

RELIGIOUS NATIONALISM AND RIGHT-WING POPULISM: TRUMPISM AND BEYOND

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One of the great puzzles of the 2016 and 2020 elections in the United States was the extraordinary support that Donald Trump received from white evangelicals. Roughly 40% voted for Trump during the GOP primaries in 2016, and over 80% ultimately voted for him in the general election (Bailey, 2016). Nor was this enthusiasm specific to white *evangelicals*. On the contrary, it was shared by white Christians more generally, albeit to a lesser degree. But it was specific to *white* evangelicals. The majority of non-white evangelicals voted for other candidates. In the 2020 elections, white evangelical support for Trump eroded by only a few percentage points.

Nor is this a uniquely American puzzle, or one that will fade away once Trump leaves office. The affinity between religious conservatism and right-wing populism antedates Trump and extends to many parts of the world including: Orban's Hungary, Modi's India, Bolsonaro's Brazil and Duterte's Philippines. The affinity is perhaps less obvious and also less important in Western Europe, but even there, neo-populists such as Matteo Salvini, Marine Le Pen, and Geert Wilders have frequently positioned themselves as defenders of "Christian civilization" (Brubaker, 2017). This is no doubt also the case in Poland, where, as Geneviève Zubrzycki points out in her contribution to this volume, Catholic and Polish identity are equated by many. This is why liberal Poles are often philosemites: they seek to challenge Catholic hegemony by adopting Jewish practices. I consider how religious, political, and ethnic identity are knotted together in the US and elsewhere.

Of course, not all religious conservatives feel attracted to the populist message. In the US, for instance, the ranks of the #neverTrumpers include a good number of conservative Christian intellectuals, Protestants as well as Catholics. One thinks of the *New York Times* columnists, Peter Wehner and Ross Douthat, for example. In Western Europe, meanwhile, many of the official representatives of the Christian churches have publicly denounced conservative populism.

The question, then, is which religious conservatives support the populists and why? The general answer I propose here is: "religious nationalists" (Philip S Gorski and Türkmen-Derivoğlu, 2013), and in the specific case of the United States, "white Christian nationalists" (Philip S. Gorski, 2019b; Philip Gorski, 2020) This paper has three interrelated aims: 1) to unpack the cultural logic that connects race, religion, and nation in contemporary American politics, and American religious history more generally (Philip Gorski, 2019a); 2), to show how Trump has mobilized it; and 3) to ask whether similar logics are at work in other cases as well.

I will also argue that Trumpism is best understood as a secularized version of white Christian nationalism. By this, I mean a version that has been evacuated of scriptural references and theological content, what Springs calls in his essay „zombie nationalism.“ There are both old and new features of this theopolitical worldview. On the one hand, Trumpism mobilizes the central metaphors and tropes of white Christian nationalism, specifically blood metaphors and

apocalyptic tropes. That is what is old about it. This is why Trumpism still resonates with evangelicals, without being obviously evangelical. On the other hand, it is not bound by Christian ethics or political theology. This is what makes it new, and also dangerous: it cannot be held accountable to any higher standard.

“RELIGIOUS NATIONALISM”?

At first glance, the relationship between religion and nationalism may appear more contradictory than complementary. Isn't religion universalistic and nationalism particularistic? Isn't religion traditional and nationalism modern? A certain narrative of Western modernity might lead one to think so. But this narrative is mistaken, because religion and nationalism as we now understand them have a common, historical root. Both are derived from a certain (Christian) reading of the Hebrew scriptures — a supersessionist one. This means that there are hidden links between religion and nation that can always be reactivated, even if they have lain dormant for a time.

Until fairly recently, most social scientists would have dismissed the very concept of religious nationalism as an oxymoron. Some still do. Nationalism was long assumed to be a wholly “modern” phenomenon (Hobsbawm, 1992; Gellner, 1983). Some even regarded it as an ersatz religion for a secular modernity, the cultural stuff used to plug up the God-shaped hole left behind by a *deus absconditus* (Benedict Anderson, 1991). Today, however, many scholars understand religious nationalism as a distinctive variant of modern nationalism, one that makes religious identity the litmus test of national belonging (Van der Veer, 1994; Juergensmeyer, 1993; Friedland, 2001).

In the United States, for example, religious nationalists have long argued that only a “good Christian” can be a “real American,” and vice versa (Philip Gorski, 2020; Philip S. Gorski, 2019b). Just a century ago, however, being a good Christian was not good enough; real Americans were *Protestant* Christians. Today, one can also be a Catholic (so long as one is anti-abortion) or even (!) a Jew (so long as one is strongly “pro-Israel”). Nor are such claims about the link between religious and national identity peculiar to the United States. As Zubrzycki argues elsewhere in this volume, one hears similar rhetoric about Polish-ness and Catholicism (Zubrzycki, 2006). And, one might add, about Hindu-ness and Indian-ness or Sunni-ness and Turkish-ness, too (Sharma, 2007; 2011; 2013; Kaplan, 2005).

One could still argue that religious nationalism is a specifically modern phenomenon, of course, and for two reasons. First, because religious nationalism emerges as a specific *type* only in opposition to a secular nationalism, that is, to a form of nationalism based on ideas of civic belonging or ethnic origins. These conceptions first arise during the democratic revolutions of the late 18th century and the romantic movements of the late 19th century, respectively. And second, because the category of religion as we now understand it arguably first emerges during this same period as a means of conceptualizing the relationship of Christianity to other traditions, and its superiority to them (Jonathan Z Smith, 2004b; Asad, 1993; Masuzawa, 2005; Nongbri, 2013). The idea that there are multiple species of religion that are members of the same genus does not really begin to take shape in the West until the early modern era, when overseas exploration brought Western Christians into sustained contact with “Oriental” religion and did not fully take hold until Western colonialism sparked claims of religio-cultural superiority vis-à-vis non-Christian others (Rennie and Tite, 2008).

