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Political Psychology

BOOK REVIEW

Radical faith and white masculinity: Political extremism in modern American Christianity

Disciples of White Jesus: The Radicalization of American Boyhood

by Angela Denker, Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2025

The Violent Take it by Force: The Christian Movement that is Threatening Our Democracy

by Matthew D. Taylor, Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2024

Eric A. Baldwin

Stanford Law School, Stanford University, Stanford, California, USA

Email: ebaldwin@law.stanford.edu

The 2024 presidential election still lies in the future as this review goes to press but the themes discussed here will doubtlessly figure heavily in both the election and, depending on who wins, the response to the election. Religion, resentment, white supremacy, and young men all will play prominent roles in the voting. Over the past 30 years, the United States has witnessed a resurgence of domestic political extremism, fueled in large part by the political radicalization of young men. These young men find themselves drawn to ideologies that intersect with white supremacy, authoritarian politics, xenophobia, Aryan ideals, and Christian nationalism. At the heart of this, radicalization lies a toxic combination of social alienation, racial resentment, anti-government sentiment, and religious zealotry. All of these have been weaponized by charismatic leaders and amplified in the darkest corners of the Internet. These movements give young men a sense of identity and purpose as defenders of American tradition, racial supremacy, and Christian society, all of which are perceived as under threat. While such extremism has long existed on the fringes of society, for much of the postwar era, it remained concealed and marginal. However, in recent years, the new breed of extremism has taken off, reshaping the political landscape and posing a serious threat to the principles of democracy, stability, and pluralism that are the ballasts of the American experiment. The renewed emphasis on masculinity, religion, and nationalism has created a breeding ground for violent ideologies and calls into doubt the ability of American political and social institutions to address this growing crisis. Even more so, we must ask ourselves the question of why young American men are resorting to these ideologies?

In Angela Denker's forthcoming, "Disciples of White Jesus," she addresses this question. Denker is a midwestern mother and Lutheran pastor who sees this crisis through the lens of her two teenage boys as well as through the lens of her work as a Lutheran pastor and through the Christian institutions she serves and is a member of. She blends reportage with personal anecdote and political analysis to try to figure out why white masculinity has become part and parcel of American Christianity, transforming some young men into agents of white supremacist

violence. Her investigation paints a picture of young boys caught between the loving aspirations of their families and the toxic pull of racial resentment and hyper-charged religion. The titular White Jesus invokes the perverted and weaponized form of Christianity that nurtures grievances and breeds a sense of superiority rather than empathy and humility.

The radicalization of young American men, Denker argues, is not the result of fringe beliefs and is not isolated to those at the margins of the political landscape. Rather, Denker's research suggests that this radicalization is embedded in the very core of American society, a reflection of systemic inequality, and a white Christian culture that refuses to confront its complicity in violence and hatred. This refusal is what leaves boys vulnerable to ideologies that exploit their anxieties and frustrations. Denker examines the case of Dylann Roof, the perpetrator of the mass shooting at Emmanuel AME church in Charlottesville. Roof in many ways represented a typical American upbringing in a conservative, deeply Christian, and deeply white southern culture. Very few warning signs were seen. Yet, in hindsight, Denker finds Roof was exposed to ideas about immigrants replacing native-born Americans, the displacement of Whites in society, and increasing equality between men and women that in his perception, came at the expense of emasculating men. He saw racial minorities as the "other" and rather than drawing on the lessons of love and compassion that were often the subject of the church sermons he attended, he latched onto notions of patriarchy and racial resentment. This coupled with exposure to white supremacy and neo-Nazi materials online, led to him opening fire on innocent parishioners. While perpetrators such as Dylan Roof remain a statistical outlier and most young White boys in America will not commit such atrocities, the underlying notions of racial resentment and a retrenchment of patriarchal masculinity are increasingly infused in the cultural leitmotifs of American boys.

American Christianity, particularly the more evangelical and conservative off-shoots of Protestantism, are encouraging American Christian boys to embrace an aggressive form of masculinity shaped in ideas of conquest, dominance, providership, and protectionism. The radicalism and violence that emanates from this is not an aberration, but an extension of the very values these boys are being taught. These values are reinforcing the figure of White Jesus, which in Denker's telling, is a distorted version of Christianity that legitimizes resentment, anger, and violence in the name of religious piety and racial purity.

White Jesus is reinforced through broader social trends. Political rhetoric that depicts Christian conservatives as "high testosterone" and "alpha males" and left-leaning men as "betas" and "low testosterone." Furthermore, a proliferation of online venues including Twitter, Reddit, Discord, and Twitch, where like-minded males come together in echo chambers that push old-school notions of white masculinity, sharing racist and sexist memes, and delegitimizing progress made by minorities. These environments prime young men for radicalization. While this represents more active encouragement, passive silence also bears partial blame. The charismatic leaders who are at the heart of American Christian culture fail to address or counteract these narratives.

What makes Disciples of White Jesus so compelling is Denker's insistence on the emotional and psychological dimensions of radicalization. Denker emphasizes how fear, anxiety, and vulnerability—feelings often dismissed and discouraged among young men—play a central role in driving young Christian boys toward extremist ideologies. Her ultimate point is that young men in America are not born into such modes of thinking, rather, they are shaped by the conservative Christian ecosystem in which they come of age. Such a conservative ecosystem also plays a central role in the changing landscape of our politics. Early signs of the radicalization of the far right, especially among white males, was seen with Timothy McVeigh and the Oklahoma City Bombing and Randy Weaver and the Ruby Ridge standoff. Such events, while still statistically anomalous, have increased in frequency in recent years including the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing, the 2015 church shooting, the 2016 Orlando nightclub shooting, the 2017 Charlottesville car attack, and the 2020 siege on

the Capitol. Underlying each of these events are American men—and women in the case of the Capitol siege—who had allowed rage to build up inside of themselves to the point that they lash out in a violent act.

