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As PRA Senior Research Analyst Frederick Clarkson has noted, U.S. conventional wisdom has a cyclical tendency to prematurely declare the death of the Christian Right, only to see it come roaring back to life. Or to underestimate its dynamism, just to watch in confusion as it adapts to new circumstances. The confounding evangelical embrace of Donald Trump is only the latest example in the nearly 40 years since the founding of the Moral Majority. And yet, while the Christian Right isn't going away anytime soon, recent years have witnessed the rise of a new, complicating force: the increasing defection of members of the movement, either as they come of age or confront aspects of ideology that force them to make a choice.

In **"Losing their Religion" (pg. 3)**, PRA gathered four people from backgrounds spanning the Christian and evangelical spectrum for a roundtable discussion about leaving one's faith community. Across different generations, locations, and backgrounds, an evangelical church planter's son, a Southern Baptist women's leader, a Quiverfull daughter, and the son of a multi-national Mormon regional authority describe the fraught process of exiting their churches and beginning again. "Like radioactivity," one writes, leaving "has a half life, and lots of layers."

Although the Christian Right may frequently seem to set the standard for regressive politics, it's hardly alone. As Adam Lee writes in **"What's the Matter with Secularism?" (pg. 9)**, between the strident Islamophobia and pseudoscientific racism of brand name atheists like Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris, and the ambient misogyny of the movement's lesser YouTube stars, "New Atheism" has developed a troubling relationship with the Alt Right. Lately, Lee writes, that tension has built to a contest over the movement's soul, reflecting a wide gulf between atheism's most prominent and provocative voices and its more broadly progressive core.

Since the 1990s, as Christopher Stroop writes in **"The Struggle for LGBTQ Inclusion at Christian Colleges and Universities" (pg. 14)**, LGBTQ students at the nation's evangelical and fundamentalist institutions of higher education have fought for their right to exist on some of the most hostile ground imaginable. In recent years, this advocacy work has built to a critical mass of students, and some faculty, vocally pressing for change. "But resistance to that change," Stroop writes, "has built as well, drawing not just on conservative theology and ideology but also macro-economic circumstances that affect all of higher education."

In **"Book Review: Pure" (pg. 20)**, Rev. Ashley Easter reviews Linda Kay Klein's acclaimed new memoir about the evangelical purity movement that arose in the '80s and '90s. The movement, which transformed abiding religious teachings about abstinence into a pop culture phenomenon and for-profit industry, also left in its wake a generation of women whose internalized shame undermined the very marriages they were supposed to save themselves for.

In between issues of *The Public Eye*, PRA publishes blog posts, features, reports, and more every week, so be sure to visit us at politicalresearch.org.

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Losing their Religion

A Roundtable Discussion

In the 1980s, the Moral Majority helped usher in an era of politicized Christianity in the United States. The breadth of Christian Right activity since then, from the evangelical Right, to fundamentalist homeschooling, to cross-denominational culture war collaborations, have been fixtures of PRA's research and analysis. But 30 years later, in the early 2010s, a second phenomenon has been taking place: a wave of people who grew up or lived their adult lives within conservative Christian settings beginning to leave. On social media, many have come together in new and growing "exvangelical" communities. LGBTQ people have formed support groups both within and outside their faiths. Abuse survivors have formed organizations and blogs critiquing the cultures that harmed them, some gathering around hashtags like #ChurchToo. PRA brought together four people from backgrounds across the Christian or evangelical spectrum to discuss the landscape of leaving one's faith community.

TELL US ABOUT YOURSELVES AND YOUR EXPERIENCE LEAVING A CONSERVATIVE FAITH.

Akiko Ross: From 1969 until 2015, I was active in the conservative Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) as a lay leader, a Sunday School teacher, and through various committee and church positions. In 1998, I formally resigned when the SBC elected Paige Patterson as its president. Patterson, part of the SBC's fundamentalist wing, sought to remake the SBC into his own image, pronouncing that women must submit to their husbands, who would make all major decisions. Complementarianism had come to the SBC, and although many of us did not see scripture as Patterson did, because we were mostly women, our interpretations didn't count.

When I renounced my membership, I could no longer be a "messenger"—representing my church at the SBC's annual convention—and certain church positions were now closed to me. But I remained a Christian, bouncing around to different SBC and non-denominational churches every time I moved.

Although I was successful at leading women, teen girls, and singles, I began to notice some disconcerting things. By 2015, during the election cycle, my nagging doubts reach a zenith. I was leading a women's group at the largest Baptist church in Clearwater, Florida, where, except for me, all the members were White. The women in my group seemed lost, depressed,



Church pew. Photo: Donald Joski/AdobeStock.

and lonely. One woman said her life would be better if we had a border wall to keep out undesirables who were stealing all the good jobs. The others nodded along, saying things like, "Obama ruined the sanctity of marriage and life," and "Obama didn't care about White people losing jobs to 'illegals.'" I realized I wanted out. I disbanded the class and walked away.

I saw the whole "Trumpvangelical" thing coming, but did not realize its size. As the lone Democrat in my churches, I had ignored many earlier cues in an effort to survive the dichotomy of being a Southern Baptist and a progressive. In 2015, I cut all ties with organized religion, and after the election, I severed ties with dozens of friends. It took until this election to know that my values—equality and justice for all—were not their values.

I am still a Christ follower, and Proverbs 31:8-9 still resonates with me today: be the voice for the voiceless, seek justice for the marginalized. In other

words, just love your neighbor in the way that makes your neighbor feel that love.

I have worked in the legal field for about 30 years. After the election, I went back to school for a B.S. in Public Policy. I'm currently a junior, and my goal is to work on public education policy.

Heather Doney: I'm the eldest in a family of 10 children raised in the Quiverfull movement, a loosely organized set of fundamentalist Christian beliefs similar to the lifestyle depicted on

the Duggar family reality TV show, “19 Kids and Counting.” My father was a non-denominational, part-time pastor and ran mission trips to Costa Rica and Haiti. In the late 1980s, we later began “home churching”: gathering to worship in private homes. I was pseudo-homeschooled until 9th grade, until my grandparents intervened and I was sent to public high school.

The beliefs I was raised with heavily supported patriarchy and a fundamentalist reading of the Bible. When I was a

with some residual effects of my upbringing, I would like to think it has also made me more understanding of the many types of suffering people can face due to abuse, trauma, or poverty. I am a content expert on homeschooling policy and child abuse, and have spearheaded groundbreaking advocacy work and research on the topic.

I am joining this discussion out of concern that leaders who adhere to abusive ideologies like the one I was raised in now hold positions of significant politi-

the '80s and '90s. My father held very high positions in the Church from a young age. He became a Bishop when I was around three years old, a Stake President when I was about five, a Mission President when I was 17, and an Area Seventy (or regional authority) when I was 21. He continues to hold this position today, overseeing church operations in Venezuela, Peru, Colombia, Ecuador, and Bolivia.

I served in a variety of church leadership positions during my youth. I later attended Brigham Young University, where I completed a degree in neuroscience. While there, I was called to serve as a Mormon missionary in San Francisco.

As the eldest child of one of Guatemala's most well-known Mormon families, the expectations for me to continue in my family's footsteps were high. But they also conflicted with my orientation as a gay man. While I came out to some friends in high school, I didn't fully embrace myself until my mission to San Francisco, where I first met other LGBTQ Mormons leading admirable lives. I'd previously accepted negative LGBTQ stereotypes, fearing that embracing my identity would bring condemnation from God. Seeing happy, exemplary LGBTQ Mormons allowed me to envision myself as deserving the same rights and love as other people.

After my mission I became highly involved in LGBTQ activism, as president of BYU's LGBTQ organization and a participant in various conferences, podcasts, and other activities to promote LGBTQ tolerance within Mormonism. Sadly, this work took a heavy toll on my personal life. After realizing that my work was unappreciated and mocked, I retreated from anything related to Mormonism. I now live as an atheist secular humanist in New York City, where I recently completed a master's degree at the Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University. I am currently interviewing for different positions in public health research in New York City, am engaged to a wonderful man, and am excited to travel the world.

Chris Stroop: I grew up mostly in Indiana, attending various churches across the Missionary, Baptist, and Wesleyan de-

I saw the whole “Trumpvangelical” thing coming, but did not realize its size.



Donald Trump prays with pastors during a campaign visit in Las Vegas, Nevada, October 5, 2016. Photo: REUTERS/Mike Segar.

teenager, I decided that God was terrible for allowing women to be treated the way they were in the Bible—particularly the gang rape and murder of the concubine in the Book of Judges. I rebelled against the wholly domestic role for women that I'd been taught and left home at age 17 to escape ongoing violence based largely on the Christian childrearing manual *To Train Up a Child*.

Today I live with my husband in Boston, working in public policy for at-risk populations. Although I still struggle

cal power. But despite the high stakes, I believe that instead of passing judgment on people taken in by authoritarian religious teachings, we must encourage them to face intergenerational trauma in their own lives to avoid passing it on.

Samy Galvez: I was born into one of the most prominent Mormon families in Guatemala. Mormonism was introduced to Guatemala in the late 1940s. My father's family joined early, in 1971, and my mother's would follow a decade later, amid Latin America's Mormon boom in

nominations. When my dad became the music minister at Traders Point Christian Church, we joined the Restoration Movement, not that I understood that history as a kid. What I did quickly learn was that denominational distinctions didn't matter as much as the demand that "real" Christians take the Bible literally and devote themselves to right-wing political goals like banning abortion and opposing LGBTQ rights.

When my sister and I were old enough to enter school, my mom became a teacher at Indianapolis's Heritage Christian School: an interdenominational school with strong Baptist and Calvinist flavors. The Christian nationalism there was rampant, from our mascot (the Eagles), to daily pledges to the American and Christian flags and to the Bible, to the wall painted with the words, "Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD." Our elementary school talent shows ended with a sing-along to Lee Greenwood's god-awful "God Bless the USA."

