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Framing an Insurrection: A Typology of Responses by Evangelical Leaders

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Abstract

As the January 6th insurrection unfolded, religious leaders who had supported Donald Trump were set on a behavioral process of response or silence. Some religious leaders offered statements that largely condemned the violence, others promoted conspiracy theories about the actors involved, and still others responded defensively. In this article, the author presents Twitter data of religious leaders from January 1 through the insurrection's 6-month anniversary on July 6, 2021, and argues that their responses form a typology from the conciliatory to the antagonistic. This typology offers a useful framework for assessing their immediate and changing responses in the contestation of January 6th. The insurrection represents a potential rally event in an ongoing narrative of Christian nationalism, and how religious leaders frame it has significant implications for the civic education and engagement of their followers.

Keywords: religion, communication, insurrection, clergy, social media, Christian nationalism

On January 6, 2021, a mob broke into the U.S. Capitol building as the Senate was carrying out its constitutionally prescribed duty to tally Electoral College votes. Representatives and senators either fled or huddled for safety as the situation grew increasingly violent. Offices and chambers were ransacked, and five people died in the melee. As the scene unfolded live on national television, political leaders of all stripes decried what was quickly termed an “insurrection,” the first ever of its kind in American politics in which a band of citizens used violence to attempt to stop the certification of a presidential election. Finally, at about 9:00 p.m., the Senate and House resumed the process of counting state electoral votes, and Joe Biden was certified as president-elect at 3:32 a.m. on January 7, 2021.

These events were the culmination of months, years, and perhaps decades of priming by various actors who cast doubt on electoral legitimacy, demonized the political opposition, or otherwise created or exploited divisions in the social fabric for political gain. The role of religious actors in this complex brew merits examination. The emergence of the New Christian Right and its Culture War in the 1970s aided partisan realignment, leaving a party system in which religious affiliation remains a dominant cleavage. In 2016, 77% of White evangelical Protestants and 64% of White Catholics voted for Donald Trump (Pew Research Center, 2018). In 2020, even with a slight drop among White Catholics, the share of the White evangelical vote for Trump increased to 84% (Igielnik et al., 2021). With a third of the electorate (33%) made up of White evangelicals and Catholics, and with Trump securing such a lopsided share of their votes, it is fair to say that the Christian Right is a strong base of Trump support (Igielnik et al., 2021).

From the beginning, Donald Trump sought religious support, bringing religious leaders into his inner circle and using them to reach the rank-and-file. In June 2016, candidate Trump released a list of 26 names that would form his “evangelical executive advisory board” (Gass, 2021). Throughout his presidency, these individuals would appear at White House events, offer public support for the president and his policies, and generally enjoy unprecedented access to the Oval Office. Having been such ardent supporters of this president and his administration, the Christian Right had much at stake in the outcome of the 2020 election and was prevalent in post-election rallies, marches, and protests leading up to January 6, 2021. How religious leaders responded (and respond) to the insurrection is important for how that shapes the civic education and engagement of the Christian Right going forward.

This research represents a preliminary effort to assess how leaders in the Christian Right framed the January 6th insurrection.¹ From the rhetoric used at post-election rallies, to the religious symbolism displayed that day, to the subsequent reactions of religious leaders, it is evident that appeals to religion were both a stimulus for and response to the insurrection. Relying on reports of the day as well as original searches of Twitter accounts of prominent Christian Right leaders, I found that although most condemned the violence, there was variation in the framing by religious elites, forming a typology ranging from the apologetic to the conspiratorial. I argue that this spectrum gives religious leaders leeway in the ongoing contestation of January 6th, and the frame they adopt is crucial to the opinion formation of their followers and to the civic learning that is essential to a healthy democracy.

¹ By *Christian Right*, I mean religious elites and rank-and-file, mostly evangelical, who represent the confluence of conservative Christianity and politics.

