

The rise of the Catholic Alt-Right

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Abstract

This paper examines the rise of the Catholic Alt-Right, in particular the group Church Militant. Drawing on ethnographic research at a recent Catholic Men's Conference in a Midwestern battleground state it examines the manipulative integration of rightwing themes of anti-feminism, anti-LGBTQ community, anti-immigration and anti-leftist ideology into Catholicism. It maps the roots of the Catholic Alt-Right out of prolife anti-feminism, apocalyptic Marianism, the charismatic masculinity manual, and the flourishing of ultra-conservative sects within Catholicism after the Vatican shutdown of liberation theology, feminist theology and the LGBT rights movement within the church in the 1980s and 1990s. It concludes with a re-imagining of potential paths back to liberation.

This article examines the roots and rise of the Catholic Alt-Right, focusing on the emergence of the influential media website Church Militant, which boasts 1.5 million monthly visitors (Lombroso, 2007; Vice, 2017). In particular, it examines the Catholic Alt-Right's ideological agenda of redirecting anger from economic trauma, false promises of social mobility (Aronowitz, 1991) and class warfare in working-class male consciousness onto cultural issues demonizing feminists, gays, leftists, and immigrants. Founded by "ex-gay" former Fox News reporter Michael Voris, Church Militant was denounced by a Vatican-linked journal as part of an apocalyptic, Manichean "ecumenicism of hate" between the conservative Catholics and evangelical fundamentalists who brought the Trump administration to power (Spadano & Figueroa, 2017). Its Breitbart News-style censure of feminists for male problems and its blaming of gays for the church sex abuse crisis are disturbing developments. Indeed, examples of the power of this dark ecumenicism abound. The bloody attacks on LGBT pride parade participants in 2019 in Bialystok, Poland, by angry rightwing protesters who waged a months-long antigay

propaganda campaign demanding “LGBT free zones,” was supported by figures in the local Roman Catholic hierarchy (Reuters, 2019; Santora, 2019; Santora & Berendt, 2019a; Santora & Berendt, 2019b), and calls by “ex-gay” media personality Mauricio Clark for an ex-gay “freedom march” in Mexico City (El Universal, 2019) suggest disturbing, coordinated global developments that invoke the bloody and disturbing history of the Christian Right’s Ugandan “Kill the Gays bill” of 2009 (Kaoma, 2009; Tabachnick, 2013; Williams, 2013). In other words, there is a new front in the Alt-Right war.

My study offers an overview of what motivates and defines this war. From entrepreneurial nuns running television (TV) networks to priests peddling oversexed marriage conduct manuals, the world of Alt-Right Christianity is fueled by a need to recast economic insecurity as gender insecurity, impoverishment as emasculation. Refusing to find a role for the church in righting economic wrongs, it instead offers a portrait of the imperiled laborer who must battle the morally bankrupt practices of liberalism, not the financially bankrupting practices of capitalism, to regain his ascendant role as the head of the household. As is about to become clear, an overtly heteronormative (Butler, 1990; Warner, 1993), homophobic agenda informs that battle. A study of Church Militant and its cultural and historical context, then, can help scholars of labor, religion, and gender to understand the new forces emerging in the Alt Right’s attacks on women and the LGBTQ community as a coded response against progressive interpretations of economic precarity.

I chart this emergence by identifying linkages between anti-feminist and anti-labor ideologies in the religious right. I analyze the rise of ultraconservative sects in the Catholic Church (Fox, 2012) and spiritual warfare-linked charismatic practices that gained traction in the church after the Vatican’s silencing of liberation theology, feminist theology, and gay rights in the mid-1980s during the 35-year reign of the conservative papacies of John Paul II and Benedict XVI.¹ I situate these movements in the context of the rise of fundamentalist movements throughout the major world religions at the end of the Cold War (Marty & Scott Appleby, 1994). Inspired by Pentecostal spirituality, Charismatic Christianity and its charismatic practices of speaking in tongues, divine healing and prophecy, and spiritual warfare, are increasingly influential throughout evangelical Christianity, with movements in mainline Protestantism and the Catholic Church. Researchers consider Charismatic Christianity the fastest-growing religious movement in the world, with over a half billion converts in the past 50 years (Cox, 1995; Jenkins, 2007; Martin, 1993; 2001; 2005; Pew, 2006). The Catholic charismatic movement, for instance, (Csordas, 1997, 2001) made headlines in 2018 when one of its members, Amy Coney Barrett, made the short list for nomination to the Supreme Court (Boorstein & Zauzmer, 2018; Graham, 2018).

I write as both a critical theorist of religion, gender, and politics and a former participant in the culture of charismatic religion (Wetzel, 2011a, 2011b, 2014; Wetzel & Caplan, 2011). As liberationist thought was silenced by conservative movements in the church who saw it as inspired by Marxist notions of class warfare, the charismatic practices and Manichean, spiritual warfare rhetoric associated with the so-called “Third Wave” of Pentecostalism increased in influence. The First Wave of Pentecostalism was the original Azusa Street revival in Los Angeles in 1906 which anticipated a new Pentecost with the revival of speaking in tongues. The Second Wave spread charismatic practices of divine healing, prophecy, and speaking in tongues into mainline denominations, including the Catholic Church. The apocalyptic, spiritual warfare rhetoric of the so-called Third Wave of Pentecostalism, beginning in the 1980s, reflects its mobilization by conservative strategists and incorporation into the Christian Right by Pat Robertson, Paul Weyrich, and lesser known figures such as church growth specialist C. Peter Wagner.

Pentecostals, charismatics, and other evangelicals went from political passivity, dating from the embarrassment of the 1925 Scopes Trial, to political engagement, stunning political and cultural observers (Ballmer 2006, 2014; Diamond, 1989).

With this mobilization came the darker, more aggressive, apocalyptic rhetoric of spiritual warfare, which has increasingly come to advocate the theocratic fundamentalism known as dominionism. Dominionism is an update of the fundamentalist ideology of Christian Reconstructionism that seeks to reconstruct a Christian society based on literal interpretation of biblical law. In this ideology, true Christians are to seek dominion over the crucial cultural and political “kingdoms” of government, law, education, science, business, media, arts, entertainment, and the family—where men straight out of *The Handmaid’s Tale* are instructed to assert dominion over their wives. It is also one of the principle promoters of the procapitalist prosperity gospel, which sees religion as a method for financial success. Fuller Seminary church growth strategist and charismatic brander Wagner (1988, 2008, 2012), dissertation advisor to evangelical leader and Obama-advisor Rick Warren, best-selling author of *The Purpose Driven Life* (2002), with 34 million copies and 70 translations, has been particularly influential. Wagner coined the term the Third Wave, also known as the New Apostolic Reformation, a network of charismatic ministers and missionaries widely credited with inspiring the infamous Uganda Anti-Homosexuality Act, known informally as the “Kill the Gays” bill and similar initiatives (Kaoma, 2009; Tabachnick, 2008, 2013).

To make sense of the way that such acts rely upon a particular intersection of politics and religion, I examine the entwinement of antifeminist and anti-LGBT gender ideology with free market ideology in charismatic culture. While conservative critics celebrate the rise of Charismatic Christianity as the chosen path of the global working class over “failed” progressive secular efforts (Jenkins, 2007; Martin, 2005), I focus instead on how the individualistic mindset of rightwing libertarianism ascendant in the era of neoliberalism has been internalized in religious constructions of anti-feminist gender ideology and practice in a way that obscures the material conditions of work and economic insecurity in working-class communities—and blames problems on the “cultural Marxism” of movements like feminism, immigrant and LGBTQ rights instead (Berkowitz, 2003).

1 | MOTHER ANGELICA, RAYMOND ARROYO, AND THE ETERNAL WORD TV NETWORK

Sociologist and Christian Right researcher Diamond argues that religious broadcasting networks have long constituted evangelicals’ most significant resource (1995).² By the 1980s and 1990s, the televangelism phenomenon, and later, scandals, of Jimmy Swaggart and Jim and Tammy Bakker on cable TV, would come to define the supernaturally oriented world of the Christian Right in popular consciousness. Diamond argues the mainstream media underestimated the full power and influence of the movement. Her work details the extensive support for the rightwing political campaigns of the Reagan administration in Central America and South Africa on Robertson’s 700 Club whose programs she monitored throughout the 1980s which largely evaded the radar of the mainstream media. She argues the rhetoric and practices of spiritual warfare became the unifying ideology of the religious right in the 1980s (Diamond, 1989).

