

## Chapter 6

# Spiritual Warfare and the Apocalypse: The Religious Framing of Political Violence in American Cultural Nationalism

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The framing of political violence in the Trump era has included the use of religious themes to legitimate a coalition uniting segments of the Christian right with non-Christian far-right groups like American Nazis, QAnon followers, and the Proud Boys. This chapter traces the formation of the concepts of spiritual warfare and apocalyptic violence among these groups prior to their current alliance, activities contributing to the formation of this alliance (the message of the framing), and whether the alliance is sustainable in its present form.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

It is hard to ignore the prevalence of religious ideas and symbols among conspiracy theorists and right-wing extremists engaged in political unrest and violence in the U.S. today. QAnon has appropriated evangelical ideas about spiritual warfare and a hoped for religious great awakening (Argentino, 2020; Burke, 2020). There is no hiding support from the Christian right for the stop-the-steal movement after the 2020 presidential election or conservative Christian involvement in the rally and riot at the Capitol building on the day of the certification of the Electoral College results (Boorstein, 2021; Cox, 2021; Dias & Graham, 2021; Green, 2021). Current far-right warnings of an impending civil war have antecedents in racist interpretations of Bible prophecy and dystopian novels (Allen, 2019; Kaplan, 2018). Even after the inauguration of Joe Biden, “prophets” declared that Trump would still become President and at times even promised a military coup (Boorstein, 2021; Faith Unveiled Network, 2021; Mantyla, 2021).

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Until recently, the appearance of religious themes in domestic extremism, actions such as the bombing of abortion clinics or the criminality and violence of the Posse Comitatus and Montana Freeman, had been viewed as isolated events tied to radicalized lone wolves or small groups of zealots (Juergensmeyer, 1998; Schlatter, 2006). However, we are now seeing the rise of a new-right coalition that mobilizes people using well-established religious frames tied to spiritual warfare and apocalyptic violence in the promotion of American cultural nationalism, whether or not its followers are personally religious (Nascimento, 2005). The result has been the mainstreaming of extremism (Barkun, 2017).

This cooperation of Christian conservatives and non-Christian extremists under the same religious umbrella could not have been anticipated four decades ago. In the 1980s, the rise of a transatlantic network of right-wing extremists challenged Protestant hegemony over the American far right with a new wave of groups (Berlet & Vysotsky, 2006; Gardell, 2003; Hawley, 2018; Kaplan & Weinberg, 1998; Main, 2018). Recognizing this development raises two obvious questions. First, how did Christian groups that had once regarded the development and spread of democratic institutions as part of the nation's divine mission come to reject democracy in favor of authoritarianism and accelerationism? Second, how did new-wave extremists come to find Christian language acceptable? This paper discusses the development of these religious frames, activities contributing to the formation of this coalition and the message of the framing, and whether the alliance is sustainable in its present form.

## **American Cultural Nationalism**

Cultural nationalism refers to an attempt of one group of people to lay claim to the institutions, culture, and values of a society to the exclusion of the claims of other groups that also participated in the development and maintenance of the society (Leerssen, 2006; Smith, 1999). In the U.S., cultural nationalists describe American society as having core components that are Christian, White, and European (Hawley, 2018; Main, 2018; Posner, 2020; Stewart, 2020; Whitehead & Perry, 2020). This position underlies resistance to anything deemed by its adherents as a special privilege granted to racial or cultural minorities—affirmative action policies, diversity initiatives in education and the workplace, “safe spaces,” and public recognition of non-Christian holidays. Nonetheless, there is considerable variation regarding the degree of emphasis on specific components and the extent to which “outsiders” are tolerated. For example, Christian nationalists regard religious influences as foundational to the U.S. while White supremacists accentuate the country's racialized Anglo-Saxon or European heritage. Some groups decry racial and cultural intermingling; others are willing to coexist as long as the hegemony of White European culture is acknowledged.

Individual groups on the right share a preoccupation with the alleged decline of the West. Concern for the state of Western civilization has not been limited to cultural nationalists. Regardless theoretical orientation, social thinkers in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries were almost unanimous in their conclusions that people had somehow become “lost” in the transition to modernity. Durkheim (1997) referred to anomie and the pathological division of labor. Marx (1959) called the problem alienation. For Weber (2001), it was termed disenchantment. Freud (2002) saw modernization as a source of psychosis.

