

THE TRUMP PRESIDENCY AND THE PORNIFICATION OF THE AMERICAN DREAM

*They call it the American Dream because
you have to be asleep to believe it*

– George Carlin

Masculinity is in crisis. For much of the 20th century, male significance was centered on being a breadwinner in a patriarchal society. Yet as costs rise and neoliberal austerity is institutionalized, families increasingly require two income-earners to survive. Along with the rise of feminism that countered the idea of women as the ‘second sex,’¹ male significance, particularly its naturalized link with economic earning, has been decentered. This paper examines the right’s capturing of the male imaginary evidenced in Trump’s marshalling of white male working and lower middle-class resentment. I situate it in the “political and conceptual crisis” brought on by the convergence of a general sense of powerlessness in society that seems to offer little in the way of imaginative or empowering alternatives for society.² Through analysis of both secular and religious popular culture,³ I read the rise of toxic hyper-masculinity as over-compensation in response to the increased stresses of neoliberalism’s unleashing of the free market, erosion of social support and the safety net, and the valorizing of individual self-reliance as solution. As the direct experience of individual success becomes increasingly harder to attain for most, I examine how the visual “pornification” of success in the American Dream functions as its replacement in the neo-patriarchal fantasy of the Trump/Fox News/Alt-Right imaginary. Drawing on analysis of popular culture, as well as my research on Catholic charismatic ‘masculinity manuals’ and their internalization of neoliberal ideology, I analyze the fusion of evangelicalism, hyper-masculinity, and neoliberalism in an increasingly fantastical prosperity gospel. At the same time, I survey the cracks in this dominant ideology augured by the #metoo and #churchtoo movements.

Roger Ailes’s Sightlines

While progressive critique has focused on the role of Fox News in mobilizing white working-class male resentment against the “other” rather than the

1 Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (Bantam Books, 1970).

2 Stanley Aronowitz and Peter Bratsis. “Situations Manifesto,” *Situations* (Vol. 1, 2005).

3 Theodor Adorno. *The Culture Industry* (Routledge Classics, 2001).

corporate capitalist class, what has gotten less attention is the role of Fox News in creating the *visual* fantasy of female subordination⁴ in the American Dream and its pornification. One of the primary contributions of the #metoo movement was the way Gretchen Carlson's sexual harassment lawsuit⁵ against Fox News founder Roger Ailes helped link what sociologist Erving Goffman⁶ might call the "front-stage" and the "backstage" of the principal mediators of rightwing consciousness in America: the gender policing and harassment "behind the scenes" at Fox and the gleaming visual fantasy Fox presents of the American Dream onstage.

As Carlson details, Fox was more interested in the visual display female broadcasters had to offer, rather than their journalistic or editorial skills. Fox executives would flip through *Victoria's Secret* catalogues, pointing to pictures of different women laughing and joking to each other: "so do you think *she* can talk?". More pointedly, Ailes had a 'no pants' rule for women, helping facilitate Fox News' visual fantasy: older men sitting with, and surrounded by, gorgeous, compliant, deferential women agreeing with and complimenting them and their conservative fantasies of male empowerment and leadership. Broadcaster duos increasingly look like "someone's grandfather and his second wife," as the media documentary *Miss Representation*⁷ puts it. The counterpart to Ailes's 'no pants' rule was his rule for 'sightlines'. In a typical Fox News program, the female broadcaster's legs are at located at center stage. If anything blocked the legs, Ailes would vigilantly shout from his perch to 'clear the sightlines!'. The number of sexual harassment allegations climbed to twenty-five women before Ailes was finally ousted, raising questions as to how such a pervasive culture of sexual harassment at a major media corporation could be allowed to fester for so long. One case made headlines charging, that, along with sex, Ailes forced a female employee to kneel, bow, and, as he placed his hands on her head, pledge her complete and total loyalty to him.

Piecing together the numerous #metoo allegations at Fox, including Bill O'Reilly's late night, masturbatory phone calls to female broadcasters, the harassment lawsuits depict a Playboy Mansion atmosphere. This was an atmosphere not simply hidden in corporate back rooms, however, but one produced for visual consumption for the Fox News demographic: white, male, pushing seventy.⁸ Here one can see the precursor of Trump as exemplar of the secular prosperity gospel, 'American Dream as porn fantasy': you too can become a successful, billionaire businessman surrounded by beautiful, deferential, silent women – if only you have the right 'attitude'.