In 1993, my family moved to Colorado Springs, when my dad took a position with a church plant under the umbrella of the Missionary Church. Colorado Springs Christian School, where my mom taught and my sister and I went for two years, was even more fundamentalist than Heritage. We were taught that people of African descent are the descendants of Noah's cursed son Ham; that evolution was wrong; and that sexual "purity" was paramount. At a seventh-grade class "retreat," we were asked to sign purity pledges, which we did, fearing we might be suspended or expelled if we didn't.

On a mission trip in rural Russia after high school, I developed an interest in Russian culture, language, and history. I was already then in an intense crisis of faith that ultimately led me, a few years after completing a Ph.D. in Russian history at Stanford in 2012, to finally become comfortable with saying I am non-religious.

Because my unusual combination of academic expertise and life experience gives me insights into the Christian Right, Putinist Russia, and the affinities and connections between them, I've been able to publish commentary and policy research related to current events

(including here at PRA). Today, I'm a leader in the emerging "exvangelical" movement consisting of former evangelicals who are reclaiming our stories and speaking out against the abusive, authoritarian subculture in which we grew up. I have created viral hashtags, including #EmptyThePews and #ChristianAlt-Facts, that have helped "exvies" not only find each other and work toward healing but also expose the extent to which even "mainstream" evangelicalism is abusive and anti-democratic. My blog, *Not Your Mission Field* at CStroop.com, mostly covers related topics and also hosts a resources page for former fundamentalists and spiritual abuse survivors.

WHAT WAS YOUR EXPERIENCE IN LEAVING YOUR CHURCH OR COMMUNITY?

Chris: My process of deconstruction dragged out over a very long period, beginning with doubts that became irrepressible when I read through the entire Bible for the first time at age 16. I was afraid my doubts were temptations from the devil, and also that leaving would mean breaking with my entire social world. In my twenties, when I could no longer accept inerrancy doctrine and support right-wing politics, I dissimu-

We were taught that people of African descent are the descendants of Noah's cursed son Ham; that evolution was wrong; and that sexual "purity" was paramount.

lated with family, torturing myself about whether I was protecting them or myself. I voted for Bush in 2000, with serious qualms; in 2004, I voted for Kerry, and have not voted for a Republican since.

My changing political beliefs puzzled my relatives. Later, when I vocally supported universal healthcare and opposed California's anti-gay Prop 8, or criticized evangelicalism to my mother, I would sometimes break down and recant. Only in 2015 did I start publishing strong critiques of evangelical subculture, making it impossible to waver with my family. Multiple relatives accused me of being "brainwashed" and "attacking everything we stand for." One close relative became estranged from me for a few months after the 2016 election, saying I was unable to

"separate family from politics." My parents and I are in a pretty good place now, but there have been some very rough moments.

Heather: Mine dragged out for a long time, too. Like radioactivity, it has a half life, and lots of layers. I started leaving when I was still a minor and had few rights. I faced severe repercussions, including being shunned within the Christian homeschoolers group my family belonged to, which declared me a "bad influence" for things like backtalking and wearing bright nail polish. At home, my parents threatened to throw me out—a terrifying prospect to any teen, especially one taught the world was full of spiritual warfare. Literature and journaling became a healthy form of escape, and they set me on the path to furthering my education.

I also did what most girls from my background do and found a boyfriend I thought would rescue me. Unpacking the patriarchy part of Christian patriarchy has been the longest and most painful part of the process, because I'd been lied to about love, sex, and natural human needs. I hope any young women reading this know that they need to rescue themselves!

Time and living away have healed some wounds. Today when I see my mom and she brings up religion, I joke with her about it, telling her the difference between "heathen" and "Heather" is just one letter, and she's the one that named me. She doesn't find it particularly funny, but cultivating a sense of humor about this stuff has helped save my sanity.

Although I'm not close to my parents, I have love and pity for them, as their lives were ruined by this movement. They were sold lies and turned into middle management for their own lives and children. It is very sad and so unnecessary.

Samy: My family hasn't really had time to focus on my leaving the religion because they're still focused on my coming out as

gay. This is a much bigger deal in their minds, so their discussions and interactions with me regarding the changes that have transpired in my life have all focused on that. Ultimately, we have come to avoid certain topics and be cordial in order to safeguard our relationships.

Most Mormons my age, including cousins and siblings, are very understanding and even supportive. There is always one extremist here and there but they are the exception rather than the rule. In general, millennials in Mormonism tend to be more understanding.

Akiko: I was raised cross-culturally by a non-religious father and a Buddhist mother, and we moved frequently as an Air Force family. I didn't feel I belonged anywhere until I went to Vacation Bible School the summer I was nine and was saved. Being Southern Baptist gave me a sense of belonging. But even so, there were cracks. I was so Republican in high school that I served as a "hostess" for the Party, wearing a slinky gown and intro-

Evangelicals asked how I could call myself a Christian and be a Democrat, and tried to tell me that Trump fulfilled prophecy.

ducing male Republicans to each other at parties. Later, when a Republican leader I worked for sexually assaulted me, I was nearly undone by it: being raised in the church's purity culture made me feel that I'd become dirty and unworthy.

The cracks continued to grow when, as a lay leader in the SBC, I helped women leave abusive relationships, which the church didn't really support. I had friends who were gay, atheists, divorced, or who had had abortions. My acceptance of them, and my refusal to evangelize to them, did not make me popular in church leadership, but they couldn't deny that when I did Monday night visitations, people showed up the next Sunday. I wanted to give these friends a family that was supportive and encouraging. So churches allowed me to continue my work. However, I began to experience an undercurrent of hate—whispers and outright accusations that I must be sleeping around because men were always asking me out.

By the mid-2000s, I'd left a church that told me to return to an abusive husband; tried non-denominational churches that were basically SBC in disguise; and began to see that the church fears divorced women who speak up. The dam broke during the election. Evangelicals asked how I could call myself a Christian and be a Democrat, and tried to tell me that Trump fulfilled prophecy. I had a year in which I thought I had gone crazy. I was alone. The invitations to parties, game nights, baseball games, potlucks, and weddings all ceased. I lost friends going back 40 years. But I have gained a new community in the Exvans!

WHAT OTHER CHALLENGES DID YOU ENCOUNTER IN LEAVING THAT WORLD BEHIND?

Heather: My leaving was an escape. I went to public high school, moved in with a cousin, then went to college and lived in the dorms. I couldn't wait to be 18 and was glad to be out, but I was also griefstruck at first because I missed my siblings, many of whom I had helped raise and who I wasn't permitted to see for a time. I was also very afraid of spending money; I feared that one mistake would land me out in the world alone. I ended up anemic a couple times because I was pinching pennies with regards to food.

I think better resources and policies for homeschooled students transferring into public school are needed. Perhaps a "buddy" system. And there needs to be options for college students who don't have a place to go over breaks. Finding a place to live for a month was always stressful. For many who don't go to college, or have parents who won't let them leave, domestic violence shelters should do more to help. I've heard of people getting turned away because they are a daughter and not a spouse, even though they're dealing with the same issues at home.

Chris: Being socialized in an evangelical enclave and then rejecting its ideology is psychologically damaging and socially isolating. I emerged with religious trau-

ma and depression. The people I grew up with didn't understand me, and neither do people who haven't lived religious fundamentalism. I continued to be viscerally afraid of hell for more than a decade after I stopped believing in it, and only recognized that I am queer in my mid-30s. (I am attracted to women, which was part of the reason I didn't recognize it earlier, although fundamentalist socialization that rejects the possibility of queer existence is a key factor.) I feel like much of my childhood and youth were stolen from me, and I still sometimes feel "weird everywhere."

Getting comprehensive sex education and access to a community of people who have left fundamentalism could have helped immensely. I agree that we need more resources for those who need to escape from their families in a way that I didn't, like safe spaces specifically for youth leaving fundamentalist environments. Ideally, I'd love to see an advocacy organization that could oversee that, and provide scholarships to people deprived of a good education, due to homeschooling or Christian schooling, to go on to college. Perhaps this organization could also provide remedial tutoring, and, in my dream version, it would also contain a library and archive to facilitate research on the Christian Right.

Samy: Ultimately, the most difficult aspects of my faith transition, besides my family, have been internal: constant self-doubt over my choices and constant reevaluation to affirm them. It's hard to unpack Mormonism, which tends to dominate every aspect of your life: who you hang out with, what you do on a weekly basis, what underwear you wear, how you spend money, what you consume. Given these restrictions, it's hard to start from zero: you trust Mormonism to make choices for you, but now you have to be somebody outside of Mormonism. It's a long process, and one I'm still working through, but also one that's rewarding as I have built my own morality based on personal convictions rather than the dictations of a sect leader.

I also find that, although Mormonism has been abusive to me, it entices me back. I love talking about Mormonism, but it's ultimately unhealthy and harm-

ful for me to engage. Even this discussion has taken some emotional energy to open up and be vulnerable.

Akiko: When a community is also your social life, losing one means losing both. I've found a new community, but I don't fit in as well as I would like. Because I was evangelical for nearly 50 years, having sex is still connected to marriage for me, and I struggle with this every day, as well as with simple physical affection, because part of me thinks I might cause someone to "stumble."

I have been self-supporting since I was 18, and raised three children largely on my own. In evangelicalism, this was a problem because evangelical men don't appreciate self-sufficient women. Even though I am out of evangelicalism now, I find I can't date because this mindset overshadows the rational part of me that says there are men who embrace egalitarianism.

What would have been helpful to me is meeting other people with similar experiences and talking about coping skills and how to move on. I'm a big believer in therapy, but it's hard to find a therapist who really understands how purity culture indoctrinates you, or that egalitarianism is real and obtainable.

WERE THERE ASPECTS THAT WERE POSITIVE OR JOYFUL?

Chris: There is something positive in the way I can now speak out about the harm evangelicalism (and any religious fundamentalism) does to people, which, as Heather mentioned above, has to do also with intergenerational trauma. My shorthand psychological definition of fundamentalism is a misdirected response to trauma perpetuated communally and generationally. There have been moments of joy in discovering the complexities of my gender and sexuality, but my sense of liberation is seriously tempered by the Trumpist theocratic coup we're undergoing.

