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Chapter 5

THE CROSS AND THE FLAG

IN 1912, A SMALL group of farmers and business owners started Yorba Linda Friends Church thirty miles from Los Angeles in what was then agrarian Orange County. The “Friends” refers to the Society of Friends, more commonly known as the Quakers. Southern California may seem like a strange place for Quakers to settle. But in 1912, Orange County looked more like central Pennsylvania, where Amish, Mennonite, and Quaker communities dot the landscape, than the suburban sprawl it is now. It was farmland, with a population of orange trees and other fruit crops that far outpaced the number of people. Frank and Hannah Nixon were among the founding members of Yorba Linda Friends Church. It is where they would first introduce their son Richard—who would become thirty-seventh president of the United States—to the Christian faith (although neither the pacifist elements of Quaker teachings nor the ethics of honesty seem to have stuck).

In 1918, Cecil Pickering, a friend of Hannah Nixon, wanted to put up an American flag in the meetinghouse in order to honor the soldiers returning home from World War I. Taking initiative without consulting others in the community, she hung the Stars and Stripes on a wall where notices and bulletins were often posted. Soon after

worship started that Sunday, William Marshburn, the first doctor and most prominent citizen of the tiny town, turned his chair and came face to face with the flag.

“Who dared put that thing up here?” he asked, right before ripping it down. A lifelong Quaker, Marshburn held the principle that Christian worship should be kept separate from nationalist devotion. In his mind, associating the flag with the cross was the path to idolizing the nation over the kingdom of God. The good doctor’s sentiment didn’t prevail in Yorba Linda—or the nation at large.

A generation later in the early 1960s, the Marshburn family helped plant a second Friends Church in Yorba Linda, just a few miles from the original. The pastor, C. W. Perry, was married to Mary Marshburn. Mary and other members of the Marshburn family, including her brother Don, helped found the new church: Rose Drive Friends. Rose Drive Friends Church is where I converted to evangelicalism in 1995 and served in ministry from 1998 to 2005. By that time, it had grown to a megachurch of roughly two thousand people. Gone were the days of agrarian Orange County. By the early 2000s, shows like *The OC* glamorized the region as the glitzy suburban alternative to Los Angeles. Gone, too, were the days of the fledgling Friends community in Yorba Linda. When I arrived, Rose Drive was a sprawling complex with baseball fields, youth rooms, and a middle school campus spread across acres of land. There were more than a dozen pastoral staff and an annual seven-figure church budget.

Dr. Marshburn’s heirs didn’t inherit their forefather’s qualms about mixing nationalism and faith. From the time I began attending in 1995 to when I left in 2005, the American flag was always present in the worship hall. It was posted alongside the Christian flag on one side of the sanctuary stage. I remember wondering, as a teenager, if it made sense for us to worship God with the American flag hovering nearby as a part of our religious devotion. If we were meant to glorify God, why would we also revere Old Glory?

In 2015, a new music minister removed the American flag from the worship stage. While I had been absent from the community for

a decade by then, old friends from Rose Drive told me that as soon as the American flag was taken out of the sanctuary, Leon, a member of the congregation, proclaimed it was his last Sunday at Rose Drive. While a number of issues were leading him out the door, the flag was the last straw. Leon refused to enter the sanctuary—or even to step foot on the church campus—if the American flag wasn't reinstated.

Leon wasn't just any member. A slim, cantankerous man of few words but of many opinions, Leon had been at the church since the beginning. He was the lifeblood of the place—the guy who drove the bus on youth group outings, fixed up the chairs and stage and pews when they needed repair, and ran the sound system for Sunday services. His life had been spent in service to Rose Drive Friends Church. But as soon as the American flag was no longer part of worship, he vowed never to attend there again.

So between 1918 and 2018, the Friends community in Yorba Linda went from tearing the American flag out of its worship sanctuaries to being a place where its most prominent and devoted members refused to enter them—the sacred spaces where they worship God—if the American flag wasn't present.