Literature Review

It has been well-established that opinions can change depending on how issues are framed (Chong & Druckman, 2007). Chong and Druckman (2007) defined *framing* as “the process by which people develop a particular conceptualization of an issue or reorient their thinking about an issue” (p. 104). When an issue is new, “the public is uncertain of its stakes and of how competing positions relate to their values” (p. 113). This heightens the importance of framing by trusted elites such as clerical leaders. Furthermore, frames can be mimicked by other actors, which is a significant reinforcement mechanism. The events of January 6, 2021, are still fresh in the minds of the public, and frames are still being contested (Zhao, 2021). This contestation heightens the importance of evangelical leaders, whose cues were key in generating support for President Trump among their followers and in framing the insurrection.

There is evidence that messaging by religious elites can affect public opinion (Djupe & Calfano, 2014). Religious communication primes values—either inclusive or exclusive—by which individuals process events and issues, and Djupe and Calfano (2014) found that evangelicals are more likely to express exclusive values, those that emphasize in/out-group boundaries. This priming activates social identity boundaries among listeners and shapes political attitudes (Djupe & Calfano, 2014). This process is contingent on variables, such as exposure, the political sophistication of listeners, and the credibility of the speaker, but the overall effect is powerful because religious elites can speak across both religious and public domains (Djupe & Calfano, 2014). “The efficacy of elite cues may depend on the congruence of their message, how their expertise is assessed, and the validity of their representational claim” (p. 212). In the case of framing the insurrection, evangelical leaders can implicitly draw on their past access to the Trump Administration (many in this study were members of his evangelical advisory board) to establish their credibility, but as this typology demonstrates, there is still variation in how they talk about January 6th. A single frame has yet to be established.

The pervasive influence of Christian nationalism raises the stakes of framing the insurrection. “As a collection of narratives, traditions, myths, value systems and symbols, Christian nationalism expresses the belief that America is distinctly 'Christian,' and that this should be reflected in its public policies, sacred symbols, and national identity” (Baker et al., 2020). Scholars have shown that these views, especially among Trump supporters (Baker et al., 2020; Whitehead et al., 2018), and the presence of Christian symbols and language at the marches and in the breach of the Capitol certainly represent Christian nationalism in action. Moreover, through their responses, evangelical leaders are positioned to influence whether the insurrection becomes a “rally event” in the narrative of Christian nationalism (Edwards & Swenson, 1997; Newman & Forcehimes, 2010).

Culminating on January 6th

Beginning the day after the election on November 3, 2020, pro-Trump protests formed at state capitols around the United States. Many of these were loosely organized under “Stop the Steal,” a Facebook group that amassed upwards of 300,000 members before it was banned from the platform, and many were led or joined by white supremacist or militia groups (Kelly, 2020; Lang et al., 2020). In fact, as multiple groups formed, connected on social media, and showed up at the same place on the same day, it was hard to draw lines around individual groups. Among these was the Jericho March, whose name borrowed from an Old Testament story and whose members marched around state capitols soliciting divine intervention to overturn the election

results.² Adherents drew heavily from Judeo-Christian symbolism, especially the shofar, a ram's horn used by ancient Jews as a trumpet in battle. However, Jericho March was not founded by established religious elites but by Rob Weaver, a health-care executive whose nomination for head of the Indian Health Service in the Trump Administration fell under scrutiny of his record, and Arina Grossu, a staffer at the Family Research Council. In interviews, both Weaver and Grossu described supernatural visions as the impetus for founding the group: "God told me to let the church roar" ("Jericho March Co-Founder," 2020).

