

INTRODUCTION

WHEN THE RIOTING started in earnest, the Christian leaders mostly held back. Bundled in parkas and hats against the frigid January air, they knelt and prayed with fervent tones and feverish emotion. Some participated in prayer conference calls on their cell phones or live streamed the frenzy and fury around them. A few joined the expletive-screaming throngs forcing their way into the Capitol Building, but most waited outside with the restive crowds.

These Christian leaders weren't passive so much as expectant—waiting for God to show up. They prayed. They worshipped. They decreed and declared and sang and beseeched. They did battle in the spirit realm. There on the sprawling Capitol Grounds, they prepared for God's promised deliverance. They pined for a miracle that did not materialize.

We Americans have spent years now grappling with the aftermath of January 6, 2021—the day American democracy came to the brink of collapse. There have been endless reports, thousands of legal proceedings, congressional hearings, and media investigations of the insurrection. We think we know the story: Donald Trump refusing to concede the 2020 election; his legal team trying dozens of ways to litigate his frivolous claims, all unsuccessfully; and his call for crowds of supporters to descend on Washington, DC, on January 6 to prevent the final certification of the election. We know the shape of that day, its contours: Trump instigating the crowds to “fight like hell” at a rally on the National Mall and then those crowds storming the Capitol, led by Proud Boys' and Oath Keepers' shock troops.

But a crucial side of that story has not been fully told. Christian symbolism, Christian prayers, Christian music, and Christian citations of the Bible were rife among the riotous crowds. And this seemingly jumbled array of Christian symbols and utterances, dispersed around the besieged Capitol, baffled and disoriented many who noticed it. Who can forget the QAnon Shaman—a quixotic American religious figure if there ever was one—tattooed, shirtless, bellowing, then courteously removing his bull-horned hat to pray an overtly Christian prayer in the Senate chamber? Or the “Jesus is my Savior, Trump is my President” flags? Or the Proud Boys kneeling in prayer before stomping off to crack some skulls? As Peter Manseau, curator of American Religious History at the Smithsonian, put it, religion was not a piece of the story of that day; it was “*the* story of what happened” on January 6.¹

But that true statement raises many questions: Whose religion? What sort of religion? What genre of Christianity was on display? How did religion serve as a propellant for a patently political rebellion that sought to overturn a national election?

In *The Violent Take It by Force*, you'll read about a particular form of American Christianity whose escalating radicalization poses a real and imminent threat to pluralism and democracy. Leaders from this group inspired many of the visible expressions of Christian piety and forged the Christian ethos of January 6. In these pages, we will investigate the Christian leaders and the theological ideas that kindled the Capitol Riot.

If “follow the money” is a good journalistic dictum, “follow the theology” is an important corollary here. I’m less preoccupied with the foot-soldier Christian believers who were among the hundreds of rioters entering the Capitol or the thousands in the supportive crowds surrounding the building. I want to understand the ringleaders, the instigators: the people I’m calling the principal theological architects of the Capitol Riot.

None of the major characters of this book—all of whom were either present at the riot or whose ideas were widely invoked that day—have faced any legal prosecution or congressional scrutiny for their role in January 6. If anything, these leaders’ radicalism, their power, and their influence have grown since that day. And even if you are an avid religion-news consumer, you may have never heard of them. They aren’t among the A-list celebrities of the religious right, like Phyllis Schlafly, Jerry Falwell, James Dobson, or Tony Perkins. These are not household names outside of a certain niche of American Christianity. But their ideas helped whip up an insurrection, and their reach among devoted Christians is growing both in the United States and globally.

The movement I track in this book is called the New Apostolic Reformation (NAR), and it has thrived in relative obscurity. This little-known but potent network of Christian leaders built the theology of Christian Trumpism and then inspired thousands of Christians to show up on January 6 to fight for Donald Trump. Further, the NAR’s theological ideas around politics and spiritual warfare are increasingly setting the agenda for the religious right in America and quickening our polarized, zero-sum political environment.

