

CHAPTER 10

No Exit

The red-white-and-blue world of Christian nationalism is a fascinating place, but it can also get claustrophobic. After a dozen years of reporting on the subject, I began to feel restless and perhaps at times a little unsafe. When I relocated, temporarily and for family reasons, from the United States to the UK in 2021, I therefore welcomed the distance. Though I planned to continue my reporting with regular return trips and a seemingly permanent virtual presence, I felt lighter and more carefree. London was my escape.

We found lodgings through an old friend in the Clerkenwell neighborhood, a jumble of Georgian row houses and converted warehouses that, almost two centuries ago, provided the setting for Charles Dickens's novels *Oliver Twist* and *Great Expectations* and that now serves as a hub for media, design, and technology firms. It felt as far from MAGA-land as seemed decent to imagine. In those first days after the move, I set off on late-summer morning walks past eclectic restaurants and pub staff sweeping out the remains of the previous evening. I was elated. Here was a faraway perch from which to gain some perspective on the madness back in the homeland.

On a Sunday morning shortly after moving in, I step outside our new apartment for another exploratory ramble, and I hear singing. Humming along to a familiar-sounding tune, I discover a church at the other end of our very short block. The Clerkenwell Medical Mission is an elegant, square-shaped Victorian structure, and as the plaque outside explains, it was built to evangelize the disabled. A newer banner overhead announces the current incarnation of the building as GraceLife London.

The tune that I'm humming, I belatedly realize, is "Great Is Thy Faithfulness," a contemporary worship classic at America's evangelical and nondenominational churches. A contemporary artist who popularized it, Chris Rice, was something of a celebrity until 2019, when a church in Lexington, Kentucky, launched an investigation following accusations from a former student that Rice had sexually assaulted him on multiple occasions at youth retreats. (The church's pastor issued a public statement deeming the allegations "credible because of the source of the allegations and

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corroborating evidence we have discovered.") No matter, I think; the church on my street can't be blamed for the misdeeds of the songwriter, and likely they don't even know about it. I decide to take a look.

A friendly woman who appears to be in her mid-twenties, wearing a blue dress and box braids with a toddler at her side, waves me in at the door. "Are you new here?" she asks. She introduces herself as Dorcas and invites me to take some literature at the front table. I pick up several titles: *Your Local Church and Why It Matters*; *Answering the Hard Questions About Forgiveness*; and *The Believer's Armor: God's Provision for Your Protection*. Opening the last one to the last page, I read: "Every time God's Word leads a person to salvation, it demonstrates its power to cut a swath through Satan's dominion of darkness and bring light to a darkened soul."

The interior of the church is as olde-world as the outside. Time-worn rows of wooden pews face an elevated pulpit in the old style, and a dozen arched windows line the second story. The crowd inside is alive with smiles and hugs, and groups of congregants are engaging in boisterous conversation before the service. Perhaps the majority, like Dorcas, are Black, but I also see a mix of white, East Asian, and South Asian congregants, too. On the surface, I think as I look around the light-filled room, this gathering bears little resemblance to some of the traditional Southern Baptist services I have attended in the U.S., with their suburban settings and often racially homogenous congregations. Then the preacher ascends to his pulpit, and I take my seat for the sermon.

"Wouldn't you be happy for it all to be over?" the preacher intones. He is Black, and he speaks with an American accent. From the literature I gather his name is Adam Waller.

"Don't you wish that the issues of this world, the sin of this world, this fallen creation, don't you wish it was all over?"

He pauses and looks around the room searchingly.

“God’s people say YES,” he announces, gathering up the silent stares. “We wish it was over and we didn’t have to deal with this sinful world.”

“Well, soon it WILL be over,” Waller assures us. “The sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give us light, the stars will fall from heaven and the heavens will be shaken,” he says, appearing to read from the Bible in front of him. “There will be wars across the surface of the earth,” he continues with palpable menace. “Nations against nations, kingdoms against kingdoms, famines, pestilence, earthquakes.” He inhales audibly, and I realize that this is the windup. He is just getting started with the end of the world.

“It will be massive and cause great destruction, great death. And it will be interrupted by the lights going out ... No man will be able to stop what is happening.” Mountains will tremble, we are told, the earth may come off its axis, and indescribable pain will be inflicted on all the men, women, and children who do not believe with their whole hearts in Waller’s preferred version of the Christian religion.