4 Erving Goffman. *Gender Advertisements* (Harper and Row, 1979) and Sut Jhally. *The Codes of Gender* (Media Education Foundation, 2010).

5 Manuel Roig-Franzia, Scott Highman, Paul Farhi, Paul and Krissah Thompson. "The Fall of Roger Ailes: He Made Fox News His 'Locker Room'- and Now Women Are Telling Their Stories". (*The Washington Post*, July 22, 2016).

6 See Erving Goffman. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. (Doubleday, 1959).

7 Jennifer Siebel Newsom. *Miss Representation*. (The Representation Project, 2011).

8 Adam Epstein. Fox News' Problem Isn't the Ailes Ouster, It's That Its Average Viewer is a Dinosaur. (*Quartz*. July 21, 2016).

Trump's Birther Roots

A factor under-examined in the daily onslaught of over-the-top headlines and media spin in Trump's first two years in office are his political roots in the conspiracy-theory driven Birther movement. As commentators thawing from the shock of Trump's victory attempt to process the first two years of his presidency, stung by the mendacious character of his immigrant race-baiting, things become clearer when one considers Trump cut his political teeth in the Birther movement, which terrorized the Obama presidency with conspiratorial claims that he was not a citizen; that he was born in Kenya, not Hawaii, to a dark-skinned "socialist" father. Exploiting the 'strangeness' and foreign-soundingness of Barack's middle name Hussein, the Birther conspiracy argues he is not a Christian, but a Muslim. And not only in 2016; Trump was tracing the letter 'H' for Hussein in the air as a visual dog-whistle to his rally audiences days before the 2018 midterm election. It doesn't matter that the argument is patently false, given the fact Obama attended his civil rights-oriented church in Chicago for decades. It is all red meat to his base, two-thirds of whom believe Obama is a Muslim and almost sixty percent that he was not born in the United States.⁹ Recall that, during Obama's presidency, a quarter of Americans thought he was the Antichrist; and 37 percent considered global warming a hoax.¹⁰

Brooklyn: Hillary's Base?

Much ink has been spilled about how much the left and the chattering classes missed the boat when it came to Trump's success. While this narrative highlights the post-election shock of Trump's victory, it obscures the troubling issue of the increasingly undemocratic nature of the electoral college as the country experiences dramatic demographic change. The fact that Hillary Clinton won by almost three million votes didn't emerge till weeks later, due to the delayed nature of modern mail-in voting. The significance of this "fact" was muddled by the hyper-real and hyper-instant nature of TV and digital results that trumpeted Trump's victory. In retrospect, many of us were increasingly queasy about the deterministic assumptions that Secretary Clinton was 'inevitably' going to win – particularly after FBI Director James Comey's October Surprise memo surreally linking her emails to Anthony Weiner's online sex pics to underage girls.

Then again, as Henri Lefebvre¹¹ argues, we can only piece things together in critical hindsight. We can never really know what is going on in the moment.

⁹ Alex Gangitano. "Poll: Two-thirds of Trump Backers Think Obama is a Muslim." (*Rollcall*. May 10, 2016).

¹⁰ Paul Harris. "One in Four Americans Think Obama May Be the Antichrist, Survey says." (*The Guardian*. April 2, 2013).

¹¹ Henri Lefebvre. *Critique of Everyday Life, vol 1*. (Verso, 2008).

That is the point of reflection. We can only gain knowledge through the work of critical reflection about what we and others have experienced. As I began a little soul-searching after the election, I realized that at least half if not two-thirds of my CUNY students are young women of color – Clinton’s supposed ‘base’. Yet I could not remember even one genuinely enthusiastic supporter of her among them. What I did remember were several very enthusiastic Trump supporters. The first, counter-intuitively, was a middle-aged transman from upstate New York from an Italian working-class family of cops. Technically homeless, he and his partner lived in a shelter, where, he believed, blacks, latinos and other minorities were getting “special treatment”. A psychiatric survivor of trans-reparation therapy for his gender dysphoria, he was an engaged and smart – if dramatic – student. The second supporter was a middle-aged, tattooed, colorful character that worked at a local coffee shop in Brighton Beach, where we became friends. He enjoyed talking about his time in the Marines and as a bouncer at clubs, including gay clubs, in the 80s and 90s. He liked guns almost as much as he liked talking. When Trump’s candidacy appeared, I couldn’t help but inquire; he was a big fan, it turned out. “But you’re Latino – Trump hates Latinos!” I queried. “Trump hates Mexicans – I’m Puerto Rican! He replied emphatically. He explained to me his feelings of alienation from the Democratic Party; too much whining about people losing their benefits – welfare and food stamps. This didn’t feel empowering to him. The third supporter, yet another middle-aged male, orphaned at a young age, felt that Trump spoke to him. Struggling with his intensive writing requirements, he ambitiously planned to write about Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle*, convinced of the deleterious tendencies of modern technology and social media. A former union member re-training for the maritime trades, he planned to move to Seattle to work on a boat. Raised Jewish, he worked part-time as a janitor at a local Brighton Beach synagogue. The membership had dwindled so much it was closing; as he would both lose his job and his housing. Though clearly no big Trump supporter myself, I found each of these colorful characters to be very human and relatable in their own ways.

