

Christian Nationalism and Revival

ON OCTOBER 2, 2023, a member of the House of Representatives and vice chair of the House Republican Caucus, Mike Johnson, took part in a livestreamed prayer call organized by a group called the World Prayer Network.¹ The leader of the call, an evangelical pastor named Jim Garlow who in 2016 had likened Hillary Clinton to Jezebel, opened, as he typically does, by emphasizing the purpose of the call: “To pray for holiness and righteousness and for Biblical justice, not social justice.” He continued: “We’re way beyond the issue of partisanship. We’re way beyond the issue of Republican versus Democrat, or right versus left. Where we *are* squarely is right versus wrong, good versus evil, light versus darkness, biblical truth as opposed to anti-scriptural constructs, the things of God as opposed to the things of the evil one.” The call began officially with the sounding of a shofar by Robert Weinger, a master shofar blower in Israel’s West Bank.² Garlow reminded listeners that the call was not open to the media or the public.

Mike Johnson was Garlow’s first guest that day, and he spoke at some length, giving clear testimony of his faith, his view of American society, and his hopes for the future. The immediate reason for the call was the state of the Republican-led house, which was in turmoil because Kevin McCarthy had been voted out of his leadership position.

The views that Johnson expressed were as radical as Garlow’s. He introduced himself and then made a profession of faith—explaining

how he had come to deepen his own beliefs after his father, a firefighter, survived a terrible explosion. He then discussed the tenuous situation in the House, explaining his deep sense of uncertainty, and asserting that though the Lord had always given him a general “sense for where things are going to lead,” at that point he really didn’t know. He continued: “All I know is that the Lord has directly spoken to my heart and told me to be prepared for a shaking.”

Soon Johnson began his prayer request: “What we need is a spiritual intervention from the God of the universe, the God in whom we Trust.” Johnson digressed with a brief history lesson, referencing the phrase that has adorned the House of Representatives since 1962, asking: “Why did they put ‘In God We Trust’ above the marble above the speaker’s head?” He explained that it had been installed during the Cold War as a reminder to Americans that they were different from the Soviets, whose Marxist worldview “begins with the idea that there is no God.” But Johnson was adamant: “We *are* different. We *are* a nation subservient to Him. The reason that we became the great nation that we did, as everybody on this call knows, was because *that* was the foundation, that we hold truths to be self-evident, because God created us all equally and gave us our rights.” Now, he warned, “our nation has abandoned that.”³

When he got to the specifics of his request, Johnson said: “This is an inflection point. We are at a civilizational moment. The only question is: Is God going to allow our nation to enter a time of judgment for our collective sins, which his mercy and grace have held back for some time? Or is he going to give us one more chance to restore the foundations and return to Him?” He affirmed that what the nation really needed was a revival. But more immediately, Johnson said, “what we are going to need is a prayer for divine intervention in the hearts and among the members of this body [the House] . . . We will not be able to do it without the Lord’s help . . . This is going to have to bring people to their knees.”

Before Representative Johnson got off the call, Garlow prompted him to say something about whether this might be a time of judgment for America. Johnson gave a stark reminder about the “terrible state that we’re in,” citing a loss of faith in institutions, low church attendance, and a culture that is “so dark and depraved that it almost seems irredeemable.”

He noted that “the number of people who do not believe in absolute truth is now above the majority for the first time. . . . We’re losing the country.”⁴ Johnson did not mention himself as a possible replacement for McCarthy. But by the end of the month, on October 25, 2023, whether by divine intervention or sheer GOP desperation, he was confirmed as the new Speaker of the House.

Johnson’s relative obscurity turned out to be an asset. Being mostly unknown allowed him to appear less radical than he was. As Jonathan Blitzer put it, writing in *The New Yorker*, “Johnson’s power has followed from his discretion.”⁵ At the World Prayer Network, Johnson’s ascension received little attention because the meetings in the aftermath of October 7, 2023, were dominated by the massacre and hostage-taking in Israel. While there would be a small schism on the Hard Right over the war in Gaza, the World Prayer Network group, like most right-wing Christian organizations in the United States, strongly supported Netanyahu and everything he stood for.⁶

This chapter is about right-wing Christian nationalism and Christian supremacy in the United States. Religion has been a pervasive theme throughout the book already—from Yoram Hazony’s assertion that “this was a Christian nation, historically and according to its laws, and it’s going to be a Christian nation again,” to the Postliberal Catholics’ “integration from within.” Here, I explore how New Right intellectualism intersects with and overlaps with Christianity—and especially Protestant Christianity.

The New Right movement that materialized under the first Trump administration and then grew in power after January 6, 2021, was in many respects hard for American liberals to see and appreciate. This was partly because the movement was given cover by Trump’s anti-intellectualism, and partly because liberals (and establishment types, too) have difficulty conceiving of perspectives and world views that differ so significantly from their own and seem so outlandish and extreme.

These blind spots also concern religion. The early twenty-first century was a time of spiritual turmoil, realignment, and dealignment in the United States, and it took some dramatic turns during the Trump era.⁷ The Bronze Agers were part of this cultural foment; so were the

“Hour-is-laters,” the integralists, the Dimes Square avant-garde, and the people pining for old-fashioned nationalism. As with the world of conservative intellectualism, the conservative Christian world saw dramatic rearrangements and reorientations after Trump’s electoral victory in 2016. Across the Christian right, establishment figures were put on their heels, new leaders, previously obscure, were brought into the halls of power, and new ideas were granted authority from those on high. In this chapter I bring some light to the religious undercurrents—and Christian nationalist arguments—that shaped the right between 2016 and 2024 and consider how they relate to the New Right intellectual world we have explored heretofore.