The rightwing demagoguery of the original hate radio entrepreneur, Fr. Coughlin of the 1930s is well documented (Lee & Lee, 1939; Warren, 1996); less well documented is the rightwing, anti-feminist Catholic media of today. The Eternal Word TV Network (EWTN), is a

vast, conservative, increasingly rightwing Catholic media conglomerate started by a feisty, entrepreneurial nun-magnate named Mother Angelica that began broadcasting out of a studio garage at Our Lady of Angels monastery in Irondale, Alabama in 1981. EWTN claims to be the largest religious media network in the world, reaching 140 countries and a quarter billion homes. Chances are one has crossed upon EWTN while channel surfing on cable, where reruns of Mother Angelica's shows of spontaneous religious commentary, rosary praying, singing nuns and Vatican masses can be seen. Early on, EWTN received funding from wealthy Catholics anxious to see Catholicism catch up with Protestant evangelical success on TV (Schlumpf, 2019). Raymond Arroyo, a conservative journalist and talking head on Fox News, is its director of news programming. Influential rightwing Catholic billionaire Timothy Busch, founder of the Catholic, free-market promoting Napa Institute, is on its board of directors (Roberts, 2019). Arroyo cohosted *Mother Angelica Live* for years, wrote her official biography, and has written a book with Fox News personality and white nationalist Trump-defender Laura Ingraham.

Arroyo's recent New York Times bestseller *Mother Angelica: Her Grand Silence* (2018) argues EWTN began with Mother Angelica's encounter with the charismatic renewal in the early 1970s. "An intense encounter with 'the Spirit,' including the gift of speaking in tongues, stimulated Mother's interest in the Scriptures. For the first time, she began studying the Bible intensely" (p. 28). This led to a Bible study at a local women's Episcopal prayer group, then a weekly Scriptures study at the Monastery. It was "during these meetings that Angelica refined her homespun approach to the Gospels, vividly bringing the Good News to life while mining the stories for practical spiritual guidance" (Arroyo, 2018). The sisters recorded Angelica's talks and sold them for a dollar apiece. The sisters dissolved the peanut company business Mother Angelica had started to focus instead on their emerging media business. Her friend in the charismatic Episcopal prayer group was tasked to find a studio, organize a TV crew and finance the venture. Jimmy Bakker sent workers to help build the studio. Pat Robertson's Christian Broadcasting Network was so impressed they ordered 60 episodes. In the recording of her second series, Mother became aware of a forthcoming Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) miniseries entitled *The Word* concerning newly discovered ancient scrolls challenging the divinity of Jesus, which she considered "blasphemous" (p. 30). Confronting the general manager at her station, the local Birmingham CBS affiliate, she demanded he not air *The Word*. Refused, she left to begin her own. Her foray into cable would be called the EWTN as a "sly protest" against *The Word* (p. 31).

This pattern of confrontation with authorities, including church authorities, would define Mother Angelica's feisty, populist—and fundamentalist—style as the culture war of the mid-1990s heated up. As a woman with power in the church, Mother Angelica is, paradoxically, both a product of and reaction to Vatican II. She began to take on what she considered the liberal church hierarchy in the United States (Schlumpf, 2019). Her defense of traditional values ideology manifested as prolife, anti-feminist and anti-LGBTQ. As Arroyo notes, "when a bishop or even a cardinal strayed from orthodoxy, Mother fearlessly called him out." Famous incidents include her opposition to the "human" depiction of Jesus as subject to sexual temptation in Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* in 1988. She organized a full, Schlafly-style resistance campaign that undermined the film—without ever watching it. At World Youth Day in Denver in 1993, with the pope in attendance, Mother Angelica angrily denounced a mimed reenactment of the Stations of the Cross that depicted Jesus as a woman. This outburst heralded a new approach, visibly marked by a return to a more traditional habit for Mother Angelica and her order. Claiming she had "a right to be Roman Catholic without your persecution," Mother Angelica took an approach not dissimilar to Catholic media populist Fr. Charles Coughlin in

painting conservative Catholics as the suffering masses against a liberal establishment in the church (Schlumpf, 2019).

Cardinal Weakland of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee later called Mother Angelica's comments "one of the most disgraceful, un-Christian, offensive and divisive diatribes I have ever heard." Mother Angelica's response? "He can go put his head in the back toilet as far as I am concerned!" (Arroyo, 2007; Schlumpf, 2019). Arroyo argues "I have often said that Mother Angelica single-handedly saved the Church in America, and maybe around the world. When there were liturgical abuses, when devotions were being cast aside or disparaged, it was Mother Angelica who challenged the status quo and vigorously defended Church teaching" (p. 34). Recent articles by *National Catholic Reporter* Winters (2018, 2019) detail the increasingly Alt-Right, Fox-News, anti-immigrant turn of Raymond Arroyo and EWTN as he defends Trump's immigration policy, promotes rightwing propaganda, and hosts and promotes former Trump strategist and Alt-Right guru Steve Bannon on his show, *The World Over with Raymond Arroyo*.

2 | CHURCH MILITANT: THE CATHOLIC ALT-RIGHT TURN

The rising influence of Church Militant takes the conservative rhetoric of EWTN to a whole new level of spiritual warfare against "leftist LGBT forces." Founded as the website *Real Catholic TV* by former Fox News reporter Michael Voris in 2008, in 2012, he changed its name to Church Militant after the Detroit Archdiocese objected to its use of the word Catholic. Church Militant advocates against "accommodation" with the world and incites its followers to "challenge and confront" the secular world. I attended Church Militant's fifth annual "Strength and Honor" Men's Conference in August 2019 in Dearborn, Michigan. Most of the attendees were from the battleground states of Ohio, Michigan, and Pennsylvania. The title was "Take Back Your Home: Prepare to Be Challenged":

Are you being the man God is calling you to be? The salvation of your family, your peers and Western civilization itself depend on it. The forces of evil are attacking true manhood, and it's up to you to live it and pass on the Catholic faith. Bring your son, your father, your brother, your uncle or your nephew—especially if they have only known what the world calls "manhood."

The opening talk by Voris, titled "Confronting Toxic Femininity," blended Breitbart-style confrontation with the imagery of spiritual warfare. Dramatically positioned to the left of the speakers was a huge statue of St. Michael the Archangel drawing out his sword and a statue of the Virgin Mary. Women weren't allowed to attend, but watched via live stream. Voris argued that beginning with the sexual and cultural revolutions of the '60s "Satan has grabbed the microphone" and that "there are too many males who think like women." He went on to define manhood as a respect for objective truth and toxic femininity as the extreme truth that "only feeling matters." The reason Trump is so popular, he argued, is that he speaks about truth. The "pro-aborts," on the other hand, deny that there is any truth. He cleverly redefined the feminist notion of toxic masculinity as "any man who lives in opposition to the truth." Liberal priests will say "Why don't we ordain women?" Voris responds "about half the ordinations we do *are* women!" At this homophobic joke, the crowd broke out laughing. Voris went on to decry seminaries perverted by homosexuals. He decried liberal priests and bishops as "emasculated men

who do not care for the truth.” Speaking in conspiratorial tones, he outed a church nearby where the Catholic LGBT group Dignity holds mass, which 15–20 priests support and enable. He then asked the crowd: “When have you not said something you should have?” to a priest doing or allowing something wrong. A few people raised their hands. “How many of you have said something?” More hands. “Every time we don’t,” Voris argued, “you demonstrate a love of self over others.” Church Militant has a subgroup named “Resistance” that advises and organizes visitors to its website into groups to protest priests seen as liberal or progressive at their respective parishes (see Church Militant.org; Vice News, 2017).

