

# Ethno-nationalism, Christianity, and the Unite the Right Rally

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## *Introduction*

The Unite the Right rally took place in Charlottesville, Virginia on August 11 and 12, 2017. The rally was primarily organized and promoted by University of Virginia (U.Va.) alumni and Alt-Right leaders Jason Kessler and Richard Spencer, who became the most public faces of the rally. It was inspired by the Charlottesville City Council's decision to remove Confederate General Robert E Lee's statue from a public park near the Downtown Mall in Charlottesville.

The Unite the Right rally was the culmination of what many Charlottesville residents have now dubbed the "summer of hate."<sup>1</sup> The rally came after a smaller Alt-Right rally in May and an official Ku Klux Klan (KKK) rally in July, both in protest of the statue's removal.<sup>2</sup> As the movement to stop the statue's removal gained support throughout the summer and more Alt-Right leaders and groups signed on to participate, the stated goal of the rally evolved from a limited statement to stop the removal of the statue to become a broader protest in defense of "white" interests.<sup>3</sup> It soon became apparent that hundreds of protesters were coming, and that this could be the largest white supremacist gathering in America in a decade or more.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the size of the gathering became a statement. It was a message to the Charlottesville government, social activists, and all who opposed the Alt-Right, that the Alt-Right could and would organize in the public square, not simply on the internet, and they would not accept what they saw as challenges and disrespect to their history. Their goal was to, as the name suggests, "Unite the Right." This meant, on a basic level, to unite all the

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<sup>1</sup> Astead W. Herndon, "Charlottesville Inspired Biden to Run. Now It Has a Message for Him.," *The New York Times* (*The New York Times*, January 21, 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/21/us/politics/charlottesville-attack-biden.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Madison Park, "Why White Nationalists Are Drawn to Charlottesville," *CNN* (Cable News Network, August 12, 2017), <https://www.cnn.com/2017/08/11/us/charlottesville-white-nationalists-rally-why/index.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Robert King, "This Indiana Man Is in the Middle of the 'Unite the Right' Rally in Charlottesville," *The Indianapolis Star* (*IndyStar*, August 13, 2017), <https://www.indystar.com/story/news/2017/08/12/unite-right-white-nationalist-rally-charlottesville-erupts-violence/562095001/>.

<sup>4</sup> The Associated Press, "Hate-Watch Groups Agree Rally Was Largest in Decade or More," *AP NEWS* (Associated Press, August 14, 2017), <https://apnews.com/article/7f00c96367f64cb9992e342242a461b1>.

participating groups, from the Alt-Right, to the alt-light, to the Southern nationalists, to the neo-Nazis. Organizers also created the rally in order to reach other white Americans dissatisfied with the direction of the country and its politics to show them that resistance was possible through their movement.<sup>5</sup> The rally was an attempt to bring the ethno-nationalist goals of the Alt-Right into the mainstream and to make their views publicly acceptable to discuss and to influence public policy.<sup>6</sup> The groups and individual protesters at the rally were wide ranging in their beliefs and ideologies, as seen in the signs, symbolism, and chants they used at the rally. The majority of these outward displays of loyalty to their cause were white nationalistic, racist, or antisemitic in nature. However, a motif of Christian symbolism relating to Christian history and theology emerged from the rally as well. Christianity? A religion based on love? What about the Unite the Right rally and its racism and violence was Christian? Why did the Alt-Right, with its complicated history with Christianity, choose to invoke Christianity in its messaging that promoted white nationalism?

In this paper, I will explore the Christian elements of the Unite the Right rally, the symbols and chants used by rally participants, as well as their historical antecedents and larger implications in the Alt-Right's goals for the rally. This paper addresses these questions in three sections: *Christianity, Unite the Right, and the Alt-Right*, which explores the Alt-Right's complicated relationship with Christianity and how it was used in the Unite the Right rally; *Unite the Right: Ethno-nationalism in Action*, which discusses the ethno-nationalism of the Alt-Right and rally participants; and *The Historical Antecedents of Christian Racism in America*, which provides an overview of Christian theological racism through American history and its influences today. I begin by introducing one of the most key figures of Unite

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<sup>5</sup> Trey Knickerbocker, "The Unite The Right Rally Will Finally Put Black-Pillars In Their Place," August 1, 2017, <https://altright.com/2017/08/01/great-white-hunter-beware-of-the-alt-rino/>.

<sup>6</sup> Vincent Law, "The 'Unite The Right' Rally Is Going To Be A Turning Point For White Identity In America," AltRight.com, August 6, 2017, <https://altright.com/2017/08/05/the-unite-the-right-rally-is-going-to-be-a-turning-point-for-white-identity-in-america/>.

the Right and the movement of the Alt-Right, Richard Spencer. Later, I will discuss primary organizer Jason Kessler.

*Richard Spencer and Unite the Right*

On the morning of August 11, 2017, before the beginning of the events of the Unite the Right rally and the violence and discourse surrounding it, Richard Spencer published the “Charlottesville Statement,” explaining what he believed it meant to be Alt-Right.<sup>7</sup> A fundamental part of the Alt-Right’s ideology and the ideology of the organizers of the Unite the Right is that there must be a white ethno-state to preserve the white race. As Spencer explains, he believes this ethno-state, the homeland for white people, should be America and that America was made for white people, by white people, adding that, “The founding population of the United States was primarily Anglo-Saxon and Protestant. By the Great War, a coherent American nation emerged that was European and Christian... Whites alone defined America as a European society and political order.”<sup>8</sup>

According to Spencer and others in the Alt-Right, European whiteness, which excluded Jews, and Christianity were the two factors that made America a great country.<sup>9</sup> We already see, therefore, how Christianity got into Unite the Right. Spencer and others in the Alt-right identify Christianity as a key part of American nationalism, and a white American ethno-state would be predicated on Christian thought and influence. Spencer and the Alt-Right supported presidential candidate Donald Trump, and subsequent to his election, used his political movement to bring attention to their own.<sup>10</sup> According to a study by Whitehead and Perry, the more Christian nationalist a voter was, the more likely they were to

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<sup>7</sup> Richard Spencer, “What It Means to Be Alt-Right,” AltRight.com, August 11, 2017, <https://altright.com/2017/08/11/what-it-means-to-be-alt-right/>.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Josh Harkinson, “Meet the White Nationalist Trying to Ride the Trump Train to Lasting Power,” Mother Jones, October 27, 2016, <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2016/10/richard-spencer-trump-alt-right-white-nationalist/>.

vote for Donald Trump in 2016.<sup>11</sup> This was the context of the relationship between the Alt-Right and Christianity at the time of Unite the Right, with the Alt-Right growing its base of supporters from Trump's base.

Richard Spencer is an atheist.<sup>12</sup> His goals were not religious, but racial and national. However, he understood the politics of the time. The 2016 presidential election had galvanized certain facets of the American electorate; the white nationalist converts growing in the ranks of the Alt-Right were one such facet, Christian nationalists were another.<sup>13</sup> Christian nationalists were potential converts to a Christian Alt-Right movement, if only they could be convinced of the merits of white nationalism.<sup>14</sup> As Whitehead and Perry explain, Christian nationalism is not necessarily "Christianity," but rather a cultural framework of "myths, traditions, symbols, narratives, and values systems" that idealize Christianity with the belief that it should be given a preferential place in American civic society.<sup>15</sup> By engaging with Christianity at Unite the Right, the Alt-Right sought to create a type of Christian ethno-nationalism. They built on the civil religious traditions of Christian nationalism, and combined them with the history, politics, and narratives of white nationalism. The Alt-Right used Christianity as a political tool to gain recruits by invoking a memory of shared identity that could serve as the basis for an ideal political future for the Alt-Right and Christian nationalists. They did this through direct Christian symbolism, invocation of white European Christian history and legend, such as the Lost Cause of the Confederacy, as well as emphasizing the historical antecedents of racist Christian theology.

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<sup>11</sup> Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2020), 62.

<sup>12</sup> Graeme Wood, "Richard Spencer Was My High-School Classmate," June 12, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/06/his-kampf/524505/>.

<sup>13</sup> Trey Knickerbocker, "The Unite The Right Rally Will Finally Put Black-Pillers In Their Place"; Whitehead and Perry, *Taking America Back for God*, 66-67

<sup>14</sup> Alexander Zusammenbau, "The Christianity Question," AltRight.com, November 21, 2017, <https://altright.com/2017/11/20/the-christianity-question/>.

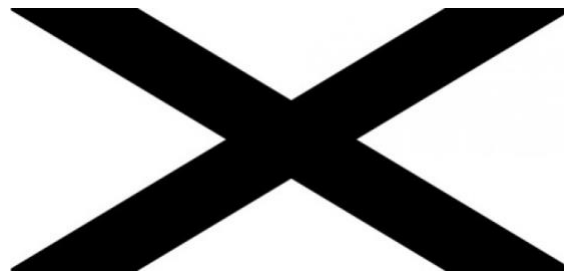
<sup>15</sup> Whitehead and Perry, *Taking America Back for God*, 10-11.

Christianity added another strong, historical unifier beyond ethnicity, one that had significant political and cultural relevancy that could be used to push the Alt-Right's goals further into mainstream society.

### *Christianity, Unite the Right, and the Alt-Right*

#### *Signs, Symbols, and History*

Symbols used by Unite the Right protesters were meant to invoke the relationship between Christianity and European whiteness, as well compare Christian martyrdom with the martyrdom of the United States as it loses its whiteness. One common symbol that made this comparison was the Southern Nationalist flag, which evokes St. Andrew's Cross and the Confederate battle flag.<sup>16</sup>



This symbol was seen on many flags and shields throughout the rally. Created by a former member of the neo-Confederate League of the South, it advocates for the South as its own nation, one which has been martyred by the North and society's liberalization.<sup>17</sup> The cross, also known as a saltire, was originally chosen for the Confederate battle flag due to the large Scottish population in the South, as St. Andrew is the patron saint of Scotland. It is meant to resemble the shape of the cross that St. Andrew was crucified upon, as he believed he did not deserve to die in the same way as Christ.<sup>18</sup> The saltire is a symbol of martyrdom and

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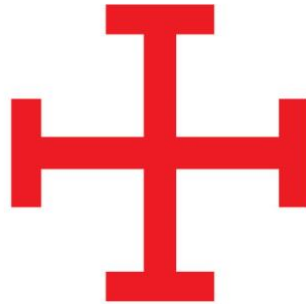
<sup>16</sup> Hatewatch Staff. "Flags and Other Symbols Used by Far-Right Groups in Charlottesville," August 12, 2017. <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2017/08/12/flags-and-other-symbols-used-far-right-groups-charlottesville>.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> John M. Coski, *The Confederate Battle Flag: America's Most Embattled Emblem* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2006), 19.

independence for Southern Nationalists, it was a simple but strong statement that was seen on flags and shields throughout the rally.

