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Original Article

# Why evangelicals voted for Trump: A critical cultural sociology

**Philip Gorski**

Department of Sociology, Yale University, 493 College Street, New Haven,  
CT 06520, USA.

E-mail: philip.gorski@yale.edu

**Abstract** Most white evangelicals viewed Donald Trump as the lesser of two evils. They were driven by concerns about abortion, religious freedom, and the Supreme Court. But a plurality preferred him to other GOP candidates. Why? Because they are white Christian nationalists. As such, they were attracted by Trump's racialized, apocalyptic, and blood-drenched rhetoric. It recalled an earlier version of American religious nationalism, one that antedated the softened tones of modern-day "American exceptionalism" first introduced by Ronald Reagan. At the same time, Trumpism was stripped of the explicit allusions to Christian scripture that traditionally tethered American religious nationalism to Christian political theology. One way of reading Trumpism, then, is as a reactionary and secularized version of white Christian nationalism. I conclude by arguing that the proper response to Trumpism is not to double down on radical secularism but to recover America's civil religious tradition.

*American Journal of Cultural Sociology* (2017) 5, 338–354.

doi:10.1057/s41290-017-0043-9; published online 31 July 2017

**Keywords:** Trumpism; American exceptionalism; religious nationalism; civil religion; evangelicalism

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Why did so many evangelical Christians vote for Donald Trump? Why did they vote for a man who has six children by three wives? A man who bragged about "grabbing" women? And who nonetheless claimed that he's never done anything he needed to be forgiven for? A man who hadn't darkened a church door in decades? Why, in short, did they rally behind someone who seems the very antithesis of most everything they have ever claimed to stand for: family values, piety, humility, and mercy?

For some, of course, Trump was simply the lesser of two evils. Whatever misgivings they may have had about Trump's character, were ultimately eclipsed by their reservations about Clinton's policies. Their votes can be understood as a perfectly rational decision based on their personal political preferences. For other evangelicals though Trump was the first choice from



the very start. They could have voted for an orthodox evangelical. But Donald Trump was their first choice. Why?

I propose a simple answer: because they are also white Christian nationalists and Trumpism is *inter alia* a reactionary version of white Christian nationalism (WCN). On my interpretation, WCN has four key elements: (1) racism; (2) sacrificialism; (3) apocalypticism; and (4) nostalgia. “American exceptionalism” is a sublimated and euphemistic version of WCN. Trumpism recuperates a more full-throated and less “politically correct” version of WCN, while also adding some new, more secular elements.

### The “Lesser of Two Evils” Voters

It is important to remember that American evangelicals are ethnically diverse and increasingly so, and that many evangelicals did not vote for Trump (Chaves, 2011; Putnam *et al.*, 2010; Smith, 2000). Today, roughly one-quarter of self-declared evangelicals are non-white, and around two-thirds of these voters appear to have supported Clinton (Smietana, 2016). Moreover, while the theological beliefs of black Protestants are quite similar to those of white evangelicals, roughly 90% of them voted for the Democratic candidate (Tyson and Maniam, 2016; Cox and Jones, 2016). The question is not so much why evangelicals voted for Trump then – many did not – but why so many *white* evangelicals did.

It is also important to remember that a substantial number of prominent white evangelicals took highly public stands against Trump’s candidacy (Miller, 2016a). Peter Wehner of the Ethics and Public Policy Center described Trump’s “theology” as embodying “a Nietzschean morality rather than a Christian one.” (Wehner, 2016) Russell Moore of the Southern Baptist Convention sharply distanced himself from Trump’s racist rhetoric. “The Bible speaks so directly to these issues,” he reflected, “that, really, in order to avoid questions of racial unity, one has to evade the Bible itself” (Warman, 2016).

Further, most rank and file evangelicals were slow to come around to Trump. The majority of evangelical voters initially divided their support between Carson, Cruz, or Rubio (Gass, 2016). It was not until early May, in the Indiana Primary, that Trump finally secured an outright majority of evangelical voters.

Furthermore, once the general election was underway, conservative evangelicals had plenty of reasons to prefer Trump to Clinton. Take abortion. Trump took a strongly pro-life stance during the primaries (Flegenheimer and Haberman, 2016). Meanwhile, Clinton voiced unconditional support for abortion rights and federal monies for Planned Parenthood.

