"The Return of the 'Cult': Bad Religion in the Age of Trump and COVID" special issue of *Implicit Religion*

Republicanism as Bad Religion: The "Cult" of Trump in Contemporary American Politics

Susannah Crockford
University of Exeter
s.crockford@exeter.ac.uk

Abstract

Since Donald Trump was elected president in 2016, it has become commonplace for his opponents to refer to him as a "cult leader." The apparent fanaticism of his supporters inspires both awe and fear in observers. His propensity to disseminate conspiracy theories and alleged encouragement of the Jan 6 insurrection pushes Trump beyond the boundaries of political norms. In this article, I trace the elements of Trump's rhetorical and political style that led to accusations of his being some sort of charismatic "cult leader." The analysis broadens to discuss the complex interconnections between modern Republicanism in the US and Protestant Christianity, examining how a form of nationalist morality has come to uphold their claims to power. Both opponents and supporters of Donald Trump see him in a religious frame, either as a dangerous authoritarian leader or messianic saviour. What does this tell us about the definitions and boundaries of religion and politics? And why does Donald Trump seem to trouble those boundaries?

Keywords

Cult discourse; Evangelicalism; Christian nationalism; Rhetoric; Anthropology

Introduction

In August 2018, I attended a picnic for the Mohave County Republican Party held in the Hualapai Mountain National Park, near Kingman, Arizona. A hot high desert area, there were tents for shade, people sitting at desks with merchandise, candidates for various posts handing out water and campaign literature, as well as giving their stump speeches for the upcoming midterm elections. As I entered the site, I was handed a badge that had crossed rifles with the slogan "2A Doug Ducey," indicating that the current Arizona Governor would defend the Second Amendment, the constitutional amendment that is interpreted as guaranteeing the right to own firearms. The speakers stood outside the shade area with a microphone, taking their turns to pitch their candidacy to the assembled crowds. The school board candidates uniformly offered a revised curriculum for public education, promising that children will learn cursive and memorize times tables and maths

problems for immediate recall. They inveighed against what they called the "educational industrial complex," promising to repeal and replace the Common Core[1] and provide new textbooks. There would be no more "indoctrination" in Arizona's schools; their kids would be American. One candidate promised that "we will not lose our country" and that children must know the "blessing" of American citizenship through being taught in school how great America is. What their speeches indicated was that for Republicans federally set educational standards equated indoctrination that would make their children feel less American. The candidates framed American citizenship as a "blessing," as if nationality were somehow bestowed by divinity. How would education result in losing America? The aim of public education in these school board candidates' visions was to teach children how great their country is, rather than any pedagogical goals.

In 2021, the animus revealed at this Republican Party picnic in 2018 continued with takeovers of school boards by local parents and other community members, often expressing virulent opposition to critical race theory. An academic theory that is not taught to school age children in the US, critical race theory (CRT) addresses how the law, government administrations, and other bureaucratic regimes perpetuate systemic oppression of people of colour (Delgado and Stefancic 2017). However, Republicans successfully redefined CRT as teaching school-age children that white people are evil because they bear direct responsibility for slavery.[2] Republican activists mobilized support against mask mandates and critical race theory during the COVID-19 pandemic (Nierenberg 2021). They stoked fear over what children were being taught, with allegations that teachers were telling children to be ashamed of being American, much as the school board candidates I heard claimed. Republicans were no longer working with Democrats on school boards but taking over and driving the direction by themselves. Coordinated by national groups, the situation escalated into disruptive protests at meetings and even violent attacks and harassment of school board members (Kamenetz 2021). The focus on school boards was in part an electoral strategy to influence the more significant nationwide elections, but it was also about control of what children learn and know about America. Through characterizing education as a form of left-wing indoctrination, Republicans seemed to be implementing indoctrination in their own ideology instead, in which being American was not only something to be proud of but a divine blessing.

Actions such as taking over school boards led to opponents calling the Republican Party a "cult." Writer Wajahat Ali (2021) called the Republican Party a "right-wing zombie death cult," in part for their actions in taking over school boards and opposing COVID-19 mitigation measures such as mask wearing and vaccinations. Why would these be the actions of a cult and not simply a difference in political opinion? Much of the cult discourse surrounding the Republican Party in the early 2020s focuses on the style and behaviour of Donald Trump, the former president who

[1] Arizona has its own state educational standards, rejecting the federally set Common Core in 2016 (Hinton 2016). Republicans framed adoption of the Common Core as a state versus federal control issue, and it became so toxic in Arizona politics that even two years later Republican candidates for school boards were still promising to repeal and replace it.

[2] The explicit aim of conservative activist Christopher Rufo was to mischaracterize CRT as an attack on all white people in America, in order to mobilize electoral support for the Republican Party (Wallace-Wells 2021).

remained the most significant leader in the Republican Party even after he lost to Joe Biden in 2020. Anthropologist Michael Taussig (2017) draws attention to Donald Trump's Rabelaisian qualities, his grotesquery, his excess. For Taussig, what he calls "Trump studies" must be equal to its object of study, addressing the excesses and emergencies of this political moment. In this article, I draw on Trump studies, the study of Donald Trump and his supporters by social scientists, as well as work from the study of new religious movements, to ask why Donald Trump is labelled a cult leader by political opponents, commentators, and the anti-cult movement. What this revivified cult discourse suggests is that in his excess, Trump has transgressed the boundaries of politics as a discrete domain, blurring the illusory lines with religion. However, this blurring is caused by more than Trump alone, feeding on historical currents of political nationalism, evangelicalism, and white supremacy in the US.