At a rally in Washington, DC, on December 12, 2020, the emcee for the event was Eric Metaxas, a radio talk-show host who has described himself as "an ambassador for faith in public life" (Metaxas Media, 2021). Also featured were Alex Jones, head of InfoWars, a media platform specializing in conspiracy theories; disgraced former General Michael Flynn, who was convicted for lying to the FBI, later pardoned by President Trump, and now pledged allegiance to QAnon; and Mike Lindell, CEO of MyPillow. In addition to these main speakers, there were also religious leaders, including Catholic Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò, Jonathan Cahn, a Messianic Jewish minister known among Charismatic evangelicals for his apocalyptic focus, and Mark Burns, a South Carolina pastor and member of Trump's evangelical advisory board. The 4-hour event was live-streamed, culminating in a fly-over by Marine One (Cheney, 2020). Rhetoric was on a war-footing, with a shofar sounding a battle cry and calling listeners to "fight" for Donald Trump (Cheney, 2020).

This Jericho March was repeated a month later, on January 5, 2021, and once again, the event fused religious worship and political protest as participants marched around the Capitol singing hymns. Over the course of several days, there were multiple rallies sponsored by different groups, but as before, events and participants overlapped. At the Jericho March, Tennessee Pastor Greg Locke prayed explicitly for Enrique Tarrio, the leader of the white supremacist group the Proud Boys, who had been arrested the day before for tearing down a Black Lives Matter banner during that group's rally: "We just thank God that we can lock shields, and we can come shoulder to shoulder with people that still stand up for this nation" (Jenkins, 2021a). Permits suggest that the largest organized gathering planned for January 6, 2021, was the all-day "Save America" rally, organized by individuals with direct connections to the Trump campaign (Beaujon, 2021; Lardner & Smith, 2021).

Featuring President Trump's associates, like Roger Stone and Michael Flynn, and members of Congress, such as Representative Mo Brooks (R-AL), the rally on January 6th had broad-based appeal to the variety of Trump supporters there, including evangelicals. Paula White, Trump's personal spiritual advisor whom he appointed to head of his Faith and Opportunity Initiative, gave an invocation: "Let every adversary against democracy, against freedom, against life, against liberty, against justice, against peace, against righteousness be overturned right now in the name of Jesus" (Posner, 2021).

Christian symbolism was readily visible among the crowd. One person carried a sign depicting Jesus and a caption that read, "I saw what you did with those ballots" ("Supporters," 2021), suggesting that Jesus himself acknowledged election fraud. Others carried signs, banners, and flags reading, "Jesus Saves" or "Jesus 2020" (Farley, 2021). One of these was positioned

² Their website (<https://jerichomarch.org/>) has now been scrubbed of all identifying information except for two statements, dated January 8 and January 14, 2021, denouncing the violence of January 6th and claiming that all Jericho Marches were peaceful.

next to a gallows that had been built, presumably in preparation to act on the rally-goers' cries, "Hang Mike Pence!" (Schor, 2021). Pictures and videos revealed several life-sized crosses in the crowd, in addition to those that adorned apparel (Farley, 2021). Carrying over from the previous day's events, many participants knelt in prayer or raised their hands in worship (Farley, 2021). Under the banner of prayer, storming the Capitol became a religious act. Such conflation of loyalties was established in other ways. "Shout if you love Jesus!" one group yelled, to which another responded, "Shout if you love Trump!" (Green, 2021) Elsewhere the chant was, "Give it up if you believe in Jesus!" to which another group responded, "Give it up if you believe in Donald Trump!" (Goldberg, 2021).

Upon breaching the Senate chamber, rioters gathered on the dais to offer a prayer. To a chorus of "Amen," one person shouted, "Jesus Christ, we invoke your name!" (Jenkins, 2021b). At this point, one of the most memorable figures, known as "the Shaman," called for "a prayer in this sacred space" (Jenkins, 2021b). Through a bullhorn, his prayer relied on familiar evangelical language, even as it harkened to a generic spirituality by invoking a "divine, omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent creator God" (Jenkins, 2021b). He offered thanksgiving for the opportunity to "exercise our rights, to allow us to send a message to all the tyrants, the communists and the globalists that this is our nation, not theirs" and for "filling this chamber with patriots that love you and that love Christ" and for "allowing the United States of America to be reborn" (Jenkins, 2021b). Some around him knelt; others raised their hands in praise. One in the room later described it as a moment when the Senate was "consecrated to Jesus" and called the prayer the "ultimate statement of where we are at with this movement" (Jenkins, 2021b). Police officers testified before Congress that the crowds tried to evangelize the officers, even as the rioters battered them (Sharlet, 2021).