Another Christian motif within the rally was the phrase and symbol for the phrase, “Deus Vult,” meaning “God wills it,” seen here:<sup>19</sup>



This symbol was also seen on signs and flags throughout the rally. The symbol and its associated phrase have a long history in Christianity, having once been used in the Crusades. It was supposedly used by Pope Urban III in 1095 when he instructed the First Crusaders to take the “Holy Land” back.<sup>20</sup> The use of it at the Unite the Right rally may imply that the United States is now the Holy Land, that it must be taken back from those who have taken it over but do not have a religious or historical claim to it. It also displays anti-Muslim sentiment, as the crusades were meant to unseat Muslim rule from the Holy Land.<sup>21</sup> “Deus Vult” connects the Christian crusades and holy wars of ancestral Europe to the struggle for American white identity today. Immigration and liberalization of America acts as a holy threat, and the wielders of this symbol are prepared to fight a holy war.

Throughout the rally, numerous references to Christian Bible verses that promoted Alt-Right and white nationalist beliefs were observed. Ku Klux Klan members, most of whom are explicitly Christian nationalists as well as white supremacists, were seen at both the Unite the Right protest and the earlier July KKK rally holding signs listing Bible verses

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<sup>19</sup> Washington Post Staff. “Deconstructing the Symbols and Slogans Spotted in Charlottesville,” August 18, 2017. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2017/local/charlottesville-videos/>.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.



that supposedly justified racism and antisemitism.<sup>22</sup> A truck spotted driving around Charlottesville on August 12 sported numerous signs demanding the end of abortion and accusing those who support abortion of being child murderers and engaging in child sacrifice, all while citing Bible passages like Exodus 20 and Romans 6:23, as well as the United States Constitution.<sup>23</sup> Being against abortion is not an Alt-Right exclusive belief, as many Americans, both politically liberal and conservative, are anti-abortion. However, many white nationalists have aligned themselves with the anti-abortion movement. The fear of losing their status as the majority race in America is so great that white women having abortions of white babies are viewed as contributing to the white genocide that they believe is occurring.<sup>24</sup> The driver of this truck was a white nationalist protestor in town for the Unite the Right rally, but on another day, he would look like an extreme anti-abortion activist, of which there are many who do not hold racist beliefs. The integration of white nationalist ideas with groups already going to political extremes for other causes bridges the gap between their ideologies and infers that in a white nation, traditional values would be upheld and acts like abortion would be outlawed.

### *The Alt-Right*

The Alt-Right is not a Christian organization, but rather a decentralized movement that includes a wide variety of people and far-right ideologies, disseminated and popularized through the internet with the core goal of white nationalism. The name “Alt-Right” is a relatively recent term that came from a 2008 lecture by emeritus Elizabethtown College

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<sup>22</sup> Jake Meador, “On Trump and Repentance - Mere Orthodoxy: Christianity, Politics, and Culture,” Mere Orthodoxy | Christianity, Politics, and Culture, August 17, 2017, <https://mereorthodoxy.com/trump-evangelicals-charlottesville/>.

<sup>23</sup> Waitman Beorn, “Extremist Christian Anti-Abortion Vehicle,” Digital Collecting - “Unite the Right” Rally and Community Response, August 12, 2017, <http://digitalcollecting.lib.virginia.edu/rally/items/show/88>.

<sup>24</sup> Ari Brostoff, “Perspective | How White Nationalists Aligned Themselves with the Antiabortion Movement,” The Washington Post (WP Company, June 22, 2020), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/08/27/how-white-nationalists-aligned-themselves-with-antiabortion-movement/>.

Professor Paul Gottfried, “The Decline and Rise of the Alternative Right,” which Unite the Right rally organizer Richard Spencer would soon adopt, shorten, and popularize as “Alt-Right.”<sup>25</sup> The Alt-Right, and its less extreme counterpart, the “alt-light,” can be difficult to define due to the number of often conflicting ideologies within its ranks. From the outsider perspective, the Southern Poverty Law Center defines the Alt-Right as follows: “The Alternative Right, commonly known as the ‘Alt-Right,’ is a set of far-right ideologies, groups and individuals whose core belief is that ‘white identity’ is under attack by multicultural forces using ‘political correctness’ and ‘social justice’ to undermine white people and ‘their’ civilization.”<sup>26</sup> Unite the Right and Alt-Right leader Richard Spencer gives a more detailed definition. On August 11, 2017, the day of the torchlit march through the University of Virginia campus by Unite the Right participants, Spencer published the “Charlottesville Statement,” a list of the main factors that he believed to make up the Alt-Right ideology.<sup>27</sup>

Of the twenty factors he listed, four main themes emerge:

- *Race Matters* – “Race is real. Race matters. Race is the foundation of identity.” Race is fundamental to the Alt-Right: they are proud of their race and they seek to create unity with their white brethren. The Alt-Right does not necessarily see other races as inferior, but those who are not European in ancestry (such as Jews) are inherently other.
- *Ethno-nationalism* – “Nations must secure their existence and uniqueness and promote their own development and flourishing... Racially or ethnically defined states are legitimate and necessary.” A rejection of globalism and diversity, the white ethno-state is vital for the white race’s survival and ethno-states for all races would be beneficial to all.
- *Human Nature* – This is the idea that there is a “reality of race, sex, heritability, and innate endowments” inherent within humanity. Traditional gender and familial roles

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<sup>25</sup> Alexandra Minna Stern, *Proud Boys and the White Ethnostate: How the Alt-Right Is Warping the American Imagination* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2020), 5

<sup>26</sup> Southern Poverty Law Center, “Alt-Right,” Southern Poverty Law Center, accessed April 15, 2021, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/alt-right>.

<sup>27</sup> Richard Spencer, “What It Means to Be Alt-Right”

are upheld and honored as the foundation of functioning society, whereas “feminism, deviancy, the futile denial of biological reality, and everything destructive to healthy relations between men and women” is opposed.

- *Political Rights* – A fundamental part of the Alt-Right’s activism is tied to their perceived loss of rights. The Left and their liberalization of society is infringing on their rights and way of life. Spencer explains that the rights that the Alt-Right most seeks to defend are that of free speech, the right to bear arms, and education free of liberal dogma.

The Alt-Right movement is informed by a long history of white identity and supremacist movements in the United States. The Ku Klux Klan first emerged after the end of the Civil War as a white supremacist group dedicated to maintaining the social and cultural order of the South after the fall of the Confederacy. It came to prominence for a second time after World War I, hitting its largest membership in 1924 at about four million members nationwide.<sup>28</sup> A third resurgence occurred in the 1950s and 1960s in reaction to the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>29</sup> Each resurgence of the Klan was motivated by different cultural and ideological issues and varied in beliefs and tactics by region. The Klan of the 1860s and 1870s reacted to the loss of the Confederacy and the Reconstruction era and was primarily based in the South, whereas the second resurgence of the Klan in the 1920s was nationwide.<sup>30</sup> Depending on the regional politics and concerns of the area, the 1920s Klan was anti-Black, anti-Catholic, antisemitic, anti-immigrant, and anti-labor, which enabled its mass membership and control.<sup>31</sup> The third Klan resurgence was a reaction to the perceived threat

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<sup>28</sup> Kathleen Belew, *Bring the War Home: the White Power Movement and Paramilitary America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), 36

<sup>29</sup> Kathleen Belew argues that there is a correlation between war and the rise of violent white identity movements, noting that the three major Ku Klux Klan movements occurred after the Civil War, World War I, and World War II and the Korean War. The White Power Movement of the 1970s and 1980s came during and after the Vietnam War.

<sup>30</sup> Kat Chow and Kathleen Blee, “What The Ebbs And Flows Of The KKK Can Tell Us About White Supremacy Today,” NPR (NPR, December 8, 2018), <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2018/12/08/671999530/what-the-ebbs-and-flows-of-the-kkk-can-tell-us-about-white-supremacy-today>.

<sup>31</sup> Kathleen Belew, *Bring the War Home*, 37

that civil rights and desegregation posed to white supremacy in America, showing that major Klan resurgences tend to correlate with a threat to the power of white, Protestant men.

In the 1970s, new white supremacists with different ideologies began to emerge. Nazi ideology has been present in the United States since Hitler came to power in Germany; however, proponents had been relatively small in influence. Then came the Vietnam War. Anti-communist sentiment raged throughout America, and a Neo-Nazi movement began to form, considering itself as ready to fight back against communism on American soil as America once fought on Vietnamese soil.<sup>32</sup> The white power movement was born in the aftermath of the Vietnam War and in the loss of trust in the American government due to its failures and perceived betrayals. Uniting Christian Identitarians, Klansmen, Neo-Nazis, Southern separatists, the white power movement began to pursue an all-white nation that would better protect their traditional beliefs and societal norms.<sup>33</sup> At the movement's peak, they had some 25,000 "hard core" members, with 150,000-175,000 buying literature or engaging in rallies, with the literature read by hundreds of thousands more.<sup>34</sup> The white power movement was a significant precursor to the Alt-Right. It showed that groups of different ideologies could work together towards a common goal and have significant impact. The white power movement also popularized the idea of white nationalism, a key component of the Alt-Right and the Unite the Right rally.

The Alt-Right movement differs from these earlier movements because it was created on the internet, with the potential to reach millions of internet users. While the KKK would emerge and re-emerge from the 1860s through the 1960s, its resurgences were frequently based on regional politics and power was decentralized in regional groups. Direct communication between distant Klans was constricted by the technology of the time.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 54

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 23-24

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 4

Members of the white power movement contacted each other only by telephone, and white power literature was limited to what could be printed and physically distributed. But in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the age of the internet, anyone can come across Alt-Right literature and beliefs and be “red-pilled.” Red pilling is a reference to the 1999 movie *The Matrix*, wherein the main character Neo must make the choice between taking a blue pill, one which would make him forget everything in a happy fantasy, or take the red pill and learn the harsh realities of the world he lives in.<sup>35</sup> In the Alt-Right, to be red-pilled is to become aware of the validity of the movement, whether that be the understanding that liberal society is incorrect and must again be replaced with traditional values and structures, or that white nationalism is the ideal political state.<sup>36</sup>

White nationalism is a form of ethno-nationalism. According to nationalism scholar Walker Connor, a “nation connotes a group of people who believe they are ancestrally related.”<sup>37</sup> Thereafter, nationalism is identification with and loyalty to one’s nation.<sup>38</sup> Ethno-nationalism is loyalty to a nation based on ethnicity and a common ancestral background. The Alt-Right seeks to create a world where the phrases nationalism and ethno-nationalism would be functionally the same.<sup>39</sup> Today, America is extremely diverse in its citizens’ ethnic backgrounds. However, the historically most populous and powerful demographic in America history has been white Americans of European descent. Perceiving a possible change in that demographic, Alt-Right white nationalists seek to restore America to what it once was, a country by white people, for white people, without the draining force of liberalism or diversity.<sup>40</sup> But the idea of whiteness in America is a complicated subject.

