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Chapter 1

WOULD I HAVE BEEN THERE?

I SPENT THE FIRST sunlit hours of January 6, 2021, bobbing in the Pacific Ocean. Having awakened at dawn and gone surfing, I was surprised that no other surfers were in sight that morning; it was a rare but welcome phenomenon. With all that room to think, my thoughts expanded into the endless blue of the ocean around me. Two surprising Democratic victories in Georgia's Senate runoff elections the day before had made me jubilant. As the sun rose above Northern California, I thought of Raphael Warnock, a Black minister, and Jon Ossoff, a Jewish man in his early thirties, representing the Peach State in the Senate. The Democrats would now have control, by the slimmest of margins, of the White House and both houses of Congress.

My face was numb from the forty-degree air and fifty-degree water, but my body was glowing with anticipation. Maybe we are headed for better days, I thought, sitting on my board, looking at the horizon and tracing the long continuous arc of the Monterey Bay from Santa Cruz to Seaside. After four years of living under a contracted and sinister vision of America, I was ready for the country to unfurl itself from the myopia of the previous administration and move forward once again.

As a scholar who teaches courses on the racism, misogyny, xenophobia, and homophobia that mark American history, I should have known better. I *did* know better. I have told my students a million times: Even if the arc of the universe bends toward justice, it's not a straight line. It's a zigzag, or a curve that doubles back on itself, one full of loops and hairpin turns.

Nonetheless, it was hard not to feel relieved or even buoyant. Before going home, I took a selfie with the ocean in the background. In the frame, the sun is soft and golden; my hair is still wet, and I'm smiling calmly. When I look at that photograph now, I am amazed at the hope that glimmers in my eyes, the sense of anticipation in my smile.

By the time I got to my office later that morning, everything had changed. When I sat down in front of my computer, images of rioters breaching the US Capitol began to stream across my screen. In a matter of minutes, ebullience transformed into dread as I watched a mob overtake the Capitol in an attempt to overturn the 2020 presidential election. The initial video footage showed throngs of people, many flying Trump flags and wearing MAGA hats, descending on the Capitol in droves. They pushed through barriers, overran Capitol Police, and seized the building. It looked for all the world like footage of an invading force toppling an enemy government.

The first picture I posted to social media was a still shot from the base of the Capitol, looking upward to the rotunda. A large blue Trump flag takes up the bottom third of the frame. Two men in black are holding it on either side, one of them triumphantly waving his free hand in the air. Smoke hovers throughout the image. Contrasted with the illuminated rotunda in the top third of the picture, the gray haze creates an eerie aura. The Capitol looks like a haunted house. It is a startling depiction of the most important and iconic building in American democracy.

I used to live on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC, less than a mile from the Capitol. Though I passed it almost daily, while walking to

the gym or heading to the grocery store, the gravitas of the building struck me each time it came into sight. The image of its desecration now unnerved me. Like millions of other Americans, I felt like democracy was crumbling before my eyes.

As video of the mob kept streaming across my screen, I began to notice something else. Religious symbols started to come into view. In one frame, I saw an enraged man waving a “Jesus Is My Savior—Trump Is My President” flag, with the besieged Capitol in the background. Rage and resentment saturate the photograph. In another frame, I saw banners with Bible verses and, in yet another, a statue of Jesus being carried as an icon of insurrection. The image that plagues me still is a panorama shot in which the Trump, Christian, Gadsen (“Don’t Tread on Me”), and Confederate flags all fly in a row. The flags are so close to one another that they touch. That line of flags, with the mob of rioters dotting the Capitol steps—well, it seems like footage from a country that has been overtaken by intruders. If you didn’t know better, you’d think that the rioters had replaced Old Glory with a new set of flags representing their new nation and its political leader—religious figurehead.

Watching the insurrection play out on my screen, I remembered that the night before, the second Jericho March had taken place not far from the Capitol. Billed as a prayer rally by the organizers, that march was a who’s who of MAGA Nation’s most ardent religious and conspiratorial leaders—from Michael Flynn to Alex Jones to Eric Metaxas, the writer and radio host turned Trumpian celebrity. I thought of the first Jericho March, held about a month prior, on December 12, 2020. Friends from home in Southern California had told me that people from the evangelical megachurch I used to belong to had attended that event.

