

## REVIEW

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**Talia Lavin, *Wild Faith: How the Christian Right Is Taking Over America*, New York: Legacy Lit of Hachette Book Group, 2024, 304 pp., \$30.00 (hardback), \$15.00 (e-book)**

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In the first two weeks of the second Trump administration, the United States bore witness to a tale of two priests. During the Inaugural Prayer Service at Washington National Cathedral, the Anglican bishop Mariann Budde implored President Trump to “have mercy” on migrants and members of the LGBTQ+ community.<sup>1</sup> She referenced Trump’s stated belief that divine intervention saved him from the assassination attempt in Butler, Pennsylvania, and requested that he show this mercy “in the name of” the same loving God. Trump responded with derision, criticizing the prayer service and the right reverend herself, and demanded an apology.<sup>2</sup>

A little over a week later, Calvin Robinson—a priest at an Anglican Catholic Church congregation in Grand Rapids, Michigan—held a hand over his heart when addressing attendees at the National Pro-Life Summit, before extending it out from his chest in a straight-armed raised salute. This “gesture” was an apparent reference to Elon Musk’s similar and much-critiqued gesture at an event celebrating Trump’s second inauguration. Both gestures have been called out for what they clearly appear to be—a Nazi salute. Robinson had his license in his church revoked. He took to Facebook to state that he is “not a Nazi,” and he, Musk, and many other mainstream MAGA supporters have pointed to the public discourse that resulted as liberal overreaction.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, members of the far right took

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1 Tiffany Stanley, “What to Know about Mariann Budde, the Bishop Who Upset Trump with Her Inaugural Sermon,” *AP News*, January 24, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/trump-inaugural-prayer-service-episcopal-bishop-mariann-budde-60d409d1ba9b69ad1065065b9218c558>.

2 Tiffany Stanley, Darlene Superville, and Gary Fields, “Trump Demands an Apology from Bishop Who Asked Him to ‘Have Mercy’ on LGBTQ+ People and Migrants,” *AP News*, January 21, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/trump-inaugural-prayer-service-washington-national-cathedral-interfaith-a95b36f962be93c8647cc5144266da11>.

3 Marina Dunbar, “Michigan Priest Defrocked after Making Apparent Nazi Salute at Anti-Abortion Summit,” *Guardian*, January 30, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/jan/30/michigan-priest-salute>.

to podcast appearances and telegram channels to celebrate and praise what they took to be a full Roman salute, or even more explicitly, a Sieg Heil.<sup>4</sup>

These two anecdotes illustrate the timeliness of Talia Lavin's *Wild Faith: How the Christian Right Is Taking Over America*. Both incidents are illustrations of faith interacting with state power, and the response by those in or close to the government clearly shows which was praised and which was condemned. Lavin, the critically acclaimed author of *Culture Warlords*, turns in her second book to the large and diverse Christian right—its agenda, influence, and consequences for US politics. I should note at the top of this review that *Wild Faith* is not an academic text, although it is nonfiction and utilizes primary sources and extensive interviews. As such, many points of critique normally offered in academic reviews are largely moot. Additionally, I want to spend part of this review reflecting on what lessons academics—within the larger realm of right-wing studies, which certainly includes Lavin—can take from book projects such as *Wild Faith*.

*Wild Faith* is divided into two parts. Part 1 provides a conceptual overview of the Christian right and aspects of its agenda and ideology. Part 2 provides an in-depth look at family politics within the Christian right, particularly the subjugation and abuse of women and children. Chapters address the dispute over school segregation and parental rights in schooling, the homeschool movement, corporal punishment, and doctrinal patriarchy. The structure as a whole is narrative, with explanatory and historical details unfolding throughout the chapters. The concepts build on each other toward Lavin's ultimate goal—understanding the movement with the same seriousness that its adherents do. This is not a book ideal for picking and choosing the subject area most relevant to one's own research and delving into that chapter. I believe it is meant to be read, and is best understood, holistically.

One argument that Lavin tells the reader up front she would like them to come away with is that far-right Christians view themselves as waging “a just and righteous war”—a holy war—and that understanding this conviction is key to understanding the movement (3). She notes in the afterword that it is essential to take their beliefs seriously insofar as they believe what they say. Rather than just professing the high stakes of the movement and its political goals, *Wild Faith* illustrates how eschatology connects to our political environment. She explains the biblical passages—particularly from the book of Revelation—held as truth by the movement, and the doctrinal beliefs that lead to support for politicians viewed as “prophets,” for a full Christian-right economy, and for the ubiquity of right-wing Christianity in legislation and political discourse. Lavin provides examples of the ideology's influence in campaigns regarding gender, healthcare, schooling, and even US foreign policy, including (non)participation in international organizations and treaties.

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4 Right Wing Watch (@RightWingWatch), “Hitler-Loving White Nationalist Nick Fuentes on Elon Musk's Salute: ‘That Was a Straight up like ‘Sieg Heil,’ like Loving Hitler Energy,’” X (formerly Twitter), January 21, 2025, <https://t.co/G6ayaFkH1o>; “Musk's Inaugural Roman Salute Sparks Outrage, Far-Right Praise,” Southern Poverty Law Center, January 21, 2025, <https://www.splcenter.org/resources/hate-watch/elon-musks-inaugural-roman-salute-sparks-outrage-far-right-praise/>.