Still, these arguments should not be overstated either, and for similar reasons. Ethnic identities have long been intertwined with religious identities, or at least not clearly differentiated from them (Grosby, 2003; Hastings, 1997). They sometimes still are. This intertwining can be obvious, as in the opposition between a Catholic Ireland and a Protestant England. But it can also be more subtle, as in the Protestant influence on the civic culture of the United States, with its emphasis on personal beliefs and individual rights, or in the Catholic influence on the civic culture of France, with its emphasis on public space and sartorial conformity (Bowen, 2007; O'Brien, 1988). Religion and national identity, it appears, are not so easily disentangled. Indeed, as Amesbury shows in his contribution to this volume, religion is often called upon as a legitimating force for founding nations.

Nor is this entanglement an accident of history. Western nationalism itself has religious roots. The common root is the Hebrew Scriptures or, rather, a certain Christian appropriation of them. The definitional triptych of the nation—"people, land, and state"—is already prefigured in the Pentateuch, after all, which speaks of a chosen people, a holy land, and a Jewish polity (Anthony D. Smith, 2004a). And most Western nationalism originally arose out of Christian claims to supersede the Ancient Israelites as God's Chosen People (Hutchison and Lehmann, 1994). Virtually every nation in Europe advanced claims of this sort at some point in its history.

Americans were hardly alone in their claims of chosen-ness (Cherry, 1998). On the contrary, claims of national chosenness were widespread in the history of Western Europe and its settler colonies. They were the rule rather than the exception. The Dutch and the English both envisioned themselves as "New Israels" during the Reformation Era, for example (Philip Gorski, 2000). That, in fact, is the historical origin of the American conceit. Nor were the early modern Calvinists anything like the first to do so. The Hebraic analogy had already made earlier appearances in Medieval France and Dark Age England, too (Beaune and Cheyette, 1991; Philip S Gorski, 2006).

American religious historians have long been aware of the role that such claims have played in the development of American national consciousness. The New England Puritans already cast themselves in the role of the "New Israel" in the early 17th century. And when the Puritan settlers were subsequently cast as the founding grandfathers of the United States, and their Thanksgiving proclaimed America's second national holiday, alongside the 4th of July, the claim of chosenness was effectively extended to the nation as a whole (McKenna, 2008).

Claims of national chosenness are still alive even today in the semi-secular ideology of "American Exceptionalism," which insists that the United States is a "nation like no other" upon which a special "mission" has been conferred, a "crusade" to defend freedom. The crusader variant of religious nationalism is not new either. It made its first appearance during the Puritans' wars with the native peoples during the late 17th Century. Since then, it has reappeared in many different guises in the nation's many different wars: as Anglo-Protestant nationalism in the French and Indian Wars, for example, as WASP nationalism in the colonial conquests of the fin-de-siècle, as Judeo-Christian nationalism in the Cold War against "godless Communism," and, more recently, against "radical Islam."

No one should be surprised to discover an additional link between race and nation. After all, the Latin word for nation is the root word for birth, and the "birth of a nation" often has overtones of

race, especially in the United States. But what do whiteness and Christianity have to do with one another? In recent years, critical social scientists have argued that we need to think “intersectionally” about race, class and gender (Crenshaw, 1990). Accordingly, such insights led to proposals that we think about religion intersectionally, too (Wilde and Glassman, 2016). Certainly, that is warranted in the American case.

For in America, religious nationalism has always been entangled with white supremacy. It has always been *white* Christian nationalism. All too often, blood conquest and blood purity have gone hand in hand. On the frontier and in the colonies, “uncivilized” and “heathen” peoples—red, brown, and yellow—were subjugated, and then „civilized“, or, failing that, simply destroyed (or, more politely, allowed to “disappear”) (O'Brien, 2010). The racial logic of the “Indian wars”—white claims on a promised land in the hands of colored “Canaanites”—was simply extended westwards and southwards in the repression of Asian immigrants and the seizure of Mexican territory (Gómez, 2018; Lew-Williams, 2018). After all, productive land could not be left in the hands of unproductive people, the argument went! On the plantation, meanwhile, the subjugation of black slaves helped to create and then reinforce an enduring culture of white violence (McCurry, 1997). The honor of white men, it seemed, could only be effectively sustained through periodic and violent assaults on black and brown bodies.

Nor is this all. Christian nationalism of the crusading sort has also led to a militaristic understanding of the American state (Fred Anderson and Cayton, 2005; McDougall, 2018; Guyatt, 2007). For blood conquest and blood purity inevitably go together with blood sacrifice and military might. If the mission of United States was to Christianize the world and rid it of evil, then military might was necessarily one of the means to achieving that end.

Academic analysts have often remarked on the quasi-religious character of modern nationalism. Some have explained this in functional terms. On this account, nationalism is a “political religion” that fills the “God-shaped hole” left by secularization (Gentile, 2006). Others have explained it in instrumental terms (Brass, 1997). From this perspective, nationalist politicians cynically invoke religious language to galvanize their followers. The genealogical account suggests a different perspective: modern nationalism has a religious “unconscious” that can always be summoned back to the surface again, and often is, not least in the United States.

CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM IN AMERICAN HISTORY

As should be clear by now, Christian nationalism is nothing new in the United States. On the contrary it is very, very old—almost as old as New England, which is, in fact, where it first began. But for much of American history, white Christian nationalism has also lay dormant and has mostly reared its head during wartime. Why? Because Christian nationalism was a useful tool for wartime mobilization. It raised the stakes of a conflict by turning profane wars into holy wars (Philip Smith, 2005). It was also a soothing balm for uneasy consciences and mourning survivors (Faust, 2009). It drew a clear line between us and them, and aligned it with the distinction between good and evil. And it leant meaning to the casualties of war by turning death in battle into martyrdom for the faith, a blood sacrifice on the altar of a righteous nation (Stout, 2006). In all these ways, religious nationalism made it possible to override the moral universalism of the Christian Gospels, with their clear proscriptions on violence and killing.

