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ARTICLE



## Alternatives

# Decoding ‘the base’: white evangelicals or Christian nationalists?

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### ABSTRACT

That white evangelicals form the political foundation of Trumpism is widely taken for granted. A contrary interpretation focuses on Christian nationalism: the view that the United States is, and should remain, a predominantly white Christian nation. Drawing on analysis of religious nationalisms in India and South Africa, this essay suggests how Christian nationalism can be seen as part of a contradictory hegemonic project, intimately linked with US imperialism and racial capitalism. The essay also reflects on the political challenges of the present moment.

### KEYWORDS

Christian nationalism; hegemony; imperialism; racial capitalism



Title: The Million MAGA March in Washington DC 12/12/2020.

The sign in the top right-hand corner reads: “For the kingdom is the **LORDS**. HE rules over the **NATIONS**.”

Photo credit: Olivier Douliery/AFP via Getty Image

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## Introduction

When I began this essay in late December 2020, it was evident that the normally routine ratification of the US presidential election results on January 6, 2021 was destined to become a blood-on-the-floor battle within the Republican Party. The most surprising aspect of how concretely this expectation materialized was the ease with which Trump's stormtroopers burst into the Capitol, although the stark contrast to the police violence visited on Black Lives Matter protestors in 2020 quickly made clear the white supremacist character of the spectacle. In a chilling assessment on MSNBC on the evening of January 8, journalist Ron Suskind estimated that some 20 percent of Trump voters (around 15 million people) are raring to take up arms to form a personal army ready to fight at Trump's behest.<sup>1</sup> A poll, taken on January 7, of 1,397 registered voters found that 45 percent of the 74 million Republicans who voted for Trump actively supported the invasion of the Capitol<sup>2</sup>—which explains why 147 Republicans in the House and Senate were willing to validate Trump's absurd claim that the election had been stolen, despite having had to hunker in the basement for four hours while his troops rampaged through the halls of Congress.

The excruciatingly bad movie we are being forced to witness will undoubtedly have unspooled in further bizarre directions by the time this essay is published, and only the most foolhardy among us would dare predict what these will be.<sup>3</sup> What will remain a crucial issue, though, is the imperative for the Left to pay close attention to what is likely to be Trump's ongoing popular support, and specifically to the question of religious commitments that many of us (myself included) find extremely difficult to fathom in terms that do not merely invoke false consciousness or some snooty liberal version of a "basket of deplorables" that serves further to inflame his supporters.

Initially, I was drawn to these questions in an effort to understand popular support for Jacob Zuma in South Africa, and subsequently to the rise of Right-wing Hindu nationalism (Hindutva) in India. Since 2016, I have been situating Trumpism in a global comparative frame and have increasingly come to see apartheid South Africa as a precursor to conditions in the United States. It is from this critical comparative perspective that I want to engage in this essay with what seems a crucially important debate unfolding in the United States about the religious character of Trumpism.

By far the most common interpretation points an accusing finger at white evangelicals who, despite declining as a proportion of the population, continue to make up 20 to 25 percent of voters, and went heavily for Trump in 2016 and 2020.<sup>4</sup> According to Michael Gerson, the term evangelical "encompasses a 'born-again' religious experience, a commitment to the authority of the Bible, and an emphasis on the redemptive power of Jesus Christ."<sup>5</sup> A perennial question in the mainstream liberal media has been what drives huge numbers of seemingly devout Christians not only to give political support to a lying, cheating, irreligious, adulterous mobster, but to frequently express their outright devotion to him. One of the most influential sets of answers comes from Gerson—chief speechwriter for Bush 2 from 2001 to 2006, a devout evangelical, and a columnist for the *Washington Post*—who lays the blame on the moral failings of the evangelical leadership as well as on evangelicals having come to regard themselves "hysterically and with self-pity, as an oppressed minority that

requires a strongman to rescue it”<sup>6</sup>—a view that Trump happily helped to amplify in his role of bully-in-chief. This widely shared perspective of white evangelicals having gone off the moral rails in the time of Trump leads, in turn, to the liberal hope that processes of geographic concentration and relative population decline portend the inevitable diminution of this anxious religious group and its nefarious political influence.<sup>7</sup>

In a distinctively different interpretation, Katherine Stewart insists that Trump’s core support:

[D]oes not come from white evangelicals as such, but from an overlapping group of not necessarily evangelical, and not necessarily white, people who identify at least loosely with Christian nationalism: the idea that the United States is and ought to be a Christian nation governed under a reactionary understanding of Christian values.<sup>8</sup>

