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# United States: White

David P. Gushee and Isaac B. Sharp

In the wake of his 2016 election and throughout his presidency and most especially in the lead-up to and wake of the 2020 election, Donald Trump made near constant reference to 'fake news', 'rigged' outcomes and 'stolen' elections. His false claims about stolen elections predictably reached a crescendo when Joe Biden was elected as the forty-sixth President of the United States in November 2020. In early 2021, crowds of Trump supporters descended on Washington, DC, to protest against Congress's certification of the election results. On 6 January, with Trump's encouragement, thousands of those who had gathered in DC marched to the US Capitol grounds in an attempt to overturn the results of the election. Quickly overwhelming security, hundreds of the rioters broke into the Capitol building, which they occupied for much of the afternoon.

Republican Party lawmakers and donors, US military members and various rogue militia groups, QAnon supporters and other conspiracists, Proud Boys and Boogaloo Boys, along with an array of other far-right and white-nationalist groups, from neo-Nazis to neo-Confederates, were represented in the coalition that stormed the Capitol. So too were members of one of Donald Trump's most faithful and devoted groups of supporters: white Christians. Religious iconography in general and Christian imagery in particular were well represented. Flags, banners and posters bearing crosses and Christian messaging marched lockstep alongside the kinds of Norse mythological symbols often appropriated for contemporary white supremacist purposes; a variety of marchers wore clothing emblazoned with a range of racist and anti-Semitic slogans, memes and ideas.

When pressed, some of the white Christian leaders who otherwise supported Trump throughout his presidency and re-election campaign denounced and distanced themselves from the Capitol rioters. Others were either actually there or at least close by. Some supported the messaging but not the methods. As it became clear that Christianity was in some way implicated, some merely demurred for one reason or another.

Whatever else it might currently signify or encompass, white Christianity in the context of the contemporary USA cannot be divorced from its militantly ethno-nationalist representation, which was on display during the 6 January siege. Nor can contemporary white US American

Christianity be properly understood apart from the broader reality of the large numbers of aggrieved white Christians who might not have participated directly or even approved of what transpired, but who similarly consider themselves an oppressed, persecuted or at least beleaguered minority in a rapidly changing culture bent on undermining their way of life. As a racialised tradition that has been historically accustomed to taking for granted its own normativity and pre-eminence as the nation's default version of mainstream religiosity, white Christianity in the contemporary US context has increasingly become defined by widespread collective anxiety over its diminishing social control and waning cultural relevance. Whether that is all that it now is, it is at least that. To understand how it got there, a brief historical overview is in order.

### **Historical Background**

One way of telling the story of twentieth-century white Christianity in the USA is as the rise and fall of white Protestantism as the presumptively predominant religious tradition in US life, and of the triumphant rise and unhappy fall of the white Protestant self-perception as guardians of the national soul along with it. Another way of telling the story is of the proliferation of nationalistic forms of Christianity, the fusion of white Protestantism with American patriotism, and the establishment of a mythic Judeo-Christian (though primarily white Protestant) national heritage.

This external presumption of cultural and religious normativity intensified the various internal battles for pre-eminence within white Protestantism itself, because it was the fate of US culture and not just the church that was presumed to be at stake. For the first few decades of the twentieth century, theologically progressive, socially reformist and politically liberal elements within white Protestant Christianity seemed to be winning the intra-Protestant tug-of-war. From the social gospel of figures like Walter Rauschenbusch to the realist social ethics of figures like Reinhold Niebuhr, the left hand of white Protestantism that eventually became known as the mainline enjoyed massive influence within the nation's churches and in the halls of national power until at least the middle of the century.

Early twentieth-century struggles between fundamentalist and modernist white Protestants had apparently resulted in a resounding victory for the liberals. The established Protestant churches remained securely in the hands of those who believed that the fruits of modern knowledge – the historical-critical study of the Bible and the reality of Darwinian evolution, in particular – were perfectly reconcilable with Christian faith. Fundamentalist white Protestants, on the other hand, had been forced to retreat. As later histories would eventually retrieve, however, fundamentalist white Protestants had not so much disappeared

as they had retreated into sectarian enclaves, where they busily worked to build their own networks of schools, ministries, interdenominational organisations and publishing houses.

