

## The 2024 Presidential Election

Theological Studies  
2025, Vol. 86(2) 292–311  
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DOI: 10.1177/00405639251331971  
journals.sagepub.com/home/tsj



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### Abstract

This Note recaps highlights of the 2024 US presidential election from a Catholic perspective. It is not this article's aim to pronounce an authoritative postmortem on reasons for the election result, and post-inauguration actions of the second Trump administration are also outside its scope. Instead, this Note lifts up perspectives from recent theological work that shed light on major issues in the campaign. It will reflect on the key events in the election cycle and identify some similarities between the candidates' positions before assembling theological work dealing with two issues where the candidates markedly differed: abortion and religious nationalism. It will close with some reflections on the semiotics of the candidates' public personae that point toward calls for future moral-theological work.

### Keywords

2024 presidential election, abortion, fundamentalism, integralism, masculinity, nationalism, US politics

### Key Moments in the 2024 Presidential Election

The major inflection points of the 2024 presidential election are well known.<sup>1</sup> Throughout the first half of the year, Donald Trump, who previously served as

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1. An article on the US presidential election could conceivably reflect on every social issue of national importance. I regret that this article is unable to treat more issues of importance to voters—and to Catholic moral theology—at length, including LGBTQ+ human dignity, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, environmental protection, taxation, wealth inequality, and the protection of voting rights.

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president from 2016 to 2020, was the Republican candidate and Joe Biden, the sitting President, campaigned as the Democratic candidate. Amid growing public concern about his ability to serve after apparent lapses in mental acuity, including during a live televised debate, Biden announced on July 21, 2024, that he would no longer seek the Democratic nomination. He endorsed his vice-president, Kamala Harris, a former senator and attorney general for the state of California and 2020 presidential candidate. Typically, presidential primaries are held as early as March of the election year, meaning the deadline for a candidate to file to appear on a primary ballot can be as early as November of the year before.<sup>2</sup> With no realistic way to hold a primary, Democratic party leaders quickly rallied around Harris as their party's candidate. In July, Trump chose Ohio senator and best-selling memoirist JD Vance as his running mate, with Harris selecting Minnesota governor Tim Walz as her vice-presidential candidate in August.<sup>3</sup>

The 2024 presidential election was unusual in many respects. With her legal background, senate service, and vice-presidential post, Harris was in many ways a traditional and well-qualified candidate. But her short runway to the candidacy left voters in an unusual situation, which denied voters the opportunity to hear primary debates or to vote in a Democratic primary, and provided less time than typical for general election debates and media coverage of the person at the top of the ticket. Trump, for his part, had never held elected office before being elected president in 2016. He left that office with the COVID-19 pandemic raging, shortly after a large group of his supporters attacked the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, under the false belief that Biden's victory over Trump was the result of electoral fraud. In 2023, he was found guilty in a civil trial of sexually assaulting an acquaintance more than thirty years before and of defaming her during the 2023 trial process. As part of that trial, two other women testified that Trump had assaulted them in similar ways.<sup>4</sup> During his second presidential campaign, he became the first former US president to be convicted of a crime, the felony of falsifying business records.<sup>5</sup> Major news media outlets declared Trump the presumptive 2024 presidential victor late on election night, after he captured the "swing states" of Michigan, Ohio, and Wisconsin and their crucial electoral college votes. In the 2016 election, Trump had become president by winning the electoral college but lost the popular vote to his opponent, Hillary Clinton. In 2024, he also beat Harris in the popular vote, coming close to but falling short of 50 percent of votes

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2. Federal Election Commission, "2024 Presidential Primary Dates and Candidate Filing Deadlines for Ballot Access," <https://www.fec.gov/resources/cms-content/documents/2024pdates.pdf>.
  3. J.D. Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis* (New York: HarperCollins, 2016).
  4. Benjamin Weiser, Lola Fadulu, and Kate Christobek, "Donald Trump Sexually Abused and Defamed E. Jean Carroll, Jury Finds," *New York Times*, May 9, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/09/nyregion/trump-carroll-trial-sexual-abuse-defamation.html>.
  5. Shayna Jacobs et al., "Donald Trump Found Guilty on All Counts in New York Hush Money Trial," *Washington Post*, May 30, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2024/05/30/trump-guilty-verdict-hush-money-trial>.

cast.<sup>6</sup> On January 6, 2025, Harris, presiding over the Senate in her capacity as sitting vice-president, certified Trump's victory in the election, a day that concluded without allegations of electoral misconduct or a whisper of the historically unprecedented violence of four years earlier.

In no small part because of the truncated campaign, Harris focused on style, character, and qualifications rather than policy details in seeking to contrast herself with Trump. She frequently deplored Trump's use of racist and violent rhetoric, which is unique among politicians in democracies and has increased since his appearance on the national political stage in 2015. As two political scientists found, "By 2024, Trump's use of violent language had surpassed that of nearly all other democratic politicians we considered, approximating that of authoritarian figures such as Kim Jong Un and Fidel Castro."<sup>7</sup> He notably deploys "exclusionary populist rhetoric" that portrays out-groups as enemies, dividing the country into "us" and "them." For her part, Harris cast Trump's agenda as a return to an outdated past with her rallying cry "We're not going back!"

To the extent that concrete policies can be identified, the priorities of Catholic social thought identify both candidates' positions as largely similar on several important issues. On immigration, for example, Trump advocated mass deportations and decreased clemency for asylum seekers and undocumented child migrants.<sup>8</sup> Harris did not embrace such inhumanity but still sought to cast herself as tough on the border, even in comparison with her own earlier positions. As a presidential candidate in 2024, she repeatedly refused to confirm that she would support pathways to citizenship that she had backed as a candidate in 2020 or that the Biden administration supported.<sup>9</sup>

Likewise, neither 2024 candidate established a strong, compelling antipoverty platform. As the *New York Times* pointed out, both Harris and Trump had served in office during periods when major government spending reduced poverty, although their stated goals while on the campaign trail demonstrated very different perspectives on the promise of such measures for the future. As president in 2020, Trump signed an economic stimulus law that included significant antipoverty measures, but his recent campaign blasted programs including Medicaid, housing assistance, and food stamps as wasteful deterrents to work. Harris continued to support the types of government

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6. Domenico Montanaro, "Trump Falls Just Below 50% in Popular Vote, but Gets More than in Past Elections," *NPR*, December 3, 2024, <https://www.npr.org/2024/12/03/nx-s1-5213810/2024-presidential-election-popular-vote-trump-kamala-harris>.

7. Daniel Treisman and Nikita Savin, "We Analyzed 9 Years of Trump Political Speeches, and His Violent Rhetoric Has Increased Dramatically," *The Conversation*, October 26, 2024, <http://theconversation.com/we-analyzed-9-years-of-trump-political-speeches-and-his-violent-rhetoric-has-increased-dramatically-238962>.

8. Maria Sacchetti et al., "Harris vs. Trump on Immigration: Where They Stand on the Issue," *Washington Post*, September 10, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/interactive/2024/trump-harris-immigration>.