Figure 1: A truck with a Confederate flag tailgate, parked near a church in Arizona in 2018. ©Susannah Crockford.

America Gets Trumped

A pickup truck sits showing its tailgate emblazoned with the Confederate battle flag, parked beside a Christian church somewhere in Arizona. An SUV in Phoenix Airport wears decals, one with the Statue of Liberty holding an assault rifle aloft, another with an American flag edged with the words "back-to-back world war champs," and another with only a slogan: "USDHS certified right-wing extremist." On Facebook, in a group for locals in the Ash Fork-Williams area, a picture is posted of a truck with twenty-eight separate flags flying, including the Confederate battle flag, a half-Stars and Stripes half-Confederate flag, a yellow Don't Tread on Me flag, a QAnon flag, Trump 2020 flags, and Blue Lives Matter flags. Significantly several of the American flags are upside down, signifying a nation in distress. The comment on the post read: "So this happened in Ash Fork today!" The stickers, flags, and vehicles celebrating and supporting Donald Trump and the regime he implemented seemed like symbols of change. Signs that a specific formation of "America" was in ascendancy after the 2016 election. As an anthropologist, my field site is northern Arizona and I have been visiting regularly for extended periods since 2012. My training alerted me to the importance of these symbols, made more jarring by the gaps when I was not in the US, returning to see these symbols proliferating like smallpox scars. Passing a "Trump store" in Show Low, a town in the Mormon-dominated east of Arizona, decorated with Trump flags of all sizes, advertising Trump-branded coffee, with an inflatable Christmas-themed Minion outside, brought home to me the crossovers of Trumpism with capitalism. Trump was a brand; and in Arizona, people were buying it.

Cult is an accusation; a word used to label opponents. It delegitimizes; a symbol filled with heinous historical associations. It is also a word with a commonsense definition that most people feel they understand without much contemplation. If we go by the dictionary definition, Merriam-Webster defines cult as "a small religious group that is not part of a larger and more accepted

religion and that has beliefs regarded by many people as extreme or dangerous."[3] There is an implicit distinction between good and bad religion underlying this definition. Larger, more accepted religion is OK, but small religious groups that can be seen as extreme or dangerous, these are cults. Much of this distinction hinges on "*by many people*," a view cast on a minority by the majority, as such, it can be used as a tool of discrimination or persecution. And people think they know what a cult looks like. Cults look like Jonestown, in the popular imagination (Moore 2018: 146). They are led by charismatic leaders, they have unusual or extreme beliefs, they seclude and isolate themselves, often symbolically, but sometimes physically. When a category is defined through a checklist based on past manifestations, countervailing examples are a priori excluded. However, symbols live and flourish in everyday life. There was something about the flags and the bumper stickers and stores that indicated a profound shift in American politics, something immersive, almost invasive. Trump had taken over, and he seemed to fit a mould created by the category "cult."

Much of the analysis early on in Trump's campaign for president dwelled on his rallies as explanations for what was different about him compared to other candidates. Other candidates conformed to a norm - "president-lawyers" (Taussig 2017) - whereas Trump was more of a vaudeville flimflammer. Speaking directly and extemporaneously to the crowd at rallies, he became renowned for using insulting catchphrases like "Lyin' Ted" and "Crooked Hillary" and whipping up his supporters into a frenzy (Saunders 2016). Trump rallies were very different from standard political campaign stops that had speeches that the crowd listened to and politely applauded and then went home. A video from a postponed rally at the University of Illinois-Chicago on 11 March 2016 provides an example of the difference.[4] Trump himself does not even appear. The tension in the crowd in the stadium is palpable even on video. People are screaming, shouting, swearing, jumping in unison; myriad little flashpoints ignite among supporters and protestors, white men in red baseball caps squaring up against Black protestors with signs. The media stand up on a raised podium, fenced in, for a clear view but also for their protection. Chants ring out of "we want Trump!" and "USA! USA!" Police wearing tactical vests lead out protestors holding up signs that say "1492," "liberation not deportation," or simply their middle fingers. Responses from the crowd are heard: "Your sign was made in China!" and "Go back to Europe you fucking reject!" American flags abound on clothing. The scene is more reminiscent of a mosh pit at a rock concert or a contentious local sports derby than a political rally. The people are angry, and they are itching to fight. It is excessive, rippling with desired violence. It ends with a crackling loudspeaker, telling the assembled crowd that they should go home, and the event has been cancelled (Taylor 2016).