The sermon at the end of time continues for almost an hour. The only interruptions come from the pew behind me, where a young boy, who looks to be about eight years old, punctuates the gore with loud snuffles and the occasional cough. Now he clings to his mother, eyes at half mast, resting his head against her shoulder, his cheeks streaked with tears.

While the talk of global annihilation continues, I discreetly scan the literature in my hands. I find a piece titled “The Church Must Confront Homosexuality as a Sin,” in which I am informed that “unrepentant homosexuality excludes one from inheriting the kingdom of God,” and that “Christians are under obligation to confront the sinfulness of

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homosexuality ... nor can they stay silent about the terrible consequences that await those who practice homosexuality.”

Then comes an essay on “Marriage Busting Myth #2,” by Tom Drion, a pastor who helped to establish GraceLife London. “By examining God’s word, we can see that gender equality was not a foundational cornerstone God used to create paradise,” he writes. “In contrast to our 21st century ideals, God did not make men and women equal.” In Drion’s view, it all goes back to the Garden of Eden. “Eve’s role in her marriage was to be Adam’s helper. She was to help him carry out his will.” Lucky Adam, unlucky Eve: There isn’t much nuance in the theology of gender here. “To help anyone complete a task, we must submit ourselves to sit under the authority of the one who was commissioned to do the job. We

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must allow ourselves to be guided by the person who is leading the task ... Eve’s God given role was to help [Adam].”

While Waller continues his catalog of the horrors that the earth’s people will endure on account of their failure to respect God’s gender order and other alleged moral crimes, I discreetly pull out my iPhone to check up on his Twitter feed. One of his retweets (from a since-deleted account) from the previous summer gives a flavor of his social media presence: “Black Lives Matter (BLM) is inspiring a generation of young people to be angry, hateful, violent, rebellious, destructive, covetous, and envious under the guise of ‘justice.’ But true justice (impartial equity) is not what BLM wants. It has never wanted that and never will.” As a Black pastor from the States, Waller must know that he has strategic value for higher-ups in a church that is widely thought to be complicit in the racist demagoguery of right-wing American politics. In his sermon, however, he leaves no hint of self-awareness on the point.

After the service, I chat with Dorcas. She joined the church nine years ago, shortly after it was established. She lights up when I tell her I used to live in California. “We traveled to the Master’s Seminary in Los Angeles, which is where this church comes from,” she explains. “It’s where our pastors went through training before they started this church.” I smile and pretend I didn’t know that already.

The GraceLife church in London is what is known as a “church plant.” It is one of hundreds of affiliated churches and ministries scattered around the world. It belongs to a church-planting parachurch network headquartered at Grace Community Church in Sun Valley, California. John MacArthur, who took over the pastorate of Grace Community Church in 1969, is a lion in America’s Christian nationalist circles but little known outside of them. His Sun Valley church draws thousands of weekly attendants, and the Master’s Seminary in Los Angeles, which he has led since 1986, has trained some of the most politically influential and connected of America’s Christian nationalist preachers in the same

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hyperpatriarchal, homophobic, end-times religion on display at GraceLife London.

MacArthur’s insistence on male domination over women leaves no room for any hopeful reinterpretation. He has

instructed male seminarians not to speak at conferences with female speakers because it is “a total violation of Scripture.”
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His ministry has instructed victims of abuse to “submit” and remain with their abuser. In a typical 2012 sermon titled “The Willful Submission of a Christian Wife,” MacArthur instructs women to “rank yourself under” husbands. “A woman’s task, a woman’s work, a woman’s employment, a woman’s calling is to be at home,” he explains. “Working
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outside removes her from under her husband and puts her under other men to whom she is forced to submit.” In other writings, MacArthur turns repeatedly to familiar passages from Ephesians (“Wives be subject to your husbands”) and Colossians (“Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord”). In another representative essay, MacArthur announces, “Biblical love excludes homosexuality because of its sinfulness. Christians can best share the gospel with
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homosexuals by calling their lifestyle what the Bible calls it—sin.” In yet another typical effort, this time on “The Theology of Creation,” MacArthur offers a series of Bible verses that appear to condemn the theory of evolution and
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favor instead creationist doctrine.

