

Reading *Peanuts*: the Secular and the Sacred

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Introduction

- 1 Charles Monroe "Sparky" Schulz's *Peanuts* comic strip was like none before it. The children-filled frames took the world by storm, fulfilling Sparky Schulz's childhood dreams. Though he was "a barber's son brimming with insecurity, depression, loss, and resentment" (Lorberer), Schulz was able to take a kid, a dog, and some ragamuffin friends and turn them into an historic franchise – one literally for the record books. For Schulz, the success was no surprise: "Well, frankly, I guess I did expect *Peanuts* would be successful, because after all, it was something I had planned for since I was six years old" (Larkin and Schulz 6).
- 2 Schulz's interest in comics began in childhood. As he would walk home with his father, who was the local barber, the two would discuss current strips, agonizing over possible futures that lay in store for the various characters. After seeing Schulz draw a picture of a man shoveling snow, Schulz's kindergarten teacher told him, "Someday, Charles, you're going to be an artist" (6). In order to further his dream, Schulz enrolled in a correspondence course. He submitted countless cartoons to major magazines, but merely received rejection – something he was used to. It was at *Timeless Topix*, though, that Schulz got his real start. Through *Topix*, Schulz was able to produce strips for several Catholic-based magazines. Eventually, Schulz created *Li'l Folks* and sold it as a weekly feature to the St. Paul Pioneer Press (7-9). Schulz continued to work on his skills and sent his work out to major syndicates. Eventually, he mailed off some of his best cartoons to United Feature Syndicate in New York City and was given his big break (9). Once signed, Schulz's strip began to evolve, the characters changing closer to those we know now. Unfortunately for Schulz, however, the strip could not maintain the name *Li'l Folks* because of its similarity to a former strip entitled *Little Folks*. An editor who had never seen Schulz's work was asked to produce some possible names for a comic strip. One of these names, *Peanuts*, was chosen as the new banner for Schulz's strip. Schulz later said that he was "horrified" when he found out the name. The first *Peanuts* strip was then printed on October 2, 1950 (14, 25-26).
- 3 Though the first strip ended with Shermie saying, "Good Ol' Charlie Brown ... How I hate him!" the world disagreed. Schulz went on to create a total of 18,170 strips total (Schulz *Complete Peanuts* 301). It was not a strip, though, that cemented Schulz's place in history. In 1965, Schulz's story, *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, was brought to life for television viewers. Early speculation by everyone involved was that the show would be a failure. The use of child voice actors, no canned laugh-tracks, poor animation, slow action, and an explicit religious message seemed surefire marks of the project's doom. The public thought otherwise, and the show was a sensation. When it was replayed in 1969, fifty-five million viewers tuned in to see "what Christmas was really all about." According to Garrison Keillor, "on that one night in 1969, he [Schulz] reached a larger, more diverse audience than any other single popular artist in American history. What was more, *Peanuts* was single-handedly expanding an industry that would revolutionize worldwide entertainment into the next century" (Schulz *Complete Peanuts*

4 The engines of the franchise certainly were rolling and brought in the kind of success that the night in '69 foretold. *A Charlie Brown Christmas* and other *Peanuts* classics became holiday regulars. Many *Peanuts* classics have received nods from the movie industry. *A Charlie Brown Christmas* won an Emmy and a Peabody, despite the show's early criticism. Emmys were also won for *A Charlie Brown Thanksgiving*, *You're A Good Sport*, *Charlie Brown*, *Happy Anniversary*, *Charlie Brown*; *Life is a Circus*, *Charlie Brown*; and *What Have We Learned*, *Charlie Brown?* Outside of the monstrous movie industry, the *Peanuts* characters have worked in marketing campaigns for *MetLife* and the Ford Falcon (Wikipedia). In 1960, *Hallmark* began producing *Peanuts* greeting cards, a connection that has created a lasting market for the franchise. Camp Snoopy began in Knotts Berry Farm and has become a staple of several theme parks. Snoopy has made his way into Holiday on Ice and national museums. He was also featured in *The Guinness Book of World Records* after the strip sold to its 2,000th newspaper in 1984. *Peanuts* has also graced the covers of *Time*, *Saturday Review*, *Newsweek*, and other major publications. Schulz himself has received numerous and diverse honors for his greatly cherished work, including honorary degrees and international accolades (Larkin and Schulz 253).

5 Schulz and his body of work have made history. According to Keiller, "at the peak of Schulz's popularity, *Peanuts* captured three hundred and fifty-five million readers, and the merchandising of the brand created a franchise unlike any of the funny papers had ever known, with the cartoonist himself earning from \$30 million to \$40 million a year" (Schulz *Complete Peanuts* 301). Keiller continues:

At all levels of society *Peanuts* had a profound and lasting influence on the way people saw themselves and the world in the second half of the 20th century. Schulz's achievement was singular and planetary. An artist, a storyteller, he was now a worldwide industry, too. This had never happened to a newspaper cartoonist before. The new markets that *Peanuts* was dominating in stage, television, film, book, record and subsidiary forms, simply hadn't been open to newspaper comic strip artists in 1950, when United Media had given Schulz the chance to dream his dream. (Schulz *Complete Peanuts* 300).

With such wide success and circulation, *Peanuts* has elicited a variety of responses. There are two categories of such readings that I will discuss here – the *secular*, and the *sacred*. The secular reading takes *Peanuts* at its face value as a loveable pop culture comic strip with little baggage. It is simply good ol' Charlie Brown, Snoopy as Joe Cool, and endless missed football kicks. While the strip may make occasional philosophical inquiries into the human condition, no spiritual meaning is attributed to the franchise by the secular reader. This reading is the dominant reading, as Charlie Brown is not explicitly labeled as a "Christian comic" in the same way that other franchises like *VeggieTales* are. The sacred reader, however, sees *Peanuts* as existing in a moral universe and articulating a distinct religious message. Linus's philosophizing, recitation of Scripture, and belief in The Great Pumpkin are all indicators of and critical elements to the construction of an ideology Schulz is articulating through his work. While there are differing interpretations of what these acts say about Schulz's particular ideology, the acts are nonetheless seen as symbolic pieces of a Schulzian religion.