Once a war-time tool, used to legitimate Westward „expansion“ and then overseas empire, white Christian nationalism has lately become a fixed feature of the American cultural landscape, even during peacetime. Why? One reason is geopolitical. For most of their history, Americans were highly suspicious of standing armies. This is an old suspicion that derives from the political tradition known as civic republicanism (Van Gelderen and Skinner, 2005). Civic republicans have always seen standing armies as seedbeds of tyranny. And this is one reason why America’s armies were always demobilized so rapidly in peacetime. The Cold War put an end to this. Americans were taught to love the military and to associate fighting with freedom (Herzog, 2011; Gunn, 2008; Lahr, 2007). They were taught that “freedom isn’t free”: it must be bought with blood.

There is also another important reason for the recent growth of religious nationalism: a theological shift within American Protestantism. For most of American history, the vast majority of Protestant theologians espoused a “postmillennialist” understanding of Christian eschatology (Moorhead, 1984; 1999). On this reading of Biblical prophecy, the Second Coming of Christ will occur after his followers have established the Kingdom of God for a thousand years, i.e., after the millennium. For postmillennialists, the violent struggles between supernatural beings depicted in the book of Revelation are to be understood metaphorically, as spiritual struggles within the individual believer’s heart. The other reading of Biblical prophecy is “premillennialist.” Premillennialists believe that the Second Coming of Christ will initiate the Kingdom of God. That is, it will precede the millennium. Premillennialists understand Revelation as a literal depiction of the final conflict between the forces of good and evil. Premillennialism has become increasingly influential amongst American Protestants over the last century (Boyer, 1992; Sutton, 2014). Today, it is the hegemonic view, at least amongst evangelical Christians.

And not only amongst them. By now, apocalypticism has seeped deep into America’s secular, pop-culture (Kyle, 1998; Frykholm, 2004). Consider the “left behind” novels by Tim La Haye and Jerry Jenkins. They are part Tom Clancy mystery and part End Times theology. They have sold tens of millions of copies. Or, in a still more secular vein, consider books such as Cormac McCarthy’s, *The Road* or films such as “X-Men: Apocalypse.” They are part of the burgeoning genre of “post-apocalyptic” works. In this way, key elements of Christian nationalism have become a core part of secular culture. They supply Americans with some of their most potent cultural tropes and political frames. This is one reason why white Christian nationalism can make common cause with white ethno-nationalism, and did so during the Trump Presidency. “Christian” becomes a euphemism for whiteness.

Apocalypticism is one key component of Christian nationalism American style (Philip S. Gorski, 2019b; Philip Gorski, 2020). Blood rhetoric is the second. Blood serves as a kind of linguistic binding agent. It is the metaphorical glue that holds together three key elements of Christian nationalism: blood conquest, blood sacrifice, and blood belonging. The Promised Land must be taken by force, as it was in the backwoods of New England, the prairies of the Midwest, and the deserts of the Southwest. With the “closing of the frontier” in the late 19th century, the crusading impulse was directed outwards into the American Empire (Putney, 2009; Immerwahr, 2019; Grandin, 2019). It still is. White Christian nationalists like to say that America has always been a force for good in the world. And by force, they mean military force. For them, the American military is the human arm of divine justice. Under Trump’s more isolationist „America First“ vision, the crusading impulse has turned inwards again, not against „Indians“ or „communists“ but against Muslims and liberals.

Of course, war brings death, which is interpreted as blood sacrifice. Though, here, too, there has been a change. Old-time Christian nationalism transfigured death that occurred during battle into Christian martyrdom (Stout, 2006; Rowley, 2018). Even so measured a politician as Abraham Lincoln spoke of hallowed ground consecrated by the blood of fallen soldiers in the text of his Gettysburg Address. Today, politicians more often speak the watered-down language of “ultimate sacrifice.” But the theological undertones of such talk are clear enough for those with ears to hear them. In this regard, as in so many others, Trump and many of his followers prefer to „say the quiet part out loud.“

What about blood belonging? American identity cannot be grounded in a myth of shared descent in the way that many other national identities can. With the exception of the native peoples, Americans are all from someplace else. This is one reason why Christian nationalists have usually defined American identity in terms of some ethno-religious other. In Puritan New England, Native Americans and Protestant sectarians were usually cast in this role (Lepore, 1999; Shoemaker, 2006; Warren, 2018). In the Southern Colonies, of course, it was African slaves who were the racial *and* religious other (Gerbner, 2018). By the mid-19th century, Irish and Italian Catholics were regarded as the chief threat to a Protestant America (Higham, 1965). During the late 19th century, Jews from Central and Eastern Europe were co-starring with them in this role. Nowadays, of course, it is Muslim Americans, Latinx immigrants, and secular progressives who are portrayed as mortal threats to a Judeo-Christian America. In each period, religion and race have been intertwined with each other.

RELIGIOUS NATIONALISM AND RACE

From the start, the whiteness of white Christian nationalism was opposed to blackness as well as to redness and to color more generally. Until well into the 19th century, many American whites believed that their black slaves had no souls to save (Jordan, 2013). To be black was to be irredeemable. The reverse was also true. To be unredeemed was to be “black.” Until well into the 20th century, the Irish and Italian Catholics and Central and East European Jews who immigrated to America were regarded not only as religious others but also—and therefore—as racial others (Goldstein, 2019; Brodtkin, 1998; Jacobson, 1999; Roediger, 1991; Guglielmo, 2003; Ignatiev, 2009; Gerstle, 2017). Italians, Irish and Jews were widely understood as “black.” Their whitening only took place gradually. The whitening of Mexican-Americans, meanwhile, was halting at best, and that of Asian-Americans more halting still (Foley, 1998; Deverell, 2004; Glenn, 2009; Fox, 2012)

The racial segregation of American churches is as well-known as it is enduring (Dougherty, 2003; Hadaway et al., 1984). But the effects of whiteness on evangelical Christianity were theological as well as sociological. Consider Biblical literalism. Its origins are usually traced to the American reception of German “historical-criticism” during the late 19th-century and the eruption of the “fundamentalist/modernist” controversy during the early 20th (Marsden, 2006). But as the religious historian Mark Noll has persuasively shown, Biblical literalism initially emerged a half century earlier as a means of defending slavery (Noll and Blair, 2006). Whereas abolitionists appealed to the “spirit” of the Bible, pro-slavery theologians fastened onto the “letter” by focusing on specific passages that mentioned slavery in an approving fashion. Many conservative Protestants were already inclined to Biblical literalism long before the Social

Gospel and the Scopes Trials turned them against political and theological liberalism.