Heather: My family's first church was a predominantly Black church in New

Orleans, and though that church's pastor helped lead my father into fundamentalism, I still think that experience has been meaningful to me as a White woman. There were some really good things mixed in with the bad, such as an exposure to Black liberation theology. For a lot of people, church is the closest thing they'll get to therapy for trauma



An LGBTQ pride flag in front of the Salt Lake City Mormon temple. Photo: Pastelitodepapa/Wikimedia Commons.

and stress; if they have an emergency, churches can be an important support in areas where government services are functionally nonexistent. I know how much beauty churches can hold for people, alongside the problematic or abusive teachings, and why disparaging them will get you promptly tuned out and prayed for.

I also find that a lot of the "homemaker" skills I learned in lieu of math and science make for excellent party tricks. I cook traditional Cajun recipes and crochet and sew and make candles and excellent pies

and all kinds of other quaint throwback stuff with an ease that impresses hipsters. I don't believe it was right to try to teach me how to make whole wheat muffins in lieu of long division, but I respect the idea of teaching both—to both girls and boys.

Samy: There's joy in being sure of my moral and ethical principles and in realizing I am living a very fulfilling life. I have come to be more critical of oppressive structures and learn more about how to be empathetic toward others and their struggles.

Akiko: Today, I find joy in knowing I was an ethical Christian, and now an ethical Christ follower; in knowing that loving your neighbor is the right thing to do, no matter what, and that calling out oppression wherever you see it is just one way of expressing love.

DO ELEMENTS OF EACH OTHER'S EXPERIENCES SEEM FAMILIAR?

Chris: Definitely. It seems that for many of us, issues of gender equality matter a lot. For some of us, queerness is a factor in our inability to stay with the "traditionalist" religion we grew up in. Trauma and relationship issues are also, unsurprisingly, common themes.

Heather: I agree with Chris but think I grew up in what would be the tip of the iceberg and most of the other participants grew up in the larger hidden part, so we have somewhat different experiences and challenges.

My family used to be hard core "fundy." No holidays and birthdays; no makeup or jewelry; no married women working outside the home. They didn't vote, so I don't have that in common with the other participants. But it isn't that they weren't political. They believed that Christians are meant to follow an anointed king who is part of the church and led by God. It was full-on Dominionist Rushdoony stuff. I think the more "fundy-lite" side still moves us toward the same theocratic

ends, but there's plausible deniability about the intent, which can actually be harder to recognize and leave behind.

Samy: There definitely are commonalities, especially in the difficulties that arise from dealing with post-religious trauma and recovery and conflict with family.

Since I grew up in Guatemala, there are elements of my experience that arise from that culture, and not just religion. For example, while many Mormons in the United States have changed their views on LGBTQ issues in recent years, these changes have not happened in other countries. My family is living in a different version of Mormonism than U.S. Mormons, so there are more layers to my interactions with the church there, which perceives my sexual orientation as a U.S. imposition on their culture.

Akiko: I see some commonalities: Samy's cultural experiences colored his religious experiences, as mine did. Chris's struggles with "traditional" religion and relationships, while not like mine in terms of partners, is similar to how I tried to fit into my religion's acceptable relationships.

On the other hand, compared to the fundamentalism Heather describes, I was a typical SBC evangelical. SBC churches celebrate the flag, the 4th of July, and every major holiday. We sang and danced, and drank wine away from church functions. I wasn't so restricted from the worldly stuff, and Dominionist theology was not part of my SBC churches. However, I realized in the 1990s that fundamentalists were taking over the SBC, and that they were enraptured with the Dominionist stuff, even if that wasn't the case where I was.

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO PEOPLE LEAVING SIMILAR COMMUNITIES NOW?

Heather: People coming from high-demand religions can greatly benefit from therapy and journaling. Even if you leave physically, the underlying framework and unprocessed trauma needs to be worked on sooner or later. For me, it was being diagnosed with delayed-onset PTSD that started me unpacking what had really been done to me in this move-

ment. You're on survival mode when you first leave and often have to put self-discovery on a backburner. You just want to pass for normal and not be weird. That leaves parts of your life almost unspeakable, unknowable even to people you want to be close to.

You can get to a point where it needs to be speakable, and then a point where it's only one part of your story, because you have built so many other things into your life.

I wish so badly that we had a one-stop shop of resources for people who leave. Ex-Hasidic people have Footsteps, but there's nothing standard for us because we are spread all over the country. Most therapists will be shocked to hear some of the things being done under the Christian label, and it can be hard to have your therapist look shocked or be misinformed. But good therapy can help you out of the remnants of black-and-white thinking and learned helplessness. I'd also suggest that people raised in environments that practiced guilt, shunning, and corporal punishment get more thorough medical checkups, with a special focus on the immune system. Way too many of us end up with autoimmune problems because of years having the body and mind on high alert, or not knowing how to live in moderation after we leave.

Survivors have to learn to take loving care of our whole selves. It is a massive amount of work to change these baseline settings, but totally worth it.

Chris: I hope that they know that they're not alone, and that there are people and resources for them to find and connect with. I would advise them to trust their own doubts, which goes against the grain of fundamentalist socialization. They're there to tell you something is wrong. Resist the gaslighting, much of which you've probably internalized and will need to dismantle, and find your authentic voice.

Connecting with survivors is crucial for many of us—not, ideally, as a replacement for therapy, but as another part of our healing. Some people are unable to afford therapy; others struggle to find therapists who can effectively help with religious trauma, as there are a lot

of Christian therapists out there with proper credentials who nevertheless misuse religion in their practice. Other therapists simply don't understand. This is also why the exvangelical community is critical. In coming together to promote exvangelical voices and stories, we are finally becoming visible enough to change the media's approach to evangelicals.

Samy: The single most important aspect is to find a community that is fully supportive. Being or feeling alone can be destructive. The sooner you find that community and protection within it, the better off you'll be. Of course your community cannot be the only protection from the trauma, but it's an essential aspect for full recovery.

Akiko: First, you definitely are not alone and your experiences are the experiences of many others. Second, you should identify what affected you most and why, and be willing to share your experiences within a safe setting like a support group. Talking about it really does help.

Before I left evangelicalism, I went with my boss for lunch, and she stopped first at an Al-Anon group. At first, I was furious with her for taking me somewhere where people seemed weak and messed up. But as I listened to their stories, it dawned on me that they were like my own. I realized I had no self-worth because in the eyes of the church, I was less of a leader and teacher because I was a woman. I went into therapy, and my therapist said I didn't have a fear of failure, but a fear of success. He was right. I learned that I was born to speak up, to lead, and to help others find themselves. That is what I want for everyone leaving evangelicalism: find out who you are and live the life that fulfills you, even if at first you're doing it alone. 🙏

Kathryn Joyce is an author and journalist based in New York City. She is author of The Child Catchers: Rescue, Trafficking and the New Gospel of Adoption (PublicAffairs, 2013) and Quiverfull: Inside the Christian Patriarchy Movement (Beacon Press, 2009). Her freelance writing has appeared in The New York Times Magazine, Highline, Pacific Standard, The New Republic, Mother Jones, The Nation, and many other publications.

BY ADAM LEE

What's the Matter with Secularism?

How New Atheism Feeds the Right



The most prominent New Atheists, ironically dubbed the Four Horsemen. From left to right: Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Daniel Dennett. Illustration: Gabriel Joffe/PRA. Photos: Wikimedia Commons.

In April 2017, the influential atheist author Sam Harris interviewed Charles Murray on his popular podcast, “Waking Up.” Murray is infamous for *The Bell Curve*, the 1994 book that argues Black people are genetically predetermined to be less intelligent. But Harris didn’t invite Murray to challenge him. On the contrary, it was a friendly, softball interview in which Harris treated Murray’s thesis as uncontroversial truth and dismissed critics of his work as motivated by dishonesty or anti-intellectual political correctness.

Vox’s Ezra Klein responded with an article challenging Harris’s kid-glove treatment of Murray,¹ pointing out that a simplistic measure like IQ scores can’t separate genetics from America’s long history of racism and unequal treatment, and suggesting that Harris’s views were influenced by tribal sympathy for conservative White intellectuals. Harris lashed out furiously, denouncing Klein’s article as “a disingenuous hit piece”² that incited

a “fake, defamatory controversy,”³ and sniffing that he would no longer bother trying to reach “the far left.”⁴

Later that same year, an atheist conference called Mythcon, run by the organization Mythicist Milwaukee, invited YouTube personality Carl Benjamin to be their star guest. Benjamin, who writes and speaks online under the name “Sargon of Akkad” (a reference to the empire-building Sumerian king), is known for his racist, misogynistic, and anti-social-justice views. Most notoriously, in May 2016, he tweeted “I wouldn’t even rape you” at a female British MP who helped lead an anti-internet-harassment campaign.⁵ On stage at the Milwaukee conference, when criticized by the moderator for this remark, Benjamin proudly affirmed it, whereupon his fans in the audience burst out into whoops and cheers.⁶

Last but not least, in June 2017, after the Atheist Foundation of Australia announced that feminist author Clementine Ford would headline their upcoming

Global Atheist Convention, AFA’s Facebook page was flooded with rape and death threats from commenters angry that an outspoken feminist would be given a prominent platform. It was a “fountain of vileness,” someone affiliated with AFA recalled, “horrible beyond words. And all from fellow atheists.”⁷

Over the last few years, incidents like these have created a deep rift that’s split the atheist community. Famous atheists regularly become nexuses of controversy over remarks widely denounced as bigoted. Longtime activists have quit the movement in disgust. Others, particularly women, LGBTQ people, and people of color, have been driven out by violent harassment. At the root of these battles is a question of identity: should the atheist movement strive to be part of a progressive coalition and uphold a broad spectrum of liberal causes, or should atheists care *only* about secularism and welcome anyone who’s on board with that, regardless of whether they’re liberal, conser-

vative, libertarian or even Alt Right and White supremacist?

ATHEISM'S PARADOX

The atheist community would seem like unlikely soil for right-wing ideas to take root. Polls consistently show that the nonreligious are among the most progressive demographics in the United States. Taken as a whole, they're peaceful: the most anti-war, the most anti-torture, the most anti-corporal-punishment.⁸ They're far and away the most pro-choice.⁹ They're strong supporters of LGBTQ rights and immigration.¹⁰ And of course, separation of church and state is a classic liberal issue.

