Parasocial mourning and political ritual: the case of Charlie Kirk

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This paper examines parasocial mourning, mediated intimacy, and the emotional repertoires that shaped the public response to Charlie Kirk's 2025 assassination. Drawing on news coverage, social media posts, and public statements, the analysis shows how grief, anger, fear, and hope were expressed and circulated in ways that made the loss feel both personal and political. The paper clarifies how mediated intimacy, symbolic elevation, and forms of collective expression took shape in the aftermath, and distinguishes these dynamics from esthetic elements rooted in evangelical culture. It also highlights how practices of remembrance, shared symbolism, and boundary enforcement sometimes resembled secular religious forms without implying theological equivalence. The paper concludes by outlining the implications of parasocial politics for democratic practice and platform-mediated political engagement.

KEYWORDS

affective publics, assassination, digital rituals, mediated intimacy, parasocial politics, political mourning, secular religion, symbolic elevation

1 Introduction

Parasocial politics has become a defining feature of the digital platform era (Cohen and Holbert, 2021; Zenor, 2014). Political leaders and influencers cultivate one-sided bonds that make followers feel personally connected to them, even when interaction is mediated and asymmetrical (Dibble et al., 2016; Horton and Wohl, 1956). These ties are not incidental: they shape loyalty, identity, and mobilization. While Barack Obama's 2008 campaign demonstrated the potential of social media to personalize politics (Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez, 2011), and Donald Trump's 2016 campaign demonstrated how sustained media exposure and social media presence could translate into a highly personalized political following (Gabriel et al., 2018), the recent case of Charlie Kirk illustrates the emotional depth and ritual character of parasocial politics in stark relief. Scholars note that parasociality extends beyond living figures into mourning practices, as audiences grieve mediated companions in ways that mirror personal loss (Bingaman, 2022; DeGroot and Leith, 2018; Sanderson and Cheong, 2010).

This paper asks how parasocial intimacy, mediated emotional repertoires, and ritualized collective responses become visible in the political aftermath of a sudden crisis. The analysis offers an illustrative account of how existing theories of parasocial attachment, affective publics, and political symbolism help make sense of the Kirk case. The central argument is that the mediated routines and emotional responses surrounding Kirk's death illustrate patterns that resemble secular religious forms without collapsing politics into religion.

Kirk, founder of Turning Point United States and a prominent conservative podcaster (McCann, 2025; Mondschein, 2025), cultivated millions of followers through a blend of campus tours, daily podcasts, viral social media clips, and books (e.g., Kirk, 2020; Kirk and Hamachek, 2016). When he was assassinated during an event in Utah in September 2025, the reaction was immediate and intense (Moore, 2025). Supporters held candlelight vigils, his widow vowed to continue the movement he built, and those who mocked his death faced swift censure (The Associated Press, 2025). The aftermath resembled the mourning of a prophet or

martyr more than that of a conventional activist (Sottile, 2025). These responses illustrate how parasocial attachments extend beyond private sentiment, shaping collective rituals, institutional practices, and political discourse.

This paper uses the case of Charlie Kirk to explore how parasocial intimacy, mediated routines, and emotional repertoires combine to produce political communities that function like secular religions. The analysis focuses on how Kirk's persona created bonds of loyalty, how emotions such as grief and anger fueled mobilization after his death, and how rituals and symbols sustained the community. By doing so, it illuminates both the promise and the peril of parasocial politics for democratic practice. The scale of subsequent rituals, from candlelight vigils to a stadium memorial and even congressional recognition, illustrates how parasocial mourning can quickly expand into national performance.

Before turning to the empirical material, the following section clarifies how key terms are used in this analysis and outlines their conceptual boundaries.

1.1 Key concepts: Parasocial communities, authenticity, Sacralization, and secular religion

For clarity, this paper draws several concepts in a bounded and descriptive sense. "Parasocial communities" refers to loosely organized publics whose sense of belonging emerges from shared attachment to a mediated figure. Well-known examples include celebrity fandoms such as those surrounding Taylor Swift (Maxwell et al., 2025; Zafina and Sinha, 2024). In politics, these parasocial communities resemble what Hills (2002) calls fan cultures but operate within an explicitly political frame.

