

The Spirit of 1690

In 2019, the *New York Times* launched “the 1619 Project.” Why “1619”? That year, 20 kidnapped Africans arrived off the coast of Port Comfort, in the English colony of Virginia. They were then sold into a lifetime of bondage. And so began the history of Black slavery in what would become the United States. In a series of podcasts, the leader of the project, journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones, traced the consequences of this moment up through the present day. Her claim that 1619 was as definitive a year as 1776 for the history of the country met with a mix of applause and outrage that broke along predictable party lines.¹

In October 2020, shortly before losing his bid for re-election, then President Trump assembled a “1776 Commission” that included no professional historians, but was led by executives at the conservative Hillsdale College as well as Charlie Kirk and other intellectuals, politicians, and pundits. The Commission issued its hastily written report on January 18, 2021, less than two weeks after the Capitol Insurrection and only two days before Joe Biden took office. The authors insisted that “the United States has a definite birthday”: not an unknown day in 1619, but “July 4, 1776.” The report listed “slavery” as a “challenge to America’s principles,” alongside “fascism” and “communism” and also “progressivism” and

“identity politics.” Its claims met with a similarly mixed reception, also along predictable party lines.²

Between these two dates falls another crucial milestone—not a founding, exactly, but an inflection point. For it was around 1690 that racism, apocalypticism, and nationalism first fused into a deep story. It’s important to emphasize that things could have turned out differently had some of the colonists acted differently. You could say that in 1690 we lost an alternative vision for life in the New World: one in which the natives and the colonists would live in concord or even in community; one in which the line between white and Black did not yet fully and irrevocably correspond to that between freedom and bondage; and one in which there was room, not only for non-Protestants but also for non-Christians. The death of that vision went hand in hand with the birth of a new vision: a social order dominated by white Protestant men and defined in opposition to “red savagery,” Black bondage, and Roman popery. Within that order, race, religion, and nationalism were to be aligned—by force, if necessary. That is the spirit of 1690: the spirit of white Christian nationalism.

The original alignment of race, religion, and nation was repeatedly rejiggered in the centuries that followed, though never radically transformed. The bounds of whiteness were expanded to make room for successive waves of European immigrants. Only for Protestants at first, but eventually for Catholics and (some) Jews, who, it should be emphasized, were *not* considered white at first.³ The borders of the nation expanded steadily westward to the Pacific and then beyond. The nation became an empire in which whites ruled and “races” multiplied: to “black” and “red” were added “brown” and “yellow.” But while the cast of the deep story changed a great deal, the script itself changed very little. In the Spirit of 1690, whiteness connotes “freedom” and “order,” but also “violence”: freedom in opposition to Black bondage; order against native “savagery,” and violence as the means of ensuring both.

Our vision is much closer to that of the 1619 Project than the 1776 Commission. But it also differs from both in important ways. Where the 1619 Project sees mostly continuity, we see much contingency. In 1619, a more inclusive and egalitarian society was still possible, if not probable. It was the decisions and actions of Puritan thinkers and leaders that throttled it. What's more, that possibility was choked off not only by the enslavement of kidnapped Africans, but also by warfare with native peoples—and their French Catholic allies. “Whiteness” was defined not only in opposition to “blackness” but also to “redness,” and not only in terms of color but also in terms of religion: Protestant vs. Catholic and Christian vs. “heathen.”⁴ The first colonists committed two “original sins,” not one. If we too often forget the first one—the violent expropriation of the indigenous peoples—it is partly because violence and disease left behind far fewer of their descendants to remind us. The Spirit of 1690 was to impose white control over non-white bodies, indigenous lands, and all political institutions.

As for the 1776 Commission, where it saw rupture, we see repetition. In 1776, a more inclusive and egalitarian society once again appeared possible, if only briefly. Some whites—and many non-whites—took the founding ideals of liberty and equality to their obvious and logical conclusion: abolition.⁵ But the price of manumission was deemed too high, and national unity was bought at the expense of racial equality. That same pattern would repeat itself for a third time with the end of Reconstruction and a fourth time after the civil rights movement. Four times the dream of racial equality was sacrificed on the altar of (white) national unity. The question is whether history will repeat itself a fifth time in our own era. This much should be clear by now: realizing the dream of a multiracial democracy means abandoning the spirit of 1690 and the story—the “deep story”—that has sustained it for over three centuries. Instead

we must find a new story—a better story—about what America can and should be. In what follows, we will also single out some white Christians who tried to write such a story.

Before we begin, a brief note on “periodization.” Historians usually break up their narratives into successive eras or “periods.” One way of periodizing American history is around “founding” events (Puritans and Revolution) and “refounding” moments (Civil War and Civil Rights). Another is around “great wars” (Revolution, Civil War, World War II). But the development of the deep story does not quite follow these rhythms. Its development was more often driven by America’s oft-forgotten little wars (e.g., King Philipp’s, French and Indian, Mexican-American, Spanish-American, and Cold War) and by population shifts (westward expansion, mass immigration) and changing religious demographics (Catholic, Jewish, and non-Christian immigration). In what follows, we focus on a different series of crucial moments, roughly speaking: 1689, 1763, 1889, and 1989. It was around 1690, following King Philipp’s War, that the deep story first crystallized in the form of white Protestant chosenness. By the close of the French and Indian Wars in 1763, it had taken the form of Anglo Protestantism. By the end of the Spanish-American War in 1898, it had become WASP Imperialism. A century later, at the close of the Cold War, it had evolved into White Judaeo-Christian Americanism. How this evolution occurred and what these labels mean is the subject to which we now turn.