The reference to “not necessarily white” is significant, in light of higher levels of Trump support by Latinx and Black voters in 2020 than in 2016.<sup>9</sup> Stewart develops arguments about Christian nationalism more fully in *The Power Worshipers: Inside the Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism* (2019). Drawing on large-scale survey data, Andrew Whitehead and Samuel Perry reiterate this shift in focus from white evangelicals to Christian nationalism more broadly in *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* (2020). Reading Trumpism as a “Reactionary and secularized version of white Christian nationalism” with deep historical roots, Philip Gorski views religious nationalism as “political idolatry dressed up as religious orthodoxy.”<sup>10</sup>

From a comparative perspective, I have found the small but growing literature on Christian nationalism to be simultaneously compelling and in urgent need of further development. Most immediately, this work literally brought home to me that the US version draws on some of the same theological sources that informed white Christian nationalism in South Africa—most notably the influential ideas of the neo-Calvinist theologian and former Dutch prime minister Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920). Kuyper’s politicotheological claims of divinely ordained nations helped to drive the redefinition of white Afrikaner nationalism to Christian nationalism in the early 1930s. Spearheaded by the extremely powerful *Broederbond* (Band of Brothers), which described itself as “born out of the deep conviction that the Afrikaner nation has been planted in this country by the Hand of God,” white Christian nationalism was closely linked with the project of *volkskapitalisme* (people’s capitalism), and together they aimed to contain class struggle.<sup>11</sup> White Christian nationalism, in turn, formed the moral justification for the apartheid regime (1948–1990), while also providing a target of moral outrage to the anti-apartheid movement, an important component of which was framed in religious terms.

Although helping to clarify why the Trump years have felt so eerily familiar to one born and raised in apartheid South Africa, recent work about Christian nationalism is very narrowly focused on the United States—in effect reiterating the specific form of American exceptionalism to which its critique is directed, and abstracting from US imperialism.<sup>12</sup> In addition, the liberal thrust of recent efforts to understand Trumpism in terms of Christian nationalism precludes comprehension of the articulations of race, religion, and nationalism with capitalism and class—and hence the profound

contradictions through which these interconnected forces play out in practice.<sup>13</sup> Drawing from my 2020 essay “Why Did It Take So Long? Trump-Bannonism in a Global Conjunctural Frame,” I suggest that situating religious nationalisms in South Africa and India in relation to those in the United States deepens our understanding of the unexceptional and profoundly contradictory character of toxic and dangerous religious nationalisms in the world today, not least in the United States. First though, let me outline my reading of efforts to understand Christian nationalism in the United States.

### Accounting for (mostly white) Christian nationalism in the United States

Christian nationalism ... promotes the myth that the American republic was founded as a Christian nation ... Its defining fear is that the nation has strayed from the truths that once made it great ... It looks forward to a future in which its versions of the Christian religion and its adherents, along with their political allies, enjoy positions of exceptional privilege and power in government and in law. Christian nationalism is also a device for mobilizing (and often manipulating) large segments of the population and concentrating power in the hands of a new elite.<sup>14</sup>

Conflicting accounts of Trump’s base in terms of white evangelicalism as opposed to predominantly white Christian nationalism were preceded by sharply divergent historical narratives. The standard narrative, exemplified by Frances FitzGerald’s *The Evangelicals*, holds that their anti-evolution campaign, culminating in profound humiliation in the 1925 Scopes “monkey trial,” drove conservative white evangelicals back into apolitical churches, and that they emerged as a political army of cultural warriors only in response to liberal Supreme Court rulings on school prayer, pornography, and abortion in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>15</sup> This is, in other words, a narrative of “sleeping bears suddenly roused to political rampage.”<sup>16</sup> In the decades of their political exile, Gerson emphasizes that evangelicals “created a web of institutions—radio stations, religious schools, outreach ministries—that eventually constituted a healthy subculture.”<sup>17</sup>

A distinctively different interpretation by Allan Lichtman in *White Protestant Nation* maintains that modern conservatism, combining Christianity with private enterprise, took shape in the decade after World War I as a form of nationalism:

At the core of right-wing politics in the 1920s and beyond was an anti-pluralistic ideal of America as a unified, white Protestant nation ... Virtually every dispute over radicalism, loyalty, reproduction, race, immigration, sexuality, crime, permissiveness, creationism, and school prayer had its forerunner in the ’20s. So too did forms of right-wing political mobilization ... Since World War I, conservatives have been cultural, religious, and at times racial nationalists, dedicated to protecting America’s superior civilization from racially or culturally inferior peoples, foreign ideologies, sexual deviance, ecumenical religion, or the encroachment of so-called one-world government.<sup>18</sup>

These conservatives exempted capitalism from cultural corruption, thus opening a “space within which big capital could unite politically with ordinary shopkeepers, farmers, and workers.”<sup>19</sup> The predominantly white cross-class coalition of contemporary Trump support occupies precisely this space.

