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Bringing Back God: Goldenberg and the Vestigial State in American Religion

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Abstract :Naomi Goldenberg's model of religion as a "vestigial state" is an excellent interrogation of how religion interacts with the state. To Goldenberg, religions traditionally functioned in the same manner as nation-states before being conquered and delineated as semi-autonomous institutions under the larger secular apparatus. However, I argue in this paper that Goldenberg's "vestigial state" fails to account for the dynamism that religions have in their relationships to the state. I propose seeing religions as "alternative authorities," which can be subordinate, cooperative, or hostile to the secular state. These perspectives as an alternative authority are seen best in the evolution of American fundamentalism and Christian nationalism, whose adherents have historically distinguished themselves from the state while simultaneously engaging in the effort to reshape it. In looking at how these movements develop, we understand that religions are constantly evolving in how to achieve and maintain power.

Keywords: Christian nationalism; fundamentalism; secularism; American Christianity; vestigial state

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Introduction: New and Old Models of Religion

Scholars in the past century have fiercely debated the dynamics of religion in our rapidly changing world. Perhaps nothing has captivated the scholarly attention or influenced our public perceptions of religion more so than the issue of secularization. While there are plenty aspects of secularization worth dissecting, the most important factor discussed for this paper is the relationship between religion and the nation-state. While often understood to be distinct entities, distilled into categories of "religious" and "secular," Naomi Goldenberg's concept of the "vestigial state" collapses that distinction and highlights the ways that religious institutions have traditionally functioned in a similar manner to the nation-state.

While Goldenberg's model is useful in moving beyond these flawed categories, her presentation of the weakened, conquered vestigial state fails to recognize how religious institutions might have radically different relationships to the nation-state. Rather than being purely subservient vestigial states, I argue that religions behave as ever-evolving "alternative authorities." By analyzing the developments of fundamentalist and Christian nationalist movements in the United States, we can see the ways that religions can engage with the nation-state, developing simultaneous relationships of coexistence, collaboration, and competition.

To fully recognize the dynamics of alternative authorities, we must understand Goldenberg's model of the vestigial state. Goldenberg, at the core of her argument, is providing a new perspective on the relationship between the religious and secular. That very relationship has been interrogated by scholars of various different approaches and disciplines, with many thinkers positing that modernity has decentered religious authority from being the sole voice dictating the governance of the polity. Hoping to end the wars of religion and religious persecution, the Treaty of Westphalia had birthed a system where the "secular" nation-state took the reins from the religious authority. Because of this decoupling of religion from authority, a distinction and separation of the immanent, public, secular realm from the transcendent, private, religious realm had been conceived. Soon, national identity became the superior social marker, with religious identity being a purely individual

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distinction. Religious affiliations and the beliefs of individuals are chosen and changeable, and should also not interfere with these "worldly," secular affairs [1].

While that model of distinction has been largely accepted and popularized, it fails to recognize how the religious and "secular" politics have always been woven together. Drawing from critical scholars of religion, most notably William Cavanaugh, Naomi Goldenberg illustrates that the bifurcation of the "secular state" and "religion" is fundamentally misguided. Goldenberg asserts that rather than being two separate entities, religion functions as a "vestigial state." As a vestigial state, Goldenberg argues, these things known as religions are the surviving entities of formerly sovereign powers. According to Goldenberg, the concept of religion appears and evolves from periods of conquest, where "the conquered people might be allowed to continue with their cultures and institutions in attenuated and monitored forms. Prior governmental arrangements are granted limited recognition and circumscribed power. The now marginalized group can live on practicing…as the notion of 'religion'"[2].

While vestigial and non-vestigial states function in a similar manner, they differ in their justifications. For non-vestigial state, they might ground their actions on ideals of "freedom, equality, justice" or as "the proper homelands of an idealized race or ethnicity"[3]. Meanwhile, religions often cite divine chosenness as their primary motivator. This is not to say they are completely unalike in their justifications, since governments often cite religion in their effort to validate the government and elevate their sovereignty. For example, the phrase "One nation, under God" being inserted into the Pledge of Allegiance [4].