I squinted at the screen, peering more closely. Were people I knew from church at the second Jericho March on January 5? Were people I used to sit next to in church storming the Capitol now, as the world watched and waited to see if they would succeed?

Later that night, as people across the globe began digesting the horrific reports and graphic videos from an armed insurrection, one thought kept looping through my mind: *I could have been there.*

MAYBE I'M A JESUS FREAK

In eighth grade, it can be hard to find ways to see your girlfriend outside of school, especially on a weeknight. So when Kelly invited me to Wednesday night Bible study at Rose Drive Friends Church, I said yes immediately. Listening to a Bible lesson was well worth it if we could sneak away for ten minutes to make out in the field behind the church. Plus, I knew a bunch of kids from school who went to this place. Maybe it would be fun.

Rose Drive Friends Church is in Yorba Linda, a small enclave in the northern region of Orange County, California. Other than being the birthplace of former president Richard Nixon, it's commonly known as one of the towns that borders Anaheim, the home of Disneyland and the Anaheim Angels of Major League Baseball. Only thirty miles from Los Angeles, Yorba Linda feels like it's a world away from both the glamour of Hollywood and the city streets where riots erupted after the 1992 acquittal of police officers who brutalized Rodney King.

Kelly dumped me soon after that first Wednesday, but the youth group quickly became my second home. When I went that first night, I expected to encounter corny adults like Ned Flanders from the *Simpsons*. Instead, I met cool youth leaders who had tattoos and played in Christian punk bands. They taught me how Jesus would forgive my sins and grant me eternal salvation. They taught me that the answers to my existential crises about meaning and purpose lay in God's plan for my life. They explained that the Bible wasn't a boring ancient text but a "personal love letter from my creator."

My conversion was extreme. Until April 1995, I was an eighth grader living in the grunge era, blasting Nirvana, Pearl Jam, and the Smashing Pumpkins through his portable CD player—one who was experimenting with drugs, sex, and vandalism; who had been

suspended from school; and who had worried his parents by dyeing his hair every color possible. But soon after visiting Rose Drive, I became a bona fide Jesus freak. Landing in the youth group at Rose Drive Friends, I felt like I had discovered a hidden world, one that had existed right in front of me but that I had somehow missed or willfully ignored.

Soon my identity became wrapped in purity pledges, dedications and rededications of my life to my savior, and evangelism to the lost. I traded childhood friends for a new flock at church. Instead of sneaking behind the movie theater to light up a smoke, I stood in front of the theater with my new comrades, hoping to talk to anyone who passed by about their eternal destiny and God's plan for their life. We fashioned ourselves as a chosen minority living amid a Southern California culture given over to rebellion, licentiousness, fornication, and obscenity. We lamented that our neighbors and our country had abandoned the faith of our forefathers for secular humanism and Darwin's theory of evolution. At school, we handed out pamphlets decrying the atrocities of abortion. And we awaited the rapture with bated breath, knowing that Jesus would return at any moment to take us home.

At fourteen, I went from a smart-mouthed kid to a zealous convert. I was the guy who leads a Bible study at school lunchtime, proselytizes to strangers on the boardwalk at the beach, and refuses to leave the house without a Bible in hand. In 2001, I married my high school sweetheart and became a full-time youth minister at Rose Drive Friends Church. In that role, I would oversee a flock of two hundred kids as their spiritual leader. I was twenty years old.

WHAT IS EVANGELICALISM?

The histories and belief systems of the different strands of American evangelicalisms are complex; they look quite different depending on what time period you examine as well as the dimensions of class, politics, and geography. Race is especially decisive when sorting

American evangelicals. Yet the basic teachings across a broad swath of evangelicals are pretty simple: The Bible is the errorless Word of God. It should be read and followed as literally as possible. Unlike in Catholicism, hierarchy and tradition aren't sources of authority. Instead, dynamic preachers invite worshippers into services more akin to contemporary tent revivals than solemn ceremonies. Evangelicals don't care about celebrating dead saints or (except for a very few) maintaining liturgical traditions of the church. They locate authority in the Bible and those who, in their minds, teach it faithfully. Spreading the gospel is a top priority for evangelicals, because they believe that all those who die without accepting Christ as their personal savior will spend eternity in hell.

