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THE CHRISTIAN WORLDVIEW AND THE FORMATION OF THEO-  
POLITICAL CITIZENS: AN ETHNO-CASE STUDY OF A CONSERVATIVE  
CHRISTIAN SCHOOL

Dissertation

By

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **THE CHRISTIAN WORLDVIEW AND THE FORMATION OF THEO-POLITICAL CITIZENS: AN ETHNO-CASE STUDY OF A CONSERVATIVE CHRISTIAN SCHOOL**

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This dissertation presents an ethno-case study explaining how students at a conservative Christian high school were socialized into ideas about civic and public life in a pluralistic society. Drawing on democratic educational theory and institutional theory to analyze ethnographic data gathered during a full school year of observations, interviews, and document collection, this dissertation addresses the following questions: (1) What are the logics, practices, and symbolic representations concerning civic identity and participation in democratic society conveyed explicitly and implicitly at a conservative Christian high school? (2) How do students understand and engage with ideas about civic identity and participation conveyed at that school? (3) How do families understand and engage with these ideas about civic identity and participation?

This dissertation argues that the school was organized around a theo-political institutional logic committed to the absolute truth of Christianity. This logic was symbolically represented in the language and concepts of the “Christian worldview” and reinforced through consistent and recurrent school practices that shaped students’ behavior and their ways of interpreting the world. This theo-political logic, which was pervasive throughout formal and informal curriculum and instruction at the school, presented an all-encompassing vision of Christianity as “the truth” and offered a coherent connection between doctrinal beliefs and actual behavior. This logic was

also notable for what it omitted and lacked, particularly acknowledgment of the racialized nature of schooling and society, attention to the pluralism of worldviews in a diverse democratic nation, and recognition of the systemic and structural causes of injustice in society. The emphases as well as the omissions of the theo-political logic at the school shaped students' civic identity as first and foremost a religious identity, which meant engaging with society to promote conservative social policies, candidates, and political perspectives. The dissertation shows that students largely embraced the theo-political logic that animated the school, and their parents chose the school because of the presence of this logic.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Conservative Christian Schools and Civic Life

January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021 was a watershed moment in the history of the United States of America. It showed both the perilous fragility of a major democratic society and the growing danger of Christian nationalism. Signs, images, and symbols of Christianity could be seen throughout the day as crowds flooded through barriers and into the Capitol building. There were banners proclaiming the name of Jesus, a cross was erected outside the Capitol building, and a Christian flag was marched onto the Senate floor (Edsall, 2021). This clear display of Christian nationalism brought to the forefront of public conversations the complex and varied relationships between some segments of conservative Christianity and democratic society (Boorstein, 2021; Edsall, 2021). Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a movement of conservative Christianity has established and fortified many institutions—media platforms, publishing houses, colleges, and private K-12 schools—that are intended to support, reproduce, and disseminate their ideological perspectives. This dissertation focuses attention on the role of one of these institutions, conservative Christian high schools.

In the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the United States saw the development of a Christian school movement that would grow to educate nearly 2 million students a year by the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (NCES, 2020, Slater, 2019). The expansion of these schools was in part a response by evangelical and fundamentalist Christians to the perceived secularization of American society, particularly in terms of how secularization impacted public schooling (Carper & Laymen, 2002; Reese, 2010). Parents and churches established schools that would not only teach students how to read, write, and do arithmetic, but would also help form students into

individuals who would hold fast to and embody Christian ideals. The withdrawal from public schooling was not simply a protest against secular agendas, but an attempt to build alternative organizations controlled by families and churches that would help reproduce Christian values in students and society (Rose, 1988). This movement was animated by a desire to restore an imagined past during which conservative Protestant Christianity had a greater influence on American culture (Slater, 2019). Slater (2019) clearly articulated this desire when he concluded his history of the Christian school movement with these words.

Today, with the battle continuing to rage on – with issues arising from the LGBTQ agenda, religious liberty, and the political left – the descendants of [the founders of the Christian school movement] faithfully continue undaunted, believing that the blurred and faded image of a Christian America is still obtainable. (pp. 167-168)

This desire to preserve an imagined past and the dream of a Christian America reveals that the conservative Christian school movement was never simply an educational one, it was always a political quest. This same desire for a restoration of the past is also apparent in the public resurgence of Christian nationalism in American politics and society at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Whitehead & Perry, 2020).

Sociologists Whitehead and Perry (2020) have defined Christian nationalism as “an ideology that idealizes and advocates a fusion of American civic life with a particular type of Christian identity and culture” (pp. ix-x). Historical sociologist Gorski (2020) asserted that the roots of Christian nationalism in the United States trace back to the first encounters Europeans had with indigenous peoples on the American continent. Gorski went on to summarize the myth undergirding Christian nationalism in the following manner:

America was founded as a Christian nation. The Pilgrims were traditional Christians. So were the Founding Fathers. This is why God showered so many blessings on America for so long. This is why America became so rich and powerful. But now America is falling away from its Christian heritage. It is no longer obeying God's laws. This is why America's riches and power have been declining: God is no longer protecting the nation. The only way to turn back the tide – the only way to make America great again, if you like – is for Christians to take back the country. Or at least to push back hard against its enemies – the liberals, secularists, and humanists who have been taking over. (Gorski, 2020, p. 109)

Christian nationalism is not just about the history and origins of America, it is also tied to conceptions of identity and belonging. In other words, Christian nationalism is a cultural framework that combines the religious ideology of Christianity with political conceptions of what the United States is as a nation and who belongs within this nation. In this sense, Christian nationalism concerns itself with how society is ordered in the United States and who benefits from this particular order.

Because Christian nationalism involves not only political and religious ideologies but also racial ideologies and perspectives, it also functions as a way of understanding race in society. As Gorski (2020) explained, Christian nationalism might better be referred to as *white* Christian nationalism because it stems from the conception that “America was built by and for white Christians, and that if you are not a white Christian, you are also not fully or truly American” (p. 108). In fact, several scholars of Christian nationalism have now turned to the term, “White Christian nationalism,” to highlight the ways in which it is not only a religious and political ideology but also a racial ideology (Davis & Perry, 2020; Gorski, 2020; Gorski & Perry,

2022; PRRI/Brookings, 2023). White Christian nationalism supports a color-blind ideology that claims racism is about individual attitudes and biases rather than the result of long-standing structural and systemic factors (Gorski & Perry, 2022). However, as many critics have pointed out over time, color-blind ideology fails to account for the ways whiteness has long controlled the status quo and has become the accepted norm for behavior in the United States (Bonilla-Silva, 2013). Along these lines, White Christian nationalism tends to regard minorities, especially those of “foreign” descent, as perpetual foreigners and never able to be truly American (Gorski & Perry, 2022). Many scholars have argued that White Christian nationalism presents a threat to the diversity of the United States and to democratic pluralism.

Over the past several decades, the link between conservative Christianity, especially evangelical forms, and white Christian nationalism has grown stronger. Looking at more recent political trends, Philip Gorski (2017) demonstrated that many white evangelicals have come to support Christian nationalist ideologies that combine nativist politics, fear of non-European immigrants, social conservatism, and the desire to recover a kind of “golden age” of America’s past. In making this claim, he also acknowledged that while Christian nationalism is not synonymous with evangelicalism, it is estimated that as many as 50% of evangelicals hold political ideas that are consistent with the ideas of Christian nationalists (Gorski, 2017). The connections between conservative Christianity and Christian nationalism have important consequences for democracy and public life in America as the 21<sup>st</sup> century moves forward. Therefore, it is important to understand Christian schools and the role they play in forming individuals for citizenship.

In this dissertation, I suggest that Christian schools are not organized simply as religious organizations, but as political ones as well. This is in keeping with the argument that all schools

are “political sites” (Hess & McAvoy, 2015, p. 4). Throughout their history, schools have been the sites of political controversies. This can be seen in legal challenges involving such issues as free speech (Ross, 2015), segregation (Guinier, 2004), school board and public arguments over what curriculum to use or exclude (Laats, 2015), and current debates over how race and diversity should be addressed in schools (Natanson, 2021). These political controversies often play out in school board meetings and through newspaper articles attempting to persuade the public of various positions. However, these controversies do not make schools political sites, they simply reveal the political nature of schooling. There are two important aspects of schools as political sites: schools as places where future citizens are developed (Westheimer, 2015) and the school curriculum itself as political (Pinar, et al., 1995).

Public schooling has always had a civic imperative; that is, one of the purposes of schooling has been forming literate and knowledgeable people, which was often seen as necessary for maintaining a democratic republic (Kaestle, 1983). Educational historian, Labaree (2011), argued that Horace Mann, an early proponent of public education, “made clear that the primary rationale for this institution was political” (p. 384). While the civic function of a school is not the only purpose of schooling, it is a powerful one and highlights schools as political sites where students are formed, both intentionally and unintentionally, into political citizens.

Along with the fact that schools are spaces that aim to help students become citizens, schools need to be understood as political because the curriculum itself is political. Pinar et al. (1995) have argued that since the 1970s, it has become commonplace to regard schools, and specifically curriculum, as political. Previous notions of curriculum as politically neutral have been replaced with the acknowledgment that curriculum, whether explicit or hidden, serves political ends (Apple, 2006). Through the inclusion and exclusion of certain ideas and topics in

textbooks, the curriculum itself helps to normalize and legitimize certain forms of knowledge and behavior for students. It is this political nature of the curriculum that has often been the focus of controversies and protests (Laats, 2015).

Schools are political sites because they help form citizens and the curriculum often communicates political ideologies through the inclusion or exclusion of specific topics or by presenting material in a particular manner. Conservative Christians have understood this aspect of schools and have tried to influence or shape schools in a variety of ways to align with their own religious and political commitments (Apple, 2006). When efforts to influence public schools failed, these Christians often started their own schools that align with their political and religious ideologies (Reese, 2010; Slater, 2019). This means that Christian schools exist as spaces that present political ideology within the framework of a religious doctrine and commitment. Presenting political ideology within this context creates an environment where political positions are entwined with theological ones. Because students who attend these schools live and participate in a wider democratic society, how conservative Christian schools socialize students as members of society is of interest both to the supporters of these schools and to the larger public (Feinberg, 2006).

This dissertation examines in depth one conservative Christian high school in order to understand how it shapes students' understanding of their roles as citizens in a democratic society and participants in public life. Conceptualized and designed as an "ethno-case study" (Parker-Jenkins, 2018), the aim of the dissertation is to understand and unpack the messages conveyed to students in a conservative Christian school about how to live as participants in society. Understanding conservative Christian schools can lead to clarity concerning how and to what extent these schools may reproduce ideologies of Christian nationalism. The ideologies of

Christian nationalism strain the bonds of a pluralistic democracy due to their singular and exclusionary visions of how society ought to be organized (Groski, 2020; Whitehead & Perry, 2020). Even though conservative Christian schools are private schools, the impact they have on their students is also an impact on public life. As citizens, students who have been educated at conservative Christian schools become neighbors, colleagues, and participants in democratic life. Recognizing the ideologies that shape students helps articulate the way conservative Christian schools relate to a larger democratic society.

### **Research Questions and Context**

Of the over 2 million students who are educated in Protestant Christian schools, close to 700,000 of them attend what the National Center for Educational Statistics refers to as “conservative Christian schools” (Broughman et al., 2019). According to the NCES categorization, conservative Christian schools belong to one of four national associations – Accelerated Christian Education, American Association of Christian Schools, Association of Christian Schools International, and Oral Roberts University Educational Fellowship (Broughman et al., 2019). These national associations are not connected with any specific Christian denomination but are organized as non-denominational Protestant associations, often holding to conservative evangelical theology. Therefore, while schools in these associations may attract families from a diversity of Christian traditions, the curriculum and ethos are structured by evangelical theology. This theology subscribes to the inerrancy and authority of the Bible, humanity’s need for salvation through a personal relationship with Jesus, and the idea that Christianity represents the true understanding of the world and humanity (ACSI, 2020). Many conservative Christian schools refer to themselves as evangelical (Sikkink, 2018) or simply as

“Christian schools” (Stitzlein, 2008). In this dissertation, I use the designation of “conservative Christian” in keeping with the language of NCES.

As noted, the dissertation is designed and conceptualized as an “ethno-case study” (Parker-Jenkins, 2018) of a conservative Christian high school. An ethno-case study is a case study that uses ethnographic methods to research a phenomenon. This dissertation is influenced by previous ethnographic research on Christian schools, including foundational studies such as Alan Peshkin’s (1986) *God’s Choice* and Susan Rose’s (1988) *Keeping Them Out of the Hands of Satan*, as well as Allison Blosser’s (2019) contemporary ethnography, *Faith, Diversity, and Education*. Following the examples of these previous works, which are elaborated on in the literature review, this dissertation reveals the life and learning of students within a conservative Christian high school. However, unlike these previous studies, this dissertation is concerned specifically with the way *citizenship* is understood and communicated in a conservative Christian school. While previous research has elaborated on the culture and life of conservative Christian schools, they have not focused specifically on questions of citizenship, civic development, and participation in public life. This dissertation seeks to address these issues by exploring how these organizations shape students’ civic identity. With the rise of Christian nationalism, which desires to “take back America for God” (Whitehead & Perry, 2020), and with a deeply divided American democracy that often struggles with its own commitment to pluralism, understanding how hundreds of thousands of future participants in civic society are being taught to think and engage with society and democracy is critical.

It is important to clarify the meaning of citizenship as considered in this dissertation. Often the term is used to refer to the legal status one has within the context of a nation or state (Banks, 2021). Thus, to be a citizen, or have citizenship, is to have a certain legal standing or

belonging within a state. Historically, this notion of citizenship has also included discussions about the rights and duties individuals hold because of their citizenship (Heater, 1999). This kind of understanding of citizenship may lead to defining it too narrowly or equating it with political activity or governmentality in the sense of how a community or state is structured and functions. But citizenship is not reducible simply to rights and duties in relation to the state. Rather citizenship entails a people's common life together, or what Dewey (1916/1944) referred to as "associated living" (p. 87). Citizenship includes aspects of political life but also includes other aspects of common life together as a community, such as how people engage with and treat their neighbors and co-workers, and how people take care of common public concerns within a community. In this sense, terms such as common life or public life are akin to the term, citizenship (Bretherton, 2019). Throughout this dissertation, I use the terms citizenship, public life, and common life in a way that is not narrowly focused on legal issues or governmentality, but in a way that is expansive and includes people's public and shared life. Citizenship concerns people's "associated living" or our common public life.

Using both democratic educational theory and new institutional theory, this dissertation seeks to better understand conceptions of citizenship and public engagement that are conveyed by a Conservative Christian school. Following new institutional theory, the school is understood as a specific organization that influences the way its members think about and act in their social world. The goal is to provide clarity concerning the messages conveyed to students and parents concerning how one is to live as a citizen in a pluralistic democracy. In doing so, this dissertation asks the following central question:

What are the logics, practices, and symbolic representations concerning civic identity and participation in democratic society conveyed explicitly and implicitly at one conservative Christian high school?

Informed by institutional theory, this question is designed to uncover how a particular conservative Christian school functions as a site that offers students specific ways of understanding public life. Working within the field of organizational studies, John W. Meyer and Brian Rowan (1977) claimed that organizations are shaped by the rules and norms of larger social institutions. In being shaped by these larger institutional norms, organizations normalize particular ways of thinking and acting for individuals within the organization. The main research question for this dissertation focuses specifically on the logics, material practices, and symbolic systems that influence and shape students' conceptualization of civic identity and engagement. However, to better understand the messages conveyed by the school, I also ask two further questions to help add other perspectives.

How do students understand and engage with ideas of civic identity and participation conveyed at that school? and How do families understand and engage with ideas of civic identity and participation conveyed?

These additional questions were designed to add multiple perspectives to this study to better understand conservative Christian schools. Question two adds the students' perspectives and was an attempt to understand how students engage with the ideas conveyed by the larger organization with students conceptualized as agents themselves rather than as simple recipients of the ideology of the school. This question seeks to discover ways students interpret, accept, modify, or reject the messages the school conveys. Question three adds the perspective of the families to this research study in order to apprehend how parents interpret and engage with the

messages from the school concerning citizenship. Families could engage with these messages in several ways, including reinforcing the messages of the school, simply tolerating them, resisting them, or modifying them in various ways. Adding both the students' and parents' perspectives to this study helped to give a fuller understanding of how a conservative Christian school serves as an organization that contributes to the formation of students' civic identity.

Organizations are always situated within a larger context, both historically and socially. Because of this, it is not possible to fully understand conservative Christian schools without examining their larger historical context. This means accounting for the origins of these schools as part of a larger Christian school movement in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Carper & Layman, 2002; Slater, 2019). Along with this historical context, it is also necessary to further explain what makes a school a conservative Christian school. The next two sections explore these contexts by discussing the rise of the Christian school movement and describing conservative Christian schools as a category used by the NCES.

### **History of Protestant Christian Schools**

Protestant Christian schooling has existed in the United States since colonial times and predates the common school movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Prior to the common school movement, several Protestant denominations sponsored their own schools that helped provide both spiritual and academic education for students. In the late 17<sup>th</sup> century and throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Protestant denominations often helped sponsor charity schools in urban areas as well as Sunday schools to help provide basic education in reading, arithmetic, and morality along with religious education (Kaestle, 1983). When nonsectarian common schools became the norm in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there were mixed reactions from Protestants (Glenn, 1988). However, most Protestants eventually offered support to these schools due to their inclusion of Bible reading and

prayer (Kaestle, 1983). For the most part, public schooling enjoyed the support of Protestant Christianity until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century when a new expression of Christianity emerged to protest social change (Carper & Layman, 2002)

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, religious dimensions of American society were changing significantly as a result of increased urbanization and intellectual shifts brought about by concepts such as “materialistic evolution, higher criticism, and theological modernism” (Laats, 2010, p. 12). Darwin’s theory of natural selection challenged long-held theological understandings about the world and humanity. Materialistic evolution offered a different way to see the origins and place of humans in the world. This was perceived by many conservative Christians as a challenge to biblical authority and the veracity of Christianity. Along with this, higher criticism began to challenge and call into question the authority of Scripture as a divine text. This form of criticism saw the text of Scripture as a human invention edited and pieced together over time. As with materialistic evolution, conservative Christians understood this as a challenge to the belief of Scripture’s divine origin. As materialistic evolution and higher criticism were accepted by mainline churches and academic institutions, theological modernism began to take hold in many Protestant denominations. This was a movement that attempted to reinterpret supernatural claims of Scripture in light of modern scientific knowledge to make faith more palatable for modern people.

Eventually, these shifts inspired a new conservative group within Protestant Christianity, who were referred to as fundamentalists. Contrary to images of American fundamentalism as a populist religious movement comprised mostly of the uneducated masses, sociologist of religion Riesebrodt (1993) argued that religious fundamentalism was originally an intellectual protest movement that stood in opposition to the religious consequences of modern developments in

society. Riesebrodt pointed to three main consequences brought about by modern society that drew the concern of fundamentalists: “the disintegration of the supernatural view of life by modern science; cultural pluralism . . . particularly in larger, modern cities; and structural pluralism . . . whereby religion becomes a personal matter” (pp. 22-23). As fundamentalists struggled to make sense of their changing world, they made public schools, which once enjoyed their support, the site of their protest and activism.

In the opening decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was a flurry of political and social activity from fundamentalists attempting to influence the direction of schools and the content of their curriculum. According to historian Adam Laats (2010), this flurry of activity led to eleven states passing laws by 1930 mandating Bible reading in public schools; in states that did not have laws regulating this, many cities and large towns passed local laws requiring Bible reading in schools. Along with this attempt to ensure the Bible would be read in schools, there was a major push from fundamentalists and other conservatives to ban the teaching of evolution in public schools. Laats (2010) reported that “between 1922-1929, fundamentalists promoted at least 53 antievolution bills or resolutions in 21 state legislatures” (p. 4). The goal of this educational activism was “to keep a system of education that would reinforce evangelical belief” (Laats, 2010, p. 7). These efforts along with the Scopes Trial of 1925 helped to form an alliance between fundamentalists and other conservative Christians and gave this group an enemy to fight against – secular public schools.

For those Christians who saw public school as a tool of a secularizing society that would secularize their children, there were few other options outside of educational activism. This changed after World War II. In his classic work explaining American fundamentalism, George Marsden (2006) articulated the ways fundamentalists and conservative Christians joined together

under the banner of evangelicalism after WWII. These Christians focused on “building a subculture with institutions, mores, and social connections that would eventually provide acceptable alternatives to the dominant cultural ethos” (Marsden, 2006, p. 204). In building this subculture, the National Association of Christian Schools (NACS) was formed in 1948 within the larger organization of the National Association of Evangelicals (Slater, 2019; Swezey, 2006). While there were Protestant schools before the NACS, the vast majority of them were organized and run through specific denominations. The NACS helped to launch non-denominational Protestant Christian schools across the United States. These schools began to provide a viable alternative for families to public schooling and offered a curriculum that “would take its shape around the central belief in the Scriptures as the absolute truth of God and central all learning” (Slater, 2019, 72).

The growth of these new Christian schools remained slow until the 1960s. Carper and Layman (2002) argued that during this decade a “disenchantment with the ongoing secularization of public education, a resurgent evangelical faith, and, in some cases, fears related to desegregation sparked the phenomenal increase in the number of Christian day schools” (p 504). This can be seen in three specific events that served as catalysts for the Christian school movement: the removal of school-sponsored prayer in 1962, the removal of school-sponsored Bible reading in public schooling in 1963, and the continued push toward desegregation with the Civil Rights Act of 1964. These events furthered a sense of estrangement from public schooling for many conservative Christians, both fundamentalist and evangelical. Below I look briefly at each of these events.

Two key Supreme Court decisions helped to solidify the idea that public schools had become secular institutions that were largely antagonistic to the Christian faith. In the 1962

decision *Engel v. Vital*, 370 U.S. 42 (1962), the court ruled that school sponsored prayer, even if nonsectarian, was an unconstitutional violation of the first amendment. Laats (2012) demonstrated that the response to this decision from Christians was largely mixed. Some conservative Christian groups saw this as an indication that America had drifted away from God and that public schools were no longer hospitable to Christians, while others saw this decision with cautious optimism, thinking that their children would no longer be influenced by a generic civil religion which was contrary to the true Christian faith (Laats, 2012, Green, 2019). However, the next year the *School District of Abington Township v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963) decision presented another challenge to Christians' support of public schooling.

The *Schempp* case challenged daily readings from the King James Bible and the recitation of the Lord's Prayer in schools. Ultimately the court held that this practice was a violation of the constitution. Added to the *Engel* decision from the previous year, this decision was met with backlash from fundamentalists and other conservative Christians. Laats (2012) claimed that in the wake of these decisions many conservative Christians "came to the conclusion that they had been exiled from public schooling" (p. 333). Furthermore, *Christianity Today*, the main publication for the emerging evangelical movement, declared "in the schools, secularization has triumphed" (cited in Laats, 2012, p. 331). Ultimately these court decisions contributed to a growing sense of dissatisfaction with public schooling for many Christian groups and provided support for the emergence of the Christian school movement.

The third event that helped fuel the development of Christian schools was the push for desegregation through the Civil Rights Act of 1964. While desegregation was officially decided in 1954 with the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, this was met with mass resistance not only in the South but throughout the United States (Chou et al., 1982). With the passage of the

Civil Rights Act of 1964 and increased legal challenges to the various forms of mass resistance, the federal government finally had levers to work toward meaningful school desegregation. One of the results was the emergence of segregation academies to serve white families, many of which were sponsored by churches and connected with fundamentalist Christianity (Nordin & Turner, 1980; Myers, 2004). While not all Christian schools formed in the late 1960s and early 1970s were organized as segregation academies, many scholars have demonstrated that there was a significant overlap between these two movements (Edmonds, 2020; Fuquay, 2002; Myers, 2004; Nevin & Bills, 1976). Furthermore, many of those who were looking to avoid desegregation, regardless of their religious commitments, supported new Christian schools because they were predominantly white.

The cultural shifts of the 1960s were experienced by many Christian families as a tumultuous secularization of society and public schooling. Carper and Layman (2002) claimed that as it relates to education, Christians responded to these shifts in several ways. Some became activists challenging curriculum and advocating for reinserting Christian values into schools, some opted to educate their children at home, while others helped establish new Christian schools. It was during this period that the Christian school movement matured and flourished (Carper & Layman, 2002). This growth is particularly apparent in the example of the development of the Western Association of Christian Schools, which accredited and supported schools in the western United States. In 1967 there were fewer than 15,000 students in WACS schools; however, just over a decade later, in 1979, these schools had grown to serve 74,460 students (Swezey, 2006, p. 100). One of the results of this growth was the proliferation of national associations to support these newly formed Christian schools. Many of these associations were formed through mergers of smaller state or regional associations.

The four national associations that would come to be classified as conservative Christian by NCES were formed between 1970 and 1983. The largest of these, the Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI) was formed in 1978 when two smaller regional associations and one state association decided to merge. As one of the board members at the time of the formation explained, the purpose of this new association was to provide the Christian school movement with one strong national association (Swezey, 2006). The ACSI emerged as the second largest private school association in the United States serving nearly 500,000 students nationwide in 2017 and accounting for 82% of the students who attended a conservative Christian school (Broughman et al., 2019). The only association currently larger than the ACSI is the National Catholic Educational Association.

Within the landscape of Christian schooling, it is important to recognize, as Sikkink (2001) claimed, that there is a “wide diversity of Christian schools” (p. 7). This diversity can be seen in different theological claims across schools, different approaches to curriculum, different populations served, and several other factors (Sikkink, 2001). However, even while acknowledging this diversity, some important characteristics are common to Christian schools as part of a larger movement, two of which are central to this dissertation.

The first is the social discontent and opposition to secularism which led to the formation of these alternative organizations. Many who have examined the history of Christian schools point to a growing sense of disenfranchisement and conflict with secularism in public schooling as the central characteristic driving the formation of Christian schools (Carper & Layman, 2002; Reese, 2010; Sikkink, 2001; Slater, 2019). Along these lines, educational historian Reese (2010) wrote, “the notion that schools were once heavily Protestant and God-centered but became humanistic if not atheistic pervaded the ideology of the Christian school movement” (p. 118).

Central to the Christian school movement was a rejection of the secular world and public schools due to their increased secularism. But as Almond et al. (2004) argued in their explanation of religious fundamentalism, world-rejecting attitudes are not just about renunciation of the world but also entail a world-creating strategy that attempts to form an alternative way of living in the modern world through the creation of new organizations. This suggests that the Christian school movement can be understood not just as a rejection of public education, but also as part of the work of world building.

A second important characteristic of the Christian school movement is the links between America as a nation, education, and faith. Most Protestant Christians supported public schooling during the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries largely because schools were heavily shaped by and supportive of Protestant understandings of life (Carper & Laymen, 2002; Reese, 2010). In recounting the historical development of Christian schools, Reese (2010) described conservative Christians as “self-appointed guardians of mass education” who were concerned with preserving traditional values including “unquestioned patriotism and faith in God” (p. 117). When these values seemed to be waning in the public schools, it was Christian schools that became the carriers of these values and they espoused an ideology that placed Protestantism as central to the story of America. This can be seen clearly in Robert Slater’s (2019) recounting of the history of the Christian school movement. Slater claimed that as the “guardians” of American culture, conservative Christians saw building a Christian school movement as an effort to “return to Christian ideals for America” (p. 166). He further claimed, “the birth of the Christian school movement in the middle of the twentieth century distinctly reflected [American Protestant’s] long held vision of a ‘Christian America’” (p. 165). The Christian school movement was not just about the desire to create educational organizations that served as alternatives to secular public

ones, but it was also about the hope of rebuilding and preserving a Christian America. Within the Christian school movement, there is both an implicit and explicit connection to an ideology that supports Christian nationalism.

### **Conservative Christian Schools as an NCES Category**

Because the Christian school movement was non-denominational and loosely organized, there is significant diversity among Protestant schools in the United States today (Sikkink, 2001). This makes it difficult to describe and understand the various ways these schools are similar to one another as well as how they may differ. Their diversity also makes it difficult to name and categorize the various kinds of schools in meaningful ways. Because of this, there is no universal consensus regarding terminology or a system for grouping these schools. As mentioned previously, some researchers use the language of “evangelical schools” or “evangelical Protestant schools” (Sikkink, 2018). Others have used the terms “fundamentalist Christian schools” (Peshkin, 1986, Rose, 1993), or simply “Christian schools” (Stitzlein, 2008; Wellman, 2021). While various researchers have explained some of the differences and justification for these various terms, there is also considerable overlap between their usage and meanings (Reese, 2010; Sikkink, 2001).

To have a stable category and a way to distinguish among schools, this dissertation uses the organization of private schooling employed by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES). In keeping with the NCES designation, I thus use the language of “Conservative Christian schools.” The NCES divides private religious schools in the United States into two main categories, “Catholic” and “Other Religious.” Catholic, as a category, accounts for the various Catholic schools – parochial, diocesan, and independent. These schools accounted for about 40% of private school students in 2017 (Broughman et al., 2019). The category of “Other

Religious” is broken into three subgroups: Conservative Christian, Affiliated, and Unaffiliated. Membership in these categories is based on schools belonging to a particular association or accreditation organization.

As previously noted, according to the NCES, schools that belong to the subgroup “Conservative Christian” belong to one of four associations: Accelerated Christian Education (ACE), American Association of Christian Schools (AACCS), Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI), or the Oral Roberts University Education Fellowship (Broughman et al., 2017). Those schools classified as “affiliated” do not belong to one of the four Conservative Christian associations but still belong to a national or regional association. Most schools categorized as “affiliated” belong to a specific denominational association such as the Evangelical Lutheran Education Association or the National Association of Episcopal Schools. Along with these denominational associations, Jewish and Islamic school associations are included as a part of the “affiliated” classification. The final category, “unaffiliated,” includes those schools “that have a religious orientation or purpose but are not classified as Conservative Christian or affiliated” (Broughman et al., 2019, p. A-5). Many of these may be very similar to Conservative Christian schools, but for various reasons, they want to remain independent or have yet to receive accreditation from an association.

Conservative Christian schools currently account for almost 13% of students attending private schools in the U.S. Since 2011, these schools have enrolled an average of 700,000 students nationwide each year. According to the most recent survey results from the NCES “Private School Universe Survey” (PSS), there were about 590,000 students enrolled in a Conservative Christian school for the 2019-2020 school year (Broughman et al., 2021). While this is lower enrollment than in previous years, it is important to see this number in light of the

disruption that the Covid-19 pandemic caused for schools and families during the 2019-2020 school year. Furthermore, reporting to the NCES through the PSS is voluntary for these schools and thus may not account for all students in Conservative Christian schools. It is also important to acknowledge other reports of growing populations in Christian schools nationwide. Journalist, Ruth Graham, (2021) recently reported in the *New York Times* that there is evidence of a “boom in conservative Christian schooling, driven nationwide by a combination of pandemic frustrations and rising parental anxieties around how schools handle education on issues including race and the rights of transgender students” (p. 1). These schools have been and will continue to be an important sector of private education.

It is important to make a note concerning the way this dissertation makes use of the term conservative Christian. The NCES category Conservative Christian school can be confusing because the term, “conservative” is often used to describe theological, political, or social positions. In this way, conservative is often understood as describing a position that is traditional or non-progressive, wanting to maintain perceived traditional patterns of society. For the remainder of this dissertation when I refer to the NCES category of “Conservative Christian,” I capitalize the term. However, when the term “conservative” is used as a descriptor of a group or individual’s position or ideology, I use lowercase.

### **Overview of Findings and Major Argument**

Based on data collected over the course of a full school year, I found that the Conservative Christian high school I observed was animated and organized around what I refer to as a “theo-political” institutional logic. This logic shaped the formation of the students who attended the school to be theo-political citizens of the larger society. Throughout this dissertation, I make the argument that the institutional logic that animated the Conservative

Christian high school I studied for an entire school year was what I refer to as a theo-political logic. I use the term, “theo-political” as a way of indicating that the logic of the school was first and foremost a theological logic. The “theo” of theo-political is primary in this term. But the “political” of the term emphasizes that theological claims, specifically those about humanity, identity, and the nature of the world, carry within them implications for the political organization of life and society. If politics is understood as more than governmentality and statecraft, and rather focuses on the ways people, as a *polis* or political community, organize life and society, then theological claims often imply political claims. While they remain theological claims, they carry with them, often unspoken and assumed, ways of structuring and thinking about humanity’s common life, or more specifically, ways of ordering a people’s political life. Therefore the “political” of the term theo-political indicates that the logic of this school was also, and simultaneously, a political logic, one that communicated ways of ordering life and society.

The usage of the term theo-political throughout this dissertation can further be understood by situating it in relation to the way others have used the term. In theology and philosophy, the term theo-political is sometimes used to emphasize the notion that modern political ideas carry with them theological assumptions and claims (Cavanaugh, 2002; Kemp, 2019; Phillips, 2014). For example, theologian William Cavanaugh (2002) used the term to indicate that “secular political theory is really theology in disguise” (p. 2). For Cavanaugh political arguments carry an assumed anthropology and way of ordering the world, and thus are ultimately theological in nature. This does not mean they are theological in a confessional manner as if they were part of a specific religious group or organization. Political ideas are theological in that they make a claim about what it means to be human, how society ought to be organized, and the aim or direction of society. Cavanaugh’s argument and usage of the term, theo-political, can appear to reduce all

political claims to theological ones. However, a perhaps more helpful way of understanding the theological, or religious, nature of political claims has been offered by the anthropologist Talal Asad. He argued, “the category of ‘politics’ and ‘religion’ turn out to implicate each other more profoundly than we thought” (Asad, 2003; p. 200). He further elaborated on this idea by explaining that modern thinking has tended either to reduce religious claims to political ones or separate them so they are completely different aspects of life. Instead, Asad (1993) argued that these two shape one another because each makes claims about the proper way of inhabiting the world and organizing society. The usage of the term theo-political is intended to highlight this deep connection, often overlooked, between political ideas and theological ones.

I use the term theo-political in a way that is somewhat similar to Asad’s. Whereas some scholars use this term to highlight the theological nature of political ideas, I use the term to highlight the political nature of theological ideas. Thus, the theo-political logic that animated and organized life at the school was not simply preparing students for their religious life, it was providing them with taken-for-granted ways of understanding their entire participation in society and the way to understanding what was true about the structure of society.

Because this dissertation focuses on the messages conveyed to students about civic and public life in a religious school, the idea of theo-political logic carries with it political assumptions and ramifications as well as religious ideas. The term theo-political signifies that the logic of the Conservative Christian school I studied was primarily theologically driven and yet at the same time carried with it critically important assumptions about political life, namely how communal life should be organized and what the ultimate aim of common life should be. The political ramifications of the theological perspectives of conservative Christians and some other religious schools can easily be obscured by the heavy emphasis on religious ideas, language, and

concepts. Thus, the term theo-political aims to focus attention on the political nature of the theological logic that is pervasive in Conservative Christian schools.

My usage of the term theo-political does not signify a reduction of religious ideas to political ones. In keeping with Asad's arguments above, religious ideas and ways of ordering life are not simply another way of talking about politics. So, while they do have political ramifications, it would be wrong to collapse the two into the same thing. To talk about the theo-political is to highlight the intertwining of the theological and political, not the reduction of theology to politics. While these theological claims often supported and justified specific political positions, as I argue throughout this dissertation, it is important to recognize that theological beliefs are more than political ones. The term theo-political does not seek to reduce religious claims and beliefs to simply political or social claims. Understanding what theo-political is not helps clarify what it is and how it is used throughout this dissertation.

This understanding of the term theo-political is central to the argument that I make throughout this dissertation, namely that the institutional logic of Conservative Christian schools helps to form students into theo-political citizens. These citizens do not necessarily aim at democratic norms but are focused on exercising religious faithfulness. The theo-political logic of the school offered a powerful socializing force that shaped students' understanding of themselves and the society in which they live. It helped to form theo-political citizens concerned first and foremost with demonstrating religious faithfulness as they participated in their civic and public lives.

This dissertation has three initial chapters that lay the groundwork for the study, three chapters that make the major analytic arguments of the study, and a conclusion. Chapter One explains the importance of understanding civic development at Conservative Christian schools

and reviews the social and historical contexts in which the questions of this dissertation are situated.

Chapter Two explains the theoretical frameworks used and also presents a review of relevant literature. Here I explain democratic educational theory and institutional theory, which provide frameworks that guide this dissertation. Chapter Two also reviews empirical and conceptual literature related to both Christian schooling and civic education in order to situate the dissertation within larger research conversations concerning the development of civic and public participation at Conservative Christian schools. The literature review demonstrates that there is not necessarily a consensus concerning the kind of civic development schools ought to focus on; however, there is consistent evidence showing that curriculum and pedagogies intentionally built around discussion and engagement with the community can help foster students' civic identity. When it comes to understanding Conservative Christian schools as places of civic development, the literature is unclear about the kinds of citizens these schools help to form. Instead of becoming "civic spaces" (Parker, 2008) that help students encounter a world filled with differences, many Conservative Christian schools present a world that reinforces the perspectives of the families and faith communities that students belong to. Furthermore, the research suggests that some Conservative Christian schools use curriculum and pedagogical strategies aimed at cultivating religious knowledge and commitment rather than democratic and civic commitments.

Chapter Three explains the research methods used in this "ethno-case study" (Parker-Jenkins, 2018) and situates this in the context of both ethnographic methodologies and case studies. This chapter also describes in some detail the research site and the participants involved in this study. The chapter describes the data – including interviews, school observations, and

school documents – that were collected at the school. Finally, the chapter includes a discussion of the ways in which data was analyzed in order to develop and build propositions and arguments.

The first research question of this dissertation, which has to do with the institutional logic related to civic identity and participation in a democratic society is explored in Chapters Four and Five. Combined, these chapters argue that a theo-political institutional logic animated and organized all aspects of the Conservative Christian high school I studied, which shaped the ways students thought about their participation in civic and public life. More specifically, Chapter Four analyzes the symbolic representation of this theo-political logic through the language and theory of the “Christian worldview.” Not only was the language of the Christian worldview consistently used throughout the school, but it also provided an all-encompassing vision of Christianity as “the truth” and offered a coherent connection between doctrinal beliefs that were held and the civic and public actions these beliefs entailed or required. The symbolic representation of the theo-political logic through the language and concepts of the Christian worldview taught students a religious and theological understanding of how to participate in civic and public life, forming them as theo-political citizens. While the Christian worldview offered a powerful way of organizing all of life, it also contained internal tensions, specifically between the commitment to the absolute truth of Christianity and Christian ways of being and knowing, on one hand, and the command to love one’s neighbors, including those who are different, on the other hand. I suggest in Chapter Four that this tension was often resolved by valuing truth over love and thus redefining how to “love one’s neighbor” while also maintaining the absolute truth of Christianity. This perspective defined “love” as telling the (Christian) truth and supporting Christianity against other ways of living.

Chapter Five builds on my analysis of the symbolic representations of theo-political logic by turning attention to the material practices of the school. This chapter identifies and analyzes major schema for action that were provided to students in order to help them make sense of acting in society and the everyday practices that embodied for them particular ways of being and acting in society. The chapter argues that, taken together, these schemas and practices trained students to understand their own participation in civic and public life in terms of supporting policies and candidates who were perceived as supportive of conservative Christianity. Thus, the material practices of this theo-political logic helped to develop students who acted in society as faithful religious citizens, or theo-political citizens. Similar to the Christian worldview, the material practices at the school also involved an inherent tension inherent in the theo-political logic, specifically between practices intended to implement Christian morality in society and those that aimed to serve and care for others in society. As with the tension between truth and love, this tension was often resolved by valuing the implementation of Christian morality in society more so than serving and caring for others. The assumption here was that shaping society to reflect Christianity and Christian perspectives would ultimately serve and benefit those in need within society. Chapter Five further argues that the ways in which material practices were organized at the Conservative Christian high school I studied focused students' attention on participation in civic and public life primarily in individualistic and personal terms. In short, the theo-political logic of the school obscured structural understandings of action and living in society. This was especially clear concerning issues of race. Instead of being exposed to the idea that society is racialized and has been built around the assumed superiority of whiteness (Bonilla-Silva, 2013), students at the school were taught to approach society in a “color-blind” manner. This approach to race focused on individual actions and attitudes concerning race rather

than acknowledging systemic or structural inequalities. Christian theology and biblical texts were used to justify the color-blind approach and often worked to help maintain the racial status quo in society.

Chapter Six takes up the second and third research questions by analyzing the ways in which students and parents engaged with the theo-political logic of the school. This chapter shows that students largely embraced the logic presented through the Christian worldview and the everyday practices of the school as a way of making sense of their own civic identities and participation in public life. Further, the chapter shows that even as they embraced this overarching logic, individual students focused on its various pieces as they worked out their own civic identities and ways of engaging in public life. In doing so, the students demonstrated what institutional theorists have called embedded agency (Battliana & D'Aunno, 2009; Thornton et al., 2012) whereby the structure provided by the theo-political logic provided them with a framework within which to exercise their agency as they navigated their civic and public lives.

Furthermore, Chapter Six suggests that while parents tended to choose to send their children to a Conservative Christian school for several reasons, the primary reason was that they were desirous of an education that was framed by the Christian worldview and aligned with their own socially and politically conservative perspectives. Along with this, many parents also chose a Conservative Christian school because they were attempting to avoid perceived problems with public schools and secularism. In this way, parents were being pulled toward the school because of its theo-political logic while also being pushed away from public schools by its secularism and attention to controversial issues related to race and LGBTQ concerns. By choosing to educate their children in a Conservative Christian school, parents signaled significant support for the theo-political logic of the school, particularly as it related to the messages students received

concerning civic and public life. The overlap between the socialization students received at home and the school offered them a clear and coherent understanding of how to participate in civic and public life, one that was shaped primarily by and for a conservative interpretation of Christianity.

Finally, in Chapter Seven, I synthesize and highlight the major arguments of this ethno-case study and consider the implications of this research. I argue that the way the theo-political logic worked at the school was to form theo-political citizens whose participation in civic and public life was driven more by the desire to maintain faithfulness to a conservative form of Christianity than by a commitment to preserve democratic norms in society. This is not to say that theo-political forms of citizenship do not involve democratic norms. Rather, theo-political forms of citizenship seek to use democratic norms in order to implement a religious vision for ordering society and public life. In Chapter Seven, I consider this dissertation's implications for the use of institutional theory to study various aspects of education, for research, policy, practice, and for understanding a pluralistic society. One of the most important implications of this dissertation is that more research is needed about the connection between Conservative Christian schools and support for White Christian nationalism. While the link between these is currently undocumented, the need to understand this connection carries significant weight for both Conservative Christian schools and the future of pluralistic democracy in the U.S. Furthermore, this dissertation demonstrates the continual need to think about the role of education and schooling in shaping citizens who will contribute to preserving and reproducing democratic society.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **Framing the Landscape: The Theoretical Framework & Literature Review**

I begin this chapter by explaining the theoretical frameworks that give shape to this dissertation. This provides a lens or frame from within which to understand this research. After explaining this theoretical perspective, I turn my attention to examining empirical and conceptual literature on Christian schooling and civic education. This literature review helps to make sense of the context to understand how Conservative Christian schools influence the development of students' participation in civic and public life.

#### **Theoretical Framework**

This dissertation is informed by two theoretical frameworks: democratic educational theory and institutional theory. Democratic educational theory was used because the dissertation is dealing specifically with questions concerning citizenship in a pluralistic democracy. This theory offers language and concepts for thinking about citizenship, and it provides a framework for investigating how schools can foster civic identity and participation in a democratic society (Gutmann, 1999; Kessel, 2015; Westheimer, 2019). Institutional theory was also used because this dissertation focused on the organizational level and asked how a Conservative Christian school, as an organization, served as a site that forms citizens. Since this dissertation was concerned with the development of citizens within a particular kind of organization, I needed to make sense theoretically of both the school's approach to citizenship and the organizational context. Democratic educational theory was used to theorize the notions of citizenship, while institutional theory helped make sense of the organizational context.

#### **Democratic Education**

Democratic education is a complex theory that involves not simply conceptualizing schools as sites where students learn, but also seeing them as political sites where students are formed into certain kinds of people (Hess & McAvoy, 2015). To better understand this theoretical framework, it is necessary to first examine the theory behind democratic education and then how this informs the education of citizens for democracy.

### ***Democratic Education Theory***

Issues of citizenship and democracy have been central to discussions about education and schooling since the beginning of public education in America (Kaestle, 1983; Labaree, 2011). While significant disagreement exists concerning the specific role schools play in helping to form citizens, there is considerable agreement “that schools have an essential role to play in preparing students for informed engagements in civic and political life” (Westheimer, 2019, p. 4; see also Barber, 2003; Westheimer, 2015). Democratic education theory aims to better understand the complex relationships among schooling, citizenship, and democratic society (Biesta, 2011; Sant, 2019).

Democratic education is not a monolithic theory but draws from various “historical and philosophical accounts of democracy” (Sant, 2019, p. 656; see also Abowitz & Harnish, 2006). Sant (2019) recently used discourse analysis to examine academic articles published between 2006 and 2017 that dealt with democratic education. She argued that within this body of literature, seven pro-democratic patterns of political discourse were employed by authors to theoretically support and guide democratic education: liberal, deliberative, participatory, multicultural, cosmopolitan, critical, and agnostic (p. 660). Even though Sant identified various ways of talking about democratic education, she also asserted that the most common and “most powerful discourse shaping the meaning of democratic education” was liberalism (p. 663).

Liberalism, sometimes referred to as classical liberalism, is a political theory that is used to support democracy as a form of government and a way to organize society. In what follows, I describe liberalism as a political theory that is used to support and give shape to a democratic society.

As a political theory, liberalism centers on the rights of the individual, freedom, and equality. While liberalism developed in Europe during the early modern period, it has become the dominant political theory supporting democratic societies in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Groski, 2020; Sant, 2019). Liberalism was foundational to the formation of democracy in the United States and continues to be influential in discussions concerning American democracy. This tradition argues that democracies are built on a “tacit social contract between individuals and the state in which representativeness and plurality are key features” (Sant, 2019, p. 663). The state operates on a social contract based on “the consent of the rights-bearing individuals” and is empowered to protect individual rights and freedoms (Gorski, 2020, p. 18). This focus on individual rights and freedom also entails the need to foster political equality among individuals (Abowitz & Harnish, 2006). Even though political liberalism has been the most common way of understanding democracy in the United States, it is not the only way to think about democracy and has been significantly critiqued (Carr, 2008; Fraser-Burgess, 2009; Kessel, 2015). It is important to examine two major critiques that have been leveled against liberalism as a foundation for democracy. The first critique is that in the late 20<sup>th</sup>-century liberalism devolved into neoliberalism (Barber, 2003). The second has to do with liberalism’s inability to account for multiculturalism (Fraser-Burgess, 2009). Examining both critiques brings to the forefront important aspects of liberalism as a political theory and the ways it serves as a support for democratic forms of living, including the idea of democratic education.

The neoliberal critique of liberalism claims that the focus on individual rights and freedom within liberalism has merged with radical individualism and late 20th-century capitalism to give birth to neoliberalism. Neoliberalism leads to what political theorist Benjamin Barber (2003) called a thin version of democracy wherein democracy becomes a social arrangement that seeks little more than to preserve “individualist and private ends” (p. 4). Barber further argued that thin democracy “is concerned more to promote individual liberty than to secure public justice, to advance interests rather than to discover goods, and to keep men safely apart rather than to bring them fruitfully together” (p. 4). Neoliberalism leads to a democracy focused on individualism which erodes social relationships rather than solidifying them. In focusing on individualistic understandings of freedom, neoliberalism leads to a thin democracy that eclipses the importance of thinking about our common associated living with others.

Thin democracy pits individuals against one another as competitors and reduces democracy to simple procedures for securing private goods. Citizens’ participation in democracy becomes little more than electing representatives who will best preserve their individual rights and freedoms. This thin representational form of democracy fails to involve the people in the democratic process in any substantial way and has been critiqued for lacking both deliberation about and participation in a democratic society (Apple 2018; Barber, 2003). The neoliberal critique of liberalism claims that liberalism has essentially run its course due to the influence of radical individualism and late 20th-century capitalism. However, looking more closely at the idea of freedom within liberalism provides an answer to this critique and demonstrates how liberalism can still serve as a foundation for a strong democratic society.

Central to liberalism is a commitment to the freedom of the individual, which Levinson (1999) claimed entails two important features. First, there is the privileging of “the private

component of individuals' lives, attempting to shield individuals from interference by the state, government, and other secondary associations" (p. 107). Alongside this private component, Levinson argued is a second feature, namely the freedom and responsibility to engage in the civic aspect of life. The civic aspect is "concerned with the public character of individual's lives, as well as with individuals' obligations to preserve the institutions of public life" (p. 108). The neoliberal critique sees liberalism as focused only on the private aspect of individuals' lives and assumes liberalism has devolved into a form of living that can only support individuals pursuing their own private ends. A more robust liberalism acknowledges the public role of individuals along with the desire to maintain the protection and freedom of the private sphere. Levinson (1999) argued that individuals have a responsibility to participate in public life, if only for the "maintenance of liberal democratic institutions" (p. 108). Liberalism does not need to devolve into neoliberalism; rightly understood it ought to support participatory forms of democracy. As Levinson further explained, "the civic element of political liberalism finds expression in its insistence that citizens come to identify with the political community" (p. 108). In coming to identify with the political community through participation, individuals are no longer just in competition with one another for private goods but are connected for common political goods that impact all members of society. As Westheimer and Kahne (2004) elaborated, participatory citizenship helps citizens develop "relationships, common understandings, trust, and collective commitments" with others (p. 242). By focusing on the civic aspects of liberalism, it becomes clear that liberalism has the resources to respond to the neoliberal critique of liberalism and help support strong democracies that value participation and deliberation focused on public justice which, in turn, protects individual freedoms, rights, and equality.

The second critique of liberalism, the multicultural critique, challenges liberalism's claim to be neutral concerning comprehensive, or all-encompassing, visions of the good life. This critique argues that liberalism can be coercive and leads to the hegemony of the dominant cultural group, leaving out minority groups or points of view that do not align with liberalism (Fraser-Burgess, 2009). According to Fraser-Burgess (2009), liberalism cannot adequately account for diversity because of its insistence on participants identifying in some way with the common culture of liberalism itself. In order to participate in liberal forms of democracy, individuals and groups are forced to buy into "overarching principles of tolerance, respect, etc." (Fraser-Burgess, 2009, p. 10). As Reich (2002) explained, "from the perspective of multicultural theory, the liberal state privileges certain ways of life over others in the demands it makes on citizens" (p. 38). Therefore, any group or position that does not conform to the standards and values of liberalism is not allowed to participate fully in liberal democracy. Liberalism claims to be a political theory concerned with the ordering of society in a way that allows for multiple groups to coexist and still retain their own comprehensive views of the good life; however, multiculturalists claim that in practice liberalism itself becomes a comprehensive view of the good life and forces all groups to function according to its values (Callan, 1997; Reich, 2002). From this perspective, liberalism thus becomes undemocratic in its inability to allow for strong pluralism and a truly multicultural society.

The multicultural critique of liberalism stems from several sources. Religious groups often complain about the coerciveness of liberalism and its inability to allow for other ways of thinking about the good life or alternative values (Hauerwas, 2007; Macedo, 2000). Other critiques stem from specific racial, gender, or sexual identities and claim that liberalism's assumptions about neutrality work to preserve racist and oppressive structures within society that

benefits the dominant group (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Fraser-Burgess, 2009). The struggle for liberalism lies in the question of how it can recognize various groups within society on their own terms, rather than forcing assimilation.

The work of Nancy Fraser (Fraser & Honneth, 2003) provides a helpful way of thinking through this multicultural critique by calling attention to the need for recognition as a form of public justice. For Fraser, recognition entails “a difference-friendly world, where assimilation to majority of dominant cultural norms is no longer the price of equal respect” (p. 7). This recognition is a form of justice that seeks to preserve differences while also securing equality for individuals and groups in society. To achieve this justice as recognition, Fraser argued for a “parity of participation” (p. 36). She described this as “the condition of being a *peer*, of being on *par* with others, of standing on an equal footing” (p. 101). To achieve recognition as parity of participation Fraser argued that two conditions must be met. First, “the distribution of material resources must be such as to ensure participants’ independence and ‘voice’” (p. 36). And second, it “requires that institutionalized patterns of cultural value express equal respect for all participants and ensure equal opportunity for achieving social esteem” (p. 36). This implies that there is a lack of parity of participation, and thus an injustice, when social structures prevent the equal recognition of all participants. Therefore, those barriers need to be reconceived or replaced in order to reach parity of participation.

Fraser’s parity of participation provides a helpful framework for liberalism to rethink ways it may be oppressive or coercive to diverse perspectives and groups. The idea of parity of participation can also help liberalism be understood as a second-order good or as a political ordering rather than a comprehensive or ultimate good. As a second-order good, liberalism ceases to become the ultimate aim of society and instead becomes a means through which to

navigate our differences. Framing liberalism as a second-order good allows individuals and groups to hold on to their culture and traditions while also providing a framework within which various groups may engage in dialogue about their differences (Reich, 2002). This allows various groups within society to maintain their own comprehensive accounts of goods and values, and still find ways of co-existing democratically through liberalism. The multicultural critique is important for liberalism as it highlights the ways liberalism can include multiple perspectives.