Then, there was the Supreme Court. The unexpected death of Antonin Scalia in February of 2016, and the unprecedented refusal of the Republican-controlled Senate to consider Obama’s nominee, Merrick Garland, meant that

the ideological balance on the Supreme Court hinged on the outcome of the election – and with it any chance to realize conservatives’ long cherished dream of overturning *Roe v. Wade*. With the confirmation of Neil Gorsuch to Scalia’s seat, pro-lifers are one step closer to this goal.

Meanwhile, on that other major front of the culture wars – the struggle over gay marriage – religious conservatives had been steadily losing ground for the better part of a decade, as state after state legalized gay unions. And with the Supreme Court’s landmark decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges*, which effectively nationalized gay marriage, that battle suddenly seemed lost.

Forced into a tactical retreat on this issue, conservative culture warriors reassembled under the flag of “religious freedom” (Eberstadt, 2016). Christian conservatives worried that they would soon be legally compelled to sanctify gay marriages by signing wedding licenses, baking wedding cakes, and officiating at gay weddings.

Conservative Catholics were upset by the U.S. Department Health and Human Services rule that contraception coverage be included in insurance packages provided under the Affordable Care Act. Since they view certain means of artificial contraception as “abortifacients,” they felt that they were effectively being forced to subsidize abortions.

Then, there was the issue of transgender bathroom access. When Pat McCrory, the former governor of North Carolina, signed a bill requiring that individuals use the bathroom that corresponded to the biological sex listed on their birth certificates, then Attorney General Loretta Lynch responded by mandating that public schools allow individuals to use the locker room or bathroom that corresponded to their gender identity (Tucker, 2016).

Religious conservatives saw these decisions as the first steps down a slippery slope that would eventually strip them of their First Amendment right to religious freedom and, indeed, as part of a larger campaign of anti-Christian harassment and intimidation that was being waged on social media and in college classrooms (Green, 2016). Trump adroitly positioned himself as their (secular?) protector.

So Christian conservatives had plenty of reasons to prefer Trump to Clinton in the general election. But why did so many of them prefer Trump during the Presidential primaries? One reason – perhaps the chief reason – is that many conservative evangelicals are also white Christian nationalists.

## **Religious Nationalism in the United States: Its Sources and History**

American religious nationalism pulls on two sources (Gorski, 2017), both Biblical: a “conquest narrative” that draws on certain strands of the Hebrew Scriptures; and “premillennial apocalypticism,” a heterodox interpretation of Daniel and John. The metaphorical glue that binds together these two strands of



discourse is a rhetoric of blood, specifically, of blood sacrifice to an angry God. It is the metaphor of blood, moreover, that allows for the alchemical transformation of religious boundaries into racial ones, and thereby a synthesis of religious and ethnic nationalism.

The conquest narrative is based on a particular reading of the Hebrew Scriptures, that has been influential not only in the United States but around the world (Akenson, 1991; Hutchison and Lehmann, 1994). In the conquest narrative, the Israelite nation is formed, not through acts of covenanting, but through acts of violence and exclusion. The red thread that runs through all of these acts and links them together is blood: blood spilled on the battlefield, blood spattered on the altars, and blood passed on from parents to children.

The conquest narrative enters into American culture via the Puritans' wars against the native peoples (Lepore, 1999; Slotkin, 1973). The first generation of Puritans had understood their "errand into the wilderness" in terms of the logic of covenanting (Miller, 1939, 1983). But some members of the third generation sought to sanctify their bloody conflicts with the Native Americans via the logic of violence and exclusion (Bailey, 2011, Lovejoy, 1994). They recast the natives as Canaanites, their New England as the Promised Land, and their fearsome casualties as martyrs and sacrifices. And they drew a clear color line between white and red.

Later generations of Americans would frequently fall into lockstep behind them, especially during times of war. Blood rhetoric would be used by both sides in the Civil War; by white settlers battling native peoples on the Western frontier; by "Anglos" in the battle for the Southwest; by "Anglo-Saxon" empire builders throughout the world; and, most recently, by modern-day proponents of American intervention in the Middle East (Stout, 2006; Hietala, 1985; Tuveson, 1968; Slotkin, 1992; McDougall, 1997, 2016).