Many evangelicals expect Jesus will return soon, and evangelical kids who come home to an empty house sometimes wonder if their family has been raptured to heaven and they have been left behind for some unacknowledged sin. Other religions are seen as false teachings with little to no value. Interreligious dialogue is something of an oxymoron for most evangelicals, because they don't see other religions as legitimate. Moreover, evangelicals see themselves as "not of this world" because their true home is in eternal paradise with Jesus and God the Father. The "world" is an evil enemy, given over to sin and licentiousness. There is no cohering of faith with culture. Instead, there is a battle between them that goes back to the serpent's temptation of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3. This is why most evangelicals are allergic to discussions of social justice. They see social or political solutions to inequality, racism, and other issues of injustice as soft approaches to fixing worldly problems, and they prefer what they see as a biblical approach, which they consider to be individual salvation, to fixing social ills. Real Christians don't focus on feeding the hungry. They feed hungry souls.

LOSING MY RELIGION

In 2005, after eleven years in the movement and seven years in ministry, I left evangelicalism. My elders in the church had always told me

that if I read too many books, my brain would railroad my heart and lead me away from the church. Turns out they were right.

When I began to read widely in theology, philosophy, and church history during and after college, my perspective started to expand and change. It became clear to me that the timeless truths we had attributed to the Bible in my church were modern inventions. I learned that our staunch commitment to voting Republican in order to oppose abortion of any kind was fueled by GOP operatives who preyed on our care for the unborn in order to garner millions of votes. From there, I digested the histories of evangelical theologies of sex, gender, race, and immigration. As I read and studied and reflected on my own experience, the picture grew ever more complex and yet much more vivid: White evangelicalism is a movement thoroughly entrenched in American nationalism, White supremacy, patriarchy, and xenophobia.

It wasn't easy to come to these revelations while I was still in ministry. Some Sundays I would lead prayers in front of two hundred teenagers while wondering if I still believed in God. In March 2005, I received notice that I had been accepted into a master's program in theology at Oxford University in the United Kingdom. This was my way out. When I arrived in Oxford in September of that year—a city of transcendent spires, cobblestone streets, ornate libraries, and medieval traditions—it was the first time in my adult life I was free to be myself without worrying that I was setting a bad example for the kids in my youth group or the church as a whole. Studying in the same places as John Locke and Duns Scotus, and drinking my first beers in the same pub where J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis used to meet weekly, was as exhilarating as it was terrifying. My only job was to read theology and, in essence, figure out my approach to faith, politics, and the human condition. No one was policing my thoughts or my writing. I didn't worry about who would see the stack of books on my desk and wonder if I was sliding into “liberal” Christianity or, worse, secular humanism. In a city grounded by a thousand years of history, there was no longer an anchor to my life. No church barriers keeping me inside a set area. It was my responsibility to figure out

how to re-create my sense of self and the moral contours of my world. That period in Oxford set me on an intellectual and personal journey that I am still on today.

What I realized then, and have been processing ever since, is that the Christianity I converted to was as much about a particular myth of the United States as it was about the gospel of Christ. Scholars now call this “Christian nationalism.” I didn’t have the term to label it back then. In the decade after I departed the church in 2005, I identified how the American myth had twisted American evangelicalism into a tradition that prioritizes patriotism over compassion, national defense over loving one’s neighbor, and protecting the unborn more than loving anyone on earth.

Since leaving evangelicalism, I have pursued a scholarly life in Oxford, Paris, and across the United States. While I no longer identify as a Christian, I have spent the last decade and a half as a scholar of religion consumed by questions surrounding faith, the divine, and the ways humans make meaning. My time and energy have been devoted to understanding the histories of Christianity, from early church fathers and medieval mystics to modern reformers and American preachers and revivals. But it wasn’t until 2018 that I was ready to merge my scholarly projects with my personal history. The ravages of the Trump administration led me to want to help both insiders and outsiders understand why more than 80 percent of White evangelicals and 60 percent of White Catholics voted for Donald Trump. It seemed like my insider scholarly lens might provide a decoder ring to help explain why some of the most conservative religious Americans supported the forty-fifth president’s sexual misconduct, acts of cruelty, crass rhetoric, lack of religious literacy, and overtures to White supremacy and xenophobia.

