Introduction

Media, Religion, and “the Crisis of Masculinity”

“The new American man doesn’t look like his father,” noted National Public Radio’s All Things Considered while introducing a special series, “Men in America.”1 The program’s producers presented a wide-ranging overview of men, masculinity, and fatherhood that showed how questions of masculine identity remain unsettled today. The breadth of covered topics illustrated the scope of contemporary concerns about masculinity—single fatherhood, the sources of masculine identity, gender relations in the domestic sphere, work and career, the essences of “manhood,” and racial and ethnic differences. Equally interesting were the ideas expressed on the program’s comment boards, where a diverse, lively discourse raged as comment posters searched for central points of conversation in a fluid field of ideas, claims, and experiences.2

This book enters this unsettled landscape with an account of how American Protestant Christianity and media influence white, middle-class, heterosexual men’s ideas about masculinity and their roles in their families and in public life. Religion is thought by some to exert a positive influence on men and masculinity, encouraging positive roles in family life and even in broader civic spheres. Media, on the other hand, are thought by many to be a negative influence. This book, based on extensive interviews, focus group studies, and participant observations with both Evangelical and non-Evangelical Protestant men, concludes that the picture is not so simple. There is more to both the challenges and potential solutions to the puzzle of masculinity than simple inputs from either religion or the media. The puzzle of American masculinity is complex and has been made more complex by social and political events that have, in recent years, been increasingly interpreted and understood through lenses of gender.

Such events have included recent acts of horrific violence at Sandy Hook Elementary School and in Isla Vista, California. Each of these
events was interpreted in gendered ways, and each connected to the comparatively mundane realm of politics where increasingly gendered—and specifically male-gendered—accounts of purpose, value, and effect seem to have achieved a new focus in recent years. This gender trouble, to borrow from Judith Butler, was particularly obvious in the 2012 presidential election. What had been expected to be a close and indeterminate race instead delivered an outcome that was seen by many as predictive of even more social change to come. It was seen as the confirmation of a decades-long shift in the political culture of the United States, away from one defined by a dominant cultural establishment and toward a multicultural future. Women and people of color were the decisive factors in many of the battleground states and were seen by most observers as representing an emerging core of American politics.

In the political discourse surrounding the election, the theme of masculinity emerged with a surprising force and intensity around the implications of its outcome for the prospects and interests of white men. The white male voter had been predicted to be at the core of the Republican coalition, with some pundits assuming that the intensity of this group would carry through into a winning turnout for the Republican ticket. Others were not so sure, and in the end, the intensity seemed to be on the other side. The fact that political strategies in the election had so clearly identified these men as a target group can, in part, explain how central they became in the postmortems. But regardless of their significance to the politics of the moment, the discussion of men, their interests, and their prospects clearly pointed to a much broader and deeper discourse about them and their roles. They are, of course, a marker for the sociocultural establishment. American conversations about gender and power over the past thirty years have assumed the centrality of men in dominant white culture. Thus, when that culture begins to lose influence, we can assume that men are centrally implicated in that loss.

But the discussions of men, politics, race, and culture in the months following the election also seemed to take for granted a discourse with some specific themes: themes of shifting relations of power concerning gender, themes of a decline in men’s prerogatives and influence, themes of a continuing crisis that some men feel in relation to their roles and positions in society. These themes can be seen in a sampling of the headlines that circulated in the wake of the election. “What are white guys
afraid of?” asked Catherine Poe in the conservative *Washington Times*.\(^4\) “What is that creaking noise you hear? It is the sound of conservative white men trying to fight off change—and failing,” observed Rich Benjamin on *Salon.com*.\(^5\)

Probably the most widely noted and commented-on of the post-election ruminations were those of the conservative male voices Rush Limbaugh, Glenn Beck, and Bill O’Reilly. For them, it was a time of lamentation, not just over the outcome of this one contest but also over what it represented to them: another stage in the ongoing decline of the influence of men, and of white men in particular, in American society.

Derek Thompson, writing in *The Atlantic* online, noted: “White men are now a clear minority of the electorate. Old Christian white men—the bread and butter of the GOP—hardly comprise [sic] one-third of voters.”\(^6\) Much of this discourse pointed to the centrality of white men to the shifting demographics of the American electorate. This shift, of course, has two dimensions. As Thompson and other critics were quick to point out, and most conservative voices acknowledged, there was the simple reality of where the votes were. But there is a second, more subtle, and in many ways just as significant dimension of the cultural image of white-maleness and its prospects in a changing culture. Nationally, more than a quarter of the white men who voted (and majorities of white men in some states and in many localities) voted for President Obama in 2012. But theirs was not the story that the culture wished to tell itself. Instead, it was a story of declining influence and the declining prospects of white men as a central force in defining the culture.