Even in the face of these critiques, liberalism as a theory can serve as a useful foundation for understanding democratic education. These critiques of liberalism as a political theory help expand and clarify some of the ways liberalism can help in pushing for a more democratic and just society. The neoliberal critique suggests that liberal theory needs to resist the tendency to focus simply on individual rights and freedom of choice, and instead develop strong democracy built around participation and deliberation. The multicultural critique forces liberalism to be seen as a second-order good that acknowledges multiple ways of living and helps cultivate parity of participation.

Throughout this dissertation, liberalism is understood as providing a framework for understanding democratic education and citizenship. While liberalism is not beyond critique, those critiques should allow one to see liberalism, like democracy itself, as an ongoing project rather than a settled position. Building on this notion of liberalism it is now possible to turn attention to what it means to provide a democratic education in schools.

### ***Democratic Education in Schools***

Scholars have utilized democratic education to take up various issues facing education and schooling today. Some of these include a focus on the political nature of curriculum (Apple,

2006), pedagogies that enable civic development (Hess & McAvoy, 2015), questions concerning educational policy and control of schooling (Gutmann, 1999), as well as working to correct inequalities in education (Levinson, 2012). In all of these, the core of democratic education is the role schools play in fostering the kind of democratic society we want to live in together (Westheimer, 2019). Along these lines, democratic education focuses on the need for understanding the common good and public justice within schooling. The purpose is to help students learn to engage in deliberation about the common good and public justice, even if citizens ultimately have differing visions for this common good (Feinberg, 2006).

In this dissertation, I focus on three aspects of democratic education that are central to understanding civic education in schools: the cultivation of democratic skills and knowledge, a commitment to democratic pluralism and toleration, and the development of personal autonomy that allows for critical questioning of traditions and society. These three aspects of democratic education are important because they work together to equip students for life in a pluralistic democracy and allow them to pursue an associated living with others who have different conceptions of the good life. The rest of this section is devoted to explaining each of these three aspects of democratic educational theory.

**Democratic Skills & Knowledge.** Fundamental to democratic education is the claim that students ought to be educated for democratic participation, which requires that they are taught democratic skills and knowledge (Campbell, 2008). Democratic skills entail “the capacity to be involved in the political process” while democratic knowledge includes “an understanding of the nation’s political system” (Campbell, 2008, 489-490). If students are unaware of the nation’s political system and lack the skills to navigate that system, they are essentially cut off from any meaningful participation in the system of politics. However, providing students with civic

knowledge and skills enables students to engage in the political realm in real and effective ways (Levinson, 2012).

Teaching democratic skills and knowledge however is not enough to have a democratic education. The danger of reducing democratic education to knowledge and skills is that the practice of democracy becomes procedural—understanding how systems work and voting processes, for example—which fails to cultivate a democratic society or to examine the structures of society that lead to unjust ways of living (Westheimer, 2015). Those who advocate for democratic education want to move beyond simply *informing* students and instead focus on *forming* students into democratic citizens. Teaching that is formative in the development of democratic citizens is much more difficult. It focuses attention on educating students for a common good that seeks to challenge the unjust structures of society and helps it become more democratic and just (Westheimer, 2015).

In writing about democratic education, John Dewey (1916/1944) explained, “a democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living” (p. 87). Westheimer (2019) echoed this idea, suggesting that democracy is more than a system of government, it is about the way people live together in society and the way they choose to structure and organize that society. This means that democratic education moves beyond teaching civics simply as information and skills, and moves toward helping students develop the ability to understand and evaluate alternative ways of living (Gutmann, 1999), to regard others as free and equal citizens (Callan, 1997), and to understand the structures of society (Westheimer, 2015).

A democratic education ought to also help students cultivate the ability to engage with alternative ways of living. In a pluralistic democracy, citizens encounter understandings of the

good life that may differ from what they have been taught at home, their places of worship, or in their local communities. Thus, they need to be educated in a way that helps them cultivate the ability to engage with this difference. Along these lines, Amy Gutmann (1999) argued that “critical deliberation” is key to helping students develop “the capacity to understand and to evaluate competing conceptions of the good life and the good society” (p. 44). More recently, in an interview updating her thoughts on democratic education, Gutmann reaffirmed the need for a democratic education based on deliberation and built on mutual respect for others (Sardoc, 2018). She argued that in recent years democratic education has become even more important “given the seismic civic and political shifts we are witnessing even in some of the most stable democratic nations around the world” (p. 247). Democratic education conceptualizes critical deliberation as more than just a skill, such as critical listening and reading and evaluating sources, and more than just knowledge, such as understanding various positions and histories. Rather, critical deliberation entails cultivating the dispositions of toleration, mutual respect, trust, and care for others (Levinson, 1999).

Beyond cultivating the dispositions needed for citizenship, democratic education also helps students develop the ability to regard others as free and equal citizens (Callan, 1997). This means education ought to work to form public or political dispositions in students that help them see others as free and equal, even when they may disagree substantially about ways of living and what the common good might be. Seeing others as free and equal is not simply to tolerate them, but to have what Gutmann explained as “mutual respect for different ways of life and different points of view” (Sardoc, 2018, p. 248; see also Gutmann, 1995). Without the disposition to see and treat others in this way, the ability to live in association with one another is difficult to maintain.

Along with the ability to examine alternative ways of living and to see others as free and equal, democratic education also means that students understand the structures of society and evaluate them in light of the principles of democracy, particularly structures that keep some from participating or experiencing the freedom and justice that democracy promises (Levinson, 2012). Democratic education strives to teach students “to examine social, political, and economic structures and explore strategies for change that address root causes of problems” (Westheimer, 2015, p 40). As students come to understand structures in society and the ways they function to restrict freedom and justice, they can then work to change these structures rather than allow them to continue. Educating students as citizens requires helping them understand how to change society so that it fully embraces the promises of democracy and justice (Kessel, 2015; Westheimer, 2019).

**Democratic Pluralism and Toleration.** Pluralism is a feature of modern life and an education that seeks to prepare students as citizens must engage with this pluralism. While philosophers and political theorists may debate various kinds of pluralisms, this concept refers to the reality that within society people have different visions of the good life and disagree about what constitutes the goods worth pursuing in society (Kaemingk, 2018; Wenneborg, 2001). Pluralism does not simply offer a description of society but presents a public and political question. How do we live together with differing values and conceptions of the good life? Providing a democratic education for students entails engaging them with the pluralism of society and the problems it brings.

Pluralism in society requires citizens to develop the ability to discern what positions can be morally permitted within a society that aims at preserving the freedom and justice for all its citizens. Educational theorist Eamonn Callan (1997) argued that society ought to aim at

maintaining a form of reasonable pluralism, which helps to set “the range of values and perspectives that [can] properly enter into political deliberation in a just society” (p. 21). Reasonable pluralism recognizes that a pure pluralism, which allows all perspectives to flourish, has no way to exclude perspectives that may be ethically oppressive toward others. Callan asserted that reasonable pluralism focuses on including diverse viewpoints in political dialogue, while at the same time helping to cultivate a just society. Callan argued that questions of what can be included in political discussions are about both “filtering out various moral toxins that threaten to contaminate public reason . . . [and] honoring the differences that we ought to honor” (p. 22). In discerning issues of inclusion, reasonable pluralism is framed as an ongoing and continuous public conversation that requires discernment and dialogue.

An education that is democratic must engage students in a way that cultivates the ability to discern and dialogue concerning what reasonable pluralism ought to allow. For students to learn this kind of discernment and develop the ability to dialogue about various positions, they must first encounter a plurality of perspectives. It is in the encounter with other perspectives and ways of ordering the world, that students learn how to think through their own lives and the lives of others. Levinson (1999) argued that a pluralistic environment allows students to be presented with values and opinions that differ from one another, and also to understand that these are often held by other reasonable individuals. The goal of encountering various perspectives is not to minimize students’ own perspectives or traditions, but to enlarge them and allow students to understand that reasonable people can and do disagree about important values in life.

In the course of encountering various perspectives, there will inevitably be disagreement about these ways of ordering life. Pluralism generates conflict because, as Callan (1997) pointed out, “we believe the truth, not just personal preference, to be at stake” (p. 207). It is for this

disagreement that a democratic education ought to prepare students. This is done not just by encountering pluralism, but also through understanding the importance of tolerance in a pluralistic society. Toleration has been defined by Bretherton (2019) as “the willingness to accept differences (whether religious, moral, or cultural) which one might, as an individual or community, find objectionable or which conflict with one’s own beliefs and practices” (p. 260). Bretherton further explained that toleration, which is necessary to preserve the diversity that pluralism brings, is not simply an agreement to disagree. Instead, toleration entails the refusal to use political coercion “to prohibit conduct believed to be wrong” (p. 260). This frames toleration as a political virtue necessary for a pluralistic democracy. The virtue of toleration does not take away disagreement; rather, it focuses on dialogue, not coercion, as the way to engage with these disagreements.

The goal of democratic education is to help form citizens that can act to preserve and further democratic modes of living. In order to do this within a pluralistic society, education has to engage students with differences that are real and meaningful. Encountering these differences helps students understand their own perspectives as well as the reasonableness of other perspectives. Furthermore, teaching differences requires the cultivation of the virtue of tolerance to prepare students as citizens in a pluralistic society.

**Autonomy and Critical Questioning.** Along with the cultivation of democratic knowledge and skills as well as the ability to dialogue and exercise tolerance within a pluralistic society, a democratic education also helps citizens develop autonomy. Autonomy is important for citizens, as it supports the freedom to think critically about questions concerning how they should live. Autonomy entails respecting one’s own personhood and that of others, and it allows citizens to make meaningful choices about the direction of their lives.

As a starting point to understanding autonomy, one can look at its origin in the Greek language and define it as self-rule. Reich (2002) has argued that this starting point often leads to a Kantian or Romantic notion of autonomy as a kind of self-creation or self-authorship, which, in turn, fosters individualism and self-reliance. This can be understood as an individualistic view of autonomy, or as Reich called it “autonomy as self-creation” (p. 98). In autonomy, as self-creation, the individual alone must create their life, and therefore they are cut off from meaningful attachments to community and traditions, and the goods that come with these, all in the name of a life completely authored by the free, unencumbered self. Reich counters this view of autonomy as self-creation with what he called a minimalist view of autonomy. He defines minimal autonomy as:

A person’s ability to reflect independently and critically upon basic commitments, values, desires, and beliefs, be they chosen or unchosen, and to enjoy a range of meaningful life options from which to choose, upon which to act, and around which to orient and pursue one’s life projects. (p. 92)

This definition does not require individuals to be self-creators in order to be considered autonomous; rather, Reich emphasized autonomy as a kind of self-determination where one is “in charge of their own lives, able to make significant choices from a range of meaningful options about how their lives will unfold” (p. 100). A minimalist view of autonomy also recognizes that much of what forms individuals is the communities and traditions in which they are born and find belonging. Central to being an autonomous person is the ability to make one’s own choices rather than being subject to the choices of others. This entails not breaking from community or tradition, but the ability to be “capable of reflecting upon, reassessing, and

potentially changing such ties and obligations” (Reich, 2002, p. 98). A democratic education helps cultivate this kind of autonomy.

An education that is democratic helps to cultivate minimal autonomy by fostering in students what Callan (1997) referred to as “practical reason,” which allows individuals to evaluate the values of others along with the values they hold for themselves (p. 148). Callan argued that education ought to liberate students “from cultural domination, whether it be in the family or in some larger cultural unit” (p. 149). It is this notion of autonomy as freeing students from family or cultural background that worries some, specifically multiculturalists, as discussed above (Fraser-Burgess, 2009; Reich, 2002). However, minimal autonomy does not mean pulling students away from their communities, families, or traditions. Instead, it means helping students develop the ability to critique and understand those communities and traditions more fully and to choose for themselves to remain within those communities and traditions. As Reich (2002) explained,

What matters for minimalist autonomy is that the decision to lead a life of any sort—liberal or traditionalist, agonistic or devoted, cosmopolitan or parochial—be reached without compulsion from others and always be potentially subject to review, or critical scrutiny. (p. 102)

A democratic education that aims at minimal autonomy seeks to develop in students the practical reasoning to critically examine their own lives and the lives of others to chart a path forward for themselves.

This dissertation is shaped by an understanding of democratic education which is based on political liberalism. This understanding of democratic education includes three aspects that are central to the formation of citizens: the cultivation of democratic skills and knowledge, a

commitment to pluralism and toleration, and the development of personal autonomy that allows for critical questioning of traditions and society. The theory of democratic education explained here informs the way citizenship and civic education are understood throughout this dissertation.

### **Institutional Theory**

The second theoretical framework I employ in this dissertation is new institutionalism. Developed from older forms of institutional theory, new institutionalism helps makes sense of the way “people actively construct meaning within institutionalized settings through language and other symbolic representations” (H.-D. Meyer & Rowan, 2006, p. 6). This section briefly examines the historical development of new institutionalism and then explains the role that logics, practices, and symbolic representations have in forming taken-for-granted social worlds that help organizations and individuals make sense of and navigate their lives. Before discussing the historical development of new institutionalism, it is important to understand how the terms *institution* and *organization* are used. Throughout this dissertation, the term *institution* is used to refer to the broadest level of human conduct and activity. Along these lines, Friedland and Alford (1991) argued that institutions ought to be conceived as “supraorganizational patterns of activity through which humans conduct their material life in time and space, and symbolic systems through which they categorize that activity and infuse it with meaning” (p. 242). Institutions give credibility and meaning to particular ways of acting within social worlds. Furthermore, institutions can span multiple organizations and coexist with other, sometimes competing, institutions within the same organization. Friedland and Alford (1991) further suggest that in the modern capitalist West, multiple central institutions help to shape individual interests and behavior – capitalist markets, the bureaucratic state, democracy, the nuclear family, and the Christian religion (p. 232).

In contrast to *institutions* as supraorganizational patterns of activity, I use the term *organization* to refer to particular entities wherein individuals are organized for a specific task or activity. As Scott (1992) explained, organizations are collectives that function within set social structures in order to fulfill a goal. Institutions influence and give shape to particular organizations. Along these lines, if Christianity functions as an institution in Western society as Friedland and Alford (1991) claim, this institution gives shape to organizations such as specific churches or Christian schools. The church or school functions as an organization gathering individuals together within a given social structure and for specific purposes. With this distinction between institution and organization in mind, it is possible to turn attention to the historical development of new institutionalism.

### ***Historical Development of Institutional and New Institutional Theory***

This discussion of the historical development of new institutional theory highlights some of the major ideas developed within institutional thinking that are relevant to this dissertation. While new institutional theory largely developed in the 1970s as a part of organizational theory, it grew out of fundamental questions and concerns raised in European sociology during its foundational period in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Scott, 2014). Questions concerning the relationship between individuals and larger social structures have animated the field of sociology since its beginnings. Faced with changing dynamics in the nation-state and the industrialization of society, early sociologists were concerned with understanding how the state, economic markets, and religion framed rationality and behavior for individuals. Some of the ideas of French sociologist Emile Durkheim help to illustrate early ways of thinking about the influence of institutions on society.

As Europe was changing at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Durkheim was trying to understand the complex relationship between society and the individuals living within it; specifically, he was concerned with how society influenced and shaped individuals (Lukes, 1985). In his early work, *The Rules of Sociological Method*, Durkheim argued that there were social beliefs that guided individual action, which he referred to as the “conscience collective” (Durkheim, 1972, p. 70; see also Lukes, 1985). For Durkheim, the conscience collective had “a reality outside the individuals who, at any moment of time, conform to it” (Durkheim, 1972, p. 71). That is to say, the actions of an individual within society were shaped and constrained by the conscience collective which existed outside of individuals themselves. Therefore, human action was not simply reducible to personal choices or psychological states but was instead shaped by society at large through the conscience collective.

While Durkheim later abandoned the language of the conscience collective, the idea remained in his notion of “social facts” (Lukes, 1985). Like the conscience collective, social facts were said to exist outside of individuals and to constrain their behavior. These social facts functioned as rules or moral norms that were internalized by members of society and directed their behavior. The idea of conscience collective, or social facts, demonstrates Durkheim’s central concern for “the ways in which social and cultural factors influence, indeed largely constitute, individuals” (Lukes, 1985, p. 13). Durkheim’s idea of social norms that existed outside of individuals that directed human action set the direction for sociology after him and laid a foundation upon which institutional theories developed the notion of institutions.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, American sociologists Berger and Luckmann (1967) moved beyond Durkheim to argue that society produced not just rules or norms for behavior but shared knowledge systems as well. They agreed with Durkheim and others that social forces, now

commonly referred to as institutions, “control human conduct by setting up predefined patterns of conduct, which channel it in one direction as against the many other directions that would theoretically be possible” (p. 55). But Berger and Luckmann also went further to argue that it was not just action or behavior that was guided by institutions, it was also patterns of knowledge. That is, knowledge is socially constructed through symbolic systems such as language. As Berger and Luckmann explain:

Language objectivates the shared experiences and makes them available to all within the linguistic community, thus becoming both the basis and the instrument of the collective stock of knowledge. Furthermore, language provides the means for objectifying new experiences, allowing their incorporation into the already existing stock of knowledge. (p. 68)

Thus, Berger and Luckmann argued that institutions did not simply create norms and rules that provided patterns of action, they also shaped cognitive understanding. Institutional thinking within sociology expanded to help explain how institutions gave shape to both the action and knowledge of individuals within a society.

In 1977 John W. Meyer and Brian Rowan helped to bring institutional theory to bear on organizational theory with their essay exploring the formal structures of organizations. Meyer and Rowan examined the way institutions did not simply influence individuals but also shaped how organizations were structured and operated. They argued that the formal structures of organizations “reflect[ed] the myths of their institutional environments,” rather than arising from the complexities of the work of organizations (p. 341). Meyer and Rowan described these myths as having two main features. First, “they are rationalized and impersonal prescriptions” that provide social purposes and rules for pursuing these purposes (p. 343). Second, these myths are

institutionalized and therefore exist outside of the individual or specific organization (p. 343).

When organizations conformed to these myths Meyer and Rowan suggested they were seen as legitimate within society. From this perspective, institutional theory was not only a way of thinking about how the actions and knowledge of individuals were shaped by institutions but also how organizations were shaped by and thus reproduced the myths of these institutions.

Building on the influential work of Meyer & Rowan (1977), Powell and DiMaggio (1991) gathered together several previously published essays and new reflections on institutional theory, along with a new introduction that called for institutional theory to move outside of organizational theory to engage with larger social theory. They refer to the changes inaugurated by Meyer & Rowan (1977), and furthered in their collection of essays, as “new institutionalism.” A significant difference in this new form of institutionalism was a “turn toward cognitive and cultural explanations” of individual action and behavior (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991, p. 8). This shift indicated a move away from explaining individual behavior through strict rules and rational processes and instead saw “an alternative theory of individual action, which stress[ed] the unreflective, routine, taken-for-granted nature of most human behavior and view[ed] interests and actors as themselves constituted by institutions” (Powell and DiMaggio, 1991, p. 14). This is similar to Swidler’s (1986) notion of culture as “a ‘tool kit’ of symbols, stories, rituals, and world-views, which people may use in varying configurations to solve different kinds of problems” (p. 273). Institutions help provide resources that both enable and constrain ways of acting and thinking.

As a way to pull together this historical overview, I return to Friedland and Alford’s (1991) definition of institutions. As mentioned above, they defined institutions as “supraorganizational patterns of activity through which humans conduct their material life in

time and space, and symbolic systems through which they categorize that activity and infuse it with meaning” (p. 232). This definition highlights two important aspects of institutions. First, institutions are supraorganizational, existing above and outside of organizations which are in turn shaped by those institutions. Second, institutions influence both the material activities and symbolic systems individuals and groups use to organize and provide meaning to social life. Another way to understand this definition is to see institutions as reflecting particular logic that helps make sense of the social world. As H.-D. Meyer and Rowan (2006) explained, “Institutions are thus repositories of taken-for-granted cognitive schemata that shape people’s understandings of the world they live in and provide scripts to guide their action” (p. 6). These logics are expressed through both practices, or conduct in our material life, and through symbolic representations, or symbolic systems used to categorize and give meaning to our activities. The following section examines institutional logics further.

### ***Institutional Logics***

Institutions are understood as normative systems that organize and rationalize life for individuals and groups. Friedland and Alford (1991) claimed that institutions have a central logic, or “a set of material practices and symbolic constructions—which constitutes its organizing principles” (248). Different institutions are animated by their own logic and thus lead to different norms for acting and making sense of the world. Friedland and Alford’s (1991) maintained that the core institutions of Western societies—capitalism, the family, the bureaucratic state, democracy, and Christianity—reflect different logics.

Thornton et al. (2012) built on the work of Friedland and Alford to explain institutional logic as:

Frames of reference that condition actors' choices for sensemaking, the vocabulary they use to motivate action, and their sense of self and identity. The principles, practices, and symbols of each institutional order differently shape how reasoning takes place and how rationality is perceived and experienced. (p. 2)

Institutional logics provides people with “frames of reference” to understand and make sense of the world and their lives. Thornton et al. go on to suggest that the way individuals and groups make sense of the world and their actions within it are “embedded within prevailing institutional logics” (p. 7). This means that institutional logics provides people with ways of thinking that help them act in and make sense of the social world. It is important to note that Thornton et al. assert that institutional logics do not simply *constrain* action and thought, but also *enables* action and opens up possibilities for acting and understanding the world (see also Thornton & Ocasio, 2008).

Institutional logics consists of both material and symbolic elements (Thornton & Ocasio, 2008; Thornton et al., 2012). The material elements include both structures and practices of everyday life, while the symbolic elements refer to the ideational aspects, often articulated through language and knowledge (Thornton & Ocasio, 2008; Thornton et al., 2012). While the material and symbolic elements are intertwined in such a way that they reinforce one another, analytically they can be discussed separately to better understand how institutional logics are manifested in the lives of individuals and groups. To analyze institutional logics, it is necessary to examine both the material and the symbolic elements of organizations and individuals. Throughout this dissertation, I use the term *practice* to refer to the material element of institutional logics and *symbolic representations* to refer to their symbolic element, which I elaborate upon below.

**Practices.** Institutional logics are understood to include “a set of material practices” (Friedland & Alford, 1991, p. 248), or embodied ways of negotiating the world that “become tangibly manifested in concrete settings” (Thornton et al., 2012, p. 132). While the term practice is intentionally broad, it does not encompass any or all actions, rather it is used to refer to meaningful actions. Thornton et al. (2012) defined practices as “forms or constellations of socially meaningful activity that are relatively coherent and established” (p. 128). Similarly, sociologist Schatzki (2001) has defined practices as “embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity centrally organized around shared practical understanding” (p. 11). Central to these definitions of practices is the notion that practices are embodied activities which both provide meaning for groups and individuals and are organized around common beliefs.

Two important aspects informed this dissertation. The first is the notion that practices embody institutional logics within organizations. Practices are informed by specific institutional logics, but also serve to reinforce those logics (Thornton et al., 2012). Along these lines, Friedland and Alford (1991) used the example of voting to articulate the connection between logics and practices. The practice of voting is a way many embody democracy; however, this very activity is given shape by the logic and theories of democracy. This example demonstrates the way practices embody and manifest particular logics.

A second important aspect of practices is that they are constrained by organizational structures. The organization environment helps to provide routines for activities (Thornton et al., 2012). The way an organization is structured shapes the possible actions available for those within the organization. This can be seen in schools where the material structure of the classroom constrains and gives shape to the practice of teaching that takes place in that classroom. Over

time, these practices become routinized and habitual, and thereby come to be understood as normal activities within an organization (Scott, 2014).

Practices are shaped by the institutional logics that guide an organization as well as the material structures of organizations. Paying attention to the practices within a community can be a helpful way of understanding the institutional logics that are shaping that community. In this dissertation, I use practices as a way to help understand the specific logics that influence and guide a Conservative Christian school.

**Symbolic Representations.** Not only are institutional logics made up of material practices, but they also consist of symbolic systems that function as carriers of institutional logics. As carriers of institutional logics, symbolic systems help to define and construct social worlds (Scott, 2014). According to institutional theory, ideas and beliefs do not simply exist, rather they are mediated through symbolic systems. Thornton et al. (2012) suggested that symbolic systems carry the logics of institutions and are represented through theories, frames, and narratives. This dissertation refers to these three as symbolic representations. By examining these three expressions of symbolic representations, it is possible to understand the logics they carry.

Theories offer “general guiding principles and explanations for why and how institutional structures and practices should operate” (Thornton et al., 2012, p. 152). This symbolic representation of logics tends to be highly reflective and coherent. They provide abstract categories and models to help guide organizations (Scott, 2014). Theories provide individuals and groups with a cognitive model to appeal to in order to justify and give meaning to their actions and ways of organizing.

A second form of symbolic representation is found in frames, or ways of organizing and interpreting events and information. Frames shape the way information is understood. Entman (1993) provided the following explanation concerning the importance of frames in thinking:

To frame is to *select some aspect of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation* for the item described. (p. 52)

Frames use language to shape how information is used, imply certain causes for situations or problems, make judgments, and suggest solutions to those very problems expressed (Entman, 1993, p. 52). Using insights from social movements, Thornton et al. (2012) claimed that frames “generate cultural resonance, critical for group identification and mobilization” (p. 154). Frames are an important representation of symbolic systems which help groups and individuals organize and perceive information.

In line with Thornton et al. (2012), this dissertation treats narratives as “a story or account that organizes events and human actions into a whole, thereby attributing significance to individual actions and events” (p. 155). Narratives are interpretations that provide ways for individuals and organizations to make sense of the world around them and their own place within that world. As a way of making sense of the world, Thornton et al. claimed narratives served to legitimize specific practices, interpret events, and help create identities. Narratives, as symbolic representations of institutional logics, highlight the way meaning is communicated and shared discursively throughout organizations.

Symbolic representations appear as theories, frames, and narratives. Because these are representations of symbolic systems, they also serve as expressions of institutional logics.

Inspecting the specific theories that guide thinking, frames that shape how information is perceived, and narratives that offer interpretations of people's lives can help make sense of the logics that animate a Conservative Christian school and help the individuals within this organization make sense of citizenship and civic identity.

Institutional logics, composed of the symbolic representations and practices of an organization, help to communicate the cognitive schema that orders the world of individuals within an organization. The practices embody and bring to life particular logics, while the symbolic representations communicate the logics through a symbolic system. In this way, both practices and symbolic representations help to form the way things are done, or what is taken-for-granted within a particular organization. It is through institutional logics, expressed through practices and symbolic representations, that groups and individuals make sense of and find meaning in their social world.

### **Theoretical Frameworks and the Dissertation**

This dissertation is focused on analyzing the way a Conservative Christian school helps shape citizens. To accomplish this, the study relies on two different theoretical frameworks: democratic educational theory and new institutional theory. Democratic educational theory provides a framework for conceptualizing and theorizing the role schools can play in helping to form citizens. It also provides the language and vocabulary for discussing issues around citizenship. But the dissertation is not concerned simply with citizenship in schooling generally, it is specifically concerned with understanding how the organization of Conservative Christian schooling shapes understandings of citizenship. Therefore, it needs a theoretical framework to make sense of how organizations function. Institutional theory, and more specifically, institutional logics provide this framing. By examining the practices and symbolic

representations within a Conservative Christian school, the larger institutional logics can be understood and articulated. This helps to uncover the logics that animate Conservative Christian schooling and how these may influence the shaping of citizens. Both democratic theory and institutional theory helped to support and guide this dissertation.

### **Literature Review**

The dissertation is informed by two large bodies of research to provide the context for the study: research on Christian schooling and research examining citizenship education. Together, these help to provide a context within which to understand and examine how Conservative Christian schools influence or shape the development of students' civic identity and participation. This literature explains the educational environment that Conservative Christian schools provide for students, highlights the varied ways to understand civic identity, and emphasizes the influence of curriculum and pedagogy in shaping civic identity and participation.

#### **Christian Schooling**

A major body of literature that informs this dissertation is research on Christian schools. This research is almost as diverse as educational research in general, covering such topics as school management (Martin, 2018), federal or state policy issues about Christian schools such as vouchers (Kang, 2006) and legal cases (Riley, 2006), curriculum concerns (Schweber, 2006a), and general school ethos (Peshkin, 1986; Guhin, 2020). In examining the literature on Christian schooling, I focus on three specific areas that are most relevant to this dissertation. First, I examine three ethnographies of Christian schooling that serve as models for the current study and help to provide an understanding of the ethos of Christian schools. Second, I examine literature that attempts to understand what is known about civic development in Christian schooling. Finally, I inspect research literature explaining how curriculum and pedagogy within

Christian schools relate to issues of civic development. Together, these three areas of the literature suggest ways to understand the ethos of Christian schools and how these schools shape students' ideas about citizenship.

### ***Ethnographies of Christian Schooling.***

There are three ethnographic studies on Conservative Christian schools that attempt to understand Christian schools from the inside and thus serve as models for this dissertation both methodologically and conceptually. Even though each has its own unique focus, taken together, they provide a way to understand the ethos of Christian schooling.

**God's Choice.** Alan Peshkin's *God's Choice: The Total World of a Fundamentalist Christian School* (1986) is not only one of the first major studies of Christian schooling but also serves as a classic text in the field. Although it has been 30 years since its publication, it continues to prompt new questions and research (Flatt, 2019; Stitzlein, 2008). Using field observations, interviews, document analysis, and survey work, Peshkin spent the 1979-1980 school year trying to understand the nature of Bethany Baptist Academy, a school run by an Independent Baptist church in Illinois and affiliated with the Conservative Christian association, the American Association of Christian Schools. Peshkin specifically focused on the way the dictates of doctrine served to organize the structure and ethos of Bethany.

While much at Bethany resembles any other school in America—classroom organization, student work on walls, standard class periods and schedules—Peshkin (1986) argued that the defining feature of Bethany was the underlying belief that the school aligned with and furthered the work of God. Peshkin suggested that those involved with Bethany, both as staff and families, “believe that their school is God’s school and that they are doing God’s work, fulfilling his plan for themselves and their work” (p. 39). This central abiding belief means that “God’s truth is the

beginning and end of instruction” (p. 39). Herein lies the epistemic commitment that Peshkin highlighted: an unwavering commitment to God’s truth as the center of all instruction. Peshkin explained this epistemic commitment:

Fundamentalists claim unequivocally to know the Truth. They organize their institutions – family, church, and school – to be fully congruent with it, confidently ignoring alternative notions, based, for example, on new evidence or on changing times. . . . To question such Truth, except within the framework of faith, is to question God himself. (pp. 260-261)

According to Peshkin, holding this interpretation of truth as absolute and “from God” served as the foundation for Bethany Baptist Academy. The commitment to this understanding of truth permeated every aspect of school life and organization.

Peshkin argued that this intense focus on truth led to an ethos that was characterized by structures of authority and control. At Bethany, the “structure of control encompasses the behavior of parents, students, teachers and other employees” (p. 92). This structure influenced every aspect of school life: topics of study in classrooms, textbooks that were used, materials made available in the library, dynamics of student leadership, and social relations (p. 93). At Bethany, these structures were not simply in place for the school but extended to the whole life of students. The head of the school described the rules and codes of conduct at Bethany as an “‘umbrella policy’ of twenty-four hour concern for his students’ behavior” (p. 93).

This authoritative structure was not simply about the rules; rather, it extended to the curriculum as well. Peshkin found that exploration of alternative perspectives was nearly nonexistent in the classroom. As Peshkin asserted,

BBA [Bethany Baptist Academy] rejects the notion that students benefit by dealing with alternative perspectives of ideology, interpretation, and policy. Choice, doubt, suspended judgment, evidence – these are excluded from its pedagogical arsenal. On principle, they are strangers to the Christian classroom, alien presences where Truth reigns. (p. 141)

Bethany aimed to conform itself and its students to the truth of God, a truth that can be clearly known and understood. Thus, Peshkin argued there is no need to engage in discussion about alternative perspectives or ideas because the school is not focused on forming informed citizens who think critically through various options in a pluralistic society, but on citizens who were formed by and for God.

Peshkin drew on the work of Erving Goffman (1961) to describe Bethany as a totalizing institution. Goffman defined a totalizing institution as “a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life” (p. x). For Goffman, these institutions can range from care facilities for the sick to religious establishments, such as abbeys and monasteries that were “designed as retreats from the world even while often serving also as training stations for the religious” (p. 5). As a totalizing institution, Peshkin argued that Bethany sought to exercise control over the lives of students, families, and staff as it attempted to conform individuals to God’s truth. Peshkin explained it was the doctrinal basis of Bethany which animated its aspiration for totality to extend “to most all behavior and thought, everywhere, at all times” (p. 265).

Peshkin concluded *God’s Choice* with an assessment of Bethany from his own perspective, stepping out of the role of giving voice to the participants and instead analyzing what he saw. Peshkin pointed to a central problem with Bethany as a school, namely its lack of

preparing students for a diverse and pluralistic society. Since doctrinal truths animated all of life and were justified by divine authority, there was no need to question or inquire after truth.

Peshkin described Bethany as a school “closed to intellectual diversity and inquiry” (p. 287).

Peshkin worried about the implications this would have for a democratic society.

Students neither learn the habit of compromise nor grasp its necessity in a diverse complex society. Furthermore, I do not see students learning that dissent and compromise are critical attributes of healthy democracies, rather than unwelcome guests in the house of orthodoxy. (p. 296)

While concerned for the social implications of Bethany Baptist Academy, Peshkin concluded that this school, and others like it, present a challenge for a pluralistic society, but this challenge does not mean these schools should be precluded from “serving as appropriate educational means to a particular community’s ends” (p. 298). Rather, Peshkin saw a place for institutions like Bethany within the landscape of American pluralism. Wanting to preserve a pluralistic society that had institutions which specific missions and perspectives, Peshkin argued that schools like Bethany should be allowed and tolerated in society.

**Keeping Them Out of the Hands of Satan.** In her work, *Keeping Them Out of the Hands of Satan: Evangelical Schooling in America*, Susan D. Rose (1988) conducted an ethnographic study of two different schools in upstate New York that belonged to the broad evangelical Christian tradition. Her goal was to analyze these schools as sites that can reveal “the meaning systems, organizational structures, and daily lives of evangelicals” (p. xix). She constructed her description of these two schools as a story “about the search for coherence, the struggle for control, and the building of community” (p. 3). By studying two schools together, Rose demonstrated that, while there is diversity among various Christian schools, there is also

significant overlap in how these Christian social groups seek out coherence, control, and community.

The first school in Rose's study was Lakehaven Academy, a Conservative Christian school connected with an Independent Baptist church that used Accelerated Christian Education (ACE) curriculum. The Academy was a small K-12 school providing education to about 45 families, the majority of which either attended the sponsoring church or one of the two other Baptist churches in the community. The second school was the Covenant school, which provided K-8 education and was also started and run by a local church. However, the sponsoring church was an independent charismatic fellowship and all the students from the church attended the school along with a small handful of students coming from the wider community.

Rose argued that central to understanding both schools was the ways individuals used religion as a way of finding meaning and coherence in the world. In both communities, she found a significant overlap between family life, church life, and school life, which she referred to as "the trinity of family-church-school" (p. 1). She found that both the Academy and the Covenant school reflected the structure, attitude, and teaching of their sponsoring churches. The overlap among these three spheres created an atmosphere where the influences of schooling on students reinforced the social worlds communicated through home and church. Rose argued,

By reuniting the three major socializing institutions of family, church, and school, evangelicals hope to achieve a greater coherence in their own lives, bring their children up in the faith, and bring morality back to the United States. (p. 26)

The union of these socializing institutions was seen in the ways that parents, teachers, and students at both schools were "embedded in a network of relationships that are couched in a theology of evangelical Christian belief and behavior" (p. 167). Similar to Peshkin's use of the

concept of “totalizing institution,” Rose found that all of life was embedded within the context of religious faith in order to provide coherence and meaning.

Beyond the coherence of meaning brought about by the overlap of these schools with church and home, Rose also established that these schools exercised various degrees of control over the lives of students. Even though these two schools differed in the level of control they utilized, Rose argued that both sought control through regulations of behavior and curriculum. At the Academy, behavior was controlled through adherence to rules. Rose asserted that while teachers and leaders enforced rules with a sense of gentleness, “external conformity to rules t[ook] precedence” as a means of maintaining order (p. 106). The Covenant school demonstrated a less formalized and more open structure; with students having the “opportunity to explore – both their surroundings and their limits” (p. 87). However, this freedom to explore was still controlled by behavior norms, enforced in a relational context that sought to develop “character and spiritual growth” (p. 92).

Rose’s study showed that the most obvious way to exercise control at these schools was through the curriculum. The Academy used the ACE curriculum, often referred to as PACEs, which contains individualized self-contained packets. Students were expected to work through each PACE on their own without the help of teachers or interacting with other students. Rose stated,

ACE is a model for *individualized* instruction, but it does not encourage *independent* learning. Curricular choices are made from fixed alternatives; supplementary materials are limited and censored. The curriculum allows little room for individuals to raise questions or to explore answers to the questions asked. Students are to read the unit

(PACE), fill out the accompanying worksheet, and take the test. All of the answers can be found within the PACE – they need look no further. (p. 139)

Rose maintained that the Covenant school provided more freedom in its curriculum by using secular textbooks and encouraging students to ask questions; however, the goal of this freedom was to inculcate Christian values into students. Rose found that when dealing with secular texts, teachers continually integrated Christian principles to correct and challenge the ideas presented. In doing so, they sought to train students to discern everything from “God’s perspective.” Whether behavior and curriculum were strictly formalized or contained a degree of freedom, Rose argued that both schools sought to control the influences and socialization of students to help develop within them a Christian perspective on life and knowledge.

Along with seeking coherence and exercising control, Rose found these schools also contributed to the development of the community. As mentioned above, these schools were joined with the church and home to create a way of protecting members from secular society and reproducing faith in students. Rose claimed the community was “meant to protect their lifestyles and ideologies – and their children. It serves as a sanctuary where sacred values are preserved” (p. 150). A part of this community formation was the cultivation of a particular understanding of Christianity and American culture.

Both schools mixed Christianity with conservative social values to present what they believed was a true view of what American culture should be. According to Rose, for members of the Academy, patriotism was “an integral part of Christianity” (p. 99). The ACE curriculum extolled conservative social values, such as the free market, as Christian values. The ACE social studies curriculum blamed increasing inequalities and the secularization of society on progressivism and atheism, which attack “basic biblical and philosophical truths” (cited in Rose,

p 127). Even the Covenant school, which was slightly less separatist, hoped to reform society by transforming it with Christian values (p. 75). The goal of educating students in the Christian faith was also tied up with the restoration of America. The formation of both of these educational communities was not simply to preserve religious ideals for the next generation, but also to pass on to children a particular understanding of America, one that mixed Christian theology with conservative political values.

Rose argued that both the Academy and Covenant were schools formed as people sought coherence, control, and community amid their changing worlds. The consequence of this was the creation of schools that endeavored to reproduce particular religious and political ideologies. Rose concluded, “when the church, family, and school join together to create a mutually reinforcing socializing network, values and beliefs may be more efficiently transmitted to their children than in those public socializing institutions which are ambiguous or contradictory about their goals” (p. 204). Even though she did not use Peshkin’s language of totalizing institutions, Rose’s work echoed Peshkin’s claim and demonstrated the ways school function as a means of ideological reproduction and formation.

**Faith, Diversity, and Education.** In a more recent ethnography, Allison Blosser (2019) examined the role of race and diversity at a Conservative Christian school in the southeastern United States. In *Faith, Diversity, and Education: An Ethnography of a Conservative Christian School*, Blosser looked at Grace Academy, a 1000-student K-12 school that belonged to the Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI). Through participant observations, interviews with staff, parents, and students, and document materials, Blosser tried to explain how those in “a conservative Christian school make sense of diversity” (p. 140). Her year-long study took place during the 2013-2014 school year. During this time, a new Head of School desired to

bring about more diversity, and an ACSI committee encouraged the school to become more diverse in order to obtain accreditation. Blosser found that while the school was committed to issues of diversity, it defined diversity in a way school leaders believed built upon their commitment to biblical Christianity. Their definition of diversity was based on a “color-blind” approach that deemphasized race and ethnicity, which was in keeping with their understanding of the Christian faith.

As with other Conservative Christian schools, Grace was committed to taking a “truly ‘biblical approach’” to all issues, including diversity (p. 31). According to Blosser, this meant a desire to seek out diversity “in terms of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and ability, but not in terms of religion or sexual orientation” (p. 32). This notion of diversity, which excluded religion and sexual orientation, is consistent with what others have found regarding diversity in Conservative Christian schools (Joldersma, 2016; Smith, 2021). Blosser explained that the desire for diversity was most often framed as a “belief in colorblindness” by faculty and staff (p. 33). This colorblindness meant giving no preference to and making no observance of issues of race or ethnicity. Blosser explained this led to Grace Academy ignoring Martin Luther King Jr. Day and Black History Month, as well as refraining from seeking representations of racial or ethnic diversity in reading or curricular material.

According to Blosser, the commitment to diversity through colorblindness had the effect of normalizing white, middle-class behavior and maintaining Grace as “a white institutional space” (p. 64). Using the work of Bracey and Moore (2017), who investigated racial boundaries in white evangelical churches, Blosser argued that Grace thought its colorblindness led to an environment of race neutrality. However, this masked a culture of white normativity which helped to maintain the organization’s identity. Blosser showed that this culture was clearly

reflected in the process of student recruitment and admissions. Due to their commitment to colorblindness, the admissions staff used the notion of “fit” to guide decisions concerning potential students. As Blosser pointed out, Grace's “administrators were interested in admitting black students from two-parent homes, from families who desired a Christian education, and ‘good kids’ who would assimilate to [Grace’s] culture rather than try to change it” (p. 47). However, Blosser found that these same demands were not applied when admitting white students. Students from racial and ethnic minorities were welcomed into the community of Grace as long as they did not disrupt the cultural norms of the school, which meant elevating Christian identity over racial and ethnic identities.

Interestingly, the notion of “fit” was not only applied to students at Grace, but also to the faculty. Blosser described the firing of Mrs. Griffin, the first black academic teacher at Grace. Racial and political missteps eventually led to the firing of Mrs. Griffin. Blosser recounts many faculty and staff talking about the impact of Mrs. Griffin showing up to a teacher in-service training session wearing a shirt promoting President Obama. In doing this, she “violated [Grace’s] conservative political norms” (p. 55). Furthermore, parents complained that Mrs. Griffin had an agenda in her classroom; she “wanted students to recognize the contributions of minority writers and think critically about white people’s historic oppression of African Americans” (p. 58). This behavior challenged the color-blind norms that Grace cultivated in the name of Christian unity and eventually led to Mrs. Griffin being fired.

By examining diversity at a Conservative Christian school, Blosser demonstrated the way conservative political norms were combined with theological claims to form an understanding of what it meant to deal with diversity biblically. Defining diversity within a biblical framework became a way of explaining away racial and ethnic issues as well as a way to signal who

belonged and who did not. By excluding LGBTQ students as a form of diversity, Blosser claimed the message was communicated that “being gay and/or supporting people who are gay is incompatible with living a Christlike life” (p. 114). Furthermore, she claimed Grace’s quest for the “right kind” of diversity was linked with a commitment to forming a pure community. Grace Academy held that “Christian communities should be pure, and the wrong kinds of difference will pervert those communities” (p. 114). Diversity was defined and implemented in a manner that supported boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. According to Blosser, they also helped to further a “white, politically conservative, colorblind perspective” (p. 58).

Even though these three ethnographies focused on different aspects of Christian schools, together they provide a rich understanding of the overarching ethos generated at these schools. Taking these studies together, it is possible to see Conservative Christian schools as totalizing institutions that intend to reproduce a conservative political and religious ideology in students. These studies suggest that this ideology is framed as a biblical perspective on life, but often includes conservative politics and ways of viewing America as intertwined with Christianity. Following the methodological approaches of these previous ethnographies, this dissertation seeks to understand the way Conservative Christian schools help individuals make sense of the world, and more particularly, prepare them as citizens. Furthermore, previous studies provide a basis for understanding Conservative Christian schools as political and religious sites, where two ideologies are woven together and presented to students through curriculum and more generally, through the life of the school. Below, I review research that examines civic development in Christian schooling.

### *Developing Citizens in Christian Schools*

In addition to the major ethnographies about Christian schooling examined above, there has also been research that focuses specifically on civic education within Christian schools and the role of curriculum and pedagogy. I review this literature below. It has long been held that schools are a significant place of political socialization and civic development for children (CIRCLE, 2003; Labaree, 1997). However, when it comes to Christian schools, research on civic development has been scarce. As Lin (2021) recently explained in a literature review of civic education in Christian schools, “Little is known about the extent that civic education operates within the realm of Christian education” (p. 43). This section examines several studies that help illustrate what is currently known about civic education and development in Christian schools.

Researchers working to understand civic education and development often claim that Christian schools help not only to develop students’ civic knowledge and skills but also produce students who engage in civic activity at higher rates (Lin 2021; Sikkink, 2018). Several quantitative studies have been used to support this claim. In an oft-cited study by Godwin et al. (2004), survey data was used to compare the civic socialization of students at public and fundamentalist schools in a metropolitan area of the southwest United States. Ten fundamentalist schools were described as teaching “biblical inerrancy, creationism rather than evolution, salvation by faith alone, the sinfulness of homosexual behavior, and that women should submit graciously to their husband” (p. 1100). Using difference-of-means tests and multivariate regression on survey results from 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> graders, Godwin et al. found that by 12<sup>th</sup> grade, students at fundamentalist schools surpassed students at public schools in their support for “democratic norms, political tolerance, and moral reasoning/autonomy” (p. 1109). However, these same students at fundamentalist schools scored lower than public school students on issues supporting “greater social equality and the acceptance of all lifestyles based on rationality” (p.

1109). Based on these results, Godwin et al. (2004) claimed, contrary to their many critics, that fundamentalist Christian schools help students develop civic identities that are in keeping with democratic norms. They concluded, “Fundamentalist schools appear to be as successful as public schools in teaching the values necessary to assume the burdens of citizenship in a democratic society” (p. 1109). However, this quantitative study may not warrant the conclusions the authors have drawn. The data presented here explains neither the ways in which political tolerance is applied nor the context in which it is applied by students from fundamentalist schools. While students from fundamentalist schools may score high in their support for political toleration and moral reasoning/autonomy, the data does not delve into their willingness to extend political tolerance to include perspectives and voices they disagree with in political conversations. The fact that surveys showed that students from fundamentalist schools were less likely to support issues of social equality and alternative lifestyles than their public school peers may indicate an unwillingness to extend tolerance to all groups. However, the quantitative data used did not allow exploration of the nuances of how these students engage in civic life.

Two other quantitative studies, which used data gathered through the 1996 National Household Education Survey (NHES), provided an understanding of civic development at Christian schools. Using this data, Sikkink (2009) constructed a portrait of what he called “conservative Protestant” schools. To compose this portrait, he used the NHES data about “non-Catholic religious schools” as a “fairly accurate measure of the conservative Protestant school sector” (p. 290). Campbell (2001) used the same data set to try to understand democratic education in non-public schools as part of a larger conversation on school choice.

Both of these studies offer insights into civic development at Christian schools. In his portrayal of conservative Protestant schools, Sikkink (2009) argued that these schools tended to

be more authoritarian in structure and discipline than their public school counterparts. However, students at conservative Protestant schools were more likely to agree that “students and teachers respected one another in their schools” than their public school peers (p. 294). Furthermore, these schools “had the highest percentage of students strongly agreeing that students’ opinions were listened to” (p. 294). Thus, Sikkink concluded, that while authority was exercised through the structure and discipline of these schools, they were also able to create an environment where students had a sense of ownership and respect, which helped produce an environment of participation and “which provide[d] an important civic education in itself” (p. 294). Political knowledge is often thought to be an important aspect of civic education because, without an understanding of politics and civic life, it becomes difficult to participate in this aspect of life (Berner & Hunter, 2014). Both Sikkink (2009) and Campbell (2001) noted that according to the NHES data, conservative Protestant schools scored lower than all other kinds of schools in political knowledge. This lack of political knowledge may be linked to claims that Christian schools tend to place less of an emphasis on the civic dimensions of schooling and instead focus on the moral and religious aspects of development (Sikkink, 2001; Rose, 1993).

In order to understand civic development in Christian schooling, it is not enough to just look at civic knowledge, but also civic participation. Participation in the wider community through service or community projects is often considered an important factor in students’ civic development (Levine, 2011). Both Sikkink (2009) and Campbell (2001) claimed that the NHES data showed that levels of community service were higher at Protestant Christian schools than at public and secular private schools. Campbell (2001) explained that the higher rates of community service among students at these schools remained even when community service was voluntary and when other factors, such as students who have parents engaging in community

service, were accounted for. This increased community service has also been shown to have a lasting effect on students from these schools. In fact, Sikkink & Schwarz (2017) used data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) to demonstrate that graduates from Evangelical Protestant schools “[we]re about 40 percent more likely than public school alumni/ae to volunteer through at least one organization” (p. 9). Although less definitive in their conclusions, Hill and den Dulk (2013) found similar results when using data from multiple waves of the National Study of Youth and Religion taken from 2002 through 2008 to examine the impact of types of schooling on long-term volunteering. However, as Sikkink and Schwarz (2017) pointed out, volunteer service is likely to be mediated through religious congregations or organizations. Thus, it is unclear from the research whether students from Christian schools (and the adults they become) engage in service that is directed at helping the diverse communities they live in or if their service is confined to their religious communities.

Political toleration, along with developing mutual respect for those who hold different ideals, is also seen as an important factor in educating students for civic life (Gutmann, 1999). Along these lines, Campbell (2001) included an analysis of political toleration in his analysis of the NHES data. While controlling for parental variables, Campbell claimed that when asked questions related to political toleration, students at non-Catholic religious schools scored significantly lower than their peers at public, Catholic, and private secular schools. Specifically, students at non-Catholic religious schools were the least likely to allow controversial books or reading material to be placed in public libraries and were the least likely to allow antireligious speech (pp. 257-258). This supports the findings of Godwin et al. (2004), mentioned above, concerning the lack of student support for alternative lifestyles.

While they framed their findings differently, many of the themes noted above also showed up in Hess and McAvoy's (2015) discussion of their large-scale study of 21 high schools, including 1001 students and 35 teachers, in the Midwest conducted from 2005 to 2009. The goal was to understand the student experience and learning in "social studies courses that emphasize the discussion of controversial international and/or domestic issues" (p. 217). Two of the schools represented were described as evangelical Christians. Hess and McAvoy found that these schools represented what they termed "like-minded" schools. To be declared a like-minded school, the following three conditions had to be met: 80% of the students claimed they would have voted for the same presidential candidate if they were able to vote in the 2004 election; the political orientation scores on surveys "showed the class's views leaned heavily to the political right or left" (p. 136); and in interviews, students described the schools as a place where everyone believed the same things ideologically. Of the 21 schools studied, 3 were deemed like-minded. This included the two evangelical Christian schools which were politically to the right and one public school located in a left-leaning town. Hess and McAvoy (2015) found that there were both significant democratic benefits for students growing up in a like-minded school setting, as well as areas of concern. Like-minded schools tended to have students who were more "ideologically coherent" in their political views and more likely to participate in democratic processes, like voting (p. 147). They claimed, "being raised in a like-minded political community is clearly an asset if the goal is to foster awareness of current events and participation in the electoral process" (p. 148). However, like-mindedness also comes with concerns about issues of tolerance. Hess and McAvoy argued that these students rarely encountered others who held truly different ideological beliefs and who could challenge them. These schools fostered an ethos of

sameness and therefore in order for difference to be part of the curriculum, teachers had to intentionally propose differences and challenge students with other views and perspectives.

Taken together, these studies provide an important picture of the civic education and development of students who attend Christian schools. The research suggests that these schools provided an atmosphere of structure and authority, but also one in which students felt able to contribute and share (Sikkink, 2009). These schools also fostered students who engage in volunteer service and electoral politics at higher rates than other schools (Campbell, 2001; Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Sikkink, 2009; Sikkink & Schwarz, 2017). When it comes to political knowledge and understanding, it is impossible to draw clear conclusions from the literature. Some studies found that students lacked political knowledge (Godwin et al., 2004), while others found students to be quite knowledgeable (Hess & McAvoy, 2015). There may be several other factors that shape the level of political knowledge these schools foster. An important, consistent finding in these earlier studies is concern over issues of political tolerance. Central to a democratic society is learning political toleration and compromise (Allen, 2004). Students at Christian schools continually demonstrate low levels of tolerance for those who are different or outside of their community (Campbell, 2001; Sikkink 2009).

The next section examines curriculum and pedagogy at Christian schools. Despite the diversity among Christian schools, there emerges a consistent picture that the curriculum and pedagogy used to help reinforce a specific conservative religious view of life. This conservative religious view of life is supported by curricula material and teaching methods that aim to bind thinking and intellectual pursuit around the authority of God and the Bible.