Not being able, or willing, to separate cross and flag is Christian nationalism in a nutshell. It's about more than theology or doctrine. Christian nationalism is a cultural identity built around the myth that the United States is a Christian nation. For many Christian nationalists, who believe that political power is a sign of God's favor, the Bible should be a governing document of the republic, alongside the Constitution. And many Christian nationalists are willing to topple and overtake anyone or anything that gets in the way of enacting this vision of the United States. Even if it means ousting one of their own.

A SUNDAY SCHOOL TEACHER FOR A PRESIDENT

Jimmy Carter was born in Plains, Georgia, on October 1, 1924. Plains is a tiny place in the southwestern part of the state. It's closer to the Florida Panhandle than to Atlanta. Jimmy's family were peanut

farmers. He grew up running around the rural property with both Black and White playmates, a rarity in that time and place. Though his family were devout Southern Baptists, Jimmy didn't mark his conversion experience until his early teen years, when he felt God's call on his life. From that point on, he determined to dedicate himself to serving the Lord and his people. In good evangelical fashion, Jimmy went on to marry a childhood friend and sweetheart—Rosallynn Smith—in 1946. Soon after leaving school, Jimmy joined the military and quickly became an officer in the navy. He and Rosallynn moved all over the country, carting their young family with them.

When Jimmy's dad, Earl, became ill, however, Jimmy returned to the Carter peanut farm in Plains to be at his father's bedside. The visit changed Jimmy's path forever. Here is how Randall Balmer, who wrote a critically acclaimed biography of Carter, explained it to me in a 2020 interview:

Carter went back to Plains to be at his father's bedside as he was dying. And it just made a powerful impression upon him because as he was there at the bedside, various people from the community would come in to pay their respects to Mr. Earl, as they called him—to thank him for various kindnesses that he had demonstrated toward them very quietly in that community. For example, when he had extended credit at the Carter store for people who were facing financial difficulties, when he provided new clothes for a family so they could attend their daughter's graduation and be proud of themselves—for doing that sort of thing. And as these stories began to mount, Jimmy Carter was profoundly affected by that.

After moving his young family back to his home in Plains, Jimmy took over the family peanut farm and determined to help his community, like his father had before him. As he rerooted himself in Plains, Jimmy ran and won a seat on the school board. This role

exposed him to the vast disparity between the White and Black schools in the region. Though Jimmy's father was not a progressive by twenty-first-century standards, Jimmy grew up playing with Black children. He was taught by his mother and influential teachers in his life to see all people as equal. When he took over the family farm, Jimmy refused to join the White Citizens League—a modern-day offshoot of the KKK—despite warnings from his neighbors that he and his family would be outcasts in the community and that there would likely be a boycott of the Carter peanut business. He was one of the only White men in Plains not to join the “League.” Thus, when Jimmy noticed the stark racial inequalities that marked the school system, he knew that as a person who had dedicated his life to serving God and people, he had to act. He advocated for school integration despite the segregationist majority all around him.

Wanting to do more to transform the school system and other issues, he decided to run for statewide office. In our 2020 interview, Randall Balmer told me the story: “On his thirty-eighth birthday—October 1, 1962—he gets out of bed and he puts on his church clothes rather than his work clothes. And he informs Rosalynn that he’s going down to the Cook County courthouse to file to run for the Georgia state senate.”

Jimmy's political flight took off from there. After a few terms in the Georgia senate, he became governor of the state in 1970. In a capstone to a lightning-in-a-bottle political career, he won the presidency in 1976—seemingly coming from nowhere to take the most powerful political office in the world.

Carter's ascendance to the White House coincided with the rise of the Religious Right, and its merger with Weyrich's and Viguerie's New Right—what I am calling the New Religious Right. So much of the national press were unfamiliar with evangelical Christianity during the presidential election that they reported on Carter and his family as if they were aliens from another planet. *Time* declared 1976 the “Year of the Evangelical” in recognition of the growing visibility

of conservative Christians all over the country and in reference to Carter's surprise presidential victory.

One might surmise that Jerry Falwell, Paul Weyrich, and their colleagues on the New Religious Right would have been ecstatic to have a White, Bible-carrying, Sunday school-teaching Southern Baptist farmer making his way to the White House, with scripture on his lips and the Lord in his heart. Yet while on paper it seemed a match made in heaven, it was not a partnership that worked on earth. The story of why it didn't is worth the telling.