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Paradoxically, in spite of its liberal leanings, organized atheism has acquired a reputation as friendly to conservatives and, in recent years, the White nationalist Alt Right. As the above incidents show, the reputation isn't unearned. Some of the most prominent and popular atheists have proven themselves openly hostile to feminism, racial diversity, and social justice.

There's no more blatant example of atheism's potential for racism and anti-feminism than Richard Dawkins, the most renowned name in the modern atheist movement. Although he claims to be a "passionate feminist," he appears to believe that he, and not women, should decide what does or doesn't count as a feminist issue. That was the point of Dawkins' infamous 2011 "Dear Muslima" letter,¹¹ which argued that because women in Islamic theocracies suffer worse oppression, like genital mutilation, Western feminists should "stop whining" about comparatively minor issues like workplace sexual harassment (which Dawkins derisively characterized as "being inappropriately touched by the water cooler")¹² or creepy, aggressive come-ons.

Another atheist equal in stature to Dawkins is the late Christopher Hitchens. When Hitchens joined the vanguard

of atheism with his book *God Is Not Great*, nonbelievers hailed him for his intellect, erudition and caustic wit. Fewer seemed to notice or care about his coarse sexism, embodied in articles like his 2007 "Why Women Aren't Funny,"¹³ or his entwined racism and homophobia, such as when he dismissed the comedian Wanda Sykes as "the black d**e."¹⁴ At an atheist conference in 2007, Hitchens advocated war on the Middle East so ferociously that he drew boos and walkouts, but even this seemed to have no lasting impact on his popularity.¹⁵

There's also the firebrand activist David Silverman, who in 2014, as then-president of American Atheists, applied for

his group to table at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), the pre-eminent annual gathering of the grassroots Right. Silverman was enthusiastic about the idea, describing it as "a serious outreach" and "the first step of many,"¹⁶ since, as he told a reporter, "the Democrats are too liberal for me."¹⁷ He was so determined to make inroads among conservative activists that, when CPAC denied American Atheists' request, Silverman attended as an individual to preach the godless cause. The next year, when American Atheists tried again, CPAC granted their request.¹⁸

A MOVEMENT MORE DIVERSE THAN ITS LEADERSHIP

Atheists have formally organized for decades, but the modern atheist movement (sometimes called "New Atheism") coalesced after 9/11 as a backlash against both Islamist terrorism and the cultural overreach of the Christian Right. Its advocates are zealous supporters of state-church separation: opposing Ten Commandments monuments in courthouses, prayer in legislative meetings and creationism in public schools. They've waged a public-relations battle against religion, with bestselling books like *The End of Faith* by Sam Harris and *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins, and public

events like the 2012 Reason Rally on the National Mall in Washington, D.C.

Based on demographic data, atheism has a bright future in the United States. Although many people cling to the idea of it being a "Christian nation," the U.S. nonreligious demographic is growing with startling speed. (Not all unaffiliated or nonreligious people self-identify as atheists or agnostics, but many fall into those categories based on stated beliefs.¹⁹) Upon coming of age, Millennials became the least religious generation in all of American history²⁰—until their younger siblings, sometimes called Generation Z, took the title from them.²¹ A quarter of Americans under 50, and a third under 30, now profess no religious affiliation.²² Nonreligious Americans outnumber every Christian denomination and, if current trends continue, by around 2050 they'll outnumber all U.S. Protestants combined.²³

Despite the early involvement of women leaders like Madalyn Murray O'Hair or Anne Nicol Gaylor, atheist activism has predominantly been a White male preoccupation. There are several, not mutually exclusive explanations for this. One is that White men can leverage a position of greater power in society to challenge social norms, whereas women and people of color who breach conventions tend to face more severe opprobrium and harassment.

Another is that many well-known figures in the atheist community come from academia, which has its own longstanding race and gender biases governing who gets admitted, who gets hired, who gets research funding, who is invited to conferences, and who gets offered prestigious tenured positions.²⁴ Similar dynamics have been cited in the publication industry: White men tend to be taken more seriously as deep thinkers on philosophy and world affairs, and men who write books on these traditionally "masculine" topics are more likely to get reviews and attention.²⁵

Despite the homogenous origins of the atheist community, there are signs that nonbelievers as a whole are becoming more diverse. The Barna Group, a Christian research firm, issued a 2015 "State of Atheism in America" report²⁶ that

noted “the entry of millions of women into the skeptic ranks” and the fact that “skepticism has become more racially and ethnically inclusive.” (“Skepticism” is Barna’s umbrella term for atheists and agnostics.)

But what *hasn’t* changed is that the most prominent New Atheists—the ones who are treated as *de facto* representatives of all atheists; the ones who are sought out for media quotes, headline coverage and keynote addresses at conferences—remain almost exclusively White men. This legacy effect has resulted in a movement that’s more diverse than its leadership.

The most visible example of this disconnect is the group of White male atheists ironically dubbed the Four Horsemen: Dawkins, Harris, Hitchens and Daniel Dennett, a philosophy professor from Tufts University. These men received the lion’s share of early media coverage of New Atheism,²⁷ laying the foundation for a trend that continues to this day. They’ve starred in magazine “special editions”²⁸ and have been depicted with bizarre reverence on T-shirts²⁹ and in comics³⁰ as crusading warriors for science and reason. Even encyclopedia entries on the New Atheist movement often name the four of them and no one else.³¹

The lack of diversity at upper levels of the movement filters down to the way the public perceives who atheists are. For example, the larger atheist Facebook groups are notorious for having banner images that consist of a lineup of White male faces,³² perhaps with one token woman or person of color shoved in somewhere. (Ironically, the one non-White person who appears most often in these images is Neil deGrasse Tyson, who personally is agnostic but has publicly stated he doesn’t desire to be involved with the atheist movement.) Atheist publications display the same bias: *The Portable Atheist*, a 2007 anthology edited by Hitchens, includes just four women-authored essays out of 47.

THE LIMITATIONS OF THE WHITE MALE VIEWPOINT

Like any large group of people, the atheist community mirrors broader trends. As women and people of color

increasingly identify as nonbelievers, there’s been a call for the atheist movement to refocus its energy on issues crucial to a diverse community. And, also as in broader society, this call has given rise to a conservative backlash from the old guard who thinks the atheist movement is just fine the way it is.

Despite their self-reported progressive leanings, the inherent narrowness of a White-male-only thought leadership means the atheist movement suffers from limitations, especially when it comes to diversity and inclusion. For example, atheists have long treated LGBTQ rights as a natural extension of their activism. Yet many of those same atheists treat feminism as outside their sphere of concern,³³ despite the similar way religion has historically been used to justify unequal treatment in both cases.

In 2014, Sam Harris responded to a question about the underrepresentation of women in movement atheism by suggesting that the “critical posture” is “to some degree intrinsically male” and that atheism lacks an “estrogen vibe.”³⁴ In other words, Harris was arguing, women avoided movement atheism because they lacked the critical chops to get it, rather than because of alienating incidents like Dawkins’ “Dear Muslima” letter or Harris’ own pronouncement that, “If I could wave a magic wand and get rid of either rape or religion, I would not hesitate to get rid of religion.”³⁵

Misogyny in this movement manifests as leering, sexist comments directed at female atheists, or violent antipathy toward feminists and feminism, as in the case of Clementine Ford. Outspoken secular women get so many obscene, harassing and violent messages that, in 2014, members of the feminist/atheist site Skepchick created an art exhibit that literally wallpapered a room with printouts of abuse they’d received. They called the exhibit “an immersive experience of the daily harassment women face online.”³⁶

Similarly, although atheists have battled against creationism and other intrusions of religion into public schools, the atheist movement seems less concerned about other vital education issues, such as segregation and chronic underfund-

ing of schools in majority-minority neighborhoods. As Debbie Goddard, current vice president of American Atheists, writes:

I am frustrated that we-the-movement only seem to get involved with public education when a teacher puts Bible quotes on the walls of her classroom, when a football coach leads his high school team in prayer, when a science teacher spends time promoting intelligent design, when an administration prevents a student from starting an atheist club, or when a high school graduation is scheduled to take place in a church. Then we swoop in with our science advocates and Wall of Separation to make everything right... but don’t seem to worry about the fact that the high school’s graduation rate might be less than 50% and the shared science textbooks are older than the students.³⁷

Along the same lines, when atheists write about the importance of being inclusive and welcoming to people of color, they can reliably expect sneering comments denouncing inclusion as “a complete non-issue” only noticed by “the most ardent proponents of identity politics.”³⁸ Worse, they often get scorn from top-tier atheists like Richard Dawkins dismissing them as “social justice warriors.”³⁹

Of course, by any reasonable definition of the term, the atheist movement is itself a kind of identity politics seeking to organize and to act on the basis of shared identity as atheists, just as Jewish, Muslim, or Christian groups organize on the basis of their religious identity.

Similarly, the quest to protect nonbelievers from discrimination and oppression, and to stop members of the majority religion from claiming special privileges for themselves, is nothing if not social justice. Yet many prominent atheist leaders persist in seeing themselves as neutral and ideology-free, and their concerns as arising from dispassionate reason and nothing else, while *other people* are polluting the cause with their personal bias.

Some of the most glaring examples of atheist leaders’ selective attention revolve around Islam. For example, take

the case of Ahmed Mohamed, a 14-year-old Texas freshman who brought a homemade clock to school to show his teachers, and was arrested when the school administrators had an over-the-top panic reaction because he was brown and Muslim.⁴⁰ Instead of encouraging and defending this young inventor, Richard Dawkins, who for over a decade was Oxford's Professor of the Public Understanding of Science, took to Twitter to denounce and insult Mohamed: calling him "Hoax Boy,"⁴¹ bizarrely accusing him of lying about building the clock, spinning conspiracy theories about how he must have wanted to get arrested,⁴² and for the topper, comparing him to an ISIS child soldier.⁴³

Like Dawkins, Sam Harris appears to

the Alt Right figurehead Milo Yiannopoulos⁴⁸ and uncritically accepted the Alt Right concept of "cultural Marxism"—the idea that a secret liberal conspiracy is plotting to undermine Western culture from within. In December of 2017, *Skeptic* also gave the psychologist Carol Tavris a column to denounce the #MeToo movement, which she compared to Satanic ritual abuse hysteria and predicted that it would lead to a "Mike Pence world where [women] cannot have a business dinner or go to a party without a chaperone."⁴⁹

Skeptic also hosted an attempted James O'Keefe-style⁵⁰ hoax on the field of gender studies, written by conservative-leaning skeptics Peter Boghossian and James Lindsay, who assert that "gender studies is crippled academically by an overrid-

ism and misogyny in addition to criticizing religion.