Additionally, as mentioned previously, there is a power imbalance between these varieties of states. Though the religion is separated off from the larger structures of political governance, Goldenberg argues that these vestigial institutions will take any opportunities ceded to them by the state. Goldenberg points to laws and customs regarding the family, since these are usually understood to be "proper" spheres for religious institutions, who then tend to set many of the rules and policies in a national context. Because of this power that is wielded by religions, however, conflict with the state can arise [5]. Should a vestigial state–or a movement attached to it–step out of line and then turn to violence, it is often seen as an illegitimate or inauthentic form of religion. In essence, it becomes separated from the category of religion and becomes an inappropriate political movement [6].

Goldenberg's work is extremely valuable, and she opens the door to seeing religious institutions in a new way. Goldenberg, in particular, highlights how using the model of vestigial states allows us to see religion as an avenue to perpetuate male domination. Goldenberg argues that these this model of religion accounts for issues such as gender, since these "vestigial states" are primarily platformed on a nostalgia and support for masculine, hegemonic government. Often, religion come into conflict with the current–usually more progressive–state regarding their perspective on issues of gender and sexuality. In these clashes, vestigial states can successfully argue for their sexist practices. However,

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[1] Jocelyn Cesari, *We God's People: Christianity, Islam and Hinduism in the World of Nations,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2022), 4-5.

[2] Naomi Goldenberg, "The Contemporary Deconstruction of Religion: How Current Scholarship in Religious Studies is Changing Methods and Theories," *Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies* 18, no. ½ (September 2022): 75.

[3] Naomi Goldenberg, "Theorizing Religions as Vestigial States in Relation to Gender and Law: Three Cases," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 29, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 40-41.

[4] Naomi Goldenberg, "The Category of Religion in the Technology of Governance: An Argument for Understanding Religion as Vestigial States," in *Religion as a Category of Governance and Sovereignty,* eds. Trevor Stack, Naomi Goldenberg, and Timothy Fitzgerald (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 283-284.

[5] Goldenberg, "Category of Governance," 282-283.

[6] Goldenberg, "Contemporary Deconstruction," 74.

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more egalitarian elements and factions of these traditions, usually informed by "women in liberal Western democracies" can also push for reform [7].

Various scholars have taken up Goldenberg's model and applied them to new case studies such as the obfuscation of gender-based violence behind the "specialness of religion," [8] the Catholic Church's shift towards sexual morality to maintain a privileged space within the larger neoliberal state [9], and how white supremacy is buttressed by vestigial, religious imagery [10]. All of these perspectives and arguments are insightful for our field, particularly because these authors take up Goldenberg's challenge to apply contextualized experiences in order to truly highlight the dynamics of the vestigial state. In whatever way we use it, Goldenberg's theory can radically alter the ways that we can engage in religious studies since it challenges some of our basic assumptions and understandings of what "religion" is and how we conceive of it, especially in the modern context.

However, I would argue that Goldenberg's model is incomplete, particularly in how it frames religion as something that survived the past and persists in the present. While Goldenberg readily acknowledges that "vestigial" falls short in truly encapsulating the pasts and possibilities of these in these institutions [11], there is a deeper problem in framing these traditions as ancillary institutions who are always diminished by the now-dominant nation-state. Religions are a constantly changing force and their relationship to the nation-state is much more complex than initially suspected.

I am not saying that we should wholly dismiss Goldenberg's argument, it is far too useful and powerful, but I argue for reframing religion as an "alternative authority" rather than a vestigial state. As an alternative authority, religious traditions can have multiple different relationships to power and the nation-state, particularly in the modern age. This might mean that the religion is/becomes the primary institution of power, or works in direct partnership with the nation-state, or is relegated to a subordinate role much in the same way that Goldenberg describes. In arguing for religions as an alternative authority, which functions in a similar way to the nation-state but often conceives of itself in relatively distinct terms, I'm arguing for the dynamism that Goldenberg wishes to portray. Religions as an alternative authority illustrates that there are very different paths in the future for how the nation-state can be structured and conceived. While certain religious institution are content (or unable to challenge) with their status as a subordinate alternative authority, another might be constantly utilizing its status as a "ancient" or superior alternative authority to subvert that power structure and assert its primacy.

