

## Article

# The “Right” History: Religion, Race, and Nostalgic Stories of Christian America

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**Abstract:** A wide range of right-wing movements are bound together by their adherence to a nostalgic vision of the United States as a “Christian nation,” yet there are meaningful differences in the specific narratives promoted by these groups that are not fully understood. This article identifies two ideal-typical versions of this narrative: the *white Christian nation* and the *colorblind Judeo-Christian nation*. The two narratives share a common declension structure, but differ in their framing of how religion and race intersect as markers of American belonging and power. Although participants in right-wing movements often slide back and forth between the two narratives in practice, distinguishing between them analytically enables us to better understand how the two renderings of American history carry different meanings and perform different kinds of political work for participants in these movements. Theoretically, the analysis extends the insights of a “complex religion” approach to sites beyond organized religion, while also demonstrating how scholarship on Christian nationalism and on right-wing movements’ use of national history could each be enhanced by greater attention to the other.

**Keywords:** Christian nationalism; right-wing movements; race; religion; nostalgia

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## 1. Introduction: The Christian Nation in Peril

### *Religion, Race, and Mythical Visions of American History*

When people think of the role religion plays in right-wing social movements, they tend to focus exclusively on the Religious Right, a movement that mobilizes conservative Christians around issues explicitly linked to their faith. Yet religion plays important roles in *most* right-wing social movements in the United States, including many that are not explicitly “religious,” such as the Tea Party movement, the patriot/militia movement, the sovereign citizen movement, the tax protest movement, and white supremacist movements such as the Ku Klux Klan. Most recently, members of far-right groups, such as the Proud Boys, deployed “Christian rituals, symbols and language” during their violent January 6<sup>th</sup> attempt to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election in Donald Trump’s favor (Dias and Graham 2021). Despite their many differences, these groups are loosely bound together by their adherence to a mythical vision of the United States as a “Christian nation” that must be protected and preserved (Braunstein 2017b, 2018; Gorski 2017a; Green 2015; Kruse 2015; Seidel 2019; Whitehead and Perry 2020).

The growing body of research on Christian nationalism has not been attuned enough to these complex and varied uses of the Christian nation myth in right-wing movements beyond the Religious Right. Meanwhile, although recent research has demonstrated how a nostalgic orientation toward American history is central to right-wing movements’ cultures and guides participants’ practices and attitudes (Aho 2016; Braunstein 2017b; Cooter 2013; Jackson 2020; McCann 2019), most work on the American right has, rightfully, focused on the role that race and racism play in this historical mythology. As such, researchers have not been sufficiently attuned to how religion intersects with race in these groups’

construction of American history and ideal “Americanness” (Cooter 2013). Understanding the right’s historical narrative through the lens of the Christian nation myth not only brings religion’s role in these movements to the foreground, but also reveals how religion is deeply entangled with these groups’ racialized identities and attitudes.

In this article, I analyze previous research on right-wing movements using a “complex religion” approach (Wilde 2018), with a particular emphasis on how religion and race intersect in the “stories of American peoplehood” these movements deploy (Braunstein 2017b, 2018; Smith 2003). I find they draw on two competing ideal-typical framings of the Christian nation narrative: the *white Christian nation* (WCN) and the *colorblind Judeo-Christian nation* (CJCN). Structurally, both are narratives of original perfection, decline, and potential restoration. Yet this structural similarity masks variation in the content of the narratives that circulate on the right. An examination of how religion and race intersect in right-wing movements’ ideal visions of Americanness and its enemies reveals meaningful differences that are not fully understood. Although participants in right-wing movements often slide back and forth between the two narratives in practice, distinguishing between them analytically enables us to better understand how the two renderings of American history carry different meanings and perform different kinds of political work for participants in these movements. In so doing, the analysis extends the insights of a “complex religion” approach to sites beyond organized religion, while also demonstrating how scholarship on Christian nationalism and on right-wing movements’ use of national history could each be enhanced by greater attention to the other.

## 2. Literature Review: “Complex Religion” and Nationalist Narratives

### 2.1. “Complex Religion” beyond Organized Religion

By analyzing how religion and race intersect in right-wing movements’ ideal visions of Americanness and its enemies, this article draws on and extends the burgeoning study of “complex religion” in America. Originally advanced by Wilde (2018, p. 294), this approach calls for greater attention to how religion “deeply intersect(s) with race, ethnicity, class, and, consequently, gender and sexuality” and to how “these relationships have been reproduced over time.” Wilde draws on theories of intersectionality to argue that religion should not simply be operationalized as a standalone “variable,” but as one of many social characteristics that define a “cell”: “what matters is not just religion or race or class—but it is the combination of these factors, and how they differ in those combinations ... that matters” (p. 294). In recent years, researchers of religion and American politics have moved toward this approach in their recognition that religion cannot be considered apart from its intersections with social factors such as race (Wilde and Glassman 2016; Yukich and Edgell 2020). For example, recent research demonstrates that it is not religious conservatism alone that leads people to take conservative political views or support Republicans, since this is only true among majority white religious groups such as white evangelical Protestants, and not for those within “racialized religious traditions” such as Muslims, Black Protestants, and Latinx Catholics (O’Brien and Abdelhadi 2020; see also Edgell 2017; McDaniel and Ellison 2008).

The majority of research in the vein of complex religion has focused on individual-level religiosity or religious institutions such as denominations and congregations, and the extent to which the latter remain “a place of stark segregation by race, ethnicity, and class” (Wilde and Glassman 2016, p. 408). Yet this should not suggest these same dynamics are not present beyond personal and organized religion. Religion is part of the air that Americans breathe; it is mixed into the soil in which American institutions, laws, ideas and practices have taken root and grown (Williams 1999), and this more amorphous public religion, too, is “raced” (Williams 2020). Americans’ attitudes about religion’s public roles—including the proper place of Christianity in public life and of religion in defining the boundaries of American citizenship—are also shaped by a combination of racial and religious interests and identity (Braunstein 2017b; Braunstein and Taylor 2017; Delehanty

et al. 2018; Edgell et al. 2016; Edgell et al. 2006; Lichterman 2012; Whitehead and Perry 2020; Williams 2020). For this reason, Wilde and Glassman (2016, p. 409) are right to call for greater attention to the place of “complex religion” within social movements, political culture, and nationalism.

Such an approach promises to enlarge our understanding of religion’s role in “religio-racial projects” (Hill Fletcher 2017; see also Goldschmidt and McAlister 2004; Wilde and Danielsen 2014; Yukich and Edgell 2020). This concept builds on Omi and Winant’s (2015) concept of “racial projects” to account for how religion has been entangled in the project of defining and defending whiteness in America. While researchers have shown how such projects are advanced within specific religious communities (Jones 2020; Wilde and Danielsen 2014; Wilde 2018), less attention has been paid to how the religio-racial project of white Christian America mythology is promoted outside of “religious” spaces (cf. Joshi 2020). As this article shows, this mythology has been a key mobilizing tool for right-wing movements for more than a century, making these groups an important site in which to deepen our understanding of how religion and race intersect in Americans’ contested understandings of the country and their place within it.

## 2.2. Christian Nationalism and Right-Wing Movements

This article does not address the question of whether America was in fact founded as a “Christian nation” (Green 2015; Seidel 2019) or whether Christianity and American democracy are compatible or not (Gorski 2020). Rather, it views the understanding that America is a Christian nation as one of many foundational “myths” that Americans draw upon to make sense of their place in the country’s past, present and future, or as Gaston (2019, p. 1) puts it, to “dream America.” Moreover, it takes these myths seriously, accepting Kammen’s (1991) conclusion that “what people believe to be true about their past is usually more important in determining their behavior and responses than truth itself” (pp. 38–39). Research on the American right reveals not only frequent references to American history, mythology, and nostalgia within right-wing social movements, but also the extent to which these groups’ particular understandings of history guide participants’ attitudes and behaviors (Braunstein 2017b; Cooter 2013; Jackson 2020; Smith 2003). This phenomenon is not limited to right-wing movements—an emerging body of research on the “Marley Hypothesis” suggests a lack of “critical historical knowledge” is associated with racist attitudes among the general public (Bonam et al. 2019; see also Nelson et al. 2013),<sup>1</sup> and history can play a similar role within progressive movements (Braunstein 2017b; Murphy 2008; Smith 2003).

