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Reading, feeling, believing: online testimonies and the making of Evangelical emotion

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ABSTRACT

A personal relationship with God is central to Evangelical belief. It unfolds as believers interpret internal sensations as coming from outside—from God. How does the formulaic design of testimonies present the audience with a personal relationship with God as a pursuit that is both feasible and deeply desirable? Analyzing the discursive rules structuring the appearance of emotion in the most popular testimonies on the online platform of *Christianity Today* reveals that such texts expertly present a microcosm in which the experience of reading mirrors the trajectory toward belief writers describe. To read a testimony from start to finish, readers must choose to tolerate the unfamiliar: that is, feel emotions that specifically belong in an Evangelical frame. Online written testimony relies on compelling storytelling to move readers, making them practise what it feels like to hand over part of one's own story to God.

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That night, speeding toward the point of no return, I lay face-down on the carpet, arms extended, and cried out to Jesus, “I am yours. Save me.” Instantly I was sucked over. From that point on, God became personal. I talked with him. He sometimes answered. I had stark dreams. [...] It was bizarre at first—unnerving. I’d never experienced anything like this. [...] Jesus is real. This palpable relationship transformed me. (Wilder 2013)

In *When God Talks Back*, Tanya Luhrmann explores one central question: how does God become real? (Luhrmann 2012, xi) Lynn Wilder, in the description of her conversion (see quote above), is absolutely sure: Jesus and God are real, palpably so. What is more, she maintains a loving relationship with him, in which she receives unexpected support and wisdom. Luhrmann explains how this relationship is forged inside the mind, as the result of a process in which Evangelical believers “learn to reinterpret the familiar experiences of their own minds and bodies as not being their own at all—but God’s” (Luhrmann 2012, xxi). Wilder may have had particularly ‘stark’ dreams before, but she now understands these as *happening* in her own mind, yet *originating* externally: they come from God. Listening to God, or listening to one’s own mind and body in such

a way that God is thought to be speaking, is a skill Evangelical believers carefully hone throughout their lives.

Luhrmann has been criticized for making experience too central to Evangelical believers' lives (Jenkins 2013). This article moves away from the ethnographic attention to experience, taking a more media-focused approach. I take seriously Luhrmann's assertion that a close relationship with God is central to Evangelical experience, building on her work in asking how people are moved to pursue or to keep pursuing that relationship. This study thus does not focus on the process of conversion or the experience of believing, but rather on invoking desire: the way stories like Wilder's aim to make readers *want* to have a relationship with God. How does the stylistic design of testimonies present the reader with a personal relationship with God that is not only feasible, but also deeply desirable?

Testimonies

Publicly 'witnessing' for Christ is of central importance in Evangelical Christianity. Studying worldly engagement in an Evangelical setting, Omri Elisha refers to conversion narratives as one of the main ways in which spiritual fellowship is professed (Elisha 2011, 20). This is echoed by James Davison Hunter in his book on American Evangelicalism in the twentieth century: alongside Bible reading and prayer, giving public testimony is "essential for spiritual growth" (Hunter 1983, 77). Witnessing includes, at the very least, the Gospel story and an invitation or exhortation to receive Christ as one's "personal savior" (Harding 2000, 38). A testimony, defined as an "account of an encounter between [the believer] and God", may also be included (*ibid*). Often, testimonies discuss the encounter that made the witness convert. Susan Harding understands witnessing as impressing a "new, previously unperceived or indistinct reality" on listeners (Harding 2000, 37). Luhrmann describes the work that goes into the continuous maintenance and fortification of this Evangelical reality. Here, it suffices to note that testimonies have the express purpose of awakening their audience to a reality in which a personal relationship with God is both possible and desirable.

Describing the various ways in which the giving of testimony has been "subject to rigorous systematization and methodization", Hunter briefly discusses instruction manuals and training programs detailing efficient strategies for evangelization (Hunter 1983, 80). He mainly considers instructions that predate WWII, but the phenomenon of manuals for sharing a personal experience persists to this day. Online, these instruction manuals are no less systematic or meticulous: worksheets, which can be downloaded, with questions, such as 'What was your life like before you met Jesus?', as well as possible angles for answering them,

a list of answers for questions ‘non-Christian Jay’ might have or even a ‘sample testimony’ are some examples (Cawley 2012; Internet Evangelism Day, n.d.; NEXT Worldwide, n.d.) Interestingly, some training guides include solutions for people who do not specifically recall ‘meeting Jesus’ because they were raised Christian or whose lives did not change significantly after conversion (Langley 2005; Vandekemp 2014). Such reassurances—as well as the questions on the worksheets and the sample testimony—suggest that the ideal testimony includes a clear ‘before’, God coming into the narrator’s life at a low point, and a subsequent conversion that inspired dramatic positive changes.