That plasticity is illustrated best by contemporary Christian nationalism and fundamentalism in the United States. Where Goldenberg portrays religious institutions as a conquered and thus weakened entity, Christian nationalist and fundamentalist movements willingly use the rhetoric of subjugation and separation as a means of mobilizing their political ambitions. Rather than a dormant, vestigial state, fundamentalism and Christian nationalism provide us an avenue to see religion as an active alternative authority that seeks to reshape the state.

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[7] Goldenberg, "Theorizing Religions," 44.

[8] Kathleen McPhillips, "Religion as a Vestigial State: A Comment on Religion, Gender, and Violence," in *The End of Religion: Feminist Reappraisals of the State.* ed. Kathleen McPhillips & Naomi Goldenberg, (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2020), 39.

[9] Andrew Pump, "The Liberalisation of Modern Catholic Social Thought: Contextualising Catholic Anti-Feminism and Homophobia in a Vestigial State," in *The End of Religion: Feminist Reappraisals of the State.* ed. Kathleen McPhillips & Naomi Goldenberg, (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2020), 177.

[10] Richard Newton, Scared Sheetless: Negrophobia, the Fear of Go, and Justified Violence in the U.S. Christian-White Imaginary," *Journal of Religion and Violence* 7, no. 3 (2019): 308.

[11] Goldenberg, "Contemporary Deconstruction," 74.

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Old School Revival: Defining Fundamentalism and Christian Nationalism

But first, it is imperative to define what I mean by fundamentalism and Christian nationalism. While fundamentalist and Christian nationalist movements are not unique to United States, their roots are within a stream of conservative, American Protestantism (and American Christianity in general). While situating these movements in the United States, we see how these phenomena challenge Goldenberg's model and use their status as alternative authorities to empower their claims to power.

Fundamentalism and Christian nationalism are often used interchangeably, but they are not completely identical. While both movements have continued to build off each other in the larger sphere of conservative Christianity, they are distinct movements that arise out of different contexts. In other words, while plenty of Christian nationalists have been fundamentalists, not all fundamentalists are Christian nationalists and vice versa. Nevertheless, seeing the ways that the stories of fundamentalism and Christian nationalism are woven together is crucial to understanding the shifts in American religion and politics in the past century. More importantly, these changes illustrate how religion functions as an alternative authority with various different relations to the nation-state.

"Fundamentalism" as a category is perhaps the more contentious and complex of the two, since there are nuances and contexts that contribute to different forms of fundamentalism. For this paper, fundamentalism is primarily located within its original American, evangelical Protestant context. In the 1910s, the first self-identified "fundamentalists" were a consortium of Protestants who wrote and preached against the effects of modernism and liberal theology on core doctrinal positions such as Jesus' virgin birth and the inerrancy of the Bible. Soon, fundamentalist-modernist battles split churches and communities across the country, though the 1925 Scopes Monkey Trial seemed to be the death blow of the fundamentalists. Publicly defeated, most Americans believed that the fundamentalists retreated into obscurity, resorting to building separatist institutions and insulating themselves from the pressures from the modern world .[12] They couldn't have been further from the truth, and fundamentalists still maintain a public presence over a century later.

Since it first came on the scene, scholars and practitioners have fiercely debated what fundamentalism entails. For the most part, "fundamentalism" been a shorthand for a backwards and intolerant kind of religiosity [13]. However, that overwhelmingly pejorative perspective fails to recognize the ways that fundamentalist movements have been able to survive–and, at times, thrive–for over a century. More than an extremist, anti-modern reactionary movement, the fundamentalist effort to get American society back to basics is built upon political and technological innovation.

While being a much more recent target of scholarly attention, Christian nationalism similarly posits a problem with the changes in society. Christian nationalism, as described by Samuel Perry and Andrew Whitehead, is best understood as a perspective where the United States "has and always should be a distinctly 'Christian'…from top to bottom–in its self-identity, interpretations of its own history, sacred symbols, cherished values, and public policies–and it aims to keep it that way" [14]. This sense of national Christian identity has frequently been expressed through nativist, racist, and cisheteropatriarchal policies. Simply put, being a good American has meant being a good Christian, both of which are often contrasted with Black, Asian, Indigenous, Jewish, Muslim, and Queer populations [15].

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[12] Andrew Atherstone and David Ceri Jones, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Christian Fundamentalism* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2023), 5-6.

[13] Atherstone and Jones, eds., *Christian Fundamentalism*, 16.

