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"A Robin Hood Taking Over the Empire": Donald Trump's Revival

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Abstract

Since the founding of the Northern colonies and the creation of the United States, conservative Christianity's involvement in the political realm has followed cycles of activity and subsequent retreat into passivity. Donald Trump's presidency, and the support he gathered from major religious right's organizations as well as conservative Christian voters, represent the latest of such cycles of involvement and withdrawal. But if his defeat signaled the end of yet another participation cycle for the movement, Trump's figure managed nonetheless to usher in the white Christian nationalist revival some his voters were longing for.

Keywords: Religious Right; Donald trump; Religion and Politics; Protestantism; Populism.

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Chiara Migliori obtained her PhD in cultural studies and sociology from the Graduate School of North American Studies of the Freie Universität of Berlin. For her research, she conducted individual as well as focus-groups interviews with both ordinary Trump voters and members of Religious Right's advocacy groups, and she attended gatherings of conservative activists in the US. Her dissertation was titled " 'We're Saying Merry Christmas Again': Donald Trump as the Savior of White Conservative Christian Identity," and will be published as a book by Palgrave in Summer 2022, with the title "Religious Rhetoric in US Right-Wing Politics: Donald Trump, Intergroup Threat, and Nationalism." Her current research interests focus on the development of forms of religious or christian right in western democracies in the twenty-first century, their reactionary public and political discourse, and the resonance that their conservative, authoritarian narratives has among their potential constituency.

1 Introduction

On June 1, 2020, as the streets of Washington, D.C. were filled with people protesting the murder of George Floyd and the plague of police brutality against African American citizens in the United States, Donald Trump left the White House for a photo op holding a Bible in front of St. John's Episcopal Church nearby. As unexpected and out of context this event appeared to be, it was perfectly in line with the rising white Christian nationalism (WCN) Trump had tapped into since the beginning of his campaign in June 2015.[1]

Much to the dismay of several religious public figures and ordinary citizens, during the 45th president's mandate, the names of Trump and Jesus were mentioned in the same sentence more often than a part of the Republican establishment was comfortable with. Christian symbols and words were also prominently on display on January 6, 2021, when a demonstration against Trump's defeat in the 2020 presidential election rapidly turned into a horrifying act of what the FBI deemed domestic terrorism.[2]

This paper provides the context in which the figure of Trump, as the savior of Christianity and of the United States, arose and developed. The following paragraphs will retrace the growth and decline of religion's involvement with politics throughout the country's history, with a closer look at the twentieth century and the changes within the religious realm that occurred during those cycles. This will clarify Donald Trump's crucial role in the latest occurrence of the relationship between conservative Christianity and right-wing politics in the United States, and delineate the major characteristics of this relationship in the twenty-first century.

2 Covenant, Apostasy, and Revival

The Covenant—Apostasy—Revival Trope (CART), which was elaborated by Gorski[3] to describe the ebb-and-flow motion of conservative Protestantism in the nation's political realm, is applied here to the figure showing the impressive support obtained by the 45th president of the U.S. on the part of a constituency known as white Evangelicals, the often mentioned 81%.[4] The CART constitutes the basis of conservative Protestants' narrative of the history of the United States, including the colonial period, as it

> recounts American history [...] as a story in three acts: a primordial golden age of religious faith and social order ('covenant'), which is followed by a period of religious apostasy and social decline, necessitating an age of religious revival and social restoration.[5]

Expanding on the spiritual framework within which the CART trope was conceived, the rise of Trump's political career can be inserted into the long cycle of growth, retreat, and resurgence of the entanglement of religion and politics. This clarifies that his success, albeit appalling, did nothing but follow a prescribed, almost physiological, pattern. Trump was indeed considered by prominent figures of the religious right to be an instrument sent by God to address the political, social, cultural, and spiritual issues supposedly plaguing the nation. What should not be underestimated, however, is the peculiarity of the figure of Trump within the relationship between religion and politics. If, on

1. See Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

2. Considering the number of Christian symbols seen on that day, the event was also deemed a "Christian insurrection" of sort. See also Emma Green, "A Christian Insurrection. Many of those who mobbed the Capitol on Wednesday claimed to be enacting God's will," *The Atlantic*, January 8, 2021, https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2021/01/evangelicals-catholics-jericho-march-capitol/617591/, last accessed on August 15, 2021.

3. Philip S. Gorski, "Conservative protestantism in the United States? Toward a comparative and historical perspective," in *Evangelicals and Democracy in America, Volume 1: Religion and Society*, ed. Steven Brint and Jean R. Schroedel (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2009), 74–113.

4. Although the term *Evangelical* is present in the paper, I prefer to use the definition *conservative Christians* to indicate the Christian voters who supported Trump.

