

Attacks on Religious
Minorities in America

By Steven Waldman

Repairing Democracy
for Black Lives

By Andrew Wilkes

Zelensky is a Jewish
Hero. Some Jews Worry
the Acclaim Won't Last.

By Jane Eisner

Religion & Politics

Fit For Polite Company

ISSUE 02

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SPECIAL ISSUE
2018-2022

Religion & Politics is an online news journal, dedicated to the two topics thought unfit for polite company. It is a project of the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics at Washington University in St. Louis.



John C. Danforth Center on
RELIGION AND POLITICS

 Washington University in St. Louis

EDITOR'S NOTE

Marie Griffith
Editor

WELCOME TO THE SECOND anthology of *Religion & Politics*, covering years six through ten of our journal's publication!

The role of religion in U.S. politics has continued to be robust and contentious during that time, as this selection of articles shows. Between 2018-2022, we saw countless mass shootings, including many that occurred in churches, mosques, and synagogues; these were often followed by calls for an armed laity, on the one hand, and demands for greater gun control (and gun-free worship spaces) on the other. We witnessed white evangelical support for Donald Trump remain steady, and we watched as he fulfilled the hopes of many by appointing three new Justices to the Supreme Court who would become crucial ballasts in the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*. The clergy abuse crisis in the Catholic church continued to grow, and similar scandals emerged in numerous Protestant settings as well, most notably the Southern Baptist Convention. The Covid-19 pandemic wreaked havoc in all our lives, and fights erupted over whether to hold in-person services in religious spaces. The siege on the U.S. Capitol was driven by people whose brandishing of religious symbols astounded many other people of faith. And religious responses to the growing Black Lives Matter movement ranged from strong clergy support for mass social justice protests to white nationalist condemnations of so-called Critical Race Theory.

Celebrating Ten Years of R&P

As we have in years past, our journal staff sought experts from academia and journalism to write thoughtfully about these and other issues of religious and political import. Our ongoing commitment to tackling these issues directly so as to educate both our students and the broader public is a key part of the mission of the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics at Washington University in St. Louis, where the journal has its home and vision. We continue to believe that religion and politics are topics "fit for polite company," as our tagline makes clear, and we aim to shed light on as many angles of those subjects as we can.

I am deeply thankful to the journal's longstanding managing editor, Tiffany Stanley, for her extraordinary work and dedication to the excellence of our publication. This journal would not exist in anything like its current form without her fine-tuned instincts for good topics and her superb editorial skills. I am also grateful to the Center's assistant director, Debra Kennard, for widely disseminating our weekly pieces and, still more, for masterminding both our first and second anthologies. Sincere thanks also to our hard-working student interns, our many advisors, my faculty colleagues at the Center who have written so thoughtfully for the journal, and all of our readers who inspire us to continue this work.

The following pages contain a sampling of some of the best pieces we have published since January 2018. We hope they will continue to educate and encourage readers of all kinds to grapple with our nation's past and present and inspire them to work for a better future. Visit us online at religionandpolitics.org and enjoy this collection!

MASTHEAD

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CONTENTS

ISSUE 02
2023

2018

The NRA’s Assault on Christian Faith and Practice

By Charles Marsh PG 4

Evangelicals of Color in the Trump Era

By Melani McAlister PG 10

Ahmadi Muslims Have an Overlooked American Legacy

By Aysha Khan PG 17

The Politicization of the Catholic Clergy Abuse Crisis

By John Gehring PG 22

2019

THE WOMANIST THEOLOGY OF KATIE GENEVA CANNON LIVES ON

By Angela D. Sims PG 28

DAANGEROUS LOGIC AT THE BORDER

By Elizabeth Shakman Hurd PG 33

THE RISE OF #EXVANGELICAL

By Bradley Onishi PG 38

ATTACKS ON RELIGIOUS MINORITIES IN AMERICA

By Steven Waldman PG 42

Cover illustration by Armando Veve

2020

RELIGIOUS RESPONSES TO THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

By Sarah Ngu PG 46

THE PROPHETIC WITNESS OF THE CHRISTIANITY TODAY EDITORIAL

By Richard Mouw PG 53

REPAIRING DEMOCRACY FOR BLACK LIVES

By Andrew Wilkes PG 56

AMY CONEY BARRETT AND THE CHRISTIAN LEGAL MOVEMENT

By Daniel Bennett PG 60

WHITE EVANGELICALS AND THE NEW AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM OF DONALD TRUMP

By Abram Van Engen PG 64

JUSTICE GINSBURG ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

By Ronit Y. Stahl PG 68

WILL CATHOLIC VOTERS DECIDE THE ELECTION?

By Elena Trueba PG 74

2021

Scholars of Religion and Politics Respond to the Capitol Insurrection

By The Editors PG 78

Amanda Gorman’s “City on a Hill”

By Nichole Renée Phillips PG 86

Social Media and Orthodox Jewish Women’s Rights

By Avital Chizhik-Goldschmidt PG 90

The Eugenics Roots of Evangelical Family Values

By Audrey Clare Farley PG 95

The 20-Year Media Spectacle of Saving Afghan Women

By Tazeen M. Ali PG 100

2022

Zelensky Is a Jewish Hero. Some Jews Worry the Acclaim Won’t Last.

By Jane Eisner PG 104

American Christians “Backing the Blue”: On Faith and Policing

By Aaron Griffith PG 108

Religion & Politics

The NRA's Assault on Christian Faith and Practice

By Charles Marsh

Published on
January 3, 2018

LAW
MEDIA
MONEY

The call to an armed laity puts the evangelical gun loyalist in an exceedingly awkward relation to the teachings of Jesus.

ON MONDAY, NOVEMBER 6, ROBERT JEFFRESS, the senior minister of First Baptist Dallas, told the hosts of “Fox and Friends” that a mass shooting such as the one that had taken place the day before in Sutherland Springs, Texas, would not likely happen on the premises of his 130 million-dollar church campus downtown. “I’d say a quarter to a half of our members are concealed carry, they have guns, and I don’t think there’s anything wrong with that.” Jeffress agreed with co-host Ainsley Earhardt’s remark that carrying guns to church makes you feel safer, and added, “I think if somebody tries that in our church, they may get one shot off or two shots off, but that’s it, and that’s the last thing they’ll ever do in this life.”

Jeffress’s response to the Sutherland Springs massacre comes straight from the gun lobby’s playbook. A week after the mass killing of 20 children and six educators at Sandy Hook Elementary in Newtown, Connecticut, Wayne LaPierre, the executive vice president of the National Rifle Association, declared

DANIEL ACKER/BLOOMBERG VIA GETTY IMAGES



in a nationally televised press statement, “The only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun.” A safer nation lies in the hope of every good guy being armed. All the time. So bring your guns to church.

In the February 2018 issue of *Guns* magazine, a full-page advertisement by Crossbreed Holster reflects the gun industry’s recognition of the new market. A thirty-something man in a tweed jacket and dress jeans holds a little girl’s hand—a blue bow has been neatly tied in her long auburn hair—as the two walk to church. The red-brick sanctuary and its white spire appear in the short distance ahead. At first glance everything about the scene looks normal, until you notice the position of the man’s/father’s free hand. A magnified cutaway highlights the new Crossbreed Supertuck, a handsome hand-crafted holster inside the waistband, which encases a Springfield XD-S handgun. “Proud to be on your side,” a banner reads. The father’s freehand is positioned for a quick retrieval of the weapon. Though there are no signs of visible danger, we know that evil lurks everywhere, evil men with guns. “This is the world we’re living in,” Pastor Jeffress said. And “we need to do everything we can” to protect ourselves, our families, and our churches. Even if it means—as in the Supertuck ad—that carrying our guns to church requires leaving our Bibles behind.

The call to an armed laity is beset with problems. First, there’s the practical. Empirical accounts of active shooting environments present a starkly different picture than the simplistic good guy kills bad guy hypotheticals promulgated by the gun lobby. A recent study at the University of Pennsylvania found that a person who owns a gun is “4.46 times more likely to be shot in an assault.” The sight of a man openly carrying a firearm in public rarely ensures the security that the gun lobby promises. Despite his heroic efforts and NRA training, the armed civilian, who arrived at First Baptist Sutherland Springs after hearing rapid gun shots coming from the church, was not able to prevent a single one of the 26 homicides; and police officers would arrive on the scene moments later. Army veteran Charles Clymer explained in a column for NBC that “the psychological strength required to act quickly and effectively in a mass shooting comes from the kind of monotonous training that over several years builds up muscle memory.” How does

one know whether the guy with a gun is a bad guy shooter or another good guy defender? States with “shall-issue” concealed-carry licensing standards have homicide rates 6.5 percent higher than states with “may-issue” standards. The National Bureau of Economic Research, in a study on the effects of concealed-carry laws on crime, “found that violent crime rates increased with each additional year such a statute was in place, presumably as more people were carrying guns. By 10 years after the adoption of a right-to-carry law, violent crime rates were 13 to 15 percent higher than predicted had such laws not been in place,” according to gun policy researchers writing for *The Washington Post*. The good-guy-with-the-gun thesis is further complicated by the NRA’s successful opposition to any basic training requirements for gun ownership.

Jeffress’s views on guns and gun ownership represent the most widely shared view among white evangelicals. According to 2017 Pew Research Center data analyzed by *Christianity Today*, white evangelicals “are more likely than members of other faith groups or the average citizen to own a gun”; forty-one percent are gun owners, compared to 30 percent of the general population. Sixty-five percent of white evangelicals who own a handgun carry the gun with them in public (compared to 57 percent of all gun owners); white evangelicals are in turn more likely than other gun owners to hold the view that “most places should allow citizens to carry guns.”

Then there are the theological problems. Suffice it to say, the call to an armed laity puts the evangelical gun loyalist in an exceedingly awkward relation to the teachings of Jesus. “Put your sword back in its place,” Jesus tells Peter in the Garden of Gethsemane. “Everyone who uses a sword will be killed by a sword.” This is not to say that the Christian tradition is, or ought to be, uniformly pacifist; still, the religion of Jesus clusters undeniably around the practices of forgiveness, reconciliation, and the preferential option for nonviolence. “Christians, instead of arming themselves with swords, extend their hands in prayer,” wrote one of the fourth-century authors of Christian orthodoxy, Athanasius of Alexandria. An armed church is a church without martyrs.

As a former Southern Baptist with abiding family ties to the conservative evangelical subculture, I have heard gun loyalists describe the experience of holding and carrying a firearm as one

How might members of the body of Christ think more faithfully about guns and gun violence in light of Christian peculiarity and the doctrine of the Kingdom of God?

approximating inward strength, heightened discernment, and qualities often associated with Christian spiritual growth—*guns mark me as a man freed from bondage*. I have also heard gun loyalists speak of the possession of a gun in terms of control over others, a quality often associated with God—*with a gun, I gain power over people who may want to harm me or my family*. Social psychologists speak of “psychic numbing” caused by the trauma of repeated mass shootings and gun violence: But should we also ask of the “spiritual uplift” that comes through trust in the gun? “A gun may be only a thing but it is a thing with a spirit that hungers to be in control,” the Presbyterian minister James Atwood wrote in his helpful book *Gundamentalism and Where It is Taking America*.

Some gun proponents go even further in suggesting what gun ownership provides. Charlton Heston, during his tenure as the NRA president, once said

at a conference: “Sacred stuff resides in that wooden stock and blued steel.”

Or consider the extraordinary declaration by J. Warren Cassidy, former executive vice president of the NRA, in a 2001 interview with *Time* magazine. “You would get a far better understanding if you approached us as if you were approaching one of the great religions of the world.” This bold religious claim should scare the hell out of every believer who blithely presumes that allegiance to the gun fits neatly with Christian faith and practice.

Speaking on the issue of gun control in the context of evangelical social ethics, Russell D. Moore, president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, has tried to strike a measured tone. Moore has emerged in the national spotlight as an irenic and generous fundamentalist, a Never-Trump conservative who speaks eloquently of the Kingdom of God as an antidote to Christian Reconstructionism and the theocratic aspirations of the Rushdoony movement. “To embrace the kingdom of Jesus, we must embrace an entirely new set of principles that guide our thoughts,” says Moore, standing in the good company of such Baptist visionaries as Martin Luther King Jr., Clarence Jordan, Lottie Moon, and Walter Rauschenbusch in reclaiming the doctrine of the Kingdom as the theological framework of the church’s mission in the world. (As far as I can tell, Moore never mentions Clarence Jordan, even though no Southern Baptist has served the Kingdom of God more faithfully, vividly, and sacrificially than this New Testament scholar from Talbotton, Georgia. In 1942, Jordan purchased 440 acres near the town of Americus, and there amidst briars, dusty fields, and withering heat, launched a “demonstration plot for the Kingdom of God”—which at the time meant reading the Bible against the brutalities of Jim Crow.) From a Kingdom perspective, Moore says, thinking about guns, like most challenging social issues, means being informed “by my conscience as a Christian,” “shaped by Scripture and the church.”

It is disappointing then that Moore does not then proceed to examine the gun issue on the basis of Scripture and the church. For Moore has all the skills to build bridges between conservatives and gun safety organizations such as the Brady Campaign (founded by Reagan Republicans), Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America (formed

by mothers in the wake of the Newtown school massacre), or the Coalition to Stop Gun Violence (created in 1974 as a non-profit ministry of the United Methodist Church). Instead he calls gun control proponents “misguided” and proposals for new gun regulations “naïve and ineffective.” He criticizes even those who argue that the question about Christians and gun violence should be framed as a pro-life issue. (See for example, James Mumford’s “What’s Pro-Life About an AR-15?” in *The American Conservative*.) Moore thinks that the question involves “a very different conversation” than one shaped by applications of the seamless garment of life. Debates about gun safety and violence should not be formulated as “gospel arguments,” he says, but as “prudential arguments about whether gun control works and what the Constitution guarantees,” as he writes in his book, *Onward: Engaging the Culture without Losing the Gospel*. Bereft of theological analysis, however, Moore’s position remains aligned with the NRA and the gun-loyalists of his denomination.

Whether you’re Republican, Democrat, or independent, whether you think the NRA is democracy’s best friend, a necessary evil in a mean world, or “the Darth Vader of special-interest groups,” casting light on Christian peculiarity in the context of public policy—on Christianity’s distinctive truth claims and attendant social practices—is a necessary task.

How might members of the body of Christ think more faithfully about guns and gun violence in light of Christian peculiarity and the doctrine of the Kingdom of God?

Healing thoughts and prayers are an altogether fitting response to any tragedy. Christians ask God to comfort the victim’s families and loved ones, for perseverance in suffering and for safer communities; but “thoughts and prayers” alone are not what the Lord requires. And evangelicals, it should be noted, are well equipped to do more than pray. In recent decades, evangelicals have prayed and studied and mounted campaigns to break the cycles of injustice—especially in such areas as sex trafficking, global poverty, and AIDS in Africa—employing legal advocacy, public policy, and political organizing. A 2004 statement issued by the National Association of Evangelicals, entitled “For the Health of the Nation: An Evangelical Call to Civic Responsibility,” challenged “our leaders to change the patterns of

trade that harm the poor and to make the reduction of global poverty a central concern of American foreign policy.” It is often forgotten that Habitat for Humanity grew out of Clarence Jordan’s experiment in New Testament community known as Koinonia Farm. Such robust engagement in the social order has not gone unnoticed by many outside observers. In an often-cited essay, *The New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof chided his fellow liberals for failing to appreciate the breadth of the evangelical movement and the work it “quietly does on issues ranging from prison reform to human trafficking to fighting poverty.”

Evil cannot be completely eradicated; gun violence cannot be reduced to zero. The world is fallen; all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Yet there are reasonable measures that would decrease the number of gun deaths and mass shootings: universal background checks, limits on the size of magazines, closing the private sale and gun show loopholes, and empowering federal agencies and the CDC to share critical information and compile data on gun violence in public health are all sensible measures that save lives.

On issues related to gun violence, safety, and regulation, evangelicals clearly need, and deserve, a more theologically robust discussion. A good start might be formulating questions for reflection and study, such as: Are there aspects of American gun culture that contradict or confuse the message of the Gospel? (If so, let’s name them.) Have evangelicals sought to understand gun violence in America under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and with prayerful discernment of practical solutions? How can followers of Jesus preserve the distinctive speech and practices of Christian witness from the religion of the NRA, whose distinctive speech and practices cluster around the promise of overwhelming force? Under what conditions, if any, should the Christian lay down his or her arms? Does the support of the American gun lobby bring glory to God?

My father is a conservative Southern Baptist minister who for 40 years served parishes in Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia. In his theological and social convictions and most other respects, he would be called a Russell Moore evangelical. The one major exception is guns. On this issue, my father’s deep loyalty to the global ecumenical church and his experiences in missions through evangelical


congregations in Europe and Africa have time and again brought him into conversations with people for whom the American gun loyalty remains a stumbling block to faith. Though he is very much a social conservative, my father believes that a Christian’s commitment to the Gospel must chasten the person’s cultural and political preferences—and for this reason, he admires the counter-cultural ecumenism of Baptists like Clarence Jordan and Carlyle Marney.

In a letter written in the spring of 2007 after the mass killing of 33 people at Virginia Tech, my father spoke of the tragic alliance of evangelicals and guns and its effects on Christian conviction. “Church people in the United States are getting their signals from political ideology and the NRA lobbyists,” he said. “There is no rational connection between the 2nd Amendment and stock piling of semiautomatic rifles and ammunition. What should the church’s role be? Teach the people to take seriously the teachings of Jesus. When He talked about refusing to be people of violence, that is what He meant. If I want what is best for my fellow beings, if I really desire to see a society of order, security, and freedom, then I should have no problem in seeing the connection between GUNS FOR ALL and the prevailing tragedies of war and mass killing that follow. The prophets had a vision of the kingdom where swords would be beaten into plows. I hope and I pray, that we in the church will capture that vision.”

Since December of 2012, when a gunman walked into Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, and shot 20 children and six educators, there have been at least 1,500 mass shootings in the United States. A mass shooting is defined most generally as four or more persons shot and/or killed in a single event, at the same general time and location. Every day in the United States, 315 people are shot in murders, assaults, suicides, suicide attempts, unintentional shootings, and police intervention; and every day 93 people die from gun violence. Every year in the United States, nearly 115,000 people in America are shot in murders, assaults, suicides, suicide attempts, unintentional shootings, or by police intervention; and each year more than 33,000 people die from gun violence, 2,600 of whom are children. Among the 22 most high-income countries, the United States accounts for more than 90 percent of all gun deaths of children under the age of 15. Sixty-five percent of all gun deaths are suicides. On

average, 50 women are shot to death each month by intimate partners. Since 1968, more than 1.5 million Americans have died in gun-related incidents; this is a higher death count than Americans killed in all U.S. wars combined. Not to be forgotten are the staggering economic costs of American gun violence: A recent John Hopkins study of 704,000 people admitted to emergency rooms for treatment of firearm-related injuries over a nine-year period found that emergency room and inpatient charges alone accounted for \$2.8 billion each year. This all adds up to a crisis of human life on an epic scale.

It is of course the right of every law-abiding citizen to own a gun and of institutions, including churches, to think diligently about public safety and effective policing practices. Such matters have been heavy on the minds of my colleagues and compatriots in Charlottesville, Virginia, as we’ve tried to understand why our university and town were overrun by gun-wielding white supremacists on August 11 and 12 of last summer, with precious few interventions by university, local, and state police. But it is the responsibility of every person baptized into “the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit” (II Corinthians 13:14) to engage the world with new habits of thought, speech, and behavior. Our reckoning as Christians with the “costs of discipleship” may not lead to the judgment that an armed church or gun ownership is behavior displeasing to God. But it must disrupt the easy alliance that currently prevails between the NRA and American evangelicals.

What real significance can the Gospel have if its ambassadors so readily gamble with human life? If we become accomplices in the NRA’s assault on the miracle and mystery of Christian conviction? Is it any wonder that amid the violent convulsions of the most heavily armed nation on earth—if not soon the most heavily armed churches—the watching world turns away in disgust? 

CHARLES MARSH teaches in the department of religious studies at the University of Virginia, where he also directs the Project on Lived Theology. He is a member of the National Advisory Board of the Danforth Center on Religion and Politics, which publishes this journal. He is author of seven books, including *Wayward Christian Soldiers: Against the Political Captivity of the Gospel*.

Evangelicals of Color in the Trump Era

By Melani McAlister

Published on
August 7, 2018

BIOETHICS
CIVIL LIBERTIES
CULTURE
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The headlines about “evangelical” support for the president and his agenda mean that evangelicals of color can seem to be an invisible community.

BEFORE THE 2016 ELECTION, Nikki Toyama-Szeto had thought of the term “evangelical” as neutral. “It was about theology,” she told me recently. She had a long history working with evangelical organizations like International Justice Mission and InterVarsity, and as the executive director of Evangelicals for Social Action, she was a well-known speaker and activist in evangelical circles. Her faith had been central to affirming her own racial and gender identities. “For myself, as a person of color, as an evangelical, I would say that I actually discovered my identity as an Asian American woman in the context of my faith,” she told me. “General, secular American society was saying you are invisible, or you can be either a newscaster or you can be the ‘dragon lady.’ It was in the context of my faith that I found out,



‘Oh, God created my gender and my ethnicity to be a gift for me.’”

Then, with the election of Donald Trump and her awareness that white evangelicals had voted for him overwhelmingly, she said, “I became suspicious that we don’t have each other’s back. I thought we did.” She kept thinking of white believers: “If you voted for Trump, then his racism was just not a deal-breaker for you. When push comes to shove, I feel like you threw me under the bus.”

President Trump’s support among white evangelicals remains strikingly strong (with 75 percent voicing their approval in April), but as commentators and the press continue to unpack their dedication to Trump, another set of statistics is getting far less attention: According to Pew Research, almost 25 percent of American evangelicals are not white, and they voted quite differently. (Another poll from PRRI puts the percentages of people of color far higher, saying that 46 percent of U.S. evangelicals are Black, Asian, Latino, or otherwise non-white. The poll’s method was to count as evangelical any person who identifies as Protestant and who answers “yes” when asked if they are evangelical or born again.)

Not surprisingly, but importantly, Trump’s support among evangelicals of color is dramatically lower than among white evangelicals. (Only 7 percent of Black born-again Christians voted for Trump; 31 percent of Latinx and 37 percent of Asian American born-again or evangelical Protestants did.) Yet the headlines about “evangelical” support for the president and his agenda mean that evangelicals of color can seem to be an invisible community—rarely acknowledged by journalists even when they go to the same churches or claim a similar theology. White evangelicals are numerically dominant—although declining—but their opinions disproportionately dominate U.S. media reporting on how theologically conservative Protestants think, vote, and believe.

At one level, the racial difference is eminently predictable. Surely the whiteness of white evangelicals is crucial to understanding their political beliefs and their voting patterns. As Janelle Wong shows in her new book, *Immigrants, Evangelicals, and Politics in an Era of Demographic Change*, although evangelicals of any given race are more conservative than the general population of that race, evangelicals of color overall are far less conservative than

white evangelicals. Indeed, they are less conservative than white people overall.

For Toyama-Szeto, the election results were a kind of violence—an attack on her membership in her religious community. “I mean, you have a name or something for yourself that is an identity, like evangelical. And somebody else actually takes it, and destroys it and changes it. But, really, the tricky thing is that the distortion came from within.”

The very term “evangelical” has become fraught for many people of color, who might never have been that comfortable with the label to begin with. For some time, a crucial reality of evangelical life has been its increasing racial diversity, buoyed by evangelicalism’s growing transnational ties. In the last few decades, U.S. believers have grown more likely to travel on short-term missions, participate in international conferences, or simply watch one of the multiracial and multinational teachers and preachers on Christian television and online. Over the last two years, however, the election of President Trump has created a profound generational, racial, political, and gender divide—one that has shaped U.S. evangelical life so thoroughly that the long-term impact will not likely be known for a generation.

As President Trump and his administration continue racialized policies and rhetoric, the question of how evangelicals of color will identify—how they manage their religious and racial identities—is becoming more fraught. A whole range of issues has divided theologically conservative Protestants of color from white evangelicals, including immigration, refugee resettlement, and Black Lives Matter, as well as differences over the relative priority of abortion or same-sex marriage as key political issues. Many evangelicals of color make clear that the age of Trump has been a time of anxiety, disappointment, and often anger—with the president, and also with the white evangelical community. The day after the 2016 election, Pastor T.D. Jakes, not known for being particularly liberal, described African Americans as “traumatized” by Trump’s election.

That sense of betrayal has remained. Evangelicals of color I spoke to described “wandering” or feeling lost in the evangelical churches in which they have made their lives. As Toyama-Szeto put it: “A lot of folks are saying that ‘If this is what evangelical means, then I’m not that.’ So we are becoming spiritually homeless.”

A whole range of issues has divided theologically conservative Protestants of color from white evangelicals, including immigration, refugee resettlement, and Black Lives Matter.

HERE’S THE STATISTIC THAT everybody knows: 81 percent of white evangelicals voted for Donald Trump in 2016, slightly higher than voted for the Republican nominee in either of the previous four presidential elections. “I think it’s the number, that raw reality. Eighty-one percent is a shocking statistic. It’s an overwhelming number.” This was Jemar Tisby’s observation. Tisby, who is African American, is one of the founders of The Witness: A Black Christian Collective and the author of the forthcoming, *The Color of Compromise: The Truth About the American Church’s Complicity in Racism*.

Before the 2016 election, Tisby was an activist and Ph.D. student, living in a small Arkansas town and studying at the University of Mississippi. He was active in the Reformed movement, trying to increase the visibility and viability of Reformed theology

among African Americans, and also worshipping and participating in a Presbyterian (PCA) church. An intense and soft-spoken father of two, he quickly found himself working on racial issues in the church. In 2014, after Michael Brown was killed in Ferguson, Missouri, and as the Black Lives Matter movement was gaining momentum, Tisby felt that people in the church were willing to talk about racial justice, not just “reconciliation.” It wasn’t easy, because, as Tisby points out and as scholarship has shown, white evangelicals tend to see the world individualistically, to focus on individual behavior rather than on systems and policies. But things were happening; the conversation was moving. Or so he thought.

After the 2016 election, Tisby was stunned. A couple of days later, he spoke on an episode of *Pass the Mic*, the podcast of the Reformed African American Network (now *The Witness*) about how he was feeling. “I really, this Sunday, don’t feel safe worshipping with white people,” he said on the podcast. “I go to a church that is predominantly white and Reformed.” He added that he felt betrayed by the church, even as he remained committed to the universal church and to Christ. In churches he had been a part of, he said, “There are folks who were overtly, outright, boldly Trump supporters who are happy right now. And I cannot emotionally bring myself to be comfortable with that and going in on Sunday morning and singing songs and praying with this group of people who seem so out of touch with my experience in America.”

Later, he told me, “I just couldn’t believe that America had elected this man,” given Trump’s description of Mexicans as rapists, and his questioning of Obama’s citizenship, as well as his involvement with casinos and pornography, his moral failures, and racist ideologies. “I remember thinking, not just as an American citizen but as a person of faith, how devastating it was.”

Another turning point was the “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville last August. The event’s racism and violence—including the death of a counter-protester—were shocking enough, but so was the stunning dismissal by Trump, who said in a press conference that there were “very fine people” on both sides of the protests.

After the rally, Tisby wrote an essay for *The Washington Post* asking, “After Charlottesville, will white pastors finally take racism seriously?” He wondered

PREVIOUS SPREAD: BARBARA DAVIDSON/LOS ANGELES TIMES/GETTY

if white pastors were behaving as Martin Luther King Jr. had described them in a “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” as “more cautious than courageous” in the face of racial injustice. He argued that Charlottesville made clear that it was time—past time—for white pastors and churches to take racism seriously, to acknowledge that racial oppression was a church issue—not (just) a political issue but also an issue of faith. “Black Christians who speak boldly about racism and white supremacy often get muted or silenced,” Tisby wrote. “We can only infer that the sensitivities of white listeners matter more than the pain of Black brothers and sisters.”

Nikki Toyama-Szeto also saw Charlottesville as a turning point. She describes the changing landscape this way: “So, a friend of mine lives in New Mexico. She’s part of the Latinx community that, back in the nineteenth century, found that the border had crossed over them. The family never immigrated to the U.S., but the border moved and suddenly they were in a new country.” Something similar, she says, has begun to happen to white evangelicalism. “I don’t know if they know it, but the border has moved. It used to be that you could do nothing about race as a white evangelical church, or a predominantly white evangelical church, and you would be presumed to be neutral, or benevolently ignorant.” After Charlottesville, though, when there was a notable silence from many prominent white evangelicals, she said, “I don’t know if those folks realized it, but the border at that point moved over them.”

Toyama-Szeto says that the presumption that she and other evangelicals of color bring to the table has changed. They are now more likely to use the language of white supremacy. They no longer assume that silence on the issue of race is something they can overlook. “I don’t know how much the leaders realize the liability of staying silent, because they used to have the luxury to say nothing at all.” That’s simply no longer the case. “Now, if you have no deeds done, then you are suspected of perpetuating a deeply racist system.”

IN EARLY SEPTEMBER 2017, the Trump administration announced that it would phase out the DACA program, which had protected approximately 800,000 undocumented people who had been brought to the U.S. as children. Trump insisted

that some version of immigration reform could protect the so-called DREAMers, but the legislation would also have to fund the border wall that he had long demanded, along with other provisions.

The outrage from many people of color, including evangelicals, was intense and immediate. Gabriel Salguero, founder of the National Latino Evangelical Coalition, said that he and others supported the Dreamers, not only because it was the right thing to do, but because they saw many of them as fellow believers. “These are our brothers and sisters, worshipping in our churches, going to our Sunday schools,” Salguero told NPR. “They’re the playmates of our sons and daughters.”

Salguero has long been outspoken about the need for what he described to *Christianity Today* as a “non-partisan” agenda, one in which Latino

The power of social media to help construct communities is valuable for minorities of many types, but the nastiness found there is unraveling the tenuous sense of multi-racial possibility that existed before the recent election.

evangelicals (and others) focus on an “evangelicalism that does not prioritize pragmatism or winning. Instead, we want to have a faithful public witness.” But Salguero also defines himself as a progressive: He spoke at the Democratic National Convention in 2016 and he was one of the co-chairs of a meeting held at Wheaton College this past April that was designed to provide an alternative voice to the white pro-Trump evangelical leadership. Attendees included A.J. Bernard, the African American pastor who was the only person to resign from Trump’s evangelical advisory council over Charlottesville. According to reports from the meeting, there was something of a divide, with the largely older, white contingent stressing unity and a need to reach beyond partisanship, while the largely younger contingent of people of color were more likely to ask for repentance from white evangelicals. Some, like New York pastor Tim Keller, bemoaned the divisions, the “red evangelicalism” and “blue evangelicalism.” But Salguero said that the meeting made him hopeful: He appreciated the diversity of the group, the willingness to disagree. “As evangelicals, we struggle with a whole host of issues,” he told Religion News Service. “Maybe we can do better together in conversation.”

Over the course of last spring, Trump continued to dangle the possibility of a deal for Dreamers, and even some conservative white evangelicals began to insist on a deal for protecting DACA. The members of the Evangelical Immigration Table, as well as leaders of many of the major evangelical organizations (the National Association of Evangelicals, World Vision, World Relief, etc.), offered recommendations for a path to citizenship for Dreamers.