As mentioned, *Wild Faith* is meant for popular consumption. But Lavin does meet high research standards—particularly in part 2, where she reports on an impressive number of ethnographic interviews and examines texts embraced by the Christian right. Lavin draws on a similar approach to Alice Miller’s *For Your Own Good: Hidden Cruelty in Child-Rearing and the Roots of Violence*,<sup>5</sup> which centered on authoritarian and violent parenting practices in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Germany. Both Lavin and Miller utilize pedagogical texts from the eras they examine, and consider the consequences of teaching, as Lavin quotes one parenting book author, to “extinguish the will of the child utterly” (194). One key theme of Lavin’s book is the violence this population endures, both as children and as wives. Another revealing finding is that this violence is political in its root ideology—families that are obedient to the father are crucial for maintaining social order. A final takeaway from over one hundred interviews with former evangelicals is that this population was “above all . . . grateful that someone was paying attention to them” (201). I believe a significant accomplishment of the book is its thorough treatment of such individual-level family dynamics. At first, moving to the household-level may feel disjointed to the reader, but after hearing multiple first-hand accounts and quotes from movement texts, we see how this small unit of analysis connects to the broader holy war political project.

However, experts on Christian nationalism may find the book too general in its purpose. As a fan of *Culture Warlords*, Lavin’s first book, I found myself wishing there was a greater discussion of how the movement fits into the broader ideology of the far right. She argues that the political influence of the Christian right particularly emerged in response to school desegregation. Yet this treatment came in part 2, and I found myself looking for more analysis on the movement’s ties to and origins in white supremacy.

To say that this is not a text primarily for academics is not to deny its usefulness for those of us locked away in the ivory tower—in fact, quite the opposite. In reading *Wild Faith*, I was struck by three points the field of right-wing studies should take away from the book and consider in future work. The first is to consider further what political science can learn from journalistic and interpretive work on the far right. The rise and ubiquity of the far right in today’s political and media landscapes makes clear that this is a subject with enormous implications. As others have argued, scholars in this field should take journalistic work seriously and consider addressing deficits in mass media with their own public-facing work.<sup>6</sup> I was struck by the breadth of fields *Wild Faith* invoked—gender studies, communications, international relations, international law, family law, and many more. While I have found the right-wing studies research community very collaborative and boundary-crossing, I think the present moment

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5 Alice Miller, *For Your Own Good: Hidden Cruelty in Child-Rearing and the Roots of Violence*, trans. Hildegarde Hannum and Hunter Hannum (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990).

6 A. J. Bauer, “Right-Wing Studies’ Time Has Come,” *Nieman Lab* (blog), accessed January 31, 2025, <https://www.niemanlab.org/2024/12/right-wing-studies-time-has-come/>; A. J. Bauer and Anthony Nadler, “Competing for Cultural Authority: Journalism Studies Must Account for the Right,” *Journalism Studies* 26, no. 5 (2025): 624–37, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2025.2454344>.

calls for taking narrative and descriptive work—and journalism too—seriously in order to create a broader understanding of the far right, especially within my own field of political science. Political science thrives on “puzzles,” but it is difficult to know what is puzzling about concepts, ideologies, and populations rarely spoken about, or people rarely spoken to.

Second, Lavin shines particularly in part 2 of the book when her analysis turns to the family itself as a small political unit. Particularly in political science—and my own work suffers from this—much of the field focuses on aggregates and higher levels of analysis. Lavin examines the Christian right as a culture and a movement at the level of the family, the individual, and the small group. Attention to granular levels of analysis is useful when considering the far right, particularly in efforts to better understand and analyze the heterogeneities and connections within the broader right-wing ecosystem. For example, chapter 10 notes how popular parenting books in the evangelical community describe children as “tyrants, anarchists, belligerents, and hardened revolutionaries” (203), evoking securitizing language common to nonreligious far-right actors and other strains of conservative ideology. At the same time, here the children are painted as the revolutionaries, whereas the father represents legitimate social order. Among white nationalist terrorists, however, the social order is what is seen as illegitimate and the actors themselves are the revolutionaries. The language is similar, but the fight is different. In one interview, a subject (pseudonymously referred to as “Maria”) describes an attempt to seek community through online Christian homeschooling forums, one of which not only provided socialization but also advice on recommended “discipline” products for sale. Lavin points out in the first section of the book how common grifting and moneymaking strategies are among right-wing influencers, but this anecdote also provides a familiar story of individuals seeking connection online and finding not only community but radicalization.

Lastly, *Wild Faith* made me question my personal definition of far-right ideology, and if it was expansive or inclusive enough. The book begins by discussing Christianity’s hegemony in the history and culture of the United States. Much like Robert Mickey’s work on authoritarian enclaves in the American South questioned the mythology of American democracy,<sup>7</sup> *Wild Faith* raises questions about the role biblical concepts of authority have played in US politics and law, and how these relate to norms of liberal democracy pertaining to religious liberty. Ours is a time of right-wing resurgence, and right-wing studies as a field would benefit from taking a closer look at our concepts and scrutinizing recent history as well. We may end up with more case studies.

This all points to an expansive to-do list for scholars of the far right, which I believe is a testament to Talia Lavin’s compelling and engaging treatment of the Christian right in *Wild Faith*. It is my hope that scholars will find this book as inspiring as I did, as we all meet the new political era—and age of right-wing studies—we may be entering.

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7 Robert Mickey, *Paths out of Dixie: The Democratization of Authoritarian Enclaves in America’s Deep South, 1944–1972* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).