9. Alex Thompson and Stef W. Kight, "How Harris Is Getting Trump-y on Immigration," *Axios*, October 6, 2024, <https://www.axios.com/2024/10/06/kamala-harris-trump-immigration-border-security>.

poverty assistance that the Biden administration had fought for, including expanded access to Medicaid and a refundable child tax credit that effectively functioned as a guaranteed income measure for the poorest families but that expired a year after it was introduced as a COVID-19 relief effort.<sup>10</sup>

On other aspects of economic policy, the two candidates' positions were closer than their rhetoric, as the *Washington Post* illustrated. For example, the Biden-Harris administration had continued tariffs on Chinese imports put in place by President Trump, even as Harris denounced Trump's plans for new tariffs on the campaign trail. Both candidates appeared positioned to maintain spending levels on Social Security, Medicare, and the military. While Harris promised to raise taxes on the highest earners and Trump to slash them, Harris's proposed rate of tax on capital gains was nearly half that proposed by President Biden, a comparative reduction of the tax contribution of wealthy investors.<sup>11</sup> Political scientists who study political rhetoric noted that references to economic matters have declined in speeches by candidates of both major parties since at least 2012.<sup>12</sup> Certainly, a more traditional campaign might have exposed more sustained policy differences between the two candidates, as Harris had relatively little time to formulate and promote her own policies and Trump is well known to resist elaborating his own. But the areas of overlap between members of the two parties also seem to reflect a real consensus that wealthy and older Americans and the institution of the military must not be asked to sacrifice for the common good and that the poor are a low priority.

During the presidential election, Israel continued its bombing, invasion, and economic sanctions in the Palestinian territory of Gaza, following the October 7, 2023, attack in which Hamas, the unelected organization that governs the Gaza Strip, killed more than 1,000 Israeli and foreign citizens, including many civilians, and took over 200 hostages. As of November 2024, Palestinian authorities claimed more than 43,000 Palestinians had been killed in Israel's ongoing offensive. While the United Nations was able to verify only some 8,000 deaths at that time via a policy of checking with three sources, they confirmed that a high percentage of those killed were women and children noncombatants, upon which the UN Human Rights Office condemned Israel for violating international humanitarian law.<sup>13</sup>

The ongoing crisis in Gaza galvanized many US voters in opposite directions. Some urged the US to continue its historical military support to Israel out of retaliation for Hamas's attack, envisioning a potential solution to the ongoing conflict in the death of all current Hamas actors. Other voters insisted the US discontinue its military

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10. Jason DeParle, "Trump and Harris Embody a Stark Partisan Divide on Fighting Poverty," *New York Times*, August 26, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/08/26/us/politics/trump-harris-poverty-policies.html>.

11. Jeff Stein et al., "Kamala Harris's Economic Policies, Explained," *Washington Post*, September 10, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/interactive/2023/presidential-candidates-2024-policies-issues/kamala-harris-economic-policy>.

12. Treisman and Savin, "We Analyzed 9 Years of Trump Political Speeches."

13. Emma Farge, "Gaza Women, Children Are Nearly 70% of Verified War Dead, UN Rights Office Says," *Reuters*, November 8, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/nearly-70-gaza-war-dead-women-children-un-rights-office-says-2024-11-08>.

support to Israel to pressure them into following international humanitarian law by allowing aid into Gaza and protecting noncombatants. This latter position coalesced during the primary elections, early in 2024, into the Uncommitted National Movement, launched by US Muslim and Arab-American activists.<sup>14</sup> Since Biden, still at the top of the Democratic ticket, faced no primary opponent, this movement urged Democratic primary voters to vote “uncommitted” to urge Biden, then both candidate and sitting president, to exercise more pressure on Israel to protect Gaza civilians. The movement won many electoral victories, capturing shares of the primary vote higher than the historical general-election margin of victory in the key swing states Michigan and Wisconsin.<sup>15</sup> While the movement secured meetings with Biden and then with Harris, as the eventual candidate, the Biden administration did not change its policy of continuing to provide Israel with arms and support at the United Nations, nor did candidate Harris commit to levying more pressure than calling in general terms for a ceasefire.

This account of a grassroots movement—one whose remarkable support did not translate into successful pressure on its targets to change—reveals that, as with poverty and immigration, the difference between the two candidates’ views on Gaza was more of a matter of rhetoric than action promised or taken. The nonprofit Middle East Institute observed that while Trump expressed strong support for Israel and its right to self-defense, Harris called for a cease-fire while “expressing empathy for Palestinians and calling for humanitarian aid into Gaza.”<sup>16</sup> A journalist for *The Times of Israel* found significant common ground between both candidates, evaluating that “both Harris and Trump support Israel’s multi-front war against a range of adversaries. . . . Neither is a big fan of the phrase ‘two-state solution.’ . . . Their disagreements tend to appear in the fine print of those policies, and in the style with which each delivers their message.”<sup>17</sup> And the Uncommitted National Movement declined to endorse Harris in light of her inaction on Gaza, while clarifying that supporters should not vote for Trump or third-party candidates.<sup>18</sup> Both independent observers and would-be voters identified that, regarding US action in support of Israel or Gaza, yet another issue of profound significance to human life and dignity, the distinctions between the major party candidates came down, largely, to rhetoric.

14. Voting “uncommitted” or “uninstructed” on a primary ballot means that the voter does not instruct the primary delegates to support any particular candidate.

15. Al Jazeera staff, “Wisconsin Is Latest US State to Send ‘Uncommitted’ Message to Biden on Gaza,” *Al Jazeera*, April 3, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/4/3/wisconsin-is-latest-us-state-to-send-uncommitted-message-to-biden-on-gaza>.

16. Brian Katulis and Athena Masthoff, “Harris vs. Trump on the War and Crisis in the Middle East,” *Middle East Institute*, October 25, 2024, <https://mei.edu/publications/harris-vs-trump-war-and-crisis-middle-east>.

17. Ron Kampeas, “How Donald Trump and Kamala Harris Differ (and Agree) on Middle East Policy,” *The Times of Israel*, October 24, 2024, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/how-donald-trump-and-kamala-harris-differ-and-agree-on-middle-east-policy>.

18. Myah Ward, “‘Uncommitted’ Group Won’t Endorse Harris as She Swings through Michigan,” *Politico*, September 19, 2024, <https://www.politico.com/news/2024/09/19/uncommitted-no-endorsement-harris-third-party-trump-00180002>.