"Authenticity" is treated as a perceived quality produced through mediated style, repetition, and emotional alignment rather than as an intrinsic personal trait (Enli, 2015; Marwick and Boyd, 2011). In parasocial settings, authenticity is co-constructed by audiences and platforms and sustained through narrative consistency and affective resonance.

"Sacralization" is used descriptively to denote processes through which certain figures, symbols, or acts become treated as emotionally elevated, morally protected, or symbolically untouchable, without implying formal religious doctrine (Gentile, 1996, 2005).

"Secular religion" refers to patterned collective practices—ritualized expression, symbolic veneration, boundary enforcement, and narratives of sacrifice—that mirror religious forms while remaining grounded in political, not theological, commitments (Bellah, 1967). The paper does not claim equivalence between political practice and religion; rather, it illustrates how these patterns can appear under conditions of intense mediated intimacy and collective emotion.

With these clarifications in place, the analysis proceeds by outlining the sources used and the interpretive approach taken in this commentary.

1.2 Methodological note

This commentary adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach in which publicly available materials inform a conceptual–theoretical

discussion of the Kirk case. The analysis draws on national and local news reports, televised statements, livestreamed memorial events, employer and political reactions documented in mainstream outlets, and widely circulated social media posts from platforms such as LinkedIn, YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok.

Materials were selected for their relevance to the immediate aftermath of the assassination (September–October 2025), understood as their visibility, frequency of circulation, and prominence in public discussion, and read through an exploratory, interpretive lens. Identification was iterative, informed by close following of the case as it unfolded in media and online discourse.

Because the analysis relies on mediated accounts rather than interviews or ethnographic fieldwork, it does not make claims about individual motivations. Instead, the materials are used to illustrate broader symbolic patterns, emotional repertoires, and framing dynamics that emerged during the crisis. These choices frame the conceptual analysis that follows, beginning with an overview of parasociality in political communication.

2 Parasociality and political mobilization

Understanding the response to Kirk's death requires situating it within the broader dynamics of parasocial interaction and mediated intimacy in contemporary politics. The concept of parasocial interaction was introduced by Horton and Wohl (1956) to describe the illusion of intimacy that audiences form with media figures. Subsequent research showed that parasocial bonds provide psychological benefits such as companionship, guidance, and identity reinforcement (Giles, 2002; Klimmt et al., 2006). Over time, the framework has been extended beyond entertainment to domains such as sports (Frederick et al., 2014), religion (Auter and Lane, 1999), and politics (Gabriel et al., 2018).

2.1 Historical development of Parasocial politics

In political life, parasociality helps explain why citizens often experience leaders and commentators as trusted companions rather than distant officials. Politicians who master broadcast or digital media create familiarity and consistency that sustain these attachments. Early examples highlight how parasocial dynamics have shaped recent U. S. campaigns. Barack Obama's 2008 campaign used social media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube to create a sense of personal connection with voters (Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez, 2011).

Donald Trump's 2016 campaign drew on his established media persona and frequent social media presence, enabling many supporters to experience him as a familiar and trusted figure (Gabriel et al., 2018). More recently, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez has used Instagram livestreams to foster a conversational style of engagement with followers (Ceccobelli and Colombo, 2025; Tanwar et al., 2024), while Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's campaigns have leveraged WhatsApp networks to maintain direct-seeming ties with supporters (Neyazi and Schroeder, 2021; Schroeder et al., 2024). Together, these cases illustrate how political figures across contexts employ digital media to cultivate mediated intimacy, regardless of ideology.

Scholars have long noted that appeals to mediated intimacy sit within broader shifts toward personalized and emotionalized political communication (Jasper, 1998; Snow and Benford, 1988). These frameworks help explain why parasocial figures become focal points for meaning-making, particularly during crisis moments.

The personalized style associated with parasociality also aligns with theories of charismatic authority, where trust and credibility rest on perceived personal qualities rather than institutional roles (Weber, 1947). While Kirk was not a traditional charismatic leader, his repeated presence across mediated environments resembled mediated charisma, produced through visibility, authenticity cues, and narrative consistency (Abidin, 2018; Marwick and Boyd, 2011).

