

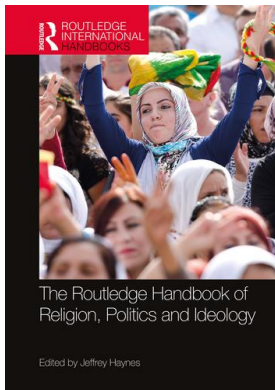
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Jeffrey Haynes

### Religion and the Alt-Right

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George Hawley

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# RELIGION AND THE ALT-RIGHT

*George Hawley*

When the so-called Alt-Right, short for “alternative right,” began making its presence known in American politics, mostly in the context of the 2016 U.S. presidential election, it garnered an extraordinary amount of attention from journalists, watchdog groups, and scholars. The Alt-Right’s rapid rise seemed shocking to many people. However, the Alt-Right’s ideology was not new, even if it used novel tactics. At its core, the Alt-Right was the latest manifestation of the white nationalist movement that has long existed in various forms in the United States.

The subject of religion and its relationship with the racist right can often be confusing. We often think of religion and right-wing thought, at least in the U.S., as being closely connected. The Christian right, for example, has long been an integral element of the American conservative movement and a critical element of the Republican Party’s electoral coalition. For the white nationalist right, however, the story is more complicated. White nationalist attitudes toward religion in general, and Christianity specifically, have often been, at best, ambivalent. Often white nationalists have been openly hostile to Christianity, viewing it as a barrier to stronger feelings of white identity and white solidarity in the American public. This ambivalence is also found in the Alt-Right.

To begin, I should note that, although the term “Alt-Right” remains in wide circulation, the movement has suffered calamitous decline since its peak in 2016. Following the violent “Unite the Right” white nationalist rally in Charlottesville, VA, the Alt-Right received unprecedented, worldwide attention. However, this was also the moment when the movement began to come apart (Hawley 2018). The negative attention led to massive waves of online deplatforming, making organizing and spreading Alt-Right propaganda more difficult. It also led to a series of devastating lawsuits, ruining organizations that already operated on shoe-string budgets. The event was also a public relations disaster, turning the mass public sharply against the Alt-Right to a new degree. Since then, the Alt-Right has suffered massive in-fighting and has had great difficulty maintaining its existing organizations or starting new ones. The term “Alt-Right” is now considered so toxic that relatively few people still use it as a self-description. Informed observers may reasonably question whether the Alt-Right even exists as a movement at the time of this writing (July 2020). It nonetheless deserves continued scholarly attention because the ideas that motivated the movement remain in circulation, and it is quite likely that a successor movement will arise in the future, pursuing a similar ideological agenda.

In this chapter, I will discuss the broad history of religion and its role in U.S. race relations, noting that Christianity, in particular, has had a complex relationship with racial ideologies, sometimes supporting white supremacy and sometimes undermining it. I will then explain the modern white nationalist movement and discuss its relationship with Christianity. I will also discuss the European New Right and its views on Christianity. This discussion is necessary because of the significant influence of this European movement on the U.S. Alt-Right. This will lead into a discussion of the Alt-Right, in which I explain its rise and what made it distinct from its ideological predecessors, followed by a discussion of the Alt-Right's views on Christianity – which were, and are, not monolithic. I will end by speculating on the role of religion and racist movements in the future.

### **Religion and race in America: an ambiguous relationship**

The relationship between racism and religion in the United States has been extraordinarily complex. For much of U.S. history, the country was almost universally Christian, at least in terms of the population's self-identification, with religious minorities making up just a small fraction of the nation. However, there was, from the colonial period onward, a dizzying number of Christian denominations competing for adherents (Finke and Stark 2005). Different denominations took different positions on the question of slavery, going back to the colonial period. Quakers, for example, took an early stance against slavery, whereas Anglicans were generally accepting of the institution (Fischer 1989). In the 19th century, some denominations split over the issue of slavery. The Southern Baptist Convention, for example, broke with Baptists in the Northern states because of the latter's opposition to slavery.