Christianity in the United States is varied and dispersed: It extends across a vast proliferation of denominations and religious communities that span the full political spectrum. Though it takes harder and softer forms, Christian nationalism is pervasive in many of these communities, where it has, in some version or another, been cultivated for decades. It is distinct from other expressions of Christianity in that it is political and seeks political domination. The writer Katherine Stewart puts the matter clearly: “It does not seek to add another voice to America’s pluralistic democracy, but to replace our foundational democratic principles and institutions with a state grounded on a particular version of Christianity.”⁸ Christian nationalists believe that America is a Christian nation (indeed, God’s chosen nation), and must be defended as such. Kristin Kobes Du Mez, author of the book *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* (2020), adds another key layer to this story: “Evangelical support for Trump was no aberration, nor was it merely a pragmatic choice. It was, rather, the culmination of evangelicals’ embrace of militant masculinity, an ideology that enshrines patriarchal authority and condones the callous display of power, at home and abroad. . . . Evangelicals did not cast their vote despite their beliefs, but because of them.”⁹

In what follows, we will see more evidence for these claims, coming from various quarters. I discuss three distinctive Christian nationalist (or Christian supremacist) traditions and sensibilities, moving from the

more mainstream and familiar to the unfamiliar and hard-line. My aim is to provide illustrative snapshots of the Christian nationalist world to take and knit into our cumulative understanding of the New Right.

Christian Founding Story Hour

Right-wing intellectuals have rich traditions of nationalist, far-right reactionary, and constitutional thought to draw on in their characterizations of American ideals; so too with Christian nationalists. American political history is full of claims about America being a “Christian nation” with a “Christian founding,” and there is also—contrary to the liberal imagination—some good evidence for such assertions. In right-wing circles, Americans are culturally primed to believe that America was founded as a Christian country, that Christianity is fundamental to American civic identity, that America enjoys a world-historical situation analogous to the Israelites in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, and that God’s favor is bestowed or denied according to Americans’ adherence to Christian values.

These are some of the beliefs that characterize what we might call Christian Founding Era (or CFE) doctrine, and which are pervasive on the American right. CFE ideas have gained popularity since the 1960s. Around the time that Barry Goldwater won the Republican nomination at the Cow Palace Convention, the GOP began to consolidate its role as the political bastion of religious conservatism. Ronald Reagan’s “moral majority” rose in response to the social turmoil of the 1960s and 1970s—turmoil that involved the Cold War and Vietnam War, the civil rights movement with its bold left-wing Christian influences, women’s liberation, and the gay rights movement. Against this background of change and rebellion, a reactive, white, masculinist Christian nationalism asserted itself. This strain of conservative religiosity came to be known variously as “New Christian Right,” the “New Religious Right,” the “New Religious Political Right,” or simply the “religious right.” It was the age of televangelists like Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell and the formation of many new antifeminist, anti-LGBTQ religious organizations.¹⁰ The Federalist Society was also formed around this

time. The New Christian Right comprised the strong social and moral leg of establishment, Buckley/Reagan style conservatism.

The New Christian Right of the 1980s also had its own prehistory. Arguments about the intimate relationship between the Christian faith and American civic life go back to before the founding, and contentious arguments about this were part of founding-era debates.¹¹ CFE doctrine consistently obscures the complexity of that history and those debates, and outright rejects the religious pluralism of the present. The parallels here with Claremont- and Hillsdale-style political thinking are evident, and the two narratives are mutually reinforcing, and mutually radicalizing.

I was witness to a broad spectrum of Christian nationalist sentiment and argumentation at the ISI/Claremont Institute conference I attended in Fort Lauderdale in February 2023—the one where Robby George (whom I do not consider a Christian nationalist) was the keynote, and where I saw so many other figures from the New Right, like Michael Anton, Yoram Hazony, and Charles Kesler.

On the final day of the conference, February 24, there was a panel called “Christian Nationalism and the American Regime,” sponsored by Hazony’s Edmund Burke Foundation and chaired by Clifford Humphrey, the Hillsdale PhD and then-director of religious coalitions for the foundation. The panel included Ben Crenshaw (at the time a PhD candidate at Hillsdale), as well as Stephen Wolfe, author of the controversial book *The Case for Christian Nationalism* (2022). “Christian nationalism” had been used frequently among academics and in the liberal commentariat during this period—mostly as a pejorative—and Wolfe’s book was the first overt, book-length defense of the concept. The inevitable controversy surrounding the book mushroomed when Wolfe’s podcasting partner’s racist and misogynist online activity was discovered (this, recall, was the spur to the far right’s NETTR debate). We will come back to Wolfe and his book.

Crenshaw’s brief presentation, which was about Christian nationalism and the American founding, offered a useful sampling of CFE

doctrine.¹² Crenshaw rehearsed some of the most common arguments for the idea of a distinctly Christian founding. He was working within a long and contentious tradition that includes scholars like John Fea and Mark David Hall on the more moderate end, and popular writers like David Barton—a defender of Christian nationalism who has been discredited by numerous historians—on the extreme.¹³

Crenshaw began by quoting from a famous letter from John Adams to the militia of Massachusetts in October 1798. The conclusion reads: “We have no Government armed with Power capable of contending with human Passions unbridled by morality and Religion. Avarice, Ambition, Revenge or Galantry, would break the strongest chords of our Constitution as a Whale goes through a Net. Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious People. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.”¹⁴

This letter is one of several texts often cited by conservatives in defense of Christian nationalism because it offers such a clear and unequivocal account of Adams’s attitude toward religiosity and good government. Crenshaw argued that Adams, like the majority of Americans during the era, had the Christian religion in mind when he spoke of morality and religion.

Then Crenshaw went further, building toward the argument that America was founded as a Christian nation and in effect had a Christian nationalist founding. He covered three areas: the American people, the laws and institutions, and the culture and mores, all at the time of the founding. He took up the most controversial argument first, concerning the religiosity of ordinary people. He argued that church involvement was much higher than other scholars have claimed. Next, he turned to the role that Christianity played in early American laws and institutions, making some arguments resonant with what we saw in Vermeule’s *Common Good Constitutionalism* concerning the Christian character of early American legal institutions and provisions. Then he homed in on early state constitutions.

Crenshaw described how the early colonies had established churches, and how this continued in several states even after 1776. Focusing on New Hampshire’s state constitution of 1784, he argued that, for the earliest citizens of the state, religious practice was seen—in the vein of the

Adams letter—to be crucial to civic virtue and self-government, and also that religious liberty (the freedom to choose one's form of worship) was not considered to be in conflict with religious establishment (in short, people could have religious freedom even if there was an established state church). Crenshaw argued that the references to God in these documents should be understood as references to the Christian deity, and not to some rationalist deity or theistic rationalism, as liberals so often argue. And he discussed how the debate around religious establishment at the time of the founding typically concerned allowing religious liberty among competing Christian denominations, and not broader forms of religious pluralism.

