

CHAPTER 8

The Rise of the Spirit Warriors

Julie Green is a “prophet.” She claims to be in direct communication with God, and she regularly offers prophecies

through her YouTube channel. In one video, she foresees that one day soon all those political leaders who continue to

deny that the 2020 election was stolen will be executed for their crimes against the nation. In the 2022 election cycle, she spoke at rallies on behalf of Doug Mastriano, the coup supporter who had converted his calls to overturn the 2020 election into the Republican nomination for governor of Pennsylvania. A leader in a charismatic religious network and movement that I will describe in this chapter, she belongs to a group of political actors who often refer to themselves as spiritual warriors—or, as I will call them, by way of slapping an admittedly simplistic phrase on a complicated reality, “spirit warriors.”

Green was not the only spirit warrior on the hustings in the 2022 campaign. Over in Arizona, Sean Feucht hit the

stumps for gubernatorial candidate Kari Lake. An antivaccine, pro-Trump, guitar-strumming preacher, Feucht stages “praise concerts” on public lands through his ministry Let Us Worship. His other ministry, Burn 24-7, features a “Spiritual Oversight” board that includes prominent neocharismatic spirit warriors like Cindy Jacobs and Lou Engle. In 2022, Feucht also lent support to Doug Lamborn, a Republican candidate from Colorado, and Lauren Boebert, the

congresswoman from Colorado. In one instance, he and his bandmates showed up at the Capitol Rotunda with Boebert,

accompanying her as her prayers echoed through the building. Feucht also rang in the New Year on December 31, 2021, with Ron and Casey DeSantis. At a concert in support of the Florida governor, he prayed over the couple, saying, “I thank

you for the gift they are to America.”

Lance Wallnau is arguably an even more successful spirit warrior. He has campaigned for Mastriano in Pennsylvania, prayed over Marjorie Taylor Greene before a cheering crowd in Atlanta, and amassed a robust following on social media for his prophecies, which tend to involve political predictions, sales pitches, or a combination of the two. A Texas-based businessman-cum-conspiracist and evangelist, Wallnau was little known outside of charismatic telehuckstering circles until he hitched his wagon to the Trump train. In *God’s Chaos Candidate: Donald J. Trump and the American Unraveling* (2016), Wallnau revealed that Trump was “anointed” by God. “I believe the 45th president is meant to be an Isaiah 45

Cyrus” who will “restore the crumbling walls that separate us from cultural collapse,” he added. (Cyrus was the Babylonian king who, despite not being Jewish, encouraged the return of Jewish people to the former Kingdom of Judah in the Southern Levant.) In 2020, Wallnau backed Trump again—as did God, by his reckoning. Apparently eager to turn

his fiery predictions into cold hard cash, Wallnau set up a business venture selling \$45 coins with the image of Trump on one side and King Cyrus on the other. He claimed the coins could be used by their holders as a “point of contact” with

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God in their prayers for Trump’s reelection.

Wallnau peddles a rotating selection of theologically inflected conspiracy theories. For example, he has alleged that

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environmentalists and anti-fossil-fuel activists are controlled by demons. He has also identified Tucker Carlson, the racist

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former Fox TV host, as a “secular prophet” who is “used by God” and is “more powerful than a lot of preachers.” In Wallnau’s world, clerical positions and religious affiliations appear to matter less in establishing an individual’s religious status than having the right politics. During the 2022 elections Wallnau was a busy man, speaking at churches around the country, making frequent appearances on popular Christian nationalist podcasts, such as Truth & Liberty Coalition, on whose board he sits, and keeping his two million followers apprised of the latest prophesies. By October 2023 his conspiracism had taken an especially sinister turn; he suggested it was Soros-backed anti-Netanyahu protesters who

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distracted the Israeli army, allowing Hamas to breach the Gaza Strip barrier and murder civilians.

Over in California, the politically connected pastor Jim Garlow offers what appears to be a similar flavor of spiritual warfare. His ministry, Well Versed, cultivates government leaders, and he has called the state’s Democratic governor, Gavin Newsom, “the chief of the baby-killers.” He invited “intercession prayer leader” Maryal Boumann to his show *World Prayer Network*, which is posted on YouTube, to discuss California’s “diabolical” Proposition 1, the referendum

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that added the right to contraception and abortion to the state’s constitution.

Speaking at a gathering of City Elders, a national network of “spiritual, political and business leaders” that seek to “establish righteousness in governance” and “draft civil laws which reflect and uphold Biblical values and Judeo-ecclesia ethics,” Wallnau attributed a “loss of trust” to “big tech, big pharma,” “media, much of business,” “the ‘woke’ church”

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and “the top ranks of (woke) military,” among others, and vowed to transform the culture through “biblical truth.” He added, “This is a strategy that is executable ... this is doable and it is so strategic in its nature that county by county ... across America this can be done. I like to run with people that have strategy that makes sense. That is doable. And that’s

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why I’m here.”

Today, the language of the spirit warriors appears to be everywhere on the right. On Eric Metaxas’s right-wing radio

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show, repeat guest Roger Stone told him that a “demonic portal” had opened above the Biden White House. Pentecostal pastor Mark Burns has riled up his fan base at political gatherings by saying, “I’ve come here to declare war on every

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demonic, demon-possessed Democrat that comes from the gates of hell.” Sean Feucht, the roving guitarist-preacher, has

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cast Democratic initiatives as “schemes of the devil in the political realm.” At the Family Research Council’s 2023 conference, the first speaker, Jonathan Cahn, said America is presently possessed by a trio of ancient and evil spirits that

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are turning the country into a pagan nation because it has turned away from the Lord. And Chad Connelly of Faith Wins,

who appeared on the 2017 membership list of the United States Coalition of Apostolic Leaders (USCAL), appeared, in advance of the 2024 presidential election, to still be touring churches on the Lindseys' dime, bringing a message of political battle against the demonic forces of the left.