After the election I started asking my students – again, the majority of whom comprised Clinton’s supposed base of minorities, youth and women – what they thought of the presidential candidates. “They both sucked,” was the typical refrain. “Actually, I like Bernie”. It was hard not to get the distinct sense the Democratic Party machine’s preference for Clinton subverted what appears to have been a late surge of support for Bernie Sanders among young people of color.

Donald Gay Trump

A popular YouTube video parody that has been viewed several million times cleverly deconstructs the gender politics of the 2016 Presidential race. Title-

Donald Gay Trump,¹² I use it in class to illustrate a few simple points. The video shows Trump at a campaign rally in South Carolina flanked by Melania on one side and Ivanka on the other. Behind him, smirking and gushing in admiration is Republican candidate for Governor of South Carolina Henry McMaster and his wife. Trump is in full form, gesticulating wildly as he unfurls his stump speech, call-and-response-style: “Who’s gonna pay for the wall?” “Mexico’s gonna pay the wall!!” yells the audience back enthusiastically. “Look at all the media here!” Trump menaces, pointing to the back of the room self-importantly. He moves on to making fun of Marco Rubio and Ted Cruz for losing their recent primaries. At first he pretends their accomplishments were significant enough to be noted, ostensibly defending them from the audience’s howls of derision he has stirred up, before going in for the kill: “No, wait, listen.. there’s nothing easy running for President, I can tell you.. it’s vicious, nasty, brutal, and... (pregnant pause)... beautiful. When you win it’s beautiful! And we’re.. we’re gonna start winning again!!” The crowd cheers. Criticizing the statement of an “ex”-Mexican official who said “Mexico wouldn’t pay for the wall,” he concludes in a threatening tone: “The Wall just got ten feet taller!!” As the crowd roars, Trump points to people in the audience and makes eye contact, as though his efforts were for each individually.

Leaving Trump’s own words and visual gestures unchanged, Serafinawicz has done a voiceover in the video “queening” up Trump. As a result, Trump’s over-the-top hyperbole and flamboyant gesticulations function beautifully as self-parodying drag.¹³ As such, the video efficiently points out the gender double-standard for power and leadership roles such as the Presidency. During the run-up to the Presidential election, Hillary Clinton was criticized for coming off cold and mannish, a consequence of her need to offset the prevailing, patriarchal “common sense”¹⁴ that women are too “emotional” to be President. In the run up to the election, to my surprise, a young white woman raised her hand to declare: “that’s what I believe – women *are* too emotional to be president!”. After showing the video, I ask students to imagine that if Trump was a woman, could he get elected President? The irony, not lost on students, is that there are fewer people in the public sphere *more* emotional than Trump. Yet, with his white, straight male privilege, he gets away with all the emotionalism he wants.

At the same time, the video effectively showcases the visual fantasy of the American-Dream-as-success-porn. Like the Fox News empire that Trump is embedded in, we see an older, “successful” white male shooting his mouth off, flanked by quiet, submissive, gorgeous women. Which one is the daughter

¹² Peter Serafinowicz. *Donald Gay Trump* (YouTube. Feb 23, 2016).

¹³ Judith Butler. *Gender Trouble* (Routledge, 1990).

¹⁴ Antonio Gramsci. *The Prison Notebooks* (International Publishers, 1971).

and which one is the wife is hard to tell – perhaps that’s the point – adding an incestuous, Oedipal layer to the fantasy.