Then, in May, the Trump administration began enacting its “zero tolerance” policy of separating migrant families at the U.S.-Mexico border. The Evangelical Immigration table issued a letter of protest, asking Trump to reverse the policy. Even Franklin Graham, a staunch Trump defender, said he found the policy “disgraceful.” Attorney General Jeff Sessions quoted Romans 13 to defend the separations, saying that people were to obey the government because God has ordained it. Christians from a broad variety of backgrounds cried foul over Sessions’ mobilization of Scripture that had been used to defend both slavery and apartheid. Salguero was among them, saying that a fuller reading of Scrip-

ture brought one to a different conclusion. “Overwhelmingly Scripture causes us to defend families,” Salguero told *The Washington Post*. “The Bible calls us to be pro-family, and I personally find it deeply lamentable that we are separating children from their parents at the border or anywhere.”

Salguero and other Latinx evangelical leaders often described Latinx voters as “the ultimate swing vote,” saying that neither Democrats nor Republicans should take them for granted. But it is clear that Trump’s aggressively hostile policy toward migrants is making it challenging for someone like Salguero to remain politically ambidextrous. During the Wheaton meeting in April, according to Katelyn Beaty writing for *The New Yorker*, Salguero had denounced (white) evangelicals who were overly focused on civility and safety. “We have to change our tone, yes,” he said. “I submit that silence is a tone that speaks volumes.”

MANY COMMENTATORS HAVE OBSERVED that white evangelicals in particular often justify their support for Trump on the grounds of his potential Supreme Court picks. After Justice Kennedy’s announcement opened up the way for the Trump administration to nominate another conservative, Brett Kavanaugh, for the Court, the white evangelical community seemed suddenly unified.

As Tisby pointed out in a tweet, for some white evangelicals, this pick and the direction of the Supreme Court led to a sense of triumph: “With regard to #politics, many conservative #evangelicals probably feel like they are #winning right now. Ok. Just be aware that many historically marginalized people groups (Black folks, women, non-European immigrants, the poor) don’t feel that way. Interrogate that discrepancy.”

Indeed, even some quite conservative evangelicals of color raised questions about how white evangelicals who had been critical of Trump seemed to be willing to trade anything for a Supreme Court win. Thabiti Anyabwile is pastor of a Southern Baptist church in Washington, D.C., and a member of the Gospel Coalition, a popular blog as well as a network of Reformed evangelical churches founded by New York pastor Tim Keller and theologian D.A. Carson. An outspoken social conservative, Anyabwile has nevertheless been critical of Trump and

Ahmadi Muslims Have an Overlooked American Legacy

By Aysha Khan

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Sectarian divides have often sidelined the contributions of Ahmadi Muslims to American Islam.

of white evangelicalism's embrace of him. In June, he wrote an essay for *The Washington Post* that argued that evangelicals should beware of using *Roe v. Wade* as their political bottom line. Anyabwile argued that, although he is opposed to abortion, evangelicals should still not compromise their opposition to Trump. "I'm for overturning *Roe*," he wrote, "but I'm also for protecting Black and brown lives from racism and the kind of criminalization that swells our prisons and devastates communities or separates families at the borders."

His insistence that the Supreme Court could not be the bottom line was one that specifically positioned abortion and other social issues dear to white evangelicals as part of a package of issues that needed to include challenging the zero-tolerance immigration policy, travel bans, maximum sentences for drug offenses, and other racialized policies. "We are going to give an account to God for our complicit silence before the immoral policies and actions of the Trump administration," Anyabwile wrote.


It's not surprising, perhaps, that Anyabwile was attacked by many people for his essay, both in the article's comments and on Twitter. "This fake Christian pastor does not represent Trump's base or Christians," announced one not-atypical comment on the *Post* site. One person wrote on Twitter: "Your tweet appears to reveal a deep rooted idolatry. If you don't consider the potential of a conservative justice at the helm to protect lives, yes millions of Black lives as well, you have lost your objectivity. It's truly been sad to watch you slide into identity politics."

In fact, it seems that the story of multiracial evangelical politics today cannot be fully understood without at least some appreciation for how social media is changing the conversation. Like many other public figures, leading evangelicals often have large Twitter followings, which can both amplify their voices and lead to a sense of embattlement. Tisby said that Twitter was sometimes just another space where race often made conversations hard. "It's always been a negotiation for Black people in whatever context: higher ed, business, neighborhoods, and especially churches. It's always been a negotiation... That's nothing Black people aren't used to."

But social media brings an intensification of such negotiations: the interactivity and public

access means that strangers can make angry comments, in soundbites, where snarky tones and the questioning of others' motives are ways to get likes and followers. As Tisby pointed out, it allows anyone to question and attack a person's orthodoxy or commitment without having to be accountable themselves. Twenty-first century communication could make multiracial evangelicalism even harder as a lived experience, even as it also makes it possible to create communities in which evangelicals of color might support each other and educate their white fellow believers. The power of social media to help construct communities is valuable for minorities of many types, but the nastiness found there is unraveling the tenuous sense of multiracial possibility that existed before the recent election. This has led to questions about whether being an evangelical of color, especially one committed to multiracial ministry, might mean something like near-permanent dispossession.

In thinking about the disorientation and disappointment of the last two years, Nikki Toyama-Szeto finds a point of comparison with the genocide in Rwanda—not in terms of the levels of violence or suffering, but in terms of the question Rwanda raised for Christians: "How is it that people of such a Christian nation could turn on each other?" With Rwanda, she said, "In my circles, people see that as the failure of an integrated and robust theology—so that [theology] was trumped by tribal affiliation." She's seeing something similar among U.S. evangelicals, with race as a dividing line.

Whether or not evangelicals of color can feel at home in U.S. evangelical life today is unclear. Of course, the global evangelical context will still be multiracial, and the ownership of the term "evangelical" is likely to be increasingly contested. But, for many evangelicals of color, the politics of white supremacy is now the dominant reality associated with a multiracial faith identity that they once comfortably (if not always enthusiastically) claimed. And that trumps everything. 

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LAW
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HANIA MANSOOR DROVE FOR MORE than 10 hours to catch a glimpse of her caliph.

As members of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community in Michigan, the 23-year-old graduate student and her family have spent years listening to the live Friday sermons of His Holiness Mirza Masroor Ahmad and writing letters to him asking for prayers. It wasn't even the first time she had seen the fifth caliph, or khalifa—she's met him in his office in London, where the Ahmadiyya movement's international headquarters are located, and she's seen him during his previous three U.S. trips.

But each encounter with her spiritual leader, she says, feels like the first. "For us, missing a few days of school or work is nothing compared to the chance to meet our beloved khalifa," she said, standing outside of Bait-us-Samad mosque near Baltimore, Maryland. Just hours before, Masroor Ahmad had inaugurated the mosque with a formal opening ceremony before a crowd of around 1,000

of his followers. “God willing, this mosque will prove to be a symbol of peace, radiating nothing but love, compassion, and brotherhood throughout the city and far beyond,” he told guests during his keynote speech at a reception downtown. “We strive for interfaith dialogue. We value and cherish our neighbors.”

Masroor Ahmad’s three-week U.S. tour, which ended November 5, gave him a chance to meet his American followers, particularly African American Ahmadis, new converts, and recently resettled refugees.

The 20,000-strong community of U.S. Ahmadi Muslims is made up largely of immigrants from South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Africa. Americans may know them best as the minority Muslim group that hosts 9/11 blood drives annually and helped restore a Philadelphia-area Jewish graveyard that was vandalized last year, or perhaps as the sect that Oscar-winning actor Mahershala Ali belongs to.

But the reformist, mission-oriented denomination—founded in 1889 in India by Masroor Ahmad’s great-grandfather, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad—actually has much longer history in the United States. They helped lay the groundwork for much of the missionary work and Islamic movements that would later arise in the country, from Sunni Islam to the Nation of Islam. But sectarian divides have meant that Ahmadi missionaries’ contributions to the foundations of Islam in the United States, though increasingly the focus of scholarship by historians, are sidelined by most Muslim advocacy and religious organizations.

Founder Ghulam Ahmad, who in the nineteenth century was a leading defender of Islam in the face of defamation by British Christian missionaries, argued that Islamic scholars—the ulema class—had corrupted the faith. His calls for a revival of Islam through moral reform and non-violence gained him followers, but his claim to prophethood made him an enemy for much of the Muslim mainstream. Sunni and Shia leaders largely recognized his community as heterodox, both then and now.

In 1920, Ghulam Ahmad’s son, the second caliph, sent one of his followers, Mufti Muhammad Sadiq, to become the first Muslim missionary in the United States. When Sadiq arrived in Philadelphia—a few miles from where, last month, Masroor Ahmad inaugurated the city’s first mosque



A missionary of the Ahmadiyya Movement in Islam stands in front of a window at Baitul Hameed Mosque in Chino, California.

IRFAN KHAN/LOS ANGELES TIMES/GETTY

built from the ground up—he was promptly detained because U.S. officials incorrectly assumed the dark-skinned, turbaned Indian man practiced polygamy. While in prison, he noted the racism faced by African Americans. Armed with that knowledge, he was able to successfully contrast what he saw as Christianity’s inherent white male supremacy versus Islam’s universalism and racial and gender egalitarianism. At least fifteen of the prisoners he had been detained with converted.

He became the first Muslim missionary to make an “explicit appeal to blacks based on the

race-neutral ideals of Islam,” Sally Howell, University of Michigan’s director of the Center for Arab American Studies, noted in her dissertation. Sadiq became friendly with black nationalist leader Marcus Garvey, and began preaching to and converting several Garveyites. During his three years in the U.S., he converted at least 700 Americans. (In a Friday sermon at the new Philadelphia mosque, Masroor Ahmad said the community estimates that that number was closer to five or six thousand.) By 1940, Ahmadis had converted some 10,000 Americans. These converts and early American

From its inception until the present day, many mainstream Muslim leaders consider Ahmadis to be outside the fold of Islam.

Ahmadi leaders were largely African American, Brooklyn College English Professor Mustafa Bayoumi noted in an article in the *Journal of Asian American Studies*, though the community comprised black, brown, and white people in cities from the East Coast to the Midwest.

Sadiq also helped orchestrate campaigns to increase awareness about Islam in the West. Ahmadis wrote hundreds of letters to seminaries, universities, government leaders, journals, and newspapers, hoping to spread their message. The first prominent American convert to Islam, New Yorker Muhammad Alexander Russell Webb, began exchanging letters with Ghulam Ahmad, and Webb soon joined Sunni Islam and became a leading

American Muslim spokesperson: At the first Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago, he stood as the only representative for Islam, potentially exposing thousands more Westerners to the faith.

"That's the untold story that historians and scholars are aware of, but is not part of American Muslims' own public memory," said Zareena Grewal, who teaches American and religious studies at Yale University, in an interview.

The influence of the Ahmadiyya movement stretches to Malcolm X. When Malcolm X and his friend Malcolm "Shorty" Jarvis were incarcerated at Norfolk Prison Colony, it was an Ahmadi imam who visited them in prison and taught them both to pray in Arabic. Jarvis later wrote about it in his own memoir. Malcolm X never joined the denomination—he believed music was forbidden in Islam, and he was unimpressed with how many prominent black Ahmadis at the time, like multi-instrumentalist Yusef Lateef, were jazz musicians. Still, the movement's proselytizing efforts had expanded to many urban centers like Boston, where Malcolm X found Islam, and the universalist Ahmadi vision of a multiracial Islam grew with it.

"In America, all Islamic and proto-Islamic development before 1930 was linked to the Ahmadiyya movement," Fatima Fanusie, a historian for the Howard Thurman Historical Home, explained in an interview. "You simply cannot talk about these proto-Islamic groups without talking about the Ahmadi influence."

Even the Moorish Science Temple and, later, the Nation of Islam may have taken inspiration in various forms from the Ahmadiyya. Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam adopted an Ahmadi translation of the Quran that was disparaged by Sunni orthodoxy. Fanusie's dissertation research, one of the most in-depth scholarly examinations of the U.S. Ahmadiyya missionary project, found that Nation of Islam founder Wallace Fard Muhammad may have been affiliated with the Lahori Ahmadiyya branch. The scholar Michael Gomez has also documented evidence that the Moorish Science Temple founder Noble Drew Ali was approached by Ahmadi missionaries in the 1920s, and his organization of racial uplift took on Islamic influences. "The spread of proto-Islamic movements and Islamic teachings in general is just replete with examples like this," Fanusie noted.

Sadiq and his fellow Ahmadi missionaries also found the United States to be fertile ground for proselytizing because locals had no knowledge of the stigma associated with the Ahmadiyya in Muslim-majority nations, especially in South Asia. From its inception until the present day, many mainstream Muslim leaders consider Ahmadis to be outside the fold of Islam. The theological reasons largely stem from a debate over the finality of the prophethood. Orthodox Muslims believe that the Prophet Muhammad was the last sent by God, and that Jesus will descend bodily from the heavens as the promised messiah. He will then join the promised Mahdi, or redeemer of Islam, to bring the world under the fold of Islam.

Ahmadis believe Jesus survived crucifixion and traveled to India, where he continued his ministry and died a natural death. They accept Ghulam Ahmad, their founder, as both the metaphorical second coming of Jesus—the promised messiah—and the Mahdi in one. Since he followed Muhammad as a subordinate prophet, bringing no new law of his own, Ahmadis say their beliefs are consistent with the finality of Muhammad's prophethood.

Non-Ahmadi Muslims, however, see their founder as one of the false prophets Muhammad warned about, and have branded Ahmadis as heretics. In Pakistan, the country with the largest population of Ahmadis, they are legally barred from calling themselves Muslims and are disproportionately affected by the country's harsh blasphemy laws. That political discourse and theological debate has leaked into U.S. understandings of Ahmadis. In Virginia, the Sunni groups Idara Dawat-O-Irshad and the Khatme Nubuwwat Center (which translates to the finality of the prophethood) largely focus on "exposing" the Ahmadi movement as deceptive, fraudulent, and un-Islamic. This month they published an open letter to Masroor Ahmad, asking him to either "join the Muslim Ummah (community)" and admit he leads "a man-made cult and a passing lunacy, unjustly associated with Islam."

These political and theological debates also go on to affect public memory of Islam in America. "In a moment when American Muslims are living with enormous amounts of xenophobia and they want to claim their deep roots in this country, you still are seeing this sectarian selectivity about the kinds of roots they want to claim," Grewal said.


The scholarly discourse in the academy about Islam in America has increasingly focused on the Ahmadi role. "But that's very different from American Muslims' own narratives about their history, which the Ahmadiyya are absolutely erased from constantly," Grewal said. Sadiq is rarely acknowledged as an important predecessor by Sunni scholars, she said, and academics sometimes replicate these Sunni-normative frameworks.

Sociologist Muhacit Bilici's *Finding Mecca in America* tells a post-1965 story of Americanization that almost entirely skips over the Ahmadi influence. An exhibit on Islam in America at a New York museum included a poster on legendary jazz musician Yusuf Lateef, without mentioning that he was openly Ahmadi. And many imams and Islamic scholars typically ignore Sadiq and other early Ahmadis when discussing important early Muslim American figures.

But the deepest omission, scholars told me, is in the dissemination and engagement of scholarship on Ahmadis by Muslim activists and Islamic leaders. "I don't think we can overemphasize the role that the Ahmadiyya played in the development of Islam in America," Fanusie said. "I know this is a sensitive issue for Muslims but I just followed the thread." And there was no mistaking that that thread led directly to Ghulam Ahmad and the community his followers created in the United States, she said.

His Holiness Masroor Ahmad gave a nod to this storied history during his Friday sermon at the new Ahmadiyya mosque in Philadelphia, mentioning by name several of the early local converts. He noted Ghulam Ahmad's response at the time to Sadiq's successes: "If this is the amount of people entering the fold, then within a few decades that figure could reach the hundreds of thousands."

Their community fell far short of that target in the United States. "But now we have the opportunity to make this endeavor with resolve," Masroor Ahmad told his followers.

Almost 100 years after Ahmadiyya Islam arrived on American shores, the community is revving up to reclaim its legacy of missionary zeal. "May this mosque be a milestone in spreading the true message of Islam in this area," he prayed. 

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The Politicization of the Catholic Clergy Abuse Crisis

By John Gehring

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LAW
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The Catholic right is waging a campaign against Pope Francis.

IT HAS BEEN A SEASON OF ANGUISH and rage for Catholics. Sixteen years after *The Boston Globe* uncovered widespread clergy sexual abuse in a city where the church's powerful influence once defined a brand of swaggering American Catholicism, those chilling words—"predators" and "cover-up"—are again back in the headlines. The first explosion went off in early summer. Theodore McCarrick, the former archbishop of Washington and a prominent church leader who traveled the world on social justice missions, was removed from ministry after an investigation found credible allegations that he sexually abused a teenager as a priest. Reports also surfaced that McCarrick, who now holds the ignominious title of the first American to resign from the College of Cardinals, routinely sexually harassed seminarians. Not even two months later, a Pennsylvania grand jury report detailed a horrifying history: More than a thousand children and young people were abused by hundreds of priests in six dioceses across the state over the past seven decades. This staggering scale of



Illustration by Trevor Davis

institutional evil shattered any lingering illusions that the abuse crisis was isolated. The culture of abuse and cover-up is systemic. After consulting with the FBI, the grand jury described the way church officials acted as “a playbook” for concealing the truth. The bombshells didn’t end there.

The latest eruption landed with even more impact, and has sparked perhaps the most bitter round of church infighting in the history of the U.S. Catholic Church. On a Sunday in late August, conservative Catholic media outlets in the United States and Italy released a stunning 11-page letter from the former Vatican ambassador to Washington, Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò. The testimony, as the nuncio described it, made a series of sweeping allegations without documented proof, the most dramatic being that Pope Francis ignored Viganò’s warnings about McCarrick’s behavior. In the late 2000s, he alleges, Pope Benedict XVI had ordered McCarrick to “a life of prayer and penance,” prohibiting him from saying Mass or speaking in public. Francis, the retired nuncio wrote, not only disregarded that supposed order but made McCarrick a “trusted counselor” who helped the pope appoint several progressive-minded bishops in the United States, including Cardinals Blase Cupich in Chicago and Joe Tobin of Newark—both viewed as prominent Francis allies. Most audaciously, Viganò urged Pope Francis to resign “to set a good example for cardinals and bishops who covered up McCarrick’s abuses.”

Pope Francis, addressing reporters during an in-flight press conference after the news broke at the end of his recent visit to Ireland, essentially dismissed the allegations, encouraging journalists to uncover the truth. “I think this statement speaks for itself, and you have the sufficient journalistic capacity to draw conclusions,” he said. Reporters from multiple outlets have already pointed out discrepancies between Viganò’s testimony and the historical record. While the former ambassador claims that Pope Benedict XVI ordered McCarrick to never say Mass and withdraw from public view, reporters quickly produced photographs, videos, and other evidence of the disgraced cardinal presiding at Mass, including in Rome at St. Peter’s Basilica during Benedict’s papacy. McCarrick continued to attend papal functions during Benedict’s tenure, received awards from Catholic institutions, sat on the board of Catholic Relief Services, and

If the Catholic hierarchy is able to emerge from this crisis with any credibility, it will only happen when a patriarchal hierarchy recognizes that nothing less than radical reform is needed.

made dozens of international trips. In a 2012 photograph, Viganò is seen congratulating McCarrick at a gala dinner sponsored by the Pontifical Missions Society in New York. More recently, the former ambassador has backpeddled, telling *LifeSiteNews*, one of the conservative Catholic media outlets that originally released Viganò’s letter, that the alleged sanctions imposed on McCarrick were “private” and that neither he nor Pope Benedict XVI were able to enforce them. The retired pope’s personal secretary, Archbishop Georg Gänswein, told the Italian media outlet ANSA that reports of Benedict confirming some of the accusations in Viganò’s testimony were “fake news, a

lie.” Last week, in a letter obtained by *Catholic News Service*, a top official from the Vatican’s secretary of state office acknowledged receiving allegations about McCarrick’s behavior with seminarians as far back as 2000, during the papacy of John Paul II. A statement released this week from members of the pope’s advisory council of nine cardinals expressed “full solidarity with Pope Francis in the face of what has happened in the last few weeks,” and noted that the Holy See is “formulating possible and necessary clarifications.”

While the daily developments and details of Viganò’s claims should be thoroughly investigated no matter where they lead, there is no way to understand this saga without recognizing how the former ambassador’s claims are part of a coordinated effort to undermine the Francis papacy. The Viganò letter is as much about power politics in the church as it is about rooting out a culture of abuse and cover-up. A small but vocal group of conservative Catholic pundits, priests, and archbishops, including the former archbishop of St. Louis Cardinal Raymond Burke, have led what can be described without hyperbole as a resistance movement against their own Holy Father since his election five years ago. Pope Francis, the insurgents insist, is dangerously steering the church away from traditional orthodoxy on homosexuality, divorce, and family life because of his more inclusive tone toward LGBT people and efforts to find pastoral ways to approach divorced and remarried Catholics. These conservative critics, many of whom essentially labeled progressive Catholics heretics for not showing enough deference to Pope Benedict XVI, are not discreet in their efforts to rebuke Francis. Last year, in a letter to the pope from the former head of the doctrine office at the U.S. bishops’ conference in Washington, Fr. Thomas Weinandy accused the pope of “demeaning” the importance of doctrine, appointing bishops who “scandalize” the faithful, and creating “chronic confusion” in his teachings. “To teach with such an intentional lack of clarity, inevitably risks sinning against the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth,” the priest wrote in remarkably patronizing language more befitting a teacher correcting a student than a priest addressing the successor of Peter.

Viganò’s testimony therefore should not be read in isolation or as an aberration, but as the latest

chapter in an ongoing campaign to weaken the credibility of Pope Francis. Political, cultural, and theological rifts among Catholics are nothing new in the church’s 2,000-year history, but Viganò’s call for the pope’s resignation has set off the ecclesial version of a street fight. “The current divisions among Catholics in the United States have no parallel in my lifetime,” Stephen Schneck, the former director of the Institute for Policy Research and Catholic Studies at Catholic University of America, said in an interview. Bishops who usually take pains to show unity in public have issued dueling statements on Viganò’s letter that reflect this discord. Cardinal Tobin, who was appointed by Francis, sees Viganò’s accusations being used by the pope’s opponents to gain leverage. “I do think it’s about limiting the days of this pope, and short of that, neutering his voice or casting ambiguity around him,” the cardinal told *The New York Times*. Some conservatives in the hierarchy have cheered Viganò. Bishop Joseph Strickland of Tyler, Texas, issued a statement just hours after the letter was made public and ordered priests in his diocese to read his statement during Mass. “As your shepherd, I find them credible,” the bishop wrote in response to Viganò’s allegations.

In part, the letter feels like a manifesto written with all of the standard Catholic right talking points and grievances. This is especially the case when it comes to how the church approaches sexuality. The former nuncio, who consulted with a conservative Italian journalist before releasing the text, writes about “homosexual networks” in the church that “act under the concealment of secrecy and lies with the power of octopus tentacles, and strangle innocent victims and priestly vocations, and are strangling the entire Church.” Viganò laments church leaders “promoting homosexuals into positions of responsibility.” This language and demonization echo the arguments some Catholic conservatives have made for years in an effort to blame the clergy-abuse crisis on gay clergy, and more broadly to challenge the advance of LGBT rights in the secular culture.

Viganò is not a newcomer to these fights. During his time as nuncio in Washington, he broke with ambassadorial norms of carefully avoiding becoming publicly enmeshed in hot-button political disputes by appearing at an anti-gay rally in 2014 organized by the National Organization for Marriage. Speaking at the event outside the

U.S. Capitol, San Francisco Archbishop Salvatore Cordileone said Viganò's participation "signifies the presence and support of Pope Francis." But it was during Pope Francis's 2015 trip to the United States when Viganò really went rogue, working with Liberty Counsel, a conservative legal group, to enlist the pope into American culture wars by hastily arranging a meeting between Francis and Kim Davis, the county clerk in Kentucky who refused to give marriage licenses to same-sex couples. The brief meeting, at the nuncio's residence, blew up into a fiasco that threatened to spoil the pope's successful first visit to the United States. Conservative leaders in the church attempted to frame the meeting as the pope choosing sides in the Davis controversy. Vatican officials immediately denied that and distanced themselves from Viganò's decision to orchestrate the meeting. Instead, the Vatican highlighted a meeting the pope had at the embassy with a gay former student and his partner.

In his letter, Viganò specifically names the Rev. James Martin, a Jesuit priest and prominent editor

at *America* magazine, as an example of how the church's teachings about homosexuality have been derailed under Francis. In his writings, television appearances, and most recently during a speech at the Vatican-sponsored World Meeting of Families, Martin has urged the church and LGBT Catholics to dialogue together. Even though he doesn't call for a change in church teaching on same-sex marriage and has the backing of several American cardinals, the media-savvy priest, who has a wide following on social media, is a bogeyman for a network of Catholic right groups. Last fall, the seminary at Catholic University rescinded a speaking gig for Martin because of the manufactured controversies surrounding the priest. "While the contempt directed at gay clergy is coming from just a handful of cardinals, bishops, and priests, as well as a subset of Catholic commentators, it is as intense as it is dangerous," Martin recently wrote in *America*. Two American bishops, responding to Viganò's letter, give credence to Martin's argument. "It is time to admit that there is a homosexual subculture within the hierarchy of the Catholic Church that is wreaking great devastation in the vineyard of the Lord," Bishop Robert Morlino of Madison, Wisconsin, wrote in a letter to Catholics in his diocese. Cardinal Burke told a conservative Italian newspaper that a "homosexual culture" has "roots inside the church and can be connected to the drama of abuses perpetuated on adolescents and young adults." A detailed study of the causes and context of clergy abuse, led by researchers at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice after the Boston scandals erupted, found no statistical evidence that gay priests were more likely to abuse minors. A witch-hunt mentality toward gay clergy nevertheless persists. Viganò's letter only energizes that ugly tendency.


There is a certain irony that Archbishop Viganò wants to target a supposed "homosexual culture" in the church and claim the mantle of truth and transparency on clergy abuse. His record and credibility on those counts are checkered. Two years ago, when documents were disclosed as part of a criminal investigation of the St. Paul-Minneapolis archdiocese, a memo from a Catholic priest alleged that in 2014 Viganò ordered two auxiliary bishops to end their investigation of then-Archbishop John Nienstedt over his alleged misconduct with adult

men, including seminarians, when he was serving in another diocese. The memo stated that a local law firm's investigation into the allegations found compelling evidence against the archbishop, and that archdiocese officials agreed that Nienstedt should resign. But after Nienstedt allegedly met with Viganò to persuade him those claims were made by critics who disagreed with his vocal opposition to same-sex marriage, the memo said, the nuncio ordered the investigation to end quickly and told the archdiocese to destroy a letter from auxiliary bishops to him objecting to that decision. Viganò has recently denied those charges. Citing his own failure of leadership, Nienstedt voluntarily resigned in 2015 after prosecutors accused the archdiocese of repeatedly ignoring warning signs of an abusive priest. That priest was later defrocked and sent to prison for abusing boys in his parish.

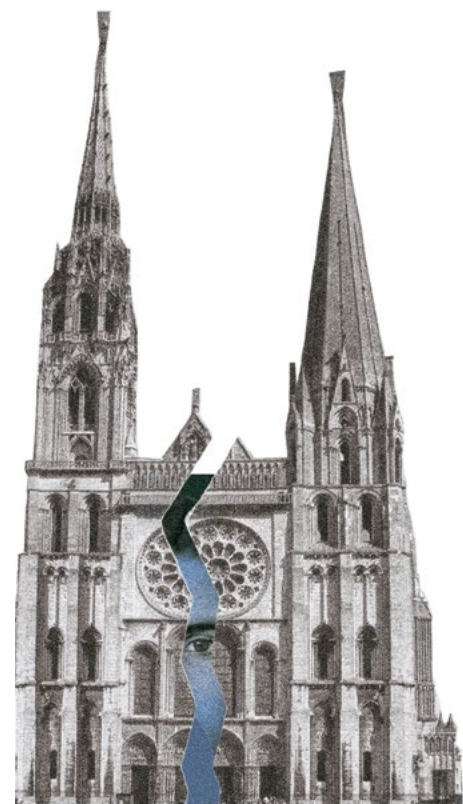
The swirling accusations and counter-responses surrounding the former ambassador's letter highlight the influence of a close-knit, well-funded conservative Catholic network. Viganò's letter was not first reported on by secular news sources or down-the-middle Catholic media. He released the text to the *National Catholic Register* and *LifeSiteNews*, two outlets that have often served as a hub for Catholic commentary critical of the pope's reforms. The *Register's* Rome correspondent, Edward Pentin, is a leading critic of the Francis papacy, and the *Register's* parent company, Eternal Word Television Network (EWTN), mixes traditionalist Catholic programming with conservative political and religious commentators often more aligned with Donald Trump than Pope Francis.

The New York Times reported that before the letter was published, Viganò "shared his plan to speak out" with Timothy Busch, a wealthy Catholic lawyer, donor, and hotel magnate who founded a Napa-based winery where conservative bishops, philanthropists, and the occasional Republican politician meet each summer for prayer and networking. Busch is also on the board of EWTN. "Archbishop Viganò has done us a great service," Busch said in a recent interview with the *Times*. "He decided to come forward because if he didn't, he realized he would be perpetuating a cover-up." Busch should be viewed with skepticism when it comes to this recent interest in holding church leaders accountable for clergy abuse.

His own Napa Institute employed the services of Archbishop Neinstedt even after the archbishop resigned in the wake of clergy abuse scandals in Minneapolis. In a recent email sent to Napa Institute supporters, Busch denied that he was consulted on the letter before publication.

It still remains to be seen how many of the accusations leveled by Archbishop Viganò will stand up under scrutiny. His letter is part and parcel of an anti-Francis movement. Some Catholic networks on the right, which baptize themselves self-appointed watchdogs of orthodoxy and want to undermine the pope and his allies, will continue their campaigns. None of this gives a pass to any church leader, especially Pope Francis, on the sex-abuse crisis. Even Francis's allies acknowledge that while he has spoken out for victims, he has not created systems to hold bishops accountable for enabling a clerical culture where abuse and cover-up flourish. If the Catholic hierarchy is able to emerge from this crisis with any credibility, it will only happen when a patriarchal hierarchy recognizes that nothing less than radical reform is needed. This reality includes making sure that lay people, especially women, are empowered. Kerry Robinson, founding executive director of the Leadership Roundtable, which began after the sexual abuse revelations in Boston, asks the right question. "How compromised is the Church by failing to include women at the highest level of leadership and at the tables of decision making?" she told me. "This is a matter of managerial urgency." Inter-cine fights between Catholic factions that weaponize the abuse crisis to advance agendas might be inevitable in a deeply polarized church, but only deepen the wounds of survivors. The Catholic Church must radically reform a culture where clericalism privileges secrecy and abuse of power. Dismantling that system will require an uncomfortable shift away from an institutional mentality that views clergy and bishops as a special caste. Catholics at the grassroots, on the left and right, will need to lead this revolution together. 

JOHN GEHRING is Catholic program director at *Faith in Public Life*, and former associate director for media relations at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. He is the author of *The Francis Effect*.