In the final part of his talk, Crenshaw spoke about public norms and opinions of the founding era. He mentioned a number of civic institutions that have a spiritual dimension—like congressional prayers, national holidays, pledges, and other symbolism—then discussed the national days of prayer and thanksgiving that were established in the earliest days of the Republic. He explained how during their presidencies, Madison and Jefferson, both of whom were religious skeptics, declared national days of thanksgiving, even though they had said in private that it went against the separation of church and state—a clear demonstration of the Christian constraints of the founding era.

Crenshaw's talk in Fort Lauderdale included a smattering of standard fare CFE arguments. Other such claims include the idea that early Americans understood the revolution to have a religious valence (the early Puritans were fighting for their right to practice their chosen denomination of Christianity, not to throw off the yoke of religion), and that the Establishment Clause was not meant to deny Christianity a privileged position, but to ensure that no single domination took over. Most states, after all, already had established churches.

These claims are true, with some caveats and in a way, and so was Crenshaw's basic conclusion that at the time of the founding America was constituted by Christians, who presumably meant to establish a society based largely on Christian morality.

The problems arise when Crenshaw and others extrapolate to make more sweeping and totalizing claims—saying, for example, as

Crenshaw did, that Christianity was *the* public religion, and *the* source of American public morality, and that the early Americans sought to establish “a nation whose political institutions, laws, morals, and cultural mores are grounded on the truths of the Christian religion.” Those statements may not sound so different from what came before, but they are just totalizing enough to conceal the relevant controversy.

And even if we, like Crenshaw and so many others, constrain ourselves to the founding era and so ignore the 250 or so years of subsequent liberalizing change, the controversy is genuine. It was there from the beginning.

Crenshaw’s talk was entirely lopsided—as these arguments so often are—and so it occluded the liberal position, which has its own favorite bevy of founding-era quotes, arguments, and laws.

For example, take the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, which Jefferson helped to draft. During this process, efforts were made to insert “Jesus Christ” into the preamble of the law, right before the more generic words “the holy author of our religion.” Jefferson, along with James Madison, rejected that effort, and the law was passed by a broad majority in 1786—without specific mention of Jesus. In his autobiography, he wrote about how this was proof that they “meant to comprehend, within the mantle of its protection, the Jew and the Gentile, the Christian and Mahometan, the Hindoo, and infidel of every denomination.”¹⁵ I love this passage because it offers such a forceful and expansive embrace of genuine pluralism. Jefferson was proud of his success, and the statute influenced the Bill of Rights. His role in passing Virginia’s statute for religious freedom was inscribed on his tombstone.

Or consider texts like George Washington’s Letter to the Hebrew congregation in Newport, from 1790, which asserted that “the Citizens of the United States of America have a right to applaud themselves for having given to mankind examples of an enlarged and liberal policy: a policy worthy of imitation. All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship.” Washington further declared that the US

government gives “to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance” and “requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens, in giving it on all occasions their effectual support.”¹⁶ The beautiful conclusion to the letter reads: “May the Children of the Stock of Abraham, who dwell in this land, continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other Inhabitants; while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and figtree, and there shall be none to make him afraid. May the father of all mercies scatter light and not darkness in our paths, and make us all in our several vocations useful here, and in his own due time and way everlastingly happy.”

There’s also the Treaty of Tripoli, between the United States and Tripoli (now Libya) in 1797, which in article 11 stated explicitly that “the United States of America is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion” and “has in itself no character of enmity against the laws, religion, or tranquility, of Mussulmen (Muslims).” This treaty was negotiated by a representative of President Washington, was read aloud on the Senate floor on May 29, passed through Congress unanimously (by all present), and signed into law by President John Adams on June 10, 1797.¹⁷

During the Q&A at the Christian Nationalism panel, I asked Crenshaw about the liberal flipside to CFE doctrine. Religious freedom and pluralism were both there from the start and, furthermore, were a source of patriotic love for many Americans. Why was he ignoring the other part of this history? Crenshaw had a reasonable enough response. He said that what I was talking about was “Virginia supremacy,” and that this Jeffersonian outlook had almost completely eclipsed the other side of the story, the “Christian founding” side. He said that in his work he was trying to rectify this imbalance by highlighting alternative arguments. In other words, the Jeffersonian, liberal vision is all around us; it is the water we swim in, and that we take for granted, whereas these other views needed to be recovered.¹⁸

Those are fair points, even if they were absent from his original talk. Crenshaw was undoubtedly correct that in mainstream liberal contexts, the pluralistic (or secular) liberal account is dominant, sometimes to the point of excluding good historical arguments about American Christianity.

The deeper questions lurking here, though, concerned the present. Which vision of America—the Christian or the pluralist—should be embraced and celebrated today? Crenshaw and his fellow panelists seemed quite willing to deny or obscure the pluralistic arguments of the founding, and they seemed to be doing so in the service of a present-day political movement. In 2024 Crenshaw welcomed the idea of a “Christian Prince” for the *American Reformer* website. “Support for Trump could help pave the way for future Christian statesmanship,” he wrote, “whether constitutional or post-constitutional.” Crenshaw insisted that standing by Trump would translate into support for a future Christian Prince “when the time comes to restore order and good rule to America.” He acknowledged that the process would “inevitably require difficult and painful policies that separate friends from enemies.”¹⁹

This is how arguments that start with Christian Founding Era doctrine tip into hardened, unconstitutional Christian nationalism. It’s one thing to explore history and reveal some long-forgotten truths. It’s quite another to impose a reductive version of the past—or a newfangled Postliberal theocracy—onto the present. Especially after 250 plus years of pluralistic transformation.

Sociologists Andrew Whitehead and Samuel Perry consider Christian nationalism to be a cultural framework—“a collection of myths, traditions, symbols, narratives, and value systems—that idealizes and advocates a fusion of Christianity with American civic life.” They continue: “Understood in this light, Christian nationalism contends that America has been and should always be distinctively ‘Christian’ from top to bottom—in its self-identity, interpretations of its own history, sacred symbols, cherished values and public policies—and it aims to keep it this way.”²⁰ It’s a very short intellectual leap from the CFE doctrine to the Christian nationalism that they describe.