[14] Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, *Taking Back America for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* (New York: Oxford University, 2020), 10.

[15] Phillip Gorski, "Religious Nationalism and Right-Wing Populism: Trumpism and Beyond" in *Religion, Populism, and Modernity: Confronting White Christian Nationalism and Racism* eds. Atalia Omer and Joshua Lupo (Notre Dame; University of Notre Dame, 2023), 24.

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Much like fundamentalism, Christian nationalism has shifted according to the times, often expanding who it includes in the movement. While traditionally associated with evangelical and Charismatic Protestants, Christian nationalists today include mainline Protestants and once vilified groups such as Catholics, Latter-Day saints, Jews, among other non-Christian groups [16]. Uniting all these groups is a concern for the feeling that the Christian culture of the United States is being threatened by supposedly anti-Christian secularists. In response to these transgressions, Christian nationalists have built alliances and developed new strategies in the hopes of winning the war for the soul of the nation.

Despite the shared hostility towards this changing America, neither tradition has given up on reaching outwards. There exists two seemingly contradictory aspects of fundamentalism and Christian nationalism: a hostility towards modernism or secularism, but also an acceptance of new opportunities to engage the culture. While the methods may change, fundamentalists and Christian nationalists have constantly worked towards a "traditional" American society. This combination of old and new is seen best in formation of the Religious Right and its influence on conservative Christianity in America.

1910s-1950s: Fundamental Beginnings and National Growth

While fundamentalist movements originated as a rough coalition of traditionalists in a variety of Protestant denominations decades before the Scopes Monkey Trial, they were largely removed from American politics. That changed in the aftermath of the First World War, with disillusioned Christians of the early 1920s being concerned with supposedly anti-Christian issues such as the teaching of evolution in public schools. Modernism and liberalism, these fundamentalists claimed, had undermined the Biblical values of American society. They were particularly outspoken against anything considered too secular, communist, or Catholic. However, aside from issues such as Prohibition–which related to their anti-Catholicism–coalitions of fundamentalists, evangelicals, and Protestants at large were few and far between [17].

Fundamentalists continued to be split along political boundaries in the 30s, with Northern fundamentalists being hostile towards the New Deal, arguing that it would lead to a socialist, anti-Christian state. Their Southern counterparts, however, were much more receptive to government aid [18]. Despite their general agreement that modernism liberalism and socialism was a direct threat to Bible-believing, Christian society, there was no systematic approach to politics [19].

However, explicitly conspiratorial rhetoric around plots to destroy American Christianity would become prominent at this time. More so, it would set a standard for future generations. Texts such as Arno C. Gaebelein's *The Conflict of the Ages* presents an interconnected web of socialists, secret societies, Catholics, and Jews collaborating in the destruction of America and its righteous Protestantism. Gaeblein focused on Jews in particular, in large part thanks to the publication of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* [20]. This conspiratorial, Manichean mindset, propagated through books, pamphlets, magazines, and radio programs represented a distinct turn in both fundamentalism and conservative Protestantism at large. It is this turn towards embracing the "paranoid style" that is pivotal to seeing the future developments of the Christian right. Reflecting their already millenarian and dispensationalist beliefs, these breeds of Protestantism applied a similar battle of good versus evil to their political motivations. Simply put, fundamentalists and conservative Protestants began to think that every part of history–political and religious–as a conspiracy, "set in motion by demonic

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[16] Phillip Gorski and Samuel L. Perry, *The Flag and the Cross: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy,* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2022), 49.

[17] Daniel K. Williams, "The Christian Right," in *The Oxford Handbook of Christian Fundamentalism,* eds. Andrew Atherstone and David Ceri Jones (Oxford: Oxford University, 2023), 573.

[18] Williams, "Christian Right," 573.

[19] George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2022), 262.

[20] Marsden, *Fundamentalism,* 263-264.

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forces of almost transcendent power, and what is felt to be needed to defeat it is…an all out crusade"[21]. The embrace of conspiracies didn't discourage political engagement, but only galvanized it. Demons, devils, communists, and Catholics alike needed to be combatted at every level of society.