The NAR is organized around a highly networked but loosely affiliated pantheon of charismatic preachers, pastors, celebrities, nonprofit leaders, and international entrepreneurs who understand themselves to be recreating the energy and vitality of the early Christian church. They believe that the church has languished for centuries in feebleness and aimlessness, led by timid pastors and functionary priests—until now. Now, they believe, in these momentous latter days, God has reinvigorated the church through the Holy Spirit-backed renewed leadership of apostles and prophets. They believe that Christians

need to conquer the high places of influence in society and govern from the top down. Engaged in a cosmic spiritual war against the forces of darkness, they believe God has mandated them to use spiritual violence to defeat Satan and then build the kingdom of God on earth.

I have spent months and months immersed in the data of January 6, including legal filings and massive databases of social media posts and videos from that day. Digging deeply into the social networks and ideational formation of hundreds of Christians who were there, I have tracked more than fifty charismatic Christian leaders to Washington, DC, on January 6. *Charismatic* here does not mean “appealing” or “magnetic” in personality; I use it here as a technical term of Christian belief and practice that emphasizes the supernatural dimensions of Christian experience. Some of these charismatic Christian leaders from the Capitol Riot are local pastors or heads of small ministries, and some are international Christian celebrities. Among the January 6 religious celebrities in attendance was a cadre of top NAR leaders you will get to know in this book.

So while images of the Q Shaman may be burned into our collective memory, when you dig a bit deeper, you’ll see signs of charismatic influence everywhere on January 6:

- Many in attendance that day were doing a “Jericho March.” They saw it as the culmination of a series of dozens of such Jericho Marches in the preceding months. Like January 6, these previous events entailed intercessory prayers, worship music, shofar-blowings, and marching around government buildings in swing-state capitals and in Washington, DC.²
- Dozens of people arranged themselves in choir formation and sang Christian praise songs, a cappella, just yards from the besieged Capitol. “The Lord will fight the battle for his people when we cry aloud unto him,” they sang, as onlookers listened and live streamed, “and he will crush the enemy.”³
- A troupe of prophets roved through the enraged crowds at the steps of the Capitol, prophesying “against communism and against a spirit, a demonic spirit that wants to be unleashed in this country.”⁴
- A pastor offered personalized prayers and blessings to people who had broken into the Capitol and who witnessed the shooting of Ashli Babbitt: “God, Lord, protect this soldier for you, this man that was brave. Father, Lord, I just declare right now [over] this lionheart that angels of God be protecting over him.”⁵
- Many people in different parts of the surrounding crowds, evidently unrelated, made no attempt to enter the Capitol but repeatedly shouted or sang, “The blood of Jesus” toward the building.⁶

- Dozens of white flags emblazoned with a simple green pine tree and the phrase “An Appeal to Heaven” punctuated the roiling crowds. This flag, as we’ll see, has become a totem for a prophetic movement to reconstitute America.⁷

You may not have noticed those manifestations of religion in the coverage of January 6. Or if you did, you might not have seen them as pieces of one coherent expression of American Christianity. But they are.

What Does Christian Nationalism Look Like?

Christian nationalism, the belief that America was founded by and for Christians, has become a catchall designation for the Americanized spirituality we saw on January 6. But there are many compartments and subdivisions of American Christian nationalism, and the broad-strokes label gets applied to a warren of different communities, ideologies, and theologies. Some of what gets called “Christian nationalism” is deadly serious, and other manifestations are actually fairly benign and sentimental. I’m a religion scholar, and the fact that some churches sing historic Christian nationalist hymns like “God Bless America” or the “Battle Hymn of the Republic” doesn’t keep me up at night. Such mashups of piety and patriotism aren’t my cup of tea, but neither do they pose a grave hazard to American democracy.

Other versions of American Christian nationalism are overtly racist and white supremacist or misogynistic and, clearly, are not benign at all. Those are real and malignant forms of Christian nationalism. However, those openly racist and misogynist tendencies are not precisely what I have in view here either. Indeed, this investigation into the NAR and the broader phenomenon of what we might call *the Independent Charismatic style of Christian nationalism* may surprise readers who come with a strong prior impression of what Christian nationalism looks like.