Prophets, Apostles, Revival, and Warfare

Though the scene that unfolded at the Capitol on January 6, 2021, could not have been more different from the mood at the Fort Lauderdale conference two years later, on January 6 we did catch a glimpse of the

kind of “difficult and painful policies” that might be required to install a Crenshaw-style “Christian Prince” in the United States of America.

I watched what was happening at the Capitol on TV. We were living in Frederick, Maryland, at the time, so nowhere nearby, but it felt like watching an act of desecration. I remember thinking, naively: Why isn’t Trump putting a stop to this? At the time, I recognized some of the far right symbology but was also perplexed by what I saw—and not just the QAnon Shaman, but also all the other religious iconography—the shofars, for example, and the “Appeal to Heaven” flags. This was due to my own blind spots; experts on right-wing Christianity were soon able to show how this symbology provided visual evidence for the Christian nationalist dimensions of the day.²¹ The role that Christian nationalism played on January 6—and in the broader story of Trump’s rise—is one of the great neglected stories of the era.

When Representative Mike Johnson—a Southern Baptist—spoke to the World Prayer Network in October 2023, he spoke in a variety of registers. He discoursed about the phrase “In God We Trust” that has adorned the House of Representatives since 1962, and he did so using CFE concepts and language. And he also spoke about a “time of judgment for our collective sins,” something you might well hear in Southern Baptist circles. But then he also spoke about the coming of a “shaking,” and the need for a revival and divine intervention. This was more in the arena of charismatic, revivalist Christianity. Johnson is comfortable in all three worlds and demonstrates the extent to which traditional denominational lines matter less and less.

Both Garlow and Johnson are fellow travelers with part of a Christian revivalism that is quite distinct from New Right intellectualism, and from the Christian Founding Era arguments. It involves different people, different ideas and practices, and arguably a quite different set of motives. Scholars have various ways of describing this sector; I will refer to it as the independent Charismatic network. Another relevant term here is the New Apostolic Reformation (NAR), which is a subset of the broader network.

The independent Charismatic network played an outsized role in organizing and supporting the Capitol insurrection. While John Eastman

was busy writing his memos and organizing fake slates of electors, the independent Charismatics and other Christian groups were organizing on behalf of the president too. In his book *The Violent Take It by Force* (2024), religion scholar Matthew Taylor wrote that “the distinctive prophecy-driven, charismatic spirituality of the New Apostolic Reformation (NAR) provided the Christian stage-setting to January 6, tying together what would otherwise seem like a bizarre array of Christian expressions.” Taylor’s book provides an exhaustive account of how independent Charismatic groups and leaders hosted major rallies and “Stop the Steal” marches, engaged in “spiritual warfare” for Trump, and formed a significant presence in DC that day. Three of the six permits issued for protests at the Capitol were made out to Charismatic groups. Taylor calls the Charismatic nondenominational subset of American Christianity the “amorphous, tumultuous Wild West of the modern church.”²²

Though this is just one slice of the Christian landscape in America—most Christians, be they Catholic or Protestant, belong to a formal denomination of Christianity—it is one of the few forms of Christianity that is growing, both in the United States and globally. Scholars have estimated that there were 312 million Independent Charismatics in the world in 2020 (contrasted with 44 million in 1970).²³

So what exactly are we talking about here?

Pentecostalism is a subset of Protestantism that emphasizes direct personal experience of God. (Sarah Palin was the first Pentecostal to join a major party ticket.) The independent subset of Pentecostalism is distinct for its rejection of typical denominational governance. Rather than standard top-down church hierarchies, the independents form a loosely organized network of people, many of whom see themselves as present-day apostles and prophets—i.e., individuals whom God speaks through directly.²⁴ More than other forms of Pentecostalism, the independent churches are invested in recreating, in the words of Taylor, “the miraculous environment of the early church and creating a revival movement towards what they understand to be the end times.”²⁵ Further, Taylor writes, “*Independent Charismatic communities are the epicenter of Christian Trumpism.*”²⁶

One of the elements of the Independent Charismatic world that Taylor emphasizes as crucial to understanding popular Christian attachment to Trump is modern-day prophecy. Trump has benefited from Charismatic prophesies that go back almost two decades now (Taylor cites a 2007 prophecy by a South African prophet Kim Clement that said, “Trump shall become a trumpet”; there were also hundreds of prophets who proclaimed in 2020 that Trump would be reelected). Citing studies from 2022, Taylor writes:

Belief in modern-day prophecy—and particularly, belief in prophecies about Donald Trump—was both strongly correlated with belief in Trump’s claims of election fraud and a major accelerant for extreme political views, including an openness to supporting violence or lawbreaking in the pursuit of political goals. This should not surprise anyone too much: If you believe—truly believe—that God is intervening directly in American politics and anointing presidents, then democracy and the will of the people must logically be secondary and subordinate to the will of God.²⁷

Taylor is always careful to note just how big and complicated Evangelicalism is in America, but his work also demonstrates the special import of the independent Charismatic network to Trumpism.

The story of how Trump and Trumpism came to have such deep ties to the Charismatic sector of American Christianity is fascinating. Trump was not a typical candidate for the Republican nomination, and if there is one thing besides his fame that smoothed his path for victory in 2016, it was that he had cultivated ties in the evangelical movement for years. His main contact was the televangelist Paula White. Taylor calls White “the fulcrum on which an epochal shift in American religious politics tilted.” As the investigative journalist Sarah Posner has explained, Trump was always “more like a televangelist than a politician,” and he seemed to respect White from the moment he met her.²⁸ When 2016 came around, Trump leaned on his connections to White to solidify his candidacy. As Posner explained to me, “It was not unheard of for Republican candidates to reach out to the Charismatic

world (recall Sarah Palin). Trump just did it more and better and placed White at the center of his evangelical outreach.”²⁹

Paula White and the early involvement of Charismatic Christians in the Trump campaign created an early permission structure for Trumpism among evangelicals somewhat analogous to what was happening for intellectuals in the blog pages of the *Journal of American Greatness*. In those early days, mainstream evangelicals were generally uncomfortable with Trump as a candidate and tended to stay aloof, which had the effect of amplifying the role of independent Charismatics in Trump’s orbit. And because they showed loyalty early, they enjoyed outsized influence in Trump’s version of the GOP, and as such throughout the country. Taylor used the analogy of the fringe becoming the rug.³⁰ As we have seen throughout this book, a similarly dramatic reorientation took place among conservative intellectuals.