THE DIVINE FAMILY

While Jerry Falwell and Paul Weyrich didn't officially launch the "Moral Majority" until 1979—an official political organization set up, among other things, to stop Carter's reelection and ensure Ronald Reagan would be the next president—their feud with Carter and his administration traced back to the beginning of Carter's presidency.

In 1976, Carter earned 54 percent of the Catholic vote and 47 percent of the Protestant vote. The latter marked a 7 percent increase in the number of Protestant voters the average Democratic presidential candidates normally received. In the wake of Watergate and Vietnam, the country was in the mood for a candidate whose folksy old-time values and religion conveyed a sense of trust, integrity, and honesty—factors sorely missing from American politics over the prior half decade. One factor in Carter's surprise victory was his ability to retain much of the Catholic majority, despite his overtly evangelical identity, while simultaneously increasing the Protestant vote. In one sense, Carter was a bridge candidate, whose Christian values seemed to offer a way forward for a Protestant-Catholic political alliance. Over the course of American history, Protestants have persecuted Catholics culturally and politically. The KKK was an explicitly anti-Catholic organization, as was the Know-Nothing party of the 1850s before them. The election of John F. Kennedy to the

presidency in 1960 was, in fact, a minor miracle, given the formidable anti-Catholic sentiment that prevailed in American society.

It's not hard to see how Carter appealed to White Christian Americans—both Catholic and Protestant—at this point in the country's history. Still reeling from the cultural and sexual revolutions of the sixties and recovering from the shock of Nixon's betrayal and the brutality of the Vietnam war in the early seventies, many saw in Carter a man who emanated old-time family values: a small-town boy who married his childhood sweetheart, a military officer who quoted scripture as much as the Constitution and who didn't bring the baggage of corruption to the office. Carter sealed the deal by promising to convene a conference on family issues if elected to the White House.

After the election, however, Carter's identity as a born-again Christian was not enough for the burgeoning evangelical-Catholic bloc that composed the core of Falwell's and Weyrich's New Religious Right—and the eventual White Christian nationalist heart of MAGA Nation. By the mid-1970s, Weyrich and Viguerie had already approached Falwell and his evangelical cohorts about forming a political organization that would enable conservative White Christians to take the country back for God and themselves. While Falwell didn't agree to form the Moral Majority until 1979, he and Weyrich had already keyed in on the grand strategy for the reconquest of America: the family.

In the previous chapter, we traced the line from proslavery theologies in the 1800s to the KKK of the 1920s to the reaction to the *Brown v. Board* 1954 decision and finally the call to desegregate schools in the late 1960s. By the 1970s, Falwell, Weyrich, and their colleagues had all framed the issue of school desegregation as an attack on the traditional family and the God-given right to parent one's children as they see fit. Realizing the potential of using the family as a symbol in the war to reconquer America, Falwell and his colleagues on the Religious Right began to expand “family values”

discourse into other domains, including abortion, feminism and the Equal Rights Amendment, and the movement for LGBTQ rights. It was an ingenious if insidious strategy: Use the family to sell White Christians as victims of cultural persecution rather than as the perpetrators of prejudice. Reframe their opposition to civil liberties and protections for people of color and the LGBTQ community as staving off assaults on God's traditional family structure rather than as out-and-out racism.

Jimmy Carter was collateral damage in this culture war. As we have seen, the decision to revoke the tax-exempt status of segregationist schools and churches came from the Supreme Court in *Green vs. Connally*. The IRS began to enforce the rule under Nixon. By the late 1970s, churches were beginning to fear they would be next in the IRS's line of fire. And so, to many White evangelicals, Jimmy Carter's administration became the face of the government's "attack" on religious communities. Not only was this an issue of keeping the government out of how parents decide to educate their children; it was a matter—according to the New Religious Right—of an infringement on religious liberties.