### ***Curriculum & Pedagogy in Christian Schools***

There is widespread agreement that curriculum and pedagogy matter when it comes to developing students into citizens (Levinson, 2012). Curricular material, including specific lessons and textbooks, provides not only the content for learning, but also conveys implicit, and explicit, values and political ideologies (Apple, 2006). In Christian schools, the messages communicated to students through the curriculum and pedagogy are steeped in religious and political ideology. The goal is often to replicate in students a conservative understanding of the world and of politics that is justified through Scripture and empowered by the authority of God.

Curriculum materials, specifically textbooks, have long been critiqued by researchers (Wellman, 2021). Many Conservative Christian schools used textbooks published by Abeka Books, Bob Jones University (BJU) Press, and Accelerated Christian Education (ACE) curriculum (Cox et al., 2007; Wellman, 2021). All three have connections with the fundamentalist school, Bob Jones University (Laats, 2010). A central belief of many Christian schools is that textbooks and other curriculum material ought to reinforce a biblical perspective and provide an emphasis on “Christian character qualities, and biblical concepts” (Cox et al., 2007). However, as Wellman (2021) has demonstrated, Christian textbooks also present significant obstacles to forming students into democratic citizens.

In an examination of Christian textbooks, Wellman (2021) focused on the historical narratives portrayed through Abeka Books, BJU Press, and the ACE curriculum. She worked from the assumption that history is important because it carries with it “civic implications for the separation of church and state, civil rights, and religious toleration – all essential foundations of pluralistic democracy” (p. 15). Wellman argued that ultimately Abeka Books, BJU Press, and ACE textbooks presented “bad history” (p. 298), in that these textbooks were out of step with the consensus among professional historians and selectively used material to justify their own

political and social ideology. This is specifically noticeable in the way these texts present America.

The curriculum materials offered by Abeka Books, BJU Press, and ACE present America as a Christian nation. Wellman claimed they used history to demonstrate “God’s hand in the providential unfolding of American history, affirming its exceptionalism and making it a model for the rest of human history” (p. 167). She quoted Abeka’s US history text, which asserted that “because of the faith of the early citizens of the United States and because of their biblical foundation of its government and laws, God blessed the United States; and it became the strongest and most prosperous nation on earth” (pp. 169-170). According to Wellman, these curricular materials present the American revolution as a religious movement, one that based political liberty firmly on religious liberty (p. 173). Furthermore, another Abeka United States history text claimed that a democratic republic was possible only “where a majority of citizens are steeped in the virtues of biblical Christianity” (cited in Wellman, 2021, p. 183). Wellman found that the clear message presented in these texts was that America is a Christian nation, and the values of Christianity are necessary to maintain freedom and democracy within it.

Paterson (2000) has also examined Abeka Books, BJU Press, and ACE curriculum to understand how these texts “treat the constitutional jurisprudence of the Supreme Court” (p. 408). Using high school United States history texts, current events texts, and civics or American government texts, Paterson organized the judicial cases mentioned in these curricula into five categories: historical cases, First Amendment cases, abortion cases, public school desegregation cases, and miscellaneous cases. Paterson concluded that most textbooks presented cases as a mix of “factual and editorial material” and “many cases appear to be selected to support a conservative religious-political viewpoint rather than teach about the law” (p. 428). Paterson also

found that the language used, arguments omitted, and editorial comments all served to help “reinforce the conservative ideology presented” (p. 429).

The ACE curriculum, presented in booklets called PACEs, has been critiqued multiple times for its distortion of history and concerns with the presentation of race (Alberta Department of Education, 1985; Dent, 1993). Recently Scaramanga and Reiss (2018) performed a content analysis of the ACE curriculum, focusing on literature, social studies, and science. Looking at both the text and images used in the curriculum, they found, “ACE denies the value of worldviews and cultures other than its own, and through its rugged individualism, denies the reality of structural racism” (p. 346). Scaramanga and Reiss provided several examples to support this claim, including their finding that between 80% and 90% percent of the images and cartoons used in various PACE booklets across all three subjects portrayed white individuals (pp. 340-341). Additionally, the social studies curriculum devoted 889 words in total to Dr. Martin Luther King, school integration, and the Civil Rights Acts. However, the same curriculum devoted 733 words solely to the Supreme Court’s decision to remove school-sponsored prayer from public schools (p. 342). The authors claimed, “PACEs make little or no distinction between Christian values and the values of the white, middle-class, Southern American milieu from which they originated” (p. 341).

Studies focusing on textbooks and curriculum material from Christian publishers often concluded that these materials were slanted to reinforce a particular view of the world, one that is socially conservative, Christian, and holds America as a Christian nation (Paterson, 2020; Scaramanga & Reiss, 2018; Wellman, 2021). The ACE curriculum is particularly noteworthy on this point because it is a self-paced curriculum that students work through on their own with no teacher or classmates to challenge the narrative presented (Rose, 1988, Scaramanga & Reiss,

2018). Textbooks and curricular materials from other publishers are often mediated through a teacher, and thus it is important to understand curriculum and pedagogy beyond just textbooks.

The pedagogy in Christian schools, just as in public schools, varies significantly; however, much of the research suggests that critical thinking and investigation limited by the authority of God appeared to be consistent features of Christian schooling (Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Schweber, 2006a; 2006c). In the same study described in the section above, Hess and McAvoy (2015) found that teachers at Christian schools often aimed to teach what they called bounded autonomy or “autonomy within certain limits” (p. 133). For example, Mr. Walters, who taught government at one Christian school they studied, wanted students to be able to think through controversial topics, such as nationality and assimilation, but to consider these issues “*as Christians*” (p. 141). Hess and McAvoy found that students were encouraged to think critically and independently, but also to do this “within the boundaries of a ‘Christian worldview’” (p. 142).

The work of Schweber and colleagues (2006a; 2006c; Schweber & Irwin, 2003) found a similar trend in the teaching of history at a fundamentalist Christian school in a midwestern city in the United States. Schweber focused on an 8th-grade social studies class learning about the Holocaust. During Schweber’s research, the unit was interrupted by the events of September 11, 2001. This allowed her to observe not only how history was taught, but also how contemporary issues were handled. Based on her research, Schweber (2006c) claimed that the narrative concerning all of history, including current events, was based on two principles: “(1) that all events are under God’s control, and (2) that because God is good, all events occur for a greater good the human mind may not be able to fathom initially” (p. 399). In this way, Schweber suggested that history was conveyed as coming under the authority of religious faith, therefore

“instruction in history and instruction in religion” were one and the same (p. 408). Under this guiding narrative of God’s control over history, Schweber (2006a) found that the teaching of the Holocaust was co-opted as a means to “build a strong Christian identity” (p. 26) rather than to focus on the attempted extermination of the Jewish people. The curriculum in this particular class used Corrie ten Boom’s *The Hiding Place* as a textbook to help students understand the Holocaust. Throughout the unit, the teacher highlighted the ways that Christians served as rescuers of the Jewish people during the Holocaust, rather than as supporters of the Nazi party. This narrative neglected the complex historical reality that “many Nazis remained avowed Christians” (p. 24). Schweber (2006a, 2006c) concluded that the teaching of history as controlled by God became a way to reinforce Christian identity.

As indicated throughout this review, the research on Christian schools generally suggests that curriculum and pedagogy are aligned to help achieve the mission of developing the Christian faith in students. Through textbooks, curriculum material, and pedagogical methods, students are instructed into a way of seeing the world that places Christianity and the Bible as the ultimate authority over every subject. However, this research also demonstrates that these schools are not only focused on cultivating religious identities, but on cultivating political identities as well. The literature suggests that what is presented, in the name of Christianity, is a conservative social politic that focuses on America as a Christian nation.

Building upon the research presented here concerning curriculum and pedagogy, this dissertation works from the assumption that political ideology is intertwined with theological beliefs at Conservative Christian schools. From this perspective, the dissertation seeks to better understand the nature of political-religious ideology at a particular Conservative Christian school and how this impacts the development of students’ civic identity.

## **Civics Development and Education**

In addition to the literature on Christian schools, a second body of literature dealing specifically with civic development and education is also very relevant to this dissertation. Often scholars refer to research on political socialization as the examination of “how politics and other political societies and systems inculcate appropriate norms and practices in citizens, residents, or members” (Sapiro, 2004, p. 2). While the literature examined here fits within this larger category of political socialization, this section focuses more narrowly on the civic development of students within the context of schools. This section examines the literature on civic development and education by looking at two specific questions: (1) What kinds of citizens and civic development are focused on in schools? (2) How do curriculum and pedagogy impact civic development?

### ***What Kind of Citizenship***

Definitions of citizenship are not uncontested. In fact, a significant amount of research on civic development attempts to understand what counts as civic identity or engagement (Abowitz and Harnish; 2006; Berner & Hunter; 2014). Although citizenship is often tied to legal categories of national origin or belonging (Heater, 1999), citizenship is not simply a legal category. It also includes notions of cultural membership, identity, common knowledge, and values within a community (Abowitz & Harnish, 2006; Gonzales, 2016; Heater, 1999). Downplaying legal definitions of citizenship, Levinson (2005) offered a helpful way to understand citizenship that highlights cultural membership: “Citizenship is about the rules and meanings of political and cultural membership, and the associated modes of participation implied by such membership” (p. 336). Working from this understanding of citizenship, this section explores civic education by asking what kind of citizens we expect schools to help produce.

Abowitz and Harnish (2006) offered a helpful framework for sorting out various approaches to understanding issues of citizenship and civic education. By looking at the discourse in scholarly and curricular material, including several state civics standards, they identified four broad theoretical categories used to teach citizenship: civic republicanism, liberal citizenship, critical citizenship, and transnationalism. Abowitz and Harnish argued that civic republicanism tends to focus on teaching civics in a way that prioritizes political knowledge and patriotic loyalty to the state. Furthermore, this outlook tends to highlight an individual's responsibility to and identity within the community. They describe liberal citizenship as prioritizing the rights of individuals to pursue their own goods; thus, autonomy and reasoning are highly valued. In terms of civics, liberal civic approaches value deliberation, discussion, and consensus building. Abowitz and Harnish use critical citizenship as a category that includes those discourses that "raise issues of membership, identity, and engagement in creative, productive ways" (p. 666). Often, this approach is an attempt to challenge the ways in which citizenship education can be nationalistic and assimilationist. Critical approaches also highlight the need for civics education to focus on the transformation of society. The final approach to citizenship and civic education is what Abowitz and Harnish called transnationalism. This approach focuses on local, national, and international aspects of citizenship, and recognizes that "membership is more fluid and transcends national or regional borders" (p. 675). Abowitz and Harnish's framework helps to sort out the assumptions underlying various discourses about how citizenship and civic education support the social order. However, it does not necessarily provide an answer to what kinds of citizens schools ought to be developing.

Another way of explaining the goals of civic education and describing what kinds of citizens ought to be developed was presented in the report, *The Civic Mission of Schools*

(CIRCLE, 2003), which was composed by both scholars and practitioners. This report claimed that the “overall goal of civic education should be to help young people acquire and learn to use the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that will prepare them to be competent and responsible citizens” (p. 10). To accomplish this overarching goal, *The Civic Mission of Schools* laid out four dimensions of being a good citizen that should be cultivated through civics education. These dimensions include forming citizens that are informed and thoughtful, participate in their communities, act politically, and have moral and civic virtues. These four dimensions highlight the need for knowledge of the civic dimensions of life, the skills necessary to engage with social problems in a political manner, and the dispositions necessary to take responsibility for and with fellow citizens.

The four-fold explanation of civic education expounded in *The Civic Mission of Schools* (CIRCLE, 2003) has become well established in the literature (Campbell, 2008; Berner & Hunter, 2014). Along these lines, Berner and Hunter (2014) claimed that significant consensus had formed among scholars examining “the school effects in citizenship behavior” (p. 196). Similar to *The Civic Mission of Schools*, the four elements Berner and Hunter presented were: “participation in public-spirited collective action (community service); the capacity to be involved in the political process (civic skills); an understanding of the nation’s political system (political knowledge); [and] respect for the civil liberties of others (political tolerance)” (pp. 196-197). Like *The Civic Mission of Schools* report, these four aspects focus on the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for civic engagement and life. While this approach to understanding citizenship can help provide a taxonomy of civic education, it only provides a general description of what society wants from its citizens. It focuses heavily on skills and knowledge but does not offer a description of *how* citizens should use those skills and knowledge.

The works on citizenship and civics education by Westheimer (2015; 2019; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004) offer a helpful way to understand the question concerning the kinds of citizens schools ought to help produce for society. For Westheimer (2019), questions about what kind of citizens we want and what civics education should look like become “a proxy for the kind of society we seek to create” (p. 6). Therefore, civics education is not simply about creating good citizens, but it is concerned with creating democratic citizens who will “support an effective democratic society” (Westheimer, 2015, p. 38). Westheimer and Kahne (2004) studied various civic education programs and discovered that most programs took one of three approaches to citizenship: personally responsible citizenship; participatory citizenship; or social justice-oriented citizenship. These different approaches to citizenship are driven by different goals and entail different kinds of curricula for schools. Westheimer (2015) expounded upon this in *What Kinds of Citizens?: Educating our Children for the Common Good*.

According to Westheimer, personally responsible citizenship entails an emphasis on “either good character – including the importance of volunteering and helping those in need – or technical knowledge of legislatures and how government works” (p. 44). This tends to produce citizens who demonstrate civility toward one another, have a working knowledge of government and politics, and serve the wider community. However, this does not produce citizens who question the roots of social problems, nor does it necessarily create citizens who are democratically engaged in collective action. The second kind of citizenship, participatory citizenship, focuses on teaching students about citizenship by engaging them in projects within the communities in which they live. This often involves service-learning projects in which they learn to address problems in the community and work with others to support community development. This form of civics education still teaches civic and political knowledge but does

so through student engagement and practice. This practical approach to citizenship education helps students develop a working knowledge of politics and encourages them to work toward building communities. The third approach to citizenship is social justice-oriented citizenship, which is “oriented around improving society through structural changes” (p. 57). This approach to teaching citizenship prioritizes increasing students’ understanding of the perspectives of their fellow citizens along with the ability to assess and address the root causes of problems in society and communities. Social justice-oriented citizenship education helps students understand the structures of society and equips them with the skills to make systematic change. The goal of this perspective is not just to create citizens with political knowledge and skills, but to create democratic citizens who can help to maintain and cultivate a more just democratic order.

Each of these approaches to citizenship education involves schools adopting different goals and methods. Westheimer and Kahne (2004) provided a helpful example that captures the different goals among these three forms of citizenship: the personally responsible citizen “contributes food to a food drive,” the participatory citizen “helps to organize the food drive,” and the social justice-oriented citizen “explores why people are hungry and acts to solve root causes” (p. 240). Westheimer and Kahne concluded that these three different conceptions of civics education are ultimately based on different “beliefs regarding the capacities and commitments that citizens need for democracy to flourish” (p. 263).

The research explained above highlights the way various conceptions of citizenship impact civic education and development in schools. The conception of citizenship used in this dissertation is informed by this research in three important ways. First, my study’s conception of citizenship is shaped by the idea that in order to become engaged, democratic citizens, students need knowledge of the political system and society. Second, the study assumes that citizenship

involves more than the possession of knowledge; students also need the skills to act in democracy. This includes not just the skills to participate in political activities such as voting, but the skills needed to be active in committees and help bring about democratic change in society. Third, the conception of citizenship that animates this dissertation relies on the idea that civics education ought to cultivate dispositions that help students understand both their rights and responsibilities for working toward a more just democracy.

### ***Curriculum & Pedagogy***

As mentioned above, curriculum and pedagogy matter when it comes to developing students for citizenship (Campbell, 2019; Levinson, 2012). Here I examine the literature that gets at several aspects of curriculum and pedagogy, which have been shown to have an impact on civic development: classroom discussion and participatory learning.

More than a century ago, John Dewey (1916/1944) claimed that “democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience” (p. 87). This suggests that communication, and therefore discussion, is central to learning how to be citizens and live with others in society. In their study of civic learning in schools, which is examined above in the section on “Curriculum and Pedagogy in Christian Schools,” Hess and McAvoy (2015) used both quantitative and qualitative methods of research to conclude that lecture-based classes tended to focus on student learning on individual civic concerns, such as voting or their own achievement. Yet students in discussion-based courses not only became “more interested in politics, but also came to view politics as a social activity – one shared with friends, family, and co-workers” (p. 58). Along with this, students also “learned that disagreement is a normal part of political life” (p. 58). However, the research suggests that discussion per se is not necessarily a civic activity. Discussion as a pedagogical tool has several

weaknesses. It may simply involve students talking and sharing opinions (Hess, 2009), it can be poorly executed and structured by teachers (Flynn, 2009), or it can lack an intentional purpose tied to civic learning (Parker, 2008). It is helpful to look at two examples of how intentional and controversial discussions can help facilitate civic development.

Parker (2006; 2008) has defended the importance of discussion as a pedagogical tool that can intentionally help students grow as citizens. He claimed that discussion can be both a way to learn important material and develop the democratic skills of conversing with others. To demonstrate this, he made a distinction between discussions framed as seminars and those designed as deliberation (Parker, 2006). Parker argued that seminars serve the purpose of helping students “plumb the world deeply” through engaging with one another over a common text or ideas (p. 12). Seminars focus on examining a specific text where students engage in questioning, interpretation, and discussion to collectively bring out the meaning. With seminar discussions, the goal is to facilitate deep learning and understanding. In contrast, deliberative discussions helped “participants speak and listen [in order] to *decide*” on a course of action (p. 12). Through deliberation, students take on specific problems. These problems may deal with the micro level, dealing specifically with students’ lives, or they may be more macro level issues found in society. The goal of deliberation is to help students dialogue with one another concerning possible solutions and ultimately work toward a decision on a course of action. This process requires students to listen, reason together, persuade one another, and understand specifics about the particular problems being addressed. Parker argued these two pedagogical devices—seminars and deliberative discussions— can help produce “*enlightened political engagement*” (p. 13) wherein students are educated not simply to know information about civics, but to also make decisions as citizens in society.

Hess (2009) has also highlighted the importance of discussion as both a way to learn about civics and a tool to help engage students in civics. In her study of teaching controversies in the classroom, Hess claimed discussion “cultivates skills and habits and a deeper understanding of public issues” (p. 29). She explained that schools should be places where students can engage with others around controversial political issues because learning in this manner develops “a core component of a functioning democratic community, while building the understanding, skills, and dispositions that young people need to live in and to improve such a community” (p. 5). By “controversial issues,” Hess means “questions of public policy that spark significant disagreement” (p. 37). These are not just historic scenarios or hypothetical questions, but real open-ended topics that are of contemporary importance to society. While having discussions about controversial issues in the classroom can be difficult, Hess argued that it helps students develop both civic understanding and the skills necessary to participate in a democratic society.

Classroom discussions can be a powerful pedagogical tool designed to help develop students’ civic identity; however, many scholars have argued that civic learning also needs to be action oriented and help students learn to engage with their community and society at large (Levine, 2011; Levinson, 2012; Kahne & Sporte, 2008; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Often, learning civics through action and engagement is referred to as service learning, which Campbell (2019) has defined as learning

which combines elements of both classroom learning and extracurricular activity. Similar to other forms of extracurricular activity, service learning largely takes place outside of the classroom, but it is not actually ‘extra,’ as it consists of service work done under the auspices of a class. (p. 40)

Therefore, even though the learning and activity may take place outside of the classroom or school day, service learning is still seen as an intentional part of the civics curriculum. This form of civics learning helps students learn how to *be* citizens, not just how to think *about* citizenship.

In her research about civic education, Levinson (2012) argued that civic learning should move beyond simple service learning, which tends to be short-term and focused on individual volunteerism, failing to challenge social structures or make lasting change. Instead, she argued for action civics, which encourages students to “*do civics and behave as citizens* by engaging in a cycle of research, action, and reflection about problems they care about personally while learning about deeper principles of effective civic and especially political action” (p. 224). Based on her own experience teaching the Civics in Action program in her middle school class, Levinson found that through the curriculum students learned how to discover public problems facing their communities. Through research and planning, students were able to partner with local leaders to form sports leagues for city youth as a violence prevention measure. Levinson claimed that action civic projects helped students leverage their knowledge while developing new knowledge of the community and politics, and at the same time learn how to participate in civic political action. Along with other researchers (Levine, 2011; Schmidt et al., 2007; Zaff, et al., 2010), Levinson (2012) has argued that various forms of service and active learning are important for civic development.

Parker (2008) suggests that schools serve as “civic spaces” (p. 69) where students encounter a public world that is often different than the private ones shaped by their family and faith community. In these spaces, students learn what it means to live as citizens and as members of society. The research on civics development in education shows that there may not be consensus concerning the kind of citizenship schools should focus on, but there is consistent

evidence to demonstrate that curriculum and pedagogies intentionally built around discussion and engagement with the community can help foster civic identity. However, when it comes to understanding Conservative Christian schools as sites of civic development, it is less clear what kinds of citizens these schools help to form. Instead of becoming “civic spaces” (Parker, 2008) that help students encounter a world filled with difference, some schools present a world that reinforces the perspectives of families and faith communities. Furthermore, research suggests that some Conservative Christian schools tend to use curriculum and pedagogy aimed at the cultivation of religious knowledge and commitment rather than democratic or civic commitments. This dissertation examines a particular Conservative Christian school to better understand the kinds of citizens produced in these spaces.

## **CHAPTER THREE:**

### **Research Methodology and Methods: An Ethno-Case Study**

The research design of this dissertation study is what I refer to as an ethno-case study, following the work of Parker-Jenkins (2018). The following sections explain the overall research design of this dissertation including the methodology and methods, the research site, my own positionality within the research, data collection, and data analysis.

#### **Methodology: Ethno-Case Study**

This dissertation is an ethnographic case study, or what Parker-Jenkins (2018) referred to as an “ethno-case study” (p. 24), suggesting this new term because it helped her make sense of her own methodological approaches, which drew on both ethnographic and case study methods. While researchers before her have highlighted the connections between ethnography and case studies (Creswell, 2013, Merriam, 1998; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Stake, 1994), Parker-Jenkins argued that this new “hybrid term can help set boundaries and expectations, acknowledge that the study is located within a richer, wider context and be realistic as to the nature of the resulting claims” (p. 29). In order to better understand this methodological approach, the following subsections examine ethnography and case study separately, followed by a concluding subsection that explores their combination as ethno-case study and how this methodology guides this dissertation.

#### **Ethnography**

Originating in anthropology, ethnography has been taken up by almost every field of social science, including educational researchers who use ethnographic approaches for the purpose of understanding the culture of schools and students (Erickson, 1984). Scholars have

offered multiple ways to define ethnography. Emerson et al. (2011) claimed that ethnographic research “involves the study of groups and people as they go about their everyday lives” (p. 1). Heath and Street (2008) defined ethnography as “a theory-building enterprise constructed through detailed systematic observing, recording, and analyzing of human behavior in specifiable spaces and interactions” (p. 29). Hammersley (2006) provided a more detailed definition of ethnography:

Research that emphasizes the importance of studying *first hand* what people do and say in particular contexts. This usually involves fairly lengthy contact, through participant observation in relevant settings, and/or through relatively open-ended interviews, designed to understand people’s perspectives, perhaps complemented by the study of various sorts of document—official, publicly available, or personal. (p. 4)

While differing in several ways, these definitions are united in explaining ethnography as an attempt to understand specific groups of people and their cultures through firsthand experience with their everyday lives.

In focusing on people and their cultures, ethnographic work emphasizes what Geertz (1973) famously referred to as a “thick description” of society. In order to provide thick descriptions, ethnographic methods seek to provide an emic perspective, that is, the perspective of “the insider to the culture” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Erickson (1984) emphasized this focus on local insider meanings as a central aspect of ethnographic research. He wrote, “ethnography portrays events, at least in part, from the points of view of the actors involved in the events” (p. 52). While presenting an emic understanding of culture is important and is what ethnographic research strives for, many have recognized that this insider’s perspective is always mediated through the ethnographers themselves (Heath & Steele, 2008). Highlighting the role of the

ethnographer as involved with mediating others' perspectives also conveys an important aspect of ethnographic methodology – the role of the ethnographer as an instrument of the research.

While ethnography aims to present the perspective of the participants and actors within their own cultures, this is always mixed with the ethnographer's own perspective. As Agar (1996) explained, ethnographic descriptions are always a blend of both insider and outsider points of view. "A statement would almost always contain some assumptions about perception or intent on the part of group members, but it would also be constructed by the ethnographer in terms of his [sic] own professional context and goals" (Agar, 1996, p. 239). This highlights the role of the ethnographer as an interpreter of culture and meaning. To explain this interpretive role, Crapanzano (1986) used the example of the Greek messenger god, Hermes.

The ethnographer is a little like Hermes . . . He presents languages, cultures, and societies in all their opacity, their foreignness, their meaninglessness; then like the magician, the hermeneut, Hermes himself, he clarifies the opaque, renders the foreign familiar, and gives meaning to the meaningless. He decodes the message. He interprets. (p. 51)

Although ethnography attempts to present the meanings and perspectives of insiders, it is best understood as an act of translation. The ethnographer translates what is unfamiliar and makes it understandable, but in doing so, the ethnographer becomes an essential instrument as the one who interprets and offers description.

Ethnographers employ a number of methods to gather data and construct their understandings. Central to collecting data for ethnographic work are interviewing and observation (Hammersley, 2018). Along with these methods, ethnography is also known for its "long-term involvement of the researcher in research contexts" (Beach et al., 2018, p. 516). While this kind of long-term involvement is no longer simply understood as living among a

particular people group for multiple years (Hammersley, 2006), the time devoted to the research should be long enough to reach a point of saturation, where one begins “to see or hear the same things over and over again, and no new information surfaces” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 248). Along with long-term observations and interviews, many ethnographers have employed surveys, document analysis, video or print images, and audio recordings (Hammersley, 2006; Parker-Jenkins, 2018) in order to gain a better understanding of people and their everyday lives.

Ethnography is a methodology that aims to provide thick descriptions of the lives of people or a specific community in a manner that makes sense to outsiders but still captures the emic perspective of the participants. As such, the ethnographer takes on the role of both researcher and interpreter.

### **Case Study**

The term case study has been used in multiple different ways, and this often leads to vagueness when the term is applied to research (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Merriam 1998). Merriam (1998) argued that case study is often used as “a sort of catch-all category” to refer to qualitative research within the field of education. In order to avoid vagueness, I draw on the work of Stake (1994; 1995) and Merriam (1998; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) to define and explain case study.

Stake’s (1994) definition highlights some of the vagueness in referring to research as a case study. He defined case study research as “not a methodological choice, but a choice of object to be studied. We choose to study the case” (p. 236). Therefore, to call research a case study offers no clarification to the audience concerning specific methods used; rather, it simply highlights the particular thing or phenomenon being researched. In a similar fashion, Merriam (1998) claimed the “single most defining characteristic of case study research lies in delimiting the object of study, the case” (p. 27). Echoing Stake, she further explained, “case study does not

claim any particular methods for data collection or data analysis” (p. 31). With these definitions, both Stake and Merriam are drawing on the idea of a “bounded system” from Smith (1978) to explain case studies. The specific “case” of a case study is a singular unit that is bounded or fenced in. The case is understood as “a thing, a single entity, a unit around which there are boundaries” (Merriam, 1998, p. 27). Or as Stake (1994) claimed, the case “is one among others. In any given study, we will concentrate on the one” (p. 236). Case studies communicate the thing or phenomenon being researched, not how the research is conducted.

Building on the idea that case study research focuses on a singular entity that is bounded, Merriam (1998) further elaborated that case study allows researchers to focus on “holistic description and explanation” (p. 29). The goal of a case study is to provide a rich description of a phenomenon, but this description is also interpretive (Merriam, 1998). While case studies often attempt to provide an emic understanding of the phenomenon under review, it is important to note that as with all qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument of the research who provides interpretations of the case in question (Heath & Street, 2008; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Along similar lines, Stake (1995) explained that in case studies

We try hard to understand how the actors, the people being studied, see things.

Ultimately, the interpretations of the researcher are likely to be emphasized more than the interpretations of those people studied, but the qualitative case researcher tries to preserve the *multiple realities*, the different and even contradictory views of what is happening. (p. 12)

Similar to ethnography, a case study often aims at presenting participants’ own perspectives, but again, this raises the problem of the researcher’s own interpretation and presentation of meaning.

To provide in-depth descriptions and meanings regarding a particular phenomenon, case studies require the researcher to spend time with the case through personal contact. This allows for reflection as well as revising one's understandings of the possible meanings being created in and about the case (Stake, 1994). In explaining case studies, Stake (1994) made a distinction between intrinsic and instrumental cases. Stake explained that an intrinsic case is one that is taken up "because, in all its particularity and ordinariness, this case itself is of interest" (p. 237). The goal of an intrinsic case is not to build theory or make general claims about the phenomenon studied; rather, the goal is to learn about the specific case in question because it is of interest or importance in and of itself. In contrast to this, Stake (1994) described instrumental cases as those taken up "to provide insight into an issue or refinement of theory" (p. 237). While the particulars of the case are examined and researched in detail, the goal is often something larger than or external to the case itself. Even though Stake argued for these two different approaches to case study research, he also emphasized the importance of paying attention to the particular case for both approaches. He claimed "the real business of case study is particularization, not generalization. We take a particular case and come to know it well, not primarily as to how it is different from others but what it is, what it does" (Stake, 1995, p. 8). With case studies, researchers develop an understanding of a phenomenon that can aid in both theory building and refining (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007), but the primary task is to offer an in-depth portrait of a single phenomenon.

### **Ethno-Case Study**

Reflecting on her own work and the growing number of researchers claiming to be doing ethnography within the field of education, Parker-Jenkins (2018) developed the term "ethno-case study" as a better indicator of what she, and others, were doing methodologically. While she

admitted that there is much overlap between ethnography and case study, there are also key differences. Focusing on the similarities, Parker Jenkins explained “both approaches employ research methods that are dynamic and have application to different contexts, sharing a variety of data collection techniques to answer a range of questions” (p. 21). Furthermore, both methodologies focus on identifying emic perspectives of a group or community, even if that is mixed with the researcher’s own analytic perspective. Because of the overlap between these two, Parker-Jenkins noted that “the word ethnography is frequently used interchangeably with that of case study,” (p. 21) but using these concepts interchangeably does not adequately demarcate qualitative research practices.

A significant difference Parker-Jenkins (2018) highlights between ethnography and case study is the amount of time spent in the field collecting data. The concern here is not just with time, which is often augmented through technology, but immersion in a specific context. Parker-Jenkins argued:

A key difference between the two terms is the extent to which the researcher is immersed in the context and/or data and it may be more correct to state that the researcher is not conducting ethnography but drawing on ethnographic techniques. (p. 23)

The goal in making distinctions between ethnography and case study is not to maintain a rigid distinction between the two, but to communicate both what was done in in the research and what can be expected from the research.

Due to the desire to maintain the distinctions between ethnography and case study, but also to acknowledge the various ways these two methodologies overlap, Parker-Jenkins (2018) concluded that the hybrid term “ethno-case study” was a useful way to describe research that takes place in education. She went on to argue that the term ethno-case study “might better

convey the sense of an inquiry concerning people, which employs techniques associated with long-term and intensive ethnography, but which is limited in terms of scope and time spent in the field” (p. 24). This new term helps clarify methodological approaches in research and clarify both the boundaries of the research and the claims drawn from that research. As Parker-Jenkins concluded, “the hybrid term can help set boundaries and expectations, acknowledge that the study is located within a richer, wider context and be realistic as to the nature of the resulting claims” (p. 29).

As an ethno-case study, this dissertation draws methodologically on both ethnography and case study. In terms of ethnography, the dissertation is focused on the everyday life of a community—a specific Conservative Christian school. In focusing on a particular school community, the aim is to prioritize an understanding of the life and culture of the school from emic perspectives, as those in the community themselves understand their lives. The central question of this dissertation focuses on the logics, practices, and symbolic representations of civic identity and participation at a Conservative Christian school. Ethnographic methodology can aid in uncovering and making sense of the assumptions and practices of civic identity within this community.

However, this dissertation is also a case study. This point is clearest when considering the way in which the case is bounded. The focus of this dissertation is specifically on the school as an organization that is animated by a particular logic and communicates a particular way of being to its members. The lives of students, faculty, and staff extend beyond this particular organization in numerous and important ways, but the focus of this dissertation is how the organization itself shapes the lives of students. While a full ethnography might follow students into their home, work, and social lives to better understand their beliefs and behaviors about

citizenship, as a case study, this dissertation is bounded by the school walls in order to focus on understanding the intentional logics of a Conservative Christian school that shape civic development. Furthermore, this dissertation is more limited in both time and engagement than an ethnography normally might be. As explained below, the data collection took place over the 2021-2022 school year; therefore, it lacked some of the long-term observations that one would expect with a complete ethnography.

As a kind of case study, this dissertation can best be understood as what Stake (1994) called an instrumental case because it offers an in-depth understanding of a larger phenomenon, namely, the socialization of students as citizens at a Conservative Christian school. However, as Stake (1995) warned, any generalizations should be seen as “*petite generalizations*” rather than “*grand generalizations*” (p. 7). Therefore, any general principles or insights drawn from this case study must be held loosely and refined.

In sum, this dissertation is designed as an ethno-case study, which draws from both ethnography and case study research. By focusing on one Conservative Christian school, the dissertation examines the logics, practices, and symbolic representations that shape how students understand their civic identity and participation in a democratic society.

### **Research Site**

The site for this dissertation was a Conservative Christian school, which I refer to as King’s Academy.<sup>1</sup> Tucked away in a part of the city that even long-term residents rarely drive through, the school was easy to miss, yet within the school walls there was a vibrant educational community. King’s is a K-12 school situated within a small New England city, which attracted families from several surrounding communities with some driving over an hour a day to attend

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<sup>1</sup> All names used in this dissertation are pseudonyms.

the medium size Christian private school. Originally started by Central Baptist Church in 1974 as Central Baptist School, the school was conceived as a ministry to help families within the church raise and socialize their children in the context of Christianity. However, over the years the school had a challenging relationship with its founding church.

Amy Smith, the Academic Dean and a member of the faculty since the late 1980s, explained that in 2004, just 5 years after the school had received accreditation through the Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI), the church wanted to close the high school. Enrollment was down, and the then pastoral leadership of the church no longer had a vision for Christian education. Mrs. Smith believed that the Holy Spirit prompted her to lead a campaign to transition the school away from its connection with the church and to become an independent Christian school. Convinced that God wanted to do the impossible, she began to meet with the church leadership about this transition.

As Mrs. Smith recounted these meetings with me, she started to laugh and her face beamed with excitement recalling this time of transition.

One of the elders said to me, ‘Amy, I just want you to understand, it’s completely impossible. It’s impossible for this school to be able to become an independent school. You know, it just can’t happen.’ So, I looked at both the elders and I just looked at them and I said, ‘Gentlemen, I agree. I even know more than you how completely impossible this is. I absolutely agree with you, but the question isn’t is it impossible, the question is does God want to do the impossible?’<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout this dissertation, direct quotes are used when excerpts were taken directly from recorded conversations or when talk was written down word for word as it happened in my fieldnotes. Excerpts or information from my fieldnotes are described and ideas are attributed to speakers, where appropriate, but not cited as direct quotes.

With a smile and a chuckle Mrs. Smith continued, “Well, they couldn’t argue with that. They’re not going to argue with that question.” The elders conceded and, with God on her side, Mrs. Smith and other school staff started laying plans to transition the school and become an independent Christian school.

In 2006, after two years of struggling, planning, and a lot of praying, Central Baptist School was renamed and reborn as King’s Academy, which opened its doors in a new facility and with a renewed commitment to PreK-12 Christian education. This was a rebirth for the school and an opportunity for the faculty and staff to start afresh. The new school broadened its appeal beyond families connected to Central Baptist Church and refocused its mission to make “disciples for the kingdom of God” while educating students. As their new mission statement stated, “King’s Academy is a life preparatory educational institution that works in harmony with families to promote the spiritual, intellectual, emotional, physical, and creative growth of students, empowering them to live for the glory of Jesus Christ” (King’s, 2021a, p. 1).

After becoming an independent Christian school, King’s experienced periods of growth and decline as many private schools do; however, with the 2018-2019 school year King’s started experiencing a period of significant growth in attendance. The school’s PreK-12 enrollment for the 2021-2022 academic year was 317, which represented the highest enrollment the school had ever experienced. Since the 2018-2019 school year, King’s increased its enrollment by a whopping 50%, from 213 students to the current 317, despite the challenges that Covid-19 caused King’s. This growth was in keeping with national trends that have seen increased enrollment in Conservative Christian schools during this same timeframe (Graham, 2021). The high school at King’s had an enrollment of 108 for the 2021-2022 school year, making it the third-largest high school in the New England area accredited by the ACSI. In comparison, the

average enrollment for the 30 high schools in New England that are either accredited or associated with ACSI for the 2021-2022 school year was 45 students, with the largest boasting approximately 200 students.

According to interviews with staff and school documentation, the growth King's experienced can be attributed to several different factors. A portion of the growth was due to the arrival of the Head of School, Jeff Jacobs, who left another Christian school an hour south of King's to take this position. With Mr. Jacobs' hire came several families who followed him, despite the need to take on a significantly longer commute. Kim Wilcox, the Director of Admissions, also credited current social and political issues as pushing the rise in attendance. With a bit of concern in her voice she explained:

The number one issue now is really social issues. What's happening in the world, do we teach CRT? Do we have traditional boys' and girls' bathrooms? You would be so surprised how many times I get that question, whether it be over email or those first phone calls. Health, vaccine requirements, what are our protocols?

While the Christian character of the school remained a draw for families, many over the last three years were looking for an education that aligned with their social or political views, and the conservative social and political views of the school meant that King's is reaping the benefit of this trend.

While the mission of King's was to prepare students for life, the high school was designed to offer a college prep curriculum. To accomplish this, instead of offering the typical AP courses, the school partnered with a local community college to offer a dual enrollment program starting in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade. This program allowed students to graduate high school with two semesters of college general education courses already completed. After high school, nearly

75% of the students went on to attend college or university at various schools, including both religious and secular private schools as well as public colleges. Recent graduates have attended private Christian schools such as Liberty University and Cedarville University, while others have gone to state universities including the University of New Hampshire and Indiana University Bloomington. Still, other students elected to attend private colleges, such as St. Anselm College and Boston College. For the 25% who do not enroll in a 4-year college or university, many attend community colleges or vocational training schools, while others have gone into the military or directly into the workforce.

Academically, King's 2021 strategic plan stated that it strives to be a place that helps "students build a deep understanding of how to think (not just what to think)" (King's, 2021a, p. 5) However, they aimed to accomplish this while also holding to the belief that "absolute truth [is] rooted in the Bible, creation and the personhood of Jesus Christ" (p. 8). To accomplish this task, the school focused not just on teaching information and various subjects, but on taking a "worldview approach" to teaching. This approach sought to build a comprehensive Christian view of the world and life across all subjects of knowledge. A worldview approach meant Christianity and biblical teachings were integrated into every subject, rather than being confined to a Bible course or the Spiritual Life program, as is the case in some Christian schools. In this way, Christianity was presented as touching all areas of life and knowledge. Along with this integrative approach, students were required to take a worldview course every year for 9<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grade. This course sought to teach students the content of a biblical worldview and how this ought to shape how one lived in society.

King's Academy strove to be more than just an academic community. As reflected in their mission statement, they were intentionally building a school that was a life preparatory

institution. This manifested itself in multiple ways. Students at the school learned CPR (cardiopulmonary resuscitation) and also learned how to change a car tire in Life Management Skills which was required for all seniors. They learned personal budgeting as part of their senior Personal Finance class, learned to deal with stress and healthy living in health classes, and participated in sports and drama after school. But the life preparatory mission at King's was more than simply adding life skills into the curriculum and offering extracurricular activities. King's attempt to offer a wholistic approach to students gave students opportunities to develop various dimensions of their lives and integrate these dimensions into a unified cohesive life built around Christianity.

A significant part of this wholistic approach to students and learning was a focus on spiritual development. The Christian nature of the school was impossible to miss as one walked around and observed students and classes. From posters with Bible verses hanging on walls in classrooms and the hallways to flyers advertising church and religious events on student bulletin boards, the Christian focus was clear. Furthermore, classes at King's nearly always began with a prayer or a devotional thought encouraging students to live the Christian life. Even their mascot, the Kingsmen, was a reference to the Christian faith and the notion of God as king.

Yet, the Christian aspect of the school was not reflected just in artifacts or rituals the community engages in, as mentioned already, the Christian focus was integrated throughout the curriculum. This meant students in psychology class contemplated how God created individuals with emotions, science classes reflected on what the natural world might tell students about the divine, and math courses helped students see a logical and orderly creator. Along with this focus on integration, there was also intentional programming around Christianity and spiritual development. Students attended weekly chapel services which were primarily led and organized

by students. Classes started with a prayer to help remind students of God's involvement in their everyday lives. Students also had to take yearly Bible classes where they learned both the content of the Scriptures and how to apply it to their lives.

A significant part of the spiritual dimension of the school was its focus on service. Students were required to perform service hours throughout the school year and in the spring of each year, the school canceled classes and engaged in service week for students. During this time, students served the local community through various tasks such as working with a Christian humanitarian organization to help pack meals to be sent overseas, they also worked around the school itself doing service projects, or they worked with organizations in the community, such as homeless shelters. This service was animated by the school's communal understanding of the Bible. They took seriously the words found in the Gospel of Matthew 22:39 wherein Jesus claimed the second greatest command was to "Love your neighbor as yourself" (*English Standard Version*, 2001/2011). Therefore, service was seen as a natural outworking of their Christian faith. As Amy Smith explained, when the school restarted as an independent school one of the goals was:

to be known as a school that serves our community and that blesses our community. If they closed down King's for some reason, we want the community to feel a distinct loss. So, we wanted to be a blessing and to serve.

This focus on service was an integral expression of faith at King's.

One of the unique features of this school community was the way in which it cultivated a community of care. This community was a place where individuals encounter one another as humans and were attentive to one another, deferring themselves to one another. This community of care was seen in how teachers interact with students. Teachers made an effort to know their

students and provided the academic help they needed to succeed in their classes. This was shown through tailoring assignments for students and teachers' willingness to work one-on-one with students during study periods or other times outside of class. But the care demonstrated for students was about more than their academic endeavors, it extended to the whole life of students. It was seen when Jill Larson, one of the Bible teachers, invited a student and her family to her house for Thanksgiving after she found out the student's mother was in a neighboring state taking care of ill grandparents. Furthermore, during faculty meetings, teachers and staff took time to pray for individual students by name and in specific ways that demonstrated both their knowledge of their students and their care for their wellbeing.

While the faculty and staff intentionally helped to foster a community of care at King's, the students also demonstrated care for others as well. In the way they supported and encouraged one another in class, students in this small community showed that they knew their classmates and genuinely wished the best for them. What was perhaps unique about this community was not only the way students cared for their peers but also the way they cared about the faculty and staff. Several times I noted a student praying for or with a teacher who was having a difficult day. Furthermore, I once observed a senior bringing his literature teacher lunch from Chipotle because he found out she had forgotten her lunch at home and was having a challenging day. Students noticed others in the community and demonstrated a posture of care that helped to foster a school community that was more than simply an academic community, it was a community where individuals are recognized and treated as having dignity and value.

Although King's Academy was, in certain ways, a unique educational community, some of its key features may be shared with other Christian schools, given that many of the features of the King's community have been reported in other Christian schools across the country (Blosser,

2019; Feinberg, 2006; Guhin, 2021). Structured around Christianity and the development of students' spiritual lives, these schools often create communities that work alongside and reinforce the socialization students are receiving at home and through their churches. King's was no exception to this, focused on educating students within the context of the Christian faith, they offered not just an academic education, but an education that formed students to see the world through the lens of the Christian worldview. In doing so, they aimed to create "Gospel-oriented citizens." (King's, 2021a, p. 4). This dissertation unpacks and explains the institutional logic behind this vision of citizenship.

### **Positionality**

All research involves a level of interpretation on the part of the researcher, which in turn shapes how the data are presented and explained (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). When it comes to ethnographic methodologies, Heath & Street (2008) argued: "all ethnographic research is inherently interpretive, subjective, and partial" (p. 45). Given that this dissertation is an ethno-case study, it is especially important to explain my own place and positionality in this dissertation. The point of describing my own positioning is not to add validity to the research or somehow separate myself from the research through a kind of reflexivity; rather, the point is to make more explicit my own perspective and how I see the world as I engage in the research.

In many ways, I consider myself a former insider to the world of conservative Christianity. Raised in a conservative Christian church and attending a conservative Christian university in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States, my own experiences have been shaped by this social world. Furthermore, I taught theology for 18 years at a private Christian high school in New England, which as of 2016, when it joined the Association of Christian Schools International, has been classified as a Conservative Christian school. While I no longer apply the

descriptors of “conservative” or “evangelical” to myself, I still claim the label “Christian” as an important part of my self-understanding and identity. Over the last 20 years, it has become obvious to me that in public discourse, the terms “conservative” and “evangelical” have become associated with certain political and social ideologies more than theological commitments. Because I no longer align with the political and social perspectives these terms imply, I have stopped using them as ways of describing my own positionality.

Even though I have broken with conservative Christianity, because of my history, I am familiar with the insider discourses, images, references, and narratives that Christians often employ to make sense of the world and their own lives. Additionally, I have formally studied both theology and Christian thought and have earned a master’s degree in each field. This helps me understand the many theological concepts and presumptions that underlie the language used by members of this community. This background knowledge also equips me to understand many cultural and theological positions taken up by individuals and groups within the Christian community.

Furthermore, my own background and affiliation with a Conservative Christian school helped me gain access to King’s Academy as a research site. Schools like King’s are often difficult to gain entry to because of the caution and concern leaders have about outsiders who may not agree with or understand the perspectives and goals of their educational organizations (Blosser, 2019; Peshkin, 1986). After several initial meetings during the summer of 2021 to discuss my research with Jeff Jacobs, the Head of School, and a recommendation from my own school administration, King’s welcomed me in as a researcher and took a significant interest in supporting and learning from this dissertation research.

Having this kind of insider status is not only a benefit to understanding the research topic of this dissertation. The social world of King's Academy is its own manifestation of Christian practice and schooling. It is possible that as an insider, I might fail to see what is interesting or different because it is part of what I take for granted. As Schweber (2006b) explained while researching religious communities with their own unique references, histories, and narratives, "I can't know what I was missing as a researcher" (p. 127). My own positioning as a former insider shaped my understanding and ability to see this community, and thus it highlighted some aspects and muted others. Furthermore, my own movement away from the labels of "conservative" and "evangelical" may bias the way I observed and heard the participants throughout this research. I needed to understand my own critical stance toward many positions that King's may embrace and I worked to ensure that I was, to the extent possible, understanding and articulating participants' understanding of their world. This means that I needed to continually account for my own self and my own position during this dissertation project, as in many ways, I was researching a social world that for many years I had been a part of. To address this, I tried to be reflexive about what I was and was not observing at the school. I also engaged in dialogue with critical friends, who were both insiders and outsiders, concerning my observations and interpretation to help call these into question and understand how my own biases were influencing this process of interpretation and analysis.

### **Data Collection Methods**

The dissertation seeks to understand the logics, as presented through practices and symbolic representations, concerning the civic identity and participation in democratic society conveyed explicitly and implicitly at one Conservative Christian high school. In order to accomplish this, this study draws on three sources of data. Following ethnographic methods,

observation and interviewing are central methods for data collection (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Both methods help to explain what participants do in a given space and how they make sense of their own life within that space. Along with observation and interviews, I also used documents to help understand the school as an organization and the messages it communicates concerning civic identity and participation. The three data types—documents, observations, and interviews—as well as the sources and specific data collected for this dissertation are listed in Table 3.1.

**Table 3.1**

*Data Types and Sources*

Data Type	Data Sources	Data
<p><b>Documents</b> (Other documents to be collected as appropriate)</p>	Official School Documents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strategic Plan</li> <li>• Faculty &amp; Student Handbooks</li> <li>• Professional Development Material</li> <li>• School Profile</li> </ul>
	External Communications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parent Newsletters</li> <li>• Twitter</li> <li>• Instagram</li> <li>• Parent Night Handouts</li> </ul>
	Curricular Documents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Textbooks</li> <li>• Course Readings &amp; Handouts</li> <li>• Course Syllabi</li> <li>• Course Assignment</li> </ul>
<p><b>Observations</b> (~10 hours a week for ~13 weeks, ~ 130+ hours total observations between September 2021-February 2022. Follow-up observations were conducted as appropriation between February and May 2022.)</p>	Classroom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Worldview IV Class</li> <li>• Bible Class</li> <li>• British Literature Class</li> <li>• US Government Class</li> </ul>
	School Life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Homeroom</li> <li>• Lunch</li> <li>• Study Halls</li> <li>• Chapel</li> <li>• Faculty Meeting &amp; PD</li> </ul>
	Parent Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parent Connection Meetings</li> <li>• Family Orientation Meeting</li> </ul>
<p><b>Interviews</b> (~1 hour in-depth interviews with each person, 9 interviews with school personnel; 12 with students; 8 with parents; total: 29 interviews)</p>	School Staff & Faculty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Head of School</li> <li>• Dean of Academics</li> <li>• Director of Admissions</li> <li>• Worldview Teacher</li> <li>• Bible Teacher</li> <li>• Literature Teacher</li> <li>• Government &amp; History Teacher</li> </ul>
	Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 12 Senior</li> </ul>
	Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 8 Parents of Senior</li> </ul>

## Documents

Documents are important when researching organizations as they often convey how the organization wants to project itself and how it understands its own values and mission (Blosser, 2019). The term document is “an umbrella term [used] to refer to a wide range of written, visual, digital, and physical material relevant to the study” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Within qualitative work, documents are often used as a means to triangulate research to confirm findings. However, Bowen (2009) points out that documents should be seen as an important source of information on their own in that they help provide “contextual richness” to research (p. 36). This contextual richness involves the historical context of organizations, as well as the perspectives, official positions, and beliefs of an organization. Using documents in research is not without its limitations. Documents are often produced for reasons other than research, thus they don’t always address the questions and framings of the research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Furthermore, many documents from organizations can be heavily edited and crafted, which can be both a liability and a benefit (Bowen, 2009). While this editing may not reflect the process and complexity of an organization, these documents often project an ideal or official position of an organization.

This dissertation made use of two broad categories of documents to understand the logics, practices, and symbolic representations of civic identity: official school documents and curricular materials. Official school documents include those documents prepared by the school itself to describe or explain the school. This included, but was not limited to, the Student Handbook, school profile, Strategic Plan, the school website, official school social media, and parent newsletters. These documents helped to explain the official beliefs and values of the school. These also provided information that the school deems important and valuable to communicate

to parents and the outside world. Curricular documents included textbooks and supplemental readings from class, course syllabi, assignments, and other handouts or material used in class. These documents are important because students regularly engaged with this material, and it served as a significant part of the explicit curriculum.

## **Observation**

Observation is an essential ethnographic method for understanding the way groups make sense of and navigate their world. Lareau (2021) defined observation as “systematically ‘hanging out’ with people on a regular basis” (p. 149). Observations help to unpack the everyday lives of groups and individuals and provide a firsthand account of a research site (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Being an observer means taking a stance concerning the involvement with those being observed. For this dissertation, I take the stance of participant observer, or in Gold’s (1958) classic typology “observer as participant” (cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 144). With this stance “the researcher’s observer activities are known to the group; [however] participation in the group is definitely secondary to the role of information gatherer” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, pp. 144-145). In order to adequately address the research questions, three main aspects of the school were observed: classrooms and other daily school activities, faculty and staff activities, and parent meetings.

The majority of my observations were conducted in classrooms and regular school activities, such as chapels, lunches, and hallway interactions. In order to focus these observations, I concentrated on a cohort of 16 seniors, chosen for several reasons. First, as seniors, these students experienced more aspects of the school curriculum and life than other students. Second, because of their age, they were preparing to or had recently entered a new stage of their own citizenship with legal privileges to vote. Third, these 16 seniors composed one

section of the Worldview IV class, the fourth and final worldview class all students at King's were required to take in order to graduate. The Worldview IV class was chosen as a cohort of students to observe and follow because this course focused on living out "the ethics of the biblical worldview" (King's, 2021b). This class was designed specifically to help students understand how to live as Christians in the modern world and, as such, it addressed topics directly related to students' understanding of their civic identity and participation in society. A final reason for focusing on this cohort of 16 seniors was a practical one. This particular group of students was suggested to me by the Academic Dean, who allowed me access throughout the year. While my observations included students at King's other than the 16 in this cohort, my focus was on following the students in this cohort throughout their school day. This included observing them in classes, during lunch, and during other school day activities.

This cohort of seniors represented half of the entire senior class of 32 students at King's during the 2021-2022 school year. Of the 16 students I observed, the vast majority had attended King's for three years or more with only 4 at the school for two years or less. Also, many had come to King's from other Christian schools or from homeschooling. In fact, only six of the students had attended public school at some point in their schooling. While race was not the main focus of this dissertation, it is important to note that my cohort of 16 students, like the population of the rest of the school, was almost entirely White with the exception of a single international student from China. Considering the entire senior class of 32 students, only three students identified as racial minorities, making the senior class 91% White. From my observations at the school over a year, it was very clear that King's was a predominantly White institution with only one person of color on the staff as the facilities director. It should also be noted, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, the city in which the school was located was 86%

white. This racial makeup is in keeping with previous research on Conservative Christian schools that has shown them to be predominantly White institutions (Blosser, 2019). Conservative Christian schools nationwide report enrolling 69% white students, which is one of the highest percentages of White enrollment among all classifications of private schools (Broughman et al., 2021). For comparison, 63% of the students attending Catholic private identify as White and 60% of students attending non-sectarian private schools identify as White.