Part of the diversity of opinion on this subject stems from ambiguities within the fundamental Christian texts. In both the Old Testament and the New Testament, one will not find a single verse that explicitly describes slavery as sinful, and many that suggest it is acceptable as long as slaves are not mistreated. On the other hand, one can also reasonably argue that slavery goes against the spirit of Christianity, especially the egalitarian message that Jesus preached in the Gospels. This ambiguity has given Christianity a great deal of flexibility, allowing it to thrive in a great number of social contexts. Nonetheless, in the years leading up to the U.S. Civil War, Christian leaders in the North were some of the most vocal proponents of abolition.

Following the Civil War, with the question of slavery permanently settled, there remained no Christian consensus on the subject of how African Americans should be treated. The defeated South remained intensely Christian and simultaneously reasserted white supremacy in the region without apparent religious compunction. At the same time, there were still religious movements in the U.S. that were intensely devoted to the ideal of racial equality.

The Ku Klux Klan (KKK) is best known for its anti-black racism. However, especially at the organization's peak in the 1920s, it also had a strong religious element. The Klan sought not just to maintain white supremacy in the United States but to ensure the continued dominance of Protestant Christianity. The group was thus also intensely anti-Catholic and anti-Semitic (Pegram 2011).

Christianity had a mixed record in the Civil Rights Movement. Martin Luther King Jr's status as a Christian minister gave him special credibility in the eyes of many white Christians, and many Christian leaders, both black and white, played important roles in the fight for racial justice. Churches played an important institutional role in organizing and supporting civil rights activists.

Some pro-segregation Southern leaders furthermore recognized that anti-segregation religious leaders represented a particularly dire threat to the racial order in the South. Charles

Wallace Collins, one of the most important Southern political strategists behind the “Dixiecrat” revolt of 1948 (Lowndes 2008), expressed special concern that religious leaders would use the government to undermine white supremacy in the South. This subject occupied an entire chapter of his manifesto, *Whither Solid South* (1947).

Nonetheless, it is also true that some of the most vocal voices denouncing racial integration were white evangelical Christians. In the 1960s, figures like Carl McIntire and Billy James Hargis had popular radio programmes promoting evangelical Christianity and defending racial segregation. These programmes were especially important for laying the groundwork for the subsequent electoral realignment of the American South, as white Southerners abandoned the increasingly progressive Democratic Party in favour of the more racially conservative Republican Party (Matzko 2020).

As Southern states were increasingly forced to accept the integration of public schools, a growing number of segregated private Christian schools were formed throughout the region. The growth of these “segregation academies” was unquestionably driven, in large part, by racial concerns, though other social trends, such as greater secularism in public education, were additional reasons parents sought them out. This way of bypassing school integration came to an end, however. The Internal Revenue Service began denying the tax-exempt status of educational institutions that practised racial segregation. This issue, among others, was one of the driving forces of the Christian right, which began to flex its political muscles in the 1970s, and would eventually be a major player in the Republican Party and American politics more generally (Martin 2005). That said, we should not overstate the role of race in contemporary evangelical thought. We must acknowledge the racial diversity of American evangelicals, as well as the pro-immigration stances taken by leading conservative evangelical leaders (McAlister 2019). We should also recognize the distinction between white racial conservatives – those who oppose greater government efforts to achieve higher levels of racial equality – and explicit white nationalists, who articulate a much more radical racist vision.

### The origins of post-war white nationalism

Although racism and white supremacy have always played a role in American life, often a central role, white nationalism, as we currently understand it, is a relatively young phenomenon, not really emerging until after World War II. Prior to that point, the notion of a single, unified “white” race with shared interests across the globe was not a common sentiment in the United States, though certainly not unheard of. During the height of eugenic thinking, during the progressive era of the early 20th century, many intellectuals, such as Madison Grant, were focused on biological distinctions between various European groups. “Nordic” Europeans, for example, were deemed superior to “Alpines” and “Mediterraneans” (Grant 1916). Although they were certainly racist toward non-whites, one of their primary political projects was to reduce immigration from those Southern and Eastern European countries whose genetic qualities they deemed inferior. This would thus maintain the “Nordic” racial characteristics of white America. These policies would become law in 1924, with the passage of an extremely restrictive national quotas immigration policy. This began a four-decade period of extremely limited immigration to the United States (Tichenor 2002). One of the ironies of the immigration restrictions of the 1920s, which contemporary white nationalists often admire, was that one of its biggest long-term effects was a reduction in the number of Europeans that came to the United States in the mid-20th century.