In recent years, the rhetoric of religious nationalism has become more euphemistic. Talk of blood conquest, Christian martyrdom, and racial purity has given way to a euphemistic language of American "missions," "ultimate sacrifices," and "the Judeo-Christian tradition." But the underlying logic – a logic of blood conquest, blood sacrifice, and blood purity – still flows just below the surface (Marvin and Ingle, 1996, 1999).

The second set of textual sources for religious nationalism is the apocalyptic visions of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. The traditional interpretation of these texts was allegorical and "postmillennial" (Boyer, 1992; Weber, 2000). Augustine and other early church fathers insisted that the fearsome monsters and violent struggles that populate the Revelation of John had to be understood as internal struggles between conflicting desires within the human heart. They believed that the Second Coming of Christ would come *after the millennium* (hence, "postmillennial"), once the Church had established the Kingdom of God on earth.

For most of American history, the dominant version of political theology was the traditional one: allegorical and postmillennial (Moorhead, 1978, 1984, 1999). It was not until the early 20th century that a literalist and “premillennialist” vision gained widespread traction among American Protestants (Sutton, 2009, 2014). In this vision, the book of Revelation is a coded account of future events.

Almost from the start, American religious nationalism was alloyed with racist elements (Jacobson, 1998; Roediger, 1991). The colonial era boundaries between “Christians” and “heathens” were racial as well as religious. So were the 19th century ones between Protestants and Catholics and Anglo-Saxons and other Europeans in the East, and between white Protestants and Chinese and Latino Americans in the West. Today, the social boundary between Muslims and Christians is increasingly understood in racialized terms (Akhtar, 2011).

Too, there has long been an element of nostalgia in WCN, the romance of a golden age in tension with worries about national decline (Bercovitch, 1978). Eighteenth Century New Englanders romanticized their Puritan predecessors (McKenna, 2008). Nineteenth Century Americans apotheosized the Founding Fathers (Albanese, 1976). Jerry Falwell’s Moral Majority hearkened back to the small-town idyll of the mid-20th century (Harding, 2000). Today though, the yearning is less for the virtues of the fathers and more for the fleshpots of Egypt.

These, then, are the four core elements of the American version of the historic discourse of religious nationalism: conquest, apocalypse, ethno-religious boundary-making, and Golden Age nostalgia. Whom does it still resonate with today?

### **White Christian Nationalism: Its Religious and Social Bases**

In opinion polls, conservative white evangelicals exhibit many of the social and political “attitudes” that one would expect of a white Christian nationalist as defined above, and at higher levels than other religious communities in the United States. For example, they express higher levels of national pride than other Americans, and feel particularly proud of the American military (Greeley and Hout, 2006). They are also more opposed to interracial marriage than other religious communities, especially unions between whites and blacks, but also (if less intensely) with Latino and Asian Americans, in accord with a logic of whiteness (Perry, 2013, 2014). Further, they typically express greater fear of and animosity towards Muslims than other religious groups (Kalkan *et al*, 2009, Edgell *et al*, 2006). Finally, they are more likely than other groups to think that America is “on the wrong track” or that “our best days are already behind us” (Miller, 2016b).

Of course, not all white evangelical conservatives are white Christian nationalists and vice versa. Recent studies suggest that roughly half of all



evangelicals were Christian nationalists by 2004, which suggests that something like two-thirds of white evangelicals were Christian nationalists by this time. And there is every reason to believe that this number will have increased further in the intervening years, as white evangelicals have watched their numbers dwindle and come to think of themselves as an embattled minority (McDaniel *et al*, 2009). Not surprisingly, WCN is highly correlated with nativist sentiments (McDaniel *et al*, 2010), opposition to interracial relationships and negative feelings towards Muslims as well (Perry and Whitehead, 2015).

### Trumpism and WCN: Resonances and Ruptures

One way of reading Trumpism is as a reactionary and secularized version of WCN. Trumpism echoes all the traditional themes of WCN – blood purity, blood conquest, bloody apocalypses, and golden age nostalgia. But it also refuses the euphemistic formulations about “culture,” “ultimate sacrifices,” and “axes of evil” that have come to characterize that modern-day version of WCN commonly known as “American exceptionalism.” Under the guise of being “politically incorrect,” Trumpism reaches back to the full-throated, blood-drenched rhetoric of centuries past. Trumpism also dispenses with the subtle allusions to Christian Scripture that have long tethered American exceptionalism to Christian ethics and political theology in favor of the not-so-subtle tropes of American popular culture. This is what makes it secular – and also what makes it potentially so dangerous. For without that tether to tradition, WCN is free to drift even further in the direction of secular messianism and political authoritarianism.

