

## George Floyd and the “American Spring:” Secular Martyrs, Democratic Uprisings, and the Radical Religion of Trumpist Fascism

Ellen Amster

*George Floyd’s death was a secular martyrdom that sparked a 2020 “American Spring,” reminiscent of the democratic “Arab Spring” uprisings in the Islamic world of 2011. The popular democratic revolutions in Syria, Egypt, and Tunisia also coalesced around the murder of an innocent by security forces; these modern-day martyrs reveal the religious and corporeal nature of politics itself. Martyrdom, a concept from religion, is instructive because it describes a way politics function as lived experience, a reality for which politics itself has no precise language. Secular martyrs like Floyd render the abstraction of political injustice visible and visceral, inspiring others to collective action. A second role of religion in US politics is Trumpist Christianity, a radical religion designed to support the revolutionary fascist movement coalescing around Donald Trump, or “Trumpism.” Trumpism seeks to replace the American republic with a white ethnic authoritarian state through violence. Comparative international histories illuminate the functions of religion in modern politics and the importance of religious studies methodology to “reading” the dynamics of contemporary politics.*

**Keywords:** *George Floyd, Arab Spring, fascism, martyrdom, democracy, religion, radicalism, Christianity, Islam, Trump, public health, violence*

The death of George Floyd in 2020 ignited an “American Spring” in the United States, a democratic uprising that recalls the 2011 Arab Spring in the Islamic world. US street protests coalesced around the death, recorded image, story, and body of George Floyd, a black man killed slowly in public by police—a death recorded on cell phones that illustrated the injustice at the heart of the American political system.<sup>1</sup> In the Arab world, popular democratic uprisings also organized around the bodies, deaths, video images and stories of innocents unjustly killed by security forces. The American Spring and Arab Spring(s) emerged from very different politics, actors, ideologies, and contexts, yet each crystallized around a secular martyr. Martyrdom, a concept from religion, articulates a form of lived political experience. Secular martyrs like Floyd render the abstraction of political injustice visible and visceral; their life stories and bodily suffering inspire others to political action. The human body has a key role, as a social connector of the individual to the collective. Modern-day martyrs and the political movements they energize expand our concept of martyrdom and illustrate the value of religious studies for social movement theory.

Trump’s Christian allies suggest another comparison, to radical religious groups globally who seek to replace governments with utopian authoritarian states through violence. Wry twitter posters dubbed Trump’s supporters “Y’all Qaeda” or “American ISIS,” especially after the FBI foiled a plot by the Wolverine Watchmen to abduct Governor Whitmer of Michigan, put her on “trial,” and execute her for “crimes.” Comparing Trumpism and extra-state jihadist terrorist movements is fruitful, for it suggests how religions can be weaponized for politics and it unsettles the myth of American exceptionalism.<sup>2</sup> Trumpist Christianity is an ideology that envisions an

---

<sup>1</sup> Consider how this interpretation engages with the necropolitics of Achille Mbembe, J.-A. Mbembé, Libby Meintjes, “Necropolitics,” *Public Culture* 15(1)2003: 11–40.

<sup>2</sup> On the decline of American exceptionalism in historiography, Ian Tyrrell, “American Exceptionalism in an Age of International History,” *American Historical Review*, (1991) 96(4): 1031–55. Postcolonial theorists and African American scholars and activists for example have long compared the experiences of the US and the formerly colonized world for theoretical insight. African Americans were slave labor within a colonial, then neo-colonial system and

authoritarian state to replace democratic government. This white nationalist religious movement rejects pluralistic society, disrupts democratic institutions, and envisions a new political/moral order of the ethnically pure, “cleansed” of corruption by social violence.

These two cases, George Floyd’s secular martyrdom and Trumpist Christianity, are examples of religious phenomena in US politics. They also represent the two opposing political visions now competing to define the polity in the United States.

### **“We are all George Floyd”: The Political Martyr and the Social Contract**

Martyr seems an unlikely term for George Floyd, who was neither persecuted for his faith in God nor eager to embrace death at the hands of his tormentors. But his example reminds us that martyrs have a social function. Martyrs rejuvenate the community; through the martyr’s witness, suffering, and life, the faithful affirm their own covenant (with God).<sup>3</sup> In a secular republic, the covenant [social contract] is between citizen and body politic; the Creator is involved only indirectly by endowing human beings with inalienable rights. George Floyd’s murder inspired protestors because citizens saw in him not a paragon of faith but themselves—their own lives, their children, and their communities. Protestors told the *New York Times*, “In every city there’s a George Floyd” (Michael Sampson, FL),<sup>4</sup> “It could be my father, my brother, my uncle, my cousin, my friend.” (Victoria Sloan, NYC).<sup>5</sup> “If you’re not standing up for George Floyd, who’s going to stand up for you?” (Beth Muffett, TX).<sup>6</sup> “It could have easily been my body under that police officer.” (Rashaad Dinkins, MN), “[I am here because] I watched a man die, that’s why. I watched a man die.” (Erika Zdon, MN).<sup>7</sup>

Floyd exemplifies witness (*martus* in Greek, *shahada* in Arabic), the first aspect of martyrdom. If the Constitution “constitutes” the polity, then Floyd witnesses its violation by the state. His death obliges fellow Americans to witness as well and condemn the state’s illegitimate action. African Americans have long suffered violations of their citizens’ rights and structural racism as white America turned away, refusing to validate this political reality. But the BLM protestors call on American citizens to witness. Floyd’s public killing concretizes injustice in the spectacle of a police officer crushing a man to death. BLM argues that if the police can kill citizen Floyd with impunity, if African American citizens are not safe, US citizenship is in question. Where is liberty if a citizen can be executed with impunity? Protecting black lives is not ally-ship, but duty—an imperative for all citizens from the constitution to realize the republic for all.

---

confronted a racist U.S. republic and white supremacist ideology. Of this extensive literature consider Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Press, 1961), Malcolm X in Robert L. Allen, “Reassessing the Internal (Neo) Colonialism Theory,” *The Black Scholar*, 35(1): 2–11, and historiographical interventions like Gary Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation-State: Negritude and Colonial Humanism Between the Two World Wars*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> Jon Davies, “The Nature of Martyrdom,” in *Death, Burial, and Rebirth in the Religions of Antiquity*, (New York: Routledge, 1999): 201–16.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Sampson, Community Organizer who works with families whose sons were killed by police, “In Every City There’s a George Floyd: Portraits of Protest,” *NYT* June 2, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> “Inside a Huge Brooklyn Protest: ‘The World is Watching,’” *New York Times*, June 1, 2020.