5. Gorski, "Conservative protestantism in the United States?," 79.

one hand, Trump's support on the part of mainly white conservative Christians was to be expected, the disruptiveness of his persona forces us to reckon with the growth of white Christian nationalism, a phenomenon that permanently altered the religious-political landscape of the United States.

In four centuries, conservative Protestantism has transformed and evolved into one of the major tools to advance reactionary identity politics exploited with success by right-wing populist figures such as Trump. Through every cycle of exploitation for political purposes, fighting against modernization, societal change and subsequent retreat, conservative Christianity has been depleted of its spiritual elements and has been reduced to a handful of revengeful slogans to be deployed during presidential campaigns. These catchphrases, tinged with authoritarianism, ethnocentrism, and populism, were ready for Trump's use when he announced his candidacy and during his mandate. But it was not only his bombastic tone, bragging attitude and flaunted indifference to political correctness that made them so powerful. The conservative Christian constituency that flocked to him was willing to receive those slogans as a sign of his alignment with their fear for an identity and culture allegedly under threat.

3 From a City upon a Hill to a Retreat into Passivity

An account of the ways in which Christian religion, through sermons, Jeremiads, and the interpretation of the Scriptures, was crucial in creating the narrative supporting the British colonization of North America is beyond the scope of this paper. However, a few words are necessary in order to understand the role of religion, and especially religious rhetoric in public discourse, in spurring waves of commitment and recommitment to the supposedly godly plan of the foundation of the United States.

In the first decades of life in the northern colonies, sermons linked the fate of the colonizing endeavour to the history of the Jewish people. Pastors preached to the population that the uncertainties and hardships of the new life surrounded by the wilderness were justified as necessary challenges to fulfil God's plan to create a new Jerusalem in the New World.[6] On the threshold of the first Great Awakening at the beginning of the eighteenth century, sermons began lamenting the evils that afflicted the society established in the New World, already troubled by the spiritual impurity of its inhabitants, in order to spur a longed-for renewal in the souls of the faithful.

A leitmotif of the Jeremiads and of the preachers' discourse, and one that is present to this day among some conservative Christian circles, was a reprimand against sin, in order to prevent God from unleashing his wrath upon the nation.[7] Throughout the decades that accompanied the colonies towards their future as a nation, pastors and religious leaders spurred citizens to repent of their sins in order to fulfil God's plans for the future nation. Spiritual leaders were increasingly linking the fate of the land with the will of God, especially on the brink of the American Revolution.

Up to the beginning of the twentieth century, Christian religion, symbols, and rhetoric continued to be exploited to spur political action aimed at redressing injustice and addressing societal issues. Primary examples of this were abolitionism and the temperance movement as well as the strain of nineteenth-century social activism known as Social Gospel.[8] At the beginning of the twentieth century, however, the great controversy between modernism and those who at that time began to be known

6. See Emory Elliott, *Power and the pulpit in Puritan New England*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1975); Philip S. Gorski, *American Covenant. A History of Civil Religion from the Puritans to the Present* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2019); Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1975) and *The American Jeremiad* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1978).

7. This narrative and attempt at civic subjugation have been entrenched in the modus operandi of conservative religious leaders throughout the history of the country. One twenty-first century example of this is the infamous conversation between the late Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, two pivotal figures of the New Christian Right. In the aftermath of the World Trade Center terroristic attack, the two ended a broadcasted conversation by agreeing that the tragedy had been undoubtedly brought upon the country by those allegedly not adhering to a Christian lifestyle. As claimed by Falwell, "I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People For the American Way–all of them who have tried to secularize America—I point the finger in their face and say 'you helped this happen'." Excerpt taken from the website: http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Christianity/2001/09/You-Helped-This-Happen.aspx, last accessed on August 29, 2021.

8. George M. Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991).

as fundamentalists, saw the public defeat of the latter, and the subsequent retreat of conservative Protestants from the public arena.

In July 1924, in Dayton, Tennessee, the so-called Scopes Monkey Trial (*The State of Tennessee v. John Thomas Scopes*) was held in which the American Civil Liberties Union recruited a Tennessee teacher to test the recently-passed Butler Act, which prohibited the teaching of evolution in public schools. John Scopes, a biology teacher, agreed to violate the act and was, therefore, charged and condemned. The trial is best remembered for the fight between a supporter of evolution, Clarence Darrow, who was Scopes' attorney, and the conservative Christian, William Jennings Bryan, the plaintiff's attorney. Scopes lost the case and was condemned to pay a fine (the ruling was later reversed), but the worst defeat was the one suffered by fundamentalist Christians, who were ridiculed by Darrow during the confrontation.

After the battle against the teaching of evolution, Evangelical Protestants withdrew into a state of "*quiescent politics*,"[9] characterized by an avoidance of engaging in overt political action. This time was defined by a focus on the local level of evangelicalism caused by a widespread disillusion in the state of American culture and society. While surely limiting their presence in the public scene, conservative Christians who had fought to erase evolution from public school curricula began to establish new educational facilities and set out to expand their presence in religious radio programs.