Those who study the Christian right had a name for what was happening and explained the movement’s political doctrine—and Trump’s ideology—in terms of Christian nationalism. Some on the right protested this characterization. Others—notably Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene—started to embrace the label openly. In an interview on July 23, 2022, at the Turning Point USA Student Action Summit in Florida, she said: “We need to be the party of nationalism and I’m a Christian, and I say it proudly, we should be Christian nationalists.”³¹

Experts like Posner, Taylor, and Kristin Kobes Du Mez agree that the connection between Trump and the Christian right is not entirely or even primarily transactional; it is much more sincere and emotionally charged, and Trump is often seen as a vessel of the divine. Posner observed that Trump is a culmination of decades of political organizing on the Christian right. “He became their savior,” she wrote, “because he spoke the language that tied them and him—and the grievances of the alt-right—together against ‘political correctness,’ civil and human rights, and at its core, the entire arduous project of maintaining a pluralistic, secular, liberal democracy.”³² The New Right gave intellectuals a justificatory rationale for Trumpism; the evangelical right helped to provide that for conservative Christians. In both cases the fringe became the weave, and in both cases the fabrics stayed intact, and were even strengthened

and reinforced, after January 6, 2021, at which time the new “Lost Cause” narrative gained momentum.

One important wrinkle here is that the independent Charismatics are more transnational than nationalist. This is a multiracial, multi-ethnic network seeking global Christian supremacy, and it is more open to women in leadership than other Christian groups. Taylor suggested to me that the nondenominational character of the movement naturally decenters adherents, detaches them from denominational identities, and so reduces the salience of ethnic and theological categories. All identity categories are “subsumed under a generic and quite intentionally decultured ‘Christian’ identity.”³³ But because the independent Charismatic network is multiracial and global does not mean that it is politically moderate. On the contrary, there are strong connections between American Pentecostals, Charismatics, and Christian Zionism, and, with some important exceptions, this subset of American Christianity supports an aggressive and rhetorically violent form of Christian nationalism.³⁴

Many independent Charismatic leaders, for example, embrace a doctrine called the Seven Mountain Mandate, or 7M, an idea that originated within Dominion Theology.³⁵ Dominion Theology supports the idea of pervasive Christian political and cultural domination, whereby Christians are justified in taking over whole societies, and even the world. Some of the most prominent Dominionist intellectuals in America historically have been Calvinist Christian Reconstructionists (like Rousas John Rushdoony, whom we will meet again shortly). 7M is a Charismatic, Pentecostal variation on Dominion Theology that delineates the seven distinctive “mountains” that are ripe for Christian takeover and control: family, religion, education, media, entertainment, business, and government. This is the Charismatic version of Yarvin’s destruction of the Cathedral and “Retire All Government Employees,” of Catholic “integration from within,” or of Rufo and Roberts’s “march through the institutions.” Several prominent members of the Dominionist movement, like the influencer Charlie Kirk and the prophet Lance Wallnau, identify openly as Christian nationalists.³⁶

Another popular prophecy in independent circles, also promoted by Wallnau, likens Trump to the Persian king Cyrus (this is sometimes

called the “Cyrus Anointing”). In the Hebrew Bible, God uses Cyrus, the great Persian king from the sixth century BCE (who was not Jewish), to help liberate the Israelites from Babylon. According to the Cyrus Anointing, Trump is the new Cyrus who will save the Christians from liberal secularism. “Sometimes,” Lance said in 2018, “God can anoint a wrecking ball.”³⁷ Kevin Roberts of the Heritage Foundation, who is Catholic, has appealed to the Cyrus theory.³⁸

Finally, in addition to the Seven Mountain Mandate and the idea of Trump-as-Cyrus, apostles and prophets within the Charismatic networks often speak of politics in terms of “spiritual warfare,” “discipling nations,” and Christian colonialism.³⁹ As Taylor wrote in his book, the crux of the problem of the independent Charismatic sector today concerns its “theologies of violence, the ideation of violence, and the romanticization of spiritual violence that have grown up in Charismatic evangelicalism. It is about the culture of violent rhetoric that has spread from there into broader American Christianity and into American politics.”⁴⁰ This is a movement that rejects, in the strongest possible terms, the idea of church-state separation, and seeks to dominate and control all areas of public life. More than other, older versions of the Christian Right, the independent Charismatic ecosystem empowers individuals to take matters into their own hands, as spiritual warriors for Jesus.⁴¹

Stephen Wolfe, operating in an entirely different mode and register, is also interested in empowering Christians—and especially Christian men—to dominate America.

Stephen Wolfe’s Big Bad Book

Yes, atheism will be crushed.

And we’ll do it citing scripture, Tradition, and Plato.

—STEPHEN WOLFE, OR @PERFINJUST

Ben Crenshaw’s discussion of the Christian founding was part of a panel at the ISI/Claremont conference that included a presentation by Stephen Wolfe, whose *The Case for Christian Nationalism* was published in fall 2022. Wolfe represents a highly cerebral version of Christian

nationalism grounded in Calvinist theology. This is far away from the Charismatic world, but just as extreme (if not more so), and there are a few points of contact.

Wolfe is certainly part of the New Right. He graduated from West Point in 2008 and was active duty for five years, attaining the rank of captain.⁴² He earned a master's degree in political science at Louisiana State University in 2016, and another master's degree in philosophy in 2019. He earned his PhD in political science from LSU in 2020. His dissertation was called "Protestant Experience and Continuity of Political Thought in Early America, 1630–1789." It was an erudite defense of Protestantism as "not just another competing source or tradition among others in the founding era," but rather as the tradition that "supplied the underlying principles of early American political thought." At LSU, he worked with a well-regarded conservative professor named James Stoner. (Fun fact: In 2013, my husband and I were offered faculty positions in the political science department at LSU; on another timeline, I could have been Wolfe's teacher.) After graduating in 2020, Wolfe held a postdoctoral fellowship with Robby George's James Madison Program in American Ideals and Institutions.⁴³ *The Case for Christian Nationalism* was published by Canon Press on November 1, 2022.