6 These are two distinct polar readings of *Peanuts*: the secular and the sacred. Each has its own set of reading practices that produce the resulting interpretations. In this paper I do not seek to argue for one reading's superiority, but rather I endeavor to uncover the characteristics of each reading practice, showing that it is not just the interpretations that differ, but also the process by which the reader gets to the interpretation. *How* the reader reads *Peanuts* will determine how he or she sees the franchise, as either secular or sacred. This paper will thus proceed to

take up the elements of the ardent secular and sacred readings, examining their characteristics and problematizing their polarity.

The Secular and the Sacred

7 The secular reading is the dominant reading. As noted above, this is evidenced by the fact that *Peanuts* is not culturally labeled as a "Christian franchise" in the way that *VeggieTales*, *StoryKeepers*, and others are. Snoopy is not the marketing product of Christian bookstores, but instead fills the shelves of *Hallmark* and dances for *MetLife*. I do not intend, though, to argue that there is a singular secular reading that exists in relation to the ubiquitous Snoopy apparel, Charlie Brown mascots at theme parks or by the original comic strip itself. Instead, a secular reading has as its unifying feature the absence of religious, theological, or overtly spiritual interpretation. The results of this style of reading obviously depends on many variables, but the readings are all still in a singular category of secular, given their absence of sacred interpretation.

8 I do not seek to create a monolithic secular reading, but rather wish to explicate elements of secular interpretation. Because of this, I will not utilize a particular singular text as emblematic of this reading style. Instead, a multitude of texts will be utilized. Mass media reports, editorial comments, *Peanuts* anthologies, and even museum exhibits will be employed as representative of a secular style of reading. Because the secular reading is the dominant reading, and because it is represented in many ways, my objective is to examine a cross-section of these various texts in order to isolate similar characteristics of their reading practices. What is it that they are attending to in their secular interaction with Schulz's works? Three such characteristics will be examined. The secular interpretation reads *Peanuts* through the success of the franchise, through a distinct view of the characters, and through Schulz's 12 devices.

9 The sacred reading is set in distinct contrast to the secular reading, as it seeks to unearth a system of religious belief within *Peanuts*. From scriptural references to metaphorical Christ-figures, the *Peanuts* texts are built on and proclaim, at varying degrees of subtlety, a particular theological framework. As with the secular reading, I do not seek to create a singular notion of the sacred reading. Individuals have viewed the sacred meaning in radically different ways, and thus to claim that there is a unified sacred discourse would be unsound. Additionally, because there are a variety of particular sacred readings, it would be unwise for me to make my case for sacred reading practices based on any one sacred reading. To establish trends in sacred reading practices, I will thus utilize a variety of sacred readings, from journal articles, to sermons, to news clippings, to blog postings. There are three distinct characteristics of this reading style, which sit in convenient contrast to the secular reading style. These characteristics are a focus on intentionality, meaning, and what I call lightning rods.

Success and Intentionality

10 One element that secular references to *Peanuts* rest upon is the success of the franchise. As described above, *Peanuts* has enjoyed immense success in many different venues. When coming into contact with a *Peanuts* text, secular readers often read it through this success. That is to say, *Peanuts* is not seen as a religious text. Instead, *Peanuts* is read as a popular, mainstream mega-product. It is "the most successful comic strip in newspaper history," has "appeared in some 2,600 newspapers in 75 countries and was translated into 21 languages," and "has sold more than 300 million copies worldwide" (Lambiek). *People* tells the reader that "as creator of the most widely syndicated comic strip in history, Schulz added 'security blanket' to the popular lexicon; his quote 'Happiness is a warm puppy' is in Bartlett's; and Snoopy,

perhaps his most enduring icon, was stenciled on the helmet's of American soldiers in Vietnam" (Chin). The secular reader does not see *Peanuts* without simultaneously seeing its cultural vitality.

11 This rhetoric of success was evident in readers' responses to Schulz's death. This was seen in *BBC News's* Talking Point, "Your tributes to the creator of *Peanuts*." Fans posted: "The truth is, the creator is gone, but the creatures will live by themselves" – Sergio Giavarina; "1998 Sept, when McDonalds introduced 28 Snoopy with different countries' style, I laughed at the long lines of people buying them. But today I think I have got to love Snoopy. You know I have got altogether 14 different countries of Snoopy" – Irene H P Lee; and "He may have just wanted to amuse us all around the world, and he did so well for almost 50 years, but he did manage to contribute so much to our vernacular also" – Riz Rahim. Other fans said, "You are among the great names to be remembered. Your achievement is unparalleled as far as cartoonist is concerned" – Mukazhi Lau; and "You touched millions of people, Charles Schulz, and your creation will be in our hearts all the rest of our lives" – Ian C Stirk ("Your Tributes"). The memories cultivated by these fans' readings were based on an interpretation and consumption of *Peanuts'* success. Additionally, David Astor, author for *Brandweek*, says that newspapers are in a dilemma given the great success of *Peanuts* and the death of Schulz. Reruns of the strip are still filling the slots in the funnies, possibly "stifling the next generation" of cartoonists. The continued dominance, Astor notes, is because "'*Peanuts'* was the most popular comic in a popular art form. [...] One indication of just how popular '*Peanuts'* was came when *Newsweek* published a cover story about Schultz's [sic] retirement in late 1999. The issue was the second-highest-selling at the newsstand for the magazine last year (321,000), trailing only the issue featuring a tribute to John F. Kennedy Jr., after his accidental death" (Astor).

12 The term "icon" is used frequently across the secular readings. It is seen in *People* magazine, quoted above, and a publication by *Time* asked the question, "How did a comic strip about a depressed kid become a cultural icon?" (Grossman). "Classic" is another term often used in this same way (Strauss). Elements of *Peanuts* such as Charlie Brown and Snoopy are seen as representative of American culture. They are not seen as abstract preachers atop a pulpit, but rather they are read as *part of* and *representative of* mainstream culture: "Schulz has transformed a comic strip into part of the very essence of American life. [...] His characters have become legends in their own comic strip lifetimes" (Berger 193). By linking *Peanuts* with the dominant culture, the reader secularizes the text. *Peanuts* is not an enclaved religious text, but is instead part of the dominant culture. That dominant culture is by its nature secular. Charles Taylor has argued that the long march of society's progress has brought us into a current "social imaginary" whereby our understanding of our society is an understanding not connected to "God or the beyond" (Taylor 187). Our culture is one that is "disenchanted," reading prominent texts through a lens of the individual instead of the divine. It is a "modern secular society" and *Peanuts* is a part of it. Taylor does not argue that God is "altogether absent" from mainstream culture, but that the sacred is now contained in personal devotion and particular political identities (193). Successful pop culture is now conceived of as independent from the sacred.