Building upon the work of their fundamentalist forebears, in the years following the Second World War, a new generation of white Fundamentalists burst forth on the scene with a less bellicose, putatively more culturally engaged vision of Protestant conservatism, positioning it as a direct rival of and challenge to liberal-mainline Protestantism's apparent pride of place as the self-appointed caretaker of the national soul. Rebranding their culturally reengaged fundamentalism as neo-Evangelicalism – and eventually just Evangelicalism – the architects and founders of older fundamentalist Bible colleges and publishing houses, along with newer groups and institutions like the National Association of Evangelicals, Fuller Theological Seminary and *Christianity Today*, began rallying an enormous coalition of conservative white Protestants that would soon surpass organisations like the National Council of Churches and publications like the *Christian Century* in terms of both scope and influence. Whereas mainline leaders like Harry Emerson Fosdick or the aforementioned Reinhold Niebuhr were arguably the most influential white Christian figures until at least the middle of the century, the balance of power shifted in its later decades with the rise of conservative white Christian figureheads – including one of the most famous and influential Christians of the twentieth century, evangelist Billy Graham – to new levels of prominence in national life.

Both the Protestant soul-of-the-nation mythos and the struggle for pre-eminence within white Protestantism for control of the narrative included anti-Catholic, anti-Semitic and anti-immigrant animus, whether open or thinly veiled. The obvious presumed rightness of white, native-born Protestantism's status as the predominant form of American religiosity was part and parcel of much of twentieth-century Protestantism's official and unofficial theological, social and political positioning, despite the fact that many twentieth-century white Protestant leaders were themselves only a generation or two away from immigrant ancestors.

Over time, the presumption of white Protestant normativity softened to include space for Catholicism and Judaism within the range of acceptable forms of American religiosity. But for the most part, Catholics and Jews would be considered as safely within the bounds of a vague, newly regnant Judeo-Christian heritage only if they were successfully assimilated. The eventual measure of toleration for the Judeo-Christian rendering of suitably American religious identities depended in large part, in other words, on the ability of Catholics and Jews to become 'white/American' in their self-perception and self-presentation – and to be accepted as such from the perspective of those whose white Americanness had already

been established. Jewish theologian Will Herberg's 1955 work *Protestant Catholic Jew* is famous at least as much for its timing and title as for its contents. The idea that the bounds of religious America had now stretched, however uneasily, to include not just white Anglo-Saxon Protestants but also other kinds of Protestants, and not just Protestant Christians but also Catholic Christians, and not just Christians but also Jews, seemed like a major step forward in inclusivity as well as perhaps a tolerable stopping point for American religious diversity. America would be a (white) Judeo-Christian country, with Protestants pre-eminent but Catholics and Jews also included. Notice that Eastern Orthodoxy did not make that list, nor did people of any other religious tradition.

By the later years of the twentieth century, it nonetheless had become increasingly clear that nothing would be able to prevent an emerging tide of social and political change from eroding the foundations of white Protestantism's majoritarian status. As waves of mass immigration and changing national demographic, geographic and religious patterns, as well as an increasingly globalised world, slowly chipped away at the presumption of WASP normativity, panic over the breakdown of white Christian dominance resulted in widespread resistance to some of the twentieth century's most significant social and political movements. Perceiving the civil rights, feminist, anti-Vietnam, anti-nuke and early gay rights movements as direct threats to white, straight, male, Christian hegemony over the collective national morality, white Christians – both Catholic and Protestant – consistently (though never universally) positioned themselves in direct opposition to struggles for major social change. A religion founded by a radical Jewish prophet had become the most predictably and stubbornly conservative force in American life.

Throughout the twentieth century, a variety of major internal theological, political, institutional and ecclesiological changes within both white Protestantism and white American Christianity more broadly also made monocausal narratives of either ascension or decline increasingly impossible. While establishment and/or mainstream versions of white Protestantism waxed and waned, for example, Pentecostal and Charismatic versions of Christianity came roaring in from the margins with explosive growth. The long, slow death of denominationalism was similarly paralleled by the proliferation of various non-denominational groups, small independent church traditions and a slew of individual mega-churches and multi-site church networks. Both trends represented iterations of a perennial theme in US religious history in general and in white Protestantism in particular: the prevalence of disestablished, initially anti-institutional, popular religious movements, and the frequent success of charismatic, personality-driven, wildcat expressions of Christianity.