Besides Sargon of Akkad, another YouTube character is TJ Kirk, a.k.a. "The Amazing Atheist," whose videos display a similar mixture of toxic ignorance and casual cruelty. His worldview is steeped in misogyny. He is indignant about the term "rape survivor" (because "Rape isn't fatal") and told an actual rape survivor "I think we should give the guy who raped you a medal." He also sneers at Black culture as "a victim cult."⁵³

There's also Phil Mason, a.k.a. "Thunderf00t," another YouTube personality who started out with videos aimed at countering creationism, but subsequently began to argue that sexual-harassment policies at atheist conferences are a waste of time since, he argued, "talking about sexual harassment can sometimes be a bigger problem than sexual harassment."⁵⁴ Lately, his antipathy to feminism has grown, and he's branched out into

videos with titles like "Why 'Feminism' is poisoning Atheism" and rants against the media critic Anita Sarkeesian. Mason, like Sargon, was a strong supporter of the "Gamergate" movement⁵⁵ that arose as a backlash to feminist criticism like Sarkeesian's and that is recognized as a contributor to the rise of the Alt Right.

Despite the bigoted and incendiary views they espouse, all of these figures have attracted sizable and enthusiastic followings. Mason and Carl Benjamin each have over 800,000 subscribers on YouTube, and Kirk over 1 million.

WHY DO ATHEISTS FEEL KINSHIP WITH THE ALT RIGHT?

The racist ideology that the Alt Right has rebranded is experiencing a resurgence in general, and it's unsurprising that atheism, like other spheres of society, is affected by it. But there are points of attraction between the two communities that make this pairing more likely than others.

First and foremost is a shared antipathy toward Islam. The New Atheist movement arose in response to 9/11, and many atheists still assign collective

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have a particular bias against Muslims. He's argued that airport security *should* profile anyone who "looks like"⁴⁴ they could be Muslim (prompting many to ask: what does a Muslim look like?) and has advocated harshly restricting immigration from majority-Muslim countries, arguing: "You can't have too many Muslims in your culture if you want it to remain enlightened."⁴⁵

OTHER ATHEIST FRIENDS OF THE ALT RIGHT

In addition to the "Horsemen," there are lesser-known but still prominent atheists who've been friendly to Alt Right ideas. One is Michael Shermer, publisher of *Skeptic* magazine, who's asserted that the underrepresentation of women is because skepticism is "more of a guy thing."⁴⁶ When criticized for this, Shermer took it upon himself to speak for women and people of color and to say that they're not worried about racism or sexism: "[W]omen & blacks don't want prostrate pity of white males... Drop the race/sex obsession."⁴⁷

Under Shermer's leadership, *Skeptic* gave a sympathetic review in July 2017 to

ing almost-religious belief that maleness is the root of all evil." To prove this, the two wrote an intentionally ridiculous article and sought to get it published in a reputable gender-studies journal. As it happened, their hoax article was *rejected* by the first legitimate journal they submitted it to, and only published in a low-quality pay-to-play journal. Nevertheless, Boghossian and Lindsay wasted no time in taking a victory lap—publishing a column⁵¹ in which they boasted that their paid publication proved the entire gender-studies field to be a sham—with White male atheist leaders lining up to congratulate them.⁵²

Just as atheists like Sam Harris argue that religious moderates give cover and respectability to toxic fundamentalism, the regressive views of these so-called thought leaders give license to even more extreme anti-feminist and White supremacist ideologies in the atheist community. The cross-pollination between atheists and the Alt Right is most evident on YouTube, where some of the most prominent atheist videobloggers, boasting tens or hundreds of thousands of subscribers, openly disseminate rac-

blame to all Muslims for the attacks. This bias is most evident in views such as Sam Harris', who has implied that Islam is an inherently more alien or more dangerous religion than others. Richard Dawkins has also joined in with musings on how Christian cathedral bells sound "so much nicer" than the "aggressive-sounding"⁵⁶ Muslim call to prayer.

Another is that the atheist movement has frequently employed taboo-breaking and intentionally provocative rhetoric. When wielded against irrational and harmful religious dogmas, these tactics have their place. Ex-believers will testify that, to overcome the programming of religious indoctrination, deliberately breaking a taboo—eating forbidden foods, reading forbidden books, wearing forbidden clothes, having forbidden kinds of sex—can be a powerfully liberating act.⁵⁷ And the subversive power of ridicule is an effective way to puncture the pretensions of religious authorities who claim that faith occupies a sacred place and ought to be exempt from criticism.

However, too many atheists have overgeneralized from this lesson to conclude that every widely held belief ought to be transgressed in the same way: using provocation as an end in itself, rather than a means to an end. Taken to an extreme, this can veer into mean-spiritedness or can reinforce discriminatory attitudes against minority religions. And because provocation for its own sake is also a tactic of the Alt Right,⁵⁸ when they come across conservatives or White nationalists who claim they're only resisting "political correctness," these atheists mistakenly believe that they've found kindred spirits.

A third avenue that's led atheists astray is evolutionary psychology, the field of study that posits that human preferences and values are shaped by our evolutionary past. Again, this isn't an inherently illegitimate subject for research. Evolutionary psychology can be wielded fruitfully to explain some human traits. However, it becomes a pseudoscience when it's misused to claim that our current wealth distribution, gender roles, or racial hierarchies are "natural" and therefore immutable. When distorted in

this way, evo-psych resembles a modern version of the old "great chain of being" fallacy that placed White men of European descent above all other races and genders. And of course, that's exactly how Alt Rightists and White nationalists have used it, leading some unwary atheists to conclude that White male superiority is scientifically proven.

One proponent of these views is Satoshi Kanazawa, an evolutionary psychologist who argues that atheists are more intelligent;⁵⁹ that Black women are "objectively" less attractive than other races; that money and power make men happy whereas having children makes women happy; and that an appropriate response to 9/11 would have been to drop nuclear bombs throughout the Middle East.

The New Atheist movement arose in response to 9/11, and many atheists still assign collective blame to all Muslims for the attacks.

There's one more fallacy specific to atheists that has made the atheist community uniquely resistant to changing course. This mistaken idea could best be summarized as, "Because I am rational, my opponents must be irrational, otherwise they'd believe the same things as me." Many atheists assume that, because they so often defend scientific skepticism against outside attacks, that makes them the supreme advocates of reason and gives them the right to speak with the authority of science on whatever topic they address, regardless of how much or how little familiarity they have with it.⁶⁰ Worst of all, it lures them into believing that they can't possibly be susceptible to unconscious bias and other common errors of thinking.

This perception hasn't been helped by the fact that many of the New Atheists' original adversaries really do treat their own faith-based worldview as immune to evidence. (For example, the Christian apologist William Lane Craig has said that if a conflict arises between "the fundamental truth of the Christian faith and beliefs based on argument and evidence, then it is the former which must take precedence over the latter, not vice versa."⁶¹)

Too many atheists have applied the same approach they use against such dogmatic believers, assuming that everyone they disagree with must hold the same mind-set.

THE IDEOLOGICAL DEAD END

It can't be denied that many prominent atheists, as well as some of the louder and most vehement voices in the community, have supported Alt Right ideology and White male supremacy. However, many of the larger atheist and secular groups have gone in the opposite direction and are quietly engaged in serious work on social-justice and intersectional issues. Organizations like the American Humanist Association, the Freedom from Religion Foundation, and the atheist charity

Foundation Beyond Belief have a solid record of supporting women's equality and reproductive justice, promoting the voices of people of color, and supporting non-church-based charitable programs in underserved communities worldwide.

These groups and others like them have recognized that society is diversifying, and so must the atheist movement. To remain narrowly focused on the issues of greatest concern to White men, and no others, would lead the secular community into an ideological dead end. To actively scorn the concerns of women and people of color isn't just morally abhorrent, but self-eradicating. As for atheists, there are strong currents pulling the movement in both directions. Which one will win out, and how that victory will reshape the movement's priorities, are very much open questions.🔗

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The Struggle for LGBTQ Inclusion at Christian Colleges and Universities



Images from Soulforce's Equality Rides, 2006-2007. Credit: Soulforce/Wikimedia Commons.

When Gary Campbell enrolled in Baptist Bible College (now Clarks Summit University [CSU]) in Lackawanna County, Pennsylvania, in 2001, he knew he was gay. He was among those students who, in an effort to repress their sexual orientation, choose the restrictive environment of Christian colleges: schools where students, faculty, and staff are required to sign theologically conservative statements of faith and lifestyle agreements, some of which bar not only extramarital sex and drinking but also dancing and most R-rated movies, in addition to enforcing curfews and mandating chapel attendance.

After he was caught kissing another male student and was placed on probation, Campbell withdrew from the school in 2003, just six credits shy of graduating. In 2012, he joined the Navy, but he was discharged in 2015 for drunk

driving. A few years later—now sober, open about his sexuality, and agnostic—Campbell sought to reenroll in Clarks Summit, intending to complete his degree online and pursue a counseling career helping others overcome substance use disorders. In early May 2018, he was accepted for the fall semester. But in late August, Campbell received a call from the dean of men, telling him that his “homosexual lifestyle” was a violation of CSU’s code of conduct, and his admission was therefore revoked.¹ Such discrimination is routine—and largely legally protected—at evangelical and fundamentalist Christian colleges.