Measuring Responses

As all this unfolded on January 6th, it was obvious to participants and observers alike that this was an insurrection infused with Christianity. Religious leaders were pressed to respond, and these responses form a typology indicating what the insurrection means to the Christian Right and how it might be used in an ongoing narrative of Christian nationalism. To examine the responses of religious leaders, I first relied on media reports of the day. Reporters from both national and international media sought comments from religious figures, especially those who had had an obvious presence in the Trump Administration.

To these reports, I added results from original searches of the Twitter accounts of prominent religious supporters of Donald Trump. Twitter is an appropriate social medium to measure because, as Trump relied on it as his primary form of direct public communication, so too have many of these religious leaders used it to extend their platform beyond the pulpit. It is a vehicle by which they transition from the religious to the public domain (Djupe & Calfano 2014). I conducted both word/phrase searches (e.g., "Capitol," "protest," "rally") as well as date searches (from January 1 to July 6, 2021) to capture relevant responses. I began my searches with the names on Trump's evangelical advisory board and then added other individuals (e.g., Pastor Rodney Howard-Browne) and groups (e.g., Charisma Media) who distinguished themselves for their public support of President Trump. Not all of these maintain an active Twitter presence, but at the time of this writing, I concluded searches of 31 accounts.³

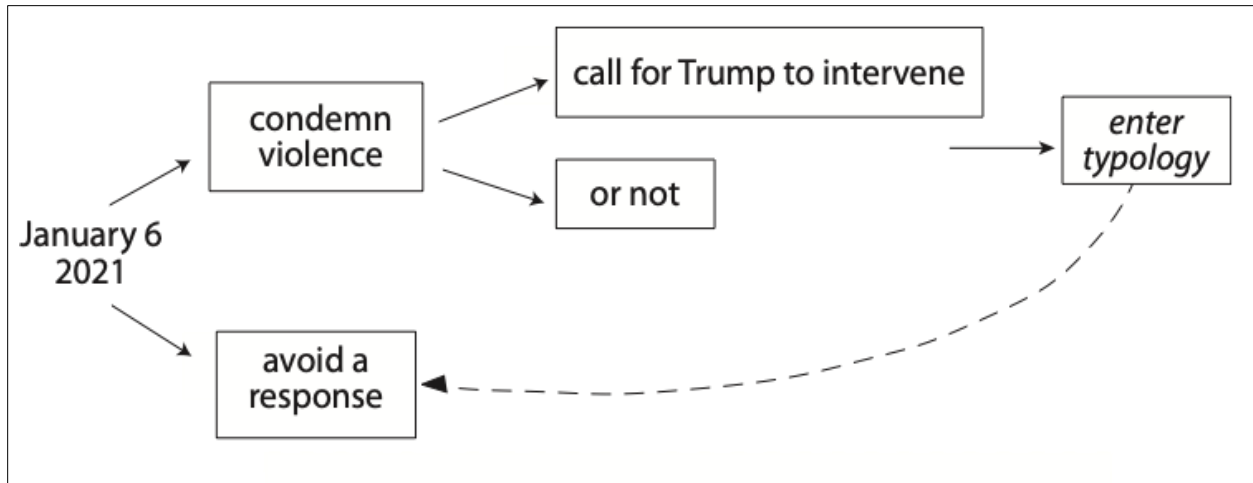
³ Search terms and names of accounts are available as an appendix.

A Process and a Typology of Responses

Beginning on January 6th, Christian Right leaders entered a behavioral process, as presented in Figure 1, starting with their decision to respond or not respond to the event.