Arguing along complementary lines and rejecting the sleeping bears narrative explicitly, Daniel Williams maintains in *God's Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right* that:

Conservative Christians had been politically active since the early twentieth century, and they never retreated from the public square. Their commitment to political activism and conservatism was much deeper and more long-standing than most analysts realized. What was new in 1980 was not evangelicals' interest in politics but, rather, their level of partisan commitment. Evangelicals gained prominence during Ronald Reagan's campaign not because they were speaking out on political issues—they had been doing this for decades—but because they were taking over the Republican Party. It was an event more than fifty years in the making.<sup>20</sup>

Pointing to sharp divisions over questions of race and civil rights in the white evangelical political movement since the 1950s, Williams shows how the creation of the “New Christian Right” at the end of the 1970s in support of Reaganism required melding together disparate factions of conservative Protestants. For Kevin Kruse in *One Nation Under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America*, an important component of the conviction that the United States had been, and should always be, a Christian nation can be traced to the political and economic turmoil of the Great Depression with “business leaders enlisting clergymen in their war against the New Deal.”<sup>21</sup> In the next section, I demonstrate the salience of these and other insights from these earlier debates that are missing from the contemporary accounts of Christian nationalism in the time of Trump.

Philip Gorski is the first analyst of whom I am aware to identify Trumpism as a “secular form of religious nationalism,” which he did prior to the 2016 election in his explanation of polls predicting that more white evangelicals would vote for Trump than voted for Mitt Romney in 2012.<sup>22</sup> In 2017, he expanded these observations to argue that white evangelicals voted for Trump because “They are also white Christian nationalists and Trumpism is *inter alia* a reactionary version of white Christian nationalism” with roots that extend far back in American history:

Seen within the longer sweep of American history, Trumpism is not really so novel. Most of its central tropes—racism, conquest, apocalypse, and nostalgia—have been core elements of American religious nationalism since the late 17th century. Placed against the shorter history of the “religious right” that begins in the 1970s though, Trumpism does have several features that set it apart from the version of religious nationalism that took hold during the Reagan era—namely a conservative version of “American exceptionalism.”<sup>23</sup>

This historical narrative—clearly very different from that of Lichtman, Williams, and Kruse—relates to Gorski's warning that secular progressivism and its rejection of tradition is not the answer to religious nationalism. Instead, the imperative is to reconstitute a “vital center”—namely “an anti-authoritarian alliance of committed liberal democrats that spans the partisan divide between Republicans and Democrats,” and cognizant of the unifying story of the American covenant.<sup>24</sup> Questions of class play no role in this analysis.

Neither historical nor class analysis feature in Whitehead and Perry's use of statistical methods to question the widely taken-for-granted claim that white evangelicals put Trump in the White House. Instead, they insist that orientation to

Christian nationalism “explained almost all of the ‘religious vote’ for Trump”—even after controlling for the effects of race and religious affiliation.<sup>25</sup> Although Christian nationalism is most prevalent among white evangelicals, they are not synonymous. Indeed, once the authors control for Christian nationalism, personal religiosity is positively associated with more progressive political stances. In short, the authors insist that religious piety must be rigorously distinguished from Christian nationalism, which “co-opts Christian language and iconography to cloak particular political or social ends in moral and religious symbolism.”<sup>26</sup> The distinction between Christian nationalism and religiosity pertains as well to the drawing of racial and religious boundaries. Not surprisingly, Christian nationalism correlates positively with measures of white supremacy, anti-immigration sentiment, fear of Muslims, and antipathy to most other religions, while personal religiosity is associated with greater racial and religious inclusion.

Although they are using regression analysis to isolate the effects of Christian nationalism and demonstrate its difference from religious piety, the authors recognize Christian nationalism as part of a “complex web of ideologies” to which it is closely related. They are emphatic that it should not be seen as reducible to any of these, but rather as “intimately intertwined” with them. They insist, for example, that Christian nationalism is not just about racism: “It is the *intersection* of race and Christian nationalism that matters.”<sup>27</sup> Pointing to Frederick Douglass, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and the Rev. William Barber II, Whitehead and Perry acknowledge that the “Christian nation narrative can be—and indeed has been—invoked in the service of the disempowered demanding justice as well as those who wish to preserve their own cultural power” and they call for “more interviews with racial and ethnic minorities.”<sup>28</sup> The problem is that, even when supplemented by interviews, their positivist method does not allow for what would necessarily require relational and historical forms of understanding—especially if ideology is understood not just as ideas, attitudes, or even culture broadly conceived, but also as power-laden practices and institutions that change in relation to one another.<sup>29</sup>