## Abortion

Both candidates portrayed abortion as an issue of profound importance to their supporters and one where they differed significantly with their opponent. Trump claimed credit for appointing the Supreme Court justices who overturned *Roe v. Wade* even as he criticized Florida's six-week abortion ban, which that judicial decision, *Dobbs v. Jackson*, made possible, as "a terrible mistake."<sup>19</sup> Catholic pro-life commentators questioned Trump's commitment to ending abortion access in light of this and other comments viewed as moderating his earlier commitments as the election approached.<sup>20</sup> For their part, the Democratic ticket rallied support among pro-choice voters by pointing to Trump's impact on the Supreme Court and the *Dobbs* decision. During Biden's presidency, Harris often spoke in favor of abortion access and was the first US president or vice-president to visit an abortion clinic.<sup>21</sup>

Spurred in part by the shifting legal landscape thanks to *Dobbs*, Catholic theological scholarship has recently returned to reflecting on abortion after a period of time in which views on all sides of the matter may have appeared to be settled. In January 2023, the *Journal of Moral Theology* published a symposium of short essays reflecting on dialogue after *Dobbs* on campuses, in the church, and beyond.<sup>22</sup> Reflecting the broad range of viewpoints characteristic of Catholics in the United States, essays ranged from Holly Taylor Coolman's call for legal protection of the unborn to M. T. Davila's urging Catholic institutions to regard "reproductive autonomy as integral to personhood."<sup>23</sup> Uplifting Catholic social teaching's consistent identification of violations of bodily integrity as evil, Kathleen Bonnette defended women's bodily integrity as an intrinsic good.<sup>24</sup> Many other essays considered productive dialogue across difference in the

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19. Amy B. Wang and Adriana Usero, "How Trump's Abortion Stance Has Shifted over the Years," *Washington Post*, April 8, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2024/04/08/trump-abortion-stances>.
  20. Charles C. Camosy, "Pro-Life Voters Are Politically Homeless," *The Atlantic*, September 9, 2024, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2024/09/pro-life-voters-are-politically-homeless/679734>; Tyler Arnold, "Trump-Vance Campaign Launches Catholics for Trump Coalition," *National Catholic Register*, September 4, 2024, <https://www.ncregister.com/cna/trump-vance-campaign-launches-catholics-for-trump-coalition>.
  21. Deepa Shivaram and Tamara Keith, "Harris Visited an Abortion Clinic, a First for Any President or Vice President," *NPR*, March 14, 2024, <https://www.npr.org/2024/03/13/1238420757/harris-visits-abortion-clinic-minnesota>.
  22. M. Therese Lysaught et al., "Dialogue after Dobbs: Introduction," *Journal of Moral Theology* 12, no. 1 (2023): 89–96, <https://doi.org/10.55476/001c.66239>.
  23. Holly Taylor Coolman, "'Danger Invites Rescue': An Argument for Legal Protection of Unborn Life," *Journal of Moral Theology* 12, no. 1 (2023): 122–26, <https://doi.org/10.55476/001c.66247>; Maria (MT) Davila, "Catholic Higher Education and Student Formation in a Post-Roe World: A Modest Proposal for Women's Personhood and Reproductive Autonomy," *Journal of Moral Theology* 12, no. 1 (2023): 120, <https://doi.org/10.55476/001c.66246>.
  24. Kathleen Bonnette, "Holding the Tensions: Female Bodily Integrity as an Intrinsic Good," *Journal of Moral Theology* 12, no. 1 (2023): 113–17, <https://doi.org/10.55476/001c.66245>.



aftermath of *Dobbs*, including Jane Sloan Peters's guide for helping students distinguish reason and emotion in classroom conversations about abortion.<sup>25</sup>

The period of the 2024 election saw the publication of two major works from Emily Reimer-Barry dealing with reproductive justice: the monograph *Reproductive Justice and the Catholic Church: Advancing Pragmatic Solidarity with Pregnant Women* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2024) and *Reproduction and the Common Good: Global Perspectives from the Catholic Tradition* (Pickwick, 2024), which Reimer-Barry coedited with Simeiqi He. Reimer-Barry is a leader in urging Catholic theology to dialogue with the reproductive justice framework, which an ill-informed misnomer labels as a euphemism for the legal right to abortion. Rather, reproductive justice, a thought framework created by Black feminists in the late twentieth century, calls for the right to have or not have children and the right to raise them in safe and stable conditions, evoking the recent history of forced sterilization and family separation as well as environmental racism, impoverishment, hyperincarceration, and other social evils that impede healthy and flourishing family life, especially for women of color and their children in the United States.<sup>26</sup>

In her monograph, Reimer-Barry focuses squarely on Catholic teaching on abortion, including how Catholic hospitals are expected to respond when pregnancy complications threaten maternal and prenatal life. In the ethical directives that providers in Catholic health systems are required to follow, "moral absolutes are never invoked in favor of the pregnant woman but only in favor of prenatal life."<sup>27</sup> This "moral absolutism" extends to Catholic discussion of abortion outside of medical emergencies, or "elective" abortion. Reimer-Barry points out that the high value placed on prenatal life within Catholic teaching avoids the traditional desire of Catholic moral theology to evaluate moral acts in the context of the person's freedom and circumstances. "It is not self-evident that every abortion is best categorized as a *personal sin*," she writes, "even when we recognize a disvalue in the act itself and its consequences in the lives of affected persons. Taking seriously the social and relationship constraints pregnant women face, legitimate concerns pregnant women navigate regarding their own health, and the absence of alternate choices pregnant women perceive, it is clear that we need a more expansive vocabulary" to accurately capture the reality that while a harm is done, the church's interpretation of sin has traditionally taken into account the intent and freedom of the person who acts, as well as the act itself.<sup>28</sup>

25. Jane Sloan Peters, "Discerning the Roles of Reason and Emotion in Classroom Conversations about Abortion," *Journal of Moral Theology* 12, no. 1 (2023): 109–12, <https://doi.org/10.55476/001c.66244>.

26. Loretta Ross and Rickie Solinger, *Reproductive Justice: An Introduction* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2017).

27. Emily Reimer-Barry, *Reproductive Justice and the Catholic Church: Advancing Pragmatic Solidarity with Pregnant Women* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2024), 73, <https://rowman.com/ISBN/9781538182642/Reproductive-Justice-and-the-Catholic-Church-Advancing-Pragmatic-Solidarity-with-Pregnant-Women>.

28. Reimer-Barry, *Reproductive Justice and the Catholic Church*, 55–56.

As Reimer-Barry, He, and their international slate of collaborators show in *Reproduction and the Common Good*, the reproductive justice framework shares many affinities with Catholic social thought's vision of flourishing for women and families in globalized capitalist nation-states.<sup>29</sup> So, for example, Virginia Saldanha invoked reproductive justice in decrying gender-based violence, femicide, and feminized poverty in India.<sup>30</sup> Julie Clague and Suzanne Mulligan, in separate essays, discussed the structural injustice that leads to unintended pregnancies and women facing abortion decisions.<sup>31</sup> Mary Lillian Akhere Ehdiamhen observes the impacts of bride-price, polygamy, and female genital cutting on women's reproductive autonomy in Nigeria, calling the Catholic Church to "promote a kind of flourishing which enables women to take responsibility for their reproductive rights and health in collaboration with their spouses," through a process of listening and accompaniment.<sup>32</sup> Addressing the US context, I observed that Catholic social teaching and the reproductive justice framework overlap significantly in addressing family formation and family size, and Karen Peterson-Iyer reflected on how the added dangers of migration across a militarized border complicate access to reproductive justice for many US farmworker women.<sup>33</sup> The reproductive justice framework reveals that whether abortion is legal is but one small piece of the puzzle in achieving women's bodily integrity and their full flourishing along with their families. Equally, whether abortion is illegal is but one small piece of the puzzle in ensuring full flourishing for born and unborn children. Poverty, militarized borders, male entitlement to women's bodies, education access, and other social issues where the 2024 candidates largely agreed, or that drew little attention, shape reproductive justice for women and fullness of life for their children in ways that go far beyond the question of whether abortion is legal.

