# Christianity and the Alt-Right

## Exploring the Relationship

Damon T. Berry

# CHRISTIANITY AND THE ALT-RIGHT

*Christianity and the Alt-Right: Exploring the Relationship* looks back at the 2016 presidential election and the support President Trump enjoyed among white Evangelicals. This cutting-edge volume offers insights into the role of race and racism in shaping both the Trump candidacy and presidency and the ways in which xenophobia, racism, and religion intersect within the Alt-Right and Evangelical cultures in the age of Trump.

This book aims to examine the specific role that Christianity plays within the Alt-Right itself. Of special concern is the development of what is called "pro-white Christianity" and an ethic of religious tolerance between members of the Alt-Right who are Pagan or atheist and those who are Christian, whilst also exploring the reaction from Christian communities to the phenomenon of the Alt-Right.

Looking at the larger relationship between American Christians, especially white Evangelicals, and the Alt-Right as well as the current American political context, the place of Christianity within the Alt-Right itself, and responses from Christian communities to the Alt-Right, this is a must-read for those interested in religion in America, religion and politics, evangelicalism, and religion and race.

**Damon T. Berry** is Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at St. Lawrence University, USA.

"With this book, Professor Berry has demonstrated, yet again, that he is one of the most important experts on religion and the racist right in America. He is furthermore a gifted writer, capable of providing a dispassionate, readable explanation of some of the most controversial subjects of our time. Berry has a gift for ideological empathy. He is able to fairly and accurately describe arguments that he personally finds distasteful, even loathsome. He presents his subjects as they are, rather than as caricatures, allowing readers to draw their own conclusions. Scholars, students, and activists will find this tremendous work of scholarship incredibly useful."

**George Hawley**, *Associate Professor of Political Science, University of Alabama, USA*

"This timely and troubling work fills an important hole in our understanding not only of the 'Alt-Right,' but also of the relationship between the history of American racism and Christianity more broadly. Berry's book should be essential reading for any scholar trying to assess what was happening in American Christianity during the Trump era."

**Michael J. McVicar**, *Associate Professor of Religion, Florida State University, USA*

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As I write these acknowledgments, the Coronavirus pandemic has killed 1,681,666 people worldwide and more than 315,000 in the United States, more than in any other nation, according to John Hopkins University Coronavirus Resource Center. The social disruptions and suffering that resulted from the pandemic have not yet been fully quantified, but they have been catastrophic for many people. For this reason, I want to acknowledge the various essential workers who have kept some semblance of society going, especially medical professionals who have faced not just the ravages of working with very ill people but also political obscurantism and a lack of resources. More specifically, I want to thank my immediate family for their patience, love, and support, especially my devoted partner, who has done so much for me emotionally and materially as I worked to see this pre-pandemic commitment to completion under distressing and difficult circumstances.

# INTRODUCTION

## Understanding the Alt-Right

This book has one basic premise—the relationship between Christianity and the Alt-Right is complicated. More than that, however, I argue that the relationship between Christianity and the Alt-Right has developed in two ways in the context of the United States. In the first instance, the Alt-Right brand emerged late in the first decade of the twenty-first century from the existing American white nationalist scene. From these origins, the Alt-Right carried a complicated relationship with religion, and with Christianity in particular. While some of the most significant influencers among the Alt-Right are best categorized as either atheist or agnostic and are particularly rigid in their condemnation of modern Christian thought, some have expressed a fondness for what they often described as "traditional" Christianity. That is, while they reject most contemporary expressions of Christianity, some Alt-Rightists nevertheless long for an idealized version of Christendom, often imagined as a common thread of pan-European identity. Others, as has been the case among American white nationalists of previous generations, still reject Christianity outright, especially those activists who advocate for a return to pre-Christian traditions of Europe. Yet, a minority of those associated with the Alt-Right identify as Christian and regard Christianity as indispensable to the success of the Alt-Right's political and social goals.

This complicated relationship with Christianity among the Alt-Right is in part an inheritance from its deep connection to earlier expressions of American white nationalism. In *Blood and Faith: Christianity in American White Nationalism* (2017), I argued that Christianity was seen as a problem for many white nationalists because they saw it as either too Jewish or as an alien ideology that weakened the racial instincts of Europeans (p. 193). However, Christianity remained a significant political force for white conservatives in America who were, in some ways, thought of by white nationalists as potential political allies. In the context of the early 2000s, white nationalists who sought such alliances were concerned with being perceived as too vocally anti-Christian, as that could endanger their broader appeal to white Americans

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(Berry, 2017: 188–9). I agree with the political scientist George Hawley that the Alt-Right is an expression of white nationalism; therefore, I argue that we should understand that the complications and disagreements, the various strategies and fractures that were true of American white nationalists concerning religion, and Christianity in particular, were also present among those affiliated with the Alt-Right (Hawley, 2017: p. 3 & 139–40). We will see in the first two chapters of this book that this was the case as some who had at one time embraced the Alt-Right brand later abandoned it partly because of differing positions concerning religion and its role in advocacy for Euro-American ethnonationalism.

The second site of complication for the relationship between Christianity and the Alt-Right is how American Christians responded to the emergence of the Alt-Right into public view in the 2016 U.S. Presidential race and then again with the 2017 "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. While the first two chapters address the complex relationships with Christianity within the Alt-Right, the second two chapters address how some Christians have responded to the Alt-Right, which in some cases has affected certain Christian institutions in profound ways. To better comprehend the relationship between Christianity and the Alt-Right, we must also appreciate how the emergence of the Alt-Right as a movement and a political brand affected Christians and their institutions. For politically progressive evangelical Protestants, the Alt-Right represented a further expression of older forms of white supremacy that had long plagued the church and American society. For more conservative organizations, like the Southern Baptist Convention, the Alt-Right's public notoriety came at a time when they were already struggling to address the institution's origins in defense of slavery, its opposition to desegregation in the 1950s and 60s, and continuing issues of racial inclusion in ecclesiastical leadership. In such cases, the presence of the Alt-Right exacerbated longstanding racial tensions that compelled specific public responses from American churches, even at the institutional level.

Other American Christians, especially Latter-day Saints and Catholics, debated the Alt-Right brand somewhat differently. It is true that, like Southern Baptists, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) as an institution publicly denounced the Alt-Right and white supremacy and wanted to be seen publicly doing so, in part because of their racist past. However, alongside American Catholics, individual Latter-day Saints were also debating among themselves shifting social mores concerning homosexuality in the Church and its institutions, and in broader society. While some Catholics and Latter-day Saints argued that their respective institutions should change their views regarding the acceptance of LGBTQ+ persons, others vehemently opposed what they regarded as heresy in accepting sin. As this debate concerning the emergence of a "Catholic Alt-Right" or a "Mormon Alt-Right" took shape, and as more progressive elements in these institutions began describing their opponents as "Alt-Right," those so-labeled responded that they were simply following church teachings. For them, progressives and liberals represented the extremist threat to the church, not Christians like themselves who were in their view simply upholding what they regarded as the authentic doctrines and practices of their respective traditions. The debate about the Alt-Right within Christian communities in the U.S. has helped

to shape the most significant discussions about race and sexuality among American Christians and what constitutes authentic Christianity in the 21st century.

This book is expository since part of its point is to briefly explore some of these complications, primarily in the context of the United States. However, there is something more to say concerning what we find in this exposition. The relationship between Christianity and the Alt-Right is multivalent and cuts through relationships among those associated with the Alt-Right. Equally true is the fact that the relationship penetrated Christian communities as well. In the first instance, the Alt-Right's approach to religion dismayed some of its influencers, some of whom have abandoned the brand, in part, because of religious differences. As the brand fell into disfavor after its heightened visibility in 2017, other articulations of white nationalism have emerged, some focused on a particular insertion of religious ideology into the Alt-Right's white identity politics. I argue concerning this point that religion in general and Christianity in particular will continue to matter to American white nationalists in part because they seem unable to find common ground among themselves about the role of religion in organized white racialist activism. Ultimately, however, I think the more significant point that emerges from this book concerns what the Alt-Right has meant to American Christians. I contend that the most important legacy of the relationship between the Alt-Right and Christianity in the United States is not what it has meant to white nationalists but what it means to American Christians. In the years after the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election, the Alt-Right became a reference point for American Christians as they reflected upon their relationships to their own institutional and doctrinal past and attempted to forge new sensibilities concerning their collective commitment to racial equality, diverse representation in pastoral and institutional leadership, and attitudes toward members of the LGBTQ+ community going forward in the twenty-first century.

## What is the Alt-Right?

In 2016, the *New York Times* published an article titled "News Outlets Rethink Usage of the Term Alt-Right" (Ember). The substance of the article is that there was little consensus among the general public and journalists on what the term signified. As we will see in later chapters, this lack of consensus played a significant role in how some Christians discussed the meaning of the Alt-Right or even if their traditions had an Alt-Right faction within them. The first thing to do is to clarify what I mean by the Alt-Right in this book. Though the invention of the Alt-Right brand happened several years earlier, most Americans were unfamiliar with it before the 2016 U.S. presidential race when the de-facto representative of the movement, Richard Spencer, made several positive references to Donald Trump's campaign. In interviews with news media during the campaign, Spencer often expressed his appreciation of how Trump was unsettling politics and how he was challenging Republicans to rethink what it meant to be properly of the right. In an interview with Sarah Posner for *Rolling Stone*, Spencer said, "The Trump phenomenon expresses a fundamental truth…that the Republican Party has won elections based on implicit

nationalism and not based on the Constitution, free-market economics, vague Christian values and so on." He went on to argue, "Even a leftist would agree with that statement. Like, Trump has shown the hand of the GOP. The GOP is a white person's populist party." In a 2015 interview for *Vice*, he stated, "I'm glad Donald Trump is running for president. He's brought an existential quality to politics. He's talking about, 'Are we a nation? Is America a nation?'" (Millard).

These statements from Spencer signaled to the broader public that the movement approved of Trump as someone who would challenge the mores of the Republican Party and the conservative movement and a candidate who challenged the status quo in American politics. It also said something about how one should understand the movement Spencer and others were attempting to establish. It was not right-wing in the sense of being grounded in constitutional originalism or shaped by conservative fiscal policy, and certainly not on hawkish foreign policy. Rather, it was a movement concerned with nationalism and race, not markets. It was not a movement grounded in "vague Christian values" but on the supposed realities of racial nationalism and the goal to ensure the survival and flourishing of Europeans.

Spencer's approval of Trump's campaign and political style coincided with that of David Duke, the founder of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, who regarded Trump's campaign in similar terms. For Duke, Trump was not necessarily aligned with his views in every detail, but when asked if Trump's voters were his voters, he said, "Well, of course they are!… Because I represent the ideas of preserving this country and the heritage of this country, and I think Trump represents that as well" (NBC News, 2017). White nationalists of many persuasions saw Trump's campaign as an opportunity to turn the political culture of America in favor of nationalism, even if Trump's daughter had converted to Judaism and married Jared Kushner, or if Trump was himself not, in their view, particularly devoted to racialist causes. Trump, whether he intended to or not, was speaking the language of white nationalists who often spoke of his campaign in hopeful terms.

Alt-Rightists, in particular, saw Trump running a campaign to turn the Republican Party into a more nationalist party, and making white Americans consider identity politics as a means for mobilizing cultural and political forces after eight years of the Obama administration to take their country back. As political scientist Ashley Jardina wrote in *White Identity Politics* (2019), Trump's "severe positions on immigrants, disparaging comments about Muslims and other racially charged remarks have appealed to members of these right-wing organizations," and in particular seemed to have "breathed even more life into the alt-right movement" (276). After the 2016 election, at a meeting in Washington D.C. organized by the white nationalist think tank National Policy Institute, Spencer gave a speech that captured the feelings of jubilation widely shared among his comrades. In addition to stating that Trump "was the identity President," Spencer also famously shouted, "Hail Trump! Hail Victory! Hail our people!" amid a flurry of Nazi salutes and shouts of celebration. This moment even more than the previous statements of public support for Trump and his policies from those long affiliated with racist organizations solidified the Alt-Right's image and left little to the public's imagination as to what it represented, especially concerning their support for Trump's presidency.

The Alt-Right seemed rather unambiguous in its public presentation, and the term itself quickly became synonymous with white supremacy. In the summer of 2017, however, the public saw something else on the evening before the Unite The Right rally, organized ostensibly to protest the removal of a monument dedicated to Robert E. Lee, but which functioned as a meeting point for the various strands of the American far-right. One image in particular seemed to solidify the image of the Alt-Right, when white men bearing lit Tiki torches, wearing khakis and polo shirts, marched onto the University of Virginia's campus chanting, "You will not replace us!," before switching the chant to "Jews will not replace us!" That night, a small-scale riot broke out at the foot of the statue of Thomas Jefferson in front of the rotunda on the University of Virginia campus (Spencer & Stolberg, 2017). However, the violence that ensued that evening was overshadowed by the viciousness on the following day during the actual rally. Attendees of the rally, some carrying various firearms and accouterment symbolizing their ideological alignment with the organizers and speakers scheduled for the event, clashed with counter-protesters. One of the people who were there to protest against the presence of the far-right at Charlottesville, Heather Heyer, was killed by James Alex Fields Jr. when he drove his car into a crowd of the counter-protesters (Stolberg & Rosenthal, 2017).

Although there was a spectrum of right-wing groups at the rally, some of whom would not specifically identify as Alt-Right, the rally became the way that most people understood the movement, and more significantly, how Trump's presidency was related to it. At the rally, David Duke stated,

> We are determined to take our country back… We are going to fulfill the promises of Donald Trump. That's what we believed in. That's why we voted for Donald Trump because he said he's going to take our country back.
>
> (NBC News, *2017)*

That Trump had faced backlash during his campaign for a less-than-convincing denunciation of Duke, claiming not to have been familiar with him, something that was easily refuted, made this comment from Duke in the context of the rally all the more troubling. However, it was President Trump's equivocating remarks following the violence at the rally that cemented the perception that the Alt-Right was for Trump and that Trump was at least implicitly for the Alt-Right. Trump and administration officials attempted to more clearly denounce racism and racist violence but those efforts did not undo the perception that Trump was the white person's candidate and that the Alt-Right, to whom he seemed sympathetic, was among his base of support. It certainly did not help that Trump had Steve Bannon, the former editor at *Breitbart*, a magazine that Bannon himself called the "platform for the Alt-Right," as his campaign manager during the 2016 race and later as a political advisor for his administration (Posner, 2016b).

As the Alt-Right came into public view during the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election, candidate Trump also began to cultivate support among white conservative Christians who later became a significant part of his voting base in 2016 and into the 2020

election. He blended statements about ending immigration of Muslims and promises that Mexico would pay for construction of a wall on the southern border with strong opposition to abortion and the promise that he would appoint anti-abortion judges to the Supreme Court. In a move that seemed to signal his commitment to conservative Christians, candidate Trump picked Mike Pence as his running mate. Trump's repeated appeals to issues that traditionally motivated conservative Christian voters seemed to have paid off for his election with a higher percentage of white evangelical Protestants voting for him than voted for George W. Bush, a confessing evangelical Christian, in 2000 and 2004. Robert P. Jones, founding CEO of Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) and his team of researchers are primarily responsible for the much-referenced datum that 81 percent of white evangelical Protestants voted for Trump in the 2016 presidential election, reporting just weeks before that "No religious group is more strongly backing Trump's candidacy than white evangelical Protestants" (Cox & Jones, 2016). Though one cannot establish a causal relationship between Trump's appeal to white Christian voters and his support from the Alt-Right, we can note that support in both camps intersected at the points of immigration and his nationalist and populist rhetoric.

During the 2016 campaign and later in his presidency, some Christians had taken note of this intersection of support from white Christians and the Alt-Right for Trump. Womanist theologian and Dean of Episcopal Divinity School at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, The Reverend Canon Kelly Brown Douglas wrote, "The bottom line is that in their support of Trump, much of white Christian America opted to support a white supremacist vision for the country" (2018: p.22). After the events at Charlottesville in 2017, following President Trump's equivocating statements about the violence perpetrated there, #BlackClergyUprising organized a call to condemn both the white nationalist violence that took place but also what they called "the President's support for white supremacists [that] has emboldened them and put the lives of African Americans, other people of color, our Jewish sisters and brothers and all people of faith who oppose their hateful agenda in danger." Other Christians, though they perhaps did not tie the president as closely to white nationalists and the Alt-Right, nevertheless called upon him to make clearer his denunciation of racism and antisemitism. Leadership from the Southern Baptist Convention, the United Methodist Church, and the Latter-day Saints, or Mormons, drafted public letters calling on the president to denounce the Alt-Right and white supremacy in more clearly. More than this, the emergence of the Alt-Right and the incredible support that Trump got from white Christians prompted several reactions from churches and other Christian organizations already dealing with a growing diversity of parishioners who were still mostly led by white male clergy and who were attempting to address racism in their churches and the broader society.

In this context, the term "Alt-Right" came to be used in public discourse and among some Christian communities in the U.S. to signify the far-right more broadly. However, this often overlooks the complicated and strained relationships among those who were thus categorized. Part of this recent trouble of the Alt-Right is due to the legal and financial troubles of those who either self-branded or

were branded by others as Alt-Right. In other cases, leading influencers decided to abandon the brand for several reasons. As George Hawley, author of *Making Sense of the Alt-Right* (2017), said to Tess Owen from *Vice News* in 2019 that it is better to think of the Alt-Right "in the past tense." Significant disagreements among the most influential voices behind the Alt-Right have fallen out of favor among those associated with it, and in some cases, deplatforming, or the removal of some sites from online platforms, has hurt the brand's image and influence. Furthermore, as we will see in the coming chapters, some of the most vocal influencers among the Alt-Right have stopped identifying as Alt-Right even if their racialist activism continued. More particular to the focus of this book, some of those who formerly described themselves as Alt-Right abandoned the use of the term for reasons related to their religious identities and other ethical objections to some of the behavior of those affiliated with the brand.

Because of these various shifts in the use of the term Alt-Right across different publics, it is productive to think about the Alt-Right as a brand more than as a movement. By brand I mean, as co-founder and CEO of Branders.com, Jerry McLaughlin wrote in *Forbes*, "everything the public thinks it knows about your name brand offering—both factual (e.g. It comes in a robin's-egg-blue box), and emotional (e.g. It's romantic)." Marty Neumeier, one of the most influential writers and speakers about brands states, "A brand is a person's gut feeling about a product, service, or company," and that "each person creates their own version of it." He argues that a brand is "not what you say it is" but "what THEY say it is" (p. 2–3, emphasis in the original). Dissimilar from a corporation or a political party, the Alt-Right has no clear leadership or centralized platform that is then voted upon or agreed upon by all who claim the title. There is no president, CEO, no board of directors, nor is there a recognized hierarchy that directs coordinated action or drafts definitive statements for a cooperate body. Rather, what are best described as influencers wield charismatic and often contested power in shaping the discourse in the Alt-Right. Operating mostly through various online platforms, these influencers have found relative agreement on some issues, but on others, particularly on religion, they can differ widely. What constitutes the Alt-Right then is in constant debate, with some influencers abandoning the label altogether in more recent years in favor of terms like Deep-Right or Folk-right as they rebrand their ethnonationalist politics and sensibilities.

Adding to the complexity of what we might describe as the Alt-Right proper, with some having described it as a haven for neo-Nazis, some affiliated with the brand have stated they are not white supremacists, but agree with Alt-Right positions on other issues like opposition to feminism and "political correctness." Others still have offered descriptors like "Alt-Lite" to distinguish between less overtly racialist affiliates and the "Nazi types." Proud Boys founder, Gavin McInnis, for example, made careful distinctions along these lines in a video posted on YouTube that illustrates some of the ways that those associated with the brand have differentiated themselves. He describes himself and those he is most close to as "Alt-Lite," and that they and some further on the right end of the spectrum of the Alt-Right share the sentiment that he describes as "Western chauvinism" and are not "embarrassed about whiteness," while he describes

the smallest sliver right of the Alt-Right as the "Nazi nut-bars." The distinction between Alt-Lite and Alt-Right for him is that Alt-Righters care about whiteness and dabble in anti-Semitic conspiracism, while he and his associates in the Alt-Lite simply require that one confesses that "the Western world is the best, and refuse to apologize for creating the modern world." The main difference that McInnis and others that speak of an "Alt-Lite" discern between themselves seem to be one that, in the case of the "Nazi Types," assumes extreme biological difference along the lines of race, while the "Alt-Lite" codes its politics in terms of cultural racism, what he called "Western chauvinism." Hawley notes that divisions are inevitable when a movement becomes large enough, so this should not be surprising to us. Hawley further notes, however, "there is a yawning gap between 'cultural libertarians'… and the neo-Nazis," and therefore the big "tent term" of "Alt-Right may be too small to contain these sensibilities" (2017: p.157). Indeed, the years since 2017 have proven this to be the case with several people abandoning the brand.

Following this internal distinction between the "Alt-Right" and the "Alt-Lite" as articulated by McInnis, Hawley interviewed Greg Johnson of the North American New Right and Counter-Currents Publishing. Here, Johnson argued, "The term 'Alt Right' is a vague umbrella term that encompasses all people who reject mainstream conservatism," not all of whom are "racially aware." In that sense, he says, "the Alt Right is White Nationalist not in the sense that all Alt Rightists are White Nationalists," but rather that "the original *Alternative Right* webzine was founded as a vehicle by which White Nationalists could interact with dissident Rightists who were closer to the mainstream in order to convert them to our way of thinking" (quoted in Hawley 2017: p.151). From Johnson's point of view, the Alt-Right is at its core a white nationalist movement, in part because of its origins with Richard Spencer and the establishment of *Alternative Right*.

This certainly the case for Richard Spencer. His political thought is rooted in his participation in both the dissident libertarian and paleoconservative right before helping to develop the Alt-Right as most people were introduced to it during the 2016 election. He worked for *American Conservative*, from which he was eventually fired, and then began working for *Taki's Top Drawer*, later named *Taki's Magazine* in 2008 (Bar-On, 2019: p.227; Hawley, 2017: p.54). According to George Hawley, under Spencer's leadership, the magazine "took a sharp right turn," and even featured white nationalist leader Jared Taylor, who founded *American Renaissance* (Hawley, 2017: p.55). Spencer then attempted to start a website called *Alternative Right* in 2009. Spencer took from a rather eclectic mix of political ideologies to describe his position. Piecing together paleoconservatism, European New Right thought, and the work of theorists like Carl Schmitt, Ernst Jünger, Julius Evola, mixed with white nationalist politics, he developed his message for a new approach to white nationalist political activism (Bar-On, 2019: pp.226–7). On sites like AltRight.com and Radix, Spencer gathered various voices among the newly branded Alt-Right to popularize their message and form the movement into a real political and social force. In his role at the National Policy Institute, founded and funded by William Regnery II, the publishing heir, it became a source of organizing events like the one in Washington D.C. after the 2016 election.

The Alt-Right seemed then to be a descriptor for those who had little regard for American political conventions and rejected the mainstream of American conservative thought (Hawley, 2017: p.61). Thomas J. Main argued in *The Rise of The Alt-Right* (2018), that there were four main components to the Alt-Right. They are, "rejection of liberal democracy," "white racialism," a rejection of allegiance to America, transferred instead to the white race, and "vitriolic rhetoric," or what Main calls "course ethnic humor, prejudicial stereotyping, vituperative criticism, and the flaunting of extremist symbols" (p. 8). This etic description seems to reflect emic discussions of the Alt-Right. Spencer told Hawley that he did not think of the politics of this movement as following the traditions of "quaint Anglo-American conservatism," but rather that expressed by "the French New Right, something like the traditionalism of [Julius] Evola, something like Nietzsche, German Idealism, Heidegger" (quoted in Hawley, 2017: p.61). For him, the brand represented a resistance to the entire mainstream political order, including conservatism. Yet, Spencer has also claimed that the term Alt-Right is arbitrary. In 2016 for an interview with National Public Radio he stated, "I mean, the whole point is that this is a movement of consciousness and identity for European people in the 21st century. That's what it is. If you don't like it, you can, you know, talk about linguistics." However, in 2017 Spencer encapsulated what he saw to be the Alt-Right most succinctly just before the events in Charlottesville in what came to be called, among other names, the "Alt-Right Manifesto" (Bar-On, 2019: p.232).

Race is central to Spencer's description of the movement's aims and ideology. The manifesto, titled "What It Means to Be Alt-Right" on Altright.com, begins with "Race is real. Race matters. Race is the foundation of identity." Spencer elaborates:

> "White" is shorthand for a worldwide constellation of peoples, each of which is derived from the Indo-European race, often called Aryan. "European" refers to a core stock—Celtic, Germanic, Hellenic, Latin, Nordic, and Slavic—from which related cultures and a shared civilization sprang.
>
> *(2017)*

The basis of his understanding of ethnonationalism is one that thinks in terms of pan-European whiteness that is typically found in American white nationalism. Spencer argues in the manifesto, "Racially or ethnically defined states are legitimate and necessary." There are twenty points in total, which address everything from education to gender and sexuality, and stating particular opposition to "feminism, deviancy, the futile denial of biological reality, and everything destructive to healthy relations between men and women." Opposition to feminism and other forms of egalitarian ideology, he argues, is necessary to establish a healthy and adequately functional society, which he sees as the aim of the Alt-Right.

Race, gender, sexual relations, and the future white ethnostate are all woven together into a model of what it means, according to Spencer, to be Alt-Right. However, most interesting for us is his lone reference to "Judeo-Christianity" in the point titled simply "Jews." Spencer says, "'Judeo-Christian values' might be a quaint political slogan, but it is a distortion of the historical and metaphysical reality

of both Jews and Europeans." This is an essential point for how Spencer's version of the Alt-Right draws a distinction between itself and mainstream conservatism in the United States, but also one that has created some tension among those associated with the brand.

However, we must note that Spencer was not the only one trying to describe what the Alt-Right was and what it stood for. In 2016, before Spencer released his manifesto, Vox Day, born Theodore Beale, defined the Alt-Right with sixteen points in an essay titled "What the Inevitable is." Spencer's and Vox Day's manifestos are relatively similar, especially concerning their ethnonationalist ambitions, but they differ on the issue of Christianity and its place in the movement they were trying to influence. Vox Day describes the Alt-Right primarily as a political movement that opposes "mainstream conservatism" as well as liberalism and socialism. Consistent with the majority opinions of those most influential for the brand, Vox Day defines it as "anti-globalist," "anti-equalitarian," and "avowedly nationalist," supporting "all nationalisms and the right of the nation to exist, homogeneous and unadulterated by foreign invasion and immigration." This reference to invasion and immigration is another common feature, as is its setting within a framework of traditional white nationalism. If to make this point more clear for the readers already familiar with the scene, point fourteen is "The Alt Right believes we must secure the existence of white people and a future for white children," borrowing directly from the "14 words."—"We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children." The phrase was developed by David Lane, a former member of the white nationalist terrorist organization The Order, or The Silent Brothers, who died in federal prison for his role in the assassination of a Jewish radio show host named Alan Berg in 1984, and it is now ubiquitous among white nationalists (Berry, 2017: pp.120–1). Vox Day positions the Alt-Right as white separatist rather than supremacist, as it specifically denounces, in his words, "the general supremacy of any race, nation, people, or sub-species," and asserts that "[e]very race, nation, people, and human sub-species has its own unique strengths and weaknesses, and possesses the sovereign right to dwell unmolested in the native culture it prefers." This is common discourse in American white nationalism in that the movement was framed as racial protectionist in orientation rather than exterminationist, though, as I have argued in *Blood & Faith*, exterminationist logic is never far away from the ideology of racial protectionism. As if to make this point, referencing the violence directed at non-white peoples, a commenter on Vox Day's essay asked rhetorically, "Could the U.S. have been founded or accomplished what it has without domination of Europeans who founded it?"

On most points, as we can see, there is no significant disagreement between Richard Spencer and Vox Day concerning the movement's core values. However, unlike Spencer, Vox emphasizes a particular role for Christianity as a pillar of proper Alt-Right ideology. "The Alt Right believes Western civilization is the pinnacle of human achievement and supports its three foundational pillars," Vox Day argues, and describes them as, "Christianity, the European nations, and the Graeco-Roman legacy." While the latter two components might not alienate too many Alt-Rightists or even those associated with the western chauvinist Alt-Lite, the point about

Christianity is a contentious one. One of the comments on Vox Day's post reads, "I'll have a think about Christianity and the West, I think the seeds of success are older than Christianity." Another comment stated, "I don't think a lot of the alt-righteous will get on board with Christianity and I know that most Christians will not get on board with the alt-right. I don't object to Christianity per se, but the way it is practiced in the west makes it an enemy." Vox Day tries to address the point that religious preference need not be a point of division for those associated with the Alt-Right in a reply post in the thread. He explains, "There is room in the Alt Right for Christians, pagans, agnostics, and atheists," but that it allows "no room for Islam," as he explains, "because Islam is a rival ideology as well as a religion." The Alt-Right for Vox Day allows for religious diversity to a degree, but he is ardent in his reply to the comments that "the Alt Right does not believe in the freedom of all religions." Despite this nod to religious pluralism, and though not every Alt-Right influencer agreed, Christianity was for Vox Day a "pillar" for the Alt-Right as he understood it.

As the thread continues, there is a great deal of discussion about the other points, particularly the use of the "14 Words" and what that signals about the Alt-Right's proximity to neo-nazism. The issue of Christianity emerges frequently and particularly its place in the history of Europeans and what it could mean to the movement they were trying to create. We will discuss these positions on Christianity and on religion more generally in the coming chapters; however, it is important to notice here that Christianity held a particularly unsteady place for those associated with the Alt-Right brand. Generally speaking, religion, as it was with earlier forms of American white nationalism, was not a minor issue. Religious history, its relationship to the political aspirations of significant influencers, and the complicated religious disagreements among those associated with the Alt-Right were all part of how the brand was debated and re-described across various competing online and print outlets.

Yet another manifesto of the Alt-Right in 2016 by a blogger named Lawrence Murray, also known as the Atlantic Centurion, a frequent contributor to *Counter-Currents* and other sites like *The Right Stuff*, describes the Alt-Right as a refutation of conservatism and the American Republican Party. He says, "The Alt-Right is a synod of dissident right-wing, nationalist, identitarian, and fascist (oy vey) thinkers opposed to the postwar liberal order in the White nations of Europe," an order that he says has, "enacted government policies" that have rendered whites as an "increasingly smaller share of the global population" and in their former majority countries. For him, the Alt-Right is indeed focused on white identity politics but is also concerned with refuting egalitarianism in all forms—gender as well as race, placing feminism and anti-racism in the categories of "anti-reality" and utopian. Murray lists a series of posts he had written as well as pieces by other like-minded authors and a series of websites that he describes as "Major Alt-Right sites," which include his blog, *Atlantic Centurion*, and other affiliated sites, like The Right Stuff, Counter-Currents, Radix Journal, The Occidental Observer, Daily Stormer, Alternative Right, The Alternative Hypothesis, VDare, and American Renaissance. The Alt-Right, according to Murray, is then best understood as eclectic, mainly existing online in networked fashion among right-oriented dissidents that have found common enemies in egalitarians of every kind.