<sup>6</sup> “In Every City There’s a George Floyd.”

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

The Black Lives Matter protests are a demand for just governance and George Floyd enlivens this democratic social movement. The US Republic arose in human slavery;<sup>8</sup> but the protestors, like the civil rights movement of the 1960s, demand that the universal promise of the republic be realized for all Americans at last. Only when black lives matter can we all be free. As Reverend Al Sharpton said in Floyd’s eulogy, “Make America Great? Great for whom and great when? We’re going to make America great for everybody for the first time.”<sup>9</sup> Floyd incarnates this universal aspiration; thus Floyd murals appear in Houston, New York City, Oakland, Denver, Dallas, Pittsburgh, Pensacola, Greensboro, Long Beach, Birmingham, and La Mesa. But, Floyd murals also appear globally, in Gaza, Manchester, Toronto, Montreal, Karachi, Nairobi, Athens, Naples, Strombeek-Bever (Belgium), Berlin, Dundee (Scotland), and on a ruined wall in Idlib, Syria.<sup>10</sup>

The trappings of sainthood spring up around Floyd. He is immortalized in the now-iconic Minneapolis mural at the site of his death; pilgrims visit the mural/shrine with offerings of flowers, candles, and signs;<sup>11</sup> and he is depicted with a halo (Dallas), angel’s wings (Houston), and in Pensacola, the “scripture” of Founding Father Thomas Jefferson, “The care of human life and happiness, and not their destruction, is the first and only object of good government.”<sup>12</sup> Trumpist vandals have defaced Floyd’s murals and set fire to his Minneapolis shrine/mural; but “street theologian” Dr. Jeanelle Austin rescued “relics” from the flames, saying “We want the people to be able to forever tell their own story and allow these pieces to continue to protest against injustice by inspiring people to do the work in their own communities.”<sup>13</sup> Floyd’s murals function as *lieux de mémoire*,<sup>14</sup> saint shrines, anchoring sacred history to earth. Pilgrims visit shrines to connect their individual lives to the larger collective and a shared cosmological framework.<sup>15</sup> Trumpist vandals deface Floyd’s murals just as Wahhabi-*salafi* militant groups bomb Sufi shrines, and for analogous reasons:<sup>16</sup> to efface Floyd’s story, to undermine democracy, and to assert their own supremacist ideology (here, white Christian nationalism).<sup>17</sup> Through defacing Floyd’s image, Trumpists attack America as an egalitarian republic. Floyd’s mural/shrine demonstrates the centrality of secular martyrs to political movements.

New political communities also coalesced around the bodies of secular martyrs in the Arab Spring. On December 14, 2010, Mohamed Bouazizi set fire to his own body before the presidential

---

<sup>8</sup> Edward Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism*, (New York: Basic Books, 2016).

<sup>9</sup> “George Floyd Memorial Service: Rev. Al Sharpton Delivers Eulogy,” WCCO-CBS Minnesota, June 4, 2020, Youtube video: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PICUSo4irXI&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PICUSo4irXI&feature=emb_logo)

<sup>10</sup> “George Floyd Murals are Popping Up All Over the World,” *CNN*, June 26, 2020.

<sup>11</sup> “The Righteous Power of the George Floyd Mural,” *The New Republic*, June 15, 2020.

<sup>12</sup> “George Floyd Murals Are Popping Up All Over the World.”

<sup>13</sup> “Preserving George Floyd’s Memorial: ‘Allow these pieces to continue to protest,’” *MPR News*, December 2, 2020.

<sup>14</sup> Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,” *Representations*, 26(Spring 1989): 7–24.

<sup>15</sup> Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints*, (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1982). Ellen J. Amster, *Medicine and the Saints: Science, Islam, and the Colonial Encounter in Morocco*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013), Chapter 1.

<sup>16</sup> From the literature on Islamic shrine destruction and politics, it can be extra-state groups (ISIS) or theocratic governments (Iran and Saudi Arabia) who resent an alternate vision of Islam and independent political thinking. See attacks on shrines in Timbuktu, Tunisia, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Libya, Algeria, Central Asia, and works like Ondrej Beranek and Pavel Tupek, *The Temptation of Graves in Salafi Islam: Iconoclasm, Destruction, and Idolatry*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018).

<sup>17</sup> Most of the vandalism is white power symbols, “Some George Floyd Murals Are Being Defaced,” *Forbes*, June 11, 2020.

palace in Tunis and started the Arab Spring. A university graduate unable to find work, beaten by police when he tried, Bouazizi martyred himself to speak the impossibility of survival in Ben Ali's Tunisia. In his life story Tunisians saw themselves—I too cannot eat, work, have shelter, or raise a family; I too cannot survive under this regime. By what right does it rule? Tunisians rose in massive protests and ousted President Ben Ali. In Egypt, after police beat university student Khalid Said to death in public, Egyptians marched under the image of his shattered corpse chanting, "We are all Khalid Said."<sup>18</sup> In Syria, thirteen year-old Hamza al-Khatib was abducted by security forces and tortured to death. Weeks later, his mutilated corpse was released to his parents; his penis had been hacked off, his neck broken, and his chest bore several bullet holes (May 2011).<sup>19</sup> Widely-disseminated images of Hamza al-Khatib's broken body inspired Syrians to rise against Assad's government. "We are all Hamza al-Khatib" mobilized Syrians, first as a Facebook group, then street protests, and finally in revolution and civil war in Syria.<sup>20</sup> Assad correctly identified the political threat of al-Khatib's martyrdom, for a new, energized and democratic Syrian body politic rapidly coalesced around al-Khatib. Assad's militias shelled the boy's grave with mortars in 2013 in an effort to erase his memory and [thus] Syrian revolutionary resistance.<sup>21</sup> For ordinary citizens, the abstraction of political injustice is personalized by secular martyrs. Injustice is written literally on the bodies of Mohammed Bouazizi, Khalid Said, Hamza al-Khatib, and now George Floyd.