First, outside observers of Christian nationalism often assume that it is a uniformly white, racialized phenomenon, bound up with American racism and nativism; hence, many analysts prefer to write about *white Christian nationalism*.⁸ The Independent Charismatic corner of American Christianity, as we will see, is highly multiethnic and even transnational in its orientation. Indeed, among the religious leaders who were designated advisers to Donald Trump, almost all the Christian leaders of color in those circles were Independent Charismatics.⁹ This is not to say that race and racism are not relevant here; they certainly are. But it’s a more perplexing picture of race and religion than one might surmise at first glance.

Second, observers frequently draw an explicit connection between Christian nationalism and patriarchy. As sociologists Andrew Whitehead and Samuel Perry write, “Christian nationalism advocates for a particular social order that lionizes hierarchies between men and women.”¹⁰ This is broadly true, and Independent Charismatic leaders and communities certainly do have strong views on gender and gender-attuned topics like abortion. But we’ll also discover their surprisingly egalitarian sensibility when it comes to gender and leadership, with women moving within every echelon of charismatic religious leadership in a way that scandalizes other Christian nationalists and many other Christian traditions.

Third, it is commonly asserted that Christian nationalism is detached from Christian belief. As one popular resource claims, it is “a cultural framework . . . [that] is more about identity than religion,” implying that Christian nationalists subordinate theology and biblical interpretation to more mundane political interests.¹¹ But I’m going to argue that the NAR’s longstanding alliance with Donald Trump (not to mention their mobilization for January 6) has been every bit as much about theology and biblical interpretation as it ever was about politics.

I raise all this not to invalidate or undermine existing conversations about American Christian nationalism but to illustrate why we need more in-depth examinations of the strands and subcurrents within it. The predominant form of Christian nationalism that generated the Christian countenance of the Capitol Riot was not simply reducible to racist, misogynistic, or abstract political motivations. The Capitol Riot was also propelled by potent theological ideas.

The Charismaticization of Right-Wing Politics

Beyond the Capitol Riot and its Independent Charismatic Christian instigators, this is a book about a series of tectonic shifts that have occurred in recent decades, a subterranean yet exceedingly significant revolution in the leadership of the religious right in America. We will explore this little-understood world of Independent Charismatic Christianity, an ethos and a segment of evangelicalism that is rapidly expanding both nationally and globally. Through interviews with dozens of NAR and other Independent Charismatic leaders, some of whom were there on January 6, and through archival research, I have gained an unprecedented level of access to how they understand themselves, the relational and social dynamics among these leaders, and what motivates them.

The spaces, networks, and ideas that we’ll explore in these pages are among the most poorly understood domains of Christianity by outside observers. A diagram can offer a simple taxonomy for

locating these groups in the larger landscape of American Christianity. While it's not meant to be proportional, this can illuminate the way the leaders and ideas in this book are nested within larger movements.