This discourse about race and about masculinity needs to be seen as layered over a number of prior public iterations of these same issues. Questions of men, men’s prospects, and men’s prerogatives have emerged in other ways and other places in American politics in recent times. Both the George W. Bush and Obama administrations focused on the so-called masculinity crisis facing society’s men and fathers, pursuing this emphasis through programs directed at men, fathers, and boys. In fact, the idea that contemporary American men find themselves in a crisis has a long history, finding expression in initiatives and movements stretching back to at least the nineteenth century in the United States.\(^7\)

Other themes emerge in the contemporary discourse of a “masculinity crisis.” One is the particular challenge this “crisis” poses for boys and
their social and moral development. In a rather traditionalist turn, many voices suggest that boys are especially affected by the crisis of masculinity and that a range of social problems are at least made more severe to the extent that fathers are absent. Others claim that one of the outcomes that need to be addressed is the impact this situation has on broader society. It is thought by some that men have a special role to play in the area of work and vocation and particularly in conveying values of work and vocation to the next generation. Still others extend a prescription to the broader context of civil society, civic engagement, and democratic practice, claiming that these are particular spheres of activity that men have vacated and should re-inhabit. And yet other voices connect the problem of masculinity—and its solution—with what they see to be the traditional institutions and folkways of the culture. Religion, for example, is thought by some to offer particular value and potential solutions. Others point to deeper, more essentialist dimensions of the culture as resources, suggesting, for example, that men and boys today suffer because the “rites of passage” that once defined manhood are no longer practiced.

Media loom large in these contemporary discussions about the crisis of masculinity. Those sources that lament the loss of traditional institutions, the decline of religion, and the absence of rites of passage often point to a media sphere that is complicit in the contemporary crisis of masculinity and, indeed, a perceived decline of men. On the one hand, media, according to these views, convey only the most negative and trivial stereotypes of men and fathers, while at the same time encouraging the overall culture’s orientation toward women, women’s rights, and women’s prospects. On the other hand, media are seen as a distraction from the real work of helping men find their true place in the culture. Media lure men with escape and distraction, drawing them away from the kinds of disciplined action that are their essential role in the culture. At least, that is the critique.

This conversation draws together important and compelling contemporary themes. Gender continues to be a central concern of modern life, as changes in the workplace continue to reorganize gender relations in private and public spheres. Religion persists as an important dimension of American cultural geography, but its expression in public and private life remains controversial. Further, the language of “crisis” brings issues
that were once private into the public realm of policy and professional action. The overall issue of whether and how the world “outside” invades the private sphere of domestic life is therefore centered. Finally, across the culture there has been a growing concern with civic engagement, citizenship, and vocation. The larger conversation has been centered on Robert Putnam’s ideas about social capital articulated in *Bowling Alone.* The “crisis” discourse asks what specific role men should play in reinvigorating social spaces and reanimating social capital.

Looking into this “crisis of masculinity” occurred to us as a natural extension of our research on media and meaning-making in the contexts of home and family. Our work has centered on households and the ways they use the various available communication channels to make meanings about themselves, their lives, and their world. We’ve been especially interested in questions of religion and spirituality in these relations, looking at how traditional and formal religious involvements relate to media and at how people make innovative religious and spiritual sense out of entertainment media that may or may not have a religious or spiritual intention. This book extends this work in two ways. First, it focuses on white, heterosexual Christian men and the ways in which their religious commitments and media consumption intersect with their gender identities. Second, it considers how these men’s gender identities intersect with their private lives as husbands and fathers and their public lives as workers and citizens.

Against the traditionalist “crisis of masculinity” discourse, the findings here contest the idea that religion yields more stable masculine identities that will, by extension, yield a more stable and “good” society. Christianity is central to the identities and life experiences of the men in this study, but it does not simply instill positive gender identity or encourage public involvement. Further, media are as central as religion in the narratives of these devoted Christian men. This centrality of media does not create the toxic masculinity feared by conservative critics. Rather, media often reinforce Christian masculinity in ways that religion does not seem to. The men in this book do not engage media, Christianity, or the general “crisis of masculinity” discourse in the ways suggested by conservative critics. Instead, theirs is a complex interaction within public, mediated, and private spheres that cannot be reduced to a simple prescription for a “good” society.
At first glance, this argument might seem to resonate with the critiques offered by champions of the “crisis of masculinity” discourse. Christianity has lost its authority in directing “godly” men, and media have taken up the slack, with dire cultural consequences, so that argument goes. However, while there are similar threads here, our argument moves in a different direction. Religion has lost some of its authority and media have taken up the slack, yet the overwhelming majority of men in this study still cling to an essentialist patriarchy, albeit one that looks different from that of their fathers. Media and religion play important, if ambivalent and sometimes contradictory, roles in the persistence of this essentialist patriarchy, and both media and religion are involved in the turn inward toward what we call the “domestic ideal,” and away from traditional ideas of public engagement.

Two of our respondents, Glenn Donegal and Denton Calhoun, help to elucidate further the contours of the “crisis of masculinity” discourse and our argument about it. Both men were surprising in some ways because they defied some tried-and-true expectations about conservative religious men in relation to gender, family, media, and public life. A convert from Catholicism to Evangelical Protestantism, Glenn was clearly negotiating an identity amid a range of often contradictory structural forces. Glenn’s wife was the primary breadwinner in their household, a fact that challenged his received ideas about the natural way of life in the home. He believed deeply in a traditional view of gender relations, and he clearly struggled with changes in those realms, though he and his wife had mostly settled the issues concerning her career and their own relationship. Glenn was a recovering alcoholic who attributed his recovery to his religious conversion. His struggles with addiction led him to talk about personal responsibility and morality, and he clearly looked to religion and religious organizations (e.g., the Evangelically based Promise Keepers and Focus on the Family) for support for his ideas about manhood. He strove to integrate into his own relationship with his wife and children religiously inflected ideas from these organizations about male “headship” in the home, a project that seemed to be more an aspiration than an accomplishment. Ironically, Glenn was surprisingly universalistic in his own religious quest, claiming to have received insights from Eastern religions along with those from his deeply felt Christianity. Glenn was remarkably judgmental about issues of personal and public
morality, and he had high and puritanical standards for what qualified as responsible social life. He felt deeply that responsible manhood involved civic engagement, where men are, through their character, responsible for the stability of the social world. He was particularly critical and judgmental about media and popular culture, seeming to feel that they were both a waste of time and a negative moral influence. At the same time, Glenn talked with some passion about men needing to rethink their traditional role expectations and values, suggesting that most men would benefit from rediscovering their “feminine” sides.