In public discourse, the shift from the term *fundamentalist*, which started to be used with a positive connotation but later acquired a derogatory hue,[10] to the term *evangelical* occurred in 1942 with the founding of the National Association of Evangelicals, or "the first Washington lobbyist group."[11] This also signaled the end of the self-imposed isolation of the evangelical world. The detachment began to dissipate also thanks to the work of world-renowned preachers like the late Billy Graham. In those years, conservative Protestant activism began to resurface and believers were prompted once again to openly take part in the change of the nation.

The anti-communist orientation of the 1950s religious right saw a renewed involvement of religious citizens in civic and political matters, but this too waned after a few years.[12] By the end of the 1970s, the mobilization efforts of the New Christian Right became more focused and systematic, and allowed for the beginning of the third ongoing wave of activity of the movement seeking to bring God into the public square.[13]

4 The New Christian Right and the Grand Old Party

On August 21, 1980, during a campaign speech held at the National Affairs Briefing, Ronald Reagan addressed the audience gathered in Dallas with the following words:

> Since the start of my presidential campaign, I and many others have felt a new vitality in American politics. […] Religious America is awakening perhaps just in time for our country's sake.[14]

9. John C. Green, "Seeking a Place," in *Toward an Evangelical Public Policy. Political Strategies for the health of the Nation*, ed. Ronald J. Sider and Diane Knippers (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 15.

10. See George M. Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991).

11. Daniel K. Williams, *God's Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 4. Robert Wuthnow considers 1943 and the creation of the National Association of Evangelicals as "[one] of the first steps toward forging a national movement around the idea of evangelical Christianity." See Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith since World War II* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 173.

12. Clyde Wilcox, "Laying Up Treasures in Washington and in Heaven: The Christian Right and Evangelical Politics in the Twentieth Century and Beyond," *Organization of American Historians Magazine of History*, 17(2003): 23–29.

13. In this paper, the names "New Christian Right" and "religious right" are both used to indicate the movement founded in the 1970s consisting of religion-based organizations, lobbies, and advocacy groups, such as the Moral Majority, the Family Research Council, and the Alliance Defending Freedom.

14. All quotes from Reagan cited here are from the transcription retrievable at: https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/ronaldreaganreligiousliberty.htm, last accessed on December 20, 2021.

This candidate, who had become the Republican Party's nominee on July 17, was conveying two messages. The first spoke of a newly-found purpose and a renewed commitment to the covenant, which were all elements of the religious rhetoric of Protestantism in the United States that have been passed down to political discourse.[15]

The second trope the presidential hopeful was deploying was the urgency with which the recommitment had to happen in order for the country to thrive and be successful again. The sense of impending doom was also conveyed by the following statement introducing the extensively-deployed trope of an attack to the Christian culture:

> Today, you and I are meeting at a time when traditional Judeo-Christian values, based on the moral teaching of religion, are undergoing what is perhaps the most serious challenge in our nation's history.

The speech was being held during a conference organized by, among others, Ed McAteer from the Religious Roundtable, and several associated with the New Christian Right were present, the foremost among them was Jerry Falwell, creator of the Moral Majority. Under the guidance of its most prolific strategist, Paul Weyrich, the unofficial coalition of religion-based interest groups was formed to protest the 1973 Supreme Court decision in *Roe v. Wade*, which made abortion more accessible in the country.[16]

Created during the favorable rise of neoconservatism, the religious right managed to capitalize on the discontent of white citizens who felt that the Democratic Party had stopped representing their interests. Until the 1970s, Americans had supported government programs aimed at helping economically disadvantaged citizens as well as the fight against racial discrimination. During the Johnson presidency, most Americans welcomed initiatives such as Medicare, which provided medical care to citizens over the age of 65. In contrast, welfare actions aimed at the less affluent and, above all, at the non-white population, such as Medicaid, Food Stamps and the Model Cities program, were mainly looked upon with suspicion by white middle-class citizens.[17]

Neoconservatism also spread as a reaction to the cultural revolutions that swept through society in the sixties and seventies.[18] Hence, if the first rallying cry of the newly founded religious right was the fight against the right to abortion, the second strategy implemented by Weyrich was aimed at rebranding "the right's anti-pluralist ideology as 'cultural conservatism.' "[19] A new coalition of voters was forming, which included white workers, middle class citizens, southerners, Protestants but also Catholics, as well as wealthy Sunbelt inhabitants who were working for the chemical and aerospace industries. What all these people had in common was their willingness to believe in the narrative that the social decay and economic decline of the country were to be blamed on the low morality of young people, on the advocates for the rights to abortion and divorce, on feminists, and in general, on what was seen as an abandonment of the Christian values on which the nation had supposedly been founded.