When Trump does appear at rallies, his speeches have a rambling, mercurial quality. Yet there is a consistency in the way he speaks, the rhetorical forms he uses, and the implications of what he is saying. He has been saying much the same thing, in the same format, since 2015 until

[3] "Cult," *Merriam-Webster*, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cult

[4] Video archived online: https://mediaburn.org/video/donald-j-trump-rally/ is the source for this and subsequent quotes in this paragraph.

the time of writing. To take the most recent speech at time of writing as an example, given in Iowa on October 9, 2021,[5] he begins by creating a sense of crisis: "After just nine months under Biden, violent criminals and blood thirsty gangs are taking over our streets, illegal aliens and deadly drug cartels are taking over our borders. Inflation is taking over our economy. China is taking over our jobs." America is under siege by its enemies, much the same as he stated in his inauguration speech in January 2017 in which he described "American carnage."[6] But now the Democrats are back in control of the Presidency and Congress, and they are ruining the nation:

> And now the Democrats want $6 billion in new federal funding to teach critical race theory, which I ended in our schools at the same time that Biden is unleashing the FBI on parents who stand up and object at school board meetings. The parents are the enemy. Biden is using federal law enforcement to threaten and silence citizens who oppose radical left indoctrination.

Here he picks up and repeats the same themes as I heard from the school board candidates at the Republican Party picnic; the left is using schools to indoctrinate children. There is a uniformity of message, regardless of current events or facticity. The addition of CRT is symbolic, any other signifier could be substituted in its place to refer to bad things that the Democrats are doing. The point is that Trump's political opponents are enemies of the nation.

What is created is a sense of us versus them, which goes beyond mere difference of opinion on the state of the nation. This is war, an implication which supports Trump's continued claim that the 2020 election was won fraudulently: "The election was rigged." However, he assures his supporters that it is not their fault, creating a sense of a special relationship, "Nobody's ever been better to Iowa and the farmers than Trump. I can tell you that. You know that." They are part of the same in-group; they share the same knowledge. They also share the same enemies, not only the Democrats but also the media, in this speech Trump repeats his recurrent slogans: "That's because it's fake news. They are the enemy of the people," referring to the media. The oppositional positioning exacerbates a sense of division in the country, a sense that is also evoked by the dictionary definition of cult as a group that is separated from or opposed by the rest of society. He also espouses beliefs that may seem unusual or extreme to many, claiming that the Hyde Amendment, a legislative provision that bars federal funding for abortion, legalizes "killing babies even after birth." This claim may seem laughably false, however, it is perhaps more accurately interpreted as a dog-whistle to QAnon conspiracy theories, in which the Democrats are literal child traffickers and baby killers (Rothschild 2021: 133-136). What's at stake is no less than the fate of the entire nation: "But the bottom line will always be a socialist transformation of America if they allow this to happen," because he and his supporters are fighting against evil: "They are sick people and they're really hurting our country." The response from the crowd is adoring, as they chant

[5] Transcript archived online: https://www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/donald-trump-des-moines-iowa-rally-speech-transcript-october-9

[6] Transcript archived online: https://www.politico.com/story/2017/01/full-text-donald-trump-inauguration-speech-transcript-233907

"USA! USA!" and "Trump won! Trump won!" and finally, "We love you! We love you!" When Trump gave this 1hr41min speech, the next presidential campaign had not even started. It was October 2021. He had just lost in November 2020. The next presidential election was in November 2024. Winning the election seemed to be beyond the point, especially given his repeated claims that elections in which Trump lost were rigged anyway. He seemed to be creating a larger movement. Journalist Jeff Sharlet explicitly compared Trump's rallies to religious rituals in which the "cult of Trump" receives his "gospel," with attendees explicitly stating that they see Trump on a "mission from God" to destroy the "hidden demons of the deep state" (Sharlet 2020). In this reading, cult is not a metaphor.

Linguistic anthropologists have focused on Trump's use of language in their analyses of what pushes him beyond the bounds of political norms. James Slotta notes that Trump's communication is marked by "incoherent remarks and incredible claims" (2019: 399). The media then "annotate" his speech to make it make sense to those unfamiliar with conservative media and its tropes, spreading right-wing narratives to a wider audience in the process. Slotta argues that Trump is more coherent to his audience than to opponents and observers. He does this with dog whistles, as mentioned above. Referencing the name "Sidney Blumenthal" in a seemingly nonsensical spiel will signal to anti-Semites and white supremacists who respond to references to Jewish names differently. However, what "Sidney Blumenthal" represents is an entire narrative diffused through right-wing media ecosystems; he is the Clintons' evil henchman (Slotta 2019: 404). Only those familiar with those narratives realize the relevance of his name when used by Trump as a signifier in his speeches without further context. This helps to create the impression that the other side lives in an alternate reality, the now-famous "echo chambers" and "filter bubbles." Trump is only speaking to his in-group, to those who already understand. For political commentators, the prevailing assumption was that politicians, especially the President, should want to speak to as many Americans as possible, to appeal as broadly as possible to expand their base of supporters. Trump's speech is deemed unpresidential in part because it appeals directly and almost exclusively to his pre-existing group of supporters. And this, I argue, is a significant part of how Trump is seen as transgressing the boundaries between religion and politics. Religious leaders speak directly to their followers, they speak in esoteric codes and employ narratives known only to those who already believe. Those perceived as "cult leaders" do this more so because it is an isolating mechanism. It gives the impression that believers speak different languages, even live in different realities than non-believers.