The 40s and 50s saw the continual effort of fundamentalists reach out to a wider audience and engage with other conservative Protestants–usually evangelicals–who were similarly concerned about Catholic and Communist influence on the American government. It would also be where this coalition became seriously entrenched within American politics and the Republican Party in particular. The foundation of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) in 1942 brought together Lutherans, Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and even the once maligned Charismatics, in service of advancing conservative Protestantism across the country [22]. Evangelicals such as Billy Graham (who formerly identified as a fundamentalist) counseled the mainliner president Dwight D. Eisenhower, often promoting policies that visibly amplified Christian ideals. This is seen best in the adoption of "One Nation Under God" as the national motto and the addition of "under God" to the Pledge of Allegiance. All this was adopted to contrast with the godless atheism of the Soviets. This civil, conservative, Protestant religiosity was often disseminated by *Christianity Today*, a publication founded by Graham [23].

But conservative Protestants did not restrict themselves to just print materials. Rather, fundamentalists and conservatives readily took advantage of new technologies for religious proselytization and political organization. By 1949, there were thousands of evangelical radio programs being broadcasted in the country, with figures such as Graham, Oral Roberts, and Charles Edward Fuller becoming household names. These programs survived by building a consistent stream of listeners, with conservative and evangelical broadcasters hoping to be unchallenged on national airwaves. However, the passing of the 1934 Communications Act led to the expansion of mainline Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish radio programs. Feeling excluded and attacked, evangelical and fundamentalist organizers formed the National Religious Broadcasters (NRB) lobbying group. Backed by influential organizations such as the NAE, the NRB was effective not just in advancing conservative Protestant radio programs, but also in establishing a foundation for the future of conservative broadcasting [24].

1960s-1970s: New Opponents, Allies, and Avenues

This ever-expanding coalition of conservative Protestants continued to make inroads headed into the 60s. While still largely divided politically, this movement became particularly attached to the Republican party with the nomination of the Catholic John F. Kennedy in the 1960 presidential election. Conservative Protestants across the board–from evangelicals, fundamentalists, charismatics, and even conservative mainliners–united to combat this Catholic takeover. Graham himself even worked alongside the Nixon campaign. In particular, the vast media network created by these Conservative Protestants was used to warn voters against what was thought to be a transgression against God [25].

That conservative coalition was not built to last, however, and some of the more moderate White evangelicals such as Graham no longer self-identified as fundamentalists. Because of their unwillingness to work with mainline Protestants, there emerged a stricter separatist stream of fundamentalists composed of figures such as Bob Jones Sr., Carl McIntire, and Billy James Hargis.

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[21] Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (New York: Library of America, 2020), 525.

[22] Anthea Butler, *White Evangelical Racism: The Politics of Morality in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina), 36-38.

[23] Williams, "Christian Right," 574.

[24] Robert Glenn Howard and Megan L. Zahay, "From the Television Age to the Digital Revolution," in *The Oxford Handbook of Christian Fundamentalism,* eds. Andrew Atherstone and David Ceri Jones (Oxford: Oxford University, 2023), 644-645.

[25] Williams, "Christian Right," 574.

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This division was also exasperated by the Civil Rights Movement, with moderate evangelicals like Graham supporting integration. That, however, was still a reluctant acceptance, as can be seen when Graham wrote that some "extremists were going too fast" in advancing integration [26]. For the hardline fundamentalists and a significant number of White evangelicals, integration as dire a threat to the nation as the communists and Catholics. Plenty of these fundamentalists and conservative Protestants argued that activists like Martin Luther King Jr. represented a "lawlessness" that threatened American values [27].

Interestingly, concerns around racial purity began to reunite a diverse group of Christians. A substantial number of evangelicals, fundamentalists, mainliners, and charismatics in both the North and South argued that segregation should be maintained both politically and theologically, with a growing number of White Catholics agreeing. These Catholics, who were often descended from European immigrants, decided to forsake much of their distinctive ethnic identities in favor of the White American [28]. While not totally immune from anti-Catholic sentiment, Catholic communities embrace of Whiteness helped ingratiate themselves among the crop of Conservative Protestants.