Donald Trump's defenders cast his 34 felony convictions and 57 outstanding felony charges (as of this writing) as part of a "spiritual battle." Trump encouraged these views by characterizing his 2024 presidential campaign as part of a "Final Battle," telling the National Religious Broadcasters convention that his opponents are part of a "wicked" system intent on attacking Christianity, and by praising QAnon, which promotes Christian nationalist and dominionist tropes, along with

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spirit warrior ideas and conspiracies.

Political leaders in the Republican Party have taken note of the spirit warriors—and have rejoiced in the harvest of potential voters. GOP leaders have imitated the new crusaders, and some have even joined their ranks. Florida governor Ron DeSantis is rarely described as charismatic, yet he certainly knows when and how to parrot the language of the spirit warriors. In a speech at Hillsdale College, the nondenominational Christian institution that is a major player in the religious right's war on public education, he paraphrased a passage from Ephesians that serves as a guidepost and virtue signal for this new style of religion: "Put on the full armor of God. Stand firm against the Left's schemes," he said,

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substituting "the Left" where the Bible refers to "the devil." He repeated the same trope at the 2021 Road to Majority conference, an influential annual gathering of conservative activists, strategists, and politicians sponsored by Ralph

Reed's Faith and Freedom Coalition, and his campaign produced an ad that said he was sent by God to "take the arrows."

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Other politicians at the conference drew on the same variety of religious expression. "We are soldiers in God's army engaged in spiritual warfare for our country," Texas congressman Louis Gohmert declared at the 2022 Road to Majority

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conference in Nashville, Tennessee. "We can fight or fail." In North Carolina, Lieutenant Governor Mark Robinson is also on record with his view that his political opponents (meaning Democrats) are "demonic" and full of "the spirit of the anti-Christ." He thinks LGBT people are "filth" and has said that Jewish bankers represent one of the "four horsemen of

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the apocalypse."

The combination of nationalism, conspiracism, and demon obsession received a kind of canonical expression in the Jericho March held in Washington, D.C., on the night of January 5, 2021, in anticipation of the next day's attack on the

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Capitol. At that rally, the pastor Robert Weaver stated that God wanted Americans to march around "the spiritual walls

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of this country." Rev. Kevin Jessip, also speaking at the event, said, "This battle cry is a Christian call to all Christian

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men ... as we prepare for a strategic gathering of men in this hour to dispel the Kingdom of Darkness." Father Greg Bramlage, who pastored at Catholic parishes and incorporated "Healing/Deliverance" into his ministry before founding his organization, Missionaries of the New Evangelization, conducted an exorcism onstage. Telling the crowd, "We are in a spiritual battle, this cannot be solved by human means," he prayed that "no demonic bondage, door, entity, portal, astral

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projection, or disembodied spirit may enter this space." Bishop Leon Benjamin, senior pastor of the New Life Harvest Church in Richmond, Virginia, said, "The demons we kill now, our children will not have to fight these devils. These are

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our devils, and we will kill them now." On the following morning, of course, many who prayed took up arms—or at

least flags, along with barricades and other objects they could use as blunt instruments. They assaulted police officers, and they ran free through the Capitol with banners proclaiming that “Jesus Saves.” One group brought a large wooden cross, another a flag with a cross, and one man added a Confederate flag for good measure.

In October 2023, the spirit warriors notched another stunning victory when one of their own, in a manner of speaking, became Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives. Congressman Mike Johnson of Louisiana indicated on his first day as Speaker that God himself had a hand in his ascension to a position second in line to the presidency. “God is the one who raises up those in authority,” he told the House ²⁹when, after three weeks of infighting, the Republican caucus at last

settled on him as their fifth candidate for the position. It’s abundantly clear that Johnson fully subscribes to the Christian nation myth. The pseudohistorian and propagandist David Barton, says Johnson, had “such a profound influence on me, ³⁰

and my work, and my life, and everything I do.”

Johnson has long been associated with the Southern Baptist Convention but is fluent in the language of the spirit warriors. On a broadcast of the World Prayer Network with Jim Garlow, Johnson called America “dark and depraved.” “Is God going to allow our nation to enter a time of judgment for our collective sins?” he asked. “Or is he going to give us ³¹

one more chance to restore the foundations and return to Him?”

Johnson ran a podcast with his wife, Kelly, for several years, and on it the pair insist that the “biblical worldview” is ³²

the only valid one, and that the separation of church and state is a myth. Speaking at an antiabortion gathering, Johnson ³³

told the crowd that America can be saved only if it returns to “eighteenth-century values.” The biblical worldview, to judge from the support Mike Johnson has provided to the Creation Museum, appears to include the doctrine that Earth was created in its present form six thousand years ago. It also involves rejecting action to deal with the climate crisis, which, according to Johnson, “defies the created order of how this is all supposed to work.” God, he explains, ³⁴

commanded us “to take dominion of the earth. You subdue it ... We’re supposed to eat those animals.” The biblical worldview also apparently supports spreading lies about election results to advance a coup. Johnson played a lead role in filing spurious court cases intended to derail Biden’s victory in the 2020 presidential election and then, on the evening of January 6, 2021, after the Capitol had been ransacked, led 147 of his fellow congressional Republicans in voting against ³⁵

the certification of the election results.