Yet there has not been sufficient attention to variation in these historical understandings on the right. To the contrary, because the American right is so heterogenous (Blee and Creasap 2010; Diamond 1995), some scholars propose that what actually ties many of these groups together is their *shared* nostalgic orientation toward a “mythologized” American past (Cooter 2013, pp. 5–6; Jackson 2020, p. 12).<sup>2</sup> This is a helpful corrective to accounts that erroneously presume shared ideological or policy commitments across widely disparate groups. Yet this focus on what is shared occludes our ability to recognize meaningful differences between different framings of American history on the right.

<sup>1</sup> I wish to thank Samuel L. Perry for bringing this line of research to my attention.

<sup>2</sup> Defining what counts as a right-wing movement is not only analytically complex; it is also politically contentious, as the label “right-wing” is resisted by some movements due to its association with extremism (Blee and Creasap 2010). Nonetheless, a broad typology of the right like that offered by Diamond (1995) is useful in that it enables us to see continuities and connections between disparate groups, including those sometimes separated into “conservative” and “right-wing” movements despite the reality that “a single movement is likely to have conservative and right-wing aspects” (Blee and Creasap 2010, p. 271). Although Diamond’s (1995) typology would benefit from an update to reflect new developments, I follow its lead in defining the right broadly, and especially bringing the Religious Right into the same analytic frame as the racist right and other conservative, nativist and anti-government groups (see also Blee and Creasap 2010; Jackson 2019a).

Moreover, while scholars of right-wing movements have significantly advanced our understanding of racism and white identity politics in America (Blee 2002; McVeigh 2009; McVeigh and Estep 2019), this literature has largely treated religion as a descriptive feature of these movements rather than as an analytic category. This is curious when considering that even many groups on the “racist right” (Diamond 1995) are as likely to reference Christianity as they are to reference whiteness in their definition of Americanness (Belew 2018; McVeigh 2009). Religion is also present in the descriptions of right-wing movements’ imagined enemies: for example, Jews, Muslims, and “godless” communists. Yet religion itself is rarely an analytic focus unless right-wing movements involve *organized* religious constituencies or leaders, such as the role played by white evangelicals in the Religious Right (Ingersoll 2015; Kruse 2015; Whitehead and Perry 2020), or by “Christian Identity” churches in the racist right (Aho 2016; Baker and McMillan 2019; Barkun 1997). As a result, research on right-wing movements tends to underestimate how religion intersects with race in the American right’s construction of ideal Americanness.

Race’s deep entanglement with religion on the right comes clearly into view when we focus on these movements’ invocation of the “founding myth” of America as a Christian nation (Seidel 2019). This myth is rooted in the idea that the country’s exceptionalism and special favor from God are incumbent upon Americans’ religiosity and shared religious values—America is “One Nation Under God,” “In God We Trust” (Kruse 2015). This myth is shared to varying degrees by Americans across the political spectrum (Green 2015; Kruse 2015; Whitehead and Perry 2020), but for groups on the political right it is the basis for a more specific historical narrative that frames the Christian nation as an ideal state that was achieved at the moment of the country’s founding but has been in peril ever since (Braunstein 2018; Gorski 2017a).

Recent work on Christian nationalism has importantly demonstrated the political relevance of this myth for contemporary American politics, but has tended to focus on the Religious Right as its primary carrier (Gorski 2017a; Seidel 2019; Stewart 2020; Whitehead and Perry 2020). Historical work on the idea of Christian America has traced connections between the Religious Right and other right-wing movements, with a focus on anticomunist and libertarian groups (Gaston 2019; Kruse 2015; Marti 2020). Furthermore, research on the Tea Party movement finds that Christian nationalism operates as a symbolic bridge between religious conservatives and other groups on the right (Braunstein 2017b; Braunstein and Taylor 2017). However, generally speaking, the literatures on the Religious Right and other right-wing movements are not closely connected, and too little attention has been paid to the place of the Christian nation myth across different right-wing movements (cf. Baker 2011; Diamond 1995; Hardisty 1999). Moreover, given a dominant concern with distinguishing Christian nationalism from other related phenomena—including civil religion and competing visions of both Christianity and nationalism (Gorski 2017a, 2020; Seidel 2019; Whitehead and Perry 2020)—researchers have only begun to grapple with *variation in* Christian nationalism’s expression. By variation I mean not just differences in intensity of support for ideas associated with this myth (Whitehead and Perry 2020), but also qualitatively different ways in which religion and race intersect in right-wing movements’ framings of Christian America and its enemies.

### 2.3. A Narrative Approach to Nationalism

When people say that America is a Christian nation, they are making a claim about American national identity, identifying the criteria for full belonging, and marking the boundary between insiders and outsiders. Standard accounts of national identity focus on such visions of who “we” are as a nation (Bail 2008; Bonikowski and DiMaggio 2016; Brubaker 2009; Theiss-Morse 2009) and encourage attention to groups whose “formal” or “substantive” citizenship is contested (Glenn 2002). A narrative approach to nationalism embeds static renderings of the national “we” in a broader “story of peoplehood” (Smith 2003), an account of the nation’s history, character, and destiny. These kinds of stories not only offer an account of “who we are” as a nation, but also link a vision of a nation’s past

("where we have been") to a vision of its future ("where we are going"). They work "as persuasive historical stories that prompt people to embrace the valorized identities, play the stirring roles, and have the fulfilling experiences that political leaders strive to evoke for them" (Smith 2003, p. 45). They often do so by embedding citizens' personal stories of struggle and triumph within a larger, transcendent, narrative of national destiny (Bellah 1967).

Because stories of peoplehood embed each individual's biography within history (Mills 2000), they are likely to be most effective when they connect to what Hochschild (2016, p. 16) calls a particular group's "deep story," "a story that *feels as if it were true*," even if it is not based on one's actual experiences or material conditions (Polletta and Calahan 2017). This is especially (although not exclusively) true of nostalgic stories, which link individuals' idealized memories of their own childhoods to historical renderings of the country's "Golden Age" (Murphy 2009), and fears about their own "status devaluation" (McVeigh 2009) to accounts of the decline of the country as a whole (Braunstein 2017b).

Stories of peoplehood can play a critical role in political life, particularly when they take the form of *competing* versions of national history, as they do in the US. In recurrent battles over how to tell the story of America—collectively called "history wars"—an "angry swirl of emotions ... surrounds public memory" (Linenthal and Engelhardt 1996). As one observer described of a 2014 skirmish over how to teach US history to high school students, "Navigating the tension between patriotic inspiration and historical thinking, between respectful veneration and critical engagement, is an especially difficult task, made even more complicated by a marked shift in the very composition of 'we the people'" (Grossman 2014). The latest battle in this ongoing war (Onion 2019) was set off by the publication of the *New York Times'* 1619 Project, which "aims to reframe the country's history by placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of black Americans at the very center of our national narrative."<sup>3</sup> This project struck deep into the heart of the nostalgic narratives of America's sacred founding that animate the American right, and particularly those who join right-wing movements in order to "make sure that their story of independence, patriotism and individual success is not 'repressed or obscured' by other, competing stories that are put forth as part of the national biography" (Cooter 2013, p. 5; see also Zubrzycki 2006).