The Womanist Theology of Katie Geneva Cannon

By Angela D. Sims

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CIVIL LIBERTIES
CULTURE
EDUCATION
SEXUALITY & GENDER

The progenitor of womanist theological ethics, who died in 2018, was a brilliant scholar and a mentor extraordinaire.

"Each person's life must be defined, nurtured and transformed, wherein the self is actualized, affirming the inward authority which arouses greater meaning and potential with each mystical experience."

— Katie Geneva Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*

IN EVERY GENERATION, a "remnant" of scholars emerges that challenges status quo perspectives. Their critiques of normative constructs serve as models for subsequent scholars who learn how to work not only to eat but also to work in a manner that enables others to eat. The Rev. Dr. Katie Geneva Cannon was indeed such a person. She loved life, loved people, loved laughter, loved food, loved imagining the not yet, loved calling things into existence. The progenitor of womanist theological ethics, Cannon was a brilliant scholar, a mentor extraordinaire who possessed an ability to discern what was most needed, and generous (almost to a fault) in the sharing of her time and resources.

In 2016, she invited me to be one of the seven persons to serve on the design team for the Center for Womanist Leadership, an initiative she founded at Union Presbyterian Seminary. I was excited to witness her joy two years later when hundreds gathered in Richmond, Virginia, in April of 2018, to celebrate and participate in the center's sold-out inaugural conference. It was a weekend that not only highlighted the depth and breadth of womanist scholarship, arts, and com-

munity activism, but also a moment to acknowledge Cannon's commitment to curate spaces that welcome and value the diverse ways in which people contribute to fashioning a world where all have the potential to survive and thrive.

When I received a call two months later to inform me of her leukemia diagnosis and hospitalization, my immediate reaction was that of disbelief followed by a litany of questions. After all, we had dined together and chatted about everything from family to work during the conference. In addition, I had not observed a decrease in her energy as she interacted with almost everyone in attendance. When I received news of her death on August 8 of last year, my immediate response was to stifle a scream as I walked out of a faculty meeting. In that

moment, my feeble attempt to rationalize the magnitude of this loss left me speechless as I realized there would be no more texts, emails, phone calls, or public encounters that began with a simple request, "Dr. C, do you have a minute?"

Born January 3, 1950, in Kannapolis, North Carolina, Cannon became the first Black woman to be ordained in the United Presbyterian Church, a precursor to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). After earning her doctorate at Union Theological Seminary in New York City—the first African American woman to do so—Cannon laid the foundation for womanist ethics in her 1985 essay, "The Emergence of Black Feminist Consciousness." Many Black women in theological disciplines, including Cannon, have gravitated to the use of



Illustration by Palesa Monareng

author Alice Walker's term "womanist" as both a challenge to and a confessional statement for our own work. Womanist, as defined in Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*, contains elements of tradition, community, self, and a critique of white feminist thought and provides a fertile ground for religious reflection and practical application.

Cannon expanded on Walker's term and applied it theologically to "examine the expressive products of oral culture that deal with a perennial quest for liberation, as well as written literature that invites African Americans to recognize 'the distinction between nature in its inevitability and culture in its changeability.'" As she later wrote in the *Introduction to Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community*:

Womanism requires that we stress the urgency of Black women's movement from death to life. In order to do this, we recount in a logical manner the historical consequences of what precedes us. We investigate contestable issues according to official records. In other words, womanist religious scholars insist that individuals look back at race, sex, and class constructions before it is too late and put forth critical analysis in such a way that errors of the past will not be repeated.

Womanist ethics center the experience and worldviews of Black women as primary sources for moral reflection. Recognizing that Black women contend not just with sexism but with racism and classism, Cannon offered a succinct overview of the United States's enterprise of Black human commodification from an era of chattel slavery through the latter twentieth century as a framework in which to discuss Black women's agency and response to racialize gendered patriarchy. As one who self-identified as a Christian ethicist, Cannon affirmed and valued Black women's lived experiences as indispensable to how the Bible is read. Any subsequent interpretation must take seriously the lived reality of Black women and any systems that thwart an ability to be fully human.

Her groundbreaking essay is as relevant now as it was 34 years ago. In a time when a large percentage of white Christian women voted for a presidential candidate whose message advocates misogyny, racism, homophobia, and xenophobia, Cannon's

Womanist ethics center the experience and worldviews of Black women as primary sources for moral reflection.

words remind us that womanist ethics demand deep critique and analysis of systemic evil. As she wrote, "Often compelled to act or to refrain from acting in accordance with the powers and principalities of the external world, Black womanists search the Scriptures to learn how to dispel the threat of death in order to seize the present life." She followed up with her 1988 book *Black Womanist Ethics*, which emphasized the significance of Black women's literary tradition as a repository of Black women's moral wisdom.

Cannon was adamant that as life-affirming moral agents, "we have a responsibility to study the ideological hegemony of the past so that we do not remain doomed to recurring cyclical patterns of hermeneutical distortions in the present." With this assertion as a guide, Cannon designed courses to cultivate intellectual curiosity in students. A perusal of her syllabi highlights the emphasis she placed on the "development of critical awareness of the methods of influential ethical representatives in light of their own moral claims and social practices they mediate; comprehension of methodological pro-



Katie Geneva Cannon at Auraria Campus in Denver, Colorado, in 1989.

THE DENVER POST/GETTY IMAGES

cesses that are pertinent to current controversies and perennial social problems; and development of students' own procedures for ethical discernment and scholarly research."

Known for her pedagogical acumen, over the course of her career, Cannon taught at Harvard Divinity School, Episcopal Divinity School, Temple University; and from 2001 until her death, she served as the Annie Scales Rogers Professor of Christian Social Ethics at Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond. Teaching was a calling, and Cannon's classrooms were living laboratories in which students were encouraged to understand themselves as mutual-learners.

She was the recipient of many academic honors and awards, including the distinguished professor award from Spelman College and the distinguished alumna designation at both Barber-Scotia College and Johnson C. Smith Theological Seminary at the Interdenominational Theological Center. She also served as the Sterling Brown Visiting Professor in Religion and African American Studies at Williams College, the Lilly Distinguished Visiting Professor of Religion at Davidson College, and the Rockefeller Scholar-in-Residence at the Center for the Study of Black Literature and Culture at the University of Pennsylvania.


Cannon authored and edited several books, including *Teaching Preaching: Isaac R. Clark and Black Sacred Rhetoric* and *The Oxford Handbook of African American Theology* (with Anthony B. Pinn). She also edited *Womanist Theological Ethics: A Reader* along with Emilie M. Townes and me. This book grew out of a conversation Cannon convened at Yale Divinity School with several senior womanist scholars. She had invited me, as her then-graduate student, to serve as project editor. Together, we mapped out a concept and framework for the book that could be accessible to a broad spectrum of readers. What the book does not capture is the camaraderie I witnessed as a participant observer as each gathered participant offered constructive feedback to each other in a manner that exemplified womanist embodied mediated knowledge.

When I remember the Rev. Dr. Katie Geneva Cannon, I do so ever mindful to heed her instruction that a "womanist methodology must critically analyze social-cultural conditions and contexts in order to burst asunder the dominant understandings of

A prophetic truth-teller, Cannon took seriously her commitment to honor the contributions of ancestors whose lives and work informed her own sense of vocation to teach.

theodicy and produce new archetypes that release the Afro-Christian mind and spirit from the manacles of patriarchy so that Black women might emerge and discern just what kind of moral agents we really want to be.” For Cannon, this imperative was a daily practice to examine one’s own value system and to resolve to *do the work one’s soul must have*.

When I enrolled in a Doctor of Ministry program at the Samuel DeWitt Proctor School of Theology at Virginia Union University in 2001, I thought Cannon was still on faculty at Temple University. Imagine my surprise when my advisor, Alison P. Gise Johnson, informed me that for my electives I would need to cross-register to take doctoral seminars at Union Presbyterian Seminary with Katie Geneva Cannon. My first class with Cannon was Theological Ethics, and that encounter changed my educational and professional trajectory. As I reflect on wisdom shared and insights gleaned from my initial exchange with Cannon in 2002 through our last exchange during the summer of 2018, I continue to find myself thinking deeply about the manner in which one captures the essence and soul of mentoring in language that enables others to imagine possibilities that might emerge when one is intentional about developing nurturing relationships.

A prophetic truth-teller, Cannon took seriously her commitment to honor the contributions of ancestors and elders whose very lives and work were connected intricately to and informed her own sense of vocation to teach. Always mindful of socio-economic disparities and the manner in which typologies are used to shame and marginalize, Cannon brought her authentic self into the classroom, the pulpit, and public settings. With a keen awareness that “to whom much is given, much is required,” her unique ability to draw on personal and communal narratives models embodied mediated knowledge in ways that demonstrated that effective communication must be conveyed in a manner that can be grasped by anyone, irrespective of an acquired level of formal education. With a remarkable sense of humor, she invited others to gather with her around varied tables to name moral problems and to work collaboratively to imagine ethical possibilities. Because of Cannon’s visionary leadership, I and others are scholars, teachers, and administrators. May we always honor her investment in our professional development and strive, like her, to do our best work without “foreclosing on our souls.” 

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Dangerous Logic at the Border: Religion and the Travel Ban

By Elizabeth Shakman Hurd

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Religion, race, and national security are entangled in the history of American foreign and immigration policy.

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A WEEK AFTER TAKING office in January 2017, Donald Trump issued Executive Order 13769, “Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States,” suspending entry to the U.S. for citizens of Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen. The federal courts deemed this order and a second iteration that followed unconstitutional. A third iteration, Proclamation 9645, issued September 24, 2017, was also challenged in the courts, and in October 2017 a federal district court in Hawaii granted a nationwide injunction barring enforcement. This version placed entry restrictions on the nationals of eight states whose systems for sharing information the President deemed inadequate, resulting in what former Acting Solicitor General and counsel in *Trump v. Hawaii* Neal Katyal has described as “a ban on foreign nationals’ entry to the country using a facially neutral policy that predominantly impacts Muslim-majority nations.” The 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals upheld the district court’s decision, observing that the Proclamation likely contravened



Protesters rally against Trump's travel ban in New York's Union Square.

two provisions of the Immigration and Nationality Act, 1182(f) and 1152(a)(1)(A). The first, 1182(f), authorizes the President to “suspend the entry of all aliens or any class of aliens” whenever he “finds” that their entry “would be detrimental to the interests of the United States,” while 1152(a)(1)(A) provides that “no person shall... be discriminated against in the issuance of an immigrant visa because of the person’s race, sex, nationality, place of birth, or place of residence.” On June 26, 2018, the U.S. Supreme Court reversed the 9th Circuit’s decision, ruling 5-4 in favor of the government. With anti-Muslim rhetoric at the highest levels of the U.S. government, including numerous incontrovertible statements by the President himself, how could the majority in

Trump v. Hawaii find that the ban is not about religion or religious animus?

All sides in the Supreme Court decision act as if the ban is motivated either by religion, in which case it is illegal, or national security, in which case it is legal. It is not only the majority; the concurrence and both dissents also posit sharp distinctions between religion and national security. Chief Justice John Roberts writes for the majority that the ban is “expressly premised on legitimate purposes and says nothing about religion.” The dissent counters that the ban is motivated not by security but religious animus, rendering it unconstitutional. The majority, the dissent, Justice Anthony Kennedy’s concurrence, and Justice Stephen Breyer’s dissent

ALEX WONG/GETTY IMAGES

all presume that the ban either rests legitimately on a national security justification or illegitimately on anti-Muslim bias. Outside experts echo the binary: co-director of the Brennan Center’s Liberty and National Security Program Faiza Patel notes that “the Muslim ban has been in effect for over a year, upheld by the Supreme Court despite overwhelming evidence that it was motivated by religious animus not national security.”

The segregation of matters of religion from matters of national security fails to reflect the political or religious realities of the contemporary United States. It is not and has never been possible to disentangle religious and racial animus from practices of national security. To understand, and ultimately to

challenge, the ban requires confronting the specific ways in which religion, race, and national security are entangled not only in Proclamation 9645 but in the history of American foreign and immigration policy more broadly. The law is ill equipped to address this situation because it is in part responsible for creating it. Examples of legal discrimination which relied on and reinforced various forms of racial and religious favoritism include the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which suspended Chinese immigration for ten years and declared the Chinese ineligible for naturalization, and the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924, which limited the number of immigrants allowed to enter the U.S. through a national origins quota that provided immigration visas to 2 percent of the total number of people of each nationality in the United States as of the 1890 national census, and completely excluded immigrants from Asia.

The law and the courts have played a crucial role in contributing to a status quo in which a small but significant segment of the American public understands anti-Muslim animus and national security to be indistinguishable. The argument that the ban is either about anti-Muslim animus or national security refuses the assumptions on which the ban itself is based and ignores the political context in which it was promulgated. Katyal, the attorney who argued the case for the State of Hawaii and other plaintiffs, makes a similar point: “in focusing on the four corners of the Proclamation, the Court ignored the tainted influence of the President’s comments on the Proclamation itself. Though the majority recognized that President Trump had instructed his lawyers to craft a ‘legal’ version of a Muslim ban, it assessed the Proclamation as if it had randomly dropped out of the sky.”

He is right, but we need to take this argument further. Far from being invented by Trump, discriminatory treatment of non-nationals is a product of state sovereignty. Institutionalized discrimination is the product of U.S. law and a side effect of an international order based on sovereign claims to land. Discrimination literally comes with the territory; border politics are violent regardless of who is in charge. A long list of groups designated as threats have suffered: the Japanese during World War II, the Chinese in the early twentieth century, those accused of international terrorism today, not to mention those deemed internal threats including Native Americans, communists,

Puerto Rican nationalists, Muslims, African-Americans, and others. The U.S. security apparatus, government, media, and popular discourse all reinforce the perception of these groups as threats.

Trump v. Hawaii reflects and revivifies this darker side of the American project. It contributes to a climate of suspicion surrounding American Muslims, heightening a tendency to filter their words, actions, and appearance through the lens of moderation versus extremism. Moderate, good American Muslims are seen as allies in the war on terror; others are potential terrorists, importers of Shariah, and oppressors of women. National security policy is shot through with assumptions about what it means to be democratic and tolerant, and what it means to practice religion in ways that are understood to be moderate and free. These favor particular understandings of Islam (as private faith) while disfavoring others (observance of Shariah). The U.S. has long sought to coopt Muslims abroad in the interest of national security, and American conceptions of religious freedom and moderation are institutionalized in the law through mechanisms aimed at preserving security. To understand the travel ban requires grappling with how the politics of religion is plainly expressed through U.S. political and legal institutions, not outside of them.

The First Amendment also cannot save us. In her dissenting opinion in the *Trump v. Hawaii* case, Justice Sonia Sotomayor criticizes the majority for abandoning our constitutional commitment to religious liberty, noting that the ban “runs afoul of the Establishment Clause’s guarantee of religious neutrality.” “The First Amendment,” she writes, “stands as a bulwark against official religious prejudice and embodies our Nation’s deep commitment to religious plurality and tolerance.” Typical of liberal legal discourse on religion, Sotomayor’s nostalgic reference to the First Amendment fails to reflect the patchy and partial legal protection and privileging of particular religions by the Court in this case and others throughout U.S. history. The First Amendment does not and never has stood as a bulwark against government-sanctioned religious and racial prejudice, particularly in cases where national security is involved. Katyal notes that *Korematsu*, a notorious 1944 Supreme Court decision sanctioning the internment of Japanese Americans and

upholding an exclusion order based on what dissenting Justice Robert Jackson described as a “mere declaration” of “reasonable military necessity,” was simultaneously overturned and revived by the Court in *Trump v. Hawaii*. In this, the dissent is right: “by blindly accepting the Government’s misguided invitation to sanction a discriminatory policy motivated by animosity toward a disfavored group, all in the name of a superficial claim of national security, the Court redeploys the same dangerous logic underlying *Korematsu* and merely replaces one ‘gravely wrong’ decision with another.”

National security is and has always been a racial and religious discourse. To account for this requires not only re-reading U.S. history but also inventing new ways of talking about religion in legal and political contexts. It means forgoing attempts to prove that the president’s anti-Muslim animus animates the ban—which is as obvious as it is legal—in favor of grappling with the political problems indexed by Proclamation 9645.

Those problems deserve immediate attention. The ban emerges from a broader anti-liberal social and political movement that, as French political scientist Nadia Marzouki explains, is “far from the liberal approach to constitutional democracy, which affirms equal rights for all and extends legal protections to religious minorities to shelter them from the chance winds of popular will.” In this movement, the sovereign people, “united and already constituted, may at any moment decide to suspend the guaranteed constitutional protections when faced with a threatening minority that is not part of ‘the people.’” Extrapolating to the present case, supporters of Trump’s travel ban believe that national security demands action against a threatening minority that is allegedly not part of the people. Describing these supporters as merely “Islamophobic” does not capture their ambitions. The aim of the broader movement from which these supporters emerged, as Marzouki notes in her book, is to “prolong the controversy over Islam, saturate public discourse in arguments hostile not only to Muslims but to the Obama administration, the Democratic Party, a certain conception of liberal democracy—and even toward conservative Republicans who are considered too moderate.”


This populist challenge, according to Marzouki, focuses “not on rights but on what is right.” This

To understand the travel ban requires grappling with how the politics of religion is plainly expressed through U.S. political and legal institutions, not outside of them.

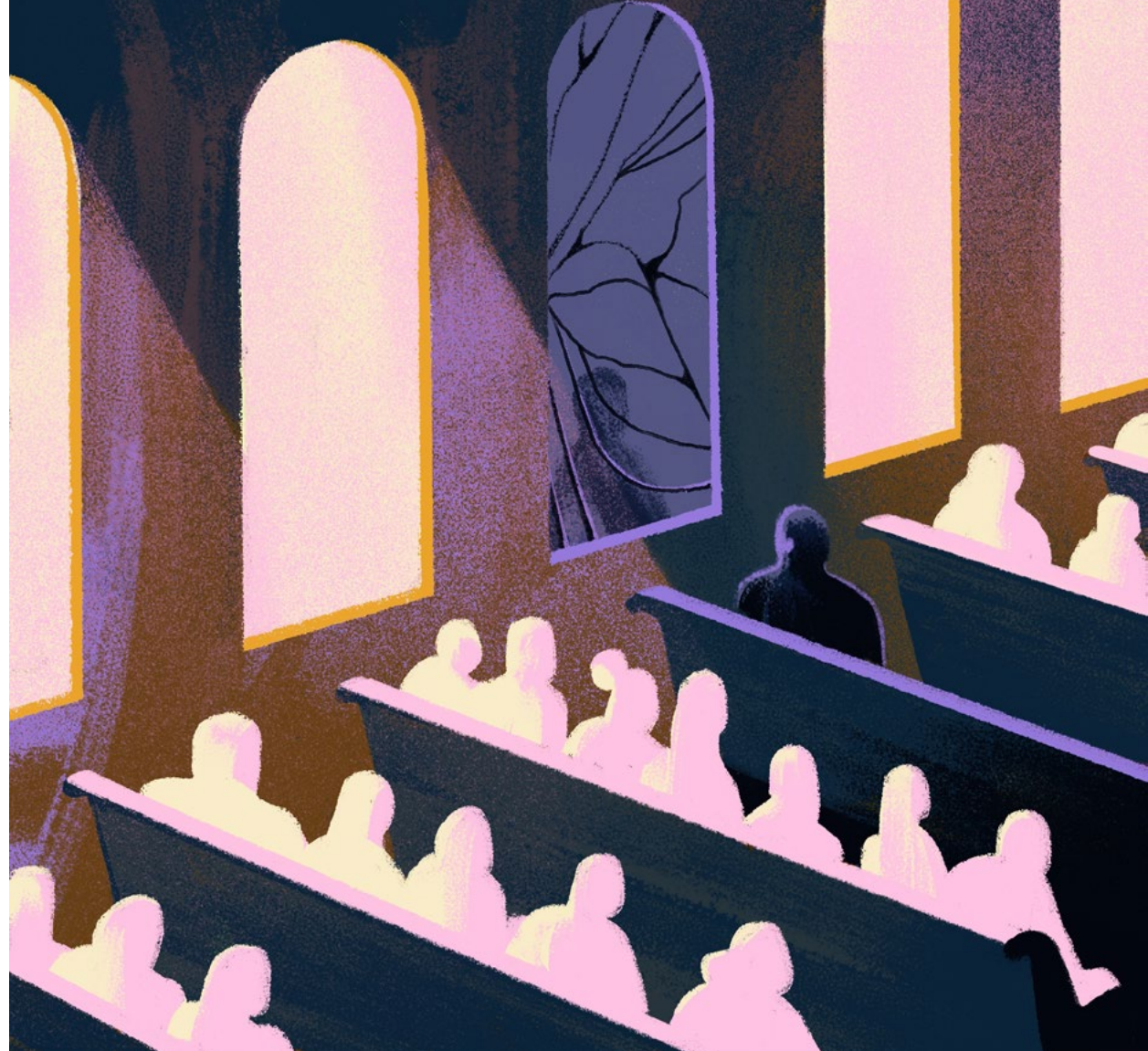
accounts for the limited resonance of liberal arguments against Countering Violent Extremism programming and the surveillance and disciplining of so-called Black Identity Extremists. Moreover, as exemplified by the reference to “honor killings” in the ban’s first iteration, nationalist-populist efforts to generate hostility against Muslims and Islam tap into a long history of mobilizing rights discourse on gender equality to justify various forms of imperial feminism—the appropriation of women’s rights in the service of empire.

Different responses to these developments are needed on different fronts. Political organizing is crucial: new movements; new forms of organizing in the streets, schools, and airports; campaigns for justice and solidarity with those excluded by these policies; and efforts to elect representatives that stand ready to dismantle them. Modifying the laws that grant such exceptional powers to the executive is also urgent. The president exercises extraordinary authority in foreign relations and immigration. The majority in *Trump v. Hawaii* argued that even if one assumed that anti-Muslim animus motivated the ban, assessing motivation for the orders falls beyond the

purview of the Court’s authority. In Chief Justice Roberts’ words, “by its terms, §1182(f) exudes deference to the President in every clause.” Writing in the *Illinois Law Review*, Northwestern University law professor Erin Delaney explains that the majority invoked a set of legal rules known as the “plenary-power,” shorthand for a state of affairs in which setting rules for entry and exit and determining the status of aliens are federal powers that are largely insulated from judicial review. Plenary power over immigration, Delaney continues, is “rooted in the stark racism of the late-nineteenth century, and one subject to much criticism.” Though briefly checked during the Watergate era, the congressional framework put in place to constrain presidential conduct has eroded. Since 9/11 both parties have unleashed virtually unlimited presidential powers in the name of national security. Katyal describes this as “very-near-blind deference to the executive branch,” and Harvard Law School professor Jack Goldsmith predicts that “after Trump, and due to him, there will be a serious reckoning with this constitutional arrangement like no time since the 1970s, and possibly ever in American history.”

Finally, Americans have outgrown the antiquated conventions of First Amendment-speak. We need new legal discourses on religion that better reflect U.S. political and religious realities. It is hard to believe that Chief Justice Roberts could write that the travel ban “is expressly premised on legitimate purposes: preventing entry of nationals who cannot be adequately vetted and inducing other nations to improve their practices. The text says nothing about religion.” There is no religion untouched by state attempts to enforce security. Religion, race, and national security are and always have been co-constituted. The U.S. has been defined as a nation by securing “real” Americans against a series of religious, racial, and civilizational others. Other Americans have vehemently opposed these efforts. To do so effectively in this case starts with acknowledging that no matter what the Court says, Proclamation 9645 is both a Muslim ban and a national security-based ban. In this sense, if only in this sense, its proponents have it right. 

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REPORT
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The Rise of #Exvangelical

Spurred on by white evangelical support for Donald Trump, the #exvangelical movement provides a welcoming community that helps the disenchanting work through the process of deconversion.

By Bradley Onishi

Published on
April 9, 2019

Illustration by Sara Wong

LEFT EVANGELICALISM IN 2005 after years of struggling with my church's stringent theology and narrow approaches to politics. In a matter of months, I went from having an expansive network of church brethren who claimed to love and support me to living in social and emotional exile. As one of the youth ministers at my church, I was used to playing the role of moral exemplar and community leader. Soon, I became *persona non grata*—the guy my former evangelical kin would awkwardly ignore in the coffee shop or at the grocery store. This experience led me into a deep sense of isolation. I didn't yet know how to navigate the world outside of the strict evangelical bubble in which I'd spent my teenage and young adult years, but my crisis of faith meant I could no longer exist in the evangelical movement. To make matters worse, I could find no community of fellow deconverts for me to join—no support group with which to work through the conflicting feelings of guilt, freedom, sadness, and hope. Leaving the church meant being alone.

It also meant being immoral. People at my former church expressed grief over my leaving and hope that someday I would return to the righteous path. In their eyes, I had transformed from someone their kids should look up to into someone their kids should stay away from. Soon church members began asking my parents if I was an alcoholic or cheating on my wife.

History is rife with evangelicals like me who have grown disenchanted with their born-again faith. When the passion of piety flames out, converts are too often left to wander in the wilderness, lacking the ready-made community that their prior churches offered. But things are changing. Recently, those who have left evangelicalism have begun organizing themselves online under the hashtag #exvangelical. Spurred on by white evangelical support for Donald Trump, the #exvangelical movement is providing the type of group I, and so many other ex-evangelicals, longed for during our deconversion process: a welcoming community that helps the disenchanting work through the process of deconversion. But #exvangelical isn't just a support network. It's an activist movement full of individuals trying to reshape the political and moral narrative surrounding evangelicalism by subverting its claims to moral and patriotic authority.

CBS recently aired "Deconstructing My Religion," a documentary centered on the stories of the figures who started and have worked to sustain the #exvangelical movement. Liz Kineke, one of the show's producers, explained in an email why she thought this story was so important. "Evangelical subculture is not well understood by those of us who grew up outside of it," she wrote. "So much of what has been reported looks at white evangelicals' unwavering support for Trump, but there hasn't been much on those who left the movement, what triggered it, and why they feel it's important to speak publicly about it."

In addition to highlighting the life and work of Linda Kay Klein, whose recent memoir *Pure* examines the effects of evangelicalism's purity culture on young women, the documentary focuses on Blake Chastain, Christopher Stroop, and Emily Joy—three of the most active and visible figures in the #exvangelical community.

Blake Chastain started the #exvangelical hashtag in 2016. Chastain grew up in a strict conservative evangelical community and felt a call to ministry during high school. During his first year of college at Indiana Wesleyan University in 2001, his religious and political views began to change. Some of his doubt formed in reaction to the invasion of Iraq and the way evangelicals supported George W. Bush's hawkish policies. After a prolonged period of questioning, Chastain left evangelicalism. He now attends an Episcopal church, though he identifies as an "agnostic to some degree."

As he told me in an email, he began tweeting under #exvangelical in order to create "a safe space for people to find solidarity with others who have gone through similar experiences." This is why he also started the *Exvangelical* podcast: "I was primarily motivated to understand why so many of my friends and colleagues from Christian colleges were no longer evangelical. What were the reasons for us leaving? I wanted to explore that in depth, and the best way to do that seemed to be by having longform conversations."

The podcast now gets about 13,000 downloads a month. In Chastain's words, it's meant to boost the stories of those who have left the movement, because, "letting people know that they are not alone is an incredible comfort." It is now the de facto hub for the broader #exvangelical community—a platform where Chastain interviews authors, bloggers,

activists, and academics who share their experiences of leaving the faith and provide perspective for those working through what he calls their own journey of “deconstruction,” the process of breaking down one worldview in order to erect another.

Though he recognizes that the reasons for leaving are always unique and personal, after almost 100 episodes of the podcast, it is clear to him that crises of faith, along with experiences of misogyny, homophobia, and racism, are the main reasons people exit the evangelical movement. These experiences were exacerbated by white evangelical support for Trump in the 2016 election. Thus, according to Chastain, it’s no coincidence #exvangelical as an online movement formed in the wake of the election.

He put it this way: “I think this is certainly the case for many white evangelicals in particular, who had perhaps thought that their faith leaders and communities would not embrace such a brashly xenophobic, racist, misogynistic, and resolutely and unapologetically immoral man like Donald Trump as president.”

If Chastain is the movement’s shepherd whose podcast provides a cathartic space for ex-evangelicals to work through the process of deconversion, Chris Stroop is #exvangelical’s prophetic voice. The election of Trump induced, as Stroop told me, a “retraumatization” that has led him on a mission to change the narrative surrounding white American evangelicalism. Instead of viewing this religious group as a kind of national moral compass filled with pious patriots, Stroop argues we should see them as an insidious religious and political force.

After receiving his doctorate in Russian history from Stanford University, Stroop began writing about his experiences in evangelical subculture. He also has an uncanny knack for launching viral hashtag campaigns. He started #emptythepews, which called for an exodus from evangelical communities in light of their support for Trump; #Christianaltfacts, which he writes highlights the way “enclave communities” like conservative churches demand adherence to a set of absolute truths “meant to oppose and undermine credible science and scholarship that threatens the fundamentalist worldview”; and most recently #exposechristianschools, which he launched after news broke that Karen Pence, wife of the Vice President Mike Pence, is working at a private Christian school with anti-LGBTQ policies.

Those who associate with #exvangelical are not leftist outsiders with no real experience within the subculture. They are former insiders who testify to what they see as the traumatizing effects of living under evangelicalism’s patriarchal, heteronormative, and racist norms.

“Those who associate with #exvangelical on Twitter are going to be in the vast majority of cases liberal to left. People who were harmed by patriarchal politics because we were queer, women, people of color,” Stroop told me in an interview. “This means that being an ex-evangelical is inherently a political position.”

Stroop’s activism highlights an important point: Ex-evangelicals hold a singular potential for undermining evangelical politics. Those who associate with #exvangelical are not leftist outsiders with no real experience within the subculture. They are

former insiders who testify to what they see as the traumatizing effects of living under evangelicalism’s patriarchal, heteronormative, and racist norms. As Stroop wrote for *Playboy* last June: “When Christian nationalists are in power and perpetrating horrors, we should oppose their dominionism not with a different reading of the Bible, but with a robust defense of pluralism and secularism.”

Stroop’s call to ideological battle brings to mind the research of sociologists of religion Alfredo García and Joseph Blankholm who investigated what motivates people with no religious affiliation to join “nonbeliever” organizations, such as the American Humanist Association, American Atheists, or the Secular Student Alliance, for the purposes of “community, identity, and political collectivity.” What they found through a national survey is that in any given county in the United States, “it is actually the percentage of evangelical Protestants in a county that is statistically significant in predicting the presence and number of nonbeliever organizations.” In other words, when nonbelievers feel threatened by the presence of conservative religious groups, they organize in opposition.


Of course, #exvangelicals are not the only former evangelicals who have come to reject the evangelical label. Well-known conservative Christian writers who have been consistent critics of Donald Trump, such as Michael Gerson and Peter Wehner, have come to question—and have eventually rejected—both the label “Republican” in its current iteration and “evangelical.” Other Christians of a more progressive variety, from Bishop William Barber and the Rev. Traci Blackmon to up-and-coming writers like Guthrie Graves-Fitzsimmons, persistently remind audiences that “evangelical” does not equal “Christian,” and that many Christians have very little in common with their evangelical counterparts. As for #exvangelicals, while some still identify as Christian, and others have migrated into other religious traditions, they are united by their negative experiences within evangelicalism and their opposition to its cultural and political influence.