Breaking Bad: Walter White’s Crisis of Masculinity

More Odyssean than Oedipal, the hit Netflix series *Breaking Bad* (2008–2013) zeroes in on the contemporary, overlapping crises of economic struggle and man as economic provider. Depressed high school chemistry teacher Walter White contemplates suicide as he faces a complete loss of control with a looming lung cancer death sentence, poverty wages, thwarted dreams and ambitions, mid-career rut and a disabled son who seems to symbolize his own lack of agency. Premiering in January 2008, a year before Obama’s victory, *Breaking Bad* presciently foretells the Trump era’s crisis of the white working class/lower middle-class; as well as the “Red for Ed” revolt of woefully underpaid teachers throughout the South and Southwest. Situated in Albuquerque, New Mexico, stuck making \$43,700 in the low-prestige occupation of high school teacher, Walter is forced to marinate in humiliated spectatorship at the success of his ex-girlfriend and ex-best-friend. Now billionaires married to each other, they capitalized on Walter’s early genius and ideas, buying him out of the company they started decades ago for a few thousand dollars.

Having internalized the logic of neoliberal self-reliance, Walter seems to have no one to blame but himself for his own failure, poor choices and lack of initiative. Forced to endure the humiliation of low-paid work at a car wash to provide additional income for his family, Walter washes his wealthy students’ sports cars to compensate for his under-remuneration – his failure to provide. At the same time, he is shadowed by the over-sized masculinity of Hank, his brother-in-law, a classic guy’s guy and DEA agent who hunts down drug dealers and bad guys for a living. As Frank shows off his gun, Walter watches as his son worships Hank in awe of his performance of the hegemonic masculine ideal.¹⁵ Facing death and a total loss of agency on every front, Walter seizes initiative by turning his chemistry skills to lucrative meth production, ostensibly to fulfil his manly duty to provide for his family after his death. Though, as the series slowly reveals, the real reason has more to do with breaking out of the paralysis and lack of agency he finds himself in: “breaking bad” into a kind of transgressive, outlaw status. An old American frontier trope, Mike Davis suggests the white male working class/lower middle class has done the same for Trump, reflective of their own sense of powerlessness and declining status, as they head to minority status.¹⁶ Things don’t so end well for Walter, as they likely won’t for Trump or his white male working/lower middle-class base. But he had fun along the way..

¹⁵ Myra Marx Ferree and Lisa Wade. *Gender: Ideas, Interactions, Institutions* (Norton, 2014).

¹⁶ Mike Davis. “The Great God Trump and the White Working Class” (*Jacobin*, 2017).

Be a Man! The He-Man-gelical Prosperity Gospel

Antecedents to the Trump phenomenon are wide-ranging if one is willing to look in the right places. Andrea Butler sees a clear link between Trump's secular prosperity gospel and the more religious versions promoted by evangelical megachurch ministers like Joel Osteen.¹⁷ After all, white evangelicals are at the core of Trump's base – 80 percent of whom voted for him in 2016. Trump also attended *The Power of Positive Thinking* author Vincent Norman Peale's Marble Collegiate Church throughout his childhood, marrying there twice. In my research on charismatic Catholicism – a syncretic product of evangelical influence on Catholicism, with which I was involved in my youth – what has emerged over the past couple decades is what I term the He-Man-gelical Prosperity Gospel, or He-Man-gelicalism, where a self-reliant hyper-masculinity is presented as neoliberal “solution” to the “problems” of feminism, economic stress, porn and homosexuality. In this emerging religious and cultural genre, political economic conditions of declining opportunities, scarce jobs, automation, and outsourcing linked to neoliberal, free market ideology-driven globalization are ignored. Instead, cultural issues dominate.

This dynamic can be seen in the burgeoning industry of charismatic Catholic youth evangelization and entrepreneurial men's conference speakers who model a refashioned and recalibrated pre-and-postmodern masculinity. One that ‘recycles’ but updates antiquated notions of wartime Catholic masculinist nationalism that conflate physical strength and purity with spiritual strength and purity for its working-class male audiences, as in *Let's Take the Hard Road!*¹⁸ or *A Priest-Soldier Talks to Youth*.¹⁹ Fr. Larry's popular charismatic, rustbelt masculinity manual *Be A Man! Becoming the Man God Created You to Be*²⁰ – titled after Opus Dei founder Josemarie Escriva's famous directive equating manhood with Jesus – indicates the ideological interpellation or ‘manwork’ going on. The charismatic *Delivered: True Stories of Men and Women Who Turned from Porn to Purity*²¹ lists Escriva's quote under the Sexual Sin subsection: “Don't say, ‘That's the way I am – it's my character’. It's your lack of character. *Esto vir!* – Be a man!”. This incitement to ‘Be A Man!’ recalls Althusser's argument on the imaginary, yet linguistic nature of ideology as lived experience and institution, whereby subject-hood is revealed, confirmed, and created in the police's call to the man on the street ‘Hey, you there!’ – who turns around in recognition and subject-tion.²² Similarly, Fr. Larry and Escriva interpolate their subjects to “Be A Man!”.

