

Colgate University

Sourdough and Syntax:

The Belief System, Rhetoric, and Aesthetics of the Traditionalist Catholic
Movement for Women

Jenna Eisenmann

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Professor Chris Vecsey, Thesis Advisor

Professors Jenna Reinbold and Tim Byrnes, Readers

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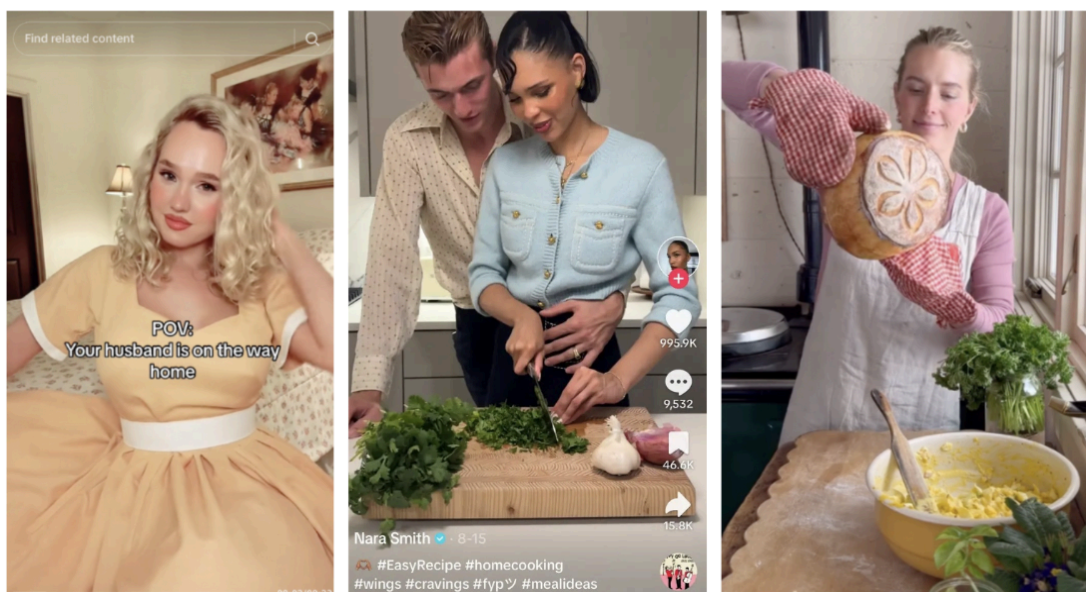
Telling the story of my research:

Sometime in the last year, I started getting ‘Trad Wife’ content on my TikTok For You page just as I began to attend Mass once again and reconnect with my Catholic faith. As a cradle Catholic from the south of Boston, my experiences with Catholicism were in part determined by the leftover Irish and immigrant culture that permeates eastern Massachusetts. Everyone is a Democrat and wants to get out of Mass and on the couch before the Patriots play. I was an altar server for years in my parish and my all-girls Catholic school taught me that women can do anything men can – there was absolutely no indication that it's holier for women to be homemakers rather than have careers. Most of my friends' moms worked, as did mine. Feminism seemed to fit right in with what we learned about the Social Gospel. There was an emphasis on developing girls into strong women with agency who made their own decisions.

This past summer I had the opportunity to intern as a research assistant at a Catholic university in Pennsylvania. In my time there, I came into contact with understandings of Catholicism that were much different than my own. While I'm no stranger to the plurality of religion, I was surprised by the ideas about women and their role in the Church that some people around me held – usually also women. This introduced doubts into my head regarding my worthiness to consider myself a Catholic, and the rules seem to have shifted. Ideas that I thought were old-fashioned or fringe were common and popular among young people. I felt like an

outsider even though I was technically an insider. I dressed differently, I carried myself differently, I was loud and outspoken in comparison. I suddenly became acutely aware that I was a woman, and therefore expected to act a certain way. I hadn't ever noticed this before.

Every time I opened up TikTok, women of diverse faiths in long dresses showed off their armies of blonde home-schooled children. They made sourdough from scratch and shared clips of their families gathered around the table. They spoke softly about their faith and the guidance of their husband. They wrote blogs about homemaking, making yourself desirable after giving birth, and why women don't need college. They published articles about the lies of feminism and why women need men to protect and provide for them. I knew from the guilt I felt in my interactions with young Traditionalist Catholic women that the widespread dissemination of these ideas on social media could have consequences for young, vulnerable women.



Estee Williams, Nara Smith, and Hannah Neeleman are all prominent Christian Trad Wives on TikTok.

I decided to examine this phenomenon of Traditionalist Catholics in order to become more familiar with the origins, ideology, and values that make it up. In this exploratory essay, I aim to analyze the contemporary movement of Traditional Catholic Women while positioning myself in relation to it as a young Catholic woman. Therefore, I am taking the liberty of offering my own critical evaluation of the Traditionalist Catholic movement to engage thoughtfully with the movement's ideas and practices. I am not looking to condemn these women; I am searching to understand what they are, how they came to be, and why they're gaining so much traction in society. This movement is as American and political as it is Catholic, and encapsulates diverse viewpoints. It's an amalgamation of the religious and the political that has morphed into an identity. It's fueled by Catholic doctrine, traditions, beliefs, and aesthetics, but often rejects the authority of the Vatican and Pope Francis.¹ Ultimately, I will argue that this movement is a troubling development with adverse implications for gender equality and ecclesial unity.

The Traditionalist Catholic movement can best be understood as a reaction to a rapidly changing society that merges political values with religious doctrine and aesthetics in order to form an ideological worldview that prioritizes formerly accustomary gender roles. In a world where there is little autonomy available on a macro level due to economic instability, climate disasters, and war, Traditionalist belief systems can offer an alternative – dreams of a simpler time, less pressure on women to perform economically, and a community of like-minded individuals.

¹Passed away on Easter Monday, April 21, 2025.

With its origins in reactions to the Vatican II reforms, the Traditionalist movement has morphed into a counter-culture which is appealing to those who feel abandoned by the current state of society. It is taking place primarily online, in blogs, substack articles, conservative Catholic and political publications, and podcasts, where these women are sharing an interesting mix of content about homemaking and mothering, but also anti-feminist rhetoric and political beliefs. In a time when the United States is divided more than ever politically, culturally, and economically, Traditionalism and its associated lifestyle that emphasizes conservatism, family, God, and the home is particularly attractive, especially for young women who aren't interested in corporate America.

Though “Trad Wives” are distinct from the Catholic Traditionalist movement *per se* and encapsulate Mormons or Evangelicals as well as Catholics, their hundreds of thousands of followers exemplify a cultural desire for a return to a more conventional society. Young people are drawn to this type of content, which is why it performs so well. The idea of a young, beautiful, “traditional” wife to meet their needs is exceptionally appealing to millennial and Gen Z men. For young women, the idea of being a stay-at-home mom is appealing for those who don't subscribe to the “girlboss” feminism Gen Z was raised on. The popularity of Trad Wives points to a cultural and political landscape that is conducive to conservative Traditionalist movements.

While the contemporary Traditionalist movement for women—both Evangelical and Catholic—draws on the core values and rhetoric of the Christian

Right, it departs from earlier iterations in form and context. It retains themes of traditional gender roles, religious conservatism, and resistance to societal modernization, but rearticulates them in response to the distinct sociopolitical conditions of 21st-century America, which are often shaped through social media. This overall movement can be understood as a reaction to societal change, romanticizing the past as a more appealing alternative for those who seek to return their worldview to cultural dominance. This is exemplified by the adoption of the 1950s housewife aesthetic by online Trad Wives and by Donald Trump's election in 2016 and consequent re-election in 2024.

Aesthetics play an important role in this movement in terms of performing femininity and providing physical markers of a traditional understanding of Catholicism. A salient example of the significance of aesthetics for traditionalist women is the practice of veiling. Vatican II removed veiling as a requirement, and most women have continued to leave their heads uncovered in the Church as a result, but it is having a resurgence. In an ethnographic study on the return of veiling, authors Emma Cieslik and Robert Phillips identify a surprisingly strong connection between veiling and traditional Catholicism, and many women who were interviewed acknowledge that their motivation for veiling often coincides with the motives that draw them to traditional Catholicism.²

The veil is an external, physical expression of traditional Catholic identity and a manifestation of these women's opposition to immodesty, secularization, and

²Cieslik, Emma & Phillips, Robert. 2022. "Veiled Heads, Venerating Hearts: The Return of Veiling among US Catholics Post Vatican II," *The International Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society*, 12 (2), 50, 52.

sexuality.³ The veil allows these women to identify themselves as adherents to a particular form of Catholicism and connects them to older expressions of the faith. This study also found that women who veil are more tuned in to the “smells and bells” of traditional Catholic Mass, such as incense, intricate religious vestments, and layperson dress codes that may specify women wear dresses or skirts.⁴ The focus on veiling and the aesthetic qualities of the Mass highlights the importance of physical and sensory elements in fostering a sense of tradition. The emphasis on aesthetics of femininity and Catholicism underscores a resistance to modernity and reaffirms their commitment to a version of the faith deeply rooted in ritual and symbolism. Cieslik and Roberts observe that “these women explain that broader American society marginalizes traditional Catholicism along with feminine womanhood,”⁵ highlighting how Traditionalist women position themselves in opposition to both secular or liberal Catholics and the wider culture.