There are hundreds of conservative Christian colleges in the United States. Among that number are more than 140 evangelical schools represented by the Council of Christian Colleges & Universities (CCCU),² which accounts for 445,000 students and 72,000 faculty and staff an-

nually. (Overall, the schools are largely White.) The group’s influence is substantial. A study it commissioned estimates that its member institutions alone make a collective economic impact on the United States of more than \$60 billion annually.³ In 2015, after two Mennonite schools, Eastern Mennonite University and Goshen College, moved to allow the hiring of faculty and staff in same-sex marriages, they were essentially forced out of the organization, which has now specified that it will sanction any member institutions that break with “the historic Christian view of marriage.”⁴

And yet, the fact that CCCU was confronted with the issue at all speaks to the impact of advocacy efforts for LGBTQ inclusion at Christian colleges—work often led by alumni and, where safe, students, and involving quiet support from some faculty.

In recent years, this advocacy work has

come to represent a critical mass (though not a majority) of students on many evangelical campuses who are vocally pressing for change. But resistance to that change has built as well, drawing not just on conservative theology and ideology but also macro-economic circumstances that affect all of higher education. As smaller private colleges struggle to stay afloat, many Christian institutions have doubled down on orthodoxy, in accordance with the demands of students' tuition-paying parents.⁵ Influential school donors expect Christian colleges to continue incubating the next generation of right-wing culture warriors, feeding graduates into organizations such as the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) and Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF). As Haven Herrin, executive director of the LGBTQ advocacy group Soulforce, cautions, "Don't underestimate the influence of the nexus of business, non-profit interests, and major right-wing philanthropy in this sector of higher education that has at least some of its roots in White supremacy."⁶

But while placating parents and donors at the expense of student and alumni activists may seem like a survival strategy for now, over the longer term, it is likely to contribute to the growing exodus of young people from evangelicalism.⁷ Over the last eight years, Herrin said, the wave of advocacy among students and alumni—the visibility of which is only possible thanks to social media—has led many observers to wonder whether conservative Christian colleges have turned a corner: "Does a school kick the person out like they used to? Can they still get away with that?"⁸

Since the news broke in January 2019 that Second Lady Karen Pence is teaching art at a K-8 Christian school that bans not only LGBTQ faculty, students, and parents, but even support for LGBTQ people, this issue has been in the public eye. But evangelical elementary and secondary schools are unlikely to change any time soon, despite the public outcry over Pence.⁹ Neither will fundamentalist Bible colleges like CSU. But for evangelical colleges and universities with pretensions to greater respectability outside the

conservative Christian bubble, public image is a concern—and for advocates, an opportunity.

A SHORT HISTORY OF LGBTQ CHRISTIAN COLLEGE ADVOCACY

After CSU refused to reconsider Gary Campbell's enrollment, Lackawanna College, a local private school, accepted him and worked out a plan to transfer most of his credits—no small matter, given that credits from fundamentalist Bible colleges are rarely honored at other schools. When Campbell was then faced with higher tuition than he had planned for, an advocacy group called HeartStrong offered him a \$3,000 grant to help make up the difference.

"You can't trust very many, if any, of your friends."

When HeartStrong was founded in 1996, it was the first organization in the country dedicated to helping LGBTQ college students at religious (not just evangelical and fundamentalist) institutions of higher education. Two years later, it was joined by Soulforce, which focused on direct nonviolent activism on behalf of such students. (In recent years, Soulforce has worked more on training and supporting local student groups.) Starting with the fundamentalist Oral Roberts University in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in 2000, LGBTQ alumni groups for individual schools began to emerge as well.¹⁰

In the 1990s and through the turn of the century, many fundamentalist and evangelical schools had a sort of "informant culture," where LGBTQ students lived in fear of being outed to school authorities. As Carina Hilbert, who graduated from Mount Vernon Nazarene University in 1997, noted on Twitter, it was an atmosphere in which "You can't trust very many, if any, of your friends."¹¹ At schools like the "fundamentalist flagship" Bob Jones University, former student Jeffrey Hoffman recalled, "the prevailing message" from then BJU President, Bob Jones III, was "that gay people should be put to death immediately."¹²

And yet, despite the generally hostile

environment, on some evangelical campuses in the 1990s, a conversation on sexuality began to take place. At some colleges and universities, it was even permissible to discuss the possibility of LGBTQ acceptance.¹³ That is, in evangelical parlance, "Side A" theology: an LGBTQ-affirming stance that works toward equality. ("Side B" of that debate, by contrast, refers to people who recognize that sexual orientation is generally immutable but insist that those who experience same-sex attraction are called to celibacy. Some evangelicals also use "Side X" to refer to the insistence that LGBTQ people should look to God to change their orientation, and thus advocate the now thoroughly discredited practice of "reparative" or "ex-gay" therapy.¹⁴)

These conversations continued, but the impact was uneven and, at most schools, minimal. It would take the activism of Soulforce—whose members sometimes got arrested for trespassing while participating in "Equality Ride" tours of Christian colleges and universities between 2005 and 2016—and the rise of social media to allow for the proliferation of locally focused alumni and student advocacy groups exerting pressure on particular institutions.¹⁵

But many groups were formed, even at Bob Jones University, where the informant culture still prevails and outed LGBTQ students are still suspended, and barred from graduation unless, after undergoing unprofessional "biblical counseling" that attempts to "correct" their sexuality, they can convince the school that they've become straight. (Hoffman said he's unaware of any students ever actually passing this test and being readmitted.) In 2012, Hoffman and other alumni founded BJUnity, a New York-based nonprofit that operates primarily online to support the school's LGBTQ students. By 2015, BJUnity managed, through a Change.org petition, to compel Bob Jones III to issue a halfhearted apology for the tone of violent anti-LGBTQ rhetoric he'd set for the school. (Notably, Jones didn't apologize for statements made at BJU, but rather his public comments during a 1980 visit to the White House,¹⁶ when he said, "It would not be a bad idea

to bring the swift justice today that was brought in Israel's day against murder and rape and homosexuality. I guarantee it would solve the problem post-haste if homosexuals were stoned, if murderers were immediately killed as the Bible commands."¹⁷ And in his apology, Jones said he never advocated the stoning of LGBTQ people—a clear lie.)

BJUnity probably represents the most influential LGBTQ advocacy effort targeting fundamentalist schools, but thanks to the internet, it's able to provide a crucial lifeline to LGBTQ students that the school's administration, which refuses to communicate with BJUnity's leadership, cannot quash.¹⁸ At some evangelical schools, even greater strides were made. In 2007, Cedarville University alumnus David Olsen, now the Communication Studies chair at California State University, Los Angeles, founded Cedarville Out to support LGBTQ students at his alma mater. According to Olsen, between 2007 and 2013, it was getting safer at the school to be out as LGBTQ without getting kicked out (though still not safe to be "practicing").¹⁹ The school's Vice President for Student Life at the time, Carl Ruby, was open to meeting LGBTQ students off campus, and his support allowed some faculty to feel safe participating in dialogue with LGBTQ students as well.

But even at comparatively much more open schools, administrative crackdowns remain a possibility, threatening to push student and alumni groups underground. In early 2013, in what appears to have been a purge carried out by newly hired Cedarville President Thomas White and the university's board of trustees, Ruby abruptly and unexpectedly resigned. (At the same time, a number of women professors who taught Bible classes also resigned, and the school's philosophy major was eliminated.)²⁰ With Ruby gone, faculty would no longer show up to Cedarville Out meetings, and students quickly came to understand that it was unsafe for them to attend even off-campus LGBTQ events without faculty backing. Olsen, who had frequently returned to the campus as a guest lecturer,

was banned in 2015 from visiting classes to give presentations, even if they were only related to his academic expertise.²¹ And some students, he claimed, were even essentially pushed into withdrawing from the school. These days, Olsen continues to communicate with a handful of students from the school, but says that Cedarville Out's focus has become "less about institutional change [than] saving lives,"²² since social ostracization and forced repression are drivers of LGBTQ youth's disproportionate rates of self-harm and suicide.²³

Often, though, as Soulforce noted in a 2016 article, repression at evangelical schools has become "much more nuanced and deceptive." Instead of students being expelled explicitly on the basis of their sexuality or gender identity, LGBTQ students "are often shown

Many evangelical colleges find that defending right-wing orthodoxy makes for good marketing.

no mercy when failing classes (often due to mental health issues), caught breaking codes of conduct that others would generally be given a slap on the wrist or one page essay assignment for, and often intimidated to drop out."²⁴

Other aspects of the fight continue on different grounds. Since 2014, numerous Christian schools have applied for and received exemptions from some of the non-discrimination requirements of Title IX,²⁵ the federal law that requires schools that receive federal funds to forbid discrimination on the basis of sex—including, after Obama administration guidance issued in 2016, discrimination on the basis of gender identity. Although the Trump administration rescinded that guidance soon after taking office, reversing protections for transgender students, administrators at evangelical schools remain concerned that as their anti-LGBTQ beliefs become increasingly out of step with American public opinion, their access to federal funding could be at risk. Some fundamentalist and evangelical colleges have never taken federal funding precisely in order to evade require-

ments under Title IX and Title IV, which regulates colleges whose students are able to receive federal financial aid.²⁶

Meanwhile, faculty and students at evangelical colleges and universities who would like to see their schools move toward LGBTQ inclusion are largely powerless to effect significant change. Many Christian colleges do not offer tenure, and even when they do, pretexts may be found to remove tenured faculty who rock the boat. And purged faculty may be silenced by non-disclosure agreements tied to severance packages.²⁷

There are several reasons why Christian college administrations and boards of trustees go to such lengths to suppress support for LGBTQ students. Chief among them is fear—the same fear that has led White evangelicals, concerned about their slipping demographic status in the U.S., to embrace Christian nationalism, and with it, Donald Trump.²⁸ Like evangelical Trumpism, the anti-LGBTQ crackdowns taking place at evangelical colleges and universities are an expression of right-wing backlash against civil rights gains—particularly the Supreme Court's 2015 *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision, which legalized same-sex marriage—as well as against the legacy of America's first Black president. In this cultural context, it's easy to see why evangelical colleges, facing the same economic challenges as other small private colleges, often find that defending right-wing orthodoxy makes for good marketing. Real budget squeezes can also provide convenient cover for targeted faculty purges.