2.2 Platform affordances and mediated intimacy

Parasocial politics is intensified by the affordances of social media (Bucher and Helmond, 2018). Unlike one-way broadcast media, social media platforms create the impression of interactivity (Baym, 2015). Followers can reply to tweets, comment on livestreams, or direct-message influencers, producing a sense of reciprocal exchange even when ignored. Podcasts deepen this illusion: listeners often spend hours with the same voice, cultivating a bond that feels like friendship (Berry, 2016). This illusion of intimacy lowers skepticism and enhances trust (Rubin and Perse, 1987). When applied to political communication, the result is a form of authority grounded not in institutions or policy expertise but in perceived authenticity and emotional resonance.

The mobilizing potential of parasocial politics rests in its ability to channel emotion. Digital publics are also affective publics (Papacharissi, 2015): they are organized around shared feelings as much as around issues. Parasocial figures act as emotional anchors, giving shape to grief, anger, fear, or hope. These emotions, once circulated through networks, bind individuals into communities of sentiment that can act collectively. Importantly, parasocial attachment personalizes these emotions: followers experience them as loyalty to a trusted companion rather than abstract adherence to a cause.

3 Charlie Kirk's persona and platforms

Charlie Kirk's visibility grew within a media environment shaped by algorithmic amplification and multi-platform presence (Bucher and Helmond, 2018; Huszár et al., 2022). His rise drew not on electoral office but on his ability to operate across long-form commentary, viral short-form video, and large in-person events. Independent reporting routinely positioned him as one of the most prominent conservative youth figures, with Turning Point United States conferences drawing thousands and his podcast, livestreams, and social media clips reaching large audiences (Herman, 2024; Kobley et al., 2025).

3.1 Multi-platform visibility and audience reach

Kirk's communicative style relied on clarity, repetition, and the performance of ideological certainty — characteristics that lend themselves to parasocial attachment (Giles, 2002; Horton and Wohl, 1956). His podcast format created repeated encounters in which he framed political events, offered guidance, and articulated grievances in a personalized tone. Research on podcast intimacy shows that extended, voice-dominant formats often strengthen perceived closeness, accessibility, and relational investment among listeners (Berry, 2016; De García Torres et al., 2025; Madsen and Slåtten, 2025). Accordingly, while the intensity of these attachments varied, the structure of the media environment made such interpretations plausible for many followers. These observations do not assume uniform experience among followers but describe features of a media environment conducive to selective identification.

Short-form content circulated on TikTok, X, Instagram, and YouTube further intensified recognizability. Clips featuring confrontations, emphatic monologs, or emotionally charged statements traveled widely, aligning with platform dynamics that reward immediacy and affect (Huszár et al., 2022; Milli et al., 2025; Papacharissi, 2015). Scholars of digital fandom have argued that cross-platform repetition can strengthen identification by presenting figures as stable reference points in otherwise fluid information environments (Baym, 2015; Booth, 2010; Papacharissi, 2015). Kirk's omnipresence across modalities created such a patterned presence.

3.2 Ritualized events and movement identity formation

Turning Point United States conferences added a large-scale ritual dimension. These events, which often blended political messaging with elements familiar from American evangelical youth culture—music, testimonials, moral narratives—were livestreamed, extending participation beyond physical attendees (Herman, 2024). Scholarship on political religion and populist movements notes that emotionally charged live events can function as ritualized gatherings that reinforce collective identity and belonging (Durkheim, 1912/1965; Gentile, 1996; Moffitt, 2016). Although these dynamics do not prove parasocial relationships, they illustrate the conditions that make parasocial interpretations of public figures more likely.

Taken together, these practices reflect not a singular mechanism but a media ecology in which repeated exposure, affective narration, and symbolic performance create opportunities for mediated intimacy. This context helps explain why the emotional responses to Kirk's assassination appeared personal as well as political. These dynamics reflect a mediated construction of reality (Couldry and Hepp, 2018), in which repeated exposure, symbolic cues, and platform logics coalesce to create socially meaningful figures. In Kirk's case, the layering of long-form commentary, short-form clips, and live events exemplified how contemporary influencers become nodal points in wider interpretive communities.