Overall, #exvangelical is a community formed from collective trauma. The movement is diverse in the sense that it is populated by atheists, agnostics, progressive Christians, and any number of other religious or nonreligious people. However, the question as to whether the movement will be predom-

inantly white, and fronted by men, remains open. For instance, all of those highlighted in the CBS documentary are white. That doesn’t mean there are no people of color participating in, and leading, the rise of #exvangelical. Tori Williams Douglass, who tweets under the handle @Toriglass, is a prominent member of the community who foregrounds the intersection of racism and conservative religion in her work. Her activism highlights the intersection of trauma involving racism, evangelical purity culture, and institutional authoritarianism.

However, the question of representation is perhaps the most crucial one for the future of the #exvangelical movement. #MeToo and #Never-Again and other social movements formed from trauma have had to reckon with questions of whose stories are centered and why. As it gains influence and numbers, #exvangelical will continue to face similar questions. Evangelicals of color have also been traumatized by their religious community’s response to the election of Donald Trump. But Janelle Wong, author of *Immigrants, Evangelicals, and Politics in an Era of Demographic Change*, told me in a recent interview that she finds young people of color staying in their evangelical communities even if they disagree with some doctrinal aspects of their communities. “They are finding space to stay,” she said.

While #exvangelical began as an online community, Chastain, Stroop, and others have organized in-person events and roundtables for the exvangelical community. They would like to continue to take their organizing off-line in order to strengthen the social bonds of those who identify with the movement and reach those who are not on engaging through social media.

For now, it seems important to recognize that there is a new force organizing in opposition to the most powerful religious group in American politics, one that refuses white evangelicalism’s claim to morality on the basis of their own experiences. As self-exiles who identify as survivors, not backsliders, #exvangelicals thus occupy a uniquely subversive position in relation to conservative Christianity, one that the Religious Right has yet to encounter and whose potential is just coming to light. 

BRADLEY ONISHI is a scholar, writer, and co-host of the Straight White American Jesus podcast.

Attacks on Religious Minorities in America

What can we learn about the nature of the modern attacks on Muslims from previous attacks on Mormons, Catholics, and other religious minorities?

By Steven Waldman

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IN MARCH, AN ARSONIST TARGETED A MOSQUE in California. Another mosque burned in Connecticut in May. Other mosques have received threats during this holy month of Ramadan. The FBI reported in its latest hate crime statistics that there was a 77 percent increase in anti-Muslim incidents between 2014 and 2017.

In these recent attacks on American Muslims, we have seen the return of shocking ideas that had fueled earlier assaults on religious freedom in the United States. Throughout American history, attacks on religious minorities have returned periodically like cicadas that lay low for a few decades and then emerge again in full force. They followed certain patterns. Peculiar arguments that were made against Baptists in the eighteenth century reappeared in attacks on Mormons and Catholics in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

What can we learn about the nature of the modern attacks on Muslims from previous attacks on Mormons, Catholics, and other religious minorities?

First, in the past when Americans wanted to seriously undermine a minority faith they didn't merely argue that it was an untrue religion but that it wasn't a religion at all. Samuel Morse, the inventor of the Morse code and the telegraph, led attacks on Catholics in the nineteenth century by saying that "Popery" was less a religion than "a Political system, despotic in its organization, anti-democratic and anti-republican, cannot therefore coexist with American republicanism." A few decades later, Mormonism was described in similar ways—"an immoral and quasi criminal conspiracy," as the *Kalamazoo Telegraph* put it.

Now listen to how Islam has been described by modern American anti-Islam activists. "Islam is a political ideology. It definitely hides behind being a reli-

gion," said Michael Flynn, President Trump's first national security advisor, in 2016. That same year, a poll found that only half of Republicans said Islam should be legal in America.

In case there was any ambiguity about why this distinction was important, Lieutenant General William G. "Jerry" Boykin, an anti-Muslim activist and former Pentagon official, explained in 2010 that since Islam is "a totalitarian way of life," it "should not be protected under the First Amendment."

Second, practitioners of particular minority religions could not assimilate, we were told. An editorial in the *Missouri Commercial Appeal* took this tactic in describing Mormons: "Their manners, customs, religion and all, [Mormons] are more obnoxious to our citizens than those of the Indians, and they can never live among us in peace." An anti-Mormon group in Carroll County in 1838 complained that too many Mormons came from across the border. (No, the other border). "It is impossible that the two communities can long live together," wrote the *Signal*. "They can *never* assimilate." To these writers, the Mormons were alien and dangerous. The next month the governor of the state, Lilburn Boggs,

issued a rule that "the Mormons must be treated as enemies, and must be exterminated and driven from the State if necessary for the public peace."

Three days later, about 250 Missourians, including a state senator, went to a small community called Haun's Mill and massacred 17 Mormons.

At other moments in history, Catholics, Jews, and other European immigrants were also thought to be unassimilable too.

In modern times, anti-Islam activists have claimed, against evidence, that Muslims are particularly unable to assimilate. When the Islamic Society of Milwaukee applied for permission to build a mosque, a rally was held where one resident explained that "a mosque is a Trojan Horse in a community. Muslims have not come to integrate but to dominate." Donald Trump made it explicit. "I'm talking about second and third generation," Donald Trump said during the 2016 campaign. "They come—they don't—for some reason, there's no real assimilation."

In thwarting religious freedom, Americans have accused adherents of minority faiths of having dual allegiances. When Al Smith, a Catholic, ran for president in 1928, cartoons depicted him as kissing the



GETTY/ANADOLU AGENCY

Americans became unable to distinguish between the worst elements of a particular faith and those who practice that religion.

ring of—or serving the liquor to—the pope whom, it was assumed, would be calling the shots. The newly constructed Holland Tunnel in New York was supposedly going to provide the pontiff ready access to America. Jews have long been subject to a similar charge, initially that they would put global Jewry above loyalty to country, and more recently that they would put the interests of Israel over that of America—criticisms that were reflected in the recent comments by Rep. Ilhan Omar that “the political influence in this country that says it is okay to push for allegiance to a foreign country.”

In the twenty-first century, the most pervasive dual loyalty charge has been against American Muslims, like Rep. Omar. They are, we are told, required by their faith to follow Sharia, the broad set of Islamic religious rules, akin to Catholic Canon Law or Halacha rules influencing some Orthodox Jews. Brigitte Gabriel, leader of ACT for America, one of the leading anti-Islam groups, has said, “A practicing Muslim who believes the word of the Koran to be the word of Allah, who abides by Islam, who goes to mosque and prays every Friday, who prays five times a day—this practicing Muslim, who believes in the teachings of the Koran, cannot be a loyal citizen to the United States of America.”

Like the argument that Islam is not a religion, the anti-Sharia drive can be used to break apart First Amendment protections. “Far from being entitled to the protections of our Constitution under the principle of freedom of religion,” wrote anti-Muslim activist Frank Gaffney, Sharia “is actually a seditious assault on our Constitution which we are obliged to prosecute, not protect.” A report issued by his Center for Security Policy in 2010, signed by numerous notable anti-Muslim activists, recommended

that Muslims who back Sharia should be prohibited from holding elective office or serving in the military.

President Trump’s familiar attacks on Muslims have often implied dual loyalty, as when he claimed he saw “thousands and thousands” of Muslims in New Jersey cheering the destruction of the Twin Towers on 9/11 or when he maintained that Muslims don’t report suspicious activity. “They’re not turning them in,” he said in a 2016 interview.

Race is, not surprisingly, also a component of attacks on religious minorities. Unpopular groups have often been depicted as non-white. In his anti-Catholic cartoons from the nineteenth century, Thomas Nast depicted Irish Catholics as being physically indistinguishable from American blacks, another marginalized group.

Given the amount of humor created about Mormons being the whitest people in America, it’s surprising to see how they were deemed “Asiatic” because of their embrace of polygamy. A military doctor, Robert Bartholow, in 1861 described a typical Mormon: “yellow, sunken, cadaverous visage; the greenish-colored eye; the thick, protuberant lips, the low forehead; the light, yellowish hair, and the lank, angular person, constitute an appearance so characteristic of the new race, the production of polygamy, as to distinguish them at a glance.”

Of course, racializing the attacks on American Muslims is far easier. What’s interesting is that most attacks on American Muslims conflate them with Arabs, even though most American Muslims are not Arab or from the Middle East.

Generalizations became more general when stereotyping minority religions. Americans became unable to distinguish between the worst elements of a particular faith and the Americans who practice that religion. Opponents of Catholicism for centuries argued that because the Catholic Church had often supported undemocratic regimes in nineteenth and eighteenth-century Europe, American Catholics could not be trusted to support American democracy. In fact, the Vatican did oppose separation of church and state, but American Catholics—including Al Smith and John Kennedy—supported the American model of religious freedom.

Today, anti-Muslim voices routinely conflate Muslim extremists with Muslims in general. When local Tennessee Muslims wanted to build a mosque in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, one of the billboards

that popped up to oppose it declared, “Defeat Universal Jihad Now.” After a federal judge struck down an anti-Sharia amendment, *Jihad Watch*’s Robert Spencer reposted an article titled, “Taliban Chops Off Man’s Hand for Theft,” and asked, “Isn’t it great that Judge Vicki Miles-LaGrange has made Oklahoma safe for Sharia?” Many of the hundreds of acts of violence against American Muslims reveal that inability to make such distinctions. As a sample, in the final quarter of 2015, the attacks against American Muslims included these:

- In Bloomington, Indiana, an Indiana University student yelled “Kill them all!” at a Muslim woman prior to slamming her head into a table and attempting to pull off her hijab.
- In New York City, three students assaulted a sixth-grade Muslim student during recess. They called her “ISIS,” punched her, and tried to pull off her hijab.
- In Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, a Muslim taxi driver was shot by a passenger asking about ISIS.
- In Vandalia, Ohio, while riding on a school bus, a seventh grader threatened to shoot a Muslim schoolmate, calling him “towelhead,” “terrorist,” and “son of ISIS.”

There are, however, some ways in which the experience of American Muslims does differ from past history.

Encouragingly, when Trump first proposed his so-called Muslim ban, thousands of Americans rallied against it. The courts eventually forced the administration to scale back the measure to be less focused on Islam as the defining factor in immigration. When Trump proposed a registry for Muslims, the head of the Anti-Defamation League declared, “Because I am committed to the fight against anti-Semitism...if one day Muslim-Americans are forced to register their identities, that is the day this proud Jew will register as Muslim.” Notably, as president, Trump has still not created the registry, an indication that the roots of religious liberty have in some quarters grown deep.

But in other ways, this moment is worse or at least more uncertain than earlier periods. We have never had a president of the United States attempt to demonize a particular minority religion as much as this one has. Millard Fillmore ran for president


as a Know Nothing, an explicitly anti-Catholic party, but he lost. Richard Nixon was a raving anti-Semite, but in private. And even those presidents that wanted to use immigration laws to keep out Catholics or Jews did not offer explicitly religious rationales. We don’t know what it means to have a president actively undermining rather than defending religious freedom.

Second, social media makes it far easier for anti-Muslim sentiment to spread. Much attention has been given to the ways that the internet can radicalize lonely outcasts until they commit mass violence. But the more common role of social media is to normalize previously taboo ideas among respectable people. Posts that evoke strong reactions, either in agreement or in rage, are deemed by algorithms to be more valuable and can be more widely distributed.

Social media doesn’t create hate, but it can incentivize it. The following examples all involve local public officials who got in trouble for posting on Facebook:

- A member of the conservation commission of Easton, Massachusetts, posted a photo of a nuclear mushroom cloud with the headline “Dealing with Muslims... Rules of Engagement.”
- A member of the Board of Education in Elmwood Park, New Jersey, wrote: “Go back to your own country; America needs to get rid of people like you.”
- The Minnesota Republican Party posted a photo of then-Rep. Keith Ellison, a Muslim, on its page, under the headline, “Minnesota’s Head Muslim Goat Humper.”

And yet, the most extreme anti-Muslim voices have also been given platforms by Fox News and influential talk radio personalities.

Looking at the attacks on American Muslims in recent years one must conclude that the consensus around religious liberty is more fragile than it once seemed. The question in coming years will be whether the traditions of religious American freedom—one of our nation’s greatest inventions—will prove enduring. 

STEVEN WALDMAN is the author of *Sacred Liberty: America’s Long, Bloody, and Ongoing Fight for Religious Freedom*, from which this essay was adapted. He is also co-founder of Report for America.

Religious Responses to the Coronavirus Pandemic

By Sarah Ngu

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Across the country, religious communities are adapting traditions and finding new ways to reach people.

“HAS ANYONE WRITTEN A call n response liturgy specifically for Coronavirus?” I tweeted hastily at 9 a.m. on March 15.

Our Sunday service—which would be live-streamed via Facebook to our 500-person congregation—was starting in an hour, and at the last minute, we realized that our Lenten liturgy no longer felt appropriate. Our pastor at Forefront Church, which is based in Brooklyn, was busy going over his sermon, our three musicians were rehearsing, and the two-person A/V team was setting up the cameras. It fell on me, the executive director, to rewrite our liturgy. Several people had replied to my tweet with resources, and I found a prayer I liked, so I adapted it for our congregation. Despite the scrambling, we pulled off our first remote and live-streamed Sunday service, which was viewed a few thousand times.

Rewriting the liturgy was just one of many decisions that we had to quickly make over the course of the next few weeks. By the time our governor issued an order for all non-essential businesses to close, we reimagined our

BIOETHICS
CULTURE
EDUCATION
LAW
MEDIA
MONEY
SCIENCE

Buddhist Lhoppön
Rinpoche leads online
meditations at Mipham
Shedra Buddhist temple in
Westminster, Colorado.

ALEX WONG/GETTY IMAGES



Sunday service yet again, this time getting each person on staff to livestream their segment from their apartment.

Despite the hiccups, our transition has been relatively smooth. We are a progressive nondenominational Christian church that skews young; our congregation is fairly technologically savvy, and we already had in place most of the infrastructure for a live-stream. From the beginning, that meant we were able to focus on other things, such as circulating forms that people could fill out to request and offer help, from financial assistance to grocery transportation. We knew that creating as many forms of virtual community as possible was a huge priority given the social isolation people felt, and luckily many congregants stepped up to host virtual prayer and meditation events on Zoom, a video-conferencing platform.

All across the country, in big cities and small towns, other religious and congregational leaders are also trying to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic by finding new ways to reach people. Most of them are, like me, trying to recreate physical services on virtual platforms, to improvise with ancient liturgical traditions, and to contact congregants, especially those most at-risk, to see how they are doing and connect them with help when needed. During the past two weeks, as I interviewed a number of faith leaders—from Catholic, Buddhist, Jewish, Muslim, and Protestant traditions—several of them told me their current plans and then warned me that things might change the next week. Each congregational leader had their distinct concerns, but most were wrestling with a number of paradoxes, namely, how to strengthen networks of community and support while maintaining physical distance, and how to respect tradition while radically adapting it to the current context.

THE FIRST TIME I rang the Rev. Rich Andre, the associate pastor of St. Austin Catholic Parish in Austin, Texas, at the time we had agreed to chat, my call went straight to voicemail. He left me a very apologetic voicemail a few hours later. “It’s been an absolutely nutty day,” he said. “I’m spending the whole day trying work with videographers to up the production value of our livestream.”

As far as Catholic priests go, Father Andre is

fairly online: He is on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, SoundCloud, and even Pinterest. And yet even he was struggling with the technological transition, as it was hard to get good sound quality while streaming on Facebook Live in the large, echoing space of the church.

More than 2,000 families call St. Austin home, which also runs a pre-K through eighth grade school and operates 47 ministries, many focused on social justice and caring for the homeless. Much of the staff’s focus has been on how to continue to meet the needs of those who knock on their doors for help, while also establishing necessary health precautions. Like almost all of the clergy leaders I spoke to, Father Andre seemed to be stretched thin.

“I had a moment yesterday—it’s never happened to me in my career—where I was answering the phone to respond to a request to anoint a dying patient, and my cell phone was ringing, and the office phone was ringing all at the same time,” he said. “I don’t know how long anybody can keep working at this frenetic level, as the ground keeps shifting.”

Two days before our call, the bishop of his diocese canceled all public Masses to Father Andre’s relief, as public Masses cannot be canceled without the bishop’s authorization. The previous Sunday, when St. Austin still had to hold its five public Masses, the priests asked parishioners not to come if they were elderly and immunocompromised. Still, Andre estimated that 300 people showed up that day—and many of them were elderly or known to be at-risk.

“For people of faith, their community is an essential operation and necessary part of their lives,” said the Rev. Daniel Horan, a Catholic theologian and Franciscan friar who teaches at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. “In a trying time where people are very afraid, their faith community is exactly where they want to be.” That said, the commitment to life must supersede our desire to be in a physical, worshipping community, he carefully added.

The Catholic Church has historically instructed people to make an act of “spiritual communion” in times in which they cannot, for whatever reason, attend Mass. “If the church cannot gather physically, we gather together in communion through the Holy Spirit as occasioned by baptism,” Horan said. “That’s not taught to many folks.”

Part of the appeal of the Eucharist—the consuming of consecrated wine and bread—is its physical

tangibility and the clear step-by-step nature of the rite. By contrast, spiritual communion seems less clear. Archdioceses, such as Washington D.C.’s, have started offering step-by-step guides for how to conduct prayer services, including a prayer for the act of spiritual communion, at home. “This is an opportunity to revisit our tradition and see what resources are out there to help us respond to our needs,” Horan said.

Spiritual communion has proven to be a confusing concept for many of St. Austin’s parishioners, based on the emails and calls that the staff have received. Father Andre thinks they have to shift congregants’ habits. “We’ve been telling people for so long that there’s no substitute for going to Mass,” he said, noting that older generations especially value this church attendance. “Now all of a sudden, we’re turning on a dime and saying, ‘Don’t come to Mass.’” It will take time for parishioners to learn this new way of practicing communion.

Student Cantor Kalix Jacobson sings to an iPad for the High Holidays services at Hebrew Tabernacle of Washington Heights, New York.



ALEX WONG/GETTY IMAGES

REVISITING TRADITION HAS also been something that the Rev. John Iwohara has been pondering. He is the senior resident minister of Gardena Buddhist Church, which serves the South Bay region of Los Angeles County and is part of the Jodo Shinshu Japanese school of Buddhism. Out of the dozen clergy I spoke with, he seemed the calmest. Yes, they had canceled their Sunday services, and he had been posting video messages on Facebook. Yes, they had many elderly members—the total membership is around 500—but there were at least a dozen younger volunteers who had stepped up to wait in line at the grocery store, even for up to a few hours, on their behalf.

An essential practice of the Jodo Shinshu school of Buddhism is to chant for half an hour every day. He and the other ministers have not figured out what the best way to host a virtual chanting experience, one that would allow members to hear each other chanting at the same time. Right now, members are encouraged to chant at their home altars. When we spoke, he mentioned that they were going to have a Zoom discussion, “Dinner and Dharma,” that night for the young adults. They would be reading from a collection of letters written by Rennyo Shonin, a fifteenth-century Japanese priest. The letter demarcated for that night’s discussion detailed the experience of an epidemic during Rennyo’s time.

“The letters talk about how many people are dying because of the epidemic, and some people think it’s because of illness,” Iwohara said. “But the real cause of death is birth. Coming to fully understand that...helps put everything in perspective.”

WHILE SOME CLERGY, like Iwohara, take comfort in being grounded in their unchanging, spiritual truths, other clergy are grappling with reframing ancient tradition.

Rabbi Valerie Cohen leads a Reform synagogue, Temple Emanuel Sinai, in Worcester, Massachusetts. For the 400 families on its membership roster, many life-cycle events, such as weddings, b’nai mitzvah, and b’not mitzvah, have been postponed. The biggest ritual on Rabbi Cohen’s mind, though, is funerals. Jews do not traditionally cremate. Bodies, which are typically not embalmed, are supposed to be buried as soon as possible, ideally within 24 hours of death.

Each congregational leader had their distinct concerns, but most were wrestling with how to strengthen networks of community while maintaining physical distance, and how to respect tradition while adapting it to the current context.

“I would hesitate to say it would be impossible to postpone burials,” said Rabbi Cohen, though she added that it would take extreme circumstances to change the tradition. “The vast majority of [rabbi]s have decided we’ll do a funeral at the gravesite. Some say immediate family only, some say less than 10, some less than five people, all six feet apart.”

She’s heard, however, of people doing memorial services, even shivas—a mourning period where relatives and friends congregate at the bereaved’s home—on Zoom.

Despite these stresses, Cohen has seen positive things emerge. A pen-pal program between young kids, who draw and color pictures, and elderly con-

gregants, who write letters in response, has sprung up. A member in the community who moved to Israel joined in on a Talmud class hosted on Zoom. A woman from a small congregation in Mississippi recently called Cohen to ask if her congregation could watch their live-stream. Cohen asked if they would also like to participate in their online Torah study. “We can create connection with another congregation without the same resources,” Cohen said. “This pandemic will widen our boundaries in ways that they should’ve already been widened.”

The possibilities of technology are a bit more constrained for Orthodox Jewish congregations, for whom observing the Sabbath, or Shabbat (Friday night to Saturday night), means refraining from technology, especially the usage of phones or computers. Without the possibility of livestreaming a Shabbat service, many Orthodox congregations have chosen to cancel services entirely.

Rabbi Yechiel Shaffer is an Orthodox rabbi at the Pikesville Jewish Congregation near Baltimore, Maryland. According to Shaffer, it is a highly social Modern Orthodox congregation with more than 150 families, mostly with young children. Despite the canceling of public services, Shaffer has tried to create as much connection as he can, posting Shabbat prayer and candle-lighting times on the website so that families can pray together in their homes during those times, knowing they are connected with other congregants even if physically apart.

Since his congregants can no longer hear him give his usual messages during Shabbat services, Shaffer is also posting short audio clips on Jewish law and spiritual life for members. Outside of Shabbat, his congregation has organized various ways to connect via Zoom.

Traditional Jewish law requires praying three times a day, but there are certain prayers that can only be made within the context of a minyan, or a quorum of ten people (or ten men, for Orthodox Jews) in the same physical space. Social distancing has made it virtually impossible to gather a minyan, so many Orthodox communities, Shaffer said, have created Zoom prayer rooms where everyone prays individually while dialed in, skipping over the sections in their prayer book that require a minyan.

“Social distancing is the most important piece of this which runs smack in the face of life-cycle

events; we like to celebrate together, whether it’s a wedding or circumcision,” he said. “While there is an aspect of it that is disappointing and sad, there is also something deeply intimate, private and personal about it. It’s made all of us question and rethink what is important to us, and what makes something spiritually impactful and significant.”

WHILE PLENTY OF CLERGY are preoccupied with recreating religious services online, for some religious leaders, strengthening social services has been an equal, if not greater, concern. Imam Khalid Latif, the executive director of the Islamic Center at New York University, said the center joined with two other Muslim organizations to raise almost \$500,000 from more than 3,000 supporters for people financially affected by COVID-19. So far, the funds have been distributed to 554 households and 1,750 individuals around the country in micro-grants ranging from \$250 to \$1,000.

The Islamic Center at NYU serves more than 10,000 people in the tri-state area. While the center has been very active in hosting virtual meetings—from yoga sessions to study circles (*halaqas*)—Imam Latif was much more interested in detailing the center’s social services. Just a few days ago, the center raised funds for and distributed 5,000 masks to local hospitals.

Citing a *hadith*, or a saying from the prophet Muhammad, which states, “you will not enter Paradise until you have faith and you will not have faith until you love each other,” Imam Latif said, “The completion of your faith is that you have love for one another. Islam is a very God-centric, not ego-centric, religion, and it places as much emphasis on externals as it does on internals...on how individuals treat people around them.”

The Rev. Theresa Cho ministers in San Francisco at St. John’s Presbyterian Church, part of the mainline PC(USA) denomination. Since food security is a huge concern in the city, and since many members of her congregation have stable salaries, she saw it as non-negotiable that the church kept their food pantry open. “Many food pantries are closing because most churches’ volunteers are over 65,” she said. “Most of our volunteers are younger...we feel an obligation to provide this service because this is what we believe a church should be doing.”

Like Cho, the Rev. Andrew Draper has been hard at work trying to figure out how to respond to the pandemic-related needs in his city of Muncie, Indiana. Fifteen years ago, Draper founded Urban Light Community Church as a multi-racial and working-class congregation. Part of the evangelical denomination Churches of God, the congregation operates a robust set of social services and counseling ministries, as well as a community development corporation, which runs a women's recovery home, a housing redevelopment program, and a community garden.

The church's counseling ministries have shifted to Zoom, and its social services are mostly limited to phone calls, with occasional handovers of bus passes or grocery store gift cards. The main social service program is its partnership with a local food bank to deliver goods to around 40 families in need. "We knew we needed to keep things going," he said. "There is some level of risk we just have to take. People have physical, emotional, and psychological needs... We don't think the church should stop meeting needs or be considered 'non-essential' when things like Burger King's drive-thru seem to be considered 'essential' right now." He added, "Giving is going down a bit which is a challenge because needs are going up."

The decline in giving is a weighty concern for many churches who don't have much savings. The Rev. Valerie Washington is the minister at Hughlett Temple A.M.E. Zion Church in Louisville, Kentucky. Most members of her 144-person congregation are between the ages of 55 and 75. In addition to Sunday services, the church operates a food and clothing pantry on its premises. "We live week-to-week as far as finances are concerned, and last week, we had a loan that's due, an insurance bill that is due," she said. "This past Sunday, there was a shortage of 40 percent in giving."


Now that services are canceled, Washington, together with her web technician, has set up online giving platforms for members. She hopes that the young adults in the congregation will start to teach the older ones how to use these tools, as so far online giving has not taken off. Most congregants are still calling to see if they can drop off their money in the church's mailbox.

The church leadership's next big decision is whether to conduct services via conference call or

Facebook Live. Many congregations are opting for Facebook Live, which allows people to watch a live-streamed service and type comments, but she has a slight preference for conference calls.

She explained, "One time we were snowed in and no one could get to church, so we had church through conference call." Forty-four members called in. "There's something about the camaraderie, the fellowship with one another." And to her, that's what church is all about. "When you come to church with other believers, it encourages, strengthens, and feeds you—you get spiritual nourishment that you don't get by yourself at home."

PERHAPS THE BIGGEST theme across my conversations was how exhausted all the clergy I spoke to felt. Rabbi Shaffer said, "We are human and we are adjusting to this new reality ourselves. This is a big opportunity for kindness, to reach out to clergy and say, 'How are you doing?'"

I thought of his comments during a virtual Shabbat dinner that I joined. A few friends in Philadelphia hosted it over Zoom. The hosts sang the blessings over the bread and wine, and then we began eating dinner, separately, but connected through our web cameras. It was a simple, sweet meal that came together within a few days. It wasn't organized by a rabbi or any official clergy, but rather by laypeople who simply wanted to connect spiritually and communally. Maybe the biggest stress relief for clergy will be realizing that spiritual community still happens, even without them. 

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ESSAY
CULTURE
ELECTIONS
FOREIGN POLICY
LAW
MEDIA

By Richard Mouw

Published on
January 7, 2020

The Prophetic Witness of the Christianity Today Editorial

A distinguished Christian leader on calls for Trump's removal from office.

NOT TOO LONG AFTER DONALD TRUMP took office in 2017, a reporter told me about a series of interviews she had conducted with Mr. Trump's evangelical supporters. These folks explained their enthusiasm, she said, for the new president with explicit references to the Bible. A common theme was President Trump is like King David. Morally flawed, of course, but still used by God to accomplish good things for the cause of righteousness.

As an evangelical critic of President Trump, I do not share their admiration for our commander-in-chief, but in some respects, I do appreciate the biblical point they are making. I certainly believe that God does use people who are seriously flawed in their public lives to accomplish his purposes for our collective existence. And David did accomplish many good things as the king of Israel. And he certainly did some very bad things during his reign—not the least being his double sin of having an affair with a married woman, Bathsheba, and then using his kingly powers to ensure that her husband was killed in the line of battle.

But there is another important voice in David's story: the Prophet Nathan. When Nathan learned of David's affair with Bathsheba, he came to David to make it clear that this was unacceptable to the Lord. In what was surely a move that put his own life at risk, Nathan preached a sermon to the king in which he told a story about a person who used his power to commit a serious sin. Then he drew the parallel to what David had done.

I was reminded of Nathan the Prophet after the recent *Christianity Today* editorial calling for Trump's removal from office. That call honored a crucial element in the King David story. In pronouncing a blessing on David's kingship,



Faith leaders pray over the president during an “Evangelicals for Trump” campaign event on January 3, 2020, in Miami, Florida. The rally was announced after a December editorial published in *Christianity Today* called for President Trump’s removal from office.

the Lord did not expect David’s subjects simply to ignore the impact of his sinful behavior on his ability to lead. Published just before Christmas, retiring Editor-in-Chief Mark Galli’s words were a clarion call to Christians that the president has abused his power and must be called to account. “But the facts in this instance are unambiguous: The president of the United States attempted to use his political power to coerce a foreign leader to harass and discredit one of the president’s political opponents,” Galli wrote. “That is not only a violation of the Constitution; more importantly, it is profoundly immoral.”

At the risk of losing subscribers and harming their publication—which was attacked by the pres-

ident himself on Twitter—*Christianity Today* delivered an important message. The prophetic editorial has been the occasion for renewed charges that Trump’s evangelical supporters have allowed political concerns to override concerns about presidential character. The president’s supporters do not dispute claims that he has said and done some highly offensive things. Instead, they tell us that we are obliged as citizens to support leaders who promote what we consider to be crucial political goals. And in this, they tell us, President Trump—whatever else we might say about him—has shown himself to be on our side. *Christianity Today* had a response to this as well: “To the many evangelicals who continue to support Mr. Trump in spite of his blackened moral

record, we might say this . . . Consider what an unbelieving world will say if you continue to brush off Mr. Trump’s immoral words and behavior in the cause of political expediency.”

Many evangelical leaders have been very un-Nathan-like in their relationship with President Trump. The president, one of them has told us, is still “a baby Christian.” Others have argued that a focus on the president’s misdeeds detracts from the way Trump is furthering causes that are important to people of faith. We are warned that evangelicals who express our disappointment in his behaviors threaten our own political influence. In American politics, we have been told, we are not voting for candidates for sainthood but for leaders who can

promote concerns that are crucial to the evangelical cause. The result is that moral teaching is made subservient to political expediency.

My point here is not a partisan one about Donald Trump. All Christians, on the left or on the right, need to be aware of the ways in which our assessments of a public leader’s character are often strongly influenced by our political biases. As sinners, we are constantly tempted to frame public discussions in ways that promote our partisan causes.

My argument here is not directed to those who might insist that Donald Trump has not been especially sinful in his use of power. I would strongly disagree, but that is a different kind of argument. What I am arguing against here is the views of those Christian leaders who offer political reasons for not drawing attention to the president’s misdeeds. They offer no defense of the behavior in question—but they neither do they offer any reprimands.

The prophet Nathan saw things differently. My educated guess is that if David were running for re-election as king right after the Bathsheba affair, Nathan would not have voted for him. The prophet insisted that worshipers of the true God should hold leaders accountable for serious violations of their obligations as leaders. Moreover, King David responded to Nathan’s critique by repenting of his sin, and by seeking forgiveness. I have seen no such remorse from the president.