Cultural nationalists often look to radical right intellectuals in Europe from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century onward for theoretical definitions of their grievances (Vandiver, 2018). Most notably, Oswald Spengler (1880-1936), author of the famed two-volume *The Decline of the West*, published in 1918 and 1922, maintained that technology and rationalism had brought a cultural winter to Western civilization, and racial minorities would eventually revolt and use the West's tools against it (Engels, 2019; Frye, 1974;

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Hughes, 1991; Prince, 2007). The great-replacement thesis blames cultural decay on the numerical growth of minority groups and cross-border migrants (Charlton, 2019; Davey & Ebner, 2019).

Several authors Americanize these themes (Sedgwick, 2019). Pat Buchanan may have been the most influential contributors to the mainstreaming of the far right (Ashbee, 2019). Not only is Buchanan's name well recognized from his time as a Nixon aide and Republican presidential candidate, but Buchanan also adopts a more mild tone in his bestselling book, *The Death of the West* (2002). Buchanan distinguishes himself from many others in the movement by focusing on cultural differences associated with race and ethnicity over the preoccupation of many White identitarians on biological traits.

Today's new right responds to the perceived decline of the West with an emphasis on authoritarianism and accelerationism. (Neither authoritarianism nor accelerationism are exclusively right-wing phenomena; I deal only with the new right here.) Modern authoritarianism is an antidemocratic position asserting that only a certain individual or group should govern. Key points of this argument vary by whether the perspective is grounded in European fascism or American paleoconservatism. The European position is rooted in Julius Evola's (1995) boosterism for a spiritual racism led and protected by strong leaders (Hakl, 2019). Consistent with the argument laid out by Spengler, Evola regarded democratic tendencies as a weakening of the social order. In the American version, a Machiavellian republicanism puts limits on who should be allowed to participate in democratic processes (Galston, 2018; Vatter, 2012). Whether democratic processes are chaotic is a point that can be argued in the abstract; however, the American new right redirects populist arguments against elitism and globalism by demonizing minorities and immigrants to justify segregation, voter suppression, and travel bans (DeRienzo, 2020).

Accelerationism is used to justify the escalation of violence in the present time to achieve the authoritarian goal (Anti-Defamation League, 2019; Byman, 2020; Noys, 2014). The idea, a modern-day revamping of Schumpeter's creative destruction, legitimates rapid, dramatic social changes in the face of the purported crises of our time. In the hands of the new right, accelerationism means overturning a status quo that has accepted foreign influences such as globalism and immigration. Violent force is deemed an acceptable strategy when these issues cannot be curtailed through electoral processes and the rule of law.

## **Religious Framing and the Legitimation of Violence**

The debate over the relationship between religion and violence is often presented as a binary (Cavanaugh, 2013). Either religion is intrinsically violent or it is not, and there is no middle ground. The proponents of the connection of religion and violence have supporting anecdotes about despicable actions such as wars, terrorism, sexual abuse, and slavery done in the name of religion or by people claiming to be religious. The defenders of religion forward examples of religious humanitarianism and cite the protective benefits of religion in dealing with problems like substance abuse, mental health, and juvenile delinquency.

However, the link between religion and violence is much more complicated. Violence is not universal to religious experience, nor is it a necessary consequence of religion. Nonetheless, religious violence is intrinsically tied to the way in which religious communities segregate themselves from outsiders and respond to perceived threats (Cavanaugh, 2007; Huber, 2011; Juergensmeyer et al., 2017; Singal, 2019; Wellman & Tokuno, 2004). Given the inconsistency of outcomes, religious beliefs and practices should be viewed as malleable; their meaning can be adapted to fit a variety of situations (Rogers, 2004).

Religion, then, is not a static entity but part of a cultural tool kit drawn upon during periods of crisis (Swidler, 1986). Religious rites, symbols, and the ideologies can be used as part of a social-movement

framing process having four functions (Benford & Snow, 2000; della Porta & Pavan, 2017; Snow, 2008; Snow et al., 1986). First, religion can be used to define grievances and identify the underlying source of problems. Second, it can provide slogans, symbols, and ideologies to justify mass mobilizations. Next, it can dictate possible courses for action. Finally, it can legitimate a movement or protest by anchoring it in longstanding traditions and values.