Reagan, however, didn't perform any concrete action in support of the movement's claims. Moreover, during those years, the religious right's reputation was severely tarnished by scandals involving some of its prominent public figures, such as the pastors Bakker and Swaggart.

Then Marion G. "Pat" Robertson enters, one of the few old-guard New Christian Right leaders, who is still alive in 2022; he was a Christian Charismatic, a failed presidential candidate and the owner

15. See Loren Baritz, *City on a Hill: A History of Ideas and Myths in America* (New York: Wiley, 1964) and David C. Leege and Lyman A. Kellstedt, *Rediscovering the Religious Factor in American Politics* (Armonk, NY: Sharpe Books, 1993).

16. The real reason behind the creation of the movement, however, must be looked for in the Supreme Court's decision on the case, *Green v. Connally*, 1971, which established that private schools still practicing racial segregation could not maintain their tax-exempt status. See William C. Martin, *With God on Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right in America* (New York: Broadway, 1996), Randall Balmer, *Thy Kingdom Come: An Evangelical's Lament. How the Religious Right Distorts the Faith and Threatens America* (New York: Basic Books, 2006).

17. Michael Schaller, *Right Turn* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

18. Rinaldo Petrignani, *L'era americana* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2001), 293.

19. Allan J. Lichtman, *White Protestant Nation: The Rise of the American Conservative Movement* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2008), 387.

of Christian Broadcasting Network. In 1988, Robertson lost the Republican presidential nomination to George H. W. Bush. However, he found Ralph Reed and set out with him to revitalize the movement. In 1990, the still-existing Christian Coalition was founded as the Christian Coalition of America. One of Reed's major accomplishments consisted in broadening support for the religious right, first, by curbing efforts to court pastors, and then, by engaging in the mobilization of younger and more highly educated voters.[20]

When it was the Democrats turn at the presidency, the religious right set out to rebrand their peculiar militaristic tone in order to adopt a more inclusive rhetoric, albeit always focusing on the necessity of defending a traditional and heteronormative idea of family values. The arrival of George W. Bush, who publicly declared his born-again identity and the fact that Jesus Christ was his favorite philosopher, coincided with another internal change in the religious right's ranks. The founder of Focus on the Family and of the Family Research Council, James Dobson made sure that the Republican Party understood that the religious right's support, accomplished by the mobilization of prospective voters, would have to be obtained through a political agenda strongly emphasizing the fight against abortion and for the curtailment of LGBTQ rights.

Once again, and despite his public attunement to the movement's claims, Bush did not deliver on anything really significative in the realm of pro-life policies. Moreover, same-sex marriage became legal in Massachusetts in 2004, paving the way for the Supreme Court's decision in the 2015 civil rights case, *Obergefell v. Hodges*, legalizing same-sex unions in the whole country.

From the second half of the twentieth century, the relationship between religion and politics has been characterized by systematic support in favor of Republican candidates on the part of conservative lay and religious leaders of the New Christian Right. This support, which eventually translates into ballots cast on election day, was on the condition of a series of political promises made by the candidate to the movement; however, these promises have rarely been maintained. What Wilcox observed at the beginning of the twenty-first century, in spite of the election of George W. Bush, was that "never before in American history has a social movement been so successful in elections and so unsuccessful in policies."[21]

Since its inception at the end of the 1970s, the religious right has justified support for Republican presidential candidates by the alleged necessity for a Commander in Chief who, by enacting conservative social policies, would have restored Christian principles as the basis of American life to bring the nation back to a supposed past greatness. This support translates into the depiction of the winning candidate as the figure most attuned to the Christian values upon which the nation was allegedly founded. As expected, and despite Trump's far from genuinely faithful behavior and talk, the movement followed the same script during his first campaign, in particular, after it became clear that he would have won the Republican primaries.

On their part, Republican candidates and presidents need to show their ideological alignment with the cause of religion-based interest groups, and they do so by means of gestures of differentiation.[22] Aware of his role as the GOP candidate, Trump did not hesitate in declaring his intended support for the claims of self-identified, conservative Christian citizens. Before being elected, Trump created the Evangelical Advisory Board and made the promise to appoint conservative Supreme Court justices a theme in his campaign speeches. He also courted Catholic voters, a key constituency in Midwestern states, by creating a Catholic Advisory Committee.[23]

Once elected, Trump immediately reinstated the Mexico City Policy, preventing international organizations advocating for abortion rights from receiving U.S. funds. Throughout his mandate he proceeded to nominate conservative justices both to lower courts across the country and to the highest court. Among the most prominent gestures aimed at pleasing the religious right coalition, were

20. Dan Gilgoff, *The Jesus Machine: How James Dobson, Focus on the Family, and Evangelical America Are Winning the Culture War* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2008).