Voris’ apocalyptic rhetoric turned explicitly violent at times: “You should be so angry you want to punch them in the face. Now I’m not saying you should; (pause) though that’s an option” (laughter). “You’ve got to confront,” Voris continued. “God does not care about feelings.” Evangelization is the only way to avoid being a “slave of Satan.” Voris went on to discuss his 20 years in the secular media. When the Supreme Court upheld abortion rights in 1992, the secular journalists in the newsroom “burst out crying and hugging each other; the Luciferian media have the microphone; our job is to take that microphone back.” Voris concludes: “Evil always turns on itself—just look at the Democrat debates. Truth always prevails because truth is supernatural. We must be superheroes.” Voris has developed his theories of gendered spiritual warfare in books like *Resistance: Fighting the Devil Within* (2017) and *Militant: Resurrecting Authentic Catholicism* (2015) published by the company he founded, St. Michael’s Media. In Chapter 10 of *Militant*, titled “The Feminized Hierarchy: Masculinity Abandoned,” Voris articulates further his thesis of the equation of masculinity with truth and virtue and femininity with weakness and vice. He situates the current generation of Catholic Church bishops as corrupted by the sexual and cultural revolution: “the majority of today’s bishops were young seminarians when the wave of evil broke over the American culture in the 1960s and 70s” (p. 105). “They are the first generation of leaders who have had their manhood thoroughly sucked from them by the culture, a culture where the feminine rules supreme and the masculine is debased” (p. 107). “They learned how not to be men, how not to stand in opposition to spiritual danger, and learned rather how to be women, to proclaim and repeat such insipid, Protestant theology-inspired phrases like ‘all are welcome’ or ‘we should not judge, or a host of other spiritually destructive mantras dressed up in high-sounding, well-intentioned, bumper-sticker phrases” (Voris, 2016). Voris concludes: “They learned to lead like women, to accentuate all that is feminine to the virtual exclusion of the masculine. They never mentioned a word about the acceptance of sexual immorality on the part of so many of their congregations. They kept silent and allowed the firestorm to continue sucking in the faithful. And in the early years, they sat somewhat content behind rich storehouses of diocesan wealth and investments. But then came the reality of what their silence in front of evil and their cooperation with it had wrought: the homosexual priest sex abuse scandal” (p. 108). On April 24, 2016, Michael Voris “came out” about his own fifteen-year homosexual past, supposedly to preempt forces in the New York diocese from doing so first. In the video, Voris (2016) argues that after his “reversion” to the Catholic faith on his mother’s deathbed, “I was given back my masculinity I had squandered.”

The next speaker, Doug Barry, a fitness instructor and men’s speaker who teaches self-defense, gave the talk “First Line of Defense” where he argued that men have “become cowardly about the faith”. We’ve become “low-T (testosterone) spiritually speaking.” Instead, men’s calling is for battle. He decried the prevalent idea that “the holier I become, the more passive I have to become.” We need to “remind ourselves to be heroes.” He gave a story about a possessed/homeless man who entered a church and stuffed a whole handful of consecrated wafers in his mouth, then ran out of the church. Did any men stop him? No. We have to remember,

Barry argued, we're fighting principalities of darkness. Satan is trying to destroy your family. You are the first line of defense. What are you doing about it? "Don't be a spiritual sissy." You must be a spiritual warrior and "lead your wife!" Barry concludes with a male supremacist twist. While not a published book author (yet), Barry had dozens of CDs with his talk for sale at a booth afterward.

The next speaker, Church Militant chief of staff, Simon Rafe, in his late 30s, high-strung with a thick British accent gave the talk "Rules for Radicals" in which he consistently affirmed masculine values as inherently better than feminine values. Rafe argued that its "hip to be square" and that the "only revolution left is orthodoxy-rebellion against the world." One rule was to "always correct misconceptions—you won't be popular, but (enunciating each word pompously) *you-will-be-right*. Which is what is important." Another rule was "place duty before pleasure," which he argued was the "most masculine thing you can do." Drinking may be fun but too much is "not what you were made to do." Another rule was to "Never assume more than is said or explicitly implied" and to "never answer more than is asked." This will piss off women, Simon argued, but "that's good, as it reminds us that men and women are different." One important rule was "remember your objectives," half of which boiled down to the idea that one should not waste one's time trying to convince people on the other side of the fence. Rather, one's time is most efficiently spent organizing friends and family around you. Another rule was "credentials mean nothing when you are wrong." He offered James Martin—the Jesuit who recently wrote a book arguing for the church to open up dialogue with homosexuals (Martin, 2017)—as Exhibit A, to audience laughter. "We always dog on him," (more laughter) but it's a "waste of time to talk to him." He concluded with the idea that saying the Our Father prayer was "more radical than Alinsky or Marx," and to "never forget you are a revolutionary, whose goal is to overturn the order of the (demonic) universe."

The final speaker, former boxing and kickboxing star Jesse Romero, gave a talk titled "The Virtue of Sacrifice" and repeatedly invoked the imagery of battle, swords and spiritual warfare against the demonic presence surrounding us. Jesse is a popular speaker in the Catholic Charismatic movement and has written several books, including *Catholics, Wake Up! Be A Spiritual Warrior* (2014), the prayer book *Lord Prepare My Hands for Battle* (2015), *Knocked Off the Donkey: Burro No More* (2016) (which argues Catholics, and specifically Hispanic Catholics, should exit the Democratic Party), and his recent *Devil in the City of Angels: My Encounters with the Diabolical* (2019), which he encouraged people to buy at his booth. He spoke of the "sword of the spirit" one receives during the adolescent Catholic rite of confirmation. When you die, Jesse states, you will experience the "examination of the sword": Christ will say "Let me see your sword." The goal, Jesse argues, is to "give him a very bloody sword." "You're all soldiers of Christ, are you in?? he asks the crowd in a booming, charismatic voice. Again, even louder: 'Are you in?'" Jesse asks the audience (the audience roars). Next, Jesse talks about the devil, the world and the flesh: some say that what's happening among the clergy (sex abuse scandals, homosexuality, etc.) is due to liberals and modernists. "No! It's diabolical!" Jesse thunders. In 1973, he says, the "approved" Marian Apparition in Akita, Japan, Mary said "the work of the devil will infiltrate the church." Jesse then cited a Georgetown study that only 17% of Catholics believe in the devil anymore. He cited the Vatican exorcist of thirty years, the inspiration for the movie *The Rite* (his red pill moment, Jesse says) who argues the "devil sows confusion": like the "idea that boys will be girls and girls will be boys." Fr. Candido, who trained this exorcist, Fr. Amorth, argues that there are "so many devils, that if visible, they would eclipse the sun." The Our Father prayer itself, in its original form—to "protect us from the evil one"—is a minor exorcism. Jesse then argued that many charismatic Christians get it wrong when they lay hands

on an “afflicted” one. No, you should not do this, he has learned, in researching his latest book, as you leave yourself “open” to spirits, who can then enter you surreptitiously. Jesse then went into detail about the power of “imprecatory prayer,” a special prayer to ward off evil spirits, that only a priest can do—or you can do for your immediate family and yourself—but not others. He then talked about a woman who was ritually consecrated to Satan. Five guys held her down for three hours. Thirty seconds after speaking the rosary in Latin, it was like dropping a microphone into hell. Demon spirits “don’t like Latin,” Jesse explains—one can understand “why Modernists took it away!” Jesse then pitches his new prayer book with imprecatory prayers included. He argues “demons are attracted to evil people, evil places—just look at the DNC (Democratic National Committee), Planned Parenthood, gentlemen clubs, Playboy, Hustler. Want to go to heaven? Don’t hang out with knuckleheads.” As a cop in LA, he claims he was invited every day for 20 years to a bar with free drinks and food for cops. The (female) bartenders and women there “liked the uniform,” he explains. He never went once! Lastly, he gave a story about a time he went to an apartment with three Cuban guys who had statues of African deities. He could feel the presence of evil, so he sprinkled some holy water on them—just a few drops surreptitiously—which helped subdue them. He concluded with tips on good Latin prayers to say to ward evil spirits off. As St. Faustina says, “prayer torments demons.”

Throughout the day rituals of Catholic sacraments were made available, which lent the veneer of religious legitimacy and sacredness to the conference. A local priest was available for confessions, and, after a concluding panel that answered written questions from the audience (hand-selected by Church Militant to maintain control), a Catholic mass with Eucharist was conducted. The mixture of Breitbart-style political demonization of liberals, feminists, gays, and Democrats with traditional religious rituals was off-putting and troubling for someone like me raised cradle Catholic. That the conference coincided precisely with the two mass shootings in El Paso, Texas and Dayton, Ohio, motivated by white nationalist, Alt-Right rhetoric not dissimilar to the energy being marshaled at the Men’s Conference was disturbing. The reality of urban decay and depression, so noticeable in the surrounding Dearborn neighborhood was left unengaged by the speakers or the conference itself.

