Review Essay*

Jesus and John Wayne and the Shifting Grounds of Evangelical Historiography

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In the wake of the 81% white evangelical vote for Donald Trump in 2016, headline after headline featured lively debate about how evangelicals could vote for a man who had strayed so far from their values.[1] The discussion in the media over the white evangelical alliance with Trump reflected the on-the-ground confusion among evangelicals themselves, especially upon the release of the Access Hollywood tapes. How could the evangelical faithful lend such broad support for a twice-divorced, "grab 'em by the pussy" misogynist, some leaders wondered?[2] Russell Moore—at

* Kristin Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* (New York: Liveright, 2020) 384 pp., $18.95 pb., ISBN: 978-1-63149-905-0. Page references appear in parenthesis within the text.

[1] For an example of journalistic coverage immediately after Trump's election, see Sarah Pulliam Bailey, "White Evangelicals Voted Overwhelmingly for Donald Trump, Exit Polls Show," *The Washington Post* (9 November 2016), https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2016/11/09/exit-polls-show-white-evangelicals-voted-overwhelmingly-for-donald-trump/. For a historian's take a few months after the election, see Molly Worthen, "A Match Made in Heaven: Why Conservative Evangelicals Have Lined Up Behind Trump," *The Atlantic* (May 2017), https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/05/a-match-made-in-heaven/521409/. On evangelicals of color, see Deborah Jian Lee, "Betrayed at the Polls, Evangelicals of Color at a Crossroads," *Religion Dispatches* (27 April 2017), https://religiondispatches.org/betrayed-at-the-polls-evangelicals-of-color-at-a-crossroads/.

[2] Kristin Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* (New York: Liveright, 2020) 250–72. In ch. 15, "A New High Priest," Du Mez discusses in-depth the confusion, ambivalence, as well as the solidification of support for Trump

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the time, president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission for the Southern Baptist Convention—as well as other evangelical pastors themselves believed, or at least held out hope, that evangelicals would rise above the temptation to endorse someone who so clearly did not espouse their theological beliefs and family values. Narratives of denial and disbelief emerged from the center of white evangelical power, even as a majority of white evangelicals showed unwavering support for Trump's election to the highest political office.

Narratives of evangelical reformation also had staying power. Before Trump's rise to power, a narrative had been developing among journalists, academics, and evangelicals, that a new generation of evangelicals were reforming the movement. In *The Next Evangelicalism,* Soong-Chan Rah cast a vision for an American evangelicalism free from its bondage to white and western cultural captivity, given the movement's increasing ethnic diversity domestically and abroad.[3] Some argued that a remnant, in part, rooted in a longer history of the "evangelical left," were not only building a more racially inclusive, but also feminist and queer-friendly movement, decoupled from the Republican party.[4] "Evangelical" did not necessarily equate to the Christian Right, according to this narrative. The 19% of white evangelicals, as well as the nonwhite evangelicals who opposed Trump, would continue to seek the transformation of evangelical America, expanding its boundaries of inclusion or restoring the movement to its original theological commitments. Meanwhile, a rising tide of the disenchanted—represented in the social media hashtag #exvangelicals—swore off evangelicalism in America altogether.[5]

In the wake of the 2016 election, practitioners, journalists, and scholars alike, faced a crisis of narrative. Whose narrative was correct? Was the evangelical vote for Trump a betrayal of evangelicals' long-held beliefs and values? Or did it exemplify who they have been all along? Were evangelicals beholden to the politics of the Republican party or could their movement adhere to a different political vision? Amid this narrative crisis, scholars, journalists, politicians, and religious leaders published a range of monographs, edited volumes, articles, chapters, op-eds, news stories, blogs, and social media posts to provide fresh interpretations (or share old ones that had not gained traction) about the rise of evangelical political power.[6]

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among white evangelicals.

[3] Soong-Chan Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism: Releasing the Church from Western Cultural Captivity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2009).