SAINTS AND DEMONS, PURITANS AND “INDIANS”

Who were the Puritans? It is a tricky question, a bit like defining “evangelical” today. The term encompassed a wide range of theological positions and various forms of religious community. Writing

in 1581, the English Puritan Perceval Wilburn cheekily described his religious compatriots as “the hotter sort of Protestants”: those who burned with religious zeal—and were also sometimes *literally* burned for it. Many historians have made this definition their own. More recently, journalist James Sleeper has ambivalently described the Puritan refugees who fled to a New England as “America’s first Very Serious People,” people who were serious about their moral principles.⁶ And also serious about enforcing them (including on non-Puritans).

If there was one thing the Puritans took very seriously though, it was their Bible. They didn’t just read the Bible. In a way, they read themselves *into* the Bible. For the Puritans understood themselves as—literally—a “New Israel,” and they slowly came to see New England as their “Promised Land.” Not all at once or from the outset. The first Puritan settlers still saw New England as a “howling wilderness.” England was their real home, their Promised Land, and they expected to return there one day. Like the God-fearing Israelites whom the Babylonians had cast out of Jerusalem, so, too, would they one day return to their homeland and their capital city and be restored to honor and glory. But that day would never come. Puritans—and Catholics—did rule premodern England, but only briefly. England would ultimately remain in the hands of the cooler sort of Protestants, the very sorts the Puritans desperately sought to escape. If the Puritans were to have a Promised Land, it would have to be New England.⁷

Few played a more prominent role in crafting this vision of New England as a New Israel than the Mathers, Cotton (1663–1728) and his father and grandfather, Increase and Richard Mather. Today, Cotton is most often remembered for his role in the Salem witch trials of 1692. But he was also one of the first chroniclers of New England—and of its wars with the natives. For the secular reader,

Mather's chronicle seems a curious hodgepodge of military and church history. There are long descriptions of battles between the New England colonists and various native tribes, but also entire chapters on Baptist and Quaker dissenters. For Mather, though, war and dissent were inextricably linked by covenant and providence. In his view, the Puritans had made a covenant with God to defend the true religion. The presence of dissenters was a breach of this covenant. God punished the Puritans for that breach by sending the natives to wage war on them. In Mather's words, "since this degeneracy has obtained so much among us, the wrath of heaven has raised up against us a succession of other adversaries and calamities." If heretics were the cause of God's wrath, then the natives were his chosen instrument. As with the biblical Israelites of the Old Testament, so with his new Chosen People in their new Promised Land of New England.⁸

Mather was not the first to view the Puritans' wars with the native tribes through a providential lens. But he was arguably the first to view it through an apocalyptic lens as well. Viewed through the first lens, the Puritans' wars with the natives were a—literal—repeat of the Israelites' wars with the Canaanites; viewed through the second lens, they were also part of the apocalyptic battle between the forces of Christ and the Anti-Christ. Either way, the message was the same: the Puritans' wars were holy wars, the native lands were to be Puritan lands, and the expulsion and extermination of the natives was a righteous sacrifice to an angry God.⁹

It must be stressed that Mather's was not the only vision. Where he preached elimination, other Puritans pursued conversion, though by that they meant conversion not just to a creed or a church but to an entire way of life. On this view, the dominant view, to be a Christian was to live like an English person (i.e., to settle in one place, to work the land, to own personal property, to

practice monogamy, to wear trousers, and to accept one's providential station in life). To this end, Puritan missionaries such as John Eliot established several dozen settlements of "praying Indians" in Massachusetts. Like Mather, Eliot saw the native tribes through biblical lenses. But his lenses were ground a little differently than Mather's. Eliot saw the native tribes as the lost tribes of Israel. And he hoped that by gathering them together, he was helping to bring about Christ's return. But Eliot's dream was shattered by the brutal conflict generally known as "King Philip's War." So were many of the praying villages he helped establish. That war, in which 30 to 40% of the English population was killed, and native tribes suffered even more devastating losses, challenged the Puritans' understanding of themselves and their understanding of the "New World."¹⁰

It's important to stress that killing or converting Indians were not the only possibilities entertained by the Puritans. There was also a third: coexistence. The first to theorize and practice it was Roger Williams (1603–1683). Though a Puritan, Williams quickly fell out with his brethren and was banished from Boston. He then established the Providence Colony in what is now Rhode Island. Williams developed close ties with the native tribes. He sometimes preached the gospel to his native acquaintances. But he did not attempt to change their way of life. For him, being a Christian did not require living like an Englishman. Under Williams' leadership, the Providence Colony became a haven for dissent and a beacon of toleration—and also an early prototype of what a multiracial and multicultural democracy might look like.

It's important to understand why. It was not because Williams himself was "ecumenical" or "respectful." He was not. But Williams's views differed from Mather's in at least three key respects. First, he drew a sharp line between Christianity and morality: the one did not

imply the other. In his observation, the morality of the natives was often superior to that of the Puritans. Second, he drew a sharp line between religious and civil authority, much sharper even than the Puritans, not because he worried about the church corrupting the state but rather the reverse. Third, because he believed that freedom of conscience was absolute, and that it implied freedom of expression. He rejected the collective authority of the Puritan clergy and, even more, their efforts to silence dissent. In sum, Williams believed that people of the most varied backgrounds could still form a civil society together, so long as they separated religion and morality and church and state and did not force anyone's conscience or silence anyone's speech. This he called "meer civility."¹¹ Sadly, the path of "meer civility" was the road less traveled in Williams's day. Killing and converting would become the dominant poles of "Indian policy" in the centuries that followed.