"The education system has been taken over by secular humanists," argued San Diego megachurch pastor Tim LaHaye. According to him, Carter was "establishing a religion and giving the high priest a position on the cabinet." The revocation of tax-exempt status of segregationist schools also served to bolster the evangelical-Catholic alliance, albeit in this instance against Carter. As Falwell himself explained, the tax issue "worried Catholics as much as us."

In response, many evangelicals began homeschooling their children. Since the 1980s, homeschooling in the United States has grown exponentially, with conservative Protestants funding and fueling the push. While evangelical homeschool families claimed that the public school systems were polluting their children's minds with ideologies such as feminism, communism, and environmentalism, many now see Christian homeschooling as the front line of the culture wars. The

most popular curricula in Christian homeschooling circles unabashedly promote Christian nationalism as a way of training the next generation to fight God's war. In some lessons, students are taught that African Americans were better off under slavery and that Nelson Mandela was a "communist agitator."

While this new and unexpected religious-political bloc fought the IRS, it also waged conflict against the Equal Rights Amendment. As the historian J. Brooks Flippen has shown, evangelicals (and many Catholics) viewed the ERA as a threat to the nuclear family. They maintained that the Bible prescribed certain roles for men and women, and they believed the new amendment, which would have ensured legal protection against gender discrimination for women, would usurp God's vision for the structure of the family and society.

By far the most influential opponent to the ERA was Catholic activist Phyllis Schlafly, an antifeminist organizer from Ohio who opposed the ERA in the name of family values and argued for the maintenance of patriarchal gender roles. Schlafly maintained that the ERA was a dangerous step toward a society where the "traditional" family would be abandoned and chaos would reign. A skilled organizer, Schlafly compiled extensive mailing lists to build a grassroots movement to stop the amendment from passing. She claimed that if the ERA passed, women would lose their children in divorce proceedings, homosexual marriage would be legalized, and women would be sent to the front lines of combat. Her scare tactics, coupled with her extraordinary ability to reach her audience directly through well-organized mail campaigns and public events, helped stop the ERA from ratification.

In many ways, Schlafly and other proponents of the traditional family employed the same argument used in proslavery theologies, just recycled for use in the 1960s rather than the 1860s. Despite the shift in issue from slavery to women's rights, the argument stayed the same: God envisions the family as a hetero-patriarchal unit. A change to the laws would upset God's plan.

Catholics and evangelicals also mobilized against any progress on the front of LGBTQ rights and protections. In 1977, Falwell became personally involved in the campaign to stop legislation in Florida's Miami Dade County that aimed to protect LGBTQ individuals from discrimination in the workplace. Standing alongside Anita Bryant, a beauty queen turned antigay activist, Falwell once again decried the attack on "traditional" family values and the malice of the "homosexual" community.

Then there was the issue of abortion. Abortion had been a priority issue for American Catholics for decades. As we saw in the previous chapter, it was not a Protestant issue even in 1973, when the *Roe v. Wade* decision came down. But by the late 1970s, many evangelical leaders began using the abortion issue as another means of employing the family for political purposes. Abortion was sold as another attack on the family and the "sanctity of life." Given the dizzying changes wrought by the sixties, evangelical luminaries such as Falwell and the theologian Francis Schaeffer didn't have a hard time using abortion as a strategy to portray secular humanists and non-Christians as part of a large plot to persecute and marginalize conservative people of faith.

Carter explained publicly that he personally opposed abortion but that he did not believe that the government should legislate a woman's right to control her own body. He drew on his Baptist heritage in order to argue that a clear separation of church and state means this: Christians can strive to create the type of society they envision as resonant with the kingdom of God, but they cannot expect government policy to effect the change for them. He believed Christians should work to embody God's justice and peace on earth but that this meant protecting the liberties of people of all religions—and people of no faith at all—rather than just their own. In essence, Carter was too Protestant for his Christian nationalist counterparts. His position was drawn from a long tradition of Baptist nonconformists who view freedom *from* religion as the basis for freedom *of* religion.

On the other side, Weyrich, Falwell, and their evangelical and Catholic audiences prioritized American nationalism over the separation of church and state. Their goal was dominance, politically and socially. So even if Carter upheld a stringent Christian personal ethos, and even if he personally opposed abortion, they railed against his unwillingness to take the antiabortion stance in policy and legislation.