Traditionally, WCN’s preferred racial and religious others were blacks, Catholics, and Jews. In Trumpism, they have been partly displaced by “Mexicans” and Muslims. Trump consistently portrays these others as threatening and polluting. The solution, it follows, is purification and separation.

Consider Trump’s now infamous remarks about Mexican migrants: they’re bringing drugs, they’re bringing crime, they’re rapists (Rose, 2016). In other words, they are a source of physical, moral, and sexual pollution of the racialized body politic. What is the solution? Purification by means of special “deportation squads” that would collect and expel millions of undocumented immigrants from the national body; and separation by means of a “big beautiful wall,” a protective skin that would seal off the Southern underbelly of the national body from renewed “infection.”

Trump’s remarks about Muslim Americans follow the same, totalizing and categorical logic. Trump totalizes by affixing the definite article to social categories: “the gays,” “the blacks,” “the Latinos,” and so on. In this way, social groups are reified into unitary entities, authorizing crude generalizations: “the” Muslims are threatening and polluting and “Islam hates us.” “There’s a

tremendous hatred” (Sherfinski, 2016). The solution? First, “a complete and total shutdown of Muslims entering the United States until our country’s representatives can figure out what the hell is going on” (Johnson, 2015). Second, the creation of a “special registry” for any Muslim already inside the United States (Gabriel, 2015). In effect: an anti-Muslim quarantine. Again, the logic is to expel the infectious agents and seal off the body politic.

Of course, blood logic can also be invoked in an inclusive way: commingled blood spilled on the nation’s battlefields is a longstanding trope for racial inclusion in America’s bellicose political culture. And thus, it was that Khizr Khan’s stirring speech about his soldier son’s heroic death in the Iraq War evoked such a fierce reaction from Trump: it threatened the exclusionary logic of his own blood rhetoric. Deploying the classic tactic of the skilled pitchman about to lose a sale, Trump promptly sought to change the subject, in this instance, to Khan’s wife, implying that her silence was a sign of her subjugation (Haberma and Oppel Jr., 2016). Following a familiar script, he implied that the “oppressed Muslim woman” was in need of a white, political savior (Abu-Lughod, 2013).

Trump can hardly be characterized as an old-school anti-Semite. He is strongly, even militantly pro-Israel after all, and a number of his closest advisers are Jewish, including his trusted son-in-law, Jared Kushner. Still, Trump was not above deploying thinly veiled anti-Semitic tropes in the final stage of his campaign, presumably as a fop to his white supremacist supporters from the so-called alt-right. Responding to the latest wikileaks of Democratic emails, Trump charged that: “Hillary Clinton meets in secret with international banks to plot the destruction of U.S. sovereignty in order to enrich these global financial powers, her special interest friends and her donors” (Chokshi, 2016). Then, during the final week of the campaign, Trump released a television ad claiming that “the establishment has trillions of dollars at stake in this election” and warning that “those who control the levers of power in Washington and for the global special interests...don’t have your good in mind” (Cillizza, 2016). Just in case the allusions to the “Protocols of the Elders of Zion” hadn’t fully registered with the target audience, the producers spliced in footage of George Soros and Janet Yellen – both Jewish. And just in case any of Trump’s white supremacist followers worried he’d sold them out after assuming office, Trump broke with precedent by omitting any specific mention of Jewish victims from his 2017 Holocaust Remembrance Day statement (Dawsey *et al*, 2016).

What about “the blacks”? Here, Trump’s strategy was a little different if not particularly original. Blackness was linked to the ghetto, and vice versa. The problems of the ghetto were a result of blackness – of black “culture.” And the problems of “the blacks” were a result of the ghetto – of ghetto “violence.” The problems of black America were the consequence of black culture, and so it was up to black Americans to solve them.