Stewart moves some way in this direction.<sup>30</sup> Emphasizing that Christian nationalism is not a grassroots movement, she directs attention to how it operates through a national infrastructure of powerful organizations, burgeoning far-Right media, and conservative houses of worship:

The churches may be fragmented in a variety of denominations and theologies, but Christian nationalist leaders have had considerable success in uniting them around their political vision and mobilizing them to get out the vote for their chosen candidates ... [and] to overturning regulatory, legal, or constitutional restrictions on the political activity of churches.<sup>31</sup>

She also documents how these organizations are recipients of colossal funding from Right-wing foundations, “the massive flow of right-wing dark money targeting the courts,”<sup>32</sup> the diversion of public resources (especially public schools) to subsidize religious institutions, and how the Trump administration was both drawn from and insinuated into these networks of power and money.

Tracing the ideological origins of Christian nationalism, Stewart underscores the ongoing influence of Rousas John Rushdoony’s (1916–2001) Christian



Reconstructionism and dominion theology, and his intellectual lineage with nineteenth century proslavery theologians such as Robert Lewis Dabney as well as Abraham Kuyper, mentioned earlier, whose theology helped to drive white Christian nationalism in South Africa in the 1930s. It is important here to acknowledge the pathbreaking work of Sara Diamond, who first made clear that “What was important about Reconstructionism and other expressions of dominion theology was not so much the eccentricities of its key advocates, but rather the diffuse influence of the ideas that America was ordained as a Christian nation and that Christians, exclusively, were to rule and reign.”<sup>33</sup>

The spread of dominion theology in the 1980s coincided with and helped propel the Christian nationalist takeover of the Republican Party that forms the focus of Daniel Williams’s *God’s Own Party*. It remains powerfully at play in the present, and might extend into any post-Trumpian future. According to his father Rafael Cruz, none other than Ted Cruz has been anointed by God “to ‘go to the marketplace and occupy the land ... and take dominion’ over it.”<sup>34</sup> The Cruzes subscribe to Seven Mountains dominionism, which calls for believers to take control of family, religion, education, media, entertainment, business, and government, trusting that “When this Christian nation is in place (or back in place), Jesus will return.”<sup>35</sup> Little wonder that on January 6, 2021, Ted Cruz was locked in combat with the upstart Josh Hawley for laying claim to Trump’s base. Presidential-hopeful Hawley draws explicitly on Kuyper, whom he invoked, for example, in a 2017 speech announcing that “There is not one square inch of all creation over which Jesus Christ is not Lord” and, in a revealing intertwining of nationalism and imperialism, that “We are called to take that message into every sphere of life that we touch, including the political realm and to seek the obedience of the nations. Of our nation!”<sup>36</sup>

A small but important body of ethnographic work sheds light on the processes through which what one can interpret as Christian nationalism has become incorporated into “common sense” in everyday practice, and points to the limits of Stewart’s insistence of Christian nationalism as a top-down project.<sup>37</sup> Lydia Bean’s superb study of churches on either side of the US/Canada border stands out in revealing what is distinctive about US forms of Christian nationalism.<sup>38</sup> It also provides deep insights into the multilayered forces that prepared the ground for Trumpism and enabled it to take powerful hold.<sup>39</sup> More studies along these lines are urgently needed.

More generally, I suggest that we need a dialectical understanding of Christian nationalism as part of a hegemonic project, intimately linked with US forms of racial capitalism and imperialism, and that this also requires going beyond the US-centric focus of this literature. Next, I will suggest some key ways that religious nationalisms in South Africa and India can extend the work on Christian nationalism outlined here, and help illuminate the ongoing crisis in the United States.

## Religious nationalisms in a global frame

Let me start with a brief outline of the essay on which I will be drawing directly.<sup>40</sup> As presaged in the title, it is framed around the question “Why did it take so long for a



demagogic figure like Trump to ascend to power, given the long histories of racism and right-wing Christian nationalism in the United States; the ravages of neoliberal forms of capitalism; and the abandonment of the working class by the Democratic Party?” This question sprang from my engagements initially with trying to understand widespread popular support for Jacob Zuma since the early 2000s, which then led me to a rich and deeply informative Indian literature on the rise of Hindutva and the takeover of the State by Narendra Modi’s Bharatiya Janata Party. What also came into view was the resurgence of Right-wing nationalisms and populist politics in many other regions of the world, especially in the post-Cold War period. In relation to all of these, the 2016 electoral triumph of Trumpism appeared as a belated victory in the United States of forces that had been actively in play in different regions of the world for some time.