Thus, despite a shift toward acceptance of same-sex marriage among evangelical youth—according to data from the Public Religion Research Institute, 53 percent of White evangelicals aged 18–29 support same-sex marriage—evangelical power-brokers seem determined to die on the hill of opposing LGBTQ rights.²⁹ But the extent to which some individual schools may move toward accommodation of their LGBTQ students has yet to be determined. Two ongoing battles, at Azusa Pacific University and Grove City College, illustrate the dynamics in play.



A professor offers a prayer during a rally by the LGBTQ Christian community at Azusa Pacific University to show support after the school reinstated a ban on same-sex relationships, October 1, 2018. Photo: Myung J. Chun/Los Angeles Times via Getty Images.

THE EVANGELICAL ESTABLISHMENT STRIKES BACK: THE CASE OF AZUSA PACIFIC UNIVERSITY

Azusa Pacific University (APU) is a CCCU-affiliated, non-denominational evangelical school rooted in the Wesleyan holiness tradition, with particularly close ties to the Free Methodist denomination. Located in Los Angeles County, California, APU attempts to cultivate a reputation for moderation—willing to hire women for leadership roles even in its theology and philosophy department, which is unusual for an evangelical school. However, in 2013, when the chair of theology became public about his identity as a transgender man, the school, which does not offer tenure, dismissed him.³⁰

For some time, Christian colleges and universities have been quietly using job applicants' stance on marriage as a litmus test in hiring.³¹ Azusa Pacific is no exception according to Christy Lambertson, a freelance grant writer who worked there from 2003–06. When she applied to be Los Angeles term coordinator for a sociology and global studies program that “had a bit of a reputation for turning out

students who bailed on evangelicalism and/or turned liberal,” she went through three interviews, including one with APU President Jon Wallace. As she explains it, “I suppose they felt the need to give me extra vetting.” One interview included a question about whether she’d feel comfortable telling a hypothetical student that Muslims she met through the program were “going to hell.” She observes, “we spent a lot of time on my opinions about gay people—or rather I heard a lot about their opinions about gay people. ... They tried to put a kinder, gentler face on it... but [Wallace] very clearly said, that if a student decided they were gay and that being gay was okay, he would tell them that another school would be a better fit for them.”³²

Later, when Lambertson applied to teach a sociology class for a professor who was going on sabbatical, she was confronted with the school’s statement of faith, which she hadn’t had to sign as staff. By then, she no longer considered herself evangelical and admitted she couldn’t affirm the statement’s theology. After several rounds of what she describes as polite interviews, during

her final meeting, again involving Wallace, she discovered that “my opinion on gay people was clearly just as much or more of an issue than my opinions on evangelical theological orthodoxy, and it was clearly a make or break issue.” In 2016, Azusa Pacific also joined a number of Christian universities in California to form the Association of Faith-Based Institutions, which spent \$350,000 successfully lobbying against a California state bill that would have required schools to clearly disclose their exemptions from non-discrimination laws.³³

In August 2018, APU was hailed for moderating its official stance on same-sex relationships when the school’s student handbook dropped language express-

ly forbidding “romanticized same-sex relationships.” The school also made a handful of changes to its human sexuality statement, including the removal of an explicit reference to “sin.” The statement continued to affirm that sexual activity is only acceptable within marriage, which must be between a man and a woman, and the school clarified that, “A change in policy does not change practice.” But still, the changes were widely interpreted as creating space for romantic, albeit celibate, same-sex relationships.³⁴

These language changes might seem insignificant to people outside evangelical communities, but the advocates who worked with the administration—including APU students associated with the local underground LGBTQ support group, Haven, and Erin Green from the national advocacy organization, Brave Commons—saw them as a positive step. In a September 2018 email Green sent to school faculty and officials whom she had negotiated with, she praised their decision and urged them to stay the course.³⁵

But prominent evangelical leaders, including Albert Mohler, President of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary,

immediately condemned APU's move.³⁶ Private and local pressure was quickly applied as well. APU Associate Professor of Communication Studies Ryan Montague wrote APU's Board of Trustees in mid-September, lamenting the school's ostensible "mission drift" away from its motto, "God first." He estimated that about 50 percent of APU graduates lose their faith and accused APU of "compromise after compromise with culture and fearing backlash from students or public."³⁷

Montague forwarded his message to Chris Lewis, lead pastor of Foothill Church, a non-denominational church attended by many APU community members. On September 18, Lewis in turn forwarded the email to some of his congregants, urging them to write their own letters to the board, though not, he cautioned, "as a staff member/elder/attender" of Foothill Church, but rather as alumni, faculty, or former faculty of APU.³⁸ Soon thereafter, the school reversed course, announcing in late September that the language changes hadn't been approved by the Board of Trustees.³⁹ Green called APU's reversal "incredibly disappointing," noting, "We feel completely exploited by APU."⁴⁰

"They've asked us to tone it down before, but they can't really make us leave."

Donors almost certainly represent one of the key factors holding Azusa Pacific back from positive change. APU's annual reports indicate that the school receives grants from right-wing organizations such as the Charles Koch Foundation and the National Christian Foundation, the latter of which, according to *Inside Philanthropy*, "is probably the single biggest source of money fueling the pro-life and anti-LGBT movements over the past 15 years."⁴¹

APU trustees themselves have a pattern of deep involvement in far-right organizations. Steven L. Perry is one of the founders of National Christian Foundation, California. Raleigh Washington is a leader of the evangelical men's group Promise Keepers, although he, along with Dave Dias, resigned from APU's board in December 2018, accusing the

school of straying from evangelical orthodoxy in its initial move to soften its human sexuality statement. This suggests that, despite the current setback, the fight at APU is not over. According to Green, the board remains divided in its vision for the future.⁴² With President Wallace resigning at the end of this year, it is not entirely clear where the school will go from here, though should it move in a more inclusive direction, its CCCU membership will be threatened. APU did not respond to email and phone requests for comment regarding its hiring practices and the reversal of its decision to soften its approach to same-sex relationships among students.

IS PROGRESS POSSIBLE? THE CASE OF GROVE CITY COLLEGE

Might other evangelical schools chart a different course from that of Azusa Pacific? The case of Grove City College (GCC), an evangelical school of about 2,400 undergraduate students located in the small town of Grove City, Pennsylvania, suggests that a different outcome is not out of the question. GCC is not a member of the CCCU, and so isn't subject to pressure from that body. However, since

GCC is among those schools that forego federal funding in order to avoid anti-discrimination reg-

ulation, it will also never have to worry about Title IX compliance. While the school is officially non-denominational, it has been and continues to be shaped by conservative Presbyterianism. Grove City President Paul J. McNulty has a longstanding relationship with Vice President Mike Pence, who was GCC's controversial choice for 2017 commencement speaker.⁴³ The college's character as a staunchly conservative institution seems unshakeable.

Still, GCC is home to Associate Professor of Psychology Warren Throckmorton, a prominent evangelical author and blogger who once supported "ex-gay" therapy but has since repudiated it.⁴⁴ And Grove's administration is engaged in dialogue with two unofficial LGBTQ support groups: Allies for Gender and Sexuality Inclusion (often referred to simply

as Allies) and The Table, both of which are allowed to meet on campus. GCC is a place where students outed as LGBTQ are at risk of losing university employment or opportunities to participate in certain programs, but at the same time one where student activists are free to distribute rainbow stickers on National Coming Out Day without facing disciplinary action. GCC's newspaper, *The Collegian*, has also been able to cover events like these without facing the type of censorship that has plagued other Christian college papers.⁴⁵

"They've asked us to tone it down before, but they can't really make us leave," noted queer senior psychology major Maddie Myers.⁴⁶

Even so, attempts by LGBTQ student support groups to gain official status have thus far been unsuccessful. GCC Director of Student Activities and Programs Scott Gordon wrote to a student activist in January 2018, praising Allies for participating in "informative, congenial and constructive" dialogue on sexuality, and acknowledging that the group "worked diligently and sincerely to craft a proposal that would give Allies a chance at becoming an official campus group." Nevertheless, he wrote, there was no approval forthcoming. "At this time the College is remaining consistent with its' [sic] independent and Scripturally consistent view of same-sex attraction, marriage, and gender which precludes any *official recognition of a formal group supporting same-sex attraction.*"⁴⁷

Myers, who was homeschooled in a conservative Christian environment before enrolling at GCC, and who did not realize she was queer until her sophomore year, describes the school as "very non-affirming." And certainly in many ways it is. Upon returning from a mission trip for which she had received funds from a GCC program, Myers, now the president of Allies, was told by the program's leadership that if she had been very vocal about her sexuality prior to applying, she likely wouldn't have been accepted. Mack Griffith, a transgender man and president of The Table, mentioned being exposed to "ex-gay" teachings in a group that has since been dissolved, and which was led by a former Campus Ministries

Assistant Director.⁴⁸ When Myers organized a 2018 panel discussion on “LGBTQ and Politics” through GCC’s College Democrats chapter, the school dragged its feet approving the event and forbade the speakers from discussing theology.⁴⁹ Myers also says that College Democrats’ posters are often defaced and torn down, and GCC’s invitation to Vice President Pence to be its 2017 commencement speaker struck Griffith as “a slap in the face.”⁵⁰

And yet, unlike at other fundamentalist and evangelical schools, when leaders of The Table requested a meeting with school President McNulty to explain why the choice of Pence was harmful, they were granted one, and, according to comments posted to a closed Facebook group, the conversation “was overall cordial and friendly.”⁵¹ Pence still spoke; a small number of graduating student advocates refused to shake his hand when walking across the stage. But this was still a level of dialogue that doesn’t happen at similar schools.⁵² And unlike fundamentalist schools that use unprofessional Christian counseling as a disciplinary mechanism, LGBTQ GCC students confirmed that the school affords them access to legitimate professional counseling.