Trump uses social media to talk directly to his supporters, without editing or managing by public relations professionals. Political analysts perceived him having a "ceiling" because of his unpopularity and divisiveness (Stolee and Caton 2018: 149). Although he won 46% of votes in the 2016 election, Trump's popularity level in polls dropped post-election to the 30th percentile and stayed there. But his core followers remained enthusiastic and unwavering in their support. Stolee and Caton analyze Trump as consistently projecting a "Message" that addresses a "Base," who remain receptive regardless of changing events (2018: 150). Outside observers refer to Trump's base as "white working class" or a "basket of deplorables" depending on the level of empathy

engaged to understand them (Walley 2017: 231-232). According to Stolee and Caton, the base is "the candidate's devoted following who will believe in their candidate no matter what, especially if the revelations come from the mainstream media for which they harbor a deep and abiding distrust" (2018: 152). Using Twitter as a form of direct communication, Trump appealed aggressively and exclusively to his base. He cared only about those who supported him, whereas those who did not were his enemies. This exclusive focus on his base undermined his credibility as a politician and led him to be interpreted as a religious leader instead.

Critics alleged supporters of Trump were in a "cult-like thrall" (McIntosh 2020: 24). For Janet McIntosh, it was his repeated lies that created a false sense of reality. She calls persistent lying a form of language control, a way to control perceptions to alter reality (2020: 37). Trump's frequent lies, about crowd sizes, the effectiveness of his administration's COVID-19 response, and more, are a way of controlling political narratives. Observers feel gaslit, whereas supporters feel that what he says is true whether it is or not. Trump seems more confident than experts and fuels his supporters' rebellion against dominant narratives that they feel malign them. Trump's lies stick because they wear down resistance. According to McIntosh, it becomes too dangerous and exhausting to keep fighting lies, using chaos as a strategy to assert power over truth with performative language, Trump "asserts supreme authority over world-making" (2020: 38). Those identified as cult leaders are believed to do this, perpetuating the myth of the charismatic leader that followers believe to the exclusion of reality, safety, and sanity.

Yet there are political categories that can be employed to describe this same behaviour. Norma Mendoza-Denton (2020: 354) groups Trump as a "messianic autocrat" with similar Latin American autocrats like Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil and former Mexican presidents Vicente Fox and Enrique Peña Nieto. All use narratives of masculinity to communicate their strength and power to their audience of followers. Is a "cult leader" simply an authoritarian leader of a religious group rather than a political leader? And if so, it seems as if Trump could be labelled an authoritarian without further extrapolation. Yet his opponents and commentators consistently frame Trump and the Republican Party in religious terms - why?

The MAGA Cult

Figure 2: A "Trump store" in Show Low, Arizona, in 2018. ©Susannah Crockford

In February 2021, Adam Schiff, a Democratic congressman from California, was reported as saying that the Republican Party has "become essentially a cult" in an interview with news outlet CBS (Segers 2021). He cited the continuing support of Donald Trump, a month after the Jan 6 insurrection, the presence in the party of Georgia congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene, and the prevalence of conspiracy theories. Schiff was speaking prior to voting to strip Taylor Greene of her committee positions due to her dissemination of conspiracy theories, especially QAnon, and appearing to incite violence against Democrats. Schiff also referenced the conspiracy theories about voter fraud that Trump continues to espouse to claim that he is the true President.

In September 2021, Democratic Speaker of the House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi was reported as saying that the Republican Party had been "hijacked by a cult" (Porter 2021). Extremists were threatening American democracy. Trump had incited an insurrection. It was more than a political disagreement. She addressed Republicans directly and said, "take your party back." Conservatives were legitimate in Pelosi's view, but Trump and his followers represented something more extreme; they were off the spectrum, against the idea of government entirely.

In February 2021, Jackie Speier, a Democratic congresswoman for California and survivor of the Jonestown massacre, called Trump a "political cult leader" (Pilkington 2021). Speier was shot by followers of Jim Jones on the airstrip in Jonestown, Guyana, in 1978, events which began the mass murder of 918 people that became a byword for violent cults (Moore 2018: 148). Speier entered politics because of the shooting at Jonestown, which killed her boss the Congressman Leo Ryan, and she subsequently took over his congressional seat until announcing her resignation in 2021. "Jim Jones was a religious cult leader, Donald Trump is a political cult leader," Speier told *The Guardian* newspaper, "As a victim of violence and of a cult leader, I am sensitive to conduct that smacks of that. We have got to be wary of anyone who can have such control over people that they lose their ability to think independently." Speier characterized the Jan 6 insurrection in Washington DC as motivated by "groupthink" with the aim of overthrowing the government. She was particularly concerned about recruitment of military members by extremist groups, wanting to use their training. Donald Trump talked to them in code, she said.

These are a few examples, taken from among numerous comments, in which opponents and commentators cast the Republican Party as a cult with Donald Trump as their leader. Evidence for this characterization is the prevalence of conspiracy theories, unusual and extreme beliefs that lead to violence, and deluded believers unquestioningly following their charismatic leader. Jackie Speier leveraged her position as a survivor of mass murder to grant authority to her claim; she knows what a cult looks like because she was at Jonestown. There is a perpetuation of the popular understanding of what a cult is and how it will act. *Vanity Fair* asked whether Trump's "cult of followers" could be "deprogrammed" (Hagan 2021). The answer is provided through an interview with cult researcher Steve Hassan, a well-known member of the anti-cult movement who also wrote a book called *The Cult of Trump* (2019). Hassan confidently asserted that Trump has all the characteristics of a cult leader. In his opinion, millions of Americans have been "brainwashed." Trump used social media to impose undue influence or "mind control."