When Trump’s evangelical supporters tell us that in presidential elections we are not voting for candidates for sainthood, I agree. I have been voting in elections for more than a half-century now, and I have frequently cast my ballot for folks whose personal lives fall far short of sainthood. I have never insisted that candidates for public office get high scores in “What would Jesus do?” tests. But Christians do have a responsibility to promote the cause of moral leadership in public life. And I do want Christian leaders to be guided in their decisions by keeping the “What would Nathan do?” question clearly in mind. The writer of the *Christianity Today* editorial has now done just that in the case of President Trump. I am grateful for the prophetic message. **RM**

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JOE RAEDLE/GETTY IMAGES

Repairing Democracy for Black Lives

By Andrew Wilkes

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CIVIL LIBERTIES
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MONEY

The Rev. Andrew Wilkes refutes superficial calls to civility while refusing to give up on love as a civic virtue.

"The bones of love are everywhere but I won't let it be. There will be no love dying here for me." Gregory Porter, "No Love Dying"

THE BONES OF LOVE, of Black lives, are everywhere in America. As a co-pastor providing congregational care and delivering sermons to a Black congregation each week, it is difficult to watch politicians and pundits deploy love as a rationale for a hollow unity or thin call to civility. This summer, members of Congress have called for national days of civility, asking Americans to rise "above our disagreements and unite for the greater good of our nation." Police unions and associations across the nation, from cities like Chicago to states like Minnesota, are calling for the return of civility in our public life. As I witness such calls, I wonder: How would these calls to action, if heeded, affect our congregation?

Despite superficial calls to civility, which effectively ask us to love one another as citizens in a conflict-averse way, I'm not ready to give up on love as a meaningful civic virtue. If we suppose that love is not simply sentiment nor a technique of public discussion, but rather, a sustained, organized commitment to realizing a just future, then we might conclude that love as a force for social reconstruction in this nation is alive yet wounded, on fire yet in ashes. Media outlets gush that more participants joined the protests declaring Black Lives Matter than any movement in U.S. history. Some estimates argue that 15 to

Illustration by Erin Robinson



26 million Americans may have joined. That's surely worth celebrating. Still, there is but modest evidence that the social motion and moral imperative of this moment—impressive as the numbers are—constitutes a movement whose policy impacts will abolish our government's reliance on surveillance, violence, and punishment as the go-to policy response for working-class Black communities.

Certainly, there are multiple, meaningful reasons—murals, street signs, convincing arguments to abolish police in our societies and our schools—to feel that this moment might be different, that it might be an inflection point of sorts. We may very well stand at the beginning of a movement for racial, economic, and gender justice that will make the long years and forlorn hopes of the Black freedom struggle worthwhile. All this could be true. And yet, to use a biblical image from the book of Ezekiel, the dry bones—of love, of Black lives—are everywhere. The Hebrew Bible depicts the prophet Ezekiel, in conversation with God, surveying a valley filled with dry bones. God asks Ezekiel if the bones can live. Ezekiel responds: “O Lord, you alone know.” God then reveals that the dry bones represent the people of Israel, whose possibilities and hope will be revived with a divine wind.

A beautiful image, and yet what might the bones mean for us today? Dry bones represent the beleaguered vitality of our collective existence. They are people, places, and things that appear dead at first blush, but upon closer inspection are, in fact, alive. Principal among dry bones, yet not alone in the vast valley, is the love-laden hope that Black lives will indeed matter in the customs, court decisions, and law codes of our society.

There are too many Black folks' bones dismembered from the breath of life, at the hands and from the knees of police. Too much Black unemployment, more than 15 percent for the past three months, according to the Department of Labor. Too much reluctance from national political parties to provide robust legal protections, community wealth strategies, and public programs for working-class and low-wealth people. Too many injured and dead people—whose bones, again, are lifeless—from Covid-19. Too many unnecessary caskets resulting from unequal healthcare systems in African American and Latinx communities. The bones of love, of Black lives, are everywhere.

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Yet I take courage in jazz singer Gregory Porter's defiant lyrics, cited above. He begins with a lament: “The bones of love are everywhere.” Then, he continues, “but I won't let it be. There will be no love dying here for me.” While not necessarily about romantic love, Porter penned the lyrics with the understanding that they might be interpreted that way. On NPR's beloved Tiny Desk series, Porter expounds on the song's meaning as follows: “I've really enjoyed singing that song around the world, and really, whenever there's any trouble in my life. So, you can take it the same way. If there's any trouble in your house, there will be no love that's dying here for you and me.”

Notably, Porter explains that these lyrics not only furnish joy when he experiences trouble, but that the audience can also interpret the song in “the same way.” For Porter, trouble and the subsequent undying love are linked for us all. To my mind, there is a certain kind of love whose work, amid the dry bones of our society, must be performed in this moment.


What I have in mind, here, is a love of reparative democracy. By reparative democracy, I mean viewing politics and economics as avenues for redressing generations of policy harm, extraction of value from Black communities, and legacies of exclusion—or in Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor's choice phrase, predatory inclusion—within government decision-making about resource allocation. The starting point must be to remove the root causes of harm from Black communities, which is racist capitalism and its associated harms, such as redlining, which decimated Black neighborhoods, and private prisons, which disproportionately incarcerate folks of color. We should begin with these reforms rather than the more abstract, often race-neutral starting point of, say, realizing a more perfect union. Reparative democracy might also join Ta-Nehisi Coates and Nikole Hannah-Jones, to pick two well-known proponents, and call for reparations for Black people, beginning at a minimum with the passage of H.R. 40 in Congress, which would establish a commission to study and develop reparation proposals for African Americans.

Ultimately, repairing the foundations of our public life requires turning the page on a capitalism that occasionally consults its citizens on the decisions of its largest investors, donors, and

industry leaders—we call these elections—and instead moving to a participatory socialism. Elections certainly have consequences, particularly in the case of ballot initiatives and legislative reforms, but elections will continue to be an important but painfully piecemeal exercise in progress without the redistribution of wealth, wider membership in unions, and the leveraging public investment—taxation, monetary policy, and trade policy—in order to meet public needs.

Instead of capitalism, a participatory socialism happens when everyday people can help make choices about our common life, from regional planning and public banking to setting the agenda for local economic development. The recently conducted Strike for Black Lives, for example, mobilized more than 60 labor organizations across the country in coordinated worker walkouts from their jobs, illustrating the promise and social power of explicitly centering the wages and well-being of Black people in our polity.

In addition to redesigning our economy, the promise of reparative democracy also gives us an opportunity to unlearn America's rituals and routines of white supremacy. Unlearning white supremacy is about curating a political culture of radical candor and interdependence that seeks to understand how deep the wounds of anti-Black enslavement and its afterlife run. Redressing those wounds is essential to our democracy's future.

The incessant push alerts on our phones, notifying us yet again that the dream, the hoped-for future, indeed the bones of another, beautiful Black life have gone to glory are as emotionally unsettling as they are ubiquitous. What I am hoping, and praying, is that enough of us will coalesce into a movement for Black lives, filled with a love for reparative democracy, suffused with the passion of that psalmist, Gregory Porter, and say with one voice: We won't let it be. 

THE REV. ANDREW WILKES is the co-pastor of the Double Love Experience in Brooklyn, New York. He is also a Ph.D. student at the CUNY Graduate Center and the former executive director of the Drum Major Institute, a social change organization started by the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

Amy Coney Barrett and the Christian Legal Movement

The Christian legal movement considers the Supreme Court nominee to be one of their own.

By Daniel Bennett

Published on
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NEARLY THREE YEARS AGO, Amy Coney Barrett, then a professor at Notre Dame Law School, made her first appearance before the Senate Judiciary Committee. The senators were weighing her nomination to the Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit, and the hearing would have typically received little attention.

Then, in a line of questioning directed toward the nominee's views on the relationship between precedent and the legal philosophy of original meaning, Senator Dianne Feinstein, the ranking Democrat on the committee, emphasized possible conflicts between the nominee's Catholic beliefs and established law. "I think in your case, professor, when you read your speeches, the conclusion one draws is that the dogma lives loudly within you," she said.

While Barrett was already well known in the small world of the conservative legal movement, this exchange made her a star. "The dogma lives loudly within you" became a rallying cry, especially for conservative Christians, on social media. Barrett's defenders ranged from *National Review's* Alexandra DeSanctis and *Christianity Today's* Ed Stetzer to Princeton's Christopher Eisgruber and Harvard's Noah Feldman. Each emphasized the Constitution's prohibition on religious tests for public office, while also arguing that religious convictions should not be maligned or demonized in the context of public service.

Barrett is now President Donald Trump's third nominee to the Supreme Court. If confirmed, she would transform the Court's ideological balance in a way not seen for generations. Just as importantly, though, her confirmation would give another major victory to the conservative Christians who have remained steadily behind Trump during four tumultuous years. It would be a fitting parting gift to

this bloc in case of a Joe Biden victory in November, shoring up their defenses in the cultural, political, and legal battles to come.

FOLLOWING TRUMP'S NARROW victory in 2016, conservatives may not have dreamed of the opportunity they now face so close to another election. Barrett would be Trump's third addition to the Court, the most for a president in one term since Richard Nixon, who added four. But more importantly, Ruth Bader Ginsburg was a steady presence on the Court's liberal wing for nearly three decades, and her death at this point means an ideological realignment. Barrett's confirmation would shift a 5-4 conservative majority to a 6-3 conservative vice grip, assuming she is confirmed. Not since Clarence Thomas replaced Thurgood Marshall in 1991 will a justice be replaced by someone more opposite their ideology.

After Ginsburg's death, Barrett was immediately floated as a top candidate. Social conservatives had pulled for Barrett two years earlier to be the nominee for the vacancy that ultimately went to Brett Kavanaugh. As I wrote at the time, "If Amy Coney Barrett would have been a grand slam home run for the conservative Christians who bet big on Donald Trump, then Brett Kavanaugh is a bases-clearing double—not as flashy, and won't have them on their feet cheering for as long, but still puts them in great position to win." In some sense, there isn't a world in which Barrett wasn't the nominee this time around.

Barrett would be both different from and similar to her future Supreme Court colleagues. She would be the first justice since Sandra Day O'Connor to not have attended either Harvard or Yale, and would be the first ever to have graduated from a Catholic law school (Notre Dame '97). Barrett would be the fifth woman to serve on the Court (and the third in 11 years), but would be its most conservative woman by far. Despite Barrett's relatively short tenure on



the Seventh Circuit, she did author more than 100 opinions on a variety of issues, including gun rights and campus sexual assault. Barrett would also join Kavanaugh, Neil Gorsuch, Elena Kagan, and John Roberts as justices who clerked for a justice, as she clerked for Antonin Scalia during the Court's 1998 term.

Importantly, and legal acumen aside, Barrett would be unlikely to disrupt the collegial environment of the Court. Just as President Obama famously valued Kagan's interpersonal skills as much as her intellect when he selected her for the Court, Barrett would, by most measures, be an outstanding colleague. Following her nomination to the Seventh Circuit in 2017, all 34 clerks from her 1998 cohort signed a letter supporting her nomination, calling her "a woman of remarkable character and intellect." Following her recent nomination, one of these clerks wrote that though he disagreed with much of her legal philosophy, Barrett is "a sincere, lovely person," continuing, "She will be an ideal colleague."

IRFAN KHAN/LOS ANGELES TIMES/GETTY

Amy Coney Barrett waits for a meeting at the U.S. Capitol Building in October 2020.

Despite a resume that is impressive in both traditional and nontraditional ways, Barrett has received her share of scrutiny, both as a nominee to the Seventh Circuit and as a nominee today. And while some of this scrutiny has predictably focused on her conservative legal views and originalist reading of the Constitution, it is her religious beliefs that have drawn the most attention. In the same hearing where Dianne Feinstein questioned the role of Barrett's "dogma" in her ability to be a judge, Senator Dick Durbin asked with concern if she was an "orthodox Catholic," pointing to Barrett's use of the term in an article she had co-authored 20 years earlier.

More recently, others have defended raising concerns about the influence of Barrett's religious beliefs on her ability to serve as a Supreme Court justice. Villanova's Massimo Faggioli argued in *Politico* that her religious convictions should be fair game for the Senate to examine—specifically, her involvement with the charismatic group People of Praise, which was initially erroneously reported as being an inspiration for Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. "Barrett's nomination would raise an important new problem," Faggioli writes. "Is there a tension between forthrightly serving as one of the final interpreters of the Constitution and swearing an oath to an organization that lacks transparency and visible structures of authority?" Another article in *Politico* raised questions about whether Barrett was a "Manchurian candidate," pointing to her involvement with conservative professors and The Federalist Society during her time as a law student.

There has been no shortage of forceful responses to these critiques. For *Newsweek*, John Inazu of the Washington University School of Law and the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics (which publishes this journal) said that just because someone's religious practices seem "unfamiliar, weird, and even threatening to outsiders," these same practices are normal, harmless, and even fruitful for religious growth when viewed through the appropriate lens. And in his newsletter for *The Dispatch*, David French countered, "Tight-knit Christian communities aren't 'weird' or 'strange'... Because people are highly imperfect, there is no question that some communities and some fellowships can be dysfunctional, but the mere existence of the fellowship is not suspicious."

If replacing Scalia with Gorsuch was good and replacing Kennedy with Kavanaugh was great, then replacing Ginsburg with Barrett would be extraordinary.

Additionally, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary's Bruce Ashford asked for *First Things*: "The fact that Barrett is part of an association of Christians, People of Praise, who wish to live out their faith intentionally, is not disqualifying. How does this make her any different from the dozens of other Supreme Court justices—conservative and liberal—who have lived out their faith intentionally?" While it is reasonable for Americans to wonder how any nominee's convictions would shape their identity and responsibilities as a jurist, treating a nominee's religious beliefs as especially troubling or cause for special concern is not.


For now, Senate Democrats appear hesitant to draw from the playbook of their colleagues during Barrett's first confirmation battle. In responding to Barrett's Supreme Court nomination, Democrats have tended to aim their fire on what Barrett's confirmation would mean for the future of the Affordable Care Act, abortion, and even next month's presidential election. Given the bipartisan rejection of Democrats' earlier focus on Barrett's religion, it would be odd for them to go down that road again.

PERHAPS NO COMMUNITY is more pleased with Barrett's nomination than the small but influential Christian legal movement. This movement has had its share of successes before the Supreme Court in recent years—the legal group Alliance Defending Freedom, for example, has a nearly perfect record before the Court since 2014. But Barrett's confirmation would be the movement's biggest victory yet: In addition to her sympathy for socially conservative legal arguments, Barrett has in the past lectured at Alliance Defending Freedom's Blackstone Legal Fellowship, which trains and mentors promising law students. The Christian legal movement considers her to be one of their own, and her confirmation would mean that they will have someone on the foremost stage of America's legal and cultural battles for decades. While the other conservatives on the Court are usually allies of this movement, Barrett would be an actual friend.

Just as the Christian legal movement is cheering this nomination, so too are conservative Christians in general. This community had multiple motivations in voting for Donald Trump in 2016, but

among them was the potential for judges that would rule favorably on issues important to them, such as religious freedom and abortion. If replacing Scalia with Gorsuch was good and replacing Kennedy with Kavanaugh was great, then replacing Ginsburg with Barrett would be extraordinary. Regardless of the outcome of next month's presidential election, three reliably conservative justices would have been added to the Supreme Court in four years, something not seen in nearly 50 years. Such a prospect would have thrilled any conservative Christian voter four years ago.

The confirmation hearing for Amy Coney Barrett will likely lack the drama and explosiveness of the Kavanaugh hearing. Senate Republicans have set a goal of confirming Barrett prior to the election, a goal that has not changed despite a handful of Republican senators recently testing positive for coronavirus. And despite a cacophony of Democratic complaints about this process compared to the GOP's handling of President Obama's nominee in 2016, it appears that Republicans have the votes to do so. It remains to be seen whether Democrats will one day push through reforms to the judiciary (such as increasing the number of Supreme Court justices to achieve ideological balance) in response to how this process has unfolded, but if the votes are there, the immediate allure of confirming Barrett will be too great for Republicans to ignore.

A successful Barrett confirmation would be an exclamation point on the Trump administration's irrefutable success in shaping the federal courts. Under Trump, the Senate has confirmed almost 200 federal judges and more than a quarter of appeals courts judges, including Barrett. Adding her to the Supreme Court would be icing on the cake for the conservative Christians who have held their noses at the repugnant aspects of the Trump administration. Indeed, for this group, it may very well have made this chaotic administration worth it after all. 

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White Evangelicals and the New American Exceptionalism of Donald Trump

The president's 1776 Commission embraces a history of this nation promoted by his white evangelical base.

By Abram Van Engen

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September 29, 2020

ON SEPTEMBER 17, PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP announced he was establishing “the 1776 Commission,” a plan to “promote patriotic education” and a “pro-American curriculum.” Trump defined his commission against critical race theory and *The New York Times Magazine*’s 1619 Project, which examines the legacy of slavery in the United States. He claimed that such projects “teach our children that we were founded on the principle of oppression, not freedom.” To teach critical race theory to children, in his view, was tantamount to “child abuse.” Instead, he declared, the 1776 Commission would develop a curriculum “that celebrates the truth about our nation’s great history.”

The truth, according to Donald Trump, is that the United States is “the most exceptional nation in the history of the world.” That claim is more surprising than it might seem. Five years ago, he flatly denied that America was exceptional and described the idea as insulting. He told no histories of America (apart from the vague sense that it was once great), never talked about the Pilgrims, never compared America to a “city on a hill,” and did not hearken back to 1776 or the idea of America’s “immortal principles.” Instead, Trump based his first campaign on the idea that America was falling behind the rest of the world. “America First” portrayed the nation as a place of carnage needing a savior to set it straight.

Now, as Trump tries to “Keep America Great,” he has turned his cry of “America First!” back toward the language he once opposed. In particular, Trump has pitched his weight behind exceptionalist histories of the nation that bring him almost full circle to the rhetoric of Ronald Reagan.

Illustration by Nate Kitch



In the last political speech of his presidency, President Reagan called for an “informed patriotism” with “more attention to American history.” Like Trump, he worried about parents who refused to teach their children an “unambivalent appreciation of America.” Like Trump, he laid the blame on modern, leftist indoctrination in schools: “We’ve got to teach history based not on what’s in fashion,” Reagan said, “but what’s important.” The “fashionable” was any history unappreciative of America; the “important” stuff was whatever made it great—or at least, whatever Reagan thought made it “great” (his two examples were the Pilgrims and Jimmy Doolittle).

In his new pitch for a patriotic education, Donald Trump is also clearly pandering to his white evangelical base, which came into its own as a political force during the Reagan years. Many white evangelicals have long been suspicious of public school education. And polls show that white evangelicals are the least likely among religious groups to believe in systemic racism—which the 1776 Commission aims to debunk. Just as importantly, many white evangelical leaders embrace a history of this nation that sees it not just as great, but as sacred.

Such language could not be missed in Trump’s remarks establishing the 1776 Commission. He called the National Archives “the sacred home of our national memory.” He claimed to be defending “the immortal principles of our nation’s founders.” He called for a curriculum that would teach “the miracle of American history.” He said the nation’s youth should learn “to love America with all of their heart and all of their soul.” And he promised to “save this cherished inheritance for our children, for their children, and for every generation to come.”

All these lines parallel Scripture. In Exodus 12, God calls on the Israelites to remember their deliverance and pass it on to their children and to their children’s children in the Promised Land. In Matthew 22:37, Jesus commands, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” Trump’s speech redirects this language of religious devotion, usually reserved for God, to the nation.

It might seem counterintuitive, but that is what so many in his white evangelical base want. It is no accident that Vice President Mike Pence likewise rewrote Scripture to commend a sacred love of the United States. Many evangelical leaders, as

Why do so many white evangelicals link a love of God to a particular view of American history? Why does the nation itself need to be rewritten as sacred in order to shore up the church?

they progress through their careers, turn their attention to (false) retellings of history that baptize the American founding and portray American citizens as God’s chosen people, elected to uphold the truth of Christianity through the power of the United States. A career that may begin with writing useful devotionals and books about Scripture or Christian living eventually becomes one that speaks primarily to American history and politics. If a male, white evangelical leader has enough followers, sooner or later he feels compelled to write a history of 1776.

This pattern is not new. Francis Schaeffer, for example, began his work founding the L’Abri community in 1955 in the Swiss Alps and writing on all kinds of topics—theology, ethics, art, and more. That was not enough. Eventually he had to write *A Christian Manifesto* (1981), a book almost wholly lacking in accuracy or scholarly rigor, which claimed the formative influence of Samuel B. Rutherford on the American founders. Through Rutherford, Schaeffer argued that the civil government of the United States had formed largely under the auspices of Christianity. As always, the consequences were clear: A loss of Christianity in the broader culture meant the loss of America itself. Schaeffer was taken to task by evangelical historians like George Marsden and Mark Noll—reminding us that evangelicals are not all alike and that Christian historians regularly rise against false history—but this pattern for popular evangelical writers has often been repeated.

These days we see it playing out in evangelical leaders like Eric Metaxas and Os Guinness. Most know Metaxas today as the firebrand “court evangelical” propping up Trump while writing inaccurate histories of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and—of course—the American founders. But Metaxas actually began his career not with history but with a book called *Everything You Wanted to Know About God (But Were Afraid to Ask)*. As his influence rose, he turned to history. Os Guinness spent a lifetime writing thoughtful books to Christian audiences about all kinds of subjects, including the church, community, vocation, and Scripture. These days he’s writing about—you guessed it—American history.

The trajectory traced by leaders like Schaeffer, Metaxas, Guinness, and others is common enough to raise a basic question: Why do so many white evangelicals link a love of God to a particular view of American history? Why does the nation itself need to be rewritten as sacred in order to shore up the church?

The answers are many, including business interests (as Kevin Kruse has written about), the legacy of a Cold War binary with an atheistic competitor, and evangelical views of gendered power (as Kristin Kobes Du Mez has recently described so well). The origins of American religious nationalism go back a long way (as Sam Haselby shows), but the idea of a basically sacred nation, Christian at its core, remains an essential plank in the creed for many white evangelicals today.

Now, as a large number of white evangelicals have come to define Trump’s power base—and as the president has pitched his rhetoric and campaign primarily toward shoring up that base—Trump, like so many evangelical leaders, has turned to American history.


The extent of that transformation can be seen in Trump’s RNC speech in August. Comparing Trump’s major speeches from 2016 to the present day shows just how much he has shifted toward American exceptionalism. Yet even as he embraces Reagan’s rhetoric, his re-telling of American history is—incredibly—even whiter and less multicultural than Reagan’s. Reagan at the very least talked of immigrants from all lands seeking America’s shores. He touted the United States as a place of asylum. He described John Winthrop, the first Puritan governor, as looking for freedom in the same way as a refugee in the South China Sea. No one could claim

that Reagan embraced critical race theory, but his speeches now and then recognized that multiple races make up the fabric of American history.

As Trump rounded out his long RNC speech, his exalted rhetoric did no such thing. “Our American ancestors,” he declared, “sailed across the perilous ocean to build a new life on a new continent.” The enslaved, we learn, are not part of this tale. After arriving, Trump continued, “our” American ancestors “picked up their Bibles, packed up their belongings, climbed into covered wagons, and set out West for the next adventure.” Native Americans, we learn, are not part of this tale. Once out west, Trump persisted, “our” heroic, Bible-wielding ancestors staked a claim “in the wild frontier,” building “beautiful homesteads on the open range.”

Again and again, Trump’s history of America includes only the deeds of white people (and only some deeds at that). A new life on a new continent. An open range. A frontier “wild” with a faceless foe. And all of it tamed, settled, and built by heroes with Bibles in hand, establishing churches across the land. The 1619 Project is not without its problems. But to counter the 1619 Project, Trump has begun telling a history of the U.S. that reveals exactly why we need it in the first place. In Trump’s telling, “our American ancestors” are largely Christian and largely white—just like his base.

What we see in Donald Trump’s recent embrace of American exceptionalism, in other words, is that evangelicals have reshaped Trump as much as Trump has reshaped them. The influence has gone both ways. In 2016, as I have noted elsewhere, the phrase “city on a hill” drove a wedge between the Reagan remnant and the tribe of Trump. In 2020, the tribe of Trump has turned him back to Reagan’s rhetoric of a Christian America embraced by his evangelical base.

There are many reasons that so many evangelicals remain committed to Trump. Most commentators have talked about the way evangelicals love a bully who will stand up for their cause. But as much as Trump is the evangelicals’ bully, he has also become their puppet. 

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ESSAY

The Book of Ruth: Justice Ginsburg on Religious Freedom

By Ronit Y. Stahl

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As the first Jewish woman to sit on the nation's highest court, the late justice understood what it meant to be a religious minority and was deeply committed to religious freedom.

LAW
SEXUALITY & GENDER
BIOETHICS
CIVIL LIBERTIES

IN WHAT TURNED OUT TO BE her final dissent, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg opened with a warning: “In accommodating claims of religious freedom, this Court has taken a balanced approach, one that does not allow the religious beliefs of some to overwhelm the rights and interests of others who do not share those beliefs.” But, to her deep dismay, she wrote, “Today, for the first time, the Court casts totally aside countervailing rights and interests in its zeal to secure religious rights to the nth degree.”

As it happened, this case centered on contraception, thus poignantly bringing together her views on religious freedom with her life's work on gender equality. The latter, especially her commitment to women's rights—first as an advocate through the ACLU's Women's Rights Project and then as a judge—is perhaps most well-known. But her commitment to equality in the realm of religious freedom is no less important.

As the first Jewish woman to sit on the nation's highest court, Ginsburg

understood what it meant to be a religious minority. In the weeks following her death, much has been made of the piece of Jewish art that hung in her chambers: “*tzedek, tzedek tirdof*.” The words from Deuteronomy 16:20, “Justice, justice you shall pursue,” served as the animating force behind her work as a litigator and a law professor, a federal judge and a Supreme Court justice. But what did justice mean for RBG when it came to religion?

Two interlocking commitments grounded Ginsburg’s religion jurisprudence: first, a worldview shaped by being a religious outsider, a Jew in a demographically and culturally Christian society; and second, a sensitivity for the vulnerable, an ethos that underscored the relevance of power dynamics in interpreting the impact of laws. Together, these insights meant that she understood that coercion, in the religious realm, was not simply a matter of government imposition or obstruction. Religions can impose on others, and she vehemently resisted all forms of religious coercion, whether from the government, another religious group, or one’s own religious tradition.

As the Supreme Court takes up cases on its religion docket this term, Ginsburg’s absence will be palpable. On the day after Election Day, the Court will hear *Fulton v. City of Philadelphia*, a case about whether Philadelphia can exclude Catholic Social Services (CSS) from the city’s foster care system because it refuses to place children with same-sex or unmarried couples. Like a number of recent cases, it appears to pit anti-discrimination law against religious freedom.

Whereas Ginsburg understood that when the government offers funds or delegates tasks to private entities, it can condition participation on adherence to anti-discrimination law, it’s doubtful that her likely replacement, Amy Coney Barrett, will rule similarly.

Ginsburg’s understanding of religious freedom as a balancing act can be traced over her 40 years as a federal judge, often through her dissents. In the 1980s, as a judge on the D.C. Circuit, she—along with fellow future Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia—signaled support for Air Force Captain Simcha Goldman’s right to wear a yarmulke, a religious head covering, while on duty. The prohibition, she argued, “suggests ‘callous indifference’ to Dr. Goldman’s religious faith,” and deference to military policy was, therefore, unwarranted. Goldman would go

on to lose in a fraught 5-4 decision at the Supreme Court, though Congress later intervened and legislated permission for religious head coverings to be worn while in military uniform.

Ginsburg’s position emphasized that a seemingly neutral government policy could be remarkably insensitive and exclusionary—and thus a problem. Her ability to see and chide casual religious ostracism emerged more clearly over time. In 2014, the Supreme Court heard *Town of Greece v. Galloway*, a case about opening town meetings with a prayer from clergy, all of whom happened to be Christian. RBG assigned the dissent to Justice Elena Kagan. Why? In her view, the Establishment Clause required a robust conception of religious diversity, and Ginsburg emphasized that Kagan wrote from the perspective of a religious outsider. “She was an outsider even in her own religion in that she had to fight to be an insider. She had to fight to be the first girl bat mitzvah in her Orthodox synagogue. She was insistent . . . I think she has that sensitivity. It’s something that my colleagues don’t really get because they haven’t been in that situation.”

“That situation,” which meant embodying the dual roles of the religious outsider—as a Jew in a predominantly and culturally Christian society and as a woman within traditional Judaism—also granted Ginsburg a perspective many of her fellow justices lacked. Indeed, when RBG arrived at the Supreme Court in 1993, there had not been a Jewish justice since Abe Fortas resigned in 1969. The court’s customs reflected this, with no one noticing (or caring) that the law mandating starting the new term on the first Monday in October could collide with the Jewish High Holidays. In 1995, after Justice Stephen Breyer joined the court, Yom Kippur, the most sacred day in the Jewish calendar, fell on Wednesday, October 5—what should have been a day of oral arguments. The conflict was irregular, but real. After some behind-the-scenes negotiating, Ginsburg helped ensure that the Court would always adjust its schedule to avoid the problem. As she recalled the story later, she commented that “people of good will can accommodate sincerely held religious beliefs without undue disturbance of other interests.”

Over the past few years, this emphasis on balancing competing interests in religion cases crystallized in five 7-2 cases in which Ginsburg and Justice Sonia Sotomayor dissented

together: *Trinity Lutheran* (2017), *Masterpiece Cakeshop* (2018), *American Legion* (2019), *Morrissey-Berru* (2020), and *Little Sisters* (2020).

The topics of these cases ranged, of course. They included conflicts over playground resurfacing, wedding cakes, memorial crosses, religious school employment, and contraception; and they each arose from particular circumstances, in specific places, with distinct litigants. Nevertheless, they all raised questions about how, if at all, the government could or should engage with—be it with support for or by limitations on—religion.

One of the hallmarks of the American landscape of religion is voluntarism. Per the Establishment clause, there is no state church, and per the Free Exercise clause, individuals choose how to be, or not to be, religious. Many have argued that this “free marketplace of religion” has helped sustain the ever-expanding diversity of American religions. Others have hailed the importance of non-interference as essential for the independence, creativity, and strength of various religious traditions. And then there are also those who view the government’s role as a protector of religion, and they seek greater fortification and fewer constraints. This latter group has found favor with the court’s conservative majority and, on occasion, Justices Breyer and Kagan too.

Yet when the government tips the scales toward insulating religion from regulation, there are costs. As Ginsburg underscored in her dissents, adulation creates an unbalanced marketplace of religion. After all, as she had to point out in *American Legion*, a recent case about the acceptability of a publicly supported World War I memorial in the shape of a cross, “the Latin cross is the foremost symbol of the Christian faith.” Despite the majority’s claims that a 40-foot cross had acquired a “secular” meaning, Ginsburg highlighted (accurately!) that crosses did not adorn Jewish soldiers’ graves and “precisely because the cross symbolizes these sectarian beliefs, it is a common marker for the graves of Christian soldiers.” It is not, therefore, secular. Thus, she continued, “maintaining the Peace Cross on a public highway . . . elevates Christianity over other faiths, and religion over nonreligion.”