In brief, the spirit warriors have arrived—and they have almost conquered. But where did they come from? The story that many Americans like to tell themselves is that America’s God landed around 1620 near Plymouth Rock, ³⁶

and He hasn’t changed much since. Of course, it isn’t true. American religion has undergone massive transformations in ³⁷

its long history, from the Great Awakening to the rise of the social gospel. Such changes happen in this country episodically. We are undergoing another such transformation right now—arguably the least well reported yet most politically problematic one yet.

The aspect of the change in the religious landscape that generally attracts the most media attention is the rise of the ³⁸

“nones,” that is, individuals who do not identify with any religion. But this apparent move toward secularism can be misinterpreted. The rise of the nones has occurred alongside a countervailing trend among those who do identify with religion. The nones, moreover, cannot simply be identified with secularism; an appreciable fraction of them reject

religious labels not because they lack religion but because they do not see their own sense of religion reflected in those labels.

Alongside the nones and the “somes,” as it were, a hotter and more reactionary style of religion is surging in America.

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It cuts across traditional denominational divides. And it tracks some global shifts in religion, shifts in which America is

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a follower as well as a leader.

The new religious sensibility in America is not all or even mainly about a fixed set of doctrines or denominations. While it finds its most comfortable home in Pentecostal and charismatic forms of faith, which include multiple networks and movements such as the New Apostolic Reformation, not everyone who adheres to this mode of religion is affiliated with those groups, conforms to those doctrines, or identifies with those labels. It is rather a certain style of religion: an attitude, a set of dispositions, patterns, behaviors, and a shared language. For simplicity’s sake, I will refer to it generally as the religion of the spirit warriors.

Although not everyone caught up in the fervor subscribes to the same theology or comes down on the same side of the political spectrum, Pentecostals and other spirit warriors are often targeted for political exploitation, and they are exploited overwhelmingly on behalf of the extreme right. Through doctrines about global conspiracies, the supposed right of Christians to assume control over all aspects of social and political life, and the political mobilization of sexual and gender anxieties, this new religious movement thrives in times of high political and economic instability, and it has become a significant factor in the rise of the antidemocratic reaction in the United States. Perhaps not surprisingly, its origins in America go back to an earlier time of great instability. A good place to start would be that warm summer night in April 1906 when a thirty-five-year-old traveling preacher named William Seymour and seven of his friends sat down to

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talk with God.

They sat patiently, waiting for His divine presence, when suddenly they all fell to the floor “as though hit by a bolt of

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lightning.” They writhed on the ground and began speaking in tongues. Seymour, by all accounts a gentle and contemplative character whose parents had been emancipated from slavery with the end of the Civil War, found in that

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experience the key to a new kind of religion in America. The Azusa Street Revival, named after the street in Los

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Angeles where the event took place, was unabashedly multiracial and gender-inclusive from the start. Not surprisingly, representatives of the mainline denominations considered it wildly unorthodox, and believed the scandal was all the worse for the interracial aspect of the festivities. An article in the *Los Angeles Times* sneered at the religious presumptions of the

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revival and its “disgraceful intermingling of the races.” By 1915 the Azusa Street Revival had lost much of its momentum, yet in retrospect it looks more like the first act in the extraordinary rise of a new branch of Christianity called

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Pentecostalism, which in turn contributed to subsequent waves of charismatic and neocharismatic expression.

“Pentecostalism represents a rare feat in American religion—a tradition that is growing,” according to Ryan Burge, assistant professor of political science at Eastern Illinois University. “The Assemblies of God, which stands as the largest Pentecostal denomination, has seen a 50 percent increase in membership over the last three decades, while every other prominent Protestant denomination has seen their membership decline precipitously.”

In socioeconomic terms, Pentecostalism in America appears to fare best among lower-income groups and the non-college-educated. According to a 2016 survey by Pew, only 9 percent of members of the Church of God in Christ and 10 percent of members of the Assemblies of God, both Pentecostal congregations, had family incomes above \$100,000

per year. That compares with 35 percent of Episcopalians and 19 percent of Catholics. The statistics on educational attainment are similarly skewed, with college and graduate degrees more heavily concentrated among the old mainline
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denominations.

Pentecostalism also remains an outlier in the American religious landscape when it comes to race. An old saw has it
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that America is never so divided by race as on Sunday mornings. Starting with the Azusa Street Revival, however, that rule has not really applied to Pentecostals. To be sure, some Pentecostal communities remain segregated, but many others
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are notable for their racial diversity. According to Burge, 44 percent of Pentecostals in America are Black and Latino. Pentecostals are also, not coincidentally, notable for their political diversity. Many Black Pentecostal traditions in
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America are strongly associated with the pursuit of racial and economic justice and social ethics. Diversity, however, is not the same thing as general tendency; some of the largest and fastest-growing Pentecostal and neocharismatic
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communities lean decidedly to the right.

“Religious identity is one of the biggest divides among Latinos,” notes Robert P. Jones, founder and CEO of the Public Religion Research Institute, pointing to the 2020 AP/Votecast exit polls showing that Latino Catholics voted 67 percent for Biden while Latino Protestants (including Pentecostals) voted 58 percent for Trump. “Most Latino Protestants identify as evangelical, and in the American context, that shared religious identity with white evangelicals has brought
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along with it a Republican partisan identity and set of political attitudes and priorities.”