The associations among influencers on these various websites have been strained since Murray wrote his article. *Alternative Right*, for example, very much a flagship of the brand, has been rebranded as *Affirmative Right*. Colin Liddell, an active contributor to many of the websites mentioned by Murray, and an important influencer in his own right, led this rebranding of the site as its chief editor. In a 2018 article titled "Walking Away From A Broken Brand," Liddell argues that the original site served an important function under Spencer's guidance in that it served as a platform for the emerging ideas of this new right-wing form of thought, but that the term "Alt-Right" has in fact "become a handicap." He argues further that the brand "has become an unfortunate marker designed to draw down long-range, deplatforming artillery from [their] enemies." Naming several critical factors like ideological errors as well as moral failings and tactical mistakes, he argues, "Rather than being a movement defined by morality and a positive identity, [the Alt-Right] has allowed itself to become a forum for Nazi-esque trolling and pointless Jew-baiting (as opposed to developing a deeper and more palatable understanding of the J.Q.), all seasoned with a constant drip-drip of racial slurs, aimed at everybody, including members of its own audience." The Alt-Right had now become toxic, and seemingly for some of the very reasons it had gotten broader attention during the 2016 U.S. Presidential election.

This abandonment of the Alt-Right brand is not entirely surprising. Greg Johnson posted on Counter-Currents in 2016, shortly after the broader public saw Richard Spencer's celebration of Trump's election through the reporting done by The Atlantic, who was invited to NPI's event and said, "It is ironic — or maybe just sadly fitting — that Richard Spencer, the man who launched the Alternative Right brand, may have just destroyed it." The thrust of his argument is that Spencer's embarrassing and surprising gaffe had hurt the brand because this performance reinforced the image in the media that the Alt-Right were simply Nazis. "Literally everything about this controversy, from Spencer's 'Nazism' to the press coverage to the adulation of the Nazi troll army is at best superficial and at worst fake," he argues, "The negative consequences, however, are real." Johnson claimed that "some Alt Rightists are rejoicing that Spencer's gesture has caused Alt Light poseurs and 'cucks' to abandon the Alt Right brand," but that he felt this was "self-defeating." He argued that attempts to reach out to possible allies only work if one is attracting those that do not already agree with their positions. "These people are only a danger if we fail to convert and assimilate them," he argued, "But apparently some people don't want to be bothered with converts." His post ended with an important point I want to also reinforce. Johnson held out hope that the "Alt Right" was a "useful brand," but argued also that "even if the Alt Right is dead, White Nationalism is still very much alive and growing." He ends by stating that for white nationalists advancing their ideas "has always been two steps forward, one step back. So let's just learn from this setback and keep pressing forward."

This final point is significant. The Alt-Right is a brand, and as of now, a damaged one, and it is not clear what its failure means for the future of white racialist activism. However, we will see in the coming chapters how religion, and especially Christianity, was a contentious issue among Alt-Rightists as it was for earlier white nationalists. In some cases, despite efforts at accommodation, we will

see how religious disagreements have contributed to some choosing to leave the brand behind. Nevertheless, what we find is not a general awakening to racial tolerance or and abandonment of the core white nationalist ideology that the brand presented, but rather a reframing or in some cases a rebranding of their ethnonationalism. This is an important point, not only because the topic is too big for one scholar to fully describe in a single short volume, but also because there are potentially larger stakes in studying the Alt-Right for understanding what the next popular expression of white nationalism in America might look like. Organized racism in America is an ever-changing phenomenon, and this particular expression of it will play a role in newer forms of racialist activism as white nationalists reckon with its failures. In this sense we should consider that however marginal these figures might seem from our perspective, familiarity with their debates will help us better understand not just past expressions of organized racism but also the various expressions of white nationalism that will continue to be part of the American social and political landscape for the foreseeable future.

The above point, however, is only one of the conclusions I want to impress upon the reader. The most significant legacy of the Alt-Right phenomenon is not what it has meant to white nationalists, but rather what it has meant for American Christians. What these Christians debated while they contended with the seemingly new movement was not its particular expression of racism, but how their own traditions and institutions reflected that racism. For politically progressive American evangelical Protestants, the Alt-Right seemed to be a different expression of the kind of racism that had long plagued the church and American society, signaling that more work needed to be done to fight it on both fronts. Among leaders in the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and the LDS Church, it provoked further discussion about their churches' racist past and their current commitment to the inclusion of people of color within their ecclesiastical hierarchy. In some cases, the debate about the meaning of the term "Alt-Right" among American Christians came to reflect ongoing debates about a host of other issues, including how their institutions should respond to the LGBTQ+ community. What was at stake for American Christians, then, was not necessarily the presence and possible social and political influence of the Alt-Right itself, but what its emergence onto the scene during the 2016 election said about the state of the country, their churches and institutions, and what the proper Christian response to racism, xenophobia, and homophobia should be.

## Chapters

The first two chapters of the book discuss the relationship between the Alt-Right and Christianity from the perspective of those affiliated with the brand. The argument in this section is that the relationship between Christianity and the Alt-Right is one that is in many ways conditioned by the American white nationalist scene from which it emerged. Similar to older expressions of white nationalism, religion was a contentious topic, and especially concerning Christianity. Therefore, the first chapter describes the general sense of religion, broadly speaking, for some of the

most visible influencers for the Alt-Right brand and how they navigated these ongoing debates.

In the second chapter, we take a turn to discuss some of the efforts from white ethnonationalists who attempted to develop a Christianity for the Alt-Right or to argue for a particular Christian perspective that would aid in what they thought should to be its goals. In this context, we can see, along with the first chapter, that debates and disagreements about religion and especially Christianity that so influenced the development of white nationalism in America had continued to hold sway in the context of the Alt-Right. This, I argue, reinforces my view that religion is not merely an ancillary issue for white nationalist movements in America, but a critical component to how they imagine their organizations and formulate political and meta-political strategies. In the case of the Alt-Right, disagreements over religion contributed to its failure to galvanize cooperation across the far-right.

In the second section of the book, I discuss the relationship between American Christians and the Alt-Right. In the third chapter, we explore American evangelical Protestants' responses to the emergence of the Alt-Right, focusing on politically progressive Christians, followed by the reactions from the more conservative Southern Baptist Convention (SBC). In the latter case, we focus on how the emergence of the Alt-Right compelled the SBC to reckon with their racist past and the ways that they had, perhaps inadequately, made efforts to be more racially inclusive and to address adequately the concerns expressed by people of color.

In the fourth chapter, I discuss other American Christians' responses to explore how the issues confronting Southern Baptists were similar to, for example, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), but importantly, how these circumstances were different. Just as the SBC had racist doctrines and institutional policies deep in its early history, so did the LDS Church. However, the history and teachings of the LDS are distinct from the SBC in important ways that shaped their particular reaction to the emergence of the Alt-Right. Furthermore, for members of the LDS Church, the specter of a "Mormon Alt-Right" had developed around a particular hashtag that used much of the acerbic meme culture and rhetoric of the Alt-Right to voice opposition to the inclusion of homosexuals within the good graces of Mormon institutions. Similarly, the idea of a "Catholic Alt-Right" emerged at almost the same moment concerning that very issue, and in particular focused on the efforts by some priests attempting to articulate a new way forward for relations between the Catholic Church hierarchy and the LGBTQ+ community. In both contexts, the term Alt-Right had come to signify other positions than white nationalism. In these cases, deployment of the term Alt-Right and debate over its meaning had come to shape the way some Catholics and Mormons articulated their positions on homosexuality and how their institutions should respond to LGBTQ+ individuals.

In the short conclusion that follows, I summarize the main point of this book, that the relationship between Christianity and the Alt-Right is complicated and multivalent. It pierces through relationships among those associated with the brand, extending to how the emergence of the brand shaped the way evangelical Protestants rearticulated their opposition to racism, and to how Mormons and Catholics debated

what should be the position of their institutions on LGBTQ+ inclusion. Finally, I argue that studying the Alt-Right phenomenon is important. It is important not only to uncover the ideology of "extremists," some of whom most people have never heard of, precisely because we know we cannot afford to neglect ideologies like white nationalism that motivate acts of violence. It is also important to understand how the Alt-Right, at least for a time, was able to shape so much about how American Christians debated their traditions' racial past, their ethical commitments in the present, and what religious orthodoxy within their traditions might look like in the future.

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# 1

# UNDERSTANDING RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY AMONG THE ALT-RIGHT

Studying religion in the Alt-Right is difficult. There is no single paradigmatic Alt-Right view of religion, nor is there a coherent set of source materials for exploring Alt-Right religious discourse. Various perspectives on religion, ranging from atheism and agnosticism to multiple forms of Christianity and Paganism, are distributed throughout numerous social media sites, print materials, and online video posts. However, rather than this signifying that there is nothing noteworthy to say about religion among the Alt-Right, I argue that its amorphous character is the most important point for us to consider. Because of the lack of agreement on religious matters among those affiliated with it, the Alt-Right brand has suffered some fractures over religious differences despite some efforts to prevent such schisms. Furthermore, the diversity of opinions about religion as expressed by specific influencers among the Alt-Right became a mechanism for creating and policing discursive boundaries of belonging.

In one sense, the borders between who is genuinely Alt-Right or who is a "cuck," a sexualized term of derision used to describe those whom Alt-Rightists consider too liberal or otherwise traitors to the authentic right, are always in play. This is particularly true for concerns about Christianity and so-called Christian "cucks." Questions emerged, for example, about whether a Christian can be Alt-Right if they are perhaps a certain type of racially conscious or "pro-white" Christian. Part of this question about the compatibility of Christianity with the Alt-Right emerged from the relationship between the Alt-Right, as articulated by Spencer, Vox Day, and others, and older forms of white nationalism in America that were often hostile to Christianity. Moreover, individual Alt-Rightists strongly influenced by religious viewpoints found deeper faults with the brand and its more visible representatives. Carolyn Emerick, a Pagan, and Ayla Stewart, a Mormon, both of whom eventually abandoned the Alt-Right brand, were intensely critical of the Alt-Right in part because of what they saw as general childishness and the lack of a clear ethical system. However, they were also critical of the Alt-Right because they perceived the atheists and agnostics who have

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comprised the recognized face of the movement to have marginalized both Christian and Pagans associated with it.

Yet, amid such controversy concerning religion, Lana Lokteff, a self-described Pagan and host of *Radio 3Fourteen*, invited the hosts of "Good Morning White America" to discuss how pro-white Christians and Pagans might cooperate for the good of all white people. Echoing the sentiment from other 21st century white nationalists who saw religious tolerance as a way to better unify people in the political cause of creating a white ethnostate, some associated with the Alt-Right label tried to accommodate religious pluralism. Religious pluralism within the Alt-Right, then, as it was for white nationalism more broadly, is for those associated with the brand, a site of negotiation toward the broader political goal of establishing a white or European ethnostate (Berry 2017: 189–90).

## Atheism, agnosticism, and parody religion

In the history of American white nationalism, beginning in the latter half of the twentieth century, the relationship between white nationalist ideology and Christianity was tense. For many of the most important founding thinkers in that movement, there was an entrenched hostility to Christianity. Revilo Oliver (1908–1994), a founding member of the John Birch Society and contributor to *National Review*, was one of the most formative ideologues in the creation of American white nationalism and was later in his life quite harsh in his criticism of Christianity. While he initially saw non-liberal Christianity as the religion of the West, he later changed his position and rejected all Christianity as a strategy designed by Jews to dull the racial survivalist instincts of the white people (Berry 2017: 35). Ben Klassen (1918–1993), founder of the racialist new religion Creativity, formerly known as Church of the Creator, and William Pierce (1933–2002), founder and leader of National Alliance, also saw Christianity as a threat to white racial survival on similar grounds (Berry 2017: 68; 88–89). Many white nationalist Pagans, too, agreed that Christianity was bad for white racial consciousness, and argued for a return or a reconstruction of the pre-Christian traditions of Europe as necessary for white people seeking to recapture a sense of racial identity, which was necessary for the creation of a white identity political movement and to eventually create a white homeland in North America (Berry 2017: 126).

For most of the history of white nationalism in the twentieth century, many of those associated with the movement were either hostile to Christianity or did not think it was adequate for forming an ideological basis for white racial activism. Such a position caused considerable friction with white nationalists who still held to Christian beliefs. Moreover, as white nationalists attempted to mainstream their ideas with American conservatives in the early 2000s, some among them became concerned that overtly anti-Christian stances would hinder efforts at creating political alliances with conservative white Americans (Berry 2017: 195–8). In an attempt to create a framework that would prevent fractures that would inhibit the movement's political efforts at establishing a white homeland in North America, some white nationalists argued for an accommodating stance in favor of allowing

religion to be a marginal matter in comparison to the larger political goal of the survival of the white race. Greg Johnson's 2010 article titled "The Christian Question and White Nationalism" typifies this position. He argued that while it was accurate that Christianity was a problem for many white nationalists because of its moral teachings of universal brotherhood and because it gave particular significance to the Jewish people, it need not be a point of division among white people. Rather, he opted for religious tolerance in favor of a political vision of the movement that relegated religious issues to be a matter of personal preference (Berry 2017: 184–6).

This disposition toward accommodating religious differences with a focus on common concerns of white ethnonationalism has had some influence on those among the Alt-Right. Richard Spencer and others associated with the brand have often favored Nietzsche-inflected atheism, emphasizing meaning-making projects that draw from the European past with a sense of strategic bricolage. Yet, even as they prize what they understand to be rationality and pragmatism, they often express a certain romanticism for older European forms of Christianity and Paganism. In this context, discussions of Christianity often revolved around criticisms of what Alt-Rightists regard as liberalized or "cucked" forms of Christianity. For the most part, in similar ways to Oliver's early critiques of liberal Christianity, modern Christians, even those who would be identified with the religious right in America, are regarded as liberal "cucks." In the use of the Alt-Right meme Pepe the Frog, too, some engage in satirical critiques of "cucked" Christianity and the Alt-Right's political opponents in a parody religion called Kekism. Though much of the purpose of the Kek or "Bishop Pepe" image was to foster insider humor, we will see that this satirical approach to religion was a means for some Alt-Rightists to deal with the serious concerns within the movement. We will also see that some who have left the Alt-Right label behind have done so in part because of the perceived lack of care with which some of its associates have treated religious issues.

When thinking about religion in the Alt-Right we have to consider how much of it expresses a ludic approach, owing in part to the fact that it exists primarily online. Even in interviews, *trollish* posturing continues as a mode of communication and rhetorical combat. For example, in an interview with Charles Barkley for his show on TNT Network (2017) titled *American Race*, Richard Spencer mixed serious discussions about inequality in nature with gleeful derision of liberal and Enlightenment values. When Barkley's co-host, Atlanta-based civil rights attorney Gerald Griggs, said to Spencer that African Americans want "those three American values—life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," Spencer responded by shifting in his seat, crinkling his nose and exclaiming, "Sounds very Enlightenment; kinda, I'm tempted to say, faggy." Here, Spencer does not directly refute the humanistic appeal for racial equality with an argument against the Enlightenment or even racial equality. Rather, in sarcastic tones, the entire point is evaded with a gesture one might expect to find on an acerbic Twitter post. Yet, the ridicule of equality and other ideals expressed in the Enlightenment tradition reflects a serious position held by Spencer and other Alt-Rightists. In a sense, this demonstrates the quintessential Alt-Right approach—a mix of caustic attempts at humor with sincere endeavors to express and disseminate their illiberal

ideology. As historian of religions Egil Asprem has noted, "The tone of irony and satire was central to the movement's activities, but its very persistence, aggression, and focused cultivation of negative affect betrayed underlying moods and motivations that were anything but playful" (Asprem 2020: 23).

Spencer often blends sarcasm and serious discussion on the topic of religion as well. He perhaps was most clear about his position on religion, and concerning Christianity in particular, in an interview on YouTube with one of the social media influencers of the Alt-Right named Tim Gionet, also known as Baked Alaska (Garbage Heap 2018). The interview begins with Gionet explaining that he agrees with Spencer on most issues, but is troubled by Spencer's previous statements that signaled hostility toward Christianity. Gionet identifies himself as a Christian and explains that he feels Christianity has done much for "white people," Western civilization, and the United States, so he invites Spencer to clarify his views. Spencer explains in the interview that he is "not one of those dorm room, or high school level 'oh, God is dead, man'," type of people, but adds, "But that does not mean God is not dead." He explains further that he is not a "proud atheist," as he says one commentator described him, but is instead a "tragic atheist." Spencer explains that he grew up in an Episcopalian home and a "culturally Christian" context, but states that Christianity has become "an aesthetic, ceremonial experience… a goofball, Walmart experience" that has been evacuated of any serious elements that make it a force for what he would view as positive force in society. Here, Spencer's rejection of Christianity is tempered with a measure of disaffection and a sense of loss, and as we will see, a longing for something meaningful to emerge in Christianity's place.

Gionet, reflecting on what he perceives as the lack of seriousness that some Christians express concerning their faith, agrees with Spencer that Christianity has been "cucked," but argues, "not everyone who acts like that represents Christianity." Gionet attempts to argue for a version of Christianity that does not obsess over what he regards as pointless details and yet takes itself seriously, but Spencer interrupts him. Spencer wanted to point out to Gionete that a kind of "Whole Foods" take-what-you-like Christianity is an expression of the problem. For Spencer, modern Christianity, unrooted in his view from what he understands as traditional European values, is so bankrupt precisely because of this open interpretation of what it can mean for each Christian. Christianity then proves itself to be incapable of providing discipline or direction for Europeans and simply reflects the values of the modern, decadent society in which it exists. Ultimately, Spencer's criticism seems to be that it is ineffective for forming an active and resilient political or social identity.

Contrasted with this modern, decadent Christianity, the Christianity that draws most of Spencer's praise is what he thinks of as traditional European Christianity as it was adapted for Europeans' sensibilities in the Middle Ages, which he argues was "dramatically different from what Jesus actually believed." However, he does not necessarily think a return to this Christian tradition is valuable. Though he respects specifically European Christianity of the past, he maintains that contemporary society has become largely post-Christian to the point that Christianity could not offer sufficient support for white nationalist aspirations any more than a revived

Paganism could. He seems to be most concerned with pointing out that Christianity in European societies performed certain positive social functions through establishing traditions. However, after those traditions had been lost, in their place emerged a consumeristic, globalist Christianity that no longer reflects that tradition. This is the foundation for his claim to be a tragic atheist rather than a happy one—the religions of the past have proven unhelpful in the present and have thereby become obsolete; yet, without religion, there is nothing to unify European peoples. There seems to be now no center for their identity which might compel them to fight for their preservation.

Though Spencer does not advocate for a return to traditionalist Christianity or even Paganism, he argues in rather Durkheimian terms for the potential social and metapolitical, or "intangible," power of religiosity to bind a community together and to act as a source of power for motivating social cohesion. The loss of faith by Europeans, he claims, is part of the broader loss of self-confidence as a people, stating in the interview, "I do not think we can have a renewed confidence in ourselves as white people without some sort of spiritual basis." Religiosity is not merely a neurosis or simply an expression of the irrational for Spencer. Religion can be, if used properly, a way forward to creating a cohesive European identity that can overcome the destructive elements of "cucked" Christianity and the Enlightenment.

Speaking with Gionet, Spencer states that Nietzsche influenced his perspective on religion, but that he is not ready to simply "throw away" religion, even though he is very critical of forms of Christianity that he regards as "cucked." In a podcast on radixjournal.com titled "Cucksplaning—Christianity is for Cucks," presented with the editor of *Radix*, Hannibal Bateman, he develops this criticism further. Spencer and Bateman explain that Christianity in the modern world has become less influenced by European identity and has taken on a more globalist outlook. In the episode, most of the discussion of Christianity is developed from an extensive critique of an article about the work of the author Evelyn Waugh (1903–1966) written in 2017 by the senior editor of *First Things* website and columnist for the *Catholic Herald* website, Matthew Smidtz. Spencer and Bateman's objections are mainly to how the article represents what they regard as the central problem for conservative Christianity, namely that it naively approaches the racialist content in what they regard as white identitarian forms of Christianity of previous generations. They explain that Christianity has been malleable, and that it had been shaped by Europeans to reflect their values and, in turn, shaped Europeans themselves. In the case of the modern world, however, Spencer and Bateman argue that Christianity has accommodated itself to a form of liberalism that poses as conservative Christianity. Much like earlier white nationalist leaders, they see this expression of Christianity as so wedded to the modern conservative movement that does not, in their view, address race, that it is antithetical to the racial-nationalist aspirations of the Alt-Right.

Spencer and Bateman's critique focuses more sharply on how Schmitz claims in his review of Waugh's *Sword of Honor* trilogy that "Waugh's hero learns from a wise woman…[and] sees that Christianity is not a matter of blood, or of race, or of victory in this world. It requires us to accept defeat in this life so we might enjoy

triumph in the next." Spencer and Bateman find this claim both repulsive and emblematic of liberalism and even modern conservative Christianity. Of course, they believe Schmitz is misreading Waugh, but the larger point is in the question that Spencer asks Bateman near the end of the podcast. He asks, "Do you think Christianity is inherently for cucks?" Bateman refers to Christianity's flexibility over centuries of its history and argues that it can be used to express several ideas. One expression of Christianity denies the world and abandons the fight to preserve the white race and its civilization, but another might be of use in a battle to preserve it, he argues. It would seem, for Bateman, that Christianity's strength was the source of its eventual obsolescence.

We get a further insight into Spencer's attitude toward religion in a podcast from 6 September 2016 with Spencer and Charles Lyons, Chief Administrative Officer of Arktos Media, which had been preserved in part on YouTube (Soft Nationalism 2017). The segment on YouTube seems in part to be an elaboration on what Spencer stated in his interview with Gionete, but with an added discussion of Kekism. Spencer reiterates the social value of religious ideas, especially in the context of cultural warfare. Proclaiming that "we are at war," he offers the hypothetical that if a battlefield commander were to order his men to attack the enemy or face execution for not following orders that would be less effective than giving them something to die for beyond themselves. That is for Spencer a significant part of the value of religion, though, for him, its particular content is negligible. However, he then discusses a particular obstacle for the Alt-Right. He and so many in the Alt-Right do not believe in God. "This is actually a big problem for us," he argues. The belief in a god or gods is still an important part of how he understands religion, which is at odds with Alt-Right atheistic sensibilities, and yet, he also argues that it "would be better in a way if we actually had something to bind us."

Reflecting on this predicament, Spencer jokingly claims the religion that could fill that social role for the Alt-Right is the "religion of Kek." The term Kek has a rather complicated origin, much of it in the folklore on Internet spaces. The Korean character ㅋ (sometimes written "ㅋㅋㅋ" in text messages to represent "hahaha"), which is equivalent to the English "LOL" in text and online discourse, coincided with the popularity of the "Pepe" character (Gillam 1981; Ellis 2018). Asprem notes that the "Cult of Kek" was born in online spaces like 4chan, and from the use of the anthropomorphic frog, Pepe, that was coopted in 2010 across the Internet from a 2005 online comic book titled *Boys Club*, and came to be associated with extreme-right views and the Alt-Right (2020: 23). In the conversation about Kekism, after some shared chuckles from Lyons and Spencer, Lyons states, "Esoteric Kekism is the quickest, fastest-growing religion in the Alt-Right," as Spencer laughs aloud. There is a turn to a more serious discussion of the utility of memes and meme magic about which both men agree. Referencing how the Internet rumors that then-candidate Hillary Clinton was ill had made headway in news media, among other examples, Lyons claims that some of the things they had been "memeing kind of like in jest they're appearing in reality." Spencer then interjects to explain, "This is how religions arise. Religions are often spurious." Referencing the adoption of Christianity by the

Roman Empire, he argues that the adoption of the "Christian cult… came out of nowhere" and became "a state religion." He argues that "it's good to have a healthy irony about Kek and Pepe and all of this kind of stuff, but this is literally how religions arise." Looking toward "the Alt-Right victory," Spencer conjectures that perhaps a mythology will arise describing how Kek came to unleash a "chaos" that led to the death of the old order and the birth of a "new order that's European."

The conversation between Lyons and Spencer vacillates between the place of the frog in various mythologies and jocular flourishes like "Praise Kek!", but ends with Spencer suggesting that there may be some validity to the hypothesis of Kekism becoming a valid religion in the future. "Stranger things have happened," Spencer exclaims, referring to the rise of early Christianity—a derided religion from a distant Roman province, once attacked and ridiculed, later became a major historical force for social transformation. Spencer wonders aloud if the religion of Kek, like Christianity, might also begin in obscurity and ignominy to later become the driving force behind a new cultural and social movement. This is unlikely, of course, but there is an important point here. For Spencer, religion is not about the worship of any particular deity or the faithful adherence to doctrine. In a sense, religion, whatever its name or particular content, is always non-theistic if not atheistic. It is judged by its ability to perform important social functions, and if it fails it is discarded.

I think this conversation is most significant because of what it reveals about perspectives on religiosity among so many associated with the Alt-Right at the time. In an essay first published during the 2016 presidential campaign, Lawrence Murray, a frequent contributor to sites like countercurrents.com, references Kek's green skin in an attempt to subvert the label of white-supremacist, writing, "A green frog cannot even factually be a White supremacist under the left's own swirling vision of burning crosses, flaming ovens, and values-voters that informs it. Can you think of a purportedly White supremacist society that would welcome green-colored people?" The religion of Kek is ultimately, for Murray, a vessel for the refutation of the values they attribute to "Catlady Ascendancy hierophant Hillary Clinton," and the "whiggish delusions of Judeo-Calvinism." Across the numerous web posts and independently published books featuring Kek and the Alt-Right's "meme magic," the sardonic humor in the deployment of Kekism is both a playful exercise in lampooning the political opposition and a serious expression of Alt-Right positions and tactics.

Kekism's serious playfulness reflects certain views of religion among those associated with the Alt-Right, but it also confronts the contentiousness of religious topics by parodying them. In an essay titled "Toward an Alt-Right Religion," F. C. Stoughton writes: "We in the Alt Right tend to regard our internal religious debates as pointless and divisive; Atheist or Anglican or Asatru, we feel, target each other for denunciation or proselytization only to the detriment of our cause." He argues that this is why they "often adopt a playful cynicism when dealing with the subject of religion so as to avoid intragroup strife and hurt feels." In something similar to what we heard from Spencer, Stoughton remarks that despite these attitudes, "many of us continue to dream of mapping out some kind of Alt-Right religious system or systems," and for similar reasons given by Spencer. Stoughton argues that white identitarians are caught

between the "twin death cults" of Islamic jihadism and Leftist egalitarianism, which forces for him a certain question: "what do we want our beliefs to do?" He argues, "the religion of the Alt Right, in all its forms, is refreshingly pragmatic," and that it is subject to "one ethical question—the iron question: *is it good for Europeans*?"

As is the case for American white nationalism more broadly, for these influencers of the Alt-Right, religion is a point of pragmatic negotiation and political strategy. As we have seen with Spencer and Stoughton, for example, religion is taken seriously as a social phenomenon with potential political, cultural, and organizational utility, but not necessarily as a matter of personal conviction. However, Alt-Rightists are not in complete agreement here. For some, religious convictions were still central to their white identity formation and the future of their ethnonationalist politics.

## Paganism

The pursuit of an authentic European narrative of identity often shaped the debates about religion among those affiliated with the Alt-Right as much as it did for white nationalists of the previous generation. In the history of American white nationalism, a certain romanticism of the European pre-Christian religious past has been attractive to people in the movement. In many cases, this attraction was directed toward Norse traditions, or Odinism, imagined as the ancient tradition of northern Europeans supplanted by Christianity (Berry 2017; Gardell 2003). Concerning the more recent thought on Paganism in the milieu of Alt-Right, however, we must distinguish between Alt-Right perspectives on Paganism and Alt-Right Pagan perspectives. The romanticism of an imagined pre-Christian European past continues to influence white nationalism today and is therefore a point of interest for those associated with the Alt-Right. In some cases, particularly on *Red Ice* and the associated site *Radio 3Fourteen*, we find specifically Pagan perspectives, while on *AltRight.com* and *Arktos* there seems to be more often a reflection of the value of what the various authors imagine as a European Pagan ethos. In the latter, contributors see the European Pagan past as part of the total spectrum of influences that made Europeans unique and perhaps part of a future synthesis with European traditionalist Christianity to redefine authentic European-ness for the future. However, some influencers, like Carolyn Emerick, whose writing has appeared on both *AltRight.com* and *Arktos*, have articulated specifically Pagan perspectives while also being heavily critical of the Alt-Right as a movement for its lack of grounding in ethics and spirituality.

Concerning Paganism, pragmatic concerns still shape how the various contributors to the major Alt-Right sites think about religion. An example of this discourse is an essay taken from a YouTube post under the name of Reinhard Wolf, the transcript of which was posted on Red Ice (RedIce 2017; Seeking Insight 2019). Wolf argues that just as any "great civilization requires a uniting mythos" that "defines and reinforces" its "values, identity, and destiny," so Europeans need a new unifying mythos if they are to deal with the "existential crisis" facing the West. He argues the West has undergone several significant "ideological ruptures," beginning when "Indo-Europeans invaded Europe" and "brought with them a virile, action oriented form of polytheism" that shaped the Paganisms of Europe. The "next great rupture" came

with Christianity, which he argues became "popular among slaves and peasants," but then became the official religion of the Roman Empire. However, Wolf argues that though "Christianity has Semitic origins, to say that it is entirely foreign is incorrect." He claims that while the Church was trying to "convert Pagan tribes, Christianity became Germanicized."

The thesis of a Germanization of Christianity is something that comes up with some frequency in discussions on Alt-Right sites. For example, Richard Spencer in an essay titled "Ghosts of Christmas Past" (Spencer 2016) discusses the recurring Pagan themes in European Christmas celebrations. He argues that at the heart of these rituals of celebration is an "eternal return" to themes inherent in European Paganism and that the reason for this is in part because the "real conversion" that took place with Europeans accepting Christianity was that Christianity itself "accommodated European folkways and began to be articulated by them." To make this point Spencer references James Russell's *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity* (1994). The thesis of this book is that when Christianity contacted Europe, there was a dual conversion. He argues that the "gradual Germanization of Christian ethics, liturgy, religious culture, and ecclesiastical organization which occurred contemporaneously with Christianization efforts," resulting in a particular form of Germanized Christianity (Russell 1994: 43 & 214). Spencer takes this to mean that European Christianity was a vessel for the Pagan ethos that Europeans never relinquished, making a holiday like Christmas at once Pagan and Christian because it is fully European.

Wolf's essay goes on to briefly describe the Protestant Reformation and the onset of the Enlightenment as additional ruptures in European history that ultimately led to a rejection of "the Christian mythos," one that had created a common European identity, leaving a void that has since been "filled by Cultural Marxism." In reflecting on this history, Wolf looks to a mythos that may unite the West. He argues that it will not be Christian or Pagan. With the diversity of religious views within the Alt-Right, he doubts that either Pagans or Christians can convert one another. He argues instead,

> This new mythos based on the fundamental laws of nature – hierarchy, identity, differentiation, upward evolution and struggle, to name a few. For regardless which stances one takes on metaphysical issues, the laws of nature reign supreme in this world, and civilizations that fall out of the natural order are doomed. This new ideology must support virtue and promotes excellence, strength, beauty, and honor. Most importantly, it must be able to transcend our differences.

Here, Wolf chooses to look beyond the breaks in European history to promote a new synchronistic worldview that blends European Christian and Pagan traditions with the scientific positivism of the Enlightenment. However, at its core, this proposed new mythos relies upon a narrative that European-ness is rooted in the Pagan past, even to the point that Christianity itself was paganized enough to become a specifically European religion.