As we reflected on Glenn’s story, we came to see how extensively media were integrated into his values and his consciousness. Not only were many of the resources important to his life mediated (Focus on the Family broadcasts, tapes, and publications; the LeHaye/Jenkins *Left Behind* books and films; Promise Keepers publications and events, etc.), but also some of his most important icons and models of masculinity were also mediated (the western-movie actor John Wayne, for example). At the same time, he clearly saw “the secular media” as representing an important challenge to his deeply held values about character, self-reliance, and responsibility. The media sphere thus played an important role in structuring his world, but largely in a negative way, he thought. It was significant, then, that Glenn also saw one media example as positively meaningful to him and his sense of himself as a father and community citizen. Glenn identified with the 1960s-era comedy-drama *The Andy Griffith Show* as a powerful expression of manhood and fatherhood. Glenn’s view of *The Andy Griffith Show* was clearly demarcated by his own experience as a father and by broader themes of a culture struggling to contend with the aspirations of the women’s movement. What made Andy such a good model to Glenn was the very fact that Andy was a single father. Thus, he was a father who inhabited both the imputed “male” and “female” characteristics that Glenn saw as necessary to effective masculinity on the one hand, but, on the other hand, this complementarity was modulated by Glenn’s desire not to deny the importance of women and their essential contribution to social life. Glenn’s hope for the recovery of a sense of male prerogative (called “headship” by many contemporary conservative Christian voices) thus found a kind of satisfying expression in a father who could be both a mother and a father to his son.
Glenn was struggling to negotiate a sense of himself against a backdrop of received cultural values of manhood and masculinity. That backdrop was one partly defined by religion and partly by the broader culture. It was also one that was structured by a mediated public sphere that provided him with both problematic and unproblematic resources. Glenn was clearly involved in what Anthony Giddens might call a “reflexive project of the self” wherein he was working to construct narratives that incorporated the received backdrop with emerging realities and claims. He found some of these claims compelling, like egalitarian gender relations in the home, in spite of his more traditionalist impulses. Glenn, then, represented a negotiation having to do with issues of importance to the “crisis of masculinity” discourse, and he also showed how complex this situation is. His interview also suggested to us that our emerging sense of media households as places of meaning-making needed to focus on men and masculinity as a next step.

Partly because of what we learned from Glenn Donegal, the emergent public discourse concerning the crisis of masculinity took on some additional depth and resonance for us. At about the same time we’d talked with Glenn, there was a round of publicity from the Bush administration announcing a new initiative to be headed by First Lady Laura Bush intended to address the needs of boys in relation to this “crisis.” The latest layers of this discourse in public discussions having to do with masculine prerogative, military service, and gun violence have provided new definition to this discourse, but the basic themes remain the same.

We have described some of its claims already, but we can think of this discourse about a crisis of masculinity as arising from, and pointing to, an emergent generic argument about contemporary men. It links people like Glenn Donegal to media figures like former Fox News host Glenn Beck in a set of claims and conditions surrounding men as they negotiate their identities today. Ironically, this argument also links people across the political spectrum like Beck, Bill O’Reilly, and Mitt Romney to Barack Obama and the Nation of Islam’s longtime leader, Louis Farrakhan. The outlines of this argument can be seen in Glenn Donegal’s narrative of self. Through his eyes we can see men today contending with a situation in which their traditional roles and prerogatives have been thrown into question by a combination of forces in the labor markets, in the cultural success of the women’s movement, and in the political
success of multiculturalism. They might see current trends as significant losses in areas of domestic life and family where fathers should have an important role to play in their children’s lives. But there are broader losses as well. In this view, men have traditionally had a responsibility in civil society, contributing efforts to citizenship, career, and vocation. These men also contend with a broader cultural context that provides mediated sources that are both positive and helpful, even though media generally are seen as largely negative.

This generic argument is not universal, of course, but it has found some important and influential proponents. There is also a growing network of scholars, public intellectuals, and advocacy organizations that has taken up this cause. At the center of this discourse in the Bush administration was Dr. Don Eberly, who has provided a spirited and coherent argument about the problem of masculinity, its relationship to fatherhood and the needs of civil society, and its sources in religion and the media. Eberly has much in common in this view with Dr. James Dobson, the founder of Focus on the Family, who through his long career has also articulated an extensive theory of normative masculinity and fatherhood.

Eberly held several positions in the Bush administration and more recently in two organizations, the Civil Society Project and the National Fatherhood Initiative. He is a leading voice on civil society in conservative circles and identifies with what has come to be known as a “neo-traditionalist” view of masculinity, fatherhood, and family sociology.

