

Crusading for a Christian Nation:
How Christian Nationalist Pastors Have
Disseminated Donald Trump's Myth
of the Stolen Election

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Abstract: With the Capitol riot on January 6, 2021, being one of the latest manifestations of the deep crisis that American democracy is facing, this essay focuses on the fusion of religion and politics as manifested in the Christian nationalist movement – a belief system rooted in the superior morality of Christianity and the conviction that both American society and politics should be exclusively guided by Christian principles. Three sermons by altogether three pastors – namely Greg Locke, Ken Peters, and Brian Gibson – serve as the basis for this analysis, which focuses on the following question: How exactly did they interpret Trump's loss in the 2020 presidential election, and how have they supported the narrative of a stolen election?

The myth of a stolen election (the *Big Lie*) was introduced by former president Donald Trump himself after his loss in the 2020 election to 'stop the steal' and secure his second term in office by mobilizing his loyal followers. The analysis will prove that the pseudo-religious movement played a major role in consolidating this narrative by using biblical language and scripture, apocalyptic visions, conspiracy theories, as well as violent rhetoric to support *their* president. Eventually, it was exactly this politico-religious agenda and religious fervor that promoted violence and hatred, which facilitated the violent insurrection at the U.S. Capitol – an incident that has shaken American democracy to the core.

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Keywords: Christian nationalism; religion; politics; Capitol riot; Donald Trump

On January 6, 2021, when the electoral college was set to meet and certify the results of the 2020 presidential election, former U.S. President Donald Trump organized a rally at the Ellipse in Washington D.C., aimed at ‘stopping the steal’ and ‘saving America.’ In his imagination, the election was stolen from him and his loyal followers, whom he asked to support his conspiracist narrative, eventually “bolstered by a collective move to refuse to confirm election results” (Gorski et al., 2022: 99). Trump’s “anti-government animus” (Pally, 2022: 59) paved the way for the violent insurrection at the U.S. Capitol. While Trump was still delivering a speech on the platform, “a riotous mob of white supremacists, fascists and other extremists stormed and occupied the [...] Capitol” (Dalsheim and Starrett, 2021: 26). Throughout this incident of domestic terrorism, referred to as the *Capitol riot*, Christian symbols were omnipresent, and rioters publicly compared themselves or *their* president, Trump, to Jesus, the Messiah: “The inclusion of Christian symbols at a populist *political* riot was the outcome not only of Trump’s encouragement but of a half-century defensive-bellucose strain among white evangelical Christians” (Pally, 2022: 87). The insurrection can thus be classified as the culmination of “America’s latest wave of Christian nationalism – Trump’s wave” (Seidel, 2021: 310).

The concept of Christian nationalism is defined as “an effort to (re)assert the dominant moral and cultural authority of a white, native-born, straight, masculine, and Christian social order” (Baker et al., 2020: 603). This ideology successfully merges religious dogma anchored in Christianity with American patriotism, which, practiced to an extreme extent, turns into nationalism. The “cultural framework – a collection of myths, traditions, symbols, narratives, and value systems – that idealizes [...] a fusion of Christianity with American civic life” (Whitehead and Perry, 2020: 10) is but the logical consequence and inevitable progression of the anti-secularist and mostly evangelical *Religious Right*. This movement was initiated by famous preachers such as Billy Graham and Jerry Falwell in the early 1960s when the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Feminist Movement all put conservatism in question: Conservative Christians “were appalled at the cultural assault on the nation’s Christian heritage [...] when a radical countercultural movement attacked what conservatives deemed sacred” (Lambert, 2008: 189). This socio-political development triggered the emergence of exactly this Christian and mostly evangelical conservative movement that has always strived for cultural hegemony based on its supposed superior morality. However, in its agenda, Christian nationalism goes well beyond this religious sphere and traditional denominations as it “uses Christian language and symbols to demarcate and defend group boundaries and privileges” (Whitehead and Perry, 2020: 87), ultimately favoring a white heteronormative patriarchal society.

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In 2016, the Christian nationalist movement gained major political power and influence due to the election of Donald Trump as the 45th president of the United States, whose campaign appealed to the movement because of its similarity to the Christian nationalist agenda: “Making America ‘great again’ seemed to mean making it both whiter and more Christian” (Gorski et al., 2022: 77). Grateful for their president’s “willingness to stack the courts and federal agencies with Christian right loyalists, and to give them full authority to transform a secular liberal democracy into a Christian nationalist autocracy” (ibid.: 260 f.), the Christian nationalist movement warmly welcomed the idea of a potential second term in office for Trump. With the threat of Trump’s possible defeat in the 2020 election becoming more and more imminent, his loyal followers supported “the idea that a corrupt ‘deep state’ had stolen [...] the election” (Pally, 2022: 59), facilitating the violent insurrection on January 6, 2021.

This essay, thus, seeks to evaluate the relationship between the Christian nationalist movement and former president Donald Trump by answering the following question: How exactly did Christian nationalists interpret Trump’s loss in the 2020 election and how have they supported or contributed to the persistent myth of a stolen election?