If the legal right to abortion does not secure reproductive justice, neither does criminalizing abortion securely defend the dignity of human life. In a recent article, James Bretzke analyzed the impact on medical practice of state-level abortion bans that took

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29. Emily Reimer-Barry and Simeiqi He, eds., *Reproduction and the Common Good: Global Perspectives from the Catholic Tradition* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2024).
  30. Virginia Saldanha, "Religio-Cultural Underpinnings of Gender and Reproductive Injustice and Their Impact on Women's Agency in India," *Journal of Moral Theology* 6, CTEWC Book Series 6 (2024): 391–410, <https://doi.org/10.55476/001c.124031>.
  31. Julie Clague, "Structural Inequality and the Social Determinants of Unintended Pregnancy," *Journal of Moral Theology* 6, CTEWC Book Series 6 (2024): 21–54, <https://doi.org/10.55476/001c.124017>; Suzanne Mulligan, "Thinking about Reproductive Justice in Contexts of Violence," *Journal of Moral Theology* 6, CTEWC Book Series 6 (27, 2024): 148–74, <https://doi.org/10.55476/001c.124021>.
  32. Mary Lillian Akhere Ehdiamhen, "Reclaiming Women's Agency for Reproductive Justice in Nigeria Today: Flourishing for Mother and Child in Situations of Constraints," *Journal of Moral Theology* 6, CTEWC Book Series 6 (2024): 332, <https://doi.org/10.55476/001c.124028>.
  33. Kate Ward, "Never Just a Choice: Three Theoretical Approaches to Economic Constraints on Family Formation," *Journal of Moral Theology* 6, CTEWC Book Series 6 (27, 2024): 55–89, <https://doi.org/10.55476/001c.124018>; Karen Peterson-Iyer, "Reproductive Justice and Agricultural Labor Migrants," *Journal of Moral Theology* 6, CTEWC Book Series 6 (2024): 257–89, <https://doi.org/10.55476/001c.124026>.



effect after the *Dobbs* decision. While many Catholics championed these so-called trigger laws and their restriction of access to elective abortion, Bretzke points out that the laws, written by legislators and not by physicians or bioethicists, rarely follow “settled casuistry” regarding when termination of nonviable pregnancy may be permissible or even required (e.g. to save the mother’s life in the case of an ectopic pregnancy, where saving the child’s life is not a possibility).<sup>34</sup> Bioethical casuistry represents centuries of deliberation over how life—both prenatal life and the mother’s life—may best be protected and promoted in hard cases of nonviable and/or life-threatening pregnancies. In stark contrast, state-level “trigger” laws are written in broad, black-and-white, political rhetoric that does not admit the possibility of exceptions. Consequently, these laws prohibit doctors from ending pregnancies even when the child’s life cannot be saved and the mother’s life is in danger. Predictably and tragically, such bans have led to preventable deaths of mothers in the years since the *Dobbs* decision made them possible, as the nonprofit news agency ProPublica recently reported.<sup>35</sup> As public awareness of the fatal dangers overly broad bans can pose continues to grow, Bretzke asserts an emerging moral consensus holding that

the best approach in such complicated and difficult cases is that individual health care decisions are best made by the people most closely and intimately involved. In other words, decisions should be made by the woman herself, her close family and friends, and her professional health care providers. . . . While some would identify this as a classic “pro-choice” position, this emerging position could be framed by application of the established moral principle of subsidiarity.<sup>36</sup>

Bretzke quotes Cathleen Kaveny, who reflected on a broad abortion-access referendum passed by Ohio voters following a particularly harrowing “trigger-ban” case, that of a child who became pregnant after being raped when she was nine. Kaveny observed that “when people lack basic trust, they pass laws that protect themselves from the abuses they most dread.”<sup>37</sup> Per Kaveny, many Ohio voters likely did not personally support abortion in all the circumstances protected in the constitutional amendment they voted for, but they found common ground in the desire to protect medical decisions in hard cases from interference by legislators.

On the day following Trump’s 2024 election, white nationalist Nick Fuentes celebrated by posting “Your body, my choice,” inspiring a wave of harassment of women and girls both online and in person. While it references the legalized-abortion slogan “My body, my choice,” in the context of the election of a president found liable for

34. James T. Bretzke, “Beyond the Binary: Religious Bioethical Analysis of Post-Dobbs Abortion Legislation,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 44, no. 2 (2024): 273, <https://doi.org/10.5840/jsce2024814111>.

35. “Life of the Mother (Series),” *ProPublica*, September 16, 2024, <https://www.propublica.org/series/life-of-the-mother>. Bretzke also maintains a public database of such cases, which can be found in his cited article.

36. Bretzke, “Beyond the Binary,” 276.

37. M. Cathleen Kaveny, “Who Trusts the Pro-Life Movement?,” *Commonweal*, November 27, 2023, <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/abortion-ohio-kaveny-women-GOP-rape>.

sexual assault, this phrase was often intended by aggressors and interpreted by victims as a threat of sexual assault or rape.<sup>38</sup> As much as we might want the rolling back of legal abortion rights to issue from a commitment to protecting prenatal life, it appears that for certain supporters of Trump and his agenda, the denying of women's bodily autonomy is part of the appeal. This came amid a multi-thousandfold rise in online misogynist speech in the weeks surrounding Trump's election, additionally characterized by statements such as "repeal the 19th" (referring to the constitutional amendment that granted women the franchise) and "get back in the kitchen."<sup>39</sup>

Catholic public discourse strongly emphasizes protecting prenatal life and communicates suspicion of the framing of "choice" as a good, pointing out that recourse to rights language does not help us navigate competing claims between equally precious lives. As Reimer-Barry points out, even *Amoris Laetitia* in the English translation holds the alarming phrase "no alleged right to one's own body."<sup>40</sup> Without an equally strong rhetorical commitment to uplifting the good of women's bodily integrity and right to life and self-determination, public communications of Catholic teaching can easily be weaponized against legitimate assertions of women's rights to full personhood and bodily integrity. The reproductive justice framework reveals that proclaiming bodily autonomy as a good, opposing gender-based violence, and defending women's right to full participation in public life are deeply intertwined goals.

## Religious Nationalism, Fundamentalism, and Polarization

Another area of great disparity between the 2024 presidential candidates is found in their visions of religious pluralism in America, or at least those held by their supporters. Not visibly religious, Trump courted Christian nationalists, with his vice-presidential nominee Vance, who converted to Catholicism in 2019, identifying as "post-liberal" and appearing to many Catholic observers to hold integralist views.<sup>41</sup>

38. Isabelle Frances-Wright and Moustafa Ayad, "'Your Body, My Choice': Hate and Harassment towards Women Spreads Online," *Institute for Strategic Dialogue*, November 8, 2024, [https://www.isdglobal.org/digital\\_dispatches/your-body-my-choice-hate-and-harassment-towards-women-spreads-online](https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/your-body-my-choice-hate-and-harassment-towards-women-spreads-online).

39. Frances-Wright and Ayad, "Your Body, My Choice."

40. Reimer-Barry, *Reproductive Justice and the Catholic Church*, 47. This seems to me an inaccurate translation of the Latin in *Amoris Laetitia* 83, which I would translate as "By no means could a right be claimed over one's own body such that such a life could be decided upon, because it [prenatal life] is an end in itself and can never be the object of domination by any person." In other words, the document is not denying that one has a right over one's own body but that such a right is not of the kind that extends to making a decision to end another person's life.