Among the various reactionary, far-right books combining religion and politics available for purchase was one titled *Revolution and Counter-Revolution* by a Brazilian professor named Plinio Correa de Oliveira (2014). Published by “The American Society for the Defense of Tradition, Family and Property,” its motto states “If the Revolution is disorder, the Counter-Revolution is the restoration of Order.” In it, the author lumps together the three “great revolutions in the history of the West: the Pseudo-Reformation, the French Revolution, and Communism” as the great “evil” responsible for the decline of the Church in modern society. Defending the principle of hierarchy ordered by nature, Oliveira argues that “pride leads to the hatred of all superiority and, thus, to the affirmation that inequality is an evil in itself” (pp. 2–3). The egalitarianism of the French Revolution led to the “false maxim that all inequality is an injustice, all authority a danger, and freedom the supreme good” (p. 4).

Another book for sale was Regnery Press’s *The Dictator Pope: The Inside Story of the Francis Papacy* (Colonna, 2017), which makes Francis out as a controlling, Peronist-inspired dictator who has taken over the Vatican and surreptitiously seeks to enact the global culture war on the Church. At lunch one day, several of the men I spoke with at the conference in my lunch table group spoke conspiratorially about the upcoming Amazon synod, the “Synod on Bishops for the Pan-American Region,” where, in addition to an emphasis on environmental degradation in the Amazon, rumors circulate that Francis will announce an exception to vocational celibacy

in order to deal with the drastic shortage of priests for indigenous communities in the Amazon, where estimates cite one priest per 10,000 believers (McElwhee, 2019; PBS News Hour, 2019).

This mixture of Catholicism and rightwing politics could also be heard in Michigan on the show *Catholic Answers Live* on the local affiliate for Ave Maria Radio. Surfing the radio, I heard author and Catholic radio personality Trent Horn promote his upcoming book *Why Catholics Can't be Socialists*. Drawing on pronouncements against socialism by conservative popes a century ago, Horn instructed his radio audience about what is and isn't allowed for Catholics to believe. Summarily dismissing socialism for its lack of respect for private property, Horn generously leaves open the possibility that one doesn't have to be a slavish devotee of free market capitalism in order to be an "authentic" Catholic, though, apparently, in the ideology of Catholic Answers, this doesn't hurt. While one can't be socialist, one can be open to "distributive justice"—within certain parameters, which Horn discusses in the book. Both Trent Horn and the Men's Conference attendees I spoke with cited popular Alt-Right thinker Jordan Peterson in their arguments. Listening to the program, it is clear the upcoming book is aimed for maximum election-year influence to battle blossoming millennial interest in the democratic socialism of Bernie Sanders and the so-called "socialist squad" that includes Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Michigan's own Rashida Tlaib.

3 | ROOTS OF THE CATHOLIC ALT-RIGHT: PRODIGAL DAUGHTERS: CATHOLIC WOMEN COME HOME TO THE CHURCH

The roots of the Catholic Alt-Right and its efforts to divide the Catholic world between left and right, good and evil, can be seen in the rise of EWTN over the past several decades. Since its origin in 1981, Mother Angelica's EWTN has promoted anti-feminist ideologies in the Catholic world amidst the backlash to the Vatican II council's modernizing reforms that sought to give laity, women and the "people of God" larger roles in the institutional church. EWTN promotes works by publishers like the ultraconservative Ignatius Press.³ One provocative title, *Prodigal Daughters: Catholic Women Come Home to the Church* (1999), edited by longtime prolife activist Donna Steichen,⁴ signals the strategy of anti-feminist resistance: "making space" for conservative women while demonizing feminism for excluding conservative women's experience. In the introduction, for instance, Steichen points out that in the dominant religious and cultural narrative, the term prodigal is understood as male—the prodigal son. Here, space is made for women as "prodigal daughters." The title sets the tone for the often *The Handmaid's Tale*—judgment of women that follows:

In this memorable book, seventeen women of the Baby Boom generation tell their poignant personal stories of apostasy and repentance. Each left the Catholic Church to seek autonomy and fulfillment on the major cultural battlegrounds of this era. Each eventually turned homeward to find, like her prodigal brother in the best-loved of Christ's parables, that her Heavenly Father had been calling her throughout her absence, watching and yearning for her return.

Feminists in the bureaucratic networks of Catholic dissent continually predict that women will abandon the Church *en masse* unless they are soon admitted to the

hierarchy. The women who recount their experiences in this timely and important book prove the dissenters wrong.

The reader who picks up this book encounters byzantine personal stories of rightwing return to the church; testimonies to the lived tensions and splits as religiously affiliated social justice and feminist movements clashed with the emerging pro-life movement. Many of the stories speak of the return to faith after periods of feminist, secular or New Age commitment while challenging whether feminism “allows space” for the perspectives of nonfeminist women concerned with the lives of the unborn, traditional marriage and faith. In the conclusion, Steichen argues that those who left the church were “victims” of baby boomer counterculture, casualties of erroneous and weak “Simon and Garfunkel theology” who can only be redeemed through a return to orthodox Catholicism.

4 | SPIRITUAL WARFARE AND MARIAN APOCALYPTICISM

The roots of the Catholic Alt-Right can also be seen in anti-feminist Catholic ideology that draws on preexisting anticommunist ideologies historically entwined with certain versions of the cult of the Virgin Mary. The rightwing political history of Marian apparitions and devotionism is well documented (Apolito, 2005; Cousino, 2006; Cuneo, 1997; Perry & Echeverria, 1988; Zimdars-Swartz, 1992, 2006). There is a self-propagating effect to Marian messages, with much repetition of messaging between apparitions. Typically channeled through uneducated peasant children, the messages are codified and refined by educated Marian devotees, often priests or educated laymen, around them.⁵

Many feminists have argued the cult of the Virgin Mary has been used historically to subjugate women. Marina Warner's *Alone of All Her Sex* (Warner, 1976) shows how Mary's myth was used from the beginning of Christianity to impose orthodoxy. Early Christianity dueled two major heresies, the idealist, Gnostic belief that Jesus was all divine and the more materialist, Arian belief that Jesus was all man. The Virgin Mary myth helped combat these two heresies; as the Mother of God, she emphasized Christ's humanity; as giver of Christ's virgin birth, she emphasized his divinity. The Virgin Mary cult paradoxically reflects Christianity's absorption of pagan fertility cults and goddesses as well as a patriarchal neo-Platonic dualism that sees women, sexuality and the body as inferior. Warner argues the image of the Virgin Mary has been used to deploy the classic Christian triadic complex of “sex-sin-death” to “other” ordinary women who “bore Eve's curse,” giving birth in pain, corrupted by the sexual demands of the body for reproduction. It is easy to fall into a simplistic romanticism with Our Lady, as the main feminine center of divine spirituality in an otherwise patriarchal Christianity. Warner critiques Carl Jung for endorsing Mary as a protofeminist spiritual figure, while ignoring her central role in historically policing and domesticating women to their inferior social position. Held aloft by a patriarchal society, “alone of all her sex,” Mary has often been used to stigmatize and judge “ordinary” women's impure linkages to the labor of body and sexuality.

Researchers Perry and Echeverria (1988) show Marian devotionism's central role in Catholic antimodernism historically in fascist movements in Portugal, Spain, Argentina, and Chile. They chart her use for reactionary, rightwing causes, to fight liberation theology in Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s, as well as her utilization by the charismatic movement. The

influential Medjugorjean apparition itself, they point out, was prophesied out of a charismatic prayer group meeting. Enforcer of orthodoxy, they argue Marian devotionism “comes out” in times of church crisis. In this sense, Marian devotionism, as orthodoxy, is the closest Catholicism has historically to a fundamentalist tradition. At the same time, the Mary devotion is a terrain of struggle theologically, as feminist Catholic theologians seek to reappropriate, reimagine, and liberate Mary from the patriarchal setting in which she has been framed and used historically.