Religion knows what secularists forget, that the body is the precondition of human sovereignty.<sup>22</sup> Religion and politics are corporeal. Murals of George Floyd include his last words, "I can't breathe"—the basic truth that life, the body, and the collective are inseparable. Whether founded on human rights or faith in God, the collective and the individual create each other, they are "mutually constitutive," as anthropologist Jean Comaroff writes.<sup>23</sup> Martyrdom stories recount the *acta* (acts) and the *passio* (passion), the unjust political decisions condemning the martyr and the torment she consequently endures.<sup>24</sup> As injustice literally tears her flesh, her agonies vibrate in our own viscera, as Michel Foucault,<sup>25</sup> Judith Butler,<sup>26</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, and others have recognized. Yet the moderns do not look for politics in the body. We tell ourselves a fiction, Bruno Latour says, that we can exist outside our bodies as rational citizen-subjects.<sup>27</sup> But, the body is inescapable, it is the ontological source of personhood as phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes, "the body is my point of view on the world. I am the absolute source, my existence does not stem...from my physical and social environment; instead it moves out towards them and sustains them."<sup>28</sup> Citizenship springs from the body; a state that does not allow its citizens to survive—to

---

<sup>18</sup> T. Oleson, "'We are all Khaled Said': Visual Injustice Symbols in the Egyptian Revolution, 2010-2011," in Doerr, Mattoni and Teune, (eds.) *Advances in the Visual Analysis of Social Movements (Research in Social Movements, Conflicts, and Change, Vol.35)*, Emerald Group Publishing Limited, Bingley, p. 3–25.

<sup>19</sup> "Teenage Victim Becomes a Symbol for Syria's Revolution," *The Guardian*, May 31, 2011.

<sup>20</sup> Sam Dagher, *Assad or We Burn the Country*, (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2019).

<sup>21</sup> "Assad Militias Destroy Tombstone of Hamza al-Khatib," *OrientNet*, July 13, 2013.

<sup>22</sup> Ellen Amster, "The Body and the Body Politic: Medicine, Public Health, and Healing as History in the Modern Middle East and North Africa," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, (47)2015: 563–65.

<sup>23</sup> Jean Comaroff, *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance: The Culture and History of a South African People*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 8.

<sup>24</sup> Candida R. Moss, "Current Trends in the Study of Early Christian Martyrdom," *Bulletin for the Study of Religion*, 41(3) Sept 2012: 22–29.

<sup>25</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, (New York: Vintage, 1995).

<sup>26</sup> Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, (New York: Verso, 2004).

<sup>27</sup> Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991).

<sup>28</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, excerpted in Margaret Lock and Judith Farquar, *Beyond the Body Proper: Reading the Anthropology of Material Life* (Durham, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2007): 133–47.

eat, to breathe, to live—is illegitimate. Only extreme violence can keep such a government in power. As a former Syrian military officer told the *Wall Street Journal*, “Assad or we burn the country’...I knew that Assad would not leave until he had demolished the entire country and blood would run in the streets.”<sup>29</sup>

The US had a kind of democratic “American Spring,” because the Trump regime 2016–2020 threatened the physical survival of many American citizens. With the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, suffering has spread—545,000+ Americans dead from COVID-19, a staggering economy, 21 million jobs lost, widespread public hunger, and overwhelm of the health infrastructure. If public health is the physical manifestation of the social contract,<sup>30</sup> Trump has sabotaged it at every turn. He lied about coronavirus testing,<sup>31</sup> lied about masks and PPE,<sup>32</sup> attacked public health officials,<sup>33</sup> eviscerated the Centers for Disease Control,<sup>34</sup> withheld federal funds and supplies from cities and states,<sup>35</sup> peddled discredited remedies,<sup>36</sup> encouraged insurrectionary violence against elected government,<sup>37</sup> failed to organize an effective national coronavirus response, and damaged scientific institutions and public faith in science and public health.<sup>38</sup> For the first time in history, top medical journals in 2020 begged the American public to vote out a sitting president in order to save human lives (*Lancet*):<sup>39</sup>

When it comes to the largest public health crisis of our time, our current political leaders have demonstrated that they are dangerously incompetent. We should not abet them and enable the deaths of thousands more Americans by allowing them to keep their jobs (*NEJM*).<sup>40</sup>

Trump responded to democratic civilian protests like any autocrat, with a faceless secret police,<sup>41</sup> arbitrary detention,<sup>42</sup> and a private spy apparatus answerable only to himself.<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> Abduljabar al-Akidi, former colonel in Syrian army, quoted in “‘Assad or We Burn the Country’: How the Syrian Regime Prevailed,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 6, 2019.

<sup>30</sup> Amster, “The Body and the Body Politic.”

<sup>31</sup> “Fact Check: Trump Claims US Testing for Coronavirus Most Per Capita—It’s Not,” *NPR*, April 2, 2020.

<sup>32</sup> “Fact Check: Trump Falsely Claims Obama Left Him ‘Nothing’ in the National Stockpile,” *NBC News*, May 6, 2020.

<sup>33</sup> “‘I Think You Can Trust Me’: Fauci Stands Firm as Trump Works to Undermine Him,” *The Guardian*, July 15, 2020.

<sup>34</sup> “The Administration Orders Hospitals to Bypass the CDC with Key Virus Data, Alarming Health Experts,” *New York Times*, July 14, 2020, “Where is the CDC? How Trump Sidelined the Public Health Agency in a Pandemic,” *The Guardian*, May 14, 2020, “Donald Trump is Destroying the CDC,” *Bloomberg News*, September 28, 2020.

<sup>35</sup> “Trump Says Coronavirus ‘Bailouts’ for Blue States Are Unfair to Republicans,” *CNN*, May 5, 2020.

<sup>36</sup> “Trump Defends Disproved COVID-19 Treatment,” *AP*, July 28, 2020.

<sup>37</sup> “Trump Tweets ‘Liberate’ Michigan, Two Other States with Dem Governors,” *The Detroit News*, April 17, 2020.

<sup>38</sup> “How Trump Damaged Science—and why it could take decades to recover,” *Nature*, October 5, 2020, 586, 190–94.

<sup>39</sup> “The US election 2020,” *The Lancet*, October 31, 2020, Vol. 396(10260): 1373.

<sup>40</sup> “Dying in a Leadership Vacuum,” *The New England Journal of Medicine*, October 8, 2020, 383: 1479-1480.

<sup>41</sup> “Unidentified Federal Police Prompt Fears Amid Protests in Washington,” *New York Times*, June 4, 2020.

<sup>42</sup> “CNN Crew Released After They Were Arrested Live on Air in Minneapolis,” *CNN*, May 29, 2020.

<sup>43</sup> “Erik Prince Recruits Ex-Spies to Help Infiltrate Liberal Groups,” *New York Times*, March 7, 2020.