Matthew Taylor's *The Violent Take It by Force* tackles this topic from a more overtly political and theological angle. Taylor traces the rise of Christian nationalism, particularly the New Apostolic Reformation (NAR), a branch of Charismatics that blends spiritual warfare with authoritarian politics. The NAR contributed to the transformation of fringe charismatic Christian beliefs into a mainstream force driving radical political action, particularly around the figure of Donald Trump.

At the heart of the NAR is spiritual warfare, the idea that Christians are engaged in an ongoing battle between good and evil, where the forces of darkness, represented by secularism, liberalism, and non-Christian religions, must be combated both spiritually, and increasingly, physically. NAR leaders frame political conflicts not as policy disagreements but as existential threats to God's Kingdom on Earth. The protection of God's Kingdom requires aggressive and even violent action. While these modes of thinking have long existed in the fringes of the evangelical movement, NAR has worked diligently through the training and placement of its preachers into seemingly moderate communities and slowly building a coalition of like-minded spiritual warriors.

Taylor directly links the theology of spiritual warfare espoused by NAR to political radicalization, showing how it fueled the action of those involved in the 2021 Capitol siege. The NAR furthers radicalization through its "apostles" and "prophets" who claim direct revelation from God. These Charismatic figures, often existing outside standard clerical hierarchy, are alleged to have the power to interpret current political events as part of a divine plan. Figures such as Lance Wallnau and Paula White rallied around Trump, calling him a modern-day "Cyrus"—a biblical figure chosen by God to lead despite his defects. This is the theological construct that allows NAR leaders to dismiss some of Trump's past misdeeds—indeed, unchristian acts—while depicting him as a divinely anointed spiritual warrior against evil. Across the American evangelical movement, this theology encourages a devout loyalty to Trump that makes political dissent tantamount to heresy.

The NAR also radicalizes American Christians through the "Seven Mountains Mandate." In this doctrine, Christians are called to dominate the seven essential areas of society: government, media, education, family, religion, arts and entertainment and business. In dominating these seven areas, Christians can bring about God's Kingdom on Earth. Nothing short of complete cultural monopoly is sufficient. Taking action to bring about the Christian monopoly over society is a divine imperative in which direct, and even violent confrontation is justified.

Taylor's research also uncovers the NAR's use of prophetic symbolism and ritual to radicalize its followers. For instance, he describes how NAR leaders organized "Jericho Marches" around government buildings, where followers blew shofars (ram's horns) and circled these buildings in imitation of the biblical story of the Battle of Jericho, invoking divine intervention to overthrow perceived political enemies. This blend of religious ritual and political action fosters a sense of divine sanction for extreme political behavior, reinforcing the belief that adherents are fighting not just for political outcomes but for the very survival of their faith and nation.

Perhaps most disturbing is Taylor's documentation of how the NAR's theology legitimizes authoritarianism. He traces the movement's endorsement of autocratic leadership to its belief that strong, divinely appointed leaders—such as NAR's apostles or figures like Trump—are necessary to lead the spiritual battle against evil. This theological justification for authoritarianism dovetails with the movement's disdain for pluralism and democratic norms. Taylor shows how NAR leaders frequently disparage compromise and dissent, framing them as obstacles to God's will. In this worldview, democratic processes become secondary to the goal of

establishing Christian rule, and political violence becomes a permissible, even necessary, tool to achieve it.

Where Denker emphasizes the emotional and relational dimensions of young men's radicalization, Taylor focuses on the organized efforts of religious leaders who have weaponized Christian theology for political purposes. The NAR, as described by Taylor, is not merely a fringe movement but one with increasing mainstream appeal, shaping everything from worship music to political rallies, including their visible presence at the January 6 insurrection.

Taylor's investigation makes clear that these religious leaders see themselves as modern-day apostles, tasked with taking control of political and cultural institutions to establish a divine kingdom on Earth. The radicalization of young men, in this context, is not a by-product but a strategic goal. The movement's theological narrative revolves around cosmic battles between good and evil, where young men are called to be warriors in a literal and spiritual sense, defending their faith by any means necessary.

Both books engage with the question of how this radicalization intersects with American politics, but they approach it from distinct angles. Denker explores how everyday boys are socialized into a culture of Christian supremacy that celebrates male dominance and white entitlement. Taylor, meanwhile, unpacks the ideological machinery that enlists these boys in broader political movements, showing how they are drawn into networks of religious nationalism that frame political violence as a sacred duty.

Together, these books highlight the dangerous nexus between masculinity, Christianity, and nationalism in America. The radicalization of young men is no longer the exception but increasingly the rule, aided by religious narratives that glorify violence in the name of faith. Denker's personal insights, combined with Taylor's exhaustive research, underscore the urgency of confronting these ideologies before they further erode the democratic fabric of the nation.

In the end, both authors issue a warning: whether through the emotional fragility and insecurity of boyhood or the militant theology of nationalist leaders, American Christianity is at a crossroads. The future, they suggest, depends on whether the nation can reclaim a version of faith that rejects supremacy and violence and instead fosters empathy, equality, and true spiritual humility.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable—no new data generated.