In 2016, I took a job at Skidmore College in upstate New York. This put me only two hours away from my good friend Dan Miller, who teaches at a college nearby. Dan is also a former evangelical minister who is now a scholar of religion. We met at Oxford and have

been friends ever since. In July 2018, I drove the short distance to his town in western Massachusetts. We had a beer at a bar near his house and threw around ideas about how to use our personal experiences and academic training to help a larger public understand the religious elements of MAGA Nation—that coalition of Americans, mostly White ones, who supported Trump and his America first ambitions. We eventually landed on the idea of starting a podcast.

When Dan and I started recording the *Straight White American Jesus* podcast a few months later, we wanted to explore issues related to race, gender, sex, and politics in order to unpack a puzzle that, to the casual observer, seemed not to make sense. How could those who touted the Bible at every turn support a man who clearly had never read it? How could the pastors who called on Bill Clinton to resign after his sexual misconduct support a thrice-married president who had paid hush money to a sex worker and gleefully described sexually assaulting women? Why would they not abandon a man who neither spoke of Jesus nor attended church as he pursued a border wall, a Muslim ban, and tax cuts for the rich? Our wager was that we could provide a helpful perspective on the religious-political trappings of the Trump era by addressing these questions and more.

Our goals were humble. We thought a podcast would help some of our colleagues and friends get a handle on important issues. If nothing else, it would be cathartic to relate the religious support for the Trump administration to our evangelical pasts. We had no idea how relevant our research and conversations would become. As we launched our show and invited guests to come talk with us about what we were all seeing, we knew our conversations were important. We knew it was crucial for our nation to figure out what mix of nationalism, racism, and religion had gotten Trump elected.

What we didn't know was that within two years' time, an armed mob would storm the Capitol intending to hang the vice president and assassinate the Speaker of the House after being convinced that the election—and "their" country—had been stolen from them.

WOULD I HAVE BEEN THERE?

As I saw the rioters enter the Capitol on January 6, many of them carrying “Jesus 2020” flags and wearing “Faith, Family, Freedom” shirts, I began to worry and wonder. Over the next few days and weeks, it would become clear that busloads of White evangelicals were indeed among the rioters, having traveled to Washington, DC, with neighbors and friends from church. Would I have been there if I had not left the movement? Or if I hadn’t gone myself, would I have been watching the images in tacit support, perhaps praying for the “patriots” willing to do God’s will even when it’s not easy?

A few days after the J6 insurrection, friends from my old church informed me that dozens of people from churches in our home region had been there and that there were even more back home who approved of the rioters’ actions. What seemed like a fringe movement of violent Trump supporters was populated by the small business owners, accountants, and lawyers from the affluent suburbs surrounding my old church. With a wave of nausea, I admitted to myself that had history unfolded in a different pattern, I could have been one of them.

On one hand, I told myself, you would have known better. After all, over time you have transformed from a youthful zealot to a heady professor. Your brain would have never let your body get on a plane to DC. You would have seen the folly in such a move, right? *Right?*

On the other hand, my headiness is exactly what had made me so extreme. After working through the logical components of evangelical teachings—like the idea that Jesus could return at any moment—as a teenager I had committed myself to living them out in the most stringent and pure ways, even if it meant social awkwardness and disapproval from my family. I had clearly been a zealot, and I couldn’t know now how far that zealotry would have taken me.

I felt like I was occupying two perspectives on the whole spectacle. As a former insider, my body came alive with the memories of the righteous indignation that fueled my anger about issues like

abortion and the “attacks” on Christianity by the US government. I remembered trusting pastors and elders whose faith inspired me to forgo critical thought for radical obedience. If that meant saving my country from ruin by “stopping the steal,” I imagine that saying a prayer and jumping into the fray like the patriots of 1776 would have made sense to me. In ways that startled me, it wasn’t hard to think myself into the rioters’ shoes.