17 Anthea Butler. “The Cheap Prosperity Gospel of Trump and Osteen” (*New YorkTimes*, August 30, 2017).

18 John Cross. *Let's Take the Hard Road!* (Osh Kosh: John Cross Publications, 1960).

19 Patrick J. Ryan. *A Soldier Priest Talks to Youth* (Random House, 1963).

20 Fr. Larry Richards. *Be A Man!* (Ignatius Press, 2009).

21 Matt Fraad. *Delivered: True Stories of Men and Women Who Turned From Porn to Purity*. (Catholic Answers Press, 2014).

22 Louis Althusser. *Lenin and Other Essays* (Monthly Review Press, 2001).

Fr. Larry, for instance, presents Jesus Christ as a “man’s man,” while paradoxically fusing him to the mid-century Catholic “cult of suffering”:²³

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!

Straight out of the dystopian *The Handmaid’s Tale*²⁴ novel and Netflix series (2016–18), Fr. Larry pronounces: “If you are married, then another way that you need to be a spiritual leader is in the bedroom” and “if you want to have great sex with you wife, pray with your wife before sex!”.

Feminist Men as ‘Spiritual Wimps’: Fr. Larry continues:

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)

Fr. Larry goes on: “It is erroneous to tell men to be overly nice, to be overly gentle, and to speak softly – come on! It hasn’t worked.” Fr. Larry suggests this is why men don’t like to go to church – because liberals are trying to “feminize” men:

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 far messier questions of the larger social and cultural reality beyond the church that has begun to question the socially constructed nature of gender roles and sexuality.

²³ Robert A. Orsi. *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them*. (Princeton University Press, 2005).

²⁴ Margaret Atwood. *The Handmaid’s Tale* (Anchor Books, 1998).

Fr. Larry continues with his neoliberal framing of self-reliance and possessive individualism²⁵ through language of the “ownership society”:

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 as priest-sarge emerges, as his inner Dr. Phil-meets James Dobson-meets Grover Norquist excoriates men in the contemporary fantasy of libertarian self-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 budgets. The flip side of libertarian individualism is to blame the individual – or, as Dr. Phil or Fr. Larry might have it – blame yourself – and let society off the hook. Interestingly, it is not until 151 pages into the book that the word ‘society’ finally appears – but only to put down people for supposedly wanting to blame their problems on it. The heightening of the evangelical, individualistic mandate over that of social justice could not be higher or more manipulative. Fr. Larry excoriates his men sado-masochistically to ‘take ownership’ for being losers – invoking the classic evangelical-capitalist ethos he has internalized so well.

Jesse Romero: Latin(o) Lover of Our Lord and Lady & He-Man-gelical Masculine Ideal

Another variation on this theme is ex-cop and USA national kickboxing champion Jesse Romero. I first heard him at a charismatic leadership conference in San Antonio giving the keynote address. His booming, evangelical voice was impressive and powerful: power evangelization in action, with emphasis on POWER! It was surprising to find a Catholic speaker with such charismatic theatricality. Reading his reversion story in *Welcome Home!* one learns he put in his time in an evangelical/fundamentalist church.²⁶ Raised in a “solid, traditional, Catholic family,” he got involved in the Chicano rights movement as a teen and in other secular interests, and fell astray from the church.²⁷

²⁵ C. B. Macpherson. *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*. (Oxford, 2011).

²⁶ Jesse Romero. “I Found My ‘Catholic Answers’” in Victor Claveau, ed. *Welcome Home! Fallen away Catholics Who Have Come Back* (Ignatius Press, 2000, p. 39-54).

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

His list of masculine achievements is impressive. He epitomizes the hegemonic He-MAN-gelical masculine ideal of hyper-masculinity par excellence: Los Angeles Sheriff's Deputy at age 21, three-time World Police Olympic middleweight boxing champion and national kickboxing champion. Jesse Romero is clearly the kind of evangelical/charismatic "stud" that signifies the type of conservative, charismatic Catholic masculinity desired: athletic, heroic, patriotic, law and order, religiously and evangelistically zealous, family-oriented. And (hopefully) a trailblazing conservative role model for the surging Latino demographic in the U.S. .