These dynamics also help contextualize the reactions that followed his death, in which long-standing mediated routines shaped how supporters interpreted the loss.

4 Emotions as Engines of Mobilization

Parasocial politics does not operate primarily through rational persuasion. In this case, mediated intimacy appeared to shape how emotions were expressed and shared, offering an illustration of how affect can align with political identity and collective interpretation.

Emotions featured prominently in the public response to Kirk's assassination, and the available material illustrates how they were expressed, circulated, and linked to collective meaning. In affective publics, political communication often relies on shared feelings rather than argument alone, shaping how events are interpreted and how communities form around those interpretations (Ahmed, 2004; Lünenborg, 2019; Papacharissi, 2015). In this case, grief, anger, fear, and hope appeared as recurring emotional themes in media interviews, vigils, statements from political figures, and online posts.

The emotional dynamics observed here also resonate with political psychology-oriented research showing that emotions such as anger, fear, and hope function as interpretive lenses that guide how citizens recognize threats, evaluate opponents, and orient toward collective futures (Ahmed, 2004; Cottam et al., 2022; Marcus et al., 2000). These emotions do not arise in a vacuum but circulate through shared symbolic environments.

4.1 Grief and the personalization of public loss

Grief was expressed in personal terms. Many supporters described Kirk's death as the loss of someone who had accompanied them in daily routines, a pattern consistent with scholarship on parasocial grieving, where mediated figures are experienced as emotionally present (Bingaman, 2022; DeGroot and Leith, 2018; Eyal and Cohen, 2006). Rather than demonstrating a mechanism, these responses illustrate how parasocial intimacy can function as a framework for interpreting public tragedy as personally meaningful.

4.2 Anger and the reaffirmation of boundaries

Anger surfaced in commentary that situated the assassination within broader narratives of political hostility (Holmes, 2025; Tanfani et al., 2025). Psychological research suggests that anger in political contexts often intensifies pre-existing adversarial distinctions rather than creating new ones (Cottam et al., 2022; Marcus et al., 2000). The Kirk case aligns with this pattern: anger was mapped onto already polarized divides, reinforcing boundaries in ways typical of affective political environments.

4.3 Fear and the perception of vulnerability

Fear appeared as heightened vigilance. Politicians canceled events, activists increased security, and some supporters expressed concern about future risks (Lalljee, 2025). Such reactions are common in movements that experience sudden acts of violence; they illustrate how collective emotion shapes interpretations of vulnerability rather than establishing causality.

4.4 Hope and narrative renewal

Hope was articulated through calls for continuity and renewal, especially in speeches by Turning Point United States and Kirk's

widow (Crisnel, 2025; King, 2025). In the context of political mourning, hope functions as a narrative device that projects meaning onto loss, allowing communities to reorient toward the future (Davies, 2017; Pool, 2021; Sanderson and Cheong, 2010).

Together, these emotional expressions do not provide causal evidence but show how parasocial intimacy, mediated routines, and political narratives intersect in moments of upheaval. They illustrate how emotions circulate through media systems and become shared resources for collective interpretation. In the material examined here, grief was articulated as personalized loss; anger was expressed in ways that clarified perceived adversaries; fear appeared as heightened vigilance; and hope was framed as endurance and future commitment. Each emotion was mediated through Kirk's persona, anchoring the community in affective solidarity (Papacharissi, 2015).

4.5 Emotional repertoires summarized

Emotional expressions often become part of a movement's framing activity (Snow and Benford, 1988), supplying shorthand cues through which supporters interpret unfolding events. Table 1 summarizes how the emotions articulated in the public response to Kirk's death appeared within these broader repertoires, without implying sequentiality or causal hierarchy.

To clarify how emotions structured the response to Kirk's assassination, Table 1 synthesizes the patterns discussed in the preceding subsections. It is intended as an interpretive overview rather than a sequential or causal model of emotional response.