[4] Deborah Jian Lee, *Rescuing Jesus: How People of Color, Women, and Queer Christians Are Reclaiming Evangelicalism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2015). Note the longer history of an evangelical left in David R. Swartz, *Moral Minority: The Evangelical Left in an Age of Conservatism* (1st ed.; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

[5] See, for instance, Bradley Onishi, "The Rise of #Exvangelical," *Religion and Politics* (9 April 2019), https://religionandpolitics.org/2019/04/09/the-rise-of-exvangelical/. Note the longer history of evangelical disenchantment explored in David Hempton, *Evangelical Disenchantment: Nine Portraits of Faith and Doubt* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

[6] For monographs, see fn. 16 as well as the following examples published after the 2016

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Kristin Du Mez's *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation,* published in 2020, has risen to the top of that reading list as a *New York Times* bestseller.

In *Jesus and John Wayne*, Du Mez cuts through multiple narratives about modern American evangelicalism. She writes: "In 2016, many observers were stunned at evangelicals' apparent betrayal of their own values. In reality, evangelicals did not cast their vote despite their beliefs, but because of them" (3). Through rigorous descriptive-analytical work as a historian, and with an appropriate sense of humor, Du Mez argues with piercing clarity: support for Trump was not an aberration, but a display of white evangelicals' true character.

The book hinges on a stunning gendered argument centered on a history of white evangelical devotion to militant masculinity. Du Mez shows that, at the heart of evangelicalism in modern American history, is a white masculinist culture that has "traded a faith that privileges humility and elevates 'the least of these' for one that derides gentleness as the province of wusses" (3). In endorsing Trump, the white evangelical elite and masses revealed what they had been constructing for at least the past fifty years—a movement beyond a devotion to biblical literalism, and the saving grace of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, but one bent on defending and protecting the evangelical cult of masculinity. The "evangelical support for Trump," then, was a "culmination of evangelicals' embrace of militant masculinity, an ideology that enshrines patriarchal authority and condones the callous display of power, at home and abroad" (3).

Reviewed in not only academic journals but also on evangelical websites and blogs, such as the Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood and the Gospel Coalition, the book's impact can be indexed by its wide circulation throughout university classrooms as well as the very evangelical marketplace it incisively critiques.[7] Liveright, the book's publisher, which is an imprint of W.W. Norton & Co, called the book a " 'surprise hit' of 2020," as it "sold over 300 hardcover copies every week in its first months of publication."[8] But the impact of the book can also

election which shed light on the white evangelical support for Trump as well as provide a broader critique of white Christian supremacy: Angela Denker, *Red State Christians: Understanding the Voters Who Elected Donald Trump* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2019); Khyati Y. Joshi, *White Christian Privilege* (New York: NYU Press, 2021); Robert P. Jones, *White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2021); Sarah Posner, *Unholy: How White Christian Nationalists Powered the Trump Presidency, and the Devastating Legacy They Left Behind* (New York: Random House, 2021); Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* (Updated ed.; New York: Oxford University Press, 2022).

[7] Anne Kennedy, "*Jesus and John Wayne*: A Fair Portrait of Evangelicalism?", The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, 5 April 2021, https://cbmw.org/2021/04/05/jesus-and-john-wayne-a-fair-portrait-of-evangelicalism/; Al Stewart, "Review: *Jesus and John Wayne* by Kristin Kobes Du Mez," *The Gospel Coalition* (Australia Edition), 23 September 2021, https://au.thegospelcoalition.org/book-review/review-jesus-and-john-wayne-by-kristin-kobes-du-mez/.

[8] Sarah Pulliam Bailey, "How a Book about Evangelicals, Trump and Militant Masculinity Became a Surprise Bestseller," *The Washington Post*, 16 July 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.

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be seen in its intervention into the historiographic crisis that academic historians have faced in the wake of Trump's rise to power. That is, historians of American religions like other academics have not been immune to the political reckoning in the last six years, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Rather, the political moment has powerfully reverberated into the field's research, writing and teaching. Only hindsight will likely help us to see these changes clearly.