Cultural Warriors for Christ Creed

The hyperbolic and homophobic rhetoric of his spiritual warfare language can be seen quite clearly in the *Cultural Warriors for Christ Creed* on his website:

The Secular Humanist moral relativist liberal progressive carnal men are using the power of the courts to reshape our society with a preemptive strike on Christianity. All Christian bibles, books, crosses, symbols, ceremonies and holidays have been ordered out of the public schools. Out went Adam & Eve, in came Heather has two Mommies. Out went Easter, in came earth day.

Out went collections for the poor and homeless and in came recycling and the "go green" earth worshipers. Out went Bible teachings about the immorality of homosexuality; in came the homosexuals to teach about the immorality of homophobia. Out went school prayer and in came pornography, obscenities, vulgarity and profanity. Out went boy's military haircuts and in came purple, orange and green hair Mohawks with nose, tongue and cheek piercings.

Out went our Judeo - Christian heritage and in comes an introduction to Islam & the dogma of Darwinism. Out goes modest dress and in comes the dress code of freaks. Out goes music & the fine arts and in comes Planned Parenthood. Out goes the electives on "etiquette and manners" and in comes the promotion of the lesbian gay bisexual transgender lifestyle. Out went the teachings about right and wrong and in comes politically correct tolerance and moral relativism.

Out went the 10 Commandments and in came condoms and birth control. Out went the parental rights of Mom & Dad and in came medical marijuana. Out went the notion of "One Nation Under God" and in came the study of witchcraft, vampires and totem poles. Out went any mention of the Christ and in came chaos, shootings and violence. For the sake of our children, it's time we fight back!²⁸

²⁸ Jesse Romero. *Cultural Warriors for Christ Creed*. www.jesseromero.com.

Christianity as Spectacle?

Some of the spectacle-laden success-fantasy of the American Dream's secularized prosperity gospel is prefigured in the Third Wave of Pentecostalism, a highly supernatural turn within contemporary Pentecostalism that coincides with their mobilization in the 1980s by the Religious Right, in which apocalyptic spiritual warfare between good and evil dominates the world. Demonic territorial spirits are seen to literally occupy cities, which need to be "rescued" by missionaries mobilizing people in spiritual warfare prayer rallies. The infamous 'Kill the Gays' Bill in Uganda in 2009 that sought the death penalty for homosexual conduct was the result of one such rally.²⁹ Spiritual warfare-oriented evangelizers note this kind of evangelism makes things "exciting" – especially for men, easily alienated from religion and church.³⁰ As Canadian Todd Bentley – Third Wave evangelist and tattooed ex-convict famous for kicking and "punching" demonic spirits out of people in healing sessions – puts it: "talking about Jesus as one's Lord and savior isn't enough anymore". The blurring of boundaries between spirituality and self-interest can be seen in many examples of the capitalist-promoting prosperity gospel, which believes God rewards donations and believers with financial success. As the documentary *God Loves Uganda* reports, donations from evangelical supporters in the US tripled after the 'Kill the Gays' Bill was proposed, bragged its leading preacher-supporter, now one of the richest individuals in Uganda.³¹ Apparently being anti-gay is good for business. Atlanta megachurch pastor Creflo Dollar, in one famous example, made headlines asking each parishioner for \$300 so he could buy a \$65 million elite private jet.

#metoo; #churchtoo?

Yet perhaps most significant of all the recent events and fallout from the #metoo movement is the impact it is making in the evangelical world through the #churchtoo movement. Paige Patterson is not a household name throughout the US, but he is in the evangelical world. He is viewed as one of the masterminds who engineered the conservative takeover of the Southern Baptist convention in 1979, a significant piece of the GOP's Southern Strategy to mobilize white resentment against the Democratic Party's civil rights legislation to shift the South to the Republican Party.³² A strategy that essentially institutionalized the Religious Right by convincing evangelical leaders to endorse what had been viewed up to that point as the "Catholic" issue of

²⁹ Kapyia Kaoma. "The US Christian Right and the Attack on Gays in Africa" (*The Public Eye*, Winter 2009/Spring 2010).

³⁰ Peter C. Wagner, ed. *Territorial Spirits: Practical Strategies for How to Crush the Enemy Through Spiritual Warfare* (Destiny Publishers, 2012).

³¹ Roger Ross Williams. *God Loves Uganda* (Variance Films. 2013).