By drawing on live church services broadcast by three pastors associated with the Christian nationalist movement, namely Greg Locke (*Global Vision Bible Church*), Ken Peters (*Patriot Church*), and Brian Gibson (*HIS Church*), this contribution serves to prove that the Christian nationalist movement has been a driving force behind the myth of a stolen election after Trump’s loss in the 2020 presidential election. In their sermons, the three pastors combine biblical language and the scripture with a clear political agenda, trying to convince their congregation that the election was stolen from them and that Democrats, especially President Joe Biden and his supporters, are not following God’s plan for the nation. Consequently, they are calling their followers to Washington D.C. on January 6, 2021, to fight voter fraud and support *their* president Trump. They evoke an apocalyptic mood by announcing that God is going to reveal himself to true Christian Americans only, which naturally includes themselves and their congregations. This narrative of *us versus them*¹ and, finally, good Christians – the equivalent of good Americans – versus bad Christians – and, consequently, bad Americans – is supported throughout all three sermons and reinforced by the vision of the imminent apocalypse.

The sermons chosen for this research all took place shortly before the riot at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021. Both Pastors Locke and Peters delivered their sermons as part of their regular Sunday services in their respective

1 This narrative is rooted in the Christian fight against liberal secularism and can be traced back to the early beginnings of the Christian conservative movement and the *Religious Right*. Moreover, it can be linked to Hunter’s framework of the so-called “culture wars” as explored in his pioneering work *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*.

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churches on January 3, 2021. On his various social media outlets such as Facebook and Instagram, Locke's homily is titled "Join us as Pastor Greg Locke preaches on Being Loosed From the Bondage of Satan." It has a total duration of 95 minutes. Peters' 90-minute sermon was broadcast under the regular title of "Get ready for Sunday!" used for every Sunday service. Gibson, however, has chosen a stage other than his church in Kentucky for his deliverance: The speaker's podium at the *March for Trump* in West Monroe, L.A., on January 2, 2021. The event took place as part of a cross-country bus tour organized by the *Women for America First* movement to support President Trump and fight Biden's victory in the 2020 election under the allegation of manipulated and wrongful election results. During their many rallies, "speakers mixed religious and nationalist fervor with incendiary claims about the election" (Tanfani et al., 2021). This also applies to Gibson, whose political performance on stage can clearly be classified as religious since it contains elements of preaching such as religiously loaded language, biblical allegories, and a closing prayer. His 13-minute speech at the rally was posted on his personal Facebook page with the following description: "The American Revolution was sparked in the pulpit when preachers began to thunder in the pulpit. We're praying for revival unlike anything we've ever seen!"

Mixing the language of warfare with biblical analogies and alternative facts that reinterpret reality and make the message of Christian nationalism possible in the first place, the three pastors have contributed to the persistent myth of a stolen election. At the same time, they incited violence by calling their loyal followers to Washington D.C., on January 6, 2021, to support *their* president, namely Donald Trump. In the following, this assertion will be proven by analyzing the pastors' rhetoric and recurrent motives in all three sermons.

The Messiah Donald Trump and the *Big Lie*

At first glance, the alliance between Christian nationalists, who view moral standards derived from the Bible as an absolute necessity, and reality TV star and businessman Donald Trump seems highly unlikely, especially given his many immoral missteps and scandals. Moreover, Trump has proven his religious ignorance more often than not by, for example, misquoting a popular Bible verse and referring to it as "Two Corinthians" instead of "Second Corinthians" while delivering a speech at a private Christian university (Kilgore, 2020). However, during his first presidential campaign, he managed to become the movement's hero despite – or perhaps precisely because of – his sinful behavior and lack of religious knowledge. To justify their support for the sinner, Christian nationalists tend to employ a biblical narrative that glorifies Trump and turns him into a God-sent messiah:

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God chooses imperfect vessels to embody His will. Trump may have paid prostitutes and bragged about grabbing women ‘by the pussy’, but the biblical King David [...] murdered Uriah the Hittite, Bathsheba’s husband, so he could freely bed her. (Simon, 2021: 10)

This is just one of the many narratives employed to justify religiously motivated support for the former president. Their shared denominator is the conviction that Trump is the hero they have been waiting for who would eventually lead the formerly great American nation out of its deep crisis and save it from the dangers and excesses of liberalism. Trump’s campaign strategy and rhetoric on how to “Make America Great Again” (MAGA) resonated with the Christian nationalist mind because of it being a “semi-secularized version of white Christian nationalism’s deep story” (Gorski et al., 2022: 84).² The Christian nationalist deep story goes as follows:

America was founded as a Christian nation. The Pilgrims were traditional Christians. So were the Founding Fathers. This is why God showered so many blessings on America for so long. This is why America became so rich and powerful. But now America is falling away from its Christian heritage. It is no longer obeying God’s laws. [...] The only way to turn back the tide – the only way to make America great again, if you like – is for Christians to take back the country. Or at least to push back hard against its enemies – the liberals, secularists, and humanists who have been taking over. (Gorski, 2022: 109)

The MAGA campaign, thus, appealed to Christian nationalists because of Trump’s promise to save (white) Christians from persecution and marginalization by restoring their religious, social, and political power and, consequently, their hegemonic status in the nation.