In the first decades of the 20th century, most Americans and Europeans took it for granted that whites would continue to dominate the globe for the foreseeable future. The non-white

world was not expected to play a significant role in future struggles between great powers. There were exceptions to this. Oswald Spengler in Germany, for example, warned that Western powers would soon face threats from abroad, especially if they did not carefully safeguard their technological advantages. In his short 1931 book, *Man and Technics*, he pointed to Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese War as evidence for this possibility. In the U.S., Lothrop Stoddard, a protégé of Madison Grant, was similarly sounding the alarm that the growing demographic strength of the non-white world would end white supremacy and ultimately destroy the white race. He argued in *The Rising Tide of Color against White-World Supremacy* (1920) that whites would be doomed if whites did not begin showing greater racial solidarity. These voices were in the minority, however.

After World War II, as anti-colonial movements in Africa and Asia drove European powers out of one country after another, and as the struggle for African American civil rights began gaining new momentum in the United States, arguments for a pan-European sense of identity and solidarity, including members of the European diaspora in the Americas, became more common on the extreme right. It was in this context that white nationalism, as we currently understand it, began to grow. Damon Berry (2017, p. 3) described white nationalism as “racial protectionism” justified by the “belief that the white race is imperilled and it is the duty of every white man and woman to do what they must to protect it from biological extinction.”

Francis Parker Yockey, a leading intellectual of the post-war extreme right, called for a new form of white solidarity that would extend beyond the traditional bounds of the nation state. His 1948 book, *Imperium*, would be an important early text in the development of modern white nationalism.

Other figures in the United States soon emerged promoting other varieties of white nationalism. The flamboyant George Lincoln Rockwell, a former officer in the U.S. Navy, founded the American Nazi Party in 1959. Over the subsequent decades, many new white nationalist organizations developed in the United States, such as the Aryan Nations, the National Alliance, and the Church of the Creator. Each of these different groups developed its own unique approaches to religious questions. Few significant white nationalists, however, were conventional Christians.

### White nationalism and religion

Although they have never been monolithic on this question, white nationalists have had a few common critiques of Christianity. One argument is that Christianity is not truly indigenous to Europe and thus not an appropriate religion for whites. If whites must have a religion, according to this logic, it should be a religion that originated in Europe and was practised by Europeans' pagan ancestors. The Norse/Germanic pantheon of gods (Odin, Thor, etc.) is especially popular among a subset of modern white nationalists (Gardell 2003).

Another problem with Christianity, from a white nationalist perspective, is that it elevates a non-European people to a special status within the religion. Although there is a long record of anti-Semitism within Christianity, it is also true that the Old Testament of the Christian Bible describes the ancestors of modern Jews as “God's chosen people.” This special religious status, white nationalists argue, gives Jews undue influence over white Gentile society. White nationalists believe the degree to which white evangelicals are willing to provide extraordinary support for Israel is evidence for this claim.

Some white Christian nationalists have resolved this problem by altering Christian theology in a way that elevates white Europeans (Barkun 1996). The “Christian Identity” religion holds that different European peoples are the actual descendants of the original Israelites from the Bible. Contemporary Jews, far from enjoying an elevated position in the religion, are actually

a cursed people. This variety of Christianity has always been opposed by mainstream Christian denominations and has never had more than a small number of followers. However, it has been promoted by prominent white nationalists. Although George Lincoln Rockwell was personally agnostic when it came to religion (Rockwell 1967), he endorsed Christian Identity as an approved religion for his followers (Simonelli 1996). Aryan Nations, led by “pastor” Richard Butler, also promoted Christian Identity.

White nationalists have also objected to Christianity’s universalist aspects. Christian doctrine explicitly states that salvation is open to all people, regardless of demographic background. As Paul wrote in his Epistle to the Galatians, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.” Such a perspective, if taken seriously by Christians, seems necessarily to lead to diminished levels of ethnocentrism. Right-wing Christians can reasonably counter that there is nothing in the Bible calling for the end of distinct ethnicities, races, or nations or that spiritual equality necessitates political equality. This claim is technically correct. Nonetheless, the most important Christian texts contain egalitarian messages that can be difficult to reconcile with the most extreme right-wing political positions.