Traditionalist Catholic women represent a small subset of the greater cultural shift towards conservatism occurring in American society, operating at the intersection of gender, religion, and politics. As adherents to an ideology that often places emphasis on traditional understandings of gender roles, it is important to explore how these women understand themselves and their vocation as conservative Catholic women, and how that informs their politics. Some of these connections between religious and political belief are more obvious, such as the issue of abortion. The official position of the Catholic Church opposes abortion and all forms

³Cieslik, Emma & Phillips, Robert. “Veiled Heads, Venerating Hearts,” 53-54.

⁴Cieslik, Emma & Phillips, Robert. “Veiled Heads, Venerating Hearts,” 49.

⁵ Cieslik, Emma & Phillips, Robert. “Veiled Heads, Venerating Hearts,” 49.

of artificial birth control, which is also the conservative position. The links between Catholic teaching and other values these women hold are murkier, such as the belief that women should not have careers or shouldn't be involved in ministry.

In order to explore the panoply of beliefs, values, and ideological positions held by the women who consider themselves part of this movement, I will present a series of case studies rooted in the content these women share. I will utilize books, published articles, and blog posts, as well as a personal interview to explore the ideas put forth by these women. I will also critically engage and enter into conversation with these materials based on my own positionality as an insider to Catholicism but an outsider to this movement. Therefore, I will explore how this movement functions in society, offer my own personal reflections and conversation, and investigate the rhetoric accompanying these ideas. The first case study will present a conservative publication for Traditionalist women to provide an understanding of the type of content these women are creating and consuming. Then, I will present three explorations of writers who all consider themselves Traditionalist and represent the mosaic of positions in the movement.

Post-Vatican II Catholic Traditionalism:

In order to understand the landscape of the contemporary Traditionalist Catholic movement for women, it is important to first examine the origins of the religious right in America. The American Catholic Traditionalist movement began as a reactionary response to reforms introduced by Vatican II. Though

the catalyst for this revival was the liturgical reforms, primarily the elimination of the Latin Mass, the liturgical changes represented a wider shift in Catholic identity and a greater project of modernization. Since there were very few modifications to the liturgy between the council of Trent in the mid-1500s and Vatican II, these reforms felt extreme to a faction of Catholics and cracked the cohesion of American Catholic identity.

American Catholics were not alone in resisting some of the reforms introduced by Vatican II and embracing traditionalism in response. Marcel Lefebvre, a French Archbishop and early opposer to modernization, first received international attention for his refusal to sign on to the Vatican II Declaration on Religious Freedom (*Dignitatus Humanae*),² which reversed earlier Church doctrine regarding truth in other religions and human dignity. He then formed the Society of Saint Pius X (SSPX) in 1970, which can be understood as the locus of the extreme Catholic traditionalist world and which expanded into the United States by 1974.³ Over the next decade, Lefebvre's continued criticism of Vatican II brought him into increasingly explicit conflict with Rome. After consecrating four Bishops in 1988 in defiance of Vatican authority, Lefebvre and his priests were excommunicated.⁴ Today, SSPX runs priories, chapels, missions, and seminaries around the world with its several hundred priests and seminarians and remains in a state of schism.⁶

While a majority of American Catholics welcomed and approved of the liturgical reform because it allowed Catholics to feel more involved in the Mass,

⁶Payne, Daniel. 2024. "What is the SSPX? A look at the Controversial Traditionalist Catholic Group," *Catholic News Agency*, September 21.

Traditionalists drew parallels between Vatican II and the Protestant campaign to “destroy the mass” during the Reformation, when the relationship between the Church and conservatism first began.⁷ The changes promulgated during Vatican II represent an institutional transformation that radically altered the everyday experience of the Catholic faith for its members.⁸ As a tradition that relies heavily on the aesthetic and sensory components of the Mass to create a transcendent experience, the changes created fear amongst some Catholics that the Vatican II reforms were eroding the “sacred identity” of Catholicism by instituting changes to the mystical and hierarchical nature of the Church.⁹ Thus the Catholic Traditionalist Movement was born as a reaction to the project of modernization.

While “traditionalist” implies a long history of the movement, the terms “traditionalist” and “traditional Catholic” did not come into use until after Vatican II. Pre-1960s, Catholics were referred to simply as “Catholics.”¹⁰ The birth of this term exemplifies the wide scope of this movement. While the pushback against liturgical reforms is often what characterizes the dawn of this movement, rejection of ideological changes made in Vatican II documents shaped the response of conservative U.S. Bishops. The reaction to *Dignitatis Humanae*¹¹ and formation of SSPX illustrates this. This document had many opponents who rejected the Church’s changing doctrine. The wide range of modifications made during Vatican II

⁷Dinges, William. 1987. “Ritual Conflict as Social Conflict: Liturgical Reform in the Roman Catholic Church,” *Oxford University Press*, 48 (2): 138-157.

⁸Ebin, Chelsea. 2024. *The Radical Mind: The Origins of Right-Wing Catholic and Protestant Coalition Building*, University Press of Kansas, 62. .

⁹Ebin, Chelsea. *The Radical Mind*, 63.

¹⁰McConahay, Mary Jo. 2023. *Playing God: American Catholic Bishops and the Far Right*, Melville House, 37.

¹¹ “Declaration on Religious Freedom: *Dignitatis Humanae*,” The Second Vatican Council, 1965.

provided rationale for creation of a Traditionalist faction backed by Bishops, particularly in the United States.

Origins of the Religious Right:

Paul Weyrich, a conservative Catholic whose ideology formed in response to the changes of Vatican II, was the political architect behind the formation of the Christian right in the 1970s. The ‘Religious Right’, which encompasses the Moral Majority, is the ideological and political predecessor to the contemporary Traditionalist movement. In order to form the Religious Right, Weyrich united Catholics with Evangelical Christians on the basis of a pro-family political platform.¹² Though Catholics and Evangelicals had long avoided each other or looked upon each other as enemies, Weyrich succeeded in bringing these groups together by building an ideological position that both groups could subscribe to and matched the goals of American Catholic bishops. In addition, Weyrich was the perfect person for the job: he came from a pious family and held a vision of the U.S. as a Christian nation, and his extraordinary persistence and sensational talent for networking united Catholic and Evangelical groups ideologically and politically.¹³

The portrayal of equal rights for women as a threat to the family was indispensable to the creation of the Religious Right. Paul Weyrich and his political allies, particularly Phyllis Schlafly and Beverly LaHaye, provided the architects, foot-soldiers, and money for the anti-feminist campaign. Schlafly, known primarily

¹²Ebin, Chelsea. *The Radical Mind*, 57.

¹³McConahay, Mary Jo. *Playing God*, 34-36.

for her role as the leader of the STOP ERA campaign, was a forceful conservative voice that helped to create the Religious Right. The Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) was a Constitutional Amendment that would have expanded women's rights by banning gender-based discrimination in state and federal laws.¹⁴ A Roman Catholic housewife, Schlafly was able to successfully persuade many Americans that ERA would dissolve a husband's obligation to provide his wife with financial support, create federal funding for abortions, force women into military combat, mandate sex-integrated bathrooms, and enable gay marriage.¹⁵ By framing ERA in this way, Schlafly was able to identify and assemble large swaths of Christian women who opposed ERA, feminism, and modern liberalism with the same level of intensity that feminists brought to their cause.

Schlafly's great success lay in her ability to mobilize Christian women to fight against feminist rhetoric and fold them into the Religious Right. Her anti-feminist message was religious at its core, shaped by the belief that women's equality under the law was antithetical to the natural order of society created by God. According to this natural law, heterosexual gender roles were ordained by God and women belonged in the home raising children.¹⁶ This set of ideas attracted both Catholic and Evangelical Christian women with anxieties about modernity, as they tended to share common concerns regarding the role of women and the family in society.

¹⁴Martin, Douglas. 2016. "Phyllis Schlafly, The 'First Lady' of a Political March to the Right, Dies at 92," *The New York Times*, September 5.

¹⁵Dorrough Smith, Leslie. 2014. *Righteous Rhetoric: Sex, Speech, and the Politics of Concerned Women for America*, Oxford University Press, 46.

¹⁶McConahay, Mary Jo. *Playing God*, 49.

The anti-feminist atmosphere created by Schlafly contributed to the political momentum required to bring the Religious Right into power by harnessing the fears of conservative women.