Before the rise of the new right, American cultural nationalism relied extensively on Christian frames. For example, throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, segments of American evangelicalism used the Bible to justify White racial superiority, slavery, and Jim Crow (Butler, 2021; Haynes, 2002). In the wake of D. W. Griffin's 1915 film *Birth of a Nation*, the Ku Klux Klan's popularity surged because of its claims to support Protestant institutions and morality allegedly threatened by foreign immigration (Fox, 2011; Jenkins, 1990; McVeigh, 2009).

Through much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, British Israelism and Christian Identity were used as major frames to legitimate White supremacy (Barkun, 1997). British Israelism posited that some of the descendants of the lost ten tribes of Israel made their way to England and eventually the United States, quite literally turning the New World into the New Israel. Christian Identity, the movement's offshoot, regarded only Whites (e.g., Anglo-Saxons, Germanic, and Nordic peoples) as biological descendants of Adam while supporting prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory practices on the grounds that contemporary Jews and non-Whites were members of inferior, non-Adamite races.

During the 1970s, a new transatlantic right rose that was more committed to violence and less Christian than the past (Kaplan & Weinberg, 1998). Christianity did not completely disappear from the American far right, but many groups in this new wave of extremists groups used alternative frames that explicitly rejected Christianity—pantheism, Odinism, occultism, eugenics, or secular humanism (Hawley, 2018; Main, 2018; Posner, 2020; Stewart, 2020; Whitehead & Perry, 2020).

Nonetheless, American movements did not sustain completely their radical turn away from Christianity. First, the “clash of civilizations” (Huntington, 1996) triggered a series of conflicts framed largely in religious terms, such as Islam versus the Christian West, so much so that the prevalence of religious motifs in the framing of terrorist groups and other security threats dominated the era (Rapoport, 2004). Second, even with secularization, a large segment of the U.S. had retained its religiosity, so the appropriation of religious frames was an important component in the mainstreaming of radicalism. With the American new right, two ideas—spiritual warfare and apocalyptic violence—have been particularly important religious frames.

## **Spiritual Warfare**

Militaristic themes in the Christian right today appeal directly to the Bible for their precedent (Wagner, 2012a). According to Scripture, there is a fundamental conflict between light and darkness (Mt. 4:16; 5:14-15; 6:22-23; Jo. 1:1-9; 4:19-21; 1 Co. 4:5; 2 Co. 4:4-5; 6:14; Ep. 5:8-14; 1 Th. 5:4-5; 1 Pe. 2:9 2 Pe. 1:18; 1 Jo. 1:5-7). This battle is described as spiritual, and it is not a war against visible forces (Zec. 4:6; 2 Co. 10:3-6; Ep. 6:11-12). God is a fortress (2 Sa. 22:2; Ps. 18:2; 62:6; 91:2; 144:2), and believers are encouraged to “be strong” and “stand” (1 Co. 15:58; Ga. 5:1; Eph. 6:10-17; 2 Th. 2:15; 1 Pe. 5:12). The Christian warrior does not depend on guns, bombs, and tanks, but on prayer, Scripture, and moral suasion.

## Spiritual Warfare and the Christian Right

For most Christians, spiritual warfare is exactly as it is described above—spiritual, not physical. Nonetheless, with the rise of dominion theology, segments of the Christian right have adapted the concept as a frame to legitimate violence against targets like cultural minorities, political adversaries, and international enemies (Clarkson, 2016). Most noteworthy has been the influence of dominion theology across Christian reconstructionism, the New Apostolic Reformation (NAR), and Marianist Catholicism.

Dominionism originated in the Christian reconstructionism of Rousas John Rushdoony (1916-2001), who presupposed that Christian beliefs and ethics were the divinely ordained foundation for society (Ingersoll, 2015). According to reconstructionists, Old Testament laws are still binding, including harsh penalties such as stoning and death. The founders of the U.S., it is claimed, established a theonomy, not a democracy for free-thinking individuals. They assumed that the states were already Christian republics with the Constitution serving as a pact between them to manage secular affairs. Liberty exists only when the country accepts divine guidance and abides by biblical standards (Hedges, 2006; Kirk et al., 2021). To restore the original vision of the nation's founders, contemporary Christians should reject separation of church and state and lay claim to the culture at large. Versions of these ideas have permeated the Christian home school movement, neoconservative politics and international relations, libertarian politics, and the Tea Party (Hedges, 2006; Ingersoll, 2015; Sharlet, 2010).