Figure 1

A Process of Response



Those religious leaders who avoided a response either did not have an active Twitter presence or bided their time in silence, perhaps waiting for a consensus to form, to be led by broader denominational statements, or to distance themselves from potential condemnation. Of those who chose to respond, the initial and almost universal response was to condemn the violence. Some leaders explicitly called on President Trump to intervene by telling his supporters to stand down. This was an implicit recognition that the violence was being carried out by Trump supporters—an idea that some would contest. In a now-deleted tweet, megachurch pastor and author Rick Warren strongly criticized what he saw: “Armed breaching of capitol security behind a confederate flag is anarchy, unAmerican, criminal treason and domestic terrorism. President Trump must clearly tell his supporters ‘We lost. Go home now’” (“Faith Leaders,” 2021). Russell Moore (2021), then-head of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, the public policy arm of the Southern Baptist Convention, tweeted at 1:36 p.m.: “President @realDonaldTrump, you have a moral responsibility to call on these mobs to stop this dangerous and anti-constitutional anarchy. Please do so.” Then-president of the SBC J.D. Greear (2021) soon followed:

Peaceable transitions of power have marked our Republic since the beginning. It is part of honoring and submitting to God’s ordained leaders whether they were our choice or not. We need you, @POTUS to condemn this mob. Let’s move forward together. Praying for safety.

Most, of course, did not mention President Trump, but in a joint statement issued on January 6th, Reverend Samuel Rodriguez, president of the National Hispanic Leadership Conference and Reverend Johnnie Moore, both members of Trump’s evangelical advisory board, credited Trump’s intervention: “We are relieved that both the President-Elect and President

Trump have now spoken directly to the issue telling protesters in DC to go home, calling for peace” (“Faith Leaders,” 2021).

Evangelicals were clearly set apart among religious leaders in their responses to January 6th. Rabbi Jack Moline of the Interfaith Alliance described a “sickening sight of rioters,” while the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church Michael Curry said, “We believe the actions of armed protestors represent a coup attempt” (“Faith Leaders” 2021). As the dust settled, these and other religious leaders remained strong and vocal in their condemnation of events; only evangelical leaders tried to calibrate a response that would offend neither President Trump nor their followers.

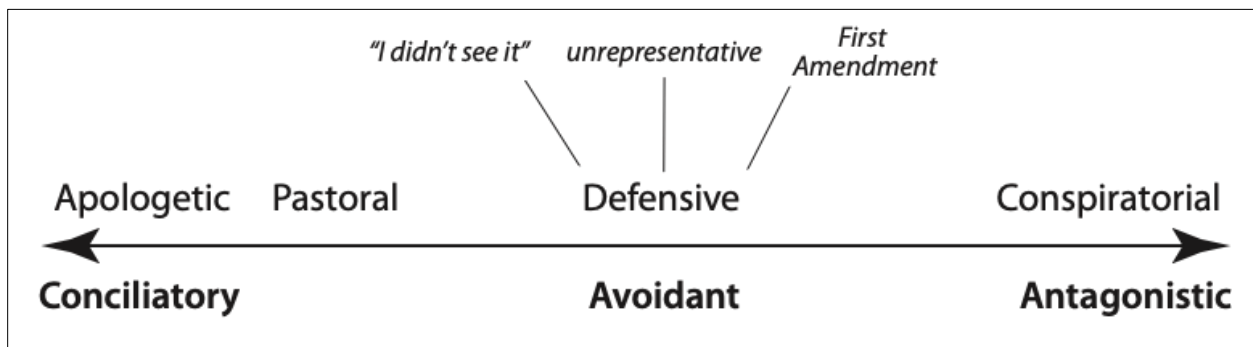
Whether the response called on President Trump to intervene or not, the variance lies in how the leader framed the violence and in what actions they subsequently called for or took themselves.