Nominally, MacArthur and his church subscribe to Calvinist theology that purports to base its teachings on a literal
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reading of the Bible. But lumping his group in with “evangelicals” in general would be to overlook some subtle but important distinctions among those who fall under that label. The mainline Protestant denominations in the United States
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are shedding members, and the evangelical Southern Baptist Convention has trended toward decline. But MacArthur appears to represent that variety of hard-line, reactionary religion that is actually growing. Indeed, as far as MacArthur is concerned, the more conventional evangelicals are part of the problem. “Sadly, the broader evangelical church finds itself unprepared for the storm clouds of persecution gathering on the horizon. The net effect of weak theology, shallow preaching, syrupy sentimentalism in worship, and a consumer-driven approach to ministry has left the church vulnerable and infirm,” he has preached. “The world is indeed spiraling down at breakneck speed, and to a significant degree, the
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church is going down with it.”

Setting aside the apocalyptic visions of the Book of Revelation, the Bible is of limited help in understanding the doctrines and appeal of the style of religion that MacArthur represents. Perhaps a better guide can be found on the daily talking points of conservative propaganda platforms. When MacArthur came out against COVID-19 vaccines, he cited scripture, to be sure, but his arguments came straight from the disinformation mills of right-wing social media. The “government,” he claimed, had cooked up a pandemic, exaggerated the threat, and then pushed fake vaccines.
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“There is no pandemic,” he said.

In America, Christian nationalism has thrived in the same disinformation space that has sheltered the MAGA movement and will host its inevitable successors. The religious leaders in this sector have their eyes fixed on the political leaders of the nation. One of the Master’s Seminary graduates, Ralph Drollinger, the president and founder of Capitol Ministries, led prayer sessions attended by some of the most powerful members of the first administration at the Trump
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White House even as he built a missionary network aimed at high government officials across dozens of countries.

The politico-religious ambitions of reactionary religion extend far beyond U.S. borders. Grace Community Church in America may appeal to the America First crowd, but as with Capitol Ministries, it has undertaken a massive worldwide expansion. Its website offers a helpful map function, which lights up its affiliated church plants in multiple international

locales.

What exactly are they doing in the UK? This is a country where nonbelief appears headed for an absolute majority of the population. Less than 1 percent of the population can be found in church on any given Sunday. According to polls from YouGov and Gallup, only 9 percent of Britons reject evolution, as compared with 38 percent of Americans who

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believe God created humans in their present form.

MacArthur and his seminarians don't mind the long odds. When they look at the UK, they see a lost country that needs to be retaken. And they plan to participate in the conquest using methods developed and tested in the United States. Alongside its English founders, GraceLife London has now received reinforcements in the form of two additional ministers sent over from the United States. Adam Waller is one, and Michael Dionne of Faith Bible Church in Spokane, Washington, is the other.

"The vision of GraceLife London is not the revival of England, but the re-evangelization of England," Dionne explains in a blog post. "What the country needs is a resurgence of faithful ministers and families ready to plant churches and preach the gospel, which is what GLL longs to do. The encouraging thing about this vision is that it is strictly biblical." The goal, he adds, is to plant enough churches so that every inhabitant of Greater London is within forty-five minutes of salvation—"meaning that almost 1/4 of England can be reached with sound, expository preaching, faithful shepherding

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and discipleship, and clear biblical evangelism."

If there is a statistical grain of hope for ambitious churches seeking to re-evangelize the homeland, it is this: While the mainstream forms of Christianity in the UK, primarily the Church of England, have declined precipitously over the past

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two decades, the Pentecostal and charismatic varieties that are on the rise around the world are up by double digits. The hotter and harder forms of evangelical religion are also gaining traction, often setting up shop by renting underutilized religious facilities, such as the Clerkenwell Medical Mission. And influential evangelical organizations in the UK are pursuing their agendas through a range of religious organizations as well as political strategies.

This, of course, is happening alongside the steady growth of Islam, which is up 44 percent in the UK over the last

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decade and now comprises at least 6.5 percent of the UK population. If there is religion in the UK's future, it's probably not going to center on the stately, museum-quality rituals of the Anglican church.

On my Sunday morning in London, I say goodbye to Dorcas and leave the church. I feel in need of some fresh air. The sight of the Australian fusion restaurant across the street, with its stylish clientele and fanciful coffee options, somehow offers relief from the lingering visions of damnation. Not more than two hundred yards to the west of GraceLife I spot the storied St. James Church on Clerkenwell Green. Founded as a nunnery in the twelfth century, it rose to fame as a burial site for playwrights and thieves. It served as the venue for the 1632 wedding of Pocahontas's and John Rolfe's son, Thomas Rolfe, to his bride, Elizabeth. The churchyard, with its charming coffee kiosk, now functions as an unofficial community center and dog park. As I stroll over to St. James, I notice a bright, modern-looking banner over the door, INSPIRE ST. JAMES CLERKENWELL.