41. Integralism holds that Catholic teaching should shape the aims of government, or even that government should serve the goals of the church, even if that means limiting the rights of citizens of other or no faiths. Brian Fraga, "'New Right' Academics Argue for Biblical Lawmaking at Steubenville Conference," *National Catholic Reporter*, October 17, 2022, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/new-right-academics-argue-biblical-lawmaking-steubenville-conference>; Jonathan Liedl, "JD Vance Is a Catholic 'Post-Liberal': Here's What That Means—And Why It Matters," *National Catholic Register*, July 24, 2024, <https://www.ncregister.com/news/j-d-vance-is-a-catholic-post-liberal>.

As vice-president and candidate, Harris elevated both her own roots in the Black church, her mother's Hinduism, and her husband's Judaism, with their family serving as a microcosm of the liberal tradition of visibly celebrating not just tolerance but amity and love across religious difference. For many Trump-backers, a vision of a Christian United States is part of the appeal, while Harris's multifaith, cosmopolitan household represented the aspirations of many of her supporters. Christian nationalism is a growing phenomenon in the US; this section is able to highlight only a few of the works that might be helpful in beginning to understand the phenomenon and its urgency.

Journalist Tim Alberta, an evangelical Christian and pastor's son, explored the co-optation of US evangelical Christianity by nationalism in his 2023 book *The Kingdom, The Power and the Glory* (HarperCollins, 2023). Beginning long before Trump, a widespread view that God desires a particular vision of earthly success and triumph for the United States, and that Christianity is under attack by forces inside and outside the Christian community, has become as important as the basics of Christian faith to many evangelicals and has fractured churches across the country. But Alberta shows how Trump uniquely capitalized on that emerging alliance:

More than any figure in American history, the forty-fifth president turned *evangelical* from spiritual signifier into political punch line, exposing the selective morality and ethical inconsistency and rank hypocrisy that had for so long lurked in the subconscious of the movement. To be fair, this slow-motion reputational collapse predated Trump: he did not author the cultural insecurities of the Church. But he did identify them, and prey upon them, in ways that have accelerated the unraveling of institutional Christianity in the United States.<sup>42</sup>

Alberta laments how his church's co-optation by one political viewpoint hinders its ability to be a community of worshiping believers, with congregations ousting members or even firing pastors for failing to express sufficient enthusiasm for nationalist ideas. He views the commitment of many evangelical churches to culture war stances and advancing the Republican party as a significant cause for the well-documented decline in church attendance, particularly but not exclusively on the part of members of younger generations.<sup>43</sup>

Nationalist fundamentalism, with its good vs. evil binary and desire for the US government to serve a particular church, is not limited to evangelicalism. Antonio Spadaro, the Jesuit editor, and Marcelo Figueroa, a Presbyterian pastor, warned of the confluence of evangelical fundamentalism and Catholic integralism in a 2017 article for *La Civiltà Cattolica*. "Both Evangelical and Catholic Integralists condemn traditional ecumenism," they wrote, "and yet promote an ecumenism of conflict that unites

42. Tim Alberta, *The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory: American Evangelicals in an Age of Extremism* (New York: HarperCollins, 2023), 438.

43. Alberta, *The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory*, 96; see also Terry Shoemaker, "White Gen X and Millennial Evangelicals Are Losing Faith in the Conservative Culture Wars," *The Conversation*, June 22, 2021, <http://theconversation.com/white-gen-x-and-millennial-evangelicals-are-losing-faith-in-the-conservative-culture-wars-162407>.

them in the nostalgic dream of a theocratic type of state.”<sup>44</sup> Another touchpoint between Catholicism and evangelical fundamentalism was observed by theologian Sean Swain Martin in his 2021 book *American Pope: Scott Hahn and the Rise of Catholic Fundamentalism*.<sup>45</sup> Analyzing the works of Scott Hahn, who holds a PhD in theology but is best known as a popular exponent of Catholic doctrine, Martin diagnoses that “the distinguishing mark of fundamentalism . . . is certainty . . . the belief that the other can have nothing to offer because the fullness of knowledge and truth resides inside of those on the sides of the angels, which, most often, is ‘me’ and ‘those that look, act, and live like me.’”<sup>46</sup> While Hahn himself does not promote integralist or religious-nationalist ideas, his widespread influence as a popular faith leader acting outside traditional ecclesial structures recalls parallels with the rise of fundamentalism Alberta describes in evangelical communities. Martin warns that members of the theological academy dismiss Hahn and others like him at their peril, finding in Hahn’s deceptively simple assertions of “common sense” a dangerous and potentially polarizing certainty. He urges theologians to respond to the growing influence of Hahn and other figures by offering the accessible theology that believers seek when they flock to such popularizers.<sup>47</sup>

*Confronting Racism and White Supremacy in the US: Twenty-First Century Theological Perspectives* (ed. Michael R. Fisher Jr., Friendship Press, 2024) was published this year by the National Council of Churches to reflect that ecumenical organization’s efforts to end racism, uplift religious initiatives to bring about racial healing and justice, and warn of the dangers of white Christian nationalism. The volume includes chapters from Catholic, mainline Protestant, Baptist, Pentecostal, Peace Church, and Orthodox perspectives. Particularly helpful is a chapter by Douglas A. Foster on the historical origins and contemporary embracement of the Great Replacement Theory, which stokes racist fears that “the white race in white-majority countries”—including the US—“is being intentionally and covertly replaced by inferior people of color through immigration and interracial marriage.”<sup>48</sup> Foster establishes the history of the Great Replacement Theory as it has evolved through slavery,

44. Antonio Spadaro, “Evangelical Fundamentalism and Catholic Integralism in the USA: A Surprising Ecumenism,” *La Civiltà Cattolica*, July 13, 2017, <https://www.laciviltacattolica.com/evangelical-fundamentalism-and-catholic-integralism-in-the-usa-a-surprising-ecumenism>.

45. I look forward to *Catholic Fundamentalism in America*, forthcoming from Oxford University Press in 2025 by Mark Massa, SJ, which I was unable to review in time for this article.

46. Sean Swain Martin, *American Pope: Scott Hahn and the Rise of Catholic Fundamentalism* (Woodland Hills, CA: Pickwick Publications, 2021), chap. 4.

47. Sean Swain Martin, “Why I Wrote American Pope: Scott Hahn and the Rise of Catholic Fundamentalism,” *Righting America* (blog), February 4, 2022, <https://rightingamerica.net/why-i-wrote-american-pope-scott-hahn-and-the-rise-of-catholic-fundamentalism>.