When it became clear that Trump would not be granted a second term in office, many of his loyal followers, including the Christian nationalist camp, embraced and supported the idea of a stolen election – Trump’s *Big Lie*. Following the already existing pattern of fear and a narrative of victimization, Christian nationalists thought of Biden’s victory as a liberal plot planned to fight Christianity in the U.S. and minimize its spheres of influence. Consequently, in the Christian nationalist imagination, Trump would have easily won the election if foul play had not been involved in the process. Both Trump himself and his staff as well as the Christian nationalist movement with its many pastors and supporters “spent the weeks after the election cultivating the feelings of unjust loss, theft, and, more importantly, the desire to fight back against this perceived wrong in the name of their god” (Seidel, 2021: 301). Since God has selected Trump as his ‘chosen one,’ Christian na-

² Hochschild provides the following definition for the concept of the deep story: “A deep story is a feels-as-if story—it’s the story feelings tell, in the language of symbols. It removes judgment. It removes facts” (2016: 135).

tionalists “differentiate the ‘real results’ of the election (as revealed by God) from the real results of the election (as certified through democratic and constitutional means)” (Rowley, 2021: 146). In their eyes, “divine revelation relativises democratic results” (ibid.: 146). Like many Trump supporters, Locke, Peters, and Gibson also believe that “Trump will achieve MAGA because God has anointed him to carry out his mission. He may not be a Christian, but God has chosen him to protect Christians and therefore America” (Posner, 2020: 15).

Pastor Locke establishes a connection between President Trump and Jesus by implying that Trump is “somebody to stand up with some authority and use that authority in the name of God” (Locke, 2021: 00:39:31–00:39:35). He compares him to Jesus and his actions as described in Luke 13.³ Throughout his sermon, the clergyman even takes it one step further and contrasts Jesus with progressive liberal politicians stating that “Jesus didn’t give you a bunch of mind-boggling political opinions. He said, ‘Here’s what the bible says!’” (ibid.: 00:41:55–00:41:57). It becomes obvious that Locke advocates for a fundamentalist reading of the Bible, which should, in his mind, directly influence American politics and reduce these “mind-boggling political opinions.” By comparing him with Jesus, Locke portrays the former president as the only suitable leader who has the authority and power to restore America’s greatness and heal it from its “spirit of infirmity” (Luke 13:11; Locke, 2021: 00:42:34–00:45:25), just like Jesus healed the crippled woman in Luke 13. By using this passage of scripture for political ends, Locke employs a “prophetic and miraculous discourse [...] in the service of seizing political authority for Trump” (Rowley, 2021: 146). At the same time, his rhetoric aims at degrading Trump’s supposed opponents and the movement’s secular enemies. Despite the explicit political agenda that drives his sermon, Locke assures his congregation that he “ain’t talking politics [...] but] Bible” (Locke, 2021: 01:17:10–01:17:13). Thus, he suggests that the Bible offers solutions and strategies suitable for contemporary political problems.

His fellow pastor Ken Peters follows the same narrative by referring to his congregation as “servants to the kingdom of God, servants to their church [...] and servants to their [...] nation” (Peters, 2021: 00:15:49–00:15:55). Here again, a relationship between religion (kingdom of God, church) and politics (nation) is emphasized, putting the focus on the political duties good Christians have in order to make their country great again. Following the words of former attorney general John Ashcroft, according to whom “America has no king but Jesus” (Goldberg, 2006: 28), Peters underlines the authority of religion in opposition to earthly and, therefore, meaningless politicians. To substantiate the claim of a stolen election by biblical means, Peters draws on Philippians 12, where the term “crooked nation” is mentioned in verse

3 The King James Version of the Bible was used for this paper.

15. He relates this concept of a crooked nation to the 2020 election and its process by stating that “something crooked went on” (Peters, 2021: 01:04:46–01:04:48) for which he supposedly has evidence:

We’ve seen them run ballots through over and over, we’ve seen them pull ballots out of from underneath tables. Everything shut down. I went to bed, I thought Trump’s got it easy. Went to bed, woke up in the morning, found out Biden won. In the middle of the night, like a thief in the night, he won. We know this, there is crooked that’s going on. [...] We live in a crooked nation. And that’s what Paul is saying here in the church of Philippi, he was saying ‘You are in a crooked nation’ and, unfortunately, we’re in that same boat. (Peters, 2021: 01:04:53–01:05:36)

By portraying Biden as a crooked thief who stole the electoral victory from Trump, its rightful winner, Peters enforces the *Big Lie* propaganda, initiated by Trump’s “populist rhetoric that encouraged the belief among his supporters that the 2020 election was stolen from him – and by extension, therefore, from them” (McDaniel et al., 2022: 169). The pastor incites further hatred by referring to Biden as “sleepy Joe” (Peters, 2021: 00:15:03) – a nickname Trump liked to use to refer to his political opponent Joe Biden (Gorski et al., 2022: 91). Apart from this, Peters explicitly mentions that Trump supporters are “coming against fraud” (Peters, 2021: 00:15:06–00:15:09).