The deep story was coming together. But it was not yet complete. Mather had woven together the Promised Land and the End Times in his narrative of New England's history up through King Philip's War. His version of white Christian nationalism might be called "white Puritan chosen-ness." But the racist strand of the deep story was still underdeveloped in his writing. One does find proto-racist ideas in Mather. He often described the natives in dehumanizing and demonizing language, as animals or devil-worshippers. Further, he sometimes claimed that divine salvation was a matter of biological descent; chosen-ness ("election") was passed down from parents to children via "loins" and flowed in the "blood." But a thicker, tauter version of the racist thread was being spun together further south, in the colony of Virginia. Its original purpose was to bind the Black "bondsmen" and make their enslavement heritable. All too often, the master weavers were Christian clergy.

SLAVE AND FREE IN BLACK AND WHITE

In the premodern era, most Christian theologians agreed that there were two types of people who could be justifiably enslaved: “heathens” and “captives” of war. “Indians” and “Negroes” were not the only persons in the southern colonies who fit these categories. Irish Catholics did too. England’s colonization of North America and its conquest of Ireland overlapped in time and influenced each other. For example, English commentators often described the Catholic Irish as “heathens” and sometimes even as “Indians” in order to justify the seizure of Irish property and establishment of English “plantations” on the “Emerald Isle.” Nor was the legal status of Irish-Catholic indentured servants in the American colonies altogether different from that of enslaved Blacks and Natives, at least not at first. That would change. For a new racial order was emerging in the New World, an order in which “white” meant “free,” “black” meant “slave,” and “red” meant neither bound nor free but “savage.”¹²

The reasons for this shift from various forms of nonracial bondage to a system of Black slavery were largely economic: the turn to labor-intensive cash crops such as tobacco and sugar; the shortage of white labor in the colonies; the constant flight of enslaved natives who knew the land better than their captors; and, finally, the flood of kidnapped Africans onto the Atlantic slave market that followed the foundation of the British Royal Africa Company and the Dutch West India Company.¹³

But the shift to Black slavery created a problem for English theologians, a problem that grew more acute as some enslaved Blacks converted to Christianity and enslavement was passed on from mother to child. On what grounds could Christians enslave other Christians—Christians, moreover, who were not captives of

war? The old theological justifications provided no clear answer. New justifications had to be invented. What was needed, in a phrase, was a racist theology.

The need was soon met. Writing in 1681, the Anglican priest Morgan Godwyn listed the two most common forms of racist theology. The first was “pre-Adamism,” the belief that there had been two separate creations resulting in two separate species: pre-Adamites and Adamites. Only the latter were humans with souls. The second was Noah’s Curse: because Ham had seen Noah drunk and naked in his tent, God placed a mark on Ham’s son Canaan and condemned his offspring to perpetual servitude.¹⁴

By 1700, proslavery theologians had woven these and other stories together into what historian David Whitford calls the “Curse Matrix.” It had three elements: (1) “black skin is the result of God’s curse”; (2) so is Africans’ supposed “hypersexuality and libidinousness”; and (3) slavery was actually a boon to Africans because it exposed them to Christianity and (white) civilization.¹⁵

Of course, if theology delivered some of the most influential arguments for Black enslavement, it also provided some of the most powerful counterarguments against it. Take one contemporary of Godwyn’s, Judge Samuel Sewall. In 1700, Sewall published “The Selling of Joseph,” generally regarded as the first antislavery tract written in the English colonies. In it, Sewall sought to refute several common theological justifications of slavery. He argued that “all Men are Sons of Adam, are Co-heirs, and have equal right unto Liberty.” And he argued that the Curse of Ham did not apply to Africans. The first argument was the more consequential: all humans are of one blood and therefore entitled to equal rights.¹⁶ It was an argument that would be echoed by later generations of Christian abolitionists and by civil rights activists up through the present day, when they insist that all human beings are made in the “image of God.”

In colonial Virginia though, the Curse of Ham won out over the Image of God. As so often happens, the theology followed the money. Like Williams's, Sewall's was the path less traveled. But it marked out the road that Christian abolitionists and civil rights activists would follow in the future.

By 1700, then, the three narrative threads that comprise white Christian nationalism's deep story had each been spun together in the British colonies, two in the North, and one in the South. But they were only loosely nationalistic and not at all "American." What fused them together into a single thread? And what made that thread "American"? Put simply, what transformed white Puritan chosenness into white Protestant Americanism? The answer once again is the heat of war, or, rather a series of wars. Not wars with the natives, though, so much as wars with and between France and England.

EMPIRE AND WAR IN THE MAKING OF WHITE PROTESTANT AMERICA

Americans are accustomed to thinking of the Revolution as a battle for freedom from England. But this frame is too narrow. If we widen our view a bit, the Revolution appears in a very different light, as part of much wider and longer struggle between the rulers and nations of Europe for control over the land and riches of "the New World." The theater of war encompassed most of North America and Western Europe. The leading roles in the conflict are taken by the colonial powers of Europe—England, of course, but also France, Spain, and the Netherlands. Their North American colonists really only play bit parts in the contest until quite late in the game. The various native tribes were often more important—and arguably more powerful—than the colonists.¹⁷ This centuries-long drama opens

with the arrival of the Spanish in the 15th century and closes when Mexico and then Canada gain their independence during the mid-19th century.¹⁸

Now let's zoom back in a bit on the key context for our story—the story of white Christian nationalism in what becomes the United States. The key actors in this part of the action are England and France and their colonies, the native tribes that inhabited the Eastern Seaboard and the Great Lakes region, and enslaved Africans living in the Southeast. The key events are two wars or rather series of wars: (1) the French and Indian Wars (1688–1763) and (2) the American Revolution (1775–1783) and the War of 1812.¹⁹ The stakes are land and resources, power and money. But what interests us here is not so much the outcome of the struggle—fateful as that was, especially for the native peoples—as its effects on the colonists and their culture.