On the Evangelical side of the movement, Beverly LaHaye and her Concerned Women for America (CWA) worked in concert with figures like Weyrich and Schlafly to fight for biblical values. While Schlafly's audience primarily consisted of middle-aged and older women, LaHaye targeted career-aged women considering the choices that feminism had recently made possible.¹⁷ CWA's message followed the same talking points as the rest of the Christian Right, arguing that sexual ethics, heterosexual marriage, and traditional understandings of gender roles are constantly under attack from liberal forces.¹⁸ The contributions of women such as Schlafly and LaHaye to the development of traditionalist ideology cannot be overstated. Though the actors have changed, their ideas have remained stable for over forty-five years and the organizations formed by these women remain powerful platforms for advancing traditionalist values in policy and politics.

The Christian Right, as a forerunner to the contemporary Traditionalist movement, owes much of its success to the contributions of women. The great irony of this is, of course, that the high degree of public female involvement wouldn't have been possible without feminist activism that enabled women to take on powerful roles in historically male spaces and to mobilize their peers.¹⁹ The women who

¹⁷Dorrough Smith, Leslie. *Righteous Rhetoric*, 2.

¹⁸Dorrough Smith, Leslie. *Righteous Rhetoric*, 4.

¹⁹Dorrough Smith, Leslie. *Righteous Rhetoric*, 49.

shaped the Christian Right served as prototypes for today's Traditionalist women, mirroring their rhetoric and ideological positions.

While some modern Traditionalist women reject the strict belief that a woman's place is always in the home, this notion remains a cornerstone for the majority within the movement. Many women at the forefront of the current movement embody the same paradox as their predecessors: for example, they advocate for women to forgo higher education and a career and to depend on their husband, despite the fact that many of these advocates are highly educated and accomplished.

The Role of U.S. Bishops:

The role of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) in forming the hierarchical, political, and religious landscape that allows traditionalist ideas to permeate American Catholicism is worth our attention. The actions and beliefs of the USCCB have put significant distance between the U.S. Catholic Church and the Vatican in the past decades, with many in the Church fearing schism. As a group, the U.S. bishops tend to lean much more conservative compared to their global counterparts. The U.S. bishops are also remarkably dominant in U.S. politics, as they are one of the most powerful lobbying groups in America, and have been since the formation of the Christian Right. The goal of the U.S. bishops is clear: they are looking to insert aspects of Catholicism into the nation's laws and society in order to Christianize America and make their moral views the law of the

land.²⁰ Since they represent the closest thing to a national consensus among Catholic clerical leaders, it is apparent that the magisterial American Catholic Church is taking a distinctive stance, not always in line with the Vatican.

In addition to the American Church's rocky relationship with the Vatican in general, the USCCB reserves particular ire for Pope Francis and his message of discernment, acceptance, and modernization. They do not defend the Pope when attacks on him circulate in the media, nor do they speak out regarding individual bishops who reject Pope Francis' teachings, often in publications that refer to themselves as authentically Catholic. A notable instance is the behavior of Texas bishop Joseph Strickland, who has endorsed videos that refer to Pope Francis as a "diabolically disordered clown"²¹ and has questioned Francis' fidelity to the Catholic faith.²² The divide between the U.S. bishops and Pope Francis is not entirely one-sided. The Pope has spoken out against Traditionalists, telling a group of Jesuits in 2023 that the American Church has a "very strong reactionary attitude" and that "Being backward-looking is useless."²³ These comments, while not useful for promoting a way forward in unity, get to the heart of why the U.S. bishops are so tied to traditionalism and conservatism – they resist the idea of Catholicism as a living tradition that changes according to the signs of the times.²⁴ By failing to parse

²⁰McConahay, Mary Jo. *Playing God*, 7.

²¹Cf. <https://x.com/BishStrickland/status/1545362231226994689?s=20&t=DZ6-lpMxgqcHfjzF95pgdA>

²²Cf. https://x.com/BishStrickland/status/1657222411459215360?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwtterm%5E1657222411459215360%7Ctwgr%5E63f85d84a7c9ca2f36f2456751f7da7322751c34%7Ctwcon%5Es1_&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.ncronline.org%2Fnews%2Ftexas-bishop-strickland-accuses-pope-francis-undermining-catholic-faith

²³Sullivan, Tim. 2024. "A Step Back in Time: America's Catholic Church Sees an Immense Shift Toward the Old Ways," *Associated Press*, May 1.

²⁴Ivereigh, Austin. 2022. "Has the Pope Been Too Hard on Traditionalists?", *Commonweal Magazine*, March.

out the positive aspects of the modern Church and society from the negative, the U.S. bishops have more or less rejected the project of modernization as a whole. On the other side of the argument, the Pope has been unsuccessful thus far in bridging the gap between the U.S. Church and the Vatican. It is within the context of this conservatism on the part of American Catholic bishops that we can best understand the contemporary Traditionalist movement for Catholic women.

Case Study 1: *Evie Magazine*

Evie Magazine markets itself as a “conservative Cosmo” for women who are tired of the messaging of mainstream women’s publications, which *Evie* understands as “agendas driven by one-sided politics, cultural anti-values, and ad-driven profits.”²⁵ The founders are Gabriel and Brittany Hugoboom, the latter who serves as editor-in-chief. The Hugobooms are a traditionalist Catholic couple in their early 30s, and run a menstrual cycle tracking app called “28”²⁶ in addition to *Evie*. Menstrual cycle tracking apps are a contemporary aid to improving the accuracy of the Vatican-approved “rhythm” method of planning pregnancies.²⁷ Brittany Hugoboom was raised Catholic and became a “tradcath”²⁸ around a decade ago. She prefers the Traditional Latin Mass, a popular choice for Traditionalist Catholics.

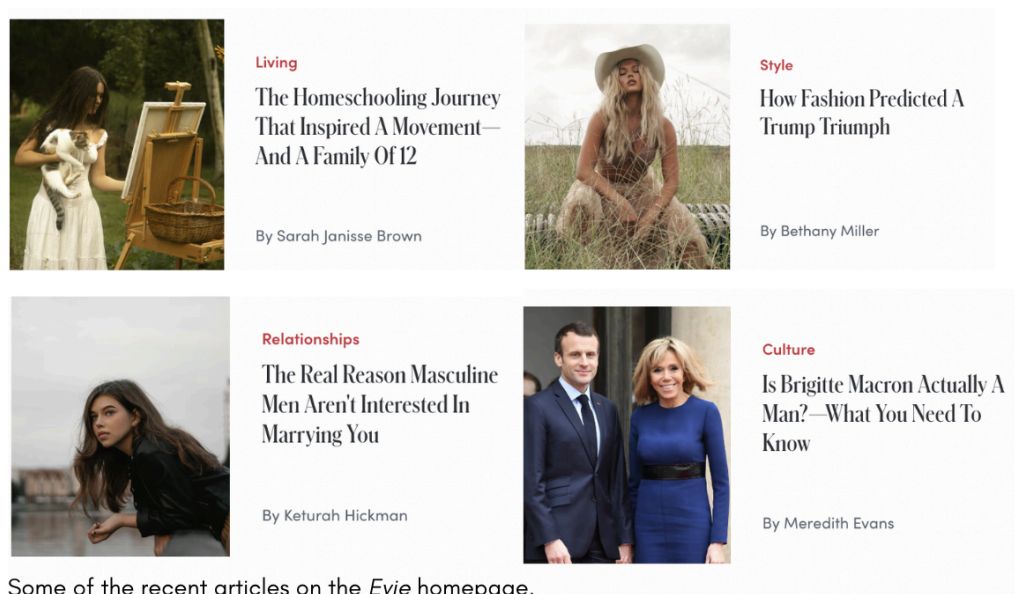
²⁵“About Us,” *Evie Magazine*, <https://www.eviemagazine.com/about>

²⁶“28 Wellness,” 28, <https://28.co/>

²⁷Pope Paul VI. 1968. “*Humanae Vitae*,” Encyclical letter, July 25.

²⁸Mrs. Hugoboom uses the term “tradcath” to refer to herself.

In a profile in the *New York Times*, the Hugobooms reflect on *Evie* and its goals. The name “Evie” is a riff on Eve, the first woman who caused the fall of man after being tempted by the serpent to eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, disobeying God. Regarding the name, Mrs. Hugoboom stated, “Eve screwed the world and this is a new Eve who will save the world.”²⁹ Unsurprisingly, the Hugobooms hold ambitious ideas about the role Evie will play in ushering in a new conservative era, which they feel they represent.³⁰ Though the Hugobooms are Catholic, *Evie*’s content can be described more as generally conservative Christian than specifically Catholic.



Some of the recent articles on the *Evie* homepage.

Evie’s content reflects conservative positions, such as opposition to abortion and artificial birth control, transgender rights, and vaccines, as well as support for the Trump family.³¹ Some of their content presents more fringe ideas, even by

²⁹Baker, Katie. 2025. “The Conservative Women’s Magazine With Big Ambitions, and Sex Tips for Wives,” *The New York Times*, March 21.

³⁰Lynton, Charlotte. 2025. “No Sex Before Marriage! The Model and Trad Wife Glossy,” *The Times*, April 16.