All of this came to a head at the long-awaited conference for families that Carter had promised on the campaign trail and finally convened in June 1980. If this was the moment that the embattled president thought he could win back White evangelicals and Catholics, he was sorely mistaken. Carter's goal was to examine "the strengths of American families, the difficulties they face, and the ways in which family life is affected by public policies." The organizers who led the conference took this as a mandate to explore how "non-traditional" families, including single-parent and LGBTQ households, were navigating the social and professional landscapes. By this point, Falwell and Weyrich had officially launched the Moral Majority, a political organization aimed at mobilizing conservative Christians to vote and rally behind various issues, including opposition to abortion. Instead of participating in the conference on families, Falwell and his cohorts protested it. The Moral Majority labeled the gathering "the Anti-Family Conference," while Alabama governor Fob James decided not to deploy delegates "because the conference appears to oppose Judeo-Christian values."

IF YOU CAN'T PROTECT THE FAMILY, HOW WILL YOU SECURE THE NATION?

There was one more issue that drove a wedge between Carter and the New Religious Right. Despite his status as a military officer, Carter displayed an unwavering commitment to diplomacy and negotiation in matters of foreign policy. He emphasized human rights in his criticism and attacks on the Soviet Union, he gave control of the Panama

Canal back to Panama in an effort to create goodwill between the United States and countries in the region, and, perhaps most damning, his handling of the Iran hostage crisis led to a disastrous rescue attempt. For Carter, the responsibility of the United States as a world power was to exemplify patience, diplomacy, and humility. While the success of his foreign policy can be debated, it's clear that these approaches were born from his deep personal piety. They were the policy expressions of a Christian trying to live out Christ's command to love your neighbor.

By contrast, figures like Jerry Falwell clearly preferred a commander in chief who would emanate a tough-guy persona in interactions with the Soviet Union and other foreign powers. The Weyrich-Falwell coalition viewed Carter as too much of a dove when it came to the Soviet Union and foreign policy in general. "If we would substantially reduce or totally eliminate most of our foolish welfare programs at home and abroad, we would have ample funds to defend this country and provide for the people within it," Falwell wrote in the magazine *Faith Aflame* in 1976. "As Christians, we are certainly in favor of providing for the aged, the sick and the helpless. But we certainly need to get away from these giveaway programs which are producing a generation of 'bums' in our society. Paul said 'if a man will not work, neither shall he eat.'"

Falwell's call to end "foolish welfare programs" and a call for a candidate who would "defend this country" coincided with his I Love America Rallies, a series of 1976 events celebrating the nation's bicentennial and highlighting the "old-time" religion that supposedly made the country great. The altar calls at the rallies were dubbed "Last call for America." A gospel choir would sing patriotic songs to accompany the throngs of Americans coming down to the stage to devote themselves to saving the country from ruin.

All the base elements of Christian nationalism were front and center in Falwell's "I Love America" tour: the conflation of the flag and the cross into an entangled symbol of the nation as chosen by

God to carry out a special mission in the world; the transposition of the call to accept Christ into a call to transform America's politics before the country is supposedly lost. And the symbolism—gospel hymns played before and after patriotic ballads, coupled with the patriotic accoutrements of the state—reflected Falwell's belief in the inseparability of the nation and the kingdom of God.

Falwell's approach could not have been more different from Carter's, even though both men came from the Southern Baptist denomination, were lifelong southerners, and professed the same faith. Despite their shared identity, Falwell, along with the stalwarts of the New Religious Right, viewed Carter as too weak to protect either the family or the nation. It was like an enemy was occupying the White House. Their goal became to elect someone who shared their Christian nationalist priorities, if not their Christian piety.

A HOLLYWOOD STAR FOR PRESIDENT

It's easy to think of Ronald Reagan as an affable, handsome Hollywood actor who used his stage presence and on-camera persona to woo conservatives and independents. Though his policies were conservative through and through, he had the power to charm and magnetize his audiences in ways that escaped other Republican candidates, including Barry Goldwater. His appeal, the tale goes, was as much likability as it was policy.