48. Douglas A. Foster, “The Origins and Anti-Christian Nature of the Great Replacement Theory,” in *Confronting Racism and White Supremacy in the US: Twenty-First-Century Theological Perspectives*, ed. Michael R. Fisher Jr. (Chester Heights, PA: Friendship Press, 2024), 103.

eugenics, Hitler's thought, and its modern-day popularization by the French author Renaud Camus, whose book in English is titled *You Will Not Replace Us*. By insisting that God is a "respector of persons," contravening the equality of the *imago Dei* and acting as an encouragement to fear, the Great Replacement Theory flagrantly opposes the discipleship indicated in Scripture. "When one's primary identity becomes 'white American Christian' (each term defining the others') one's identity is no longer in Christ but in an idol that demands human sacrifice."<sup>49</sup> Trump and Vance have both promoted the Great Replacement Theory in campaign speeches.<sup>50</sup>

Seeking to make sense of the increasing polarization in the country, which has co-opted those of every faith, Catholic not excepted, into identifying more with political positions than religious belonging, I revisited Julie Hanlon Rubio's *Hope for Common Ground: Mediating the Personal and the Political in a Divided Church* (Georgetown University Press, 2016). Rubio's book aims at common ground among Catholics, not necessarily politically—although to be sure, the fact that political polarization often drowns out religious identity means that it would be impossible to achieve Catholic common ground without advancing dialogue across political differences. Rubio's program for support for families, cooperation with the good as solution to abortion, dignity at end of life, and poverty reduction as areas of "common ground" is still compelling in the changed landscape of Trump's second term. These are still issues that motivate many Catholics, even as serious practical solutions to them are little discussed by either major party. Particularly worth revisiting in a climate where religious nationalism and fundamentalism significantly color the relationship of faith and politics is the chapter where Rubio argues for action in their local communities as "the primary way Christians will change the world."<sup>51</sup> Action in our local communities militates against placing too much of our trust in government; honors the Catholic social teaching principle of subsidiarity; places us in community with those who think differently than us, including Christians at the opposite "pole" and those of other or no faiths; and offers the potential for personal transformation that makes us more fully human.<sup>52</sup> While Rubio does not explicitly address religious fundamentalism and nationalism, these related threats to the common good rely on in-group/out-group binaries and placing earthly trust in the government, respectively. Her argument for local action holds potential as a corrective for those who see the enemy as among those sitting in the next pew.

49. Foster, "The Origins and Anti-Christian Nature of the Great Replacement Theory," 115.

50. Sabrina Moreno, "Trump Promotes Replacement Conspiracy Theory at Richmond Rally," *Axios*, March 4, 2024, <https://www.axios.com/local/richmond/2024/03/04/donald-trump-rallies-in-richmond-super-tuesday>; Steve Peoples, "Republican Senate Candidates Promote 'Replacement' Theory," *PBS News*, May 17, 2022, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/republican-senate-candidates-promote-replacement-theory>.

51. Julie Hanlon Rubio, *Hope for Common Ground: Mediating the Personal and the Political in a Divided Church* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2016), 74.

52. Rubio, *Hope for Common Ground*, chap. 3.

*The Gap in God's Country: A Longer View on Our Culture Wars* (Wipf and Stock, 2024), by political scientist Laurie M. Johnson, is part diagnostic, part proposed solution to contemporary political polarization. Johnson finds a culturally US communalism hiding in plain sight in the economic practices common in rural farming communities as recently as sixty years ago.<sup>53</sup> In the later twentieth century, farm and labor policies supported by both Republicans and Democrats led to a great population shift out of rural areas and into precarious waged work, shredding the embedded networks of family, land, community, and religious life that had provided stability, meaning, and a positive communalist ethos. People thus left vulnerable, Johnson warns, "become attracted to violent mass movements . . . because genuine religion is not available to them. Both Islamic extremism and the rise of the New Right / populist politics in the U.S. and around the globe are consequences of the economic dislocation and cultural disruptions caused by globalized capitalism."<sup>54</sup> Johnson does not shy away from examining the ways churches have been complicit in this shift, by failing to be genuine places of community for those in need and embracing a two-sides mentality that may temporarily strengthen religious belonging but ultimately feeds ideology (something Christian communities on the left and right both do).<sup>55</sup> But she finds a path toward a hope-filled future in a thoughtful and skilled application of Christian thought—including Catholic social thought, the distributist Peter Maurin, and agrarian poet Wendell Berry—pointing toward how government could invest resources to help rebuild the rooted community that creates an environment where neighbors are both able and inclined to care for one another.<sup>56</sup> This brief synopsis does not capture the full affordances of this book, which incorporates a wide range of political theory, an informed critique of neoliberal capitalism, and such a well-informed treatment of theology by political scientist Johnson that one wishes more scholars dared to venture outside their disciplinary silos to tackle large problems as she has here done.

Theologian Kaveny, too, turns to historical US communal practices in the search for a shared story of meaning that can lead us past polarization. Kaveny warns that the US has yet to develop "a stable, sober, and humble theology of the nation—of our nation—that is suitable for the challenges of our times. Instead, thus far, the resources of our theological tradition tend to move unstably between a dangerous Christian nationalism, on the one hand, and a somewhat rootless cosmopolitanism, on the other."<sup>57</sup> Among other suggestions for US Christian theologians to develop "a morally sound ethics of national mutual responsibility that avoids the pitfalls of morally unsound nationalism," Kaveny suggests reclaiming rituals of lamentation and penance from the Puritan settlers.<sup>58</sup> "By placing acknowledgement of our nation's sinfulness

53. Laurie M. Johnson, *The Gap in God's Country: A Longer View on Our Culture Wars* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2024), 13.

54. Johnson, *The Gap in God's Country*, 118–19.

55. Johnson, chap. 6.

56. Johnson, chaps. 7–8.

57. Cathleen Kaveny, "Neighbors, States, Peoples, and Nations: What Do We Owe Our Fellow Americans?," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 42, no. 1 (2022): 17.

58. Kaveny, "Neighbors, States, Peoples, and Nations," 18.



within a broader context of worship, we may be able to emphasize the communal nature of our nation's two great 'original sins'—the appropriation of the land from the indigenous population and the enslavement of Africans and their descendants."<sup>59</sup>

Also turning our attention to local communities facing challenging problems of ideology, a chapter authored by Matthew Shadle in the National Council of Churches' *Confronting Racism and White Supremacy in the US* provides practical strategies for local church communities. Shadle profiles aspiring antiracist congregations to develop a playbook for churches seeking to dismantle racism in their own internal practice and community engagement. The list of "exemplar churches," which includes only one Catholic congregation, points to concrete best practices, including encouraging preaching against the evil of racism, providing regular education for the community, and perhaps most importantly, developing a partnership with another nearby congregation of a predominantly different ethnic or racial background. "One of the best ways to help address racism is to get to know people of other races and ethnicities, to listen to their experiences, and to make a commitment to transform the community together," Shadle concludes.<sup>60</sup> While electoral difference is not the focus of Shadle's proposal, in light of the polarization in US Christian communities observed by Alberta, Rubio, Johnson, and others, it is hard not to reflect that such partnerships also hold promise, hope as the hope for water in the desert, of rebuilding Christian unity in light of political polarization.

## Reflections on the Candidates' Personae

A US presidential election influences so many aspects of local, national, and global life that gathering theological scholarship on every issue implicated could fill several journal volumes. And yet, many voters interact with and choose their candidate based less on the candidate's position on various issues than on how they perceive the candidate as a person—and these elements of what appears to mark someone as an eligible and qualified leader are also worthy of ethical reflection. In light of that, I will close this article with some reflections on what I might call the semiotics of the candidates' personae, which point toward areas for further work in moral theology.