³¹Baker, Katie. “The Conservative Women’s Magazine.”

conservative standards, such as criticisms of no-fault divorce and transvestigation³² of Brigitte Macron, France’s first lady. *Evie* makes it clear in the ‘About Us’ section of the website that it emphasizes gender essentialism, writing, “We know that no matter how hard the forces that shape society advocate otherwise, women and men are inherently different. And we believe that the only way forward is to acknowledge and celebrate those differences by embracing our nature despite the world telling us we should hate the realities of our bodies and what we are.”³³ By pointing to “the forces that shape society” and then offering its own politically expedient solution, *Evie* leverages fear and disorder to persuade readers, which is a form of chaos rhetoric.

Brittany Hugoboom posits that *Evie* is a publication opposed to what she calls “modern” feminism, which she defines as a self-hating movement that is anti-family and anti-male. She thinks the messaging of “girlboss” feminism has made women anxious, lonely, and unfulfilled.³⁴ Drawing on another common critique of feminism, Mrs. Hugoboom asserts that feminism turned “first-rate women into second-rate men.”³⁵ Instead, *Evie* strives to “highlight proven paths to longevity and joy, helping women celebrate their femininity in all areas of their lives.”³⁶ In this way, *Evie* places the concept of femininity in opposition to modern feminism.

³² “Transvestigation” refers to a conspiracy theory that targets public cis-gendered figures and “investigates” them by offering fake pseudo-scientific “evidence” that they are transgender (cf. [GLAAD Guide to Anti-LGBT Online Hate and Disinformation](#))

³³ “About Us,” *Evie Magazine*, <https://www.eviemagazine.com/about>

³⁴ Baker, Katie. “The Conservative Women’s Magazine.”

³⁵ Lynton, Charlotte. “The Model and Trad Wife Glossy.”

³⁶ “About Us,” *Evie Magazine*, <https://www.eviemagazine.com/about>

The Hugobooms have a very clear idea of who the *Evie* reader is and what her goals are. The publication assumes that its female reader aspires to be a wife and mother, though she has options within that, including education and perhaps a career – as long as it doesn't get in the way of wifely duties. The *Evie* reader is also sexually adventurous, as evidenced by the myriad of articles offering sex tips and tricks, but with disclaimers that they are exclusively for married women.³⁷

While Brittany Hugoboom has found success in a hard-hitting career as a model and now a founder, she doesn't think that choice is right for most women. She insists that most women aren't cut out for competitive career trajectories, stating, "I think when most women try to do that, they fail."³⁸ In her mind, women would be a lot happier if they focused on family, femininity, and their husbands. She says, "I do think more women want a soft life, a beautiful life, than feeling all this pressure to do all these things."³⁹

Building on this overview, I turn to a critical examination of *Evie* and its representation of traditional femininity. In response to Brittany Hugoboom's belief that "girlboss" feminism is causing women to feel anxious, lonely, and unfulfilled, I do not think feminism is the prime issue at hand. Through what Leslie Dorrough Smith understands as a "renegotiation of terms," feminism is no longer synonymous only with "working women" but with lesbianism, liberalism, and any other non-conservative gendered cause.⁴⁰ While feminism has paved the way for women to

³⁷"Sex," <https://www.eviemagazine.com/section/sex>

³⁸Baker, Katie. "The Conservative Women's Magazine."

³⁹Baker, Katie. "The Conservative Women's Magazine."

⁴⁰ Dorrough Smith, Leslie. *Righteous Rhetoric*, 86.

have more options, there seems to be a lack of systemic support for women, especially single and working mothers. The working mother is often expected to perform all of the duties of a stay-at-home mom once she leaves work, placing a lot of pressure on women in that situation.

I also take issue with Mrs. Hugoboom's assertion that women generally aren't cut out for high-pressure jobs and would prefer a "soft life" instead. In addition to taking a belittling position on what women want in life, the idea that women are free to choose a soft life is out of touch for most except a small cadre of wealthy elites. Most women work because they have to. The Christian Right has always positioned itself as the defender of "family values," framing them as under threat from feminist, liberal, or secular forces. Hugoboom understands "girlboss feminism" to be emblematic of cultural shifts that the Christian Right rejects, namely women in corporate America. This idea that women aren't capable of hard-hitting careers reflects a larger strategy of creating a moral dichotomy that understands feminist or liberal ideologies as a source of societal decay while championing a return to biblical principles for the happiness of women.

Much like the Trad Wives of TikTok, *Evie* offers a romanticized and unrealistic outlook on the role of women, which mirrors earlier Christian Right campaigns that idealized the nuclear family like Phyllis Schlafly's "STOP ERA" campaign, in which she argued the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) would undermine the traditional family structure. Since these idealized portrayals rarely take into account the reality of women's lived experiences and the barriers they may

face, publications like *Evie* run the risk, in my view, of alienating the women who aren't in a social or financial position to live out these ideals.

Case Study 2: Leila Lawler

Leila Lawler was one of the first Catholic Traditionalist women I came across in my research. I found her through a conference she spoke at, which was focused on what it means to be an “authentic woman” in Catholicism. I had the opportunity to interview Lawler, and she provided significant insight into her values, beliefs, and worldview as a woman who considers herself to be a Traditionalist Catholic. Lawler runs a blog called *Like Mother, Like Daughter*, where she primarily shares content dedicated to her Traditionalist lifestyle. She refers to herself on the blog as “Auntie Leila,” and offers advice both generally and specifically in the form of an “Ask Auntie Leila” column. She writes about homemaking, homeschooling and raising children, marriage, beauty and style, and shares ideas about Traditionalist womanhood and the dangers of feminism. She also provides plenty of homemade sourdough recipes. Lawler’s work on her blog often takes the form of casual musings, sharing her thoughts in a way that is accessible as well as personal.

One reason I was highly motivated to speak with Lawler is her positionality as a convert to Catholicism. While the rest of the women represented in this exploration are cradle Catholics, converts to Catholicism, as exemplified by figures such as Vice President JD Vance or current Fox News commentator Newt Gingrich, tend to lean towards more conservative, traditional understandings of Catholicism

than their born-and-raised counterparts.⁴¹ Lawler was raised primarily without religion by a feminist mother who was born Methodist and a father who was a cultural Muslim from Egypt. Lawler stated that she was imbued with ideas of “sexual humanism,”⁴² and did not have exposure to Catholicism until reading the Gospel of Matthew in high school, piquing her interest. She met her husband in her late teens, and he convinced her to be baptised. She converted because she feels that Catholicism is the “truest expression of Jesus Christ on earth.”⁴³

In terms of her practice of Catholicism, Lawler understands herself as a “follower of tradition” since her conversion in the late 1970s. She thinks any project of reform would be useless in the Church, and that a return to pre-Vatican II tradition is the only way forward because it values austerity, a virtue she finds missing from the contemporary Church. As a Traditionalist, she understands her life as a Catholic and mother as having been carried out in a state of resistance, in the sense that she had to continually evaluate every priest and parish to find those who were conservative enough. She has always sought out the most conservative, traditionalist parishes possible, which she refers to as “unicorn parishes.” This idea of conservative or traditionalist Catholicism as a state of resistance is echoed by other prominent converts, with Vance describing his conversion journey as joining the resistance.⁴⁴ By positioning conservative Catholicism as part of a resistance,

⁴¹Feuerherd, Peter. 2024. “Today’s Celebrity Catholic Converts Lean Conservative,” *National Catholic Reporter*, September 23.

⁴²“Sexual Humanism,” not officially defined, refers to the intersection of humanist principles with perspectives on sex and sexuality. (cf. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iBTDK8eloB0>)

⁴³ Lawler, Leila. 2024. Interview by Jenna Eisenmann, October 25.

⁴⁴Feuerherd, Peter. “Today’s Celebrity Catholic Converts Lean Conservative”

Lawler is placing herself in opposition to the authority of Rome and more progressive understandings of Catholicism.

In her conception of her Catholic life as in a state of resistance, Lawler reveals how she understands the relationship between Traditionalism and the authority of the Church. Like many of her peers, she sees Traditionalists as the faithful remnant of a Church in disarray, from which she must defend her vision of the faith.⁴⁵ It is salient to note that Lawler has not rejected the authority of the Church completely since her conversion – she appreciated Pope John Paul II's orthodoxy, and had high hopes for the papacy of Pope Benedict XVI⁴⁶ based on his prioritization to reinvigorate Catholicism on a traditional path.⁴⁷ While unhappy with the state of the Church, many contemporary Traditionalist Catholics did not come to reject Rome outright until the election of Pope Francis, whose inclusive and progressive vision of the Church is out of alignment with Traditionalism.

My conversation with Lawler about her struggles as a Traditionalist Catholic naturally led to a discussion about schism. In a compelling rhetorical move, Lawler explained that she sees the Vatican itself in a state of schism from the true expression of the faith. She believes that the Church is experiencing an anomalous situation where the progressive element in power is schismatic and then projecting schism onto those who “hold to the foundational and ages old form of the Church.”⁴⁸

⁴⁵Ivereigh, Austin. “Has the Pope Been Too Hard on Traditionalists?,” 17.