But even the significant growth of various Pentecostal, Charismatic, non-denominational and mega-church versions of (mostly Evangelical) white Protestantism would not be enough to stave off the precipitous demographic decline of white Christianity. By the end of the twentieth century, white Protestantism's dominance as the majority faith of the nation had already come to an end. White mainline Protestantism had declined to a shell of its former self, and white Evangelicalism had plateaued before beginning its own decline in the first decades of the twenty-first century.

The changing relationship between US Protestantism and Catholicism in the last third of the twentieth century reveals much about shifting power dynamics as well as religious realignment. Roman Catholicism had seemed frighteningly 'Roman' – that is, alien, foreign, anti-democratic and wholly other – until the historic Vatican II conference (1962–5) began a modernising of Catholicism that in many ways brought its spirit into alignment with then current mainline Protestantism. Much of the perceived foreignness abated with the shift to the vernacular Mass and the overall modernisation of Catholic worship and education. The sense that Catholic theology was archaic and backward-looking was exploded by new currents in Catholic theology, including respect for other Christian and non-Christian faiths, that suddenly appeared in Vatican II documents. The peace and justice themes that predominated in the ethics documents of Vatican II were highly congenial to the increasingly progressive mainline moralists and denominational leaders.

Thus, the first serious rapprochement between US Catholics and Protestants occurred on the left end of the spectrum. A generation of post-Vatican II Catholic and mainline Protestant theologians, ethicists and church leaders formed new working relationships as confessional hostility dissolved. But then, beginning in the 1980s, conservative white Evangelicals fell hard for Pope John Paul II, who reigned from 1978 to 2005 and whose anti-Communism, conservative positions on family-related and sexual issues, along with his political dexterity, proved highly attractive. Moreover, as Evangelicals fixed on opposition to abortion as a central part of their US electoral and policy agenda, they found intellectual resources and co-belligerents especially on the conservative side of the US Catholic Church. This foreshadowed a development that by now is in full flower – theological and especially political conservatism, and liberalism, would become so salient that 'right' or 'left' would eventually overwhelm confessional identity in significance for many US Christians.

### **Twenty-first-century Developments**

With the dawn of the twenty-first century, the decline of white Christian pre-eminence more broadly was only getting started. Within a few short

years, white Protestants and white Catholics combined would no longer represent a majority of the population. The last year that more than half of Americans (50.5%) were white Christians was 2011. By 2012 their numbers had fallen to 48%. By the end of the 2010s white Christians made up only 42% of the population. All indications suggest that these patterns of demographic decline will continue into the near and distant future. For weal or for woe, this ongoing pattern of decline will likely remain among the most significant contextual realities affecting white Catholicism and white Protestantism alike. The current and future shape of white Christianity in the contemporary US context will undoubtedly be determined in large part by the nature of white Christian groups' responses to these changes. It is not easy for any religious group to face losing almost one percentage point of market share every year, especially one that has always considered itself the properly dominant religious community in a 245-year-old nation.

Due in large part to enormously effective marketing across the final decades of the twentieth century – orchestrated in most cases by conservative white Christian groups – the mythos of a white Judeo-Christian heritage as the religious wellspring of the national soul has remained persistent despite white Christian numerical decline. The power and pervasiveness of the myth has so thoroughly imbricated white Christianity with national life that it is often hard to tell whether a ritual, practice, belief or idea is an example of Christianity or Americanism. (Consider the US Pledge of Allegiance, the references to God in political speeches or presidential inaugural ceremonies structured along the lines of worship services.) The intertwining of Americanism and Christianity used to be called civil religion, evidence of which was seen as intellectually interesting, perhaps a bit troubling from the perspective of Christian theological integrity, on the one hand, or separation of church and state, on the other. But today, in a more frightened and reactionary white conservative Christian community, this religio-political intertwining looks more like white Christian ethno-nationalism and now appears uncomfortably like Peronist Catholicism in mid-century Argentina or Christian Nazism in 1930s Germany. Apparently, the mid-twentieth-century German theologians Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer were right in warning against racist-nationalist-quasi-Christian idolatry.