21. Wilcox, *Laying Up Treasures*, 23.

22. Joseph R. Gusfield, *Symbolic Crusade: Status Politics and the American Temperance Movement* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1963).

23. Mark J. Rozell, "Donald J. Trump and the Enduring Religion Factor in U.S. Elections," in *God at the Grassroots 2016: The Christian Right in American Politics*, ed. Mark J. Rozell and Clyde Wilcox (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 3–18.

the Executive Order Promoting Free Speech and Religious Liberty, followed by the Executive Order Improving Free Inquiry, Transparency, and Accountability at Colleges and Universities in 2019. Both orders were welcomed by conservatives as long-needed actions aimed at protecting rights to religious freedom and free speech. Within the realm of the fight against LGBTQIA+ rights, in 2017, Trump issued a Presidential Memorandum preventing transgender people from serving in the US military (later revoked by Joe Biden).

The highly symbolic as well as effective gestures of differentiation performed by Trump, punctuated by the repetition of slogans exalting a supposedly imperiled Christian culture, characterized the latest occurrence of a resurgence of the religious right's public activity in the twenty-first century. The momentum that the movement seemed to have gained, however, ended once again with the election of a Democratic president.

5 From Protestantism to a Trans-denominational Populism

A cyclical pattern of action and passivity with regard to civic engagement is not attributable solely to the lobbies and advocacy groups composing the religious right coalition. Steve Bruce described the conservative Christian political commitment as a sort of continuous cycle, made of dedication, delusion, retreat, and new dedication.

> Conservatives gradually come to be concerned about the moral, political, and spiritual state of America. They get off their verandas and campaign. When the campaign fails, they go back to the verandas to concentrate on preserving their own purity while America continues to slide down the tubes.[24]

What happens after hopes have been left unattended to by the sympathetic president in charge, can be described as a retreat into holy passivity, or "the idea that to be set apart as Christians entails an abdication of active civic participation within the secular realm in favor of a purely transcendent, spiritual form of political intervention."[25]

The historical phases of retreat into passivity on the part of conservative Christians have also been linked to the inevitable emergence of religious particularism. In periods of relative social tranquility, the Christian population of the country seems to be counting on an unspoken consensus on the so-called Judeo-Christian foundation of the nation itself, which corresponds to a private phase of religious life.[26] When an outgroup begins engaging in behavior that defies the moral tenets of the conservative Christian citizenship, this cluster of the population reawakens from the passive state of the, supposedly, shared consensus. At this point, religion goes public and politics becomes invested in the role of protecting a supposedly endangered moral order.

The cycle's final step sees particularism among different denominations resurfacing, making believers realize the different views each denomination has over the issue that caused controversy in the first place. This Christianity-internal disagreement has the potential to steal the momentum of the mobilization of conservative Christian citizens. The consequence is a return to the privatization of religion and the rebuilding of consensus until the next controversial issue presents itself; and so the cycle continues.

One of the major changes to have affected the relationship between religion and politics in the United States during the twentieth century has been the broadening of the coalition of Christian believers who are ready to engage in politics. The years of the fight against abortion rights resulted in the birth of the alliance between conservative Protestants and Catholics. Moreover, the creation of the religious right to attract voters to the Republican party fostered the growth of a

24. Steve Bruce, *Pray TV. Televangelism in America* (London: Routledge, 1990), 167; see also Andrew Povtak and Ryan L. Claassen, "The Christian Right Thesis: Explaining Longitudinal Change in Participation Among Evangelical Christians," *The Journal of Politics* 72(2010): 2–15.

25. Zachary Sheldon, " 'God Said, 'You're Hearing the Voice of the President': Citizenship in The Trump Prophecy," *Journal of Media and Religion*, 19(2020): 94.

26. Ted G. Jelen, *The Political Mobilization of Religious Beliefs* (New York: Praeger, 1991).

> 'trans-denominational populism' [that] increasingly characterized American evangelicalism, contributing over time to the erosion of theological, denominational, and regional boundaries that used to divide American Protestants.[27]

Finally, in the last decades, a phenomenon began to affect conservative Christianity in the United States, which prevents religious particularism from resurfacing and jeopardising the efforts of those who exploit Christian symbols for political purposes. Starting with the last two decades of the twentieth century, nondenominational Christianity has undergone exponential growth.[28] Believers who tend to gravitate towards churches unaffiliated with existing denominations (i.e., Methodists, Baptists, Lutherans) find in nondenominational congregations the answer to their dissatisfaction with established or traditional modes of worshipping.