The two sets of wars affected the English colonies very differently. The first phase brought them much closer to the “Motherland.” At perhaps no other time did the colonists feel themselves more “British” than during their struggle against the Catholic French and their native allies during the French and Indian Wars (1688–1763). The second phase pushed them far apart. At perhaps no other time did England's (former) colonists feel less “British” than after the Revolution and during the War of 1812. In sum, white Christian nationalism became “British” in phase one and then “American” in phase two.²⁰ It was the heat of war that really fused religion, race, and nation together into white Christian nationalism.

It was also during this period, that the holy trinity of white Christian nationalism—that peculiar nexus of freedom, order, and violence—really first crystallized.²¹ To be “British” during the 18th century was also to be “Protestant” and “free,” and therefore to be anti-French.²² For Protestants were not free in France; they were

a persecuted minority. And English Catholics were (supposedly) against freedom; they were viewed as a dangerous minority bent on tyranny. So, to be free was to be Protestant and British.²³

But the “freedom” of Protestant Englishmen was only possible if the racial order was maintained; and that often required the exercise of violence against racial others. On the frontier, that meant natives who controlled land and other resources, such as furs. In the colonies, that meant enslaved Blacks, who were both a source and a form of wealth to white slavers. The threat to “white freedom” appeared all the greater, insofar as both groups were sometime allies of England’s imperial rivals.²⁴ These threats to the racial order—and to private wealth—had to be met with brutal violence; and they were.

The French and Indian Wars were like a crucible in which whiteness was forged. What began as a fight among European powers for control of land and resources was transformed as colonists of English descent allied with others of European descent to defend “white” rule. Out of this crucible came a new racial hierarchy, painted in white, red, and Black: white on top, Black on the bottom, and red in between.²⁵

The French and Indian Wars generated a British and Protestant version of white Christian nationalism in the colonies; the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812 helped to “Americanize” it. Until the Revolution, most colonists identified as “British” or “English”; the term “American” usually referred to the native peoples. After the Revolution, the former colonists struggled to articulate what was “American” about the United States. They often answered that question by appropriating native culture. What supposedly made white American men different from their former British countrymen was that they also had a tinge of “red” and a bit of the “savage” in them. The first symbol of this white American

masculinity was not the “cowboy” but the “scout,” the frontiersman who ventured into the wild, learned the ways of the “Indian,” and absorbed a bit of “savagery” in the process.²⁶ The figure of the scout, in other words, was the first heroic embodiment of the individualistic ethos that is at the heart of white Christian nationalism and its holy trinity of freedom, order, and violence.

In the Southern states, this association between white freedom and male violence was stronger still. For there, freedom and violence were linked, not only by the threat of native war bands on a distant frontier, but also by fears of Black insurrection on local plantations. This is one reason why so many of the revolutionaries defined “freedom,” not only in opposition to “tyranny,” but to “slavery” as well.²⁷ To be sure, they understood “slavery” broadly; it referred to any form of dependency or subservience to the will of another. Chattel slavery was just its most extreme form. But for some, especially in the Southern colonies, Black slavery was also the bedrock foundation of a certain kind of white freedom. Relieved of the burdens of physical labor, rich Southern planters such as Washington and Jefferson were free to dabble in science and engage in politics. Even in times of peace, preserving their personal liberty meant depriving others of theirs, by violent means when necessary.

White fear was even greater during times of war, when some enslaved Blacks sided with America’s enemies in the hope of winning their own freedom. Much has been made of the small number of free Blacks who joined the “patriot cause” during the Revolution. But there were many more enslaved Blacks who fled their American enslavers and joined the British forces in hopes of securing their freedom.²⁸

This was also true in the War of 1812. Indeed, the British marine units that stormed the US Capitol included many Blacks soldiers who had fled slavery. Seen in this context, the third stanza of the

Star Spangled Banner (composed in 1814) appears in a much more sinister light.

Their blood has wash'd out their foul footstep's pollution.
 No refuge could save the hireling and slave
 From the terror of flight or the gloom of the grave,
 And the star-spangled banner in triumph doth wave
 O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave.

In other words, the blood of Black British soldiers slain by white American “heroes” washed away the “pollution” left by their Black bodies on the sacred grounds of the Capitol. White freedom was bought with Black blood. The holy trinity of white Christian nationalism is written right into the national anthem of the United States.

It goes without saying that most Black Americans saw through this mythology. But so did some white Christians. For some revolutionaries, whiteness, Protestantism, American-ness, freedom, and violence defined “the Spirit of 1776.” But not for all. For early Quaker abolitionists, such as Anthony Benezet and Warner Mifflin, Black enslavement was not only a “National Sin” but a violation of the Golden Rule—the most basic tenet of Christian morality. There could be no such thing as “Christian Slavery” nor a “Christian slaveholder”; both were contradictions in terms.

Of course, Christians weren't alone in this. For some Enlightenment rationalists such as Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Paine, the institution of slavery violated the ideals of equality and freedom for which the Revolution had been waged. For still others, such as the Christian physician and social reformer Benjamin Rush, there was no contradiction between Christianity and democracy; each reinforced the other—and each opposed slavery. What all these men had in common, besides their hatred of slavery, was their

roots in Pennsylvania. What Roger Williams's Providence Colony had been to the 17th century, William Penn's Colony was to the 18th: an early experiment in multiracial, multireligious democracy. That popular histories of the Revolution focus so much attention on New England and Virginia is a form of collective amnesia about what might have been, of the elusive possibility of a multiracial republic that appeared (again and for a second time) during and after the Revolution.²⁹

Political realists might respond that this experiment was doomed to failure from the start, and that the price of the Constitution was the perpetuation of slavery. Historian Gary Nash disputes this conclusion. That this did not happen, he concludes, was due, not just to the intransigence of Southern slave owners, but to the cowardice of Northern politicians—and the avarice of Northern slave traders. In Nash's reckoning, the Founders' compromise on slavery was not just immoral; it was unnecessary and self-interested.³⁰

By the end of the War of 1812, white Christian nationalism had become both Protestant and American. And it had developed a particular understanding of freedom, order, and violence—grounded in a specific kind of individualism. As the United States expanded outward and then westward, white Christian nationalism would be distilled still further, into what we call “WASP imperialism.” Once again, the crucial catalyst was war, not for North America, this time, but for Cuba.