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<sup>35</sup> Stern, *Proud Boys and the White Ethnostate*, 16

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 16

<sup>37</sup> Walker Connor, *Ethnonationalism: the Quest for Understanding* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1994), xi

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, xi

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, xi

<sup>40</sup> Knickerbocker, “The Unite The Right Rally Will Finally Put Black-Pillers In Their Place”

Whiteness is not a race and the bounds of who is considered white frequently change and develop, depending on the ethnic and religious groups who gained power in America.<sup>41</sup> At the crux of American power sat Anglo Saxon Protestants, who were primarily responsible for the foundation of America and the held hegemonic control over the country for over a century.<sup>42</sup> Religion, race, and national identity thereby become associated in the America psyche and historical memory. Nonwhite ethnic groups and non-Protestant religious groups like Jews, Catholics, and Mormons were historically marginalized and considered inferior, and were frequently excluded from the idea of American white nationalism. American white nationalism combined with Protestant ideals created a rich history of Christian nationalism in the United States, from the concept of manifest destiny,<sup>43</sup> through political themes that led to the election of President Donald Trump in 2016.<sup>44</sup> In the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the movements antecedent of the Alt-Right began to fear that customary associations of race, religion, and power in America were coming apart. The Alt-Right acts as a counterculture to modern America's racial and intellectual diversity, seeking to push back the clock and restore original concepts American nationalism through whiteness and Protestantism.

In the case of white nationalism in the Alt-Right and the Unite the Right rally, white nationalism is the concept that ethnicity and national identity are, and should be, connected and anyone outside the given ethnicity is not a true citizen of the nation. Like the white power movement before them, most major groups participating in the Unite the Right rally

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<sup>41</sup> Isenberg, Nancy. "White, Whiteness, Whitewash: The Masks We Wear in America." *The American Scholar*, Wntr 2021, 18+. *Gale Literature Resource Center* (accessed May 2, 2021).  
[https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A650413569/LitRC?u=viva\\_uva&sid=LitRC&xid=e2d230ea](https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A650413569/LitRC?u=viva_uva&sid=LitRC&xid=e2d230ea).

<sup>42</sup> Jeannine Hill Fletcher, "Warrants for Reconstruction: Christian Hegemony, White Supremacy," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 51, no. 1 (2016): pp. 54-79, <https://doi.org/10.1353/ecu.2016.0011>.

<sup>43</sup> John Wilsey, "'Our Country Is Destined to Be the Great Nation of Futurity': John L. O'Sullivan's Manifest Destiny and Christian Nationalism, 1837-1846," *Religions* 8, no. 4 (2017): <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel8040068>, 68

<sup>44</sup> Andrew L Whitehead, Samuel Perry, and Joseph O. Baker, "Make America Christian Again: Christian Nationalism and Voting for Donald Trump in the 2016 Presidential Election," 2017, <https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/rdn98>

had an ultimate goal of a white ethno-state.<sup>45</sup> The white ethno-state seeks not only to exist independently, but to remove that which does not fit, to fundamentally reject what America is now and reshape it into the all white country they believe it should be. A significant motivator for the white ethno-state is the ideology of “racial protectionism,” the idea that the white race is biologically endangered and thus must be protected from perceived racial, cultural, and ideological contamination.<sup>46</sup> The line between white nationalism and white supremacy is thin and hard to distinguish at times, as they often go hand and hand. However, many white nationalists, including participants in Unite the Right and organizer Richard Spencer himself, deny holding ideas of racial superiority or inferiority; instead, they rather advocate for “enforced racial segregation” through nationhood in order to improve society and protect all races.<sup>47</sup> White nationalism was prevalent in some way in almost all of the identifiable ideologies of the rally’s participating groups. At its core, it is an identitarian movement, one which seeks to make connections between the facets of American and racial identity. Allegiance to Christianity is a significant driver of many politically active Americans today and by integrating Christianity as an important factor in the nationalist identity they were attempting to form, the Alt-Right could become more appealing to some individuals who put their Christian nationalism at the forefront of their identity.

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<sup>45</sup> Stern, *Proud Boys and the White Ethnostate*, 9

<sup>46</sup> Damon T. Berry, *Blood and Faith Christianity in American White Nationalism* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2017), 3

<sup>47</sup> Callum Borchers, “Analysis | Is Richard Spencer a White Nationalist or a White Supremacist? It Depends on the News Source.,” *The Washington Post* (WP Company, April 28, 2019), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/10/19/is-richard-spencer-a-white-nationalist-or-a-white-supremacist-it-depends-on-the-news-source/>; However, in 2019, a recorded version of Richard Spencer’s reaction to Heather Heyer’s death in August, 2017 shows how slippery the line between white nationalist and white supremacist can be, with Spencer using antisemitic slurs and exclaiming that his ancestors enslaved those that opposed him.

## *Unite the Right: Ethno-nationalism in Action*

### *The Lost Cause and Southern Nationalism*

The Lost Cause was at the core of Unite the Right. The Lost Cause was the idea that even though the Confederacy lost the war, their cause was ultimately a just one that should be lived out, even under the subjugation of the North. It was a reaction to the humiliation of the South by the loss of the Confederacy and of slavery. It acted as a civil religion in the South after the Civil War, combining Christian sentiment and values with that of the Confederacy. Christian sentiment and devotions had grown in America during the years of the war, as well as the idea that Americans were a people chosen by God to play a special role in the world.<sup>48</sup> The South found their loss particularly devastating in this regard as they had gone above and beyond to make sure that the Confederacy was to be a deeply Christian nation, as many believed in Southern America's inherent superiority and in the promise of American freedom.<sup>49</sup> It was a deep struggle for them to reconcile the religious beliefs they held which they believed would assure them victory and the continuation of their superior way of life with the realities of their loss. The Lost Cause was often associated with the story of Jesus Christ's resurrection, with the suffering and death of Christ serving as a direct parallel to the suffering and death of the Confederacy.<sup>50</sup>

Southerners wanted a return to their core values and traditions, along with a glorification of the idea that was the Confederacy. They began to participate in a form of civil religion in remembrance and honor of the South and its fallen, revering artifacts and images of the Civil War as holy and honoring the dead and the former leaders with

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<sup>48</sup> Charles Reagan Wilson, "The Religion of the Lost Cause: Ritual and Organization of the Southern Civil Religion, 1865-1920," *The Journal of Southern History* 46, no. 2 (1980): <https://doi.org/10.2307/2208359>, 219

<sup>49</sup> John Fea, "The Confederacy's Christian Nation," *Patheos* (Patheos, April 26, 2011), <https://www.patheos.com/resources/additional-resources/2011/04/confederacys-christian-nation-john-fea-04-27-2011>.

<sup>50</sup> Wilson, *The Religion of the Lost Cause*, 223



reverence.<sup>51</sup> To show that the sacrifices of these heroes had not been in vain, organizations such as the United Daughters of the Confederacy were famous for enacting monuments all over the South to honor the Lost Cause and to make sure future Southerners did not forget their divine duty to live out the principles of the South.<sup>52</sup> These Confederate statues served as memorials to those who died in the conflict, but also to act as symbols to inspire allegiance to the Confederate ideals.<sup>53</sup> Under the Lost Cause, Southerners attempted to continue living life under strictly traditional Confederate values. These values primarily informed their race relations, gender roles, and class interactions.<sup>54</sup> In the late nineteenth century, segregationist theology began to emerge and be written about widely. Revisionist literature of slavery as a benevolent institution that benefited both Blacks and whites in America became common, an idea that is still promoted today by many Southern heritage groups.<sup>55</sup>

The Lost Cause is central to the events of the Unite the Right rally and to the people and ideas involved. The rally was initiated in order to protest the removal of the statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee. Many Confederate monuments, Charlottesville's Robert E. Lee statue included, were built decades after the Civil War ended, coinciding with Jim Crow laws and Black disenfranchisement and intimidation throughout the South and all of America.<sup>56</sup> Protection and honoring of the Lost Cause is key to white nationalists' hopes for the future. While most of the attendees did not describe themselves as neo-Confederates, the effect of the rally was to reaffirm the Confederacy's legacy. Participants may have had their own ideas about what a white nation would be or how it would come to be, but the

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 224

<sup>52</sup> Allen G Breed, "The Lost Cause: the Women's Group Fighting for Confederate Monuments," *The Guardian* (Guardian News and Media, August 10, 2018), <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/aug/10/united-daughters-of-the-confederacy-statues-lawsuit>.

<sup>53</sup> Ryan Best, "Confederate Statues Were Never Really About Preserving History," *FiveThirtyEight*, July 8, 2020. <https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/confederate-statues/>.

<sup>54</sup> Karen L Cox, "Lost Cause Ideology," *Encyclopedia of Alabama*, August 16, 2008, <http://encyclopediaofalabama.org/article/h-1643>.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ryan Best, "Confederate Statues Were Never Really About Preserving History," *FiveThirtyEight*, July 8, 2020, <https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/confederate-statues/>.

Confederacy is an American archetype of white nationalism and that is the legacy that Unite the Right sought to defend.

The Lost Cause and its tenets were uniquely honored during the rally. The official announcement for the rally reads:

This is an event which seeks to unify the right-wing against a totalitarian Communist crackdown, to speak out against displacement level immigration policies in the United States and Europe, and to affirm the right of Southerners and white people to organize for their interests just like any other group is able to do, free of persecution... This is a UNITE THE RIGHT event bringing together the Alt-Right with the Alt-Right and Confederate supporters around the country.<sup>57</sup>

Twice, Southerners and Confederates are specified out of the rest of the group. While only two of the participating groups in the rally were neo-Confederates, the League of the South and Identity Dixie, the Confederate cause and history is prioritized in the organization and planning of the rally. The rally was in defense of the legacy of the Confederacy and its leaders, with songs honoring the Confederacy sung, and the goals of the rally as a free speech rally echo the narrative of the Confederacy fighting for states' rights and the freedom to live out their preferred way of life unhindered.<sup>58</sup> Unite the Right organizers hoped to attract others who ascribed to the Lost Cause into their fold.