Just like his colleagues, Gibson also supports the *Big Lie*. He rounds off his short sermon at the March for Trump on January 2, 2021, with a prayer, partly issued for Trump: “I pray in the name of Jesus for four more years and I pray for every lying tongue to be exposed and every wicked action to be stopped. We declare these things in Jesus’ mighty name” (Gibson, 2021: 00:12:43–00:12:59). A divine power in the form of Jesus is invoked to guarantee Trump’s electoral victory and consequently prevent Biden’s upcoming presidency, which is described as a wicked action. Here again, we find a direct juxtaposition of Trump, the earthly representative of God, and Jesus, the original Messiah.

Pastors Locke, Peters, and Gibson stirred up (verbal) hatred in their sermons merely days before the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol took place, where this type of hatred and fomented violence was unleashed. Just like their Messiah Trump, the religious leaders are “master[s] of verbal violence, skilled at using words as weapons to wound opponents and intimidate rivals” (Gorski et al., 2022: 91). As proven, it is primarily the then newly elected President Joe Biden, whom they see as their rival trying to take away their religious freedom and power by manipulating the democratic process and, thus, winning the election in an immoral and sheer conniving way. How exactly they manage to create and transfer this combative atmosphere will be the focus of analysis in the following chapter.

The Christian Crusade

In general, violence is a central theme for Christian nationalism, especially in its interaction with freedom and order:

The general principle is this: [W]hite men must sometimes exercise righteous violence to defend (their) freedom and maintain social (and racial) order. It is freedom for ‘us’ and authoritarian social order for ‘them.’ (Gorski et al., 2022: 7)

This ideology and interpretation of reality results in a categorical division of society into two groups: The adherents and supporters of Christian nationalism and its opponents. For the group itself, this division can be reduced to a fundamental distinction between *us vs. them*, which may lead to (in their eyes, justified) violence if the members of the in-group feel threatened by the out-group.⁴ Considering “[t]he decline of church attendance or membership, as well as the transformation of Christianity’s political significance” (van der Tol and Rowley, 2021: 104), the fear of marginalization and a sense of victimhood is ubiquitous in the Christian nationalist mind that is in a constant fight against secular liberalism. Consequently, Christian nationalism as a religious and political framework is the only effective antidote for harmful liberal policies that directly threaten the core of the American nation. The sense of victimhood agrees with the origins of the Religious Right movement, which has always centered on the fundamental belief that “America has abandoned its historical religious foundations and needs to be restored to its proper status as a Christian nation” (Lane, 2008: 25). When translating this cultural vision to the 2020 election and the *Big Lie*, “Trump’s loyal followers see their divine leader as a victim beset by enemies from multiple directions and see themselves as spiritual warriors called by God to protect him” (Posner, 2020: 246). This warlike and pugnacious mindset also becomes noticeable in the chosen worship services that produce rhetoric inspired by violence.

The very beginnings of all three sermons already set the tone for what is to come: Within the first few seconds of speech, the pastors all mention the verb *to fight*, like in “God is fighting for us” (Locke, 2021: 00:10:57), “Because the world, the one fighting with them, is Satan, right. Now for us, the one fighting for us, is God” (Peters, 2021: 00:06:01–00:06:11), or “Anybody believes America is still worth fighting for?” (Gibson, 2021: 00:00:02–00:00:05). Additionally, Locke and Peters already established their narrative of *us vs. them*, relating their camp of the cultural battle to God and the liberal, progres-

4 In sociology and social psychology, the theory of in-group and out-group identities is crucial for understanding society. This concept describes a “differentiation between the group containing the self, the in-group, and other groups, the out-groups” (Dovidio et al., 2010: 192). This understanding consequently leads to a supposedly superior in-group identity and the discrimination of out-groups perceived as inferior and less worthy (ibid.: 193).

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sive side to Satan. This antagonistic narrative is reinforced throughout their sermons and is also applied by their colleague Gibson.