As with other conservative Christian schools, there are a number of faculty who are ahead of the administration in their willingness to support LGBTQ students. For LGBTQ students in these environments, finding such faculty can be vital. At GCC, allied faculty had in recent years begun to display rainbow stickers on their office doors—an act of solidarity that McNulty strongly discouraged by forming a committee to create a generic “Grove City Cares” sticker to replace the rainbow stickers. In a January 2018 memorandum on the issue to faculty and staff, McNulty implied that those who wished to continue displaying rainbow stickers may need to consider leaving:

All of us, administrators and faculty, sign one-year contracts in which we af-

firm our “full support for the purpose, mission, identity, goals and objectives of the College, including its religious values and moral standards.” Adherence to this condition is an issue of personal integrity. If you find yourself out of alignment with the College’s vision, mission and values, it is important to earnestly and honestly consider whether Grove City College is where you can serve in good conscience.⁵³

A committee was formed to create a generic “Grove City Cares” sticker to replace the rainbow stickers.



Despite this memorandum, current students report that a few professors continue to display rainbow stickers.

Senior Director of Communications Jacquelyn Muller responded to some questions about GCC via email, writing, “Grove City College is committed to doing its very best to address any concerns that may conflict with” its Christian mission, adding, “student leaders who are aligned with LGBTQ interests have recognized this commitment and expressed appreciation for the caring environment which exists to educate all students and encourage civil discourse.”⁵⁴

Many of the GCC students and alumni I spoke to by and large agree with that claim. “For all its flaws,” said Griffith, who remains more theologically conser-

vative than most of his peers in GCC’s LGBTQ community, “Grove City is very much redeemable.” Griffith is still required to live in women’s housing at GCC, but his resident assistant and resident director recognize and use Griffith’s correct pronouns.⁵⁵

While there appear to be limits beyond which the current administration of GCC will not go, that it has gone as far as it has is likely a result of several factors: the school’s independence from CCCU regulations; the presence of faculty, like Throckmorton, who are committed to authentic scholarship even if it challenges conservative evangelical orthodoxy; the willingness of the administration to retain such faculty and to engage in dialogue with concerned students.

If we want to see more evangelical colleges eventually follow in the footsteps of GCC, and to see schools like GCC go further, we need to keep the concerns of LGBTQ students and alumni in the public eye. It won’t be easy for LGBTQ and allied students, alumni, and faculty to overcome the immense pressure exerted by hardline conservative donors, the nexus between evangelical schools and right-wing institutions, pressure from conservative parents, and, in many cases, the CCCU. But the more that their

concerns are heard and acknowledged, and the more the press and the public shine a light on schools invested in having a humane and respectable reputation, the better chance there may be for positive change down the line. ☺

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Book Review: *Pure* by Linda Kay Klein



Purity Ring. Photo: Rlmabie/Wikimedia Commons.

Evangelical “purity” culture, roughly defined, is the belief that Christianity requires sexual abstinence before (heterosexual) marriage, especially for girls and women, and promises sexual fulfillment to those who save sex until marriage. It’s a belief system often accompanied by messages of shame for those who fail to remain virgins until their wedding day—who are not only said to be breaking God’s law but risking lifelong consequences for their sexual “sins.”

Pure: Inside the Evangelical Movement That Shamed a Generation of Young Women and How I Broke Free, by Linda Kay Klein, was unlike anything I’ve ever read and yet, as a millennial who grew up during the height of purity culture, each page felt like a part of my own story.

While the idea of abstaining from sex until marriage has existed in various religious communities for thousands of

years, in the U.S. in the late 1980s and early ’90s, it became a movement, a theology, and soon after, a for-profit evangelical industry that exists to this day. Even the government got involved, funding purity-related sex education initiatives, such as the Christian abstinence-only group Silver Ring Thing, which received \$1.4 million from the federal government until a 2005 lawsuit demonstrated that it was illegally evangelizing with taxpayer funds.¹

A tidal wave of purity-pushing books and Bible study materials were written and marketed to teens, parents, and pastors of teens, chief among them Elisabeth Elliot’s *Passion and Purity*, and Josh Harris’ cult classic *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*. Church youth groups began sending their teens to conferences like True Love Waits, an event started in 1993 by LifeWay, which, as the product-selling arm of the Southern Baptist Convention,

had access to the largest Protestant denomination in the U.S.² (The SBC’s commercialization of purity culture closely coincides with the conservative takeover of the denomination in the ’80s and ’90s, which sharply curtailed the rights and role of Southern Baptist women.) At True Love Waits events, young people were encouraged by the thousands to pledge their virginity to both God and family. Formal “Purity Balls” for fathers and daughters,³ complete with post-dance “Purity Certificates,” drew families from further outside the mainstream conference circuit.⁴ And celebrities like Nick Jonas and Miley Cyrus donned “purity rings,” helping usher in a wave of related merchandise, from purity themed T-shirts to bumper stickers to coffee mugs and more.⁵

When Klein read Elliot’s *Passion and Purity*, she was left with such overwhelming guilt for having kissed her boyfriend

that she felt God was directing her to break up with him. At school, a sex ed lesson consisted of a teacher passing an Oreo cookie around the class, and, after it had been touched by each person, dropped on the ground, and spat upon, warning students that if they let themselves be treated like the cookie, “no one will want you.”⁶

Klein’s experiences were echoed by dozens of women she interviewed, who were variously taught that purity meant: waiting until their wedding ceremony, or at least their engagement, for their first kiss; trying to avoid all feelings of sexual desire prior to marriage; dressing modestly; or a sliding scale of rules: only kissing in public places or only while standing up, kissing and touching while lying down but never achieving orgasm, or, on the far end, engaging in “everything but” vaginal intercourse, up to and including oral and anal sex.

The only universals, it seemed, were a heavy dose of guilt and shame, ladled on in the name of God, and the distinct lack of any actual sexual education. And the repercussions of the latter is a recurring theme in the book, leaving the women Klein spoke to filled with confusion, fear, and shame. Some told Klein of not understanding even the basic mechanics of sexual intercourse until their senior year of college or their honeymoons. As one woman in her mid-twenties explained:

our “sex talks” were all generic metaphors and warnings about what would happen to us if we crossed a line, which was defined differently by so many people that we were left guessing all the same. Meanwhile, we knew we would be shamed if we asked sexual questions; shamed if we discussed sexual decisions; shamed if we shared our confusing sexual feelings and thoughts; and shamed worst of all if we admitted we had already done anything sexual.⁷

But it wasn’t just awkward first kisses at the altar, or an embarrassing ignorance

“Linda Kay Klein takes us inside religious purity culture as only one who grew up in it can. She shows us how the system of mind-and-body shaming works within a religious movement so culturally and politically influential that it must be understood by us all.” —GLORIA STEINEM

PURE

Inside the Evangelical Movement
that Shamed a Generation
of Young Women
and How I Broke Free

LINDA KAY KLEIN

Pure: Inside the Evangelical Movement That Shamed a Generation of Young Women and How I Broke Free by Linda Kay Klein (New York: Touchstone, 2018).

of anatomy. Women raised in evangelical purity culture also found that the fairytale honeymoons they were promised were in reality marred by panic attacks, long-lasting shame, and physical pain, all of which haunted (and in some cases destroyed) their relationships and marriages. Many faced a double bind: having long been expected to shut down their sexuality, upon marriage they were expected to be “tigresses” in bed.

It didn’t work. The same shame used to keep women from violating purity rules followed them into their marriages, leaving many unable to experience orgasm or relax during lovemaking. Many experienced painful sex, or found themselves unable to actually have penetrative sex for weeks after their honeymoon—which in turn brought more guilt and shame. For some, these symptoms lasted years, leading to depression, self-harm, medical complications, and withdrawal from

The same shame used to keep women from violating purity rules followed them into their marriages.

otherwise healthy relationships.

The shame and fear was compounded for those in the LGBTQ community, since purity culture held that being “pure” also meant being heterosexual, as it was when purity culture collided with sexual assault, since purity teachings rarely differentiated between assault and consensual premarital sex.⁸ In some cases, purity teachings were even used as tools for sexual predators. Klein’s own youth pastor was convicted of child enticement with the intent to have sexual contact after he groomed a 12-year-old girl in the same youth group where Klein was taught to be pure. Throughout the book, Klein addresses major sexual abuse scandals within churches that heralded purity culture, such as Joshua Harris’s former Maryland megachurch, Covenant Life Church, which became the center

of a child sexual abuse and cover-up scandal in 2014.⁹

While some purity culture preachers purposefully may scheme to use the teachings for abusive agendas, many others clearly believed they were helping a generation of young people understand their version of God’s plan for sexuality. But Klein’s book makes a strong argument that, irrespective of intentions, this movement leaves too many young people scarred for life.☹

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BlitzWatch: Tracking Christian Nationalism

Last spring, PRA Senior Research Analyst Frederick Clarkson uncovered a coordinated effort to promote Christian nationalism in public life. Project Blitz, developed by the Congressional Prayer Caucus Foundation, the National Legal Foundation, and WallBuilders' ProFamily Legislators Conference, packages a wide-ranging slate of model bills intended to "protect the free exercise of traditional Judeo-Christian religious values and beliefs in the public square."

At least 70 Project Blitz-related bills—including measures that attack LGBTQ people, undermine access to reproductive health-care, and insert religion into public schools—were introduced in state legislatures in 2018.

According to Clarkson, the group's 2019 planning manual, Report and Analysis on Religious Freedom Measures Impacting Prayer and Faith in America, clearly promotes

"a Christian nationalist view of history and a long-term Dominionist political vision that's profoundly at odds with what most would consider a reasonable approach to religious freedom."

These bills are intended to escalate. By starting with "In God We Trust" license plates (which Project Blitz calls "moving billboards"), before advancing resolutions on prayer in schools, heterosexual marriage, or so-called "biblical values" on gender and adoption, the state-level prayer caucuses hope to build momentum with easy victories then move on to more dangerous bills undermining equality.

In response, PRA is helping anchor the monitoring project BlitzWatch, along with a coalition of national organizations committed to protecting equality and human rights.

Visit www.blitzwatch.org to learn more.



"In God We Trust" license plates are already available in 20 states and in some the phrase will appear on every license plate. Photo: Eli Christman/Flickr.

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