The NAR modified dominionism to suit its own purposes. Built on theories of church growth elaborated by C. Peter Wagner (1998, 1999), the NAR comprises independent networks of charismatic churches claiming to recover the ancient spiritual offices of apostle and prophet, who supposedly receive divine instructions about the governance of the Church and access to new revelations from God for our time. According to the NAR, spiritual warfare is a literal battle between angels and demons in the spirit realm, a place unseen by human eyes where angelic activities impact real-world affairs in the earthly realm (Wagner, 2012b). In this spirit realm, specific angels and demons are described as fighting for control over geographic territories to which they are assigned. The “seven mountain mandate” lays out a claim that Christians should exercise their dominion over seven cultural spheres—education, religion, family, business, government/military, arts, and the media (Weaver, 2016).

For Wagner, dominion theology was largely about social engagement. Wagner's (1999) earliest examples were organizing against abortion, combating food insecurity, sponsoring community events, and apolitical activities like Marches for Jesus and Promise Keepers rallies. It is also not clear that the original advocates of the seven-mountain mandate meant anything more than Christians should be bolder about their involvement in secular affairs. They did not, at least not initially, advocate working outside existing political processes to establish theonomic authoritarianism.

Although Christian nationalism is often described as evangelical in nature, its spread among American Roman Catholics cannot be ignored (Berlet & Lyons, 2000). Marianists, who seek to preserve traditional veneration of the Virgin Mother, maintain that they are engaged in warfare against Satan. One of its major organizations, Human Life International, is noted for its promotion of theocratic ideas and its production and distribution of materials for the pro-life movement.

Some members of the aforementioned movements have diminished the spiritual part of spiritual warfare in favor of an emphasis on the warfare side. This contingent endorses pursuing theonomic or theocratic authoritarianism through an aggressive approach to politics and militaristic conquests of the seven mountains. Reproductive rights, housing fairness for LGBTQ individuals, and racial equality have been labeled demonic in this contemporary war (O'Donnell, 2020a, 2020b; Tabachnick, 2013; Weaver,

2016). In Third World countries, dominionism has been used to sanction mob violence and military coups (Garrard, 2020). In the U.S., the theology has been associated with antiabortion bombings and voter suppression (Hedges, 2006; Stuart, 2013; Weaver, 2016). In 2013 evangelist Rick Joyner called for the overthrow of the Obama administration, and prior to the 2020 election, the same person called for Christians to join citizen militias in preparation for armed conflicts with the left (Lemon, 2020; Weaver, 2016). Although there still remains debate about the size of the following of this form of religious extremism, certainly some of the support within the Christian right for Trumpism should be interpreted in this light (Clarkson, 2016; Mikva, 2021; Mindshift Podcast, 2020; Montgomery, 2021; Stroop, 2020). Not surprisingly, the theme of spiritual warfare was used to legitimate stop-the-steal advocacy and other post-election conspiracy theories and protests.

### Spiritual Warfare and the Non-Christian Right

While some patriot and militia groups have a foundation in Christian Identity (Barkun, 1997; Berlet & Lyons, 2000), many American new-wave movements joined the quest for alternative religious or philosophical frames (Gardell, 2003; Goodrick-Clarke, 2002). William Luther Pierce created his own religion, a pantheistic worldview called cosmotheism, in which Whites, unlike Jews or Blacks, possessed a divine spark. (Whether Pierce's religious organization was intended to be spiritual or simply a ruse to claim a religious tax exemption is an open question.) Ben Klassen's Church of the Creativity regarded Christianity as too Jewish in origin and concluded that loving one's neighbor was racial suicide. European paganism entered the American right through the introduction of practices allegedly derived from the Celtic, Germanic, and Nordic peoples. Interest in the origins of the Aryans in Vedic India also opened the door to occult and Hindu influences through the theosophy of Madame Blavatsky and the teachings of Savitri Devi.

Nonetheless, the cross-fertilization of Christian ideas affected these groups in two ways (Hawley, 2018). First, there was a revisioning of the person Jesus. An affinity emerged between the Christian idea of spiritual warfare and European folk traditions, most notably Norse mythology and the glorification of warrior-heroes, who in Odinism are attributed personal strength, bravery, and take-charge attitudes making them worthy of emulation (Nighswander, 2020). Savitri Devi's claim that highly gifted "Men above Time" flourished in a variety of contexts encouraged national socialists to examine a number of well-known religious figures, including Jesus, Buddha, and Akhenation (Gardell, 2003). For example, James Nolan Mason (2017, 2018), a self-proclaimed devotee of Adolf Hitler and Charles Manson and whose writings inspire today's Atomwaffen and The Base, found sufficient similarities between Jesus and Hitler that Mason put Jesus on par with Hitler and Manson while still rejecting the institutional Church.