But Pentecostalism is not merely an American phenomenon. And Pentecostal celebrity evangelists now play an outsize role in the religious life of large parts of the globe. Argentina native and now California-based Alberto Mottesi, who describes himself as “an evangelist who prophesies but I’m not a prophet” and has been referred to as “the Billy Graham of Latin America” and “crusader to the world,” tours extensively in Central and South America and has a robust
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global radio and TV presence. According to *Charisma* magazine, Mottesi works to “transfer the anointing of an evangelist to young people and women in Latin America, a region that is in the midst of an unprecedented *avivamiento*
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spiritual—or ‘spiritual revival.’ ”

Mottesi has hailed the region’s shift away from Roman Catholicism. “For the past forty years I’ve seen the Latin American people depressed, abused, downcast from idolatry, witchcraft, and political corruption,” he said. Today, “eighty percent of Christians in Latin America are Pentecostals or charismatic. This is the era of the Holy Spirit in Latin
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America.”

Many commentators on the religious right still remain focused on the “white evangelical” label. But those who report on the movement at the ground level have noted the shift. “The Pentecostal and charismatic movement is one of the biggest surges in the history of global and American Christianity,” says Frederick Clarkson, senior research analyst at Political Research Associates, who has been reporting on the religious right for four decades. In the most expansive definition, Pentecostalism now claims as many as six hundred million adherents worldwide, or more than a quarter of all
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Christians. It has a huge presence in Brazil, where it played a decisive role in the rise of the populist demagogue Jair

Bolsonaro; in Hungary, where it helped elevate the explicitly illiberal Viktor Orbán; and in Guatemala, where Pentecostal evangelicalism was exported from the United States to counter the influence of the Second Vatican Council

and the rise of liberation theology, with its apparently dangerous theories about social justice and the common good. It is surging among migrant workers in Gulf states, where some Pentecostal networks provide key services to the

disempowered, and also in Nigeria, where human trafficking organizations have infiltrated certain Pentecostal networks.

From the perspective of some global leaders of the movement, the United States looks like an aging and corrupt capital. It's now the kind of place to which missionaries must go, rather than the place from whence they come. The safest generalization about the theology of Pentecostalism is that it is "a religion of the here and now" and "not of the forever beyond," as author Elle Hardy, author of *Beyond Belief: How Pentecostal Christianity Is Taking Over the World*

(Hurst, 2021), told me. A key attraction is not some heavenly reward in the next life but greater material blessings in this one. Many varieties of Pentecostalism blend well with America's Prosperity Gospel, along with elements of the New Age.

The other promise that Pentecostalism and its charismatic offshoots make is that its followers will become heroes in an epic struggle between good and evil, to be played out very much in the here and now. Demons are real, "spiritual warfare" is the way to contain them, and adherents are called to serve in the battle. To engage in the battle, naturally, one must understand and speak the language of the spirits. Among many of these denominations, networks, and groupings there is a great interest in speaking in tongues.

Among some expressions of Pentecostalism, the emphasis is on overcoming adversity and gaining mastery over one's own "demons" in order to live a healthier, happier, and holier life. But in the reactionary, politicized U.S. spirit warrior circles, the conflict is also taking place on the public stage. You can read about it—or more likely catch it on TV—every day in the headlines. Hence the "apostles" and "prophets" and their allies who claim to be engaged in "spiritual warfare"

on behalf of anointed political leaders and political parties (mostly Trump and the Republican Party).

The paradox of a demon-haunted world, of course, is that the demons are always in charge, for the moment, even if the angels are assuredly destined for ultimate victory. The Reform Prayer Network, for example, which I describe in my previous book *The Power Worshipers* (Bloomsbury, 2020), aims to "reverse the curse over America" by "igniting a holy

reformation in every sphere of society." When the televangelist Paula White, a longtime friend of Donald Trump who served as an adviser to the first administration's Faith and Opportunity Initiative, famously said "We command all satanic pregnancies to miscarry right now" from "satanic wombs," she likewise meant to suggest that the demons appear to be

winning—for the moment.

My one attempt to speak in tongues ended in embarrassment. It all started back in 2010, when I was researching my book about the religious right's war on public education. I found myself spending some time at the Life Challenge Church, a moderately sized charismatic church in Odessa, Texas. At the time, Life Challenge was busing "prayer warriors" to public school board meetings to oppose comprehensive health education classes and support the introduction of an explicitly sectarian Bible program. Churchgoers were by and large working class, the racially integrated services were warm and welcoming, and the worship music was magnificent.

Life Challenge is where I began to grasp the appeal of this style of religion. On several occasions I fell into conversation with a modestly dressed congregant who arrived with her three children. She had the disheveled appearance of a new mother just struggling to keep it together. She told me she held down a part-time job and received little help

from the children's father. As services began, the children were whisked from her side and taken to the kids' area in another section of the church. The worship band launched into a contemporary gospel track, and she swayed in prayer, eyes closed; as they picked up the pace, she danced with joyful abandon.

Her eldest child, she told me, was thriving at the local public school thanks to the services for kids with learning challenges. She planned for the younger two to attend the neighborhood public school, too. But the attitude toward public education at Life Challenge was decidedly oppositional. I heard several speakers and members of the congregation refer to public schools as "government schools." Parents were encouraged to send their kids to Christian schools or homeschool if they could afford to do so. The feeling about education in general was ambivalent at best. During one sermon the lead pastor Daniel Smesler, a tall, stern white man, said, "We do support you going to college ... but don't let it make you so

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analytic that it ruins your faith. Get your degree, and then get victory over your degree."