So much for racism. What about apocalypticism? If the official themes of Barack Obama’s 2008 campaign were “hope” and “change,” the unofficial



themes of Trump's 2016 campaign were "fear" and "decline." Trump's acceptance speech was a veritable litany of mayhem: murderers, rioters and terrorists, shuttered factories, declining incomes, and beleaguered workers. Many of Trump's campaign ads resembled movie trailers for disaster flicks. One can almost hear the Hollywood voiceover: "In a world, where terrorists roam our streets, and rapists cross our borders, and our cities are in flames...." And, of course, no candidate used the word disaster more often than Donald Trump. The Middle East, the Mexican border, and the inner cities – all "disasters." Then, in his Inaugural Address, Trump spoke of school children "deprived of all knowledge" of "rusted out factories scattered like tombstones across the landscape of our nation"; of "the crime and the gangs and the drugs" that sap the nation's potential. Trump's version of the apocalypse is a secular one of course. There is no talk of the Second Coming, and no allusions to the Book of Revelation. But it is an apocalypse nonetheless. And that is surely one reason his campaign resonated so strongly with so many evangelicals.

Meanwhile, some of Trump's most fervent evangelical supporters propagated an apocalyptic narrative of their own. They referred to 2016 as the "Flight 93 election." The meme originated in a pseudonymous article published in *The Claremont Review* (Mus, 2016). It was subsequently picked up by Gary Bauer, a long-time, conservative Christian political activist and sometime Republican party official (Haine, 2016). Speaking at the 2016 "Values Voters Summit," Bauer compared the United States to Flight 93, warning that: "This country is the equivalent of that hijacked plane right now....We're headin' to a disaster unless we can get control of the cockpit again and then maybe, just maybe, we'll have a chance....Ladies and Gentlemen...this may be our last shot. It's time to roll. It's time to run down the aisle and save Western civilization!" The Flight 93 meme subsequently went viral.

Apocalyptic thinking has also become a staple ingredient in the conspiracy theories propagated on conservative talk radio. Consider Alex Jones, a conservative talk show host and the CEO of the Infowars PR firm (Klein, 2016). In the latter role, Jones originated right-wing memes such as the Obama qua Joker portrait and "Hillary for Prison" emblem. In the former role, Jones repeatedly claimed that Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama are plagued by swarms of flies wherever they go. Why? Because they smell like sulfur. Why? Because they are possessed by demons. Indeed, may actually *be* demons.

Explicit blood rhetoric had gradually faded from public discussion over the last century. Euphemistic talk of "the ultimate sacrifice" became the preferred locution. Americans had grown squeamish. Donald Trump is not known for being squeamish. He was not afraid to talk about blood. In fact, he spoke openly of blood sacrifice during the Presidential Primaries. At his rallies, he often recounted an apocryphal story about General John Pershing (Berenson, 2016). After capturing fifty Muslim terrorists in the Philippines during World War I, the story goes, Pershing had fifty bullets dipped in pigs' blood. 49 of the



bullets were used to execute 49 of the prisoners. Pershing then gave the 50th bullet to the 50th man and told him to return to his people. There were no more acts of Islamic terrorism for almost thirty years, Trump triumphantly concludes. It was one of the biggest applause lines in his stump speech. Evidently, it spoke to the innermost id of many of his most fervent supporters.

Trump was not alone in talking about blood though. Take Kentucky Governor Matt Bevin, a hard right Southern Baptist. (Walker, 2016):

Somebody asked me yesterday... "...if Hillary Clinton were to win the election, do you think it's possible that we'll be able to survive, that we'd ever be able to recover as a nation?" ... I do think it would be possible, but at what price? At what price? The roots of the tree of liberty are watered by what? The blood of who? The tyrants, to be sure, but who else? The patriots. Whose blood will be shed? It may be that of those in this room. It might be that of our children and grandchildren.

As in Trump's Pershing story, Bevin implies that martyrs' blood has magical powers – redemptive powers of national regeneration.

There are some moments of sweetness and light in the Trumpian arrangement of the WCN melody. The dark chord of apocalypticism is often followed by a high note about the golden age. The age when all was right with the world. The time when America was great. Just when was that time? Before the Emancipation Proclamation? Before the New Deal? Before the sexual revolution? Before Obamacare? Trump does not answer that question directly, except to say that America was "winning" instead of "losing." Winning what? Wars and deals are the most common referents. America won World War II but is losing against ISIS. It used to be the number one manufacturer, but now it has been passed by China. And so on.