St. James Church turns out to be now occupied by a group that delivers "biblical teaching" in a different flavor of the evangelical tradition. A separate group from GraceLife London at the Clerkenwell mission, but a parallel message nonetheless.

In a November 2023 talk on "God's Good News for Our Sexuality," Inspire St. James Clerkenwell's vicar, Mark Jackson, offers a "biblical overview" of human sexuality. Among the consequences of Eve's sin is that "He [Adam] will

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rule over her," as Jackson says. Good news for whom? Inspire St. James Clerkenwell is a member of the Gospel Coalition (TGC), cofounded by the late Tim Keller. TGC-affiliated churches are required to conform to the organization's theological doctrines. Marriages should be "complementarian"—which is a rather nicer way of saying that men are entitled to control and women must submit. God loves everyone, even gay people! But make no mistake, being gay is a sin. Above all, every person who fails to believe as they do will endure conscious torment for all eternity.

"Why are some people born with sexual attraction to those of the same sex?" Jackson asks. "It is all a consequence of

the Fall. It's Adam and Eve, turned from God's goodness to their own way."

That evening I stop in at the local pub, hoping to revive my spirits with a pint and some conversation. My new friends prove to be as convivial and reassuring as I had hoped. But one tells me he heard a rumor that a blizzard that struck the United States earlier that year, leaving four million Texans without power, had been generated by the government; he seems unsure as to whether or not this is true. I overhear a man at the next table haranguing his friend about another, supposedly liberal plot: "fifteen-minute cities." On my very short walk back to our apartment, I wrestle with the reality that the transitory move to London will not offer quite the kind of escape I had anticipated.

The longer I stayed in London, the more I became convinced that you cannot map the politics of one country easily onto another. But on the margins at least there are some distinct similarities. The UK Christian right is increasingly drawing on a U.S.-forged playbook. And while the UK movement draws substantially on funding and support from the U.S., they have their own Funders, too.

Take, as an example, the UK hedge fund manager Paul Marshall, who is reportedly worth £875 million, according to

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the *London Times*. Marshall is determined to use his wealth to combat liberalism, which he believes "has lost its moorings," in religion as well as politics. He and his wife worship at Holy Trinity Brompton, a very large and extremely well funded church with a strong evangelical and charismatic slant. HTB, as it is known, is home to Alpha, an evangelistic organization with a global reach. In recent years HTB has been more forthcoming on their antipathy to liberal reforms—opposing, for instance, blessings for same-sex couples. Marshall has invested in a range of religious initiatives, including a scheme to place a Bible in every state school in the UK and support for a theological training center that inculcates in its pupils a more conservative form of theology and the culture war positions that accompany it. He has also invested in church-planting initiatives which the writer Andrew Graystone described in the *Prospect* as "a Marshall Plan for the beleaguered Church of England, [that] is widely loathed in other parts of the Church for its flatpack formula of

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guitar music and easy certainties."

But Marshall's efforts go well beyond support for religion in the UK. His aims are clearly political. He has forged alliances with a number of conservative politicians and launched an organization called the Alliance for Responsible Citizenship, which draws in right-wing activists and personalities that promote a range of conservative positions. He made an initial investment of £10 million into GB News, a conservative media outlet that frequently veers into right-wing culture war territory à la Fox News, and has subsequently invested millions more. He has also invested £18 million in Ralston College, a tiny Savannah, Georgia-based liberal arts college with a robust online platform, whose chancellor is the right-wing culture warrior Jordan Peterson. As of this writing, he is attempting to take over the conservative-leaning UK publications the *Spectator* and the *Telegraph*. In doing so, he will play a pivotal role in shaping conservative politics

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in the UK for years to come.

For now, of course, people like Marshall are swimming against the UK tide; American-style culture wars remain unpopular in the British Isles. Most British people were stunned when the U.S. Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*. One friend, a Tory Brexiteer, asked me in genuine confusion, "Why would anyone want to ban abortion?" But the U.S. religious right has found willing UK partners and is carefully laying the groundwork for an assault on abortion rights there, too.