Another aspect in the Unite the Right's planning that gave precedence to the Lost Cause was the emphasis of the song "Dixie" by the organizers. Elliot Kline, working under the pseudonym Eli Mosley, wrote a comprehensive operational document for the rally, titled "Operation Unite the Right Charlottesville 2.0." The document gives packing lists, warns of legal ramifications, and gives explicit details of the plans for August 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup>. The first note under the "Torchlight Rally" section is "Dixie," saying, "At the torchlight rally we will be singing the song "Dixie". It is VERY important for everyone to learn this song and the

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<sup>57</sup> Now deleted Facebook announcement of the event, as archived in Michael Hill, "League Will Be at Unite the Right Rally, 12 August, Charlottesville, VA," League of The South, June 9, 2017, <https://leagueofthesouth.com/league-will-be-at-unite-the-right-rally-12-august-charlottesville-va/>.

<sup>58</sup> Newsradio WINA, *Newsradio WINA*, July 2017, <https://soundcloud.com/1070wina/jason-kessler>.

lyrics. In announcements we will put out the version we are using.”<sup>59</sup> The version used by Unite the Right, the most common version of the song, goes:

*I wish I was in the land of cotton, old times there are not forgotten,  
Look away, look away, look away, Dixie Land.  
In Dixie Land where I was born in, early on a frosty mornin',  
Look away, look away, look away, Dixie Land.*

*Then I wish I was in Dixie, hooray! hooray!  
In Dixie Land I'll take my stand to live and die in Dixie,  
Away, away, away down South in Dixie,  
Away, away, away down South in Dixie.*

The original song was written in 1859, on the eve of the American Civil War, by Daniel Decatur Emmett, a composer for a minstrel show that played on Broadway in New York City.<sup>60</sup> The song reportedly was initially inspired by the author’s nostalgia for the South on a gloomy day in New York, but as it spread rapidly throughout the country and into the South itself, it took on new meaning.<sup>61</sup> It quickly became a patriotic song for the South as tensions rose and the Confederacy was created. It was played and sung by Confederate soldiers during battles, as well as during key events such as when Jefferson Davis went to take his oath of office in 1861, and finally it was played even when the Confederacy was defeated, a tribute to the idea and its people.<sup>62</sup> The song has maintained popularity ever since, as an unofficial hymn for the Confederacy, becoming part of the civil religion of the Lost Cause. In times of joy, it acts as a celebration of the “great” history and culture of the South. In times of sadness, it is a lament to the Lost Cause and the lost way of life.

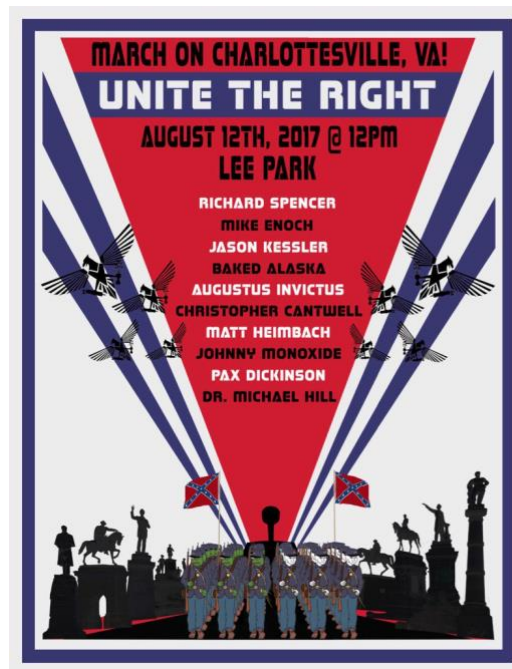
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<sup>59</sup> Eli Mosley, “Operation Unite the Right Charlottesville 2.0,” Unicorn Riot, August 10, 2017, [https://www.unicornriot.ninja/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/OpOrd3\\_General.pdf](https://www.unicornriot.ninja/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/OpOrd3_General.pdf).

<sup>60</sup> Michael C Hardy, “Look Away Dixie Land,” *Civil War Times* 47, no. 2 (April 2008); There is debate on whether or not Dan Emmett was the original author of the song, see *Way up North in Dixie: A Black Family's Claim to the Confederate Anthem*

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

*Unite the Right: Goals and Leaders*

Official Unite the Right Poster and speaker lineup for the rally<sup>63</sup>

The name “Unite the Right” represents the ultimate goal for the rally participants: unite the different factions of the Alt-Right, the alt-light, and every day white Americans who also felt their history and legacy were being threatened with the removal of Confederate monuments around the United States.<sup>64</sup> Organizers hoped to bring national attention to the perceived oppression and erasure white people were facing at the hands of the Left and communists.<sup>65</sup> The rejection of communism has a long history in American white identity movements, for whom Communism was perceived as a threat to white Christian identity. American individualism fueled the rejection of this political philosophy, as Cold War understandings of communism were perceived as a threat to Christianity,<sup>66</sup> and fear of the antisemitic myth of “Judeo-Communism” increased anxieties.<sup>67</sup> Communists are a stated

<sup>63</sup> Lee Rogers, “Join Daily Stormer Staff at the ‘Unite the Right’ Rally in Charlottesville, Virginia!,” Daily Stormer, July 30, 2017, <https://dailystormer.su/join-daily-stormer-staff-at-the-unite-the-right-rally-in-charlottesville-virginia/>.

<sup>64</sup> Hill, “League Will Be at Unite the Right Rally”

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Kathleen Belew, *Bring the War Home*, 5

<sup>67</sup> André Gerrits, “Antisemitism and Anti-Communism: The Myth of ‘Judeo-Communism’ in Eastern Europe,” *East European Jewish Affairs* 25, no. 1 (1995): pp. 49-72, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501679508577796>.

enemy to the Alt-Right, as communism attempts to erase differences between people and put everyone on an even playing field. Even if white nationalists are not white supremacists, they believe that the white identity and culture that is so important to them is threatened by communism.

As noted, the Unite the Right rally was the Alt-Right showing that the movement was not simply a group of radicals on the internet, but that they could organize in real life, in order to bring attention and recruits to their cause. What separates the Alt-Right from other American political movements is the extremism with which they express their beliefs and their dedication to white nationalism.<sup>68</sup> To grow their cohort, the Alt-Right wanted to convert those in the alt-light and attract those with whom they could find points of agreement such as “opposition to multiculturalism, ‘political correctness,’ open immigration, support for ‘English only’ initiatives, support for a proposed border wall, and a nativist ‘America first’ disposition.”<sup>69</sup> Organizers hoped that their numbers and their passion for what they saw to be a righteous cause would push their goals and white nationalism into the mainstream.

Unite the Right was a labor of many individuals and groups coordinating and organizing together, but its two most public organizers were Jason Kessler and Richard Spencer. Kessler was the primary logistical organizer of the Unite the Right rally. As a Charlottesville resident, he was among the first to push back against the Charlottesville City Council’s decision to remove the Robert E. Lee statue. The matter of the statue’s removal had first been publicly floated by City Councilor Kristen Szakos in 2012, followed by high school freshman Zyanha Bryant’s 2016 Change.org petition which received hundreds of signatures, and then continued with the election of Wes Bellamy as Charlottesville’s Vice-

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<sup>68</sup> Daniel Odin Shaw, “Something Old, Something New, Something Borrowed: The Alt-Right on Building Christendom Without Christ,” *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies* 18, no. 54 (2019), 81

<sup>69</sup> Damon T Berry, “Religious Strategies of White Nationalism at Charlottesville,” Religion Culture Forum, October 13, 2017, <https://voices.uchicago.edu/religionculture/2017/10/13/religious-strategies-of-white-nationalism-at-charlottesville/>.

Mayor.<sup>70</sup> Bellamy's campaign to remove the statue infuriated Kessler, and he set out to attempt to prevent the statue's removal, as well as attempt to remove Bellamy from office.<sup>71</sup> Neither of these attempts were successful and the campaign to remove the Lee statue moved forward. Kessler was not finished, however; he reached out to fellow U.Va. alumnus and Alt-Right leader Richard Spencer to bring greater attention to the issue. It was Kessler who applied for the permit to hold the Unite the Right rally on August 12 in Charlottesville and who was the main logistical organizer for the rally.<sup>72</sup>

Ideologically, Kessler ascribes to the idea of racial protectionism, describing himself as a "Pro-White advocate" who organized Unite the Right because he wanted a large crowd to come out and demonstrate in "support, not just [for] the Lee Monument, but also [for] white people in general, because it is our race which is under attack."<sup>73</sup> Kessler is a proponent of the idea of "white genocide," arguing that diversity is slowly destroying the white race, both through interracial coupling and through the destruction of white culture, like the removal of Confederate statues, and that the only way to protect the white race is to have a white-only homeland, as white people are "the only ethnicity on Earth without a country of their own."<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Hawes Spencer, *Summer of Hate: Charlottesville, USA* (Charlottesville, VA: UNIV OF VIRGINIA Press, 2019), Kindle 68-69

<sup>71</sup> Spencer, *Summer of Hate*, Kindle 55-56

<sup>72</sup> Ian Shapira, "Inside Jason Kessler's Hate-Fueled Rise," *The Washington Post* (WP Company, August 11, 2018), [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/inside-jason-kesslers-hate-fueled-rise/2018/08/11/335eaf42-999e-11e8-b60b-1c897f17e185\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/inside-jason-kesslers-hate-fueled-rise/2018/08/11/335eaf42-999e-11e8-b60b-1c897f17e185_story.html).

<sup>73</sup> RBLEE22468, "Jason Kessler Tells White Nationalist Radio Host That He Hopes to Destigmatize White Nationalism with the Unite The Right Rally," *Restoring the Honor*, July 31, 2017, [https://web.archive.org/web/20170816070116/http://restoringthehonor.blogspot.com/2017/07/jason-kessler-tells-white-nationalist\\_31.html](https://web.archive.org/web/20170816070116/http://restoringthehonor.blogspot.com/2017/07/jason-kessler-tells-white-nationalist_31.html).

<sup>74</sup> Jason Kessler, "Yes, Virginia (Dare), There Is Such A Thing As White Genocide," *VDARE.com*, June 19, 2017, <https://vdare.com/articles/yes-virginia-dare-there-is-such-a-thing-as-white-genocide>.