Sticking with the theme of word choice, it is striking that the three church leaders all follow the same lexical patterns to convey their combative message making use of the word field of war and battle. This comprises words such as “battle” (Peters, 2021: 00:06:17), “battlefield” (Gibson, 2021: 00:08:49, 00:08:51), “battleship” (Locke, 2021: 01:14:21), as well as the explicit mention of “war” (Locke, 2021: 01:22:59; Gibson, 2021: 00:08:15, 00:08:45) and the people involved in such a war, like “the minutemen and the militiamen” (Gibson, 2021: 00:08:41–00:08:43), the “enemy” (Locke 00:20:47), and “army/armies” (Locke, 2021: 01:15:27, 01:15:31, 01:16:43) – note how the stylistic device of repetition is used here to emphasize this particular word within a period of merely one and a half minute. In keeping with the applied reasoning in the services, it is worth referring to Locke’s first book of his “spiritual warfare series” (as stated on the front page), provocatively titled *This Means War* (2020). In his book, the pastor devotes 168 pages to the violent vision of Christian nationalists based primarily on the premise that the U.S. was founded as a Christian nation and that liberal politics has forced the country and society to turn away from that Christian foundation, leading to evil and misery. It is, therefore, according to Locke and his colleagues, the duty of every good and, thus, patriotic American Christian to bring biblical ideology back into the sphere of politics and to reduce secularism to a minimum, for only in this way can the country be restored to its glory and its exceptional status within the global frame. This understanding of the nation is based on American religious exceptionalism, which “politicizes religion and religionizes politics, rendering piety and patriotism as indistinguishable” (McDaniel et al., 2022: 24). Following this ideological framework, Christian nationalists claim that the nation was founded on religious principles, and is thereby, by its very origins, a Christian nation. This myth is also addressed in the sermons: Gibson, for example, asserts that “the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ birthed America” (Gibson, 2021: 00:02:41–00:02:56). In his opinion, God is to thank for the founding documents and the Bill of Rights, including the 1st Amendment that guarantees religious freedom. In his opinion, this is why “we ought to give God a handclap for the 1st [Amendment], we ought to give God a handclap for the 2nd that protects the 1st” (ibid.: 00:06:15–00:06:21). Likewise, his colleague Peters supports this argument and adds that the “nation was birthed with Christian roots on Judeo-Christian values” (ibid.: 00:16:27–00:16:32). It becomes apparent that, according to them, America was only able to achieve such greatness and glory because the nation was blessed by God from its very beginning. To restore America’s former greatness and exceptionality, Christian nationalists thus see it as indispensable to wage – a spiritual or, if necessary, even an actual – war against secular liberals, their arch-enemies that

intend to steal their religious rights and freedom from them by abolishing the 1st and the 2nd Amendment.

With Trump losing the election, Christian nationalists, like Locke, Peters, and Gibson, fear that they might lose their sphere of influence and power that is based on “reenthroning white Christian dominance through xenophobic politics and a culture war based on violence and terrorism” (Jones, 2020: 106). This culture war also entails the degradation of one’s supposed opponents. The pastors do so by, firstly, relating their “enemies” (Locke, 2021: 00:20:47) to Satan and his kingdom of evil. Secondly, they employ biblical allegories and metaphors to give more emphasis and urgency to their claim of the election being stolen from them, righteous and true Americans whose “archest of enemies are the misguided souls who would champion ‘social justice’” (Stewart, 2019: 125).

Both Locke and Gibson do so by talking about the Jezebel Spirit (Locke, 2021: 00:48:45–00:48:47; Gibson, 2021: 00:05:14–00:05:16, 00:05:24–00:05:35), which is never explicitly mentioned in the Bible but symbolically implied. The spirit can be described as “[a] disposition, or demonic influence, that causes to create rifts in the church and in marriages through cunning, deception, and seduction” (Bolinger, 2022). According to Gibson, “it’s time for the prophets in America to raise their voice because there’s an Ahab and a Jezebel that want the heart and the soul of America” (Gibson, 2021: 00:05:09–00:05:18). Throughout Locke’s sermon, the metaphor of evil spirits is continuously reinforced by additional biblical passages that serve as his basis for interpretation: Luke 13 and Ephesians 2. While the first centers on a “spirit of infirmity” (Luke 13:11), the latter talks about a “spirit of disobedience” (Ephesians 2:2). Altogether, he specifies these spirits as given by the devil and lets his audience know that “only the spirit of God can break the power of the devil’s spirit and the oppressive demonic spirit that we have in our life” (Locke, 2021: 00:49:20–00:46:26). With special regard to the political situation, he diagnoses that America is suffering from a spirit that has “crept its way into the church, [...] into the White House, [...] into every aspect of humanity” (ibid., 2021: 00:52:00–00:52:10). According to Locke, this is largely the fault of the liberal side because they are possessed by yet another spirit, namely the “spirit of delusion” (ibid., 2021:01:17:15–01:17:18). Unlike his opponents, he “got the Holy Spirit” (ibid., 2021:01:16:13–01:16:16), which makes him invincible (ibid., 2021: 01:16:50). This clear opposition between the in-group portrayed as operating under God’s will and blessed by the Holy Spirit and the out-group portrayed as the devil’s army who is possessed by evil spirits fits into the framework and mechanisms of Christian nationalism. Locke also lays out his declaration of war against these spirits in his book, which reads as follows: “This is a fight against anything evil and wicked in this world, and by all indications, this is a battle for the souls of humanity. [...]

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This is a rallying of troops in God’s holy army” (Locke, 2020: 3). To save the once hegemonic status of Christianity in the nation, this “holy army” is to fight against “the deconstruction of Christian influence in America [which] has been the primary goal of globalist progressives over the past 50 years” (ibid.: 13).