On an early February morning, I ride the train to Birmingham and head to St. Mary's College Oscott, a Catholic seminary. I have signed up to observe "Rethink Abortion Day," a seminar aimed at motivating and training antiabortion

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activists in England. I enter an elegant building, adorned with stained-glass windows, elegant wooden carvings, and marble sculptures, which dates from the early nineteenth century. Passing through the somber stone hallways and serene cloisters, I make my way to the gathering spot for the day's activities.

Several dozen attendees are already assembled in the cozy, wood-paneled conference room, and I take a seat on one of the fold-out chairs. An older lady in a colorful sweater smiles as she makes room for me. To my right is a young woman with auburn hair and thick glasses. She seems a bit nervous. As we chat a bit before the program begins, I begin to grasp

the source of her anxiety; she feels out of step with her peers. “It’s good to be here with people who share the same views,” she tells me. Recently, she says, one of her closest friends, impregnated against her will by a guy she dated only briefly, decided to have an abortion. She now regrets that she didn’t interfere. “I just didn’t know what to say,” she tells me. She’s here today in hopes of learning the tactics of persuasion.

Overhearing our conversation, the older lady leans over. “I’ve joined some clinic pickets, but the young girls don’t pay attention to me. One of them said something rude,” she adds; the memory clearly stings. “But you’re young,” she adds, smiling encouragingly at the auburn-haired woman. “They’ll listen to you.”

With fifty or sixty participants settled into our seats, the day’s presentations begin. Much of the training is focused on the how-to of mounting demonstrations outside women’s health centers. Long a feature of abortion politics in the United States, antiabortion protests outside UK clinics and hospitals have surged in recent years, and the presenters at the

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Birmingham event can claim much of the credit. They include Ben Thatcher, director of March for Life UK, a spinoff of

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the U.S.-based March for Life, which draws tens of thousands of participants to Washington, D.C., annually. Another speaker, Dave Brennan, is the director of Brephos, which aims to help “churches respond to abortion” and which is a

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spin-off of the U.S.-based Center for Bio-Ethical Reform (CBR).” Apart from the Catholic entities cohosting the event, the four groups principally involved in presentations at the Birmingham event are UK affiliates of U.S.-based organizations, and several of the presenters have deep ties to other major groups in America’s Christian nationalist

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movement.

Leading the discussion on demonstrations and antiabortion messaging are representatives of 40 Days for Life UK, an

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affiliate of the U.S.-based 40 Days for Life. Founded in 2004 in Bryan, Texas—a small city that antiabortion activists have described as “the most antichoice place in the nation”—40 Days for Life specializes in training and organizing

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protests in front of abortion clinics and other providers. The stated goal is to dissuade women from going through with an abortion, though the usual effect is simply to bully and shame them for doing so. The group also runs a “university,” that is, an online program where, for \$497, users can access multiple training videos on recruiting fellow protesters and, for only \$29, on performing sidewalk “counseling.” Participants can also obtain antiabortion signs and materials and

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receive personal coaching.

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Forty Days for Life now claims to operate in more than a thousand cities in sixty-three countries. The UK branch

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kicked off with campaigns in Northern Ireland in 2009 and now boasts multiple chapters in the island nation. The organization’s UK leader, Robert Colquhoun, received support for his work when he enrolled in the Leadership Institute’s

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International School of Fundraising —the same parent organization that offered training and support to Moms for

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Liberty and that hired Bridget Ziegler as their director of school board programs before she resigned in disgrace.

Headquartered in Virginia, the Leadership Institute offers various forms of training and networking opportunities to right-wing politicians and activists in the U.S. and around the world. Its founder and president, Morton Blackwell, is the former executive director of the Council for National Policy, one of the leading networking organizations of the Christian

nationalist movement, and he signs his name to some memos from the Conservative Action Project, which is associated ³⁶

with the CNP and serves to unite the right in its policy positions. In the fiscal year 2019, according to publicly available tax forms, the organization spent \$92,494 on “educational seminars” and \$25,871 on grantmaking in Europe, along with ³⁷

substantial sums in the Middle East, East Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, Central America, and elsewhere.