I was also struck by Mike Davis’s observation that “With the help of Breitbart and the alt right, [Donald Trump] essentially ran in Patrick Buchanan’s old shoes.”<sup>41</sup> Buchanan was a key figure on the Christian Right, a self-described paleoconservative who ran for the US presidency on a Christian nationalist platform in 1992, 1996, and 2000, deploying the “America First” slogan made popular by fascist sympathizers in the 1930s. In the last of these campaigns, he ran against none other than Trump in the primaries. Trump dropped out but pocketed the slogan for future use. While I completely agree with Davis’s observation, the question remains as to why it took so long for Buchanan’s old shoes to gain traction?

The answer I have proposed requires situating the United States in a global conjunctural and comparative frame in which, first, South Africa, India, and the United States are seen not as pre-given bounded national units or separate “cases,” but as related yet historically specific nodes in interconnected historical geographies; and, second, the relation of these national formations to the forms of imperialism in different spatio-historical conjunctures receives close attention—with “conjuncture” understood not just as a period or a “slice of time” but as an accumulation of contradictions. The frame is organized around a set of key global conjunctural moments, defined as major turning points when interconnected forces at multiple levels and spatial scales in different regions of the world—both structural and contingent—have come together to generate new conditions with worldwide implications and reverberations.

Recognizing historical processes of nation formation, the frame focuses, first, on the conjuncture of the late 1940s and the emergence of Cold-War-era projects of accumulation and hegemony—Apartheid in South Africa; Nehru’s project of Development, secular democracy, and nonalignment; and Fordism in the United States<sup>42</sup>—and, second, on the multiple processes through which these projects imploded from the late 1960s, giving way to the neoliberal counterrevolution, albeit in spatiohistorically specific ways. I sought to show how the distinctive forms and timing of destructive forces unleashed in the post-Cold War era—including the rise of Right-wing nationalisms and populist politics—are to be found in the wreckage of Cold-War-era projects in South Africa, India, and the United States, along with the rise of new forms of financial and military imperialism in the 1980s through which the relations of the United States to different regions of the nonwestern world changed significantly. The frame

focuses on multiple, changing articulations of nationalism in relation to historically-specific dynamics of capitalist accumulation, class differentiation, and class struggle. It also compels attention to articulations of race/racism, gender, sexuality, caste, and religion as inseparably and actively constitutive of both class processes and nationalisms through the workings of bourgeois hegemony. This frame lets us see Trumpism neither as an aberration nor as the inevitable consequence of the failures of “progressive neoliberalism,” as some have argued, but as a live, though latent, possibility that required a particular configuration of forces—both structural and contingent—to burst forth.

Another key argument that emerges from my work in South Africa distinguishes two key forms of neoliberal hegemony: a liberal, technocratic form that seeks to neutralize the popular antagonisms often exacerbated by neoliberal capitalism, and a populist form that seeks to mobilize these antagonisms through articulations of nationalism with racial, religious, nativist, gendered, and other forms of difference while also seeking to keep them under control. What has been set in motion since the end of the Cold War is a perpetual war between these two forms of hegemony, and the social forces that constitute them, although these battles have assumed dramatically different forms in different nation-states. The forced departure of Zuma from the presidency in South Africa in February 2018 has been accompanied by a deeply destructive battle within the African National Congress between liberal and populist forces, with the latter deploying a form of Christian nationalist political mobilization as a key cudgel with which to bludgeon the liberal Ramaphosa faction. In India, Modi’s Hindu nationalism has triumphed for the time being over the dregs of Nehruvian liberal secularism that survived the neoliberal turn of the Congress Party since the early 1990s. And, as I write in the lead-up to Biden’s inauguration, the electoral defeat of Trump has unleashed levels of antagonism in the United States not seen since the Civil War.

Engaging with the debates about evangelicals vs. Christian nationalists in the first part of this essay, I want to conclude by suggesting some insights enabled by situating religious nationalisms in a global frame in three conjunctures, of necessity in shorthand form, that I will develop more fully in a forthcoming book.