Central to this conservative view of civil society is the role of “virtue” and a focus on morality. In the words of Gertrude Himmelfarb, a revered voice to this movement, “When we speak of the restoration of civil society, it is a moral restoration we should seek.” For Eberly and other neo-traditionalists, men are particularly implicated in the maintenance of moral culture and therefore must be at the center of this moral restoration. In this view the problem lies in the rise of the “Republic of the Autonomous Self, where the individual is the only real sovereign, where ‘mediating’ structures have been leveled, and where rules proliferate, yet lack legitimacy.” Eberly points to a “good society” based in revitalized civic consciousness and voluntary associations.

Eberly, Dobson, and other neo-traditionalist social critics identify the family as the place where civic vocation is formed, though the fami-
ily cannot go it alone—or so the thinking goes. Voluntary associations, what Eberly calls “the seedbeds of citizenship,” work with the family, but the family is the primary unit of value in civil society. This line of reasoning connecting the family with the larger project of civil society and civic vocation has deep roots. Eberly and others cite Edmund Burke’s idea of families as “little platoons” and Tocqueville’s notion that families are the “first link” in a chain leading to civic engagement. But they see a growing problem for families in fulfilling their role in civic engagement and civil society. Eberly argues that the role of the family as a moral center has suffered from the withdrawal of the normative role of “parents, priests, and pedagogues.” The key parent in these regards, he contends, is the father. What he calls “father absence” is at the root of the withdrawal of families from their central moral role in crafting the good society.

This neo-traditionalist argument contends that men and fathers have much to gain from religion as they rise to their responsibilities in relation to civic engagement. Their role should address social problems emerging in the next generation, including alienation and declining respect for authority. One can find concerns about feminism lurking behind much of this critique. Lamenting the rise of identity politics and decrying the emergent social idea that “the personal is political,” Eberly and others see men as lacking the social capital that should be available to them in community and culture, such as through voluntary associations, and they decry the eclipsing of traditional standpoints and cultural anchors, which has left men without positive models.

A society of too few mature fathers ends up with what Dr. Frank Pittman calls “toxic masculinity,” where essentially weak, insecure, and poorly fathered men chase after a socially destructive masculine mystique. Men who have not fully felt the love and approval of their fathers are men who live in masculine shame. Says Pittman, “[M]en without models don’t know what is behind their shame, loneliness, and despair, their desperate search for love, for affirmation and for structure, their frantic tendency to compete over just about anything with just about anybody.”

Eberly links his analysis to the broader discourse about “social capital” and argues that religion is one of the most important voluntary
associations that should be supporting progress toward the good society: “A national consensus is beginning to emerge on certain key public concerns such as family disintegration and out-of-wedlock childbearing. Moreover, notwithstanding the reservations of some, religion is likely to have a stronger voice in the public square, both as a legitimate well-spring of personal values and as perhaps the richest source of renewed social capital in communities.”

But there is an even more fundamental role for religion in this project. Religion should support fundamental truths about male identity, according to this view. As Eberly puts it, referring to an imagined past where male identities were rooted in “God-centered masculinity,” “Here, we find the man as he was meant to be, mirroring the true character of God. Here we find the paternal male who generates, not destroys life—the benevolent provider and defender, not the aggressor or predator. Here we discover the man who finds his strength and purpose as a father and friend, a protector and provider, and mentor and a moral example. . . .”

As religion plays a positive role in this outlook, the media play a negative role. Eberly speaks for many, and not just on the right end of the political spectrum, in his view of the relationship of media and popular culture to identity, masculinity, and civic engagement.

Many of the most corrupting viruses are now being borne along not by sinister politicians but by an entertainment and information media culture whose omnipresence is displacing the core social institutions that once shaped and molded the democratic citizen. Whereas parents, priests, and pedagogues once presided over the socialization of the young, now television, film, music, cyberspace and the celebrity culture of sports and entertainment dominate this process of shaping youthful attitudes and beliefs. It is popular mass culture that largely informs our most basic understanding of society, our public life, our obligations to each other, and even the nature of the American experiment.

In remarks on the issue of fatherhood, President Obama has also routinely included critiques of media: “Don’t just sit in the house and watch ‘Sports Center’ all weekend long. That’s why so many children are growing up in front of the television. As fathers and parents, we’ve got
to spend more time with them, and help them with their homework, and replace the video game or the remote control with a book once in a while . . .”31 “It’s up to us to say to our daughters, don’t ever let images on TV tell you what you are worth, because I expect you to dream without limit and reach for those goals. It’s up to us to tell our sons, those songs on the radio may glorify violence, but in my house we give glory to achievement, self-respect and hard work. It’s up to us to set these high expectations. And that means meeting those expectations ourselves. That means setting examples of excellence in our own lives.”32

This larger societal discourse about the crisis of masculinity has assumed greater focus in both scholarly and lay settings.33 These observers, both scholarly and popular, have suggested that men today suffer from the effects of what Joseph Pleck has called “sex role strain.”34 While there are different versions of this argument, the central idea is that as a result of the social evolution of gender roles over the past several decades, men have been left without definitive ideas about roles and identities and without helpful models for what should now be normative masculinity.35 As one journalist put it, “[S]ociety used to assign certain characteristics to men, including power, aggressiveness, professional success and autonomy.” Today, shifts in gender roles have put such expectations into question. “This has left some young men wondering what it means these days to be a guy.”36

The normative discourse of masculinity and fatherhood articulated by Glenn Donegal and then by Don Eberly, James Dobson, President Obama, Glenn Beck, and others answers the question of this “crisis” by suggesting that what is missing and what is needed is a new concentration on masculinity and fatherhood as a moral project, and that its object is to create (or they would argue “re-create”) a place for men at the center of social life. Men’s centrality is both natural and essential, and their role is to provide models and resources to their children and to succeeding generations through leadership in vocation, in civil society, and in civic engagement. As this thinking goes, men have a natural place, and their roles have been displaced.