Finally, elements of the far right have objected to Christianity on Nietzschean grounds that are not necessarily racist. The anti-egalitarian, aristocratic aspects of right-wing thought have long objected to Christianity’s celebration of humility and weakness, calling it a “slave morality.” This right-wing approach to life, which often, but not necessarily, overlaps with ethnocentrism, would prefer a more virile, masculine religion, one that celebrated strength and a will to power.

White nationalist leaders and organizations that had problems with mainstream Christianity sought different solutions to these perceived problems. As mentioned, George Lincoln Rockwell, while not personally a believer, was not anti-Christianity – though he preferred to promote Christian Identity rather than more mainstream Christian denominations. Others sought to provide spiritual alternatives to Christianity.

William Pierce, founder of the National Alliance and author of the notorious genocidal novel, *The Turner Diaries*, did not personally have any supernatural beliefs. Before dedicating his life to his racist cause, Pierce had a career as a physics professor. He nonetheless believed his movement required some kind of spiritual foundation. Pierce thus promoted a quasi-religion he called “Cosmotheism,” which might be described as a racist variety of pantheism. According to this worldview, whites have a duty to advance the race, moving it toward its ultimate destiny of evolving toward a kind of secular godhood (Whitsel 1998). Pierce detested the Christian left and the Christian right and made it clear that one could not simultaneously be a member of the National Alliance and a member of a liberal Christian church that supported racial egalitarianism or a conservative Christian church that supported Zionism. As he put it:

Any Alliance member who is also a member of a church or other Christian organization which supports racial mixing or Zionism should decide now where he stands, and he should then resign either from his church or from the Alliance.

(Pierce 1982)

Ben Klassen, who founded the white supremacist “Church of the Creator” in 1973, was even more focused on religious questions – though he also rejected entirely the existence of an afterlife or anything supernatural. “Creativity,” as it is also called, calls for whites to make a religion out of the advancement of their race, forsaking all other religious notions. He wrote three “holy books” promoting this belief system: *Nature’s Eternal Religion*, *The White Man’s Bible*, and *Salubrious Living*. He attempted to organize his followers in a manner analogous to what

one finds in an organized religion and declared himself “Pontifex Maximus.” He hoped his compound would one day become the premier training ground for a new generation of white nationalist leaders.

### **Religion and the European far right**

Although the Alt-Right is a new iteration of the white nationalist movement in the United States, it was arguably more influenced by right-wing currents in Europe than in America. In particular, the Alt-Right was strongly influenced by the European New Right, which had very strong views on religion (O’Meara 2004).

The European New Right was a movement that developed at a time when the European far left was at the peak of its influence. In 1968, as the far-left protests threatened to bring down the French government, a young intellectual named Alain de Benoist founded a new think tank called the Research and Study Group for European Civilisation (in French, this forms the acronym GRECE). De Benoist and his colleagues sought to create a new right-wing alternative to the mainstream ideologies of the day (Bar-On 2007). Their goal was a new approach to politics, distinct from pro-American, pro-business, and pro-Catholic conservatism, but also rejecting left-wing egalitarianism and cosmopolitanism. The European New Right borrowed elements from other ideological groups, appropriating much of the left’s critique of capitalism. It also built on far-right ideas from earlier in the 20th century, especially those thinkers associated with the “Conservative revolutionaries” of inter-war Germany – people like Carl Schmitt, Oswald Spengler, and Ernst Jünger.

In his early writing career, De Benoist was explicitly racist. As time went on, he tempered his approach to race, dropping his arguments about biological differences between racial groups while still maintaining exclusionary attitudes toward immigrants. The European New Right eventually called for “the right to difference.” That is, in place of the homogenizing effects of American capitalism, Soviet communism, or progressive liberalism – all of which, at least in theory, were cosmopolitan and tolerant – different cultures had a right to maintain their uniqueness, even if it meant excluding outsiders.

De Benoist wrote extensively on religion (2004). His open criticism of Christianity was one reason his movement did not seek to build bridges with conservative Catholics in France. De Benoist’s critiques of Christianity are interesting in that he simultaneously attacks the religion from the left and the right. He shares the right-wing critique of Christianity’s inherent egalitarianism and suggests that, although the modern left is generally secular and often anti-religion, it nonetheless maintains a certain fundamental Christian ethos.