The Germanization thesis is repeated in a review of the television series *Vikings* in a post on Radix (2014). The review mentions Russell's book to frame the

discussion of the series and argues that the two-sidedness of the Christian conversion in Europe that Russell proposed is demonstrated in the drama of the series. For the reviewer, this foreshadows larger questions about the Alt-Right and the future of the identitarian movement in European-majority countries. "Christianity didn't merely conquer the Indo-European world," they argue, "It was also molded by it, almost beyond recognition after centuries of reciprocal acculturation." The reviewer sees this history on display in the first two seasons of the show. Under the Jarlship of Ragnar, Viking armies raid the Kingdom of Northumbria, during which time Ragnar captures a Christian monk named Athelstan, who becomes his slave. However, Athelstan displays ingenuity, intelligence, and courage, which the reviewer notes impresses Ragnar, who embraces him as a friend. Athelstan slowly becomes acculturated into Viking society as the series goes on, and the reviewer describes this as Athelstan deciding to "convert" to Pagan ways, but also describes this conversion to Paganism as a "reversion." The Christian monk becomes more Pagan, and consequently more authentically himself.

The reviewer states that they do not wish to return to Paganism or Christianity themselves, as both have been discarded by Europeans and can never be fully recovered in a useful way. They do, however, look to this moment in the show as a reminder that there was a deep connection between the Saxon Christian and the Nordic Pagan that continued through European history. "For all the legitimate criticisms that Pagan or Nietzschean alt-righters can have about Christianity (especially today's Christianity, whether Catholic or Protestant)," the reviewer argues, "they shouldn't forget that it was the first religion that gave a feeling of kinship and a common purpose to Europeans." To capture this unifying element of Germanized Christianity, the reviewer suggests a "futuristic religion" that "comprises both Paganism and Christianity as successive, necessary steps in European Man's upward journey."

The Pagan European past still exerts significant pressure as Alt-Rightists wrestle with the perceived need for identifying a metaphysical center to European identity from which they might form some future ethnopolitics. Another example of this is an article posted on AltRight.com by frequent contributor Vincent Law (2017), titled "White People Must Embrace Their Inner Noble Savage." In this article, Law references a number of popular films, including *The Last of The Mohicans* with Daniel Day-Lewis, *The Last Samurai* with Tom Cruise, and Dances with Wolves with Kevin Costner, and even the character Aragorn from the *Lord of the Rings* film trilogy, to address the revival of the "noble savage" trope that signifies for him that "White people" are in the twenty-first century, "running away from Modernism." For Law, this desire is demonstrated by the popularity, too, of tribal tattoos and piercing, which results from the fact that "more than any other race," Europeans feel "keenly they have lost something that connects them to the savage world from which their ancestors hailed from." He goes on to say, "adorning themselves with African and Maori tribal decorations to feel a part of a tribe again." Fundamentally, the issue for Law is an existential crisis emerging from the lack of an authentically European spiritual tradition that could guide Europeans in post-Enlightenment society. "White people want to connect to something deeper and more ancient," he argues, "we on the Alt-Right

have to provide that. It doesn't have to be neo-paganism, it can be Christianity as well or better yet, a merger of the two."

Law does not develop what he means by suggesting a proposed religious synthesis, but the point of the article is that a rejection of modernity and the recovery of some ancient and forgotten aspect of pre-Christian tribalism, perhaps blended with Christianity, stands out as a possibility for the positive recovery of European-ness. This is again quite common in the articles on Paganism found on Alt-Right sites, particularly AltRight.com. However, not everyone commenting on this article was satisfied with what Law proposed. Some regarded this kind of play with tribalism as simply "LARPing," or live-action role-playing, as a "savage" and not expressing a serious response to the problems of modernity. Others felt that adopting the Rousseau-esque trope of the "noble savage" was demeaning to the ancient European Pagans, especially the Romans and Greeks. Others still saw deeper problems with the deployment of half measures concerning the recovery of the Pagan past.

One person voiced a sentiment that is reminiscent of the older Odinist critique of Christianity as foreign to the European spirit. Under the name Dave Overman, the commenter stated, "Giving up Christianity would be a step in the right direction," and then offered reading suggestions, including the Eddas, to aid one in the effort to recover a sense of European identity. In an additional post a little further down the thread, Overman goes on to ridicule Law, stating, "[the] Article sounds like a kid who watched Conan or 'Vikings' and suddenly feels as if he's discovered he has a penis." Overman seems to say that the article both fantasizes about and celebrates the fantasy of the European barbarian without real reflection on what that means. Finally, he laments,

> Christianity is FOREIGN [*sic*] to Europe, as much as Judaism and Islam are. It always has been. But this recognition has been lost over time, and to challenge the notion raises the ire of many Abrahamics [*sic*]. Why is good to look to our "savage roots"? Why is "Becoming a Barbarian" … something so frightening to most modernized whites? We look to the past because they had a culture that was superior to ours.

Overman's comments reflect what should be taken as a rejection of the exotification of pre-Christian European lifeways and a critique of the perceived half-measures of the approach to blending Christianity and pre-Christian spirituality. This critique of the Alt-Right from a more Pagan perspective, however, is not exclusive to the comments section of websites.

One particularly important critique of the Alt-Right from among the ethnonationalist Pagan Right emerges from Carolyn Emerick. She is a folklorist, writer, and organizer of what she calls the Folkright movement, which she established, as she explains, to counter the problems she saw in the Alt-Right. On her Amazon page introducing her magazine, *Europa Sun*, Emerick states that she had worked with a Celtic indie magazine on topics like history and Arthurian legend, but gravitated more toward folklore. In the videos, Emerick tells how she became affiliated with the Alt-Right, that she had seen in 2015 what she describes as "anti-

West rhetoric" and "open hate and racism" promoted by groups like Black Lives Matter, and in particular "hostile language" in the media to describe white men in particular. This made her consider that her work on European history, culture, and folklore may be also bound with a more political message than she had previously considered. "When I saw my own people, my cultural heritage, my cultural history being attacked so brazenly," she says, "I took the red pill."

Emerick repeats this narrative of her coming to the Alt-Right in a discussion on a *Bitchute* broadcast with other less recognizable Alt-Rightists from the U.S. and the U.K. titled "This Week on The Alt-Right W/ Carolyn Emerick" (Bitchute 2018). She specifically points to the "migrant caravan and the Trump campaign," and how these issues made her "more nationalist" and "racially aware." Her plans before her turn to the Alt-Right were to publish a magazine that would emphasize her interests in folklore and culture, but after taking the red pill and adopting the Alt-Right perspective, she wanted to turn her work in that direction. She then describes how she began to build new networks among the racial-nationalist scene to publish the magazine *Europa Sun*, which she describes in the first issue as "dedicated to a positive promotion of European cultural heritage," and whose contributors "tell the truth about history, confronting the spin put upon it by agenda driven leftists." Her conversion, as it were, was to a new political standpoint that was still informed by her previous Pagan perspective (Emerick 2017).

Emerick contributed to other Alt-Right sites after this conversion, including posts on *Arktos* and AltRight.com. In each of these contributions, she addresses issues similarly as she had done in her magazine. In "The Celebration of Ostara," published on AltRight.com in 2018, she argued that, though repressed by the early Church, Easter celebrations today retain elements from the still-earlier influences of Germanic Paganism. The point of the article was to refute the claim that Easter is a purely Christian holiday that existed quite apart from any Pagan traditions that may have influenced it. In the closing lines of the article, she argues, "Based on a review of the evidence, the only conclusion for such a heated rejection of [the] fact that the pagan Eostre is still considered a threat to those who would appropriate her holy holiday." We will see in a moment that these comments came to alienate Ayla Stewart from the Alt-Right just as hostile comments countering Emerick's insistence on recovering a pre-Christian Pagan past had played a role in alienating her from the brand as well. Emerick at this point, however, still tried to influence the Alt-Right milieu with her understanding of the importance of recovering a specifically European, non-alien, which is to say non-Christian, cultural heritage to form a movement that would indeed create a new culture that would be worth preserving.

In two articles posted on *Arktos*, Emerick argued more specifically for a return to European history and Pagan culture as a guide for the modern pan-European, white identity movement. In 2018, she also posted a piece titled "The Romantic Era: A Lighthouse for Modern Nationalism," in which she argues that the Romantic Era serves as an example of when Europeans came to the "realization the something of immense value was being lost" as a result of industrialization and a mechanized view of life becoming dominant. She argues that it was

Romanticism's concern with "the spirit and the soul of the folk that had been preserved through all those generations before mechanized farming machinery started to make labourers redundant" that characterized the era. This, she argues further, is needed in our time for ethnic nationalism to succeed. "Within the folk tradition," she says, "is preserved the kernels of cultural identity which grow and blossom in the great flourishings of cultural expression that the Western artistic tradition has produced in an unbroken line dating back to the Classical Era."

The claim that folklore and classical period art all share an unbroken continuity that speaks to a "soul" of the "folk" is specious, of course. However, Emerick's point here is that the supposed folk-soul invested in these European cultural forms is the soul and culture of European peoples that was the heart of the nineteenth-century Romanticism, and should still be at the center of modern ethnonationalism. "While the populist nationalist awakening seen widespread across the world is to be applauded," she argues, "we must take caution." She warns that while these movements are rightly attacking "globalists" they should take care to build their movements on a "grounding in [their] own ethnic past." For her, without recovering this deeper past, European ethnonationalism will be without a sustaining and authentic core and consequently will ultimately fail.

This is a point is made again in her 2019 article, also on *Arktos,* titled "Nationalism and Folk Identity." Here, she argues similarly to what she said in 2018 that ethnonationalists must find their roots to construct a meaningful movement, claiming sternly that the "answer is a double-fisted grasping-on to our indigenous European ethno-cultural roots, just as all ethnic groups should do, and nurturing a love and celebration for our own unique ethnic identity." For white people in Europe, she points to a history of European nationalisms venerating the Pagan past, so she argues for a return to that. For white Americans, the picture is more complex. She argues that all Europeans should "see the value in their own pre-Christian culture," but that Americans have been "recruited into a problematic version of Christianity that shuns and rejects our indigenous European roots." This, she argues, is the biggest challenge for ethnonationalists in the U.S., but still, she does not advocate a full rejection of Christianity, as she does elsewhere. Instead, she argues, "We must reject cultural Marxism on both sides of the Atlantic, and American Christians must seriously consider how they can synthesize their faith with our ancient ethnic heritage."

In this article, Emerick also articulates the basis for the rejection of the Alt-Right brand. She argues here that it offers no real grounding in European history. She says plainly, "My biggest criticism of the Alt-Right is that it seems largely rooted in emotional reactivity." She goes on to explain that it may not be the fault of the people in the movement, but rather the societies in which they have been raised. She argues that the Alt-Right "arises in a generation of individuals rightly rebelling against the liberal indoctrination which demonizes them, but they themselves lack any grounding in the ethnoculture they claim to be standing up for." The Alt-Right here is a symptom of rebellion and not necessarily a real response to the existential crisis plaguing white Americans. However sympathetic she may appear to Alt-Rightists on some counts, her larger point is that because they lack a deeper

cultural grounding in authentic European folkways and are so driven by reactionary politics rather than tradition, they cannot be trusted with leading in the future of European ethnopolitics.

It is difficult to ascertain precisely when Emerick's criticism of the movement first began to form, but what is certain is that by 2019 she had come to reject the Alt-Right brand altogether and in more harsh terms than the previous article demonstrates. One year after her discussion about the Alt-Right on *Bitchute* where she discussed how she was "red pilled," she was back on *Bitchute*, this time alone, to explain why she had come to reject the Alt-Right completely. She lists further complaints about the movement, but they seem related to her previously-discussed concerns. Specifically, she had a strong reaction to what she regarded as the incompetence of the organizers of the "Unite the Right" rally, and how they handled what took place there and its aftermath, referring to them as leaders of the "Dolt-Right." She argued that this was a full demonstration of their ineptitude, and their complete disregard for the people, some of whom she calls "kids," who followed the leadership there. In particular, she mentions James Fields, who was sentenced to a life term plus 419 years and $480,000 in fines for killing Heather Heyer when he rammed his vehicle into a crowd of counterdemonstrators at the rally (Ingber 2019).

Emerick spends a great deal of time criticizing what she describes as the Alt-Right leadership who brought Fields to the event and then did nothing to aid in his legal defense or to help his mother. This neglect and ineptitude was for her the paradigmatic example of why the Alt-Right is ill-prepared to be the vehicle for ethnonationalism. The "Dolt-Right" had demonstrated, in her view, that they had no specific strategic vision, nor did they have a deep sense of community that would care for its members. She argued further, the "leaders" had no concern for their "troops," which for her is anathema to what being a good leader meant to ancient European people.

In a sense, one can see that Emerick's criticism of the Alt-Right so far is that the leadership is incompetent and apathetic, in part because they have no grounding in the folk culture of Europe, which, as she has argued before, is the only proper basis of an ethnonationalist movement. Going further in her criticism, she remarks upon the quality of the people associated with the brand, and in particular, what she regards as a lack of morality in the way they conduct themselves. Perhaps surprising to some, a principal target of her condemnation is the widespread misogyny in the movement. Emerick also attacks their general reliance upon "shitposting" and their "sperging out" on women—a rather odious reference to Asperger Syndrome she deploys to remark on their overindulgent and derogatory Internet posts attacking women. Rather than developing an ethos of positive action rooted in the "ethnos" and its traditions, she argues, Alt-Rightists chose to act irresponsibly, with childishness, and to disparage women.

Everything with which she finds fault in the Alt-Right ultimately comes back to this more general criticism that the Alt-Right is too reactionary and not grounded in European culture and traditions. We can see an elaboration of this criticism in a discussion with another ethnonationalist Pagan, Grimvera, co-operator of what is now Madot Media. Madot Media, according to the About page, "was started in the spring of 2018 as a current-events opinion blog from a hard, alt-right position."

However, in this discussion, both Emerick and Grimvera criticize the Alt-Right from what they call the "Folkright" perspective. Emerick explains that she had come to the decision to abandon the Alt-Right brand for what she calls "Folk-right." She references a hashtag, #PGTOW, or "Pagans Going Their Own Way," which plays on the men's rights movement hashtag, #MGTOW, the hashtag for an anti-feminist online community called "Men Going Their Own Way." In this case, the hashtag refers to a larger Pagan exodus from the Alt-Right propelled by many of the factors Emerick mentioned previously.

Grimvera agrees with Emerick that the Alt-Right did have a point in their rejection of what they perceive as white men being under attack, but that the "moniker" is no longer useful. He specifically references what he describes "Christian identitarian" attacks on Pagans in the movement to argue that the Alt-Right has become too beholden to Christian ideology and thereby has no place for Pagans. Emerick also argues that this is the case and goes further to argue that Christianity, even if it is expressed in racialist terms, is "universalist" and therefore inimical to "the ethnos." There is more to the "red pill" than attacking women and rejecting liberalism, she argues, advocating "waking up to Abrahamism," not just liberalism. In other words, an authentic European identity movement, like the Alt-Right was supposed to be, must reject non-European ideologies.

For Emerick, as was the case with so many Pagan white nationalists before her, Christianity is part of a larger network of social and psychological issues facing Europeans. She uses a well-known example from social attachment theory in the work done by the American Psychologist Harry Harlow to argue for a further perniciousness of Christianity. Harlow removed baby rhesus monkeys from their mothers and placed them in cages with inanimate surrogates, one of which was made from soft materials. The monkeys seemed to prefer the one that was softer and clung to that model as if it were their mother. Emerick argues that Europeans attached themselves to Christianity in this same way when they were robbed of their traditions. Far from a tradition adapted to Europeans' social and cultural sensibilities, Christianity is a "desert religion" that has an "alien" view of society; an alien view that has also poisoned Europeans' view of women. Her criticism of Christianity is that it is finally irreconcilable with an authentic European consciousness.

Emerick, as I noted, is a critic also of the Alt-Right's misogyny, which she sees originating ultimately in Christianity. She argues that in Christianity, men are convinced to denigrate and dominate their women rather than valuing them as "part of a greater whole." From her perspective, an ethnonationalist Pagan viewpoint does not support such a disposition. The roots of the failings of the Alt-Right on this count, then, are to be found in the "Abrahamization" of European thought through the imposition of Christianity. Christianity taught Europeans to disrespect women as much as it taught them to reject their traditions and practices. For Emerick and Grimvera a return to pre-Christian European traditions, including its "indigenous faith," is necessary for the construction of an effective and holistic pan-European ethnopolitics. Among the Alt-Right religious differences coupled with deeper issues concerning the use of memes and its overt misogyny, threatened its

future relevance, at least among some ethnonationalist Pagans. Yet, some Alt-Right influencers did try to find a way through the Christian/Pagan divide and establish common ground.

## Negotiating religious difference

The negotiation of religious conflict has been an issue for American white nationalism from its beginnings in the latter half of the twentieth century. In Emerick's case, and perhaps for others adopting the #PGTOW hashtag, the Alt-Right brand is too tainted. Nevertheless, some Alt-Rightists have made an effort to accommodate religious pluralism among "pro-white" Pagans and Christians. One example of these efforts is an interview with the hosts of Good Morning White America on *Radio 3Fourteen* by Lana Lokteff in March 2017. Though it seems their podcasts have ceased as of May 2017 after announcing a break from broadcasting, *Good Morning White America* is a "pro-white, Christian podcast of the Alt Right" hosted by the pseudonymous Adam and Mary Grey. Lokteff had them on her show to discuss several issues, but in particular "interreligious conflict in the Alt-Right, building community for pro-White Christians" (Radio 3Fourteen 2017).

This particular episode begins with Adam and Mary describing their backgrounds. Adam had become convinced of the inerrancy of the Bible and other core doctrines of conservative Christianity. After meeting Mary, he says that they together became "red pilled on race and the JQ," or the "Jewish Question." Adam says that while he explored these issues, "the cross" was always "central" to his life. Though he was exploring the Alt-Right he never strayed, he says, from his identity as a Christian. Mary however grew up with Christianity, though she describes her upbringing in a non-denominational, mixed-race church, as having made her a "hardcore cuck." When Adam began to investigate "Alt-Rightish" sites three years after they married, she, not yet a convert to the Alt-Right, was concerned. For Mary, the biggest question that turned her to Adam's way of thinking was, as she describes the question, "What would you do with the Christians that are not white?" His response to her as she recalled was that he told her that "they can have their own society over there." That Adam favored racial separation, even within the Church, over genocide was enough to convince Mary that this new political turn was not only permissible but Godly.

Lokteff and the Greys agree together that most Christian churches have become "cucked," as the Christian tradition was perverted by liberalism. Adam argues further that like other institutions in society, churches have been "infiltrated" by "Marxism," and that the proper, racially aware, and "pro-white" Christian perspective has been all but extinguished among white Christians. "When you look at the SJW [Social Justice Warriors] like activities of these major denominations," Adam argues, "doctrinally they are not far off from Unitarian Universalists or the Communist Party USA." Therefore, in his view, such churches are not Christian at all but have perverted Christianity to conform to a leftist political agenda. There is more than a passing similarity in what Adam says to what we heard from Spencer and others critical of modern Christianity. He goes on to argue

that a more "traditional" expression of the tradition would be more "racially aware," and would support Alt-Right positions and political ideals.

Following this, Lokteff presents another issue—the connection between Christianity and Jews, in particular Jesus' Jewishness. Adam states plainly that Judaism "at its core is anti-gentile" as well as anti-Christian and "anti-Christ." "The Jews," he argues further, "are not the key people today." Relying on the idea that God has rejected the Jewish people, the argument is that Jesus' Jewishness is now irrelevant. Commenting on contemporary American Christianity, Adam and Mary agree, too, that the philo-Semitism of many white evangelical Protestants is not only doctrinally erroneous but also nonsensical because, as they put it, the Jews are behind various plots, including the "third world invasion" of the West. Lokteff then joins in on this point to say that she often asks Christians who complain about "the filth coming out of Hollywood" if the understand that "Jews are making that stuff." However, when pressed on the question of Jesus' Jewish origins, Adam insists that Jesus is the son of David in fulfillment of prophecy and that Jesus is therefore Jewish. However, he then qualifies this by saying he doubts if the Jews today are true descendants of the ancient tribe of Judah, again pivoting on older anti-Semitic tropes to try to address this question. This claim in particular is common among explicitly racialist forms of Christianity, namely that the people who claim to be Jews today are in truth impostors. Adam, however, does not rely too much on the trope of the false Jew. Instead, he points out that the Jews as a people have rejected Jesus and killed him, even though some of their "co-ethnics," the Apostles and early Christians, followed him. The point seems to be that Christianity and Judaism, whatever their earlier connections, are deeply antagonistic to one another, and so the historical connection is basically meaningless for the white-identity Christianity he espouses. Adam does not try to dwell on these fine points too much, but instead seems more concerned to avoid the Jewish origins of Christianity to form solidarity with Lokteff on the grounds of a shared antipathy toward Jews. Finally, however much they might differ in their views on Christianity, they agree on "the JQ," and that seems in this interview to satisfy Lokteff's concern.

The conversation then moves on to the debate between Christians and Pagans in the Alt-Right as Lokteff asks them to discuss their view of this controversy. Interestingly, Adam talks about how his family embraces the "heritage" of the West, including reading the Greek classics to their children. "We embrace the heritage that our forefathers created and passed down to us," he says, justifying this position by associating it with the biblical commandment to honor one's father and mother. For Mary the commonality is a mutual interest for both groups to have a positive environment and a future for white children. For her, the issues concerning white people go beyond the issue of religion to a more fundamental concern for racial survival through strong family units, something on which she and Lokteff agree. Adam points out that what was at that time a controversy over Richard Spencer claiming to support the right to an abortion demonstrates that there will be disagreements between them and other members of the movement, but that these differences can be accommodated and debated at a later time, after the more immediate crises facing the race are dealt with. Similar in some ways to what we

find from Greg Johnson in 2010, one finds here an attempt and even a faith in the ability of race interest to consolidate support across religious lines.

In this interview, Lokteff claims that "the white mind is complex," and that a diversity of opinion is therefore inevitable within the movement. She, like others who have argued for religious tolerance among white nationalists, wants to focus on pragmatic concerns. "Considering the times were in its best to avoid arguing with anyone on our side about their religion or lack thereof," Lokteff argues as she closes the program. The lesson she leaves the listener with, very much like Adam's argument about disagreements over abortion, is that debates over religion are best left for after the existential threat to the white race is dealt with. The preservation of the white race, at least in this instance, is the only issue where disagreements are not entertained.

As much as this particular episode seemed to argue for a place for Pagans and Christians together in the Alt-Right, Pagans like Emerick and Grimvera are not alone in their dissatisfaction with the broader Alt-Right response to religious differences. In a YouTube video from April of 2018, the one-time face of what was described as the "Mormon Alt-Right," Ayla Stewart, known by her social media handle "Wife With a Purpose," read aloud her blog post on her now-inactive website wherein she explained why she left the label of the Alt-Right behind and discussed in some detail what that means for her as she continues to advocate for "traditionalism, sovereignty, and faith." Stewart also gave some background on herself and how she came to adopt the brand in the first place. She explains in the video that like many who became involved in the Alt-Right, she was attracted to it during Trump's 2016 campaign. She was particularly attracted to Vox Day's sixteen points, in part because she also identified as a "Trad," or traditional Christian, something that she had never shied from sharing. In an appearance on Radio 3Fourteen (2015), she explained how she was a former leftist, feminist Pagan, with a master's degree in Women's Spirituality (Trad Women vs. The Feminist Lyfestyle). She explained that when she "began researching things independently… that's when things began to crumble" for her former "liberal" perspective. Stewart explains that she had always wanted to be a wife and stay at home mother and that this was for her a contradiction with the liberal politics that she had formerly accepted. Finally, describing how she rejected Paganism to become Mormon, she explains that she is actually more of a "Barnes and Noble Pagan," engaging in "hippy-dippy" Paganism but never taking the practice too seriously. She explains that her liberalism and attraction to Paganism were finally rejected in favor of a more conservative worldview and Mormonism, which appealed to her shifting political sensibility.

In the 2015 interview and the 2019 YouTube video, Stewart notes that her conversion to the Alt-Right came initially from the attacks against white people and white culture, as she understood them, that she had observed on social media and in the broader American culture. While she then saw the Alt-Right as a means to address these concerns, as she describes in her YouTube video reading her essay, by 2019 the brand Alt-Right had become too tarnished for her to keep that name to describe her political and social position. Furthermore, she explains that she is not alone in this defection, as Vox Day and Paul Ramsey, or RAMZPAUL, had also abandoned the term a year before her recording the video. Her specific complaints

seem to center on the "stigma" that had come to characterize the movement, particularly after the debacle of Charlottesville; more precisely, that anyone associated with the Alt-Right brand was too easily labeled a Nazi. She makes every effort to explain that while she does not want to appear to be an "optics cuck," appearances matter for the continued fight for the issues that brought her to the movement in the first place, and the appearances of the Alt-Right were not helpful to that end any longer. The brand was just too damaged to be of any use, in her view.

Stewart's further disengagement from the Alt-Right, however, like Emerick's, is rooted in criticism of its lack of a moral center. Stewart notes with some directness the behavior of Matt Heimbach, leader of the Traditionalist Workers Party, who became known to many Americans for his assault on an African American woman protester at a 2016 Trump campaign rally in Kentucky (Glowicki 2018). This particular act of violence, however, was not her concern. Rather she was upset by his marital infidelity and reports that he physically assaulted his wife in front of their children. For Stewart, such actions demonstrate the kind of moral failings possessed by many "prominent people" associated with the Alt-Right, which provided further reason to disassociate herself from it. On this point, Emerick and Stewart agree, as they both see problems with the personal behavior of those who have come to most represent the Alt-Right and how the events at the Charlottesville rally tarnished the brand. However, there was a deeper issue still that had put Stewart on the path away from the brand.

Stewart explains that she was very unhappy with a tweet from Richard Spencer in which he drew attention to an article concerning Easter on his website AltRight.com. The article in question was Emerick's aforementioned "The Celebration of Ostara," which Spencer described in the tweet as an "[i]nformative essay on the Pagan origins of Easter." Stewart took extreme offense to this and regarded it as an attack on her Christian beliefs. This was not, she explains, the only time such offense had been given from those in the Alt-Right. On her Gab account, she described how she had posted Easter dinner recipes to share her celebration of the Easter holiday and had received derogatory remarks from Alt-Rightists who said of her faith that she worshiped "a Jew on a stick." She explained how she had previously accepted such attacks as "outliers," but had with this perceived attack coming from Spencer on his website become convinced that the Alt-Right was in fact "anti-Christian."

The abandonment of the Alt-Right brand seems to have been a rather easy decision for Stewart, in part because she identifies, as she says in the 2019 YouTube post, "first and foremost as a Christian." For her that means she should continue to be "a good steward of God's creation" by "preserving and defending" all races in the nations that God created for them, continuing to advocate for ethnonationalism as God ordained according to her reading of Genesis 10:32. She explains that she would obey God's command in Ezekiel 22:30 by continuing "defending our borders," continuing to "honor [the] ancestry and heritage that God gave us," and raising large families in which children are taught to "defend their people." She also commits to advocating for a society that protects women by not allowing "people and cultures into our country which harm and mistreat" them, and loving their families and neighbors, which she uses Matthew 22:36–39

to define as "our literal neighbor whom we share our nation and culture with." Finally, she argues, she will continue to advocate against equality because "the Bible speaks against false notions of equality of earthy ability." Her politics, therefore, had not changed, but, in her estimate, her affiliations had to. Finally, her commitment to what she understood to be proper Christian teachings compelled her exodus from the Alt-Right, leaving behind a damaged brand while maintaining the substance of Christian-endorsed white nationalism.

Like Emerick, Stewart could not, in the end, find a place for her religious identity within the existing parameters of the Alt-Right or with the overwhelming atheist or agnostic influence of those like Richard Spencer, whom she regarded as an atheist with little respect for Christians associated with the Alt-Right. The bad behavior of those like Heimbach and other "Nazi LARPers," as she calls them in the 2019 video, also irreparably damaged the Alt-Right's image in her estimation. However, in both Emerick and Stewart's rejection of the brand, the core of what drew them to the Alt-Right still motivates their activism. Though they differ significantly on matters of religious faith and practice, they are both still religiously motivated ethnonationalists. The question concerning religious pluralism in the Alt-Right is now once again a broader question about religious pluralism within a splintered American white nationalist milieu.

## Conclusion

Emerick, Stewart, the Greys, and so many others continue to struggle to share their ideas after having some of their sites removed from online media platforms. Even while writing this book I found that previously accessible documents or videos from even a year prior have been removed. This can in some sense explain why the movement has faltered, as do the rather public incidents, the spectacle of the "Unite the Right" rally among them, which have drawn an increasingly negative spotlight on the movement since it first came to public attention in the 2016 election. Infighting over money and prestige, and personal disagreements, too, have played a role in the decline of the Alt-Right in recent years. What has been less well understood, however, is that the kinds of accommodations for religious difference prompted by Greg Johnson and to a lesser degree, by influencers like Lana Lokteff, to keep the movement unified for the sake of political goals within a rather broad ethnonationalist movement seem to have broken down in fairly significant and public ways.

For all the reasons discussed so far—infighting, disagreements over what the Alt-Right is, and deeply divisive opinions about tactics, the Alt-Right is perhaps even more difficult to describe now than it was in 2016. However, we can say that as was the case with American white nationalism more broadly, the domain of religion has proven an obstacle for the Alt-Right. For white nationalists in America, religious differences, especially concerning disagreements over Christianity's place in white ethnonationalism, are sites where division often leads to larger splits in specific movements. However, some influencers attempted to stake claims about the value of a certain understanding of Christianity to the Alt-Right. Despite the

perceived hostility of the Alt-Right toward Christians that Stewart noted, some self-identified Christians have attempted to express their views of Christianity and what it means or even should mean to the Alt-Right, even if they have had little to no success in making Alt-Right converts.

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# 2

# UNDERSTANDING ALT-RIGHT CHRISTIANITIES

Both the diversity of religious perspectives within the Alt-Right and the defections by people like Carolyn Emerick and Ayla Stewart point to the important yet tense relationship those affiliated with the Alt-Right have with religion. Richard Spencer and others who share his non-theistic views often think of religion as socially useful, and regard the historical role of Christianity as important to the formation of European cultures. However, just as Spencer himself claimed, many Alt-Rightists did not necessarily want a return to Christianity or pre-Christian European traditions. Yet, some Christians sympathetic to the Alt-Right and its ethnonationalist politics tried to argue that a certain view of Christianity not only should be accepted within the movement, but that it would be conducive to promoting good ethics, and perhaps also helpful to the brand. For these Alt-Right Christian advocates, Christianity, if properly understood, could provide an authentic ethnonationalist identity and facilitate success in their efforts to transform society. Importantly, however, their concerns were not simply practical. They also believed that their understanding of Christianity was true and therefore should be heeded.

The main lesson from the previous chapter was that the plurality of views on religion in the broader white nationalist movement proved to be irreconcilable within the broader tent of the Alt-Right. In this chapter, we will see that Christians associated with the Alt-Right have nevertheless tried to argue for a significant role for Christianity, but with little success. This lack of success in popularizing Christianity among the Alt-Right may be in part due to their lack of a shared theological vision coupled with the general resistance toward Christianity among many American white nationalists associated with the brand. Christian Alt-Right advocates often differed widely in their expressions of what an Alt-Right Christianity should be, adding to the general complexity of religious perspectives among Alt-Rightists rather than offering a clear religious option. Additionally, Christian Alt-Rightists seemed to differ on what ethnonationalism should be. While the

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American-centered cast of the leading influencers in the Alt-Right had adapted much from the older white nationalist ideology, others outside the United States developed conceptions of ethnicity that go beyond the white/black racial binary. In the case of Andrew "Drew" Fraser, whom we will discuss in greater depth later in this chapter, this is related to particular conceptions of Christian doctrines that, in his view, teach that the ethnically defined nation, not the white race, is the vehicle for God's work in the world.