## **Trumpist Christianity: The Radical Religion of American Fascism**

President-elect Joe Biden's victory in November 2020 seemed to bring a change and Americans celebrated in the streets.<sup>44</sup> Yet profound unease remains. Historians and the German media recognize Trump's parallels to Hitler; in 2017, *Der Stern* depicted Trump with a Nazi salute under the words, "Sein Kampf."<sup>45</sup> Like Hitler, Trump incites civil violence and blames leftists,<sup>46</sup> tries to suspend constitutional civil liberties,<sup>47</sup> claims extraordinary executive powers,<sup>48</sup> denounces and censors the press,<sup>49</sup> and tries to declare martial law.<sup>50</sup> Sociologists have identified Trump as an authoritarian<sup>51</sup> and a conduit for the American white power movement.<sup>52</sup> With his electoral defeat, Trump and his supporters only grow more belligerent, and Republican legislators in the House and Senate join Trump in contesting the validity of the 2020 presidential election.<sup>53</sup> On January 6, 2021, thousands of Trumpist protestors stormed the US Capitol to shut down the tabulation of electoral votes and the transfer of presidential power, necessitating the evacuation of US legislators and Vice President Pence. Trump and his allies directly attack the legitimacy of the US government, US law, and citizens' rights. This is an effort to radicalize a mass militant revolutionary movement and replace the US Republic. Trumpists are correctly identified as a domestic terror threat:

...domestic terrorism analysts are raising concern about the security implications of millions of conservatives buying into baseless right-wing claims. They say the line between mainstream and fringe is vanishing, with conspiracy-minded Republicans now marching alongside armed extremists at rallies across the country. Disparate factions on the right are coalescing into one side, analysts say, self-proclaimed "real Americans" who are cocooned in their own news outlets, their own social media networks, and, ultimately, their own "truth."<sup>54</sup>

---

<sup>44</sup> "Donald Trump's Loss Celebrated by Americans Across the Country," *Teen Vogue*, November 9, 2020.

<sup>45</sup> "German magazine 'Stern' criticized for 'Nazi' Trump cover," *USA Today*, August 25, 2017.

<sup>46</sup> "Trump, Lacking Clear Authority, Says US Will Declare Antifa a Terrorist Group," *New York Times*, May 31, 2020.

<sup>47</sup> "Report: Trump's Justice Department Wants to Suspend Habeas Corpus," *Hill Reporter.Com*, March 21, 2020.

<sup>48</sup> "Trump Falsely Claims That 'When Somebody is the President of the United States, the Authority is Total,'" *Business Insider*, April 13, 2020.

<sup>49</sup> "Amid feud with Twitter, Trump to sign executive order on social media Thursday, White House says," *National Post*, May 28, 2020.

<sup>50</sup> Jack Detsch, "Defense Secretaries Worried About a Trump Power Grab--Talk of Trump Imposing Martial Law Helped Spur the Ex-Pentagon Chiefs to Speak Out," *Foreign Policy*, January 4, 2021.

<sup>51</sup> For example, David Norman Smith, "Authoritarianism Reimagined: The Riddle of Trump's Base," *The Sociological Quarterly*, 2019, Vol 60(2): 210-23.

<sup>52</sup> Kathleen Bewley, *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), David Neiwert, *Alt-America: The Rise of the Radical Right in the Age of Trump*, (New York: Verso Books, 2017).

<sup>53</sup> Nearly two-thirds of House Republicans join baseless effort to overturn election," *The Guardian*, December 11, 2020. "At least 140 House Republicans to Vote Against Counting Electoral Votes, Two GOP Lawmakers Say," *CNN*, December 31, 2020.

<sup>54</sup> "Right Wing Embrace of Conspiracy is 'Mass Radicalization,' Experts Warn," *NPR*, December 15, 2020. Hampton Stall, Roudabeh Kishi, Clionadh Raleigh, *STANDING BY: Right-Wing Militia Groups and the US Election*, (Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project, October 1, 2020).

Trumpism is now best understood as an extra-state revolutionary political movement that aims to replace the republic with a white-supremacist Christian authoritarian state. Trump’s actions are not “tantrums,” ineptitude, or mental illness—they are a coordinated strategy. It is no coincidence that Trump refuses the right of citizens to elect their own representatives, declares American laws invalid, refuses the peaceful transfer of power, and chooses Steve Bannon as his chief political strategist. It is no coincidence that he is the chosen leader of neo-Nazis, the Proud Boys, and the KKK. Republican wealthy elites have used Trump for their own ends—to break unions, support capital, attack leftists, and undermine the democratic process,<sup>55</sup> just as Weimar German conservative anti-democratic elites once used Adolf Hitler.<sup>56</sup> Republican politicians cynically flirt with Trump’s alt-right supporters, but will be forced to choose the Republic or Trump.<sup>57</sup> At Kelly Loeffler’s rally on December 21, 2020, the crowd drowned her out with “Fight for Trump!” and “Stop the Steal!” An attendee told CNN, “Republicans may vote [for Loeffler in the Georgia runoff election] but I’m MAGA [Make America Great Again, or Trumpist]...”<sup>58</sup> Trumpism will engulf the Republican party or split from it, as Trumpists try to wrest a new nation from the US. Like the “new states” of “New Nevada” and “New California,” who filed an amicus brief threatening secession from the United States,<sup>59</sup> MAGA/Trumpism aims to establish a new nation-state. Senator Ben Sasse of Nebraska wrote in an open letter on December 30, 2020:

We have a bunch of ambitious politicians who think there’s a quick way to tap into the president’s populist base without doing any real, long-term damage. But they’re wrong—and this issue is bigger than anyone’s personal ambitions. Adults don’t point a loaded gun at the heart of legitimate self-government.<sup>60</sup>

Foreign observers see what Americans cannot—Trumpism is a revolutionary movement analogous to jihadist movements or Nazism.<sup>61</sup> In 2017, *Der Spiegel* depicted Trump as ISIS, holding the bloody, severed head of the Statue of Liberty and a machete.<sup>62</sup> Trump and his alt-right white supremacist “accelerationists”<sup>63</sup> seek to overthrow the republic and are clear about drawing tactics

---

<sup>55</sup> See the blog of Heather Cox Richardson and her book, *How the South Won the Civil War: Oligarchy, Democracy, and the Continuing Fight for the Soul of America*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

<sup>56</sup> David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, *The Peculiarities of German History: Bourgeois Society and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Germany*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

<sup>57</sup> “Kelly Loeffler Slammed for Posing with Former KKK Leader Ahead of George Runoff Elections,” *Newsweek*, December 13, 2020.

<sup>58</sup> “Trump’s conspiracies have MAGA world talking Georgia boycott,” *Politico*, November 26, 2020.

<sup>59</sup> “Imaginary States ‘New California’ and ‘New Nevada’ File Brief Supporting Texas Lawsuit to Overturn Election,” *Forbes*, December 11, 2020. For the brief itself, please see: [https://www.supremecourt.gov/DocketPDF/22/22O155/163506/20201211114620451\\_Amicus%202020-12-11.pdf](https://www.supremecourt.gov/DocketPDF/22/22O155/163506/20201211114620451_Amicus%202020-12-11.pdf)

<sup>60</sup> Quoted in “GOP Senator Criticizes ‘Ambitious Politicians’ for ‘Dangerous’ Electoral Policy Ploy,” *The Hill*, December 31, 2020.