Right-wing movements are not alone in this cause, as the mainstream resonance of the "history wars" makes clear. In defending their version of American history, right-wing movements often find common cause with more mainstream conservatives who share their nostalgic view of the past (Green 2015). PRRI (Public Religion Research Institute) finds that around half the country believes that "America's best days are behind us" and that "American culture and way of life" has mostly changed for the worse since the 1950s, while the other half believes the opposite (Jones et al. 2020). As groups of varying stripes coalesce around these rival historical narratives—one nostalgic and one critical of the country's past—these narratives shape political alliances and have the potential to reshape the political field as a whole (Smith 2003). Moreover, these narratives serve as prisms through which each group comes to interpret and understand the political world, including who their allies and enemies are, and what information and authorities are credible (Braunstein 2017b, 2018; Jackson 2020; Lepore 2010; Reed 2017). This can heighten misunderstanding and polarization between rival groups, but it can also bring "strange bedfellows" together and imbue their shared efforts with sacred meaning.

Narratives convey meaning through both their structure (plot) and their content (characters and events) (Polletta et al. 2011). As I will show, those on the nostalgic "side" of today's history wars agree on a common narrative *structure*, or plot, in which the country was once better and is now worse. Less is known, however, about the specific *contents* of this nostalgia narrative, and whether different versions feature different characters,

<sup>3</sup> See <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/1619-america-slavery.html>.

events, and dramatic turning points. A narrative approach to nationalism provides useful tools for detecting this variation, because it enables an analysis that recognizes structural parallels between different narratives, even as the contents differ; or vice versa, narratives with similar content, but different narrative structures. A narrative approach also helps to bridge the conversations occurring between religion scholars studying Christian nationalism and scholars of right-wing social movements who are interested in the role of American history within these movements, as it recognizes Christian nationalism not merely as a set of beliefs but as a way of narrating American history. Finally, by recognizing the importance of symbolism, perspective and character, a narrative approach enables an analysis that is deeply attuned to “complex religion,” and specifically the ways in which religion and race intersect in competing visions of Americanness and its enemies, and in claims about whose stories should be remembered and whose should be forgotten, in the name of patriotism.

### 3. “Christian Nation” Narratives on the Right

#### 3.1. *The White Christian Nation and the Colorblind Judeo-Christian Nation*

Right-wing movements draw upon mythical visions of American history in order to help participants make sense of their place in the country’s past, present, and future. Central to most of these historical accounts is the myth that America was founded as a Christian nation, and moreover, that ever since this moment of original perfection its Christian heritage has been under assault. Yet scholarship on this national mythology, and especially its role in right-wing movements, conflates two different versions of this narrative: the *white Christian nation* (WCN) and the *colorblind Judeo-Christian nation* (CJCN). Both of these narratives differ from the relatively generic and widely embraced idea, largely invented in the 1950s, that America is “One Nation Under God” (Kruse 2015), although they draw legitimacy from their alignment with it. They also differ from prophetic stories of the country’s uneven journey toward a “more perfect union” (Braunstein 2018; Gorski 2017a; Murphy 2008; Smith 2017). Less recognized is that these narratives also differ from one another in subtle yet meaningful ways, even as they also feature significant continuities. In the following sections, I describe similarities in these ideal-typical narratives’ *structures*; then outline differences in each narratives’ *content*, with primary attention to the “complex” intersections of race and religion in their framings of Americanness and various threats to it.

##### 3.1.1. Similar Structure: Perfection, Decline, Restoration

While specifics vary, most right-wing movements embrace a “declension” narrative in which American history can be broken down into the following components: original perfection, decline, and future restoration (Williams 2012). Scholars of the right routinely document a nostalgic orientation toward a “Golden Age” (Murphy 2009) or “mythologized” American past (Aho 2016; Braunstein 2017b; Cooter 2013). Whether it is explicitly identified or not, the Christian nation myth is often at the heart of this nostalgia. This mythology is not simply a nod to the fact that, demographically speaking, the US has been majority white and Christian for most of its history, although this is part of it (Jones 2016; Wuthnow 2005). It also conveys the belief that the United States is God’s “chosen nation,” its people a “chosen people,” and its birthright to be a “city on a hill,” a model for all the world to follow (Murphy 2009; Smith 2004; Van Engen 2020). The Golden Age to which right-wing movements refer was an age in which the country fulfilled this calling, through imagined widespread citizen adherence to traditional Christian (or Judeo-Christian) values and few challenges to the hegemonic power of these values (Gaston 2019).

Right-wing movements convey their nostalgia in a variety of ways. The Religious Right, for example, sacralizes the nation’s founding through their references to the “Founders and virtuous ancestors” who “in the jeremiadic tradition ... represent a standing reproach to degenerate present-day Americans” (Murphy 2009, p. 127). Groups from

the radical anti-government Posse Comitatus to the Tea Party movement to the patriot/militia movement signal their reverence for the Constitution by framing it as divinely inspired, engaging in close study of the text, and insisting on an “originalist” approach to interpretation (Barkun 1997; Braunstein 2017b; Levitas 2002; McCann 2019). These same groups also engage in other rituals that enable them to reenact—through costumed role-play or militia exercises—the “purer” forms of patriotism they associate with this Golden Age (Cooter 2013; Jackson 2020; Lepore 2010). Finally, some movements’ names are rooted in a vision of themselves as modern heirs to the patriotic leaders of the founding era: for example, the Tea Party movement (Braunstein 2017b; Lepore 2010; Skocpol and Williamson 2012) or the Three Percenters.<sup>4</sup>

While the founding era looms large in right-wing movements’ mythological understanding of American history, it is not the only moment for which participants are nostalgic. As Dionne (2016, p. 1) observes of conservatives more generally, those who share a nostalgic view of the past do not consistently reference a specific moment in US history that was “better” than today, but rather blend nostalgia for “the government and the economy of the 1890s, the cultural norms of the 1950s, and, in more recent times, the ethnic makeup of the country in the 1940s.” What each of these eras share is their imagined status as moments of relative cultural “consensus,” before the expansion of the federal government, social activism of the 1960s, and subsequent “culture wars” resulted in multi-pronged challenges to white Christian male power and privilege within American society (Gaston 2019, p. 5; Putnam and Campbell 2010).

Perfection does not last in the right-wing story of America. At the heart of any declension narrative is a pattern of decline or deterioration, of people backsliding or straying from the path of righteousness. In the right’s story of America, the country as a whole suffers from this deterioration, which movement leaders evoke through vivid references to social breakdown and decay, political corruption, and economic collapse (Braunstein 2018; Murphy 2009). They attribute decline to a variety of factors, including demographic change (driven largely by immigration); rising support for racial equality, religious pluralism, and secularism; and communist influence on economics and politics. Although they depict the entire country in a state of decline, they frame some social groups (namely, nonwhites, non-Christians, and women) as benefitting from these new conditions at the expense of others (white Christian men) (Hochschild 2016). Meanwhile, the citizens on the losing end of this “decline” are sometimes framed as complicit in the crisis, as a consequence of their own religious backsliding. As Ronald Reagan once said, “If we ever forget that we’re one nation under God, then we will be a nation gone under.” Other right-wing activists blame themselves for becoming politically complacent, and thus allowing loud minorities, elites, and “deep state” bureaucrats to take “their” country away (Braunstein 2017b).

Yet, it is in this way that the right’s story of America also points to a hopeful path forward. If the country’s decline can be attributed, at least in part, to the absence of God and ordinary citizens from public life, then it can be saved by faithful citizens if they mobilize to reassert themselves. Right-wing movements thus write themselves into their American story as the patriotic heroes who will alter the course of the country’s decline by urging a return to the conditions of the past (Braunstein 2017b). The Religious Right, for example, has long promoted religious revival as the key to halting the country’s moral and political decline (Murphy 2009). The Tea Party movement, meanwhile, sought to restore American greatness by calling the country back to its original Constitutional principles and Judeo-Christian values (Braunstein 2017b). Similarly, those who joined “constitutionalist” militias during the early 2000s “believe they are fighting to maintain personal liberties and a national identity that aligns with an originalist understanding of the Constitution and their interpretation of the Founding Fathers’ vision for the country” (Cooter

<sup>4</sup> See: <https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounders/oath-keepers-and-three-ers-part-of-growing-anti-government-movement>.