13 Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* created uproar primarily because it violated this rule, and explicitly declared that the sacred would be inserted into the secular public sphere. Some may argue that this example actually contradicts the notion of the mainstream secular/sacred split. While that is true, and denies the inherent opposition between the successful and the sacred, the commotion surrounding the film still proves the popular adherence to the dichotomy. What the spectacle created by Gibson's work actually proves is twofold. First, by its

very nature of being a spectacle, it proves the oddity of the sacred being located within mainstream culture. Its status as spectacular makes its secular counterparts definitionally standard. Even when the sacred is given mainstream voice, it is not seen as representative of the mainstream. Second, Gibson's work highlights the fact that for the sacred to be clearly conceived of as sacred within the dominant society, it must boisterously make a case for being sacred, and be willing to fight for a place in mainstream culture. The secular reader does not see *Peanuts* as making such a statement, but instead sees it as standard, i.e. secular.

14 Additionally, secular readers do not attend to *Peanuts* strictly as comic strips created by Schulz. Rather, a more consumption-based reading style is often employed because of the success of the franchise: "'*Peanuts*' [is] such a powerful licensing machine that it [is] sometimes easy to forget that the source of all the calendars and coffee mugs, the commercials and Christmas specials, [is] a strip that [runs] in the local paper's funnies" (Editor & Publisher). Because of this, the "texts" that readers have the ability to read are often not texts that make any allusions to anything but secular meaning. While comic strips occasionally featured biblical quotations, the popular merchandising that most readers are exposed to does not. Eric Lorberer notes that "the ubiquity of Schulz's creations, in fact, leaves them in danger of being remembered as spokestoons for insurance ads rather than as the eloquent voices of cultural malaise they once were" (Lorberer).

15 Further evidencing this phenomenon, The Charles Schulz Museum and Research Center in Santa Rosa, California, opened in Schulz's honor in 2002, "with the mission of preserving, displaying, and interpreting the art of this legendary cartoonist." Very little, if any, however, of the material in the museum reflects anything but secularity. The biography of Schulz mentions nothing of his religious affiliations. Sacred texts articulate a biography full of religious connections, from Schulz's family to his position as a Sunday School teacher. The museum's version has none of this in the biography. Nowhere on the museum's website can any potentially sacred references be found – not even a mention of Short's highly successful interpretative *The Gospel According to Peanuts*. Likewise, the successful *Charles M. Schulz: 40 Years Life and Art* by Giovanni Trimboli, triumphed for its inclusion of a preface by Umberto Eco, never explicitly addresses the question of the sacred, and only has a few strips, among the many reprints, that make scriptural references.

16 *Hallmark* is another popular source for *Peanuts* texts to come into contact with its readers outside of the traditional comic strip. A quick glance through the stores or the online Hallmark.com reveals secular dominance. There are no explicit markings of sacred meaning in any of the pieces for sale. The closest to non-secular material is the *A Charlie Brown Christmas* merchandise that one can find amidst the mounds of Snoopy products. Even this Christmas material, however, is secularized, with most depictions simply showing the children and the Christmas tree. The secular reader thus reads *Peanuts* through its success. When a reader sees Snoopy, he or she sees a part of this classic, iconic franchise that has reached millions in the dominant secular society. Discussion of the franchise is then placed in light of the success, not in light of any potential sacred meaning. This reading is further established by the secular display and merchandising that have become an integral part of the franchise's success.

17 While much of the secular reading sees *Peanuts* through the lens of its enormous mainstream success, the sacred reading attends more closely to an alleged intended meaning inscribed into *Peanuts* by creator Schulz. Sacred readings note "cartoonist Schulz's world," "an inhospitable world that Charles. M. Schulz has sketched," "lucid depictions of the struggle between existentialism and religious determinism," and "brilliant self-reflexive moves from

Schulz" (Koresky). Other sacred readings note, "Schulz's genius lies in his simplicity, which points to some greater reality" (Cunningham). "The thing is, the heart of the special isn't Charlie Brown, or Charles Schultz's [sic] humor, but instead it's his parable of belief surrounding Linus. [...] he found a humorous way to express how important believing in something was to him" (Seger). "It's a rare comic strip that can include explicit theological references. [...] More significant theologically, however, was the world Schulz created" ("Charles M. Schulz Retires" 53); "[Schulz defined a] moral universe" (DeLuca 302). "[He] is the best at bringing religion into comics" (Foss and Howard); and "[he] considered his work far more than a job – it was a vocation. [...] His medium [for preaching] was the cartoon" (Gilbert).

18 To establish this element of intentionality, sacred readings attend to Schulz's biography. Throughout his life, Charles Schulz had a variety of interactions with Christianity. Based on that information, the reader views *Peanuts* as an outgrowth of those experiences. Because Schulz had consistent interactions with the church, it is assumed that *Peanuts* can justifiably be read as an outgrowth of that sacred involvement. The emphasis on Schulz's biography is made clear by the explicit references to it in sacred interpretations. DeLuca notes that "When he [Schulz] returned from the war, he began attending church services and studying the Bible" (301). Likewise, "Schulz was a devout Christian, and he was never afraid to include that into his comic" (Seger). "Schulz, who was raised Lutheran, is active with the Church of God," (Foss and Howard). Additionally, "a conservative Protestant and member of the Church of God, [...] Schulz created characters that broke from strict parameters or denominations, yet reflected the beliefs ingrained from his upbringing. [...] He [also] taught Sunday School, and, through his Peanut gallery, searched for some sort of meaning" (Koresky).

19 Regardless of the success of the comic strip, the sacred reader reads *Peanuts* through a set of data that seems to reflect Schulz's intentions. Schulz was from a Christian family, studied the Bible, was active in the church, and even taught Sunday School. Therefore, if there are elements in *Peanuts* that appear to create a moral universe and express a religious truth, then the sacred reader believes that meaning was intended. This intended meaning is of great importance as it connects to 'God and beyond', and therefore forms the backbone for the sacred reader's interpretation of *Peanuts*, as opposed to circulation figures or profit margins.