<sup>61</sup> Masood Ashraf Raja and others have made the Taliban-American parallel, Masood Ashraf Raja, *The Religious Right and the Talibanization of America*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016, Markos Moulitsas, *American Taliban: How War, Sex, Sin, and Power Bind Jihadists and the Radical Right*, (Polipoint Press, 2010).

<sup>62</sup> “Der Spiegel Editor Defends Donald Trump Cover Cartoon Showing Him Beheading Statue of Liberty,” *Independent*, February 8, 2017.

<sup>63</sup> This fascist theory from Georges Sorel and Benito Mussolini has been revived, for example Zack Beauchamp, “Accelerationism: The Obscure Idea Inspiring White Supremacist Killers Around the World,” *Vox*, November 18, 2019.

and goals from their fascist forbearers.<sup>64</sup> Like French fascists from Georges Sorel (1847-1922) to Renaud Camus,<sup>65</sup> Trump's alt-right goads its followers to "accelerate" violent revolution and race civil war (the so-called "boogaloo")<sup>66</sup> in order to destroy the US government and "purify" white civilization through violence.<sup>67</sup> Trumpism's paramilitaries engage in terrorist acts and target elected officials, like Governor Whitmer<sup>68</sup> and Michigan Democrats Cynthia A. Johnson, Malcolm Kenyatta, and Darrin Camilleri, who received emails "Be prepared to take your last meal" and "We're looking forward to bringing back firing squads."<sup>69</sup> Trumpists disrupt democratic processes, like the Prayer Patriots' storming the Oregon legislature<sup>70</sup> and the January 6, 2021 attack on Congress itself. Like jihadist groups, Trumpism attempts state-building,<sup>71</sup> first Trump tried to transform the US government into his personal autocracy (signing public welfare as a gift from himself, appointing family members to government posts, requiring loyalty to himself before the Constitution). Failing this, Trumpism will endure as a social movement harassing the state.<sup>72</sup> Many Muslim-majority countries are familiar with this dynamic.<sup>73</sup>

Religion plays a vital role for Trumpism. Trump's link with Christian evangelical leaders is not a marriage of convenience—the famed "laying on of hands" by evangelical pastors in the Oval Office in 2017,<sup>74</sup> the choice of Mike Pence as Vice President, Trump's notorious photo-op with a Bible in front of St. John's Church<sup>75</sup>—Trumpism needs Christianity. A vandal's slur written across George Floyd's face on the Minneapolis mural is key to understanding Christianity's

---

<sup>64</sup> The Southern Poverty Law Centre gives an overview, "Accusations in a Mirror: How the Radical Right Blames Rising Political Violence on the Left," *SPLC*, June 11, 2019. Compare with Zeev Sternhell, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology: From Cultural Rebellion to Political Revolution*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994). The lessons of fascism in the French republic are instructive, as Trump and French fascists are "neither right nor left," but destroy the system itself, Zeev Sternhell, *Neither Right Nor Left: Fascist Ideology in France*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

<sup>65</sup> Thomas Chatterton Williams, "The French Origins of 'You Will Not Replace Us,'" *The New Yorker*, November 27, 2017.

<sup>66</sup> Alex Goldenberg and Joel Finkelstein, "Cyber Swarming, Memetic Warfare, and Viral Insurgency: How Domestic Militants Organize on Memes to Incite Violent Insurrection and Terror Against Government and Law Enforcement," *Network Contagion Research Institute* White Paper, <https://networkcontagion.us/reports/cyber-swarming-memetic-warfare-and-viral-insurgency-how-domestic-militants-organize-on-memes-to-incite-violent-insurrection-and-terror-against-government-and-law-enforcement/>. "The Boogaloo: Extremists' New Slang for a Coming Civil War," *ADL*, November 26, 2019.

<sup>67</sup> On the theory of fascist violent revolution, see Georges Sorel in Walter Benjamin (ed. Peter Fenves and Julia Ng), *Towards the Critique of Violence*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021).

<sup>68</sup> "Lock Them All Up": Trump's Whitmer Attack Fits a Damaging Pattern," *New York Times*, October 18, 2020.

<sup>69</sup> "As Trump Rails against His Loss, His Supporters Become More Threatening," *New York Times*, December 8, 2020. In the January 6 event, an armed Trumpist threatened to assassinate Nancy Pelosi, "Man With Assault Rifle Charged With Threatening Pelosi, Officials Say," *NYT*, January 9, 2021.

<sup>70</sup> "Far-right protesters disrupt Oregon Legislature special session," *OPB*, December 21, 2020. "The Pro-Trump, Anti-Left Patriot Prayer Group, Explained," *Vox*, September 8, 2020.

<sup>71</sup> ISIS envisions a bureaucratic state and issues passports, Aymenn al-Tamimi, "The Evolution in Islamic State Administration: The Documentary Evidence," *Perspectives on Terrorism*, August 2015, 9(4): 117–29.

<sup>72</sup> Roudabeh Kishi, Hampton Stall, Sam Jones, "The Future of 'Stop the Steal': Post-Election Trajectories for Right-Wing Mobilization in the US," (Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project, Dec. 1, 2020).

[www.jstor.org/stable/resrep27416](http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep27416). Steve Bannon promised chaos and the "fog of war" for January 6, 2021, when the electoral college votes would be certified, "Steve Bannon: 'All Hell is Going to Break Loose Tomorrow,'" *The Georgia Straight*, January 5, 2021.

<sup>73</sup> From this extensive literature, consider Bassam Tibi, *Islamism and Islam*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).

<sup>74</sup> "Photo surfaces of evangelical pastors laying hands on Trump in the Oval Office," *Washington Post*, July 12, 2017.

<sup>75</sup> This event even has its own Wikipedia page, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Donald\\_Trump\\_photo\\_op\\_at\\_St.\\_John%27s\\_Church](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Donald_Trump_photo_op_at_St._John%27s_Church).



function for Trumpism: “Fuck [Governor] Walz, Commies and Satan.”<sup>76</sup> Trumpism needs religion to legitimize its violence against its three enemies—the democratically-elected government of the United States (Governor Walz), the egalitarian, multicultural idea of an American republic that could bring social justice to all (“Commies”), and critics—the press, political opponents, non-white and non-Christian Americans, Hollywood, and Democrats (collectively “Satan”). Evangelical Christianity, QAnon, and white nationalism together provide the moral foundation for a MAGA America. Trumpism is weaponizing Christianity as ISIS and Al Qaeda have weaponized Islam.