While there is a growing literature on the presence of Christianity online, particularly in the African context (see Asamoah-Gyadu 2007; Adogame 2008), analyses of Evangelical web sites have focused on videos and social media rather than texts (see Flewelling 2010; Van der Vliet 2012; Hutchings 2012). Similarly, the practice of giving testimony from person to person has been studied extensively, while testimony in its written form has not received similar attention. Evangelizing speech separates listeners from their prior reality, to borrow Harding’s terms, employing various means to do so: mass media, products, powerful narrative techniques, and even bodily demonstrations of the positive changes (becoming more muscular, thinner) which the encounter with God has instigated in the believer, frequently tapping into existing class discourses (Harding 2000, 37).¹ The body of work that does target written testimonies (if not online) has generally focused on the representation of doctrinal positions, neglecting the persuasive potency of these texts (see Trammell 2015; England 1954; Erzen 2007).

This focus belies the fact that instructions for testifying are generally more concerned with the “great laws of selling or persuading” than with intricate theological matters, according to Hunter (1983, 81).² Testimonies entice, rather than argue or teach. The Evangelical Press Association’s reminder to avoid ‘Christianese’ in writing for non-Christians (which includes a long list of undesirable “verbal short-cuts”) serves as an example of the push to “communicate effectively” in testimony writing (Evangelical Press Association, n.d.). A written testimony is thus a story which is engineered to take effect quite independent of readers’ cognitive engagement with Evangelical positions. My analysis focuses on this aspect in the *genre* of online written testimony. This article explores how online written testimonies are engineered to persuade their readers that a personal relationship with God is desirable and feasible. How do such texts tell a story that, in its predictability, is expertly structured to pull in the listener? Or more precisely, how does the *formula* structuring online written testimonies serve that aim?

Outside cognition

In order to grasp how the formulaic structure of a testimony supports its aim to present the reader with a relationship with God that seems attainable and fulfilling, it is important to chart the terrain where testimonies do their work. In recent years, ‘affect’ has come to refer to what happens before the cognitive parts of the mind engage, potentially making it a useful term for the persuasive potency of testimonies. In her critique of affect theory, Ruth Leys discusses several definitions of affect (ranging from a “non-intentional, bodily reaction” to “a nonsignifying, nonconscious ‘intensity’”), pointing out that these all “share a single belief: the belief that affect is independent of signification and meaning”, effectively outside of “the mind’s control” (Leys 2011, 437, 441, 443). From this perspective, testimonies would emerge as designed to build up the ‘intensity’ that moves people toward a relationship with God. However, Leys convincingly demonstrates that the concept of affect, in its implied assertion that the body and cognition are wholly separate, falsely privileges bodies and neglects culture (Leys 2011, 468–469). The experiments on which affect theory is based do not satisfactorily prove that mind and body are not always already constitutive of each other (Leys 2011, 470). For this reason, affect is not a satisfactory tool for studying testimonies.

Emotion, however, is such a tool. Historian of emotion Monique Scheer defines emotion as the “meaningful cultural activity of ascribing, interpreting, and constructing an event as a trigger” (Scheer 2012, 206). Emotion is conceived as an *action* or *practice* rather than a reaction or response. This lines up extremely well with Luhrmann’s work, in which believing is the *act* of interpreting, i.e. actively learning to conceive of internal processes as coming from outside. Scheer describes a cyclical “emotion/trigger circuit”—emotion making the trigger meaningful as the event that produced emotion—that is always culturally determined, inseparable from the “social positioning” which Scheer (following Bourdieu) understands as *habitus* (Scheer 2012, 201, 206). Her conception of emotion is thus rooted in an understanding of the body and cognition as constantly, cyclically intertwined and situated within a specific culture. Taking up Scheer’s perspective, Evangelical testimonies emerge as operating in a particular Evangelical ‘emotion/trigger circuit’, in which some sensations and feelings, following Luhrmann, are actively understood as triggered by an external force, i.e. God.