³² Marie Griffith. "Southern Baptists, Gender Hierarchy and the Road to Trump" (*Religion & Politics*, 2018).

opposition to abortion – which united conservative Catholics and evangelicals together in the pro-life movement.³³ Watching the Netflix hit series *The Handmaid's Tale*, based on Margaret Atwood's dystopian 1985 novel, written as the Christian Right reared to power in the 1980s, the titular head of Gilead appears based on – and even looks eerily similar to – Paige Patterson. Paige helped codify the idea that women should “submit themselves graciously” to their husbands in the evangelical world.

Forty years later, 2000 conservative evangelical women made headlines in signing a letter of protest demanding Patterson step down as president of the influential Baptist seminary he heads.³⁴ This was due to previous comments that had surfaced where he counseled women to stay with and “pray” for physically abusive husbands and sexual harassers – rather than divorce or report them to the police. Many observers are pondering whether a feminist movement may finally be stirring in evangelicalism – which since the rise of the Christian Right and the prolife movement in the 1980s has defined itself against feminism as the documentary *Reversing Roe* expertly details.³⁵ Rush Limbaugh's successful demonization of feminists as ‘feminazis’ from the 1980s on sums up the incredibly successful backlash against feminism inaugurated. In my interviews of current and past charismatic participants, many cite this backlash and its demonization of feminism for the qualms they have felt well into their adulthood with identifying with feminism. This includes my own three sisters, even though we grew up in relatively liberal Seattle.

The misogynist tropes have done a lot of damage: feminists are women who aren't attractive enough to get men; feminists are angry lesbians, etc. The charismatic pastor of my working-class parish in the 1990s loved to blame the problems of the church – if not society – on the “lesbian nuns from the 60s”.³⁶ After my sister caught her husband cheating and wanted a divorce, she was sent by our mother to him for counseling about an annulment. He tried to dissuade her. “Believe me, you'll have plenty of sex!” if she divorced, he exclaimed. He also informed her he always “kept the door open” when he met with young women like her because they might “come on” to him. Needless to say, the whole experience crept her out. Perhaps unsurprisingly, he was later removed from ministry for decades-old crimes of sexual harassment and molestation of teenage women. The unraveling of sex abuse

33 Frank Schaeffer. *Crazy For God: How I Grew Up One of the Elect, Helped Found the Religious Right, and Lived to Take All (or Almost All) of It Back*. (Da Capo Press, 2008).

34 Sarah Pulliam Bailey. “We are Shocked’: Thousands of Southern Baptist Women Denounce Leader’s ‘Objectifying’ Comments, Advice to Abused Women” (*The Washington Post*. May 7, 2018).

35 Ricky Stern and Anne Sundberg. *Reversing Roe*. (Netflix Original Documentary, 2018).

36 Dominic Wetzel. “Is it possible to be Queer and Catholic? Overcoming the ‘Silence of Sodom’” in *Queering Religion, Religious Queers* eds. Yvette Taylor and Ria Snowdon. (Routledge, 2014).

scandals long swept under the rug by the church hierarchy is stunning for both long-time believers and those, like myself, raised Catholic. It is hard not to become numb by the volume and steady drip of the revelations, with the sense that what has emerged is only the tip of the iceberg. The crisis and scandal has captured the popular imagination: the popular Netflix series *The Keepers* expose about the Baltimore Archdiocese and police-linked coverup of Catholic girls' school teach Sister Cathy's 1968 murder by the serial molester priest she was about to expose follows the film *The Spotlight* film's success in capturing the dramatic revelation of the Boston Globe's 2002 reporting of Cardinal Bernard Law's sex abuse coverups.³⁷ The Pennsylvania Attorney General's report detailing over a thousand victims of hundreds of priests has left believers in shock. Additional attorney general-initiated investigations and successful #metoo-driven reform of statute of limitation laws in New York and elsewhere signals more to come.³⁸ Above all, it reveals the total failure of a corrupt church hierarchy and bureaucracy to "self-police".

At the same time new, rightwing, Alt-Right-style organizations like Church Militant,³⁹ run by former Fox News reporter and 'ex-gay' Catholic Michael Voris, seek to blame the sex abuse scandals on the "problem" of homosexuality. They follow the rightwing, culture war efforts of American Cardinal Raymond Burke and Italian Archbishop Carlo Maria Vigano to stoke a civil war in the Catholic Church. For the right, apparently, popes are only to be followed when they are rightwing. It is hard to imagine such an interpretation sustaining itself long-term, however, as the increased acceptability of the LGBTQ community, sexual difference and sexual choice seem to be winning the culture war, at least in the developed world.