Yet as a scholar who has been analyzing White Christian nationalism for years, I realized that the Capitol insurrection was the logical outcome of a half century of patriotic Christians preparing for combat. It was set in motion by the New Right—a conservative political movement, birthed in the 1960s, ready to use any means necessary to stop the cultural revolutions and return the country to the hands of White, landowning men. In the 1970s, the Religious Right—an explicitly political coalition of evangelicals and Catholics set on restoring old-time religion and family values—joined forces with the New Right. Together they form the *New Religious Right*. In the half century since they linked up, their Christian nationalist mission has been to take America back for God and the people they deem worthy of holding power in his name.

In many ways, it was the White Christian nationalism of the New Religious Right to which I converted back in eighth grade. Thus, for me, January 6 was the physical manifestation of the culture war in which I had been a soldier for eleven years—one that pitted God’s patriots on one side against godless traitors on the other. For more than a decade, I had learned the war’s topography. Front and center was the fight to take the country back for God. Christians needed to rise up, enter positions of leadership and influence, and ensure the nation didn’t fall into the hands of godless socialists and radical leftists—even if ascending the political hierarchy and maintaining power required antidemocratic strategies.

On one flank was a separate but related battle against “government schools,” waged through unregulated homeschool curricula and private

academies. On the other was the struggle to maintain the “traditional family” against the “gay agenda” and the women’s rights movement. This clash merged with the militant proborn movement, standing up to the “holocaust” of abortion. Soldiers in this war were trained in a particular model of masculinity. As a teenager, I was taught by the male elders in my life that the best examples of Christian manhood came from Mel Gibson movies like *Braveheart* and *The Patriot*, in which a courageous hero refuses to allow the government to take his people’s way of life and successfully ignites a revolution.

What I knew instinctively on January 6 was that Christian nationalists’ war on our democracy didn’t start after the November 2020 election. It didn’t even start with Trump. It has been raging for over half a century. Trump’s Big Lie simply provided the impetus to take it from the political and cultural levels to an actual attempted coup.

As I began to catalog artifacts from that day, scrolling for hours through #capitalsiegereligion (started by Smithsonian curator Peter Manseau), two things became evident. First, religious symbols were everywhere—rioters carrying crosses and icons of Mary, tough guys wearing Bible verses stitched onto chest patches declaring war on God’s enemies, people breaking out in impromptu worship songs, the Proud Boys kneeling and praying together in a circle before violently overtaking law enforcement to enter the Capitol. Second, White Christian nationalism was a major unifying phenomenon among the insurrectionists.

It became clear that, if we were ever going to understand what seemed like an unthinkable set of events, we were going to need to reckon with how White Christian nationalism helped birth MAGA Nation.

WHAT IS CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM?

White evangelicalism and White Christian nationalism are not the same thing. White Christian nationalism far exceeds the bounds of

White evangelicalism. There are White Catholic Christian nationalists. And strangely enough, according to recent scholarly work, even some adherents of other faiths qualify as White Christian nationalists. One way to think of White Christian nationalism is as a stream that runs throughout evangelical, Catholic, and other religious traditions and communities. Some White Catholics, for example, are White Christian nationalists. Others are not. It's possible to be a White evangelical or White Catholic without being a White Christian nationalist. However, during the Trump era, White Christian nationalism became so prevalent among these communities—especially in White evangelicalism—that it became hard to separate the two categories.

Recent data shows that over 80 percent of White evangelicals are Christian nationalists, to some degree. This is why the two categories are often conflated. As we will see in chapters 2 and 3, White evangelicals have been formative in the development of White Christian nationalist culture and politics since the 1960s. Thus, while it is a mistake to think of White evangelicalism and White Christian nationalism as synonymous, they are indeed intimately linked.

According to the sociologists Samuel Perry and Andrew Whitehead in their groundbreaking book *Taking America Back for God*, Christian nationalism exists on a spectrum. Some Christian nationalists are extremist and prone to violence. Others are less hard-core but willing to affirm Christian nationalist tenets about the supposedly Christian founding of America or God's plan for the country. Christian nationalism is a spectrum because, according to Perry and Whitehead, it is less about Christian beliefs and doctrines and more about "historical identity, cultural preeminence, and political influence." Rather than a stable ideology, it is a cultural identity. It's more a matter of how one thinks of oneself and the stories one draws on than a coherent theological belief system.

