

Review of Bradley Onishi, *Preparing for War: the extremist history of White Christian nationalism—and what comes next* (Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2023).

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Search #capitolsiegereligion and you'll find stark evidence that the siege of the US Capitol on 6 January 2021 was a profoundly religious act. The hashtag, initiated by a curator of the Smithsonian, charts the Christian iconography, ritual, and language by which rally/riot attendees chose to identify themselves and their cause. In *Preparing for War*, scholar of religion Bradley Onishi explores the history of White Christian nationalism and anticipates where it's headed next. His claim is bold: the storming of the US Capitol "was not the last stand of a dying faction. It was the first violent battle in what they foresee as the coming civil war" (221).

Onishi begins by unpacking White Christian nationalism—what it is, the myths and narratives driving it, and its distinction from Black Christian nationalism—and outlines his own experience within the movement as a zealous teenage convert and youth leader.

Chapters 2–5 trace the development of White Christian nationalism and extreme right-wing politics from the 1960s American South. Onishi finds a direct antecedent of Donald Trump in Barry Goldwater, the Republican nominee for the 1964 presidential election. Trump reads straight from Goldwater's playbook of anti-elitism, libertarianism, and isolationism, cultivating the same image of cavalier self-reliant manhood, if not quite his "cowboy mystique" (37). Goldwater's influence on the voting public was visible in the 70s and 80s as well. Whereas Jimmy Carter's personal ethic was demonstrably more "Christian" than Ronald Reagan's, the latter's Christian nationalist policies secured him wild popularity among Christian nationalist voters and a second term in office.

As early as the 1960s, the American Republican party recognised the enormous potential of the White Christian nationalist electorate. Political entrepreneurs like Paul Weyrich and Ricgard Viguerie cynically and coolly levelled their sights on White evangelicals. Drawing from sources as varied as court records and footage of political rallies, Onishi makes the case that Republican priorities often



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thought of as theologically motivated—anti-abortionism, family values, tax breaks for Christian schools—are really driven by a White supremacist vision for a segregated, ‘pure’ American society. Big business also piggy-backed on conservative Christianity, whose prosperity gospel and “sacralization of the individual” (49) promoted the goods of capitalist consumerism and salvation through hard work. This is the most compelling aspect of *Preparing for War*—contextualising the siege of January 6th as the natural and even predictable result of socio-political wheels set in motion over 50 years ago.

Chapters 6–8 examines key features of the White Christian nationalist worldview. The imperative for ‘family values’ and the obsession with purity (particularly of the teenage body) is essentially a drive to purify a nation. James Dobson, founder of *Focus on the Family* and key exponent of the ‘family values’ movement, has uncomfortable links with eugenics, though Onishi leaves the reader to conclude whether resemblances are much more than accidental. Onishi’s confusion about whether he was praying *at* the US flagpole or *to* the flag as a teenager sparks discussion of why American ‘patriots’ are drawn to authoritarian leaders, be they Vladimir Putin or Donald Trump. Feeling their authority threatened, White Christian nationalists turn to conspiracy theories like QAnon to alter dominant narratives of truth and normativity.

The final three chapters reframe the storming of the Capitol as the first battle in MAGA nation’s war on American democracy. January 6th is a direct outworking of a conservative reading of Joshua 6, which recounts the Israelites’ divinely-sanctioned siege and massacre at the pagan city Jericho. The iconography and Christian paraphernalia at the siege is unmistakable: “White Christians saw themselves as warriors, protecting the nation” (171). The breach of the Capitol can be mythologised as a cleansing of the Temple, a religious ritual both transgressive and blessed by God. A woman killed during the siege has been cast as a martyr in the godly crusade to retake the country. A comparison with Hitler’s rise from a similar political moment underlines the perilousness of the situation.

Onishi concludes by considering the future. The exodus of White Christian nationalists to the American Redoubt (Idaho, Montana, Wyoming) may lay the ground for the next phase of White Christian nationalists’ war against American democracy. Onishi commits his book as a warning for the country to prepare for the coming civil war.

Onishi is not reticent about his allegiances. Indeed, his identity as a ‘former White Christian nationalist’ gives him an ‘insider’s view’ into the social phenomenon he sets out to analyse, while his profession as a “scholar of religion” (1) who “no longer identif[ies] as a Christian” gives him the tools to do so (12). His political persuasion is the subtext of the entire book: he feels “relieved or even buoyant” at the prospect of the Democrats controlling the White House and both houses of Congress (5),

while the Republican party is the pathology under examination. Arguably this candour is necessary for the author of a book so overtly political, but it may alienate some readers.

Onishi's Christian past is the thread that binds the book together. The question "Would I have been there?" is said to have inspired the book and returns to haunt the reader as it does the author himself. Anecdotes from his time as an evangelical are liberally scattered throughout the book, giving the writing immediacy and drive. Honing in on Orange County, Southern California (the birthplace of modern conservatism (58) and Onishi's childhood home) makes the weighty task Onishi sets himself more manageable and accessible.

However, familiarity breeds contempt, and one senses that the break from his faith community was not an altogether clean one. It's hard not to understand Onishi's narration of his journey as one from the primordial darkness of Christian nationalism to the rational light of agnostic multiculturalism. Perhaps this would have been softened if he had contrasted White Christian nationalism with other communities of faith. How did liberal strains of Christianity respond to January 6th? What about American Muslims?

I found Onishi's theological engagement with White Christian nationalism lacking. Many of the views Onishi mentions as problematic have solid biblical grounding. Biblical scholars would admit that Jesus was in many ways "an icon of insurrection" (7), both as a "historical" figure and in his portrayal in the gospels. To interpret calamity as God's punishment is fundamental to the prophetic tradition of the Hebrew Bible, not just a Christian nationalist aberration. As jarring as it might be to secular ears, the idea that "our bodies are not our own" and "when you sin sexually, you misuse what is God's" (111) is thoroughly Pauline.

Onishi sometimes depends upon the reader's sympathy to see the obvious injustice or ridiculousness of Christian nationalist positions, rather than formulating real arguments against them. Why is "a vision of Christianity as a privatized, individualist endeavour" (51) somehow illegitimate, as Onishi leads us to believe? What about the prosperity gospel? Criticism of the behaviour of White Christian nationalists would have been strengthened by serious engagement with the beliefs that motivate them. Onishi briefly touches upon different interpretative lenses with which to read the Bible—literal versus allegorical—but his argument would have benefitted from at least a section devoted to this topic.

In little over 200 pages, Onishi takes the pulse and delivers a prognosis for a movement in modern America that cannot be ignored. *Preparing for War* provides the context that contemporary conversations about right-wing nationalism lack in an accessible and engaging manner.