The rise of nondenominational churches caters to the sense of disaffection towards traditional denominations and the need for an authenticity found in disestablishment. It is also true, however, that the rise of nondenominational Christianity might constitute an additional weapon in the hands of right-wing populist and authoritarian politicians for creating and spreading the image of the United States as an inherent Christian nation, without having to acknowledge differences in denominations and the degree of orthodoxy. This would greatly simplify their process of tapping into the sense of resentment and ethnocentrism perceived by those mainly white citizens who identify with Christians, but for whom Christianity is only an exploitable trait of identity politics.

6 The Internet: Conspiracies, Prophecies, and a Call to Arms

There is another sphere in which this need is catered to. The internet has magnified the power of preachers and self-described prophets to spread their own vision of how the country would have been saved by the figure of Donald Trump.

> In recent years, self-described prophets have proliferated across the country, accelerating in status over the course of the Trump era. [...] Many are independent evangelists who do not lead churches or other institutions.[29]

Graham also puts this in correlation with the growth of nondenominational Christianity. The decline of mainline and Evangelical Protestant churches as well as the Catholic church has been crucial in creating a free space detached from any traditional congregation for religious leaders to propose their charismatic strength.

Online prophets are a growing group, and their actions expand well beyond the internet. They include Jericho March's founder Rob Weaver, among the organizers of the "Stop the Steal" gathering in Washington, D.C. in protest of the ratification of the Biden-Harris victory.[30] As a matter of fact, many of these figures were present at several pro-Trump rallies that took place at the Capital on January 5th and 6th, 2021, such as The Rally to Revival, The Silent Majority, and March for Trump/Save America. In those rallies, religion mixed with conspiracy theories amidst cries of a supposedly stolen election and as a provocation to channel the 1776 revolutionary spirit.

Internet religious and lay personalities played a role in the events of January 6, 2021 by spreading the narrative of an actual war taking place in the country. A war in which their champion was clearly being betrayed.

27. Steven K. Green, *Inventing a Christian America: The Myth of the Religious Founding* (New York: Oxford UP, 2015), 16.

28. Ed Stetzer, "The Rise of Evangelical 'Nones'," *CNN*, June 12, 2015. https://edition.cnn.com/2015/06/12/living/stetzer-christian-nones/index.html?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+rss%2Fcnn_living+%28RSS%3A+CNN+-+Living%29, last accessed on August 5, 2021.

29. Ruth Graham, "Christian Prophecy Movement is Hit Hard by Trump's Defeat," *The New York Times*, February 12, 2021.

30. Peter Montgomery, "Jericho March Leader Urges Pastors to Mobilize Followers for 'Stop the Steal' Effort," *Right Wing Watch*, January 5, 2021, https://www.rightwingwatch.org/post/jericho-march-leader-urges-pastors-to-mobilize-followers-for-stop-the-steal-efforts/, last accessed on August 13, 2021.

> These leaders and media outlets inflated the stakes of Trump's re-election campaign and post-election efforts to 'stop the steal' by portraying them as part of a spiritual war between good and evil. In their telling, Trump was the divinely anointed leader of the forces of light, and his opponents were agents of Satan bent on crushing religious freedom and destroying the American republic.[31]

Among such self-proclaimed prophets is Frank Amedia, a pastor and the founder of Touch Heaven Ministries and the Touch Heaven Church in Canfield, Ohio. Amedia is also the creator of the POTUS Shield: "a council of prelates that is assembling to raise up a spiritual shield."[32] The pastor was among those who prophesied the re-election of Donald Trump in November 2020. When this did not happen, he released a podcast explaining the reasons why his prophecy had been wrong, and Biden was, in fact, the man God intended to put in the White House. On February 21, 2021, after having recovered from the incorrect prediction, Amedia explained to his followers that God could not have allowed pride and haughtiness to dwell in Washington, D.C. Therefore, Trump's defeat was the appropriate punishment from God since American Christians had clearly elevated Trump above Him and had forgotten that the Kingdom has importance above everything else. Finally, Amedia admonished his listeners that they all must put God first in their lives. Then, and only then, will they be able to change things in the country.

Another prominent online prophet is Lance Wallnau, author of *God's Chaos Candidate* (2016). In his book, Wallnau makes use of the metaphor that became common during Trump's campaign whenever anyone questioned his spiritual stature, which equated Trump with King Cyrus. "The usefulness of King Cyrus is undoubtedly found in the fact that the Persian ruler, despite being a pagan, is described in the Bible as chosen by God and raised up to end the captivity of God's people in Babylon."[33] In Trump's case, "Cyrus is no longer just a non-Jew, but also a non-Christian, one example of many 'wicked and ungodly' who God not only has used but even 'raised up' for a particular purpose [...]."[34] Therefore, despite the comparison with a Biblical character, the King-Cyrus metaphor as applied to Trump points once again in the direction of the growth of nondenominational Christianity for advancing the exploitation of a generalized religious identity and the expansion of white Christian nationalism.