The standard story about Reagan and the New Religious Right is that the latter abandoned Carter the Evangelical for Reagan the Actor in a bid to see their political agenda advanced by the White House. There's no denying the truth of this narrative. As the 1980 election approached, the new bloc of Christian nationalist evangelical and Catholic voters that formed the heart of the New Religious Right turned away from Carter and threw their support fully behind the former governor of California. "There's no question that Moral Majority and other religious right organizations turned out

multiplied millions of voters,” Falwell proclaimed after Reagan’s victory.

In many ways, the shift from the Southern Baptist to the Hollywood actor was unsurprising. Evangelicals and Catholics were unhappy with Carter’s approaches to abortion, the ERA, gay rights, and the Cold War. They wanted a nationalist more than a Baptist, and political power more than religious solidarity. Despite the fact that Reagan was a divorced man who made his living in Hollywood—a den of sin, according to many conservative Christians—and despite the fact that he had supported abortion as governor of California and had tense relationships with his older children, the New Religious Right viewed him as more “Christian” than the evangelical sitting in the Oval Office. “We have to make a choice between a person who may be less than perfect but who supports the values we believe in,” said Paul Weyrich. “In that case, we come down on the side of Ronald Reagan.”

But the story goes back further than the Carter administration, to the Goldwater campaign of 1964. As Election Day approached in 1964, Ronald Reagan gave a famous speech on behalf of Goldwater. While Goldwater would ultimately lose the election, the speech, “A Time for Choosing,” propelled Reagan to the national spotlight as the next great hope of American conservatism. “This is the issue of this election, whether we believe in our capacity for self-government or whether we abandon the American revolution and confess that a little intellectual elite in a far distant Capitol can plan our lives for us better than we can plan them ourselves,” Reagan said. “You and I are told increasingly we have to choose between left or right. What I’d like to suggest is that there is no such thing as the left or right. There’s only an up or down.”

As Randall Balmer noted in a 2021 interview with me, Reagan’s first foray into politics was to support the repeal of a California housing act that had been designed to eliminate racial discrimination in real estate transactions. Like Goldwater, he opposed the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act.

Only two years after the failure of the Goldwater campaign, Reagan became governor of California. His campaign was based on, among other things, restoring “law and order.” He was reelected to a second term in 1970. By that time, the whispers of his presidential run were turning into shouts all over the country.

Twenty years before he ran against Jimmy Carter, through an extremist libertarianism and Christian nationalism that began with a grassroots movement in Southern California, Ronald Reagan was building and cultivating support. Nothing changed when Reagan ran for president. He was the same candidate who had been formed by racial animus and libertarian ideals in the 1960s.

“I think the crowning moment that showed Reagan for what he was, was the fact that he opened his general election campaign in 1980 with an address at the Neshoba County Fair—in, of all places, Philadelphia, Mississippi, on August 3, 1980,” Randall Balmer told me in our 2021 interview. “Philadelphia, Mississippi: the place where sixteen summers earlier, the Ku Klux Klan had abducted, tortured, and murdered three civil rights workers. And lest one miss his meaning . . . Reagan on that occasion invoked the timeless segregationist battle cry of states’ rights.”

When Ronald Reagan won the presidency, it represented more than just conservative Christians supporting a candidate who promised to give them political power. It represented the mainstreaming and nationalization of a Sunbelt faction of the Republican Party that was once considered extremist. It injected the radical views of the John Birch Society’s Robert Welch, along with Goldwater, Weyrich, Viguier, and Falwell, into the heart of the GOP. If Goldwater lost the battle in 1964, a decade and a half later his heirs won the war.

Viewed through this long lens, the choice of Christian nationalists of the New Religious Right—Reagan over Carter—is less surprising. Reagan’s election in 1980 was the result of two decades of Christian nationalist organizing, coalition-building, and campaigning on the part of the New Right and the Religious Right, who never

wavered in their mission to retake the country for their God and for themselves. It developed in Southern California and in the South. Then it took the nation by storm.