Over the week that I spent at Life Challenge, I was also befriended by one of the staffers' wives, an elegant woman of Native American ancestry who favored long skirts and whose hair fell like a curtain to the back of her knees. She and her friends were determined to get me to speak in tongues. I could see that it meant a lot to them, and so I really did try to get into the right frame of mind. During portions of the service, they instructed me to repeat, over and over, "Hallelujah" and "I love you." They assured me that repeating these phrases would "loosen your tongue." Truly I gave it my all, but the Holy Spirit never overtook me, and the reporter in me couldn't go along with the idea of faking it. The ladies seemed disappointed and a bit irritated. I left wondering if maybe they did expect me to fake it, just a little, at least until I broke through.

Toward the end of my time at Life Challenge, my elegant friend recommended I attend a church in my then hometown. She wrote down the name of the church and the letters NAR beside it, underlined twice. This was my first introduction to the New Apostolic Reformation (NAR).

André Gagné, a theology professor at Concordia University in Canada and the author of *American Evangelicals for*

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Trump: Dominion, Spiritual Warfare, and the End Times (Routledge, 2023), has studied the NAR for some number of years. "The movement," he tells me, is "dominion in and of itself—bringing about God's Kingdom in these networks." It

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took off with the late C. Peter Wagner, an author and missionary who spent a decade and a half in Bolivia. Wagner no doubt absorbed some of his ideas in his extended encounters with the spiritual practices of other religions. In 1971, he became a professor of church growth at Fuller Theological Seminary's School of World Missions in Pasadena, California,

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and authored many books, including the seminal *Dominion! How Kingdom Action Can Change the World*. Wagner was instrumental in popularizing the vision of modern-day apostles and prophets, "spiritual warfare" with demons, and

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"territorial spirits." Above all, he gave voice to the ideology of Seven Mountains Dominionism—though Wagner gave credit to Lance Wallnau for some of his ideas.

The basic proposal behind the Seven Mountains ideology is that there are seven critical peaks of modern culture—government, business, media, education, entertainment and arts, family, and religion—and that Christians of a

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certain reactionary variety should rightfully dominate all of them. The ideology reportedly got its start in 1975, when Loren Cunningham, a missionary leader, and Bill Bright, the founder of Campus Crusade for Christ (now known as "Cru"), allegedly heard messages from God urging them to invade the "seven spheres" of society. According to Wagner, the responsibility of Christians to take over "whatever molder of culture or subdivision God has placed them in" is really

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a matter of "taking dominion back from Satan."

At the heart of the NAR is a political theology of power, and it spreads well beyond NAR networks. Victory Channel, owned by the televangelist Kenneth Copeland, consistently pushes far-right and pro-Trump disinformation, including the

lie that the 2020 election was stolen. Gene Bailey, a pastor at Eagle Mountain Church in Colorado and the host of *Flashpoint*, which airs on the Victory Channel network, often appears at megachurches alongside Andrew Wommack and Lance Wallnau, where he leads the congregations in a prayer called the Watchman Decree:

Whereas: we have been given legal power from heaven and now exercise our authority ...

Whereas: because of our covenant with God, we are equipped and delegated by Him to destroy every attempted advance of the enemy ...

The prayer shifts to a series of declarations:

We declare that we stand against wokeness, the occult, and every evil attempt against our nation ...

We declare that we take back and permanently control positions of influence and leadership in each of the Seven Mountains.

It continues in this vein for some time. Judicial rulings will be biblical, the one true God will be honored, and “

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AMERICA SHALL BE SAVED!”

Not surprisingly, given its quest for dominion, the NAR sometimes behaves more like a political party than a church—a revolutionary political party that imagines itself destined not just to win elections but to rule the earth one day in the name of God. As Frederick Clarkson puts it, “Visions of global religious and political dominion have moved to the center of their religious identity and animate their activities. Increasingly this broad movement, led by the New Apostolic Reformation, has become an integral part of authoritarian politics around the world and is deeply infused in American politics at all levels.”

The NAR is not just in some sense a political party, but a political party that guards its own identity as a kind of political secret. Unlike more traditional religious orders, the NAR seems reluctant to admit to its own existence. It does not have a readily accessible centralized website, nor does it advertise its system of hierarchy. In fact, the NAR does have a hierarchy, which goes by the name of the Fivefold Ministry, with apostles at the top, prophets one step down, then

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evangelists, pastors, and teachers. It also has affiliated congregations, like Life Challenge in Odessa, Texas, and its sister church in my hometown, among many others. But you won’t find them listed in any convenient public-facing guidebook. What you’ll get from NAR affiliates is something like the note my friend at Life Challenge gave to me—a couple of lines, underscored, to let you know that this or that person or place is the real deal.

“Quantifying the membership of networks within the NAR is difficult, as it operates as relational networks rather than a denomination,” explains André Gagné. “This creates a level of opacity within the NAR. The networks within the NAR function similarly to enterprises, with members embedded in various societal spheres, such as the Seven Mountains of culture.” Lance Wallnau, Jim Garlow, Julie Green, and Cindy Jacobs are all the subject of reports that connect them with this movement, and if you listen to their sermons and the podcasts in which they participate, it’s not hard to discern the

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features and language of the NAR’s theology of power. But you won’t hear about the connection from them.

When I reached out by email to Julie Green, I received a response from “Julie’s assistant,” who perhaps protested too much. “Katherine,” she wrote, “I have never heard of the New Apostolic Reformation. Is it an organization with members? Or just a title that has been conferred by the media on those who are preaching & teaching about what God is doing in this nation? Since we are not sure what you are referring to, I apologize, but I can’t confirm anything for you.”