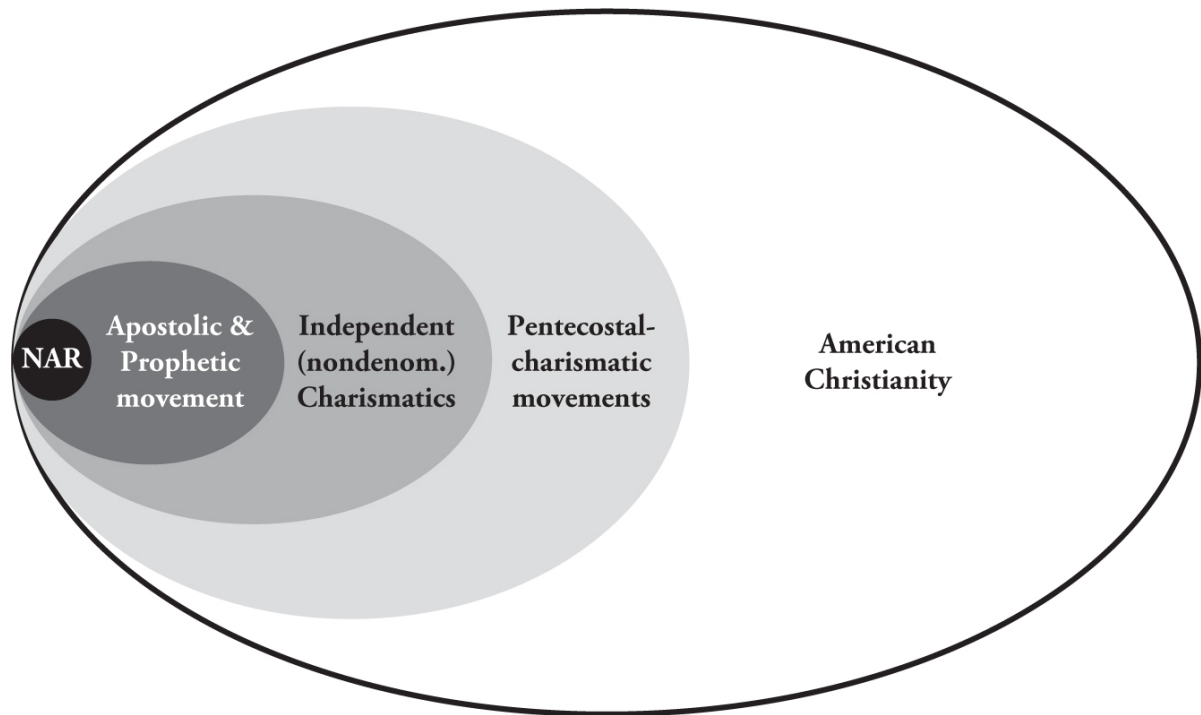


Fig. 0.1 Taxonomy of Independent Charismatics and the New Apostolic Reformation within American Christianity.

Many observers are accustomed to sorting American Christianity into simple buckets such as Catholic, evangelical, mainline Protestant, Historically Black Protestant, and Orthodox. But as I'll lay out with more complexity in the first chapter, the world of the Pentecostal-charismatic, sometimes just called *charismatic*, movements overlap with all those categories. In conversations with some American religion reporters, several of them have told me that these Pentecostal-charismatic folks are the most difficult to write about and report on because, while demographically sizable and important, they hold supernatural beliefs and practice a mystical spirituality that are peculiar and virtually unintelligible to outsiders.

And even within the *mélange* of Pentecostals and charismatics, the action of this book takes place among the amorphous nondenominational segment of charismatic Christianity, where there are few boundaries or overarching institutions. This is a distinct subculture *within* the evangelical subculture—the realm of nondenominational megachurches, of televangelism channels, of prophecy conferences, of healing revivals and prosperity gospel preachers, of free-range evangelists and exorcists. Starting in the 1980s, some leaders in this Independent Charismatic sector began arguing that God is reconstituting the early-church roles of apostles and prophets to lead the modern church, giving rise to what we can call the

Apostolic and Prophetic movement, a speedily growing global trend of nondenominational churches aligning themselves with these apostles and prophets. The NAR is one set of networks—the most influential and controversial one—within that global Apostolic and Prophetic movement.

The Violent Take It by Force tells the story of how a cohort of respected NAR leaders embraced the candidacy of Donald Trump early on in the 2016 election cycle. By constructing creative theologies and biblical rationales for supporting a debauched real-estate mogul, they prodded and harnessed the latent power of a previously politically disjointed Independent Charismatic world. These seemingly fringe theologies—some with catchy titles like the Seven Mountain Mandate or the Cyrus Anointing—have leached into broader American evangelicalism, engendering aggressive and chauvinistic visions of Christian supremacy.