Major twenty-first-century events and major figures in the life of white American Christianity have thus been inextricably tangled up in major events in the nation writ large. To a large extent, the history of US politics since 2001 just is the history of US white Christianity, as narrowly theological or ecclesial developments have been dwarfed in significance by political developments with religious connections, implications and interpretations.

At the outset of the century, the 9/11 attack on the USA and the events in its wake were a prime example. Political leaders successfully cast the subsequent beginning of the never-ending 'war on terror' as a civilisational clash between the good forces of Western, white, democratic, Judeo-Christian America and the evil forces of Middle Eastern Islamic terrorists. White Christians in the USA were particularly susceptible to and adept at popularising narratives that painted Muslims and Islam as an inherent threat to the American/Judeo-Christian way of life. Many of the worst atrocities of the ensuing years – from anti-Muslim bigotry and anti-immigrant backlash to US war crimes, human rights violations and the use of torture – received enthusiastic support from white Christians in particular. Indeed, on torture, white Evangelical Christians polled higher than any other religious group in supporting the torture of suspected terrorists. White Christian anxieties about waning national influence mixed with broader American anxieties about the nation's role in international affairs made the remaining years of the presidency of George W. Bush a particularly fertile ground for widespread expressions of religious patriotism and patriotic religion.

The George W. Bush years were also memorable because of that president's explicitly Evangelical faith. Unlike his father, former President George H. W. Bush, the younger Bush was a Texas-raised born-again Evangelical who credited faith with freeing him from addiction and getting his life on track. He came into office promising a 'compassionate conservatism' while also elevating the role of faith – and partnerships with faith-based organisations – in the official work of the US federal government. Bush's first major policy initiative, almost forgotten now, was to ban federal support for most embryonic stem-cell research, because he said this technology required the destruction of human life. This was a maximalist kind of anti-abortion position made into US science policy, a move pleasing to conservative Catholics and Evangelicals alike. Bush made a major speech to this effect in August 2001, a month before the terrorist attacks that drove his administration in a very different direction. Thus the 'embryonic' first months of the Bush administration presaged a certain kind of white conservative Christianity at the helm of American public life, which combined conversionist piety, faith-government partnerships, even more 'pro-life' policies than had been championed by Ronald Reagan and a faith-infused softheartedness towards, for example, immigrants and refugees.

The 2008 election of Barack Obama as the first Black US President seemingly signalled a watershed moment for a nation that has never truly reckoned with its long and ongoing legacy of white racism. For all the vaunted rhetoric about the putatively post-racial era his election



symbolised, Obama's two terms in office wound up giving the lie to collective myths about American progress on race. A moderate Democrat politically, who sought compromise with Republicans and also reached out to conservative and progressive Christian leaders alike, Obama nonetheless inspired – or simply uncovered – a tide of racist vitriol among white Christians in particular. White racial anxiety combined with conservative Christian anxieties over waning cultural relevance made the reactions of the white Christians associated with the religious right especially hysterical. The 'birther' conspiracy movement claimed that Obama was not born in the USA and was therefore ineligible to be President. Grotesque racist insults and innuendos proliferated, including on Christian social media sites. Charges that Obama was secretly a Muslim rather than a Christian found common currency among certain subsets of the white Christian population, despite his longstanding Christian self-identification and church involvement. And Obama's occasional efforts to gingerly address US racial problems directly ran into frantic opposition.

For conservative white Protestants and Catholics alike, one of the era's most significant cultural developments was the relatively rapid shift in the general population's support for same-sex marriage, its eventual nationwide legalisation in 2015 and the broader societal acceptance of LGBTQ persons more generally that went hand in hand with such changes. In the early years of the gay rights movement, in the 1970s and 1980s, conservative white Christian organisations and lobbying groups had utterly opposed that movement, sometimes with the most hateful and degrading rhetoric. Twenty years later, when the issue became marriage, these same groups or their successors threw their weight behind opposition to the legalisation of same-sex marriage at both the state and national level. They lost, relatively quickly, and the loss stung. Today, some white Christian groups have shifted their focus to fighting for religiously based exemptions to laws requiring equal treatment of same-sex couples in business and commerce – and, of course, in their churches. This approach to religious liberty remains a major issue in US jurisprudence today. Meanwhile, most conservative white Christians would certainly welcome the (unlikely) reversal of gay marriage.