### **Post-World War I**

The aftermath of World War I, the Russian Revolution, and indeed the Spanish flu pandemic, constitutes another global conjunctural moment that was followed by popular uprisings all over the world as well as by conservative forms of backlash. Claims outlined earlier that Christian nationalism emerged as a political force in the interwar years in the United States resonate of course with the rise of white Christian nationalism driven by the *Broederbond* in South Africa in the early 1930s, as well as with the formation of Right-wing Hindu nationalism in India in the mid-1920s. Hindutva took inspiration from Italian fascism and, later, Nazism. Combining blood-and-soil nationalism with mythologies of Muslim tyranny, it was driven by “anxieties among large sections of the upper caste elites as they were pressed by the upsurge of lower castes from one side and the rise of a multi-religious, multi-caste nationalism that was becoming a veritable mass-movement with Gandhi’s shepherding of the

Congress, especially after 1919,” as Aijaz Ahmad makes clear.<sup>43</sup> Drawing explicitly on Gramsci’s conjunctural analysis, Ahmad has also underscored how “If the October Revolution inspired the colonial peoples into a praxeological belief in mass uprisings against colonial State apparatuses, that same revolution instilled in the propertied classes of our countries the fear that the anti-colonial revolution may indeed proceed uninterruptedly to an anti-capitalist one.”<sup>44</sup>

More generally, if we are to relate politics and religion to class struggle, Gramsci has charted the most useful course by far. My own efforts to move along this path are informed by Ahmad, Himani Bannerji, and Fabio Frosini’s brilliant reading of Gramsci on religion and politics:<sup>45</sup>

[W]ith the First World War and the Soviet Revolution a phase of ‘frenetic’ and ‘totalitarian’ integration of subaltern classes is opened, where ‘liberal’ modalities will be, in various degrees, abandoned or downsized, passing to the politics of permanent mobilization of the whole population ... The bourgeoisie, reduced to the role of pure preservation ... takes hold of the religious myths of subalterns and uses them as the engine of the passive inclusion of the masses into the state: the politics of total mobilization absorb the vindication of the people’s participation in power, the politics of colonial expansionism replies to the socialist egalitarian demand. Bourgeois universalism, devoid of any proper content, absorbs the common sense of subalterns and re-organizes its meaning. In this way bourgeois power incorporates the utopian energy of popular religious universalism, rendering it functional to its own expansion.<sup>46</sup>

Frosini’s analysis links directly with Gramsci’s concept of passive revolution that constitutes an extremely valuable comparative category, one that I consider in some depth in my 2014 book about the South African crisis.<sup>47</sup>

## ***Post-World War II***

With the exception of Apartheid, Cold-War-era projects were defined by liberal secular nationalisms, the contradictions of which contributed to the implosions of these projects. An important part of opposition to Apartheid was cast in religious terms. More generally, Daniel Magaziner reminds us that “Christianity has been a key component of South African nationalisms—both black and white” since the nineteenth century; he illuminates as well the process through which many were led to “a total redefinition of the Christian faith in the South African context, from one complicit in colonization and dispossession to a message of assured liberation.”<sup>48</sup> These multiple re-articulations of Christianity as part of political struggles in South Africa highlight the importance of Nikhil Pal Singh’s argument that liberal appropriations of Martin Luther King have rendered him “part of a mythic nationalist discourse, even as it obscures his significantly more complex, worldly, and radical politics.”<sup>49</sup> Singh goes on to note that King came to attack “the presumptions of the ‘amazing universalism’ of the American dream he had championed a only few years before,” coming to argue instead “that the U.S. nation-state was neither a stable mediator of social antagonisms nor the ultimate horizon of black hopes for justice.”<sup>50</sup> In the process, King became more closely allied with other key figures in the Black liberation struggle in the United States who rejected

liberal narratives of inclusive nationalism, turning instead to “a combination of grassroots insurgency with global dreams.”<sup>51</sup>

Religious nationalisms need to be situated explicitly in relation to the crisis of Cold-War-era projects in the late 1960s and early 1970s, summarized succinctly by Leo Panitch as:

A time when increased inter-capitalist competition, rampant inflation, falling rates of profit and spreading speculation against the dollar were conjoined with a worldwide upsurge against American imperialism, while the core capitalist countries themselves were shaken not only by waves of industrial militancy, but by the eruption of youth and black protests in the streets, as the war in Indochina became a US disaster.<sup>52</sup>

Popular struggles were not, however, confined to core capitalist countries, and this was also a time of a global resurgence of fundamentalist religious movements. Emerging in the mid-1970s in many regions of the world, these movements fiercely challenged secular liberalism and “aimed at recovering a sacred foundation for the organization of society—by changing it if necessary,” as Gilles Kepel has pointed out.<sup>53</sup> In addition to Evangelicals, these movements included Hindutva, Political Islam, antisecular Zionists, and Catholic charismatics.<sup>54</sup> They serve as a reminder that the growing political power of Christian nationalism in the United States throughout the 1970s was part of worldwide processes, and take us back to a Gramscian understanding of class struggle in relation to the politics of religious nationalisms.