However, some of De Benoist’s arguments against Christianity sound as though they are coming from the political left. In his view, Christianity is inherently totalitarian, and modern totalitarian regimes in the West also had certain Christian roots. In his view, Christianity was problematic because of its insistence on a single path to heaven. One either accepted Jesus Christ as the sole means of salvation, or one was condemned to hell. According to De Benoist, this is very different from the pagan view of spirituality, which accepted a plethora of gods, each unique to different peoples. The Ancient Romans notably never sought to force conquered peoples to abandon their local gods and accepted spiritual diversity within the Empire. This ended when Christianity became the official state religion and continued after the Roman Empire fell. Pagan groups that did not accept Christianity were often violently suppressed. Emperor Charlemagne’s massacre of Saxons was a particularly notable, but not unique, example of this. The end result of Christianity’s rise was the demise of religious diversity within Europe and, eventually, its demise in many places beyond Europe when conquistadors and other colonialists

forced Christianity upon foreign peoples. Thus Christianity was fundamentally at odds with the premise of the right to difference.

The European New Right is worth discussing here because of its influence on the U.S. Alt-Right. Alt-Right leaders such as Richard Spencer and Greg Johnson have cited that movement as an inspiration. De Benoist lectured at a conference hosted by Spencer's white nationalist think tank, The National Policy Institute. The now-defunct Alt-Right organization, Identity Evropa, was clearly modelled on right-wing movements in Europe.

### The Alt-Right's origins, rise, and decline

The Alt-Right was born at a time when the older white nationalist groups and leaders mentioned above were at a nadir in terms of members and influence. The National Alliance largely collapsed after William Pierce's death in 2002. The Aryan Nations suffered financial hardship following a shooting incident in 1998. A subsequent lawsuit cost the group its Idaho compound. Neither Christian Identity nor Creativity gained a substantive number of adherents in the early 2000s. White nationalists had a presence on the internet, but such content was mostly found on fringe sites such as the white nationalist message board Stormfront, which meant it was largely out of view for most people. Other varieties of right-wing thought that differed from mainstream conservatism, such as the "paleoconservatism" represented by figures such as Patrick Buchanan, was also mostly defunct by the time President George W. Bush was inaugurated in January 2001 (Hawley 2016).

For the first few years of the Bush Administration, the mainstream conservative movement, especially the social conservatives and the foreign policy hawks, seemed to dominate American politics. President Bush launched the invasion that resulted in a regime change in Iraq. Anti-gay marriage initiatives were passed in states throughout the country. Conservative evangelical Christians could reasonably claim that they were responsible for President Bush's 2004 re-election.

By the end of Bush's second term, however, the political situation looked very different. The Iraq War had become a bloody quagmire. A financial crisis threatened to spark a global depression. Prominent Republicans were embroiled in embarrassing scandals. In a few short years, the Republican Party had undermined its credibility as the party of national security, economic growth, and moral virtue. At the start of 2009, Barack Obama was president, and Democrats controlled the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate. This opened up space for right-wing alternatives to Bush-era conservatism to seek adherents.

It was during this period that the term "Alternative Right" was coined by Richard Spencer, then the editor of a webzine called *Taki's Magazine*, in 2008. At first, the term was not explicitly racial and instead could describe any American right-wing movement that broke with one or more fundamental tenets of Bush-era mainstream conservatism, including libertarians, the remnants of the paleoconservatives, localists, and white nationalists. One common thread for all of these groups was a tendency to support the libertarian Ron Paul's quixotic campaign for the Republican nomination for president in 2008.

The racial aspect to the Alternative Right became more apparent over time, especially after Spencer left *Taki's Magazine* and formed his own new website, AlternativeRight.com. At this new site, race was a much more prominent topic, and white nationalist and anti-Semitic content was prevalent. This site was relatively short lived, however, as Spencer shut it down in 2013. At the time, it appeared that the term "Alternative Right" was going to die out.

In subsequent years, however, a new radical online right-wing movement began to form, especially on image boards like 4chan and social media sites like Twitter. It differed from older



white nationalist online content in that it had greater visibility – it was not mostly cordoned off in its own online spheres, as had been the case for earlier white nationalist material on the internet. It had a significant presence on YouTube, social media, and popular message boards. This new movement, mostly anonymous, used the language of internet-savvy millennials, promoting an extreme right-wing agenda via ironic memes, pop culture references, and hashtags.