She pointed out that multiple forms of coercion can arise without “governmental neutrality among religious faiths, and between religion and nonreligion.” A critical element of Ginsburg’s religious

A critical element of Ginsburg’s religious freedom jurisprudence was a focus on volition: Religious praxis was to be chosen and, at the same time, it was not to be imposed on others.



Ruth Bader Ginsburg is sworn in as Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States by Chief Justice William H. Rehnquist, as President Bill Clinton and her husband Martin watch.

freedom jurisprudence was a focus on volition: Religious praxis was to be chosen and, at the same time, it was not to be imposed on others.

Indeed, for Ginsburg, concerns about religious coercion were not limited to what the government might demand of religious Americans. She also apprehended the dangers of religious Americans imposing religion on one another. This logic was most evident in *Masterpiece Cakeshop* and *Little Sisters*, which centered on claims for religious exemptions from anti-discrimination laws and the contraceptive mandate of the Affordable Care Act.

In each of these cases, she took a holistic approach that not only analyzed the religious claims but also the burdens of those claims. In *Masterpiece Cakeshop*, for example, she zeroed in on the distribution of power and thus harm. “What matters,” she wrote, “is that [the baker, Jack] Phillips would not provide a good or service to a same-sex couple that he would provide to a heterosexual couple.”

The emphasis on balancing religious rights and religious burdens reached its fullest expression in *Little Sisters*, her last dissent. She repeatedly foregrounded the disparate impact of absolute solicitude to religion, and she did so with incredulity, as in footnote 20: “Remarkably, Justice Alito maintains that stripping women of insurance coverage for contraceptive services imposes no burden.” This calculated indifference to consequences horrified Ginsburg. It not only fortified her analysis of the case, but also encapsulated how she approached religious freedom cases more broadly.

MARK REINSTEIN/GETTY IMAGES

Since 1993, many of the religion cases that reach the Supreme Court are litigated under the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA). This statutory framework asks if an otherwise neutrally applicable law “substantially burdens” a sincere religious belief; if the government has a “compelling interest” in so doing; and if the government has used the “least restrictive means” to accomplish its goal. But Ginsburg recognized that burdens and harms flow in both directions, and when values, such as women’s equality and religious freedom, are in tension, the government must balance multiple moving parts.


In *Little Sisters*, therefore, Ginsburg argued that the Court could not simply heed the anti-contraception beliefs of religious employers. It had to account for the material impact on employees as well. In this case, that meant recognizing that “between 70,500 and 126,400 women would immediately lose access to no-cost contraceptive services.” Leaving these women to “fend for themselves” was unconscionable as it let a religious exemption “condone harm to third parties occasioned by entire disregard of their needs.” More specifically, the problem with Justice Alito’s concurrence, which would mandate (rather than simply validate) a religious exemption, was that it legitimized religious coercion of others. As she put it, he “ignores the distinction between (1) a request for an accommodation with regard to one’s own conduct, and (2) an attempt to require others to conform their conduct to one’s own religious beliefs.” This was unacceptable.

For Ginsburg, religious freedom ends when it tramples on other people’s autonomy. Whether the perpetrator is the government or a religious employer, the problem lies in coercion. Religion in the United States—whether understood as belief, ritual, belonging, or ethical obligation—must maintain itself through choice, not force.

This rendering asserts that religion is most powerful when it is most voluntary. In this, Justice Ginsburg follows the legacy of her biblical namesake. Ruth, a religious outsider, a Moabite woman, elects to follow her mother-in-law Naomi back to the land of Judah. Yet three times Naomi tries to turn her back. Undaunted, Ruth proclaims, “Wherever you will go, I will go; wherever you lie down, I will lie down; your people will be my people, your God is my God.” This conversion story—

and indeed the future of the Israelites through the line of David—hinges on a woman’s choice.

But choice, in religion or any other domain, does not exist in a vacuum. As Ginsburg knew all too well from her work on women’s equality, the ability to exercise choice is constrained by structures of power. Thus, for Ginsburg, justice required a contextual reading of both law and its impact. Justice, in the words of another phrase from the Hebrew Bible, meant “do not put a stumbling block before the blind” (Leviticus 19:14). The idea that laws should not make people more vulnerable, materially harm them, or force them to carry a heavier burden was central to Ginsburg’s jurisprudence—and, especially, her analysis of religion in the United States.

Building an enduring foundation for equality under the law in American society means caring about the impact and consequences of the law on other people, including those who do not share the same religious values. For Ginsburg, the crux of vulnerability in religion cases was not necessarily borne by the religious claimant; it could just as easily be imposed on someone else. The distribution of power in religion cases was therefore central to her analysis: Who sought free exercise for themselves and who sought to limit the free exercise of others? And this is a key point distinguishing the Court’s religious conservatives from its religious liberals. It’s not a question of who is religious, but of how they understand religion operating in the world. Is religion a tool through which to wield coercive power or a shield to protect the vulnerable from coercion? 

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Will Catholic Voters Decide the Election?

These swing voters could be pivotal in battleground states.

By Elena Trueba

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ON ASH WEDNESDAY, which begins the Christian season of Lent, presidential candidate Joe Biden participated in a CNN town hall. Remnants of ashes—a public declaration of penitent faith—could be seen on Biden’s forehead as he spoke to a minister whose wife was murdered in the Charleston church shooting. “I happen to be a practicing Catholic,” Biden said, visibly moved. He quoted a phrase from the theologian Søren Kierkegaard that gives him hope in times of grief: “Faith sees best in the dark.” The quotation became particularly comforting after his son Beau died, he told Stephen Colbert in 2015. And it’s a quote that the former vice president has repeated many times on the campaign trail.

Joe Biden has put his Catholic faith on display throughout his public life. He regularly attends Mass, wears a rosary, and speaks openly about the meaning, values, and purpose he derives from Catholicism. If elected, Biden would be only the second Catholic president in history. However, his personal appeal to fellow Catholics does not mean he has a lock on their votes. President Trump’s campaign is also pursuing Catholic supporters, and his most recent Supreme Court pick Amy Coney Barrett, confirmed just days before the election, holds a strong appeal for conservative Catholics. Moreover, Catholic voters, like all voters with religious persuasions, are not a monolith. “Catholics are multi-issue voters,” Josh Dickson, the Biden campaign’s national faith engagement director, told me. “And we are fighting for every single Catholic vote.”

Catholics have long been considered important swing voters, especially in battleground states. They make up one-fifth of the U.S. population (down from



President Biden speaks with Pope Francis at the Vatican, aided by translator Elisabetta Savigni Ullmann

a quarter in the early aughts), and polls show that overall they are evenly split between the parties. Catholics of color make up an increasing share of the U.S. church, which is now 59 percent white and 34 percent Hispanic, according to Pew. Exit polling from 2016 showed that Donald Trump won 50 percent of the Catholic vote to Hillary Clinton’s 46 percent, with roughly 59 percent of white Catholics voting Republican and 74 percent of Hispanic Catholics voting Democratic. Those leanings have shifted over the past four years: An October 15 Pew survey found that Catholic voters prefer Biden to Trump, 51 to 44 percent. Sixty-seven percent of Hispanic Catholics support Biden, while Trump’s former 19-point lead among white Catholics has dropped precipitously to just 8 points (51 to 43 percent).

Catholic voters could determine who will be the next president, especially if Biden continues to undercut their support of Trump. The former vice president is currently leading in the swing states of Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin, all home to large shares of white Catholics. In the battleground states of Florida and Arizona, which are home to many Hispanic Catholics, Biden narrowly leads and ties with Trump, respectively. Understanding how Catholic voters, particularly on-the-fence white Catholics, might influence the outcome of this election necessitates understanding their historical status as a swing vote—and how this sliver of a demographic could turn the fate of an entire country.

“White Catholics have been a swing vote in America, but they’ve been turning to the right for the last three election cycles,” said Ryan P. Burge, an assistant professor of political science at Eastern Illinois University. “And then, over the last four years, they shifted back to the left.” In a recent article for *Christianity Today*, Burge outlined the slipping support for Trump among white Catholics. In April of 2020, white Catholics preferred Trump by 56 percent, but

VATICAN POOL/GETTY

In April of 2020, white Catholics preferred Trump by 56 percent, but by September, Biden and Trump were locked in “a statistical dead heat,” with white Catholic support for Biden jumping by almost 8 percentage points.

by September, Biden and Trump were locked in “a statistical dead heat,” with white Catholic support for Biden jumping by almost 8 percentage points. The white Catholic vote may be a 50-50 split this year—“a huge shift from the 18-point margin Trump won in 2016,” Burge told me. Should that happen, the chance that Trump is able to make up the difference with other voters is slim: “He’s losing by subtraction,” Burge said.

True swing voters are coveted but increasingly rare: An August *Wall Street Journal*/NBC News poll found that just 10 percent of registered voters plan to vote for a different political party than the one they supported during the 2016 presidential election. Still, both campaigns are treating Catholic voters as if they are crucial to electoral victory. The Trump campaign has received support from Catholic surrogates, including former House Speaker Newt Gingrich (whose wife Callista is the current ambassador to the Vatican) and Trump appoin-

tee Mick Mulvaney; both serve on the advisory board of Catholics for Trump. The president of the anti-abortion group Susan B. Anthony List, Marjorie Dannenfelser, is Catholic and also leads “Pro-Life Voices for Trump.” Groups like CatholicVote, a non-profit with a connected PAC of the same name, are bolstering Trump’s reelection effort as well. This conservative PAC recently launched a \$9.7 million ad campaign targeting Catholic voters in swing states with anti-abortion messages. The Trump campaign seems to be exercising a similar strategy with white Catholic voters as it has, very successfully, with white evangelicals: focusing on the issue of abortion and pressing forward with the nominations of Supreme Court justices sympathetic to conservative goals.

Such a strategy rests on the expectation that these issues are priorities for Catholic voters. However, the available data paints a more nuanced picture. A recent poll conducted by RealClear Opinion and the Eternal Word Television Network (EWTN), a Catholic news organization that leans conservative, asked Catholics who are likely voters to identify the issues that matter most to them. The top three issues were the economy and jobs (91 percent), healthcare (89 percent), and the coronavirus pandemic (88 percent). The Supreme Court came in 11th place at 68 percent, and abortion ranked last of those issues listed, coming in at 13th place, with 59 percent saying it was a top priority. Biden has faced criticism from Catholics and conservatives for supporting abortion rights, which contradicts Catholic teaching. Notably, the former vice president was denied communion at a Catholic church in South Carolina last year over his support for abortion rights. But a slim majority of the U.S. Catholic laity seems to align with his views: 56 percent of U.S. Catholics support legal abortion, according to Pew.

The Biden campaign has been conducting a broad outreach to Catholic voters. They have launched multiple coalitions dedicated to reaching religious voters through phone banking, voter turnout initiatives, and virtual roundtable discussions, among other events. One of these coalitions, Catholics for Biden, is co-chaired by prominent Catholic surrogates for the campaign like Sen. Tim Kaine and religious historian Anthea Butler. Joan Neal, a former executive vice president at Catholic Relief Services and a Catholics for Biden co-chair, told me


the three dozen co-chairs have been “given a lot of freedom” to focus on the areas of outreach about which they are passionate. Neal’s efforts have primarily focused on reaching Black Catholics; she has created a voter guide for the Black Catholic community and developed a prayer for Black Catholics to pray leading up to the election “for God’s help and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.” The campaign has also launched a series of ads highlighting Biden’s personal faith and touting the endorsements he has received from more 1,600 faith leaders. Spearheading many of these endeavors is Dickson, the campaign’s national faith engagement director and a former Republican evangelical whose Twitter bio identifies him as a “Common good Christian.”

The “common good” is a phrase that appears frequently in the Biden campaign’s messaging—Dickson himself recently described the campaign as being “deeply aligned with the common good values of Catholics.” It’s a nod to Catholic social teaching, which the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops describes as a “rich treasure of wisdom” instructing Catholics how to pursue the common good, which means “building a just society and living lives of holiness amidst the challenges of modern society.” John Carr, the director of the Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life at Georgetown University, told me that Biden speaks the language of the common good as he campaigns: “When Biden talks about dignity, when he talks about the least of these, when he talks about treating everyone with respect—these are the building blocks of the common good.”

Carr spent more than two decades working with the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, shaping the documents used to guide Catholic political engagement. He has never publicly endorsed a presidential candidate until this election. In a recent statement explaining his endorsement of Biden, Carr described himself as “politically homeless” but conscience-bound to vote for a candidate who, broadly speaking, will “seek the common good.” Carr does not support what he calls Biden’s “abortion extremism,” but he also says his Catholicism calls him to consider a range of issues when voting. “Our faith puts at the very center of our lives what we do for the least of these, and I believe that begins with unborn children, but it certainly doesn’t end there,” Carr told me.

Neal expressed a similar sentiment to me, emphasizing a “consistent ethic of life” that “preserves and protects life not just from threats in the womb, but from a lack of access to all the things that support the thriving of life.” For Neal, this mandate includes not only access to healthcare and a quality education, but also police reform and opposition to the death penalty and mass incarceration. “We need to care for unborn lives, but we also need to care for them once they are born.”

The Biden campaign’s broad emphasis on the common good may be enough to sway some white Catholic voters who have, as Burge told me, been “pushed away” by Trump’s divisiveness. Whether it will draw enough of these swing votes leftward to turn the election for Biden is unclear. Maria Mazzenga, the curator of the American Catholic History Research Center at Catholic University, noted that Catholics are like the U.S. population more broadly: “They vote in the same proportion of conservative and liberal as other voters in the U.S.” Still, there are voters who may respond to rhetoric that echoes Catholic social teaching. Mazzenga said, “If Biden talks about the common good, he could appeal to a group of Catholic voters who haven’t been addressed like this in a long time.”

Will the Biden campaign’s strategy triumph in winning over this key sliver of Catholic voters? As this election cycle comes chaotically to an end, polling certainly indicates that Biden is surging among voters, and he may yet win some of the white Catholic swing voters that could be critical to electoral victory. What does seem certain is that Biden’s faith—and his impact on Catholic voters both now and in election cycles to come—will remain squarely in the spotlight. 

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Scholars of Religion and Politics Respond to the Capitol Insurrection

Insurrectionists, observers, and critics alike deployed the rhetoric of religion for political ends.

By The Editors

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January 12, 2021

JANUARY 6, 2021, IS A DAY THAT will live in infamy. A sitting president, abetted by congressional leaders, incited a violent mob of his supporters, who sieged the United States Capitol in an attempted coup, the scope of which we are still uncovering. All along the route from Trump's rally on the Ellipse to the Capitol, there was no shortage of religious imagery. Some of the rioters carried crosses, or spoke of the "end times," or brandished images of Trump as Jesus. They waved Christian flags and Confederate flags. They wore markers of racism and neo-Nazi loyalty.

We at *Religion & Politics* and the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics condemn the Capitol siege in no uncertain terms. It may be impossible to make sense of the actions of violent extremists, but there are lessons to be learned from what happened. Some of these pertain to the variety of ways rioters and their supporters, like many before them, have weaponized religion for political ends. In light of these appalling events, we invited the faculty of the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics to share their initial thoughts, bringing their expertise in history, ethics, and religious studies to bear on this fraught moment in U.S. politics.



**MARIE GRIFFITH**

*Director and John C. Danforth
Distinguished Professor in the
Humanities*

There's been a great deal of commentary on the white Christian nationalism on display at the January 6 siege of the U.S. Capitol. The name of God was everywhere, invoked by men and women claiming to wear God's armor as patriot soldiers protecting the soul of an exceptionalist nation. Josh Hawley, a Christian nationalist senator who egged on their false belief that the recent presidential election was stolen from Donald Trump, was seen raising his fist in solidarity with those gathered. The blood of Jesus was said to be "covering this place," as prayers rang out pleading that "the evil of Congress be brought to an end." Members of Christian militias that spread lies about Muslims were in abundance, as were marks of anti-Black racism, anti-Semitism, and Holocaust nostalgia. It was a menagerie of Trumpian evangelicalism, as far from what many other Christians see as the gospel of Jesus as it seems possible to be.

Some Christian critics saw more of the occult than the orthodox in the QAnon conspiracies fueling the rioters' aspirations to be knight liberators; to be sure, it's hard to tell the difference between evangelicalism and occultism these days, and the lines are so blurred that the terminology hardly matters anymore. From multiple origins, a conglomeration of superhero narratives have converged, luring countless numbers of Americans to see themselves as, in Ross Douhat's words, "actors in a world-historical drama, saviors or re-founders of the American Republic." Analyzing the Capitol insurrectionist whose military gear included patches sporting slogans like "Armor of God" and "God will judge our enemies. We'll arrange the meeting," Peter Manseau marvels at "the danger of comic book notions of faith meeting comic book notions of nation," concluding, "We are being held hostage by permanent adolescents." The armed so-called freedom fighters are doing their best to bring their comic book, their superhero movie, their violent video game, or their Book of Revelation revenge fantasy (isn't it all the same?) to real life, and their target list includes all of us who don't accept their reality.

Those of us who don't accept their reality and who object to Christian nationalism, white supremacist

ideology, and self-appointed savior vigilantism are a diverse lot ourselves, occupying what are still starkly divergent political, economic, and religious worlds. We are hardly a "we." Progressive fans of the Squad in Congress have little in common, policy-wise, with the conservative never-Trumpers who spearheaded the Lincoln Project, and the 2020 election made for strange bedfellows, as so many elections do. But I would wager, or hope, that most dissenters to the riot have at the very least not attached ourselves to the persecution narrative of the Christian nationalist who sees Satanic power in feminism, anti-racist efforts, or religious pluralism. I want to think we reject the hubris of imagining ourselves to be God's violent foot soldiers in the war against such so-called principalities and powers, that whether we are religious or secular, our everyday lives have meaning through caring for others, not fantasizing the bloody deaths of political foes. How to live among those who see life as a cosmic war between good and evil, self-righteously certain of just who is evil and who shall be victorious, is the great test of our time.

**MARK VALERI**

*Reverend Priscilla Wood Neaves
Distinguished Professor of Religion
and Politics*

From the American Revolution to the Civil War, the Civil Rights movement, and 9/11, Americans have relied on religious language to assert the importance of momentous events. January 6, 2021, was no different. Insurrectionists, observers, and critics alike deployed the rhetoric of the sacred to describe what happened as a cataclysm, a tragedy.

The sight of the symbols of religion carried by participants in the storming astounded and saddened me. Supporters brandished flags with the name of Jesus, held large Bibles, conducted prayer circles, and marched around blowing shofars to signal divine punishment on the government—an imitation of the story of the fall of the walls of Jericho in the book of Joshua. One could interpret these gestures as parody, more frivolous than reverent. One could also interpret them as literal and deadly serious.

The commentary of much of the media and of politicians on January 6 depended on a different set of tropes, derived from America's tradition of civil

religion. Several pundits and members of Congress denounced the assault on the Capitol as a desecration—the defilement of a holy site. Others spoke of the Capitol as a shrine to democracy, violated by malevolent enemies. President-elect Joe Biden referred to the sacred rite of confirming a presidential election. The rhetoric conveyed the magnitude of the offense by asserting the sacrality of America's democratic traditions.

The speaker of the House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, and her colleague in the Senate, Timothy Kaine, relied on yet a third tradition of sacred words and imagery. Pelosi reminded the House that January 6 was the feast of the Epiphany (the revelation of the divine nature of Jesus to the world), and she prompted her listeners to see the events in D.C. as an epiphany of the true nature of the Trump presidency. As she denounced sedition, she quoted from the famous prayer traditionally ascribed to Francis of Assisi ("Lord, make me a channel of thy peace") and said a prayer of her own. Kaine spoke later of the need for fellow senators such as Josh Hawley of Missouri to reckon with Jesus' admonition against selling one's soul for the sake of worldly gain. Pelosi and Kaine are self-identified Roman Catholics.

During times of crisis, Americans have used religious language because that language conveys a sense of judgment and justice, of pleading and hope, that frames tumultuous events. Our references to the sacred helps us to interpret our current situation in relation to transcendent realities and ideals, the disregard for which was all too evident by those who stormed the Capitol and their advocates in the ranks of Congress itself.

**TAZEEN M. ALI**

*Assistant Professor of Religion
and Politics*

Much of the country watched in horror as a mob of white supremacists attempted to overturn the 2020 election results by storming the U.S. Capitol last Wednesday. Acting at Trump's behest, these domestic terrorists sought to interrupt the process of certifying Joe Biden's victory, which they declared had been fraudulent. Throughout the week, many Americans repeatedly expressed different configurations of dis-

belief and outrage that a coup could be attempted in the United States. Others shared in the sentiments of horror, but not the shock, rightly pointing out that this event was anything but surprising. In the months leading up to the November election, Trump and his key supporters had continuously cast doubt over the integrity of the process and repeated that the only way he could lose the election is if it was stolen from him. In no uncertain terms, he vowed that he would never concede the election. And Trump has stayed true to his word. Last Wednesday's events follow dozens of post-election lawsuits contesting Biden's victory, focusing in particular on predominantly Black cities like Philadelphia, Detroit, and Milwaukee, insisting that only "legitimate" (barely veiled code for white) votes should count.

While Trump's status as a serial liar is well documented, it behooves us to take seriously the ways

We will be facing the challenges raised by the religion-saturated rioting of January 6 for years to come—not only as academics, but also as citizens of a democracy made vulnerable by these latest lords of misrule and those Republican politicians who incited them to overthrow the altars.

—LEIGH ERIC SCHMIDT

in which he has been transparent and consistent about his white supremacist agenda. Throughout his presidency, Trump has delivered on his promises to uphold the racist status quo of the United States. Rampant Islamophobia undergirded his 2016 campaign as he called for “a complete and total shutdown” of Muslims entering the country. Many insisted that this was mere hyperbole, that Trump would never act on it. Yet only days into his presidency, he signed an executive order banning entry to foreign nationals from seven Muslim-majority countries. This would be the first of three “Muslim bans.” Since Islamophobia in the U.S. is a form of anti-Muslim racism rooted in anti-Blackness, it should come as no surprise that this travel ban included a number of African countries with significant Muslim populations. Trump’s immigration policies hearken back to an earlier period in U.S. history when citizenship was tied to whiteness and Christianity: Muslims were barred from naturalization until the mid-twentieth century.

Trump’s incitement of mob violence last week is only the latest event in his thorough commitment to upholding the white supremacist ideals that the U.S. was founded upon. Just the last four years provide sufficient context to overcome our shock and understand exactly how this situation came to be, let alone considering the last four centuries of American history and the enduring legacies of slavery. This was no random angry mob, but a group led and incited by elected officials, further evidenced by Trump’s affectionate words towards them. Moreover, even as Republican Senators Ted Cruz and Josh Hawley “condemned” the mob violence, they still went on to contest the certification of the election results with no sense of irony. We should not linger on Cruz and Hawley’s so-called cognitive dissonance; their halfhearted condemnations of white mob violence were never going to cohere with their attempts to overturn the election results. In other words, we should not focus on their lies, and instead take seriously when they speak their truths. Trump and his allies have been clear and consistent in their commitment to white supremacy, and we should take them at their word.

We should not understand the resignations of members of Trump’s cabinet, or the institutions that are suddenly distancing themselves from him at this chaotic eleventh hour, as anything more than a farce. We also should not linger on the discrepancy

between police attitudes towards peaceful BLM protestors and violent white supremacists. To do so fundamentally misunderstands the history of law enforcement that was established to uphold the racist status quo. This long history will not be undone with the advent of a new administration. But in the meantime, Trump and his enablers should be held to account beyond the end of their terms in office, in order to prevent the possibility that the next coup attempt will be successful.



LEIGH ERIC SCHMIDT
Edward C. Mallinckrodt
Distinguished University Professor
in the Humanities

In 1973 the acclaimed historian of early modern France, Natalie Zemon Davis, published one of her most enduring essays, “The Rites of Violence,” on the bloody religious riots that recurrently stained Europe’s post-Reformation landscape. A harbinger of the shift toward a cultural history deeply inflected by cultural anthropology, Davis’s essay exhumed the ritualistic patterns that governed otherwise chaotic mobs and fevered rabble bent on destruction and desecration. Contemporary descriptions of sixteenth-century religious rioters—Protestant and Catholic—commonly depicted them as disordered, hydra-headed crowds driven “by the appetite of those who stir them up [to] extreme rage, just looking for the chance to carry out any kind of cruelty.” Davis suggested that we needed to look beneath the surface of frenzied tumult and mindless brutality to see the performative prescriptions—the liturgics—of religious violence.

I was reminded of Davis’s essay as Trump’s riotous insurrectionists stormed the U.S. Capitol on Wednesday. It will take a while for us to sort through the video evidence and journalistic reporting to see what role religion and ritual played in these “wild” and seemingly unscripted scenes. We know enough already, though, to recognize many of the religious threads that were woven into these latest rites of violence. We might well start with the religion of the Lost Cause, the huge debt the rioters owe to the palpable devotion to the Confederacy still nurtured in rightwing circles (Trump was yet battling the removal of Confederate names from American

military bases days before this rampage). Those Confederate flags waving inside the Capitol building or from its balconies looked like the requital of all those who had so piously tended Southern “heritage” and white supremacy for well over a century.

We would need to turn quickly thereafter to the evangelical Protestant nationalism that has wrapped itself in the Trump flag, to all those who showed up with Bibles in hand as their ritualistic prop of white Christian solidarity (much as Trump did for his photo-op in front of St. John’s Church last June to dramatize his supposed vanquishing of the Black Lives Matter movement). One rioter carried a Christian flag into the Senate building; another carried a banner that read “Jesus is my savior/Trump is my president”; many sported T-shirts or baseball caps heralding their combined loyalty to “God, Guns, and Trump”; many were zealous to demonize their enemies—from the media to Nancy Pelosi to Mitt Romney—as profaners of their amalgamated deities. All told, the “heavy religious vibe” among those in attendance was impossible to miss, the liturgical pageantry of the rioting all too plain, if not always easy to decipher: What are we to make, for example, of the two celebrants wearing vestments, emblazoned with an image of the Virgin Mary, who were intoning a Catholic blessing over the gathering, while carrying Jewish shofars? It will take scholars with Davis’s gifts for semiotic analysis to fathom our own rites of violence in all their religious complexity and perversity. We will be facing the challenges raised by the religion-saturated rioting of January 6 for years to come—not only as academics, but also as citizens of a democracy made vulnerable by these latest lords of misrule and those Republican politicians who incited them to overthrow the altars.



LERONE A. MARTIN
Associate Professor of Religion
and Politics

I write this letter to white evangelical moderates. I write not as an outsider, but as a son of evangelicalism. I am a born-again believer, my faith nurtured in the cradle of white evangelical churches and schools.

As we confront the aftermath of January 6, there is much blame to go around: President Trump, the legion of violent insurrectionists, Senators Joshua

Hawley and Ted Cruz, and the list goes on. They have most certainly sown lies and violence, causing us all to reap the same.

Yet, my attention, however, turns to you: The white evangelical moderate who aided and abetted the violence at the Capitol. I do not mean the violent white Christian nationalists; they already stand condemned. Nor do I refer to the white evangelicals who consistently stood for justice and equality. No, I am writing to you, who with loud voices proclaimed from the mountain tops of social media your disgust with Trump, Hawley, and Cruz this past week, but who remained silent during the violence of the past four years.

Your support and silence helped create the insurrection. The ashes of destruction that remain at the Capitol are not the result of a sudden fire. Wednesday was no spontaneous combustion. It was a slow burn, a flame that was fanned by white evangelical affirmations and the even louder silences during the Trump years. Perhaps you feel my criticism is too harsh. But with political power comes moral responsibility. Simply put: to whom much is given, much is required. Yet, the majority of moderate white evangelicals counted the political cost and chose not to bear their cross. In exchange you received your political salvation: lower corporate taxes, pro-life judges, and a renewed sense of cultural power and relevance.

To you I ask: What does it profit a body of believers to gain political appointments and lose its own soul?

As we approach MLK Day, I paraphrase what he said to white Christian moderates in 1963. I have looked at your churches and colleges and asked: “What kind of people worship here? Who is their God? Where were their voices when the lips of [President Trump] dripped with words of interposition and nullification? Where were they when [President Trump] gave a clarion call for defiance and hatred? Where were their voices of support when bruised and weary [Black] men and women decided to rise...to the bright hills of creative protest” against police brutality.

Your silences have spoken volumes, permitting four years of deception. You allowed the sin of bearing false witness to simply become “alternative facts.” You blessed the fount of lies from which sprang “stop the steal.” And any white evangelical who said otherwise was excommunicated, cast into the outer darkness of treason.

The pain of the insurrection on January 6 is compounded by finding little about it surprising, and knowing from that lack of surprise that there was so much that could have been done to keep things from getting to this point.

—FANNIE BIALEK

Now that the nation's Capitol lies desecrated, it is in vogue to engage in soul-searching. White evangelicals and Republicans alike have expressed shock and moral outrage with the Trump administration and its coddling of white nationalist violence. Yet none of these statements will divorce you from your history.

I know my disappointment may come across as harsh, but as King said, “there can be no deep disappointment where there is not deep love.” Beloved, if you do not muster the courage to stand against sin on the left AND the right, you will remain, as King noted of the white moderates of his day, “the great stumbling block” towards racial equality and justice. It is not the white Christian nationalists and far-right extremists who present the greatest hurdle, but rather “the white moderate, who is more devoted to ‘order’ than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice.” Beloved, if you fail to unhinge yourself from the chains of conformity, your faith communities and gospel witness will continue to lose authenticity, you will forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be treated as a white nationalist political party masquerading as a church.

I close as King closed his letter to white moderates: If I have said anything in this letter that over-

states the truth, I ask your forgiveness. If I have said anything that understates the truth and indicates a willingness to settle for anything less than justice and equality, I beg God to forgive me.



LAURIE F. MAFFLY-KIPP
*Archer Alexander Distinguished
Professor*

One of the casualties of the economic downturn spurred by the pandemic has been cutbacks in the academic study of history and society. Numerous colleges and universities, feeling the multiple pressures of parental focus on “practical” training, the rise of majors in the STEM fields, and the need to reduce their budgets, have cut programs in the liberal arts, including foreign languages, history, and religious studies. Their arguments are utilitarian: Job markets are shifting, and increasingly students seek an education that will provide a solid basis of employment.

I strenuously disagree with this erosion of the humanities, but my purpose here is not to argue with the calculus employed by students, their parents, and academic administrators. What worries me is this: On January 6, Trump supporters, encouraged by politicians, stormed into the U.S. Capitol, damaging its contents and terrifying its occupants. How are we to make sense of such events without some knowledge of history, critical thinking, and social movements? Or without the reasoning and rhetorical skills provided by philosophy and literature? How do we assess the puzzling mix of Nordic headdress, signs bearing the message “Jesus 2020,” crosses, shofars, and “Camp Auschwitz” sweatshirts without knowing something about both the recent and ancient past?

It is those “softer” skills that help us explain, analyze, and (hopefully) work through dark social moments. These are languages that citizens of a democracy must learn. Just as I stare in ignorance at circuit boards, I worry that students, without the ability to decipher complex codes of social knowledge, will shrug in helplessness at political, religious, and cultural events to come. I’ve already heard over the past week repeated phrases uttered in disbelief: “How could we have seen this coming?” or “We’re better than this.”