Similar to Locke and the aforementioned spirit of homosexuality, Peters labels typically progressive politics centering on issues such as gender and sexuality as “Satan’s plan” (Peters, 2021: 01:07:54). Sticking to the supposedly evil power of progressive politics, Peters takes it one step further by stating that “Leftism doesn’t understand human nature” (ibid., 2021: 01:14:24–01:14:28), rendering liberal and progressive politics inhumane. According to the pastor, real Christians – not “lukewarm Christian[s]”⁵ (ibid., 2021: 01:15:47) – are “gonna win in Jesus’ name and [...] be successful together in Jesus’ name” (ibid., 2021: 01:23:06–01:23:14) in their fight against Satan and his worldly army.

Additionally, the portrayal of left politics anchored in communism as the arch-enemy of the American nation is reinforced by Gibson, who compares Americans to Chinese, affirming that “American men [need] to start acting like American men or [they are] gonna have to live like Chinese men under a communist regime” (Gibson, 2021: 00:02:57–00:03:05). Likewise, Peters proclaims that “Communism is based on a falsehood” (Peters, 2021: 01:14:39–01:14:43). A look back into history shows that during the 20th century and especially the period of the Cold War, “the second order was for born-again Americans to embrace ‘Americanism’ as a way to protect the nation and its citizens from the communist threat,” next to personal salvation as “the first order of business” (Butler, 2021: 42). Early leaders of the Religious Right like televangelist Billy Graham established the persistent trope of communism and socialism as the major enemy of the supposedly Christian nation: “For evangelicals, communism was not simply a social movement but an atheist movement that, with almost religious fervor, sought to destroy Christianity” (ibid.: 40). Until today, a large part of American society is still opposed to social democracy because, for them, “Christianity and socialism are incompatible” (Gorski, 2022: 23).

5 Revelation 3:16 mentions the term *lukewarm*: “So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth.” In this verse, Jesus describes the church of Laodicea as “lukewarm” because they drank neither hot nor cold but lukewarm water during religious sacrifices. This made Jesus feel so sick he felt like vomiting. The term lukewarm illustrates that it is best to be *spiritually hot*, which means actively engaged in faith. Those who are cold still have an opportunity to be influenced and brought on the right path. However, being lukewarm is the worst place for a Christian to be. Therefore, the term is used by Christian nationalists (here: Ken Peters) to express their resentment for, in their eyes, hypocritical and pretentious Christians, as can often be found in traditional denominational churches.

Apart from the Bible passages and the idea of evil spirits haunting the nation and thus threatening its exceptional status, the pastors employ further religious narratives to transmit their message. Gibson, for example, mentions how pastors, on the one hand, “lead sheep” and, on the other hand, “kill wolves” (Gibson, 2021: 00:08:16–00:08:23). Following biblical symbolism and its meaning, the sheep is a “clean, patient, harmless animal” representing “[a]ll the children of God” (Smith, 1812: 337). As a symbol of submission and modesty, the sheep is used to describe the in-group of Christian nationalism that is being led by their divine shepherd, Jesus Christ. On earth, he is represented by pastors like Gibson who guide his flock for him and in his will. The wolf, in contrast, is described as a ferocious animal, whose primary goal is to kill other animals, such as innocent sheep, and create devastation (Smith, 1812: 375). This juxtaposition of the good sheep and the bad wolf reinforces the prevalent mentality of *us vs. them*. In this context, the symbol of the sheep is about Gibson’s audience and, figuratively, all the obedient Christians and, thus, good Americans. Likewise, Locke refers to his congregants as “[h]is [s]heep” (Locke, 2020: 29). Meanwhile, the wolf is personified by all the faithless and unbelieving secularists and, consequently, bad Americans. In keeping with this, research proves that “the mere notion of atheism causes great angst and stress among those who are most committed to protecting and promoting religion’s role in American society” (McDaniel et al., 2022: 45). Suggesting that “you cannot negotiate with wolves” (Gibson, 2021: 00:08:28–00:08:31), Gibson continues his line of thought focused primarily on eliminating wolves and, therefore, eliminating secularism and atheism among American politics and cultures. He combines this with a depiction of war-like scenes (ibid., 2021: 00:08:35–00:08:57). Additionally, Gibson also includes the image of the lamb – as a sacrificial animal and “example of creation-typology” (Fabiny, 1992: 64) – into his speech. He refers to the lamb various times and puts a lot of emphasis on its symbolical meaning (e.g. Gibson, 2021: 00:09:17). The lamb represents “the most perfect gift of creation” (Fabiny, 1992: 65). In contrast to the purity of the lamb, Gibson uses the symbol of the ferocious lion to clarify that “in America right now [...], it’s time to play the lion. It’s time to speak up” (Gibson, 2021: 00:10:58–00:11:06), reinforcing the battle-like character of the nation’s political situation and stressing the urgency of fighting back.

Moreover, Peters applies the biblical story of David and Goliath to the situation, thereby combining both the idea of spirits and the image of the lion:

We meet Goliath face to face and head-on, knowing that he that’s in us is greater than he that’s in the world. And devil you can taunt us all you want but we have the spirit of the Lion of the tribe of Judah inside of us, from the seed of David, and we meet Goliath head-on, and we will win, not because we are great, but because the Great One’s inside of us and that makes me great. (Peters, 2021: 01:29:41–01:30:09)

In the Christian nationalist mind, the contemporary Goliath is personified by the liberal and secular movement as represented by the Democratic Party and, regarding the 2020 election, Trump's opponent Joe Biden. Since their in-group is supported by God himself, they are virtually invincible. Thus, according to the pastor's argumentation, their enemies, who suffer from an evil spirit orchestrated by the devil, cannot triumph over them.