In the conference room at St. Mary’s Oscott, as speakers from each organization launch into their presentations, the young woman to my right takes copious notes. We receive verbal as well as written instruction on all aspects of how we ought to comport ourselves during our future adventures in clinic demonstrations, the harassment of women seeking abortions, and related activities. We are given remarkably specific recommendations on verbal messaging and body language; we are told to smile; we are even advised on our personal hygiene and fashion choices. We are offered scripts for engaging others in conversation about abortion, and techniques for “winning” those conversations by manipulating points relevant to the zeitgeist. To best support people like my young auburn-haired seatmate, we get a surprising amount of discussion about our own feelings and reactions to the imagined scenarios. There is no discussion of what it feels like to be on the other side of the picket line.

In the United States, 40 Days for Life is distinctive in that it focuses heavily on creating a certain kind of experience for its activists. The “40 Days” refers not to pregnancy terms, as one might at first suppose, but to the duration of the demonstrations. Participants commit to forty-day “vigils,” the founders have explained, because forty days is a period with strong biblical associations.

At our UK conference there is a detailed discussion of “rights”—though, again, it is all about the rights of abortion opponents—from Isabel Vaughan-Spruce, the leader of the Birmingham chapter of 40 Days for Life. In December 2022, police charged Vaughan-Spruce with four counts of breaching an exclusion zone, or buffer zone, at a maternal health-care center. She promptly appeared in a YouTube video in which, wearing a pastel coat, her hair neatly pinned, she softly complains that she has been indicted for nothing more than “silently praying in my head.” Her case was taken up by the UK branch of the Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF), the U.S.-headquartered right-wing legal advocacy juggernaut. In a well-coordinated PR campaign, conservative Christian media outlets joined Vaughan-Spruce in characterizing her alleged crime as “standing silently near an abortion clinic” or a “silent prayer crime.” The incident received widespread media coverage in the UK, and the charges were soon dropped. None of the mainstream outlets identified Vaughan-Spruce as a ³⁸

leader of 40 Days for Life UK. Several months later she got herself rearrested and repeated the same talking points. (The police later released her without charges.)

Today, in blue jeans, tall black boots, and a black sweater, blond hair tumbling over her shoulders, she tells us antiabortion demonstrations are all about “free speech.” The praying was presumably never silent after all.

Father Sean Gough, a young Roman Catholic priest with soulful eyes and a close-cropped beard, steps to the front of the room to continue with this “free speech” theme. Gough has asserted in interviews that he is the product of sexual ³⁹

violence, and that “my mother chose life for me.” He appears to be one of the UK’s most determined faces of the antiabortion movement, and his gentle demeanor belies his determination to force other women into what his mother appears to have actively chosen. Previously, Gough was charged with “protesting and engaging in an act that is ⁴⁰

intimidating to service users” of a Birmingham clinic. With the help of the ADF, the charges against him, too, were ⁴¹

dropped. In a clever bit of PR jujitsu, he appeared almost immediately on Tucker Carlson’s Fox News show. “You ⁴²

know, I was praying for free speech, which I believe is threatened in the United Kingdom,” he said.

To make sure participants get the point, we are offered a flyer: “Is the Law our Enemy or Our Friend? A lawyer’s guide for pro-lifers.” The flyer advertises a presentation by Jeremiah Igunnubole, who serves as legal counsel to the UK branch of the ADF and represented Sean Gough. Igunnubole has argued for the organization’s position that the “safety

barriers” erected in response to increasingly aggressive protests at clinics and maternity hospitals violate speech rights.

At the antiabortion recruitment gatherings that I have attended in the United States, there is invariably the moment where speakers treat the audience to a slide show involving gory images of aborted fetuses. Birmingham does not disappoint. Taking the podium in a navy sweater and jeans and cheery attitude, Dave Brennan of the UK branch of CBR delivers the goods. The CBR is known in the U.S. for its use of graphic images, which are often enlarged and displayed as

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placards and billboards near playgrounds, schools, and other places where children congregate. The organization also

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attracted notice when some of its leaders compared aborted fetuses with victims of lynching and Nazi genocide.

But it’s not just abortion that they’re coming after; CBR has a much broader and more radical agenda. In line with its predecessor, Brennan’s UK affiliate opposes the most effective forms of contraception, including birth control pills and mini pills, implants, IUDs, and vaginal rings. Any method that prevents a united sperm and egg from implanting into the vaginal wall, Brennan’s group maintains, amounts to “ending human life.”