2013, p. 4). And in early 2021, before marching on the U.S. Capitol in an attempt to overturn the results of the 2020 election, members of the far-right group the Proud Boys “prayed for God to bring ‘reformation and revival.’ They gave thanks for ‘the wonderful nation we’ve all been blessed to be in.’ They asked God for the restoration of their ‘value systems,’” (Dias and Graham 2021). In each version of the story, the country’s historical trajectory takes the form of a circle—the path forward involves going back to an idealized moment of earlier perfection (Gorski 2017a, p. 27).

That said, there are some right-wing movements that are less optimistic about the possibilities of fixing what is broken about America, at least within the scope of its current political borders or historical time. These groups—which Churchill (2009) calls “millenarian” in contrast to the “constitutionalist” groups described above (cited in Cooter 2013, p. 71)—tend to be more closely aligned with the racist right. As Belew (2018, p. 5) argues, the white power movement in the 1990s “was not dedicated to political conservatism aimed at preserving an existing way of life, or even to the reestablishment of bygone racial or gender hierarchies.” Departing from the *political* approaches of other contemporary right-wing movements, and from the reactionary but ultimately *nationalistic* visions of previous white supremacist movements such as the Ku Klux Klan, the latter white power movement “sought revolution and separation—the founding of a racial utopian nation.” In more recent years, secessionist groups have proposed founding, by violent means if necessary, a “Christian homeland populated by members of the Patriot movement” (Sottile 2019).

These visions of restoration are rooted in an apocalyptic worldview that is common among adherents of a radical strain of Christianity, called Christian Identity, that places white supremacy and anti-Semitism at its center (Aho 2016; Baker and McMillan 2019; Barkun 1997; Belew 2018, p. 6; Sottile 2019). Whereas conservative Christians have popularized the idea of an apocalypse marked by the peaceful rapture of the faithful from the world, the white power movement imagines the end-times as a race war in which “the faithful would be tasked with ridding the world of the unfaithful, the world’s nonwhite and Jewish population, before the return of Christ” (Belew 2018, p. 6). Moreover, because many of these groups believe that the US government has been infiltrated by sinister forces, sometimes referred to as the Zionist Occupational Government or the New World Order, this apocalyptic race war is often imagined as a war *against* the US government (Belew 2018, p. 7). When members of these groups engage in paramilitary exercises and stockpile food and weapons to prepare for the coming war, they do so from a very different vantage than the “constitutionalist” militias described earlier. Yet they too are imagining themselves as the latest cast of characters in a story of national decline and potential restoration—the primary difference is that the nation they imagine in both the past and the future is not the actually existing United States; it is a mythical white Christian homeland.

### 3.1.2. Different Content: Americanness

While we have seen that there is subtle variation in the structures of right-wing movements’ stories of American decline, the WCN and CJCN narratives are not clearly distinguishable when examining their structures alone. Where they reveal themselves as distinct narratives is when we turn our attention to their content: specifically, their central symbols; the identities of the stories’ heroes; the characteristics of the society they fight for; and the perspective from which the stories are told. These features reveal how participants in these groups imagine an ideal form of Americanness.

In the WCN narrative, whiteness, Christianity, and American patriotism are explicitly fused, and Christianity is used to legitimize a vision of American society rooted in white supremacy (Marti 2020). Consider this narrative’s use in the founding of the 1920s Ku Klux Klan. When the former Methodist preacher William Joseph Simmons led a group of followers to the top of Stone Mountain near Atlanta, Georgia on Thanksgiving 1915, he initiated his new group “with a flag fluttering in the wind beside them, a Bible open to



the twelfth chapter of Romans, and a flaming cross to light the night sky above” (McVeigh and Estep 2019, p. 28). Such rituals—combining symbols of patriotism, Christianity, and racial terrorism—were common within the Klan, which “claimed to be a ‘one-hundred percent American’ organization and promised to unite white, native-born Protestants in a common cause” (McVeigh 2009, p. 3), in protection of a mythological white Protestant nation (Baker 2011). This symbolism was also central to the 1960s Klan that mobilized to resist the gains of the civil rights movement. Leaders framed regular cross burnings as religious rites and rallies resembled “tent revivals of the 1930s,” complete with prayer, hymn singing and fiery sermons depicting white supremacy as a righteous and patriotic cause (PBS 2015).

As it became less acceptable for Americans to openly cite race or ethnicity as a basis for national inclusion, it became less common for groups seeking mainstream political legitimacy to explicitly embrace the WCN narrative. As such, in recent decades it has primarily been referenced by “radical” or “extremist” (Jackson 2019a) groups such as the white power movement that brought Klan, neo-Nazi and other racist and anti-Semitic groups into common cause (Belew 2018; Blee 2002).<sup>5</sup> While scholars studying these groups have tended to focus primarily on how participants frame true Americanness in terms of whiteness (Blee 2002), many groups also weave white supremacy and Christianity together through a mythological story of the country’s sacred founding by white Christian men. One source of this mythology is Christian Identity ideology, which draws on British-Israelism to assert that the white Anglo-Saxons who founded the US are the true “chosen people” of God. Although Christian Identity is generally viewed as “‘Christian’ in name only,”<sup>6</sup> it has offered right-wing groups a Biblical justification for both anti-Semitism and white supremacy, and has been used to sacralize a militant form of white Christian nationalism within groups such as the Aryan Nations and the Posse Comitatus (Baker and McMillan 2019; Barkun 1997; Levitas 2002; Sottile 2019).

Christian Identity plays a far less prominent role on the right today than it did during the 1980s and 1990s (Baker and McMillan 2019; Cooter 2013), but its explicit invocation of the WCN myth brings it into symbolic alignment with the more widely embraced idea of “Christian dominionism” (Aho 2016; Diamond 1995).<sup>7</sup> In “one of the Christian Right’s most important texts into the 1990s” (Diamond 1995, p. 246), *A Christian Manifesto*, the white evangelical writer Francis Schaffer laid out an influential version of the dominionist perspective, which essentially argues that “America began as a nation rooted in Biblical principles,” and that it has declined as these principles have been replaced by “secular humanism” (p. 246). Schaffer closes the book by advocating “the use by Christians of civil disobedience to restore Biblical morality” (p. 246). This worldview has been embraced by various groups within the Religious Right over the years, including most prominently the Christian Reconstructionist movement of the 1980s and 1990s (Diamond 1995, p. 246; Ingersoll 2015). Yet its influence is far more widespread: “the diffuse influence of the ideas that America was ordained as a Christian nation and that Christians, exclusively, were to rule and reign” is evidenced by the “wide following for softer forms of dominionism” (Diamond 1995, p. 248). Today, both “hard” and “soft” versions of dominionism continue to find adherents within and beyond the Religious Right: the former in far-right “Christian patriot” (Aho 2016) groups, including those who aim to create a theocratic white Christian homeland in the Pacific Northwest (Sottile 2019), and the latter in more visible groups such as creationists, Tea Party activists, and Donald Trump supporters who embrace white Christian nationalism (Ingersoll 2015; Whitehead and Perry 2020, pp. 10–12).

<sup>5</sup> Notably, the white supremacist “Alt-Right” movement does not appear to embrace either Christian nation narrative (Baker 2016; Hawley 2017).

<sup>6</sup> See also <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/christian-identity>.

<sup>7</sup> Whereas Sottile (2019) identifies an alignment between Christian dominionism and Christian Identity, Aho (2016, p. 85) classifies Christian Identity as a “more virulent type of Dominionism,” compared to the more well-known Christian Reconstructionism (Ingersoll 2015).

Each of these groups draws on the WCN narrative, in different ways, to define white Christians as central to the American story. Through the lens of this narrative, white Christians were the heroic founders of the nation and the authors of its sacred texts; white Christians alone embody the values on which a healthy democracy rests; and as such, white Christians alone are suited to hold positions of social influence and political power, or the country is destined to collapse.