Second, leaderless resistance and internet communication have resulted in a free-flowing exchange of ideas (Dickson, 2020b). This lack of structure undermines the formation of group consensus as participants are free to introduce an eclectic mix of ideas into conversations and threads without constraint or penalty. The result has been the incorporation of Christian language and religious frames within new-wave movements where they previously had been absent. For example, the rough-and-tumble Proud Boys, while not embracing formal positions on theology and personal spirituality, describe themselves fighting for Christianity as part of their effort to preserve Western civilization (Southern Poverty Law Center, n.d.). QAnon adopted religious themes as evangelicals embraced it (Argentino, 2020; Burke, 2020).

## Apocalyptic Violence

The use of Bible prophecy to interpret current events has been part of Anglo-American public discourse since the 16<sup>th</sup> century (Bekkering, 2011; Rogers, 2004; Toon, 1972). In addition to the obvious Christian roots of this apocalyptic language, apocalypticism has been secularized in the forms of utopian and dystopian literature and cinema (Cowan, 2011; Ritzenhoff & Krewani, 2015; Stewart & Harding, 1999). In recent events, both Christian and alt-right versions of apocalypticism have been used to justify political violence and accelerationism.

### Apocalyptic Violence and the Christian Right

While Christian views regarding the end times are based on Scripture, unlike the concept of spiritual warfare, they are not straightforward. Instead, they are bound to communities of interpretation that guide their followers through a complex maze of events and symbols described in biblical passages deemed futuristic, most notably the Books of Revelation and Daniel, Jesus's discourse about the destruction of Jerusalem, and epistles written to the Thessalonians and allegedly by Peter. A variety of positions have emerged with pretribulationism and postmillennialism providing the dominant frames (Boyer, 1992; Frykholm, 2007; Gribben, 2009; Wilson, 2001).

Pretribulationism holds true believers will be “raptured” from the Earth before the tribulation, a seven-year period of repeated global crises, natural and human made. During these years, the world will unite under the rule of the one-world government of the Antichrist, and as the armies of the world gather for war near Megiddo in Israel, Jesus Christ will suddenly return to Earth and physically establish a kingdom that will last for a millennium. These events, it is currently argued, must happen within a generation of the 1948 founding of the State of Israel, which means prophetic events should begin to move quickly over this decade, including a final end-times revival that will result in the conversion of a large numbers of Jews to Christianity. Versions of pretribulationism have dominated evangelical prophecy belief throughout the 20th century and include best-selling books such as Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970) and the *Left Behind* series of the 1990s.

By contrast, postmillennialists assume that the establishment of the kingdom of God is a human endeavor and that any physical return of Jesus Christ will happen after the millennium. The position had longstanding acceptance in Christianity since at least the time of Augustine (354-430) and remained the preeminent position on the end times until the rise of dispensational fundamentalism in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Today this position sees Christians living through the difficult times of the tribulation, and it has confidence that Christians have can usher in a theonomy or theocracy on their own without divine intervention. Postmillennialism is experiencing a revival due to the spread of the ideas of dominionism, also sometimes called Kingdom Now theology to emphasize the possibility that ushering in the reign of God could happen as the result of the work of Christians today, not in the future (Ingersoll, 2015).

Premillennialism and postmillennialism historically have been regarded as incompatible teachings because of their difference on the timing of Jesus's return, but they currently share a religious frame in which contemporary social and political struggles are deemed battles against the so-called New World Order (NWO). According to NWO conspiracy theories, global elites are working behind the scenes to create a one-world government, the same “beast system” that will be governed by the future Antichrist (Lecaque, 2020). Politicized versions of these theories often name the Democratic Party as co-conspirators in this plot because of its alleged role in the promotion of socialism and desire to cooperate with inter-

national governments and organizations, including Communist China, on matters such as trade and the environment. Trump's presidency was seen as thwarting demonic attempts to prevent the advancement of Christianity before we moved into the last days (Berry, 2020)