Alongside new collaborators, these conservative Christians continued to take advantage of new technologies. Having built a powerful precedent with radio, television was the next logical step. As soon as the Federal Communication Committee allowed them in 1960, conservative Christians began buying up slots at an astronomical rate. Thanks to its accessibility and marketability, television fueled the growth of televangelists, some of which were already existing radio personalities. Figures such as Oral Roberts, Jimmy Swaggart, Jim Bakker, Jerry Falwell, and Pat Robertson became some of the most prolific conservative Christian voices of the era, in large part thanks to their usage of televangelism. By the 70s, conservatives knew that they could utilize this diverse body of television personalities into forming a solid voting bloc [29].

At the same time in the early to mid-70s, Republican politicians continued to work alongside more moderate conservative Christians such as Graham. With their help, and a policy focused on anti-communism and the racial dog whistle of "social order," Republican incumbent Richard Nixon were able to recapture the presidency in 1972. However, Watergate would turn many conservative Christians away from blind loyalty towards the Republican party. Many of these conservatives urged voters to consider a candidate's morality and quality of character more than his party affiliation [30].

That concern for moral fiber extended not just to politicians, but the nation as a whole. In particular, concerns around sexual purity and abortion became the tentpole issues for the consolidation of conservative Christians. Both moderate and fundamentalist conservatives launched campaigns advocating for a return to the heteronormative, nuclear family. Any kind of domestic or sexual deviancy was understood to be not just a personal failure, but was indicative of social rot. It is at this point you see a true partnership formed between conservative Protestants and Catholics, primarily in opposing abortion after the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision. But this strong, ecumenical partnership was also concerned with what Francis Schaeffer called "secular humanism," which included everything that could be considered secular, modernist, or liberal [31].

1980s-1990s: The Religious Right and A New Standard

With a powerful coalition from across the denominational spectrum, conservative Christians across the country hoped to turn the U.S. back to its godly roots. With the born-again, evangelical Jimmy Carter elected president in 1976, that seemed to be the case. However disappointment after

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[26] Butler, *White Evangelical,* 52.

[27] Williams, "Christian Right," 575.

[28] Robert P. Jones, *White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020), 70.

[29] Howard and Zahay, "Television Age," 646-647.

[30] Williams, "Christian Right," 575.

[31] Williams, "Christian Right," 576-577.

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disappointment by Carter and other Christian politicians shifted how they thought about political allies; rather than a candidate's moral character or personal piety, the most important thing was that these candidates would fight for the laws that these conservative Christians wanted. If they were to say the save the soul of the nation from the evils of abortion, race mixing, feminism, communism, and homosexuality, the only way forward was to radically change the laws of the state [32].

Political action committees and lobbying groups such as the Moral Majority, Campus Crusade for Christ, and Christian Voice put significant pressure on conservative politicians to support their goals of bringing back God in public schools, outlawing abortion, combatting international communism, and supporting Israel. The movement quickly threw their support behind Republican candidate Ronald Reagan in the 1980 election. Frequently appearing conservative Christian events, endorsing their rhetoric, and dominating the White evangelical vote, Reagan would set the standard for all of the future Republican presidential candidates [33].

With the turn towards policy positions over personal morality, conservative Christians became one of the strongest voting constituencies, and one that was frequently favored by the Republican party. With the Republican party attached, conservative Christians pushed for policies to promote their mostly White private schools and the cisheteronormative nuclear family [34]. However, abortion remained the biggest issue for the religious right by the late 80s. With several generations of evangelicals, charismatics, fundamentalists, Catholics, and a variety of other Christian conservatives motivated by ideas of social justice and spiritual warfare, many of these anti-abortion activists moved to ideas of civil disobedience. While firmly attached to the Republican party, some on the religious right felt it necessary to take matters into their own hands and run for office. This is seen best in Pat Robertson's 1980 presidential campaign. While unsuccessful in gaining a majority of the evangelical vote, the results revealed that conservative Christians were willing to engage in politics and reshape the nation according to their beliefs [35].

Robertson's campaign also presented a turn towards religious freedom as a core issue of the religious right. With some of their policy proposals being less palatable to most Americans, the "moral majority" shifted and framed itself as a persecuted minority. Despite having a solid voting bloc and significant political clout, conservative Christians asserted that they were a minority that needed 1st Amendment protections from the larger culture. Throughout the 90s, right-wing Christians mobilized for the Republican party from the local and state level, all the way to Congress in the effort of "protecting" their rights. With organizations like the Christian Coalition, Family Research Council, and Focus on the Family helping mobilize voters around issues such as anti-gay legislation, the Republican party took up these positions as well [36].