Or consider the evangelical reading of Christian ethics in terms of “personal accountability” rather than “social justice.” As the political scientist Michael Lienesch and other scholars have shown, this theology was propagated by Gilded Age business elites as a means of opposing the Social Gospel and providing theological cover for laissez-faire economics (Lienesch, 1993; Hammond, 2017; Grem, 2016). And as the American historian Kevin Kruse and others have shown, it was repropagated by Cold War business elites for similar purposes (Kruse, 2015; Wall, 2009; Stevens, 2010). Conservative Christians were taught that their faith was about saving individual souls not about pursuing the common good. But the ethics of personal accountability had as much to do with race as with economics. As sociologists Christian Smith and Michael Emerson have demonstrated, personal accountability talk has also become a means of stripping inequality of its social context, a means, that is, of blaming the poor, and especially poor blacks, for their own poverty, and for a lack of wealth that is demonstrably better understood in structural and historical terms (Emerson and Smith, 2001).

Finally, consider evangelical theologians newfound love for the subtleties of the Holy Trinity. For decades, evangelical preachers have urged their followers to establish a “personal relationship with Jesus.” So “Christ-centered” was their theology that God the Father sometimes seemed to fade into the background. As for the Holy Spirit, that was for the “Holy Rollers” of a Pentecostal persuasion no more. As “radical Islam” has replaced “Godless communism” as the religio-racial other for religious conservatives, evangelical theologians have rediscovered the Triune God (Graham, 2015; Hartley, 2016). For trinitarian doctrine makes it possible to draw a sharp line between Christianity and Islam, since the latter insists on the one-ness of God. It allows evangelical theologians to argue that Christians and Muslims do not worship the same God. That this dividing line also runs between Christianity and Judaism, or that the doctrine of the Trinity has no “Biblical basis” whatsoever (i.e., is not explicitly mentioned in the scripture), is evidently of no account. The theology must be bent to fit the politics. The racial tail is wagging the theological dog, and not for the first time in the history of evangelicalism. The interpretation of Scripture is often bent so as to justify the subjugation of racial others, whether Indians, Blacks, Asians, Irish or Mexicans. Presented with a choice between egalitarian and inclusive readings of Scripture, and hierarchical and exclusionary ones, many white Christians opted for the later.

CONTEMPORARY WHITE CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM: THE FOUR KEY ELEMENTS

The original recipe for American religious nationalism had two ingredients: apocalypticism and blood rhetoric. Today’s new and improved recipe contains two additional ones: messianism and victimization narratives. Messianism had relatively little purchase in the high church WASP version of American religious nationalism that was predominant until the early 20th century. On the contrary, there was widespread distrust of the charismatic preachers and faith healers who have long been stock figures of revivalist and sectarian movements within American Protestantism. But messianic leaders are absolutely central within the low church milieu that now dominates American Protestantism. The lineage is long: itinerant preachers were gradually replaced by urban revivalists who were followed in turn by the radio and by preachers

and now by the celebrity pastors of America's giga-churches. Given this history, it is hardly surprising that conservative evangelicals would be drawn to messianic leaders.

A similar dynamic can be observed with respect to victimization narratives. The high church, American Protestants of the 19th century often hailed from the well-heeled classes (Niebuhr, 1929; Park and Reimer, 2002). Or at least aspired to them. They were more apt to understand themselves as conquerors rather than as victims. This was not so with their low-church, sectarian brethren. The collective memory and everyday experience of Baptists and Pentecostals was and is rife with a sense of victimization. This is one reason why most white evangelicals now believe—truly and fervently believe—that Christians are the single “most persecuted group in America” (Cox et al., 2017)

The American version of religious nationalism now has at least four key elements:

1. *Blood tropes*. Talk of blood is the red thread that runs through both the Jewish and Christian scriptures. There is talk of blood sacrifice, blood conquest, blood purity, and blood atonement, amongst other things. Blood is the solvent that rinses out the universalistic aspirations of Christianity. It is also the cement that binds it to the particularistic (and racialized) vision of the nation. In short, blood rhetoric is what makes it possible to nationalize (and racialize) Christianity. It is what makes the ideal of the (white) Christian nation possible.
2. *Apocalyptic narratives*. The histories of Judaism and Christianity are both replete with apocalyptic discourse. For most of these histories, however, literalist interpretations of the apocalyptic texts (viz., Daniel, Revelation) were confined to fringe movements. Over the last century, however, they have become a core element of evangelical Christianity. But they are not only limited to evangelical Christianity. Apocalyptic tropes now pervade the popular culture of the United States as well. As noted earlier, apocalyptic story-lines are a recurring feature of contemporary American film and literature. In this way, Biblical literalism has seeped deep into “secular” culture and laid the groundwork for a seeming contradiction: secularized versions of white Christian nationalism.
3. *Persecution/victimization narratives*. The “pariah” status of the ancient Jews and Roman persecution of the Jesus movement left a deep imprint in the collective memories of both traditions. It is especially felt amongst present-day American evangelicals. This is understandable. After all, evangelicals are the scions of “low church” sects and movements (e.g., Baptists and Methodists) that were objects of high-brow contempt and sometimes were also subjects of political persecution both in the Old World and in the New. Over the last half century, white evangelicals have become increasingly prosperous and powerful. At the same time, however, the non-white and non-Christian populations have grown rapidly, especially over the last two decades. These twin developments—economic and demographic—explain why many evangelicals feel persecuted, and also why such claims seem preposterous to many non-evangelicals. For what is really at issue is not so much (Christian) persecution as (white) privilege. Wedding cakes are not the moral equivalent of lynching trees. When the owners of a small bakery refuse to bake a cake for a gay wedding, on the grounds that it violates their religious freedom, it is hardly equivalent to the joyful mutilation of black bodies by white communities in the Jim Crow South or anti-black riots in 1960s Chicago.
4. *Messianic expectations*. Full-blown messianic movements have probably been somewhat more common in modern Judaism, but modern Christianity has certainly had its share