In their extreme form, NWO theories have absorbed classic conspiracies about Jews, the Illuminati, the United Nations, and Satanic cabals dating back to the time of ancient Babylon. Although there is a long history of American evangelicals accepting certain conspiracy theories, these ideas were given new life within the Christian right because Pat Robertson, a televangelist and Republican presidential candidate, published a book titled *New World Order* in 1991 (Berlet & Lyons, 2000; FitzGerald, 2017). Some NAR leaders have promoted claims that human bloodlines are affected by reptilian beings or extraterrestrials, demons reside in mosques, and Barak Obama was working for the Islamicization of America (Weaver, 2016). In addition, Marianists within the Roman Catholic Church use NWO theories as lenses through which they interpret the messages allegedly delivered by the Virgin Mary at Fatima in 1917 (Berlet & Lyons, 2000).

These beliefs have created a frame supporting the idea that the adherents of the supposed NWO need to be constrained, perhaps violently. For premillennialists, elites are hindering a global great awakening—one last outpouring of the Holy Spirit—before believers are raptured. For some, this revival also results in the conversion of the Jews to Christianity. For postmillennialists, a victorious war over the NWO brings about the desired theonomy or theocracy.

## Apocalyptic Violence and the Non-Christian Right

Since the publication of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* in 1903, White supremacists have promoted NWO conspiracy theories, even framing them as struggles against the same “beast system” tied to Christian interpretations of the end times. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, far-right apocalyptic fiction has portrayed the ultimate victory as a product of violence (Kaplan, 2018). Particularly important to the reinforcement of the death-of-the-West thesis are two dystopian novels published in the 1970s (Allen, 2019). In France in 1973, Jean Raspail published *Camp of the Saints*, which described the collapse of the West due to Third World immigration. In 1978, William Luther Pierce published *The Turner Diaries*, the now classic statement of a race war in the U.S.

These two novels continue to have a profound influence on the American new up to this present time. White supremacists use as a motivational slogan the acronym RAHOWA, which stands for racial holy war (Gardell, 2003). Lone wolves have cited *The Turner Diaries* to justify domestic terrorism, and events in the book parallel some of what was seen in the Capitol riot on January 6 (Alter, 2021; Berger, 2016). *Camp of the Saints* had been less influential in the U.S. historically, but it rose to greater prominence in the Trump administration because it influenced Steve Bannon's views on social order, and White House advisor Stephen Miller encouraged *Breitbart* to make comparisons between current immigration trends and the book (Blumenthal & Rieger, 2017; Garcia-Navarro, 2019).

End-times thinking has been emerging in other ways as well. Militia groups have defended their preparations for armed conflict using NWO conspiracy theories (Barkun, 1997; Berlet & Lyons, 2000). In December 2020, Oath Keepers issued a call for armed resistance against the Chinese takeover of the U.S., which would happen through China's two new puppets, Joe Biden and Kamala Harris (End Times Watch, 2020). QAnon incorporated evangelical apocalyptic themes, including converting hopes for an end-times great awakening into a desire for a utopian age free from the perversions of the Deep State (Alt, 2020).



## The Organization and Ideology of the Alliance

The alliance between the Christian and non-Christian right is the product of decades of deliberate organizing intended to mainstream extremism. The Christian right started to “take back” the U.S. after the 1975 IRS ruling that students at Bob Jones University could be deprived federal student aid because of the school’s segregationist practices (Balmer, 2006; Berlet & Lyons, 2000; Nelson, 2019; Stewart, 2020). The IRS decision rippled through a network of private Southern Christian schools that had been organized intentionally to create White educational enclaves to evade the consequences of *Brown v. Board of Education* and subsequent civil rights legislation. Under the leadership of a handful of wealthy and politically active segregationists, right-wing conservatives covertly spread their racialized agenda by linking it to positions that would appeal to mainstream conservatives, wedge issues such as religious freedom, abortion, and free markets. The building of this coalition resulted in an extensive organizational infrastructure that has included groups like the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), Moral Majority, Coalition on Revival (COR), Rutherford Institute, and Council on National Policy (CNP).

Richard Spencer’s alt-right was the first attempt to create a broad alliance to unite the splintered American new right under the umbrella of cultural nationalism (Bar-On, 2019). However, it was the appeal of Trumpism that ultimately led to the formation of an ideological alliance between the Christian and non-Christians wings of the far right. Radical Catholic and former *Breitbart* editor Steve Bannon used the spiritual-warfare frame in multiple media projects (Urban, 2017). “Court evangelicals” incorporated Trump into their end-times prophecies (Fea, 2018). Behind the scenes, groups like the ALEC and the CNP designed communication and legislative strategies to accompany the agenda (Nelson, 2019; Rosenberg, 2021).