The divisions and disagreements over religion among those associated with the Alt-Right, in part because of its emergence from older expressions of American white nationalism that were suspicious of Christianity, meant that Christians seeking to influence the Alt-Right were already at a disadvantage. Further disagreements among the few who attempted to present an Alt-Right Christianity likely also inhibited their influence on the broader Alt-Right milieu. In this sense, the story of Alt-Right Christianity reflects the general complexity of views on religion among the Alt-Right, which often put these Christian Alt-Rightists in the position of apologists for both ethnocentric Christianity and ethnonationalism.

## The Christian Alt-Right

Perhaps the best place to begin to discuss the Christian perspectives in the Alt-Right is with Vox Day. Though Ayla Stewart describes Vox Day as having abandoned the Alt-Right by 2019, his place in the Alt-Right was perhaps always complicated. He was an important influencer for the brand, but perhaps it is more accurate to say that Vox was, as he has said of himself, never a "joiner" (Day 2016b). He explains that he came to be associated with the Alt-Right by the attribution of others. He says in his discussion with Greg Johnson that he "was a well-known Gamer Gater meant that I was sort of tied to all of the shitposters, shitlords, and so forth." So, according to Vox Day, his place in the Alt-Right was one of being associated with a style of online activism rather than becoming a member of a movement. There is some truth to the idea that his association as a leader of the Alt-Right was by attribution, however, he did help define the brand and expressed sympathies for its politics, especially through his statement about the Alt-Right that preceded Richard Spencer's manifesto.

Vox Day, unlike other influencers for the Alt-Right, is a professed Christian. As has already been noted in the Introduction, the main point that separated Vox Day's definition of the Alt-Right from Spencer's was the former's placement of Christianity as one of the key constitutive elements of the movement. Alongside "the European nations" and "the Greco-Roman legacy," Vox lists Christianity as one of the three foundational pillars of Western civilization. He does indeed think of Christianity as an important element of the politic project of the Alt-Right, Vox Day, however, does not advocate for Christianity on merely pragmatic grounds. Rather, he takes his faith commitment quite seriously. In one of his posts on his blog, *Vox Populi*, he states plainly and in very familiar evangelical language, "I am a Christian because I not only believe in Jesus Christ but have accepted that he is the Lord of my life, not me" (2005). For Vox Day, Christianity is not simply a possible

component of a unifying mythos for the coming ethnostate. It is the very foundation for his being and for the formation of Western civilization.

In his 2005 post, Vox Day goes on to describe the resolve of his faith. He explains that his "reasons for deciding to follow Jesus Christ and abide by the principles of Christianity as laid out in the Bible and by Christian Tradition… are threefold." First, he argues, "Christian principles predict human behavior and concomitant consequences better than anything else I've witnessed or studied." In this way, Vox Day argues that Christianity, because of this insight into human nature, offers a "more intellectually coherent" picture of humanity "than any other philosophy or religion." Second, returning to his original point, he claims to have "witnessed and experienced the power of Jesus Christ in [his] life and in [the] lives of those around [him]." For this reason more than any other, he is compelled to believe. "So, even if Christianity was, by its own lights, false," he argues, "it would still an uncannily powerful placebo and one that one would be churlish, if not downright evil, to deny others." Once again Vox Day offers what he regards as empirical evidence for the reasonableness of Christianity, and goes on to explain that he also finds "[t]he very hatred that so many betray for Christianity, as opposed to Islam, Judaism (the religion not the people) and Buddhism is, to me, testimony of the veracity of the Christian Worldview." Finally, Vox Day explains that the "existence and persistence of evil, great and small" has convinced him of the validity of his faith. "I believed in the tangible reality of evil before I believed in the existence of God," he explains. "The one requires the other, for without God, there is no evil, there is only one opinion or a lack of perfect utility." For this reason, he states, "even if Christianity is a human construct, I'll take it on Voltairean grounds alone, for it is a construct that has served humanity longer and better than any other."

Vox provides as an apologia for his faith the ability of Christian sources and tradition to predict and prescribe human behavior, the ability of Jesus to transform individual lives, for which he provides a witness, and finally the existence of evil necessitating the existence of God. Whatever we might think of the value of these claims or his ability to provide a convincing argument for both the existence of God and for faith in Christianity as the one true religion, we can see that Vox Day defends Christianity for more than pragmatic reasons. He argues, "beyond the merely intellectual, there is a joy in my heart when I contemplate the simple phrase 'He is Risen' that gives me a persistent optimism even in the face of the world's panoply of evils." Though he regards himself as something of a pessimist because of his conviction that the world is destined to be destroyed and that it is currently "ruled by vicious sadists," he is a "cheerful pessimist" because of his faith. "I do not know that I am right with regards to these things," he writes, "But it is enough, it is more than enough, to trust that I am."

It is worth noting that there is nothing about his apologetics here that is a deviation from what one might see in any number of conservative evangelical outlets. Vox Day's faith as described in this 2005 post, of course, predates the emergence of the Alt-Right, but there is no sign that his commitment to his Christian faith or his efforts at apologetics has since wavered. He has written several times on his blog about his Christian beliefs, often in the context of defending them. He also published a book in

2016 addressing the reasonableness of faith in *On The Existence of Gods*, co-authored with Dominic Saltarelli, and attacked what he calls "the Unholy Trinity" of atheism—Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens in his 2008 book, *The Irrational Atheist*.

Vox is an extremely active blogger and writer, so there is perhaps more available material that could be discussed here, but the point for now is that Vox Day views Christianity in a radically different way than Spencer and others who have been associated as the main influencers of the Alt-Right. He commented on this very issue in a blog post from 2018 titled "The anti-Churchian Alt-Right." Addressing the common description of the Alt-Right as anti-Christian and the claim that Alt-Right thinkers are overwhelmingly atheist, Vox Day claims that this is a distorted picture created by the media. He states that he is often contacted by media outlets, but that they never quote him, arguing in this post that they refuse to do so because his "words did not fit their preconceived narrative, while the media-dancing performance art of Richard Spencer and Andrew Anglin did, just as Greg Johnson's anti-Christianity and homosexuality fits the narrative that Matthew Rose and First Things are pushing to discredit and demonize the Alt-Right in the eyes of their readership." Vox Day goes on to explain that he does not blame Spencer, Anglin, or Johnson for this distortion, but that he was "simply pointing out that, once again, the media simply cannot be trusted to report on philosophical matters such as these in an accurate, honest, and intelligent manner."

Vox considers the perception that the entirety of the Alt-Right is led by atheists to be a false one painted by neglectful reporters; however, there is a greater point that he wants to make regarding this view. Not only is the Alt-Right not anti-Christian, he argues in his post, but Alt-Rightists support "genuine Bible-based traditional Christianity." Here, he makes a key distinction that runs through his various discussions of Christianity; one that is common to many in the Alt-Right. He sees a clear distinction between what he at times calls "cucked Christianity," or other times "Churchianity," which he sees as a liberal distortion of Christian traditions, and true Christianity, which is rooted in what he regards as the historically formed tradition in Europe. To this point, in his blog post, Vox Day argues that the Alt-Right "is pro-Christian and anti-Churchian." The kind of Christianity that the Alt-Right condemns is not Vox's understanding of it, the faith he espouses, but rather the "globalist Judeo Christ-worshipping churchians."

Vox offers a definition of Churchianity in a chapter he wrote in *Cuckservative: How "Conservatives" Betrayed America* (2015), co-authored with John Red Eagle with a forward by Mike Cernovich—themselves figures associated with the Alt-Right. In the book, Vox uses the terms Churchian and Churchian cuckservatism to identify that form of Christianity that he says has reduced all of Christian teaching to the parable of the Good Samaritan. Here, this parable from the Gospel of Luke is described by Vox as having become the main source for the "SJW" perversion of the total message of the Bible and of the Christian tradition in the West. "And while they subscribe chiefly to salvation through works and societally-approved attitudes rather than faith," he argues, "they nevertheless possess complete and utter faith in the intrinsic goodness of foreigners" (2015: 179).

As one might have guessed from his criticism of "Churchianity," the main issues to which he objects are the role of Christians in what he regards as open borders immigration and the social justice "perversions" that support such biblical interpretation. Indeed the main thrust of the book is the authors' dislike of the way mainstream conservatives have dealt with immigration, regarding them as globalists as much as liberals. Tied to this main theme throughout the book is the accusation that guilt is driving much of the social justice efforts among Evangelicals that Vox Day despises. He argues that "cuckservatives and other Churchians have elevated a literally extra-Biblical post-Christian concept that flies directly in the face of genuine Christian theology," and that this "theological confusion" has not only has supported "teen mission trips to impoverished but sunny lands near the equator," but also led to "transracial adoption as the new Christian virtue," especially among white evangelical Christians (p.183). He titled the heading for this section, "The Great Cuckoo Hunt," which of course is a reference to the idea that such interracial entanglements are inherently perverse and damaging. Referencing the passage from James 1:27, which states, "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world," he argues "there are better ways to provide for orphans than to displace one's own children" (Day, 2015: 185).

Vox Day is here reading the very text that modern Christians use to, in his view, pervert the Bible into a tool for social justice to make his argument against them. It is interesting to note the clear implication of racial competition and the anxiety over the place of black or brown offspring in white homes that permeates the very history of the fear of non-white men impregnating white women. It is especially interesting given his own penchant for claiming a racially mixed background in being part Native American. Nevertheless, this is his effort to re-read the passages used by "cucked" Christians to demonstrate that they are wrong about the social justice messages they find in the Bible. In another part of the chapter, he refers to Galatians 3:28: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." While many Christians have used this passage for an argument against racism, Vox Day sees that as a misreading of the text. "Now, this is obviously a reference to spiritual equality before God rather a denial of observable Earthly differences," he argues. Vox Day references an article by David and Desiree Smolin, vocal critics of the adoption practices of evangelicals, to make a final point on this topic. He quotes from "The Liberal Roots of the Modern Adoption Movement," to emphasize that "the pro-transracial adoption rhetoric is fundamentally pro-equality, integrationist and multi-cultural rhetoric" (quoted in Day 2015: 186). For him, this is evidence that the argument for transracial adoption as well as other expressions of "Christian cuckservatism" is not Christian at all and more politically rather than biblically motivated. He argues that "to the extent that transracial adoption is influenced by Christianity, it is the result of the same erroneous theological perspective as the racial and immigration aspects, namely, Jesus Christ's penultimate command to love one's neighbor as oneself" (p.186).

Just as Ayla Stewart and the hosts of Good Morning White America had commented, Vox asks rhetorically in his post, "But who, precisely, is one's neighbor?"

He addresses the question by analyzing the Parable of the Good Samaritan once again; specifically, to demonstrate how exactly the "cucked" Christians have misunderstood the limits of the aid the Samaritan offered the person who was beaten and robbed, left on the road to die. The first point of opposition follows a libertarian objection to the use of tax dollars to aid immigrants or others who may be in need. "The Good Samaritan did help the man," but he argues, "he helped him by giving the man some of his own money, not by using the king's soldiers to take money away from other people, taking a cut himself, and giving the rest to the man" (pp.187–8). The second point refers to an argument on strict nativist nationalism. "He put the man up in an inn," he argues, "he did not move the man into his house, provide him with room and board, then permit the man to send for his wife, his children, his parents, and his cousins, and let them live off the largesse of the other people in his neighborhood while raping their children, stealing their cars, and trashing their yards." The injured traveler was helped by an individual who used his private resources, and who kept him at a distance, housing him in an inn rather than the family home. Vox Day argues from this lesson, "To have mercy on foreigners in need is not to pay for them to literally become your neighbor and move in next door to you and live off the welfare state" (p.188).

As a counterpoint to the Parable of the Good Samaritan as it has been used by those he calls "SJWs", Vox Day offers what he describes as the "genuine Christian position on refugees, immigration, and people from other lands" quoting the passage from Matthew 15:21–26 which reads:

> Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly." Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, "Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel." The woman came and knelt before him. "Lord, help me!" she said. He replied, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs."
>
> *(quoted in Day, 2015: 188)*

Vox Day goes on to recognize that Jesus "made an exception to the rule for the woman's sake, because of her faith," but is quick to add that this was, in fact, an exception that does not contradict what he understands to be the general rule regarding the treatment of ethnically different foreigners. Jesus did aid the woman, but did not regard her as part of the Jewish people to whom he was ministering, nor did this establish in Vox's view that Christians should be openly inviting of foreigners in their respective nations. On the contrary, it demonstrates for him Jesus' approval of ethnonationalism and offers a genuine biblical rebuttal to Christians' aid efforts on behalf of refugees and immigrants.

On both libertarian and ethnonationalist grounds, Vox Day argues that "Churchianity" has perverted the "genuine" message of the Bible, muddling God's Word with "extra-biblical" inclusions that in his view bear no resemblance to

authentic Christianity. There is, perhaps predictably, little reflection on the point one could make that his reading of the Bible could well be equally influenced by extra-biblical ideology. His claims regarding biblical positions on immigration blend libertarianism and ethnonationalism to read Christianity as compatible with his political views. However, my point here is not to correct his theology, but to point out that for Vox, his assumptions about the authentic versions of the Alt-Right and Christianity support one another. His faith and his politics are, perhaps by necessity for him, mutually reinforcing ideas.

Vox Day's argument that there are two Christianities—one that supports Alt-Right views, the authentic one, and the modern, SJW, or "cucked" Christianity—is neither novel within the context of American white nationalism nor unique to him within the Alt-Right. This was the core of Revilo Oliver's much earlier critique of liberal Christianity, and the position of a contributor to Alt-Right.com named Alfred Clark. In an article titled, "Is Contemporary Christianity a Suicide Cult?," posted in 2017, Clark argued that "Christian cucks… support immigration," "have become obsessed" with the idea that all people bear the image of God, adopted the "Culturally Marxist" view of "racial reconciliation," "tied the pro-life movement to the support of Third World immigration," and support interracial adoption. He argues further that at one time in history "Christians did not hesitate to take up arms to repel the invaders," now Western Christianity has "been overtaken by beta girly men," whom he suggested have "bad genes for self-preservation." Once again, we see two Christianites for those associated with the Alt-Right—the traditional, European Christianity and the more recent "cucked" Christianity against which they must fight.

This attitude toward contemporary Christianity is standard fare among the Alt-Right, even among those who profess Christian commitments or sympathy for some expressions of the tradition. However, it is worth referencing some comments on Clark's article as it was posted on *Occam's Razor* that reveal the continued debate about Christianity and its historical place in among white racialists. One comment from Dirtnapninja argues, "Christianity in its current form is toast," agreeing with Clark's theory that its weakening had something to do with it being a "formerly masculine space" that was feminized. Cecil Henry replies similarly, "How has Christianity come to be for the Tower of Babel: it is not Christianity." Though he claims that he is not "religious," Clark holds out the possibility that a "newer, uncucked form of Christianity" may "rise to replace" modern, cucked Christianity. The majority of the respondents to his article either identify as former Christians disaffected with modern Christianity, or those opting for either atheism or Paganism as alternatives, but it is worth noting again the ambivalent views concerning Christianity among those active on Alt-Right sites where Christianity comes up. Where it once fostered proper racial consciousness, it has been overcome by "cultural Marxism," liberalism, and the feminism; however, some still conjecture that "traditional" Christianity can be recovered to some positive effect.

These kinds of exchanges in the comments section of Alt-Right affiliated websites are quite common, with the majority of respondents fairly resigned to the notion that Christianity has failed Europeans. However, some make use of websites to advocate for an Alt-Right vision of Christianity, very much like Vox Day had

done. One of these sites is hosted by a man who goes under the pseudonym Travis Hale. He developed altrightchristian.com, and according to his 2018 article titled "Christian Apologetics for the Alt-Right," he did so to "record an apologetic for the harmony of nationalism and [his children's] faith." This was, "for the benefit of my fellow Alt Right comrades, some of whom may misunderstand Christianity – and given the leftist propaganda masquerading as Christianity these days, not a misunderstanding without reason."

Many of the articles on the site are dedicated to Hale's defense of "theism," placing his views within a similar rationalist frame as Vox Day has done with his apologetics against atheism. Other articles develop arguments aimed at some of the most controversial issues for Alt-Rightists. One article in particular points to the ethics of abortion, and the way he sees this debate play out in the Alt-Right (Hale, 2016). Hale acknowledges that while some in the movement see abortion as a net positive because it culls out "dysgenic" populations and limits the numbers of non-white births, he objects to this on ethical grounds. He argues, "The problem is not with the pro-life position, but with our immigration, welfare and democratic policies of our polyglot empire." Rather than seeing free access to abortion as a solution to the rise of birthrates of non-whites in the United States, he rather argues for full regime change in European majority countries to enforce a certain vision of population control. "Regardless of how abortion affects relative numbers of blacks and whites, ultimately we can only restore white hegemony through non-democratic means, if democratic means one human one vote," he argues. He goes on, "Our problem is not a numbers game, but rather an *act of will* that must take place among our people such that we are determined to survive. Once that act of will takes place, that change of heart, the non-democratic means will be available to us."

The second prong to this argument against abortion is one that Alt-Rightists would perhaps be receptive to as well. Hale argues that only raising birthrates among whites will preserve western civilization, and abortion among whites is therefore detrimental to that effort. Connected to this idea, too, he argues that "the availability of abortion is a signal to young women that they can easily escape the consequences of shirking their historical duty to restrict their sexual activity to marriage." Hale's objection is that the general acceptance of abortion among the majority of the Alt-Right is counter to the aims of the Alt-Right itself. Moreover, Hale also worries that Alt-Rightists risk alienating would-be Christian allies for their position on abortion. He argues,

> When certain elements of the Alt Right push a moral code that normal white Christian people find appalling, they prevent the emergence of what could be a powerful alliance between the post-religious-right and secular ethnic nationalists. Such posturing, of showing one's sophistication relative to the jeezus-loving rubes of the heartland, is a form of status signaling that is destructive to the very ends the Alt Right seeks to realize. The mass of Christian whites (as opposed to their self-appointed leaders) are natural allies of the Alt Right, consistently supporting Alt Right immigration policies in opinion polls, and forsaking this alliance could have catastrophic consequences for our people.

Reminiscent of the argument from Greg Johnson that anti-Christian posturing would endanger broader coalition-building by alienating potential Christian allies, Hale seems concerned about the possibility that a certain perception of Alt-Right ethics could alienate white Christians.

The article that most concisely presents Hale's views on Christianity, however, is one from 2017 titled "Guilt, Paganism & Christianity." Here he describes in very similar terms to many Alt-Rightists, that modern Christianity is a "cucked version" of the traditional faith. Hale's specific concern here is, however, whether some "Alt-Right folks who dislike Christianity" are correct in their assertion that "Christian theology's legitimation of guilt" is "crippling to whites worldwide." The specific argument against Christianity that he finds among Alt-Rightists that he positions himself to counter is the claim that "the modern cult of 'white guilt' is simply the secular form of Christian guilt." To this he responds, "The secular Alt-Right is absolutely correct when they point to the idea of sin and guilt as a huge problem. It is not, however, a result of Christianity but something inherent in man." His point is that practices of sacrifices and sexual asceticism were common among European Pagan communities, demonstrating the inherent need of human beings to expiate their guilt for transgressions. Furthermore, he argues that such acts under Paganism were insufficient to deal with the inherent feelings of guilt and that eventually "if Christianity didn't exist, we would almost have to invent something like it."

Hale argues in this article that Christianity "replaces archaic systems, some simply mess, like animal sacrifice, and others truly horrific, like the infant sacrifice practiced by Near Easter Pagans," with an "eminently civil ritual of the bread and the cup, and the remission of sins… ritualized through the simple use of ordinary water in baptism." The point seems to be that Christianity and Christian practice is more aesthetically and morally pleasing, and more effective for social cohesion. Hale at this point again repeats his point from earlier, "If you wanted to take man's sin and guilt instincts and channel them into a benevolent form, you would have to invent something like Christianity." This defense of Christianity reads like a functionalist defense of the faith more than an ontological one. It may be that Hale is focused on defending the faith and chooses a position that reads well within the practically-minded Alt-Right, but it may be too that Hale is pragmatic in his outlook as well. He argues that Christianity does more than effectively channel guilt, it does so to promote socially positive mores, like the prohibition of murder and lying; mores that "build the sort of high-trust, highly advanced, specialized societies Europeans desire."

There is more than a little Calvinist influence in that Hale thinks his points about Christianity position it as the best "religious system to account for the full range of human depravity," but he then also moves on to illustrate his point about the efficacy of Christianity by referencing what he regards as the successes of the European colonialism. He argues, "By relieving people of the burden of sin and guilt, and the uncertainty associated with the mercurial pagan gods, Christianity allowed its adherents more freedom to pursue their destiny as a people." He goes on, "The most highly refined form of Christianity, that of free grace salvation, emerged in Northern Europe after the Reformation," which freed these people

from "residual guilt," and allowed "the mightiest empires emerge from these Northern European countries who conquer the world, in their view with God's approval" (Hale, 2017).

Though he states in the article that he does not want "to make a utilitarian argument," Hale's defense of Christianity here seems nevertheless committed to the idea that Christianity, especially after the Reformation, has served Europeans well as they sought to control the world's resources and subjugate other populations to their ends. Referencing the British Empire, which he describes as "an amalgamation of the high ritual of Catholicism, but the free grace of the Reformation, all under the umbrella of a King as head of government and church," he argues that they saw themselves "as explicitly doing God's work in bringing other peoples into subjection, and represents possibly the most purely 'Nietzschean' society, the race of supermen upon whose lands the sun never set." In other words, for Hale, Christianity, if properly understood, does not subvert the conquering instincts of Europeans, as so many white nationalists and Alt-Rightists have argued. Christianity, even as late as the Christianity of the British Empire, fully realizes it. Christianity is not a Jewish, dysgenic, or dead religious creed for Hale. It is the best form of religious and social ideology for Europeans today. It is the religion of the European empire.

In the statements by Vox Day and Travis Hale, there is a specific emphasis on a defense of the faith aimed at Alt-Right audiences. This is not surprising given that they are a minority voice within a movement that has had its main influencers rather ambivalent to Christianity or even hostile to it. Vox Day sat uneasily among his fellow Alt-Right influencers, perhaps because his libertarianism was too liberal-looking for some, and other times perhaps because his answers to the "Jewish Question" were perceived as too mild. And, as Stewart noted, Vox Day left the brand behind. Travis Hale has had less success than Vox Day in getting pro-Christian views accepted within the Alt-Right. However, his article about guilt was reposted on the site of a more recognized influencer named James Edwards.

Edwards' site Political Cesspool was a broader venue for Hale's ideas, especially as Edwards was much better known than Hale, and had the ear of audiences that would not identify as Alt-Right. In March 2016 some controversy brought Edwards to public attention when Donald Trump Jr. and Edwards spoke together on a broadcast of Liberty Roundtable, a conservative Utah-based radio show hosted by Sam Bushman, who also syndicates Political Cesspool (Walsh & Cameron-Moore 2016). Just before this story, media outlets reported that the Trump campaign gave press credentials to Edwards, which also created a high profile for his show (Byrnes 2016). Edwards is also the author of a self-published book, *Racism, Schmacism: How Liberals Use the "R" Word to Push the Obama Agenda* (2010), and describes his show as standing "for The Dispossessed Majority," a clear reference to the 1972 book of that title written by Wilmont Robertson that has become a classic among white nationalists. Edwards further describes his program in the "Statement of Principles" as "Pro-Christian (God), Pro-White (Family), Pro-South (Republic)," so one cannot assume that Hale had made converts to either Christianity or the Alt-Right among what was probably a friendly audience.

However, this demonstrates the existence of a vocal minority of Christian influencers associated with the Alt-Right at the height of its public life.

I contend that Christians in the Alt-Right were often involved in dual apologetics. On the one hand, Christian Alt-Rightists sought to justify their politics to the greater society they wished to influence, while on the other they were compelled to offer a defense of their faith among those with whom they shared political affinities but who doubted the efficaciousness of a turn or return to "traditional" Christianity. The theological content of Christian Alt-Rightist claims is therefore more often presented through the prism of these apologetics rather than in any systematic fashion. Theological reflection often appears only as it relates to the broader concerns of these potential audiences. Nevertheless, there have been efforts to use a specifically Christian perspective to inform the metapolitical project of the Alt-Right, even if such efforts are frustrated by the seeming diminishment of the relevance of the Alt-Right more recently.

## Christian theology & ethnic alternatives to Alt-Right "whiteness"

One can see, then, that there is a general lack of systematic theological thought among the Christian Alt-Right. As Dan DeCarlo, a freelance writer living in Washington, DC, argued, "Regarding the 'Christian alt-right,' it is important to note that it is almost exclusively an *aesthetic phenomenon* and not a theological one." However, this is not to say that no one has attempted a more thorough, though perhaps still not systematic, Christian theological approach. Andrew Fraser, a former law professor who has received some theological training, assembled several essays in a 2017 book meant to provide the Alt-Right with a specific theology titled *Dissident Dispatches: An Alt-Right Guide to Christian Theology* (2017), which builds on much of what he wrote in a 2011 book, *The WASP Question*. Fraser was born in 1944 in Ontario, Canada, but moved to Australia later where he lived throughout most of his professional life. According to his curriculum vitae that he shared with me, he received a Master of Arts degree in history from the University of North Carolina in 1971, and later a law degree from Harvard in 1982. He also later received a Bachelor of Arts in theology from Charles Stewart University in Parramatta in 2017, though not without a measure of disagreement concerning his views on race.

Fraser's teaching career, too, is diverse and ended with no small measure of controversy. He lectured on history at Lenoir Community College in Kingston, North Carolina from 1971–1972, and taught in the School of Law, Macquarie University, Sydney Australia from 1977–2006. The conclusion of his tenure at Macquarie University, however, is what put him on the radar for white nationalists and the general public in Australia. According to a story from 30 July 2005 in *The Sydney Morning Herald,* Fraser had been suspended from his teaching duties at Macquarie for having made "allegations that African migration increased crime rates." This was about a letter he wrote to a local newspaper, *Parramatta Sun*, where he voiced opposition to non-Anglo immigration policies, arguing that Australia was losing its "distinctive national identity," as it was becoming less Anglo-Australian (quoted in "Speaking Out of Turn

is Not Free Speech", Sydney Morning Herald 2005).[1] Initially, Fraser was defiant, refusing to accept a buyout that the university offered him with eleven months in his teaching contract remaining, but eventually, he left his position as an assistant professor of law and retired from teaching in 2006.

His departure from the university under these conditions did, however, earn him a measure of attention among white nationalists. In September of 2005, Fraser posted an article on American Renaissance's website, titled "Rethinking the White Australia Policy" detailing his opposition to non-Anglo immigration into Australia in more detail. Furthermore, his interview with journalist Michael Duffy of *The Sydney Morning Herald* in 2005 wherein he describes his opposition to his suspension on the grounds of free speech was posted on the *VDare* website by Steve Sailor, a journalist and a frequent contributor to the site, one day after it came out in Australia. Fraser's battle with the university and his eventual retirement from academia in 2006, too, became the subject of discussion on spaces like the message boards of *Stormfront*, one of the longest-lived white nationalist websites in the world. In 2020, *Arktos*' authors website still introduced Fraser as being "best-known for a controversy involving statements he made that were critical of Australian immigration policy."

Fraser's familiarity within and support from the American white nationalists notwithstanding, he describes his ideas about the meaning of ethnicity in somewhat different terms than most American white nationalists, which also plays a significant role in his theological outlook for the Alt-Right. He is clear that his view is not one that reflects the white/black binary of American white nationalism. In my discussion with Professor Fraser, he explained that what had affected him while growing up in Ontario was not the division between "whites" and "blacks," but the differences between those who were British and those who were French (Fraser 2019a). Indeed, his greatest political influences come from sources about British and French ethnic issues. In our discussion, Fraser mentioned one of his inspirations was George Grant (1918–1988), a Canadian philosopher and theologian who is perhaps best known for his books *Lament for a Nation* (1965) and *Technology and Empire* (1969), which led to his acquiring an "enduring reputation as a nationalist, a Red Tory, and a critic of modernity" (Fraser 2019a). Fraser specifically referred to *Lament for a Nation* as an early influence on his developing nationalist politics. He also mentioned Sir J. R. Seeley's *The Expansion of England: Two Courses of Lectures* (1883), and Pierre Vallières' *White Niggers of America*, originally published as *Nègres blancs d'Amerique: Autobiographie précoce d'un "terroriste" québéois* in 1968.

Vallières' work in particular marked for Fraser the fundamental difference between his Canadian perspective on race and ethnicity and that of Americans (Fraser 2019a). Writing from the Manhattan House of Detention for Men in New York, where he was detained from 1996–7, Vallières argued that though French Canadians were not subjected to the same racism "that has done so much wrong to the workers, white and black, of the United States… since there [in Quebec] there is no 'black problem'," that the black liberation struggles in America had nevertheless aroused "growing interest among the French-Canadian population" (1971: 21). Taking the lead from Malcolm X's autobiography more than anything of the French tradition, Vallières brought

international attention to the oppression experienced by the Québecois through the lens of the Black Power struggle (Mills 2010: 74 & 80–81). Contrasting these influences with Winthrop Jordan's classic study of white racism targeting African Americans, *White Over Black* (1968), Fraser saw Vallières' book as an illustration of how different perceptions of race and ethnicity were for him as a British Canadian as opposed to his American counterparts, and ultimately why he felt that ethnonationalism should be more specific to ethnicities like Britishness and French-ness rather than a generic "white" nationalism (Fraser 2019a).

Fraser mentioned in our discussion also that his British identity was important to him as he moved to Australia in the 1970s. He described it as an overwhelmingly British society at that time, which he lamented in his 2005 letter and to me in our conversation as having been lost. This was, of course, why he protested in his letter from 2005 the rescinding of the White Australia policy. Observing the increase in immigration since that time, he noted it had made Australia less British and more multicultural. This for him was an awakening to the importance of going beyond acknowledging the need to recognize ethnic-national differences, to actively fighting to maintain the geographical integrity of the respective nation-states and their presumed historical majorities. Such was his inspiration in writing the letter and for his interest in Sir J. R. Seeley's lectures.

Seeley concludes his lectures with a discussion of the growth of British colonies and the British diaspora, a term Fraser uses to describe the distribution of WASPs (White Anglo-Saxon Protestants) abroad and argues that in the "colonial part of" the English Empire, "we see a natural growth, a mere normal extension of the English race into other lands, which were for the most part so thinly peopled that our settlers took possession of them without conquest" (Seeley 1883: 343–4). For Fraser, this White Anglo Saxon Protestant diaspora constitutes a national identity that continues a diasporic community that could potentially, because of its numerical size, "make the Jewish diaspora eat its heart out" (Berry 2019). Fraser argues, too, that many of the influencers of the Alt-Right like Jared Taylor and Peter Brimelow "eschew" their Britishness, possibly to their detriment, and that WASPs like them have had a disproportionate impact on the movement (Fraser 2019a).