⁴⁶ Pope Benedict's pontificate was scarred by the sex abuse scandal he inherited from Pope John Paul II.

⁴⁷ Winfield, Nicole. 2022. “Benedict XVI, Reluctant Pope Who Chose to Retire, Dies at 95,” *Associated Press*, December 31.

⁴⁸Lawler, Leila. 2024. Interview by Jenna Eisenmann, October 25.

Lawler looks upon Pope Francis with particular contempt, which informs her ideas about the schismatic nature of his pontificate. She finds him to be a confusing figure who regards his mission as creating chaos in the Church by “questioning everything and putting everything into confusion.”⁴⁹ While she did not give specifics, my assumption is that she’s referring to his messages of inclusivity and progressive hopes for the future of the Church, as illustrated by her article rejecting synodality, an ecclesial process that involves lay people (including women) rather than a bishops-only leadership body.⁵⁰ This is evidenced by his work in *The Joy of Love*, where he emphasizes an equitable distribution of duties between spouses, criticizes the almost exclusive focus on procreation as well as excessive idealization far removed from the concrete situations of real families.⁵¹ Lawler pushes back against this idea as well, writing that the Vatican aspires to make women “a bureaucratic sharer of power” when their true role is the formation of children.⁵² The Pope concerns her as a mother as she fears that Francis’ pontificate will have consequences for her children. Lawler explicitly noted that she takes issue with Pope Francis’ view that women should enjoy greater involvement in ministry, an idea she finds fundamentally misguided because she believes that the most important role for women in the church is as mothers.⁵³ Unsurprisingly, Lawler holds essentialist ideas about gender and looks negatively upon the project of feminism. She often refers to “the feminist lie,” which is that it is feasible for a

⁴⁹Lawler, Leila. 2024. Interview by Jenna Eisenmann, October 25.

⁵⁰Lawler, Leila. 2022. “Changing the Church One Bureaucracy at a Time,” *Happy Despite Them*, October 7.

⁵¹Pope Francis. 2016. *The Joy of Love*, Paulist Press, 20, 23.

⁵²Lawler, Leila. 2022. “Changing the Church One Bureaucracy at a Time.”

⁵³Lawler, Leila. 2024. Interview by Jenna Eisenmann, October 25.

woman to be a mother and have a career. She says that women need to think about the best way to raise their family, which is the father as the provider and the mother as the homemaker. She states, “The man is a worker, doer, actor, and fighter, the woman is the nurturer and place for peacefulness – she is the holy place and the opposite of needing to make money.”⁵⁴

This notion of gender roles in the family stems from the doctrine of complementarity, which stipulates that God created the division of humans into man and woman and that marriage is strictly heterosexual.⁵⁵ The doctrine of complementarity places women under a patriarchal framework in which their primary duties are to become a wife, mother, and homemaker in order to fulfill their earthly role as Catholic women. At the same time, the concept of the sexes as complements contributes to Traditionalist beliefs about gender essentialism and the problem of feminism. The doctrine of complementarity can be understood through the writings of St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas on the subject of marriage and the position of women, considered two of the normative theologians of the Roman Catholic Tradition. Lawler understands complementarity in conjunction with a natural hierarchy between the sexes. She explained that she believes everything in the universe is hierarchical, and authority does not necessarily relate to virtue. Therefore, Lawler sees men and women as equal in dignity, but with different roles on earth that position men as authority figures in the lives of women.

⁵⁴Lawler, Leila. 2024. Interview by Jenna Eisenmann, October 25.

⁵⁵ Butler, Judith. 2024. *Who's Afraid of Gender?*, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 75.

St. Augustine, one of the fathers of the Church, has had an enormous influence on Christian sexual ethics, and continues to be read and revered amongst Catholics and Protestants alike.⁵⁶ In *On the Good of Marriage*, Augustine emphasizes three matrimonial values that characterize what marriage means in the Catholic Church: the good of offspring, or the procreation and upbringing of children; mutual fidelity, which refers to both sexual fidelity and loyal companionship between man and wife; and the good of the sacrament, which refers to the permanence of marriage and the sin of divorce.⁵⁷ These values inform the Catholic understanding of what marriage is, how it should function, and the importance of procreation for the fulfillment of God's plan on earth.

Active in the early fifth century, Augustine's ideas on the primacy of matrimony between man and woman and the emphasis on procreation is alive and well in the Church today, as evidenced by Church teachings on homosexuality, birth control, and abortion. In terms of family structure, Augustine understands the male as the head of the family, as man possesses dominion over non-human creation as well as subordinate persons in the family.⁵⁸ This idea of family structure is upheld by contemporary Traditionalists. On the subject of marriage, Lawler notes that the purpose of marriage is procreation and education of children. If one does not accept

⁵⁶Porcile-Santiso, Maria-Theresa. 1997. "Roman Catholic Teachings on Female Sexuality" In *Women, Religion, and Sexuality: Studies on the Impact of Religious Teachings on Women*. Trinity Press International, 196.

⁵⁷St. Augustine of Hippo. [401]. "The Good of Marriage" In *Treatises on Marriage and Other Subjects*, translated by Charles T. Wilcox et al., edited by Roy J. Deferrari. The Catholic University of America Press, 1999.

⁵⁸Radford Reuther, Rosemary. 2002. "The War on Women" In *Conscience: The News Journal of Catholic Opinion*, 22 (4), 222.

this, they can avoid marriage.⁵⁹ This is evidentiary of the narrow confines of what marriage means and how it functions for Traditionalists.

St. Thomas Aquinas, who remains the normative theologian for the Roman Catholic tradition, writes on the position of women in *Summa Theologiae*. Lawler cites her reading of Thomas Aquinas as the moment that drew her to the Catholic faith.⁶⁰ On the subject of women, Aquinas conceptualizes them as a “misbegotten male,” a defective imitation that was unworthy to have been made in “the first production of things.”⁶¹ Due to their inherent and natural inferiority, women’s role can best be understood as helpers of men and the subject of male authority, which women need. This idea connects to the doctrine of complementarity and provides evidence for why women should be assigned a submissive role in the family structure.

Lawler and I ended our conversation on the subject of social media trad wives. Traditionalist women hold a range of conceptions on trad wives. Some, like Lawler, look upon trad wives with contempt and do not wish to be associated with the term “Trad Wife,” a label which is often placed on Traditionalist women. Lawler’s understanding of online trad wives crosses into the realm of conspiracy theory. She asserts that online trad wives are controlled opposition⁶² designed to discredit the authentic movement of traditionalist women with its extremism and

⁵⁹Lawler, Leila. 2024. “On Femininity & Feminism: An Interview with Leila Lawler,” Interview by Robert Marco. *Catholic Exchange*, September 9.

⁶⁰Lawler, Leila. 2024. Interview by Jenna Eisenmann, October 25.

⁶¹Aquinas, St. Thomas. *The Summa Theologiae of St. Thomas Aquinas*, Second and Revised edition, translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 1920.

⁶² Controlled Opposition is related to “black propaganda,” which refers to material that falsely claims a message or image was created by the opposition in order to discredit them (cf. [The Colors of Propaganda](#)).

somewhat pornographic character. She also pushes back against the hypocrisy of trad wives in terms of the monetization of their lives. She believes that monetization is one of the most “insidious trends” in our society today, and the mother at home is “the bastion of not doing that.”⁶³ Lawler’s blog emphasizes her view of the home and family as sacred, which explains her distaste with the commodification of traditional families.

To more fully engage Lawler’s arguments, I offer the following critique, shaped by my own positionality and lived experience. Lawler claims that Traditionalists are holding on to the true, “ages old” form of the Church, while Rome is in a state of schism. What constitutes the “ages old” form of the Church? Throughout her long history, the Church’s ability to progress is part of why it has survived for so long – she must change with the times in order for her message to be salient for the masses. She’s been a beacon of righteousness as well as a den of corruption throughout her centuries-long existence. Even some of the most foundational Catholic social beliefs have shifted over time. For example, medieval Catholics subscribed to the Aristotelian understanding that a fetus is not ensouled until the 120th day of gestation, making early abortion acceptable. This position was not changed until modern times.⁶⁴ The Catholic Church is a living Church in the sense that it is able to develop and advance with society, which allows for its longevity. The Church is always changing to meet the times, often at a slow rate.

⁶³Lawler, Leila. 2024. Interview by Jenna Eisenmann, October 25.

⁶⁴Radford Reuther, Rosemary. “War on Women,” 222.

Lawler also holds strong essentialist ideas regarding gender roles in the home, believing that women should stay home while men work. The idea of gender essentialism is connected to both the Christian Right's idealization of the nuclear family as well as long-established Catholic moral theology which denies women's equal status with men.⁶⁵ While many assume that it is less complicated for women to stay at home, rather than juggling the demands of both children and a career, economic factors make this option increasingly unfeasible for many families. The majority American families, particularly those with lots of children, need to have two streams of income in order to cover all of their needs.