However, one thing is clear for now. Not only have the grounds beneath us shifted, but the very publications emerging from scholars within the field have shifted the grounds upon which we narrate evangelical America's past. Prior to 2016, scholars had long debated the definition and character of "evangelicals." But there was a strong historiographic trend to write beyond the "evangelical as Christian right" narrative, including in the field-defining works of Du Mez's own advisor at University of Notre Dame, George Marsden. To overly emphasize the "evangelical as Christian right" narrative was, in part, seen as limiting, and as primarily a soundbite from the media about evangelicals in its coverage of US politics since the 1980s. Unlike the reductive narratives in the media, academic historians found a more complicated narrative in the archives in which American evangelicals were more than participants in a politically conservative movement.[9] They exhibited greater theological depth, political diversity, as well as a more multiracial and global face than the media suggested.[10] In many ways, the jury is still out on this narrative trajectory. It is possible that the evangelical left, Trump-opposing white evangelicals, and nonwhite evangelicals (domestic and global) will make a significant impact on the ground, and in the historiography, as they represent those seeking to transform the evangelical movement as its new heirs, or, the "next evangelicals," as Rah puts it.[11]

Yet, in this era of political reckoning, one sees a significant historiographic shift with publications like *Jesus and John Wayne.* Du Mez's work has indelibly highlighted a deeper inequality embedded in, and driven by, evangelicalism in America—threatening American democracy—than had been previously emphasized in the literature. Along with other recent works from historians, such as Anthea D. Butler's *White Evangelical Racism*, Randall Herbert Balmer's *Bad Faith*, and Beth Allison Barr's *The Making of Biblical Womanhood*, Du Mez cautions against

com/religion/2021/07/16/jesus-and-john-wayne-evangelicals-surprise-bestseller/.

[9] In Mark Noll's introduction "One Word but Three Crises," in *Evangelicals: Who They Have Been, Are Now, and Could Be* (ed. Mark A. Noll, David W. Bebbington, and George M. Marsden; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019) 1–16, he charts the historiographic arc I describe here, noting the influence of the work of historians like David Bebbington and George Marsden. See, in this volume, Bebbington and Marsden's essays from the 1980s, which chart the power of an evangelical movement, rooted in a theological foundation, that does not necessarily equate to the Christian right or to support for Trump. Note Noll's emphasis on the distinction between the popular usage of the term "evangelical" and that of historians of evangelicalism in modern US and global history.

[10] In Mark Noll's introduction, he puts an emphasis on the global character of evangelicalism (ibid., 1–16).

[11] Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism*.

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historiographic moves that may have blinded academic historians from the full extent of the racialized, gendered, and Christian nationalist catastrophe embedded in, and driven by, American evangelicalism.[12] As Jon Butler put it, *Jesus and John Wayne* contests the "rather benign ways" we have narrated post-1945 US evangelical history. The book, he writes, serves as a "shocking counterweight" to the "largely comfortable evangelical history most of us have read, written, and taught of the last half-century."[13]

Jesus and John Wayne has shifted the historiographic grounds of modern American evangelical history in its unapologetic critique of the "evangelicals as beyond the Christian right" narrative that held sway between the 1980s and 2016. *Jesus and John Wayne* does so by telling a story that, importantly, goes beyond Trump. Trump's rise "did not trigger this militant turn" in US evangelicalism, Du Mez writes, but is "symptomatic of a long-standing condition" (3). To that end, she unveils a history of militant evangelical masculinity sustained by the power of the evangelical marketplace, a cultural channel through which the evangelical cult of masculinity is distributed and consumed. She writes, "White evangelicalism has such an expansive reach in large part because of the culture it has created, the culture that it sells" (7). She sketches out a world run by evangelical elites with their religious products—from books, sermons, and material culture—as they reveal how some of the "basic tenets of evangelical theology" have been "immersed in this evangelical popular culture" (7). But even the elite do not have full control over this marketplace: "During the Trump campaign, many pastors were surprised to find that they wielded little influence over people in the pews. What they didn't realize was that they were up against a more powerful system of authority—an evangelical popular culture that reflected and reinforced a compelling ideology and a coherent worldview" (8).