Posters illustrating the concept of white genocide posted on the U.Va. Central Library front doors, August 10, 2017<sup>75</sup>

Kessler was also a sworn-in member of the Proud Boys, a self-described Western chauvinist group, which at the time was one of the least extreme groups whose members participated in Unite the Right, due to the organization’s lack of official white nationalist position.<sup>76</sup> Kessler would be kicked out of the Proud Boys soon after the events of Unite the Right, with Proud Boys founder Gavin McInnes disavowing the Alt-Right and racism.<sup>77</sup> Soon after, the Proud Boys released an official statement that they were not Alt-Right and that they did not discriminate based on race or sex, highlighting that a Western chauvinist is not a racist, but someone “who refuses to apologize for creating the modern world” and believes that “West is The Best.”<sup>78</sup> However, many Proud Boys members beyond Kessler were in attendance at the rally and organized in Charlottesville before the rally as well.<sup>79</sup>

Kessler’s reaching out to Richard Spencer was the spark that made Unite the Right grow into the movement that it became. Not only did Spencer have a vested interest in the

<sup>75</sup> Krista Farrell, “Signs posted on Central Library front doors,” *Digital Collecting*, <http://digitalcollecting.lib.virginia.edu/rally/items/show/105>.

<sup>76</sup> Luke Barnes, “Proud Boys Founder Disavows Violence at Charlottesville but One of Its Members Organized the Event,” ThinkProgress, August 24, 2017, <https://archive.thinkprogress.org/proud-boys-founder-tries-and-fails-to-distance-itself-from-charlottesville-6862fb8b3ae9/>.

<sup>77</sup> Luke Barnes, “Proud Boys Founder Disavows Violence at Charlottesville but One of Its Members Organized the Event”

<sup>78</sup> The Elders, “Proud Boys: Who Are They?,” August 24, 2017, <https://web.archive.org/web/20200408072647/https://officialproudboys.com/proud-boys/whoaretheproudboys/>.

<sup>79</sup> WINA, “Jason Kessler, Proud Boys Take to Downtown Mall,” NewsRadio WINA, June 18, 2017, <https://wina.com/news/064460-jason-kessler-proud-boys-take-to-downtown-mall/>.

Charlottesville community due to his time as a student at the University of Virginia, but he was the face of the Alt-Right at the time. He coined the term Alt-Right, he was a prolific Alt-Right blogger and speaker, and he was getting significant news coverage for his activities well before Unite the Right. An ardent white nationalist, Spencer wanted to move the Alt-Right and his white nationalist goals into the mainstream. Spencer marked a distinct change in how white nationalists presented themselves. He was not part of some prior significant movements that visibly demonstrated racism (e.g., skinhead, through tattoos, or hoods); instead, he wore nice suits and was the president of a think tank. When the organization Mother Jones did a cover story on him, they notoriously described him as “dapper.”<sup>80</sup> Spencer was already working on how to unite the various far-right groups that had fallen into ideological disagreement with each other and with that of the mainstream right since the decline of the white power movement. He was able to capitalize on the increase of attention on white identity politics from then presidential candidate Donald Trump.<sup>81</sup> He went viral shortly after the 2016 election and Trump’s decisive win in the electoral college, speaking at his think tank, the National Policy Institute’s conference.<sup>82</sup> In a video from the conference, published by *The Atlantic*, Spencer shocked viewers by proclaiming, “Hail Trump! Hail our people! Hail victory!” to a cheering crowd with a notable few audience members holding their right arms straight up and out in Nazi salutes.<sup>83</sup> Finally, Spencer had inadvertently sparked a national debate when giving an interview in Washington D.C. on the day of Trump’s inauguration, an unknown man ran up to Spencer and punched him in the face.<sup>84</sup> It instantly became a meme on the left, a bounty hunt for attacker by the Alt-Right, and

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<sup>80</sup> April Siese, “Mother Jones Roasted for 'Dapper White Nationalist' Description of Racists,” *The Daily Dot*, November 21, 2016, <https://www.dailydot.com/unclick/mother-jones-white-nationalist-tweet-roasted/>.

<sup>81</sup> Josh Harkinson, “Meet the White Nationalist Trying to Ride the Trump Train to Lasting Power”

<sup>82</sup> In 2021, the National Policy Institute is now rebranded as the Geopolitical Studies Institute, though all information on the website still refers to it as the National Policy Institute, <https://geopol.institute/>

<sup>83</sup> Graeme Wood, “Richard Spencer Was My High-School Classmate”

<sup>84</sup> Mike Wendling, *Alt-Right From 4chan to the White House* (London, UK: Pluto Press, 2018), 3



spawned dozens of op-eds entitled, “Is it OK to Punch a Nazi?”<sup>85</sup> Richard Spencer was the Alt-Right media star that launched the Alt-Right into the mainstream conversation and Unite the Right was the moment he sought to unite the various factions of the Alt-Right and attempt to inspire sympathetic white Americans into joining the cause to move his views further into the mainstream, with Trump supporting conservatives as his main targets, saying:

“If you want to radically shift the Overton window [the idea that the range of acceptable political discourse gets defined by a safe distance between extremes], you need that far-right flank for that to make sense,” he says. “Clearly, we are working with Trump in this way.”<sup>86</sup>

*August 11 and 12, 2017*

Many racially charged chants were heard throughout the night of August 11 and the day of August 12, when protestors moved into Charlottesville and the park where the Robert E. Lee statue was displayed. Most prominently heard were: “white lives matter,” “blood and soil,” “Jews/You will not replace us,” and “one people, one nation, end immigration.”<sup>87</sup> Blood and soil is an English translation of the popular German National Socialist slogan, “Blut and Boden,” which emphasizes the racial nationalist connection between the blood of a people and their land.<sup>88</sup> In Germany, it became connected with the idea of “Lebensraum,” or “living space,” which motivated Germany to expand its territory to make room for the Aryan German race, a key factor in the Holocaust, as this required them to systematically destroy the non-Aryan people already living in these territories.<sup>89</sup> Unite the Right participants

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<sup>85</sup> Wendling, *Alt-Right*, 12-13

<sup>86</sup> Harkinson, “Meet the White Nationalist Trying to Ride the Trump Train to Lasting Power”

<sup>87</sup> Southern Poverty Law Center, “Alt-Right Charlottesville Marchers Chant 'Blood and Soil' and 'Hail Trump!'," Southern Poverty Law Center, 2017, <https://www.splcenter.org/file/15771>.

<sup>88</sup> David Neiwert, “When White Nationalists Chant Their Weird Slogans, What Do They Mean?," Southern Poverty Law Center, October 10, 2017, <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2017/10/10/when-white-nationalists-chant-their-weird-slogans-what-do-they-mean>.

<sup>89</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Lebensraum,” Holocaust Encyclopedia (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum), accessed April 16, 2021, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/lebensraum>.

accepted the concept that their ancestors laid claim to American soil by their blood and sacrifice, and that they refused to be displaced by their enemies, by “Jews” or other groups.

The Unite the Right rally ended in violence and resulted in the death of one of the counter-protestors, Heather Heyer. Subsequent lawsuits, media coverage, and the recanting of held positions by many participating in the rally, including the dissolution of some groups participating in the rally, led to the dissolution of any unified movement. Many organizations like Identity Evropa were forced to rebrand and eventually disband.<sup>90</sup> Much of the blame fell onto the head of main organizer Jason Kessler, not only for bringing Unite the Right to Charlottesville, but also because a few days after the rally and the death of Heather Heyer at the hands of James Alex Fields Jr., Kessler tweeted: “Heather Heyer was a fat, disgusting Communist. Communists have killed 94 million. Looks like it was payback time.”<sup>91</sup> Kessler’s collaborator Richard Spencer immediately washed his hands of Kessler, himself tweeting: “I will no longer associate w/ Jason Kessler; no one should. Heyer’s death was deeply saddening. ‘Payback’ is a morally reprehensible idea.”<sup>92</sup> While Kessler’s expressed sentiments, which he would later blame on a mix of sleeping pills and alcohol, were certainly not unique, anyone in the Alt-Right hoping to maintain any sort of reputable public image condemned Kessler.<sup>93</sup> Kessler would try again on the year anniversary of Unite the Right in 2018 to have a similar protest in Washington D.C., but only 20-25 people attended, as no major figures would collaborate with him as a result of the extreme negative public backlash from the original Unite the Right rally.<sup>94</sup> Kessler is now widely disgraced within the Alt-Right.

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<sup>90</sup> Chris Schiano, “Neo-Nazi ‘American Identity Movement’ Disbands,” Unicorn Riot, November 2, 2020, <https://unicornriot.ninja/2020/neo-nazi-american-identity-movement-disbands/>.

<sup>91</sup> Terry McAuliffe, “On White Nationalism and the Lessons of Charlottesville,” Literary Hub, August 6, 2019, <https://lithub.com/on-white-nationalism-and-the-lessons-of-charlottesville/>.

<sup>92</sup> Terry McAuliffe, “On White Nationalism and the Lessons of Charlottesville”

<sup>93</sup> Alex Lubben, “A Short History of People Tweeting on Ambien and Not Being Racist,” VICE, May 30, 2018, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/8xe5xk/a-short-history-of-people-tweeting-on-ambien-and-not-being-racist>.

<sup>94</sup> German Lopez, “Unite the Right 2018 Was a Pathetic Failure,” Vox (Vox, August 12, 2018), <https://www.vox.com/identities/2018/8/12/17681444/unite-the-right-rally-dc-charlottesville-failure>.

The Unite the Right rally is a particularly unique moment in the American Alt-Right movement as it brought together Alt-Right groups of different ideologies from all around the country in order to meet and stand for one cause: the defense of the white American legacy symbolized by the Confederate Lee statue. White nationalist groups who had once denounced Christianity because they blamed Christian moral teachings as “the primary cause of the White race’s ongoing suicide and the main impediment to turning the tide” against white nationalism, marched alongside explicitly Christian Alt-Right groups at Unite the Right.<sup>95</sup> The most prominent Christian nationalist groups in attendance were the various KKK factions, Identity Dixie, and the League of the South, all of which would consider “white nationalism,” “Christian nationalism,” and “Southern nationalism” nearly synonymous terms because they all are tied to the Lost Cause, the remembrance of the Confederate South as the ideal state, racially, culturally, and religiously. The white homeland they envision is the South. Even if white nationalist groups would not actively engage actively with Christianity, they engaged with Lost Cause religiosity such as the veneration of Confederate idols and singing songs honoring the Lost Cause and Southern culture.<sup>96</sup>

White nationalism and Christian nationalism function analogously for many neo-Confederate groups involved in Unite the Right. The organizers were not necessarily Christian but understood the effect that Christian history and mythos had on American politics and the ethnically white European imagination. Unite the Right was violent and angry, and yet it invoked a religion that endorses peace and tolerance. However, they were able to draw upon a long history of Christianity being used for hate and violence, from the symbolism of the crusades to Christian thought and theology that was used to justify slavery

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<sup>95</sup> Greg Johnson, “The Christian Question in White Nationalism,” *Occidental Observer*, May 14, 2010, <https://web.archive.org/web/20100621074301/http://www.theoccidentalobserver.net/authors/Johnson-Christianity.html>.