For Perry and Whitehead, Christian nationalism has three foundational components: the myth of the Christian nation, nostalgia for past glory, and an apocalyptic view of the nation's future.

Understanding each of these three dimensions of Christian nationalism is essential to figuring out what happened on January 6 and what is likely to happen in the future.

The easiest way to envision the first facet of Christian nationalism is as the marriage of cross and flag. In ideological terms, Christian nationalists believe that this country was built for and by Christians. They follow a particular vision of the Puritan preacher John Winthrop's idea that America was founded as a nation to be a "city on a hill," a light to the world. They see themselves as central to the narrative of the United States not only as a nation under God but one elected by God to play an exceptional role in world history. The Christian elements—belief in God's rule and election—are fused with a White nationalist ideology: that the United States is superior to all other nations, that we should take an "America first" approach to policy and trade, and that White people deserve to remain at the top of social, political, and economic hierarchies. Christian nationalists believe that the United States is a "Christian nation," even if—and this may be surprising—some of them do not regularly attend church, read the Bible, or pray. For not all Christian nationalists are traditionally religious. If you believe that the nation was chosen by God, was founded on religious principles, and has strayed from its divine founding to a sinful state of being, then you might be a Christian nationalist—even if you are only loosely (or not at all) a practicing Christian.

By using the Christian nation myth, Christian nationalist propaganda isn't limited to a certain subset of White evangelicals. It doesn't matter what your denominational affiliation is; you can unite with other believers in a Christian nationalist movement centered on "saving" the nation from "godless ruin." While the data shows that more than 80 percent of White evangelicals register as Christian nationalist to some degree, the myth is expansive enough to include non-Protestants. Perry and Whitehead show that nearly half of American Catholics also chart as Christian nationalists to some level. There are also members of the Latter-day Saints (Mormons) and even some Jews who fit the category.

This explains one of the confusing aspects of Christian nationalism: it often doesn't correlate to denominational identity or personal religious practice. Many Christian nationalists haven't been to church in decades, swear like sailors, and couldn't find the book "Two Corinthians" (as Trump once called it) in the Bible. The "Jesus 2020" and "Trump Is My President—Jesus Is My Savior" flags are a signal of group identity—indicators of what group they belong to and what story they are living out—rather than an indicator of their personal religious practices.

In addition to believing that the United States was founded as a Christian nation, Christian nationalists share the conviction that the country has declined over time due to the growing prominence of outside invaders and ungodly forces. As Perry and Whitehead argue, Christian nationalists view the United States as similar to Israel in the Hebrew Bible (what Christians call the Old Testament): if the nation disobeys God's commandments, it should expect divine retribution and ruin. And Christian nationalists hold the keys, in their own minds at least, to what God wants, what he commands, and who is to blame when the nation gets "punished."

For example, days after 9/11, Jerry Falwell—one of the figureheads of modern White evangelicalism and a formational figure in the Religious Right—said that the terrorist attack was God's punishment for our nation's sins:

Throwing God out successfully with the help of the federal court system, throwing God out of the public square, out of the schools. . . . The abortionists have got to bear some burden for this because God will not be mocked. And when we destroy 40 million little innocent babies, we make God mad. [T]he 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."

For Falwell, feminists, members of the LGBTQ community, and the ACLU are invaders similar to enemies of the nation of Israel. Not only is the punishment a direct result of what he takes to be disobedience, but it also reflects how the nation has allowed those with no right to leadership and authority—women, racial minorities, sexual-identity minorities, and others—to shape the country's ethos.

This perspective is shared among Falwell's evangelical cohorts. In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, prominent evangelical megachurch pastor John Hagee said, "I believe that New Orleans had a level of sin that was offensive to God, and they were recipients of the judgment of God for that." Franklin Graham, son of Billy Graham, had this to say: "This is one wicked city, OK? It's known for Mardi Gras, for Satan worship. It's known for sex perversion. It's known for every type of drugs and alcohol and the orgies and all of these things that go on down there in New Orleans. There's been a black spiritual cloud over New Orleans for years." The prevailing idea among Christian nationalists such as Falwell, Hagee, and Graham is that as a Christian nation, the United States has a covenant with God that trades obedience and loyalty for protection and blessing. The nation's perceived decline is, in their view, a result of the United States breaking its covenant with God.

