

FELIX KRÄMER, *Moral Leaders: Medien, Gender und Glaube in den USA der 1970er und 1980er Jahre* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2015), 416 pp.

On March 30, 1981, President Ronald Reagan was shot by a deranged man, John Hinckley, Jr. This well-known tidbit of US-American history is one of the examples Felix Krämer uses to illustrate the production of what he calls “moral leadership” in the televised evening news. He locates this figure at the intersection of media production, white hegemonic masculinity, and the new religious politics in the 1970s and 1980s. In contrast to earlier Presidents, like Richard Nixon who, after his resignation, had become so ill he was sent to the hospital and was portrayed in the news as a frail, sickly, and defeated body (119), Reagan “proved” his virility by walking upright into the hospital (159-63, 176-78). There, he was “born again,” not only by surviving a punctured lung and heavy blood loss, but also as an exemplary leader who bested the erratic attack of a madman and showed the magnanimity to forgive him (180). Hinckley, the shooter, who inspired by the movie *Taxi Driver* had sought to impress actress Jodi Foster through his action, was declared legally insane. In the media coverage, Hinckley and Reagan came to symbolize violent, immoral anomy and decisive, moral leadership respectively, inscribing the dichotomy between good and evil into the public discourse (163-67). In the figure of Reagan, the combination of virility and virtue crystalized, making his blood a relic, the bartering of which made the evening news in 2012 (385).

Felix Krämer is a historian focusing on North America, discourse analysis, and gender studies. The reviewed book, written in German and published in 2015, was adapted from his dissertation submitted to the Westfälische-Whilhelms University, Münster in 2012. In *Moral Leaders*, Krämer undertook the herculean task of analyzing two decades of evening news of the three major US-American TV stations ABC, CBS, and NBC, translating the audio-visual discourse not only into text but also into German. Critical of an apparent crisis of masculinity during the 1970s and startled by the emergence of the New Christian Right at the end of that decade (386, 387), Krämer studiously examined the evening news to figure out how the media facilitated the enjoining of religious virtue and

virility and produced a dispositive of (male, white, heterosexual) moral leadership, cumulating in the figure of the President as pastor.

The first three chapters of the book follow a loosely chronological order, moving from the media portrayal of various insurgent movements and related topics in the 1970s to the emergence of the new Christian Right in the late 1970s, and the coalescence of religion and politics at the time of Reagan’s election as US-President at the turn of the decade. The following two chapters investigate the media production of two distinct clusters—knowledge, church service, space; and pastor, medium, man—and the last chapter assembles a collage of the 1980s, the “decade of destiny.” In his quest to “reorganize messages and media for the contemporary U.S. history” (book jacket blurb), Krämer analyzed the complex field of interconnected discourses, researched along a multitude of variegated search terms, including “abortion, crisis, disease, evil, evangelical, homosexuals, leadership, masculinity, moral values, sexuality, weakness” (29). He not only investigated the portrayal and production of these notions in the medium of televised evening news, he also theorized “the evangelical university,” “the church service,” and “the figure of the pastor” as forms of media and included an analysis of their construction in the evening news (11). He showed how religious television shows adopted the format of news shows and how pastors styled themselves as news anchors, and especially how the pastor and the church became newsworthy and then normalized into the repertoire of evening news. Krämer’s conclusion that the supposedly distinct spheres of religion and politics could no longer be differentiated in the 1980s evening news (388) concur with the findings of sociologists of religion like Allan Wolfe or Jeremy Stolow¹ who observe trends of the integration of religion in everyday practices, blurring the lines of supposedly distinct spheres.

In the context of the book, the 1970s function as the backdrop against which the story

¹ Allan Wolfe, *The Transformation of American Religion: How We Actually Live Our Faith* (New York, NY: Free Press, 2003); Jeremy Stolow, “Religion, Media, and Globalization,” in: Bryan S. Turner (ed.), *The New Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Religion* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp. 544-62.

of the enjoining of religion and politics in the 1980s is told. Krämer talks of “genealogically following the traces of the figure of moral leadership backwards into the tele-visualization of the emancipation movement between 1969 and 1975” (paraphrased, 31). Even when critically reporting on the reactions of religio-political leaders like Jerry Falwell to a liberal-emancipatory agenda, mainstream TV stations thus provided them with a platform to popularize their ideas and establish them amongst the inventory of “utterable” notions. For the purpose of showing the free exchange of terminology and liberal borrowing of religious notions, Krämer integrates an analysis of the Moral Majority Report, the newsletter of the most prominent New Christian Right organization Moral Majority (especially 184-190), into his narrative of the 1980s. In this first part of the book, Krämer elaborates that “religion was communication and mainstream-journalism was part of this communication and not an investigative outside” (190). TV made religious leaders’ utterances news and thus facilitated the introduction of the figure of the pastor into politics, the most prominent example being Falwell, the Moral Majority leader and head of a religious imperium complete with a TV station and university.