It should also be noted that this cohort was the group of students the school allowed me to have access to and observe throughout the 2021-2022 school year because of practical scheduling issues for the school and because the Academic Dean thought this was a particularly interesting mix of students that would be willing to participate in the study. The majority of these students were honors students. Nearly all of them were taking at least two classes for dual enrollment credit (similar to AP credit, as noted earlier), with most in dual enrollment for British Literature and American Government. Furthermore, 10 of the students were taking Worldview IV for honors credit. However, it is important to note, that honors and dual enrollment were not separate classes from the regular college preparatory classes. Instead, King's had sections of courses that were a mix of honors and non-honors students so they all received the same instruction and curriculum; however, the honors and dual-enrollment students typically had to do more or different assignments.

While my observation took place throughout the 2021-2022 school year, the first semester was my primary focus. This allowed me to learn what everyday life at King's was like prior to doing interviews, which took place during the second semester, as explained below. As mentioned above, Worldview IV was a central class that I observed. Along with this class, I also gave priority to observing Bible, literature, and U.S. Government classes. During the second

semester, observations continued, but they were more targeted and strategic, focused on events and topics that pertain directly to issues dealing with citizenship.

Along with observing students in their regular school activities, I also focused on observing faculty and staff during the school day as well as faculty and staff meetings. During these meetings, a portion of the time was used for professional development, which focused on integrating biblical principles into all areas of the curriculum. Observing faculty and staff meetings can be an important way to understand the logics of citizenship that guide the school and subsequently shape students.

A final area of observation was with parents. I observed parent meetings, such as morning coffee with the Head of School and information sessions in the evening, throughout the school year. On the one hand, observing these times with parents helped inform my understanding of how the school presents itself to parents and the messages it communicates about its purpose and mission. On the other hand, these observations revealed concerns parents raised as well as ways parents engaged with the school.

Throughout these observations, I paid attention to and took descriptive notes on several aspects of school life including: the material setting of classrooms and the school itself; the ideas and content of the courses, specifically as they related to citizenship or participation with society; student discussions during and outside of class; and practices or ritual activities that students engaged in throughout the school day. After each day of observing the school, the day's notes and jottings were written up as fieldnotes, organized written accounts of what was "seen, heard, and experienced in the field" (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 21). Along with writing up fieldnotes, in-process memos were written in order to help "provide insight, direction, and guidance for the ongoing fieldwork" (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 123). Observations provided an important data

source for “unpacking everyday practices” of individuals and groups within the school (Lareau, 2021, p. 149). To help unpack the logic of citizenship at King’s Academy, throughout the observations I paid particularly close attention to practices and symbolic representations that informed and revealed these logics.

## **Interviews**

Interviews were the final source of data collection for this dissertation. Lareau (2021) argued that in most ethnographic studies, interviewing should go hand in hand with participant observations as they help to provide a deeper understanding of the phenomenon being observed. If observations reveal everyday practices, then interviews help form insight into how groups and individuals interpret their own lived experiences (Emerson et al., 2011; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Interviews can help make clear and help discover “something about an individual’s experience” through their own words and interpretations (Rinaldo & Guhin, 2022, p. 39).

In order to understand the logic of citizenship at King’s, I interviewed three groups of participants: school administrators and faculty, students, and parents. Interviews lasted about one hour and were audio recorded for transcription and coding. I conducted follow-up interviews as necessary to clarify and probe deeper into relevant topics. All interviews were what Crinson & Leontowitsch (2006) referred to as “in-depth” interviews. Unlike structured or semi-structured interviews, this format does not follow a set protocol of questions but rather aims to obtain “a more detailed, rich understanding of the topic of interest” (para. 5). This way of interviewing provided enough structure to focus on general topics but created room to explore with participants their own perspectives and descriptions of phenomena.

Faculty and staff interview participants consisted of key administrators, staff, and faculty. For administrators and staff, this included, but was not limited to, the Head of School, Academic

Dean, and Director of Admission. The goal of these interviews was to gain a better understanding of the official perspectives on what was being communicated about citizenship to students as well as the official stance that King's Academy took on issues of civic concern. Faculty interviews were with the instructors of the classes observed while I was observing the senior cohort. Specifically, this entailed the Worldviews IV teacher, multiple Bible teachers, and the US Government teacher. Interviews with faculty aimed at uncovering some of their own perspectives on citizenship and how they thought students ought to engage with wider society, and how those perspectives influenced what happened in their own classroom with their pedagogy and curriculum. More specifically, these interviews included the following topics: understandings of the mission/purpose of the school and Christian schools in general, views on citizenship and the role Christianity plays in shaping this view, the role of the school in shaping students, and administrators/faculty roles in interacting with students and parents.

For student interviews, I invited all the participants in the cohort of the 16 seniors I observed throughout the year. Of the 16 students, four of them declined to participate in interviews, most of them saying they did not have the time to sit down for a 45-60 minute interview with me. However, one student asserted that she was not going to tell me anything I had not already heard from other students. This claim was interesting in its own right and demonstrates a possible assumption from this student that all the other students were in agreement on issues of civic and public life. While the 12 students I interviewed represented more than a third of the entire senior class, one of the limits of this dissertation is that it is possible that some viewpoints were unaddressed or not identified by me because of students' unwillingness to participate in interviews. For those students involved, the interviews focused on topics such as: their experience with the school, the messages about Christianity they heard from

the school, the way their faith influenced how they thought about civic and social issues, their understanding of civic responsibility, and their understanding of citizenship. These interviews revealed how students understood the way civic identity and engagement were presented by the school.

Along with interviewing students from the cohort, I also interviewed their parents. This helped to get at parents' perspectives on civic identity and the roles they perceived the school playing in shaping students' perspectives. The interviews with parents focused on such topics as: their interactions with the school, reasons for choosing this school for their child/children, expectations they had for the school, their understanding of the school's mission/purpose, and its alignment with their own views, their understanding of citizenship and civic responsibility, and the way their faith influenced their ideas about society.

Parent participation in the interviews was somewhat lower than with students. Of the 12 students interviewed from the cohort, eight of their families were represented in the parent interviews. Some of the parents who were invited, both through letters and emails, did not respond. Of the eight parents interviewed, most had more than one child at King's or had other children who had already graduated from King's Academy. The parents who participated in these interviews represented 17 current students at King's and two alumni.

All interviews took place during the second semester of the school year and were recorded in order to be transcribed for analysis. This allowed me to both learn about King's through observation and build relationships with most participants prior to conducting interviews. Learning through observation and building a relationship with participants informed the interviews and allowed me to target questions toward phenomena directly observed at King's.

In sum, the data collection for this dissertation consisted of documents, observations, and interviews, all common sources for ethnographic research (Agar, 1996; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The three data sources used, as well as the multiple perspectives investigated, helped to give a complex and fuller understanding of the role Conservative Christian schools play in shaping students' understanding of their participation in civic and public life.

### **Data Analysis**

This dissertation aimed to produce a coherent analysis of the messages and ideas about civic development and public life that were conveyed to students at a Conservative Christian high school. Data were collected, organized, and analyzed to help make this research site comprehensible to those who were “not directly acquainted with the social world at issue” (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 171). My analysis of the data provided partial answers to the research questions by yielding both descriptions and interpretations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) concerning the phenomena in question. To analyze and interpret the data, I drew on interpretive research methods, specifically data coding and memo writing in order to identify and develop themes across data sources (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Erickson, 1986). It is important to note that this analysis did not simply take place after the collection of data, but also during the data collection process in order to refine and refocus the data collection as it was taking place (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Documentary data, field notes, and interview transcripts were analyzed initially using open coding and NVivo software to keep track of and manage the data (Emerson et al., 2011). My open coding approach was heavily influenced by theoretical frameworks related to democratic education (Gutmann, 1999) and institutional theory (Meyer & Rowan, 2006; Powell & DiMaggio, 1991; Thornton, et al., 2012) to help identify key ideas and topics pertaining to the

research questions. This means that while the initial coding was open, my attention was focused in particular on specific logics, practices, and symbolic representations that helped explain and inform ideas about living in democratic societies, civic identity, and engagement in public life. The coding was open at this stage in the sense that there were no preset categories that I looked for; however, coding was influenced by ideas generated from previous scholarship on democratic education, civic identity, and institutional theory. This initial open coding resulted in a list of codes that I refined and revised during subsequent readings and rounds of coding the data.

After initial codes had been developed through this process of open coding, I turned back to the original data and read through it multiple times to perform focused coding (Emerson et al., 2011). Emerson and colleagues explain that focused coding is a more fine-grained analysis that “involves building up and . . . further elaborating analytically interesting themes, both by connecting data that initially may not have appeared to go together and by further delineating subthemes and subtopics that distinguish differences and variations within a broader topic” (p. 191). During this focused coding I continued to refine the list of codes by adding, expanding, and combining some of the original codes that were developed during the open coding process. This focused coding led to a revised list of codes and subcodes. With this newly revised list, I went back to the data again to read through it with the revised codes and subcodes to test how they worked in organizing and categorizing the data. I continued this process until I reached my final list of codes and subcodes shown in Table 2.

**Table 3.2***Data Analysis Codes*

<b>Codes</b>	<b>Subcodes</b>
General political and civic life	Civic identity Engaging with society Gospel-centered citizenship Salt & light in society Conflict with society Socially conservative ideas/actions Liberal/progressive ideas/actions Political activity Voting Political triage Other political activity Trump Christian nationalism
The Christian worldview	Definitions/explanations of the Christian worldview Absolute truth Command to love others Christian beliefs/doctrines Parents and the Christian worldview Students and the Christian worldview Faculty/Staff and the Christian worldview
Worship and faith practices	Chapel services Prayer Personal faith/belief Personal application/life advice Serving others
Democratic values	Tolerance Pluralism/diversity Democratic skills and virtues
Service practices	Service week Service projects Service outside of school – with family & churches Reason for service Individual help/responsibility
Social & cultural issues	LGBTQ Gender norms Race Critical race theory Abortion

Classroom curriculum & instruction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Issues with science</li> <li>Teacher's care and wholistic approach</li> <li>Life application and preparation</li> <li>Critical thinking</li> <li>Diverse perspectives</li> <li>Personal stories</li> </ul>
General ethos at King's	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>School community</li> <li>Boundaries of inclusion and exclusion</li> </ul>
Parent's perspective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Involvement with King's community</li> <li>Conflict/disagreement with school</li> <li>Support/agreement with school</li> <li>Christian faith and church connection</li> <li>Political and civic views</li> <li>Political and civic activity</li> <li>Public/Christian school experience</li> <li>Reasons for enrolling at King's</li> <li>Social &amp; cultural concerns <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>CRT</li> <li>Covid</li> <li>Secularism</li> <li>LGBTQ</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Student's perspectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Christian faith and church</li> <li>Conflict/disagreement with school</li> <li>Support/agreement with school</li> <li>Attitude toward teachers</li> <li>Political and civic views</li> <li>Public/Christian school experience</li> <li>Service activity/attitudes</li> <li>Parental and family influence</li> <li>School influence</li> </ul>

Along with coding the data, I used analytic memos and the final list of codes to summarize trends and develop possible themes that cut across multiple data sources. In developing themes, I paid attention to reoccurring patterns and consistency across data specifically as related to issues of citizenship as framed by democratic education and institutional theory. Stake (1995) refers to this as looking for “correspondence” among the data sources (p. 78). However, it is important to note that themes do not simply exist in the data or in the social

world. Rather, they are based on interpretations and are constructed by the researcher; As Stake (1995) suggests, they are developed by pulling apart data and putting it back together in a meaningful and coherent way. After identifying possible themes through writing analytic memos, I looked for what Erickson (1986) called “key linkages among various items of data” (p. 147), which draw together multiple sources of data as “analogous instances of the same phenomenon” (p. 148). Identifying these key linkages helped to support and further develop themes and propositions that were grounded in the data itself.

While developing themes and propositions from the data, I also looked for disconfirming or anomalous data that did not fit with the propositions I was developing. Paying attention to this data helped in the reevaluation and clarification of the themes. Furthermore, it also helped identify tensions within the data and interpretations. By refining themes and linking them with data, I developed descriptions and interpretations into multiple assertions that answered the research questions (Erickson, 1986). This process aimed to demonstrate that an “adequate evidentiary warrant exist[ed] for the assertions made” (Erickson, 1986, p. 149). The assertions and interpretations that emerged from the data analysis focused primarily on the logics, practices, and symbolic representations concerning the civic identity and participation in democratic society conveyed at the Conservative Christian high school where I spent a year observing and talking to people.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Worldview Thinking & Symbolic Representation

Schools play a vital role in developing citizens. Along these lines, noted educational historian, David Labaree (2011) argued that one of the core rationales for the formation of public schooling was “to create citizens with the knowledge, skills, and public spirit required to maintain a republic and to protect it from sources of faction, class, and self-interest” (p. 384). How and to what extent the kind of democratic purpose Labaree described is present or absent from contemporary schooling has consequences for the political stability of communities and for our common life together. Along these lines, Hess and McAvoy (2015) suggested that schools are political spaces that, intentionally or unintentionally, help students engage with the question, “How should we live together?” (p. 4). Knowing how students in various contexts are socialized into ways of thinking about civic and public life and ways of engaging as participants in a democratic society contributes to a broader understanding of the present and future state of democracy in the United States.

This dissertation examines a conservative Christian high school in order to understand the operating logic related to students’ civic identity and ways of engagement with the world beyond the walls of the school. Across the next three chapters, I argue that the institutional logic operating at King’s Academy, which shaped students’ civic identity, was a theo-political logic. As discussed in Chapter One, the terminology signals that the logic of King’s was both theological and political; it also highlights the reality that the pervasive theological ideas at King’s carried with them assumptions and implications concerning politics and civic life. Importantly, the term theo-political is not an attempt to reduce theological claims to political

ones, rather it is aimed at highlighting the political assumptions that are associated with theological and religious claims. My analysis shows that the theo-political logic that animated the school offered students a religious way of understanding civic identity and public life rather than a democratic one. This does not mean that the theo-political logic was anti-democratic, but it does mean that the driving norms and goals of King's Academy were not aimed primarily at cultivating students as democratic participants who would help maintain the nation's democratic institutions. Instead, the theo-political logic that animated the school had primarily to do with cultivating a very strong religious identity in students and helping students develop and maintain their faithfulness to God. In other words, the logic at work at King's shaped students' understanding of their civic identity as first and foremost a religious identity that was connected with politics to support a conservative theological understanding of society and life. Through both symbolic representations and regular everyday practices, which are analyzed in Chapters Four and Five, respectively, King's theo-political logic conveyed both explicit and implicit messages about civic identity and engagement. Chapter Six argues that students largely agreed and embodied this theo-political logic in their own lives and that their parents generally supported and sought out the school because of its theo-political logic.

As explained in Chapter Two, institutional logics provide "frames of reference" that help individuals and groups understand the world and how to live in that world (Thornton et al., 2012, p. 2). Friedland and Alford (1991) argued that logics are comprised of a "set of material practices and symbolic constructions" (p. 248), which serve as manifestations of the underlying logic, but also work to reinforce the taken-for-granted nature of the logic itself. Therefore, to understand the institutional logic that animates an organization, it is necessary to look at the symbolic constructions and material practices within that community.

This chapter examines the symbolic aspects of the theo-political logic that were at work at King's Academy. By analyzing school documents, classroom observations, and interviews with faculty and staff, I demonstrate in this chapter that the language and theory of the Christian worldview were central to the theo-political logic represented and communicated to students. To do this, in the first major section, I briefly revisit the theoretical frameworks of institutional theory and democratic education in order to provide an understanding of the data presented here. This section of this chapter moves on to argue that the faculty and staff at King's Academy intentionally and consistently used worldview language and worldview thinking to consider public life and issues concerning citizenship and participation in broader society. In this section, I also situate the use of worldview language at King's within the larger context of the history of worldview thinking within conservative Christianity. In the second major section of this chapter, I again draw on classroom observations and interview data to analyze the systematic vision of a Christian worldview presented to students at King's. Building on this description, the third major section of the chapter offers an analysis of the civic identity communicated through the theo-political logic. Overall, this chapter argues that the theo-political logic of King's Academy was symbolically represented to students through the language and theory of the conservative Christian "worldview," which included an all-encompassing vision of Christianity as "the truth" and offered a coherent connection between doctrinal beliefs and actual behavior. In doing this, the conservative Christian worldview served as a kind of religious warrant for a particular kind of Christian civic identity and public life. I found that the theo-political logic that was central at King's focused so heavily on religious identity that civic identity and ideas about public life were subsumed within it. This meant that students were encouraged to frame their lives, their

understandings of society, and their ways of making sense of how to live in the larger world through a religious framework, and thus were shaped as theo-political citizens.

Chapter Five presents an analysis of the central material practices and ways of thinking about actions that were central to the theo-political institutional logic that animated King's Academy. Here, I argue that the theo-political logic animating the school included multiple schemas for understanding action in society. The central idea that was reflected across the schemas was that Christians ought to try to influence society and help to shape it in a manner that reflected conservative Christian morality. This included ideas about voting and engaging in other civic actions in an instrumental manner to support public officials and policies that were perceived as bolstering conservative Christian perspectives and agendas. Theo-political logic also framed societal problems, such as poverty and homelessness, and their potential solutions, as the responsibility of individuals rather than as problems produced and reproduced by structural and systemic inequities in society. Chapter Five suggests that the school's tightly coherent approach to the everyday practices of worship and service reflected and reinforced these understandings of action and civic engagement.

Chapter Six explores the ways in which both students and parents understood and responded to the theo-political logic animating King's Academy. In Chapter Six, I argue that for the most part, students embraced the theo-political logic of King's along with its implicit notions of civic and public life. Their responses can be understood in terms of what institutional theorists call "embedded agency" (Battliana & D'Aunno, 2009; Seo & Creed, 2002) wherein a larger institutional logic provides a framework within which various actors develop and respond somewhat differently, depending on their own capacities and experiences. In terms of my analysis, this means that the highly coherent theo-political logic that animated King's Academy

served as a powerful set of structures for student learning and development. Embedded within these structures, King's students navigated their civic and public lives. Furthermore, I argue in Chapter Six that parents also supported the theo-political logic of King's, and many families were pulled toward the school by the allure of an education structured by the Christian worldview while also being pushed there by conflicts, often ideological in nature, with public education and the stances and actions that characterized public schools.

### **Forming Good Christians: 'Worldview' Thinking as an Overarching Framework**

The term citizenship is often associated with belonging to a state or nation (Banks, 2021). As such, this notion carries with it concerns about the rights and duties individuals have as a result of their citizenship (Heater, 1999). In this way, citizenship and civic education have often been narrowly focused on political participation or governmentality – how communities are structured and function politically (Heater, 1999; Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). However, as Dewey (1916/1944) claimed, “democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living” (p. 87). Somewhat akin to Dewey's point here, the idea of citizenship used throughout this dissertation includes aspects of political life but also references the common life that people live in a shared community. This means participation in society includes much more than the traditional measures of citizenship such as voting; it also entails how individuals engage with their neighbors and co-workers, as well as how they participate in a shared public life with others. In the remainder of this dissertation, to communicate this larger understanding of citizenship and participation in society, I use the language, “civic and public life.” In order to understand what key ideas and messages were communicated to students at King's Academy about the nature of participation in civic and

public life, my analysis in this dissertation draws on ideas from both institutional theory and democratic theory.

As elaborated in some detail in Chapter Two, institutional theory is helpful for examining the ways organizations are animated by institutional logics that organize and rationalize life for individuals and groups. Thornton and colleagues (2012) explained institutional logic as:

Frames of reference that condition actors' choices for sensemaking, the vocabulary they use to motivate action, and their sense of self and identity. The principles, practices, and symbols of each institutional order differently shape how reasoning takes place and how rationality is perceived and experienced. (p. 2)

Institutional logics are comprised of principles that provide “frames of reference” for interpreting and making sense of the lives and social worlds of individuals. These logics consist of and are communicated through both the practices of everyday life and their symbolic representations. The present chapter specifically focuses on the symbolic representations that constituted the animating logic of King’s Academy. Symbolic representations provide a language to understand and think about the world. They serve as reflective and coherent categories that guide organizations (Scott, 2014; Thornton et al., 2021).

Along with institutional theory, this dissertation also draws on ideas about democratic education, which, as I have noted, is more than just civic education (Guttman, 1999; Hess, 2009; Levinson, 1999). A democratic education “purposely teaches young people how to *do* democracy” (Hess, 2009, p. 15). This understanding of democratic education in schools includes three main aspects—the cultivation of democratic skills and knowledge, a commitment to pluralism and tolerance, and the development of personal autonomy that allows for critical

questions of traditions and society. Together, these aspects constitute how democratic education is conceptualized throughout this dissertation.

The language of “worldview thinking” has been common within conservative Christian philosophy and schooling since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Bonzo & Stevens, 2009; Naugle, 2002). Worldview thinking has become a way to systematize and discuss one’s comprehensive perspective on the world and life. In doing so, it encompasses fundamental assumptions about reality and the world that shape how individuals or groups think about and act within the world. Christian philosopher James Olthuis (1989) described worldviews in the following manner:

The ultimate questions of life lie deep within the heart of everyone. Who am I? Where am I going? What’s it all about? Is there a god? How can I live and die happily?

Everyone formulates some answer to these questions about the human condition, if only partially or implicitly. The answer we give may be referred to as our worldview, or vision of life. It may or may not be thematized or codified, but it makes up the framework of fundamental considerations which give context, direction, and meaning to our lives. (p. 26)

Here Olthuis highlighted that at its most basic level, a worldview is understood as a vision of life, even if it is partially thought through or implicitly assumed. Olthuis further explained that the worldview a person holds inevitably affects “both our perceptions of the world and our actions in the world” (p. 26). In a similar way, Christian thinker James Sire (2004), who has helped to popularize the notion of worldview thinking within conservative and evangelical Christianity (Naugle, 2002), defined worldview as “a set of presuppositions (assumptions which may be true, partially true or entirely false) which we hold (consciously or subconsciously, consistently or inconsistently) about the basic makeup of the world” (p. 19). In short, according

to Sire, worldview is simply the presuppositions we hold about the basic makeup of the world. Throughout my time at King's Academy, worldview language dominated the way people talked and thought about Christianity. The following section explains the usage of that language at King's and traces some of the historical developments of worldview thinking within conservative Christianity in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Worldview Thinking as Guardrails at King's Academy**

Worldview thinking was central to the way that administrators and faculty at King's thought about education and Christianity. In fact, worldview thinking drove not only classroom teaching, but also how the community organized itself as a school. Because it functioned as a central theory of life and practice, worldview thinking served as a way to frame how those within the organization saw the world around them. The leadership of King's Academy made an intentional choice to use worldview thinking as the overarching scheme for organizing the way they not only thought about and articulated Christianity but also how they educated students.

According to the school's strategic plan, "developing a school-wide worldview curriculum map" (King's, 2021a, p. 9) was one of the major academic initiatives they had been working on and planned to continue to focus on in the coming years. Highlighting this, Amy Smith, the academic dean, claimed in an interview that consciously working and building the worldview program was of vital importance for both the school and students. Talking about this initiative, she explained:

A major aspect that we know we're building into and building upon is a worldview program. I think our school is distinctive and I think our school has much to learn from others, but we can continue to really improve our worldview program and engage

students in major discussions and give them the opportunity to think, to reason, and to ask good questions.

The worldview program Mrs. Smith referenced included the Worldview<sup>3</sup> courses that students in the high school were required to take and the overarching approach King's faculty took towards presenting Christianity as a worldview.

The most obvious piece of the worldview program at King's was the sequence of four classes students were required to take, one each year, while in high school (see Table 4.1 for course scope and sequence). These courses aimed to engage students with fundamental questions about truth, Christianity, and living in the world. It is important to note that the presence of Worldview classes did not mean that the language and thinking of Christianity as a worldview was only confined to these specific classes. Rather, worldview language and concepts were intentionally used throughout the school to help members of the community understand the school's approach to education. In fact, during the 2021-2022 school year, the Worldview teacher, Mary Anderson, led the faculty in professional development by studying Roger Erdvig's (2021) book, *Beyond Biblical Integration: Immersing You and Your Students in a Biblical Worldview*. As the title suggests, the main argument of this text was that Christian school teachers ought to intentionally teach all subject matter "from a biblical worldview perspective" (p. 181) and thus provide students with a complete immersion into the biblical worldview. The goal of this professional development was to help teachers in every subject frame their classes and teach from the perspective of worldview thinking.

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<sup>3</sup> Throughout this dissertation, when speaking of the Worldview class I capitalize the term worldview. When discussing the concept of worldview, I use lowercase.

**Table 4.1***Worldview Curriculum Map at King's Academy*

<b>Course Title</b>	<b>Grade Level</b>	<b>Central Topics</b>
Worldview I: Examining the Biblical Worldview	9	Why apologetics? How can we know truth? Does God exist? Is the Bible true? – Part I Is the resurrection true? – Part I Is Jesus the only way? The problem of evil – Part I Who are we?
Worldview II: Engaging the Biblical Worldview	10	Objections to God What is the church? Is the resurrection true? – Part II How do we engage culture? Is the Bible true? – Part II What is the gospel?
Worldview III: Elevating the Biblical Worldview	11	Apologetic methods Who was C. S. Lewis? The problem of evil – Part II Apologetic debates & ministries More objections to Christianity How do we live? Science and Christianity
Worldview IV: Ethics of the Biblical Worldview	12	Biblical foundation of life Personhood God's design for marriage God's design for sexuality Reproductive technologies Transhumanism & the soul Grace & truth

*Notes.* This table is based on individual course maps developed by Mary Anderson King's Academy, 2021.

The language of the Christian worldview served as the overarching framework presented to students to help them understand their lives and the world. While not all faculty members presented worldview thinking in the same manner, there was a consistent message that what made education at King's Academy unique was that it was shaped by the Christian worldview. During my interview with faculty member, Adam Mueller, he discussed how the notion of worldview worked to frame how those in the school viewed themselves and reality. Adam had

worked part-time at King's since 2019, teaching in the Bible department and leading the drama department. When asked about the importance and role of Christian schooling, Mr. Mueller explained to me:

I think Christian schools should be schools first and foremost. The main objective is education, that's what I would say. But then being able to do this in an atmosphere and with the philosophical guardrails of the Christian worldview. In that sense, if that's what they're doing if they're primarily . . . I guess what I'm saying is I don't see Christian schools as missionary factories, just turning out missionaries or what it might be. I would see it primarily as we're here to educate kids, everything from reading, writing, arithmetic, to higher level learning. It's primarily about educating them. And then that [is done] under the auspices of Christian philosophy and Christian ethics and all that sort of stuff.<sup>4</sup>

Following this statement, I asked Mr. Mueller to explain what he meant by the language of worldview and whether or not there was a diversity of Christian worldviews. In response, he said:

For me personally, what I would say is that any educator, even in a public school, there's going to be a lane that's presented. Do you know what I mean? Whether it's just teacher to teacher, and I really can't say anything about public schools because I've never been a part of one, so I don't really know. But my guess would be, because public schools are supposed to be non-religious, but certain things are going to come out from the teachers.

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<sup>4</sup> In direct quotes from participants, I use ellipses to indicate a pause by the speaker rather than to indicate an omission. Pauses were often moments when participants stopped to think, rephrase, or restate something that had been said already in the interview. Throughout this dissertation, when reading quotes from individual participants ellipses should be read as pauses, not as omissions.

It's impossible, we're incurably religious as human beings, even those that would not claim religion. That's my view. So, you're going to present some sort of reality, it's impossible not to. What I would say then as a Christian is – what we're doing is we are presenting the Christian worldview broadly in terms of the existence of an almighty, all-knowing creator person that we would call God. And as best we can, presenting reality from the perspective of the Bible. But for me personally, I would say, I think that is fairly broad because I do believe there's ... Christianity is a wide swath.

For Mr. Mueller, all teaching comes or should come, from a perspective that is religious or quasi-religious. Teaching is more than providing information about arithmetic, literature, or history. Teaching entails the presentation of reality, and Christian teaching is the presentation of a Christian view of reality. Of all the faculty and staff, I talked with, Mr. Mueller seemed to present the broadest understanding of the Christian worldview in the sense that he made room for a wide variety of variations of Christianity, as long as they held to the core belief of the existence of an almighty, all-knowing personal creator and sought to understand reality from the perspective of the Bible. However, even while he understood Christianity as a “wide swath,” he also highlighted that teaching at King's meant that the Christian worldview provided the guardrails that shaped the content of the curriculum.

The metaphor of the Christian worldview as guardrails helped explain how worldview language was used at King's. For travelers along a road, guardrails serve at least two functions. First, they provide safety for travelers, keeping them on the road they're traveling and away from the dangers that may exist beyond the road. Secondly, guardrails help define the road being traveled. That is, they mark the boundary between the road being traveled and the wild beyond the road. As guardrails, the Christian worldview provided the boundaries within which students

were educated at King's and also provided a framework that shaped the way students saw and understood the world around them.

Mr. Mueller was not alone in his claim that teaching was always grounded in a perspective about the world. All the faculty and staff members I talked with understood the importance of holding and teaching from a Christian worldview. As a school organization, King's Academy intentionally adopted the language of worldview thinking as the means of organizing the curriculum. This was seen in the strategic planning of the school and reflected in the curriculum itself. But what is more important, the language of worldview was the normal way faculty and staff thought and talked about the craft of teaching. They explained that they were helping students learn to see all things "through the lens of a believer," as Bible and science teacher Jill Larson explained when asked what it meant to teach with a Christian worldview.

It's important to note that worldview theory and language have a history in both philosophy and Christian theology. In order to better understand how worldview thinking served as both the language and theory that communicated a theo-political logic to students, it helps to step away from the school for a moment and examine how worldview thinking was introduced into conservative Christianity at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The next section briefly examines the introduction of worldview thinking within conservative evangelical thinking, and how this eventually was taken on by Conservative Christian schools.

### **The Historical Development of Worldview Thinking in Christianity**

In order to understand the concept of worldview as a way of theorizing life, it is helpful to understand the history of how this idea was incorporated into Christianity and Conservative Christian education. The idea of a Christian worldview was first articulated by two Christian scholars attempting to make sense of Christianity in the rapidly changing world of the late 19<sup>th</sup>

century (Naugle 2002, 2009). The first to intentionally use this language was the Scottish Presbyterian theologian, James Orr, who delivered his now-famous Kerr Lectures in Edinburgh in 1891, later published as *The Christian View of God and the World* (1897). The second was the Dutch theologian and statesman, Abraham Kuyper, whose Stone Lectures at Princeton in 1898 articulated the need to understand Christianity as a world and life system (Kuyper, 1931/2000, Naugle 2002). Like Orr, Kuyper's lectures were also later published as *Lectures in Calvinism* (1931/2000).

While these two lectures were geographically separated by the Atlantic Ocean, the content fit together to help formulate a foundation for worldview thinking within Christianity. Both Orr and Kuyper attempted to respond to conflicts Christianity experienced within the modern world, particularly with the rise of social science as a way of explaining society, the Darwinian explanation of human origins, and historical criticism's approach to the Bible, which sought to understand the text as a historical document rather than a product of divine inspiration. In the face of a rapidly changing society and challenges to Christian doctrine, both thinkers defended Christianity by presenting it as a unified system of thought rather than isolated doctrines or ideas (Naugle, 2002). To do this, they turned to the German word *weltanschauung*, which they translated as "worldview" or "world and life view." The term *weltanschauung* first appeared in Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Judgement* in 1790 to explain how one apprehended objects in the world as moral and aesthetic realities (Naugle, 2002; Sanchez, 2021). In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Wilhelm Dilthey popularized the term as a way of describing the historical contingencies that shaped one's understanding of life (Sanchez, 2021). Using this philosophical background, both Orr and Kuyper translated *weltanschauung* into a powerful way of understanding Christianity.

Orr used the idea of a unifying world and life view, a *weltanschauung*, to help give coherence to Christianity. In his 1891 Kerr lectures, Orr explained Christianity as an apprehending of the world that differed from other ways of thinking, be they religious or modern. At the beginning of his lecture, Orr (1897) claimed:

He who with his whole heart believes in Jesus as the Son of God is thereby committed to much else besides. He is committed to a view of God, to a view of man, to a view of sin, to a view of Redemption, to a view of the purpose of God in creation and history, to a view of human destiny, found only in Christianity. This forms a ‘Weltanschauung,’ or “Christian view of the world,” which stands in marked contrast with theories wrought out from a purely philosophical or scientific standpoint. (p. 4)

Orr presented Christianity as a unified system where beliefs about humanity and society flowed directly from doctrinal claims and Christianity was set in “marked contrast” from other perspectives. Eight years after Orr’s lecture introduction of the Christian worldview as a systematic whole way of life, another European thinker would articulate the importance of the Christian worldview, but this time, on the other side of the Atlantic.

Abraham Kuyper was not only a theologian but also helped start the Free University of Amsterdam and served as the prime minister of the Netherlands from 1901-1905 (Naugle, 2002). Kuyper’s work was driven by the desire to see Christianity influence every aspect of life and society (Naugle, 2002; de Vriers, 1931/2000). His lectures presented the theology of Calvinism as a whole world and life view which was not just about believing specific doctrines, but about organizing life in particular ways. Like Orr, Kuyper saw a fundamental conflict between the Christian way of apprehending the world and a secular modern perspective. At the beginning of the Stone Lectures, Kuyper (1931/2000) explained:

Two *life systems* are wrestling with one another, in mortal combat. Modernism is bound to build a world of its own from the data of the natural man, and to construct man himself from the data of nature; while, on the other hand, all those who reverently bend the knee to Christ and worship Him as the Son of the living God, and God himself, are bent upon saving the “Christian Heritage.” This is *the* struggle in Europe, this is *the* struggle in America. (p. 11)

This is an important passage because Kuyper presented an either/or relationship between the Modern life system and the Christian one. Furthermore, here he referenced Orr’s *Christian View of God and the World* in a footnote and expressly stated that his use of the word “life-system” is the attempt to translate the German *weltanschauung* which Orr translated as a *view of the world* (Kuyper, 1931/2000, p. 11, fn. 1). Kuyper built on Orr’s work and argued that a worldview was not just a unified system of belief but it also forms a kind of pre-theoretical interpretive grid through which one makes sense of experience. While this is similar to what other thinkers would come to refer to as tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 1958/2015) or even the taken-for-granted world of experience (Berger & Luckman, 1967), Kuyper’s notion was different, as he argued one’s perspective on the world was shaped first and foremost by one’s orientation to God, thus placing Christianity in contrast with secular views (Kuyper, 1913/2000).

Later thinkers such as Gordon Clark and Harold Ockenga contributed to popularizing the use of the language of worldview in the United States. This not only influenced the way Christianity was understood but also the nature of Christian schooling. Gordon Clark (1902-1986) was one of the leading Christian philosophers of his time and taught at the evangelical Wheaton College before becoming the chair of the philosophy department at Butler University (Naugle, 2002). Clark was influenced by Orr’s work and devoted the first two chapters of his *A*

*Christian Philosophy of Education* (1946) to explaining the need for a Christian worldview in education. Clark's influence extended to individuals such as Carl Henry, who became the first editor-in-chief of *Christianity Today*, which was founded in 1956 (Worthen, 2014). According to Worthen (2014), under Henry's leadership *Christianity Today* was responsible for bringing Orr's idea of a unique coherent Christian worldview to churches and Christians throughout the United States. Through *Christianity Today* the Christian worldview was brought to bear on all aspects of life including schooling.

Henry Ockenga (1905-1985) also played an important role in popularizing the Christian worldview and influencing Christian education. He helped found and was the inaugural president of the National Association of Evangelicals (Cook, 2021). Ockenga called for a Christian *weltanschauung* to combat the influences of fascism, Nazism, communism, and liberalism (Worthen, 2014) making it clear that the Christian worldview was not just about theological claims but was also mixed with cultural and social positions (Cook, 2021). Several years after it was founded, the NAE helped to establish the National Association of Christian Schools (NACS), dedicated to founding and running Christian day schools (Slater, 2019). This led to the formation of a Christian school movement in the 1970s and to the formation of the Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI), the largest association of Conservative Christian schools in the United States (Swezey, 2006).

The historical development of worldview thinking within conservative and evangelical Christianity highlights several central features. First, the use of the term worldview presented Christianity as having its own coherent logic and reason, a perspective that helped Christianity face the rising challenges of modern society. Second Christianity was presented as a unified system of belief *and* practice, which meant specific social and cultural positions within the world

were the logical consequences of holding to Christian doctrine. Third, Christian worldview thinking included a clear distinction from non-Christian ways of thinking and acting within the world. These features of the Christian worldview became central to worldview thinking for evangelical and conservative Christianity and Christian education. Not surprisingly, these features were central to the way worldview was theorized and presented at King's Academy.

### **Theo-political Logic as Christian Worldview**

At King's Academy, the theory and language of worldview served as the primary symbolic representation of the theo-political logic that animated the school at large. As noted above, symbolic representations carry institutional logics and provide individuals and groups with the concepts and language to make sense of their lives in society. Analyzing the way worldview concepts and language were used at King's Academy helped to reveal the logic that drove this organization. My analysis of school documents, classroom observations, and interviews with faculty and staff pointed to four central aspects that demonstrated worldview thinking and teaching at King's. First, the truth was emphasized as the central feature of the Christian worldview along with the point that this idea conflicted with competing worldviews. Second, the Christian worldview was presented as all-encompassing, providing a coherent connection between doctrinal beliefs and specific ethical behaviors. Third, the Christian worldview presented at King's was not about religion per se but was mixed with socially conservative political stances. Fourth, love was presented as a key characteristic of what it meant to embody the Christian worldview, although, as I discuss later, love was understood as subservient to the truth. King's Academy's powerful theo-political logic was symbolically represented through the language and thinking of worldview; it was primarily a religious logic that carried with it implications for civic and political life.

## **The Centrality of Absolute Truth for the Christian Worldview**

Jill Larson was a passionate teacher at King's Academy who deeply cared about the lives of her students – her “kiddos” as she referred to them. Before and after class she often asked students about their day and talked with them about various aspects of their lives, often she even offered them hugs as they left. Every time I talked with her over the course of the year about students, her love and care for them was evident. During an early morning senior Bible class, she began with a devotional thought for the day. “Before going back to our lesson, I want to look at Philippians 4:8,” as several students began to look up the biblical text on their computer or took out their Bibles, she began to read from her own well-worn Bible:

“Finally brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” This verse helps us align our thoughts and goals, what do we spend our time thinking about? Is it the truth? Is it good? Mrs. Larson further commented, “This is similar to what Jesus said in John's gospel in chapter eight verses 31-32. We need to abide in the word of God, which is true. And this truth sets you free.” Thinking about the truth and living according to that truth for Mrs. Larson, and King's Academy, was essential to living in accordance with Christianity. According to Mrs. Larson, there was truth to be found in Christianity, and to be a believer was to focus on this truth of and to align one's life with this truth.

As was typical of teachers at King's, Mrs. Larson's implied, Christianity was a worldview that offered students the *true* view of the world. King's Academy was a school committed to the idea that Christianity carried with it the absolute truth about God, humanity, and the world. In fact, a commitment to truth was listed as the first of the school's core values.

Using the same verse Mrs. Larson referenced, John 8:32, the Core Values of King's stated "we value absolute truth rooted in the Bible, creation and the personhood of Jesus Christ" (King's, 2021a, p. 7). This kind of language, common to school documents and faculty, made it clear that the Christian worldview presented was not simply one way to see the world; rather, the Christian worldview was *the* way to see the world and *the* truth about the world. My observations, interviews, and document analysis made clear that in the way the Christian worldview was presented and discussed at King's, two important aspects stood out. The first was that Christianity was the *only* truth—that is, the Christian worldview was *the* only proper way to understand all of life. The second, which was a way to reinforce the claim that Christianity is the only truth, was the way other viewpoints, or worldviews, were challenged as being false representations of the world and life.

### ***The Christian Worldview as the Truth***

Mrs. Larson's Bible class crystallized the way the Christian worldview was presented to students at King's as the only truth. As Mrs. Larson explained to me after my first observation of her class (and I heard her remind students of this point throughout the year), the senior Bible class she taught was based upon a text from the Gospel of Matthew wherein Jesus is portrayed as saying, "Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few" (*English Standard Version*, 2001/2011, Matthew 7:13-14). Throughout the year, in her class discussions and assignments, Mrs. Larson emphasized to students the idea that there were two paths one could live by. One of these paths, the "wide path," she described as following one's own desires and feelings, trusting in oneself, and living according to the world. This was a false life, she said, one that led ultimately to

destruction. The other path, the “narrow” one Mrs. Larson described as leading to truth, was the path of self-denial and of trusting in the truth of God. In Mrs. Larson’s teaching, there was only one way to the truth – through Christ and Christianity. All other ways led to falsehood and destruction. Here Mrs. Larson presented several dichotomies that helped distinguish Christianity and non-Christian ways of living. These included the difference between trusting God and trusting one’s own self, between self-denial and being driven by one’s desires and feelings, between the truth and falsehoods, and ultimately between life and death. According to Mrs. Larson, life “worked” when lived according to *the* truth, and the truth was found only in Christianity. The implication of this was that life outside of Christianity, away from God, was not only false but also led to destruction.

This same singular focus on Christianity as the only truth was clear in interviews with Mrs. Larson as well. When I asked about helping students live in a pluralistic and polarized society, she pointed back to Christianity as the only truth students could rely on. She explained:

I hope that they [students], again, like with Bible class, connect with the Word [the Bible], and they see it for what it is. See it through the right lens. Not try to pick opinions and pick sides, but truly just ask what does the Word of God say? And they’re able to just withstand those things that are out there. They recognize what it really is, what the spirit behind whatever it is, that they see it through those spiritual lenses. That no matter the situation, no matter the struggle. In all of these different opinions and all these things, what does the Word of God say? So, this year has been like, should I trust my own heart? And we talked about how people, the heart is, no! So, understanding that, what is it, what is the one thing I can trust? I can trust the Word. I can trust the Holy Spirit in all things,

to be able to decipher when to speak, when not to speak, what to give ear to, what not to, who to hang out with, who not to hang out with, and what opinions really matter.

In the midst of pluralism and polarization, Mrs. Larson wanted students to hold on to the one thing that was true and the one thing they could trust – the Word of God, the Bible. For her, it was not about trusting their own selves or trying to weigh various opinions and ideas, it was about looking to the Bible itself because it was the only thing to be trusted.

While Mrs. Larson did not use the language of the Christian worldview in this comment, her understanding of Christianity, and specifically the Bible, as being the only truth, was consistent with the core values of King’s Academy and the way other teachers approached the truth. The point was that even though they lived in a pluralistic society, students were taught to ignore any and all messages that did not align with the truth of the Bible. Opinions and ideas that went against the Bible were not to be trusted. In the midst of a pluralistic and polarized society, King’s Academy students were told to trust the truth of God as their guide for engaging with society at large. Contrary to a democratic approach to education, pluralism at King’s was not seen as something to cultivate or value, it was seen as the competition for truth. Students at King’s were thus not taught how to deliberate within a pluralistic society or to learn from others; they were taught the importance of holding onto *the truth*, defined as the Christian worldview.

### ***The Christian Worldview and Other Worldviews***

Building on the idea that Christianity was the only truth, the Christian worldview was invoked to challenge and ultimately reject other viewpoints, or worldviews, which were characterized as false understandings of the world and life. This was clear when Mrs. Anderson, the Worldview teacher and head of the Bible department, covered race and racism in the senior Worldview class. Mrs. Anderson devoted several days to talking about race and racism from the

perspective of a Christian worldview. Over the course of these classes, she explained critical race theory to students and discussed some of its major tenants.

Mrs. Anderson introduced critical race theory by negatively comparing it to the Civil Rights Movement, which she argued was based on a color-blind ideology that looked specifically at the actions and behaviors of individuals in society. She explained that color-blind ideology sought to ignore race, to treat all individuals equally, and to make judgments solely on an individual's actions. In contrast to color-blind ideology, Mrs. Anderson claimed critical race theory was a worldview that attempted to rethink history in terms of group oppression and exploitation. Thus, making racial identity more important than an individual's actions. To further explain CRT, she used a YouTube video from James Lindsey, a mathematician who entered public debates after his involvement in writing hoax scientific papers in academic journals in what became known as the "grievance studies" affair, or the "Sokal Squared" scandal (Mangan, 2019; Melchior, 2018). Lindsey has since become a cultural critic of many progressive ideas, particularly CRT. While he himself has claimed to be an atheist (Lindsay, 2015), many Christians have used and supported his critiques of CRT and "woke" ideology (Joyce, 2022, Smietana, 2021). In the video used by Mrs. Anderson in class, Lindsey claimed that CRT was un-American because it "rejects the core tenets of the American classically liberal Judeo-Christian value system" (Lindsey, 2021). Further, he explained, "Critical Race Theory holds that the most important thing about you is your race. The color of your skin, that's who you are" (Lindsey, 2021). Lindsey did acknowledge that there was a "kernel of truth" in CRT, particularly with respect to the origins of racism and imperialism in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, any truth that could have been found in CRT was ignored in class. After the video, Mrs. Anderson offered her own commentary and explanation on Lindsey and CRT: "He's right about CRT. If you're white,

you're inherently racist according to CRT. CRT is incompatible with Christianity and a biblical worldview.”

Here Mrs. Anderson made a truth claim about both CRT and the Christian worldview. First, she explained CRT not simply as a theory or perspective one can use when analyzing history and racism in America, instead she classified it as a worldview, a comprehensive way of understanding the world and acting within that world. Her next move was to claim that this worldview was contrary to the Christian worldview. Since the Christian worldview was understood to be correct and to hold the truth, then all other views had to be false. Because CRT, as a worldview, was different from the Christian worldview, Mrs. Anderson taught the class to dismiss it as false. Rather than trying to understand whether CRT contained truth or provided a helpful way of thinking about racism, it was rejected outright. The message presented to students was that if anything ran counter to, or was different from, the Christian worldview, then that view should be rejected as a competing worldview. According to Mrs. Anderson, the truth of the Christian worldview held that all other views were false and should be dismissed rather than engaged with and learned from.

The treatment of issues related to race in Mrs. Anderson's class, particularly the unification of color-blind ideology and Christianity as well as the anti-critical race perspective, served to mask the racialized structures of society. According to Bonilla-Silva (2013), this kind of color-blind ideology, which has been the dominant strategy in understanding race post-civil rights era, makes it possible to ignore racialized social systems that reinforce white privilege. By focusing simply on the personal aspects of racism, Mrs. Anderson ignored the “network of social relations at social, political, economic, and ideological levels that shape the life chances of the

various races” (Bonilla-Silva, 2013, p. 32). As Bonilla-Silva argued, color-blind ideology and strategy are powerful tools for obscuring the structure of racism in society.

Much as Jim Crow racism served as the glue for defending a brutal and overt system of racial oppression in the pre-civil rights era, color-blind racism serves today as the ideological armor for a covert and institutionalized system in the post-civil rights era.

And the beauty of this new ideology is that it aids in the maintenance of white privilege without fanfare, without naming those who it subjects and those who it rewards. (p. 15)

By framing racial problems as individual or personal issues, the theo-political logic that was pervasive at King’s obscured the fact that in the U.S., white supremacy is a central way of organizing society and life.

At the core of King’s Academy, the theo-political logic was a commitment to the absolute truth of Christianity. This commitment to truth included the premise that other ideas or perspectives were not simply different, they were false. This created a binary understanding of truth, suggesting that there could be little learning from other views nor could there be a dialogue about topics or issues that might be unclear or uncertain. A commitment to the absolute truth of the Christian worldview carried with it certainty and assurance. Bible teacher Adam Mueller highlighted this clearly when we talked about diverse opinions at the school.

I don’t know many people who are able to embrace the doubt or embrace the nuance and say, ‘Well, I’m not sure.’ Because we’ve been taught our whole lives, partially because it is true, that truth exists. There is such a thing as absolute truths. And I totally believe that but maybe a side effect of that is it’s really hard for us in areas that maybe are more gray to be able to go, ‘I don’t know.’

As Mr. Mueller articulated, a commitment to and belief in absolute truth did not leave much room for doubts or questions, and even less room for finding truth in other worldviews. The theo-political logic at King's carried with it a commitment to absolute truth and the confidence that it was to be found only in the Christian worldview. This view of truth closed off discussion and limited the authentic exploration of various ideas that many have argued are necessary for cultivating democratic citizens. Along these lines, Hess (2009) has argued that discussion is not only "a way to learn, but also a skill to be learned" (p. 29) but for there to be discussion, there must be an openness to difference and other perspectives. Discussion can be an important pedagogical tool to help students engage with various interpretations of their lives and collectively entertain various meanings of phenomena in the world (Parker, 2006). Many scholars suggest that open discussion, which includes listening and entertaining other points of view, is a necessary skill for living in a democratic society (Hess, 2009; Parker, 2006). In a pluralistic democracy, students need to understand how to dialogue with others in order to discern the common good. However, at King's, the hyper-focus on truth as an essential part of the conservative Christian worldview forestalled authentic discussion and therefore opportunities to learn about being a democratic citizen. This approach does not allow students to develop their own democratic skills, nor does it help them come to understand how to engage with the pluralism of society in a way that fosters tolerance. The language and theory of worldview thinking were more than simply focused on truth. As the next section shows, worldview thinking offered students a unified coherent way to understand the connections between thoughts and actions.

### **The All-Encompassing Coherence of the Worldview**

One of the key features of worldview thinking in general concerned the way beliefs and practices were united into a wholistic understanding of life (Naugle, 2009). The way individuals live was assumed to be based on beliefs or ideas they had about the world, humanity, and ultimate reality. Worldview language was tantamount to offering a comprehensive, or totalizing, view of life. In Peshkin's (1986) classic analysis of Bethany Baptist Academy, a Christian fundamentalist school in the 1980s, he used the work of sociologist Erving Goffman (1961) to argue the school was a "totalizing" institution that desired separation from the world and sought control over all of life for those who were connected to the school. As I show below, there are similarities between what Peshkin said about Bethany Baptist as a totalizing institution and the function of worldview thinking as a totalizing view of life at King's.

This all-encompassing nature of worldview thinking, which provided a coherent connection between theological beliefs and practical behavior, was present throughout King's Academy. In this section, I explore the ways in which faculty and staff presented the Christian worldview as impacting every area of a person's life.

Central to the teachers' understanding of worldview was the idea that a worldview provided answers to some of life's most basic questions. Because Mrs. Anderson was the Worldview class teacher, I asked her during our interview to clarify what she meant by this term. She explained it as a lens that helped one see their life and the world.

It's the lens through which you view life and answer the big questions of life like, why am I here? How did I get here? What happens to me when I die? How do I treat others? How do I function within this world?

In referring to a worldview as a lens, Mrs. Anderson evoked the image of putting on glasses that helped make what a person was looking at clear, blurry, or colored in some way. And, as she

noted, this lens impacted all of life by answering its biggest questions. The list of questions Mrs. Anderson claimed a worldview answered dealt with issues of purpose, ultimate origins and destination of life, interpersonal interactions, and navigating society. For Mrs. Anderson, there was no aspect of life that was untouched by one's worldview.

Defining a worldview as providing answers to life's major questions was also common with other teachers at King's. Bible teacher Adam Muller was walking his class through the Gospel of Matthew, specifically a passage known widely as the Sermon on the Mount, when the students started to ask about the nature of religion and worldviews. Mr. Muller explained to the class that at their core, worldviews offer specific answers to life's biggest questions: questions like, why are we here, what's our purpose, what happens when we die, where did we come from, and why. For all the faculty at King's that I observed and interviewed, the language of worldview provided a shorthand way for talking about a comprehensive perspective that individuals used to answer the major questions about life and the world. But worldview thinking was more than just providing answers to these questions. Worldview thinking provided a unified and comprehensive view of the world which in turn influenced everything in life.

Worldview thinking at King's was presented in a way that implied one's worldview influenced every aspect of life. This became the standard message that students received in Mrs. Anderson's senior Worldview class. When she began a unit looking at Christianity and LGBTQ+ issues, Mrs. Anderson started by explaining some of the assignments students were going to complete over the next several days. In the middle of this explanation, she made a point to emphasize to the class that the ways in which people live are based on and filtered through the worldview they hold. The idea that actions and ways of living were based on one's worldview was an idea that Mrs. Anderson would repeat throughout the year to her students. She tried to

communicate that the worldview a person holds was not simply about fundamental questions concerning life but it also shaped an individual's actions and the way they lived in the world. Throughout this unit, Mrs. Anderson taught that the Christian worldview held that gender and sex were identical and were rooted in the way God created humanity. This meant that the only correct sexual and romantic relationships were between a biological male and a biological female, all other relationships were contrary to the Christian worldview.