For this analysis, the point is to understand how testimonies move readers into a frame where having a personal relationship with God becomes desirable, without formally educating the readers about the specificities of that frame. Scheer’s understanding of emotion makes it possible to sharpen that question. She emphasizes that, while emotion

only ever becomes available for analysis through material expression, emotion also often needs material objects or events to come into existence in the first place (Scheer 2012, 219). Testimonies on web sites may thus be understood as artefacts in space, arousing certain bodily states in the site visitor.³ In Scheer's view, texts are "main sources" in studying emotion as a cultural activity, not only because they contain "traces of observable action", but also because they offer access to implicit orders that structure and organize culturally specific emotion/trigger circuits (Scheer 2012, 218). This perspective makes it possible to think of online testimonies as starting points, rather than just as being reflective of experience or dogma. I understand online testimonies as objects that offer access to an emotion/trigger circuit by positioning themselves as springboards for emotions that fit in with and affirm the Evangelical framework or emotional circuit.

Method

Scheer claims that a text is "talking about an emotion" in her sense when "language that links the body with the mind" is used (Scheer 2012, 218). Metaphors, in which the experience of emotion becomes a "physical involvement in thought", are examples of this type of language (ibid). Focusing on the possibility of a history of emotion, Scheer advises reading texts for shifts in language use that are likely tied to historical shifts in bodily practice (ibid). Because my interest is neither historical, nor in texts as *representing* emotion, I do not pursue a comparative analysis. Rather, in line with the formulaic nature of testimonies, I opt for a reading that is focused on the principles underpinning texts. If rigid and consistent principles underpin the ways in which the body and the mind are linked in testimonies, the question is how the aim to incite particular emotions in the reader is reflected in these principles.

I rely on Michel Foucault's work on discourse for uncovering these underpinning rules. A Foucauldian approach requires reading to detect patterns of dispersion, rather than underlying meaning, which fits with the focus of this article on the actual testimonies, rather than on the people writing them. Abandoning assumed unities (including the notion of the author-as-person) helps bring the clustering of statements into focus (Foucault 1969, 32, 41). A particular cluster of dispersed statements can then be identified as a discursive formation, constituted and determined by its rules of formation (Foucault 1969, 41, 42). The rules underpinning discursive formations, according to Sara Mills, determine what can be considered "real or worthy of attention, or even as existing" (Mills 1997, 46). If texts do not adhere to these rules, they can be dismissed as nonsensical (Foucault 1969, 41, 42). Applying this perspective to

testimonies means that bodies, in these texts, are linked to mental states in accordance with rules that determine whether the text is meaningful and appropriate as an Evangelical testimony. I identify and interpret these rules in relation to the way they leverage this potential for “making real”, in Mill’s words, to encourage readers to pursue a close relationship with God.

While discourse analysis is useful here, both because it allows for a strict focus on the text itself and because it offers tools for describing the principles underpinning formulaic texts, it can only be productive if the texts being read are indeed considered part of the *genre* of online written testimony in American Evangelicalism. Numerous web sites collect as many testimonies as possible, inviting site visitors to submit their own. While such web sites (examples include “2 Praise God” and “Precious Testimonies”) are interesting in their own right, they are not very suitable as entry points to a discursive formation (2 Praise God, n.d.; Precious Testimonies, n.d.). In the case of such collection-oriented web sites, there is no way to find out which texts are considered ‘real’ or even meaningful as testimonies to Evangelical Christians.⁴ For this reason, I chose a media platform which is in a position of power: the testimonies posted there have been edited and selected in accordance with the ‘rules’ of Evangelical discourse that the platform itself both obeys and enforces. Due to the influential position of the platform, the testimonies published there may well be ‘templates’ for Evangelical online written testimony more generally. That platform is *Christianity Today*.

Corpus

Christianity Today (henceforth CT) is by far the most acclaimed platform in the American Evangelical world. This magazine claims to reach 3.5 million readers every month and explicitly refers to itself as “leading” and as “trusted” by Christian leaders (Christianity Today, n.d.). Although CT started as a magazine, it is very active online, posting articles, questionnaires, op-eds, interviews, and testimonies daily. Most testimonies were initially published in the print magazine, then reformatted and re-titled (e.g. from “Humdrum Hallelujah” to “My Boring Testimony: How I Know it’s Nonetheless Real”) in a way that incites curiosity, thus encouraging clicks. All the testimonies are collected under the web site’s ‘testimony’ tag. For this analysis, I used the ten most recent testimonies as of 20 April 2015 as well as the ten testimonies CT named as the most popular in 2014.