Although ideologically congruent with earlier manifestations of white nationalism, the Alt-Right relied mostly on humour and online trolling, in contrast to older, drearier promoters of the same philosophical principles. In place of dour broadcasts from voices like William Pierce, the Alt-Right preferred to spread its racist message via baffling cartoon characters like Pepe the Frog. This new online right-wing movement eventually embraced the term “Alternative Right,” shortening it to the punchier phrase, “Alt-Right.”

The Alt-Right’s online presence grew dramatically in the context of the 2016 presidential election when the movement determined from the very beginning that Donald Trump was their candidate of choice. It is worth noting that, in most recent presidential elections, explicit white nationalists have shown little interest in mainstream Republican candidates – showing no enthusiasm for candidates like Bob Dole, George Bush, John McCain, or Mitt Romney. Trump earned their support because of his aggressive anti-immigration positions and his total rejection of so-called political correctness.

As the election season continued, the Alt-Right’s popularity and name recognition continued to grow. For a time, the term seemed like a wide-ranging term for Trump’s entire right-wing populist base, which included, but was not limited to, explicit white nationalists. At one point, Steve Bannon, then head of *Breitbart*, a popular right-wing news and opinion venue, declared his website a “platform of the Alt-Right.” This is obviously concerning, given Bannon’s subsequent role in the Trump campaign and in the Trump White House (Bannon later became chief executive of the Trump campaign and for several months served as White House Chief Strategist). However, Joshua Green, author of a comprehensive biography of Steve Bannon, noted that, when he used that term, Bannon was using the “catchall definition” of the Alt-Right, which included at that time, not just “white supremacists and full-on neo-Nazis,” but also “populists, libertarians, immigration restrictionists, reactionaries, [and] paleoconservatives” (Green, 2017, p. 212).

The Alt-Right made such an impact over the course of the election that Hillary Clinton dedicated an entire speech to the Alt-Right, its radicalism, and its association with Donald Trump. Although the speech was entirely negative, the Alt-Right was jubilant at receiving so much exposure. From that point on, the Alt-Right could reasonably claim to be major players in the campaign, and perhaps even in American politics more broadly. The Alt-Right was additionally ecstatic when Trump surprisingly won the election.

Following Trump’s victory, however, the Alt-Right’s subsequent history was mainly one of setbacks. Shortly after the election, when Richard Spencer’s National Policy Institute hosted a conference, Spencer infamously declared, “Hail Trump. Hail our people. Hail victory.” At which point, many people in the audience responded with Nazi salutes. This led Trump to denounce the Alt-Right, something he had declined to do throughout the campaign (Diamond 2016). Things only got worse for the Alt-Right during the first year of the Trump presidency. As mentioned in the introduction, the “Unite the Right” rally, which was intended to demonstrate the Alt-Right’s status as a permanent fixture of American politics, proved to be the movement’s high-water mark. Furthermore, the Trump presidency did not mark the dramatic break with traditional conservative Republican policies. The Trump White House was mostly filled with conventional Republicans, and Republicans in Congress mostly set the domestic agenda during the first years of the Trump Administration (Alberty 2019).

## Religion and the Alt-Right

As was the case with the earlier manifestations of white nationalism in America, many leading figures in the Alt-Right were deeply concerned with questions of religion. Also, like earlier white nationalists, many of the most important voices in the Alt-Right were overtly hostile to Christianity. Richard Spencer, for example, has never hidden his contempt for Christianity. The same is true for other prominent, contemporary white nationalists such as Greg Johnson, who runs the influential white nationalist webzine *Counter-Currents* (Berry 2017).

Many leading Alt-Right writers explained at length why they believed Christianity is problematic for their cause. These commentaries often echoed the critiques of earlier white nationalists. The prolific Alt-Right essayist Gregory Hood, for example, argued that Christianity makes it more difficult to create a movement for explicit identity politics around race or ethnicity because “Such a creed renders family, kin, and nation irrelevant” (2013). Hood nonetheless suggested that, from his ideology’s perspective, one could find some redeeming qualities in Christianity. There is therefore no need to destroy ancient cathedrals, which are now a treasured part of Europe’s cultural heritage. However, all of those Christian qualities he considered positive were due to the influence that German paganism had on the early church, qualities that have now been mostly expunged from the religion: “The only kind of ‘Christendom’ that could redeem the West is a Germanic Christianity, which is to say, a pagan Christianity drawing upon European folk traditions. Given our history, why must we continue to cling to this unnatural conglomeration?”

