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Christian Nationalism's Dark Forebears

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I just finished an extraordinarily illuminating book. It's not new — it was first published in 2001 — but if you follow the growth and influence of Christian nationalism in the United States, it feels fresh.

It's by the British historian Julian Jackson, an expert on the French experience in World War II, and it's called "France: The Dark Years, 1940-1944." It's about the regime that emerged after France's catastrophic defeat in World War II. And as strange as this might sound, reading about the Vichy government is like reading a MAGA Christian fever dream. The nation that the Catholic Vichy nationalists constructed in the unoccupied portion of France is very much like the world that American Christian nationalists are trying to build.

If you read the words "Vichy France," to the extent that they register at all, one word is likely to come to mind: collaboration.

The Vichy government certainly accommodated itself to German dominance. Its troops fought American and British troops during Operation Torch, the Allied invasion of French North Africa in 1942. Worse, the regime deported tens of thousands of Jews from Vichy France, sending them to their deaths in Nazi concentration camps.

All of those things are true, but they're only part of the story. And that's not why I'm writing about Vichy France today. The beating heart of Vichy — its animating purpose

— wasn't collaboration with Germany, much less an alliance with the Nazis. While there were plenty of fascists and Nazi sympathizers in Vichy's ranks, its true purpose could be summed up in four words.

Make France great again.

Here was the Vichy regime's core argument: Liberal democracy had failed. Its individualism and its decadence (especially its decadence) had resulted in the military and moral catastrophe that was the fall of France.

With liberal democracy in decline, its most dangerous successor wasn't necessarily fascism, at least to the Vichy government, but communism, and there was only one way to combat communism and restore French greatness — what many in Vichy called the National Revolution.

And what was the National Revolution? As Jackson wrote, "The National Revolution defined itself first and foremost in opposition to liberal individualism, which uprooted people from the 'natural' communities of family, workplace and region."

These communities "supposedly offered 'real' freedoms unlike the abstract and hollow rights vaunted by liberals."

These "natural" communities were also the answer to Marxism. Again, here's Jackson: "Once society was reorganized hierarchically into organic communities, the class struggle would become redundant: The liberal obsession with rights would be replaced by a stress on duties."

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The Vichy regime adopted "Principles of the Community" as an answer to the French Revolution's Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen of 1789. The central community was the family. The leader of Vichy France, Philippe Pétain, called the family the "essential cell" of the social order and said that the "rights of the family precede those of the state and the individual."

This meant that a woman's place was in the home, and her highest purpose was motherhood. Jackson quotes a Vichy writer: "We must never tire of repeating this: Woman, wife and mother, is made for man, for the home, for the child. As long as the young wives of France do not understand this, do not live out this truth of nature, nothing can be achieved."

In October 1940, the Vichy government made it illegal to employ married women in the public sector. In April 1941, it made it much more difficult to obtain a divorce.

If the natural community of the family placed a woman in the home, who belonged to the natural community of the nation? Who was truly French?

As Jackson wrote, “Some people had no place in Vichy’s France of rootedness and regions.” Vichy France was extraordinarily nativist and thoroughly antisemitic. Through a series of laws enacted beginning in 1940, the government dictated that only citizens born of French fathers could be civil servants, doctors, dentists, pharmacists and lawyers.

“In effect,” Jackson wrote, “these measures created a second class of French citizens whose families were deemed not to have been French sufficiently long.”

The Vichy attack on liberalism was comprehensive. Jean Bichelonne, Vichy’s secretary general of the Ministry of Industrial Production, announced in 1942 that “a modern state should not be allowed to run according to the blind and simplistic rules of the liberal economy.”

The echoes of Vichy are everywhere in American Christian nationalism. There is much the same critique of liberalism — that its emphasis on individualism has drained the society of moral strength and communal spirit. Individualism breeds decadence, the argument goes, as people seek self-actualization and give it their highest value.

And there is much the same critique of women’s rights — that taking women out of the home and putting them in the workplace has harmed the family and harmed women. One can easily imagine Pétain applauding when a Christian nationalist like Douglas Wilson advocates “household voting,” where families (led by men) vote as a single unit. Wives would not have an independent voice.

One can also easily imagine Vichy enthusiasm for the rise of the trad wife.

MAGA has a Vichy approach to immigration as well. Jackson highlights the words of Jean Giraudoux, a prominent French playwright who was briefly a part of the Vichy regime, as indicative of the French nationalist view of immigration. France, Giraudoux argued, had become “an invaded country” facing a “continuous infiltration of barbarians.”

The language of an immigrant invasion is omnipresent in MAGA political discourse, including from Pete Hegseth, the secretary of defense, perhaps the most powerful Christian nationalist in America.

Speaking in Normandy on the anniversary of D-Day on June 6, Hegseth said, “Sadly, today different European beaches are stormed by different dangerous ideologies.

Beaches in Spain, in Italy, in Greece and Bulgaria, boats and men arrive. When will European capitals do something about that invasion?”

And why would Hegseth be talking about immigration on D-Day, of all days? It demonstrates the extent to which MAGA views immigrants as a threat to the Western way of life.

In far-right circles, you’ll read of the desire for a “Protestant Franco” or a “Baptist Pinochet,” as Christian nationalists search for their historic model. Why don’t we hear about a “Presbyterian Pétain”?

Of course, much of the answer relates to the Vichy regime’s collaboration with Nazi Germany, but it’s also connected to the nature of the regime itself. “From the beginning,” Jackson writes, “Vichy was a regime of persecution and repression. It was also authoritarian and anti-democratic.” No one should be utopian or Pollyannish about the virtues of liberal democracy, but when you upend liberalism, you are by definition denying or drastically limiting the power of the people’s voice.

You are replacing a government they choose with a government that you believe is good for them.

Or, as Jackson wrote, “Vichy represented the opportunity to reorganize the world without having to worry about the human beings that inhabited it.” In the language of the modern MAGA right, “Turns out you can just do things.”

I find the Vichy example particularly salient not just for its rhetoric, but for its context. The case for liberal failure was particularly strong in 1940, when the Vichy government came to power. The liberal democracies had failed to stop the rise of Hitler. German democracy was extinct. France had been defeated on the battlefield, and few people believed that Britain could successfully stand alone.

The United States was an economic titan and a military midget. Its isolationism made it a geopolitical afterthought.

The rising powers of the time were fascist, communist and imperialistic. It took an immense amount of faith in 1940 to believe that democracy would prevail.

MAGA, by contrast, has arisen in a very different time. Liberal democracy is disappointing many of its citizens, no doubt, and its inherent and permanent flaws (including, often, excessive individualism) mean that democracy will always be frustrating and messy.

But democracy has not failed — not by any measure comparable to 1940. The liberal democracies are collectively the most powerful and prosperous nations in the world.

So MAGA thrives only by warning of imminent collapse. That’s why, for example, the

Flight 93 essay, by Michael Anton, was so important in the 2016 race. Its central thesis, that voters had to “charge the cockpit,” reject Hillary Clinton, and risk Donald Trump or we would all be doomed, was, in essence, a warning that only MAGA could stop a national collapse.

Doomerism is indispensable to MAGA, because it is only the downfall of democracy that can make patriarchal authoritarianism palatable. But it turns out that when you try to impose the patriarchy back onto a society that has already embraced liberalism, you mainly remind people of why they chose liberalism in the first place.

I’ve grown to hate the phrase “the new right” — even though I’ve often used it myself. There is nothing new about the MAGA right, including its Christian nationalist wing. Its ideas have been tried before, and they have failed before, including in a regime that is rightly remembered by the French as a source of national shame.

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