Lastly, I want to bring Lawler and *Evie* into conversation with each other to showcase the diverse range of viewpoints represented within this movement. *Evie* embraces influencers, often placing TikTok Trad Wives like Hannah Neeleman of Ballerina Farm⁶⁶ on the cover. While *Evie* embraces influencing as a valid option for women, Lawler finds influencing inauthentic, particularly as it pertains to Trad Wives. While I think that influencing is a great way for women to stay at home while having a career (which Lawler finds "insidious"), online Trad Wives, like their secular influencer counterparts, are selling a fantasy that is not realistic nor necessarily representative of genuine Traditionalist lifestyles.

⁶⁵Radford Reuther, Rosemary. 2002. "The War on Women," 222.

⁶⁶ Hannah Neeleman is a Mormon "tradwife" influencer who gained exceptional notoriety following a profile of her in *The Times* (cf. [My Day With The Trad Wife Queen and What I Really Thought of Her](#))

Case Study 3: Elizabeth Grace Matthew

Elizabeth Grace Matthew is a freelance writer and the primary caregiver for her four children. She holds a doctorate in Education and spent over a decade as a university professor before turning to writing. Her intellectualism shines through in her work, and her takes are the product of thorough inquiry and an understanding of nuanced perspectives on motherhood and womanhood. She refers to herself and her family structure as “traditional,” in which her husband is the breadwinner, she attends Mass with her family each Sunday, and sends her children to parochial school.⁶⁷ Though she covers families, feminism, and politics rather than Catholicism itself, Matthew is writing from the perspective of a traditional Catholic woman, which in turn guides her beliefs. She is not a theologian; her Catholicism comes through her work in a personal, familiar way.

Matthew’s insights integrate ideas about the promotion of traditional family values with a practical interpretation of modern womanhood and the reality of raising a family. She offers intelligently and carefully constructed arguments that are informed by a robust understanding of feminism, which distinguishes her from the previous case studies. She is much more of a centrist than the others I’ve chosen to evaluate, a former Democrat who now finds herself party-less.⁶⁸ Her outlook also serves to highlight differences in approach when compared to Carrie Gress, who represents the most severe fragment of the movement.

⁶⁷Matthew, Elizabeth Grace. 2023. “I’m a Conservative Catholic Mom. ‘Trad Wives’ Promote Unrealistic Stereotypes,” *USA Today*, July 19.

⁶⁸Matthew, Elizabeth Grace. “I’m a Conservative Catholic Mom.”

Elizabeth Grace Matthew understands the challenges of motherhood in the modern age, particularly that it is often an extremely difficult and isolating experience for women. She writes that contemporary motherhood, with its “assumptions of total self-sufficiency and its lack of practical communal support,” is not easy, even for those blessed with physical health, financial security, and access to parental assistance.⁶⁹ Here, Matthew notes something most of the other women in the movement neglect: that the expectations of motherhood are not the same today as they were historically, especially in a society that glorifies individualism and is not set up in a way in which most women can easily access communal support, as was common throughout history.

Matthew maintains that modern feminism’s strong emphasis on women as autonomous, sexually liberated individuals and consequent de-emphasis on female interdependence on men and family has been catastrophic for women and societies, pointing to rising rates of female unhappiness, feminization of poverty, and plummeting birth rates as evidence of this trend.⁷⁰ While she sees problems for women in modern feminism, Elizabeth Grace Matthew is by no means an “anti-feminist” and embraces a version reminiscent of the 1970s feminism of her youth rather than rejecting it completely. Foremost, she does not equate womanhood with motherhood, as the other women represented in this project do. Matthew asserts that there is no one true or authentic way to be a woman, and that womanhood comes from simply existing as an adult human female, and that it is

⁶⁹Matthew, Elizabeth Grace. 2023. “Why Modern Motherhood Needs Religion,” *Law & Liberty*, December 8.

⁷⁰Matthew, Elizabeth Grace. 2023. “The Lives of the Feminists,” *Law & Liberty*, November 24.

“reductive and infantilizing” to assert otherwise.⁷¹ Matthew believes in pluralistic tolerance, which refers to the coexistence and respect among diverse groups and perspectives in society that contribute to its flourishing. She wants to hear from people on both sides of the aisle in order to learn, gain nuance, and sharpen her own understanding of different issues.⁷² Matthew is of the opinion that in this particularly tumultuous and divided era of American society, everyone could benefit from a more concentrated focus on pluralistic tolerance and a compassionate attitude of understanding.

Through her writing across publications, Matthew offers a fresh perspective on how religion in conjunction with feminism can inspire more women to have children, and tradwives are not the answer. She finds the tradwife label to be performative rather than descriptive,⁷³ which is evidenced by their strong presence on social media. She finds the tradwife identity troubling because “it unhelpfully pigeonholes our conceptions of both sexes.”⁷⁴ In terms of how a feminist embrace of religion can increase interest in motherhood, Matthew lays out a compelling prescription: though highly educated women have fewer children than their less educated counterparts, religiosity mediates this. Highly educated women who are also religious are on average having more children.⁷⁵ In order to first make religiosity more appealing to the progressive and educated woman, we need to take a different perspective on sexual morality. She posits that most institutional

⁷¹Matthew, Elizabeth Grace “The Lives of the Feminists.”

⁷²Matthew, Elizabeth Grace. 2024. “An Elegy for Tolerance?,” *Patheos*, July 29.

⁷³Matthew, Elizabeth Grace. 2025. “Perspective: Girlbosses, Tradwives and the Hollowness of Labels,” *Deseret News*, January 17.

⁷⁴ Matthew, Elizabeth Grace. “I’m a Conservative Catholic Mom”

⁷⁵Matthew, Elizabeth Grace. “Why Modern Motherhood Needs Religion”

religions set the bar for sexual morality so high that the majority of believers fail to reach it, which leads many people to eschew religion completely.⁷⁶ Instead, she thinks that we should just focus on it less.

In addition to this, Matthew makes an insightful point regarding a shift in how we view parenthood today and why that may be a factor in fewer women deciding to have children. She posits that fewer people choosing to have children has turned parenthood into an identity rather than a feature of adult life. Matthew believes that changing our perspective and returning to the understanding of parenthood as “a vocation and extension of well-lived adult life” will allow for less pressure on parents. By looking at parenthood as simply a part of life rather than an extensively planned lifestyle choice, it would ease the anxieties parents face in trying to be the perfect parent.⁷⁷ This echoes the Catholic worldview that parenting is a sacred calling rather than an identity. This is exemplified in *The Joy of Love*, which understands family as an “ecclesial experience of communion among persons, which reflects, through grace, the mystery of the Holy Trinity.”⁷⁸

Elizabeth Grace Matthew attempts to solve the problems facing women, families, and society today in a manner that prioritizes the genuine circumstances of American life. She offers a solution based on fact, tolerance, and the integration of different outlooks that aim to uplift women and respect their options while encouraging greater religiosity and a renewed focus on the American family. She understands the struggles that real people face, and knows that idealization and

⁷⁶Matthew, Elizabeth Grace. “Why Modern Motherhood Needs Religion”

⁷⁷Matthew, Elizabeth Grace. “Perspective: Girlbosses, Tradwives and the Hollowness of Labels”

⁷⁸Pope Francis, *The Joy of Love*, 62.

impossible standards are not a salient solution for female unhappiness and falling birth rates.

While I feel Elizabeth Grace Matthew takes a well-thought-out stance on most issues, I disagree with her response to rising rates of female unhappiness, feminization of poverty, and plummeting birth rates. While these are salient issues that need to be addressed, Matthew paints modern feminism with a broad brush, understanding it as the predominant cause rather than a contributor, much like *Evie*. The panoply of choices modern feminism offers women certainly means that fewer women are having children, and are perhaps more unhappy than previous generations, but turning against female autonomy and liberation is not the way forward. Instead, society would benefit from a renewed focus on supporting women as mothers and as contributing members of the workforce.

In her critique of *Trad Wives*, Matthew argues that those who wish to uplift traditional families need to broaden its attractiveness, which I agree with. By asserting that the only authentic family structure is one where the male provides and the woman stays home, so many families are excluded from the realm of acceptance and are out of touch for the majority. She writes that those who value the two-parent family structure should invest in widening its appeal, not narrowing its confines by “creating an exclusionary ideal with unearned and impractical merit.”⁷⁹ Matthew understands the reality of contemporary American families and offers a useful assessment of the unhelpful idealism of *Trad Wives*.

⁷⁹Matthew, Elizabeth Grace. “I’m a Conservative Catholic Mom”

I also appreciate how Matthew approaches the issue of sexual morality in institutional religions: just don't make it your main focus. While this can seem like a non-answer, I think it deals with the problem of impossible standards in an effective and realistic way and reflects the experiences of many Catholics – a lot of us already pick and choose what works for us and ignore what doesn't. Matthew goes on to explain that, as women, we can recognize our own impurity without self-hatred and find our place in religious communities without changing the standards of sexual morality.⁸⁰ Rather than trying to change religion, we can change our perspective on this standard. In addition to its role as a catalyst for women to have more children, religion can also offer women a greater sense of community and support on their journeys of motherhood.