Religion is seen to have a positive role to play in addressing this situation. For many, religion is a center of social and moral values that provides moral support to men as they rise to their obligations. Others articulate a more complex role for religion, which they feel should play a
more important role in civil society and at the same time should provide a theological justification for a renewal of masculinity. Additionally, all seem to agree that the role of the media in these regards is unquestionably a negative one. It can be blamed for distracting men from their role by absorbing their time and attention; being the source of influences and attractions of sensation, sexuality, and irresponsible living; providing negative, even antisocial models and images of masculinity, and replacing the normative influence of fathers by dominating the time, attention, and values of children.

There are, of course, other social contexts of discourse about masculinity both in relation to religion and in relation to media. A growing popular and scholarly literature focuses on men’s spiritualities and men’s religious sensibilities. John Eldredge’s bestseller *Wild at Heart*[^37] is typical of the popular genre, laying out an argument for the recovery of the essentials of masculinity within a framework of faith (but not necessarily religious institutions). In *Numen, Old Men*, Joseph Gelfer[^38] details a growing scholarly record looking at men, religion, and spirituality. In it, he describes a wide range of perspectives, from those stressing an elemental masculinity to those which hold that gender is constructed through cultural and social influence. Both the popular and scholarly literatures raise important questions about the easy assumption that religion should be thought of as playing a positive, determinative (and singular) role in masculinity.

Eldredge and other popularizers, for example, talk matter-of-factly about the perceived failure of religion to address the concerns and interests of men. Likewise, Gelfer and others[^39] identify much in the research and other scholarly literatures that raises a question about how the whole issue of religion is to be thought about. At the same time, many of these sources raise questions about the notion that media play a necessarily negative role. Neither the popular nor the scholarly literature, it seems, can get very far in describing the nature of contemporary masculinity without referring to media. Television and film seem to provide powerful and probative models and symbols for the way men think about their lives, just as John Wayne and Andy Griffith did for Glenn Donegal.

These claims of a crisis of masculinity suggested by Eberly and others (with all of the implications for public and private life) suggested to us that it was time for a careful inquiry about masculinities, so we
began talking about them with white, married, heterosexual couples and individual men. We wanted to find out where and how these men get their ideas about masculine roles and identities. We wanted to ask them about their perceptions of responsibilities as fathers and as influences and models in their families and their communities. We wanted to find out how they thought about questions of career and vocation in relation to their ideas of manhood and civic responsibility. We also wanted to look directly at the questions of religion and the media. In terms of real, lived lives and everyday experience, how do media and religion serve the needs of men as they think through who they should be in their families and beyond?

In this process, we met Denton Calhoun, an exemplar Evangelical respondent whom we discuss here to introduce themes we will develop in the coming pages. Denton was twenty-eight and lived with his wife, Nancy, and their four-year-old son in a middle-class home in a small town in the American South. Denton and Nancy were raised in conservative Christian households, and they had gravitated toward churches that were theologically conservative. They held social attitudes and beliefs about gender roles and relations that were traditional, though not without some negotiation. Denton expressed a traditionalist, patriarchal, and essentialist view of gender relations in marriage but tacked toward a softer expression of his patriarchy than he thought others did. He said, “I would even say that if you push the traditional thought too far, you could do it in a way where you would be crossing the line in my mind as far as putting women down [is concerned]. I would hopefully not go that far. . . . There are definitely some people who push it so far, you know, the woman being submissive to the man. . . . I would just look at it as different roles with equal importance.”

While Denton believed that this expression of “headship” had Biblical roots, he had an ambiguous view of his religion, which is a theme we will explore in chapter 1. He and Nancy were by all accounts devout and active in their nondenominational Evangelical congregation and clearly identified “Christ-centered” faith as important to them. At the same time, many of the trappings of formal religion, even formal Evangelicalism, bothered him. He was suspicious of subcultural “buzzwords,” for example “born-again” or “Evangelical”; Evangelical media texts, for example Left Behind and The Purpose Driven Life; and self-appointed
Evangelical authorities, for example Pat Robertson. Christianity, to the Calhouns, was radically simple and personal and could not be judged by its popularity in this world. Given his general suspicion of organized religion and of religious authority, it might not be surprising to learn that Denton had found little in church that helped him decipher what it meant to be a man and a father. What was there seemed not to move him very much, morally or spiritually. When asked what his church specifically teaches about being a man, he responded, “Um, again, I'm trying to think of it exactly, I mean real specific teachings? I don’t know.” Denton was aware of the general discourse about Christian headship, aware of key texts and para-church organizations devoted to masculinity, for example *Wild at Heart* and Promise Keepers, yet he was both suspicious of and uncertain about what religious authorities had to offer him generally and about developing as a man.