Grief, anger, fear, and hope were not only personal reactions but also collective forces, each shaping how followers, institutions, and opponents interpreted the event and acted upon it. The patterns summarized below should be read as interpretive tendencies rather than fixed stages, illustrating how different emotions became publicly articulated in the aftermath.

These emotional expressions set the stage for understanding how rituals, symbols, and interpretive frameworks acquired intensified meaning in the aftermath.

5 Parasocial politics as secular religion

The aftermath of Kirk's assassination illustrated patterns that resembled secular religious forms, understood here not as doctrinal structures but as repeated symbolic practices and emotionally charged collective responses. This interpretation aligns with a long line of scholarship on civil religion (Bellah, 1967), political religion (Gentile, 2005), and the sacralization of political symbols (Gorski, 2017; Kertzer, 1988). These frameworks stress that secular collectives often draw on ritual, symbolism, and moral elevation when processing crisis or loss, even outside institutional religion.

Classic work in sociology of religion argues that intense shared emotion, especially in moments of mourning, can elevate individuals or symbols to special moral status (Durkheim, 1912/1965). Similar dynamics have been documented in earlier cases of parasocial mourning, most notably the public response to the death of Princess

TABLE 1 Emotional repertoires of parasocial politics.

Emotion	Trigger in Kirk's case	Political function	Ritual/Symbolic form
Grief	Assassination framed as personal loss of a mentor/friend	Consolidates solidarity; sacralizes the figure as martyr	Candlelight vigils, memorial hashtags, online testimonies
Anger	Narratives of enemy responsibility ("radical left")	Clarifies adversaries; legitimizes counter-mobilization	Outrage posts, denunciations, punitive boundary enforcement
Fear	Sense of vulnerability and political violence	Reinforces loyalty to community and leaders	Event cancelations, heightened vigilance, defensive rhetoric
Hope	Vows to continue "the movement" and public act of forgiveness at the Glendale memorial	Transforms despair into determination; sustains future orientation	Widow's speeches, legacy framing, rededication rituals

Diana, where mediated intimacy fostered widespread emotional identification and collective ritual (Kear and Steinberg, 1999; Walter, 1999). Scholars of political religion similarly observe that political movements sometimes adopt ritual forms during crises, creating moments of heightened solidarity and symbolic elevation (Gentile, 1996; Kertzer, 1988).

5.1 Ritual intensification in the aftermath

The stadium memorial in Glendale serves as a prominent example. It combined musical performances, emotional testimony, patriotic iconography, and political speech (Gambino, 2025; Kobley et al., 2025). Such gatherings echo ritual intensification (Kertzer, 1988), which are moments when political communities mobilize symbolic repertoires to reaffirm shared identity. While elements of the event reflect the evangelical culture prevalent among many attendees, the focus on a political figure whose authority was grounded in mediated visibility demonstrates how religious and political symbolisms can overlap without becoming interchangeable.

5.2 Symbols, icons, and boundary policing

Symbolic repetition also played a role. These symbolic practices do not imply that followers understood them in explicitly religious terms; rather, they illustrate how political meaning-making can draw on familiar ritual-like forms. Followers reshared past clips, adopted memorial hashtags, and circulated branded images. Media theorists argue that media rituals operate by transforming ordinary representational acts into meaningful communal performances (Couldry, 2003) and icons condense meaning and serve as focal points for collective identity (Couldry and Hepp, 2018). In this case, political memes and video fragments functioned as affective anchors that facilitated communal expression, even if they were not religious icons in a strict sense.

Boundary enforcement further illustrated how sacralization can emerge in political contexts. Individuals who mocked or criticized Kirk's death faced public denunciations, workplace consequences, and calls for accountability (Bauder, 2025; Cerullo, 2025; Metzger, 2025). Though these reactions did not rely explicitly on sacred language, their intensity suggests that Kirk's symbolic status had been elevated in ways that made perceived disrespect morally transgressive. Scholars of

political religion note that such boundary policing often signals the construction of sacred figures in secular domains (Gentile, 1996, 2005).