In *The Cult of Trump*, Hassan described how Trump uses mind control to manipulate the Republicans into a destructive authoritarian cult. His framework for defining a destructive authoritarian cult is the BITE model, the use of **B**ehaviour, **I**nformation, **T**hought, and **E**motion control to make someone a "mirror" or "clone" of the cult, dependent on and obedient to the leader (2019: 10). Followers suffer from something like dissociative disorder; their real self is suppressed, and a new identity is put in its place by their leader. Hassan compared Trump to Jim Jones, Sun Myung Moon, and founder of Scientology L. Ron Hubbard. He was a member of Moon's Unification Church for two and a half years in the mid-1970s, and "worshipped as the messiah" Sun Myung Moon (2019: 8). But now he sees himself as having been "tricked" (2019: 5). Cult

leaders promise something that believers want but can never be delivered. They have a "playbook," and Trump used the same techniques: sow fear and confusion, lie and create alternate realities, demand absolute loyalty, shun and belittle critics and ex-believers (2019: 10). These techniques allow leaders to gain "psychological sway" over followers through manipulating their followers' emotions, who feel special, part of an in-group, whereas outsiders are dangerous and unenlightened. This is the us vs them framing previously mentioned that Trump creates through his speeches and rallies. According to Hassan (2019: 13), cult leaders used to use physical isolation, but they can now use digital technology and smartphones, like human traffickers do with their victims and Trump does with social media. They deceptively recruit, indoctrinate, and control followers. Such destructive groups or relationships can cause radical personality change. Followers develop opposite values; they lose the ability to consider contradictory facts or evidence that challenges their new values. The solution Hassan offers is for followers to reconnect with their families and their "true, or authentic, selves" (2019: 16).

There is a series of assumptions underlying Hassan's model. That people have true or authentic selves. That people know what they want to do and are able do it. If someone else persuades them to do something else, this is inherently inauthentic. The techniques Hassan describes are undeniably abusive. They are forms of psychological torture. However, the concept of brainwashing is controversial, coming from propaganda explanations for what happened to a minority of Korean War POWs who seemed to prefer Communism at least for a while (Reichert, Richardson, and Thomas 2015: 4). The concept continues to be used in legal cases involving terrorism, parental alienation, and new religious movements to describe a form of psychological coercion, making people act "against their will." However, it relies on contested understandings of human will.

The idea that people can be forced to act against their will is substantively disputed by sociologist Eileen Barker. In her extensive study of Hassan's former group, Barker found that 90% of those who came to the Unification Church residential centres, which were purported to use brainwashing techniques to recruit members, resisted the recruitment effort (2011: 20). Of those who joined, the majority left within two years of their own volition. The techniques used are neither irresistible nor irreversible. Barker called brainwashing a "metaphor" (2004: 579). Her work led her to be personally engaged in the "cult wars" between new religious movements, the anticult movement, and the media. Barker's position remained that new religious movements are more likely to have their human rights, especially their freedom of religion, infringed than to infringe on the rights of their followers. Much of the dispute seems to emerge from problems of definition. Barker maintained that it is very difficult to make a legal definition of a cult and that few exist (2004: 573). Whereas she sees the anti-cult movement as focusing only on the negative aspects of NRMs and selectively using the worst examples to generalize from, while the media sensationalizes to sell copy. The metaphor of brainwashing or mind control "sometimes appears to bewildered relatives to be the only account that could explain why intelligent people accept incredible beliefs and spend their lives doing abnormal and unnatural things" (Barker 2004: 583). NRMs do put pressure on people to convert but so do mainstream religions, and research has

shown multiple times over that the techniques of NRMs are not as effective as they may wish or as opponents allege. Most NRMs do not commit crimes, with lower average rates than the general population, yet the image of them as violent is created by an overweening focus in the media on the worst-case scenarios such as Peoples Temple, Aum Shinrikyo, and the Order of the Solar Temple (Barker 2004: 591). And while the anti-cult movement sees NRMs as a de facto social problem because they dupe followers with false belief and alternate realities, sociologists have long seen all social reality as constructed by humans. As such the construction of "alternate realities" is only a problem if those realities lead to harmful or criminal behaviour (Barker 2010: 199-200). Everyone selects evidence and ignores counterevidence to reinforce their view of reality as the "correct" one, that is not a sign of being in a cult as much as it is of being in society.

However, Barker and others like her writing from the perspective of NRM studies have had less influence on popular culture than the anti-cult movement. The animosity between the sides of the "cult wars" remains. Hassan (2018) wrote an online response to academics who say there is no undue influence in destructive cults. He described a continuum of healthy to unhealthy influence, using his BITE model. Unhealthy influence creates "slaves to a person or ideology." Denying the harmful social influence of groups like Scientology and the Unification Church is "disingenuous academically and downright harmful" according to Hassan. Returning to the problem of definition, for Hassan a cult is not limited to small religious groups, he also includes human traffickers, terrorist cells, controlling individuals, multi-level marketing schemes, political groups, and more. Addressing Barker's claims directly, Hassan alleges that the Unification Church altered workshops when they knew sociologists such as her were coming, so she did not see the harmful or dangerous techniques. Barker denied this claim. Destructive groups lie to outsiders to appear normal or harmless because they have an ends-justify-the-means mentality, according to Hassan, who further claimed that sociologists dismiss ex-members as biased.