As he reflected on the role of his faith community on his self-understandings of masculinity, the media began to appear as a source of influence. Like many of his Evangelical and non-Evangelical peers, Denton had an ambiguous relationship with media. At the same time that he articulated the vibrant critique of popular media we have come to expect from religious conservatives, he did watch a good deal of television and was a loyal viewer of the situation comedy *Friends* (long in reruns) and a number of other popular programs, many of which contained what he considered negative moral messages. Denton also readily recalled shows, characters, and themes in secular, mainstream media (especially films and television shows) that expressed what he considered positive characteristics of masculinity. He mentioned a Biblical character only once—Jesus—and this was in reference to the film *The Passion of the Christ*. Further, his discussion of Jesus was not in reference to characteristics of masculinity. For these references, Denton drew on Jack from *Lost* and others like him, similar to the way Glenn drew on John Wayne and Andy Griffith. We consider these ambiguities around media more closely in our analysis in chapter 2.

While Denton was ambivalent about the roles of media and Christianity in his self-understanding of masculinity, he was certain that his primary roles were to be a godly husband and father. Everything else he did—work, career, church, citizenship—served these primary roles, creating a carefully constructed “domestic ideal” that we will explore in
chapter 3 and its implications for public life in the Conclusion. Denton was ambitious in his career, but he wasn’t “called” to it, he said. His calling was to provide for his family, to be a godly father and husband. Further, he did see his work as a sort of “mission field,” but not one ripe for proselytizing and not one that should interfere with his central duties to provide for and protect the domestic sphere. Work was purposeful, but largely insofar as it helped him provide and protect his family.

When asked to reflect further on whether a religiously inflected notion of vocation or calling would be relevant to him, Denton demurred. His ideas of work and vocation were less high-minded, save those that might have been in pastoral or mission work, and again revolved around work’s relation to home:

**Denton:** I think they would definitely say that everybody has a calling, and some people’s calling would be in something like missions and other people’s calling would be for the factory line or whatever. . . . [For] me specifically, I guess I wonder to some degree what that is, but . . . I don’t spend a lot of time worrying about that. I think God has me where he wants me, and when it’s time to go somewhere else, we’ll go there. I do get irritated when people sit around, sit around, sit around, asking, “What’s my calling?” Well, if you just do something, there’s your calling. . . . At this stage in my life, I certainly see a large part of my calling as being a father and a husband. Ultimately that’s much more important than a calling to work at an ad agency.

For Denton, Christianity (both his local community and the broader Evangelical sphere), media, and even his father provided complex and contradictory models for his self-understanding of masculinity. He was committed to his Christian faith and faith community, but he was suspicious of many aspects of it and ambivalent about what this faith offered him as a father and husband. He was critical of the media, yet he readily found media symbols that resonated with his sense of masculine self and media texts from which he derived much pleasure (even while recognizing their negative characteristics). Even his father, a man Denton loved and sought to emulate in some ways, could not escape Denton’s ambivalence, for example in commitment to work and provision for family, yet
whom Denton also criticized as being too detached, working too much, and being emotionally or spiritually disconnected from his family.

In many ways, Denton’s narrative echoes the neo-traditionalist masculinity proposed by Eberly and others—a commitment to church and family and criticism of the media. But Denton’s narrative was also much more complicated. He had profound ambivalence about institutional religion, a complex relationship with media, and a commitment to family that superseded concern for “the public.” Denton’s—and Glenn’s—relationship to the broader neo-traditionalist discourse was, thus, more complicated than we might have expected.

To what extent is what we’ve learned from Denton and Glenn typical of other men in other physical, religious, and cultural locations? We undertook to find out through a series of interviews, observations, and group discussions around the United States with white, heterosexual Protestant men. These conversations gave us additional insights into the sources of male identity in contemporary life, the influences of various authorities on these questions, the ways that men are negotiating gender relations in daily life, and the ways they think about career, vocation, and civic engagement. We have also learned about the ways in which contemporary religious and media cultures frame, condition, and contribute to these negotiations.

These conversations took place in a narrow range of households. Nearly all of our informants were from two-parent heterosexual households. All but one of the respondents discussed here were white. All identified as Christian, and nearly all were of the middle class. This selection was intentional. These interviews reveal the households implied by the political discourse on male gender that followed the 2012 election. To an extent, our purpose in carrying out these inquiries was to test an implicit syllogism in much of the public commentary (particularly from a neo-conservative perspective). Much of this prescriptive language has assumed that masculinity is best expressed in fatherhood, and in fatherhood as contributing to “stable” domestic life for children. A range of critical literature on gender and family rightly points out that definitions of what is stable in family relations deserves careful and critical reflection. At the same time, the received prescription often outlines a role for religion for men, fatherhood, and family life. Again, these notions have been subject to critical scholarly and public scrutiny. In looking at
white, heteronormative and Christian households we by no means argue for the normativity of either. Our project is quite different. We see this inquiry as a kind of “critical test” of received ideas and values. If public voices such as Don Eberly’s and James Dobson’s are right, then their normative view of masculinity should be most settled for two-parent, heterosexual, Christian, middle-class, white households. Evidence that things are not settled in the ways assumed is then significant. And as should be obvious from our conversations with Denton Calhoun and Glenn Donegal, there is much evidence that the received view deserves some careful rethinking.

“The Masculine” in These Pages

In our conversations with the men and women in this book, there is much talk about the relationship among ideas of gender and a range of contexts. We talk about how family, church, faith, spirituality, friendship networks, the media, and the broader culture relate to their ideas of what it means to be a man. In this way our work is very much consistent with a great deal of other work focused on these questions. We know a great deal about the relationship of broader contexts to ideas of what it means to be a woman or a man in contemporary life.

