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Book Review

White Evangelicals and Right-Wing Populism: How Did We Get Here?

by Marcia Pally

Author(s): Matthew R. Hartman

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necessitates relationship with those who struggle under injustice” (119). Decolonial love as a political posture of liberative praxis offers theologians of every locality a foothold within colonial modernity from which to commit to the sacred, and to the struggle to transform reality. It is the option of love and liberation before us all.

Javney Mohr is a scholar and organizer pursuing Ph.D. studies as a Presidential Scholar in the Department of Ethics at the Graduate Theological Union. Grounded in the traditions of decolonial feminist thought and liberationist praxis, her research inquires the pedagogic character of radical social movements and Third World liberation struggles, and the networks of inter/nationalist solidarities that constitute its praxis. Her current work proposes the emancipatory motion of decoloniality and abolitionism as the radical political activity of militant love and as the inherent orientation of the Land.

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White Evangelicals and Right-Wing Populism:

How Did We Get Here?

By: **Marcia Pally**

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Reviewed by: Matthew R. Hartman, Graduate Theological Union

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How did we get here? The subtitle of Marcia Pally’s *White Evangelicals and Right-Wing Populism* echoes a familiar refrain heard in American political and religious discourse over the past few years. From media pundits to the political elite class, to even many (most?) in academia, questions such as

“how did we get here?” “how did this happen?” (*here* and *this* typically referring to Trumpism, January 6th, etc.) and the like have dominated cable news shows, speaking circuits, and even classroom discussions since 2016. One can almost see the hand-wringing and hear the sighs of exasperation evoked by the question—a question that belies another that has been oft-asked and is a subtext to this work: How did white evangelical Christians support a candidate and movement that would seem to go against so much of the moral standards they had publicly espoused as fundamental to their collective identity and faith since at least the latter half of the 20th century?

While such a question is likely uttered in earnest by those suddenly interested in the rise of the right in America (not to mention globally), there is a certain naïveté of which Pally, and the many important sources from which she draws, is no doubt aware. In reality, many have been sounding the alarm for some time now of a resurgent right, even if those voices have been largely ignored or muted in popular discourse. Luckily, this book provides a helpful historical journey through much of the literature and scholarship that situates contemporary religious and political relationships and contextualizes the current moment.

Pally’s first task is to define “populism,” or at least work with existing definitions to put forward a kind of rubric for identifying what populism is, what it is not, and when it is only *kind of* on display. After all, populism is not only limited to right-wing politics and movements, though as the primary subject of Pally’s study her definitions lean on tropes of this group. Pally lists a number of characteristics of populism for her rubric, key features being that populism is a way of understanding unwanted societal change (real or imagined), it tends to coalesce around a perceived “we” informed by shared historical-cultural narratives—thus buttressing an “us/them” dichotomy—and it is effective when communicated in ways understandable to large portions of a group or community. An important observation Pally makes here is that populist movements exist on a continuum, from what she calls softer and stronger forms of populism, and under the right conditions can be useful in aiding democratic efforts rather than dismantling them in the name of reactionary politics (18).

But that is ultimately not the focus of the book, and in Chapter 2 Pally turns to a brief historical discussion of the theological and political

shaping of early American society through a discourse on covenant. The Protestant-influenced covenant between God and humans that in turn shapes human covenants ultimately adds an individual, localized veneer to political maturation that, Pally argues, lays the groundwork for anti-authority identities of American religious groups such as white evangelicals. While a helpful lesson in a particular area of political history, one wonders why such foundational political theory has had a seemingly myopic effect on white evangelicals specifically? Pally does not really address this question, but the historical intertwining of religious covenant and civic life is helpful in understanding the making and maintenance of a particular kind of national/local identity.

While Chapter 3 tells the now-familiar story of duress and decline that seems to have shifted political identities on the American right including those of white evangelicals—loss of economic opportunities, decreasing quality of life, etc.—Chapter 4 presents the saliency of supposed right-wing populist solutions to these concerns. Here Pally focuses on two broad characterizations of the populist right: 1) a general distrust of government and institutions; and 2) a fear of the “other” and wariness of outsiders. Pally argues such sentiments get effectively embodied and employed by Donald Trump, culminating in both his populist, seemingly unexpected election in 2016 followed by his inspired insurrection in 2020 to ultimately bookend his presidency. Importantly, Trump’s heavy reliance on such us-them frameworks underscores a deeper resonance with American white evangelicals on policy and identity rather than notating a simple Faustian bargain.