QAnon is merging with evangelical Christianity for a messianic Trumpist quasi-religion to replace popular sovereignty and the US republic. Created in 2017, QAnon<sup>77</sup> now has many aspects of a religion; the anonymous modern-day Prophet “Q” writes a “new scripture” accusing Trump’s enemies of child trafficking, child murder, and Satanic rituals. Q foretells an apocalyptic judgment day (“the Storm,”) ushered in by Trump as the messiah.<sup>78</sup> As “Travis View” (a pseudonym) of the QAnon Anonymous Podcast explains:

In the QAnon narrative, President Trump is the savior of humanity. Literally, they believe if Donald Trump didn’t come riding along and was elected president then it would essentially mean the end of the United States and the end of the world. They worship him, essentially.<sup>79</sup>

Unsurprisingly, the goal of the QAnon Great Awakening is an America led by Trump, who rules as benevolent autocrat over “real” [Christian white] Americans and “evil” people are “jailed” or “far away.”<sup>80</sup> American evangelicalism is adaptable to QAnon/Trump in part because of its white supremacist history; Southern US white evangelical churches validated segregation, racism, and slavery as God’s natural order.<sup>81</sup> The majority of US evangelical voters endorsed Trump in the 2020 election<sup>82</sup> and a few churches explicitly endorse QAnon, among them the Rock Urban Church in Grandville Michigan, the Pentecostal Bethel Megachurch in Redding, California, and Indiana-based Omega Kingdom Ministry.<sup>83</sup> This latter explicitly reconciles QAnon “theology” with passages in the Bible.<sup>84</sup>

---

<sup>76</sup> “George Floyd Mural in Minneapolis Defaced with Vulgar Message,” *New York Daily News*, October 8, 2020.

<sup>77</sup> For a brief history, “How Three Conspiracy Theorists took ‘Q’ and Sparked ‘QAnon,’” *NBC News*, August 14, 2018. For an in-depth study of QAnon, see the podcast QAnon Anonymous, <https://soundcloud.com/qanonanonymous>.

<sup>78</sup> “How QAnon Uses Religion to Lure Unsuspecting Christians,” *CNN*, October 15, 2020.

<sup>79</sup> “Travis View,” interviewed on *NPR*, “‘QAnon Anonymous’ on the Conspiracy Movement’s Growing Influence,” August 23, 2020.

<sup>80</sup> “How QAnon Uses Religion to Lure Unsuspecting Christians.”

<sup>81</sup> Carolyn Renée Dupont, *Mississippi Praying: White Evangelicals and the Civil Rights Movement, 1945-1975*, (New York: NYU Press, 2015). Robert P. Jones, *White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2020). Alan Cross, *When Heaven and Earth Collide: Racism, Southern Evangelicals, and the Better Way of Jesus*, (NewSouth Books, 2014). Sarah Posner, *Unholy: Why White Evangelicals Worship at the Altar of Donald Trump*, (New York: Random House, 2020). Kristin Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation*, (Liveright, 2020).

<sup>82</sup> 76% of American evangelicals voted for Trump in the 2020 election, “What’s Next for American Evangelicals after Trump Leaves Office?” *The Conversation*, November 13, 2020. See also Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*.

<sup>83</sup> Marc-André Argentino, “The Church of QAnon: Will Conspiracy Theories Form the Basis of a New Religious Movement?” *The Conversation*, May 18, 2020.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

Like the “Positive Christianity” of the Nazis or the radical Islam of ISIS,<sup>85</sup> Trumpist QAnon Christianity is an identitarian ideology<sup>86</sup> and what Bassam Tibi calls a “religionized politics.”<sup>87</sup> Trumpist Christianity provides a utopian and messianic narrative—Trump is the salvation of “real” Americans and “real” America from Satanic enemies against whom holy war must be waged. Consider the deft interweaving of Trump’s enemies, the defense of “real America,” martial law, and the New Testament in a Q “drop” from 2017.<sup>88</sup> Trumpism should be studied with the same analytical tools normally applied to Islamic jihadist movements.<sup>89</sup>

---

<sup>85</sup> Jason A. Edwards, “The Myth of the Caliph: Suffering and Redemption in the Rhetoric of ISIS,” ed. Michael Krona and Rosemary Pennington, *The Media World of ISIS*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019): 13-32, Nukhet Sandal, “Apocalypse Soon: Revolutionary Revanchism of ISIS,” in ed Feisal al-Istrabadi and Sumit Ganguly, *The Future of ISIS: Regional and International Implications*, (Washington, D.C., Brookings Institution Press, 2018): 17–38.

<sup>86</sup> John R. Hibbing suggests that Christianity is an identity marker for Trump supporters, “Many Trump supporters (and Trump himself), are not deeply, doctrinally Christian so much as they value the existence of Christianity as a core touchstone for insiders. They may not go to church often, but that does not prevent them from becoming livid at the very thought of Christianity being under attack,” *The Securitarian Personality*, 61.

<sup>87</sup> Bassam Tibi, *Islamism and Islam*.

<sup>88</sup> The Q “drop” reads as follows: “Q Clearance Patriot

My fellow Americans, over the course of the next several days you will undoubtedly realize that we are taking back our great country (the land of the free) from the evil tyrants that wish to do us harm and destroy the last remaining refuge of shining light. On POTUS’ order, we have initiated certain fail-safes that shall safeguard the public from the primary fallout, which is slated to occur 11.3 upon the arrest announcement of Mr. Podesta (actionable 11.4). Confirmation (to the public) of what is occurring will then be revealed and will not be openly accepted. Public riots are being organized in serious numbers in an effort to prevent the arrest and capture of more senior public officials. On POTUS’ order, a state of temporary military control will be actioned and special ops carried out. False leaks have been made to retain several within the confines of the United States to prevent extradition and special operator necessity. Rest assured, the safety and well-being of every man, woman, and child of this country is being exhausted in full. However, the atmosphere within the country will unfortunately be divided as so many have fallen for the corrupt and evil narrative that has long been broadcast. We will be initiating the Emergency Broadcast System (EMS) during this time in an effort to provide a direct message (avoiding the fake news) to all citizens. Organizations and/or people that wish to do us harm during this time will be met with swift fury—certain laws have been pre-lifted to provide our great military the necessary authority to handle and conduct these operations (at home and abroad).