The second part of the book traces the “channels” through which religious knowledge was transferred into the public (255), focusing on the knowledge production of the “media” of 1) the religious university and 2) the church service in chapter four and 3) the figure of the pastor in chapter five. Using Pat Robertson’s CBN University and Falwell’s Lynchburg Baptist/ Liberty College as examples, Krämer describes the New Christian Right’s knowledge production and transmission as based on religious empires of university and church grouped around one leader (198, 199). Pastors used these spaces but also the public space of television, creating new formats like the religious entertainment show and the religious news show (200). Secular news anchors helped them become public and political figures by reporting on televangelism as news (230) and through their perpetual attempt to inform and warn their audiences about these religious figures (260). By reporting their “overreaching critique, ABC, CBS, and NBC,” according to Krämer, “inscribed pastors with political relevance” (284). Televised evening news thus produced the pastor as “individual star, as TV redeemer” (300),

linking masculine virility with religious virtue in the figure of the white moral leader (305, 315). While televangelists played an important role in creating this figure, it existed independently, and actually was most effectively used not by TV-pastors (Pat Robertson failed in his race for the Presidency, 310-18) but by a politician. While Krämer argues that the figure existed independently of particular persons, he nonetheless insists that it was best embodied by Ronald Reagan.

The last chapter is dedicated to an overview the mediatized body-politics of the 1980s, discussing topics like AIDS, gender, father’s day, and ethnic minorities. It serves to illustrate that the norm body in the evening news was conceived of as white, Christian, heterosexual, and male, all attributes Krämer ascribes to the figure of moral leadership.

The overall argument of *Moral Leaders* is plausible and the source work impressive. Occasionally, however, one feels that in-depth arguments were foreshortened in favor of breadth, and discussions of literature were forsaken in favor of readability. Accordingly, an analysis of the Moral Majority Report as well as subchapters like the interlude introducing two religious institutions of higher learning, Liberty College and Regent University (212-22), would have deserved their own study. Also, the sheer breadth of topics covered in the book often left the reader breathless and wondering whether any comprehensive insights could follow from jumping, for example, from feminism (46), to abortion (50), to church (59), to homosexuality (63), to blacks (74), to black Muslims (81) in a matter of pages, especially when the argument was exclusively derived from the sources without any reference to literature to facilitate social and historical contextualization. Furthermore, one would have wished for greater clarity in the use of terminology, especially the main terms. One gets the impression that “moral leadership” was simply the label attached to a discursive formation, and another pair of words aligning religion and politics, like “religious politics” might have served as well. The study would have profited from an engagement with findings and theses from the history and sociology of religion. This would have helped to explain and substantiate claims like the one that the transmission of religion into TV-scapes during the 1980s was “more than civil religious adoration” (245), especially when sociologists

like Robert Wuthnow have described public forms of evangelicalism precisely as civil religion.² Moreover, the uncritical use of the term “evangelical” for all Protestant actors appearing in the public arena of televised evening news ran afoul at the latest when Krämer classified Mark Noll, one of the foremost evangelical thinkers, as “left or liberal” (199). As sociologist Christian Smith has argued, journalists played a part in obliterating the discriminatory power of the term “evangelical” by using it indiscriminately for various Protestant movements like Fundamentalism, Evangelicalism, and Pentecostalism and applying it also to the religiously inspired activists of the New Christian Right.³ In regards to religion,

Krämer thus reproduced in parts a journalistic discourse he sought to analyze.

Moral Leaders is a pioneering study opening up the genre of television evening news to discourse analysis. In his ambitious study, Krämer roamed widely across the fields of gender-, race-, and media-studies and studies of the New Christian Right. He succeeded in presenting a readable account of the coalescence of religion and politics in TV-scapes of the 1970s and 1980s and convincingly argued that this new figure of what he called “moral leadership” culminated and was embodied in President Ronald Reagan.

Mainz

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² Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith since World War II*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1988), pp. 241-67.

³ Christian Smith, *Christian America? What Evangelicals Really Want* (Berkeley, CA: U of California P, 2000), p. 15.