THE CLOSING OF THE FRONTIER AND THE MAKING OF WHITE CHRISTIAN EMPIRE

If the 1690s were a formative decade for white Christian nationalism—and its holy trinity of freedom, order, and violence—then

the 1890s were a transformative one. There were two catalysts for this transformation: the closing of the American frontier and the beginning of the American Empire. The result of the transformation was threefold: changed understandings of whiteness, divine providence, and national identity. The spirit of 1690 was reborn as WASP Imperialism.

The spirit of 1690 adapted easily enough to life on the 19th-century frontier. It encountered many familiar faces there: the “red” faces of the native tribes that were being driven steadily and violently westward and corralled into so-called reservations by century’s end and the Black faces of enslaved persons who were involuntarily marched or transported westward and onto new plantations from Kentucky to Texas. That white men used violence to “protect” their freedom (and to seize others’ property) was nothing new.

The spirit of 1690 also encountered new faces on the frontier: the “brown” faces of Mexican citizens who suddenly found themselves on American territory as Texas, California, and large swaths of the Southwest were forcibly incorporated into the United States following the Mexican-American War (1846–1848); and also the “yellow” faces of Chinese and Japanese immigrants to the Pacific coast beginning with the California gold rush of 1848. Here, too, irregular militias and vigilante justice were critical means of moving the frontier westward and establishing white freedom. Then, as before, racial conflict and white Christian nationalism evolved in tandem with violent white men starring as the hero-protagonists who enforced the racial order.³¹

To the spirit of 1690 the new faces looked an awful lot like the old ones. Dehumanizing racial and religious stereotypes first developed to justify war against the natives and the enslavement of Africans were quickly adapted to new “others.” Asian immigrants were derided as an inferior race of “heathens” unfit for citizenship in

a “Christian republic.” Asian women were seen as hypersexualized temptresses, unsuited for marriage or motherhood. Mexicans were classified as a “mongrel race” whose Catholic faith had inured them to despotism. There was perhaps some hope for Mexican women but only if they were paired with white Protestant men. Brown and yellow actors could be cast in roles once reserved for red and Black actors with only minor adjustments to the script.³²

But other developments in this era would eventually force a major rewrite of the deep story. The first was the Civil War. In the Reconstruction era (1865–1877), when Union troops occupied the defeated Confederacy, emancipated Blacks could vote freely, and abolitionist Republicans controlled Congress, a truly radical rewrite of the American story again seemed possible, a re-envisioning of the United States as a multiracial democracy. But that vision was rejected by Northern Democrats and then buried by rehabilitated Confederates. These self-styled Southern “Redeemers” developed a whitewashed account of the Civil War, the myth of the “Lost Cause.” In this narrative, the Civil War became a “War of Northern Aggression” in which soldiers of the Confederacy fought to defend “states’ rights,” and Reconstruction was a period of “Negro misrule” abetted by greedy “carpetbaggers” from the North. It was white Southern women—Daughters of the Confederacy—who seared the Lost Cause myth into the collective memory of the Old Confederacy. They did so through public rituals, such as Memorial Day; public monuments to Confederate heroes; and, last but not least, by teaching the Lost Cause myth to generations of Southern children.³³

The Lost Cause myth introduced a new scriptural wrinkle into white Christian nationalism. It foretold that the Old South would “rise again” one day, like the crucified Christ, its suffering transfigured into glory. This, too, was a form of white Christian

nationalism derived from Christian scripture, but one based on themes of crucifixion and redemption rather than Promised Lands or End Times. It is crucial to understanding contemporary claims of Christian victimhood and vengeance among white Christian nationalists.³⁴

The second key development was theological. After the Revolution, Northern Protestant theologians began subtly redefining the End Times story. For Cotton Mather, recall, the Second Coming of Christ and his thousand-year reign on Earth would be preceded by a cosmic war between good and evil—the Battle of Armageddon. Because the End Times *preceded* Christ’s millennial return, the technical term for Mather’s interpretation is “premillennial apocalypticism.” But the dominant view of the white Protestant establishment during the 19th century was actually “post-millennial”: Christ would return only *after* the Kingdom of God had been established on Earth for a full thousand years by means of gradual social and moral reform led by the Christian churches. Northern theologians such as Horace Greeley (1811–1872) and Josiah Strong (1847–1916) then combined this new postmillennial view of the End Times with the old Promised Land story. The result was the doctrine of “Manifest Destiny.” White Americans were still a chosen people. But their task was not just to build a “city on a hill” in New England but to “civilize” an entire continent. Their westward movement was part of a divine plan. The great pre-Revolutionary revivalist and theologian, Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) had already noted that Christ’s gospel had always moved from East to West—from the Middle East to Western Europe on to North America. That it should continue its triumphant march all the way to the shores of the Pacific was nothing short of providential.³⁵