What does this dispute mean for the "cult of Trump" and also the category of "cult" itself? Is every person who voted for Trump a member of the cult? Have millions of Americans been brainwashed via social media and Fox News? Reviewing the allegations listed at the top of this section, the problem seems to be the harmful behaviour caused by Trump, such as the Capitol Siege in which five people died. And yet Trump is hardly the first American president to create situations which lead to people dying. Arguably, American presidents are collectively far more responsible for mass death than even Jim Jones. The issue is one of justification. Trump motivated his supporters to overthrow the government, therefore the violent action was unjustified. Cults supposedly motivate behaviour based on alternate realities and false belief; therefore, their violent action is criminal.

Questions often lead from normative assumptions about social position. Barker asked in her study of the Unification Church: "How did well-educated, middle-class young people come to be Unificationists – or, as they were by then popularly known, 'Moonies'?" (2010: 19) But why wouldn't people become Moonies? The key assumption here is "well-educated, middle-class young people" - they *should* want normative occupations, relationships, and so on, and when they do not their behaviour becomes a question, a problem, for social scientists to answer. Equally

accusations of Trump as a cult leader come from a similar place: "How did well-educated middle-class Americans come to vote for Trump?" The popular answer being that those who vote for Trump are neither well educated nor middle class, but ignorant, poor deplorables or euphemistically "the white working class." Here Trump studies tell us that these are not in fact the core of Trump voters, that Trump voters are indeed well educated and overwhelmingly middle class (Walley 2017: 231; Gusterson 2017: 210). So why vote for someone so "unpresidential"? He must be doing something nefarious to the country. Cue the accusations of mind control, of Trump as a political cult leader, an authoritarian rising. It is perhaps easier to accept brainwashing as an explanation than to accept that around 46% of voting age adults in America prefer Trump. That they want it this way. "Cult" is used to explain a social phenomenon that otherwise transgresses assumptions of the normal order of things. But it lets participants off the hook, it undermines their agency and accountability, and leaves those assumptions unexamined. Cult is a liberal white American explanation for how the political life of the country is so different than what they had assumed it was. It is a false explanation for why some Americans will overthrow the government rather than allow white supremacy to be challenged.

Bad Religion

When thinking through why the Republican Party in particular might be labelled a cult, the historical link between the Party and the so-called "Christian Right" must be examined. The Republican Party is connected to and supported by a particular religion, or group of Christian denominations, more specifically. There is a mutually supportive relationship between the two. Therefore, the connection between Republicanism and religion is not only rhetorical, but also historical. There is a substantive and material overlap between the Republican Party and certain strains of American Protestantism.

The term "Christian Right" refers to a coalition of denominations that generally support socially and fiscally conservative values, and electorally, the Republican Party. Susan Harding (2001) describes how Southern Baptist pastor Jerry Falwell led what she calls "fundamentalists" to become more politically engaged from the mid-twentieth century onward, after previously defining themselves through separation from the secular mainstream of American life. They engaged in cultural politics rather than protest politics, trying to rearrange cultural power relations to gain power and influence for conservative Christians in the name of their self-defined "Christian values." This shift saw conservative Christians contribute time and money to moral causes, participate in local, party, and national politics, vote for morally conservative candidates, and run for public office. Their justification for this political engagement was that they were called by God. Fundamentalists tended to be lumped together by non-fundamentalists and seen as backward "others." Being exiled from public life meant they could claim for themselves an outsider status, while enabling secular Americans to see themselves as modern, superior, and progressive. The formation of the New Christian Right shocked most non-believers, "it was a modern nightmare come true" (Harding 2001: 23). However, the Christian Right compared themselves to the Civil

Rights movement. Harding makes clear that the Christian Right is not a homogenous whole, and encompasses right-wing aligned Christian denominations variously called fundamentalists and evangelicals.

More recent sociologists and historians of American Christianity tend to group the denominations of the Christian Right under the term "evangelicals," and moreover emphasize that they are white evangelicals. Black evangelicals tend to read the gospel as requiring radically different political commitments than do white evangelicals. Race is positioned as a central factor in the divergent political outcomes of those who ostensibly share the same theological commitments. According to Robert P. Jones (2021), in the nineteenth century white evangelicals not only accepted slavery but thought it was divinely mandated. The Southern Baptist Convention began as a defense of slavery and the position of slaveholders in the church, splitting from northern Baptists and then supporting the Confederacy once the Civil War began. Jones calls it a "secessionist religion" that came to dominate Southern culture and "sacralized white supremacy" (2021: 10). It grew to become the largest Christian denomination in the US by mid-twentieth century, when Jerry Falwell led the shift toward political engagement that Harding describes. Nearly all mainline Protestants split in the 1840s over slavery, not only the Baptists, and the Southern branches of these churches justified white superiority theologically. This involved not only rhetorical justification of slavery but after the Civil War, material and public support for the terrorism of lynching and public violence against free Black people. Jones concludes that "as the dominant cultural power in America, they [white Christian churches] have been responsible for constructing and sustaining a project to protect white supremacy and resist black equality. This project has framed the entire American story" (2021: 12).