“While the term *New Apostolic Reformation* has stood the test of time for more than a quarter of a century, some don’t like it, mostly because others in the movement have been harshly criticized,” says Clarkson. He points, by way of example, to a 2023 conference of the U.S. Coalition of Apostolic Leaders (USCAL), the U.S. arm of the International Coalition of Apostolic Leaders (ICAL). The event was “an attempt to distance the movement from its widely accepted name,” he reports. But “while much of the summit sought to define what they are (and what they are not) in the face of criticism and controversy, the Dominionist agenda of the movement remains unchanged.”

To be clear, not all spirit warriors are explicitly affiliated with New Apostolic Reformation networks. Some are associated

with other groups, and some appear to have switched affiliations and allegiances enough times to count as freelancers. I think of Leigh Valentine as one of them.

I came across Valentine in person at the 2023 Road to Majority conference, an annual gathering of Christian nationalist activists and strategists. As speaker after speaker proclaimed the attack on “wokeness,” I briefly noticed the impeccably groomed woman seated behind me. With blond hair styled in lush waves and what appeared to be a Chanel suit in creamy shades, she epitomized a certain type of female Trump superfan. I couldn’t tell if I’d spotted her on social media before, or if she just had the look of a woman I’d imagine attending one of Trump’s black-tie parties at Mar-a-Lago.

Leigh Valentine is in fact a member of Women for Trump, and she has spoken from the podium in at least one Trump rally. Her social media accounts are well stocked with photos of herself alongside major figures from Trump world—Paula White, Kari Lake, Mark Meadows, Roger Stone, and MyPillow conspiracy monger Mike Lindell. Like many other aligned spirit warrior leaders, she claims to have foreseen the Trump experience long before anyone knew it would be a thing. “God had given me a dream back in the ’80s and showed me that [Trump] would run and that he would win. A literal dream from heaven,” Valentine said in 2018 on the *Faith & Freedom* TV program. “If you don’t like the president, well, there’s a lot of other countries you can go to. Just get out. This is the time to get out because the Trump

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train is rolling.”

Valentine’s story properly begins in the 1980s, around the time she says she had that dream. A former Miss Missouri USA who had been forced to give up on pageant competitions after a brutal car accident, she developed close friendships with the leaders of a North Carolina sect called the Word of Faith Fellowship, which had affiliated churches in Ghana,

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Brazil, and elsewhere. According to a February 1995 exposé in the TV show *Inside Edition*, as well as articles in the

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Associated Press, *People* magazine, and the *Washington Post*, Word of Faith Fellowship practiced something called “demon-blasting,” or forming a circle around people, including children and babies, who are accused of demon possession and shouting at them for hours.

At times the shouting turned into physical beatings, with reports eventually coming out about broken ribs, punched noses, and sexual abuse. “It wasn’t enough to yell and scream at the devils. You literally had to beat the devils out of

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people,” said Rick Cooper, a U.S. Navy veteran who belonged to the church for over twenty years. The group was the subject of several investigations by North Carolina state authorities; several members were charged and sentenced for criminal activities. According to state officials, however, some allegations of child abuse were hampered by the victims’

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reluctance to speak out. (A portion of the Word of Faith website, titled “Response to Media Lies,” includes video testimony from those who are presumably current members of the church; they dismiss the allegations as “absurdities”

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and attest to the “example of godly living” of Word of Faith church leaders.)

Valentine’s next move was to divorce her first husband, the evangelist Robert Valentine. Somewhere along the line she met Rev. Robert Tilton, a wealthy older televangelist and religious entrepreneur who was close to the Word of Faith leaders, and whose own church, Word of Faith Outreach Center Church, was based in Dallas. His television show,

Success-N-Life, was running on over two hundred stations nationwide and taking in \$80 million per year from its viewers.

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An early master of telemarketing, Tilton employed hundreds of “prayer warriors” to answer his toll-free hotlines and

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collect callers’ data, which he then used for mass mailings that generated still more cash. It all came to an end with

multiple lawsuits from disgruntled donors amid allegations of racketeering and fraud. (None of the plaintiffs appear to have prevailed, in part due to the religious nature of Tilton's organization and First Amendment prohibition on the court's consideration of "the truth or falsity of religious convictions and the power of prayer, matters obviously beyond the

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cognizance of the state.")

Tilton had a wife of twenty-five years, but four months after his divorce he married Valentine. That marriage lasted only twenty-one months, but it was long enough, in Valentine's eyes, that Tilton's church and telemarketing assets should

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count as communal property. She lost that claim in court. Forced to make her own way, Valentine reinvented herself as

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a cosmetics entrepreneur and "international evangelist." There followed a bankruptcy in which it was revealed that she had continued to support the Word of Faith Fellowship in North Carolina with regular contributions—well after the

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allegations of child abuse were made known. She appears to remain in contact with Word of Faith founder Jane Whaley,

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and stood beside her at a Trump rally in 2016. At the same time, she appears to have become involved in a Holocaust

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museum for children.

At the 2023 Road to Majority conference, shortly after taking my seat, I felt a tap on my shoulder. Turning around, I saw it was the Chanel-suited blond lady seated behind me, and I took note of her name tag. Valentine looked in fine form, and it was easy to sense that the Trump train had indeed come for her like a dream come true. Her conversational opener was to ask, "Are you Jewish?"

The vibe seemed oppositional, but I smiled in response. "Yes," I replied. "Are you?"

"No," she said, as though surprised by the question, but then added, "Well, I have some Jewish blood."

Then she asked, angrily, "Are you a journalist?"