POTUS will be well insulated/protected on AF1 and abroad (specific locations classified) while these operations are conducted due to the nature of the entrenchment. It is time to take back our country and make America great again. Let us salute and pray for the brave men and women in uniform who will undertake this assignment to bring forth peace, unity, and return power to the people.

It is our hope that this message reaches enough people to make a meaningful impact. We cannot yet telegraph this message through normal methods for reasons I’m sure everyone here can understand. Follow the questions from the previous thread(s) and remain calm, the primary targets are within DC and remain at the top (on both sides). The spill over in the streets will be quickly shut down. Look for more false flags—stay alert, be vigilant, and above all, please pray.

‘For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. Love is patient, love is kind.’

God bless my fellow Americans. 4,10,20.” Cited in “The Storm is the New Pizzagate,” *The Intelligencer New York Magazine*, December 19, 2017. See also “QAnon: A Timeline of Violence Linked to the Conspiracy Theory,” *The Guardian*, October 16, 2020.

<sup>89</sup> Antiterrorism analysis and deradicalization techniques applied to members of jihadist groups are now being used for Trumpists/QAnon followers, “The Capitol Riot Could Lead to Further Radicalization. Here’s How to Pull People Back From the Brink,” *WHYY*, January 19, 2021.

Trumpist militias clash with George Floyd protestors first because Trumpism needs enemies; Trumpism is predicated upon an existential threat (Democrats, antifa, the press, non-whites, global elites, elected US officials, socialism, Jews) and must have adversaries.<sup>90</sup> Christianity is essential to demonize Trumpism’s enemies as “Satan” and to transform Trumpist violence into holy war. Scholars of Christianity are vital to an in-depth analysis of how Christian theology is being deployed in Trumpism, and how it is lived by adherents as a cultural, moral, and religious experience.<sup>91</sup> Political analysis is not sufficient to explain the willingness of Trump’s followers to sacrifice reason, science, and often their own health.<sup>92</sup> Consider the evangelical rally organized by activist Sean Feucht on New Year’s Eve 2020, “running to Jesus” in defiance of COVID-19 and public health. As actor Kurt Cameron recorded on Instagram, Americans should follow God, not the US government, “We need to be listening for the voice of God, rather than being distracted by the noise of men...”<sup>93</sup>

More fundamentally, Trumpism and BLM present two opposing models of sovereignty and governance. For now, the struggle for America is fought in the ballot box, the courts, and the public square. But Trumpism will not end on January 20, 2021. As of January 5, 2021, the majority of Republican voters and Republican elected officials supported Trump’s claims that the 2020 presidential election and 2021 Georgia senate election were illegitimate.<sup>94</sup> Trumpism attacks the legitimacy of the republic and now the US government itself.

### **Democracy as Spiritual Practice: The Future of the American Republic**

By way of conclusion, religious studies and history illuminate possible political futures for the United States. Drawing from the examples of Islamic countries in the Arab Spring, the history of the French republic, and the corporeality of politics in US history, we consider how religion and politics might come together in defense (and true realization) of the US republic.

Histories of the French and US republics suggest that democracy is better conceptualized as a process than an event. The French revolution was not completed in 1789 but was fought again and again. France was a republic (1792–1804) then an empire (1804–1815) then a Bourbon monarchy (1815–1830) then a democratic revolt (1830) and another monarchy (1830–1848), then

---

<sup>90</sup> John R. Hibbing, *The Securitarian Personality: What Really Motivates Trump’s Base and Why It Matters for the Post-Trump Era*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 3. Also, “Georgia Republicans Deliver Persistent Message: Fear the Democrats,” *New York Times*, Dec. 31, 2020. On the anti-Semitism of Trumpism, Jonathan D. Sarna, “A Scholar of American Anti-Semitism Explains the Hate Symbols Present During the US Capitol Riot,” *The Conversation*, January 8, 2021.

<sup>91</sup> See for example the Christian authoritarianism of Senator Josh Hawley, Katherine Stewart, “The Roots of Josh Hawley’s Rage,” *New York Times*, January 11, 2021, and Damon Barry, “Voting in the Kingdom: Prophecy Voters, the New Apostolic Reformation, and Christian Support for Trump,” *Nova Religio*, (2020)23(4): 69–93.

<sup>92</sup> Sociologist/physician Jonathan Metzl observes that Trump’s social policies harm the white rural base that supports him, Jonathan Metzl, *Dying of Whiteness: How the Politics of Racial Resentment is Killing America’s Heartland*, (New York: Basic Books, 2019).

<sup>93</sup> “Evangelist singer draws a crowd of 2,500 to New Year’s Eve Gathering, Ignoring Risk of COVID-19 Spread,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 1, 2021.

<sup>94</sup> “Most Republicans Say They Doubt the Election. How Many Really Mean It?” *New York Times*, November 30, 2020, “I won’t vote next time’: Could Georgia Republicans’ doubts cost them the runoffs?” December 13, 2020, “Ted Cruz is Spearheading a New GOP Effort to Overturn the 2020 Election,” *Vox*, January 2, 2021. The majority of the Republican caucus in the House of Representatives, 121 members, and six US senators voted to challenge the electoral votes of the state of Arizona on January 6, 2021.

a second republic (1848–1852) then a second empire (1852–1870) then a third republic (1870–1940) challenged by French forces of reaction in the Dreyfus Affair (1894–1906) a fascist regime under Nazi occupation (1940–1945), a fourth republic that fell with decolonization (1946–1958), and now finally a fifth republic (1958–present). The US republic has also been fought for over and over, from 1776 to civil war to civil rights to 2021.<sup>95</sup> Both France and the United States began as racist republics, espousing universal human rights yet excluding specific groups from political rights and full citizenship. Both built their economies on empire and human slavery.<sup>96</sup> Yet Dr. Martin Luther King embraced this deeply flawed republic. He approached democracy as a discipline, a spiritual journey, a historic struggle to realize the “promised land” of the republican ideal.<sup>97</sup> His leadership prefigured the BLM political movement,<sup>98</sup> which challenges systemic racism in the US to realize a true republic.<sup>99</sup>

The question is whether Americans of all races will recognize themselves in the martyrdom of George Floyd or America will split into a white Christian Trumpist nation and an embattled republic. Martyrs are ephemeral and disappear without institutional memory, thus Dr. Jeanelle Austin rescues scorched offerings from the George Floyd mural for exhibit<sup>100</sup> and BLM exhorts us to “say the names” of the African-Americans martyred to the American republic, from Emmett Till to George Floyd.<sup>101</sup> America will turn left or right, realize the potential of the republic or fracture from internal divisions. The experience of Confederate/Nazi-attired Trumpist mobs ransacking the US Capitol to kidnap or murder U.S. lawmakers and stop the peaceful transfer of power may give Americans pause.<sup>102</sup> Social movement theory suggests that Trumpism will only

---

<sup>95</sup> Manisha Sinha, “Historian: White Terrorist Groups Attacked Democracy During Reconstruction, They Are Doing It Again,” *Democracy Now*, January 7, 2021.