(e.g., Mormonism) and the history of American Protestantism is replete with charismatic preachers (e.g., George Whitefield) who claimed quasi-messianic powers. If anything, messianism is even more pronounced in contemporary American evangelicalism. There are various reasons for this. Perhaps the most important is that modern media—radio, television and social media—has spawned a new breed of celebrity pastors with mass followings. With their massive staffs and high-tech sanctuaries, contemporary mega-churches have generated a new, spectatorial form of religiosity that centers around CEO pastors who control sprawling empires of satellite congregations and para-church organizations. As the congregants become more passive, “gifted” pastors become ever more important. Messianism is hoped for, even expected.

TRUMPISM AS WHITE CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM

With this four-point definition in hand, it becomes much easier to understand why Trumpism resonates so strongly with some American evangelicals (Philip Gorski, 2019a; 2020). There is to begin Trump’s catastrophizing rhetoric. To be sure, it is not explicitly apocalyptic. Trump does not allude to the end times, in the way that some Republican politicians have been wont to do. Indeed, given his meager knowledge of Christian Scripture, it is not clear that he would be capable of doing so. But Trump certainly does espy disaster and conflict most everywhere he looks. “Disaster” is one of his favorite words. And for him, recent American history has been a long litany of disasters. Provoking conflict, meanwhile, is one of his favorite tactics. For him, American life—indeed all life—is ultimately a struggle between “us: (“very good people”) and “them” (“very bad people”).

Then, there is Trump’s morbid fascination with blood, particularly women’s blood. Recall his bizarre remarks about the female TV news anchors Megyn Kelly and Mika Brezezinski during the 2016 campaign about “blood coming out of [Kelly’s] whatever” or “blood streaming down [Brezezinski’s] face” (Glenn Thrush, 2017; Rucker, 2015) A more chilling example concerns an apocryphal story concerning General John Pershing that Trump frequently recounted in his campaign speeches, often to raucous applause (Qiu, 2017). During the Philippine-American War, so the story goes, Pershing captured fifty “Muslim terrorists.” He then had fifty bullets dipped in pig’s blood. Forty-nine of the bullets were used to execute forty-nine of the prisoners. The fiftieth bullet was then given to the fiftieth soldier, who was instructed to return to “his people” and warn them not to engage in terrorism. And they did not – for thirty years! Or so the story goes. For Trump, blood is full of danger and power; it can pollute, especially when it is women’s blood. But it can also purify, especially when it is men’s blood. White Christian nationalists are equally fascinated with blood.

What about messianism? It goes without saying that Trump views himself in messianic terms. In his 2016 speech accepting the Republican nomination for President, for example, he claimed that “I am your voice” and “I alone can fix it.” During the 2019 trade war with China, he glanced heavenward and announced that “I am the chosen one”(Sherwood, 2018) More surprising perhaps is how quick some were remarkably to embrace Trump’s conceits and how willing they have been to defend them. Some evangelicals immediately compared Trump to messianic leaders from the Hebrew Bible, such as King David. More saw in him a modern-day King Cyrus, the Persian Emperor who freed the Jews from their Babylonian captivity (Stewart,

2018). They hoped that he would deliver them from the Kenyan captivity under Barack Obama and restored them to their rightful place in the American Jerusalem: Washington, D.C.

This brings me to the fourth and final area of overlap between Trumpism and evangelicalism: the discourse of victimization (Fea, 2018; Denker, 2019). Despite his supposedly messianic powers, Trump constantly complains that he and his allies are being treated “unfairly” and persecuted by their enemies. During the campaign, for example, he warned that the electoral system was “rigged” against him. After the election, he claimed that he had lost the popular vote only because “millions” of people had voted “illegally.” He then denounced the Mueller investigation as “rigged,” a “hoax”, and a “witch hunt.” While Trump surely regards himself as a “winner,” he also feels like a victim. Despite his (supposedly) enormous business successes, he feels himself wrongly excluded from the upper echelons of New York society. This wins him the sympathy of American evangelicals, who also feel rejected by America’s “cultural elites.” To the secular observer, these claims of persecution may seem overstated. But there is no doubt that they are sincerely felt nonetheless.

Thus far, I have argued that the connection between Trumpism and evangelicalism is white Christian nationalism. Which is to say that white evangelicals support Trump if and insofar as they are also white Christian nationalists. There is also solid statistical evidence to support this argument. Sociologist Sam Perry and political scientist Andrew Whitehead constructed a measure of white Christian nationalism based on six questions taken from the 2007 wave of the Baylor Religion Survey (Andrew Whitehead, 2020).

So, what does this scale have to do with race? As it turns out, a lot. The higher your score on the Christian nationalism scale, for example, the more likely you are to oppose interracial marriage, especially between whites and blacks (Perry and Whitehead, 2015). You are also more likely to support restrictions on immigration on the grounds that Latino immigrants contribute to crime and live off welfare. Indeed, once you control for Christian nationalism, the correlation between evangelicalism and racism simply disappears.

How about violence? In a follow up study, Perry and Whitehead have shown that there is a strong statistical relationship between support for Christian nationalism and opposition to gun control (Whitehead et al., 2018). It’s also well established that evangelicalism is strongly correlated with various measures of patriotism and militarism (Greeley and Hout, 2006). One suspects that this relationship would also disappear if one controlled for white Christian nationalism.