One of the most important ideas sustaining Du Mez's argument is the evangelical marketplace, for it allows her to highlight the power of a cultural force, embedded in a religious movement, that runs deeper than one political figure, and goes beyond fringe extremists. She writes, "Rather than seeking to distinguish 'real' from 'supposed' evangelicals, then, it is more useful to think in terms of the degree to which individuals participate in this evangelical culture of consumption" (8). Thus, Du Mez's cast of characters go beyond Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and Phyllis Schlafly, who are crucial to her story but are all well-known in the scholarly literature for their affiliation with the Christian right. Rather, she exposes yet another layer of the evangelical marketplace in the evangelical world of letters—the books and thought leaders that have shaped the theology and practices of the modern movement. She names evangelical scholars—considered theological heavyweights

[12] Randall Herbert Balmer, *Bad Faith: Race and the Rise of the Religious Right* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021); Beth Allison Barr, *The Making of Biblical Womanhood: How the Subjugation of Women Became Gospel Truth* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2021); Anthea D. Butler, *White Evangelical Racism: The Politics of Morality in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021).

[13] Jon Butler, review of Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*, *Church History* 89.3 (2020) 747–50.

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for some in the evangelical movement—such as Wayne Grudem and John Piper, as well as popular writers such as Joshua Harris and Mark Driscoll. In so doing, she threads together a broader network, beyond the well-known Moral Majority, who work in disparate factions, with different styles and even theological beliefs, but who are ultimately undergirded by the same devotion to the cult of evangelical masculinity.

Jesus and John Wayne argues that the roots of evangelical militant masculinity run deeper than Trump because this broad network of evangelical thought leaders and authors has fueled the formation of the evangelical cult of masculinity with its theological treatises on gender complementarianism, and from megachurch pulpits, which are part of everyday evangelicalism, not fringe. To that end, she takes us through the impact of Grudem and Piper's publications like *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* and the broader Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood that sustained the theology of gender complementarianism (166–69). Alongside of the stinging critique of works like *Pure* by Linda Kay Klein, she exposes the evangelical homeschooling culture out of which Harris and his book emerged to cultivate an evangelical sexual purity culture that depended on female subordination.[14] Du Mez concludes: "Twenty years after the publication of *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, Josh Harris acknowledged that he hadn't really known what he was talking about" (303). She exposes the patriarchal culture threaded throughout the New Calvinist movement, examining the rise and fall of Mark Driscoll, a charismatic megachurch pastor notorious for his gender complementarian books like *Real Marriage*, and ultimately, for the harassment scandals at his church Mars Hill (193–204). Thus, she describes a nearly fifty-year-long devotion to the evangelical cult of masculinity channeled through the power of the evangelical marketplace, which, ultimately, links everyday evangelicalism, and its culture of consumption, to the rise of Trump.

But how did this evangelical marketplace, and these seemingly benign authors, pastors and writers, cultivate the rise of a political figure like Trump? She argues that the circulation of their ideas throughout the evangelical marketplace helped to cultivate an identity that could be readily tapped into political action and channeled into electoral outcomes. She argues that "this expansive media network functioned less as a traditional soul-saving enterprise and more as a means by which evangelicals created and maintained their own identity—an identity rooted in 'family values' and infused with a sense of cultural embattlement" (12). As such, it could dictate ideas about, not only gender and family values, but also, ultimately, votes: "For decades to come, militant masculinity (and a sweet, submissive femininity) would remain entrenched in the evangelical imagination, shaping conceptions of what was good and true. By the 1980s, evangelicals were able to mobilize so effectively as a partisan political force because they already participated in a shared cultural identity" (12).

[14] Linda Kay Klein, *Pure: Inside the Evangelical Movement That Shamed a Generation of Young Women and How I Broke Free* (rpr. ed; New York; London: Atria Books, 2019).

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Thus, everyday evangelical authors and thought leaders may not have been on the *700 Club* with Pat Robertson dictating people's votes, but they were helping to cultivate a masculinist culture and identity comfortable with substituting the image of John Wayne for Jesus, and even channeling that identity into votes for Trump.