Testimony, in the words of CT’s managing editor Katelyn Beaty, is “one of [our] most popular features” (Hill 2014). To reiterate, testimonies are central to witnessing, that is moving others toward a personal relationship with God. However, as discussed above, they are not persuasive in the way

arguments are. When they are understood as working with emotion, it becomes clear why testimonies are so popular. CT testimonies could serve as examples for readers eager to improve their own testimonies (the wealth of how-to guides online certainly suggests that this demand exists), they could simply have entertainment value or readers might find them spiritually encouraging. Quite independent of the readers' use of testimonies, however, the fact remains that testimonies are designed to offer a key tenet of Evangelical faith—that the relationship with God is real and fulfilling—in the shape of a story that will make readers feel this. Whether readers consider this a welcome affirmation (as the popularity of the feature would suggest) is beyond the scope of this article; it suffices to note that I consider the format of CT testimonies emblematic of the *genre* in its persuasive presentation of a particularly Evangelical emotional circuit.

A cluster of social media icons accompanies every online testimony: Facebook, Twitter, a shortcut for e-mailing, and a button that provides a perma-link to the text, to be “shared with friends” (Wood 2014). The most shared testimonies of 2014 include the conversion of a “leftist lesbian professor”, a Fox News presenter, a former Muslim (“Christ Called Me Off the Minaret”), a professional football player, a Harvard-educated former atheist, and an “armed bank robber” (Champagne Butterfield 2013; Powers 2013; Qureshi 2014; Gray 2014; Monge 2013; Hopwood 2014). The writers' experiences are just as varied as their identities: some writers were already religious—Muslim, Buddhist, Mormon—while others were atheists, like the Harvard-educated woman or ‘the professor’. All the writers' lives benefited hugely from converting, according to their testimonies. Still, quite a few authors report having felt happy before knowing about Jesus: statements like “Islam was my identity, and I loved it” or “my life was happy, meaningful, and full” leave little doubt about this (Qureshi 2014; Powers 2013). In other testimonies, there was a crisis before conversion: a break-up, declining physical health for a sports player or a prison sentence (Gray 2014; Powers 2013; Hopwood 2014). The stories tap into different realms of experience and will thus resonate with different people.

CT is a commercial platform. It seeks to make a profit from its readers, wanting testimonies to be popular and readers to keep clicking, and sharing and actively offering testimonies that are likely to pique people's interest. In fact, many authors seem to have made profitable careers from their uniquely scintillating testimony, with author bylines on CT referring to organizations the authors work for or linking to Amazon pages for the writers' books. Titles include *Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus* (Qureshi 2016) and *The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert* (Champagne Butterfield 2012). The effect is one of consumer-oriented variety: there is a testimony

for every preference and further immersion in the testimonial narrative offered by the author is available through commercial channels.

While the commercialism of CT testimonies should not be discounted, it does not necessarily detract from the religious aim of these testimonies. Profit or popularity is not at all incompatible with a genuine aim to demonstrate the importance of a close relationship with God. Simon Coleman's ethnographic work is helpful here.⁵ Coleman's interlocutors understand the Word of God to have transformative powers: in the 'spiritually healthy person', an encounter with the divine results in empowerment, happiness, and even physical fitness or prosperity (Coleman 2006, 169, 171, 178). Coleman describes an "economy of salvation", in which such happiness and empowerment is externalized (e.g. "His power in me") and then reabsorbed once this externalization has made a positive, noticeable difference in the world (Coleman 2006, 171, 174). Coleman emphasizes the importance given to "measurable" results; effecting noticeable change in the world by, for example, converting someone or bringing someone closer to God, constitutes a person as spiritually "successful" (Coleman 2006, 177, 174, 173). If what one is able to contribute to this "circulation of transformative power" is God's imprint in one's own life—the topic of testimonies—what one is then able to receive, either as material blessing or spiritual bounty, is a natural return on one's investment (Coleman 2006, 181).

Coleman's analysis shows how economic and spiritual ends may converge seamlessly in publishing testimonies. After all, real-world profits or popularity are rendered as the result of religious success, i.e. an effective presentation of God's transformative power. The number of 'likes', clicks, and 'shares' indexes the spiritual efficacy of a testimony. In the light of this, choosing and editing testimonies likely to be spiritually effective in such a way that there will be a quantifiable material measurement of their success only makes sense. CT is more than just a gatekeeper, selecting testimonies that are 'properly' Evangelical, because the platform does seek economic success (as do the authors, given the Amazon links), but any such profit is inseparable from the religious purpose of the stories. The testimonies used here have all been measurably 'successful' in this way, with their popularity linked to their spiritual potency from the outset. Discourse analysis makes it possible to describe how the rules underpinning the *genre* of the testimony, by prescribing how body and mind are to be linked in the text, anticipate its religious aim to offer readers a particular emotional experience.