For those who engage seriously in the study of the liberal arts, January 6 was neither a shock nor an aberration. For people of color, the eruption of white nationalist sentiment wrapped up in a (mostly) Christian package was no surprise. And this is why we all have to know what our country is and has been in the past. This is why I teach about religious achievement and religious conflict in U.S. history and politics.

Our students need this knowledge alongside the more obviously “useful” knowledge gained in business, engineering, or computer science. Without it, they will be caught up short every time by future social challenges—or, worse yet, easily persuaded by any demagogues that come along. The liberal arts are not the optional desserts consumed by a privileged elite; they are the bones and sinew of our body politic that allow our democratic society to exist. We scale them back at our own peril.



FANNIE BIALEK
*Assistant Professor of Religion
and Politics*


What does it mean to feel, and to say, that the insurrection at the Capitol on January 6 was not surprising? From around the time footage of the attack began appearing on television, Twitter was full of people proclaiming their lack of surprise, citing historical precedent in white supremacist violence and fascist movements as well as Trump’s tweets, for weeks, advocating increasingly extra-procedural measures to “stop the steal.” By the evening, the unsurprise had reached mainstream media and I watched even my local news anchors comment that the day was “shocking, but not surprising.” In the days that have followed, reasons not to be surprised have been piling up: historical reasons and proximate reasons, including the explicit announcements of the action by many participants and political leaders, and their transparent preparations for violence.

The attack was not a surprise. It was planned in the open, it was promoted by the president, and it follows decades of right-wing extremist violence that included in only the last few months an effort to kidnap a sitting governor. To be surprised admits of not having paid attention, or not having understood. It might indicate an overinvestment in fantasies of

American exceptionalism, or a privileged and myopic position in a society that has long shown many of its members the possibility of this kind of harm.

The problem with not being surprised—the pain of it—is that surprise would allow us to forgive some failures to have prepared for it, or prevented it. At the beginning of the pandemic, I often felt a version of this relief. The coronavirus was novel, as its name reminded us daily; the disruptions were not our fault, the lack of a treatment was not our failure. The work required was to care for each other now and start fighting the threat expediently, for the days ahead. As the failures in this country to be prepared for such a pandemic became more obvious, any sense of relief from responsibility vanished. This virus was novel, but the possibility of a pandemic wasn’t. And the mismanagement of the pandemic, from those precious early days, squandered whatever blamelessness novelty might afford.

It is comforting to find horrors surprising because it suggests that you couldn’t have done anything to stop them, since you didn’t even know they could happen. It is also comforting, in some strange sense of comfort, to be surprised because you had done everything you could to prevent them, and their defeat of those efforts is what presents the surprise. The pain of the insurrection on January 6 is compounded by finding little about it surprising, and knowing from that lack of surprise that there was so much that could have been done to keep things from getting to this point.

The right response to this pain cannot be to hope the perpetrators have all learned their lessons, the ones that we who are not surprised already knew. The problem is not what was known and not known—that’s what being unsurprised should teach us. The problem is what was not done: the many incidents of domestic terrorism that have been implicitly sanctioned by a lack of response; the repeated incitements to violence by a president and other political leaders that meet sighs instead of censure; the proliferation of guns and militia groups and open domestic terrorist activity that is so rarely addressed by more than shock. Genuine accountability for this attack is necessary. To move on, even to some supposed prevention of future violence, would sanction such violence irreparably. If justice is not done here, the next attack will not be surprising again. We must build a society through accountability and repair in which we can again be surprised. 

Amanda Gorman's “City on a Hill”

The poet revives American exceptionalism with new meaning for a new era.

By Nichole Renée
Phillips

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THE TRANSITION FROM BLACK HISTORY MONTH to Women's History Month is an occasion for commemorating the contributions of Black women to our nation's history—and to the very idea and identity of America. Inaugural poet Amanda Gorman's “The Hill We Climb” continues a line of prominent Americans who have called the nation to reflect on the meaning and identity of America.

A full appreciation of Gorman's poem begins with someone not associated with either Black History Month or Women's History Month—the seventeenth-century founding figure of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, John Winthrop. Winthrop's call to early Americans to be “a city upon a hill” is among the first efforts to define America—to summon us to think about who we are and who we want to be. We are still climbing that hill. Gorman's poem reminds us why we must continue the vital work needed to reach that sought-after city.

One of the earliest settlers to ponder the meaning of America was the Englishman Sir John Winthrop. Along with his fellow Puritans, he traveled across the Atlantic Ocean aboard the *Arbella* in 1630 to a “new” England to flee the religious and political persecution of “old” England. Winthrop proposed that the meaning of this new colony was to establish autonomous and democratic congregations, independent and separate from a centralized English state church. Simply put, it was to represent religious and political freedom.

This new colony would be a “city upon a hill,” he famously declared in his “A Model of Christian Charity,” where the “eyes of all people are upon us.” His sermon was virtually unknown in his day but would amass popularity as a consequence of the Cold War.



Illustration by Ellen Weinstein

Without knowing the U.S. would ultimately become an independent nation, this metaphorical “city on a hill” was a civil religious symbol for the national and religious commitments of a newly developing English colony—a colony that Winthrop hoped would eventually be an exemplar for English colonies throughout North America and elsewhere. Here, the church and civil society in partnership with each other were destined to carry out covenantal responsibilities for living together as one community.

This metaphorical “city on a hill” has been appealed to repeatedly throughout U.S. history. One of the earliest documented instances is Harvard scholar Perry Miller’s retrieval of the metaphor in his mid-twentieth century efforts to define and articulate the meaning of America. After identifying Puritanism as the beginnings of this incipient nation (even though Native Americans were here all along), Miller turned to Winthrop’s sermon and his symbolic phrase to assert both the purpose and distinctiveness of the American experience. In *City on a Hill: A History of American Exceptionalism*, Abram C. Van Engen reminds us that after Miller, almost every U.S. president to hold office, from John F. Kennedy to Barack Obama, recapitulated the phrase to proclaim and liken the United States to a “city upon a hill.” Ronald Reagan, especially, is remembered for building a powerful presidential platform by repeating this metaphor of American exceptionalism.

And so, without exception, this trope of American exceptionalism was again reinscribed when 22-year-old Amanda Gorman took the national stage in January to recite her inaugural poem, “The Hill We Climb.”

Her poem is especially significant because though we are a culturally pluralistic nation, Winthrop’s “city on a hill” is at times elusive for large segments of the U.S. population, particularly Blacks, other peoples of color, and even women. In other words, to actualize the message on our national seal, *e pluribus unum*—“out of many, one”—requires a more arduous understanding of “the hill we climb” to reach that far-off city.

That understanding became paramount a mere two weeks after a failed assault on the U.S. Capitol when Amanda Gorman, the nation’s youngest inaugural poet in U.S. history, assumed the monumental responsibility of speaking at Biden’s presi-

dential inauguration and to the theme of “America United.” Yet, her early twenty-first century version of a “united America” would be very different from the nation’s English and colonial predecessors, where *white and Protestant and male* were the *prima facie* racial, religious, and gender categories.

Now, to reach that distant “city on a hill” will demand “the hill we climb.” Because a maelstrom of factors—political violence, racial and social unrest, a tenuous economy, and a death-dealing pandemic—have created special circumstances provoking the U.S. public and national leaders, alike, into making clarion calls to address this country’s fragile state and to heal.

Amanda Gorman has responded by being the voice that calls us to “close the divide because we know, to put our future first, we must first put our differences aside.” She asks us to “lay down our arms so we can reach out our arms to one another.”

Gorman’s “city on a hill” further stands in stark contrast to the January 6 uprising “on the hill” of our Capitol, the sacred temple of our democracy. On that day, Christian nationalists defiantly waved their flags, even wielding them as weapons. As Gorman

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simply unfinished.”**

recited, in lines she wrote after the insurrection: “We have seen a force that would shatter our nation rather than share it, would destroy our country if it meant delaying democracy.”

Immediately after the violence, though, political and thought leaders, cultural critics, social commentators, everyday citizens, and even foreign heads of state and diplomats incredulously intoned, “This is not America.” They rejected the idea that American identity is synonymous with sedition, violence, and, yes, racism. Yet, American history shows us that, in actuality, this is also who we are.

We had a Civil War—marked by regional, fratricidal battles that became one of the defining features of statehood leading to a crisis about what it means to be American. Threatening the breakup of the union was the secession of an entire region of the country over the issue of slavery.

“The Hill We Climb” delivers on the tensions created by the multiple and conflicting meanings of America—the hopeful and the sinful alike. At times dissonant yet revealing a cacophony of meanings, Gorman recites: “Scripture tells us to envision that everyone shall sit under their own vine and fig tree and no one shall make them afraid. If we’re to live up to our own time, then victory won’t lie in the blade but in all the bridges we’ve made that is the promise to glade, the hill we climb. If only we dare.”

Such “daring” moreover seizes upon the tensions inherent to America being a representative democracy with its oft-times irreconcilable elements: a civic republic and a liberal democracy both fashioning a puzzling paradox.

This, too, is America.

And so, Amanda Gorman’s poem, her metaphorical “city on a hill”—one that we are still climbing toward—reminds us that this is also who we are. “Yes,” she says, “we are far from polished, far from pristine. But that doesn’t mean we are striving to form a union that is perfect. We are striving to forge our union with purpose.”

We are a nation guided by an American civil religious tradition, that while not monolithic, still ensures the visibility of diverse racial, religious, and ethnic national groups and communities. Dissenting from “a consensus model of culture,” the late historian of religion Charles Long pressed in his essay, “Civil Rights—Civil Religion: Visible People and Invisible Religion,” for an inclusive American

civil religion, guided by a shared pursuit of justice, equity, and righteousness.


We are a nation that, though an imperfect union, still strives to fulfill covenantal responsibilities for, as Gorman reveals, “somehow we’ve weathered and witnessed a nation that isn’t broken but simply unfinished.” Covenantal responsibilities effectuate a common good and subvert individual wills to that of the group, calling forth a “we”-ness, a form of social belonging, that supersedes regional and racial differences as well as social animosities. “We will rise from the gold-limbed hills of the west,” the poem intones. “We will rise from the windswept north-east where our forefathers first realized revolution.”

We are a nation that continues to be exceptional, despite our unexceptionalisms, where a politics of social belonging demands, in Gorman’s words, that we dare “not march back to what was, but move to what shall be”; where the common discourse and language of a spirited civic republic becomes the rudder for an American civil religious tradition of shared, yet diverse stories, that have not always been culturally available to all Americans—for national, racial, ethnic, and even linguistic reasons

That those who were once excluded—a failure of American democracy—now feel the acceptance of inclusion from the east-to-the-west, from the north-to-the-south, and everywhere in-between.

This, too, is America.

National disunification threatens this America of which I am speaking—an America in need of Black women’s voices and advocates of its civil religion. Because Gorman lucidly and boldly claims: “We [are] the successors of a country and a time where a skinny Black girl descended from slaves and raised by a single mother can dream of becoming president, only to find herself reciting for one.”

Yes, this America is Amanda Gorman’s hopeful and renewed vision of America, that at the close of this Black-turned-Women’s History Month, sings as Langston Hughes did, “I, too, am America”—that “city on a hill.” 

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Social Media and Orthodox Jewish Women's Rights

By Avital
Chizhik-Goldschmidt

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CIVIL LIBERTIES
CULTURE
LAW
MEDIA
SEXUALITY & GENDER

Chava Herman and
supporters of her effort to
obtain a religious divorce

Women are taking to Instagram to call for divorce reforms.

DALIA OZIEL IS NO SEASONED social justice warrior. She is a 25-year-old influencer, with an Instagram following of 34,000. She is known for her ubiquitous beanie plopped on top of her long wig, her sales of long-lasting lipstick, and her signature color: salmon pink.

But Oziel was propelled into activism when she received a direct message from a Brooklyn-based woman named Chava Herman. Herman, a mother of two daughters, is an *agunah*—a Hebrew term that means a “chained woman.” According to Herman, she has been waiting for a religious divorce from her husband since 2011. (Herman did not respond to a request for comment.) Though she obtained a civil divorce, until she receives a *gett*, the religious document which only a husband has the power to give, she is forbidden by Orthodox Jewish law from remarrying.

Herman is not alone in this situation; the Organization for the Resolution of Agunot is working on around 300 cases of women trapped in religious Jewish

marriages, and some advocates estimate that the real numbers are closer to 500 in the United States alone.

Herman messaged Oziel, asking her to share a poster calling on her husband to issue a divorce.

And so Oziel did, on February 9—with the hashtag, #freechava.

Within a few weeks, the hashtag would explode into a rallying cry among young Orthodox women demanding their right to divorce, some going as far as demanding transparency and accountability in the Orthodox rabbinical system, with close to 1,500 posts and thousands more stories. Teenagers, housewives, wig-makers, and food bloggers started coming out of the woodwork across Ortho-

dox communities, posting about women's rights, creating lip-syncing reels, and some even taking to the streets to protest on behalf of Herman and other women.

Danielle Renov, a food blogger in Jerusalem, posted an Instagram story wearing a pink headscarf, holding her newborn: “There’s a woman whose life is stuck, she can’t go on. So we will keep doing this until we set her free.” These stories appear in between her videos of food prep—*chicken and cous-cous tonight*—and Passover prep tips.

“The past month the #freechava campaign took off and has quite literally rocked our world,” wrote Dini Weinberg of Monsey, New York, known for her high-



ANNA RATHKOPF

end eponymous wig brand, to her 110,000 Instagram followers. Weinberg invited Herman to her salon and shared a photo of Herman trying on a new wig, which was paid for by a group of concerned women. (In the Orthodox community, many married women traditionally cover their heads, some with wigs, as markers of their marital status.) “It’s gotten us to look around and see the abuse, the inconsistencies, and total falsehood. But it’s also shown us that together, we are unstoppable.”

But the campaign shows something else that is fascinating: The way the internet is being used to fight for justice in a religious community. Here, women are amassing large followings, where they can speak their minds on social issues outside of traditional media.

The campaign is not just about Herman’s plight. It is a message to a wider community: Don’t mess with one of us, or we’ll *open our mouths*.

The *agunah* issue has sparked occasional uproar in the community, eventually receding from public view until the next wave of outrage. In pre-war Europe, Orthodox feminist Bertha Pappenheim railed about leadership failures in solving this legal challenge; in 1995, British Orthodox women’s rights activists launched a campaign demanding that the chief rabbi institute a pre-nuptial agreement. But among millennials, until recently, most Orthodox young women rarely opened their mouths about the issue—as religious women, they accepted the yoke of being beholden to religious authority and its interpretation of Jewish law as a central part of their faith. This relative silence may have been largely because *agunahs* themselves kept their predicaments secret, and at the very least did not share their stories online—while those who knew the stories and decried the *agunah* crisis were often perceived as radical feminists. But now, those once-fringe issues have moved into the center, nestled in between community news, lipstick sales, and Sabbath recipes.

“Social media works. Activism works. Pressure works,” Orthodox feminist activist Adina Miles-Sash posted earlier this month on Instagram when one *agunah* finally received her divorce, which many credited to social media pressure. Speaking to *gett* refusers, Miles-Sash wrote: “We will have you fired from your job. We will publicly humiliate you. We will find ways to have you arrested. And we will not rest until every prisoner is set free.”

A religious Jewish divorce is generally given in front of a rabbinical court, which consists of three rabbinic judges. The laws of religious divorce are complex and fill countless volumes over the centuries: The document must be given of a man’s free will, and not under duress; if the divorce is deemed somehow illegitimate and the woman has a child afterwards with another man, the child might be deemed a bastard; and annulment of marriage without a husband’s consent is deeply controversial.

The power dynamics complicate matters further: In the United States, religious divorce courts are not centralized, have little oversight, and can easily go renegade. Any group of three men can put a logo on a piece of paper and declare itself a court—with some offering a welcome haven for a recalcitrant husband.

“Every *gett* refuser has a rabbi who is enabling him, whispering into his ear, encouraging [him] to withhold the divorce,” said one ultra-Orthodox rabbinical judge, who requested anonymity for fear of professional consequences. “Enablers are protecting their own interests, be it money or power.” The judge added that, in his experience, an enabling rabbi might have a financial incentive in extending a litigation in his court, for which he receives hourly fees—or simply might want the ability to exhibit power, in controlling which couples get divorced and which must stay married. Many women end up paying for their freedom, whether giving up child support or properties in return for the precious *gett*.

Among activists, there are varying opinions about their movement’s goals: Some see this as a battle merely against individual perpetrators, involving rallies (at times raucous ones) outside the homes of *gett* refusers. But others see this as a battle against a system, and advocate for sweeping change. That change can happen through religious pre-nups being standardized; through exposure of ex-husbands’ enablers, who have weaponized the *gett* process; and through advocating that state legislatures pass bills to render coercive control a felony, as one former *agunah* and NYC Council candidate Amber Adler is arguing for.

And in the midst of all the solidarity, a sort of “MeToo” movement emerged in the last month—a phenomenon that is radical in a community where divorce is still largely stigmatized. Divorced Orthodox women have been turning on their phones to weep on camera about abusive exes, silent bystand-

ers, and rabbinical courts that let them languish as they waited for freedom.

“Seeing it all over Instagram is super triggering for me,” said Long Island-based hair stylist Devori Ulman on a recent Instagram story. “But two and a half years could have easily turned into ten years,” she said, referring to the time that she waited for her divorce. She went on, “How easy it is for these men to get away with holding you hostage, not letting you continue with your life, not letting you make your own choices? Something has to change, and I hope the change is now.”

Izzy Massre, an Orthodox woman in Cleveland, Ohio, who herself recently received her divorce, said that she had been too afraid to share her experience as she was going through it. “When I finally posted a few months ago that I was going through a divorce, I had so many people reach out to me, I felt so much support,” she said in an interview. “I told myself then, that when I get my *gett*, I will speak about divorce because I waited so long. On January 15, [2021], I got my *gett*, and I posted about it on Instagram.” Massre said that she was flooded with messages afterwards from other religious women who themselves had gone through this experience and felt validated seeing her post.

But Herman’s story may have sparked something much greater: a collective rage among young Orthodox Jews over the state of marriage and divorce in their community, and for some, anger about leadership’s inability to solve the issue. It is a fascinating transformation to watch—a platform once used for outfits of the day, for selling dresses and wigs, is now being weaponized into a rallying cry for change. Religious women have built power online, often through small businesses—and that power is now transferring to the streets.

“What’s happening on social media is the start of a grassroots movement,” said Leslie Ginsparg Klein, a historian of Orthodox gender history. “Historically, this is one of the most effective ways change happens in the Jewish community, especially change relating to women.” Ginsparg Klein cites the history of Sarah Schenirer, a Polish Jewish woman who created the first girls’ Jewish schools in inter-war Europe, as an example of that sort of change. “Schenirer started organizing on a grassroots level and ultimately shifted communal perspectives on education for girls, to the point where Jewish edu-

Divorced Orthodox women have been turning on their phones to weep on camera about abusive exes, silent bystanders, and rabbinical courts that let them languish as they waited for freedom.

cation is universal today in the community. The women on social media today are following her lead.”

Of course, these sorts of campaigns can easily go wrong—without legal counsel, accounts can be accused of doxxing or posting unverified information. It is a strategy ridden with risk, a suboptimal one, a path which activists argue has become necessary due to a failure of leadership. Community members have essentially become citizen journalists, slowly uncovering what they are experiencing—on Instagram they’re posting pictures of a *gett* refuser on the run, and on WhatsApp, they’re sharing voice-notes in which women secretly record the abuse going on in their homes. It’s a sad reality in a community which does not always value investigative journalism—and risks errors, with no fact-checking process.

“Information needs to be verified by certain criteria,” said Shoshanna Keats-Jaskoll, an Orthodox women’s activist based in Israel. “Have these men been warned? Are they in contempt of a decision? Have they been told multiple times that if they don’t give a divorce, sanctions will be enacted? Then yes, we do it. We definitely should not have everyone saying, ‘I also don’t have a *gett*!’ randomly. We are not here to doxx, we are here to help the community understand that there is abuse going on. Should we not have to do it? Absolutely. But that’s the establishment putting us in this position.”

Others lament that *agunahs* need to make a public (and very exposing) plea for their freedom. “The line of questioning that is going on, the need for women to reveal personal information about their situation, I think, is not ideal. It minimizes women,” said one Brooklyn-based former *agunah*, who requested anonymity out of concern about community backlash. “The thing is, if this was going on when I was going through my divorce, I probably would have been one of those women telling my story, because it would have been my only hope. Unfortunately, the rabbis dropped the ball on this subject. There is really nobody to turn to who can help.”


For all the ills of social media, in insular religious communities it is offering a free platform for once-marginalized voices—and for exposure of wrongdoing, in a space where there are fewer gatekeepers. In some ways, it is a welcome development, one that could only happen thanks to independent digital media and to women demanding

visibility. In a community where women’s faces are routinely omitted from traditional publications, on the grounds of “modesty”—a practice that has little precedent in religious law yet is the result of growing fundamentalism—the appearance of a woman’s smiling face next to her children, the sound of her voice telling her painful story on a social media feed, has the power to spark a movement.

“It’s baffling to me that people don’t see the connection between erasing women in print and the *agunah* crisis,” said one ultra-Orthodox female educator, who requested anonymity for fear of backlash. “They’re expressions of the same core philosophy. When women aren’t seen, they aren’t considered. Their experience isn’t factored into the equation and they lose their humanity in the context of the conversation.”

Daniella Presser, whose mother has been waiting for her divorce since 2005, said that she feels grateful for the publicity, but a “bit of resentment” that it took so long. “Where were you all of these years? When we were fighting tirelessly?”

Is this the explosion of an Orthodox Spring? Perhaps, but only if the focus is less on individual perpetrators and more on systemic change, including reforming rabbinical courts. “The pressure for now is great,” Presser said. “But it’s not enough to stop it for the future generations.” She wants to normalize religious pre-nuptial agreements, which would prevent withholding divorces.

Until then, Massre said, “The community is taking matters into its own hands.” 

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The Eugenics Roots of Evangelical Family Values

By Audrey Clare Farley

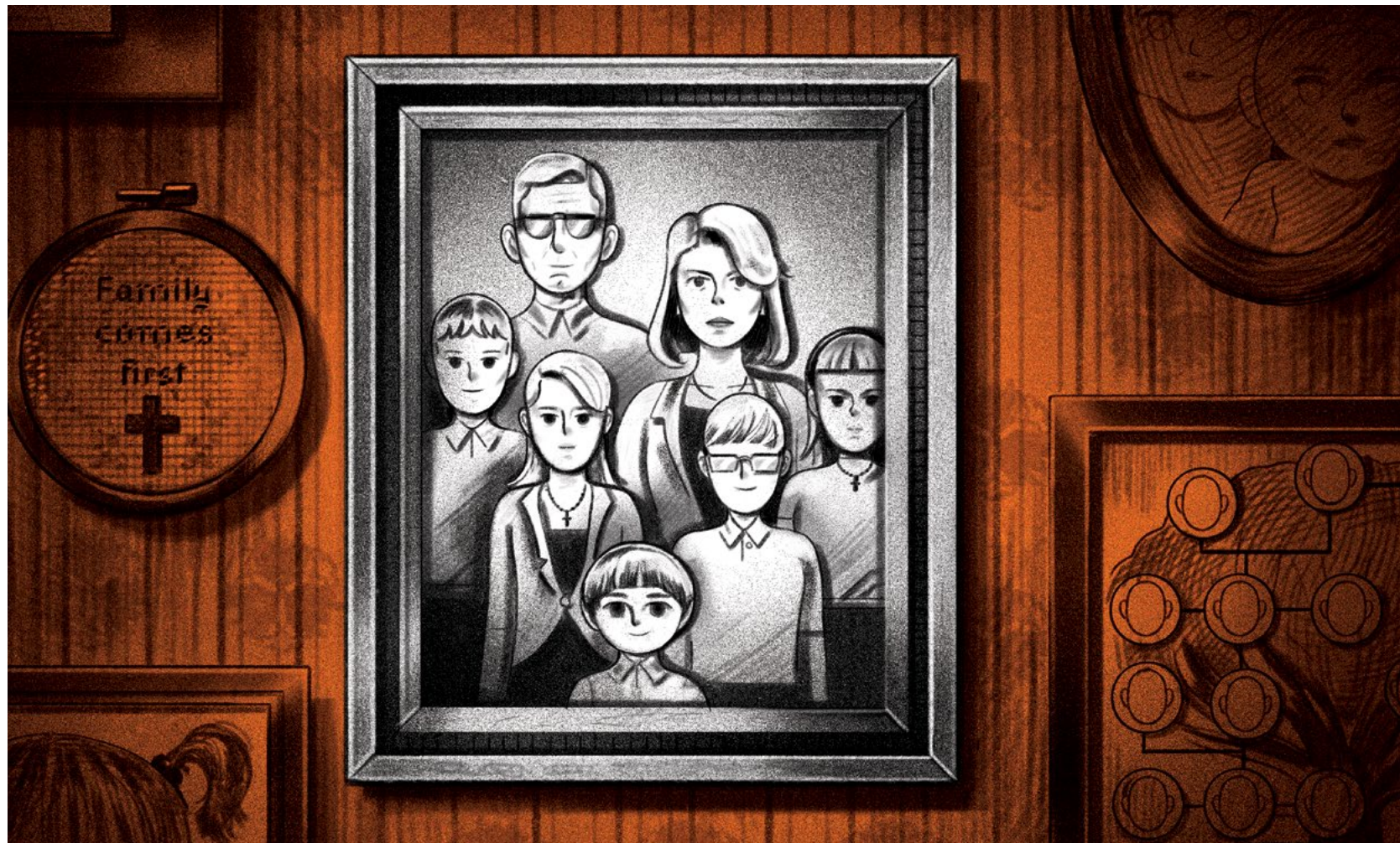
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Eugenics and evangelicalism have been thought antithetical, but the history of Christian marriage counseling shows where they’ve been allies.

BIOETHICS
CIVIL LIBERTIES
CULTURE
EDUCATION
LAW
MEDIA
SEXUALITY & GENDER

BETH MOORE IS STILL MAKING WAVES. On April 7, soon after announcing her departure from the Southern Baptist Convention, she took to Twitter to proclaim complementarianism “a doctrine of MAN” and to beg forgiveness for supporting the theology of male headship. “I could not see it for what it was until 2016,” she wrote. (Moore later clarified that she hasn’t totally abandoned complementarianism; rather, she disapproves of how the doctrine became supreme.)

Conservative evangelicals were swift to rebuke her, quoting scriptural commands for women to “remain quiet” and expressing regret that Moore was “running to embrace the world.” Others applauded her for acknowledging how complementarianism is derived from human culture, not divine law. The latter critique is also described in a recent wave of academic books that argues that complementarianism and its corollaries—“purity culture” and “family values”—are based on a foundation of sexism and white supremacy. Within this wave is Beth Allison Barr’s *Making Biblical Womanhood: How the Subjugation of Women*



Became Gospel Truth, which examines how figures like James Dobson “sanctified” the nineteenth-century “cult of domesticity” demanding women’s piety, purity, submission, and domesticity.

There is another, lesser known source of inspiration for modern white evangelicals and Dobson, in particular: eugenics. And this specific history helps to explain how procreative, heterosexual marriage became enshrined as the single-most important moral duty for some evangelicals—one that believers are enticed to pursue from a young age and then to perform at all costs, including physical and psychological harm.

Eugenics, a program to improve the “quality” of the human population, gained popularity in the early twentieth century, when more than 30

states enacted laws authorizing the forced sterilization of the “unfit”—poor, disabled, immigrant, and otherwise socially undesirable persons. Eugenics and evangelicalism have long been thought to be antithetical, as evangelicals largely opposed sterilization. (As Christine Rosen explains in *Preaching Eugenics: Religious Leaders and the American Eugenics Movement*, evangelicals were not inclined to support any practice that grew out of bogeyman Charles Darwin’s evolutionary theory, nor were they as enthusiastic about social reform as were the liberal Protestants who endorsed eugenics—their focus was on saving souls.) But the evangelicals-versus-eugenics framing is too simple. Evangelicals fervently supported other eugenics programs, including anti-miscegenation laws, stringent immigration

restrictions, and even so-called “responsible breeding.” The Rev. Billy Sunday once ranted about the last at a 1917 revival, citing the famous case studies of the “Juke” and “Edwards” families to stress the impact of heredity. (Eugenicists claimed the pseudonymous Jukes were a long line of criminal degenerates, while the descendants of the revivalist preacher Jonathan Edwards were virtuous and well-bred.) A *New York Times* writer marveled that “the scientific aspect of his sermon . . . overshadowed the denunciations of sin.” Sunday, after all, had a reputation for rebuffing modern science.

Evangelicals even more firmly embraced eugenics after World War II, as sterilization advocates shifted focus to the other side of the eugenics coin: “positive eugenics.” Positive eugenics aimed to

increase the breeding of the “fit” (able-bodied, middle-class whites), providing a far more respectable face for the movement, which had become imperiled by scientific criticism and the rise of the unpopular Nazi party. This modernized form of eugenics gelled with racist notions of Christian dominion, which avowed segregationist and eugenicist R.J. Rushdoony would popularize in the 1960s and 70s.

One positive eugenicist who particularly shaped religious conservatives was Californian Paul Popenoe, a central figure in my recent book, *The Unfit Heiress: The Tragic Life and Scandalous Sterilization of Ann Cooper Hewitt*. Popenoe had been one of the most prolific advocates for the segregation and forced sterilization of people whom he deemed to be “waste humanity,” even inspiring leaders of the Third Reich before the time came for him to rebrand as a defender of patriarchal, procreative marriage. In 1930, Popenoe, an atheist, opened the American Institute of Family Relations (AIFR) in Los Angeles to improve marital harmony and remove what he thought to be obstacles to white reproduction, such as rape, masturbation, pornography, female frigidity, and feminist yearnings. Over the next several decades, Popenoe counseled white couples on the importance of strict gender-norms and same-race marriage, training psychologists, clergymen (many Baptist and Mormon), and youth group leaders—his new allies in the racial betterment project—to do the same. According to Hilde Løvdal Stephens, author of *Family Matters: James Dobson and Focus on the Family’s Crusade for the Christian Home*, he instructed counselors to use “heredity” and “interpersonal compatibility” as codes for race, especially when his views on race began to go out of vogue.

Popenoe encouraged women to make themselves sexy for their husbands, let domestic violence slide, and look out for their man’s ego and sexual needs. Knowing that some women were sexually reticent, he hired Dr. Arnold Kegel to develop a treatment. (“Kegels” were born.) Popenoe explored methods to suppress homosexual desire, such as electroshock therapy, though it’s not clear if his institute ever used this technology. The man dubbed “Mr. Marriage” also gave considerable attention to clients’ temperaments. One of his first-generation eugenics colleagues, Roswell Johnson, abetted these efforts. Johnson, who’d previously crafted intelligence tests to identify and

weed out the “feeble-minded,” developed an extensive personality test for assessing compatibility, an adaptation of which is popularly used by Christian marriage experts today.