The third development was “racial”: a changed understanding of whiteness that was more “scientific” and also more “shaded.” In

the aftermath of the French and Indian Wars, the Bible was the main basis on which the various “races” were classified and racial inequality explained; “white” was a catch-call category opposed to “black” and then “red.” By the late 19th century, accounts of race often appealed to “science” as well.³⁶ Some “race scientists” claimed that the various races had evolved separately; others argued that racial differences expressed themselves in physical characteristics that could be precisely measured; still others placed more emphasis on cultural differences. So-called germ theorists made vague, scientific-sounding claims about the racial, physical, and cultural superiority of “Aryans,” “Nordics,” or “White Anglo-Saxon Protestants” who were the supposed bearers of an invisible “germ” of civilization, a people destined to conquer and rule the world. On this account, widely embraced by America’s Protestant establishment, whites were still superior to non-whites, but now some whites were whiter than others. Meanwhile, in the South, a new term was invented for whites who commingled and intermarried with non-whites: “white trash.” This new, hierarchical theory of whiteness was especially attractive to native-born and middle-class white Americans during the second half of the 19th century because it explained why they were superior to the newly arriving Catholic and Jewish immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe—and also why they and their fellow Anglo-Saxons were meant to conquer the world.³⁷

Which brings us back, at last, to the topic of empire. The word was not really foreign to the vocabulary of 19th-century Americans. Thomas Jefferson had famously envisioned an “empire of liberty” comprising the United States and Canada, for example.³⁸ Nor was the law of empire foreign to the Constitution Jefferson had helped author. It distinguished between sovereign “states” where constitutional rights applied and subject “territories” where they did not, such as the Northwest Territory established in 1795 and the first

Indian Territory established in 1803. In principle, the residents of a territory could petition for statehood upon meeting certain requirements. In practice, the approval of such requests hinged on the religious and racial composition of the population. In 1849, for example, the Mormon leader Brigham Young proposed to establish a vast western state named “Deseret.” At that time, Mormons were widely regarded as heretics, and Congress summarily rejected the proposal. It likewise rejected the initial petitions for statehood from Arizona and New Mexico, essentially on the grounds that their populations were insufficiently white. As for the Indian Territory established by the Creek confederation, it was dissolved by Andrew Jackson, despite having all the trappings of republicanism and “civilization,” including a written constitution, an elected president, and several indigenous-language newspapers. Only Anglo Protestants were “real Americans.” Everyone else was a second-class citizen—at best.³⁹

Ironically, the American Empire began as an attempt to end the Spanish Empire. A pattern was thereby set: America’s crusades for democracy led to the extension of its empire. The Spanish-American War began in 1898 in much the same way that subsequent American wars would: as an armed intervention into a civil war with the stated aim of “liberating” an oppressed people from tyranny. In this case, the war was in Cuba. From there, it moved on to the Philippines, Guam, and Puerto Rico. It was the beginning of an empire.

It was war that had solidified the Spirit of 1690; and it was war that transformed it into the Spirit of 1898. Or, rather, it was the series of overseas wars that began that year—and that continues into the present day. The new Spirit differed from the Old in at least three important ways. First, taking a cue from the South’s Lost Cause myth, the new Spirit portrayed America’s imperial adventurism as a form of noble self-sacrifice. Like Christ—and the Protestant theologians

of the era did not hesitate for a moment to draw that comparison—America was acting out of compassion, altruism, and benevolence, never vengefulness, self-interest, or greed. America's motives were always and ever innocent, perfectly so. Even when it employed the most savage violence, it was doing God's will. There was a secular justification, too, and this is the second change. When America employs violence, this argument goes, it does so to spread freedom to others. On the frontier and on the plantation, violence had been used to establish and secure white freedom. Now, military violence would be used to spread the blessings of freedom throughout the world. All of America's imperial wars were and are wars of liberation, by definition. Once again, we see how white Christian nationalism is entangled with the holy trinity of racial order, Christian freedom, and male violence.

The high mass of white Christian nationalism was celebrated only periodically. It, too, culminated in the ritual sacrifice of human blood, in this case, the blood of those charged with violating the racial order: non-whites thought to have transgressed the color line, often Black men accused of sexual improprieties toward white women.⁴⁰ Whether they were actually guilty of the charges leveled at them was immaterial. The point was to draw whites together and unite them through their moral complicity in grisly acts of extrajudicial murder. The ritualized violence at the lynching tree was, of course, just the most extreme form of the racialized rituals that reinforced the color line in the everyday life of the Jim Crow South. And not only there. Outside the South, Jewish, Chinese, and Mexican Americans were the victims of mob violence as well.⁴¹

But what, some might ask, did these gruesome rituals have to do with Christianity? A great deal. Christian clergy sometimes participated in lynchings or even gave them their blessings. And the racial terrorists of the KKK were not just anti-Black racists. They

purported to defend the supremacy of white Protestants against Catholics and Jews as well. Of course, there were also politer, more genteel forms of white Christian nationalism, found behind the closed parlor doors of the so-called White Citizen's Councils. But they were no less racist for all their gentility.⁴²

And who nurtured the new Spirit of 1898? Looking back from the present, one might suppose that it was conservative, evangelical Protestants. In fact, it was more often liberal, mainline Protestants, people who prided themselves on being open to new ideas, such as Darwinism or biblical criticism. Many of the sharpest critics of the new Spirit were theological conservatives who held fast to Creationism and literalism and resisted free-market capitalism and American militarism: people such as three-time Democratic presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan.⁴³ That would change, as conservative evangelicals took control over the deep story.

THE SPIRIT OF 1989: (WHITE) JUDEO-CHRISTIAN NATION

For over two centuries, from 1689 to 1898, white Christian nationalism was championed by the "Protestant Establishment." By 1989 the torch had been passed on to conservative white evangelicals. Over the course of the previous century, many white liberal Protestants had become secular progressives—and also liberal Democrats. Meanwhile, most white evangelicals had become conservative Republicans, and also pro-market and pro-military.

Why the radical reversal?