Even as conservative white Christian leaders drew a line in the sand of the culture wars on the question of same-sex marriage, signs of internal change simultaneously began piling up. Higher levels of support among younger conservative white Christians for gay rights, tentative steps towards equal treatment for same-sex couples by certain white Evangelical institutions – though never without significant backlash – as well as broad support for LGBTQ persons and their relationships among the historically mainline white Christian denominations, have all made clear that white

Christianity is by no means monolithic on these questions. But the frustration of white conservative Christian leaders about the erosion of what they believe to be the clear 'biblical' position on sexuality is intense.

In recent years, conservative white Christian power-brokers have lost some of the influence that they once wielded over the white Christian Protestant and Catholic laity. Driven in part by rising distrust in white Christian leaders, disappointment with white Christian clergy and dismay over ongoing revelations of abuse within white Christian power structures, white Christian disaffection with the institutional representations of their respective traditions grew significantly in the opening decades of the twenty-first century. The revelations of rampant sexual abuse and the widespread covering up thereof dating back decades in the Catholic Church were among the earliest examples of the scandals that have combined to form a crisis of trust in white Christian institutions and leadership.

Inspired in part by the untold millions of women who began publicly sharing their stories of rape, assault and sexual abuse under the social media hashtag #MeToo, the past few years have also witnessed the beginnings of a yet ongoing reckoning over the prevalence of abusive behaviour in general and sexual abuse in particular in white Evangelical church hierarchies. Denominations like the Southern Baptist Convention, multi-site mega-church networks such as Willow Creek and Mars Hill, and para-church organisations like Ravi Zacharias International Ministries have all been disturbed by revelations that they enabled and, in some cases, covered up all manner of abusive behaviour by their almost universally white male leadership. Conservative white US Protestants had once pointed to Catholic sex abuse scandals as evidence for the superiority of their version of Christian faith, but they can no longer do so. At the same time, and perhaps in consequence, a number of women raised in Evangelical circles and/or scholars of this part of the US white Christian world have been analysing and attacking patriarchal theology and toxic masculinity within their former (or current) faith communities. Kristin Kobes Du Mez's work *Jesus and John Wayne* (2020) tore through the Evangelical reading public like wildfire, as did news of superstar Bible teacher Beth Moore deciding to abandon the Southern Baptist Convention.

White Christianity's apparent toleration of abusive male leaders likely played at least some role in the 2016 election of Donald Trump and has contributed to the fallout at the time of this writing. Despite openly flouting almost every conceivable item on the usual list of contemporary white Christian positions on personal morality and differing profoundly in character and spirit from George W. Bush, Trump's election would not have been possible without the support of the same white Christian voters who elected Bush. Majorities of each of the major subgroups of white

Christian voters – including white Catholics, white mainline Protestants and white Evangelicals – chose Trump in 2016. White Evangelicals, in particular, overwhelmingly voted in his favour, remained his most loyal supporters throughout his presidency and voted for him once again in 2020 at the same levels as the first time.

Even after Trump's incitement of the 6 January 2021 insurrection, with dozens of lawsuits and potential criminal prosecutions looming, he remains the single most popular figure in the white US Evangelical Christian world. This presents something of a dilemma for conservative white religious leaders who wish to remain relevant or even viable with their constituencies. Like Republican politicians, these religious figures must decide whether to (continue to) embrace Trump or to place some distance between themselves and him. Figures like Eric Metaxas and Franklin Graham remain all in with Trump, while Southern Baptist Theological Seminary president R. Albert Mohler, Jr, tacks in his direction and former SBC Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission head Russell Moore's opposition to Trump led eventually to his resignation in 2021. Examining this situation nearly 80 years after the birth of the modern US white Evangelical movement, the contrast is stark indeed. White Evangelicalism had wanted to transform US culture for Christ. By 2020, it had become deeply enmeshed with a decadent US cultural figure like Donald Trump.

Looking to broader trends in US white Christianity, a place to begin is to note that the US white population appears increasingly indifferent to organised religion, with its refugees sometimes reporting weariness with the politicising of Christianity as a primary reason. To the extent that US Catholicism is holding its own numerically, this is clearly due to the influx of more devout immigrant populations, especially from Latin America. At the time of the COVID crisis, which began in March 2020, white Evangelicals did continue to boast some of the largest and most well attended mega-churches, though critics noted their reliance on a rock-concert and celebrity-culture ethos susceptible to both the abuse of power and the neglect of pastoral care and discipleship.