Thus, any difficulty the nation faces can be chalked up to collective disobedience and need for a return to the good old days of loyalty to God. This is why nostalgia politics, hinging on the promise to "make America great again," tap into the lifeblood of Christian nationalism. Politicians working this angle promise to return the country to what they take to be the ideal state: an American garden of Eden, founded by American patron saints such as Thomas Jefferson and George Washington and destined to be the greatest nation on earth.

Lurking beneath the patriotic rhetoric of restoring the nation to its former glory is a desire to reinstate a retrograde social and political order. The goal is to return to a state wherein straight, White, native-born Christian men take their rightful places of authority

and leadership. Everyone else—including women, racial minorities, religious minorities, and certainly the LGBTQ community—must accept their place as either lower on the American register or outside of it altogether. “The ‘Christianity’ of Christian nationalism represents something more than religion. . . . It includes assumptions of nativism, white supremacy, patriarchy, and heteronormativity,” Perry and Whitehead write. “It is as ethnic and political as it is religious.”

This is the sinister underbelly of Christian nationalism’s nostalgia politics. The calls for a nation’s renewed loyalty and obedience to God are also calls for a return to a time when straight, White Christian men had exclusive control of the nation’s political and cultural spheres. It is a movement, in essence, to right-size America by taking it back from people of color, women, immigrants, and LGBTQ people as well as Muslims, secularists, and other religious or nonreligious groups. In essence, “make America great again” is code for “make America White and Christian again.”

The final defining trait of Christian nationalism is its apocalyptic tone. The evangelical emphasis on the end of the world is transposed into a crisis narrative that envisions the country as on the precipice of a catastrophic decline. If real Americans don’t take decisive action, the story goes, they will not simply lose their majority in the houses of Congress or see a political opponent in the White House; the country as they know it will be gone forever.

As a teenager I learned firsthand how motivating crisis narratives can be. Soon after I converted, my youth leaders introduced me to films like *Thief in the Night*, which claims Jesus could return at any moment to take all Christians to heaven, leaving unbelievers to endure a great tribulation and then an eternity of punishment. As a convert prone to letting logic govern his life in extreme ways, I decided that the best use of my time would be to convert as many people as possible before the end of the world. So I stood outside movie theaters with pamphlets about the gospel, walked up to strangers at lunch at my high school with my Bible in hand, and interjected Jesus into otherwise pleasant

conversations with second cousins at family functions. Even though I was captain of the basketball team my senior year, I was the only guy on the squad without a letterman's jacket. How could I spend money on such a frivolous item when we could direct those funds to people who needed to hear the good news of Jesus Christ?

Christian nationalism applies this crisis logic on a national political scale. Politicians and pastors warn that unless patriots and good people of faith take action, the country will be destroyed by "godless, communist" movements, which now include feminism, Black Lives Matter, and secularism. "The hard truth is you won't be safe in Joe Biden's America," then vice president Mike Pence said before the 2020 election. Donald Trump did him one better by claiming the election is "a choice between a socialist nightmare and the American dream." This sentiment was echoed by Christian nationalist pastors such as Brian Gibson, who said that if Biden won, it would be "the death of America," because electing Joe Biden is a "win for Marxism." For Christian nationalists, the choice is not between two viable political candidates; it's between saving the nation and witnessing its demise.

It's a short step from apocalyptic thinking about elections to the demonization of your political opponents. In this system, it's logical to believe that they are capable of—and perhaps already committing—the worst atrocities imaginable. This is how conspiracy theories such as QAnon are so readily adapted to a Christian nationalist worldview, as we will see. If you believe the country is in a cosmic war between good and evil, it's not hard to take the jump to thinking that there is a grand conspiracy, wherein a cabal of global elites are trying to take down the United States in service to Satan. This worldview also makes it possible to demonize your political enemies—literally. "She is an abject, psychopathic, demon from Hell," popular conspiracy theorist Alex Jones said about Hillary Clinton in 2016. "I'm telling you, she's a demon."