In the midst of these conversations, though, we found ourselves looking at the central question of what our informants say masculinity is. There is a lot of talk about threats to male prerogative, challenges to traditional ideas of manhood and masculinity, and aspirations to positive or normative values of the masculine. But at its core, what is this thing “masculinity”? We know that normative ideas of the masculine have been in flux and in negotiation for at least five decades. Feminism has had the profound effect of identifying ways that women must think of themselves as people with unique needs, goals, and challenges. As a variety of writers on masculinity have noted, this feminist critique has often found its distinctiveness in contrast to “the male” or “the masculine.” And as many of those same writers have noted, this vision of the masculine as a contrast has not provided men or those interested in masculinity in and of itself a substantive or extensive description. So it is with much of the discourse in our interviews. Men, women, and couples
here have found it easier to describe men in relation to women than to identify precisely what it is to be “a man.”

But a picture does emerge, one that we call “elemental masculinity.” We describe what we mean by this term because there is much potential for it to be misunderstood. First and foremost, we stress that our use of the term is empirical, not normative. The idea of elemental masculinity emerges from our data. Across the board among our interviewees, from conservative to progressive, the men with whom we spoke expressed a remarkable consensus that three basic things define masculinity. In a way, they clearly saw these as the residual essence of men’s roles and identities when the elements of maleness that might be socially problematic (aggressiveness, nonrelational attitudes to family and personal relationships, etc.) are discarded. What was left for the men in these pages can be described as “provision,” “protection,” and “purpose.” It is obvious that the notion of “elementalism” evokes longstanding debates in gender theory over “essentialism.” There is a sense in which our informants thought of these ideas as essential, as natural. They did not search for a first cause for these dimensions of manhood. These dimensions were, for them, a given. It is important to note that we’ve found these ideas even among men who’ve had ample exposure to debates about “nature versus nurture” and who accept that gender roles are constructed and imposed by social and cultural context, men who would describe themselves as feminists as well as men who are traditionalists who wish to be “soft” traditionalists. For all of them, there was still a core of what it means to be a man, and these three ideas are the core. Ideas of provision, protection, and purpose thus function on a normative level of discourse where they may well (and indeed do) find themselves in conflict with the practical realities of modern life, domestic relations, and aspirations for the nurture of children (three large themes of our discussions).

But while our informants treated their elementalism as essentialist, we do not argue that our work is a defense of essentialism. Far from it. We see this work as an elaboration of constructivist views of gender, providing a rich and layered account of how ideas of gender are negotiated in modern life. We are not saying that provision, protection, and purpose are essentially “male.” Rather, we are saying we found that nearly universally among our informants, these impulses were seen as
definitive across a range of sources and contexts where ideas of maleness and masculinity are brought to bear.

These ideas, even as expressed here, are not exactly a “hard” essentialism as might be described in some more scholarly or more popular work. These men (and women) saw these elementals as the particular gifts or talents that men can uniquely bring to domestic space. They were often careful to make this distinction themselves, and particularly to distance themselves from the notion that these unique male talents should devolve to unique male prerogatives in dominance or power. For them, it was simply that, all things considered, women needed to do some things and men needed to do some other things.

Debates over essentialism in gender studies center on the prospects of women in domestic and work life. Much of the research looks at whether there are essential differences between the sexes that reveal themselves in systematic outcomes in life. The literature here is extensive, and the debates remain spirited. We’d like to describe our work in relation to this literature in order to make what we think is an important distinction between essentialism and our “elementalism.”

A series of articles in the British Journal of Sociology has focused on the work of Catherine Hakim, a sociologist who has produced a prodigious literature on women and work life articulating a paradigm she calls “preference theory.” Hakim describes her work as focusing on preferences in work and career choice, and she has provided some important and comprehensive accounts of the domestic negotiations over women’s work prospects, using large (largely European) databases. She has demonstrated that domestic relations in women’s work life can be described in three broad categories: women whose preferences are “home centered,” women who are “work centered” (each about 20 percent of households), and a large category (60 percent) of “adaptive” households where work–life preferences are much more in a process of constant negotiation. While Hakim distances her work from other paradigms of gender and work, it is nonetheless difficult not to think of her work as falling in the broad context of “rational choice” theory. Indeed, she has been broadly influential among those who wish to focus on the potential for positive gender outcomes of the neo-liberal market.

Hakim’s primary interlocutor in the BJS debates has been Rosemary Crompton and a series of collaborators. Crompton and her associates
wish to shift the focus away from the expression of preference toward questions of structural constraints and determinants. Their argument is that while there is strong empirical evidence for Hakim’s suggestion that women choose to focus on the domestic or on career and that women’s choices and negotiations are fundamental, Hakim seems to miss that such preferences can themselves be the result of structural factors. Hakim’s approach is thus essentialist in that it seems to assume that there is something prior to or outside of structural constraint that determines women’s choices to work inside or outside their homes. This argument links as well to questions of agency versus determination in social relations. If one assumes the level of agency proposed in Hakim’s preference theory, it necessarily suggests that the explanation for systematic gender differences in choice must have its roots in some version of essentialism. Hakim has mounted a spirited defense of her work seeking to distance herself from hard essentialism. It is nonetheless hard to see her measurement of “preference” without recourse to some fundamental explanation.