Whether such trends are particularly acute in contemporary white Christianity or are merely the white Christian version of broader cultural developments is perhaps an open question. But at this juncture in history, it has become abundantly clear that white (mostly Evangelical) Christians have developed their own cultural ecosystem comprising an extensive network of publishers, producers, writers, artists and popular figures who make and distribute media targeted at and consumed by a still sizeable, white, mostly Evangelical Christian populace. In fact, white, mostly Evangelical Christians are arguably most clearly distinguishable by the media that they consume. To be a white Christian in the contemporary US context

often means participating above all else in a subculture with its own linguistic idioms, media diet and patterns of consumption. White Christians have their own set of internet celebrities, popular pastors, bloggers, podcasters, influencers, musicians and authors whose products sometimes become best-sellers based solely on their appeal to generally conservative white Christians. There is a real sense, in other words, in which contemporary white Christianity in the USA has become an industry that most directly catechises its people via the media products that it sells them, rather than through congregational life.

The contemporary Christian music (CCM) genre is a prime example. CCM has developed its own industrial complex that simultaneously draws from, reflects and drives trends in the ecclesial, liturgical and personal devotional practices of millions of white Christians. Mega-churches with in-house bands and high-level production capabilities write and record 'praise and worship' songs that reach considerable audiences via both traditional outlets like Christian radio stations and newer formats like streaming platforms, where they are then heard, absorbed and eventually played in innumerable smaller (mostly white Evangelical) churches throughout the country. Though some critics point out that the mass consumer nature of the CCM industry tends to produce derivative, trendy and hackneyed material that is slickly produced but theologically thin, the genre remains incredibly popular.

The white Christian media industry often replicates the in-group/out-group border-guarding of white Evangelical culture writ large. CCM artists, pop theologians and various Christian celebrities, for instance, occasionally run foul either of their distributors or of their consumers by stepping outside the acceptable bounds of regnant Evangelical orthodoxy on a host of theological or political issues. Christian bookstores have withdrawn the work of popular authors, pastors, artists and musicians for, among other sins, advocating for the acceptance of the moral legitimacy of LGBTQ persons and their relationships, questioning the eschatological reality of the eternal conscious damnation of non-Christians, and challenging the *de facto* political orthodoxy of the white Evangelical establishment.

No one yet knows what post-COVID church life will look like, and whether scarred, perhaps frightened US Christians will want to gather in massive indoor worship centres any time soon. But in the meantime, white Christian media culture continues disciplining white mostly Evangelical Christians apace.

Mainline white Protestantism as of 2020 had few culturally visible leaders, though if one adds the post-Evangelical exiles and refugees, the number of visible figures swells a bit: Brian McLaren, Jim Wallis, Diane Butler Bass, Nadia Bolz-Weber, Peter Enns and Rob Bell. Increasingly, the

energy on the religious left, and the dominant voices, are coming from non-white, non-male, non-straight figures, and the justice commitment of the white Christian left encourages them to cede pride of place to such leaders in conference and church venues. The white Evangelical left has also become heavily politicised. Though without the numbers or visibility of white conservative leaders, many on the white Evangelical left worked just as hard and explicitly for the election of moderate Catholic Democrat Joe Biden as the other side did for Donald Trump. The discovery that America's white Christians were just as politically divided as everyone else, and that their supposedly shared religion failed to provide meaningful common ground, frightened many observers who fear further political violence.

Ultimately, America's original sin of racism seems the issue that most profoundly defines this period in American history and the divisions that persist. The difference today, perhaps, is that a growing number of white US Christians are committed to the #BlackLivesMatter fight, while others dig in their heels against it. The year 2020 in the United States of America saw the murder of the Black man George Floyd by white Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin, the massive street protests that followed, the deepening of #BlackLivesMatter activism on the progressive side and the doubling down of opposition to even the study of critical race theory among white conservative Christians. America's oldest moral problem manifested in yet one more way, illuminating the extent to which the nation, and its white Christians, were utterly divided.

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