Nostalgia is nothing new in American politics. Like so much else, it is as old as Puritan New England. Still, there is something novel about Trumpian nostalgia. For one thing, it severs the traditional connection between greatness and virtue. In the Puritan narrative, moral decline precedes material and political decline, and a return to the law must precede any return to greatness. So, too, in the civic republican narrative that was grafted onto it: corruption precedes collapse and recovery requires virtue. Historic versions of WCN still paid lip service to this idea by claiming or at least implying that white Protestants (however designated) possessed special virtues or embodied a higher civilization (Lichtman, 2009; Saxton, 1990). Not so in Trump's version of nostalgia. In this narrative, decline is brought about by docility and femininity and the return to greatness requires little more than a reassertion of dominance and masculinity. In this way, "virtue" is reduced to its root etymology of manly bravado.



We now come to the fourth and final chord in the Trumpian progression: messianism. Donald Trump may seem an unlikely messiah. But he does talk about himself in plainly messianic terms. “I am your voice,” he told his supporters at the Republican National Convention, and “I alone can fix” the nation’s problems, he continued. “Believe me folks,” he often says, “I will do it.” Don’t ask how, he assures his followers. Just believe. The implication: I have mysterious powers; I will deliver you from evil, I will redeem you from poverty, and I will lift you up again above all races. With me in charge, he says, America will “win” again.

Now, few religious conservatives really think that The Donald is the messiah. One popular view, advanced by Alex Jones and also by Sean Hannity, is that Trump is a modern version of an Old Testament King.<sup>1</sup> One theory is that he is a modern day King David. (David was an adulterer, too, remember!) The more common comparison is to the Persian Emperor, Cyrus the Great.<sup>2</sup> Cyrus freed the Jews from their Babylonian Captivity. God used him to punish the Jews’ enemies and restore their homeland. That is what some evangelicals hope Trump will do, too. Punish the secular humanists and restore the Christian nation. And rearm the American Empire, while he is at it. So, Trump is mainly viewed as a political messiah, rather than a spiritual one.

In a special Christmas greeting written on behalf of the RNC, Trump’s incoming chief-of-staff Reince Priebus penned the following accolade:

Over two millennia ago, a new hope was born into the world, a Savior who would offer the promise of salvation to all mankind. Just as the three wise men did on that night, this Christmas heralds a time to celebrate the good news of a new King.

A ferocious interchange ensued on social media. Who was the “new King”? Jesus? Or Trump? Priebus’ formulation was sufficiently ambiguous to allow for either interpretation. Was it intentionally ambiguous? Or just poorly formulated? Probably the latter. But the reaction is revealing of the messianic expectations that Trump awoke among his followers.

## Conclusion

Donald Trump was not the first choice candidate for most American evangelicals. Non-white evangelicals mostly voted for Clinton. And many

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<sup>1</sup> For Jones’ interpretation, see Brian Tashman, “Alex Jones: Donald Trump is a ‘Messenger of God,’ and ‘A King David Of Our Time,’” *Right Wing Watch*, October 28, 2016. For Hannity’s intervention, see <https://twitter.com/BuzzFeedNews/status/784592106857914368>.

<sup>2</sup> For one example, see <http://scottwebsterministries.org/article/is-donald-trump-a-modern-day-cyrus>.

white evangelicals saw Trump as the lesser of two evils. These “OK Trumppers” seem to have been motivated primarily by opposition to abortion, the vacant seat on the Supreme Court, and rising concerns about religious freedom. One can question their judgment, but they had rational reasons for choosing Trump.

But Donald Trump *was* the first choice for a plurality of evangelicals, and perhaps even a majority of white evangelicals. Why? Because many conservative white evangelicals are also white Christian nationalists. They believe that the United States was founded as a white Christian nation, and they fear that “their” nation is being muddied by non-European immigrants, corrupted by “secular humanists,” and infiltrated by “radical Islam.” Many of them likely found Cruz, Carson, and Rubio too restrained in demeanor and, one suspects, also too brown in color. They wanted a champion who was more muscular, and also a tad lighter. Donald Trump was their great white hope. He promised to cleanse the national body by purging it of ethno-cultural pollutants and sealing it off against future penetrations.