For our purposes here an essential distinction between the two perspectives is over what is meant by a “preference.” Crompton and others who focus on structural factors as determinative would argue that a “preference” is something more ideological than Hakim seems to accept, a choice that is determined by structural factors. This determination happens through the mechanism of the articulation and circulation of social norms and values that intervene in the construction of preferences and then in choices. For Hakim, “preference” is instead only a behavior, a measurable choice to work inside or outside their homes, or negotiate something in between. If structure is to work itself out in preferences and choices, it would do so through its construction of appropriate societal norms and expectations. This notion is where the linkage to our conversations comes in, as we are clearly involved in an elaboration of the circulation of and negotiations with social norms in the lives of our informants. Hakim dismisses attention to social norms: “There is only a weak link between societal norms and personal preferences. (We can agree that it is a good idea for everyone to stop smoking, yet choose to smoke ourselves.) Societal norms are non-causal attitudes; they are part of the social furniture but do not predict individual behaviour. Personal preferences are causal attitudes and strongly shape behaviour. In
the absence of major contextual constraints, they can become the primary determinant of behaviour.”

This is an essential, even fundamental, distinction. What do we do with discourses that are focused on the level of norms and values? If they do not necessarily predict behavior (and they do not necessarily do so, even for our informants), then what is their role and status? We are collecting “stories we tell ourselves” from these informants, contributing to what have been called informants’ “plausible narratives of the self.” These narratives constitute a repertoire of self-knowledge and aspiration that underlies much of one’s conceptual relationship to other domains, constraints, sources, and outcomes. These narratives can be seen to underlie choices in politics and personal life, connect with senses of the self, and express identity. They are also important to senses of happiness and well-being. In short, any part of the complex of behaviors, interactions, and ideas that circulate around socially situated individuals that is conceptual rather than behavioral clearly plays a role in identity and preferences. That is the point of the discourses we will present here.

We are not measuring choice, or outcome, or happiness or satisfaction per se; we are interpreting the way individuals talk about their negotiation of meaningful spaces of interaction in ways that contribute to their senses of themselves, of their options, and of their location in the web of social relations that define their lives. We are not measuring directly what choices are made or what behaviors result from those choices, though we do see evidence of these choices in our interviews. These accounts are performances, though, and we consider them to be part of gender performance in Judith Butler’s sense. They are therefore also significant for what they tell us about larger discourses of norms, values, and ideals of gender. If such performances are important to the constitution of gender (and we argue that they are), then these accounts are also significant in that way. Further, they are significant to the political discourses with which we began the discussion. Accounts such as these are deeply linked to the discursive possibilities that define the moral discourse of the contemporary political sphere.

These accounts are important in what they can tell us about their formation in broader social contexts, including the media, which is a major theme of our project here. Our view of elementalism is broadly interactionist, drawing on the work of Goffman, Denzin, and others. We
are pursuing the agenda in relation to masculinity, gender, and media suggested by Gauntlett in his account of Butler’s significance for media studies: “The call for gender trouble has obvious media implications, since the mass media is [sic] the primary means for alternative images to be disseminated. The media is therefore the site upon which this ‘semiotic war’ (a war of symbols, of how things are represented) would take place.”

Our category of “elemental masculinity” is not focused on demonstrating that the ideas of provision, protection, and purpose are essentialist. These categories are more like ideals, norms, or values in our discussions. They are poles or dimensions against which other claims on time, attention, and belief are measured and tested. They are discursive and narrative, a “gender performance” fitted to the particular demands of these households at this point in time with this set of challenges, constraints, and aspirations orbiting it. They may be, as we’ve said, a kind of residual of traditionalism, left over when other, more problematic dimensions of masculinity have been discarded in the process of social progress toward egalitarianism.

Of course, they might be “essential” in some way. Something like this was argued in Harvey Mansfield’s controversial book *Manliness*. Mansfield, an intellectual historian, set out to recover some sense of what remained of masculinity after the gender revolution of the past fifty years by looking back at the classics. Lamenting the loss of something essential, he claimed that something that looks like our provision, protection, and (particularly) purpose was at the root of the classical sense of the masculine. Does this concordance with Mansfield mean that our informants are also on some level essentialists? It is true that they probably think that if they were to follow Mansfield and look back far enough in sacred texts (classical or theological) they might well find an essence very much like provision, protection, and purpose. That is, however, not our argument. We would see their articulation of these elements, and Mansfield’s, as a kind of measure of where we are in the evolution of changed relations in the gendered domestic sphere. These elements are the way that our informants articulated their senses of what it is men should be thinking they are about. Certainly, these senses are rooted in history and perceived essentials. That is, in fact, the point. That the men and women we interview claim as their own these dimensions of
elementalism, articulated in the way they do, as central to their senses of who they are tells us much about where we are in the historical process of rethinking gender in modern life. Our work moves beyond essentialism, though, by lodging this discourse of elementalism in the potential sources of meaning—family, religion, the media, and broader social and cultural contexts. Further, we ask whether some of these sources have, in fact, failed.

It should be obvious as well that we take a somewhat skeptical and analytic view of the crisis of masculinity. Even though it appears without quotation marks in our title, we use this term advisedly throughout this book. It is clear that there is a crisis of masculinity to the extent that broad themes in the culture focus on changes in the nature of masculinity and male identity and identify these as broadly unsettled and in flux. That we lack languages and consensual frameworks can be a discursive crisis and thus an identity crisis, and there is evidence of this in these pages. Whether there is a crisis in some absolute sense is another question, and one that, while we do not fully answer it here, we believe we can speak to, and we do—in the final chapter.