Yet this is not the only version of this narrative that circulates on the right. For various reasons—including the declining acceptability of explicit racism in American society, a desire by many right-wing groups to distance themselves from the racist ideologies that fueled the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing (Barkun 1997; Jackson 2017), a longer-term move toward the “Judeo-Christian” category starting in the 1940s and 1950s (Gaston 2019), and an effort to attract adherents beyond white evangelicals (Braunstein and Lawton 2019)—many right-wing movements today have embraced a related but distinct narrative: the CJCN narrative. This narrative is not always easy to distinguish from the WCN narrative, and indeed many who deploy it *implicitly* portray white Christian men at the center of the American story. For example, although participants in the Tea Party and “constitutionalist” militia groups insist they are *not* racist, the historical figures they lift up as exemplary citizens and models of what true patriotism looks like are almost always white Christian men—the Founding Fathers, prominent conservative politicians, patriotic military heroes, and for some, right-wing “martyrs” felled by state violence (Aho 2016; Belew 2018; Braunstein 2017b; Cooter 2013; Corcoran 1995; Jackson 2020).

Even so, these same groups *explicitly* promote the CJCN, meaning they emphasize the country’s “Judeo-Christian” heritage and either ignore race or use colorblind language to describe ideal Americanness. Within the Tea Party, for example, a religiously diverse array of participants—including conservative Christians and nonreligious economic conservatives, libertarians and others—asserted their reverence for “Judeo-Christian values” as the foundation of a healthy society and democracy (Braunstein 2017b, p. 107; Braunstein and Taylor 2017). As a group, they engaged in practices that “highlighted the influence of Judeo-Christian values on the nation’s founders” (Braunstein 2017b, p. 107) and promoted “strict adherence to the Constitution and a restored commitment to the Judeo-Christian values on which the country was founded” as the only way of saving the country from further decline (p. 93; see also Skocpol and Williamson 2012).

In relying on the idea that America was founded on Judeo-Christian principles, the Tea Party continued a trend that began in the 1970s, when “with the rise of the religious right, a new generation of conservatives mobilized Judeo-Christian discourse to signal their intent to return America to the public piety and ‘fighting faith’ mentality of the early Cold War years” (p. 15), based on their “shared memory of the 1950s as a time of universal piety, traditional social norms, and religiously grounded harmony” (Gaston 2019, p. 16). This was a stark departure from the original meaning of “Judeo-Christian America,” an idea that had emerged in the spirit of inclusivity when “after the revelations of the Nazi death camps [of World War II], a phrase like ‘our Christian civilization’ seemed ominously exclusive” (Silk 1984, p. 69). It also diverged from the meaning implied by Judeo-Christian *pluralists* who used the phrase “loosely as a shorthand term for religious pluralism in general” (Gaston 2019, p. 8). When the Religious Right embraced this narrative in the 1970s, they embraced an *exceptionalist* variant of the term that promoted the idea that American democracy was rooted in and “requires specific theological and ethical resources that were unique to Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism—and [is] deeply threatened by tendencies toward pluralization and secularization in American public life” (Gaston 2019, p. 8). As this exceptionalist brand of Judeo-Christian rhetoric spread on the right, Judeo-Christian America came to look much like Christian America, rooted in “family values” (Gaston 2019, p. 8) and white privilege, although the latter now extended to Catholics and Jews, too. Even so, the power of this rhetoric is still found in its veneer of inclusivity (Seidel 2019, p. 3).

Many contemporary right-wing groups also use “colorblind” language to talk about American history, or highlight the country’s racial progress while downplaying its history of white supremacy (Burke 2015; Taylor and Bernstein 2019). The contemporary patriot/militia movement and the Tea Party movement, for example, often cite the civil rights movement and leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr. or Rosa Parks as important historical exemplars for their own activism, including their use of civil disobedience (Braunstein 2017b; Jackson 2019b). When Fox News host Glenn Beck faced criticism over his decision to hold a 2010 rally that attracted many of these activists to Washington, DC on the anniversary of King’s “I Have a Dream” speech, he framed his rally as aligned with King’s project: “We are on the right side of history. We are on the side of individual freedoms and liberties, and damn it we will reclaim the civil rights moment” (Braunstein 2015, p. 364). More generally, participants in these movements promoted a racially inclusive image of their movements, and by extension their vision of ideal Americanness. For example, it was common within the Tea Party movement to prominently feature people of color as speakers during public rallies or events, even as the majority of participants were white (Braunstein 2015; Skocpol and Williamson 2012, p. 69). By engaging in these efforts to “deny, deflect, and distract from charges that activists are racist” (Taylor and Bernstein 2019, p. 137), the Tea Party resembled many other right-wing movements today that work to “reaffirm their anti-racist self-image” and “reenact a super-citizen vision of themselves and of an egalitarian America” (Cooter 2013, p. 145; see also Jackson 2017).

In sum, in contrast to those who draw on the WCN narrative to explicitly mark whiteness and Christianity as criteria for American belonging and power (Blee 2002), many right-wing groups today deploy the CJC/N narrative in order to expand these boundaries. They do so by creating a broader religious category—Judeo-Christian rather than Christian—that folds Jews, Protestants, and Catholics as well as anyone else who lives according to Judeo-Christian “values” into their vision of Americanness. Meanwhile, they unmark race by using colorblind language and denying that race matters in their definition of Americanness. These strategies of widening America’s religious and racial boundaries, respectively, are separate but not wholly unrelated; rather, they intersect in the movement’s stories of American history, which suggest that America’s heroes are not defined by race, but by their adherence to a narrow set of conservative values (e.g., freedom, individualism) framed as “Judeo-Christian.” In this way, the CJC/N narrative operates on the right as a form of symbolic racism (Cooter 2013, p. 133) or cultural nationalism (Diamond 1995, p. 259), even as many who reference it may believe they are promoting religious and racial inclusivity.

### 3.1.3. Different Content: Enemies

In the Christian America narrative, original perfection gives way to decline and heroes defend against villains. So just as these stories reveal how right-wing movements imagine the American “us,” so too do they reveal who these movements view as enemies—those groups that threaten to tear down or takeover the right’s America. Before delineating differences between the WCN and CJC/N narratives, however, it is necessary to recognize that nearly all right-wing movements share a concern about the existential threat posed by communism. For this reason, Diamond (1995) singles out anticommunism as the “American right’s dominant motif” (p. 9). The Christian America narrative was in large part invented as a way of presenting the US as “godless” communism’s sacred other, and has been invoked against *external* threats posed by communist regimes; as well as to dramatize *internal* threats, including any perceived increase in the size, scope or authority of the federal government, especially if it is perceived to primarily benefit non-whites (Bellew 2018; Diamond 1995; Huret 2014; Kruse 2015; Martin 2015), or any perceived decrease in the power of white native-born Christians, whether due to rising immigration, the civil rights movement, or the election of the nation’s first Black president (Marti 2020, p. 173; McVeigh and Estep 2019, p. 41; Parker and Barreto 2014). “Godless communism” is thus a symbolic thread running through both versions of the right’s story of America, used not

only to signal ideological concerns about collectivism, but also to mark a range of racial and religious “others” as threats (Baker and Smith 2015).