Contemporary conservatives often make *Roe v. Wade* the turning point in the story. In this account, the Religious Right emerged out of opposition to abortion. But the facts don't really fit

that story particularly well. Conservative white Protestants did not become pro-life until the late 1970s. Before that, Protestants were divided on the question and abortion was seen as a “Catholic” issue. The rightward turn of white evangelicals actually began a quarter-century earlier with another Supreme Court case: *Brown v. Board of Education*. The political architects of the Religious Right—Paul Weyrich and Richard Viguerie—were quite clear on this point. Opposition to racial integration was the real catalyst for the rise of the Religious Right. Race was the wedge that split off white evangelicals from the Democratic Party. “Family values” was just the political cement Republican strategists used to bind white evangelicals to their old arch-enemies: conservative Catholics.⁴⁴

How did this influence white Christian nationalism?

Conservative white evangelicals made three important changes to the white Christian nationalist script. First, they reverted to the premillennialist version of the End Times story.⁴⁵ The horrors of the World Wars and the invention of atomic weapons had made the fiery battle scenes of Revelation seem more real than metaphorical. And predictions of nuclear holocaust were also promises of deliverance and vengeance: true believers could view the nuclear Armageddon secure in the knowledge that it heralded Jesus’s return. It should be little surprise that by the middle 2000s, one of the strongest predictors that white Americans affirm Christian nationalist ideology is their confidence that literal Rapture and Armageddon events will take place, in which the faithful are caught up to be with Jesus followed by a war of God’s faithful against “the Beast” of Revelation (see Figure 2.1).

Second, they gradually shifted from white supremacism to “color-blindness.” At first, the shift was purely tactical. Instead of shouting the n-word, conservative white leaders now tut-tutted about “welfare queens.”⁴⁶ The “Curse of Cain” was reborn as the

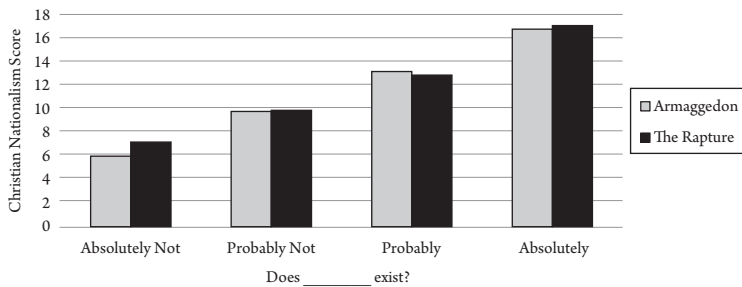


Figure 2.1. Predicted adherence to Christian nationalism across belief in a literal Rapture and Armageddon.

Note: Ordinary least squares regression models predicting Christian nationalism scale. Controls include political party identification, political conservatism, religious tradition, religiosity, beliefs about the Bible, age, gender, educational attainment, income, and region of the country.

Source: 2007 Baylor Religion Survey

“Culture of Poverty.” Later, it became more “personal.” “Racial reconciliation” was the watchword, as if Blacks needed to offer an apology for their own oppression. But the key was that race should not be “politicized.” The only way to address racism, in this view, was to “change hearts,” or better yet, to stop talking about race altogether. Changing laws was not necessary. Paying reparations was out of the question. Racism was a personal problem, not a social one.⁴⁷ Social justice was derided as “un-Christian.” Conservative color-blindness was and remains today, in effect, a form of anti-anti-racism, a way of deflecting demands for racial justice.

The third and final shift was the focus on sexual sin. Of course, the focus on sex was not entirely new; it went back to the New England Puritans and beyond. After all, they invented the “scarlet letter!” What was new was the near exclusive focus on sex as the most dangerous form of sin. The Puritans had been equally concerned with other transgressions, such as drunkenness,

covetousness, idleness, and immodest dress. The Methodists and Baptists of the 19th century also worried about “upright” living and personal “holiness.” For conservative white evangelicals on the other hand, “Christian morality” was increasingly equated with sexual morality.⁴⁸

The net result of these three shifts was a hyper-aggressive foreign policy, a laissez-faire economic policy, and attempts to legislate sexual morality.

The individualist component of white Christian nationalism was also changing in the decades after World War II, becoming color-blind “Christian libertarianism.” Secular progressives are often puzzled by this pairing. It seems like a marriage of convenience. Or maybe just an oxymoron. After all, one says “thou shalt not,” while the other says leave me alone. One says, “blessed are the poor,” but the other says “greed is good.” Aren’t Christianity and capitalism fundamentally at odds? Not for the Christian libertarian.

THE OTHER SPIRIT OF 1989: (WHITE) CHRISTIAN LIBERTARIANISM

In *One Nation Under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America*, Princeton historian Kevin Kruse recounts the career of the California minister Kevin Fifield and his pro-business organization, Spiritual Mobilization.⁴⁹ Fifield hobnobbed with rich businessmen. He also lived like one, sporting tailored suits and driving fast cars. In many ways, he was the prototype of the prosperity gospel preacher of our own era—minus the designer sneakers. At the same time, Fifield happily supported President Eisenhower’s efforts to conjure up a Christian—and capitalist—America to fight the “Godless communism” of the Soviet

Union. And he did so with the support of conservative Christian businessmen like J. Howard Pew.