Mind and body

Lyle Dorsett describes converting after feeling the 'presence' of God in his car, blessing him and loving him "in spite of his wretchedness", namely his

alcoholism (Dorsett 2014). God’s direct intervention in Dorsett’s life did not come out of nowhere, however:

[O]ne of my favorite students spent money he couldn’t afford to buy me a copy of G. K. Chesterton’s *Orthodoxy*, then challenged me to read C. S. Lewis’s *Mere Christianity*. Simultaneously, my car radio malfunctioned and stuck on a gospel station. I kept the radio on because I needed noise. Gradually the programs began to warm my soul. (Dorsett 2014)

Dorsett was already engaging with Christian points of view before his eventual “liberating encounter” with Jesus. He encountered Christian ideas prior to experiencing Jesus actually being in the car with him. In Dorsett’s case, his wife and his students were responsible for his familiarity with Christian concepts. For Jordan Monge, Harvard-educated skeptic, it was her friend Joseph; for lesbian professor Rosaria Champagne Butterfield, it was a pastor called Ken; for football player Derwin Gray, it was his team mate Steve, and so on (Monge 2013; Champagne Butterfield 2013; Gray 2014). In all testimonies, intellectual familiarity with Evangelical viewpoints precedes the bodily experience of the encounter with God or Jesus.

In Alexander Chu’s terms, “Before I could place faith in Jesus, I needed to know there was a rational basis for Christianity’s foundational truths” (Chu 2014). Similarly, Monge researched Christianity extensively prior to realizing that “the only reasonable course of action was to believe” (Monge 2013). Nabeel Qureshi followed the same trajectory, concluding after three years of studying that “the case for Christianity was strong” (Qureshi 2014). This intellectual acceptance does not always take shape as a scientific process: sometimes, merely coming across God everywhere, because he is mentioned “at playgroup, in the grocery store, on the street”, is enough to put Him firmly in one’s mind (DeRusha 2014). Being “intellectually convinced of the existence of God”, in Scott Carney’s words, is not all there is to building a personal relationship, but it is an absolutely necessary step (Carney 2014). Whatever their methods, all the authors engage mentally with Christianity before any bodily experiences come about. The first discursive rule structuring the emotional circuit thus is: *the mind has always been engaged first; an encounter with God or Jesus can only occur after the individual acknowledges their existence in the intellectual realm.*

Yet, as Kirsten Powers writes, despite being impressed with “the weight of evidence”, she “didn’t feel any connection to God” (Powers 2013). She is certainly not alone in this: several testimonies describe how authors struggled truly to connect to God, in spite of knowing of His existence. An example of this can be found in Casey Cease’s testimony:

So I resolved to read through the New Testament of a student Bible that my mother had given me. I began reading about Jesus every night. [...] The more I tried to be a Christian, the emptier I felt. The more I tried to figure faith out, the more confused I became. There were many times that I wanted to wash my hands of [sic] the whole thing, but there was a gnawing in my heart drawing me back to the Jesus I was reading about. (Cease 2013)

Christine Scheller, too, states that, after learning about Christianity, she “grew seriously anxious about my eternal security. It got so bad that I couldn’t read the Bible without applying every negative verse to myself.” (Scheller 2015) Megan Hill, who was raised as an Evangelical, shared this doubt and fear: “With no outward markers of coming to Christ, I questioned whether I had at all.” (Hill 2014) Understanding, “figuring faith out”, is not enough to feel secure in the relationship with God. Something more is needed. Cease’s use of body parts indicates the realm in which the connection might be felt: an ‘empty’ feeling, a ‘gnawing’, wanting to ‘wash off’ the whole endeavor, yet feeling *pulled* in a particular direction.⁶ His unrest is decidedly physical.

The settling of this unrest—the encounter with Jesus or God—is a similarly bodily event. Here, too, the body parts or physical sensations mentioned vary. Champagne Butterfield writes that “the voice of God sang a sanguine love song [...] I drank, tentatively at first, then passionately, of the solace of the Holy Spirit” (Champagne Butterfield 2013). Her experience is described in terms of hearing, but also as a fluid, a quenching of thirst. This is not unusual. James Bell, for example, speaks of “a fountain of living waters” rising from deep inside (Bell 2015) and Claire Diaz-Ortiz claims that God “flooded” her life (Diaz-Ortiz 2014). Hearing God is also common (Qureshi 2014; Dorsett 2014; Chu 2014; Carney 2014). Others discuss their experiences in terms of visions, with the world “looking entirely different, like a veil had been lifted off”, “gaining total clarity” after being “blind”, feeling as if they “could see for the first time” (Powers 2013; Carney 2014; Gray 2014). Even when the encounter with God does not go beyond distinctly feeling “a presence”, it is immediately clear that it is real. As Powers writes: “I tried to write off the experience as misfiring synapses, but I couldn’t shake it. [...] It felt like an invasion.” (Powers 2013) The realness of the experience is inseparable from its physicality: if knowing about God intellectually is necessary but not sufficient for true belief, experiencing God as a tangible reality seals the deal in testimonies. The second discursive rule thus emerges as follows: *the mind is never enough; the believer has to experience God in a bodily manner.*

