

Chapter 79

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).

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-6684-7464-8.ch079

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 19th and early 20th centuries were almost unanimous in their conclusions that people had somehow become “lost” in the transition to modernity. Durkheim (1997) referred to anomy 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 20th 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

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