<sup>96</sup> Padraig Martin, “The South’s Christian Identity Challenge,” *Identity Dixie*, February 21, 2021, <https://identitydixie.com/2021/02/21/the-souths-christian-identity-challenge/>.

and racial segregation in America. These historical antecedents for Christianity as a tool for discrimination and segregation allowed white nationalists to connect with potential recruits still influenced by these ideas.

### *The Historical Antecedents of Christian Racism in America*

#### *Aryanism, Semitism, and Nationalism*

The concept of the racial divinity of white Americans has been an incredibly powerful narrative in American Christian theology from the early American settlers, into the modern day. Throughout American history, numerous Christian movements have emerged that fused their theology with the racial sentiments and theories of the time. From the theological justification of slavery to the idea that white Americans have inherited God's promise to Israel, the Christian American worldview was frequently used to justify white Christians' power in America. While overtly racist narratives have largely been rejected by mainstream Christians today, the effects still linger. Without understanding the history of these beliefs and how they can continue to influence Christians from the Alt-Right like the KKK or Identity Dixie, to the average evangelical who would claim no racial prejudices, white supremacist narratives will live on unchallenged, enabling the Alt-Right take advantage of the narratives and convert more recruits through them.

One extremely influential racial theory in Alt-Right and the much of the Western world was the Aryan racial theory. Emerging in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Aryan race theory was a secular theory that was the result of philological study that found that there was likely a common "linguistic ancestor" between the Indo-European languages, from Sanskrit to English to Keltic, which would be called Aryan, and there was a distinct other linguistic

ancestor called Semite for languages such as Hebrew or Aramaic.<sup>97</sup> While the idea of Aryan racial supremacy was known and understood within the United States,<sup>98</sup> it was in 1930s and 1940s Germany that the idea came into its most radical form. Jews, perceived as inferior by the Nazis due to their Semitic background, as well as other non-Aryan groups, were targeted by the Nazis, pushed out of their homes, and systematically murdered in the Holocaust. In fact, the Semitic origin of Christianity has caused many white supremacists to openly oppose Christianity and the Jewish Christ.<sup>99</sup>

One racial theory that sought to alleviate the tension between the Jewish origins of Christianity and Christ's own race was British-Israelism, also called Anglo-Israelism once it spread to the United States. British-Israelism is the religious theory that Anglo-Saxons and related peoples are descendants of the ten lost tribes of Israel. It was first conceptualized in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, but it rose to worldwide popularity between the 1870s and 1890s and was thought to have exceeded two million adherents by the early twentieth century.<sup>100</sup> Its findings are inherently opposed to that of the Aryan racial theory. While the Aryan myth relied on the academic study of philology, British-Israelism relied on scriptural interpretation and occasionally questionable etymologies such as: "The Hebrew for the word covenant is *Brith* or *Brit*, which, with the addition of *ish*, the Hebrew for man, is our name British."<sup>101</sup> The Aryan myth explicitly explained that white Europeans were Aryan in ancestry, and there was no connection between Semitic languages and that of European languages, whereas

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<sup>97</sup> Alan Davies, *Infected Christianity: a Study of Modern Racism* (Montréal, CA: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014). Alan Davies, *Infected Christianity: a Study of Modern Racism* (Montréal, CA: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014), 22

<sup>98</sup> John Fiske, "Who Are the Aryans?," *The Atlantic* (Atlantic Media Company, February 1881), <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1881/02/who-are-the-aryans/521367/>.

<sup>99</sup> Greg Johnson, "The Christian Question in White Nationalism."

<sup>100</sup> Colin Kidd, *The Forging of Races: Race and Scripture in the Protestant Atlantic World, 1600-2000* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 209

<sup>101</sup> J. Bell, *British-Israel Bible Notes* (London, UK: R. Banks & Son, 1903), 6

British-Israelists believed that Anglo-Saxons were Semites and were the direct descendants of Israel.<sup>102</sup>

British-Israelism saw Anglo-Saxons as God's chosen people, and it was Anglo-Saxons that would inherit the promise of Israel. This led adherents of British-Israelism, like adherents to the Aryan racial theory, to believe in the racial superiority of their own ethnicity, and British-Israelism also afforded Anglo-Saxons the idea of divine favor and spiritual superiority over other races and religions. The idea of the racial divinity of white Americans, even when separated from the idea of British-Israelism, is incredibly powerful and has echoes in today's Christian nationalists, who are known to draw parallels between America and Old Testament Israel as God's chosen peoples.<sup>103</sup> As Whitehead, Perry, and Baker found in their study of Christian nationalism and how it affected voting behaviors and beliefs in the 2016 presidential election, "Christian nationalism is often linked with racist sentiments, equating cultural purity with racial or ethnic exclusion."<sup>104</sup>

The Neo-Confederate group Identity Dixie is an extreme Christian nationalist group. Combining British-Israelism and "Southern Christian Identity," Identity Dixie argues that Southerners have become God's chosen people, who have been given the promise of Israel, which can only be fulfilled through secession.<sup>105</sup> Blogger Padraig Martin, thought to be a pseudonym for Jim O'Brien, a Southern nationalist who marched with The League of the South at Unite the Right, discusses this philosophy on the Identity Dixie website.<sup>106</sup> The South and anyone working towards the goal of Southern Nationalism must accept the idea that The South is now God's chosen people, for "The South cannot divorce itself from the

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<sup>102</sup> Kidd, *The Forging of Races*, 211

<sup>103</sup> Davies, *Infected Christianity*, 83-84

<sup>104</sup> Andrew L Whitehead, Samuel Perry, and Joseph O. Baker, "Make America Christian Again: Christian Nationalism and Voting for Donald Trump in the 2016 Presidential Election," 2017, <https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/rdn98>, 150

<sup>105</sup> Padraig Martin, "The South's Christian Identity Challenge"

<sup>106</sup> Hatewatch Staff, "Retaking Everything: The Story of Identity Dixie," Southern Poverty Law Center, July 17, 2019, <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2019/07/17/retaking-everything-story-identity-dixie>.

yankee dominated, federal empire without divorcing itself from any notion that the Jewish people share Chosen status.”<sup>107</sup>

*From Theory to White Supremacy*

Another concept that significantly impacted the Christian defense of white supremacy in America was the Anglo-Christ. This idea is explored in Alan Davies’ book, *Infected Christianity: A Study of Modern Racism*. Davies explains that in the wake of Charles Darwin’s foundational book on evolutionary theory, and the concept of survival of the fittest, some British Anglo-Saxons, obsessed with their massive empire they had created and their dominion over so many different peoples of the world, began to build on the myth of their inherent racial superiority.<sup>108</sup> The race which gained and conquered the most was the social evolutionary superior to all other races. When America defeated the British, America was considered the most superior nation by these theorists.<sup>109</sup>

The idea of America as the most socially evolved country was soon combined with the Aryan myth by philosopher Herbert Spencer. He proposed that the superior Aryan ancestry combined with the highest possible form of government and social evolution meant that white American were the most superior race, the pinnacle of evolution.<sup>110</sup> The American destiny was to continue growing and thriving as a result of God’s divine providence over them and their perfect race, until they would eventually bring all of the world under them and into a “single supreme civilization.”<sup>111</sup> To taint the American experiment with significant numbers of nonwhite peoples or ideals counter to the American experiment meant that America would be inherently weakened and therefore would not be able to fulfill its divine will, thus making the idea of American citizenship an even more exclusive concept than it

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Davies, *Infected Christianity*, 77

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 78

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 79

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 82

already was. Similar to the British-Israelists, white Americans were viewed as the inheritors of the promise of Israel, but they were not imagined to be genetic decedents of the Jews. Instead, Josiah Strong, another prominent Christian theologian, postulated that the American white had inherited the Hebrew gift of spirituality, implying that the post-biblical Jews had lost their gift when they rejected Jesus Christ.<sup>112</sup> These concepts further cemented the idea of white racial and religious superiority and this theory was spread and adopted throughout America.

As a result, there came a shift within some Americans' view of Christ in relation to these theories. As Jesus was a Hebrew man born in the Middle East, he should not have been a perfect Anglo-Saxon archetype. Yet, if Jesus was God, he had to be flawless. Herbert Spencer would conclude that Christ was "an American as well, or at least a proto-American in addition to being a proto-Christian and proto-Saxon."<sup>113</sup> Christ was at the top of the evolutionary scale as God, and he would not take on a lesser identity. Soon, Christ would begin to be depicted like an Olympian god, with blond hair and a fair complexion, a picture of Aryan and Anglo-Saxon perfection.<sup>114</sup> The idea of a white Christ was present and promoted by members of the Unite the Right rally. The Loyal White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, a recently formed group dedicated to maintaining the original KKK's traditions and rituals,<sup>115</sup> and active participant in the July 2017 Charlottesville KKK rally and the Unite the Right rally,<sup>116</sup> explain on the homepage of their website that Jews are not the chosen people, and that Christ was white.

Now I keep hearing from people well Christ was a Jew. Well if you would take the time to look up what Pontius Pilate said in his description of Christ. The first time he ever seen him before the Jews crucified him. He says Christ was a tall man with hair the color of wheat his eyes like the sky. So this tells us he was a

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 82-83

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 83

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 86

<sup>115</sup> Terrorism Research & Analysis Consortium, "Loyal White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan (LWK)," TRAC, accessed April 16, 2021, <https://www.trackingterrorism.org/group/loyal-white-knights-ku-klux-klan-lwk>.

<sup>116</sup> Park, "Why White Nationalists Are Drawn to Charlottesville"



gold brown hair man with blue eyes. He goes on later to say his skin was like milk so that tells us he is white not Jewish.<sup>117</sup>

The description of Christ given here comes from an apocryphal letter that was popularized in the fifteenth century, supposedly written by Publius Lentulus, a procurator of Judea, to the Roman Senate, containing a detailed physical description of Jesus.<sup>118</sup> The Loyal White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan partake in a particular brand of American Christian antisemitism, claiming that the Mark of Cain was the “curse of the Jew,” as well as blaming the Jews for the death of Christ.<sup>119</sup> These ideas have a historical framework that they have been built upon and they continue to be espoused, in extreme ways such as KKK rallies, to subtle ways of enforcing white supremacy by continuing to depict Jesus Christ as white in art, despite the fact that he was a Jewish Middle Eastern man.