Case Study 4: The Radical Anti-Feminism of Carrie Gress

“The matriarchy has been incredibly successful in making over women to be the whores, dykes, and bitches they envisioned.”⁸¹

Carrie Gress can be considered one of the most radical and inflammatory voices of the Catholic Traditionalist movement for women, focusing her work on the problem of feminism and the evils she believes it has wrought upon women and society. Gress, who identifies herself primarily as a homemaker, is a fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center (EPPC), a right-wing think tank dedicated to the application of Judeo-Christian moral traditions in public policy. She writes for

⁸⁰Matthew, Elizabeth Grace. “Why Modern Motherhood Needs Religion”

⁸¹ Gress, Carrie. 2019. *The Anti-Mary Exposed: Rescuing the Culture From Toxic Femininity*, TAN Books, 92.

numerous Catholic and conservative publications and has authored books dedicated to Traditionalist ideology for women and the wickedness she sees in the feminist project. Her work *The End of Woman* received a scathing review from Elizabeth Grace Matthew on the basis of its inaccuracies and its narrow view that womanhood derives wholly from motherhood.⁸² On the other hand, Leila Lawler advertised *The End of Woman* to her readers as part of an article on the supposed lies of feminism.

Gress' published works are for the more ideologically minded, and cover topics at the intersection of right-wing politics, women, and Catholicism. While she writes on a few different yet related subjects, she echoes many of the same ideas across her works. In order to examine her ideology and the beliefs she expresses in her work, I will be looking at the salient points that come up repeatedly in her writing. While Gress has produced a number of publications, she tends to echo the same few talking points and key concepts. The most overarching of these is her notion concerning the conspiracy of feminism, upon which Gress is able to build her rhetorical arguments about the state of women and what she prescribes they need for the health of family, Church, and society. Therefore, like many right-wing reactionaries, Gress relies on chaos rhetoric to persuade her readers.

Chaos rhetoric refers to a type of declension speech that attempts to persuade an audience by stressing an imminent threat to a beloved entity, such as children or liberty.⁸³ This sort of rhetoric works by portraying the world as dominated by chaos,

⁸²Matthew, Elizabeth Grace "The Lives of the Feminists."

⁸³Dorrough Smith, Leslie. *Righteous Rhetoric*, 5.

threat, disorder, and fear. Once this threat has been rhetorically crafted, the author of the threat often will offer their own politically advantageous solution that positions the author as the embodiment of goodness, stability, and order.⁸⁴ For Gress, the imminent threat is Feminism and the “Anti-Mary,” an antichrist Gress invented specifically for women. The beloved entity is what Gress understands as the “true” role of women – weak, submissive, and nurturing mothers. All of Gress’ works mentioned in this case study are built upon this framework and utilize this rhetoric. Her goal is to convince her reader of the conspiratorial⁸⁵ and demonic nature of feminism,⁸⁶ the existence of evil women who should be avoided,⁸⁷ and that the prescription is for women to embrace submissive femininity.⁸⁸

Perhaps the most distinctive element of Carrie Gress’ work is her expansively anti-feminist perspective. For Gress, anti-feminism encapsulates all of her fears about society and frames it as an ideological battle between good and evil. Feminist theorist Judith Butler understands the phenomena of the anti-feminist movement as a collective dream that promises an end to the unforgiving anxieties that afflict so many people experiencing climate destruction, ubiquitous violence, expanding police powers, and intensifying economic precarity.⁸⁹ Her writing leaves the impression that she either doesn’t understand feminism’s project of gender equality or that she is so shrouded in her contempt that she can no longer see the positive aspects of the movement. She declares that the goal of feminists is to “promote

⁸⁴Dorrough Smith, Leslie. *Righteous Rhetoric*, 5.

⁸⁵Gress, Carrie. *The End of Woman*, xxii.

⁸⁶Gress, Carrie. *The Anti-Mary Exposed*, 19.

⁸⁷Gress, Carrie. *The Anti-Mary Exposed*, 40-41.

⁸⁸Gress, Carrie. *The Anti-Mary Exposed*, 98.

⁸⁹ Butler, Judith. *Who’s Afraid of Gender?*, 15.

promiscuity, eroticism, prostitution, abortion, and homosexuality,”⁹⁰ a claim that exemplifies Gress’ reliance on inflammatory speech not based in fact. In a similar vein, she argues that in post-feminist American culture “women can be psychotic, schizophrenic, addicts, lesbians, or anything else under the sun, but virgins, contented mothers, and pro-lifers are no longer considered women.”⁹¹

As part of her anti-feminist argument, Gress attempts to link feminism with communism. She believes that feminism, “focused on free love, a restructuring of society, and the occult” integrates with “communist concepts of free love, restructuring society, and atheism.”⁹² While it could be argued that feminism and communism both include a restructuring of society, so does Gress’ project of a return to submissive womanhood. This rhetoric can be understood as “Cultural Marxism,” a right-wing conspiracy theory that describes Marxism as the cause of modern progressive movements and an attempt to wreck American culture and morality, thus subverting American Christianity. Cultural Marxism has its roots in the Christian Right since “the most significant institutional support for the theory of Cultural Marxism comes from [Paul] Weyrich, [William] Lind, and their Free Congress Foundation.”⁹³

Taking things a step further in *The Anti-Mary Exposed*, Gress argues that feminism is a demonic force. She states, “As St. Paul warned, it is fair to say some “cunning serpent” has made its way into the hearts of women and led them very far

⁹⁰Gress, Carrie. *The End of Woman*, 10.

⁹¹Gress, Carrie. *The Anti-Mary Exposed*, 82.

⁹²Gress, Carrie. “The Gospel of Discontent”

⁹³Berkowitz, Bill. 2003. “Cultural Marxism’ Catching On,” *Southern Poverty Law Center*, August 15.

astray.”⁹⁴ Gress does not offer any sort of evidence, rooted in theology or anecdotal or otherwise, to back up her claim of the existence of an “Anti-Mary” or “cunning serpent” to lead women away from God. Once again, Gress must rely on chaos rhetoric and fear mongering in order to convince the reader of her argument. She extends similar treatment to the second wave feminist movement, which she claims “operated like a coven because of the rampant witchcraft and goddess worship among women.”⁹⁵

The inflammatory nature of Gress’ work lends itself to critique. Therefore, I will be taking up a number of Gress’ points and engaging with them. In her argument that virgins, contented mothers, and pro-lifers are no longer considered women but psychotic, schizophrenic, addicts, and lesbians are,⁹⁶ Gress lapses into the realm of the nonsensical. Women *can* be anything under the sun, and neuropsychiatric disorders, sexuality, and struggles such as addiction have no bearing on what it means to be a woman. The latter part of the claim that virgins, contented mothers, and pro-lifers are no longer considered women is a blatant falsehood.

In the connections she draws between feminism, communism, and occult practices, it becomes clear that most of Gress’ arguments aren’t necessarily based in fact or offering a fresh perspective, and the way she understands feminism as a monolithic project rooted in the occult and designed to destroy women alludes to a dangerously uninformed worldview. Using these concepts to position feminism as

⁹⁴Gress, Carrie. *The Anti-Mary Exposed*, 19.

⁹⁵Gress, Carrie. *The Anti-Mary Exposed*, 66.

⁹⁶Gress, Carrie. *The Anti-Mary Exposed*, 82.

the ultimate enemy of women and the family, Gress provides a textbook example of how chaos rhetoric functions. Something must be culturally identified as frightening before the majority of people will fear it.⁹⁷ Through her use of chaos rhetoric, Gress positions feminism as the boogeyman coming to destroy women, family, and society. Judith Butler understands the phenomena of the anti-feminist movement as a collective dream that promises an end to the unforgiving anxieties that afflict so many people experiencing climate destruction, ubiquitous violence, expanding police powers, and intensifying economic precarity.⁹⁸ By focusing on anti-feminism as a phantasm of all their fears, Traditionalist women are reaching for a narrative that will give them a sense of control.

The more of Gress' work I read, the more I got the sense that Gress does not believe in gender equality. In her section on the demonic nature of feminism, she proclaims, "When a woman rejects the authority of men, of her husband, that God has placed above her — as we have seen, to protect women from the abuse of their own power — her refusal carries with it something of the demonic."⁹⁹ In other words, the woman who disobeys her husband is of the devil. The idea that women need to listen to men for their own good strips women of their agency and infantilizes them. This quote reveals the internalized misogyny that informs Gress' ideas and position on women — that they can't be trusted.

Gress' understanding of women as subordinate is exemplified in her depiction of Mary as the most perfect example of womanhood due to her self-sacrifice,

⁹⁷Dorrough Smith, Leslie. *Righteous Rhetoric*, 63.