Popenoe expanded his reach when he began to author a column based on real-life clients for *Ladies’ Home Journal* and make television appearances. He hosted the syndicated Divorce Hearing and was a regular guest on the conservative evangelical and right-wing media mogul Art Linkletter’s House Party on CBS. Before his death in 1979, he helped give rise to a cottage industry of Christian sex and marriage guides, including Herbert Miles’ 1967 *Sexual Happiness in Marriage*; J. Allan Peterson’s anthology *The Marriage Affair*, which put Popenoe’s patriarchal marital ideals alongside those of Billy Graham and Tim LaHaye; and Tim and Beverly LaHaye’s 1976 *The Act of Marriage: The Beauty of Sexual Love*. (All of these books cited the eugenicist.)

Beyond pushing run-of-the-mill gender essentialism and the constant, careful management of women’s bodies and personalities, Christian marriage manuals helped normalize marital misery—a phenomenon well captured by another of LaHaye’s titles, *How to Be Happy Though Married*. They often portrayed marriage as groan-worthy, but “worth it,” laying the groundwork for Gary Chapman’s 1992 *Five Love Languages*, which has become a perennial bestseller. In *The Tragedy of Heterosexuality*, scholar Jane Ward notes that books like Chapman’s foreshadowed more contemporary Christian mega-church events, which similarly ask individuals, particularly women, to reinvent themselves for the sake of lifelong unity. (One can’t help but also think of the recently gone-viral video of a Baptist pastor who berated wives for “letting themselves go.”)

Of course, adapting eugenicists’ notions of hygienic and well-adjusted marriage isn’t inherently racist; and as Ward notes, secular culture, too, drew upon positive eugenics. Mid-century television programs like *I Love Lucy* and *The Honeymooners* made comedy of marital discontent, while ads stressed the importance of maintaining trim figures, skin bleaching, douching, and even modifying one’s demeanor, where necessary. But the eugenicist-evangelical alliance manifested in a present culture that idealizes white reproduction, stokes fear of non-white reproduction, and blames a lack of marital morality for problems actually wrought by sexism and white supremacy.

This phenomenon may be best illustrated by tracing the trajectory of psychologist James Dobson, author of many child-rearing and marriage manuals; founder of the hugely influential parachurch organization Focus on the Family (FoF); and former host of the so-named radio program. FoF was formed in 1977 to promote the same ideals as AIFR—heterosexual marriage and conservative gender norms—in addition to creationism, school prayer, and other culture war imperatives.

Prior to launching his pro-marriage empire, Dobson went to work for Popenoe—a detail conspicuously missing from journalist Dale Buss’s authorized biography of him. As the eugenicist’s assistant, he authored numerous publications on male/female differences and the dangers of feminism. Like his mentor Popenoe, who wrote the forward to his first book, Dobson viewed homosexuality and feminism as grave threats to the family, seeming to rank crises like domestic abuse much lower. (In his 1983 *Love Must Be Tough*, he even questioned the innocence of abuse victims, recalling a woman at his church who supposedly baited her husband to hit her so she’d have a bruise to show off to the congregation.)

Post-AIFR, Dobson’s extensive output for mostly white audiences was sprinkled with expressions of anxiety about interracial marriage and non-white reproductive trends, as Popenoe’s had been. Whereas Popenoe advised “marrying your own,” FoF discouraged crossing the color line, claiming concerns about compatibility. And whereas Popenoe fretted about the prolific reproduction of the lower classes, particularly Mexican Americans in California, FoF devoted much attention in the 90s and early 2000s to Black welfare dependency and out-of-wedlock births. Now-FoF President Jim Daly even invoked the infamous Moynihan Report, which suggested that the welfare state had contributed to the disintegration of the Black family in impoverished areas. In a copublication of Political Research Associates and the Women of Color Resource Center, political scientist Jane Hardisty has noted that by carefully avoiding overt statements of the inferiority of people of color, organizations like FoF managed to spread the idea that African Americans constituted the bulk of welfare recipients (they do not); obscure racial and gender discrimination as causes of poverty; and tout white Christian norms as the solution to any and all social ills.


The Popenoe-Dobson legacy still reverberates loudly within corners of white evangelical culture.

Dobson, who retired from FoF in 2009 and now hosts the radio program *Dr. James Dobson’s Family Talk*, has repeatedly betrayed his personal anxieties about a dark-skinned takeover. After visiting the southern border in 2019 at the Trump administration’s invitation, he claimed to fear “illiterate,” “unhealthy,” “violent criminals” would “bankrupt” and “take down” America, if not controlled. Popenoe’s protégé has also coupled comments about immigration with myths of declining birth rates in America, as have Christian-right activists behind a slew of books and films predicting the end of white civilization. (It may have been Ben Wattenberg’s blatantly eugenicist 1987 book *The Birth Dearth: What Happens When People in Free Countries Don’t Have Enough Bodies* that first popularized such notions of cultural and genetic suicide; Ward notes that this text explicitly influenced the political rhetoric of 90s conservatives like Pat Robertson, Pat Buchanan, and Dan Quayle.) Dobson often appeals to his opposition to abortion as some sort of proof of his anti-racism. But in framing abortion as Black genocide, he once again infantilizes women of color by pretending they have no agency.

The interplay between secular eugenicists and religious conservatives utterly contradicts the latter’s claims to reject godless culture, which may be why Popenoe’s son thought the allyship between his father and people like Dobson so curious. Reflecting on his parent’s later years in a publication of

the secular think-tank Institute of American Values, David Popenoe remarked, “My father was no more religious than ever, but [religious persons] were his new professional and ideological allies and proteges.” But beyond this revealing secular-religious collaboration, such history reveals how fears of racial decay have shaped the conservative imagination of morality. Eugenicist fears of white replacement have rendered marriage non-negotiable, even in cases where marriage requires, in Ward’s words, “a significant amount of performativity.” African Americans who veer off-script are blamed for any social and economic hardships they may experience; and whites who do so are also dehumanized.

The Popenoe-Dobson legacy still reverberates loudly within corners of white evangelical culture, where sexual abuse is still rampant and married women face pressure to quietly endure because of the stigma of divorce. Some married women are shamed for not wanting to have a “quiverfull” of children, especially in circles where ideas of white decline pervade everyday conversation. In some cases, teens and young adults are threatened with disease and lifelong sexual frustration if they do not “save” themselves for heterosexual marriage, which is sold as the be-all, end-all of earthly life. The “abstinence-only” message, rooted as much in fears of race-mixing as STDs, teaches that girls are either pure or utterly wanton—there is no in-between. Some gay evangelical youth and college students are still subjected to conversion therapy, which many medical professional associations have deemed ineffective and harmful.

Under the mantle of outbreeding “inferior” people, these conservative messages and mores have sanctioned many harms. Beth Moore is right to look around and note that much of what passes for God’s plan today is devastatingly “of man.” In the case of complementarianism and family values, evangelicals have taken up a fight with humanity’s worst designs. 

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By Tazeen M. Ali

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The 20-Year Media Spectacle of Saving Afghan Women

The focus on the suffering of Afghan women deflects attention from the more difficult questions about what the U.S. actually set out to achieve in the longest war in our history.



JOSHUA ROBERTS/GETTY IMAGES

AT THE END OF A LIVE BBC interview in Kabul, Afghanistan, on August 31, 2021, correspondent Secunder Kermani asked the founder and president of the Afghan Women's Network, Mahbouba Seraj, "Do you feel safe here [Kabul] as a woman's rights activist?" Seraj, in her seventies, answered, "I don't really know what is the meaning of that word. Feeling safe is not something that I have done in Afghanistan for the past 20 years so I cannot tell you. Right now, I am neither safe nor unsafe, so we'll see what happens."

Seraj's comments come on the heels of the end of the 20-year American occupation of Afghanistan after the departure of the U.S. military on August 30, 2021, under President Biden's orders. Biden's withdrawal of U.S. armed forces from the country were mostly consistent with the terms specified in the Doha Agreement, a peace deal made between U.S. and Taliban leaders, signed by the Trump administration in February 2020. The Doha Agreement, which did not include any representatives from the Afghan government, or women for that matter, was widely critiqued by Afghans who were eager for its reappraisal by the Biden administration. In particular, Afghan women's rights leaders warned that negotiations with the Taliban whose laws devalue women's lives—limiting their public roles, policing their behaviors, and threatening their safety and well-being more broadly—would reverse the gains women had made in education, the work force, and in politics. Indeed, Afghan women activists and politicians who had publicly criticized the Taliban were increasingly subjected to violence over the course of 2020.

Today, these Afghan women's warnings have already begun to come to fruition. For example, female journalists and staff across more than 100 Afghan media organizations have become subjected to violence and harassment, and the majority of them have stopped working as a result. Additionally, in certain areas in Afghanistan, women are required to be accompanied by a male escort in

order to attend university. These facts have been scrupulously documented across U.S. news media in recent

weeks, through reports that attest to the dire conditions of Afghan women under the Taliban. These headlines are replete with descriptors of Afghan women as silenced, desperate, and waiting for "rescue." They are also accompanied by familiar images of women in blue burqas, garments that cover the whole body, including a mesh fabric for over the eyes, which saturated U.S. media in the months and years immediately following 9/11. These familiar headlines and images, central to War on Terror discourse, depict Afghan women as hapless, downtrodden victims of Muslim extremists, whose hardships are laid bare for the (white) American gaze.

To be sure, Afghan women do face deadly conditions under Taliban rule, and they are worthy of the collective attention of the international community. Yet U.S. media concern for them has always been voyeuristic in nature. Detailed media descriptions and images that often linger over details like burqas and the prohibitions on make-up and nail polish, while glossing over the deadly impact of U.S. bombs, have been framed by a white savior complex in which saving Afghan women specifically from the Taliban is cast as a feminist moral imperative. This was the case in 2001, and such depictions continue to serve as a basis for white American feminist groups to cultivate and perform their public anguish and sympathy over the plight of their "Afghan sisters," while also appealing to their own sense of moral superiority. American attitudes towards Afghan women, generated and sustained by these media representations, have had profoundly violent consequences. As anthropologists Charles Hirschkind and Saba Mahmood have shown, in 2001, American feminist groups like the Feminist Majority played a critical role in facilitating public support for U.S. military intervention in Afghanistan with no reflection or acknowledgment of how war unequivocally destabilizes society and harms women.

In other words, the abuse of Afghan women under the Taliban regime took center stage in the justification for the U.S. War on Terror. While the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 was initially framed as retaliation for the terrorist attacks on September 11, the trope of the subjugated Muslim woman provided the means through which to manufacture moral authority for it. This was certainly the effect of then-First Lady Laura Bush's presidential radio address in November 2001, which she delivered on

A woman prays boarding a bus at a center for Afghan refugees in Virginia.

behalf of her husband, George W. Bush, who bears responsibility for starting the war in Afghanistan. In her remarks, Mrs. Bush not only painted a grim picture of the reality of Afghan women's lives, but also issued a warning about the grave implications this reality would have on U.S. citizens: "The plight of the women and children in Afghanistan is a matter of deliberate human cruelty carried out by those who seek to intimidate and control. Civilized people throughout the world are speaking out in horror, not only because our hearts break for the women and children in Afghanistan but also because, in Afghanistan, we see the world the terrorists would like to impose on the rest of us." By using the plight of women in Afghanistan as a visceral image of what the future might look like for American women lest the Taliban were defeated, the First Lady imbued a moral urgency on the War on Terror. She went further in that radio address to declare: "The terrorists who helped rule that country now plot and plan in many countries, and they must be stopped. The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women." Equating the War on the Terror with the moral imperative to save Afghan women undoubtedly contributed to near unanimous support in Congress and among the U.S. population for the military invasion of Afghanistan.

Fifteen years later, in 2016, during a period when more Americans were questioning why the U.S. occupation in Afghanistan had continued for so long and were beginning to view it as a mistake, Laura Bush continued to justify the military presence on behalf of Afghan women. She wrote an op-ed in *The Washington Post* and made the rounds on national news outlets to praise then-President Obama for continuing the American occupation and to promote her book, *We Are Afghan Women*. The book, a collection of Afghan women's stories published by the George W. Bush Institute, includes an introduction written by the former first lady, explaining that she had always been fascinated by Afghanistan even as a little girl because it was the most "exotic country" she could think of. In her rhetoric, we see the voyeuristic quality of thinking about Afghanistan as a foreign land far removed from American culture, priming the U.S. imagination to marvel, in decontextualized horror, at women who are subjected to unspeakable harms

by their men and religion. This posturing renders Afghan women ideal candidates for liberation by the benevolent white savior, a role that Laura Bush has eagerly embraced. Within this framework, we are primed to understand Afghan women's stories of resilience and "defying the odds," such as those documented in the Bush Institute's book, as possible only through the U.S. military occupation, once again equating military intervention as the ideal mode of saving Afghan women.

The issue with the framing of the benevolent U.S. military, committed to saving Afghan women from the Taliban, is what this narrative obscures. By all accounts, conditions for women under the Taliban are horrific. But when media accounts focus on the Taliban's Islamic extremism as the only aspect of their rule worth reflecting on, they treat their rise to power and their violence as a tragic inevitability. This framing effaces the broader geopolitical context in which the Taliban came to power in the first place, and the central role that the U.S. military played to facilitate it. In fighting a proxy war against the Soviets who were occupying Afghanistan between 1979-1989, the United States supplied Afghan rebels—the mujahideen, the precursors to the Taliban—with both weapons and training. It is relevant then, that the U.S.-backed war against the Soviets led to the complete destabilization of Afghan society, resulting in tremendous loss of civilian life and a power vacuum in which the Taliban then seized power.


Yet these facts have not been foregrounded in politicians' rhetoric or in mainstream media narratives as a crisis in Afghanistan unfolds today in the wake of the withdrawal of U.S. troops. As American Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Spencer Ackerman recently put it, "The United States tends not to attribute its brutality to any of the circumstances that it comes to bemoan when they manifest in the world. And Afghanistan is certainly a tragic example of that ... after 9/11, the United States, in its political and journalistic and intellectual elites, generally speaking, refused to accept that there was a direct and tragic and awful historic consequence of its destabilization of Afghanistan in the 1980s." Rather than reflect on America's history of violence in Afghanistan, much of the U.S. media has again elected to focus the plight of Afghan women, and the moral imperative to save

American feminist groups like the Feminist Majority played a critical role in facilitating public support for U.S. military intervention in Afghanistan with no reflection or acknowledgment of how war unequivocally destabilizes society and harms women.

them from the Taliban. Afghan women and their suffering function as a spectacle to deflect from a deeper historical and political reckoning with how the last several decades of U.S. foreign policy has wreaked havoc in Afghanistan. The fact is, the U.S. suffered a military defeat at the hands of the Taliban, despite the \$2.3 trillion invested in the 20-year occupation, and the loss of 2,448 American service members' and 47,245 Afghan civilian lives. Afghan women have been collateral damage through it all.

The focus on the suffering of Afghan women deflects attention from the more difficult questions about what the U.S. actually set out to achieve in the longest war in our history. Moreover, the char-

acterization of Afghan women in need of saving prevents us from taking seriously their grassroots efforts to resist and challenge the Taliban, today and between 1996 and 2001. Following U.S. withdrawal from their country, Afghan women have been protesting in the streets for their rights. They have also articulated their own ideas about how world leaders could serve as allies to them. Yet many Afghan activists have felt that the U.S. and other international partners have excluded them from opportunities to substantially engage in the planning for the future of Afghanistan, stemming from failure to see them as full agents as opposed to as perpetual victims. Over the course of the last 20 years, Afghan women have made significant gains under U.S. occupation, especially in Kabul and other urban centers. At the same time, over the course of the last 20 years, Afghan women and their families, especially those in rural areas under Taliban control, have endured continued violence by U.S. drone strikes. Put another way, discussions of how to secure a safe and prosperous future for Afghan women cannot be reduced to terms of U.S. military presence or withdrawal. After all, as prominent women's rights activist Mahbouba Seraj remarked above, women in Afghanistan have never been entirely safe either under U.S. occupation or under the Taliban.

As Americans continue to reflect with concern over the fate of women in Afghanistan, it is worth reflecting on the complicity of the U.S. government and media in enabling the conditions that put them and Afghan society more broadly in grave peril today. As we grapple with this history, we as Americans should show generosity and support toward Afghan refugees amid this unfolding humanitarian crisis. At a time when many leaders are framing the prospect of refugees as something to be feared, understanding the U.S.'s role in the destabilization of Afghanistan is critically important in order to understand that welcoming Afghans, rather than "saving" them, is the real moral imperative. 

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Zelensky Is a Jewish Hero. Some Jews Worry the Acclaim Won't Last.

Ukraine's history is rife with antisemitism, and Jews have been a minority targeted by all sides of its politics.

By Jane Eisner

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MOST AMERICAN JEWS, like most Americans, view the war in Ukraine as a horrific human catastrophe that demands political support, philanthropic dollars, and fervent prayers. We are entreated to attend rallies, assist refugees, and raise funds; some are participating in humanitarian missions to the neighboring countries that are reeling from waves of desperate Ukrainians fleeing to safety, as many of our relatives were forced to flee from the Nazis decades ago.

There is also an unexpected surge of pride. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, the global hero of the moment, is a Jew, and for now, his identity is not a liability and often an asset.

Across the usually fractious American Jewish spectrum, from the Orthodox to the most liberal, Zelensky has been embraced with a kind of familial hug as a charismatic symbol of resolve and courage. As Rob Eshman wrote in *The Forward*, this is not simply one-directional hero worship, but a deeper mutual admiration.

"Not only did we embrace Zelensky, he embraced us back. On two occasions since the invasion began, he has spoken directly to American Jews, asking them to speak out as Jews on behalf of Ukraine," Eshman wrote.

In this, Jews are largely aligned with other Americans, a majority of whom approve of the Biden administration's approach of working with European allies and tightening economic sanctions against Russia (even if Republicans still don't approve of President Biden himself). Zelensky's address to the U.S. Congress on March 16 drew a sustained standing ovation. And polling shows that U.S. hatred of Zelensky's nemesis, Russian President Vladimir Putin, is at an all-time high.



Illustration by Ellen Weinstein

But this seemingly straightforward picture of unanimity and support across the religious landscape is laced with anxiety. For while it appears as if American Jews are firmly on the side of the good guys in this brutal conflict, the global reality is fuzzier. And the eagerness to rally and raise funds cloaks a gut-wrenching worry: that the moment won't last. Zelensky could be knocked off his pedestal in a flash, his global goodwill dissipated if he makes a misstep, or the war drags on at great cost, or he is deposed or worse, murdered.

There's a good reason for this anxiety. Historically, Ukraine has been a graveyard for Jews, a minority targeted by all sides of its politics. The wave of tolerance and pluralism that enabled Zelensky to become president in 2019, after an election campaign during which his religion was never instrumentalized by his opponents, is a relatively recent phenomenon.

The 2014 Maidan uprising, when the pro-Russian Ukrainian government was overthrown, ushered in this period of Western-leaning liberalism, in which a vibrant nationalism seemed to override ethnic and religious divisions. The worry is that it will be short-lived.

Ukrainian President
Volodymyr Zelensky
speaks to the U.S.
Congress at the U.S.
Capitol in March 2022.

"When things go wrong, it would not surprise me if one or another group starts to blame the Jews," Jeffrey Veidlinger, professor of history and Judaic studies at the University of Michigan, told me in an interview.

Complicating the religious landscape is the role of Israel, which is treading a narrow middle ground—as the government joins the West to welcome refugees and condemn Russia, it also hesitates to sanction Jewish oligarchs and tries to pursue a role as mediator with Putin to end the conflict.

In the first weeks of the war, more than a dozen private planes from Moscow reportedly landed at Israel's Ben Gurion airport; some Russian billionaires also have Israeli passports, and their vast wealth and real estate holdings have granted them social and political power in the country. The avoidance of fully sanctioning the many oligarchs who claim Jewish heritage has particularly rankled some American officials. Victoria Nuland, the U.S. under secretary of state for political affairs, told an Israeli television news channel that "you don't want to become the last haven for dirty money that's fueling Putin's wars."

In a caustic address to Israeli leaders on Sunday evoking the Holocaust, Zelensky himself criticized the Jewish state for failing to arm his country. As the journalist and historian Gershom Gorenberg

warned in *The Washington Post*, Israel will eventually have to decide where it stands. "In our dark new world, half-neutrality is impossible," he wrote.

Jewish identity in these complicated situations is, in and of itself, complex. Decades of Soviet rule forced a strange contradiction: Jewish life was suppressed at the same time that Jews were targeted for persecution, and many found safety in thinking of themselves as Soviet rather than Ukrainian. As Stanford University history professor Steven Zipperstein told me, "Part of this story is a reminder of how identity is not made out of one thing."

Indeed, like so many more well-known American Jews—including Leonard Bernstein, Bob Dylan, and Jon Stewart—I can trace my ancestry back to Ukraine, in my case Kolomyia, a city that was variously ruled by Moldavia and Poland, and now is in western Ukraine. While for centuries Jews lived in thriving communities in these contested areas, there were also long periods of extreme and violent antisemitism, which is why my family emigrated to America in stages, before and after World War I.


In his recent book, *In the Midst of Civilized Europe: The Pogroms of 1918-1921 and the Onset of the Holocaust*, Veidlinger argues "that the presence of Jews on all sides of the conflict that enveloped Ukraine during the revolutionary era following the

First World War meant that whichever side you were on, there was always a Jew to blame." As a result, about 100,000 Jews were killed in more than 1,000 pogroms that took place in 500 locations. And this was before an estimated 1.5 million Ukrainian Jews were murdered in the Holocaust, among them Zelensky's family members.

Only in the last few years, and particularly since Zelensky's unexpected election as president, has Ukraine begun to reckon with its bloody past. When I visited what was known as Babi Yar outside Kyiv in the early 1980s, the site of one of the worst massacres during World War II was still under Soviet rule and was left forlorn and neglected. The fact that 34,000 Jews were murdered there was not even mentioned. Last year, Zelensky presided over the commemoration of a planned new \$100 million memorial for what is now known in local parlance as Babyn Yar. (In the early days of this latest war, Russian military bombed a nearby radio tower, killing five people and damaging the existing memorial.)

The recent flourishing of Jewish religious and cultural life in Ukraine has come to an abrupt halt with the war, as thousands of Jews flee death and destruction, leaving those who remain a smaller minority, even if their co-religionist is president. "Things have changed dramatically in Ukraine in the last five years," said Veidlinger. "It's hard to know how much the old patterns can be revived even if someone tried to revive them."

And so the anxiety continues. Veidlinger said he would not be surprised if Putin started to employ coded antisemitic tropes to characterize Zelensky—as a tool of "western cosmopolitans," or George Soros, or Israel—and try to discredit the Ukrainian leader in the eyes of his citizens.

As Veidlinger wrote in a recent forum for the University of Pennsylvania: "The presence of Jews today on all sides of the current conflict is a testament to the ease with which Jews, after decades of repression in the Soviet Union, have been able to succeed in the modern states of Russia and Ukraine. But as rockets fall on Babyn Yar and synagogues turn into bomb shelters, it is worth remembering how Jews have fared when wars have ravaged the region in the past." 

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J. SCOTT APPLEWHITE-POOL/GETTY IMAGES

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American Christians “Backing the Blue”: On Faith and Policing

From the inception of the modern policing profession, supportive Christian efforts have proven to be a powerful resource.

By Aaron Griffith

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BLUE LIVES MATTER AND THEY MATTER especially to God. Or so goes the thinking in certain law enforcement circles. Recently, a Louisville newspaper revealed that a Bible verse along these lines was used in a 2017 police department firearms training. The verse, Romans 13:4, adorned a “thin blue line” symbol often associated with the “blue lives matter” movement. It reads: “For he is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer.”

The use of this verse in a firearms training was significant given that this was the same department from which officers executing a raid shot and killed Breonna Taylor in 2020. It also mirrors other forms of Christian influence in modern American law enforcement such as police-themed Bibles, Christian police retreats and trainings, and similar blue-hued religious emblems. Critics have argued that this influence represents a threat to the separation of church and state. For police ministries and Christian supporters, however, the linkage of faith and policing serves to offer officers a sense of divine purpose in the face of trauma and criticism. But this connection also threatens to obscure problems in the profession, bolster the power of the police, and foreclose other possibilities for addressing America’s social problems and inequalities.

Policing is challenging work. In addition to the stresses of the job itself, officers are at a high risk of experiencing trauma and diminished mental health. At the same time, police have been the target of criticism amidst growing public awareness of officer misconduct and racial disparities in how citizens are treated

by the police. As I discuss in my scholarly work, Christian officers have also wrestled with the competing demands of peaceful discipleship and departmental duty. Simply put, can one be a good police officer and obey Jesus’ commands to turn the other cheek and forsake violence?

As law enforcement has searched for solutions to these problems that have troubled officers from the inception of the modern policing profession, supportive Christian efforts have proven to be a powerful resource. The Christian Police Association was founded in 1883 in London and established branches in American cities soon after. Association sites ministered to officers and argued for their profession’s spiritual validity. Later in the 20th century, amidst a surging evangelical movement, organizations like the Fellowship of Christian Peace Officers (FCPO), founded in 1971, functioned similarly. One FCPO member reported in 1979 that he had initially wrestled with his police duties given Jesus’s commands. But through the FCPO he had learned that policing was a distinctly Christian obligation. “Enforcing the laws of the land,” he said, “[is] enforcing God’s law.” Similar justifications could be found

in various evangelical books and films from around the same time that promoted the work of policing as a legitimate, even ideal, Christian vocation.

Today, the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association houses a National Law Enforcement Ministry and runs retreats for officers that echo these past efforts. Though the ministry has faced criticism for its conservative views on sexuality, most retreat sessions focus on providing for officers’ “spiritual fitness” through emotional care. At the same time, Christian Bible publishers have made holy writ itself a site for police support. Bibles like Zondervan’s *Peacemakers New Testament*, Holman’s *Law Enforcement Officer’s Bible*, and the American Bible Society’s *Strength for the Street* all have police-themed aesthetics such as badge seals and the “thin blue line flag” cover theme, and include spiritual instructional material for officers trying to deepen their relationship with Jesus. As the Holman Bible puts it, Jesus is “the most pro-police person in the universe.”

The overarching message in these ministries and media is that God loves police officers and has a plan for their lives. Verses from Romans 13, the same Bible passage the Louisville department training



BARBARA DAVIDSON/LOS ANGELES TIMES/GETTY

To contend for a more critical approach to policing should not lead Christians to ignore the very real challenges and struggles that officers face.

referenced, are frequently appealed to; one popular Bible paraphrase even inserts the word “policeman” itself into the passage, in place of “ruler” or “servant.” Jesus’ proclamation “blessed are the peacemakers” is likewise read as applying to the work of policing, with “thin blue line” dog tags to match.

This is a message with a clear resonance among white American Christians more broadly. PRRI polling has shown that whereas 61 percent of Americans trust police “to do what is right” either “just about always” or “most of time,” 82 percent of white evangelicals and white Roman Catholics express the same sentiment, with white mainline Protestants not far behind at 80 percent.

However, white Christian police support also provides religious justification for a profession that is violent, that disproportionately affects the poor and communities of color, and that has a tragic record of racism. Perhaps this is why the same polling shows Black Christian trust for police is far lower, at only 32 percent. Baptist pastor F. Bruce Williams voiced frustration on this point after the “thin blue line” Bible verse image was revealed in Louisville. “Given the long, nightmarish history that Black people have not only with LMPD but with police departments in general,” he told *LEO Weekly*, “that’s a very scary prospect to have a Bible verse like that and to describe the police force as the wrath of God to carry out justice on evil doers.”

Enthusiastic Christian identification of policing as a divinely appointed role may originate from a desire to address problems officers face. But it also easily accepts the status quo, limiting the possibility of asking hard questions about problems with police tactics, racial bias, funding, or the prospects for dramatic change. If you believe God has instituted the law enforcement authorities, can you defund them when they are failing? The answer for most Christian police ministries is clearly no. As one Christian law enforcement retreat speaker put it, after declaring that governmental authorities were God’s servants, “There shouldn’t be any worry about equipment or overtime.” Many evangelical pastors and churches agree, hosting “back the blue” events and urging fellow believers on national television to “defend, don’t defund” the police.

Police supporters contend that their full-throated defense of police and dismissal of defunding efforts is ultimately about addressing the problem of crime.

This was a motivating factor in the late ‘60s and ‘70s, when evangelicals’ pro-police apologetics emerged in full force; crime rates, particularly rates of violent crime, were rising dramatically then. Similarly, pro-police politicians today point to crime rates as a rationale for expanding law enforcement funding and presence, even framing the cause as progressive and a needed service to poor neighborhoods and communities of color.


In the face of crime, Christian police supporters argue that communities need law enforcement to protect the innocent and keep chaos and evil at bay. This has been an especially common evangelical refrain throughout the twentieth century. To be sure, some evangelicals defended brutal police tactics and behavior. But overall, their vision of policing has been less about hailing macho “Dirty Harry” types looking for a fight, and more about stressing compassionate servanthood and love for communities. Indeed, Christians have been among the most vocal advocates of community policing efforts that forged social service partnerships and emphasized sensitivity and neighborhood engagement over a purely punitive mentality. “God’s servant warriors,” as Zondervan’s *Peacemakers New Testament* puts it, are there to enact Jesus’ commandment to “love your neighbor as yourself.”

Community policing efforts have been criticized for co-opting social services and for enshrining an expansive police presence in disadvantaged communities. However sensitive they may be, reliance on police results in more people being surveilled and locked up. Instead, critics, Christians among them, contend for other possibilities for public safety, including the abolition of police departments altogether. Far from ignoring the problem of crime, abolitionists argue that our present system of policing does little to address actual harms or the deep-rooted social and economic inequalities that foster violence. As one Mennonite abolitionist Bible study curriculum puts it, riffing on well-known abolitionist Ruth Wilson Gilmore and St. Paul, a “transformed, baptismal life” offers a vision of community that does not rely on policing or prisons in order to achieve accountability, equality, and justice.

American Christians unfamiliar with abolition will no doubt find these arguments challenging and perhaps practically unworkable. However, whether or not they embrace abolition or a more modest

vision of police reform, what would it take for Christians to develop a more critical account of policing? It might start with scripture, by avoiding a simplistic reading of Romans 13 that offers cover for unjust policies and glorifies the violent power of authorities. Indeed, for biblical scholar Esau McCauley, Romans 13 actually shows the *limits* of state power, the judgment of God upon authorities who uphold structures of injustice and who fail to defend the weak.

Christians longing for changes to American law enforcement might also grant the point made by police ministries: officers face trauma themselves. To contend for a more critical approach to policing should not lead Christians to ignore the very real challenges and struggles that officers face. Because our nation has forgone substantive investment in disadvantaged communities, officers are too often the ones who bear the burden of solving crime problems that are rooted in lack of quality education, housing, jobs, and healthcare. This burden should not be on individual officers as much as it should be on a society that demands safety at any cost and that refuses to address structural inequalities that create conditions for crime, addiction, and violence.

Do blue lives matter to God? As a Christian myself, I would say yes. But not because they are police. Police officers matter to God because, like all people, they are bearers of the divine image. Therefore, we might think about the possibility of a Christian understanding of policing focused less on some abstract notion of “backing the blue” and more on the well-being of human communities, police and policed alike, who need more than a sword to truly flourish. 

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We are a nation that continues
to be exceptional, despite our
unexceptionalisms, where a
politics of social belonging
demands, in Amanda
Gorman's words, that we dare
“not march back to what was,
but move to what shall be.

—Nichole Renée Phillips, p. 89

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