Canon is not an academic or a mainstream press; rather, it is Douglas Wilson's press. Wilson is a theologian in the Reformed Presbyterian (Calvinist) tradition of Christianity, also known as Christian Reconstructionism. Christian Reconstructionism in the United States traces back to thinkers like Gary North, David Chilton, and, most especially, the aforementioned Rousas John Rushdoony—a major theologian of Dominion theology, who wrote from an austere Calvinist perspective.⁴⁴ This is a narrow but influential group of Christian thinkers who are committed to "restoring" full Christian dominance to America—which means a fundamental transformation of the regime. As Jerome Copulsky wrote in his book *American Heretics* (2024): "Christian Reconstructionists believed that restoration of law and order would require a return to the ultimate source of law and order—submission to the sovereignty of the triune God. 'Christ or chaos, God's law or tyranny' was their slogan." Copulsky goes on to

explain that Rushdoony's ideas were extremely influential on the New Christian Right in the 1980s, even though no one admitted it at the time. He asks: "Why did they refuse to admit his influence on their thinking?" His answer: "Because Rushdoony was a fearless advocate of theocracy."⁴⁵

Douglas Wilson is also a highly controversial figure in his own right, thanks to: his advocacy of theocracy in the town of Moscow, Idaho; concerns about his handling of sexual assault cases in his community and teachings that involve the subordination of women; and a Canon Press pamphlet called *Southern Slavery, As It Was* (1996), which contained claims like "slavery produced in the South a genuine affection between the races that we believe we can say has never existed in any nation before the War or since."⁴⁶ Wolfe does not identify as a Dominionist or a Reconstructionist, but he is certainly Calvinist, and Canon was the press that he chose for his book.

The Case for Christian Nationalism features a blurb from Yoram Hazony on its cover that says "A Pioneering Work . . . Relentlessly Innovative." That is one way of putting it. As noted previously, there was a good deal of controversy surrounding Wolfe's book upon publication, when his podcast partner at the time, Thomas Achord, was outed as a white nationalist.⁴⁷ This caused controversy for Wolfe not only because of the friendship, but also because his book can easily be read as a defense of "Kinism," or racial and ethnic chauvinism. Wolfe offers a strong defense of love of one's own in the book, and, while he offers the occasional repudiation of white supremacy, he does "use the terms *ethnicity* and *nation* almost synonymously," and claims that "no nation (properly speaking) is composed of two or more ethnicities."⁴⁸ Mark David Hall, who is not exactly hawkish against Christian nationalism, noted that the book is peppered with references to notions like "blood relations," "the *volk*," "community in blood," and "the principle of similarity."⁴⁹

To be clear, though, Wolfe's book was not just some unthinking screed or manifesto. Wolfe is a highly learned person with deep knowledge of the tradition he works within. His book is situated largely within the Reformed, Calvinist conservative tradition of Protestant political thought. He claims from the outset to be a political theorist, not a theologian, which means that he is less interested in the political

implications of given passages of scripture (which he rarely cites), and more in how Calvinist thinkers of the past—mainly sixteenth- and seventeenth-century authors—have sought to reconcile biblical teachings with the real world. As Hall explained in his review of the book, “Wolfe proceeds on the assumption that the Reformed theological tradition is true, and so makes ‘little effort’ to make biblical or more broadly theological arguments to support it.” Hall continues: “Unless one assumes the truth of Reformed theology, there is little reason to read this work.”

In some respects, the American Calvinists are the true opposites of the independent Charismatic types. You will not find Wolfe taking part in revelatory prophecies or talking of “shakings”; this is someone invested in high Calvinist theology and the religious life of the mind. But as with the revivalists, Wolfe’s thinking stands in stark opposition to mainstream American liberalism. And as with Christian Founding Era doctrine, Wolfe’s reading of the past dismisses all modern Enlightenment influences as deeply misguided. Indeed, Wolfe’s version of Christianity is so austere that it is not altogether clear whom his audience is. Hall suggests that it “includes Douglas Wilson and some of his followers, but I’m not sure it extends much beyond this quirky collection of patriarchal Calvinists,” and that Wolfe is not a Christian nationalist in the sense that the term is typically understood (especially by its critics)—i.e., as involving a nationalist takeover of the country. Rather, Hall argues, Wolfe is committed to local and regional forms of Christian nationalism; the book ought perhaps to have been titled “The Case for Patriarchal Christian Localism.”⁵⁰ There is not a whiff of internationalism in Wolfe’s work, to the point where he opposes Christian Zionism (and has been accused of antisemitism for it).⁵¹

Readers who are curious about Wolfe’s political theology should consult the book for themselves, and the many reviews written by experts, including a two-part review titled “Treatise or Tweet?” by one of Wolfe’s intellectual mentors, Glenn Moots.⁵² What I can say with confidence is that in the more than four hundred pages of his tome—as well as all over social media—in addition to the genteel, localist man of learning, Wolfe plays the chauvinist edgelord and provocateur. Hall and others

suggest that Wolfe's book will be of interest only to people in the Reformed tradition, but that is credulous. The book is also BAPism for Protestants, a red-pill for the Christian crowd.

It would be tedious—especially so late in this journey—to enumerate the ways in which Wolfe's work has affinities with Hard Right thinking. But two points are worth emphasizing: First, Wolfe's politics are deeply misogynist. His work is utterly Schmittian, and for him the enemy is the contemporary liberal regime, which he prefers to call, echoing BAP, "gynocracy." Wolfe writes: "We live under a gynocracy—a rule of women. This may not be apparent on the surface, since men still run many things. But the governing virtues of America are feminine vices, associated with certain feminine virtues, such as empathy, fairness, and equality."⁵³

While it is true that there are strong whiffs of Kinism in the book, Wolfe, like BAP, goes full throttle with the reactionary misogyny.