Several days later, the class was looking more closely at transgender issues, specifically as they related to teens deciding to transition away from the gender assigned to them at birth. On the first day of this unit, Mrs. Anderson broke students into various groups and assigned each group a different reading (Anderson, 2018; Cretella et al., 2017; Dhejne, 2011; Littman, 2018). This was intended to provide them with what she referred to as “well-researched articles for students to learn from.” One of these articles was a paper Mrs. Anderson wrote for a theology class at a large conservative Christian university in the Mid-Atlantic region where she was working on her Ph.D. in theology through a distance learning program. Two of the other articles were written and published by conservative groups – the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank dedicated to promoting “public policies based on the principles of free enterprise, limited government, individual freedom, traditional American values, and a strong national defense” (Heritage, 2022) and the American College of Pediatricians, a group started by 60 doctors who broke away from the American Academy of Pediatrics after the Academy supported same-sex adoption in 2002 (ACLU, 2012). Despite their varying foci, all of these articles supported the position that gender reassignment was wrong and harmful to teens. Instead, these articles advocated counseling for teenagers who sought gender reassignment due to gender dysphoria because, as one article claimed, “as many as 98% of gender confused boys and 88% of

gender confused girls eventually accept their biological sex after naturally passing through puberty” (Cretella, et al., 2017, p. 2).

Students were asked to read these articles and use what they learned from them to have an organized class discussion about teens who were transitioning genders. To facilitate this discussion Mrs. Anderson provided ground rules for students such as, only one person could speak at a time, students needed to look at the person speaking, and students should respond to, build upon, or challenge specific comments made by previous speakers. Mrs. Anderson had students log in to a digital discussion app that allowed her to provide specific prompts to students and where students could enter a queue to wait their turn to respond and comment.

Throughout the 45-minute class, students engaged with one another and the articles they read. They quickly realized that the various articles all presented evidence for and drew the same conclusion – that gender transitioning for teens was dangerous and gender dysphoria was a mental health problem to be handled through counseling. Throughout the discussion, students expressed agreement with the conclusions of these articles, and most comments explained how “confused” teens needed to find their identity in Jesus. In fact, many students claimed that the answer to teens who struggled with questions about gender and identity was counseling not medical assistance to transition. Students also argued that being transgender was contrary to God’s design for humans. As one student explained, “being trans is not the way you were made, God made you in the image of God and this is not the way to go.” This student used her knowledge of the theological doctrine of creation to make an ethical and social claim – namely that God created humans a particular way and it was wrong to attempt to alter this created order.

Toward the end of the class period, Mrs. Anderson intentionally pushed the conversation away from talking about the individual morality of teens and gender transitioning and towards

issues involving policies and laws governing the issue. Responding to a question concerning policy governing teens transitioning, one student related her experience of transferring away from a public school when she was in sixth grade because the school board in her town had decided to convert their bathrooms to gender-neutral ones, despite the protest of many parents. The student used this experience to indicate that schools often overstep the authority of parents regarding gender issues. She thought that taking parents out of decisions about their teenage children's gender was problematic and that society should have policies to include parents in these discussions.

Following up on these students' comments, another student also expressed frustration with the lack of parental rights and voice on gender issues in public schools. The second student had transferred to King's Academy at the beginning of her junior year and was from a working-class family whose parents were both non-believers. She explained to me in an interview later in the year that her parents were very socially conservative and therefore fit into the school community even though they were not religious. Focusing on parental rights in regard to their children she exclaimed

It's amazing I can't get my ear pierced without my mother's signature, so I think it's baffling that a child that is literally modifying their hormones and 'what's down there' and the fact that they are making that decision, it's so ... so, I don't want to say wrong, but it's weird. Why are they allowed to make these decisions, I don't understand it.

While holding back from claiming gender transitioning was wrong for all teens, this student indicated her own disagreement and frustration with policies regarding the lack of parental involvement in health and social decisions.

As the class period drew to a close, Mrs. Anderson revisited the comments about the establishment of gender-neutral bathrooms in public schools. She explained that this episode demonstrated why it was important to talk about Christianity and politics in Worldview class. This example stood out to Mrs. Anderson because she too served on her local public school board committee. She explained to the class that she carried her Christian worldview with her into school board meetings. “Policy comes from people’s worldviews,” she declared to the class. Then she made a short speech about the importance of paying attention to people’s worldviews, specifically those people running for local offices like school board positions because they could have a dramatic impact on students’ everyday lives. While she explained the role of worldviews and their connection with political decisions, Mrs. Anderson also provided students with important civics information about the role and importance of local elections.

In providing her own example and leading this discussion, Mrs. Anderson’s aim was to demonstrate an important civic lesson to students under the banner of Christianity and theology. Mrs. Anderson emphasized that living from a Christian worldview did not mean withdrawing from society but, to the contrary, it meant engaging with the social issues of the day from the Christian worldview. In fact, she used her own involvement with her local public school board, despite the fact that her own children were in college or were students at King’s, to provide students with an example of Christian involvement with the democratic structures of society. This was one of a few times I observed when a teacher shared an example with students about her own involvement with society. It is important to note that the social involvement this discussion seemed to encourage, along with Mrs. Anderson’s own individual involvement with the local school board, did not have to do with the common good or with participating in deliberative democracy. Rather the point was how to illustrate the implementation of one’s

Christian worldview in a pluralistic society. The theo-political logic that was conveyed through the concepts and language of worldview taught students to put their religious identity front and center as a guide for civic actions and to subsume their civic engagement within their commitment to the Christian worldview.

The framing of Mrs. Anderson's unit on LGBTQ issues demonstrated the all-encompassing nature of worldview thinking at King's. To refer to a worldview as all-encompassing was to claim that it was not simply about how one perceived the world and society, but it also determined and shaped how one acted within society. As Mrs. Anderson stated, behaviors were linked to and in fact, were the natural outflow of worldviews. Chapter Five specifically examines practices and actions as they related to the general theo-political logic of King's. However, what is important to note here is that worldview thinking created an all-encompassing perspective concerning thought and action. The sequence of classes looking at LGBTQ issues was framed by the idea that individuals acted through the lens of their worldview. This demonstrated that the Christian worldview was more than just the beliefs that one holds, it also connected those beliefs to actions in society. It is also important to note that this episode demonstrated the link between the Christian worldview and conservative stances on cultural and social issues, which is elaborated more specifically in the next section of this chapter.

Worldview thinking was understood at King's to be a wholistic way of seeing the world. It included beliefs about fundamental aspects of reality, humanity, and the cosmos. Furthermore, it entailed living in certain ways based on these beliefs. The theo-political logic presented through worldview thinking was one that united beliefs and actions. The message presented to students was that to hold a Christian worldview, or to be a Christian, was not simply to hold certain beliefs, but to act in particular ways because of those beliefs. Furthermore, it was

emphasized that people always, either consciously or unconsciously, based their actions on their worldviews, as Mrs. Anderson explained when talking about her role on the school board, “the worldview I have, I carry with me into the school board.” Worldview thinking at King’s presented an all-encompassing way to see all of life. Worldview was not just the ideas one held, but also determined how one lived in society.

I want to return to Peshkin’s (1986) claim that fundamentalist Christian schools like Bethany Baptist Academy where he did fieldwork were totalizing institutions. A totalizing institution is one that has an all-encompassing nature that tends to control or capture the time and interests of its members in a way that offers a “barrier to social intercourse with the outside” (Goffman, 1961, p. 4). Speaking of Bethany, Peshkin suggested that the totalizing nature of the school was seen in the fact that all participants “dr[ew] their prescriptions and proscriptions from the same ultimate authority. They ha[d] one primary source of influence that shape[d] everyone’s lives in the same way” (p. 273). Worldview thinking at King’s also provided a way of thinking about and living out Christianity, and thus presented a totalizing view of life. While there are similarities between Peshkin’s analysis and mine, my analysis differs in important ways. Peshkin’s description of Bethany Baptist as a totalizing institution focused on the way authority and control were used to promote the conformity of the community to a particular version of Christianity and to separate it from the larger society. My analysis of King’s Academy, however, focuses on the institutional logic that shaped the organization and provided those within it with a taken-for-granted view of their life and society, thus helping to form their civic and public lives. The message at King’s Academy was that thinking about and with the Christian worldview meant that students’ identity was shaped, first and foremost, by Christian commitments. This means that when it came to civic activity, such as engaging with LGBTQ issues, these issues

were framed as religious concerns rather than simply civic ones. Using worldview thinking as a way to systematize Christianity and unite thinking and acting, the theo-political logic of King's presented the Christian worldview in a way that gave religious justification for Christians' ways of entering into and engaging in public life.

Scott (2014) suggests that the symbolic forms of institutional logic help form "shared conceptions that constitute the nature of social reality and create the frames through which meaning is made" (p. 67). At King's, the language of the Christian worldview, which was based on truth, defined social reality and generated the frames students were taught to use to make sense of that reality. The Christian worldview united thinking and action. In this way, all living and acting in the world were understood to be unified around one's Christian commitments. Therefore, one's civic identity and public engagement in society were framed as an extension of an individual's religious life as a Christian. This meant that students' civic and public lives were justified and supported by their religious lives, thus forming a unified whole. In the following section, I argue that the unified Christian worldview presented at King's included not only strong religious ideals but was also intertwined with socially and politically conservative cultural assumptions.

### **The Social Conservatism of the Christian Worldview**

The Christian worldview that animated King's Academy was not only a way to understand the truth as all-encompassing, but was also mixed with a socially conservative stance regarding both culture and politics. As noted in Chapter One, the connection between Christianity and conservative politics and cultural stances emerged as part of conservative Christianity in the 1970s (Casanova, 1994, Bjork-James, 2021). Along these lines, Casanova (1994) argued that in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century conservative Protestant Christianity sometimes

referred to as evangelicalism or fundamentalism, reemerged as a public presence. He described the public face of this conservative Christianity as “a proactive offensive to restore the American way of life, a counterrevolutionary theocratic impulse to impose biblical morality upon the nation, and a proactive involvement in the public affairs of the nation” (p. 157). In keeping with Casanova’s description of conservative Protestant Christianity’s public engagement within society, previous studies of Christian education have shown that many Christian schools connect their faith with socially conservative stances on both politics and culture (Peshkin, 1986; Rose, 1988; Guhin, 2021). King’s Academy was no exception to this. The theo-political logic that governed the school was intertwined with conservative positions on cultural and political issues that were presented symbolically to students as a *conservative* Christian worldview.

Furthermore, the intertwining of conservative positions with the Christian worldview demonstrated the way civic and public life was tied together with religious life. The focus on being a Christian dictated what it meant to be a citizen. The Christian worldview carried assumptions about how to live in the world as a citizen, and these were often assumed to be a part of being a faithful Christian.

At King’s Academy, faculty claimed they worked with students from a stance of openness on difficult topics, including cultural and political issues. In fact, the strategic plan at King’s stated that one of the school’s aims was to help students “to build a deep understanding of how to think (not just what to think)” (King’s, 2021a, p. 4). This kind of statement coupled with faculty comments seemed to indicate that the aim at King’s was *not* to present a single set of answers to students, particularly on difficult or controversial topics. Rather, the stated aim was to help students engage openly and honestly with multiple perspectives and allow them to draw their own answers and conclusions. This kind of goal for students sounds like democratic

education aimed at helping students develop their own autonomy, given that autonomy is one of the key dimensions of democratic education. However, during my observations at King's Academy over the course of an entire school year, I rarely saw openness to diverse viewpoints on difficult cultural or political issues in the classroom. Instead, faculty often made comments in class that indicated that socially conservative views were part and parcel of the Christian worldview. Socially conservative views were intertwined with the Christian worldview through explicit comments concerning what Christian social positions were acceptable, and these views were also implied by the parameters and limits teachers established for allowable discussion topics, particularly with regard to controversial issues.

In an interview with Worldview teacher Mrs. Anderson, we talked about the role and place of controversial topics in the worldview curriculum. She exuded an air of openness and explained that she wanted her students to think through controversial issues for themselves. She gave the example of the topic of creation and the age of the universe. Mrs. Anderson explained:

That's a major hang-up for some non-believers to come to Christianity, 'cause all they have seen is one viewpoint and it becomes a scientific barrier for them to come to Christ. So, I present all the views – balanced, fairly, pros and cons. I don't tell the students what my view is.

She further clarified that what she saw as the plurality of views she presented to students about creation were all premised on the idea that God was responsible for creating the world and humanity, but these views varied in terms of ideas about the mechanics of God's creation and the age of the universe. From Mrs. Anderson's perspective, all of these views, even if they included evolution, were God-centered views of the creation and age of the universe that were held by various factions of the broader Christian community. Interestingly, however, on social issues, her

tone quickly changed, as she admitted to only presenting a singular, conservative Christian perspective on issues. In the same conversation, she switched to talk about her senior Worldview class and explained:

Flip that to my seniors. There are definitely controversial topics such as LGBTQ where I'm not going to give them three viewpoints, pros and cons. I'm going to give them the biblical worldview and I'm gonna show them why the biblical worldview excels in the flourishing of human beings and how these [other] worldviews do not.

There seemed to be a clear difference in how Mrs. Anderson approached theological issues versus cultural or ethical issues. While she was willing to entertain that the Christian worldview was large enough to accept various understandings of the way God created the world and humanity, this worldview was not expansive enough to include various understandings of human sexuality. In fact, there was only one view concerning gender and sexuality that she saw as consistent with the “biblical worldview.” Not only did Mrs. Anderson present only one view to students in class, but she also made it clear that this view was the correct way to understand gender and sexuality. She also emphasized that the true, “biblical worldview” led to human flourishing. To claim that only one perspective could lead to human flourishing was also to claim that other worldviews led to human deterioration or decline. Similar to the dichotomies Mrs. Larson presented in her Bible class discussed above, Mrs. Anderson demonstrated an unwillingness to present multiple perspectives on gender and sexuality with her students and in doing so she communicated to them that there was only one acceptable Christian view. Based on this and other examples, it was clear that the theo-political logic animating King’s Academy encompassed a particular conservative perspective on social issues; that is, conservative political

and social positions were inextricably entangled with, almost baked into, the Christian worldview.

One might argue that Mrs. Anderson's teaching of gender and sexuality was not linked with social conservatism, but was simply her attempt to maintain what she understood to be an orthodox theological position. However, in the same interview as above, Mrs. Anderson continued to link Christianity with being conservative. When we turned to questions of politics and how Christians should choose political candidates to vote for and support, her initial comments implied that for Christians there was a wide breadth in terms of whom they could support. She suggested that differences in voting were a "Romans 14 issue." In the New Testament Epistle to the Romans chapter 14 chapter, the author explained that some believers chose to continue to participate in the social customs of their day, such as honoring various Roman holidays while others did not. Furthermore, some believers thought they could eat meat that had been used in the worship of idols and then offered to the public as food, while other Christians thought to eat this meat at a meal was to participate in the worshiping of those idols and gods. The author of the book of Romans argued that God had accepted all people into the church through faith, regardless of the days they chose to honor or whether or not they ate meat that had been offered to idols. Therefore, Christians were not to judge one another based on the social customs they engaged in but instead were to extend freedom and understanding toward one another.

Many biblical commentators and Christian thinkers have used this chapter from Romans to justify allowing a plurality of positions on social or political issues to coexist within Christianity (Naselli, 2017; Stott, 1994). Mrs. Anderson seemed to have this idea in mind when she clarified that when it came to voting "as a believer, you have to decide your conscience with

the Lord on this.” In the interview, she went on to talk about her own experience with the 2020 presidential election and to boast with a chuckle that she had “never-Trumper friends... I have die-hard Trumper friends, I have Biden friends, and we all get along.” And yet, Mrs. Anderson’s apparent openness disappeared a moment later as I asked for clarification about what she had said.

J: And so, from your perspective then and the way you teach the class, are all of those views legitimate? You just talked about the Biden supporters, the Trumpers, the never-Trumpers. Are all of those valid Christian perspectives that fit under a Christian worldview?

M: I would not say the Democratic platform fits under a Christian worldview. I do believe in history, it has, but not as it currently stands.

A moment later she further elaborated:

I’ve chosen to align myself with a school who holds a particular form of the biblical worldview that says, ‘We’re pro-life, we’re pro-marriage, we’re pro-family,’ you know. So, our statement of faith and our position papers as a school would be opposed to a Biden candidacy.

There appeared to be no doubt in the mind of Mrs. Anderson, despite her initial comments about a more open approach to political positions, that to hold what she considered the “Christian worldview” and what I have referred to as the “conservative Christian” perspective was inconsistent with supporting Democrats running for office or for a Biden presidency. While earlier in this same interview she claimed to allow for a diversity of political positions within Christianity, she made it clear that she thought there was a conflict between holding a Christian worldview on one hand and being or voting for a Democrat on the other. In fact, she maintained

that her position – and King’s Academy’s position – of being pro-life, pro-marriage, and pro-family precluded supporting Biden’s candidacy for president.

The implication of Mrs. Anderson’s perspective was that there are particular social stances that Christians should take and support. This meant that not all political positions were acceptable for Christians, despite Mrs. Anderson’s earlier claim that Romans 14 allowed a plurality of perspectives on political issues within Christianity. By the end of our conversation, it was very clear that Mrs. Anderson believed – and taught her students – that taking a Christian worldview in society included supporting conservative political candidates and positions. Because Mrs. Anderson was the only one who taught Worldview classes in the King’s Academy high school, every student had her at least three times a week for class during all four years. Furthermore, she also taught Bible classes which meant some students, including many of the seniors in the cohort I followed, saw her an additional five times a week. This meant that many students had Mrs. Anderson as a teacher for eight hours a week. The frequency with which King’s students were in class with Mrs. Anderson meant that she was essentially a spokesperson for the school. She presented to students a vision of Christianity that was bound up with a socially conservative stance toward culture and politics. Because these political stances were tied to the Christian worldview, they were seen as part of being a Christian. In this way, the theological logic of King’s closely intertwined civic and public life with religious life, and the message was clear that to have a Christian worldview was to be socially and politically conservative.

The idea that a Christian worldview was linked with socially conservative positions was communicated overtly by Mrs. Anderson and other faculty in the ways they approached cultural and political topics in class. In addition, the connection between being a Christian, on one hand,

and taking conservative stances on many political and cultural issues, on the other, was also reinforced by what teachers chose to leave out of their teaching. Along these lines, my analysis of interviews and observation notes revealed that there was a silencing, or a chilling effect, on various perspectives related to cultural and political issues. My interview with Cliff Winters, a history teacher who taught both Government and Economics classes for seniors, provided a good illustration of the silencing of other perspectives. Winters identified himself as a Libertarian and was the only person – adult or teenager – I interviewed who shared with me his strong “never Trump” position, though he did this quietly as if he were sharing a secret. Mr. Winters felt and understood the socially conservative ethos of King’s and was himself cautious about overtly challenging this perspective. In my interview with him, he explained his sense that the community was overwhelmingly conservative, to the point that anyone who did not share this view completely remained silent. This came out especially when we were talking about how he handled diverse student opinions in class.

J: Do your students hold a diversity of opinions, are they willing to engage with a diversity of opinions? What’s your take on that?

W: There is reasonably a diversity of opinions, but not as much as you’d see in a more diverse school setting. I think kids are afraid to, afraid to... [pause] if their opinion is different from what the more outspoken opinion is. I think they’re afraid to engage, and they’re afraid to let their opinion be known. There’s a fear of ostracization with that. And I definitely noticed that with our informal discussion about like vaccines and things like that. There are students that have very strong opinions against, and they tend to be the louder ones.

J: Against vaccines?

W: Yeah, against the Covid vaccines in particular. I didn't know that people were that anti-vaccine before this. Apparently, they were. I think there were some students that have been vaccinated, that I know about, that were afraid to let that be known because they didn't want to be, they didn't want to deal with the ridicule of that or the consternation of their peers. And that's unfortunate, and that's just one example. But certainly, during the past election time . . . because its election they can get, there can be, I mean . . . [he paused] this school tends to be majority one way.

J: Would it be safe to assume the school is majority Republican?

W: Yeah, oh yeah without a doubt. And kids are obviously very influenced by their families and that's expected and there's a varying array of that. I mean I try to avoid getting into hot topic political debates.

This interview took place during the winter of 2022, over a year after the release of the Covid vaccine. As is now well known, the Covid pandemic quickly became a site for controversy in the culture wars in the United States, with Republicans and other social conservatives challenging mask mandates, shutdowns of schools and other services and other organizations, and vaccine requirements (Newport, 2020, Perry et al., 2020). Mr. Winters used the pushback against Covid mandates as an example of the political and cultural ethos of the school. Mr. Winters assumed that the school, as an organization and as a community, was Republican and therefore socially conservative. This assumption was so strong that he indicated that students and he himself felt silenced when it came Covid precautions and vaccinations. While none of the students expressed to me that they supported Covid precautions or vaccinations, many indicated through their

comments and jokes in the classroom, that they thought Covid was no big deal and they did not trust the vaccination, further supporting Mr. Winter's claim.

Mr. Winters was so influenced by the conservative assumptions at King's that he intentionally avoided talking about "hot topic political debates" with students in class. The avoidance that Mr. Winters referred to was seen later in the same interview when I asked him about some of the content in the textbook he used for his Government class.

J: I was looking at your syllabus last night and you have a unit on civil rights and civil liberties, and I was looking at the textbook too and the chapter that deals with civil liberties has a section on Black codes and it brings in LGBTQ issues. I know that race and LGBTQ issues are hot buttons across the country right now. Do those come up in class, and how do you engage with this? Do you ever make a distinction between the political common good versus what Christians may want out of society?

W: The LGBTQ issues I haven't really had to deal with. We haven't had a whole lot of conversation about that in my classes over the year. I think people don't want to talk about those things.

J: Do they not want to talk about them because they are hot button issues or because they assume "here's the answer, we all agree, we don't need to deal with it"?

W: Yeah, yeah, I think it's the second. That's pretty much it. I think it's, "here's what the Bible says and there's not a whole lot of room for argument there." I'm sure there are students over the years who have had opposite opinions on those things, but they don't ask question about it, we haven't touched it.

Here Mr. Winter admitted that he avoided possible controversial issues because there was a perceived agreement about the answers. Because the Bible provided the answer, it was assumed that the issue was settled and everyone in the community agreed on those answers. Despite the fact that the topics of civil rights and civil liberties were in his syllabus and the textbook provided chapters on Black codes and the struggle for LGBTQ rights, Mr. Winters chose to ignore those portions of the textbooks so as not to have to talk with students about complex social issues. It is important to note that within the larger community of Christians, including Christians who are more liberal and Christians who are more conservative, many people do in fact disagree about many of these issues and thus many do not consider these issues settled (Joldersma, 2016; Smith, 2021). However, Mr. Winter chose not to discuss these aspects of U.S. history with his students in part because he thought the vast majority of them already agreed that the Bible provided them with answers. It is unclear whether Mr. Winter's students were genuinely uninterested in topics related to human sexuality, which have of course preoccupied many young people for centuries. It is clear, however, that Mr. Winters believed that his best move at the school was to remain silent and ignore the issues. Ironically his silence lent support to the assumption that there were widely agreed-upon and "true" answers to these questions.

Despite the claims that King's Academy wanted to help students learn *how* to think, not simply *what* to think, and that both Mrs. Anderson and Mr. Winters initially claimed in their interviews that a diversity of perspectives was allowed and taught in their classes, the entirety of their interviews revealed otherwise. Mrs. Anderson asserted that some topics, specifically LGBTQ issues, did not deserve or require multiple perspectives because the Christian worldview already provided the truth. Furthermore, she claimed to teach from the perspective, and with the authority of the school, that to hold to a Christian worldview meant it was incorrect to support

Democrats as policymakers or to support their progressive agendas. Somewhat differently, Mr. Winters intentionally avoided bringing up controversial topics in history and government classes because of the assumption that a plurality of alternative perspectives was unwelcome since there were already Biblical answers provided on these issues.

This created a chilling or silencing effect at the school, where certain topics and positions were not able to be discussed because they were perceived to be outside the boundaries of a conservative Christian worldview. This kind of silencing presents problems for what many people suggest is a truly democratic education. For example, Hess (2009) has argued that discussing multiple perspectives on controversial topics can help students develop political tolerance and help them develop the skills to participate in a diverse public square. Furthermore, open discussion and exploring multiple perspectives can help bring out new or different understandings of a topic and thus, as Parker (2006) has explained, produce “*enlightened political engagement*” (p. 13) wherein students are prepared to make informed decisions as citizens. Silencing multiple or plural perspectives does not help students develop the skills and virtues necessary to help sustain and participate in democratic structures. Nor does it help students to develop their own autonomy and ability to critically question society. By simply not including or explicitly or implicitly silencing positions that were not perceived as socially conservative and therefore inconsistent with a Christian worldview, teachers at King’s Academy did not give students the opportunity to authentically question what they were being taught, which would have helped develop their own autonomous understandings of life. Since socially conservative views were intertwined with the Christian worldview at King’s, to question or challenge these views was to go against the Christian worldview itself and challenge the foundation of the theo-political logic that pervaded the school. This means that despite

statements in some of King's Academy documents about the importance of students learning to think, pluralism was not necessarily assumed to be a good thing, and student autonomy and critical thinking were defined within rather narrow guardrails of the conservative Christian worldview. Rather than being focused on the cultivation of democratic participants, the logic of King's was about developing religious citizens who held to conservative ideologies that were intertwined with their all-encompassing religious commitments. As religious participants, students were taught that their civic and public lives were an extension of and were guided by their religious lives.

### **The Virtue of Love within the Christian Worldview**

So far, this chapter has shown that the theo-political logic at King's Academy was symbolically represented through the concepts and language of the Christian worldview, which was focused on truth, was all-encompassing, and was connected to socially conservative perspectives on social and political issues. In addition, my analysis of classroom observations and interviews with faculty and students indicated that the notion of Christian love was heavily emphasized as part of this worldview. I found that in many ways, classroom discussions and references to love dominated the way faculty and students understood their engagement with other people. In other words, the emphasis on Christian love as a central part of the Christian worldview meant that students were supposed to care for the people around them, even while still holding to the truth of the Christian worldview. Within the wider Christian tradition, love has often been understood as the pinnacle of virtue and of the utmost importance as a guide for life (Pieper, 1962/1977). At King's Academy, two dimensions of love were emphasized as significant to the Christian worldview. First, the concept of love was grounded in and defined through the biblical narrative. The faculty and students often appealed to the Bible when

discussing love, thus justifying its place as a guiding ethical principle. But second, love was defined and shaped by the overarching commitment to truth. Thus, while the virtue of love was emphasized in terms of how students should care about others, even people who were unlike them in political and religious views and in terms of gender orientation, the idea of Christian love did not change core aspects of the Christian worldview. This was the case because the idea of Christian love was superseded by a commitment to a specific biblical truth that defined a particular manner of thinking about living in society.

### ***Love Grounded in the Bible***

My analysis of observational, interview, and document data revealed that at King's Academy, Christian love – and/or the need to show love – was talked about often by faculty and students alike. While love was a quality often attributed to God and his actions toward humanity, love was also understood as the highest virtue that humans ought to strive to embody. Often, when faculty, staff, or students discussed the importance of love, they referred to two central texts from the Bible – Jesus' command in the Gospel of Matthew that people should love their neighbors as they loved themselves (*English Standard Version*, 2001/2011, Matthew 12:28-34) and the "Parable of the Good Samaritan," which is found in the Gospel of Luke (*English Standard Version*, 2001/2011, Luke 10:25-37). These texts provided a way for faculty and students to talk about their engagement and treatment of others, even those with whom they disagreed.

An episode from Mr. Mueller's Bible class offers an example of the way the concept of loving one's neighbor was presented to students. This was particularly interesting because this class discussion began as a typical explanation grounding the notion of loving one's neighbor in Scripture, an explanation similar to those I heard in other classes. However, by the end of the

conversation, as I show below, Mr. Mueller had applied the notion of loving others to social issues of the day. In a discussion concerning the connection between love and obeying God, Mr. Mueller used the language of loving one's neighbor to explain the importance of actions flowing from love and not simply obedience to a rule. Echoing the language of the Bible, Mr. Mueller offered an explanation of the neighbor to students as "someone in your proximity, someone you know or interact with, even if they're not your friend." Later in the same conversation, Mr. Mueller expanded the concept of loving one's neighbor even further to discuss with students what it might mean to love one's enemies. In a rare moment when Mr. Mueller tried to discuss civic issues with his students, he challenged the class stating:

One of the challenges with some of the political rhetoric that gets thrown around when you talk about Muslims and illegal immigration is that we have to filter this through the lens of loving our enemies and think about what this means. Do we build walls?

He paused to let students think about this question when a student blurted out a loud "Yes!" which prompted laughter from most of the class. Before Mr. Mueller could respond, the bell sounded to dismiss students, who immediately gathered their belongings to leave for the next class. To my knowledge, Mr. Mueller never returned to this question he asked the class.

In this rare incident, Mr. Mueller attempted to connect the divine command to love others to contemporary social issues related to immigration and minoritized immigrants, such as Muslims. In appealing to the divine command to love, Mr. Mueller tried to elevate love to a position that guided and shaped how students evaluated and understood social issues in society. In this sense, Mr. Mueller challenged students to use love, rather than truth, as the overarching guiding principle for how they were supposed to engage with civic and public life. Here, it is important to note that it was not that Mr. Mueller ignored the truth, but rather that in this episode

he made an appeal to love having a priority over truth as a way to determine how Christians ought to engage with society.

There are two important aspects of this classroom episode. First, Mr. Mueller referred to the concept of love as a driving motivation and virtue of Christian living and thinking, suggesting that love was central to the Christian worldview. Alluding to the biblical command to love one's neighbor, he explained that love ought to animate how Christians engage with others. Secondly, Mr. Mueller indicated that love ought to guide how one thinks about larger social issues as well. In his attempt to connect the concept of Christian love to the issues of minoritized communities, such as Muslims, and to issues of immigration and border control, Mr. Mueller seemed to be saying that social issues were more than just political or civic, they were also religious. Here he appeared to suggest that love extended beyond simply caring for and treating others with kindness; rather Christian love had implications for how students thought about civic and public issues.

It was unfortunate that Mr. Mueller's conversation about love was cut short by the end of the period. While I never heard Mr. Mueller revisit this discussion in class, during our interview, he indicated to me that he thought love should make Christians more willing to accept and help outsiders like Muslims and immigrants. What was apparent in the classroom discussion, however, was that love, grounded in the biblical text, was a central aspect of the conservative Christian worldview presented at King's. It is also important to note the student's resounding "Yes" to Mr. Mueller's question about building a wall and the accompanying laughter from the rest of the class seemed to indicate that many students saw no contradiction between loving one's neighbor and building a wall to keep immigrants out of the United States. This highlights another aspect of love within the Christian worldview, the idea that it was most often defined by

a commitment to truth and conservative understandings of life and society. I return to discuss Mr. Mueller as a possible outlier at King's later in the chapter.

### ***Love Subservient to Truth***

Even though Christian love was important and often talked about by both faculty and students as part of the Christian worldview, love was understood to be subservient to the truth. As discussed above, the truth, as per accepted interpretations of the Bible, was the central aspect of the conservative Christian worldview and therefore, the truth helped to shape and define the way love was understood. The supremacy of the truth over love was demonstrated in a comparison of Mrs. Collins' literature class with Mrs. Anderson's worldview class.

Mrs. Collins was a veteran teacher who was soft-spoken and patient with her students. Throughout the year, she demonstrated what appeared to be genuine care and love for her students by talking with them about their lives and gently correcting their behavior in class. When Mrs. Collins introduced Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, she explained that the text was written at a time of religious tension in England when Catholics were disliked and Puritans thought the Church of England was corrupt. Voicing her own disapproval, she further explained to students that various Christian groups at the time of Swift were persecuting and killing one another over small differences in doctrine and political stances. She began her introduction of the text by first saying, "I love the church, I go to church, but I get mad at the church because we do damage to the cause of Christ with the choices we make. We are called to love others." Here she indicated her own disapproval of the way some Christians engaged with society in ways that were not characterized by loving one's neighbor or showing compassion and care for others. She then turned directly to Swift:

Swift is writing against some of the things in the church and the way that people were looking at their religion as a weapon. I'm not for outrage, but it's so popular on social media, but it doesn't help or fix things. It's not loving. When you're outraged, don't tweet about it, do something loving to fix it.

Students appeared engaged with Mrs. Collins and one senior even supported what she was saying by shouting out "preach it" to the affirmation and laughter of other students. In this introduction to Jonathan Swift, Mrs. Collins encouraged students to learn how to exercise tolerance from Swift's writings and to prioritize showing love as they engaged with society rather than using Christianity as a weapon to point out flaws in society or how people are wrong. She told students that when one perceived problems in society, the biblical command to love one's neighbor meant getting involved to fix the problems rather than raging or complaining against them but not getting involved. As was common to Mrs. Collins' teaching of literature, she used the texts the students were reading to draw out lessons and applications for the present. For example, when she taught John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, she examined the characters of Faithfulness and Sloth in order to demonstrate to students what these characteristics can lead to in their own lives. With *Gulliver's Travels*, she combined Christian notions of love with Swift's writings to highlight the importance of toleration and rethinking how a Christian interacts with society. Through *Gulliver's Travels*, Mrs. Collins took the opportunity to express the way Christian love could lead to the toleration of various perspectives in society.

In both episodes examined here, Mr. Mueller and Mrs. Collins presented an understanding of the Christian worldview that was centered in and driven primarily by the Christian concept of love of neighbor. In these rare examples, love was elevated above the importance of truth; however, this should not be understood as a competing logic. The theo-

political logic operating at King's was broad enough to encompass Mr. Mueller's and Mrs. Collins' emphases on love as the driving force of Christianity as well as Mrs. Anderson's focus on the importance of truth's role in defining love. Both love and truth were key aspects of this theo-political logic, and in the rare instances described here, love was prioritized over truth; however, this was not the norm. This was demonstrated the same day that Mrs. Collins introduced students to Swift's writings.

The possibility of using love to think about civic identity and engagement that was introduced by Mrs. Collins was blunted in its effect, in the same manner that the ending of class and a student's comment blunted Mr. Mueller's effort to prioritize the love of neighbor. Immediately after this session of the British literature class where Mrs. Collins seemed to raise some important questions about how to engage in public life, the seniors gathered their things and moved down the hall to Mrs. Anderson's worldview class where they discussed the issue of transgender and teenagers, as detailed earlier in this chapter. The conversation in worldview class demonstrated the more common way Christian love was defined at King's – as subservient to the truth.

As detailed above, in the worldview class, students discussed how Christians ought to respond to transgender issues in society. During this discussion, many students referred to the importance of love but then located it as secondary to the truth, which for these students, meant that being transgender was problematic and wrong. Mrs. Anderson gave the students a prompt to get the conversation started and then stepped back to let the students carry on. The first student to comment explained that with respect to the issues of transgender and teens:

We [Christians] are called to love and act like Jesus. It can be difficult not to support [those who want to transition genders] but to show [them] God's love and grace.

Christians often aren't known for being loving or kind, they don't have that reputation.

But, trans is not the way you were made, God made you in the image of God and this is not the way to go.

Here the student emphasized the importance of loving others, even those with whom one disagreed, while at the same time saying that loving others did not mean supporting their wrong decisions or positions about issues. Moments later, another student built upon this and stated:

There's a fine line between loving and showing grace and obviously, it's loving to help people not live in sin. When you have friends, you want them to call you out when you're doing something stupid and that's the take that Christians need to help people realize.

Later, this same student added:

As Christians, we find our identity in Jesus and we know that we are loved by him.

Helping them [those thinking of transitioning] find their identity in Jesus can help them see this transition as not helping with what they're struggling with.

These comments, which were echoed by several other students throughout the conversation, demonstrated a desire to love others, but with love understood to mean correcting others who were wrong or who were engaged in wrong behavior and instead pointing them to the truth of Christianity. As this discussion proceeded, it became clear that Christian love was being defined as subservient to Christian truth. In other words, loving others meant correcting their false ideas while at the same time attempting to show them kindness. The assumption was that teenagers who were attempting to live as trans persons were committing a sin and to love those persons was to help them avoid this. Mrs. Anderson allowed this conversation to happen among the students without offering any comment until the end. Concluding class, Mrs. Anderson reminded students that "policy comes from people's worldviews," and she emphasized the importance of

understanding the worldviews of political figures as well as how those worldviews would impact society through various policies. By concluding the discussion in this manner, Mrs. Anderson highlighted the importance of students living according to the Christian worldview in their civic and public lives wherein what it meant to love one's neighbor was shaped by and defined by the truth of conservative Christianity about right and wrong. She also noted that policymakers should be chosen according to their worldviews because the policies they put in place would have an impact on everyone.

As this and many other examples show, Mrs. Anderson taught the students that from the worldview of Christianity, gender and sex were the same thing and that sexual or romantic relationships should only happen between a biological man and a biological woman. This was the message that students consistently heard from Mrs. Anderson and from their Bible class teachers, and, as discussed above, this message was also communicated through the readings students did to prepare for this discussion. Even though some students in the class discussion tried to invoke the importance of love when engaging with others in society, the concept of love that was a central part of King's worldview was embedded within a commitment to a specific understanding of the truth. While love was often discussed at King's, the overarching theological logic positioned truth as dominant and as defining how love was to be understood in the civic and public lives of individuals.

That the truth was preeminent within the Christian worldview that was taught at King's was highlighted by the juxtaposition of the two classes described above. A mere 15 minutes after Mrs. Collins encouraged students to understand their engagement with others in society through love, those same students agreed that loving others they disagreed with meant correcting their "wrong" behavior or choices in the name of the truth and Christianity. While love was discussed

often and was firmly grounded in the biblical narrative at King's, it was nearly always subservient to a hyper-focus on the truth that was present within the language and teaching concerning the Christian worldview. As part of the theo-political logic that animated King's Academy, love was a notion that called people to kindness and concern for others, but love was always mediated by a higher commitment to the truth. The message at King's was that loving others was not a justification or reason for being inclusive of multiple perspectives and ways of being. The call to love others did not change the Christian worldview about what was true and right, it only helped modify how one interacted with others.

The relationship between love and truth highlights an important feature of the theo-political logic at King's – namely that it contained a tension between these two key features. While placing truth above love was a way of resolving this tension, it did not completely do away with the tension. However, I never observed a situation or conversation wherein this tension was acknowledged or addressed directly by faculty or students. Rather it appeared that the elevation of truth above love masked the tension even though it did not completely do away with the tension. In Chapter Five, this tension reappears in my analysis of how King's theo-political logic communicated that students were to act in society to care for and help others while at the same time working to implement Christian ways of living in society. The presence of this tension is also important because it shows that the institutional logic that animated King's Academy contained within itself some aspects that were not fully consistent with one another. Chapter Six explores how allowed students to emphasize one aspect of this logic over another, as they tried to live by this logic. In short, the elevation of truth over love helped make the theo-political logic of King's appear to be largely coherent and consistent; and yet, as the next chapters show, there was an important unspoken tension between these aspects.

## **The Civic Implications of a Theo-Political Logic**

To conclude this chapter, I return explicitly to institutional theory in order to elaborate on the ways in which theo-political logic, through the symbolic representation of worldview thinking, provided King's Academy students with a religious warrant for their civic and public lives. The focus here is not so much on the extent to which students actually took on or rejected this identity, which is examined in Chapter Six. Rather the focus here is on identifying, interpreting, and theorizing the conception of citizenship that King's Academy's pervasive theo-political logic conveyed to students.

### **Symbolic Representation and Institutional Theory**

As previously noted above, Friedland and Alford (1991) suggested that institutional logics are the “organizing principles” (p. 248) that animate organizations in society and provide groups and individuals with frames for making sense of their lives and society. In this chapter, I have explored the symbolic elements of the theo-political logic that animated King's – the theory and language of worldview. According to Scott (2014), within institutional logics, symbolic systems “at their most basic level, work to construct social reality, to define the nature of properties of social actors and social action” (p. 68); they do so through the consistent and pervasive “*framing* of information or issues” (p. 173).

At King's, a conservative Christian worldview provided a frame within which faculty and students thought about their lives and the social world. The language of worldview helped to frame what was important and offered a way of making important ideas seem natural and rational, while it also occluded or rejected other ideas. Worldview thinking provided what Mr. Mueller, the Bible teacher, called the “guardrails” within which students were supposed to understand their own lives, including the nature of their participation in public life. As

guardrails, the conservative Christian worldview provided boundaries indicating what it meant to believe and follow Christianity. The conservative Christian worldview defined what it meant to be a Christian and made clear that to function outside those guardrails was to live as a non-Christian.

### **Citizenship and Worldview Thinking**

As I have shown, citizenship and civic responsibilities were rarely directly discussed at King's. However, this does not mean that students were not being educated about the meaning and implications of living as citizens in the world. Even though the language and theory of worldview emphasized a theological or religious understanding of the ordering of students' lives and the world, it also carried with it assumptions about their civic and public lives. The theological logic of King's which was symbolically represented through worldview thinking taught students to understand their civic and public lives as an extension of their religious identity and faith.

Many theorists who wrote about religion, modernity, and secularization in the twentieth century observed that religion was retreating from public life and becoming privatized within the lives of individuals. Therefore, many secular scholars assumed that religion would become "ever more marginal and irrelevant in the modern world" (Casanova, 1994, p. 5). Working from the assumption of the privatization of religion, John Rawls (1999) argued that political rationality needed to set aside religion in order to develop neutral public reasoning open and available to all, regardless of religious commitments. This kind of public and secular reasoning would allow groups to discuss and debate issues of public policy and justice with common justifications. As philosopher Wolterstoff (1997) pointed out, this meant that in public discourse, religious

individuals needed to set aside their particular theological reasoning and be “ready to offer non-religious reasons” (p. 75) for issues involving policy and justice.

However, these assumptions about the privatization of religion and its waning influence on public life have been widely documented as inaccurate (Casanova, 1995; Gorski & Perry, 2022; Riesebrodt, 1993; Taylor, 2007/2018). As Casanova (1995) explained

We are witnessing the ‘deprivatization’ of religion in the modern world. By deprivatization I mean the fact that religious traditions throughout the world are refusing to accept the marginal and privatized role which theories of modernity as well as theories of secularization had reserved for them. (p. 5)

Rather than retreating to the private sphere, there has been a resurgence of religious reasoning in the public realm, as evidenced by the rise of vocal forms of Christian nationalism in the United States since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Gorski & Perry, 2022; Whitehead & Perry, 2020). The theo-political logic of King’s demonstrated this very point. Although it was primarily a religious logic, the theo-political logic of King’s had serious implications for civic and public life as well. In fact, this logic implied a particular kind of civic logic because it provided frames of reference for making sense of living in society.

This intertwining of religion and public life aligns more with the post-secular claim that religion and politics are “intertwined, both in theory and practice” (Bretherton, 2012, p. 167). Thus, when someone enters into the realm of civics, they do so with their whole selves, including their religious commitments. As institutional theorists, Roger Friedland and Kenneth Moss (2016) stated in their discussion of religious nationalism, “Today we live in a world in which the divine is not only a resurgent source of individual identity and meaning but also a basis for making claims in the public sphere” (p. 416). Religious individuals and groups no longer have

the need to bifurcate their lives and place their religious reasoning into the private realm; instead, they now bring their religious logic with them into public debate and conversation.

Students at King's were encouraged to see their lives wholistically, and thus to see their civic and public lives as an extension of their religious lives. As Mrs. Anderson often reminded students, the way they were supposed to live in society was to be based on Christianity because the Christian worldview was all-encompassing and did not just deal with religious doctrine, but with how Christians lived out those doctrines in the world. This reminded students that their civic and public lives were to be driven by their Christian worldview. The theo-political logic at King's taught students that their civic identity was to be grounded in their religious identity and thus helped to form them as theo-political citizens.

It was clear throughout my year at King's and as shown above that the animating logic was first and foremost a religious, or theological, logic that was politically and socially tied to conservatism. That is, there was a connection between being a Christian and being conservative politically and socially. This linkage between Christianity and conservatism made it possible for the few students and families who were not Christian but were conservative, to be comfortable at King's, as I show in Chapter Six. But here it is important to note that conservatism was deeply connected with the Christian worldview, and thus a central part of the theo-political logic of King's. There was a clear civic message communicated to students about their identity – to be a Christian religiously, was to be a conservative socially and politically.

Combining social conservatism with a vision of Christianity as absolute truth carried implications for how one engaged with, and lived in, a pluralistic democratic society. This combination provided a religious warrant for conservative social and political views and discouraged fundamental democratic virtues such as tolerance, deliberation, and compromise.

Although these virtues are necessary for a pluralistic democracy (Bretherton, 2019; Callan, 1997; Levinson, 2012), when political stances carry a religious warrant, they can actively discourage individuals from cultivating democratic virtues beyond those practically necessary to implement their own policies. Furthermore, the message that some topics are not open for discussion can discourage students from cultivating the democratic virtues of tolerance, deliberation, and compromise. Although King's Academy documents claimed that it aimed at helping "students to build a deep understanding of how to think (not just what to think)" (King's, 2021a, p. 4), my analysis indicates that the school presented one perspective on social and political issues, such as LGBTQ and racial issues surrounding critical race theory. With rare exceptions, King's students did not authentically encounter other ideological beliefs or positions that were different from those of conservative Christianity. Rather, the theo-political logic offered a largely consistent and coherent understanding of how to participate in civic and public life. This coherence fostered an ethos of sameness within the school and communicated a powerful message about what it meant to live as a Christian in society.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Theo-Political Schemas and Everyday Practices

In Chapter Four, I argue that the institutional logic that animated King's Academy was a theo-political logic that intertwined religious life with civic and public life in the forming of theo-political citizens. This logic was symbolically represented through the language and theory of the Christian worldview, which presented a wholistic way of uniting theological beliefs with ways of living in society. More specifically, the Christian worldview that was pervasive at King's combined social conservatism with an understanding of Christianity as the absolute truth, which meant that social and political stances were supported and justified by religious beliefs. Chapter Five builds on this argument from Chapter Four by analyzing the material practices of the theo-political logic of King's. Taken together, these two chapters demonstrate that the overarching theo-political logic that animated King's conveyed to students how they were supposed to understand their participation in civic and public life as driven primarily by their religious beliefs.

As I discussed in Chapter Two, new institutional theorists suggest that institutional logics provide "frames of reference" (Thornton et al., 2012, p. 2) to help individuals and groups understand the world and how to live in that world. Logics are comprised of both symbolic constructions and material practices (Friedland & Alford, 1991). To talk about material practices is to focus on both the embodied practices of living and the cognitive strategies for understanding action in the world that was conveyed at King's. In other words, although social practices are always bodily activities in a certain sense, they are more than simply bodily. Rather they carry with them particular ways of knowing and understanding life and the world. As

cultural theorist Andreas Reckwitz (2002) argues this point: “social practices are sets of routinized bodily performances, but they are at the same time sets of mental activities. They necessarily imply certain routinized ways of understanding the world, of desiring something, of knowing how to do something” (p. 251). Social practices are bodily activities that normalize ways of being in the world and also provide ways of knowing and understanding that world. But this knowledge is often intuitive or prerational in the sense that it is often untheorized by participants. Religious anthropologist Nancy Ammerman (2021) explained practices as;

*A cluster of actions* that is socially recognizable in ways that allow others to know how to respond. . . . Practices, that is, assume shared *practical* understanding – understanding that is as much in our bones, as in our heads, as much a product of habitual dispositions as a critical assessment. (p. 15)

The knowledge that practices require, and that they provide, is what Ammerman refers to as practical knowledge (literally, knowledge of practices), rather than critical theoretical knowledge. Practices carry with them the practical knowledge for navigating life in society.

By analyzing data from interviews with faculty, staff, and students and from extensive school observations, this chapter argues that King’s theo-political logic was not only symbolically represented to students through the language of worldview but was also communicated to them through key material practices that provided specific patterns for participating in civic and public life. To understand the material practices involved in the theo-political logic at work at King’s, it is necessary to examine both the practical knowledge that helped make sense of acting within society, which I discuss below as schemas of action, and also the everyday practices in which the community engage, which I discuss as practices.

Accordingly, this chapter is divided into two main sections: the first section analyzes three

schemas of action that were central to life at King's. Essentially, these schemas contained the practical knowledge students needed to select strategies for engaging with and acting within society. The second section of this chapter turns attention to two key everyday practices – worship and service, which were at the heart of school life at King's and which helped to shape students and prepare them to engage with wider society. Both the schemas and everyday practices were aimed at forming students to live primarily as religious citizens who engaged in efforts to make society more in sync with Christianity and with what they believed about the kingdom of God on earth. This meant acting in society in a manner that prioritized service to others who were in need and also taking political action that was thought to support conservative Christianity. King's theo-political logic framed service to others as an essential part of students' public life. Importantly, however, as I show below, this logic focused on helping individuals who were in need while ignoring the structural and systemic problems within society that caused them to need help in the first place. In addition, when it came to political action, King's schemas and practices prompted students to act in instrumental ways to support policies and support candidates who were likely to support policies that were in sync with conservative Christianity. The material practices reinforced the theo-political logic of King's that was already communicated through the language of the Christian worldview and helped trained students to understand their participation in civic and public life as building the kingdom of God and, accordingly, being part of efforts to make society conform to conservative Christianity. In this way, the theo-political logic of King's was aimed at forming theo-political citizens who saw their actions in society as, first and foremost, a reflection of their religious identity rather than as a reflection of their responsibility as democratic citizens to consider the public good.

### **Theo-Political Schemas of Action**

Institutional logic not only shapes how people think about their lives within the world, but also provides schemas for them to act and make sense of action, within that world. DiMaggio & Powell (1983) claimed: “behavior may be reflexive or prerational in the sense that it reflects deeply embedded predispositions, scripts, schema, or classifications” (fn. 5, p. 8). Thornton et al. (2012) further explained schema as “learned, organized cognitive structures that shape attention, construal, inference, and problem solving” (p. 88). Schemas provide actors with a kind of conceptual map that helps to make sense of their activity within the world. They help frame what is important, and thus they drive and organize action. In providing conceptual maps, schemas provide general rules and a framework within which individuals make sense of their own actions, often in unreflective or taken-for-granted ways. Thus, schemas provide individuals and groups with what Swidler (1986) called a “tool kit” (p. 273) to draw upon in order to know how to act and engage with the world around them. Drawing on this work, I use the term “schema” in what follows to mean a conceptual map that provides individuals and groups with ways of acting and ways of making sense of their actions within society. It is important to note that schemas do not provide individuals with a step-by-step understanding of actions; rather, they offer general principles that guide action. Schemas are different from practices because they provided cognitive maps or strategies that help make sense of action, whereas practices, discussed later in this chapter, are the embodied activities students participated in on a routine basis.

This section begins by explaining three schemas that were pervasive in the ethos of King’s that helped students make sense of how to act within society. Next, this section argues that these particular schemas helped to solidify the theo-political logic that animated the school providing embodied ways of participating in civic and public life. There were three schemas presented at King’s Academy to help individuals – both faculty and staff, as well as students –

make sense of the actions and practices they engaged with on a regular basis. These schemas were both explicitly and implicitly manifest in school documents and materials, interviews with faculty and staff, and observations. Each of the schemas discussed below was named directly in official documents of King's Academy or was named by faculty during interviews and class observations. The first schema was *practicing gospel-oriented citizenship*, which focused on students' general engagement with their communities and society at large. The second schema, *being salt and light*, centered on student engagement with other people in society in ways that treated others with kindness and respect, while also maintaining a commitment to Christian values within society. The third and final schema was *engaging in political triage*, which was explicitly focused on political action.

These three schemas served as cognitive maps to both guide action within society and help students make sense of those actions within the larger theo-political logic of King's. I argue here that there were two important assumptions about civic and public action that were consistently communicated to students through these schemas: (1) that civic and public action was instrumental toward the larger goal of shaping society according to Christian morality and theology, and (2) that civic and public action was individualistic, focusing on personal responsibility and personal interactions, rather than attending to larger social or structural issues in society.

### **Practicing Gospel-Oriented Citizenship**

The first schema was pervasive in the way civic and public action was conceptualized at King's, which was reflected in the official language used in the key King's document, "Portrait of a Graduate" (King's, 2021a). This document explained the official aims of the school administration and faculty for students who attended the school. Among the various

characteristics and qualities listed was the goal that students would be engaged as active members within their communities. This document stated, “We desire our students to work to enhance the community in which they live through exemplary, Gospel-oriented citizenship” (King’s, 2021a, p. 4). The schema of *practicing gospel-oriented citizenship* was intended to provide individuals at King’s with a way to think about their civic and public actions. This document did not expressly explain what “enhance the community” or “gospel-oriented” actually meant, but left these ideas open for interpretation. In faculty and staff members’ responses to questions about this language during interviews, there appeared to be two central ideas that were consistently mentioned – service to others and promoting the kingdom of God.

Often the first thing faculty mentioned when asked to define gospel-oriented citizenship was that graduates should serve the community they lived in. For example, during my interview with Karen Collins, a literature teacher at King’s, she highlighted the importance of a service-oriented interpretation of the phrase “gospel-oriented citizenship.” When asked about this phrase she said:

This school is not just about checking off boxes and saying, we did the things to check off boxes and say we did the things we were supposed to do and now we’re done. It’s about being able to see what may be messed up in the world and instead of just saying, it’s a messed-up world, say, what can I do to, if not turn it around, at least knock off some of the dark stuff.