Where does the apocalypse fit into this though? As it turns out that apocalyptic beliefs are strongly correlated with Christian nationalism, too (Perry, 2019).

In sum, the historical and cultural analysis and the statistical and quantitative analysis corroborate one another. My analysis of Trumpism and evangelicalism and Perry and Whitehead’s analysis of Christian nationalism and racism are clearly complementary.

There is good news and bad news in these findings. The good news is that evangelicalism per se is not associated with racism, xenophobia, and militarism (Wong, 2018). The bad news is that many evangelicals are white Christian nationalists, as are quite a number of conservative Protestants more generally.

But most observers of the Trump phenomenon have interpreted it as a form of right-wing populism. What if anything does right-wing populism have to do with white Christian nationalism and with religious nationalism more generally?

RIGHT-WING POPULISM AND RELIGIOUS NATIONALISM

There is widespread scholarly agreement that populism is not an “ideology,” at least not in the sense that, say, liberalism or communism are ideologies (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017; Müller, 2016; Hawkins, 2010; Moffitt, 2016). Populism does not have a Mill or a Marx, a treatise or a manifesto. Nor does it have a program of reform or revolution, such as the expansion of individual rights or the abolition of private property. And yet, while it may lack the intellectual systematicity of these Nineteenth Century ideologies, it is not without a certain coherence.

Some analysts have proposed that populism is best understood as a political discourse centered around the notion of the “sovereign people” and related notions such as “popular will” and “popular unity” (Müller, 2016). This is why populist rhetoric so often has a democratic ring. However, as proponents of this interpretation are quick to point out, right-wing populists also reject core elements of *liberal* democracy, such as the rule of law, minority rights, and formal procedure. On this reading, right-wing populism aspires to *illiberal* democracy. Appeals to “popular sovereignty” are used to delegitimize and override liberal principles. They also hint at the violence inherent in any nation’s founding, and warn of its possible return.

But there is more to populist discourse than claims to popular sovereignty. Populist discourse also has a narrative dimension, as well as a conceptual one. How so? In *Strangers in Their Own Land*, her widely-read ethnography about white conservatives in the rural South, Arlie Hochschild concludes that her subjects interpret the world through the frame of a “deep story,” a narrative that they themselves were not always readily able to articulate, but which they still immediately recognized and affirmed as “theirs” as soon she articulated it for them (Hochschild, 2016).

The central event in the populist story is “line-cutting.” Hochschild’s subjects imagine themselves to be waiting patiently in a long queue that leads to the “American dream” of material prosperity. But the line is standing still. In fact, it hasn’t moved in years, decades even. Why? Up ahead, her subjects notice, other people are cutting in line, immigrants and minorities who just recently arrived. Not only that, agents of the Federal Government are actually escorting them to the front of the line. This, they feel, is deeply unjust. The unspoken premise is that “we the people”—the ones at the front of the line, who were always already “here first” regardless of when we actually arrived—are white people. Right-wing populism contains hints of violence, then, but also demands for justice, but an unequal justice that privileges whiteness.

Hochschild’s analysis can be generalized. The deep story she discovers in the American South is actually just one variant of a more generic narrative that underlies right-wing populism throughout the world. This story features four actors: a pure people, a corrupt elite, an undeserving other, and a messianic leader. The people have been betrayed by the elite which is allied with the other, and the leader promises to expel the infiltrators and restore the people to its birthright. Of course, different actors can be cast in these roles. That is what makes the narrative

generic.

Are the people “pure” because they are religious? And, if so, which religion – Protestant, Catholic, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Shinto? Or are they pure because they are “secular,” which is to say, not Muslim, as in present-day Western Europe? And who is the corrupt other? Politicians? Intellectuals? Journalists? Bureaucrats? What about the undeserving other? Most every religion has been cast in this role somewhere at some time, including Christianity. Finally, what has been lost and is now being reclaimed? Purity? Prosperity? Honor? As with other fairy tales, the possible variations of the populist narrative are locally variable and virtually endless. Vagueness is a feature of this narrative, rather than a bug: “the people” is an empty signifier that can be filled with varied contents, not only by populist demagogues but also by their followers. As Amesbury notes in his essay, it is this “filling in” that establishes the legitimacy of a people. Race, religion, and gender can all serve this role, and often do so in combination with one another.

One question that has long bedeviled scholars of populism is whether it is progressive, conservative, or protean. Focusing on narrative allows us to resolve this issue. For there is also a left-wing version of populism’s deep story. It features three actors rather than four: an oppressed people, a corrupt elite, and a social movement. In this account, the people are being exploited by the elite and have joined together in a movement of liberation. Bernie Sanders’ two campaigns for the Presidency are paradigmatic examples of the left-wing variant of populism. It pits the 99% against the 1%, and its slogan is a “political revolution” in the name of “not me, but us.”

Note that the two variants of populism overlap on two points: their elevation of the common people and their condemnation of a corrupt elite. This explains the shape-shifting character of populist politics. It is why populist politicians and/or their followers sometimes shift from one end of the political spectrum, as with the “Bernie to Trump” voters in 2016 (Dyck et al., 2018). But the two populisms do also diverge in two key respects: there is no ethno-cultural other in the progressive version, and the focus is on the movement rather than the leader. In general, class rather than culture is the cleavage that matters most in progressive versions of populism. And the corrupt elites are economic rather than cultural elites. A different variety of progressive populism can be found in Poland, where, as described by Zubrzycki, religio-cultural others—in this case Jews—are assimilated into the “people” through cultural appropriation.

In the present analysis though, the focus is on right-wing populism. These movements have at least two other common, if not universal features. The first—and the most important for our purposes—is a charismatic leader. Because the populist goal of popular unity can never really be achieved, it must be performed. In left-wing populist movements, the unity of the people is usually embodied in “the movement.” Left-wing populist movements do of course have leaders as well (e.g., Juan and Eva Peron, William Jennings Bryant). But they point away from themselves and towards the movement or the people in their rhetoric and their performances. In right-wing populist movements, by contrast, popular unity and power is more often incorporated in a leader who promises power and salvation, not to mention retribution and revenge. Recall Donald Trump’s speech at the Republican National Convention in 2016: “I am your voice” and “I alone can fix it.”