The events I describe in these pages have brought about a sea change in the leadership of right-wing Christianity in America. Independent Charismatic leaders, who twenty years ago would have been mocked by mainstream religious right leaders, are now frontline captains in the American culture wars. Amid the 2016 campaign and Trump's victory, George W. Bush's former chief of staff, Andrew Card, commented that "the rug of American politics used to have more rug than fringe. Today, the rug seems to have little rug and a lot of fringe."¹² Card was describing the radicalization of politics on the right in general, but we could use the same analogy to describe the radicalization and charismaticization of the religious right. Indeed, by the time Trump was inaugurated and running the country, the fringe had become the carpet.

My narrow focus on what used to be the evangelical fringe—Independent Charismatics and the NAR—is not intended to excuse or exonerate broader American evangelicalism for its authoritarian turn. Rather, it is to narrate the route by which a once purportedly principled and values-driven evangelical religiopolitical movement became obsessed with an autocratic and principleless individual. These are the leading-edge charismatic pastors and leaders who threw open the doors of evangelicalism to Trump. They have served as the early adopters, most ardent advocates, and die-hard avengers of Christian Trumpism. And the NAR leaders' militant theologies, violent rhetoric, and Christian mobilization efforts were inextricable from the happenings at the Capitol Riot.

Entry Points

While I didn't grow up in the NAR circles per se, I was raised next door to them theologically. The first thirty years of my life were spent as an evangelical in Southern California, caroming around among the same set of institutions that gave rise to the NAR, so I couldn't help but catch the edges of these leaders'

influence. I have friends, acquaintances, and family members who've joined some of the churches and networks described in this book. I have seen firsthand how alluring and mesmerizing they can be.

After college, I went into evangelical Christian ministry, spending seven years working with college students, unwittingly sharing some of the same charismatic experiences and theologies I later discovered emerged alongside and through the NAR. I earned a master's degree in theology from Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, the social and academic space in which the NAR was first conceived and incubated. Then I left that evangelical world and moved to Washington, DC, to Georgetown University, where I earned a PhD in religious studies with a focus on modern religious movements and Muslim-Christian relations. I also discovered a great affection for that historic, beautiful, and complicated capital city. I thought I had left behind the slightly idiosyncratic and hard-to-explain charismatic Southern California evangelical environment in which I came of age.

Then, on January 6, 2021, I watched with revulsion as the symbols and scriptures of evangelical Christianity were used to endorse a violent, antidemocratic attack. I cringed, trying to keep my preschool-age children from noticing the raging events on the TV, unable myself to look away as mobs of Christians overran some of the locations of my treasured memories of Washington, DC.

As someone who grew up proximal to this NAR movement and who has the theological and academic background to make some sense of it, I felt a certain responsibility to write this book. My analysis is rooted in the disciplines of religious studies, theology, and history, and I make every effort to be even-handed. But these pages do not contain some dispassionate, arms-length rendering. The book's very title should signal that I am out to warn against these ideas and the hyper-politicization of charismatic theology as a civic menace to American democracy. Yet I do not disdain these leaders. Given my background, I sympathize and even, on some level, identify with the NAR leaders and followers. I know how electrifying and life-altering an exciting new theological paradigm or charismatic experience can be. I understand how perceived manifestations of the supernatural—as mediated through truly captivating and talented human beings—can inspire deep-seated devotion.

If you read what critics write online about the NAR, you'll soon discover ill-informed opinions galore. Some people depict the NAR leaders as a kind of charismatic Illuminati, spookily manipulating American politics. Some Christians think the NAR leaders are heretics, others a cult. Still other commentators will say that the NAR leaders are frauds—hucksters out to grab power and money. I disagree with all these assessments. The NAR, and the broader Independent Charismatic arena in which it operates, offers a very plausible, popular, and even evangelical interpretation of Christianity. You will

find the characters of this book citing the Bible with a facility and familiarity that rival most other Christian leaders. To many of their followers and fans, the characters of this book have unparalleled access to the mind and power of God.