5 | “SLAVES OF MARY”: FR. GOBBI'S MILITANT MARIANISM

More roots of the Catholic Alt-Right can be seen in Fr. Gobbi's Marian Movement of Priests, a subterranean influence on the Marian messages of the 1980s/1990s-era Our Lady of Medjugorje apparition in conflict-ridden, Cold War-era Croatia in the former Soviet Republic of Yugoslavia. Well below the radar of the secular world, Fr. Gobbi, an Italian priest influenced by the medieval, Montfortian “slaves of Mary” tradition, in 1972 claimed to begin receiving “interior locutions”—an “inner voice” speaking to him from the Virgin Mary while visiting the shrine of Fatima, the site of the famous 1917 apparition that denounced the “Satanic error of communism” and incited the faithful to pray for the conversion of Russia. Fr. Gobbi alleges Our Lady instructed him to gather priests that would be willing to consecrate themselves to the Immaculate Heart of Mary⁶ and unite to defend the Pope and the Catholic Church against the threats of modernity. Claiming over 400 cardinals and bishops, a hundred thousand priests around the world, and millions of laypersons, the movement is a fraternal organization for priests, organized around regional cenacles, or prayer meetings, centered on the book that records Fr. Gobbi's 30 years of supposed inner locutions, *To the Priests: Our Lady's Beloved Sons* (Gobbi, 2000).⁷ It claims twenty printings and well over a million copies distributed.⁸ Fr. Gobbi was close to Pope John Paul II, a major devotee to Mary, and co-celebrated mass in the private Papal chapel regularly.

The authoritarian nature of Fr. Gobbi's “interior locutions” from our Lady is clear from the start:

Renew your consecration to my Immaculate Heart. You are mine; you belong to me. At every moment you must be just as I would have you be; at every moment you must do just what I would have you do. Do not be afraid. I will always be near you! I am now preparing you for great things, but little by little as a mother does with her child. (July 7, 1973)

In apocalyptic language of spiritual warfare, the messages call out feminism, the sexual revolution, rebellious priests and communism as Satanic threats:

The reason for my tears, for the Mother's tears, is my children, who, in great numbers, live unmindful of God, immersed in the pleasures of the flesh, and are hastening irreparably to their perdition.

Above all, the cause of my weeping is the priests: those beloved sons.... Do you see how they no longer love me? How they no longer want me? Do you see how they no longer listen to the words of my Son? How they frequently betray Him?

These will be my priests: consecrated to me, and they will do whatever I command them. The time is near when I will make my voice heard by them, and when I will place myself at the head of this, my cohort, prepared for battle. (July 13, 1973)

These priest-sons of mine, who have betrayed the Gospel in order to second the great satanic error of Marxism. It is especially because of them that the chastisement of Communism will soon come and will deprive everyone of all they possess. Times of great tribulation will unfold. (July 28, 1973)

Truly the Demon of Corruption, the Spirit of Lust has seduced all the nations of the world! Not one of them is any longer preserved. This veil of death is spread out over the world, and souls are being defiled, even before they awaken to the knowledge of life.

The priests of my Movement must restore purity in souls and fight firmly against the Demon of Lust in all its manifestations. They must combat styles that are more and more indecent and provocative; they must combat the press that publicizes evil and entertainment which ruins morals. They must struggle against the prevalent mentality that legitimizes and justifies everything, and against current morality that permits everything. (October 16, 1973)

As can be seen in this brief sampling, Gobbi's messages from Mary are posed in stark, apocalyptic, Manichean terms: Mary versus Satan, absolute good versus absolute evil. Evil signified by communism, pride and lust. Feminism equals pride, rather than feminine submission. The only respite is prayer and total submission to Mary; to suffer for Mary, and submit oneself to Mary as Mary submits herself to the Son and the Father. As she instructs on July 23, 1973: "Be ever in my Heart, and at each moment, you will find peace. Do not be worried about what you are to do! One who has consecrated himself to me belongs totally to me. He cannot, at any moment of the day, decide freely what he is to do with himself. If you would remain with me, I myself will tell you at every moment what I would like you to do, and then whatever you do will always be according to my will." Going on for hundreds of pages, priests, and laypeople are encouraged to meditate on extremely regressive, masochistic messages. Priests and followers are to become like little children, sons. Motherly guilt is used to extreme effect. Thinking for oneself is of the devil. Complete obedience and submission to Mary and the Church is demanded. Individual freedom is negated and subsumed into Mary's will. In the cenacles, the prayer meetings of the movement, critical reflection or discussion was not allowed as it could undermine the goal of childlike obedience. Cenacle members were instructed to simply read the locutions aloud and pray.

The admonition to "pray, pray, pray" in the now Vatican-discredited Medjugorjean messages echoes Fr. Gobbi's interior locutions: pray and become one with Mary. Our Lady of Medjugorje's seemingly innocuous title as "Queen of Peace" is less so once decoded through Fr. Gobbi's writings, where submission and peace are equated. When one has submitted oneself to Mary and orthodoxy, one is at peace. When one resists the church, the Pope and the hierarchy, or asserts oneself "against nature," as feminists, communists and homosexuals do; one is in conflict, at war, on the side of Satan. Literary theorist Cousino (2006) aptly summarizes Mary's representation in this literature as a "feminized devil fighting a militarized Mary in a final, decisive battle," aggression which "ultimately leads to a cult of fertility, which expresses itself in blood" (p. 104).⁹

6 | THE HE-MAN-GELICAL MASCULINE IDEAL: JESUS CHRIST AS “MAN’S MAN”

More roots of the Catholic Alt-Right can be seen in the charismatic men’s speaker Fr. Larry’s masculinity manual *Be A Man! Becoming the Man God Created You to Be*, published by Ignatius Press (Richards, 2009). Fr. Larry’s work updates an older Catholic genre of World War II-era anticommunist masculinity that conflated physical and spiritual health and emphasized obedience to authority. It also reveals the influence of the Third Wave’s spiritual warfare and prosperity gospel outlook in arguing that gender normativity, the free market, and individual, masculine self-reliance should be seen as the solution to the “problems” of feminism, porn and homosexuality—all while steadfastly ignoring the social and economic conditions creating widespread economic insecurity in places like Fr. Larry’s rustbelt, Erie, PA context. Opus Dei founder Josemarie Escriva’s famous directive equating manhood with Jesus, signals the ideological interpellation or “man work” going on: “Don’t say, ‘That’s the way I am—it’s my character.’ It’s your lack of character. *Esto vir!*—Be a man!” (Fraad, 2014). The incitement to “Be A Man!” recalls Althusser’s (2001) famous argument on the imaginary, yet linguistic and material nature of ideology as lived experience and institution, whereby subject-hood is revealed, confirmed, and created in interactions such as the police’s call to the man on the street “Hey, you there!”—who turns around in recognition and subject-tion.

Be A Man! showcases this form of churchy, God-sponsored-and-incited hypermasculinity. Fr. Larry discusses the masculinity of his father a tough, unemotional—except when angry—police sergeant from the beaten-down districts of deindustrialized Pittsburgh. In a clever fusion of therapy-talk with religiously inspired acceptance, Fr. Larry uses the image of his tough, emotionally challenged, alcoholic father to showcase his struggles with his own masculinity as a model of Christ-inspired overcoming. His references to charismatic Christianity, spiritual warriorhood, the Holy Spirit, sponsor trips to Medjugorje, and war stories of escorting high school prep boys to prolife rallies underscore the impact of the charismatic movement. The tough, almost survivalist, “free market masculinity” model suggests the influence of the evangelical-libertarian focus on the family-like self-help genre. Fr. Larry’s tough talk, however, is contradicted by his demand for complete submission to God’s will, which, as in all evangelical literature, makes for a contradictory combination. Similar, in many ways, to what Fromm (1994) describes as the authoritarian, lower-middle class position of the Lutheran Protestant—submission to authority above and oppression of those below.

Internal tensions can be observed throughout Fr. Larry’s work. A gendered emphasis on power and strength, yet submission to authority, Jesus and the church. An emphasis on denying the world, yet changing it. Submission in the outer world, yet masculine control in the family. Emphasis on individual sin and pride, but no discussion of work or economic conditions. Constant biblical references suggest evangelically influenced audiences, for whom bible-based religious references are a priority.

One change from the “priest-soldier-athlete” model of Catholic masculine purity in the first half of the 20th century is Fr. Larry’s willingness to talk about sex (Foucault, 1990), rather than simply demonizing or ignoring it. Instead Fr. Larry talks “honestly” about sex and his struggles with temptation; soliciting identification from his audience. The implication here is that if Fr. Larry struggles with sex, then he must be human, and presumably heterosexual—like “us.” The previous priest-centered model of desexualized Catholic masculinity is updated to compete

with evangelical-libertarian masculinity, where manhood is intrinsically linked to sexual desire, or at least, desiring a woman. Plus, sex sells. Just the talk of sexual temptation—even for someone who has putatively renounced it—evokes Fr. Larry’s “unbridled” masculinity, something today’s gender-essentialist everyman is expected to identify with.