All in all, Christian nationalist ideology "transforms democratic debate between opposing parties into an all-out war between the forces of good and evil" (Gorski, 2022: 66–67). This chapter has shown that, concerning the 2020 election and the allegations of voter fraud, Locke, Peters, and Gibson unambiguously used violent rhetoric to disseminate their divisive and populist message among their audiences. Their argumentation rests on the premise that "[w]hite Christian citizens have God-given rights, right to 'life, liberty, and property'" (ibid.: 101). Whenever these inalienable rights are threatened, Christian nationalists may apply violence (justified by God) to guarantee order. For them, this type of "violence is [...] the most fundamental expression of freedom" (ibid.: 102). Furthermore, the Christian nationalist pastors follow their political leader Trump in his rhetorical warfare because, just like him, they have perfected their "skill and persistence in plumbing us-them frameworks long vibrant in it [=American culture]" (Pally, 2022: 60).

Doomsday

Prepared to use the sword along with the cross to defend their rights and restore their power, Christian nationalists justify violence by putting it in a religious disguise that is sewn together with a biblical narrative of conquest and apocalypse. To this end, Christian nationalists believe in the apocalyptic writings presented in the Book of Daniel and the Revelation of John (Gorski, 2022: 111). Within the scope of this analysis, it has already been proven that the Christian nationalist pastors Locke, Peters, and Gibson exploit the narrative of *us vs. them* to provide the necessary foundation for their line of argument and ideology, which is deeply rooted in apocalyptic anger that "originates in the evangelical theological emphasis on human sin and divine judgment" (Jones, 2016: 203). Their final goal is to birth a Christian nation on American soil, where either (white) conservative Christians, namely they themselves, will govern as the Bible allegedly preaches or God himself will enter the throne and transform the U.S. into the very center of his kingdom. The apocalypse, thus, will make true their "motivating dream of [...] the restoration of an imagined Christian nation" (Goldberg, 2006: 7). Their satanic enemies, in contrast, will be sent off to hell, where they and their evil spirits rightly belong, according to Locke, Peters, and Gibson. In their sermons, the pastors prophetically present January 6, 2021 – the day for which the joint

session of Congress was set to count electoral votes and certify Joe Biden's electoral victory – as doomsday.

Two out of the three pastors presented explicitly mention the date of January 6 in their sermons, namely Locke and Peters. They do so multiple times (e.g. Locke, 2021: 00:13:18–00:13:42, Peters, 2021: 00:13:37–00:14:45). Gibson, on the contrary, never mentions the exact date or the rally planned by then-President Trump at the Ellipse near the White House, and only implies that the apocalypse and “revival” (Gibson, 2021: 00:12:27) are near. Given the fact that Gibson's speech is held at a political event planned and executed by *Women for Trump* in West Monroe and aimed at “stopping the steal,” it is, however, not surprising that the pastor promotes political activism by conservative Christians and merges religion and politics in the form of supporting Trump. Like his colleagues Locke and Peters, he applies militant and apocalyptic rhetoric aimed at implementing God's kingdom on earth.

Unlike Gibson, both Locke and Peters try to actively mobilize their congregation to travel to Washington D.C. and participate in the rally on January 6 at the very beginning of their sermons. Locke, for instance, lets his flock know that the “President has asked as many patriots as can possibly be in D.C. to get to D.C.” (Locke, 2021: 00:13:18–00:13:23), which is why “people [...] from around the world [...] are gonna be there that day” (ibid.: 00:14:19–00:14:24). Peters informs his audience of the upcoming event in the following way:

On Wednesday, there's a little tiny rally going on [...]. Just a little one, all right. It's in Washington D.C. President Trump, it's the first time he's ever done this. He's asked us personally to be there. Now I know, many of you can't, but [...], if you can, make it. Please come to D.C., get there maybe on Tuesday, or get there early on Wednesday. I think the stuff starts around ten in the morning. All right, so you wanna be within striking distance. Listen, I think [...] there's gonna be 5 million people there. (Peters, 2021: 00:13:37–00:14:15)

Not wanting to miss out on what the fellow members of their in-group might experience on January 6, it is likely that the pastors' mobilization has led to some of their congregants traveling to D.C. to participate in the rally planned by their president, Donald Trump. In a way, thus, the January 6 riot that tried to overturn the presidential election in favor of Trump can be characterized as a national ritual with religious motivation. As Marvin and Ingle state, “[w]ars and presidential elections are the most important national rituals. [...] Failed rituals produce disunity” (1999: 92). In the Christian nationalist perception, the 2020 election was indeed a failed ritual since the electoral victory was stolen from Trump, and thereby from them, in an unjust way. Wanting to overturn the election and consequently reinstate righteousness, many adherents of the movement participated in the rally at the Ellipse and, later that

day, the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol. Consequently, the pastors' call to participate in the rally and actively engage in the movement's agenda to "stop the steal" and liberate the nation from its evil spirit, enabled and drove this ritual in the first place.