We must acknowledge that “we are in spiritual warfare against the enemy of our souls ... and HE [Satan] is determined,” he tells the gathering, as we take in the stream of images. He sketches a theology according to which “saving the unborn” is the greatest moral issue of our time. Implicitly acknowledging that the activists gathered in Birmingham represent both Catholic and Protestant traditions, I hear a call for “co-belligerence.” The idea—crafted in America over a period of fifteen years and enshrined in a key 2009 document titled “Manhattan Declaration: A Call of Christian Conscience” and signed by a broad range of reactionary activists and theologians—is that Catholics and Protestants should set aside centuries of theological differences in order to fight their common enemies who support abortion,

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same-sex marriage, and other liberal causes.

Vaughan-Spruce ends the presentation with a handout on the “ABC of Abortion,” which amounts to a series of rebuttals of counterarguments one is likely to hear while harassing patients at health centers. “We need to take back some control,” Vaughan-Spruce says, her voice animated with a can-do lilt. “We want them to acknowledge it’s a baby, it’s a human, it’s a child.” She nods and smiles. “If they raise point B or C, get back to point A. We’re not trying to bring our religious values in at this point. We’re not talking about anything political. We’re just talking about the scientific.”

During a break in the activities, the older lady to my left confides to me, “I read that now Satanists are getting pregnant on purpose so that they can have abortions.” I ask her where she picked up this idea. “I think it was Eternal Word,” she replies, referencing Eternal Word Television Network (EWTN), a worldwide media empire that some of its

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critics refer to as “the Fox news of Catholicism” and Pope Francis has suggested is “the work of the devil.”

She furrows her brow. “We’ve got to do something, because things keep getting worse and worse.”

The next speaker, Rachel Mackenzie, takes the stage. With her short pink hair, oversize poncho, and recurring scowl,

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she looks like she would fit right in at an Extinction Rebellion demonstration.

Mackenzie is affiliated with Rachel’s Vineyard, a faith-based U.S. organization dedicated to “healing the trauma of

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abortion.” It appears her specialty is promoting the familiar trope that frames abortion as a harm to mothers and fathers.

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Dr. Theresa Burke, the founder of Rachel’s Vineyard, built her activist career as a pastoral associate of Priests for Life, whose national director is the provocateur and defrocked priest Frank Pavone. A zealous supporter of former president Donald Trump, Pavone drew attention to himself by actively promoting the Stop the Steal movement that spread the lie

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that the 2020 election was stolen.

“Focus on truth and love,” Mackenzie advises us, her eyes flashing with righteous fury. “If truth is going to be communicated without love, it cannot and won’t be accepted.” Then her presentation takes a bizarre and sadistic turn. Mackenzie insists that even a ten-year-old rape victim should be expected to carry a pregnancy. “You don’t get unraped by an abortion,” she sternly admonishes the Birmingham audience. “Considering the alternative is to go through an abortion then the most loving solution that we can offer is life.”

Rounding out the speakers in Birmingham is Ben Thatcher with March for Life UK, and antiabortion campaigner Father Sean Gough. With a steady demeanor, Gough echoes the messages of the earlier speakers, though he seems to want to soften the edges. Participants should avoid being “aggressive” in promoting their views, he tells us. Abortion is the “greatest social justice issue of our time,” but we should avoid calling it murder. We don’t want to win the arguments,

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he concludes, we want to win souls.

Having heard from one side of the picket line, I reach out for voices from the other side. I find Lucy Grieve, a twenty-five-year-old from Scotland, whose life took a fresh turn on the day she accompanied her friend, Alice Murray, to a reproductive health center in Glasgow.

When she and Alice arrived outside the clinic, a group of protesters attempted to force antiabortion literature into their hands. When she and Alice declined to accept the literature, she recounts, the protesters flung the papers at them.

“They claimed to be trying to help and pray for my friend,” Lucy says, but they were really attempting to “intimidate, humiliate, and shame. It felt like harassment.” So much for winning souls.

The experience motivated Lucy and Alice to organize Back Off Scotland, an advocacy group that lobbies for 150-meter “exclusion zones” around reproductive health clinics.

One impression that seems to stick with Grieve is the demonstrators’ preoccupation with their own feelings and concerns. When she suggested to the protesters that they might make their case in a better setting than accosting strangers on the street, she recalls, they insisted they had a right to “free speech.”