Christian nationalism primes people to conspiratorial extremism by expanding the apocalyptic cosmology I adopted as a teenager into

a national political register. The script reads like this: we have a short time to save the country; if we don't treat this as a red-alert situation and devote all our time and energy to this campaign, the country will be destroyed forever by Marxists and socialists.

Political opponents become demons. Elections become end-times events. And the nation's history is viewed as a cosmic war, with enemies of the republic on one side and God-fearing patriots—and the Lord of heaven and earth—on the other.

WHAT DOES “WHITE” HAVE TO DO WITH WHITE CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM?

Race has everything to do with how Christian nationalism is constructed and lived out. In a study on attitudes toward racial inequalities, Perry and Whitehead make it clear that there are Black Christian nationalists, too, but that they view the nation and its history in a starkly different way than their White counterparts. In contrast to White Christian nationalists, who largely attributed racial inequality to laziness and lack of motivation on the part of Black people, Perry and Whitehead found that “Black Americans who affirmed being a Christian was very important to being truly American were more likely to attribute black-white inequality to racial discrimination and educational opportunities.” This means, Perry and Whitehead maintain, “that connecting Christian and American identities does not necessarily bolster white supremacy, but for black Americans it may in fact evoke ideals of racial justice and structural transformation.”

On the whole, Black Christian nationalists view Christianity as a means for uprooting unequal and unjust political and social systems. Raphael Warnock, who preaches from the pulpit once occupied by Martin Luther King Jr., was the first Black Democrat elected to the Senate from the Deep South since Reconstruction. Warnock frames it this way: “I’ve been trying to point us toward the highest ideals in our humanity and in the covenant we have with one another as American people—that all of us deserve an opportunity to create a

prosperous life for us and our families.” For most Black Americans who view the United States as a nation in covenant with God, the goal is not to maintain the status quo or return the country to a mythical past. Rather, this version of Christian nationalism means pushing the nation forward to reach its potential and to more fully embody the view that all people are created equal with the right to pursue life, liberty, and happiness.

It’s a different story for White Christian nationalists. In general, the goal for them is not to push the United States to live up to its ideals for the first time but to return the country to a supposed idyllic period when it was flourishing. While Christian nationalism isn’t limited to evangelicals, as we saw, the latter make up a significant percentage of the group, and they have been formative in the development of White Christian nationalist rhetoric (more on this in chapters 3 and 4). In her 2018 work on evangelicals and immigration, Dr. Janelle Wong shows that White evangelicals are extreme outliers with regard to opposition to the Black Lives Matter movement, national apologies for slavery, taxing the wealthy, and immigration. White evangelicals are more than twice as likely—and sometimes three times as likely—to oppose these issues as their Latinx, Asian, and Black counterparts. In essence, data shows how the White in “White evangelical” makes this group a unique subset of extremists on a range of political and social issues.

This leads Wong to conclude that evangelical support for Trump originated in a fear of losing status, socially and politically. She points out that White evangelicals perceive themselves to be the victims of discrimination. As I discuss throughout the book, I am a biracial person who experienced firsthand how the “White” in “White Christian nationalist” is definitive. The “White” in the “White Christian nationalist” train is, and always has been, the engine. In fact, Whiteness is more than that—it is both engine and fuel, both wheel and track for the locomotive of Christian exceptionalism. While the logo on the side of the train car might say “Christian,” Whiteness—and

the fear of losing racial status—is what propels the train down the track toward cultural and political supremacy in the United States.

WHY DIDN'T WE SEE IT COMING?

Almost two decades after leaving evangelicalism, I have no way of knowing if I would have taken part in these events. But there is a more relevant and, I think, urgent question to ask than my own personal musings on whether I might have been there. In light of the modern history of White Christian nationalism that helped get Trump elected, and then provided an integrating force for the insurrection he inspired, we must ask: Why didn't we see this coming? And what else are we missing? What further outworking of the MAGA movement will develop in the coming years? In what follows, I attempt to answer these questions.

While pastors and political operatives are the central players in this tale, one of the founding figures of the modern movement was a cowboy from the American West—a man full of animal magnetism and a brusque masculinity, a person born into privilege who somehow made himself out to be an everyman by eschewing book-learning and East Coast elitism, and one who led a successful political career with no major setbacks, only to become the biggest loser in American presidential history.