Fulfillment and the heart

Personally knowing God or Jesus is described in terms of incredible satisfaction. This is closely tied to the state of mind writers report being

in before the experience. As mentioned above, many authors lived happy, fulfilling lives before knowing about Christ. Once they acknowledged God's existence intellectually, however, a period of misery set in. This period is often expressed in terms of profound emptiness and hopelessness, for example, "empty and lost and alone", having to "fill the void", feeling "alone in the cosmos", "stripped of everything I thought gave me meaning" (Cease 2013; Dorsett 2014; Bell 2015; Gray 2014). Once the depicted mental awareness of God has been completed with an encounter described in bodily terms, this emptiness dissipates.

Sometimes this is almost literal, for example, when Wilder (2013) describes how her "appetite for God grew exponentially. [...] I devour his Work and find him there." Her hunger is satisfied in her encounter with Jesus. Carney overwhelmingly relates his experience of Jesus to "healing", letting the "wound" close (Carney 2014). The satisfaction authors recount is often phrased in terms of peace—"a peace overtook me as I gazed at the sky" after calling to God or finally recovering a childhood "glow of warmth and peace"—and of being "whole" again, with Jesus being credited for "creating an unexpected and beautiful pattern out of a broken life" or "making broken people brand new" (Chu 2014; Bell 2015; Zacharias 2013; Cease 2013). While metaphors vary, feeling fulfilled and complete after encountering God is ubiquitous across the testimonies. This fulfillment is as physical as it is mental: mind and body align in this state. The body no longer confirms the mind's previous ideas and desires and the mind no longer runs 'ahead' of the body in believing. They come together in reaching the goal. This alignment is what makes the experience so profoundly satisfactory and peaceful. The underlying discursive rule here reads: *in an encounter with God, mind and body become inseparable, which is an incredibly fulfilling experience.*

In the light of this rule, Monge's reflection on the difficulties she had in getting her "head" and her "heart" to align during conversion acquires new significance. She writes:

I'd been waiting for my head and my heart to be in agreement. By the end of the church retreat, they weren't completely in sync. Many days they still aren't. But I realized that the unity could come later. If my heart had agreed at one point, and my head agreed now, then my heart would follow. I couldn't let a malfunctioning heart delay the logical course of action [...]. (Monge 2013)

At first sight, it would make sense to interpret 'head' to refer to the mind and 'heart' to the body. However, it becomes clear that the heart is more than a *pars pro toto*—one body part representing the whole. Monge laments her difficulty in holding on to the 'unity' of head and heart that belief requires. In her encounter with God, she experienced the satisfaction of head and heart being 'completely in sync'. Even though she *has* felt God bringing her body and mind together, she does not feel it all the time. The

solution to this malfunctioning is not, however, to repeat the conversion. Rather, the solution is to trust that mind and body are aligned *even when it feels like they are not*. Trust and the heart are used interchangeably in the CT testimonies. For Diaz-Ortiz (2014), trust was God’s immediate requirement—“all the power of God’s presence entered my heart, telling me to trust”—while Ravi Zacharias (2013) scorns his initial “half-hearted” and thus meaningless commitment to belief.

It is no coincidence that Cease felt a ‘gnawing in his heart’ when he doubted God (Cease 2013) or that Champagne Butterfield, who lived a “sinful” life for a long time, refers to her “former life” as lurking “in the edges of my heart, shiny and still like a knife” (Champagne Butterfield 2013). For Carney, struggling with grief about his mother’s death, God healed a “numbed” heart that was “unable to feel anything” (Carney 2014), while Qureshi describes God “bending my heart toward him” despite his initial resistance (Qureshi 2014). Chu states that his Buddhist upbringing was “not in my heart”, while God’s “indwelling” there has only become deeper with time (Chu 2014). The heart is not a physical part in these examples, but rather a site of contact: this is the space where God enters, the room He demands, and ‘old lives’ may hide in the corner, but can no longer take center stage. That is trust—having faith that the heart really is God’s, without having to experience Him bodily in every moment of doubt or fear. The heart embodies the link between mind and body: if a personal relationship with God can be felt when mind and body merge, the heart is the site at which they come together. The final discursive rule thus reads: *the heart becomes God’s terrain in an encounter with Him; this is the site where mind and body are trusted to be one.*