Beyond communism itself, the primary villains within the WCN narrative are Jews and Blacks (Blee 2002; Belew 2018; Cooter 2013). Jews, in particular, loom large in the narrative of white Christian America’s decline. While white Christian men are foregrounded as this narrative’s heroes, Jews lurk behind the scenes as “mythically and irredeemably evil” villains; they “control world history, dominating all others through an unseen conspiracy” (Blee 2002, p. 79). Anti-Semitism is central, for example, to Christian Identity ideology, animating concerns at one gathering that “the destruction of white Christian people will continue until the stranger [“almost certainly a code word for ‘Jew’”] is removed from the position of being over His people” (Barkun 1997, p. 283). Even beyond Christian Identity leaders, right-wing movements draw on anti-Semitic stereotypes and conspiracy theories to both frame many *individual* Jews as threats because of stereotypes of Jews as “communists and communist-sympathizers” or “figures of moral evil” (Blee 2002, p. 87), and to frame Jews *in general* as a source of “awesome, incomprehensible, and disembodied power” (p. 88). As women in the white power movement described, “Jewish control is absolute... They can grant, and revoke, all privileges of daily life” (pp. 87–88). In particular, some right-wing movements promote the idea that “Jewish control of politicians, schools, media, corporations, and banks has created ... a ‘Zionist-occupied government’ (ZOG)” (p. 88). Other groups avoid this term, preferring more coded language such as the New World Order (Barkun 1997, p. 257; Belew 2018, p. 7) to imply that a shadowy cabal of Jews has secretly taken control of the country.

In sharp contrast, the CJC narrative symbolically places Jews—or at least Jewish values—at the country’s moral and religious center. Critics may argue that for groups such as the Religious Right, “‘Judeo-’ is a sop; a fig leaf, tossed about to avoid controversy and complaint. It is simply a morsel of inclusion offered to soften the edge of an exclusionary, Christian movement” (Seidel 2019, p. 4). However, this should not suggest there is *no* difference between these two narratives’ renderings of Jews’ place in America. Even if groups embracing the CJC narrative do not view Jews as equal to Christians in their Americanness, neither do they frame them as subhuman villains. This is perhaps part of the reason why anti-Semitic extremism, despite experiencing an uptick in recent years, is still consigned to the radical fringe and is condemned by most groups on the right. This more inclusive stance toward Judaism has also facilitated deeper, albeit complicated, political ties between conservative Christians and Jews through the rise of Christian Zionism (Spector 2009).

However, this should not suggest that the CJC narrative is without villains. Indeed, the embrace of a Judeo-Christian America on the right has often combined “anti-anti-Semitism” with anti-secularism (Gaston 2019, p. 17). This combination was exemplified by Ronald Reagan, who as president not only “became the most prolific presidential user of Judeo-Christian terminology in American history,” but also “the first sitting president to use the terms ‘secularism’ and ‘secularist’ as pejoratives” (p. 16). Most importantly, the CJC narrative also features an expanded focus on the threat of “radical Islam” (Gaston 2019, p. 4). Departing from the pluralistic ideal embedded in liberal references to a Judeo-Christian America (Gaston 2019, p. 8), right-wing movements reference the country’s Judeo-Christian heritage in order to explicitly define Muslims as “outsiders, enemies and others” (Braunstein 2017a). This animates foreign policy through heightened right-wing support for the state of Israel, framed not only through the lens of Jews’ and Christians’ shared heritage, but also through shared focus on the threat of Islam. Domestically, too, right-wing movements routinely point to the country’s Judeo-Christian character as a basis for framing Islam as one of the preeminent threats to American democracy. Within the Tea Party, for example, participants not only cited fears about terrorist threats posed by “radical Islamic extremists,” but also concerns that Muslims sought to use sharia law in order to undermine the Constitution, and ultimately, the religious freedom of “real” Americans (Braunstein 2017b). Similarly, “many militia members understand the term

‘Muslim Americans’ to be oxymoron” (Cooter 2013, p. 154). As one put it, “And [the Constitution] is for all people. All people of all races, all creeds and all religions. But one thing you gots (sic.) to understand: the Muslim religion and our Constitution and our way of life cannot co-exist. They can’t do it” (p. 154). Islam thus operates within the CJCJN narrative as a singular cultural threat to Americanness.

Just as non-Christians occupy different places within these two narratives, so too do non-whites. As previously discussed, the WCN narrative draws on tenets of the racist and anti-Semitic Christian Identity church as well as Christian dominionist theology in order to frame white Christians as the only group suited to hold positions of social and political power in America. In particular, Christian Identity leaders claim that “whites were the true lost tribes of Israel and that nonwhites and Jews were descended from Satan or from animals” (Belew 2018, p. 6). Through this lens, non-white racial minorities are viewed as inferior “others” whose very presence is a source of interpersonal danger (Blee 2002, pp. 78–79), and whose demands for greater power threaten to disrupt the racial and religious order on which America was built (Belew 2018; McVeigh 2009).

Meanwhile, the CJCJN narrative is definitionally “colorblind,” and those who deploy it deny viewing race as relevant to how they define America’s enemies or others. As previously discussed, those who deploy the CJCJN narrative also attempt to present their movements as racially inclusive, particularly with respect to Black Americans. It is nonetheless important to recognize that these same groups typically depict Muslims as both religious *and* racial others. Within the Michigan Militia, for example, Cooter (2013, p. 132) finds that members viewed Muslims “as a racial, not just religious, outgroup.” Similarly, within the Tea Party, participants likened Muslims to other non-white “illegal” immigrants who were viewed as threats to both Americans’ safety and the “American” story itself due to a refusal to assimilate (Braunstein 2017b).

### 3.2. *The Politics of the Gaps and Slippages between the Two Narratives*

Contemporary right-wing movements use these two narratives to both understand their own place in American history (Braunstein 2017b; Jackson 2020) and to engage in “boundary-work” by aligning or distancing themselves from other groups, whom they use as “foils” to their own activities (Gieryn 1983, p. 791). Like many social movements, they work to frame their efforts as mainstream and to distance themselves from activities that could be cast as extreme or radical (Haines 1984).<sup>8</sup> These concerns are especially salient for contemporary right-wing movements, as changing public attitudes about race and multiculturalism have rendered many of these groups—and particularly those who frame America explicitly as a white Christian nation—increasingly out of step with mainstream society. This has left right-wing movements at a strategic crossroads: to downplay the contrast between their vision of America and the mainstream, or to heighten this contrast and embrace their identity as radicals. The WCN and CJCJN narratives are key tools that right-wing movements use to navigate this tension. While use of the WCN narrative clearly marks those who reference it as outside the mainstream, the CJCJN narrative has enough in common with mainstream conservative discourse that it can be deployed by groups seeking political legitimacy. Of course, it is also common for participants in right-wing groups to slip back and forth between the two narratives depending on the context and the audiences.

Below, I describe four ways that these gaps and slippages between the two narratives perform political work for right-wing movements: as coded language; as mainstreaming strategy; as expressions of aspirational nationhood; and as practices of forgetting.

#### 3.2.1. Coded Language

<sup>8</sup> There are disagreements within some movements over whether to “celebrate” or “suppress” differences from the mainstream, particularly when communities wish to both encourage pride in these differences and demand social inclusion (Bernstein 1997).

Scholars have highlighted contemporary right-wing movements' use of racial code words, which allow them to "rely on messages that contain racial cues but are not perceived by most voters as racial" (Mendelberg 2001, p. 21) and to mobilize racists without sounding racist (Aho 2016; citing Bonilla-Silva 2003). The CJCJN narrative is a useful tool for engaging in this kind of coded language on the right. As previously discussed, the WCN and CJCJN narratives share a similar structure, yet have different content. The structural similarity between the two serves as a "bridging mechanism" (Barkun 1997, p. 287) between the racist right and right-wing groups that distance themselves from racism, by signaling a shared concern about the decline of "real" America. As such, even if groups use the CJCJN narrative out of a genuine desire to be more racially and religiously inclusive, it nonetheless serves as a "dog whistle"—a signal only some listeners are primed to hear—to all other groups who embrace this decline narrative, including explicitly white and Christian supremacist groups. At the same time, the CJCJN narrative's more inclusive framing of American history offers these groups legitimacy and plausible deniability by bringing it into alignment with the widely held belief that America is "one nation under God" (Kruse 2015). Seidel (2019), for example, argues that "the term [Judeo-Christian] has the benefit of sounding inclusive to a broad audience while actually speaking directly to conservative Christians who hear only the second part of the term, 'Christian'" (p. 3). As a form of coded language, the use of the CJCJN narrative can be viewed as part of a broader shift from biological to symbolic racism (Cooter 2013, p. 133), and from racist to cultural nationalism (Diamond 1995, p. 259).