Despite their influence, many on the Christian right became increasingly frustrated with various political failures–neither abortion nor homosexuality had been outlawed despite their efforts–and rebuked the traditional strategies. Instead, they advocated for forming conservative enclaves distinct from their secular neighbors. While not embraced whole hog, this turn to "Reconstructionism" helped advance the Christian homeschooling movement and the "traditional" patriarchal family. Even at its most banal, the Christian right simultaneously separated and expanded itself with mediums such as Christian radio, music, and education [37].

2000s to Present: Big Lies and a Big Movement

The Christian right carried on into the new millennia with vigor, though this time it became more decentralized. That decentralization is in large part thanks to the internet. With the internet came various online forums that helped establish communities for those interested in right-wing

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[32] Williams, "Christian Right," 577.

[33] Williams, "Christian Right," 578.

[34] Williams, "Christian Right," 578-579.

[35] Williams, "Christian Right," 580-581.

[36] Williams, "Right," 582.

[37] Williams, "Right," 583.

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Christianity. Importantly, the internet facilitated members of these communities to easily regulate their membership, with members of these message boards or other social media platforms to ban or block detractors. Without having to worry about physical proximity or dissenting voices, membership became easily strengthened and maintained [38]. In addition, various conservative Christian influencers created content that reinforced conservative beliefs or conspiratorial narratives. Social media, in particular, helped blur distinctions between layperson and authority, as well as individual and institution; with the internet, everybody could become an expert and a leader [39].

Despite their decentralization and dispersal of authority, the Christian right still had major institutional support. While right-wing Christian organizations still certainly had sway, the Republican party had become the primary avenue for conservative Christian political action. The Christian right supported the wars in the Iraq and Afghanistan, viewing Islamism as the next Manichean battleground, much like communism had been for prior generations. Beyond the Middle East, conservative Christians and the Republican party focused on two issues above all: queer rights and abortion. These issues–once again perceived as issues around religious freedom–put them in frequent conflict with the larger American society, and the Obama administration in particular. With the 2014 *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby* and 2015 *Obgerfell v. Hodges* Supreme Court decisions, the former a narrow victory and the latter a loss, Christian conservatives felt it was more important than ever to reshape the laws through the courts and legislation [40]. Feeling that they were threatened by "persecution," these White Christian conservatives embraced a seemingly radical candidate [41].

That effort to control the state and avoid victimization led to the overwhelming support of Donald Trump. Trump, who was supported in 2016 and 2020 by a majority of all White Christians,[42] once again was a partnership that focused on the political ambitions rather than personal morality. While Trump received some pushback from his Christian allies, the majority were clearly willing to support Trump through thick and thin. That political partnership can be seen best in the conspiratorial narrative of the Big Lie. Believing that Democrats and a handful of Republicans were conspiring to steal the 2020 election from Trump, supporters argued that drastic measures needed to be taken. With January 6th, there was a significant turn towards violence that had largely been unseen by conservative Christians. Coating themselves in paraphernalia that mixed support for Trump alongside Christian imagery, plenty of rioters advocated for violence against government officials, all under the pretense that it was pushing back against a dastardly conspiracy to steal the election. This no fringe event as well, with adherents of Christian nationalism asserting that these "patriots" were justified in trying to "take back" the country for God and Trump [43].

Christian nationalists continue to push for taking over the state and attacking their opponents, particularly with the 2024 election on the horizon. With an ever-expanding base of supporters, thanks in large part to the internet and grassroots activism, conservative Christians and Christian nationalists are making significant headway. Organizations such as Turning Point USA and its founder, Charlie Kirk, are leading the charge by encouraging college-aged Americans to become ardent conservatives that want to see the "Church return to its rightful place." With Mom's for Liberty, Christian nationalists are encouraging engaging in politics at the local, state, and federal level. But this is also a movement with significant institutional support, including a conservative Supreme Court and a sympathetic speaker of the house in Mike Johnson. And this is to say nothing about the various extremist streams of Christian nationalism perpetuated by figures such as Nick Fuentes, who have been crucial to radicalizing young

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[38] Howard and Zahay, "Television," 652.