As a result of these and numerous other efforts, this diverse alliance is now framed around themes of spiritual warfare and apocalyptic violence. The current christianization of the American new right does not appear to be a commitment to evangelical or Catholic piety as they are commonly understood. Rather, it pursues a racialized myth of a glorious past in Europe and America. However, we need to be cautious about viewing this actively solely as a grievance about diversity or the end of Christian hegemony. Beneath it lies a concern about a growing divide between elites and masses of people, especially working-class laborers feeling unable to support their families and rural areas as massive demographic and economic changes sweep across the country (Sawhill, 2018; Wuthnow, 2019). Religious frames related to spiritual warfare and the Apocalypse supports to use of violence as a response to this situation in at least two ways:

1. *The language of spiritual warfare legitimates authoritarianism.* The framing of political issues as battles in a spiritual war escalates ordinary politics. Political disagreements are no longer solely differences in governing philosophy but are tied deeply to the direction of Western civilization. By way of illustration, a simple, sensible act like wearing a facemask to protect oneself and others has escalated into a plot by antichristian forces to introduce socialism (Collins, 2020; Dickson, 2020a). In response, dominion theology has been used to unite a segment of the Christian right with national socialists and other far-right groups to support top-down approaches to secular rule, even if the actions result in the overturning of democratic norms. The end, it appears, justifies the means.
2. *Apocalyptic language promotes accelerationism.* Eschatology for American new right is not a vague discussion of future events or a gradual dawning of the kingdom of God. The fulfillment

of prophecy is understood to be here and now. The ordinary machinations of the political system are now seen as the workings of a global conspiracy that must be resisted at all costs. The warrior-hero who takes things in one's own hands becomes a model for the acceleration of violence for the radicalized individual to emulate.

## **Discussion**

It is easy to misinterpret the support for mass violence through concepts like spiritual warfare and the Apocalypse as necessary consequences of conservative Christianity or the far-right glorification of the Nordic warrior-heroes. It is true that in some sense the elaboration of these concepts in religious texts sets an agenda for action. However, there can be multiple outcomes supported from the same texts because religious ideas are malleable. Prophecies can be used to support utopian thinking just as they can be used to support apocalyptic violence. Consequently, religion is best understood as a cultural tool, and in light of recent events, the tool has been used to mobilize people in support authoritarianism and accelerationism.

This paper lays a basic groundwork for discussing the use of religious frames to support antidemocratic trends and political violence in the American new right. The breadth of support for this kind of religious extremism is uncertain. Survey data indicates widespread support for election conspiracies and political violence among evangelicals and Republicans (Cox, 2021, 2021). However, adherence to ideas like spiritual warfare and the end times are best described as continuums of belief and practice. There are those for whom these religious frames simply provide an opportunity to vent dissatisfaction about the state of society without an intent to engage in violence. For others, these ideas align with strategies for aggressive or violent action. Most people identifying with the Christian right have yet cross the line separating loud but peaceful dissent from violence. We are still unclear where this line is and what it takes to push or pull someone across it.

The real question is whether this alliance should be regarded as a long-term security threat. High levels of emotional intensity are hard to sustain across a large group of people with stable social relationships (Douglas, 1970). Certainly the non-Christian far right has always taken extremist stances and shows no signs of moderation. Historically, these extremist groups have not stayed alive through the formation of large stable organizations capable of influencing the main currents of the prevailing culture. Instead, they are caught in a never-ending series of splits, and their security threats are usually limited to lone-wolf activities. I do not want to minimize the potential impact of these activities, as we saw in the devastating Oklahoma City bombing in 1995, but a solitary actor is not going to overthrow the whole of American democracy, as was attempted on January 6. Similarly, the Christian right already has a history of lone-wolf domestic terrorism, and there seems to be nothing that indicates its abatement.