Moreover, Locke and Peters depict January 6 as a crucial day for both their community and American society in general by combining the expectation of this day with the notion of the imminent apocalypse. However, there is one difference that separates Locke and Peters in their message: While Locke attributes the sole power and responsibility for revival to God, Peters relies on God's human army to establish "a kingdom of heaven on earth" (Peters, 2021: 01:27:04–01:27:38). Additionally, Locke is convinced that "God's gonna do something in this nation and [he] believe[s] what God is about to do on the 6th is gonna be so unbelievable" (Locke, 2021: 00:13:57–00:14:04). His friend Peters, however, states that "something's about to drop in D.C. [... because] Trump has a plan" (Peters, 2021: 00:15:10–00:15:15). Thus, regarding Christian eschatology, Locke follows the idea of premillennialism – or, as he likes to call it, the "pre-trib' belief" (Locke, 2020: 11) with a reference to pre-tribulation – whilst Peters adheres to postmillennialism. Therefore, in Peter's understanding of Christianity, it is Trump who will create an ideal Christian nation with the help of his loyal spiritual army based in his church: Ultimately, Patriot Church is "all about [s]haking the gates of hell [...] and set[ting] up a kingdom of heaven on earth" (Peters, 2021: 01:27:05–01:27:28). Meanwhile, Locke assumes that the fate of the nation lies in God's hands: "I declare to you that God almighty is about to get glory. [...] He's about to do something in this nation that's gonna be so glorious, so supernatural [...], that can't nobody get the glory except God" (Locke, 2021: 01:14:45–01:16:00).

Gibson, the third pastor in the group, implies throughout his speech that he is also a disciple of premillennialism. For instance, he mentions that "he [Jesus] is coming back for his Church [...] and] he will turn all the wrongs right on this earth" (Gibson, 2021: 00:10:23–00:10:34). Moreover, he asks God to "shake America from the sea [...], from Canada to Mexico" and trigger "the greatest awakening that's ever hit this nation" (ibid., 2021: 00:12:28–00:12:36). He also thanks him for saving the Republic (ibid., 2021: 00:12:23–00:12:25). Despite their disagreement in terms of eschatology, it becomes obvious that the pastors all believe that the apocalypse is near and connected to January 6, 2021 – whether explicitly mentioned or not. What they differ most, is to whom they attribute the agency to transform the U.S. into a sacred nation based on biblical principles.

In sum, Locke, Peters, and Gibson – as representatives of the religious and pseudo-institutional branch of Christian nationalism – use their prophetic vision of the imminent apocalypse to justify anticipated (political) violence and the movement's anti-democratic tendencies. By declaring January 6, 2021,

as the eventual doomsday, they give their loyal flock the feeling of belonging to an exceptional movement ordained and directed by God himself. In their minds, this crusade will ultimately achieve tremendous glory and protect their beloved nation from “heathen darkness” (Juergensmeyer, 2017: 40) in the form of a secular state, personified by Biden, whose presidency must be prevented at all costs.

Conclusion

The preceding analysis was able to demonstrate that the three Christian nationalist pastors – Greg Locke, Ken Peters, and Brian Gibson – have disseminated Trump’s myth of the stolen election. To reinforce their message, the pastors have used the frame of *us vs. them*, which is central to the “culture wars.” These wars have been fought between liberal secularists in favor of progressive politics and orthodox conservatives advocating for traditional values rooted in the Christian faith since the early 1960s. Furthermore, the pastors have portrayed then-President Trump as the nation’s savior and Messiah, who will eventually expose the evil and satanic forces rooted in the Democratic party and the political establishment and bring back America’s former greatness that is closely linked to its allegedly religious heritage. By presenting January 6, 2021, as a prophetic day that will decide the nation’s faith, they have tried to lure as many Trump supporters as possible to Washington D.C., where both Trump’s *Save America* rally and the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol took place. The Capitol building is often referred to as the nation’s symbol of democracy representing the inseparable union of the American people. By storming this building and leaving a trail of violence and sheer devastation behind, the insurrectionists have directly attacked democracy. Their assault has left both the American people and the global community speechless because, up to that point, no one had truly realized the actual threat that anti-democratic efforts such as the Christian Nationalist movement pose to modern democracy.

However, the Capitol riot – described as “a stain on US history, ending more than two centuries of pride in an American democracy that had provided forty-four consecutive peaceful transitions of power” (Jones, 2020: 239) – has not been the movement’s last mission. Roughly one and a half years after the insurrection had taken place, the conservative Christian movement managed to achieve its long-desired goal of abolishing the female right to abortion. This decision was championed by Pastors Locke, Peters, and Gibson alike. President Trump’s legacy – a predominantly conservative Supreme Court – remains vivid, even after his electoral defeat, which he and his loyal supporters refuse to acknowledge until this very day.

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