Invitation

A discursive analysis of the CT testimonies has shown four rules which prescribe how body and mind are to be linked in the text:

- (1) the mind has always been engaged first: an encounter with God or Jesus can only occur after the individual acknowledges their existence in the intellectual realm.
- (2) The mind is never enough: the believer has to experience God in a bodily manner.
- (3) In an encounter with God, mind and body become inseparable; this is an incredibly fulfilling experience.
- (4) The heart becomes God’s terrain in an encounter with him; this is the site where mind and body are trusted to be one.

These discursive rules structure the emotional circuit—the merging of mind and body—presented in the texts. The next step is to read these

rules in relation to the way they are designed to affect the reader. The aim of testimonies is, after all, to move readers into a frame where a close relationship with God is important, desirable, and feasible.

Rule 1 and 2 set up a feedback loop: the mental knowledge of God does not mean anything without the body and a bodily experience does not occur to people that do not have some mental image of God. Once the reader has come across the testimony, there is some mental knowledge of God and rule 1 and 2 immediately apply. As explained above, mental engagement does not equal being intellectually convinced so much as it equals awareness of Evangelical viewpoints. The moment a person reads the testimony, s/he has acknowledged the notion that God may exist in the intellectual realm, even if s/he is not convinced of the Evangelical God's existence in any way. There is no way to read a testimony while one remains outside the loop. Rule 1 and 2 make it possible for the reader to perceive mind and body as mutually constitutive, continually striving for unification *at the level of the story*. That is, the emotional experience (of longing for body and mind to be one) is contained within the experience of reading. The reader can locate him/herself in the loop—at rule 1, that is—without having to do anything to close the loop except continue reading. An engagement for which only reading along is required involves little effort and is accessible, but is an engagement nonetheless.

Rule 3 provides closure to rule 1 and 2: the circle is closed as mind and body become one. The authors' struggle to unite mind and body is the central structuring principle of the testimony. Rule 3 is the arrival, the fulfillment of the story. It would be too simple to say that this trajectory holds up an example to the reader, who has after all been 'inserted' into the loop which rule 1 and 2 set up. Examples function by using analogy, which implies a conscious employment of cognitive processes, such as 'The author is like me and I should therefore do as the author does'. Testimonies do not demand such interpretative work. Instead, insertion into the feedback loop firmly locates the reader in an Evangelical frame. This makes the idea of fulfillment, the story reaching its apex, very attractive *in reading*. It is the proper resolution of the struggle, the only way the story can fulfill its promise. Avoiding simple analogies, testimonies allow readers to experience desire and have it satisfied within the experience of reading. As Luhrmann's work shows, maintaining a personal relationship with God in the real world, outside the story, takes considerable effort. Therefore, believers may also find such predictably and easily satiated desire quite pleasurable.

Only when rule 4 comes into play do testimonies demand more from their readers. The 'heart' is given to God in faith, trusting that body and mind are one, even when they are not felt to be. Reading a testimony to

completion means going along with the notion that such a space, which is both internal, pertaining to the author's individual mind and body, and external, inhabited and owned by an external force, exists. The abstract concept of a heart that is being bent, entered into by a God who can 'gnaw' to be let in, is definitely not part of the vernacular of a non-believing reader. Even for CT readers, envisioning the heart as a simultaneously physical and spiritual entity would require imagination. Reading on in spite of this unfamiliarity is a deliberate act that requires trust.

If being Evangelical equals understanding your emotions in a particular way (cf. Luhrmann), testimonies impress this Evangelical framework for emotion upon readers not by explaining it, but by offering it *as an experience*. Reading a testimony demands faith—the suspension of disbelief toward the unfamiliar or difficult-to-imagine. Authors describe bearing uncertainty (are body and mind really still one, i.e. is God still close to me even when I do not feel Him?) by assuming that this unity exists outside their selves, in the heart that has become 'God's terrain'. Readers bear their unfamiliarity by experiencing that it is through faith, through trust, that the difficult-to-imagine becomes real and accessible. Faith, here, is reading on in spite of the foreign or abstract. This act has become imaginable according to rule 1 and 2, when the set-up becomes visible, and desirable according to rule 3, when the story fulfills its promise.⁷ In the process of reading a testimony to the end, the hard-to-imagine parts of the story turn out to be part of a cohesive and complete framework. All readers can experience the fulfillment yielded by deliberate trust that everything will make sense in the end. In effect, reading testimonies amounts to *practising* the pursuit of a similar deliberate trust—the unknown as ultimately fulfilling rather than upsetting—in understanding one's own emotions. As the story arrives at its logical and complete conclusion, every testimony allows its readers to experience a bit of how gratifying such trust can be.