20 The secular reader is not wholly unaware of this biographical information, however, and it seems pertinent for me to address a sort of "data debate" concerning Schulz. Blogger Mark2000 points clearly at this issue, stating, "[Schulz] was a Methodist Sunday School teacher for a time, after all. Entire books have been written about the Christian undertones in *Peanuts*; however, Schultz [sic] himself claimed later in life to be a secular humanist and is quoted as saying 'the only theology is no theology' (Farinas). The secular reader may thus refute the sacred interpretation by denying the intentions of Schulz. This denial is backed by quotes from Schulz. To answer Mark2000's subsequent question, "Just what did this guy believe in?" is rather difficult. Joanne Greenberg, author of *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden*, gave Schulz the label "secular humanist". Schulz himself once admitted in an interview, "I don't even know what secular humanism is" (Schulz *Complete Peanuts* 330). In the same interview, Schulz's belief system is articulated as clearly as anywhere else, as Schulz himself often skirted the issue, but a distinct answer is hard to identify. Perhaps he dodged the question because he wanted his strip to maintain its mainstream appeal, or perhaps he was shy in answering the question because of his lifetime of pain and rejection, suffering shyness, weak stature, failure in physics and English, rejection from publishers, his mother's death, and the marriage proposal rejection by Donna Johnson (Chin). That may explain why *Peanuts* could serve as a great outlet for his beliefs. It is also possible that his theology was difficult for him to articulate, as he said, "the more I talk about it the more difficult

it gets for me to express it and it just simply gets away from me!" (Conversations 41).

21 The finality of the intentionality debate is impossible, as Schulz himself makes it so. He once said, "Maybe if we looked through [the strips] I could point out a few where I might be trying to say something against hypocrisy, I really don't know" (Schulz *Complete Peanuts* 329). Ultimately, though, the debate does not need to be settled to point to the characteristic of the sacred readings. A key element in how the reader interprets *Peanuts* as sacred is often the use of intention to frame the perception of the text. For the sacred reader, *Peanuts* is not a cute or classic franchise that dominates the market place with unparalleled success. Instead, it is the intentionally crafted work by a student of Scripture and Bible teacher and has sacred meaning written in it.

22 Ultimately, though, it would be foolish to deny the success of *Peanuts* and the impact it has had on viewers. Certainly, the success of the franchise, along with its merchandising and consumption, has propagated a simpler secular view of *Peanuts* sitting on the store shelves. That is not to say, though, that this success forecloses the possibility of something more than commercialism being the heart of Schulz's work. While Schulz was certainly trying to sell strips that would sell papers, he has also indicated that there is occasionally something more lurking behind the beagle. While Schulz's comments about his faith, or the function of that faith, in his strips are anything but unambiguous, they do point to instances of sacred meaning within the text. In fact, the ambiguity of his statements speaks towards a desire for Schulz to have his cake and eat it too ... desiring to maintain the pop culture success of his strip while holding onto the ability to occasionally interject a thought of sacred value. Having *Peanuts* proclaim the gospel message in a Christmas classic or having the strip contain comments about it "raining on the just and the unjust" certainly draws one's attention to Schulz's desire to have a particular ideology manifested through his work. That does not mean, though, that he intended his strip to be a sacred text in its totality, for Schulz was still trying to create a successful strip that he had been dreaming about since he was six years old. The sacred attention to intentionality segments Schulz's intentions into the sole category of the sacred, shutting off perception of other successful and intentional elements of the strip. Schulz's work is a combination of strips that investigate the human condition, strips that speak toward a sacred meaning, and strips that are simply there because they are humorous. Despite the often secular/sacred polarity, the success of the strip and Schulz's intentionality are not mutually exclusive: they are part of the complexity that is Schulz.

The Characters and Meaning

23 According to Berger, "We enjoy *Peanuts* because it is extremely funny. [...] he [Schulz] is a master of representing expressions in his characters" (183). It is these characters that drive the franchise. One way that the secular reader reads the *Peanuts* texts is through an attention to the characters in a manner that is distinct from the sacred reader. The characters of comics are "reassuring," and give the reader "something steady in their lives" (Kennedy qtd. in Astor). The secular reading focuses on the characters, not a sacred meaning behind them.

24 Secular readers tend to focus their attention on two key characters of *Peanuts*, namely Charlie Brown and Snoopy. I do not say this to state the obvious fact that a franchise is driven by its main characters, but rather to highlight a commonality in the secular readings that is unlike most sacred readings. A *USA Today* report on the Schulz museum notes that "it will contain permanent and rotating displays of *Peanuts* cartoons featuring Charlie Brown, Snoopy and the gang" (Sloan). Charlie Brown and Snoopy are the central and representative characters of *Peanuts*. The rest, while certainly loved and important to the history of the franchise, are ultimately 'part of the gang'. The *BBC News* postings reflect the Charlie Brown/Snoopy

centrality: "I've had so much familiar attachment to his [Schulz's] characters, especially Snoopy, since I was a kid." – Maki Darwin; "No one can write a good character like Snoopy, Charlie Brown, etc." – Eli Geisinger; "Everybody have [sic] a little Charlie Brown (or 'Carlitos' in Spanish) in our heart." – Jesus Quintero; "I will always identify with Charlie Brown... you [Schulz] are sadly missed, but you, Charlie Brown and his friends will always be remembered fondly." – Steven Dunn; and "Snoopy is my favourite." – Ching ("Your Tributes").

25 As mentioned before, *Hallmark's* merchandising is focused on key characters like Snoopy and Charlie Brown. This may begin to explain why the secular reader is attracted predominantly to Charlie Brown and Snoopy as representative of *Peanuts*. Naming is another way in which the reader is inundated with the overwhelming Charlie Brown/Snoopy centrality. It is *Camp Snoopy*, not *Peanuts Park*, and it is "*A Charlie Brown Christmas*" not "*A Peanuts Christmas*." This is certainly due in part to Schulz's unaffectionate response to the title "*Peanuts*," but also serves as a source and reflection of the dominant social association of *Peanuts* with Charlie Brown and Snoopy, not a deep ideological framework or the particularities of the gang.

26 As David Michaelis says in "The Life and Times of Charles M. Schulz" in *The Complete Peanuts*, Charlie Brown is a national symbol. Charlie Brown is not alone, though:

Conceived as the protagonist of *Peanuts*, Charlie Brown remains the eccentric hub around which all the action wobbles. He is the only player to ever get billing: *Peanuts, featuring Good Ol' Charlie Brown*. But face it, Charlie Brown, Snoopy has stolen the show. He is the figure most readily identified with the strip – or without the strip – and Schulz concedes that *Peanuts* reached the height of its popularity on Snoopy's bi-wings (Johnson 78).