The spirit warriors believe that demons appear in a variety of forms and with all sorts of agendas. As perhaps befits a group that comes predominantly (but not exclusively) from lower income groups with lower educational attainment, the warriors often seem to see in the demons the face of "the expert." Evil takes the form of the scientist who tells you that vaccines save lives, the people who base their moral code on the principles of rationalism and empathy rather than biblical truth, or the professor who advocates a devious theory. "Satan has taken over the academic mountain, he's taking over government and the FBI, he's taking over Hollywood and Netflix," said Lance Wallnau at a July 2023 event at the Faith

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Life Church in Ohio.

But the demons that matter most, and most reliably feature in the redemption narratives of spirit warriors, are those that have to do with sexuality and perceived sexual deviance. Anxieties about the gender order, and a particular concern with "the homosexual agenda" and "transgender ideology," are the rocket fuel that sends them hurling against the (perceived) establishment. These are the demons that get people out of the pews and ready to fight the decadent, liberal, secular enemy.

When I attended the Values Voters Summit (now called Pray, Vote, Stand) in Washington, D.C., in 2016, I was surprised to discover that nearly every speaker had bathrooms on their mind. One presenter after another announced some variation of "We've got to talk about transgender bathrooms!" The focus on the bathroom issue seemed to suggest that movement leadership had discovered a new and potentially unifying theme that would resonate with their base. And, as the polling suggested, once it could be linked to concerns about the maintenance and integrity of all-female spaces, such as prisons and shelters, or the principles of fairness in competitive sports and access to college sports scholarship money, the issue had potential as a kind of political kryptonite, with appeal well outside the conservative bubble.

Setting aside the merits of such concerns, a full-throated defense of women's sports was quite a paradox for leaders of

the Christian nationalist movement, who wished to evince concern for the rights of women on one hand while eviscerating them with the other. Journalist Amy Littlefield recorded the impact at the 2023 Pray Vote Stand conference in a piece filed for the *Nation*. “That devotion to gender essentialism has always animated the Christian right; what’s new is the intensity with which it is now focused on trans people. And as that focus intensifies, the rhetoric itself is darkening. I lost

count of the number of times speakers mentioned ‘demons’ or the ‘demonic agenda’ they believe is at work on the Left.”
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For some conservatives, issues related to transgender identity get to the essence of their religion—but for a great many others it matters even more in the political context. In July 2023, speaking at a gathering of the Her Voice Movement, a religious organization affiliated with “apostle” Lou Engle that aims to evangelize women and mobilize them for political causes on the right, Lance Wallnau said, “When it comes down to a movement in America, not everybody’s going to become a Christian to fight transgenderism. But everybody will fight transgenderism if we frame it as an attack against

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your children. So the battle of public persuasion is on us.”

In theory, the spirits could play on either side of the political aisle. In reality, its anti-intellectualism and belief in the reality of demons makes this style of religion a more natural fit with the right than the left in America today. In the United States, according to Ryan Burge, conservative Pentecostals have proven to be among the most reliable—and reliably extreme—supporters of Christian nationalism. In his Survey of Church Going Americans in March 2022, Burge developed a system for scoring individuals on a scale of Christian nationalism. The analysis rests on responses to key questions, such as whether the federal government should declare the United States to be a Christian nation and whether the federal government should enforce the separation of church and state. According to his conclusions, Pentecostals

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score highest on measures of Christian nationalism.

Some of the best evidence for the impact of the spirit warrior religion comes from data on voters identified as Hispanic

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or Latino. Between 2016 and 2020, Trump picked up eight points among Latino voters (the numbers vary somewhat by

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source); in the 2018 midterm elections, Republicans cut into the Democratic advantage by an estimated ten points. The state-level results should concern Democratic strategists even more. In heavily Latino Miami-Dade County—the largest county in what was once considered the biggest swing state in the nation—President Joe Biden won only 53 percent of the vote in 2020, compared with the 63 percent share won by Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton in 2016 and

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the 62 percent share won by former president Barack Obama in 2012. In 2024, Harris won even fewer.

Although the survey data linking these major shifts to Pentecostalism is thin, the anecdotal evidence is compelling. Pastor Frank Lopez, who heads the Jesus Worship Center, a Miami-based church with two campuses that is allied with KCIA, “an alliance of apostles and prophets,” has characterized former president Biden, in Spanish on Twitter, as “an

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ignorant leader with a destructive agenda” who is “rebellious against God.” He hosts prominent Latin American conservatives on his YouTube show, where he has vied with the Argentinian writer Agustin Laje Arrigoni to serve up the reddest of meat to the culture warriors in the audience. The “New Left,” as he calls it, promotes abortion as a way of killing off the poor. It seeks economic chaos. Its main beneficiaries are universities, journalists, feminists, and “globalist organizations.” Ronald Reagan and Donald Trump were as one, in his telling, in opposing this defining agenda of the

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Democratic Party.

Lopez is hardly a voice in the wilderness; he serves on the board of directors of the Asociación de Ministros Hispanos del Sur de la Florida, a Miami-based association of pastors that has coordinated activities with Ralph Reed’s Faith and Freedom Coalition.

Even as it makes inroads among Latino communities, the religion of the spirit warriors appears to be surging among white nationalist extremist groups. Some factions of the Oath Keepers and the Proud Boys—both associated with the January 6 coup attempt—have aligned themselves with neocharismatic forms of Christianity. Some sectors of the Constitutional Sheriffs and Peace Officers Association, a reactionary group that aims to recruit inside law enforcement

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agencies, also promote the movement's ideas. The group's founding meeting in 2013 featured a man who was reportedly a New Apostolic Reformation adherent and who went on to become the leader of the Republican caucus in the

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Washington State House. Stewart Rhodes, then leader of the Oath Keepers, now convicted for seditious conspiracy,

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was present at the creation, too.