My hope is to humanize these leaders—in both directions. That is, to their admirers and devotees, I try to situate them historically, locating their ideas and their supernatural claims within the realm of social forces and human motivations. But to their legion of critics, I’m also attempting to make intelligible a set of beliefs, practices, and ambitions that frequently seem bizarre to the uninitiated. I hope by the end of this book, you both understand what motivates the NAR leaders and recognize the grave peril their theological vision poses to pluralism and democracy in the United States and around the globe.

In this book, we’ll ask: How does a group of talented, intelligent, and very capable people get religiously and politically radicalized? How do they come to believe they are God’s anointed leaders in our time, hearing directly from God and battling against the devil? How do millions of people trust such leaders, even to the point of mobilizing to storm the US Capitol? And could they do it again?

The Violent Take It by Force

Littered among the endless scroll of social media posts about January 6 from charismatic Christians who were present at the Capitol or cheering them on at a distance are thousands of prophecies, exhortations to stand with Trump, and Bible verses. So many Bible verses. One of the most repeated biblical citations you can find there, appearing in post after post, is the passage in which Jesus said, “From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force” (Matt. 11:12).

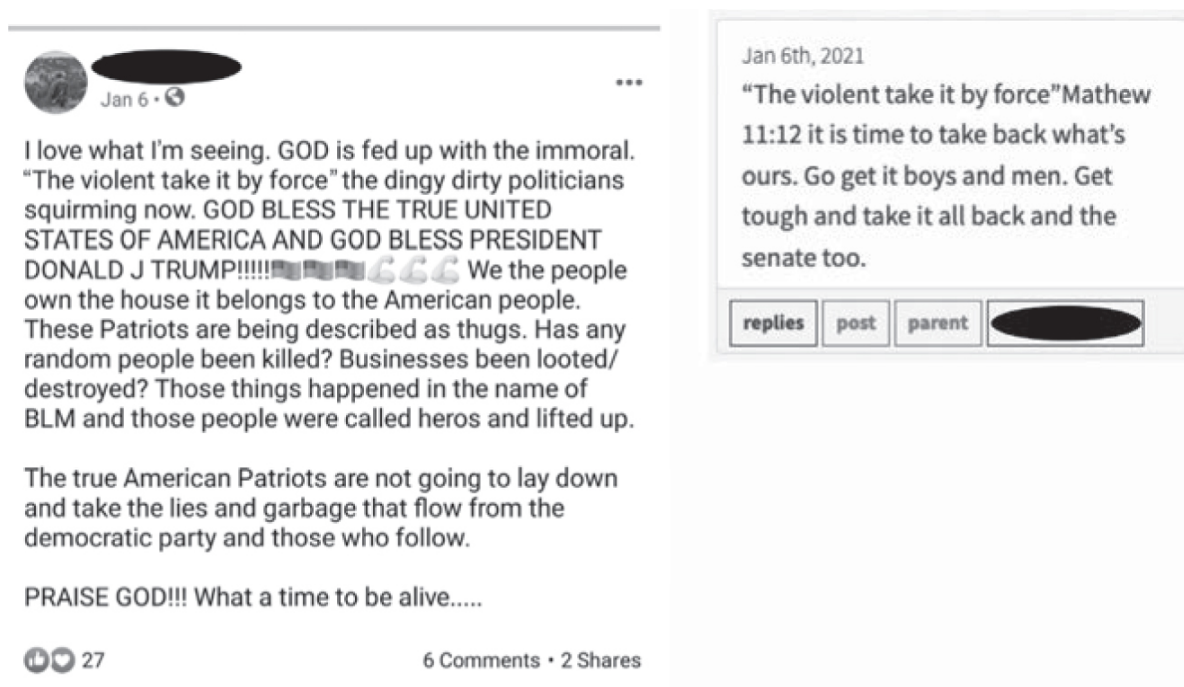


Fig. 0.2 Social media posts on Facebook and Parler by Trump-supporting Christians on January 6, 2021.