The occasion of Biden stepping away from his candidacy as a sitting president due to age-related decline in ability was an unusual historic event. As an opportunity for a shared cultural reflection on managing vocational transitions and limited ability to exercise power in older adulthood, it was, sadly, mostly overlooked. For me, it called to mind another historic resignation, when Pope Benedict XVI stepped down from the papacy in 2013, citing "strength of mind and body" inadequate to the demands of the office.<sup>61</sup> Biden, serving as Barack Obama's vice-president when Benedict resigned,

59. Kaveny, 18.

60. Matthew A. Shadle, "How to Be an Antiracist Congregation," in Fisher, *Confronting Racism and White Supremacy in the US*, 213.

61. Benedict XVI, "Declaratio" (February 11, 2013), [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2013/february/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20130211\\_declaratio.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2013/february/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20130211_declaratio.html).

could not have been unaffected by the sudden and unprecedented retirement of a world leader and the head of his own church. But from what I observed, this parallel resignation of a worldwide leadership office did not enter into public analysis of the Catholic Biden's decision not to seek reelection. Nor, as I hoped might happen, has there been a national conversation about the ethical considerations that might lead a person to resign significant power for reasons of advanced age, or of the virtues and spiritual considerations that might lead to them doing so at the right time, for the right reasons, and with full interior freedom.

This disappointing silence comes although most Americans hope to live to an age where many experience some diminishment of physical and mental strength, and many daily face such situations with loved ones. Practical theologian Joyce Ann Mercer writes that due to the "too-easy collapse of the notion of divine calling with work or career," theology has done a poor job of speaking about the lived reality of vocation in older adulthood. This period of life may be characterized as a time when embodiment takes center stage because of the emerging reality of bodily limitations, and awareness of a shortening lifespan brings about a new and possibly galvanizing relationship to time.<sup>62</sup> If we are fortunate enough to live long lives, we will all face the same decision as Biden and Benedict, perhaps not resigning a worldwide leadership position but stepping away from a beloved volunteer role, a longtime career or the freedom that comes with driving. My colleague Conor Kelly frequently notes that "the ethics of ordinary life" are underinvestigated despite their obvious importance.<sup>63</sup> Our national failure to take Biden's momentous decision as an opportunity to reflect on virtuous resignation of cherished responsibilities is a failure to contribute to the ethics of ordinary life and one that I hope theologians will work to rectify in the years to come.

Harris's ascension to the position of major-party nominee for president was historic for many reasons, including some embodied in her personal identity. She was the first Black woman and South Asian person (as a biracial person) to hold that honor, and only the second woman, with the first—Hillary Clinton—having been the spouse of a former president. While these historical milestones are worth celebrating, the facts of Harris's gaining her candidacy with a short time frame to the election, due to Biden's stepping down, evokes a phenomenon management scholars call the glass cliff. The glass cliff, which evokes a precarious, dangerous situation and references the image of the "glass ceiling" barrier to women's professional achievement, describes a phenomenon where women are more likely to be appointed to leadership roles in companies facing trouble, meaning they are disproportionately likely to face blame for any future failure.<sup>64</sup> Later research observed this pattern to hold true for men and women of color

62. Joyce Ann Mercer, "Older Adulthood: Vocation at Life's End," in *Calling All Years Good: Christian Vocation throughout Life's Seasons*, ed. Kathleen A. Cahalan and Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017), 182–87.

63. See, for example, Conor M. Kelly, "Virtues for Ordinary Christians . . . Continued," in *Bothering to Love: James F. Keenan's Retrieval and Reinvention of Catholic Ethics*, ed. Christopher P. Vogt and Kate Ward (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2024), 97–107.

64. Michelle K. Ryan and S. Alexander Haslam, "The Glass Cliff: Exploring the Dynamics Surrounding the Appointment of Women to Precarious Leadership Positions," *The Academy of Management Review* 32, no. 2 (2007): 549–72.

as well as for white women.<sup>65</sup> When organizational failure does occur after a woman leader has been appointed to a “glass cliff” position, “explanations for poor performance are more likely to focus on the individual abilities of those organizations’ leaders than on situational and contextual factors that affect organizational performance,” explain the researchers who coined the phrase.<sup>66</sup> Theologians would likely identify that a pattern of failing to elevate qualified women to leadership positions in our institutions is an ethical problem. It is important, too, to be alert to the phenomenon of the “glass cliff” as our academic and ecclesial institutions traverse times of challenge and as advocates continue to call for expanded leadership positions for women in the Catholic Church.

While not fully analogous to a situation of the “glass cliff” (because the situation of women in Catholic institutions has not reached parity with that of Kamala Harris at the top of a major party’s ticket), M. Shawn Copeland’s reflections on collegiality provide an apt theological response. Unacknowledged racism and white supremacy among white academics threaten the exercise of real collegiality by obscuring the genuine skills, interests, and qualifications of colleagues who are Black, Native American, Asian American, and Latine.<sup>67</sup> Copeland calls for basic regard—“at least the recognition of difference without aversion or exclusion . . . recognition of our common humanity”—as a precursor to the practice of real collegiality: “Authentically engaging the difference of the concrete human other in all its uniqueness, variation, and fullness as *human* life debunks the myth that difference is the conceptual opposite to equality.”<sup>68</sup> In the context of national politics, Copeland encourages us to hope that whatever we do to build a culture of basic regard—whether treating neighbors with dignity or teaching white children to recognize excellence in their Black peers—directs us toward a world where voters will choose their leaders on qualifications of character, experience, and agenda, with no hint of racism, sexism, or white supremacy clouding one’s decision-making.

Minnesota Governor Tim Walz was announced as Harris’s vice-presidential pick at the Democratic convention in late August, lacking the established national profile of his counterpart, best-selling author and senator Vance. For the rest of Harris’s campaign, she was often introduced on stage by one of two men who derived their power and position from their association with her: Walz and Harris’s husband, Doug Emhoff. I experienced it as novel, if not unprecedented, to see not one but two men on the national stage enthusiastically accepting subordinate roles to a highly qualified woman

65. Alison Cook and Christy Glass, “Above the Glass Ceiling: When Are Women and Racial/Ethnic Minorities Promoted to CEO?,” *Strategic Management Journal* 35, no. 7 (2014): 1080–89, <https://doi.org/10.1002/smj.2161>.

66. Ryan and Haslam, “The Glass Cliff,” 557.

67. M. Shawn Copeland, “Collegiality as a Moral and Ethical Practice,” in *Practice What You Preach: Virtues, Ethics, and Power in the Lives of Pastoral Ministers and Their Congregations*, ed. James F. Keenan and Joseph J. Kotva (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1999), 315–32.

68. Copeland, “Collegiality as a Moral and Ethical Practice,” 327–28.

(after all, when Bill Clinton introduced candidate Hillary Clinton, he did so as someone still answering to the honorific title of president, the powerful office his spouse sought). In his fairly limited time in the national spotlight, embodying a masculine role in support of a woman's excellence proved to be a key feature of Walz's public persona.