Trump's ascendance in the twenty-first century is the outcome of this racial divide in American Christianity and politics. White Christians across denominations support Trump, and they support him because of the persistence of deeply racist attitudes (Jones 2021: 20). White supremacy is part of his appeal. Contrary to arguments that Trump supporters are brainwashed by abusive tactics, support for him and the Republican Party's policies conforms with the pre-existing beliefs of white evangelicals. Whereas in the Jerry Falwell-era, the Christian Right called themselves the "moral majority," support for Trump has torn away this veneer of morality. Jones calls them nostalgia voters rather than values voters; they vote to maintain a past version of America. Trump's moral failings and lack of presidential character did nothing to undermine evangelical support for him because what really held together the Christian Right coalition was whiteness. Being white is a privileged class in America, and that means enhanced access to political rights, economic prosperity, legal benefits, and more, a historically contingent situation analyzed and deconstructed by an academic body of literature called critical race theory. White Christians created and maintained the exclusionary form of Americanness, according to Jones, they "made full membership in the nation contingent on skin tone and religious belief" (2021: 23). It also allows white people to deny that they "see colour" at all; white innocence rests on a religious purity (Jones 2021: 25). Now the Republican Party fights to maintain this innocence through maligning critical race theory.

Historian Anthea Butler (2021) locates racism as co-constitutive of white evangelicalism. Evangelicals find "Christian race," America, and belief synonymous; "Christianity is whiteness as well as belief" (2021: 9). Christianity is more than their religion, it is their race, their identity. Trump is part of this, a collaborator not an aberration. Butler traces the history of evangelical racism, through slavery and Reconstruction, the Jim Crow laws in the South, the terrorism of the Ku Klux Klan, to Billy Graham, Jerry Falwell, and other leaders of the "moral majority" in the twentieth century. The Tea Party movement and Sarah Palin's vice-presidential candidacy continued the racist animus of the Republican Party in the twenty first century, responding to the first Black president with racist conspiracy theories and obstruction of governance. The birther conspiracy theory that Barack Obama was born in Kenya and secretly a Muslim began the political career of Donald Trump, whose moral failings were overlooked by white evangelicals because of shared identity, values, and beliefs. Christian nationalism is a constitutive part of this underlying identity, the ideology that America is a white, Christian nation, and should be ruled by white, male, heterosexual citizens. According to Butler, evangelicalism is a "nationalistic political movement" that supports Christian nationalism (2021: 138). The ideology is the product of a nation founded by white slaveholding men that enables and perpetuates their power. In Butler's reading, evangelicals were racist all along, and that is why they support Trump. He represents them, he is an outcome of this shared history and culture. He is not a "cult leader" who has swayed "good Christians" or "real conservatives" from their authentic selves.

Historian Kristen Du Mez also argues that evangelical support of Trump is not aberrant or pragmatic but "the culmination of evangelicals' embrace of militant masculinity, an ideology that enshrines patriarchal authority and condones the callous display of power, at home and abroad" (2020: 7). Support of Trump is not a betrayal of their values but an outcome of them. White evangelicals share Trump's nativism, Islamophobia, racism, and nationalism. Du Mez argues that evangelical is a racially specific, cultural identity rather than a theological definition. Evangelicalism connects to whiteness, patriarchy, binary gender difference, and Christian nationalism in a way that cuts across denominational, regional, and socioeconomic groups. White evangelicalism has a specific culture, and it sells that culture, through a range of products including Christian music, films, magazines, home decor, other media, and this has led to a diffusion of white evangelical consumer culture far beyond churches. This cultural evangelicalism is now common in mainline churches and has blurred the distinctiveness of denominational borders. People can participate in it without going to church at all. For Du Mez, being a conservative evangelical is as much about culture as theology (2020: 14).

Analyzing this culture, sociologists Andrew Whitehead and Samuel Perry (2020) make clear that Christian nationalism is not synonymous with evangelicalism but cuts across denominations and can also be found among ostensibly secular Americans. It is a current that "idealizes and advocates a fusion of American civic life with a particular type of Christian identity and culture" where "Christian" means white heterosexual conservative American citizens, to the exclusion of all others (2020: 9). Christian nationalists express a conviction that God is on America's side, and Jesus died for their nation, and American prosperity is contingent on the

Christian faith. In terms of political commitments, the party that advances this view of America is the Republican Party. Much as in Trump's speeches, Whitehead and Perry found that Christian nationalists agreed that being against Christianity in any way is trying to destroy America. This means that Christianity should be privileged in law and public policy, and if the government is not aligned with their ideology, it should be overthrown, which appears to be the justification of many of the insurrectionists on Jan 6. Those with Christian nationalist commitments support a social order with a hierarchy based on gender, race, citizenship status, and sexuality. This social order is threatened by demographic change that shifts political power in favour of the Democrats, with current trends indicating a nonwhite majority by 2048 (Jones 2016: 246-247).