Mrs. Collins thought of gospel-oriented citizenship as service in the community one lived in and attempting to heal some of the hurt or “messed-up” parts of the world. She provided a tangible example of what this meant from her own life of helping the homeless and inviting King’s students into this form of service.

I invite the kids into my experience, and I think living life in front of them and sometimes taking them with you to a place is good. I have had students who've come with me to a homeless café that distributes food. I'm taking 16 girls to a homeless clothing ministry during service week and we're going to shift over the clothes from winter to summer and have a chance to do something very specific, very visual to make a difference in the lives of the homeless people in the city. And that kind of thing, that's what we do that's really important. I mean, I love the academic subject that I teach. I'm very excited about British literature. I think it's a very good subject and worth learning. But that's not what students really need. They really need to have people in their lives who really care about them and who are living life in a way that says life is good, we matter, and we can make a difference in the lives of other people. And that's really, for me, what citizenship is all about.

Here Mrs. Collins highlighted the way service was central to practicing gospel-oriented citizenship. Mrs. Collins's discussion of practicing gospel-oriented citizenship assumed that society was "messed-up" or broken in some manner, meaning that people needed help in their everyday lives. Action in society was intended to serve others who were in need. Engaging in service projects, like helping a homeless clothing ministry, was seen as "making a difference in the lives of homeless people," it was a way to show care and concern for the needs of others in society. Service to others made a difference in the world and according to Mrs. Collins, it "knocked off some of the dark stuff," a phrase that appeared to refer to the difficulties and oppression that individuals might experience, such as homelessness and the complex social, economic and emotional problems this brings into the lives of individuals.

It is important to notice that the “service” Mrs. Collins focused on in this conversation was directed toward helping individual people. She wanted students to be able to see others around them and to recognize the needs they might have as well as to act to help meet those needs. This required a personal engagement on the part of students, which was central to helping King’s students learn to be active in their community. However, it is also important to notice that missing from this perspective on service was attention to, or discussion concerning, the root systemic or structural causes of people’s needs. The aim of service was to meet the needs of the homeless, not to ask why individuals and families were homeless in the first place. Mrs. Collins never mentioned serving the homeless by bringing attention to root causes, such as income inequality or unfair housing practices that can lead to homelessness. By ignoring the structural aspects of social problems, engaging in gospel-oriented citizenship was intended to promote a form of public action to meet the needs of individuals but not to consider structural and systemic forms of injustice in society.

The schema of practicing gospel-oriented citizenship provided members of the King’s community with a way to conceptualize acting in society as serving and helping individuals. In addition to this, there was also a second way in which faculty and staff understood what it meant to practice gospel-oriented citizenship – namely as the advancement of the kingdom of God in society. Along these lines, when Jeff Jacobs, the Head of School at King’s, talked to me about the meaning of gospel-oriented citizenship he highlighted not the service aspect of this schema, but living in society in order to advance the kingdom of God.

Mr. Jacobs had a charismatic personality and was excited to talk with me about King’s, including the challenges of leading the school during the three years he had been there. Mr. Jacobs had yet to experience what he would call a “normal” school year because of the impact of

the Covid-19 pandemic on school life. As we sat in his office, I asked if he could unpack the language of gospel-oriented citizenship for me.

I think the tension that we want to create, I know that sounds weird, but the tension we want to create is that believers are a part of two kingdoms, in a sense. They're part of their nation's kingdom. In our case, it would be the United States, but we're also part of God's kingdom. So, there's this tension of, how do you live in both? And what does it look like? I just talked to a kid yesterday, because – are you familiar with Family Foundations and John Howell? Family Foundations is a family values-based non-profit that advocates for, I would say, family values in the city. And so, [the Family Foundation has] different internships [for students] and so forth. So, we have a student that is very interested in government, and I got him the information because John reached out to me. So, there could be that level where literally [students] want to be a rep or whatever, or it could be simple voting or whatever. But, then how do you blend that, knowing that the United States is not a part of the end times, as far as we see in the Scripture?<sup>5</sup> So how do you navigate what to fight for and what values are worth? I would say that is the goal. How are we doing that? I mean, I would say a little bit through the worldview class.

While his answer may seem a bit rambling, mixing several examples and posing multiple questions, it is essential to note that he was attempting to provide an understanding of what gospel-oriented citizenship meant. Behind Mr. Jacobs' response lay the assumption that believers were part of two different kingdoms. One kingdom referred to countries and governments of society; in this sense, the United States or Canada would be understood as a "kingdom," in that

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<sup>5</sup> The "end times" refers to the conservative Christian doctrine that at the end of time/history, God will come to earth in order to set up His kingdom and rule over a new heaven and new earth. Here, Mr. Jacobs claimed that America as a nation, along with all other nations, would have no special place in the end times because all nations would be dissolved and everything would be under God's rule.

they have laws that governed and shaped the lives of those who dwelt in these countries. But Mr. Jacobs was assuming that there was also another kingdom in which believers live at the same time – the kingdom of God. In the kingdom of God, Christians were expected to live according to the rules and authority of God in the present time, no matter what other earthly kingdom they were a part of. According to Mr. Jacobs, believers lived in both of these kingdoms at the same time and thus had a kind of dual citizenship where they belonged to an earthly nation and also to the kingdom of God. As members of an earthly nation, they could be involved as citizens in a number of ways, such as by voting or by being an elected representative. However, as members of the kingdom of God, believers had a responsibility to live according to God’s laws and morality, and this responsibility was prioritized above the responsibilities of the earthly kingdom. Mr. Jacobs assumed that there could be tension or conflict between a believer’s citizenship in an earthly nation and their citizenship in the kingdom of God.

For Mr. Jacobs, practicing gospel-oriented citizenship was a way to make sense of the tension that existed for believers by simultaneously belonging to two different “kingdoms.” He claimed that the goal of this was to know how to navigate society and public life knowing “what to fight for and what values are worth [standing up for].” He assumed that the values of these two kingdoms would conflict at times and that practicing gospel-oriented citizenship involved knowing how to navigate this conflict. The implication was that believers should live by the values of the kingdom of God and seek to implement these in society through their political actions in the earthly kingdoms, or nations, they lived in. Practicing gospel-oriented citizenship, according to Mr. Jacobs, was about acting in civic and public life in ways that aligned with the values of the kingdom of God and applying these values to those of earthly nations.

The schema of practicing gospel-oriented citizenship provided members of the King's community with a way of understanding their civic and public lives in terms of helping those in need and living out the values of the kingdom of God. On the one hand, this encouraged students to be actively involved in, and care for, their community, a necessary disposition for cultivating democratic citizens. On the other hand, the form of participation advocated at King's was about helping to implement the values of the kingdom of God in society, which meant engagement with a particular agenda. The schema of practicing gospel-oriented citizenship gave students a reason to be actively engaged with their communities in order to build and shape society to conform to their understanding of the kingdom of God.

### **Being Salt & Light**

The second schema that was pervasive at King's for making sense of action was the notion of *being salt and light* in the world. This language was taken directly from the Gospel of Matthew in the Bible and not only provided members of the King's community with a way of understanding action in the world but also demonstrated the importance of grounding their actions in biblical commands. The Gospel of Matthew says that Jesus spoke this to his followers:

You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. (*English Standard Version*, 2001/2011, Matthew 5:13-16)

Biblical commentators often focus on these metaphors as central messages about how Christians ought to engage with society. As salt, Christians are to act in ways that serve “mainly to give flavour, and to prevent corruption” (France, 1985, p. 112). Embedded within this metaphor is the idea of preserving society from the corrupting influences of secularism. As light, Christians are to live their lives publicly and do good for the world to see. Green (2000) has argued that these images “militate against all forms of separation and withdrawal. [Christians] are meant to get involved and be a light and preservative” (p. 92). Light implies shining forth as an example to others by living lives that exemplify Christianity to all humanity and demonstrate to them how they too should live with God and one another. In many branches of Christianity, the schema of salt and light highlights *how* Christians are expected to engage with the world.

In my interview with Mrs. Anderson, she explained that living as salt and light in the world was one way in which students ought to participate as citizens within society. When I asked her to explain further what she meant, she responded with an example from her own life and her work as a member of the local school board where she lived. She said:

So, I model [integrity and honesty] as a school board member, I don't treat opposing viewpoints with disrespect. I don't degrade people that I disagree with that come and give their opinions, and I treat everyone with kindness. I'm bringing an entirely different kind of demeanor to our school board that they haven't experienced before.

She paused here to give an example from her campaign for a seat as a school board member. During the campaign, one of the sitting members of the school board used social media to claim Mrs. Anderson was a fundamentalist Christian who wanted to bring creationism into the public schools. This school board member further used social media to say “all kinds of hateful things” about Mrs. Anderson. Despite this, Mrs. Anderson won a spot on the school board and has had to

work with the board member whom she thought attacked her during the campaign. Since being elected to the board, Mrs. Anderson explained:

I've earned her respect because I didn't do, say, or act in any of the ways she thought I would because I'm a Christian. That's what it means to be salt. Have I compromised any of my biblical views? Not a single bit.

Mrs. Anderson acted with kindness toward this other member and did not engage with what she perceived as hateful rhetoric; instead, she said she listened to other people. She concluded her explanation of what it meant to be salt in society by stating:

I have treated people as the intrinsically valuable people that they are. That's what I mean, by being salt and light. I know how to act. I know what to act on, but I know in what ways to do that. And that's what I'm trying to teach my students.

According to Mrs. Anderson's explanation, the schema of salt and light meant engaging with society in such a way that demonstrated honesty, integrity, and treating other people with dignity and respect. She saw this as the norm, even if other people in society did not reciprocate these qualities. This scheme was very important at King's, not only because it was the way Mrs. Anderson thought she should act in society, but it was also the way she was teaching students to participate.

At first glance, this schema appears to encourage virtues that many scholars would suggest are necessary to participate as a democratic citizen in society. However, upon further analysis, this is not necessarily the case. Virtues such as honesty, integrity, and valuing others are foundational in a democratic society, but they are not sufficient to cultivate and maintain that society. As Mrs. Anderson claimed, being salt and light on the school board committee was about her demeanor towards others, but it was not about her openness nor willingness to change

her point of view. Demeanor has to do with people's outward behavior toward others. To be willing to let others talk, to show them kindness, and treat them with respect are important qualities for the cultivation of civil interactions between people, but these qualities do not necessarily produce a democratic society. In fact, Mrs. Anderson emphasized that she was able to have this demeanor toward others without ever changing or compromising her biblical values. Being salt and light was not about engaging with others in order to learn from them or to have one's own views challenged and modified. It was about maintaining a demeanor that communicated civility and basic kindness toward others.

Mrs. Anderson was not the only one at King's to use the schema of being salt and light to help them make sense of participation in civic and public life. Several students also used this schema to help them explain their actions in society. Maddie Baker, a senior at King's, also used this schema during our interview. When I asked her what it meant to be a Christian but also be a citizen and engage with society, she responded:

I think it's just being a light, wherever you go. If your intentions are that I want to be the best that I can be to benefit others, then I think that's the best mindset you can have and that will affect everything that you do. So, if you're going into it like, oh, I want this country to be the best for me to live in, then you're just going to be voting for yourself. You're going to be talking to people, and it's all for yourself. But if you really want to make the world a better place, then it shifts the way you do things. So, just going in your job, whatever that may be and it doesn't have to be ministry, that you share light and you serve others. It can be any job, if you just go into that job for the fact of like, I'm not working for myself I'm working for other people, I'm working for God. That's the best way you can be a good citizen.

Here, Maddie used the metaphor of light to explain how she thought about participating as a citizen, as a voter, and in one's place of work. Being a light for her meant putting other people first, focusing not only on one's own desires, but seeking to help others. But it seemed to also be more than just trying to help others. She claimed that Christians were supposed to share the light and work for God, with this language implying more than putting other people first or not being selfish. In keeping with this metaphor, light shows something or brings attention to something previously unseen. Within the context of the Christian worldview, the metaphor of light was about demonstrating Christianity to others. While this implied putting others first, the motivation and cause of this, as Maddie said about work, was because one was ultimately working for God. Thus, for Maddie, being a good citizen was living in such a way that people saw God and Christianity in her. This implied being selfless and showing concern for others.

As noted, the schema of being salt and light was taken directly from the biblical text; it offered both faculty and students at King's a way to understand their actions in society. While the focus of this schema was on valuing and focusing on others, the main point was the cultivation of a particular Christian demeanor rather than the cultivation of democratic virtues. This is not to detract from the importance of treating others with respect and value. In fact, cultivating these virtues and dispositions is essential to cultivating democratic citizens, but respect is not sufficient for preserving and maintaining a democratic society. More is needed, including democratic deliberation and compromise for the common good in society. Underlying this schema was the assumption that one's actions in society were primarily to be focused on God. In the biblical text, the role of salt was to help preserve society and the purpose of light was to draw attention to God through the way one acted. In short, while this schema was often explained as treating others with kindness or putting others first, at its core, this schema was

about participating in society in a manner that would direct others toward God. The reason for having a kind and respectful demeanor was to cause others to see Christianity in a positive light and thus be drawn toward God.

### **Engaging in Political Triage**

The third schema for action at King's, which was also the most directly related to civic activity, is what I refer to as *engaging in political triage*. This language came directly from Mrs. Anderson when she gave students a strategy for making political decisions by weighing various options and prioritizing particular values. She used this language specifically when discussing voting, but it was also prevalent enough to form a conceptual map for how students in terms of how to think about their own political participation in society. Interestingly, the topic of voting was discussed more in the Worldview class than in the Government class at King's. While the Government class approached voting from a procedural perspective, including teaching students the electoral process, the Worldview class taught students how to think through the activity of voting from a Christian perspective.

The practical, or procedural, approach to voting was demonstrated in a project Mr. Winters described from his U.S. Government class.

Whenever there is an election whether it's a midterm or presidential election. I do this project where students follow a candidate, especially during primary season, and act as campaign managers or press managers, and they have to pay attention to the press and look at the polling and get really involved to see what it's like to follow these things and really drill down into the policy initiatives and get to know the candidates in a way going through what the media is saying about them. And they have to summarize and do press releases and follow these candidates on a daily basis and give reports every week.

According to Mr. Winters, this project was intended to help students learn about the procedures and “political process” regarding voting and candidate selection. Understandably, this was not a yearly project since it was based on the presidential election cycle and thus did not happen during the year I observed King’s. This project focused on helping students understand the electoral process and their civic responsibility and activity with regard to voting. However, in the Worldview class, Mrs. Anderson actively taught students a schema to help them make political decisions, specifically in relation to voting.

At various times over the course of the year, Mrs. Anderson talked with students in class about the importance of voting, even though political processes and the workings of government were not the focus of the class. This was evident during a class discussion she had concerning transgender teens. This class discussion is analyzed in some detail in Chapter Four wherein I argue that the Christian worldview involved a conservative perspective on social issues (pp. 152-156). Here I return to this same class session in order specifically to highlight Mrs. Anderson’s comments at the end of the discussion. While wrapping up, she explained that leaders and politicians make policies based on their worldviews. She then stressed to the students the importance of local elections, particularly focusing on school boards and their power to shape schooling. “Local elections are so important, but they have the lowest turnout. Your school board elections are in the spring. This is important because they affect what goes on to you personally.” This comment seemed to have been prompted by Mrs. Anderson’s own participation on her local school board. She presented voting as an important part of civic action because it directly impacted the direction of society. She explained that school board officials make policies that had moral consequences for society, often ones that were contrary to Christian morality. Because of this, she explained, voting was as much a moral activity as a civic one. From the perspective

that voting was a moral issue, Mrs. Anderson actively taught students the schema of engaging in political triage in her Worldview classes to help them understand the activity of voting and political decision making.

During my interview with Mrs. Anderson, she explained that political triage was a way of helping students make sense of how to participate in voting and politics. She told me that she explained to students:

There's never gonna be a perfect candidate, so find the one who most resembles in word and deed your worldview. And I give them what I call *political triage*. Our first choice is a candidate who their policies and their character align with our worldview. Our second choice is someone whose policies agree, but their character does not. And our third choice is both bad.

This notion of political triage provided students with a framework for weighing political options and making decisions. In the same way that emergency room doctors and nurses triage patients to determine what injuries or issues are most important to treat, political triage was intended to provide a way for students to determine what was most important and valuable when making political decisions. In her example of voting, she provided three scenarios and ranked them according to what should be valued. What is important to note in this ranking is that for conservative Christian voters, agreement with a candidate's stance on policies took precedence over a candidate's character. This schema defined political action as a way to try to get the issues one supported implemented in policy and practice, even if that meant supporting a candidate whose character was morally problematic.

While Mrs. Anderson was the only person I heard directly teach and communicate the political triage schema to students, the prevalence of her voice as both the Worldview teacher

and a Bible teacher who taught every student at King's heavily influenced how the students understood political activity, especially voting. During my interviews with students, for example, many of them referred to using political triage when it came to making decisions about whom to vote for. In fact, a handful of students explained they would have voted for Trump despite his flawed character and his flawed personal morality because they perceived him as supporting policies that aligned with conservative Christianity.

It's worth noting that the political triage schema was not universally accepted at King's. As mentioned in Chapter Four, Mr. Winters was a self-described "never Trumper," although he seemed to be the only never-Trump voice on the faculty. In contrast to Mrs. Anderson's view, Winters explained to me that his objections to Trump as a presidential possibility were largely due to character issues rather than policy disagreements. However, Mr. Winter's objections, which he seldom felt he could share with students in the classroom, were overshadowed by Mrs. Anderson's schema, which became an influential way students thought about making political decisions.

Because the political triage schema taught by Mrs. Anderson focused primarily on making voting decisions based candidates' stance on policy issues rather than the character of the individuals involved, political triage can be understood as providing students with an instrumental way of approaching political participation. Instrumentalism is often associated with John Dewey and the American pragmatic tradition in philosophy (Copleston, 1966). To take an instrumental view of action is to understand that a given course of action is undertaken with reference to some other thing, an end that is anticipated to be the result of that action. That is to say, actions are not done for themselves, for intrinsic value, but for some particular end or goal outside of the action itself. Engaging in political triage regarded voting, and other political

actions, as instrumental actions. The goal of political action was to implement the policy that one agreed with, even if that meant supporting candidates with questionable character or morals. From this perspective, civic and political action are instruments for some other goal – namely implementing policies perceived to be in sync with conservative Christianity.

While one might desire a candidate with moral character, according to Mrs. Anderson, this was highly unlikely to be found in reality. Therefore, the best course of action was to vote for a candidate who was going to push for the policies one valued, regardless of their character. Rather than taking a principled approach to voting, where the character and ideals of a candidate mattered, engaging in political triage meant embracing an instrumentalist approach that taught students to place policies above the character of a candidate. While the political triage schema focused specifically on voting, in the absence of teachers talking about other ways to engage in political activities, this represented an overarching framework for students to think about evaluating their political actions.

Each of the three schemas examined here – practicing gospel-oriented citizenship, being salt and light in the world, and engaging in political triage – not only gave students strategies for navigating the world but were also carriers of the theo-political logic that conveyed conceptual maps to students that make sense of both acting within society and society itself. The next section analyzes the assumptions, tensions, and implications for citizenship that these particular schemas communicated to students.

### **The Theo-Political Logic Behind the Schemas**

As Chapter Four explains, a strong theo-political logic was transmitted to students at King's Academy symbolically through the language of the Christian worldview, and, as this chapter shows, this logic was also transmitted to students through the schemas, which were an

aspect of the material practices that were pervasive at King's. The schemas examined above help to give an account of how students at King's were taught to act and live in society. In this section, I analyze the assumptions behind these schemas, the tensions they created, and the connections with democratic citizenship.

Cutting across the schemas that were central at King's were several assumptions concerning civic and public participation in society. Two of the most important assumptions were: (1) students should be active in society, and (2) students should be active on behalf of Christianity, reflecting the very strong religious commitment that animated King's.

All of the schemas that were central at King's were based on the assumption that students should be active in the world. Whether they were voting or serving neighbors in their community, it was assumed that as (conservative) Christians, they would be active participants in society. It is important to emphasize that King's Academy was not part of a religious organization based on the idea that Christians should withdraw from society and the world, as some forms of Christian education have promoted, such as the more insular Fundamentalist Christianity community or Amish communities (Rose, 1988, 1993; *Wisconsin v. Yoder*, 1972). Rather, at King's, the idea was to socialize students into particular ways of participating in, not withdrawing from, larger society, in order to influence and shape that larger society. As Mr. Jacobs explained, in order to be gospel-oriented citizens, students needed to learn how to act within society according to the values of the kingdom of God, not withdraw from society.

The work of religious scholar, Martin Riesebrodt (1993) on religious fundamentalism helps illuminate this assumption about being active in society, which was central to all of the King's schemas. Following Max Weber, Riesebrodt argued that religious movements fundamentally took either a world-rejecting or a world-affirming viewpoint with most

conservative Christian groups taking a world-rejecting perspective that demonstrates a “dissatisfaction with current social conditions” (p. 18). However, Riesebrodt further argued that this rejection of the world could lead to either flight or attempts at mastery of the world. “In the first case adherents seek to establish an ideal community by withdrawing from the world. In the second they seek to force their ideal of a just social order onto the world” (p. 18). Riesebrodt suggested that the “force” religious movements used to change the social order ranged on a continuum from, on one end, the kind of movement that “respects political institutions and the constitution” (p. 18) and thus seeks to work within those frames all the way to, on the other end, a movement that “seeks an institutional transformation” (p. 18) and uses its power to try to make this happen. Riesebrodt’s analysis of religious fundamentalist movements helps us understand the nature of civic activity implicit in the central schemas at King’s. Being active in society was central to all three of the action schemas. This was based on a rejection of the present social order but not a withdrawal from that order. Rather the point was to strive to change the social order according to the values and precepts of Christianity. This is connected to the second assumption underlying all the schemas – that students should be active in society *as believers*.

All of the schemas at King’s assumed that students should be active in society and that the goal of their activity was to influence and reshape society so that it reflected, or came into alignment with, the values and norms of the kingdom of God. Each of the schemas at King’s made it clear that the main goal of Christians’ activity within society was to change society to better reflect Christianity. This was very clear in the salt and light schema, wherein the purpose of having a kind and honest demeanor was to bear witness to and advance Christianity. But this was also present in the schema of political triage wherein valuing policy over character meant

advocating for policy that was aligned with the conservative Christian worldview regardless of the moral character of the policy maker.

Not only did these schemas teach students that they were to participate and be active in society, but they also taught them that they were to care for and serve others in the community, particularly those who were marginalized and in need. This created tension. While these schemas emphasized participating in society to help and benefit others, at the same time, they also emphasized working with others to make society conform to conservative understandings of Christianity and to implement Christian morality within society. Thus, students were being taught both to care for and help others who were different from them and, at the same time, to support policies and laws that reflected a (white) conservative Christian understanding of life. This meant that while students were socialized to help those who were marginalized, they were also socialized to actively advocate for policies that caused or reproduced marginalization, specifically those in the LGBTQ community, immigrants, and racially minoritized communities. This tension is similar to, and can be seen as an extension of, the tension between a bedrock commitment to truth, on one hand, and a commitment to love, on the other, which Chapter Four discusses in some detail with regard to the Christian worldview.

During my year of observation and participation at King's, I never heard this tension directly discussed nor even acknowledged. The lack of attention to this tension could have been because the faculty did not recognize a tension between helping and loving others, including those different from Christians, on one hand, and influencing society toward Christianity norms and beliefs, on the other. Or more likely, many in the King's community assumed that by pushing society to embrace white conservative Christian standards of morality and living, one was already helping people with their problems and needs. In Chapter Six, I present examples of

how various students seemed to resolve this tension in their own lives as they engaged with the theo-political logic of King's. However, I want to highlight here that the tension between caring for and helping others who were in need, on the one hand, and trying to make society conform to the norms and values of white conservative Christianity, on the other, was never clearly addressed nor did the pervasive schemas at King's provide a clear way for students to resolve this tension.

The assumptions and tension that were present, but unaddressed, within these schemas are related to certain issues in democratic citizenship. The theo-political logic at King's offered various schemas to help students navigate the world, which had ramifications for how to engage with pluralism in society. The pervasive schemas at King's presented a way of engaging with the world that was aimed at shaping society to reflect a conservative Christian view of morality and order. These schemas did not reflect an understanding of pluralism as a democratic good that could lead to communal flourishing. Instead, pluralism was framed essentially as a competition among worldviews wherein people needed to advocate for their own vision of the good, which in the case of King's Academy, was a white conservative Christian vision. Thus, students were not trained to think about a marketplace of ideas that presented opportunities to increase and modify their understandings of the world and life; rather, they were trained to see the competition among worldviews as a struggle in which the goal was policies and practices that conformed to, and supported, conservative Christianity. This was reflected in Mr. Jacobs' explanation of practicing gospel-oriented citizenship, which was about living in accordance with, and working toward, the kingdom of God reflected within society. Rather than understanding social life as a reflection of the plurality of human experiences and perspectives in our very diverse society, the King's schemas socialized students to help change society to better reflect Christianity.

The schemas for action presented at King's – *practicing gospel-oriented citizenship, being salt and light, and engaging in political triage* – were both shaped by the theo-political logic of the school and conveyed this logic to the students. The vision of civic engagement that students were socialized into emphasized being active in society in order to make society more in sync with conservative Christian morality.

Having explored the schemas that presented students with strategies for how to make sense of acting in society, it is now possible to turn attention directly to the everyday practices of King's. Unlike schemas, which contained strategies for making sense of and acting in society, examining everyday practices focuses on the routine embodied ways of living within the King's community. These everyday practices helped form habitual dispositions in students by shaping their taken-for-granted ways of understanding the world and their lives.

### **The Practice of King's Theo-Political Logic**

As I have made clear, institutional logics provide patterns for human activity (Friedland & Alford, 1991). These patterns help people make sense of their world and offer meanings for the material conditions and everyday practices in which individuals and groups engage. As Friedland & Alford (1991) argued “the routines of each institution are connected to rituals which define the order of the world and one's position within it, rituals through which belief in the institution is reproduced” (p. 250). This suggests that rituals, or practices as I will call them, make sense within a particular symbolic order and help to reaffirm that order. By engaging in particular practices, the meanings of those practices are internalized and shape people's views of the world and their place within it. In this section, I examine two of the everyday practices that conveyed King's theo-political logic to students: the practice of worship and the practice of service.

Before examining each of these practices, it is important to understand and further discuss the term practice. As I noted earlier, German sociologist and cultural theorist Andreas Reckwitz (2002) provides an expansive definition of practice using the German term *praktick*.

A 'practice' (*Praktick*) is a routinized type of behavior which consists of several elements, interconnected to one other: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, 'things' and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge. (p. 249)

Reckwitz explains practices as routinized behaviors constituted by several elements united together to form a whole. These elements include bodily and mental activities, as well as ways of using artifacts, tacit forms of knowing how, and emotional states. In a somewhat similar, but simpler fashion, philosopher and sociologist Schatzki (2001) defines practices as "embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity centrally organized around shaped practical understanding" (p. 2). Schatzki included many of the same aspects of Reckwitz in his notion of practice; however, Schatzki highlighted the communal aspect of practice that was only implied in Reckwitz. Finally, religious sociologist Ammerman (2021) defined practices simply as an array of activities.

A practice isn't necessarily something formalized into a ritual – although it might be – but it is an *array* of activity. It is a *cluster of actions that is socially recognizable in ways that allow others to know how to respond*. (p. 15)

Here Ammerman emphasizes that practices are not simply a single action, but an array of activities that are clustered together to form a meaningful and recognizable whole. Furthermore, she also highlights the idea that practices are social phenomena requiring knowledge and connections with others.

Drawing on these definitions, it is possible to identify four characteristics of practices. *Practices are social activities.* Even when a practice is engaged in by individuals alone, such as prayer, the meaning and understanding of this activity are carried through a social community. That is, participants make sense of what they are doing by reference to their belonging within a particular community that understands that activity. *Practices are embodied,* which means they are activities performed within the material world. The physicality of practices trains individuals and groups to be in the social world in particular ways. The embodiment of practices includes not just human bodies, but interaction and use of other physical living beings and nonliving artifacts. *Practices are forms of knowing.* Knowledge, often tacit and unarticulated, is carried within practices. This includes not just practical knowledge, or knowing how to do something, but also a specific cognitive understanding of the world that is grasped. *Practices are clusters of activities.* A practice is not simply a single action, but often an array of activities. The general practice of prayer can serve as an example of these characteristics of practice. Prayer is not just one thing, but a cluster of activities joined together. It involves a type of speech or dialogue as well as various embodied activities, such as kneeling, lighting candles, walking, or gesturing. When they are put together in various ways, at particular places, or at particular times, these individual actions are understood as the practice of prayer, and as such, they carry with them particular ways of knowing. Clusters of embodied actions are also interconnected with other practices. For instance, prayer can be connected with eating, mourning, worshipping, and other practices. In this way, practices form overlapping and reinforcing networks that allow individuals and groups to make sense of their lives and the world. Thus, a practice can be understood as a communally shared cluster of activity that is embodied in the material and carries tacit

knowledge that helps make sense of and offers meaning to life. Practices are tied with symbolic representations and work together to form the logic of an organization or group of individuals.

### **The Practice of Worship: Making God Present**

Even though in many ways – students, teachers, classrooms, rows of desks, courses – King’s resembled a typical school in America, one of the features that made it stand out was the practice of worship. Generally defined as ascribing worth to something or someone, “worship” in the Christian tradition directly refers to ascribing worth to and praising the Christian God. This takes place through a variety of activities – prayer, song, and liturgies. Two central aspects of the practice of worship at King’s were weekly chapel services and prayer. In this section, I argue that the regular and consistent practice of worship conveyed the message to students that God was present and active in their lives and made it clear that all students’ actions, including their civic and public actions, were to be carried out as a way of worshipping and obeying God.

#### ***Chapel***

The most obvious site for the practice of worship at King’s was weekly chapels. This was a time set aside during the week when the middle school and high school students gathered along with teachers and staff for a formal time of worship. There were also a few times throughout the year when the whole community, pre-K through 12 grades, gathered together for chapel services, including Christmas, Easter, Veterans Day, and other significant events. One might describe weekly chapel services as a short pop concert matched with a spiritually motivational or encouraging sermon or talk. Along these lines, chapel services often started with a student-organized “worship band” that led students in pop-style songs about God, faith, and love. The music was nearly always accompanied by specialized lighting, and the sound of the band was often turned up louder than the community singing along. On some occasions, the band added

smoke machines to their performances. This was typically followed by a guest speaker, often a local pastor, or a faculty member giving a 20-30 minute sermon or talk to the students.

Chapel sermons conveyed several ideas to students, as they were sitting in an auditorium without the option to leave. For example, one speaker talked with students about some of the difficulties they might face in life and provided them with the Christian response to those problems – trust in God and the Bible. The major point of the message was that students could trust God and the Bible – but not other sources – for the truth about their lives. Part of the point here was that God was personally present and active in students’ lives. God was not distant from them, but could be relied upon during times of trouble or distress. This sermon was based on the assumption that God and the Bible were the main, possibly only, sources of truth about life.

Even though sermons were delivered to the whole student body of King’s Academy, the focus was individualistic rather than communal. The speaker was not talking to the students as a whole entity but as a group of individuals. He appeared to want each of them individually to develop trust in God and the Bible. Thus, while chapel services were communal events, they were individually focused, meaning that the goal was that students as individuals learned and grew from the experience.

While there was a clear communal aspect to the practice of worship in that it was something done together, it was at the same time highly individualistic. This was reflected in the language of chapel songs and in the messages conveyed by speakers, as well as the way in which chapel services were conducted. For example, the songs used throughout the year were often popular Christian pop-style worship songs such as “Oceans” (Crocker et al., 2012), “Reckless Love” (Asbury et al., 2017), or “The Blessings” (Jobe et al., 2020). These songs

highlighted individual and personal relations with God. For instance, “Reckless Love” (Asbury et al., 2017) talked of God’s love searching for and chasing the songwriter:

Oh, the overwhelming, never-ending, reckless love of God  
Oh, it chases me down, fights ‘til I’m found, leaves the ninety-nine  
I couldn’t earn it, I don’t deserve it, still You give Yourself away  
Oh, the overwhelming, never-ending, reckless love of God.

Another song students often sang in chapel services was “Oceans” (Crocker et al., 2012), which was intended to encourage individual faith in, and dependency on, God.

Spirit lead me where my trust is without borders  
Let me walk upon the waters  
Wherever You would call me  
Take me deeper than my feet could ever wander  
And my faith will be made stronger  
In the presence of my Saviour

These songs and many other common chapel songs were focused on the individual and on personal relationships with God. Even though students sang in a crowd surrounded by other people, they were singing as individuals. Furthermore, the songs communicated and asked students to acknowledge God as immanent and close to them. The image of God that was consistently presented in the music and words of chapel services was as one who leads, who chases after people, and who loves. The repetition of these ideas emphasized to students that God was immanent and personal in their individual lives.

Chapel services were the most obvious place in which the practice of worship took place at King’s. This routine activity was intended to shape the way students, as well as faculty and

staff, understood their lives at school and within the larger world. During this activity students engaged as active individual participants in a larger communal practice. There was a clear social dimension to chapel services, it was a common experience for the community, but this experience was also highly individualistic. From the musical lyrics to the words of the sermons, chapel services focused on students' individual faith and their relationships with God who was portrayed as intimately involved in their everyday lives. This activity was intended to train students to think and act according to the assumption that God was involved in all of life.

The routine practice of worship was intended to shape the ways students thought about their lives in the world. Specifically, students were taught to see their lives as lived in the presence of a God who was intimately involved in everyday life and to think of their lives primarily in individualistic ways. These ideas were not directly told to students during worship; rather they were repeatedly and consistently communicated through the embodied practice of worship and thus were deeply impressed upon students. The practice of worship had important ramifications for the civic and public lives of students. Because the practice of worship communicated God's presence in all of life, this implied that God was also involved with and concerned about their civic and public lives. This meant that how students engaged in public life should be a matter of being faithful to God and the Bible, which was at the center of life and all other aspects of life were an overflow from this. The practice of worship reinforced the idea that students' religious identity was overarching and that religious identity determined and shaped civic and public participation.

### ***Prayer***

If the most obvious practice of worship at King's Academy was chapel services, then the most common was prayer. The activity of prayer took place regularly throughout the day –

teachers regularly began class with prayer; students prayed before lunch. Jeff Jacobs, the Head of School, prayed after morning announcements; teachers prayed with students who were having a difficult day. In short, prayer was impossible to avoid because it was everywhere at King's. Most of the prayers I overheard throughout the year were casual and conversational, in fact, I never observed formal prayers with pre-set language being used. Prayers were also offered for what would appear to be mundane aspects of life, for instance, before a Bible class one morning Mrs. Anderson prayed that the technology would work during class. During a class just before the Thanksgiving break, Mr. Mueller casually prayed that God would protect people traveling and see them to their destinations safely, talking as if he were asking a favor from a friend. It is important to emphasize that these prayers were made out loud, with the teacher or a student speaking, though I did observe a couple of times when a teacher had students pray quietly with and for the student sitting next to them at the beginning or end of class. The casual and conversational style of prayer I observed is consistent with the findings of other studies of evangelical or conservative Christian groups (Luhrmann, 2012; Winchester & Guhin, 2019). Bible teacher, Mr. Muller, taught students that prayer was simply "a personal conversation between you and God. It's not about performance, it's a pretty normal conversation like you'd have with other people." His description communicated that prayer was not only a normal part of life, but it was also casual and ordinary, just talking to God. The practice of prayer was a regular and unremarked upon aspect of King's and further demonstrated the assumption that God was active and involved in all aspects of daily life.

Even though chapel services were the most overt place that worship was practiced at King's, prayer made the practice of worship an everyday regular occurrence. This practice embodied King's theo-political logic and communicated to students that God was present and

their entire lives, including their civic and public lives, which were supposed to be lived as an act of worship to God. By analyzing the prayers I observed in classes and during chapel services over the course of the year, I identified several ways in which the activity of prayer functioned at King's. These functions were not necessarily isolated from one another but often overlapped and thus the same prayer could function in multiple ways at the same time. Each of these functions of prayer communicated to students that God was actively involved in every aspect of everyday life, but even more than this, it trained students to see that God acted in their lives and exercised control over all things in life. Not only did this imply that God was active in and exercised control over civic and public aspects of life, but similar to the language of the Christian worldview, it presented students with a unified understanding of their lives. Because God is involved with all aspects of life, he is also involved with civic and public life. Through the practice of worship, students were encouraged to live a unified life rather than dividing their lives into parts such as academic, religious, social, and civic. Praying regularly and praying for the mundane aspects of everyday life, trained students to embrace a wholistic religious understanding of their lives. To participate in society, was to do so in a way that demonstrated obedience to God, and as an act of worship of God – in short, this meant living as a religious, or theo-political, citizen.

An important way prayer functioned at King's was to set off certain activities, specifically their beginnings or endings. Nearly every class began with prayer and most meetings or gatherings ended in prayer. Mrs. Collins, the Literature teacher, often announced "Okay, I'm praying now." She then asked if students had prayer requests or things to pray for, or she launched into a prayer. This was often used as a way to focus students at the beginning of class and to signal to them to stop their side conversations and pay attention. Prayer also marked the

ending of meetings and gatherings as a way to signal closure. It was common for faculty meetings or chapels to end with a prayer that wrapped up the event and signaled to the individuals involved that this activity was concluded. Using prayer in this manner does seem mundane or routine in a certain way, but importantly, it also signaled to members of the community that the activity they were about to engage in or had just engaged in was enacted in the presence of a God who was constantly involved with them.

Importantly, however, prayer functioned in more important ways than simply marking out time. Prayer also functioned as a strategy for facing practical problems in life. This was the most common usage of prayer. At the beginning of classes, teachers and students prayed for the technology to work, prayed for physical healing when loved ones were sick, and prayed for other practical problems such as college acceptance or success on a test or quiz. When a short fight broke out between two senior boys after Literature class one day, Mrs. Collins was visibly disturbed. Two senior girls gathered around her to pray with her. They prayed for comfort for Mrs. Collins to be able to teach her next class and that the two boys would be able to calmly work out their differences. At King's Academy, the activity of prayer was framed as a natural response to difficulties and needs, and it was assumed that God could and did intervene in the everyday lives of individuals to provide help and comfort amid life's difficulties.

Another way in which prayer functioned at King's was as a way to talk about the inner transformation of individuals. Similar to prayer as a way of facing practical problems, this function assumed God was active in the lives of individuals. Mrs. Larson, a Bible teacher, often prayed in this manner before classes. She asked God to "come alive [in] their [students] hearts" or to "set us on the path of righteousness." Prayers of this sort focused on internal change or growth; they featured a God who could change a person's attitudes, feelings, and motivations.

After one Bible class, Sam Jones, a senior student, talked with Mrs. Larson about a time when his pastor prayed for him and his family at church. Sam explained how encouraged and calmed he was by this experience. At King's, it was assumed that prayer was an activity that could bring about inner transformation and remind individuals that God was involved in their everyday lives.

The final function of prayer was to invoke God's involvement in or blessing upon activities or people, such as classes, as when Mr. Winters prayed before his Economics class, "God be with us as we talk and bless our conversation." Here there was a direct connection between prayer and reminding students that what they were doing in class and what they were learning was being done in the presence of God. The assumption of God's constant involvement in everything was demonstrated by Mrs. Wilcox's prayer at the beginning of psychology class when she said, "God made our brains intricately and amazingly."

Similar to the activity of chapel, the activity of prayer framed students as individual actors and portrayed God as immanently active in their lives. As a regular everyday activity, prayer reinforced these ideas as part of the taken-for-granted reality for students and trained them to engage with the world according to that understanding. Because practices are embodied activities and carry with them particular ways of understanding oneself and the world, engaging in these practices shapes individuals over time. Practices form what anthropologist Ammerman (2021), building on Pierre Bourdieu, called "habitual dispositions – how we act without thinking" (p. 16-17). Practices become habitual and automatic responses to life and shape the taken-for-granted ways individuals and groups navigate the world. Furthermore, Ammerman (2021) argued that while practices may be formed in a particular social realm of life, just as the practice of prayer is often formed in the context of religious forms of life, these ways of living overflow into other areas. Ammerman asserted:

What we learn to do in one place can spill over into other places. As a result, for example, action can be both religious and political at the same time. While it may be useful to think about distinct social domains and the cultural logics they sustain, the reality of everyday life is that practices travel across those boundaries. (p. 17)

Similarly, sociologist Michel de Certeau (1984) argued that practices and ways of living “traverse the frontiers dividing time, place, and type of action” (p. 29). Because practices shape habitual dispositions and ways of being in the world, they cannot help but move from one context to another.

The notion of practices spilling over or traversing social boundaries suggests that the practices King’s students learned in the context of worship at school spilled over into the civic and public sphere as well. Practices developed in one sphere of life traverse that sphere and spill over into other areas of life because practices form unexamined habitual ways of being in the world. The practice of worship at King’s shaped the ways students engaged with the world based on the premise that God was actively involved in everyday affairs. In this way, the practice of worship reinforced the pervasive theo-political logic that animated King’s Academy and spilled over into the civic and public lives of students. Always the message was that religious identity and practice were overarching and paramount in all forms of engagement with society.

The theo-political logic of King’s was communicated to students through the language of the Christian worldview and was embodied in the everyday practice of worship. This practice taught students not only that God was involved with every aspect of life, but also that all of life should be centered on following God. In this way, there was a strong coherence between how students were told to think about action and the actual practices they engaged in daily at school. The theo-political logic, which was embodied through the practice of worship, formed habits within

students to understand their engagement with society as first and foremost about their identity as Christians and their religious faithfulness.

### **The Practice of Serving: Shaping a Society of Caring Individuals**

Another central material practice at King's, which conveyed the theo-political logic to students, was the everyday practice of service. The finding that service and volunteer work had a central place at King's is consistent with the findings of other researchers that levels of community service tend to be higher at Protestant Christian schools than at their public or secular private school counterparts (Campbell, 2001; Sikkink, 2009). At King's, the practice of service included many different activities, all of which had to do with assisting other people within the school community, the local community, and around the globe.

Just as the practice of worship socialized students to see the world and their lives as constantly lived in the presence of, and for the worship of, God, so too the practice of service trained students to care about others in their communities. Shaped by the larger theo-political logic of the school, the practice of service prompted students to pay attention to the needs of others and trained them to care for those in need. At the same time, however, as I have argued above, the practice of service at King's framed social problems as individual and personal rather than structural or systemic.

### ***The Context of Service***

Service was central at King's Academy and took place in a variety of forms— everyday acts of serving the community, coordinated service projects, and service week. The difference among these three was primarily the level of organization and the duration of the service activity. For everyday acts, there was little to no formal organization, and typically these were short momentary acts of service. For coordinated service projects, there was a higher level of

organization, typically orchestrated by a faculty or staff member, and these projects took place over a long period of time, normally for the entire school year. Service week involved the highest level of organization because this event involved partnering with organizations outside the school for a short-term activity, taking place within a single week during the spring semester.

Unplanned and informal everyday serving included moments when students, unprompted, helped set up and put away chairs and musical equipment for chapel services or engaged in other acts of kindness or helpfulness based on their awareness of the needs of those around them. When I first started observations at King's, I noticed quickly that students often took time out of their day to help others. When I was lost during the first several times visiting the school, students routinely stopped to ask if they could help me find the room or office I was looking for. Students also stopped to hold doors for one another and especially for teachers and staff. There was a general awareness of the needs of others and with this, a willingness to help serve others when needed.

Everyday acts of service were not confined only to spontaneous and courteous behaviors. They also included students voluntarily filling roles or doing jobs that served the community. For example, Billy Connors, a senior, served on a volunteer team of students who helped organize and run chapel services, and Brittany Smith, another senior, volunteered to help elementary students during some of her free periods. Neither Billy nor Brittany thought what they were doing was a big deal. As Billy explained to me one day, he simply enjoyed working with sound and video and thought he could help out. Like Billy and Brittany, many students at King's served in everyday ways by being aware of the needs of those around them and using their talents to help the school community.

The second context for the practice of service was coordinated service projects. Throughout the year that I observed at the school, the majority of students participated in some form of organized service project, from food collections to clothing drives. Most of these were organized and run by student clubs or groups, with the aid of a faculty advisor, and were aimed at serving the larger community of the city and often involved partnering with outside organizations. Through these coordinated service projects, students from the student council or various service clubs had opportunities to connect with those in need and help in the planning and organization of service. The opportunities to serve in this way were intended to raise awareness among the students of the needs of those in the larger community and to impress upon students that they had the capacity and the responsibility to help those in need. Service opportunities were framed for students as part of what it meant to love their neighbors. During my interview with Bible teacher Mr. Mueller, I asked him about service projects at the school, and he explained that living out a Christian worldview meant “there is going to be a concern for the downtrodden, for the poor. There is going to be a concern for, to borrow the buzzword, social justice and things like that.” While Mr. Mueller seemed hesitant to use the term social justice, possibly because of its association in conservative Christianity with progressives or being “woke,” he explained that the focus on service at King’s was intended to socialize students into seeing their responsibilities to those in need. Even though Mr. Mueller used the term social justice in our conversation, the service focus of King’s was primarily framed as addressing the needs and problems experienced by individual people, rather than addressing larger social or structural issues, which is generally implied in discussions of social justice.

The third context for the practice of service at King’s Academy was the events surrounding “service week.” For a week before spring break, classes were canceled at King’s,

and students spent time serving in various locations. Some of the service was devoted to projects around the school, such as cleaning up the playground and cleaning out the theater storage area, but the majority of the service was done at various locations around the city. For example, during service week, several students went with Mrs. Collins to work with an organization dedicated to providing clothes and services for homeless individuals and families. The students helped sort clothes that had been donated and helped switch over the clothing shop from winter to spring and summer clothes. A different group of students went to help at “Unto,” the humanitarian division of a large global Christian ministry organization, which worked to provide food and aid to communities in need internationally. The students serving at Unto helped pack boxes with agricultural material and clothing to be sent to Ukraine.

To better understand the meaning of service at King’s, it is helpful to look closely at a specific example. Starting at the beginning of the year, the senior Worldview class at King’s devoted Fridays to a specific long-term service project. Mrs. Anderson, the Worldview teacher, partnered with a local organization that raised money to run an orphanage and school in Colombia. The students at King’s “adopted” a young boy and raised money by selling Colombian coffee beans to financially support him at the orphanage and school in Colombia for the year. Originally, this was intended to be a year-long service-learning project where students learned about the people they were trying to help, which culminated in a mission trip during service week to meet the young boy they had “adopted” and to spend the week working at the orphanage. However, the trip was canceled due to Covid concerns.

Despite the absence of the trip, this example of service is particularly interesting because it highlights several of the typical aspects of the practice of service at King’s. As with all the other displays of service, this project was focused on helping those in need. In this way, the

practice of service trained students to recognize the needs of others and to see themselves as able to help with those needs. It is important to note, however, that, similar to other forms of service at the school, this project was impersonal and not focused on forming relationships. As with many service opportunities, students did not form significant relationships with the people they were serving. This does not mean that the encounters they had were not meaningful, but simply that they were short-lived and not based on lasting relationships. Even the planned service trip to work at the orphanage would have been short-lived and could have done more harm than good. Many scholars and practitioners have argued that “service projects and mission trips *do not effect lasting change*” (Lupton, 2011, p. 15) and instead tend to reinforce a larger short-term service industry that helps individuals feel good about service and only offers short-term fixes to deeper structural problems (Lupton, 2011; ver Beek, 2006).

In this particular project, students learned the story about the young boy they were “adopting” and exchanged a handful of letters early on in the school year, but by spring when I talked with many of these seniors about the project, most had forgotten about it or simply saw it as a moment to do some good in the world. Furthermore, this service project, like all the others at King’s, centered on individuals and their needs. There was never a discussion of the conditions or causes that led to individuals being in need; instead, the focus was on meeting the needs. At the beginning of Mrs. Anderson’s project, there was a presentation to students about some of the causes of poverty in Colombia, but there was never attention to how to address those problems. For instance, students were told that poverty in Colombia was caused by the drug trade, lack of access to education, and lack of government support, particularly in rural communities. While these were mentioned the first time this project was introduced, the class never revisited these issues nor investigated what was actually happening in Colombia. They simply moved on to

discuss how to raise money to help the young boy with no consideration of ways to change society to mitigate the problem.

The Colombia service project had some unique aspects at King's in that it was organized within a specific class and the students were told at the beginning of the project that they were going to take time to learn about the culture of the young Colombia boy and build a relationship with him through video conferencing over the course of the year. However, these goals never fully materialized. The Worldview curriculum ended up taking priority and the Friday classes, which had been announced as dedicated to this service-learning project, were used to focus on the regular worldview curriculum.

During observations at King's over the course of the whole school year, I never observed teachers or staff intentionally leading students to reflect on the practice of service or teaching them the context or background of their service. When I conducted interviews with seniors in the spring semester, I asked all of them what they were taught about why they served or about the context for the various forms of service they did. A handful pointed to the Colombia project as the only time they recalled specifically reflecting on the context and the learning that was connected to the project. Others mentioned general comments from teachers that Christians ought to serve, but senior Eric Larson summed up well the response from most of the seniors. Eric was the son of Bible teacher Jill Larson and had attended King's since kindergarten. When I asked him if teachers and staff talked about why people are in need or about the purposes behind the service they performed, he looked at me confidently and said, "I think we probably . . ." then paused to think as if trying to recall something. He restarted, this time a bit unsure, "If any class, it would be in Worldview class that we went over something like that and helping the community by serving, that sort of thing." He followed this up with, "It's not like we had a specific chapter

and we were like, ‘Let’s go over service.’” Eric typified most seniors' responses to this line of questioning. Students recalled that serving the community was important and reported that they had been engaged in service in multiple contexts. However, this never included learning to look at the root causes or structural dynamics of problems such as poverty or homelessness.

### *The Civic Message of Service*

As suggested earlier, practices are activities that help shape a tacit understanding about life in the world and give meaning to life (Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, 2001). Recalling the words of Ammerman (2021) – that practices cultivate “habitual dispositions” – daily activity at King’s can be understood as shaping students’ habitual dispositions toward service by helping individuals with specific needs but not attending to the structural and systemic aspects of social problems. Much of the service at King’s took place within one of three contexts—Christian communities, the school itself, or in local churches. However, some service activities were also directed generally to the larger community in which King’s Academy was located, and some even had an international focus. In this way, students were socialized to care about the individuals in their community and to be involved in the betterment of those with whom they lived.

The practice of service was carried out in an individualistic manner, and it is important to note that students’ engagement in service did not encourage the cultivation of deep or lasting relationships or connections. This means that service was defined in terms of both working to meet the needs of individual people who were often less fortunate than oneself and giving to charitable causes or relief initiatives to meet individuals' specific needs. Many students took the practice of service very seriously and became invested in opportunities to help other people. While some of the service work took the form of fundraisers to support other people who did the

actual work of service, nearly all of the service week projects and many other organized service opportunities at King's put students in direct contact with individuals who were in need. Despite students being in direct contact with individuals and focusing on their specific needs, however, most of the service opportunities fell short of cultivating lasting relationships or any sense of collective action, which is a vital part of community engagement. In this way, the practice of service at King's was similar to the practice of worship, in that it was focused on the individual rather than the collective. All of the contexts in which students practiced service conveyed the idea that the goal was helping an individual or person, not changing society or working with others to help reorganize the structure of society. It is important to note that the encounters students did have with the people they served were sometimes powerful and meaningful to individual students, but they were also short-lived, mainly because the organization of the majority of service opportunities was short-term.

In addition to centering on the individual aspects of service, the ways service was enacted at King's actually obscured the structural problems in society. Combining the individualistic nature of service with the reality that students never discussed or examined the social or structural causes of social problems meant that problems were seen simply in personal and individual terms. This meant that problems that needed to be solved had to do with people in need and their personal lives and situations, rather than involving asking questions about the ultimate causes or roots of people's needs in the first place. This individualistic focus meant that the structural dynamics of social issues were occluded and remained outside the frame of civic attention. The nature of service at King's was very different from the civic engagement that Westheimer (2015) describes as social justice-oriented wherein students "are able to examine social, political, and economic structures and explore strategies for change that address root

causes of problems” (p. 40). At King’s, service was an activity that was completely disconnected from students’ learning about political and economic issues. Thus, King’s students did not have the opportunity to move from individual service to larger understandings of political action as a kind of service that not only aimed at meeting the needs of people but also aimed to address the structural and systemic causes of those needs.

This lack of attention to structural and systemic injustices at King’s also obscured consideration of the racial dynamics of society. As discussed in Chapter Four, the tight connection between color-blind ideology and the Christian worldview meant ignoring the very long history of structural racism that serves to reinforce white supremacy in the U.S. This omission was demonstrated in the service project wherein students “adopted” an orphan in Colombia. As explained above, there was no consideration of structural issues and in fact, no mention of racial differences between the adopted child and the King’s students when they discussed this project. The theo-political logic of King’s completely omitted attention to structural and systemic problems. The hyperfocus on the individual and the personal within the practice of service and worship meant the theo-political logic offered a frame of reference to students that masked structural and systemic problems, making them almost completely invisible and nonexistent.