7 Trump's Orthodoxy and White Christian Nationalism

White Christian nationalism has been described as a "toxic blend of apocalyptic religion and imperial zeal that envisions the United States as a righteous nation charged with a divine commission to rid the world of evil and usher in the Second Coming,"[35] Christian nationalism is not an invention of the twenty-first century.[36] However, under Trump it has been one of the "dark truths that underpin the public face of Christianity in contemporary America,"[37] which has been permanently brought to light. The resonance and relative absence of speech constrictions on the web have, once again, to be credited for it. Along with the numerous rallies, the internet was the place of connection between Trump and his faithful followers. Up to January 8, 2021, Twitter provided Trump with unmediated interaction with people who had already been extensively bought into the fake-news narrative.

31. Peter Montgomery, "The Religious Right's Rhetoric Fueled the Insurrection," *The American Prospect*, February 8, 2021, https://prospect.org/politics/religious-right-rhetoric-fueled-the-capitol-insurrection/, last accessed on August 13, 2021.

32. https://www.potusshield.com, last accessed on August 26, 2021.

33. Hanne A. Trangerud, "The American Cyrus: How an Ancient King Became a Political Tool for Voter Mobilization," *Religions*, 12(2021): 2. See also: Hanne A. Trangerud, "The Trump Prophecies and the Mobilization of Evangelical Voters," *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses*, (2021): 1–21.

34. Trangerud, "The American Cyrus," 15.

35. Gorski, *American Covenant*, 2.

36. Gerardo Martí, "The Unexpected Orthodoxy of Donald J. Trump: White Evangelical Support for the 45th President of the United States," *Sociology of Religion*, 80(2019): 1–8. See also Gerardo Martì, *American Blindspot, Race, class, religion, and the Trump presidency* (Lanham, MA: Rowman&Littlefield, 2020).

37. Mathew Guest, "Tracing the Routes to pro-Trump Evangelicalism," *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 36(2021): 164.

A wealth of excerpts from Trump's rhetoric shows how his public behavior, proper actually more of a TV personality than a politician, would have been enough to cause the demise of any other candidate or president. His actions were regularly performed outside "the norms of the institution, [and] he risked undermining its prestige, and therefore also its power."[38] Even though Trump's figure dealt a harsh blow to the institution of the presidency, all the hues of his questionable behavior had the effect of making him more approachable by the public. Trump perfectly fit the role of the savior within the white Christian nationalist narrative and his personal life did not constitute a deterrent for religious voters. As a matter of fact, "Trump's white Evangelical support [requires] an understanding of religious orthodoxy that [includes] more than just individualist virtues."[39]

In this sense, Trump's support from conservative Christians has also been considered as a pragmatic choice:

> I believe that today's Evangelical conservatives have given up on a spiritual revival as a means of change. […] The accumulated frustrations of not being able to ease their sense of religious decline, their continued legal struggles against abortion and gay marriage, and the overwhelming shifts in popular culture promoting much less religiously restrictive understandings of personal identity have prompted politically active religious actors to take a far more pragmatic stance.[40]

Undoubtedly, the religious right's major figures who came out in support of Trump sometimes had to engage in impressive exercises of rephrasing and recontextualizing of the president's words in order to continually justify their support for such a controversial figure. Trump's peculiar form of orthodoxy is what permanently altered the public face of the relationship between religion and politics, exposing the religious right's agenda that was much more tinged by the desired enforcement of reactionary and ethnocentric policies than by the purported need to save citizens' souls for the good of the nation.

On the other hand, Trump's regular Christian electors, or those not involved in the activities of the religious right, found in him the figure they were looking for. Originating from the same dissatisfaction with traditional denominations and the need for what seemed like an unaffiliated figure, this support turned Trump into the prominent figure for the longed-for white Christian nationalist revival. Specifically, Trump's addition to white Christian nationalism has been a secular one. Although detached from the traditional links to the Scriptures that accompanied American exceptionalism since its inception, this made it even more appealing for his plethora of nominal Christian followers.[41]

8 Conclusion

In October 2017, Sebastian Gorka, a former strategist of Donald Trump, addressed the audience at the Values Voter Summit (main annual gathering of the religious right held in Washington, D.C.), stating that:

> on January the 20 [2017], it was a scrappy band of insurgents that moved into the White House. It wasn't a schlep of a GOP establishment of a RINO candidate, it was the utter

38. Mary E. Stuckey, "The Rhetoric of the Trump Administration," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 51(2021): 133.