Figure 2 illustrates a spectrum—from conciliatory to antagonistic—on which individual responses may be categorized as *pastoral*, *defensive*, or *conspiratorial*. Pastoral responses were those which called for prayer, offered a biblical verse, or some other statement of counsel. These I labeled as conciliatory in that they were meant to appease or offer guidance to followers. In their calls for prayer, most responses demonstrated some sense of the pastoral. After tweeting two separate calls for President Trump to denounce the mob and “follow the Constitution,” Reverend Ed Litton (2021), current president of the SBC, followed with a series of pastoral messages:

In this hour, when all seems to be coming unhinged, turn your heart to the Lord. Find your peace and rest in Him. All who trust in Him today, find healing in His sacrifice. I will wait for you Lord.

Figure 2

A Typology of Responses



At the other end of the spectrum, some responses were conspiratorial in that they fomented skepticism or doubt about what happened on January 6th. They trafficked in conspiracy theories—for instance, that the breach of the Capitol was a false flag operation by antifa. These responses were, of course, antagonistic because they fueled anger and distrust toward the political system. A statement by Franklin Graham fed this conspiracy:

They have a right to protest. To tell people to go home, it's not for me to decide that. The people who broke the windows in the Capitol did not look like the people out there demonstrating. Most likely it was antifa. ("Faith Leaders," 2021)

Reverend Robert Jeffress (2021a), pastor of First Baptist Dallas and frequent guest on the Fox News Channel, tweeted, "Disobeying and assaulting police is a sin whether it's done by Antifa or angry Republicans." This message equivocated between antifa, which featured—sometimes with violent outcomes—in nationwide protests and counter-protests during the summer of 2020, and the current assault on the Capitol. Jeffress's statement also contributed to the emerging myth that, despite their appearances, the insurrectionists were not Trump supporters but antifa in disguise to perpetuate violence.

Between these poles lie defensive responses. Defensiveness can assume different forms, including mere disbelief. Reverend Tony Suarez (2021), vice president of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference and member of Trump's evangelical advisory board, tweeted, "I never thought I would see such a scene like this in the United States. This is the kind of stuff that happens in Venezuela but not here." Defensiveness also occurred when the individual either claimed not to have seen any violence from their vantage point or implied that the actions did not reflect the identity of the actors. In a thread on the evening of January 6th, Ché Ahn (2021b), a Charismatic pastor, tweeted, "I can say the gatherings were 99% peaceful and marked by alot [sic] of prayer and worship." In his sermon the following Sunday, Ahn elaborated: "I want to give full disclosure: I was not at the Capitol. I was at the rally hearing President Trump." He continued to describe the large crowd size that he said had him stuck for four hours "with a small bladder," and to laughs explained how after finding a restroom, he returned to his hotel room for a "power nap" but "ended up sleeping through the whole rioting" (Ahn, 2021a). Ralph Reed (2021), a political consultant who arguably was the founder of the Christian Right as director of the Christian Coalition in the 1990s, tweeted:

The violence at the U.S. Capitol is an assault on democracy and representative government. Resort to mob violence has no place in the life of our nation, and I condemn and repudiate it. It does not represent our movement or the cause of Christ.

There also was a subgroup of defensive responses that loosely referenced the First Amendment—either as justification for the free association of groups that day or for the common complaint during the Trump presidency that social media de-platformed conservative or pro-Trump voices (Shepardson, 2019). Of course, that idea only gained credence in the days following January 6th when Twitter and Facebook suspended Trump's accounts, which caused many evangelical leaders to join other conservatives in seeking out other platforms like Parler and Telegram (Dzhanova, 2021). After offering a prayer at the "Save America" rally earlier in the day, Paula White (2021a) tweeted the following at 3:55 p.m.:

I always have and will denounce violence, lawlessness, and anarchy in any and all forms. I have deep convictions for all people to have protection over the 1st Amendment and freedom of speech. We should be able to do this without becoming violent. I ask all to continue praying.