Service was a central practice the students continually engaged in while at King’s Academy and provided them with habitual dispositions for engaging with society. As with the practice of worship, the everyday practice of service formed habitual dispositions that guided the way of thinking about and engaging with society which impacts students' civic identity and engagement. While the focus on service socialized students into virtues of care and concern for

others, it also encouraged interactions that were individualistic in focus and failed to build lasting relationships or see problems in society as social or structural.

### **Material Practices and the Habits of Citizenship**

As defined in this chapter, practices are communally shared clusters of activity that are embodied in the material and carry within them forms of tacit knowledge that help actors make sense of and give meaning to their lives (Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, 2001). As I pointed out above, Ammerman (2021) argues that these practices offer an understanding of life and the world that is “as much in our bones as in our heads” (p. 15). The schemas and practices of King’s Academy worked together to shape the habitual dispositions through which students thought about and lived out their civic and public lives.

The theo-political logic of King’s not only formed the schemas and practices that animated the school but was also reinforced by those same schemas and practices. In other words, everyday ways of acting and thinking about action constituted a taken-for-granted world shaped by a theo-political logic. This logic told students they were expected to act as religious citizens whose job was to make society conform with conservative Christianity and with what they perceived to be the kingdom of God. Students were socialized to believe that their actions could shape society so that it was in sync with conservative Christian perspectives and agendas. Even civic action, such as voting, was to be aimed at worshiping God. Furthermore, King’s theo-political logic provided normative frames that encouraged students to help those in need but in a personal and individual manner that obscured structural and systemic causes of social problems within society.

The primary research question of this dissertation has to do with the logics, practices, and symbolic representations concerning civic identity and participation in democratic society that

were conveyed explicitly and implicitly at one Conservative Christian high school. Together, Chapters Four and Five argue that the central logic of King's Academy was a theo-political logic that was committed to the absolute truth of Christianity. This logic was consistent with the idea that students' civic identity was first and foremost a religious identity and that their engagement with society was intended to support a conservative theological understanding of society.

Through both symbolic representations and regular everyday practices students were taught to see their participation in civic and public life as an overflow of their religious identity. Instead of seeing their civic identity and participation primarily in democratic terms, students were taught to understand them in religious ways. That is, they were first and foremost theo-political citizens of the kingdom of God, and their civic and public identity and engagement were derived from membership in the conservative Christian community.

## CHAPTER SIX

### **Student and Parent Engagement with a Theo-Political Logic**

Chapters Four and Five work together to focus on analyzing and explaining the logic that animated civic development at King's and shaped students' conceptions of their civic identity and how they should engage with society. As discussed, King's theo-political logic, which was premised on the absolute truth of the tenets of conservative Christianity, dominated the school culture and eclipsed other agendas. Furthermore, this theo-political logic prioritized students' religious identities over all other aspects of their identities such that civic identity was completely subsumed by, and incorporated into, religious identity. Chapter Four discusses how theo-political logic was symbolically represented at King's through worldview language, concepts, and thinking. Chapter Five analyzes the way theo-political logic was enacted through schemas of action and practices that reinforced the theo-political logic in students' lives. By focusing on the school as an organization that communicated a specific logic to students about how to live and engage in public life, Chapters Four and Five together answer the primary question of this dissertation, which has to do with the logics, practices, and symbolic representations related to civic identity and participation in a democratic society that were conveyed at a Conservative Christian high school.

In Chapter Six, my focus shifts away from the school itself and turns to look at the students and parents. In doing so, this chapter takes up the second and third research questions of this dissertation, first answering the question of how students understood and engaged with the ideas of civic identity and participation conveyed at the school and then answering the question of how parents understood and engaged with the ideas of civic identity and participation

conveyed at King's. While the powerful theo-political logic pervasive at King's Academy was intended to shape students in a particular direction, it cannot be assumed that students (or parents) were simply passive recipients of the institutional logic that animated the educational institution they attended. This chapter explores how and to what extent students embraced the King's Academy logic in their thinking and acting. Furthermore, this chapter analyzes how parents thought about and engaged with the theo-political logic of the school.

The first part of this chapter is based primarily on my analysis of student interviews, but also draws on my analysis of classroom observations. Overall, I found that students largely embraced the theo-political logic that was conveyed through the Christian worldview and the everyday practices of King's Academy as a way of making sense of their own civic identity and participation in public life. However, while students generally embraced the school's logic as a way of making sense of their lives in a diverse democratic society, individually, they tended to highlight various aspects of this logic as they worked out their own civic identities and ways of engaging in public life. In doing this, the students demonstrated a sense of what institutional theorists have called "embedded agency" (Seo & Creed, 2002) whereby the structure implicit in the theo-political logic of King's provided the narrow context within which they could exercise their own agency as they navigated their civic and public lives.

In the second part of this chapter, I draw primarily on my analysis of interviews with parents as well as some observational data of parent meetings and events at the school. In this portion of the chapter, I argue that parents sent their children to King's Academy for a number of reasons. Primarily, however, the parents I interviewed were seeking an education that was framed by the Christian worldview and aligned with their own politically conservative perspectives. Also, many parents chose to send their children to King's because they wanted

specifically to avoid perceived problems with public school curriculum, social practices, and secular culture. Thus, parents were making both a positive choice *for* the Christian worldview they believed they would find at King's and, at the same time, making a negative choice *against* public education and against secular influences on their children. In choosing King's, parents demonstrated a high degree of support for the theo-political logic of King's, which often overlapped and were consistent with the messages students received about civic and public life at home. This overlap between home life and school life created a powerful force for socializing students into the idea that civic and public life was (and ought to be) an outgrowth of religious commitments.

### **Student and the Theo-Political Logic of King's Academy**

As Chapter Three details, I followed a cohort of 16 seniors throughout the 2021-2022 school year. This group of students was chosen because they comprised one of the sections of the senior Worldview IV classes taught by Mrs. Anderson. The cohort I followed represented half of the entire senior class of 32 young people for that academic year. Of the 16 students in the cohort, 12 agreed to participate in one-on-one interviews, which represented well more than a third of the senior class. The other four students in the cohort I observed were invited to engage in interviews, but offered various reasons for not wanting to do so. Most claimed they just did not have the time for an interview, but one student explained that she was sure she was not going to tell me anything I had not heard already from other students. In making this claim, she seemed to indicate that she thought there would be significant agreement among the students and that her voice was not going to add anything new. One of the limits of this dissertation is that it is possible some student viewpoints and perspectives were unaddressed or not visible to me over the course of the full school year. More about these missing voices is addressed below.

Of the students I interviewed, many had spent most of their high school years at King's. Two of the students had attended King's for the majority of their entire school experience – Eric Larson had attended King's since pre-K, and Brittany Smith had spent eight years at King's alternating between attending King's and being homeschooled for part of elementary and middle school. Not only had Eric and Brittany attended King's for most of their educational careers, but both Eric and Brittany's mothers were employed as teachers at King's. Of the other ten students, five had transferred to King's after the school they were attending, Southern Valley Christian School, experienced leadership problems. Southern Valley was a K-12 Conservative Christian school directly connected with a local church about 30 minutes south of the city where King's was located. While Jeff Jacobs was the Head of School at Southern Valley, there was controversy at the school board level concerning the school's relationship with its founding church. Mr. Jacobs finally left the school at the end of the 2018-2019 school year to take over as Head of School at King's Academy. When this happened, about a third of the families and several staff members also left Southern Valley to follow Mr. Jacobs to King's, despite the fact that this added significant time to many families' commuting time to the school. For instance, one student, Makayla Adams, drove more than 40 minutes in each direction to attend King's after leaving Southern Valley. Of the 12 students I interviewed, only five had attended public school at some point, which included Paul Zhang's experience attending public school in China before coming to the United States in the 2019-2020 school year. Table 6.1 conveys the educational experiences of the students in my research cohort.

**Table 6.1***Educational Experience (K-12) of the Observed Cohort*

<b>Student</b>	<b>Participated in Interview</b>	<b>Years Attending King's Academy</b>	<b>Years Attending Public School</b>	<b>Transferred from South Valley Christian School</b>
Makayla Adams	Yes	3	2	Yes
Mark Anderson	Yes	3	0	Yes
Maddie Baker	Yes	6	7	No
Kay Bennet	Yes	4	0	No
Emma Blanchet	Yes	2	11	No
Abby Carter	Yes	4	0	No
Billy Conners	No	1	11	No
Brian Donaldson	Yes	3	0	Yes
Philip Dunn	Yes	3	8	Yes
Bridget Kelly	Yes	3	0	Yes
Eric Larson	Yes	12	0	No
Faith Porter	No	2	8	No
Lisa Shields	No	3	0	Yes
Brittany Smith	Yes	8	0	No
Grace Walsh	No	1	0	No
Paul Zhang	Yes	3	In China	No

*Note - = indicates information not provided by the student or available from King's Academy.*

While race was not a focus of this dissertation, it should be noted that all of the students in the cohort I observed were white except for Paul Zhang, who was an international student from China. In the entire senior class of 32 students, only three students identified as coming from families considered to be racial minorities – two identified as African American and one identified as Asian. From my observations at the school over a whole year, it was very clear that King's was a predominantly white institution with only one person of color on the staff as the

facilities director. It should also be noted that, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, the city in which King's Academy was located was 86% white. The racial makeup of King's was in keeping with previous research on Conservative Christian schools, which indicates that as a whole, they are predominantly white institutions (Blosser, 2019). Nationwide, Conservative Christian schools are comprised of 69% white students, one of the highest percentages of white enrollment among all classifications of private schools (Broughman et al., 2021). As a comparison, Catholic private school enrollment is 63% white students while non-sectarian private school enrollment is 60% white students.

With one exception, the students I interviewed clearly indicated that they identified as Christian. The single exception was Emma Blanchet who had come to King's at the beginning of her junior year because her parents wanted her to attend in-person classes, and her local public school was fully remote due to Covid-19. When I asked her about her faith and religious commitment, she explained, "I think I'm at a point where I'm trying to strive away from my parent's view because my parents aren't [Christians]. So, I'm trying to figure it out for myself." For Emma, the Christian aspect of the school was all new and after two years, she indicated that was still trying to figure out what that meant for her and what it meant to move away from her parents' perspective. The other students I interviewed told me they came from Christian families and that Christianity had been central to their lives for as long as they could remember. Besides Emma, the only other student who did not come from a Christian background was Paul Zhang, who came to the U.S. in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade and started attending King's at that point. For three years, he lived with fellow senior, Eric Larson, whose mother, Jill Larson, was one of the senior Bible teachers at King's Academy. Paul told me in our interview that he became a Christian under the influence of the school and living with the Larson family. While he did not elaborate much on

the importance of Christianity in his life, it is telling that he planned to attend a large evangelical Christian college the following year.

Generally speaking, the students I observed and interviewed at King's embraced the theo-political logic of King's, and their thinking concerning their civic identity and participation in the larger society seemed to be shaped by that logic. In keeping with this theo-political logic, the students understood their public life primarily in religious terms rather than in specific civic terms or concepts. In doing this, they sought to live out the conservative Christian worldview which was intended to influence every aspect of their public lives. However, I found that the students did not simply mimic or mindlessly reproduce the theo-political logic; rather, as I show below, as individual actors, students sought to live out this logic in various ways. In short, students exercised a certain kind of agency, which was embedded in the theo-political logic framework that animated the school.

### **Student Agency Embedded in the Theo-Political Logic of King's**

The notion of embedded agency is particularly helpful here. One of the enduring problems in institutional theory, and social sciences in general, is the relationship between structure and agency (Battilana & D'Aunno, 2009; Scott, 2014). Battilana and D'Aunno (2009) distinguish two "extreme perspectives" (p. 33) within this debate – the determinist orientation and the voluntarist orientation. With the determinist orientation, action is considered always to be the product of structural or environmental forces, such that "there is little room for human agency" (p. 33). Whereas, from the perspective of the voluntarist orientation, actors are seen as "autonomous, pro-active, and self-directed" (p. 33). Battilana and D'Aunno (2009) explained that most theorists are neither fully at the extreme of one orientation nor the other, but rather lean towards one of these poles. Institutional theory, which was heavily influenced by Anthony

Giddens's theory of structuration and Pierre Bourdieu's work on habitus, understands agency as embedded within a particular context or logic (Loc & Willmont, 2019; Scott, 2014). That is, the structure that actors find themselves in provides them with schemas and rules for acting; however, actors take these and engage in a way that may be unique while still fitting within the schemas and rules. This may be similar to the various ways a stage actor may take up and deliver a script: there is a set structure, but actors emphasize various aspects of the script. In this way, the action is structured, but the structure provides room for variation and agency. Thus, as Thornton et al. (2012) argued, the notion of embedded agency "implies individual agency, albeit subject to constraints" (p. 79).

Within institutional theory, the notion of agency has usually been considered on the organizational level, trying to account for how organizations change or vary within a given organizational field rather than examining agency on the individual level (Battilana & D'Aunno, 2009; DiMaggio, 1988; Friedland & Alford, 1991). However, there have been some attempts to better understand agency on the individual level within institutional theory. Along these lines, some theorists have argued for the concept of institutional entrepreneurship to understand how actors within an organization introduce new behaviors and change within institutional structures (DiMaggio, 1988; Battilana, 2006). As Battilana (2006) has argued, institutional change happens because actors with lower status or power within an organization are often less embedded in or influenced by the prevailing institutional logic and thus have the ability to "promote alternative practices" (p. 663) and thereby become institutional entrepreneurs offering an organization new ways of acting within an institutional field. Another way institutional theory has tried to account for individual agency is by focusing attention on contradictions or conflicts that exist between dominant rules or patterns within a logic. Some theorists suggest that these contradictions can be

exploited by actors to create new patterns of behavior or thinking, thus demonstrating greater amounts of agency within a given structure (Seo & Creed, 2002). A final way institutional theorists have aimed to give greater attention to agency is through the recognition that actors often function within multiple organizations and thus under multiple logics. Dealing primarily at the organizational level, Phillips et al. (2016), for example, argue that organizations can draw from various logics that migrate across fields and help formulate “hybrid organizations.” In a similar way, it may be possible for actors to combine logics across various institutions they operate in to form hybrid logics and introduce change. Although institutional scholars have tried to account for agency and change within organizations in various ways, it is important to note that within varying accounts, agency is still understood as working within a particular institutional framework. That is, none of these perspectives move away from the significance of embedded agency. Rather they emphasize that the structure of the dominant logic provides the rules for understanding and acting. The notion of embedded agency helps us make sense of how students engaged with the theo-political logic of King’s in relation to their own understandings of civic and public life.

Based on interviews and observations of students in classes and other school contexts, I argue that the majority of students understood civic and public life through the structure of the theo-political logic of King’s, thus seeing their public life as an overflow of their religious identity and commitments. When students thought about their responsibilities and their engagement with public life, they discussed these as natural outflows of their commitment to Christianity and the Christian worldview. In short, they saw their civic and public lives as derived from their religious identities. The single exception to this pattern was Emma, who did not identify as a Christian; however, as discussed below, even Emma admitted to being

influenced by the Christian worldview in terms of how she thought about civic and public life, and was seriously considering becoming a Christian herself. Consistent with the finding that students saw their civic and public lives as an overflow of their religious lives in keeping with the theo-political logic of King's, the students also connected Christianity with conservative politics and social stances. Whether it was supporting Trump's candidacy and presidency or agreeing with pro-life positions, the students at King's tended to equate conservative social and political positions with being a Christian. Interestingly, however, despite these broad tendencies, the students exercised a certain degree of individual agency in how they lived out their civic and public lives embedded within the guardrails provided to them through the theo-political logic. For a number of students, as Chapters Four and Five suggest, agency could be seen in the ways they tried to resolve the tensions between absolute Christian truth, which rejected many aspects of difference and diversity and focused on implementing the norms and values of conservative Christianity in social and political life, on one hand, and Christian love, which was supposed to be given to all of one's "neighbors," broadly construed, on the other. While various students exercised certain degrees of agency by emphasizing and deemphasizing various aspects of the theo-political logic, nearly all of them acted within the larger framework of the theo-political logic itself. This illustrates the nature of embedded agency— wherein the theo-political logic provided the structure within which students exercised a certain degree of agency in their civic and public lives.

The following pages provide some detail about some of the students and their parents, following the example of Peshkin (1986), who offered portraits of students at Bethany Baptist Academy, in order to provide an in-depth picture of how they engaged with the school. Below, I offer three portraits focused on the ways individual students, through their own words, engaged

with, and understand ideas about civic and public life. The portraits were constructed based on data gathered through one-on-one interviews, often including follow-up interviews, conversations with students while in the field observing, as well as observations of each student in classes and other activities that occurred throughout the year I was at King's. The portraits offer the kind of in-depth, rich, and nuanced understanding that is common in ethnographic research (Emerson, et al., 2011; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) focusing on the way these students engaged with the theo-political logic of King's. It is important to note that these portraits do not represent categories or "types" of students at King's. Instead, they are intended to highlight the ways in which student agency was embedded within the context of the overarching theo-political logic of King's and to show how this embeddedness shaped different students' understandings of civic and public life.

***Bridget Kelly: Building the Kingdom of God***

Bridget Kelly had only attended King's Academy for three years at the time I interviewed her, but she was no stranger to Christian schooling. She had been enrolled in Christian schools since kindergarten and was part of one of the families who followed Mr. Jacobs from Southern Valley when he took the head position at King's. Bridget's faith was central to her identity as she explained to me in an interview, "I have such a good relationship with God. He's my number one. My parents have definitely raised me with such a good background in faith, and I am just so strong in what I believe." The importance of faith for Bridget was displayed in her leadership role singing and participating as a member of the worship band for chapel as well as in the way she drew on her faith during class discussions, as she did when in literature class when she evaluated the morality of characters in novels through the lens of Christianity. She appeared to be a popular student in the senior class and seemed liked by her peers, in fact, she brought in

leftover bagels from her work most Tuesdays and left them in the senior lounge for other students. She also was an engaged student and often participated in and contributed to class discussions. Bridget's understanding of civic and public life was fully aligned with the theological logic of King's and tightly fused with her commitment to Christianity.

Overall, Bridget communicated that she loved her experience at Christian schools, particularly what she saw as the biblical foundation of academics.

I love being able to go to a Christian school, and academic wise, being able to just learn about truth, not having to go and sit through classes, especially like science is the first thing you think of, where I don't agree with anything that [public schools] are teaching me about evolution and all these things, the world's created millions of years ago. I don't want to have to sit through that and be tested on what this book says is right and wrong, differentiation from what I know is right and wrong. So, that's a big plus for me having all my classes being based in the truth and on the Bible, and almost every curriculum that we use, everything goes back to just the Scriptures and how this relates to our own personal walk with God, and it's really, it's a good thing to base your academic foundation on.

Having academics based on the truth, or rather, the Bible was important for Bridget. She wanted her educational experience to be shaped by Christianity and not to challenge or conflict with what she already knew to be true from Scripture. Bridget did not see her schooling as a means to challenge or expand her understanding but wanted it to support and affirm the religious beliefs she was already convinced of. Even though she had never attended a school that was not Christian, she was convinced that if she had, the teaching and curriculum would be contrary to what she knew to be true because of her commitment to Christianity. While Bridget appreciated

her Christian schooling, she also felt that at times she had to defend her Christian faith to other students, and even was shocked by what Mr. Winters taught in her history class.

Mr. Winters was one of the few teachers who mentioned to me that he took an anti-Trump position even though he was a conservative politically. Bridget took issue with this perspective being presented in her history class leading up to the 2020 election. At first, she explained to me that her problem with Mr. Winters was not his anti-Trump position, but the fact that she thought he was so vocal and aggressive about his position and shutting down conversations about being pro-Trump, which she admitted was the position of the majority of the students at King's. However, as we talked further, she eventually explained:

As a whole, we were talking about Trump or no Trump, you're voting for conservative or non-conservative values. Whoever is running, you're voting for abortion or not abortion. You're voting for gay marriage or [for making it] illegal. It's all very laid out, plain and simple.

For Bridget, being anti-Trump was equivalent to being anti-conservative, because, as she said, it was all very plain and simple. This seemed to indicate that her real concern with Mr. Winters was not the way he discussed, or did not discuss, the possibility of supporting Trump in class, but it was his anti-Trump position itself that was incompatible with her understanding of being conservative. She further indicated in this same conversation that she thought Mr. Winter's position was incompatible with Christianity. She stated that among the students there "was a really big consensus, just how a teacher can so vocally in a Christian school vocalize such non-Christian beliefs." This appeared to indicate that for Bridget, and the students she talked with, to be anti-Trump was to be anti-conservative and thus to hold a non-Christian perspective.

Following the theo-political logic of King's, Bridget's understanding of Christianity was fully enmeshed with conservative politics.

When it came to understanding her role in society and her public life, Bridget understood this through her commitment to Christianity. During our interview when I asked about her role as a citizen and member of society, she explained:

First and foremost, definitely, because I'm a Christian, our roles in society are different than those who are not, just because my number one priority is building the kingdom [of God], furthering the kingdom and just doing whatever I can just basically to be on God's call. That's what I am.

Later in the conversation, she summarized her understanding by claiming "my role in society is just to build [the] kingdom and live for God." For Bridget, to live as a citizen in society was an opportunity to live for God and to spread Christianity. She understood her identity as being a Christian first, and public life was an overflow of that identity. As we talked further, I asked her to explain what this meant about her engagement with politics. In response, she explained:

As Christians [we ought] to do what we can to build the kingdom politically, it's like voting for biblical values, and just seeing if you really truly believe [what] the Bible has [to] say and you know God's heart, then these things will be so black and white to you. You're truly just voting on abortion. Is abortion legal or making abortion illegal it's truly just that.

Bridget understood her political involvement as a way to further the kingdom of God and seemed to indicate here that this was simple, one just had to have biblical values and vote according to those. This assumed that there was only one Christian way to understand complex issues like abortion. It is important to note that this interview took place prior to the *Dobbs v. Jackson*

(2022) decision, which overturned *Roe v. Wade* (1973) and pushed the abortion debate down from the federal level to the state level. During a follow-up interview with Bridget, which took place after the *Dobbs* decision had been leaked to the press, we talked further and she offered a bit more complex view than simply claiming issues were black or white.

Revisiting the question concerning her understanding of her civic engagement as a Christian, she still claimed that implementing her Christian values was important, but she seemed unsure about what this meant practically. Following up on her position concerning abortion in light of the pending *Dobbs* decision, she claimed she would support a full abortion ban; however, she also struggled to articulate what that would mean for cases of rape and incest. She eventually concluded, “I would love a full ban.” Just after she said this, she paused to think, as if she was searching for the right words, and then added “however, it’s America and you have choice. So, you have freedoms. They [the government] can’t necessarily just rip away everyone’s choice.” While Bridget was clear that she thought abortion should be banned, she also seemed to want to preserve individual freedoms. She made similar statements about gay marriages.

Bridget claimed that she did not support gay marriage and thought it should be illegal. However, when I pressed her on the practical application of this position and asked if she was in favor of revoking that right and privilege from people, she responded “Yes, however...” then paused and thought for a moment before adding, “Yes, I would period. However, I also, I’m in no way for people who protest against [LGBT people].” She went on to talk about the need to treat those in the LGBT community with love and kindness, but still ultimately affirmed that gay marriage should not be allowed. When I pressed her if this meant taking away people's freedom, which she had just earlier supported concerning abortion, she replied “It’s not necessarily taking away their freedom. . . . I don’t know what I’m trying to say. In my head, I have my sentence,

but I'm not sure what I'm trying to say." When it came to the practical implications of her stance, which seemed contradictory in certain ways, Bridget was unable to clearly articulate what her position on gay marriage would mean for society.

During our conversations, Bridget started off being very clear and confident concerning how Christianity guided her public life and engagement with society. She was convinced that implementing biblical morality on issues such as abortion and LGBT issues in society was an aspect of building the kingdom of God. However, when pressed about the practical implications of this, she struggled to articulate what this would mean for society and often made exceptions or qualifications to her original stance, which resulted in contradictions. This struggle could indicate several things. It could be that Bridget had never thought about the real implications of her stance until I asked her to explain some of this during our interview. Or, it could be that she truly believed that building the kingdom of God meant implementing Christian morality, and she was trying to make her stance sound more accepting and kinder by offering exceptions and qualifications to her absolute stance. However, her lack of clarity could indicate an internal conflict or struggle with contradiction, namely that she wanted what she considered to be biblical morality in public life but was also pulled by the values of individual freedom and the ability to choose one's direction in life. Based on my conversations and observations of Bridget over the course of the year, I interpret her struggle as her attempt to soften the blow of her position. That is, she appeared to truly want Christian morality to govern social norms and laws in the US, and she even claimed "I do think [Christianity is] why we became one of the best nations in the world . . . so economically prosperous and free." Bridget genuinely perceived that the U.S. was built upon Christianity and should maintain adherence to Christianity as a country. Her focus on the absolute truth of Christianity and the need for society to conform to this standard caused her

to only superficially make reference to the need to show love to others. She resolved the tension between truth and love by focusing on the importance of truth and acting as if there was no tension between these aspects of the theo-political logic.

It was clear from my conversations with Bridget and my observations of her in classes and at the school in general that she fully embraced the theo-political logic of King's Academy, which she perceived as presenting a straightforward approach to public life. She was first and foremost a Christian, and for her, answers to the question of how to engage in public life were already answered by this commitment. She desired that U.S. social policy and laws should conform to the morality of Christianity. Bridget saw voting as a means of accomplishing this goal, and she believed that civic and public life should be centered on building the kingdom of God. For Bridget, her identity was fully wrapped up in being a Christian, and she sought to live this out in her public life.

Within the framework of the theo-political logic, Bridget chose to emphasize and prioritize the absolute truth of the Christian worldview and what that meant for working to help make society conform to Christian values and reflect the kingdom of God, rather than emphasizing the divine command to love and act in a way to help and serve others. Thus, she focused on one aspect of the theo-political logic and emphasized this in understanding how she should participate in civic and public life. This helps demonstrated her embedded agency. It was embedded within the larger framework provided by the theo-political logic of King's, but she had agency in what aspects of that logic she chose to emphasize and prioritize in her own living.

### ***Brittany Smith: A Nuanced Public Life***

In many ways, Brittany Smith showed a more nuanced understanding of her civic and public life than Bridget. She was quiet and unassuming, easily overlooked in a classroom by her

peers. I rarely heard Brittany speak up in class, although she always smiled and was friendly to her classmates. Furthermore, my observations and interview with her suggested that her understandings of how she should engage in civic and public life were more reflective than Bridget's. Brittany had been attending King's Academy off and on since preschool, spending a couple of years during the elementary and middle school period being homeschooled. Brittany was less excited about her experience at King's than Bridget was, especially during high school. Brittany said that for much of 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grade, she had strained friendships with other students that she did not elaborate on and avoided when I asked for further explanations, but this did lead to her changing her friend group by the end of 11<sup>th</sup> grade. Covid-19 did not help with those relationships because classes were sometimes remote, and students were allowed to opt-in for remote learning even when classes were offered in person. She had been unsure about returning for her senior year, but ultimately decided to and seemed to have a better experience with her final year.

Of all the students that I interviewed, Brittany demonstrated the most nuanced and thoughtful understanding of what her own civic and public life could or should be. On the one hand, when it came to her ideas concerning politics and her own future plans to vote, she leaned heavily on the truth of Christianity to understand how she should think and act. This meant that she sought to apply her faith to how she understood politics and what is good for society. On the other hand, when it came to her life at work, she recognized the importance of pluralism and diversity. Here she focused on the need to love and serve others, regardless of how they lived or who they were. Brittany made a clear distinction between how she thought about politics and how she thought about her public life at work. In this way, she demonstrated a form of embedded

agency and chose which aspects of the theo-political logic to draw upon to help her navigate various contexts of her civic and public life in different contexts.

When it came to political activities such as voting, Brittany prioritized the need to do research. She thought it was important for citizens to be informed about the candidates and issues they were voting on because those choices would have an impact on others and society as a whole. When asked about the importance of doing research and knowing what one is voting for, she explained, “If you don’t know what you’re doing, then you shouldn’t be making a decision that affects other people. I feel like if you don’t know what you’re doing, then you should figure it out first or just step back.” For Brittany, voting impacted the lives of many people, and the responsibility of deciding how to vote should not be handled lightly. Along with the importance of researching and understanding what one was voting for, Brittany also explained that her Christian faith impacted how she would vote in the future. Talking about how she thought her faith would influence her later, Brittany explained:

I know that my personal beliefs do affect how I vote. I know that I take [Christianity] into consideration while I’m doing my research so that I can make sure that I’m well-informed. But also picking someone who I feel like God would want in place.

While doing research and understanding various positions was important for Brittany, it was also important for her to weigh candidates' positions against her understanding of God and Christianity.

Even though Brittany thought it important to bring her faith into civic activities such as voting, she explained other aspects of her public life differently. When it came to her part-time job at the local public library, she was hesitant to bring her faith into this aspect of life. When I asked about how Christianity impacted her at work, she stated:

It's different going into a public setting because I feel like no matter what differences we have, we have to . . . Almost like you still take part of [Christianity] with you, but you have to leave some of that at the door. Because when you go into these public places, you have to go in unbiased because there's going to be transgendered people. There's going to be all these other things that you may not necessarily agree with, but you're there in the community. You still have to respect their views and stuff too, but also just be there. Sometimes, you just really want to talk about God and stuff. You just kind of . . . there's a time and a place. I feel like if it comes up naturally, then sure, that's fine.

Here Brittany indicated that in some ways, she “left some of her Christianity at the door” in order to interact with people who were different from her and with whom she disagreed. This split between Brittany's understanding of how Christianity influenced her ways of engaging in public life in the context of the local library, on one hand, and how Christianity influenced her views about abortion and transgender people, on the other. This was not a matter of having two different lives, one private guided by her faith and one public not guided by faith. Rather, she seemed to be trying to figure out how to navigate the process of living by and with her faith commitment in various contexts. The theo-political logic of King's Academy helped structure the way she understood her life and the world, and she drew from this to navigate the various aspects of living in society.

Along these lines, her willingness to mute some of her faith in public came from a desire to care for and show concern for other people, as she further explained:

I feel like the school teaches that you bring [Christianity] with you everywhere and that you are supposed to network and that kind of stuff. I just feel like it's difficult, but I feel like if [religion] comes up naturally, then that's okay. I feel like especially when you

work in a public setting because you don't want to get in trouble for doing that, it's not necessarily just getting in trouble. You just want to make sure that you're going in there, that you can be a safe person for people to talk to or whatever.

While she tried to find the right words to describe her stance, she finally concluded that leaving some of her faith at the door allowed her to be a safe person for others to talk with and engage with. It allowed her to show love to others in her public life

In the course of our interview, Brittany explained that Christians' engagement with society ought to be shaped by their responsibility to love others. She mentioned:

In the Bible, it teaches [Christians] to love others as yourself. I feel like you should be going out and helping your neighbors, helping in your community, and being involved because I feel like you can make changes just by being involved. Even if you aren't going around preaching, that if you're just a light in the world, I feel like that's what we are here to do.

For Brittany, this call to love others implied active involvement in the community for the good of others. Here she invoked the schema of being salt and light, which was discussed in Chapter Five, by claiming that she was trying to be "a light in the world" as she helped others in the community. For her, the call to love meant showing love even to those who were different from herself, as she explained "I believe that you still should [love others], no matter what the differences are. I feel like we can come together."

This understanding of love was key to understanding Brittany's approach to public life, which was especially salient for her at work. While engaging in political activities such as voting, she believed she could be overt about how her Christian faith would influence her decisions. However, at work in the public library, an almost perfect metaphor for how she

envisioned her own public life as a participant in larger society, she also understood that she had a responsibility to work with those who were different from her. Here she was guided by the Christian notion to love one's neighbor, and thus she believed it was okay to mute or downplay some of the more rigid aspects of her faith, which implied rejection of difference, and instead demonstrate kindness and care for all those with whom she interacted. It is possible to interpret Brittany's perspective not as leaving her faith at the door of her workplace but as applying her interpretation of the schema of "being salt and light in the world" to engage with others. From this perspective, her focus on loving others could be understood as another way to live out her faith in public spaces.

While Brittany offered a more nuanced understanding of how a Christian should engage in civic and public life than Bridget, Brittany's ideas were also heavily largely shaped by the theo-political logic that animated King's academy. However, Brittany exercised agency by emphasizing different aspects of the overall logic depending on her situation and circumstances. Brittany's claim that she left some of her Christianity at the door may on the face of it seem like she was not driven by the theo-political logic. However, when interpreted in connection to the notion of Christian love and the schema of Christians being salt and light in the world, Brittany's perspective is still fully in keeping with the larger theo-political logic animating King's, even though Brittany's way of embodying this logic was different from Bridget's. Like Bridget, Brittany demonstrated an agency that was embedded in the larger theo-political logic of King's. However, Brittany also demonstrated that within that larger framework, it was possible to emphasize different aspects of that logic in different circumstances. Her agency was reflected in her ability to negotiate which aspect of the logic to draw on in any given situation. Exercising her

agency, she learned to draw on the resources of this theo-political logic to help navigate various aspects of public life.

***Emma Blanchet: Belonging as a Conservative***

As an athletic, outgoing, and socially conservative young woman, Emma Blanchet fit right into King's Academy even though she had attended for less than two years and despite being a non-Christian. As noted previously, Emma was the only student I interviewed who disclosed that she was not a Christian and yet, she too was influenced and shaped by the predominant logic at King's. Despite being at the school for only two years, Emma was influenced by the framework of the theo-political logic of King's. Her socialization into this logic also helps to highlight the overlap between the religious and conservative aspects of the logic.

Emma started attending King's Academy two months into her junior year after her mother was frustrated with the online-only instruction she and one of her sisters were receiving at their local high school during the Covid pandemic. The family had a connection to King's because Emma's youngest sister, who was still in middle school, was attending King's to play basketball. The in-person learning that was offered at King's during Covid and the possibility of earning college credit through the dual enrollment program King's had with a local community college enticed Emma's parents to move Emma and her high school sister to King's.

Skeptical about having to take Bible classes and nervous about being in a new environment, Emma was upset and did not want to move to King's so late in her high school career. However, some of these fears abated when she toured the school, as she explained to me:

The one thing that [my sister and I] noticed when we toured was that everyone here was so nice. We were like, 'What water are these people drinking?' because everyone was

just so nice, so welcoming, and so caring. We never had that at our old school, so I think that was something too, like, ‘Wow, these people actually care, and they actually want you to succeed.’

This friendliness and King’s caring ethos helped Emma feel comfortable even though she was still skeptical about Bible classes. But as she explained to me during an interview, as she experienced the Bible classes, she started to change her mind and appreciate them.

The more Bible classes I took, and Worldview [classes], I realized they were more classes to open up a new mindset, and then they became more important to me.

Especially this year, I would say my Bible class now has really opened up my viewpoint on certain things, and Worldview class as well, because that was a very open-based discussion class, which I love. I like how we were able to express our opinions while she [the teacher] also gave hers. I think this year definitely changed my view on it.

Emma’s views about these classes changed as she experienced them, and these classes came to be important and enjoyable to Emma because she felt they caused her to learn and think more. From her perspective, Bible and Worldview were open classes that presented a wide variety of opinions. It is important to note that Emma’s perspective here was not consistent with my observations of these classes. As I point out in Chapter Four, these classes focused on presenting a conservative Christian understanding of society and what that meant for how to live in the world. When other viewpoints were considered, it was in order to demonstrate the superiority of Christianity. Interestingly Emma herself explained later in the interview that most of the information presented in the Worldview class was actually from a conservative Christian point of view. Her perception of an open classroom that explored multiple perspectives seemed to focus more on the fact that students were allowed to talk and share opinions in the class, even though

the material and opinions themselves were clearly confined within the guardrails of the Christian worldview.

Not only did Emma come to appreciate her Bible and Worldview classes, but she also acknowledged to me that being at the school had influenced her as a person and had shaped the way she understood her role in public life. On a personal level, Emma told me King's, and her Bible and Worldview classes specifically, had changed her. Before coming to King's, she described herself as short-tempered and quick to judge other people, however "after taking those classes, they helped me see I need[ed] to just take a step back and I need[ed] to appreciate things more. [I] pretty much just realized that not everything is as bad as I make it seem." During her time at King's, Emma told me that she had developed the ability to step back, listen, and see other positions more fully.

Emma also claimed to have grown in her understanding of religious faith and Christianity. While she did not identify as a Christian, she disclosed that she had started to distance herself from her father's atheism and mother's agnosticism concerning religion and was considering becoming a Christian. She also claimed that the Christianity she had learned while at King's had influenced her understanding of civic and political issues. Specifically, she mentioned her views on abortion and explained:

At first, I was more on the pro-choice side when I came [to King's] but that was also because I was influenced by my old school, by just other factors. Then I came here, and I got another point of view and I was able to finally look at both sides and make a better judgment on what I personally believe. So, I would say at that point Christianity came into play and helped me make a better decision on that.

Abortion was a specific part of the senior worldview class, and students took several days to examine this issue. Mrs. Anderson taught this unit from a pro-life perspective, and many of the students I talked with said that they were pro-life. Emma claimed that Christianity had influenced her thinking about abortion and changed how she understood this issue compared to her view just two years prior. The theo-political logic that shaped King's seemed to impact how Emma was coming to understand her own civic and public life as well.

Emma indicated that King's shaped her personally and that it had influenced her views on public social issues, like abortion. However, Emma also found that she generally fit into the King's community because, on many social issues, she was already conservative and therefore already fit with the overarching theo-political logic of the school. When I asked if the messages she received from the school about civic and public life conflicted with her understanding and with perspectives at her home she explained

I realized a lot of people here are Republican, and my family is also Republican. So even though my parents may not be Christian, we still share a whole lot of the same views. So, there's never really been a point where there's been something that conflicted with our views or our personal beliefs.

From Emma's own perspective, then, she and her family fit at King's because of their shared commitment to Republican perspectives and to socially conservative policies and positions. Despite the differences concerning core religious outlooks on life, Emma felt like she belonged and fit at King's because of shared understandings of civic and public life.

It is especially interesting that Emma bought into and was shaped by the theo-political logic of King's Academy, even without a faith commitment to Christianity. This emphasizes how deeply entangled the theo-political logic was with conservative perspectives on social and

other issues affecting public life. Notably, even a religious outsider could feel like she belonged and agreed with the prevailing logic of the organization. This also raises questions about the relationship between religious commitments and conservative social commitments—were religious commitments driving understandings of public life or were conservative social commitments the driving force behind the school’s messaging about how to be a member of society and to engage in public life

### **Agency Embedded within Institutional Logic**

Bridget, Brittany, and Emma, along with the other students I interviewed and observed, were shaped and formed by the theo-political logic that animated King’s Academy. However, no two of them embodied that logic in exactly the same way. Within a shared framing of the world and of public life within that world, each of these three students exercised their agency in terms of how they thought about living day to day in a larger public community. The differing lives of these students helps to demonstrate that being shaped by the prevailing logic did not mean a lock-step kind of behavior with no possibility of individual variation. Rather the contrasts among the portraits of three different students demonstrate different forms and degrees of agency embedded within the prevailing overall logic at King’s. Each student acted within the structure of King’s institutional logic, which, as detailed earlier, braided together a religious and a political perspective.

The students I interviewed and observed understood their lives in the larger social and political world through the framework of the theo-political logic of King’s Academy. Whether they had been at the school for a few years or their entire lives, this logic shaped how they talked about and understood their current and future participation in civic and public life. However, this does not mean that they lived their lives in the exact same manner. These portraits provide a

glimpse of three different perspectives on living in the world. For both Bridget and Brittany, their ways of understanding civic and public life were completely embedded within the framework provided by the theo-political logic of King's. However, they chose differently about what and how to emphasize various aspects of this logic in their own lives, thereby demonstrating a kind of agency within the framework of the logic. Emma, however, was a relative newcomer to King's who was quickly influenced and socialized into the overarching theo-political logic of the school, which began to shape her understanding of herself and of her role in civic and public life.

Bridget understood civic and public life, both at the time and in the future, as centered on building the kingdom of God, and her identity was fully wrapped up in her Christianity. In terms of agency, she applied her understanding of the theo-political logic at King's in a manner that was fairly consistent with a Christian nationalist way of engaging with society. Christian nationalism, understood as a cultural framework, "idealizes and advocates a fusion of Christianity with American civic life" (Whitehead & Perry, 2020, p. x). Socialized into the theo-political logic that was pervasive at King's, Bridget wanted to see the values and norms of conservative Christianity fused into civic life in the U.S., as she articulated through her views on abortion and LGBT issues.

In contrast, Brittany found resources within the King's theo-political logic to accept the pluralism she found in her workplace and to engage with others with an attitude of love and care. Here she muted or downplayed some of her faith, as a way of living out her faith and loving those around her. She exercised agency, which was embedded in the theo-political logic of King's, to highlight the rules and norms of love in the context of work, while elevating the rules and norms of truth in the context of voting and political activity.

Emma's lack of faith did not preclude her from being influenced and shaped by this logic in important ways. After two years, her understanding of her own civic and public life was beginning to be shaped by the logic at King's. Emma found a sense of belonging at King's based on a shared conservative view of political and social issues. This highlights how central the role of a conservative understanding of social and political issues was to the theo-political logic of King's. It is important to emphasize once again that the King's institutional logic was not a Christian logic, it was a *conservative* Christian logic, which made it possible for a new student to find a sense of belonging because of shared conservative positions on social and political issues, even while not being a Christian.

All three of the students I have profiled here were deeply influenced by the theo-political logic of King's Academy, even though they understood and lived with that logic in diverse ways. However, within the larger framework of the theo-political logic, they exercised agency in various ways to highlight and emphasize different aspects of that logic. Because agency is embedded within a particular institutional logic does not mean that the individuals who inhabit the same organization are shaped by the logic in the same ways or that they always act in the same ways. Rather, as the notion of embedded agency suggests, agency is embedded within a particular logic that shapes the range of possible ways of thinking and acting. However, individuals who are part of specific organizations and logics still maintain a sense of agency as actors, and as Scott (2014) argued, they "are viewed as knowledgeable and reflexive, capable of understanding and taking account of everyday situations" (pp. 93-94). However, their agency is located within the framework of the dominant institutional logic.

In various ways, the students at King's drew on their understandings of the prevailing logic and acted within society in ways that demonstrated both adherence to the theo-political

logic and their own agency within the structural framework of that logic. In short, the institution both “constrain[ed] and enable[d] individual and organizational actors” (Thornton, et al., 2021, p. 7). In both constraining and enabling action, accepting and living with the dominant logic did not require mimicry or uniformity, instead, it provided a framework for actors to understand their lives in society and to act. These three examples help demonstrate that individuals can be shaped by the structure of institutional logic while also maintaining their agency to act within the boundaries of that logic.

### **Unvoiced and Alternative Perspectives**

Prior to moving on to explore the ways parents engaged with the theo-political logic of King’s Academy, it is important to comment on student voices that were unheard along with the limits of my research with students. As mentioned above, the cohort I focused on consisted of 16 seniors out of a graduating class of 30. Of these 16, 12 agreed to be interviewed. That means there were multiple voices not represented in my data, including four who chose not to be interviewed. My analysis in this chapter is limited by the students I had access to and the students willing to participate in interviews with me.

Lisa Shields was a part of the senior cohort of students whom I followed and observed in multiple classes, but she did not want to be interviewed. She was friendly and polite toward me during my observations, as most students were, but whenever asked about her participation in an interview, she gave one of two excuses. The first was that she was sure I had enough people already and she was not going to add anything new to what others had already said. The second excuse was that I probably did not want her perspective. While she only offered this second excuse to me once, it did suggest that might have had a different perspective than other students. While all but one of the students I talked to claimed to be Christian, all of them told me that there

were non-believers at the school because they had an open enrollment policy, meaning neither parents nor students had to be Christian to enroll. While no one at the school, including administrators, could give me an exact breakdown, most students and faculty estimated that about 20% of the students were non-Christians. Kim Wilcox, the Director of Admissions, estimated that between 10-15% of the students came from non-Christian families or backgrounds.

While Lisa was friendly with other students and had friends to sit and talk with, she also seemed to me to be on the outside of most of the friend groups and rarely shared her own perspectives during class discussions. At various times during Worldview class, I observed that Lisa was sleeping or rolling her eyes at comments made by Mrs. Anderson. In many ways, she had an air of polite indifference. This behavior suggested that there might have been aspects of King's that she did not fit with or felt at odds with, but she was unwilling or did not feel free to articulate this. Some of Lisa's friends, who were seniors outside of the cohort I followed, demonstrated a similar attitude and stance toward the school. In order to make sure I was getting as many different perspectives from students as I could, I invited some of these students to participate in interviews as well; however, they declined. While I do not have sufficient data to support this point and Lisa's difference from other students is only conjecture, it is worth noting that it is possible that there were outliers among the students at King's in the sense of different ways of engaging with the school's theo-political logic than the general pattern I identified based on the students I had access to.

The first part of this chapter has focused on students in order to answer my research question about how students understood and engaged with the ideas of civic identity and participation conveyed at the school. As I have shown above, I found that students largely

embraced the theo-political logic of King's Academy and that their ideas about their own civic identity and participation generally conformed to this theo-political logic. While students demonstrated a variety of ways of applying this theo-political logic, the logic provided them with a structure to understand their lives and society. The following section considers how parents understood and engaged with King's institutional logic.

### **Parents and the Theo-Political Logic of King's**

Parents play a significant role in forming students as citizens and preparing them for public life (Campbell, 2008). This is not just because of the impact of home life on students, but also because parents make educational decisions that determine the schools students attend and therefore the influences to which students are exposed to (Burgess, 2014; Erickson, 2017). When it comes to private schools, parents make educational choices for a variety of reasons, including academic quality, safety, extracurricular opportunities, religious or moral ethos, and overall fit for the child (DiPerna & Catt, 2016; Erickson, 2017). While the parents I talked with at King's offered various reasons for choosing King's and choosing Christian education in general, their reasoning tended to coalesce around a handful of key issues.

Most parents chose to send their children to King's either because multiple factors were pulling and enticing them toward the school and Christian education in general and/or factors were pushing them out of other educational choices, specifically public school. The major factor pulling parents to King's was the desire for their children to be educated within the context of Christianity and the Christian worldview, while families were often pushed toward King's because of perceived problems with public schools and with secular culture. The parents I encountered during my year at King's were largely supportive of what their children were learning about their civic and public life at King's. This support does not mean that parents were

in full agreement with everything at the school, but their desire for an education focused on Christianity and the Christian worldview overshadowed most other concerns.

Furthermore, most parents explained that what their children were learning at King's that had to do with civic engagement and public life was consistent with what parents were communicating to their students in their own homes. This created an overlap whereby students were hearing a consistent message about how they ought to engage in public life as an overflow or extension of their religious life. This overlap helped to form a consistent pattern of socialization for these students into a specifically conservative Christian way of seeing their lives and the world.

### **Parents Described as a Research Group**

As noted, I interviewed 12 of the 16 students in the cohort I followed over the course of a year at King's. In terms of parent participation, eight different families were represented in the parent interviews. Several of these families also had more than one child at King's or had children who were alumni of King's. One family not only had a son in the senior cohort but was also the guardian of Paul Zhang, who was the single international student in the cohort. He lived with the Larson family for all three years he attended King's. Table 6.2 describes the parents who participated and the number of students from each family who attended King's.

**Table 6.2***Parent Participants*

<b>Parent Participant</b>	<b>Senior Cohort Students</b>	<b>Other Students at King's</b>	<b>Number of Years as a Parent at King's</b>
Kim Carter*	Abby Carter	3	4
Melissa & Doug Adams	Makayla Adams	0	3
Jessica Bennet*	Kay Bennet	0	4
Mary Anderson*	Mark Anderson	0	3
Christine Dunn	Phillip Dunn	1 Alumni from 2020	3
Katie Baker	Maddie Baker	2	6
Jill Larson*	Erik Larson Paul Zhang (Guardian)	2 1 Alumni from 2019	13
Olivia Smith*	Brittany Smith	2	12

*Note* \* = Parent is employed by King's at least part-time as a teacher.

My conclusions about parents' perspectives are limited by two factors. First, there was a limited number of parents who were available and willing to be interviewed. Despite several emails from myself and the Director of Operations, Sally Richards, many parents expressed no interest. Mrs. Richards even made personal phone calls to parents to encourage them, but they dismissed these invitations or said they were too busy to meet for an interview. Another limiting factor with respect to parent data is that many of the parents who participated were also employed by the school in some capacity, indicated by an asterisk (\*) in Table 6.2. Three of the parents taught full-time at King's, including Mrs. Anderson who was the worldview teacher. The other two taught middle and elementary students. Furthermore, two of the parents were employed part-time at King's. This included Mrs. Larson, who taught Bible and Health classes, and Mrs. Bennet, who worked with the student council and student life. While these parents' perspectives are important and help in understanding the parent community, they also have a greater connection and investment in the school than most parents. On the other hand, the parents

who participated in the interviews had other children who also attended King's or who had already graduated; thus, these parents represented more than just 8 students.

In addition to parent interviews, this section draws on data from interviews with students, as they often talked about their parents' perspectives and influence. My analysis also draws on data from parent gatherings such as meet and greets and evening parent discussions, and from interviews with the administration who dealt directly with parents, specifically the Director of Admissions. Adding these data to the parent interview data added to my analysis of how parents engaged with the theo-political logic of King's Academy.

In the next two sections, I argue that most parents placed their children at King's specifically so that they would receive an education that aligned with the Christian worldview, which for most parents, included a conservative stance on social issues. While some parents took issue with some aspects of the theo-political logic at King's, in general, they thought the school's teachings about students' civic and public life aligned with what students were hearing at home. This overlap helped to form a consistent socialization for these students into a specifically conservative Christian way of seeing their lives and the world. While there was significant overlap between parents and the theo-political logic of King's, not every parent expressed this in the same manner. Just as students exercised their own agency within the larger structure provided by the theo-political logic of King's, parents also were largely in agreement with the overall theo-political logic of the school, though expressed that in their own ways.

### **Desiring Education from the Christian Worldview**

In order to understand how parents responded and thought about the theo-political logic of King's Academy, I start by discussing the reasons they chose to send their own children there. This helps to explain what they valued in schooling and uncovers assumptions about their own

engagement with civic and public life. After discussing the parent community as a whole, I present portraits of three parents to better understand some of the variations and complexities within the parent.

Because King's was a private school, parents made a conscious choice to send their children there, often costing significant time in terms of transportation to and from school as well as the financial cost of paying tuition. The choice to send a student to a private school can reveal the values of parents, as well as how they think about the purpose of education. In fact, in my interviews with parents, their educational decisions were often reflections of larger civic and public commitments that parents had.

Parents offered various reasons for choosing King's, or Christian schooling in general; however, these reasons coalesced around three specific areas. First, parents wanted an education that was framed by Christianity and the Christian worldview. Many wanted to ensure that their children were being taught by Christians and from the perspective of Christianity. Second, some parents chose King's and Christian education as a response to specific or assumed problems with public education, including specific experiences they and their children had as well as general assumptions they made about the state of public education. The third reason given was the perceived academic quality of King's. Some parents valued the dual-enrollment credits through a local community college, which allowed graduates to start college with up to a year of core requirements already met, thus possibly reducing the cost of college.

The most common, and often the primary reason parents chose King's for their children was the desire to have their children educated within the context of Christianity and the Christian worldview. As one parent explained, "We always wanted our kids to have a good education, but also with a Christian worldview, and how to be a person who loves God and loves people."

While having a quality education was important for this parent, “quality” was understood as an education that reinforced Christianity and helped socialize their own children into Christianity. This parent went on to explain that they believed that at King’s “kids are going to have a history that involves Christ-centered values and a Christian worldview when you’re approaching science and history, and just the values of character, integrity, and honesty.” As other studies have shown (Blosser, 2019; Guhin, 2021; Peshkin, 1986; Rose, 1988, 1993), parents often choose Christian schooling to help socialize their children in a way that leads to or supports faith commitments. An education framed by Christianity and the Christian worldview was a major draw for parents pulling them into King’s Academy.

Similar to the desire for an education shaped by Christianity, several families were pushed toward King’s because of conflicts with public education and secular culture in general. Four families admitted to a specific conflict or disagreement with their local public school as the catalyst for moving to King’s, or to Christian education in general. These conflicts ranged from perceived bullying due to a child’s faith commitment, the introduction of gender-neutral bathrooms, and the lack of in-person learning during Covid-19. Beyond these specific conflicts, many parents also perceived general problems with public education, even if their children had never attended a public school. One parent explained why she didn’t want her children in public school because of the moral content. When I asked her to clarify what she meant by problems with the moral content, she stated:

So, I’ve been hearing about the critical race theory and then also you know teaching like kindergarteners and second graders sex ed and trying to push the, you know, the gay movement I guess if you want to say. That’s not the role of the school to teach them those things.

This concern over the teaching of racial issues and gender issues was a common refrain from the majority of the parents. Concerns about and distrust of public education and secular culture were echoed by parents in other contexts as well.