39. Martì, "The Unexpected Orthodoxy of Donald J. Trump," 2.

40. Ibid, 5.

41. As Gorski claims, "without that tether to tradition, WCN is free to drift even further in the direction of secular messianism and political authoritarianism." See Philip S. Gorski, "Why evangelicals voted for Trump: A critical cultural sociology," *American Journal of Cultural Sociology*, 5(2017): 343. See also Philip S. Gorski, "Christianity and Democracy after Trump," *Political Theology*, 19(2018): 361–362. In light of the increasing use of the definition "Evangelicals" as a political category rather than a religious one, scholars have begun to suggest the use of alternatives such as "cultural Evangelicals" (Penny Edgell, "An Agenda for Research on American Religion in Light of the 2016 Election," Sociology of Religion 78(2017):1–8; "Trump Evangelicals" (Margery Eagan, "Are 'Trump Christians' really Christian?" *The Boston Globe*, April 2, 2018, https://www.bostonglobe.com/opinion/2018/04/01/are-trump-christians-really-christian/loTMwQyqRBYgOoovmYA7eI/story.html, last accessed on August 6, 2021), or "Christianists" (Gorski, "Christianity and Democracy after Trump.").

> outsider and his small band of merry men and women. […] He's like Robin Hood, a Robin Hood taking over the empire.[42]

Despite Gorska's enthusiasm, as well as the victories Trump obtained in the realm of the Supreme Court, his defeat in November 2020 seems to have left the religious right disappointed once again.

> Lacking organizational unity, the Christian Right does not have a collective view of what tactics and strategy are necessary to achieve a re-Christianization of America. […] The numerical decline of white Christians and growing liberalism of Americans on some social issues—make it implausible that a re-Christianization of America would occur through a large-scale, voluntary readoption of Christian conservative values.[43]

The political and public persona of the 45th president forced the religious right to attune their ways of communicating and mobilizing to Trump's unashamed, openly authoritarian and ethnocentric discourse. However, once the Biden-Harris ticket was inaugurated, the movement had to confront the loss of an ally in the White House once more.

Despite having opened and closed the latest cycle of the religious right's activity in the country, Trump drastically reshaped the relation between religion and politics in the United States. If he lost the election because of his use of the "paranoid style,"[44] it was this style that resonated with his most ardent followers. If Sebastian Gorka's words did not literally describe Trump's inauguration, they became a shocking reality on the day that Joe Biden was officially declared to be the new president. In January 2021, a handful of citizens concretely attempted to take over another symbol of the nation's political power, Capitol Hill, refusing to believe that the person who they considered as the champion of their freedoms had been legitimately defeated in the latest election. Moreover, in May 2021, 53% of Republicans expressed their conviction that Donald Trump was still the president of the United States while 61% continued to believe that Joe Biden had stolen the November 2020 presidential election.[45]

Despite the impressive resonance of his words with their minds, we should not believe that Trump's supporters were unable to distinguish between real and fake religious commitment.[46] What we observed, during his campaign and presidency, was an unspoken agreement of mutual understanding based on the promise to glorify the supposedly traditional white, mainly male Christian identity. It was not that Trump had the success he did despite his superficial treatment of Christian symbols and language, but precisely because of this. His supporters were attuned to his treatment of religion as a mere pool of the few, trite slogans that accompanied him throughout his run towards the White House and his permanence within those walls. He was not willing to concede more than photo ops with Evangelical leaders and participation in their gatherings, and his flock did not need more than what he fed them. This, I contend, is the result of the phases of growth and recession of religious involvement in the public and political sphere of the United States. The revival Trump was expected to usher in was a revival of an identity that had lost its grip on the culture, society, and politics of the nation. It was an ethnocentric, reactionary revival, seasoned with a few, symbolic Christian elements.

White conservative Christians are a shrinking demographic group. What Trump represented is the new face of the relationship between religion and politics in the twenty-first century. In it, old and traditional elements still find their place, such as prophecies on the destiny of the nation, and the idea that it must purge itself of all evils to prevent God from punishing its inhabitants. The most important new element, which is not novel as much as it is now impossible to ignore, and which the

42. Sebastian Gorka, "VVS 2017: Dr. Sebastian Gorka." YouTube Video, min. 9:54, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wd9RainURRw, last accessed on August 29, 2021.

43. Jeffrey Haynes, "Donald Trump, the Christian Right and COVID-19: The Politics of Religious Freedom," *Laws*, 10(2021): 2–4.

44. Roderick P. Hart, "Why Trump Lost and How? A Rhetorical Explanation," *American Behavioral Scientist*, 66(2022): 7.

45. Reuter Poll, May 24, 2021, https://www.reuters.com/world/us/53-republicans-view-trump-true-us-president-reutersipsos-2021-05-24/, last accessed on August 1, 2021.

46. Bart Bonikowski, "Ethno-nationalist Populism and the Mobilization of Collective Resentment," *British Journal of Sociology*, 68(2017): 181–213.

religious right movement, as well as the rest of the nation, will have to face from now on, is the spread of a resentment-fuelled white Christian nationalism. This has now been established as the foundation upon which the next cycle of religious-political activity will resurge.