At another level, even the WCN narrative involves some coded language. In particular, it uses Christianity—and religion more generally—as code for whiteness. Perry suggests that for many Christian nationalists today, "'Christianity' ... has virtually nothing to do with orthodoxy or character, but is merely an ethnic identity—a reverse dog whistle every bit as racialized as 'super predators,' 'illegals,' 'welfare queens,' or 'terrorists.' It's what Rogers Brubaker, talking about the European context, has called an 'identitarian Christianity' that marks and unifies 'us' (white, native-born, cultural Christians) against the 'them' (nonwhite, foreign, infidels)" (Gorski and Perry 2020). This coded meaning has a long history: for example, Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke "peppered his speeches and fundraising letters with references to Jesus and a 'Christian nation'" alongside other "coded race language" during his early-1990s forays in electoral politics (Diamond 1995, p. 271). This code is likely effective because while most Americans today would not feel comfortable openly defending their *white* privilege, they are less squeamish about defending *Christianity's* prominent role in public life. This helps to explain a growing trend within both the US and Europe in which Christianity is framed as a marker of race or ethnicity and has become the basis for an "ethnic"-style vision of the nation (Brubaker 2016; Gorski 2017b).

### 3.2.2. Mainstreaming

Many contemporary right-wing movements seek to present themselves as "the carrier and guardian of mainstream American values" (Barkun 1997, p. 282). Although some movements advance this project of "mainstreaming" or "normalization" through the use of coded language (as previously discussed), they also do so by aligning themselves with mythical visions of American history. As Jackson (2018) explains:

Referring to national history can be an effective way for extremists to gain wider support despite the radical nature of their goals and behavior. Heroes from national myths often carry tacit—even unquestionable—political legitimacy and moral authority. Far-right extremists...may attempt to claim some of this legitimacy and authority for themselves by ... depicting historical conflicts and crises as parallel to contemporary events, and themselves as the political descendants of the national heroes.

The CJCN narrative helps right-wing movements to do just this, by aligning them with a relatively mainstream story about America, while distancing them from racism and anti-Semitism. The Tea Party, for example, drew on this narrative in their bid for political legitimacy, and largely succeeded in normalizing the message that the country had fallen away from its “Judeo-Christian heritage” and that various enemies were to blame (Braunstein 2017b; Skocpol and Williamson 2012). By the time Donald Trump ran for president in 2016, these ideas had gained a sufficient foothold among mainstream Republican voters that he could “abandon the niceties of Judeo-Christian rhetoric altogether” (Gaston 2019, p. 5) and pivot more explicitly to a WCN narrative (McVeigh and Estep 2019; Whitehead and Perry 2020). In so doing, he has given permission to other right-wing groups to draw publicly on the WCN narrative. Perhaps the most high-profile example was the 2017 Unite the Right rally against the removal of a Confederate statue in Charlottesville, VA, which featured the chant, “Jews will not replace us.” This chant, heard alongside shouts of “white power,” “explicitly invokes what White supremacists and White nationalists call, ‘White genocide replacement theory,’ which falsely posits that there exists an organized plan to wreak havoc on ‘White Christian’ civilization in Europe and North America by flooding these continents with non-Christians and people of color” (Kaplan and Lipstadt 2020).

Not all right-wing movements, however, are well positioned to associate themselves with mainstream American ideals or historical figures—neo-Nazis, for example, are typically viewed as too closely aligned with anti-Semitism and one of the United States’ greatest enemies to pull this off (Jackson 2018). Yet the Unite the Right rally, which prominently featured Nazi symbolism, revealed the extent to which the mainstreaming of some right-wing groups and ideas—such as the idea that the Judeo-Christian nation is in decline—can enable more extreme groups and ideas to flourish at the margins. Some of these groups do not actually seek to become mainstream, but rather thrive by heightening the contrast between their movement and mainstream values (Smith 1998), such as secularism, pluralism, and multiculturalism (Gaston 2019). Some do so by explicitly distancing themselves from the CJCN narrative, and by extension from these mainstream values. As a flyer designed to recruit women into “organized racism” put it, “White racially-conscious women, if you have any wits left about you, flee the Judaic and Judeo-Christian insanity and join the throngs of the Aryan women warriors” (Blee 2002, p. 121).

### 3.2.3. Aspirational Nationhood

The CJCN narrative is also used by participants in right-wing movements who appear to truly *believe* their movements are neither racist nor anti-Semitic, and who desire to imagine themselves as part of a racially and religiously inclusive story of America, however riddled with blind spots and exceptions their story may be (Braunstein 2017b; Cooter 2013; Marti 2020; McCann 2019). The idea of Judeo-Christian America has always been aspirational in this way. Since the 1930s, “when the term first captured America’s political imagination,” it “did in part describe burgeoning new realities on the ground,” yet it also “represented fervent, even wishful, attempts to create such unity” (Gaston 2019, p. 2). Today, even as participants in right-wing movements idealize a “Golden Age” in which white Christian men had a monopoly on social and political power and openly villainize Muslims as enemies of America, they also take pains to present their movements and the country as racially and religiously inclusive. The statement on the Michigan Militia’s homepage—“Everyone is welcome, regardless of race, creed, color, religion or political affiliation, provided you do not wish to bring harm to our country or people” (Cooter 2013, p. 138; see also Barkun 1997, p. 282)—may surprise some, but this same sentiment is expressed by the Tea Party movement, the Oath Keepers, the Three Percenters, and a wide range of other contemporary right-wing groups (Braunstein 2017b; Jackson 2017; 2020, p. 33). While this racially and religiously inclusive self-presentation is part of a strategic effort to distance their movements from the extremism and violence of some white supremacist groups (Barkun 1997; Jackson 2017), many contemporary participants also express a

more personal desire to cleanse the political values they hold dear—such as individualism, self-sufficiency, equality, and freedom—from the taint of racism (Cooter 2013; McCann 2019). By framing the heroic pursuit of these values as intrinsic to America's founding as a CJCN (and *not* a WCN), they engage in a “fervent, even wishful attempt” to bring this more inclusive yet freedom-loving nation they imagine into existence.

Meanwhile, right-wing movements also draw on the WCN narrative in the spirit of “aspirational nationhood.” Indeed, Miller-Idriss (2018, p. 21) coined this term to describe “fantasy expressions of a nation that never existed but that is nonetheless aspired to” within racist right groups. In the US context, it may seem counterintuitive to argue that America was never a white Christian nation, in light of the fact that white Christians did in fact make up a demographic majority and exert hegemonic power over American culture for much of the country's history (Jones 2016; Wuthnow 2005). Indeed, the need to declare “the end of white Christian America” (Jones 2016) would seem to confirm that white Christian America previously existed. Yet, the US was never as white or as Christian, demographically or culturally, as the racially and religiously purified “white Christian homelands” that racist right movements seek to create (Manseau 2015). In this way, their use of this narrative can also be viewed as a “fervent, even wishful attempt” to bring the highly exclusionary nation they imagine into existence.

### 3.2.4. Forgetting

Reflecting on the role history plays in right-wing movements, Aho (2016, pp. 44–45) writes, “The tempting thing about the mood of sentimental nostalgia/resentment/urgency is its precondition: forgetfulness. What Patriots forget is that the ‘sister’ of nostalgia (to use Carl Jung's term) is brutality.... Christian Patriots are blind to the despoliations, enslavements, rapes, and murders of the past that have provided them with the rights and privileges they enjoy today.” Any rendering of American history that frames the country's founding as sacred and perfect is erasing the “brutality” of conquest and slavery on which the country was built (Braunstein 2018; Lepore 2018; Murphy 2008; Smith 2003). When right-wing movements promote these nostalgic historical narratives, they thus engage in different strategies of forgetting.