While sacred meaning can be found in these two characters, as Short argues in detail, most of the explicit sacred references such as scriptural recitation come from a character simply lumped in "the gang" – Linus. For sacred readers, Linus becomes a lightning rod, attracting sacred interpretations. By reading *Peanuts* through Charlie Brown and Snoopy, the secular reader is able to avoid ideational contest with potential sacred meaning.

27 This is not to say, though, that reading *Peanuts* through these characters makes the secular reading necessarily flat and "meaningless," for as Condit notes, texts are rarely read as pure pleasure without further meaning (Avery and Eason 383). Instead, the reading of the strip is focused on the characters instead of a sacred message. *Peanuts* is about "Charlie Brown, Snoopy, and the gang," not about Christianity or religious conviction. Deeper meaning in the strip is then read through its relationship to the characters, not to a sacred ideology. The characters themselves are seen as "ever-so-loveable," "precocious," and "angst-ridden" (Sloan). Charlie Brown is loved because "we recognize ourselves in Charlie Brown – in his dignity despite doomed ballgames, his endurance despite a deep awareness of death, his stoicism in the face of life's disasters – because he is willing to admit that just to keep on being Charlie Brown is an exhausting and painful process" (Michaelis in Schulz *Complete Peanuts* 295). The rather existential issues discussed are not part of an overall Schulzian ideology preached through *Peanuts*, but rather are seen as elements of a particular character, namely Charlie Brown. When grief or failure or philosophical inquiry are entered into the scene, they are a part of these characters, not part of a Schulzian sermon. Linus, the one who recites the biblical Christmas story in *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, is certainly not ignored by the secular reader. Rather, he is seen as simply 'the philosophical one' in the gang. *Peanuts* is read with Charlie Brown and Snoopy as the central figures. Linus is thus part of the gang, his own character not a reflection of a totalizing *Peanuts* system of belief. Instead, he simply "has a scripture-quoting philosophical bent" (Trimboli 39).

28 Because *Peanuts* is read through Charlie Brown and Snoopy, any meaningful associations to

the strip are those associated to them, like grief, rejection, hope and imaginative zaniness. According to Berger, "Schulz mixes graphic, verbal, and ideational humor in a genuinely inventive manner. [...] His characters tend to be monomaniacs who pursue their destinies with all the zany abandon of divinely inspired zealots. We seldom see them this way, however, because we have been taught to regard children (and dogs) as innocent and mildly amusing" (Berger 183). Schulz's use of children is similar to a common literary technique that dulls the impact that any particularly heavy statement may hold. Berger says, "Since the characters are children (and animals), we are not offended by the light they throw on our voices" (Berger 185). We are not only not offended by the children's messages, but also, the secular reader does not take them too deeply. Instead, Schulz's portrayal is of common human themes – "he dealt with the concerns all people have – love, rejection, failure," and these are themes associated primarily with Charlie Brown (Astor).

29 Umberto Eco is often quoted, saying that Schulz's characters are "monstrous infantile reductions of all the neuroses of a modern citizen of the industrial civilization" (qtd. in Koerner). This philosophical discussion in *Peanuts*, however, paired with the use of children and the focus on key consumable characters like Charlie Brown and Snoopy, serves to inoculate the reader against any possible sacred reading. If the reader moves beyond consumption of the widespread *Peanuts* franchise and sees deeper meaning, then the focus on "concerns all people have" causes the reader to read the texts through a lens of universal grief, not a distinctly sacred ideological system. The occasional deep read by the secular reader sees humanity's foibles personified in the characters. There is a distinction between seeing *Peanuts* as about grief and rejection and seeing *Peanuts* as about Charlie Brown who constantly suffers grief and rejection. Even if that distinction is weak, though, the focus on characters still tends to limit philosophical inquiry and discussion of "modern neuroses" to a secular discussion, as sacred investigation is tied to Linus who is just part of the gang.

30 Conversely, while the secular reading views the characters, primarily Charlie Brown and Snoopy, as loveable, endearing characters with congenial insights into a universal human existence, the sacred reader sees *Peanuts* as a system driven primarily by meaning, not characters. The characters are merely vehicles for that meaning to be articulated. When the secular reader looks at *Peanuts*, he or she sees the characters in various plots; when the sacred reader looks at *Peanuts*, he or she sees deeper meaning being unearthed and proclaimed.

31 The focus on meaning is the central element that truly makes the sacred reading a sacred reading (though that's not to say that the other two characteristics I explain are irrelevant). The sacred meaning found within *Peanuts* may vary, but *Peanuts* is seen as being a world unto itself, a moral universe, and thus meaning can be sought out. As Marshall says, "the comic world can usefully be conceived of as a whole, as a complete universe with its own rules and regulations" (Marshall 421). As Thomas Inge further explains, "a key element in all of Schulz's work is his sense of man's place in the scheme of things in a theological sense" (qtd. in Nichols). The sacred reader attempts to understand that moral universe and identify what Schulz argues is that place. For example, it was said of *It's the Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown*, that "the moral of the story is no matter what happens, no matter who ridicules or who falls away: Never stop believing. [...] [T]his special captures the core of Charles Schulz: Belief" (Seeger). As Short argues (and I shall return to him later), "*Peanuts* [...] often assumes the form of a modern-day, Christian parable" (Short Gospel 21). Often, the sacred reading attends to *Peanuts* through this lens, seeing the storylines as Schulz's metaphors or parables containing a sacred meaning. For instance, "Think of Linus, the prophet without a people, who unwaveringly [sic] in his belief in the Great Pumpkin. [...] Schulz's genius lies in his simplicity, which points to

some greater reality. [...] Jesus lived 30 years in unrecorded simplicity" (Cunningham).

- 32 Further examples illustrate this attention to deeper meaning beyond the characters themselves: "Schulz establishes that the Great Pumpkin represents something far greater than childish want; the Pumpkin is the messiah of Linus's Halloween, the holiday itself defined by longstanding religious objection and centuries-old attempts to Christianize it, becoming conflated with Christmas" (Koresky). Or more cynically:

To get a full picture of the theological beliefs of Charles M. Schultz [sic] I think *Charlie Brown Christmas* needs to be matched up with its lesser known younger brother: *It's the Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown*, which is a not so subtle criticism of blind faith. [...] Linus tries to recruit followers, passes up pleasures of the flesh, and attempts to chastise and shame nonbelievers. Linus is convinced that his suffering will result in rewards the heathens don't deserve, and they will live to regret their folly. It's pretty classic zealot behavior. In the end Linus succumbs to the same fatal attitude that got Lot's wife turned into sodium chloride (Farinas).