After avoiding a response on January 6th, Gary Bauer (2021), former president of the Family Research Council, tweeted the following on January 9 amid the social media purges of QAnon accounts: "We are at a dangerous moment in our country. Silencing speech is what is done in communist China, Iran and North Korea. It must not be allowed in America." Others, including

Jordan Easley, an SBC pastor and member of Trump’s Faith Leadership Initiative, Samuel Rodriguez, and Ché Ahn issued tweets criticizing Twitter censorship and/or calling for their followers to join them on Parler.

Some leaders were directly challenged as instigators of the insurrection and defended themselves with fury. In a since-deleted tweet, Representative Adam Kinzinger (R-MO), one of the few GOP critics of Trump, called out certain evangelical leaders for their role in perpetuating the “Big Lie” that was a catalyst for the insurrection. Jeffress (2021b) responded, “Adam, you need to get your facts straight. I’ve never once claimed the election was ‘stolen.’ If anyone needs to ‘admit their mistake,’ it’s YOU. Will be awaiting your apology.” Kinzinger (2021) apologized to Jeffress but maintained his overall criticism:

You know sir? You are absolutely correct. You did act honorably, and while my point remains about the Church and the need for pastors to lead, you did not press those stolen election conspiracies. I am sorry for including you in that.

Similarly, Jordan Easley (2021) tweeted this on January 11: “I just received an email from an angry viewer stating that the insurrection at the capital [*sic*] last week was MY flt.—people—stop looking for someone to blame.”

Contrary to that tone, the most conciliatory response was the *apologetic*. Apologies were rare; in fact, I could only find one example among my searches. On the night of January 6th, Cindy Jacobs (2021a), a self-described teacher and prophet with a following among Charismatic evangelicals, tweeted a link to a *Washington Times* article: “Facial recognition firm claims antifa infiltrated Trump protesters who stormed Capitol.” Two days later, Jacobs’ (2021b) response had changed from the conspiratorial to the apologetic: “Questions I am asking myself tonight: 1. Was my heart centered on Jesus or politics? 2. Did I love my brother as myself? Confession! My heart was more centered on politics. So sorry, Lord!” Her tweet was met with some criticism by followers but also some support by fellow evangelical leader Tony Suarez.

Since that day, evangelical leaders have mostly looped back to avoidant behavior. Twitter feeds resumed daily devotionals or sermon clips. Some turned their attention to defending President Trump, who faced a second impeachment effort for his role in instigating what happened on January 6th. Franklin Graham (2021) tweeted,

I hope President @JoeBiden will stand up to those on Capitol Hill who want to impeach Donald Trump and tell them to put this behind us. If he wants to unite the country, this would be a huge step forward. I encourage everyone to pray for him.

On February 13, when the Senate voted to acquit Donald Trump, Paula White (2021b) issued an apparently celebratory tweet with the results of the vote and a list of Republicans who voted to convict. On July 6, 2021, the 6-month anniversary of the attack, neither Franklin Graham nor Paula White made mention of the events that had transpired.

Analysis

The varying responses among leaders reflect the sense of confusion in the moment. After having supported Trump so fully throughout his 4-year term, including explaining away his personal moral failings so obviously at odds with what they expect of their followers, these leaders were left flailing to respond when national institutions that many have imbued with providential significance were attacked. That many of these attackers likely had attended the prayer rallies and services they led the day before only added to the ambivalence. Thus, the

motivations for responses in the aftermath of January 6th are a complex brew of disbelief, self-preservation, and perhaps some remorse.