What is distinctively peculiar about the United States is how, in the 1980s, the Christian Right was a driving force behind the emergence of new forms of US imperialism through its active engagement with proxy wars in different regions of the non-Western world.<sup>55</sup> A global frame also enables us to see how the Christian nationalist takeover of the Republican Party is central to understanding the specific form of racialized neoliberalism in the United States, as well as the interconnections between inner and outer wars.<sup>56</sup>

### ***The present conjuncture***

The retreat of Donald Trump to his kingdom by the sea has left most denizens of blue America bathed in a warm glow of relief, lit by glimmers of hope of a return to liberal “normalcy” with Biden moving quickly to dismantle Trump’s legacy and confront the Covid-19 crisis. Yet the powerful volcanic forces that Trump helped to unleash and amplify are not far from the surface, as Sarah Posner makes clear in her chilling account of how the Christian Right is invoking the wrath of God and Jesus over the theft of the election from Trump and his people.<sup>57</sup>

These escalating tensions between liberal and populist forms of neoliberal hegemony underscore the enormity of the challenges confronting the Left in the United States. They also highlight the need for new forms of internationalism, and for analyses that might help enable such alliances by shedding light on spatiohistorical specificities and interconnections. In a necessarily telegraphic way, let me suggest some ways that the analysis outlined in this essay might contribute to such a project.

The first is the crucial importance of the specific, but changing, forms of US financial and military imperialism, through which the relations of the United States,

not only to its European allies but also to different regions of the non-Western world, have been transformed since the 1980s, and in which the Christian Right was deeply implicated. Reconfigurations of US imperialism since the 1980s form an important part of the answer to why it took so long for Trumpism to take hold.<sup>58</sup>

Second, these imperialist reconfigurations are also deeply interconnected with dynamics of political-economic and spatial restructuring in the United States since the 1980s, along with intensifying class, race, and spatial inequalities—and hence with the mounting antagonisms that we are now witnessing between liberal and populist forms of neoliberal hegemony. In delving more deeply into how these mutually antagonistic hegemonic processes play out in practice, in the realms of everyday life, I have found significant insights in Michael Bray’s work on the mental/manual labour divide as a key force driving forms of class conflict.<sup>59</sup> I propose, in addition, that conjoining these insights with understandings of religious nationalisms in relation to the contradictions and limits of liberal secularism would contribute significantly to our understanding of the warring tendencies inherent in neoliberal forms of hegemony both in and beyond the United States—and do so in mutually illuminating ways.

A third and related set of considerations concerns the limits of nominally inclusive liberal nationalisms, in relation not only to exclusionary religious nationalisms but also to Black liberation struggles. In *Black is a Country*, Singh illuminates how the fundamental reconsideration of race and nation by Black activists and intellectuals in the United States has entailed thinking in a global frame about spatiohistorical processes of interconnection and the global reach of the colour line. This analysis of nationalism speaks directly to debates about racial capitalism, as well as to internationalist aspirations.

## Conclusion

My fundamental task in this essay has been to suggest how a global comparative and conjunctural frame helps to illuminate the politics of religious nationalisms in relation to class processes, and hence, in Gramscian terms, the structural constraints and conjunctural possibilities in which we find ourselves. I offer this analysis as a warning about the dangers of overly optimistic, if not voluntarist, assessments of the socialist potentials of the current crisis. If we are to hold open the possibility for a socialist/ecologically secure future, the Left is going to have to gear up for a very long march through institutions that include the terrain on which the religious nationalist Right has already made significant gains, and that is not limited to the United States.

## Notes

1. *The Rachel Maddow Show*.
2. Smith, Ballard, and Sanders. “Most Voters Say.”
3. The most astute commentary is by Mike Davis, “Riot on the Hill,” along with his “Trench Warfare”—a fine-grained analysis of the election results that sheds light on the rise of Latinx support for Trump in specific regions such as the Texas border.
4. On November 12, 2020, Jennifer Rubin of the *Washington Post* cited exit polls from the National Election Pool showing that, as in 2016, Trump won more than 80 percent of the White evangelical vote: Rubin, “What Election Results Tell Us about Religion in