Throughout *Be a Man!*, love is equated with obedience. Under the section “Be a Man Who is Strong,” says Fr. Larry, “If the only strength we have is from the world, we are going to have problems. Our strength must come from God” (p. 89). Furthermore, “we have a choice: we can focus on our weaknesses or we can focus on God’s strength” (p. 90). In order to be a man who is strong, one needs to “control one’s body and conquer one’s lusts.” To do this, one needs three things: a good prayer life, good friends, and the heart of a servant. Fr. Larry suggests joining a men’s group, which can hold one “accountable,” as his group does for him, quoting Proverbs 27:17 “Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another.” Fr. Larry continues: “Obedience is the next aspect to becoming strong. [...] I used to tell my students all the time, ‘Gentlemen, the only way you can prove you love God, and know this, gentlemen, is to obey Him. Period!’” (p. 106). He then gives an example of a former student who joined the Marines and went from a “little, skinny youth” to “this big Marine.” How do Marines turn boys into men? Discipline and obedience. “Marines who do not obey can get killed real easily. They become strong in all ways because they learn to obey their superiors. Yet, way too many people refuse to obey Christ. Let this not be said of you” (p. 102).

In classic, authoritarian fashion, masculinity is equated in obedience to Christ, military, and authority.

Particularly disturbing and ideologically driven is the gendering of Jesus. In the chapter, “Be a Man Who is Loving”, Fr. Larry examines Jesus as a model for love:

Now let us look at the love Jesus had. Sometimes people make love this “la la” thing. We think of Jesus as tiptoeing through the tulips. We make Jesus this gentle, very peaceful, passive person. Oh yeah, this is the Jesus I want to spend eternity with! Come on, gentleman; *Jesus Christ was a man’s man!* He gave everything to prove that—just look at a crucifix! (p. 114) [emphasis mine]

Here we see Fr. Larry work through the construction of Jesus as peaceful and loving, which he associates with femininity, with the National Rifle Association (NRA) image of masculinity. The threat here is that Jesus’ image as loving and peaceful, underscored by liberals and more progressive types, makes Jesus “passive” and weak, creating a “crisis of identity” for men. Instead, Fr. Larry asserts Jesus’ “active” role: Jesus was a “man’s man!”

Fr. Larry pushes back against the feminist questioning of the socially constructed nature of gender roles. In the chapter “Be the Man Who Lives as He Was Created,” Fr. Larry argues:

Thus from the beginning God created males and females—on purpose! One of the biggest problems of today, in my humble opinion, is when people try to say there is no difference between males and females! [...] Our physical bodies are very different, but they are complementary, which is a glorious thing. Male bodies and female bodies fit together; they become a whole person when they become one. God created us that way on purpose. (p. 144)

After the obligatory clarification that “men are not better than women, just different”, Fr. Larry continues his tirade:

Men are not supposed to be like women, and women are not supposed to be like men—we were created to be different. As I have been reflecting on masculinity in the Church, I have found that the problem with the Catholic Church these last forty years or so is that some new theologies have arisen that have tried to make men feminine. It is erroneous to tell men to be overly nice, to be overly gentle, and to speak softly—come on! It hasn't worked. This is one of the reasons that men don't like to go to church. Men are not challenged to be better men; they have been often challenged to be politically correct! [as a result] the Church has been in one of the worst periods since she was founded. (p. 144) [emphasis mine]

Here we see more interesting ideological “manwork” going on. Fr. Larry suggests men don't like to go to church because liberals are trying to “feminize” men, one of the main themes of Catholic Alt-Right Church Militant:

The problem with too many in the Church these past years is that many of the men have become more feminine and the women have become more masculine! There, I said it; many have thought it, but it needs to be brought out into the open. Men need to be men, and women need to be women, and we cannot be confused! This is the will of God; this is the way He created us! I don't want to be like a woman. I want to be the man God Himself created me to be. Hopefully, you want to be a man that God created you to be also. (p. 145) [emphasis mine]

One wonders of course how many church-going Catholic men “have become more feminine” and church-going Catholic “women have become more masculine.” But it is a convenient rhetorical move to get his point across, blaming progressive and feminist Catholic theologians, without engaging the larger social and cultural conditions beyond the church that has begun to question the socially constructed nature of gender roles and sexuality.

Next, Fr. Larry encourages his working class Catholic male readers to *fuse their identity with Christ* and his heroic sacrifice, which saved the world. This heroism and magnitude should give them a “healthy self-image about being a man,” as their manhood and gender role is based on “His”—though such an interpretation problematically excludes women from this association with Jesus. “Your history in this world does not define you; your salvation history in Christ, Who created you and lives inside of you, defines who you are” (p. 146). What is missing is any discussion of the actual social, economic, and work conditions of men's lives. What would Jesus do when work dries up? Would Jesus support the strike? Would Jesus demand more wages? Fr. Larry shores up the flagging and beleaguered masculinity of his male audience, hemmed in by their sagging fortunes in the era of corporate, neoliberal globalization, by blaming a feminist movement that supposedly empowers women at men's expense.

Fr. Larry then calls out men for being spiritual wimps:

One of the roles that men have, given to them by God (see Gen 3:16; 1 Cor 11:3; Eph 5:23), is to be the spiritual leaders of their families. Now this is where I have called men ‘spiritual wimps’ for many years. Many men have let their wives be the

spiritual leaders of their families, but this is *not* the way God created it to be (p. 148).

With the concept of “spiritual wimps,” Fr. Larry cleverly conflates spiritual flaccidness with physical and sexual flaccidness to demonize feminism.

What does being the leader of the family entail? Being the “servant leader of your family,” who “leads by example,” and must “be a man of prayer.” However, “you cannot be a good and true leader unless you are a true and good follower.” And again, “You need to be the spiritual leader by being a man of sacrifice.” In order to lead one’s family, then, one must sacrifice oneself and submit to authority.

Bending logic in the fashion of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Fr. Larry argues “if you are married, then another way that you need to be a spiritual leader is in the bedroom” (p. 149) and “If you want great sex with your wife, pray with your wife before sex” (p. 150). One starts to wonder to what extent Fr. Larry has “jumped the shark” here.

Fr. Larry concludes with the individualist logic of libertarian self-reliance:

Men today often do not want to take responsibility for their own actions. This is nothing new, of course. Adam did the same thing in Genesis when he blamed the whole Fall on his wife, Eve. In Genesis 3:12 he said, “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate.” Notice how Adam even tries to blame God Himself when he says “whom you gave to be with me.”

As we said in Chapter 5, to be a man of God you need to take responsibility for your actions! That means that you stop placing the blame on society, on your past, on your boss, on your family, or on God and begin to take ownership of the fact that you are where you are today because of the decisions that you have made! It is time, gentlemen!

Once you do this it will be good news, because now you can do something with God to create a better future. But start now. Take responsibility for your life and turn it over to Jesus Christ. He will deliver you from yourself and He will help you be the man you are called to be, but only if you suck it up and stop blaming everyone but yourself. (p. 151) [emphases mine]

Here Fr. Larry excoriates men in the contemporary, individualistic fantasy of libertarian empowerment to “take ownership” and “responsibility” for their lives, to “stop blaming society” and hold themselves “accountable,” as though one’s individual self-scapes were corporate or municipal budgets. The flip side of libertarian individualism is to blame the individual, or as Fr. Larry would have it—blame yourself—and let society off the hook. Interestingly, here at page 151 the word “society” finally appears; but only to put down people for supposedly wanting to blame their problems on it! Essentially, Fr. Larry excoriates his men to “take ownership” for being losers—invoking the evangelical-capitalist ethos he has internalized so well. At the Church Militant Men’s Conference I attended, however, attendees seemed to think Fr. Larry’s approach was already dated—not “aggressive” enough. That he has neither denounced James Martin’s call for engagement with LGBTQ Catholics, nor denounced Pope Francis, has made him suspect with Church Militant. At the conference, even “ex-gay” Michael Voris himself made fun of Fr. Larry for being a “wimp.”