The WASP diaspora is central to Fraser's focus in his book *The WASP Question*. "This book is not," he states early in the text, "a narrowly ethnocentric piece of pro-WASP advocacy," but rather an "attack" on his "co-ethnics; namely the American WASPs who for over two centuries have waged a reckless, revolutionary, and relentless cultural war on the ethnoreligious traditions which once inspired the Anglo-Saxon province of Christendom to greatness" (p.14). Over the 402 pages of the book, Fraser outlines the historical development of WASPs, from their "ethnogenesis," emerging from the Germanic genetic heritage of the Anglo-Saxon people from which a specific culture emerged, to the rise of the British Empire and its colonies, finally to the overthrow of the "old-stock WASP upper class" as a result of their own "Anglophobia" after the "anxious need to be seen taking the lead on issues of racial integration and anti-Semitism created an all-pervasive atmosphere of competitive altruism among top managers" (p.269). But the

book's final point is not simply to describe how it came to be that WASPs in America came under the sway of "statist idolatry in the religion of the Republic" and the "enchantments of Mammon for which they have sold their collective soul," but to offer a prescription for the recovery of an Anglo-Saxon collective ethnic identity in America that will affect the "mental and physical well-being" of their "co-ethnics" in Australia, New Zealand, Canada and England (p.15).

Of central importance to this project, Fraser argues, is the role of religion, specifically what he describes as the imperative to "restore the ethnoreligious integrity of the Anglican Church," and to recall it to its "original mission as the Church of the Anglo-Saxons," which he describes as a "theopolitical imperative." Any other measure is simply not enough, in Fraser's view, to cure the "dis-ease" of the Anglophobia in American WASPs proximately caused, as he describes it, by "America's constitutional faith." He argues, "The religion of the Republic cannot be reconciled with the restoration of Anglo-Saxon Christendom," and further, that if "WASPs are to survive the challenges of the twenty-first century they must rediscover an authentically Christian folk religion firmly rooted in a regeneration of Anglo-Saxon bioculture" (p.323). Fraser argues, "both Negroes and Jews have out-played WASPs in the post-modern game of identity politics," therefore to meet "the intellectual and political, moral and spiritual challenges thrown up by Jewish (and Negro) ethnology," WASPs must return to "Orthodox Christianity" (pp.323 & 325).

Reiterating this theme of a return of WASPs to their biocultural roots, Fraser argues that the "next Protestant Reformation must recall the Anglican Church to its original mission to shepherd the Anglo-Saxon race into the Kingdom of God." In defining the theological drive behind such a reformation of the Anglican Church, Fraser proposes a "groundwork" in "at least three closely related… strands of Reformed theology" that may still "challenge… the neo-communist dogmas that now poison the minds of Anglo-Saxon Christians." They are kinism, preterism, and covenant creationism (p.325). We should define each of these terms in turn, particularly because they are not terms he invented, nor are all of these terms related to racialist ideation.

The first term to discuss, however, is explicitly tied to racism. Kinism is segregationist in its view, holding that God created the peoples of the Earth to dwell separately, dividing them into the nations of the Earth, and therefore does not allow interracial or inter-ethnic miscegenation. The Christian Reformed Church declared kinism heresy at the 2019 synod, and lamented "the historic tolerance and indifference within our Reformed theological tradition perpetuating hateful racial prejudice and the theological error of kinism" (quoted in Christian Reformed Church 2019). Nevertheless, just as the Southern Baptist Convention has had to reconcile itself with its support for slavery and racial segregation, so the Reformed Church has had to reckon with its historical connection to kinism. As one minister of the Church, Timothy Hansen, stated, "not all Reformed people were kinists, all kinists were reformed" (quoted in Christian Reformed Church 2019). Most sources opposed to kinist ideology state that it grew, as Paul Kaiser, pastor of New Covenant Baptist Church argued, from "a theonomist movement or a Christian Reconstructionist, dominionist theology," however kinists themselves argue that their teachings are

rooted in the history of orthodoxy from the scriptures themselves, through Augustine, to more modern commentary (Quoted in Faithfully 2016). In an article published in *The Kinist Review* titled "A Kinist Elucidation," which was cited by Fraser in *The WASP Question*, Ehud Would, who operates a kinist website and blog, used among other sources Mathew Henry's sixteenth-century commentaries to argue this point (Would, 2010). Would uses, in particular, Henry's commentary on Genesis chapter nine to argue that God established the prophetic boundaries of the nations that would come from his sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth, and then finally to explain the curse of Canaan, the son of Ham. He also describes chapter eleven of Genesis where human beings attempted to reach the heavens via the Tower of Babel and were scattered to demonstrate the rationale for concluding that God himself desires ethnonational separation. For Would, aided by Henry and other early sources, these passages demonstrate that God established nations, which he understands in explicitly racialist terms, as separate and desires them to stay that way. He argues,

> God prefaces His indictment of humanity: "Indeed the people are one…" (Gen.11:6) "It is thus decreed that they must not be one." (M. Henry's Comm. on Gen.11) And though God's confusion of their tongues could have been exacted according to social groupings, by age or any manner whatsoever, He ultimately decreed that the division would rigidly follow and reinforce lines of descent, by "families, tribes and nations" in keeping with Noah's earlier proclamation (Gen 9:24–27).
>
> *(Would 2010: 4)*

Using Henry's commentaries on Deuteronomy, Would concludes his article by arguing that "homogeneity is thus a precondition to any form of Christian government," and that "the yoking of a stranger-king to one's people is the tacit acceptance of your people's dissolution, an act of national suicide," a condition, as is stated in the quote from Henry's commentary on Deuteronomy chapter 32, which is brought on by denying that

> [God] divides to nations their inheritance, and will have every one to know his own, and not to invade another's property… The great God, in governing the world, and ordering the affairs of states and kingdoms, has a special regard to his church and people, and consults their good in all.
>
> *(quoted in Would 2010: 24)*

In this article, the myth of the curse of Ham that has historically been used to justify anti-black racism is simply part of the broader point for kinists, that God has ordained and desires ethnonationalist separation. Referencing the election of Barak Obama as President of the United States, Would argues, "Even when [they are] 'conservative' Christians, Non-Whites' vision for America is one of perpetual Statist revolution." He goes on to say this is why Barack Obama was successful in running under the slogan, "Change." For Would,

> This perspectival dissolution is precisely the sort to which Henry refers and which Nehemiah mitigated through stringent application of God's Law—because acquiescence to the "exceptions" in such matters only provide a foothold for the national revolution and desolation of Deuteronomy 28.
>
> *(p.21)*

Barak Obama's election in 2007 and anxiety about the loss of control over institutions as people of color and their white allies continued to fight against historically entrenched forms of racism in their religious and political communities are for the kinist simply a violation of God's Law in a further demonstration of the need for a return to the teachings of the church's historical leaders.

Fraser feels no different in this regard, though his ambition is to modify kinism with the application of sociobiology to aid in ethnoreligious evangelism. He argues in *The WASP Question* that a "fusion of kinism and sociobiology can achieve critical mass only when a Reformed Anglicanism brings WASPs into the Christian fold" (Fraser 2011: 386). Fraser offers a specific theological justification for his racial-nationalist reading of Christian tradition, one that is tied to his preterist views of the Parousia. Derived from the Latin word *praeter*, which means past, preterism denotes a particular position especially concerning The Olivet Discourse as recorded in Matthew chapter 24, Mark chapter 13, and Luke chapter 21. One can trace preterist teachings quite far back in the history of Christian thought, however the man who most defined the position for subsequent theologians was John Stuart Russell in *The Parousia* (1878). In the words of the popular preterist teacher and theologian R. C. Sproul, Russell is "perhaps the most important scholar of the preterist school," whom Sproul credits for having "anticipated many of the theories that would be presented by twentieth-century scholars" (Sproul 1998: 28). Sproul writes that Russell's central thesis "and indeed of all preterists is that the New Testament's time-frame references with respect to the Parousia point to a fulfillment within the lifetime of at least some of Jesus's disciples" (p.29). Simply put, the preterist view, contrasted with the futurist view, is that Jesus has already come back to establish his kingdom and fulfill the prophecy that the temple at Jerusalem would be destroyed in the year 70 of the Common Era.

Fraser remarked in our discussion that his own preterist views were influenced initially by *Beyond Creation Science: New Covenant Creation from Genesis to Revelation*, by Timothy P. Martin and Jefferey L. Vaughn, first published in 2001, and by the work of preterist theologian Don K. Preston. Fraser references *Beyond Creation Science* and Preston's work with some regularity in both *The WASP Question* and in *Dissident Dispatches* and they should be understood as his most significant theological influence. Fraser develops preterism to articulate his ethnonationalist vision of God's plan for the world. In an essay titled "Synagogue of Satan?" included in *Dissident Dispatches,* Fraser argues that after the Parousia in 70 AD, "the Kingdom of God is a presently existing reality in a world without end," and that within the "preterist tradition, therefore, the Bible is recovering its former status as the foundation charter of the new covenant creation," which points to the salvific plan for the nations (2017: 44). Covenant creationism, too, he argues in *The WASP*

*Question*, allows for a hermeneutic on the Genesis creation account that does not conflict with science, reading it not as the account of the "physical creation of the universe," nor as a narrative that was "intended to explain the origins of mankind at large," but rather as a mythical account that only dealt with "the first men made after the image of God; the people whose cosmic role was to represent God to the rest of creation" (p.388). This particular point for Fraser lends credibility to polygenetic accounts of the origins of different ethnicities which, because of the rejection of Jesus by Jews and the subsequent judgment on their nation in 70 AD, now "stand outside the New Jerusalem… many as its sworn enemies," and the Gentile peoples now as members of the Church, a "New Israel," stand as inheritors of God's promises to His people (pp.389–90).

Coming back to kinism, Fraser remarks in the following paragraph of this essay, "Covenant creationism packs a powerful kinist punch," in that it, at least by implication, "councils Christians to embrace ethnoreligious realism insisting that there can be no seamless Judeo-Christian tradition of ecumenical harmony." Because they rejected Jesus, Fraser argues, "Christ sentenced the stiff-necked synagogue of Satan to spiritual death," while "Anglo-Saxons eagerly entered into the new covenant world" (2011: 390). This connection to the early Church by these Anglo-Saxon tribes created, in Fraser's view, a distinct biocultural connection to the Church, which created a covenant bond inherited by the descendants of those tribes.

Fraser, therefore, argues in *The WASP Question*, "Christian faith, kinship, and covenant, taken together, represent the archaic core of Anglo-Saxon bioculture," but more than that the specific ethnoreligious connection of WASPs means that there is something specific, more than generically white or European to Fraser's theology (p.58). Apart from the specific historical data that he gives to support the thesis of this particular connection to Christianity and the hope for a future revival of WASP Christianity and monarchy, he looks for specific religious expressions by WASPs that reflect, in his view, a peculiar expression Anglo Christianity. When we spoke about his views, we discussed classic works in the Old-English language like *The Dream of the Rood,* and other religious poetry. Fraser's response was to exclaim that this kind of early Anglo-Saxon Christian cultural production is an example of God's continued work through that nation of people who could offer "new insights," even "new gospels," specific to their national religious character. For Fraser, God's work continues in this way, through nations who have embraced His covenant, and not in the drama of the individual or a canon of scriptures wherein the Jewish people play a central role. "God is still working in the world," Fraser explained to me in our discussion, and that His vehicle is the ethnos, the nation. This means for him, that the Christian scriptures "still provide both a *warrant* to every faithful Christian nation seeking to preserve and protect the kingdom of God and a *warning* to every nation which loses (or never had) faith in the man of sorrows" (Fraser 2017: 261).

In spite of some important differences, there are some significant similarities in the kind of language that Vox Day and Andrew Fraser use when describing their opposition to the form of Christianity that they find objectionable. In the introduction to *Dissident Dispatches*, Fraser states, "Given its contemptible complicity in

the communistic campaign to collapse the polygenic foundations of European Christendom, contemporary 'churchianity' can and should be targeted as the spiritually soft and morally flabby underbelly of the anti-white New World Order" (p.xv). This sentence in particular sounds very close to what we heard from Vox and several other Alt-Rightists. Fraser, like Vox and even Stewart, specifically criticizes the uses, which he regards as abuses, of the parable of The Good Samaritan. In an essay titled "Pathological Altruism and the Cult of the Other," also in *Dissident Dispatches*, Fraser writes that the misreading of this passage has allowed "pious xenophiles" to undermine "what remains of the traditions of family, faith, and folk uniquely associated with high-trust, European-descended societies" (pp.470–1).

All of this echoes again much of what we have heard so far from Alt-Right Christians, and to some degree from non-Christians associated with the brand. However, we cannot overlook the real differences between them. Fraser's WASP ethnonationalism and aspirations for a revived monarchy, for which he offers a theological justification based on kinism, preterism, and covenant creationism, are not shared by most associated with the Alt-Right, even those who are Christian. For example, the kinist Ehud Would reviewed *Dissident Dispatches* on the Faith and Heritage website in 2017, and stated that despite his assessment that Fraser's thoughts concerning America are accurate in many ways, nevertheless he "certainly and emphatically disagree[s] with his assessment of America's founding and… institution." He argues, "So in spite of Mr. Fraser's many other wonderful insights, I take a pass with respect to his discussion of the Constitution and our founding faith." The divisions here are in a sense political, with Would rejecting the monarchism that Fraser advocates, but since Fraser's theology is his politics we should understand that the disagreement is deeper than mere political organization. In a sense, we are back to the divisions discussed in the introduction of this book, namely that there is no singular sense of what the Alt-Right is or what it should be. While there might not visible rancor between Vox Day and Drew Fraser, for example, this does not mean they share a vision of a common future for European peoples or of the kind of Christianity that is efficacious or, perhaps more importantly, which Christian theology is valid.

## Conclusions

To speak of Christianity is always to speak in the plural. There is no single Christian point of view even on important theological issues, even within the smaller circles of the Alt-Right. Though there is much that Vox, Hale, and Fraser would agree on regarding the enemy, it is clear that Vox's libertarianism distinguishes him from someone like Hale and Fraser. Fraser in particular stands out as agreeing completely with neither Vox nor Hale on theological grounds, but also on what kind of ethnonationalism is worth fighting for. Furthermore, Christianity proved to be a stumbling block for those associated with the Alt-Right. The relationship between the Alt-Right and Christianity can therefore also be characterized as fraught. One of the significant lessons from the two chapters so far is that the role of Christianity will continue to be important yet contested in future expressions of

white nationalism. Indeed, it may be that the future of American white nationalism is tied to how white nationalists debate religion, and especially how they describe the relationship of Christianity to the movement.

This point, however, is only half of the story concerning Christianity and the Alt-Right. In the following chapters, we will move from discussing the positions on Christianity among those associated with the Alt-Right to discussing how Christian communities in the U.S. in particular have responded to the emergence of the Alt-Right during the 2016 U.S. Presidential election and after. Moreover, we will see that this response emerged for many Christians at a moment when their respective ministries and denominations were already dealing with controversies over diversity in churches and in their leadership, shifting attitudes toward the LGBTQ+ community and gender roles, and even the validity of previous doctrinal and institutional positions on race and sexuality. In this context, for many Christians, the term "Alt-Right" itself became important to how they were debating these issues and what their traditions should look like in the twenty-first century.

## Note

1 The original letter by Fraser as published in *Parramatta Sun* is not archived by the paper. For more on this particular event, see Goldie Osuri's 2008 Article, "White Free Speech: The Fraser Event and its Enlightenment Legacies."

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# 3

# EVANGELICAL PROTESTANTS AND THE ALT-RIGHT

The Alt-Right's emergence into public view during the 2016 U.S. presidential race provided news media and the general public with a new signifier for the far-right in America. For American Christians, this moment also offered an occasion for debate concerning longstanding issues, particularly racism in their traditions and acceptance of LGBTQ+ people in their institutions. The coinciding events of Trump's divisive candidacy and eventual election in 2016 and the rise of Alt-Right influencers like Richard Spencer who vocally supported Trump's candidacy and celebrated his victory caused many left-leaning Christian organizations to strongly condemn both Trump's campaign rhetoric and the Alt-Right as evidence of the persistence of bigotry in American society. Some conservative Christians, too, expressed concern about candidate Trump's behavior and the support he enjoyed among the Alt-Right. Famously, Russell D. Moore, president of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, criticized Trump in a 2015 *New York Times* op-ed for his lax morals and unrepentant attitude, and encouraged evangelical Christians to withhold their support during the 2016 election on those grounds. Despite such criticism, Trump easily won over white evangelical Protestant voters by an even greater percentage than George W. Bush in 2000 and was generally successful with white Christian voters overall (Cox 2016).

As Trump's 2020 reelection campaign began, support among white Christians had slipped very little. A Pew Research Center report released in March 2019 stated that President Trump still enjoyed a 69 percent overall approval rating among evangelical Protestants, more than any other religious and unaffiliated category of Americans in that survey (Schwadel & Smith 2019). As the country was in the grip of the global pandemic, and as massive demonstrations against police violence were ongoing, on 4 June 2020, PRRI noted that the president's favorability ratings had declined from a high mark in March of that year, and had fallen slightly among some white Christians, including a small drop in white Catholic support. Nevertheless, the report noted,

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"Among all white Christians, a majority (52%) [held] favorable views of Trump, which [was] unchanged since April" (PRRI Staff 2020). Trump seemed motivated to secure this voting bloc in the 2020 election. His photo-op on 1 June, showing him posing bible in hand with St. John's Episcopal Church in the backdrop after delivering a speech wherein he threatened to deploy federal forces to quell the protests, was clearly meant to secure that demographic's support (Gjelten 2020).

During the 2016 campaign, Trump made multiple appeals to issues that traditionally motivate the religious right. However, these efforts to attract conservative Christian votes seemed inadequate to explain his support from the group once referred to as "values voters." Robert P. Jones, founding CEO of Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI), and his team of researchers are primarily responsible for the much-referenced datum that 81 percent of white evangelical Protestants voted for Trump in the 2016 presidential election, reporting just weeks before that, "No religious group is more strongly backing Trump's candidacy than white evangelical Protestants" (Cox and Jones 2015). In *The End of White Christian America*, Jones charts the developments that led to such strong support for this unlikely champion of Christian virtues until just before the 2016 election, explaining how, in the words of his article in *The Atlantic*, values voters had become "nostalgia voters" (Jones 2016a). Jones' key point was that the blending of nostalgia for a bygone America controlled by white Christians and their fear of losing influence in the future drove white evangelical Protestants to vote for Trump.

Some segments of the evangelical Protestant community, however, did not share the enthusiasm for Trump that their white counterparts seemed to have. According to exit polls, the total percentage of black Americans who voted for Trump was in single digits (Huang, Jacoby, Strickland, & Lai 2016). Support for President Trump remained low among African Americans in general, but also among black Christians. According to Pew Research, in June of 2020, the approval rating among black Protestants for the president was seven percent, with a disapproval rating of 83 percent (Lipka & Smith 2020). Moreover, as cultural and political historian Melanie McAlister has noted, some black church leaders described Trump's 2016 victory in terms of a traumatic event (2018: 287). This sense of trauma deepened with President Trump's equivocating remarks after the violence at Charlottesville. For example, #BlackClergyUprising organized a call to condemn both the white nationalist violence that took place but also what they called "the President's support for white supremacists [that] has emboldened them and put the lives of African Americans, other people of color, our Jewish sisters and brothers and all people of faith who oppose their hateful agenda in danger."

While negative perceptions of Trump among African Americans persisted through his attempts at reelection in 2020, in March of 2020, Pew released a report in which they noted a particular gulf between white Americans and African Americans regarding Trump. It noted that "white evangelical Protestants generally see Trump as standing up for them," and that "63% of white evangelical Protestants say their side has been winning lately, nearly triple the share who said this in May 2016, six months before Trump's election" (Pew Research 2020). The report

noted, however, that African American Protestants did not share in this optimism, noting that, "Whereas 43% of black Protestants said their side was generally winning in May 2016, just 26% say this today." This disparity is not surprising given the data in a 2019 study published in the journal *Sociology of Religion* by Samuel L. Perry and Andrew L. Whitehead that demonstrated stark differences in attitudes toward race and social justice issues between white and black Christians in America. Perry and Whitehead concluded that "Unlike their white counterparts, for black Americans, closely overlapping national and religious identities does not bolster white supremacy, but rather challenges racist structures and victim blaming" (Perry & Whitehead 2018: 295). One should conclude that the divisions over Trump among white and black Protestants represent deeper divides that have long troubled race relations in American Christian communities.

Trump's presidency seemed to confirm suspicions about his sympathies for the Alt-Right with the apparent overlap between his administration's position toward immigration and those of the Alt-Right. Suspicion deepened, too, with the early inclusion of Steve Bannon in the administration and the later discovery that Stephen Miller, Trump's senior policy advisor, had shared over 900 emails with *Breitbart* during the 2016 campaign that detailed shared anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim views, and that he had shared links from *VDare* articles on these topics (Rogers & DePearle 2019). These facts coupled with President Trump's response to the events at the Unite The Right rally fed the belief that the Alt-Right had indeed found their champion in Donald Trump. This perception seemed to be confirmed by former Klan leader David Duke, who stated at the rally, "We are going to fulfill the promises of Donald Trump. That's what we believed in. That's why we voted for Donald Trump, because he said he's going to take our country back" (quoted in Nelson 2017). This confluence of events during the 2016 election through the Unite the Right rally at Charlottesville in 2017 provided an opportunity for American Christians to debate the Alt-Right and institutional racism, but more importantly their role in combatting racial injustice and bigotry.

Politically left Christian ministries who had been at the forefront of addressing social justice issues for decades regarded the emergence of the Alt-Right and its seeming influence in the Trump administration as confirmation that the fight against racism had to continue. More conservative evangelical Protestant organizations like the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), who were wrestling with ever more diverse congregations and the implications of the continued white majority leadership, also felt the need to speak out on what was happening, but in slightly different terms. The SBC was embroiled in internal and public discussions about Trump's apparent racism in part because of Moore's statement against Trump in the lead up to the election in 2016. However, in the summer of 2017 representatives of the SBC held a contentious debate and finally a vote concerning the condemnation of white supremacy and the Alt-Right. Trump's controversial campaign, the support it received from visible influencers among the Alt-Right and white Christians, and the president's response to the Unite the Right rally all came at a moment when American Christians were wrestling with their institutions' past and their present complicity in institutionalized racial inequality in the church as

well as the larger society. In this context, as American evangelical Protestants debated the proper stance concerning the Alt-Right they were also making statements about their own commitment to the struggle for racial justice.

## Contextualizing Christian responses to Alt-Right racism

The relationship between Christianity and racism goes quite far back in American history. As Jemar Tisby, president of Witness: A Black Christian Collective, wrote in *The Color of Compromise: The Truth about the American Church's Complicity in Racism* (2019), "Historically speaking, when faced with the choice between racism and equality, the American church has tended to practice a complicit Christianity rather than a courageous Christianity" (p.17). Historian Colin Kidd argues in *The Forging of the Races: Race and Scripture in the Protestant Atlantic World, 1600–2000* (2006) that while "Christianity has clearly played a significant role in the ideological assault upon racism," nevertheless "[in] some areas race retained an inescapable theological dimension into the second half of the twentieth century" (p.275). Moreover, he argues regarding opposition integration efforts in the 1950s and 60s, "Fears of miscegenation provided a compelling social backdrop for continuing discussion in the United States of the divine significance of racial differences, including the contentious issue of Noah's curse upon the Canaanite lineage of Ham," which previously served as a justification of slavery as well as discrimination against black people in America (pp.275–6). The interpretation of the curse of Ham as a justification for the presumed racial inferiority of black people and biblical proof for their irreconcilable difference from whites supported racialist ideology and the notion of divinely appointed racial segregation. One rather infamous example of the application of such ideas is the statement by the judge who initially ruled against interracial marriage in the Loving v. Virginia case. He argued, "Almighty God created the races white, black, yellow, malay and red, and he placed them on separate continents. And, but for the interference with his arrangement, there would be no cause for such marriage. The fact that he separated the races shows that he did not intend for the races to mix."

Though the Supreme Court reversed the judge's opinion in 1967, the sentiment of biblically sanctioned racism remained an issue that American Christians continued to debate and account for into the twenty-first century. As Kidd states in his concluding remarks,

> Notwithstanding the united stand of most mainstream churches against the sins of racism, we should not lose sight of the disturbing fact that some of the themes of sacred ethnology continue, on the esoteric fringes of Protestantism, to provide the doctrinal fuel of militant religions of race hatred.
>
> *(p.276)*

I would hasten to add, however, the issue of how evangelical Protestants responded to the Alt-Right was not merely about the "esoteric fringe." The overwhelming concern in dealing with the Alt-Right phenomenon was not how they

should deal with "extremists," but rather how they might continue to fight against systemic racism and the institutional violence that comes with it within churches and the broader society.

This commitment was exemplified especially in articles published in the politically progressive Christian magazine *Sojourners* and books authored by its editor-in-chief, Reverend Jim Wallis. The magazine is an extension of the ministry work that Wallis and others were engaged in as part of their opposition to the Vietnam War and support for a Christian left response to pressing social and political issues. "Sojourners' ministries," as its website's About page describes it, "grew out of the Sojourners Community, located in Southern Columbia Heights, an inner-city neighborhood in Washington, D.C." The community began in the early 1970s at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois, when "a handful of students began meeting to discuss the relationship between their faith and political issues, particularly the Vietnam War." Since that time, Sojourners has focused on advocacy on several issues. However, it focuses on what it describes as "three key commitments," which are "racial and social justice, life and peace, and environmental stewardship" (Sojourners n.d.). With the emergence of the Alt-Right during the 2016 election, Sojourners' commitment to these tenets, the magazine's focus seemed to change little.

Reverend Wallis, who has been described as "an evangelical Christian who has become almost synonymous with the religious left, a sort of Pat Robertson for liberals," has responded to these events apart from his official capacity as editor-in-chief of the magazine (Lizza 2005). He has written two books addressing racism. The first is *America's Original Sin: Racism, White Privilege, and the Bridge to a New America*, originally published in 2016, and then in 2017 released in paperback with an additional preface. In the new edition of *America's Original Sin*, Wallis references the 2012 murder of Treyvon Martin, whose killer, George Zimmerman, was acquitted of the charge; the ongoing police violence and the "killings of young black men and women, one after another;" as well as the murders of nine African Americans at Mother Emanuel AME church in Charleston, South Carolina in 2015 by Dylann Roof, who was specifically motivated by white supremacist ideology. Wallis goes on to say concerning the paperback edition that it was "being released in the wake of the most vitriolic American presidential campaign in modern history" (2017: xvii). He adds, too, "Especially painful for me as a white Christian and evangelical is that white Christians—especially white evangelicals—made up the core of Donald Trump's support" (2017: xvii). In the remaining pages of the preface, Wallis exhorts Christians to expose and oppose racial profiling by police, defend Muslims against attack and discrimination, and listen to marginalized voices, and he calls on churches to "emphatically renounce bigotry and become the multiethnic body of Christ that God wants us to be" (2017: xxi).

In this preface, Wallis quickly addresses the reasons for writing the book in the first instance and the context for the paperback edition. However, what is interesting for us here is that in this call to action he makes no mention of the Alt-Right. Historical injustices, ongoing institutional forms of violence, and other expressions of bigotry and white supremacy in America are his intended targets in the book. In that context, Wallis condemns white evangelical Christian support for Trump and Trump's

campaign rhetoric; however, he does not mention the Alt-Right by name anywhere in the book. His criticism is broader in scope, looking instead at the long history of racism among American Christians, imploring them to "shed ourselves of our race idols," and create movements to construct a more just society (p.219). In short, the focus of the book is on systemic injustices in America. In the preface to the paperback, Wallis' criticism of the support white Christians gave Donald Trump reflects his criticism of that systemic issue and of deeper problems in American churches, not necessarily the particular expression of racism and xenophobia of the Alt-Right. This, however, is not to say that *Sojourners* or Jim Wallis himself never addressed the Alt-Right, only that they did so always with reference to how the racism and violence associated with the Alt-Right was not an aberration of American society but a symptom of a more profound social illness.

In response to the 2017 Unite The Right rally, *Sojourners* magazine ran several stories covering these events and Christian responses to what happened there. On 8 August 2017, days before the rally was scheduled to take place, *Sojourners* reported on the planned counter-protest organized by local Charlottesville clergy (Potter 2017). On 8 August 2018, the magazine also reported on "a historically black church and a predominantly white church in Washington, D.C.," planning to share communion and lead a prayer walk at the Martin Luther King Jr. memorial on the first anniversary of the deadly Unite the Right Rally (Addanki 2018). On 24 August 2017, soon after the rally was over, Rev. Wallis wrote an editorial describing what he thought churches could and should do in response to those events. Among other things, Wallis stated,

> Our pastors should be challenged to call white supremacy a sin from each of our nation's pulpits as just a beginning point. We could even do the research to uncover whether our own churches or denominations have *ever* called racism a sin from the pulpit or in a formal way. What a changing experience would it be if every American congregation clearly and publicly called racism and white supremacy sin from their pulpits—especially those of predominantly white churches.

Among the critiques here, echoing what he stated in *America's Original Sin*, was that systemic racism continues to be a significant problem in America and that American Christians must be a part of the solution. He writes, "How can the church, and our congregations in each of our local communities, become a truthful, just, and healing balm to the wounds of such division and hate rising again in America? That is a question for the prayerful discernment of every church in the nation."

In his second book on racism titled *Christ in Crisis: Why We Need to Reclaim Jesus* (2019), Wallis addressed again systemic racism expressed in voter suppression, policing of communities of color, and other issues, but also white nationalism more directly. He writes, "Unfortunately, America's white nationalism is always present with those 'demons' in our history and national life that lie just beneath the surface" (p.19). He also mentions how "those historic demons" of racism and xenophobia "have empowered white nationalist political base," which led to the murders of Muslims in Christchurch, New Zealand; black church worshippers in

Charleston, South Carolina; and Jews at a Pittsburg synagogue. For Wallis, this was all evidence that "the white nationalist movement is growing globally" (p.18). Furthermore, Wallis includes the "Reclaiming Jesus" declaration at the end of the book, in which he and the other 22 signatories affirm that they "reject the resurgence of white nationalism and racism in our nation on many fronts, including the highest levels of political leadership." They go on to assert they are committed to rejecting "white supremacy and commit themselves to help dismantle the systems and structures that perpetuate white preference and advantage" (Wallis 2019: p.225). Wallis is once again direct in his condemnation of white supremacy, mentioning specific incidents of white nationalist violence once again. However, the Alt-Right goes unmentioned by name in this book as well.

The focus of *Christ in Crisis* is, like *America's Original Sin*, is not on any single racist movement, or how the Alt-Right, in particular, has affected politics in America or what it might mean for Christians. Instead, Wallis chooses to focus on the "demons" of American history that have allowed the Alt-Right to emerge and have the resonance it did, and particularly how racism and xenophobia exist in more extensive networks of systemic oppression and violence. The target in the writings addressed here is not Alt-Right racism, but American racism, and especially that of American Christians.