Conclusion

This study set out to answer the question of how online written testimonies impress upon the reader that a personal relationship with God is both feasible and highly desirable. By answering this question, this article contributes to the larger question of how people are persuaded to adopt an Evangelical frame, in which internal feelings and sensations are skillfully interpreted as having originated externally. The online written testimony is an under-studied *genre* that is deeply structured by this overarching aim. I argue that testimonies do not *teach* their readers; rather, they rely on emotion to motivate them. Due to the highly formulaic nature of testimonies, and in line with a focus on the texts themselves rather than the people writing or reading them, I pursued

a discourse analysis. I examined testimonies posted on *Christianity Today*, which function as templates for online written testimonies more generally.

A close examination of the discursive rules underpinning the Evangelical emotional circuit as presented in these texts brings to light that testimonies offer readers something like a microcosm. The structure of the stories sets readers up to go through the same movements as the author, from intellectual acquaintance to desiring fulfillment to achieving that fulfillment, but strictly at the level of the story. In order to read the text from start to finish, however, the reader must make an active choice to read on in spite of difficult-to-imagine story elements. As authors describe handing over their hearts to God, the stories reach their apex: a personal relationship with God gains roots. The reader, able to answer the question the story poses, brings about this culmination by willingly imagining and accepting that the ‘heart’ can be given to God, in the trust that mind and body are forever united there—a proposition that follows logically from the storyline structuring the testimony, but makes little sense outside an Evangelical worldview.

The way emotion in testimony is structured awakens feelings that have a strong and particular meaning in Evangelical frameworks. The power of testimonies exceeds a crude ‘monkey see, monkey do’ mechanism, as analogy is not recognized or applied cognitively. Reading is the unfolding of a story. Testimonies incite longing for fulfillment through their structure. Then, to satisfy this desire, they require the trust that such fulfillment *will* come, even though this stands to happen in a sphere that is foreign or difficult to imagine. Reading such stories amounts to something of a dry run or a practice round. Success—reading the testimony to the end by *believing* in the wholly ‘other’ as the keystone that will close the loop and fulfill the promise of the story—is motivating: faith yields results. By offering practice as well as achievement, testimonies powerfully impress on readers that it is both feasible and gratifying to pursue a real-life relationship in which a part of one’s own story has to be consistently believed to belong to a wholly other God.

Notes

1. On narrative and witnessing, see also Molina Roa 2009; Ingram 1989; Long 2004. On testimony and (mass) media or products, see Wright 1989; Hendershot 2010. On bodily demonstrations, see Gerber 2009; Mazer 1994.
2. I will not make explicit the comparison between testimonial discourse and ‘selling’ discourses, although the overlap is very interesting (see also Peck 1993).
3. For a careful consideration of the congruity between spaces and bodily intensities, see Reckwitz 2012.
4. While some web sites do sort the testimonies submitted to them—“Precious Testimonies” boasts topics ranging from “Trapped in the Occult” to “Caught up in

Porn/Sexual Lust”—and seem to edit these texts, they generally do not differentiate between testimonies or designate some as ‘proper’ and others as un-testimony-like or strange.

5. While Coleman’s fieldwork took place among prosperity Christians, he asserts that his analysis holds up for (conservative) Evangelicalism more generally, turning to the history of Protestantism to excavate similar lines of thinking.
6. Of course, the hand-washing metaphor has specific biblical connotations. The expression is not so much associated with actual hand-washing as with Pontius Pilate’s abandonment of Jesus. That works well for the situation Cease describes and his use of the expression immediately conjures up a particular physical unrest: moving from emptiness to the hands, far from the center of the body, back to the chest, in which something is moving, while simultaneously being ‘drawn’ toward something (by an outside presence), and so on.
7. For this study, I read dozens of testimonies. While I do not think I came any closer to being a believer (let alone to developing a personal relationship with God), I did find that it is almost impossible to begin reading a testimony and not finish it. No matter how much they all resemble each other, testimonies immediately set up a loop that must be closed, so that I found reading them to completion, in order to let the story unfold the way it is meant to unfold, strangely satisfying. The design of testimonial texts invites and sustains such prolonged engagement.

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