<sup>96</sup> On slavery and racial capitalism as foundations of the US economy, see Ed Baptist, *The Half has Never Been Told* and Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition), (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2000).

<sup>97</sup> Lewis V. Baldwin and Victor Anderson (eds.), *Revives my Soul Again: The Spirituality of Martin Luther King Jr.*, (1517 Media, Fortress Press, 2018).

<sup>98</sup> There is debate on this point, but consider Robert M. Franklin, James T. Laney and Berta R. Laney, “Rehabilitating Democracy: Restoring Civil Rights and Leading the Next Human Rights Revolution,” *Journal of Law and Religion*, Vol. 30(3) October 2015: 414–27, Jermaine M. McDonald, “Ferguson and Baltimore According to Dr. King: How Competing Interpretations of King’s Legacy Frame the Public Discourse on Black Lives Matter,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*, Vol. 36(2) Fall/Winter 2016: 141–58, and Hebah Farrag, “The Spirit in Black Lives Matter: New Spiritual Community in Black Radical Organizing,” *Transition*, no. 125, Religion (2018): 76–88.

<sup>99</sup> France also has a French BLM and its own politicians who vilify BLM protestors, “Assa Traoré and the Fight for Black Lives in France,” *The New Yorker*, June 18, 2020. Frédérique Vidal, minister of higher education, condemned critical race theory as “Islamismo-leftism” imported from the US, “<<Islamismo-gauchisme>>: Emmanuel Macron passé du <<en même temps>> à l’<<attrape-tout>>,” *Le Monde*, Feb. 26, 2021. A survey found 2/3 of the French public supports Vidal, “Islamismo-gauchisme: une large majorité de Français soutient Frédérique Vidal,” *Le Figaro*, February 25, 2021.

<sup>100</sup> “Preserving George Floyd’s Memorial.”

<sup>101</sup> “Say Their Names. Black Lives Matter. Photograph of painting intervention on plywood-covered store windows in NYC, June 2020,” *The Nation*, July 15, 2020, <https://www.pacificoaks.edu/voices/social-justice/black-lives-matter-say-their-names/>, “‘Say Their Name’ Podcast Memorializes Black Men Killed by Police,” *NPR*, November 22, 2020, The African American Policy Forum, <https://aapf.org/sayhername>, <https://blacklivesmatter.com/rest-in-power-beautiful/>, Precious Fondren, “The ‘Say Her Name’ Movement Started for a Reason: We Forget Black Women Killed by Police,” *Teen Vogue*, June 11, 2020.

<sup>102</sup> “Some Among America’s Military Allies Believe Trump Deliberately Attempted a Coup and May Have Had Help from Federal Law-Enforcement Officials,” *Business Insider*, January 7, 2020. See the video of Trump and his allies celebrating the siege of the capitol, Mark Sumner, “Everything About the Trump Insurrection Was Planned... Except Failing,” *Daily Kos*, January 8, 2021. Members of the mob had plastic handcuffs to take members

radicalize; the January 6, 2021, insurrection is a warm up for terrorist acts to come.<sup>103</sup> Trumpism is developing as a political movement and a terrorist network for future attacks on the U.S. Republic. The pardon of Steve Bannon, hundreds of millions raised for Trump (in his “Stop the Steal” campaign), and the *1776 Report* reinforce Trump’s claim that “the movement we created is only just beginning.”

Tunisia, where the Arab Spring began, provides important insights for the United States. Tunisia had the most successful outcome from its democratic revolution, despite its own local Islamic version of “accelerationists.” Radical Islamic extra-state *salafi* groups harassed the state, bombing the US embassy and assassinating leftist Tunisian politicians in an effort to spark civil war.<sup>104</sup> But, Tunisia stayed the course and 90% of eligible voters turned out to elect a new parliament. Islamic and secular parties came together to draft and ratify a widely-lauded new Tunisian constitution in 2014. The US appears to be on a similar path with Joe Biden’s victory, but Tunisia attempted reconciliation by creating a Truth and Dignity Commission to rectify historic injustices committed by the state.<sup>105</sup> If the United States can bring the insurrectionists and corrupt officials to trial, address its long history of structural racism and economic inequality, and mitigate the current health crisis, it could transcend Tunisia.

Faith leaders and scholars of religion have a central role to play in the defense of the American republic and the guarantee of its promise. Faith leaders can critique the ways that Trumpist actors are co-opting religious texts and clergy can denounce the uses of Christianity for hatred, authoritarianism, and violence. Cultural scholars of religion provide the intellectual tools required to deconstruct contemporary American political reality, from the messianic vision of QAnon to the religion in President Biden’s inauguration. But it is the comparative study of religions, especially insights from scholars of non-Christian traditions, that can help us to understand the secular martyrs, political radicalization, and weaponized religion we find in contemporary US politics.



*Ellen J. Amster is Associate Professor in the Departments of Religious Studies and Family Medicine at McMaster University and holds the Jason A. Hannah Chair in the History of Medicine.*

The views, opinions, and positions expressed in all articles published by the *Journal of Interreligious Studies (JIRS)* are the authors’ own and do not reflect or represent those of the *JIRS* staff, the *JIRS* Board of Advisors, or *JIRS* publishing partners.

---

of congress hostage, Dan Kois, “They Were Out for Blood,” *Slate*, January 8, 2021. Rioters wore symbols of the Nazis, the “Three Percenters,” The Proud Boys, the Oath Keepers, the Confederate Flag, an America First Flag, and “MAGA Civil War, January 6, 2020” T Shirts, “Decoding the Extremists Symbols and Groups at the Capitol Hill Insurrection,” *CNN*, January 11, 2021.

<sup>103</sup> For example, Randy Borum, “Radicalization into Violent Extremism I: A Review of Social Science Theories,” *Journal of Strategic Security*, Vol 4(4) Winter 2011: 7–36, Anne Marie Baylouny, “Social Movement Studies and the Middle East,” in Sadiki, Larbi eds, *Handbook of Middle East Politics*, (New York: Routledge, 2020): Ch. 25.

<sup>104</sup> For an overview, see the film *A Revolution in Four Seasons* (2016).

<sup>105</sup> “Tunisia: Truth Commission Outlines Decades of Abuse,” *Human Rights Watch*, April 5, 2019.