Further, in a sermon, Reverend McPike of the Trinity Lutheran Church says, "Lucy's little brother Linus goes to the pumpkin patch each year waiting for The Great Pumpkin to rise up and go through with lots of toys for the children. [...] Jesus warned of false expectations concerning the coming of the Kingdom of God" (McPike).

- 33 In a different sermon, another reverend asks, "How could anybody not see the deep theological aspects of this animated cartoon? You just have to peel away the surface in order to dig into the spirituality that lies within" [italics mine] (Reverend Steve). A Leonard E. Greenberg Center article seems to answer the question partly, saying, "In one sense, the media's relative lack of interest in the religion angle should not be surprising: Schulz had a way of injecting his distinctive Christian perspective into the main arteries of American mass culture without raising secularist eyebrows" (Hoover). The reason the meaning may be missed is the same argument that sacred readers point to for their interpretation – it's in parable or metaphor form. For sacred readers, the meaning is not laid out in *Peanuts* in four-point sermon form, but is rather hidden within and behind the characters for the sacred reader to discover, for the sacred reader to find after 'peeling away the surface'. It is in effect a system of code by which the sacred reader must look beyond the characters themselves to unlock the ultimate meaning. This thus gives rise to varying interpretations of the message, as has already been seen above with The Great Pumpkin being a symbol of both faith and heresy. While Mark2000 argues that the Schulzian system is one critiquing faith, the Greenberg article claims that "there was a substructure of decidedly non-sugarcoated Christian theology – God is sovereign, no matter how difficult things get; humanity is fallen, sustained only by the grace of God" (Hoover).

- 34 Such disputes over meaning may turn some away from the sacred approach. As Condit notes, decoding often takes great work that may elicit silence instead of interpretation (Avery and Eason 370-372). This may further explain the dominance of the secular approach: deciphering a possible religious code by Schulz may be found to be difficult and therefore the reader never actually decodes the message. Readers may be more interested in the less difficult enjoyment than in the complicated work of decoding something that is already enjoyable without a sacred meaning. By default, the text is thus left as secular. In a more general sense, though, this discussion highlights an element of how the sacred reader approaches the text. He or she reads *Peanuts* through a desire to uncover the meaning locked in the metaphoric parables that the characters enact.

- 35 This dichotomy of the characters and deeper meaning, however, stands in over-simplified opposition. While the secular reader tends to view *Peanuts* as the Charlie Brown and Snoopy

show, and the sacred reader looks for meaning behind that, both views miss the complex interweaving as they stand at wrongful extremes. *Peanuts* certainly is about Charlie Brown, Snoopy, and the gang. Schulz makes it so throughout his work. However, Schulz also has much of his work investigate themes of the human condition – grief, loss, hope, etc. For the sacred reading to stand in opposition to this is naive. Much complexity can be seen in Schulz's packaging of grand philosophers in six-year-old bodies. Charlie Brown is the prime example of a character with afflictions and deeper meaning. He constantly suffers loss and rejection, only to continue on the next day, ever hoping to kick that football. Schulz speaks to his adult readers through these common themes, but in no way speaks a message of simplicity. Schulz's interrogation of humanity through Charlie Brown's constant rejection also betrays the notion that only the sacred reader holds claim to Schulz's intentionality. Schulz's biography may read to the ardent sacredist as ripe for the pulpit, but it also reads to the objective reader as being full of rejection and loss that is later mirrored in *Peanuts*. For instance, the Little Red Haired Girl is a representation of Donna Johnson, the woman that rejected Schulz's marriage proposal. She does not share the spotlight with Charlie Brown and Snoopy, and is actually only a fringe member of "the gang," but she symbolizes for Schulz and the interested reader a truth of rejection that is deeper than a quick read of Joe Cool. Schulz's characters are not simple. They are also not averse to deeper theological meaning as the Gospel message is read every Christmas, and Scripture is occasionally invoked, but the meaning found in Luke is certainly not the only meaning Schulz investigates.

Schulz's 12 Devices and Lightning Rods

36 The final way that the secular viewer reads *Peanuts* is through Schulz's 12 devices. These devices serve to reinforce a sense of steadiness, simplicity, and universal appeal in *Peanuts*. These "devices" are the recurring elements throughout *Peanuts*: "Schulz identifies [these devices] that have worked so well he is willing to attribute to them his strip's historic popularity. He is particularly proud of the ideas, for they are products of his unique intellect, things no one else would have thought of. Or at least no one did. To Schulz, [these are] the twelve things that helped make *Peanuts*" (Johnson 74). (These twelve devices are: the kite eating tree; Schroeder's music; Linus's blanket; Lucy's psychiatry booth; Snoopy's doghouse; Snoopy himself; The Red Barron; Woodstock; the baseball games; the football episodes; The Great Pumpkin; and The Little Redhaired Girl (72-83)).

37 The secular reader often reads *Peanuts* through these recurring themes. *Peanuts* is 'about' these twelve devices – they 'are' *Peanuts*. For instance, one journalist wrote, "No more Charlie Brown? Think what that means. No more Charlie trying and trying and trying to kick a football [...]. This is terrible. Because if you love sports for what sports can be, you had to love good ol' Charlie Brown" (Kindred 70). The covers of the 40th and 50th year anthologies feature Snoopy and Snoopy's doghouse, respectively. An article that referred to Charlie Brown as a "cultural icon" explained that "Charlie Brown tried to kick a football for the first time in November 1951" (Grossman). Another report says, "For millions, it's a sad day for the funny pages. [...] [Charlie Brown] has spent nearly half a century trying to kick a field goal, avoid kite-eating trees, and work up enough courage to say 'hello' to his secret crush" (Koerner). The *BBC News* postings reflect the same sentiments: "I will always remember my most favourite stuffed animal growing up-my Snoopy dog." – E. Price; "My favourite strip was one about 25 years ago where Lucy asks Charlie Brown what are the 3 certainties in life while he starts to run up to kick the football. He replies 'death and taxes' but cannot remember the third until Lucy inevitably takes the ball away at the last minute and he lands flat on his back. Then he remembers!" – Richard Barnett; and "[Linus and Snoopy's] eternal struggle over Linus's blanket fills many warm memories from my childhood." – Matt Tedone ("Your Tribute"). It was also in the sixties that

Snoopy's doghouse burned in the strip, prompting a flood of sympathy letters from fans.