“It wasn’t about the women or the girls obtaining abortions,” she observes with chagrin. “It was all about *their* rights.” She pauses, and then adds that the demonstrators also seemed indifferent to the impact of demonstrations on the medical staff at clinics or hospitals, many of whom are not involved in elective pregnancy terminations but are instead offering prenatal care, delivering babies, assisting women with pregnancy complications, or working in neonatal units tending to newborns with severe health problems. “It affects [medical staff’s] care they can provide because they are being called murderers at their own work,” she says. She notes that 40 Days for Life has regularly conducted demonstrations at Scotland’s largest hospital, in an area near the neonatal unit and maternity ward. The activity, she points out, is incredibly disruptive to both patients and staff.

The UK remains far behind the United States in the vigor of its culture war over women’s health-care rights. Indeed, the growing antiabortion activity around reproductive health facilities has sparked a backlash that appears to be limiting the movement’s policy gains for now. In early 2023, the UK’s highest court recognized that harassment around health-care facilities violates the rights of those seeking reproductive and sexual health services. Even many regional courts are enforcing clinic buffer zones. The courts acknowledge that they are protecting women from harassment, rather than casting this as a “free speech issue,” and the UK parliament recently moved toward legislating the establishment of buffer

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zones around abortion clinics.

Even so, ritualized harassment and humiliation of women seeking medical care is hardly the only American contribution to the budding culture war over reproductive services in the UK. U.S. organizations are also contributing to the influx of antiabortion counseling centers. Billed as “crisis pregnancy centers,” these groups attempt to dissuade women from seeking abortions, often by offering misleading or unethical advice. In the United States there are about four

thousand such operations, the majority affiliated with large networks like Heartbeat International and Stanton Healthcare.

These organizations and others have now established multiple UK affiliates. According to an investigation by the BBC's *Panorama*, at least fifty-seven such centers have opened in the UK, and more than one-third were found to provide

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unsound or unethical medical advice.

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The U.S.-based Stanton Healthcare, which operates a clinic in Belfast, recently expanded into Scotland. In 2018 a UK reporter for the *Times* of London visited the Belfast clinic and recorded a conversation in which she was told abortion would make her breasts "fill with cancer." She was warned, "You could get your womb perforated, you might be left

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sterile."

To get a better sense of these developments, I check in with Katherine O'Brien, a spokesperson for the nonprofit British Pregnancy Advisory Service. "We've seen a real uptick in protest activity over this year," she tells me. O'Brien cautions that it would be dangerous to underestimate the potential impact of these groups. "We know that antiabortion groups are well funded, well organized, and well connected with influential parliamentarians," she says. "They are going into schools, into universities, and have a real drive to recruit the 'next generation' of antiabortion activists. They know they are playing the long game, and ... they believe that they will win, even if it takes decades."

The American leaders of the antiabortion movement are well aware of the long-term potential of utilizing their resources to build up the movement overseas. A joint investigation by the UK publications the *Observer* and *Citizens UK*, published in 2023, revealed that Right to Life UK increased its Facebook advertising budget more than ten times over the

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past three years. At the UK March for Life in September 2022, Shawn Carney, the U.S. CEO of 40 Days for Life, stood in front of a banner bearing the slogan LIFE FROM CONCEPTION, NO EXCEPTION and referenced the overturning of

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Roe v. Wade. "If we can do it," he told the cheering crowd assembled in London's Parliament Square, "you can do it."

The train from Birmingham back to London leaves me at Euston Station in the late afternoon. As I take a meandering walk back to my apartment in Clerkenwell, I find it difficult to imagine an American-style culture war erupting here and taking aim at democratic institutions. But then I wander in my memory back to my childhood in 1970s Boston, and it occurs to me that Americans then might have had equal difficulty imagining what has become of our national politics. At that time, abortion was thought to be of concern mainly to a subset of Catholics, and it didn't divide along partisan lines. In 1972 the popular television show *Maude*, executive-produced by the late Norman Lear, featured two segments in which the lead character faced an unintended pregnancy and chose abortion. Lear later remarked that this storyline didn't

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generate much controversy when it first aired. By then many conservative Protestants and their institutions, including the Southern Baptist Convention, had welcomed the Supreme Court ruling that for half a century secured the right of American women to reproductive freedom. Even after the religious right succeeded in convincing conservatives that all evil came down to abortion, the issue was initially thought to be a social one, to be resolved by democratic means within the existing institutions.

Few people at the time would have imagined that antiabortion activism would become an indispensable tool for mobilizing large groups of people to join in an assault on democracy itself. The recent developments in the UK, I realize, are like a window on the American past. This is how things must have looked before the antidemocratic reaction really took hold.