Neocharismatic forms of Christianity are rife with “the idea that God’s army of soldiers is in an active conflict with Satan’s forces,” Brad Onishi, author of *Preparing for War: The Extremist History of White Christian Nationalism—And What Comes Next* (Broadleaf, 2023), tells me. The movement “envision[s] the role of the Church as the dominating agent of God on earth,” he says. “White nationalist and militia groups find in these theologies a call to battle that resonates with their worldview—one that sees the United States in conflict against domestic enemies.”

As the language of spiritual warfare has taken hold across America, it has gotten consistently more bloodthirsty. Paul Doyle, a Pentecostal pastor of the Cornerstone Church in Batavia, New York, offers a case in point. In April 2022, he took aim at “leftist agenda policies,” “woke churches,” and “vaccines and critical race theory.” He framed the midterm elections as “a new battle of good and evil,” and he left no doubt that the political color of evil is blue. “Jesus bloodied

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himself for me,” he said, “and I am ready to bloody myself for him.”

At the 2022 Road to Majority conference in Nashville, Florida congressman Byron Donalds, who is Black, showed how this kind of Christian nationalism could unite at least some reactionaries across color lines. Later nominated by members of the House Freedom Caucus as House speaker prior to Kevin McCarthy’s confirmation, Donalds served on a

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panel titled “Draw the Line: The Hijacking of Our Mountains of Societal Influence and How to Reclaim Them.” Emceeding this panel, with its overtly dominionist title, was Madgie Nicolas, the Faith & Freedom Coalition’s National Strategist of African American Engagement. She introduced Donalds and the four other participants as “four gatekeepers that [have] been helping, enforcing the Seven Mountains of influence.” “We need to reclaim our dignity in this country,”

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Nicholas declared. “We need to reclaim our sovereignty, and we need to reclaim our White House.”

Much of the panel discussion was centered on the supposedly false history of racial oppression in America. As Michael Harriot, author of *Black AF History: The Unwashed Story of America* (Dey Street Books, 2023), noted in the *Grio*, “To successfully rise in the ranks of the GOP, Black conservatives have to do more than deny the existence of racism; they must validate their conservative credentials by proving that they are willing to sacrifice Black lives.” Referring to South Carolina senator Tim Scott and Kentucky attorney general Daniel Cameron, he added, “In their cases,

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erasing the lives of Black people is just part of their job descriptions.”

Recounting a story about what she claimed to be a Democratic voter registration operation, Adianis Morales Robles, a GOP operative, spoke at the Road to Majority conference in spirit warrior vernacular when she said, “God was showing

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me the injustices that these organizations, these demonic organizations, are doing to our people.” In fact, the spirit warrior formula has proven so politically effective that it has been adopted even by leaders who are not in any formal way part of the religious movement. Political figures like former national security adviser Michael Flynn and former president of Brazil Jair Bolsonaro identify as Catholic, and yet they outdo many Pentecostals in their commitment to spiritual warfare, their professed belief in the reality of demons, and the way they fuse national identity with a reactionary idea of

religious righteousness. The extraordinarily violent rhetoric coming out of right-wing political gatherings is a reflection of the movement's influence. At the 2021 Road to Majority conference, which I attended, speakers inveighed that America is "on the precipice," careening toward a "socialist revolution," "anarchy," and "chaos," and is under the thumb of the most despicable human beings imaginable—namely Democrats, who were referred to as "the enemy," "Satanic," and "agents of evil." "The backlash is coming," Senator Rick Scott of Florida warned. "Just mount up and ride to the

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sounds of the guns, and they are all over this country. It is time to take this country back."

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" 'Tis the time's plague, when madmen lead the blind," writes Shakespeare in *King Lear*. It is a helpful image to bear in mind when considering the relationship between the spiritual leaders of the antidemocratic reaction and their congregations of rank-and-file warriors. The two ends of the new hierarchy suffer from distinct pathologies; yet both arise from the same fundamental conditions of society. The prophets and the demagogues—the Thinkers and Sergeants—have figured out how to lift themselves above the crowd in a time when competition for status is brutal; the infantry have found a way to resolve the anxieties and grievances associated with life in the lower middle of the distribution.

There is a tendency today to reduce social and political analysis to studying the antics of a handful of powerful personalities. Many people have blamed America's current political dysfunction on Donald Trump. They take for granted that the problem will go away when he, along with his fellow religious nationalist demagogues, at long last depart for wherever they are going. But the spirit warriors aren't going to disappear with them. They might very well choose leaders who are even madder. Major religious transformations don't happen for shallow reasons. Their causes run deep. In certain instances, they help clear the ground and set the stage for the rise of authoritarian leaders who tell us that they alone can fix whatever ails us.

Will the burdens of the single mother of three who dances with abandon at the Life Challenge Church really ease when the movement shutter her children's public school, when her government benefits are brought to a halt, when her birth control pills are outlawed, and when her boss is legally permitted to demote or fire her simply because she is a woman? There is no reason to think so. But the appeal of the spirit warrior religion isn't hard to fathom. It is easily discernible in the demographic data. The religion of material demons in the here and now works best with those for whom the here and now doesn't work. Religion in America is starting to look more like religion in Brazil and Guatemala because some parts of America, in some respects, are starting to resemble Brazil and Guatemala: rife with conspiracies and disinformation, increasingly unequal, bitterly divided, and unstable. If we want people to choose different gods, we might think about tackling the conditions that lead them to prefer one kind over another. In the meantime, we can expect the ranks of the spirit warriors to grow, and we can predict that, under the direction of their leaders, they will fight valiantly against any effort to solve the problems from which they emerged.