[39] Howard and Zahay, "Television," 653-654.

[40] Williams, "Christian Right," 584-585.

[41] Gorski and Perry, *Flag*, 113.

[42] Gregory A. Smith, "5 Facts about Religion and Americans' Views of Donald Trump," Pew Research Center. *https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/03/15/5-facts-about-religion-and-americans-views-of-donald-trump/*

[43] Gorski and Perry, *Flag*, 98-101.

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Americans with a brand of extremely bigoted and hostile breed of Christian nationalism. Feeding off of new conspiracies, particularly that queer folk are "groomers" dead set on exploiting children [44], Christian nationalists are a powerful force that could very well change the fate of the United States. Influenced by fundamentalists and Christian conservatives of the past, our current generation of Christian nationalists are continuing a long trend of presenting itself as a superior, alternative authority. A century after the fundamentalists protested teaching evolution in public schools, Christian nationalists are working to make sure such a transgression of their authority never happens again.

Our Better Angels: Religion as an Alternative Authority

In the development of fundamentalism and contemporary Christian nationalism, we see movements that are dedicated to changing the very relationship that churches have with the state. While not always unified around issues, these contemporary Christians illustrate a desire to make the alternative authority the dominant model for the state. While January 6th illustrated that the attempts to control the state apparatus can be violent, but the entirety of the movement reflects an effort to empower itself through legislative efforts and civil engagement. In other words, this is not a "conquest" that Goldenberg describes, but a takeover of the state by an alternative authority. To do so, fundamentalists and Christian nationalists have been willing to use modern methods and new technologies, all the while appealing to a mystified past. Religions, as an alternative authority, are not dormant, but constantly strategizing and working to maintain themselves. Despite their status as a smaller, sometimes despised, alternative authority, these movements illustrate a dynamism towards politics and society at large.

It is this dynamism that shows the fault lines in Goldenberg's usage of the "vestigial state." Despite the rhetoric of Christian nationalists who would say that this is going back to the "good old days" where religion informed the laws of the land, this is not a remnant of some conquered state; these are modern movements that have a real dissatisfaction with the way the state and society functions. Because of their place in modern history, we can't reduce fundamentalism nor Christian nationalism to something from that past that is hoping to reclaim what was lost. While they might appeal to the past, these are movements that are constantly in conversation with the nation-state, which has been both cooperative and antagonistic. With their varied positions on the secular nation-state, either embracing it or rejecting all in the effort of reshaping it, we must see that religious movements like fundamentalism and Christian nationalism are not a "vestigial" hanger-on, but evolve alongside and in response to society as an alternative authority.

Goldenberg's model, as I mentioned before, is extremely useful for blurring the line between religious and secular. However, we should not dismiss the ways that these movements uphold that distinction themselves, often to strengthen their claims their authority. By using the imagery of a righteous, persecuted community–often with a conspiratorial edge to it– under a harsh, secular state, these movements have developed a perspective that galvanize supporters. These groups are criticizing the religious/secular distinction because that wall of separation should not exist, either with the church as the primary authority over the state or the two in direct cooperation. Religion need not be fully subservient nor wholly in power, and the history of the fundamentalist and Christian nationalist movements reflects a very real tension in how to assert their authority.

Once again, Goldenberg's model of the vestigial state is pivotal to collapsing the faulty distinction between the "religious" and the "secular," primarily because both see religion as an organized method of maintaining boundaries and hierarchies. However, the problem of "vestigial" looms large. Goldenberg herself recognizes the difficulty in illustrating these authorities as "vestigial," but the core problem is seeing religion as something that is old and conquered. Fundamentalism and Christian nationalism illustrate that, in the modern nation-state, religions function as alternative authorities that are constantly changing in response to the state. More so, as we see with contemporary Christian nationalism, these alternative authorities have a real impact on the nation-state. To understand how religion works in the modern context, we must see how it frames its authority in comparison to the nation-state, whether it is

[44] Aoife Gallagher and Tim Squirrell, "The 'Groomer' Slur," *Institute for Strategic Dialogue,* January 16, 2023, https://www.isdglobal.org/explainers/the-groomer-slur/.

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subservient to, coexisting with, or dominating that state. Ultimately, religion is not some left-over vestigial state, but as a constantly evolving alternative authority.

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