38 Schulz said, "A cartoonist is someone who has to draw the same thing day after day after day without repeating himself" (Schulz *You Don't Look* 35). That is what Schulz did through these twelve devices. He created the world of *Peanuts* such that these twelve repeating elements become *Peanuts* for the reader. The creative repetition tells readers that this is what *Peanuts* is really all about. If scripture is quoted from the pitcher's mound, the theological reference is not what *Peanuts* is about, but rather *Peanuts* is about the baseball game that we are seeing once more, and all the zaniness that comes with nonchalant shortstops and Beethoven-loving catchers. The scripture references are simply a new twist on the device; the device is not a new twist on scripture. Umberto Eco says, "[comics] continue to repeat the same story ad nauseam, but they do, however, give viewers or readers the impression that they are reading a new story. Readers believe they're reading a new story, and yet they're gratified to find they're reading exactly the same story all the time" (in Trimboli 8-9). The twists on the device make the comic enjoyable, but at its core, the device itself is the constant that the secular reader can read *Peanuts* through. *Peanuts* is not about 'God or the beyond'; *Peanuts* is about these little kids dealing with pumpkins, kites, footballs, and crushes.

39 The discussion brings us now to the final characteristic of the sacred reading style, an element that for many sacred readers is really the starting point. This characteristic is the attention to what I call lightning rods as opposed to the twelve devices. By lightning rods, I mean elements found throughout the discourse that attract a distinct interpretation or style of reading. For *Peanuts*, there are three key lightning rods: *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, scriptural references, and Robert Short's works. These elements attract sacred analysis and for the sacred reader justify a sacred interpretation. The sacred reader sees *Peanuts* in light of these elements, as opposed to seeing *Peanuts* as a composition of the repeated twelve devices. A given strip is not another football episode, but is rather a place where deeper meaning, biblical truth, or parable may be found.

40 *A Charlie Brown Christmas* is the first lightning rod. Set as a Christmas tale, this Charlie Brown escapade is inherently positioned within a potentially theological realm. Other Christmas classics, however, like Rudolph and The Grinch, are not seen as theologically centered. It is Linus's recitation of the Gospel of Luke that declares *A Charlie Brown Christmas* as a Christian proclamation. As Linus says, "That's what Christmas is all about." For the sacred reader, Schulz's distinctly Christian classic is a proclamation that 'That's what *Peanuts* is all about.' The story of the "Christmas classic that almost wasn't," the Christmas special being too genre-breaking to be a success, reinforces the notion that this is an important benchmark in the *Peanuts* franchise. As Bill Melendez said, "[Schulz] wanted to be very straightforward and honest, and he said what he wanted to say because he was a very religious guy. When I first looked at that part of the story I told Sparky, 'We can't do this, it's too religious.' And he said to me, 'Bill, if we don't do it, who else can? We're the only ones who can do it'" (Mendelson 39-40). Subsequently, *Peanuts* is read as extensions of this message that only Schulz and company could give. In Condit's terms, *A Charlie Brown Christmas* serves as an "historical agent" to ground further reflection on related texts (Avery and Eason 377-378). For instance, *It's the Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown*, aired the year after the Christmas Special, is seen in relation to the real meaning of Christmas. Koresky argues that because of his place as prophet in *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, "even before the start of *It's the Great Pumpkin*, Linus has already been waiting for a sign, something that will literally drop from the sky and make itself known as a messenger of good tidings." For Koresky, the connection between Halloween and Christmas in the discussions of *The Great Pumpkin* further reinforces a connection between the two stories. Additionally, Mark2000's blog post, quoted earlier, which argues that the

Halloween special must be read in addition to the Christmas special in order to "truly" understand Schulz's theology, speaks to the tendency for sacred readers to view the implications of Schulz's work in light of *A Charlie Brown Christmas*.

41 Unlike the secular reading, focusing on Charlie Brown, Snoopy, and "the gang," the sacred reading gives Linus a higher place of prominence, in that he is the one with that prophetic-bent. Linus is not the only character, though, to articulate concepts of theological merit. This brings us to our second lightning rod, scriptural references. These scriptural references are located within the strips themselves, though, as noted before, it is often easy to forget that the franchise is driven by "a strip that runs in the local funnies." Charlie Brown once read to his sister, "... But David won the fight when he hit Goliath in the head with a stone..." to which Sally replied, "What did Goliath's mom say about that?" (Larkin and Schulz 141). Snoopy quoted The Song of Solomon when writing a letter to his sweetheart Truffles (*Short Short Meditations* 73). Charlie Brown once quoted from the book of Isaiah to Snoopy at dinner, saying "The dogs have a mighty appetite...they never have enough;" Sally once made Christmas cards where "each one has a little bunny on it dressed like a shepherd," prompting her to warn "Don't say I'm not religious!!" and Lucy once noted, "I was praying for greater patience and understanding but I quit... I was afraid I might get it" (Schulz *You Don't Look* 35). According to Short, approximately ten percent of Schulz's strips contain explicit theological references. While this means that 90 percent of the strip is of a more on-face secular nature, the sacred reader sees it as a large amount of a comic strip that has a consistent reflection on a system of sacred meaning. To the sacred reader, it 'makes sense' to read *Peanuts* as an extension of biblical truth because it is biblical truth that the characters are quoting. The scriptural references within the strip thus attract broader sacred readings of the franchise.