My aging father now sits squarely in the Trump camp, for whom the resentment-based othering of women, minorities, and the LGBT community resonates – though he had assured me early on he would never vote for Trump – at the time a ludicrous, if not laughable candidacy. How many of my five brothers (or brother-in-laws) voted for Trump is a mystery. Yet it is my mother's reaction that is perhaps most interesting. A die-hard pro-lifer and daily-mass-and-rosary Catholic church lady who wants to believe God and the Holy Spirit oversee if not pre-determine everything, she voted for Trump because of abortion, but is increasingly disturbed by him. He does not fit her vision of Godliness. Amidst the pipe bombs sent to Democrats days before the midterm elections by an unhinged Trump supporter, it was hard for her not to acknowledge Trump's role in inciting hate. The weakening of support

³⁷ Ryan White, Director, *The Keepers*. Original Netflix documentary series, Episodes 1-7. Released May 19, 2019 and Tom McCarthy, Director, *The Spotlight* (Participant Media, 2015).

³⁸ John Gehring. "The Politicization of the Catholic Clergy Abuse Crisis." *Religion & Politics*. 2018.

³⁹ Church Militant at www.churchmilitant.com

by evangelical-aligned, conservative charismatic Catholics like her suggest interesting fractures in the half-century firewall between evangelicalism and the women's movement.

Trump as a Weapon of Mass Distraction?

We're Going to Make America Great Again! – Donald Trump

The American Dream is dead – Donald Trump

If nothing else, Trump proved that the wrong answer beats no answer. Whether the left will be able to come up with alternative answers that can compete with the schizophrenic 'success porn' of Fox, Trump and the He-Man-gelical Prosperity Gospel that juxtaposes visual fantasies of success with the race-and-immigrant-baiting, climate change-denying, nationalist victimhood that has captured the white male working and lower middle-class imaginary remains to be seen. Recent challenges to the dominant neoliberal-centrism in the Democratic Party as symbolized by Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez's takedown of party boss Rep. Joseph Crowley are promising signs.

At the same time, the emerging theme of the crisis of masculinity in popular culture, whether conscious or unconscious, highlights the problems our society's warped expectations in the era of neoliberal austerity create for males, whose identity is often still linked to their ability to provide. The documentary *The Mask You Live In* by The Representation Project, for instance, highlights the destructive and traumatic "emotional constipation" our society creates for males, as they are charged with the increasingly difficult task of "providing" in an era of diminishing economic returns.⁴⁰ Stress that is only intensified by race and class. Falling life expectancy, increased rates of opioid and drug abuse, declining social mobility, poor graduation rates, higher rates of suicide, homicide, violence and last, but not least, mass shooters, paint an increasingly dark tableau. Women, on the other hand, have benefited from a half century of radical feminism and its reflection on the socially constructed nature of women's gendered experience. In comparison, males are still in the dark ages. At the same time, the emergence of the #metoo, #timesup and #churchtoo movements, the increasing acceptability of sexual difference, gender fluidity and choice; and the acceptance of LGBTQ peoples as citizens who deserve equal rights is a heartening development. Can these movements help lead the way out of the "political and conceptual crisis" of determinism, defeatism and ecological crisis our stagnant society is mired in? Can they help spark society's creative re-imagining past the current neo-patriarchal stasis? A conceptual and political movement encouraging men to reflect on their social construction – particu-

⁴⁰ See Jennifer Siebel Newsom, Director. *The Mask You Live In* (The Representation Project, 2015).

larly its toxic and self-denying aspects – to embrace empathy and compassion, for themselves and others, against the isolating and contrived self-reliance of neoliberal austerity – could go far to help them regain their humanity; to find a new significance beyond “provider” or “protector”. How effective a “protector” can one be when one is profoundly emotionally disconnected? How can one care about the planet when one sees nature as something to be dominated? While Trump tries to shore up a flagging masculinity by banning transgendered persons from the military and re-institutionalizing the gender binary, these questions, I submit, are the more pressing problems society should be focusing on. In an age of manufactured scarcity and institutionalized austerity, men need reskilling. It is high-time they began the “hard work” and emotional labor of processing the trauma of their own work and economic conditions. In this, at least, they have a model in the #metoo movement.

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