Kim Wilcox, the Director of Admissions at King's Academy, explained to me that over eight years of working at King's, she had seen a shift in why parents were looking at the school. Previously, parents were concerned first with the faith piece of the school; however, she indicated that over the last three years, the two most common questions she received from prospective families had to do with whether (and how) the school taught critical race theory and how the school dealt with gender issues. Furthermore, at an evening parent meeting I attended, Mr. Jacobs, the Head of School, spoke to about 20 parents about the importance of the similarity of value systems between the school and the parents who were thought of as partners in their children's education. This partnership allowed the school and families to approach any cultural or other issues students were facing from a common, shared perspective. At the end of the evening, parents had a chance to give feedback and ask questions about the school. One of the most common topics parents were concerned about was how the school planned to navigate LGBTQ issues and to deal with the influence of issues relating to the LGBTQ movement.

Parents chose to send their children to King's because they were being pushed away from public education and secular society because of real and perceived conflicts. But the factors that pushed them toward King's were also bound up with those factors that were pulling them toward the school, namely the prospect of an education that was framed by Christianity and that promised to help socialize their children in a way that was consistent with the Christian faith. It should be noted here that even parents who felt pushed toward King's and toward Christian education because of conflicts with wider culture were not aiming to completely avoid or escape

society. Rather, as one parent explained, “My goal is that they would be prepared to live a life out in the world, but holding on to those core values and beliefs [of Christianity] and learn how to flesh that out.” Parents appeared to want their children socialized into Christianity so that they could navigate society as believers who were able to maintain their faith as adults.

A final reason some parents mentioned for choosing King’s was the academic quality of the school although this reason was not as prevalent as some school choice literature suggests (Burgess et al., 2015; Erickson, 2017). Academic reasons were normally mentioned as a secondary factor to those previously mentioned. The exception to this was two families, the Andersons and the Blanchetts. Mrs. Anderson, who was the worldview teacher, listed academic achievement as her first criterion for selecting a school option for her children, though she went on to make the general claim that “on the whole Christian schools do better academically when you look at the standardized testing and graduation rates and attendance in college and all those things.” The other family, the Blanchetts, a non-religious family, chose King’s because of the academic programs, specifically the opportunity to earn college credit through the dual-enrollment program with the local community college. However, according to Emma Blanchett, who was a senior at King’s, the choice of the school was prompted first and foremost by the lack of in-person learning happening at their public school, which for her family, was a question of academic quality. The perceived academic quality of King’s offered another pull factor attracting families to the school.

While there were several individual reasons for parents choosing to send their children to King’s Academy, the primary reasons were the pull of an education framed by the Christian worldview and the push from conflicts with public education and secular culture. Even though parents may not have understood fully the theo-political logic of King’s, their reasons for

choosing the school fit within the larger framework of this logic in that parents wanted the Christian worldview to help socialize their students to see all of life through the lens of Christianity. This Christian socialization overlapped with what the majority of parents were providing their students at home, and presumably through their churches as well. In this way, parents' willingness to choose to send their students to King's demonstrated both an explicit and tacit agreement between parents and the theo-political logic of King's Academy.

### **Portraits of Parent's Relationships to the Theo-Political Logic of King's Academy**

Similar to the presentation of students above, this section presents portraits of three families who sent their children to King's Academy. As was true for the students, these portraits do not represent categories or types of parents or families at King's; rather, they demonstrate some of the diversity among families and their relationship to the theo-political logic of King's. These portraits help demonstrate the way the theo-political logic of King's overlapped with parents' own views of Christianity and civic and public life.

#### ***The Baker Family: Reacting Against Culture & Public Education***

The Bakers had three children at King's Academy. They moved their children to King's when their oldest, Maddie who was a senior, was in seventh grade. In my interview with Mrs. Katie Baker, I learned that they had never intended to send their children to private school because they thought the influence of their family and church would be enough to encourage and shape their children. However, a major cultural conflict with their local public school, detailed below, drove them to leave and enroll at King's and never look back. Even though the initial move to King's was as a response against their local public school, over time they came to appreciate and desire the way King's reinforced their own views of civic and public life by focusing on service and being faithful first and foremost to Christianity.

Maddie and her siblings attended the local public school for the first seven years of their school careers with no major problems. Mrs. Baker reported that the children did well academically and had a close group of friends. However, that all changed when the school board moved to allow transgender bathrooms, which did not mean building new bathrooms but allowing students to use the bathrooms associated with their gender identities. As Mrs. Baker recounted to me:

I felt like they were pushing an agenda. And so, for us, our faith is very important and I felt like our kids were beginning to be in a situation where, not that they were the only Christians in the school, that wasn't even the bad part. It was that they were really being put down for their faith, and that's hard for kids. They're kids, so just the peers and the teachers and that sort of thing, kind of talking about things that have no place in the school system and then bringing in . . . The kicker, honestly, for us was, we live in a small town and they [the school board], behind all the parents' backs, started pushing these transgender bathrooms. So, I've got a 12-year-old girl, and all of a sudden, they're going to not only let boys and girls use the same bathroom together, but then they were going to . . . The way that it was actually written is, they don't even have to tell the parents. So, if my child's going through something, they can keep that away.

The Bakers claimed they were concerned about the implications and safety of their daughter if the school had transgendered bathrooms, but more so, they were concerned that their voice as parents was being ignored. They worried that the school could be keeping things about their children from them. This led them to get involved, along with other parents, and lead a campaign to stop this change.

The Bakers helped to organize a parent group and filed a petition with the school board to stop the new policies related to the use of bathrooms. In our interview, Mrs. Baker described the final meeting when the board was to vote on the policy:

I sat in that meeting, the final meeting where they voted, and they opened it up and let people speak, and 85% of the people stood up and never said anything bad. We just said, "We want to find another solution. We love all these kids, and if kids are going through anything, we want to find a solution that works for all kids, so let's just take a minute and not push something through." And that was what 85% were saying. And when it passed, I just couldn't . . . To me, I'm sitting here going, "I wonder if Jesus felt like this when they were asking whether he should be crucified or not, and they're yelling for the sinners to be crucified." It was just so foreign to me that I'm looking around, like, "Is anybody else witnessing this right now?" And so, we came back, my husband and I came back and we prayed about it, and we just said, "You know what? Our kids aren't science experiments. We have a short amount of time not to screw up our kids."

Mrs. Baker was distraught and frustrated that the school board pushed what she considered to be its own agenda and, from her perspective, ignored the concerns raised by the parents. In response to this vote, the Bakers enrolled Maddie and her siblings at King's Academy and were thrilled that within two weeks, the Head of School knew their children by name and teachers cared about them as individuals and empowered them to grow in a Christian context.

Their experience with public education and the process of local politics caused Mrs. Baker and her husband to become somewhat cynical toward civic and public life. In fact, Mrs. Baker claimed that she often ignored the news and that had withdrawn from social media since the events at her local public school mostly because of the rhetoric used toward them while

fighting the school board. Mrs. Baker explained they were called bigots and people said that Christians hated transgender children. This caused her to withdraw from civic and public life. However, the Baker family was still active in serving those in need through their church.

For the Baker family, serving others was grounded in their faith. As Mrs. Baker expounded:

I think [serving] is the big thing for our family, we're put on this earth to love God and love people, and what does that look like? It doesn't look like just going to work and cashing our paycheck and doing our thing, but it's real service.

She went on to add that her family's focus on service was completely based on their Christian faith – "it's what the Bible tells us to do." It is important to note that the Baker's withdrawal from civic and public life did not mean that they ignored the world around them, but their experience with their former public school did cause them to rethink how best to engage with their community. Focusing on serving, because this was what their faith taught them, was a value they wanted to pass on to their children, and they were thankful that King's put a priority on teaching students the importance of service and giving them the opportunities to serve through events like service week.

When it came to what King's was teaching, Mrs. Baker indicated that she appreciated that everything was from a Christian perspective, although from her perspective, students were also exposed to other ways of understanding the world. While she thought students were exposed to a wide perspective of ideas and beliefs, she stated:

But what I love about it is, they're coming back to Christianity and going, "Here's what we believe, and then here's all the other things, too." So, they're not pushing [other perspectives], like, "Oh, you should go this way," but they are explaining all that.

Mrs. Baker did not want her children to be placed in a bubble or withdrawn from wider society, but she did want them in an environment that looked at all topics and issues from the foundation of Christianity and the Bible. She found that at King's.

The Baker family never set out to join a Christian school, but when cultural and ideological conflicts emerged at their public school, a Christian school became the obvious choice for them. They did not want a school that was pushing an agenda that conflicted with their home life, and at King's Academy, they found a school that was teaching from a perspective that aligned with their home. The Bakers desired for their children to learn from a perspective that was not going to challenge their Christianity. The theo-political logic of King's helped to reinforce this Christian worldview and supported their understanding of civic and public life flowing from their Christian faith. Mrs. Baker liked everything her children got at King's because "it aligns 100% with what my family aligns with." The Baker's home coincided with the theo-political logic of King's and helped create a single message to their children, namely, that civic and public life was first and foremost about Christian commitment and living faithfully as Christians.

### ***The Bennett Family: Education for Christian Values***

The Bennett family was committed to Christian education, with Mrs. Bennett working at various Christian schools throughout her career and sending their two daughters to Christian schools. Their desire was for their own children to build mentoring relationships with adult Christians, and thus be influenced by the Christian worldview to see their whole lives through the lens of Christianity. In this way, the Bennett family's desire to place Christianity as the most important aspect of life and education fit with the theo-political logic of King's. And yet, even

with this basic overlap, Mrs. Bennett expressed some frustration and difference with the way the Christian worldview was often presented at King's.

Mrs. Bennett was not only connected to King's as a parent but she was also employed part-time to work with the student council and student life issues at King's. While the Bennett family had only been at King's for four years, they specifically chose this kind of Christian education primarily for mentoring relationships and to lay a foundation for the Christian faith in their children. As Mrs. Bennett explained in my interview with her, "I want [my children] to have solid role models that are going to encourage them." She trusted that these role models would be "pushing godly qualities, and that to me was always important." Later, she added, "I think the faith component [at a Christian school] gives them a foundation, and they can choose to take that and build their own relationship with God from there." It was clear throughout my interview, that Mrs. Bennett was committed to Christian education, and explained, given the chance to do it over, she would choose to send her children to King's "again in a heartbeat." However, even with this endorsement of the school and overlapping with wanting her own children to see things from the perspective of the Christian faith, she did take some exceptions to the lack of openness at King's and voiced concerns with the way that Christianity was presented as equated with conservative Christianity.

Throughout our interview, Mrs. Bennett expressed gratitude mixed with concern about the Worldview classes at King's. She explained "we have wonderful worldview classes [at King's]," but then followed this up by stating:

I talk to these kids, and when they get out of the worldview classes, all they've got is a sour taste in their mouths. Because they're being told, that all of these things are bad, and

wrong because the Bible says this, but they're not being taught necessarily how to love people that are going to make those choices.

Mrs. Bennett worried that students were being told “truths” from the Bible without also being told how to love and show compassion for other people. The problem Mrs. Bennett highlighted was not that she disagreed with the biblical answers to questions about life and living that were given by the school. Rather she worried that teachers and parents were focused on making sure students had the “right” biblical answers rather than learning to love others and think for themselves. At one point she indicated that the biggest flaw of Christian education was that educators “tell [students] what to think instead of teaching them how to think the way we think [as Christians].” It is important to note that this concern raised by Mrs. Bennett was *not* that Christianity was not based on truth nor that the truths of Christianity were not taught to students. Rather her concern was that ready-made answers were handed to students rather than supporting students as they learned to think for themselves.

When it came to civics and public life, Mrs. Bennett talked in our interview about the importance of voting and serving, and consistent with the theo-political logic of King’s, she saw these activities as driven by Christian faith. However, unlike the theo-political logic of King’s, Mrs. Bennett saw engagement in civic and public life as less tied to conservative social and political positions. When I asked Mrs. Bennett if Christians should vote she exclaimed:

Of course, Christians should vote! Everyone should vote. I run the student council; everyone should vote. But how you vote is personal, I don’t think that a Christian should [necessarily] vote one way or the other. Because what’s important to me, and what’s important to you, is based on a lot of factors in our lives.

She went on to explain that it was important for students to learn to look at the pros and cons of the individuals running for political office and of the issues that were up for public vote, rather than simply voting for a particular party. She further explained that Christianity influenced how she thought about her own civic and public life but confessed that she could not clearly explain how. She explained that Christianity and public life “are definitely not separated, they’re definitely intertwined. Of course, they’re intertwined, but that’s my personal conundrum. You’ve just hit it, like, how do you do it?” While she could not offer a clear answer to this question, some of her thoughts were manifest when she talked about the importance of serving one’s community.

Mrs. Bennett thought that service was a major aspect of being a good citizen and she grounded this in her Christianity. When I asked her about serving the community and what motivated that, she replied:

Jesus was here to serve. That's the whole purpose that he came, he came to serve, in the end dying on the cross. But that requires the ultimate servant heart. I think having a servant heart, is being willing to see others instead of just seeing yourself. See those needs that need to be met, and being willing to step into that.

For Mrs. Bennett, serving those in the community who were in need was about following the example that Jesus had set out for Christians. By following this example, Christians themselves could become an example of the goodness of Christianity to others. She further explained:

[Christians] need to be an example, in our words, in our conversations, in the way that we interact with people, that’s all a reflection. Who you vote for has less impact than who you are in the world. Let your light shine, be a light.

Here Mrs. Bennett used the language of shining like a light in society, which echoes the salt and light schema that Chapter Five discusses. She indicated that the purpose of service was not simply to help others in need, but also to demonstrate Christianity to them. She presented a way of thinking about civic and public life that was less about voting and more about how one acted and treated others.

For Mrs. Bennett, service and love were the major drivers of civic and public life. While she appreciated King's worldview focus and the way they taught everything from the perspective of Christianity, she also expressed frustration that more often than not, students were provided answers rather than encouraged to think critically and develop their own autonomous views. In one critical sense, Mrs. Bennett's position was consistent with the larger framework of the theo-political logic at King's Academy, specifically given that she wanted her daughter to be educated first and foremost from within the context of a Christian worldview. Moreover, she also supported the idea that a person's civic and public life should be animated by Christianity so that how one engaged with society was based on a strong faith commitment. Where Mrs. Bennett diverged from the dominant theo-political logic that animated King's, however, was in her desire to encourage and allow students to have more intellectual autonomy and expose them to a wider array of perspectives and ways of understanding their lives and the world. It is important to note that what Mrs. Bennett desired from the school was what the school claimed it was doing in its "Portrait of a Graduate" document—namely, teaching students "how to think (not just what to think)" (King's, 2021a, p. 4). However, in practice, students at King's were being taught how to think according to a narrowly conservative interpretation and understanding of the Christian worldview.

***The Adams Family: An Education for the Conservative Christian Worldview***

When I interviewed members of the Adams family, they were clear and direct about why they chose King's and why they sought out Christian education more broadly. Mr. Adams said that the choice between public and Christian schooling was the choice between two "totally diametrically separate worldviews." The Adams family wanted their children to be influenced and shaped by a Christian worldview, which for Mr. and Mrs. Adams, meant a *conservative* Christian worldview. Throughout my interview with them, both Mr. and Mrs. Adams expressed ideas that showed a significant overlap with the theo-political logic of King's and were fully on board with the way the school was shaping students for civic and public life.

While the Adams family had been connected to King's for only three years, they had placed Makayla and her older sister in Christian schools since Makayla was in second grade. As a working-class family, they thought they could not afford the Christian education they desired for their girls. However, when Makayla's older sister was bullied at their public elementary school because of her faith, the Adams family made the financial sacrifice to place the two girls in Gate City Christian Academy, a school connected with the church they attended. After attending Gate City for several years, the school closed and the family enrolled at Southern Valley Christian School for a year, and then after Makayla's ninth-grade year moved over to King's Academy along with many other families.

Even though the bullying incident, which the Adams family did not elaborate on in the interview, was the impetus for the original switch away from the public schools, Mr. Adams explained that the underlying motivation was the desire to have their children taught from the perspective of a Christian worldview.

Well, I suppose at the core of why we would want to send our kids to [Christian] school is [that] the two philosophies, the two worldviews are diametrically opposed. We as

Christians believe that there is a good and a bad, there's good and evil, and that there's an umpire over good and evil if you want to call him that, and that is God. Most of us can agree on that point, regardless of who you are. Some people would say no. So, because of that, you're going to address certain things certain ways because of that view. And basically, we look at that, and we say, well, there is a God. He created you. He has certain plans and purposes for you. There are certain absolutes that he does not budge on. And some people don't like the fact that we're not going to budge on that, but a male is a male and a female is a female. What can I tell you? I'm not going to budge on that. I'm not going to budge on the fact that it takes a male and a female to produce another child. I'm not going to budge on that. Those laws of nature, basically, whether you're talking about a moose or whether you're talking about humans, that's how it's done. God is a God of order. He's not a God of chaos. He does things all succinctly. I've disagreed with so many different things that the public education system has to offer. I think they've just plain and simply deviated from just plain and simply teaching much of anything. Even if you left it to just teach our kids to read, just teach our kids math, teach our kids whatever, they can't even seem to do that. Then, 'Well, we have to teach your kids about sex.' And I'm like, 'No, you don't.' It's totally diametrically two separate worldviews.

Here Mr. Adams not only explained that he wanted his daughters to have an education that was shaped by Christianity, but that this also entailed a conservative understanding of Christianity. From his perspective, a Christian education meant addressing life and the world from a particular perspective, one that acknowledged pure good and evil as defined by God. Mr. Adams also explained his stance on what the Christian worldview meant concerning gender issues, namely that from the Christian point of view there were only two options, being biologically male or

biologically female. Mr. Adams equated conservative stances on gender with the Christian worldview, so to have a Christian education meant not just teaching from the perspective of Christianity in general, but from the perspective of a conservative interpretation of social issues, especially those related to sex, gender orientation, and sexuality. For the Adams family, a Christian worldview and a conservative stance on social issues were one and the same. Mrs. Adams added to what Mr. Adams explained and stated that one of the driving desires for having Makayla and her sister in Christian education was that she and her husband “really wanted them to be in an environment with like-minded people who shared our faith and things like that.” The Adams family looked for a school that supported and reinforce what they were teaching and modeling in their home. At King’s, the Adams family felt they had found that environment of “like-minded people.”

Both Mr. and Mrs. Adams identified as conservative socially and politically. And even though Mrs. Adams pointed out that she was not very active in keeping up with the news or what was happening in society, Mr. Adams was an avid listener of conservative podcasts and radio, and he commented that he specifically liked listening to Charlie Kirk. Kirk is the founder and president of Turning Point USA, “a national students movement dedicated to identifying, organizing, and empowering young people to promote the principles of free markets and limited government” (Kirk, n.d.). Kirk is also a rising star within the Republican party and a strong supporter of Trump. Along with this statement about Kirk, throughout the interview, Mr. Adams made several side remarks that revealed his conservative positions. He claimed that Biden stole the 2020 presidential election, he spoke negatively about critical race theory being taught in public schools, and he expressed confusion about a local Christian college in New England that

had an LGBTQ club on campus. For Mr. Adams, this meant that the college must have given up on its Christian faith commitment.

When I asked Mr. and Mrs. Adams if they thought King's supported and shared their conservative perspective on politics and social issues, they both firmly agreed. Mrs. Adams stated, "there's an alignment between our views [politically] and the views of the school." Mr. Adams was a bit less confident about the school's perspective but thought other families at the school aligned with their views. He explained: "I don't know a ton of the teachers but because of rubbing shoulders with all the sports people, I have met tons of parents that seem to be just like me." From the Adams' perspective, King's not only provided a Christian perspective and worldview but also provided a conservative perspective on civic and public life as well. The Adams family wanted an education for their daughters that was framed within the Christian worldview, which for them also meant being conservative politically and socially. They found what they were looking for in the theo-political logic of King's.

### **Home and School: A Socializing Network**

Each of these three families profiled above came to King's Academy, and Christian education in general, for somewhat different reasons. The Baker family was fleeing secular influences that were manifested at the public school in terms of debates about transgender bathrooms. The Bennett family wanted to ensure that their children were getting an education that was framed by the Christian worldview. The Adams family left public education because of a bullying incident related to their religious beliefs. Although their specific stories varied, in one way or another, each of these families chose King's on account of the positive influence of the Christian worldview reinforced what these families taught at home. Furthermore, all three

families were trying to avoid what they perceived as the negative influences of secular society on their children. At King's, all of these families found what they were looking for.

The theo-political logic of King's Academy provided an education that was shaped, not only by Christianity, but by a conservative branch of Christianity that taught students that the ways they should engage in civic matters and the ways they constructed their public lives should be based on their commitment to Christianity. Most of the families supported this vision of public life and thought that it significantly overlapped with what they were trying to communicate to their children about being in the world in their own homes. Some families did express minor concerns about what their children were learning. As noted above, for instance, Mrs. Bennett wanted King's to promote more critical reflection in students rather than simply providing them with ready-made answers. However, these concerns were not significant enough to cause families to leave or push back against the school curriculum or policy or even to address their concerns with the administration. Rather it seemed to be the case that the benefits parents perceived their children receiving an education from a Christian perspective, outweighed the concerns they might have had about how this was done.

The overlap between the values and norms at home and at school provided a powerful form of socialization for students at King's Academy. This is similar to the overlap between church, home, and school that Rose (1988) discussed in her ethnographic study of two Conservative Christian schools in upstate New York. As discussed in Chapter Two, Rose found that the schools she researched sought to support and reinforce how students were being socialized both at home and in the churches associated with the schools. In this way, Rose argued that the overlap between these three spheres of life created a "mutually reinforcing socializing network" (p. 204). This kind of network can be very effective and efficient in transmitting to

children the values and beliefs of a particular community. In the case of King's Academy, the parental support of the schools, which included support for its overall theo-political logic, helped to create a mutually reinforcing socializing network that tightly linked school and home, and in many cases, probably families' churches as well, although that was not part of this study. This meant that students' ideas about how to understand and participate in civic and public life were shaped by a singular consistent message – that they always were to act as Christians first and foremost and that all decisions and issues related to public life were to be filtered through their faith. In this sense, they were socialized into being religious, or theo-political citizens. I return to these ideas in Chapter Seven, the conclusion of this dissertation.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### **Theo-political Citizens and Pluralistic Democracy**

Conservative Christian schools are growing across the United States with the Covid-19 pandemic and other social issues driving most of this growth (Graham, 2021, Lee & Price, 2022). The ACSI, the largest association of Conservative Christian schools, reported that just since the 2019-2020 school year, their schools have experienced an average 35% growth in enrollment (Lee & Price, 2022). The non-profit consulting firm, Dikerson-Bakker (2022) reported that 79% of Christian school leaders have reported their school enrolment increasing “somewhat” or “substantially” (p. 3). Whether overtly or not, these schools are socializing future citizens into particular ways of understanding and participating in civic and public life. With the Conservative Christian educational sector growing so rapidly, it is important that the wider public take an interest in what is happening in these schools, and in, as Feinberg (2006) suggests, whether these schools are educating “students into the shared moral understandings required to sustain and reproduce liberal, pluralistic democracies” (p. xi). This includes moral understandings such as a commitment to tolerance, which is necessary to support a pluralistic democracy, and a willingness to deliberate with a plurality of others concerning the common good.

This final chapter highlights and synthesizes the points of my argument concerning the institutional logic that animated King’s Academy and shaped students’ understanding of their participation in civic and public life. Then I explore the implications of this study. Starting with implications for the use of institutional theory in educational studies, I then talk about implications for research, policy, and practice in the field of education. Finally, I conclude by

reflecting on the implications this dissertation has for understanding the place of Conservative Christian schools within a pluralistic democracy that is currently highly polarized and divided.

Throughout this dissertation, I argue that the institutional logic animating and organizing King's Academy, a fairly typical Conservative Christian high school at least in terms of its demographics and history, was a theo-political logic. This theo-political logic impacted every aspect of school life. The logic was communicated to students, both implicitly and explicitly, through symbolic representations and the material practices that were pervasive at King's. While the theo-political logic animated all aspects of life at King's, it was often invisible as a specific kind of logic to members of the King's community themselves because it was engrained as simply the way things were, or as a taken-for-granted reality of life and the world (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). As a taken-for-granted reality, this logic formed the foundation for how those at King's saw the world and themselves – in short, how they made sense of their lives. In this way, it both constrained and enabled them to understand themselves and society, as well as to act within society (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991).

As this dissertation shows, at King's, the theo-political logic was communicated to students through symbolic representation and the organization of everyday practices. Symbolically the idea of the Christian worldview provided a powerful way of presenting the theo-political logic to students. This all-encompassing understanding of Christianity framed life for students in specifically religious terms and explicitly intertwined their understandings of Christianity with conservative social and political issues, stances, and actors. Thus, the students were socialized into a way of seeing and being in society that assumed that a conservative understanding of Christianity was the truth that guided all of life, including civic and public life. Not only was the theo-political logic communicated through the symbolic usage of the Christian

worldview, but it was also impressed into the lives of students through the material practices of the school. The schemas that helped students make sense of their actions in society and the everyday practices of worship and service socialized students to assume that certain civic and public actions were normal and desired ways of acting. These schemas and practices normalized the theo-political logic of King's in students' lives and molded them into what I refer to as theo-political citizens. As such, they lived in society and engaged in public life as religious believers first and foremost.

It is important to recognize that King's theo-political logic was aimed at producing students who understood their civic and public lives in terms of their own religious faithfulness rather than as a means of preserving the democratic norms of society. This is not to say that students were taught explicitly or implicitly to be anti-democratic. Rather, as I show throughout this dissertation, supporting and preserving democratic norms was not part of the purpose of what students were taught about their civic and public participation. Instead, the highly coherent and consistent messages that were explicit (and implicit) at the school had to do with religious faithfulness, which centered on each Christian contributing to the implementation of a conservative Christian ordering of society as the goal. In this way, students at this Conservative Christian high school were being formed to be theo-political citizens who were driven in all aspects of life by their religious identity as Christians.

### **Implications for Theory Development and Use**

The use of institutional theory, particularly the concept of institutional logic, is central to my analysis in this dissertation, particularly in developing an in-depth understanding of civic formation at King's Academy, as a Conservative Christian high school. Much of the existing research concerning civic development and education has focused on the use of survey data and

statistics to evaluate what students are taught in school as well as what civic views they hold (Campbell, 2001; Godwin, et al., 2004; Sikkink, 2009). However, the previous research generally has not asked what *kind* of civic education students receive and what *kind* of citizenship they are shaped to embody in society (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Institutional theory provides powerful frameworks for answering these questions, given its focus on the dominant logic of organizations, which provides students with taken-for-granted ways of thinking about and acting in the world.

The ideas of institutional theory help us understand that groups and individuals are often shaped by the unconscious shared understandings of organizations, which provide a kind of orthodoxy about ways of thinking and acting (Scott, 2014). As DiMaggio and Powell (1991) argued, institutional theory “emphasizes the ways in which action is structured and order made possible by shared systems of rules that both constrain the inclination and capacity of actors” (p. 11). As this dissertation demonstrates, institutional theory, as a theoretical framework for analyzing the organizational behavior of a school, provides powerful ways of unpacking and understanding what messages schools convey to students about civic engagement, what it means to live in a shared public community, and what their responsibilities are. This kind of analysis moves beyond simplistic understandings of voting preferences, hours spent in service to others, or self-reported civic attitudes, and instead helps to uncover the deeper concepts, beliefs, and assumptions that drive and shape how students think about their own lives, society, and public engagement.

On one hand, using conventional standards related to civic learning and education, such as voting habits and participation in community service, King’s Academy, along with many other Conservative Christian schools, may appear to be doing very well. For example, all the

students I talked with indicated that they planned to vote once they were old enough, most of them seemed to understand the civic and democratic procedures of government, most were involved and said they planned to stay involved with various forms of community service, and many were able to articulate their own political views concerning party affiliation and policy concerns. On the other hand, a different picture of the success of the school – as a site for preparing students to live in and participate in a diverse democratic society – emerges when institutional theory is used to understand the deeper institutional logic that shaped civic understandings at the school. Informed by ideas from institutional theory, my analysis reveals that civic education at King’s Academy was pervaded by religious faithfulness and religious commitment. This kind of civic education lacked acknowledgment of the racialized history and current nature of schooling and society; it lacked attention to the pluralism of worldviews and perspectives in our highly diverse democratic nation; and, it lacked recognition of the systemic and structural causes of injustice in society. Institutional theory provides a framework to get at the deeper story of citizenship education at a school and to unpack and critique the logic that animates how an organization and the individuals within it understand their civic and public lives.

Not only does this dissertation demonstrate how institutional theory can provide a deeper understanding of what kinds of citizens are formed at particular schools, but this dissertation also contributes to institutional theory itself and particularly to ideas about institutional logics. Within institutional theory, many scholars have discussed the way contradictions arise within given institutions (Japperson, 1991; Seo & Creed, 2002) as well as the contradictions that exist between and among various institutional logics (Friedland & Alford, 1991; Thornton & Ocasio, 2008). This dissertation demonstrates the possibility of tensions existing *within* a particular

institutional logic itself. As I argue, the theo-political logic of King's provided a powerful cognitive cultural understanding of society and of individuals' lives and trajectories within that society and thus conveyed a taken-for-granted understanding about how life worked and how it made sense. However, this logic was not fully consistent in and of itself; rather, it contained tensions. These tensions could be seen within the language of the Christian worldview, as Chapter Four demonstrates, which emphasized both a bedrock commitment to the absolute truth of Christianity, which privileged particular ways of being, and, at the same time, a command to love others, even those who were different from oneself in that they were non-Christian and/or different in race, sexual orientation, perspectives, and stances on political and social issues. This internal tension in institutional logic created uncertainty for some students and for a few teachers about how to live out these two values in civic and public life. This tension was generally resolved by defining love through the prism of commitment to the absolute truth of Christianity – in other words, loving others meant (often, gently) correcting their false ideas with the truth of conservative Christianity while at the same time attempting to show them kindness. And yet, there were moments when the commitment to love seemed to be prioritized over the truth, such as when a teacher asked what the idea of loving one's neighbor had to do with the current treatment of immigrants in the U.S. or when another teacher used literature to encourage students to think about political tolerance and pluralism. This same tension was sometimes reflected in the schemas and practices that permeated the culture of the school and shaped students' ideas about both supporting the implementation of Christian morality within society, and at the same time, loving and serving those who were different or non-Christian. For example, showing kindness and helping LGBTQ co-workers who needed help while at the same time supporting policies that would not allow homosexual marriages or students to use a restroom that aligned

with their gender identity. Students at King's Academy exercised a certain degree of agency, as it was embedded within the overarching theo-political logic of the school. As noted in Chapter Five, students' agency was embedded in the theo-political logic of King's Academy, which included the tension between adherence to the absolute truth of (white) conservative Christianity, on one hand, and the commandment to love others even those who were different, on the other hand. This allowed students to emphasize different aspects of the theo-political logic. As I describe in Chapter Six, this resulted in one student understanding civic and public life primarily in terms of her responsibility to make society conform to Christian ideals and to implement the kingdom of God on earth. However, the same tension in internal institutional logic also allowed another student to emphasize the need to show hospitality and love to others at her job, even though they were different from her. While both of these students were shaped by the same theo-political logic and both seemed to be developing into theo-political citizens, they embodied the rules of the institutional logic in somewhat different ways.

This dissertation suggests that there may be tensions and contradictions not only between different institutions and their various institutional logics, but also there can be contradictions and inconsistencies internally within institutional logics, even those that appear on the surface to be highly coherent. Because institutional logics are rarely completely consistent, their inconsistencies and tensions may function as resources for individuals and groups to resist or modify logics. Friedland and Alford (1991) have argued, "Sometimes rules and symbols are internalized and result in almost universal conformity, but sometimes they are resources manipulated by individuals, groups, and organizations" (p. 254). While Friedland and Alford were specifically talking about how various institutional logics sometimes contribute to change within institutions and organizations, this idea also applies to internal tensions and contradictions

within a specific institutional logic. If institutional logics contains tensions and contradictions within themselves, then these may become resources for individuals and groups to act in various ways rather than in total lockstep with each other.

### **Implications For Research, Policy, and Practice**

German sociologist and cultural theorist, Andreas Reckwitz (2002, maintained that “a social-theoretical vocabulary is a heuristic device, a sensitizing ‘framework’ for empirical research in the social sciences. It thus opens up a certain way of seeing and analyzing social phenomena” (p. 257). This section explores some of the ways of seeing and analyzing the social phenomena of socialization into civic and public life at a (white) Conservative Christian school. The implications I discuss here do not constitute an exhaustive list nor are they fully fleshed out; they are simply indicators of ways in which this dissertation can contribute to our ongoing understanding of the social world.

### **Implications for Research**

This dissertation has several implications for research, four of which I discuss below. First, as I note above, institutional theory and institutional logics can be powerful frameworks in understanding schools as sites of socialization. Institutional theory has long been concerned with understanding education as an institutional field (H-D. Meyer & Rowan, 2006, Meyer, 1977, Rowan & Miskel, 1999), and many studies have focused on education as an institution, institutional change and schools, or schools as organizations within the educational field. Some scholars, such as H-D. Meyers (2006), have focused on the organizing logics, or myths, that give shape to schools and thus to the students they produce. This dissertation demonstrates that institutional theory, particularly the notion of institutional logics, can be especially helpful in understanding the various ways schools function as sites of socialization.

A second contribution this dissertation makes to research has to do with the possible connection between the theo-political logic of Conservative Christian schools and the manifestation of White Christian nationalism within the early part of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. As explained in Chapter One, White Christian nationalism is “an ideology that idealizes and advocates a fusion of American civic life with a particular type of Christian identity and culture” (Whitehead & Perry, 2020, pp. ix-x). Gorski and Perry (2022) refer to White Christian nationalism as a “deep story” that functions more as a guiding myth rather than a history. They suggest that this deep story is told in the following manner:

America was founded as a Christian nation by (white) men who were ‘traditional’ Christians, who based the nation’s founding documents on ‘Christian principles.’ The United States is blessed by God, which is why it has been so successful; and the nation has a special role to play in God’s plan for humanity. But these blessings are threatened by cultural degradation from ‘un-American’ influences both inside and outside our borders. (p. 4)

This “deep story” functions in many ways like an institutional logic for the White Christian nationalist movement, shaping how this group understands and makes meaning of the world and of their lives. Much of the research on White Christian nationalism has focused on a historical and sociological understanding of the phenomenon (Gorski, 2019; Gorski & Perry, 2022; Smith & Adler, 2022; Whitehead & Perry, 2020), its impact on the culture wars (Perry et al., 2020), and its impact on politics (Boorstein, 2021; Davis & Perry, 2021; Whitehead et al., 2018). However, there has been no research that I can locate that has explored the connection between Conservative Christian schools and the increasing influence of White Christian nationalism.

This dissertation suggests that the theo-political logic of Conservative Christian schools may overlap significantly with the deep story that supports and fuels White Christian nationalism. The clearest connection between the two is the shared desire to ensure that white conservative Christian morality is reflected in American law and society. Currently white Christian nationalism is doing this through culture wars and political means, while the theo-political logic of King's did so through the way it framed civic and public life as aimed at living out and implementing the kingdom of God in society. Furthermore, both handle issues of race similarly and support an assumed white superiority. As explained throughout this dissertation, the theo-political logic at King's framed race in a way that completely ignored and omitted from conversation issues related to the U.S. as a racialized society and/or issues that involved understanding the racialized nature of society's systems and structures. Rather, utilizing a color-blind ideology, the theo-political logic at the school explained racial problems as a matter of individual actions and responsibilities. This meant that racism was only confined to an individual's specific attitudes or actions and had nothing to do with systemic problems or historical structures in society. This assumed and helped preserve whiteness as the normal status quo of society. In a similar manner, White Christian nationalism uses color-blindness to make sense of racism in the U.S. As Gorski & Perry (2022) explained, White Christian nationalism claims that the only way to address racism is to "'change hearts,' or better yet, to stop talking about race altogether. Changing laws [is] not necessary" (p. 70). From this perspective, race is an individual matter that should be dealt with in terms of a person's specific attitudes toward others, not by creating or changing laws. Furthermore, White Christian nationalism assumes that focusing on and giving attention to racism only increases it. What is needed is to move beyond the racist history of the U.S. and realize we live (or should live) in a color-blind society. Similar

to the theo-political logic of King's, this approach to race and racism ignores systemic and structural issues and reinforces white privilege and supremacy (Gorski & Perry, 2022).

Along with aversion to conversations about race and race issues, White Christian nationalism “conflate[s] into a single identity” (Gorski & Perry, 2022, p. 27) “white” and “Christian.” The absence of talk about race, racism, and the U.S. as a racialized society within the theo-political logic at King's Academy parallels the color-blind strategy used by White Christian nationalists to combine white and Christian.

Despite these and other possible connections between the theo-political logic that may characterize Conservative Christian schools and the driving ideas behind White Christian nationalism, it is important also to mention the differences that may exist between these two. Specifically, White Christian nationalism appears to be militant, nationalistic, exclusionary, and supportive of nativism to an extent that the theo-political logic I observed was not. However, this does not mean that there may not be important connections between the theo-political logic of Conservative Christian schools, as discussed in this dissertation, and White Christian nationalism. Are the young theo-political citizens produced by a theo-political logic like that at King's Academy similar in characteristics, actions, and politics to the grown-up citizens who are a part of the White Christian nationalist movement? This is an important question and the link between Conservative Christian schools and manifestations of White Christian nationalism is an area that is wide open for research and one that has critically important implications for the future of democratic society and for the future of Christianity in the U.S.

A third implication of this dissertation for research concerns civic education. As indicated earlier in this chapter, research on civics education has too often relied on surveys and statistical analyses to examine students' civic views and understandings (Campbell, 2001; Godwin, et al.,

2004; Sikkink, 2009). This dissertation has instead tried to follow Westheimer & Kahne's (2004) suggestions by asking what *kind* of citizens are being formed in Conservative Christian schools. Future research on students' civic development needs to continue focusing on the kinds of citizens being produced and the logics that are shaping them. In addition to examining the kinds of citizens being developed, future research also needs to develop more longitudinal studies concerning citizenship. This dissertation analyzes the institutional logic that contributed to students' understandings of their civic and public life, but it does not go on to explore how those students changed and developed as they grew into adulthood and lived their individual lives. It is unknown how exposure to the theo-political logic at King's will influence individual students when they start participating in the voting process, when they attend college or enter the workplace, or when they have families of their own. In order to better understand the impact of civic education at Conservative Christian schools and the place of schools in general in shaping students' civic identity, what is needed are longitudinal studies that follow a specific cohort over time.

The fourth implication this dissertation has for research concerns possible future changes in the logic of Conservative Christian schools. As this dissertation shows and other research supports (Dikerson-Bakker, 2022; Graham, 2021; Lee & Price, 2022), parents are currently being pushed toward Conservative Christian schools. Much of the push comes from parents' engagement in or exposure to the culture wars and their belief that critical race theory is being taught in public schools and that LGBTQ issues are increasingly being accepted in the public school curriculum and policy. Parents' perceptions that they are being pushed out of public schools and pulled toward Conservative Christian schools positions these schools as possible actors within the culture wars. Will conservative Christian schools become more rigid

concerning issues related to race and gender in order to attract families and increase enrollment? The influence of the culture wars on these schools, particularly concerning critical race theory and LGBTQ issues, is an important area for research to examine how and to what extent these organizations change in the coming years.

### **Implications for Policy**

This dissertation not only has implications for research but also for policy. One area is particularly significant and controversial within the larger educational landscape – school vouchers and school choice. Voucher programs and other school choice programs that use public funds to cover the cost of private education continue to be hotly contested and debated across the U.S. (Stanford, 2023). Currently, there are 27 different voucher programs across 16 states, the District of Columbia, and the territory of Puerto Rico, not to mention the 15 other states that have some form of tax incentive or credit that allows funds to go to private schools (EdChoice, 2023). Furthermore, as of the beginning of 2023, at least 11 states “have introduced and, in some cases, passed school choice bills” (Stanford, 2023). Many of these school choice programs allow public money to support, through direct tuition as well as scholarships, religious schools, including many Conservative Christian schools (Scaramanga & Reiss, 2018). Along these lines, the Supreme Court has consistently held that voucher and choice programs cannot exclude religious schools from participation simply based on the school's religious status. The court has ruled in favor of vouchers for religious schools in Ohio (*Zelman v. Simmons-Harris*, 2002), tax-credit scholarship programs used by religious schools in Montana (*Espinoza v. Montana Department of Revenue*, 2020), and most recently allowing religious schools to participate in Maine’s tuition assistance program (*Carson v. Makin*, 2022).

While this dissertation does not directly deal with the debate surrounding school choice and funding options, it does have implications for decisions about policies allowing public funding to support schools like King's Academy. It is important for policymakers to consider and understand the kinds of schools they are allowing to use public funds. Previous studies have found that many Conservative Christian schools use history textbooks that support Christian nationalism (Wellman, 2021), use curricula that support racism (Scaramanga & Reiss, 2018), and present sexist teachings that "infringe on the well-being of the children within these schools" (Stitzlein, 2008, P. 46). This dissertation provides an understanding of a particular Conservative Christian school that moves beyond the textbooks and curriculum, and instead examines the animating logic of the school, specifically as it applies to issues of citizenship. As Feinberg (2006) has argued, the role schools play in preparing students to help "sustain and reproduce liberal, pluralistic democracies" (p. xi) should be a concern for all members of the public, but this takes on particular importance when considering what kinds of schools to fund and support with public money.

This should not be understood as an argument for or against vouchers and other school choice programs, for it may well be that, as Berner (2017) has argued, there is no one way to educate children and American education policy should move toward funding "educational pluralism" (p. 3) as many other liberal democracies do globally. However, it is important to note that the educational pluralism that Berner argues for does not mean doing away with common goals and shared purposes regarding schooling. Instead, Berner argues for "government regulations and oversight" for any and all schools that receive public funding (p. 4-5). A significant part of those regulations would entail schools fulfilling their purpose of helping to form democratic citizens. According to Berner (2017), this means "helping students develop

relevant knowledge and understanding, and form positive attitudes toward being a citizen and participating in activities related to civic and citizenship education” (p. 76). Berner argues that schools that meet this civic education standard, along with other academic and school cultural standards, should not be barred from receiving public funds on account of religious belief. Of course, this would require having clear guidelines and standards for all schools for civic education and having an accurate understanding of what is taking place in private schools with regard to civic education, especially Conservative Christian ones like King’s. This dissertation provides some insights to policymakers concerning how Conservative Christian schools are and are not preparing students for participation in civic and public life.

### **Implications for Practice**

This dissertation focused very little on classroom practice per se, and when it did focus on classrooms, it did so as a way of understanding the larger logic that animated the school. The other implications I have considered so far are focused on Conservative Christian schools as organizations within the larger educational and political landscape. Unlike my other points about the implications of this dissertation, the point I want to make here has to do with implications for practices *within* Christian schools themselves in light of the findings of this study. That is, here I consider how those involved as leaders and teachers in Conservative Christian schools might move toward rethinking their practices in relation to the civic development of the students they teach, who are the future generation of a democratic society.

As mentioned in Chapter One, Christian schools exist primarily to educate students within the context of a commitment to the Christian faith. However, as schools, these organizations have a responsibility to think about how they are preparing students to engage with and support the future of democracy in the U.S. Is it possible for Christian school administrators

and teachers to work in ways that both maintain a commitment to their faith tradition, but also prepare students with the skills and dispositions necessary to engage as democratic citizens in a pluralistic society? Is it possible that these two aspects are not mutually exclusive of one another in Christian schools?

As Levinson (1999) has pointed out, a key component of developing individual autonomy within students is giving them a sense of “*embeddedness or cultural coherence*” (p. 91), which helps in the development “of personal identity, on the basis of which one first begins to judge, weigh, and evaluate events, opportunities, and ideas that one encounters across a lifetime” (p. 91). Christianity, like other faith traditions, could help offer this sense to students and thus give them a place from which to judge and interpret life as they encountered it. Christian schools, as seen with King’s, often focus on developing cultural coherence in students, fully taking on their role to partner with the church and family seriously and seeking to help socialize students into Christianity (Guhin, 2021; Rose, 1988). However, along with this cultural coherence, Levinson also argued that students need to be given the “*capacity or conditions for choice*” (p. 91). According to Levinson, this entails:

A bundle of personal and mental habits, skills, values, attitudes, structures of belief, etc. that taken together enable one: to recognize and take seriously a variety of ways of life and conceptions of the good; to evaluate critically one’s own beliefs and commitments and to alter them when appropriate. (p. 91)

This can be understood as teaching students in a manner that develops the conditions for critical reflection. As Feinberg (2006) has pointed out in his research on religious schools, “critical reflection need not work against religious communities” (p. 197). Teaching in a way that fosters critical reflection and thinking does not necessarily have to work against belief and one’s

religious community. Feinberg (2006) argues that it is reasonable for faith schools to teach from the perspective of their own tradition and teaching in religious schools does not require that teachers present every perspective in a neutral manner. In this sense, it could be appropriate and important that faith schools teach and evaluate the world from within their own traditions providing the cultural coherence Levinson (1999) describes. However, teaching critical thinking requires “teachers who are aware of the interpretive opportunities within their own tradition, and who use this awareness, to help students grow within their own faith traditions, while . . . learning to respect the ideas and beliefs of others” (p. 197).

Informed by Levinson and others, this dissertation suggests that it is important for administrators and teachers at Christian schools to reflect on their own practice as situated within the tension between teaching for cultural coherence, on one hand, and teaching to cultivate the capacity for choice and critical analysis, on the other. Teaching within this tension requires school leaders and teachers who value democratic society, critical thinking, and the broadness of the Christian tradition. Furthermore, it requires that Christian school leaders and teachers understand that preparation for democratic citizenship has been an essential goal of education in the United States for centuries (Gutmann, 1999), and educating within the faith tradition of Christianity does not exempt schools from reflecting on and pursuing this goal while educating their students.

### **Implications for Pluralism**

This dissertation focuses specifically on understanding the logic that guided the civic development of students at a Conservative Christian high school, and thus has direct implications for understanding pluralism and democratic society. Reich (2002) claimed that a pluralistic society does “not share any substantive view of the good life” (p. 11); rather, there are multiple

ways of understanding the good life. Along these lines, advocating for a pluralistic society is based on the premise that multiple views exist within the same society concerning the way to live and to define what “the good life” is. Pluralism in terms of beliefs, values, and perspectives is a fact of life in U.S. society, at least in the sense that people do in fact have widely varying conceptions of what constitutes a good life and how one should live. Gutmann (1999) takes this a step further by explaining that “pluralism is an important political value insofar as social diversity enriches our lives by expanding our understandings of differing ways of life” (p. 33). Many democratic theorists agree that pluralism is not only a fact describing the diverse ways of living in society, but that pluralism is also a good that expands people’s understandings of how to live as they encounter differences. But pluralism in a democratic society also presents a problem – namely how open to pluralism can a democratic society be while not silencing or doing harm to dissenting and minority voices or sliding into authoritarianism?

A pluralistic democratic society cannot accept every viewpoint, specifically those views that would seek to dominate or restrict the freedom and rights of others. Or to put it another way, if a pluralistic democratic society allowed all views equally without any condemnation, then even those views that are oppressive of the freedoms and rights of specific individuals or groups would be allowed to go unchecked. This problem has led to many theories talking about the need for modified or reasonable pluralism, as Callen (1997) argued: “the boundaries of reasonable pluralism fix the range of values and perspectives that properly enter into political deliberation in a just society” (p. 21). For Callen, the question of drawing the boundaries of reasonable pluralism has to do with issues of inclusion and tolerance. Concerning inclusion, Callen argued, “the problem of inclusion is as much about filtering out various moral toxins that threaten to contaminate public reason as it is about honouring the differences that we ought to honor” (p.

22). Questions about the boundaries of pluralism in a democratic society are questions about what should be included and tolerated and what, for the good of democratic pluralism, should be excluded and intolerable in terms of public reasoning.

To frame this problem in another way, Bretherton (2019) stated “part of sustaining a political life is making prudential judgments about what is objectionable but tolerable and what is intolerable and must be actively opposed or reconfigured through either democratic politics or legal process” (p. 268). Pluralism cannot continue to exist in a democratic society without attention to the very problem of promoting pluralism while also maintaining a common political life together. This is why the civic purposes of schooling are vitally important. The shaping of democratic citizens must be more than teaching students the processes of government, the importance of voting, or the need to be involved in the life of a community. Schools play an important role in shaping democratic citizens and ought to help reproduce and protect a pluralistic *democratic* society in future citizens (Gutmann, 1999). Democratic citizenship requires that students learn the skills and virtues necessary to reflect upon their own views of the good life as well as those views that others may hold. But more than this, democratic citizenship requires being able to enter into deliberation about pluralism itself – what are its boundaries, what views are to be tolerated and included, and which are intolerable and thus opposed, given the larger commitment to maintaining a democratic society?

This dissertation has shown that the version of democratic citizenship referred to above, which champions a plurality of perspectives, was not a part of the theo-political logic shaping students at King’s Academy. Instead, students at King’s were socialized as theo-political citizens who were committed to a particular conservative Christian vision intended to make society conform to what they believed about the kingdom of God. Thus, students were not socialized as

democratic citizens who valued pluralism and were educated in a way that could help support and preserve pluralist democracy.

What does the above discussion mean for the continued existence of Conservative Christian (and other religious) schools in society? Should they be a part of the pluralistic educational landscape of the U.S., or do they present a threat to the preservation of a pluralistic democracy? To answer these questions and conclude this dissertation, I return to Peshkin's (1986) foundational work on Christian schooling. At the end of his now classic ethnography of Bethany Baptist Academy, a fundamentalist Christian school, Peshkin (1986) reflected that schools like Bethany Baptist not only concerned him but also added to the divisiveness of American society. However, he went on to argue that the idea of pluralism itself encouraged the allowance of these schools. He concluded;

The existence of fundamentalist Christian schools creates a paradox of pluralism in the United States. Paradoxes of pluralism testify to our ideological health. I hope the day never comes when our society feels that Christian schools must be suppressed or curtailed in any way. (p. 298)

Using the words of abolitionist Wendell Phillips, Peshkin argued that the presence of fundamentalist Christian schools should call us to "eternal vigilance" to protect both democratic ideals and a pluralistic society. A part of the paradox of pluralism that Peshkin refers to here is the reality that a pluralistic society will allow, to an extent, groups of people and individuals who themselves do not actively support pluralism. The question this paradox highlights is how much anti-pluralism can be tolerated within a democratic pluralistic society while still allowing it to maintain and reproduce itself. More specific to this dissertation, the question is – should

Conservative Christian schools, like King's, that do not support nor actively cultivate a commitment to a civic and public vision of democratic pluralism, be allowed?

Nearly 40 years after Peshkin, I affirm his thoughtful and provocative conclusion that schools like King's should be allowed a place within our democratic pluralistic society, even if they do not fully support that society, because their continued presence demonstrates a commitment to and allows for a diversity of perspectives in our pluralistic democracy. However, while generally agreeing with Peshkin, I want to add a significant concern with regard to recent developments at Conservative Christian schools and the political landscape of the U.S., and that concern is the implicit (and potentially very powerful) alliance between Conservative Christian schools and White Christian nationalism. As mentioned above, the theo-political logic that shaped students' understanding of civic and public life at King's Academy was similar to the ideology of White Christian nationalism. In fact, the theo-political logic that shaped students at King's overlapped in troubling ways with the values, beliefs, and logic of White Christian nationalism. Whitehead and Perry (2020) have demonstrated that White Christian nationalism "idealizes and advocates a fusion of Christianity with American civic life. . . . it includes assumptions of nativism, white supremacy, patriarchy, and heteronormativity, along with divine sanction for authoritarian control and militarism" (p. 10). Many of these same features were part of the theo-political logic at King's Academy, particularly advocacy for the fusion between a conservative understanding of Christianity, on one hand, and American civic life, on the other.

While it is reasonable to think that there may be an important connection between Conservative Christian schools and White Christian nationalism, as some research, including this dissertation, suggests may be the case (Scaramanga & Reiss, 2018; Wellman, 2021), this connection is uncertain, and as explained above, needs more research. If Conservative Christian

schools do encourage and support White Christian nationalism, they would seem to present a threat to pluralistic democracy. As Gorski & Perry (2022) have argued, White Christian nationalism defines “national belong in terms of race, religion, and native birth,” which presents a direct threat to a liberal democracy dedicated to the ideals of “universal suffrage, human rights, and equality under the law” (p. 114). If Conservative Christian schools are aligned with White Christian nationalism, not only would they be failing to reproduce democratic pluralism in society, but they would be actively socializing students against some of the most foundational commitments undergirding democratic pluralism. Currently, however, it is unclear whether, to what extent, and to what degree of variation Conservative Christian schools intentionally or explicitly encourage or support White Christian nationalism. Until and unless we have firm evidence that this is the case, then it would seem, as Peshkin maintained, that allowing a place for these schools within the wide array of schools available in a democratic society could be seen as a testament to the strength of pluralistic democracy itself, even if this also presents a paradox of pluralism. In other words, in the absence of evidence that Conservative Christian schools actively teach nativism, white supremacy, and divine sanction for authoritarian control and militarism, it may be that tolerating the perspectives and values of these schools serves as a testament to the values of pluralistic democracy and thus help to preserve it.

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