In Pally’s historical telling, a populist shift to the right amongst white evangelicals coalescing around growing fears of the other and the government ramps up in the 20th century—the subject of Chapters 6 and 7. Southern politics during Reconstruction, public battles over evolution, and skepticism of policies such as FDR’s New Deal and later LBJ’s Great Society and signing of the Civil Rights act all contributed to white evangelical distrust of the U.S. government. According to Pally, this series of perceived “losses”—in policy and status—led to a positioning of fighting back, including language of militarization and masculinity. Pally’s historical narrative here draws a throughline from emphases on masculine

Christianity in evangelical literature in the 1980s and 90s to performances of militant Christianity in more recent displays of insurrection and Christian-influenced paramilitary groups.

Of course, a key factor inspiring much of this sense of loss and subsequent rightward turn amongst white evangelicals documented by Pally is race. The reality is that the “other” constructed in white evangelical populism is typically not merely religious, but racialized. Pally regularly references the covenantal community ethic of colonial America, the “forebears of today’s white evangelicals,” whose community of recent settlers to America was fundamentally organized around a fear of the “Indigenous other” (94). And yet in an ironic turn, immigrants today are demonized by the right—increasingly by evangelicals. “Importantly,” writes Pally, “the link among ‘outside’ animus, racist views, and identification as a white Christian is strongest among faith groups that have historically been dominant” (100). This coalition includes white evangelicals in the South, as well as increasingly white Catholics in the Northeast. In many ways, loss of status fundamentally translates to loss of racial status.

The final chapter before Pally’s concluding remarks offers a kind of alternative timeline of evangelical history, focusing on some of the various individuals and groups pushing back on this rightward, populist turn. From networks such as the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) denouncing January 6th to prominent evangelical figures such as Russell Moore and Beth Moore (no relation) distancing themselves from Trump-supporting leaders or leaving the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) altogether, to groups like the Evangelical Environmental Network (EEN) attempting to engage evangelicals in climate action, the point is that there are alternatives to the us/them populist frame of prominent white evangelicals. While helpful to note these efforts and movements, an important question to ask is: How do these voices break through? Perhaps other messaging exists in evangelical culture, but this movement has long been shaped by the loudest voices which has constructed a collective identity that is largely dominant and profoundly resonant.

In terms of messaging influence, the loudest voices come from key figures in the conservative media apparatus—which has long-been persuasive with the rise of Talk Radio, Fox News, and evangelical

broadcasting such as Pat Robertson's 700 Club—but equally important is the more recent rise of social media on the right, its increasing role in disseminating conservative ideology, and in spreading right-wing conspiracies and cultural grievances. And this is one area in Pally's work that could have benefitted from more attention. For instance, in Chapter 4 Pally gives a brief nod to the proliferation of social media platforms as important in the rapid dissemination of right-wing ideologies, but quickly moves on to what she sees as more important factors at play since “the boost from electronic and social media pertains to both right- and left-wing populists” (52). While new developments in social media are happening constantly making this a complex and messy area to draw firm analyses, I was left wanting more here—even a short section documenting some important changes in the media landscape would have been helpful. Especially in a chapter that highlights anti-government sentiments and systematic constructions of the “other” in national discourse, a brief discussion of misinformation and conspiracy theories found online—which have especially proliferated on the right in rapid fashion, and increasingly amongst right-wing religious groups—would have been appreciated. Pally offers helpful sources for further exploration in this area by way of a footnote, but the seeming equivocation of the influence of social media on the right and the left felt like a notable gloss in an otherwise comprehensive study.

Still, this book is a useful resource for understanding the precarity of our present moment by contextualizing the past, ultimately providing a useful entry in contemporary studies of white Christian nationalism and right-wing movements. It also provides a helpful analysis to better address the sometimes-confounding questions of how, indeed, we got here. For those who conduct research in this space, and who study phenomena such as conservative media or Christian nationalism or even far-right paramilitary groups, the answer to how we got here is likely not much of a surprise: Trump did not just show up out of left field, nor did January 6th happen in a vacuum. Far from aberrations, these events were culminations of a particular historical trajectory. And yet, even if many (most?) were not paying attention before, more are now and Pally's book provides a helpful

guide to better understand the history of white evangelicalism and its ongoing embracement of right-wing populism.

Matthew R. Hartman is a Doctoral Candidate (ABD) in Ethics at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, CA. His research analyzes the history and future of climate change denialism, with a particular focus on the American religious and political right. He is Lead Managing Editor of the Berkeley Journal of Religion and Theology.