Throughout the Alt-Right’s rise, it was easy to find Alt-Right voices denouncing Christianity in both scholarly and vulgar fashions. However, as I analysed both the Alt-Right and its ideological predecessors, I concluded that anti-Christianity in white American nationalism is less pronounced now than it was in the past. Although most of the Alt-Right’s leading figures were not Christians, in recent years, few expressed any real sense of urgency to the “problem” of Christianity. This may be because traditional religion is simply less politically relevant now than it was in the 20th century.

Christianity is in a period of long-term decline in the U.S. (Hawley 2017a). Compared to the religious right’s peak of influence, Christian conservatism’s political and cultural clout is greatly diminished and thus no longer represents the same challenge to overt white nationalism as may have been the case in the late 20th century. For this reason, white nationalist organizers may feel less necessity to offer some kind of replacement religion, whether in the form of a racist version of Christianity (Christian Identity), the revival of pre-Christian pagan religions (Odinism), or the creation of new religious cults dedicated entirely to racial purity and advancement (Creativity, Cosmotheism). Instead, I saw a large number of contemporary white nationalists simply ignoring the subject of religion entirely.

To be clear, over the last decade, we have witnessed the appearance of some explicitly Christian white nationalists and white nationalist groups. For example, the now-defunct Traditionalist Worker Party identified itself as an explicitly orthodox Christian organization. American white nationalists tend to view Orthodox Christianity more favourably than other denominations. This is because many view Orthodox Christianity, with its many different national branches, as more comfortable with nationalist sentiments than either Roman Catholicism or mainstream Protestant denominations.

During discussions of non-white immigration into the United States and Europe, right-wing activists, intellectuals, and politicians tend to bring up the hot-button topic of Islam and Islamophobia. Anti-Muslim attitudes in the U.S. surged after the 11 September 2001 terror attacks (Gerges 2003) and have been a fixture of populist conservative discourse ever since (Belt

2016). Donald Trump famously called for a complete ban on all Muslim immigration during the 2016 presidential election – a promise that was only partially fulfilled (in the form of a travel ban from some majority-Muslim countries) following his election.

One, perhaps surprising, element of the Alt-Right's rhetoric around immigration and Muslims is that it is often, in some ways, less Islamophobic than what one hears from mainstream American conservatives. That is not to say that Alt-Right supporters and other white nationalists want Islam's presence to grow in Western countries. However, they do tend to focus less on Islam as such and instead focus more on the fact that most Muslims in the world today would not be classified as white. As Richard Spencer argued in 2015: "Ultimately, a person's race, ethnicity, and country of origin are far more important components of identity than religion; and these should be, as they have been in the past, the primary criteria in considering the immigration question." To put it another way, the Alt-Right, on average, may have been less Islamophobic than many mainstream conservatives precisely because it was more racist (Hawley 2017b).

Animus toward Islam and Muslims definitely played a role in the rise of Trump's right-wing populist movement – though we should not overstate this (Hawley 2019). These anti-Muslim views are often framed in a peculiar way. They are rarely presented as unbridled religious discrimination or as part of a Christian nationalist agenda. Instead, conservatives tend to justify anti-Muslim policies in two general ways. One frame is the concern about terrorism, combined with the claim that fundamental Muslim beliefs require religious violence (Beck 2015). The other, perhaps more interesting, conservative claim is that Muslims should be excluded from America and Europe because Islam is supposedly incompatible with progressive Western values. That is, Islam is, according to this narrative, hostile to women and sexual minorities and it does not respect the separation of church and state. Muslims are furthermore not assimilating to Western norms on these questions (Caldwell 2009).

One can reasonably argue that conservatives that make the latter argument are being disingenuous. After all, during its peak, the Christian right was not friendly toward feminism, gay liberation, or the notion that we must keep religion out of government. Whether it is out of conviction or political expedience, however, many mainstream conservatives have felt it necessary to frame their opposition to Muslim immigration in terms of modern progressivism, in a sense conceding that they acquiesce to, or even celebrate, liberal victories on these questions.