Seen within the longer sweep of American history, Trumpism is not really so novel. Most of its central tropes – racism, conquest, apocalypse, and nostalgia – have been core elements of American religious nationalism since the late 17th century. Placed against the shorter history of “the religious right” that begins in the 1970s though, Trumpism does have several features that set it apart from the version of religious nationalism that took hold during the Reagan era – namely, a conservative version of “American exceptionalism” (Gorski, 2009; Gorski and McMillan, 2012)

To begin, it is more secular. It is shorn of the Scriptural citations and allusions that still adorned the rhetoric of recent Presidents, Republicans, and Democrats alike, from Reagan to Obama. All it retains from Christianity are faint echoes of a deep story: tropes of pollution and purification, invasion and resistance, apocalypse and salvation, corruption and renewal. These tropes have long since become stock elements of our popular culture. So much so, in fact, that one could probably internalize them without any formal exposure to Christian teachings. Whether Trump’s followers learned them in Sunday school or in the movie theater is an interesting question that would bear further investigation.

The Trumpist variant of WCN is also more reactionary than its “exceptionalist” predecessor. It is shorn of the polite euphemisms about missions and sacrifices that took hold during the 20th century in favor of an older rhetoric of bloodletting and domination. It likewise discards the new-fangled, racist dog-whistles of “welfare” and “crime” that were fashioned for the post-Civil Rights era and takes up the racist bull-horns of “rapists” and “invaders” that were invented in the post-Reconstruction period and popularized in “Birth of a Nation.”

There are at least two other novel features of Trumpism that bear mention. The first is the decoupling of moral character and national greatness. In the old Puritan jeremiad, divine blessings hinged on covenant keeping (Miller, 1983).



For Revolutionary era republicans, self-government required civic virtue (Wood, 1969). For Abraham Lincoln, the Civil War was divine retribution for the nation's original sin of black slavery (Lincoln, 1992). To be sure, Ronald Reagan had already relaxed the moral tension by proclaiming the moral greatness of the average American qua American (Diggins, 2007). But Donald Trump has dissolved the tension completely by reducing national greatness to little more than masculine dominance. In the new covenant of Donald Trump, national decline results from male weakness rather than original sin.

Novel, too, is the secular messianism of the Trumpist dispensation. One thing that American exceptionalists have generally been immune to is political idolatry. The Puritans considered themselves theocrats (Winship, 2006). They wanted to be ruled by God, not men. That is one reason so many of them fled England in the first place. The American revolutionaries also rejected personal rule. One of their slogans was “No King but Jesus!” (Greaves, 1992). Conservative Christians of the 20th century era expressed similar sentiments. They criticized fascism and communism as “godless” religions that divinized political leaders (Kruse, 2016). No longer. Some of Trump's white supremacist supporters on the so-called alt-right now openly describe him as the “God Emperor.” In doing so, they effectively hearken back to a pre-Christian and indeed pre-Axial form of political order: one ruled by a god-king (Bellah, 2011). There is more than a hint of youthful irony in all this, of course. Still, irony of this sort would have been completely outside the bounds of popular discourse not too long ago. Where are the Christian critics of idolatry now?

Loosed from its religious moorings, religious nationalism floats free of the ethical tether of Christian ethics and political theology with a would-be messiah clinging to that frayed rope. Secular progressives have often wished for the demise of religious conservatism. They imagined that a reasonable form of secular conservatism would take its place. This now looks like wishful thinking.

For all these reasons and many more, the election of Donald Trump constitutes perhaps the greatest threat to American democracy since the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. There is a real and growing danger that representative government will be slowly but effectively supplanted by a populist form of authoritarian rule in the years to come. Media intimidation, mass propaganda, voter suppression, court packing, and even armed paramilitaries – many of the necessary and sufficient conditions for an authoritarian devolution are gradually falling into place. Whether America's political culture and institutions are resilient enough to withstand these developments is an open question.

How should “never Trumpers” respond to this threat? The immediate imperative is to reconstitute a “vital center.” By this, I mean an anti-authoritarian alliance of committed liberal democrats that spans the partisan divide between Republicans and Democrats. Only a broad-based “popular front” of this sort will ultimately be strong enough to withstand the

authoritarian tide. And that tide may well reach the shore in the not too distant future, swept in by a terrorist attack, an economic collapse, a race riot or perhaps even a perfect storm of all three. The likelihood of such events is not low. The meteorological conditions are increasingly favorable.

### About the Author

Philip Gorski is Professor of Sociology and Religious Studies at Yale University. His most recent book is *American Covenant: A History of Civil Religion from the Puritans to the Present* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

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