Monica Hesse, the gender columnist for the *Washington Post*, commented on a wave of online discourse that cast the Midwestern Walz as "America's dad," noting, "The memes circulating this week are in praise of Walz's masculinity. *Stereotypical* masculinity, even . . . the kind classically defined by such traits as stoicism, reliability, leadership and physical strength."<sup>69</sup> Hesse reached for the phrase "tonic masculinity" to describe the capable strength and quiet good humor observers saw in Walz's persona. Difficult to trace in origin, this phrase uses the connotations of "tonic" as refreshing or healing as an intentional foil to violent, anti-woman "toxic masculinity." For Hesse, popular excitement at Walz's national profile reveals the dearth of positive role models of masculinity, as well as the fiction that voters on the left dislike masculinity or men.

This canard is alive and well in a segment of the media landscape with documented influence on the 2024 election: online podcasts aimed at young male audiences. New online media lacks the traditional ethical commitments of legacy media to verifiability and even-handedness and is influential among young men of voting age. The broadcasters who have achieved success in this space promote racist views and lies, such as the fiction that Biden won the 2020 election through fraud, and portray gains in equality for women as coming at men's expense. "Above all, the broadcasters described American men as victims of a Democratic campaign to strip them of their power—a comforting message to a dispirited audience," wrote the authors of a Bloomberg report on the influence of podcasters in swaying young male voters to Trump. "These days, young men are lonelier than ever, with those aged 18 to 23 the least optimistic about their futures, and having the lowest levels of social support."<sup>70</sup> They are drawn to media that present a clearly articulated account of men's place in the world, even if the vision of masculinity presented is characterized, in limiting and even dangerous ways, by physical strength, uncontrolled appetites, and anti-woman views.

Just as Kaveny observed about the need to replace nationalism with a "theology of the nation," proffering positive accounts of masculinity is an area where moral theology must help fill the obvious cultural vacuum. At this writing, one of the very few results for an internet search for "tonic masculinity" is actually a brief video from a popular Catholic outlet, which reflects positively on the equality of men and women through Genesis 2.<sup>71</sup> The facts that this resource is rare both as a positive discussion of

69. Monica Hesse, "Masculinity's Check-Engine Light Is On: Let Tim Walz Have a Look," *Washington Post*, August 8, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/style/power/2024/08/08/tim-walz-midwestern-dad>.

70. Davey Alba et al., "How Popular YouTubers Pushed Young Male Voters Toward Trump," *Bloomberg.Com*, January 22, 2025, <https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2025-youtube-podcast-men-for-trump>.

71. "How Tonic Masculinity Will Save the World," Theology of the Body Institute, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v24fexbXe0Q>.

masculinity and particularly as a Catholic resource, and that it attempts a positive vision of manhood without discussing the person of Jesus, shows that Hess's point about the vacuum in popular, positive, and constructive accounts of masculinity goes double for theology.<sup>72</sup> There is a crying need for a robust, appealing, and flexible account of masculinity that can speak to contemporary men and boys about their diverse experiences and aspirations and that is authentically and fully Christian, meaning it draws on the breadth of the Christian tradition, human reason, and experience, and particularly the whole of Scripture with a focus on the Gospels.

JD Vance rose to national prominence in the aftermath of Trump's 2016 victory, when his memoir *Hillbilly Elegy* was depicted as an explainer for so-called rural resentment, despite the fact that in 2016, people of means were more likely to support Trump, while poor white folks like Vance's parents and grandparents broke for Hillary Clinton.<sup>73</sup> In the 2024 race, Vance deployed his identity less as a poverty escapee than, newly Catholic, as ambassador to the religious right for the famously irreligious Trump. In October 2024, Kathryn Joyce, a journalist who covers the Christian Right, explored "the Catholic Right's celebrity conversion industrial complex," noting the connections between conversion to Catholicism and success in far-right politics and media. Then-vice-presidential candidate Vance, who converted to Catholicism in 2019, was a signal example of this phenomenon along with media personalities like Candace Owen and Russell Brand.<sup>74</sup> Interviewed for this article, theologians including Stephen Millies and Massimo Faggioli observed that the phenomenon indicates that the US Catholic bishops no longer stand as the arbiters of Catholic identity in the United States. Rather, well-funded lay organizations, including Eternal Word Television Network and Word on Fire, which both slant conservative in terms of doctrine and worship as well as US politics, drive the widespread perception of what Catholic identity means. This is related to the rise of religious fundamentalism as believers turn away from traditional structures of religious authority, including, in the Catholic Church, the presumption that priests and bishops bear unquestionable doctrinal and moral authority.

Before his appearance on a national ticket and even before his Senate run, JD Vance published an account of his conversion to Catholicism in the online Catholic magazine *The Lamp*.<sup>75</sup> The essay chronicles his growing intellectual and emotional attachment to Catholicism in tension with the suspicion that his beloved grandmother, called

72. I note as a promising counterexample David H. Delaney, *Viri Dignitatem: Personhood, Masculinity and Fatherhood in the Thought of John Paul II* (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2023), which I was unable to review in time for this article.

73. Jon Henley, "White and Wealthy Voters Gave Victory to Donald Trump, Exit Polls Show," *The Guardian*, November 9, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/nov/09/white-voters-victory-donald-trump-exit-polls>.

74. Kathryn Joyce, "Behind the Catholic Right's Celebrity-Conversion Industrial Complex," *Vanity Fair*, September 10, 2024, <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/story/catholic-right-celebrity-conversion-industrial-complex>.

75. I'm grateful to Paul Baumann, "Another Catholic in the White House," *Commonweal*, November 19, 2024, <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/another-catholic-white-house>, for bringing this essay to my attention.

Mamaw, who died in 2006, might see in it a different sort of Christianity than the one that animated her life.<sup>76</sup> Vance concludes that the Catholicism he adopted—which rejects the prosperity gospel, embraces Scripture and tradition as guides, and understands “our bad behavior as simultaneously social and individual, structural and moral”—is “Mamaw’s Christianity.” But reading his essay in 2025, after Tim Alberta’s exposé on religious nationalism, I wondered whether the confluence still holds. While Mamaw loved Jesus, Vance says, she “didn’t like politics as a matter of course and cared even less for the political drift of modern Protestantism.”<sup>77</sup> Can this be anything other than the enmeshment with the nationalism Alberta identifies among evangelicals and that catapulted the Catholic Vance to the White House?

## Conclusion

In the aftermath of the 2024 US presidential election, the task for theologians is the same as ever: to proclaim human dignity and identify the structures of sin that violate it, including any ideology that portrays human beings as disposable or as deserving of violence; to accurately teach the Catholic tradition and correct the errors of those who misinterpret it, including those who equate Catholic faith with fundamentalist or nationalist views; to set worthy boundaries for Catholics active in the public square, reminding them to defend truth while respecting the conscientious freedom of others; and to reflect on the concrete circumstances of people’s lives in light of Gospel and tradition, in order to help them more clearly discern their own path to God. These tasks would have been ours whatever the outcome to the election. This article has sought to read the election as a sign of the times in order to indicate where this work might most fruitfully continue.

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76. J.D. Vance, “How I Joined the Resistance,” *The Lamp Magazine*, April 1, 2020, <https://thelampmagazine.com/blog/how-i-joined-the-resistance>.

77. Vance, “How I Joined the Resistance.”