In the face of this change, evangelicals have elevated Donald Trump to a messianic figure, equivalent to Cyrus the Great, a leader who will break down the current social and political order so it can be rebuilt for the benefit of believers (Willenbrink 2021: 228-231). The biblical verse Isaiah 45:4, which refers to Cyrus being chosen to help the Jewish people, is interpreted as prophesying Trump's win (Beverley 2020: 11). It is also instructive for evangelicals to support Trump despite his moral and spiritual failings. Even if he is imperfect, God chose Trump to make America great again just as he chose Persian emperor Cyrus to save the Jewish people. Charismatic and Pentecostal pastors, such as Paula White and Mark Taylor, have made their own prophecies interpreted as both predicting and legitimating Trump's presidency. However, not all Christians accept such prophecies, or the act of modern prophecy at all. Those that do perceive Trump messianically are accused of being a "cult" by those who are outside Christianity altogether or from different American Protestant denominations. Du Mez (2020: 7) explicitly positions herself as having been raised in evangelicalism but watching residents of her hometown cheering for Trump: "I didn't recognise them." There is some boundary work going on here, a sense of trying to establish what "real" or "proper" Christianity is (Du Mez's book is subtitled "how evangelicals *corrupted* a faith" [emphasis added]). White evangelicals are called a cult even though they constitute the demographic core of the American religio-political fabric, now and historically.

The term "cult" has been used to negotiate what Christianity is in a theological and normative sense since the 19th century, when it was primarily used to distinguish heretical, schismatic groups from legitimized churches (Snow 2023). It demarcated good from bad religion, which, in a sense, scholars such as Du Mez continue to do in calling Christian nationalism a corruption of the faith. They occlude what Christianity has been and continues to be in the US, and allows them to maintain that the faith, once purified of corruption, can be redeemed. This discourse enables people who identify as Christian to position themselves as still capable of being morally superior social progressives, through distancing themselves from the "bad evangelicals" that secular progressives also disdain as backwards others. At the same time, this process of othering feeds into evangelicals' own sense of persecution. Perceiving Christian values as constitutively American and so requiring special status and legal protection, the existence of religious, cultural, and sexual minorities that do not hold the same values is interpreted as a threat (Whitehead and Perry 2020: 102). In turn they reappropriate cult discourse and accuse their opponents who have lost their way without the "true" religion. For example, critical race theory is a "cult" because it is

a "system of veneration and devotion…[with] total submission to approved thinking"; it is a doctrine that is used for indoctrination (Kelley 2021).

Evangelicals do not support Trump because they are tricked into doing so; it is an outcome of their culture and values. It is the same culture and values that puts an AR-15 in the hands of the Statue of Liberty and turns that image into a sticker on the back of a vehicle, proudly telling everyone who sees that this is what they think America should be. To call Donald Trump a cult leader and the Republican Party a cult is to ignore and deny the overlapping principles of white evangelicalism, Christian nationalism, and right-wing politics in the United States.

Figure 3: A car decal of the Statue of Liberty, holding an AR-15 aloft, seen in Phoenix Airport in 2018. ©Susannah Crockford.

Conclusion

In a country founded on the principle of the separation of church and state, politicians are not meant to promote a specific religion through policy. A core American value is transgressed; the boundaries of religion and politics are meant to be separate. Yet the animus of Christian nationalism does transgress this boundary. The view of America as a Christian nation, with the founders as devout Protestants, is not merely historically inaccurate; it is prescriptive. There is a significant portion of the population that want a specific religion to be privileged in law and public policy, and they believe that religion should be white evangelical Christianity. The Republican Party politically advances this view, more so since the election of Donald Trump. Trump's willingness to speak only to his followers positions him as a religious leader addressing the faithful rather than a political leader who is presumed to lead the nation regardless of whether they voted for him. However, the merging of politics with religion advocated in Christian nationalism calls for this kind of leadership; one who excludes those who do not follow their values. An American leader, in the eyes of Christian nationalists, should only represent and concern themselves with "real Americans."

Why should this be seen as "cult" behaviour then? Such an interpretation rests on an implicit definition of cults as controlling, dangerous, abusive groups, that can be religious, or political, or even commercial or criminal in nature. The nature of their beliefs is secondary to the fact that those beliefs are extreme, unusual, and invariably lead to violence. This definition perpetuates a stereotype of brainwashed zombies following their charismatic leader into ruin. However, there is no definition of a cult that easily excludes mainstream religions or political parties. Even defining cults as groups that use abusive tactics could arguably include the military and law enforcement, who also physically isolate and emotionally manipulate their charges. The popular definition of cults rests on a tacit distinction between good and bad religion (or politics), and that some uses of abusive techniques are socially acceptable and some are not. Cults are socially unacceptable religious or political groups using those same techniques and tactics.

Using the category of cult is problematic because it reduces accountability for those involved and it distracts from examining the historical and social systemic reasons for the success of Donald Trump and Republicanism in its current form. Calling Trump a cult leader and Republicans a cult absolves white American Christians, and American society at large, of their white supremacy. It makes him an aberration, and the current drift of the Republican Party one of "extremism," when it is being supported by almost half of adults in the country. This is not extremist behaviour of an aberrant cult; this is the social reality of contemporary American politics.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Aled Thomas, for inviting me to contribute to this special issue even when I was not at my most reliable. Jenny Gage, for telling me to stop procrastinating and write. Bradley Onishi and Janet McIntosh, and two anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful and considerate feedback.