The power of Du Mez's argument is in the fresh frame through which the book synthesizes data from a broader evangelical world than previously conceived as core to the making of the right. The expansive boundaries of *Jesus and John Wayne*'s world, especially through the frame of the evangelical marketplace, is what I hope will be pushed further in future studies, amid the shifting grounds of evangelical historiography.

As Du Mez writes, the power of "conservative white evangelicalism is apparent in both the size of its market share and its influence over religious distribution channels. As a diffuse movement, evangelicalism lacks clear institutional authority structures, but the evangelical marketplace itself helps define who is inside and who is outside the fold" (9). In this diffuse structure, the size of the nonwhite share of this evangelical world of consumption is, presumably, not small, even if the nonwhite distributors are likely smaller in number. Du Mez cites the Black Christian tradition as espousing a theological and political culture sharply delineated against white evangelicalism, but what can we say about the nonwhite people—including Black, Latinx and Asian/Asian American evangelicals—who regularly consume, or are consumed by, this marketplace?

To push the boundaries further: To what extent have nonwhite Christians' religious and political lives been shaped by the white evangelical cult of masculinity? Have they hybridized the evangelical cult of masculinity into their own racial and ethnic contexts, to propel their own patriarchal hopes or do they espouse significantly different theological politics that mitigate gender inequality? How do we understand the lives of Black, Latinx, and Asian/Asian American evangelicals, in the US and abroad, who consume evangelical books on sexual purity culture distributed by the white evangelical marketplace?[15] As I show in my own work, modern evangelical America amassed power through its dependence on nonwhite people in the Pacific world.[16] So, how far is the global reach of the evangelical marketplace, featured in *Jesus and John Wayne*'s world, which is centered in a white evangelical base, but whose distribution channels know no national borders, given the powerful economic currents of neoliberalism?

Du Mez raises some of these questions though largely argues that evangelical militant masculinity is primarily a phenomenon observed among white evangelicals (301). If we use the work of political scientist Janelle Wong for reference, however,

[15] Marla Frederick's transnational work in connecting the sexual politics of prosperity theologies between the US and Caribbean is a helpful reference to think through this question (Marla Faye Frederick, *Colored Television: American Religion Gone Global* [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016]).

[16] Helen Jin Kim, *Race for Revival: How Cold War South Korea Shaped the American Evangelical Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022).

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contemporary nonwhite evangelicals tend to disagree with white evangelicals on race and immigration, but not on questions of gender and sexuality, such as abortion and same sex marriage, which leaves the door open for exploring masculinist and patriarchal synchronicities across racial/ethnic evangelical communities in contemporary US.[17] If we were to extend this inquiry in a transnational direction, into the region of Asia-Pacific, for instance, we know that evangelicalism is a core factor in structuring patriarchal and hypermasculine subjectivities in a context like South Korea.[18] To what extent did the world of *Jesus and John Wayne* create an evangelical marketplace that fueled a transpacific cult of evangelical masculinity, connecting the US to noncommunist and heavily Protestant regions like South Korea? Lastly, given that the terms "Vietnam War" and "sex" are cited almost equally, according to the book's index, and that General MacArthur, who led the wars in the Pacific theater, is cited as a key hero within the white evangelical cult of masculinity, the legacies of the Cold War in Asia—an unending war—pulse like an undercurrent throughout the book. So, to what extent was the world of *Jesus and John Wayne*—and its ideas about gender, sex and the family—fueled by the Orientalism and militarism in and of the Pacific world?

That we do not yet have the empirical data or the historical narratives in the literature to answer these questions comprehensively—that very invisibility—is what haunts the evangelical marketplace, and the shifting grounds of evangelical historiography: all of the people whose stories go untold, whose lives are unaccounted for, but who are nevertheless subject to its whims.

[17] Janelle Wong, *Immigrants, Evangelicals, and Politics in an Era of Demographic Change* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2018).

[18] Kelly H. Chong, *Deliverance and Submission: Evangelical Women and the Negotiation of Patriarchy in South Korea* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2008); Nami Kim, *The Gendered Politics of the Korean Protestant Right: Hegemonic Masculinity* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

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