in which these opinions were expressed.

In spite of these limitations, certain themes would seem likely to emerge from any similar set of data. In particular, the research literature strongly supports the observed distinction between quest religiosity and authoritarianism, as well as the tendency of critics to respond to distinctiveness threats by marginalizing ingroup members who blur group boundaries.

This study did not directly measure the relationship between universalism and other variables such as religiosity, social identity complexity, and outgroup tolerance. In fact, doing so would require the development of a new psychometric instrument, as no scale currently exists to assess belief in universalist doctrines of heaven, hell, and salvation. Development of such a scale could be a first step in a fruitful research program that would provide additional insights into the relationship between the content of religious beliefs and the attitudes and behaviors of those who espouse them.

Finally, this study could serve to inform future efforts to promote dialogue about religious differences. To this end, three specific observations are worth noting.

First, those on either side of any doctrinal dispute may hold many other beliefs in common. While conflict over beliefs naturally increases the salience of the doctrines in question, a skilled facilitator would be wise to emphasize points of agreement and identify superordinate goals. Within the context of religious conflict, appeals to shared prosocial religious teachings may serve to reduce outgroup hostility and promote constructive dialogue. In addition, interventions aimed at increasing participants' awareness of multiple, non-convergent ingroup categorizations may serve to increase social identity complexity, moderating responses to ingroup threats and yielding greater tolerance of difference.

Second, groups in dispute can easily find themselves using the same language to describe different concepts. For instance, to Bell's critics, words like "judgment" and "justice" were viewed as synonymous with "punishment." Thus, critics deemed Bell's message—which focused on restoration and redemption rather than punishment—to be a gospel that included "no judgment" and "no hell." Likewise, the word *universalism* can be associated with a variety of beliefs, some (but not all) of which are clearly contrary to the teachings of orthodox Christianity. Thus, any meaningful discussion about universalism must make clear exactly what is meant by the word. This is, of course, true for other topics as well.

Finally, those engaged in dialogue about religious difference must be careful to account not only for the substance of the beliefs in question, but also the manner in which

those beliefs are held. For instance, one whose religious experience is predominantly of the quest variety is not likely to be moved (and may in fact be offended) by authoritarian appeals to scripture. Likewise, a fundamentalist believer may not respond well to being presented with alternative interpretations of scripture. Constructive dialogue between individuals with such contrasting religious orientations will likely require skillful facilitation and clear ground rules that establish a safe and non-threatening environment for the exploration of religious differences.

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