Christian commentators disagree mightily about how to interpret this verse. Some argue that Jesus is lamenting the persecution of Christians by “the violent,” a lá Herod executing Jesus’s cousin, John the Baptist. In other words, they maintain that Jesus is being descriptive rather than prescriptive. Others argue that Jesus is using a positive metaphor of violence to describe the passionate intensity in laying spiritual claim to the kingdom of heaven “by force.” Still others, like the NAR leaders we’ll encounter in this book, understand this verse as a mandate, from the mouth of Jesus himself, for Christians to employ spiritual violence to advance the kingdom of God on earth.

Some Trump-supporting Bible-quoters, in the lead-up to January 6, amended their citations of the verse with one word: “the violent take it *back* by force.” *Make America Great Again* became synonymous with the flourishing of the kingdom of God.

Experts in political violence and democracy tell us when a surge in violence threatens the democratic order, as we saw on January 6, that violence is merely the tip of the iceberg. The relatively small group of people who actually commit violence is only the visible outcropping, one that indicates the existence of a much larger mass of people who participate in the discourse of violence, believe violence is necessary, imagine and cheer on that violence, and support the people who commit it.¹³ In short, if we stop our analysis of January 6 at the people who beat Capitol Police officers or trashed the seat of Congress, we miss the bigger picture of what transpired that day. For every person who assaulted the Capitol Building, thousands more were praying for and urging them on, either in person in the surrounding crowds or online at a distance. The rule of law involves the prosecution of those who

commit antidemocratic political violence. But if we don't acknowledge and deal with the iceberg, we are just waiting for another outcropping to surface.

This book is about the iceberg: the invisible mass of invective, violent ideation, and aggression that has taken hold among many, many American Christians in the Trump era and that is with us still. Since the mid-1990s, based on verses like Matthew 11:12, charismatic leaders have created an entire vernacular of spiritual violence: of Christian war campaigns against Satan, of literally demonizing their human opponents by accusing them of being possessed by evil spirits, and of advancing a belligerent theological orientation toward the rest of American culture.

Most of the time, these theologies of violence and aggression are so diffuse, so spiritual, so rhetorical, and so causally detached from actual violence that drawing a straight line from the Christian leaders using violent rhetoric to the people enacting violence becomes dreadfully difficult. But the Trump administration and the aftermath of the 2020 election were crystallizing events—a turbulent microcosm that mirrored our embedded forms of extremism back to us. What had been subtext became text. What had been innuendo became a riot. The forcible discourse of spiritual violence tipped over into actual violence before our very eyes.

Just as we have been able to determine who the political and practical ringleaders, schemers, and organizers of January 6 were, we need to recognize the religious leaders who helped push our politics to the precipice. Which leaders inspired masses of Christians to show up on January 6? What symbols did they innovate and theologies did they operationalize? What epistemic assumptions and ecstatic visions drove the principal theological architects of January 6 to do what they did?

When you seek out the underlying leaders and the theologies that spurred thousands of Christians to pursue the illegitimate reinstatement of Donald Trump, you inevitably come to the people mentored and the ideas propagated by a renegade evangelical seminary professor, C. Peter Wagner, the “intellectual godfather” of the NAR.¹⁴ Even though Wagner died in 2016, more than four years before the Capitol Riot, the unique group of leaders who amassed around him would create one of the major trajectories converging toward January 6 and become a profoundly aggravating force in America's polarized politics.

Yet before we meet Wagner and his disciples, we need to reckon with one of their most prominent allies: Paula White. This self-described “messed-up Mississippi girl” turned powerhouse preacher has helped to facilitate a massive reconfiguration of power in the religious right in the past decade. She gained a level of political influence during the Trump administration that was virtually unparalleled for any American religious figure in recent memory. Understanding her odyssey from obscurity to the halls

of power and the Independent Charismatic world that has shaped her will set the stage for the rest of our investigation. Indeed, when the definitive history of Christianity in twenty-first-century America is written, Paula White will be, for good or for ill, a central character in that story.