7 | COUNTERING THE ALT-RIGHT

In sum, the Vatican shutdown of liberation theology, feminist theology and the movement for LGBT rights in the Catholic Church in the 1980s and 1990s opened the floodgates for the Christian Right's apocalyptic rhetoric and charismatic practices of spiritual warfare, and now, the Alt-Right movement of nativism, white nationalism, male supremacy and the demonization of feminism and the LGBTQ community. Along the way, as Church Militant and Fr. Larry's charismatic masculinity manual demonstrate, working class and lower middle-class Catholic males are incited to "dominion" over wife, family and nature in exchange for obedience, sacrifice and submission to authority. Feminism is blamed for masculine "woundedness" and trauma, rather than economic conditions such as deindustrialization and the destruction of jobs via political deals on trade, outsourcing and automation. Serious threats to planetary health and survival—nature itself—are laughed at and ridiculed while the real causes of male economic trauma are ignored. This may work for the aging bases of the Ted Cruz and Trump audiences and the youth contingent of the Alt-Right. But recent polls indicate younger generations are moving in a decidedly more progressive direction on gender and religion (Pew Report, 2012; Pew Research, 2015a, 2015b). Evangelical fundamentalism's claim to cling to "timeless truths" prevents it from engaging with changing social, cultural, and economic conditions in anything resembling a rational, empathetic—or "Christian"—fashion. As the texts analyzed here demonstrate, this resistance to change has been funneled into a hyperpoliticization that weaponizes masculinity and demonizes feminism and the LGBT community. A false resistance that leaves the working-class males they claim to be concerned about economically stranded, bereft of the critical tools to analyze their economic conditions of servitude. For instance, the suicides of nine male police officers in New York City so far this year give the lie to the ideology of masculinist self-reliance, as police officials plead with officers in need to reach out and get help (Sandoval & Southall, 2019).

The recent exposé on the anonymous funding and institutionalization of the anti-immigrant movement by Mellon banking heiress Cordelia Scaife May (Kulish & McIntire, 2019) reveals in depressing fashion the moneyed forces behind the Alt-Right. The tax-exempt Colcom foundation has distributed 180 million to a network of astro-turf anti-immigrant groups. At 500 million, it's worth more than when she died in 2005; it's not going away any time soon. The existence of tax-exempt rightwing foundations with virtually unlimited money, funded by wealthy industrialist heirs who never worked a day in their lives and enable long-dead billionaires to determine the future is a damning indictment of our rigged political system. Or, as another recent headline has it, the ability of one billionaire to "keep three countries hooked on coal for decades" (Sengupta, Williams, & Chandrasekhar, 2019). Similar charges can be leveled at the gun lobby, the prison industrial complex or the fossil fuel industry that funds evangelical denial of climate change (Phillips, 2007). Or the impasse over the Israel–Palestine conflict, as pro-Israel conservatives increasingly see evangelicals as their natural partners given the Christian Zionism of evangelicalism's End-Times Rapture Narrative (Forbes & Kilde, 2004).

A cofounder with Jerry Falwell of the modern religious right, conservative Catholic strategist Paul Weyrich was perhaps the central player in bringing conservative Catholics and evangelicals together to create the pro-life movement. Indeed, Weyrich recruited Jerry Falwell himself. Frank Schaeffer (2008), in his memoir *Crazy for God: How I grew up as One of the Elect, Helped Found the Religious Right, and Lived to Take All (or Almost All) Of It Back* documents the seduction of his father, influential evangelical theologian Francis Schaeffer (1980), by Republican strategists seeking his aid in leading evangelicals to oppose abortion—previously

seen as a “Catholic” issue (Diamond, 1989, pp 60–61). Weyrich succeeded in uniting conservative Catholics and evangelicals into a powerful voting block that has lasted forty years. It effectively divided Catholics on issues of women's rights and civil rights and sought to seize the high moral ground by making abortion a matter of social justice, murder and protection of the innocent; obscuring the religious right's actual origins in efforts to resist desegregation (Ballmer, 2014). In opposing feminism and abortion rights, it successfully divided movements for social justice such as liberation theology, successfully turning Catholics like my parents from Kennedy Democrats to Reagan Republicans. In the defense of religious liberty, liberation itself has been left behind.

In conservative Catholic and influential New Right strategist Paul Weyrich's last work, *The Next Conservatism* coauthored with William S. Lind (Weyrich and Lind, 2009), published just after the Obama victory, Weyrich laid out his vision for what he called the “next conservatism.” Weyrich claimed that while the conservative movement had won politically, it had lost culturally. Weyrich and Lind argue that “cultural Marxism” was behind the rise of political correctness and multiculturalism designed to destroy Western civilization and Christian religion as we know it. They argue the job of the “next conservatism” would be to “expose and oppose” this cultural Marxism, characterized as beginning with Lukacs and Gramsci after the contradictions of World War I, later institutionalized with the Frankfurt School of Social Research. In particular they call out what they see as the hedonism and “instant gratification” of Marcuse and his sexual revolution of *Eros and Civilization* (Marcuse, 1962). Calling out the destruction of the family and traditional marriage by feminism, and echoing white nationalist, anti-immigrant “clash of civilizations” style arguments (Huntington, 1996) such as Patrick Buchanan's *The Death of the West; How Dying Populations and Immigrant Invasions Imperil Our Country and Civilization* (Buchanan, 2002), they predict future wars will be more cultural than political. The concluding chapter, written by Weyrich the day he died, argues for the restoration of the republic and “Retro-culture,” a return to the past and idyllic nature of the 1950s suburbia and 19th century rural small-town life and the farm; a harbinger of Trump's “Make America Great Again.”

Weyrich and Lind's proposal is essentially a fundamentalist and nativist call for cultural separation along lines of race, gender, sexuality, and citizenship, whose dangerous reality we face today. They highlight the fundamentalist-inspired homeschooling movement and the conservative orientation as a “way of life” like the Amish. Comments sprinkled in dissing the “double sin” of gay pride, however, reveal the dangerous, religiously hewn culture war they have in mind; one Church Militant fights with enthusiasm. That Anders Behring Breivik, the white nationalist terrorist who killed 77 people and injured 319 in Norway in 2011, was inspired by Lind's ideological “othering” of immigrants as a threat to Western civilization indicates the treacherous path being tread. Christian Right researcher Chip Berlet (2011) argues Lind's theory—or rather, conspiracy theory—that inspired Breivik, “Political Correctness: A Short History of An Ideology” published by the Free Congress Foundation (Lind, 2004) can be reduced to the follow equation: “Cultural Marxism = Political Correctness = Multiculturalism = Muslim Immigration = Destruction of Judeo-Christian nations.” The mass shootings inspired by the relentless, apocalyptic repetition by conservative talking heads on Fox News, our President, and elsewhere, of the idea that immigrants are “invaders” recruited by “cultural elites” seeking to destroy white civilization is chilling (Peters, Grynbaum, Collins, Harris, & Taylor, 2019).

Will the left be able to rise to the challenge and lead society to new horizons of possibility? Doing so, I argue, will require comprehending and countering the inroads the Alt-Right's anti-LGBTQ, anti-feminist, anti-immigrant, and anti-labor ideologies of heroic, masculinist self-

reliance have made into the ideologies of society—and church. Countering the billionaires' money, the movements they fund, and the rightwing appropriation of Gramsci's culture war insights will require reviving the left's radical imagination (Aronowitz & Bratsis, 2005). This will require reimagining the traditional concept of class (Aronowitz, 2003) to include movements for LGBTQ rights, feminism, displaced migrants, and planetary survival. Moreover, it means reimagining and reappropriating from the right what freedom and genuine liberation would look like in the world today. Hearteningly, in the case of the Catholic Church, this is actually possible again for the first time in almost a half-century.