42 We are now brought to a work of broader sacred reading and our final lightning rod, the works of Robert L. Short. Short first wrote *The Gospel according to Peanuts* in 1964, and it has subsequently become the most prominent sacred reading of *Peanuts*, even included in some chronologies of the franchise (Larkin and Schulz 253). Because of its prominence, selling over ten million copies, Short's work, along with his two subsequent books, *The Parables of Peanuts* and *Short Meditations on the Bible and Peanuts*, has attracted an increasing amount of sacred interpretations. Short's work strays from the typical sacred reading practices that I have outlined above, though, in that he believes that "*Peanuts* lends itself easily to this kind of Christian interpretation, whether these thoughts were always in the artist's mind or not" (Short *Gospel* 124). His reading is one built on a purpose – to share the Gospel – and he sees *Peanuts* as a vehicle to do so. *Peanuts* strips serve as parables, conveying truth in a similar manner to the stories that Christ told in the gospels. Short reads *Peanuts* for his own teleological purposes, not for Schulz's theological intentions. In contrast to most sacred readings, Short claims to read *out of*, not *into* *Peanuts* (26). Nonetheless, his project has been simplified to a work that establishes a connection between Christian Truth and *Peanuts* and thus attracts further sacred reading. These readings are attracted by these lightning rods, and in light of Schulz's theological ties, focus on the deeper meaning behind the characters.

43 While the secular reader has a tendency to read *Peanuts* through the twelve devices, and the sacred reader is attracted to theological themes through the various lightning rods, neither view speaks of the whole truth. Schulz himself declared that he was proud of making *Peanuts* revolve around his twelve devices, and the readings of the strip show that he was successful. As with the discussion of characters, that does not mean that these twelve devices foreclose the possibility of deeper meaning being found (though that deeper meaning is not necessarily always of sacred kind). The ardent secular reader sees *Peanuts* solely through the lens of the twelve devices, missing the signal that explicit sacred references give. To the ardent secular

reader, The Great Pumpkin is simply a cute part of the Halloween tradition, but this interpretation misses the cues that Schulz gives that something more is potentially being said. It is no accident that The Great Pumpkin is conflated with Christmas, set in opposition to materialism, and couched in explicit terms of religion and denomination. Something is being missed by the strict secular reader. The sacred reader, however, is not without fault. Schulz may be saying something at particular times through The Great Pumpkin, but that is not to say that the twelve devices that Schulz loved so dearly are merely there for the rare occasion to shine forth the light of the Gospel. To view the twelve devices solely as vehicles for sacred meaning reduces the strip down to a simplicity while the sacred reader simultaneously accuses the secularist of utter simplicity. While *A Charlie Brown Christmas* may be telling of Schulz's beliefs, this does not mean that a strictly sacred reading of all of *Peanuts* is justified. Instead, these lightning rods should be viewed as indicators of potential messages within *Peanuts*. They should open the eyes of the reader, allowing for the possibility that one may see sacred references in the strip, but they should not instruct the reader to search out sacred meaning in every instance of the franchise. These lightning rods are cues, not instructions. Generally speaking, the extreme secular reading tends to be too shallow, while the ardent sacred reading is too narrow. Both extremes miss the mark.

Conclusion

44 There are two polarized ways of reading *Peanuts*. It has been read by some as a part of our secular mainstream society. Others view it as a sacred text – a sermon-in-a-strip. The processes of reading differ as much as the ultimate interpretation. I said in the Introduction that I was not going to argue for the superiority of either the sacred or secular readings. I believe I have kept that promise, for both the sacred and secular readings are one-sided. It is not even enough to say that they are two sides to the same coin, but rather they are more like two lenses to the same pair of 3-D glasses. A seemingly complete figure may be seen by looking through only one lens, but it closes off the truth that the other eye could see, and further, it hides the simple intricacies visible only through both lenses. Both the secular and sacred interpretations contain valid arguments for their positions. The error in either way is seeing interpretation as an activity of strictly dichotomous results – as *either* secular or sacred. Perhaps it is a little bit of both. *Peanuts* is a complex topography of simplicity crafted by an artist with a personal ideology that inevitably shaped the final three-dimensional product. At times this shaping takes the form of explicit message or parable; at other times, this ideology has no explicit ties to a final proclamation. Is *Peanuts* secular? Is it sacred? Yes. Both views have merit, but both are too polar. *Peanuts* is not simply a secular or a sacred text, it's the artistic working of a man who suffered loss, had an interest in the sacred, wanted people to laugh, had a dog, knew a girl, had some kids, and ultimately drew it all on paper for the world to see.

45 The exploration of reading practices does allow for further investigation. In particular, other texts are read through the secular/sacred dichotomy, such as C.S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* and J.R.R. Tolkien's tales of Middle Earth. An examination of the rhetorics of the readings in conjunction with the texts offers insight in many avenues, such as audience interpretation, intentionality, and encoded meaning. This study of *Peanuts* is merely a minor representation of the work that could take up questions comparing *Narnia's* great box office results to Bruner and Ware's *Finding God in the Land of Narnia* and the like. The characteristics of reading practices described here, while specifically tied to *Peanuts*, will likely serve as a rough map for the ways readers take up these other texts. Additionally, by attention to potential lightning rods, the critic may be able to draw even more works into this particular field of inquiry.

This examination of *Peanuts* also cues us in on more fundamental elements of reading practices. The elements of the polarities highlight critical elements of texts that must be attended to ... intentionality, repeated devices, etc. More importantly, these elements do not always receive equal attention. This serves the critic by expanding his/her field of vision when exploring the interaction between the text and the audience. Just because a text enjoys great cultural success, for instance, does not mean that all of its audience will view it through that lens. Nor do an author's vocalized intentions guarantee that the text will be viewed in that light. The critic must be careful not to wrongfully assume that an audience has or will interpret a text through any given mode. Likewise, when a critic endeavors to posit his/her own interpretation of a text, the intricate possibilities must each be considered with an ever-present guard against oversimplification and false dichotomies. As seen here, these practices are of particular importance when dealing with the secular and the sacred. Ultimately, this particular paper joins the ranks of the countless responses to the late Charles M. Schulz's work. The strip drove a franchise into success and circulation that has afforded such extreme and diverse readings. What drove the strip was a boy, his dog, and some friends. What drove them was a master artist, Sparky Schulz.

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“religious” insofar as it is related to communication with deities (particularly in his close readings of other Birmingham mass meeting speakers comprise the data: Fred Shuttlesworth, James Bevel, Ralph Abernathy, James Farmer, and Roy Wilkins. In addition to a rhetorical analysis, Holmes situates each of the speakers within their respective backgrounds and contexts, particularly organizational affiliation and education. At the outset, Holmes asks what abiding rhetorical and cultural relevance might be derived from a study of orators other than King. While Farmer was seminary trained and the son of a preacher, he, as a self-described humanist, held a secular prophetic voice that engaged social gospel, with an emphasis on social over gospel. At the book’s conclusion, Holmes examines the “contested legacies” of the Civil Rights movement.