These dynamics echo the activation of "sacred values," where perceived violations trigger moral outrage disproportionate to the original act (Haidt, 2012). In political contexts, such reactions often signal the emergence of sacralized authority, where loyalty becomes morally coded (Gentile, 1996, 2005).

Taken together, these dynamics do not demonstrate that the movement became a religion. Rather, they illustrate how rituals, symbols, and prohibitions may arise in political communities when intense emotion meets mediated intimacy. The Kirk case shows how sacralization can appear within populist or personality-centered movements, particularly when sudden loss galvanizes collective attention.

These observations raise an important interpretive issue concerning the sources of these ritualized forms.

5.3 Evangelical culture and political Sacralization

Scholars of American religion note that evangelical styles of expression—testimony, musical worship, emotive storytelling—can migrate into political spaces without transforming those spaces into religion (Brint and Schroedel, 2009; Steensland and Wright, 2014). Distinguishing cultural religiosity from political sacralization, therefore, clarifies what is inherited and what emerges anew in the Kirk case.

A key distinction in interpreting the Kirk case concerns the difference between pre-existing evangelical cultural practices and the political sacralization that emerged after his death. Turning Point United States events long incorporated elements familiar within American evangelical spaces—music, testimony-like speeches, and moralized narratives. These reflect the cultural backgrounds of many participants rather than political religion in a strict sense. The aftermath of the assassination, however, displayed a different dynamic: elements traditionally associated with religious veneration were directed toward a political figure whose authority rested on mediated intimacy rather than theological office. The stadium memorial, the narrative of sacrifice, and the emotional boundary policing illustrate how political communities can generate quasi-sacred meanings that coexist with, but are not reducible to, evangelical identity. This distinction helps clarify that what appears after Kirk's death is not simply religion carried into politics but a process through which political devotion itself takes on sacralized form.

5.4 Secular religion features summarized

These dynamics can also be mapped onto features that resemble a secular religion. Table 2 synthesizes the themes discussed in the preceding subsections. It highlights recurring symbolic patterns without implying either theological equivalence or a formalized belief system. Rather than asserting causality, it organizes the observable features of the response into an analytic overview to clarify how secular-religious dynamics became visible in the aftermath.

Recognizing parasocial politics as secular religion underscores how deeply affective and symbolic political communities can become. It also explains why criticism of figures like Kirk feels sacrilegious to followers, and why their memory outlasts their presence.

The question that follows is how these emotionally charged symbolic practices intersect with democratic norms and institutions, particularly when mourning becomes entwined with political mobilization. The democratic stakes of these dynamics become clearer when examining how parasocial mourning interacts with institutional processes and norms of public discourse.

6 Implications for democratic practice

Kirk's assassination highlights both the mobilizing potential and the democratic risks of parasocial politics. His death showed how parasocial bonds anchor communities, sustain collective action, and reconstitute themselves even in the face of loss. Yet these same dynamics raise questions about accountability, pluralism, and institutional resilience. The democratic tensions observed here reflect broader concerns in populism and political sociology, where personalized authority and mediated charisma often challenge institutional checks and norms of deliberation (Eatwell and Goodwin, 2018; Moffitt, 2016).

6.1 Personalization and the Erosion of institutional authority

Parasocial loyalty shifts the basis of political authority from institutions to personalities. Followers place more trust in the influencer they "know" than in journalists, parties, or official processes. This undermines traditional mechanisms of accountability. If a leader's persona is sacralized, criticism becomes taboo, and oversight loses force.

6.2 Sacralization, polarization, and free speech constraints

Parasocial politics also intensifies polarization. When grief and reverence take religious form, opponents are easily cast as enemies or heretics. The aftermath of Kirk's death saw not only mourning but punitive responses to those who mocked him (Alsharif, 2025). Such boundary enforcement strengthens group cohesion but narrows the space for dissent and dialog.