Those who promote the WCN narrative do so through the work of what Aho (2016) calls “fantasy,” involving not only the projection of “aspirational” ideals onto the past (Miller-Idriss 2018), but also the elaborate construction of alternative theologies and world histories and the conjuring of conspiracies, demons, and revelations. In contrast, those who promote the CJCN narrative hew closer to verifiable historical characters, events and timelines, yet they too engage in two distinct forms of forgetting. In some cases, this involves the erasure of memories of how their own movements grew out of or were historically linked to explicitly racist or anti-Semitic movements on the right. Many Trump supporters, for example, are likely unaware (or refuse to acknowledge) that his references to putting “America First” and his promise to “Make America Great Again” draw from a century-old white nationalist playbook (McVeigh and Estep 2019). Similarly, many members of contemporary patriot/militia groups and of the sovereign citizens movement appear not to be aware of how much their mythical American history or their “fanatic, mystical understanding of the U.S. Constitution” can be traced to the racist, anti-Semitic and violent Posse Comitatus (McCann 2019, p. 41; see also Loeser 2015, p. 1124).

Meanwhile, they also indulge in what McCann (2019, p. 299) calls “historical amnesia.” Unlike the “far-right fantasies” that fuel the WCN narrative, however, this amnesia was not manufactured by right-wing movements themselves, but was promoted by the founders and mythic heroes they so revere. Consider Thomas Jefferson, for example, who once declared to an audience of Native Americans, “It is so long since our forefathers came from beyond the great water, that we have lost the memory of it, and seem to have grown out of this land, as you have done.” Upon finding these words inscribed on a 1993 sculpture of a white, rifle-wielding pioneer family in Portland, Oregon—called *The Promised Land*—McCann (2019, p. 299) points to the statue as a salient symbol of the “amnesiac”



patriot movement's rendering of American history. Jefferson's pronouncement, he writes, not only "declared *historical amnesia* a national and racial condition," but "in doing so, it laid white claims to the American continent on that very condition of forgetfulness."

By recognizing how these repeated invocations to forget are embedded in the mythology of Christian America, it becomes clearer why calls to *remember* the brutality on which the country was founded—as the 1619 Project and other progressive stories of America promote (Braunstein 2018; Murphy 2008)—are perceived as deeply threatening. Forgetting and remembering also have implications for individuals. In particular, by promoting a version of the American story that rests on historical amnesia about the country's past, right-wing groups who draw on the CJC narrative are—intentionally or not—promoting an "epistemology of ignorance" that "afford denial of and inaction about injustice" (Nelson et al. 2013, p. 213) and is associated with a lower capacity to recognize individual and systemic racism (Bonam et al. 2019; see also Mueller 2020).

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusions

This article brings together research on Christian nationalism and right-wing movements to argue that the idea that America is a Christian nation is central to right-wing movements' mythological understandings of American history. It then identifies two ideal-typical versions of the Christian nation narrative that circulate within contemporary right-wing movements—the WCN and CJC narratives—and demonstrates that, despite their structural similarities, these narratives differ in their framing of how religion and race intersect as markers of American belonging and power. Finally, the article describes four ways that gaps and slippages between these narratives are used by right-wing groups in practice: as coded language; as a mainstreaming strategy; as expressions of aspirational nationhood; and as practices of forgetting.

My insistence on marking the difference between the WCN and CJC narratives may appear to run counter to recent work that has demonstrated how Judeo-Christian discourse is used, particularly by groups on the right, in order to bolster the cultural power of whiteness and justify the exclusion of religio-racial minorities under the guise of pluralistic inclusivity—in short, that it is merely a coded version of the WCN narrative updated for the age of political correctness (Seidel 2019). However, this is not my intention; indeed, I have made versions of this critical argument myself (Braunstein 2017b, 2018). What I am arguing here is that we must recognize differences between these two ideal-typical narratives in order to understand why groups on the right draw on one rather than the other or move back and forth between the two, what these choices mean to them, and what political work these narratives perform. Moreover, building on recent scholarship on Judeo-Christian discourse that recognizes that it has advanced *both* exclusionary and inclusionary visions of American democracy (Gaston 2019), I have shown that it is not only liberal pluralists but also some members of right-wing movements who use this discourse in an aspirational, inclusionary way, even as they also engage in practices and support policies that implicitly center white Christianity. Attention to this subtle but meaningful variation in how the Christian nation myth is deployed in practice on the right thus contributes to a deeper understanding of the heterogeneity of right-wing movements and of how religion and race intersect in right-wing visions of American identity.

Through the lens of complex religion, religion never exists as a standalone variable, but rather is inextricably bound up with other forms of social inequality—primarily race, class and gender—requiring an analysis that is attuned to religion's contributions to a range of intersectional identities (Wilde 2018; Wilde and Glassman 2016). Although research applying a complex religion approach has primarily focused on formal religious organizations and affiliations, this article demonstrates its utility in understanding religion's more amorphous public roles. In so doing, it builds on scholarship that is attuned to how religion and race intersect in the contested social and moral boundaries that define American public life (Edgell 2017; Yukich and Edgell 2020). Examining the construction

of these boundaries from the perspective of right-wing social movements offers new insights into a mythical vision of Americanness that explicitly empowers or implicitly centers white Christians. Both the WCN and CJCJN narratives lift up exemplars of Americanness that are defined by their intersectional identities as white Christians, and name enemies who are defined by their status as either non-white/non-Christian others or threats to white Christian dominance. Yet by distinguishing between the WCN and CJCJN narratives, the analysis also reveals variation in how this is understood and achieved within right-wing social movements. On the surface, the CJCJN narrative *expands* the circle of Americanness to include racial and religious groups that are excluded in the WCN narrative, allowing participants in some contemporary right-wing movements to present themselves and their values as antiracist and religiously inclusive. At the same time, however, the CJCJN narrative also *reframes* race and religion as sources of civic and cultural virtue rather than ethno-religious purity, enabling group members to justify strong negative attitudes toward racial and religious outgroups in civic rather than ethnic terms, and thus maintain their inclusive self-image and public presentation (Braunstein 2017a).

This article also offers lessons to scholars of right-wing social movements, who have greatly advanced our understanding of how white supremacy is cultivated within and exported beyond these groups, but have not been as attuned to religion's role in this process. To the extent this literature has embraced an intersectional approach to analyzing right-wing movements, the emphasis has been primarily on how race and gender intersect in constructions of white masculinity or white womanhood (Belew 2018; Blee 2002; Cooter 2013). Yet these movements are also central to the production and defense of white Christian privilege in America (Joshi 2020), in large part through their promotion of Christian nation mythology. While this is acknowledged in research on the Religious Right (Whitehead and Perry 2020; Marti 2020) and in the small number of studies of the Christian Identity church (Aho 2016; Baker and McMillan 2019; Barkun 1997), more serious analytic attention should also be paid to religion within right-wing movements that are not explicitly "religious." To this end, the complex religion approach offers tools for more deeply theorizing the role religion plays on the right, and integrating these findings into broader understandings of American religion.

Finally, because the historical narratives developed within right-wing groups can spill beyond them, this article offers insight into the ongoing battles over American history that are playing out in the streets, in newsrooms, and in classrooms around the country. It is debatable whether the citizens of democracies ought to be overly attached to their own mythologized pasts (Kammen 1991), and whether any appeal to national identity can be compatible with values of "egalitarian inclusiveness" (Smith 2017). Still, Americans across the political spectrum are currently waging war over the right to control the country's story. The sides of this battle disagree about more than chronological accounts of the events that have shaped the country; in the characteristics of their heroes and villains, and their choices about what to remember and what to forget, their narratives reveal different visions of Americanness itself. The ideal America that the right imagines, defends, and seeks to recreate is deeply shaped by Christian nation mythology that, in both of its ideal-typical forms, justifies the preservation of white Christian privilege and views any challenge to this narrative as an attack on the sacred nation itself. We cannot understand this battle without close attention to religion's "complex" role in the right's narrative, as well as in rival renderings of the American story.

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