The second common feature of right-wing populist movements (sometimes found in the left-

wing variant, too) is the performance of “bad manners,” above all by the leader, but also by his (or, occasionally, her) followers (Moffitt, 2016). Following Benjamin Moffitt, by “bad manners,” I understand ongoing violations of social norms of polite speech and sometimes also of proper dress and grooming. The speech of populist leaders is often impolite and profane. In a rambling monologue before the Conservative Political Action Committee in March 2019, for instance, Donald Trump described charges of Russian collusion as “bullshit,” a word never before uttered by a sitting President in a public address. Venezuela’s Hugo Chavez was also renowned for his profanity and invective, as is the Philippines’ President Rodrigo Duterte. This symbolic violence against social norms sets the stage for and sometimes devolves into verbal or physical violence against cultural others, as in the mass shooting in El Paso, Texas, which targeted Latinos. In both instances, the violence is a demonstration of sovereignty, in which the power of the people supersedes laws and institutions.

Perhaps the most peculiar aspects of populist performance is its stylistic aspect. The personal appearance of right-wing populist leaders is often unconventional or even bizarre. Many of today’s populist leaders sport highly eccentric coiffures (e.g., Trump, Wilders and Boris Johnson). Others adopt peculiar habiliments (e.g., Chavez’s iconic track suits, Modi’s equally iconic *chaiwala* outfits, Trump’s overlong red ties). But this eccentricity has its own logic. Bad manners and strange dress serve two important purposes: they distance the leader from the elite and thereby signal his or her closeness to the people, even as they also distance the leader from “ordinary” people who cannot afford to defy convention. The populist leader is both a man of the people and a man beyond the people, human and superhuman at the same time.

Having enumerated some important characteristics of both religious nationalism and right-wing populism, it is now possible to identify some of the elective affinities between them.

THE ELECTIVE AFFINITIES

The “elective affinities” concept was first introduced into historical social science by the German sociologist, Max Weber, though he had borrowed the phrase from Goethe who had himself borrowed it from chemistry. Goethe’s eponymous novel (*Die Wahlverwandtschaften*) featured two aristocratic couples that split apart and then recombined into one new couple and two abandoned spouses. In chemistry, the phrase describes chemical reactions in which two compounds form a new compound and various precipitates when combined. Elective affinity, then, is not just a poetic phrase for a “causal relationship,” as is sometimes claimed. It describes the process whereby two existing elements give way to a new historical compound.

The relationship between conservative religion and right-wing populism is also one of elective affinity. Each contains elements that are strongly attracted to one another. But each also contains elements that are not so easily bonded together. When the two are combined, they form a new compound and generate certain precipitates. The new compound is religious nationalism; the precipitates include religious universalism and political conservatism. The result of the reaction is a metamorphosis: universalistic religion is particularized and political conservatism is radicalized.

Consider the affinity from the standpoint of conservatism. Religious conservatives are attracted to right-wing populist movements and parties if and insofar as they:

- 1) *Invoke notions of blood sacrifice, blood conquest, blood purity and, more generally, attribute mystical powers to human blood.*
- 2) *Paint the contemporary world in Manichean and apocalyptic terms as a cosmic struggle between good and evil that is hurtling towards its final and violent denouement.*
- 3) *Portray the dominant ethno-cultural majority as a persecuted, religious minority, and in particular, as a minority persecuted on account of its faith.*
- 4) *Are headed by a charismatic leader who makes messianic promises and claims magical powers.*

Let us call these four features the *religious nationalist quadrilateral (RNQ)*.

It is important to emphasize that this affinity obtains, not only for conservative Christians, but for religious conservatives in many traditions, not only ones which centrally feature the RNQ (e.g., evangelical Protestantism or Shia Islam) but even in ones that do not. Hindu nationalists in India and Buddhist nationalists in Sri Lanka have rummaged through their own traditions in search of a textual basis for the RNQ – and they have not come up empty-handed. For blood, they have substituted soil, as in “Mother India” or Lanka’s “sons of the soil” (Sharma, 2011; Tambiah, 1992). For the linear eschatology of the Abrahamic faiths they have substituted a cyclical eschatology of cataclysmic renewal with violent “karpas.” They, too, have found their others in Muslims and secularists. And they have often found their messianic leaders in political gurus, rather than in messiah figures. Where the RNQ did not exist, then, something analogous had to be invented.

The affinity is not one-sided but mutual. Right-wing populists are drawn to religious nationalism insofar as it:

- 1) *Emphasizes the moral purity of the common people.* For secular populists, religion serves mainly as a marker of cultural authenticity, rather than as a mark of divine salvation. In the American South, for instance, the “evangelical” label sometimes functions as an ethnic identity, rather than a religious one, and in South Asia, secular nationalists often claim to be “Hindus” on ethno-cultural grounds. In Europe, meanwhile, right-wing populists often style themselves as defenders of “Christian civilization” even though they themselves are not practicing Christians, while in Turkey right-wing populists portray themselves as stewards of “Ottoman civilization,” thereby aligning themselves with the last caliphate.
- 2) *Blames national decline on cultural elites, and especially on secular intellectuals.* By tacitly defining “the corrupt elite” in cultural terms and focusing especially on humanist intellectuals, right-wing populists are able to deflect attention from the economic elites and religious intellectuals who typically serve as their financial backers and public apologists. Ironically, insofar as economic inequality and regional decline are key drivers of populist resentments, “culture wars” tactics of this sort not only mask but exacerbate the socio-economic causes of the

populist backlash, all while justifying policies that benefit the privileged. Hindu nationalist attacks on set-aside programs for lower castes and other underprivileged groups are but one example of such a dynamic.