The framing of the white Christ and the white American as the pinnacle of race along with being the inheritors of the promise of Israel enabled white Americans to view those who did not fit those categories, such as Jews, African Americans, and Native Americans, with both suspicion and contempt. In some early American Christian theology, Americans were compared to latter-day Israelites, whereas the other racial groups were the latter-day Canaanites.<sup>120</sup> Canaan was a competing nation with Israel, routinely condemned in the Old Testament for their sinfulness, and they were eventually wiped out in Joshua chapters 10 and 11. Notably, the Canaanites were also the descendants of Ham, the son Noah curses so that all his descendants would be servants to Noah’s other sons, Shem and Japheth, which will be discussed in-depth later in this paper. All nonwhite other races were sons of Ham according

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<sup>117</sup> Loyal White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, “Home,” Loyal White Knights Of The Ku Klux Klan, <https://lwkkkk.com/wp/>

<sup>118</sup> Cora E. Lutz, “The Letter of Lentulus Describing Christ.” *The Yale University Library Gazette* 50, no. 2 (1975): 91-97. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40858588>;

There is a supposed letter by Pontius Pilate that briefly describes Christ but the description does not match and the Vatican and scholars confirmed it to be a forgery shortly after its discovery, so it’s less likely they would be referring to this letter, despite the attribution to Pilate. Winter, Paul. “A Letter from Pontius Pilate.” *Novum Testamentum* 7, no. 1 (1964): 37-43. doi:10.2307/1560249.

<sup>119</sup> Loyal White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, “Home”

<sup>120</sup> Davies, *Infected Christianity*, 83-84

to the theology of many white Americans and it was this tradition that created some of the early racial hierarchies of America. This hierarchy continues to affect race relations and created perspectives of both American white supremacy and white complacency to this day, as is discussed in the next section.

### *The Mark of Cain*

Historically in the US, biblical stories have been used to justify white supremacy, segregation, and discrimination. Throughout most of American history, the most prevalent racial minority within the United States has been African Americans. Racist Christians developed a theology from Biblical stories in Genesis in order to justify African servitude to whites, and even after the abolition of slavery, would allow white Americans to theologically justify a segregated society. The first of these stories was the story of Cain. Genesis 4 depicts Cain and Abel, the sons of Adam and Eve, and describes that one day, Cain became jealous of his brother Abel for earning God's favor and kills Abel, becoming the first murderer.<sup>121</sup> God punishes Cain, cursing him to roam the earth and places a "mark" on him so that no one would kill him. Cain leaves, finds a wife, and establishes a line of descendants. What the mark of Cain actually was has been hotly debated by scholars and religious adherents since antiquity. It was in the eighteenth century that the idea that Cain's mark was blackness of skin first emerged, and it became popularized in America in the nineteenth century by Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism.<sup>122</sup> Where exactly this theory found its evidence is unclear, but David M. Goldenberg in *The Curse of Ham* theorizes that a misinterpretation of the line "he became sad" into "he became black" to possibly reflect spiritual darkness was the origin for the theory and that it eventually traveled through Western thought.<sup>123</sup> The idea that

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<sup>121</sup> Genesis 4 (NIV)

<sup>122</sup> Stephen R. Haynes, *Noah's Curse: the Biblical Justification of American Slavery* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2007), 15

<sup>123</sup> David Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 182

the mark of Cain was blackness and that all Africans carried the tainted blood of the first murderer, as well as his curse, was a powerful tool that was used to dehumanize African Americans.

Another association between Cain and blackness is the question of who his wife was. One theory was that she was a pre-Adamite, a race of inferior humans made separate from Adam and Eve. The theory of pre-Adamite polygenesis follows that it was Cain's wife that was Black and thus, while blackness was not the mark of Cain, but it was a sign of being his direct descendent.<sup>124</sup> This too continued the logic of dehumanization and distrust of African Americans. The narrative of Cain being the originator of blackness enabled the one drop rule, the idea that even one African ancestor meant that someone was Black, as one drop of Cain's blood was enough to make someone morally corrupt and untrustworthy.<sup>125</sup> The Cain narrative made no mention of servitude so while it effectively dehumanized all peoples of African descent, it needed the narrative of the Curse of Ham in order to combine the moral inferiority of Africans with the justification of their targeted enslavement. Post abolition, the narrative of Cain and blackness remained to cast suspicion on the moral character of the newly freed African Americans and strengthened the case for segregation.

### *The Curse of Ham*

The Curse of Ham, narrated in Genesis 9:20-27, is one of the most prevalent religious justifications of African slavery that was used in America and around the world. It tells the story of a post-flood Noah getting drunk and falling asleep naked in his tent. His son Ham comes upon him and seeing his father's nakedness, he goes to tell his two brothers Shem and Japheth, the implication being to laugh at Noah.<sup>126</sup> However, Shem and Japheth simply cover

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<sup>124</sup> Haynes, *Noah's Curse*, 15

<sup>125</sup> Lester E. Bush and Armand L. Mauss, *Neither White nor Black: Mormon Scholars Confront the Race Issue in a Universal Church* (Midvale, UT: Signature Books, 1984), Chapter 2.

<sup>126</sup> Though some scholars believe it could be a darker, sexual motive (Noah's nakedness and the curse on Canaan Bergsma, Hahn)

their father up and turn their backs away so that they do not see his nakedness. In the aftermath, the story goes:

When Noah awoke from his wine and  
knew what his youngest son had done to him,  
he said, “Cursed be Canaan;  
lowest of slaves shall he be to his brothers.”  
He also said,  
“Blessed by the Lord my God be Shem;  
and let Canaan be his slave.  
May God make space for Japheth,  
and let him live in the tents of Shem;  
and let Canaan be his slave.”<sup>127</sup>

In doing so, Noah cursed Canaan, Ham’s son to be a lowly slave to Ham’s brothers. In those three verses, Canaan is damned to always be second and subjugated to Israel. The curse is placed explicitly on Canaan, in contrast to the curse itself being widely known as the Curse of Ham. Canaan, despite being cursed to be a slave, does not disappear from the historical narrative. As discussed earlier, Canaan is the namesake for and founder of the Canaanites, who often acted as antagonists to Israel, the people of Ham’s brother Shem’s line, in the Old Testament. The land of Canaan housed the infamously sinful cities of Sodom and Gomorrah that were destroyed due to their depravity. Depending on the interpretation and the lens that the story is viewed through, numerous conclusions can be reached about the story of the Curse of Ham.

The broadest interpretation of the Curse of Ham is that the curse said by Noah is not only upon Canaan, but upon Ham and his descendants. This would mean that all of the descendants of Ham were cursed to be servants to the other races of the world who stemmed from the lines of Shem and Japheth. In the defense of African slavery, this is a powerful interpretation. Canaan is not Ham’s only son that started a line of his own people, he also begot Egypt, Put, and Cush.<sup>128</sup> All three of these sons are thought to have settled in Africa

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<sup>127</sup> Genesis 9:24-27 (NIV)

<sup>128</sup> Genesis 10:6 (NIV)

and created the African nations, and it was Canaan that settled in the Middle East.<sup>129</sup> In this biblical interpretation, if the Curse of Ham falls on all descendants of Ham, the other races of the world are well within their right to take the children of Ham as their slaves and all people of African descent would be descendants of Ham.

For Christian segregationists, the blackness of Ham's descendants contributes to the justification of African slavery. The Bible frequently discusses slavery and the major patriarchs of the religion having slaves, and the Apostle Paul tells slaves to obey their masters. However, there is no explicit justification for the enslavement of Africans and only Africans.<sup>130</sup> Here, the "Mark of Cain" narrative is tied back into African slavery. It was assumed that Ham and his brothers were not Black, as they birthed the other diverse nations of the world, including white Europeans. However, as mentioned above, it was Ham and his descendants who were thought to have fathered the majority of the African nations. If Ham was married to a Black woman, a descendant of Cain who carried his curse, then this would explain the blackness of Ham's descendants, along with justifying the enslavement of Black peoples due to the direct link between the black corruption of Cain's line and the curse of slavery upon Ham's line.<sup>131</sup> This connection between the idea of the moral corruptness of the Black races and their biblical damnation to slavery provided the core theological narrative for justifying the slavery and repression of African Americans, and was seen both before and after emancipation. These stories and their interpretations show the dangers of how religious texts can be manipulated and interpreted to justify nearly anything a reader desires. Not all Christians ascribed to these interpretations. For example, some of the most ardent abolitionists in America were Quakers, who predicated their abolitionist beliefs on the idea

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<sup>129</sup> Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham*, 169

<sup>130</sup> Haynes, *Noah's Curse*, 12

<sup>131</sup> Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham*, 178

that all people were created equal under God.<sup>132</sup> Christians invested in justifying slavery used interpretations of Biblical stories to create a theology that benefited them.

### *Nimrod and the Tower of Babel*

Many in the antebellum South saw the story of Ham as an example of him being enslaved for his own good, as something inherent to his character that made slavery a blessing upon him.<sup>133</sup> This interpretation was the “gentle” view of slavery, that white slave owners were helping their slaves by leading them in morality and discipline. Other biblical stories were used that supposedly justified the suppression of African Americans, such as the story of Nimrod. Nimrod was the son of Cush and a grandson of Ham, and thus accepted to be Black. He was a king who rebelled against God and who is thought to have incited the creation of the Tower of Babel.<sup>134</sup> Nimrod was the epitome of what white supremacists feared from the African Americans living among them. He was full of pride, rebelling against God, and laid the seeds of chaos among his peoples.<sup>135</sup> The biblical story proved a narrative that white supremacists would have feared, both in the time of slavery, up until and through the Civil Rights era, that a Nimrod figure among the slaves or the freed-yet-still-oppressed African Americans could have sparked a full-on rebellion which would have torn apart their way of life.