A focus on the broader picture of white supremacy was also important for contributors to *Sojourners*. In 2018, commenting on Trump's election and his continued support among white Americans, and white Christians in particular, Lisa Sharon Harper, the founder and president of FreedomRoad.us, a consulting group that focuses on racial, gender, economic, cultural, environmental and theological justice, contributed an article to the magazine. She wrote, "The election of Donald Trump has not birthed something new in the Republican Party," but "only pushed the party's white supremacist agenda and its operatives to the fore, to lead us all" (p.14). The prominent womanist theologian and Dean of Episcopal Divinity School at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, The Reverend Canon Kelly Brown Douglas, also contributed to the same issue of *Sojourners*. She wrote, "The bottom line is that in their support of Trump, much of white Christian America opted to support a white supremacist vision for the country," thereby not "abandoning their role as 'values voters', they simply made clear what they value above all else" (p.22). Her point here is historical, in that "Donald Trump's vision to Make America Great Again is a 21st-century effort to carry forth the legacy of the Anglo-Saxon myth and the culture of whiteness that protects that myth" (p.21). "Trump harkened back to this history," she argued, "by aligning America's greatness with evangelical Christian values, as he consistently linked a great America with a Christian America" (p.22). Trump's rhetoric wedded historical white supremacy with Christian nationalism to provide a mythical foundation for white Christian hegemony that minimized or excluded people of color and non-Christians, but also Christians who did not share in his white Christian nationalist vision of the future. The point is that what many white Christians heralded as the beginning of a rebirth of America as a Christian nation, many Christians of color, like Ms. Harper

and Reverend Douglas, saw as a reminder of how much America had stayed the same. The emergence of the Alt-Right was one of many manifestations of this continuity.

Among laypeople who have contributed to *Sojourners*, their concern was not to target the Alt-Right in particular but to focus on what this moment in American history says about the state of American and American Christians. For example, Jay Wamstead, a high school math teacher and writer, wrote an article for *Sojourners* in 2019 titled, "How Racism Wins: Watch the Devil Distract with Extremity and Hyperbole." He references Kevin Spacey's line from the 1995 film *The Usual Suspects*, cribbed from Baudelaire, whose character says of the film's antagonist, "The greatest trick the Devil ever pulled is convincing the world that he didn't exist" (p.29). Wamstead argues that white Americans have, in a similar fashion, convinced themselves that racism is only associated with extremists (p.29). Additionally, he sees the Alt-Right's emergence as an evolution of racism in America rather than something completely novel. "It appears that we are in a new phase of racism in America," though he quickly adds the "collective relief" that white people feel at such overt expressions of racism is the problem that white nationalists pose to the rest of society (pp.29–30). When white people look at Dylann Roof, he says, they think, "This is what racism looks like," then regard this as the "lunatic fringe," and excuse their own complicity in racism's persistence (p.30). "This is how Racism wins," he argues. He concludes, "Look for the Devil in the shadows, not on Twitter or television. Look inside your mind, under the structures of your mostly white spaces of safety" (p.31). For Wamstead, fascination with the Alt-Right phenomenon is potentially a distraction from a much deeper problem with racism in American society and among American Christians. The extraordinary visibility of their racism blinds many white Christians from their racist tendencies.

We can say that for contributors to *Sojourners* and Reverend Wallis individually, the Alt-Right was an expression of the larger, more systemic, and more deeply ingrained problem of white supremacy and racial injustice in America. Just as white Christian support for Trump spoke to what they had long criticized in the American religious right, the Alt-Right phenomenon signified the deeper problems facing American Christianity. For these Christians, the focus is not on countering the Alt-Right per se, but more on the continued struggle against the general complicity of the church with entrenched forms of exclusion, injustice, and systemic violence. This sense that the Alt-Right reflected racism one could find in general society and even in the church, however, was not limited to theologically liberal or politically progressive Christian organizations after the 2016 election. Among conservative Christian organizations like The Southern Baptist Convention, the Alt-Right and Trump's presidency drew attention to and, for some, highlighted unresolved racial issues within their ministries and institutions.

## The Alt-Right and The Southern Baptist Convention

The Southern Baptist Convention is an interesting case study for understanding the impact of the emergence of the Alt-Right on American evangelical Christians in

particular, because of its historical support for slavery and segregation. It is also an important case study because Southern Baptists are diverse, but still majority white, tend to favor the Republican Party, and are more conservative than many other Christians on a number of social and political issues (Fahmy 2019).[1] The significance of the case of the SBC and its response to the Alt-Right lies also in the heated debates that were ongoing during the period when the Alt-Right emerged through to the 2020 U.S. election season. Not only was the SBC debating support for Trump in 2015, in part because of the vocal opposition by Russell Moore, but it was still dealing with continued internal criticism for its lack of diversity in leadership positions in its seminaries and other institutions that reflected the unresolved legacy of the SBC's racist past.

The history of the SBC, though it is not unique in its overtly racist practices and positions in the past, is particularly important for the context of its response to the Alt-Right in 2017. Historian Mark Newman wrote in *Getting Right With God: Southern Baptists and Desegregation, 1945–1995* (2001), the SBC was founded by "disgruntled white southerners" in 1845 (p.2). When the Civil War divided the nation, he writes, white Southern Baptists "rallied to the South's defense," after having organized in Augusta, Georgia in 1845 after white southern Baptists had affirmed in their minds that "abolitionists seized control over" the Baptist convention when the General Missions Society affirmed that they would not appoint any slaveholder as a missionary (Newman 2001: 2). The SBC was obviously racially segregated during slavery and continued the practice after emancipation, though, again, this was not entirely peculiar to them (Newman 2001: 49–50). Southern Baptist institutions and individuals continued this troubling tradition of racism, as the "Report on Slavery and Racism in the History of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary" (SBTS 2018) stated. The statement continued, "The history of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary is intertwined with the history of American slavery and the commitment to white supremacy which supported it." The president of the seminary, R. Albert Mohler, Jr. wrote a letter included at the beginning of the report that acknowledged this history and what he described as "the moral burden of history" that "requires a more direct and far more candid acknowledgment of the legacy of this school in the horrifying realities of American slavery, Jim Crow segregation, racism, and even the avowal of white racial supremacy."

There were several Convention resolutions regarding race relations, from nineteenth-century projects of missionary work among newly-freed African Americans to a resolution in 2019 stating the Convention's position on the place of critical race theory and intersectionality in biblical hermeneutics, which has caused no small measure of debate alongside issues of gender in the Convention (Banks 2020). However, there is one resolution in particular that often seems to serve as a touchstone for Southern Baptists when discussing the Convention's racist past and attempts at atonement and racial reconciliation. In 1995, at the annual meeting held in Atlanta, Georgia, which marked the 250th anniversary of its founding, the SBC passed a resolution denouncing racism. The resolution stated the SBC did indeed "lament and repudiate historic acts of evil such as slavery from which we continue to reap a bitter harvest,

and… recognize that the racism which yet plagues our culture today is inextricably tied to the past." It also formally apologized "to all African-Americans for condoning and/or perpetuating individual and systemic racism in our lifetime; and we genuinely repent of racism of which we have been guilty," followed by a plea for forgiveness. Concerning this resolution, Newman concluded that the adoption of this resolution by the SBC "demonstrated that many white Baptists were coming to terms with one of the most unfortunate aspects of their past" (2001: 210). But as historian Alan Scott Willis noted, much of the statement was put in the present tense, signifying that the SBC was aware that racism was still a pervasive problem for Southern Baptist churches (2005: 197).

The specific history of the SBC concerning racial issues and the persistence of racism within its churches continues to be a topic of particular concern for the Convention. However, the majority-white and deeply conservative SBC membership was forced to reckon with its commitment to anti-racism anew with the emergence of the Alt-Right when the position of its members on racial equality was called into question during what was imagined by some to be a routine vote on resolutions at the 2017 annual convention. During this meeting in Phoenix, Arizona, Southern Baptists in attendance voted to condemn what it called "the anti-gospel of Alt-Right white supremacy" in an official resolution (SBC 2017a). The resolution stated, "[T]he messengers to the Southern Baptist Convention, meeting in Phoenix, Arizona, June 13–14, 2017, decry every form of racism, including alt-right white supremacy, as antithetical to the Gospel of Jesus Christ;" and that "we denounce and repudiate white supremacy and every form of racial and ethnic hatred as a scheme of the devil intended to bring suffering and division to our society;" and that "we still must make progress in rooting out any remaining forms of intentional or unintentional racism in our midst."

The statement contextualized their rejection of racism by stating, "We know from our Southern Baptist history the effects of the horrific sins of racism and hatred." It noted further that in 1995, the Convention "repudiated 'historic acts of evil, such as slavery'," that the Convention had committed itself to eradicate racism in all its forms from Southern Baptist life and ministry, and "genuinely repent[ed] of racism of which we have been guilty, whether consciously or unconsciously."

The 2017 statement coming from the SBC's annual meeting might seem uncontroversial, or even positive. However, this resolution did not draw public attention to the SBC because of its content, but rather because the original resolution was not called to a vote when it was first proposed days prior to the eventual vote. Emma Green writing for *The Atlantic* on 14 June described the events that followed as having "turned chaotic," stating, "leaders initially declined to consider the proposal submitted by a prominent black pastor in Texas, Dwight McKissic." She explained, too, that leaders in the meeting "changed course only after a significant backlash," and the attendees passed a revised statement officially condemning the Alt-Right and white supremacy. Green notes, however, "the drama over the resolution revealed deep tension lines within a denomination that was explicitly founded to support slavery." Green went on to describe other reactions to the handling of the resolution. Green was, of course, correct about the backlash.

Thabiti Anyabwile, a prolific author and pastor at Anacostia River Church in southeast Washington, D.C, tweeted concerning these events, "The amount of work left to do in 'evangelical' (who knows [what] that means any more?) church is staggering," and stated further,

> We must be clear: We live in a time when equivocating on these matters furthers the sin of racism even to violence and death… Any "church" that cannot denounce white supremacy without hesitancy and equivocation is a dead, Jesus denying assembly. No 2 ways about it … I'm done. With this Twitter spiel. With "evangelicalism." With all the racist and indifferent nonsense that passes as "Christian".
>
> *(Quoted in Green 2017)*

In *Christianity Today*, Ed Stetzer, holder of the Billy Graham Distinguished Chair of Church, Mission, and Evangelism at Wheaton College and Executive Director of the Billy Graham Center, commented on the events. On 14 June, referencing Green's article, he argued that she had indeed assessed the situation at the annual meeting correctly, however with the caveat that "[t]here was some chaos, but maybe not in ways that social media always understands." Stetzer went on to explain that there was no "wing" of the SBC that was for the Alt-Right, but that Southern Baptists still needed to address the Alt-Right and the situation at the meeting because of their history. He argued that such a reckoning was needed, "not the least of which," because "too many Southern Baptists were on the wrong side of the fire hoses in Birmingham." Precisely because of the SBC's troubled racial history, he argued, the SBC needed "to get on the correct side, against the rising tide of racism, often associated (rightly or wrongly) with where many Southern Baptists live." At the same time Stetzer was writing his comments, the newly revised resolution was due to be presented before the body for a vote. Noting this, Stetzer cautioned, "The world is watching, sure, but more importantly, so is a dark-skinned Middle Eastern Jew who died on the cross for all people."

For Stetzer, the concern about the fate of the vote was bigger than a public image issue, it was also theological. However, the SBC had to confront the picture that the handling of the resolution painted, and not just for the general public. For some Southern Baptists, this seeming failure to adequately denounce racism was not an isolated incident. Rev. Dwight McKissic published a draft of his proposed resolution in a post on his blog from 27 May of that year, and again on the following day on the Southern Baptist forum, *SBC Voice,* two weeks before the scheduled meeting in June of that year. Leading up to this, Rev. McKissic addressed another controversy concerning racial attitudes in the SBC. In a post on *SBC Voices* from 28 April 2017, Reverend McKissic wrote an entry discussing a recent incident when a group of white faculty at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary posed for a photo of themselves dressed in stereotypical "gangsta" garb. The caption for the photo read, "Why you should come study at the School of Preaching @swbts! Rap the word. Reach the world." Additional comments on the image read "Notorious S.O.P.," for "School of

Preaching." David Allen, the faculty member who posted the picture on social media responded to the outrage that followed this image of an all-white group of faculty at an SBC institution with a Tweet dated 25 April 2017. He writes, "I apologize for a recent image I posted which was offensive. Context is immaterial. @swbts stance on racism is as clear as mine." The next day, then president of the seminary Paige Patterson, issued a statement that read in part, "Southwestern cannot make a moment of bad judgment disappear… But we can and will redouble our efforts to put an end to any form of racism on this campus and to return to a focus that is our priority—namely, getting the Gospel to every man and woman on earth." However, for McKissic, the issue was more than a slight misstep in a continued effort to combat racism on that particular campus or in the SBC more broadly.

In his post from 28 April 2017, McKissic wrote, "The scandal reflected in the SWBTS Preaching Professor 'Gangsta' Garb/Image may be the lack of diversity represented in addition to the unwise images depicted. The willingness to demonstrate appreciation for diversity through displaying the symbolism of 'gangsta' garb/images; but, the unwillingness to demonstrate the reality of diversity by hiring a diverse faculty is the real scandal represented by this picture." He prefaced this statement by drawing attention to the offense's invisibility to the white faculty who participated in the production of such an image. Rev. McKissic saw this issue in particular as something that reflected a more significant point about the lack of black faculty at the seminary. "A Black Preaching Professor would have no doubt persuaded his co-laborers of the single most important reason why this 'gangsta rap' photo idea should have been a non-starter," McKissic wrote, and argued that a black faulty member "would have argued it would be impossible for the larger culture to appreciate the optics as being genuine and sincere." He goes on to explain that while none of the faculty in the picture are "flaming racists" and that he fully forgives them, racial diversity remains an issue that must be addressed for the school to recover from the damage done to its image because of the picture.

This particular controversy establishes some context for the fallout over the handling of the resolution on the Alt-Right at the annual meeting. However, Dr. Jason Duesing, the academic Provost and Professor of Historical Theology at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and one of the members of the resolutions committee in 2017, explained that the issue with refusing the proposal as written by Rev. McKissic was procedural and did not reflect the SBC's desire to avoid condemning the Alt-Right and white supremacy. In a conversation with me, Dr. Duesing explained that specific procedures were in place for presenting a resolution and that specific criteria had to be met for a proposed resolution to be presented for a vote at the meeting (Deusing 2019). Some of this references the specifics of the SBC's functioning at the Convention level, as Duesing explained on an episode *SBC This Week* from 16 April 2018 and as described in section 20 of the SBC's bylaws (Whitfield & Howe, 2018). This, however, was not what many in attendance or who were watching from outside the meeting understood as the issue.

During the original resolution committee report read on the floor of the convention in 2017, McKissic protested the as yet unexplained absence of the resolution

on the Alt-Right. After the official vote on the resolutions, he spoke to the need for the resolution to be brought before the attendees for discussion and to make a public stand against the ethnonationalism propagated by Alt-Right influencers like Richard Spencer and James Edwards, whom he specifically referenced (Lifeway 2017b). Chairperson Duke also specifically noted that some of the language in the original resolution as proposed was not acceptable as written. The chief parliamentarian of the convention was called to explain that McKissic's request was not something that the bylaws allow. While the chair of the committee can allow a statement concerning the resolution, a two-thirds majority to suspend the rules was required to release the resolution, which they did not get. One attendee, Garrett Kell of Del Rey Baptist Church in Alexandria, Virginia, objected as the resolutions committee's scheduled time came to a close. He stated that he was concerned that this phase of the meeting would end before clarifying the SBC's position on the Alt-Right, leaving "confusion" as to its views on white supremacy and the Alt-Right. Chairperson Duke explained, however, that the resolution was "too open-ended" concerning who was being described in the resolution as part of the Alt-Right, that the resolution did not adequately distinguish between those who "might hold some conservative views," as opposed to those who adhere to the more problematic views of white supremacy. He stated further that the resolution contained what he called "inflammatory language," specifically noting the statement in the original draft that members of the Alt-Right believe in "ethnic cleansing."

Of course, this original point was not the end of the matter, especially as controversy continued to brew over what appeared to some to be an embarrassing misstep by the committee. After much work into the late hours of Tuesday night and Wednesday morning, Jason Duesing, Russell Moore, and others in the resolutions committee revised the proposal to present it for a vote on the floor (Duesing 2019). Chairperson Duke then introduced the revised resolution with an apology for the confusion and pain that resulted from the previous handling of the resolution. Though one attendee, David Mills of Beech Haven Baptist Church in Athens, Georgia, suggested that the SBC set up a study of "Alt-Right and Alt-Left movements in the United States," the remaining respondents kept on the point of a clear and strong denunciation of the racism of the Alt-Right. This was demonstrated by Russell Moore's impassioned appeal before the vote that the resolution be passed immediately, and another statement by Charles Hedman an associate pastor for Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington D.C., who agreed with Moore (Lifeway 2017a). Mr. Hedman also stated to the attendees that the previous rejection of the resolution had created confusion, as chairperson Duke noted, but he went further in stating that the actions of the committee had encouraged the Alt-Right itself. He stated that outside the meeting's venue, Alt-Rightists had gathered to hand out pamphlets and that on Twitter they were praising the SBC's decision to not adopt the resolution. Richard Spencer, for example, had tweeted on the evening of the thirteenth after news had emerged about the rejection of Rev. McKissic's resolution, "So apparently the Southern Baptists Convention *didn't* [*sic*] denounce the Alt-Right after all. Interesting development!"

For proponents of the Alt-Right and for its detractors in the SBC, this vote was about the SBC's position on the movement and a broader statement on white nationalism. For members of the resolutions committee, however, the refusal to bring Rev. McKissic's resolution to a vote without explanation had nothing to do with the Alt-Right itself. According to Duesing, among the issues that affected the committee's decision was that the proposal required further editorial work, and the issues seemingly raised in the original proposal had been addressed in previous resolutions in 2015, which spoke to racial reconciliation in the SBC, and in a 2016 resolution which addressed the display of the Confederate flag (Duesing 2019). From the perspective of the committee, the resolution was not suitable for presentation for a vote, and by the rules of the convention at that time the decision to not bring to a vote an explanation as to why would not have been noted in the bulletin for anyone to see. The reasoning to not present McKissic's resolution for a vote, apart from what was said on the floor, was, however, not known to anyone outside the committee itself. The rules for listing the declined resolutions have since been changed so that resolutions not submitted for a vote would be listed with a brief explanation in the meeting's bulletin, but at the time of the 2017 vote, the only notice that the committee did not see the resolution needed a vote was that it was not brought to the floor (Whitfield & Howe 2018).

Duesing explained that the committee was taken a little aback by the reaction, but took action to address the important issue, and the committee initially "had not read the public opinion" when they had simply agreed to not have the original vote (Whitfield & Howe 2018). When the revised resolution was brought to the floor of the convention, Barrett Duke, chairperson of the resolutions committee issued an apology as well from the stage of the convention for "the pain and confusion [they] created" for attendees "and the watching world" when they did not report out the resolution proposed by McKissic (Lifeway 2017a).

After the vote affirming the revised resolution, Rev. McKissic and a few other guests joined Roland Martin on his internet show, *News One Now*, to discuss these events. There, he explained that he was shocked at the accusations that the original resolution was poorly written or contained incendiary language, and exclaimed that there was no cited example of such language. Further, he explained that his being offended was not necessarily as a result of the committee's decision as such but rather "that there has never been a black chairman of the resolutions committee in history." He argued, "I am offended that the committee is by and large made up of no minorities." He explained further, "You've got 20 percent minorities in the Convention, only one black person was there [on the committee], and they're almost forced to go along to get along." Once again, the issue for McKissic is the general lack of diversity in the leadership positions in the SBC that creates scenarios like the one at Southwestern Baptist Seminary and at the 2017 annual meeting.

The 2017 annual meeting is certainly a significant moment, but it was not to be the only time members of the SBC addressed the Alt-Right. When President Trump equivocated on the violence of the Charlottesville Unite The Right rally, Rev. McKissic and Keith Whitfield, a professor and dean at Southeastern Baptist

Theological Seminary, drafted a letter of protest that was endorsed broadly among evangelicals and was signed by Dr. Steve Gaines, then President of the Southern Baptist Convention, and J. D. Greear, who later became SBC President, among others (Moody 2017).[2] In this letter, they call upon President Trump to speak out against "the alt-right movement" and not just denounce white supremacy in the generic, as he had done in a statement from 14 September 2017. The statement's authors criticize Trump's relative silence concerning the Alt-Right, stating, "This movement has escaped your disapproval." They go on to say, "We believe it is important for this movement to be addressed, for at its core it is a white identity movement and the majority of its members are white nationalists or white supremacists." Noting the simultaneous rise of the Alt-Right and Trump's controversial campaign, the letter states, "This movement gained public prominence during your candidacy for President of the United States," and furthermore that those among the Alt-Right "have claimed that you share their vision for our country." McKissic and Whitfield further argue that in this way the members of the Alt-Right "have sought to use the political and cultural concerns of people of goodwill for their prejudiced political agendas." The letter goes on, "It concerned many of us when three people associated with the alt-right movement were given jobs in the White House," referring most obviously to Steve Bannon, and conclude the letter by offering an exhortation to prayer. It reads,

> We are praying, and call upon God's people to humble themselves and pray that you would take the bold and moral step to denounce the alt-right. And we pray that we may see the beauty of people from all racial backgrounds dwelling together in unity, from which the blessings flow; and then we may see—God Bless America.
>
> *(Psalm 133:1)*

The same sentiment of public and specific denunciation of the Alt-Right, and not simply generic white supremacy, especially as it relates to the political moment of 2017 was carried over from Rev. McKissic's original draft of the 2017 resolution. He noted, too, in his discussion of the letter in a post on SBC Voices from 30 September 2017, "The initial forty (40) signatories are almost perfectly balanced evenly racially. That is a rare feat. This may even be unprecedented. Sam Rodriguez added his name to the list after the initial publishing on CNN. He is the first member of President Trump's advisory council to do so." Though specific in its content and aim to condemn the Alt-Right and challenge any support for its white supremacist agenda, the resolution and the letter to President Trump were, for Rev. McKissic, also about the larger racial problems within the SBC and for American Christians more generally.

In August of 2017 Rev. McKissic wrote on *SBC Voices*, "The Southern Baptist Convention's response in its Annual Session in Phoenix, June 2017, to the White Supremacy/Alt-Right Resolution that I submitted, may be recorded by historians as a defining moment in SBC history, particularly on the racial front." This may in fact be the case. The effect of the events surrounding the 2017 resolution to condemn

the Alt-Right at the SBC annual meeting seemed to have produced structural changes if not also a shift in commitment to diversifying leadership. On 28 March 2018, *Baptist Press* announced that Duesing had been appointed as chairperson for the committee and introduced the new committee members, which included African American and Asian American Southern Baptist leaders (Baptist Press Staff 2018). In June of that year, they also published a story noting that this new committee was, according to then SBC President Gaines, "predominantly non-Anglo and is probably one of the most ethnically diverse committees in the history of the SBC" (Roach 2018). Furthermore, as Duesing discusses in an interview published on SBC Voices in April of 2018, there were changes to the process for resolutions after 2017. One of the more specific changes was that the resolutions committee would now offer a brief explanation in the bulletin given to attendees of why proposed resolutions are rejected, which was not in practice in 2017 (Whitfield & Howe 2018). One can then assume that the events of the 2017 resolutions vote have indeed had an effect not just on the rhetoric of the SBC concerning race but that they have made structural and procedural changes within the institution, and in particular to the resolutions committee.

The media attention concerning the resolution condemning the Alt-Right and white supremacy was for some Southern Baptists an opportunity to state to the world that the SBC, despite its past, stands firm against white supremacy. For others, however, the chaos surrounding the vote distracted from the work the SBC was doing on the other issues that mattered to Southern Baptists. In the interview with Dr. Duesing on *SBC This Week* where he discussed the resolutions committee for 2018, there was little discussion of the Alt-Right vote apart from general references by the hosts to the "controversy." They did, however, mention that other resolutions were "lost in the shuffle" because of that "other one," referring, of course, to the resolution on the Alt-Right. Interestingly, one of the resolutions that was mentioned in the interview and that Duesing mentioned to me that was passed and all but ignored by the press was the resolution denouncing Planned Parenthood. The resolution stated, "the immoral agenda and practices of Planned Parenthood Federation of America and its affiliates, especially their role in the unjust killing each year of more than 300,000 precious unborn babies, its use of particularly gruesome illegal abortion methods, and its profiteering from harvesting unborn babies' tissues and organs" (SBC 2017b). It also urged Congress to defund Planned Parenthood and that the Department of Justice "pursue criminal charges against Planned Parenthood Federation of America and its affiliates." In the year in review show for 2017, too, the hosts of SBC Life gave little time to the resolution condemning the Alt-Right, stating rather briefly that this was the main story coming out of the convention (Whitfield & Howe 2017). They noted that a "strong statement" followed the initial controversy and made mention of the letter sent to President Trump from SBC leaders urging him to condemn the Alt-Right by name. It was nevertheless clear that for the hosts of the show other issues took priority over the controversy of the Alt-Right.

With J. D. Greear as president, the SBC has taken a rather public stance on being more diverse and welcoming to people of color. When I spoke with Todd

Unzicker, President Greear's associate pastor at The Summit Church, in Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina, he made it clear that the SBC was dedicated to diverse representation without falling into "tokenism." Greear's tenure as SBC President seems to be dedicated to addressing several issues that have troubled the Convention. In 2019, when the SBC was reeling under a sexual abuse scandal, Greear "invited victims of sexual abuse to stand as he and others led in a prayer of lament, repentance and sorrow over the instances of abuse that have taken place within [the] convention" (Hollifield 2019). The report also mentioned that just before this meeting, SBC delegates from cooperating churches, called messengers, whose role it is to confer and determine the programs, policies, and budget of the Convention, agreed together on addressing important issues. At the 2018 annual meeting, led by President Greear, they "overwhelmingly approved proposed changes to the SBC's constitution and bylaws that would deem sexual abuse and racial discrimination as grounds for a church to be declared not in friendly cooperation with our convention." As President Greear addressed punitive measures for those who commit sexual abuse, racism was listed officially as a sin that could result in an official sanction for offenders.

The SBC also published a book in June of 2017, just days before the annual meeting, titled *Removing the Stain of Racism from the Southern Baptist Convention: Diverse African American and White Perspectives*. It was edited by Jaris J. Williams, an African American professor of New Testament interpretation at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, and Kevin M. Jones, another African American educator and dean of academic innovation and professor of education at Boyce College, also in Louisville. Its body of contributors was diverse, and included R. Albert Mohler Jr., president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and a respected historical theologian, and Rev. McKissic. The volume was praised by such figures as the eminent historian of American Christianity Mark Noll, and Russell Moore, who said in his comments, "The Southern Baptist Convention of the year 2050 will be truly multiethnic, or it will be dead." He concluded his remarks by adding that he prayed that through this book God would help the SBC overcome racism, which he described in similar terms as he did at the 2017 annual meeting as "antichrist."

The editors' stated aim was to put side-by-side white and African American contributors to "symbolize the kind of partnership we as African American editors believe must take place within the SBC if the stain of racism is to be removed once and for all" (Williams & Jones 2017: xxvi–xxvii). With full recognition of the "messy relationship" African Americans have had with the SBC, they reference the SBC's history of "marginalization, oppression, and exploitation of black and brown people" (Williams & Jones 2017: xxvii). Published on 1 June 2017, before the meeting in Arizona took place, there is no mention of those events or any direct reference to the Alt-Right. Nevertheless, what is said in the book resonates with what was in both versions of the resolution and spoken on the floor of the meeting. The editors, too, echoing what we heard from Rev. McKissic, state that the "white majority" of the SBC "must be willing to partner with and submit lovingly and humbly to the leadership of their vetted, qualified, and gifted black and brown

brothers and sisters in the SBC" (Williams & Jones 2017: xxvii). That is to say, many voices in the SBC, especially African Americans, were already calling for the kind of inclusion and participation that Rev. McKissic called for throughout the events of the 2017 vote, including the kind of diversification in leadership that occurred in the appointment of the 2018 resolutions committee. It would seem then, perhaps, that the broader context of the 2017 resolution as much as the resolution itself contributed to shaping what has apparently become a pivotal moment for the future of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Green noted in her *Atlantic* piece that the optics of the 2017 resolution were important to observers, noting Pastor Hedman's impassioned comments about how Alt-Rightists were taking note of these events. The importance of this vote, then, especially after the very public confusion about the original resolution, was that it brought into focus the stakes for Christians in addressing the Alt-Right phenomenon. The Alt-Right phenomenon, therefore, played a significant role at that time in shaping how the SBC was publicly defining itself in the light of its troubling racist past.

The SBC's commitment to fighting racism has been a refrain since the 2017 convention. On 25 May 2020, President Greear and New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary President Jamie Dew issued a statement commenting on the killing of George Floyd. The statement reads, "While all must grieve, we understand that in the hearts of our fellow citizens of color, incidents like these connect to a long history of unequal justice in our country, going back to the grievous Jim Crow and slavery eras." They write further, the video and images of Mr. Floyd's death at the hands of a white police officer indicate "that there is much more work to be done to ensure that there is not even a hint of racial inequity in the distribution of justice in our country" (Baptist Press Staff 2020). However, controversy remained for the SBC, especially in the aftermath of the widespread protests against police brutality that followed the release of the video that showed the circumstances of Mr. Floyd's death. President Trump's use of phrases from the Civil Rights era like "law and order" and "when the looting starts the shooting starts" certainly signaled his stance toward protestors (Sprunt 2020). He aimed squarely at his base with his announcement in the Rose Garden of the White House announcing that he would establish law and order, even with the use of the military. After this announcement, protesters were forcibly driven with tear gas and other means from the area of a local church damaged by fire, where Trump then posed with a Bible in hand for photographers from the news media (Wise 2020). Franklin Graham supported the president's use of the Bible in the photo-op. One of the president's most staunch supporters, Robert Jeffress, pastor of First Baptist Dallas, said,

> Every believer I talked to certainly appreciates what the president did and the message he was sending… I think it will be one of those historic moments in his presidency, especially when set against the backdrop of nights of violence throughout our country.
>
> *(Quoted in Flegenheimer 2020)*

Many Christian leaders, however, criticized Trump's posing with the Bible as grotesque political theatre. Among them was the Archbishop of Washington D.C. and Rev. Mariann Edgar Budde, the Episcopal bishop of Washington who oversees St. John's Episcopal Church, the church where Trump posed for photos. Rev. Budde tweeted, "We are followers of Jesus. In no way do we support the President's incendiary response to a wounded, grieving nation. We stand with those seeking justice for the death of George Floyd through the sacred act of peaceful protest." The president's response was perhaps predictable when he said in an interview with Brian Kilmeade of Fox News, against available evidence, that most religious leaders "loved it." "I heard Franklin Graham this morning thought it was great," Trump exclaimed, adding "it's only the other side that didn't like it. You know, the opposing – the opposition party as the expression goes" (Trump 2020). J. D. Greear, however, said of Trump's photo-op, "The Bible is a book we should hold only with fear and trembling, given to us that in it we might find eternal life… Our only agenda should be to advance God's kingdom, proclaim his gospel, or find rest for our souls." Russell Moore echoed this statement by saying, "For me, the Bible is the Word of the living God, and should be treated with reverence and awe," adding condemnation of violent protest but also that "murder of African-American citizens, who bear the image of God" is "morally wrong" (quoted in Bailey & Boorstein 2020).