The Alt-Right did not follow this approach. Few on the Alt-Right expressed their problems with Islam in these terms. Although, to my knowledge, no significant figure associated with the Alt-Right has suggested that Muslim immigration to the U.S. or Europe is a good thing, few have complained that Islam is incompatible with the West because that religion (which, I should note, is incredibly diverse in terms of theology) is inherently illiberal. In fact, some on the Alt-Right expressed admiration for the supposed illiberal qualities in Islam.

Although I argue that the Alt-Right is fundamentally a white nationalist movement and focused on race, it was also fundamentally an anti-feminist or misogynist movement. For this reason, many on the Alt-Right actually celebrated the most illiberal aspects that they see in contemporary Muslim countries. In Alt-Right discourse online, one can readily find voices describing modern American culture as "degenerate," especially because of its willingness to tolerate homosexuality and promiscuity among women. Some suggested that the Alt-Right should appropriate the most reactionary elements of Islam without converting to the religion. They would like to see white people become more explicitly patriarchal and again have separate spheres for men and women. Especially in 2017, many on the Alt-Right were calling for what they called "white Sharia." That is, white Americans and Europeans should place the same legal restrictions on women's activities that one finds in many (though certainly not all) majority-Muslim countries.

The idea of “white Sharia” was promoted primarily by the white nationalist website, *The Daily Stormer*, mostly in 2017 and 2018. It is infrequently used by the extreme right now, but for a time, it was a prominent meme. Some Alt-Right voices were harshly critical of the idea, suggesting it was counterproductive (Thoresen 2017). Others, however, suggest that the meme became popular precisely because it provides a vision that might prove to be a useful recruiting tool for young white men:

[White Sharia] serves as a distant beacon of the patriarchy we as a people need and will one day have. It is both a rallying cry for the disillusioned young men in our movement as well as their guiding light.

(Vandal 2017)

This point may be largely moot now, however, as the white Sharia meme seems to have lost momentum. I can find few recent examples of a prominent Alt-Right figure either endorsing the idea or attacking it. In any event, the Alt-Right’s stance on Islam was always distinct from that of mainstream conservatives. They were simultaneously more insistent that people from majority-Muslim countries should not be allowed to enter the U.S., and more willing to express admiration for the social orders in those countries as they perceived them.

## Conclusion

Given the Alt-Right’s current state of disarray, how the movement dealt with questions of religion may be an academic point. However, as it has always done in the past, we can anticipate that the white nationalist movement will regroup from its recent setbacks. I suspect its next major manifestation will be under a different name. It is thus worth speculating how the Alt-Right’s successors will deal with this issue.

We may have got some hints about this from right-wing YouTube programme host Nick Fuentes and the so-called “Groyper movement.” This was a far-right movement that achieved some national attention due to its activism on college campuses in 2019 (Coasten 2019). This movement, which included many people formally associated with the Alt-Right, generally abandoned calls for explicit white nationalism, and instead focused on a nebulous, but clearly racist, “American nationalism.” This movement was also more pro-Christian – Fuentes, for example, is a Catholic. Activists from this movement often presented themselves as ostentatiously Catholic. The movement largely came to a halt when Covid-19 shut down college campuses, and thus their main means of activism was shut down.

It is notable that Fuentes and his movement made a more conscious effort to be less alienating toward mainstream, middle-class Americans than the Alt-Right. For some on the Alt-Right, the lesson from Charlottesville was that they need at least some support from ordinary white conservatives – most of whom are Christians. Thus being pro-Christian, or at least not anti-Christian, was a logical step. This focus on ordinary Americans contrasts with most of the notable figures of the Alt-Right, who mostly largely presented themselves as part of a revolutionary vanguard movement (Marcy 2020). This limited its appeal to ordinary conservatives, who were not interested in revolutionary change or in abandoning Christianity.

Regardless of the future direction of the American extreme right, its internal debates about Christianity will surely continue. The question of whether Christianity must be destroyed or accommodated to create a new white nationalist order is unlikely to be resolved. The fact that this issue remains divisive on the extreme right is advantageous to supporters of tolerance and liberal democracy, as this debate has proven a stumbling block to white nationalism’s internal cohesion and its ability to engage in successful outreach.

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