Wolfe argues explicitly for a patriarchal, male-exclusive politics where women are kept out. In civil affairs, Wolfe says, echoing another far right misogynist subculture, that "men should go their own way" (MGTOW). He includes the occasional Scott Yenor-like footnote about how, for example, restrictive Covid policies have "exacerbated women's already fragile mental health."⁵⁴ On social media, he is on the record asserting that he does not affirm women's right to vote.⁵⁵

Second, Wolfe is dedicated to a reactionary aestheticized politics of domination. His book includes encomiums to the possibilities of "Great men," the possibilities of "heroic masculinity," and new feats of the will, and, more specifically, to the possibility of a great "Christian Prince" who will lead the whole to greatness and do "everything in his power to make his people's culture, as a whole, Christian." The book includes pleas for revolution against the current regime and acknowledges that if a minority of Christians can constitute a secure government "for true justice and the complete good," then they do not have to care about the consent of non-Christians. He says that non-Christians deserve justice, peace, and safety, but not political equality; heretics and atheists will be treated harshly. He concludes his chapter on revolution with a call to arms reminiscent of the fascist Eliade: "We are gripped by a slavish

devotion to our secularist captors. But we do not have to be like this. We have the power and the right to act. Let us train the will and cultivate our resolve.”⁵⁶ He recommends starting locally, in the states.⁵⁷

The concluding section of Wolfe’s book—an epilogue entitled “Now What?”—is by far the most manifesto-like. It consists of a series of pseudo-Nietzschean aphoristic observations that include further meditations on gynocracy (“The rise of Christian nationalism necessitates the fall of gynocracy”), virulent attacks against secular liberal elites as “enemies of the human race,” extended disquisitions on the evils of the “Globalist American Empire” (he uses the acronym “GAE,” borrowed from Darren Beattie of Revolver News and Raw Egg Nationalist); and the need for self-overcoming in the face of our modern sentiments (“We have to retrain the mind by the strength of will. We might *feel*, for example, that it is wrong for public space to be exclusively Christian, but it still ought to be. . . . We must overcome ourselves”).⁵⁸

There are good, historically informed accounts of fascism out there, several of which include lists of archetypal features of fascist movements—things like “nostalgia for a purer, mythic, often rural past; cults of tradition and cultural regeneration . . . the universalizing of some groups as authentically national, while dehumanizing all other groups . . . anti-modernism; fetishized patriarchal masculinity.”⁵⁹ Wolfe knows how to check those boxes.

In Fort Lauderdale, Wolfe and his fellow panelists did not focus on the fascist factor in *The Case for Christian Nationalism*. Wolfe used his time to clarify his concept of “complacent self-love,” which is a nice, almost Rousseauian, idea that he uses in the book to defend the idea of the basic goodness of Christian life and of the self, and so too of the nation. And he spent some time clarifying what he means by the Christian Nation and Christian nationalism. He emphasized that he was not working in the Reconstructionist or Dominionist or Postmillennial traditions, but within the tradition of magisterial Protestantism and Classical protestant theology. He said that he did not believe America had a special covenant

with God, he was not arguing against natural law, nor was he arguing for direct theocracy—in fact, he explained, he was against the idea of pastors and church magistrates participating in politics. Instead, Wolfe explained, what he seeks is a nation that is “self-consciously Christian.”⁶⁰ Generally speaking, at the ISI/Claremont conference, Wolfe reined himself in.

That did not stop the audience from taking up some of the bait in his book. The first person to ask a question after the panel ended was Nathan Pinkoski. He wondered what the panelists’ thoughts were about terms like “ethnic nationalism” and “ethno-nationalism.” Pinkoski recognized that these categories had “negative connotations,” and conceded that he probably wouldn’t want to fight the battle to return to a world of *racial* nationalism. But he “might fight the battle on the other front and point to countries in the world that define themselves in terms of an *ethnos*.” What were the panelists’ thoughts on this, he wondered. Wolfe took the question and dutifully disavowed the idea of race and DNA as the basis for nationalism, preferring instead a phenomenological account emphasizing commonalities of place and historical experiences and struggle. It was prudently done.

The rest of my day at the ISI conference was quite strange. Immediately after the panel, a woman came up to me to try to explain how the Enlightenment was not a major influence on the founders. She was displeased when I strongly disagreed. Clifford Humphrey and I sat together at lunch and spoke at length about foundationalism, Christian nationalism, and the meaning of the Constitution. He was so nice and friendly. Humphrey basically said that he defended Christian nationalism because Christian moral standards were foundational to decent living and to the American Constitutional order. And he took strong issue with the current liberal norms dominating American life, which I took to mean “wokeness” and “cancel culture.” I believe he called them the new blasphemy laws. I thought that was an exaggeration, and I said so. If you misspoke today, you might be faced with social consequences, or maybe even professional ones—but you would not be fined or held

criminally accountable or whipped, and you might even be rewarded in other social settings and circles, like the ones we were sitting in.

He pushed back, asking where I thought the standards for rules and norms came from, suggesting that I must be a moral relativist. I said that while I believed in principles, I thought that they did change over time, and ultimately had to be negotiated by democratic peoples—and that such shifts were not arbitrary impositions. In our system, people had to show up, reason things through, persuade and campaign hard, protest and organize, and win free and fair elections. At one point he tried to put me in the majoritarian, winner-takes-all Stephen Douglas camp in a manner reminiscent of the 1776 Report. We were both frustrated. I was reminded how hard it is to defend liberal pluralism and epistemology against bull-headed self-certainty and fundamentalism.

The exchange with Humphrey also conjured up a time in graduate school when we were discussing the possibility that all human knowledge is mediated knowledge—mediated through our prophets, traditions, texts, history, languages, brains, and so forth—such that access to the full truth remains utterly elusive. In the thick of this very grad school moment, one of my more conservative and religious classmates became animated and exclaimed something along the lines of “but there *must* be *true knowledge*! Like, *out there*!” His point was that mediated knowledge was not good enough—for truth to be truth, it had to be independent, otherworldly, permanent and absolute truth, the kind that Richard Weaver, Harry Jaffa, and Congressman Johnson were all so taken by.