After this public response to the murder of Mr. Floyd, the SBC was again in the spotlight, this time as a result of controversy concerning perceived silence and callousness by some white SBC leaders toward the suffering of people of color at the hands of police. On 11 June 2020, an organization called Faithful America, which describes itself as a "Christian social-justice organization," circulated a petition to remove Albert Mohler as president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary after statements he made concerning the Episcopal Church when asked about the 1 June photo-op. A description of the petition on Faithful America's website stated that Mohler had evaded discussion of President Trump's use of the Bible and instead "bizarrely and offensively" pivoted to "argue that the Episcopal Church's use of Scripture (presumably in its embrace of LGBTQ rights)," to shift the conversation from racism to an apparent attack on the Episcopal Church's position on homosexuality. Mohler's comments on the theology of the Episcopal Church were seen as a clear evasion when confronted with the opportunity to address racial injustice. "Not once between the May 25 death of George Floyd and the June 7 launch of this petition," they argue, "has Mohler, likely the next president of the Southern Baptist Convention, used his daily podcast to condemn white supremacy or police violence." They argue further that "he has often focused on condemning protesters, never even mentioning the word 'racism' except to disagree with a progressive Black writer." The petition also noted Mohler's comments on slavery in 1998 where he appeared to say that slaves ought to have obeyed their masters when asked about Harriet Tubman's resistance to slavery. Mohler said later of his comments that they were "incredibly stupid," claiming he "fell into a trap" and that he did not "stand by those comments," stating, "I repudiate the statements I made" (Quoted in Leonard 2020). The petition, however, mobilizing these

statements by Mohler, states that in light of recent and past statements, "It's enough to make you wonder: Does Mohler feel like Black lives don't matter?"

Like other American Christian organizations, the SBC's response to the Alt-Right is situated within pre-existing and ongoing debates about racism within their institutions. The debates concerning the Alt-Right and support for Donald Trump are tied to broader concerns that preceded the 2016 election and the 2017 resolution, and are not going away after the 2020 election. Certainly, some of the debates were about optics, especially concerning the SBC's efforts to adequately and publicly atone for their history of racism and correct the poor representation of people in color in leadership. However, we can see also that the debates reflected attempts to deal with the substantial and continued effects of racism in the SBC and its institutions.

## Conclusion: American evangelicals and the Alt-Right

How American evangelical Protestants responded to the Alt-Right, whether in the pages of *Sojourners* or among Southern Baptist leaders, was conditioned by the longer-lived and pernicious history of racism in America and the complicity in that history of the majority-white Christian institutions. Evangelicals, though they differ widely on political, social, and theological grounds, responded to the Alt-Right in many ways as they had already responded to racism before the emergence of the brand to public attention on the 2016 U.S. presidential race. This opposition seemed to intensify after the rally at Charlottesville. In some cases, there were institutional changes, as we saw with the rules changes for resolutions for the SBC or the greater attention to diversity in the resolutions committee, but one could argue that this was the result of the controversy over the process of the vote in 2017 and an attempt to avoid such confusion in the future rather than the Alt-Right itself. For left-oriented Christians like Jim Wallis and Kelly Brown Douglas, the emergence of the Alt-Right and Trump's incredible support from white Christians signaled that the fight against racism that had been waging raged still in the era of #BlackLivesMatter.

Evangelical Protestants were, however, not the only American Christians who responded to the Alt-Right after 2016. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) had to confront their history of institutionalized and theologically supported racism, very much like the SBC did. At the same time, concerns over a "Mormon Alt-Right" were stoked by Ayla Stewart's visible racialist activism, and some Latter-day Saints had begun to use the term "Alt-Right" in their debates about homosexuality and the acceptance of LGBTQ+ people in the church. Something quite similar was also happening among American Catholics, especially concerning the controversial organization called Church Militant. In these cases, the very validity of the term "Alt-Right" came into question. Latter-day Saints who used online tactics similar to the Alt-Right to, as they saw it, defend LDS teachings on sexuality decried being labeled as Alt-Right by progressives. Equally, Catholics debated the usefulness of the term as it seemed to be applied to anyone who, in their view, adhered to Catholic teachings on sexuality. So what was at stake as American Christians debated the Alt-Right was not simply Christianity's

entanglements with racism, but also the inclusion of LGBTQ+ people within their institutions and what constituted orthodox positions on sexuality in the twenty-first century. In short, Christians' debates about the Alt-Right were, in a sense, debates about the meaning of Christianity itself at a moment of significant social change in America.

## Notes

1 Pew's Religious Landscape study titled "Members of the Southern Baptist Convention" demonstrates the points in Fahmy's summary on the website for the Pew Research Center, and provides more details concerning voting habits and other statistical data for the Southern Baptists.
2 The link to the full letter has been deactivated, but the CNN report includes the full text of the letter. Rev. McKissic on *SBC Voices* again reproduces the text in the 30 September 2017 post.

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# 4

# DEBATING THE "ALT-RIGHT"

The emergence of the Alt-Right into public view during the 2016 election and the spectacle of the Unite the Right rally in 2017 provoked reactions from American Christians across a wide spectrum of traditions. These responses often resembled those we saw from evangelical Protestants, though with specific references to their institutions' history, doctrines, and practices. Christians' reactions to the Alt-Right also reflected their views on the most contentious disputes within their respective traditions. For some Christians, the Alt-Right brand came at once to symbolize the troubled relations Christians had with their churches' racial pasts. Alt-Right also became a term deployed in the most contentious disputes that American Christians were having in the first decades of the twenty-first century.

In this chapter, we will focus on how this happened for members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), who like Southern Baptists continued to address their racist past, in particular the restrictions placed on African American male members of the church, while responding to concerns over the rise of a "Mormon Alt-Right" movement. Then we will turn to how the term Alt-Right became a contested signifier deployed in other debates among LDS members and among American Catholics to frame discussions about LGBTQ+ people in these traditions in the years following the 2016 U.S. Presidential election. Here I argue that for American Christians, the Alt-Right had become part of how they debated not just race but also issues concerning the acceptance of LGBTQ+ people within their institutions and even the meaning of their traditions in the twenty-first century.

## Latter-day Saints, the Alt-Right, and race

The LDS Church's moment for confronting the Alt-Right came when Ayla Stewart's racialist activism became known to the broader public, especially after Charlottesville when she became the public face of what some were calling the

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Mormon Alt-Right. News reports about Stewart's online activity as "Wife With a Purpose" and her role in the Unite the Right rally brought attention to the troubled racial history of the LDS and put to question how much the Church had dealt with that past. In August of 2017, the public forum section of *The Salt Lake Tribune* published a letter to the paper titled "Letter: Racism in the LDS Church 'Alive and Well'" (Fisher 2017). The author of the letter referenced both Stewart's outspoken racism and the events at Charlottesville to argue, "Sadly, like in Charlottesville, Va., racism in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is very much alive and well, too." One of the complaints in this letter was that the LDS Church had tolerated Stewart's racism, something the author tied to the Church's past with withholding the priesthood from African Americans and its racialized doctrines concerning skin color.

In that same month, however, news outlets had reported on statements from LDS Church leaders who officially condemned racism in response to the spectacle of the Unite the Right rally. The official comments were issued on 13 August 2017 and then again two days later. The statement from 13 August made no mention of Stewart, but instead focused its condemnation on the events at Charlottesville and the "increase of intolerance in both words and actions that we see everywhere." In the statement from 15 August, however, the Church addressed white supremacy in the LDS more directly. "It has been called to our attention that there are some among the various pro-white and white supremacy communities who assert that the Church is neutral toward or in support of their views," the statement read. The authors commented further, "Nothing could be further from the truth. In the New Testament, Jesus said: 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour [*sic*] as thyself' (Matthew 22:37–39)." They then referenced one of the texts particular to the LDS tradition, *The Book of Mormon*, which they argued "teaches 'all are alike unto God' (2 Nephi 26:33)." The statement went further in unequivocally condemning white supremacist views as "morally wrong and sinful," and stating that "we condemn them." Finally, it said plainly, "Church members who promote or pursue a 'white culture' or white supremacy agenda are not in harmony with the teachings of the Church."

Stewart was upset by the latter statement, taking it as a personal attack and as an attack on white people. She posted on her Twitter account (now deleted) on 15 August 2017,

> The church just declared that I have no right to my heritage or culture. I am white. My culture is white. It's not superior to black or Asian or Jewish culture but it IS [*sic*] equal to those cultures. I believe God loves ALL his children, including the white ones. I cannot be a part of this racism.
>
> *(Riess 2017)*

However, for the LDS Church, these statements against white supremacy were in line with the Church's current position on racial issues.

This brief discussion touches on two significant points for the context of the LDS's response to the Alt-Right. First, the LDS Church's history with racism shaped perceptions of the LDS when the specter of a Mormon Alt-Right appeared and certainly shaped its response to organized racism in August of 2017. As Mormonism scholars W. Paul Reeve, Max Perry Mueller, and Craig R. Prentiss have noted, the creation of racial mythologies, the racialization of church institutions, and race in the doctrines of the history of the Latter-day Saints are particularly complex and important to the tradition. "While the LDS did not invent these social barriers," Prentiss writes, referring to the categorization of Native Americans, blackness, and whiteness in the LDS tradition, "their mythic resources gave them a distinctive manner for interpreting, reinforcing, and reformulating social barriers stemming from racial ideology" (2003: 136). Prentiss references specific passages from *The Book of Mormon*, namely when the Lamanites rebelled against God as described in 2 Nephi 5:21. The passage states that God "caused the accursing to come upon them, yea, even a sore cursing, because of their iniquity." It continues, "For behold, they had hardened their hearts against him, that they had become like unto a flint; wherefore, as they were white, and exceedingly fair and delightsome, that they might not be enticing unto my people the Lord God did cause a skin of blackness to come upon them." The passage continues with a particular pronouncement that shaped Mormon attitudes about mixing races and later, an argument for the impermanent status of this curse. It reads, "And thus saith the Lord God: I will cause that they shall be loathsome unto thy people, save they shall repent of their iniquities. And cursed shall be the seed of him that mixeth with their seed; for they shall be cursed even with the same cursing. And the Lord spake it, and it was done."

Prentiss further argues that Mormons understood this curse as it related to another passage from *The Book of Mormon*, 2 Nephi 30:6, in which a prophecy is given in which the cursed people at Christ's coming would return to God and, quoting from the passage, have their skin transformed to become "white and delightsome" (Prentiss, 2003: 129). He notes that the passage was changed later in revisions to read "pure and delightsome," but for him, this nevertheless marked a particularly Mormon way of understanding racial categories; in this case, an explanation of the differences in skin color between Native and Anglo Americans. However, these categories were not necessarily indicative of static, biological difference, but rather designated temporary states reflected in the anticipation of a "profound change" that was to come upon the cursed population (Prentiss, 2003: 129). This promise of a future change in status and color according to God's unfolding plan was also subject to the understanding of later LDS prophets who had access to God's revelation. This particular understanding of a progressive revelation of God's plan as delivered through living prophets would play a significant role in the most controversial element of racial teaching and practices of the LDS, specifically, the refusal to admit Black males into the priesthood of the Church.

Reeve and Mueller argue for understanding Mormons' relationship to racial categories as particular to the tradition, especially the belief in the unfolding revelation of God's divine plan through living prophets, and yet related to the context of race in America.

Both scholars point to the shifting attitudes toward race within the LDS Church, and how this has reflected "a microcosm of the history of race in America" (Reeve, 2015: 3). This was no less true in 2017 when media attention turned to Mormons in the Alt-Right. When asked by Peggy Fletcher Stack of *The Salt Lake City Tribune* concerning a 2017 story on Ayla Stewart and Alt-Right Mormons, Reeve commented that racist notions "persist in the hearts of minds of some Mormons," and that this is related to "ongoing racial issues" in the Church. Mueller further discusses the entrenched notion of whiteness for Latter-day Saints in the context of the Alt-Right in an interview with Emma Green for a 2017 article in *The Atlantic*. Green says, "There's been talk about an emerging Mormon alt-right, populated by Mormon white nationalists." She notes, referring to Stewart, "Much of this has focused on a Utah woman who blogs under the name 'Wife with a Purpose,' who created a 'white-baby challenge' for fellow Mormons to perpetuate their putatively white heritage." When Green asked Mueller to respond to this, he said, "Within Mormonism's history is this concept of whiteness as Godliness and purity… The kind of white supremacy that's at the heart of a lot of Mormon history, and the contemporary church that rejects white supremacy, both embody the same space." When Green asks Mueller to explain what kind of white supremacy is manifested in "Mormon culture," Mueller replies that Mormons are "trying to present themselves to mainstream, white, partisan gatekeepers as pious, patriotic, family-oriented, hardworking, contributing to the society, and willing to fight for the American flag in war." The issue of presenting themselves as part of the American mainstream should not be underestimated as part of the motive for the LDS's responses to the Alt-Right, and in particular the hyper-visibility of Stewart's racialist activism. Neither should we overlook the fraught history of anti-black ideation reflected in the teachings and practices of the LDS Church.

Anti-blackness in the LDS, though it often reflected racist attitudes that were commonplace in American Christianity, cannot be thought of as Mormons simply adopting racist norms. As historians Matthew L. Harris and Newell G. Bringhurst note, there were doctrinal and scriptural reasons for anti-blackness specific to the LDS. They note that in *The Book of Mormon, The Pearl of Great Price*, and *Doctrines and Covenants*, the primary texts for LDS teachings apart from the Bible, one can find black skin described as both a curse on those who are disobedient to God, as in 2 Nephi in *The Book of Mormon*, and as a mark on those descended from Cain. The Book of Moses found in *The Pearl of Great Price*, Harris and Bringhurst write, "details the deeds, or rather the misdeeds of Cain" who was marked by God for his killing of Abel, and "casts his descendants in an unfavorable light" (Harris & Bringhurst 2015: 11–12). The text itself reads in part,

> And Enoch also beheld the residue of the people which were the sons of Adam; and they were a mixture of all the seed of Adam save it was the seed of Cain, for the seed of Cain were black and had not a place among them.
>
> *(Harris & Bringhurst 2015: 12)*

The stigma of blackness was powerfully present in the texts of the LDS and its practices. Most visible, perhaps, was the exclusion of African American men from the priesthood of the Church. To offer some explanation, the LDS priesthood is

not a specific ecclesiastical office reserved for specialists in the clergy, as it is in the Catholic tradition. For the LDS, priesthood refers to both rights and responsibilities of male members of the Church. More specifically, as the LDS currently describes the institution, "Our Heavenly Father delegates His priesthood power to worthy male members of the Church," which "enables them to act in God's name for the salvation of the human family" and "Through it, they can be authorized to preach the gospel, administer the ordinances of salvation, and govern God's kingdom on earth" (Chapter 13: The Priesthood). This office is still limited to male members in good standing with the Church, but it also excluded black men for a time.

As Newell G. Bringhurst and Darron T. Smith noted in their introduction to *Black and Mormon* (2004), what was described as the long-awaited and expected lifting of the restriction on African American men in the priesthood finally arrived in 1978 with a revelation to the LDS leadership. In June of that year, God declared, "all worthy male members of the Church may be ordained to the priesthood without regard for race or color" (Official Declaration 2; Bringhurst & Smith 2004: 1). Bringhurst and Smith also noted, however, that the leadership was "curiously low-keyed in their reaction to the revelation" (2004: 3). They concluded that the "relative silence" concerning the revelation "allowed the church to move forward vigorously in accepting blacks in full fellowship without having to confront the unpleasant, negative historical and theological questions in justifying the now-defunct practice" (2004: 3). The LDS's racist past nevertheless continued to be a problem, in part because of the Church's apparent lack of clarity concerning their position on interracial marriage even when they did clarify that women would not be included in the priesthood. According to Bringhurst and Smith, the official position on interracial marriage was "confusing, contradictory, and ambiguous," while the position on women in the priesthood was an emphatic no (2004: 5).

Complications concerning the Church's position on race and interracial marriage also resulted from a statement from the Prophet two years earlier. In 1976, LDS President, Spencer W. Kimball stated the LDS's position against interracial marriage in a speech at Brigham Young University. He said:

> We are grateful that this one survey reveals that about 90 percent of the temple marriages hold fast. Because of this, we recommend that people marry those who are of the same racial background generally, and of somewhat the same economic and social and educational background (some of those are not an absolute necessity, but preferred), and above all, the same religious background, without question. In spite of the most favorable matings [*sic*], the evil one still takes a monumental toll and is the cause for many broken homes and frustrated lives.

It seemed then, and as we will see in a moment, still appears to some LDS members that there was a definitive Church position on interracial "matings." However, not all Mormons were happy to accept this position after the inclusion of African American men in the priesthood in 1978. This ambiguity on interracial marriage contributed to the confusion concerning the LDS Church's position on its history of anti-blackness.

This troubled history continued to be of significance for the LDS into the twenty-first century. Sociologist Armand L. Mauss wrote in his contribution to *Black and Mormon* titled "Casting off the 'Curse of Cain': The Extent and Limits of Progress Since 1978," the LDS is now in the process of addressing the relative silence concerning the Church's racist past. He argues, "We cannot be sure how much the lingering racial myths in the Mormon religious heritage affect either the missionary work or the congregational relationships between blacks and whites" (p.105). However, racial attitudes concerning interracial marriage seem to be very much at issue in the twenty-first century for some Mormons. A post from January 2018 on *Mormon Chronicle* titled "Interracial Marriage Discouraged by Church Leaders Today," for example, cited President Kimball's statement against interracial marriage from 1976 and added references to interracial marriage in the *CES Eternal Marriage Student Manual* and the *Aaronic Priesthood Manual 3*. The author of the post states, "The world seeks to bring us pitfalls by making us fear to tell the truth. Here we share inspired warnings and encouragement from latter-day prophets re a lesser-known principle in preserving marriages." In 2007, the LDS subsidiary *Deseret News* ran an article focusing on the growing acceptance of "mixed marriages" among those in the LDS, however, it is clear that there are some for whom the racial mythologies of the Church's past still held sway (Bulkeley 2007).

Mormons of color have also commented on the persistence of racist attitudes within the LDS Church. Janan Graham-Russell, a Ph.D. candidate at Harvard focusing on womanist theology, Afro-Atlantic religion, and contemporary Mormonism, wrote in *The Atlantic* in 2016 that the LDS indeed has "a complicated relationship with its black members," and that it had tried to evade these issues in the past. "In a 1996 interview with *60 Minutes*," she writes, "then-Church president Gordon B. Hinckley downplayed the comments by Brigham Young and the racial history of the LDS Church," and that he later "renounced racism in a speech given in 2006." However, she goes on to state that "the attitudes of white members, who make up the majority of the Church in the U.S., have not necessarily changed." The intransigence of racist attitudes among white members of the LDS Church is a repeated point of concern in the scholarship on LDS history, especially concerning the Church's origins. Moreover, Prentiss argues the racial myths in Mormonism provided LDS members with an "interpretative key" for understanding the origins of Native Americans, for understanding the significance of their relatively darker skin, but also established this difference as a reflection of a "hierarchy of pigmentation" (Prentiss, 2003: 127–8). He goes on to argue that these myths helped to establish and enforce social order but also helped shape attitudes toward Native Americans by Mormon missionaries and white Mormons' attitudes toward people of African descent (pp.128–9). In other words, myths about color, especially concerning blessed state of whiteness and the cursed nature of blackness, shaped LDS sensibilities from the very beginning of the tradition. This offers a particular challenge to people of color in the Church. Mauss argues, "Many black members [of the LDS], however, reading recurring passages from that very legacy in recently reprinted church books, will find it difficult to see themselves

and their identities in those passages and correspondingly difficult to remain identified with the church." He then concludes that until the "curse of Cain" is "completely cast off" it will continue to "be a burden for the church itself, and its mission, as well as for its black members as individuals" (Mauss 2004: 108).

The LDS was presented another opportunity to address its racialized past in a public way in 2012 when a religion professor at Brigham Young University made statements concerning the Church's position on race in an interview with Jason Horowitz in *The Washington Post* published in February 2012. Professor Randy Bott attempted to describe the LDS's past positions on race. Horowitz quotes Bott concerning the past restrictions for Black men in the priesthood, "God has always been discriminatory" concerning the authority of the priesthood. Horowitz went on to characterize Bott's position; "Bott compares blacks with a young child prematurely asking for the keys to her father's car," he writes, "and explains that similarly until 1978, the Lord determined that blacks were not yet ready for the priesthood." Bott's view was that such restrictions were not discriminatory, in part, because black men denied the priesthood would be spared anguish in the afterlife because those who abused the powers of the priesthood suffer severe punishment. In the interview, Bott stated, "You couldn't fall off the top of the ladder, because you weren't on the top of the ladder. So, in reality the blacks not having the priesthood was the greatest blessing God could give them."

The majority of the article was about Mitt Romney's bid for the U.S. Presidency in light of the Church's past teachings on race, but Bott's comments inspired the most vocal response from the LDS community. The Church released an official declaration on his claims in the article, stating, "The positions attributed to BYU professor Randy Bott in a recent *Washington Post* article absolutely do not represent the teachings and doctrines of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints." "BYU faculty members do not speak for the Church," it went on to say. The statement also explained that Church officials were not given a chance to respond to Bott's claims, but went on to state unequivocally, "The Church's position is clear—we believe all people are God's children and are equal in His eyes and in the Church. We do not tolerate racism in any form." The statement goes on to explain, "For a time in the Church there was a restriction on the priesthood for male members of African descent," and that "It is not known precisely why, how, or when this restriction began in the Church but what is clear is that it ended decades ago." The LDS statement claims here that the historical entrenchment of racist teachings in the Church was not a result of its doctrinal position, but rather describes it as "some" members having "attempted to explain the reason for this [priesthood] restriction." Concerning Bott's exposition of the history of race in the LDS Church, the official word from LDS leadership was that "these attempts should be viewed as speculation and opinion, not doctrine." Disavowing any past and current claims concerning the racist positions of the LDS were doctrine, the statement ends, "We condemn racism, including any and all past racism by individuals both inside and outside the Church."

In an article from 29 February 2012, *Deseret News* reporter Joseph Walker described the statement from the Church as "forceful," and states that Bott claimed he was

misquoted in the *Washington Post* article, and that he only gave the interview because he thought the church had permitted the reporter to conduct it. Furthermore, second-hand information given to Walker seemed to imply that Bott simply attempted to explain his understanding of what LDS scriptures taught. Walker quotes one student of Bott's who said, "He said he was misquoted… He said he just shared the scriptures with the reporter and told them that the church hasn't given an official reason for the priesthood ban." Fellow BYU professor of religion, Daniel C. Peterson stated, "I feel sorry for [Bott]… I'm confident, though I don't know him, that he's a good, well-intentioned man." However, as Walker notes, Peterson wrote on his blog that speculations over the denial of the priesthood were harmful, and that God's denial of the priesthood to Black people, "We just don't know. And if we ever learn the reason, that knowledge will come through the Lord's chosen prophets and apostles, not through BYU professors like me" (Walker 2012).

An article in *The Daily Universe*, BYU's campus news website, stated that they had received numerous letters concerning Bott's comments. The article also featured the comments of Professor Margaret Young of the BYU English Department and co-producer of a documentary titled *Nobody Knows: The Untold Story of Black Mormons*. She stated that Bott's views "did not represent Church doctrine in any way, they were extremely patronizing." Young went on to explain, "In order to have that kind of position, you have to view blacks as a group according to stereotypes that are deeply offensive to our sensibilities now" (Bennion 2012). Harris and Bringhurst shed light on some nuance in the reactions that followed the *Washington Post* interview. They note some LDS members had come to regard any "assertion linking skin color with moral purity [as] a relic of the past," yet the Church still published books that perpetuated "the divine curse doctrine" (2015: 137). They go on to explain that some religion faculty at BYU were "dismayed" at the reaction to Bott's claims, that they had also taught something close to what he claimed in the article without understanding that the position of the church had changed. Professor Bott retired after the end of the spring term in 2012. Harris and Bringhurst state, "On this particular doctrine, [Bott] was behind the curve," and erred in that he "did not understand that the church's position had changed" (2015: 138). Mormonism scholar Lester E. Bush Jr. wrote concerning these events in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, "As appalling as this was to read, especially amidst the strides being made by the Church in Africa and elsewhere, I felt a little bad for Professor Bott." Bush wrote further of Bott's claims, "He really had only presented the authoritative views of past Church leaders, views which had yet to be authoritatively disavowed" (2018: 12). It seemed that Bott had embarrassed the Church by stating aloud teachings that the LDS leadership wanted to distance itself from in the public eye. Harris and Bringhurst deduced that the event "was troubling not only for its outdated theological assertion, but because it threatened to undermine the goodwill the church had enjoyed in recent years working with people of color in community outreach programs" (2015: 138).

In part because of this confusion resulting from the Bott incident, the LDS released a statement in 2013 on "Race and the Priesthood," co-authored by Professor Reeve (Harris & Bringhurst 2015: 142). The document set out to explain the Church's

definitive position on the issue. The document stated, "Today, the Church disavows the theories advanced in the past that black skin is a sign of divine disfavor or curse, or that it reflects unrighteous actions in a premortal life; that mixed-race marriages are a sin; or that blacks or people of any other race or ethnicity are inferior in any way to anyone else. Church leaders today unequivocally condemn all racism, past and present, in any form." It also offered an endnote referencing LDS President Gordon Hinckley's 2006 address "The Need for Greater Kindness," which has become one of the touchstone statements for the LDS Church addressing racism. In this address, Hinckley recalls the revelation given to President Kimball in 1978 to open up the priesthood and states concerning the persistence of "racial strife" among LDS members, "I cannot understand how it can be." He further states concerning the lifting of the ban, "There was no doubt in my mind or in the minds of my associates that what was revealed was the mind and the will of the Lord." He goes on to say, "I remind you that no man who makes disparaging remarks concerning those of another race can consider himself a true disciple of Christ. Nor can he consider himself to be in harmony with the teachings of the Church of Christ… Let us all recognize that each of us is a son or daughter of our Father in Heaven, who loves all of His children." Referencing Hinckley's 2006 address which referenced the 1978 pronouncement on priesthood, the 2013 statement was presented, in part, to quell the 2012 controversy stirred by Bott's public comments about racism in the Church. This, in a sense, is the definitive statement by the LDS Church on race before the emergence of the Alt-Right that only occurred after a decades-long struggle for clarity.

A further complication remained in that Mormons believe that LDS leaders speak directly to God and speak according to His word to them. LDS members understood that God's revelation of his plan to Church leaders was continuous, yet these new statements on race seemed to contradict previous prophets. The 2013 statement seemed to say that previous leaders were wrong on race, and still offered little clarity concerning the teachings concerning the curse of Cain (Stack 2013; Harris & Bringhurst 2015: 142). Bush wrote, "Although recent Church statements continue to claim that the original reason for the priesthood ban is not known, I wonder if anyone has asked Brigham Young." Bush continued, "He, after all, was the one who introduced it. If he ever is asked, he will be quite clear—as he repeatedly was during his presidency. It was because African Blacks were descendants of Cain" (2018: 15). For Bush, however, this historical connection with racism, including past positions of Church prophets, combined with the persistence of racialized attitudes within the Church to paint a dire picture of race relations in the present. In a footnote to his article, Bush references anecdotal reports by Black members of the LDS that they were subjected to racist comments and a survey from 2014 that stated that only about 20 percent of LDS members in the United States were aware of the 2013 statement on race and the priesthood. He concludes that Brigham Young and others were influenced by "nineteenth-century beliefs about Cain," and other popular beliefs about racial purity, but that the LDS Church does indeed need to denounce these teachings in spite of the belief concerning prophets of the Church to avoid the perception that such ideas were "of divine origin" (p.24). Moreover, Bush says that it is important to

confront this issue to avoid providing a situation where "[t]hose members who seek some theological justification for their personal bias still can tell themselves that God is on their side" (p.25).

This last statement brings us to the point I want to make here about the Church's response to the emergence of the Alt-Right. Its official denunciation of white supremacy in 2017, provoked by Stewart's highly visible participation in the Alt-Right, was part of a continuing effort to address its own troubled racial past. The broader context of the claim that LDS teaching is that "all men are alike unto God" to refute the Alt-Right is one in which the LDS Church, very much like the Southern Baptist Convention, was already struggling to clarify its more newly found anti-racism. Whatever their statements regarding the equality of people before God, however, all people were not always equal before the Church and its institutions. We should understand that as with Southern Baptists, Mormon responses to the Alt-Right are best understood in the broader context of the Church's efforts to overcome its racial past and to make publicly unambiguous their convictions on racial equality in the twenty-first century.

## "Traditional," "conservative," or "Alt-Right"

As important as it is to understand LDS responses to the Alt-Right in the context of ongoing debates about racism in the Church, the Mormons' reactions to the Alt-Right went beyond that particular issue. At the same moment that LDS leadership was responding to Stewart's racialist activism and the displays of racist violence at Charlottesville, another fight was brewing in the Church over the possibility of an Alt-Right Mormon faction operating online. In a story on the local ABC affiliate in Salt Lake City titled "'Deseret Nation': Alt-right Mormon militants or Twitter truth defenders?," culture and religion correspondent Andrew Reeser describes the debate about #DezNat, which stands for "Deseret Nation," a reference to the State of Deseret proposed in 1849 as the political body of the LDS in Utah (Crawley 1989; Reeser 2019). The new hashtag reflected much about what had previously become familiar in the Alt-Right's Internet-based activism. The acerbic attempts at comedy, usually aimed at theologically liberal and politically progressive targets, were very much in line with the "shitposting" and memeing culture of the Alt-Right, which added to the concern that this hashtag was a manifestation of the Alt-Right.

One of the memes shared in the report was posted on Twitter by "Latter-Day Militant" and featured a square-jawed white man in a suit and said in text, "Hey kid. Wanna blood atone some apostates?" (Reeser 2019). This particular meme made explicit reference to the controversial idea that the LDS teaches that when someone commits certain crimes, like murder, for example, they should be killed to atone for that particular sin with their blood. LDS leadership has denied the idea that the practice called "blood atonement" was ever an official doctrine. In 2010 the Church released a statement in *Deseret News* to clarify its position on this issue. It reads, "In the mid-19th century, when rhetorical, emotional oratory was common, some church members and leaders used strong language that included

notions of people making restitution for their sins by giving up their own lives," but goes on to say that "so-called 'blood atonement,' by which individuals would be required to shed their own blood to pay for their sins, is not a doctrine of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints." No doubt such a reference in the meme also brought to mind for some the case from the 1980s when it was revealed that several former members of a break-away group of Latter-day Saints were targeted for death by members of the sect in which "blood atonement" was assumed to be the motive (Tolley 1989).

However, Reeser notes that some respondents shared with him that #DezNat did not represent anything as radical as the murder of alleged apostates. One of the main refutations that Resser notes concerning the claim that #DezNat is Alt-Right came from a man named Tanner Guzy. Guzy claimed on another website, "Deznat is not a movement, it is not political, racial, national, or sexual… We do not agitate for change within the church but anxiously seek to submit our wills to that of the Lord—as revealed through His proper channels and authorities." Guzy, who runs an online company called Masculine Style, and who gives men's fashion advice on YouTube and other Internet sites and wrote a book a self-published book titled *The Appearance of Power: How Masculinity is Expressed Through Aesthetics* (2017), claimed Deznat simply stood for the word of the LDS prophets. More specifically, he said of Deznat, "We do not worship at the altars of money, physical pleasure, diversity, or equality and recognize that — while these are admirable pursuits — if they replace the will of God, they quickly become false idols that lead to misery and unhappiness." He goes on to say, "We believe in and support The Family: A Proclamation to the World and recognize the family as the foundation of both earthly and celestial civilization." In closing, Guzy says of those affiliated with the hashtag, "we follow the prophet."