The election of the “slum bishop” of Buenos Aires, Jorge Bergoglio, as Pope Francis is a breathtaking change after 40 years of rightwing-led culture war in the Catholic Church. Significant reversals have already taken place. The Vatican investigation of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) in the United States, initiated at the request of conservatives in the U.S. National Conference of Catholic Bishops, has been stopped. The investigation was initiated because of LCWR's endorsement of the ideas of theologian Elisabeth Johnson, whose book *Quest for the Living God* included chapters on black and feminist theology and interfaith engagement (Johnson, 2001). Bishops at the recent Amazon Synod heartily endorsed a recommendation to allow married priests in the priest-starved region, though not female deacons, which they at least considered. The Synod revived the social justice concept of “social sin” in examining the ecological destruction of the Amazon. Meanwhile, Pope Francis has methodically marginalized and demoted ultraconservative and Opus Dei culture warriors like Cardinal Raymond Burke and Archbishop Chaput and replaced them with progressives like Cardinals Coupich and Tobin, raising the possibility of recuperating the U.S. Bishop conferences' progressive past, after decades of ultraconservative hegemony. In response to homophobic culture war saber-rattling by Burke, Chaput, and Church Militant, Francis recently met with Fr. James Martin, in a show of support for the latter's efforts to reach out to the LGBT community through his book *Building a Bridge: How the Catholic Church and the LGBT Community Can Enter into a Relationship of Respect, Compassion and Sensitivity*. It is in this context that the rise of the Catholic Alt-Right should be contextualized. The Catholic Church has entered a new chapter in the culture wars, and, while entities like Church Militant are loud, attention-grabbing, and clearly, well organized and funded by the right with clear intentions to influence electoral outcomes in the United States, and particularly the historically Catholic Midwest—the balance of power between left and right in the church is shifting. After 40 difficult years, this is a remarkable opportunity to rethink and reimagine concepts that had been all but banned.

In *Quest for the Living God*, Elisabeth Johnson (2001) argues that without reimagining and rethinking religious concepts within the context of one's contemporary world, religion risks becoming stale, oppressive, useless and dead. Ironically, her investigation—demanded by people who hadn't even read her book and couldn't identify what doctrinal issue it violated—led to record sales. “When the moral authority of the hierarchy is hemorrhaging due to financial scandals and many bishops who cover up sexual abuse of children, a cover up that continues in some quarters to this day, and thousands are drifting away from the church, the waste of time on this investigation is unconscionable,” said Johnson (Hall, 2014). The revival of liberation theology, its turn toward an emphasis on ecological justice (Berry, 1999; Boff, 1995), broader acceptance of feminist theology and LGBTQ outreach are all welcome and overdue developments. This would be a good time for the recuperation and reevaluation of the thought and social justice efforts of previously expelled or marginalized thinkers. For instance, the ecospirituality of expelled former theologian and Dominican monk Matthew Fox, who, in his influential Creation Theology work *Original Blessing* (Fox, 2000) carved out space for a more

positive view of human nature, sexuality, and creation itself, calling out the austere, dualistic theology of the Augustinian fall/redemption narrative, which so easily leads to devaluation of the importance and care of the material world, the body and sexuality, and whose negative consequences we see all too clearly today. Or the ecumenical and interfaith efforts of censured theologian Hans Kung and his critique of papal infallibility. Or the efforts of Uruguayan liberation theologian Luis Segundo to give intellectual grounding, independence and liberation to engaged theology itself (Segundo, 1976). Or the efforts of peace activist Archbishop Hunthausen, in my own native Northwest Diocese, who opened the doors of the Seattle Cathedral to the Catholic LGBT community, allowed girls to be altar servers, and led efforts to resist nuclear proliferation and the arms race through tax resistance; efforts that were met with censure and investigation by the Vatican. Or David Tracy, the Catholic theologian who protested Paul IV's backward-looking, anticontraceptive *Humanae Vitae* encyclical when it came out in 1968 and temporarily lost his job because of it. Or interfaith efforts by thinkers like the founder of Engaged Buddhism, Thich Nhat Hahn, whose letter to Martin Luther King in the 1960s convinced him to oppose the Vietnam War; and whose interfaith writings such as *Living Buddha, Living Christ* (Hahn, 2007) have helped many Catholics and other Christians achieve a better understanding of their tradition than their own institutional church, in a time which seemed more enamored of domination, judgment and lack of empathy than anything else. For those raised Catholic like me, today is a welcome time for a reckoning, rethinking, and reimagining of the social justice tradition we were born into and raised with, that, wherever they may be on the secular-religious spectrum today, offers the possibility for an enhanced self-understanding, on individual, institutional, and societal levels. Having lived through decades of debate framed by the religious right, the chance to reframe it in terms of social justice and liberation is a welcome, needed, and historic opportunity. One that shouldn't be left to the hatemongers and manipulative culture warriors of a reactive, emergent Catholic Alt-Right.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ While broadly viewed as conservative papacies, they retained liberal/progressive stances on other issues, including war and unbridled capitalism, and the Church's relationship with Judaism.
- ² Following the Federal Communications Commission's 1960 ruling that encouraged networks to sell air time to religious broadcasters, programming came to be controlled by evangelical and fundamentalist "parachurch" organizations. Unlike the mainline churches, these ministries could afford to spend their large budgets on equipment and air time; they were unfettered by denominational bureaucracies and the daily necessities of running a church. Between 1967 and 1972, membership in the National Religious Broadcasters quadrupled. While evangelical broadcasters purchased air time on network affiliate stations, they also began to accumulate fully owned and operated stations of their own. Reverend Pat Robertson started the trend in 1960 when his Virginia television station became the first station licensed to air religious programming more than 50 percent of the time. Robertson's stations were also the first to raise money through telethons. By 1979, Robertson's Christian Broadcasting Network grew to be a \$50 million-a-year operation, with a national audience of 5 million for the syndicated "700 Club" talk show (1989, pp. 1–44; 1995, pp. 162–163).
- ³ Founded by Joseph Fessio, a doctoral student of Joseph Ratzinger, the ideological watchdog as Director of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (formerly known as the Supreme Sacred Congregation of the Roman and Universal Inquisition) during the conservative papacy of Pope John Paul II, 1976–2005. Ratzinger would later become pope himself from 2005 until his retirement in 2013. Fr. Fessio became president of Ave Maria University in southwest Florida, the conservative Catholic utopian town and college community

founded by Thomas Monaghan, owner of Domino's Pizza, which he imagined as a place that would free from premarital sex, contraceptives, and pornography (Miller, 2011).

- ⁴ Steichen is also author of the best-selling *Ungodly Rage: The Hidden Face of Catholic Feminism* (Steichen, 1991).
- ⁵ There have been significant approved and unapproved apparitions. The Our Lady of Fatima apparition to three peasant children in Portugal in 1917, with its three secrets and strident anticommunist message, is classic. As Michael Cuneo argues in his essay *The Vengeful Virgin*, Fatima and its anticommunist message did not fully make its impact in the United States until the 1950s. Cuneo (1997) argues all apparitions share ideological characteristics of the approaching (apocalyptic) chastisement, anticommunism, conspiracy mentality, Catholicism-in-crisis, Papacy-in-crisis, sectarian impulse, premillennial fatalism, thaumaturgical authority and the idea of a “holy elite” who may not be accepted by the church bureaucracy. The Our Lady of Medjugorje apparition is the latest major apparition. Appearing to six peasant children in conflict-ridden Croatia in the former Yugoslavia in 1981, the apparition was the first one to be spread by modern communication technology such as the Internet and cell phone pictures and videos (Apolito, 2005). Over the course of the 1980s and 1980s it drew millions of visitors to Medjugorje for the daily apparitions, spawning dozens of associated charismatic “visionaries” around the world. My mother regularly read its messages to me and my eight siblings as children and we would attend masses with traveling pictures of Our Lady of Medjugorje blessed by the seers. Concerns over the commercial interests of the seers in the vast tourism industry built up around Medjugorje, along with their practice of scheduling apparitions “on demand”, led to still-pending investigations by Popes Benedict and Francis.
- ⁶ The Immaculate Heart of Mary devotion was born in the early struggles against modernism and the Reformation in the 17th century. Attributed to St. Jean Etudes, it is most strongly marked by the medieval Marian spirituality of St. Marie de Montfort, who codified the “slaves of Mary” movement of total subjection, submission and abandonment to the wishes and desire of Mary.
- ⁷ The cult-like cenacles outlaw critical discussion of the messages; only prayer is allowed. The form the messages are delivered in—“interior locutions”—rather than a direct apparition, seem designed to avoid the critical scrutiny given other antimodernist and anti-Vatican II apparitional movements such as the one in Garabandal, Spain in the 1960s.
- ⁸ It is widely read within the Medjugorjean and visionary community, as noted by principle Medjugorje U.S. popularizer Wayne Weible in his *Medjugorje: the Message* (1989). My own mother read it to us in our childhood, and my grandmother ran a local cenacle in Redmond, WA.
- ⁹ Cousino bases her analysis on the extensive writings of John Leary from upstate New York who became a visionary after visiting Medjugorje.

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