A more complicated issue is whether the Christian right as a whole could become a security threat given its recent support for Trumpism and political violence. Here there are multiple possible outcomes. At this moment, the Christian right is becoming a divided faith community in the wake of recent events. Until now, those advocating conspiracy theories or extremism have dominated the mass and social media. In the wake of the election and the ongoing claims of "prophets" that God's power will be seen in legal or military actions that will restore the Trump's presidency (I am writing in April 2021 and these "prophecies" are still happening), there is mounting opposition to right-wing extremism from groups of traditional evangelical and charismatic/Pentecostal leaders (Duin, 2021; Jenkins, 2021). One possible outcome is that this mounting opposition will prevail, and we return to the religious status quo of the

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pre-Trump era. However, this opposition has yet to demonstrate that it can sway the mass of the laity who support the Christian right, and at this time there are indicators that segments of the evangelical movement are preparing to remain with the religious frames that support mass unrest and political violence. In light of this, I lay out four possible scenarios.

*Scenario #1: The Christian right becomes a security threat.* One possibility is that a significant segment of the Christian right will become a bona fide security threat. In the wake of the election and Capitol riot, some evangelicals, especially in southern California and Arizona, have continued to engage in conversations with alt-light groups, like Charlie Kirk's Turning Point USA (Hibbs & Kirk, 2021; Kirk et al., 2021). In addition, premillennialist interpretations regarding the Second Coming of Jesus Christ within a generation of the founding of the nation of Israel have created a "prophetic time bomb." Predictions that Christ's coming would occur within 40 to 70 years (an interpretation of the biblical meaning of a generation) have not been fulfilled, and some prophecy believers are now insisting the key events will happen in or near 2028. It is not a stretch to think that a group of baby-boom evangelicals, anticipating the proximity of the end times, could utilize frames of spiritual warfare and the Apocalypse to accelerate violent confrontations with what they regard as evil.

*Scenario #2: The Christian right institutionalizes as a political party.* The formation of new political parties and the transformation of existing ones are ways in which religious and revolutionary movements routinize the energy of the foundational epoch. For example, the Second Great Awakening gave rise to the Know Nothing party, and the lingering effects of its religious revivals permanently altered voting patterns in Western New York and Ohio (Hammond, 1979); the Sudanese Mahdists provided the foundation for the National Umma Party (Warburg, 2003). One might argue that the transformation of the Republican Party fulfills this scenario, though there still remains consideration discussion in far-right chat rooms over whether wealthy donors and party bosses can make loyal allies in the struggle against elites and the NWO, and some have been promoting the establishment of a third party.

*Scenario #3: The Christian right experiences a religious awakening.* The history of evangelicalism to renew itself may in part reflect its commitment to a sacred text that has to be confronted on its own terms (Ong, 2002). While it appears that the Christian right today is highlighting militaristic themes from Scripture, a text-driven approach to lifestyle ethics must eventually return to passages about personal character and social justice (e.g., Mt. 5-7; Mt. 25:31-46; Ga. 5:22-23), as Christian groups have done at various times in the past, or else the movement completely changes its character. One might argue that this transition already appears to be happening as millennial evangelicals reject the social and political positions of their parents (Griswold, 2018). Moreover, the oft unrecognized diversity of evangelicalism—its appeal among Black and Hispanic minorities—creates a context in which a cross fertilization of ideas that undermine White supremacy is likely as White evangelicalism declines as a proportion of the population (Bailey, 2020; Rodriguez, 2008).

*Scenario #4: The Christian right declines in influence.* The final path is secularization. Here the historical precedent is Cromwellian England, whose inability to accept moral diversity led to a rejection of the religious monopolization of public life and eventually the Acts of Toleration. We cannot yet dismiss the possibility that a slight change in voting results in swing states could yield dramatically different outcomes on the national level and give the right-wing alliance some life in the short term. However, as with the strict public morality imposed by the Puritans, the ideological coalition driving authoritarianism and accelerationism is not supported by a majority of Americans. Missteps by a governing alliance of the American new right would likely hasten the rejection of any traditional religious institutions if

the social upheaval and mass violence implicit in the current understandings of spiritual warfare and the Apocalypse were pursued.

Of the four scenarios, recent trends in religious belief and practice are consistent with this final one (Jones, 2017). According to the Gallup Organization, membership in a church or synagogue has fallen dramatically from 70% of the adult population in 1992 to 47% in 2020 (Gallup Organization, n.d.). Until now, this change largely impacted mainline churches; the Christian right has been fairly immune. This is no longer the case. While the percent of the population self-identifying as evangelical or born again has its ups and downs, it has hovered at or near 40% of the population through much of this period. However, since Trump's election in 2016, this segment of the population has fallen 14%.

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