- America.” In mid-November in the *New York Times*, Katherine Stewart cited exit polls from Edison Research showing that 28 percent of voters identified as either white evangelical or white born-again Christian, and of these 76 percent voted for Trump: Stewart, “Trump or No Trump.”
5. Gerson, “The Last Temptation.”
  6. In “The Last Temptation,” Gerson railed fiercely against Trump and his religious allies.
  7. Rubin, “What the Election Tells Us About Religion in America.”
  8. Stewart, “Trump or No Trump.”
  9. In addition to the insights generated by analyses such as those of Davis in “Trench Warfare,” Cristina Beltrán’s conception of multiracial whiteness in “To Understand Trump’s Support” is apposite: “Multiracial whiteness reflects an understanding of whiteness as a political color and not simply a racial identity—a discriminatory worldview in which feelings of freedom and belonging are produced through the persecution and dehumanization of others.”
  10. Gorski, *American Covenant*, 3.
  11. O’Meara *Volkskapitalisme*, 83.
  12. As recently discussed by Walden Bello, “The conservative version of American Exceptionalism was first forcibly expressed in the early 1980s by Jeane Kirkpatrick, Ronald Reagan’s ambassador to the United Nations, who said that the United States was indeed exceptional and unique and that its democracy was *not* for export as other countries lacked the cultural requisites to water it, thus providing the justification of American support for dictators like the Philippines’ Ferdinand Marcos and Chile’s Augusto Pinochet.” Bello, “The United States Has Entered a Frightening Weimar Era.”
  13. See Hart “Changing Concepts of Articulation” for a discussion of my use of this concept.
  14. Stewart, *The Power Worshipers*, 4.
  15. See Williams, *God’s Own Party*, 278–79 for a bibliography of earlier literature.
  16. Worthen, *Apostles of Reason*, 10.
  17. Gerson, “The Last Temptation.”
  18. Lichtman, *White Protestant Nation*, 2–4.
  19. Lichtman, *White Protestant Nation*, 5.
  20. Williams, *God’s Own Party*, 2.
  21. Kruse, *One Nation Under God*, 292–93.
  22. Gorski, “Revisited: Why Do Evangelicals Vote for Trump?”
  23. Gorski, “Why Evangelicals Voted for Trump.”
  24. Gorski “Why Evangelicals Voted for Trump;” see also his *American Covenant* for an elaboration of this argument.
  25. Whitehead and Perry, *Taking America Back for God*, 62. They draw mainly on the 2017 Baylor Religion Survey to construct a composite scale based on respondents’ level of agreement with six separate, though related, statements about whether the United States should be a Christian nation, and use this to identify four main orientations towards Christian nationalism. They then use multiple regressions to correlate these measures with various indicators.
  26. Whitehead and Perry, *Taking America Back for God*, 153.
  27. Whitehead and Perry, *Taking America Back for God*, 19; emphasis in original.
  28. Whitehead and Perry, *Taking America Back for God*, 17, 117, 178.
  29. See Rehmann, *Theories of Ideology*, for an extremely useful elaboration of theories of ideology.
  30. Stewart, *The Power Worshipers*.
  31. Stewart, *The Power Worshipers*, 7.
  32. Stewart, *The Power Worshipers*, 8–9.
  33. Diamond, *The Road to Dominion*, 248. Other significant but uncited contributions include Goldberg, *Kingdom Coming* that traverses some of the same ground as Stewart’s account, and Hedges, *American Fascism*.
  34. Shea, *Believe Me*, 36.

35. Clarkson, *Dominionism*, 7.
36. Hawley, “The American Renewal Project.”
37. Monographs of which I am aware are McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*; Moreton, *To Serve God and Walmart*; and Bean, *The Politics of Evangelical Identity*.
38. Bean, *The Politics of Evangelical Identity*.
39. See also Jadhav, “Was It Rural Populism?”
40. Hart, “Why Did It Take So Long?”
41. Davis, “The Great God Trump.”
42. In “D/developments After the Meltdown,” I distinguish between “small d” as the development of capitalism, and “big D” Development as a project of intervention in the “Third World” that took hold in the post-World War II era.
43. Ahmad, “India: Liberal Democracy,” 182.
44. Ahmad, *Lineages of the Present*, 165.
45. Bannerji, *Demography and Democracy* and Frosini, “Why Does Religion Matter?”
46. Frosini, “Why Does Religion Matter?” 183.
47. Hart, *Rethinking the South African Crisis*, especially chapter 6.
48. Magaziner, *The Law and the Prophets*, 11.
49. Singh, *Black is a Country*, 3.
50. Singh, *Black Is a Country*, 14.
51. Singh, *Black Is a Country*, 219.
52. Panitch, “The New Imperial State,” 10.
53. Kepel, *The Revenge of God*, 2.
54. Important accounts of the resurgence of Hindutva in the 1970s include Bannerji, *Democracy and Demography* and Basu *et al.*, *Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags*.
55. Hart, “Why Did It Take So Long,” 253–54.
56. I will develop these arguments more fully in forthcoming work. Key interlocutors include Camp, *Incarcerating the Crisis*, Singh, *Race and America’s Long War*, and Camp and Greenburg “Counterinsurgency Reexamined.”
57. Posner, “How the Christian Right Helped Foment Insurrection.”
58. Hart, “Why Did It Take So Long?” 251–56.
59. Bray, “Rearticulating Contemporary Populism” and *Powers of the Mind*.

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