3) *Clearly identifies moral and/or religious others who can never become full members of the people.* This, too, forms a general pattern that goes together with national variations. In the United States, Western Europe and also in much of South Asia, the Muslim has become the paradigmatic other, who is doubly unassimilable, both because Muslims are not members of the “national religion” but also because they are supposedly incapable of becoming fully secular. Why? Because secularity is rooted in Christianity—or so the claim. This dynamic is not specific to Christianity however. Indeed, in other contexts, such as Nepal or the Gulf, it is the Christian who is doubly unassimilable, both as a *de facto* agent of Western imperialism and an apostate from the national religion(s). This exclusionary dynamic is inherent to religious nationalism whatever its roots.

4) *Sanctifies the charismatic leader, despite or even because of his or her bad manners.* Secular conservatives often prefer strong leaders, not because they believe in political messiahs, but rather because they believe in hierarchy. They often cathect with unruly leaders, despite their penchant for order, not because it signals superhuman powers, but because it signals masculine bravado, a willingness to flout the “pussified” and “feminine” norms of polite society. From this perspective, bad manners are simply one tactic in a broader repertoire of dominance politics, where the aim is not to achieve agreement but to compel submission. While populist leaders vary a great deal in their manners, with some displaying great decorum (e.g., Modi and Erdogan), they are quite uniform in their displays of hyper-masculinity (e.g., physical strength, sexual prowess, athletic ability etc.).

To reiterate, this new compound generates at least two precipitates: ethical universalism and political conservatism. Most religions embrace some form of ethical universalism. They command their followers to ignore differences of race and even of religion in their moral dealings with other people. When conservative religion joins with populist politics to form religious nationalism, however, ethical universalism must be abandoned in favor of ethical particularism: only co-nationals cum co-religionists have full moral worth; all others merit moral indifference at best. This moral alchemy often requires a certain measure of pseudo-theological labor. In justifying Trump’s harsh immigration policies in the face of the Christian ethics of hospitality, for example, Mike Huckabee enlisted St. Paul’s teachings on obedience to political authority. In his telling, would-be Central American refugees became *de facto* “law breakers” rather than modern day Samaritans.

At least since Burke, political conservatives have styled themselves the defenders of cultural tradition and local community and resisted top-down, state-led reforms on the grounds that they unsettle the extant moral and social order. Neoliberals could still pretend that they were conservatives by espousing “family values” and “religious tradition” while turning a blind eye to the social and cultural effects of market fundamentalism. At first glance, populists might seem to be pursuing a similar strategy insofar as they portray themselves as the defenders of cultural identity and national community, even as they launch a frontal attack on political norms and minority communities. But right-wing populism is better understood as reactionary and even radical. It is reactionary insofar as it seeks to reclaim rather than preserve, as in “make American

great *again*.” And it is radical insofar as it does not hesitate to use the violence of the state in pursuit of its ends.

CONCLUSION

So, why did evangelicals vote for Donald Trump? Again, it’s important to emphasize that many of them did not. Non-white evangelicals mostly voted for Hillary Clinton. Also, a number of evangelical intellectuals publicly opposed Donald Trump, as did a number of female pastors and youth leaders. But most white evangelicals did vote for him in the end. More devout evangelicals seem to have voted for him because of their opposition to abortion and gay marriage. Less devout evangelicals have voted for him because they are white Christian nationalists. What’s more, the devout seem to have overcome their initial reservations about Trump and now enthusiastically support him, perhaps because their long cherished goal of overturning *Roe v. Wade* now seems within reach or perhaps simply because they have become die-hard political partisans.

What white evangelicals seem not to realize is how costly this victory was. For the alliance between evangelical Christianity and political conservatism has a price, two prices, to be exact. The first is the rapid growth of “religious nones” in the younger generation. Young people who might have had a lukewarm relationship to organized religion and might even have returned to the church as they grew older are now rejecting religion in growing numbers and on political grounds. This should worry American evangelicals, first, given their concern with saving souls. The second reason it should worry them is that it indicates growing fissures within the evangelical fold itself. Some have already left the fold. They are still Christians, but not evangelicals. Others are pushing back against the aging white men who still claim to speak for the evangelical faithful, men like Franklin Graham and Jerry Falwell, Jr. This should also worry American evangelicals, given their history of schism.

What, finally, does all of this portend for the future of American religion and democracy? In *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville observed that religion and republicanism had always gone hand in hand in the United States, and to the benefit of both. Not because church and state were merged or because the clergy meddled in politics but precisely because they weren’t and didn’t. There was no established religion and the clergy maintained a respectful distance from politics. Still, religion provided a powerful buttress to republican government. The churches schooled Americans in the practice of voluntary association while the clergy gently instilled respect for the nation’s laws. Not always, of course, but in their better moments at least. In France, on the other hand, religion and republicanism were increasingly at odds with each other, and to the detriment of both. The rupture between religion and republicanism during the Revolution was succeeded by a bad marriage between religion and empire consecrated by Napoleon. There was an official religion and the clergy was politically vocal. In this ill-fated union between throne and altar, the Catholic Church supported the French monarchy while the clergy preached obedience to authority. Republicans therefore opposed both. This same dynamic played out across all of Latin Europe. In these countries, it was politics rather than science that really drove people out of the churches.

Having discerned the likely outcome of these dynamics early on, Tocqueville issued this warning: “Religion by uniting with different political powers, can . . . form only burdensome alliances. It has no need of their help to survive and may die, if it serves them.”

The religious right in Trump’s America would do well to heed Tocqueville’s advice. Since the late 1970s it has embraced the Republican Party ever more tightly, alienating increasing numbers of Americans from Christianity. For a time, the adverse effects of the evangelical-Republican alliance on American Christianity were concealed by high birth rates among religious conservatives. But then, three years ago, a number of evangelical leaders made a Faustian bargain with Donald Trump: their moral credibility in exchange for promises of political protection. The reckoning for that bargain is now coming into view.

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