⁹⁸Butler, Judith. *Who's Afraid of Gender?*, 15.

⁹⁹Gress, Carrie. *The Anti-Mary Exposed*, 105.

virginity, and motherhood. Motherhood as the primary role of women is the locus of Gress' beliefs about women, from which her worldview is defined and identity is created. Gress understands Mary's strength and power is in her capacity to surrender herself to the authority of God, which allows God to shine through her.¹⁰⁰ In Elizabeth Johnson's work on reinterpreting Mary from a feminist perspective, she posits that this sort of theology of Mary functions negatively to promote an idealized notion of the obedient female self, which then legitimizes women's subordinate place.¹⁰¹

The manner in which Gress understands womanhood and demonizes feminism promulgates antiquated ideas that are dangerous for the position of women. Gress holds a very narrow conception of womanhood, and what a woman can say, do, and be, which she often supports with untruths. Part of what makes Gress' work truly dangerous is its religiosity. Since religious claims assert that their legitimacy comes from an ultimate and unquestionable source, they are automatically a power claim.¹⁰² Therefore, the moral righteousness from which Gress understands her position allows for the justification and fueling of hatred. All those on "the other side" are the true agents of destruction, so anything they believe or adhere to are inherently evil, and therefore can, and must, be destroyed.

¹⁰⁰Gress, Carrie. *The Anti-Mary Exposed*, 161-162.

¹⁰¹Johnson, Elizabeth. 2003. *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints*, The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc, xiv.

¹⁰²Dorrough Smith, Leslie. *Righteous Rhetoric*, 19.

Reactionary Traditionalism:

Through this project, I've attempted to gain a nuanced understanding of the origins, ideology, and appeal of the Traditionalist Catholic movement for women. While emerging, fragmented, and difficult to track, this movement is part of a broader cultural project with implications for mainstream American Catholics and women, particularly Catholic women. This movement merges the doctrine and aesthetics of Catholicism with political ideology, and the Catholic messaging has been mixed with right-wing conservative messaging to the point where that the average reader would have a difficult time parsing the two.

Traditionalist Catholicism foremost rejects the idea of the living Church. The concept of the living Church understands that it must be able to advance and develop with the times, which allows for its longevity. This is evidenced in *Gaudium et Spes*,¹⁰³ the Vatican II document that explores how the Church should respond to issues of modernity such as communism and modern warfare. The Church has always changed to meet the times, albeit at a slow pace. Therefore, the concept of Catholic Traditionalism is not really traditional at all – it is a reaction to the progression of the Church and greater society predicated on an antagonistic relationship to modernism.

Traditional Catholicism is a form of invented tradition that emphasizes certain ideas and motifs of Catholicism, such as the Traditional Latin Mass, in order to imply continuity with a bygone expression of the faith. This is evidenced by the Traditionalist impetus to focus on doctrine or intellectual traditions that best apply

¹⁰³“Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World: *Gaudium et Spes*, *The Second Vatican Council*, 1965.

to their socio-political beliefs, such as Gress' patriarchal reading of Mary as a submissive servant. The idea of invented tradition is best elucidated by Eric Hobsbawm, who writes that invented tradition is conceptualized as a set of practices that are normally governed by explicitly or implicitly accepted rules of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to instill values and normative behavior through repetition, which automatically suggests continuity with the past.

As invented traditions are responses to new situations in the form of reference to old situations, the historic past into which the tradition is inserted does not need to be lengthy.¹⁰⁴ For contemporary Catholic Traditionalists, their beliefs and practices are quantified as a return to a pre-Vatican II form of Catholicism in the form of a cultural rehabilitation. This sort of project is not unique to the Catholic Traditionalists, as they've aligned themselves with far-right political movements that promise the protection of the housewife and her family that Traditionalists seek.¹⁰⁵ Traditionalist Catholics prioritize political values and embrace a narrow interpretation of Catholicism that aligns with their identity, which suggests that they are attracted to Catholicism for its lengthy tradition and aesthetic appeal in order to reinforce their values and worldview. This is supported by Stephen Adubato, who asserts that "traditionalism is the product of an artificially constructed culture, picking and choosing elements from the past that fit the ideological and aesthetic tastes of its adherents."¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴Hobsbawm, Eric. 1983. "Inventing Traditions," In *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, 1-2.

¹⁰⁵Cieslik, Emma. "Catholic Trad Wives."

¹⁰⁶Adubato, Stephen. 2025. "Is the Trad Catholic Trend About Tradition – Or About Individual Proclivities?" *National Catholic Reporter*, January 25.

Carrie Gress writes that she wants to see a “restoration of our culture, return to the family, to healthy and honored womanhood and motherhood, and wide scale desexualization.”¹⁰⁷ This idea of a “return” is not based on historical fact. It is a fantasy in the sense that it is an organization of desire and anxiety which draws upon both conscious and unconscious material.¹⁰⁸ This restoration project is not really about going back to a simpler time in history, in part because that ‘simpler time’ does not exist. It is, instead, about creating a novel authoritarian, *reactionary* culture in which Catholic Traditionalist belief systems and lifestyles are normative and free from the threats of feminism and communism, and from the modern world more generally.

Therefore, the contemporary Traditionalist movement is a reaction to the tenets of 21st-century society and culture that threaten their ideals of authoritative hierarchy and traditional family structures, which is in line with Hobsbawm’s understanding of how “traditional” movements germinate. He writes that we ought to expect invented traditions to occur more frequently when a rapid transformation of society weakens or destroys the social patterns for which ‘old’ traditions were designed.¹⁰⁹ The greater cultural shift towards conservatism in America, as evidenced by the rise of Trumpism, shows that those who feel their values and lifestyles have been abandoned by society are pushing back.

¹⁰⁷Gress, Carrie. *The End of Woman*, 169.

¹⁰⁸Butler, Judith. *Who’s Afraid of Gender?*, 10.

¹⁰⁹ Hobsbawm, Eric. “Inventing Traditions,” 4-5.

A Hidden Hand?

In looking at this movement as a small part of this greater shift, there are certain power dynamics at play influencing the beliefs of the women who subscribe to this ideology. While the nature of the movement, with women sharing content online and through conservative or Catholic publications, points to a grassroots approach in which women are connecting with others who share their values and lifestyles, there are arguably other forces at play prioritizing this sort of content.

There does appear to be a ‘hidden hand’ guiding women and Catholics in general to this sort of content: the USCCB, described above. In 2022, the USCCB made the decision to close the domestic arm of the Catholic News Service (CNS), an editorially independent news organization with a reputation for unbiased reporting that the USCCB had owned for more than a century.¹¹⁰ By getting rid of the CNS, the USCCB opened up space in the American market for more conservative, Right-Wing news outlets to gain audiences. This has allowed much more traditionalist, reactionary media to expand, bringing conservative ideas to the forefront of Catholic media in the United States while allowing U.S. Bishops to turn hearts and minds against Rome.

The activities of the U.S. Bishops as a lobbying firm, clerical hierarchy, and set of media magnates have been paramount in spreading Traditionalist ideology that goes beyond religion by entering the realm of the political to American Catholics, while more or less evading detection. Though the Traditionalist movement appears on the surface to be a grassroots mission propagated by

¹¹⁰McConahay, Mary Jo. *Playing God*, 135.

laypeople who consider themselves Traditional Catholics and conservatives, these messages have also been spread by the governing body of American Catholicism. An example of this is the content shared on the Eternal World Television Network (EWTN). The EWTN is an American Catholic broadcasting service which shares programming such as Mass and the Rosary, but also provides a regular platform for critics of Pope Francis like Raymond Arroyo, a talking head who also moonlights on Fox News Channel's *The Ingraham Angle*.¹¹¹

The messaging of the Catholic Traditionalist movement for women is primarily created by women, for women. However, it is important to note the role played by the U.S. Catholic Bishops in providing space in the media for these ideas to disseminate, the authority for this movement to exist, and their lobbying power for inserting their ideology into law. The actions of the U.S. Bishops also promote schismatic ideas regarding the Vatican and rejection of Pope Francis, to which many Traditionalist women subscribe. As the ideological divides between Traditionalist and progressive understandings of Catholicism widen, the opportunity for reconciliation with Rome closes. It is not impossible that Traditionalism will at one point break with Vatican Catholicism, especially as Traditionalist communities continue to look inward and become more sectarian to survive.

One of the most pressing questions I've had throughout my research has been how this ideology has been transmitted to so many well-educated, intelligent women when it often works against the interests of themselves and their daughters. The actions of the USCCB provides a partial answer in using its control over the

¹¹¹McConahay, Mary Jo. *Playing God*, 118.

American Catholic media to circulate these ideas, which often reach beyond the scope of religion to political ideology and the role of women in society. These ideas, which I found so foreign to my own experiences as a lifelong Catholic, had always been present but gained significant momentum in recent years, fueled by the undeniable political and cultural shift in the United States toward conservative values and aesthetics.

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