Conservative white businessmen and theologians were not the only ones in the kitchen cooking up Christian libertarianism. Southern white racists also had a finger in the pot. For example, Strom Thurmond, the long-serving Senator from South Carolina, began his career as a progressive Democrat and ended it as a conservative Republican.⁵⁰ The civil rights movement was the key inflection point. For Thurmond, choosing between white supremacy and economic equality was not difficult. He intuited—correctly—that many other whites felt the same way, and not just in the South. Thurmond’s “Southern Strategy” was not just a strategy for bringing the Old Confederacy into the Republican fold, however. It was also a means of exporting small-town Southern politics to Northern whites hostile to racial equality, and to white suburban Southerners too polite to use the “n-word.”⁵¹ The means to this end was the libertarian language of “free markets” and “private property” in tandem with racial dog-whistles like “welfare dependency” and “crime waves.” For many white Americans, libertarian rhetoric was really just a polite, “color-blind” way of being racist.

Christian libertarianism did not really become a major force in American politics until the Reagan Era. Here, too, the crucial turning point was civil rights. Evangelical resistance to desegregation could no longer be couched in explicitly racist terms. Libertarianism provided a politer language. Consider the case of Jerry Falwell. He is best known as the cofounder of the “Moral Majority,” an evangelical advocacy organization at the forefront of the “culture wars.”⁵² But he was also an aggressive champion of “free markets.” Like Strom Thurmond, he embraced libertarian rhetoric as a means of rejecting demands for racial equality without resorting to racialized

rhetoric. Falwell's evolution from segregationist to libertarian was a common one.

Insofar as there was a "systematic theology" that integrated Christian libertarianism and Christian nationalism, it was the work of the "Christian Reconstructionists" or "theonomists," a small but influential movement centered around Rousas John Rushdoony, an ultraconservative Presbyterian pastor who settled in Orange County.⁵³ He argued that the American government and society had to be "reconstructed" according to "Biblical law."

Rushdoony was also a Christian libertarian, in the general sense that he was strongly pro-capitalist and vehemently anti-communist. But it was really his son-in-law, Gary North, who attempted to synthesize neoclassical economics and Calvinist theology into some sort of coherent whole.⁵⁴ This was not as difficult as it may sound, at least within the particular tradition of Dutch Calvinism to which North and his father-in-law both adhered.⁵⁵ Like all good Calvinists, North took a rather dim view of human goodness that comported well with neoclassical assumptions about the inevitability of self-interested behavior. Because humans are inherently sinful, the best way to organize an economy is to channel their self-interest via the market. Free markets are also the best way to punish vice and reward virtue, to assure that everyone gets their just desserts. Government regulation is not only inefficient, on this view, it is also un-Christian. Following the Dutch Calvinist, Abraham Kuyper, North also believed that God had divided human life into various "spheres," which were independent of one another, but all of which were under divine sovereignty. This meant that the state must not "intervene" in the economy. As for federal taxation for purposes of economic redistribution, North regarded it as a form of "theft" that violated the Seventh Commandment. North eventually moved from

California to Texas, where he became a close adviser of libertarian congressman and Republican presidential candidate Ron Paul.

If Gary North was the greatest systematizer of Christian libertarianism, then Dave Ramsey is arguably its greatest popularizer.⁵⁶ Ramsey lives in a multimillion-dollar home outside Nashville and manages a staff of nearly 700 people at his gleaming headquarters nearby. He has a self-syndicated radio show that airs weekdays on over 300 radio stations across the country. He has preached his gospel at thousands of churches around the country. His immense wealth notwithstanding, Ramsey's gospel is not the prosperity gospel; it is an austerity gospel. In his 20s, Ramsey was a free-spending real estate mogul with a healthy appetite for high living. Until he went bankrupt, that is. For him, the conversion to austerity and Christianity went hand in hand. Not surprisingly, Ramsey's politics lean libertarian—Christian libertarian. Like North, he decries taxes as “theft” and derides “Social Insecurity.”⁵⁷ It goes without saying that he is “pro-gun” and “pro-police.” If North's is the egghead's version of Christian libertarianism, then Ramsey's is the mass-market one.

CONCLUSION: BACK TO THE BULL HORN?

In some ways, white Christian nationalism has changed a great deal over the last three-plus centuries. The boundaries of whiteness expanded to include not just Englishmen but anyone of European descent. The meaning of “Christian” was loosened to include Catholics and Mormons and even hyphenated to include (some “good”) Jews. Hubristic talk of American “chosen-ness” was toned down to the seemingly more modest claim of “American exceptionalism.” Gory talk of “blood sacrifice” was watered down into the euphemistic

rhetoric of “ultimate sacrifice.” The racial and religious undertones were still there, of course, for those with the ears to hear them. But it was no longer acceptable to just say them out loud. White Christian nationalism seemed kinder and gentler. Though not of course to those on the receiving end.

Its individualist strand underwent a similar evolution during this period. The market replaced the frontier as the arena of “freedom.”⁵⁸ The maintenance of order at home and abroad was transferred from lynch mobs and posses to the police and the uniformed military. Christian morality was shrunk down to fit into the box of “personal accountability.” Scouts, slave drivers, and cowboys were out; soldiers, entrepreneurs, and sports heroes were in. This despite, or rather because of, growing economic inequality, mass incarceration of Black men, and the growth of the Religious Right.

By the early aughts, American politics seemed to have settled into a predictable equilibrium. The country was closely divided and elections were ritual tugs-of-war between two evenly matched teams fighting over marginal tax rates and Social Security spending. The team leaders were generally polite to one another. Al Gore conceded a close and controversial election to George W. Bush. John McCain memorably defended Barack Obama against conspiracist claims that he was a “secret Muslim.” George and Laura Bush welcomed the first Black president and first lady to the White House following McCain’s defeat.

But the surface calm proved deceptive. Deeper down, the tectonic plates of American history were grinding against one another. The pressure and the heat were building. The first sign of trouble was the election of 2016. The next was the violent eruption on January 6, 2021. It turned out that white Christian nationalism had not weakened or disappeared. On the contrary, it was gaining strength and changing shape. Yet again.