POWER TRUMPS PIETY

In retrospect, the evangelical breakup with Jimmy Carter was the result of numerous complex issues. But all the details lead back to a central theme: though Carter was one of them, his policies didn't fit their agenda. His faith was unquestionable. He was born and raised a Southern Baptist, served as a missionary, supported his church at every turn, and married his one and only love. Carter's politics, on the other hand, were not aligned with the vision Weyrich, Falwell, and the others had for the United States. They felt he didn't represent the power of the nation. In essence, Carter was Christian enough but not nationalist, or patriarchal, or warmongering enough for their tastes. The man who embodied family values was characterized as hating the traditional family. The man who was an officer in the navy was castigated as unpatriotic when it came to foreign policy. We could say that he brought the cross into the White House but that, according to his critics, he left the flag out of the sanctuary.

Thus, in the 1980 presidential election, the Christian nationalists of the New Religious Right supported a divorced Hollywood actor, with a mixed record on issues surrounding "family values" and a history of supporting abortion, over the Southern Baptist Sunday school teacher who married his high school sweetheart, served with distinction in the armed forces, and often took his Bible with him when leaving the house. It was the election that made clear that the cross wasn't enough. For Christian nationalists, the cross must always be accompanied by the flag.

This leads to one final lesson to be learned from the Carter-Reagan election. When it came to voting for Donald Trump, Christian nationalists had a precedent for prioritizing politics over morals

and policies over identity. In the wake of Trump's 2016 election, in which he gained the support of 81 percent of White evangelicals and 60 percent of White Catholics, many claimed that conservative Christians must have had to hold their noses in order to vote for a thrice-divorced television star who talked about God at opportune moments but seemed, by all accounts, to have no relationship *with* God. Yet viewed through the lens of the Goldwater-Reagan heritage, as it was cultivated by the likes of Weyrich, Falwell, and others, voting for Trump was likely a gratifying, once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for many Christian nationalists. If Reagan's two-term presidency was the culmination of Goldwater's extremism, then the election of Trump was an unforeseen triumph. A man who mixed the unhinged rhetoric of Goldwater with the civil war mentality of Weyrich and Falwell and the camera-ready persona of Reagan, Trump was not an imperfect candidate who somehow managed to garner the votes of White Christians. He was the prototype of the candidate White Christians had been searching for since the early 1960s.

GOING BACK TO CHURCH

When Dr. Marshburn threw the flag out from the worship room in Yorba Linda that day in 1918, he was trying to send a message: the United States and the kingdom of God are not one and the same; their missions and values are distinct; and the glorification of God should not take place alongside the adulation of Old Glory. This, in essence, was Jimmy Carter's approach. He wanted to be a Christian and an American, but not a Christian nationalist. In other words, he did not believe the country was built for and by White Christians, and he did not think it was the government's job to protect or privilege them.

This wasn't good enough for the White evangelicals and Catholics on the New Religious Right. When I reflect on how their alliance helped turn the tide of American history by ushering Ronald Reagan

into the White House, I'm brought back to all those Sundays at Rose Drive when I was a teenager and young adult. Since I was a convert, I hadn't grown up in the church like many of my peers sitting near me in Sunday services. It meant I would take in the scenery like a tourist visiting a new country for the first time. I noticed the maroon color of the choir's robes, and the way the pastors held their Bibles with a special tenderness. When they prayed in church, I soaked up their peculiarly gentle cadence. During sermons my mind often wandered, so I flipped through all the hymnals in the pew rack, learning the lyrics for the first time. My eyes scanned the room, the enraptured faces of adults and fidgety kids looking at the pictures in their Bibles. It also meant that I saw something that for others just blended into the background. At the front of the sanctuary, to the left of the stage, the American flag stood so close to the Christian flag that the two were often touching. In the White American Christianity to which I converted, there was no question that the flag and the cross belonged together. They were the twin pillars of our faith.

At this point it's clear why we took this as a given: By the time I became an evangelical, the New Religious Right had cemented its stronghold over the GOP and White American Christianity. The Christian Americans like Jimmy Carter were relegated to secondary status. The Christian nationalists held power. But political victory wasn't enough. They still needed to take back American culture.