This process model is a useful framework for assessing responses—both past and future—of evangelical leaders. Just 6 months later, some political figures were seeking to change the narrative of January 6th. Senator Ron Johnson (R-WI) explained, “It’s extremely important to create an accurate historical record of exactly what happened so the false narrative—that there were thousands of armed insurrectionists—doesn’t last” (Zhao, 2021). Representative Andrew Clyde (R-GA), who is seen on video barricading the door of the House chamber against incursion, described in a congressional hearing the behavior of insurrectionists that day as “a normal tourist visit” (Itkowitz, 2021). Perhaps the most startling reversion came from Representative Kevin McCarthy (R-CA), minority leader in the House, who, as insurrectionists were breaking into Capitol offices, phoned President Trump to ask him to call off his supporters; when Trump refused, McCarthy furiously shouted, “Who the f---k do you think you’re talking to?” (Gangel et al., 2021). Just 6 months later, McCarthy actively thwarted congressional attempts to investigate events of the day (Rupar, 2021).

It will be worth watching to see whether evangelical leaders follow suit and form an echo chamber around Republicans seeking to reframe the insurrection. For example, individual leaders might move from an initial pastoral response to a defensive or even conspiratorial frame. A revision by a few key leaders, such as Graham or White, might provide the impetus for others to join the bandwagon and create coherent messaging that increases the efficacy of their frame (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Djupe & Calfano, 2014). This might be expected if Republicans succeed in reframing events and if Donald Trump remains a viable political figure, leveraging his transactional relationship with evangelicals once again.

It is telling that Republicans, and some evangelical leaders, did not just downplay the scope of events but created an alternative construction that blamed antifa for what happened. This suggests that January 6th could be used as a rally event in an ongoing narrative of Christian nationalism that justifies a culture—and perhaps literal—war to reclaim America as a Christian nation against secularism and an evolving set of threats (Baker et al., 2020; Newman & Forcehimes, 2010).

Above all, evangelicals have created flexibility for themselves in their responses to January 6th. By offering, say, a conciliatory initial response and then engaging in avoidant behavior, they have leeway to move more antagonistically as political conditions change. Leeway presents a “time for choosing.”

With the emergence of this typology from my preliminary research, I plan to refine my sample by enlarging my list of leaders and the range of dates to capture any response, or none. Utilizing this dataset, future research will enable me to categorize all responses via this typology and use descriptive and analytical statistics to view trends and patterns. However, there is a caveat: Although researchers can measure the public statements of evangelical leaders from their press releases, social media, and journalists’ inquiries, they may respond differently in sermons, newsletters, or specialized outlets that primarily target their congregation or adherents. Many of these fora are best described as semi-public because they are indirectly accessible to those outside the target population, but it is these forms of communication that could have maximum influence due to their direct reach to their target audience (Djupe & Calfano, 2014).

Another area of future research is the assessment of responses according to the varieties of evangelical leaders. For example, I would expect that institutional leaders who are heads of established denominations would have a more measured response than media leaders who appeal to a different constituency. Moreover, this focus could be expanded to study how these messages are received by adherents. After all, communication is a feedback loop, and it is likely that these responses by leaders were shaped by the anticipated reception of their followers. For instance, those leaders who quickly located themselves in the conspiratorial likely knew that messaging would resonate with their followers.

Certain stimuli, such as the release of a report from the congressional select committee investigating the events of January 6, 2021, or future anniversaries, present opportunities for evangelical leaders to respond. What type of response they offer bears implications for democracy and civic learning. Research findings have clearly indicated that religious leaders are thought leaders with a special influence because of the level of trust followers place in them. Moreover, religious leaders can connect a moral frame to a political issue or event, elevating the attitude formation of their followers to the spiritual realm (Chong & Druckman, 2007). These traits have important implications for the civic knowledge and engagement of their adherents. With declining levels of trust in governmental actors, religious figures hold the public trust, and evangelical leaders, especially those who had access to the Trump Administration, leveraged this to become sources of political knowledge for their followers. Thus, how they interpret January 6th stands to effect whether their followers view it as an insurrection or acceptable political behavior. The latter is how political violence becomes normalized as civic engagement.

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