Guzy's essay is relatively short, but he offers a link to a more comprehensive article on the meaning and purpose of #DezNat on a website called Teancum's Javelin. The site describes itself as "the website for unapologetic Latter-day Saints where we share testimony and perspective on the simple truths of the Gospel of Jesus Christ" (Turner n.d.).[1] The article is titled "The Official #DezNat User Guide," and was written under the pseudonym J. P. (John Paul) Bellum, which seems to be a play on the Latin term "jus post bellum," or "justice after war." Bellum's bio attached to the article describes him as "the founder of the #DezNat hashtag and is a faithful member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints." The article itself claims that the hashtag was established to refute the variety of Internet sites and Twitter hashtags concerning the Latter-day Saint faith that seemed to him to be very critical of LDS doctrines and of "the Brethren" that lead the LDS. Bellum exclaims that he, like others, was "faced with a choice: you either adjust your testimony to fit in with the great and spacious criticism of the church online or you give up on that part of social media forever as lost to the Enemy." He says that he was at that "crossroads" when he created the new hashtag. "Something had to be done or I had to leave Twitter," Bellum stated, so he looked to the history of the establishment of Deseret and the eventual statehood of Utah as inspiration. "It was to be a safe haven for members of the church and fellow believers in the Restored Gospel of Jesus Christ," he says of the Mormon community. "All were welcome as long as they recognized God's

authority and were willing to work together to build the Kingdom of God. This was my inspiration to start a new hashtag that would be welcoming to all who were willing to build the kingdom and defend the church and its leaders online." For Bellum, "A major part of #DezNat is being unapologetic about supporting the church and following the prophets," which he argues, "means supporting and sustaining even past prophets who may not be seen as politically correct looking through our modern lenses, most notably applying to Brigham Young." On this point, Bellum wrote a post shortly after this one on the same site in which he defended Brigham Young, stating that despite charges of racism, misogyny, and homophobia, "He was the right man at the right time doing the right job the Lord needed him to do" (2018a).

Concerning the methods of #DezNat online, Bellum writes, "#DezNat would stand firm on supporting him and all of Joseph Smith's successors in this dispensation" (2018b). In particular, Bellum references what he describes as a "particularly famous speech" in which Brigham Young is said to have brandished "a large Bowie knife and placing it on the pulpit, theatrically threatening all apostates who were harassing the church and its members to leave the territory or be driven out." While he notes that for others, this story presents Young as a brutal theocrat, for this hashtag and its users it came to be used "in memes and jokes to show how absurd the church's detractors were and how unafraid we were to embrace our history, even the ugly parts." In this way, he argues, "The Bowie knife became a symbol of #DezNat," and exclaimed, "Those harassing the church and its members on Twitter would not be met with weakness and apologies." He argues concerning the use of memes, they "have become a common language on a platform where words are limited, so this has been a tactic employed to quickly and boldly state our positions." However, very much in the way of Internet trolling culture that the Alt-Right was so fond of, he offers the caveat concerning the vagueness of the meanings of memes, stating that "not all memes are funny and not all memes are to be taken seriously."

The main targets of the hashtag are, Bellum explains, "those who have self-identified as 'Progressive Mormons' (*ProgMo* for Twitter utility)" (2019b). He explains that these are Mormons who, in his view, "seem to have placed a greater emphasis on changing the church to fit their political ideology rather than framing their politics according to their religious beliefs." Here Bellum specifically references a document from 1995 that Guzy also referenced titled *The Family: A Proclamation to the World*, in which then-President Hinkley stated, "The family is ordained of God. Marriage between man and woman is essential to His eternal plan. Children are entitled to birth within the bonds of matrimony, and to be reared by a father and a mother who honor marital vows with complete fidelity." For Bellum, progressive Mormons are the main antagonists. He argues,

> *ProgMos* preach that the Church is racist, sexist, and homophobic and should "get on the right side of history." *ProgMos* want the worthiness standards for temple attendance relaxed and desire the doctrine be shifted to allow for abortion. They often claim to have received revelation contrary to what the church currently teaches in order to justify their doctrinal heresies.

#DezNat, according to Bellum, then, is not Alt-Right. In his view and that of those associated with the hashtag, it is a virtual community created by and for Mormons who adhere to the doctrines of the LDS, particularly those concerning gender and sexuality in the context of the Church's position on the family.

Still, there seemed to be some incongruity with the caustic attempts at humor in the deployment of the hashtag that perhaps was ill-fitting for devout Mormons. Concerning the controversy over troubling language like that of references to blood atonement, Bellum argues, "#DezNat may not be to everyone's taste. Those who use the hashtag can be combative, rude, crass, aggressive, even mean." However, he states, "one thing you will never have to worry about with #DezNat is that when the prophet speaks, we listen, and when he directs, we obey." Moreover, regarding their being labeled Alt-Right, he argues, "#DezNat is not a movement, it is not political (especially not alt-right), racial, national, or sexual." Quite directly he presents #DezNat as "simply a hashtag used by members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints who are unapologetic about their belief in the restored Gospel, Christ as our Savior, Joseph Smith as the prophet of the Restoration, and Russell M Nelson [the 17th and current president of the LDS] as God's current prophet, seer, and revelator on the earth today."

Reeser states in his report on #DezNat that the LDS Church declined to comment on the hashtag or the controversy it sparked; however, an article from 24 June 2020 in *The Daily Universe* described how "social media has become a battleground" between Mormons of differing opinions. This new Twitter battle was being fought over another hashtag called #Provo. Named after Provo, the name of the city in Utah where Brigham Young University was established, the hashtag has been used to debate the very issues Bellum noted in his use of #DezNat, and the hashtag itself has been used in the online campus feud. "On one side, a group who identifies as Deseret Nation, or #DezNat for short, [who] tweet in support of conservative religious beliefs, often citing early apostles and prophets," the article states, while "[t]he other side pushes for changes in the Church and sides frequently with LGBT members of the Church" (Merkley 2020). Much of the article discusses the effects of social media discourse on the LDS Church and individuals, but it also references near its conclusion disagreements in the Church about social issues. Political scientist David Campbell states in the article, "We know there's been a much greater reckoning of that within the Church in the last few years, and much of that actually has been driven by commentary made online that in turn has had an influence on people that might have the ear of the general authorities." The article also references the disagreements between Ezra Taft Benson, who criticized the civil rights movement, and Hugh B. Brown in the 1960s over civil rights, as well other disagreements over prohibition in the Twenties. The point seems of this seems to be to say that such disagreements are to be expected among a diverse group of engaged people like Mormons. However, it seems to me that even in this context of debates on social media, LDS Church's troubling racial past contributes to how Mormons discuss other social debates in the Church.

The 24 June article in *The Daily Universe*, in my view, almost minimized how significant the disagreements were, and in particular the effects that the hashtags

were having on some Mormons. On social media and various Internet sites, the debate about #DezNat and the possibility of a dangerous Mormon Alt-Right continued, sometimes with fear for one's safety. In Reeser's article, a former Mormon that goes by Brother Mike on Twitter said of some users of #DezNat that they were "alternate right extremists." Brother Mike spoke to Reeser about worries that LGBTQ members of the church had that the inflammatory language of the group, often targeting homosexuals, could lead to violence. This alarm was echoed in a post on Queer Mormon Confessions' Twitter account, which stated, "I am absolutely TERRIFIED of #deznat [*sic*] I feel like it's only one letdown away from being the one who ends up killing someone like me."

The controversy continued in February of 2020, when Brigham Young University announced online that it had updated the university's honor code, which made some revisions to the language that dealt with homosexuality. The new code did state that all students, faculty, and staff should "[l]ive a chaste and virtuous life, including abstaining from any sexual relations outside a marriage between a man and a woman," but had removed the provision referring to "homosexual behavior." The article quotes the new language that reads, "God's commandments forbid all unchaste behavior, either same-sex or heterosexual." Some students celebrated this new wording as a sign of progressive changes for the campus, as it seemed that the university was softening its stance against homosexuality, yet others were puzzled about the meaning of this omission in the new code (Bigelow 2020; Tanner 2020c). While many observers speculated as to the significance of the change, BYU quickly released a tweet on the same day the news broke about the omission. It read, "With the recently released general handbook of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Church Educational System has updated the CES Honor Code to be in alignment with the doctrine and policies of the Church," which do condemn homosexuality.

Confusion concerning the university's position on homosexuality notwithstanding, one faculty member received a great deal of attention when a video of his class where he celebrated what he saw as a positive move toward tolerance at the university made it to the larger public. Professor Jim Brau's video has since been removed from YouTube, but an article in *The Salt Lake Tribune* contained some language from his video and discussion of the controversy that followed. Brau reportedly said in the video, "I do realize for some of us, including me, who have been praying for this moment for years, today is a massive watershed… For others of you, this is a huge struggle and I understand that. … But if you see same-gender couples walking around campus, being respectful, acting like straight couples, that's really going to get you ready for the real world" (Tanner 2020b). The responses Brau received to his statement were varied, but some were extremely threatening, including, according to another article in *The Salt Lake Tribune*, death threats against Brau and his family. According to this article, Brau wrote a letter to his students explaining that he would no longer broadcast his class sessions as he did previously since he had been targeted by "alt-right online groups" (Tanner 2020c). It is worth noting as well that on 4 March, LDS leadership released a letter that was sent through the BYU Twitter account that stated, "the moral standards of the

Church did not change with the recent release of the General Handbook or the updated Honor Code." This statement affirmed once again its position that marriage is a sacred institution ordained by God, and is a bond between man and woman as outlined in *The Family Proclamation*. This is the document, of course, that Guzy referred to, and was referred to by John Paul Bellum in a tweet from 2 March that stated, "Just a reminder, just reading Church doctrine out loud (#FamProc) will get you in trouble now with the honor code if someone deems it homophobic. How is that possible at #BYU? #DezNat."

The emergence of the Alt-Right, not so much as a movement but as a phenomenon of social and political discourse, challenged the Latter-day Saints on more issues than race. As is the case with many socially and theologically conservative traditions, LGBTQ+ issues in the LDS tradition are particularly contested in the twenty-first century. For the LDS Church, however, the particular theological importance of the heteronormative family structure makes establishing common ground between proponents and opponents for LGBTQ+ inclusion and acceptance extremely difficult. However, more to our point here is that much of this debate in years after 2016 has been colored by references to the Alt-Right, particularly among the social media active Mormon youth. Whether we agree that #DezNat represents an actual expression of the Alt-Right or not, the Alt-Right brand is nevertheless significant for how Mormons debated important social issues. I hasten to add, however, that this is true for other traditions as well. At the same time Latter-day Saints discussed the existence of a "Mormon Alt-Right," especially relating to the debates about LGBTQ+ acceptance and inclusion in the LDS Church, American Catholics were also debating the meaning of the term. In these contests, the "Alt-Right" came up frequently in the years after 2016 as they argued about what should constitute the Catholic Church's position on sexuality. The Alt-Right described in the first two chapters of this book was not necessarily the focus of these discussions. For Mormons and Catholics participating in these debates, what was at stake for those referring to their opponents as "Alt-Right" or the accused refuting that claim was the very meaning of their traditions in the twenty-first century.

## The Church Militant, homosexuality, and the "Catholic Alt-Right"

When speculation about a Catholic faction of the Alt-Right emerged after the 2016 election, the term was often used as a new way of signifying far-right positions on immigration and other such issues. This was certainly the case in a discussion titled "How Catholics Should Respond to the Rise of the Alt-Right," hosted by the Institute for Policy Research & Catholic Studies at The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., and *Millennial*, a Catholic website that states that its main aim is "to highlight the voices of a wide range of young Catholics." Featured speakers included Jordan Denari Duffner, a scholar of Muslim-Christian relations, interreligious dialogue, and Islamophobia; Julia G. Young, a historian of migration, Mexico and Latin America, and Catholicism in the Americas; and Chris Hale, co-founder of *Millennial* and a senior fellow at Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good. The discussions in

the symposium highlighted the disturbing reality that many positions that are associated with the Alt-Right—specifically, Islamophobia, misogyny, and nativism—were shared by some Catholics. However, there was no specific definition of what the Alt-Right truly was apart from occasional references to Steve Bannon and the influence of *Breitbart* in popularizing Alt-Right ideas. In his keynote speech for the symposium, Michael Sean Winters, a Catholic writer and contributor to *National Catholic Reporter*, referred to Rosie Gray's article in *Buzzfeed*, which he quotes as stating that Richard Spencer said to her that the powerful presence of the Alt-Right had something to do with Trump. Winters went on to explain a little more about what he thought was at the core of the Alt-Right. For him, the xenophobia and racism are significant, but more to his point, its core the Alt-Right was anti-Enlightenment in its ideology and anti-liberal in its politics.

This panel saw the Alt-Right as a particular expression of racism, illiberalism, and authoritarianism, tied to figures like Steve Bannon and Richard Spencer, and encouraged by Trump's presidency. These were views shared by much of the American public at the time, and are not altogether incorrect. The broader debate among many American Catholics about a possible Catholic Alt-Right, however, turned on another issue. On 16 October 2017, a post to *Christian Forums* posed a question presented by the article linked in the post titled "What's an 'Alt-Right' Catholic?" In the first comment to the post, one person stated, "I honestly couldn't tell you what alt-right is." They go on to say that some would associate an Alt-Right Catholic with "white supremacists," but that they "tend to believe they're just on the far end of the spectrum (obviously) with a wish to return to conservative times of the past." The commenter further stated that the Alt-Right is associated with misogyny, Islamophobia, and anti-Semitism, but that answers would vary. They conclude, "Sorry for the long post that amounts to I have no idea, but I'm interested myself, especially with respect to what alt-right Catholics would be." Others, however, seemed less uncertain and repeated a theme that appeared frequently in the thread. The term "Alt-Right" was a term loosely applied to those who opposed progressive or liberal perspectives concerning social policies in the church or more generally. One person responded, "I don't what an alt right anything is. As far as I can tell it's a stupid made up term that is supposed to be derogatory for anyone who is conservative." Another stated, "The box people were being stuffed in before used to be neo-con. Now it is alt-right… Calling people alt.right [*sic*] is an ad hominem argument. Anyone who does that is not really interested in ideas anyway." In the final response in the thread, someone commenting under the name "Sword of the Lord" stated that the term was, "A stupid name for people who have the audacity to be real Catholics." Interestingly, this is almost precisely what J. P. Bellum said on 12 August 2020, when he tweeted that the term "Alt-right" had "become so expansive in describing anyone right of center as to become totally mundane," calling it "a lazy tool of the left that simultaneously dismisses any challenge to their agenda and signals to their own tribe their disdain for ANY idealogical [*sic*] intercourse."

This discussion of the Catholic Alt-Right on Christian Forums resulted from a user named "Mitchie" posting a 5 October 2017 article from a conservative Catholic website, *Creative Minority Report*. It was written by Patrick Archbold, co-

founder of *Creative Minority Report*, a columnist for a Catholic news site *The Remnant*, and a former columnist at the *National Catholic Register*. He wrote the article when a report surfaced that Father James Martin, an advocate for a more accepting stance toward LGBTQ+ people in the Church, referred to "Catholics who oppose what he wrote in his latest book," as Archbold put it, as "alt-right Catholics." The book to which he referred is *Building a Bridge: How the Catholic Church and the LGBT Community Can Enter into a Relationship of Respect, Compassion, and Sensitivity* (2017a). Driven by the Pulse nightclub shooting in Orlando, Florida in summer 2016, and the comparative silence from Catholic leadership offering condolences to the LGBTQ+ community targeted in that shooting, Fr. Martin states that he wanted to bridge what he perceived to be a divide between the institutions of the church and the LGBTQ+ community. In the revised edition from 2018, he notes the controversy that his book generated and writes that the book's intention was not "a treatise on moral theology, nor is it a reflection on the sexual morality of LGBT people." "This is a book," he writes, "primarily about dialogue and prayer" (pp.12–13). While Catholics like Archbold objected to Fr. Martin's book, it was Fr. Martin's statements beyond the book itself that drew Archbold's ire.

In an op-ed in *Washington Post* from September 2017 titled, "I Called for Christians to Love Gay People. Now the Catholic Alt-Right is Taking Revenge," Father Martin spoke of the backlash he received from "the far-right." In particular, he referenced his opponents' efforts to force cancellations of his speaking engagements and how websites like *Church Militant* attempted to convince their readers that he was, in fact, a heretic. Fr. Martin wrote, "in the past few weeks, three lectures I was invited to have been canceled, and I have been targeted by some far-right groups whose actions betray a level of homophobia that is hard to fathom." He went on to say, "These groups, a kind of Catholic alt-right, are increasingly attempting to substitute themselves for legitimate Church authority by passing judgments on which Catholics are orthodox and which are not." He went on to describe that the last two venues that canceled, "the organizers admitted that they were responding to people who had been persuaded by online campaigns of far-right sites designed to lead people to view [him] as a heretic." He went on, "even though I am what Catholics call a 'priest in good standing' and the book had been vetted and endorsed by legitimate Church authorities," these efforts seemed to have been successful in shutting down several engagements.

At stake in this contest between Fr. Martin and his detractors so far was not only the appropriateness of his effort to be more welcoming to LGBTQ+ people in the Church, but also the question of who gets to decide that issue. Who has the right to proclaim a position to which Catholics adhere, clergy in good standing with the Church or laypeople on social media? In an article on a website called *Think Progress* titled "'Alt-Right Catholics' are Getting Faith Leaders Disinvited from Speaking at Colleges," Jack Jenkins writes that the groups that Fr. Martin characterizes as "far-right… insist they are trying to protect orthodoxy," though, he notes, "they appear to operate well outside established Church hierarchy" (Jenkins 2017). In this article, too, Jenkins mentions that the organization most often associated with what has come to be called the "Catholic Alt-Right" is Church

Militant, which is led by a self-described ex-gay Catholic named Michael Voris. As the article mentions, Voris reacted strongly to Fr. Martin's position, and Church Militant was one of the organizations that were particularly vocal in opposition to his invitation to speak at the engagements where Fr. Martin was disinvited. Responding to Father Martin's responses to his being disinvited from speaking events, Voris called him a "heresy preaching, pro-sodomy priest" and a "homosexualist priest" on his YouTube show, *The Vortex*. These ad hominem attacks on Father Martin were paired with attacks on those whom Voris called the "church establishment," accusing them of a lack of "fidelity to the Church's teaching" in their being "backers of the gay agenda." Jenkins quotes Voris, who states concerning the accusation that he was "bucking" ecclesiastical authority with his audacious attacks on clergy. "Archbishops are not the Church. Nor are cardinals… They are ordained and consecrated to safeguard the teaching passed onto them, not re-invent or re-interpret it. It does not belong to them. Even Jesus had Judas." He went on, "The standard of measure is being faithful to orthodox teaching, not siding with one bishop or another."

Steve Bannon is likely the highest-profile symbol for the "Catholic Alt-Right," and it is true that in January of 2018, a Catholic school teacher was fired because he had ties to Richard Spencer's National Policy Institute (ABC13 Staff 2018). However, Church Militant and other anti-LGBTQ+ Catholic websites have been the focus of debate about the "Catholic Alt-Right." In Jenkins' article, for example, Church Militant receives most of the attention. In an article titled "How the Catholic 'Alt-Right' aims to Purge LGBTQ Members from the Church," Senior writer at NBC News Corky Siemaszko associates Church Militant, LifeSite News, and the Lepanto Institute with this phenomenon, and states that such sites were "ratcheting up the rhetoric while replacing polite and prayerful discourse with personal attacks on supporters of gay Catholics." He goes on to quote Fordham University theologian Jason Steidl, who says of these groups, "I call them the 'Catholic alt-right'," and goes on to say, "We haven't seen anything like this before. I think they are part of a bigger cultural movement. These people have hitched their wagons to Trump's presidency, to his tactics" (In Siemaszko 2018). Referencing the reactions that Fr. Martin received for his book *Building a Bridge*, Steidl said of these groups, "They use the same tactics as the political alt-right: lies, personal vilification and demonization of minority groups."

Michael Voris and Mike Hichborn of the Lepanto Institute, one of the groups referred to as part of the Catholic Alt-Right, however, rejected the "Alt-Right" label. Hichborn said that the institute "did not stand for anything beyond the absolute and immutable teachings of the Catholic Church" (Siemaszko 2018). For him, this stance did not make them, in his words, "alt-right" but rather "fully faithful." Voris said something quite similar on the website *Church Militant* concerning the use of the term "Alt-Right" to describe the organization. Referencing a story done on him and Church Militant in *The Atlantic*, he stated, "Church Militant has become an established entity now in the secular media. The moniker we've been tagged with is that of a right-wing, extremist, alt-right, Catholic media empire. We'd disagree with just about every adjective in that long title, except of course 'Catholic,' but hey, whatever."

As with the concern about the presence of a Mormon Alt-Right faction, when the discussion of a specific faction of Alt-Right Catholicism emerged within the context of debates about the way the Church should respond to LGBTQ+ people, what was revealed about how American Christians responded to the Alt-Right was, of course, complicated, but in many ways revealed that the concerns they were responding to were bigger than the Alt-Right itself. What was at stake for Mormons and Catholics was not simply how they might counter the Alt-Right and its possible influence on their churches, but more specifically what their traditions should mean for social issues, like acceptance of LGBTQ+ people, in the twenty-first century. And for Mormons and Catholics accused of being part of Alt-Right factions, the stakes were similar in that they perceived themselves not as extremists but defenders of traditional orthodoxy.

## Conclusion

Many of the debates discussed in this chapter continue on social media spaces as of late 2020. John Paul Bellum still tweets using the #DezNat hashtag, and Church Militant is still quite active. Though the Alt-Right brand has fallen out of favor with many of its former influencers, it still has resonance elsewhere. In the context of the years following the 2016 U.S. Presidential election and the events at the "Unite the Right" rally, American Christians debated not just the use of the term Alt-Right and the possible presence and influence of "extremists" in their institutions, but also the meaning of their traditions in a shifting political and social landscape. This has brought to the fore conversations about what their institutions will do on several of the most contentious issues, not just for Christians, but for all Americans. This, I argue, is the most significant aspect of the complicated relationship between Christianity and the Alt-Right; that has in the years following 2016 inflected the language of many American Christians as they struggled to find a fitting place for older doctrines in a society that no longer agrees with many of those teachings and to come to terms with their personal and institutional legacies of systemic bigotry and exclusion. In that sense, the importance of the Alt-Right has outlived the Alt-Right itself.

## Note

1 The site's name comes from the leader of the Nephites from the Book of Mormon, who is described in LDS tradition as a fighter for freedom against an ambitious and unjust despot named Amalickiah who conspired with their enemies, the Lamanites, to take control over the Nephites.

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# CONCLUSION

## After the hate, the pain

A few months before the 2020 U.S. Presidential election, Richard Spencer shocked almost everyone when he announced that he was not supporting President Trump again and supporting Biden and the Democrats across the board. On 23 August 2020, Spencer tweeted, "I plan to vote for Biden and a straight democratic ticket. It's not based on 'accelerationism' or anything like that; the liberals are clearly more competent people." The next day, he tweeted: "The MAGA/Alt-Right moment is over. I made mistakes; Trump is an obvious disaster; but mainly the paradigm contained flaws that we now are able to perceive. And it needs to end." He went on in the tweet to say, "So be patient. We'll have another day in the sun. We need to recover and return in a new form." His comments were taken in a variety of ways by those on Twitter. Some assumed he was trolling to either provoke a critical response aimed at Democrats or that he was simply playing on Twitter for attention. He was, however, as much as one can surmise, sincere in his rejection of Trump and the GOP, and, as ever, conservatives. He was also seemingly genuine about his conclusion that the brand he had helped to define was over. On 25 August, he tweeted once again on the topic. He wrote, "MAGA and the GOP are 'collectivist' now, in the sense that the party messages to 'normal white people,' with heavy Southern evangelical inflection. I simply recognize how ineffective, useless, and traitorous the GOP is." On 3 November, Spencer tweeted, "I voted straight Dem. In referenda, I also voted FOR the expansion of gun rights in the state and AGAINST the expansion of marijuana legalization. To hell with libertarian ideology. I'm a libertarian when I want to be," with a picture of ballot showing the empty circle next to the name of Libertarian presidential candidate Jo Jorgensen.

The Alt-Right moment is over; however, this does not mean that support from white nationalists for Trump has universally dissolved since 2016. VDare tweeted, referring to a book on Immigration by Jerry Krammer, Senior Research Fellow at the Center for Immigration Studies, "Politically Correct restrictionists [*sic*] like

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Kammer, who even in this book refers to Trump's 'ugly xenophobia,' opposed him every step of the way still haven't got the message of Trump's 2016 victory: American nationalism and implicit 'white identity'" (2020). President Trump's statements during the 2020 campaign seemed to echo these themes. In particular, in attempt to appeal to suburban voters, he raised a talking point that echoed the pernicious arguments from the era of red-lining and desegregation battles. During the campaign, the president tweeted, "I am happy to inform all of the people living their Suburban Lifestyle Dream that you will no longer be bothered or financially hurt by having low income housing built in your neighborhood." Trump also promoted the notion that he was going to secure the suburban dream at an event in West Texas stating, "People fight all of their lives to get into the suburbs and have a beautiful home." He continued, "There will be no more low-income housing forced into the suburbs," and that "It's been hell for suburbia" (in Karni, Haberman, & Ember 2020).

Though the Alt-Right is not the story of the 2020 election in the way it was in 2016, the issues it raised then have in the years following remained very much at stake. For American Christians, the need to confront racial injustice has taken on new urgency in the wake of the killing of George Floyd, as have renewed calls for justice concerning the killing of Breonna Taylor and the shooting of Jacob Blake by police in Wisconsin, which left him paralyzed. As if to punctuate these concerns, Reverend Marianne Budde, who so criticized Trump's unauthorized use of her church in the 1 June photo-op, stated concerning the prayer she gave at the 2020 Democratic National Convention that these issues had compelled her to speak. She said about her appearance at the convention, "It's not an endorsement, not a speech. All of us are feeling like this is an opportunity to really take some significant steps forward on racial justice and equity" (In Boorstein 2020).

Not all Christians were, however, unanimous in their rejection of Trump and his policies. Sarah Pulliam Bailey reported on 21 August 2020 that, as some white evangelicals have joined in the protest against police brutality, their continued support for Trump has caused significant strain. She drew attention to a case in point concerning a former rising African American star in the Southern Baptist Convention, John Onwuchekwa, whose church broke from the Convention that summer. To explain his views, Pastor Onwuchekwa wrote an essay titled "4 Reasons We Left the SBC." He explains he left the SBC because it was not going to be the "vehicle" by which he could reach the "Destination" he desired, namely, "the correction of the racial injustices and socioeconomic inequalities that plague our country." He lists the four reasons as, "misremembered history" concerning the Convention's past support for slavery and racist policies like segregation, that the SBC's efforts at addressing racial justice have "fallen flat." He goes on to his third point, what he calls "unhealthy partisanship." He gives several examples to clarify this point:

> Influential churches vocal about pulling funding from the SBC when Russell Moore spoke out against basic human decency issues regarding President Trump in 2016; Pence's invitation and subsequent address at the SBC in one of the most

> polarizing political cycles of my lifetime; Al Mohler, the President of the largest SBC Seminary and apparent incumbent President of the SBC, using his public platform at T4G to endorse President Trump and reaffirm his personal lifelong allegiance to the Republican Party… and the list goes on and on.

Onwuchekwa notes that while the SBC boasted about its political and cultural diversity, it nevertheless has hurt its image in appearing to support Trump and the Republican Party despite the injurious racial rhetoric from the 2016 campaign well into 2020. Anticipating a rebuttal, he writes, "The minorities among you believe it to be true."

In his final point, Onwuchekwa states, "While the Southern Baptist Convention is working to solve its unity problem, they fail to realize that this unity problem could be solved by deep diving into the problem of race in America." He argues the church talks a great deal about "racial reconciliation" but ignores "unity," and that when issues concerning justice are mentioned, "there are immediate accusations of being unduly influenced by critical race theory and cultural Marxism." He concludes with this statement regarding the SBC:

> I trust God that none of our labor was in vain, but I do not see the utility of our church made up predominantly of ethnic minorities remaining in the SBC. Because rather than being an agent of change, I fear our presence has largely been an advertisement for other churches of similar makeup saying "Come in… the water's fine." The sign I'd rather hold up is "Enter at Your Own Risk!"

Onwuchekwa's reasons for withdrawing from the Southern Baptist Convention are unambiguously connected to the very issues that the emergence of the Alt-Right exacerbated for the SBC discussed in chapter three. Though he directs his criticism specifically at the SBC, other African American Christians have made similar observations about white American Christians in 2020. Bailey notes that while evangelical institutions have attempted to repair these relationships from the 1990s into the twenty-first century, support for Trump among white Christians has troubled these efforts. 90-year-old civil rights activist and popular Evangelical speaker John Perkins argued concerning this support, "Evangelicals sold out… That created a split in the church." Many African American Christians' feelings concerning the 2016 election remained as a new election approached, even without the prominence of the Alt-Right. After the election, positions regarding Trump seem entrenched. PRRI reported in December of 2020 that Americans' views on Trump remained relatively unchanged after his defeat, and noted that "White Christian groups continue to express more favorable views of Trump than any other group."

The issues that brought the Alt-Right attention in the 2016 election cycle have persisted, as have the activities of former Alt-Right brand-bearers, many of whom are still active on social media. John Paul Bellum still operates under #DezNat on Twitter, and their trolling activities continue. The same is true of Church Militant. In August of 2020, it was reported that David Gordon, who is listed as "a

copyeditor @Church Militant, Lawyer, theology MA, author, sportsman, family man," on his Twitter profile asked a cake maker who identifies as a lesbian to bake a cake for him that contained disparaging remarks. The order read, "I am ordering this cake to celebrate and have PRIDE [*sic*] in true Christian marriage… I'd like you to write on the cake, in icing, 'Homosexual acts are gravely evil. (Catholic Catechism 2357)'" (In Newcomb 2020). The baker made the cake per his order, but Gordon never retrieved it. Apparently, Gordon's goal was to troll the cake shop, playing on the case of the Colorado cake-shop owner who refused to bake a wedding cake for a homosexual couple on the grounds of his Christian belief that homosexuality was a sin.[1]

The conclusion here is that the Alt-Right brand, for a moment, came to define many of the most challenging and significant questions that Americans faced in their social, political, and religious institutions; issues that they will continue to grapple with for the foreseeable future. For white nationalists, the failure of the Alt-Right will be instructive as they re-brand and attempt to continue their activism. For most American Christians, the concern was never really just about the Alt-Right. Rather, debating the Alt-Right came to be a way for them to address what their traditions, institutions, and politics will reflect in the twenty-first century. James Baldwin wrote in *Notes of a Native Son*, "I imagine that one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with pain" (p.101). Now that the Alt-Right is bereft of its former public prominence, what is left for American Christians is the continued struggle against the persistent hurt that these issues cause. In *White Too Long* (2020), Robert P. Jones, writing as a white man raised in the SBC, argues, "Reckoning with white supremacy, for us, is now an unavoidable moral choice" (p.236). Perhaps then we can see the continued importance of the Alt-Right phenomenon in how it has shaped debates about the moral meaning of being Christian in America today.

## Note

1 See the U.S. Supreme Court case Masterpiece Cakeshop, Ltd., et al. v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission et al.

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