These dynamics also entered formal institutions. The U. S. House passed a resolution honoring Kirk, with bipartisan but contested support (McCaskill, 2025). Critics argued that the language risked politicizing the tragedy. Meanwhile, prosecutors charged 22-year-old Tyler James Robinson with aggravated murder, seeking the death penalty. The pursuit of capital punishment risked reinforcing martyrdom narratives, intertwining the legal process with the symbolic elevation of Kirk's death. The juxtaposition of sacralization through ritual and institutionalization through law highlights how parasocial politics can both energize civic solidarity and strain democratic pluralism. The House resolution honoring Kirk (McCaskill, 2025) exemplified how parasocial mourning can be codified into state politics, embedding emotional loyalty into legislative practice.

The suspension of *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* and Vance's call to target workers who mocked Kirk demonstrate how parasocial grief and outrage can translate into punitive campaigns with chilling effects on democratic discourse (Bauder, 2025; Holmes, 2025).

6.3 Platform dynamics and democratic fragility

Platform architecture amplifies these tendencies. Algorithms reward content that provokes emotion, ensuring that grief, anger, and outrage circulate widely (Huszár et al., 2022; Milli et al., 2025). Kirk's omnipresence across podcasts, clips, and events exemplifies how influencers embed themselves in daily life. After his death, his content continued to recirculate, turning mourning into ongoing engagement. Platforms thus function as liturgical infrastructure, sustaining ritual repetition that reinforces loyalty.

Finally, parasocial politics complicates democratic resilience. On the one hand, it draws citizens into politics with passion and commitment, potentially countering apathy. On the other, it risks turning politics into devotion, where loyalty replaces deliberation. In this mode, democratic

TABLE 2 Secular religion features in the Kirk/MAGA case.

Religious feature	Political equivalent in parasocial politics	Illustrative example
Prophet/Pastor	Influencer as guide and interpreter	Kirk's youth-pastor style mentorship in podcasts
Martyrdom	Death sacralized as sacrifice for cause	Kirk's assassination framed as ultimate devotion
Ritual/Liturgy	Repeated mediated practices	Daily podcast listening, Turning Point events, vigils
Symbols/Icons	Political memes, logos, hashtags	MAGA hats, Kirk clips, Turning Point branding
Boundary enforcement	Policing dissent as blasphemy	Firings and backlash against mocking comments
Salvation/Renewal	Promise of future victory or redemption	Widow's vow to continue "the movement"; Erika Kirk's succession as CEO of Turning Point USA; her public forgiveness at Glendale memorial; congressional resolution honoring Kirk

disagreement is reframed as betrayal, and institutions are seen as obstacles rather than safeguards. The challenge, suggested by this case, is how the emotional energy surrounding parasocial politics might be directed toward inclusive democratic practices rather than toward forms of devotion that narrow the space for disagreement.

7 Conclusion

Kirk's case illustrates the durability of parasocial politics. The aftermath has already produced institutional outcomes: Erika Kirk's succession as leader of Turning Point United States ensured organizational continuity, while congressional resolutions and stadium-sized vigils codified her husband's symbolic role. Even in death, Kirk's presence persisted through rituals, symbols, and collective memory.

The response also embodied a striking tension. Figures such as JD Vance encouraged sanctioning dissent, while Erika Kirk emphasized forgiveness, publicly extending it even to her husband's alleged killer during the Glendale memorial. Her leadership and her act of forgiveness modeled renewal, offering a counterpoint to punitive campaigns that cast dissent as sacrilege. These divergent responses highlight how parasocial mourning can be mobilized in opposite directions—toward exclusion and discipline on the one hand, and toward reconciliation and renewal on the other.

Future crises may reveal whether forgiveness or discipline becomes the dominant frame for parasocial politics in American life. Recognizing parasocial politics as a form of secular religion allows us to see both its mobilizing power and its dangers. The challenge is to channel these energies toward inclusive democratic practices rather than sacralized devotion.

The Kirk case thus offers a point of comparison for future studies of mediated mourning and political sacralization, resonating with work on media events and rituals (Couldry, 2003; Dayan and Katz, 1992), civil religion (Bellah, 1967), and the emotional dynamics of collective action (Jasper, 1998; Papacharissi, 2015, 2016). As an illustrative case grounded in mediated accounts, the analysis invites further comparative and empirical work on how parasocial mourning shapes political meaning-making across contexts.

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