Humphrey would surely have agreed with them; for my part, I still don’t understand how you get unmediated access to that kind of truth, and I like the mediated versions just fine. I think they are rich and wonderful. And more true.

In any case, after that I attended a Claremont Institute panel called “What the Right Can Learn from the Left,” featuring Michael Anton, Glenn Ellmers, Kevin Slack, and Ryan Williams. This was a weird panel, where the speakers derived lessons from Marx, the New Left of the post-1960s, and Foucault. Mostly the panel was boring, but Slack, a professor at Hillsdale College (the one who taught the online course called “The American Left: From Liberalism to Despotism”), did say some

astonishing things. At one point he plugged Darren Beattie for his relentless mockery of the Globalist American Empire (or GAE) and suggested that this sort of ridicule was a terrific model for the New Right. He said that every time you see somebody ridiculous, you should show up and protest. He gave the example of the “LBBTQI+ crowd,” saying that making fun of it was crucial. It was vile and hateful.⁶¹ He recounted how he went to counterprotest one of these groups at his local library with a bunch of young New Right types and was delighted because “you can see how intimidated the rainbow people were.” In the end he wasn’t encouraging ridicule so much as intimidation.

Slack argued that it is important to get involved in local government, “control the sheriff’s office,” so that they don’t enforce things like Covid mandates. He noted that taking the Michigan state house was probably unrealistic, but that it would be good to join local associations, like rifle associations. “Most every young guy I know has an AR-15 and they go out and train. And I don’t mean with the FBI which is to say the militia, but they lift weights together and they’re trying to form the true bonds that would be the basis for a true Republicanism and political power.” He said that in the red states, they should exercise the power that they have, asking “Why do you have any progressive professors at the University of Idaho period? Get ’em! Why is Scott Yenor having to fight for a job at Boise State? . . . In our red states, we’ve got to parry or purge!” It should surprise no one that Slack is a proponent of Red Caesarism.⁶²

That’s about when I ducked out. The conference was not over, but I had booked my flight home for early in the evening, knowing that I would miss the Robby George keynote; the conference organizers had told me that it would be posted online. Michael Anton and Ryan Williams begged off early, too. I know because right after the panel they came out to the front of the hotel, and stood a few feet away from where I sat waiting for my Uber. With their luggage, they soon got into a big, official-looking SUV. I thought to myself, “I wonder if they are off to visit the DeSantis campaign?”

Months later I learned that indeed they were. Anton and Williams planned to have dinner that night with Arthur Milikh and Scott Yenor in Palm Beach, just north of Fort Lauderdale, and then would spend the weekend at the “Governor’s Blueprint Retreat,” at the Four Seasons Resort. Anton and Williams had discussed their plans via email with Yenor, who was using his public university’s email account. The exchanges—and many others—were subject to public information requests, which in 2024 led to some interesting news stories in *The New York Times* and *The Guardian*, including about their role in the anti-DEI campaign run by Christopher Rufo, as well as Yenor and Williams’s membership in the Society for American Civic Renewal, alongside Charles Haywood and Nathan Fischer. These men were later dubbed the “TheoBros.”⁶³ They were friendly with JD Vance.⁶⁴

As regards their early departure from the ISI event, Williams expressed some concern about missing Robby George, but then he said, “I must be honest in saying I’d rather us just dine together in Palm Beach than sit through Robbie and a rubber chicken hotel dinner.” Anton heartily agreed (“Absolutely”). On Saturday and Sunday, the four men were scheduled to attend DeSantis’s retreat, for which they had pitched a panel called “How to Counter the Regime with Red States,” which included tips on how to make the state into a counterrevolutionary force “against the woke regime.”⁶⁵ The idea was that states could serve as a good testing ground for restoring America (in the end, of course, they wouldn’t need to resort merely to state-level action).

When they drove by, I thought about waving from my little bench, but I couldn’t see them through the dark tinted windows, and I don’t think they would have waved back.

It was still astonishing to me that these men, and the other New Right leaders I discuss in this book, had attained such tremendous ideological authority within the GOP. People outside the Claremonter camp had their own paths into Trumpism. But ones nearest to my own intellectual universe, people like Kesler, Anton, BAP and Beattie, had done so based largely on their Straussian credentials—some by peddling extravagant rhetoric about wokeness and the end of Western civilization, others leading a descent into the gutters of race science, misogyny, and

nouveau conspiracism. It was a clear trajectory of intellectual decline and unraveling, catalyzed by a long-cultivated style of intellectual hubris. Strauss himself was a complex figure, who inspired students of all political persuasions, but his focus on esotericism and the supremacy of ancient philosophy also, at least in hindsight, came at a cost.

Christopher Hitchens once wrote: “The cynicism of Strauss’s theory and practice was summarized in his antithesis between Athens and Jerusalem. I am certain to vulgarise the recondite here, but Straussians believe in religion and not in God.”⁶⁶ This formulation brings us a long way to understanding the friendliness that some New Right intellectuals came to have toward Christian nationalism, and to radicalism more generally. Strauss’s dichotomies, both Athens vs. Jerusalem and Ancients vs. Moderns, fostered an either/or mode of thought that actively made room both for true believers—the more fanatical, the better—as well as for anyone who, educated in Straussian schools of esoteric dissembling and *thymos*, came to believe in their own superiority. But this model didn’t always make room for others—for people who were more quietly pious, or more questioning than strident, or who thought in terms beyond Strauss’s either/or. In some of these circles, anyone who believed in modern liberty and pluralism—anyone who came to believe that people might learn, even in the face of the deepest intellectual and spiritual differences, to live together in some kind of civil truce or peace—was seen at best as shallow and naïve, and at worst as a harbinger of the Last Man or the Longhouse.

None of this was based on careful thinking about anything. Rather, it was based on hyped-up formulas, macho abstract doctrines, “Straussian lullabies,” and nostalgic myths that calcified over time, reifying dogmatism and alienating anyone who dared to disagree.

And so it was that by 2024 the Claremonters, as well as their more genuinely devout NatCon and Postliberal colleagues, were cooperating with the likes of Donald Trump, with sincere extremists like those who constitute the Charismatic world, and with creeps like Stephen Wolfe. It was, in the end, the Enlightenment philosophers who made them do it.