These stories and interpretations of Christian stories to excuse and promote racism continue to influence Christian politics and beliefs in the United States. The story of Nimrod and the Tower of Babel, for example, was used by the evangelical Christian school Bob Jones University to defend their policy against interracial dating as late as 1998. In a letter written

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<sup>132</sup> Jack Marietta, “Egoism and Altruism in Quaker Abolition,” *Quaker History* 82, no. 1 (1993): pp. 1-22, <https://doi.org/10.1353/qkh.1993.0006>, 3

<sup>133</sup> Haynes, *Noah's Curse*, 10

<sup>134</sup> Benjamin M. Palmer, *The Present Crisis and its Issues, An Address Delivered before the Literary Societies of Washington and Lee University, Lexington, Va., 27th June, 1872* (Baltimore: John Murphy & Co., 1872), 18–19

<sup>135</sup> Haynes, *Noah's Curse*, 10

to James Landrith, a white man married to a Black woman who attempted to apply to the university, they wrote:

The people who built the Tower of Babel were seeking a man-glorifying unity which God has not ordained (Gen. 11:4–6). Much of the agitation for inter-marriage among the races today is for the same reason. It is promoted by one-worlders, and we oppose it for the same reason that we oppose religious ecumenism, globalism, one-world economy, one-world police force, unisex, etc. When Jesus Christ returns to the earth, He will establish world unity, but until then, a divided earth seems to be His plan.<sup>136</sup>

This statement perfectly echoes a sentiment put forward over 100 years earlier in 1872 by Christian theologian Benjamin M. Palmer, a Southern secessionist turned ardent Nationalist:<sup>137</sup>

There is no escape from the corresponding testimony, biblical and historical, that the human family, originally one, has been divided into certain large groups, for the purpose of being historically kept distinct. And all attempts, in every age of the world, and from whatever motives, whether of ambitious dominion or of an infidel Humanitarianism, to force these together, are identical in aim and parallel in guilt with the usurpation and insurrection of the first Nimrod.<sup>138</sup>

Bob Jones University would eventually rescind their ban on interracial dating in March of 2000, not admitting to any fault or hate in their beliefs but acknowledging that the widespread criticism directed at them overshadowed their more important testimony and religious beliefs.<sup>139</sup> The line of logic between the moral corruption and blackness of Cain, Ham, and Nimrod was quite linear, especially in the nineteenth-century, when most of these racial religious theories were academically published, corresponding with the rising tensions around the ethical merits of African slavery. The same thinking and religious interpretation of race relations present in nineteenth century Southern secessionists was seen in a major

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 4

<sup>137</sup> Timothy F. Reilly. "Benjamin M. Palmer: Secessionist Become Nationalist." *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 18, no. 3 (1977): 287-301. Accessed April 16, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4231694>, 3

<sup>138</sup> Benjamin M Palmer, *The Present Crisis And Its Issues* (Baltimore, MD: John Murphy & Co, 1872),19

<sup>139</sup> Gustav Niebuhr, "The New York Times," *The New York Times* (The New York Times, March 3, 2000), <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/library/national/030400bobjones-edu.html#:~:text=By%20GUSTAV%20NIEBUHR,Bob%20Jones%203d%20said%20tonight>

Christian university like Bob Jones into the twenty-first century. The case of Bob Jones University cannot be dismissed as a unique event. Historian Randall Balmer, in his book *Thy Kingdom Come*, accounts that the American New Christian Right movement, that which led to prominent figures like Jerry Falwell and James Dobson, and which is still highly influential in the Republican Party today, was not inspired by abortion beliefs, but Bob Jones University losing their tax-exempt status from the IRS due to their ban on interracial dating and refusing to admit unmarried African American students.<sup>140</sup>

The interpretation of the story of the Tower of Babel as a religious justification of segregation matches ideologically with the white nationalist stance that races are meant to be separate. Members of the Alt-Right who reject Christianity based on its egalitarian principles will not believe in the truth of the Biblical story and might not agree that all races should be separate but equal. However, the conclusion that racial integration is not natural and white people must protect themselves against it is the same that Benjamin M. Palmer reached in 1872, as well as Bob Jones University in the 1970s-1990s, and also mirrors the white nationalists of Unite the Right like Richard Spencer and Kessler that marched in 2017. These ideas are still present in American theology and culture. Unite the Right organizers sought to expand their reach by focusing on common concepts found in the political ideology of the Christian Right and some components of the Republican Party. In the past decade, white nationalists shifted from antagonism with all Christians and began to accept Christian racialists into their fold as allies due to the shared dream of America becoming a white homeland.<sup>141</sup> By not antagonizing Christianity and by understanding where racist Christianity comes from, the Alt-Right attempted to emphasize the shared ideas of the Alt-

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<sup>140</sup> Randall Herbert Balmer, *Thy Kingdom Come: How the Religious Right Distorts the Faith and Threatens America* (New York, NY: BasicBooks, 2007), 14

<sup>141</sup> Berry, "Religious Strategies of White Nationalism at Charlottesville"



Right and the predominately Christian mainstream right, thereby growing their support and expanding their political influence.

Not every slave owner, segregationist, white supremacist, or American had consistent interpretations of the Biblical stories of Cain and Ham, believed these stories were connected, or believed them to be genuine defenses of African slavery. Due to the number of different religious denominations and belief systems, not every white American believed in the divine providence of America, or in the racial and religious supremacy of the Anglo-Saxons, as not every white American was Anglo-Saxon. It is also important to note that these were not just views held by slaveholders or by Southerners, but these ideas were prevalent throughout American culture, society, and geography. These narratives that I have presented are simply general narratives, movements, stories, and ideas that were present and influencing the theology of white supremacy throughout American history, from the time the first African slave was brought to American shores, through the Civil Rights movement and anti-integration thought, to the present day, whether it be seen in Bob Jones University or in Neo-Nazis and modern-day Southern Segregationists marching down the streets of Charlottesville. Insufficient understanding of these ideas and how they continue to influence American society leaves their harmful narratives unchallenged and able to be capitalized upon by those who understand and want to repeat the darker parts of our history.

### *Conclusion*

The story of Unite the Right overwhelmingly became the story of the violence and death that occurred at the rally. This was a vital part of the story of the rally, but the messaging of the rally, the different strategies and historical antecedents the rally was pulling upon, has occasionally been underexamined. From the invocations of the crusades to assert that there was another ongoing holy war between Christians and Muslims, to the use of

Christian theology to justify segregation, their messaging draws on a deep and still influential history in American society. Religious nationalism and ethno-nationalism come from a similar place of emotional community: they represent something bigger than themselves, something that the modern, liberal world is degrading.<sup>142</sup> Religious divides today serve as powerful separators between groups, drawing boundaries between the in-groups and out-groups.<sup>143</sup> If the Alt-Right created a purely atheist or pagan identity, they would become a clear out-group to the religious nationalists and political conservatives they were hoping to convert to white nationalism. By engaging Christianity through a shared history of symbols, myths, and values, the Alt-Right was able to lean into the American Christian in-group and work to combine their Christian identity with their white identity.

The Alt-Right is once again decentralized after the disaster that the fallout around Unite the Right turned out to be for the movement, with some key leaders having been arrested or disgraced. However, their ideas do not disappear. Unite the Right was a unique moment for the Alt-Right because it was the culmination of white nationalists working to overcome religious and ideological barriers, coming to a shared understanding that their goals could be accomplished by engaging with historical Christian culture and ideas. Many rally participants actively engaged in Lost Cause religiosity, giving them a shared goal and community through the white nationalist Lost Cause. By understanding the history and Christian influences of white nationalism, white supremacy, and the Lost Cause, and how these came together to create a cohesive and deeply dangerous group, scholars and activists can be more prepared for violence like what was seen in Unite the Right. It is important to understand and dismantle the myths these groups perpetuate before they reach and impact the new generation.

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<sup>142</sup> Marja Vuorinen, "Neo-Nationalism in the 2010s: Religious Aspects of the Nordic and Northern European Extra-Parliamentary Far Right," *Approaching Religion* 9, no. 1–2 (October 23, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.30664/ar.86792>, 91

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 92

Similarly, while much of the internet traffic that led to the Unite the Right rally has been shut down, communication between groups will continue to evolve and, as American history of the KKK and other hate groups have demonstrated, these groups often go through multiple resurgences. It is through better understanding of the historical, cultural, and religious antecedents that led to an event, such as the Unite the Right rally, that future efforts can be advanced to address some of the recruitment points of this group. As one pastor noted after the rally, “If we don’t provide emerging generations with genuine identity, community and purpose through robust and vibrant spiritual communities, somebody else will do so. If good religion slumbers and stagnates, bad religion is the alternative.”<sup>144</sup>

Christian nationalism and its effects on American politics has become a larger topic of conversation since Unite the Right. An event that has been heavily connected to both Christian nationalism and Unite the Right was the January 6, 2021 storming of the United States Capitol building by participants in the “Save America” march. The Proud Boys, the “Western chauvinist” group that Unite the Right organizer Jason Kessler and other Unite the Right protesters were a part of, despite the founder disavowing the rally, were key instigators in the storming of the Capitol building.<sup>145</sup> Scholars and religious leaders have also spoken out about how they believe Christian nationalism played a role in the protest and violence, with many at the Capitol holding flags and signs merging their Christian beliefs with their political beliefs with slogans like “Make America Godly Again.”<sup>146</sup> Groups like the Proud Boys may not officially describe themselves as Alt-Right or have a white nationalist stance, but its membership were active participants and organizers for Unite the Right.

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<sup>144</sup> Brian D. McLaren, “Charlottesville: 'Alt-Right' Has Created Alt-Christianity,” *Time* (Time, August 25, 2017), <https://time.com/4915161/charlottesville-alt-right-alt-christianity/>.

<sup>145</sup> Deborah Acosta, Frank Matt, and Khadeeja Safdar, “Video Investigation: Proud Boys Were Key Instigators in Capitol Riot,” *The Wall Street Journal* (Dow Jones & Company, January 26, 2021), <https://www.wsj.com/video/video-investigation-proud-boys-were-key-instigators-in-capitol-riot/37B883B6-9B19-400F-8036-15DE4EA8A015.html>.

<sup>146</sup> Tish Harrison Warren, “We Worship with the Magi, Not MAGA,” *ChristianityToday.com* (Christianity Today, January 7, 2021), <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2021/january-web-only/trump-capitol-mob-election-politics-magi-not-maga.html>.

Subsequently, three years later other members and leadership within the organization were charged with conspiracy over the storming of Capitol.<sup>147</sup> While many “Save America” marchers were not Proud Boys, white nationalists, or Christian nationalists and had nothing to do with the storming of the Capitol, the connection the Proud Boys to both the Unite the Right and the “Save America” march which both had Christian nationalist protesters is significant. Groups, individuals, and ideas were running in similar circles, working towards similar goals.

Christian nationalism, if used in the way the Alt-Right sought to use it, could be a gateway towards white nationalism, and be used as a powerful motivator towards radicalization. Many Unite the Right protestors sought to invoke Christian imagery, symbolism, and history in a way to connect the legacy of whiteness with the legacy of Christianity and show that erasing white history through the removal of Confederate statues was an indicator of America losing its status as a Christian nation, thereby creating a sense of Christian ethno-nationalism. This is not to say that many conservatives or Christian nationalists will be vulnerable to the Alt-Right’s radicalization tactics and invocations, however, it is vital to understand who radical groups like the Alt-Right are targeting for influence, why these groups are being targeted, and how. Understanding these tactics and why they are used is the first step in countering them and preventing future radicalization.

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<sup>147</sup> Ryan Lucas, “4 Proud Boys Charged With Conspiracy Over Jan. 6 Capitol Riot,” NPR (NPR, March 19, 2021), <https://www.npr.org/2021/03/19/979304432/4-proud-boys-charged-with-conspiracy-over-jan-6-capitol-riot>.

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